

# Broken Chains

(Working title)

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# 1 Revolutions

Another warning light lit up to tell Haneu that the backup intercom had failed as well. He sighed and tapped the console a few times to make sure it was not just a faulty wire. The whole control room was more or less falling apart around him and it was all he could do to just keep the basic things running: space communications, station status displays, docking bay control.

Haneu got out of his chair and placed his head set on the keyboard in front of him. Since intercom was dead there was not much point in wearing it. Picking up his toolbox on the way he went down the hall from the control room to where the comms cupboard was. Fortunately, the intercom system was a lot simpler than the space communication systems and he set to work checking the wires and connectors until he finally found the error: a corroded lustre terminal on the main power supply unit.

“Well,” he said to himself, “at least this is something we can fix on our own.”

Being careful not to electrocute himself he replaced the terminal and reattached the main power. The sound of the comms cupboard coming alive with small beeps and clicking relays made him smile. Ever since he had been a child he had had an insatiable fascination for things that did something when you pushed a button. Especially if he actually knew why.

Since he was inside the comms cupboard already he decided that he might as well double check a few other things. He knew it probably would not yield any actual results, apart from reassuring him that nothing serious was under way. The cupboard was a veritable jungle of wires criss-crossing from one side to the other. Most of them had at some point been replaced either by Haneu or, before the control room had been separated from the rest of the space station, one of the service technicians.

When he was satisfied that things were running again he packed his tools away and went back to the control room. The warning lights had all gone out and the only lights left on were the indicators that everything was running smoothly.

Settling back in his chair he put his feet up and put the headset back on. It immediately came to life with an angry voice pouring out of it.

“Haneu, you fuck,” the voice screamed at him, “where the fuck have you been?”

“Sorry, big guy. The intercom was down and I missed your cute voice so much I had to run down and fix it right away.”

The voice of Victor Gintas, Aruna station’s owner and Haneu’s boss, lost a bit of its edge, but was still serious as he continued.

“Cut it out. If it wasn’t for the fact that space traffic controllers are nearly impossible to come by I’d have space walked to your little lair and ripped your tongue out myself. Get everything back online, we’ve got an incoming space ship. Make sure it docks in Bay D.”

“Sure thing, boss. I’ve got it on the scanner now. If things go well they should be in the bay in two hours.”

“Good,” Gintas said, “I’ll keep an eye on it myself. Just get them docked and when they’re inside, cut the comms. This is a personal friend of mine.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Haneu repeated and then cut the comms before Gintas could reply.

During the thirteen years Haneu had worked as an space traffic controller at Aruna station he had gotten used to not asking questions about Gintas’ “personal” visits. The gossip Haneu had picked up had claimed that it was anything from exiled planet dwellers to hookers to illegal goods. Personally, Haneu had stopped caring long ago. And after an explosion had made it impossible to get from the main part of the station to the control room two years ago he had had virtually no contact with the other people living at Aruna station.

After the explosion Gintas had made sure that resources had been made available for Haneu to get out of the control room a few days every month, but after assisting controller had managed to get himself knifed over a drink and a game of cards Haneu’s visits the the station had become less frequent.

It did not bother him much. Most of the people on the station already disliked him, either because they thought he was Gintas’ spy or because he had done his best to avoid contact with anyone. He had always been a loner and the people at the station, with their main interests being drinking, gambling, fighting or boasting about their past exploits, had never appealed to him. Once in a while a visiting space ship would have a talented technician or pilot that he would chat with. But when ships were docked he could not leave the control room at all and when he could they would have left, leaving only the usual crowd.

He looked at the scanner to check that the space ship was in range of the short range communications array. The space ship had not contacted the station using the long range system, but this was not odd as, in normal circumstances at least, the short range left more than enough time to get the ship and the station aligned so the ship could dock.

“Unidentified space ship,” he said into his headset, “please send your identity code and expected duration of your stay. You have been pre-cleared to dock at Bay D, please stand by for further instructions.”

Even at the edge of the short communication range the answer should only take about a minute to return. When it had not arrived after two minutes Haneu repeated it. When another five minutes passed by without any sign of life from the approaching ship Haneu contemplated calling up Gintas to ask for advice. After some reflection he decided against it on the grounds that Gintas would either be pissed off at him for not handling it on his own, or blaming him for whatever was wrong with the ship, or simply verbally tear off Haneu’s head for interrupting.

Haneu looked at the scanner again. Now that the ship was closer the systems could get a better reading of its size, speed and trajectory. So far everything was good. The ship was a medium sized cruiser class and had dropped its speed down to 1PSL, Percent of the Speed of Light, and seemed to be slowing steadily while the trajectory changed from heading straight toward the station to an orbit around a kilometer from the edge of the station.

At least it looked like whoever was piloting the ship knew what they were doing. This made Haneu relax a little and not worry too much about the lack of communication. While it was an advantage to keep an open channel to the docking ship it was not strictly necessary. Both the ship’s and the station’s system were far better at calculating the necessary course than a human and even a halfway decent pilot could land anything but the largest freighters.

When the ship had entered the orbit and matched its speed to float directly outside Bay D they finally contacted Haneu.

“Aruna STC,” a woman’s voice said, “please be advised that we are in orbit outside Bay D and request that you open the bay doors.”

“Affirmative, will comply,” Haneu said and added, with his microphone turned off, “and fuck you too.”

He entered the commands necessary to open the doors and watched as the ship gracefully docked. Whoever was piloting that ship had more than just basic piloting skills. Before the ship was completely docked he switched briefly to the visual feed from the docking bay to see how the ship looked. As much as he trusted his instruments to tell him the information he needed to get the ship in the bay he was still curious to see how it actually looked. Remembering Gintas’ warning to cut off comms he only took a quick peek, but what he saw both impressed and scared him.

The cruiser was one of the old military heavy scout ships. It was easily recognisable by its sleek design and visible weapon mounts. Though no weapons were actually mounted on this ship it was still a reminder to anyone watching it that whoever was flying this ship was not someone to be taken lightly. Getting hold of an old military ship was, in itself, quite an impressive feat. Actually flying in it without doing anything to hide it was even more impressive. Only former military command personnel or people with no regard for law and order would ever do so. Haneu whistled to himself as the cameras swept along the ship. It was definitely beautiful.

When the ship was completely inside the bay, however, he nearly fell out of his chair. He had swung one of the cameras around to look at the rear of the ship and could clearly see fuel leaking out next to one of the main engines. Zooming in he quickly spotted the two lines of small, round holes running all the way down the side of the ship to a larger cluster of holes just where the right-side engine compartment was.

As quickly as he could he turned off the visual feed and disconnected the comms in the docking bay completely. This ship had just been involved in some kind of fire fight and no matter how curious Haneu was to find out more about this his survival instincts kicked into overdrive and told him to get as far away from this as he possibly could.

While fights in space did happen from time to time they were incredibly rare and usually not something to get mixed up in. If Gintas found out that Haneu had seen the damage done to the ship Haneu was lucky if it was caused by a pirate attack. Seeing as the ship was a former military ship, however, chances were that it was something far worse. Perhaps an assassination attempt or some unresolved conflict between whoever was on the ship and some unknown faction.

Haneu shivered and made himself busy running tests to see that the long range scanners were working properly. If whatever had caused that damage was heading towards Aruna he wanted as early a warning as he could get. And he was sure Gintas and his visitors would not mind either.

The long range scanners worked as they should and Haneu set about systematically scanning the space surrounding the station. He dedicated one of the scanners to continually scan the nearby asteroid field. As dangerous as it was to navigate among the huge chunks of rock and ice the asteroid field provided completely cover from the scanners and anyone lurking at the edge of the field could easily reach the station in less than two hours if they planned their acceleration out of the field properly. Even though they would be clearly visible during their approach there was not a lot a space ship trying to escape could do. The ambushing ship would have the speed advantage and could easily close the distance and maintain full control of the engagement.

The ship Haneu had seen dock had not come from the direction of the asteroid field, but with a damaged engine a pursuer could easily overtake the ship outside the station’s sensor range and hide in the asteroid field and resume the pursuit later.

Keeping the headset on he multiplexed the major comms channels on the station. It was confusing as hell, but he had become used to having several conversations running in the background. Doing this allowed him to hear if anyone mentioned the ship, Gintas or other things that could hint at what was going on. The first thing he noticed was that the comms channels were unusually quiet. There

was a little chatter here and there, but those were mainly the automated service announcements. Apart from that only a little went on.

As such Haneu should not have been able to tap into the comms channels. They were supposed to be not only private, but also encrypted. When he had worked on restoring communications between the control room and the rest of the station after the explosion, he had found that to get any kind of internal communications up and running they had to rewire most of the communications backbone. Running all of it directly to the control room and from there on to the comms central had not been strictly necessary, but it had made it a lot easier to maintain as the alternative had been running some two kilometres of wire on the outside of the station. That he could actually use the system to listen in on anyone at anytime had not occurred to him until much later.

As for the encryption that was only possible because of a strange glitch that had happened while they were upgrading the system. Haneu was not really sure what had happened. He just one day realised that the master encryption keys for the system had been installed on the main console in the control room. Not knowing if it was some elaborate test or scheme made by Gintas Haneu had at first resisted the temptation to listen in on people's private chatter. But as time went on it became more and more natural for him to listen in if he knew something special was going on. Not that he had ever used the information for anything, nor even had any real use for what he heard. He just liked to be aware of what was happening on the station, even if it did mean that he had to listen to hours of uninteresting nonsense.

With a drunken voice boasting about her latest romantic conquests in his ear he directed the last two of the station's three scanners to randomly cover the rest of space.

After that there was not much for him to do other than sit around and wait.

As the hours passed he became more and more of the opinion that nothing was going to happen. A quick systems check showed that a repair crew had been assigned to Bay D with no specific details attached to the work order. Judging by the equipment being moved there it looked like Gintas intended to have the broken engine repaired. Unless any pursuers planned on actually ramming the station, a strategy that despite its destructive possibilities had never really proven overly effective, it would probably be a few days before the ship left again.

Good, he thought to himself, that means I have a perfect excuse to not take my scheduled trip to the station tomorrow.

The plan had been for him to get back to the station and oversee the repair work on the fourth scanner, which was currently defective. Haneu knew that the chief technician was more than capable of replacing the control circuits that had been torn loose during a recent, and extremely violent, 'roid storm. The chief also knew that he did not need Haneu's presence, in fact, Haneu often felt that the chief preferred that Haneu was not around. But when Gintas suggested that Haneu should oversee things, that was what Haneu did. Except when he had a bullet-proof excuse such as there being a docked ship in one of their hangars.

Technically speaking he should clear his absence from the repair work with Gintas and normally he would have done so. This time, he felt, it was better to quietly just remain in the control room and be busy working on other things. With the system being as dodgy as it was he could always find something to do so it was not like he was just sitting around twirling his thumbs while the ship was sitting in the hangar.

Looking around the control room he pondered where to start. On one hand it would be nice to take a look at the main computer which had been running slower and slower lately, but on the other hand the scanner displays had some serious problems with loose connectors and short circuits. He looked around for his toolbox and saw that it was, not surprisingly, still just inside the door where he had dumped it when he got back from the comms cupboard. That settled it. He slid his chair over to

the computer terminal in the control console and started looking through the main computers list of running daemons and processes.

Hours later he had managed to dig out a few runaway processes caused by some simple programming mistakes in the automatic paralleliser that had come with the system upgrade bundle from ICC, the Interstellar Communications Corp. Haneu was not surprised by the mistakes. At ICC the “corp” part was, by far, more important to its management than the “communications” part. It was true that they were responsible for most of the technology that kept the stations in Indigo system running. But it was equally true that they had stolen most of that technology from other corporations or independent enterprises.

Back when he was younger Haneu had briefly worked for ICC, but had been more than happy to leave when he found out that working for the seemingly beneficial corporation was not much better than doing the school bullies’ homework for them. Thinking back he reflected that the school bullies had probably been better to work for. At least they had seemed, on some obscure level, to appreciate his efforts. His two years at ICC had made it clear that the only reward for hard work was even more work, and the punishment for failure was far worse than being fired: it had been public humiliation. The ICC executives very much believed in leading by example, preferably the example of other people’s misery as that was great for motivating people to not screw up.

Sending a few nasty thoughts and a long stream of obscenities in the general direction of ICC he began fixing up the errors he had found. It did not take him long to find the errors, but making sure that there would be no side effects of his changes kept him busy the rest of the day and long into the night.

With a contented grunt he finally finished around midnight, station time, and clapped his hands together.

“Okay,” he said to himself, “now let’s see what we’ve got running.”

He reset the systems he had upgraded and started the paralleliser again. A pleased smile spread across his face as he saw how the system automatically began dividing the long range scan processes across the main system’s individual processors. He sent a warm thought to his old colleague Joe who had been one of the main forces behind the seemingly impossible concept of automatically splitting up running processes across several processing units. Not many at ICC had believed it possible to do what Joe had suggested, but eventually they had all had to acknowledge that whatever they thought Joe had indeed managed to build the paralleliser. Sadly, though, Joe had found far better work elsewhere and apparently the group who was currently working on his project were not up to the task.

Having the paralleliser back online meant that he could increase the speed with which the scanners searched through space and even though it did not seem to matter today there was still something deep down in the core of Haneu’s person that simply wanted things to run as fast and smooth as possible. For his own amusement he also started a program he had made that took random samples of the data gathered by the scanners and ran a different set of algorithms on it. A part of the idea behind the program was to keep an eye on the paralleliser and make sure the data processing consistently produced the correct results. But mainly it was just something he did for the fun of it to see how well ICC’s program did against his own.

He got up out of his chair and stretched his back with a yawn. It really was getting late and he might as well head off to his make shift bunk in the corner for some sleep. To get the numbness out of his legs he walked a few times around the main console and stamped his feet hard into the deck. Slowly the tingling vanished and he briefly sat down to check that all the automatic systems were running and would throw suitable warnings if anything out of the ordinary happened while he was asleep.

Curling up under his blanket he let the day's events run through his head again before falling asleep. All things considered it had been more or less a normal day at Aruna station. A couple of system failures, a strange and secretive event, a little abuse by the boss. It might not be the best job in the world, but at least Haneu knew more or less what to expect from it.

The next morning Haneu woke to the sound of his headset beeping furiously. It was still on the floor where he had dumped it so he put it on and tiredly mumbled something incoherent into the microphone. In reply he got an even more unintelligible string of foul words from Gintas. Haneu sat up and allowed himself a few seconds to get his bearings.

"What?" he said, "You want me to go where?"

"You fucking well heard me the first time. Get you fucking ass in gear and get over to the station now!"

The headset went silent.

Haneu rubbed his eyes and slowly got out of bed. He had never been good at mornings and being woken up by being shouted at did not make it any easier. He pressed a few buttons to make the window on the wall flicker to life. It was not an actual window but simply a thin screen that got updated every few minutes from the station's external cameras. Haneu looked out at Indigo Alpha rising from behind the asteroid field, a sight he always enjoyed for a few moments every morning.

In space, and in particular onboard a station such as Aruna, the concept of day and night did not make much sense. Back when the stations in Indigo system had first been built time had not been taken into account. The stations had simply been built in whichever way would make them keep running with a decent gravity provided by their rotational speed. As the centuries passed, however, it became increasingly popular to let new stations follow the day cycle of Indigo Prime, the only inhabited planet in the system. And during the peak of the space colonisation era there were funds and materials enough to actually design the stations so large that they had one revolution per day cycle. There were no practical reasons for doing so, except that the people living on the stations seemed to adjust to the lack of a rising sun far better if they at least had more or less the same view every time they woke up.

Turning away from the window he rubbed his rumbling stomach and thought of how pissed off Gintas would be if he knew Haneu did get to work straight away.

"Fucking git," he said and began fumbling around for his clothes and something to eat. There were, of course, a nearly infinite supply of energy bars but he wanted something more substantial in his stomach before even thinking about doing the space walk from the control room to the station. Being out in open space meant leaving the artificial gravity created by the station's rotation with the unavoidable nausea that followed. Having a solid meal in his stomach always helped Haneu get through it. If for no other reason than having something other than gall that could find its way up once he got back inside the station.

Rummaging around he finally managed to find a vacuum packed block of meat and some kind of vegetable like substance. In this case "vegetable like" meant that it was green. He threw it into the microwave oven and insta-nuked it. It did in no way taste good, but at least it was warm and he quickly ate it and began checking his space suit.

When everything had been checked and double checked he made his way to the air lock, briefly stopping by the control console to check the status of the night's scans. Nothing out of the ordinary had been logged, but one thing did catch his attention. Apparently the changes he had made to the paralleliser had been changed again. He made a mental to check up on that once he got back and



another mental note to remember to curse some more at ICC for having added an auto upgrade, or in this case auto downgrade, function to their software.

Once he was fully geared up in his space suit he turned on the helmet's intercom and got hold of the chief to let him know he was coming over. The chief's reply was curt, but not unpleasant. For all their differences they shared the same boss and both had a mutual sympathy for the other when they knew Gintas had sent them on yet another impossible task.

Haneu keyed in the control sequence that de-pressurised the air lock as fast as possible without being overly dangerous to his well being. The helmet protected his ears from the violent hissing of the air escaping out into space and he slowly counted the seconds until the oxygen gauge in front of him told him the air lock had been completely emptied.

He opened the door and stepped forward toward the multitude of wires running away from the control room. Space stations did not normally have a veritable web of wires running between the different structures, but the explosion had torn away most of the walkways and passages. Apart from the control room all the other sections of the station were still connected, but some routes were neither short nor easy to use. So to provide a short cut in case of emergencies the station crew had added a couple of extra air locks and pulled wires between them to allow fairly fast, but very uncomfortable, ways of getting from one end of the station to the other.

Keeping a hand securely on the bar just outside the air lock he closed the door and clasped his safety line to the wire running from the air lock at the control room to the air lock near the docking bays. With a brief prayer to whoever might be listening out in space he pushed away from the control room and began gliding along the wire. This was the part he always hated. The chance of the wire breaking was nearly zero, but Haneu had seen it happen once a couple of years ago. The poor technician who had suddenly found himself floating completely free through space had been caught again thanks to the quick reaction of his crew members, but he had never set foot outside the station again. And Haneu was out here alone with no one to catch him if the wire did break. If that happened he could only hope he would hit a part of the station with enough small bits protruding that he could catch hold of something until the chief could get someone out to pull him back in.

The trip lasted only a few minutes, but seemed to take forever. Along the way Haneu used his hands to pull himself along the wire and keep more or less pointing in head first toward his destination. As he passed the middle of the open space in the middle of the station he got a clear view of Indigo Beta, the lesser of the two stars in the system. It had a dark purple colour that made it look more like a moon or gas planet than an actual sun. And yet despite its low emission level he knew that it send far more ultraviolet light than its yellow sister, enough in fact to have burned Haneu's eyes from his socket if the helmet's visor had not protected him.

Just as Beta was about to disappear behind the station's structure again he saw an impressive sight. A huge solar flare sprang from the star's surface perpendicular to the direction Haneu was looking. The huge, purple plume shot out and blossomed into a wide cone that must have been several thousand kilometres across at the base. Knowing that the sight would be swiftly followed by a huge electrostatic discharge Haneu put both hands around the wire, ready to grasp it tightly in case the discharge was too powerful for the station's position thrusters to handle. As the station was bombarded by invisible energy he could feel the wire tremble under his fingers, but it held and he soon found himself hurtling towards the docking bays.

He gripped the brake on his safety harness and with practised ease he used it to both slow down his approach and flip himself around so his feet hit the wall first. He punched his code on the large keypad outside the air lock and went inside when the door opened. As the air lock pressurised it became increasingly difficult for him to keep his breakfast down and the technician waiting for

him on the other side did not have time to greet him before Haneu fell to his knees in front of the strategically well-placed bucket just inside the air lock.

After coughing a few times Haneu spat out the last bits of his breakfast and groped around on his belt for the small bottle of water. He rinsed out his mouth and spat a few times more before getting up. At least the chief had sent one who could at least keep a straight face and quietly wait until Haneu had composed himself. Haneu nodded to him.

“Where’s the fire?” he asked.

“Not so much a fire as a flood,” the technician said, “the chief told me to tell you that you, ahem, had to get your fucking ass in fucking gear and get to Bay D asap. Pardon the language.”

“Nah, no worries. Knowing the chief you probably left out a fucking or two.”

Haneu did not care much for the technicians, but he had learned that saying something like this seemed to put them at ease and that usually meant they did not bug him as much.

“I’ll better get going, then,” he said and began removing the space suit, “I can find my way from here, thanks, so don’t let me hold you from watching the flare. If the cameras caught it this time.”

“What? A flare?” the technician asked. “Shit! Don’t tell me you were out in that?”

So, Haneu thought, not the quiet type, this one. Guess that would have been too much to hope for. He lowered his voice almost to a growl and continued.

“Yeah, it wasn’t too bad, though. Get going. I’m sure most info screens on the station will be showing it the next couple of minutes.”

Whether it was his voice or his frown that made the technician run off did not matter much to Haneu as long as he went away. He hung his space suit in one of the lockers and went down the corridor to find out what the chief, or more likely Gintas, had waiting for him there.

Outside Bay D Haneu found Gintas himself waiting with the chief and an angry looking woman. The chief was clearly uncomfortable and in a rare display of benevolence Gintas actually seemed to be shielding from the woman’s wrath.

“Your lousy techs just blew out my engine,” the woman roared. “I don’t care what kind of wiz kid you claim is on the way, someone’s better get it fixed. Now!”

Haneu halted mid stride, not entirely sure he wanted to get in the middle of this discussion. It was too late, though, both the chief and Gintas had spotted him. The former showed great relief, the latter slight annoyance.

“Haneu,” Gintas shouted, “get your fucking ass over here. There’s a blown engine that needs tending and this little creep claims he can’t fix it.”

Gintas dismissed the chief, obviously the little creep Gintas had referred to, and the chief disappeared from sight as quickly as his short legs could carry him.

Not wanting to risk being on the receiving end of anyone’s anger Haneu chose to head straight for the door to the docking bay to see things for himself rather than stay outside. This drew a small grunt from the woman who appeared to calm down a bit as she went after him.

When she caught up with him her voice sounded more normal and Haneu recognised it as the voice he had heard in his headset the day before. She was still obviously angry, though, as she began explaining the problem to Haneu.

“As you can see the right engine just went poof. Took one of the chief’s minions with it, though I can’t say I care much about that as he was the one who caused the explosion in the first place.”

Haneu went all the way inside to the engineering station overlooking the actual docking bay. Here he got his first real look at the ship and could not prevent an impressed whistle escaping between his lips. Hanging outside the large windows the long, sleek form filled almost the entire bay. As far as Haneu could estimate it was just over a hundred metres long and maybe a third of that at its widest place. Seen straight from the front it looked vaguely like an arrow with the tinted glass of the cockpit forming the arrow's head and the ion stream balancers at the rear resembling guidance fins.

Moving to the side he could see the side of the ship more clearly and he winced visibly when he saw the large hole where the engine was now visible through the hull. Beside him the woman made an impatient noise and he turned to face her.

"What are we looking at?" he asked and cut her off when he saw her eyes flare. "Obviously a ship with a blown engine. But it's obviously military spec so I'm guessing we're not talking your average run of the mill vacuum cleaner engine here."

That one actually made her curl one end of her mouth in something resembling a smile.

"Fair enough. It's anything but standard. We had the original ion streamers replaced by speed rigged double liners."

She went on for a while describing the details of the modifications done to the engines and Haneu was hard pressed to keep track of everything. He had never been good at ships' hardware, but he did know the basics and when all was said and done it was still just a system with subsystems that needed to work together. And that was something he did know about.

"So," the woman continued, "from what Victor tells me we should be able to get our hands on a used ion streamer to get us up and running again. It's not optimal, but will give both a much needed speed boost as well as something that might actually resemble stability. Name's Chia, by the way."

The fact that she used Gintas' first name caught Haneu's attention. No one, not even Gintas' own wife, did that and Haneu did not know what to make of it.

Since Chia seemed to have forgotten all about being angry Haneu decided he had better use that to get as much information about the ship out of her as possible so he could get started on getting the ship's systems ready to accept the replacement engine. For most of an hour they went over the schematics, diagnostic views and so on until Haneu had a very clear idea of what needed to be done. It would not be trivial, but it would definitely be doable.

In the mean time the chief had managed to get the debris out of the bay and had ordered one crew to begin cleaning up the hole in the side of the engine compartment while another was busy moving the new engine to the hoist waiting at the rear of the ship. Haneu did not envy them having to work outside the station's gravity and was glad he could do the reprogramming from the engineering station. He told Chia that from the work orders he could see that the chief expected the engine to be installed in a couple of hours and after that he could begin working on the ship's systems.

"Everything should be up and running sometime tonight," he said, "if things go well before dinner, if there are problems..."

He shrugged, indicating that it would be impossible to say if problems would cause a few minutes' delay or perhaps make the entire process impossible so they had to start over. Chia seemed to get this for she grunted her acceptance.

"I'll go find some shut-eye and a meal, then. You got standard comms here? Good. Let me know if there are any changes, good or bad."

Haneu did not look up as she left. He began making a mental sketch of what the new system should look like and began reconfiguring the parts of the ship the technicians were not currently working

on. For his plan to work he needed to do a bit more than just making the new engine run stably. He needed to re-route a large part of the ship's energy stream. The military systems were still new to him, but as the morning wore on he became more and more comfortable with them and more and more sure that it would be possible to get the new engine up to almost two thirds of the remaining engine's power level. Even though that was a lot better than the expected one quarter it was not so much to impress Chia or Gintas that he did the modifications. He just could not help himself. It just made sense to him to use the system to its full capacity.

Several hours later he keyed his intercom and got hold of Chia.

"The engine is mounted and configured. You should be ready to fly in about half an hour."

Chia's reply came swiftly.

"Good. Any problems or things I should be aware of?"

"Not really. I did manage to get an extra boost out of the engine, but the systems will automatically compensate and balance the load properly. If there's nothing more I'll pack up and get back to my other tasks."

"No, there's nothing else."

The intercom link went dead which once more confirmed Haneu's impression that other people were ungrateful gits. He logged out of the systems and headed back to the airport. On the way he passed the chief who nodded to him. The tech crew had had a rough time getting the engine in place, but Haneu did not care. He just wanted to get back to the control room as quickly as possible so he commandeered one of the technicians to give him a hand with the air lock. Technically it was possible to operate the air lock alone, but for safety reasons it was best to have a human inside rather than relying on the automated systems. Or maybe it was to satisfy people's lack of trust in the systems. Haneu could never really figure it out.

Getting back to the control room went without any incidents and it was not long before Haneu was back out of the space suit and sitting in front of his console again. The scanners still had not picked up any ships nearby, but when he checked where the scanners had been pointed during the solar flare he got a bit of a surprise. One of the long range scanners had been pointing directly at the Indigo Beta and had got some very detailed measurements of the flare.

He pulled up both the visual images and the spectral analysis and let out a quiet whistle. Right in the middle of the flare he saw a small, dark object. Double checking the object's shape over the time of the flare he eliminated the chance of it being a meteor. If it had been the object should have rotated which would have been visible. Instead the object had kept the same shape all the time which meant that it might actually be a ship. It could theoretically be other things, abandoned satellites or a very strangely moving meteor, but it did not feel right to Haneu. The object was too large to be a satellite. And he had never heard of a meteor that did not at least rotate a little.

The thought of being caught not just near a flare, but right in the middle of it made him nauseous. A part of him wished that the data had shown an explosion where the ship was. That would have been better for anyone on board the ship.

He fast forwarded through the data from the scanner and cursed loudly when he found out that the scan algorithm had moved the scanner's focus away from Indigo Beta just a few minutes after the flare. He quickly reassigned one of the scanner to scan in the general direction of the star while he began analysing the data in an attempt at estimating where the ship might be headed and where it should be now. He contemplated calling up Gintas to let him know what he had found, but decided against it. Chia's ship was still docked and Haneu just did not feel like once more getting in the middle of whatever was happening at the station today.

For most of an hour he worked on the data and focused the scanners on different areas of the space between Aruna station and Indigo Beta and still he had not found the ship. That could be both good and bad. If the ship had finally blown up it would be impossible for him to see the debris on the scanners. But if the ship somehow still had engine control they could have changed its course making them difficult to notice before they got closer. Assuming they kept headed towards the station.

His calculations had led him to believe that the ship had run close to the star, probably to use its gravity well to sling shot it back toward Indigo Alpha. Such a manoeuvre was not only difficult to plan and execute. It was downright insane. The smallest error would send the ship directly into the star or, as had actually happened, any of a number of other things could go wrong. The ship had been close to the star, but the low emission of Indigo Beta made it possible for heavily reinforced ships to get very close to it. Judging by the size of the ship it might have been either a large hauler or small freighter. The hull on those classes of ships was definitely thick enough to protect the crew from the worst radiation from the star. Whether the hull was thick enough to also protect them from the flare was an entirely different matter.

Sending a small prayer to the gods of the universe he transferred a copy of the scanner data to one of the auxiliary systems that was not being used. What remained of the main system's disk was almost full and there were better things for him to do than sort out the mess it made if the disk did run completely full. The auxiliary system was not much use for anything practical as most of its processors had died over the years, but its disks were still intact so these days it served as a simple junk yard for anything that he did not need to access quickly.

The headset beeped, pulling him from his thoughts of what had happened to the ship. Gintas sounded as angry as ever when he ordered Haneu to clear Chia's ship for departure. Haneu acknowledged the order and flicked his fingers over his keyboard to enter the instructions that would open the docking bay gates and help ease the ship away from the station.

Since he had already seen the ship up close he figured there would not be any trouble if he hooked into the cameras in the docking bay. He watched as the long, sleek ship gently moved backwards until it was entirely outside the station. When it was free of the bay the docking arm that had held it in place separated from the ship and for a brief moment the ship simply hung there, suspended in the middle of nothing.

Then its side thrusters swung it around and down to get it clear of the station before it lit up its engines. On his monitors Haneu could see that the new engine glowed less brightly than the other, a sure sign that despite his modifications the other engine far outclassed the standard ion streamer Gintas had been able to scrounge up. As the ship suddenly accelerated and sped away Haneu looked, with a fair bit of pride, at the data stream from the scanners. He had done a good job and the acceleration Chia got out of the two engines combined was far more than any standard civilian ship.

When the ship was near the edge of the short range comms a message flashed across his monitor that an encrypted message was incoming on one of the low band channels. That was odd considering it had been ages since anyone had used those channels. They were slow and had even more limited bandwidth than the long range comms systems. On the other hand, he thought when he read the message, it made perfect sense for someone trying to head hunt a friend's lead technician. The message was from Chia and was as short as it was clear: "Nice work, come see me about a job."

Right, he thought to himself, I'll just swim through space, track down whoever it is Chia is and then get close enough for her to actually see me. With Gintas' blessings and assurances that he can easily do without me.

The thought did not appeal to him. While working more on that class of ships and equipment

would definitely be a welcome challenge he had a gut feeling that working for someone like Chia meant working in far too dangerous environments. Not to mention that it would probably also mean that he would get shouted at frequently and to his face. It was bad enough to hear Gintas on the intercom, having that kind of thing two inches in front of his nose would be insufferable.

He looked at the time. It was after midnight again, yet another revolution for Aruna station. Being completely worn out from the double space walk and the extra work he simply collapsed on his bed, not caring about his clothes. He had a fairly clean set he could use tomorrow. And if Gintas would stay out of his hair he just might be able to find a few minutes to put a bundle of dirty clothes together and float it down the wire to the guys at the laundry. That would have to wait until morning, though.

Before his head hit the pillow he was fast asleep and hardly moved until, far too few hours later, an high-pitched alarm went off.

The alarm was quickly followed by his headset bleeping and even before he put it on he could hear Gintas' voice.

"What the fuck is going on? The station just went completely dark for two fucking minutes!"

"Don't know, boss. A whole pile of alarms just went on. I'm on it, will get back to you when I know something."

He threw the headset halfway across the room. The last thing he needed right now was to have Gintas in his ear. All over the console warning lights were flashing. Loss of power, scanners offline, comms array down. Virtually every single thing that could go wrong had done so. Except the most dreaded thing aboard a space station: hull breach. None of the pressure sensors showed any warnings and Haneu breathed a sigh of relief. At least the station had not been torn apart by a meteor or a 'roid storm.

With near frantic haste he went through all the system diagnostics and began resetting the individual systems. They all came back online without any glitches and within a few moments all the critical warnings had stopped and the control room was once again quiet apart from the gentle humming of the ventilation system.

Haneu flipped through the remaining warning messages and when he saw nothing overly critical, people would just have to make do without getting warm food for a short while, he began digging into what had caused all the system failures.

The more he dug the more confused he became. It was soon clear that the station had suffered from a major black out and that when the power had come back on all at once the systems had drawn too much power for anything to come properly up. Unfortunately, most system had managed to get themselves half started so they had not automatically reset themselves. Once more he cursed ICC for not either a fixed start up sequence or at least a little random waiting as that would at least have limited the strain on the station's power core.

Tracing the logs back to the time just before the black out he found no traces of anything that could have been related to it. That really annoyed him as there should at least have been a little hint at something going wrong. But there was nothing. No error messages, no warnings. Not even a small information messages that could give even a little clue as to what had happened.

A frown crept onto his face as he looked at the headset on the floor. He had no idea what to tell Gintas and in addition to anticipating his boss' anger he also felt angry at himself for not being able to figure out what had happened.

Postponing the unpleasant talk with Gintas he got the remaining non-critical systems up and running and did a few more diagnostics tests to make sure that everything was working properly. When he was convinced that things were as they should be he began checking the logs for the rest

of the night and the day before, taking great care to pay extra attention to the hours after the flare. The energy released in a flare might have caused the black out, but it made no sense that it did not happen immediately after the flare.

When he still could not find anything he reluctantly went to pick up the headset and report his findings, or at least the lack thereof, to Gintas.

Gintas spent more time shouting at him than actually saying anything useful so Haneu let his thoughts wander a little. He had come to realise that the only way to properly deal with Gintas' temper was to simply let him shout as much as he wanted. Trying to stop him or, worse, contradict him would only make things worse. Every once in a while, however, he made an assertive noise to make Gintas think he was actually listening.

Haneu pulled up the results of the night's scan after the ship he had seen in the flare. The scanners had so far not been able to find the ship again so he began to suspect that either it had not been a ship at all or it had blown up at some point. Just as he was about to delete the scan data he noticed something strange. The scanners had continued to sweep across the sky, except that it had somehow managed to specifically avoid the area where the ship should have been according to Haneu's calculations.

The headset had gone quiet so he figured he better say something before Gintas exploded again.

"Hang on, I've just found something strange. Will get back later."

He knew that would definitely make Gintas blow up and this time he cut the intercom link completely to get some peace for the things he wanted to work on. He pulled up the scanner data and, manually without using the scanner software, calculated where the scanners had been pointing at what time and compared that to his earlier estimate of the ship's trajectory. It matched perfectly and he could even see how the scanners had avoided an increasingly wider area, obviously taking deviations to the calculated trajectory into account. A quick check told him that it was the algorithms running through the paralleliser that had controlled the scanners' patterns.

Before forcing the scanners back to scan where he estimated the ship would be he tried to disable the paralleliser only to find that he could not do so. The system had once more been changed and the paralleliser was now running outside his control. Nothing short of a full system power down would let him turn it off now and he did not dare try that. Not for fear of Gintas' reaction, but for fear of what might happen with the systems.

It was becoming more and more clear that someone had been actively modifying the station's internal systems. In addition to the fact that there had been no updates from ICC during the night the changes to the paralleliser could not have come from them anyway. Since Haneu had only yesterday added his own custom upgrades he was certain that a standard ICC package would simply have failed to install and that would have been the end of it.

He was equally sure that no one could have gained access to the systems from the main part of the station as the critical systems were all running in isolated environments.

The only thing that could explain what had happened was if someone had been sitting right at the main console while he had been asleep not five metres away. He tried to dismiss that thought as it simply did not make any sense. If there had been another person here he would have noticed one way or the other. And since the air lock had been closed all the time no one could have entered from outside.

Despite his best efforts he could not shake off the idea that there had been someone in the control room. And if there had it meant that they would still be here.

Picking up a wrench he slowly went through the four rooms that made up the control bridge of the station: the control room, the hallway to the comms cupboard, the comms cupboard itself and

the small toilet. Nothing. He also double checked the air lock and confirmed that it had not been opened.

He shuddered as he went back to the main console. The diagnostic programs were still running and were still finding nothing. Knowing intuitively that he would get nothing from them he shut them down. There did not seem any point in wasting processing power on them. Whoever had been inside his systems seemed to know far too much about erasing their traces than he felt comfortable with.

Deep in his mind old stories began to come to surface. Stories about computer systems coming alive and taking control away from humans. If there had been no one up here then it made sense, on some bizarre and unbelievable level, that it was the station's computer itself that had taken over.

"Superstitious crap," he mumbled and put the headset back on.

"Boss? We've got problems. Serious problems."

This time Gintas did not shout or yell at him. He did something worse: he listened. Keeping his description as brief as possible Haneu made his report about what he had found. While doing so he kept an eye on the scanners. They kept trying to return to their previous scan sequence and he kept forcing them back to where he wanted them, more and more certain that they would indeed find the ship.

When he had finished talking the headset was silent for a few moments.

"What the fuck do we do?" Gintas finally asked.

"To be honest I don't know. Taking everything offline might let us slowly clean each part of the system. But even if all available techs working on it night and day it would still take more than a week. And even so there would be no guarantee that we would have found everything."

"And if we let the fucking thing run?"

"Don't know. So far it seems to be limited to forcing the scanners to avoid a specific area of space. That's hardly critical, just very odd."

"Yeah," Gintas said, "unless there's actually something very large headed very fast towards this station from that part of space."

"True. I'm doing my best to force the scanners back... wait! I've got something!"

"Keep talking," Gintas shouted before Haneu managed to turn off the intercom again, "and forward the feed to me as well".

Haneu routed the direct feed from the scanners to Gintas' terminal. Together they watched as what was definitely a ship was analysed by the scanners. It was still too far from the station to get clear visual images, but from what they did get they could see that it was indeed a small freighter. It looked like it had passed through a 'roid field while being piloted by a blink space monkey and then gone straight back through the field just for shit and giggles.

"What the hell has happened?" Haneu said, "that ship should have fallen apart long ago. What the fuck is keeping it together?"

"Don't know, don't care. But it's heading straight for us and that I care about," Gintas said, "try to hail them on the long range comms and do whatever you can to keep them clear of the station."

"Yes, boss. I'll leave the feed on for you."

"Good. Once they've passed I want you to get your fucking ass over here and explain to me why the fuck you let some ass hat into our systems and, more importantly, why the fuck I shouldn't boot you out of the station!"



This time it was Gintas who cut the feed leaving Haneu with a bitter taste in his mouth. He was convinced there was nothing he could have done to foresee, let alone prevent, what had happened. And he knew from past experience that Gintas was not joking about throwing him out an air lock to float freely through space. It had happened more than once during Haneu's time at Aruna.

Fearing he might soon have to leave what he had come to think of as his home he began trying to hail the ship. For almost half an hour he kept sending a simple hailing message to the ship requesting that they respond with their identity, current destination and a status report.

The reply did not come until it was almost reachable by short range comms and what he got was garbled and almost unreadable. The ship was badly damaged, had almost no engine power, a power core that was erratic and several injured and dead crew members. Apparently the flare had hit them hard and they were lucky to be alive.

As the ship approached it could send longer and longer messages and Haneu gathered that whether Gintas wanted to or not the ship would eventually hit the station. All they could do was to hope they could find a way to make the impact as controlled as possible. The ship still had a little thruster power left and that might be useful for breaking it down when it got closer. If he could convince Gintas to let him use some of the station's repair drones they might even have a decent chance at breaking the freighter and altering its course enough that they could bring it to a halt next to the station rather than in the middle of it.

Not caring one bit about how Gintas would react he keyed the intercom again and spoke in a firm, controlled voice.

"Boss, this is what we do..."

## 2 The Speculative Operator

Hidden behind a turn in the corridor the operative watched as the station owner and some of his crew members discussed a problem with the station's power core. The argument was so heated that none of them noticed the quiet person who passed them. And the junior technician who so carelessly had left his access card lying completely unprotected in his pants pocket did not notice that the card was suddenly no longer there.

The operative smiled to herself when she was once more out of sight. It did not take her long to take a copy of the access card using the card reader she had pilfered from a vending machine earlier that day. At some point someone was bound to notice that the vending machine no longer charged anything for its products, but simply accepted any card it was given. That was okay. If things did not go completely wrong she would have the card reader back in place later tonight.

Risking a quick glance back towards the group she saw that they were still arguing furiously. She double checked the copy of the access card and when she was satisfied the contents were the same she put the card reader away in her small sling bag. The technician's card she dumped considered for a while. It would be best if she could put it back in his pocket, but she had always found it harder to put things back into pockets than it was to remove them in the first place.

She looked around at the nearby doors. One of them was the door to the engineering room of a docking bay where a ship was gently being eased out. She had seen both the ship and its captain before, but this time they were not the ones she was interested in. Making sure the card was visible, but not suspiciously left out in the open, she put it behind a crate near the door. Then she slipped away to blend in with the station's regular inhabitants and visitors.

Soon she was settled comfortably in the common kitchen's eating room and were contemplating when to put the next part of the plan into action.

The first part seemed to have gone perfect. Several days earlier she had found a way to gain access to the control room's systems. It had not been easy to find a way around the security systems, but when she had finally figured out how to do it it had been laughingly simple. It seemed that the better common technicians got the more they less they cared for the more mundane aspects of real life so it had been almost too easy to just place a remotely controlled drone in the laundry pack returning to the control room. The drone only had one simple purpose: find a well hidden spot where it could hook into the internal control room wires and give her an access point.

After the drone was in place, hidden deep inside the comms cupboard, she had had plenty of opportunity to infiltrate the station's systems and put a logical bomb in place.

Well, she reflected, perhaps bomb was not the correct term since it did not as such destroy or even cripple the systems. Instead it would, in time, actually improve their performance as the genetic algorithms she had developed evolved to fit their new home.

In the short term there might be some unforeseen glitches, in addition to the glitches she most definitely had anticipated. If she had not forced the scanners to avoid the damaged freighter that was approaching the station the technicians might have found a way to redirect it away from the station. She was not interested in that happening. Getting the ship to the station was crucial for the great plan, just like forcing the control room operator out of his lair was.

## 2 *The Speculative Operator*

The first step in that part of the plan had been to blow out the damaged engine on the ship in the docking bay. That means the control room operator had had to leave his control room during those critical hours where the damaged freighter came close enough for the station's scanners to pick it up.

The next step was to make sure that the station would no longer require his services. Judging by the station owner's general mood that should not be a huge problem. It just needed a few things to be timed properly. The first of those was to make sure this happened. She pressed a button on her data pad.

For the second time in less than one station revolution the station went dark. The operative quickly hid the data pad and looked around, pretending to be as surprised as everyone else.

All around her people got up in the sort of calm panic displayed by people who desperately wanted to be somewhere else but who knew, deep down, that the faster they tried to get there the more likely they were to get hurt.

She quietly followed the stream of people who exited the kitchen, not so much because she thought going anywhere would do anyone any good. She just did not want to draw attention to herself by being the only one left behind. Outside in the corridor only the battery run emergency lights were on. They left enough light that basic shapes were visible but nowhere near enough that it was possible to see details such as expressions on faces.

Somewhere in the distance she heard someone shout that the station felt like it was spinning slower. While the station indeed slow down a little she had made sure that it was not more than the automated control systems could correct within a few hours. It still felt like a lot, though, since she had not made a smooth deceleration but rather a series of decelerations followed by short bursts of acceleration giving a bumpy movement that could be felt under everyone's feet.

By now a couple of people had begun to panic properly and she keyed her data pad again to make things really interesting.

The entire crowd in the corridor she was in gave a collective gasp as they heard one of the most feared sounds onboard a space station, right next to the hissing sound of air escaping through a hole in the hull. The sound of the station's life support systems spinning down and shutting off.

Without life support the people on the station would either suffocate or freeze to death, depending on the concentration of people in various places.

All around her people could be heard mumbling prayers to whichever gods they believed in. It was clear that they knew one thing: if the systems did not get back online soon they were all dead. It was not a matter of if, but when it would happen.

This was the part of her role in life she did not enjoy. Sometimes her actions caused people to get hurt, once or twice they had even come close to claiming lives. But she always did her best to protect the people who somehow got themselves entangled in the various parts of the great plan.

Sending her own prayer to the one she served she entered another command on her data pad. Ideally she should have waited a few minutes more, but she could hear that people really were beginning to panic now and in the distance the noise of fighting could be heard. Hopefully she had not overestimated the station's systems. For a while she had had her doubts about whether or not they would be able to survive a full power cycle. She had chosen to trust her estimates and now she would soon find out if she had been right or not.

A few very long seconds passed while she waited. Then the light flickered back to life and while people squinted and blinked their eyes the gentle hum of the life support systems could be heard again. People began cheering and rejoicing at their return to the land of the living.

## 2 *The Speculative Operator*

As quickly as she could she made her way through the crowds toward the sleeping quarters. There would be nothing unusual in a person having to lie down for a bit after this experience and she needed her private quarters to completely finish her task of making her systems take over the station entirely. It had been costly, and difficult, to secure an entire cabin to herself without attracting any unwanted attention. Fortunately her order had already had another member on the station and it had been possible to take advantage of his position to both get her onboard and get her privacy.

Once inside her cabin she plugged her data pad into the station's network and logged into the control room's system. Then she began the adjustments needed to completely the next part of the plan.

### 3 Sun Burn

The numbers running across her screen did nothing to improve Valdis' mood. When she accepted the cargo back on Moon Movi she knew it was precariously close to the limit of her ability to make the deadline for the drop.

"Have you double checked this?" she asked.

Garey, standing behind her, nodded.

"Yeah, even if we stick to minimal propulsion there still won't be enough fuel left to brake safely once we get close to Aruna station," he said.

"Although," he continued, "there is another thing that might work. Far from safe, though, and I'm not sure the crew will like it. Well, except for Kam, I guess. But then it was his idea in the first place."

A disapproving frown crept onto Valdis' face. She had heard Kam talk about his idea of slingshotting the old freighter around Indigo Beta. To her it was just plain madness despite the fact that it should be theoretically possible. While Beta was the smaller of the Indigo system's two stars it was still far larger than any of the planets and easily capable of burning a ship like hers to cinders if it got even a little bit too close.

Garey took a seat in the co-pilot's chair and looked at her. He seemed to consider something, but before he could begin to speak Valdis shook her head.

"I'd rather risk running late," she said. "Noru might break my legs for that, but as far as I've heard she's yet to chuck anyone into a friggin' sun."

One of Garey's eyebrows rose slightly and he looked sideways at her.

"Okay, yeah," she said, "there was that one time. But that was a bit more serious than delivering a bunch of magazines a day or two late."

They both sat quietly for a while before Garey got up.

"I'll run the numbers one more time just to be sure," he said.

"Thanks."

While she waited for the others to finish their calculations she ran another full diagnostics of the ship. The status was still the same: the only way they could possibly hope to reach The Bulb without running out of fuel was to take it slowly and keep below one PML, per-mille of light speed. Getting up to a suitable speed would simply burn too much fuel and leave them either stranded somewhere or, worse, without the means to slow down again.

It did not take long before Garey and Kam came up to the cockpit to confirm that, according to their calculations, the sling shot should indeed be possible. As crazy as Kam was, Valdis had to respect his talent for these things. Looking over the information he had given her she could see that he had even factored in a very decent safety margin. They could be up to five percent off on their approach angle and still come off far better than if they took the safe route. What she did not like was that whatever the numbers said they would be passing far closer to Indigo Beta than anyone should ever do.

With a grim smile she looked at the walls of the old freighter. That, at least, was something that was to their advantage. The ship was so old that it had not been from the new light weight materials. The solid steel and titanium hull of the ship should provide more than adequate protection against the star's radiation. Kam's choice of flipping them over so the cargo hold would be between the star and the cockpit all the time was just more proof that he knew what he was doing.

No matter what they did things looked bleak. Their employer, Noru, was the chatelaine of the space station known as The Bulb. Over the past several decades she had turned a renegade station filled with the scum of the universe into a well oiled machine. Run by renegade scum of the universe. Though the exterior of The Bulb's operations had indeed been cleaned up Noru and her minions were still criminals and outlaws. To the extent that anything could be called law in Indigo system. But apparently even lawless people needed rules and some kind of order, even if it was one driven by who could outsmart the other using any means possible. As the years had passed and things settled down a bit after the war against the people of the planet Indigo Prime, Noru had managed to convince people that there were better ways of making a living that simply bashing each other's heads in.

One way was to produce highly addictive, yet surprisingly safe, drugs and gradually getting more and more people addicted to them. Slowly more and more people became dependant on her for the drug and she used that power ruthlessly to take over The Bulb, evict the previous crime lord and position herself as a power to be reckoned with.

Working for her had both its bonuses and drawbacks. People who served her well was well rewarded and Noru had made it a point of honour to never owe anyone anything, even if it was only a matter of insignificant amounts compared to the size of her organisation. But those who crossed her soon found themselves in far more trouble than any kind of sloppy work or petty theft was worth. Noru really had, once, gone to a fair bit of trouble to launch a re-wired escape pod carrying one of her accountants directly into Indigo Alpha. The man had tried to skim money from her accounts, but had not considered that Noru had only managed to get to where she was by knowing everything about everyone. It had been almost like a public execution, except that the mental torture of the thirty five hour trip from The Bulb to Indigo Alpha had destroyed the man's mind far more effectively than the star had destroyed his body. All the time Noru had broadcast the footage from inside the escape pod directly to every public information screen on The Bulb as well as on several long range channels. After that no one dared go directly against her.

And that was why Valdis was seriously considering Kam's crazy stunt.

"This," she told Kam and Garey, "is utterly insane. You know that, right?"

Garey nodded with a grave look on his face while Kam's lit up with a wide smile.

"Totally," he exclaimed with his usual enthusiasm showing in his eyes. "No one's ever done it before. Not successfully, at least. But it can be done. Look here."

He pointed to an extra set of calculations that Valdis had previously only given a cursory look. Upon closer examination she saw that it was not just calculations, they were real observations of several different comet trajectories. They all had one thing in common: they went about as close to Indigo Beta as the sling shot manoeuvre would take them.

"You know," she said, "while I still think this is utterly lunacy seeing those numbers actually makes me feel slightly better about it."

That earned her another beaming smile from Kam.

"If you look at this comet," he said while highlighting one of the data sets, "you'll see that it is very close to the same size of this ship and travels at a speed that is not unrealistic for us to match."

Kam continued to go over the numbers. Valdis had long ago learned not to try and stop him when he got started on something like this. If she could actually manage to stop him he would only be so confused, like a sleep walker waking up far from her bed, that he completely lost contact with the real world for a long time.

When he slowed down enough that she knew it was safe to interrupt him she quickly did so and ordered him and Garey to begin preparations. For her own part she needed, since she would be piloting the ship, to make sure she got all the right control sequences set up so the ship would follow as closely to their course as possible.

She also needed some time to herself to calm herself down. Now that she had come to believe the plan was doable she could feel that she was completely dedicated to it. She just still needed to take a break in her cabin and meditate on it for a while to gather her focus. Garey could easily plot the course to where the tricky part of Kam's plan would begin.

Rubbing her temples she took a deep breath.

"I need to go prepare," she said, "make sure the ship is in position for when I'm ready. And get Artura up here. I need him to run co on this."

Artura, the ship's first mate, had flown as Valdis' second in command for well over a decade and while they almost never shared the cockpit this was something that called for the two best pilots the ship had. Being almost as talented as Valdis Artura owed his lack of the captain title to his excessive gambling. It had put him in too much debt to be able to own his own ship for a very long time, most likely the rest of his life.

