

Dedication.

Modders are people who can see beyond what is, to what might be, when they look at a computer game. They are visionaries and artists, whose medium is code. From small tweaks, to complete engine overhauls, people that modify games are the true makers of gamers' games. They aren't afraid to look under the hood of a game, tinker with it, and make it something new. They also happen to be the fertile soil from which the future of the computer gaming industry grows. Wise game development shops recognize this, and encourage it. This work of fiction, set in the Independence War universe, is dedicated to the people who love these games, and who work to make them better. I don't write code, so I write stories. This story is dedicated to modders of all stripes, everywhere. But most especially it is dedicated to those individuals who have written, are writing, or will write mods for the Independence War games.

A note to the reader:

This story is the result of many hours of hard work. It began as a short story in the early autumn of 2002, and at the time of its completion for Christmas 2003 release, more than one year later, it is best described as a full-length science fiction novel. *The Meeting* takes place at the time of the Independence War, during the latter weeks of March, and in early April 2268. It coincides with the timing of the *Dreadnaught's* famed "Precision Factor", "Rebus", and "Conspiracy" Missions. However, this story makes reference to numerous other characters, places and events from game from around that time (see if you can spot them all!), as well as some original concepts designed to fit into the Independence War universe. Although the story itself is copyrighted ©2003 by Duncan Day, it makes use of licensed material from Particle Systems and Infogrames (now Argonaut and Atari, respectively) and thus is not publishable without acquiring licensing rights. As such, I present it to you, the community of fans, as a gift. It will be the last writing project I will set in the Independence War universe. My next fiction writing projects will be entirely original, and as such will hopefully offer me a less complicated path to publication.

You are invited to write me with comments, or feedback: duncan_day@yahoo.ca

Acknowledgement

The Meeting is an amateur writing project. I'll be the first one to admit that I still have a long road ahead of me when it comes to writing skills. Anyone can write a story, but I'm learning that to write a good story, and to write it well takes a good deal of technical skill, patience, experience, and far more hard work than I thought. Bringing a story to fruition, even something so 'frivolous' as science fiction is a laborious process. I'm still learning, and this story, represents a few more steps taken along that path, nothing more.

Having said that, I feel that this story is an improvement over my previous efforts, and is certainly more ambitious in its scope. It's a notch or two above anything else I've done to date, and I'm proud of it. When you read *The Meeting*, you are reading the result of considerable effort, long hours of work, and the benefit of much assistance from others. These people deserve recognition.

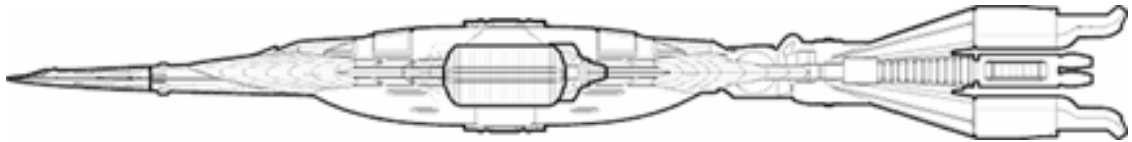
For starters, I have to acknowledge the people who created the Independence War games. They are responsible for inspiring me to use their universe to tell stories. Their creativity and hard work on those excellent games helped me to sit down and pursue this effort. Thanks also to The Corporate for his pastie deckplans and the entire deckplans thread at the I-War internet forum (now gone forever, I fear). It helped me to understand the insides of an important part of a corvette. I also must also thank Parias and the entire gang at the Atari I-war forums for keeping this alive, and SoupDragon and his wonderful Independence War website for hosting my stories past and present. I must also thank those who edited and read earlier drafts, providing comments and feedback, to help make this a tighter story. Thanks to Shane Maness for his helpful comments, and to Rob Douglas for his considerable editorial skills, his writing advice, and for helping me to realize that this is something I should just sit down and *do*.

Finally, and most importantly, I wish to thank my wife for encouraging me the whole time, even when it conflicted with other daily demands, and for supporting me in this crazy undertaking, simply because I enjoyed doing it (imagine, a novel that would be read by only a handful of fans, and that would make absolutely no money!). She believed that I could do this before even *I* did, and she helped make the time for me to write, even though I doubt she really understood just how profoundly geeky this kind of thing is. That's *amore*, baby!

Introduction

Most scholars and historians agree that the clandestine meeting between the leader of the Independent Navy, Quartermaster Colin MacDuff, and the Captain of the Commonwealth Naval Vessel *CNV 301 Dreadnaught* was a pivotal moment in the Independence War. This encounter was a turning point in that war, because both sides came to understand that a third power was manipulating their conflict. That realization allowed them to re-evaluate their longstanding hostilities, and change the outcome of history. The popularly accepted version of those events has it that an invitation to the Captain of the *Dreadnaught*, etched into a piece of debris and deliberately launched at a station, brought about this meeting. However, it turns out that this was only a small part of that story. Up until recently, little has been known about the valiant behind-the-scene efforts and sacrifices made by others in this quiet but critical historical moment. It is now clear that it took much more than a piece of debris to bring about the success of...The Meeting

The Meeting



An Independence War Novel

by

Duncan Day

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Chapter 1

Severance Package

15.03.2268

Epsilon Indi star system

Ted Allbright hated his job. This feeling wasn't the kind of disdain people express about their jobs when they've had a bad day. No, Ted felt a visceral, and passionate hatred for his job. It wasn't just the fact that running maintenance checks on communications relays was pure tedium, it had more to do with the fact that this was a fall-from-grace kind of job. This was the kind of job you ended up with after screwing up so many other aspects of your life, there weren't many options left this side of institutionalization. He hated it for all the failures it represented in his life. Most of the time he kept these feelings quiet. But after his third whiskey on those rare occasions he drank, it would emerge in a violent solitary rant to the indifferent walls of his small cylindrical shelter. Nevertheless, he clung to the job, and executed it meticulously in full knowledge that this truly was his last chance.

To make matters worse, he was in a foul mood today because he'd been called out on his day off to run a check on an FTL relay that was acting up for the third time this month. Being on call was just one of the many things he loathed about his job. It wasn't that he had much planned for his day off. But he knew that he should be half in the bag right about now, watching some ogee-ball or some porn, not coasting out to a remote satellite in his rented, piece-of-shit utility vehicle. He was also a little cranky because, as hard as it was for him to admit, he was lonely. It wasn't easy for a loner like Ted to admit something like this to himself. He wanted to meet someone on today's outing, just to exchange a few words over the comm. It must be the isolation was getting to him. Most of the time, his job was very quiet, and very lonely.

He once served proudly as chief engineer on a Puffin-class tug. He was the chief grease monkey on the *Acadian* for eight years, and had been pretty good at it. Unfortunately, he was less good at getting along with his fellow crewmembers, and even less good than that at curbing his drinking habits. The drinking eventually got so bad he couldn't do his job anymore. He'd made too many enemies and screwed up too many times. He lost his posting, his savings, his girlfriend and most of his friends all in the same year. After that he continued to slide down that slippery slope. He bounced from station job to station job, cleaning, repairing, sweeping and doing pretty much any kind of work he could get. But every crappy job he tried quickly turned sour and ended with a boot in the backside and a door slammed right behind him. After four years of this, he got the kind of serious wake-up call that only comes from a close brush with death. His friend-in-inebriation, Bernie Burns, got himself killed in a stupid, preventable and particularly messy accident that had more to do with an alcoholic haze than the inherent danger of life on a space station. Ted knew that the sloppy mess they packaged and unceremoniously cremated, once known to him as Burnsie, could just as easily have been him. He finally decided to quit drinking, clean up, and get his life back on track before he

joined Burnsie for the final cocktail party in the big black. Staying sober turned out to be the hardest thing he'd ever done, and was pure hell every step of the way.

He never forgot how bad the alternative was, though, so he eventually got himself cleaned up, and registered as an Engineer (third-class) again. He even got his drinking mostly under control. Mostly.

He was not entirely what you would call 'dry'. He still gave himself a kind of controlled burn once a month, as a form of test for himself. It was one of the promises he negotiated with himself when he was praying for strength during one of the more painful, nauseated, and shake-filled phases of his detoxification. So far he'd managed to keep his occasional binges within the limits he'd set for himself.

He found decent, though loathsome, work as a "handyman" of sorts, roaming around the Epsilon Indi system in a small utility repair ship he'd leased, doing odd jobs. He hated it. He also hated the name on his utility vehicle, but he was leasing the *Cupcake*, so there wasn't much he could do about it. The small 26-meter utility vessel wasn't made for comfort or long-duration trips, but it was tough and versatile, and you could find them in use just about everywhere these days. His work was despicably boring, but it kept him away from people, for whom he had little use most of the time, and it kept him away from the bars.

During the last few months he'd been doing maintenance on a local network of FTL relays out on the rim, just beyond Old Man Panemito's orbit. Oh, sure the relays were all automated, and they had robotic repair systems already in place. The relays even had specialized and certified maintenance people contracted for checkups and emergency repairs, but their services were expensive as hell. So he was hired, much more cheaply, to do the little troubleshooting stuff. He made sure the relays were clear, that the bots were working OK, and that any glitches got fixed before they got noticed by anyone who's services cost a lot more. He flew a regular route between the six relays, covering a huge portion of the entire system. It took days for him to complete the circuit and get back to the small asteroid hovel he called 'home base', but most would have called a storage garage. After a day or so off, he'd head back out and do it again.

He slowed the *Cupcake* to a crawl as he approached relay CCT-L1602, and began his scans. Though his vessel never exceeded what most would laughingly describe as a crawl in space travel terms, he throttled back considerably as he neared the relay so as not to disturb its very sensitive calibrations. This particular one had been acting up a fair bit lately, warranting an extra careful approach. This was the halfway point in his regular three-day circuit, and relay CCT-L1602 was the furthest one out. He wondered to himself if its position had something to do with the problems he'd been having with it during the last two visits. He didn't worry himself too much about it, though. It was getting late, and he wanted to get through his checkout routine as quickly as possible, so he could point his ship home, set the autopilot and get some sleep.

He stuffed the last half of a dry sandwich in his mouth, and released the harness holding him into the pilot's seat. With a single kick and a twist of his stocky torso, he was drifting back toward the vac suit locker. Crumbs drifted around his head as he deftly inserted himself into the back of the husk of what looked like a headless hollow man in the middle of a gentle bow, and sealed the suit around him. He pushed off the wall and drifted back to the pilot's seat, helmet in hand, still swallowing the last bites of that too-dry mouthful. He keyed up the communication protocols that would let him chat with the

1602's onboard computers, and he readied the remote for a visual inspection. He did as much as he could using the remote MFD drone he'd named *Sneezy*, allowing him to keep the inevitable outside work to a minimum. He wished he could meet the design tech that thought it would be a good idea to place an external hand-toggled maintenance check recorder on an FTL satellite.

As the *Cupcake* crept closer to the relay, two contacts appeared on his passive sensor that should not be there, and they were dangerously close to the relay. He halted his approach and stared at the information on his screens. They looked at first like small bits of debris that might have broken off from the relay. But there was no positional drift to the contacts, and they appeared to be side-by-side, equidistant from the relay. The best analysis that his next-to-useless computer could come up with was 'unknown', but he already figured that they were not rocks or drifting junk. If they were indeed ships, as he suspected, their passive signals showed them to be quite small in profile.

He knew that fighters wouldn't come out this far just to have a look at a relay. These could be repair ships or drones. Maybe they were utility vessels like his, out here doing some unscheduled repair work. That made a little more sense to him. Surprise spot checks weren't unheard of. This relay *had* been acting up lately. But then he realized that this was unlikely, as he hadn't reported the last two anomalies from this relay to anyone yet. He'd just fixed the problem, documented it, and added it into the monthly log record he was going to send in. He hadn't sent anything yet, though.

He wasn't interested in doing any more guesswork trying to figure them out, so he chose to get a conclusive ID on them. He set his active sensors on high (used mostly for locating dropped tools, fasteners, or small rocks), and pinged them a good one.

Whoever or whatever they were, that seemed to wake them up. He got movement as well as some data on them.

This time, the returned profile was quite different from the initial passive impression. These were not small vessels after all. The contact registry continued to read "unknown" in its mindless yellow lettering, but the computer's best-guess profile now classed them as Patrol Combatant-sized vessels. The computer on board the *Cupcake* was another thing Ted hated about his job. It was next to useless, and often unreliable. He knew instantly that these two ships were PatComs by their shape, mass and the way they moved. But they were not like any PatComs he'd seen in his tug crewing days. Eight years aboard an armed tug had taught him a thing or two about ship recognition. He knew he was looking at PatComs, but they didn't match any Tariq-type configuration known to him.

As thoughts of new designs and naval prototypes wandered through his mind, other thoughts of ass-covering and job-preservation seemed to kick in, too. While trying to raise the 'unknowns' unsuccessfully on comms, he also started recording all his communications, external camera views, and sensor data. As usual, he sent backups to *Sneezy* out of habit. He wasn't about to be screwed by another failure of the *Cupcake*'s antique computer.

This suddenly got him to thinking about more than job-preservation. All at once, thoughts of survival and self-preservation hit him in a surge of tingling adrenaline. After all, there was a war going on out there somewhere. He'd lost track of the politics and the hostilities, for the most part, since he left the *Acadian*. One sure thing, though, he knew he was defenceless in every sense of the word, aboard the *Cupcake*. The two 'unknown'

contacts were appearing to be less and less friendly every moment. He donned the helmet and sealed up his suit as quickly as possible. He sent a status and position test squirt through the relay, and he launched *Sneezy*, still firing every bit of data its way that he could. He sat back down in the pilot chair and strapped himself in as tightly as possible.

He tried to communicate with the approaching PatComs again, this time using mostly expletives, but all he heard back was static and the sounds of his own breathing inside his suit.

It occurred to him that he really needed to work on his *people* skills.

He could hear his breathing becoming more rapid and shallow as he watched the two unknowns close on him. This was definitely not the kind of social encounter he'd been hoping for. Self-preservation was the only thing driving his actions now, as he keyed up a full-volume, wide-spectrum test broadcast through the FTL relay and hit the "test" button. A deafening, high-pitched shriek came from every system of his ship. The sound set his bones on edge, and felt very much like someone was jamming needles simultaneously in both ears. He instinctively clasped his gloved hands over his ears, but only managed to slap the sides of his helmet. He would have launched himself out of his seat with his thrashing if he hadn't been strapped in. He felt the *Cupcake* buck and jolt but couldn't be sure if it was his own writhing or some kind of impact. More systems around him sounded alarms as they flared and sparked. Lights and consoles flickered and died, until the entire cockpit was illuminated only by the dull red glow of warning indicators and the flickering light from the screen in front of him.

He managed to turn off the sound in his helmet, but he was sure he'd suffered some damage to his hearing. The electronic keening that had jarred him a moment ago was now replaced by a painful ringing he knew was probably coming from inside his head. The sounds of his breathing seemed distant, now, as he shook from the recent, painful auditory event. He glanced at the flickering workstation display in front of him to see that the two 'unknown' contacts were gone. The only thing disturbing this new ringing sound in his ears was a new rushing sound. Miraculously, there was no smoke, and no fire in his control cabin.

The rushing sound was fading as he unbuckled his harness to visually examine the damage. Maybe his ears were recovering a little, because the rushing sound had stopped. Red lights flickered across his panels, indicating severe damage everywhere except for the drive system. There were no readings, whatsoever, from the drive system, for good or ill. The few systems that still seemed to work were on battery power. He had no idea how long the cells would hold him, but he knew they wouldn't get him home. The star field visible outside his forward view port was rotating slowly, like the time-lapse films of the night sky he watched as a kid. He could feel the *Cupcake* tumbling, so he knew the stabilizers of the flight assist weren't working to stop the motion. He cursed his luck. If he couldn't get this utility fixed, he was going to lose his job. And he could barely afford the payments for it as it was. He needed to get outside to inspect, and get some of these control systems repaired, and he needed to do it quickly. He also needed to get the main power back online, so he could find out why he was getting no readings at all on the status of the main engine. He floated clumsily from the seat and moved to the control room hatch that opened aft to the main corridor. The airlock to the outside was at the other end of the corridor just beyond the hatch.

The tumbling motion was starting to bother him. Maybe his ears were more damaged than he thought, because he was starting to feel a fair amount of nausea. He just hoped he could get there in all this spinning without puking in his helmet. He stabbed the 'open' key twice, but door didn't budge. He located his small toolkit from under the co-pilot seat and removed the override panel to the hatch. After a few more moments of tinkering, the override worked and the hatch door slid sideways in complete silence.

What should have been a five-meter corridor ended raggedly two meters away in the emptiness of space. Beyond the bent remnants of beams and conduits, floating tangles of raggedly torn wires, and twisted plates where the entire aft section of his utility ship once was, he watched the star-filled blackness of space spin slowly in a counter-clockwise direction.

And he thought he hated his job before this.

Chapter 2

The Rear View Mirror

18.03.2268
NDS-A system

“There’s nothing out here, Captain,” McMichael said from the pilot seat at the front of the corvette’s bridge, “I hate to be the one to say it, but this is going to be one of those all *search* and no *rescue* missions”.

Chief Engineer Iwamasa spoke before Captain Ferris could respond, “What are you complaining about McMichael? At least we aren’t still patrolling a bunch of quiet waypoints in empty space.”

“Yeah, except our patrol mission was all but finished when we got these new orders. We should be enjoying our government-mandated spin time right now. This is a complete waste of time, there’s nothing out here. Whoever got into trouble, didn’t do it in this sector.”

“Well, the *CNV Corregidor* is *somewhere*, and we keep looking for her until I say we stop looking for her. She’s been missing for almost a week, now,” said Captain Ferris. “There’s no telling what they might be going through.”

After a pause, the pilot finally replied with some humility. “Aye, sir. I guess you’re right. Besides, I’m in no hurry to get back.”

Captain Ferris nodded, distracted by his own impatience and restlessness. The bridge officers were finding the fatigue and boredom as difficult to bear as he was. He couldn't seem to stop himself from squirming in his seat, despite the fact that it was a new, cutting-edge, inertial-dampened, form-fitting, heat-controlled, buttocks-massaging, Commonwealth Navy-approved, deluxe captain's chair model 10-048. It wasn't so much the chair that was bothering him. He'd just been sitting in it too long. His backside seemed to be developing a will of its own, shifting and sliding about. The five-point restraint harness didn't help either. It jabbed into his sides, serving as an uncomfortable reminder that he was getting a little thick around the middle. It was bad enough that his hair was thinning at the crown, and there was more grey hair at the temples than a thirty-five year-old should have. But it wouldn't do for an active duty ship captain in the Commonwealth Navy to look like he had a desk job. He didn't want to start looking like a desk pilot. He was looking forward to some station-side time, and a few hours in the fitness and training centre.

They'd been out on three patrols in as many months, and the crew needed a break. He needed a break. Getting the orders to abandon their previous patrol mission to look for a missing Navy vessel started out as a welcome distraction from the boredom. But the endless search patterns were acquiring a monotony of their own. Search and Rescue missions usually had an element of excitement to them; the noble feeling one got 'saving the day' and all that. The excitement wore off quickly when they were all this tired, and there didn't seem to be anything out here to find to feed that heroic feeling anyway.

“We’ve completed the search pattern in this system twice now,” Captain Ferris said, “but if I were in a damaged ship, I’d seriously hope that some extra effort was going into finding me. So let’s run it again. Mac, set up new search pattern waypoints offset by

plus eight degrees from the last one. Lieutenant Ravindran, give me a fresh contact report as far out as we can see from each of these waypoints.”

“Aye, Captain,” came the gunner’s reply from her WEPs workstation.

“Plus eight degrees, Captain. Aye,” said McMichael. The LDS drive audibly ramped up as they began to speed toward the first of three new waypoints. NAV officer McMichael looked at the captain’s reflection in his latest addition to the bridge. Ferris still wasn’t used to being visible at all times by his pilot, so he glanced up to see his pilot’s eyes in the in the rearview mirror attached over Mac’s head and returned the nod in a silent acknowledgement. Ferris took the moment to look at this very non-regulation decoration recently installed by McMichael. It seemed his pilot had gotten the idea from some old practice involving internal combustion powered ground cars from a couple of hundred years ago: A pair of large dice ‘hung’ almost directly over the piloting station. They were fuzzy.

He’d affixed them to a small rectangular mirror he’d attached to the overhead bulkhead. The mirror was a purchase from an antique dealer who specialized in vintage automobile parts that had become so popular in home decorating recently. This wasn’t the first pair of fuzzy dice they’d been subjected to, either. McMichael’s first pair of homemade dice was much less attractive, and they drifted strangely in the artificial gravity and inertial dampening fields. Worse than the gaudy appearance, there was an incident when they broke free during a rapid course change, and flew dangerously close to Iwamasa’s head, causing a very loud shouting match between the two.

Captain Ferris had banished them from the bridge after that, relenting only when McMichael could convince them all that the next version would be safe and secure. That, and the fact that McMichael cited several other non-regulation changes on their ship, in support of his argument. These modifications included a 3D holosticker of some young and very well-endowed female musician attached to the NAV station in the port accommodation module, a number of joke cartoons affixed to the hatch of the infirmary, and most importantly, the non-regulation heated coffee cup holder attached to the left arm of the captain’s command chair. Mac seemed to be uncharacteristically determined to add this antique auto part to the ship as his own personalizing touch. He was very convincing. Ferris looked again at the abominations suspended above the pilot’s head. At least these dice, securely fastened and attached using strong wire so that they only *appeared* as though they were hanging, were an improvement over the first pair he’d installed. Unfortunately, they were still fuzzy.

As an unintentional benefit, though, McMichael had created a combat edge no one else had thought of. The mirror allowed pilot and captain to make eye contact when they spoke to one another and when they were speaking with others. No one really used the video comm option that was a workstation feature on every corvette the navy commissioned. It seemed that McMichael was right in thinking that some kind of imperceptible but important additional information was transmitted via eye contact, and that this should be used like any other combat effectiveness improvement. Unfortunately, the admiralty frowned on any non-regulation modifications of the bridge configuration. So Ferris simply allowed it, and neglected to mention it to anyone outside the ship.

Ravindran interrupted his musings with her first report. “Captain, there are no vessels, nor any artificial contacts within range of our sensors at this first waypoint. However, there are four inert objects within range,” she spoke with the clarity and diction

of someone who'd had an excellent education, and the touch of a Bombay accent over her Oxford English hinted at a privileged upbringing. "Two of these objects are registered asteroids; the other two are unidentified. There are so many unregistered asteroid fragments in this belt that, in all likelihood these unknowns are just more rocks."

"Thank you Lieutenant. This is a large region filled with asteroids. The density of bodies is pretty low, but there is still plenty of rock floating out there we haven't logged yet. Keep scanning," Ferris sighed. "Mac, let's go have a look at Rav's unregistered rocks, one at a time, please."

"Aye, aye, Cap," came the pilot's reply, as the ship angled toward its new heading and began to accelerate to LDS speeds again.

It was, as suspected, an unregistered rock. They logged and tagged it for the commonwealth navigational chart database. Kenji Iwamasa felt that they should name it after Ravindran, since she'd detected it first. Ferris watched the reflection of his pilot roll his eyes and make a finger-down-the-throat gagging gesture at the suggestion. Fortunately, neither of the other two saw the display. The Captain, having noticed his Engineer's growing affection for the WEPS officer, suppressed his smirk, gently deflected the comment and hoped he wouldn't have to confront this little romance directly. "Let's leave naming decisions to the astrogation folks, shall we? Mac, set course for the second object and hit it."

As they approached it, Ravindran straightened her petite frame excitedly, then leaned in to examine her screen readout more carefully. "Captain, the unknown object is now showing on our contact registry. It's still unknown, but it's definitely not another rock. It looks like it could be artificial, but with a very odd profile."

"Thank you, WEPS," came the Captain's reply. "Let's identify them, and if possible, try to contact them."

McMichael spoke next as they approached. "It isn't big enough to be the *Corregidor*, but it could be a fragment, or a... wait. Captain, we've got an ID. It's an accommodation module from the *CNV Corregidor*! That pastie looks pretty banged up, too"

"Bring us in to one hundred meters; bow-facing, and keep trying to raise them on comms," said Ferris as he called up comms and ship codes on his console in an effort to make contact.

Before he could announce their arrival to the drifting accommodation module, they were hailed on the emergency comms frequency by a young man's voice with a French accent. "*Merde! D'accord, essaye celui là... Redoubt*, come in. It is good to see you! This is Lejeune, former NAV officer and acting Captain of the *CNV Corregidor*. Or at least what's left of her."

"This is Ferris commanding the *Redoubt*. We're glad we found you, and are ready to render assistance. What is your status?"

Lejeune replied again on the audio, though the reception was poor. "Captain Ferris, I am very content to meet you. We have low power, and our attitude thrusters are damaged. We have almost a full crew complement on board, so we are a little...um...cramped. Life support is nominal, and supplies are adequate, but I am very happy we did not have to wait longer. *Ça pue ici*. Things are starting to stink in here. We are getting ready to transfer right now, and are standing by for docking procedure. I will try to slow our movement some more."

With that the comms cut off, and the pastie seemed to roll a little less rapidly. Ferris opened the emergency channel again, “Glad to hear that you and your crew are unharmed, Captain Lejeunne. We’re approaching to dock. Before we touch collars and open any hatches, though, I need a little more information about your... predicament.”

“Absolutely, sir. And I apologize. We have been drifting here for more than a week, and seeing you made me a little...well...giddy.

“The *Corregidor* was destroyed in an accident. We are all that is left. We were on patrol in this belt. I guess you already know that much or you would not be here. We met with a mishap while accelerating for an LDS transit to the next patrol waypoint.”

“What sort of *mishap*?” Ferris prompted.

Lejeunne hesitated before his voice was heard over the audio again. “It was an asteroid, Captain Ferris,” he said. The embarrassment was clear in his voice. “I’m afraid we...I...I hit an unregistered asteroid just as we were starting LDS drive. It was a ridiculous mistake; only a rookie would do this. The impact overloaded the LDA emitters, and caused massive hull and system damage, including the ring. The comsec was badly hit. Within seconds, we had explosions and fires everywhere. The port pastie was very badly damaged. We lost four people to the fire inside before we had to seal it off. We had about a minute to get everyone into this accommodation module and detach before she exploded. Captain Heckerling and Buckley, our Chief Engineer, were still trying to get the comsec separated when she blew. They didn’t make it. Everyone else did, amazingly enough. I guess all those evacuation drills paid off.”

“I see,” said Ferris. He saw Mac make a wincing, pained expression in the mirror. It was every pilot’s worst nightmare to hit a rock while entering LDS. This wasn’t the first time it had happened in the history of starship navigation, but was still a rarity. This kind of disaster could befall even excellent pilots, and from the look on McMichael’s face, it wasn’t always the pilot’s fault.

“I understand your question, though, Captain Ferris,” Lejeunne continued, “and am happy to report zero biohazard threat and zero toxicity threat. We just need showers and a fresh change of clothes.”

“Understood, Captain Lejeunne. We’re docking now,” he said. As he spoke, Ferris nodded to McMichael, who was still watching him in the mirror. This was all the command McMichael needed to bring the vessels together with a gentle nudge. Ferris continued on the communication channel to Lejeunne, “I’m sure we can manage some showers and togs. We’ll mark the module and leave it for pickup later, as soon as the transfer is complete report to my office for a full report, please. In the meantime, get your people aboard as quickly as possible. I’m sure we’re all eager to go home.”

“Already transferring...and many thanks. I’ll make sure you and your crew get a round or two on us next time we meet at *The Bad Seal*. This is the *CNV Corregidor*, signing off.”

Captain Ferris rubbed his eyes with the gesture of someone who was very tired. As he worked his thumb and forefinger into the sockets in small circular movements, he spoke to his bridge crew through a barely suppressed yawn. “Tell everyone that we’re going to be cramped for the next little while. Get the survivors secured and accommodated as quickly as possible, Kenji. They get priority in the galley, stores, medical and hygiene services. Mac, as soon as we have the *All Clear*, undock, and get us

to Saltlake Base, best possible speed. I'm going to my office for a brief meeting with acting Captain Lejeunne."

Both officers acknowledged their orders, and turned unceremoniously to their tasks, relieved that at least the bridge couldn't get any more cramped than it already was.

Chapter 3

The Demonstration

18-03-2268

Tau Ceti

The bridge of the Independent Navy corvette *Wolf-In-The-Fold* hummed with the quiet sounds of the ship's machinery busily keeping the crew warm, breathing, and navigating through the space near Tau Ceti. NAV officer Rydstrom sat at the pilot's station at the front of the bridge, unaffected by the striking vista out the forward view port. All that mattered to him was his instrumentation and readout displays. A green dot on the HUD directly ahead was growing into a small wire-frame box as the numbers on the distance counter spun down. They were nearing their destination.

"We're almost at our assigned waypoint. Who wants to call the captain?"

"Not me," said Finn from the WEPs station. "It's your turn. He's stressed, tired and cranky, with all these strange Indie fleet movements. Last thing I want to do right now is call attention to myself."

"Don't look at me, either," N'Bele added from his seat at the ENG station. "No bloody way. If I've learned anything from my years working with Volochkov, it's the value of avoiding him when he's like this. Three years ago, I watched him destroy an entire freighter with all hands just because they gave him attitude on a bad day. I've heard he's done worse back before he was with either the Indies, or the Commonwealth Navy. And I haven't seen him like this in a long time."

"So I'm screwed then," Rydstrom sighed. "At least tell me what the hell is going on, before I get spaced for paging him. I mean, why are we being sent out here when the *Crack-In-The-World* and the entire battle group are up to something back there? Do you think Guzman suspects us? It seems like we're being intentionally kept away from whatever is going on."

"If Guzman or MacDuff suspected us, we'd be dead already," replied Finn. "No, I think everyone is being watched more closely these days. Ever since that incident at the Arcadia asteroid field, the whole fleet is jittery. I even heard that MacDuff himself came out here to talk to Guzman about that incident. It's no wonder she's suspicious of everyone. All I heard about this op was that the Navy is going to try to set a trap for the Indies, the Indies know about it and have a plan to make the ambush backfire on the Navy."

"And we can't do a damn thing way out here, can we?" Rydstrom complained. "We can't even watch to see what the surprise is. Shouldn't we warn the Navy, or try to stop it?"

"Maybe we will, maybe we won't. If you want to second-guess the captain, it's *your* funeral. Personally, I'd let him decide what to do about it. He's been inside the Indie fleet and spying for the Navy for almost a year now, which is longer than any other Navy spy has lasted that I know of. And we're still here."

“Shit, nothing like a friendly reminder that we’re living on borrowed time,” Rydstrom said. “We’re here. My borrowed time may be even shorter than yours. I guess I’d better get it over with.”

A tired voice, deadened by the white noise of ventilation and air-scrubbing filters spoke in the darkened captain’s stateroom. The glow from the display screen was the only light in the cabin. “Computer, record the following for naval intelligence, using Frost encryption procedure.” The hoarse edge in the voice grew more ragged as Captain Yevgienyi Volochkov spoke those words. His Georgian accent was barely detectable since he’d spent so much of his young adulthood studying at that international university in Freetown. He cleared his throat and paused to collect his thoughts before proceeding. He closed his eyes and bowed his head as if in prayer before continuing. *“Report update from covert operative codename Clarinet: Integrity of infiltration remains intact since last contact during the ‘Out in the Cold’ incident at the Arcadia Asteroid field. However, it is becoming clearer that the commander of this Independent Navy battle group is convinced that there is an informant in their midst. The investigation following the incident with the Redoubt is ongoing, and it is only logical to assume that, in time, they will discover our ruse. We are safe for a time, but how long we have remains unknown. I fear our usefulness as a naval asset amongst the Indie fleet is diminishing. We are able to access less and less useful information, and we are being given less important missions. Due to increased fleet vigilance, and scrutiny of its membership, we have been unable to establish contact using any of the usual...”* A tone chimed from the intercom, interrupting his thought. “Pause recording,” he said. The intercom chimed again, followed by a voice.

“Rydstrom here. You asked to be notified when we reached the assigned waypoint. We’ve arrived.”

“I’m on my way,” he said. His right hand trembled slightly as he ran fingers through hair. “Computer, strike the last phrase of that recording, encrypt it and file it.” He straightened his back and rubbed his face with both hands as he inhaled. He stretched in hopes that a lungful of recycled ship air would somehow grant him the vitality to stand and face another shift in the big chair.

He dressed quickly and strolled down the short corridor to the access hatch to the bridge of the corvette he commanded. He burned his thumb when he spilled some coffee trying to juggle both it and a biscuit in one hand as he keyed the hatch open. A grimace of genuine annoyance gave his otherwise handsome face a pained expression as he dropped into his command station. “OK, I’m here. Log will show we arrived at the waypoint as ordered. Flip the switch, Kobie. I want the event data recorder off.”

“Aye, Captain,” N’Bele ventured cautiously from the ENG workstation. “The EDR is now off, as ordered, but ...umm, as you know, the mission clock will still show discrepancies, so...”

“So you’d better shut the hell up, quit questioning my orders and execute them as quickly as possible,” Volochkov barked. “Captain Guzman, our illustrious ‘leader’ on the *Crack-In-The-World*, gave us orders to wait at the assigned waypoint and prevent any Naval vessels from escaping the system through this LaGrange point. I’m sure we can do

that just as easily from a little further away. I want some more distance from this waypoint. Anything coming out of it could destroy us in a heartbeat, if we sit here. Maybe that's what Guzman wanted, but she sure as hell isn't going to get rid of us that easily.

"Rydstrom, stand us off from that L-point by another two thousand Kilometres. I've set up the new waypoint already. We'll still be able to catch anyone trying to escape out this way, but I don't want to get caught by anyone popping in here either. Take us out to..." he keyed a few strokes on his console and sent the new coordinates to the NAV workstation. "Here. Then shut us down to passive mode."

"I don't understand. She's already given us a bullshit doghouse mission," Finn added from the WEPs workstation to his left. "Won't this raise even more suspicions?"

Volochkov spun in his seat to face Finn on his left. "Why are we even discussing this? Your understanding is not required. You don't have enough information for that. Yes, we're on a backdoor mission, and it may or may not be important, but I say we watch for stragglers from further away than we were told. Yes, I'm picking and choosing which orders to obey and which to bend. That's my job. Focus on doing your own jobs, and let me do mine! Get us clear of this waypoint, now."

"Aye sir," Rydstrom replied quickly as the engines reached full pitch. "Approaching the new waypoint now."

"If I catch one more of you questioning my orders, again," Volochkov grumbled. "I'll have to operate this ship even more shorthanded than we already are. The *Wolf-In-The-Fold* moves to my commands, boys and girls. When you get to sit in this chair, you'll get the same privilege. Not before."

"Understood, sir," Rydstrom said. "We're just wondering how we can gather intelligence on this newest Indie fleet action when they send us way out here, away from the action; away from everything. What do you think is going on, that they want to prevent Commonwealth vessels from escaping this way?"

"Let me worry about that," Volochkov scowled, then added more coolly, "All I know so far is that the *Crack-In-The-World* fleet is knowingly going to walk into a trap set by the Commonwealth Navy. My guess is they've got a surprise of their own up their sleeves. When the fur starts flying, they are expecting the Navy to turn tail and run. We have standing orders that there are to be no survivors; no witnesses to talk about this counter-ambush. We're out here to catch any of them that try escaping this way.

"Having worked for the Navy awhile now, I can tell you that they'll likely have some kind of backup defensive force ready at the L-points, to make sure their ships can get home. I don't want to get caught from behind while we're concentrating on blockading an exit. *That* is why we're moving further away. Everyone happy now?!" Volochkov's reply dripped with sarcasm.

After a brief pause in which bridge crew worked at their stations, Rydstrom spoke over the bridge comm from his NAV station. "We're at the new waypoint, Captain. Shutting down to passive mode now."

N'Bele added from the ENG station. "Confirm that. Powering down."

"Good. Now we sit and we wait. Turn the EDR back on," Volochkov said. He watched the display in front of him impassively with the same steely grey eyes that inspired the name of the ship; the same eyes his crew often found so inscrutable. One thing wasn't difficult to interpret: he wasn't happy about this particular assignment. "See

if we can still pick up anything on the fleet comm frequencies. We're too far out to see anything, but maybe we'll be able to listen in."

"Aye, captain, picking up the signals now," said Finn. "There's a fair amount of interference, let me see if...there, that's better. I'll put it on audio."

They heard a moment of something incomprehensibly garbled, after which a clear voice came on with a distinctly Scottish accent. "*This'll be the moment of truth, then, won't it ladies and gentlemen.*"

Finn offered commentary. "That's got to be Quartermaster MacDuff. I didn't know he was still on the *Crack-In-The-World*. I wonder why he..."

"Shut up, Finn," ordered Volochkov. "I'm trying to listen to what they're saying."

They heard the voice of Captain Guzman next, the commander of the Indie fleet in this system. She must have been speaking from the bridge of the *Crack-In-The-World* as well. "*I've always hated the Tau Ceti system. This little gambit isn't helping to change that feeling, Colin. I don't like this one bit.*"

"*Nor do I, Mo.*" MacDuff replied. "*But we play like they told us to... for now.*"

Another voice, probably a bridge officer, was harder to discern, but was still audible. "*We're getting sensor feed from our source. We've got signatures all over the place out there in the Amarid debris field. It looks like the Commonwealth fleet is in hiding, and getting ready to jump us, ma'am.*"

"*Keep it steady, everyone. This is a serious game. We're still just strolling along, here. We stay alert, but don't let them know anything.*" That was Guzman again, in her familiar command voice.

"*Ma'am!*" cried a different officer. "*Those signatures are... they aren't just navy vessels. We're getting contacts coming active all over the place out there. We're also picking up weapons fire...lots of weapons are firing. We've got multiple missiles launching, detonations all over the navy positions. None of those missiles appear to be inbound for us.*"

"*Put it on TAC one.*" After a brief pause of what could only be the captain looking at the screen. "*It looks like the enemy is taking a royal shellacking out there.*"

"*That, they are, Mo,*" Came the reply from MacDuff. There was a hint of distaste in his voice at the slaughter they were witnessing. "*That, they are.*" They continued to listen to the mayhem being unleashed on the Commonwealth Navy fleet for a few more moments.

"*It looks like two of them are trying to escape.*" That came from the bridge officer with the garbled voice. "*Yes, two have managed to break free of the debris field, despite heavy damage to each of them. They're limping toward the supplementary L-point. If they still have LDS, we could lose them any minute.*"

"*Tell Volochkov to prevent them from escaping at all cost.*" They heard Guzman order. Moments later, Volochkov received the coded signal at his command workstation, with the order to intercept two escaping navy vessels.

"Alright, people," Volochkov said. "This is it. Let's get ready for action." They returned their attention to the sounds of destruction still audible on the bridge audio as they prepared. They were able to hear to the desperate comms of the naval fleet as they transmitted indiscriminately on general frequencies. There was a stony silence amongst the bridge crew as they listened.

Pleas for surrender and mercy started coming in fragmented transmissions from the navy fleet. It was having a disturbing effect on the bridge crew. Finally, Volochkov gave the order to cut off the audio. He sat at the command station with his head down, and his eyes closed tightly, trying to shut images out of his mind.

He was grateful he couldn't hear them, for the moment.

"How many?" He asked Finn.

"About two dozen vessels, would be my guess, captain. It's hard to tell, at this point. The *Syracuse* is the flagship. I should say *was* the flagship."

"Shit. Put the audio back on."

They heard Guzman's voice mid-sentence. "... *were very clear in their instructions to remain at this distance until they withdrew completely. It seems obvious that they didn't want survivors.*" There was a pause as if consulting some information, or listening to someone out of range of the pickup. "*But I agree. I've seen enough. There isn't any fight left in that lot, so let's get in there and mop up.*"

The same garbled bridge officer spoke again. "*Ma'am, we're being hailed. Our Source wants to address you.*"

"*On audio, then*" Guzman replied.

An ominous, digitally enhanced voice boomed slowly from the bridge speakers. "***THIS DEMONSTRATION IS CONCLUDED. WE WILL RETRIEVE OUR WEAPONS AND WITHDRAW. WE WILL AWAIT YOUR DECISION.***"

Guzman's voice came back on, sounding downright angry. "*Have the tugs begin salvage operations immediately, and have squads one and three provide cover. The rest remain with the main fleet. Make it clear to the Navy that no one escapes this system, but we've got plenty of room for survivors. Not that there will be many, from the looks of it.*" There was another garbled bit they couldn't make out before Guzman's voice could be heard again. "*What's the status on the escaping vessels?*" Someone replied something garbled, to which she could be heard saying, "*Tell Volochkov to hurry up and dispatch them, then get back, pronto. We're a little exposed here.*"

"Audio off," Volochkov ordered. "Stand by to do some hunting."

"Captain, here they come. I'm picking up the two vessels they must've been talking about. Two navy corvettes," said Finn. "They're definitely headed our way in LDS, but travelling very slowly. They must have taken some serious damage."

"Ready an LDSi missile, and stand by for full power up," Volochkov said.

"Captain, are we going to attack them?" N'Bele asked, incredulous. "I mean, technically, we're on their side."

"You're going to do what I order you to do," Volochkov snarled his warning. "Yes, we're going to finish them off. They're as good as dead anyway. We've had to kill a Commonwealth ship before this as part of our covert duties, and it's the only way I can see to regain some credibility with the Indies. We just have to be sure to recover the EDRs so no one in the Navy finds out that we're directly responsible for killing these ships. Spying's an ugly business, in case you hadn't noticed. Launch LDSi now, and bring us up to full power."

"Firing. Missile away," Finn reported, all business-like again.

"Powering up all systems. You'll have PBCs in twelve seconds," N'Bele said.

Volochkov nodded, apparently satisfied his crew were back into operation mode. “Gunner: Two seekers apiece at our navy targets, then concentrate all beam fire on the faster one once we’ve closed. Launch missiles now.”

“Aye captain, firing missiles,” Finn reported, as the ship vibrated with the launches. “Helm to me. All four missiles are away. Moving in now. PBC range in eight, seven...”

“Captain!” Finn exclaimed. “Energy spikes at the L-Point. We’ve got incoming vessels.”

Volochkov keyed his screen and saw ships emerge from capsule space as his missiles closed on the fleeing navy corvettes.

“Shit! We’ve got four navy ships arriving at the L-point, and we’ve already powered up and fired on the fleeing ships. They’ve probably already seen us fire on them, so there’s no point trying to convince them we’re on their side,” he said. He paused again when he saw the size of the fourth navy ship. “Christ! We’ve got a destroyer here, too. No way we’re taking that on. Stand by for evasive manoeuvres. We’re getting out of here.”

Finn reported what he was seeing on the WEPs display. “Captain, we got two hits with our missiles, crippling one of the corvettes. The other is still heading toward his buddies at the L-Point. We’re still out of PBC range. Damn! The new navy arrivals are launching missiles now... What the hell?! They’re firing PBCs and gattling cannon, too. We’re way too far away for them to do any...”

They all watched their screens for a moment in disbelief.

“Captain,” Finn continued after swallowing hard. “They’re firing on their own ships. The navy vessels that were fleeing are both ... both destroyed...at the hands of those Navy ships that just arrived.”

Volochkov watched the bizarre turn of events on his screen, and spoke quietly to himself, unaware that his bridge crew was listening on the audio pickup. “*Through duplicitous eyes, I see duplicity.*”

“Captain? Say again?” N’Bele said.

“Something very bad is happening that I don’t fully understand,” Volochkov said, louder this time, “but whatever it is, we’re in deep shit. We fired on navy ships and they know that. Then they killed them off for us, and we know that. They’ve seen us and know we’ve seen them. No matter what they’re up to, we’re a loose end they’ll probably want to clean up... and we need to get the hell out of here.”

Rydstrom reported more bad news. “Uh, Captain. We’ve been targeted. They’re launching more missiles, and they’re heading right for us now, full burn. What the hell is going on?”

“Let’s worry about that later. Get us the hell out of here. Make for system zenith, plus 60 a.u. Best speed. Now. Ready on countermeasures. Stay alert, everyone. This could be the run of our lives.”

Chapter 4

Redoubt Returns

20-03-2268

Earth L-5

On approach to Saltlake naval base

Home again. At the end of the *Redoubt's* third patrol in as many months, Captain Ferris was certain that his crew was feeling the fatigue as much as he was. His temper was growing shorter, and his thinking was getting fuzzier, which can be disastrous in this job. They had managed a nice little rescue operation to cap off this last mission, but the gratitude of the survivors of the *Corregidor*, and the accolades they were sure to receive from the brass wouldn't make up for the overriding need for rest. Ferris' thoughts drifted to the warm comforts of his billet on Saltlake Base. He thought of the different feel of the bed, the different sounds, and the uninterrupted sleep he could get there. For the past couple of years that was the place he called home. In fact, it was only slightly larger than his quarters on board his corvette, but that billet was all about spin time, Rest and Relaxation, and catching up with old friends. The captain's cabin on the *Redoubt* was a place to shave and catch a nap between watch duty and paperwork.

Ferris could feel the awe that gripped almost every member of every vessel that approached the cradle of the species. Even though he wasn't, his ancestors were born on Earth. No matter how far flung people had become; no matter how many generations were born and raised in the colonies, this was the common homeland to everyone. Returning here from a mission filled every member of the crew, from bridge officers to the deck hands, with excitement. Every returning spacer knew those feelings of relief. Some just relished the anticipation of getting off the ship and getting drunk and laid. For others there was a visceral sense of warmth and safety, being aboard Saltlake and so close to mother Earth.

The blue disk of Earth filled the bridge with a pleasant new brightness that was a refreshing change from the dull red overheads and the glow of their workstation monitor screens. Like a stick insect crawling across the lens of a big blue spotlight, Saltlake base appeared in the middle of that blue and white disk. It was a spindly station of cylinders, long thin docking arms at both ends, and rotating sections in the middle of its main axis orbiting the Earth's L-5 point. Two larger military ships could already be seen next to it from this far out. It all seemed to loom up at them ridiculously fast as they came out of LDS. More and more traffic quickly became apparent in the station's vicinity as they approached.

"Approach autopilot has disengaged, Captain. We're slowing to port speed and will be holding at 4 Km off Saltlake. Hey, that's the *Purdue*. It looks like Vice Admiral Wexler and his favourite destroyer are in town. Their entire support escort group is here, too. We've got corvettes all over the place out here. There's the *Strathmere*, the *Stonebridge*, the *Khyber*, and the *Toulon*. It looks like he brought the whole gang. From the look of the traffic around here, we'll be waiting awhile before getting docking clearance," McMichael reported from the pilot's seat, clearly frustrated. "Anyone need to

make a trip to the head?" He heaved a sigh that was audible over the hum of machinery, the constant squawking chatter of ship comms, and the beeps of proximity warnings.

The traffic around Saltlake Base was indeed getting heavier these past few months, and the queues for docking were a major frustration. The confines imposed by the strict regulations of space traffic control and the density of orbital activity seemed to be unnatural for vessels accustomed to plying the vast open reaches of space unfettered. Naval corvettes were not supposed to be *stuck in traffic*, especially not when they were returning from a three-week patrol, and a bit of heroic rescuing.

To make matters worse, Captain William Ferris was not inclined to be patient with the STC personnel; not since they started joking on open channels about his ship. The good-natured ribbing had started innocently enough about four months ago when the crew of the *CNV-534 Redoubt* was returning from their first patrol since the now-notorious recon mission. The STC folks had asked the crew to "cool their jets" while they waited for docking clearance. This was followed by what sounded very much like laughter in the background over the comm. Then came the apologies for having to keep them "on ice", then came suggestions to "chill out", reassurances that they weren't getting the "cold shoulder", and so forth. They heard every other bad pun or reference to the cold imaginable, and some that were stretched beyond the imagination, all of which were followed by laughter audible in the background of the STC Centre. The *Redoubt* had been forgotten by the news media, and by the war-weary populace of Earth as quickly as they had been noticed, after their reconnaissance mission. Unfortunately, it looked like their peers in the navy weren't about to let it go as easily. The past was going to continue to haunt the crew who had once been *Out in the Cold*.

Now that they were back, they had to prepare themselves for more unwanted comments. With the exception of the *Corregidor* rescue, the patrol mission had been almost entirely uneventful. After two weeks on patrol, their only excitement was a brief comm exchange with a remote listening outpost, and the discovery of an old wrecked hulk of a tug from some unheard of fight that had taken place years before. There was nothing to do but tag it, log it, and continue on their way. At least they'd been able to end things on a high note with a heroic rescue.

The crew of the *Corregidor* wasn't making any cold jokes anymore.

Nonetheless, everyone aboard the *Redoubt* settled in to wait just like they'd waited for clearance the last two times they returned from patrol. Waiting seemed to be a big part of their job these days. Ferris doubted anyone on the bridge was in the mood for more cold jokes, but he steeled himself for it, in hopes that he would at least provide a good role model for his officers. As expected, they were hailed by STC.

"*CNV-534 Redoubt*, this is Saltlake STC. Welcome back ladies and gentlemen. You are cleared to dock on number 4."

The directness, and the politeness shocked Ferris out of his grim mood. Even his restless backside was stilled for a moment. They were cleared to dock already? And on number 4! That dock had recently been designated for civilian traffic, much to the chagrin of the Navy. In fact that whole arm of Saltlake station had been opened up as a civilian section last year under considerable political pressure, and now that the Independence war was heating up, the Admiralty was sorely regretting the decision. They thumped tables and shouted things like 'security risk', 'spy haven', 'intelligence nightmare' at station council meetings. But their complaints fell on deaf ears. Large

corporate interests, as well as huge amounts of taxpayer funds help pay for and build this station, and they wanted their access. Once the Navy caved in to political pressure, and gave access to the free-market masses, it was next to impossible to take it back. Number 4 wasn't the nicest receiving area the orbital had, but it certainly was the most interesting. It was worth a stroll down the main concourse for the food stall smells alone. Ferris was thinking about the delicacy he tried during his last visit to that section for a moment before he recovered enough to consider that this might be an escalation of the pranks. Perhaps the folks in STC were joking with him.

He re-opened the channel to the traffic controller. "Saltlake STC this is the *Redoubt*. Please confirm immediate clearance to 4."

The reply was crisp, professional and very clear. "Confirmed, *CNV 534 Redoubt*. Number 4 is clear and waiting for you. Navy brass has given us permission to route any and all waiting naval traffic there, now. You aren't the only ones who get tired of waiting in line, so we're stepping things up. Nice work on the rescue of the *Corregidor* crew. Oh, and it appears that there's a message waiting for you there, Captain. Proceed when ready."

So it wasn't a joke. There was no laughing in the background, just straight up professionalism and a clear path from STC. "Acknowledged, Saltlake. Commencing docking," Ferris looked up to the mirror over the pilot station and saw McMichael looking at him in stunned silence. "You heard it right, Mac. Take us in nice and proud-like."

McMichael was rarely at a loss for clever retorts, but he still hadn't recovered sufficiently to say anything more than "Aye sir. Docking autopilot engaged."

It looked as though the Admiralty had given up complaining in council meetings and were trying a new tactic to secure that part of the station. Wondering about the waiting message, Ferris opened the comm to STC again. "Saltlake this is *Redoubt*, again. Transmit that message to me directly, please. Command codes appended"

"Negative. Aah, sorry, but no can do, *Redoubt*. It must be a special delivery. It says here that a member of Vice Admiral Wexler's staff will meet you at dock 4 with a message. That's all we know. STC out."

Ferris keyed the comm off and leaned back into the astonishingly uncomfortable captain's seat and reflected. It didn't sound good. A hardcopy message from Wexler, hand-delivered by someone from his staff simply couldn't be good. He'd only ever seen the Vice Admiral once before, during some pep talk presentation to Commonwealth Navy officers a couple of years ago. What in the hell could this be about? Re-assignment? Disciplinary proceedings? Ferris' mind started worrying over every possible screw-up he'd been part of in his career, trying to figure out what he'd done that would warrant an official skewering. For a brief moment, he entertained the possibility that this was his well-deserved commendation and promotion, but dismissed it almost as quickly. He was certain it wouldn't have anything to do with pulling off the rescue. Bad news traveled much faster, and through different channels than good news.

This was definitely not going to be good news.

McMichael, assuming that the waiting message must be related to their heroic rescue, uttered the nursery rhyme fragment that had become another signature phrase "Home again, home again, jiggity jig," to no one in particular, then added, "The last one to *The Bad Seal* buys the round. And we'd better get there early. If Wexler's boys and

girls are here, it'll be that much harder to find a table. You'd better have your creds ready, there, Kenji."

Iwamasa ignored the taunt.

Ravindran turned from her WEPs console to face Captain Ferris. Even when she was exhausted, the small delicate features of her face were striking. "This should be a pleasant change," she said. "I hope we get more leave time before our next mission. Our last furlough seemed too short."

Ferris whispered, "Amen to that" to himself, as he keyed in final commands at his console.

The corvette slowed to a crawl as it closed the final few Metres to the dock. They all felt the small bump as the collars touched and the seals locked.

"And I hope we get something better than another patrol of empty space for our next mission. You'd think they were punishing us with these boring milk runs," Iwamasa added.

Ferris just nodded absently. A boring mission would have been fine with him, but he was pretty damned sure the next mission wouldn't be another milk run.

Chapter 5

The Politics of Failure

20-03-2268

Commonwealth Naval HQ

Jovian L-5

Yves Dupuis sat in the shadows of the conference room, in awe of the powerful names and faces he saw around him. It was one of the largest meetings he had ever been part of, and it boasted more brass and senate cronies than he'd seen in a single room. As a lower-ranking officer in the administrative branch of Naval Intelligence, and as one of the youngest people in the room, he felt distinctly out of place. His recent promotion to Lieutenant still felt unreal to him, and he hadn't expected to find himself participating in a high level meeting like this so soon, but he was starting to feel like the sacrifices he'd made were starting to pay off.

There was a great deal of subtle political positioning and discussion that he had trouble following. But there was a kind of excitement and sense of opportunity feeding his ambitious side that kept him riveted to the proceedings. The meeting was turning out to be something of a scolding, and had nothing of the dignity nor decorum he imagined high-powered meetings should have. He hadn't been called upon to deliver his information to them yet, and he was wondering if he would even get the chance. Dupuis had known that this was going to be a tough meeting going in, but he hadn't imagined that it would get this bad. This was not going to be a debriefing, as it was initially described to him. It was shaping up to be more of an inquisition or a maybe even a straightforward mob lynching. He felt bad for the poor fool that got stuck wearing this one. Careers got destroyed in meetings like this. But they also got made, if you played cards right. He still felt a little excitement at being asked to sit in this room, the Big Room; the conference room designed for Navy HQ as a replica of the main council chamber on Earth.

Sitting near the end of an enormous black glass-smooth conference table, in this shadowy room, with the who's who of Commonwealth Navy brass and politicians was intimidating enough. But to be seated opposite Colonel Chen was downright terrifying. That woman was, without a doubt, the most intimidating individual with whom he'd locked eyes. Ever.

He took a sip of water from the glass placed in front of him, hoping no one would hear how loudly he swallowed, and tried to place the glass back exactly on the same ring of condensation, as if to minimize any traces of his presence in the room. He reminded himself that he was supposed to be here; that his presence had been requested as an intelligence analyst and technical consultant. He glanced at the reversed glowing lettering of his name 'Lt. Yves Dupuis' on the nearly invisible nameplate on the table in front of him, announcing his identity to Colonel Chen directly across from him. He still wasn't used to the new rank in front of his name, making him feel a little as if he was granted the new bars by clerical error; a mistake that would be discovered at any moment.

The Colonel's calm but piercing gaze made him wish he'd used someone else's name. From the tone of voice of whoever was yelling at that moment, he was pretty sure that there were others in this room also wishing that they were invisible right about now. This was turning out to be a meeting for recriminations. The politicians and navy brass looked like they were preparing for a feeding frenzy.

Blame was being hurled around the room like manure from a spreader, and no one wanted to have any stick to them. He lifted his eyes from the flat display screen in front of him to view the same images on the giant screen at the end of the table to his right. The shouts were quiet now, as everyone paid attention to the recording. He recognized this part of the briefing as it played. He'd heard the transmission recordings many times already, so he knew how it ended. He hated having to listen to this part again, but at least it was getting to be near the end, and he would soon be out of this meeting, back at his little desk, in his little cubicle office on the lower decks of this station.

Everyone else seemed to be looking down at their screens as they listened to the recordings. Everyone, except Chen. She never stopped scanning the members of the room with eyes as dark as the gleaming table between them. She watched them all, as they listened to the recording of ship-to-ship comm chatter. The comm traffic all seemed to be very normal, while a computer-generated schematic showed a reconstruction of the position and formation of the now-dead ships. Then they heard the voice of Admiral Devette as his recorded voice spoke from beyond the grave, from that day on the bridge of his cruiser the *Syracuse* over two weeks ago. The volume of the recording gained a few decibels as they came to the moments of interest.

"Still no sign that we've been detected." said the overconfident voice of the late Admiral. *"The debris field is turning out to be excellent cover, Captain. Good choice. They're just sitting there, waiting for us to pulverize them. Stand by to deploy the fleet as planned. I want everyone to hit them at the same time."*

The Captain of the Danube-class cruiser must have nodded during that brief pause. *"All ships, this is Captain Marberg. Assume attack formation Beta and..."*

"Captain, we've got hostile contacts appearing all around us." This was the distressed voice of one of the bridge officers. *"More are still appearing...dozens of them, sir."*

"Tell me what you're seeing, WEPs." The captain replied to the Fire Control Officer. There was nervousness in his voice already.

"They're still popping up, all around us," said the incredulous WEPs officer. *"They look like mines, or maybe gun platforms. They're going active everywhere, and it looks like..."*

They could hear the sounds of explosions as the *Syracuse* was rocked by hit after hit. Amid the noise, fragments of both the Captain's and the Admiral's voices were heard above the pounding explosions and frantic reports of the bridge crew.

"...walked into a trap!"

"Someone must have tipped them off that..."

"...the hell didn't we detect these things earlier? They're everywhere."

"Taking damage to all systems. We're losing..."

"Reports of damage ... from all..."

"...weapons offline. Hull breach aft of..."

"...got the Mistral requesting permission to withdraw. The Victorious is also ..."

“... with heavy damage to....”

"Get us out of here, Captain! NOW! GET US THE HELL OUT OF..."

The recording ended after a few more seconds of static. Dupuis wasn't sure if the static was left in intentionally or not, but its effect was far more dramatic than silence would have been. It was all followed by silence in the room for a few moments anyway.

One of the Senators down at the other end of the table finally broke the silence.

"An entire fleet, including a Danube-class cruiser, several highly decorated and experienced Captains, and Admiral Devette, were all *lost* in what was supposed to be a surprise raid to take out the *Crack-In-The-World* group. Vice Admiral Wexler, would you please explain to me why this happened?!"

The Vice Admiral cleared his throat at the other end of the table and spoke in his best *I'm-in-command-here* booming voice. "In response to your request, I'd like to introduce you to Lieutenant Dupuis. He's one of the intel officers who was involved in the planning of this strike, and he's been kind enough to prepare a summary of the most recent analysis reports for this meeting. Lieutenant?"

This was it. This was the reason he'd been called into this session. For a moment he was paralysed by indecision. Should he stand? Should he go to the podium in front of the big screen? Should he just start talking? He could feel the eyes of everyone, particularly those of Colonel Chen, fixed on him. Waiting. He decided to simply stand where he was to address them. His chair slid silently on the carpet as he stood. He swallowed hard, wishing he'd taken another drink of water.

"Gentlemen. And, um, ladies....um...Sirs. As you have just heard, our fleet was led into a trap, ambushed, and entirely wiped out as it lay in wait at the Amarid debris field in the Tau Ceti system. It was supposed to have been *our* trap. Instead, we walked into one and lost an entire battle group. The strike fleet we assembled for this mission, a total of 22 ships, is presumed destroyed. We don't have specific numbers, but it is possible that some of those vessels were captured by the Indies. So not only have we lost a large number of vessels, but the Indies have possibly gained strength in the process. Fortunately, it should be some time before they would be able to deploy any of this materiel against us.

"We're still analyzing the available telemetry from the nearest FTL relay to determine the nature of the weapons used against us, but it appears that the attack was made by some form of stealth gun platform equipped with some form of beam weapon, likely a higher intensity particle beam weapon, or some form of disruption projector, not unlike that used by our own disruptor missiles. These weapons platforms are far more advanced than anything the Indies were thought to have acquired. As I said, we're still not sure exactly what they used but it's clear..."

Senator Hartwick, chairman of the Naval Oversight and Appropriations Committee, interrupted him. "Lieutenant, what's *CLEAR* is that we got our asses whipped in a humiliating ambush," he said. The Senator bellowed on to the rest of the room, completely ignoring Dupuis. "We lost almost two dozen ships and crews. That's over two thousand lives, ladies and gentlemen. Do you have any *idea* of the expense of that kind of catastrophe? Do you have any idea of the impact of this kind of loss on our war effort? We're losing ships faster than the Indies are, and they turn around and start using our own ships against us every chance they get. We can't keep this up." The Senator

turned and aimed his next volley at Dupuis. "You helped planned this raid? YOU tell us why it failed. It was supposed to take out the *Crack-In-The-World*. It was supposed to be infallible. It was supposed to strike a much-needed blow for the Commonwealth. It was *supposed* to be a highly publicized victory for our strained and war-weary population. What I want to know is: *How* did those Indie bastards know we were coming?"

Dupuis could see the direction this was starting to take, and felt a tightness growing in his gut. Accusations were being aimed in his direction. Some of them were sticking to him already. He had been involved in the analysis of the intelligence data gathered about the Indie battle group, and he'd helped set up some of the parameters of the strike. He wasn't the main strategist for that strike, but he knew that making excuses would only sink him in deeper. He realized this was only going to get uglier, so he took a deep breath. Fear gripped him even more tightly, but somehow he managed to speak.

"You are absolutely correct, Senator Hartwick. This was a severe loss of military hardware and skilled personnel. We cannot ignore the impact that a loss of this magnitude will have on our war effort, on the security of our shipping supply lines, and on the morale of the people who rely on us. I am also aware of the most recent statistics of Naval losses. This is one of the largest single defeats we've suffered since the independent movement started pirating our supply routes and stealing naval vessels. This is worse than the debacle at Metallake. It rivals our recent losses at Midway." The bitterness felt by the Navy brass at the mention of Midway was almost palpable. He instantly regretted bringing it up. "Our attack was planned and coordinated carefully so as to catch the *Crack-In-The-World* and her battle group at a vulnerable staging area, while they re-supplied with Indie-sympathetic commercial vessels. We took great pains to set this one up. This operation involved months of intelligence gathering and careful work. It simply should not have failed. But it did." Murmurs of protest could be heard down the table as he spoke, and he tried to finish his point by speaking louder and a little faster. "You are absolutely correct when you say that it failed because someone betrayed us. You have already stated the obvious conclusion: Someone knew we were coming. But frankly, that is not the most important question we face." he paused for effect, taking a moment to glance around the room before continuing. That last statement got the room quieter. He was not enjoying himself. In fact he was so terrified, he wasn't sure he would be able to muster enough saliva to continue speaking in a coherent way. He dared another sip of water, which normally would have been a mistake. But this crowd was politically astute, and they understood the role of drama and theatrics in this kind of forum. They waited in silence for him to continue.

"We know exactly what the Indies have, because they got much of it from us. We can calculate with a relatively high degree of accuracy how many ships the Indies have, and what their capabilities are. Up until recently, our biggest problems have been finding them, and choking their supply lines. They have very limited military manufacturing capabilities. Starship R&D, test programs, and shipbuilding are not something they have access to. Not yet anyway, and not of a scale that poses any significant threat at this time. We knew this when we planned the strike. It should have worked whether they knew we were coming or not. The attack group we sent in to get the *Crack-In-The-World* simply should not have failed, even if we were detected early and an all-out engagement ensued. The fact that it did fail confirms for us something that we have been suspecting for some time: That the Indies have been getting some help from someone else," he paused again

as the room began to settle. "Ladies and Gentlemen, there is another party involved in this conflict, and its time that we faced that fact."

