

Noah Chinn



THE
MOSSFOOT
MARAUDERS

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To all fans of X3: Reunion

CHAPTER 1 – ESCAPING THE RUT

Julian Brennan sat in the seat of his powered up M4 Buster, a ship that had become the stuff of legends. He didn't look happy about the assignment Ban Danna, commander of the Argon fleet, had given him.

“Babysitting a bunch of raw recruits? Haven't you got something better for me?” This was a man who had traveled the length and breadth of the X-Universe, had made and lost fortunes, and built and lost fleets. Now he was not only reduced to his souped up Buster, but assigned patrol duty for a bunch of greenhorns.

“Julian, the fleet's down to thirty percent. Can you think of a more important task? You'll get a chance to put your neck on the line soon enough...”

Joseph Davidson turned off the vid. He'd seen it a dozen times already, and his break was over.

“Of course he will. He's the hero.” He often wondered just how true the movie was to what happened two years ago.

Joseph checked the specs on the navigation unit, his tiny wand searching for flaws in the circuitry. None came up. None ever came up. He put the wand down, straightened his lab coat and moved on to the next part of his routine.

Next up, sector 4B of the South building: engine diagnostic motherboards. The life of a maintenance inspector, second class. As fun as it sounds.

Joseph was born and raised in Tallus, a small unimportant manufacturing city on Argon Prime. The kind of place that built the stuff you took for granted, hardware built into machines that you never saw, and shipped throughout Argon space. The kind of place most people never, ever left. You were born in Tallus, you lived in Tallus, and by the Goners you were going to die in Tallus.

Most people were content with this. When they reached working age they'd take an apprenticeship at the plant, just like their fathers did. It was a good, safe, stable life, and there was plenty of excitement to be had at the Adventure Dome. From there they could see the universe.

But Joesph didn't just want to watch the universe on the vids, he wanted to be part of it. In his entire life he'd never seen an alien. Not a Paranid, a Teladi, a Split, or even a Boron. There were Borons on Argon Prime – one of them hosted the weather channel – but none of them visited Tallus. Hell, HE wouldn't visit Tallus. It was just a cookie cutter city with pre-fab housing complexes set up for people whose only goals in life were, stability and family. That was fine, for most people.

But how could you look at the night sky, see those points of light, and not wonder at how each and every one was a sun like Argon's, that far more than you might imagine were filled with creatures of every shape and size, and that most of them also looked to the sky and wondered over the same things?

The three-toned chime announced the plant's shift change, its melodious sound designed to be as pleasant and welcome as possible, yet managed to be irritating beyond reason.

Joseph's friend Rannei made a point of bumping into him on the way out of the factory. "Hey, Joe, whadaya know?" Her smile spoke of mischief.

"Not now, Ran."

"Come on, shift's over! Let's go to the Dome and I'll kick your ass in Nova Busters."

"Sorry, still scrimping and saving."

"My treat." She always loved beating him at that game. He was the only employee who posed a challenge to her.

Joe gave in. "Fine."

Joseph had explored much of Argon Prime on his holidays ever since he was a teenager. He'd been to the Singletree mountains and Ragnar valley, and once drove right around the planet in a Primus hovercraft ("See the world in a fortnight!"). Argon Prime was without a doubt a beautiful and interesting place, but it was so... safe. Monitored. Watched. Controlled. The one time he flipped his Primus crossing the Alluvial Straits a rescue team had arrived in five minutes. Anyone planning a hazardous trip of any kind had to submit a schedule to the authorities. It made you wonder why you bothered.

It wasn't danger Joseph was looking for, that was a consequence of what he wanted. His life was a regulated routine of 30 stazura work weeks doing repetitive work without variation. He always took the same trams to work, his vacation weeks were pre-arranged by the company to provide maximum efficiency for the company. His wage ladder was designed so he could provide for a family of three and own a nice home before he reached middle age.

Only he wasn't saving up for a house.

The cockpit monitors flashed bright white and went black.

“HA! Nailed you again!” said Ran over the intercom.

Joseph was behind 3-6 in one-on-one duels against his friend.

“You do realize if this was a real fight I'd win every time.”

“What makes you say that?”

Joseph smiled. “Because I'm smart enough to run away.”

Seventy percent of the Argon Fleet had been destroyed after the Kha'ak invasion. They'd come from nowhere and hit without warning in almost every sector of the galaxy. Up till now the Xenon had been the biggest threat to mankind. Now they were number two.

But not only Fleet ships had been destroyed. Countless civilian ships, cargo vessels, and space stations had been torn apart by their beam weapons. Some estimates said that half the Argon production force had been lost. Hundreds of thousands of lives. Trillions of credits.

But it wasn't all bad news.

They walked to the tram in the moonlight.

“You give any more thought to my offer?”

Ran laughed. It wasn't a girlish titter. “You're crazy, you know that, Joe?”

“Maybe. But I want an answer.”

“You? Out there? Flying? And you want me to come?”

“Once I got enough money for another ship, yeah.”

Ran laughed again. “It'll never happen, Joe. Folks from Tallus never leave Tallus, and they sure as hell don't leave Argon Prime. But if you actually manage to leave and actually manage to afford another ship? Hell yeah, I'll fly for you. But it'll never happen. Will it?”

It was called the Trader Advanced Naval Grant. Apparently the acronym TANG was something the historians found hilarious, something to do with early Terran space travel. It was a grant for hopeful pilots who wanted to take to the spaceways but couldn't afford their own ship until they were too old to fly. It cost 50,000 credits, and a promise of part time service to the Argon Fleet, but what you got for that more than made up for it.

An M4 class ship (type subject to availability), with basic equipment provided and a license to trade in Argon space. Argon needed more pilots out there helping to rebuild the economy, and more pilots that could be called into service should the Kha'ack attack again.

It was everything Joseph had hoped for, and for the last two years, Joseph had saved up for it.

“You're cutting it awfully close, aren't you?” said the Naval recruiter. “TANG is set to expire tomorrow.” He seemed reluctant to push through the paperwork.

Joseph straightened up to attention. “I know, sir, but it took me a while to save up the money.”

“Relax, son, you're still a civilian, and you still will be a civilian once the paperwork is done. You're not Fleet.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Now, let's see.” the officer scanned the paperwork, and found no faults with it. “Everything's in order. Seems you passed your sim test with above average marks. You sure you wouldn't rather save your money and join the Fleet? You could be behind a Nova in less than a year and after a five year stint have enough for couple of freighters.”

“Thank you, sir, but no. This is what I want.”

The officer sighed. “If you ask me, TANG has been the biggest disaster to the space program Argon High Command has ever come up with. Do you know why that is?”

“No, sir.”

“Because kids like you come in with dreams of high adventure and action, stray into pirate space, and get themselves blown to pieces. Life out there isn't like the sims, and sure as hell isn't like the vids, you understand me?”

Joseph nodded. “Crystal clear, sir. My idea of winning a fight is one I can run away from.”

The officer nodded. “Good. You might just survive the week. 'Cause let me tell you, son, the ship you're getting, ain't cut out for fighting frak.”

Ran looked over the specs on the datapad with unblinking eyes. She couldn't believe it.

“Ain't she a beaut?” It was hard to hide the pride in Joseph's voice.

“An M4 Buster? That's yours?”

“ID number YM4TG-61, registered to Joseph Davidson, rookie pilot.”

“I just can't believe it. You did it. You really did it.”

Joseph smiled.

“Of course, it's a complete hunk of junk, but it's all yours.”

Joseph failed to parry the thrust to his ego. “What do you mean junk?”

Ran tapped the datapad. “Well, look at the specs. The cargo bay is uncompressed, your maneuvering thrusters leave a lot to be desired... I guess your engine is okay, but it could still be tweaked. That's GOT to be rust on the hull. And what's this? 2 Alpha IREs? What kind of armament is that? You'll get blasted out of the sky by the first pirate you meet.”

“I don't expect to meet any pirates, Ran.”