Saying nothing more she left the cockpit to Garey with instructions to go ahead with the plan she withdrew to her cabin.

As such it was not overly difficult to accelerate into the first percentages of the speed of light. The ship's computers could easily have handled that automatically. What required extra care was that they were not in an empty part of space. Small specks of dust or even large rocks were not a problem. They would simply be smashed against the hardened hull or bounce off harmlessly.

The problem was that as the speed increased the space around them warped and twisted and the ship's computers were unable to take this into account when calculating their movements. It was one of the great unsolved mysteries of space travel. Theoretically the computers could simply be loaded with more or less intelligent programs that adjusted for the relativistic effects of nearing the speed of light. But for some reason the modifications would never be timed correctly. Some scientists had speculated that it was because computers did, after all, operate at the speed of light and were therefore also being warped as they gathered speed leaving them slightly out of sync with the actual universe. Others thought that the computers were not as such making the wrong calculations and decisions but that it was simply impossible to both observe and react to a warped space properly.

Whatever the cause of the problems the fact remained that travelling over one percent of the speed of light made it impossible to rely on computers to control a space ship's navigation systems.

For centuries that had been the upper limit of safe space travels. Then a breakthrough had been made, disguised in the form of a tragic accident. During a long distance mission a ship had been hit by a 'roid storm that left half its crew seriously injured from being bounced around against the bulkheads. Spinning out of control the ship had kept going faster and faster until it had eventually passed ten percent of the speed of light. By that time it was far from its planned course and headed into one of the asteroid fields between the system's two stars.

It had fallen to one of the deck hands to try and regain control of the ship and, being terrified out of his mind, he had had to rely completely on his intuition. The ordeal left him insane, but he had

managed to save both the ship and its crew by navigating successfully through the asteroid field. Even during normal circumstances such a feat would have been impressive.

Eventually the ship made it back to safety and the poor man had undergone intense psychological therapy. Though he had never recovered fully he had regained enough of his senses to give a fairly coherent description of what he had done. He had somehow entered a state of mind where he was almost unconscious but still able to move and think.

While in this state he had been able to see past the distortions the high speed imposed on the universe around him and as such he was able to navigate safely based on where the asteroids actually were rather than on where they seemed to be.

Following this discovery a lot of money and resources had been poured into researching the human mind from a new perspective and, eventually and after many failed experiments, the scientists had found out that while almost everyone could learn to enter this state of mind, only a part of the population had the potential for staying in it for long enough to be of any use in space travels.

Valdis was one of those fortunate enough to fall into that category. Or, as it sometimes turned out, unfortunate. There was always a large demand for people who could pilot the ships flying between the stations in Indigo, transporting passengers, trade goods, and supplies. But there was also always a lot of people who would go to great lengths to coerce or force these pilots into working for them. The job for Noru was one of those times. Suffering from some bad luck Valdis had had to call in a couple of favours from people she knew at The Bulb and ask for new favours from others. It had been enough to get her flying again, but had through unforeseen events landed her in debt to Noru.

This meant that no matter what she could not afford to lose the cargo or be unforgivably late. That her bad luck had continued and resulted in a ruptured fuel tank had nearly been enough to make her give up completely and crawl away to find a cave on some unsettled moon to hide in.

When Kam came back to the mess he was literally bouncing down the stairs with a huge grin on his face.

“We’re doing it,” he proclaimed. “This is so cool.”

Maehan and Shanna let out a collective sigh. When Valdis had been shopping around for a new mechanic three years ago she had come across the two sisters. As such only one mechanic was required, even on a run down ship as theirs, but they had insisted on not being separated. Valdis had grudgingly accepted, partly because she desperately needed a mechanic and partly because all the other applicants for the positions were hare brained ex-miners who would be hard pressed to repair a broken pencil.

It had soon become evident that Maehan and Shanna were well worth the extra cost. In addition to fixing up the ship they kept coming up with ways to improve things and so the old freighter were slowly getting fitter and fitter. It would still take quite a while before it could be said to be in a good condition, but it was definitely getting there.

Shanna threw a protein bar at Kam who deftly caught it.

“Oh, thanks,” he said, “just what I need after all that hard work.”

“Ha!” Maehan said, “maybe holding a pencil is hard work to you, short stuff. One day me and sis will drag you down to the engine room and laugh our asses off watching you replace the broken cooling duct.”

For a second Kam looked bewildered. It often showed that, despite all his theoretical knowledge, it often showed that he had almost no practical experience with mechanical parts and engineering equipment. He pointed to the air duct running through the kitchen up under the ceiling.



“What?” he said, “that’s just piping?”

That drew a laugh, even from Garey.

“Silly git,” Shanna said, “the cooling duct is what keeps the engine cool. You know how hot the engine gets, you know the numbers. How much air do you think the engine needs to suck in to not just melt the entire ship? And exactly how much air is it we have out here, in empty space?”

Kam’s lips began moving quietly.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, sis,” Maehan said, “why’d you say that? You know he’ll actually come up with an answer for that, right?”

“Yeah, I know. Depending on it, in fact.”

Shanna winked at her sister as Kam began a long explanation about space not being a complete vacuum, the pressure needed to get something resembling air out of space and the laws of thermodynamics. He kept going until Shanna cut her off.

“So basically what you’re saying is that you need extreme pressure to get enough air out of empty space. And you think those thin pipes can withstand that kind of pressure?”

“Of course not,” Kam said, “for that you’d need something at least, oh, hmm, taking the strength of steel into account. Maybe titanium. And then a safety margin. Yeah, you’d need. . . oh. . .”

Kam’s face went red as the others laughed.

“Yes, Kam,” Garey said, “those huge metal pipes down in the engine compartment are the cooling ducts. Each section weighs oh, hmm, taking the weight of steel into account. Maybe titanium. And then a safety margin. Yeah, they weight. . . a lot!”

“Oh, fuck you!” Kam said.

“Aww, Kam,” Shanna said, “come on. We’re only having a little fun.”

Maehan and Shanna got up and went to give Kam a big hug.

“I know, but why do you have to pick on me?”

“Silly Kam,” Shanna said and ruffled his hair.

“It’s because,” Maehan said, “we know you can stand it. Garey would throw a fit if we ever made fun of him, the sad old fart.”

“Hey!” Garey said, “I’m sitting right here!”

“See,” Maehan continued, “that’s what I mean. Besides we simply love you too much to not take the piss on you once in a while.”

She kissed him on the cheek which only served to make his face even redder. He disentangled himself from Maehan and Shanna and went off to his room.

“You do know you shouldn’t be so hard on the kid, right?” Garey said. “I know you mean well, but I’m not always sure he does.”

Shanna shrugged.

“Yeah,” she said, “but on the other hand. Sooner or later the real world will hit him in the face and sis and I see it as our honourable duty to ease his suffering when that time comes.”

“By making him suffer now?”

Both Maehan and Shanna smiled wickedly.

“Of course! Besides, he’s a teenager now. He’s supposed to suffer, isn’t he?”

Garey shook his head.

“You do have a point there, I guess.”

“See?” Shanna said, “and with us being the youngest we’re the only ones who can truly relate to how he feels and that gives us an advantage when it comes to poking him.”

“Whatever,” Garey said, “Just remember that the kid pulls his weight as much as you two, just in a different way. I’d hate to see the result of either of you trying to do even a tenth of the math Kam does in his head without even thinking.

“And don’t you have some work to do before we go ahead and over burn the engines?”

Maehan pouted and looked more than a little annoyed as she replied.

“What’s the point?” she said, “we’re just going to blow ourselves up so who cares how things look down there?”

“I do,” Shanna said, “I wouldn’t be caught dead in a fucked up engine room. And if we do blow up that’s exactly what I’d be. Come on, let’s get to work.”

They went off towards the corridor running all the way along the ship’s length. Garey looked after them for a while before getting up himself and beginning to tie down all the loose inventory. Everything that could fit into drawers or cupboards were stowed away. Chairs, tables and other large items he securely tied to the walls so they would not fly all over the place when things got rough.

When he had finished he went inside his own cabin. In addition to being responsible for the crew’s quarters he also had to take care of his personal things. It did not take him too long and when he was finished he checked in with Artura again.

“All done down here, “ he said, “got anything else you need me to do?”

The intercom remained silent so he repeated his question. And after more silence he repeated it yet another time. Still there was no answer.

“Okay”, he said to the silent intercom, “I’m guessing you’re busy. I’ll head down to the cargo hold and make sure everything’s secure down there as well.”

He took the main corridor to the ladder leading down to the freighter’s cargo hold which constituted the main part of the space taken up by the freighter. The ship consisted of a long cylindric cargo hold upon which the actual habitable part of the ship sat. The latter part was split into three parts: the cockpit at the front of the ship, the crew’s quarters spread out along the central corridor and the engineering bay and engines at the rear of the ship.

While most of the actual flying of the space ship was done using the instruments or with the aid of the external cameras the cockpit had still been kept in the front in a dome slightly raised above the rest of the ship. One reason for this was that a ship this size only very rarely moved in any other direction than straight forward and pilots seemed to have a general preference for feeling that they were steering from the front of the ship. Another reason, which might have been more influential, was that it was simply impressive to stand at the large windows and look at the star system spreading out in front of the ship and the multitude of other star systems visible as differently coloured specks of light floating in the black void.

The crew quarters consisted of first the captain’s and first mate’s cabins, one on either side of the corridor. Their close proximity to the cockpit made it possible for their occupants to quickly respond to any emergency that required their immediate attention. After that were the stores where things like food and other general use items were kept. Then came the kitchen, dining area and general lounge.

The crew’s cabins ran along the rest of the corridor almost all the way to the med bay. Each cabin held only a single bunk, a chair and a closet with not much extra space than was absolutely

necessary to be able to get dressed. Sometimes people would put a table in there as a work space, but that usually meant they would have to change clothes while lying in their bunks.

From the last cabin there was a dozen metres to the ship's med bay where sick or injured crew members could be treated by the ship's medic. When no medic was on board, as was the case with Valdis' ship the crew would have to make do with following the directions given by the ship's MES, the Medical Expert System.

For safety reasons there was a long stretch of empty corridor between the med bay and the engineering bay. If something went wrong with the engines it was of vital importance that any radiation leak could be contained before it reached the place where the crew lived. To this end a series of heavy doors were installed. These would close in only a few seconds if a leak was detected. Though their official term was blast doors most crews tended to refer to them as death traps since the ship's automatic systems

The gentle click of the door locking behind her made Valdis let out a breath of relief. While she had been up in the cockpit with the others she had not dared let her anxiety show. Despite knowing that they could do this her mind was still working in overdrive to point out all the different things that could go wrong, from the smallest error causing a bumpy ride to simple but critical mistakes that would lead them straight into the star's gravity well with no chance of escape.

She went to the sink in the corner of the small cabin and splashed some water in her face. Then she sat down on her bed, kicked off her boots and lay down. The cabin was too small for her to stretch out completely, so she went through a series of exercises she had developed that let her loosen most of her body. That slowed down her mind a little and she felt she could begin to have a rational conversation with it.

The first thing she did was telling it that she was perfectly clear on the stupidity of what she was about to do. Then she told it that it should shut up and give her some peace to work out all the practical details. Kam had done a great job crunching the numbers. Now it was her job to turn those numbers into actual, real world events.

Forcing herself to forget everything she began to work herself into a mental state where her mind went completely blank. She knew that this was one of those times where she needed all her focus so the mental exercise was necessary even though it took several hours. The crew knew what she was doing so they would not disturb her.

Slowly she entered a deeper and deeper meditative state until finally she felt as if she was floating freely inside herself. She used the time spent in that state to recharge herself and push away everything that might distract her: Noru no longer mattered, their cargo no longer existed, even her crew faded away. There was only her and her ship.

Breathing slowly she began pulling herself back toward the surface of her consciousness again. It was a long trip and she took it slowly to avoid disrupting the effect. When she finally opened her eyes again her face was eerily serene and void of emotions.

Almost mechanically her body sat up on the bed, put her boots back on and stood up. She no longer saw with her own eyes but were detached from herself, looking over her own shoulder. Her hand moved on its own accord to unlock and open the door and her feet took her back to the cockpit without daring to interfere with what her brains were doing.

In the cockpit Garey was sitting in the pilot's seat while Artura was tightly strapped into the co-pilot's ship.

When she got there Garey quickly got out of the pilot's seat and helped her body find its way into the pilot's seat. He strapped her into the safety harness and resumed his place at her side.

With widening eyes she turned her head to look at him.

"Is the crew ready?" she asked, already knowing what the answer would be.

"They are in their positions waiting for your orders."

"Good. Let's begin."

Slowly and deliberately her hands went to the controls and she began to key in commands to the ship. She double checked their position and nodded with approval as she noticed that Artura had placed them exactly where they needed to be. Then she keyed in the acceleration sequence that would take them to five percent of the speed of light.

While Valdis worked the controls Artura continually read her the various status messages that flashed across the screen. One of the limitations on Valdis' abilities, and the reason she was stuck doing crap jobs like this, was that she had trouble reading when she was Piloting. The ship's computers could do a synthesised text to speech conversion that was adequate on most situations. Given the amount of data, however, she needed someone to filter it and only crazy pilots would rely fully on the artificial intelligence algorithms on civilian ships. Especially when it came to high speed manoeuvring or other delicate operations. Over the years she and Artura had developed a system that worked well for them. Despite the distortion of high speed travelling Artura could still perform basic ship handling, such as internal power routing, while Valdis focused on what went on outside the ship. While doing so he could also keep an eye on the status monitors and read out any major changes to Valdis.

They began the acceleration process after Artura had meticulously gone through a long list of system checks. Going to five percent would burn up almost all their remaining fuel leaving only just enough to brake safely once they got back near The Bulb.

When he was done Valdis took over the actual flying as they began to pick up speed. Her voice was a blend of eerie calm and almost complete detachment as she spoke.

"Point one percent," she said, "prepare for over burn in two point zero one minutes."

At the announced time her fingers mechanically ran the command that would overload the engines, saturating them with liquid fuel. The basic idea of over burning the engine was to cause an explosion in the engine rather than a normal burn of the fuel. If the engine did not crack and cause the ship to blow up the force of the explosion would create a temporary high pressure bubble right behind the ship. With the ship on one side and vacuum all around it the bubble would shoot the ship forward far faster than conventional propulsion could. It was a very risky move as it could easily destroy the ship. But as a last resort, and if the pilot trusted her ship, it could also save the ship and its crew.

All over the ship the crew was already strapped in. Artura held on tight and mumbled a prayer of protection as he closed his eyes just before Valdis pressed the button that would over burn their engines.

At first nothing happened. On the monitors the numbers showed how the fuel was being pumped into the engines at ten times the normal speed. It took a few seconds before the first reaction could be seen in the readings from the engine. The over burn started as a slowly rising spike of heat until the moment when the engine became saturated. Then the numbers just went crazy. The ship itself went crazy.

Everything began to tremble and the whole ship felt as if it was about to come apart at the seams. Then all movements abruptly stopped. That was when the bubble was formed behind the ship.

Seen from the outside the whole thing would have been anything but spectacular. There would be a brief flare from the engines followed by an odd dimming of the light on the ship. Then the ship would just suddenly no longer be there as it was shot forward faster than the human eye could register.

Inside the ship everyone except Valdis blacked out from the forces imposed on their bodies. Technically Valdis' body also blacked out, but since she was in her Piloting state she was still aware of what was happening and could control her body. In a way she had already blacked out, but had found a way to not be affected by it.

The first thing she did was to administer an adrenaline shot to Artura to wake him up. Then she simply focused on Piloting the ship, fully confident that he would regain consciousness and keep her up to date on the ship's status.

All around her the space stopped working as it should as she passed the one percent mark. This was where the effects of relativistic distortion really began to be felt by humans. Colours changed depending on whether objects were in front of them or behind them and distances were no longer real distances. Once or twice Valdis had dropped out of her Piloting state and those times it had felt like she was being sucked down a kaleidoscopic drain pipe.

As they passed the orbit of the innermost planet around Indigo Beta the pull from the star's gravity increased their acceleration. This would give them the last boost up to five percent that their engines could not. Beside her Artura kept reading out their velocity vector and position. Everything were going according to Kam's plan.

At the moment they hit five percent they were exactly at the point where Beta was 45 degrees from the direction they were headed. She began to feel the sideways pull of the planet which, though it was still several million kilometres away, held the ship in a dangerous grip. Were it not for their high speed they would have been pulled straight into the star and crushed, first by the incredibly high gravity as they got closer and closer and finally when they impacted with the dense mass of the star.

Valdis rolled the ship over so the star was now below and in front of them. To her it felt both like no time and an infinity had passed before the planet was directly below the ship. She switched the engines to stand-by, there was nothing they could do at this point except simply adjustments to their alignment. She would use that to keep the bulk of the ship between the star and her crew as they passed the planet.

Passing the planet would take them an agonising two hours where nothing they did would make any change. Valdis allowed herself to relax a little, not completely just enough that she could resume contact with the rest of the world.

"So far," she said, "so good."

"So what?" Artura countered, "we're still far from through this. The numbers look good, yes, but the measurements are still all over the place. There's no telling where we come out. Or at what speed."

Valdis smiled to herself. She knew she should not read too much into what Artura said. That was just his way of letting the tension out of his body and mind in stressful situations. Besides, he did have a point.

"True. Kam's calculations have been correct and so we should, even with some deviations, at least end up in more or less the right place headed more or less the right direction."

Artura nodded.

### 3 Sun Burn

“Our trajectory around the planet seems to be holding. We’ll pass the apex of our turn in just over half an hour. When that happens we’ll know for sure.”

“Good. Keep an eye on things, but try to relax a little. I need to meditate for a while. And check on the crew.”

With that she settled back in the chair and closed her eyes. Artura called up Garey to get a status report.

“Everyone okay?” Artura asked. “We’re coming up on the apex in twenty eight minutes.”

“Things are good. Maehan’s safety belt broke off and she took a bit of a tumble. Only superficial bruises, though.”

In the background Maehan’s voice could be heard complaining loudly about the quality of the belts and, even louder, about Garey’s lack of concern.

“As you can hear she’s doing just fine. If things are stable for a while I’ll send her down to med bay with Shanna to get patched up.”

“Yeah, go ahead. But tell them to be back in twenty minutes. And have someone fix her belt. Coming out on the other side will be as bumpy as it was going in.”

“Copy that.”

Artura looked on his watch. More than 15 hours had passed since they over burned the engine.

“Also,” he continued, “make sure everyone gets up and walks around a little, get some food, hit the loo. That sort of stuff. Our trajectory is stable so you should be good.”

“Yeah,” Garey said, “as long as we don’t look outside.”

Garey’s chuckle could still be heard when Artura switched the intercom off. Following his own advise he got up and stretched his back and then went out to the pilot’s private room.

When Artura got back he checked up on Maehan’s condition. From Shanna he learned that there had been some internal bleedings that they had not noticed at first. Still nothing serious, but it would best if she was strapped into the bunk in the med bay rather than sitting upright in one of the chairs in the crew’s quarters. Artura let them do so and returned to the co-pilot’s seat to keep monitoring their progress.

The next quarter of an hour passed while he alternated between keeping an eye on the monitor and being half asleep. Then suddenly Valdis let out a strangled gasp that nearly sent him flying through the ceiling of the cockpit.

“Get us out, get us out!” she screamed, almost hysterically.

Artura grasped at her flailing arms and managed to get her pinned down in the pilot’s seat.

“What?” he asked, “What’s going on?”

Valdis’ eyes were rolling around in their sockets and she was breathing quickly.

“The star! It’s flaring! Let go of me. I need my hands.”

“Oh, shit!” Artura mumbled and let go of Valdis.

He turned on the ship wide speaker system to get the message through to the entire crew all at once.

“Attention, attention,” his voice blared through the ship, “emergency position. Repeat, emergency positions. The star is flaring, brace for impact.”

There was not time for saying more than that. Even the dimmest crew member on the safest ship dreaded those words. Despite their apparent strength the hulls of space ships could easily be crushed

by a sufficiently large rock or asteroid. And there were more than enough of those, even this close to the star.

In her seat Valdis furiously worked the controls trying to get the engine powered up to push them away from the star. The engines might not be able to pull them completely free of their trajectory, but if it could bend it just a little it might save them from some of the flare's heavy radiation.

"Shitshitshit. It's not responding. Power levels? Thruster status? Fuel levels?"

As she called out for information Artura read them back to her from the cockpit's monitors. All of it was as it should be, if they simply had to follow Kam's plan, but to adjust their course she needed to pull a miracle out of her sleeve.

Grunting she forced herself to calm down and re-enter the Piloting state as quickly as possible. She knew her head would pay the price for rushing it, but at this point she would gladly suffer the worst headache imaginable if only it meant she was alive to feel the pain.

When her body relaxed time seemed to slow around her and her head cleared. With a detached objectivity she could sense the flare forming at the star's surface below them. They were headed towards the edge of it so they should escape the worst radiation. What she needed to do was blow the sideways thrusters and roll the ship so the cockpit and quarters were protected from the flare. It would expose them a bit to the star's normal radiation, but at least it would be lower than the flare's so it was an acceptable trade off.

In her mind's eye she saw how the ship slowly crept around the star as the flare erupted. It would begin at the surface as a darkening of the star's purple light. Then it would suddenly seem like a part of the star would rise out in space like a bubble in thick gravy. At its highest point the bubble would burst open sending a spray of high energy radiation out into space where it would form a long, widening plume of light.

On the monitors the early warnings of the flare began to show up.

"Shit," Artura said, "it's a big one. Coming out fast."

"I know," Valdis said, "we can't escape it, only try and ride it out."

For several nerve wrecking minutes Valdis struggled to get the ship turned away from the worst of the flare. She succeeded in getting them rolled over so the cargo hold, and the cargo, would shield them and using most of the remaining fuel she got the steered away from the centre of the flare.

But they did not escape it completely.

Shortly after they passed the point of eruption the flare shot out towards them and they were caught in the plume. All around the ship alarms went off as the energy from the star blasted through the hull, bulkheads and everything and everyone inside the ship. The force of the blast spun the ship and sent it slowly spinning as it continued its trip around the star.

The entire ship heaved and bucked as the radiation made space particles burst into purple flames all around them. It felt as if the entire ship was pulled inside out while being crushed at the same time. All along its spine the bulkheads groaned under the strain and both rivets and welds were ripped apart by the force.

Up in the cockpit Valdis was so forcefully thrown against her safety harness that she dislocated her shoulder. The flash of pain brought her out of the Piloting state and made her cry out in pain. Artura fared slightly better. Being more aware of his surrounding had made it possible for him to brace himself better against the impact and he got away by merely being bruised.

Then suddenly the ship stopped shaking as the flare burned out. To Valdis it had seemed like several minutes, but the watch showed that less than ten seconds had passed.

As quickly as they could they began checking the ship's status to see how damaged they were. A large sigh of relief escaped them when they saw that most of their systems were still operational and that the hull seemed to be holding together. There would doubtless be a lot of repair work ahead of them. For now, though, things were looking acceptable.

Valdis put on her headset and addressed the crew. The relief she felt was clearly audible in her voice.

"Captain here. We caught the edge of the flare and got a severe beating. We're holding together and are still flying. Report your status."

The headset returned nothing but static.

"Everyone, status report," Valdis said.

More static.

She turned off her microphone.

"Artura. I've got the controls here. Go back and check their status. Maybe the intercom is just dead."

As he went down into the ship Valdis checked the status readouts. While she was no longer able to properly sense the distorted space around them she could still check the raw data and the navigation system's calculations. Their trajectory had been modified quite a lot more than she had first thought. Fortunately it was away from the star so they were not in any risk of crashing into it. And they would still be pulled all the way around and back towards Indigo Alpha. So things could definitely be worse.

Checking the fuel reserves she saw that they were almost all spent. There might not even be enough to brake down safely. She would need Kam's help figuring out how they could get back down to below one percent, preferably a lot slower than that.

The next minutes she spent double checking the remaining alerts, trying to get an idea of just how badly damaged they were. Most of the ship seemed intact and she began to turn off the alarms that were still blaring. She knew perfectly well that the water heating system had gone. They would just have to make do without hot showers until the mechanics could get the system restarted.

The last thing she checked was the cargo. She postponed that particular check because she was not sure she would be able to remain composed if it had been damaged. A few key clicks later she had confirmed that everything was as it should be. The cameras in the cargo hold had been destroyed by the flare, but the systems monitoring the canisters still all showed green. A single canister showed a slightly raised temperature which was still within acceptable limits.

She was beginning to feel like things might actually worked out well when she heard Artura's voice over the intercom.

"Captain! We've got three people down. And Garey's badly hurt as well. Broken arm, but he's conscious. Kam's not. If you can, get down here!"

Not wasting a single second she hit the quick release on her harness and shouted her acknowledgement as she jumped out of her seat and down the ladder leading down inside the ship.

The scene that met her when she reached the crew's quarters could only be described as pure mayhem. Everything was scattered all over the place. Chairs, tables, cups, plates, food. Her immediate emotion was anger at whoever had not made sure to secure all those things. Then she noticed that they had been secure, but that the force of the flare had simply torn everything apart. The next thing she noticed turned her blood to ice.



Curled up against the walls she saw Kam's still form. Artura and Garey were kneeling next to him, trying to get through to him.

"Kam!" Valdis shouted.

She leapt over a fallen table and fell to her knees next to him. His eyes were closed and a pained look was on his face. It was clear that he had been badly injured. There was blood running from his nose and from a large wound in his side.

"Nonono. Kam! Wake up. Wake up!" she screamed.

Garey put his left arm around her and gently tried to pull her away. His broken right arm hung limply down his side. He was unable to move her away as she did not sense anything but Kam's still form. She could now also see that Kam was not breathing and her screams turned to despairing sobs.

Her whole world seemed to crumble as she looked down at Kam's young face. The blood from his nose had stopped running and she leaned forward and wiped it off with her sleeve. Her tears flowed freely down onto his cheek and letting out a long, half choked wail she let her head fall down on his still chest.

Artura got up and helped Garey to his feet. The two men moved back a little while Valdis let her grief come out. Garey pulled up a chair to sit on while Artura began to feel his broken arm.

"I'm going to miss the kid," Garey said, "there was not a shred of badness in him."

"Me too. Hold still, this is going to hurt like hell."

A sickening crunch came from Garey's arm as Artura put the bone back in place and tears began to run down Garey's cheeks as well.

"The arm or the kid?" Artura asked, his voice almost devoid of emotion.

"Both. Mostly the kid, I think."

The big man let out a few sobs before yanking his head up.

"Fuck! The girls!"

Looking around in the cabin Artura got up. He headed for the rubble around the chairs where the crew had been seated during the flare, but Garey called him back.

"No, they're up in the med bay. Maehan took a tumble."

"Oh, fuck!" Artura said.

He went over to Valdis and pulled her to her feet.

"Valdis! Snap out of it. Shanna and Maehan are in the med bay. We need to get there now."

This had no effect and Valdis pushed him away and quickly hurled herself at Kam again, hugging him close to her. Just as quickly Artura pulled her back up. Kam's body fell to the floor as Valdis could not lift the dead weight of his body and that stirred a reaction in Valdis.

"You fuck!" she screamed, "show some respect. The kid's dead. We fucking killed him!"

"If you don't pull yourself together, Captain," Artura said with a harsh voice, "we might have two more corpses on our hands. The girls are in med bay."

"So? They'll be fine then. If only Kam had been there he might have had a chance."

Artura's brows narrowed and his stare became cold and steely. With a fast movement he sent his right palm across Valdis' face. The sharp crack of the impact seemed to hang in the air and stop time.

Just as Valdis was about to explode she grasped what it was Artura meant. The med bay was on the side of the ship, outside the area protected by the cargo hold. She let out a short cry as she ran down the corridor as quickly as she could.

Following close behind was Artura while Garey's stayed behind and went over to find something to cover Kam with.

When Valdis reached the med bay she was nearly panicking. As she ran along the corridor she had cried out to Shanna and Maehan, but there had been no reply. The walls of the corridor were misshapen and in several places large plates of metal had been torn free and were laying on the floor making it difficult for her to keep her footing.

She barged through the door to the med bay. It was stuck and she had to slam her shoulder hard into it to be able to get through. Once inside she stumbled as her feet slipped on something wet on the floor and she slid forward to crash against the table on the far side of the room, her legs slipping out underneath her inflicting a nasty strain in her left thigh. Behind her in the doorway Artura stopped just short of the large pool of blood. It surrounded Maehan who was lying face down in the middle of it. Not far from her Valdis could see Shanna's legs sticking out from behind the room's single bed. Valdis' feet had made two long lines through the blood, shaped almost like a V pointing toward Maehan's head.

Artura pressed through the door and knelt down next to Maehan. His fingers quickly felt for a pulse.

"She's still alive. Check Shanna," he said.

Without thinking twice Valdis got back on her feet, groaning as her left leg threatened to give way under her. She kept her balance on the blood soaked floor by clinging on the the bed as she made her way around it.

On the other side she saw Shanna lying dead in a pool of blood and vomit. Half her face had been burned to an unrecognisable, red pulp. The gruesome reality of intense radiation burns. Lodged in her right hip was a large piece of metal that had torn straight through her flesh all the way to the bone. Valdis could not tell whether Shanna had been killed outright as the radiation ate its way through her head or if she had suffered excruciatingly for the few seconds it had taken her to bleed to death.

Knowing there was nothing she could do for her Valdis went back to where Artura was examining Maehan. A quick examination showed that she had only been slightly burned and mainly seemed to be suffering from a massive head trauma. There were not other major injuries on her body so the blood on the floor must have come from Shanna.

Valdis met Artura's eyes and saw the question in them. She shook her head.

"Shanna's dead," she whispered. "Let's get Maehan up on the bed so we can clean her up a bit."

Together they lifted Maehan off the floor and onto the bed, taking great care not to slip in the blood. Working quickly they cleaned her of the worst of the blood and began treating her wounds.

"She'll have a severe concussion when she wakes up," Artura said. "We should get her to some other place before she wakes up. If she sees her sister..."

His voice trailed off.

"Yeah. We should be able to get her to her bunk. Get the stretcher ready. I'll see if I can find some bandages in this mess."

The med bay was just as messy as the crew's quarters had been. Anything that had not been, literally, bolted to the floor or walls had been thrown all over the place. And several things that

had been bolted down had been torn off. Valdis rummaged through the drawers and cupboards searching for the supplies they needed. Not just for Maehan, but for all of them. She threw everything in a medic's bag which she slung over her shoulder.

Meanwhile Artura found a useable stretcher and together they rolled Maehan onto it.

"Count of three," he said, "one, two, three!"

Together they slowly carried her back to the crew's quarters. As they walked Valdis could feel the stretcher getting heavier and heavier. The several rushes of adrenaline she had had were beginning to wear off. It was all she could do not to stumble as she lifter first one foot and then the other over the threshold between the corridor and the mess.

When they entered Garey looked up. While they had been away he had covered Kam's body and then slumped down next to him. One of his hands rested on Kam's chest in an almost loving fashion. His gaze was sad as he looked up at Valdis and Artura.

"Oh no," he said, "which one is it?"

Valdis was too tired to reply and when she remained silent Artura answered.

"Maehan. Shanna... she didn't make it either."

They put the stretcher down on the floor. Before it made any sense to carry Maehan to her cabin they needed to clear her bunk. It was bound to be filled with all the things she had enjoyed collecting. From old fashioned books to clothes and several small chests filled with jewellery, trinkets and other bits of knick-knack.

As Valdis removed one item after another from Maehan's bed the reality of what had happened really began to sink in. The consequences. While there was no legal authority to speak of in space she still had the responsibility to keep her crew safe. She had failed. Worse, she had let her own problems with getting a good job affect the others. Now a brilliant young boy was dead. A talented mechanic was dead, while another was critically hurt. Her long time friend Garey had broken an arm. Her ship was a complete mess with broken bulkheads, blood and bodies everywhere.

And she had nothing but a few bruises to show for it. She cursed herself for having thought of the cargo before checking up on her crew. That was about as low as anyone could possibly get. A depth she would never sink to. Or at least that was what she had thought when she was younger.

Something inside her stirred, began to wake up and send waves of energy through her body. Small waves at first, but they slowly grew bigger and bigger. It was the pride she had lost somewhere along the way. Pride in the choices she took. Pride in the people she refused to deal with. Pride in who she was. Or rather, pride in who she had been.

Perhaps, she thought, it was not too late for her. There might still be time to return to her former ideals. She could not undo what her bad decisions had wrought upon the rest of her crew. But she still had a crew. And she owed it to them to steer them through this. To get them back to safety. With hard work, and a bit of luck, that should be possible. If she was really lucky she might actually still have a crew once she had found a safe harbour for them.

With grim determination she quickly cleared the rest of the junk from Maehan's bunk. Then she did something she had not done in years. She got down on her knees and prayed.

Digging into the most private part of her being she felt the familiar, and much missed, tingling sensation of the prayer.

"Hear me," she said. "Hear me! Hear me, Lord and Lady of the stars. Upon this day, with the blood of those I failed still on me, I swear to you that in their names I shall willingly give my soul and body to serve your purpose. Reveal to me the path I must follow and I shall walk it without questions."

As she chanted her voice grew louder and louder until at the end it was almost a shout. When she was finished she remained on her knees for a few moments, her arms raised and spread out to the side. Then she slowly, painfully, got up and turned to see Garey looking at her from the corridor. He nodded quietly.

For a few seconds they stood there, their eyes locked. Valdis knew that Garey had never lost his faith he had kept it to himself. She knew he had done so out of respect for her and the choices she had made when she had felt betrayed by the gods.

Garey raised an eyebrow.

“As much as it pleases me that you’ve found your faith again,” he said, “we do have some things that need tending to. A certain mechanic. Not to mention my arm.”

“Right,” Valdis said, “sorry.”

She quickly went back to where Artura was waiting with the stretcher and helped him carry Maehan into her cabin and get her settled. She was beginning to stir a little. A good sign, but it also meant they had to be sure not to make loud noises or quick movements. They dimmed the light and went outside to talk.

“One of us should stay with her,” she said. “Artura, can you fix up his arm?”

“Sure,” Artura said, “I already set the bone so all he needs is a splint and something to keep it in place.”

Valdis pointed to the bag she had dumped outside Maehan’s room.

“There are bandages, tape, meds and a few other things. I’ll go sit with Maehan until you’re done. Then Garey can take over. I know your arm hurts, but we need to get this ship slowed down.”

The others nodded and left.

Inside the cabin she dimmed the lights a bit more, pulled up a chair and settled down with her hand resting on Maehan’s. From time to time she could feel the hand she was holding move a little, often accompanied by a moan or some incoherent mumbling.

Until Artura and Garey got back there was nothing she could do but sit there, thinking about what they could do to stop the ship without ending afloat in the middle of nowhere.

She went over a lot of different options in her head but none of them were realistically possible. Either they would simply not work, such as them using another gravity well to slow them. Or they would not be effective enough. In the latter category she put the idea of reversing a ship and use their remaining fuel to make a new over-burn bubble. It might slow them down, but from glimpsing over Kam’s shoulders she knew that the energy that had been required to boost them in the first place had been far more than what they could produce now. And since the laws of physics still worked fairly consistently even at their current speed the boost could not do much more than simply slow them down a little or perhaps adjust their course.

For a few moments she considered combining those two ideas to steer themselves to either Indigo Alpha or Indigo Prime. That, she concluded, was even worse rubbish as over-burning was mainly good for giving a huge boost of speed. Besides, the ship was in a terrible enough state as it was so subjecting it to another strong force was likely to tear it apart.

Perhaps prayer really was all they had left at this point in time. If only miracles really did happen.

## 4 Planting the Seed

In the bed in the corner of the control room the sleeping form moaned and rolled over. It started to snore a little, which the operative saw as a good sign. That meant she could work undisturbed for at least a good while yet.

She quickly scanned through the algorithms that were running on the data the station's systems had collected during the flare. The algorithms looked fine although a bit slower than what she could have designed herself. Unfortunately there was not enough time to completely redo them in a way that would not be too obvious. Instead she made some slight alterations to the random generator used in the evolutionary methods. To track her manipulations it would be necessary to manually go through every step in the process that what parameters were used in to evaluate which parts of the data to examine next.

Only few in Indigo had the ability to do that. And if time revealed that the control room operator were indeed that good, which she hoped for but still doubted, she would have the pleasure of presenting him to her master for inclusion in the ranks of their order. In recent years their numbers had diminished so finding a new candidate would indeed earn her the respect of her peers. Her reason for doubting the operator's worth was simply based on past experience. It would not do to too hastily allow less than perfect candidates to pass. They had seen horrible examples of what could happen if that happened.

Before leaving the algorithms to run their course she took a closer look at the data. She already knew what to look for, but not exactly when so it took her some time to find what she was looking for. It was there and the algorithms should be able to find it within a day or so. That would leave more than ample time for her to be on her way again.

Now, the next order of the day, or night as it were, was to update the systems so the operator would become redundant.

Over the past several days she had found out that among the normal technicians on the station were several who could easily run the station's systems if only they had the proper tools to do so.

As she worked she thought of how simple and primitive a station's systems really were. Granted, the technology of all the subsystems was advanced. But those were all individual systems that were well defined and worked only within their own boundaries. The central system, the part that brought it all together, really was not much more than a simple emulation of a neural processor, similar to the human brain, that just responded to various stimuli based on past rewards and punishments.

In essence, the system was no more complex than the savages that had crawled around in the mud before the time of enlightenment.

Working on systems belonging to others was one of her favourite tasks. It was not so much about the technical aspect of the work as it was the challenge of getting inside another person's head. To find out how they thought. It was possible to learn a lot from looking at how others built their systems. And it was nearly impossible to really dig deep inside a system without knowing something about the person who had constructed it.

It was a paradox. The classic problem of the chicken and the egg. Except that in space there were no chickens and any eggs would have exploded due to the pressure.

#### 4 *Planting the Seed*

Every once in a while the control room operator moved in his sleep. When he did she would stop her work, ready to slip away as quickly and quietly as she had when she had slipped past him as he went into the air lock earlier that day.

When she was finally satisfied with her work she logged out of the console, making sure the system did not store anything about her intrusion. While it would be impossible for her to hide that the systems had been changed she could still do a lot to hide the what, how and who.

Her order believed that technology should be freely available to those who needed it. An ideal that had caused no end of trouble, not least by people who confused needing technology with craving technology. It was not their way to work for the highest bidder or to work for those in power.

Instead, they worked for the ones that truly deserved it, the ones who made the human race continue. The common people.

When the order had been forced to hide away behind a veil of secrecy was unknown to her. She suspected some of the masters might still know, but being only a compeer she did not know and it was not where her interests were. What burned in her heart was the desire to spread the technology the order possessed without it falling into the wrong hands.

While the origins of their need for secrecy might not be known it was known that during the war their order had been hard pressed. In the decades leading up to the war the order had become somewhat lax about their vows of secrecy and, eventually, knowledge of their existence and their true purpose had found its way to the public. At the time it had not been seen as a problem as that period had been good to the people, both on the planet and in space.

During the war things had changed. As the destructive nature of humankind combined with the advanced technologies that had emerged over the millennia had sent their entire race plummeting towards annihilation. It had all culminated in the meteoric bombardment of the planet, a direct result of the abuse of the technology her order should have kept secret.

Using artificial gravity generators to pull asteroids out of the belts and comets out of their orbits had been both a stroke of genius and an act of madness. Only that combination could have led to the vicious attack that left the majority of the planet's inhabitant dead and the rest worse off.

In a strange way the attack had served as the catalyst for the changes necessary to rein humankind in, to keep them from damaging more than themselves and their own star system. But the price had been high. The final battles had seen the death of billions of people and the destruction of almost everything the people in space needed for their continued survival. During the war a total of three quarters of the system's population had perished. A blow that, even under the best of circumstances, would have been nearly impossible to recover from. And the state of the system when the war finally stopped was anything but good.

The people left on the planet was forced from their polluted cities and had to return to living on what the planet's crippled ecosystem could provide.

The people left in space was forced to live off whatever they could scavenge from the stations and ship still functional.

Separated by their hate for one another as much as by the technical impossibility of exchanging more than simple messages between the planet and space the system's population had become more and more divided.

All because of one man and his insatiable lust for power, knowledge and technology. A man that was both a necessary evil and, in the operative's personal and unvoiced opinion, a pattern that should never had included in the designs for this universe.

#### 4 *Planting the Seed*

Caught in the middle of this the order had sworn to return to its old ways and work towards finding a balance between what technology existed and what could be allowed in the hands of humans. It often called for long discussions among the masters and they were forced to make hard decisions. A part of her longed for the day she might rise to mastery of her *métier*, a larger part feared leaving behind that which she loved, the actual work she did while travelling from station to station.

Slipping out of the control room toward the air lock she took a last look at the sleeping man. He did not know what changes were coming to his life very soon. That the world he lived in and which made him feel secure was not as it seemed. It would soon be revealed as being merely an illusion built mainly from his own mind's need to disregard what he saw all around him yet was utterly blind to.

She let a small prayer for his safety and sanity flow from her lips, the words the lightest whisper in the faint light of the control room. Then she made her way down the corridor and the air lock.

Her space suit was still where she had left it tucked away under the floor grating near the comms cupboard. She quickly put it on and entered the air lock. Just before she closed the door she could hear movement from behind her in the control room. It would soon begin.

The air lock followed her instructions and gave no indication that anyone was going outside. No alarms went off, no lights to indicate the slight change in pressure or even a single line in the log files.

When she outside she crawled along the station's hull to where her small ship was sitting undetected in a compartment that had been exposed to space sometime during the station's harsh life. She crawled inside the cockpit and began keying in the commands that would release the ship from the station and take her away into space. The station's scanners would not see her leave, she had taken care of that earlier, and even if they had been pointed straight at her ship it would only have seemed like a dark spot against the dark background of space.

On her own monitors she could now pick up her next target. The battered freighter that had been through the flare. If left on its own it would simply pass the station by and continue to its destruction. Finding an inconspicuous way to stop it would be quite a challenge.

She looked forward to it.

## 5 Falling Down

Haneu had a nagging suspicion that he had pushed Gintas too far this time. Normally he could away with a lot of things, especially if it could somehow be excused as being for the benefit of the station. This time it was still good for the station. It was actually good for everyone since having a freighter crash straight into it would be the end of all of them, both the people on the station and those on the ship.

But Gintas had gone strangely quiet and simply agreed with Haneu's suggestions in a curt manner. That made Haneu feeling nervous. Or rather, it made him feel even more nervous than he already was.

The ship he had seen on the scanners was heading straight for them at an estimated four percent of the speed of light and would reach them in only a few hours.~He wished he had been able to find a way to brake the ship's speed and give it at least a chance of not being destroyed against the asteroid field or to leave the system to go hurtling through space.

All he could do was to hope his plan worked well enough that their course was changed enough that they would pass between the station and the asteroid field. It would cost Gintas one of his shuttles, but as Haneu saw it it was a matter of losing a shuttle or losing the shuttle and the station.

He began keying in the commands that would refuel the shuttle and bring it out of its hangar. It would be run on remote control so he ordered a tech crew to check that its comms systems were all fully functional. Then he set about doing the final calculations.

The monitor where his comms line with the ship blinked to let him know there was a new message waiting. They were still on long range comms so it was a brief message.

"Received your plan. Will prepare on our end. Valdis out."

Good, he thought. They would be ready and take care to be in the read end of the ship in case the cockpit got blown out when the shuttle exploded.

His plan was, in all its simplicity, to create an over burn bubble with the shuttle right in front of the freighter. Hopefully it would slow down the ship enough that they could use their remaining fuel to brake down completely. The bad thing was that if he mistimed the explosion just a few seconds it could easily rip the ship apart. The shuttle would not be able to withstand the blast, that much was certain, but the freighter most likely was not constructed with a strong enough front to survive if the bubble went off right in front of it. Or if it did not go off before the freighter collided with the shuttle.

The worst that could happen was if he did not properly predict the freighter's trajectory. That would cause the shuttle to blow up with absolutely no effect and the station would be doomed.

His headset bleeped.

"Yes, boss?" he said.

"This had fucking well better work!" Gintas said. "If not I'll personally space walk over and fucking throw you out the air lock. Without your fucking suit!"

Haneu killed the comms. If Gintas did not have anything to say but threats there was no point in listening to him. Either Haneu saved the station or he did not. If he did there was not much Gintas



could say since he and everyone aboard would owe Haneu their lives. If something went wrong then it did not matter anyway.

Instead of listening to Gintas he ran the numbers through one final time. Everything was looking good and the ICC packages agreed with his own hand-written programs. That rarely happened as he usually found that his own programs were both faster and more accurate than ICC's. For a few moments he wondered if he had accidentally stumbled upon a package that used some of his own, original code from when he worked at ICC. Or perhaps they actually had a few decent programmers there now. Either way, the programs agreed and he took a deep breath before sending the launch command.

Using the station's external cameras he followed the shuttle as it cleared the station and began accelerating away from towards the intersection point. When he got a clear look at it he raised an eyebrow and momentarily turned his headset back on.

"The fuck?" he said to Gintas. "That's your personal shuttle?"

"Damn right it is. The only one left in good enough condition for this. Just make fucking sure it's put to good use."

"Will do, boss. Out."

He turned to the monitor and sent a confirmation to the freighter that the plan was going according to schedule. Then he closed his eyes for a while and just leaned back in his chair to keep an eye on things. All the while he kept both his own and ICC's programs updated with the new data from the station's scanners.

Far too slowly for his comfort the shuttle sped through space while the freighter came closer and closer. When it was finally within range of decent voice communication he hailed it and did not have to wait long for a reply.

"Aruna station space control to the freighter Home, please respond."

"Aruna station, this is freighter Home. Good to hear your voice. First mate Artura speaking."

"Greetings Artura, STC Haneu here in this end. Be advised that the shuttle is still heading for the intersection point. Everything looks good. How's your status?"

"Thank you, Haneu. Things are bad here. Two dead, one seriously injured. The rest of us fairly okay."

"Sorry to hear that," Haneu said, "we'll do our best to help you. Have you run the numbers on your end?"

"Sadly, no. Our navigator's one of the dead. And, frankly, none of us have the skills to do them. We'll begin sending our position and numbers now as we're in range."

"Excellent. I'll be busy in this end, but will stay in touch frequently. Aruna out."

Haneu patched up the feed from the freighter so he would use the latest data in his algorithms. As he had foreseen it was necessary to make slight changes to the shuttle's course to compensate for the speed of the freighter.

While they all waited for the crucial moment Haneu had the chance to talk to the captain of the freighter. The impression she left on him was one of a competent, but worn-out leader. Not just worn out from their current problems but from the past many years. He hoped this would not be what pushed her over the edge into apathy. At least not until they had got the freighter away from the station.

"Aruna to Home, come in."

“This is Home,” Valdis replied, “reading you clearly.”

The distance was now so short that there was not more than a minute’s delay in the communication.

“We’re beginning the countdown in five minutes. Make sure you are all strapped in.”

“Copy that, Aruna. If all goes well we’ll see you on the other side.”

Haneu did not reply to that. He had no plans of leaving the control room and since the freighter would continue on towards the stations near Indigo Alpha he did not think it likely that he would see them again.

When the right time came he began the over-burn procedure on the shuttle. He had timed it right and the bubble formed and burst just a few kilometres in front of the freighter.

It seemed eerie to watch the numbers on the monitors in front of him. The shuttle was too far away for a video feed so he could only observe the data he got from the scanners. What it showed was a large energy spike followed by an odd black spot similar to an eclipse. After that the over-burn could be seen as a prolonged inverted gravity field.

The freighter’s speed dropped drastically, far more than he had expected and it was far down into the normal speed levels for near station cruising.

He quickly readjusted his algorithms with the new data and let them analyse in the background as he got in contact with the freighter again.

“Aruna to Home,” he said, “please respond.”

It took far longer for the reply to reach him than it should have. For several minutes he sat worrying that the force of the impact with the bubble had been more than what the freighter could withstand. The scanners showed that it should be structural intact. But that was far from the same as the people inside it being still alive. The heavy deceleration could easily have smashed someone against a bulkhead if they had not been properly strapped in.

When the reply finally came he could almost hear the pain captain Valdis must be feeling.

“Home to Aruna,” Valdis said, “what the fuck just happened. It felt like we hit a fucking planet!”

“Copy that, Valdis,” Haneu said, “I’m rerunning the numbers. Something’s way off here. Are you guys okay?”

“More or less. Even more banged up, but still alive. We’ll have to check on Maehan, but she should be securely strapped in.”

“Good. My readings show that you’re down to normal system speed. Can you confirm that?”

“Yes, Aruna. Don’t know what the fuck happened, but we should be able to cut the speed completely ourselves. I’ll check our status and get back to you.”

“Copy that. Aruna out.”

Haneu put on his headset to get in touch with Gintas again and update him on the situation. As he did so he noticed that his programs had finished and he began sifting through the results. What he saw did not please him. The shuttle’s engine had over-burned just like it should and it seemed like the bubble, when it burst, had been just as he had expected it to be. But the energy readings he picked up from the bubble could in no way have slowed down the freighter that much. It should still have been running at more than one percent. Instead it was now, relative to its previous speed, at a full stop. If it hit the station it would still have catastrophic effects, but it was not. The fuel they had onboard should be more than enough to brake completely and get safely to the station.

He put on his headset.

“Boss, new development.”

“What? Did you divert the fucking ship?”

“Not as such. . .” Haneu said, “they should get here in an hour or so. To dock.”

“The fuck?” Gintas roared, “You said they’d keep going?”

“Yeah, well,” Haneu said.

He stopped as he did not know quite how to phrase it. After a few seconds he went on.

“Some weird shit happened. The freighter slowed to normal speed. I’ve cleared them to dock outside Bay G. It should still be operational enough to get the ship moored.”

“They’re not getting on this fucking station.”

“No offence, boss, but you’re an arse. They’ve got two dead and a seriously injury. If they can’t dock here they’re dead for sure. They’re docking and that’s final.”

“Fuck you. If they dock that’s the last fucking thing you’ll do running the fucking traffic on my fucking station!”

“Yeah, right,” Haneu said, “and how will you maintain the system? You’ll crawl up here yourself?”

“No need. We did a full systems scan this morning and the last upgrade fixed the comms problems between the main station and your fucking precious control room. The normal techs can run it so I no longer need to listen to your fucking jokes. You’re done here!”

“Fine!” Haneu said.

Without waiting for more he yanked the headset from the console and threw it across the room. He got up and kicked the chair back in frustration. What the hell had just happened, he wondered.

As much as it vexed him that something strange had happened with the bubble he just could not believe what Gintas had told him. Systems did not simply repair themselves. They were not organic in that way. Automated repairs, yes. To some extent. But what Gintas had mentioned would have required a full rewiring of most of the station’s cables. That quite simply could not have happened.

His mind went off on a tangent as he thought of whether it had been the chief technician who had been behind it. It would explain why so little other work had been done on the station. However, it just did not seem likely. If Gintas had wanted to get rid of him he would have put him in charge because, no matter how much they argued, Gintas knew Haneu always did his best. Of that Haneu was very certain. So if the systems really had changed that much something else was afoot.

While he was thinking about these things he began to pack his few belongings. From somewhere he dug out an old bag he had used to haul his things back and forth between the laundry. It was not very handy, but would serve to hold his clothes until he could get a ride off the station.

He was furious with Gintas, he reflected. How much crap had he not had to put up with over the years? Every single day there was some new problem he had to fix. And it was not like he got any kind of pay out of this. Last time he had checked there was still no money in his station account.

That led him to think of a far more practical problem: what would he do?

“Fuck you, you sack of shit!” he shouted at the broken headset.

Then he just stood there in the middle of the control room and looked around. His bag fell from his hands as the full reality of his situation began to sink in. He had no money, no job. Nowhere to go. A small sob escaped him as he slumped down on the floor to cry silently.