"Nonsense!" Bellowed Hartwick and he addressed the chamber. "A monkey in a spacesuit can do more damage with a toolkit than an entire fleet, *if* he has the right information. All you need is good intelligence. Our *enemy*, is somewhere amongst us! Ladies and gentlemen, we have ourselves a spy problem, not some mysterious new power with super weapons." The Senator turned and faced Dupuis with a searing glare and an accusatory tone. "Let's not get distracted from the issue at hand, *Lieutenant*: That issue is the security of our Naval Intelligence Network. How did the Indies know we were going to hit them there and then?!"

Dupuis remained on his feet, consulted his notes, and tried to regain his composure. He couldn't think straight. He looked directly at the Senator. "Security is, indeed, an important issue Senator. Their knowledge of our plans indicates a disturbing breach. Even though they must have known about our plans, the *Crack-In-The-World* and her battle group did not destroy our strike force. They were the bait. The Indies have always known that this group was a priority target for us. But the weapons that wiped out our ships were of a new variety. We are still trying..."

"Yes, we heard." Interrupted the Senator, "You and your people are '*...still trying to analyze the data*'. Well I have another solution, and it was tabled before the joint council weeks ago. We step up production at the shipyards and we build a bigger and better fleet! Then we go and crush the bastards!"

Colonel Chen continued to listen and watch in silence with those piercing dark eyes. Vice Admiral Wexler rose to speak again in his best good-ol'-boy baritone drawl that always seemed to put people at ease. Dupuis felt a palpable relief when the Vice Admiral finally came to his defence. "Of course, the *Crack-In-The-World* group already knew we were going to try to hit them. They've always known that we'd try to hit them. They're just too much of a target for us to ignore. They were even alerted to our efforts to locate them by a recon mission a few months back. That was the same mission responsible for gathering key intelligence on their strength and movement. They aren't idiots, and they already knew we'd found them at one of their hiding places."

The Vice Admiral continued slowly, letting the members of this meeting digest the information. "But all of that was taken into account. The inexplicable thing is that they knew *exactly* where and when we'd be lying in wait. This was *not* a lucky guess on their part. They had time to prepare for us. Hell, they filled the entire region with some form of stealth weapon, and they let us waltz in and get comfortable. They even dangled the prize in front of us by bringing the *Crack-In-The-World* group in for re-supply exactly as expected. Gentlemen, we were played like fools."

"And that's exactly what we look like, isn't it?!" replied Governor Ledbetter. "We went from an assured victory to a humiliating defeat in minutes. The entire Commonwealth Navy looks like a bunch of fools, and those of us in the government are the fools who back you and pay for these precious ships you keep throwing away. What we need right now is to know how the information got to the enemy, and then we need to show everyone in the Commonwealth that we can gain the upper hand. We need to take back the initiative."

The room erupted in a roar of agreement and other sounds of assent. Two politicians leaned their heads closer together to share a comment before Senator Hartwick took the floor again, waving his arms to restore order.

"Ladies and Gentlemen." He took in the room in a sweeping dramatic look that made his gaze move over them like a lighthouse beacon. "We demand a thorough inquiry into this obvious breach of security." He slammed his palm onto the glassy black surface for effect. "And we want justice for some downright atrocious planning. Someone from within our own naval intelligence organization, whether by accident or by design, did not take sufficient security precautions to protect these plans." He glanced at Dupuis, still standing there. "More importantly, we need to send the Indies a message of the strongest kind that we will not cower; we will *not* give in to their terror tactics. I say we assemble a fleet faster than they would imagine possible and crush them once and for all. With my funding bill before the senate right now, our shipyards can start really doing what they should have been doing for months now: Building a Commonwealth war machine that will crush this group of pirates once and for all. I'm prepared to open discussion for an amendment that would attach a security rider to that, so we can tighten things up in our military forces, and stop the pathetic haemorrhaging of intelligence to the enemy. In fact, we need to become more vigilant across all sectors of our society, ladies and gentlemen, if we want to preserve our security and our way of life."

The room was taking on the air of a parliamentary session, and the politicians were warming up their rhetoric and getting in line to take their turn on the floor. The murmur grew louder as more raised their voices calling for the blood of the traitor and the blood of the Indies. Dupuis took this opportunity to sit down.

Vice Admiral Wexler cut through the cacophony, bellowing "Gentlemen," with his powerful voice, and quickly had the room calmed again. "Ladies," he then looked directly at the Senator. "If we could keep pouring ships and crews at the Indies, then we would have already won by attrition. We are, after all, the best equipped and trained force in known space. However, we need to *find* them, first. We simply do not have the resources to assemble an operation like that. Not yet. Our forces are committed elsewhere, and the President has made it clear that we are not to thin ourselves out any more than we already are. We need more time.

"Now, Senator Hartwick, we are all aware of the industrial interests you represent, and how happy your constituents would be if the government approved that funding bill quickly. We'll build more ships, I'm sure. But we need time to build that fleet you so badly want to assemble Senator Hartwick. We need time to train the crews. I agree that we need to reclaim the upper hand from these terrorists as quickly as possible. We need to take *SOME* kind of action and we need to take it now. Our current priority, as stated by President King himself, is to learn more about the Indies, and to cut off any intelligence leaks. In the process we may learn more about the origin of this new kind of weaponry they seem to have. We have been fighting the Independent forces in a guerrilla war for almost fifty years now, without any decisive advantage. The last few years have seen hostilities escalate dramatically as they've grown more powerful, and more determined. The harder we try, the worse the problem becomes. We need to learn to fight them more on their own terms.

"The trouble is we've been thinking too much like.... well, like the Navy."

Hartwick took the bait and questioned Vice Admiral Wexler. "What exactly are you getting at Vice Admiral?"

Wexler did not respond. Instead, he looked at Colonel Chen, nodded, and sat down again. The entire room turned to face the small, middle aged woman who was clearly still very fit under her highly decorated military tunic. Colonel Chen looked back at most of the individuals in the room in a subtler version of the senator's sweeping lighthouse gaze from a few moments earlier. The effect of her quiet regard was far more disturbing than anything the senator had managed to evoke. Finally Chen rose and spoke in a clear and controlled voice. "The Independent forces have been successful with small-scaled, hit-and-fade attacks for many years. They use subterfuge where we use force. They use guile where we use by-the-book, academy-approved battle plans. They favour speed and mobility over our fortress bases, rigid patrol routes, and cruiser blockades.

"Simply put, we need to change and adapt our approach to match those of the Independent Navy." Referring to the Indies as a naval force sent a disturbance rippling around the room. There was a hint of admiration when Chen spoke of the tactics favoured by the Indies. "We propose a small mission deep into Indie territory that will disrupt their infrastructure and compromise their interests. Such a mission will also provide you with your answers to the security questions, and may even provide you with your photo-opportunity victorious moment with which to appease your *weary* constituents. We have a mission in preparation that, with luck, could solve several problems at once."

Senator Hartwick, cheated of the chance to showcase his oratorical skills blustered onward. "How do we know this little strike will uncover the spy? Unless ...it's a setup!" A knowing smile spread across his broad jowls. "But wait a minute, if it's meant to trap the traitor in some kind of a sting, then how will it hurt the Indies?"

Chen responded quietly. "Despite the budget changes outlined by your own recent funding bill, Senator, the Navy still runs a special service under the command of the Naval Intelligence branch, known simply as Covert Operations. You may also recall that I am attached to this branch. This service has certain assets operating under deep cover close to the Independent Navy. Certain of these assets may have been compromised. Without going into details, we will be making contact with, and further use of one of these assets one way or another, to respond to your needs for retribution."

The small Colonel then returned to a sitting position with smooth agility. She made it clear she had nothing further to say. There was a brief silence followed by a murmur of questions from Senators. Vice Admiral Wexler deflected the questions with a single statement.

"The Covert Operations branch of the Naval Intelligence Service is already in the advanced stage of planning in this operation. For obvious reasons, there will be no further discussion of the details. Are there are any further questions? Very well, that is all."

Governor Ledbetter braved a single question as the military personnel in the conference room stood and started to collect their documents. "Who's going to keep watch on the watchers, Vice Admiral? You seem to be placing too much emphasis on the Naval Intelligence Service. How do we know they aren't the ones selling our secrets?"

This halted everyone. Chen looked at him with a hint of amusement before answering. "We are in the advanced stages of planning this operation. Mission briefings are being prepared as we speak. However, in order to guarantee the security of the mission objectives, the final decisions regarding the personnel for this mission have yet to

be made. Rest assured that all service branches of the Commonwealth Navy will be represented by their best," she said. She then turned and began to gather her things signalling the end of the meeting. Ledbetter didn't look satisfied.

Dupuis was relieved to have been left aside in that discussion, and was eager to leave the room. As he hastened toward the exit, Wexler, standing with Colonel Chen, called to him.

"Lieutenant Dupuis. A word, please, before you go."

He felt the surge of nervousness rise again as he turned to walk toward the officers. He snapped to attention in front of them, fixing his gaze somewhere neutral between them. "Yes, Admiral."

"At ease, Lieutenant. As you already know this is Colonel Chen. Colonel, this is Lieutenant Yves Dupuis, with Naval Intelligence." They exchanged almost imperceptible nods. "Dupuis is a very bright and promising analyst; one I'd hate to see lynched in some bullshit political game," Vice-Admiral Wexler paused for effect to let that sink in before turning again to face Dupuis.

"I'll get straight to the point, Dupuis. Because of your involvement in the handling and analysis of the recon data from our undercover asset in with the *Crack-In-The-World*, and because your involvement with the planning stages of the failed raid, you have gained the attention of people looking for someone to blame. Trust me, this is not the kind of attention you want to have. These are powerful people. They are precisely the people you don't want to get noticed by."

"I see, sir," was all Dupuis could stammer out. And here he thought he'd almost gotten away clean.

"No, I'm afraid you don't see. Those people that just left are already working on court martial charges aimed at you. In the past few days, I've seen two other bright young careers sacrificed to these jackals. Those 'bright young careers' are people you know. People you've worked with on this. Hell, I'll probably have to face a board of inquiry myself, next week. But I'm only going to be inconvenienced. Vice Admirals rarely get axed, but you know the navy: '*Shit rolls downhill*' and all that. Its people like you that get real damage, and these harpies are looking for a scapegoat; someone who they can make look like a spy, so they can look like they caught a spy. You see what I'm getting at? The risk to your career is greater than you think."

"What..." Dupuis tried, but failed, to swallow. "I mean. What can I do, sir?" Nervousness was escalating into real, honest-to-goodness, fight-or-flight terror.

"We're working on it. For the moment, it means you're going to have to go away for awhile; do some...field work for a change," Wexler said. The Vice Admiral then reached into the folder he carried and produced an envelope. Dupuis saw his name written on the envelope, and watched Wexler's perfectly manicured hand as he held it out to him. "Briefing's at oh-seven-thirty tomorrow on Saltlake Base. I suggest you get your things together, and get on the next shuttle over there. Read this carefully and don't be late."

Dupuis stood in silence, envelope in hand, still trying to process what he'd heard. The Vice Admiral straightened slightly, signalling his dismissal. "That is all for now Lieutenant," Wexler added. "You have your instructions. Dismissed."

Dupuis snapped to attention and saluted, grateful for the automaticity of this act from his academy training. "Sir," was all he managed to say, instantly embarrassed that

he hadn't properly addressed Colonel Chen. The salute was returned almost as an afterthought as the Vice Admiral and the Colonel turned to confer with each other, ignoring Dupuis as if he'd already gone. There was nothing else to do except oblige them, so he left.

Chapter 6

Exposed Feelings

21-03-2268
Saltlake Naval Base
Earth orbit

Lines were connected and secured, hatches opened, and the *CNV Redoubt* was, once again, one with Saltlake base. Once shutdown procedures were completed, and clearances given, crew started drifting out through the freezing connecting tube with their kitbags. Navy medical staff was on hand to look over the *Corregidor* crew, and three naval intelligence officers stood at the station side hatch, waiting for Lejeunne and the *Corregidor*'s officers for debriefings.

Ferris waited on the bridge of the *Redoubt* until he was certain his ship was secured, and the Saltlake maintenance crew was aboard. With a satisfied sigh, he signed out, switched the command console to standby, and stood up from his chair. He brushed aside a fleeting moment of reluctance at leaving his post and headed for the docking collar. A much-deserved break awaited him.

His bridge officers were standing beside their kitbags just inside the station hatch, watching the last of *Redoubt*'s crew exit with their gear, exchanging jokes and the odd good-natured insult. As Ferris re-oriented himself to the station's gravity, and approached them at a walk for the last few steps, he could see that they were waiting specifically for him.

"Lejeunne and his officers had to leave with the intelligence folks, right away," McMichael said, "but he wanted me to tell you 'thanks' on behalf of his crew one more time."

"I'm glad I wasn't here for that," Ferris joked. "I mean, he's a good man and everything, but if he had thanked me one more time to my face, I might've lost it and done something I would have regretted. He thanked me so many times during our return trip, I was starting to wish we'd left them out in the...out there."

There was a shared chuckle at this, more at his slip than at the pleasantries he was trying to make. There was no sign of the message-bearing officer from Wexler's staff that was supposed to have met them already at the docking port. Ferris had no desire to stand here and wait for whoever-it-was to show up. His billet awaited, and the entire station beckoned. The delicious smells of the civilian arm of Saltlake base were already starting to make him salivate.

Ferris looked toward the security checkpoint at the end of the passage, and the bank of lifts beyond which the rest of the station awaited. "Since the Vice Admiral's aide isn't here, I guess I'd better head toward their offices and get whatever it is over with."

McMichael looked at Captain Ferris with an expression of deep sympathy and spoke in an exaggerated tone of mock concern, "We thought we'd wait around, so we could, you know, *be there* for you when you get the bad news, whatever that may be."

Iwamasa laughed and said, "Yeah, right! Truth is we're more than just a little curious. We just don't want to wait to find out what's going on."

“We don’t want to impose, but if it concerns us or our next mission, we thought...” Ravindran added.

“It’s OK,” Ferris assured them, reaching down to grab his kitbag. “Let’s go to the Vice Admiral’s office together.”

They walked toward the security checkpoint near the lifts. Before they could reach it, they saw a man exit from the third lift to the right. “Looks like the Vice Admiral’s aide decided to come after all. Here he comes now,” said Ferris softly.

They all looked toward the man approaching the security checkpoint from the bank of lifts. They watched as he passed through the checkpoint and started toward them. Kenji and Ravindran’s eyes got bigger as he got closer. The man walking toward them, in a Commonwealth Navy uniform bearing the stripes of a Lieutenant Commander, appeared normal in all respects, except that his skin was somehow...wrong. They could see that his skin was translucent, like looking through a thin milky film into tissue layers normally obscured by the dermis. They could see the myriad blood vessels, the fat deposits, tendons and connective tissue, the superficial musculature and in some places, bone. His eyes were a disconcerting pale blue, rimmed with pink. Captain Ferris composed himself first and turned to face the approaching aide with the decorum the situation demanded.

“Captain Ferris,” said the man with the clear milky visage streaked with pink and blue. He saluted smartly, which was answered quickly, but a little less tightly by Ferris. “I’m Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard, of Vice Admiral Wexler’s staff. I apologize for the delay. I fully intended to meet you right at debarkation. I have a message to deliver that requires formal acceptance.” He reached into his breast pocket and produced a small envelope, obviously containing a data chit and a message on real paper. The sight of blood vessels, bones, tendons and cartilage of his hands was just as disturbing to the officers of the *Redoubt*, who all watched the movement with muted shock.

Ferris reached out for the envelope, pressed his thumb into the seal on the back, and said, “I, Captain William Ferris, accept this delivery.” Ferris knew that his voice pattern and thumbprint had just been registered by recording devices somewhere on the aide. “Thank you, Lieutenant Commander. And no need to apologize. We’re just grateful you made the trip all the way down here. Aren’t we Lieutenants?” They all recovered themselves and nodded in agreement. “Was there anything else?”

“No, Captain. You are simply urged to read the message immediately and attend the briefing in the morning. With the Vice Admiral’s compliments.” Skarsgaard saluted.

Ferris returned the salute, said “Thank you,” and nodded a dismissal to the aide. After Skarsgaard was beyond the checkpoint and well out of earshot, Iwamasa finally spoke.

“Sir, what the...what was wrong with him? I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Nothing’s wrong with him, Kenji,” replied Ferris absently as he turned his attention to opening the message envelope and pulling his data pad from his pocket in order to read the chit. “He’s a Visible Man.” This left Iwamasa no more informed than he was a moment before.

“It was kind of a fad about ten or fifteen years ago,” McMichael added. “A bunch of people went through some genetic and chemo procedures to thin the skin and remove all traces of pigment. It made their skin almost see-through. Apparently it was a pretty

painful procedure, and most suffered from skin sensitivity problems after the fact. The fad died out pretty quickly.”

“No shit!” Iwamasa snorted. “That’s the creepiest thing I’ve ever seen. He must be great at Halloween parties.”

Ravindran spoke for the first time since the aide had departed their company. “I remember reading something about this. People did it to make a statement. They wanted to renounce any racial affiliations whatsoever, didn’t they?”

“People did it,” Ferris said, as he inserted the data chit into the pad, “for the same reasons people do just about anything like that: to make some kind of statement. Some were making a statement about racism, like you said. Some were saying something about our moving to the stars and living inside artificial protective shells; kind of declaring that Humanity no longer needed skin as protection from the elements. Some were saying something about secrets and concealing stuff from others. Apparently you can always tell what these folks are feeling, so they can’t lie very well. Some people did it to defy the superficial nature of everyone’s ideas of beauty. I think a lot of them just did it to be different; you know, for pure shock value. It makes quite an impact.”

“Well, it sure worked on me.” Iwamasa said. Ravindran had already gathered up her kit and was starting to move toward the checkpoint. Kenji watched her and continued, almost to himself, “A Visible Man. Damn, now I’ve seen everything...and I’m not sure I wanted to see as much as I just did.”

Ferris had been looking over the message with a furrowed brow. “Ravindran, hold up for a second. You were all dying to know the contents of the message, well here it is: I’ve got a briefing at 07:30 tomorrow morning about a new mission. They’re already starting to make some changes to the *Redoubt* as we speak, and readying her for departure sometime in the next couple of days from the look of the work schedule. It looks like we get an even shorter break than we thought. Meet me at the lounge down the hall from my billet at 10:00 tomorrow, and I’ll tell you whatever I can at that time. In the meantime, get all the sleep you can pack into the next 18 hours. More than likely we’ll ship out again in a couple of days with all this hurry.”

McMichael objected openly to the news. “Wait a minute. Aren’t we supposed to get at least a couple of weeks of spin time after that many weeks of grav plates? I mean, I thought it was a health rule or a law or something. You’re supposed to only spend so much time in artificial gravity fields because of the health risks, then you get down time either dirtside, or in the spinning sections, away from the fields. I remember reading that in our training vids.”

“You’re probably right,” Ferris said, “except they were guidelines, not rules, and the Navy’s own studies say the health risks of the grav fields aren’t that bad, so they ignore the guidelines whenever it suits them. Besides, these are orders. Health and safety guidelines or not, we obey orders.”

“Yeah, well...if I get cancer, or my nuts start to rot, the Navy’ll be hearing from my legal team.”

“Give it a rest, will you, Mac,” Iwamasa said as they started to collect their things to clear the security checks. “All you’ve been doing the past couple of weeks is gripe and complain.”

“I only complain when I have good reason to. Have you noticed that most of the time I’m pointing out the lousy maintenance work you and your so-called Engineers have been doing? You wouldn’t have to hear about it if you were halfway competent.”

“Sure. Whatever you say, Mac. Just stay away from me during our shore leave, OK?” Iwamasa then turned to Ravindran “Hey Rav, you want a hand with your bag there?” he offered the WEPS officer, somewhat meekly.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” McMichael bellowed. “Would you two please drop the school-yard crush crap for one stinkin’ moment?! For three weeks you’ve been driving me nuts with ‘Hey Rav, want to take a coffee break with me?’ or ‘Hey Rav, what do you think of my PBC cooling conduit modifications?’ I’m sick of it, and I’m sick of you two. Hey Kenji, here,” Mac held out his own kitbag. “You can carry my fuckin’ bag if you’re so eager to help someone.” He dropped his bag on the deck, turned, and walked toward the security desk.

“Stop right there, pilot!” Ferris said with a firmness that halted McMichael before he got four paces away. When he did not turn back around to face them, Ferris yelled louder than he remembered yelling in months. “Turn and face your Captain when he’s speaking to you, Lieutenant! And by God, you will stand at attention!”

That got everyone’s attention. McMichael spun around, and they all snapped to attention. Ferris fumed as he took a deep breath and spoke to them all in a strained, but much quieter tone. “You may be tired and you may be irritable, but that does not excuse you from treating fellow officers with respect. Believe me, I’m as much in need of a break from you as I am from the bridge of that ship. But we are officers of the Commonwealth Navy. We’ve all worked and trained too hard to give in to a little fatigue or to personal frictions. Lieutenant McMichael, you just crossed the line with that outburst. You are an embarrassment to the uniform you wear. You owe your colleagues an apology. Right here, right now. You also owe your Captain an apology for that display of conduct most unbecoming of a naval officer.”

“Aye, Captain,” McMichael seethed. He paused before turning to face Ravindran and Iwamasa. He balled his hands tightly at his sides as he forced the apology. “Lt. Iwamasa, Lt. Ravindran. I apologize for my outburst.” Kenji was still flushed with embarrassment, or rage, Ferris couldn’t tell, and Ravindran had remained cool throughout the exchange. They simply nodded acceptance.

McMichael then turned to Ferris. “There are no excuses, sir.”

“Damn right, there aren’t! Now, according to this message, we need to revise the duty roster and make room for several new staff and a specialized accommodation module. That means we have to leave behind about a third of our crew for this next mission. You just earned yourself the task of coming up with recommendations for who stays and who goes. I’ll expect to review them by oh-six hundred, Lieutenant, so unless you can work fast, you can forget about a stop at *The Bad Seal* this evening. Get me?!” Ferris said.

“Aye, Captain,” McMichael said again, all formality and military snap.

Ferris turned to his engineer and weapons officers. “I don’t know how much of this I should be directing at you, Ravindran, but I’m going to say it to both of you, here and in the open: I don’t know what, if anything, is going on between you two. Frankly, I don’t care. You already know the navy’s policies in this regard, so you proceed with any romantic entanglements at your own peril. However, you also seem to require a reminder

about the uniform you're wearing. I demand absolute professionalism, courteous conduct and top performance from you, on or off duty. No more flirtations. We're here to get a job done. Do you understand me?!"

"We understand you, sir!" they both yelled in unison.

"Very well, then. The two of you, go and get the most out of whatever liberty we're going to get. I'm guessing it won't be much of a break, so focus on the *rest* part of R and R." Ravindran gave Iwamasa a look that shifted from annoyance to warmth before they headed to the checkpoint. Each of them carried their own kitbag. Ferris watched them as they stood together, reading their body language and how closely they stood to one another as yet another sign that they were now more than fellow bridge officers. They took turns leaning and looking directly into the security scanner. A light turned green, a computer voice cleared them, and they walked into a lift. They barely got a nod from the bored soldiers standing there, weapons dangling loosely from shoulder webbing.

"Mac, you're with me. Pick up your kit. Bring mine, too, while you're at it."

"Aye, sir," McMichael acknowledged, without the usual wisecracks. There was a distinct absence of gentleness as he grabbed the bag, letting Ferris know he was still furious. *Let him pout*, Ferris thought.

With that, Ferris started toward the security checkpoint and the lift beyond it that would take them to the concourse. Delicious smells of the food stalls were already drifting in the air, playing havoc with his salivary glands. McMichael fell in close behind him, lugging the bags.

Chapter 7

Fresh Recruit

20.03.2268
Saltlake Naval Base
Earth orbit

Ted Allbright's gratitude for the rescue pickup had worn off several days ago. Since then he had vacillated between irritability, and openly hostility. This whole naval debriefing and protective custody bullshit was just a fancy way of saying he was a prisoner. He was well fed and relatively comfortable, but he knew evasive answers and stalling tactics when he saw them. He'd undergone three intensive interviews with three different navy officers, but when it came time for him to ask a few questions of his own, the flow of information abruptly stopped. They seemed to want to know a lot about the vessels he'd seen just before they attacked him. Unfortunately, he didn't know much. Then, as soon as they learned that he had been an officer aboard the *Acadian*, he suffered a barrage of new, more aggressive questions. They suddenly wanted to know all about his former ship and crewmates. Shortly after that, his interrogators stopped coming to see him, and not even his guard was talking to him.

All he could gather was that the *Acadian* was involved in the Independence movement, which put him in the unfavourable position of being suspected of being sympathetic to their cause. He didn't care about the Independence War one way or another, and he found it hard to believe that his former crew was in with the Indies. He knew his former captain Bilodeau too well, so if the *Acadian* had gone over to the Indies, it would have meant a change of command. He simply chalked it up to another stroke of incredibly bad luck in a long string of Allbright-style bad luck, and tried to work out how he could manoeuvre himself out of this mess.

When he wasn't watching his vid, he tried to fight his preoccupation with getting his hands on some whiskey. He spent more and more time wishing he could indulge in a major binge. He even promised himself he'd tie a good one on if he could only get out of this room. The only distraction from his craving was trying to figure things out.

First, there was this Independence War. It had started out a few of generations ago as a bunch of colonials, grumbling about the unfairness of the central Commonwealth government. They refused to recognize Commonwealth authority and tried to establish an independent government in protest. The Commonwealth came in and squashed it pretty thoroughly, but it kept popping up stronger and more defiant every time. It started to get violent with acts of sabotage, piracy and a steadily increasing trend toward neutronium theft. Neutral vessels, commercial tugs, and all manner of ships were arming themselves, and refusing to submit to Commonwealth law. When the Indies started stealing Navy warships, things started to really get serious. The conflict was still growing and getting nastier every month. Both sides were acquiring stronger forces, but neither side was gaining any distinct advantage. He chuckled cynically to himself at the thought that somebody was getting stinking rich off of this whole thing. The stuff he saw in the news

about a recent defeat for the Commonwealth at Tau Ceti made it clear that the Indies had some serious firepower.

He was digesting his supper, thinking about how those strange stealth ships fit into the picture, when the door to his room slid open. A Navy guard looked in at him, then stood back from the entrance to reveal a small middle-aged Asian woman in Navy uniform. She looked directly at Ted, as she entered the room alone. She stood just inside the entrance as the door closed silently behind her. Her eyes never deviated from him for at least half a minute. He returned the look with a vaguely hostile glare that started to wither under her gaze. Another moment passed before she lifted her arm and pointed to one of the two chairs in his room; the one without the food tray covered with empty cartons and wadded serviettes.

“May I sit down?” she asked.

“Do you really care what my answer is?” Allbright shot back, though it lacked the barb he hoped it might have. He sighed and gestured toward the chair. “Make yourself at home.”

She placed the chair closer to his cot and sat with the fluidity of a gymnast. He swung his legs down and sat up on his cot to face her. A closer look revealed that, despite the apparent age on her face, she was very fit. She looked around the small room slowly, examining every detail with her dark eyes. Finally she said, “I can see why you don’t like being here.”

“Do you mean because I’m not allowed to leave, and I can’t even go to the head without an armed escort?” he replied sardonically.

She smiled a little, and said, “No, I mean to say that the room is all wrong. The arrangement and dimensions are not...felicitous.”

“Yeah, well maybe bad Feng Shui is part of the torture, eh?” he said. He was finding it very difficult to keep his rancour at full force with her sitting so calmly right next to him. “Look, I’m sure you didn’t come here with redecoration in mind, so what’s on the agenda today? Foot beatings? Electrical wires to the testicles? Or maybe you’re here to give me the old Chinese water torture.”

She looked at him for a moment before answering. “My name is Colonel Chen. I’m with a special branch of the Commonwealth Forces, and I’d like to talk to you about your...situation.”

“My situation? Sure. A chat with a Colonel would be a delightful change of pace,” replied Allbright with more than a little sarcasm. “Maybe I can bring you up to speed. I was doing my *job* when I was attacked by a couple of your secret new stealthy ships. I was rescued by a Navy corvette, transferred to something bigger and brought here. I’ve been incarcerated for almost a week, I have no idea where I am, I’ve been held without any charges levelled against me, I’ve almost certainly lost the pathetic excuse for a job I had, and I’ll probably never be able to pay for the trashed Margate Multi I was renting from my employer...I mean former employer.”

Chen was unfazed by his vitriolic response. “Mr. Allbright, I can understand your hostility. I apologise for the way you have been treated. In fact, I’m here to try to make things right; hopefully in a way that will benefit us all. We find ourselves in a rare position of serendipitous mutuality. In fact I hope that I can make you see the equilibrium; the intertwined harmony of the decisions that lay before us. You have

something that we want, and we have something that you want. We can both benefit. I ask only that you listen to what I have to say, and think carefully before you respond.”

Allbright said nothing for a moment. He simply looked at her, trying to decide if this was a snow job, or the real thing. He decided to give her the benefit of the doubt for the moment, and eased off on the hostility a notch or two. “I have no idea what you mean by *serendipitous something-or-other*, but I’m listening,” he said as he leaned back and crossed his arms.

She remained perfectly still, sitting upright in what he’d already determined was a very uncomfortable chair. Somehow, she managed to make it look positively luxurious. “Let me begin with an assurance of release,” she continued. “You were held here at Saltlake Base because you were a witness to something that has eluded us for some time. Your claims to have recordings of sensor data of something that we haven’t been able find made some of our officers a little overzealous in their coercion. Then, when they learned that you once served with a vessel known to have Indie sympathies, they felt that they had all the justification they needed to suspend your rights and keep you contained. In fact we are now quite certain that you have no real affiliation with the Independence movement, nor with your former crew on the *Acadian* for that matter. So I apologize for the way that you’ve been held, and for the lack of respect you’ve been shown. I guess we can say that these are difficult times.”

“You don’t even know the meaning of the words ‘difficult times’,” Allbright muttered. “Let’s get to the part about the release. I’ve got plants back at the homestead that will be in serious need of tending.”

She nodded with a hint of a smile and continued, “A fellow gardener! It has been too long since I was able to tend my own garden. I’m delighted to learn that we share this interest.”

“Yeah, it’s mutual,” he said sarcastically. “A man’s got to eat. Besides, the air scrubbers in my home base aren’t exactly top quality, so the plants help a little. You were about to get to the part about my release?”

She smiled again, before resuming. “Regardless of what your decision may be, you will be free to leave this facility. The next shuttle leaves in the morning. In the meantime, I’d like to propose a mutually beneficial undertaking.”

He glanced at his watch and said, “I’ve got several hours before I need to pack. I’m still listening, but I have to be honest, the chances of me doing anything but leaving are slim. I don’t like the sound of the word ‘undertaking’.”

Chen seemed to relax a little as she became more erudite. “As you know, spacers see all manner of strange things out there, and they enjoy telling tales when they get home. Part of what we do is to sort out reality from myth in the many rumours we hear. From time to time, strange stealth ships have been spotted briefly in the past few years, but no one has been able to make any kind of sensor lock, let alone a recording of sensor data. The vessels you saw were indeed of an advanced design. Unfortunately, they were not ‘ours’ as you suspect. The recordings you claim to have made would be of great interest to us, and we would consider them to be very...*valuable*.”

“I get it. Straight coercion didn’t work, so now you’re interested in bargaining.” Allbright’s hostility was coming back to the surface.

“It is perhaps a bargain of sorts, but one that holds something of value for you, too,” Chen remained calm. “Please recall that you are free to leave on the next shuttle. There is more, though, that you should hear.”

Since he didn’t object, she proceeded, “You may choose to keep your sensor recordings to yourself. We are confident that we will eventually succeed in making similar recordings. Then, your recordings will be much less...*valuable* to us. However, there is something else you have that is of interest us: your experience and your...independence.”

“How’s that?” Allbright was truly stumped. “My what?” He’d undergone enough grilling the past several days to not want to hear anything like the word ‘Independent’ again.

“Your experience as an engineer, and your *independence*.” Chen repeated.

Allbright almost laughed out loud, “Ma’am, I was chief engineer on a tug nearly six years ago. I started out on a CRAC team, and worked my way up from there to the chief’s seat, so my schooling was pretty...informal. Mind you, I was damn good at it, but that was aboard a Puffin-class tug, which wasn’t exactly cutting edge technology back then, if you get my meaning.”

“I’m afraid my knowledge of Engineering terminology is limited,” she said.

“What is the *Crack team*?”

“C.R.A.C: Collider Ring Accelerator Coils. The CRAC team is usually a couple of junior engineers who sit in a small noisy control room down on the engineering decks of a ship and monitor the ring systems, which are finicky to say the least, as I’m sure you already know. That was a long time ago for me. I served as chief for eight years. Since then, I’ve been doing the engineering equivalent of pushing a broom. Oh sure, I’ve learned loads about FTL relay systems lately, but frankly I find that stuff boring as hell. That and I’ve been fighting a few personal demons of my own. Even the greenest freshman in naval academy probably knows more about current tech than I do. And I don’t know what you mean by ‘independence’. I don’t think I want to know.”

“What I mean by ‘independence’, Mr. Allbright, is the fact that you appear to have no personal investment in either side of this conflict between the Commonwealth and the Independence Movement, yet you have contacts on both sides.”

“If you mean the *Acadian*, they are very old contacts, who would probably rather not be contacted,” he corrected.

“As you say,” she nodded. “Nevertheless, there can be great merit in being on the outside of things, when being on the inside brings only suspicion.”

“I’m sorry but...you lost me there,” he confessed.

“Your independence; your status as an outsider, makes you valuable to us right now. There are certain internal problems within the different branches of the Commonwealth Navy that make any individual we recruit from within our own ranks...suspect. We would much rather recruit someone who is truly a reliably disinterested independent with substandard skills, than a more skilled member whose loyalties are uncertain. In short, we would rather have you, and help you to brush up your engineering skills, than rely on a graduate from the naval academy who may have come under the influence of a questionable faction within the Navy.”

Allbright held up his index finger to interrupt her “Let’s just set aside that little ‘substandard’ comment for a moment. You said ‘recruit’ twice just now. Are you saying that you want to *recruit* me?”

“Yes,” she said. Her candour shocked him to silence for a moment.

“But...” he started to stammer out objections. “I’ve got to be at least five years older than you are. I’ve been studying to re-qualify, but I haven’t gotten my first class papers yet. I don’t know anything about the whole spit and polish and saluting and ‘Aye-aye, Captain’ Navy stuff. I’m probably the last person you’d see on a Commonwealth Navy recruiting poster.”

“And that, Mr. Allbright, is why *we want you*,” she said with a rare flourish and a smile. “I’ll give you the particulars to consider. Then I’ll leave you to think about it until the morning, when I’ll return to take you either to the shuttle home, or to a meeting on board this station. First, if you agree to help us, we will pay you handsomely for the location, frequency and any information in the remote drone you recorded. We can probably even arrange to look after your plants while you’re gone; maybe fix those scrubbers, too. Second, we will place you as the second ENG officer on board a Navy corvette outbound on an important mission. I want only one thing: for that mission to succeed and for the ship to make it home intact. We have reason to suspect that there may be someone else who wishes otherwise. I am confident that you will work hard to save your own skin, if nothing else. Third, your status during the mission will be as a specialist, and your rank will be temporary. You will have to determine for yourself who to trust and who to follow, but you will be expected to behave as an officer of the Commonwealth Navy. I can give you reasonable assurances that the Captain of this vessel is trustworthy, but you should begin by trusting no one. Upon completing this mission, you will receive a full commission, back pay, hazard pay, an honourable discharge option, and full first class qualifications. In short, you’ll get a clean slate and a good jump on a new start.”

“And if I choose to decline your offer?” he asked.

Chen lifted her head and straightened her neck a little as she looked at him squarely. “Then you are free to go, but I’m afraid we won’t be able to assist you in any matters pertaining to your debt or your employment. You would be...on your own. We would also, of course, insist that you refrain from discussing this matter with anyone.”

“Figures. Some choice, eh?” Allbright said. He already seemed to be engrossed in thought.

“As I said, it is remarkable that we may both gain, or both lose equally, depending on your choice,” she said.

“Don’t think that you can manipulate me so easily, Colonel. You’re talking to someone that doesn’t have much to lose,” he snapped. “The situation isn’t nearly as *balanced* as you seem to think.”

“Precisely,” she said as she stood and took a step toward the door. “Which is why you’ll probably want time to think it over. I’ll see you at 06:30 in the morning. Sleep well, Mr. Allbright.”

Chapter 8

The Rumour Mill

20.03.2268
Saltlake Naval Base
Earth orbit

It was almost two hours before he made it to *The Bad Seal*, and he could tell the place was filling up as he approached from the main corridor's spin-ward side. He heard the susurrations of dozens of voices talking at once, and the melody of some very catchy tune. It was the latest hit from some Somali kid who had captured the essence of an entire planet's mood in a hauntingly beautiful song. Ferris paused outside the bar for a moment to listen to the song. It was catchy and visceral, and made him understand how billions of people could be sick and tired of the war...the same war he was in the middle of fighting. It seemed to be coming from speakers everywhere. While he listened, he looked up and noticed the sign over the entrance to *The Bad Seal*. It was a blue neon outline of the harmless, streamlined aquatic mammal, but this particular seal was sporting what looked like a spiked collar, sunglasses, and a blue neon cigar.

As he walked into bar, Ferris noticed that the crowd was in a more serious mood than usual. He strode in, expecting at least some ribald comment or joke about coming in from the cold, but the crowd was sombre, preoccupied by something else as they huddled around their tables. While he searched the crowd, he received a few nods of recognition from officers scattered at a few tables, and a warm greeting from the bartender, but was otherwise left alone. He gestured to indicate his order to the bartender. She nodded and pointed with her chin toward the left side of the bar. He followed her gaze and saw McMichael and the *Redoubt's* backup bridge crew at a table near the empty stage, catching up on gossip and continuing old arguments with some of the engineers. Ferris wove through the crowd, working his way to his crew's table. Before he got halfway, a hand shot out from one of the groups he was passing and grasped his upper arm.

"Bill, did you hear the news?" asked a voice Ferris recognized instantly as Boland's.

"How many times to I have to tell you, it's William! I honestly think you're getting forgetful in your old age," Ferris shot back at his friend with humour, "and no, what news is that?"

The smile left Boland's face as he shuffled his seat to the side and gestured with his free hand for Ferris to sit with them. The others moved their chairs and found a free chair for Ferris to sit on. "They're finally confirming the rumour we'd heard about the losses at Tau Ceti. The group that was sent out to get the *Crack-In-The-World* was wiped out. All of them, including the *Syracuse* and that windbag, Admiral Devette. They'll be making an official announcement any minute."

Ferris was silent a moment, and the others waited quietly, watching him react to the news, much as they had recently done. He looked at their faces, friends and acquaintances, each of them from the bridges of navy corvettes much like his own. It was hard to believe that many ships could have been lost in one day.

Finally he spoke. He knew no one else would until he did. “All of them? Did anyone get out?”

“None that we’ve heard about. It was a slaughter,” the reply came from Ramsay, across the table. “It’s the worst since Metallake.”

Ferris was still somewhat stunned by the news. “What about the *Tulsa*? Did she make it?” he asked. Heads either looked down, or shook slowly from side to side. “I knew Vince Kinsey and his crew pretty well. Damn. What the hell happened?”

“Well, that’s the big question that everyone wants answered,” replied Boland. “Including the brass and on up the political food chain. The whole hornet’s nest is pretty stirred up.”

Tagliapietra looked furtively to the side, and said in a conspiratorial whisper, “No way could the Indies have pulled that off by themselves. They just don’t have the...”

“Would you shut it?!” Boland scolded. “I already told you, this place is full of ears, and we don’t need any more garbage in the rumour mill. All this talk of spies and security breaches has everyone on edge. We don’t want to bring the navy intel folks down on us, now do we?”

Tagliapietra was not to be dissuaded. “Spies aren’t our biggest problem. Besides, we’re not the only ones in this bar talking about the mystery ships being spotted out there. I’ve heard half a dozen unofficial reports of low emission, stealth ships being detected here and there. Ships that don’t quite match any profiles we’ve got. I mean, this whole disaster means we have to at least consider that there’s another player in this conflict don’t we? I’m not the only one who thinks there’s someone else out there.”

Ferris listened to the exchange, trying to piece together what he was hearing. Finally, he realized how exhausted he was and tried to steer the discussion back to simpler things. He said, “It doesn’t matter what we think, does it? ‘Considering’ is for the higher-ups. We’re the guys who take orders and go out there to complete the missions they give us, or die trying. The upside to that is we don’t have to worry about the rest of it. And hopefully, if we do our jobs, they’ll let us go home so we can grow old and fat in peace,” he said. He raised his glass in a silent toast. “To our fallen comrades, and to our departed friends.” He up-ended his glass and drained it in true navy tradition.

Almost reflexively, the others followed suit. There was a staccato clacking, as empty glasses were placed back on the table, followed by a brief pause in the conversation.

Boland broke the silence with a new line of conversation. “I heard about your pickup of the *Corregidor*. Lejeunne and his team were very grateful.”

Ferris looked down briefly before replying. “We just happened to stumble on their signal first. They were pretty far off the beaten path, but they weren’t in any big trouble. Not really. Their accommodation section had separated fine, and they’d managed to evacuate most of the crew before the reactor went. So they were sittin’ pretty and playing cards when we showed up.”

A smile crept over Boland’s face. “That’s not exactly how Lejeunne tells it. Let’s just say they weren’t looking forward to being adrift until the supplies ran out.”

“Well I’m just glad we got them back. Too bad about Heckerling and Buckley though,” Ferris said. “I didn’t know them, but I hear they were decent men.”

“They were,” Boland said soberly.

“Ramsay, here, did a bit of rescuing of his own a week or so ago,” said Tagliapietra. “Tell him Sid.”

All eyes switched to Sid Ramsay, executive officer on the *CNV 545 Idzumo Maru*. Ramsay finished his beer to the bottom of the glass, and set the glass down slowly as he wiped his moustache with the back of his hand. He glanced toward the empty glass as a hint for a refill. He was clearly winding up for a good yarn. Those at the table already knew something about what he was about to recount, but it didn't matter. When Sid told a story, everyone leaned in, and kept quiet for the duration. A fresh beer appeared next to the empty glass, which was Sid's cue.

"Ten days ago, we're stuck on patrol in the Epsilon Indi system: a real shit hole of a system. Finally we get orders to jump out, and join a wing of corvettes watching Venturi. Apparently the Indies are getting desperate for fuel, so we're supposed to go help baby-sit the fuel processing facilities there. I'm figuring this'll be a smooth one. There are some leisure stations there, with more bars than I could hit in a term of service. So just as we're lining up at the L-point, about to jump out, we get this bitch of a blast from the FTL network that nearly fries our ears and every system on the bridge. I mean, this was the mother of all 'squawks'! So we wiggle our fingers in our ears for a minute, and when the ringing stops, we go check it out.

"Two hours later, after visiting a couple of FTL relays at the outskirts of the system, we come across this wreck of a utility multi. More like half a multi."

"You mean like a mini-multi, one of those new flitters?!" Grant asked. His interruption nearly broke the spell, and everyone gave him one of those looks.

Ramsay was unfazed, though. "No, I mean like the front half of a normal sized Margate Multi that's been severed amidships." He made a slicing motion with his hands. "Chopped clean in two. So we get close, thinking we're going to have to recover some frozen corpses and we're telling each other 'poor fuckers', when all of a sudden, we get these strobe flashes from a guy with a hand-held torch in the cab."

Grant interrupted a second time, "You mean to say the break was so clean that the cab was intact?"

"No, shit-for-brains, it was a mess, it had been spaced several hours before we got there. It had been rammed for chrissake, not sliced with a cutting beam! But this guy inside is a tough old bastard, and an experienced spacer. He had his suit on before the trouble hit him." Ramsay continued, glancing at the rapt faces around the table. "We pick him up, and he's spitting piss and vinegar the whole time. He's going on about these mysterious ships, and how he surprised them at an FTL relay, where they were up to something. He described them as PatComs, but not like anything we've got. 'Stealthy' he says, and he goes on about having proof and everything. He said the big FTL squawk was his idea, and it's the only reason he's still alive. He was probably right, too."

"So where's his proof?" this time it was Ferris who broke in with a question.

"It wasn't on the smashed up multi. He said he recorded the sensor data and transmitted it to a remote drone, then launched it. He said the drone was still out there, but he wouldn't give us its frequency, location or anything. I'm still not sure if he was scared of us, or if he was just a cantankerous fuck. We looked for it, but there was so much crap floating around we couldn't find it. Anyway, we didn't have long to look 'cause before we know it, we've got new orders to meet with the *Malta* and hand this guy Allbright over to them for 'debriefing'," Ramsay said.

“The *Malta*! I wonder what she was doing there?” Tagliapietra asked.

“No idea,” Ramsay continued, “We just do what we’re told. We dock, and a couple of spooks come aboard, grab this guy and everything to do with him, including our interview logs, and they leave with him. Just like that. They just tell us to proceed here, wait for further orders, and forget about the Venturi mission. I can’t say I’m too broken up about sitting around here. Besides, I heard the fuel dumps got hit pretty hard. The Indies tried something pretty bold and it backfired on ‘em. Lot o’ ships were lost,” he upended his beer again, and drained at least half in a single mouthful.

Ferris nodded and finished his beer quietly, listening to the others at the table as they continued to talk about recent events. Apparently, a newly salvaged Navy corvette named the *Dreadnaught* was really making a name for itself. They exchanged the standard station gossip and speculations about the Commonwealth’s politics. He was tired, and the news of the disaster at Tau Ceti was a lot of information to absorb. The implications for the war, his career, and tomorrow’s meeting drifted around in his head, but refused to connect with one another. The harder he tried to make sense of it all, the more elusive it got. He caught Mac’s eye again, and gestured that he would be there in a moment. There seemed to be some spirited discussion going on there as well.

“What did you say this guy’s name was, again?” asked Ferris.

“Allbright. Ted Allbright,” Ramsay said. “He’s not exactly a master of diplomacy, if you know what I mean, even after you rescue his ass from certain death. If you see the ungrateful prick, tell him ‘You’re welcome!’ from me.”

“I’ll be sure to convey that message in the spirit intended if I see him,” said Ferris.

Tagliapietra was fascinated by the possible connections. He wasn’t shy about sharing his ideas either. “Personally, I think it’s connected to the loss of the *Syracuse* and the attack group at Tau Ceti.”

“Here we go, another conspiracy theory,” Ramsay quipped.

“No, not a theory. More like...like a fact that just needs a little more support. Too many pieces already fit.”

“Like what?” asked Boland.

He ticked itemized points off on his fingers one by one. “We got all kinds of reports of sightings of weird ships out there...”

“Unsubstantiated reports,” Boland added.

“OK, Unsubstantiated reports, but enough to mean people are seein’ things out there...something is going on,” he continued his finger list unfazed. “We got Navy intel spooks nabbing guys after run ins with unknown, stealthy ships. We got our own spies out there working right inside the Indie fleet telling us two things: jack and shit! We got a big strike group go after a major Indie battle group and get wiped out to a man. It wasn’t a big fleet battle, it was us losing everything. I mean, that alone is just too bizarre. How often does a fleet that size, doesn’t matter whose, get defeated without at least a few survivors. This wasn’t a defeat: it was a slaughter. I’m telling you, something *weird* is going on. Look at what happened at Metallake: we get this spook intel informing us about the existence of an Indie base. We get there, and not only is it abandoned, it’s got a big old antimatter welcome gift waitin’ for our boys. The only answer is obvious: our own spooks sellin’ us out to the Indies. The Indies are makin’ some new weapons, and the spooks are helping them perfect them...probably so we can get our hands on ‘em or something. This whole ‘Naval Intelligence’ branch is just a bunch of turncoats selling us

out lock stock and barrel. Give me the days when we were just the Commonwealth Navy, and we kept those stinkin', ungrateful colonists from tearin' each other apart. We protected them, and yeah, we kept them in line too, but it was for their own effin' good!"

"Whoa there. Are you saying that the reason we lost the *Syracuse* and all those ships was because of our own intelligence people?" Ferris interrupted.

"Effin' right! Every one of those intel spooks is just waitin' for the right moment to sell us regular navy guys out. Maybe they're just waitin' until the price is high enough."

"He's got a point," Ramsay said. "Even if he does have a few too many in him, and he makes his point crudely. But who can blame him? He had a brother who was a C-Fighter pilot in the first wave at Metallake. I heard in the rumour mill that we've got a spy right in with that Indie battle group we were aiming to take out. Only I heard that they haven't been reporting in much lately. Then we go in for an assault, and suddenly we lose everything. It's got to be because they turned. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Except for one important thing," Ferris said, growing less patient at their accusations of other service branches. "You're all completely full of shit! The spook ship you're talking about saved my ass, at great risk to themselves when we recovered the data that was used to set up that raid almost four months ago. I know. I was there."

"They probably just wanted to make sure you would get away with their plans for a complete setup, and they threw in a little drama to make it more believable. You swallowed it wholesale, and now we got a whole strike fleet dead!" Ramsay said.

Ferris tried to remain calm. "You weren't there. I was. It wasn't just *a little drama*. We saw Indie ships destroyed before we got away. In fact that same spy ship almost took us out because we were posing as an Indie ship...one they'd already destroyed; one that would have threatened their cover. We had no idea...we were just trying to buy a little time so we could make a run for it. They were this close to killing us when they saw we were actually Navy. So they held their fire, they sent us some data, and they helped us get away."

"Ferris, you're the one's full o' shit," Tagliapietra retorted. "You got your loyalties all wrong. Those ships we lost out there this week? They were Commonwealth Navy ships. *Navy*. Understand? They were our *friends*. That spook you ran into just used you to help set them all up. You may not have done it intentionally. But as far as I'm concerned, you helped them wipe out our people."

"So now it's *me* who's selling out the navy is it?" he looked dangerously quiet as he fixed Ramsay, then Tagliapietra with a piercing glare. "Boland, you ought to be more careful who you choose for company," he said. He slowly looked around the table, his gaze met by equally hostile looks. "Some of these ...individuals can't seem to hold their liquor. I think I'll go sit with officers who won't insult the uniform."

He didn't need a map to tell him that this could get ugly fast. He thrust his chair back as he stood and walked away from the table. With more force than he would normally use to traverse a crowded room, he reached the table where his officers sat and leaned over to speak to McMichael.

"We're leaving. Now," he said. With that, Ferris turned his back, and strode toward the exit. His crew followed, and not a word was spoken by any of his officers. McMichael joined him in the main corridor as the rest of the *Redoubt* officers streamed

out. “We were just having a little healthy debate about our navy’s wisdom,” he said. “What’s the problem? Who’s tender sensibilities did I insult this time?”

“No one’s. This time, I’m the one who stepped in it. But things are getting ugly around here. You have those crew reassignments ready for me?” Ferris held his hand out, palm up, waiting.

McMichael handed him a data card, with a smug expression. “No way I was going to miss a few rounds at *The Bad Seal*, so I got right on it.”

“You should have reported to me when it was completed immediately,” Ferris chided without humour.

“Where’s the harm in a little...”

“Don’t make me pull rank on you twice in one day, Mac. I’m too tired to get into it again,” Ferris said as he looked around. “I’m not looking for any more disappointments from my most senior bridge officer and friend. Besides, we can’t afford any incidents right now. Something is up. We’ve got a major defeat about to be announced, talk of betrayal from within, fingers pointing every which way, but mostly at the intel folks, sightings of mystery ships, and a mission briefing in the morning that I don’t know anything about yet. Get everyone tucked away, with the warning for the new roster to be on standby for rapid return. Once you’ve done that, get some sleep and meet me tomorrow morning after the briefing.”

“Aye, sir,” McMichael grumbled. He knew better than to question or joke when his captain used that tone of voice.

Chapter 9

A New Deal

20-03-2268

*Aboard the Crack-In-The-World
Tau Ceti*

“Captain Volochkov, the Quartermaster will see you now,” said the head that briefly peered around the edge of a barely opened hatch. As quickly as it had appeared, it darted back behind the door, leaving Yevgienyi Volochkov without much of an impression of the face, hair color, or anything else. He had been trained to be good at memorizing faces, but this one escaped him entirely. He was probably a little too distracted by the feeling of dread that hit him when he heard those words. The blood drained from his face, and he could feel the tingling and clammy feeling of fear building despite his disciplined skill at hiding such emotions. He took a breath and stood up, mentally going through his calming exercise. He covered the distance to the hatch in a few strides, but that was all he needed to regain his composure and remind himself of the routine nature of this inquiry. Everyone who had been with the *Crack-In-The-World* during the past few months was getting grilled. This was just his turn.

The hatch opened again as he approached it, to let him in, then swung closed with a resounding clang. His dread returned when he heard the automatic locks secure and seal it. He looked back toward the hatch, then to his left at the simple table where two men sat amid several layers of scattered files, pages of paper, clear plastic recording DRDs, and data slugs, all lit from below by the glow of two data screens in the table. One of these men belonged to the head that peered out the door a moment ago, the other was Quartermaster Colin MacDuff, de facto leader of the Independence movement's naval forces. There he sat, businesslike and very...normal appearing. There was more grey in his beard than he had imagined, but MacDuff's hair was in his signature tightly bound ponytail, pulled back to reveal prominent veins at his greying temples. He was a small lean man, who gave the impression of a formidable strength, but the lines around his eyes revealed the face of a man who also liked to smile.

“Uh... I'm...” Volochkov began rather clumsily.

“Sit down, please captain,” MacDuff said, gesturing to a chair at the table nearest to Volochkov, without even looking up from the screen. “We'll need just another moment or two.”

Volochkov sat without saying anything, trying to project just the right amount of discomfort and awe that the situation demanded, but no more than that. The two men across the table from him worked in silence as if he weren't in the room, calling up files and data on the screens. Volochkov took this opportunity to study the two, looking closely at their faces and demeanour. He'd seen the Quartermaster before, in file images and recordings, but this other fellow was new. He had a larger frame than MacDuff, and he was clean-shaven. He looked softer and out of shape, which meant he was probably a desk jockey. Volochkov guessed he was a secretary or some kind of personal assistant,

but felt that it would probably be dangerous to underestimate him. Finally the assistant looked up and spoke directly at him.

“Captain Volochkov, I understand you had a fair run of it during our little demonstration the other day.”

“No navy ships that were part of the *Syracuse* group survived or escaped, if that’s what you mean,” Volochkov replied defensively. He intentionally kept the full details of what he witnessed that day to himself. “I chose to return via a series of indirect routes...to protect the safety of the *Crack-In-The-World*.”

“Indeed,” The assistant said. He paused just long enough to hint that there was some doubt about the story. “Well, good job on that one. Glad you’re back. Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

“As you know we’ve been reviewing the actions of the members of the *Crack-In-The-World* group since the *Out-In-The-Cold* incident a few months ago. We’ve assembled and reviewed as much as we could from that day, but logs and sensor data are sketchy. Allow me to review the events from that day: the group was waiting for re-supply, and had just moved to an asteroid field to wait, and to effect repairs. A Commonwealth Navy recon vessel was waiting for us in that asteroid field, and they managed to slip past us. We suffered further damage to our ships, we lost valuable time, and a good deal of initiative, not to mention the three PatComs destroyed that day.

“The asteroid field we had chosen for cover was very good, but it was also a source of interference for our sensors, which means our sensor logs are poor, which means we’ve had to have every commanding officer in here for a little chat, to give us their version of things. Those PatComs were crewed by experienced and valued members of this movement, so you can, perhaps, understand our desire to get a better understanding of the events.”

“I knew them personally Mr. Whatever-Your-Name-Is, so drop your *better understanding* insinuations and your *little chat* bullshit. Those ‘experienced and valued members of the movement’ were my *friends*. Just ask your goddamned questions,” Volochkov replied with an excellent display of anger and moral outrage. It caught the assistant off guard, but he thought he detected a small smile start to creep onto MacDuff’s face.

The assistant recovered with a distinctively colder approach. “Captain, let me assure you that we have very good reasons for...”

“Captain Volochkov,” MacDuff interrupted. “This is not a formal inquiry, nor is it a disciplinary hearing.” They remained silent for a moment as the focus shifted to MacDuff. “In fact, we are not the Commonwealth Navy; we simply don’t do that kind of thing.”

MacDuff turned to his assistant and spoke in a friendly and conciliatory tone, “Geoff, we’ve been at this for hours now, without a break, and you’ve had the lion’s share of it. Why don’t you take a wee stroll down to the galley and gi’ us a minute to have our ... ‘Little Chat’ while you catch your breath.” The look he gave Geoff, the assistant, made it clear that this was more than a friendly suggestion. Geoff seemed to understand. He gave Volochkov a final unfriendly look as he collected a file from the table, pushed his chair back, and walked toward the exit. MacDuff and Volochkov watched each other intently as they both waited for the hatch to close behind the assistant.

More silence followed the sound of the hatch re-sealing itself. Finally MacDuff broke the silence, and the steady look he had been directing at Volochkov. "Let's start again, shall we? This time: the no-bullshit version. Clear?"

"Very clear, sir. Thank you," Volochkov replied.

"Don't thank me yet, Captain," MacDuff leaned to the side and reached down for something in his briefcase at the side of his chair. He pulled a small, unmarked grey box from the bag and placed it on the table between them. He placed both thumbs firmly and squarely on the opposing sides of this box, and held them there for a moment until a distinct click was heard. He removed his thumbs from the box and folded his hands on the table in front of him, nodding toward the box as he resumed his discourse. "Now we can be *very* clear. No bullshit, *and* a guarantee that no one else is listening." His eyes made darting glances toward the walls and ceiling to convey his message.

"We have only a few minutes, so listen very carefully, and say nothing," MacDuff leaned in closer across the table, and gestured with a finger for Volochkov to do the same in a kind of mock conspiratorial tone as if they shared a secret. "We know we have a spy in our midst. We've known for some time. The Navy recon incident was not our first indication of the presence of this spy. Now, someone went to a great deal of trouble to make sure we wouldn't have much sensor data to assemble regarding that incident. However, we have a couple of remarkably talented specialists in our midst, both of whom are very loyal to me. They've gathered some data telling me what I need to know about this spy." He paused here for effect, studying Volochkov's stony expression. "These data are not widely available to our fellow leaders in the Independence movement. Not yet, anyway. We have enough data to go beyond mere insinuations. Captain, these data all point to the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. In short, they all point directly, and irrevocably, to you."

With a quick wave of his hand, MacDuff cut off any reply by Volochkov, and let that last comment sit there on the table between them for a moment. "Now, here's the thing: I know, *I know*, that you're the spy, and believe me, the irony of your ship's name has not been lost on me. I'm impressed you've managed it for so long, so I figure you're not alone...maybe some of your bridge officers are in on it. But as surprising as it may sound to you, I've been waiting to see exactly whose spy you were. I'll surprise you even more: I'm actually relieved to learn that you're Commonwealth Navy," he chuckled with delight at his own candour.

As MacDuff watched and savoured the reactions he saw in Volochkov's face, he jumped in. "Aha! I can see that you *ARE* just a little bit surprised by my 'no bullshit' approach. Well here's the crux of the matter: I'm going to leave you right where you are. I need you to stick around and do a few *favours* for me, and believe me when I remind you that you *need* me to keep you there. One word, and this conversation might stop being our little secret. That goes for any accidents that may befall me, as well. Do you have any idea what the good people of the *Crack-In-The-World* group, or anyone else in the movement, for that matter, would do to you if they found out that you were Navy? I'm sure you do. You probably have a little pill, or a special tooth or something to save yourself from that kind of pain. You might even try to run, but allow me to remind you that you lot aren't the only ones with spies. I'm sure some of our operatives would relish a little retributive side mission to break the monotony, so don't think you can run away, either."

Volochkov could only sit and listen in stunned silence, his pretense and role-plays shattered in a series of pre-emptive revelations.

MacDuff continued, “Make no mistake about this: your days of spying for the Commonwealth Navy are over. You've been exposed, at least to me. You are...how do they put it: 'Compromised', isn't it? Oh, don't worry. I'm not trying to turn you into a double agent, or anything. You don't need to worry about betraying the Navy. I'll even give you a few tidbits of juicy intel here and there to let you keep the Navy spooks happy. We wouldn't want to jeopardize that Navy pension now would we? But ken this: from now on, you work exclusively for me, personally. You are now *MY* operative. I've got other errands I need a specialist like you for. You already know the new chain of command: Whatever I tell you to do, you *do* it. Simple, isn't it? In the minute or so that we have before our friend Geoff returns, lets discuss your new job description.”

Chapter 10

The Briefing

21.03.2268
Saltlake Naval Base
L5 point in Earth orbit

Ted Allbright spent a sleepless night, wondering what Chen's offer had really been about, and why he'd been singled out. He guessed that there was some kind of internal power struggle going on within the Navy. He was fairly certain that he was the newest pawn in the latest ploy to gain a few points for someone's ambitious climb to the top. The choice he'd been offered hadn't been much of a choice, so here he was sitting in a brightly lit room, with navy personnel drifting in silently, coffee in one hand, files and data pads in the other. He'd given Chen what she wanted, wondering if she were already *en route* to fetch *Sneezy* and the sensor recordings he'd made. There wasn't much he had been able to do about it now.

He watched new arrivals come in and take their place, and tried to learn as much about each individual as possible while still appearing to show only casual interest. Just a few minutes earlier, he had followed one of Chen's people through mazelike passages, and found himself deposited unceremoniously, in this meeting room, with only the data files he'd been given by Chen, and a new mustard and green coloured Navy flight suit, the kind seen on crewmembers everywhere, including this room.

This room wasn't anything like the standard technology-laden, semi-circular briefing rooms he'd seen elsewhere on Saltlake base. It was more like a small rectangular classroom with excessively bright overhead lighting. He sat in the chair at the left end of the second row and looked more carefully at the others in the room. A very young non-com was moving about the room as if he were the only person there, distributing documents and DRD cards, looking very formal, very proper, very grim, and about seventeen years old. Allbright also noticed a man of medium build who settled himself toward the back of the room. He wore Commonwealth Navy Captain's bars, and had that look in his eyes that Ted recognized as the regard of a principled man with a formidable presence. Allbright's sight wasn't as acute as it used to be, but he was able to make out the fellow's nametag on the uniform: *W. Ferris*. Ferris looked back at him, and Ted met his new C.O.'s gaze with a silent and respectful nod.

There were others in the room, but Allbright didn't recognize anyone else. Before long, three men walked in with an air of authority and importance. He wasn't positive, but he guessed from the briefing file that the taller of these men would be Vice Admiral Wexler, and the short, fierce-looking bald Colonel would be none other than the infamous Colonel 'Barber' Carr. The third man entering the room was unlike any man Ted had seen before. He didn't recall anything from the briefing document about a man with see-through skin, but he guessed this must be the Vice Admiral's aide. Allbright couldn't refrain from staring, at least for a moment. The man's appearance had a similar

effect on the entire room, which quickly came to a hushed silence. The effect must have been calculated: it meant that the meeting was about to begin.

Vice Admiral Wexler strode to the front of the room, placed a few documents in front of him when he got there, gestured for everyone to sit as he did the same, and began the meeting without any ceremony. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I apologize for the hasty manner in which this briefing has been thrown together, but we haven’t had a lot of time to prepare for the mission we’re about to discuss. In fact, the details are still being worked out and will be transmitted to your command workstations prior to launch, so this may seem a little rough around the edges. But, folks, we’re fighting a war here.”

Everyone in the room relaxed a little. His easy drawl, and good-old-boy style instantly removed much of the tension from the room. Having warmed them up as much as he was going to, the vice admiral continued with the briefing.