“And that's *exactly* when you meet them. Seriously, get those upgraded as soon as possible. Don't worry about getting me a ship until you're sure you can keep yourself in one piece.”

“Ran, I intend to keep to safe space. I'm not going anywhere near Pirate space. Hell, I won't even stray into Paranid space until I'm good and ready. But I'm not happy with that cargo space one bit. That's my first priority.”

Ran looked over the specs one more time and handed the datapad back. “Well, what can I say? Congratulations. You made it off this rock. How long before I'm joining you?”

Joseph shrugged. “No idea. Hopefully by the end of the month I can afford a M5 scout and you can fly escort.”

“What, and keep your ass safe for once instead of kicking it across the solar system?”

“Something like that.”

The shuttle into space left every fifteen minutes, and its first stop was the dockyards. Joseph disembarked, felt the weird sensation of zero gravity trying to pull him away combined with his magnetic shoes keeping him rooted to the ground as he disembarked, reached the artificial gravity zone, and asked information for the directions to his berth.

Standing on the moving sidewalk that ran down the spine of the dockyards, he looked out into space, space uncluttered by atmosphere and city lights, where ten times the number of stars stared back at you, and smiled as he got off at his bay.

There, out the window, he saw his ship moored to one of the long pylons, small and insignificant next to the large Centaur corvette next to it.

Sure it was a bit rusty, but he'd spent a hundred credits to get a custom paint job and now it looked every bit the way he had dreamed it. In the vids this was where the young pilot would go off and seek out the greatest dangers from the darkest parts of the galaxy.

But as he looked at the teddy bear in a brown flight jacket painted on the side of the hull, Joseph could tell you it wasn't danger that he looked for.

It was freedom.

CHAPTER 2 – THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

Joseph strapped himself into the cockpit. It was just like the cockpit at the Dome. He configured the panels to his own personal preferences and prepared to undock. He ran through the procedure checklist. Inform control tower or automated docking computer. Warm up engines. Await disembarking lights. Release docking clamps. Engines reverse slow. Maneuvering thrusters to right angle of station, follow disembarking lights out of station proximity.

Go.

At first he darted from station to station. He told himself he was practicing docking procedures in a controlled environment, but was actually thrilled by the power he felt in the engines. Gunning his Buster to maximum thrust, feeling the G-Forces that couldn't be dampened out. Sudden boosts, sudden stops, dock onto the next station. He didn't buy any cargo, he was in no rush to get to work. For now it was all fun.

He danced around the Colossus-class ship in orbit, almost as big as a station itself, until the navigator of the vessel warned him away from military space.

So he annoyed some freighters instead.

But it didn't take long for him to tire of simple acrobatics. For a time he hung in stationary orbit over Argon Prime, switched his video enhancement goggles to full magnification, and waited for Tallus to pass by beneath him. He could see her house from here, and the backyard they sometimes camped out in, looking up at the stars and dreaming of this moment.

“I made it, Ran.”

Joseph had never left Argon Prime before. He'd been in orbit on field trips back in school, but he'd never left the system. Now, he decided, was as good a time as any to try out the local jump gates.

“Gate: Home of Light.” the computer trilled.

Joseph knew the sector, that was where the TerraCorps had their main headquarters. The very name made his heart go faster. They said back in Tallus that TerraCorp knew a hell of a lot more of human origins than they ever let on. Only the Goners had more secrets, and more access to advanced technology. He had to check out the TerraCorp station. It was as good a place to start as any.

He kicked the engines forward, and remembering spaceway etiquette, aimed for the edge of the massive ring. The last thing he needed was an capital ship to materialize in front of him and squash him like a bug on a windshield.

Hyperspace, Joseph had been told in high school, is a kind of parallel dimension to our own. Every mile in traveled in hyperspace was like a thousand light years in real space. Mass in our dimension had a very real echo in hyperspace, causing massive gravity wells. And because the distances were all so much closer, it was very easy to bounce to close to a star or crash into a supernova and that would end your trip real quick. Navigating in hyperspace

was not for the faint hearted.

The jump gates were stable “tunnels” through hyperspace which anyone could pass through under normal power. The gates themselves predated Argon civilization, though Joseph had no idea how old they really were. A number had been destroyed in the Kha'ak invasion, and were for all intents and purposes irreplaceable. Even most ships with hyperdrives relied on them for their entry-point coordinates.

There was a very old joke regarding hyperspace, that it felt a lot like being drunk. If you asked what was wrong with being drunk, the reply was “ask a glass of water.” While it didn't feel like he was being drunk, it certainly looked like he was being sucked through a great lumineTectt tube of energy. In a matter of moments he was spat out hundreds of light years away into a deep red of space.

Of course, Joseph had seen many regions of space on the vids, but it was nothing compared to the real thing. It was beautiful, if a bit unnerving. He checked his navigation unit to find the TerraCorp center.

It was blank.

“What the?” He tapped the screen, but all it showed was his ship, the gate, and a tiny circle indicating his gravidar range.

Through the red haze of the dust cloud he could see several stations, but none of them picked up on his radar.

A collision alert sounded and Joseph dove to avoid a transport that had jumped in behind him. He switched on his comm unit, and asked where TerraCorp headquarters was. The pilot, a befuddled Boron still trying to get over the near collision he'd just had, told him and went on his way.

He could see the station in the distance, looking like an equipment dock on steroids. But he hadn't got within ten clicks of it, before his comm unit

crackled to life.

“Ship ID YM4TG-61, come in please.”

Joseph wondered where the voice had come from. There was still nothing on his gravidar. “This is YM4TG-61.”

“This is Lieutenant Barnes of the 12th Renown Squadron. You are to rendezvous with us immediately.”

Joseph's confusion could only be expressed as, “What?”

“Listen, Tango, I'm evoking emergency measure C-14. You made a pledge to the Fleet to assist when called for. You're being called.”

Joseph couldn't believe his ears. “But, but, I just got this ship! I haven't been in space more than three hours! I thought this was a one-weekend-a-month situation!”

“Three hours? Frak. Okay, listen up, Tango. Yes, you're only called in one weekend a month, but you can also be called at any time for emergencies. And this is an emergency or I wouldn't be calling in every Tango in the sector. Don't worry, I'll see to it this goes towards your first weekend flight time.”

Not knowing what else to do, Joseph agreed. The Lieutenant's transponder appeared on his radar, and he joined up on the tail end of a delta formation. He noticed a private channel request flashing on his comm panel. He opened it. A face popped up, a thirty-something man smirked at him.

“Lieutenant nabbed you too, huh?”

“Um. I guess.”

“Don't worry about it. We're all Tangos here.”

“Tango?”

“You got the TANG grant, right? Out in the void we're called Tangos. Fleet can spot us a light year away by our registry numbers.”

“Swell.”

“Price of freedom, baby. Lieutenant here was given a mission, caught short handed, and is using us to fill in the gaps. Don't worry, if it was serious they wouldn't let us do it.”

“So what are we going to do?”

There was a second flash on the comm channel. “I guess we're about to find out.”

Lieutenant Barns flashed on the HUD “Okay, squad. Listen up. We've picked up unusual hyperspace signals in this sector and Cloud Base South West. It's probably nothing, but we're going to do a simple patrol and make sure. But keep your eyes peeled, Fleet thinks it might be Kha'ak or Xenon transmissions.” He then assigned them simple designations. Joseph was Tango 5, the man on the private channel was Tango 1.

Joseph's mind swirled. Ten minutes ago he had been just a happy-go-lucky pilot flying about without a care in the world, now he was facing off against Kha'ak and Xenon in an un-upgraded rust bucket.

The private channel blinked again. “You being honest about that three-hours-in-space story?”

“You can check my logs.”

The man nodded. “Alright. If anything happens you stick close to me.”

“Thanks, but it's okay. I'm a pretty good pilot.”

“Sure you are, kid. Sure you are.”

The sector patrol of Home of Light was uneventful and they jumped through to Cloud Base South West. Joseph couldn't see jack through his radar and relied more on his visuals.