It was not until a loud beeping from the console got through to him that he stopped.

Slowly, achingly, he got up to see what was happening now. It was Valdis from the freighter.

“Home to Aruna, do you copy?”

Without really wanting to he put her on the speaker and dug around for an old microphone. In the mean time Valdis kept hailing him.

“Haneu, you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Sort of. You got the docking course?”

“Yes, it came through a while ago. We’ve got enough fuel to make it.”

“That’s good. Once you get here you should check in with the tech crew. They’ll be running things from our end.”

“What? I thought you were the controller?”

“Just got fired.”

“Fuck that. You just saved your boss’ station and he fires you? What kind of moron is he?”

“He’s an moron whose strings are being pulled. Weird shit’s happening here. Don’t ask.”

“Got it. I’ll let you know when we’re docked. Oh, and me and the crew figure we owe you one hell of a big drink. Any good bars on the station?”

“There’s the 714. Quiet and you’re left to yourself.”

“Meet you there later, then. Over and out.”

Haneu let her words hang in the air for a while.

“Over and out.”

That somehow summed up his current situation quite nicely. He went to pick up his bag and headed towards the air lock.

Pausing in the corridor he went back and took a copy of as much scan data as he could fit into his data pad. He was still very keen on finding out what had happened both during the flare and with the bubble. While he was at it he used the chance to purge his own programs from the system. He knew it was childish, but did not care. He was angry enough with Gintas that he actually felt like wiping the entire system. That would, however, be too destructive and easily traceable. His own program he could always claim had been of no real use. Taking down the entire system was likely to mark him so he would never find work on any station again, not even with Gintas’ worst enemies.

When he was sure there was nothing else he needed from the control room he flicked the light switch and went to put on his space suit and float over to the main station.

As he passed through the open space he imagined he could see the freighter as a small speck of light out in the direction of the asteroid field. It might only have been a random piece of space trash or a small meteor, but the idea of it being the freighter appealed to him. There was something amazing about watching the large space ships float gently through space with his own eyes. Even the best quality video feed could not give the full scale of things.

For several minutes he hung outside the door to the station’s air lock entertaining the idea of staying there to watch the freighter’s final approach. In the end he decided against it as it was already beginning to be uncomfortably cold and the suit he had was so worn from repeated use that it did not offer as much protection against Indigo Beta’s radiation as it should.

Reluctantly he opened the air lock and went inside the station.

On the other side the chief himself had shown up. That struck Haneu as being odd. The chief had always had something against Haneu, mostly because the chief did not get to boss him around like he could with the normal tech crews. Worse even, Haneu could always put in priority requests that messed up the chief’s plans completely.

Not really knowing how he should react to this he just nodded at the chief.

“It sucks,” the chief said, “and I can’t say I like this.”

That caught Haneu by surprise. Not so much the words as the sincerity he could detect in the chief’s voice. He had half expected some gloating remark or at least a brusque manner. Instead he got sympathy.

“Gintas didn’t tell me until this morning that he had upgraded the systems,” the chief went on. “And it just doesn’t make sense. Fuck it. I know he didn’t use my crew. He booted you so I’m guessing he didn’t let you in on it either. So who the fuck did it?”

“Don’t know,” Haneu said, “and I don’t care. I’ll just get going. Find some stuff to do until the next transport off, I guess.”

The chief shrugged.

“Yeah. Say, if you can swing a fake ID I could give you some part time job. Shitty work, mostly, since it’d have to be far away from anyone else on the station. But it’d be something to do.”

“Appreciate it, but no thanks. I just want to get off this hell hole.”

“Fair enough. Fly safe.”

“Take care.”

Not looking back Haneu made his way to the central hub in the station. Along the way he tried logging into the station’s systems but found that Gintas had not only revoked his administrative rights, he had also blocked him so effectively that it would be easier to just go check the public screens rather than go through his list of alternative logins. The walk would also do him good. He had not exactly got a lot of exercise out in the control room.

As he walked down the corridors there were more and more people around him the closer he got to the central hub. What struck him as exceedingly strange was that no one seemed to recognise him. He could have been any random stranger dragging a busted, oversized bag through any station in the system. Once or twice he thought someone had recognised him, but every time they just looked again without a second glance. In a way that made him both sad and slightly angry.

He had dedicated his every waking moment to running the systems that made these people survive and they did not even know who he was.

That made him angry.

What made him sad was that no one seemed to even care. He heard no one talk about how the station was run. They all seemed wrapped up in their own affairs without even thinking about how they could breathe, where their food came from.

It was as if they did not even care.

To someone like Haneu who was a technician at heart that just did not make sense. How could people not care about such things? It reminded him of why he generally avoided other people.

In the central hub of the station he quickly went to the info screens while cursing to himself. If he had only had access he could have found the information he needed simply by using his datapad from anywhere in the station. Instead he had to stand between sweaty people who were shouting at each other. After standing in line for several minutes it was finally his turn. It took him only a few seconds to look up when the next transport off the station was scheduled to leave. Ten days. That made him curse even louder which in turn drew an angry look from a woman using the screen next to his. She said something that Haneu only vaguely registered. Something about watching his language in front of her children. He just glared at her, blanked the screen and left towards the lifts to the lower decks.

He did his best to block the noise of the crowd out of his head as he went to the bar. It was not often he visited the main station, it was even less often that he visited one of the bars there. The only one he found somewhat tolerable was the 714 as it was usually a quiet place and its patrons seemed to mainly be people who wanted to be left alone. A fact the bartender respected.

When Haneu entered the bar the bartender only briefly looked up and then went back to wiping glasses. It did not seem like they had actually been used, but he wiped them anyway. Haneu had never really thought about that before but now it struck him that perhaps that was all the bartender really had to do in between serving customers. In a way it was like the standard tasks Haneu himself did, maintenance that was not strictly necessary but which he nevertheless did on a daily basis.

There were only a couple of people in the bar so he had no problems finding a table in the corner, slightly concealed behind one of the beams that supported the ceiling. The 714 was a small bar hidden away on one of the lowest reachable decks and could trace its origins back to before the great war. It had started out as an illicit drinking hall where people of questionable morals could meet and engage in shady deals.

As time passed and the station was taken over by various people after the government had collapsed. A few of them had been honest business people, but most had been nefarious crime lords of some sort. Aruna's placement on the outer side of the asteroid field made it uninteresting for the larger syndicates in the system and so it had been fairly easy for more or less any petty thief to try to carve out his own little empire in space. The result of this was that there was no longer any actual laws on the station and so the 714 had eventually grown into just another bar, only one placed so far from the central hub that most people found it too much effort to ever go down there.

After existing for two thirds of a millennium the bar had slowly been worn down until one owner had simply decided that it would be far easier to let go of the whole concept of decorating the bar and simply let the customers bring their own things. Eventually the bar took on a life of its own and despite it only having a small group of regulars it still managed to stay alive as the centuries ticked by.

And so it was that Haneu sat down on an ancient metal stool and leaned back to rest his head against the bulkhead. He closed his eyes and began thinking seriously about what to do. Ten days to the next transport. He would have to find somewhere to sleep. That should be fairly easily taken care of, assuming he had had any money.

With a sigh he double checked his datapad. Navigating through the menus to access his station account he expected to see virtually no credits available to him. He got himself quite a big surprise when he saw the seven digits. It did not make sense until he checked the transactions. It seemed that contrary to his nature Gintas had decided to pay the wages he owed Haneu. Over ten years pay in one single transaction. He even recognised the origin account as being the station's official salaries account which could only be accessed if proper authorisation had been made. He should know, he had designed that system after Gintas had discovered someone stealing from his employees' pay checks. Or maybe Gintas and his accountants had never discovered the small piece of the system that had anticipated that Gintas might "forget" to pay him if something ugly were to happen. Haneu might not be good with people, but that did not mean that he was completely naïve.

He flicked off the datapad and put it away. At least he did not have to worry about cash. That felt good and he allowed himself to relax and just sit there for a while without thinking about anything.

He had only been sitting there for a few minutes when the crash of a glass hitting the metal table in front of Haneu startled him out of his half sleep. He opened his eyes and blinked as he looked up at a battered woman. She was a few years older than him, perhaps forty or so. Her face was covered in scratches and bruises and her arm was in a sling.

“Wake up,” she said. “Here’s that drink I owe you.”

At the best of times Haneu did not like people. When they got that close to him he got nervous. Being woken up by strangers slamming drinks down in front of him made him downright scared.

He scrambled to his feet only to find that that was actually worse since he was more than a head shorter than the woman.

“Eh? Drink?” he said.

Conversations had never been his strongest side. The woman seemed to pick up on this fairly quickly. She pulled up another chair and gestured for him to sit back down. He did.

“Yeah, you’re Haneu, right? Bartender told me. I’m Valdis. From the ship you just saved.”

“Oh, right. Yeah.”

An awkward silence spread while Haneu tried to think of something to say. Valdis turned around and waved two men over and introduced them.

“This is Artura and Garey. Maehan was accepted into your med bay without too much fuss. At least not after the medics get a hefty bribe. I thought no one ever actually used leeches in medical care anymore.”

Garey gave a harsh, coughing laugh. All three of them looked exactly like what they had been through. They all sported various bandages and blood was splattered on their clothes.

“Yeah,” Valdis said when she noticed how Haneu was looking at them, “we’re a sorry looking bunch.”

Artura nodded.

“Could be worse,” he said and closed his eyes, “at least we’re alive.”

Both Artura and Garey had also brought their drinks to the table and sat down. This pushed Haneu slightly more into the corner and put him on the defensive.

The freighter crew solemnly raised their glasses.

“To Kam and Shanna,” Valdis said, “may their souls forever shine among the stars.”

Not knowing if it would be ruder to stay out of the toast or not Haneu simply lifted his glass briefly and took a small sip. It was the bartender’s home brew which meant it was not exactly good, but at least it could be forced down without coming back up again.

Apparently joining in on the toast had not been the wrong thing to do. The others seemed to approve and Haneu felt himself relax a little.

“Sorry about your friends,” he mumbled. “Can’t have been a good way to go.”

Valdis shook her head.

“No,” she said, “I haven’t seen anything like that before. Kam getting disembowelled was bad enough. Shanna... well, I can tell from your face that I should shut up about it.”

“Yeah, sorry. Never did have a strong stomach when it came to things like this.”

He looked at the drink in front of him.

“Or this for that matter,” he continued.

His comment seemed to lighten the mood slightly because Artura nearly choked on his own drink as he began to chuckle. Artura raised his glass again. This time somewhat less solemn and in a more bright mood.

“To lost friends,” he said, “and to new beginnings.”

They all emptied their glasses. To Haneu the last part was the one he felt strongest about. He waved away Valdis' offer to buy him another drink and pointed to his stomach.

"What are you going to do about repairs?" he asked. "Your ship must look a mess after all this."

"True," Valdis said. "So far we've managed to sweet talk your chief tech into refuelling Home so we can actually get moving again. But I'm not sure that really matters much since every single part of the ship is so banged up that it's unlikely that we'll ever be cleared for undocking again."

"And", Garey put in, "with the prices we had to pay the medics to take care of Maehan we're not exactly well off."

"Shut your fucking mouth, Garey," Valdis snapped. "I don't fucking care if we have to stay here the rest of our lives if it gives Maehan a chance to recover!"

Garey lifted his hands in a surrendering gesture and the topic was dropped. After a few seconds Valdis drew a deep breath.

"What Garey says is true, though. We might actually end up staying here forever."

"How badly damaged is your ship?" Haneu asked. "I mean, what's the bare minimum that needs to be fixed to get you away from here?"

A low chuckle escaped Artura.

"Give the man a drink and he throws you off his station."

Haneu shook his head. A plan was beginning to form in his head.

"No, that's not what I meant. It's just that I seriously need to get away from here and, well, I might be able to fix a fair bit of the minor damage in space. So if we could get the ship limping along I'd be more than happy to work my arse off fixing it up. If that won't be possible I'd pay a fair price to just get anywhere else than here."

He blurted out the last bit in a way that made the others draw back a little.

"Say," Valdis said, "what kind of trouble are you in, Haneu?"

"Not trouble. It's just that I never really liked being here. I liked working here, yes, but since that fuck muppet Gintas put an end to that I just want to get away."

"Fair enough," Artura said, "but what about the ship. The chief didn't exactly seem like the charitable kind."

"No," Haneu said, "but he does have a good nose for smelling easy cash. And with the lack of heavy traffic he's got plenty of tech crews sitting around doing nothing."

"Bored tech crews is any chief's main headache," Garey said, "but how do we convince him to get them in gear?"

"Just leave that to me. Gintas' way of enslaving people is to only pay in station credits rather than system credits I don't actually need the money I have here anyway and as I said, I really want to get off this station. Call it payment for the ride or whatever."

"Seriously?" Valdis said.

She was practically sitting open mouthed. Someone offering to fix her ship for free was not something she came across often. And the few times it had there had been some nasty strings attached.

"And you just want to hitch a ride?"

"Sure, why not?" Haneu said. "It's better than sitting here just waiting to grow old without anything to do."



A couple of brief looks passed between Valdis and the two others. They quickly seemed to come to an understanding because she nodded.

“Okay,” she said, “we’ll gladly take you up on that offer. The main problem right now is that one of the engines has gone bad and the cockpit is seriously banged up. Good news is that the main system is not in the cockpit so we’re only talking new consoles and not a complete new system.”

Haneu nodded. He had figured as much from the scans of the ship.

“And about that,” Valdis continued, “the cockpit was damaged when you slowed us down. How did you manage to do that? I thought the shuttle should only have been able to deflect us? Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

“I really don’t know. Some strange shit happened and I haven’t had a chance to look at the data yet. You’re right. The shuttle should only have deflected you, not slowed you completely. If you don’t mind I’d like to use your ships computers to analyse the data. I’m kind of locked out of the station’s systems and my datapad is basically just a piece of crap for this.”

“Sure thing,” Valdis said, “it’s not like it’s being used for anything else at the moment.”

They talked on for some time while they went over which repairs would be necessary to get the ship up and running again. Haneu got in touch with the chief and managed to convince him to do an unregistered job on the freighter. It took a fair bit of his money to convince the chief, but as he had expected it was not a big problem convincing him to do it. When everything had been settled they got up and made their way down to where the freighter was docked.

When Haneu entered the engineering room of docking bay G the first thing he noticed was the monitors showing the rear half of the freighter. At least one of the engines had been shaken loose from the hull and was more or less being held in place by its fuel lines and cables.

He sat down at the console and began going over the work orders the chief had entered into the system. Everything looked good which did not really surprise him. Whatever the chief was no one could accuse him of being inefficient or incompetent. If he did something he did it well.

“Okay,” he said, “this all looks good. Now, I’ll run a quick test of your systems and then I’ll go over to take a look at the cockpit. After that I seriously need to get some sleep. It hasn’t exactly been short days lately.”

“Not a problem,” Valdis said. “We’ll head up to check on Maehan. If you’ve got any questions let me know. And if anything is in the way or looks too bent out of shape just kick it aside. That usually works.”

Haneu gave her a sideways glance.

“Hardly the way to run a space ship, eh captain?” he said.

She rolled her eyes.

“Clearly you’ve never served on an independent ship before.”

“Independent? As in you owe it yourself?”

“Proud owner of a fucking pile of crap. Ain’t I lucky?”

With that she went out the door with Artura while Garey remained behind. He had taken it upon himself to try and get something done about the interior of the ship. More or less every loose item had been broken and there was a lot of work to be done simply cleaning up after the cans that had been thrown through the crew’s quarters and the kitchen leaving a patchwork of differently coloured, and flavoured, mess in their wake.

Being left to his own devices Haneu also dedicated a large slice of the ship’s system to analysing what had happened when the shuttle over-burned. He had no idea what could have caused the

increased effect, but he had a fairly good idea about how much energy was required. Calculating that part had been easy enough. It was the how and why of it that escaped him at the moment.

Most of the repairs he needed to do on the freighter was fairly basic compared to his work maintaining the station's systems. He could more or less do that by routine and that allowed him to let his mind wander to explore possible scenarios that could have led to what had happened.

His ideas ranged from the plainly impossible to the outright silly, but none of them could really account for what he had seen. In addition to the large amount of energy that seemed to come from nowhere he was also puzzled by the short period right before the over-burn where the shuttle seemed to be eclipsed by something. That just did not make sense. If there had been some kind of object between the shuttle and the station it would have been visible both before and after.

"Unless," he mumbled to himself, "unless it's not the object we see, but the light bending around the shuttle."

Feeling that he was on to something he began writing a completely different kind of analysis software. His work on the freighter would have to wait until the next day. This was more important to him and he did not want to risk losing his line of thinking.

He worked long into the night until he finally felt he had got the calculations right. It was something he had noticed before during over-burns, but never had given much attention. The force of the bubble seemed to play weird tricks with the light and it could, occasionally, make the bubble work somewhat like a prism bending the light and actually revealing objects on the other side of the bubble.

The physics needed to do this was actually beyond what he felt comfortable working with so he had to rely on the standard programs to do the hard calculations. It would take longer than if he wrote specialised software. But it would have to do. There was still a couple of days work on the ship and he should get a result well before that. Even if whatever he got was not helpful he would still have a basis for comparison and maybe even a good starting point for writing a more specialised program later on.

Satisfied that the program would yield some kind of result he decided to go to bed only to remember that he was no longer in his control room and therefore did not have his bunk in the corner. He did not know where the others had gone, but he figured they probably would not mind if he crashed on the ship so he went to the air lock and, for the first time, entered what was to become his new home for a while.

Inside the ship he could see the scars left behind by the rough treatment the ship had got. In the corridor from right inside the air lock and all the way to the crew's quarters the floor was littered with things that had been thrown around or broken off the walls. Broken lamps, smashed crates, cutlery. It looked like Garey still had a lot of work ahead of him.

When he reached the crew's quarters he looked around for someplace to crash. He felt uncomfortable about using one of the cabins. It would be embarrassing to take one of the others'. And it would be downright insulting to take one that had belonged to one of the dead crew members. Instead he flipped one of the couches back on its feet and adjusted the seats so he could lie fairly comfortable. Somewhere in the mess he also found a blanket that he wrapped around him as he curled up and fell asleep.

The next morning he was woken up by the sound of someone walking softly around near him. When he sat up on the couch and opened his eyes he saw Valdis and Artura.

"Morning," Valdis said. "Slept well?"

“Sort of.”

“Why didn’t you take a bunk?”

“Well,” Haneu said, “I wasn’t sure who slept where and I didn’t want to impose, you know?”

“Yeah,” Artura said. “Listen, why don’t you take the one over there. It’s been empty for a while so no one should mind. Right, Captain?”

Valdis nodded. She walked over and pushed open the door to the cabin with her boot.

“You’ll have to clean it yourself, though.”

“Sure, no problem.”

The other two seemed to have been up for quite a while so he went off on his own to find some breakfast. Valdis had told him that he was free to eat whatever he could find on the ship, but since it was pretty much all scattered about the kitchen he figured he would go inside the station and find something from one of the small kitchens.

He returned with a full stomach and went inside the engineering room to check up on what the chief’s crew had done overnight and to see if there was any result from the programs he had started the night before.

It seemed like the chief had assigned some of his best people to the job. Almost all the exterior damage had been patched up. Not a full repair, that would have been equivalent to rebuilding the ship from scratch, but they had done a good job fixing things. The hull should hold together for at least a few years before needing more repairs. Assuming it stuck to normal operations. As far as the insides of the ship went it turned out that they had been very lucky. It was only the cockpit that had sustained any significant damage. All the important electrical systems were functioning normally and only a little cable work needed to be done to get the auxiliary systems, mainly lighting, back to normal.

All in all it looked like the ship would be ready to leave the station in another day or two. That made him glad. The sooner he could leave the better.

He still needed to run a full diagnostics of the system and he set about doing that. Without any major issues with the ship’s backbone system it was mainly a matter of checking that all the subsystems reported back like they should and that none of them seemed to cause problems. There were a few glitches in the heating system that he passed on to the chief along with a schematic of the faulty wiring, but that was it. The rest of what he needed to do on the systems required the ship to be flying so he could optimise things according to how it actually handled in open space. He could run some simulations though they were unlikely to yield any improvements as long as the ship was docked. If he got bored before they left he might do that, but for now he had something far more interesting to dig into.

With a few key clicks he brought up the results of the nights calculations. It took him a few minutes to sift through them and figure out how to best continue from there. After a while he figured that since he had the whole day to himself he might as well try and build a visual representation of what the programs told him had been on the other side of the shuttle.

For good measure he threw some fancy graphics to make everything look less like simple grey polygons on a black background. For purely mathematical purposes the graphics were superfluous, but he always found that it somehow made things more real to add that extra little touch to them.

When he had finished he ran the small animation. The sight made him nod and smile slightly.

“I knew it,” he mumbled. “I knew they were real.”

“Who’s real?” Valdis said behind him.

Haneu had not heard her enter the room. Cursing himself for not paying attention he quickly began to hide the animation only to change his mind. If he was to hitch a ride with her it would not do to appear to be hiding things from her, especially things that could very easily be very important for the survival of her and her crew.

“Look here,” he said, “this is a playback of what happened yesterday. Or at least it’s a reconstruction. It takes into account the bending of the light that happens around an over-burn bubble.”

As he explained what she was looking at he ran the animation in slow motion.

The shuttle was easily recognisable. He had let the animation be centred on it as it moved away from the station. Just before it blew up entirely he let the camera float around to see the scene from the side. In the background the freighter could be seen as a blurred line heading toward the shuttle. The algorithms had not fully taken the relativistic distortion into account so the freighter’s actual position was not possible to determine. To represent this he had shown it as a probability field rather than as a solid object.

Off to the side, hidden from the station by the shuttle, another ship could be seen. It was a lot smaller than the freighter, almost as small as the shuttle. The lack of size only made it that much more impressive when a blueish white beam leapt from it to the bubble next to the shuttle.

“That beam,” Haneu explained, “was not actually visible to the human eye. It’s just a visualisation of the energy burst the scanners picked up. They could only catch it because it was so intense that it was warped around the edges of the bubble.”

“Right,” Valdis said.

She had sat down in the chair next to Haneu, her eyes glued to the screen as she looked on in wonder. During her career she had seen a lot of ships. None of them resembled the small craft Haneu’s animation showed. It looked sleek and fast and had an air of efficiency to it that made even the most agile and deadly military fighter seem like an asteroid in comparison.

“Wow, just look at that,” she said.

“It might not actually look like that. The basic shape is mostly accurate despite it being created from the reflection of that energy beam. The colours and material was something I just felt was appropriate.”

Valdis nodded approvingly.

“Ever considered going into space ship design?” she asked.

Haneu shook his head and continued the animation.

“See? Whoever was on that ship gave the bubble one hell of a boost just before it burst. I have no idea how they got out of there without being blown to bits. Or maybe they were blown up. There’s no trace at all of them afterwards.”

On the screen they could see how the freighter became more and more solid as its speed lowered. Haneu had it on slow motion so it took almost a full minute in which the details of the freighter became clearer and clearer in a very unreal way. When he reran it in real time it took less than a second.

“Auch,” Valdis said, “no wonder my head hurt. How much force did we hit there?”

“Not sure. It’s impossible to get the exact figure due to the distortion. But a rough estimate would place it around 400 gigas. Give or take a little.”

Valdis whistled.

“How could the old bird survive that?”

“Guess your ship is well made. Not surprising, I guess. It’s, ahem, of a somewhat elderly persuasion, if I am not much mistaken?”

“You calling my ship old?”

Haneu began to mumble an apology, but Valdis cut him off.

“She’s well over her retirement age. She’s almost 200 years old and should have stopped flying decades ago. Don’t worry, if you didn’t call her old there’d have been something wrong with you.”

She winked at him and gestured for him to continue.

“So the question,” he said, “is who was on that ship?”

“And the bonus question is why they did what they did only to disappear?”

“Yes. It doesn’t seem right that they blew up. A ship that could pull that could of energy out of its sleeve, so to speak, must have had some other hidden tricks that would allow it to slip away unharmed and undetected.”

“So you’re saying it’s still out there somewhere?”

“Perhaps,” Haneu said, “but since there’s no kind of ship in Indigo that even resembled this one I’ve got a really horrible suspicion.”

“What?”

Before continuing Haneu looked around suspiciously. He knew that Gintas had spies, both organic and inorganic, all over the station. He leaned forward and whispered into Valdis’ ear.

“What if it’s the FreeTechs?”

Valdis’ head flew back as her laughter rang through the room. It took her several minutes before she could control it enough to be able to speak again.

“You must be joking,” she said, “that’s a myth!”

“Shh!” Haneu hissed, “I’m not so sure.”

He looked around again, waited for Valdis to settle down and then continued whispering.

“I’ve seen all sorts of strange behaviour lately. Here on the station. Gintas sacked me because all of a sudden all the systems not only began to work again, they had also been re-routed so they could be controlled from the main station. That just doesn’t happen on its own.”

A shiver ran down his spine and his face went a little more pale than it already was.

“And then there’s this feeling I’ve had lately of someone watching me.”

Anticipating Valdis’ reaction he waved his hand.

“No, not just the normal paranoia. I’m serious. The last couple of days it felt like there were someone else in the control room. You know, a slight change of the way it smelled. An unexplained noise here and there. Things that had moved just a fraction of an inch.”

“You sure you shouldn’t be keeping Maehan company up in in sick bay?” Valdis asked. “You sound like you’ve been alone out there for too long.”

Haneu frowned. Then he pointed at the ship that was still on the screen in front of them.

“You sure?”

“Good point. But whoever the fuck that is I just find it hard to believe that there’s this hidden group of wankers who fly around and help people without wanting anything in return. Trust me, kid, I’ve seen all there is to see of human nature and this is just not how we are.”

“Just think about it for a while. What else could it be?”

“Remnants from the old military fleet? Rumour has it that they actually had cloaking devices during the great war and that that was how they managed to defend the planet for as long as they did.”

She wiggled her fingers and opened her eyes wide in a maniacal way.

“Or,” she said, “maybe it’s aliens.”

Once more she began to laugh, although this time a bit more controlled. Seeing the look on Haneu’s face she put her arm on his shoulder and apologised.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to poke fun at you. That ship definitely has me worried. Not just because it’s unlike any other ship. It’s because it saved me. That nearly makes me scared shitless, wondering what the fuck they did that for. It’s not like we had valuable cargo or anything.”

“What exactly are you hauling? If you don’t mind me asking. I couldn’t see that from the ship’s systems. It just said organic material.”

“Ha! That’s because I kind of find it embarrassing to admit that I’ve sunk low enough to make a living hauling first grade shit from one end of the system to the other.”

“And by shit you mean. . . ?”

“I mean shit. Literally. The contents of the sewage tanks on the mining stations on the other side of the asteroid belt. Fifty mega tons of human waste. And that’s after it’s been boiled down.”

“Fuck me! Doesn’t that smell?”

“Only if the canisters break. Which a couple of them probably did.”

She began to chuckle.

“But don’t tell Garey that. He’s in charge of unloading the cargo on this run.”

Haneu began to laugh. Partly because of what Valdis had told him and partly to get some release for the worrying thoughts the strange ship had started in his head. For a while they kept joking about how many canisters of sewage they thought Garey could stand before giving up and fleeing from the cargo hold. Through his giggles he managed to get a few words out.

“What the fuck are you going to use it for?”

“Don’t knock it. There’s surprisingly good money in this. Some of the factories closer in need it for their plasma arcs. To keep them from running dry, I guess.”

“Seriously? Well, I guess that does make sense.”

Then Haneu sobered a little.

“Listen,” he said, “don’t mention this to any of the others. I did the calculations on your ship’s systems only so there’s no trace of it in the station’s computers. There may be a less sinister explanation, but paranoia’s not a problem, you know, so let’s keep this between ourselves.”

“Probably best, yeah. How’s the repairs coming along?”

Haneu gave her a quick rundown of their status. She was very pleased and got up to leave. As she did so she squeezed his shoulder.

“You did really good. The only person I’ve seen who could run numbers as good as that was Kam, our navigator.”

For a few seconds she was silent as she tried to control her voice and prevent it from breaking.

“And you actually did something to save our lives with that shuttle.”

Haneu opened his mouth to protest that it had not actually been him that had saved them, but Valdis grip tightened to become almost painful and he kept quiet.

“I’d really like you to consider more than just hitching a ride with us. We need someone to keep our systems running and coming up with crazy ideas like that. Besides, I think you’d fit in well with us. Once you get to know the others I think. I hope. That you’ll agree. Just think about it.”

With that she quickly left leaving Haneu sitting behind with a strange feeling inside him. He looked at his watch and was surprised to find that he had spend well over an hour with Valdis. It had, literally, been years since he had spent that much time in anyone’s company and it made him uncomfortable. He liked the privacy of the control room. Suddenly opening up and just chatting with someone else was a new experience to him and as much as he had enjoyed it while it happened he did not like it now, afterwards.

It was not that he did not like Valid or Artura or even Garey, though the latter struck Haneu as being somewhat snobbish. They had some kind of bond between them that he could feel in a way he was not used to. To him other people were generally either background noise to be ignored or foreground noise that annoyed him infinitely. These three people seemed to somehow just slip close to him and make him relax.

He briefly wondered if the last member of their crew, the mechanic called Maehan, was like the others. He would probably find out soon enough, but decided that for now he would assume that she must be. From the way they had talked about her, and the two who had died, it seemed like they almost loved one another.

Despite being aware of the concept of family Haneu had always been too wrapped up in his own thoughts and projects to ever really get to know the feeling of having someone in his life that he could not imagine being without. Ever since he had been old enough that someone would entrust him with their systems he had been treated like a treasured property that should be kept away in a quiet corner where other people could not get to it and steal it away. Growing up almost completely separated from other people had had its effect on him, both in good ways and bad. He had been given the chance to let his talent unfold completely making him one of the most brilliant people in Indigo system.

But the cost had been that neither he himself nor anyone else realised it. The reason for that was that since he never really talked to anyone no one had had a chance to know what he was thinking. The people at ICC had only been interested in taking advantage of a very competent programmer for as long as possible. They had taken his decreasing performance as a sign that he was burning out and fired him rather than try to find out what was wrong. If they had dug even a little inside his mind they would have realised that even the hardest tasks they gave him had simply left him bored out of his skull.

After ICC he had, out of necessity, had a little contact with other people, but had been scared away by the fact that most of the ones he met did their best to take advantage of him. It was not until he was spotted by Victor Gintas that he found some kind of structure in his life. Gintas had been just as bad as the other people who tried to exploit Haneu, but at least Gintas had had the good sense to hold on to him and cut him some slack. Unfortunately, Gintas had also kept Haneu bottled up and while Haneu had opened up enough to engage in a little bantering with Gintas that was the limit of Haneu’s socialising.

Haneu got up from his chair in the engineering room with his head feeling strange. Everything was happening too fast for his liking. Yesterday morning everything had been normal and his life had been limited to doing what he lived and breathed for and not being bothered too much by other people. Now he was about to leave his home behind in a small tin can with a group of strangers that he would not be able to avoid. He had unconsciously checked the plans of the ship and it made him nervous that it was so small. Not that he needed more than a comms cupboard to keep him happy. But he needed to be alone in it.

The fact that a part of him actually felt excited about this made him even more scared. For a while he seriously considered just ducking back into the station and disappear somewhere. Maybe he should take the chief up on his offer. Crawling away to a distant part of the station seemed very tempting.

He went over to the wall monitors that showed the feed from the external cameras. He pressed a few controls and watched as the cameras swivelled around to show the ship from several angles at the same time.

The freighter was bulky and cumbersome to look at. And yet there was something comforting about its round form and scarred exterior. It stirred the thought in him that perhaps it was like himself. It, too, had just been through some hard changes that had left it battered and bruised. But it held together and kept flying, undaunted by what the universe had thrown at it.

He let the thought roll around in his head for a while. Having never been one to think much about his life and where he was headed he had got just as violent a trashing as the ship had. The only difference was that his bruises was on the inside. The symbolism of it all made him shiver. Perhaps the ship had not needed him to save it. Perhaps it had been him that had needed to be saved by the ship.

Haneu zoomed the view of one of the cameras out so it took up the entire monitor.

Valdis and her crew had named the freighter Home. Perhaps it really could become his Home as well.



## 6 Rendezvous

On the outskirts of the asteroid field near Aruna station the operative were sitting calmly in her ship. There was still a few minutes until she should be able to pick up the stranger's ship on her scanners.

While she waited she realigned her ship to face the direction she had been told by her masters the stranger would be travelling. That would make it easier for them to match speed and less time would be spend. The stranger had only grudgingly been allowed into Indigo System by her order because they had deemed him to be trustworthy. The operative was not entirely certain of this. She would hold back on passing judgement until she had seen with her own eyes that the stranger not only did what he had promised but also discreetly left the system again later.

If he did not it would fall to her to minimise the risk of anyone else in Indigo knowing that there were outsiders visiting. So far the FreeTechs had managed to keep the presence of other colonised star systems a secret to the main population. Centuries earlier it had been common knowledge that Indigo system was one of the original colonies that had been settled by the first space faring humans. As the system had torn itself apart internally communication with the other systems had been lost and after the great war the knowledge of the other systems had simply been forgotten.

Of all the many secrets the FreeTechs worked so hard to keep that was one of the biggest. And just as important to them was the protection of Indigo system from the other star systems. There were still many valuable minerals and frozen, organic resources to be found in the system's asteroid belts. If the other systems ever learned of those things it would simply be a matter of time before Indigo's resources would be stripped away by an interstellar swarm of locusts in the form of corporate mining ships.

At exactly the right time her scanners showed the stranger's ship as it exited the asteroid field. She hit her thrusters so her speed matched his when he drew level with her.

To avoid the risk of detection she transferred the data he needed using a needle point laser. His instructions were to hide from Aruna station by keeping on the exact opposite side of the shuttle and wait for it to over-burn. Then he should hook his power systems into the over-burn bubble and boost it enough that it would slow down the freighter to a more manageable speed.

As she scanned the stranger's ship she gave an approving nod. It would be more than adequate for this task. So much more adequate, in fact, that she made a mental note to forward the ship scan to her masters. There was something about this ship that none of the other ships from other systems had had. It seemed far too potent to her. If more ships like this began to show up it would be difficult for the FreeTechs to prevent them from entering the system undetected. She was afraid to even begin thinking about what consequences that would have.

The stranger confirmed her orders and the operative slowed down again to keep her distance. She knew the controller at Aruna station would be watching intently and she could not afford to be spotted. The existence of the FreeTechs should remain a secret to him for the time being.

As agreed the stranger kept his needle point laser pointed back at her ship and fed her his data stream. He should be able to do so until he reached what he had called the pinch point out of the system. She shook her head at the naïve word the outsiders used for this. While she could relate to

the concept of pinching together space to jump instantly from one point to another she also knew enough about the theory to know that it was possible to do far more than just jump through these pinch points. It was a divine technology, one that allowed its wielder to fully enter their own soul.

Her own theories on the matter were far from fully developed, but she truly believed that it was the human soul that served as the driving force behind folding space and time. The phenomenon had never occurred naturally, only when humans had been involved.

It was an important step on the path to the creator of all things.

Leaving aside her musings she kept a close watch on the incoming data as the shuttle slowed down to a halt in the freighter's path. Its position was just as it should be. The Aruna controller did indeed know what he was doing. It was a shame he had not been able to find a large enough ship that the over-burn could have slowed the freighter without the assistance of the stranger. Theoretically she could have used her own ship. Theoretically. The practical problem was that doing so would reveal not only her existence near the station, but most likely also give away irrefutable proof of the FreeTechs to whichever scavenger picked on the carcass of her ship.

For a few brief moments as the bubble began to form behind the shuttle she thought the stranger was going to break his promise. He did not. At the very last moment she picked up an intense energy blast between his ship and the bubble. Though it would not be completely hidden to the station's scanners it should just show up as an abnormality, something that could not be explained. It would probably tip off the controller to the fact that someone or something had interfered, but he would have no solid proof.

The freighter slowed down like it should. The force of the bursting bubble did shake it horribly, but as it glided past she could see that its hull was still intact and its electrical systems, including life support, were still functional.

When the freighter was far enough away that the stranger would not be picked up by the station's scanners she ordered him to carry on towards his pinch point. He did and in less than an hour she received the confirmation that he was exiting the system. Attached to it was a final set of data from his scanners. It showed a small metal object floating slowly through the system. Far too small to be picked up by anything but extreme short range scanners or visual feeds it could easily have straight through the system without anyone noticing.

Now that she had noticed it, however, it was her duty to investigate. So she fired up her drives in stealth mode and headed towards the pinch point and the metal object.

Thinking back to her history lessons at the FreeTech academy her blood turned to ice. If it was what she thought it was it might be far worse than if an entire fleet of outsiders showed up to blow up the system.

All the way to the pinch point she prayed to the creator that it would not be Drax.

## 7 A New Home

Less than two days after Valdis had docked at Aruna station she left it again and she was glad to be back out in space. Not because there was anything wrong with the station as such. Haneu had some horrible stories to tell, but they were, she guessed, coloured by his lack of socialising with the other inhabitants. Most of what he knew he had picked up, it turned out, from overheard conversations on the station's intercom.

Valdis made a mental note to keep an eye on what Haneu did to her ship's systems.

She had fortunately not had to deal directly with Gintas because that was one thing Haneu was completely right about. That man left a trail of despair and fear in his wake. He would stop at nothing to get what he wanted and if he lost interest in something or someone he would not lift a finger to prevent bad things happening to them.

Things had gone surprisingly smooth at the station. Despite Haneu's claim to the opposite the chief had been very helpful. She had caught half a conversation between two of the technicians and it seemed like Haneu had spent a fortune in payment, bribes really, to the chief and the tech crews. A part of her felt guilty about that, another part saw the practical side of things. She had to agree with Haneu that since he could not use his money outside the station he needed to trade them to something anyway. And he had chosen to trade them for a lift on her ship. The least she could do was to make sure he got to somewhere nice and not too unsafe.

"So," Artura said, "we're flying again. And actually a bit ahead of schedule, believe it or not."

"Yeah, it's weird. We should be able to get the goods to Noru before she blows a gasket."

They were sitting in the cockpit among all the rubble left behind. Only the most important systems had been fully restored, the rest they would repair as they got time and money to do so.

"You've got the ship," Valdis said, "I'll go check up on Maehan."

Artura nodded and Valdis left through the hatch and went down to Maehan's cabin. When she got there she found the room almost in darkness and Maehan was lying awake just staring blankly up in the ceiling.

"Hey," Valdis said, "can I come in?"

A gentle sob confirmed that she could so she slipped in and sat down in the chair next to the bunk. She reached out and took Maehan's hand in her own. For some time she just sat there without saying or doing anything. She knew Maehan suffered badly, more from the loss of her sister than from her injuries. The medics on Aruna station had diagnosed her as having a mild concussion and insisted that if they were to let her back on the ship she should remain in her bed for at least a week.

Valdis had a suspicion that the medics had not taken into account the endless thoughts that being forced to do absolutely nothing would put in the young woman's head. When Maehan had been brought back on board she had seemed almost catatonic, something Valdis had put down to the concussion and the painkillers Maehan had been pumped full of. As the day went by it had become more and more clear to all of them that it was mainly grief that made Maehan stay in her bunk.

“There’s nothing I can do or say to make her come back,” Valdis said quietly, “you know that. But we’re all here for you for when you need us. Okay?”

Maehan nodded and smiled a little even as a tear ran out of the corner of her eye and headed for her ear. With her finger, Valdis intercepted it and wiped it off.

“Just take your time. The tech crews on the station were nothing like you or Shanna. But they did manage to get us up and running again so there should be no major troubles anytime soon.”

For the first time that Valdis knew of Maehan actually replied with more than short words.

“You let some gits inside my ship? Fuck you!”

Unable to help herself Valdis laughed. It was good to hear Maehan’s spirit were at least a little higher.

“If you’re not on your feet that’s what happens, you know. No, stop! Get back down.”

Maehan had begun to sit up and Valdis had to take a firm grip on her arms to get her back down on the bunk.

“The other gits, the medics,” she said, “insisted on you relaxing. So you just do that.”

“But I can’t. When I’m awake I keep thinking of her. And when I sleep I dream of her. Why...”

Her voice trailed off as she began to cry.

“Why did she have to die? What the fuck went wrong?”

Valdis sighed.

“Nothing went wrong. Not really. Just a fucked up situation that no one could have seen coming.”

“I know that,” Maehan snapped. “That doesn’t mean a fucking thing. Shanna’s still dead.”

There was nothing Valdis could say to that. Being a captain meant she had had to go through her share of pseudo therapist session with crew members. It did not, however, mean that she was particularly good at it. She padded Maehan’s arm and squeezed it gently.

“Just don’t forget about yourself. Or what Shanna would have wanted. She’d have been furious with me for even thinking of letting those fat, lazy station techs on a ship.”

“And she’d have been damn right, too!”

There was a furious edge in Maehan’s voice that made Valdis think it was only a time before Maehan picked herself up and could continue.

“Good. Then here’s the deal. I’ll keep the new guy away from your engines so you don’t have to worry about that. In the mean time just get your head in order and get some rest.”

“Probably the best. Shit, my head hurts!”

Valdis noticed that Maehan still had not made any indication that she had realised they had a new crew member on the ship. That made her nervous as it might mean that Maehan was far from well and might even be suffering from something worse than a concussion.

“Is it getting worse?”

“No, not really. I’m just getting seriously tired of it hurting all the time. I’d pay good money to have just one hour where it didn’t feel like some fuck head with a power saw was redecorating the inside of my skull.”

The mental image of that made Valdis think back to the burned mess that had been Shanna when they found her in the med bay after the flare. She quickly pushed those thoughts from her mind and focused on the woman in front of her.

“Can’t say I envy you that part of your vacation.”

“Vacation? Fuck!” Maehan said, “It’s a work accident so this is full-pay sick leave!”

“Ha! You think? Well, yeah, of course it is. The least I can do.”

Maehan relaxed a little more and closed her eyes.

“Pass me a couple of pills, please. I think it’s best if I try to sleep a little more.”

“Of course. Just take it easy. I’ll stop by in the morning to see how things are. If there’s anything just yell.”

She found some pain killers in the large stash the medics had generously given them when they had fetched Maehan out of the station’s sick bay. She had a feeling that Haneu might also have something to do with that.

One of these days she would need to sit down with him and have a very long chat. Not because she was annoyed or angry with him. There were just a lot of hidden sides to the kid that she really wanted to know about. Nothing could make her life more troublesome than suddenly finding out new things about people she thought she knew.

On the bunk Maehan was beginning to slip away in the hazy comfort of the drugs so Valdis got up and went back to the crew’s quarters. Garey was sitting there, Haneu was nowhere in sight.

“So,” Garey said, “how’s she holding up?”

“I think she’s getting better. But I’m not sure. She sometimes seems to be blocking everything out. I’m sure someone would have something clever to say about that.”

“I do, actually. It’s a defence mechanism. Lets her deal with the things she can wrap her head around first and then she can take the rest later when she’s got more strength.”

“The fuck?” Valdis said, “who died and made you head shrink?”

“Can it! You think I got to know half the people in the system without learning a little about how people work on the inside?”

“Good point. So it’s a good sign?”

“For now, yes. Leave her some room for being erratic for a few days. If she keeps pulling more and more into her own little bubble it’s bad. But no point in worrying about that now.”

“If you say so, doc,” Valdis said, half mocking him.

“Now,” she continued, “where the heck did Haneu crawl off to?”

“He mumbled something about checking up on the systems in the cockpit. He went up there just a few minutes ago.”

“Good. They definitely need a good overhaul.”

“Yeah. By the way, if you’re worried about Maehan blocking us out then you should take a look at Haneu. That kid just can’t sit still. Real edgy, if you ask me.”

“Kid? Ha! He’s a year older than you, Gar.”

“Older? Fuck you!”

“I’m serious. I asked around a little on the station. Strangely, no one there seems to know much about him, but one of the medics did let slip that he’d been on the station for 15 years. And had a full education before that. And he worked for ICC at some point. They had his age in the his med journal.”

“Shit. He only looks like he’s just about ready for a chat about those strange downs on his chin that’s beginning to grow. Older than me? Well, what do you know?”

Valdis left him to his musings and headed for the cockpit.

“Hey Haneu,” she said when she got there, “what’s the game plan?”

“Game plan?”

Haneu looked and felt more than a little confused. Then he got her meaning.

“Oh. The repairs. Game plan, right. I figured I’d hook you up with lights for starters. Then the scanners need to be re-wired and after that...”

After several minutes of him droning on about the details of what needed to be done she held up her hand to silence him.

“Sorry I asked. I’ll put it down as ‘fix the cockpit’ for now. Everything else seems to be in order so just take it nice and quietly and fix the things you see fit. Once in a while I’d like a short status report, but nothing fancy. Basically just a quick list of what’s working again and what’s not.”

Haneu’s face lost some of its enthusiastic glow that it always got when he was working.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Oh, cheer up,” Valdis said, “I didn’t mean it like that. You just lost me with the details. You’re doing fine so don’t mind this old crone.”

Her attempt at making him relax had obviously failed for now he really looked confused.

“Just get back to work,” she said and smiled.

He did so, but soon found some excuse to leave the cockpit.

“Are you still sure about him?” Artura asked.

He had kept quiet during Valdis’ talk with Haneu.

“Hmm,” she replied, “yes. Yes, I am.”

“Me too. Was just checking. It’s going to take some time breaking him in, though.”

“Yes, but it could be worse. At least we don’t have to both break him in and teaching him how things work on a ship. He’s fucking fast.”

Nodding his head Artura pointed at the monitors in the cockpit’s main console.

“Look at that. While he’s been here he’s cleaned up the system. It’s using less than half the resources it did before. No one just does that without having years and years of experience.”

“Judging by his character I’m guessing he’s put in twenty actual years of work in the past ten.”

“Not one to sit around twirling his thumbs, I guess. You know who that reminds me of? Kam.”

Valdis sat silently for a few moments as she thought about Kam. She still felt it had been anything but fair that he should die so young. She pulled herself together, slapped her hand down on the console and sat up straight again.

“Right,” she said, “yes, he does remind me of Kam as well. But he’s not and that’s the end of it. He does good work, he wants to get away from the station and he pulls his weight. That makes him fine in my book.”

“Hey, no need to get all worked up.”

“Fuck you. Anyway, are the systems all up and running?”

Artura tapped a few keys to double check their status.

“Yes, all systems are good. What’s the course?”

“Straight for The Bulb so we can unload our cargo.”

“Aye aye, captain,” Artura said. “If you’ve got things to do I can take it from here.”

“Thanks.”

After punching in the course to The Bulb, one of the largest station’s in Indigo system and the place to be if you wanted to buy or sell things, Valdis got up and looked around before leaving. She was impressed both at how damaged the cockpit had been and at how much had already been cleaned up. Home was a good ship, old but sturdy. And thanks to Haneu it looked like it would be running for many more years.

“We really should find some way of thanking Haneu for his help,” she said.

“Definitely,” Artura said, “but I think we are, in a way, by taking him in and giving him something to do. He doesn’t strike me as someone who’d want a bunch of flowers and a box of chocolates.”

“Hey! If you ever get your hands on a whole box of chocolates you’d fucking better share with me or I’ll rip your head off!”

Winking at her Artura turned back to the console and the task of flying the ship. Valdis went through the hatch.

Down in the central computer rack Haneu was finishing up some repairs to the auxiliary system. They had not so much been broken as become disconnected from the main system. It was not overly complicated work and mostly consisted of finding out which wire to connect to which plug. Right now that suited him just fine. He had far too many thoughts roaming around in his head to be able to really focus on anything too hard.

He had still not completely come to terms with having left Aruna. It had been where he lived for so long that he still felt as if he would return to his bunk in the control room after a few hours out here on the ship. That would take some getting used to, he figured. But he was still determined he had made the right decision. There was nothing more for him on Aruna.

Another thing that had him off balance was captain Valdis. It had felt so natural to talk to her that he had simply agreed to join her crew without thinking more about it. And when they talked he found himself relaxing in a way he had never done around other people before. At least, he relaxed right until the point when he realised that he was speaking with her. Then he would become nervous and not really know what to say until one of them found an excuse to leave.

And that was even worse than talking to her: one of them leaving. It made him feel like there was something missing. He did not understand it. She was just another person. It was not even because they had much to talk about. He would usually go on about technical details and while she seemed to be interested he suspected it was simply because it had to do with her ship and therefore relevant to her.

He cursed himself as a small blue flash and a tingling sensation in his fingers quite physically, and a little painfully, made it clear how unfocused he was.

“Fucking crap,” he mumbled to himself.

The wire he had been handling was halfway ripped through so his fingers had touched the shielding at the same time as he touched the case of the computer he was connecting it to. Obviously whatever was in the other end was running on another phase than the computer. He looked at the markings on the wire and shook his head when he deciphered them. That made sense. It was the control signals to the cooling array in the kitchen. That drew too much power for it to be connected to anything else.

He checked that the wire was not too badly damaged to be used, which it was not. From his toolbox he pulled out some heat shrink tubes and covered the damaged part as much as possible. Then he plugged it in, checked the readouts on his datapad and nodded to himself. That was still working.

The ship had taken quite a beating, but so far there had mainly been superficial damage. A few cut cables, broken wire ducts, one computer that had just died. But that was it. The exterior had fared far worse, but the chief's tech crews had patched up the ship quite nicely.

This left a part of him feeling sad, he was surprised to realise. It meant there was probably no reason for him to stay on when they got to The Bulb. And he did not cherish the thought of finding a third place to live and work.

A noise down the corridor made him stick his head out to see who was coming.

Oh great, he thought as he saw Valdis heading in his direction.

"Hey Haneu," she said, "Garey said you were down here. Everything okay?"

"I think so. Still some work to be done, but we're getting there."

Again he felt awkward speaking with her. He had to force himself to not go through all the details of the work he had done.

"That's good," Valdis said. "Listen, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. Got time?"

Expecting her to tell him that while they liked his work they would have to leave him at The Bulb he nevertheless agreed and put down his tools. Being empty handed made him feel like something was amiss so he subconsciously picked up a couple of cable strips which his fingers began to play with on their own.

"What's up?" he managed to say.

"Artura and I were talking about you. How much you've helped us out even though you don't know a fuck about us. Sorry, it's blunt, but that's how it is, right?"

Speechless, he nodded.

"The thing is. You've been through the systems we have here. And it's not like they're fucking fancy or anything. So, what I'm saying is that..."

Haneu broke her off and said with a sad smile.

"That when we get to The Bulb I should leave, right? No worries. I'll get off."

"No!" Valdis said, "No, that's not what I meant. I want you to stay on board."

"You do?"

"Yes. If you want to, that is. I mean, it'll just be the same small systems here. Nothing fancy as on a station or anything. Just normal stuff. Fuck, I'm not selling this very well."

Haneu looked at her for a few seconds not knowing what to say. He was not used to people treating him like he was too good for them. And now Valdis seemed to be very interested in keeping him onboard the ship.

When he did not reply Valdis kept going.

"So, um, if you want to stay here you're more than welcome. I, that is, we figured it's the least we could do after you got us back on our feet."

Still he said nothing. This was one of those times when he felt really awkward in Valdis' presence. And the way she was leaning slightly towards him. Or maybe he was just imagining it. He blinked a few times and cleared his throat.



"I'd like that. Don't worry about the systems, I can always find something to work on. Been kind of doing that the last fifteen years anyway."

"Really? I'm really glad to hear that."

"Yeah? So, erm, would it be okay if I cleaned out some of the stuff in my bunk? There's a lot of junk in there."

He had been meaning to ask her that when he first came aboard but had not been able to find a way that did not sound ungrateful. Now that he would be staying on for a while he figured it would be okay to ask. Clearly it was.