“We don’t have time to go through introductions all around, but I’m sure you’ll recognize at least a few others in the room. I will introduce you to the people up front here with me. I think you all know who I am. I’m Vice-Admiral Wexler. To my right is Colonel Carr of the Commonwealth Navy Marines, and on my left is Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard. For the rest of you, please consult your DRDs to match faces to names and get full profiles after the briefing. Just accept my assurance that we’ve assembled the best and the most qualified individuals available, in order to assure the success of this mission. So heads up, folks, this is an important one. Let’s get down to it, shall we?”

“Most have you have already heard the bad news, but in case you haven’t, here it is, straight up: We lost a battle group of almost two dozen ships, including the cruiser *Syracuse*, under the command of Admiral Devette, in a failed raid against the Indies about a week ago. This raid was basically an ambush that we set up after a good deal of planning and intelligence gathering. It was designed to catch the *Crack-In-The-World* and her battle group with their pants down. We’ve managed to keep the existence of a second Indie destroyer fairly quiet, but I’m sure pretty well everyone here knows about the *Crack-In-The-World*. She’s a Bastille-class destroyer you may have known in her Navy days as the *Oxford*. The Indies stole her last year in an ambush that disabled most of her escort. We’ve learned a thing or two about information control since we lost the *Harvard* to the Indies six years ago, which really made us look the fools. So far we’ve managed to avoid any embarrassment about the *Oxford* because we’ve been able to keep it under wraps, but we won’t be able to keep it quiet for long. Which is why we are so eager to take her out.” He paused to let that sink in. “The raid we set up to eliminate the *Crack-In-The-World* and her support fleet backfired completely. They knew we were coming, and they let us walk into a trap of their own. We got bushwhacked, folks, plain and simple.”

He then looked directly at captain Ferris, before continuing. “Captain William Ferris of the *Redoubt*, was involved in the recon mission that spotted the *Crack-In-The-World* a few months ago, and he helped gather some of intel that was critical in planning that raid. He and his crew nearly got killed getting us that information. It’s a damned shame the raid turned out to be such a disaster.”

The Vice Admiral then turned his gaze toward a young man with dark hair, olive skin, and a clean-shaven face shadowed by what would be a thick dark beard if allowed to grow. “Lieutenant Yves Dupuis, over there, is an intelligence analyst. He was the

handler behind the recon mission, and he made use of the data collected by Ferris and helped plan what should have been a successful ambush.

“These individuals are in this room for a good reason, and their work was not, and I repeat, *not* the cause for the disaster we have recently suffered: They are here because they are some of our best assets. They already have considerable familiarity with this security-sensitive situation, and they possess the skills to get this next job done.”

Wexler consulted his notes for a moment before continuing. “The reality is that we don’t know why, after months of planning, the Indies turned our ‘*great assault*’ into a rout. The fact that they did tells us that they knew exactly what we were up to, which means their intel was better than ours. In old-fashioned terms: they’re better at the spyin’ game than we are.”

“The mission we’re here to discuss is part of a larger response to this crisis, but this mission is an essential component and it must be completed successfully before we move forward with any of our other contingencies. Here’s the problem we’re faced with: We’ve got an intelligence leak and we need to stop it. The Indies knew exactly when and where we were going to be. No amount of careful planning on our part could have prevented that kind of damage. We’ve got naval intelligence cracking down hard on every possible lead we can trace at this end, but there’s something more we can be doing *out there*, too.” He waved his hand toward the back of the room, in a gesture that was meant to include all the vastness of space that defined the Commonwealth Systems. “In fact, we have a pretty good idea who the spy is! It looks very much like it is none other than one of our own intelligence operatives. The spy game is a tricky one, and you can never be sure who’s spy is who’s.”

“What some of you may not know, is that we’ve had our own spy in amongst the *Crack-In-The-World* battle group for some time. Our spy ship, the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* is commanded by Captain Yevgienyi Volochkov. They were in large part responsible for providing the intelligence for the ambush that was planned. They collected the intel, they transmitted it, and they assisted in the extraction of that intel during the *Redoubt*’s recon mission.

“This Volochkov character, code-named ‘Clarinet’ is one wily bastard. He’s arrogant as hell and equally smart. He’s well educated, well trained, and has more experience in the command chair on a corvette than most of you in this room. Unfortunately, he also has a checkered past, to say the least, as he was something of a mercenary and a dirty job specialist for the Indies before he started doing some of the same for us. All this makes him one dangerous sumbitch. We even think he’s had a few flirtations with piracy, but we’ve been known to overlook a few nasty details if it means we get ourselves a decent spy. And with Volochkov, we definitely had one hell of an asset...at least for a while. Now it looks like our *trust* was misplaced. Remember Metallake? He was instrumental in helping the Navy learning about the location of their secret base there. Unfortunately, that’s another mission that turned to rat shit in a hurry. They were expecting us there, too. The Indies had already pulled out and left us an anti-matter present that took out several ships, and almost cost us our brand new carrier. I guess we should have seen the writing on the wall then.

“We now have very strong evidence indicating that Volochkov and his crew are responsible for the recent disaster at the Amarid debris field. We have just retrieved two EDRs from the wreckage fields near the supplementary L-point in Tau Ceti. This is

exactly where we lost at least two of our corvettes in that disaster. The recordings from the EDRs show that the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* attacked retreating and damaged navy vessels in that battle. The recordings are available in your briefings, and are very clear. In addition, not only has this former operative neglected to provide us with any intelligence on the enemy in the last three months, they haven't responded to any of our contact signals, nor have they appeared at any of the designated drop sites in weeks. We received a brief contact from them a few days ago, at an unscheduled drop, then nothing again since. It's remotely possible that they're just doing the best they can under some very tight circumstances, but all evidence suggests that they've turned against us, and are now working for the enemy.

"It seems we have a rogue spy, ladies and gentlemen, and we need to bring them in or bring them down. At the very minimum, we need eliminate them in order to stop the leaking of intelligence from our own networks, and we need to do so before we can proceed with any other actions currently in preparation.

"The mission is simple, but not easy: Your primary goal is to find the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, and remove them from the enemy's ranks. Ideally we'd like you to disable, board, and bring them in. Volochkov is the kind of man who would be very valuable to our intel people, whether he's cooperative or not. Colonel Carr and his people will be along to assist you in this aspect of the mission. Your secondary objective is to retrieve any useful intelligence possible from the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*'s logs and sensor recordings about the Indies' operations and sources. We want to turn this around and get as much as we can from them. We also want our chance to *debrief* Volochkov and his staff personally. However, it seems likely that they will not cooperate with this effort, and we anticipate some hostile action. If it comes to a shooting match, you're to destroy them completely, and seal up that leak...we can live with a few unanswered questions so long as we know they aren't a liability anymore. Is that clear?"

He glanced at Captain Ferris alone, who had a puzzled expression up until this point. When asked directly though, Ferris gave the nod of an officer who knew how to follow orders.

"We can help you locate the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* to a certain extent, but the detail work is going to be up to you and your mission specialists. You have a diverse team this time to help in this job, and a fair amount of latitude to make optimal use of them. Finally, if you do happen upon the *Crack-In-The-World*, and if you get the opportunity, we want you to hit her as hard as you can. Chances are the *Crack-In-The-World* won't be far from the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, so if you can, take her out! Keep in mind that this is a tertiary objective, and is not to jeopardize nor interfere with your primary mission to forcibly extract or eliminate the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. This one won't be easy, folks, but you'll have all the help we can give you on such short notice."

"Captain Ferris, you've been selected for this operation for a number of reasons, not least of which is your previous contact with our covert operatives on the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. You're already on the inside as far as security clearance for this op goes, but fortunately for us, you've also got 'the skills and the kills', as they say. You will be taking the *Redoubt* out again as soon as she's ready. We're making some mission-specific changes to her as we speak. The most noticeable of these changes will be a special-function accommodation module designed to house your guests: a contingent of Marines under the command of Colonel Carr, here."

Allbright followed Vice Admiral Wexler's gaze, as he looked in the direction of the bald Marine Colonel. He had heard of this Colonel, feared throughout the Commonwealth, and known everywhere as 'The Barber'. Ted tried to imagine why the lean-looking Colonel Carr had been given that nickname, and his mind conjured up lurid images of unspeakable acts with sharp objects, but he was drawn away from his thoughts by Wexler's booming voice. "Along with the new pastie, you'll also receive special munitions, and crew replacements better suited to this sort of mission. These replacements include the services of a handpicked, specially-trained Chief Engineer on your bridge, and a new second Engineer. Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard was a crack Engineer on the *Purdue*, and he was chief Engineering officer aboard the *Toulon*, before he was seconded to be my Aide-de-Camp. He'll be sitting in the chief's seat for this mission. In addition to these crew changes, you'll also be taking Lieutenant Dupuis on this mission as your intelligence advis..."

"Excuse me, Vice-Admiral Wexler." Ferris interrupted, barely disguising his anger. "There's an old saying that goes: 'The devil is in the details'. We seem to be glossing over some important details. Leaving aside for a moment the rather dramatic personnel changes you're proposing, I'd like to know how we're expected to go out there and find your spy ship. My last encounter with the *Crack-In-The-World* group was blind luck, mostly bad luck, and it came very close to getting us killed. The presence of our covert operative in amongst their fleet was a complete surprise to us, and if it weren't for them, we would have been killed by that Indie fleet, without any doubt.

"In fact, based on what they did to help us get away, I wouldn't be surprised if they exposed themselves to the Indies, and got themselves 'purged' right away. How do we know for certain your operatives are still out there and in command of that vessel? They could all be dead, and the ship seen on your recordings attacking our ships could have been an Indie crewed corvette pure and simple" Ferris was taking quite a step by jumping on a Vice Admiral like that, but Allbright recognized a pissed-off, fatigued, combat-hardened ship captain when he saw one.

Wexler seemed to recognize and respect it, too. He took this interruption in stride and surveyed the entire room before responding. "I realize that there will be a number of questions about the...*irregularities* of this mission, as I go through some of the broader strokes of this mission. I'll do my best to clarify as much as I can after we're finished. But you'll need to keep in mind that this mission is part of a larger operation, and we can only provide information to you on a need-to-know basis. Some of what you *want* to know is the kind of information you do *not need* to know, but I can tell you this much: Our intel leads us to believe that the recent contact from the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* was authentic. For better or for worse, we believe that Volochkov is still in charge of that corvette, but acting outside of mission parameters. As for finding them, that contact has been traced and we can place them in the Tau Ceti system, or in one of its neighbouring systems as recently as two day ago. Further details will be included in your recorded mission brief as you depart.

"I was about to finish telling you about the personnel and parameters of this mission, so if I may?" Wexler glared. Ferris remained silent, but clearly wasn't satisfied. The Vice-Admiral's tone did not invite any further interruptions, and no one was willing to test him. The briefing continued. "You'll also be taking Lt. Dupuis with you on the *Redoubt* as a mission specialist and intelligence advisor. We have a number of covert

operatives aboard the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, and Lt. Dupuis will be your best hope of finding them, and he'll be the main contact person once you locate and secure the target. I'll repeat that because I want everyone's job to be very clear. Yves, here is the best help you're going to get when it comes to finding the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, so listen to him. Once you locate her, he's the main contact, and communications person. Understood?"

Vice-Admiral Wexler looked around the room to make sure he saw at least a few heads nodding before continuing. "Colonel Carr will be along to make the job of securing the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* that much easier. As you know, having a spy in command of a ship with almost fifty people on board is something of a challenge. We've found that it almost never works, at least not for very long. We *have* learned that it can work very well if you have an entire team of spies, basically all the officers running the ship with very few additional personnel aboard. The Indies have a chronic staffing problem, and are constantly running ships under complement, so having our corvette operate with an all-spy skeleton crew isn't that much of an anomaly. The entire bridge and backup crew of the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, led by a Captain Volochkov, are, or rather *were* ours posing as Indies. There are a handful of additional crew aboard that are genuine Indie crewmen, and as such, represent a risk we'll need to neutralize. The Colonel, his Lieutenant, and sixteen of the best combat specialists in known space will dock in their modified accommodation module, designed specifically for this kind of operation, and secure the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*." He gestured toward Colonel Carr, who nodded once to the room. No one needed to elaborate on what '*securing the ship*' meant. The marines were going to do what they do best, which would leave more corpses than survivors amongst the spy ship's crew.

"Since this mission includes a preferred 'capture' option, Captain Ferris, you'll be armed with more disruptor missiles and fewer guided combat missiles than you are accustomed to. However, we'll provide you with two of our newest remote missiles, just in case you get a target of opportunity and get the chance to strike at that destroyer. Just remember: the only target of opportunity we're interested in hitting is the *Crack-In-The-World*, so save your REM missiles for the right moment. Finally, you'll get an escort squadron of four vessels." Wexler looked at the list in his hand, and then looked around the room until he found the individual he was seeking, and nodded toward him. "Captain Hyslop-Smith back there, of the *CNV Crusader*, will lead your escort group as far as the L-point in Tau Ceti, but then you'll be on your own until you return to the L-4 there. They'll wait, assist with any extraction difficulties, and cover your return here."

Allbright looked around the room again, realizing that several of the different faces were likely escort captains, or crew replacements for the *Redoubt*. Ferris was studying the documents in front of himself, looking anything but thrilled with things.

The Vice Admiral resumed his explanation. "There are too many details to completely cover in this briefing, so I recommend you study your mission materials carefully. It may seem like this was slapped together at the last minute, and frankly some of the final personnel decisions were," Ted didn't miss the glance in his direction, "But a good deal of planning went into this, so make sure you know it inside out."

This did not reassure Allbright at all, considering that the ambush mission for the *Syracuse* fleet was also the result of a good deal of planning.

They were all dead now.

The Vice Admiral continued. “Take some time right now to go over the materials, and get to know the rest of the people here. This will be your only opportunity to discuss matters with one another before shipping out. There is a complete security blackout on this one, so keep it zipped beyond this room. Most of you’ll be working together on the *Redoubt* for the duration of this next mission, so if you’ve got problems, work them out here and now. When you’re ready, Colonel Carr’s assistant, Lieutenant Minnes, will try to answer any mission-specific questions you may have. Good luck ladies and gentlemen.” With that, he nodded to no one in particular in the room, looked at Colonel Carr, then at Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard. The three of them left the room in single file without saying another word.

Allbright knew a disaster-in-the-making when he saw one, and this had all the signs of being a good one: Shoddy mission planning, mixed up mission objectives, crew switches, severely tired command staff, thin evidence condemning their target, and big holes in the intelligence behind the planning all pointed to a brewing disaster. He understood why Chen felt that this mission was at risk for failure...to Ted’s eyes, it seemed like it was doomed from the start by a committee of high-ranked buffoons. And he had just signed on as the new chief’s second, promising Colonel Chen to keep a low profile, and to help the *Redoubt* get through this one successfully. He suddenly realized the full magnitude of the task he’d agreed to undertake...and it didn’t feel good.

Chapter 10

Shuffling the Deck

21.03.2268
1008 GMT
Saltlake Naval Base
L5 point in Earth Orbit

One hour after the mission briefing had finished, the officers of the *Redoubt* sat together in a common recreation lounge a few doors away from Ferris' billet.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss details of the briefing any more than I already have, but that's the news. Sorry, Kenji."

"Transferred?! What...I mean, did I do anything wrong? Captain, am I being punished for something?" Iwamasa was still in shock from the news of the briefing.

"No, this is not punishment. It's life in the Navy. You go where you're ordered, and hope that they know where you can do the most good." Ferris said, still trying to reassure his Chief Engineer. "Reassignment is common, you know that. Don't take it so personally. They're just shuffling the deck a little." He regretted starting the post-briefing analysis with that piece of news. They circled the soft chairs together around a low table in the lounge, trying to look like they were just catching up on old times, and not conferring on a secure mission briefing that ended twenty minutes ago.

Iwamasa, stung by the news, was still visibly upset. "Yeah, but the *Niagara*?"

"Look on the bright side Kenji. She's only a year old. You're getting a ship that's almost brand new. And you'll be joining a good crew." McMichael tried his hand at consolation, too. "Lejeunne will be a good Captain, and the rest of the former *Corregidor* gang is a good bunch to get behind. They're experienced and they're tough. And hey, at least everyone aboard the *Niagara* has skin of some colour or another. We get to look at the Visible Man for the next few weeks..."

"I guess the crew *could* be worse," Iwamasa conceded, "but the *Niagara* spent the last eight months in repair docks, getting her premix chamber and faulty coil shielding replaced." Everyone knew about the recent spate of problems cropping up in newer corvettes as contractors tried cutting costs during manufacturing. "It isn't much comfort getting assigned to a ship that needs a new crew because her previous crew is still recovering from the dose they got. It sounds more like a curse than a blessing to me."

Ravindran reframed the assignment for him again. "Then think of it this way: Of all the things that can go wrong on a machine as complex as a star ship, that particular problem isn't likely to occur again." Whether it was her logic, or simply because it came from her, this argument provided the most effective tonic for his hurt. He stopped complaining, and looked at Ferris to continue his description of the briefing. They all looked at him, which was his cue to continue.

"I wish that was the worst part of the news, but there's more." Ferris said. "Not only will Skarsgaard fill Kenji's seat. We have a number of crew replacements and guests, which means we have to bench almost a third of our standard crew just to fit everyone on board." He waited for them to react with sounds of disbelief before he

continued. “We’ll get an intelligence specialist from the spook department; a desk jockey, by the looks of it. Apparently, it’s the same guy Rav reported to when we got back from a certain chilly mission that shall go un-named. His name is Lt. Yves Dupuis.” They looked at Ravindran, who nodded in recognition of the name, then turned their attention back to Ferris. “The cherry on the cake, though, is our esteemed guest, Colonel Carr and an assault squad of marines, complete with their own, specially equipped accommodation module.”

McMichael spoke first. “You’re joking, right? *The Barber*?! That guy is completely unhinged. He’s a psycho, Captain! You’ve heard of him, right? He’s the guy responsible for eliminating an entire colony of miners out in the NDS-A system, because they were *suspected* of being Indie sympathizers.”

“Or so the story goes.” Ferris finished for him. “Unfortunately, Mac, though the rumours we hear about Colonel “Barber” Carr may or may not be true, he’s *our* psycho. We’re stuck with him and his marines for the duration. He may be a little overly enthusiastic, but he has a reputation as the guy who gets the job done.” Ferris replied. “Like everything else, these are our orders, and it’s our job to carry them out. We’re going to have to make the best of it. We launch either late tomorrow or first thing the day after that, depending on when they get the *Redoubt* ready.”

“They’re really rushing the turnaround, aren’t they?” Iwamasa said, he was coping with the news of his reassignment better now. “Is there anything I can do to help, Captain?”

“That’s good of you to ask, Kenji, but I’m afraid you’re going to have your hands full. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but the *Niagara* heads out for a shakedown patrol tomorrow morning with a skeleton crew. You’re going to be on it. You’ve got even less leave time than we do. You probably have a message waiting for you from Lejeunne as we speak. It’s a safe bet that you’ll be in meetings for most of the afternoon,” Ferris said. Both Ravindran and McMichael looked at each other in disbelief, then more sympathetically at Iwamasa.

McMichael, in a rare gesture of camaraderie, placed his hand on Iwamasa’s shoulder and said, “As much as I love to bug you, Kenji, I hate to see you go. You’ll be missed.”

Ravindran looked at Iwamasa a moment longer and said, “That really doesn’t give you much leave time. Perhaps we should go for a walk, to delay receiving Captain Lejeunne’s message...at least for a short while.” She stood, tilted her head, and raised her eyebrows at Iwamasa, who sat there still stunned. “There are some things I need to pick up on the concourse. I could use your help. Are you coming or not?” She turned and started toward the corridor.

He didn’t need any more signalling than that. He stood quickly, and cast a glance back at Ferris. “I’m just going to...ahh, go give Rav...um, a hand...”

“Get going, then. We’ll catch up with you before you launch.” Ferris smiled and watched them leave.

McMichael blew out some air from pursed lips, raised an eyebrow, and shook his head. After Ravindran and Iwamasa rounded the corner, Ferris and McMichael sat in a silent reprise of the previous day’s tension. The air between them remained uncomfortable for a few moments. McMichael finally broke the silence. “I must be missing something, Captain. This mission makes no sense to me. They’re all hot to catch

a spy, and we're being sent out to hunt one of our own spies, one that we've hardly seen or heard from in months. How are the spooks on the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* supposed to be responsible for the Amarid massacre? It's not like we keep sending them a steady stream of sensitive information about our ambush plans. In fact, we've been pretty much out of contact for some time. It just doesn't track."

"I'm glad you see it, too." Ferris replied just as sceptically. "There is a lot about this mission that leaves me wondering. The evidence against them is thin indeed, and it all hinges on some EDR recordings I haven't even had time to review. We need to keep our eyes open. There are still a few things we don't know about the connection between the Amarid massacre and the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, but its possible that the data we retrieved from them during the Out in the Cold mission set the time and place for that ambush."

"That far in advance?" McMichael said incredulously. "I find that hard to believe. I'd be surprised if they knew where they were going to be a week in advance, let alone a few months. No, that just doesn't make sense to me."

"I agree. The logic doesn't seem right. But it won't be the first time we've seen flawed logic in this man's navy." Ferris nodded. "They really want these guys badly, dead or alive, and I get the feeling that the preference is dead. I'm not at all sure we're being sent after the right target, either. Still, something is definitely going on with the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, they've been out of touch so long."

"We owe them a serious favour. Screwed up or not, if I can use this mission to help bring them in, or help them in any way at all, I'm damn well going to do it. We owe it to them to see them out of harm's way." He paused and shook his head again. "There are just too many things that don't add up about this one." Ferris sighed as he slapped the palms of his hands on the arms of the chair in a gesture of resignation. "I guess we aren't supposed to require it to make sense. Vice Admiral Wexler said it himself: we're just a piece of the puzzle. There are other things afoot we don't get to know about. We follow our orders and trust in the folks upstairs."

They each sat for a moment in silence, absorbed in their own thoughts, until the sound of McMichael sucking the last droplets of his juice through a straw noisily from the bottom of his paper cup broke the reverie. Ferris stood with a slight grunting sound and said, "I'm going to hit the fitness centre for awhile, and then go over some of the mission prep notes. I'll call you later. I need to get our people ready, go through your recommendations to ensure we have the best of our crew with us, and then inform everyone of the roster changes. After that, I'm going to try to get some rest. I get the feeling we're going to need it. You should consider doing the same." He turned and started to leave, but then stopped short of the exit, and looked back at McMichael, who was still loudly sucking tiny juice droplets through his straw. "The *Niagara* launches tomorrow at oh nine hundred. I think we should be there about an hour earlier than that to see Kenji off."

"Absolutely. I wouldn't miss it." McMichael replied with more sincerity than Ferris had seen in awhile. It suddenly struck him how much he and Mac truly *would* miss the kid.

22.03.2268
0806 GMT
Saltlake Naval Base

Earth Orbit

0800 hours came faster than Ferris would have liked. The previous day had flown by. He had found too many things that had needed doing, and too little time in which to do them all, including his hope to catch up on sleep. He was still feeling a little groggy when he arrived at the ramp of Saltlake's docking arm six, cup of coffee in hand. McMichael was arriving at the same moment, taking a few hurried steps off the nearest lift to catch up with Ferris as they approached the main dock ramp, trying carefully not to spill his tea. Ferris saw that Ravindran and Kenji were already there, chatting together. Iwamasa seemed to be doing much better than he had been doing yesterday, when he learned of this new posting in the lounge. In fact, he was laughing and smiling with Ravindran at some shared joke. Ravindran looked different, too. She looked more relaxed and animated than usual. She looked surprisingly feminine and attractive with her wavy black hair down around her shoulders. Ferris wondered if it was due to the fact that she wore a more casual outfit than her usual amber and green duty coveralls.

McMichael called out to them as they approached. "Hey Rav, I almost didn't recognize you without the flight suit and the braid." She responded with a look toward Mac that made it clear he wasn't the reason she'd softened her appearance this morning. Ravindran and Iwamasa turned and greeted Ferris with salutes and smiles. Iwamasa held his salute for Ferris a moment longer than usual, making Ferris feel the full impact of Kenji's departure. He returned the salute, and then shook Iwamasa's hand.

"I'm glad you could make it, Captain. I just got the request to get aboard and start readying things." Iwamasa said. "This whole shakedown patrol is happening really fast. Admiralty wants the *Niagara* tuned and calibrated and ready for combat operations as soon as possible."

"I wouldn't have missed seeing you off, Kenji." Ferris said with genuine warmth. "I was just getting you whipped into shape, too. I've already filed the request paperwork to get you back, so don't get too comfortable on this bucket, hear me?"

"I won't. At least I know that Lejeunne and his crew...I guess I should say *my* new crew, are a decent lot." Iwamasa said. "Thanks for coming down, but I'd better get aboard before my new captain declares me AWOL. That wouldn't be a great way to start, would it?"

McMichael stepped in closer to Iwamasa, and shook his hand, and said, "Take care of yourself out there, kid."

"Mac." Iwamasa smiled, "Do you have any idea how much it bothers me when you call me 'kid'? It drives me nuts."

"Oh I know. I know exactly how much it bothers you." McMichael returned the smile. "My life just isn't going to be as much fun anymore."

"Maybe you can dazzle the new see-through engineer with your wit." Iwamasa countered. "I hate to admit it, but I'm going to miss you, Mac."

"Me too, kid." McMichael winked, then stepped back a few paces to let the others say their farewells.

Ravindran stepped up to Iwamasa and hugged him gently for a moment, placed an even gentler kiss on his cheek, and then stepped back without a word, joining McMichael a little further away. Iwamasa looked blankly after her, as if he'd just missed something important, but wasn't certain what.

Then Ferris reached out to shake hands with him again, and said, "I know you'll do us proud, and make your mark with your new crew. You'll be an asset to whoever gets you. I just wished to hell we could keep you with us. Stay safe, Kenji." With that he stepped away to join the others. They began to walk away, to let Iwamasa turn and join his new crew, but before they got more than a couple of meters away, Ravindran turned and walked quickly back to where Iwamasa stood. She stepped in close to him, stood on her toes, reached up to grasp the back of Kenji's neck in her hands, and drew him in for a kiss with a force that seemed incongruous with her small frame. Iwamasa's arms found their way around her slender waist, and they stood like that, pressed against one another in a deep kiss, for longer than was comfortable for Ferris or McMichael to observe. She finally ended the kiss, whispered something into his ear, and then stepped away from him with an awkward backhanded wipe of her mouth.

Kenji continued to look blankly stunned, but this time there were overtones of ecstasy in his expression. Without turning back, Iwamasa stepped through and disappeared into the *CNV Niagara*.

Ravindran walked back to the others, gave them each a confident look and a wry smile that silently dared either of them to make a wisecrack. McMichael, unable to resist, said "Rav, you are just full of surprises aren't you? You will *never* cease to amaze me."

She stepped in close to McMichael, her eyes fixed on his, and placed her hand on his cheek, tapped it there three times and said, "Good." before turning and walking away from all of them, toward the main levels of the station.

McMichael turned to Ferris, and asked, "Didn't you just lecture them about romance between ship mates?"

"Yes," Ferris replied, "but they aren't ship mates anymore."

McMichael responded to that with a nod. He then asked, "I wonder what she said to him?"

Ferris shook his head before saying, "None of our business. Come on, we've got work to do." He turned and followed Ravindran away from the ramp. McMichael shrugged and trotted a few steps to join them.

Chapter 11

Taking Sides

22.03.2268

1033 GMT

Saltlake Naval Base

Earth Orbit

Ted Allbright hefted his kit over his shoulder and walked the last few steps from the docking ramp into the main airlock that joined Saltlake Base to the *CNV 534 Redoubt*. The Universal Docking Collar and main UDC shaft at the core of the corvette was immense. The absence of gravity, once he entered it, made it feel that much bigger to Allbright. He drifted to one of the nearest handholds, and waited while a member of the ship's crew drifted by, skilfully manipulating a large supply crate into the shaft. He had to remind himself that these people were now his crewmates. He watched for a moment, trying to get his bearings in a new up-down environment. The majority of the navy crew were still on leave. The boarding call wouldn't come for another day or so, but Ted wanted to get aboard and start getting familiar with the ship as soon as possible. He also didn't have any other place to go, he knew he had a cabin assignment, and he wanted a bed and a shower badly. He noticed the flow of people in the shaft and saw a navy crewman and a few station dock personnel head for the same airlock off the UDC core shaft. The navy crewman started to shout at one of the station personnel, pointing at one of his two rather oversized kitbags, barking something unintelligible. Allbright looked more closely to see that the crewman was, in fact, his new boss: the new Chief Engineer to be precise. Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard was telling the station dock personnel something about his baggage that had him very upset. A marine on guard duty on by the opposing hatch was starting to take interest in the commotion and spoke into a collar comm. pickup. Skarsgaard seemed satisfied that his point was made about the bags, and they were both now in his charge as he guided them through the hatch into one of the accommodation modules. The station personnel left him to carry the baggage alone, returning to the UDC main hatch with looks that told Ted that their low opinion of Naval officers had just been confirmed. At least now Allbright knew reasonably clearly which side would be the port accommodation module, and ultimately his destination.

This was his second time aboard a naval corvette, and he still found it a remarkable study in contrasts from his days aboard a Puffin-class tug. The NSO-929 corvettes, first tested in 2155, weren't as old as the Puffins were, but they'd already proven themselves as the most successful medium sized military vessel in active service. They had become the standard workhorses of the Commonwealth Navy fleet. Some of the spaces in this ship, like this central UDC core shaft, were very large, as they were designed to accommodate big pieces of machinery, spare ship parts, large supply crates, even ground vehicles at times. Other parts of the ship were downright cramped. From the manuals he was studying, and from what he recalled of the *Idzumo Maru* that had rescued him, there were just as many spaces deeper inside this vessel that would seem

surprisingly small. He hadn't had much of a chance to look around the corvette that had rescued him, so he was looking forward to exploring the *Redoubt*.

He made a mental note of the hatch leading to the port accommodation module, clipped his kit to a support rung nearby, and nudged himself so that he would drift deeper in the shaft toward the hatches for the lower decks and the airlock at the opposite end of the UDC core shaft. As an experienced spacer, he had little problem judging direction and speed when he kicked off, allowing him to easily grasp a handhold next to a hatch leading to one of the lower saucer aft deck passages. This was the upper of two decks contained in the lower section of the ship. He oriented himself to the correct vertical, and opened the airlock that would place him on one of the engineering decks of the corvette. He swung himself into the opening after the hatch opened, and a moment later he felt the effects of the artificial gravity field draw him through the transitional space inside the lock. He alighted as if he'd stepped down from a normal sized step.

The corridor that opened before him was narrow and short. It ended at a small set of steps that were closer to a ladder than a staircase, leading down almost two meters. He bent down to see that it continued for a few metres only to end at another set of equally steep steps back up to his level. This must be one of the many detours the crawlspace passages had to make around the immense machinery that powered and drove the ship. He remembered the location of the main Capsule drive, from his crash course briefing documents, most of which he had yet to read, and realized he was looking at a part of it. The Capsule drive on this type of vessel was a ring-shaped assembly, situated in the lower saucer section of the corvette's hull, inside the diameter of the collider ring.

If he continued aft along that passageway, he'd come to the control room for the main injector for the collider ring, the main fusion reactor, and the smaller crawlspace passages that provided limited access to the premix chambers and plasma drive units. He would have time to explore some of those areas later. In fact, he'd be expected to make periodic trips to make checks in the small local control room back there once they got under weigh. He was also going to have to visit the Collider Ring Accelerator Coils control room in the forward parts of this level, as well. This would be where members of his team monitor the 36 accelerator cells. He'd been pretty familiar with the duties of a 'C.R.A.C.' team, back when he worked on a Puffin-class tug and the layout couldn't be that much different on this ship. He was grateful that he wouldn't have to spend much time visiting the incredibly noisy Accumulators Monitoring Station. That was someone else's job. In fact, he was grateful that visits to these control and monitoring areas in the lower section would only be periodic. Most of his duties would be handled from the comfort of one of the Engineering control workstations in the port accommodation module. After a quick look around, he decided to head to the pastie that would be home for the next few weeks, and start getting familiar with his workstation.

A shout from a marine guard posted in the main UDC shaft drew his attention. He turned to look back up the shaft at the commotion, only to realize that the marine was shouting at *him*. The noise level in the shaft made it difficult to hear what was being said, but it was clear the very large, very burly, and very bald marine was protesting Allbright's explorations, and telling him to come out of there. Allbright exited the lower passage and moved back into the main UDC shaft, keying the passageway hatch closed behind him. He would do some more exploring later. Right now, he'd better face this marine's challenge before an unfortunate misunderstanding occurred.

A gentle kick sent him on a perfect trajectory back to his clipped kitbag. The marine guard made an even more skilful interception, arriving at the same handhold rung at the same time as Ted, but at a much faster speed. The marine wasn't just a burly fellow. Once Allbright got up close to him, he could see that this marine was better described as a muscular giant. All the marines he'd seen fit that description. Ted decided there and then that the rumours he'd heard about marines ingesting a steady diet of enhancing drugs was probably true. He also noticed that they were all completely hairless, males and females alike. He'd heard that this was an effect of the drug supplements they took, but also had to do with how their combat armour was supposed to fit, or something like that.

Ted put on his best 'Don't-mess-with-me' face for the marine. This fellow was enormous, but Ted had been beaten up by the biggest and the best during his years as a barfly. A single marine wasn't enough to make an old spacer like Allbright lose his nerve. Ted stared back as he was confronted by the calm almost bored-looking visage that inspected him as if he were just another kit bag. The marine Corporal's eyes darted quickly over the name on Ted's chest. Those same eyes seemed almost soulless as they snapped back to hold his gaze in a most disturbing and unwavering manner.

"Lieutenant Allbright. You're the ship's Assistant Chief Engineer, aren't you?" The guard asked in a non-querying tone, as if he were reading information from a database scrolling by behind his eyes. Before Ted could begin to reply, the guard continued. "Sir, what was your business entering the lower saucer section hatch, please?" The addition of the polite phrasing was not meant as a nicety.

"Corporal... ah, Vecchio, is it?" Allbright read the nametag, and did his best to sound condescending, as if speaking to a child touring a naval corvette at some exhibition. "I'm the new Assistant Chief, which means I'm the guy who runs one of the four main Engineering repair teams. I oversee a lot of the engineering systems on this vessel. This means that I get to go wherever I feel like going; on whatever level I feel like going, do you understand me? The only people I have to answer to on this corvette are my direct superior, Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard, and his boss, Captain Ferris."

Vecchio continued to look at him impassively, silent for a moment, as if he were processing information and considering response options. Ted became all too aware that the man could probably reach out and snap him in two with one hand. He wondered if that were one of the options the marine was considering. Instead the marine simply said. "Until the *Redoubt* is under weigh, we are to act as ship security during loading. I was performing my duty. Please remember that the starboard accommodation module is strictly off limits to you, and all other members of the ship's crew. You will not be reminded again."

Never having been very good at showing restraint, or when to shut up, Ted poked a crooked finger into the remarkably solid chest of the Corporal. "Allow me to remind you of something, Corporal. You and your marine buddies are guests on board the *Redoubt*. In fact, a better description would be *cargo*. I'm a member of the crew, which means this is *our* ship. Confine yourself to your accommodation module, and let the rest of us go about our work." It felt good for Ted to start thinking of the *Redoubt* as *his* ship. "And that means wherever we are required to go, *including* your accommodation module."

“What’s going on here, gentlemen?” said a new voice. Allbright hadn’t heard anyone approach, so he spun around to see Captain Ferris drifting nearby, gripping a handhold looking mildly annoyed.

“Lieutenant Allbright, new assistant to the Chief, reporting for boarding, Captain.” Allbright said with what he thought was a good imitation of navy snap. “This bald sack-o’-shit, here, was just informing *crewmembers* where they could and could not go. He seems to have forgotten the difference between crew and cargo.”

Ferris just stared at Allbright for a moment, then turned his attention at the immobile marine Corporal. “Thank you, Corporal. I’ll handle this.”

Vecchio continued to hold his position for a moment, and looked off to the side, as if he were considering more options. Then he released the handhold and said to Allbright, “Please take your gear and proceed immediately to the port accommodation module. The starboard accommodation module is classified, and off limits to all unauthorized personnel. Sir.”

Without waiting for Ted to reply, the marine simply pushed off the handhold, and twisted expertly as he vaulted back to his guard station outside the starboard accommodation module hatch. Ted watched the marine surreptitiously re-holster his sidearm as he crossed the main UDC shaft. He hadn’t been aware of the fact that the weapon was there at all, let alone the fact that it had been drawn.

Ferris turned back to glare at Allbright again. “You’re not exactly Navy, are you Allbright?”

“Uh, no sir. I’m newly commissioned. I’ve been given the rank of acting Lieutenant, though, as a kind of specialist. I’ve been given to understand that it gives me all the privilege due a real Lieutenant. That marine was...”

“Not on my ship it doesn’t, Mr. Allbright.” Ferris said firmly. “This isn’t some game you can come and play for awhile. I don’t know who’s lap dog you are, or why you’re on this mission, but you had better watch your step, because I sure as shit will be.” He crooked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the marine. “Corporal Vecchio was following his orders to guard the ship while we prepare for launch. I hope you know how to take orders, and how to give them with the same kind of respect and professionalism he just showed. As the new Assistant to the Chief, you’d better know this ship inside and out. You screw this up, even once, and I’ll find you something nice and harmless to keep you busy in the toilet-cleaning department. The only thing I want to see or hear of you again, is uncommon praise for outstanding performance, do you get me?”

“Loud and clear, Captain.” Allbright said, meeting Ferris stare for stare.

“Well? You are dismissed! Do you even know how to salute? Or when?”

“Yes, sir...I mean, Aye, Captain.” Allbright stumbled as he saluted. “Permission to continue my orientation, sir.”

“Permission granted. And if you can’t keep your mouth in check around those very lethal guests of ours, stay clear of them entirely. Now get!”

Allbright unhooked his gear and drifted hand-over-hand the short distance to the open hatch of the port accommodation module. It wasn’t exactly the beginning he’d hoped for, but at least he could now say that he’d met the Captain. He wasn’t sure why, but he had just decided that he liked this Captain Ferris. In a sense, Allbright had just taken sides with a man who had chewed him out on their first meeting. Crossing the short airlock passage into the pastie reminded him just how cold these sections could get. He

flashed his ID tag to the auto-monitor at the accommodation module entrance, and drifted to the floor with an expert step, as he crossed the artificial gravity transition zone. He felt the weight of his bag again, filled with navy issue stuff he hadn't even had much time to inspect. Heat from a vent blasted down on him from the inner hatch, as he strode into the main corridor of the port pastie.

Home sweet home. He saw a couple of crewmembers busily stowing crates and gear, moving them deeper into the accommodation module down its main central corridor, and rounding the corner to the left. That must be where the galley was. To the right would be the infirmary and medical lab, if he remembered the layout correctly from his brief stay on the *Idzumo Maru*. The corridor in which he stood was wide, reminding him of the halls from his boyhood school, or that detox hospital corridor he stumbled down one time when he was so sick with the shakes. A quick glance behind him confirmed his recollection of the last module like this he was in: the hatch through which he had just come was actually a hatch within a much larger boarding ramp-type hatch. He started walking down the hall, away from the main hatch and the equipment storage area, toward the control workstations of the accommodation module. The space was roomier than he would have expected, but it was already starting to feel a little cramped because of the cargo stores being stowed. He remembered that this time out, they were accommodating more in this module than they normally would, so things would be cozy for the next few weeks.

Directly ahead, behind that closed door, were the engineering workstations, one of which would be his. Beyond that, behind yet another set of doors, would be the cockpit. He had yet to visit the command and navigational controls for the independent space flight operations of an accommodation module. He was eager to get a look at the view from the cockpit; to see the stars and the infinite depth of space. It was something he missed since he had lost the *Cupcake*. In fact, it was the only thing he missed about the *Cupcake*.

As he walked in that direction, he noticed doorways opening into the officers' suites off the main corridor. He automatically started to envy and resent the lucky sons-of-bitches who got to stay in those, until he remembered that he was one of those lucky sons-of-bitches now. The rank and title he held still took some getting used to. He checked his printed orders again, and looked more carefully at the numbers on the doors. His cabin was not in this corridor, but off the galley corridor down to the left, so he headed there to stow his bag and get cleaned up.

He found the cabin number on his right. It took him a moment to work out that his room was on the aft side of that corridor. He wanted to personally thank whoever had invented artificial gravity, which effectively negated all those up/down, fore/aft orientation concerns. He was still trying to remember the name of that long-dead scientist when he keyed open his door. Her name would come to him eventually, and he'd say a silent prayer for her when it did. In the meantime, he had new quarters to inspect. The hatch had opened silently to the side to reveal a comfortable looking cabin with a couple of bunks. *Not bad. Not bad at all*, he thought.

After a quick shower and change of clothes, he eagerly headed to his workstation, just behind the module's flight control room. Allbright opened the doors to the Engineering control area and looked at the four identical Engineering workstations that took up the majority of this area, two apiece on either side. Each station was a complex

array of consoles and displays, mostly silent for the moment. Looking at them served as a reminder to Ted of just how much catch up reading he had to do in the next day or so.

One workstation was already occupied. Sintillo, whose name was written on a piece of adhesive tape on the back of his powered anti-inertia chair, turned and nodded to him, then returned his attention to the controls. Allbright realized the other three stations had similarly labelled strips of tape: one each for Taft, Coren, and his own. Time to sit down and get to work brushing up.

As usual, someone had spelled his name wrong.

Chapter 12

Errand Boys

22.03.2268
Tau Ceti system

“Captain Volochkov, this is Fleet Commander Guzman. Nice to have you back in the fold.” He could almost see her smiling at her own pun over comm.

His espionage training and experience hadn’t prepared him for the possibility that he would actually like the people he was supposed to spy on. He put those thoughts out of his mind as her transmission continued. “While we’ve been getting a few days respite from action, it looks like you’ve been getting your share of calls to duty. No sooner do we get you back with the fleet, than we have to send you off on another of the Quartermaster’s errands. Today is no exception. Please stand by to receive a coded message, relayed directly from MacDuff himself. Let me know if there is anything we can do to help.”

He leaned forward in his command station seat and activated his comm pickup. “This is Captain Volochkov, of the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. Thanks for the offer, but as you say, it’s probably just another boring errand. ‘Go here, pickup my dry cleaning; go there, collect some pledged cash; give a message to my mommy’, stuff like that. I keep trying to figure out if MacDuff likes me, or hates me,” he lied. “Anyway, we’re standing by to receive. I’ll transmit my fleet security codes now. Go ahead with the message relay, whenever you’re ready.”

He could hear the fleet commander chuckling as she replied, “We’ve all done missions like that, and no one has been able to figure out if it’s because you’re being favoured, or punished. Transmitting now. Good luck!”

The message went through an instantaneous decryption, and began to appear on Volochkov’s command screen as a briefing. The outlines of a corvette drew themselves out, and the message “Eyes Only” appeared with the requisite codes. MacDuff’s voice matched the text message of the briefing as it appeared onscreen.

“Captain Volochkov. As you know, the Independence movement has been dealing with very powerful and mysterious associates, called COSA. While they like to keep a low profile, they have the same basic materials needs as the rest of us, and they need *us* to help keep them supplied. We keep them supplied, and they favour us with money, weapons, and sometimes more.

“A freighter that is sympathetic to our cause, the *Lady Marmalade*, is about to deliver a cargo of neutronium and other materials to our new *friends* at a neutral waypoint. COSA will collect and transfer this shipment to one of their freighters. You are being assigned to join in the escort of the *Lady Marmalade* to that waypoint. Once there, I want you to observe and to learn as much as possible about these mysterious *friends* of ours. I’m sending a pair of tugs along to assist in the escort. The Independent Navy Vessel *Bannockburn* will accompany you, along with the *Acadian*. Don’t be surprised

when you see the *Acadian*. Like the freighter, she's officially neutral, but we know that she's sympathetic to our cause, too. I want you there because, as a Commonwealth navy spy ship, I'm certain you have a top-of-the-line sensor suite. You'll be there to detect and identify anything you can, make recordings, and bring them directly back to me.

"These COSA people are very secretive, and this will be a rare opportunity to learn more about them. I don't want any such opportunities wasted, so remain vigilant, and remember that you will be watched as well. Once the cargo pods have been transferred to COSA's freighter, they will withdraw, as will our own ships. They strongly discourage any efforts to follow or track them, so your opportunity to collect data will be limited. Do not attempt to follow them. Instead, I suggest you arrive at the rendezvous point a little ahead of schedule. Navigational data and waypoints are now available to your onboard CPU. Proceed immediately to the first navigational Waypoint and wait for the *Lady Marmalade* and the other escort vessels.

"Don't disappoint me. That is all."

The briefing continued to show graphic simulations of Navigational data: a wireframe corvette meeting wireframe freighter and tugs, system routes and waypoints but Volochkov had stopped paying attention. This was his third errand since his secret meeting with MacDuff, but it was his first opportunity to acquire real intelligence data, rather than just prove to MacDuff that he was complying with their new arrangement. Volochkov understood all too clearly that MacDuff would continue to assign *errands* to him only as long as the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* was useful. He also knew that as useful as he might be to MacDuff, he was also entirely expendable.

So the 'mysterious friends' had a name: COSA. And they were about to come out of the shadows for a cargo hand-off. It sounded like MacDuff was right: this was a golden opportunity to collect information.

"Alright gentlemen, listen up," Volochkov turned his attention to his bridge officers. "I know we just got back from a quiet little escort run, but we have a new mission briefing, and we have to head out immediately.

"Rydstrom, new navigational waypoints should appear on your contact list. Make for the first of these immediately after clearing fleet operational space," he said to his Nav officer in the front.

"Aye, Captain." The ship began to reorient to the new heading a moment later. The navigational computer took over, directing the corvette to the nearest LaGrange point. The ship rumbled as main thrusters began to fire. Less than a minute later, the LDS drive activated with a whine that rose in pitch. Suddenly, the rest of the Indie fleet vessels disappeared as if yanked away from behind, and the moon they orbited flashed out of view behind them as well. Coloured lines in the pilot's HUD moved away from the green destination point in the centre of the display faster, giving the pilot visual cues for their rapidly increasing speed.

Rydstrom activated the communications video link to Volochkov and said, "We should be at that waypoint in about half an hour. Is this another of MacDuff's special errands?"

Captain Volochkov looked at the small video display in the communications arm that unfolded in front of him for the exchange. "Indeed it is. The Quartermaster wants to use our 'spy' sensors to get a look at some ships that belong to this mysterious faction

called COSA. We'll be escorting a freighter to a cargo drop. These mysterious benefactors are supposed to be there to take the cargo away. I'm beginning to think that MacDuff doesn't like or trust these people. I'm also beginning to think he might be right."

Volochkov spoke the name of his ENG chief sitting to his right, which activated a new link on the comm arm's miniature display, but N'Bele probably heard his voice directly anyway. "Kobie, have all sensors calibrated to sweep the infrared especially. Get optics on the COSA contacts as well. I want every kind of recording we can get."

He turned the comms off, and as the armature folded itself away, he read over the text of MacDuff's briefing at his command station again. The LDS drive and bridge activity made enough noise to drown out his last phrase, spoken more for his own benefit, than anyone else. "...and when we're done, I may even share some of our recordings with you, my wily little Scottish friend."

The *Lady Marmalade* was an independently owned and operated Oakland-class freighter, like hundreds of other freighters hauling cargo in this sector. This one, though, was loaded with neutronium ore, and other materials COSA wanted as part of their stealth technology production. This particular freighter was also sympathetic to the Independence movement, and was willing to risk the wrath of the Commonwealth in order to haul high-priced pods for the rebels' cause. The *Wolf-In-The-Fold* had been waiting at the specified waypoint for less than an hour when she showed up, along with her two escorts. Both escort vessels were armed Puffin-class tugs, one of which was covered in the brightly coloured graffiti, typical of the Indies, the other was not. Neither was much of a match for the Dreadnaught-class corvette painted in Guzman's blocky primary colours.

"This is the Independent vessel *Wolf-In-The-Fold*," Rydstrom announced, speaking for their ship. "We are ordered to escort you to the cargo drop. We are also encouraged to proceed as quickly as possible. Please formate with us, and stand by for transit to the designated waypoint."

"This is Captain Fleming of the Independent vessel *Bannockburn*," came the reply from the captain of the brightly painted tug escort. "We confirm those orders, and are ready to proceed. Let's get this load to them safely, shall we?" Volochkov noticed that he had a similar accent to MacDuff, and wondered if cultural or clan loyalties played a role in his choice of this escort.

The second tug, the *Acadian*, chose to acknowledge with a text only message. The newly arrived ships' computers linked with the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*'s computer, and they began to accelerate for LDS transit. The trip to the final waypoint was a short journey, relatively speaking. Their destination was only a little over two Astronomical Units away.

The *Lady Marmalade* and her escorts arrived at the cargo drop waypoint a mere eight minutes early, but there was unknown contact activity at the site as they approached. While one of the unknowns resolved almost immediately as the *Pergammon* during their approach, the other 'unknown' contacts remained unknown well within the range they should have appeared in detail on the Navigational registry.

The *Pergammon* was a large freighter, identical to the *Lady Marmalade*. She had already discharged a load of cargo pods, presumably empty or containing whatever had been arranged in trade. Standing off from the exchange point by several kilometres was a contact signal that was difficult to decipher. N'Bele worked a little magic with the sensors, while Volochkov let the tug personnel handle the negotiations upon arrival at the waypoint.

"Captain, sensors are having a difficult time making out some of the signals in the area, but the unknown contact further out there, off the exchange point turns out to be two vessels docked together, one belonging to these COSA people, and one belonging to...just a moment....I thought I had an ID there, but its still an unknown. Sensors are taking moment to figure out the signature....Hang on. They're undocking. The other vessel, looks like...a corvette. It's moving away extremely quickly, now. I'll try to keep scanning. Shit! They've hit LDS, sir. They're gone."

Finn reported from his WEPs station. "The COSA vessel is reading as a corvette, too. She still reads as an unknown on the contacts registry, and her profile doesn't match anything we've seen. In fact, we're getting some conflicting information from sensors, which must be their stealth technology. At least we know we can get a targeting lock on them."

"Keep scanning them, and make sure we're recording," Volochkov directed. "Scan anything else in the area that looks even a little bit odd. Can we get anything visual on them? Kobie, send whatever fragments of sensor data you've got for that fleeing vessel to my station. I'm going to see if I can clean it up a little, and get an I.D."

"Aye Captain. Sending that portion of the sensor stream to you now," N'Bele said. They all sat in silence for a few more minutes working at their respective stations while the transfer took place. Cargo pods undocked from the *Lady Marmalade*, beginning a strange ballet of swapping pods, as they criss-crossed the empty space between the vessels.

A few more minutes passed, with only the squawking mutter of distant comms to fill the bridge with sound. When the transfer of pods was complete, they could see the *Pergammon* begin to slowly swing about on her long axis, to bring herself up on a new bearing.

A deep booming voice filled the bridge with sound from their communications audio. "THIS IS A MESSAGE FOR MACDUFF," after which they heard a moment of high-pitched, warbling static. The slow, plodding electronic voice then continued. "WE ARE LEAVING. DO NOT FOLLOW."

With that, the *Pergammon* began to move off, as did the COSA corvette that had been sitting off the transfer point. It headed in a different direction. As if by magic, three more COSA corvettes suddenly appeared on the contacts list inside their sensor orb, much closer than the COSA corvette had been. All three had not been visible to their sensors moments before they powered up. They waited until the freighter activated her LDS drive and was off the scopes, then they all did the same thing, hitting LDS outbound on different vectors. The Indie ships kept quiet, as they brought their vessels into formation to help the *Lady Marmalade* on her journey back home.

"Captain, did you see that?" Rydstrom asked. "One second they aren't there, then the next, 'boom' they appear right in front and right behind us. Then they just leave."

Their WEPs officer added. "I wish we had that kind of stealth capability. The things I could do..."

"I'm sure that's exactly what they wanted us to feel, Finn," Volochkov said. "That was a demonstration, just like we saw at the Amarid debris field."

"Yeah, nothing like rubbing our noses in it, eh," Rydstrom said.

"They aren't exactly the friendliest of allies are they?" Volochkov mused, "Rydstrom, get us back to the *Crack-In-The-World*. Best speed."

"Aye, Captain. Best speed," replied the pilot. "What was in that squirt transmission for the Quartermaster? Anything we can use?"

N'Bele had been examining the signal, and was first to reply. "I think it was a tight beam transmission, aimed at us alone...I doubt the other ships got anything beyond the spoken message. But even if they did, it seems to have some fantastic encryption. MacDuff must be the only guy with the key. I'll try to decode it, but don't get your hopes up. At least we can be sure these other escort vessels won't have the same high tech spy decoder rings we've got. I'll get working on it."

After a brief pause N'Bele continued, "Any luck with the identity of that other ship we saw fleeing the scene when we showed up early?"

Volochkov had been applying filters to the small bits of sensor data they had recorded before the unknown ship fled. When the data were about as good as they were going to get, he asked the computer to display its best guess of the identity of that vessel.

When the name of a Commonwealth Navy corvette appeared on his screen, he rubbed his chin with one hand. "Interesting," was all he said.

Chapter 13

Room Without a View

22.03.2268
1545 GMT
Saltlake Naval Base
Earth Orbit

Lt. Dupuis had fretted away his entire last day before departure, wondering why he'd been singled out for this kind of misfortune. The Independence War was about to cease being an abstraction for analysis and data flow modeling. It was about to become a very real and dangerous thing for him. He left more than an hour early for boarding after a miserably bland lunch. It took him ten minutes to get from his quarters to the docking ramp included in his orders, and he had to wait fifteen minutes to go through security. He had not seen a security screening of this depth since anywhere except Naval HQ.

He had arrived at the dock for boarding call several hours early in hopes of gaining some sense of orientation in the whirlwind of events that had him going out on active duty for the first time. From the looks of it, everyone else involved had had the same idea. The area was already busy with activity with marines, ship crew and station personnel transferring and securing everything from food stores to data files. He wondered if they had all suffered the same kind of shock at the announcement of this mission. It didn't seem likely, as they all went about their business with an air of normalcy. He found himself wondering who these people were, that they would choose such a life. It made him think of his own choices, which, of course led him to thoughts of Corinna, and the path not chosen.

Three years ago, his career ambitions won out over love, and they had separated, going their separate ways. She had her research career to pursue and she said she would accept his choice, but she also seemed to be harder hit by it than he had expected. She seemed to recover quickly though. She took a research position at a secure Naval research facility somewhere in AC-24. It was supposed to be a top-secret project at a top-secret facility, but she sent him a message or two forcing him to swear he would never reveal that she had broken protocol to contact him. He kept his promise, but being in the Intelligence Branch, he did a little digging, and he figured out where she was, more or less. He discovered she was at the hitherto unknown SRF or *Singularity Research Facility*...but exactly where it was located remained a mystery. He still didn't know much about Corinna's research but he knew it had something to do with materials testing. Knowing she was working on ultra secret Navy research projects just made her feel more lost to him than ever. Staring at the hatch opening to the *Redoubt's* interior made him wonder if he would ever see her again.

He wasn't sure why it mattered to him, but three years later, he still found himself thinking of her more than he cared to admit. He'd only heard from her twice since, but he thought of her a good deal more than that. Had it really been three years already? She still invaded his thoughts often, and this was one of those times. Fear, he realized was one of the triggers. Whenever he felt fear, he thought of her, and of how she could make him

feel so much less afraid. He fought now to shut his mind to thoughts of her as he prepared to board a Dreadnaught-class corvette for the first time. He was unwilling to entertain regret about ending that relationship. Not now.

The Amarid disaster debriefing had scared him. The orders he received at the end of that day hit him like explosive decompression. The mission briefing he witnessed two days ago, though much smaller in scale, was even more disturbing, mostly because the reality of what he was about to do hit him that much harder. He had a new respect for the officers and crew who routinely went out in star ships, traveled across vast distances at unfathomable speeds, jumped to other stars via the even more unfathomable physical shift of capsule space, and faced death in exchanges of missiles and beam cannons with some unseen foe. He was an analyst; a desk jockey; a station-bound, strategic problem-solving kind of guy, not one of these man-of-action types getting ready to go out there and do battle.

He was flat out terrified.

He was greeted at the entrance to the UDC personnel hatch by one of the few faces on this ship he knew to be familiar. She was petite and small of frame, her skin velvety brown, and her eyes were so large and so completely dark they seemed to dominate her face.

“Lt. Ravindran. Thanks for meeting me here. I’m not sure I’d be able to find my way to where I’m supposed to be without an escort.”

She flashed a smile that brightened her face remarkably from the business like expression from a moment before. “No trouble at all Lieutenant, and welcome aboard. It does take a bit of getting used to, but once you’ve seen how she’s laid out, it won’t seem complicated at all,” she said warmly as she pointed inward. “Shall we?”

She led him into the cavernous main UDC shaft and through a hatch that opened directly into the port accommodation module. They oriented to a new up-down arrangement, and walked with a casual stroll down a short but very wide main corridor. “This module is where you’ll be most of the time,” she said. “If, for some reason, the Captain wants to meet with you personally, he’ll either come to you, or send someone to escort you to his office or maybe the briefing room. I doubt you’ll ever need to go to the bridge. In general, I would suggest you refrain from any unauthorized explorations,” she leaned in a little closer and lowered her voice a notch. “We’ve got a full load of marines aboard this trip, and we don’t want you wandering somewhere you shouldn’t.”

“Agreed,” he nodded vigorously. “I saw them at the dockside. They’re huge, and so...bald.”

She smiled again and stopped outside a door halfway down the corridor, on the right hand side. The door was one of two doors on either side of the corridor facing one another. “This is the forward alternate bridge officer’s suite,” she nodded at the closed door. “We’ve had to juggle a few accommodations, but this is where you’ll be billeted for the duration. I’m sure you’ll find it comfortable. If you have any questions, or need anything, consult the manual, or just ask one of the crew in this section. I’ll have to leave you now and return to my bridge duties, but it has been a pleasure to see you again Lieutenant. Enjoy the ride.” With that she returned the way they came, and exited through the hatch to the UDC. It took him a moment to realize that they likely wouldn’t be seeing much of one another during this mission. *Pity*, he thought. She was one of the

few members of the crew he'd encountered that was nice to him, and even nicer to look at.

He stepped into a common room that served as a sitting space and office for two officers. It wasn't as small as he thought it might be. In fact, aside from the somewhat utilitarian décor, it was downright commodious. Two doors on opposite walls, one to the right, one to the left, would lead to individual officer's quarters. He didn't care which, so for no particular reason, he opened the one on the right. The hatch slid open and Yves stepped in to the darkened room, and touched the controls of the dimmer. The lights revealed an occupant on the bed, with a kitbag on the floor next to him, arm flung over his eyes to shield them from the light.

"Who's there?" said the squinting officer, starting to peer out from under the crook of his arm.

"Dupuis. I'm Yves Dupuis," he answered. "I, ah, guess we're bunkmates. I didn't realize you were in here. I'll just take the other room, then." He started to step out, and reached to turn the lights back down.

"No, that's alright," the voice from the bed replied. "Leave it on. In fact, you can have this one if you want. I don't care one way or the other. Oh, by the way, I'm Skarsgaard. Lieutenant Commander. Formerly of Vice Admiral Wexler's staff, now Chief Engineer. Don't worry, I was a Chief Engineer long before I went to join Wexler's staff."

"Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant Commander," Dupuis said awkwardly. "I'm Lieutenant Dupuis. Actually, I'm newly promoted to Lieutenant so I'm still getting used to it. I'm with the Intelligence Branch. I'm what they're calling a *mission specialist*." He started to say more but stopped when he realized that this man, swinging his feet around and sitting up, was the Vice Admiral's aide from the briefing; the one with the translucent skin. Skarsgaard winced in pain as he sat up, and continued to hold a hand up to his face, shielding his eyes from the light.

"I was just catching a few moments rest before getting back to familiarizing myself with this ship. It's been awhile since I served on one of these."

"This is my first time even on board one," Dupuis replied. "So I apologize if I've broken some unwritten rule about quarters or something. I fit in here about as well as those freaks in the other pastie." He instantly regretted the use of that word, intending to refer to the strange appearance of the perfectly hairless marines.

Skarsgaard chuckled. "I'm usually the one being referred to as a freak. And if you want to get into a contest with me about who fits in worse here, you're going to lose."

"No, I didn't mean that, I just..." Dupuis was feeling more and more lost. "I'm just way out of my element. I thought I might have broken some unspoken navy rule barging in here."

"There are no rules I know of except *first come, first serve*, and *survival of the meanest*," said Skarsgaard. "Oh, and I care even less than you do about quarters, so take your pick. I'll throw my kit in the other one if you like."

"No, no. You're already here. Stay put. I'll just go across to the other cabin."

Dupuis was about to leave when Skarsgaard added. "There's a first time for everyone on board one of these. I wouldn't worry about fitting in. I'm not just new crew; I'm a new bridge officer. Bridge crew are a very tight knit lot. They get to be almost like

family. So breaking into one of those is no easy task. Especially when you look like I do. We're all here to do a job, though. Just do your job right, and you'll fit in fine.

"As for those marines, I doubt they fit in anywhere, except their combat armour and their drug dispensing sleep pods."

Dupuis decided to brave a comment. "Your... the...skin thing...doesn't bother me a bit."

Skarsgaard paused. It wasn't clear if he was taken aback or pleasantly refreshed by Dupuis' candour. "I've learned that that is indeed a rare thing. We may get along just fine, Lieutenant."

Dupuis nodded, and decided to save his questions about the skin for another time. He left and started across the common room. He dropped his bag inside his cabin and looked around. It was small, but nicely appointed; a true marvel of efficient use of space. He removed his tunic and kicked off his shoes to test out the bed. After a pause, he said much louder so Skarsgaard could hear him in the other room. "Have you noticed how some parts of this ship are too cold and others are too warm? At least the cabins are nicely regulated. I don't know about you, but I find this ship cramped, noisy, freezing, and altogether too fragile to be taking into combat. How...how safe or reliable are these corvettes anyway?"

Skarsgaard came out to the common room, and leaned on the doorframe to Dupuis' newly-claimed cabin. "Put your shoes on, Dupuis. I'm going to show you something about these corvettes that'll make you feel a whole lot better."

Dupuis emerged from his room a moment later, a little tentatively, but shod. "Call me Yves." He shrugged his tunic back on. "What are you going to show me?"

"Follow me, Yves," said Skarsgaard, as he strode out of their quarters back into the main corridor, and turned to the right. Dupuis hurried after him, shadowing him closely as he approached the hatch at the end of the main passage, leading to the control stations and the cockpit.

Skarsgaard keyed them through the double doors leading into the ENG suite, where four workstations were. Two of the workstations were occupied. The engineering crew sitting there were so engrossed in their activities; they never even looked up to see who was coming or going. They continued to the far end of the ENG suite and entered the cockpit. Beyond the command and control stations was a large set of windows looking out onto the port weapons pylon.

Skarsgaard worked his way a little closer to the window, and looked back at Dupuis, who stood there, staring out at the view with an expression of awe on his face. "It's a little different when you actually see the equipment, isn't it?" said Skarsgaard. He crossed his arms and stepped back to let Dupuis move up and take in the full view.

"That's incredible," replied Dupuis.

Looking down a little, he could see a few of the large square cover plates for the collider ring coils almost edge on. Beyond those plates, he could see part of the curved surface of the aft-facing Particle Beam Cannon. Its particle coil housing and tracking gimbals were huge. A little to the aft was the focusing and firing assembly of the PBC weapon itself, large radiator vanes could be seen clearly on its upper surface.

"That, my friend, is one of the many reasons you should feel very safe aboard a Naval Corvette," Skarsgaard explained, gesturing at the PBC. "Anyone who wants to

give us trouble will have to reckon with the awesome destructive power that one of those can mete out.”