The quiet was too good to last. Joseph's radar flickered a moment, then he heard the Lieutenant call out “Kha'ak ships inbound! Looks like a cluster.

Break and engage! Pick off the scouts if you can.”

Joseph panicked. Where were they? Where were they!? Nothing showed up on his radar. But the deadly beams of light featured on the late evening news were suddenly everywhere, and red lights danced across the scanner.

IrideTectt pyramid-like shapes appeared from all sides. It was impossible to tell which point was the front unless you saw the plasma trail they left behind. A Buster Joseph would only ever know as Tango 3 was cut in half by a combined blast from five of the ships.

Joseph tried to pretend it was just the simulator. That's all it was. He picked his target, lined up the reticle, pulled the trigger.

His Buster shook unexpectedly as a single beam hit his shield from the side.

“Watch your flank, Tango 5!” said Tango 1 on the private channel. There was a blossom of fire to the side where a Kha'ak had been, and a Buster screamed through the wreckage. Joseph shuddered, and tried to focus amidst the com chatter.

“I've got two behind me!”

Pick target.

“Fox one! Missile away!”

Line up reticle.

“Bogie down!”

Check radar.

“Someone cover my ass here!”

FIRE!

His two IREs blasted out red pulses of energy at the triangular scout. The shields on the scout dropped, but not nearly fast enough. He clenched the

trigger as if that would somehow make it shoot faster or harder, but still it wouldn't go down. From above blue-green pulses joined on the same target, and its shields dropped like a stone. Joseph poured on the fire until the scout exploded in a shower of sparks and metal.

“A little ambitious there, aren't you, kid?” said the voice.

“The lieutenant said to take on the scouts.”

“That was no scout, that was the cluster leader. Nice work. Now help us mop up the rest.”

The battle lasted only a few minutes. Joseph didn't get another kill, but drove off a couple of scouts hot on the tail of other rookie Tangos.

“Nice work, Tango's,” said Lieutenant Barnes. “Tango 5, I don't know what you were thinking picking on a heavy fighter with that piece of crap. You should have left it to me or Tango 1.”

“Don't worry about it, lieutenant,” said Tango 1. “I had him covered.”

The rest of the patrol was uneventful. At its end Lieutenant Barnes thanked them for their time. “It looks like it was a scouting party, meant to check our defenses. Hopefully the fact that none of them made it back will make them think twice before attacking. Have a drink at the naval shipyard on me, they've got my tab. I have to head back to the Renown. See you in space.”

The Tango's docked and toasted the memory of Tango 3. No one had known her real name.

“May she live on in the hearts of those who knew her.”

They clinked glasses. The bar was by the docking bays and their M4 ships could be seen out the window.

“Can I expect this to happen often?” asked Joseph. “This wasn't exactly what I signed on for.”

One of the pilots snorted. “It happens less than you think, but more than you like.”

Another pilot added, “The only good thing about it is that the time spent doing that comes out of our monthly duty, so we get to kick off early as a result.”

Tango 1 drained his glass. “Hell, I've pulled so much reserve duty they can't actually call me in for two months. I might just stick to Boron space for a while so they can't run into me like they do here.”

“It'll take me a month to get Julie fixed up. Do you have any idea how much the repair bill is? She's at 49%” A few low sympathetic whistles followed. A short time later the other pilots departed, leaving Tango 1 and Joseph together.

“Thanks for saving my hide back there,” said Joseph.

The man shrugged and took a drink. His third finger had a silver ring on it that caught Joseph's eye. It had a raised double M on it, one on top of the other. “No big deal. I doubt a single scout could have taken you out. But I saved you a hell of a repair bill. Look, you're new to all this. You mind if I share some of my limited wisdom with you?”

Joseph wondered just how new he looked to this man. “Sure.”

“Get that rust bucket fixed up. You've probably already found that your scanners don't even reach visual range, right?”

“Yeah, what's with that?”

“The Universal Plexus Gravidar, or Uniplex, was the standard scanner in these parts up until the Argons arrived in the universe. It was good enough for generations, but yeah, we came along and said 'What's with that?' and so we doubled its effective scanning range, and appreciating a good play on words named it the Duplex. Then the Borons went ahead and outdid us, inventing the

Triplex. THAT should be your first order of business. Buying a Triplex scanner.”

Joseph nodded. “I can see that. Let me ask you, what about sector maps? When I reached Home of Light I had nothing on my radar. Why not?”

The man shook his head. “Goddamn proprietary software. See, current up to date sector information is the life blood of traders everywhere, so they guard their data like a dog with its last bone, and the easiest way to screw your competitors is to find a way to give them fake navigation data. Then you have a conglomerate of merchants and nav computer manufacturers develop the 'UPS Maps' system – though most spacers call it UP SCUM. It stands for Universal Personal SeCUrity Maps.

“Because of UP SCUM, you can't share navigation data with other pilots. They claim it's for security reasons and the prevention of uploading false navigation data from ship to ship. Government has been trying to kill it for years, but can't. Basically it means you have to make your own maps, or pay UP SCUM dealers to upload you sector maps. That's the other reason you need to get a Triplex scanner. With one of those you can map out most sectors yourself in ten minutes. You'll be tempted to get a Duplex, but don't. Save for the Triplex, it's worth it.”

Joseph said, “Got it. Anything else?”

“The usual. Get a compression field for your cargo bay. Tweak your engines as much as you can – remember, speed is money. Find yourself a station in desperate need of supplies, you can usually get a contract with them which can earn you some decent money fast. Stick to the safe lanes for the time being.” He drained his pint and stretched. “That's it for me. I'm out of here.”

“Hey, wait. Before you go, I've got to ask. It might sound weird, but, why me?”

The man looked back. “What, why did I suddenly take you under my wing like that?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Look at my ship.”

Joseph looked at the pylon out the window where only their two fighters were still docked. Next to his Buster, the other Buster bristled with armaments, but on its hull he could clearly see a green teddy bear in a leather flight jacket.

“You're not the first Mossfoot Marauder in space,” he said.

“So you're from Argon Prime?” said Joseph. He couldn't imagine the reference being understood outside of it.

The man nodded. “Raised in Doontin.” It was a city not far from Tallus. The man smiled. “See you in the void, kid.”

Joseph realized they'd never introduced themselves, and he didn't want to call him Tango 1 forever. “The name's Joseph.”

The man nodded and shook his hand. “Call me Rudager.”

CHAPTER 3 – FROM ONE ROUTINE TO ANOTHER

The Mossfoot Marauder was a reference to a children's story that was very popular in the southern provinces of Argon Prime. Mossfoot was a green teddy bear who went on all kinds of adventures in a world that was strangely modern and medieval at the same time. He sailed on a ship called the Mossfoot Marauder and visited distant lands in search of adventure.

It was a strange show to say influenced the course of your life, but it was clear he had not been alone on that.

Rudager left after telling Joseph he might find some decent work over in Cloudbase North West, and warned him again to stay in the safe lanes. “Though nothing is a hundred percent safe out in the void.”

Joseph had taken his advice and after hopping from station to station, doing some minor trading and a few passenger ferries, found a Cahoona bakery in desperate need of wheat. They offered to give him the best possible price for the goods transported. 600 units to them. It seemed like an incredible opportunity. He didn't realize it was a newbie trap.

Each unit of wheat took up a lot of cargo space, which meant even with a compressed cargo bay he could only take about ten at a time. It would take sixty runs to get them all to the bakery. On top of that, the only wheat farm in

three sectors was very low on supplies, which meant that while he was getting paid top dollar for the wheat, he was also paying top dollar for it. It seemed that the bakery and the wheat farm were actually in cahoots on this one.

After ten mind numbing runs back and forth, Joseph felt like he wasn't even working in a factory anymore. He was a janibot at the factory, scuttling from one end of the hallway to the other on an endless routine of cleaning. He had to find a way out of this, but the contract was locked.

Joseph got to thinking. There might not be any more wheat farms in the area, but surely they sold wheat somewhere else? His eye turned to the Argon Free Trading Station close to the sector center.