"Of course," Valdis said, "it's your bunk and whatever's in there's been there for so fucking long that no one cares about it anymore."

"Cool. I'll do that. Later, I mean. Still got some things to work on here. And after that there was something I wanted to show you."

"What's that?"

"Some things I picked up on the scanner. I've been running some analyses on the data for the past few days. Don't worry, I ran them nice so they wouldn't take up resources. I think there's something weird going on. A bit like with the shuttle, just in a different way."

"Interesting," Valdis said, "care to give me a hint or are you just going to tease me?"

Haneu went completely blank just as he was about to speak. While he stood there looking like a fish out of water Valdis punched him on the shoulder.

"Oh, come on," she said, "you need to relax. Or it'll be fucking hell here cause that's the way we get by here in space. We poke fun at each other, it lightens things up and makes everything run smoother. Though not in your case, that's for sure."

"Erm, okay. Well if that's the case, then yeah, I'm not going to tell you."

Forcing himself to be a little experimenting Haneu stuck his tongue out to emphasize the childishness of the whole thing. That made Valdis laugh. She clapped her hands together with a smile.

"Good! We'll make a fucking human being out of you yet. When you're done down here come show me what it is you've found."

"Will do. By the way, how's Maehan? I asked Garey if he knew anything about the engine's state and he told me to, what was it, yes, to leave it the fuck alone or Maehan would fucking rip my fucking head off."

"Sounds like Garey. Maehan's not doing too well. Mainly her mind, I think. Losing her sister like that. . . not good. Fucking pile of shit, in fact. Of course, you fiddling with her engine might speed things up a bit. You don't mind being slapped around with a monkey wrench, do you?"

The look on Haneu's face was one of horror.

"I'll take that as a no," Valdis said, "so you'd best stay off her turf."

"Sounds like it."

"Okay, I'll let you have some peace and quiet to work in. See you later?"

Haneu lifted his hand to his head and gave a small wave to acknowledge that he would see her later. Then Valdis left and he went back to work.

There really was not a lot to do so he finished up in less than an hour and went up to find her. Since it would be long before they came across anything even remotely interesting on their way to The Bulb Valdis had let Artura take some time off and were flying the ship herself. If sitting in a chair letting the auto pilot do its thing could be called flying.

“Finished?” she asked.

“For today, yes. Now, here’s the thing I wanted to show you.”

He sat down in the co-pilot’s seat and pulled up the data on the monitor. Unlike his earlier presentation this time he only had the raw numbers. To most people it was just garbage. A random mix of digits in something almost resembling columns. To Haneu it was information. Knowledge. A clue to what had really happened.

“See this bit? This is the high-UV band during the flare. And next to it is the same band several hours later and seen from the other side of the station. See how the numbers go up? The spike there?”

Though she was not entirely sure if she saw the spike Valdis nodded. The numbers did grow higher from a seemingly stable normal value, but it had been a while since she did data analysis by hand.

“So what does that mean? That Beta spat out some UV light during the flare? That’s hardly exciting.”

“No, no. It’s not. Pretty boring, actually.”

Valdis raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, even to me it’s boring. What’s not so boring is what you find if you look at the time difference. Let’s assume that there were no other UV band stars flaring in the general direction of, oh, hey, completely empty space. And let’s assume that the second spike, the one I picked up long after the flare, is the reflection of the spike from the flare.”

“Ooohhh,” Valdis said. “Beta sends out a lot of UV light. So fucking much, in fact, that when it hits something there’s enough left that the reflection makes it back to the station. That means there’s a huge, unmapped object there?”

“No, it doesn’t. It means there’s a very small, very reflective object out there. Could just be a ship, but take a look at this as well. That’s another spike from the flare and the reflection coming back some hours later.”

“Don’t get it.”

“Then look at those numbers in the corner. That’s the direction the reflection came from.”

She looked at him.

“I fucking suck at numbers. Can you plot it somehow?”

“Sure, just a sec.”

It did not take long before Haneu had converted the time and position of the reflection to a small graph. Valdis whistled slowly as she saw what he meant.

“So what you’re saying is that whatever caused that reflection was moving in a straight line?”

“Not sure it’s exactly straight, there must be some curvature due to the . . .”

He caught the look in her eyes and cut the explanation short.

“My point is that it seems to be coming from outside Indigo System and heading on a course that will take it very close to Indigo Prime.”

“Oh, fuck! I thought those surface monkeys didn’t go into space anymore?”

“They don’t. That’s the scary part. And there’s nowhere that ship, or thing or whatever it is, could have come from inside the system. It’s just too far from anywhere. And I’m pretty sure it’s not a meteor because we can pick those up on the scanners. This one gave off no signature, except for during that high-UV blast.”

“No way! That can’t be true!” Valdis said.

“They’re not supposed to exist, no. But what if they do. Stealth ships. Wow! The thought just blows the mind, doesn’t it?”

“More like fucking fries it. Hang on. Can you send that trajectory to the navigation console? I need to check something.”

It did not take Valdis many seconds to superimpose the their own trajectory and the one Haneu had transferred. They would not only pass the small object’s trajectory, they would actually fly alongside it for a couple of hours a few days later.

“I don’t like this,” Valdis said.

Haneu could do nothing but agree with her.

“This is not a coincidence,” he said. “There’s something really scary going on. Should we tell the others?”

“Definitely. I just don’t know exactly what to tell them.”

“Maybe the best thing would be to just tell them what we’ve seen here? I just didn’t feel like blurting this out before you got a chance to think about it. I mean, you’re the captain and kind of the boss, right?”

Valdis sighed.

“Not so much boss as just the person who gets all the fucking crappy things to do. Like actually deciding things. Don’t get me wrong. I fucking love my freedom.”

She paused.

“Never mind,” she said, “that’s my headache. Let’s go down and tell them. I’m sure they’ve got a thing or two to say about this.”

Together they went down to the crew’s quarters where Valdis let Haneu present his findings. Afterwards followed a heated debate. Artura was curious to see what it was whereas Garey made it very clear that he thought they should alter their course completely. He did not like that someone had been messing with their plans.

Right in the middle of Garey and Valdis trying to shout each other’s heads off they all heard a noise coming from Maehan’s cabin. When they turned to look they saw her standing in the doorway looking thoroughly miserable. Valdis jumped up and went over to support her.

“Here,” Valdis said, “you shouldn’t be up and about.”

“Yeah, but you guys are shouting so loud I can hear you clearly even with the door shut. Figured I might as well join in.”

All around the room people looked slightly embarrassed. They had all forgotten that Maehan needed peace and quiet.

“So,” Maehan said, “what exactly did you find out?”

Clearing his throat Haneu held out his datapad so she could see the screen. On it he had plotted their course and the expected trajectory of the small object they had seen.

“Basically it’s a small something we don’t know what is that we’ll be flying alongside sometime soon. If it was just a meteor or comet that’d be the end of it. Problem is that it doesn’t register on the scanners so we’re figuring some kind of stealth ship.”

“And it doesn’t change course?” Maehan said, “sound a bit strange.”

“Yeah, unless whoever’s flying it doesn’t know we’ve spotted it and thinks changing course might give it away.”

“Good point,” Artura said. “And all the more reason to investigate.”

“Get closer to that thing?”, Gary said. “Excellent idea. Let’s just go and get ourselves right next to something that could, for all we know, blow us to bits. And probably would to keep anyone else from finding out about them.”

To prevent another round of shouting Valdis held up her hand and the others quieted down.

“Here’s the deal,” she said. “We’re not holding a fucking show of hands. This isn’t a democracy, this is my ship and whatever we do I take the fucking fall for it if something goes wrong. So I get to decide.”

She rubbed her hands across her face and looked at Maehan. Deep down she knew what she had to do, there was no question about it. But it was likely to hurt her crew and she did not like that.

“Artura, I want you to adjust our course so we pass even closer to it. Haneu, you’ll figure out some way of actually finding it. It doesn’t show on the scanners so we only have your calculations to go by. No offence, but that’s just not enough to find such a small ship in such a big void.”

Haneu nodded to let her know he agreed.

“As for you Garey, you get the best of it all. You get to come up with a way to get across to the ship, maybe even tow it. If there’s no pilot or crew we need to do something or it will head straight towards Prime which it’ll hit and that’s the end of it.”

Taking a deep breath she looked sternly at them all. They kept silent though she could see that Garey was about to burst with some unsaid words.

“While we pass it,” she said, “I need to be Piloting since we’re at point five percent. That means that I can’t be fucking baby sitting you so I need you to do your best. You got that?”

When no one answered she raised her voice and repeated herself. That got a mumbled reply from them which she took to mean that at least they got the general idea of things. She looked at Maehan.

“How do you feel?”

“Like a pile of shit,” Maehan said, “but getting better. I should be able to give Garey a hand putting a tow line together.”

“Only if you’re up to it. This goes for the rest of you: if she looks like she should be in bed you’re under fucking orders to get her to bed. And tie her down if you need to. You understand that?”

“Yes, captain,” they all said.

“Good. Now, Maehan, get your ass back in bed so you can get better. The rest of you’ve got things to do so go do them.”

Over the next days they did their best to prepare for the encounter with the other ship. At first Maehan could only stand being up for short periods of time, but as she gradually got better and also became more and more excited at the prospect she became able to help Garey for a few hours at a time before she collapsed on her bed again.

Meanwhile Haneu did his best to adjust their course so it would take them within a few kilometres of where the other ship should be. From there on they would have to rely on Valdis’ Piloting skills to get them close enough to do a visual inspection. Haneu was also working on recreating the

high-UV bursts that had let him see the ship in the first place. It was hard going as he had no real way of testing it so he had to check and double check everything. He pondered doing some test runs to try and get a fix on the ship. But as the bursts he needed to generate would put a severe strain on their engine he did not want to over do it. And even if he could have there was a very real risk that a series of non-standard bursts from the freighter would alert whoever was on the other ship that something was up. Altering their course was bad enough, but at least that would look like they were trying to approach The Bulb from the edge of the system rather than straight from Aruna. That was not entirely unheard of as people with shady cargos sometimes wanted to hide their origin.

Down in the cargo hold Garey had prepared two of their space suits so they were fit for a brief space walk. Next to the cargo bay doors he had hooked up a several hundred metre long wire. It would not be strong enough to use as a tow line, they had nothing left that was, but using a magnetic grappling hook they should be able to use it to get back and forth to the other ship. That was the best they could do on short notice. Maehan had suggested he moved the cargo hoist around so it could be used to pull in the wire quickly if they needed to. If something went wrong whoever was out in space would be grateful for that.

When Valdis and Haneu felt certain they were getting close to the other ship Valdis withdrew to her cabin to meditate and prepare herself for the strain of finely manoeuvring at relativistic speeds. It helped her a lot that they would be at the same speed as the other ship, but due to the relativistic distortion it would be nearly impossible for her to see other objects around them unless she Piloted. And with two people out in open space she needed as much warning as possible in case they got close to something. Even the tiniest meteor would kill instantly at this speed.

They had agreed that Haneu should begin scanning for the other ship when they should be within 100 kilometres of it. That should give them enough time to make the final preparations and get Artura and Garey ready to catch the other ship. Maehan had insisted she was well enough to handle the hoist and with the only other option being to let either Garey or Artura go alone Valdis had agreed to it. But only on the condition that Maehan rested before so she would not be too weary.

Up in the cockpit Haneu sat at the console and took a final look at his new scanning routines. He was sure the high-UV band burst would work. What he was a bit unsure about was how the engine would hold up. It would not cause any engine failures, but it might cause a drop in their speed. Perhaps even so much that he could only have one or two bursts in total.

When they reached the position where they were close enough for him to be able to see the ship he pushed the button. There was a small fluctuation in the engine's power level but nowhere near what he had feared. And almost instantly he had the other ship on the scanner. Right where it was supposed to be. It unnerved him a bit that it had not changed its course even a little bit. It really had gone in a completely straight line and was still headed directly towards Indigo Prime.

He quickly sent a message over the intercom to Valdis' cabin to let her know she should get up to the cockpit. Less than two minutes later she was strapped into the pilot's seat and began giving orders in a soulless voice. That almost scared him more than the stealth ship did.

Since there seemed to be no problems with the engine he kept scanning the ship with frequent intervals to keep track of where it was. He called up Artura on the intercom.

"Artura," he said, "we're approaching the ship. Get ready to open the bay doors when Valdis gives the signal."

"Copy that," Artura said, "suits are prepped and we're ready to go."

With painstakingly slowness Valdis let her ship glide closer and closer to the other ship. There was no change in its course and it did not try to hail them. After a short debate they had decided they

would not try to contact the ship before they were almost right next to it. Despite the danger of approaching an unknown vessel, especially one that might be of military design, they were all too curious about what and who was on it to risk it slipping away if they hailed it too early.

“Range is 5 kilometres,” Haneu said, “open the bay doors.”

Beside him Valdis spoke.

“Nothing ahead. Taking us in now.”

Haneu forwarded her order to the rest of the crew.

Down in the cargo bay the huge doors slowly began to open and there was a brief surge of wind as the last of the atmosphere in the cargo hold was sucked out. Next to the doors red lights lid up to warn them that there was no air.

Artura and Garey, both of them tied to the hull with strong wires, went to the opening where they had set up the small air cannon that would shoot the magnetic grapping out into space.

“Haneu,” Artura said, “what’s the range? We can’t see a fucking thing out there.”

“Dim the lights in the cargo bay,” Haneu said, “we’re still at 500 metres, but Valdis keeps closing in. You should be able to see it any time now.”

Suddenly a shape became visible against the black backdrop of space outside the system. At first it was very small, the lack of reference objects making it impossible to judge its size. Then the shape came closer and closer until it was clearly visible.

“Holy fuck!” Garey said. “That’s not a ship. It’s a fucking pod!”

“A what?” Haneu said. “An escape pod?”

“No,” Garey said. “No time to explain. We’ve got to get it onto the ship. Now, before we loose the opportunity.”

“Okay,” Artura said, “it’s small, can the wire hold it?”

“Probably not,” Garey said, “Haneu, you’ve done the math on this. Can the wire hold some ten tons of dead weight?”

“Under good conditions, yes. At this speed? I don’t know. No point in risking it. Hold on.”

He turned to Valdis and spoke slowly, hoping it would get through to her.

“Valdis, Garey insists we get this thing into the cargo hold. It’s small enough. Can you do this?”

It took a few moments before she replied. All the while her eyes darted back and forth, at some point almost rolling completely back in her head.

“Yes. Open the doors. Get them away. 20 seconds.”

Wasting no time Haneu quickly ordered the others to get out of the cargo bay and then he punched in the commands that would open the cargo bay doors completely. It would still be a tight fit, but he trusted Valdis.

“Five seconds,” she said, “Three. Two. One.”

There was a sickening lurch as she pulled the ship sideways and accelerated to catch the pod. Then she quickly decelerated to match its speed so it would not cause too much havoc banging against the walls or the canisters in the cargo hold.

On the vid feed Haneu could see how the pod was suddenly caught by the artificial gravity in the cargo hold. While it was lower than on the rest of the ship the gravity there was still enough to cause the pod to suddenly crash violently against the cargo bay floor.

He quickly began closing the doors so they could pressurise the cargo bay.

“Haneu,” Maehan said, “the pod seems to be at rest and the doors are closing. Garey and Artura are down there and look anxious to take a closer look.”

“Copy that, Maehan. The pod looks safe, so there should be no immediate risk.”

“Apart from who’s inside the pod, you mean.”

“Yeah, apart from that. I’ll get pressure and air in as soon as I can.”

Turning to Valdis he let her know that they had the pod onboard and everything had gone well. He could see how her whole body began to relax and she slumped slightly in her seat taking deep breaths.

“Are you okay?” he said.

“Yes, kind of. Oh, my head hurts. I thought it was bad enough to fly at high speeds. Turns out doing what we just did is far worse. Probably takes too much concentration to make the small adjustments. Fuck!”

Not knowing what else to do Valdis winced in sympathy.

“Can I get you anything? Pain killers?”

“If you run down to the med bay and get some you’re a fucking angel.”

“Okay. You’ve got an eye on things up here?”

“Yes. Go!”

As quickly as he could Haneu ran down to med bay to fetch some pills. When he got there he was momentarily confused at all the different drugs. It felt like a very long time before he found what he was looking for and could run back to the cockpit. As much as he wanted to help out Valdis he also wanted to see what was going on in the cargo bay.

Before he got all the way through the hatch to the cockpit he could hear Valdis speaking in the intercom. There was clearly some kind of problem down in the cargo bay.

“It says what on the fucking side?” Valdis said.

Haneu only got the last half of the reply as he put on his headset and slipped Valdis the pills.

“...so we better leave it the fuck alone,” Garey said.

“That’s a bit late now, eh?” Valdis said.

“Yes. Fuck it. I knew this was a stupid thing.”

Catching Valdis’ attention Haneu made a questioning gesture. She waved her hand and mouthed her reply.

“Will explain later.”

She turned her attention to Garey on the headset.

“We’ve got it onboard and that’s that,” she said. “We’re not dropping it back out there again. I don’t care why he’s there we’re not leaving him to fucking crash into a planet. Got it?”

“Yes, boss,” Garey said, “so what do you want us to do about it?”

“Is he stable? Can you see the monitors?”

“They’re fucking smashed to pieces and the whole thing’s a mess. But it looks fairly stable. It’s still got pressure and power so whoever’s in there should still be alive.”

“Okay, then leave it for now. I’ll see if Haneu can hook it up to our systems somehow so we can get a full status reading.”

Garey had some very unpleasant things to say to that, but Valdis ignored them. Haneu did not. He blushed at some of the words Garey used and when Valdis saw this she began giggling. She turned off the intercom to let Garey shout at nothing and let herself laugh unrestrained. After a while she quieted down and pinched her nose.

“Auch!” she said, “don’t make me laugh when my head hurts. This is fucking killing me.”

“Sorry,” Haneu said, “I just didn’t know Garey had enough imagination to picture doing that to the pod.”

That drew another laugh, followed by a wince, from Valdis.

“That one didn’t come from his imagination. Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

Haneu was sure he did not so he turned his attention back to the vid feed of the pod.

“What is that pod? Do you know?”

“Oh, yes. I know. It’s one of the more insane inventions we’ve come up with over the years. I thought they’d been taken completely out of service. It’s a prison pod.”

“A prison pod?”

“Yes. Don’t tell me you’ve never heard about them? You know, scary stories like ‘I’ll put you in a pod until you learn some manners’? Didn’t your parents ever threaten you with that?”

“Never knew my parents. Or anyone else when I was a kid for that matter. And computers don’t really threaten...”

“Fuck! Talk about a messed up childhood. Anyway, a prison pod is basically just that. Your own private prison where you’re kept conscious, but in a state where your body does not age. At least not significantly.”

“That doesn’t sound that bad, does it?”

Valdis raised an eyebrow.

“Haneu. I know you’re used to being on your own. But imagine being immobile, alone and without any kind of contact with anyone or anything. Year after fucking year.”

“Oh,” Haneu said.

“Yes. Oh! That sums it up quite nicely. Only the thing is that they stopped using those fucking death chambers a few centuries ago. Where the fuck did this one come from?”

“Judging by its course I’d say that it came from outside the system. Give me a minute here.”

Without waiting for an answer Haneu lost himself in the computer doing a lot of calculations. He tried to backtrack where the pod might have come from and though it required a few guesses and a lot of estimates he quickly got a fairly good idea of where it came from. Or rather, when it came from.

“Look here,” he said. “It’s not entirely accurate, but it should not be completely wrong. It’s been travelling at roughly one percent. If it went here...”

He zoomed the display out to show both Indigo system and its closest neighbour. The pod had been on a course straight from that star system.

“Then it must have travelled just over 4.5 light years. If whoever sent it out did their math properly it could easily have slingshotted in that system and come back here. Give or take a little for the deceleration and acceleration while it changed course and we’re easily looking at five hundred years.”

That just sounded too incredibly for Valdis.



“There is no way in hell that could be true. Five hundred years? If anyone had done that on purpose, which I guess you’re saying they did, then they’d be the ones who deserved to be put in a prison pod. If there’s someone alive in there they must be barking mad!”

Contemplating the result of such a long time in complete isolation made Haneu shut up. While he was not a student of the human psyche he did know enough to realise that Valdis was right. No one could get through that and still function as a human being. They might even, he reasoned, have been pushed so far that their brains had shut down and killed them. If they were fortunate.

“So what do we do?” he asked though he already had a fairly good idea of what the answer would be.

“What we do is that we don’t do anything about it. I stay up here and fly the ship. We’re still at one percent and someone needs to Pilot this ship. And you need to go down there and see if you can somehow get into the pod’s life support and check its status. Send Artura up here. I need him as backup.”

Without saying anything Haneu got up but before he got away Valdis caught his arm with her hand.

“Listen,” she said, “you did real good here. I’ve never come across anyone who could do these calculations as well as you have. Just don’t ever let that make you believe you can calculate everything. Be very careful when you examine the pod. If whoever is in there is fucking crazy there’s no way for you to calculate what they’ll do. Got it?”

“Got it. I’ll keep Garey nearby. Last I saw on the vid he was clutching a heavy looking piece of metal. Looked like he was ready to use it, even.”

“Thanks. I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Feeling slightly embarrassed Haneu did not know what to do so he just pulled free of her grasp and went down to the cargo bay. On the way there he stopped by his cabin to pick up his datapad. He had some custom programs on it that were likely to come in handy for accessing the pod and bypassing whatever security it had.

The prison pod was more or less a large cube, slightly dented and bent out of shape by collisions with unknown objects seeming to range from small stones to actual meteors. Though the hull was scarred it had been well built and had not been seriously damaged as far as Haneu could see. The whole thing was no more than ten metres on each side and Haneu suspected a fairly large part of that was simply a heavily reinforced hull.

Searching over the surface he found no immediate ways of gaining access to its interior until he let his probes run through a lot of different wavelengths to see if he could trigger some reaction. Somewhere in the low gigahertz bands he got some kind of reply from the pod. A little investigation showed that it was a crude version of a mostly deprecated network protocol that was only in use in either very old systems or things like vending machines with limited resources available.

He spend a little time readjusting his systems to be able to interface with the pod and found out that this was apparently the way its designers had meant it to communicate with the rest of the world. A part of him actually enjoyed getting things up and running so he could access the pod’s wireless system and he soon had enough up and running that he could begin to force his way further into it.

Getting into the prison pod’s systems was not as easy as he had thought. It was not that they were that well protected against intrusion. It was simply that they were built in a way he had never come across before. They seemed both far more advanced than anything he had worked on far more naïve in their construction. For almost an hour he worked hard trying to figure out what was what. Then it suddenly struck him that what he thought was a sophisticated design to prevent unauthorised access was simply a piece of really badly made software. It was almost as if someone

had done this without thinking it through, or if they had let their children program it as a hobby project.

The second he realised that he cursed himself for being so stupid. Of course it would be different from anything he knew. The system was at least five hundred years old and there had been astonishing breakthroughs in all areas since then. Programming back then had been nothing like what it was today and everything worked not only infinitely slower, but also completely different.

To get his bearings he took a short break from actually working on getting into the system and sat down to piece together all he had learned about the system. His line of thought took him back to the first experiments he had made when he was a kid. Some of them was not unlike this one: simple systems that did a few specific things without any kind of adaption to changes in their surroundings.

This system was very much like that. It did respond to simple things such as changes in the temperature. Other than that it was fairly straight forward. Its main purpose was to keep the prisoner alive. Anything other than that was even more simple.

He returned to his work and it did not take him many minutes to realise that its encryption was so simple that it could not be called encryption. He managed to take a dump of the entire core processor and its memory and store it on his datapad. From there it was just a matter of letting his tools build an emulated environment where he could run the pod's software. All this was done automatically these days and though it took almost an hour more it was only a matter of time before he could comfortably sift through the pod's life support system, the local storage with information about the prisoner and that was it.

As soon as he had a name and other basic information he called up Valdis.

"I've got a name for you. It's Drax Escobar. Doesn't ring a bell, but I'll try to run it against your ship's database. If he really did get five hundred years in this thing there might be some mention of him somewhere."

"Okay," Valdis said, her voice slightly distant as she kept most of her focus on Piloting the ship. "Go ahead and do that. Then check up on the pod status and when you find something get back to me or Artura immediately."

"Will do."

Turning back to the pod he quickly scanned the life support status. Everything seemed to be in order so he gestured for Garey to come over. Garey had kept his distance to the pod looking like a man who was superstitious of the strange object. It was almost as if Garey expected the thing to come alive and eat him.

"Garey," Haneu said, "get over here. We need to get this open so we can see who's inside."

Slowly Garey crept closer, his reluctance to be involved in this clearly visible to Haneu.

"Oh, come on," Haneu said. "It's one guy, he's strapped in and his body will be so unadjusted to our gravity here that he's unlikely to be able to even stand up."

"Yeah, that's easy for you to say. How do you know he's still human. He could have gone all weird in the head and developed mental power. I'm not fucking kidding. That shit's scary as hell."

Haneu could not believe his own ears.

"What the fuck? Don't tell me you believe in all this fucked up crap about mind readers and people who can control others with their minds. That's just a load of bull."

"The hell it is. A mate of mine once got all fucking weird after some chick played mind games on him."

“Wait, you told me that one, didn’t you? The guy who got sweet talked into giving all his money, and more, to one of the girls working for the Chatelaine or whatever she’s called? It didn’t occur to you that maybe the girl was not only trained to say exactly what men want to hear, she was also using pheromones to make him pliable?”

“No fucking way. He’s a big, tough guy. He’d never fall for something like that.”

Rather than answering Haneu turned back to the pod and mumbled to himself.

“The bigger they are the harder they fall,” he said making sure Garey could not hear it.

“Here,” he said louder, “get ready with that stick of yours. I’ll try to get the door open.”

With a hissing sound the front of the pod split and a doorway a few metres on each side opened. Garey gave a hoarse cry and took a few steps back.

Driven by curiosity Haneu peeked inside the pod. What he saw was that it was simply a small chamber with a box in the middle. A lot of wires, pipes and tubes ran from it to the walls, floor and ceiling. It was easy for Haneu to see that this was the really interesting part of the pod. Everything else was most likely just waste disposal filters, air generators and life support systems. The pod had no real propulsion unit to speak of so it was essentially just a protective shell around the prisoner’s coffin, a shell that let it survive almost indefinitely in open space.

There were no status displays or other visible signs of how the prisoner was doing so Haneu began to dig deeper into the pod’s computer from his datapad. It frustrated him to work on something that slow. Normally he would be able to execute his commands as quickly as he thought them, but on the pod he had to translate what he wanted to do into a strange command protocol that he was still only partly sure of how worked.

Finally, after what had felt like hours to him, he managed to find the right commands to get a full status dump. His normal programs had no problems translating the data into a visual representation showing the result of the different electrodes that were attached to the prisoner’s body. As far as Haneu could see everything was in order, but since he was not a medic he needed someone else to give him a hand analysing the data.

Calling out to Garey he unplugged his datapad.

“We need to run this scan through the ship’s MES,” he said, “just to be safe.”

The MES was the medical expert system which was standard equipment on most ships and was a decent stand-in for a real medic. Or at least a far cheaper replacement. For most common issues it was more than adequate, it was only in extreme situations it could not be used.

“Okay,” Garey said, “why don’t I take the data right up to med bay and you stay here to keep an eye on the fucking thing?”

It was still clear to Haneu that Garey was very uncomfortable around the prison pod.

“Sure,” Haneu said, “but what the fuck is it with you and this thing? It’s not like it’ll come to life and eat you or anything.”

“Yeah, that’s what you think. Those fucking things are not to be trusted.”

“How do you know?”

Briefly Haneu got the impression that he had just asked the worst question he possibly could have. Garey shifted a bit before he answered.

“I fucking don’t. Just been hearing things is all.”

“What things?”

“Just fucking things, okay? Like how people coming out of these pods are not right in the head.”

“Garey,” Haneu said, “these pods have not been in use for hundreds of years. No one’s seen anyone come out of them ever since.”

“Yeah, you just go ahead and fucking believe that. Where do you think the hundreds, thousands, of pods ended up after the war? Did they get turned into fucking baby food cans? No fucking way. They’re still in use, I bet.”

Haneu shook his head. This was getting too much for him. It was one thing that there were people who made their living off other people’s misery. He had seen enough of both the ICC and Aruna station to realise that. He could even, on some abstract level, follow the thought that there were people whose pay check came from them hurting other people. It was something entirely different to believe that something as cruel and inhumane as the prison pod was still in active use.

“Fair enough,” he said trying not to sound too annoyed, “then why don’t you just stay here and make sure everything’s okay? I’ll close the pod door and make sure it’s locked.”

“Don’t like it, Haneu. But I fucking don’t like some scrawny tech keeping us safe from whoever is in there. So I’ll stay. Get the fuck back here soon!”

“Whatever,” Haneu said and left.

## 8 The Box in the Void

Adjusting her ship's speed to match the large pod floating through space the operative activated her scanners. She soon got a result that showed that there was indeed a person being kept alive inside the pod. Worse, it was one of the infamous prison pods. One of the pieces of technology the FreeTechs had worked very hard to erase from Indigo. They had been invented before the war and had been reserved for really heinous crimes at a time where there was still so few humans living in space that the government considered even the most hardened criminal's life was considered too valuable to waste.

But there were still people who would steal, kill or, in countless other ways, destroy other peoples lives and the government had needed to do something about it. At first glance the prison pods had been perfect. They did not end a life, it only paused it for a time while the pod's sensory deprivation tank combined with several methods for altering the human mind worked on turning the prisoner into a more well adjusted human being. It was perfect. It was simple. It was an abomination.

It had not taken long before less scrupulous people began using the prison pods to their own ends, either on people they wanted to do their bidding or, in the more extreme cases, on themselves to rid get rid of what they saw as weaknesses. They would modify the human mind in ways it was not intended to. The best of those results were people whose brains short circuited and either caused the body to shut down and die. The worst of those results were those that did not just go mad but went all the way through and came out on the other side. Fully cognisant but with no morals or conscience to guide them other than what their brains had been programmed with during their time in the pod. It took brain washing to an entirely different level. And it took madness to an entirely different level.

The operative send a curse after their original inventor. And a prayer to the Lord and Lady that her order would succeed in ridding the system of the remaining prison pods. They had got most of them, but at least two dozen were still unaccounted for.

Perhaps this was one of them.

She continued scanning the pod while searching for a way to access its internal systems. If it was one of the original pods she should be able to access it directly as her ship carried, somewhere in its large databanks, all the keys and protocols needed for the missing pods. If it was a previously unknown pod she would have to break its encryption. Most likely it would not be difficult, but it would take time she did not have.

Only a few seconds passed before her computer dumped a full status report from the pod on her monitor. It was one of the missing pods. The one at the top of their list, in fact. The one carrying the dreaded Drax Escobar.

She knew most of the story of Drax by heart. It was, in fact, one of the things that had driven her towards the FreeTechs in the first place, though she did not know it at the time.

Almost a thousand years earlier Drax had been one of the most insidious military commanders. He had risen to the top in record time and could easily have become one of the most influential generals and the space government's leading military advisor. Then, suddenly, he disappeared from

the system for a very long time. No one knew where he had gone. The only thing that was known was that the cruiser he was on had been boarded by some unknown faction, its crew brutally murdered and its hull left to float abandoned in space. There had been no sign of Drax so he had been declared missing in action and so kept his full military rank in case he was ever found.

A lot of people thought he had died on some unlisted off the books mission and never expected him to show up again. Some suspected that he had gone rogue in one of the revolutionary groups and expected him to show up at the head of a terrorist organisation. What no one had expected was that he did not resurface almost half a millennium later in seemingly the same condition as when he had disappeared.

His claim was that during his ship had been ambushed by a terrorist cell who had captured him to extract information. When he had withstood their torture for several days they had decided he was of no use to them, but rather than just killing him they had dumped him in a prison pod and left him in the asteroid belt where he was later found.

Due to the length of his absence it was virtually impossible for anyone to verify his story, but he passed all the physical and mental health and security checks and was reinstated in his old rank and given as many medals as could fit on his breast.

From there on he resumed his rise to power, much boosted by receiving five hundred years back pay. Within a few years he had managed to gain a level of influence that made it possible for him to start the great war between the people living in space and those on the planet.

To this day his motives for this remained unknown and the operative could only speculate at what foul daemons had ridden Drax. Perhaps no one would ever know.

The great war culminated in Drax' asteroid bombing of Indigo Prime. After this it became too obvious that he was mad. Not because anyone could see it when they spoke to him. His actions just became too malicious and their direct result was that the infrastructure of the system was nearly destroyed. The government fell, the planet lost almost all their technology and basis for survival, everything disintegrated.

What few remnants of structure remained managed, aided by the crew of Drax' own ship, to capture him. For the last time in the official history of Indigo System a human was put in a prison pod. And for the first time in more than a thousand years a human was given what was effectively a death sentence.

Drax' punishment was to be placed in a never ending status to float freely through space without ever feeling his physical body in any way. This latter part was the harshest thing that could be done. The pod would sustain his physical body and at the same time force him to be conscious the whole time. He would never sleep, his mind would never rest. And he would know it. That was what the survivors of his atrocities had deemed justice.

The operative often felt that the people who had thought out that kind of punishment were no better than Drax himself.

She double checked the data to make sure that there could be no mistake. That it really was him. It was.

She had to report this to her superiors. As much as she wanted to there was nothing she could do to directly interfere with Drax' pod. He was currently not being a danger to anyone, not in a direct sense, so she did not have the authority to do anything. A gentle nudge from her ship would have been all it took to send him out of the system again or heading straight for the asteroid belt where he was sure to be crushed against the huge chunks of rock and ice.

But, she reflected, as much as she hated it she also agreed that no one person should be able to hold that kind of power. All she could hope for was that he would continue undetected, which was very likely since the prison pod was only a few metres on each side, and simply vanish again.

For her masters she began compiling a brief report that included the most important data from the pod's systems as well as its current speed and heading. They would decide what should be done about this.

## 9 Outside the Box

The crew lounge was as silent as the empty space surrounding the freighter. Valdis had brought them down here to hear their opinion on what they should do with the prison pod and, more importantly, with the prisoner. Not that they really had any vote when the final decision had to be made. That rested squarely on her shoulders, she would not have it any other way. But they would be affected by that decision and as she respected all of them she felt they all benefited from these sessions.

Even if the arguments could sometimes become very heated.

This was one of those times. Not that there was that much division among the crew, in fact only Garey was in favour of simply dumping the prison pod back outside again. Everyone else had the same basic idea, that they should try to revive whoever was inside and at least see if there was something they could do for him.

Once they reached that conclusion the argument died down. Garey looked like he had been beaten, but still reserved the right to let out a loud “I told you so” if things went pear shaped.

The main problem Valdis faced as she sat contemplating what to do was that though Garey’s suggestion was simply not something she wanted to get involved in he did have some very good points. Someone had decided to sentence Drax to a very long time in the prison pod. And from what little they could dig out about the prison pods from the ship’s sparsely populated library, and from the prison pod’s systems, this sentence had actually been the result of a fully official trial. That gave Garey’s argument even more weight. Whatever Drax had done it must have been horrific.

Then there was the matter of Haneu being unable to find an end date on the systems. From analysing the pod he had been able to find out that these pods were mainly used when there was a risk of someone trying to rescue the prisoner. In those cases the pod had been sent on a round trip on the outskirts of the system. But Drax had been sent outside of both Indigo Alpha and Beta’s gravity wells and if the telemetry stored in the pod was accurate he had only returned here because the pod had suddenly been subjected to an unexplained force. Almost as if he had been pushed or nudged by someone.

All of those things were, however, speculations. And she needed to decide on a course of action.

“Right,” she said, “here’s what we know: Drax was sentenced by the officials at the time, he should either never have returned or not have returned for a very long time and he is still alive in that thing. What we assume is this: he did something abominable back then and centuries in the pod will have seriously changed him, or at least his personality. What we don’t know is how he has been changed, good or bad. We also don’t know if we will even be able to revive him to a state where he can get by on his own. And more importantly: we don’t know if anyone else has spotted him.”

There was general nodding around the room.

“The way I see it,” she continued, “we have two options. The first option is that we can dump him back out and pretend this never happened. The second option is that we put in an effort to save him and get him to a place where he’ll be safe. Or, if necessary, get him to a place where we will be safe from him.”



She had consciously put the two options as far from each other in the hope that the extremity of them both would serve to emphasise that they could either kill him or try to help him. From their looks she guessed that most of them had understood.

“That makes the choice simple. I will not be involved in cold blooded murder of anyone, not even a madman. If it turns out he’ll turn around and attack us, well, we’ll take it from there and maybe we’ll be forced to kill him then. But as long as he’s defenceless it will be unjustifiable murder. Plain and simple.”

Several of the others released sighs of relief, though Garey looked about to explode. Once or twice he began opening his mouth, but both times he shut it again.

“Good,” Valdis said, “then let’s talk about what we can do. Haneu?”

Clearing his throat Haneu looked down at his datapad.

“Yes,” he said, “the pod’s systems show that he is in good shape, physically. I’m not entirely sure, but it looks like it has actually stimulated his muscles so with any luck he’s not a sack of goo when comes out.”

“That’s something,” Artura said, “at least there’s a chance he can survive somehow.”

Valdis smiled on the inside. One of the reasons she had always enjoyed working with Artura was that despite the many hard lessons life had given him he was still able to be considerate of others, even strangers.

“Or a chance that he’ll kill us the second he’s unstrapped,” Garey said. “Come on, Valdis. You know I’ll respect your decision, that goes without saying. But let’s talk containment and protection. If Haneu’s right and he’s got full motor skills what’s to say that hell machine hasn’t given him five fucking centuries of full-body workout?”

Raising an eyebrow Valdis looked questioningly at Haneu who just shrugged. None of them knew what the pod was capable of doing.

“We’ll need to confine him, somehow,” Valdis said, “maybe lock down one of the cabins for starters. Maehan, you up for a little welding?”

With a tired look on her face Maehan nodded.

“Sure,” she said, “we can reinforce the door to the end cabin and add a few bolts. It shouldn’t take long. Want me to disable the safety on the bulk heads so we can seal him in completely?”

“That might be taking it to extremes,” Valdis said.

The look on Garey made her continue.

“But since we don’t know what we’ll face you should go ahead and do so. When you’re done get yourself straight back to your own cabin. You’ve been up more than enough today.”

“Thanks,” Maehan said, “but if it’s okay I’d prefer to stick around to see him wake up. I’d rather face a maniac being tired, but standing up, than asleep in my bunk.”

“Can’t argue with that, captain,” Artura said.

Valdis nodded.

“Right,” she said, “the ship is still on autopilot and it will be a few days before we get to The Bulb. Haneu and Artura, you two get to work on reviving Drax. Garey, you stick to them like glue and be ready to put the prisoner down. Give him a little leeway to be dazzled when he comes to, but if he becomes directly hostile he’s a goner. Understood?”

They all nodded and got up to prepare for their tasks. Valdis retreated to her cabin to sit down. While she did not doubt that she had taken the right choice these situations always drained her

and she needed a little time to herself to get her bearings. There were far too many unanswered questions for her liking. But that, she thought, was what life in space was all about: answering those questions by doing something.

After about half an hour she went up to the cockpit to keep an eye on the ship. Their course took them nowhere near any large obstacles so the auto pilot could easily keep them safe. But she still liked being up there. Besides, she needed to keep herself occupied until she heard from Haneu about how they were doing with getting Drax out of the prison pod.

Down in the cargo bay the rest of the crew were getting ready to open the box in the prison pod. There was no window or internal cameras so they had no idea how Drax looked like, apart from the basic measurements which showed that he was of average height, average build, average everything. Haneu looked up from his work on the datapad.

“So,” he said, “here goes. Shouldn’t we get Valdis down here?”

“No,” Artura said, “it’s a command thing. If things go haywire down here she should be in a position to lock down the cargo room.”

“And,” Garey said, “to lock us in with this creep. No, no, Artura. I fucking get it. Makes sense. I still wish that we’d be opening the box in open space.”

“Stop it,” Artura said. “The captain made a decision and that’s final. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Fuck! There’s no need to shout, you know.”

“Come on, guys,” Maehan said, “let’s get this over with.”

“Right,” Garey said.

He shifted the metal pipe he was carrying around in his hands and for a brief second Haneu wondered who the real madman was. So far he had got a good impression of Garey who, despite his outburst, really was not that aggressive. But there was a strange sense of eagerness about him that made Haneu a little nervous.

“Okay,” he said, “here goes.”

He pressed the button that would initiate the pod’s revival sequence. For several seconds they all held their breaths while absolutely nothing happened. Then they held it for several more seconds as nothing continued to happen.

The first to break the silence was Haneu.

“That’s odd,” he said, “nothing really seems to be happening.”

“What? Anything changing on the status monitor?” Artura asked.

“Nothing. Here, see? Nothing.”

Feeling slightly embarrassed Haneu stood up and peered into the prison pod. He contemplated going in there and simply opening the box. Around him the others looked like they were thinking the same.

Slowly he entered the pod being careful to stay clear of the walls. As he passed the actual door into the pod he quickened his pace a little for fear of the door slamming down to crush him.

The air in the pod smelled slightly stale despite the built-in air recyclers. Seen up close the box looked even less impressive. It really was just that, a box. Four walls and a lid.

He heard the others call out as he reached out to pull back the lid but he did not care. Right now his curiosity was getting the better of him and he took a firm grip on the lid and pulled it open. It

was surprisingly light and swung up on the hinges on one side until it was standing straight up in the air.

The technical part of him made a mental note to get a closer look at the craftsmanship of the box at a later point. The hinges had been so well made that he had neither seen nor felt them until the lid began to swing rather than lift.

His eyes moved back to the inside of the box where a gentle mist was beginning to flow over the sides to reveal a human shape hanging suspended in the liquid which filled the box. Slowly the liquid began to drain out of the box through the pipes attached to it. That made the body glide slowly towards the body in an eerie way. It was almost like watching a ship landing.

When the body was lying completely still at the bottom Haneu's datapad began making low beeping noises. He checked it and saw that everything was still going well and that the body could now be disconnected from the box. That was what the alarms had meant.

He forced his eyes away from the box and called out to the others.

"Artura, I need your help now. And Garey, get ready."

The others, including Maehan, moved closer until they were all standing right next to the box. Artura, on account of having the most medical training, reached down and began to pull the tubes out of Drax' body. It was disgusting to look at and Haneu had to look away once or twice. He was unsure what unsettled him most: what Artura was doing or the naked, greasy man in front of him.

"Haneu," Artura said, "check the pod's status. He's got a pulse and seems to be breathing, but I want to get a last check before I pull the last electrodes off of him."

"Checking," Haneu said. "Yes, he's stable. Good pulse, blood pressure okay. His breathing is a little shallow?"

"That might be because he's breathing air now. Ew, that fucking goo in the tank is slimy as hell, but should be breathable."

"I'll pass," Haneu said.

Garey leaned forward over the box.

"So," he said, "what do we do now? We can't fucking drag him up like this. I mean, kicking a guy out an air lock is one thing, dragging him naked through a ship is something completely different."

Haneu frowned and twisted his mouth in a sour smile at the bad attempt at humour from Garey.

"Maehan," Artura said, "give me a hand with the stretcher and the blankets. We'll carry him in those."

They went to fetch the stretcher and blankets from outside the pod and returned carrying the stretcher between them. After they had placed it on the floor Artura got Haneu to lift Drax' feet and Maehan to lift his shoulders while he slid his hands under Drax to lift him out of the box.

Their first attempt at lifting him ended abruptly as they all lost their grip more or less at the same time due to the slippery goo that covered Drax. Maehan pulled a piece of cloth from her back pocket and used it to wipe the worst of the slime away before handing it to the others.

Artura held it up before him when he was done.

"Gotta love mechanics," he said, "they're the only ones who can magically conjure precisely what you need. As long as what you need is something covered in engine grease."

Taking the cloth from him and wiping off Drax' ankles Haneu laughed a little. He offered the cloth to Maehan.

"Yours, I believe?"

“Pfft!” she said. “It’s all dirty now. Just chuck it in the corner.”

Haneu did so and they all got ready to try again. They nearly dropped Drax again, but managed to get him almost gently down on the blanket covering the stretcher. They wrapped him in another blanket and Haneu and Artura lifted the stretcher and carried it out of the pod.

Staying close to the side of the stretcher with the metal pipe held firmly in a ready position Garey followed them while Maehan staying behind and closed the pod’s door. Having done that she walked briskly to catch up to them. On the way she called up Valdis on the intercom.

“Captain,” Maehan said, “we’ve got Drax out of the pod and are bringing him up now.”

After hearing Valdis’ answer she nodded.

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll tell them.”

She turned to the others.

“Valdis said to tell you that she’s sealing off the blast doors between the lift and the cockpit.”

Maehan looked slightly pale as she spoke. Haneu did not know if it was from exhaustion or because of the message Valdis had sent. He tried smiling reassuringly, but had a feeling it did not work.

Shaking her head as if to clear it Maehan looked down at Drax.

“So when’s he supposed to wake up?” she said.

“It could be anytime from now to never,” Artura said.

They used the small lift to carry the stretcher with Drax up to the main corridor. Since the lift was not meant to carry humans they could only fit one of them on it along with the stretcher. It did not take them long to decide on Garey being the lucky winner. Despite his protests against being alone with the unconscious man he accepted it.

The other three climbed the ladder as quickly as they could and arrived outside the door to the small lift just before they opened to reveal a very relieved looking Garey. He quickly jumped out of the lift and turned around with the pipe raised above his head.

“He just fucking moved,” he said.

“Okay,” Artura said, “quickly now. Let’s get him down to the cabin you prepared for him, Maehan.”

“You go ahead,” Maehan said, “I really need to sit down. That climb took more strength than I had.”

Leaning against the wall she slid down to sit on the floor holding her head in her hands. Artura quickly knelt down beside her.

“Are you okay?”

“Sure, just a fucking headache. I’ll crawl off to my bunk in a minute. Just get going.”

Haneu was not sure she really was that well and felt a little bad for just leaving her there. But they needed to get Drax moved to the secure cabin and were even more in a hurry now that he had begun to move.

As they lifted the stretcher Drax moved a bit and rolled his head to one side. A low incoherent mumble could be heard from his mouth. This made Garey look even more on edge and both Haneu and Artura picked up speed, sacrificing Drax’ comfort for their own.

All in all it did not take them more than a few minutes to carry him down to the cabin Maehan had prepared and hoist him onto the bunk. For good measure they had left a small note on the chair next to the bed describing that while they did not wish him harm and did not think he meant them any they felt it necessary to lock the door until they had a chance to talk to him.

“Hope he’s not too pissed when he wakes up,” Artura said. “I know I would be.”

“Yeah,” said Haneu, “I think we’d all be. The question is what he’ll do after he’s had a chance to think it through. Stay pissed or see it from our side?”

“Don’t know. Guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

They shut the door and slammed the bolts. Garey gave the door a good yank but it did not budge even a fraction of an inch. He gave a satisfied grunt and walked down the corridor with his metal pipe resting on his shoulder. Seen from the back he reminded Haneu of a man walking home from any normal job, not someone who had just been ready to bash another person’s brains in. Haneu wondered how Garey could manage such a transformation from one moment to the next.

Rather than trying to figure that one out he set out to see if Maehan had made it back to her cabin without problems. He found her lying in her bunk breathing heavily. Not wanting to disturb her more than he already had he quickly began to back out again, but she called out to him.

“Hey,” she said, “could you do something for me?”

“Sure. What do you need?”

“Some pain killers. My head hurts really bad.”

“Of course. I’ll get them.”

Out in the corridor he spotted Artura entering the lounge so he ran in that direction to catch up with him.

“Hey, wait up.”

Artura stopped and looked back.

“It’s Maehan,” Haneu said. “Her head hurts really bad and she’s asking for pain killers. Is she getting worse?”

“The strain of being in the cargo hold may have been too much for her. Hopefully she’s just worn out. I’ll get the pills for her. I know where they are in the med bay. You just go ahead. One of us should report to Valdis and I just don’t see Garey doing that.”

He winked as he said the last bit. Haneu grinned and nodded before going up to the cockpit. In addition to letting Valdis know how things had gone he also wanted to do a few more calculations. There was not really any need for him to re-plot their course and, he told himself, it was definitely not just an excuse to spend some time in the cockpit with Valdis.

With a small smile on his face he climbed the ladder to the cockpit and sat down in the co-pilot’s seat next to Valdis.

“So,” she said, “everything okay?”

“Yes, captain. This Drax person is secure in the cabin and is locked in tight. Maehan seems to be feeling worse, but Artura’s gone to get her some more pain killers. Hopefully she’ll be okay.”

“That’s good. Well, not the bit about Maehan. That’s really bad. I’ll go check up on her. Can you keep an eye on things? We should be good so just give a shout if something comes up.”

“Sure.”

She left and Haneu could hear her boots against the floor as she made her way towards the cabins. He figured she would be gone for some time so he set to work looking over their course. Just as he had expected everything was looking okay. While he did not have Valdis’ aptitude for Piloting he could nevertheless comprehend the mathematics needed to do an accurate plot of how they would approach The Bulb.

In a strange way he was actually beginning to look forward to visiting The Bulb. He had sometimes heard the others in Aruna station mention it while he was on one of his rare trips away from the control room. From what he had gathered it was a large station, far larger than Aruna, with a lot of ships and people coming and going every day. That made him feel slightly uncomfortable as it meant there would be a lot of noise and people around. He told himself he could always find some excuse for remaining on the ship as much as possible.

While he was sitting there in the cockpit it suddenly struck him that this was the first time he had been there all by himself for more than just a few minutes. And he actually had access to the ship's systems.

True to his nature he could not prevent himself from looking around a little to see what he could do from up here. Most of the other systems of the ship had been fully open to him, but he suspected there were a lot of things that could only be operated properly from the cockpit. It was quite simply a matter of them being so complex that the large pilot's console was necessary to get anything done. On the other hand, his work on the ship's systems had not given the slightest hint that there was anything hidden away in some dark corner.

"Oh well," he said to himself, "one can hope, right?"

What he found did not surprise him all that much and he felt a little disappointed. He had hoped to find some, to him, unknown technology or brand new way of handling the ship. But everything was much as he had already guessed. The only thing that made the cockpit fully necessary was the size of the console. All the monitors, keyboards and so on could, theoretically, have been implemented as computer controls. At least they could have, if the space they required to be workable would not have taken up far more screen space than was available. In the end, he figured, it might as well have taken up just as much as the console itself so there was not really anything saved that way.

He idly fiddled around with the controls a little and came across the scanner output just as he heard Valdis' boots on the ladder. For a split second he considered sitting back out of respect for Valdis and her position as pilot, but something on the screen caught his attention. At first it did not make any sense to him so he tried re-calibrating the scanner. That did not help so he began to run more detailed scans as Valdis climbed the stairs. When she got into the cockpit his nose was almost touching the monitor, so caught up in what he saw was he.

"Hey, what's up?" Valdis said.

"Looklooklook!"

He grabbed hold of her arm and dragged her close.

"Hey! Watch it, hot stuff. I wouldn't mind giving you a closer look, but slow down, okay?" she said.

The joke in her voice was completely lost on Haneu as he kept staring intently at the monitor and began punching in commands.

"Look! The scanner!"

Valdis sighed and gave up trying to tease him.

"What? What are you... oh!"

She sat back in her seat, completely quiet.

"It's picking something up," Haneu said "It's right behind us!"

"Fucking crap!" Valdis said, "Why the fuck didn't we see this earlier?"

Pulling up some more data Haneu cursed.

“Oh, fuck,” he said, “look at this. It’s a fucking ship. We didn’t see it earlier because it’s only just lit up its engines.”

“But when you scanned for the pod, why didn’t you see it?”