“I’ve studied how they work, and I’ve heard lots about what they can do to a ship’s hull, but I’ve never actually seen one,” admitted Dupuis.

“One hit from one of those on an unshielded part of a ship, and you’ve got an awfully big hole. Clean through, most of the time. And that’s just for the moments when the fighting gets up close and personal.” Skarsgaard pointed at the larger rectangular-shaped structure beyond the PBC. “Most of the real fighting is won and lost by the damage done by missiles, and from a much safer distance. That multi-ordinance missile magazine out there can carry a variety of nasty machines, all designed to hit their targets very hard, and from as far out as we can detect,” he explained. They watched as the bright red navigation lights flashed intermittently on the visible corners of the magazine’s enormous structure. Dupuis stared in silence at the scene for almost a full minute, leaning in close to the transparent pane and peering to the sides to try to get a better view of their vessel. There wasn’t much more that could be seen from here, though.

Skarsgaard could tell that the view of the aft-facing PBC and the port missile magazine had achieved the desired effect. Dupuis was now focused on something other than his own worries. “We’d better get back, and secure our belongings for manoeuvres,” he said to Dupuis. “We’ll be undocking in a couple of hours, and I’d better check in and get to my station before we do.”

“Sure,” said Dupuis without taking his eyes off the visible part of the PBC housing. “Thanks for the tour, Skarsgaard.”

Skarsgaard nodded and gestured toward the door with a raised arm, meaning Dupuis couldn’t stay in here alone. Yves glanced at the view one last time, before heading back to their windowless cabin suite.

Chapter 14

Stolen Thunder

22.03.2268

2230 GMT

Saltlake Naval Base

Earth orbit

With a familiar clang vibrating through the hull of the ship, and the slight nudge felt as air escaped the airlock seals, McMichael knew that the ship was clear of the station before the readouts could tell him. He touched the controls to gently ease the craft further away from the arm, while giving her a little forward thrust at the same time to start the transit to the LaGrange point. Even though the break was a short one, it was good to be back in the driver's seat. He knew this ship like it was an extension of his own body. He could make the 162-metre long corvette move with the grace and precision of a bird. At times he could almost forget that the *Redoubt* had a mass of over 19,000 tons. The illusion of agility was afforded only because of the tremendous power available to her main thrusters and plasma grid.

McMichael sort of understood how the spongiform neutronium reaction surface interacted with the accelerated particles bombarding it, but he didn't really care. All he knew was that it was a beautiful thing to be in control of at moments like this. He felt the *Redoubt* dance to his touch.

He nudged the thrust up a little as they cleared the structure of Saltlake Base, and headed for the LaGrange point marshalling area, where they were to meet their escorts. He forced himself to remain within port speed limits, but only just. Hot-shooting was not tolerated anywhere in Earth orbit, especially not around Saltlake.

McMichael risked a glance up at the mirror while he was piloting to the escort rendezvous waypoint. Captain Ferris was busy at his command station, checking systems, responding to comms from the STC people, confirming reports of readiness and ensuring that his marine guests were tucked away in their souped-up pastie. Ravindran had been very quiet and professional since they boarded and strapped-in, so he just decided to leave her alone. He was sort of missing Kenji, too.

McMichael had barely had the chance to chat with their new ENG officer, but his first impression was one of cool reserve. Skarsgaard was hard working, at least. He was trying to fit in with them, but somehow he lacked that ill-defined and unspoken social code so commonly seen amongst corvette crews. Maybe the guy was just rusty in the service, too used to fetching coffees, pressing pants, and drawing up boardroom seating plans. That, and the fact he was one very scary-looking individual. McMichael was just glad that the mirror bolted to the ceiling struts didn't offer him a view of the new Chief's disturbingly translucent skin. There were certain benefits to being up in the front seat, with your back to the rest. Not being able to see the Visible Man was number two on the list of benefits right now.

Piloting this corvette was definitely benefit number one. McMichael immersed himself in the joy of feeling at one with the *Redoubt*.

Skarsgaard spoke to Ferris from his ENG station. “All systems are functioning perfectly, Captain. LDS and Capsule drive are ready when you want them. I’m reading an unusual amount of energy being drawn by the new accommodation module, but I should be able to compensate without difficulty.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Ferris replied. “I’ll have to have a chat with Colonel Carr, and ask him about some of the *special features* his accommodation module is sporting. In the meantime, adjust power grids three and four to compensate.”

Ravindran reported from her WEPs station. “Captain, our magazines are, as you suspected, modified from the standard combat loadout. We’re carrying a larger number of LDSi missiles and Disruptor missiles than usual. We also have two REM missiles. We’ve only got a handful of seekers. All I can say is: I hope we don’t get into a fight.”

“I agree with you on that, Rav,” Ferris acknowledged. “But if we do get into a fight, we’ve got some escorts for help. Even without them, we know how to change our tactics to optimally use the loadout we’ve got. Meaning, of course, that we should run like hell, and hope to live to fight another day with some real missiles in those magazines.”

McMichael’s chuckle was stifled by the sounds of the entrance hatch to the bridge opening, then closing again. Colonel Carr strode from the airlock at the rear of the Command Section to stand next to Ferris, on the port access walkway.

“Captain, my people are secured and ready. What’s taking us so long to make the jump?” said the marine Colonel, as he walked to Ferris’ side. He glanced upward and caught sight of McMichael’s non-regulation modification affixed to the ceiling brace, and fumed, “What in the hell is *that*? Since when do non-regulation modifications get past a Commonwealth Navy Captain? Ferris, what kind of a ship are you running here, anyway?”

Ferris kept his eyes on his Command workstation screen, and replied calmly, “Colonel Carr, welcome to the bridge of the *Redoubt CNV 534*. While we’re currently only engaged in port manoeuvres, I would advise all of our guests against walking about *my* ship until we’ve extinguished the ‘no smoking’ and ‘secure seatbelt’ signs.” He made a clear point of not answering the Colonel’s questions, and he emphasized the possessive reference to the ship. He was not going to let this guy get him into a pissing contest. Not on his ship. Not in front of his officers.

“Captain,” the Colonel said slowly. “This is not a joke. You have no idea who I am, do you? I’m the man who is going...”

“Colonel Carr!” Ferris interrupted him. “I’m in the middle of operating this vessel. I would appreciate it if you would restrict yourself to the starboard accommodation module, with the rest of the marine complement. Any communications you wish to make can be made from your workstation there. I’d be happy to give you a complete tour, but it will have to be some other time. Now please leave this bridge, and let me do my job.”

“Captain Ferris, if we’re going to have some kind of a problem, you’d better...”

“Colonel Carr,” Ferris bellowed over him. “The only problem we have is the fact that you are impeding the functioning of my ship by strolling in here for no reason. Unless you want to go on record as jeopardizing this mission by challenging the command of this vessel, then you will leave now, and trust the operation of this ship to

me and to my crew. Do you understand me perfectly clearly?! Get off my bridge. Or am I going to be forced to have you removed under restraint.”

Colonel Carr was turning red as he listened to Ferris. He simply was not accustomed to any kind of backtalk. He started to shake as he struggled to control his anger. Carr glanced over his shoulder at Ravindran, who held his regard and answered it with her own glare. It was clear he wasn't going to win this one easily. It didn't stop him from trying, though. “*Captain*,” he emphasized the rank, “you just crossed a line. And it is going to cost you in the final analysis.”

“Mac,” Ferris said to his NAV officer. “Bring us a halt. All stop.” He waited quietly while McMichael fired the braking thrusters.

“All stop, Captain,” reported McMichael when the corvette had completely shed its velocity.

Ferris slowly looked over at Colonel Carr again, and held his gaze. Ferris' calm demeanour only worsened Carr's barely contained rage. “Are you still here?” Ferris asked in his best condescending tone.

Carr was beginning to turn an even deeper shade of red. “This kind of insubordin...”

“Get the *fuck* off my bridge!” Ferris cut him off again. “*NOW!*”

The marine Colonel, as intimidating as he appeared, could not bully Ferris, who simply held his stare. Ferris knew how important this little contest had become in establishing the new hierarchy aboard his vessel. He would not allow anyone to dress him down in front of his crew, especially in front of a new ENG officer. For a moment, Ferris wondered if the Colonel would draw his sidearm, and use brute force to save face. As angry as he was, Carr was not a fool. He simply stared at Ferris for as long as he deemed necessary to make his feelings clear, then he fired an equally spiteful look at each of the others before finally storming off the bridge. If he could have slammed the rear access hatch, he would have. Instead, it quietly slid closed and sealed with an anticlimactic hiss.

“Mac, resume transit to our rendezvous waypoint, please,” Ferris said as calmly as he could.

“Aye, Captain. Resuming course and speed,” replied McMichael. He glanced up at the reflection of Captain Ferris, who was breathing a little more rapidly than usual, and happened to notice the seating equipment attached to the rear bulkhead behind Ferris that they almost never used. “I'm guessing you didn't want me to point out the two fold-down rumble seats we have there at the back of the bridge, right Captain?” Ferris gave him a look in the mirror that shut him up immediately. Ravindran, who knew better than to start making jokes at such times, remained silent as she busied herself at her workstation. Unfortunately, Skarsgaard also couldn't suppress his urge to comment on the recent exchange.

“Captain, do you have any idea who Colonel Carr is?” Skarsgaard asked. “I mean, he's ‘The Barber’. I don't think that he's the kind of guy you'd want as an enemy.”

“Lieutenant Commander,” Ferris said. “If I want your opinion...” McMichael noticed the Captain's hands were shaking a little, as he worked the keyboard of his command workstation. “I know exactly who he is, and what he is, by reputation. In fact, I did a little research before we undocked, because I wanted to know a little more about my new crew. Our Colonel Carr is indeed a tough customer, and deserving of our respect when it comes to his particular expertise, but he is not going to bully me aboard my own

ship. I learned that he has a history of doing that with Naval vessels,” he said. The shakiness left his hands as he typed more commands into his console. “He and his marines are used to operating from either an LST, or as guests aboard someone else’s ship. The good Colonel has a nasty habit of going straight to the Captain of a ship and testing his or her mettle. I, for one, do not wish to be baited or harassed by a passenger. So I decided to make it clear, from the start, who is in charge of this ship.”

“Uh, I think he probably got the point,” McMichael muttered.

After a few more moments of silent operations at her workstation, Ravindran reported a new contact emerging from the port’s LaGrange point. “Traffic inbound from the L-point, Captain.” She said. “It’s the *Dreadnaught*. I heard they’d salvaged her and pressed her back into service. From all the chatter I’m hearing on comms, it sounds like she just pulled off an impressive rescue of her own. I guess they’re the new heroes of the day in the Commonwealth.”

“So much for our moment of glory,” grumbled McMichael. “They couldn’t have waited ten more minutes! No matter how famously we succeed, somebody always comes in and steals our thunder. What did they do this time?”

Ravindran was quiet for a moment as she listened on her headset. Then she relayed as much of the story as she could assemble. “They pulled a very impressive stunt in the Lupus system. They used a magnetic hopper to catch an antimatter reactor core that had been ejected and was headed for some highly populated station or something. Everyone’s talking about it. It sounds like the *Dreadnaught* is the new sweetheart of the Navy. She’s really making a name for herself again.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that, too,” Ferris said, with a hint of envy in his voice. “I heard about the big splash they made at the Venturi fuel depot not long ago. I also heard rumours that the crew is getting some special help from an old A.I. ghost box. I’d rather make do without *that* kind of help, after what I’ve heard about those ghastly experiments.”

“We’ve arrived at the marshalling point, Captain,” McMichael said. “We’re being hailed by the *Crusader*.”

“This is Captain Hyslop-Smith of the *Crusader*.” Even over the audio, Hyslop-Smith’s voice had enough snobbish arrogance to make McMichael instantly dislike the man. “Your escort is ready, Captain Ferris. We’ll use an Inclined Tetrahedron formation, with the *Cayuga* on point, the *Iroquois* and *Athabaska* on the flanks. We’ll take the ventral aft position. We can formate on your vessel when you are ready, Captain.”

McMichael rolled his eyes at Hyslop-Smith’s formation report. Every NAV officer who had ever attended pilot training knew about the I-Tet formation, it was standard stuff. This guy was talking about it as if he’d invented it. Mac didn’t care what fancy formation they chose, as long as they kept enemies away. He was pretty sure he knew why this Hyslop-Smith guy chose the rear escort position, too. He was about to voice this opinion out loud when Ravindran broke in again.

“Captain, we’re being asked to hold by STC,” she said. “We’ve been given orders to wait before proceeding to make the jump to the Toliman point.”

“Very well, then. Nothing surprising in that, especially here at Saltlake,” Ferris replied with nonchalance. “Relay that to our escort.”

After a couple of days of familiarization, Allbright found his new workstation to be much easier to operate than he thought it might be. The engineering duties were more similar to the work he'd done on the *Acadian*, than they were different. In fact, he was surprising himself at how quickly he was finding himself adapting to the job of an engineer aboard this Navy ship. The part about keeping the machine running was essentially the same, with better machinery and monitoring equipment. The hardest thing about his new job was getting used to all the Naval military behaviour, the terms they used for things, and their Procedures. There were lots of Procedures to learn.

He was thinking about the procedure for team reassignment mid-repair, when he noticed something odd about one of the plasma conduits monitored from his station. He keyed up a more detailed readout, and sure enough, the readings were well outside the parameters he'd recently studied on that particular part of the plasma grid. Nothing in the monitoring system indicated that it was a problem, though. There were no alarms, no warning notices, and no automated shutdowns, or re-routes. He simply couldn't ignore it. After surreptitiously pulling up the manual and double-checking the ideal values, he knew he was right, but he was reluctant to ask for advice or a second opinion from his fellow engineers. Not only were they were busy, but he was the new guy and knew how that would look. He also didn't want to sound any alarms that could turn out to be false, which would make him look like even more of an ass. He decided to send a test to the sensor, and try to diagnose the bizarre reading that way. He typed the commands, and watched the value fluctuate, and then return to its values well outside of normal. His head was swimming with procedures, and he knew there was probably one for this, but he simply didn't know anything better than personally going to check it out himself. He made a note of the location of the fault, and excused himself from the control room.

Within a minute he was halfway to the aft monitoring control station. He was walking slowly down the corridor at this point looking down at the grid schematic displayed on the screen of his portable data pad, and back up at the conduit labels overhead. He stopped after a few steps like this, knelt down and removed a panel from a relay station, and plugged the portable into the local node.

The reading was still way off. There should have been at least two system warnings triggered by this, but the whole ship was acting as if all was well. After a moment of self-doubt, wondering if it was just something about navy vessel design, he decided to act. He'd rather be alive, and called a fool than ignore this problem.

"Better safe than sorry," he muttered to himself, as he set himself to reprogramming the faulty valve from the data pad's interface. In doing so, he realized that someone would have had to program the valve to go screwy in the first place. Someone had to have done this on purpose, especially if it was supposed to avoid all the automatic alarms that would react to its abnormal functioning. That had the smell of sabotage, which he did not like one bit.

He also realized that in order for his new commands to take effect, he'd have to shut down and reset this entire segment of the grid. Doing that would likely set off a warning or two, and take a number of systems offline, even if only briefly. Somebody was bound to notice that kind of a fluctuation. Whoever had set this valve awry in the first place could well be that somebody. He was wondering about the wisdom of doing

this all by himself, probably in violation of a dozen procedures, when he remembered Chen's words. He wondered if this was what she meant by 'Independence.'

"Screw it," he said aloud to himself. "They can hang me later." He set to work again, determined to correct this problem, hurry back and strap himself into his workstation seat before anyone noticed he was gone. He was hoping the whole thing could be done in the time it took an old guy like him to have a decent crap. A glance at his watch told him that they wouldn't arrive at the L-point for several minutes yet.

There was plenty of time.

"Captain, Saltlake STC has just given us the green light," reported Ravindran. "We're clear to make the jump."

"Very well," Ferris replied. "Tell the escort vessels we're ready." He turned to glance up at McMichael. "Mac, take us through the LaGrange point."

"Aye, Captain," replied the pilot. "Here we go." He touched the controls and felt the thrusters propel them toward the L-point, portrayed on his Head-Up Display as a green disk with a blue mesh conical 'funnel' leading to it and a mirrored red funnel on the far side. These conventions were used as navigational aids in the HUD. They were coming up on it fast. McMichael watched the first escort flash as it passed into capsule space in front of them, then a flanking ship flashed to his right.

The *Redoubt* gained speed and crossed the theoretical plane of the green L-Point disk doing approximately 850 meters per second, relative. There was no flash, though. They passed through the LaGrange point without forming a capsule, and coasted straight into the exiting traffic space lanes, on the 'red funnel' side of the disk. The *Crusader* must have seen the failed jump and veered off at the last second, as she was still with them. The other three escorts were gone.

"Mac, get us clear of this lane, now. Bring us around and get us lined up for another try," yelled Ferris. "Rav, tell STC we had a failure, and will try again momentarily. Get them to hold traffic, and tell them we have to catch up to our escort as quickly as possible. While you're at it, thank the *Crusader* for their quick reflexes and ask them to bear with us." He turned to Skarsgaard, and spoke with quiet anger. "Chief, why the hell are we still in the Sol system while most of our escort are on their way to Alpha Centauri?"

"One moment, Captain," Skarsgaard was flustered as his strangely coloured hands worked the controls of his workstation. "It looks like someone reset a section of the grid a minute or two ago, which caused a temporary loss of a few systems. There was a power loss cascade that took the capsule drive offline for...for only a moment. I guess we lost the charge, and it took a few seconds to build that back up. It's all back and working nominally, now. We can jump anytime."

Ravindran listened to instructions in her headset, and then reported to them Ferris. "Captain, Saltlake has asked us to get positioned for another outbound LaGrange vector, and they'll clear us as soon as they've communicated with everyone else in line."

Ferris nodded at that, but continued speaking to Skarsgaard. "Mister Skarsgaard, which section of the plasma grid was reset moments before we were to make a capsule jump, and why did you have your team do that?"

“Section two, Captain,” Skarsgaard answered. “That’s Allbright’s. He’s the new...”

“Are you or are you not the Chief Engineer on this vessel?” Ferris asked him, clearly unhappy about the situation.

Skarsgaard conceded the point. “I am, sir. Although it was an unauthorized repair, and one I did not order, I am responsible. I’ll deal with it. I assure you it won’t happen again.”

“See to it, Lieutenant Commander,” Ferris chided. “And when you’re done with Mr. Allbright, send him to me,” he continued. “I’d like to have a little chat with him myself.”

Ferris returned his attention to the display in front of him, and addressed McMichael. “Mac, how long until we’re ready to try this again?”

“We’re almost there, now, Captain. Less than a minute until we’re ready. *Crusader* is right on us, too, so we’ll be ready whenever STC says go,” he replied. “I’ve got to hand it to whoever was at *Crusader*’s helm back there, sir. Those were some good reflexes.”

“Tell them later, Mac,” Ferris was clearly not pleased with the performance of his ship and new crew. His displeasure could be heard in his tone. McMichael reminded himself that they were still tired from a string of missions, with too little rest between them. The shuffling of crew must have had a bigger impact on the Captain than he thought. Maybe it was the fact that the *Dreadnaught* came in triumphant and heroic, gaining everyone’s attention as the Navy’s top crew. Maybe it was the fact that this mission had started out bad and was getting worse by the minute. Ferris sounded tired when he issued his next command. “Just get us to Alpha Centauri as quickly as possible. I’m sure our escort is wondering what happened to us.”

Ravindran looked over from her station and said. “STC says ‘go’, Captain.”

“Mr. Skarsgaard,” Ferris said a little too loudly. “Are we ready to proceed?”

“All systems nominal, Captain. Aye,” came the reply from the ENG workstation.

“Mac,” Ferris said as he looked directly at him in the mirror, almost imploring him to salvage this mission. “Let’s go find our escort, shall we? Take us through.”

“Aye, sir,” McMichael said. He fired the thrusters and aimed the *Redoubt* at the centre of the LaGrange disk for the second time in the span of eight minutes.

This time everything worked perfectly.

Chapter 15

Things That Go Bump in the Night

23.03.2268
0230 GMT
Saltlake Naval Base
Earth orbit

“Senator Hartwick. What a pleasant surprise. To what do I owe this honour?” Vice Admiral Wexler said, as he opened the door to his private suite, blinking at the brightness of the corridor lights.

“Cut the bullshit, Wexler,” the senator grumbled, as he pushed his way past the Vice Admiral into the room. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Any time I receive a visit from a senator is an honour, even if it’s...” he made a dramatic show of looking at his watch. “Two-thirty in the morning. I take it this couldn’t wait?”

“Damn right it can’t wait. We have to talk,” Hartwick was pacing the anteroom nervously. Wexler turned on lights, and gestured toward the couch in the sitting room, tightened his robe and followed the senator toward the comfort of soft furniture.

“I just got out of a meeting with the President,” Hartwick proceeded, more composed now that he was sitting. “He’s not happy. He’s scheduled to announce our new budget tomorrow afternoon. It’s not going to be a very *popular* budget, to say the least. The deficit is getting worse by the minute. He’s already down in the polls, and the ratings are heading even further south as we speak. The public is reacting to this recent military debacle at Tau Ceti even worse than we’d imagined. Frankly, he’s more than a little pissed that you’ve organized a little ‘fact-finding’ mission without consulting us about the details.”

“That mission is more than just a little...” the Vice Admiral started to defend himself.

“He doesn’t give the tiniest *shit* what it is. What the president *wants*, and what you will give him, is the name or names of the people responsible for the intelligence leak in our defence and security forces,” spat Hartwick, with more vehemence than Wexler expected. “You will provide them to his staff, along with the details of how they were captured and how they have confessed to their crimes, and how they will be punished; all by tomorrow at two. Do you understand? He fully intends to lead off his budget announcement with a nice little heart-warming, confidence-building victory story...preferably one that has some truth to it. But truth is optional: You catch yourself a god-damned spy in a very public way, and do it by tomorrow. Got it?!”

Vice Admiral Wexler leaned back in his chair, with a smug look, opened his hands, and asked, “Is that all?”

“Don’t play games, Wexler,” Hartwick was cooling off again, and started sounding exhausted. “Like I said: I’m not in the mood.”

“That’s *Vice Admiral* Wexler to you, *senator*.” Wexler said with a controlled tone that sent a chill down Hartwick’s spine. He leaned in menacingly close to Hartwick, as he spoke. “Just *VICE* Admiral. I will be a full Admiral by the end of this week, and more by

the end of the year. Much more,” his voice lost some of the deadly seriousness it had, and returned to a more cavalier tone. “I can probably give you all that espionage information right now if you want. I set up that mission to give us what we want one way or another. I was just waiting to see how things might play out, hoping we’d be able to kill a few birds with one stone. I was about to finish telling you that it’s a mission with a number of contingencies for just such changes of political will. Now that I’ve learned about our President’s weak support for a *real* spy-catching mission, all I have to do is make a call or two, and things will proceed in a slightly different way. But they will still produce the desired results. In fact, I think the results will be downright spectacular. Just between the two of us, senator, the President and I differ considerably on this point: I don’t think the public is upset *enough*. Not yet,” Wexler’s eyes burned with greater intensity, and looked through Hartwick for a moment as he expounded. “If you really want to see your shipyards in full production with lucrative military contracts; if you really want to see this entire society start screaming for more security and more military strength; if you really want to see the population crystallize their resolve to eliminate the Indie threat, then you need to scare the living shit out of them! They need to be so afraid of that Indie ‘boogey man’ out there that they’ll hand you their wallets, the keys to their hovercars, hell, even their own children, just so long as you promise to keep their lives safe, secure, and essentially the same.”

Hartwick grew pale as he realized how dangerously he had underestimated Wexler’s ambition. “What kind of ‘spectacular results’ are you talking about?”

“Let’s just say that the loss of the strike group at Tau Ceti was just a taste of the terror to come. A more...*significant* loss should really get things moving quickly in the senate. You’ll get the funding bill and the military build-up you want, and I’ll get the emergency powers I want. If King ends up looking weak, or as if he fumbled the ball, well...that’s a pity isn’t it,” he smiled a rictus grin that sent another chill through the senator.

“You don’t need to worry about the President. You’ll get your announcement. And you’ll get it on time,” the Vice Admiral regained his composure, but some of the menace stayed in his voice. “If I were you, I’d be more worried about how well you can serve me. I didn’t get this far without knowing a thing or two about tactics. I always have a backup plan or two. Or three. King will get what he wants in time for his little announcement. More importantly, I will get what I want. As far as everyone else is concerned? Well, almost everyone will get what they need...” He leaned back again, tenting his fingers in a gesture of supreme confidence, as he scrutinized the senator. “Almost.

“Now get the hell out of my sight, *senator*. I’ve got some calls to make.”

23.03.2268
Jovian orbit
Sol System
Aboard CNV 676 Niagara

The *Niagara* orbited Jupiter at a comfortable distance for the third straight hour. Iwamasa slid out from under one of the processor subunits serving the ENG workstation on the bridge, and sat up on the floor, a collection of tools and parts scattered between his feet. The shakedown patrol mission was serving its purpose by revealing a few glitches in the ship's data control systems.

"Captain, I've almost got this problem fixed." Iwamasa said to his new Captain, Emile Lejeunne, who sat watching from the command workstation. "I'll need a little more time to test it once I get things back together...maybe another hour."

"Very well, Lieutenant Iwamasa," Lejeunne replied casually, his French accent was already less obvious to Kenji, now that he was getting used to it. "Proceed. This mission has been full of delays of this sort. Better to have them happen now than in combat."

Their new pilot, Ensign Rennie North, appeared to be born at the helm. He was newly graduated from the academy, but was made for the NAV station, training or not. He was barely able to contain his excitement since they left Saltlake for a tour of the Sol system, exclaiming that the *Niagara* had even better responses than the simulator, and the training ship from which he'd transferred. Iwamasa could tell already, even after a few hours, that North was a gentler soul than McMichael had been. In fact, Kenji observed that North, an African Brit with a thick east end London accent, was downright optimistic about almost everything so far. He was friendly and respectful to Iwamasa, and seemed to appreciate Kenji's wit. Come to think of it, Kenji thought, maybe North was being a little *too* nice to Kenji, which made him oddly miss Mac's relentless teasing. At least no one was calling him "the kid" on this ship, where he was one of the more experienced crew on the bridge.

Iwamasa had found that the *Niagara* was identical to the *Redoubt*, in most ways, only she smelled newer. Fresh paint, unmarred labels, and clean handholds were the most noticeable differences. Looking around, he could see that there were fewer scratches on the floors, fewer stains in the upholstery, and fewer taped up bundles of cables than the *Redoubt* had. There was also a distinct absence of any personal touches anywhere. As much as he had hated them, Kenji had to admit to himself that he missed the fuzzy dice and the rear view mirror on the *Redoubt's* bridge.

Lejeunne was from someplace in the south of France. He came from a wealthy family and long line of ship captains. At times Iwamasa could see the spoiled rich kid in him, but he was growing to like him anyway. Iwamasa could also tell that Lejeunne was still uncomfortable in his new role as the ship's Captain. At one point during the first leg of their shakedown mission, Lejeunne completely forgot to issue an order, so they sat there for a few moments, until he realized his error. They'd been able to laugh about it then, but if it happened at a more critical moment, no one would be laughing.

Their WEPs officer was Edwina Bates. There was no telling what her original hair colour had been, but her short-cropped mop was dyed an almost blinding white. It peeked out in scintillating flashes as unruly locks of it seemed to escape from under her flight

helmet. She introduced herself to Kenji as Eddie. She was older than Rav, about a foot taller, longer limbed, and lean. She looked like the kind of gunner that was happiest when the shooting was at its most intense. Her service record seemed to bear that impression out, as she had a number of confirmed kills.

She caught Kenji looking at her, earlier in the day, as they were preparing to launch. He wasn't ogling or anything, he was just trying to figure her out, when she looked right at him from her workstation, gave him an exaggerated wink, and blew him a kiss. He felt embarrassed, but she just laughed out loud and returned to her gum chewing. She clearly enjoyed getting the attention of men.

It also didn't take Kenji long to figure out that she and Lejeunne had something going on, probably for a long time now. Kenji knew the signs to look for from personal experience, and there was no mistaking the comfort of their physical closeness, or how they spoke to one another. They must've been bed partners from when Lejeunne was the NAV officer of the *Corrigedor*. He wondered how they would manage, now that Lejeunne was in the Captain's chair. At least they got to be together on the same ship. At moments like this, it seemed like Rav was a million miles away. In fact, she was a good deal further away than that.

Lejeunne instructed North to take a break, and sent Eddie to assist the second engineering repair team in the C.R.A.C. room. The bridge seemed much quieter for a time. After a period of silence, during which Kenji worked on his back under his console, his new Captain broke the silence with a surprising question.

"Lieutenant Iwamasa," Lejeunne said. "Have you ever seen anything out there in deep space that simply defied...I mean, that you could not explain in any way?"

Iwamasa almost bumped his head as he slid back out from under the console. He sat up and thought for a moment, recalling of some of the spectacularly beautiful vistas of space he had witnessed, none of which seemed out of the realm of the natural universe. "I don't think so, sir. I recently saw a 'visible man' but I don't think that's what you mean. Do you mind if I ask why?"

By way of answering, Lejeunne asked him another question. "Were you always interested in serving as Chief Engineer aboard a starship?"

"Umm...I hadn't really thought about it like that," replied Iwamasa. "I mean, I've always wanted to be on a starship since I was a kid, and the Navy was my best chance at getting something better than a mate's or a deckhand's position. Once I joined up, they told me my strengths were in engineering and managing the onboard teams...so here I am. From what I've learned so far, I'd say they were right; it's been a pretty good fit."

Lejeunne answered this with a nod. He seemed lost in thought.

"Do you mind if I ask what you're trying to get at, Captain?" Iwamasa ventured.

"Mm? Oh, no not at all," Lejeunne answered. "I was thinking out loud, really. I was wondering about some of the things that go beyond explanation. I was wondering if my own path to this position as Captain aboard the *Niagara* might be one of them. I can't help feeling that, no matter how we try to evade our destiny, it seems to find us somehow."

There was another pause during which Iwamasa wondered if there were more questions coming, more of an explanation, or if he should return to his almost completed work under the console, no more enlightened than he was a moment ago.

“Did you know that I come from a family of ship captains?” Lejeunne continued. Without waiting for Iwamasa to reply, he explained further. “My great grandfather owned a very successful ocean going commercial shipping company based in France. Some of my family still operate those container ships, but some of us went into commercial shipping in space. My grandfather was the Captain of the *Walter Sisulu*.”

This got Iwamasa’s attention. “That was one of the first Powell-class mega-freighters ever commissioned wasn’t it? That ship is in every kid’s history book these days. I had no idea that was your grandfather. I remember learning about how she was destroyed. That must have been very difficult.”

“I wasn’t even born when it happened,” Lejeunne offered. “He was not the first in my family to die in the Captain’s seat. The real tragedy was that the Navy rescuers could not reach them in time. It seems that being rescued by the Navy is also in my blood, somehow.”

“Just because we picked you up last week doesn’t mean you have *that* in your blood,” Iwamasa said. “Besides, unlike your grandfather, the *Redoubt* found you in time, and you weren’t Captain of that ship when things went wrong.”

“True,” Lejeunne conceded, “but I still feel like I was somehow fated to find myself sitting here. My father is also Captain of a freighter, based in Ross 128. He was furious when I announced my decision to break with tradition and join the Commonwealth Navy. I was young, and I wanted to fly C-fighters. It didn’t take me long to realize that the life expectancy of fighter pilots was very brief for a reason. After a friend of mine died in training, I didn’t want any part of it. So I trained to pilot these things.

“As I said, this decision broke my father’s heart,” Lejeunne continued. “He told me I would never make Captain if I went into the Navy.”

“So, he was wrong,” Iwamasa stated. “There you sit, Captain of your own Commonwealth Navy corvette. So what if you got rescued once. It’s better than the alternative.”

“Also true,” said Lejeunne. “But there is more. My sister, she stayed with the family tradition. She is Captain of a family freighter, the *Conspiracy Theory*. She spends most of her time running neutronium from Xi Bootis. On a recent run, just a few weeks ago, she was in transit on a new route they’ve started using because too many freighters have been seeing strange things in FX-2978. While travelling through the Gulatos system, near the Lemuel LaGrange point, she came into contact with something she’d never seen before...it came up too fast to see clearly, but it was small and bright, and it knocked out all their systems for several hours. Their engineer was also rendered unconscious. She told me they were completely powerless and adrift until they were rescued by a Navy ship; I believe it was the *Dreadnaught*. It was another one of those totally inexplicable things.”

“So, she got rescued by the Navy, too. The Navy does a lot of that, I suppose. Any idea what that thing was?” Iwamasa asked.

“None,” replied Lejeunne. “No one had any idea and no one was willing to talk about it. Even my own sister was reluctant to discuss this with me. I think she finally did tell me because she knew we were going to go out there again, and she wanted me to be careful.”

Iwamasa replaced the cover to the access panel he had removed, gathered his tools and said, "I guess that would be one of those stories of things that go bump in the night. I've listened to spacers tell all kinds of tales of unexplained things they've seen out there, but I figured they were mostly made up, or embellished. You know, to keep everyone in that spooked mood, or to keep them buying rounds of beer or something like that."

"Perhaps," Lejeunne said. "But if my sister says she saw something, and her ship was affected by it, then I believe her."

Iwamasa returned to his seat at the ENG controls and started calling up command screens. "I guess there's a lot more out there than we've encountered, or can explain. I just haven't seen any of it yet."

"Anyway, speaking of seeing stuff," Kenji continued, "the optics targeting system is working again, so you can use the scopes to confirm targets and contacts out to a good distance, if you want to. Most vessels don't use optics that much these days, not with sensors the way they are. But I can tell you from experience that we found it to be very useful during a recent mission, when the *Redoubt* was doing some recon."

"Yes I heard about this mission," Lejeunne said. "Let's try it now, while we wait for the others to get back, shall we? Let's see if we can see Pluto from Jupiter orbit."

"Alright," Iwamasa said as he complied with the order. "Calculating Pluto's position, targeting and recording. We should be able to...Holy CRAP!"

"What is it?" Lejeunne demanded.

"Did you see that?" he replied excitedly. "That was one huge burst of X ray output. I think we might have caught it on the recording. It was definitely from the vicinity of Pluto space."

Iwamasa confirmed the recording and the location. "It's confirmed. It was a massive X ray burst from the location of FTL Communications relay number 307, Captain. We managed to record most of it. What do you think we should do?"

"Report it to HQ immediately," Lejeunne said. "Send a copy of the recording with a priority message to base immediately, and request permission to investigate."

"Sending," Iwamasa confirmed. "Talk about things that go bump in the night. It looks like we've got our own strange occurrence to tell stories about, now."

"Maybe it was destiny that we look at the right place at the right time, eh?" Lejeunne mused.

North and Bates returned to the bridge quickly after receiving the Captain's orders to prepare for departure to Pluto space. They were strapped in and ready for action filled with a sense of excited anticipation, and then waited what seemed like an eternity for the reply to come from Saltlake base. They chatted excitedly about the possible explanations for the event they witnessed, and they speculated about the kind of new mission orders they would get in response to it. What they received was even stranger than what they had reported.

The new orders they received made no mention of the strange burst of radiation they had recorded. Instead, they received a hastily recorded voice-only briefing from Vice Admiral Wexler describing disturbing developments about a Navy corvette gone rogue. The Vice Admiral indicated that his fleet was mobilizing to pursue the traitor vessel as soon as they could launch the *Purdue*, and her escort. The *Niagara* was active

and ready to respond to this crisis faster than any other vessels in the area. They were to proceed at best possible speed to the Toliman jump point at Alpha Centauri B and engage the fleeing Naval vessel commanded by spies with extreme hostility. Vice Admiral Wexler's direct orders were to engage and destroy the *CNV 534 Redoubt* at all costs, and by any means necessary.

Chapter 16

Detente

23.03.2268

0950 GMT

Priesthole Independent Naval Base

Epsilon Eridani system

Volochkov watched space-suited workers move like ants over the surface of a dry-docked corvette from the observation deck of the cavernous Priesthole base. The immense volume inside the hollowed out asteroid base made the corvette look tiny as it received hull patches, new graffiti and a load of missiles at the same time. He had been ordered to leave his ship and travel here aboard three different vessels almost immediately after escorting the *Lady Marmalade* to the COSA cargo swap. Now he stood watching the process of transformation by which a captured navy vessel became the latest addition to Indie fleet. He wondered who would crew this new ship, and where she would be sent.

The *Wolf-In-The-Fold* had been ordered to stand down, which would give his crew a much-deserved break while he was rushed out here, presumably because MacDuff himself wanted a face-to-face meeting. MacDuff seemed to favour face-to-face, personal meetings, and didn't concern himself with the distances others had to travel to attend them.

Volochkov had been on base for several hours, wandering the mazelike passages to pass the time. There were two security staff nearby him at all times, keeping subtle watch on him as he wandered. Even here, trust wasn't something the Indies came by easily. He had given up trying to memorize the layout of the twisting corridors, winding throughout the base haphazardly; some burrowed deeply into the rock, some contained by protruding tube structures, like this observation point, attached to the inside surface of the cavern. He looked at his watch to see that he still had more than thirty minutes to kill before he was to meet with the Quartermaster. He stared at the docking facilities inside the asteroid's cavity, trying to estimate how long it would have taken the Indies to set this all up. Only twenty-nine minutes to kill, now.

His meeting was going to be about much more than simply hand-delivering his sensor data to MacDuff. The COSA ships had given him an encrypted message to bring directly to MacDuff. N'Bele and the rest had tried everything they could to read that message, but they couldn't break the encryption. Informed of the existence of a coded message, the fleet commander on the *Crack-In-The-World* ordered him to personally courier the message here as fast as possible. Volochkov had neglected to provide every aspect of intelligence gathered at that COSA cargo swap, but somehow he still worried that maybe MacDuff had already discovered the omission. Even if he had, Volochkov had already decided to raise the stakes at this meeting.

He saw where this arrangement was heading. Sooner or later he would be asked to betray the Commonwealth, which he would have to refuse (and then would be killed), or he would be exposed to the Indie fleet (and killed), or declared a double agent by the Commonwealth (and killed), or deemed useless to MacDuff (and killed). All options ended with the same unpleasant and ultimately unacceptable eventuality. No, he needed a

new arrangement with the Quartermaster, and he now had the leverage he needed to negotiate it. It was time to renegotiate the terms of their agreement. This delivery was just the perfect opportunity to do it.

Three Indie crewmembers walked up and paused to look out at the same view of the cavernous docking bay. They spoke quietly amongst themselves for a few moments, before they moved on, glancing back briefly at Volochkov as they left. He caught a few snippets of their conversation. Apparently, they were glad to learn that a female officer of their acquaintance was going to get her first command. Apparently the corvette in view was to be her ship.

Eighteen more minutes to go.

He started to walk toward the designated meeting room, bracing himself for the challenge he would have to issue, and the potentially deadly brinkmanship that would ensue. He had lived with the knowledge that death was close to him ever since he'd agreed to spy for the Navy. Somehow, he'd always imagined it would come while he was engaged in combat, in the command seat on his bridge. He did not want to end up dead on an office floor, executed on the spot for trying to double cross the Quartermaster, but he knew it was a distinct possibility. The next half hour or so would be the true test of his ability to read MacDuff, think strategically, and play a sort of deadly game of poker.

Nine more minutes. He wondered if he would be able to count the length of time remaining of his life in minutes, too.

He stopped at the door to the suite of offices occupied by MacDuff and his staff for a deep breath, and a last moment to collect himself. He pushed the call button, the door slid aside, and he entered. It was a simple reception room, a couple of chairs that didn't match, and a metal plate on crates for a reception desk. An assistant came out and sat behind the reception desk, glancing at the data pad sitting on its surface.

"Captain Volochkov? The Quartermaster is ready right now, if you'd like to go ahead and get started a little early," she said. It was all so pleasant and cheerful. He nodded and walked to the room with the open door on the left.

MacDuff was there, reading something on a screen when he entered. He looked exactly as he had during their last encounter, greying beard, hair pulled back in a tightly braided ponytail. "Captain. Have a seat. We have a few things to discuss," he gestured to the only other chair in the small room. He turned off the screen and looked directly at Volochkov for the first time since their secretive revelatory encounter aboard the *Crack-In-The-World*. There was no indication in his eyes of any conspiratorial goings on, whatsoever. Volochkov sat.

"Thank you for coming so far, so swiftly. I have to add that you've been performing very well according to our new arrangement. My other little helpers; my...*observers*, here and there tell me you've been a very well behaved little spy. So far," he smiled dryly before continuing. "However, I had a look at the data from your last mission, and I'm convinced you're withholding something. I'm also aware of the fact that you tampered with a personal and very important message for me from COSA. I imagine you and your lads tried every trick in the book to read that one, eh?" He leaned forward and looked Volochkov directly, formidably, in the eyes. "I don't like it when my little helpers try to read my mail."

"Interesting, you should bring that up," Volochkov said calmly. "Because I'm not going to be your *little helper* any more." He leaned back in his chair, brushing lint off one

of his sleeves before folding his hands, fingers entwined, on his lap. “I find this arrangement to be most unsatisfactory, and I’m here to tell you that it is now at an end. I will not be coerced nor blackmailed anymore. I could continue to be of assistance, but the particulars of this arrangement must change.”

MacDuff raised his eyebrows, nodded and turned down the edges of his mouth in a mock expression of surprised concern. He placed a finger over a control on a panel in front of him. “Did ye know that, with the press of this wee button, three heavily armed security people will burst in here within four seconds, weapons hot, ready to shoot at anything that isn’t me?!”

“No, I did not know that.”

“Hmm,” said MacDuff. “You were saying.”

“I guessed you might consider simply eliminating me. But I’m hoping you’re both more intelligent than that, and that your agenda involves getting away from deeper COSA entanglements.”

MacDuff sat quietly for a moment, expressionless in his thoughts. “Go on.”

“I’d like to propose a new arrangement...one in which we work together. I give you everything I have, which, incidentally, is more than you think, and you don’t oblige me to try to open your mail. I’m talking about a more mutual, open, and equitable sharing of information. I’m talking about putting it all on the table in an honest, open alliance. I’m talking about détente. I can continue to be a tremendous asset, if we have a shared sense of purpose, or I can be dead in four seconds, the choice is yours. But I will not continue this arrangement, which leads ultimately to either betraying you or the Commonwealth, and...well, me being dead either way.”

MacDuff continued to listen in silence. His eyes grew unfocused for a moment, as he seemed to consider things far away. His eyes narrowed again, as his focus came back to Volochkov in a particularly keen stare. The creases around his eyes suggested the hint of a smile.

More than four seconds had elapsed.

“What exactly do you propose, Captain.”

“I tell you everything I know about what I’ve seen these past few months, and you tell me everything you know about what’s really going on here. We both know this isn’t a fight for the cause of colonial independence against the Commonwealth anymore.”

MacDuff surprised him by standing up and walking to the door. He opened it a crack, and looked into the reception area, nodded once, closed it and turned to assume a half sitting position on the edge of his desk.

“Tell me, Captain Volochkov. What do you know about the *cause of colonial independence*?”

“Oh, you know, the same old stuff about people wanting more than they’re given, so they decide to take it by force. People don’t like it when power is concentrated in someone else’s hands, so they work very hard to take that power away from them and concentrate it in their own hands. The folks who already have the power really, really don’t want to give it up, so they’ll do just about anything to stop people from taking it away. And so on and so forth. Each group makes all kind of righteous claims about the goodness of their cause, and the monstrosity of the enemies. It’s all a complete load of shit.”

“Ah, so you’re a cynic as well as a sell out,” MacDuff looked bored.

“Believe what you want,” said Volochkov without rancour. “You don’t know anything about me or my personal reasons for espionage. Just don’t preach to me about how great your cause is, because I’ve heard it all. It may have been great once, but I stopped believing in it, or even in the crap the Commonwealth claims, long ago.”

“It might surprise you to learn that we don’t disagree all that much, you and I,” MacDuff chuckled. “Here’s a wee bit of clan trivia for you, though. My great grandfather fought for independence over eighty years ago. *Eighty years!* It’s hard to imagine that we’ve been engaged in the same guerrilla warfare for almost a century now. Back then it was mostly political protests, media stunts, lots of time wasted lobbying, and the occasional bit of piracy and sabotage. But he truly believed in what he was doing. Both of my parents also fought actively in several battles against the Commonwealth forces, including the Battle at Jundears Station. I’ve personally been fighting the Commonwealth for recognition of Independence my entire life. Hell, I captured the *Harvard!* I fought at the Toliman Exchange. I believe in this movement with all my heart. I really do. But you’re right when you say things have changed. We need to find a new way. Unfortunately, my views are not shared by many in the council. In fact, the council has recently made some deeper agreements with this group COSA. And I’ll tell you this for free: it feels like a pact with the devil himself to me.

“No, this is rapidly becoming a conflict for something else. Perhaps it’s for profit. Perhaps it’s for the sake of conflict itself, but I’ll be damned if I let myself get manipulated by COSA into a fight that’s not *mine*.”

MacDuff walked around his desk and returned to his chair to face Volochkov. “Very well, Captain. I’ll play along, for now. Let’s make a new set of rules. We...*share* information and we work together. But before we do, tell me something: What is your ultimate goal. Sooner or later you and I will have to come down on one philosophical side or the other, which will bring us back to the beginning, if you ask me. So tell me what it is that you want out of this?”

Volochkov hadn’t exactly prepared an answer for that question, and had to think for a moment. He decided that honesty would be best. “I used to be in this for the money, and I’ll admit, the thrill of the ride. Now, I want to see the truth revealed. I want to know who is trying to feed this war, and I want to know why. Ultimately, I want to see it all come to an end. Once upon a time I thought I was helping to do that by helping the Navy, but I no longer believe that’s possible, nor even desirable. Not with the Commonwealth in charge. It sure as hell doesn’t seem to be what the politicians want. I want to be on the inside of whatever is going to happen to change the *status quo*.”

“‘*Status quo*’. Interesting choice of words, that,” said MacDuff. “I’m starting to think that *status quo* is exactly what all of this is about. A great deal of effort is being put into keeping the *status quo*, isn’t it?” He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a box with data chips. He selected one of the chips and placed it on the surface of the desk between them. “There is some highly sensitive information on this chip: mission briefs, the contents of that COSA message, and a few other very dangerous details. Giving this to you could put the Independence movement at great peril. Prove to me that you’re not still just a Commonwealth spy. Start talking.”

Volochkov looked carefully at the chip, suddenly uncertain of the gamble he’d taken. He was in too far to stop at this point. He suddenly realized that he actually wanted to talk. He wanted to have someone with whom he could share all the secrets of the war

openly and candidly. “During the ambush at the Amarid debris field, we were to watch the supplementary L-point for any escaping navy vessels. As you know, two came our way, and, as ordered, they were duly eliminated. But... we weren’t the ones that took them out. I mean, it would have been relatively easy. They were crippled, and they were just trying to get away. I... I chose to destroy those Commonwealth ships in a bid to gain some of the credibility I feared we were losing. We launched missiles, and were closing for the kill, when more Navy vessels emerged from the L-point. I was sure they were there to escort them out, and I figured we were screwed if we pressed the attack, so I held off the final blow, and prepared for retreat. The enemy ships fired all right, but not at us. They completely destroyed those two fleeing corvettes. Then they turned their attention to us in a very unfriendly way, so we got the hell out. It took every trick I know and then some, to lose them. We finally did after a chase of several hours. They tried everything to kill us, too. I’m quite certain they did *NOT* want us to escape. There were moments I honestly didn’t think we’d get away.”

He watched MacDuff’s reactions as he spoke. Satisfied that he saw genuine surprise on MacDuff’s face, Volochkov continued. “I’ve a few theories of my own, but perhaps you can tell me why Navy ships were finishing off their own escaping survivors that day, then going after us with everything they had.”

MacDuff closed his eyes for a moment while he pieced things together. “My best guess would be that, just like us, the Navy isn’t of one mind, and they’re going through some kind of internal power struggle over something. It must be something big, because I haven’t heard of open shooting between Navy factions before. Not ever.”

“Thank you for stating the obvious,” Volochkov voiced his disappointment sarcastically. “Don’t insult me. *What* would they be fighting over that is so big that they would destroy their own crippled, fleeing ships?” he looked at MacDuff with a narrowing of his eyes. “Maybe a better place to start would be to explain to me what was really going on during that ambush. They called it a *demonstration*. A demonstration of what, for whom, and by whom?”

“COSA, of course,” MacDuff replied. “They informed us of an opportunity to destroy a Navy strike fleet lying in wait for us in the Amarid debris field in Tau Ceti. They also informed us that this would be an opportunity for us to observe a new COSA weapon in action. They wanted to sell us a bunch of these new stealthy weapons platforms very cheaply. Practically for free, in fact. They are almost invisible until they go active. Apparently they are quite vulnerable and short-lived, but in large numbers, they can overwhelm an entire fleet. They wanted to supply us with these weapons. This was meant to be a product demonstration for our benefit. They told us where to go, what course to take, what speed, when to go there...everything. One condition they were very clear about for this ‘favour’ was complete secrecy: We were to prevent any Navy vessels from escaping after the *demonstration* was over. They did not want survivors talking about it. They were very eager to make sure that we got the credit for the destruction. The Council was only too happy to oblige, and be seen as more of a threat. It’s quite likely the Council will be asking for many more of these weapons from COSA.

“The real question is: Who was that demonstration really for. I’m convinced that there was another message in that wholesale slaughter, meant for us Indies, and that was to observe very clearly where the *real* power was. Aye, they were also telling us that we need them a good deal more than they need us. By attacking and destroying such a large

Navy target like the *Syracuse* and her strike fleet, COSA was showing us what they can do to anyone, anywhere, should they choose to. They were letting us know that we'd better appreciate the *preferred customer* status we were being given. Clearly, COSA had to have a Navy insider because that fleet was set up to perfection. The bit that you've just told me; that Navy ships were also a part of COSA's security measures, tells me that the insider help they're getting may be larger than we think, which only makes my mission more important, and far more urgent."

"Mission?" asked Volochkov. "Are you talking about that coded COSA message we brought? By the way, when you briefed us for that escort mission, you never mentioned anything about being your personal couriers."

"That's because we weren't expecting that message. But the 'mission' I just mentioned is only sort of related to the message they sent with you. I'll explain in a minute. First, tell me what else you know. What *really* happened at the neutronium hand off?"

"Well, my report contained the main gist of the encounter, but I left out a couple of important details. First off, as you suggested, we arrived a few minutes early. We must have interrupted a meeting, because at the edge of our sensor range, we detected a pair of corvettes in close proximity to one another, likely docked. As soon as we showed up, they separated and one of them fled in great haste. One of the ships was our COSA contact, of course. But guess who's ship was in such a hurry to leave?"

"A Commonwealth Navy corvette, no doubt. Did you get a specific ID?"

"Indeed I did. My guess is the special message we received for your eyes only was brought to that meeting by a Navy corvette. I'm also guessing it wasn't part of the original plan for that *rendez vous*. Anyway, they took off in a big hurry and the rest of the transfer went as planned, but just before we left, they transmitted the coded message, and a few more COSA corvettes just suddenly 'appeared' inside our sensor orb, as if by magic, then everyone left on a different vector. It was quite an impressive display. I suppose it was another one of your little '*don't-even-think-about-fucking-with-us*' demonstrations. It certainly worked on me."

"What was the name of the Navy corvette you saw fleeing the scene?" MacDuff asked.

"What was in that coded COSA message?" Volochkov countered.

MacDuff smiled and leaned back in his chair. "We must play chess someday, you and I. I think I would enjoy it," he said. Volochkov nodded, but remained tight-lipped. "Very well," MacDuff continued, "COSA has decided to do us another *favour*. They will hit another Navy target, give us credit, and retreat to the darkness of the shadows. Quite a gift, eh? Almost no strings attached, either."

"Why would they... whoever in hell 'they' are, choose to be so generous to the cause for independence if they weren't willing to openly ally themselves with the Independent Navy as members of the cause?"

MacDuff shook his head. "I'm convinced that COSA cares nothing for our political agenda, and we haven't really required it of them. The fact is that we've desperately needed their help. We were losing this war for a few years before COSA came along. All we could hope to achieve was a drawn out series of guerrilla strikes and retreats. We could capture, but we couldn't hold much of anything of strategic value, not militarily. Then, suddenly, magically, we get this very powerful friend willing to help us.

We get weapons, and amazing intelligence about Naval dispositions, and all we have to do is keep them well supplied with neutronium, and keep their identity and involvement a secret. In other words, they gave us everything, and asked for almost nothing in return. Suddenly we were back in the fight. Who, in their right mind would question a gift like that?"

"You?" Volochkov answered.

"Me!" MacDuff confirmed. "Like I said: I pick my own fights, thank you very much. These *gifts* are raising the stakes, and coming with more strings all the time. The problem is that the Independence movement is anything but a 'unified front'. Most of the representatives on the council think that this COSA business is great. The bloody Exchequer is practically in love with COSA."

"What are the details of this latest *gift* from COSA."

MacDuff looked sidelong at Volochkov for a moment before continuing. "Why not?! Here are a few details that I've put together that aren't in any of the files they've sent. COSA's biggest advantage, besides their hidden bases and secret identities, is their stealth technology. They've got thermal baffles on their exhaust systems, radar absorbent shielding on the bodies of their black ships, and they've resolved the infrared emissions problem that has stumped the Navy researchers for so long. We still have a tough time seeing their ships unless they're active.

"Now it seems that the Navy, contrary to popular belief, didn't quite give up on their stealth technology research program. They've been researching it in secret all along, and are getting close to a breakthrough. If the Navy discovers the solutions to some of the IR shielding problems they've run into, and it looks like they will quite soon, then COSA will suddenly have much less of an advantage. There's a secret Navy research facility that COSA sees as a threat to their technological edge, so they want to take it out completely. This serves their own purpose quite nicely, but they really don't want to be identified as the aggressors. Not yet anyway. They are more than happy to give us the credit for the strike. The only string attached to this *gift* is that we have to supply a fleet of Independent Navy vessels to be seen at the secret research facility immediately after the attack, to make our involvement believable. They want us to arrive just as they're leaving and mop up, get noticed, maybe even recorded, maybe even deal with the Navy response, which is likely to be swift."

"Why don't they just tell you where it is and let you decide how, when or if you're going to smash it?"

"I don't honestly know why, but this is the first time they've insisted on doing the hit themselves. My only guess is that this is an important one to their particular agenda. They probably want to make sure we don't muck it up," MacDuff replied

"And this doesn't sit well with you."

"No it does not sit well with me."

"Why not? You get to hurt the Navy, again."

"No, *they* get to hurt the Navy and *we* get to walk in and take the credit. This is not something we decided to do, because it suited us...No. We get handed these 'gifts', that are actually more like *orders*. They've even gone so far as to suggest that we send the *Crack-In-The-World* group in to mop up, since that fleet is of sufficient size to be believable. We're becoming their errand boys. Someone else calls the shots, and we are so eager to hurt the Commonwealth that we fail to see that we are no longer even in

charge of our own destiny. *That*, my little spy friend, is what this whole *Independence* thing has been about, all along: Self determination.”

“It doesn’t feel so great to be someone else’s errand boy, does it?” Volochkov baited. “So what is this mission you mentioned earlier, then.”

MacDuff brushed off the taunt with a shake of his head. “We really must play chess someday soon. All right. It won’t help you one way or the other, anyway. The ‘mission’ is my own self-appointed task. It is simply my personal agenda, one shared by a select few of us, and directed quietly by myself with the help of a few trusted friends, and...*little helpers*, so to speak. So far, you’ve been an unwitting and admittedly highly disposable part of that team. Now you’ll be a little more...informed, if we continue down this path.”

“I might be willing to allow myself to remain one of your *little helpers*, if I understood the ‘mission’ more clearly.”

“It’s simple, really,” MacDuff continued. “I want to arrange a meeting with someone in the Commonwealth Navy. I need to find someone in the Navy willing to listen to me. I have some ideas about COSA, and some evidence I’m willing to share with the right person or persons in the Navy. The trouble is, I don’t know who will listen, and I don’t know whom to trust. Not yet anyway. There are factions within the Navy that are deeply involved with COSA, I’m convinced of that, but I don’t know which. That is the ‘mission’, and that is where you can be of most help.”

Volochkov thought for a few seconds before replying. “I think it’s safe to assume that my credibility with the Navy is shot. I wouldn’t be exactly the ideal contact, nor messenger. In fact, anyone connected with the Naval Intelligence branch won’t carry a lot of credibility in the Halls of Power, if that’s where you’re hoping to find an ally.”

“Agreed. I need to find someone who has respect and credibility within the Navy, but above all, I need to find someone with no connections to those in the Navy who are tainted by COSA. We can’t just openly expose COSA...it would be far too dangerous to us all. Not to mention the support they already have within the Independence movement. No, we need to proceed quietly for the time being. I need to talk to a true warrior; someone who has been dedicated and thorough in their work; someone who is uncorruptible.”

“I see your problem,” Volochkov mused. “That’s a tall order. Even *I* can’t make any recommendations that are guaranteed to be that pure. I’ve met a few I can say I respect, but *that* level of certainty...no. When is this strike against the Navy research facility supposed to occur?”

“Very soon. A matter of days, perhaps less. Can you be ready?”

“What would happen...” Volochkov thought out loud, stopping to more carefully select his words. “What would happen if you pulled something like what you did at the cargo swap: arrive early?”

“Interesting idea,” MacDuff said as he gave it some thought. “If we arrived early, it might throw off their plans a little, make them uneasy that so many witnesses see them involved in the assault.” MacDuff’s eyes brightened as a new idea struck him, bringing those creases at the edges of his eyes into a tight smile. “Better yet: Arrive early, and with almost nothing. We could leave the *Crack-In-The-World* and her entire support group behind.”

“Whoa there. Wait a minute. If you’re thinking of sending me in alone, then I withdraw my suggestion. You don’t think I’m suicidal do you?”

“Suicidal!? A Commonwealth Navy spy walks into my office in the heart of our secret base demanding a new arrangement isn’t suicidal? If not suicidal, then you’re either mad as a hatter, or one of the boldest Navy specimens I’ve seen in awhile,” MacDuff countered as he studied his opponent for a moment. “No, I don’t imagine you are the least bit mad or suicidal. You’re shrewd and determined which is why you’ll be the ship to arrive a little early. You’ll also have all the gear necessary to record everything you see. It is quite likely that COSA will be very upset at seeing only one Indie ship coming in early, so I’ll send a few others to support you, and I’ll offer an official excuse. They’ll have no trouble believing that the *Crack-In-The-World* is delayed by mechanical problems. She’s been down for repairs for more time than she’s been operational since we got her.”

“Only a couple?” Volochkov protested.

“You won’t be there to fight. As you suggested, you’ll go in early, record everything you can about the COSA ships, their tactics, their weapons...everything. If they ask, you’ll say that the fleet is delayed, and you’ve been ordered to make an appearance for blame’s sake. You’ll get a squadron of armed tugs that are very loyal to me for help. I’ll send the *Bannockburn*, the *Braveheart*, and the *Acadian* in to assist you. Just arrive, hold position, observe and record. COSA will likely finish off the research facility and leave quickly. If COSA is unhappy with that, well...too bad. If any trouble shows up, leave. If you absolutely must, FTL for help and I’ll send the *Crack-In-The-World* to support your retreat. Otherwise, get out and report straight back to me.”

Volochkov sat and listened to MacDuff, understanding how a charismatic leader can intoxicate followers with inspiration, as he excitedly devised an attack plan on the fly. He knew a good deal more careful planning would be required for such a mission to succeed, and he wondered if it would get done before he was asked to risk his ship on this mission. He nodded and listened as MacDuff listed the potential outcomes of foiling COSA in this assault, doubting if anyone could predict how COSA would react.

“We don’t have much time to get ready,” MacDuff concluded. “Get back to your ship and await a new patrol mission assignment from me that will send you to the Momar system. Once there, you’ll receive a coded transmission from me. It will give you the location and timing of a *rendez vous* with the ships I mentioned and all the details you’ll need about the secret Navy research base. I don’t know the particulars yet, but I understand it’s quite a way out, near the edge of the system.”

“Can I assume that we have a new understanding then?” Volochkov ventured. “If I feel I’m being misused or recklessly risked, I assure you that you will regret such a decision. If I have questions about details or background, I expect you to provide them in the spirit of true collaboration. In return I will continue to work for you and provide you with full reports on COSA activities. Understood?”

“Understood, and agreed, Captain,” MacDuff reached across as he stood to shake Volochkov’s hand. “You have the qualities of a true warrior; the kind I seek amongst the Navy ranks. Unfortunately, I fear there aren’t many like you in the service of the Commonwealth.”

“You might be surprised,” Volochkov said. He turned and left the room.

MacDuff waited and watched Volochkov leave before saying quietly, "I might at that."

Chapter 17

Capsule Jumped

23.03.2268

Capsule Space

En route to Alpha Centauri B

Capsule space never ceased to impress him, no matter how often he saw it. Ferris watched the barrage of light and colour displayed before them in the tunnel effect they perceived in this distortion of physical space. The destination point was nearing, which meant that he had to prepare for the return to normal space. He listened to his bridge officers reporting on their respective systems they monitored prior to the shift into the space of the Alpha Centauri B system.

“How long until we emerge at the Toliman point?” Captain Ferris asked from the command seat.

“Just under ten minutes, sir,” McMichael answered.

“Time enough for a brief chat with Mr. Allbright,” Ferris said. He turned to the ENG station to his right. “Mr. Skarsgaard, inform Lieutenant Allbright of my desire to meet with him in my office immediately.”

“Aye Captain.”

Ferris un-strapped and exited the bridge quietly. He arrived at office, only a few steps aft of the bridge, poured himself a cup of water from the dispenser, and sat down to prepare his questions for Allbright. It was bad enough to be stuck with unfamiliar personnel on a mission that reeked of poor planning, but to have someone who didn't understand Navy protocol engage in unauthorized tinkering was unconscionable. He was considering placing this Allbright character under arrest when he heard the tap at the doorframe, and looked up to see a stout, gruff man standing shoulders squared in his doorway.

“Sit,” Ferris said, pointing to the chair opposite his desk. Allbright complied quickly, but not meekly.

“I understand you made some small, last-minute repairs to my ship just before we made jump,” Ferris started out quietly, containing his anger.

“Yes, sir, I...”

“Shut it!” Ferris snapped, escalating to anger faster than he'd intended. “You'll answer me when I ask you a direct question, not before,” Allbright nodded, crossing his arms in mute defiance. “Do you understand the consequences of your unauthorized tinkering?”

“I assume we got left behind,” Allbright said.

Ferris shook his head and snorted a half chuckle at this man's insolence. “Correct. We missed our jump. Three of four escort ships didn't and they are at Alpha Centauri wondering where the hell we are. It's a pretty sorry way start to a mission, Mr. Allbright.”

Allbright said nothing. He simply stared back at Ferris as if he were bored with the whole interview. Ferris leaned forward, arms on his desk. "Time for you to start telling me what the hell you are doing on this ship."

"Captain. You've got a sabotage problem."

"Sabotage, now is it? That isn't exactly the response I was anticipating. Is this a confession? Because right now, the only act of sabotage I have in sight is the one where we were prevented from making a coordinated jump."

"No, Captain. I'm telling you that someone else sabotaged this ship, maybe while we were in port, maybe someone on board. My guess is the former, because the damage would have put this ship at serious risk if any combat situations arose. I'm the one who..."

"Mr. Allbright. Answer my question. What the hell are you doing on this ship?"

Allbright closed his eyes and took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm the one who spotted it and fixed it as quickly as I could. There wasn't time for chain of command or protocol, sir. If we had jumped into a hostile situation, we would have overloaded a main linkage and lost weapons after one shot, shields probably would have gone offline too after a hit or two. It was a more complicated repair than I thought so the system recharge took longer than I thought it would. I do apologize for causing the mis-jump. But if I were you I'd be asking myself why someone would want this ship incapacitated in a fight. Sir."