Almost every sector had a free trading port. The prices there were fixed and usually set at galactic average, and it just so happened they carried Delaxian wheat. They also did minor ship upgrades, such as cargo compression fields.

And so Joseph had his first taste of economics: he filled his cargo bay with wheat, and with whatever money he had left over increased his cargo size, then filled that with wheat as well. He sold the wheat at the best possible price at the bakery, then repeated the process at the Free Trading Station.

By the end of the run he had barely made a profit, but he did have a much larger cargo hold to show for it, and it had only taken thirty runs instead of sixty.

Dear Ran,

How's life in the factory? Oh wait, it's exactly the same as when I left. Ha ha. Sucker!

You wouldn't believe my first week out here. You know

how they say life in the Fleet is 90 percent boredom and 10 percent terror? Well I got the terror out of the way right at the beginning and have had nothing but boredom ever since. And I'm not even Fleet.

First I get conscripted on the spot, sent on a patrol, almost get blown away, then told "good job" and sent on my merry way. I've been told it won't be the last time this will happen.

Then after that I'm stuck doing nothing but deliver cargo back and forth between station or acting as a taxi service for guys who think they're too important to take regular passenger shuttles.

Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't have it any other way. Becoming a Tango (as they call those of us who got the TANG grant) was the best thing I've ever done. I've been to over a dozen different systems, met all kinds of interesting people, and even saw my first live alien! It was a Boron trader on board a chip plant in Three Worlds I doing taxi service for. He had a tube in his nose, probably to give him the ammonia our atmosphere is lacking. I hear it's really unpleasant on board the Boron trading stations because of that. But I haven't strayed into Boron space yet, I'd rather get a bit more practice in Argon space before trying that.

I have no idea how long it will be before I can get another ship. So far all my profits are eaten up by improving the ship, so I can make more credits faster, so I can make more improvements, so I can make more credits faster. Vicious cycle

I tell you. But I will get you that ship. I promise.

Miss ya!

Joseph

Since the Cahoona Bakery run, Joseph had tried to focus on other kinds of jobs. He found regular trading difficult, largely because his ship wasn't equipped for in-system or multi-system trade runs, and he certainly didn't have access to the Merchant Guild's Time Trax Satellite Network.

So instead he focused on taxi jobs (which allowed him to explore new sectors) and take on special cargo runs for various station emergencies (which increased his reputation with the local authorities). But with his Uniplex scanner, he found it extremely difficult to find the stations he was looking for. He lost two commissions as a result of pointless searching. He could see why UP SCUM got its name.

Save for the Triplex, it's worth it.

Rudager's words of advice stuck in Joseph's head, and now, with about ten grand saved up, it was time to get one. Had he saved his credits from day one he might have had enough to buy a light M5 craft for Ran, but he always found himself putting the money back in the ship. He just hoped it was worth it.

He did not take entering Boron space lightly. The downside of a sheltered upbringing was that no matter how open minded you were raised to be, you couldn't help but be afraid of the unknown. Meeting a Boron was one thing, but flying into Boron space? That was something else entirely. What if

he got into legal trouble? Would he be allowed to contact an Argon embassy? The Boron's were basically peaceful, but that didn't mean a cultural faux-pas couldn't cause trouble. For the same reason he wouldn't be visiting Paranid or Split space until he had read up heavily on them.

When he reached Kingdom's End, the beginning (or end) of Boron space, it nearly blew his mind. He had never seen such tranquil beauty from space. All planets, even those in the throws of tectonic upheaval seemed tranquil from space, but none came close to Kingdom's End. The planet itself was huge, filling his view in almost every direction. It felt for a moment that he was a god looking over a child's ocean rather than hanging in space.

Joseph docked at the equipment dock, and noted with some surprise that the voice of the station's docking computer was the same here as it was in Argon space – then realized that was his ship's translation module at work.

Because Kingdom End was heavily visited by Argons, the station's ammonia content was kept low, but it was still unpleasant to smell, and most humans wore filters.

In the upgrade showroom, your ship was scanned and a three dimensional representation put on the showroom floor. There you could choose what customizations you wanted, and see how it would look installed on your ship. The quality of the projections were far better than those in Argon Prime, which tended to be translucent and flickery. These looked almost real. It wasn't the only way Boron technology was more advanced, the artificial gravity felt completely natural, while on Argon ships it had a strange artificial feel, your feet tended to feel heavier than your head, if that made any sense.

He spent a few minutes haggling with a rubbery skinned female over upgrades. While the Boron's were more than happy to top up his engines, they wouldn't sell him a Triplex.

“I am sorry,” the female said. “Triplex gravidars are much sought after by pirates and raiders. They allow them to see a potential target long before the target can see them. We can only sell to those the Boron trust.”

“I see,” said Joseph. He'd been told about this by other spacers over the last week, but thought it only applied to weapons and the like. They said the best way to get on the good side of a civilization was to do odd jobs for them, particularly ones where they were in a bind and needed help out. He also had another problem, he didn't have enough money yet. The Triplex was twice as much as he had thought it would be.

As he headed back to his ship, he passed by the lights and sounds of a Boron casino. Drawn to it, Joseph saw that they played blackjack, a game he was fantastic at back home. He could earn enough for the Triplex in no time!

Ten minutes later he was broke.

“Goddammit!” he yelled out, when it finally sunk in what he'd gotten himself into, and banged his head against the station's hull.

Several days and a dozen trips in Boron space later and Joseph had had as much of Boron passengers as he could take. If they weren't talking about the upcoming Fraelis Lily Festival they were talking about their jobs – which were invariably more boring than his own had been.

What was worse, to counter this boredom he had become addicted to gambling, invariably losing whatever credits he didn't put back into the ship. So while he was now considered a Trusted Courtier by the Borons, he still didn't have the money for a Triplex scanner. And a lot of Boron space was surrounded in thick nebulae, making visual reconnoiter difficult on taxi jobs. Fortunately most of his clients gave generous time allowances, largely because it gave them more time to talk about how this year's Lily Festival will be the

best one ever, and had he seen what botanical displays they planned on using, they say they're using a new nitrate fertilizer to give the leaves their lovely sheen.

Eventually he couldn't take it anymore. He sold his two Alpha IRE cannons so he could afford a Triplex scanner, swore off gambling forever, and got the hell out of Boron space.

Really, the Borons weren't that bad. The spacers like himself were easy going and had helpful advice, and he'd spent many an hour admiring their ships while they gave him hints on how to improve his. And when he got sick of sleeping in his cockpit, the hotels he stayed in (or "crash cubes" as spacers called them) had lots of interesting guests. But invariably the passengers he took on made up for in money what they lacked in personality.

But now that he had a proper scanner on his ship, he could take on missions with more confidence. He didn't think twice about not being armed.

Then he received his first S.O.S.

"Mayday! Mayday! I'm under attack!"

A Mercury TL class freighter was swarmed by three fighters, just at the edge of his radar range. One would soak the damage from its turret while the other two hit its shields on either side. Once one of their shields got too low he'd rotate out with a fresh fighter.

He had always told himself that he would run from a fight, but his first instinct was to help. These pirates acted with a precision that angered him. These weren't desperate people driven to illegal means. They were professionals that did this for a living. How many ships had they raided? Ten? A hundred? How many people had they killed for a quick buck? He couldn't stand by and do nothing.

Only he had to, because he had no weapons. What was he going to do,

scan them to death?

He contacted the authorities and they sent out a border patrol to help, but by then it was too late. The ship was destroyed, its cargo plundered, and the pirates long gone. And this was in the supposedly “safe” lanes.

He suddenly felt very naked and alone in space.

The next day he received a message:

Joseph

Oh sure, fill my heads with dreams of glory then leave me stranded here! If you can't buy a ship steal one! Ha ha.

Ran

Joseph chuckled but then noticed there was another message waiting for him:

Joseph

Care to hook up for a drink? I'm curious to know how space is working out for you. I'll be in Home of Light for the next day. If you're there, hook up on the TerraCorp headquarters.