Haneu thought about that for a while. There was only one explanation he could think of and he did not like it. He desperately searched his brain for more ways this could have happened. None came to mind. When he turned to look at Valdis his face was pale and his voice very low, almost a whisper.

“It must have been hiding in the pod’s shadow. Or maybe been attached to it.”

“So it knew about the pod? Fuck! Then it knows we’ve got it on board. Can you see what the ship is doing now?” Valdis said.

“Hold on. Yes, it’s... no, that’s just fucking weird. It’s decelerating and turning away from us. Back towards the dead zone in the centre of the system.”

“Do you have a good reading of it? Some kind of ID?”

“Got a basic system scan, but no ID. Should we hail it?”

“I’m not sure,” Valdis said. “If it wanted contact it would have done something about it. As it is I say we get the hell out of here, figure out what to do about Drax and then, hopefully, never have to worry about this again.”

On the monitors they could see the unidentified ship head away from with a speed they could not believe. The ship’s acceleration was, even taking its size into consideration, so insanely fast that it sent chills down their spine.

“That,” Haneu said, “is fucked up. No ship should be able to do that!”

“Too fucking right,” Valdis said. “Who they fuck is on that ship? And what were they doing here?”

Haneu shrugged. He took a closer look at what little data they had on the ship.

“Don’t know. Can’t really figure out if I’m relieved the ship’s left or not. If they wanted Drax dead they could have blown us up easily enough. Though it’d make more sense for it to just blow the pod away. So I’m guessing it’s got other interests in this.”

“What do you mean? Blown us up how?”

“Look at this,” he said and pointed to the visual model of the ship. “Those groves running along the front of the ship and those areas here. I’ll bet those are retractable guns, maybe even missile launchers. Fuck, given the speed of that thing it could be fucking death rays for all I know. That ship is not normal. Not even the few mil spec ships I’ve seen come close to that.”

The implications of so much weaponry on such a small ship blew Valdis’ mind away. Of the few warships left in service most were run by pirate crews who preferred to make a good show of their firepower even, or especially when, it was not that big. But even though the heavier pirate ships might eventually blow up other ships they generally had very little ammo and so relied more on scarring tactics than brute force. Everything about this ship pointed towards it not wanting to be spotted nor recognised as a warship. In fact, it seemed like whoever had built the ship had gone to great lengths to keep it a complete secret.

“My best guess is that we only saw the ship because they hadn’t guessed we’d fucking bring the entire pod on board.”

“True,” Valdis said, “they probably planned on staying hidden in the shadow of the pod.”

She suddenly let out a brief laugh.

“Wouldn’t it have been funny if they’d been so close to the pod that we had got them onboard as well?”

“Funny?” Haneu asked wide-eyed. “You’ve got a weird sense of humour.”

This made Valdis laugh long and hard.

“True, but what else did you expect out here? Anyway, the ship’s long gone now so there’s nothing more we can do about it. But let’s take another look at the scan results just to be sure we’re not missing anything.”

Together they briefly ran through the scan Haneu had made of the small ship, but there was no further information to be found.

“So,” Valdis said, “what do we make of all this?”

“It’s got to be related to Drax. Who the fuck or what the fuck he is.”

“Fuck, yeah. Maybe Garey was right after all.”

“Hey!”

Haneu looked straight at her, some of the colour returning to his face, and for the first time Valdis saw something resembling fury burning in his eyes.

“It is never right to kill someone off like he would have done,” he said.

“Okay, easy there, tiger,” Valdis said, “just saying that this Drax person seems to be one heck of a pile of trouble.”

Very slowly Haneu let out a long breath.

“Yeah, I know, sorry,” he said.

“No worries, kid. Didn’t know you’d be so upset about it.”

“Long story.”

Looking out the front screen in the cockpit Valdis gestured at the distant stars and Indigo Alpha shining brightly off to the left.

“Well,” she said, “we’ve got a long ride ahead of us and, strange ships following us or not, we’ve got to pass the time somehow.”

“Another time,” Haneu said, “don’t like to talk about it.”

“Fair enough, another time it is.”

An awkward silence spread in the cockpit for a few minutes as they both pondered the amount of trouble they seemed to have landed themselves in. A few minutes passed before Haneu cleared his throat and pointed at the section of the screen showing their destination: the station known as The Bulb.

“How can you be sure they will actually let us dock?” he asked. “I mean, I know you’ve got cargo for someone at the station, but this ship is so banged up that even the tiniest bump might risk blowing the reactor.”

“No offence,” he hastily added before Valdis had time to get insulted about his less than tactful description of her ship.

“None taken. She really is banged up hard,” Valdis said. “The thing is that the sludge we’re carrying is vital to the station’s operations and while they can replace this cargo it’s going to be expensive for them.”

She pointed to the map showing their current trajectory.



“Plus,” she continued, “we’ve got an ace up the sleeve. We’re headed straight for the station with limited engine power. And personally I’d prefer being blown up in a collision with The Bulb than starving to death out beyond the edge of the system.”

The horrified expression on Haneu’s face made her laugh.

“Or at least that’s what I’ll have them believe if they don’t let us dock. No, I don’t particularly want to die and while it’s going to take us a really long time to get there there are alternatives to docking at The Bulb.”

“Yeah, okay. Had me worried there for a while. You really are devious, you now that?”

“Yes,” she said and tilted her head to one side, “that’s what makes me so cute.”

Her wink and smile made Haneu’s face flush crimson red. He stammered a few incoherent words before trying to escape by focusing on something on the screen. Beside him Valdis shook her head and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. She let him be for a while before gently placing a hand on his arm.

“Look, Haneu,” she said, “you’re cute and I’m attracted to you. Simple as that. If you’re uncomfortable with that, fine, suit yourself. Just say it rather than burrowing away in your own little world. Trust me on this, that’ll only make it worse because it makes it all the more fun to tease you.”

She briefly felt bad for laughing slightly as she said it, but it was true. Besides, whatever feelings there might or might not be between them she, in her role as captain, really did not need her brilliant new technician to disappear from the real world. She’d seen that happen too often and while people like Haneu often made far better work than those less talented she knew that the price of genius was often instability. For long term crew members she would far prefer a good and steady person over a brilliant but flaky one.

Trying to be reassuring she moved her hand up to gently squeeze Haneu’s shoulder and gave him a small smile.

“Look, just relax for a while and get your bearings. Unless something breaks there’s not a lot for you to do at the moment, so why don’t you get settled properly, hang out with the crew, read a little or . . .”

She broke off as she felt Haneu’s body tremble. Apparently he was on the verge of tears. She raised one eyebrow inquisitively and waited patiently for Haneu to speak.

“It’s not that,” he said, “or you. It’s just that back at Aruna I really thought I had found a place to stay, you know, forever. Or a very long time, at least. And now that place is gone, psychotic people from the past show up, even stranger people are following us and in the middle of all that I can’t seem to focus because, well, because of you.”

The last few words had a stinging acidity to them that made Valdis flinch and withdraw her hand. Haneu frowned and smiled sadly at her.

“Sorry, didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yeah, well, you could have fooled me,” Valdis said and got up. “Look, I don’t really know you or your past so why don’t we just write this whole fucking thing off? I’ve just lost some fucking close friends and you, well, you said it yourself. You’ve lost your home.”

For a while Haneu sat silently in the chair and Valdis was sure he’d withdrawn completely again. She was just about to turn and leave the cockpit when he suddenly stood up and faced her with a strangely resolved look on his face.

“No,” he said and put his hand on her shoulder. “It’s not that. It’s just that the last time I let someone get close that fuck tart Gintas had her killed. And I don’t want that happening to you.”

Stunned at the change in his tone Valdis took a few seconds to recover before breaking into a wide grin.

“Well,” she said, “I don’t see any fuck tarts named Gintas around here so not much risk of that happening, eh?”

This got her a small smile and laugh from Haneu and she reached up and squeezed his hand, internally grateful that she had not just stormed out of the cockpit.

“Now,” she said, “I’ve got to go check up on Drax and the rest of the crew. How about you taking charge up here for a while? We’ve got to sort out how we actually get this heap of junk to the station in one piece, make new watch schedules and so on. I don’t fancy having to sit in the cockpit for the next week, you know?”

“Me neither,” Haneu said and squeezed her hand back, still smiling. “I’ll keep an eye on things while you go do your captainy stuff.”

Valdis smiled and made her way down the stairs as Haneu sat down at the console again. As such there Valdis had been right about there not being a lot he could do. The ship ran itself on autopilot and its control systems kept an eye out for any problems that might arise.

Leaning back in the chair Haneu closed his eyes and let his mind drift for a few minutes. So many things had changed for him and he felt he really needed to take some hard decisions very soon. Another quick glance at the ship’s status display confirmed his suspicion that there was no chance at all of getting the ship up and running properly again. There was quite simply too much structural damage. At best they could hope that it could be broken down and used as spare parts, at worst it should simply be scraped and set drifting towards the sun or the edge of the system.

“Fuck!”

He had just begun to get used to the idea of living on a space ship and he was definitely attracted to Valdis so it might even be really good to have lived on the freighter. That was no longer an option so that meant he was adrift, in a manner of speaking, again. The thought crossed his mind that all the others were in the same situation as him. There was probably very little chance of Valdis being able to afford a new ship. In fact, she was very likely to be hit very badly by this and might end up in far more debt than she could handle. He did not know if she fully owned the ship or if there was another owner who would demand compensation from her. Either way it did not look good.

To take his mind a bit off thoughts about the ship and focus more on the immediate future he pulled up the latest schematics on The Bulb as well as whatever information he could find about its management.

It was one of the largest stations in Indigo system and had an ample supply of workshops, living quarters, factories and so on. All the usual things one could expect to find. Haneu flipped through page after page until an interesting entry caught his attention. It seemed like a large part of the bottom of the station was reserved for “classified purposes” as the entry stated. Those sections were off limits to the general public and judging by the plans it seemed like there was room for at least a few thousand people down there. That was still only a minority of the stations population, some twenty odd thousand, but still a lot of people. Especially if it was, as Haneu suspected, a military garrison.

From what he had overheard on the comm system at Aruna he was of the impression that the few military forces left in Indigo system tended to keep to themselves and were usually more a form of local police force rather than military units. Some, of course, had turned rogue and had become pirates and others had simply just slowly fallen apart.

Oddly enough there was no data on what the garrison was like, or if it even was a garrison. Haneu decided to push it to the back of his mind for the time being. There were enough other things to think about.

Meanwhile, Valdis had made her way to the cabins to check on the others. Garey nodded towards the cabin where they had locked Drax in.

“He’s still pretty quiet. Sounded like some troubled dreams a while back, but other than that nothing.”

“Good,” Valdis said, “I prefer it that way. How about Maehan?”

“Still taking it badly. I don’t think she’ll stay on after this.”

Valdis shook her head sadly.

“I don’t think any of us will stay on this ship. We went over the damage again and it feels more and more like we’ll never be able to get her back in shape.”

She gently traced a hand over the steel wall, almost caressing the bulkhead. There had always been something about spaceships that had appealed to her, even when she had been a small kid. Unlike a lot of the others it had not so much been the technological aspect of ships that had drawn her in. She had seen many kids grow up to become mechanics or engineers. But for her there had always been something enchanting about being on a ship, moving through space. That was why she had worked hard year after year to both learn to fly ships and to put aside some money to buy a share in one. It had taken all her energy and patience for well over a decade, but she had done it. And now the dream seemed to be dying right before her.

“Yeah,” said Garey, “I know what you’re thinking. Don’t worry. We’ll figure something out. Still got a few contacts on The Bulb that should be able to fix us up with some repairs.”

“Nah,” Valdis said, “it’s not just repairs.”

Before she continued she made sure that there were no one else around as what she had to say might cause them to panic.

“I’m not sure Haneu noticed, but the ship’s spine is cracked. Any hard acceleration or twists is likely to tear us apart.”

“Fuck!” Garey said. “Do the others know?”

“No, and they shouldn’t. There’s fuck all we can do about it anyway so no sense in making them more worried than they already are.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Who’s the fucking captain? Of course I’m right!”

Garey made a small huffing sound.

“Relax, Valdis. No need to get all jumpy on my ass.”

While slouching shoulders Valdis slumped down in a chair and leaned back against the wall. She groaned loudly and rubbed her face.

“What the fuck are we going to do? Even if we survive and get to The Bulb there’ll be hell to pay for getting the ship docked up, finding someone who actually dare empty out the cargo and we have to keep that git hidden.”

At her last words she indicated Drax’ cabin.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll sort something out with the chief of the dockers. He still owes me a favour from way back so that should take care of getting us in safely. As for the cargo, well, if the ship doesn’t fall apart before that there shouldn’t be any problems. That only leaves Noru.”

Noru was the owner and only ruling power on the station though there had been some quiet whispers about her being a puppet for some unknown power. Most people did not pay too much attention to those rumours as Noru had, time and again, proved to be not only a ruthless leader but also a very talented one. Over the half century she had been running The Bulb she had kept a truce with all nearby pirate crews and had even used some of them to make preventive strikes against others a few times. And no matter how much it had hurt the people who had worked for her in one way or another she had a knack of making people feel that they had still got a fair deal.

“Yeah,” Valdis said, “but I figure we can swing that one by taking a large hit on the payment. It won’t leave us with much, but there should be enough to at least keep us fed and roofed for a few weeks, maybe a month or so.”

They continued discussing their options for a while but did not come closer to any real solution. From earlier trips to the station they knew that the availability of work varied greatly and that their best bet was to wait and see. If all else failed there was always a good chance they could earn a little money doing dirty jobs like scrubbing sewers or maybe even on a crew dismantling their own ship.

Eventually they came back around to the topic of Drax.

“You know,” Garey said, “I think we picked up some old files a while back. No, no, don’t ask. If my mind isn’t completely fucked there were some history entries as well. Pull up that console over there, my arm hurts like hell so I don’t feel like typing, you know?”

“Sure.”

Pulling up the console Valdis followed Garey’s instructions, apart from typing a few passwords which insisted on typing himself despite the obvious pain this caused him. Finally she could open a folder with a handful of files on the planetary war and what had went on before it. Most of it was boring listing of facts and with all that had passed she found it hard to focus on them. Garey could also not do a lot to help out. With only one console nearby only one of them could read at a time.

Rather than spend the next several weeks laboriously reading each and every document she instead decided to just run a couple of searches in the documents and read whichever few, hopefully, texts that showed up.

To her surprise quite a large number of hits was returned and she had to spend some time sifting through the list to find any kind of recurring theme. It did not take long to find and she soon gave a slow whistle as she stumbled across some interesting entries in a news journal published on Indigo Prime.

“What?” Garey said. “Find anything?”

“You bet your ass I did. Listen to this: ‘Earlier today the SNC released a press release stating that former Admiral Drax Escobar has been stripped of all ranks and a warrant for his arrest has been issued.’ Huh? Apparently our Drax was that high up in the military.”

She flipped through another few documents.

“What the hell are these files? I don’t recall ever reading anything about something like this.”

“Probably because a lot of things have either been lost in the last several hundred years. Or they have been made lost.”

“Oh, come on,” Valdis said, “not those stupid conspiracy theories again. We know for a fact that the war between the stations and Prime caused a near technological breakdown and a lot of things were indeed lost. But there haven’t even been a government for centuries. Who the hell would want to hide these things? Who would be able to?”

With a conceding gesture of his one good hand Garey signalled that she had won the argument. It was not the first time his theories about sinister plots had provoked this reaction from Valdis. And it would most likely not be the last.

“What else does it say?” he asked.

“Hang on.”

Valdis scrolled a bit more until she found something else that made her shake her head slowly.

“Fuck me sideways. I need to read this in more detail, but apparently it seems that the short version of the story is that Drax went rogue, took most of the space navy with him and eventually destroyed Prime more or less single-handedly.”

“What the fuck? We know something horrible happened back then, but how the fuck can one man do something like that alone?”

“Shut up, you git. He obviously didn’t physically do it on his own, he just ordered it or something.”

A small cough behind them made them look around. Leaning against the wall, outside the door that should have been locked, Drax was looking at them.

“No, it’s correct. I did it on my own. Some machinery involved, obviously, but yeah, on my own. Now please switch back to the usual torture, at least that was not as fucking hot and humid as this program.”

With that he stumbled back to his cabin and lay down on the bunk, groaning slightly.

“What. The. Fuck?” Valdis and Garey said as one.

Valdis was the first to recover and quickly jumped up and hit the intercom and shouted for all hands to get to the cabins. Then she, shaking all over her body, eased her way along the wall until she could see into Drax’ cabin. He was simply lying there on the bed not doing anything.

Without taking her eyes from Drax she made a few hand signals to Garey instructing him to go find some weapons in the arms locker. He quickly did so and arrived back as the first of the other crew members showed up.

“What’s going on?” Artura asked. “Why’s his door open?”

As he spoke he noticed the two guns Garey was carrying, snatched one of them and moved into position to cover Valdis.

The rest of the crew and Haneu did not take long to also arrive and were immediately silenced by the tense atmosphere and the sight of both Artura and Valdis being armed. Not wanting to get caught in any gun fire Haneu withdrew to the side of the room and half hid behind a support beam.

For several minutes no one moved or spoke. The only sound heard was the humming of the engine and, once, a gentle rustling as Drax moved over onto his side with his face against the wall.

Valdis relaxed slightly and signalled Artura to lower his gun but stay ready. Then she called out to Drax.

“Drax?” she said. “You there?”

Drax sighed and rolled over to his other side so he could look at her.

“Yes, of course I’m here. That’s the whole concept of the thing, ain’t it? For me to be here, for you to be there and, shortly I guess, for you to be replaced by yet another of those nightmares you keep throwing at me.”

This drew completely blank stares from everyone present. Another sigh could be heard from the cabin and Drax continued.

"I must admit this scene is one of your best so far. Looks like you guys are shaping up. I can see the bulkheads, the characters you have designed. It even feels real."

He briefly rapped a hand against the side of the bunk.

"But come on," he said, "if the idea is to lull me into a false sense of safety you should have given me a proper mattress and not this crap."

More blank stares and another sigh from Drax.

"Right, since you've obviously not finished the AI for the characters yet I'll just take another nap. Wake me when we being for real, okay? And close the door so I can get a little quiet."

Not knowing what else to do Valdis simply pressed the button outside the door and it closed with a gently hiss. Looking utterly bewildered she stood up from her crouch and walked a little bit away from the door.

"That's just fucking weird," Artura said. "Did any of that make any kind of sense?"

Most of the others shook their heads, only Garey did not. When Valdis looked questioningly at him he shrugged.

"It did," he said, "in an odd sort of way."

"How so?" Valdis asked.

"Well, he's in this prison pod hurtling through space for hundreds of years. He's bound to go bonkers at some point, yeah? From not getting any input, yeah? But imagine this. What if someone has been feeding him input? Mental torture?"

"Then how can he seem so lucid?"

"Was he lucid? Yeah, well, I guess he was. But what he said didn't make a whole lot of sense, did it? At least not to us?"

"So," Haneu broke in, "you're saying he's, what, caught in his own little world or something?"

"Something like that, just worse. I think he's caught in someone else's world. Something someone designed to truly break and punish him."

"Would that be the people he seemed to speak to?" Valdis asked.

"Most likely. But he did not really seem to suffer from it which kind of contradicts the theory."

They all grew silent for a while as they tried to make sense of the situation.

"What if," Haneu asked, "he had somehow won over the pod?"

"Hmm," Garey said, "yes, that would make some sense. If he had somehow managed to hold on to his former self and stay aware of everything that happened to him. That should give him a chance to fight the torture."

"Fuck," Valdis said. "Yeah, that makes sense. He must have overheard our conversation because he did seem to respond to what we talked about with the planet."

"What?" almost all the others said in unison.

"Oh, right," Valdis said, "we found some old files that Garey picked up a while back. Some of them were about Drax and what happened both just before the war and at the gruesome end of it."

"You mean when Prime was destroyed?"

"Yes. Apparently Drax was responsible, is responsible, for that. And while we talked about it he just waltzed out and said that yes, that was him. Fucking scary. What?"

The last question was directed at Haneu who had begun to wave his hands back and forth.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he said. “Back to those files. Where exactly did you pick them up, Garey?”

“Some weeks ago at one of the mining outposts at L1. Why?”

“Can I take a quick look?”

Valdis pointed at the console and Haneu sat down and quickly scanned through the folders holding the files. The more he looked the more scared he became.

“I’ve seen these exact files before. Not just some of them. This exact set of files. Hang on, let me check something. Be right back.”

He rushed off to his own cabin.

“Now what’s gone into him?” Artura asked.

“Don’t know,” Valdis said, “but this whole thing is beginning to make me think Garey’s conspiracy theories might not be completely wrong.”

“Do any of you remember hearing about this part of the war? One man destroying the entire planet?” Garey asked.

They all shook their heads.

“Only the usual bullocks,” Artura said. “The stations and the planet’s government had a fall out over, I don’t know, taxes most likely or some other stupid thing. Then the stations convinced the space based navy to join them since the stations controlled the asteroid fields and, well, the rest is history as they say.”

“Yeah,” Valdis said, “but who are they and what, exactly, are they saying about history. We’ve all been taught that the war ended with such a horrible bombardment of the planet that it definitively ended the war. After that contact between the stations and the planet was broken. But what if the damage done was so bad that contact wasn’t broken but impossible?”

Quick foot steps told them Haneu was about to return and true enough, a few seconds later he came back, his face flushing red. He was waving a small handheld computer furiously.

“This is too fucking weird,” he said. “I’ve got the exact same files here and when I checked I saw that they showed up almost three weeks ago.”

“Yeah,” Garey said, “that fits when we were at L1. Give or take a day. But what of it?”

“It’s not the when,” Haneu said. “It’s the how. I got these through the station’s network. Somehow they got bounced around all over the place for exactly a minute. Caused no end of troubles on the network, but I figured it was just someone doing a flood ping on steroids. The attack used a flaw in ICC’s fucked up network stack to use a lot of standard machines as relays and bounces. This old tablet had just been lying around in the control room for ages without updates so it was hit which is how I got the files.”

“Did you find out anything about who it started or where?” Garey asked.

“Would have if not for Gintas. After I had sorted most of the problems out he shouted at me for ages, as always, and ordered me to double check everything. So no, I never got around to it. And when I looked at the files, well, it’s just a bunch of old texts. Nothing damaging in itself, just plain boring.”

“Yeah,” Valdis said. “Suspiciously boring, if you ask me.”

Valdis pulled the console over to her and took another look.

“It doesn’t really say anything about how he destroyed the planet,” she said. “Just a few references to how he got some new ultimate weapon assembled. That could be anything.”

“Yeah,” Haneu said.

He too was going through the files, but at a far faster pace than Valdis. Years of sifting through log files and computer programs had trained him to skim texts at an incredible speed.

“Fuck!” he shouted. “No, that’s just not possible!”

“Hey,” Artura said, “keep your voice down.”

A nod towards Drax’ cabin indicated that he was worried that Drax might wake up.

“What did you find?” Garey asked.

“This is insane. Planetary bombardment, my ass. He dumped a whole bunch of fucking asteroids on their heads.”

“Get off,” Artura said. “How the fuck could he have done that? Either the asteroids would have been too few and too small to do any damage. Or he’d have had to have an insanely large ship.”

“Or,” Haneu said, pointing to the screen where an image was visible, “he had this.”

On the screen was an image taken in space depicting three ships surrounding a large asteroid. From each ship a beam of crackling energy ran through space to the asteroid giving the impression that the three ships were anchored to the asteroids, or vice versa.

“What is that?” Artura asked. “A tractor beam?”

“To say the least,” Haneu said. “There’s no text to this picture, it was just dumped in one of the folders along with a bunch of other texts that seem to have no relevance to it. Look there at that ship. Something’s written on the side of it.”

“Yeah,” Artura said, “can you zoom in?”

“Sure. Hmm, just looks like the name of the ship. The Bhaalgorn. Whatever the hell that is. And that other one is called Machasomething.”

“Try searching for those names.”

“Way ahead of you. But no results. Fuck, I’d like some specs on what that is. Look at that asteroid. It’s huge. Could definitely wreak havoc on a planet’s ecosystem.”

“And what if he managed to hurl one of them at the planet?” Valdis said.

“I’m not sure I want to know about that.”

“Hang on,” Garey said, “we’re missing something here. Drax claimed that it had been him alone who had done this. If those three ships were involved there must have been other captains, crews and so on.”

“They could be drones?” Artura suggested.

“No way,” Haneu said, “drones that big would be...”

He ground to a halt as realisation hit him.

“Yes,” he said, “what if it really were drones. I mean, we know a lot of technology has been lost in the war and after. Why not these drones? Plus, if he used drones it would mean he didn’t have to accelerate the asteroids to a very large speed. He could just get them rolling and use the drones just like we use side boosters and thrusters on space ships until they got sucked in by the planet’s gravity well.”

Valdis nodded.

“Unmanned drones means no need to find whole crews who are insane enough to go through with the project, possibly killing themselves in the process.”



“Haneu,” she continued, “do you think it’s possible to fit a control program for the drones in a small fighter?”

“Sure,” he said, “why not? Controlling the drones could basically just be controlling small dots on a map. That doesn’t require much more than a simple interface and, obviously, a transmitter with decent bandwidth.”

“So,” Valdis said, “perhaps he really did destroy the planet single-handedly.”

## 10 Punishment

In a small region of space between the two stars in Indigo system there exists an interesting physical phenomenon. The opposing gravitational pulls from both stars almost cancel each other out, effectively creating a dead zone with virtually zero gravity. Technically speaking there is a spot where the forces from each star are exactly the same, but it is so small that for all practical purposes it bears no purpose.

The general area, however, was quickly discovered, or perhaps calculated is a better word, when the inhabitants of Indigo migrated to space. Though there are no asteroid belts or large objects present it quickly became evident that it would be an ideal place to build a space station. It meant that the ore had to be transported some distance from the closest asteroid fields, but the low gravitational pull made it possible to build huge storage units as well as a full scale refinery. Especially the latter part attracted the large mining corporations as it was far more efficient for them to move the ore after it had been processed. After much negotiating the government on Prime eventually cut through and decreed how things should be done. It was decided that the station should be built by a new company which all the major corporations had shares in. Despite being against this at first the corporations finally decided that it was better to make some money than none at all, and so the new company was created and the station, named Lagrange after the system's president, was built.

At the core of the station, or rather the network of stations, hangs a large torus with spokes running towards a central core. This was the main offices of the corporation where the executives lived, where everything was run from. Around it floats several smaller stations used to house workers, store the ore mined in nearby asteroid belts, repair ships and so on.

When the station was still active it had been an impressive sight to behold. Ships of all sizes milled about moving from one unit to the other or speeding off towards the asteroid belts or the other stations. Thousands of people worked hard to keep the station running, and in turn the station provided well for them.

Then the war came and the agreement between the corporations and the government of Prime fell apart. That was the beginning of the end for the station. After only a few years the corporations had lost so many resources that all but one, ICC, had withdrawn from the station. As the only large corporation to survive in space ICC had a lot of interest in keeping the station running. If they could gain a monopoly on refining ore they would be set for life and could control the entire system's resources, at least the resources in space.

Unfortunately for ICC it turned out differently. While they did gain, and kept, the monopoly it was quickly evident that the people left in space after the war did not have the capital to build a lot of new stations and ships. Most of them were barely able to keep themselves fed and since eating rocks was not viable ICC eventually had to close down Lagrange. Or at least nearly close it down. A few basic systems had been left running under automatic control to keep the station from drifting away from the dead zone, testament to ICC's optimistic hope that they would one day have need for the station again.

Since it's last day of operation Lagrange had suffered badly. As it had become evident that ICC really had abandoned the station a handful of independent miners had tried to take over some of the facilities. This had been dealt with swiftly, brutally and stupidly by some mercenaries hired by

ICC. After taking care of the miners the mercenaries had decided to go rogue and ran their pirate operation from Lagrange until they too abandoned the station.

Throughout the first century after the war other groups frequently tried to occupy the station, but as they all found out ICC had done a fairly good job at securing the station. It was possible to break through enough of their security systems to squat in the outer units, but with no need for the refinery the station was eventually abandoned for good.

Abandoned, that is, by everyone but the FreeTechs.

Unknown to everyone else they had early on infiltrated ICC's systems and set up a base of operations in the central torus. Often they had had to keep a very low profile when there had been visitors to the station. At some times they had simply made sure the station's systems had been used to either drive off or kill intruders. And so, as the centuries had passed Lagrange had mostly disappeared from the minds of everyone in Indigo and effectively turned into the central intelligence hub for the FreeTechs. They rarely went there as a precaution against being discovered. Only in the case of grave emergencies did the masters meet.

The reappearance of Drax was such an emergency.

Not long after the operative had beamed her findings to her master had she received a short message telling her to head for Lagrange at best speed. No more than that. No explanations. No comments. She was not surprised at that as her master was always terse in his communications. What puzzled her was the order to go at best speed. Usually operatives were required to go to great lengths to remain undetected. Going full speed meant dropping all cloaking devices and go in as straight a line as possible, even if it meant passing close to stations or other ships.

That was why she had allowed herself to be detected after the freighter had picked up Drax' pod. Inside it had pained her to let them see her ship, but she had learned the hard way that the order dealt harshly with those who did not follow orders. And that was why she was now, only a few hours later, speeding towards the central torus at Lagrange.

As she approached she saw several other FreeTech ships headed for the station. This was not just a meeting between her and her master, it seemed. She quickly prepared her ship to dock and was just about to pull up at the bay when she got an incoming message.

"Drop to zero speed and wait for further instructions."

The sender was not her master. It was someone she had not heard of before, but the signature and encryption key proved that the message was authentic and came from someone well above her rank. Nothing else for her to do than wait, then.

She reversed to bring her to a complete stop and shut down the main engine. With her thrusters she kept still, following the station's rotation. This was the part she had always found difficult, waiting.

Ahead of her she could see the other ships docking up at different bays. A total of eight other ships, a few of them several sizes larger than her own. It seemed like there were several masters present. The thought of that made her nervous. The only time she had heard of so many high ranking members being together was when people from outside the system had been discovered and a decision to terminate them had to be made. Drax was from Indigo system and as such could not be eliminated in that way. The scriptures were very clear on that. Only outsiders, never insiders.

She settled down to wait, pondering what could be going on inside the station.

As it turned out she did not have to wait long. After just over a quarter of an hour she got another message.

“Dock your ship at the marked bay and follow the lights. Do not stop.”

In the middle of the cluster of used bays an empty one lit up brightly. She quickly powered on her engines and headed straight for the bay. With an efficiency born of repeated training she docked and grabbed her satchel and robe before disembarking.

The inside of the docking bay was cold and she pulled her robe close around her as she followed the blinking lights in the floor. They led her through a winding path through the docking bay area, past what must once have been administration offices and on and on for a long time.

Her internal clock told her that she had been walking for more than half an hour when the lights finally stopped. They had led her to a giant blast door, the kind often used for air locks. An involuntary shiver went down her spine as she contemplated the thought of the doors opening straight out into open space, her body being torn from the station and instantly frozen. With a great mental effort she straightened herself and forced her thoughts away from such matters. If the masters wished to end her, she trusted they had made the right decision.

With an empty mind she approached the blast door and did her best not to flinch as it hissed open. The room behind it was dark and she could not see anything. Slowly she moved forward carefully testing the floor with each step.

When she had passed the door it shut with a deep boom. Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the dark and she could begin to make out shapes around her. It seemed like a large room, the walls disappearing from sight some distance ahead of her. Right inside the door she could sense some objects that were lower than her and she got the distinct feeling that they were chairs with people sitting in them.

Suddenly a dim light came on in the floor several meters in front of her and from all around her she could hear a voice she did not recognise. It was androgynous and oddly without an echo despite the metal walls.

“Walk to the light,” the voice said.

She did so and soon stood on top of the small light embedded in the floor. Being illuminated from below had a strange effect. It was almost as if she was a torch shining in the vast darkness. Mentally she shrugged and again forced her mind to be blank. There was no use succumbing to these illusions. Whatever the masters had in mind for her she had to stay focused and free of preconceptions.

The light turned off leaving her, once more, in darkness.

“Kneel and state your full name and rank within our order,” the voice said.

Quickly she did as asked and again the light turned on.

“You stand before the masters of our order,” the voice said, “because it has come to our attention that you have discovered something of vital importance to the system whose future is in our care. Tell us what you have found.”

In as simple a way as possible she related her discoveries involving Drax. She left out all the mundane details about her work in Aruna station, but did mention that one of the people on the freighter had come from there. When she had finished the light turned off.

“The masters have heard you. Leave the room and await your fate.”

Behind her a row of lights in the floor lit up marking the way to the blast door. She followed them out the room and sighed when the doors had once more closed. The whole thing could not have taken more than a few minutes, but she felt as drained as if it had taken hours. Communicating

with her master was one thing, this was something else entirely. It had been impossible for her to tell how many there had been in the room, if there indeed had been any others present. And there could have been a lot of people watching from elsewhere. Darkness was no hindrance to the surveillance methods available to the order.

What got the most to her had been the lack of response to what she had told, the lack of feeling in the voice. That made her far more nervous than anything else because it really gave no hint at all as to what she could expect. All she knew was that she had to wait and, she guessed, that meant staying just outside the door. Pulling herself together she turned and faced the door again, mentally steadying herself for whatever would happen next.

The minutes went past with agonising slowness. A few times she thought she heard something from the other side of the door or from the corridors behind her, but every time the noise was so brief and gentle that she dismissed them as imaginary. As more and more time passed she began to feel the physical effects of waiting as well as the mental. Her legs grew tired, hunger began to creep into her stomach and her entire body gradually began to complain more and more about the lack of either movement or rest.

Finally the doors hissed open.

This time the room behind was not entirely dark. She got a brief glimpse of two rows of people, one down each side of the room, before her attention was caught by two robed figures standing at either side of the door. They were standing in the spots where she had sensed something when she had first entered the room so she concluded that she had been right about them sitting there.

The two of them beckoned her forward and when she was between them they turned to stand at either side of her. The doors closed again, this time silently so she only barely registered it.

“Approach the centre,” the androgynous voice said.

She began to walk forward and noticed that the people beside her did the same, a single step behind her. Around her she could see more robed figures standing along all four walls. None of them stood out and as the voice had spoken none of them had moved. Most likely, then, the person giving orders was not in the room but watching from someplace else.

At the centre of the room the light in the floor was once again lit and, when the voice told her to, she knelt down on top of it.

“The masters have reached their conclusion and come to a decision. Your case is a difficult one for you are not a master yet you have stumbled upon forbidden knowledge. There is therefore only one option left for us.”

Slowly she leaned her head forward, keenly aware of the punishment for what she had done. It did not matter that she had not done it deliberately. She knew something she was not allowed to and the punishment for that was death.

A low rustling behind her made her flinch involuntarily. The people behind her moved up to stand really close to her on either side. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the light reflected in the long blades they pulled from their robes.

“Guardians,” the voice said, “do your duty.”

# 11 The Light Bulb

For several hours Valdis and her crew discussed what they should do about Drax without coming to any kind of agreement. Garey was still of the opinion that it had been best to either not pick up the pod or, once they had found out who was in it, to simply kill Drax. None of the others agreed with that though Maehan had mumbled something about how it would have been easier for all of them if they dumped him back in the pod and jettisoned it.

Eventually Valdis had had to take a decision and force it through in her role as captain. She had decided to keep Drax on board but to keep him hidden and, once they reached The Bulb, to try and sneak him off the ship. With identification checks rarely occurring she would list him as Kam. They had done similar things in the past and while The Bulb had better security than most other stations this time the number of people physically present and on her crew roster would at least be the same.

The others had grumbled a bit until she had slammed her hand down on the table and told them to shut up or find another job once they had docked. She had not liked doing that but had deemed it necessary. She was not running a discussion club but a ship and though she preferred to let her crew feel part of the decision process they needed to be reminded that only one of them had the final say in any and all matters.

Whether any of them would actually leave once they arrived at the station remained to be seen, but Valdis had a feeling that this had been the final blow that would make Maehan quit. Her burns were still bad and since the death of her sister Shanna Maehan had become more and more withdrawn. The only reason Valdis could let this continue was because Haneu had proved himself capable of helping out with Maehan's chores.

Over the next few days things more or less settled down into their normal routine. Since the repairs done at Aruna seemed to hold up fairly well there were only a few things for them to do and there was a limit to how many times it made sense to check their trajectory.

That, unfortunately, gave the crew far too much time to keep talking about what had happened and, when Valdis was not around, they tended to talk about Drax.

For his part Drax had kept quiet. Once or twice they had tried to get through to him, but even with the assistance of drugs to clear his mind they could not get anything useful out of him. Perhaps, Valdis reflected, that was just as well. If he had begun to talk with them more it might have been too much for the crew to handle. It seemed far better that he just stayed to himself. But she still had to consider what to do about him once they got off the ship.

None of the people she knew on the station were obvious choices if it came to keeping him hidden. And neither did she like the idea of simply handing him over, either as an unknown or with his full name. Even if Noru's people let her go the word would soon be out that she had been implicated in this and if it turned out that Drax caused problems her life would be a hell of dried up contacts, no work and so on.

She called up Artura and asked him to give her a hand in the cockpit. As her first mate and long time friend he was the best qualified to help her figure out what to do. It did not take long for him to show up.

“What’s up?” he said.

“Hang on,” Valdis said.

She got up and took a peek down the stair to the crew quarters. No one was visible so she pushed the door almost all the way to. That would allow them to speak without being overheard and at the same time be able to hear if anyone came up the stairs.

“Drax,” Valdis said, “I seriously can’t figure out what to do with him.”

“Yeah, know what you mean. It’s some serious shit we’ve got ourselves into.”

“And we need to get ourselves out of it again which is why I need you, probably more than ever.”

“Sure thing, just say the word.”

Valdis smiled. That was why she had always liked Artura. As independent and full of initiative as he was he not only understood the concept of a chain of command, he also followed it without asking questions once things got serious.

“Our situation is,” Valdis said, “that our ship is banged up, we’re late with the cargo and we’ve got Drax on board. Solutions?”

“Cargo won’t be a problem,” Artura said. “Sure, Noru’s administrators might bitch a little, but they need what we’ve got and even if we take a hit on the pay they know that if it’s too large other freight crews will hear about it. So let’s strike cargo from the list.”

“Good. That leaves the ship and Drax.”

Artura had to think about that for a short while before answering.

“Last I heard the conclusion was that the ship is beyond repairs, right?”

“Right.”

“Then there are two solutions to that: the simple and the complicated. The first is to just scrap the ship, maybe sell off a few parts first. The latter is to find someone who’ll throw enough money at us to do a complete overhaul. Nothing is, of course, completely beyond repair.”

“Actually, our ship is. I haven’t told you or the others since there’s nothing we can do. Haneu and I found out that the spine is broken. We’re lucky to be flying and will have to be even luckier to dock without the ship literally falling apart.”

“What the fuck? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We only found out about it just before Drax got up that day. And, yeah, other things just came up. Besides, I don’t think there’s any need for the others to worry about it. There’s nothing we can do and panicking won’t help.”

“True,” Artura said, “well, then we’re back to the simple solution. Scrap the ship. I know it means a lot to you, but there’s no point holding on to a broken dream. See what money you can make from selling it as parts and scrap metal.”

For several moments Valdis sat with a sad look on her face. The ship meant more to her than anything or anyone in the world. It was her home, her base. It had taken her years to get it and now it had been ripped from her. As much as she rationally knew the ship was done for a part of her clung on to the hope that it could somehow be saved.

“Valdis,” Artura said, “get a grip. The ship’s gone and you need to keep moving. What are your options?”

She blinked a few times and looked at him. He was right, of course.

“Yes. Options. Ah, I don’t know of anyone at the station that I could easily get employed by. There are a few freight corps, but it’s not like their looking for new pilots. And I’m not panicky enough to degrade to deck hand just right now.”

“Okay, maybe you need some time to settle down and get used to things. Not stop moving, but maybe a small break would do?”

“Might be a good idea. Most of the damage to the ship was at the structural level so a lot of the electronics and at least one of the engines can be salvaged. And the reactor, of course. That should bring in a tidy sum, if we can find a buyer. Enough to pay the rest of your wages and a little extra to keep you running, but far from enough to get a new ship. Well, maybe a shuttle.”

She wrung her nose at the thought of buying one of the small shuttles used to ferry people or small items between the stations. They were only rarely used because they were relatively expensive compared to renting a cabin or storage on a larger ship. And the people who tended to use them were often arrogant or downright nasty people who viewed the shuttle’s captain more as a slave than a captain.

Artura noticed her disgusted face.

“Right,” he said, “no shuttles. So you’ll get some money, pay us off and... what? Go drink it all up in a bar somewhere? Spend it on fast women and dice?”

“Pft! You know I’d never do that. Never did like dice games, you know.”

“Anyway,” Valdis said after a while, “for now I’ll take it easy and focus on getting the ship taken apart and sold. Guess I’ll have to take it from there and see what comes up.”

“Sounds like a good enough plan for me. By the way, if you do manage to scrounge up a position as captain I know someone with perfect qualifications to be your second in command.”

“Who?”

“Me!”

Valdis laughed.

“You twit,” she said, “if I have to put a crew together again you know you’ll be first on the list. But if I don’t, what are your plans?”

“To be honest I hadn’t thought much about it. Didn’t really know I had to have plans before now, you know?”

“Fair enough. Just keep me posted, will you?”

“Of course,” he said. “Now, there’s one last problem. Drax. What the fuck do we do with him? I know we don’t do anything right now, but at some point we need to either rid ourselves of him or, well, I have no fucking idea what to do with him.”

“Me neither. If he really lives in his own little dream world it will be fucking dangerous to set him loose. If we could somehow get him back into the real world we might be able to get some useful information out of him. What’re you thinking?”

“I’m thinking about taking him to Doc. Maybe he’s got something stronger than what we have down in med bay, or perhaps he can dig out some information about the pods and what’s been used in them.”

“Not a bad idea. I thought about it at some point, but the last time I saw Doc things didn’t exactly go well, did it?”

“Oh, things did go well, just not for his nose. Did you really have to go and break it?”

“He called me a fucking baby machine!”



A playful smile spread on Artura's lips and he laughed as he replied.

"Baby machines usually are fucking, you know, at least at one point during their career."

"Fuck off," Valdis said and punched him hard on the arm.

"Haha, not likely. Seriously, though, I think Doc has had worse than that. When we're docked I'll ping him and see what he says."

"Okay, sounds good. But whether he can do something about Drax or not we still need to figure out what to do. Do we keep him with us or turn him over to... who?"

"For now I think we should keep a low profile. Doc won't have a problem with that. He's used to treating every lowlife in the system and doesn't care what the rest of us do to each other."

"Yeah, good old Doc. Fine. We'll get Drax over to him for a quiet examination and take it from there."

"What about his pod?"

"What about it?" Valdis asked.

"If we pull the ship apart and sell everything someone's bound to notice it and it's a seriously bad idea to be caught with that thing in the cargo hold. I think we should jettison it, preferably in a way that it will float off towards either Alpha or the edge of the system."

"Good point. I had completely forgotten about the pod."

"Want me to get a few of the others and get everything ready for dumping it?"

"Yes," Valdis said. "No, yes. Fuck, I can't figure it out. We'd better hang on to it in case this guy is somehow still dependent on it."

"Makes sense. Can't say I like it, but it's probably a good idea."

"The second we pulled him out of the pod we assumed some kind of responsibility for his well-being. So, unfortunately, the pod stays onboard."

"Okay. But I'll make sure it's powered down and is not connected to our internal network. Just in case."

"Good. See to it, thanks."

For the next several days not much happened aboard the freighter. They all settled into a quiet routine consisting of daily chores, eating, sleeping and frequent unproductive discussions of what they should do with Drax.

Haneu spent most of the time absorbed in his own thoughts. The full effect of being uprooted was beginning to hit him and reacted as he always did, by retreating into himself. A few times Valdis tried to get him to open up again, but his insecurity about how he felt towards her only made him disappear even more from the real world.

Only once did Drax leave his cabin and that was only briefly to proclaim that they were not doing a good job at softening him up after which he quickly withdrew again. What irked them about that episode was that he, again, had simply bypassed the lock on the cabin door, though none of them felt strongly enough about it to actually go inside his cabin to see if they could figure out how he had done it.

On the sixth day of the trip they began to pick up signs that they were near the station. A few ships on the long range scanner. Frequent, but poor quality, transmission from other ships. Nothing meant for them, just the usual radio noise that got bounced around for a while before the signal was eaten away by attenuation.

## 11 *The Light Bulb*

None of the ships on their scanner seemed to be headed in their direction and that made them relax a little. There was still the threat posed by whoever had been on the strange ship by the pod, but at least it did not seem like there was a hostile welcoming party headed for them.

At the very limit of their scan range they could pick up the energy signature of The Bulb. Usually stations tended to keep their energy radiation to an absolute minimum to avoid unnecessary waste. The Bulb was different as they could see as they slowly came close enough to get a more detailed scan and, finally, a coarse visual image as well.

The Bulb really did look just like its name implied. An upside-down pear shape that seemed to glow in the darkness of space, illuminated by an enormous number of light panels fixed to the outside of the station. In addition to cost of the energy used on lighting all the panels the cost of installing them and maintaining them must have been enormous. It seemed like the only dark spots were the docking bays where ships could dock up.

From her position in the cockpit Valdis realigned the scanners to do a more thorough scan of the ships close to the station. While several ships were bound to be docked inside the station most of the larger ships, especially freighters, tended to dock outside the station at one of the external bays. That was partly for practical reasons since some of the ships were far too large to fit inside the station, and partly for security reasons. There was always a danger of trying to fit any kind of large, heavy object inside an even larger and heavier one. On an external bay the risk of both material and personnel damage was high enough, on an internal bay even more so. The worst case scenario was a core meltdown on a docked ship which could easily take the entire station down with it.

Even so it was sometimes preferable to dock inside a station, especially if the ship needed repairs. Making any kind of fine mechanical or electrical work while in a full space suit was difficult so deck chiefs frequently had ships dock up so their crews could work outside their suits in an artificial atmosphere created in the docking bay.

For loading and unloading purposes it was more than enough for a freighter to float near one of the large cargo bays and simply move the cargo across from the ship to the station through open space. Especially on as large a station such as The Bulb where there were plenty of dock workers and resources to keep the free space cargo lifts operational. Most items carried in freighters were packed in large crates, vats or other containers that could easily withstand the jostling they received while being moved.

Valdis' scans showed nothing out of the ordinary. A dozen ship of varying sizes, but all civilian, were orbiting the stations a few kilometres out. None of them seemed to have sustained any damage so chances were good that there were most likely no pirate crews around. While pirates tended to hide out in the asteroid belts or make base in the abandoned mining stations there they did, from time to time, venture near enough to the stations to be able to pick off ships as

She flicked on the ship's intercom.

"Listen up," she said, her voice booming through the ship. "We're within scan range of The Bulb. I expect we'll be there in twelve hours if all goes well and will keep you updated regularly."

There was no immediate reply from any of the others, but after a few minutes she could hear boots on the stairs leading up to the cockpit. It turned out to be Artura. He looked tired.

"Damn," he said, "I'm glad we're nearly there."

"You look wasted. What's up?"

He shook his head and slumped down in the chair next to her.

"Haven't really slept well. I've got a really bad feeling about all this."

“You’re not the only one,” Valdis said. “With a little luck, which by the way we’re fucking entitled to now, we’ll soon have the cargo out, some money in our hand and then we can get started on taking the ship apart.”

Artura raised an eyebrow at her optimistic tone.

“You seem to be in a better mood. What’s changed?” he asked.

“Nothing. Everything. Just had a few days to really think this over. As much as I hate to see the ship go I remembered something my dad used to tell me. Never be afraid of changes. They’re the reason you are who you are and where you are.”

“Huh? Sounds wise,” Artura said, “in that annoying ‘it sounds true but you can’t really use it for anything’ way.”

“Fuck off. The point is that when I look back I remember that despite the hard work there was something fucking awesome about having a dream, a goal. What have we had this past decade? Bills, pissed off customers, crews leaving or, worse, dying. What are your goals right now?”

That made Artura shut up and Valdis briefly worried that she had sounded too harsh. It had not been her intention to bring him down, it was just a way for her to voice some of the thoughts that had gone through her mind. There did not seem to be any damage done, though, as Artura soon smiled and nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, “that’s a good point. My goals? Oh, let’s see. Get up in the morning. Eat. Move stuff around. Maybe catch a nap after lunch. Fuck, not really exciting.”

They both laughed at the exaggerated sarcasm in his voice.

“Okay, so maybe those aren’t my goals. Good question. Don’t really think I have any. They’ve all either come true, like getting on this ship, or become lost somewhere along the way.”

“Same here,” Valdis said. “Same here.”

“You’ve got that look on your face. Your sneaky look that usually means you have something up your sleeve.”

“Maybe that’s because I have.”

She held out her arm and shook it so her sleeve flicked back and forth.

“Oh,” she said, “nothing there. Guess not, then.”

“Piss off! Tell me what you’re planning. I know you’ve got something.”

“It’s still just an idea, so I need some details.”

“Fuck the details. Details makes it a plan. An idea is a goal. Spill the beans.”

“Okay,” she said, “here goes. Short term I want to get rid of Drax. Don’t really care how, just in a way that doesn’t cause problems and can’t be traced back to us. After that I’ve got my eye on something I thought of years ago, but dropped because we were doing well with the freighter. Basically I’m thinking about going back in the courier business.”

She held up a hand to still his protests before he could voice them.

“Not in the usual way. That kind of courier shit stinks. Big time. No, I’m thinking about going for a fleet of really small ships.”

“What? Small ships can’t make those kind of trips.”

The look on Artura’s face clearly showed how little he thought of that idea.

“No, they can’t. I’ll be the first to admit that. Which is why there’s a twist to the whole thing. Take a look at this.”

She punched a few keys and brought two news entries up on the screen for Artura to read. The first was a regular news broadcast. Its main story was about a food shortage on The Bulb that had forced the station's management to put all non VIP personnel or paying guests on rations. Artura whistled.

"Wow," he said. "And our cargo hold's got exactly how many tons of sludge ready to be turned into edible sludge?"

"Exactly. I've a feeling that being a little late is not a problem for us, quite the opposite in fact. Noru will have figured out that if she makes the least bit of trouble we'll either just leave or sell everything to one of the carrion eaters that call themselves free marketeers."

Artura smiled wickedly as he realised that one of the main concerns had just evaporated. He looked at the other news entry.

"What's this? This just looks silly."

The entry was an interview with a crazy looking person whose hair poked out in every direction as he wildly gestured with his arms about something.

"Just give me the general gist," Artura said. "I mean, I know who he is, but he's just a crazy guy, right? Always comes up with insane ideas about what will save our world. They all wash out though."

"True," Valdis said, "this guy, Loyola, does come up with a lot of hare brained ideas. And yes, they have all failed miserably in the past. It's not so much what he's done or what he's actually saying now. Not as such. However, look at this clip."

She played another part of the news entry for Artura. It was an interview with Loyola where he kept ranting on about the hidden government that was still active and how they oppressed the people by underhand means like assassinations, spy networks and secret agents.

"Shit," Artura said, "he's really lost it now, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but look in the background."

On the screen Loyola was standing in the middle of a corridor, ranting away as the news cameras were all around him. She flicked over to a camera from one of the smaller news stations and froze the image.

"Look at this guy," she said and pointed to a man leaning against the wall, obviously trying to be inconspicuous.

"What about him? Probably some shady dealer not wanting to get caught by the cameras."

"Yeah, but now look at this."

She pulled up a handful of other news casts. On a lot of them the same guy could be seen somewhere in the background in varying attires.

"And," Valdis continued, "if you look at these other people. Yeah, those ones. I haven't spotted all of them, but there are at least five of them and they just happen to show up as Loyola's getting interviews? Not fucking likely."