"I find myself asking myself what the hell you are doing on my ship...and I keep getting bullshit for an answer!" Ferris shouted.

This time it was Allbright who leaned in close to Ferris, fixing him with a withering stare. "I'm here because I had no other choice. So fuck you and fuck your barking dog act. I don't give a damn one way or another what you want. Lock me up for all I care, it seems to be the standard Navy way of dealing with people, as far as I can tell. You say you want the truth? Here it is: I was given an offer I couldn't refuse by one of your Navy Intelligence people. She warned me that someone would try to prevent this mission from succeeding, and that I should trust no one. She said I might be able to trust you. So I studied my ass off and tried to keep my eyes open for problems. I spotted one. I corrected it. I believe the correct response is 'Thank you', but I don't expect I'll hear it from you. Sorry if you lost a few minutes off your precious '*coordinated jump*' schedule."

"I get the impression you're not someone who tolerates all this Navy bullshit very well."

"No, to be honest, there's a lot about you people I just don't..."

"Because here's the situation *acting Lieutenant Allbright!* You're aboard a Navy vessel, which is part of the Navy fleet, all of which operates according to the tried and true method of respecting the chain of command and following orders. You don't have to like it. You just have to do it. Do you think you can do that? Respect rank, and follow orders?" Ferris glared at him.

Allbright stared back.

"I need to know right now, because if you can't, you're not only useless to me, you're a liability to this ship, and I *will* lock you up somewhere, in which case you won't be able to do whatever you were put here to do."

“I understand. I can and will respect the chain of command. You’ll have no more problems from me, Captain,” Allbright conceded.

“See that I don’t. Just tell me who put you here,” Ferris asked more calmly.

“Chen.”

“I don’t know much about her,” Ferris acknowledged, “except that she gives half the Navy the creeps, and other half just plain hates her. She was head of operations of an intelligence-gathering platform at Midway. They had to be evacuated when it looked like we were going to lose the whole system, so some ships got diverted to assist the evacuation that were needed elsewhere. I guess it was a pretty rough time for the evacuees, but the Navy took that whole thing pretty hard. The folks in intel have never been popular with the regular navy, but ever since Midway, Chen and the whole intel branch have been on a lot of people’s shit list.”

Ferris paused and thought carefully for a moment before continuing. “Here’s the deal Mr. Allbright. I’m going to give you another chance. You do your job and you do it extremely well, do you understand me?”

“Aye, Captain,” Allbright said much less enthusiastically.

“You respect that uniform, and the people you work with, and...keep your eyes peeled for any more odd occurrences. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt on this last one. When someone starts talking about sabotage on my ship, I start getting very nervous. It won’t hurt to have some extra eyes looking for unusual problems, I suppose. Just remember that I’ll be watching *you* very carefully, too,” Ferris checked his watch and realized they were due to arrive at Alpha Centauri soon.

“I’m needed back on the bridge. Return to your post and be sure to inform me of any other problems *before* you decide to take any action. Is that clear?”

“Crystal clear, sir. Thank you,” Allbright was already up and leaving the office.

“Allbright!”

“Captain?”

“In the Navy, there’s this thing called a salute...”

“Oh, sorry sir,” Allbright seemed genuinely sorry as he snapped to attention and offered a decent imitation of a Navy salute. “I really didn’t mean any...”

“Nevermind, just get,” Ferris said with a quick salute response. He waited for Allbright to leave and headed back to the bridge with two minutes to spare before exit to normal space. He would need more time than two minutes to think about the implications of a Navy Intel plant on board...and so obviously not a properly trained one on top of that, as well as the possibility of sabotage. Under normal circumstances he would bring everything to a halt and take the time to think about it. These were not normal circumstances.

They emerged in a blinding flash of light almost at the same moment the *Crusader* emerged from her capsule space transit. Alarms rang instantly, as they registered debris and residue from explosions. There has been a battle here very recently, and some of the wreckage was still hot.

“Captain, I’ve got debris and ship fragment contacts all over the area. The fighting is over, but only just,” Ravindran announced. “Five intact ships in the vicinity, all corvettes. I’m reading two in amongst the nearest cluster of debris, and three more much further out, near another collection of debris fragments.”

“WEPs, get me IDs!” Ferris shouted. “NAV, stand by evasive manoeuvres and get me *Crusader*.”

Ravindran was already identifying what she was reading. “The debris is what’s left of our escort. Three destroyed Navy corvettes. The other five ships are all stolen and heavily armed...three are on our list of known pirates.”

“*Crusader* here,” Hyslop-Smith could be heard on the comm arm as it unfolded in front of Ferris. “Looks like we caught those pirates trying to salvage what they can from their victims.”

Ferris looked at the tactical display, and realized that Hyslop-Smith was right. The pirates probably thought they had time to grab a few goodies before hightailing it again. “We’ve got five contacts, assumed hostile, and confirmation that our escort was destroyed,” he replied. “*Crusader*, you take the nearest pirate vessel, the *Caustic Kiss*, and disable her. I want prisoners. We’ll handle the rest.”

“Very well, Captain Ferris. Breaking off to attack now.” The comm arm winked out and folded itself back into the retracted position.

“Rav, launch a REM missile immediately, and link it to me.” Ferris ordered. “Then launch disruptors at the *Just Plain Mean*. Defensive PBC fire only.”

“They’ve spotted and identified us. The pirate vessels are all turning to engage us now,” McMichael said. “It looks like we surprised them a little too. They’re all launching missiles, and the *Just Plain Mean* and the *Caustic Kiss* are firing at us.”

Ferris was busy guiding his REM-linked missile toward the three pirate vessels that had been further away, but were now speeding toward them. He saw the names of the targets on his display, as they raced into PBC range. The *Something Wicked*, the *Gangrene IV*, and the *Disturbing Development* would be upon them in several seconds, but before that, hopefully they would encounter his REM missile. If he could guide it toward the middle ship and detonate it at the right moment, he would be able to destroy them all with one blow. He guided the missile at them, mentally calculating the timing of the blast with their approaching velocity. The targeting computer was making the same calculation, displaying a set of numbers that counted down so quickly they blurred into a flicker of unreadable symbols. He pressed the detonation trigger moments before the last of the digits disappeared and lost his link instantly. He looked out the front view port, to the place he estimated they were, and he saw the expanding sphere of dissipating light that marked the location of the missile’s explosion.

“Direct hit, sir,” Ravindran said. “The three pirates from the more distant group have been eliminated. The *Something Wicked* is the only one left and it is tumbling and heavily damaged. It doesn’t look like it will last long. Internal explosions are probably still ripping it apart. The *Caustic Kiss* has engaged the *Crusader*. It looks like they’re off on a high-speed chase. Both vessels are already nearing the limits of our sensors. Our first two disruptors have missed the *Just Plain Mean*, or were countered. There’s just too much debris over there. They’re using the destroyed hulks to evade missile locks. Launching another now.”

“Mac, get us in closer to those wrecks,” Ferris ordered.

“Aye, Captain. Moving in on them now,” McMichael said. He pressed the main thrust overrides into the full forward position, and gripped the controllers tightly. They all felt the subtle changes in directional forces while the pilot manoeuvred closer to the

target. “Captain, it looks like the *Caustic Kiss* has damaged the *Crusader* and is returning to engage us. The *Crusader* is adrift for the moment.”

“Stay with the *Just Plain Mean* everyone,” Ferris said. “Rav, what’s the status on that last disruptor?”

Ravindran was about to say, “Hit,” when their entire vessel shook violently. Despite the powerful inertial dampening field, the jolt she felt made her grateful for the restraint harnesses. They all looked at one another a little shocked at the reminder of the limits of the dampening field.

“What the hell was that?” Ferris shouted. “Did we just take a missile right on the hull, or was that a debris impact?”

“Neither, Captain,” McMichael said. “The starboard accommodation module has just undocked and hit full thrusters right on top of us. They’re headed for the *Just Plain Mean*, sir.”

“Damn!” Ferris exclaimed. “What in the hell is Carr up to?” he said as he keyed open a channel to the marine pastie.

“Captain,” Ravindran said. “I can confirm that we have successfully disrupted the systems of the pirate vessel *Just Plain Mean*. It looks like the marine pastie is going to dock with her. We have the *Caustic Kiss* inbound on us now. The *Crusader* is in better repair now, and trying to get back in the fight too, but she’s still quite far out.”

“How long until the *Caustic Kiss* is in range?”

“Less than fifteen seconds, sir.”

Colonel Carr was not responding to his comm request, so Ferris gave up on the pastie for the moment and focused his attention on the approaching pirate vessel.

“They’re coming in fast, launching everything they’ve got at us,” Ravindran uttered calmly into the wire-thin audio pickup attached to her headset. The ship jittered and bounced to the fire they were receiving. Yellow and magenta light flared outside the forward view port as the LDA countered incoming PBC fire. “Evading... launching countermeasures... launching seeker... and returning fire now,” she continued in her calm manner. PBC fire could be seen streaking forward toward their unseen enemy as they approached in a head on contest. A rush of static told Ferris that the pirate corvette had just skimmed past at tremendous speed. McMichael was already flipping the corvette end over end and firing at the passing pirate. “Got her!” he exclaimed.

“Confirmed, Captain,” Ravindran announced, excited. “The *Caustic Kiss* is crippled and tumbling. Our seeker is about to find her...and...” They all watched the light flare out the forward viewport. “She’s gone. Completely vaporised. Enemy destroyed, Captain.”

“Mac, get us back to the marine accommodation module,” Ferris ordered, watching the pilot nod in reply. “And try to get the Colonel on comm for me, will you. Skarsgaard, what’s the status on the CRUSADER?”

“Limping back, Captain. She’ll be OK, but my guess is they’ll need time to make repairs.”

“We’ve got a link to the marines now. Colonel Carr is on the comm.”

They heard the sounds of explosions, gunfire, and screams. They heard Colonel Carr’s voice shouting over the background din, sounding annoyed at the interruption. “We’re kind of busy here, Captain, what do you want?”

“Get back here as soon as possible, and meet me in my office immediately,” said Ferris. “And make sure we get a captive alive. I have some questions that need answering.”

“Captain,” Ravindran shouted. “We’re still not alone. I thought I saw something else when we jumped in, but there was so much wreckage and then the hostiles, I...”

“What have you got, Rav?” Ferris asked.

“I’m still not sure, captain. I’m getting two small contacts, quite far out, but within sensor range. They don’t seem to make any sense. If they were truly that small, at the range we’re seeing them, we shouldn’t be able...and the speed and power output doesn’t match...” Ravindran continued to try to decipher the readings. “Wait, they’ve moving off. It looks like they’re accelerating to LDS.”

“Mac, Pursue them!”

Aye, sir. Engaging auto...” McMichael cut short his report. “Sorry sir, they’re already gone and off the scope. I couldn’t even get a heading.”

Ferris sighed and looked down at his screen for a moment. “Contact the *Crusader* and offer assistance. In the meantime, bring that marine pastie back on board.” He watched his screen as the specialized marine accommodation module undocked from the drifting hulk of the pirate corvette and manoeuvred toward them for re-attachment.

“*Crusader* sends her compliments by text only, Captain,” Skarsgaard said.

“Captain Hyslop-Smith states that repairs are proceeding well. They are not in need of assistance, and will join us presently.”

“Very well,” said Ferris, as he keyed his comm arm again, in an effort to raise Colonel Carr. “Colonel. Please report to my office immediately. I want a full...”

“I’m sorry Captain, but I won’t be able to meet with you for some time. We’re simply too busy here with our operations,” Carr replied coolly.

Ferris held back his temper. “Understood Colonel. I’ll accept your report here and now, then. What happened during your boarding action?”

“You’ll receive a full written report of the action within twenty four hours. The upshot of it is that we had a single survivor, who was not able to provide much information to us during the debriefing phase.”

“Are you telling me we only have one survivor from that ship left?” Ferris was incredulous.

“*Had*, Captain. *Had*,” Carr corrected. “He did not survive the...debriefing.”

“What were you able to learn during this *debriefing*?”

“Only that this group of pirates were in the employ of someone who paid them well to destroy the group of vessels emerging from that L-point at that precise time,” Carr reported. “They were instructed to leave no survivors, and were permitted to take what they wanted from the wreckage, so long as they disappeared very quickly. These pirates believed they had completed their task and were looting the wrecks when we emerged...apparently taking them as much by surprise as they did our former escort ships. That is all.”

“So we have no idea who paid them?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain. That is all we know, at this point.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Next time I tell you I want survivors, you better give me survivors to talk to personally. And the next time I call you to a meeting, I expect you to

be there. Ferris out,” he cut off the comm, eager to end the conversation with the marine colonel as quickly as possible.

McMichael broke the silence. “You hear that Rav? No survivors! I told you the guy was a complete nut job. I don’t even want to think about what they did to interrogate that pirate. But I’ll bet it has something to do with why they call him ‘*The Barber*’.”

“Listen up, people. We came through that one relatively unscathed, but we need to stay sharp. This mission is making less and less sense all the time. Good work everyone. Let’s move over to the *Crusader*, and lend what aid we can.”

Chapter 18

Random Vector

24.03.2268
Saltlake Naval Base
L5 Earth Orbit

“Incoming message. Coded. Priority One,” announced the soothing electronic voice of someone’s idea of the perfect virtual secretary.

“Jesus...what is it with this place?” Wexler grumbled as he flung back the covers and pulled his robe about him. “Lights.” He rubbed his eyes, squinting in the brightness. “Receive and activate link...Wexler here.” He saw the face of Captain Malvo, commanding the *Purdue* and sighed heavily. “Captain, it is 3:40 in my a.m. This had better be very, very important.”

“You asked me to report any activity at Navy HQ, Vice Admiral. I’ve got a report of the kind of activity we definitely don’t want. The *Malta* just left with her escort.”

Wexler sat for a moment trying to absorb the news. “Damn! What else?”

“Nothing, sir. Destination: *classified*. Mission: *training manoeuvres*.”

“*Training*, my ass!”

“I was able to learn through unofficial channels that they are probably headed for Epsilon Indi, sir, but that’s unconfirmed.”

“Damn! What in the hell is she up to?” He started pulling his clothes together as he thought. “OK, get the *Purdue* ready for immediate departure, and recall all escort crews double quick. We’re going out on some *training manoeuvres* ourselves. Move. Wexler out.”

24.03.2268
Alpha Centauri

“We’re agreed then, Captain,” said the tiny image of Hyslop-Smith from the screen on the comm arm display. His voice still sounded haughty despite the tiny sound that came from the audio next to the display unit. “This is a significant setback, but the mission must proceed as planned.”

“Yes,” Ferris said. “Though with as much prudence as we can exercise. I find the timing of this attack, and the fact that pirates were paid to attack us more than a little disconcerting.”

“To say the least,” Hyslop-Smith agreed. “I haven’t seen such a bold strike by pirates or mercenaries at either of the Toliman points for years. They’re too well patrolled by the Navy for that.”

“Where are all the Navy patrols now, Captain?” Ferris asked rhetorically.

“I see your point,” Hyslop-Smith conceded. “We’ve just finished repairs. Let’s get to the L5-Point, and jump to Tau Ceti before they realize they didn’t get us all.”

“We’re on our way. *Redoubt*, out,” Ferris said and reached to touch the control that would retract the armature. “Mac, we’re leaving for Tau Ceti. Set up our NAV waypoint, and get us there as...”

Ravindran broke in excitedly with new contacts appearing on the registry. “Captain, we have multiple signals emerging from the L5-Point ahead. Two corvettes and two PatComs,” Her tone changed to one of relief. “It’s OK, they’re Navy vessels, sir. It looks like we’re getting some additional backup.”

“That would be nice,” added Ferris. “We sure could use it.”

“Rav, check your ORB display.” McMichael said cautiously. “Those ships are coming in awfully fast.” It only took another second for the situation to become clear. “Look sharp everyone, we’ve got inbound missiles.”

The bridge comms came to life, as the lead Navy vessel hailed them. The four Navy vessels continued to accelerate as they approached. “Ferris, this is Captain Peel of the *Fairfax*. Your traitor days are over. Not only are you a sell out, you’re a bloody coward. The punishment for treason is death. That’s better than you deserve, do you hear me? Our orders are to take you out, and I’m really going to enjoy being the one to do it. At least you get the chance to fight. That’s more than you gave our friends at Tau Ceti. Goodbye, Ferris. All ships: attack my target. Destroy the *Redoubt* at all costs!”

“What the...? Mac, get us some distance. Now!” Ferris barked commands. They felt the roar of the main thrusters immediately, and the corvette swung about and gained velocity. “Rav, deal with those missiles for the moment. Skarsgaard, more power to thrusters and the LDA for now, but stand by to shift power back to weapons systems.” The PBCs began firing, as Ravindran tried to pluck missiles from their destructive paths.

Ferris keyed open his comms to Hyslop-Smith. “*Crusader*. We’re being attacked by those incoming Navy vessels! Evade and assist! Target the corvette *Fairfax*.”

“I already understood that much, Captain. We’re with you *Redoubt*.” Said Hyslop-Smith. The wingman’s reply sounded remarkably calm to Ferris’ shouts. “Launching missiles now.”

The LDS drive activated as McMichael did his best to evade the incoming missiles, but before they could traverse more than a few hundred kilometres an LDS inhibitor missile burst nearby, bringing everyone back to normal space for the duration of the exchange. The main thrusters roared to life again, as they slewed and jinked to confuse their attackers targeting systems.

“Captain,” Skarsgaard yelled over the sounds of the battle. “Why do they think we’re traitors? Shouldn’t we try to talk to them?” He sounded genuinely upset.

“I get the feeling they’re too busy trying to kill us right now to listen to any arguments in our defence,” Ferris shouted back, more than a little upset by the situation, himself. “Just keep this ship in the fight, Skarsgaard, and we’ll figure out why they think we’re traitors later. If there is a later.”

Ravindran had been concentrating on her weapons fire up to this point. She took a moment to report to the Captain. “There are still two missiles tracking us. More will likely be on the way. The *Crusader* has drawn the PatComs away, but she’s taking heavy PBC fire from them. She isn’t firing back, so she may be damaged, or just reluctant to fire on Navy vessels. The *Fairfax* looks to be disabled. She’s immobile but she’s still launching missiles at us. The other corvette, the *Almeida*, is coming in hot and fast. Firing.”

They felt the jolt from the cannon machinery, as the particle beam burst leaped from their starboard side toward the distant attacker.

“Deflected.” Ravindran said, a little disappointed. She kept firing. Three incoming PBC bolts rocked the *Redoubt* as the *Almeida* fired on them. They could see the brightly coloured flashes outside the front view port as the LDA emitters countered and dissipated most of the energy of the incoming PBC blasts. Suddenly, they could see the Navy corvette for a split second as it hurled past them at seemingly impossible speed. “Aft magazine, launching seeker. Firing again.” She continued to report her activity. It just didn’t make sense that they were fighting for their lives against Navy ships. They felt their ship rock from enemy fire. The *Almeida* was trying the same rear-firing manoeuvre. From the energy impacts they felt, and the sounds of alarms as systems took damage, it seemed to be working, too. Red lights lit up Skarsgaard’s board as the *Redoubt* felt the blows of the attack. Skarsgaard dispatched repair teams to the more critical systems immediately.

“Captain, we’re taking damage...and we’ve got more missiles coming at us from behind, now,” Ravindran announced, keeping her cool throughout. “Launching counter measures.”

“Mac, keep us turning, and try to work back to the *Crusader*,” Ferris ordered. He watched his display, as the *Almeida*’s seekers closed on them relentlessly. “Brace for aft missile impact!” he yelled. An explosion rocked the ship, causing it to buck underneath them. Ferris was surprised at how much worse he had expected it to be. It wasn’t as big an explosion as he expected. He looked at Ravindran, who was still focused on her display, concentrating her fire between defensive bursts against incoming missiles, and offensive shots.

“It detonated about three hundred meters aft of us, sir,” she said, as if reading his thoughts. “Counter measures fooled it. It also looks like we hurt the *Almeida* on that last pass. She isn’t changing her vector or speed, and our seeker is about to...”

A flash on her screen, and the changes in contact registry information told the story. “Direct hit in her thrusters,” she said almost sorrowfully, as she called up new targeting information on their remaining assailants. “We just killed the Commonwealth Navy corvette *CNV 511 Almeida*.” There was a moment of silence as they all processed that information, while the *Redoubt* sped toward the *Crusader*’s position. Even if it was done in self-defence, it went against everything they stood for. “I guess that makes us truly rogue, now,” Ravindran concluded. “I wonder if the Indies will have us?”

“Do you think we should start a separate kills list for when we take out our own guys?” McMichael quipped. “Y’know, for our stats and stuff.”

“Stow that talk, Mac! You too, Rav,” Ferris shouted. “We have more Navy ships to kill if we’re going to save ourselves and our only escort vessel. The *Fairfax* has started moving again, let’s make sure she stays out of the fight for good, and get ourselves out of here.”

“Captain, the *Crusader* is back in the fight. She just launched a REM missile at the two PatComs. They’re turning and coming back for another pass at her,” McMichael described the scene before him, enhanced by labels and vector trails on his HUD. “Unfortunately, the *Fairfax* is still pouring missiles out at both of us.”

“Not for much longer,” Ravindran said. “Coming into range of the *Fairfax* now. Switching to Rapid Fire Mode. Mac, keep us facing the target. Firing.” The PBC fired a

rapid burst of punishing energy, building up heat faster than it could dissipate it. McMichael spun the ship on its axis to keep the *Fairfax* in the manual crosshairs as they sailed past it toward the *Crusader*. Overheated, the weapons shut themselves down automatically, leaving the *Redoubt* dangerously vulnerable for a moment, as they shed heat. The tactic had worked, though. The last bolts tore through the *Fairfax*'s main forward fuel reserve section, and the aft portion of the ComSec. A number of subsidiary explosions rumbled throughout the hull of the vessel before it finally ruptured and billowed in a violent fireball. The *Redoubt*, spinning back to face its trajectory, had just destroyed its second Commonwealth Navy corvette in as many minutes.

They closed on the *Crusader*, which was crippled but still in the fight. The REM missile she had launched detonated between the remaining Navy PatComs while they were accelerating in for another attack run. The rearmost PatCom was completely destroyed by the blast. The other PatCom, the *Plevna*, was crippled by the blast, coasting on its previous course directly toward the *Crusader*.

"Captain!" McMichael exclaimed. "The *Crusader*'s in serious trouble. Those missiles from the *Fairfax* are heading straight for her and they're out of our range. We can't stop them in time."

"Then let's hope the *Crusader* can," said Ferris. They were closing the gap, but not fast enough. Helpless, they watched the missiles close on the *Crusader*. Two seeker missiles slammed into the Navy escort vessel one after the other, ending her service in an expanding fireball. The explosion carried enough force to inflict more damage to the *Plevna*, which coasted helplessly past the expanding fireball where the *Crusader* had been. The bridge crew of the *Redoubt* were close enough now that they could actually see the explosion envelope the crippled PatCom, deflecting it off its course, and stripping off her magazine pylons and large chunks of hull plating.

"Well, if she wasn't screwed before, the *Plevna* sure is screwed now," said McMichael as he watched the PatCom drift away from the clouds of drifting debris that marked this battle.

Ferris nodded, as he keyed commands into his console. "Let's leave them alone, and get the hell out of here. Mac, get us to the outer boundaries of this system fast. Take us at least fifty a.u.'s out. Pick a random vector, I don't care, just get us somewhere nice and quiet. Let's clear this LDSi field and get out there before anyone else shows up." The thrusters roared to life pushing the *Redoubt* further and further away from the field.

"Captain, it may be too late to leave here unnoticed," reported Ravindran. "A moment ago I detected a vessel on the contacts registry. It was a civilian vessel, probably a tug or a freighter. She was headed toward this L-Point and stopped when she detected the battle. They probably saw the whole thing and decided to run for some other point."

"Damn! A witness was the last thing we needed. If there was any doubt that we'd become traitors before, there won't be much now that we've been seen destroying Navy ships. Did you get an ID on them?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not," Ravindran said, matter-of-factly. "They stayed quite far out, and I was distracted by the fighting, and what I thought were more contacts."

"What do you mean 'more contacts'?" Ferris asked.

"For a moment, while I was going through sensor filters on the contacts registry, looking for missiles or mines, I thought I saw two new ships in the area. They were unknowns, corvettes from the looks of it, and then they were gone. It was very similar to

the sensor blips we picked up at the time we engaged those pirates. They were probably sensor ghosts, or echoes from all the debris we just made around here.”

“Nothing we can do about it now,” said Ferris, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his hand. “Let’s get out of here. I need a minute to think.” A chime indicated the LDSi field had been cleared, and the LDS drive ramped up, kicked in, and hurled them away at near light speed.

“Captain, you realize that they’ll have the L-points of this system bottled up in no time, don’t you? We may not have all that much time,” the new ENG Chief said.

“I’m fully aware of that Mr. Skarsgaard. I didn’t say I needed a lot of time, but I need to decide on a course of action and to do that, I need to consult everyone. Assemble the bridge crew, and meet me in my office as soon as we’re at system edge and the backup crew are at their stations. Make sure Colonel Carr and Lt. Dupuis are there, too.”

24.03.2268
Alpha Centauri System
CNV 676 Niagara

“Exiting Toliman point now,” North said. “Welcome to Alpha Centau...My God! There is debris all over the place!”

“Looks like there was a fight here recently,” said Lejeunne. “*Very* recently. Stay alert everyone. Any sign of the *Redoubt*?”

“None. I just got the last traces of a ship hitting LDS as we were entering. No ID, and no way to pursue, just a rough direction,” said Bates from her WEPs station.

“Iwamasa, what are you getting from this debris? Any EDRs?”

“Aye, Captain,” Iwamasa replied. “Mostly Navy vessels here, plus a few neutrals from the navy’s ‘probably pirates’ list. All of the vessels assigned to escort the *Redoubt* were destroyed here. The other wrecks were either formerly assigned to system defence, or the *Purdue*’s battle group. From the looks of it, though, I’d say the *Redoubt* got away.”

“What in the hell is going on?” Lejeunne asked no one in particular.

Iwamasa chose to answer. “Whatever it is, there is no way I’m going to believe that Captain Ferris is a traitor. There was something funny about this whole mission, and the way I see it, this is some kind of set up.”

“I find this all difficult to believe myself. In fact, I don’t like it any more than you do, Kenji, but we received very direct orders from the Vice Admiral himself. We are ordered to destroy the *Redoubt*.” Lejeunne said.

“I have to tell you right now, sir, if we come to that point, you’re going to have to place me under arrest. I cannot participate in that kind of order. I don’t care if it means the end of my career.”

Lejeunne thought for a moment before answering. "I'm afraid there isn't much we can do to stop this, Chief. If we find them and we *don't* fire, our logs will show that we didn't carry out our orders."

Bates offered a solution. "I agree with Kenji. This whole thing stinks. I mean, what ever happened to due process? We haven't seen any evidence to support the claims that they've committed treason. Here's an idea: What if we don't ever find them?"

"Are you suggesting we intentionally avoid them?" asked Lejeunne.

"Let's assume that the *Redoubt* survived whatever happened here," Bates went on. "Let's also assume that the trace we saw hightailing it out of here was them. We could just head in the opposite direction, go through the L4 point out that way, and start roaming the Epsilon Indi system. I mean, if I were them, I'd head through Proxima to get back to Earth. There ain't much out the Epsilon Indi way."

"I'm willing to be the one responsible for leading you that way. I'll make something up to suggest I recommended going that way."

"Yeah," She nodded in agreement. "We could tell folks that Kenji here told us 'they went that-a-way'".

Lejeunne considered the option, but didn't seem convinced. "This is my first command, and I do not wish to blatantly disobey orders. I certainly did not expect to be making such a choice so quickly. Those orders were very clear and very explicit."

"But they tell us to kill one of our own," Iwamasa continued. "Can't we at least request confirmation from someone at Fleet Command? If nothing else it will buy them a little more time while we await confirmation."

"Very well, I'll send the request for confirmation to Fleet HQ. But when we get it, we will carry out those orders."

"Captain," Iwamasa said matter-of-factly. "I'm not going to be a part of the destruction of the *Redoubt*. If you don't want to avoid her, then we could always develop a serious drive or power plant failure, the kind that would take a day or two to repair. I could knock us out of the game right here and right now, if drifting around Alpha Centauri is the preferred option."

"No, I've had enough of *drifting*, and this ship needs to overcome her reputation for mechanical problems. We all owe Ferris and the entire crew of the *Redoubt* a debt of gratitude. I'll send the request for confirmation of the order and I'll agree to your suggestions. For now." He spoke to North next. "Ensign, take us on a nice sightseeing tour of the Epsilon Indi system. Let's all wish the *Redoubt* luck, wherever she decides to go."

Chapter 19

Heliopause

24.03.2268

Alpha Centauri System

76 A.U. from Alpha Centauri B

Dupuis had received the call to meet the Captain in his office almost immediately after he heard the sounds of the Linear Displacement drive ramp up and engage. He was learning to recognize *Redoubt's* different sounds, and the familiar sound of the LDS drive brought a sense of relief. He was still edgy after the recent sounds of emergency klaxons and fast manoeuvres he had heard during combat. His heart had nearly stopped when he heard the emergency *Brace! Brace! Brace!* warning. Lying strapped on his bunk while the ship fought a space battle was the most helpless he had ever felt in his life. Even though the inertial dampening field was excellent, every jolt he felt as the ship deflected enemy fire made him wince as if it would be the last sensation he felt. He was exhausted from the sustained rush of adrenaline and fear. The only comfort he derived during the battle was in his thoughts of Corinna. He was realizing what a mistake he had made letting her go to pursue his career. The fear of death had stripped away his ambition, leaving only the resolve to get her back in his life somehow. If he survived this mission, he would find a way to contact her at that research facility. He played out the whole joyous reunion in his mind as the ship dodged and rolled through combat. Those thoughts faded as he double-timed it along the main axial corridor to the Captain's suite in the ComSec.

He passed a repair crew bustling on their way to the next priority job. Before long, he stood panting outside the open door of the Captain's office. Ferris sat at the end of the small table in his cramped office doubling for the moment as a conference room. He had the same worn look of stress and sleep deprivation seen on most of the faces there. Lieutenant Dupuis joined the members of the bridge crew, sitting opposite Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard against the bulkhead wall. Under the bright light of the room, their eyes were sunken and they all seemed more pallid. The lighting also made the colours showing through the translucent skin of the Chief Engineer more disturbing than ever. He wore a pained expression on his face, and a glisten of perspiration showed on his lip. They waited in silence until Colonel Carr arrived a full twelve minutes after the meeting had been called. It seemed like an eternity.

"Ah, there you are Colonel. Thank you for joining us," said Ferris; his anger barely contained. He pointed to the last seat available. "We have very little time so I'm going to go through this very quickly. We have a new situation to digest, which seems to be changing by the minute. I have been given the gift of specialists for this so-called mission, and its time I consult your expertise." He looked around the table at sombre faces. "Here's how it's going to work: I'm going to provide the sitrep. Then I'm going to ask questions. I want answers to those questions in as quick and focused a way as possible. Rank means nothing at this table. This is life or death. We have no time for bullshit of any kind. I want answers and ideas, and I want them fast. Our comrades in

arms are in the process of hunting us. They're probably setting up blockades at the L-points in this system as we speak. Here goes:

"We were sent on a mission to hunt a spy ship that has been accused of treason. I personally found the evidence against them thin, but orders are orders. Since we have a 'capture' option I was going to strongly support that option and discourage anything else. As a result of an engineering mishap, we missed our scheduled jump by a few minutes. This mishap appears to have saved our necks, because most of our escort was eradicated by an ambush of pirate vessels, paid to destroy anything coming out of the point at precisely that time. Obviously, we were the target. Regular Navy SecPat vessels of the region were conspicuously absent. The pirates thought they had done their work, and were picking over the carcasses when we showed up with the *Crusader* and surprised them. Fortunately for us, and in spite of certain unauthorized independent actions, we prevailed," he looked directly at Colonel Carr with a cold glare that was matched by a bored look from Carr. "It turns out that there were other vessels way off at the limits of our sensor range during that exchange, and they left quickly after we destroyed the attackers. Before we knew it, we were jumped again, this time by our own people believing that we have gone rogue. Someone paid those pirates; someone gave those Navy vessels orders to attack us, leading them to believe that we were responsible for the recent disaster at Tau Ceti. Once again, we survived, but at great cost. The *Crusader* wasn't as lucky.

"We now sit at the very edge of the system while repairs are nearing completion. We're down to a handful of disruptors, even fewer seekers, and one REM missile. If we have to fight again, it's going to be a short one either way. If we want to go anywhere, we have to move out soon, or they'll have this system locked up and we'll be stuck here. We were supposed to go to Tau Ceti, but I have a feeling more unpleasantness awaits us there, so that direction is not an option, in my view. Mr. Dupuis."

Dupuis started in his seat, not expecting to be called upon so directly. "Uh, yes sir?"

"Let's talk about the mission first. We're supposed to contact the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. How do you suggest we do that, now that things have...changed?"

There was a silence at the table and a panicked moment during which Dupuis felt like getting up and running. He might have if he weren't hemmed in on either side by McMichael and Ravindran. He bit his lip. "I don't know."

"What?" Ferris asked with incredulity.

"I don't know. *Sir*."

"I said forget rank. What would you suggest we try?"

"Captain, I don't know what to tell you. I have no idea where or how to find the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. You have the same information as I do about last contact. Your guesses would be as valuable as mine. The...*have we really* been declared rogue?"

"Yes, the last combat manoeuvres you felt were part of an exchange with ships of our own forces. We destroyed four of our own vessels in that battle. If we weren't rogue before, it'll sure as shit look like we are now," Ferris replied curtly. "You were saying?"

Dupuis seemed a shade paler than he had a moment before. "The only thing I can think of would be to say that looking in Tau Ceti is a waste of time. It always *was* a waste of time, even before this all turned to...before things changed. I honestly don't even think the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* is the problem it's being made out to be, and we certainly aren't

going to find them if they don't want to be found. Listen: for months now we've been pretty sure that the *Crack-In-The-World* group used the Tau Ceti system as their main base of operations, and we haven't been able to find them. We've only spotted them twice, and the last time we did was a disaster, and they *wanted* us to find them. It's a big system. Finding a single ship, experienced in covert techniques will be next to impossible. Sir."

"... 'it's a big system'," Ferris said nodding. "I'm having a hard time believing my ears. You're our intelligence officer and that's the best you can do: 'I don't know' and 'it's a big system'? We're often out here for weeks at a time finding and fighting Indie ships, without the benefit of your 'intelligence' data. We do better than that with sensors that can only detect targets to about two thousand Kilometres. Perhaps you can tell me why you are aboard this vessel."

"Captain, I don't mean any disrespect. I'm...I'm just trying to give you straight up answers. I was included on this mission to keep me out of a political witch-hunt brewing back at Naval HQ. I came up with a conclusion that was very unpopular with the brass. No one seems to want to believe that there's another...oh never mind. Look, I'm an intelligence *analyst*. Most people think that everything we learn about the enemy comes from our 'spies'. But only about ten, maybe twenty percent of useful intelligence data comes from the work of covert operatives. The bulk of it comes from open sources; L-point activity, shipping manifests, traffic patterns, financial transactions, that sort of thing. The trick is to assemble it into useful patterns we can read. That's the kind of thing I was trained to do. My expertise as an intelligence data analyst never really had much bearing on the task of tracking a single ship in space. We spent months assembling data and modeling scenarios before we could confidently put the Indie fleet in a given place at a given time. Even then, it took a critical report to give us the specifics. I wish I could be more helpful, but in all honesty, I think my being on board this vessel is a mistake."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Mr. Dupuis. We need a plan, not explanations for why we don't have a plan. And frankly, if you're not an asset, you're a liability," Ferris looked next at Ravindran. "Rav, it looks like we get no help from our intel specialist, and from where I sit the mission is moot, anyway. Survival is the game, now. Suggestions?"

"If you ask me, we don't know enough to formulate a plan. What we need is information. We need good intelligence. Who paid those pirates? Who ordered our own ships to attack us? Whose ships were out there watching to see the outcomes of the battles? Unfortunately, we don't have time to go around looking for answers to questions; not while we're being hunted and blockaded by our own fleet. So more than intel, right now we need time and distance in order to consider the options. We need to pick a direction, and fast."

Dupuis watched the Captain look at the WEPs officer with respect. The woman was definitely a clear tactical thinker. "Agreed. Our most important objective right now is to prove that we haven't gone rogue, and in order to do that, we need to stay alive and collect information. The question becomes: Where will we find the information that's going to help us? You've already heard how easy it is to stay hidden within a given system if you don't want to be found. But ships need fuel and supplies; crews need rest. We can't run around this system forever. Colonel," Ferris turned his gaze to Colonel Carr "the routes back to Sol, and to Midway are most likely blocked by now. Which of the others would you recommend?"

Captain Ferris touched the screen of his pad and a display of the stellar map appeared on the surface of the table, rotating and zooming in to the Alpha Centauri system. Colonel Carr looked at it a moment, then pointed at the system as he spoke. "Even though the L-4 point in this system is closer, making it an easier or at least quicker escape route, I would caution against heading to Midway. Those systems are now dominated by the Independents, and as you can see only offer a dead end. No, I think your best bet would be Proxima Centauri or Epsilon Indi, as long as you don't get forced in the direction of Delta Pavonis. I suggest we use the Matisse L4, behind Matisse's Folly...it will be the least likely to be covered yet by any patrols."

Ferris nodded. "Very good. I agree. What about you two?" he looked at Skarsgaard and McMichael. "The real question at hand is where can we go that will help us to find the answers, and the proof we need to demonstrate our innocence?"

Skarsgaard shrugged, "I still think we should try for Tau Ceti. The mission..."

"The mission is FUBAR, Chief!" McMichael yelled. "We've been on *mission* for a matter of hours, and already we've been attacked by mercenaries, we've been declared rogue by our own Navy, we lost four escort vessels, we've been forced to destroy our own ships in self defence, and our intel specialist tells us we probably had no hope of ever finding that spy ship in the first place..."

"And we've been sabotaged!" Ferris added.

"Sabotaged?" McMichael asked. "What sabotage? Do you mean the missed jump?"

"It was probably done while we were docked," Ferris nodded. "One of our engineers detected and fixed it immediately. His repair was the reason why we didn't make the jump...it probably saved our lives. The problem wouldn't have stopped us from jumping, but it would have crippled us pretty quick in a fight."

"Why didn't I hear about this sooner?" Colonel Carr joined in, suddenly quite upset.

"Because we've been pretty busy since we got here!" Ferris replied. "Because I'm not certain the saboteur isn't aboard, what with all these new people. Besides, none of this helps us choose a course of action. Ravindran, you said we needed to get some good intelligence. Which direction offers us the best opportunity for that?"

She shook her head, still puzzled at the turn of events. "I'm not certain. I just wish I could have gotten a better track on those strange contacts we spotted during the battle. They might have provided some indication of course if I had been able to spend more time tracking them."

"Captain, if there is a security threat on this vessel," Carr burst in, "I expect to be apprised of it in full! The completion of this mission depends on it. There are measures my people can take that could prevent any further..."

Ferris held up his hand to cut the Colonel off. "Rav, you might be on to something. It might be worth looking back over the sensor logs. Those ambushes required some real time data, which means that whomever is behind these attacks is using some kind of spotter. We need to know more about that possibility. Colonel Carr, I agree that your marines may yet prove to be important to the security of this ship, but I alone will decide when to call for and implement those measures. I will let you know when that decision is made."

Ferris looked as if he were deep in thought. He turned off the display and gathered himself up, signalling the end of the meeting. “We may have some other options to consider before choosing our next direction. Rav, I want you to go through the sensor logs in as much detail as you can and try to get more information on those mystery contacts. I get the feeling they’re important. Mac, I want you to plot high-speed course options for the remaining possibilities, and ready yourself for a fast run through the gauntlet. I expect it’ll be just like at Arcadia, but I want to make it through whichever L-point we choose as quickly as possible, so be ready for the word. Once you’ve worked out the routes, I want you give Rav a hand with the sensor logs. Mr. Skarsgaard, repairs should be complete presently. I want you to double-check everything to make sure we have no more mechanical mishaps. I also want you to work on IFF options. See if you can hack an alteration of our identification signal. If we can borrow an ID tag for long enough to get through an L-point, it might make the difference between survival and destruction. Colonel Carr and Lieutenant Dupuis, I’d like a word with you after this meeting. The rest of you: Dismissed.”

Dupuis waited while the rest squeezed out from their places and exited the cramped room. The three of them sat in silence, while Ferris waited for the sound of the airlock hatch to close and seal behind the retreating bridge officers. Once he was certain the others were gone, he turned to Carr. “Colonel, it seems unlikely that we will be able to pursue this mission as assigned, and as such, I am questioning the utility of a marine contingent on board this vessel. Your strategic and tactical expertise is obvious, and would probably help our cause, but I see no need for you to become a part of this mess. Your module has independent LDS capacity. I’ll put it to you directly: Do you wish to remain with us, or do you wish to detach and return to the Navy on your own?”

Carr must have given some thought to the matter already. His answer was a measured one. “Captain, I have never returned to base without having completed a mission. I have no intention of doing so now. *You* may have abandoned your mission after encountering a little adversity, but *I* have not. I intend to complete my mission, and I intend to make sure your actions don’t prevent me from doing so. You have been accused of treason and declared rogue. For the moment, I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt, as I’ve seen nothing to support such allegations, and there has been nothing in the form of due process. But if I learn that you did in fact have anything to do with the disaster at Tau Ceti, or have in any way assisted the enemy, I’ll execute you myself and complete the mission. For the time being, I’ll support you in your efforts to find alternatives. Our existing mission parameters require some...adaptation. But I will not allow you to abandon our ultimate mission. Whether it’s the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, or you, we have a real security risk out there, somewhere, and it’s my job to rein them in. I have no intention of running home.”

“Very well, Colonel. I appreciate your...vote of confidence. In truth, I was hoping you would leave and take some baggage with you,” Ferris nodded in the direction of Dupuis. “But I could use all the help I can get. If you’re going to stay, we need to get one thing very clear: you are not to take any action with your accommodation module without my direct orders. That means you don’t detach without my order, you don’t fire your weapon, you don’t *do anything*, without a specific order from me. Do you understand?”

“I understand your request, and will take it under advisement,” Carr answered, as he stood to leave.

“It wasn’t a request, Colonel, As Captain of...” but Carr was already out of the room and walking down the corridor. Ferris, now alone with Dupuis, looked decidedly unhappy. “Looks like we’re stuck with each other, Lieutenant.” There was a pause while Ferris considered something. “Why do you *really* think you were included on this mission?”

“Vice Admiral Wexler gave me my orders right after the Tau Ceti debriefing. He said that they were looking for a scapegoat to hang that mess on, and he wanted to protect me from the political fallout, so I was to do some *field work*, as he called it.”

“Why would he care? I mean, why would he be so protective, even magnanimous toward you?”

“No reason I can think of, now. I’m starting to think he set us all up for some reason, but I can’t figure out why. I’m usually pretty good at seeing the patterns, and getting a handle on the different angles, but not this time. Maybe because my own skin is involved.”

“That makes two of us, but we’d better figure things out fast,” said Ferris as much to himself as to Dupuis. “What was it you concluded that was so unpopular?”

“My analyses pointed very strongly to the presence of a third faction in this war...a very quiet one,” Dupuis said.

Ferris looked at him carefully for a minute, deep in thought. “I see,” he said. “You aren’t the first person I’ve met that believes that. It does seem almost too hard to believe, but...the more I think about it, the more sense it makes. Very well, Mr. Dupuis, maybe we can find a way for you to be useful after all. Get yourself suited up for bridge duty and report to the bridge in twenty minutes. You’ll be assigned one of the fold-down rumble seats at the back of the bridge. I’ll want you to give me best guesses, analyses, estimates, or hunches whenever I ask for them, on whatever issue we find ourselves facing. You’re an intelligence specialist: it’s time to start acting like one...even if it isn’t your *area of expertise*. I need every edge I can get. Get moving!”

“Aye, sir!” Dupuis saluted and left quickly.

On returning to his cabin in the port module, Dupuis encountered Skarsgaard in the suite changing clothes, and looking for something in his room. Yves noticed him swallow a few yellow pills in his palm, holding his eyes closed for a moment before relaxing his shoulders and breathing more deeply. Finally, Skarsgaard opened his eyes and looked at Dupuis.

“Since I have to oversee the rest of the repairs, I’m going to be busy for awhile, so I thought I’d change, clean up a little, and get some of the equipment I use.” Skarsgaard said, as he placed a more pieces of equipment in a utility tote.

Dupuis nodded, and turned to enter his cabin from the common room. Before he left, though, he turned and asked, “Does it hurt? I mean, does the thing with your skin cause you pain?”

Skarsgaard nodded. “You mean the little pharmaceutical pick-me-up? The pills help. Funny. Almost no one ever asks me what it feels like. They’re usually too pre-occupied with what it looks like.”

“So, why did you do it?”

Skarsgaard looked down and smiled a crooked smile. “A girl.” He quickly held up his hand as if to ward off a blow. “I know, I know. How stupid can you get, right? But I was young, and in love, and she was...well, she was wild like nothing I’d ever seen before. She was into the whole body decoration subculture, you know: covered in tattoos, pierced everything. She was always going on about how amazing all this new radical genetic stuff was. I thought I’d impress her into wanting to be only with me, and did this.” He gestured with one hand down the length of his flight-suit covered body. “The irony of it all was that she took one look at me afterward, and nearly lost it. It turns out she was more talk than action, and nowhere near as wild as she led on. She ditched me and...I still look like this. So I guess you could say it hurts me in more ways than you might imagine, but the pills definitely help.” He placed a few more latched equipment boxes in the tote and added. “It’s crazy how the very thing you choose to do to bring someone closer can end up driving them away, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” Dupuis said. “In my case, the problem is the opposite. I chose to do something for my career, knowing it would end a relationship, and now that I have what I thought I wanted, all I want is to have her back. How’s that for stupidity?”

“Irony, stupidity...it’s just the way things go. We always seem to want what we can’t have,” Skarsgaard replied as he zipped up the bag and headed for the door. “At least you can go back. I mean you could go find her and try again.”

“I’m considering it, but I’m not sure anyone can really ever go back.”

“Maybe so. But you can always try. Anyway, I gotta get to work. See you later.” And with that Skarsgaard was gone. Dupuis found himself staring at a closed door. He left the cabin less than four minutes later feeling strangely exuberant dressed in the amber and green flight suit of an active bridge officer.

Ferris found Allbright working on a panel in the port pastie, not far from the assistance Chief’s own workstation. “Mr. Allbright. A word, if you please.”

Allbright spun around in startled surprise, almost dropping his tools as he did. “Oh, Captain. I didn’t see you coming.” He placed his tools in the holder on the tray, wiped his hands on his coverall, and stood to face Ferris. He’d been too edgy lately, he thought to himself. He struggled to control the tremor in his hands. “What can I do for you?”

“You can tell me more about what happened before you came here. I’m interested in what you claim to have seen in Epsilon Indi.”

“Not claimed to have seen, Captain. Saw! Plain and simple; with my own two eyes, and an entire bank of sensors to boot.”

Ferris nodded and looked over his shoulder to make sure they were alone. “Go on. I need to know what you saw, and what you recorded.”

“I was servicing an FTL relay unit out beyond the orbit of Old Man Panemito’s perihelion in Epsilon Indi. Up until a couple of weeks ago, that was my job. That unit had been acting up already that month. As I approached I saw two contacts that shouldn’t have been there. I started recording and sent copies of the data over to my drone’s on-board CPU. The contacts didn’t make sense, so I pinged ‘em on active. Suddenly they made even less sense, and they weren’t very friendly. These were PatComs, but different, and stealthy as hell. I recorded the whole approach, encrypted it and I launched the drone.

They had to be doing something they shouldn't have been doing, 'cause they weren't interested in talking. They just came toward me in an unfriendly way. I realized I was screwed, so I sent a full spectrum test broadcast at maximum power through the relay, and it made pretty much everything scream for a few seconds. They rammed me and ran like hell. That's it. I got picked up, transferred to the spooks, recruited by Chen, and here I stand trying to keep your ship running, despite all the interruptions."

Ferris smirked a little at the dig. "Where's the drone with the recordings?"

Allbright smiled. "If only you knew how many people have asked that question in the last couple of weeks... Actually, it isn't far from where it all happened. There's another older model FTL unit in the vicinity of the one I was repairing. It failed a few years ago, so it was replaced but never removed or demolished. So it just sits there, another inactive piece of space junk. I always figured it was left there as a backup or for parts or something. Anyway, it was from the twelve-oh-two series, so it has a fairly large storage bay for its own automated repair drone, which was long since removed and put into service elsewhere. It just so happened that the 'elsewhere' was with yours truly. All I did was to tell *Sneezy* to go 'home' and wait quietly for me."

"Could you direct us to the drone and get us those recordings?"

"I guess. Why?"

Ferris sighed. Trying to get used to non-Navy personnel and their conduct wasn't easy, but the whole situation was demanding more adaptation than most could handle. "Because, Mr. Allbright, we've been shadowed by vessels that defy any contact profile we know about. But they smell an awful lot like these stealth ships you say you encountered. We'd like to compare the little bit we have to whatever you were able to record. It might help us find them, it might help us find out where they come from, or it might help us by having more evidence to raise doubts about us being the traitors everyone thinks we are. Either way, we are without a plan, and I need to get this ship somewhere fast. Epsilon Indi might be our best bet."

"Sounds like as good a reason as any, to me, Captain. Only there's one more thing I should mention."

"...and that is?"

"We'd better hurry. Chen knows where *Sneezy* is. She may already be there collecting the data from it."

"We'll leave immediately, then. Epsilon Indi, it is! Send the coordinates for a waypoint directly from your station to McMichael's on the bridge. Stand by to assist when we get there. In the meantime, carry on, and...thank you."

Allbright turned back to his work without acknowledging Ferris' gratitude. He couldn't stop thinking about where to find something stiff to drink. Maybe the galley had some liquor. Maybe he'd be able to find something in the medical suite. His hands started to shake again. Ferris let protocol go and turned to return to the bridge. Before Ferris got more than three steps away, Allbright said, over his shoulder, "Is it just me, or are all the 'specialists' on board the *Redoubt* for this mission linked in some way or another?"

Ferris turned and waited, then asked the obvious prompting question. "Linked in what way, Mr. Allbright?"

Allbright closed up the panel and turned back toward Ferris and shook his head. He ran a shaking hand slowly over his greying head and licked his dry lips. He was suddenly acutely aware of how badly he wanted a drink. "I'm not sure, but it seems more

like someone has assembled a collection of specific people on this ship and tried very hard to destroy it. It's almost as if someone was trying to put all their problems, or loose ends, or liabilities in one place for more efficient disposal. I just can't figure what the common thing is that makes us all liabilities, and to whom."

"Interesting thought, Mr. Albright. I'll consider it. In the meantime, please remain alert to any other...anomalies."

This time Albright saluted smartly. "Aye, Captain."

"...and try not to be so damned sarcastic," added Ferris, as he left through the hatch to the bridge.

"I wasn't being sarcastic," Albright muttered to himself as he gathered his tools and headed for his command workstation.

Chapter 20

The Burden of Duty

25.03.2268

Returning to the Wolf-In-The-Fold

Volochkov felt like a caged animal as he waited for the stolen LST the Indies used as a courier vessel to dock with his corvette. He had survived another meeting with MacDuff, and returned to his awaiting ship across several jumps, navigational detours and many hours of endless LDS direction changes. These last few minutes of manoeuvres were taxing the limits of his patience more than any other time during the lengthy return journey.

His new agreement with MacDuff gave him a quiet satisfaction. His gambit had paid off. He had gained a place in the inner circle, which gave him a window into another layer of secretive dealings, but he was also under considerable pressure. He had to identify a secure contact in the Navy, and quickly. The seals locked home and he heard a hiss as pressure differentials were eliminated. The indicator panel of the inner hatch winked green. He slapped the 'open' button and waited for the motors to move the hatch aside. He drifted into the airlock space and waited for the hatch to seal again behind him before facing the outer hatch. He could hear sounds on the other side of the metal plating; the telltale sounds of a corvette's main UDC outer hatch opening. The courier ship's hatch finally slid open and he was greeted by Finn drifting in the opening, aiming a weapon directly at him.

"It's alright. It's just me," said Volochkov as he pushed past him, drifting into the UDC shaft. "I'm going directly to the bridge. Give me a report on the situation en route."

Finn hesitated before he lowered the weapon. "Well. Things have been a little tense since you've been gone, to be honest," he said.

Volochkov paused in his haste to get to the ComSec. He waited for Finn to catch up with him in the hatch entrance to the axial corridor. They both stood now, oriented to the same vertical provided by artificial gravity. "Tense? Tense, how?"

Finn hesitated again, as he searched for the right words. "Rydstrom and N'bele...they...they've been talking about cutting and running. They figure our days are numbered here. They want to return to the protection of the Commonwealth for debriefing before we end up at the wrong end of a PBC aimed by a very pissed-off group of Indies."

Volochkov just smiled and nodded. "Well the logic seems sound enough. But the deal I just arranged means we won't have to run...not yet anyway. What about the actual Indies in our crew? What are they saying?"

"Not much. They're grumbling, too, but they just want a break. Understandably."

"I'll have a chat with Rydstrom and N'bele," he looked down at the weapon still held loosely in Finn's hand. "You seem reluctant to put your sidearm away. Where are you in all this? Is this a mutiny? Are you the guy that was supposed to put me in the brig? Are you waiting for me to turn my back so you can put a round in it?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just that...well, OK. There was some talk about what we'd do if you didn't come back. We weren't sure if you would survive a showdown

with MacDuff, so we made plans. You don't have to worry about me, skip. It's just that...things have been tense since you left."

"You keep saying that," Volochkov studied Finn. "We'll sort that out later, but at the moment we have work to do. I can't talk about it yet, but there won't be any *cutting and running*." Volochkov thought for another moment, before taking a new approach.

"On second thought, maybe we should just lay everything all out on the table. Tell the bridge crew to meet me in my office immediately for a special briefing. Tell the rest of the crew to get ready for another mission. MacDuff's orders...at least *that* part of it is the truth. Promise them some rest time after this mission."

"On my way, Captain," Finn said "And sir... it's good to have you back."

"Don't get maudlin on me. We're in a hurry here. Go!"

With that, they sped to their respective destinations, Finn speaking into a hand held comm unit as he walked. Within a few minutes the bridge officers that made up the covert ops cell were seated in Volochkov's office.

"I understand things were *a little tense* while I was gone," announced Volochkov without preamble, looking at each of them individually. "N'bele... Your lack of confidence and loyalty disappoints me. We've been working together too long to start unravelling like this." He turned to look at the pilot. "Rydstrom, don't even think about getting to be captain until you can make the difficult decisions. You're ambitious and you're reckless. That makes you dangerous. If I hear one more word from you questioning my judgment, I'll shoot you myself. Clear?"

Rydstrom held out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Captain, first we're with the Indies, then we're spying for the navy, then we're killing navy ships while we're supposed to be working for them, *and* we're somehow MacDuff's very special friends at the same time. You don't tell us anything, and you kite off for these quiet meetings... What are we supposed to do? I mean, you were gone and we had no ..."

He found himself looking at the muzzle of Volochkov's sidearm, aimed directly between his eyes. "I asked you a question: Are we clear? Yes? Or No?"

"Y...yes. Clear. Sir," Rydstrom stammered.

Volochkov held the weapon aimed where it was, unwavering, but looked at the other two. "Like I've said before, you don't have enough information, so you don't know enough to make these kinds of decisions," he raised the weapon up and away from Rydstrom's sweat beaded forehead, but did not put it away. "No more games on this ship. If more information is what you want, then you'll get it, but let's make one thing clear. The only way I give up command of this ship, is if I'm dead, understand? If any of you want to try to hasten that, go right ahead. I promise you I won't go easily, or alone." He looked at all three carefully, satisfied there were no challenges afoot, spoken or unspoken.

"In hopes that you'll all feel a little less mutinous, we're going to do a little Q and A without the Q's. So listen carefully: We've been exposed as navy spies. That's right. MacDuff knows everything, right from the Arcadia incident. The reason we aren't dead yet is because he still finds us useful. The fact is he doesn't really care all that much that we're spying for the navy. He's afraid of these COSA people. He wanted us to help him spy on them for a change. With the threat of exposing us, he's had us run a few errands. He's been using us as his personal spies to collect information about this COSA group. As you have already surmised, with so many twists and unclear loyalties, sooner or later

we would have to make a choice, or get into a conflict that would get us killed. So I went to confront MacDuff with an offer: we agree to keep working for him to spy on this new faction as long as he keeps us on the inside of the picture, he keeps our cover intact, and he doesn't ask us to betray the Navy. Amazingly, he actually went for it. The situation out there is becoming very complex. Not only do we have this new COSA faction to consider, but there are factions within the Navy and factions within the Independence movement as well. The Navy, or a part of it must be in bed with COSA. They've obviously been getting some very high-level intelligence about Navy ops, which has been working to the Indies' advantage to date, but it could change at any time. We already know that the Indie council think COSA are the best thing to ever happen to them. But MacDuff and his inner circle disagree. He thinks we're *all* being manipulated by COSA, and he wants to find someone in the Navy to talk to about ending the war. Simple, right? Wrong. We don't know who in the Navy is and who is not involved with COSA. As new members of MacDuff's inner circle, our job is to find someone clean and credible within the Navy. When we do, MacDuff will arrange a meeting and have a little chat with them about COSA. That's it. That's all.

"We're all on the same page now. I'm sure you have questions but frankly I don't give a shit. Now maybe you'll be less inclined to question orders, or mutiny, or shoot me in the back. We have a new mission to complete as part of the new arrangement: COSA is planning another hit. They're going to take out a secret Naval research base somewhere in AC-24." Volochkov looked around at the perplexed faces. "That's right. I didn't know the Navy had a research facility in Momar, either. That's how secret it is, I guess."

"Where in the hell would you stick a Naval research facility in AC-24?" N'Bele asked, trying to think of a good hiding place.

"It isn't exactly *in* the AC-24 system. In fact, it's way out at the limits of what could be considered to be in the system, at least a hundred or so A.U. out. The full briefing doc is still on its way, but I was able to get some background on this. Apparently there are two planetoids in a very distant and eccentric orbit around AC-24, called the *Quarrelling Lovers*. These two bodies revolve around each other in a strange, twisting dance as they make their way around AC-24. It takes them several years to complete one orbit. At sixty-four different points in their orbit, they come close enough to each other to create a stable, navigable L point that lasts a few hours. The research base, called the Singularity Research Facility, is parked in an orbit near these planetoids. It uses the intermittent L-point as its main point of traffic access."

"How did MacDuff get all this information? COSA?" Finn asked.

"Yes. Like I said, they have some very high level sources," Volochkov continued. "The facility emits one hellacious LDSi field, and an approach by any other conventional means would be detected early by a network of sensors surrounding the place. Apparently the place is guarded by enough gunstars to ruin your whole day, and a couple of wings of PatComs, permanently stationed there."

"The place sounds positively unwelcoming. What is the Navy doing there that needs so much protection? Surely they aren't really doing research on singularities?" N'bele asked. "That would be...insane."

"Maybe they are, maybe they aren't," Volochkov shrugged. "All I know is that this is the place where the Navy does a whole pile of its secret development stuff. And apparently they're working on stealth ship technology there. COSA doesn't like that idea

at all, so they're going to take it out. Once again, they want to keep a low profile. They don't want to be seen as the attackers; they don't want to be seen at all so they're giving the credit for this hit to the Independent Navy. Again. Convenient, eh?"

"COSA wants the *Crack-In-The-World* group to arrive as they're finishing up with the attack, and smile for the cameras, and generally make things unpleasant while their black ships make a quiet retreat. MacDuff and I both agree that this stinks. He came up with a slightly better idea. I think he wants to see how cranky he can make these COSA people, or maybe just to see how far we can push them. Anyway, he isn't sending the entire group in."

"Oh, shit," said Finn. "I can see where this is going. You didn't have anything to do with him coming up with this idea, did you?"

"Not really, but I'm so glad you're still with me," Volochkov continued. "You've probably guessed right, of course. We're going in early, and with only three tugs. That's it. If COSA smashes up that SRF facility with an attack that obviously required an entire fleet to pull off, then three little Indie ships will look pretty strange won't it? They'll either think we've got a super weapon, or they'll start to wonder who was really involved. Like I said, MacDuff wants to test COSA without being too boldly... *disobedient.*"

"What are some of the possible outcomes?" N'bele asked. "I mean, how do we know we aren't just being set up with a couple of other schmuck's to get killed, so that a few Indie wrecks can be found drifting around the site of the attack?"

"Good question, Kobie," Volochkov nodded. "I wondered about that myself until MacDuff told me that he'd be sending a few of his own trusted ships, namely the *Braveheart*, the *Bannockburn* and the *Acadian*. You remember the latter two from the last errand we ran. They are all from his inner circle, and are trusted confidantes. He might've sacrificed just us, but I really doubt he'd set those others up along with us."

"That's all nice and everything, but how does this help us to find someone MacDuff can trust in the Navy?" Rydstrom crossed his arms in challenge.

"It might not help at all, but it could help us close in on an answer. Here's where it gets a little risky, but then, this whole thing is a gamble," Volochkov conceded. "During the ambush at Tau Ceti, the *Syracuse* fleet was set up for complete annihilation, right? Things didn't go perfectly, and two ships slipped past and tried to get away. We were supposed to stop them, but who showed up to finish the job? The Commonwealth Navy. We could never get a fix on their IFFs at the time, but I just got confirmation of who they were: the *Purdue.*"

"Wexler?!" Finn said in disbelief.

Volochkov nodded and continued his explanation. "Then we arrived at a cargo hand-off a little early, and who do we catch mid-meeting with COSA? Once again, the Commonwealth Navy, this time it was the *Toulon.*"

"Another one of Wexler's."

N'bele nodded in understanding. "So if we disrupt COSA's attack, maybe leaving it unfinished, MacDuff is gambling that they'll arrange to have a certain faction of the Navy come in as backup again... That means we can expect the *Purdue* and her gang to show up and try to finish the job, right?"

Volochkov nodded, smiling. "Maybe."

“So that tells us who the bad guys are. How does that help us find the good guys?” Rydstrom asked.

“*The enemy of my enemy...*” Volochkov continued. “We help whomever Wexler’s people attack. Those are our first contacts”

“Uh, what if the only people they’re shooting at is us? How will we know that any ‘good guys’ will show up at all?” Rydstrom still wasn’t convinced. “I mean, this SRF place is ultra secret.”

“COSA’s supposed to sneak in and knock out the FTL transmitters first, so the facility can’t send out any distress signals. We’re going to kind of... *help* them a little by sending out a distress signal coded to look like the SRF’s just before we jump in.”

The others looked at their captain, and at each other in disbelief. “When does this all go down? We’re going to need some preparation time to study the SRF, plan our approach, work through some contingencies, coordinate with the other tugs. Stuff like that. How much time do we have?”

“We leave in twelve hours.”

*Aboard the CNV 534 Redoubt
In capsule space*

Allbright checked the reading and watched it flicker again. This was the third time in as many minutes. Three almost imperceptible fluctuations in readings from three of the four main UDC docking clamps just didn’t make sense. It was almost as if someone were walking around the circumferential service access way to each panel and... A sudden realization flashed to him, and he knew what was happening. He sent the information directly to captain Ferris’ workstation, and hastily unbuckled himself. He got down to the UDC quickly, but it took him longer to reach the service tunnel access hatch. He shoved himself past as the hatch opened and rushed into the dark, narrow space. He found a clamp control mechanism panel, and looked for evidence of tampering. The panel had definitely been opened, but that would be normal in the frequent repair and servicing jobs on an active ship. He fumbled open the panel to look for anything that might be wrong and found...nothing. It was all reading green. He pulled out the pad and attached leads to start running tests and got the same story. It was fine.