Rudager

It seemed a little odd for Rudager to be contacting him again. There were simply acquaintances who shared similar ship names and lived in cities close to one another growing up. But then, in the vast infinity of space, perhaps that made them neighbors. Joseph couldn't see a decent reason not to go, so he went.

Rudager waited at a table next in the Far Reach, TerraCorp's spacer bar. Staff members were not encouraged to mingle, and had their own recreational facilities. Loose lips and all that.

“You sold WHAT?” was Rudager's reply when Joseph filled him in on his current status. Rudager looked out the window to the docking pylons to see if it was true.

“Well it was either that or spend another week ferrying Boron agriculturalists and enduring their stories.”

Rudager shook his head. “You're lucky you didn't get attacked. Pirates scan for those sort of things.”

Joseph told him about the pirate attack he'd witnessed, which obviously only proved Rudager's point.

“But I've got my engines tweaked out. I can run away from any trouble.”

“Not from an M5 you can't. There are three standard pirate attack groups: Mix, Hammer and Strike. Hammer groups are mostly heavy fighters, meant for dedicated raids that are planned out ahead of time. Strike groups are light fighters looking for attacks of opportunity. A Mix group is exactly that, a mix of fighters meant to handle a variety of situations.

“You have nothing to worry about for Hammer groups. You can always outrun them, and they're not interested in you anyway. Strike groups, however,

look for anything they can take on, and if you're unarmed, that's you. You can't outrun them, either. Mix groups are also a danger if they take a liking to you, because they'll send their light fighter out to harass you, and while you're busy dancing with it the heavy fighters have time to catch up.”

Joseph nodded. “So what kind of armament do you recommend?”

“For now? Just load up on IREs. Your Buster can hold six and they're cheap. You're only looking for defense right now and they'll fit the bill nicely. When you can afford it, replace them with Particle Acceleration Cannons. Against most fighters PACs are your best friends.”

“What about Mass Drivers? My Buster can take them.”

“Mass Drivers are a definite option. They pass through shields and damage the hull directly. The advantage of that is that if you're more interested in outrunning the enemy those will slow them down. But me, I prefer to blow away their shields and see them panic. If you're lucky they'll bail out and you, my friend, have got yourself a free ship. Pirates are cowards. After all, what's the point of stealing a fortune if you can't enjoy it?”

“I'll remember that,” said Rudager. “But I have to ask, why are you still flying around in an old M4? Guy like you I thought would be flying a Nova, or own a Corvette by now.”

Rudager looked at his empty glass. “I did. That's all gone now.”

“What happened?”

He shook his head. “I'd rather not talk about it. Let's just say I'm happy where I am now.”

Joseph realized something else a bit odd. Rudager was on the TANG grant. How did that happen to an old spacer like him?

Rudager saw the puzzled look in his face and smiled. “Look, if you're so damn curious I'll give you my journal. You'll see I started out greener than

you did, and maybe you'll learn a thing or two.”

CHAPTER 4 – RUDAGER'S JOURNAL

Joseph read over Rudager's journal from the beginning as he headed to the edge of safe space. He didn't intend to stray into pirate territory, but the closer to the edge you got, the more profit there was to be made. Apparently Rudager had been a navigator on board Argon One for five years before leaving the Fleet.

Hell of a first day. After scrimping and saving enough money for a used Buster, I get commissioned by Ban Danna to take some newbie pilots on a training run. Supposed to be a milk run. What happens? A bunch of Kha'ak try to ram their insectoid lasers up my ass. One of the pilots got themselves killed and one of the Kha'ak took a bum run on me when my shields were down, blowing one of my engines.

So my ship is down to 30% hull integrity, engines are at half power, and to top it off I went and made a really dumb purchase buying nothing but mosquito missiles with what money I had, totally miscalculating supply and demand. My SETA was

destroyed in the fight as well, so until I manage to unload these stupid missiles somewhere, probably at a loss, I'm stuck traveling everywhere in real time. Oh well. At least I can catch up on my reading.

I'm off to a bad start.

Joseph smiled. Green he might have been, but even in his journal Rudager talked like he chomped on a cigar all the time. It made for enthralling reading. There were parts that Joseph empathized with completely, having been in similar situations, and parts where he couldn't believe Rudager would be so bold... or reckless. Something about the story had sounded familiar, though.

At one point he had taken on a passenger being pursued by Xenon, something Joseph made a point of avoiding. Xenon had a way of popping into a system, destroying their target, and popping out before the locals could mobilize. But Rudager had a plan.

The Xenon attack as soon as we hit space. Red beacons show up like fireflies on my Triplex scanner. There isn't four, there's eight. I never would have stood a chance a week ago, but now? Well, I still don't stand a chance. Not on my own at any rate. I kick on the boost and turn tail as fast as I can.

"What are you doing? The Chip Plant is the other way!"

“Shut up and strap yourself in. First of all, those Xenon are between us and the factory. Second, I can’t possibly outgun eight of them. And third...” the ship eases out from around the Free Trading Station to reveal a huge Boron Shark lurking in the asteroid belt. “...we’re not alone.”

Xenon are extremely single minded. They say they’re actually artificial intelligence created eons ago, maybe even created by us. They were sent to explore space on our behalf, but at some point we lost contact with them, and at some point they went insane. Now they seek to wipe out organics everywhere, maybe even replace us. Have a nice day.

If I had tried to outrun them, they’d have overloaded their engines just to get a chance at shooting us down. And while the Boron are pacifistic by nature, they are not cowards in a fight. They lost almost as much as we did in the Xenon war.

I fly straight for the Shark as the Xenon catch up. My ship is fast, but theirs are still faster. Soon the carrier fills my entire viewscreen.

“Weapons now in firing range,” trills the computer.

“You’re going to crash!” yells the passenger.

I pull up just as the Xenon open fire and it splashes against the

Boron's shields. The ships attacking me are M and L class, no threat whatsoever. But it sure got the Boron's attention. Two of them go down in the initial volley before the others can break off the attack. But like I said, the Xenon are single minded. They're not going to let me get away. But I skin dance around the Shark and let her take care of the dirty work, picking off whoever I can when their shields are critical. Five minutes later I've got the Boron's thanks in assisting to stop the Xenon threat, the nerd has his schematics safely on board the Chip Plant, and I'm 9000 credits richer.

Yeah, things are starting to look up.

The journal chronicled the various ups and downs of his career. Early on something had happened to him in Cloudbase SouthWest at the Goner temple, but the rest was blanked by the Argon Navy for security reasons. A lot of stuff was blanked early on, but what wasn't blanked made him wonder how he survived as long as he did. In particular his encounters with the Xenon.

I took on another shady customer today. He needed a lift to the HEPT factory with some new specs on Xenon weaponry. I get the feeling the Argons are planning something big considering all this clandestine work going on while pretending to just be business as usual. So why do they have to bother me about it? I thought the credits were right, right up to the point where I left

the docking bay.

There were a dozen Xenon ship, all of them M4 class and above. And there wasn't any significant military presence in the sector! The Centaur Corvette I had spotted was halfway across the sector, and right behind the Xenon.

This was so not good.

I turned tail and headed back to the station. It was a standard trading station with two rotating sections that created their own gravity. It was huge, and that was my only advantage.

"What are you doing? You're going to fast to dock!"

"I'm not docking!" I said, tilted the Marauder on her side and flew right between the two sections through to the other side. I presented such a small target that almost all the Xenon laser fire hit the station instead. I wasn't worried. She could take it.

"OH GOD NO!"

I wasn't so sure about my passenger. His fears were justified, however. A full speed crash into the station and we'd be dust. 5MW shields can't take that kind of abuse.

I had hoped one or two of the single-minded Xenon might crash

into the station, but no such luck. None of them attempted my hare-brained maneuver, either, however. I picked off one as it tried to flank me the long way around, then played hide and seek with another as I looped back around... where the rest of the Xenon fleet was waiting.

My shields almost dropped to zero before I made it back inside the station and played the same trick twice. Some fighters had reached the area now and were providing enough distraction for me to take out a couple more.