Artura shrugged.

"So? Someone's keeping an eye on him. Let's assume he's right and there really is a secret government. Let's also assume that those ones are indeed its agents or whatever. That's too fucked up. Don't want to touch that with a twenty foot pole."

"Besides," he continued, "why the fuck did you come up with this? Have you been that bored lately?"

“No,” Valdis said, “or, well, yes I have been bored. It’s just that I came across an old interview with Loyola that seemed a lot different. Here, look.”

“Oh,” Artura said, “that’s fucking typical. Show me a lot of bull shit that doesn’t make sense, and only when I’m confused out of my skull do you tell me what’s really going on.”

Valdis just laughed as she pulled up a very old clip showing a young, serious looking man in a lab coat talking about the state of Indigo’s communication systems.

“Who’s this?” Artura asked.

“Same guy. Look at the eyes.”

“Oh, okay. Damn, he doesn’t look at all the same.”

The younger and more composed Loyola was describing his doomsday vision of how the stations in Indigo were growing further and further apart. Not physically, but with regards to information. Despite the many news services still operating in the system only few did any structured relaying of information between the station. Everyone, Loyola claimed, were more interested in surviving on a day to day basis and no one looked to the future. At the end of the clip he presented his solution which was a combination of light speed communication, relay satellites and a small fleet of ultra fast and agile one or two person ships that could either work as couriers or repair crews for the satellites. It all sounded very clever but, given the general lack of resources and production facilities, it also seemed highly impossible.

“I still don’t get it,” Artura said. “You want to build a communication system? Doesn’t make sense. ICC’s already got one which they use to distribute software updates and so on. It’s a bit old, yes, but that guy is just completely off.”

“Ah, he is now. And would be if that clip wasn’t well over two hundred years old. It’s dated well before ICC got their current network up and running.”

For a second it seemed like Artura was about to fall over backwards.

“The hell it is!” he said. “How the fuck did you find it?”

“Weird coincidence. This clip was in the old archives on the freighter. Remember that this ship is dating back almost three hundred years, hence its poor state. Seems like one of the previous captains had a huge crush on this Loyola guy. There was a pile of things about him, including this clip, from back then.”

“Okay, so what are you saying? He got a good idea and ICC nicked it? Pah! Hardly surprising.”

Valdis punched him hard on the shoulder.

“Git!” she said, “Look at the time stamp on the latest clips. I just picked them up from The Bulb’s news network. These are recent clips. Loyola is well over two hundred years old.”

“What the fuck?”

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly. He’s been in the news for, what, a few years now, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, over the past days I’ve spent a little time digging. Partly because, yes, I was bored. And partly because I came across the old archives while doing a more thorough check of our backup systems than we usually do. I figured that if we’re to scrap the ship I’d better make sure nothing too interesting is left in its systems. And, well, you know how there’s always been this large pile of junk that we just left there because there was plenty of space left?”

“I remember a very large porn collection,” Artura said with a smile, “that you got pissed off at me for looking at.”

“Yeah,” Valdis said, “and I’m still mad at you for that. You could fucking well have told me about it. Not fair to keep important matters like that to yourself!”

“Anyway,” she said, “the thing is that once I got to the bottom of the pile the files on Loyola showed up. I wouldn’t have thought about it if I hadn’t seen his name again in the current news. It’s not an uncommon name and he’s completely different now from what he was back then. And check this out.”

Using the console she showed him a list of news clips going back a few years.

“Those are the only clips I’ve been able to find in the news stream. If you look for other things you can easily find clips that are several decades old, but nothing on this guy until four years ago.”

“That’s odd,” Artura said. “What does that mean?”

“I think it means that there’s something really dodgy going on.”

“Well, duh! Hey, hang on. Let me see the list of clips with the sneaky people in it.”

She pulled up the list.

“What are you looking for?”

“This,” Artura said and poked the screen. “The people don’t show up until two years ago. It’s as if they suddenly found out about him and then started following him around. Are all the clips from the same station?”

“Yes, they’re from The Bulb’s archives.”

“Okay, so maybe he was on another station before that. That’d explain why there are no earlier clips.”

“No,” Valdis said, “he mentions a few time that he hasn’t been on a space ship for ages because he no longer trusts them to be safe. Keeps insisting that the secret government will make him disappear if he ever gets on one of them. So he’s been on The Bulb more or less forever.”

“Or,” Artura said, “he’s just plain mad.”

“Oh, he’s totally bonkers. No question about that. But that doesn’t mean that he’s wrong.”

“Yeah, ok. But what the fuck do we care about this? Unless you plan on kidnapping him and ransoming him off to whoever want him I can’t see the scheme in all this.”

Valdis sighed but forced herself to remember that she sometimes had far different thoughts than other people. She decided to take it from scratch to make sure Artura got the full meaning of what she had in mind.

“What’s the smallest crew you’ve ever worked on?”

“That’d have to be this one since we’re only four. Plus Haneu, I guess, so let’s call it five.”

“Why aren’t there smaller crews?”

“Because if anyone ever got smart and ballsy enough to fly solo they’d have to be brilliant mechanic, theoretical astrophysicists, crack pilots and capable of staying awake for, oh, at least several days at a time. Without losing focus.”

“And why is that?”

“Simple. Ships are just that complicated. It’s not like putting on a pair of boots and then replacing them once they get too worn. If a ship gets too worn you’re dead. Period.”

“Ah, but imagine this. You have a mechanically simple and stable ship combined with a kick ass navigational computer, right?”

“Okay. For the sake of the argument I’ll say yes. That ship would take care of the first two concerns. How would you keep someone awake for several days?”

“Not the right question to ask. Why is it necessary to always have someone awake to keep an eye on things?”

“Because ships are going fucking fast and a collision with even the smallest rock might do serious damage.”

“Pah! There are so many small rocks and other particles in space that we hit them all the time. But yes, once they get over a certain size it’s a problem because they can breach the hull or simply cause so much trembling that systems will eventually break down.”

“Yeah, and it’s impossible to prevent that unless you have someone, a human, around to scan and keep track of everything and try to prevent the worst damage.”

“Unless the ship was so small and agile that a fairly simple, relatively speaking, AI could scan down any large obstacles fast enough that it could avoid them?”

Rolling his eyes and obviously losing his patience rapidly Artura sighed and nodded.

“Okay, okay. We have a one person ship that never needs repairs, with an AI from the other side of the next singularity and a pilot who never sleeps. Yes, then I agree that it would be possible, maybe even highly profitable to go into the courier business.”

“Glad you agree,” Valdis said, sarcasm dripping from her voice. “Or at least pretend to. Why don’t you think it’s would be possible?”

Artura counted on his fingers as he listed the reasons.

“Firstly, someone would have done it already. Secondly, keeping people alive for several days? One of the oldest and best working tricks in the torturer’s handbook. Thirdly, not room enough for fuel for more than short trips. Fourthly, if that’s even a word, pirates would be able to trap it far too easily. Fifthly, as soon as pirates realised that they’d hit the courier fleet hard. And, oh, wait, no more fingers left on that hand. Want me to continue?”

“Yeah, okay, enough. This time I’ll agree with you for the sake of argument.”

“Thank you,” Artura said, “can we get back to the real world now, please?”

“Sure, just answer me one simple question first.”

“Shoot!”

“If such a ship can’t possibly exist then what the fuck was that thing next to the pod?”

That caught Artura off his guard and he said nothing for almost a full minute. Meanwhile Valdis folded her arms and just glared at him. She had given it a lot of thought over the past several days. That ship had looked far too similar, in its basic design at least, to the other ships she had seen in Indigo for it to come from someplace else. Not an alien ship or some other vague explanation of super advanced technology. No, somewhere in Indigo human beings had built that ship and if they had done that then others would be able to do the same. And the more she had found out about Loyola, crazy as he might be, the more convinced she was that he was the key to finding out where the ship had come from.

“Found your tongue yet?” she asked.

“Fucking hell. Don’t you hate being right all the time?”

“Oh yes, it becomes such a burden. Not!”

“I’ll give you this, you’re dead right that it must be possible to construct one or two person ships. Simple as that. Not so simple is how it’s done and, worse, who you’d piss off by pursuing this idea.”

“That’s the trick, isn’t it? But think about it. Fuck all this shit about hauling vats of goo around. Or do you remember the one time we played ferry? Fifty fucking civilians on cots in the cargo hold. Fucking mess. No, I want to do something completely different after the last years on this boat, as much as I’ve loved it. Well, at least not hated it utterly. Most of the time.”

Artura sat back in his chair folding his hands behind his neck and looked up at the ceiling. His mouth worked wordlessly for a while before he finally spoke.

“So you plan on salvaging whatever you can of this wreck and spend it all in a mad scramble to build something that no one in the entire system knows of, at least publicly?”

“Not all of it. I’ll pay you and the others what I owe you. If there’s something left, yes, after ten years of this I want to risk it all to do something, anything, other than this fucking tread mill work.”

“You’ve lost it,” Artura said and shook his head. “Get your ass down in your bunk, pop a sleeper and come back up here when you’ve had a good, long nap. If you’re still up for it then, well, then I won’t get in your way. Just don’t expect me to waste whatever chances I have at getting back on my feet on an insane quest.”

Valdis could feel she was starting to be really annoyed with Artura. The feeling left her a bit drained as she had counted on him being someone who would be able to see the idea as a good thing rather than just shoot it down as he had done. And she could feel that he was becoming more and more hostile. Perhaps, she thought, it was best to end the conversation before it got completely out of hand.

“Fine,” Valdis said, “never mind, then. It’s probably not even possible to get anything sensible out of Loyola even if we should be able to get a chance to speak with him.”

An uncomfortable silence flooded the cockpit. Eventually Valdis got up left, only stopping briefly to give Artura an order to keep an eye on things for a few hours.

She made her way down to her bunk and kicked off her boots. It had been far too long since she had had a good night’s sleep. Not even at Aruna had she allowed herself to properly relax and unwind. There had been far too much to do on the ship and with her dead and injured crew members. By her reckoning it had been more than two months since she had been fully rested and it was beginning to wear her down. Partly from the lack of sleep, partly from the strain of being in command. Over the years she had come to love being an independent captain, but had come to hate having the responsibility for her crew. Most of the time it was not that big a problem, but whenever something went wrong she always pushed aside herself to help them. Or at least she tried to. Lately, it seemed, she had begun to fail more than she succeeded.

Slipping down on her bunk she closed her eyes and let her head sink deep into the pillow. It felt wonderful and she could feel herself longing to just let go of everything and slip away into blissful oblivion.

As it were she did not reach oblivion, but she did fall asleep and did not wake until several hours later when someone banged on the door to her cabin. Most of her body was screaming at her to go back to sleep when she dragged herself from her bunk and opened the door. Her voice was a tired slur when she asked Garey what he wanted.

“What?” she said.

Her drowsiness made her miss that Garey’s eyes were wide and his entire posture was frantic on the edge of panic.

“You’ve got to come. Now. Right now,” he said.

She shivered a bit and wrapped her arms around her.

“Hold on, what’s fucking happening?”



Garey took hold of her arm and started dragging her out into the corridor.

“Fucking come on. Artura’s completely lost it!” he said.

“Okay, okay, let me get my boots.”

She went back inside the cabin and pulled her boots on as quickly as she could. The sleepiness was beginning to leave her and with the came the worrying. She became afraid that what she had said had somehow prompted a far too drastic reaction from Artura, although that did not really seem like his style. He had never been one to lose his temper or to do rash things.

When she had her boots back on she quickly got back up and stepped outside again.

“Right, fill me in on the way,” she said and started walking briskly towards the cockpit.

“Not that way,” Garey said, “he’s down in the cargo hold fucking up things.”

She froze in mid step. There was nothing in the cargo hold except the vats of sludge for Noru.

“What?” she said and turned around. “What the fuck is he doing there?”

They set off towards the cargo hold as quickly as they could.

“Beats me,” Garey said, “something with the vats. Haneu came running from somewhere and shouted something about Artura doing something to the pod.”

Realisation hit her like a brick. Of course. There was more than just the vats down there. She started running. It was not far to the cargo hold, but a sudden sense of urgency came over her. Behind she could hear Garey shout something that she could not make out. She did not care. She just knew she had to get down there before Artura did something stupid like destroy the pod.

When she got inside the cargo hold she did not pause to climb down the stairs. Instead she just grabbed the rails and slid down them until she landed on the floor with a loud crash and a sharp pain in one ankle. Half stumbling across the room she made her way to the pod only to find Artura bound securely with Maehan standing watch over him. The wrench in her hand had obviously been applied at least once to his head.

She could hear Garey climb down the stairs and turned towards him. Then, seeing that it would still take him some time to get to where she was standing she turned back to Maehan.

“What the fuck happened here?” Valdis shouted.

Maehan flinched, but kept a defiant look on her face when she answered.

“He trying to destroy the fucking pod,” she said. “Kept saying something about it not belonging here and that we were all better off if we destroyed it.”

“So you whacked him over the head with that?”

She pointed at the wrench.

“You could have fucking killed him?”

“Fuck yeah,” Maehan said, “and I would have if he hadn’t gone out cold. Fucking asshole came at me with a knife.”

With her boot Maehan pointed at a knife on the floor some distance from them both. Valdis instantly recognised it as Artura’s. Even so she found it hard to believe that he had threatened Maehan.

“Okay,” Valdis said, “fuck this. Anyone about to kill each other right now?”

“No,” said Garey who had joined them, “that’s what I tried to tell you when you ran off. Maehan and Haneu noticed it more or less at the same time, just in their own way. While Haneu ran off to

tell me that he had seen some strange activity on the pod's readouts Maehan was down here and saw Artura mess around with its control panel."

"Yes," Maehan said, "when I asked him what he was doing he just turned around with a fucked up smile on his face and started raving on about the pod being an evil invention and that it must never again be used, not even for noble purposes. Or something. Didn't make much sense, but when he pulled a knife on me I just whacked him. Then Garey came and we tied him up. He hasn't moved since."

She was speaking quickly and Valdis could sense that she was very agitated. With deliberate slowness Valdis reached out and took the wrench from Maehan's hands.

"We won't be needing this right now. If he pulled a knife then he got what he deserved and we'll keep him tied up until this is sorted out. Hand me the knife as well, just so no one steps in it."

Valdis did not entirely believe Maehan's story, but she decided it would be better to get everyone to calm down and get any weapons away from the area.

"Garey," Valdis said, "give me a hand here. Let's get him upstairs to his bunk. And where the fuck is Haneu. I want him to check the logs on the pod and, wait, hang on. Where the fuck was he accessing the logs from?"

"His room, I think," Garey said.

"Definitely not here," Maehan said. "I didn't see him when I found Artura."

"Did the fuck head put the pod on the ship's network?"

The stupidity of such a thing confounded Valdis. None of them knew what kind of control systems the pod had running and giving it access to the ship's network could just as easily result in the pod's system taking over the ship's. They could probably have broken its access fairly easily by simply pulling the plug, but there was no telling what it could have done in the mean time. It could quite simply have shut down the air support systems and they would all have suffocated before they realised what was wrong.

She made a mental note to chew off Haneu's head the next time she saw him.

"Anyway," she said, "I'll deal with him later. Let's get Artura away from here. Garey, we'll drag him to the lift. Maehan, get up the stairs and be ready for when he comes up."

They set about their tasks and soon had Artura safely stored away in his bunk. Valdis put Garey in charge of making sure Artura did not leave the cabin and told Maehan to take the controls while she herself found Haneu and had a serious talk with him.

She tracked down Haneu in his cabin where he seemed deeply lost in something running on his datapad. She had barged in without knocking but even so he seemed unaware of her presence.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she shouted at him. "We could have lost the entire fucking ship?"

Haneu still seemed completely unaware of her and just continued typing. This made her furious and she slammed her hand down on the desk. That got his attention and he literally flew out of his seat.

"What did you do that for?" he said.

"Shut the fuck up and sit down," Valdis roared.

She flipped his datapad over so he could not see it anymore, hoping it would keep his focus on her instead of what he had been working on. Haneu sat down meekly. When she was sure she had his attention she crossed her arms and looked him straight in the eye. As much as she wanted to tear his head off a part of her brain told her that it would not work on someone like Haneu.

“What the fuck were doing with the pod?” she asked, as calmly as she could.

Haneu looked downright scared of her so she forced herself to lower her voice even further and tried again.

“Did you hook up the pod to the ship’s network?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, “I was just looking at how it worked and tried to find out some more about what it had done to Drax.”

“Did you ever consider the risk of doing that?”

“The risk?”

Haneu looked completely blank.

“Yes, the risk. Who knows what kind of systems are running on the pod. For all we know it could have taken over the ship, shut down the life support and sent all of us drifting out of the system.”

For several moments none of them spoke. Then Haneu spoke, his voice very quiet and low.

“That’s not possible, is it? Don’t you have firewalls between the normal network and any critical systems?”

Valdis sighed and rubbed her face. He was right, she knew, or at least he should have been right.

“No,” she said, “we don’t. Not since our systems went down a couple of months ago. Right now we’re lucky to just have anything running at all.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No, you didn’t, I guess. Even so you shouldn’t have connected anything to the network without asking me first. There’s just way too many things at risk out here. What would your old boss have said if you had done something like that?”

“He wouldn’t have said anything. Or, well, not anything out of the ordinary. Whatever happened he’d usually shout and swear at me for along time and then just accept whatever it was. I could pretty much do whatever I wanted.”

“That so? He did kick you out eventually,” Valdis said and immediately regretted it when she saw the look an Haneu’s face.

“No matter,” she continued, “the thing is that back at Aruna you knew all the systems. You don’t here and that can be fucking dangerous. So just leave things alone, okay?”

“Okay,” he said and then, after a short break, “I did find out something interesting, though. Want to hear it or should I just forget it?”

“Not right now. Maybe later. We got more serious problems.”

“Artura?”

Valdis just nodded and Haneu continued.

“I noticed he was logged into the pod and was doing something. Couldn’t really figure out what.”

“We’ll find out later. He’s out cold now and we’ll get to the bottom of this once he’s conscious again. Just stay here and don’t touch anything, okay?”

“Okay,” he said with an almost inaudible voice.

As she walked out the door she briefly glanced back at him and felt a small pang of guilt at his pained expression. It looked like she had completely torn him apart. That had not been her intention and inwardly she cursed at the world in general and other people in specific for not just being simple and easy to understand and work with. There was more than enough troubles on her mind without

her having to worry about Haneu. As much as she had come to like him there was a limit to what she could handle inside her head and though a quick shipboard romance would have been pleasant she had not grown so fond of him that she would put him above her ship and crew.

Forcing all thoughts of Haneu from her mind she went back to Garey to see how Artura was doing. He was still unconscious and Garey's guess was that he would be so for at least half an hour more. Not wanting to sit idly by she went up to the cockpit to talk to Maehan and make sure the ship was still on the right course for the station. She cursed herself for not having checked that earlier, but with the rude awakening she had completely forgotten everything about where they were.

As it turned out there were no problems. They were still several hours from the station and Maehan had not had any difficulties responding to the communications they had received. Despite the ship's condition they had been pre-cleared to dock next to one of the external bays for unloading of their cargo. As soon as The Bulb's STC had learned what it was they were carrying and had double checked their systems to verify who they were everything had gone smoothly.

They still needed to make arrangements for dismantling the ship, but Valdis figured that would be a lot easier to take care of once they were safely docked and no longer posed too big a threat to the station's survival.

Once she was satisfied that everything was in order she went back down to Garey and together they managed to get a little life back into Artura. Their talk proved to be very short as Artura had quite obviously cracked under some kind of pressure none of them had been under and all he could do was talk gibberish that did not make any sense.

There was nothing for them to do but to leave him alone for the time being. Mentally Valdis added another note to her growing list of things to do once they docked. It seemed like she had more work for Doc which, she was sure, the greedy bastard would not mind. What could be done for Artura she did not know, but hopefully Doc had a few ideas. If all else failed then perhaps it was for the best if all of them got a few weeks downtime with nothing to do. The money they made from the cargo and selling the ship should be enough to last them at least through that. From there she would simply have to take things as they came.

"So," she said, "now we've got two fucked up people locked in their bunks."

"This," Garey said, "is where I'd fucking love to throw you a 'this reminds me of that time when...' lines, but somehow it's just not coming. Haven't ever been near anything as fucked up as this. Not exactly to my liking."

"You think I like this?"

"No. And I reckon none of the others do, least of all the people locked in their bunks."

Valdis nodded.

"Is Artura locked in?" she said.

"Yes. And he's tied up. I figured that'd be safest for now, for all of us. Drax, well, I have no fucking idea if he can get out or not and I really don't give a fuck right now. Just want to get us docked and get my ass inside the station."

Together they went to the crew's lounge and sat down discussing the practical matters of what they could do to sell the ship as parts. As she had hoped it turned out that Garey knew a lot of people who might be interested in buying at least some of their subsystems and though they would normally need Artura's help with unloading Garey suggested that they should simply pay their way out of it and hire a few extra dock workers. The cost of that was relatively small compared to the price of staying docked while waiting for Artura to get well again. She agreed and let her head lean back against the bulkhead.

It finally felt like there was a little bit of order in her world again. Even though she knew it would not last long it was a very welcome feeling.

"I could murder for a drink right now," she said.

"You fucking look like it," Garey said and got up. "No, don't get up. I've still got a bottle stashed away. We might as well kill that one before we land."

He went to his cabin and returned a few minutes later with a bottle of golden liquor. From one of the cabinets he got two metal mugs and poured two large drinks for them.

"Ahhh," he said, "that really is good stuff."

"Fucking yes. How long have you been stashing this, you git?"

"A few months. I had a couple of other bottles but those have gone missing somewhere along the way. This one I figured I'd save for a special occasion. Mind if I call Maehan down?"

"Sure, go ahead. There are still a couple of hours before we have to seem sober and in control of this bucket of junk."

The hot feeling of the liquor was beginning to spread through her body and with it came the full realisation that this was the last few hours she would ever spend flying on this ship. In an odd way the feeling appealed to her and she smiled softly.

Garey went to the doorway and picked up the intercom handset and called Maehan down from the cockpit. It did not take her long to get there and when she saw the mugs she simply found one for herself and sat down motioning for Garey to pour her a drink. He did so and made a silent toast.

"So," Maehan said, "what are we celebrating?"

"Our last few hours her," Valdis said and continued before Maehan had a chance to protest. "The ship is broken, nothing to do. So we'll unload and sell her as parts and scrap metal. Should bring a tidy sum and you'll get full pay. Don't worry about that part."

Despite Valdis' reassurances Maehan still looked nervous.

"But what are we going to do then?" Maehan asked.

"Don't know," Valdis said, "don't really care right now. I've got a couple of ideas but they all need a little work. Probably get back into captaining something, though. I'd suggest you just find a cheap room, get a few weeks vacation and try to find somewhere to work. You've got good skills with a wrench, in more than one way even, so you shouldn't have too much trouble finding something new."

"Oh," Maehan said, "right. What about you, Garey?"

"I'll probably just go back to doing what I do best: make things happen. Still got plenty of people I know at the station. Some of them might even fucking like me."

He laughed.

"Anyway," he continued, "if you want I wouldn't mind keeping an eye open for you and let you know if I hear of anything."

"Sure, I'd appreciate that. Though I really don't know what I want to do. After Shanna died..."

Her voice trailed off and she began to sob gently. Valdis put her arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

"It hurts, I know. Just give it time enough for you to get your bearings but not so much time that it eats you up, then find some way of getting it all out. Find some guy and fuck his brains out. Or do physical workout or whatever works for you. Just don't avoid dealing with it. That's the only real advice I can give you."

“What about Haneu?” Garey asked. “You planning on keeping him around?”

“Not bloody likely. He’s cute, yes. And insanely intelligent as well. I just don’t think he’s cut out for working well with others. Especially

For the next hour they sat together in silence, slowly emptying the bottle. When the last drop had disappeared Valdis got up, a little unsteady on her feet.

“Guess it’s time to go do my job and get us docked up. Since everyone else is confined to their cabins would you two mind getting things ready in the cargo bay?”

“Not a problem. What do you want us to do with the pod? It’s not really inconfuckingspicious, you know.”

“Can’t you put together a quick makeshift box or something? Or use some of the junk we have lying around to make it seem like more junk? If any of the dock workers start asking questions just let them do a life scan so they can see we’re not smuggling people and pay them a few creds to look the other way.”

“Will do. Though we are smuggling people, you know.”

“Yeah, but not in the fucking pod. Just go make it happen. I’ve got to get up to the cockpit.”

For the last time in her life she went up to the cockpit to sit down at the console. When she was absolutely sure the others had left from downstairs she allowed herself to cry. The ship had been her life and home for more than a decade and despite her decision to go in a new direction she was still sad. The last weeks had not gone at all as she had planned, hoped or even feared. They had gone far worse and as painful as it was she could not wait for it to be over.

She worked through the docking procedure automatically, her thoughts lost in memories.

## 12 From the Bottom Up

The world hurt.

A lot.

Slowly, her entire body screaming with pain, the operative pushed herself up into a sitting position. Beneath her she could feel cold metal that hummed gently. Something about it made her feel like she was in a space ship rather than on a station. Not her own space ship. It was not big enough to have any compartments where she could lie on the floor.

There was a gentle light on in the room and she forced herself to open her eyes completely and see where she was. The pain she had felt before was nothing compared to the searing agony in her eyes as she blinked them open.

She could see that she was in a small compartment with slanted bulkheads and a small pressure door. A folding bunk was hanging from the wall opposite the door and next to it was a small desk and chair bolted to the floor. Their look was typical of the order. Nothing had been spared on luxuries or decoration.

As the pain subsided a little bit she began to be more aware of herself. She was shivering with cold, most likely because she was naked.

Slowly she managed to get on her feet with the help of the chair. A more rational part of her brain told her that it was a good thing it was bolted to the floor or she would have looked comical as she fell down with the chair on top of her.

She leaned down over the table as a bout of pain and dizziness washed over her head.

With one hand she reached out to a very small closet set in the wall next to the door. She needed to find some clothes. Not because she was shy but because the cold had become worse as she had started to move around. Inside the closet she found a surprisingly large amount of clothes, but she simply grabbed one of the robes that hung on the inside of the closet door. It felt warm to the touch and she quickly wrapped it around her.

Warmth began to spread through her body and despite a few shivers life began to feel slightly less intolerable. With a sigh she sat down on the chair and buried her face in her hands.

What had happened to her?

The last she could remember was the guardians and their blades. Then everything had gone black until she woke up here. She recalled being absolutely certain she was about to die and how she had accepted it. Embraced it, even. So what did this mean?

Obviously something had been done to blank out her memory. But for what reason she did not know. She could still remember everything about Drax and the freighter so if the masters had attempted to rid her of that information they had failed. That did not seem likely so there must be some other explanation.

She flexed her neck and stretched her back. That was when she noticed it. She was wearing the robe of a master.

Momentarily forgetting her pain she quickly stood up, pulled off the robe and threw it as far away from her as possible. She flinched back against the wall as if afraid the robe should suddenly attack her.

With trembling hands she opened the closet again. The other two robes there were also master's robes as was the rest of the clothes. That was all wrong. Something must have gone terribly wrong, must have been mixed up somehow.

She quickly looked around the room for anything that could give some kind of explanation. The room was bare except for the robe in one corner and a small envelope on the table.

Cursing herself for not noticing it sooner she sat down, all thoughts of the cold forgotten, and picked it up. It was addressed to her.

Before opening it she closed her eyes a few seconds and took a several deep breaths to steady herself. Then she opened the envelope with careful, deliberate finger movements despite her desire to just rip it open and tear out its contents. Inside was a folded letter.

"Congratulations," it read. "You are now a master of the order with all privileges and responsibilities that entitles you to. Remember that despite what the contents of this letter may suggest you have been granted the full rank by a unanimous vote amongst all masters in the order."

That made her shiver. She was a master? But with some restrictions or misgivings? She quickly read on.

"You have no doubt realised that we have blanked out your most recent memory. That is not to keep you in the dark about what happened. As you know our order lives in the dark, yet seeks the light for its members."

The letter went on for a while more about the reasons for the orders existence, its goals and so on. Nothing she did not already know, but in her current state of mind the words had a far deeper impact on her than they had ever had before. Finally she came to the end.

"The next mission we must send you on is by no means an easy one, yet one we know you will succeed in. You must make contact with our brothers and sisters on the station known as The Bulb and with their assistance you must ensure that Drax is persuaded to give up on any ambitions of resuming his former commands.

"This means you at some point might have to approach him directly and that is why we have blanked your memory. Should you fall in the wrong hands we cannot risk you revealing the whereabouts of our order. We would have preferred to remove all traces of ourselves from your memory but that would have been paradoxical in the sense that you would not have known that you had a mission to perform."

Despite a brief feeling of betrayal at reading this she soon realised that the masters were right. They had had to take a hard decision about which memories to let her keep and which should be removed. She tried to remember the other times she had met her master, her first and subsequent initiations higher and higher up the ranks of the order. Nothing. It was all blank.

With a strange feeling of missing something she did not know what was she read the last sentence of the letter.

"Upon your successful return all your memories will be restored and you shall receive the full glory of your rank."

For several minutes she held the letter in her hand, folded because she did not need to read it again. Then the cold began to seep into her bones and she went to pick up the robe and placed it on the table. From the closet she withdrew a full set of clothes: underwear, breeches, a shirt, socks, boots.



She put them on before wrapping the robe around her once more, this time with more ceremony than the first time.

She then took a closer look at the desk and found that it had a small drawer neatly built into it. Inside the drawer she found a handheld terminal and a small lighter. The significance of the latter was not lost on her and she carefully burned the letter and made sure to grind the ashes to fine dust before wiping them off the table.

Sure enough, as soon as the ashes hit the floor there was a slight shimmering and they were absorbed into it. Not just metal after all. For a long time she had known that the masters had far more advanced technology than they had ever let her see, but this surpassed anything she could have guessed at. Which was good since that meant it would also be more advanced than anything the ordinary people of the system could think of.

Taking a deep breath she stood before the door and reached out to open it. However, before her hand touched its surface it opened with a low, hissing sound. On the wall next to it a previously hidden panel lit up with a message stating her identification and rank.

It felt strange seeing her new title. Almost surreal. It was as if she was still caught in a dream and she half expected to wake up. But wake up to what? This life was all that she remembered. There was nothing else.

She started as she realised that more of her memories were beginning to fade. As she took the first step out of her cabin she no longer remembered going to Lagrange station. Before her third step she knew only that she had to go to The Bulb to prevent Drax from destroying the civilisation in Indigo System for a second time.

Behind her she could hear the door closing again and she turned to smile at it. The door belonged to her, the ship, everything in it. She was keenly aware of the tiniest movement of the ship, every single subsystem. It was almost as if she was the ship.

Without needing to check the way she went to the cockpit and strapped herself in. No course had been plotted so she quickly entered the coordinates for The Bulb and kicked the engine on.

She smiled with pleasure at the sound of the engine and the feel of the ship around her. This was truly magnificent ship, one that would be very useful to her on her mission.

Her display showed her that the trip would take just over two days. The autopilot was more than capable to get her there while keeping her hidden so there was plenty of time for her to decide on a strategy for approaching Drax and for finding out how much he remembered and what his plans were.

The first thing she did was consult her handheld console. It had, not surprisingly, been loaded with a lot of information about The Bulb, its owners and management. And more importantly, it had information on the freighter Drax was currently on and its crew and captain.

She had been to The Bulb on a few occasions in the past so she decided to start with the freighter. The ship itself was a standard long distance hauler, nothing fancy there. Though she did add a note to the description about the damage she had observed while she had been near it.

As for the captain and crew they seemed like simple types. Their captain had worked her way up from the bottom and most of her crew had been with her for long enough that the operative expected them to be the same types of people. Only two of the crew members, or one crew member and one passenger to be precise, seemed out of place. The passenger was Haneu, the STC from Aruna, whom she had helped out just before the freighter arrived at his station. She had a lot of information about him and it was all fairly impressive, considering he was an ordinary person. Though it was not her primary mission she decided to see if she could make sure he got a chance to be something more than merely a technician on a worn out freighter.

The other crew member that stood out was the man named Garey. Her handheld console did not have a lot of entries in his file. It was mostly limited to listing that he had joined some two years earlier and been on the ship since then. Mostly. There was one short entry that peaked her interest: "It is believed that Garey may be from another system. Proof missing."

An outsider.

She snarled. The order, and herself personally, did not mind the occasional visitor to the system. That was inevitable and, fortunately, very rare. What was even rarer was a visitor who caused trouble. Most took the order's warnings to heart and respected the desire for privacy. Or at least they respected the amount of firepower the order could bring down on them if needed. If he really was an outsider that was definitely something she had to look into.

A horrible thought struck her. What if this Garey had somehow been planning to find Drax all along? Maybe he had somehow found out about the pod, perhaps he had encountered it outside the system, and had calculated its trajectory towards Indigo.

She dismissed the idea. It was, of course, still an option. But it was so far fetched that she decided that it was not likely. Her main point of argument was that it would have been nearly impossible for Garey to plan the entire mess with the solar flare, the damage to the ship and so on. There were too many uncertainties for that to make sense.

For the time being she pushed her thoughts of Garey aside and focussed on Drax.

If only she had had more time near the freighter. That would have allowed her to scan the ship more deeply so she could get a biometric reading of him. It was impossible to get a full brain scan through the thick hull of the freighter, but by observing the ship and the crew's movements she could have learned a lot from how they interacted with Drax and how much he moved around on the ship.

There was nothing useful on the handheld console about his current condition nor about the pod he had been in. Only the basics about the pod and his history as a planetary assault commander back during the planetary war. She would have given her right arm to get a full scan of him or, better yet, to simply snatch him away to a secret hideout and simply interrogate him. Making that happen seemed unlikely at the moment.

The option of trying to find the freighter and sneak up on it was out of the question. She would need a good excuse to get close to him. And a false identity that would make her interesting in the eyes of the crew, yet still anonymous enough that they did not become suspicious. To have time to set that up she needed at least a few days on The Bulb before the freighter arrived so there was no time for her to play catch with them. It was far better to get to the station as quickly as possible so she had at least a working chance to get into position.

The obvious thing for her to do would be to quickly set herself up as a ship's technician and make sure she was put to work on the freighter. Not optimal as she could only be sure she got close to them by standing out as a brilliant technician. And brilliant technicians always tended to draw the wrong kind of attention from the wrong kind of people. She only had to look at Haneu's file to get confirmation on that.

No, what she needed was something more cunning. Something that would in no way risk exposing her true skills and knowledge.

And idea slowly began to grow in her mind.

## 13 Can Flip

The interior of the bar was mainly worn down steel and far too little light for anyone to see more than enough to make your way through the room without bumping into things. Its name was The Broken Chain as signified by the two pieces of heavy duty steel chain hanging above the entrance. It had been on The Bulb for as long as anyone could remember. Partly because it really had been there for a long time. Partly because its patrons tended to burn out their brains on cheap alcohol to the point where they couldn't remember further back than their last drink.

Chia leaned back against the bulkhead and closed her eyes. If she could avoid it she would never return to Gintas' station. He would probably never turn her down, at least not unless she literally had pirates or worse right on her tail, but even when he did not charge her anything it still cost her a lot to go there. Both mentally and physically.

At least she had got the worst of the damage to her ship fixed so she could move on. She still needed to replace a few crew members, though, and cursed herself for not simply press ganging Gintas' whiz kid. It would not have been the first time she had done that. Although it had rarely ended well and for delicate work on her ship the last thing she needed was a nervous or spiteful techie.

An annoying clicking sound made her open one eye and glare at her remaining crew. Across from her at the table sat Nilf, her tail gunner. From somewhere he had found a small can of peaches which he constantly flipped end over end over end. Every time it hit the steel table it went click-screech-clonk.

With a sigh she leaned forward and emptied the dented tin mug in front of her. She was unsure what was worse: the smell and taste of the bar keep's home stilled sludge or the fact that she was beginning to grow accustomed to it.

Nilf kept flipping the can over and over, seemingly lost in some deep thoughts.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Nilf," she said, "stop flipping that can, will you?"

Click-screech-clonk.

With a swift movement Nilf spun the can around in his hand so the label was the right side up.

"Why? It's good for me and keeps my hands nimble."

At this Chia raised an eye brow.

"Peaches are good for your hands? Fuck off!"

Nilf shrugged.

"Not the peaches, numbskull. The can flipping. Don't want me going all stiff fingered next time you've got the Techs on your arse, do you?"

She had nothing to say to that but at the same time she did not want to cede the argument. As a kind of compromise she grunted something incomprehensible. Her military training screamed at her that she should not let one of her crew members talk to her like that, but experience had taught her that outside the military it was far easier to get things done by giving crew members a little slack. Ever since the planet war there had not been an actual military in Indigo and the several hundreds years that had passed had removed virtually all discipline.

She gazed around at the other people in the bar. Most of them were lowlives. Thugs, at best, lazy bums at worst. Yes, she reflected, discipline had definitely disappeared.

A few did stand out, though, as she had expected but for her next mission she needed someone really special. This particular bar was mainly known for its horrible drinks, grumpy bartender and, to a few select people, as the place to go if you needed talented people who did not mind taking on jobs of a more questionable nature. And right now that was what Chia was looking for.

It was no secret to anyone with half a brain, and at least one functional eye, that she was not your average pilot. To fly around in what was easily recognisable as a pre-war cruiser was a deliberate decision she had made a long time ago. Sure, it made it nearly impossible to hide who she was. But at the same time it had helped cement her reputation as a tough kid and now, when no one in their right mind would call her a kid anymore, that reputation still held and had helped her more than once. It was so much easier to persuade small time pirates to leave her alone when she beamed over her ID. Of course there were always a few twits who either did not know who she was or did not care. They rarely posed a danger, though, and it was good for crew morale to get a little time in the shooting gallery once in a while.

She and Nilf spend another fifteen minutes pretending to just zone out while they checked the people in the bar. The crowd was unusually thin and it quickly became clear that there were no one there worth recruiting. Only one of them, Camper, might have been a little interesting if he had not had such a bad reputation. It was one thing to be known and feared, quite another to be known as a lunatic who would go to any lengths and abuse any little loophole in both the criminal and physical laws to pick a fight. She did not need someone like that. At least not on her crew. She made a mental note to keep him in mind for future jobs.

They were just about to leave when one of the lowlives got up violently knocking over his chair. With clenched fists he went straight at Nilf while the rest of the bar's patrons scrambled to get out of his way.

"Stop that fucking noise, asshole," he screamed at Nilf.

Nilf looked up at him, can temporarily held steady just above the table. For a while he just looked at the big guy who continued shouting.

"If that can touches the table one more fucking time I'm gonna smash your brains in, you little fuck!"

The bar had almost emptied by now. Only Nilf, Chia and the big guy was left. Slowly, very slowly, Nilf flipped the can end over end so the label was upside down. Then he quickly slammed it hard down on the table and dove out of the chair. He narrowly avoided getting pummelled and rolled to get back on his feet. The big guy picked up Nilf's chair and threw it halfway through the bar. It made a horrible racket as it bounced off two tables before crashing into the wall taking down one of the bar's few lamps.

"You're dead, asshole," he screamed, "you got no friends here. And don't think that little hottie will be able to help you."

Nilf just smiled crookedly and went into a defensive position backing more and more toward the bar's exit.

"Oh yeah, you'd better run!"

"Not so much running, tough guy. Ever heard the story about the big guy who got beaten by the little guy?"

The big guy just gave a big, grunting laugh and took two steps forward to close on Nilf.

He never made it as two things happened. Firstly, someone smashed a chair into his knees from behind. Secondly, someone smashed a chair down on his head. A deep, slightly wet thud echoed briefly through the bar as the big guy hit the deck hard.

Nilf stood up straight and looked down at the limp form on the floor.

“Nice hit, guys,” he said, “perfect timing as ever.”

From behind him Syn, the last of Chia’s crew members, had simply walked out of hiding to down the big guy after Chia had, literally, swept him off his feet. He smiled broadly as he slapped Nilf on the back.

“One day I’m just gonna leave you hanging there, you know,” he said.

“Sure you will,” Nilf said, “as if you could ever pass up an easy target.”

“If he was that easy why didn’t you take him yourself?”

“Cause I know how much you love getting your hands dirty with these things.”

The three of them laughed as Chia knelt down to search the big guy. After fishing out a handful of coins from his pockets Chia went back to their table to pick up her satchel. On her way back to the others she slapped her thigh, went back to the table and picked up Nilf’s can as well. She threw it to him.

“Better not forget your lucky can, mate.”

Nilf grinned and caught it.

“Works like a charm, doesn’t it?” he said.

“Sure,” Syn said, “but we need to do something about that clicking noise. I’m seriously getting tired of that.”

Together they made their way back to the quarters they had hired on the station while they had the ship resupplied and refitted. As they passed the docking bays she paused briefly to take a look at her ship’s status. Not a full check up just a quick glance through the window out into open space where several ships were docked at the external bays. Since she only needed to refuel and resupply and did not need repairs there was no need for her to get an internal bay and in this part of the system she got a kick out of showing off her ship. It was not, however, her own ship that made her whistle as she looked out the window.

“Will you look at that heap of junk?” she said.

“Yeah, what the fuck is up with that?” Syn said, also surprised.

Right next to Chia’s sleek cruiser an old, busted hauler had been moored. Apparently someone in the station’s STC had a sick sense of humour. Those two ships were about as far from each other as possible, both in terms of design and state. One was effectively built for combat, speed and manoeuvrability. The other resembled a large freight container with an engine slapped onto the back. And not even if the bullet holes Chia had had fixed at Aruna had been visible would the cruiser had been anywhere near as banged up as the hauler was.

“I’m surprised they allowed that... that... thing anywhere near the station,” Chia said. Someone must have done some serious sweet talking to convince STC to let them dock.”

“Or had about a million times as much bribe money as that bucket of junk is worth,” Nilf chipped in.

“Wonder what happened to them,” Syn said.

“Probably got hit by a meteor storm or something,” Nilf said. “Who cares?”

“Actually,” Chia said, “I do. Look there.”

She pointed to a small group of people near the doors to the bay.

“The geeky looking one who helped patch up my ship over at Aruna. Seems like Gintas no longer owns his arse. Interesting.”

“The guy who boosted your engines?” Syn asked. “What the fuck is he doing with those haulers?”

“Not sure, but I’m going to find out. Nilf, be a darling and find out where he’s staying.”

Nilf made a quick and half mocking salute before slipping off to hang around without the geek and his mates noticing him.

Further down the docking bays Haneu stood feeling very lost. The rest of the freighter’s crew were deeply lost in a heated argument with the chief of the dock workers about whether it was safe to unload the cargo or not. The last several hours of the trip had been horrible to him. Just when he had hoped to find a new place to live he had lost it again and the feeling of being disconnected hurt badly.

He had only meant to help the others by finding out what Drax’ pod could or could not do, but it seemed to have made Valdis so angry that she did not even want to speak to him. Apart from telling him to pick up his gear and get off her ship.

The rest of the crew had followed her example, but even so he had hung around hoping that some of them would at least say good bye to him. After a few more minutes of being ignored he simply decided to walk away. He had a nice stack of creds he had saved up while working for Gintas. The job as space traffic controller had proved to have its perks when people with shady pasts needed a place to lie low for a while.

Pausing only to get his bearings at an info kiosk he quickly headed for the cheap residential part of the station. What he needed right now was a small base where he could compose himself and figure out what to do. He was not overly concerned about finding some kind of work, it was finding the right kind that he was afraid might be a problem. Ideally he would like to work on his own, perhaps as an operator on a small enough subsystem that it only really needed one person to keep it running. Other than that there were bound to be work in the docks on short term jobs for the captains who needed their ship’s systems repaired or tuned.

As he made his way down to the lower decks to find a cheap room he did not notice Nilf following him through the corridors and lifts. Not even when Nilf was forced to jump into the same lift as Haneu to make sure Haneu did not slip away after getting out at the busy marketplace.

“Chia, it’s me,” Nilf said. “I’ve got a location on your target.”

He had followed Haneu to what was probably the worst place to live in the entire station. Not because the rooms were bad but because the proprietor did his best to squeeze as many creds out of his tenants as possible. If anyone made even the smallest scratch in the wall they were likely to be billed for replacing the bulkheads in the entire complex.

Once he had seen Haneu enter one of the rooms he had quickly called up Chia to fill her in.

“Good,” Chia said. “Stay there and keep an eye on him for a while. But stay clear of him for now, okay?”

“Sure thing. I’ll keep an eye on him and find out where he hangs out, who he talks to and so on.”

“Excellent.”

The first two days Haneu just stayed in his new room as much as possible. Only two times did he go out and that was just to pick up some quick food from one of the vendors nearby. It was some of the nastiest food he had ever eaten, but it filled out his stomach and was fairly warm.

Most of the time he spent in front of his datapad analysing the scans from the strange ship and Drax' pod. When he was not doing that he did his best to avoid thinking about his current situation by hooking up to the station's network and trying to find out as much as possible about it's systems. Some of the things he did were not as such illegal, but neither were they entirely legal. He did not really care too much about that as he was of the opinion that it was the network administrators' responsibility to make sure that any sensitive areas were properly protected.

What he learned about the station did not, in the end, amount to much. At least not anything overly useful. Apart from finding good proof that the management of the station was downright ruthless when it came to dealing with their employees there was nothing worth anything to him. He got a lot of detailed information about some of the station managers, most of it related to their sexual habits. As Haneu had absolutely no interest in this and was not contemplating starting a career as black mailer he eventually decided that there was nothing more to be learned from being holed up in the small room anymore.

On his third day on the station he pulled himself together and went outside on his first attempt at finding something to do. The station's network had not been overly crowded by job ads so it was with a sinking feeling that he went down to the local dock to ask around for a job.

When he got there he noticed that he was not the only one fishing for employment. Scattered throughout the entire dock and hangar area were several dozen people who hung around, some with a calculating expression on their face most with a desperate one. A couple of times he saw a pair of dock workers forcefully removing a particularly annoying person from what Haneu guessed was one of the chiefs.

At one point one of the chief's assistants gave Haneu a hard look and Haneu decided that it was futile to hang around the docks anymore. There were far more unemployed people down there than he had expected. In his mind he had envisioned himself boldly striding up to one of the chiefs with the solution to a technical problem after which he would be hired at a premium rate. The way it looked was that firstly there were no overly technical tasks as most of the work seemed to be moving large crates around. And secondly it seemed as if he would simply be bounced away if he tried to approach the chiefs.

With a heavy heart he left the docks trying to figure out what to do. He could not make himself believe that such a large station did not have any work for him. The obvious choice of approaching the management made him weary since he had had a rough enough time dealing with Gintas back on Aruna. Back then it had worked out because Haneu had been sitting alone in the control room most of the time. Here, if he could have somehow managed to get his hands on any kind of controller work, he would likely work as part of a group of people and be closely supervised. Both of those things made him shudder. He had never been good at that and to do so for people who believed that physical punishment was a far better way of making sure people did their jobs than a good pay check was out of the question for him. He would rather find job as an air vent repairman or some other boring crap job where he at least would be on his own most of the time.

While he had been thinking he had lost his way and instead of getting back to the residential place he was living in he had made his way to on of the slightly more upscale areas. There were actual

shops here and some of the people in the corridors did not look like they had just been dragged through a food recycling vat.

Just as he was about to turn around and retrace his steps he noticed a couple of people who had the air of techies around them. They were hanging out in front of a bar he was passing and he tried to listen in on their conversation. The few pieces he picked up confirmed that they were in fact technicians, but he could not figure out what they were working on.

The idea of approaching them briefly entered his mind only to be dismissed almost immediately by his lack of guts. Unfortunately for Haneu he did not dismiss it before he had already turned and were heading straight for the bar. Suddenly struck by the horrific idea of them ridiculing him whether he started talking to them or turned away he was forced to slightly change his direction and enter the bar. He felt ashamed with himself for being such a coward that he neither dared speak with other technicians or simply walk away.

Inside the bar it was brighter than in the sparsely lit corridors. Haneu breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that the bar was empty except for the bartender. To avoid making a complete fool of himself he decided to get a single drink before leaving. He hoped that would make it less obvious that he did not belong in the bar.

“What’re you having?” the bartender asked as Haneu slipped into one of the bar stools.

“Just whatever you have,” Haneu mumbled.

“One whatever coming right up,” the bartender said jokingly. “Just as well since whatever is all we have these days. Rough day at the office?”

“Don’t have an office. Guess that’s the rough part,” Haneu said.

The bartender served him a mug of a dodgy looking liquid. Before sipping at it he smelled it precariously. That made the bartender laugh.

“Don’t worry, lad, it’s perfectly safe. Sort of. Guaranteed to only mess up your brain and not your bowels.”

Haneu tipped his head in acknowledgement and tasted the drink. It really was foul. At first it felt like a sharp needle was gently pricking around inside his nose. Then the actual taste of it hit his mouth and he nearly winced as the sourness of the drink made him want to squeeze his mouth hard shut. He gingerly put the mug back down on the bar desk.

“Clean you right out,” the bartender said. “Looks like you need it.”

“Yeah,” Haneu said, “not exactly been the best couple of weeks.”

For a while he spoke with the bartender about leaving Aruna and hitching a ride with Valdis only to realise the he would not be able to fly with them. He managed to leave out everything related to Drax and the strange ship they had seen.

While they chatted a couple of other people entered the bar and when the bartender went to serve them Haneu was struck by an odd realisation. He was normally fairly withdrawn and had a hard time opening up to strangers and yet here he was talking with the bartender about a lot of things he considered to be his own personal business.

After a few minutes the newcomers had got their drinks and were headed for one of the tables at the back. The bartender came back to Haneu apparently looking to pick up the conversation again.

“So basically,” the bartender said, “you’re a former STC looking for a job. Any good with ICC’s core system package?”

Haneu’s expression must have been comical because the bartender laughed and held up a hand defensively.



“Don’t worry, lad. I don’t know anything about all those things. Except what to ask about. If you’re looking for a job, or for someone to do a job for you, the best place to go on this station is us bartenders.”

“Why?” Haneu said.

The bartender held out the bottle towards Haneu’s mug with a questioning look on his face. Haneu nodded, mentally promising himself that it would be the last this evening. He did not want to risk getting so drunk he was unable to find his way back.

“Because, as you’ll see in a few hours, the number one recreational activity on this station is to get blindingly drunk. The only alternatives are gambling, fighting or sleeping. And while some do the latter, sometimes alone sometimes not, that also becomes boring.”

“And what of gambling and fighting?”

“I take it you’re not much into fighting. No offence meant, lad, you just don’t have the build for taking on people who can juggle a couple of kegs in each hand.”

“And gambling’s a game for losers,” Haneu said, “as the odds are never in favour of the normal player.”

“Too true, lad,” the bartender said, “glad to hear you’ve got enough sense to not go down that lane.”

The bartender leaned closer to Haneu and lowered his voice.

“And on this station you really don’t want to gamble. You’ll either pay the insane fees placed on any winnings from games or, worse, you’ll do illegal gambling which is punished far more severely if you’re caught.”

Again the bartender left to serve other people. Turning around Haneu realised that he had been so caught up in talking that he had not realised that not only was the bar now half full another two bartenders had turned up as well. He suddenly felt very exposed. It felt like everyone in the room was looking at him as if he was some kind of trespasser on their territory. He figured that in a way he probably was.

When the bartender returned Haneu decided, helped on his way by the potent drinks he had had, to go for it and ask if the bartender knew of anyone who was looking for a techie.

“Well,” the bartender said, “you’re in luck, lad. It just so happens that I know of certain parties that might be on the lookout for someone like you. But it’s a tough market so don’t get your hopes too high, okay?”

“Sure,” Haneu said, “for now I’m basically willing to take on anything that’s not too physical.”

“Might be difficult to get around that, but let’s see what we can find. Hang around for a while. If someone interesting shows up I’ll let you know.”