Captain Ferris appeared in the crawlspace at that moment, out of breath and tired-looking. “What have you got, Allbright?”

Allbright shook his head in disappointment. “I’m not sure yet, sir. I saw something on my monitor happening just a minute ago, as if someone were here doing something to these UDC clamp controls, but...I get nothing now.”

“Maybe you’re being a little too vigilant, and you’re starting to jump at shadows.” Ferris offered.

“Yeah. Maybe I am getting a little jumpy. But I could have sworn...”

Ferris saw the disbelief in Allbright’s eyes as the Assistant Chief studied the readout on the pad. Ferris started to move around the rim to the next control panel access.

“Let’s check the other panels to be certain, then I have to get back to the bridge, we’re approaching Epsilon Indi.”

“Captain, I swear there was something...” Allbright decided not to finish, folding his pad up and moving to join Ferris around the rim. “But I can’t really say why anyone would want to mess with our UDC docking locks, or any of the clamps for that matter...there are so many more effective ways to disrupt a ship’s functions if you want to sabotage it. I guess...I don’t know”

“Maybe you’ve got the jitters, but I’m not taking any chances at this point. I think it’s time to give those marines a little something to do.” Ferris said, pulling out his pocket comm. “I hope *Sneezy* pays off quickly, because our chances are getting smaller every hour that goes by.”

*Aboard the CNV 676 Niagara
Epsilon Indi system*

“Epsilon Indi isn’t the most exciting system, is it?” Bates said from her WEPs workstation.

“Right now, boring is good,” Lejeunne said. “North. As pleasant as this tour has been, please take us back to the Toriope L5 point. We’ll take up an observation station there. It’s just as easy to kill time lying in wait as it is running around, but fewer things can go wrong.”

“You mean like, there’s less chance of us running into something if we’re sitting still?” North asked.

Lejeunne’s face grew dark and tense. “No, Ensign. I meant that we have as good a chance of finding something if we watch one single L-point from a good distance as we do if we run around looking at all of them one after the other.”

“I thought the whole point was to *not* find anything,” said Iwamasa.

“We’ve played this game for long enough,” Lejeunne said. “We have a responsibility to the Commonwealth. We haven’t heard anything regarding our request for confirmation of those orders and I’m getting a little... I’ve had time to think about what we’re doing here; about what *I’m* doing here; about destiny; about *duty*. We can’t just take these ships and do whatever pleases us most. I have a duty that I must uphold; a duty that outweighs any personal feelings of indebtedness to Captain Ferris. Take us to a point 1500 Km from the L-point and assume low emission observation station.

“Understood. Heading back to our point of entry, captain,” North acknowledged.

Iwamasa said nothing.

Chapter 21

In Direct Violation

25.03.2268

Epsilon Indi Star System

Toriope L5

Bulap Orbit

“Mission update coming in on FTL, Captain,” said Bates. “It’s directly from Vice Admiral Wexler.”

“I have it, Edwina. Thank you. Maybe this is our confirmation,” Lejeunne answered as he operated the controls to unlock the transmitted briefing document. The Commonwealth symbol appeared along with the standard security codes before Wexler’s voice could be heard over text that scrolled by with the details of a new briefing.

“It saddens me to say that we have indeed found the perpetrator of recent acts of treason and terrorism resulting in immeasurable loss of life and materiel in Tau Ceti, and now in Alpha Centauri. The CNV 534 Redoubt has been pursued across the Alpha Centauri system, and was last seen fleeing two separate engagements, in which a number of naval vessels were destroyed. These vessels were destroyed while trying to peacefully detain the Redoubt, and shepherd her crew back to base for debriefing. The footage you are about to see shows very clearly the destruction of the CNV Almeida, the CNV Crusader, the CNV Fairfax, and the CNV Ompah by the rogue ship Redoubt. By a turn of good fortune, and the heroic efforts of the crew, the CNV Plevna survived the battle, confirming the allegations against the Redoubt.”

A series of clips replayed recordings of vessel IDs, their vector trails, missiles and PBC fire in a chaotic flurry of firing, manoeuvres and spectacular explosions. Lejeunne watched in silence as he studied the marker tags identifying missiles launched from the *Redoubt* slam into the *Almeida* and PBC fire from the *Redoubt* tearing through the *Fairfax* moments before it exploded. Pictures didn’t lie, but they could be taken out of context. Wexler’s voice could be heard again in the briefing document, after the footage was seen.

“We are uncertain where the Redoubt is at present, but they are not likely to remain in the Alpha Centauri system for long. We are currently engaged in blockading the exit points, but need assistance watching all possible system exits. Proceed to the waypoint provided in this document and join the blockade forces there. If you sight the Redoubt, send for immediate backup, and treat them as an extremely hostile target. Good luck. A strike fleet is being mobilized at this moment. Wexler out.”

“Eh bien, it’s official, the *Redoubt* is indeed a rogue ship, a traitor, and our primary target. We’ve wasted enough time sitting here doing nothing. We are ordered to proceed to...”

“Captain, something’s emerging from capsule space at the L-point,” Bates sounded excited. “You aren’t going to believe this, but the *Redoubt* just arrived here in the Epsilon Indi system. They aren’t wasting any time either. They’re hightailing it out to the rim of the system on full burn.”

“North. Pursue them,” Lejeunne ordered with excitement building in his voice. “But keep us as far astern of them as we can until we know where they’re going. I want to avoid detection by them for as long as possible. Bates, FTL for backup to Wexler, and advise them we’ve sighted the *Redoubt*. Stand by to open fire on them as soon as they exit LDS.” He looked over at Iwamasa’s back, at the ENG station. “Sorry Kenji. I don’t like this any more than you do, but we have orders.”

Iwamasa remained silent, as he worked the board at his workstation. A moment later, as the LDS drive engaged and they raced after the *Redoubt*’s vanishing trail, Less than a minute later, Iwamasa turned in his seat and faced Lejeunne.

“Captain Lejeunne. Don’t do this. You know it’s wrong. I’m begging you don’t attack them.”

“Kenji, you know I can’t break off now. We tried to avoid them, but it’s too late. Despite our best efforts not to, we found them. We’re committed. I’m hoping we can disable them and wait for the *Purdue* to arrive, but we cannot stop now.”

“They’re my... my friends,” Iwamasa stumbled. “They saved your lives. Doesn’t that mean *anything*?”

Lejeunne looked down. He turned to face the front of the bridge, his jaw clenching and unclenching. He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I will not disobey direct orders during my first mission as captain.”

“Then I’m sorry, too,” Iwamasa said. He touched a key, and the *Niagara* dropped out of LDS instantly. Screens at each of the workstations went dark, and the sounds of comms, machinery, and engines went silent. The ship began to tumble gently as it drifted. The bridge was bathed in the red glow of emergency lights.

Bates threw up her hands after stabbing a few keys. “That’s it. We lost them. Happy now, Chief?”

“Everything’s out here, too Captain. We’re dead stick and drifting,” North reported from the NAV station.

“Lieutenant Iwamasa. Restore power to the bridge and ship’s systems immediately,” ordered Lejeunne.

“Uh...that’s a negative, sir. We seem to have encountered some sort of glitch.”

“Dammit, Kenji. This isn’t a joke. You’re already on very thin ice. Get us our power back. Now. Or you can consider yourself relieved. Permanently.”

“Aye, Captain,” Iwamasa saluted. “I’ll get right on it, sir.” He began working at the controls, bringing power back to his console first, but his eyes were actually on the clock. He wanted to buy the *Redoubt* three minutes. He worked continually for a couple of minutes busily redirecting power through a series of pointless shunts. Ten more seconds and...

“Power and control restored sir,” Iwamasa reported. “Ship systems should be at your command in a moment or two.”

“You are relieved, Lieutenant,” Lejeunne scowled. “An escort will meet you at the aft hatch in thirty seconds. You are to accompany him to your quarters at once, where you will remain until further notice.” He turned to face his workstation. “Bates, North, get me an extrapolation of their last known course. We’ll use the charts to guess a likely destination, and try to pick up the trail of the *Redoubt* there.”

Iwamasa remained silent as he exited the bridge.

Epsilon Indi Star System
Near Old Man Panemito's perihelion

“Colonel Chen, you’re wanted on the bridge immediately, please,” urged the exec’s voice from the speaker. She folded the data pad on her desk into its recessed compartment, placed the stylus into its clip, and walked out the door of her office toward the main bridge.

The *CNV Malta* looked outwardly like any Bastille-class destroyer, but that was where the similarities ended. She had been modified for long duration intelligence missions, serving as Chen’s mobile base of operations for naval intelligence’s covert ops. Ever since the debacle at Midway, the shrewd Colonel refused to be stationed on a platform that couldn’t flee or fight back. Against the Captain’s recommendations, she had ordered the *Malta* to take up station as far out as their sensor would permit. They hung silently in the emptiness of the Epsilon Indi system, at the limit of her passive sensors and optics, watching a very specific location: the inoperative, decommissioned FTL satellite that housed a small remote servicing drone called *Sneezy*.

Allbright had given her the location and codes for *Sneezy*, and she wasted no time retrieving the data. The sensor readings of two ships, PatComs of a familiar, but unknown design, were a goldmine. The fact that they employed stealth technology made these ‘black ships’ even more interesting to her, adding to the lore she had been collecting of similar sightings. Her people were analyzing the data three doors down the same corridor she just exited, as she walked to the bridge. The lift took her to the main command deck corridor, where armed marines stood ready to challenge any unfamiliar personnel. She got a courteous nod from the sergeant at the desk. He touched a key on his console and opened the hatch to the main bridge for her.

The bridge was abuzz with activity, and she quickly found Captain Mead leaning over one of the workstations conferring with the officer working the console. He looked pleased as he straightened to meet her approach.

“It looks like your gamble has paid off, Colonel. The *Redoubt* has just arrived at the location of the drone, as you predicted. They’re just sitting there for now. I imagine they’ll be quite unhappy when they discover it’s been wiped.”

“Perhaps. I doubt it will come as a complete surprise, though,” she replied.

“Do we move in to attack?” asked Mead.

“Attack? No. We wait.”

“Colonel, do I need to remind you that Vice Admiral Wexler, of Sector Command has...”

“...has no authority nor any jurisdiction here,” she finished for him. “We’re going to ignore those orders. Do you understand? I take full responsibility, but we will not be attacking the *Redoubt*. Stand by to move the *Malta* in. I want to wait a few more minutes to see if anyone else shows up. It will be interesting to see if ...”

“Captain. Colonel,” announced the officer at the next workstation. “The *Redoubt* isn’t wasting any time. They’ve been there all of...eight minutes and twenty nine seconds, and they’re moving off already.”

“Direction?”

“Astolus-Tifun L4. From there...unknown. Probably Inchidies. They’re entering LDS now.”

“Stand by to pursue,” Chen ordered. “How’s the tracking program working? Do we have a signal?”

“Loud and clear, so far. As soon as they tried to connect with the MFD we were in. We can... Wait a moment. Another contact is coming in behind the *Redoubt*.” The same officer grew more excited as the situation grew more complicated. “It’s coming into detection range now. It looks like it’s following the *Redoubt*, too. ID coming in now...it’s the *Niagara*.”

“The *Niagara*...” Chen whispered to herself in thought. “The *Niagara* isn’t one of Wexler’s is it? Give me a roster of her bridge crew, now!”

“Do we move in, Colonel?” Captain Mead asked.

Chen held up a single finger, gesturing for him to wait, as she studied the screen in front of her. “Let’s give them another moment or two to see what they do.”

“The *Redoubt*’s long gone. The *Niagara* is just coming in, now. They must have lost the trail, they’re going to the other FTL relay from the looks of it; the one that’s still active.”

“They don’t know, do they?” Mead asked.

Chen nodded, her finger still pointing at the ceiling plates overhead. “We’ll see.”

Nine minutes earlier...

“Coming up on the waypoint for *Sneezy* now, Captain.” McMichael reported. “That was way too easy.”

Ferris nodded, fighting a yawn. “I agree. I expected a lot more trouble getting here than that. Ray, get Allbright up here on the double. And where the hell are Carr’s marines? I asked him to post guards at all vital points in the ship more than ten minutes ago. I would have expected at least a couple for the bridge, of all places...”

He watched her as she spoke softly into the jaw mike on her headset. She nodded to him once, confirming the request, and returned to her scans. “Captain, so far, this region looks clear. I’m also picking up the small mass where the drone and inactive FTL relay housing should be. Allbright’s coordinates were right on target, elapsed orbital time and everything.”

“Bring us in close, Mac.” Ferris turned to the ENG station to his right.

“Skarsgaard, send the codes and begin the download as quickly as possible.”

The Chief worked the controls for a moment before reporting back. “Bad news, Captain. The drone’s there alright, but it’s been wiped clean. Very recently, too.”

Allbright entered the bridge at that moment with a trio of armed and armoured marines. Two of the marines stopped at the entrance hatchway and took up positions on

either side, while the third walked the remaining few steps to the captain's workstation alongside Allbright. Dupuis remained silent in his fold-down seat at the rear bulkhead watching the marines impose their intimidating presence on the bridge. He leaned forward to read their names stencilled on the armour plating. The names *Hadley* and *Rinaldo*, brought a reassuring element of human-ness to the soldiers that stood in silence next to the entrance hatch. Allbright seemed unfazed by their presence and stood looking over Ferris' shoulder at the command console. The third marine placed himself directly behind Allbright, dwarfing him with his presence, and blocking him from Dupuis' view. *Connover* was stencilled on that one's back.

"Wiped, eh?" Allbright said. "Chen beat us to it, then."

"She's probably watching us right now," Ferris looked over to Rav.

"I wouldn't doubt it," Allbright agreed.

"Now what?" McMichael asked, looking at Ferris in the mirror.

"I just wish I'd been able to get a decent reading of those ships I picked up on sensors during the fighting," said Ravindran, shaking her head. "They appeared out of nowhere, moved, and then disappeared again. It was almost as if they were stealth ships or something. If only I could have gotten a heading from them, we might have..."

"If the ships I saw here a few weeks ago weren't stealth ships, then I don't know what is. They were the closest thing to stealthy as I could ever imagine," added Allbright. "I'll bet even money they're the same ones watching during the fighting."

A voice spoke out from the rear part of the bridge. "Stealth ships? Did you say 'stealth ships'? Dupuis interrupted.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Ferris turned and looked at him carefully. "Is there something you can add?"

"It's just that. Well...this is classified, but I suppose it doesn't matter much now. The weapons used against the *Syracuse* and the entire strike group at the Amarid cluster, were some form of stealth weapon platform. Unfortunately, we couldn't prove anything...like you, we never got enough sensor information."

"And...?" Ferris prompted impatiently.

Dupuis unbuckled from the rumble seat and walked up the starboard aisle to stand next to the command station. "The point is, we don't have anything even remotely like it. Not yet."

"What do you mean, 'not yet'?"

"Well," he paused. "This is even more classified. The Navy has a secret research facility. I happen to know, through a personal contact, that this same stealth technology is not only the subject of some big budget research, but its getting close to being ready for field testing."

"You must mean the same 'secret research facility' that has been reverse engineering alien technology," McMichael quipped, "and studying mind control and time travel and..."

"Shut it, Mac!" Ferris barked without taking his eyes off of Dupuis. "Are you saying these ships of Allbright's could be Navy test ships?"

"No. At least I doubt it. I haven't heard from Cor...from my *personal contact* in a few months, but she said something to the effect that they still had months of research to do before they went to prototype next year," Dupuis said, ignoring McMichael. "But

someone has these stealth ships already. Whoever they are, they'll likely be pretty unhappy about the navy figuring it out and taking away their advantage."

"Even if you're right," Skarsgaard said, his eyes narrowed in a disturbing purple shroud around those pale pink-rimmed eyes, "and the Navy is about to pull off a research breakthrough in stealth technology, how does this help us? We're rogue in case you hadn't heard. We can't get anywhere near Sol space, let alone the 'secret' military research facility on the moon. Even if we could get to the moon, the asteroid attack that almost wiped out the base a few months ago gave them an excuse to beef up security more than ever."

"I never said anything about the moon," countered Dupuis. "There's *secret* and then there's *secret*. The 'secret' lunar research base is the one everybody knows about. The one I'm talking about is..." he took a deep breath as he prepared to break a few Navy oaths, professional principles, and a personal promise to Corinna. "It's in AC-24. It's in Momar." He exhaled heavily before continuing. "It's called the Singularity Research Facility, or SRF. It's way, way out beyond the periphery of AC-24. My girlfr...my ex-girlfriend works out there in the materials research group. She never told me directly, but I figured out that she's with the research group looking at the stealth materials. I *am* in intelligence after all, and I was curious, so I did a little digging and pulled a few strings to get information that I shouldn't have, about the place. That's how I know a little about it."

"Great! Good for her," said Skarsgaard sarcastically, "and Momar's next door, too, which is convenient. I'd still like to know what good it would..."

"Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard!" Ferris scowled. "Let him finish. I'm willing to entertain anything at this moment, because the longer we sit here, the greater our chances of being seen and destroyed before we learn anything about this mess. You'll get your chance in a second." He turned back to face Dupuis.

"Captain, I'm convinced that this whole fool's mission is some kind of set up and the Navy, or at least some part of it, is involved with these stealth ships." He pointed at Allbright standing in the opposite aisle. "Allbright's seen them; they're real. Someone in the Navy doesn't want *us* to. If we can figure out how to detect them, or track them, then we can find out who they are and where they go. If we can find the real culprits and bring them out into the open, then all this manufactured 'rogue' crap will look like the load of horseshit that it is. Our best bet might be to find and talk to the scientists studying this stuff," he said. He looked as if he were imploring Ferris to take him to the SRF. He suddenly realized how desperate he was to see Corinna again, even if the circumstances were less than ideal.

Ferris studied him for a moment, looking dubious about Dupuis' motivations. He turned to look at Skarsgaard. "Chief. What do you think? Should we try for this SRF in Momar? It's possible that they may not even know about the hunt on for us. At the very least, we could maybe drop a few people off, get some supplies, catch our breath..."

"Captain," said Skarsgaard, "Dupuis just wants to see his girlfriend and get away from this ship and the big bull's-eye its got painted on it. I can't say I blame him, either. But I don't see how going to a top secret research facility will make us look any less rogue, than we already do, let alone complete the mission to bring down the spy ship we had in with the Indies."

Dupuis leaned over the display screen to get closer to Skarsgaard. “Don’t you get it? There never was a mission! I’m beginning to think that Wexler put everyone on this ship to clean up all his loose ends. Think about it: Someone high up in the Navy has to be helping this group with the stealthy ships and weapons platforms. What if it’s been Wexler all along? He finds out we had a spy in with the Indies and they see something they aren’t supposed to see, like maybe this stealth technology or something else he’s up to. He gets anyone who had anything to do with this spy,” he pointed to Ferris, “or has figured out there’s another faction,” he pointed at his own chest, “or has seen the stealth ships,” he nodded at Allbright, “and he puts them all in one mission doomed from the word ‘go’. Everyone who knows anything that can threaten his power disappears in one swat. Pretty neat, don’t you think?”

“Nice theory except for two things.” Allbright said. “First, Wexler didn’t put me here. Chen did. Second, why would Wexler put one of his own people on board to sabotage the ship if all he wanted was to wipe us out in a space battle.” He looked accusingly at Skarsgaard.

“Whoa, now wait a minute you little...” Skarsgaard started. “I may have been chosen by the Vice Admiral to keep this ship on track with the assigned mission, but I’m no saboteur. If I was, believe me, those attacks would have changed my loyalties right quick. My skin’s as much on the line here as yours, you pathetic excuse for...”

“Gentlemen,” Ferris announced. “If we’re going to start exploring conspiracy theories, or hurling insults, we’re going to do it somewhere else. Let’s talk on the way to wherever we’re going next, because sitting here and bellyaching does nothing good. Mac, get us to the L4 point at Astolus; best speed. It’s the one by Tifun. Set the capsule drive destination for Inchidies, and see if you can find the location for this SRF.”

The star field outside the forward view-port spun as the *Redoubt* oriented toward Astolus. McMichael spoke over the roar of the main thrusters as they pushed the corvette away from *Sneezy*’s grave. “I’ve already been looking, but I guess its secret for a reason. Nothing shows up as even a likely candidate for this SRF in the AC-24 system, Captain.”

“Lieutenant Dupuis, give our pilot the coordinates for this SRF in Momar, please.”

“Uh. I’m afraid I don’t know where it is.”

Ferris rubbed his eyes again with thumb and forefinger. His fatigue was apparent in the sigh he heaved. “Very well, then. Tell us what you do know.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any particulars, just the few bits that Corinna told me,” he stammered. “All I know is that the SRF itself is out at the rim of the system, there’s very little light...AC-24 is very dim, far and small, from what she’s said in her messages. Oh and they go through a final capsule jump within the system to get there.”

“That means there has to be an L-point at both ends, which might help us narrow the search some,” said McMichael as he keyed up new maps of AC-24 on his screen. “Do you remember if she said anything about what was at the nearer end of that capsule jump?”

“No. I don’t think she ever said anything about...no, wait. She did mention something like ‘Minor Lemon’, or ‘Minor LaGrange’. I can’t remember exactly. I don’t know if it’s a moon, or a rock, or a codeword. Does that help?”

“It may help a little,” Allbright said, “and it kind of fits, but I get the feeling that if she did mention the *Miner’s Lament*, then we’re in for more problems than just finding this SRF.”

“Start talking, Allbright,” Ferris ordered. “We’re headed to a system that is largely controlled by the Indies. If we can successfully get in and out of the Inchides system without getting killed by an Indie patrol, and if we can get ourselves to Momar, we still don’t have a destination for this SRF yet, so anything you can offer is welcome right now.”

“Even if it’s old spacer lore, or fairy tales?” Allbright asked.

“At this point, I’ll listen to anything,” Ferris said, waiting as they sped toward the jump point at near light speed.

Allbright nodded and offered the little he knew. “I think *Miner’s Lament* is the name of an abandoned mining operation near a large asteroid in AC-24. From what I’ve heard, it was a big rig, like a Vethonin-class mining rig.”

“Why would anyone in their right mind abandon a Vethonin-class mining rig?” Skarsgaard sneered. “That’s almost two Kilometres and millions of creds worth of extracting, processing and refining machinery. It’s like a small colony. It would be a salvage team’s score of a lifetime.”

“Who said anything about being in their right mind?” Allbright continued. “This rig is at the heart of a region of space that’s become a kind of dead zone; like a Bermuda Triangle in space. Believe me, salvagers have tried...and vanished.”

“What’s the Bermuda Triangle?” McMichael asked, genuinely curious.

“You must’ve come from the colonies,” Allbright said to the pilot in front of him, “Because every kid on Earth knows that the Bermuda Triangle has been famous for centuries as the place where seagoing ships disappeared mysteriously without a trace.

“Spacer lore has it that the *Miner’s Lament* was an operation that ceased for no apparent reason. Kind of like a boogey man or ghost story people like to tell. Any ship that has gone near there ever since has also vanished without a trace. Come to think of it...it’s the perfect setup for hiding something and discouraging gawkers.”

“Wait a minute!” Dupuis said. “Captain, Allbright may be right. I never put it together before, but I think I may have heard of this rig. I mean, not *heard* of it, but had something to do with it in another aspect. Especially if it’s a Vethonin-class rig. Back when I was training at Naval Intelligence, some documents came across my desk that were contractor invoices for some sensor and targeting systems, CPU’s, shielding plates, a bunch of FTL components and stuff like that. It was for a secret automated defence platform, but I never knew where it was located, or anything more. From the specs on the invoices, the thing had to have been huge. I was told to forget it, and in this business, you learn to do that pretty damn quickly...but this could be exactly what it was.

“The Navy must have gotten the *Miner’s Lament*, modified it, and made it look abandoned. I would guess that this thing looks dead but it is very much active and deadly. I don’t know how they’ve done it, but I’ll bet anything this thing guards one end of an L-point. The only explanation I can think of is that it would lead to the SRF.”

“Would you say that you’re sure enough to bet your own life?” Ferris asked bluntly.

Dupuis swallowed, but he seemed to remain convinced. “Yes sir, the more I think about it, the more I’m convinced that this is the way to the SRF.”

“Sounds pretty thin to me, but we’re low on options. What kind of defences are we talking about?” Ferris asked.

“I don’t know specifics. It will look completely abandoned, but be more deadly than anything you’ve seen before, if activated,” said Dupuis. “It was designed to let you approach. Unless you provide it with the correct codes within a certain amount of time, or on the right band, it basically comes alive with weaponry and would probably leave nothing bigger than a wristwatch when it’s finished. For all I know it has a team of drones that feed it the debris to fuel it. That would explain all the disappearances.”

Ferris studied him for a moment before breaking the silence. “You hear that Mac? Start combing the databases for a vessel or an abandoned mining operation, not a planetary body. Look for a big mining rig listed as inactive. My guess is they’ll have parked it near a decent sized asteroid, not too far from another planetary mass to make the stable L-point they need for an insystem jump. Once you find it, that’s our destination.

“Outstanding, gentlemen,” Ferris tried to keep up morale with some encouragement. “Assuming we can get through Inchidies without encountering the Indies, we may actually have a chance at finding this SRF. If we can find these stealth ships, and whoever is operating them, we have a chance at clearing our names. Dupuis, Allbright...I’m finally glad you’re along for the ride. Strap yourselves into the spare seats at the back and stay put. I may want to hear more of your spacer lore and old intel stories.”

“Great!” McMichael muttered sarcastically as he clicked through the database. “We’re running from the Commonwealth Navy, who are trying to kill us, through a system controlled by Indies, who are still trying to kill us, to end up at a giant killing machine that’ll leave nothing bigger than a wristwatch. All so we can meet some scientists who *might* be able to tell us more about some ships we can’t see, ‘cause if we can track them, maybe we’ll be able to find out why everyone’s trying to kill us. I liked the original bullshit mission better. At least we know that the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* is real.”

Chapter 22

Miner's Lament

*Epsilon Indi star system
Near Old Man Panemito's orbit*

Lejeunne sat very still at his command station, trying to cope with the realization that he had lost the *Redoubt*. As a new Captain on his first command, he had to remind himself that there was no point in claiming that it wasn't his fault. His was the final responsibility, even though he hadn't asked for any of it. This was only supposed to be a brief shakedown cruise around the Sol system and back. He shook with a combination of fear and anger. This was a career-destroying disaster. He had already sent the FTL call to Wexler for backup, telling them they had found the *Redoubt*. The *Purdue* and her strike fleet would arrive soon, only to find him sitting here, in command of the *Niagara*, with no prey in sight, and no idea where to find them.

"Go over it again," he ordered North. "Find me the best possible projected course."

"The only thing I can think of, Captain, is the fact that they came out here for something specific. They either got it or they didn't but the reason they came here ceased to be a reason quickly, so they moved on. It's unlikely they'd go back, given the level of Navy activity, so they probably went on to Metallake, Delta Pavonis, or Inchidies."

"But where would they go? *Where would they go?* If they really are traitors they will want to reach an Indie controlled system, no?" Lejeunne mused for a moment before choosing a course of action. He keyed open a channel on the comm arm next to his command station. "Get Iwamasa back up to the bridge." He closed the channel and looked at Bates who regarded him coolly and accusingly. "I doubt he will help willingly, but he knows them."

Minutes later the rear hatch entrance to the bridge hissed as it slid upward. Iwamasa stepped over the hatch seal lip accompanied by a fellow crewman and walked to Lejeunne's workstation. Lejeunne glared at him, barely containing his anger. "You may have saved the *Redoubt* for a few more minutes, but not for long. In so doing, you have destroyed your career, and likely the careers of everyone of us."

Iwamasa shrugged, angering Lejeunne even more. "I'm going to give you one more chance to redeem yourself. Tell me where you think they have gone. What are they up to?"

Iwamasa hesitated before replying. "Captain Lejeunne, I'm sorry if, by letting the *Redoubt* escape I've caused you, Bates or North any harm. I really am. But I can't help you to hunt my friends. These orders are bogus. You know it, and I know it. The longer we have to wait for actual confirmation, the more likely it is we're being wrongly used. At least wait until we get confirmation."

"But *we have* received confirmation, Lieutenant Iwamasa," Lejeunne blurted out in anger. "You saw the sensor logs. They *destroyed* Navy ships!"

Iwamasa shook his head. "That wasn't confirmation from fleet HQ...that was another set of bogus orders from the same bogus source the first bogus orders came from."

It is my opinion that Vice Admiral Wexler is unreliable. Captain Ferris did not do the things he's accused of. The *Redoubt* may have had to defend itself from attack, but that doesn't make them traitors. But none of that matters because I really don't know where they've gone. And if you want to know 'what are they up to', I'd guess they're trying to prove their innocence, like you or I would, if falsely accused. They'll defend themselves in the process, but most likely they're looking for a way out of the mess they're in."

Lejeunne seemed to waver for a moment, his eyes unfocused as he thought about the possibilities. He looked at Iwamasa with renewed hostility. "I have received orders from Vice Admiral Wexler of sector command, and I am obliged to carry them out. I've already sent the FTL signal for backup. They will be here very soon. I need to know where the *Redoubt* has gone, and I need to know now!"

"I'm afraid I have no idea, Captain Lejeunne. Even if I did know, I wouldn't provide you with that information. I know Captain Ferris. I know he is a good man, and we both owe him our lives, orders to the contrary or not. I know I'll probably spend the rest of my life in the stockade for this, but at least I'll know that I once served with a good crew and a good Captain. My time aboard the *Niagara* will just be a brief and unfortunate footnote." With that he turned and walked back toward the exit.

"Lieutenant Iwamasa," Lejeunne barked. "You have not been dismissed."

Iwamasa quietly returned to where he had stood and waited with a calm fortitude that disturbed Lejeunne. He sat and stared at the young Engineer for several seconds. His face showed the strain of the conflict he was feeling, his brow furrowed with stress. He blinked his red-rimmed, watery eyes several times and finally said with a thick voice. "What would you have me do?"

"Help them," Iwamasa replied. "At the very least let them go. Hell, just blame me and my incompetence for losing them if that's what you're worried about."

There was another pause while Lejeunne wrestled with his decision. Finally he said, "I'll consider your suggestion further. In the meantime, take your station." He sighed, nodding to the ENG workstation and waving the crewman who had become Iwamasa's reluctant guard to leave. He cleared his throat before saying more loudly for the entire bridge crew. "We need a course, people. Call up all last known..."

"The *Purdue* is inbound, sir, with six escorts," Bates said. "It looks like Vice Admiral Wexler didn't waste any time getting here."

"It's too late to get clear," Lejeunne said. "I'm afraid we're left with no choice Kenji. We have to fall in with the strike group. Edwina, stay alert just in case."

AC-24 Star System (Momar)
Abandoned Vethonin-class Mining Rig in
Asteroid field orbiting Wagip

Volochkov watched the enhanced image on the display of the immense grey hulk for any sign of activity. It appeared only as a shadowy smudge in front of the stars.

“Time?” he asked.

“Our colleagues should be here already,” Rydstrom said. “I don’t like this.”

“Kobie, what are you getting from that rig? Anything?”

“Nothing,” N’Bele replied. “The thing looks completely dead and cold as space.”

“Not only should the other Indies be here already,” Finn said “We’re coming up on our scheduled departure time fast, Captain. We need to send the fake distress call now, if we’re going to do it at all.”

“Any hints of jamming or other forms of comm suppression?”

“None that we can detect, sir. No hint of the abort code either,” Finn replied.

“You’re going to have to make a decision soon, sir.”

“The timing on this is too damned tight.” Volochkov sighed. “Too many things can go wrong, and when they can, they always do. If I find out that MacDuff has tried to screw us, he’d better be thorough, ‘cause he’s going to be my first target when it comes out of this.”

“We’re running out of time, so here’s how we’ll play it. Send the access codes to the Miner’s Lament at the last possible second. Once we get the green light, we send the distress call as we’re leaving. Have all weapon systems at full ...”

“Captain! Contacts coming in.” Finn said. “Three Indie IFFs are inbound...*Braveheart*, *Bannockburn*, and the *Acadian*...looks like our colleagues have finally arrived.”

“It’s about time.” Volochkov muttered. “Open a channel.”

“This is Volochkov, Captain of the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. You’re late! In case you didn’t get to hear the briefing, MacDuff wants us to arrive at the SRF early, so form up quickly. We have to get going.”

“Captain,” came a very familiar Scottish-sounding voice from the speaker. “I apologize for the delay, but there was a small, last-minute change of plan.”

“Quartermaster MacDuff!” Volochkov replied. “I...I didn’t expect you’d be coming along for the ride.”

“Hold your position for a moment, while I bring you up to speed,” said MacDuff with some urgency. “We haven’t much time as we may have encountered a Navy patrol on the way here. Keep your distance from the mining rig and whatever you do, do not, I repeat, do *NOT* transmit the codes you were given. Things have changed.”

“Holding,” Volochkov said into the pickup. “What has changed?”

The approaching tugs, two of which were brightly painted in Indie markings slowed to a halt as they came to within a few hundred metres of the waiting corvette. MacDuff’s voice was heard on the comm channel again. “We’ve heard through the grapevine that there’s been some strange Navy activity in the last day or so. It seems that a mission intended to eliminate you has gone awry.” He let that sink in for a moment.

“You mean the Commonwealth Navy is trying to eliminate the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*?”

“Apparently so. You’ve somehow been tagged as the ones responsible for massacre at Tau Ceti.”

“That’s...*bothersome*. So much for collecting that Navy pension.”

“That’s only part of it, I’m afraid,” MacDuff continued. “It seems that entire mission was a bit of a PR cock-up, and the ship that was assigned the task of bringing

you down has also been declared rogue. They are now being hunted by a number of Navy vessels... whereabouts unknown."

"It sounds like they needed a scapegoat in a hurry," Volochkov surmised. "Who else is catching the blame?"

"The *Redoubt*," said MacDuff. "Captain Ferris and his crew have been declared traitors, and are considered to be rogue, just like you. Strangely, this edict has not reached everyone in the Commonwealth Navy, nor does it seem to include everyone in the chain of command. It seems to be a fairly local action."

"The same *Redoubt* that played us at Arcadia; the so-called *Out-In-The-Cold*?"

"The same."

"It figures. Well that answers one question, not that it helps now."

"How's that, Captain?" MacDuff asked.

"I was going to suggest the *Redoubt* as a reliable and trustworthy contact candidate. They had a solid reputation within the Navy. They were known as a ship that had some integrity," Volochkov said. "I was right... they're among the good guys, but it doesn't matter now, because they'll probably be dead soon. If they somehow survive they'll have zero credibility. Anyway, I still don't see how this all affects our SRF mission. Are we going or not, 'cause time is running out."

"We're going," MacDuff continued, "but as soon as the navy started hunting one of its own, the access codes to the rig changed automatically. I don't even think that COSA know about that. If you had transmitted the codes we were given by COSA, this thing would have become very dangerous to approach. It took us a while to acquire the new codes, but we should be able to pass safely now."

"I see. Well, I'm glad we waited, then," Volochkov said. "If we want to get there early, we should get going."

"Indeed," said MacDuff. "Format on me, and approach the rig at port speed. We'll transmit the new code, at which time it should provide all L-point NAV data for our HUDs automatically, as well as a timer/countdown to tell us how long it will remain viable. We'll be able to make a capsule space jump normally once we get the navigational data. Remember to be on full alert. The situation at the other side of this short jump could be extremely hostile."

"Understood," Volochkov acknowledged. "We're ready here. We'll transmit the fake distress signal on your mark."

"Here we go ladies and gentlemen," MacDuff said. "Transmit the distress signal now. Luck be with you all."

Inchidies Star System
Sisemis LaGrange point

The *Redoubt* emerged from capsule space at the Sisemis L5 in the Inchidies system without incident. They all waited for Ravindran to complete her scan of the region around the L-point. Without a word, she nodded to Ferris, who in turn nodded to

McMichael's reflection in the overhead mirror. Indie navy traffic was common in this system, but it didn't mean the Indies 'controlled' Inchidies. It simply meant that there was a much greater likelihood that a single Commonwealth vessel would find itself the target of an Indie patrol here than in Alpha Centauri. The *Redoubt* wheeled as it moved around the LaGrange point to set up another capsule jump in rapid succession.

"As soon as the capsule drive is charged, get us through to the Momar L4 in AC-24," Ferris ordered. The crew worked silently and efficiently at their stations. Four marine guards arrived to take up positions on the bridge, while Dupuis sat fastened into the rumbled seat at the aft bulkhead.

"Still clear, Captain," Ravindran reported. "It looks like the Indies are busy elsewhere today."

"First bit of luck we've had all day," Skarsgaard muttered from the ENG workstation. "That's it. Capsule drive is charged and ready when you are driver."

"Who's a 'driver'?" McMichael said, as he hit the thrusters to take them into the L-point at 500 m/s. "I prefer the term 'Pilot', or even 'Navigator' myself, Lieutenant Commander. A driver turns a steering wheel left or right. I do fantastically complex and miraculous things like pilot a starship, and find secret, hidden mining stations like the *Miner's Lament*, which, by the way, is locked in as out next waypoint, Captain, in case anyone was wondering."

"Very well....*Pilot*. Proceed," said Ferris. Space outside the forward view port flashed brightly, bathing the bridge in the brilliant and colourful glow of capsule space. "Mac, please call Colonel Carr and invite him to the bridge."

McMichael looked at Ferris' reflection with a perplexed look, but nodded in compliance as he keyed the call button for their marine guest.

"Next stop: Momar!" McMichael said, imitating the train conductor characters he'd seen in old Earth flatties. The time in capsule space seemed interminable as they waited for their ship to traverse the quantum tunnel that defied Einsteinian physics.

With a second flash, they emerged in the Momar system. Again, all eyes turned to Ravindran as she performed the ritual scan for contacts. "Three contacts, Captain," she reported. "Unknowns. They're already in LDS and moving away from us. Going, going and gone. I doubt they even saw us arrive."

"Direction?"

McMichael answered for her. "It looks like they're heading in exactly the same direction we're going. The mining rig waypoint is right on their projected path."

"I don't like it, but I guess there isn't much we can do about it now. We're in AC-24 already, and there isn't anywhere else we can go right now. Get us to that rig as quickly as possible. Rav, stay sharp. We're heading toward too many unknowns," Ferris said. "Let's go. Every moment we spend sitting here makes us that much more of a target for someone."

"Aye, captain." McMichael said. "On our way."

Thrusters roared to full power. The *Redoubt* slewed toward her new heading as velocity increased. The LDS drive ramped up quickly as they cleared the small inhibition field. The ship suddenly entered the rapid physical shift that allowed them to travel at interplanetary speeds. McMichael watched the speed indicator rise as the HUD speed perspective lines zipped by him. The colours changed from green to orange to blue to indicate near light speeds.

McMichael looked up to the mirror and caught Ferris eye as they sped toward the new destination. “May I ask a question?”

“Always,” Ferris smiled.

“What the heck are we doing?” McMichael knew the wording might have been construed as insubordinate, but he trusted that his relationship with the Captain would make the meaning clear. “I mean, I know we’re kind of reaching for anything that might help us get out of this mess, but how will the SRF and this stealth technology research help us? More importantly, why would we want anything to do with Colonel Carr? If you ask me, we should leave that bald psycho and ...”

“Then it’s a good thing no one asked you, isn’t it, Lieutenant,” Colonel Carr said as he strode up beside the pilot’s station flanked by armed marines. “Captain Ferris, I trust you’ll be taking the appropriate disciplinary measures against this insubordinate officer. If you do not, I will apply the required discipline in order to maintain order in the ranks. I will not tolerate this kind of subversion of authority. Discipline and respect for the chain of command must be maintained. On this particular issue I will not be flexible.”

Ferris heaved a sigh that could have been equal parts exhaustion and exasperation. “Colonel Carr, I gave my officer permission to speak freely. Therefore the responsibility is mine and any discipline should be directed against me.”

“I don’t accept that, Captain. This man is responsible for the words he utters whenever he wears that uniform. I can take a little name-calling, but that kind of disrespectful behaviour in the line of duty must be punished in order to...”

“Then leave the punishment to me, Colonel,” Ferris replied sharply. “Accept my word that he will receive a formal rebuke at the appropriate time. Right now isn’t the appropriate time.”

“Very well,” nodded the Colonel. “I’ll accept that on the condition that I am witness to that punishment.”

“Fine, but right now we are faced with more pressing matters.”

“Matters, I assume, that required my presence on your bridge,” the marine Colonel replied. “I have endeavoured to respect the wishes you made clear the last time I set foot on your command deck, Captain.”

“Colonel, we’re about to arrive at an armed and automated defence platform. Its purpose is to guard a little known LaGrange point in this system. As far as we know it will lead us to a research facility that may hold some answers to the stealth ships that seem to be involved in the attacks we’ve been suffered. The problem is that we don’t have the access codes, nor any way to deactivate its rather frightening defences. But we need to gain access to the NAV data that will enable us to make the in-system jump to get to that research facility. Do you have any solutions for this problem?”

“I don’t see any problem. It is a small challenge perhaps, but not a problem. I have at least two specialists that can hack that platform, or, in a worst-case scenario, sever the right conduits to render it harmless.”

“Then ready your team and stand by. We’ll be arriving in a few minutes.”

Colonel ‘Barber’ Carr issued orders into a small link in the cuff of his uniform and turned with a snap and signalling two of the four marines on the bridge to return to the pastie using rapid hand signals. He listened to a garbled reply from a small comm on his uniform and left the bridge to prepare his assault team.

“Mac, from now on you watch your mouth,” Ferris said. “We’re all on the same side, and we need...”

“Captain!” said Ravindran. “I’ve just received a distress call from the Singularity Research Facility. It isn’t on the normal S.O.S. band, but it sounds legitimate. It’s repeating now.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Aye, sir,” she said as she activated the audio. *“This is the Commonwealth Naval research facility code-sign Calypso Lollipop 8824-srf. We are under heavy attack by unknown vessels and require immediate assistance.”*

“It sounds almost too...by-the-book, doesn’t it?” McMichael said. “Whoever sent that distress signal doesn’t sound very distressed.”

“Maybe,” said Ferris. “Or maybe whoever is in command there isn’t easily panicked. The question at hand is: Do we still want to go there at all?”

“Captain,” said Skarsgaard, “the whole point of going there was to avoid contact with Commonwealth Navy, and to hopefully get some answers to this whole stealth ship technology question, right? I don’t see how we can accomplish either by going there now. Every ship out looking for us will be rushing to the SRF as fast as they can, right? My guess is we don’t want to be in the middle of that. They probably already think that we’re the ones attacking it. This might be our best chance to get clear of this system, while everyone is preoccupied, and find a nice hole to hide in for a while. At least it will give us time to come up with a better plan than this.”

“We’re not even sure we can get there,” said Ravindran. “We still have to get past the mining rig guarding the way. And if we do, we’ll be arriving at an unknown location in the middle of a hostile situation that will only be compounded by the arrival of more naval vessels. We may be in over our heads, Captain. This might be a good opportunity to get away and regroup somewhere safe.”

Ferris nodded as he considered this option. He was still deep in thought when McMichael spoke.

“I have to agree with the Rav and the Chief on this one,” said McMichael. “This is definitely not the place we want to be if something bad is happening. That doesn’t even begin to address the possibility that this is a trap. We just saw three ships heading in exactly the same direction we’re going. We know that everyone in the navy is hunting us, and the Indies will probably do their best to kill us, too. It just smells like...”

“Horseshit!” Dupuis shouted from the back of the bridge where he had been sitting quietly through the last two jumps. “You’re all full of it and you know it!”

Dupuis strode up the aisle to stand next to Ferris putting Hadley and Rinaldo ill at ease. The marines quietly changed their stance. They held their weapons ready in case they had to dispatch anyone on the bridge at a moment’s notice. Dupuis, oblivious to the risks he was taking, spoke directly to Captain Ferris.

“As the intelligence analysis specialist for this mission, I can tell you that the trap theory makes no sense at all. If they wanted to trap you with an S.O.S., they’d do it somewhere less secret and more easily reached than a top secret research facility.” He looked over at Skarsgaard next. “And where do you propose we run to? Where should we hide, and for how long? What alternate plan of action could there be as long as we’re considered to be traitors? There is something very odd about the entire sequence of events so far. Nothing about this mission has made much sense, but it has something to

do with the stealth technology being used by those ships, some crooked navy dealings, and a new faction. The more I think about it, I am convinced our answer lies at the SRF.

“The distress call is likely to be legitimate, especially given the stealth research connection at that facility. This may be our only chance to get some answers and to clear the name of this ship.”

Ferris nodded at Dupuis’ argument without a word, seeming to be lost in thought. He looked more exhausted than anyone recalled seeing. His sunken, red-rimmed eyes were unfocused. There was a silence on the bridge as the others waited for him to say something. He spoke quietly when he finally did respond, forcing the others into a stark silence. “The only real question at hand is: *Who are we?*”

The others looked perplexed. There were uncertain glances exchanged between the crew on the bridge, including Allbright sitting quietly in the other rumble seat at the rear bulkhead. McMichael began to wonder if the fatigue and strain hadn’t finally gotten to the Captain. Ravindran’s mind raced through possible meanings as she waited for him to elaborate. He obliged them all a moment later. “In a few minutes, we’ll be arriving at the *Miner’s Lament*. You’ve all described what appears to be a choice we must make: Do we use this distracting opportunity to slip away, or do we use the opportunity to learn more about stealth technology to help expose these mystery ships? Those might be good questions, but they’re the wrong questions. I say we only need to answer one question of ourselves: Who are we? Are we, or are we not officers of the Navy?” He looked at each of them again carefully, pausing for an uncomfortable moment. “In other words: Do we continue to behave like a Commonwealth Navy Vessel, and respond to that distress call, or do we run?”

Ferris looked at each of them. “We have no future if we try to slip away. We may buy ourselves a little more time, but we’ll cease to be the Navy ship we currently are. We’ll be on the run, and truly and finally become the rogues they say we are. So far we’ve had to fight and even kill fellow Naval personnel in this mission, in order to survive, but as far as I’m concerned those ships were out of order. The crew of the *Crusader* knew it. They fought along with us, and died doing their jobs. This vessel’s designation starts with three letters. We have, and will continue to operate as a Commonwealth Navy Vessel. I haven’t given up my status as Captain of a Commonwealth ship yet, and I’m not about to turn rogue just because someone says I have. We all are officers of the Navy, and we all know that the distress call we received is our call to duty, even if we risks our own destruction.”

This caught even Dupuis off guard. McMichael squared his shoulders and shifted a little in his seat, tightening his grip on the ship’s main attitude controller. Ravindran looked down as if she were ashamed. Skarsgaard looked at Dupuis and Ferris and shook his head in disbelief. “You don’t seriously think we should just forget about everything that has happened in the past several hours and go charging in to the rescue, do you? Your sense of nobility, or duty didn’t stop you from killing those other Navy ships that attacked us. Why get all holier-than-thou and self-sacrificial now? We’re barely combat-viable as it is, with only a handful of missiles left. We’ll probably be the first ones to get blamed for whatever is happening there. Actually showing up will only make things worse...it will put us at the scene of the crime.”

“Not our crime! Not *our* crime. We’re not the criminals,” said Ferris. “And we aren’t going to start acting like we are. We aren’t defined by what we appear to be to

others. We are defined by our own beliefs and by our own actions. We've been fighting for our survival from the start of this mission. It meant making choices in the moment that would keep us alive long enough to think things through. Believe me, since then I've been thinking things through. We're going to do everything in our power to defend that station, even if it means getting killed in the process, because that's who we are.

"Mac, as soon as we get within three hundred Kilometres of the *Miner's Lament*, bring us to a halt and hold station," Ferris ordered. "Skarsgaard, I want you to get some people on the optics, get a good look at the rig and tell us what we're up against."

The bridge crew watched the distances decrease in the hundreds of millions of kilometres as the *Redoubt* hurtled across the Momar system. The trip took longer than Ferris had anticipated, but every additional minute would give the marines more time to prepare for their boarding action. McMichael finally began decreasing the LDS rate and slowed the *Redoubt* to thruster velocity just over four hundred kilometres away from the rig. They came to a halt at three hundred Kilometres distance from the abandoned mining rig. The comm arm swung out and Ferris received a final report of combat readiness from the marine module. The optics suite called to indicate that they were bringing the *Miner's Lament* into view, images of which began to appear on the CMD display, for Ferris to examine. He leaned to the side and looked back at Dupuis and signalled him to join him at the command station to see the same blurry and jumpy images that were taking shape in front of him.

"Not much to see, is there?" Ferris commented when the image stabilized and focused in on the distant, dark object. "It's hard to believe that thing's almost two clicks long and packed with weaponry."

"Believe it, Captain," Dupuis said, staring intently at the screen. "I certainly do."

"Beliefs are all we're hanging on to, right now. Yours and mine," replied Ferris.

"It must be well shielded, we're getting nothing from it; no power output, no heat, nothing," said Ravindran. "It looks completely dead."

The *Redoubt* shuddered, as the marine pastie separated and began its journey toward the *Miner's Lament*. Allbright left his seat and walked to a place between the command station and the Engineering station, looking back and forth between displays.

"Do you really think they can hack the rig and get us past it?" he asked.

"We'll know in a few minutes," said Ferris. "They're within fifty clicks of it now."

"Wait a minute. Captain," said Allbright with a hint of concern growing in his tone. "I've been thinking about that thing. It has no output on any of the normal emission wavelengths does it?"

"No, it still looks very cold"

"But look at the size of it. It's big enough to hold several small ships tucked away in all its nooks and crannies isn't it? Maybe even several dozen smaller armed drones?" Allbright asked.

"Yes, but..."

"The marines are trying to dock," interrupted McMichael, "but they're having some problems."

Allbright continued his line of questions, "What if it doesn't have a single large power source; the kind that would be necessary to operate a bunch of mounted weapons

and LDA emitters...I mean what if it were nothing but a big heavily shielded garage for a whole bunch of small armed drones?"

Ferris thought for a moment before replying. "They'd all have smaller and separate reactors that would be quicker to start from cold, and be easier to hide in shielded recesses, all over..."

"...and those Marines are heading in there thinking that they'll be hacking some central CPU or cutting some main power source."

"But *something* would have to detect and coordinate the actions of the drones. Something has to be tracking and providing the NAV data once the green light is given." Skarsgaard offered.

"Drones can be more or less autonomous and activated by a simple sensor feed. And all the navigational stuff could be handled by the equivalent of a miniature FTL relay. There may even be a few of them hidden all over for redundancy."

"What about the need for a microgravity environment so that the FTL relay can work?" asked Skarsgaard. "That thing is near a sizeable asteroid."

"Doesn't matter if it isn't really working as a relay," Allbright replied. "This thing only needs to be local, so it can park next anything it wants. The point is the marines might never find a central CPU or main power grid using their standard breaking and entering techniques. They're thinking this is going to be like a fancy gunstar or weapons platform. That thing doesn't need to be an armed platform if it's nothing but a shielded warehouse. If I'm right, then those marines could be walking into a serious death trap. If I was designing something like this, I'd make it less like a gunstar and more like a Q-ship."

"I'm trying to get Carr on the comm now," Ferris tapped a series of key sequences. "We have to tell them to abort and return here immediately, they could be pulverized if they dock to it."

Ravindran reported on the comm activity she was hearing. "We're getting more internal comms from the marine pastie now, they've found what looks like a place to dock and are moving toward it, but they're also picking up multiple low level power sources throughout the rig."

Ferris spoke into the comm arm pickup as quickly as he could. "Colonel Carr, this is Captain Ferris. That rig may have a more distributed defence system than we thought. There may be nothing to hack or cut off. Return to the *Redoubt* on the double and we'll try something else."

"Nonsense, Captain," Carr's annoyed voice replied from the speaker. "We know what we're doing. My people are trained for this sort of thing. You have a nasty habit of contacting me when I'm in the middle of delicate operations. Please allow me and my team do our jobs. I'll conta..."

"What happened?" Ferris asked. "Where's his signal?"

"He just stopped transmitting, Captain," Ravindran said. "It may be interference from the rig. I'm getting some activity from it now, more contacts are appearing. Looks like Allbright may have been right."

"Optics are confirming that. They are reporting some activity at the rig. Either the marines are using beams and cutting their way into that thing, or weapons are firing," reported Skarsgaard.

Ferris watched the dark, almost indiscernible image for a second before seeing a brief flicker of light followed by another faint flash.

“That’s weapons fire!” he said. “McMichael, start moving us in closer, and stand by for a fast retreat. Maybe we can draw some of those things off them. Ravindran, we’re going to need some of that gunner magic in a moment.”

“Aye, sir,” she replied. “It looks like the marine pastie is getting swarmed. They’re definitely taking hits. It’s starting to show damage on my readout. I hope none of the marines were outside when those things hit them...”

Ferris turned to Allbright, who was watching events unfold, as he feared they might. “Allbright, you know FTL relay systems.”

“I know a thing or two about them, yes, but...”

“You and Skarsgaard get to work and find a way to disable that thing out there without killing the NAV data stream we’re going to need. Do it now.”

Allbright felt the dryness in his mouth push the desire for a drink up to the forefront of his consciousness again. He ran his trembling hand over his mouth and down his chin in an effort to push the urge down again. He blinked away the impulse to leave the bridge in search of a bottle, and tried to focus on the details of his surrounding. He was about to tell them that he couldn’t do it; that his skills weren’t up to it; that his hands would shake so badly for lack of a drink that he would slow any efforts down, when he saw McMichael’s personal touch bolted to the overhead panels. The sight of a rear view mirror from an automobile attached to the ceiling of the bridge on an NSO model 929 Commonwealth Navy Corvette, one of the best war machines they had, complete with a pair of fuzzy dice, made him laugh with a silent burst of breath. The laughter left him gasping after a few seconds. He coughed a little, and laughed a silent wheezing laugh that broke the grip of panic and alcohol addiction that had paralysed him a moment earlier. He felt tears sting his eyes as he continued to snicker a little less silently. A new focus gripped him and he chuckled again at the silliness of that decoration next to the deadliness of what they were doing. He shook his head and settled next to the Chief Engineer’s workstation. Seconds later, he was leaning over the displays and controls speaking quietly with Skarsgaard. The Chief’s blue and pink streaked hands flew over the key commands as Allbright directed him. Together they worked furiously to find the way into the FTL navigational data stream. After a few minutes of this, the Chief turned around.

“Captain,” said Skarsgaard excitedly within a few more moments. “I think Allbright has done it. We’ve found a way into the navigational data, but...”

“But what?”

Skarsgaard’s shoulders sank a little. “There’s nothing we can do about the drones. Not yet anyway.”

“We got it,” Allbright cried. “We’re receiving the NAV feed now. Pilot, you should be seeing a destination for the capsule drive any moment.”

“I’m seeing it now,” said McMichael. “Wait. Captain, look at that timer on the L-point! We have about two minutes to make a capsule jump if we don’t want to wait a few weeks for the next opening.”

Ferris nodded an acknowledgement feeling the full weight of the news. If they tried to save the marine pastie, they might all die, and they would certainly lose the chance to get through the tiny L-point. It was about to cease to be stable enough for the capsule drive to operate within. He hated making this kind of decision, but he knew what the responsibilities of the Captain’s chair entailed.

“Mac, take us to the L-point for a capsule jump,” he said. “Full burn.”

The engines roared loudly as they shifted direction and angled for a fast approach to the new L-point appearing on the HUD.

“What about the marine pastie?” Skarsgaard asked.

“Tell them the situation,” he replied stiffly. “They have less than two minutes to get docked and secured to us as we line up for an urgent capsule jump. We’ll be under fire as we make the final course corrections for the jump, but we don’t have time to stop and fight. They’d better have a damned fine pilot because we aren’t going to slow down to let them get lined up. They’ll either make it and get mated in time, or they won’t and get left behind. Tell them to position themselves for an emergency-docking manoeuvre with a moving target.

“Rav, do your best to keep those things off of them...and us,” Ferris said before addressing everyone else on the bridge. “Strap in folks. This could get rough.” He activated the general ship-wide comm next. “All hands: Brace for enemy contact and emergency manoeuvres. Repair teams: Stand ready.”

“We’ll be in range soon,” Ravindran said. “The pastie must have gotten the message, they’re trying the break away. It looks like they’re angling in on an intercept vector.”

They all watched their display screens, as the swarm of drones following the pastie began to shift. At first a few, then several, then at least two-dozen of the armed drones streaked toward them. “Here they come,” Ravindran said as she started firing the main forward PBC into the oncoming vehicles.

“This all seems disturbingly familiar,” said McMichael with remarkable calm.

“Just get us through that L-point, Mac,” Ferris said.

“Oh, I plan to. As long as it’s still there when we get to it. Counter’s down to less than thirty seconds, now. But we’re getting close.” He rolled the corvette and pulled back on the main pitch control, changing course in a tight high-speed turn. “I don’t have much hope for those poor marines, though.”

The LDA flared and flashed its deep magenta hues as it tracked and blocked incoming fire. More and more shots were getting through. Thankfully the drones relied on numbers, not individual power, so each hit was less damaging than it might have been. The problem was that the numbers were in their favour, and the damage to ship systems was accumulating faster than it was being repaired. Dozens of drones closed in on the *Redoubt* and dodged around them, some exploding in brilliant flashes of superheated gas as PBC bolts tore into them, many more delivering their own lethal stings to the hull of the corvette.

“Watch you don’t overheat the PBCs, Rav,” chided Ferris. “We can’t afford any holes in our defence.”

“I’m firing at the optimal rate, Captain,” she replied. “Any less and we’d be dead.”

“We’re in the final vector for jump now with a few seconds to spare,” McMichael said loud enough to be heard over the din of PBC fire. “Do we slow down for the pastie, or keep pushing it? It looks like they’re getting close enough to maybe make it.”

“Damage Report!” yelled Ferris.

“Too many systems on my board are going red, Captain,” replied Skarsgaard. “If you want a working capsule drive then get us away from these damned things as fast as possible.”

“Keep pushing, Mac. They’ll just have to...”

The ship rang with a painful-sounding metallic grind as they were all jarred suddenly downward. Ferris looked at McMichael in the mirror as the corvette developed a new vibration and started slewing toward the port. McMichael was too busy struggling to keep the ship on target to see Ferris looking at him.

“Report!” Ferris yelled again, focusing on his screens, looking for answers.

“The marine pastie just pulled the boldest move I’ve ever seen,” McMichael said. “Looks like it worked, because they’re clamped onto us tight for the moment. I guess they didn’t want to get left behind. Here we go, coming up to jump in three...two...one...”

The capsule drive worked as it was designed to. They flashed out of the region of space dominated by the *Miner’s Lament*, and into capsule space for a brief respite from the barrage of light PBC fire they had endured.

“That was some good work back there, everyone,” said Ferris, “but right now we need to focus on repairs. Skarsgaard and Allbright, make that your primary focus now. Mac, we have no idea what we’re coming out into, but once we do, if there’s a quiet place to take cover for a few minutes, I need you to find it fast. Rav: that was some fine shooting. Stand ready to do some more.”

Chapter 23

A Firm Grip

25.03.2268

Singularity Research Facility

Quarrelling Lovers asteroids

Momar system

The brilliant light swirl of capsule space ended as abruptly as it had begun, and the *Redoubt* found itself drifting silently in a dark region of space. The illumination from AC-24 was barely any brighter than the glow from the nearest blue-tinted nebulae or the brighter stars visible in the darkness of interstellar space. Hundreds of small objects drifted all around them, glittering in the faint starlight as they tumbled and spun. Several of these objects touched the hull of the *Redoubt* with a pattering of metallic clanks and scrapes. McMichael nudged the thrusters and accelerated away from the exit L-point toward the larger of the two dark asteroids that made up the *Quarrelling Lovers* pair. He was busily scrolling through the contacts registry while Ravindran scanned for vessels.

Ferris watched his screens closely. "Position?" he asked McMichael.

"We are currently about one hundred and twenty a.u. from AC-24, Captain," replied the pilot. "We are as far away from a system primary as I've ever been, I think."

"So this is *deep space*. They sure picked a good hiding place for a secret base," said Skarsgaard.

"Contacts?" asked Ferris of both the gunner and pilot.

"There's almost too much clutter for the sensors to discern. It looks like there was quite a fight here recently," said McMichael. "We seem to be in the habit of arriving right after it hits the fan. This was a major battle scene not long ago. I'm detecting two debris fields, and we're sitting in the middle of the smaller one. The debris is definitely wreckage from ships. The larger concentration of wreckage is just around the horizon of the larger body," he pointed out the forward view port to the upper right quadrant, "there."

"Take us over there at a leisurely pace, Mac," ordered Ferris. "Chief, how are we doing on those repairs?"

"We should be back to one hundred percent in a few more minutes, sir," replied Skarsgaard. "I can't say the same for the marine pastie, though. They must have used some kind of grappling device to clamp onto us. The unit still isn't properly seated in the pastie bay, and the airlocks aren't anywhere near being mated or sealed. I've just sent someone over in a vac suit to deliver some medical supplies. I got word that they're in rough shape. I think they'll need to undock and then re-attach properly in order to get everything hooked up right."

"Tell them to proceed with that operation as soon as possible. Provide whatever technical or medical assistance we can," Ferris ordered. "Rav, are there any active ships out there? Or threats?"

"Working on it, Captain," Ravindran said. "It looks like a small number of vessels are still operational in the larger of the debris fields ahead, but...something out here is

causing an enormous amount of interference. I don't think it's the debris that is interfering with scans. It must be..."

"Something like that?!" McMichael exclaimed, looking out the view port.

They all watched the edge of the asteroid they were circumnavigating, as the scene revealed itself slowly, like a timid animal peering from behind a rock.

"So that's what a *Singularity Research Facility* looks like!" said McMichael. "That thing is huge! Now I understand the strange code sign they used in the distress signal. What was it...something-or-other *lollipop*? I didn't think the Navy *had* a sense of humour, but that's exactly what it looks like."

"No...more like an All-Night sucker, or a LunaPop." Skarsgaard corrected.

In fact, the SRF looked more like an enormous EAD or bio-bomber with a long station mast protruding from one end. The immense spheroid structure resembling a bio-bomber was actually a containment structure about three times the size of an EAD. On closer inspection, the long, spindly-looking stem attached to one end was also immense. It was larger than most station structures, consisting of several power generation units, manufacturing and production facilities, laboratory sections and a few habitation modules all in a row. From a distance, though, the combined effect was indeed something that resembled a lollipop. As they approached, they could see that it was surrounded by a cloud of debris, some of it still flaring with explosions.

"Whatever happened here, occurred very recently," Ravindran reported. "It may still be in progress. I'm picking up three...no four vessels in that debris field ahead. The smaller debris field we just left is what's left of several gunstars and a few smaller vessels...likely PatComs. The composition of the larger field is similar, but there are more fragments from larger structures, like station modules. Comms are decidedly quiet. I'm shocked that we aren't seeing evidence of more survivors. Whoever did this must have methodically gone around destroying every escape pod and lifeboat there was."

The distance to the SRF bled away slowly, as they approached with caution. The level of destruction that had been visited on this facility became more and more apparent with every minute that passed. Entire stations that had housed security forces, scientists, technical and support staff were smashed and dark. Huge rents, broken docking spines, and darkened impact holes gaped along the lengths of every section. Shattered hulls of vessels, metal conduits, structural beams, and frozen bodies drifted around the SRF in a ghastly cloud. Dupuis appeared in the aisle beside Captain Ferris, transfixed by the destruction he was seeing out the forward view port. His jaw hung slackly, his eyes unblinking.

"Bastards," he said. At first, his voice was a hoarse whisper, but within seconds the hatred in his voice grew. "*Bastards!* What in God's name...?" He continued to stand and stare for a few moments before speaking again. "I have to find Corinna," he said as he hastily exited the bridge. The guards, having edged forward for a better view, were too absorbed in the spectacle to consider stopping him.