“You want to go through one more time?” I laughed back at my passenger. He just threw up into a space sickness bag. “I’ll take that as a yes!” and screamed through once again. I don’t know if I could pull this kind of maneuvering off with a M3 heavy fighter, but the Marauder is an M4 and just about perfect for this kind of thing. I took down the last of the Xenon and sped over to the HEPT factory before the passenger stank up my cabin any more.

I’ll tell you one thing, we sure gave the people on board the station a good show.

Joseph smiled. *Yeah, I bet he did.*

Fleet censorship aside, it seemed that the journal ended around the time he'd earned enough to buy a freighter and was looking for someone to captain

it. Well, there was no way that was it. It looked like Rudager was only giving him part of the story. He'd have to pester him for the rest later.

For now, he decided to focus on making some money.

CHAPTER 5 – THE QUEST FOR MORE MONEY

Joseph was still strapped for cash but had managed to buy a couple of IRE blasters in case he found himself in a fight he couldn't run away from. He'd been earning a steady income running simple passenger service when someone asked him to take him to Danna's Chance for 4500 credits. He wasn't being pursued by anyone, and it seemed on the up and up, but it wasn't until later that he discovered that a) it was seven sectors away, and b) half those sectors were pirate controlled.

He thought about dumping the passenger off at the next station and forgetting the whole thing. But all things considered the risks weren't that high. Ships traveled unmolested through pirate sectors all the time, and his ship engines were running as hot as they could. With the Triplex scanner he'd see trouble far enough away to turn tail and run or simply give them a wide berth.

He should be fine. Should be.

Of course he wasn't.

Halfway through the run he picked up a Mix group on his tail. He was keeping pace with their M4 and their heavy fighter lagged behind, but the M5 Harrier must have had afterburners installed, because it screamed at him like a missile.

When it came within weapons range the Harrier opened fire. Joseph tried to jink to avoid its fire and ignored the screams of his passenger. Its high speed was now a liability as it overshot Joseph's Buster and right into his gunsights. He might only have basic IRE blasters, but against the scout's shields it was more than enough, tearing through and into its engine. Stupidly, it turned for another pass, now playing a game of chicken with him, which the pirate lost. It erupted into flame and died. Joseph hadn't even slowed down in the battle, and was able to continue on his way before the other ships could catch up.

The passenger tried to regain his composure, and commented that Joseph handled the fight like a pro, then lamented there was no way the job he was on his way to was worth this kind of risk. He was headed for a IRE production facility, and though the station was Paranid, it was in pirate space that had once been Argon. He was being brought in as a specialist to help get production back on line.

“At least I'll be safe on the station,” he said. “You'd need a lot more than a few fighters to take one of those out.” His nervous laugh indicated his lack of conviction on the matter.

The Paranid had no intention of letting Joseph dock, but reluctantly did so when they realized he had their specialist on board. What the man had done to get on the good side of the Paranid he had no idea, but they gave him a bow when he disembarked, grunting in their wild way, which my translator changed into a stilted form of Argon. Joseph was being encouraged to hastily leave when the tech came back waving his arms.

“Hey, how would you like to make a quick fifty grand?”

“I'd love to, but that sounds a little too good to be true.”

The tech smiled. “Well, you know what part of space we're in, but the job itself isn't dangerous. These Paranid, they got a ceremony or a prayer for everything – except how to conjure up more Rastar oil. That's the main reason production's come to a halt. We need as much of it as you can bring in, and believe me they'll pay top dollar. On top of that I'll be happy to offer you a fifty thousand credit bonus if you can get us the units we need within seven stazuras, what with you saving my hide and all.”

“Seven? Sounds pretty easy.”

“It is. Sort of. Remember we're still in pirate space, and you don't have a close relationship with the Split, who normally produce Rastar Oil. Normally they're closed to outsiders. But I hear Family Whi is pretty open minded... for Split. You might be able to get what you need at the Free Trading Port there.”

“Got it. Consider it done.”

“Be careful.”

“You don't need to tell me twice.”

“Warning, shields critical.”

“Okay, maybe you *do* need to tell me twice!”

The computer panels flashed warnings as subsystem after subsystem failed. The Mossfoot Marauder lurched under the PAC fire of the pirate ship.

It had been a rookie mistake. He'd put on the SETA to help time seem to pass by quicker, then planned out his route and possible stop over's instead of keeping his eye on the radar.

As a result the pirate got a free shot on him. Joseph never saw him coming. His hull was down to thirty percent integrity and he was running under half of his normal thrust. The pirate veered off to make another pass. He didn't even offer him the chance for surrender.

He tried to evade the ship's fire and simultaneously sum up the situation.

It was a Pirate Stingray, an M4 Boron fighter. It had more powerful cannons, undamaged shield and hull, and was currently twice as fast as he was. The only good news was that he didn't have a wingman.

“So this is it. I'm going to die.”

But he wouldn't lie down. He had to keep his promise to Ran. He imagined her stuck in Tallus for the rest of her life, looking up into the sky and wondering where he was. Why hadn't he kept his promise?

Joseph turned his fighter into the enemy fire. The pirate must have thought he was on a suicide run, because he peeled away like a rabbit. Joseph stayed on his tail, firing his IRE blasters until they went dry. The shields were gone and the hull took a beating. He poured on the fire until its reactor went critical and cremated its pilot.

He heard the sound of his own deep breaths as he drifted through the wreckage.

Why had keeping his promise to Ran been so important? Why had the thought angered him so much, spurred him to fight when the rest of him had given up to despair. He'd have to write to her about it once he was docked somewhere safe.

A Teladi passing by in his freighter sent a message, “Nicccce sssshooting, human. Too bad you don't have a fisssssshing licenssse.”

He wondered what the pilot meant by that, but didn't ask. He set the ship for Family Whi, hoped to find a repair dock along the way, turned on the SETA, and kept a very close eye on the radar.

There was a repair dock in Seiezwel, Teladi space. Even with their various discounts the repair bill was astronomical. He couldn't afford it right

now, but he repaired as much as he could and continued on to Family Whi, where he discovered there was no Rastar Oil to be found. The free trading port had none and no one had any to barter.

He ventured further into Split space and discovered he wasn't allowed to dock. Station after station refused him permission to dock, calling him a "creature."

He went back to Family Whi and wondered what he could do to make a good impression. It seemed they were the only sector in the area that would let him dock. It must have been some kind of buffer zone for "creatures" that absolutely had to enter Split space.

He tried ferrying passengers, hoping that would help, but it seemed to have little effect. He brought some critical supplies in from Boron space, but they didn't bat a non-existent eyelash. Finally, when a pirate raid occurred near the west gate, he thought helping the drive off the raiders had to count for something, but the battle was over before he arrived. Debris and cargo canisters registered on his scanner.

"Might as well not leave empty handed." Joseph scooped up what he could, mostly mosquito and firefly missiles, intending to sell them at the equipment dock. But one of the missiles the scanner didn't recognize. It was simply labeled "unknown."

Where had he heard that before? Didn't Rudager...? He brought up the journal and ran a search for the word "unknown."

After that it was an uneventful trip to the shipyard, where I sold the Buster hulk for a good 80 grand. But then at the Equipment Dock I had the shock of my life. That unknown cargo pod it carried was worth just as much. The guy buying it wouldn't tell

me what it was, and I wouldn't ask for fear of appearing ignorant and killing the price, but between the two I now almost have enough credits for a beat up Mercury Cargo Hauler.

But it couldn't be the same thing, could it? It was some kind of missile, that much he could tell, and Rudager later found out that the unknown pods were powerful missiles. They registered as unknown because they were restricted to military use. Well it couldn't hurt to try.

He tried to play it cool with the Split at the Equipment Dock, as if he knew exactly what he had for him. The Split played it cooler, but forked over the eighty thousand credits anyway.

It not only got his ship 90% repaired, it boosted his rep with the Split enough that he could trade freely in their space, as well as buy some additional trading software he had his eye on in Teladi space. Thinking back to Rudager's journal, he wondered if he should start thinking about getting a Mercury as well.