And so Haneu came to spend a few hours in the bar getting more and more drunk while he was hoping for some kind of lead on a new job.

In the other end of the bar Nilf slipped the bartender a nice stack of credits.

“Just keep pouring drinks down his throat at a steady pace. Don’t get him totally wasted, just drunk enough that he’ll be stumbling on his way home.”

With a wide grin the bartender pocketed the money, more than enough to pay for both the drinks and the bartender’s discretion.

“Not a problem. Looking for a date later on?”

Nilf's eyes grew hard and he sneered at the bartender.

"No fucking way. Get your nose out of my business."

"Hey, relax. I don't care either way. Just don't let it trace back to here, right?"

"Fuck off. If you keep your mouth shut about this there will not be any trace. Got it?"

The bartender nodded and went to the other end of the bar.

While still keeping an eye on Haneu Nilf quickly sent a message to Chia. Her reply came after only a few seconds and instructed him to make sure Haneu got home safely. With a little assistance from Nilf so he would have to be grateful the next time they accidentally met.

"No, no, no," Haneu said, "not more of this shit."

He tried to turn his mug over so the bartender could not pour him another drink, but fumbled it and the mug nearly fell to the floor before he caught it again.

"Fair enough," the bartender said. "Listen, why don't you call it a night. None of the people I was thinking of has shown up so they're probably not coming anyway. Drop by tomorrow evening again and maybe you'll have more luck."

"Uhm, okay. Shit. What way to sector RS1? I think that's what the place I'm staying is called."

At this the bartender lifted his eyebrows in what look like sincere concern.

"You're staying in RS1?"

Haneu tried to both nod and remain seated on the stool at the same time. He almost succeeded in both.

"Then I've got a better suggestion," the bartender said. "Tomorrow you get your gear together and get the fuck out of that place. I know a lot of newbies end up down there, but it's a fucked up place to stay. Do yourself a favour and get the fuck out. And be careful when you go home."

"Okay," Haneu said, "and I really will be going home now. So which way was it?"

"Straight down the corridor on the right, two levels down, straight ahead and you'll see the signs from there."

Placing a few creds on the bar Haneu stumbled from the stool and exited the bar. On his way out he bumped into someone and was just about to launch into a long, sputtering excuse when he saw that it was Drax. Haneu quickly looked around but could see none of the others from the freighter and since Drax seemed to have not even noticed him he quickly went outside and hurried towards the lift.

From his place at the other end of the bar Nilf had seen Haneu bump into Drax. For a few seconds Nilf stared at Drax looking like someone who had just seen a ghost. Then as Drax moved on through the bar Nilf shook his head and muttered to himself.

"Fucking cheap rat's piss is making me see things."

Finding the lift was easy enough, even in Haneu's state. And he even managed to hit the correct button to take him two levels down. The lift seemed to take forever as he tried to keep a fairly straight face and hide the fact that every little movement of the small metal box nearly made him

fall over and hit one of the other passengers. Most of them seemed to either not notice him or simply not care. Only one or two took any interest in him and that seemed to mainly be to make sure he did not vomit on them.

The doors opened with a small ding and Haneu stumbled out and began to make his way towards his room. He paused briefly, trying to remember what the bartender had said before going off in the completely wrong direction. As he got further and further into the labyrinth of corridors he slowly began to sober up. Partly because the effects of the drinks were beginning to wear off, partly because he became more and more conscious of how deserted and ill lit the corridors were.

He stopped and looked around. There were no one else around which both calmed and unnerved him. He could not recognise anything about the corridor he was standing in and could not remember seeing any signs for a very long time. For some time he debated with himself about whether to keep pushing forward or turn around and try to backtrack.

In the end he decided to turn around hoping to at least make it back close enough to the lifts that there were some kind of signs or other markers on the walls that would take him back to a less scary place.

It took him almost a quarter of an hour to get back to a less sinister corridor and he headed off in a direction he was sure would take him to the lifts.

The corridor turned out to be a dead end.

“Fuck,” Haneu said.

He turned around, ready to head back to the intersection and off in the other direction.

“Fuck,” he said again.

In front of him stood three nasty looking men and an even nastier looking woman. The woman’s face was mostly hidden by a nearly white mop of hair that was cut off straight just above her eyes and curved down along her cheeks making the hair look more like a helmet than actual hair. The men all sprouted tattoos over the heavy arms that were clearly visible as they were only wearing tank tops.

The men hung back while the woman took a step forward. Unable to help himself Haneu took first one step backward and then several others as she kept moving closer and closer.

“So,” she said, “what have we here? Haven’t seen you around before, have I?”

Scared witless Haneu quickly shook his head hoping admittance would yield a little sympathy. The woman just smiled wickedly and kept going until Haneu had his back against the wall.

“Aw,” she continued, “ran out of room, did we, newbie?”

Behind her the men laughed and began to move forward as well. The woman held up a hand and they stopped. She turned her head and spoke to them.

“Don’t worry. I think I can take care of this little fuck myself. Been a while since I had some good fun with a newbie. These days they’re all hiding in the upper levels. This one will be fun to play with.”

Seeing an opening Haneu tried to dart around her, but she simply moved her hand to grab him by the front of his jacket and slammed him back against the wall.

“Not so fast,” she said.

Finally finding his voice Haneu started pleading.

“Please don’t hurt me. Just take whatever money I have left.”

He started fumbling around in his pocket for the last of the creds he had brought with him.

“No, no, no,” the woman said. “You can keep your creds for now. We’ll come back to them later. I’ve got something else in mind for you.”

“Can I go first?” one of the men shouted. “Last time there was nothing left for me.”

Again the woman smiled at Haneu and nodded at the three men with her head.

“I think the newbie should choose for himself. Which of these fine gentlemen do you want to go first?”

A sick feeling entered Haneu’s stomach as he saw the man who had spoken begin to undo his belt. The woman seemed to wait with infinite patience for him to make a choice. Haneu began to squirm in her firm grasp. He was unable to get free.

“And while you’re thinking,” the woman continued, “don’t let me confuse you. I’ll do you as well. After. When you’re so sore that this will make you scream in pain.”

She held up her closed fist right before Haneu’s eyes. He closed his eyes and sunk the bile that was beginning to rise in his throat.

Meanwhile the men had drawn completely close. One of them had gone to the side of the corridor and smashed the few lamps that were there leaving them all in near darkness.

The woman suddenly grabbed one of Haneu’s arms and twisted it around his back and smashed his head against the wall. It nearly made him lose consciousness and he bit his tongue hard to stop himself crying out in pain.

“The strong quiet type, eh? Maybe I should do you first, then.”

She pulled him back from the wall and tripped him over so he crashed onto his back on the hard metal floor of the corridor.

“Hold him down boys,” she ordered.

One of the men sat down on his shins. The others took an arm each and pulled them up over Haneu’s head. The woman knelt down and straddled Haneu and slowly began to grind her ass against his groin. Haneu struggled as much as he could but the men’s hold on him was too strong for him to do much than wiggle his hips futilely.

“Oh, look at that,” one of the men said, “he’s trying to fuck you back.”

They all laughed and despair flooded Haneu as he stopped struggling. The woman noticed and laughed harder. She moved forward until she was sitting on his lower face and her knees were digging hard into Haneu’s upper arms.

“Wouldn’t you like to suck me dry, newbie?” the woman teased.

Her coarse combat fatigues scratched harshly against Haneu’s mouth and chin. He was unable to breath except through his nose. And even that was not easy as it had begun bleeding when he hit the wall.

The woman reached down and pressed his face harder against her. One of her hands took a strong grip in his hair and he had no choice but to let her do it. With her other hand she reached behind her. She let that hand slide down his stomach, almost in a gently, caressing way.

“Not fair to let you do all the work and let me have all the fun, eh newbie?” she said.

She arched her back pulling Haneu’s head even further up. Between her grip and the men pulling his arms in the other direction it was beginning to feel like his shoulders were about to break.

“Mmmm, that’s good,” the woman said with a mockingly moaning voice, “let me return the favour.”

She grabbed Haneu's penis and balls through his pants and squeezed hard until he screamed. Through the pain Haneu felt strangely aware of how odd his scream sounded when it was muffled by the woman's body pressed against his mouth.

Suddenly the pain lifted both from his groins and his hair. The relief was only temporary as his head slammed hard into the floor because the woman had let go. White dots flashed in front of his eyes and he lost consciousness.

When he came to again he was on his side on the floor, his head throbbing with pain. He tried to lift his head from the floor but it hurt too much. He heard a calming voice near him.

"Stay down, you've got a nasty bump on the head."

Feeling no immediate threats or direct pains Haneu was only too happy to comply. Through his half closed eyes he could sense someone moving around but was unable to make out any details.

After a while whoever was also there knelt down and placed a hand on his shoulders. Haneu turned his head as much as he could and caught a glimpse of a scary looking face. If it had not been for the man's gentle voice and soft touch Haneu would have tried to crawl away. The man was bald except for a wide strip of wild hair that rose straight from his scalp. One eye had been replaced by a white orb, obviously after something had cut down the man's face leaving a scar running from the brow to the right cheek.

"Let's give you a good look," the man said.

He rolled Haneu over on his back and did a quick examination. When he had finished he nodded and grabbed hold of Haneu's hand and shoulder and began helping him on his feet.

"You're a bit banged up but look none the worse for wear. Dizzy? Nauseous?"

Feeling a bit dizzy Haneu leaned forward to get clear his head.

"Dizzy?" the man repeated.

"A bit," Haneu said and gently shook his head.

It felt like his entire body hurt. He slowly blinked his eyes fully open and gave an involuntary gasp as he saw the woman and all three men lying on the floor. At least one of the men was visibly dead, his head a mash of blood and broken bone.

The man slid an arm under Haneu's shoulders and began moving them both away. As they began moving Haneu felt a bit better and the dizziness lifted a little. He was still unsure exactly what had happened, but the lack of soreness in his ass meant that he had got off lucky.

"Thanks," he said meekly.

"No big deal," the man said, "always a pleasure to kick the ass of those fucking scum bags."

"Big deal to me. Fuck, this hurts."

"I know. Just hang in there and let's get the fuck out of here. She usually have more gangers with her and they might be lurking around nearby."

They made their way through the corridors and soon came to the lift area. Even with Haneu dragging his feet it had not taken them more than a few minutes.

"The lifts were this close?" Haneu said.

"Yeah, but if you don't know your way around the lower levels are a fucking maze. You're not the first to get lost. Feel good enough to walk on your own? Less conspicuous that way."

"Think so."

The first few steps Haneu took were stumbling but he kept his balance and after steadying himself with a few deep breaths and a hand on the wall they were able to continue at a more normal walking pace.

When they arrived at the lifts they stopped and Haneu tried to get his bearings.

"I think I have to go that way," he said. "But who are you?"

"Name's Nilf. Just passed by on my way somewhere else and noticed those fuck heads following you. Since there were only the four of them I figured I'd take a detour and teach them some fucking manners."

"Glad you did," Haneu said. "Nilf? Never met anyone named that before. I'll definitely remember it, though. Saved my life. Thanks."

"As I said, no big deal. Do yourself a favour and learn your way around down here. Avoid any place where you notice signs missing or weird markings and scratches on the walls."

"Thanks, I'll try to remember."

A thought entered Haneu's weary mind.

"Can I give you anything in return? Don't have much cash but I do have some."

"Not necessary. You look like you can need it more than me, anyway."

"How about helping out? When my head doesn't hurt I'm a fairly good techie. And it's not like I have anything better to do."

Nilf laughed and padded Haneu on the shoulder.

"Save the sales pitch for another day and another person. I don't call the shots so no point talking to me. You sure you know your way back?"

"Yes, I can remember it now. It's just down that corridor and to the left."

"What the fuck? RS1? Do yourself a favour and get the fuck out of there if you can."

This time it was Haneu who laughed. A short and bitter rasping laugh.

"You're the second one to tell me that today. Once I get a little rest I'm fucking leaving this dump. Just need to find some work is all."

"I'm sure you'll find something soon. Best be off before those fuck heads wake up and come looking for you."

"I thought they were dead?" Haneu said.

"Only one of them, I'm afraid. I don't mind killing people in a good fight, but cold blooded executions aren't really my style."

"Fuck. Then I'm definitely leaving. Don't want to run into that crowd again."

"Good idea. Now fuck off and get some sleep."

Despite the harshness in Nilf's voice Haneu got the gist of his words and nodded his thanks a last time before heading towards his room.

When he got there he immediately went straight to bed and fell asleep.

The next morning he woke up feeling numb all over. He did not hurt as much as he had the night before and the only thing that really caused him pain was his nose.

He went over to the small mirror on the wall and winced when he saw the bloody mess in the middle of his face. With slightly trembling fingers he touched his nose and winced again. It hurt like hell and was clearly broken.

Not knowing exactly what to do about a broken nose he started by washing it as gently as he could. It still hurt but now, at least, his face was not as bloody and he could get a better view of the nose. Somewhere in the back of his mind he recalled something about having to set the nose straight. He dismissed the idea as ludicrous. Apart from only remembering hearing about it in stupid net broadcasts he had absolutely no idea about how he should actually do it. Instead he found a few pieces of toilet paper and used them to stop the thin trickle of blood that had started when he washed his face. Satisfied that he was no longer leaking he sat down on the toilet and relieved himself while looking around at the room.

It really was a shit hole, he thought. A mattress in one corner, the toilet in the other and not really any space left for anything else. Finding somewhere else to live was not such a bad idea so once he had finished he began gathering his things. That part was quickly over and done with and he was soon out in the corridor headed for the lifts.

The bartender had suggested he find something a little higher up in the station so he rode the lift back up to where he had been the night before. This time he tried to get a better look at his surroundings and realised that while this area looked far better and neater than RS1 it was still very worn and did not look as expensive as it had the first time he had been there.

There were not any places that immediately struck him as the place to go for renting a room so instead he walked around trying to find the bar from before. It was a bit of a long shot to hope that the bartender was still there, of course, and Haneu was prepared to have to either wait there for a while or, if the bar was closed to walk around for a few hours.

As it turned out the bar was open. Not as such as a bar but as an eatery and several people were sitting around eating the same squalid goo that Haneu had got from a vendor earlier.

His stomach growled at the prospect of getting something to eat. His mind did the exact opposite at the threat of having to force the horrible substance down his throat again. He was just about to turn and go off in search of something more edible when he heard someone call his name.

He looked around and saw Nilf sitting at a table in the corner with two other people. Haneu raised a hand in greeting and when he saw Nilf waving him over he began making his way past the other people in the bar.

When he got to the table he smiled weakly, said hello to Nilf and nodded at the man sitting next to Nilf. Right in front of him sat a woman who did not turn around to face him. The memories of the night before made him wary and only the fact that this woman had a completely different haircut kept him from running screaming away. There was something vaguely familiar about her and when she spoke he knew exactly why. It was Chia.

“Have a sit,” she said, “and meet some of the others.”

Haneu’s jaw nearly hit the bar’s floor as he gaped down at her. The second man laughed heartily and kicked out a chair for Haneu to sit in.

“Yeah,” he said, “get your ass in the chair. I’m dying to finally meet this whiz kid Chia’s been going on and on about for the last couple of weeks. Looks like he’s everything I’ve heard so far.”

“Fuck you, Syn,” Chia said. “Don’t mind him, Haneu. Just have a sit and some breakfast. Or have you eaten already?”

“No,” Haneu said, “kind of felt a more pressing need to get the fuck away.”

“Good man,” Nilf said, “so where’re you staying now?”

“Nowhere. Just got up here. Could you help me finding out where the fuck to get a room? Please?”

“Please?” Syn said, “Nilf. Chia. You’ve got to be shitting me. Kid’s got more manners than an entire royal banquet hall back on Prime.”

A sharp cry of pain left Syn’s mouth as Chia kicked him hard under the table.

“Shut the fuck up about that,” she said. “As I said, Haneu. Don’t mind Syn. Apart from spewing crap out his face hole he’s a good guy. Handy in a fight.”

Things were beginning to feel very much out of control for Haneu. In the less than a day since he had left his room in search of a quiet job to keep him afloat until something good showed up he had got himself drunk, nearly raped, probably also nearly killed, been rescued by one of Chia’s friends and finally met Chia again seemingly randomly.

He put his elbows on the table and rested his face in his hands sighing deeply.

“Aw, come on, kid,” Syn said, “we’ll help you get settled. Shit, I’ll even give you a hand moving your stuff.”

Haneu lifted his face from his hands and looked at Syn with a blank expression on his face for a few seconds before looking down at the small satchel on the floor.

“Shit,” Syn said, “that all your stuff? You travel fucking light, don’t you?”

Not knowing what to say Haneu simply shrugged.

Nilf signalled one of the bartenders who threw a mug through the room. He easily caught it and put it down down in front of Haneu.

“Drink?”

“After yesterday? Don’t think so.”

“No worries. This is just beer so you won’t go under the table. It’s good for you. Vitamins and stuff. You need that for the job hunt.”

One of Chia’s eyebrows shot up and she gave Nilf a slightly angry stare.

“You’re out of a job?” she asked. “That’s surprising, isn’t it Nilf?”

At the bitterness in her tone Nilf flinched visibly and muttered a half hearted excuse. Haneu did not notice the exchange as he was preoccupied with thinking about his future. He took a sip of beer and coughed.

“Yep, that’s beer. Stale and bitter. Kind of like life.”

“Sure?” Chia asked. “Remember what I told you back at Aruna?”

“That I should come see you if I needed a job? You were joking, right?”

“No. Far from it. There might not be a lot of things for you to do on my ship, but that’s not why I’d want you around. You’d be there for when the shit hits the fan and we need someone who can make things work really fast.”

“For real?”

“For fucking real,” Syn kicked in. “That thing you did with the engines? If you had done that two weeks earlier we wouldn’t have had to replace the engine.”

Haneu noticed the others getting tense as Syn spoke. It felt like they were nervous about anyone overhearing. He decided to dig a little deeper into this. The thought of working on a ship like Chia’s appealed to him. From what he had seen of it at Aruna it was one of a kind and had far superior systems than any other ship he could hope to get a job on.

“What exactly do you do?” he asked.



“Not now,” Chia said.

It was very clear to Haneu that she meant it. She had not sounded angry and he did not feel like he had gone too far, it just seemed like they wanted to keep a low profile.

“Well,” he said, “guess I’m in. Not because it’s the first thing I’ve come across. It’s a fucking nice ship, and working on something like that...”

The starry expression on his face spoke volumes about how he would feel about working for Chia and the others nodded with pleased smiles on their faces.

“There’s one other guy on the crew,” Syn said. “He’s an ugly fuck and prefers to shout rather than talk, but don’t let him get to you.”

“He makes a lot of noise,” Chia said, “but you know where you stand with him. If you’ve made a mistake he’ll shout at you, if you haven’t he won’t. Piece of cake, really.”

Remembering Ginta’s bouts of angry shouting Haneu could not help but smile.

“Not exactly like my old boss,” he said.

“Who? Gintas?” Chia said. “Urgh! He’s a fucking asshole. Good to know in a pinch, but if I can avoid him I do. No, don’t worry about Camper. You’ll meet him soon enough.”

“And speak of the devil,” Nilf said.

In the door to the bar a hulk of a man blocked the way for several people going both in and out. He did not seem to notice anyone else as he looked around. When he saw Chia and the others he lifted a hand in greeting and made his way towards them through the crowd. Those who were not fast enough to get out of his way on their own were helped along by his stocky body and heavy arms.

“See,” Syn said, “direct and straight to the point.”

A few of the other patrons sent angry glances in Camper’s general direction, but most of them seemed too scared of him to do anything. Haneu took another look at the man’s face. He looked rough. Very rough. Like someone who had spent the better part of his life being bombarded by space dust, and the rest of it asking for more. Even inside the dimly lit bar Camper was wearing a pair of slim sunglasses. That was not uncommon, Haneu had found out earlier. What was uncommon was that they were close fitting and seemed incredibly dark. Most of the others Haneu had seen wearing sunglasses had chosen either more brightly coloured glasses, like red or yellow, or some who were not completely dark. Either Camper had the worst hangover in history or he must have had such excellent eye sight that he could easily see in near darkness.

Before he sat down he reached across the table with a meaty hand and greeted Haneu. As he did so Haneu were able to make out his eyes, but only just. It looked like they were glowing ever so softly. Inside himself Haneu whistled. It seemed like Nilf was not the only one to have artificial eyes. That scared him in an oddly exhilarating way.

“Chia,” Camper said, “might be trouble. The girl at the door with the hood. Something’s fucking fishy.”

“Got it,” Chia said and nodded to Syn. “Got another white noise generator?”

Syn nodded and placed a small box on the table. When he pushed a button on the top a light lit up, but nothing else happened.

He turned to Haneu.

“This will give us some cover. Not enough to make anyone suspicious, but enough to cover what we say. When the light is on we can talk fairly freely, this device will make it seem like there’s a lot of background noise. When the light is off be careful and keep you cool. Now, say hello to Camper.”

After Haneu had been introduced Camper leaned back in his chair and emptied a mug of beer.

“So you’re the new guy? Cool. Keep up the same level of work you did on Aruna and you’ll do fine. Fuck up and you’d better fuck off.”

The way he said it gave no hint at what direction he expected Haneu to take. It was simply delivered in a flat, no-nonsense tone.

“Give me a chance to do my best,” Haneu said, “and I’ll do it.”

Camper laughed. A booming sound that filled the entire bar and made several people turn their heads.

“I like you, kid. We’ll soon find some fun for you.”

For the better part of an hour they kept talking about small things. Chia and her crew asked Haneu some more specific questions about his work at Aruna and for ICC. It was clear that they shared his bad experiences with ICC and from what they told him it seemed like none of the systems they were running on Chia’s cruiser were standard ICC packages. All of them had at the very least undergone heavy customisation and most of them were running in sand boxed environments were they could not take too many critical systems with them if they crashed.

It surprised him to learn that the core control system on the cruiser was so old it was almost a relic. The cruiser had been active since before the planetary war. Just keeping it running was a feat that baffled Haneu. Making it run smoothly and efficiently on the original control systems almost made him accuse the others of playing a joke with him.

When the topic of how he had got to The Bulb came up Haneu began to give only vague answers. He was still put off by how Valdis had reacted during the flight and when he had done some further analyses on the pod. It was clear from the others’ reactions that they immediately sensed something was amiss and that he was holding back something. After a few attempts at getting through by asking questions about the more mundane details on the freighter Chia looked him straight in the eyes.

“Look,” she said, “you’re hiding something and that’s fine. But know this. If you fly with us there’d better not come any fucking ghosts flying out of the shell to haunt us, got it? If it’s personal things, fine, if it’s not then you’d better level right here and now. We’ve all got shit in our back pockets and basically we don’t care what or who you’ve done. We just don’t want to find out about it when some insane nut case decides that the best way to get even with you is by blowing up my ship.”

The others were leaning back in their seats with their arms crossed looking at him. For a few seconds Haneu squirmed in his seat. Then he looked around to see if anyone were close enough to overhear. When he was certain there was not he leaned in across the table and spoke very softly.

“Okay,” he said, “some seriously weird shit happened on the way here. Can’t tell you all about it because I fucking don’t know half of it myself.”

He quickly gave them a brief description of how they had found the pod, taken it on board and seen the strange ship. As he spoke the others became very tense, especially Nilf who seemed about to jump out of his skin. When Haneu had finished Nilf swore long and hard.

“Then it fucking wasn’t the cheap shit they serve here. I fucking saw Drax with my own eyes yesterday. Right fucking here!”

“You what?” the others said as one.

Their outburst nearly made Haneu jump. As they settled down a bit Haneu realised that they quite clearly knew who Drax was.

“Wait,” he said, “you know who he is?”

This time it was Chia who took a very close look at the people around them before speaking.

“Yeah,” she said, “you could say that. You could even say that we know him. No more of this here. Come on, we’ve got some shit to sort out.”

Leaving Syn behind to keep an eye out for Drax they got up and headed out into the corridor.

“We’ve got a couple of rooms a bit further up,” Chia said. “Nilf, show Haneu where they are and get him an key card. Then get both of you down to the dock. I want to continue this on the ship.”

They then went their separate ways, Chia and Camper heading into the maze of corridors while Nilf led Haneu back to the lifts. Five floors higher up in the station they got out. Haneu tried his best to avoid looking like a space bum who had stumbled across a feather bed and some real food. After the first few minutes of walking through the luxurious quarters reserved for those with both money and power he gave up. He figured there was no point trying to be something he was so he allowed himself to gaze at the well painted walls, the pictures hanging there, the beautifully sculpted lamps.

Only once or twice had he been up in Ginta’s personal quarters on Aruna. Those had been one of the finest places he had ever seen in his life, only surpassed by the CEO’s office at ICC. But this at a completely different level. Even the floor was smooth and, as he found out when he knelt down to touch it, it was made of something he had never felt before.

Nilf noticed Haneu’s wonderment and chuckled.

“Surprised that a bunch of scum like us have access up here?” he said.

He pointed at the floor.

“Remnants from before the war. It’s genuine oak from Prime.”

“The planet?” Haneu said.

He had heard about things like plants, trees and so on, but never come across anything larger than a small potted plant. Nilf laughed.

“Of course the planet. Where else? Not like there’re any forests out here in space. A fucking shame, if you ask me.”

“Forest? You mean huge areas covered with trees?”

“Yeah,” Nilf said, “I miss them.”

Haneu stopped dead in his tracks and Nilf cursed hard.

“Fuck,” he said, “don’t fucking tell Chia I said that. You hear?”

Not knowing what to say Haneu just shook his head and they went on in silenct. Whatever Chia and her crew might be they did not strike him as casual liars. Or, he reflected, actually they did. But they struck him as someone who only lied when it served a purpose. And from Nilf’s sudden silence it was clear that he had over spoken.

If Nilf really did miss the forest that must mean, Haneu reasoned, that he had seen them at some point which meant he must have been on the surface of Indigo Prime. And as far as he knew there had been no transports to or from the planet since it was nearly destroyed completely. Five hundred years ago. By Drax.

## 14 Below the World

From her place just inside the entrance to the bar the operative had had a clear view of Haneu and the others. She had not been able to overhear everything they said because there were too many other people in the bar. Even the FreeTech developed directional min microphone she had had its limits. Several people were frequently blocking the direct line of sight, and hence line of hearing, and when that big guy had pushed past her he had nearly knocked her from her seat.

She rubbed her shoulder, inwardly cursing the brutish nature of ordinary people. Did they not know that the one, true path was one of calm reflection? It was not a path they could force their way onto.

Forcing herself to once again be calm and relaxed she returned her attention to the table in the corner of the bar. Apart from Haneu there were now four others and something was sitting in the back of her mind trying to tell her something.

It seemed like they were only making small talk. Haneu seemed very nervous at first, but slowly loosened up. The others were merely bragging about past exploits. At least that was what it sounded like from the parts of their conversation she could pick up. The noise in the bar was far worse than she had expected and she berated herself for not checking it sooner so she could move to a different spot. If she got up and moved closer it would have been too obvious she was trying to eavesdrop.

When they got up a while later she had only learned that they had offered Haneu a job on their ship and that he had accepted. That annoyed her because it meant she could not easily keep an eye on him anymore. And if he left they station the operative would have to choose between following him and staying put so she could find out more about Drax.

Before they left the bar she made sure to take good enough pictures of them that she could identify them and get as much information about them as possible. She followed them out the bar at a distance, hoping to not attract too much unwanted attention.

Despite considering herself quite talented at being unnoticed, especially in as large a crowd as there was in the bar, she did know her limitations. She was far better at operating stealth ships and following people through space, unseen in the blind spots of their wake.

Outside the bar she saw them split up in two and head off in different directions. Unsure what to do at first she decided to stick to Haneu for the time being. The others would have to wait while she found out where he was headed.

As it turned out she soon found out that she would not be able to follow Haneu for long. She did manage to get in the same lift as him, but when she got off at the top stop Haneu and one of the others stayed in the lift. There was no choice for her but to leave him behind so she got out and hid to the side of the elevator waiting for the doors to close. When they had she could hear the lift move further up the chute, obviously to some of the higher levels in the station. Those would be hard for her to gain access to. It would probably be necessary to get the assistance from the local chapter of her order and even so there were bound to be problems. She reckoned the upper levels were under heavier surveillance and since fewer people had access to them anyone just wandering around would soon be noticed by the security details that were bound to be around.

Seeing one of the other lifts' doors open she decided she might as well head straight back down to her order's quarters at the bottom of the station. She got in the lift and tucked herself away in the corner, pretending to be very busy with her data pad. Which, on the whole, was not an overly difficult thing to pretend since she was.

The pictures she had taken of the people Haneu had met were crystal clear and it did not take her long to get their files from the station's computers. However, a quick examination easily revealed that the files were false. She could not for one instance believe that the four people Haneu had met were simply dock workers and a concubine. The big guy might pass for a dock worker, but the guy with the silver eye, she did not even bother to commit his false identity's name to memory, would not be able to get to the upper levels if he really was moving crates in the dock.

But apart from that the files were really well made and could easily fool anyone who did not have more than a few minutes to decide who they were. The ID numbers all checked out and from the station's systems she could confirm that they really did belong to living people who went through all the regular things like going to the toilet, drinking in bars, sleeping and so on. The station, as well as almost all other stations in Indigo, kept track of those things. The purpose was, officially, to keep track of resources and predict shortages before they arose. Unofficially, the systems not only logged that someone had spent this many hours in that bar, it also logged exactly who it was. That was a small addition her order had introduced a long time ago to be better able to stay hidden and to find new recruits or people to avoid.

A few times station operators had found out about the hidden systems. Fortunately most of them had been talented enough to be included in the order. Those who were not had had to be silenced. Either by convincing them it served a better purpose or, more often, by moving them to places where they would be unable to tell anyone about their discoveries.

She shivered briefly. That had been one of the harder things to accept about her new rank. On her way to the station she had learned things from her new data pad that had made her rethink some things about how her order worked. They were, supposedly, working to aid the people left in space. And yet the order seemed not to hesitate to imprison or even kill people to remain hidden. For now she pushed those thoughts aside. She would have to make up her mind about that moral dilemma at a later time.

The files from the station's systems were as good as useless since they only dealt with the false IDs. Instead she tried running the faces through the information in her data pad. She was not surprised when she did not get any results. She would just have to run it through the order's database when she got down there.

With a small ding the lift doors opened and she went out. She was at the lowest level that ordinary people could access and from here she had to make her way to one of the hidden entrances to the lower levels. There were several entrances and she decided on one of the better hidden ones. Despite wanting to get information about them as quickly as possibly there was not any immediate rush so she had no excuse for not being careful.

Making sure no one followed her she walked down a corridor leading away from the more populated areas. This part she always hated because it was not uncommon for gangs to roam the deserted corridors looking for someone to mug or worse. The corridors were empty and she soon found herself near a grille covering a large fan in one of the air vents.

She took out her data pad and held it close to the side of the vent searching a little until she found the right place. Hidden inside the vent was a small device that could only be noticed by sending it the right series of keys from within less than an inch. If she had not known where to look for it it could easily have taken her a few hours to find it.

The fan slowly spun down and she kept a lookout to both sides down the corridor ready to let it spin back up if anyone showed up. When it had completely stopped she heard a small click and saw that the grille had opened. She slipped in and carefully passed the fan. She only just made it as the fan began to spin up far too soon for her comfort. Further down the vent she opened a concealed hatch in its side and began climbing down a ladder leading down into the darkness.

At the bottom of the ladder there was only a very small room and she had to let herself drop the last couple of meters since the ladder did not go all the way. After she had picked herself up from a less than perfect landing she flicked on her datapad and activated the program that let her identify herself to the order's systems.

Waiting for the door to open seemed like an eternity. Not because it took more than a few seconds but because she knew there were several deadly anti intrusion systems in place to dispose of her quickly and quietly if her identity was not verified.

Finally the door opened and she stepped through. Behind her it quickly hissed shut again. She found herself in a fully lit corridor. The light temporarily blinded her and she had to squeeze her eyes shut to make out the details of the two robed and hooded figures standing just outside the door.

"Greetings, sister," one of them said, obviously an older man. "We are glad to have you back as there has been a development you need to know about. Something happened while you were up above."

Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the light and she could recognise the markings on the man's robe as those of a journeyman. That ranked him high enough to have useful knowledge, but still below her so she could dispense with the formalities and get straight to the point if she so chose. The other figure was an acolyte bearing the marks of one who was going through the mandatory year of silence. She smiled, pleased that the order at least had seen fit to send her someone who she knew would not talk about what happened.

"Tell me on the way," the operative said.

She only paused briefly to transfer the pictures she had taken to the acolyte's datapad and order him to do a full scan of them and send her any information the order had on them. The acolyte got right on it and fell a few steps behind as the three of them walked toward the order's main data centre.

"As you instructed us we kept an eye on the freighter that arrived a few days ago. This morning its crew scheduled a few hours break from tearing it apart, apparently so they could get their own personal effects out, hold a small farewell ceremony and so on. Once the dock workers had left the crew unloaded a large crate which we were able to do a full scan on. It was the pod you mentioned when you arrived."

"Where is it now?"

"It is in storage here," the journeyman said and pointed at a schematic of the station.

"Hidden in plain sight in a standard storage facility. Make sure someone is always there and let me know immediately if someone so much as looks at it."

"That's just it," the journeyman said, "someone already has. A couple of dock workers sneaked in and opened the crate only a few minutes after it had been placed there. They did nothing but look and quickly covered their tracks, but it was quite clear that they were there to confirm the whereabouts of the pod."

"Who were they?"

The journeyman held up his data pad and showed a series of pictures showing two of the people Haneu had met opening a large crate.

“Good job,” the operative said.

They had arrived at the data centre and she turned to the acolyte who bowed his head quickly. With a quick gesture towards her data pad the acolyte indicated that he had the information to her and she gave him access to transfer it to her data pad.

“That will be all for now,” she said, “but stay here in case I need you again.”

With that she quickly entered the data centre to find a small cell where she could be alone and do some research and find out what to do next. There were several other masters in there and she quickly bowed her way through the ceremonial greetings, observing the order’s ancient traditions. She would have preferred to simply head straight for somewhere to think, but she had no choice in this.

Once she was alone she took a few seconds to gather her thoughts before disassembling everything she had learned. The fact that Haneu’s new employer knew about the pod was a sign that something was really wrong and made her nervous that she had come across more than just a group of average criminals looking for a few easy creds.

She pulled up the information the acolyte had found for her. When she saw the first page of the first file she cursed loudly, making a couple of masters outside her cell stop with disapproving frowns on their otherwise serene faces. She ignored them and scrolled further through the files.

The first couple of files identified the four people and confirmed that they were not random dock workers but a full crew working an old ship. The next file had details on the ship itself. Her fingers began tapping the side of the data pad nervously as she realised that the ship was one she had come across earlier in her life. It was a fast cruiser built over half a millennium ago when the people in Indigo still had access to advanced technology and production facilities. This particular cruiser had been one of her first solo assignments. Her orders had been to simply stick to it and follow it to see where it was going. It should have been simple, but somehow they had managed to slip away from her.

With growing anxiety she opened the next series of files. They were old. Very old. They were the service records of all the people the Haneu had met. Every single one of them had not only been alive since well before the planetary wars. All of them had worked on covert missions for none other than Admiral Drax Escobar. And all of them had been given nearly the same sentence as Drax had for their parts in bombarding Indigo Prime.

While their punishments had not been as severe as his they might as well have. Where Drax had been sent on an endless flight through the sparse regions of the galaxy these people have simply been sentenced to live in the pods until the pods either gave out or they died inside.

So why were they alive and well and in charge of a ship that was far superior to most others in the system?

## 15 Departure

“Where the fuck did she go?” Camper said.

He planted a heavy kick on the wall of the corridor and for several seconds a deep boom echoed around them.

“She disappeared somewhere around here,” Chia said.

They were standing in the middle of an empty corridor on the lowest level on the station they could get access to. The levels below them had been sealed off for a long time following a minor meltdown of the station’s old reactor core. Though most of the radiation had been contained enough had leaked out to force the management to close down three full levels and the sensors left in place showed that they were still too dangerous for people to enter.

“That’s not the first time we’ve come across someone who disappears like that,” Chia said. “This is seriously beginning to piss me off. Who the fuck are these people.”

“Don’t know, but if I get my hands on one of those fucks we’ll soon find out,” Camper said.

For several minutes they walked up and down the corridor until Camper gave an annoyed grunt.

“She’s gone,” he said. “Want to hang around or should we go do something about that fucking pod?”

“I definitely want to do something about the pod. But if this girl is what I think she is she can cause fucking hell for us if we don’t get our asses in gear asap. Let’s bump up the time schedule, eh?”

“I’m game. What’s the plan?”

“Let’s just go get the pod, simple as that. Tell Syn to be ready with a diversion at the warehouse and we’ll sort out a way to get the pod to the docking bay. And have Nilf get himself and Haneu down to the cruiser. Now!”

Camper spoke a few quick sentences into his wireless and nodded to Chia.

“He’s good to go. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Turning back towards the lifts they began to run. The few people they passed were all quick to get out of the way. Only once did someone, a rough looking young man, try to stop them, but Camper simply barged into him so the young man literally flew back. His head hit the wall with a sickening thud and he slumped unconscious to the floor.

Back at the lifts they pushed aside the people waiting and got inside the first lift to arrive. They paid no attention to the shouts of protests around them and simply moved as if they owned the place.

They got off at the level where the docking bays were located and went down to where Chia’s cruiser was docked. There they made sure that the ship was still ready to take off at short notice and Chia went out through the docking tube to get a pack of drinks from the ship’s storage. Then they headed towards one of the dock chiefs.

When they got close enough for him to hear Chia called out to him to get his attention.



“Oi!” she shouted. “Come here. Got something for you and your crew.”

It did not take her long to bribe the chief and his crew to take a long break, aided by a generous handful of creds and the drinks Chia had picked up at the ship.

Once the workers had disappeared into a corner Camper walked over to one of the fork lifters and strapped himself in. Meanwhile Chia kept an eye on the chief and his crew, making sure they stayed on the other side of the hangar with their backs turned.

Chia’s wireless emitted a sharp beep and she held it to her ear and listened. She then turned it off and replaced it in her pocket.

“They’re good to go and Nilf is bringing Haneu down.”

“Excellent,” Chia said. Tell them to begin in five minutes. That should give us plenty of time to get in position. What’s Syn planning?”

“Don’t know, but it’s got to be fucking impressive.”

“Too true.”

She led the way out of the docks, staying ahead of Camper’s fork lift to make sure no one got in the way. Not because she cared but because it would cause unneeded delays to have to stop and move dead bodies out of the way.

Earlier that day one of the dock workers on their payroll had called them to say that the freighter’s captain had called a long break and made everyone except her own crew leave the bay. They had gone down to see what was happening and had followed Valdis and Artura as they moved a large, unmarked crate to one of the anonymous warehouses nearby. It had not been overly subtly done, at least not compared to how Chia would have done it. But Valdis had made sure that the docking area and the warehouse was empty so the only ones to see them were the people they had passed on the way there. Among them Chia and Camper who had followed them and, when Valdis and Artura had left, had bribed their way into the warehouse so they could verify that the pod was in the crate.

Now they were once again headed for the warehouse, only this time they would do far more than just take a peek inside the crate.

At the last corner in the corridor before the warehouse they stopped and Chia checked her watch. Almost five minutes had passed so any second now they could expect Syn’s diversion to kick in and give them a few minutes of confusion to slip into the warehouse and get back out with the pod without anyone noticing.

They had only waited a few seconds when they heard screams coming from the other side of the warehouse. Someone was shouting about a fire and calling for fire extinguishers. Shortly thereafter they could hear a muffled explosion followed by a rush of air down that carried a lot of heat with it.

Not wanting to waste their chance they quickly went around the corner and kept going straight toward the warehouse doors. It proved to be quite difficult as a few dozen people were trying to press past them and in the end Chia had to climb up on the fork lift to avoid being swept away by the crowd.

When they got to the warehouse they saw what must have been Syn’s diversion. A large section of the wall to the warehouse had been blown out and inside it several crates were on fire. Chia waved Camper on and guided him through the hole in the wall. The heat from the fires were searing hot and the fork lift got more than a few scorch marks.

Inside the warehouse they could see that Syn had done a good job lighting the fires so they were nowhere near the crate with the pod.

Camper quickly steered the fork lift over to the crate and Chia jumped down so he could get it on the lift's forks. The fork lift tilted slightly as he began lifting the crate so he leaned back in the driver's seat and shouted for Chia to jump up and provide counter balance. She deftly did so and the fork lift settled back down on all its wheels.

The whole operation had taken less than two minutes, but the fires had already begun to spread too much for them to be able to get back through the hole in the wall. Instead Camper headed straight for the doors.

"Chia, got down and get those fucking doors open. Now!" he said.

Just as Chia was about to leap down she noticed something strapped to the door hinges.

"No," she shouted. "Slow down and hold on. Looks like Syn's got another surprise ready."

When they were a few metres from the door a series of small explosions went off and the door simply toppled outward into the corridor. After that it was a simple matter for them to drive out of the warehouse. As they cleared the doors they could hear klaxons going off and somewhere the sirens of the local fire fighting teams could be heard.

Back when the station had been fully operational its built-in fire suppressing systems would simply have kicked in and smothered the fire, but as the station's resources had become more and more stretched even important systems such as these had been disabled. Instead small teams had been assigned to be ready to quickly deal with fires if they could or, if not too many people would be trapped, to simply block off the areas on fire and shut down the air flow into them.

In the confusion and panic not many seemed to take notice of the fork lift heading away from the fire, even with the large crate balancing out front. A few hundred metres from the warehouse they passed the first of the fire fighting teams who were running as fast as they could, one of them guiding a tracked drone carrying a two ton fire extinguisher.

They also passed Syn who was jogging down the corridors trying, and failing miserably, at blending in with the panicking people fleeing the fire. He might have been able to pull it off if it had not been for the wide grin on his face.

Back in the docking bay they moved the crate over to the loading lifts and opened it. The cruiser was not built for transporting large amounts of cargo and the crate would only make it more difficult to get the pod onboard. Working quickly they soon had the pod ready to be loaded, just in time for Syn to come running up to them.

"Quick," Chia said, "get inside the ship and begin firing her up."

"Copy," Syn said and ran through the docking tube and began preparing the ship for take-off.

Meanwhile Chia accessed the cruiser's systems and gave permission for the loading lifts to deposit the pod in its cargo hold. The process would take about five minutes as the lifts deliberately moved slowly to avoid damaging either themselves, the cargo or the ship they served or injuring anyone stupid enough to venture near the lifts.

"Okay, let's get inside. Any word from Nilf?"

"No," Camper said. "They should've fucking been here by now. If he's got himself in a fight I'll fucking tear his head off. Now's not the fucking time for that."

"Keep calling him and drop him a message saying we're leaving in max fifteen. After that stunt Syn pulled we've got to get out fucking now."

"Got it."

While Chia ran up to help prepare the ship and strap herself in the pilot's seat Camper stayed down in the dock trying to get in contact with Nilf. He cursed frequently as Nilf did not answer and he began pacing back and forth.

"Hey, you," a voice called out. "What the fuck did you do to my fork lift?" the chief went on. "That's gonna fucking cost you, mate!"

It was the deck chief they had bribed earlier. Him and a couple of the workers were nervously making their way toward Camper. The chief looked angry, the workers looked wary and like they felt the best idea in the world was to be somewhere entirely elsewhere.

"Fuck off," Camper said. "Piss off and take your stinking lift with you."

"Not so fast. You've fucking nearly broken it. Who's gonna pay for that? Not me, I tell you."

Reaching inside his jacket Camper pulled out a handful of creds and threw them in the general direction of the chief. One of the workers immediately knelt down and began picking them up, but the chief kicked the creds away.

"Oh, you don't get off so cheap, mate. We're gonna have to teach you a little lesson, I think."

Campers stopped in his tracks and slowly turned to look directly at the chief.

"You," he said, "do not want to fuck with me."

The veins in his forehead began to stand out and the muscles in his neck tensed visibly, lending a very physical emphasis to his ice cold voice.

All thoughts of the creds gone the workers started backing away, but the chief obviously were not going to let it drop. He took a few steps forward and raised his arms in a threatening manner.

"I'm gonna take your head off, mate," he said.

In an instant Camper switched appearance completely. The threatening attitude was replaced with an almost apathetic demeanour. With a single, fluid motion he unfolded one of his arms and hit the chief right under the ear with a backhanded closed fist swipe. The chief's legs buckled and he sat down flat on his ass with a dumbfounded look on his face.

Camper turned to the workers and pointed at the chief.

"He's going to have a headache from hell, but he'll live. Get him the fuck out of here. Now!" he said and walked to the entrance to the docking tube.

The workers did not waste any time but quickly scooped up their chief and dragged him across the floor and out of the docking bay. Not once did any of them dare make eye contact with Camper.

Once more turned his attention to his wireless. There was still no answer.

Haneu's visit to the upper levels was short. Less than half an hour after they had arrived at the rooms Chia and her crew lived in Nilf got a call on his wireless. The call was short and Haneu did not hear much of it as he was trying to relax a little on a very comfortable couch. His mind was wandering without any purpose so he was not overly aware of what was going on around him. He was therefore very surprised when Nilf suddenly barged in and begin packing up his things.

"Get up," Nilf said, "we're leaving. Now."

Packing his things together was not difficult as he still only had the small satchel and had not really unpacked anything after they arrived. So within a couple of minutes they were back in the luxurious hallways, but this time they did not waste any time on Haneu admiring the decor.

A few times Haneu tried to get Nilf to tell him what was going on, but Nilf refused. The look on his face was serious enough to give Haneu the impression that something bad had happened. He hoped it had nothing to do with him, though he guessed that if it did then he would either have been left behind or withheld somewhere rather than being allowed to walk around.

Apart from a few terse directions Nilf said nothing until they had left the upper levels behind and were headed down toward the docking bays in one of the regular lifts. All the way through the upper levels he had seemed very tense and Haneu noticed that he visibly relaxed once they had left them behind.

“So far so good,” Nilf said. “The upper levels are okay for relaxing, but a pain when the shit hits the fan. Too much surveillance.”

He pointed to a broken camera that hung limply from its socket on the wall outside the lifts. They had just arrived on the docking bay level and were headed towards Chia’s ship.

“Down here most of it is either broken or so old that it’s as good as useless.”

“Okay,” Haneu said, “so what’s happened? Why are we leaving?”

“Some people we don’t like seem to be watching us. They probably won’t take any direct actions against us, but it’s better if we get the fuck out of here.”

“Who?”

“Long story. Very long. I’ll tell you later when we... oh, hello. What’s this?”

Nilf stopped dead in his track and Haneu kept going for a few steps before he noticed and stopped. When he turned around he saw Nilf looking intently at a group of people standing a short way down the corridor. Haneu walked up to him.

“What?” he said.

“Look at the bimbo. Remember the hair cut?”

One of the people in the group was the woman who had assaulted Haneu the day before. Even from a distance large bruises on her face were visible. Haneu winced at the memory of the encounter and subconsciously felt his nose.

None of the other people with the woman were the men who had also attacked Haneu so he relaxed a little. These people seemed far less aggressive, but even so he was not exactly happy when Nilf began to move towards them. When he said so Nilf just looked at him with a cunning smile on his face.

“Look at the guy half hidden behind her. Familiar?”

“Oh, fuck!” Haneu said.

The man Nilf was referring to was Drax. He was simply standing there, leaning against the wall with a vacant expression on his face.

“Come on,” Nilf said, “we’ve got to see if we can get him with us. Talk about a target of opportunity. Now where’s that fucking thing?”

Nilf stopped for a few second to rummage through his pockets until he found a small data pad. It instantly tickled Haneu’s tech gene as he had never seen anything that small before. At least not anything that he reckoned someone like Nilf and the others would waste time carrying around.

“What’s that?”

“Something that might help him remember. Hold it, will you? Need something else as well.”

From another pocket Nilf pulled out a small case which he opened to reveal an air syringe and an ampule filled with a green liquid. He swiftly inserted the ampule in the syringe and slid the syringe up his sleeve.

Nervously Haneu followed him until they were both standing right behind the woman. Some of the others had noticed them arrive, but none of them seemed alarmed or overly worried. The woman herself seemed unaware of their presence until Nilf reached out and tapped her on the shoulder.

“Hey handsome,” he said, “you really should sack your stylist. He’s made an awful mess of your face!”

At first it looked like the woman was about to either say something back or send a punch in the newcomer’s direction. Then her eyes went wide and she tried to take a step back only to be stopped by Nilf now having a firm grip on her jacket.

“See here’s the thing,” Nilf said, “I was having a few drinks last night and can’t seem to remember exactly how I got home. Could you be a good sport and... fucking get the stinking fuck out before I rip of your ugly face?”

The last he said on a low sneer only the woman could hear.

Her expression instantly changed from one of aggression to that of someone who has just seen an air lock open right before them. She hastily mumbled something about having to be somewhere else and turned to leave. Nilf kept his grip and raised his voice a little so the others could hear.

“And take your fucking friends with you.”

That quickly cleared out the area as the hangers on decided there were far better places for them to be. All except one who tried to act tough and pushed his way past Nilf. It did not work well as he simply bounced back as Nilf stood stock still. With an embarrassed look on his face the would-be tough guy ran off without looking back.

Soon only Drax remained, looking around him with a confused look on his face. He looked from side to side, seemingly unable to make up his mind about whether to stay or go with some of the others. None of them paid him any attention as they left.

“Hey,” Nilf said, “you. Come here.”

Pointing a dirty finger at himself Drax looked at him.

“Yes, you. Come over here.”

Drax began walking towards them. When he was a few steps from them his face lit up with recognition. He raised a hand and waved in a childish way, over exaggerated and wildly.

“Oh,” he said, “it’s you. Hello. Are we going flying again? I like flying. Can we go on the ship again?”

This was not addressed to Nilf, who Drax seemed to have instantly forgotten, but to Haneu. Haneu looked questioningly at Nilf. Nilf just shrugged and put the recording device back in his pocket. He silently mouthed that Haneu should go ahead and play along.

“Yes,” Haneu said, “we’re going flying again. Would you like that?”

The smile that spread on Drax’ face was so wide that Haneu briefly feared that he would injure himself. Strain a muscle in the cheek or something like that.

“Oh, yes. And can we go look at the shiny, blinking lights? I like those, too.”

Haneu nodded and promised Drax that there would be lots and lots of lights where they were going. This seemed to be enough to convince Drax to come with them and he lumbered alongside Haneu as the two of them began walking back in the direction that would take them to the docks.

Behind them Nilf followed, only pausing briefly to roll his eyes and mumble a string of obscenities. He ran for a few paces to catch up to the others and leaned close to Haneu.

“Better pick up the pace. Your girlfriend won’t take long to get a gang together and come after us. And I’ve got a feeling she’ll be bringing a lot more backup than she did last night.”

“Gotcha,” Haneu said.

He put a hand on Drax’ shoulder to get his attention.

“Do you want to play a game? It’s fun.”

“Oh, yes,” Drax said nodding vigorously. “I like games. Is it very fun?”

“Very,” Haneu assured him. “We’re going to have a race to see who’s fastest. But there’s a twist.”

This seemed to excite Drax and so Haneu continued.

“The twist is that no one must find out that we’re hurrying. So we have to go as fast as possible, but really quiet like and without running.”

“That’s not fun. That’s boring. Can’t we play with rocks instead?”

A movement at the edge of his vision caught Haneu’s attention and he turned to see Nilf shaking his head furiously.

“No,” Nilf hissed, “for fuck’s sake do not say anything about playing with rocks. Trust me.”

Haneu turned back to Drax.

“No, no,” he said, “this really is a fun game. See there? I bet you can’t get to that corner before me without making anyone turn their heads to see you.”

“Ha,” Drax said, “of course I can.”