"Wait, Lieutenant..." Ferris said, but the access hatch had already closed. Dupuis was gone.

"Get me IDs on those four ships over there," ordered Ferris, returning his attention to the situation. "Are they part of the group that did this, or are they survivors? And where the hell *is* the fleet that did this?"

“Captain,” Ravindran’s voice showed more tightness than she had wanted to reveal. “There is still a great deal of interference coming from that large structure, making it hard to get a proper IFF reading on those vessels. They look like tugs. One of them could be a corvette. I doubt they are responsible for the attack. From their speed and directions, it looks like they’re searching the wreckage.”

“They could be searching for survivors...”

“Or for something of value to steal,” Allbright added.

“What’s clear is that they couldn’t have done all this,” Ravindran said, “not without some help. The entire LDS interruption field is gone, so I imagine the force that attacked this place could have retreated by LDS.”

“Captain,” said McMichael. “I’ve got a request here from Colonel Carr to hold speed and direction steady so the marine pastie can re-attach properly.”

“Do it,” said Ferris. “Any status reports available from them, yet?” he asked Skarsgaard.

“They’re still struggling with repairs,” replied the Skarsgaard, “It sounds like they lost several marines back at the mining rig...eight or nine dead from what I’ve been able to gather.”

Hadley and Rinaldo had silently returned to the posts they had held on either side of the bridge access hatch. Until the SRF, they had watched the crew work their respective stations, and they had kept watchful eyes on Dupuis and Allbright in all their movements with the vigilance of dutiful soldiers. Now with the scene of destruction before them, and the news of fallen comrades a small crack appeared in their discipline.

“Who’s left?” asked Hadley to no one in particular. “What names are listed as still active?”

Skarsgaard keyed up a screen and read the names. “Still active, we have Connover, Hadley, Minnes and Rinaldo... and Colonel Carr, of course,” he said. “Oh, you’re Hadley and Rinaldo aren’t you? There are a few more listed in serious condition that are in need of treatment ...let’s see, there’s Ames, Odendijk, Singh, and Wilkes all listed as inactive with medical problems.”

Hadley and Rinaldo exchanged a look that Allbright understood too well when he witnessed it. He felt it too when he thought of Corporal Vecchio frozen and drifting amid the debris near the *Miner’s Lament*: once-familiar faces, now gone forever. He remembered that feeling from the days after they cremated Burnsie, though he had a hard time conjuring a mental picture of his face nowadays.

At that moment, they felt the ship groan as the marine pastie broke free. They coasted in silence for an interminable few seconds before they felt the more familiar vibrations marking a text-book docking.

“The marine pastie is secured and the hatches are sealed,” reported Skarsgaard. “The survivors are coming aboard now. The four injured are being transferred to our port pastie.”

“Resume course and speed, Mac. I want to see if those ships are attackers, grave-robbers or rescuers.”

“I’ve got IFFs now, Captain,” Ravindran called out. “Those are Indie vessels ahead! So far I can identify the *Bannockburn*, and the *Braveheart*. It looks like they’ve seen us, too. They’re changing vector and accelerating. It looks like they’re going into LDS. That’s it, the *Braveheart* and the *Bannockburn* are gone.”

“Stand by to send an LDS interrupter into that debris field, then a volley of ...”

The comm arm unfolded itself in front of Ferris as he spoke, announcing an incoming message. “Captain Ferris,” said a voice from the small speaker. “This is Captain Yevgienyi Volochkov, of the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. We have a habit of meeting under troublesome circumstances. I don’t know how you did it, but congratulations on finding us so quickly! We have to talk.”

Ferris was caught off guard by this. He felt a strange detachment come over him as if his head had been wrapped in gauze, and he was no longer seeing or hearing things clearly. He felt like he had been separated from his surroundings. He moved his hands slowly, as if in a dream over the console. He keyed open a channel to reply. “This is Captain William Ferris of the *CNV 534 Redoubt*. I have been instructed to demand your immediate surrender and to bring you and your crew into custody for immediate...”

“We don’t have time for that crap, Ferris,” interrupted Volochkov. “You’re so far behind current events, I don’t know where to start, but we don’t have time for any of that. We need help rescuing people from this mess. There are hardly any survivors here, but we just found a few trapped in a power generation unit control room. Get over here and help us out!”

“Did...didn’t you attack them in the first place?” stumbled Ferris. “Why are you helping them?”

“Because they need help!” Volochkov retorted. “And because we want witnesses. We did *not* do this.”

“Who did?” Ferris asked, regaining some of the colour in his face, and his composure. The dreamlike quality of the last several seconds was waning.

“Do you see the tug on your registry called the *Acadian*?” Ferris looked directly at Allbright, who returned the look with raised eyebrows and a shrug of the shoulders. They both looked at the display in front of them, which showed the positions of vessels in the debris field. There it was, the *Acadian*, now clearly listed on the contacts registry. They could see it now as it hovered near one of the damaged areas of the main power generation units on the SRF station’s spine. “They’re at the nearest docking port to the group of survivors in that section, but they can’t get close enough without getting caught in that high voltage arc you’re seeing between generator units. Their ship isn’t shielded to handle it. It would fry too many of their systems. But these corvettes are better shielded. They could handle it if we worked together, one on either side of them.”

“Yes, together we could do it, but ...how do I know you aren’t...”

“For chrissake, we don’t have time for this, OK? Sure, it’s hard to know who to believe; we’ve both been accused of treason; we both know it’s a pack of lies, and *blah, blah, blah*. If we’re going to get those people out of there alive, we need to trust each other for a few minutes and do this now. We have no idea how stable those power generators are. We do know that they are damaged, and barely jury-rigged by those survivors to keep going. If they fail, the containment fails. If the containment fails...”

“What if the containment fails?” Ferris prompted.

“I’m not exactly sure, but... I doubt that any of us will be able to run away fast enough.”

Ferris hesitated as he tried to weigh information. “All right, we’ll do it.”

“Just cover the *Acadian*’s backside and we’ll take a position off her bow. Expect a few heavy jolts while they pull out the survivors. We’ll wait until the tug is clear and then break free simultaneously. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Ferris. The comm arm swung away again. “Mac, take us to where he indicated and hold station until that tug is safely away from the structure.”

“Captain,” Skarsgaard ventured. “Are you just going to believe them? Those spies are the reason we are out here in the first place. They’ve betrayed the Commonwealth, and...”

“Just like we’ve betrayed the Commonwealth, Mr. Skarsgaard?” asked Ferris. “We’ve been called rogues and traitors by the same people...*your* people, Mr. Skarsgaard. Frankly, I’m not inclined to believe the Navy brass anymore. My orders to you are to proceed with the rescue of survivors, as suggested by Captain Volochkov. *That* is who we are. You just keep this ship working,” he turned to look at Mac in the overhead mirror. “Mac, take us in.”

The *Redoubt* glided toward the point designated by Volochkov, deftly dipping the weapons pylons and angling to dodge the larger chunks of spinning debris as it coasted in silence. McMichael tried not to think about the fact that they were working in collaboration with ship that was their mission objective and target. So many lines had blurred in the last couple of days, it was dizzying. Not only that, but they were about to place themselves in the stream of some very powerful energy discharges, in order to help rescue survivors that no one on board was certain even existed. They closed the distance to the generator units quickly seeing even more evidence of the recent attack. The damage was so great that McMichael truly doubted anyone could still be alive inside that power plant. He positioned the *Redoubt* as instructed, and watched the *Acadian* move closer to dock with the remains of the station module. Allbright walked closer to the pilot’s station at the front of the bridge in order to see his former ship more clearly out the view port. McMichael saw emotion work its way across the new Assistant Chief’s face, but he couldn’t be certain if it was regret, anger, or pride. It occurred to him that it might be all three.

The Puffin-class tug docked securely onto the dying station module just as the first power discharge struck the *Redoubt*. Displays quivered to static for a few moments, but the shielding held. “You realize that if one of those discharges fries our CPU, we’re dead,” McMichael reminded them all.

“Believe me, I realize that all too clearly,” Skarsgaard replied. “I don’t like being here any more than you do.”

Another discharge hit the corvette, this time creating a fluctuation in the gravitational fields. They all felt the viscera-tingling sensation of weightlessness for a moment.

“If you aren’t buckled in, get buckled in,” Ferris ordered. Allbright made his way to the rumble seat and strapped himself in securely, looking over at the empty seat on the other side of the hatch that had held Dupuis. “Hadley and Rinaldo, I’d suggest, for your own safety, that you leave the bridge. I’m sure you could be more helpful back at your pastie.”

“Sorry, sir,” replied Hadley. “We can’t do that until we’re relieved or ordered to leave our posts.”

“Suit yourselves.”

“It looks like the *Acadian* is leaving already. Stand by to get the hell away from this place on my mark.”

“*Acadian* has cleared the area and is moving off quickly,” said Ferris. “The *Wolf-In-The-Fold* says to hit full burn in...three, two, one. Mark!”

Engines roared to life pushing the two corvettes away from the power generation modules in a graceful manoeuvre of formation flying. Both vessels halted well clear of SRF and positioned themselves to face one another only a few hundred metres apart. McMichael watched the colourful *Wolf-In-The-Fold* out the forward view port, silhouetted by flashes and flares of the dying SRF in the background. He felt a little envious of their handsomely painted vessel. Ferris keyed open a comm channel to the Navy spy ship painted in the brilliant Indie colours of the *Crack-In-The-World* fleet. The comm arm unfolded quickly indicating a successful connection.

“Captain Volochkov, my compliments on a job well done. How many personnel were saved?”

“Seven.”

“Only seven?! How many in total, from this entire facility?”

“Seven”

“But, there must have been three or four thousand people working here, at least...” Ferris said, disbelief in his voice.

“Try six and a half thousand.” Volochkov replied. “...and we only found seven people alive.”

“My God. How could...ah, is there anyone amongst the survivors named Corinna?”

“I don’t know names, but we got seven healthy *male* engineering staff out of there.”

“I see,” replied Ferris. “Normally I’d insist you release the survivors to us, but under the circumstances...”

“I’m glad you see it that way. They’ll be very well treated, debriefed and eventually released. MacDuff has plans for them to hopefully sway another member or two of the Indie council to his way of thinking, but ultimately they’ll be sent home in a very public fanfare of Indie magnanimity.”

“This place’s secret is lost forever then, isn’t it?”

“Possibly. Too many people know about it, but it doesn’t really matter now. Those bastards with the stealth ships got what they wanted. There won’t be any Commonwealth Navy stealth prototypes for a long time.”

“What in the hell happened here?” asked Ferris.

“There’s another faction involved in this war, Captain Ferris. They’ve been working in the shadows for some time, but they have strong connections with some highly placed people in the Navy. Occasionally they’ll...”

The airlock at the rear of the bridge hissed open. Colonel Carr stepped over the lip of the entrance and walked onto the bridge, nodding at the marine guards flanking the hatch as they snapped to attention. He was accompanied by Conover. McMichael saw him first in the overhead mirror, and activated his comm channel to Ferris.

“It’s the *Barber*,” he said softly. Ferris pressed the ‘signal interrupt, please hold’ button, breaking contact with Volochkov temporarily.

Colonel Carr appeared beside the CMD workstation on the port aisle and clasped his hands behind his back. He was quiet for a moment, as he looked around the bridge. "Captain," he began, "it seems I owe you a debt of gratitude and an apology. If it hadn't been..." His gaze focused on the forward view port. He leaned forward a little to look more closely. "Is that what I think it is?" he asked, looking squarely at the corvette holding station directly in front of them. He looked over at Ravindran's display and saw the identification of the vessel facing them. "Captain, why wasn't I informed that we had encountered the enemy...and why aren't we firing on them?"

"Because we were too busy rescuing survivors, and now we're talking with the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. You were about to thank me?"

"Captain, our mission is to bring that ship down. Yet here we sit within striking distance, and you are *talking* with them?" He un-holstered his sidearm and held it menacingly at his side. "I gave you the benefit of the doubt when they accused you of treason, and now I find you *talking* with the enemy? I'm ordering you to disable or destroy that vessel immediately, or so help me God, I will execute you where you sit and complete the mission myself." The marines came to combat readiness in an instant, with a rattle of armour, and clicking of weaponry. Rifles were suddenly trained on bridge crew.

Ferris felt the muzzle of Carr's service pistol aimed directly at the side of his head. He spread his fingers and raised his hands slightly off the control console, and glanced at the rear view mirror above the pilot. McMichael was watching him closely. Ferris knit his brow in an effort to communicate something, but McMichael couldn't read more into the look than the supplication to *do something*.

"Colonel, I'm in the middle of trying to find out what has been going on," said Ferris. "I'd really like to..."

"Don't waste any more time, Ferris," Carr hissed acidly. "I have a mission to complete." He cocked the hammer and held the service pistol closer to Ferris' head. This tableau was interrupted by a squawk of static from Carr's comm unit. He raised his left arm to reply without moving the weapon from Ferris' head. "Carr here, what is it?"

"Colonel, this is Minnes," said the voice from the comm unit. "I require assistance in the assault unit. I have detained Lieutenant Dupuis here, and am holding him in custody until someone can come and get him."

"What do you mean you've *detained* Lieutenant Dupuis?" Carr asked.

"I'm not sure how he got aboard," replied Minnes, "but somehow in the transfer of the wounded, and the repair help we were getting from the crew, he got on board our pastie. I caught him trying to steal it. He locked himself into the flight control deck. I was able to disable the controls, but I can't get him to come out. I have him under my surveillance. The unit is now secure and empty except for us. He seems harmless enough, but he's lost it, sir. He's pretty confused, and he's incoherent. He keeps talking about *Corinna*."

"Ferris, is this another one of your tricks?" Carr asked, tightening his grip on the sidearm.

"No, Colonel, it is not," Ferris sighed. "I'm not up to any tricks. I would appreciate it if you removed that weapon from my face, though. It is getting in the way of me doing my job."

“And just what is your job, Captain?” asked Carr. “To cause as much damage as possible to our war effort? Our research? The infrastructure?”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Colonel, and if you’d just give me a moment to...”

“Colonel,” Skarsgaard interrupted. He stood up slowly from the ENG workstation with his hands splayed and in full view. “I’ve been on this ship as long as you have, so you know I’m not part of whatever conspiracy Ferris and his crew are involved in. But I do sort of know Lieutenant Dupuis. He and I share accommodations and we’ve gotten to be friends. I know I can talk sense into him, and get him out of that control room. If you’ll let me leave, I’ll go get him from your pastie and lock him up safely in his room for you.” He looked around the bridge at the marines positioned near the aft hatch in combat ready stances, weapons trained on the crew. “You’re a little short staffed, and it looks like you’ve got your hands full here.”

“Sir,” the voice of Minnes could be heard faintly from Carr’s cuff again. “What is the situation on the bridge? I’m reading active weapons status on all four of you, from this monitor. Please advise.”

Carr raised the link to speak into it again without letting his eyes or aim waver from Ferris. “The situation is under control for the moment. We have secured the bridge. The Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Skarsgaard, will be coming to remove your package and escort him away. Connover will be with him. Stay alert, watch that package carefully, and report back when the assault pastie is free of visitors. Out.” He nodded to Connover and said, “Take Mr. Skarsgaard, here, down to fetch Dupuis. Lock them *both* into their rooms, and stay with the pastie. Wait there for my orders.”

“Sir!” replied the soldier. He waved his gun from Skarsgaard to the hatch, urging the Chief to make a quick exit. Skarsgaard held his hands in front of him carefully. The bridge was silent for a moment after the hatch closed behind Connover and Skarsgaard.

“Colonel,” Ferris said. “I’m trying to prevent more pointless bloodshed here, so I am not firing on anybody until I have more information, and I suggest you do the same. I’d like to communicate with the Captain of that ship out there. I’m guessing you haven’t already fired because you either have some doubts yourself, or you’re aware of how badly outnumbered you are if you intend to operate this ship after a hostile takeover.”

“Captain Ferris, you have been nothing but a royal pain since the start. I have no doubts whatsoever, I assure you, and I don’t need any help to operate the ship. I just need to secure it and wait for help to arrive. Besides, I’m sure Skarsgaard will assist if he figures it will get him out of lockup.” Carr held the muzzle of the sidearm to Ferris’ temple. “Now engage that enemy vessel or I’ll redecorate this bridge,” he grinned widely. “And I don’t mean with mirrors and fuzzy dice.”

“Uh...in case anyone’s interested,” McMichael broke in reluctantly. “The *Wolf-In-The-Fold* is leaving. It’s moving off slowly in the direction of the *Acadian* over by that wreckage.”

“That’s not all.” Ravindran added. “There is another ship coming this way. They’re still in LDS, and I can’t read any IFFs yet, but there is at least one vessel inbound. If you don’t believe me, Colonel, look for yourself.”

Carr turned to look at Ravindran’s display, and leaned in a little closer to try to make out the ship types and vector trails. Indeed, there it was: a corvette sized ship rushing toward them. As he watched more contacts appeared in the distance, also making their way toward the SRF. The muzzle of the gun never left Ferris’ temple, and the

Captain was fairly certain that any movement would be fatal. But that brief distraction by Ravindran was the opportunity Ferris needed. He had been holding his hands somewhat raised, near his chest. He made sure McMichael was looking when he wiggled his fingers gently and raised them slowly. He then pointed directly at the five point harness buckle at his sternum, then balled his left hand into a fist and moved it forward slightly in what looked like a small punch. McMichael caught it all, and winked as he started quietly touching command keys with as little apparent limb movement as possible. Sitting furthest forward on the bridge afforded him the most cover from the gaze of the marines and their Colonel.

The entire exchange took place in the span of a few heartbeats. Carr quickly glanced around the bridge but saw nothing untoward. He resumed his vigil on Captain Ferris. "Captain: order your gunner to launch the remaining REM missile, and then vacate that seat. I'll pilot it into those Indies myself, which should fix our spy problem once and for all."

He had only just finished the sentence when they felt the familiar vibration of the marine pastie undocking from the corvette. With a surprised look, the Colonel quickly raised his link and activated a channel to the pastie. "Minnes, what the hell is going on? Why have you undocked? ...Minnes? ...Come in Marine Assault unit! Dammit who's flying my module?"

Ferris nodded slightly to McMichael. The pilot took his cue and touched three controls before saying, "Colonel there is one thing we'd all like to know before this turns ugly: Why do they call you the *Barber*?"

"What the hell is..." Carr turned to face McMichael, but he could already feel the sensation of falling. The absence of gravity was nothing new to combat hardened space marines, and Carr even felt a sense of amusement that the crew would try to gain some advantage by killing the gravity plates. But that amusement drained away as quickly as the blood from his face when he realized what it meant if the inertial dampening effects had been nullified, too. The realization hit him at the same time the acceleration from a full thrust burn drove him against the rear bulkhead of the bridge with the force of a fall from fifteen metres. He felt his right arm break at least once, and his ribcage burned with pain, too as he was held against the surface with an increasingly punishing weight. He passed out with one thought breaking through the agony: *That's twice, Ferris...*

McMichael, straining against the force of the thrust, looked up at the mirror to see the results of his handiwork. The Colonel was held against the aft bulkhead with his shoulder and twisted arm on the headrest of the empty rumble seat where Dupuis had been. The two marines, weapons strewn against the bulkhead, were similarly pinned in an uncomfortable pile directly on top of the hatch. Allbright was intact and conscious, but looked mad as hell. A marine assault rifle had slammed against the wall centimetres from his head. McMichael touched a button cycling the hatch and let his arm fall back against the rest, exhausted. The unconscious marines tumbled through the opening into the short corridor aft of the hatch clearing hands and feet safely before it sealed again. McMichael locked the hatch and activated the gravity fields again, watching Carr's unconscious body slide slowly back down on the deck. He toggled the automatic flight assist mode on to allow the *Redoubt* to bring herself to a controlled relative stop, and cut the main thrust to zero. . The braking thrusters fired briefly shedding velocity, but they stopped just as

suddenly after only a few seconds of braking. The *Redoubt* continued drifting forward at a considerable velocity.

“Good work, Mac. That’ll show the *Barber* the importance of a firm grip...but, um...why aren’t we braking?” said Ferris.

“We just lost all drive power and several other control systems. Comms are out too. Strange...only selected systems seem to have been affected. I don’t know why.” McMichael answered.

“Well find out why and bring us to a halt, please,” ordered Ferris as he turned to look behind him. “Allbright! You still with us back there?”

“Still here, no thanks to your pilot, though,” said Allbright.

“You really need to learn to be more grateful. Mac just saved our necks. Now, get up here and take the ENG station. It looks like we’re without drive power of any kind. I need you to find out what the hell happened and fix it.”

Ferris turned to his gunner and made sure she was uninjured before he gave her orders. “Rav, while they’re working, I want you to grab the Colonel and put him on the other side of the aft hatch. Give them all a dose of painkiller from the emergency medkit by the door to the head. Handcuff them or tie them all up, somehow. Get all their weapons and comms and bring them back in here. Seal that hatch again when you’re done. I don’t want to hear from any of them again, until we’re out of this.”

“Allbright, where’s our power? This is a very bad time to be adrift!”

Allbright shook his head in reply, focused on finding the problem to the *Redoubt*’s loss of drives. In the span of nine seconds, they had regained control of the bridge, and lost it again. McMichael’s hands flew over controls as he struggled in vain to regain control at the helm. He looked out the forward view port and watched the enormous shape of the containment structure loom larger and larger as they drifted directly toward it.

“Yves, this is your lucky day!” Skarsgaard said cheerfully. He operated the flight controls of the marine pastie as they accelerated away from the *Redoubt* and moved toward the incoming vessels. He might have said something else before that, but Dupuis hadn’t really heard much of what was being said. Dupuis sat in the co-pilot seat of the marine pastie, hands taped to his sides, with a look of shocked horror on his face. Skarsgaard was in the pilot’s seat next to him, his hideously flushed skin made even more macabre with the coating of spattered blood that was now drying there, as well as on his hair and uniform. Minnes’ feet could still be seen behind them just beyond the opening to the control room, as well as the pool of blood that had spread from where he had fallen in the Engineering control area. Connover’s body lay in a similar state not far beyond that.

“I tell you, this couldn’t have worked out better if you and I had been a team all along! Except I wouldn’t have had to tape you to that chair if we were a team.” The visible man reached out and tested the tape holding Dupuis to the chair, then slapped Dupuis in a chummy fashion on the shoulder before resuming his grip on the controls.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, that was the best excuse imaginable to get off the bridge and down here.”

“I...I don’t understand,” Dupuis said. “You just walked up and killed those marines, just like that.”

“An unpleasant aspect of my work,” said Skarsgaard frowning, “but a necessary one.”

“But you were smiling at them. You were talking to them so normally, even friendly...” Dupuis was still in shock.

“All part of the *slight-of-hand* aspects of assassination...ah hell,” he chuckled, “You got me there. I actually really did enjoy shooting them I have to admit it. There’s nothing like getting in under a seasoned killer’s guard and putting him down with one to the base of the skull.” He seemed jubilant and full of energy after the recent killings. “Oh damn! Before I forget, I’d better shut down the *Redoubt*. Look at her go on full burn there. Jesus, I wonder where they’re going like that? We don’t want them coming and chasing us now, do we?” He tapped a few more controls and flipped a switch. “There, that should keep them quiet for awhile. Now where was I? Oh yeah. Now *two* of them together is another matter. You have to get real close to one of them, and then distract them both somehow. It was just too perfect, having you locked up in here,” he chuckled again. “I just nodded at the door and asked them what they’d tried so far. They both turned their heads like a couple of greenies. It was almost too easy: aim, squeeze, aim, squeeze. *Thuk! Thuk!* Before you know it, you got a couple of sacks of steroid-enhanced meat and just you and me, my friend. You didn’t really think you could keep an engineer on the other side of a locked door, did you?”

“I...uh. No, not really,” stammered Dupuis.

“Well, I’m grateful you opened up voluntarily. It saved precious time. I didn’t want to have to get all suited up, vent the atmosphere, watch you die of explosive decompression, and all that. It would’ve been even messier than Connover’s head all over the place. You did the right thing.”

“Where did you get that gun?”

“Oh this?” he held up the silenced sidearm. “I stashed these things all over the place when I was ‘doing repairs’. It wasn’t hard to pause at the right location and distract Connover for a second. I just reached up, grabbed it, and palmed it. In my line of work, that’s called *Prepping the Landscape*.”

“What exactly is your line of work anyway?”

“I’m kind of a Jack-Of-All-Trades, except in my case, I’m a master of most of them, especially the more unsavoury trades” he chuckled at his own joke. “I’m Wexler’s dirty work handy man. He’s the kind of guy that always, and I mean *always*, has a ‘Plan B’ for everything he does. I’m usually his Plan B, C and D. He and I have an understanding. I understand that I am expendable, and he understands that I always get the job done and survive, because I have my own Plan Bs, Cs, Ds, and Es. In other words, he gives me the list of priorities, and then he turns me loose, knowing full well what my strengths and survival skills are. He pays me extremely well to take the risks I do.”

“But hasn’t Wexler been trying to kill us this whole time? I mean, the whole ship has been targeted, including you, hasn’t it?”

“Well, not the whole time, but yes. Almost. Believe me, I’ll extract a hefty bonus out of him for trying to kill me so thoroughly along with you. But to be honest, I kind of

expected it. Plan A didn't really have much chance of success. I think he just had to switch to Plan B fairly quickly, so I just went along with it."

"Didn't it occur to you that, like the rest of us, he was really just trying to get rid of you too, maybe because of the damage we all might do to him someday with what we know?"

Skarsgaard looked at Dupuis with an expression of delight. "You are a good analyst, aren't you? I'm impressed. Yes, that's a very good possibility. Like I said, this is your lucky day!"

"Why? Aren't you going to kill me?"

"Kill you?" Skarsgaard looked shocked, almost hurt at the notion. "Of course not. I owe you one for giving me such a perfect opportunity to get away. I also think you might still be useful to me. Hell I even like you. But more importantly, Vice Admiral Wexler likes you. He seems to think that there may be some use for you in his organization..." Skarsgaard's attention was drawn to the challenges of piloting as they dodged more debris. The drive cut out then back in again, then died completely. He was trying but failing to hail the incoming ships, and all he was getting out of comms was static. "This pastie is definitely in need of some repair work." He looked at Dupuis with a new expression on his gore-covered face. "Do you like irony? It's one of my favourites. Here I am, just finished killing the *Redoubt* with a flip of the switch, and now I'm as dead-in-the-water as they are. As much as I like you, I have to concentrate on other things now, so I'm going to have to knock you out." With that he swung the butt of his silenced sidearm up and struck Dupuis on the side of the head.

Dupuis' head flared with pain and his view swam dizzily for a moment before his world lurched sideways and he fell off the chair onto the deck beside it. Somewhere in the blurring of thoughts before he was lost in blackness, he realized that the tape that had been binding to the chair had torn when he fell.

Chapter 24

Swift Sunrise

25.03.2268

Singularity Research Facility

Momar system periphery

“Options!” Ferris yelled impatiently. “We’ve got less than two minutes, people. What haven’t we thought of? Somebody give me some good news.”

“I’ve got some good news,” Allbright offered from the Engineer’s workstation. “I know what caused this: The *Redoubt* was sabotaged by Skarsgaard. It’s the only answer. The other good news is I know how to fix it.”

“Great! Get to work on it.” Ferris ordered with relief. “So much for the theory that a Visible Man can’t lie. He screwed us pretty good.” Ravindran stood up from where she had been securing the soldiers’ weapons, and McMichael started replacing the access panel he had removed from the starboard CPU maintenance access.

“I could get started on those repairs, sir,” Allbright continued, “but it would be pointless. It will take... oh, about an hour to repair the damage he did. The problems are distributed all over the ship, cutting out specific control and power nodes at certain key points on the *Redoubt*. It can’t be done centrally, and it will take more time than we have.”

“What about shields?” asked Ferris. “Can we at least get the LDA back on line so we can bounce off that thing. That would give us the time to do the rest.”

“Negative. We don’t have LDA, LDS, PBC or any other combination of letters you can think of,” Allbright replied. “The bastard knew what he was doing. This is an all-or-nothing repair job. We can’t even call for help unless we blink our bridge lights in Morse code.”

“How hard are we going to hit, anyway? Will the ship’s hull and structure take the impact?”

“Nope,” Allbright shook his head. “We’re going to hit hard enough to hurt very, very badly for a few seconds. Then we won’t feel anything at all...ever again.”

“Can we use the pastie or the ComSec to separate? Maybe we could use them to push the *Redoubt* out of the way of the SRF. Or evacuate at least.”

Allbright shook his head in the negative again. “I’m afraid not. He’s rigged all docking clamps to lock solid. That’s probably what we picked up before. The pastie and the ComSec can’t separate. Even worse, if someone docks to us, they won’t be able to separate again, either. At least not until we get all the problems fixed.”

Ferris ran his hand through his hair and sighed heavily. “Well, I wouldn’t call any of that good news, then.”

“Captain,” McMichael said cautiously as he strapped into his pilot’s seat. “I may have something. I’m not sure if it’s *good* news, but it’s definitely interesting. The *Wolf-In-The-Fold* is on approach with us, right now.”

“I wonder what MacDuff meant by ‘Mind the *Redoubt*’?” Volochkov asked no one in particular. “Did he mean for us to be wary of it because it’s dangerous? Did he want us to protect it? Damn his colloquialisms. Damn him and his Indie friends. What a mess this has turned out to be! First we get here to find that COSA has all but decimated the place. They take one look at the four of us and run like rabbits. The whole COSA fleet just left without so much as a *farewell*. Then the *Redoubt* arrives and tries to arrest us, helps us rescue survivors, then cuts off our conversation and hits full thrust for six seconds only to start coasting straight toward the SRF? Meanwhile MacDuff and his other little helpers run away leaving us to figure out what ‘Mind the *Redoubt*’ means. And now we have Commonwealth Navy ships coming in one at a time? It doesn’t add up.”

“Nothing has made much sense since we hooked up with MacDuff, Captain,” said Finn. “Especially this weird SRF place. It’s all happening too fast.”

“Maybe MacDuff has gone for help,” N’Bele answered. “Or maybe he’s just thinking ahead guessing that the *Redoubt* might be a valuable asset in the future. He seems to want more people to hear his message about COSA. Maybe he wants to bring Ferris into the fold.”

“Maybe this is another of MacDuff’s tests,” Finn added.

“A test for what?” Rydstrom answered acidly. “Loyalty? This is the simplest, most straightforward case of getting screwed over I’ve ever seen. What part of this isn’t obvious? We’re just a bone that’s been tossed to the dogs, and our esteemed Captain Volochkov, here is either too ambitious or too in love with MacDuff to see it! Why are we even still here? Let’s get...”

“Mr. Rydstrom,” Volochkov replied with a dangerous calm. “Please step away from your station and move to the rear of the bridge.”

“Look, Captain,” Rydstrom back-pedalled as he unbuckled his harness. “I just think we should be getting out of here, too. I...”

“Do it *now*. *Move*.” Volochkov yelled.

Rydstrom walked past the Captain to the aft bulkhead and turned when he reached the hatch to face forward again. Volochkov had his service sidearm drawn and aimed carefully in Rydstrom’s direction. He fired. The bullet struck the bulkhead next to the hatch with a metallic *spang*, missing Rydstrom’s head by a centimetre or two. Rydstrom held his hands out in front of his with his eyes squeezed shut, as if he could ward off the next slug with that gesture. He held that pose for a few heartbeats before he opened his eyes one at a time, and looked up at his Captain. Volochkov let the weapon drop to his side and simply said, “You’re fired; get off my ship.”

“...but Captain, I...where do you expect me to go?”

The weapon was aimed again directly at his chest this time. “The next round won’t miss Rydstrom, and that’s a promise. You’ve been a problem for too long, and I don’t have time for your crap. I don’t care where you go. But you can start by getting off my bridge immediately, and off the ship at the soonest opportunity. Maybe the *Redoubt* will take you. But one more word out of you, and I’ll put you out an airlock. Now go.”

Volochkov wasted no time waiting to watch Rydstrom stumble out the rear access hatch. He wheeled around to face Finn and N’Bele, gun in hand. “Anyone else want to start making decisions here?” Neither remaining officer spoke. “From now on, I’ll be

handling NAV functions, too. We're docking with the *Redoubt*. We'll use our thrusters to push them away from their collision course. Finn, keep trying to raise them. Kobie, stand by to offer technical assistance."

They both scrambled to comply with his orders rather quickly.

Chen watched displays on the bridge intently as the situation unfolded. They followed the location signal unknowingly transmitted by the *Redoubt* to the SRF, holding position near the smaller of the *Quarrelling Lovers*, only a few hundred Kilometres away from what was left of the facility. She could already see that the *Redoubt* was in trouble, and was puzzled to see the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* moving to assist. The *Niagara* was there too; picking its way through the debris creeping closer to the SRF. The situation was unfolding like a scene from a stage play, to her thinking. The most recent players were just arriving, stage left, as she watched. The *Purdue* and her support vessels had cut LDS drive, and were moving toward the SRF at thruster speeds.

The *Malta's* Captain watched the displays from his vantage in the command deck as well. "Have we been detected by any of those incoming ships yet?" he asked his scans officer.

"Negative Captain. That thing there is putting out a lot of interference, but we've found a nice shadow here next to this big rock," he replied.

Colonel Chen had been quiet since they began tracking the *Redoubt's* travels, following them from a safe distance along every leg of its journey to this place. She broke her silence now. "Very soon it will be time to make our presence known. I suggest we get ready to do battle. Captain Mead, bring us in closer to the remains of that big structure," she said from her seat on the bridge of the *Malta*. "The moment you see any evidence of Wexler's ships taking hostile actions toward those ships, or what's left of the station, hail them for me. If they start shooting at the *Redoubt* or the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, you have my permission to dissuade them with lethal force."

"Yes, Ma'am," replied Captain Mead.

"Look at this mess," fumed Wexler from the raised walkway near the aft bulkhead on the *Purdue's* bridge. His face reddened as he slammed his fist on the handrail to emphasize his vexation. "I don't know who screwed up worse: COSA, or the Indies!"

"I'm not sure I understand, Vice Admiral," ventured Captain Malvo, somewhat tentatively. "The SRF has been destroyed as planned, has it not?"

"No, not *as planned!* Not in the least," replied Vice Admiral Wexler. "They weren't supposed to wipe it out like this, they were just supposed to hit it and set back their research a few more years. I had plans for that thing after I took over...after all this. Bloody COSA was supposed to destroy only the SRF's defences and their research capabilities in a rapid strike, but to leave a good number of survivors to witness the Indies when they arrived. They were supposed to send a distress call much more widely *after*

their part was done. Instead, the distress signal was sent too early, and on a different band. Then, for some reason, they proceeded to wipe the place out to a man. At least they left the main SRF structure containment section more or less intact. To make matters worse, it looks like the damned incompetent Indies missed their cue entirely.”

“Not entirely, sir,” came the report of the scans officer from his workstation below the walkway. “We’re getting IFFs on some vessels by the SRF. One of them is Indie and the other is Commonwealth Navy.”

“Are they fighting each other?”

“Negative, sir”, replied the scans officer. “From the looks of it, they’re docking with one another.”

“We’re getting ship IDs, now, sir,” he replied. “The vessels are confirmed to be the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, and the *Redoubt*. The *Redoubt* is drifting and the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* appears to be about to dock with her.”

Wexler was still for a moment as possibilities raced through his mind. A smile crept across his face. “This could work. This could be exactly what we need. Are we recording all this? Record everything. Make sure you get every detail,” he ordered excitedly. “This is perfect: Our rogue spy and our Commonwealth Navy traitor, caught working together at the scene of a cruel attack. I couldn’t have...”

“Sir, the *Niagara* is closing in on those ships, too. She’s going to be seen in the recordings.”

“Tell her to hold position and wait for our arrival,” ordered the Vice Admiral. “Then we’ll all move in to attack together. The old saying holds true: *If you want something done right, do it yourself.*”

Iwamasa linked the leftmost display screen at his ENG workstation to the gunner’s board hoping to be able to monitor the tactical situation as it unfolded. He found it more frustrating than helpful, since he couldn’t do much about what he was seeing, and he still wasn’t certain if Lejeune was going to help the *Redoubt*, or attack them. At least he was gaining credibility as Lejeune witnessed the activities of the *Purdue*’s strike fleet during the last several hours.

The *Niagara* had been given a series of orders that made it clear to Lejeune that his assignment as the forward guard of the *Purdue* strike group was little more than sacrificial fodder. This last leg of the journey had been a long LDS run to a waypoint beyond the furthest edge of Momar. It seemed like they were being sent on a long trip into deep space at near light speeds.

They arrived at Wexler’s assigned waypoint to find an immense bio-bomber-like structure stationed near a pair of large asteroids. There was debris and evidence of destruction everywhere.

“Send the *all-clear* signal to the Vice Admiral, and hold position here, North,” said Lejeune to the pilot before turning to his gunner. “Edwina, let’s see who has already arrived at this party.”

“Captain,” Iwamasa said, “there is too much interference coming from that structure to take accurate readings of the area from this distance, but there are at least two

ships over in the larger debris field surrounding that big... whatever that thing is. There is a tremendous energy output from the power appears to be fluctuating dangerously. It appears as though it is barely stable. From the looks of the damage, the power generators in the mast structure are only just holding together whatever they've got cooking in there."

"Very well, take us further into the debris field. Tell me when you know the identity of those vessels."

The bridge crew of the *Niagara* silently watched the scene of destruction and the myriad pieces of floating debris drift by them as they moved closer to the SRF. North broke the silence with a cry of astonishment. "Captain, it's them! It's the *Redoubt* and the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. The *Redoubt* is drifting fast on a collision course right for that structure, and it looks like the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* is moving in to intercept for docking.

"We're also being ordered to hold position here and wait for the rest to join us. They want a coordinated attack to destroy those vessels in one pass."

"Captain Lejeunne," said Iwamasa. "This is one of those moments. We can either get over there, help the *Redoubt* and stand with them, or we can stay here on the wrong side of that line and wait for the *Purdue* to lead us down the path to ruin."

Lejeunne said nothing. He looked ahead to the view of destruction outside and waited. He was about to speak when a new order was received from the *Purdue*, directly from the Vice Admiral.

"*Niagara*, this is Vice Admiral Wexler. We've got trouble. We just picked up another destroyer, and it may be the *Malta*. I am ordering you to destroy those two corvettes immediately. Move as quickly as you can and take out the *Redoubt* and the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. We'll soften them with a volley of missiles, and do what we can to provide you with cover, but we're still too far away to be of much use. We may have to eliminate another ... treasonous element first."

Bates reported from the gunner's station. "Captain, I've detected seeker missile launches from each of the *Purdue* strike group's vessels," she said calmly. "They're not wasting any time. They're still pretty far out even for missiles. But they're definitely sending some grief toward the *Redoubt* before they turn their attention to the *Malta*."

"Bates, warm up the PBCs and stand by to launch an LDSi missile at *Redoubt*," Lejeunne ordered. "Ensign North, take us into close range of the *Redoubt* as fast as possible."

"Captain," Iwamasa said. "Don't..."

Lejeunne held up a hand to cut him off, and spoke over Iwamasa and the roar of the main thrusters. "Stop telling me what to do, Kenji. I make the decisions for the *Niagara*. I've come to a decision, and I will stand to it. My decision is final: We help the *Redoubt*. I will not allow this ship to be on the wrong side of that line." He turned to Bates. "As soon as those missiles converge to within thirty Kilometres of the *Redoubt*, detonate the LDSi missile. That should eliminate most of them. Destroy any other incoming missiles with defensive PBC fire. We are standing with the *Redoubt* people, so be prepared to fight a battle against some very bad odds. We have only a skeleton crew and our loadout is only what they felt we would need for a short shakedown patrol. I doubt we will survive, so I want you to know that my brief service with you as Captain has been an honour and ..."

He was interrupted by another transmission coming in on an all-channels broadcast, audible from the speaker at his workstation. "This is Colonel Chen of the Commonwealth Naval Intelligence Service, Covert Operations branch, aboard the *Malta*. All vessels stand down. I repeat, you are ordered to stand down and hold position. Vice Admiral Wexler, you are invited to present yourself for an immediate meeting with me on the *Malta*." Her tone left no room for misinterpretation that this was simply an invitation.

"See?" Iwamasa said to the rest. "You made the right decision after all. I told you the *Redoubt* was on the right side of this. At least we won't be court-martialed if we survive this."

"If we survive this," Bates said. "Look at the *Purdue*, and her escort. They just launched another round of missiles at the *Redoubt*. It won't be long before they figure out we're not doing our part, then we'll be targeted too. Not only are they ignoring Chen's order, they're splitting up. The *Toulon*, the *Khyber* and the *Stonebridge* are heading this way, the rest are changing course to go meet the *Malta*; and not in a friendly way from the speed they're gathering."

"Very well," said Lejeune, his French accent growing stronger with stress. "We give them everything we have. Ready missiles. We start with the *Toulon*."

The docking mechanism of the *Redoubt*'s dorsal UDC accepted the ring of the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*'s dorsal UDC easily in the standard head-to-tail auto-docking configuration. It then locked them together with a finality that was hidden in the normal docking sounds. Without having made comm contact, the situation was clear enough to Volochkov that he didn't require permission from Ferris to act. He fired the attitude thrusters of the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*, to change the angle of attack, and pushed with his main ventral thrusters as hard as possible so the two mated ships would miss colliding with the containment structure of the SRF. The combined mass of the two corvettes was more than the attitude controls were designed to move with any speed, but the force of the thrusters on the spy vessel was making a small difference. The seconds ticked down to the moment of impact, but no impact was felt. The surface of the SRF rushed by in a blur of panels and hull plating mere metres from the forward tip of the *Redoubt*'s ComSec.

"They're clear for the time being," said Volochkov. "Let's undock and deal with whatever situation is brewing back there. I thought I heard the launch alarm."

Finn reported from the WEPs station. "Captain, the vessels of the *Purdue* group have all launched missiles at, well, at us, basically. It looks like they're targeting the *Redoubt* specifically, but we'll catch it too. They're all headed right this way. The *Niagara* is inbound, and much closer, but hasn't fired on us yet.

"Damn!" Volochkov cursed. "We can't undock. Kobie, get us free of the *Redoubt*. Quickly. They're dead weight. Neither of us can fight like this."

"I can't, sir. We're locked to them. I'm also getting a call from them on...on our *shipboard intercom*. They must've made a hard connection at the UDC. Captain Ferris seems pretty eager to talk to you."

“I’ve got it. In the meantime, Finn, target any incoming missiles, and be ready to send a volley at the closest of Wexler’s ships on approach. That would be the, let’s see...the *Niagara*. In fact, ready one of the slow pokes and REM it to me.” Volochkov keyed open the comm channel. “Ferris, you have unbelievably bad timing when it comes to chats. We have missiles coming in and some very hostile Commonwealth Navy ships after us both. First, though, get us undocked. We can’t fight if we’re stuck to you.”

“Wish I could oblige you,” Ferris replied from the comm arm, “but I can’t. We’ve been sabotaged...long story, but the bottom line is that we’re dead in the water for this fight, and we can’t move, shoot, deflect, or undock anything, including you. I know it’s a bitch of a way to say *thanks for saving us...again*.”

“Then we’re all dead,” Volochkov sighed. Comms were interrupted by the broadcast by Chen ordering everyone to stand down. They all listened to her message to the Vice Admiral Wexler. With the realization that they weren’t completely alone, Volochkov found renewed vigour to fight. “I’ll bring us around to get our shields and weapons protecting you as best we can, but...”

“Captain!” Finn yelled. “I think we have another friend. The *Niagara* just launched an LDSi missile at us but detonated it in a way that was timed to take out that first wave of missiles. They just bought us some time.”

Ferris’ voice spoke again from the comm arm. “He’s right. The *Niagara* is likely to be a friend. Our former Chief is with them. Is there any way we can talk to them through your comms?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Volochkov said, nodding to N’Bele. “I’ll hail them right now. When you hear the click, start talking.”

Volochkov hailed the *Niagara*, and nodded to N’Bele again when he received Lejeunne’s reply. “I have Captain Ferris on the line from the *Redoubt* who wants a word. They’re damaged and their comms are out, so this is being routed through our ship. Go ahead Ferris.”

Ferris spoke hastily from the speaker. “Captain Lejeunne. My compliments and thanks for the assist. We’re in a bad state here, but I’m glad you didn’t believe the lies about our so-called treachery. My new Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Allbright has an idea he’d like to run by you and Lieutenant Iwamasa. Time is short. We’ve got the *Toulon*, the *Khyber* and the *Stonebridge* all coming in for an attack and ...damn it looks like they’ve launched missiles again.” He paused to confer with someone then continued. “We need to eliminate those threats first, and I’m afraid you’re it. We’re stuck to the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* for the duration. Do your best to deal with those attackers first. We can talk about solutions later. Good luck, Captain.”

The comm connection to the *Niagara* was broken with a touch of a key by Volochkov, but the shipboard intercom remained open. Ferris had heard the *over and out* sound and assumed he was talking only to his bridge crew, when he was heard from the speaker on Volochkov’s comm arm to say, “Allbright! Get this damned ship fixed now. I don’t care what it takes. Mac, Rav, you’re his assistants until we can get separated from the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* and running. I don’t care if we have to suit up, go outside with torches and cut our own UDC off to get them free. They just saved our lives and I will not let that act be their undoing. Move, people. Now!”

Volochkov smiled as he closed the intercom connection and said, “Kobie, take a couple of reliable cell officers and get to the UDC. Take Rydstrom with you, and send him over to the *Redoubt*. Help their crew get our ships separated. Top priority. Move.”

Lejeunne watched his LDSi missile eliminate an entire wave of seeker missiles bound for the *Redoubt* with short-lived satisfaction. It would now be clear to Wexler’s vessels which side he had taken the *Niagara* to. They appeared to understand too quickly, as the *Niagara* was immediately targeted for attack by all three of the approaching corvettes. Lejeunne saw the inbound missiles and ordered his crew into action.

“Edwina, fire seekers at the *Toulon*, then concentrate on defensive PBCs for the moment. We’ve got too many missiles coming at us at once. Damn, they’re coming in fast.”

“Aye, Captain,” she said. “But I don’t like these three-on-one odds, sir.”

The sounds of LDA shields intercepting missile impacts, as well as countermeasure launches mixed with the sounds of more solid impacts of incoming weapons, both explosive and beam type.

“Too many shots getting through,” Iwamasa said.

Bates shook her head in dismay, “We hit the *Toulon* with everything, and they only took minimal damage. Firing again.”

“They’re coming in a coordinated pass now,” North reported. “I’ll try to keep us...”

The *Niagara* bucked and rocked to three successive explosions, punctuated by alarm klaxons and the ominous red illumination of emergency power. The three corvettes continued on their original course toward the *Redoubt* and the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* leaving the *Niagara* to tumble helplessly away in a shower of her own hull plating and heat sink debris.

“They got us, sir,” said Iwamasa solemnly. “The *Niagara*’s a dead ship.” He sat for a moment watching his board to make sure he hadn’t misinterpreted the information. As if to offer confirmation, the ship vibrated again to a muffled explosion in the drive sections aft of the ring. A shower of sparks burst from a panel above the bridge’s aft bulkhead. “Port accommodation module is junk, Captain, we’re down to a few seconds of emergency power. We have very little time before the reactor goes.” A second louder explosion provided urgent punctuation to his report.

“Clear the bridge,” Lejeunne said. “Get everyone to the remaining pastie and abandon ship.” He opened an intercom channel and gave the ship wide announcement to *abandon ship*. A moment passed and the bridge workstations were still occupied. “Didn’t you hear me? I said move!”

North stumbled past them on his way through the bridge access hatch, his footsteps audible down the corridor as he made his way toward safety. Edwina stood and placed a hand on Captain Lejeunne’s shoulder. He nodded toward the aft hatch and returned to typing a message into his final log. She squeezed his shoulder and made her exit almost as quickly as North. Iwamasa waited until she left, before saying, “I’ll be

making sure you get to that pastie, sir, so I respectfully request that you hurry the hell up.”

“I’m staying here,” said Lejeunne quietly. “You get going, now.”

“Uh, that’s a negative sir. Please unfasten that harness now and come with me.”

“No! Not again!” bellowed Lejeunne. “I destroyed the *Corregidor* with a piloting error and good people; a good Captain - *died* because of it. It should have been me. One day into my first command and I’ve managed to destroy another ship. This is my curse and my fate. I stay with this ship and die with her.”

“OK,” Iwamasa shifted his weight to the other hip. “Now you’re just being stupid. Forget the dying with honour and valour crap and come with me. You just took on three corvettes in a head on attack designed to help divert them from attacking helpless friends. I don’t know what could be more honourable than that. We paid the price, though, and this ship is going to blow any second. We need you alive and on that pastie, so let’s go....sir.”

“I don’t wish to sit and wait for pickup in a pastie again.” Lejeunne refused to budge.

“Edwina’ll kill me if I let you sit here and martyr yourself,” Iwamasa said.

“Please don’t make me render you unconscious.” He brandished a long panel-removing tool he had been using earlier to illustrate his point. “As you know, I’m not very good at following orders, but more than that, I am pretty damn scared of Edwina, so please...”

Iwamasa’s use of Lieutenant Bates name worked and Lejeunne’s resolve broke. “She *is* a fearsome woman, isn’t she?” he said as he unbuckled his harness. They hurried out of the bridge together and made it to the UDC core airlock when the ship was rocked by a third even more violent explosion. They wasted no time regaining their feet and launching themselves across the chasm at the pastie hatch. Bates and another member of the crew were about to seal the outer hatch when they saw Iwamasa and Lejeunne coming at them amid a cloud of smoke and sparks. The hatch was pushed open again and arms reached to pull them in. They had barely fallen to the decking in a tumble of bodies when the airlock hatches sealed home, docking clamp bolts exploded and the module’s engines roared to life. The pastie cleared the tumbling remains of the *Niagara* at full thrust. Within seconds, the main reactor of the doomed ship blew, rocking them all with the force of the blast wave of gas and debris that marked the passing of another Commonwealth Navy corvette.

“At least the *Niagara* slowed them down a little,” Volochkov said aloud, giving Ferris an update over the intercom. “They didn’t have much hope in a three-on-one direct charge like that.”

“I don’t like those kind of odds,” said Ferris’ sombre voice. “But I like the odds against the *Malta* even less. She’s designed more for intelligence work than direct combat against a fully armed destroyer and three or four corvettes. The *Purdue*’s on her already, giving her a beating. Looks like the *Malta*’s trying to get closer to the SRF as fast as possible.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” added Volochkov. “If you can’t fight hard, fight smart. The SRF is putting out enough interference to confuse missiles and disrupt REM links. The *Malta* might just be able to use that to their advantage. We can’t even tell very well what happened to the *Niagara* after that explosion because of all the interference.”

“I just hope they got clear of that explosion in a pastie,” said Ferris. “We’re all pretty fond of the Chief Engineer that was on the *Niagara*, but I’ve got a gunner here who’s beside herself with worry right now.”

“It looks like they slowed down the *Toulon* a lot. We’ve launched a REM missile at them, but our link is fading fast. I have to time the detonation carefully...I hope the survivors of the *Niagara* got some distance, ‘cause even after surviving all that, they might be taken out ... by...this.” He touched the control and the REM missile he had been piloting toward the incoming corvettes blossomed from a blinding point of brilliance into an expanding sphere of dissipating light.

“A little too soon, sir,” Finn reported. “It looks like you damaged the *Stonebridge*, pretty badly though...and you destroyed some of those incoming missiles.”

“Damn! The other two are going to be all over us in a few seconds, and there’s nothing we can do,” said Volochkov. “Ferris, any luck getting us separated?”

“Ah, negative, Captain Volochkov,” reported Ferris from the comm arm with disappointment in his voice. “We’ve had some lucky breaks and some good help from your team, but we’re still several minutes from getting separated. If only the damned *Dreadnaught* would come and save the day.”

“The *who*?” asked Volochkov.

“Oh,” said Ferris. “I was being facetious. I said the *Dreadnaught*. The famous *CNV 301 Dreadnaught*, the first production model of these corvettes. It was quite a famous ship a few years back before she was lost at the Toliman exchange. Then she was salvaged and put back into service with a new crew. She’s making a name for herself as the sweetheart of the Navy again...one of our deadliest warships in active service these days...I was just joking that this kind of last minute miraculous save-the-day kind of capture-all-the-glory moment would be perfect for them to sweep in make a picture-perfect rescue.”

“I see no such ship on the scopes,”

“Nor do I,” said Ferris. “*Nor do I.*”

“The only thing I see is trouble bearing down on us, and the *Malta* over there getting the tar kicked out of her by the *Purdue*. Looks like the *Malta*’s drives are gone. She’s just sitting there like some wounded animal waiting for the circling predators to finish her off.”

“Kind of like us, but...”

“Captain, the incoming ships have veered off from their attack,” reported Finn. “The *Purdue* and her escort are leaving the *Malta* alone as well and moving off. It looks like they’re all heading toward the same...what is that? That signal looks like several ships coming in together out of LDS.”

“That’s exactly what that is,” said Volochkov. “I’ll bet you that’s the *Crack-In-The-World* group coming in right now. I knew MacDuff wasn’t going to leave us hanging. You hear that, Ferris? You got your miracle rescue after all, and by a bunch of Indies, not your Commonwealth warrior hero!”

“I’ll take anything at this point,” Ferris replied. “And it’s just as well it’s the *Crack-In-The-World* group. The *Dreadnaught* is just one ship.”

Vice Admiral Wexler watched the *Malta* lying helpless off their port bow a few dozen Kilometres away, waiting to deliver the coup-de-grace. He was savouring this moment, imagining Colonel Chen’s personal distress and suffering at this very instant, wishing he could personally witness it before giving the order to finish the destroyer off. Just as he was about to give the order, a bridge officer in the bridge control pit in front of him yelled out a report of new sensor contacts.

“Incoming vessels, sir,” reported the sensor officer. “Several of them from the looks of it, still in LDS and on approach. Sensors are resolving them on the registry now...looks like a destroyer, several corvettes, PatComs, and a few armed tugs. Indies. Sir. It’s the...”

“The *Crack-In-The-World!*” said Wexler with growing satisfaction. “Well, this is shaping up to be a better day than it started out to be. Keep those recorders recording ladies and gentlemen. Recall all our ships and tell them to join us as quickly as possible. We’re going to attack the *Crack-In-The-World* immediately with everything we’ve got.”

Captain Malvo nodded to his officers to confirm the order, but strode closer to the Vice Admiral with a concerned expression on his face. “Vice Admiral, shouldn’t we finish off the *Malta*, and the *Redoubt* first before turning our attention to the Indies?”

“Forget them. Once we take these Indies out, and get it all recorded, we can knock out the power generators on the SRF and run like hell the other way. As soon as that containment field goes down this whole area will cease to exist. As long as we set a timer on whatever explosive we use on the SRF, we should be able to get clear with ease. That should take care of our cleanup in a single, very large explosion. We’ll have footage galore of all these very *nasty* enemies, who have been so cooperative about showing up today for our cameras. Once clear, we can tell whatever story we damned well choose to tell.

“So leave those damaged ships alone for the time being and focus all our offensive weaponry of the *Crack-In-The-World*. Everything we’ve got, you hear me? I want that ship dead!”

“Aye, sir,” said Captain Malvo as he saluted the Vice Admiral and spun around to face his officers. “Order to all ships: fire on the *Crack-In-The-World* with everything we’ve got. Gunner set me up a couple of REM missiles. Let’s see if we can’t knock that stolen destroyer down a peg or two, shall we?”

The *Purdue* and its escorts ran headlong into the oncoming *Crack-In-The-World* group in a blaze of explosions and dying ships. The two strike groups clashed in a combination of slow, close quarter exchanges, and high-speed chases that looped around the area. Missile trails criss-crossed the dark region and ended in brilliant flashes. Particle Beam and Gattling Cannon fire added to the fury. Ships rushed past one another, spun, wheeled and circled in a series of coordinated clashes and individual duels. The *Crack-In-The-World* received a severely damaging REM missile blow early in the exchange from which it never recovered. The constant barrage of missiles and the hail of PBC fire

stripped it of offensive capabilities within the first minute of the assault. Even though the corvettes from Vice Admiral Wexler's strike group suffered heavy damage from the Indie destroyer's escort, the strategy worked. The *Crack-In-The-World* died a spectacularly colourful death. In the deep darkness of the SRF's region of space, the brilliance of the explosions that tore the *Crack-In-The-World* apart lit the scene of battle like flashbulbs at a press conference. She broke in two along a dorsal seam, ending her service in a final violent burst. Her remains continued to burn and flare for several minutes after the reality of her death was clear.

The price of that kill was higher than Vice Admiral Wexler had anticipated, though. While he had thrown his resources into the destruction of the *Crack-In-The-World*, he had left too little for his own defence. Indie ships with names like *Ghost-In-The-Machine*, *Stick-In-The-Mud*, and *Bird-In-The-Hand* all directed a withering barrage of fire on the *Purdue*. The *Strathmere* had been dedicated to defending the *Purdue*, but lost her ring after a swarming attack by Indie ships, and went up in a violent explosion a few seconds after that. Despite heavy losses on both sides, with only a handful of combatants left on the field, it still appeared that the *Purdue* would be able to claim victory and leave the battle limping under its own power. In a last-ditch effort to claim the day, an Indie PatCom called *Pie-In-The-Sky* drove full burn at the *Purdue*. The Indie ship detached her ComSec at the last moment leaving the main ship body to slam into the *Purdue*'s aft section near the root of the port weapons pylon wing. The impact was only partially warded off by the LDA emitter on that quarter, inflicting considerable damage. Several decks were opened to vacuum, and explosions ripped through her hull. Despite the damage to the *Purdue*, she still had the appearance that she was operating under her own power.

The Indies, already disheartened by the loss of their destroyer, now felt that their last gambit to kill the *Purdue* had failed. The surviving ships were scattered, damaged, and very few in number. The three or four remaining Indie corvettes withdrew into LDS toward some predetermined gathering waypoint. Three Indie tugs remained behind after the survivors of the former *Crack-In-The-World* group had escaped. The *Braveheart*, the *Bannockburn* and the *Edward Teach* moved away from the *Purdue* in the direction of the *Redoubt* and the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. The two ships were still locked together in their helpless embrace.

Explosions rocked the *Purdue*, klaxons wailed on the bridge, and the red lights of emergency power told a tale of critical damage to Vice Admiral Wexler as he pulled himself back up from the deck. He surveyed the bridge, which was only barely recognizable as such after all the damage. Several bodies lay strewn in on the decking below him. A few more were slumped over their control workstations, held in place by seat harnesses. An acrid smoked fouled air of the bridge. Captain Malvo's lifeless eyes stared up at the ceiling, as if to identify the place where the structural beam that had killed him had been before it struck him down. Alone, at the very front of the bridge, the ship's pilot sat harnessed securely to his workstation, trying to make sense of screens that jumped between static, and distorted information from the damaged sensors. He

continued to do his best to manoeuvre the heavily damaged destroyer away from the battle.

Wexler pulled himself along the rail to stand beside the NAV officer at the piloting station. They looked at each other for a heartbeat, in an effort to identify the individual under the caked blood, dust, and dirt. They exchanged a nod acknowledging that they were the last alive on the bridge for the time being.

“This ship is too damaged to fight anymore, and most of the ship behind that door is either on fire or in hard vacuum. I don’t think there will be any repairs until help comes. We have only a few more seconds of emergency power left before we lose all thrust, including attitude and directional thrust, sir,” said the pilot. “Course?”

Wexler pointed out the main forward view port on the bridge. “There! Set a collision course for the *Malta*. We’re going to ram her. She’s immobile and as bad off as we are. I’m going to gamble that we’re in better shape than she is. Take the *Purdue* right through her!”

“Uh. Aye, sir,” said the pilot. “Course corrected.” The main thrusters came to life for a brief push. “We’re gaining as much velocity as we can before we lose the last of our...” The engines cut out and the *Purdue* coasted silently to her meeting with the *Malta*. “Don’t worry, sir. We still have more than enough speed to hit the *Malta* plenty hard,” said the pilot. “Umm...were you planning on staying here for the impact? ‘Cause I’d really rather not. Sir.”

“Of course not,” Wexler assured him. “Don’t you worry, I’ve always got a backup plan. Get me a copy of all our sensor logs from the past hour. I want to keep a copy on my person at all times. Check your contacts registry and see if you can find an accommodation module listed as a marine assault module. It often simply goes under ‘special’ but it should be out there, I’m pretty sure I saw them launch. Find them and hail them. They’re going to be our ride home.”

“Aye sir!” said the pilot enthusiastically.

Lieutenant Commander Skarsgaard had worked continuously to repair the damaged marine pastie throughout the entire fleet battle raging around them. The work took much longer without any assistance, but the repairs progressed nonetheless. He stepped over the bodies of Connover and Minnes several times without a thought as he travelled from the flight control deck to other parts of the module with tools and spares in his hands. Dupuis, apparently unconscious on the floor of the control deck was another object to be ignored in his single-minded work as much as the corpses were.

Dupuis had regained consciousness to some extent, though, and was struggling to re-orient himself. Despite the hammering pain in his head he managed to open one eye and pieced together where he was without being seen by Skarsgaard. He worked a hand free of the loosened tape holding his arms at his sides, and started on the other. He noticed a large tool resembling a wrench on the deck not far from where Skarsgaard sat, busily working switches and the main control keypad. He resumed feigning unconsciousness once his second hand was free, and tried to work out a plan.

The comms came to life, and Dupuis listened to what he could of the conversation from where he laid. “Are you trying to tell me that you need me to dock to your precious destroyer and save you before you smash into Chen’s precious destroyer?” Skarsgaard said. Something else was said that was too garbled for Dupuis to understand, to which Skarsgaard replied, “I don’t care how little time you have, or how important those recordings are. There’s still the matter of you trying to kill me along with the *Redoubt* for the past couple of days. We had a plan, and that plan involved killing the spy ship *first*, then eliminating the *Redoubt* in a tragic accident before they got home, of course after I got safely off the ship. I had a beautiful little plan all set up involving locked docking clamps, and a ship’s main reactor timed to go critical, and me watching them both go up together as I sped away. Instead, I had to improvise, and improvisation can get messy. I want to know why you changed plans so fast, and I want to know how you propose to compensate me for saving you now.” More muffled speech was heard from the comm unit, and Dupuis worked out that Skarsgaard was speaking with Vice Admiral Wexler. Skarsgaard answered again. “Sure, we can probably pin it on him. He’s lying right here on the floor, but I still want to know one thing: Why did you want to get rid of all of us now? Sure, you were cleaning house so no one could threaten you once you got to power, but I don’t see why you needed to do it now?” Dupuis didn’t hear the answer, but he heard Skarsgaard say, “I see. So this was one of the few chances you’d get to catch King at a moment of weakness. Well, Bravo, Vice Admiral...or should I say *soon-to-be-President* Wexler! Your decision to sacrifice the SRF was a brilliant one, and COSA and the Indies both ate it up. As they say: ‘*You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs*’. A few thousand scientist’s lives are a fair trade for the power you’ll have. Heck, you’ll be giving Admiral Brett and Admiral Hensen orders by tomorrow night if you play this right.”

Dupuis hadn’t heard everything, but he had heard enough to understand that Wexler had been the one responsible for the attacks all along. Wexler had been responsible for Corinna’s death. Wexler had been behind Skarsgaard’s treachery. *To think I considered you a friend*, he thought as he opened his eyes, grasped the tool in front of him and stood up silently behind Skarsgaard. The translucent Lieutenant Commander was so focused on activating the drive and aiming the marine assault module at the *Purdue* that he didn’t notice Dupuis positioned behind him.