Dear Ran

Space is a lot more unforgiving than I thought. I've strayed away from the safe lanes for a while and paid the price for it. On the upside I made a small fortune. On the downside I spent every credit just getting my ship repaired and upgraded.

I've decided that if you're going to come out here there is no way I want you flying anything less than an Buster. I've tangled with pirate scouts and they're just as flimsy as they are in the sim at the Dome. I know you'll say a Teladi Harrier can

pack almost as much of a punch as an M4, and I don't doubt you, but you have to remember, death is pretty darn permanent out here.

I was thinking about that when a pirate nearly tore me apart. A Stingray snuck up on me and fractured my hull, and I thought I was dead. But then I thought of you. I mean, I thought about the promise I made. Heh, you know me, I've never let you down yet, right? I might get there late, but I always get there in the end.

Hope you're practicing in the sim rooms every day. You're going to need it soon enough. Getting you a ship is my number one priority, one way or another.

Joseph

He almost didn't send it. He thought he should remove the reference to thinking of her, it just sounded corny. They'd grown up on the same block and had gone to the same school, and they'd never shown the slightest interest in one another aside from being friends. But perhaps it was because he really needed a friend out here that those feelings were changing. He pushed it away. Stupid.

Chapter 6 – A Hunting We Will Go

His pirate encounters had emboldened Joseph in a way most unexpected. The Mossfoot Marauder was now equipped with 4 IRE and 2 PAC cannons, maxed out on shields and had every other kind of upgrade he could afford. Granted he could have had a second ship by now if he'd just saved his money, but he just couldn't resist making the Marauder more and more combat worthy.

At first it was because he didn't want to fight, but figured if he was forced into it he might as well make sure he walked out of it. But now it was something different, something entrepreneurial.

He remembered Rudager's words, "If you're lucky they'll bail out and you, my friend, have got yourself a free ship. Pirates are cowards." He remembered the freighter taken out by three pirate scouts while he watched helpless. He remembered the "unknown" missile he'd picked up in Split space, dropped by a pirate fighter. He remembered what the Teladi had said about "fishing without a license."

There was money to be made being a pirate.

Joseph reckoned there was more to be made hunting them.

He continued with his usual routine. Buy low, sell high. Check the bulletin boards, bars, and cargo bays for special missions. But in addition to the

routine Joseph scanned space for red blips. Once identified, pirates had their ID codes broadcast across all races, and they automatically registered as hostile. He learned to recognize the three main pirate groupings, Strike, Hammer, and Mix, as well as their variations. Hammer and Mix groups he gave wide berth to, but Strike groups or a lone medium fighter was fair game. Heavy fighters generally had a turret, so he didn't feel comfortable taking them on yet.

His first priority had been to gain enough respect with the local authorities to buy a security or law enforcement license from them. This meant that any every kill he got gave him at least 500 credits on top of what they might drop. So far he had got them from the Teladi (who didn't care who bought them) the Argons and the Borons (who were a bit more selective). The Split still didn't trust him enough yet and he hadn't even ventured into Paranid space yet.

But before he even made his first raid he got a message.

Joseph

See you got some fishing licenses. Stop what you're doing and meet me at Home of Light. We need to talk.

Rudager

Was it his imagination, or did the message come across as angry, or perhaps disappointed?

He met Rudager back at the Far Reach on TerraCorp HQ. Rudager had a hot chocolate waiting for him.

Joseph frowned. “Hot chocolate? That’s a kid’s drink.”

“Damn right. Drink up, kid.”

Now Joseph knew there had been a “tone” to the letter. “Okay, what have I done wrong?”

Rudager leaned back against the bar railing. “It just so happens I have a pretty high standing with the authorities of all five races. I had a feeling you might go this route, so I had them let me know if anyone with your registration number asked for a fishing license.”

“Well, if I have to shoot a pirate down I might as well get paid for it, right?”

“Sure. Except those licenses cost about seven thousand credits each, and you have three of them. That means you’d have to “defend” yourself forty times to get the money back. Admit it, you’re going fishing.”

Joseph confessed. “I don’t know what the big deal is. They’re scum, picking on the weak and helpless. What’s the big deal if I help out a bit?”

Rudager’s eyes narrow. “The difference is attitude and motivation. You’re seeing dollar signs right now, aren’t you? Get a few pirates to ditch their ships and you got yourself a small fortune.”

“So? You did it. You got your first Mercury that way, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but you have no idea how that ended up, do you?”

“Well, no. But—”

“But nothing. You become a bounty hunter and you run the risk of losing a piece of your soul, kid. Trust me, I know. There are bounty hunters out there that see raiders as nothing more than a paycheck and could care less if they take them dead or alive. Then there are those driven by vengeance,” he said this part with a lowered tone. “Guys who make sure there are no survivors, even if they surrender and beg.” He said nothing for a moment. “Why are you

out here, kid? In space? What are you looking for?"

"It's the freedom." Joseph said truthfully. "Even when my life's in danger I'm seeing people, places and things I never thought I'd see in my lifetime. And I haven't even covered a fraction of known space."

Rudager nodded approvingly. "So if that's the case, why do you need to go fishing at all? You got a ship. Just go."

"Well, the thing is, the Mossfoot Marauder... that is, MY Mossfoot Marauder is a fine ship, but I still feel vulnerable, you know? I want to save up for an M3 class heavy fighter. Maybe even an M6 corvette. Something that will see me safely through Xenon or Kha'ak space if I stumble into it."

"No ship is going to make you 100 percent safe, kid. And being safe is usually a matter of being able to run away the fastest. The bigger your ship, the slower you go. But that's not all to it, is it?" Rudager looked at Joseph.

"Well, there's this girl."

"Ah."

"It's not like that. She's my best friend from since we were kids, we even worked at the same plant together in Tellus. Before I left I promised her I'd get her a ship too. She wants to be out here just as much as I do, but I don't want her flying in anything less than a souped up M4 like mine."

"So you need money for it, and who knows, you might get lucky and capture a ship from a pirate with a weak bladder. Either way you present it to her and look the hero in her eyes."

"Yeah, something like that."

Rudager smiled. "Never figured you for the romantic type, kid."

"It's not like that."

"Sure it's not. Okay, look, let me give you some advice on pirate hunting, since it's clear I can't talk you out of it." Rudager's advice had paid

dividends so far, so he was eager to listen.

“When we fought that Kha'ak recon party, I noticed that your reflexes are sharp and your aim is good. You don't waste energy on hopeless shots. That's good. Keep it up. When you get more powerful weapons you'll notice your energy drops like a rock, so you can't afford to waste shots. But I notice that you didn't strafe.”

“Strafe?”

“That's where you use your lateral thrusters in combat. Most rookie pilots equate flying in space to flying in atmosphere, and that's a big mistake. Of course it's our own fault as well, since most ships are designed to approximate atmospheric flight, automatically dampening out inertia during turns and whatnot. Heck, some ships even bank when you turn, the thrusters are set up to simulate it as if there is wind under your wings. Rubbish. But as a result, flying in space doesn't feel a lot different from atmosphere, but believe me, it is.”

Joseph had wondered about that. He knew in theory if you were to kill your engines and turn around, you should continue to fly backwards, but you didn't. That was because if you put your speed to zero, the computer automatically aligned your speed so it was stationary in relation to the stations in the system. It didn't have to be this way, but it was the convention all races used to make space travel safer and easier.

“Your strafing thrusters are the peddles by your feet, and let me tell you now, they are your best friends. If you're in a dogfight and see on your tracking camera that the enemy has fired at you, strafe. You might get nicked by the first shot, but the rest will miss.”

“I can do that just by pulling up.”

“Yes you can, and you lose whatever it is that's in your crosshairs at the

moment as well.” He leaned closer. “Think about it. If you're in a dog fight you do not want to break off an attack if you can help it, it just gives your target the opportunity to turn on you and fire. With your strafing thrusters you can fire on your target and dodge incoming fire at the same time. If you have MK2 combat software your targeting computer can easily compensate for the minor changes in your heading.”