And he could. Not because Haneu let him win but because he suddenly began moving far more purposefully than he had before. It did not seem like he was putting on an act of being dim witted. To Haneu it seemed more like he really was that, but had a lot of reflex actions hidden on his backbone that were simply activated by external prompting rather than Drax’ own.

Again Nilf rolled his eyes and looked positively grumpy as they made their way towards the docks.

“I know it’s silly,” Haneu said when Drax was a little ahead of them, “but you’ve got to admit it works.”

“Yeah,” Nilf said, “it’s just fucking scary seeing him like this.”

“I can imagine. What was that about the rocks?”

“Rocks were what Drax called the asteroids he launched at the planet. Don’t ever, fucking ever, get him started on the rocks. Especially when he’s as he is now. Fucking look at him. A fucking child with deadly skills. If he got it in his head that we’d fucking stolen his candy he’d have our heads off before we could blink.”

“Fuck,” Haneu said.

“Yeah. Wisest thing you’ve said so far.”

They started running after Drax to avoid losing sight of him. This had the effect of him stopping and laughing loudly at them claiming that they had lost the game because they were running. Them agreeing to that made Drax beam widely and he walked proudly, but to Haneu’s relief, quickly through the corridors.

When they were a few hundred meters from the docks they suddenly heard a loud explosion from a bit further down the corridor. All around them people stopped and looked around, scared expressions on their faces. A few curious ones started moving toward the sound while the more careful ones began moving away from it. Nilf pulled Haneu and Drax over to stand by the wall.

"I don't know what the fuck that was," he said, "but it can't be good."

"That's straight between us and the docks, right?"

"Yeah and I don't like that."

"Want to go around?"

"Not sure we can. It's too far and we're likely to be blocked off from the docks if the fire containment systems are still functional. Don't think they are, but still."

"Yay," Drax suddenly shouted, "pretty lights!"

They turned around and saw that there were, indeed, lights blinking close behind them.

"Oh, shit," Nilf said, "here comes the heroes."

His voice was full of sarcasm and he looked with contempt as a group of people rushed past, each of them carrying a fire extinguisher. When they had passed Nilf began moving forward again motioning for the others to follow him.

"Fucking gits think they can make a difference. An explosion that loud requires a lot more than what they can carry. Fuck it, come on. We'll just have to go through this mess."

Further up the corridor was the warehouse Syn had blown a hole in earlier. The place was a confused mass of people running to and from. The fire fighters were trying to make some kind of structured effort at putting the fires in the warehouse out. They were not succeeding as the flames had spread too far into the actual warehouse for their small cans to be effective.

One of the more creative fire fighters had found a console set in the wall and tried to get in touch with the station's operators to see if they could help put out the fire. With the lack of proper surveillance direct contact with people on site was usually the only way the operators had of knowing exactly what happened.

After some talking back and forth a series of loud crashes could be heard from inside the warehouse and the fires seemed to lose some of their intensity. Then another fire fighting team arrived, this one equipped with a transport drone that carried an oversized extinguisher that the team quickly deployed against the flames.

When Haneu, Nilf and Drax arrived things were beginning to get under control. The flames had mostly been replaced with a lot of steam and smoke that filled the corridor to either side of the warehouse.

The smoke got thicker and thicker and soon it was difficult to see where they were going. Haneu saw Nilf briefly touch the side of his head where his silver eye was. He reached out and grabbed hold of them.

"Stay close," Nilf said, "and don't lose touch."

With far greater speed than Haneu was really comfortable with Nilf led them through the corridor without getting entangled with the fire fighters or stumbling over any of the debris and other junk that were lying all over the place.

When they were safely out on the other side of the warehouse Nilf let go of them. Unable to contain himself Haneu grabbed Nilf's arm.

"You did something with your eye, didn't you? To see through the smoke?"

“Yeah, so? Just a standard infrared mode.”

“Fuck me, I thought those things were just a rumour.”

Nilf stopped and forcibly removed Haneu’s hand from his sleeve.

“Listen, kid, Chia thinks you’re important enough to drag along and that’s fine by me. But get this, there’s a lot of shit that you don’t know a fucking thing about so get used to it and stop bugging me with stupid comments like that.”

Caught by surprise Haneu muttered an excuse and pulled back a little. Not wanting to risk angering Nilf any further he turned his attention to Drax only to see him standing a short distance back, partly obscured by the smoke. It seemed like he was talking to someone and Haneu quickly ran back, cursing at himself for not keeping a better eye on Drax.

As Haneu approached Drax he could see a shadow slipping away in the smoke before he could get a good look at who it was.

“Come on,” he said to Drax and started pulling his arm. “We’ve got to go.”

“But she’s going the other way,” Drax protested.

Haneu kept pulling at his arm, not making any real progress as Drax was far stronger than him.

“Come on!”

Drax kept protesting and ranting on about some woman who had told him to come with him. But eventually Haneu managed to get them both moving towards the hangar deck. When he finally caught up with Nilf he saw that Nilf was searching through his pockets.

“Got him,” Haneu said. “What’s up?”

“My wireless. It’s fucking gone. Fuck!”

“Did you drop it?”

“No fucking way. Oh, shit. That guy back in the corridor.”

Nilf padded the pockets in his pants.

“Fuck, he’s slick. He even got my creds. Fuck it, let’s get going.”

Together they ran off and within a few minutes they arrived at the docking bays. Before entering Nilf sneaked up to the doorway and looked in. The only person present in the whole docking area was Camper who was lurking around near the tube leading to Chia’s ship.

“It’s clear. Hurry up.”

They went inside and at a cue from Nilf Haneu started running, dragging Drax with him. When they were closer to Camper Nilf hailed him and waved to let him know everything was good.

“Nilf, you twat,” Camper shouted, “where the fuck’ve you been?”

“Some git flipped me and I fucking didn’t notice.”

Camper laughed out loud.

“Serves you right. Got Haneu? Good.”

As Haneu and Drax caught up with Nilf he greeted Camper. A few steps behind him came Drax, lumbering along looking around the bay with an amused smile on his face. Through the large window the ship was visible, hanging majestically in space only held in place by a small tube. It had clearly caught his full attention and Haneu had to go back a few steps and grab him by the arm again to make him move.

Nilf slapped the back of Camper’s head.



“Oi,” he said, “wake up. Look who we picked up on the way.”

“The fuck? Where’d he come from?”

“Found him along the way. Give us a hand getting him onboard. He’s a bit... off.”

“No shit?” Camper said and turned his head back and forth looking at Drax from different angles. “Not much left of the admiral, eh?”

Getting Drax onboard proved to be fairly easy. All they had to do was ask if he wanted to go for a ride and after that was that. He practically ran through the tube and they had to slow him down to avoid him falling over and injuring himself.

The interior of the cruiser was a lot more cramped than it had been on the freighter. Instead of individual cabins there was just a single bunk room and there was no crew lounge. Nilf pointed to a couple of small lockers in the corner of the bunk room and told Haneu to store his gear there. Haneu did so and then sat on one of the unoccupied bunks. He had to spend a little time trying to guess which bunks were free since it was very hard for him to do so. All the bunks were kept in perfect state and looked like they had just been straightened out.

In the end he found out that there were some small labels at the foot of each bunk with names of the bunk’s inhabitant. He looked at all the labels: Camper, Chia, Nilf, Syn, Goat, Tinu and Watson.

The last three names he had not heard before so he guess that they must be former crew members. The idea entered his mind that he might be looking at dead people’s bunks. He swallowed as he again thought about what exactly it was Chia and the others did. And they somehow knew Drax which did not exactly make him feel more comfortable.

For a long time he just sat there on the bunk, mulling things over in his head. It had been less than two weeks since he had left his job at Aruna. True, it had been a pain to have to deal with Gintas, but all in all it had been a fairly good job. He was in control of things, there. The trip on the freighter had been mostly relaxing, even considering the mess with Drax and the pod and the mysterious ship. And the strange reaction from Valdis. Okay, he told himself, maybe the trip had not been so relaxing.

His mind drifted to what had happened within the last day. He seriously considered running straight off the ship and find a quiet dump of a room to hole up in again. Those two days, his firsts on The Bulb, had been the only ones where he had felt a little bit in control. And then he had gone and messed things up by going outside.

He leaned forward and put his head in his hands and nearly started crying. Having never been good at changes this was a very hard time for him and he could not shake the thoughts of just hiding away. So immersed was he in his thoughts and sadness that he did not notice that the ship undocked from the station and started accelerating away.

Meanwhile Chia and the others worked hard to get the ship ready for departure. She and Camper sat in the pilot and co-pilot’s seats while Syn and Nilf manned the combat and damage sections, respectively. The cockpit in the cruiser was large enough to hold half a dozen people working on a wide variety of tasks, mainly combat related.

To be able to keep an eye on Drax they ordered him to sit in one of the empty chairs and deactivated the console lest he should start messing things up for them. Under the excuse of him having to be secured for take-off they got him strapped up tightly so he also could not start wandering around. The cockpit was soon filled with rapidly snapped orders as they went through the checklists until finally Chia keyed in the commands that disengaged them from the station. They all seemed to have forgotten Haneu.

“Cruiser DRX-101, this is STC, please respond.”

Chia gave the comms speaker a wry smile.

“Took them long enough,” she said and keyed her headset to turn on her microphone.

“STC, this is Cruiser DRX-101. We’re departing asap as previously ordered.”

“Negative, Cruiser DRX-101, our systems show no such order. Spin down your engines and return to idling.”

“STC, this is Cruiser DRX-101. We say again: we’re departing as previously ordered. Get your fucking system sorted and clear us for undocking right fucking now.”

“Cruiser DRX-101. Again, negative. All systems are being rechecked, but there is no undock order from you. Please spin down your engines.”

From behind her Syn gave out a shout. He was keeping an eye on the ship’s scanners and had noticed something.

“Two sentry drones just changed their orbit and are heading this way.”

“Okay,” Chia said, “they want to play hard ball.”

She keyed a few hasty commands into her console and ordered the others to get ready for combat.

“Ready the guns,” she said. “And get a fucking hack in place to override their undock systems, Camper. Now!”

Sentry drones were no match for a small fast cruiser. Not as long as it was able to move freely. But if the sentry drones opened fire as they were sitting still right next to the station they would be ripped to pieces. They could only hope to either get themselves away before the drones started firing or that the STC held back the drones out of fear of them hitting and damaging the station.

With a bemused smile Drax watched the others frantically trying to get the ship forcefully undocked from the station and ready for action. He started humming a happy tune which earned him several frowns and scowls.

“Hack in place,” Camper said.

“Weapon pods extended,” Syn said.

Chia nodded.

“Good. Camper, go ahead. Syn, target the drones passively and get ready to fire the second they do.”

Camper punched in the final command that sent the hack straight into the station’s systems. It was a fairly simple hack, but it should work as it had done in the past. The trick behind it was simply to override the status reports sent from the ship to the station’s systems so a lot of automated security systems were triggered. Things the STC could not per default have overridden and in the time it would take them to figure out what was going on he could, manually, order the tube to disengage from the ship, again for security reasons.

The downside of the hack was that he had to disable the ship’s damage systems and if the drones started firing on them as soon as the foul play started they were likely to be unable to get their own repair systems up and running fast enough to prevent an actual catastrophe.

“Hack sent,” he said.

As soon as the hack went through to the station the large tube that held the ship in place disengaged from the station and a cloud of atmosphere was released into space. For a split second the ship seemed to hang suspended without moving, but then it slowly began to spin, pulled by the speed and weight of the tube.

Camper cursed as he struggled to convince the tube to release the ship and for a second it seemed like he would fail. Then the tube broke away and started floating off into space.

Once it was completely free of the ship Chia fired up the engines at full thrust and they were soon racing away from the station at a rapidly increasing speed.

“New object on scanner,” Nilf said. “Another sentry drone launched from the station and moving downward. The others remain in place.”

“Good,” Chia said, “keep scanning behind us even when we’re out of range of the drones.”

“Damage systems back online,” Camper reported.

Around them a few of the other ships had begun to manoeuvre out of their way. It was not strictly necessary, but the other captains were not used to ships leaving in such a haphazard way and that made them nervous. They need not have been as the small cruiser was nimble enough to easily avoid hitting them. A few hails from annoyed captains played through the comms systems in the cockpit, but no one paid them any attention.

They were getting up to speed but were still well within the range of the sentry drones when the direct comms from STC started up again.

“Cruiser DRX-101, this is STC. Stop your engines or we will open fire.”

“Drones still not firing, holding position,” Syn said. “All drones locked, firing solution in place.”

“Hold your fire,” Chia said.

She keyed the comms to STC.

“STC, this is Cruiser DRX-101. Be advised that we notified you of our departure. If your systems are fucked that’s your problem, not ours. Stand down your drones or we will see it as an act of aggression and be forced to defend ourselves.”

“Cruiser DRX-101. Drones are armed. This is your last warning. Stop your engines or we will fire.”

“Syn, take them out,” Chia said.

The next few seconds were a flurry of activity as the ship’s guns started spraying projectiles towards all the drones. Despite them being released at several times the speed of sound the distance from the ship to the drones were so large that it took almost ten full seconds until the drones were hit. That meant that tens of thousands of small steel projectiles were hurtling through space, their density marking them as small clouds of dust. Chia rolled and twisted the ship as much as possible to throw off the sentry drones’ targeting systems, adding to the chaos.

Again the other captains began hailing the cruiser shouting at them to hold their fire. Obviously they were afraid they might get hit. Chia took a few moments to shout back at them to shut up and mind their own business. She turned to Nilf.

“Damage report,” she said.

“No damage taken. Drones are holding their fire.”

“Fuck,” she said. “Syn, status on the drones?”

“Two down, one limping along. It’s confirmed that they’re not returning fire.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Chia said.

If the drones had fired it would at least have given credence to their claim that the station was the aggressor. But though the drones had had ample time to return their fire it made them look like they had simply blown them up for the fun of it. After a few seconds of pouting Chia keyed the comms again.

“STC, this is Cruiser DRX-101,” she said. “Be advised that any further attempts at restraining us unlawfully will be met with a similar response.”

The line was quiet.

“STC, this is Cruiser DRX-101. Please confirm that you will not interfere.”

They were getting closer and closer to the edge of the sentry drones’ range. But even at this distance they might suffer vital damage if they got hit by even a few shots. The sentry drones, while not built for speed or grace, were designed to quickly take down ships as effectively as possible. This meant that they were packed with heavy guns, maybe even missiles, and targeting systems that could easily keep track of the cruiser and plot a firing solution that would account for every possible twist and turn the ship could stand.

The line remained silent so Chia hailed the station again.

“STC, this is Cruiser DRX-101. We’re holding fire for now. If you try to interfere we will take out all your drones. Please acknowledge.”

This time she got a response.

“Cruiser DRX-101, this is STC. We acknowledge and will stand down our drones. Be advised that you have been flagged as undesirables on this station. If you return you will be fired upon without further warning. STC out.”

“STC, Cruiser DRX-101. Acknowledged. If we return it will be to blow you to bits.”

She shut down the comms link and leaned back in her seat. It seemed the worst was over, at least for the immediate future. She ordered the others to relax and return to normal flight mode.

“What the fuck was all that about,” Camper said. “One thing is getting pissed at us for undocking, but actually firing on us when we haven’t done anything more than that. Fucking uncalled for.”

“Done nothing, have we?” Syn said. “You call burning down a warehouse nothing? It’s not like we were fucking subtle.”

“Good point,” Camper said, “but even so. Firing on us. Or, yeah, guess they only threatened to fire on us.”

“Yeah,” Nilf said, “what was that about? It’s not exactly Noru’s style to not do something when she promises to.”

“It’s unlikely that she was down in STC when it happened, you git,” Chia said, “but yes. STC would have had their orders in place before threatening and they’d only do that if they were ready to back their words with action. So what the fuck happened?”

“Oh, I know,” Drax said.

He was bouncing up and down as much as he could in the harness that kept his tied to the seat.

“She told me to come with her but it was more fun to play with them.”

With one of his hands he vaguely gestured in the direction of Nilf.

“What the fuck are you blabbering about?” Chia said. “What fucking ‘she’?”

“The woman in the hallway,” Drax continued. “She was boring. All serious and shit. Nice cloak she had. Must be good for hide and seek.”

Chia and Camper looked at each other for a few seconds before launching themselves into action again. Behind them Syn quickly reset the guns’ targeting systems and made them ready for more targets while Nilf double checked the entire ship and put the repair systems back on alert.

“No fucking way it’s them,” Camper mumbled. “There’s no fucking way they’d approach him so directly.”

“Or,” Chia said, “maybe he is exactly the person they’d approach so fucking directly. Argh, I’ve been so fucking stupid.”

“We all have,” Syn said. “There’s been no sign of the FreeTechs for at least a century, as far as we can figure out, so naturally we assumed they’d either disappeared or gone into hiding.”

“What’s the first rule Drax told you, back then?” Nilf said quietly.

“Never assume,” they all said in unison, “because assume makes an ass out of u and me.”

Even Drax had spoken out and he looked positively puzzled by that.

“Hey, did I say that?” he said.

“Yeah,” Camper said, “a long time ago. Before you became like this.”

Drax seemed to give this quite some thought, his face all screwed up as he was thinking hard.

“I must have been very boring back then. Glad I’m not anymore. Can I go play with Haneu?”

Chia’s eyes went wide.

“Oh, shit. Haneu! Where the fuck is he?”

“Last I saw him,” Nilf said, “he went to the bunks. Fuck, I hope he strapped himself in.”

“Go check up on him and bring him up here if he’s not too banged up.”

Nilf unstrapped himself and went down to the bunks. He found Haneu sitting up against one of the walls holding a piece of cloth against his bleeding forehead. A lot of blood was running down his face and Nilf winced.

“Auch. That looks painful. Come on, let’s get you patched up.”

He went over to the lockers and opened one of them. From it he pulled a handful of bandages, a bottle of disinfectant and a jar of pills. The first thing he did was give Haneu a couple of painkillers from the jar and then he set about fixing the wound. It turned out to look far worse than it really was and he had soon stopped the bleeding.

“There. That’ll do you.”

“Thanks. What the fuck happened?”

“Ehm, minor dispute with STC about being cleared for departure. No big thing, but we probably won’t be going back there any time soon.”

“Minor dispute?” Haneu said.

“Yes. Nothing we couldn’t handle, though.”

He clapped the wall.

“This old girl’s got a few tricks up her sleeve.”

“Is that so? Shit, my head hurts.”

“Don’t worry. The pain killers will kick in soon and since you’re not nauseous it’s not a concussion.”

“Okay, give me a hand, will you?”

Nilf got up and reached out a hand to help Haneu get back on his feet. For a few seconds he was a little unsteady, but he was not feeling nauseous or faint so Nilf was right. Not a concussion.

When they got up to the cockpit the others were deeply engaged in a wild argument involving Drax and the woman he claimed to have spoken to on the station. Camper and Syn were obviously siding

against Chia while Drax just sat with drooling a little as he laughed stupidly with his mouth wide open.

With a puff of anger Chia crossed her arms and looked intently at her screen, not answering the others' questions.

"What the fuck?" Nilf said. "I leave you kids alone for five minutes and you start tearing each others' hair out? Get a grip."

No one spoke for a while so Nilf showed Haneu to a seat and got him logged into one of the consoles so he could get a look at its systems. Once that was taken care of he turned to the others.

"Seriously, guys. What the fuck's up with you?"

Syn grunted and nodded at Chia.

"For some reason she seems to think Drax is either making this shit up or that it was someone else entirely."

"I guess that's likely," Nilf said, "but given what Haneu told us had happened on the freighter I'd say that we should keep a fucking close eye on our systems. Better safe than fucking sorry."

"And," he continued, "we need to figure out what to do about him."

He nodded at Drax. This seemed to be a topic of common enough interest that the others loosened up a little.

"Any idea what the fuck we can do about him?" Nilf said.

"Do I look like a fucking doctor?" Camper said. "I only know about causing damage, not healing it."

"And your not even good at that," Chia said.

Despite the jab her tone was a little lighter and a hint of a smile flickered on her lips. Camper seemed to pick up on this and continued the joke.

"Nope," he said, "but I'm better than you. At least I can just sit on people and they break. If you tried that it'd be your skinny ass that'd fucking break."

This continued for a few minutes until they got back on the topic of what to do with Drax. They briefly tried to involve Haneu, but since he was far away in the ship's systems they let him be.

"So," Syn said, "obviously something's screwed with his mind, most likely the pod. Stick him back inside and reprogram it?"

"Might be the best shot," Chia said. "Can't think of any doctors or other quacks who's got enough knowledge to do anything better."

Camper nodded his assent and pointed at Haneu.

"You think wonder boy can actually do that?"

"Haven't got the foggiest. Figure it might be worth a shot, though."

"We'll have to dig him out of that console first," Syn said. "Now that's a challenge. Look at him. He doesn't notice anything, does he?"

Getting out of his seat Syn gently poked Haneu's shoulder. There was no response. Over Haneu's shoulder Syn could see that he was looking at the raw output from the ship's scanners.

"Shit," Syn said, "that's fucked up. No one, not even back during the war, could use the raw feed for anything useful. And yet it looks like he can. Look at this."

"Hey, yeah," Chia said and got up. "Camper, keep an eye on the controls. I don't think we'll get any more grief from the station, but just in case."

She also got up and went to look at what Haneu was doing.

“What the fuck is he doing? That’s not entirely standard procedure, is it? Looks like he’s, what, reprogramming the scanners?”

“Yes,” Haneu said, “I’m rewriting the DSP firmware to give you a better scan resolution and then I’m re-feeding it the recording from when we undocked.”

“So he does notice something,” Nilf said. “What’d you see?”

“This.”

With a few commands Haneu pulled up a new display on the monitor. It was a little crude and looked far less smooth than the usual output from the scanners. He explained to them that that was because what they usually saw was heavily filtered and had been post processed to be easier on the eye. Despite losing details it had proved to be better in the long run for standard operations since it made pilots and STCs alike less prone to headaches from looking at nitty gritty graphics.

“Now watch this,” Haneu said.

He pointed at the bottom of the station. They had reached the part in the feed where the third sentry drone was being launched. The drone was clearly visible further up on the station. Down at the bottom very small blip could be seen on the monitor.

“That’s weird,” Nilf said. “It’s too small to be a shuttle. Small recon drone?”

“No,” Haneu said, “I got this signature from it.”

On the screen an electromagnetic spectrum was now visible. Haneu pulled his datapad out of his pocket and held it up next to the monitor. On the datapad a similar spectrum was visible. It was not exactly the same, but so close that even the others could see that they were related.

“I’ll run a full analysis of this, of course,” he said, “but this has got to be the same fucking ship that we saw from the freighter. The spectrum on the datapad is clearer because, well, no offence but the scanners on the freighter were a lot larger and powerful than this ship’s. Plus, back on the freighter this ship was practically sitting right next to us.”

“None taken,” Chia said. “Can you track the ship after it undocked?”

“Yes, sort of. I’ve got it for close to a minute, then all hells must have broken lose for the sensor data is all over the place after that. Given some time I can probably get everything recalculated, but I need to re-plot everything after I run my algorithms on the raw data, sync it with the telemetry and so on.”

“Go ahead and do that in a while,” Chia said, “but the part you’ve got. Where did the ship go?”

“At first straight down,” Haneu said. “Then it turned up towards us, or at least where we were. So I think it’s a safe bet that whoever it is is going after us.”

“And,” Syn said, “I’ll bet my sweaty ass that the woman Drax spoke to is on that ship.”

“The boring woman,” Drax said.

Camper rolled his eyes.

“He’s not really any help,” he said. “Why don’t we just strap him to a bunk or stick him in the pod?”

“Fuck off,” Chia said. “But that reminds me. Haneu, do you think you can figure out how the pod works and maybe reprogram it?”

“I think so. I’m probably not the best person to set the new parameters since I’ve always been better with machines than people. But I can probably get it to modify him in at least some general direction.”

“Good, forget about the scan data for now, then. The ship is following us and at some point we’ll need to see if you can fix out scanners. But for now it’s best to get the pod up and running. I’ve got a feeling it’ll take more than a few hours to get him sorted out.”

They looked at Drax and at the sight of him counting his fingers with the tongue hanging out one side of his mouth they all silently nodded their agreement.

Haneu looked through the ship’s systems and when he was satisfied he knew how they worked he gave Nilf and Syn instructions on how to get the pod hooked up so he could start working on it. They went down to the cargo hold and began pulling wires between the pod and one of the ship’s data outlets and within the hour everything was set for Haneu.

“Right,” he said, “let’s start off with just a quick test to see if it even responds to actual commands. Syn, are you clear down there?”

The last he spoke through the ship’s intercom and Syn quickly confirmed that he and Camper were at a safe distance from the pod.

“Okay, firing it up. You should be able to see it lighting up.”

On the monitor Haneu could keep track of the pod’s status. It looked good and he began to get more and more information from it until it suddenly powered down again quite suddenly.

“What happened?” Syn said. “It just went dead.”

“No worries. It’s still sending a status feed. It just found out that there’s no one inside so it’s shut it’s life support down again to save resources. But I got enough data from it to verify that it’s still working.”

“Does that mean we can stick back Drax in this thing without him dying?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what it means. I’ll send Nilf down with him. It’s important that you connect all the electrodes directly to his skin so you’ll have to get him mostly undressed first.”

“I’ll leave that to Camper. He knows Drax far better than I do.”

“Ha ha,” Camper said, “very funny.”

“One other thing,” Haneu said, “when we found him he had tubes down both his mouth and nose for food and water. Let’s skip those for now and make sure we can just get the pod to accept him again. Once that’s done it should be fairly easy to hook up the nutritious systems as well. If it’ll even be necessary.”

“Hey,” Syn said, “you don’t hear me fucking complain about not having to stuff a pipe down Drax’ throat.”

Getting Drax to go down to the cargo hold proved to be really easy. Getting him inside the pod was a far different matter. Even though he seemed to not know what the pod was, or at least to not comprehend what it had done to him, he showed a phobic fear of the thing and as soon as they got him near he began to pull back. In the end they had to physically hold him down, strip off his clothes and force him inside the pod. He kicked and screamed and more than once he managed to land heavy blows on all of them until Camper declared that he had had enough and simply sat on him.

That drew a laugh from Chia when she heard it over the intercom.

“See,” she said, “I told you you just had to fucking sit on people.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Camper said, “fuck you too. He didn’t break.”

“Haneu,” Syn said, “Drax is in the pod so go ahead and work your magic.”



From his seat Haneu began entering commands to the pod. First he made sure the life support was active and running so Drax would not suffocate. Then he checked the vital signs. Drax' heart rate was very high, but Haneu wrote that off as him being nervous about being inside the pod again. Even so he activated some of the stimulating routines he had found in the pod, the ones that should make its subject relax and block off some of its physical senses. It was not the full sensory deprivation mode but enough to calm him down.

When he was sure that everything was running as it should he began diving into the possibilities of reprogramming Drax. The pod seemed to be working on the principle that humans had a very limited number of basic desires underneath a layer of behavioural patterns. Having never had an interest in other people made it difficult for him to fully assess which desires and behaviours would be the ones to change. Instead of just randomly experimenting he decided it would be better to at least ask some of the others if they had any idea where to begin. And since Chia was the only one left in the cockpit apart from himself that seemed as good a place to start as anywhere else.

"Let me get this straight," she said, "you've got all these things here, basic desires, and they link to these patterns over here. And you want me to figure out what to change? Fucking hell! What do I look like? A psych trainer?"

"No," Haneu said, "but what do I look like?"

Chia laughed.

"Good point. Doesn't it have any kind of log over what it's done to him? Something we can maybe work back toward?"

"Not as such. It's pretty much only got what they were aiming for and where he is now. It seems like his programming was interrupted halfway through."

"So, in simple terms, they steered him from big, bad ass planetary assault commander to infant?"

"Something like that. If we try to calculate what remains to be changed to finish the programming and then invert that we might get something that'll take us more or less in the direction of where he was before."

"More or less? Don't like the sound of that."

"You and me both," Haneu said. "And even if we hit the right direction there's no fucking way we can know how far we should let it run. Or if we can even do any kind of time calculation like that. There's no guarantee that it takes as long to reprogram him as it did to program him in the first place. It could take shorter or longer. No one knows. At least no one here."

Chia thought for a while before making another suggestion.

"What about reversing the direction and then just letting it run for a short while to see what happens? I mean, you can more or less see how his mind function changes on the screen, right? That might give us a hint about whether we're talking days or fucking centuries."

"Or it could seriously damage his mind," Haneu said.

"Yes," Chia said, "and that would not be good. But still. We've got to fucking start somewhere. If it'll make you feel better I can make it an official order and tell you to reverse the programming and let it run for twelve hours straight. Then we'll pull him out, get him conscious and see where we are."

"Thanks," Haneu said.

And he meant it. He still felt really bad about the whole thing. Messing around inside someone else's head was not his idea of a fun time. And despite Chia stating it as an order he still felt responsible for whatever would come out of the experiment.

## *15 Departure*

With a sigh he began to calculate what needed to be done. Then he checked, double checked and triple checked it before finally starting the reprogramming.

## 16 A Buggy Plan

Not far behind Drax, Haneu and Nilf the operative lurked through the corridors. She was not entirely sure what was going on with the explosion and fires, but she had an inkling that it was related to them. It seemed far too convenient that something would cause mayhem and confusion just when the cruiser's crew were trying to leave the station and, it seemed, take Drax with them.

She had been lucky to intercept their departure order. She knew that and she hated herself for it. Luck was not something that should be a part of any plan. It could not be counted on and it would always fail at the worst possible time. That being said she was not the type to miss an opportunity when it presented itself and so it was that she had simply snatched Chia's order out of the station's internal systems and erased all traces of it.

After she had done that she had tracked down Haneu. She still believed he was a key part of all that was happening and, even if he was not, she was still very interested in getting him someplace far from all the things that had happened and the people he had run into. That might give him time to settle down a little and get his bearings and then she could approach him with an offer to join the order. Assuming he could pass both the tests that she would, secretly, subject him before and the tests that was a part of his final inclusion in the order.

That was still some time out in the future and it would only happen if she managed to stick to him and, to avoid her being thrown out of the order, put a stop to the business with Drax.

Finding Haneu had proved pitifully easy. The order's surveillance suffered from the same shortage of resources that the rest of the station did, but the cameras and sensors in place in the upper levels functioned perfectly and it had taken a total of three and a half second to get a precise location on Haneu. From there on it had simply been a matter of being at the right lift stop, easily guessed after she had seen how Haneu and Nilf had rushed out of their room, and follow them from there.

She had watched quietly as the two of them ran into Drax and she had smiled contentedly as they got him to follow them. It had all suited her very well. Instead of having two separate targets to follow she now only had one.

At first the explosion had thrown her off, but she had quickly found a way to make it work to her advantage. The smoke made it a lot easier to follow the others undetected and when they had stopped completely and let Drax slip a bit behind she had taken a chance. A very big chance.

From one of the many pockets in her robe she had fished out a long range tracking device. It was not the best tracking device as it only left a very weak signal, but it was by far the most stealthy one. It worked by creating an infinitesimally small singularity in the fabric of space and time. One that would not cause any damage or other long term effects in its vicinity, but one that was large enough to be picked up with the right instruments. In many ways it was the astrophysical equivalent of a small sack of pebbles with a hole in it.

All she had to do was pick up the beginning of their trail and she would be able to track them all the way across the system, provided she did not get more than a couple of days behind them.

While she had slipped the tracking device into one of Drax' belt pouches he had suddenly turned around and looked at her as if he recognised her. He had begun talking about the time they had gone to the cinema together which had made absolutely no sense to her. To keep him occupied and

to avoid him noticing the tracking device she had played along and tried to make him come with her instead. She could find room for him on her new ship and then all she had to do was make sure she found out roughly where Haneu went so she could go after him later.

Unfortunately it had not worked. Drax had not seemed the least bit interested. He had mumbled something about her not being nice to him at the cinema. And then Haneu had come running back for Drax and the operative had had to melt away into the smoke again.

At least she did not have to worry about Drax telling them who she was or even that he had spoken to her. Even if he did she was sure that he would just continue to talk nonsense that they could not use for anything.

After following them all the way to the docking bay she had made sure that they were indeed leaving and bringing Haneu and Drax with them. Then she had rushed down to her own ship, greatly helped by the abandoned service lifts that went almost directly from the official docking bays to their secret counterparts hidden away at the very bottom of the station.

Without bothering to inform the local branch of the order she had undocked her ship and started the gravimetric scanners that would point out where they were headed. At this point it would not be necessary since she could see the ship visually, but she wanted to make sure the tracking device was working and lock her instruments to the precise signature of the miniature black holes it left behind.

It was while she was sitting cloaked in her ship that she saw the sentry drones move into position to tear the cruiser apart. Cursing herself for not foreseeing that the station's STC would not take kindly to an unauthorised departure she had immediately hacked into the drones and deactivated their targeting systems.

If she had not done so the result could very easily have been that the cruiser, and along with it Drax and Haneu, would have been blown up. And while she was sure the order would accept Drax' death without too much fuss the loss of a fairly innocent life, Haneu's, would not be taken lightly.

There was still a risk that the STC would be able to reset the drones remotely but this would at least buy the cruiser a little time. And given what she had found out so far about its crew the operative felt certain that if they could just get the cruiser out on the far side of the drones they would not have any problems getting away.

Her estimate held true and by the time the STC had figured out what was happening with the drones Chia and her crew had not only managed to give them the slip they had also blown up two of them and crippled a third.

Knowing the current state of the station's defence systems the operative knew that it had been a hard blow. Not only was a third of the drones now effectively out of commission, it would take several weeks, if not longer, for the station's crew to repair them.

Building and deploying a set of stupid slave drones that was nothing more than remote controlled guns would not be a big problem. What would cause the station's engineer no end of grey hairs was getting the targeting systems to run so well that the drones could work autonomously. If they were even capable of doing that.

Chia's control of the cruiser had been inspiring. To the point where the operative felt that they might have got away even if the drones had been able to fire at them.

Once the cruiser had left beyond the short sensor range the operative had begun moving away from the station. At first she had headed downward to avoid going anywhere near the debris from the drones. Then she had pulled up and begun heading in the same general direction as the cruiser.

She had easily picked up their trail and from the distance between the singularities she could measure their speed. They were going fast, but not fast enough to outrun her. She decided to keep them a few hours ahead of her. That placed her far beyond their sensor range and the nearest celestial objects in the direction they were headed were several astronomical units away so she had plenty of time to find out if they increased their speed or changed course.

All she had to do now was sit back and keep an eye on her scanners.

She used the next several of hours to meditate and get a little rest. She had been working non-stop for the past several days, first with getting acquainted with the local chapter of the order and then with investigating Chia's crew, the ship and Drax.

The meditation helped her enter a very calm state where she could block out all non-essential thoughts. That left room for her to go through all the facts she had as well as her theories. Convinced that she was still on the right track and that she had covered her tracks with reasonable efficiency she allowed herself a few hours sleep.

She set up a series of alarms to make sure she was woken up if the cruiser's path changed too much, if other ships came into range and so on. Then she put her head down on the pillow and was asleep within seconds.

The first thing she noticed when she woke up was that she had slept for almost an entire day. Once she had checked that nothing had happened while she slept she allowed herself to forget everything about Drax, the order and her mission for a few minutes. It felt good to just relax and lie back in the bed, hard as it was, and simply enjoy being half asleep and half awake.

All too soon she forced herself back on her feet and set about calculating likely destinations for the cruiser. They were headed towards the dead zone on the far side of Alpha, one of the least populated areas. Almost no one but pirates ventured there and even they did so cautiously. On that side of the primary sun, far outside the orbit of Indigo Prime, there was a high risk that if anything happened to a ship it would be stranded for years. Long enough for the crew to die of dehydration or starvation. On her travels she had passed several old hulks that were simply drifting through space empty except for long forgotten cargo, corpses and the ghosts of the crew members.

She gave an involuntary shiver and double checked her reactor status and supplies. Everything was in order and even if she lost the reactor she still had a powerful enough beacon with its own power source that she could send out an emergency system and be found by the order.

For several days they travelled onward, far from all the old mining stations. Some were still alive and it seemed like Chia chose to give those a wide berth. So she, too, did not want to be seen by anyone.

At long last it became clear where they were headed. At the outskirts of the dead zone there were a cluster of old hulks that had come to a precarious halt in a small asteroid belt. Most of the hulks were mining ships, the last couple were haulers. Now they were all empty. The asteroid belt itself was also uninteresting, she thought. It was part of a larger field that was divided into small belts, but all the largest asteroids had long since been mined empty of all the valuable minerals and now they were just empty shells floating in space. The field was so vast that it would take them more than a day to reach the small belt. But it was so sparse that whatever little value was left in it was scattered over too large an area. No one would ever waste resources trying to mine it again.

She briefly wondered why Chia was going there. They were far from any old mining stations or other structures that could be used as a lair. It did not make a lot of sense to her, but she had begun to respect Chia's resourcefulness so she decided that there must be something useful there. The only advantage she could think of was its remoteness.

As they got closer and closer to the place she could see the cruiser was slowing down, the singularities showing up with shorter distances between them. She slowed down to less than the cruiser's speed to be absolutely certain she did not get too close to them and, rather than go in a straight line, she began weaving her way in and out of the asteroids at the edge of the field. By her reckoning the cruiser was still several hours from the cluster of hulks, and she was a couple of hours behind them.

Her present course took her past a particularly large asteroid and she slipped in really close to it. Her external cameras picked up some good videos of its surface. It was riddled with holes from the mining lasers that had pulverised the asteroid's core where the most valuable minerals were.

She was just passing by a particularly large hole when she saw something blinking briefly inside it as if the light of Alpha was reflected off metal.

Before she had time to investigate her cockpit lit up with several flashing alarm lights. Incoming projectiles, warnings about a large singularity straight ahead of her, hostile ship nearby.

From its hiding place inside the asteroid Chia's cruiser came bearing down on her faster than she would have thought possible. She tried frantically to turn out of the path of the cloud of projectiles. It should have been easy to avoid them. She was a small and very agile target, not like the sentry drones who had practically been sitting still when Chia shot them down.

She worked the controls furiously, but the ship had become very sluggish. It was almost as if it was not flying through empty space but through water. In a fast river. Downstream.

Realisation hit her like a blow to the forehead. A large singularity ahead of her. She double checked the report, at first ignored over the more pressing danger of someone firing at her.

There it was. Not a very large singularity, only a few meters wide, so it would collapse in on itself soon enough. But not before it had pulled her into it and turned both her and her ship into something the size of a single atom.

She had one chance at surviving.

## 17 Awakening

“Wooohoo,” Camper shouted, bouncing up and down. “We fucking got her.”

The cruiser’s scanners showed the small ship heading straight for the singularity they had made after Haneu had modified the tracking device they found on Drax’ body when they put him in the pod. On its way there the ship was being hit again and again by the volleys Syn kept firing at it. Unfortunately the force of the singularity made it almost impossible to calculate both the ship’s and the bullets’ trajectories so as there were more and more misses he turned off the guns.

“Good, Haneu,” Syn said. “Good. Not sure what you did, though. Talk about it.”

“Kind of simple,” Haneu said. “At least, it was simple once I figured out what that thing was doing. Then it was just a matter of cranking up the volume, so to speak. And add a small timer to make sure we were well away before the black hole opened.”

Chia frowned.

“I know you know your stuff, but still. The idea of a black hole this close it not really comforting, you know?”

“It’s not really a black hole. At least what you would normally think of as a black hole. Technically speaking it’s called a singularity and is an infinitely small spot with infinitely high density. That creates a small gravity well that will draw in any matter nearby.”

“Isn’t that exactly what a black hole is?” Nilf said.

“Well, yes,” Haneu said. “But there are black holes and then there are black holes. The infinitely small spot isn’t actually infinitely small and its density isn’t infinitely high. What it is is a certain amount of mass compressed a whole fucking lot. And the more mass inside the singularity the larger the black hole. Or more powerful or however you want to think about it.”

“And how much mass is in that one?” Chia said.

“Don’t know. How much did the asteroid weigh? After it had been drilled to pieces?”

“Good question,” Chia said. “Look at her ship. It seems that there must at least be more mass than what her ship has. Fucking nasty. How long will it last?”

“Until it pulls in the asteroid we were hiding in. Shouldn’t be more than half an hour or so. We should probably get the fuck out of here soon.”

“I’m with geek boy on that one,” Syn said. “Still, fucking awesome that such a small device could do something like that.”

“Wish we had more of those,” Camper said. “They could come in handy.”

“Maybe,” Haneu said. “Or maybe, if there actually were many of them around, someone would overdo it and actually create a black hole so large that it would take most of the system with it.”

There was general nodding all around until Camper broke into a wide smile.

“That’s why,” he said, “we should be the only ones having them.”

Haneu rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the scanners. They still showed the ship being pulled towards the singularity, but something struck him as odd.

“Why the hell is she turning towards it? Chia, can you increase the strength on the scanners?”

“Sure,” Chia said, “I can give them a small boost. Won’t last more than a few minutes, though.”

“That’s okay. I just need to make sure she’s really turning and hasn’t just lost control.”

They kept scanning the ship for another minute until Haneu had confirmed that the ship really had turned deliberately.

“Shit,” Nilf said, “she must want to get it over with quickly.”

“No,” Haneu said, “look at this. Fuck, that’s insane!”

The scanners now showed the ship’s engine powering up at full speed and were now speeding almost directly towards the singularity. As it gained in speed it veered a little away from the singularity and then what almost seemed like a small explosion happened.

“What the fuck?” Camper said.

From the small ship a long plume of hot plasma trailed behind, slowly pulled into the singularity while the ship itself sped forward with an acceleration that must be almost as dangerous to its pilot than a collision with the singularity. The plume of plasma slowly turned into an arc and finally shower of glittering sparks that fell toward the singularity and died out as they hit it.

“That’s actually beautiful,” Haneu said.

He was almost in a trance as he gazed upon the screens in front of him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Chia said, “but beautiful or not it looks like she’s getting away. Fuck that ship is fast.”

“Very,” Haneu said. “Not sure exactly what that was, but it must have been some kind of booster system. Fuck, look at that. She’s pulled free of the singularity.”

Chia and the other sprang into action again.

“Syn, plot a firing solution. Camper, get us the fuck clear of the ‘roid. Haneu, strap yourself in.”

They quickly got the ship away from the asteroid which had now begun to move ever so slowly toward the singularity.

“Shit,” Syn said. “Can’t get a target lock. She’s gone past and around the singularity so it’s almost directly behind us and her and she’s, fuck, she’s increasing speed. We’ll lose her in a few seconds.”

“Fuck it,” Chia said. “She’s gone. Let’s get the hell out of here and hope we’re far enough away that she can’t easily pick up our trail again.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Camper said. “We’ll lose her in the asteroid belt and hide out for a while in one of the dead hulks.”

“What?” Haneu said. “Hide inside one of the old ships? That’s fucking insane!”

“Actually it isn’t,” Chia said. “These ones are from the very old days. Makes the freighter you arrived on seem like a midget. We’ve used this particular one a few times before. It’s actually easier to hide in it than it is to dock at a station.”

“Okay,” Haneu said. “I’ll take your word for it.”

While he did trust that Chia knew what she was doing he still had a very hard time truly believing that they would be able to hide the cruiser inside one of the hulks. It was a small cruiser, yes, but even so it was still at least two hundred meters long. But on the other hand, he thought, Valdis’ freighter had been well over half a kilometer so if the hulks were even bigger then they probably could fit the cruiser inside one of them.



As it turned out he had no reason to be worried. After taking a round about trip to make sure they were not being followed they soon came to the cluster of hulks. Haneu was really impressed by what he saw. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that he had come across specs on ships that were well over a kilometer long so he should not have been so surprised. But he was. The smallest of the large ships were larger than Valdis' freighter and the scanners showed that the largest was almost three kilometres long.

"Why hasn't anyone salvaged them?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"Most people don't know they're here," Chia said. "And the few who do are either not the salvaging type, like us, or they're shit scared of this area. Too many pirates for their liking."

"Pirates?" Haneu said. "Shouldn't we be worried about them as well?"

"Ha!" Chia said. "The pirates are fucking scared of us. Right, boys?"

"Fucking a," Camper said. "Wish they weren't and would stick their heads out for a quick fight."

"See?" Chia said. "Nothing to worry about. Now, let's get this baby docked up. Camper, I'll take it from here."

They flew closer to the hulks until Chia pointed out the one they could use. It was a broken wreck, obviously the victim of some kind of explosion mid-ship. A large tear ran down the ship's back and this was where they were now headed. At first Haneu again did not believe it was possible, but the tear turned out to be almost a full hundred meter wide. More than enough for Chia to get the ship safely inside.

The huge, heavy bulkheads loomed all around them. They were in the hulk's cargo hold, empty except for themselves. With great care Chia steered clear of the support beams and put the ship all the way up against the hull of the ship, as well hidden from anyone looking in through the tear as possible. She dropped the magnetic anchoring braces that would hold them securely in place.

They shut down all the cruiser's systems except a few vital life support systems and the passive scanners which they directed at the tear to get as early a warning as possible if anyone actually came after them.

"That should do it," she said. "Now we just need to wait for Drax to come out of the pod."

"He's still got a few hours left," Haneu said. "I'm really tired. Mind if I go crash for a while?"

"No, go ahead," Chia said. "That goes for the rest of you as well. You did good, now fuck off and get some rack time. I'll ping you if anything happens."

"Works for me," Syn said.

They left the cockpit and within a few minutes they were snoring away in their bunks. Even Haneu managed to fall asleep quickly.

At first when he had laid his head down on the thin pillow he had thought he would be asleep forever, his head filled with thoughts of what had happened. They had almost blown up the ship that was following them. When he heard they had fired on the drones he had been rattled. And that had only been machines. This time they had been prepared, himself included, so kill another person. He was sure there were a hard ethical debate waiting for him somewhere at the back of his mind, but right at that moment he could not be bothered to let it surface. He closed his eyes and fell asleep, the last thing he heard before he drifted off being the low rumbling snores of the others.

A loud beeping noise tore Haneu from his sleep. It had been a deep, dreamless sleep and he felt very groggy. For far too long, at least several seconds of excruciating pain, he fumbled around for

his datapad. When he finally dug it out of the pile of clothes he had left on the floor next to his bunk he quickly punched the mute button and put it down on the bunk.

From across the room came some disgruntled mumbling from one of the others. Haneu could not hear who it was and the lights were too dim for him to see properly. He blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes. Then he leaned down and pulled on his shirt and pants and finally his socks and boots.

After stretching his arms over his head he finally got up and went up to the cockpit bringing the datapad with him. On the way he looked at what had caused the alarm. He had recognised it as a standard timed buzzer so it was not anything serious.

“Hey Chia,” he said. “How are things?”

“Calm and quiet. Just the way we like them. What’s up?”

“Just woke up. There’s about fifteen minutes until Drax is ready with his cycle in the pod. Everything is running as it should.”

“Cool. Are the lazy fucks still sleeping?”

“No,” Syn said, “back on our feet. Thanks to Haneu’s pleasant little wanna-be klaxon there.”

“Sorry. Had to wake up somehow or the pod might fry his brain.”

“Not a problem, kid. About time to get up anyway. Camper will be along shortly, Nilf went straight down to the pod. I think he’s very excited about all this.”

“We all are,” Camper said stepping into the room. “Which, I think, makes fucking sense. If Drax returns as himself that would be fucking awesome.”

“Yes,” Chia said. “His old megalomaniac self.”

A serious frown slowly crept onto her face.

“You getting cold feet?” Syn asked.

Her frown turned into an evil grin.

“No. Fucking. Hell! Come on, let’s go join Nilf.”

Together with Haneu and Syn she went to the cruiser’s cargo hold to check up on the pod. Meanwhile Camper stayed in the cockpit keeping an eye on the passive scanners. Along the way Haneu checked the pod’s latest status on his datapad. Everything was still in order and if the readouts were accurate Drax’ personality was coming along nicely. Assuming they were taking it in the right direction.

Down in the cargo hold Nilf was waiting for them.

“Seems to be going good,” he said. “How much longer are we going to keep him in this fucking thing?”

“Not long,” Haneu said. “If this is accurate he should be ready in a few minutes.”

“Ready in about an hour,” Syn said and laughed. “Sound like you’re making a fucking meat pie in there.”

Shaking his head and smiling slightly Haneu walked around the pod to double check all the cables running back and forth between the pod and the ship. Everything was in order so he started entering the commands that would bring Drax back to consciousness.

The whole process took less than two minutes and he could tell that he was not the only one that was very excited about what would happen. This was the second cycle they had subjected Drax to. The first had only been a few hours and had not made any real difference in his behaviour. From

the pod's readouts Haneu could see that, technically speaking, he had changed his personality but it had been so subtle that it was not noticeable.

Apart from being a little confused and extremely annoyed with them for sticking him in the pod Drax seemed none the worse for wear so for the second cycle they had decided to give him a few days. Haneu had, at first, been nervous about doing so but in the end he had agreed on the condition that they would not ask any questions if he told them to stop the experiment. Thus mollified he had set up a series of alerts to notify him if Drax' vital signs became bad or if it looked like his personality reprogramming seemed to get out of hand.

Neither had happened. Everything had, in fact, run so smoothly that it had made him feel slightly nervous. It was one of his classic traits. He felt far better when there was something to work on, something to do. Sitting down with nothing to do but look at systems that minded themselves was just about the worst thing he could imagine. Or it had been a few weeks ago.

After double checking that it was safe to open the pod he nodded to Nilf who unlocked it and then lifted the lid. A cloud of thick fog spilled out over the sides of the pod and they stayed back waiting for it to disappear. The first time they had pulled Drax out Haneu had been surprised and scared by the fog. It had not been there when they opened the pod on the freighter and he had been afraid something had gone wrong. Apparently nothing had so this time around he was not as worried.

When the fog had thinned enough for them to look down in the pod they all leaned forward to get a look at Drax. Deep down Haneu did not really understand why he did so. It was unlikely that there would be any physical changes in Drax, but at the same time he could not stop himself. He wrote it off as perfectly normal human curiosity and decided that, all things considered, it was a good thing. Better than not being interested at all.

Drax was lying in exactly the same position they had left him in, his chest rising and falling slowly as the pod's life support system poured air in his lungs and sucked it back out. They began unhooking him from the tubes and wires and it did not take long before he was freed completely.

"Fuck," Haneu said.

"That's not really the word we want to hear right now," Chia said.

I know. Why isn't he moving?"

"You're the expert, you tell me."

"The pod says his vitals were good before we unhooked him, but last time he woke immediately. Maybe he needs a bit more time since he's been there for days, not hours."

"Could be," Chia said. "Let's get him out and get him to a bunk."

They pulled out Drax' limp form and wrapped it in a blanket before carrying it out of the cargo hold. Haneu was relieved to see that Drax was breathing calmly and a quick check confirmed that his pulse was steady. He motioned for the others to lift him and they all went back to the bunks.

"Put him down there," Haneu said. "I'll put a few electrodes on him and hook him up to a monitor on my datapad."

"No need," Drax said. "I feel fine."

He sat up in the bunk, twisted his head from one side to the other with a cracking sound and looked at the people around him.

"What the fuck are you lazy bums looking at?" he shouted. "I take a short nap and you start lounging about. Get this fucking excuse for a ship back on the line and get after the fucking enemy!"

Haneu literally jumped at Drax' hard voice and stumbled back until he hit the wall with a dull thud. The others instinctively snapped to attention and Nilf, after hearing the orders, nearly ran straight up to the cockpit to begin preparing the ship.

"Well," Drax said, "what the fuck are you waiting for? Those fucks in major Rutilus' squad can't have fucking won the war on their own, can they? Get moving!"

Another moment of silence passed before Chia cleared her throat.

"Sir," she said, "there's something you should know."