“We still have time for retrieval, Vice Admiral,” said Skarsgaard. “But I’d recommend you make sure you’re the only survivor. If you’ve got any other survivors helping you out, you’d better arrange some kind of accident. We don’t want any unnecessary loose ends. I’m on my way. I hope you can...Yves. No!” Skarsgaard glanced up to look out the forward view port in time to see the faint reflection of Lieutenant Yves Dupuis behind him, arm raised, poised to strike him with a heavy-looking metal tool. He had time to attempt to duck, but not enough time to avoid the blow. Dupuis brought the tool down as hard as he could on Skarsgaard’s head. Skarsgaard’s head flopped sideways with the impact, but quickly shot back as he arched his entire trunk stiffly, twitching twice in a full body spasm that horrified Dupuis even more than the feel of the tool crashing into the bone of his skull. Yves brought the tool down again and again, as much to end the macabre thrashing, as to kill his enemy. When his vision cleared, Skarsgaard was lying on the floor at his feet in a pool of blood. Dupuis looked up and saw the reflection of himself in the glass of the view port, still holding the tool in his blood-

coated hands. His face had been liberally spattered with blood as well. He barely recognized himself as he stared at the gory visage in that reflection, thinking of Skarsgaard's face after assassinating those marines only a short while ago, and how horrified he'd been when he saw all that blood on him. Dupuis dropped the tool and sank down into the control seat, grasping the control yoke. He pushed the throttle control to its full position and changed the marine pastie's angle slightly to head directly at the *Purdue*'s bridge.

All Dupuis could think of as he watched the *Purdue* grow larger and larger in the forward view port, was Wexler wondering what had gone wrong as he died, in the same way that Corinna had probably died with a similar question on her mind.

His timing had been pretty good for a man with so little pilot training. The marine pastie struck the *Purdue* aft of the bridge on the dorsal surface near one of the weapon and LDA emitter mounts. The force of the impact drove fiery debris from the pastie through several layers of armour and decking into the *Purdue*'s interior. A few large pieces emerged out the destroyer's ventral surface. The resulting explosions almost broke the destroyer in two. But the crippled destroyer held together despite the gaping holes separating the main body from the forward section. However, the effect was achieved. The *Purdue* was finally, a dead ship.

One survivor on the bridge of the *Purdue* stood up again, after being thrown against the ceiling from the violence of the impact. He regained his feet, gun still in hand and looked out the forward view port. The body of the pilot, still bleeding from the fresh bullet wound in his chest, remained strapped to his NAV workstation seat looking out with sightless eyes at the same unfolding scene before them. The sidearm clattered to the decking as Vice Admiral Wexler let it drop from his limp hand and simply repeated the same breathless phrase several times. "No. No. This was *not* part of the plan."

"Good news, Captain," Allbright said self-righteously. "I think we can separate the two vessels sooner than I thought. The lock is off the UDC clamps, but we can't bring them to the 'open' position under their own power yet."

"How is that good news?" Ferris asked, too tired to think. "We're still stuck together aren't we?"

"Yes, but if we can get the thrusters back online, which isn't going to be long now, we can get both ships to fire thrusters in opposite directions, and pull apart. The ships should separate under these conditions without literally ripping themselves apart. The UDC clamps should simply give under the pressure, and open all by themselves."

Ferris' haggard expression turned into a bright smile. "Get on those thrusters, Allbright. I'll tell Volochkov." He keyed open the intercom he had been using to communicate with the spy ship's Captain. "Captain Volochkov. We'll be able to separate in a few minutes as long as we can apply balanced counter-force with our respective ventral thrusters."

"Good news, indeed, Captain," replied Volochkov. "I was just arranging an evacuation with the aid of these Indie tugs nearby. They were going to dock with our ventral UDC and take everyone from both ships through that hatch and away in three

groups. The trouble with that plan was time it was going to take to get everyone off. I hope you're right about the separation. After all this, I'm afraid we're in more of a hurry than ever. Look at the *Purdue*."

Ferris keyed the display to focus on the crippled Navy destroyer. The vector trails calculated by the computer portrayed the situation clearly. The *Purdue*, now little more than a drifting, burning hulk, had been on a direct collision course with the *Malta* up until a few moments ago. The marine assault module that had been attached to the *Redoubt*, had rammed the *Purdue* with sufficient force to deflect it away from its collision course, saving the crippled *Malta*. On first glance, this seemed to Ferris to be very good news. He called up a projected course of the *Purdue* on its new trajectory, and sank back in his seat. The image was unmistakable. It felt like someone had hit him in the stomach.

"I see what you mean," he responded to Volochkov's concern. "Our NAV computer says that the *Purdue* will hit the power generators on the SRF in three minutes and forty seconds. Not much time, I'm afraid." Ferris sent Allbright a hopeful look. Allbright shook his head to say *no*, indicating that they weren't yet ready to try the separation.

"We're out of time, Captain Ferris," said Volochkov. "It was a good try, though. Frankly, I'm amazed we've lasted *this* long. We'll need at least a couple of those minutes in full LDS just to get far enough away from this place when that containment field goes down. If we're going to try this separation, we'd better do it soon."

"Agreed," said Ferris as he heard something to his right that caught his attention. Allbright was snapping his fingers to call Ferris' attention from his console. Ferris looked up to see Allbright holding his thumb upward. "Captain Volochkov, we have a green light to try separating. We're bringing thrusters online now. Have your NAV console link directly to ours and we'll try to pull apart as evenly as possible." Ferris nodded to McMichael, who was strapping himself in. "Let's do this right the first time, Mac."

McMichael nodded as he keyed the attitude thrusters to push against the thrusters on the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*. He waited for the indicators to show a complete seal had been established at the airlocks between the ships and hit the *undock* command at the same time he pulled the *Redoubt* gently up in what was, for him, a straight vertical climb. The two ships clung together for a few heartbeats, as if they were reluctant to end their embrace. Suddenly they broke free of one another and sprang apart.

"You've got comms, shields and helm again, but we'll need another few minutes to get LDS operational," Allbright reported. "Weapons will take longer."

"Forget weapons," said Ferris. "You've got one minute to get us into LDS."

"That's got it, Captain Ferris," said Volochkov from the comm arm. "Thanks for the help. It's been a pleasure working with you again. Hopefully we'll meet again under less urgent circumstances. Goodbye." With that, the *Wolf-In-The-Fold* turned to formate with the three Indie tugs. Together they accelerated away, ramping up for LDS, presumably in the direction of the Indie *rendez vous* in some other part of the Momar system.

"Thank you for saving our hides again," said Ferris to the receding ship. "I owe you one." He turned his attention to the situation at hand. "Get us over to the *Malta*, best speed."

"On our way," reported McMichael.

“Captain,” Ravindran reported excitedly from the WEPs station. “I’m getting a distress signal. It’s from the *Niagara*’s pastie. Looks like some of them got clear, but the pastie was damaged in the explosion that destroyed the *Niagara*.”

“Belay that last order, pilot,” Ferris said. “Get us to that pastie as fast as possible. We have an empty slot, and if we can get them into it while we’re waiting for our LDS drive to work, we’re going to do it.”

“Aye Aye, sir,” said McMichael. “What’s a little rescue work on top of everything else?”

The *Redoubt* pulled aside the *Niagara*’s pastie and braked hard. The pastie had lost all motive power during their evacuation, and depended on the skills of McMichael to match her gentle tumble and ease the *Redoubt* underneath and bring it gently upward to settle the errant pastie into the empty accommodation module slot on the *Redoubt*’s starboard side. The docking procedure went well, if a little rough. No one complained about the jostling. All eyes were on the clock. The pastie was secured at the same time Allbright reported a new development to Ferris.

“We now have LDS drive up and running,” said Allbright.

“Speaking of running,” said McMichael. “Isn’t that exactly what we should be doing right now?”

“In a moment, Mac,” Ferris reported. “First get us over to the *Malta*, and try to get them on comms. Rav, seeing as we have no weapons, I want you to get down to the starboard pastie airlock and help the survivors of the *Niagara* in any way we can. We owe them a big debt of gratitude, too. Let me know if you find Kenji.” Ravindran had been practically straining against her harness to rush down there already, and did not need any urging to go. She was out the bridge’s aft hatch in a flash.

“*Malta*’s responding now, Captain,” said McMichael. “Still coming in a little fuzzy, but we’ve got a connection.”

With another nervous glance at the numbers counting down on the timer, Ferris keyed the comm arm. “Come in *Malta*. This is Captain Ferris of the *Redoubt*,” he said. “What is your situation?”

“This is Captain Mead on the *Malta*. Colonel Chen is here, too. She’s sending over a comm packet to you now. Our weapons are destroyed. Sensors, Navigational and Shield systems are gone. Comms are just barely working. We still have drives, but we’re completely blind and unable to navigate. We...”

“In just over a minute, this entire area is going to be a lot like the inside of a star,” said Ferris. “Direction, at this point, is unimportant. Just hit your LDS drive, and get clear of this area. You can worry about repairs and navigation later.”

You don’t understand. We can’t repair it. It’s gone...completely gone. We’d be just as lost wherever we ended up. We’d just keep going, blind, in a straight line...”

“Can your navigational computer still link to another ship? Can you formate on us?”

“Perhaps we could formate on you, if we re-routed our targeting computer...”

“Just do it now,” Ferris interrupted him for a second time. “And get ready to move. We’re leaving in ten seconds.” He looked up at McMichael’s face in the overhead mirror. “You hear that Mac? We wait ten seconds exactly. Then we leave with as much haste as possible. Ultimately, we’re heading in the direction of Momar L4, but I want you to take us away on a course that has the larger of those two big asteroids between us and

the SRF.” He looked at the chronometer and back at the mirror. “Start moving us now, Mac. Let’s hope they got a formate link to us.”

Thrusters rumbled to life after sitting silent for too long. The *Redoubt* angled toward the desired course and accelerated away. The LDS drive ramped up to its full capacity at its normal rate, which seemed far too slowly for the anxious bridge crew. The edge of the larger of the *Quarrelling Lovers* obscured the flickers and flares of the SRF.

“The *Malta*’s with us!” cheered McMichael. They continued to feel the force of accelerating thrust as they raced away from the area.

The darkness of space so far from Momar’s primary star was profound. The interruption of that darkness came suddenly in a brilliance that flashed just beyond the horizon of the asteroid. The light grew into the blinding glare of a swift sunrise behind the *Quarrelling Lovers* asteroids. Ferris felt the stark silence of that moment, fearing the power of that event would reach out and snatch them back from their escape. An interminable heartbeat later, the *Redoubt*’s interplanetary drive hurled them away from the area at near light speed.

“What the hell was *that*?” asked McMichael. “Even at this speed, we can see that thing expanding.”

“Don’t know,” Ferris answered. “Don’t want to know. I just want to get the hell out of here, and home.” He called up the comm packet that had been sent for a quick scan, assuming it would be coded logs and intelligence data sent to them for safe return in the case of the *Malta*’s destruction. Some of the packet was indeed data he couldn’t decrypt, but in front of it all was a message directly from Chen to him. He started reading.

“Looks like we’re going to be able to get home just fine.” said Allbright. “The ship’s holding together just fine. These corvettes are really built well, ain’t they?”

“Glad you noticed, gramps,” said McMichael. “I’m also glad you know how to fix ‘em. Where’d you learn to do that?”

“Back on the *Acadian*,” replied Allbright with a little hostility. “*Sonny*.”

“Yeah, well. Thanks again,” McMichael said. “Speaking of well-built ships, the *Malta*’s still with us. Looks like they’ll get home, too. If only we weren’t still wanted fugitives, marked for death. It would seem a shame to get through all that only to be taken out by one of our own because of that little misunderstanding.”

“I don’t think that will happen,” said Ferris. “Not if this message is correct.” He looked up and glanced at each member of the bridge crew before continuing. “It seems that Wexler was playing a coy game; a kind of power play. Our mission was little more than a distraction. It was never meant to succeed. We were just pawns meant to provide him with something he wanted, a moment of perceived strength meant to coincide with a moment of perceived weakness on the part of President King. The accusations of treason and calls for our destruction were not broadcast fleet-wide, nor were they condoned or approved by Fleet Command. They were more or less local comms he was sending out to specifically targeted ships, but altered to look like fleet orders. He could do that because he had all the codes.

“Chen had been watching him for a while, gathering data about him, waiting to see what he’d do and where he’d go. Maybe she was trying to find out something about those stealth ships, too. For what its worth, she’s thrown the weight of her reputation behind us. That means we get to go home without fear of any formal action against us,

but it also means our reputation will always be kind of tainted by being so closely associated with the Intelligence Service. We may not be trusted or viewed as straight Navy by our peers, much after this, but at least we get to go home.”

“I’ll take that over certain death any day,” said McMichael. “Whatever that thing was back there that blew, I think it’s starting to fade. We’re safe for now. We should be at the L-point in about an hour.”

The comm arm swung out in front of Ferris again to reveal the widely smiling faces of Ravindran and Iwamasa. “I see our former Engineer made it back intact,” Ferris said with a smile. “Kenji, it just so happens we’re in need of a Chief Engineer on the *Redoubt*. I understand you’ll be looking for a new ship to serve with. Perhaps we can coordinate the filing of our requests back at Saltlake.”

“Gladly, Captain,” Iwamasa said from the speaker. “In the meantime, I’d like to meet that Lieutenant Allbright of yours. I hear he’s quite a find.”

“Indeed he is,” said Ferris, raising his eyebrow and smirking at Allbright’s embarrassed scowl. “Though you might have to wrestle him for the Chief’s seat.” To which Allbright sat upright with both hands raised, indicating an eager willingness to relinquish the position.

“No need for that, I’ll take a scut job down in the intercooler pumps if I have to. But I’m not leaving the *Redoubt* again,” Iwamasa joked. “Oh, and Captain Lejeunne requests a meeting with you at your convenience as well.”

“Very well,” replied Ferris. “I’d appreciate it if you sent my gunner back to her duties on the bridge. Tell Captain Lejeunne I’ll meet him in my suite as soon as he’s ready. This time it’s my turn to offer the profuse thanks. The *Niagara* saved our necks back there.” Ferris stood from his seat with a groan that reminded him of his own father. “Mac, I’ll be in my office if you need me. Please bring the *Redoubt* and the *Malta* safely back to Saltlake Naval base as quickly as possible. It’s been a long...” He waved his hand in dismissal as he slumped toward the aft hatch. “However long it’s been.”

Chapter 25

What's In A Name?

07-04-2268

Epsilon Indi

Aboard the CNV Malta

Ted Allbright paced the room with a nervousness he hadn't felt in the two weeks since the SRF had been destroyed. Something about seeing Colonel Chen was making him nervous; an effect very few people had on him. He paused again to look out the small view port into the deep space of Epsilon Indi. It was a clear courtesy on the part of Chen to stage this encounter in one of the few locations on the destroyer that actually offered a direct view of the darkness of space outside. He relished the view. Those were constellations he knew. The faint light from the distant Lysithea nebula was a familiar and comfortable glow to him. He was eager to get back to it.

The door hissed open and Colonel Chen stood there with her hands behind her back. A gentle smile warmed her face. They greeted each other stiffly. He had been the room's only occupant when she entered, but as a guest on her ship he wasn't sure if he should offer her a seat, or wait for her to offer him one. She solved his dilemma by simply sitting in the chair next to her with a graceful ease and comfort that put him at ease as quickly. He sat at the other chair by the small table.

"Mr. Allbright," she said. "Is there anything I can say to change your mind?"

"Uh...no. Not really," he stammered. "I'd really just rather take the deal you offered before." He grew a little more hostile as a thought occurred to him. "You aren't going to go back on the deal, are you?"

"Certainly not!" she replied with a hint of hurt in her voice. "I just hate to lose someone with your talents. You have a real knack for...survival, Mr. Allbright."

"Call me Ted."

"Very well. Ted," she said, testing the sound of it. "We already have everything ready, as you requested when you returned from the mission. You have a new model Margate Multipurpose utility ship, fully loaded with the best equipment we could get, complete with all the papers, registered to you, and with the name you specified." She gestured toward the space outside the window he had been viewing a few moments earlier. "I'm surprised you haven't seen her already, docked at the next arm, fueled and ready to go."

"No I didn't see her, but..." he moved to the window for a glimpse. "Oh yeah. I see it there, now." He nodded at the sight before turning to face Chen again. "Looks good. What about the other stuff we talked about?"

She enumerated the list on her fingers for his benefit. "First-class papers, license, five year contract with the employer you specified, better shielding, heater units, hydroponics lights, and air scrubbers for your home base, and the cash bonus we offered as well. By the way, you will want to check your little garden carefully when you get home. I arranged to have a small surprise installed there for you. I hope you like it."

Allbright blushed and looked very uncomfortable for a moment. “Uh...I didn’t get you anything.”

“No need, no need,” she assured him with a pleasant laugh and a raised hand. “But I would like to know something, if you permit a question.”

He shrugged. “Sure, I guess.”

“Why?” she said as she stood from her chair and walked around the small round table to look out the window. “Why did you turn down a chance at a commission and a seat with a ship in the Navy? It seems the Indies would have taken you, too. My sources tell me you were offered your old job back on the *Acadian*. You once described your handy-man job here in Epsilon Indi in very...colourful and unfavourable terms. I got the impression you hated it. Why would you choose to return to it?”

He shook his head a little at that, and sighed before answering. “I guess because this time, it *was* my choice. Those other postings, they sounded great but... they aren’t who I am. I’m not cut out for that stuff. Navy. Indie. It really doesn’t matter. After all that death and shooting and exploding and almost dying a dozen times, I realized that my little FTL maintenance job had its good points. Now I got my own rig, I’m actually looking forward to it. I’m out of debt, and I have a fresh start. I haven’t even craved a drink once in over two weeks. Two whole weeks! That’s some kind of record for me.”

Chen faced him and nodded with an understanding smile. “I see. Thank you for your candour, and for everything else. I sincerely hope you will stay in touch; perhaps favour me with a message from time to time. Who knows, maybe I’ll even pay you a social call someday at your little home base.”

“That’d be nice,” he said, surprising himself at how genuinely he meant it.

“One last question, Ted,” she ventured. “If you permit.”

“Shoot.”

“Why did you choose the name *Isolabella* for your new ship?”

Allbright smiled and winked. “Sorry,” he said, as he stood and held out his hand for her to shake. “Some things just need to stay private. See you around, Colonel.”

20-04-2268

Priesthole Base

Independent Navy Headquarters

“Come in, Captain Volochkov,” said MacDuff. “Come in. Please. Sit.” He gestured toward a chair and nodded to his assistant signalling for more coffee. “I suggest you try the coffee. It’s real. So is the milk.”

“Well,” said Volochkov as he sat. “I see that your status has afforded you a few of the finer luxuries.”

“Let’s just say that my position allows me a few small niceties,” MacDuff smiled. “I take advantage of them when I can.”

“I’m sure you didn’t call me in here for a cup of coffee,” said Volochkov. “And since things didn’t exactly go well at Momar, I’ve been waiting to hear whether I would be exposed and executed, exiled, or just left to run useless errands.”

“Oh, none of the above, I assure you.”

“Then why am I here?” Volochkov pressed.

“No doubt you’re aware that we’ve been taking some time sorting through the details of what happened last month in Momar.” MacDuff sat back as the coffee tray was delivered, waiting until the door was closed again. “The loss of the *Crack-In-The-World* has been a tremendous loss to us.”

“Yes, but the Navy also lost a destroyer and even more ships, not to mention that vast research facility.”

MacDuff waved his hand dismissively. “They’ll rebuild that thing in no time. They might even use the same location even though those planetoids aren’t there any more. And we can’t afford to be trading losses ship for ship with the Navy. That’s a losing game for us, to be sure.” MacDuff took a careful sip of his coffee and closed his eyes as if to savour the taste. “No, the real problem is that those events only served to polarize the Council even more than it was. The Independence movement is in a bad way and the time pressure is greater than ever. Those who embrace COSA feel it’s even more important that we throw our lot in with them now. Those of us who don’t like COSA so much, feel that the mission has become even more important than ever.”

“By *mission*,” said Volochkov. “I assume you’re referring to your personal mission; your desire to find a way out of this conflict and to expose COSA’s involvement?”

“Indeed. The Commonwealth has been decidedly silent about those events. The explosion of the SRF was dismissed as some random stellar event, the defeat of the *Crack-In-The-World* group hasn’t been mentioned even once, and the loss of the *Purdue* has also been written off as some random combat loss. No, the Commonwealth is keeping secrets, and these secrets only serve COSA’s interests. This means that the rot goes all the way up to the highest levels of power. However, I still believe that there are those in the Commonwealth who aren’t involved with COSA; those who would listen to us. The importance of making contact with a clean and legitimate member of the Commonwealth Navy is greater now than it ever was. Unfortunately, the best candidate we’ve been able to find thus far: the Captain of the *Redoubt*; this Captain Ferris, is also a liability. He’s lost any credibility he may have had. He will not be listened to in the halls of power. He’s been tainted by this false accusation of treason, and by his association with Chen. They truly fear and mistrust their own intelligence force. Such disdain still astonishes me. We’re back at square one as far as candidates go, unless...”

“Unless?”

“Unless you were able to procure another contact for us to use, a legitimate, clean and well-known Navy contact, perhaps? All we need is a name.”

“I’m afraid...no wait,” Volochkov thought. “Ferris did mention someone. He mentioned a ship called the *Dreadnaught*. Yes, the *CNV 301 Dreadnaught*. Apparently this ship is the deadliest ship in the Navy these days, a true rising star. He called them the ‘new sweetheart’ of the Commonwealth Navy.”

“The *Dreadnaught*, eh? Yes, this ship is known to us. She’s been giving us a bit of trouble these past few months. It certainly fills the ‘warrior’ requirement. We’re running out of time, but this lead sounds promising,” mused MacDuff as he took another sip. “What’s her Captain’s name?”

“I don’t know. I...didn’t get that,” Volochkov said. “My ‘spy’ skills must be slipping. I didn’t think it would be important so I never asked. I just got the sense that Ferris was a little envious of them.”

“An even better reason to consider them,” MacDuff seemed heartened. “No matter. I’m certain we’d be able to get the Captain’s name eventually, but as I said, we’re short on time. I’ll look into this *Dreadnaught* and consider your suggestion carefully. I thank you, Captain.” He started to push himself out of his chair. Volochkov remained immobile in his seat.

“What about me. What will happen to the *Wolf-In-The-Fold*?”

MacDuff settled back into his seat and gave Volochkov a careful look. “I need loyal ships now, more than ever. Even though the *Crack-In-The-World* and her support group were not among my inner circle, I had tremendous respect for Captain Guzman and her people. We lost too much potential there. I lost some of my more trusted Captains as well. I lost a friend. I can’t afford to lose any more at this moment. So our deal stands. I want you right where you are. You’ve proven yourself a worthy asset, and I assure you I’ll keep you on the inside of any further developments.”

“Then don’t just dismiss me like this. Tell me what you plan to do.”

“Very well, Captain,” said MacDuff as he poured fresh coffee into both cups. “You may even be invited to participate in some small way. You see I’ve prepared an invitation that will be etched into a piece of thermal shielding debris that we plan to use as a sort of calling card. All that was missing in this message was the name of the addressee. I suppose using ‘the Captain of the *Dreadnaught*’ will do, won’t it. That invitation will be launched at a Commonwealth station just hard enough to embed itself for later retrieval. It’ll be launched from, the *Acadian*, which is one of our more loyal commercial associates. We’ve arranged to make sure that this piece of debris is retrieved promptly and shown to the right people. Unfortunately, we have no control over events from there, but we will assume that the right eyes and the right minds will see it. From there, it is up to their intelligence people and the Captain of the *Dreadnaught* to follow through. Would you like to see the text of the message?”

“Yes,” said Volochkov. “It sounds like quite a gamble you’ll be taking.”

“Indeed it is,” said MacDuff. “In fact there is considerable risk associated with this venture, but we’re running out of time. We could use some more help, though. For example, the *Acadian* could use some protection to make sure it gets the message safely to and from the target system. Interested in a little escort mission?”

Volochkov nodded slowly, a half smile creeping up one side of his face. “Yes,” he said. “I believe I could be of use there.”

24-04-2268
Saltlake Naval Base
Earth orbit L-5
Aboard the CNV 534 Redoubt

Captain Ferris stepped over the lip of the hatchway onto the bridge and paused there for a moment to fully experience the pleasurable feeling of familiarity and comfort. He was home again. His bridge officers were huddled over something near the NAV station at the front of the bridge, conferring about some problem they appeared to be having with a piece of equipment. Ferris cleared his throat. Iwamasa was the first to look up and bellow "Captain on the deck!" a little too loudly. McMichael and Ravindran shot to attention as well, turning to face their Captain and dropping the item in question in their haste. McMichael started to bend to retrieve it, then stopped himself thinking better of it, and resumed his salute.

"As you were," said Ferris with a hint of suspicion.

"Welcome back, Captain," said McMichael, a little too eagerly.

Iwamasa and Ravindran had moved away from the pilot's station, as if distancing themselves from the scene of a crime, preferring to hover nearer their respective duty stations in silence. Ferris took it all in, but waited to see if they would offer an explanation. Since none seemed forthcoming, he proceeded with his speech.

"I trust you've all had an enjoyable leave. You certainly earned it. As you know the events that took place at the SRF in Momar have been classified. The Navy has decided to completely bury the whole thing. Officially, it never happened. Wexler had some powerful allies that are still in power, and they don't want any attention drawn to this. President King was also eager to have this whole thing buried. The SRF never officially existed, so in their wisdom, they've decided to cover up one lie with a few others. The *Purdue* and her ships were lost to a series of random Indie assaults. Lie. Vice Admiral Wexler died in an accident. Lie. And the destruction of the *Crack-In-The-World* doesn't get mentioned. Ever. We must each swear an oath of secrecy on this. All of it. The penalty for violating this particular oath is...quite severe. The price I have exacted for this secrecy isn't so bad, though. The *Redoubt* got a nice little refit, and a spot of paint. I got to handpick my crew, and I get to a certain amount of latitude when it comes to selecting plum missions."

"What kind of accident?" asked Mac.

"What?" Ferris shook his head.

"What kind of accident was Vice Admiral Wexler supposed to have died from?"

"This, you're going to like:" Ferris looked down at his feet trying to conceal his amusement. "He died while serving in space. His official cause of death was reported to be a *bad seal*."

McMichael, Ravindran and Iwamasa all looked at each other incredulously.

"They can't be serious," Iwamasa said. "That's got to be the oldest joke in the Commonwealth Navy. I mean: that's been around since we went into space."

"It isn't a joke; not this time," said Ferris soberly. "At least not to the public it isn't. Those of us in the Navy will know; every working spacer will know. But the general population has no idea what that means."

“I can hardly believe it, ‘*a bad seal*,’” McMichael shook his head in disbelief. “I’m starting to believe that the Commonwealth Navy actually *does* have a sense of humour. That’s just too rich. Makes swearing to keep all those secrets almost worthwhile.” His foot snaked out trying to push the bright, reflective object behind his other foot.

“Alright, what’s going on here,” he asked McMichael in a tone that made it clear it was too late to conceal anything further.

McMichael looked down at his feet, picked up the item and held it tightly. He shot a pleading look at Ravindran, then at Iwamasa before proceeding to explain. “Well, they really went over the ship after we got back,” he said, “repairing, cleaning, repainting, the whole bit. But...well...they took down my mirror and dice.” He looked up to the place over his station where they had been affixed to the support beam. Ferris followed his gaze, and indeed, the whole area was scrubbed clean, freshly painted, and conspicuously free of any adornment.

“I figured you probably wouldn’t agree to me putting a new one up,” he continued. “I know the last one caused you some grief, and I heard about the scolding you got because of Colonel Carr before we went on leave. But I found another personal touch that would be much less...conspicuous.” He held out the object that had fallen. It was a chromed metal stylized human skull about the size of a billiard ball. It bore a devilish grin, and the bone of the brow looked to be knitted in anger. The eyes contained bright red faux jewels; probably cut red glass. It looked like the kind of gaudy trinket one would see on the head of the cane of a carnival crier. McMichael held it up closer for Ferris to inspect. “Wait, this is the best part...” he pressed a region at the back of the tiny silvery object, and the eyes came to life in an eerie glow of red light. “The guy who sold it to me said the power cell in there could last for years. And hey, Captain, you never know when an extra power cell on the bridge might be a life-saver, right?!”

“You’ve thought of everything haven’t you, Mac,” said Ferris fondly. “Where exactly were you going to put this...thing.?”

McMichael scrambled to step up into his elevated piloting station and take his seat. He held the ghastly death’s head trinket in front of him with reverence before slowly lowering it onto the top of the post of the ship’s main attitude control joystick near the right arm of the powered seat. “Right here, where only I can see it,” he said. “We were just trying to figure out the best way to attach it when you came in.” He looked back and forth between Ravindran and Iwamasa who chose to remain silent. “Well we were. They both admitted that they liked it, and they had some very helpful suggestions for attaching it. Don’t let them tell you anything different...pair of kiss-asses.” Ravindran and Iwamasa took their seats at their respective stations and tried to look busy.

Ferris found it too difficult to hold his stern expression; he was having too much fun. He burst into a laugh that surprised all of them. The laugh spread to the others for a moment. As it died, Ferris said, “Damn, it’s *good* to see everyone again,” and he looked at Iwamasa, “and right where they belong. It was nice to have a month’s leave. Believe me, we all deserved it, but I have to say it feels good to be back here.” He turned to McMichael and addressed him again as he sat at the Command workstation, still dormant while they remained docked.

“Yes, Mac, you can put your little red-eyed skull on the controller as long as it doesn’t interfere with any functions or orders, and it poses no projectile risk. I also

suggest you attach it in such a way that it can be quickly removed and stowed for inspections, repairs, cleaning crews and the like.”

“Yes sir!” replied McMichael enthusiastically. “I just wish that cursed Colonel Carr hadn’t made such an issue out of the rear view mirror.”

“Oh that wasn’t all bad, Mac,” said Ferris. “I managed to turn that into an all-out investigation by a team of efficiency experts. We may see the rear view mirror again someday. In the meantime, Colonel Carr, who has incidentally made a full recovery and bears us no malice, was satisfied with the proceedings, and with your punishment.”

“My punishment?” McMichael looked confused.

“Remember, I promised to punish you for calling him a *‘bald-headed psycho’*, or something like that. And he wanted to be there to make sure you were actually punished in a manner satisfactory to him? Well he’s satisfied.”

“But... you never punished me,” said McMichael, a little confused.

“No, I didn’t,” Ferris said, “but I did promise him I’d keep a little secret; a little something I learned about him that he would rather wasn’t public knowledge.”

He looked at them all as they eagerly waited to hear the secret. He was enjoying their anticipation. “I’ll let you in on it, if you all promise not to let it off this bridge. Consider it a rider to your oath of secrecy. Since we’re in the secrecy business, I’ll give you this as a little gift for swallowing the truth and endorsing all those other lies. But if word of this gets out, I’ll have to punish Mac for real, and suffer the consequences of a tarnished honour,” he said both sarcastically making it clear he didn’t care one way or another.

“Would you like to know why he was given the nick name *‘The Barber’*? Anyone?” He looked back and forth at their confused faces. “Anyone?”

“Oh, this, I’ve got to hear,” said McMichael. Once again, the Captain was one step ahead of the rest of them, which was why McMichael had always liked serving with him.

“Hear’ is exactly right, Mac,” continued Ferris. “I checked the inventory of files we acquired for our last mission, including those unclassified files flagged for our Colonel’s personal use. I then verified this by asking around, and believe me, not many people know, or are willing to confirm the reasons for his nickname. Anyway, listen to this.” He slipped a data-chip into the reader on his console and touched a key. He crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned back in his chair with a distinctly smug look on his face. Music began to play over the bridge audio system. They listened to the sounds of men’s voices singing in strange, often complex harmonies *a cappella*. McMichael watched Ferris’ grin grow wider still, as they listened to the song.

“Excuse me, Captain,” Iwamasa finally asked, “but what is that?”

“*That* is an antiquated style of singing known as ‘Barbershop Quartet’ singing. It turns out that it is the sole off-duty passion of our esteemed Colonel Carr. That is, when he’s not training his soldiers, killing people, or bothering officers of the Commonwealth Navy.” He burst into laughter.

“That is the weirdest thing I’ve ever heard.” Iwamasa said over the laughter of McMichael and Ferris.

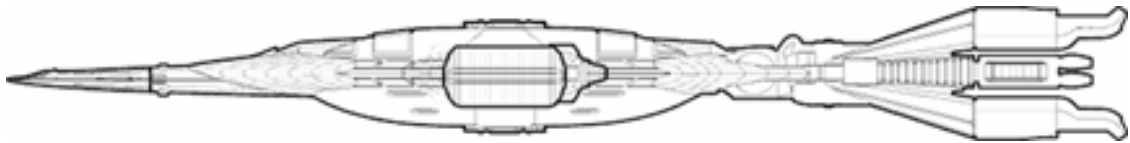
“It’s kind of catchy isn’t it?” Ravindran broke in. “I mean, I could see how it would grow on you.”

Ferris immediately cut off the audio, plunging the bridge into relative quiet again. The three men all turned to give Ravindran a silent, disbelieving look.

“What?!” she said, defiantly. After they turned back to their respective duties, she could be heard muttering to herself in a mock defensive tone, “Well, *I* liked it.”

The End.

Out in the Cold



A Short Story

Set in the

Independence War Game Universe

by

Duncan Day

A Note to the Reader:

Out in the Cold was my first writing project, and it shows. I'd always wanted to try to write fiction, so one weekend I decided on a whim to try my hand at it. I had a couple of ideas rattling around in my head, and I was (and remain) a huge fan of the Independence War computer games. It seemed logical for me to make my first foray into the craft with something that felt comfortable and familiar: The Independence War universe. I had a couple of things I wanted to work into a story. One was the feeling of tense claustrophobia one gets watching submarine movies during those moments when the crew are waiting in silence, watching the ceiling and hull around them while the sub sits on bottom, hoping to avoid detection. Avoiding detection in space would require something other than a demand for complete silence, it would require reducing emissions on all wavelengths, including infrared as much as possible. They could make all the noise they wanted, as long as they made noise in a very, very cold ship. The other concept I wanted to work in had to do with the Indie vessel paint schemes. The Independent Navy always had beautifully colourful graffiti-like paint jobs on their hulls to reflect their individuality. But how would a charismatic and powerful fleet commander paint all the ships of their strike fleet if they could impose a relatively consistent paint scheme on its members? Thus the brightly coloured Mondrian-esque ships of the *Crack-In-The-World* group were conceived.

The rest was just my efforts to bang out a story over the course of a weekend. It was more fun than I imagined it would be, and I was 'bitten by the writing bug', as they say. *The Meeting* is my third effort (*Uncertain Freight* being the second, set in the Edge of Chaos era of the Independence War universe). *The Meeting* was intended as a sequel to *Out in the Cold*, and as such it makes references to it so I've included it here. It is not necessary to have read *Out in the Cold* to understand *The Meeting*; it might just help you to know the crew of the *CNV 534 Redoubt* a little better.

I hope you enjoy it.

Out in the Cold

The gentle chime of an alarm from the navigation panel startled him from his light dozing. He almost spilled the cup of coffee still in his hand on the armrest of the captain's seat. There was still a little warmth in the cup, so he hadn't been asleep for long. It took very little time for things to get cold in the frigid temperatures they were keeping throughout the ship. In fact, all four of the bridge crew wore hats, gloves and scarves of some sort or another. What's-her-name Ravindran, their new WEPs officer was wearing a full-sized cold weather parka, with fur rimmed hood and all. He made a mental note to himself to learn to pronounce her first name properly. They'd been huddled at their stations warming hands on mugs, and watching readouts for almost a fortnight now, without much activity, and only a few rest breaks.

Watching and waiting.

The alarm was a welcome break in the inactivity, and seemed to have the same waking effect on the other members of the *CNV Redoubt's* bridge crew as well. Everyone leaned forward in their seats and started calling up information from their workstations. It was probably another false alarm: a solar flare, or some small civilian vessel passing through.

"Signatures emerging from the Arcadia Lagrange point, Captain," said McMichael. "Looks like two, no four...correction, five contacts. They're all coming to a halt just beyond the L-point. Doesn't look like we've been spotted. No IDs yet. I'll get them for you as soon as I can get some feeling back into my fingers."

"Quit whining McMichael," said Ferris. "We're pretty far away, but not *that* far away. We're keeping things shut down and cold for a reason. Start recording, rub your hands together and get me those IDs. Ravindran, stand by, and look sharp."

"Recording. Getting some IDs in Captain. Looks like Indie IFFs. Yes, our visitors are definitely Indies. Finally! We've got four Patcoms and a Corvette. Hey, the Corvette is the *Knife-in-the-Back*. The Patcom IDs are coming up now. Looks like the *Stick-in-the-Mud*, the *Whistle-in-the-Dark*, the *Fly-in-the-Ointment*, and the *Iron-in-the-Fire*. This could be the show we've been waiting for."

"The names sound right, but don't get too excited just yet," replied the Captain, struggling to contain his own excitement. "Let's keep cool heads and do our jobs. Ravindran, you're staying put. If we're spotted we'll need some cover before we're hot enough to make thrust again."

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged eagerly.

"Mr. McMichael, time to earn that extra pilot pay. We've only got a few of rocks out here that are big enough to mingle with, so make sure we're presenting the aspect that is most rock-like, and keep thruster use to an absolute minimum."

"Making like a rock, sir"

Mr. Iwamasa, get two or three of your engineering staff to accompany you to the optics suite. I want you to remove the outer cover plate. No motors, though. Use the hand cranks, and then deploy the optics dome. Get me visual confirmation of those signals."

"Sir," said Iwamasa from the ENG workstation. "Those IFFs match the Indie naming scheme used by the battle group supporting the *Crack-in-the-World*. I

recommend we proceed with a fast warm-up, then get the hell out of here as soon as we've recorded enough and the drives are hot."

The reply was quiet but icy, "Thank you for your recommendations, Engineer Iwamasa." It quickly rose to a bellow, "Save them for when I *ask* for them. It may have slipped your frost-numbered mind, but I sure as hell haven't forgotten how we got caught with our pants down three months ago. We know first-hand how good the Indies are at pulling IFF tricks. I sure as hell didn't like the last one they pulled on us, and neither did Command. Why do you think they sent us out here to freeze our butts off on this god-forsaken mission, watching a barely-used L-point in the middle of nowhere from a damned rock pile. For all we know, those signals could be coming from modified old satellites dumped off a garbage tug to throw us off the track of the *Crack-in-the-World*. I put you through drills that included using old optic techniques for a reason. Now get down to optics and get me visual confirmations. I want to *see* those Indie ships."

Iwamasa uttered a very formal, "Aye, Captain Ferris. Right away," before practically stumbling in haste out the aft hatch from the command section. The reminder of their last mission was sobering to all but Ravindran. They'd been able to capture one Indie Corvette, which was damaged beyond repair, but were completely humiliated when the entire depot and supplies they were guarding were stripped clean. The cold and the boredom had them all on the edge, and he probably was a little harsher on the kid than he'd meant to be, but he was not in the mood to have his orders questioned.

At least he felt a little warmer, now. He was certain the others did, too.

"Mr. McMichael, our Engineer made a good point. I want you to..."

"Captain, more signals arriving through the L-point! We've got five...six...damn! Sir, we've got at least a dozen new Indie arrivals with this second group. Showing Corvette IFFs now. We've got the *Pain-in-the-Neck*, the *Bird-in-the-Hand*, the *Drop-in-the-Bucket*, and the *Hole-in-the-Head*, as well as some more Patcoms. More Corvettes are still coming through, now. I'm also picking up a tug and a modified support tanker called the *Bun-in-the-Oven*. Hey Ravindran, there's one of the corvettes that ripped us off, thumbed their noses at us, then gave us the slip last time out: the *Ghost-in-the-Machine*. I'd love to give those gents some payback, right about now. We'll never live that one down until we do."

"All in good time, Mr. McMichael," cautioned Ferris. "For the moment, we're still hidden, but otherwise at a serious disadvantage. I'd like you to script the fastest possible restart procedure, and set it up. If we're picked up by any of those ships, we'll need thrust and LDS very quickly indeed. Plot us the most direct route possible to the Ranier L-point."

"On it, sir. Ranier LaGrange point, then home."

A barely detectable finger movement on the touchpad control opened a link to Iwamasa and his work crew. "Report on optics, Mr. Iwamasa. We've gotten some new arrivals."

"Optics dome deployed now, sir," came the engineering officer's reply on the comm arm. "We're having a hard time with one of the targeting axes. We can't zoom in on them if we can't get them in the viewfinder."

"All right, keep on it, and link directly to Mr. McMichael if you need us to re-orient the ship. If he's as good as he keeps boasting, then he should be able to point the scope at them using thrusters." He cut off the link then added to McMichael sitting on the

pilot's platform almost two meters in front of him, "Minimal use of thrusters, Mac. Minimal."

A few moments later, he saw the pilot nodding in response to unheard directions in front of him. The hiss of attitude thrusters seemed louder than usual, compared to the silence they'd been used to, as the star field outside the forward view port rolled a little to port, and then yawed port-ward again, before stopping.

Iwamasa's voice sounded excited over the link. "Captain, it's really them. Indie ships, all painted according to the profiles used in the *Crack-in-the-World* battle group. Squared blocks of primary colours and whites, with black trim. They look like a bunch of Mondrian paintings. I'm recording images of several..."

There was a sudden break in his speech, but not in the communications link. They could all still hear him breathing.

"Captain, I've just seen a big flash, but it doesn't look like an explosion. It looks like another ship has just come through the L-point; a big one. Oh, my God! It looks like..."

McMichael was reading his own display and spoke at the same time as Iwamasa, as if in a chorus, "It's the *Crack-in-the-World*."

"All right, Iwamasa. Tell your crew to keep recording, then get yourself back to the bridge quickly."

"Jackpot!" was the only other word from McMichael for several minutes. No one else spoke, but they were all thinking the same thing. Maybe this would vindicate them. Maybe this would mean the end to their unlucky streak. Maybe they'd be given better assignments from now on. Maybe they wouldn't have to suffer the ridicule of their peers anymore. *Jackpot*, indeed. The *Crack-in-the-World* was the latest Indie prize acquisition. The brightly painted, ex-Navy destroyer had been extremely hard to locate in recent months, and had done more than its share of damage in a series of hit-and-run raids.

Ravindran had been staring at her screens. She flipped back the hood of her parka with thin brown fingers, and turned to look directly at her Captain. "Sir, they're moving. They're establishing what looks to be a convoy formation."

"Course?"

There was a pause to consult screens before, again, turning to speak. "Directly toward us."

McMichael started reaching for startup switches, and flight controls, saying, "That's it, we've been made. Time to move on."

"Wait a moment," said Ravindran, oblivious to McMichael's actions. "No they're coming right at us, but not because they've seen us. They are moving slowly, and in convoy formation. This is not an attack posture at all."

"It doesn't matter," McMichael replied. "They're headed right at us, which means we probably already don't have enough time for a restart and a run for Ranier."

Captain Ferris listened to the newest crewmember's analysis with interest. "Keep your cool, Mac. You're probably right. But starting up right now will only hasten our detection, and bring them charging on in force. Wait for my order before starting the warm-up procedure.

"And where the hell is..."

“Right here, Captain,” said Iwamasa as he slid back into his seat like the agile youth he was. “We’ve got enough data and optics records to make the Intelligence folks very happy.”

“Thank you, Mr. Iwamasa,” said Ferris with studied calm. “Unfortunately we have a new problem that may make it difficult to get any information back to the Intelligence folks. The whole Indie group is headed our way.”

“Have we been IDed?” he asked suddenly frightened. “Why are we just sitting here?”

“They’re headed this way for the same reasons we’re here: it’s a decent hiding place. It may not be the best asteroid field, but there’s enough rock here to provide decent cover for ships intending to lay low. We’re still hidden for now, but in about fifteen minutes, it’ll be pretty obvious to them that we’re not another rock. Right now, we’re as shut down as a ship can be without being in deep cold. How long before we can be underway?”

“Less than ten minutes for thrust...about two minutes longer for LDS. We’ve been out in the cold too long.”

“Too long, indeed,” said Ferris, thinking out loud. “We could run, but by then they’d be on us the whole way. We’d be extremely lucky to make it through the L-point.”

McMichael added, “And with the way our luck has been going...”

“Mr. McMichael, get us completely behind the nearest big rock. Gently, mind you. We may have to go deeper into this rock field, but find a big one and get us hidden, and do so as quietly as possible. As soon as we’re obstructed, get going on the warmup.”

“Aye, Captain,” replied the pilot sardonically. “Quickly but quietly. Any other miracles?”

Captain Ferris had known McMichael for a long time now, and decided to let that go. Mac could be audacious, but his skill more than made up for it. They all felt the nudge of the thrusters almost immediately, as they started their escape. Hiding still wouldn’t solve their problem. The moment they made for the Ranier L-point, there would be a dozen ships on them, and more heading them off. They could try to just hide, and wait, but there was no telling how long the *Crack-in-the-World* group was planning on staying. Even that was moot, because he knew that the Indies would make a thorough inspection of the cluster anyway. No, they couldn’t run, and they couldn’t hide for much longer. He silently cursed himself. His whole plan to shut down and look like a rock was backfiring on him. They had been perfectly situated to observe traffic between L-points. But they were not, as it turned out, very well positioned if someone decided to try to use the same hiding spot. Detection ranges, time lags, startup times...all had been calculated carefully to a fine line. How could he have missed this possibility? Iwamasa was right: they’d been out in the cold too long. Maybe *he* had been out in the cold too long.

They all sat quietly, consulting the information flowing across their screens, checking restart protocols, flight paths, and defensive possibilities as the star field outside the forward view port shifted and rolled. They floated toward a boulder just large enough to obscure most the bulk of the 162 Meter-long corvette. Something about what Iwamasa said echoed in the Captain’s mind. Then it hit him.

“Mr. Iwamasa!”

“Yes, sir.”

“As soon as we restart, and reboot, we begin broadcasting our Navy IFF, correct?”

“Um, correct sir.”

“And even if we can kill the signal, they'll still detect us, and know we're hostile.”

“Also correct...”

“Am I also correct in assuming that, as part of your efforts to understand why we got flummoxed at the depot, you studied and figured out how the Indies were able to get past us?”

“I'm pretty sure I figured out how they did it, yes,” said Iwamasa, still a little perplexed, and more than a little scared.

“McMichael, what was the name of that junked Indie ship we captured?”

The NAV officer's eyes widened, and a smile started to creep across his one half of his face as he started to grasp Ferris' plan. He turned as much as he could to face the Captain's station, directly behind him, “It was called the *Out-in-the-Cold*, sir.”

“OK, kid, here's your chance to be a hero. I want you to...”

“I'll alter our IFF to read the *Out-in-the-Cold*, and match the codes to theirs. First I'll have to review their carrier comm. frequency tags, and scope out their security codes. Then I'll need to...” His voice trailed off as he focused in on his task. His eyes flicked across the screens of information flashing in front of him, and his fingers flew across touch commands.

“Iwamasa?... Kenji!”

“Um, yes sir?”

“You've got less than ten minutes. Don't worry about making it perfect, just make it pass long enough for us to get out of the rock pile and get us a head start out of here. We just want to blend in long enough to move away from them. As soon as someone takes a look out of a window at us, we're dead anyway. Get going.”

“Did everyone else grasp the plan? We're going to proceed with a startup right here. We let them come right into the field and start parking. They'll have uneven readings this far in anyway, so shaky contacts will be everyone's problem. Mr. McMichael, we join their group right here in the middle of them, then move toward the rear. We will gently start moving toward to edge of the group and the edge of the rock field. Our new destination is the Arcadia L-point simply because it's close. When I say 'GO!' I damn well mean it. I want a spread of suppressive defensive fire, all the spoofing we can dump out of the racks, and a full speed burn to the L-point.”

A click on his touchpad re-opened a comlink. “Engineering. While your chief is working on a little problem for us, I want everyone on emergency standby. Alert status for everyone. Get us powered up, and keep those drives working. We'll need everyone on their toes to get out of this one. Captain, out.”

“Oh and Mac?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don't miss.”

McMichael managed a smile on his otherwise tense face, “You can have my scarf and gloves if I do.”

The Independent battle group slowed as it approached the rock field, which was the first taste of good fortune felt by the crew of the *CNV Redoubt*, now known as the

Out-in-the-Cold. It had taken Iwamasa longer than he'd anticipated to alter the IFF signal, but in the end he successfully created a new identity that would pass a glancing inspection, but not much more than that. He also installed a toggle that would permit them to regain their Commonwealth Navy identity once they returned home. He thought far enough ahead to realize that they could escape this frying pan, only to land in a friendly fire. The ring and accumulator startup was nearly complete, but all other systems remained shut down until the Indie fleet was right on top of them. As the first Indie ships passed them a few dozen Kilometres away, gliding more deeply into the rock pile, they continued to hug their covering boulder. More ships moved in, and some were already halting, and powering themselves down. This was their second stroke of luck, as tracking active vessels wouldn't be a priority while ship contacts were flickering and dropping off contact lists. There was still no sign of detection while they remained as much a part of their covering boulder as possible. The *Hole-in-the-Head* came closer than any other ships, passing them only about twelve Kilometers away. Then it slowed and altered its course to approach them.

They'd been detected.

"OK, folks," announced Ferris. "The hiding part is over, they know we're a ship of some sort. Power up, and let's see if Mr. Iwamasa's IFF trickery worked." A few hums and whines were audible from the rear bulkhead of the command section, but little else signaled the complete powering up of their vessel. They were showing up as the *Out-in-the-Cold* to everyone, now. Captain Ferris had to remind himself to breathe as they waited to see if their trick would work. The *Hole-in-the-Head* continued in their direction, slowly closing the gap. Then she seemed to pause, then return to her original heading. It appeared to be working. More ships moved past them. It seemed that luck was with them, so the captain gave the signal to start moving toward the periphery. The *Out-in-the-Cold* came to life in the middle of the Indie battle group, and began changing her position. McMichael nudged her toward the edge, on a vector that might look to others like a search for a better parking spot. In fact he was working his way closer to, but not directly in the line of flight toward the Arcadia L-point. Every second that passed without being visually identified, or receiving a challenge, or hearing a missile lock alarm was a step closer to their escape at the L-point.

"So far, so good, people," said Ferris. The captain wasn't sure how, but they were actually moving closer to their escape point. All systems were working perfectly, and everyone was tightly focused on their jobs. It seemed that the moment of truth, when they could start their desperate flight, was getting very close.

Then a name came across the captain's contacts list that sent a chill down his spine. The original *Out-in-the-Cold* had an operating partner; a sister ship, as it were. The *Wolf-in-the-Fold* was an Indie corvette that frequently operated along side the *Out-in-the-Cold* on raiding missions. The two ships had earned a reputation as a formidable team. Now the *Wolf-in-the-Fold* was closing on them, and it looked like they intended on docking. As soon as McMichael saw it on his contact list, he keyed open their comms and heard the words of the approaching ship's captain.

"...did you get here? Sweet Mary and Joseph, man, I thought you guys were gone. Last we saw, you were taking heavy damage. How in the hell did you get out of that one?"

“All right, Mr. McMichael. Let’s speed up the process here, but try not to look too much like we’re hurrying. Wait for my signal before the full burn.”

“Aye, sir. Hurry, but don’t *look* like we’re in a hurry.”

Ferris turned his attention to the audio pickup in front of him, keyed in a few filters and other effects that might garble his voice, then began yelling at full volume into the pickup to further distort the sound, “Where in the hell were you?! We played dead for hours waiting for some help! We’re still trying to fix half our systems, but at least we could get to the rendez-vous point!” He quickly cut off the channel, and returned his attention to the approaching ship on his screen.

“Ravindran, get ready to hit them hard with everything. Then I want you to target the *Ghost-in-the-Machine* with a volley of seekers. I know we’re too far out now to really do them any damage, but I want to spit in their eye.”

“Aye, sir. Targets set.”

The *Wolf-in-the-Fold* slowed, but continued her approach steadily. She was very close to the point where a glance out of the forward viewing port would expose the ruse. In seconds, they would know that they were docking with a drab Commonwealth Navy corvette, and not a brightly painted Indie ship. The Indie Captain’s voice could be heard on audio again, “What the hell do you mean ‘rendez-vous’. We didn’t even know we were going to be here ourselves, until a few... Hey! What the hell?!”

“That’s it, sir, they’ve seen us,” said McMichael.

“It appears so. Get ready for the run of your lives. Everyone set?”

Each member of the bridge crew nodded, or voiced their acknowledgement. The Captain opened his mouth to give the order to run, but something inexplicable made him hesitate. The *Wolf-in-the-Fold* hadn’t budged. McMichael leaned forward in his seat to peer up and to the left. Sure enough, he looked right at the *Wolf-in-the-Fold* hanging there, as if frozen. Then he saw a pinpoint flash of red light flicker for an instant from the center of the Indie ship’s ComSec. It stopped as abruptly.

Iwamasa was the first to analyse it. “Sir, we’ve just received a tight beam communication. Two parts, both coded. One part I can tell is text only. It came from that Indie ship.”

“Coded?”

“Yes, sir. Sent in Commonwealth Navy code. At least part of it. The other part seems to be a much larger data packet, but I have no idea what kind of encryption it’s got.”

“Decode what you can and give it to me right away.”

“Should be on your screen now, sir.”

The message was from the Captain of the Indie ship *Wolf-in-the-Fold*. It was brief.

McMichael couldn’t contain his impatience. “Well, are we running? Are they going to kill us, or what?”

“The message reads: ‘COMPLIMENTS. GOOD SPOOK JOB. OTHER SHIPS APPROACHING. WE WILL JOIN PURSUIT. GIVE YOU 30 SECONDS HEAD START. MAYBE MORE. WILL TRY TO AIM POORLY. WE THOUGHT WE KILLED *OUT-IN-THE-COLD* 3 MONTHS AGO! WERE ABOUT TO FINISH THE JOB. GET GOING. RUN. NOW.’ Its signed ‘COVERT NAVY OPS’. Ravindran, cancel

your first target. Send a full volley to the *Ghost-in-the-Machine*, then concentrate on defensive fire. Mr. McMichael, if you please, get us the hell out of here.”

They were already underway. The roar of the main engines was almost deafening. The ship vibrated as seeker missiles left their launch tubes and started on their way toward the *Ghost-in-the-Machine*. They were gathering velocity at an incredible rate, but already two Patcoms with quick reaction times were altering course to give pursuit. They still had a significant lead, but only for the moment. Comms became a buzz of activity. Some Indie ships took the time to utter threats. Missiles were already speeding toward them. More ships were accelerating at near impossible rates to catch them.

“Right, everyone is pretty much pissed at us now. We’ve got four Patcoms closing on us fast. Looks like two or three corvettes aren’t far behind them,” said Ferris. The entire ship jolted as PBC hits were absorbed by the Displacement Array shields. McMichael was completely focused on flying to the best of his ability, accelerating and angling for the best L-point entry.

“Mr. McMichael, watch your speed. We still ...”

“I know, I know. Scarf and gloves. I won’t overshoot. But Captain, those Patcoms are accelerating way beyond what we can do if we want to get lined up for the L-point.”

“That’s because they’re not trying to jump out. It looks like they’re going to try to damage us on the way by as they overshoot.”

They all watched the numbers change as the pursuit craft continued their headlong acceleration. They were going to come very close, just when the *Out-in-the-Cold* was going to be slowing, turning, and making its final approach into the L-point.

Ravindran looked up from her station, still firing steadily at approaching missiles and ships, and said, “Captain, those ships are not going to shoot at us as they pass. They are going to ram us. It also appears that one of the pursuing Corvettes has launched a remote missile at us. We must get through that L-point now.”

More hits rocked their ship. Despite Ravindran's remarkable accuracy, damage was starting to appear on the Engineering boards as more PBC fire and missiles got past their LDA shield. The engineering work crews were frantically repairing systems as they took hit after hit, but they weren’t able to keep up.

“Full power to Engines on my mark. Let’s turn the Navy IFF back on, and let them know who played them. I at least want them to know that much,” said Ferris. He glanced at the growing list of ships streaking toward them, and saw that the *Ghost-in-the-Machine* was not one of them. She was back in the rock pile, too damaged to fight. Small satisfaction. The remote missile was fast approaching, overtaking the four closing Patcoms. It looked bad. The blast radius from the remote would do too much critical damage, leaving the Patcoms to finish the job. It was a good run, but it didn’t look like they were going to make it after all. Then, without warning, the remote missile detonated prematurely, close to the group of Patcoms. Three of them simply were no longer there, and the fourth became a tumbling wreck. The explosion cleared several approaching seeker missiles as well. Unfortunately, the explosion was close enough to the *Redoubt* that it caused some additional damage. The L-point was fast approaching, and the vector looked OK, but suddenly the Capsule Drive was offline. Without it, they would pass through the L-point as if it were just more empty space.

“Full power to thrust, now,” said Ferris. “Looks like our deep cover spook friends tried to do us a favour, but it kind of backfired. Mr. Iwamasa, get everyone on the Capsule Drive repairs. Now.”

“Already on it sir. It’s going to be close.”

The symbolic HUD wire frame cage showing the L-point was growing rapidly in the Navigational display from the pilots seat. McMichael could at least draw some satisfaction from the knowledge that he’d done his part. They were going to glide right through the middle of it at a very satisfactory angle, and high velocity. But if the Capsule Drive did not kick in at the right moment, they’d just continue to be target practice for the approaching battle group. More ships were coming at them fast. It looked like a cloud of missiles was screaming at them, and the sound of missile lock alarms was constant. Another glance at the Capsule Drive status showed that it was getting ready to come back online. But the L-point was only seconds away. There simply was no more time.

McMichael watched the graphic representation of the L-point disk pass him in a flash. He had time to close his eyes, and vow to continue to fight. At the same time, the Captain gripped the arms of his command chair with both hands as if willing them to make the jump, when suddenly there was a brilliant flash, and he saw a fiery light display fluorescing around them.

They’d made it into Capsule space.

“Mr. Iwamasa, report.”

“We’re in one piece, but just barely, sir. Getting better. We definitely couldn’t have taken much more.”

McMichael looked up from his displays, to the lightstorm streaming past them on all sides and said, “Amen to that. NAV systems seem OK. We’ll be emerging in friendly space soon. But Captain, what was that all about? Why the hell would we get sent out to recon the location of that battle group when we already had a spook in with them? We were set up, weren’t we? We’re supposed to be dead right now.”

“I’m not sure of that Mac,” said Ferris as he turned to face the WEPS officer. He stared at her thoughtfully for a moment before asking, “Ravindran, could you shed any light on this?”

There was an uncomfortable pause as all eyes turned on their newest member, and she in turn looked at each of them.

“Um, actually, yes. That data packet was meant for me.”

Iwamasa looked at her in shock, then narrowed his eyes. “I don’t *believe* it. You’re a spook plant!”

McMichael wasn’t far behind, saying, “Son of a...”

Ferris was quick to intercede, “Stow it, you two,” he said sternly. He turned his attention back to Ravindran. “Perhaps you’d like to fill us in?”

She took a moment to gather herself, then spoke clearly, as if reciting something well-practiced. “I am a Naval officer, just like you,” she said. “I just graduated from WEPS training. I was approached by special operations only after I had been assigned to this crew as a replacement for Tomms. As you know, his injuries were... he will not be crewing with you again. I was told that there was a possibility that, if we were able to locate the *Crack-in-the-World* battle group, one of our deep cover operatives would try to contact us. There are several such recon missions currently taking place with the same objectives. These undercover operatives; the crew of the *Wolf-in-the-Fold* did not know it

would be us, they did not know where exactly we would be, they only knew that someone would be out there listening. I truly believe that they came very close to killing us, believing we were the *Out-in-the-Cold*. They have been trying to get a data packet out for some time now.”

“It must be some sweet data,” said McMichael.

“I cannot discuss it with you, partly because I have been so ordered, but mostly because I don't know much about it. It is indeed very important, and will likely mean the destruction of that entire fleet within a matter of months. I was simply instructed to ensure the safe retrieval of the data in its encoded form, deliver it to the contact at base, and to erase all traces of it from all ship records and logs. Once I have done this, my mission, and I believe my entire involvement with the Special Operations people will have ended.”

“Does that word 'erase' include us?” Iwamasa asked nervously.

Before she could answer, Ferris added another question to the pile, “Why wasn't I brought in on this. This is command decision stuff, not secret agent crap.”

“Perhaps I can answer both questions at once,” continued Ravindran. “My mission to retrieve and return data was never in conflict with the one you were given, Captain. You were told to recon and report. In a sense, so was I. We were both *spying* on the enemy. It was made clear to me that both were important, and the data retrieval mission was not to interfere with any command decisions you might have made in carrying out your orders. I think they chose to do this in order to optimize success in either domain. It is the data in the packet that is important, not the fact that *we* retrieved it. The optical and other data collected as part of your recon mission is also invaluable. I'm certain it will be rewarded. My reward for success will be my release from any more dual roles. Once I deliver the packet, I'm released and free to accept a posting as WEPS officer to whatever Navy ship will have me. It is my hope that it will be this one. So, Kenji, you don't have anything to worry about from me.”

McMichael was still angry at the deception. “You can pretty much count us out, sister. We need to be able to trust each other here, and you're a long way away from...”

“That's the last time I'm going to tell you to shut it, Mac,” bellowed Ferris. He breathed deeply, then changed tone to a more conciliatory one, “You and Iwamasa were too busy at the time, but I saw her shooting just a few moments ago, and can say that she saved our necks several times over, easily. It was more than just her own ass she was saving. Ravindran was following her orders and performing her duties, just like the rest of us. And with considerable skill, I might add. I doubt she likes the fact that she had clandestine duties any more than you do. Sometimes we hate the orders we get, like sitting in a frozen can for almost two weeks watching nothing, comes to mind. But we do it.

“Ravindran, these two have short memories,” he continued. “But I gave each of them a chance, not too long ago, and they've worked out well. In this ship, there's no finer team to be cooped up with, out in the cold. You deliver your goods, conclude your duties, and get yourself completely free and clear of the Intelligence spooks. We'll keep that seat warm for you when you can come back pure Navy.”

McMichael risked further rebuke with another interjection. “Captain, begging your pardon, but I'd like to ask just one thing if I may.”

“All right, Mac,” sighed Ferris. “What is it?”

“I have no problem giving someone a chance who's earned it. And Rav, I guess you earned it. But speaking of keeping seats warm is there some reason why we need to keep the temperature setting where it is? I don't know about you folks, but I'm still freezing.”

Captain Ferris realized with a grin that in all the recent activity, no one had thought to adjust the thermostat settings. “As am I, Mr. McMichael. Iwamasa, let's warm her up. Good work everyone. Now let's get home and do some boasting. I think there are a few members of the *Lennox* crew that owe us drinks.”

The End.

About the Author

Duncan Day is a clinical neuropsychologist specializing in geriatrics in Kingston, Ontario where he lives with his wife and two children. He has been a space cadet since he was old enough to lay a chair on its back and say “3...2...1...Blast off!” As a kid, he watched a lot of TV, and spent even more time in his own imaginary worlds. He watched astronauts walk on the moon, Apes rule the future, Captain Kirk save the Federation, and HAL try to screw Dave Bowman out of a perfectly good spacecraft. Though the reality of modern space exploration has its allure, the fictional possibilities have always held grater sway with Duncan. He became an avid consumer of all things science fiction, and never stopped. The advent of computer gaming was merely another way to explore science fiction in a more interactive way than movies and books. It was love at first sight.

Having failed to successfully develop any special superpowers to support a night-time superhero alter ego, he turned to writing as one of his extracurricular activities. The decision to write in the genre of science fiction just seemed like a no-brainer, so that’s what he did. He started writing backgrounds, storylines, character bios and dialogue for a computer game development company (now defunct) and for modifications of existing games. This progressed into writing short stories and a full-length novel set in a fictional universe established by an existing computer game (Independence War). While this kind of writing for joy and personal satisfaction was gratifying, he discovered that one might also be able to write for profit. So that’s what he plans to do. He is currently working on projects of his own creation that will hopefully lead to publication, fame and fortune. He has not, however, given up his day job.

He’s still working on the whole superhero special power thing.