Joseph's eyes widened as he understood. He'd heard plenty of people talk about strafing targets, but he thought they just meant raking fire up and down the hull by tilting the nose up and down or side to side.

“Why didn't anyone tell me this before?”

“Well, for one thing it's one of the first things they teach you in Fleet Academy, which until recently is where most pilots trained at. Damn TANG grant put up a bunch of inexperienced greenhorns in space who could pass a simulated test, but didn't give them a proper education in flight training. They expect Tangos to just stick to the safe lanes, ship goods, and grease the wheels of the great Argon economy. Problem is, half of them end up wanting a bit of action, the other half find it even though they don't want it, and all of them are unprepared. But seriously, good luck to you. If you survive long enough to buy yourself a Mercury, send me a message. We'll hook up on Argon Prime and I'll give you a few more pointers.” He checked his watch. “Frak. I've got an appointment with the Chairwoman. You take care you there. I don't want to hear about your wreckage over the BBSs, got it?”

Joseph smiled, “You'll just hear about the drop in piracy levels, that's all.”

As he left he could have sworn he heard Rudager say, “I thought the same thing.”

Joseph was feeling cocky now. 2 IREs and 4PAC cannons bristled under the wings of the Mossfoot Marauder, and ten Mosquito missiles were hooked into his anti-missile system. He didn't use missiles himself, waste of good money, but Mosquitoes were cheap and could save your ass when a target used them on you.

Fishing for pirates (the term 'hunting' was reserved for bounty hunters with specific quarries) wasn't as profitable as he had hoped, but the Argon and Borons were stepping up measures against the Xenon, bringing in all kinds of covert operations trying to steal and analyze their technology. As a result there were a number of operatives out there who needed passage to another station, carrying equipment with Xenon homing beacons on them. The dang buggers were hardwired into the equipment and once they left the safety of a station a raiding party would jump in and attack. Joseph had found a pattern to their attacks, however, and used their one-track mind against them easily enough. Easy credits, easy increase in reputation.

But still it wasn't enough. A single hit to his hull could kill a week's worth of fishing bounties. He wasn't even aware of how much time had passed when he got a message from Ran:

Joseph

I hope you're not doing anything stupid out there. Every time you talk about easy money you write back the next day talking about another setback. I would have thought you'd at least take me as a passenger on your ship sometime, show me Kingdom's End at least! I'm starting to think you've forgotten

about me. Maybe I should just save up for my own ship.

Ran

Joseph sighed as he read the message. If he had just played it straight he could have had two or three ships by now. He felt like such a chump, letting her down. He was moored to the Equipment Dock at Rolk's Fate, looking for missions, and finding none. He disembarked and set course for the Royal Boron Trading Port.

Then all hell broke loose.

From nowhere three Kha'ak carriers appeared and opened fire. He spun the Marauder around and made all speed for the South Gate. He checked his radar and found with only some relief that the ships were not within firing range of him. Kha'ak clusters broke apart into little pyramid fighters and scouts and attacked the shipping lanes indiscriminately, while the carriers attacked the equipment dock he had been on.

Comm chatter came in from everywhere. Maydays and SOSs of freighters, cut off as their ships were cut in two. Border patrols trying to organize a counter offensive, despite being massively overwhelmed. From a safe distance Joseph killed the engines and watched the battle unfold. Beams of light would converge on a single point, and shortly thereafter was a brief burst of flame.

It was a slaughter. As the wave of destruction pulled away from the Equipment Dock and towards other stations, all his gravidar could see was debris and cargo pods.

Joseph was torn between his desire to keep his promise to Ran and not

wanting her to have to face what he was facing now.

Then, through the North Gate, a massive Boron Ray jumped into the system like an avenging angel. It headed straight for the first carrier and took it head on. Joseph actually cheered when the carrier erupted into a ring of blue flame.

The Ray's appearance had rallied the local fighters – even the freighters were holding off the scouts – and Joseph charged into the Ray's assistance.

Not that it needed it. The fighters that danced around the Ray were being taken down by its broadside defenses and missiles. Nevertheless Joseph saw an opportunity here. After helping out in the fight he could make a small fortune from the cargo pods.

He wondered a moment why this all sounded familiar.

He felt light and untouchable as he blasted scouts left and right. He was like a leaf on the wind. But then it all seemed to go wrong. He'd thought there were only a couple of scouts, but there were many many more. And fighters, heavy fighters. And they all turned their attention on him. Why him? Wasn't the destroyer a greater threat? Why did they suddenly turn on him? All of them? Everywhere? They closed in from all directions, he jinked and turned but saw only beams of light crisscross in front of him, burning his shields, his hull, his flesh.

“NO!”

Joseph woke with a start, and was pulled back by the seat restraints. Sweat chilled on his skin. He'd been sleeping in his cockpit to save a few credits again. The Buster didn't exactly have living quarters built in and crash cubes on a station were a luxury he couldn't afford.

The datapad he'd been reading was in his lap. It was Rudager's journal

again. The Kha'ak invasion of Rolk's Fate, which is where he was now. He scanned the paragraph he had been reading when he drifted off.

I try not to think about it and load up on floating quantum tubes, trying to ignore the debris and trying not to notice any bodies. I made more credits here than I had in a week of regular trading. I'm a horrible human vulture, but the credits I make will go a long way to upgrading my ship and repairing the hull. And God forgive me but part of me is actually hoping they attack again soon.

Joseph's dream had naturally shifted to it. He shuddered. He'd watched vids of Kha'ak attacks over and over, looking for a weakness to exploit if he got into a fight with them. It seemed the best advice was to be somewhere else. If it was just a couple of scouts or a fighter it was no problem on your own. But more than that and you were in trouble. It paid to have wingmen.

He thought about Ran again. The letter had been real enough. He'd read it before he docked.

He really hoped she didn't do anything stupid, like he generally did.

The pirate strike group had thought they had an easy target. A lone freighter with a rusty turret and bum engines. They swooped in on it, taking turns to hit the shields or draw its fire.

"Dangnabit, keep off me ya varmits!" he yelled over the comm channels.

"You can always take a walk in a space suit, gramps," laughed one of the pirates. "We'd love to have your ship in one piece."

“Screw you, kid!”

“Ha! What do you think I’m—” he never got to finish that sentence as his ship was ripped to shreds by the M4 Buster that popped around the nearby asteroid.

“FRAK! Bounty hunter!” yelled his wingman. The remaining two pilots broke off the attack on the freighter and faced off against the green Buster. If he thought he was in for an easy fight he was sorely mistaken. They were flying buffed up harriers with light PAC cannons that could rip through the Buster’s shields – if they could just get a frickin bead on him!

“He’s getting behind me! Hey, do something, would ya?”

“I can’t get a lock!” said the third pilot.

There was a scream and static as the second pilot blew apart. The third noticed the green teddy bear on the Buster’s hull, remembered hearing something about a pirate hunter who used that symbol, and tried to make a run for it, only to have his engines knocked out by the surprisingly fast Buster.

“No loot is worth this!” he said, and bailed out. With luck he’d make it to a space station that didn’t know who he was. The engine went critical and blew just as he reached a safe distance.

“Thanks there, pilot,” the man sounded like an old timer but only looked forty.

Joseph smiled and gave him a two fingered salute. “Not a problem. Take care now.”

“You wouldn’t mind seeing me safely to the next station, would ya? I gots me a proposition for ya.” Joseph wondered how on earth anyone could learn to speak Argon like this, but figured it could only hurt his sense of grammar to listen.

He found out when they met on the nearby chip plant's cafe.

“I gots me a silicon mine, way out on the rim. Me daddy gave it and Bessie, the ship ya saw me on, to me when I turned of age. I've been out there for nearly ten years, mining it meself, shipping it, goin' back. This was me last run. Oh, there's a bit more to be mined, I'm sure, but I'm rich enough as it is. Going to retire on Argon Prime, I am.”

“Well, congratulations. Glad you're going to make it there in one piece.”

The man smiled. “Couldn't have done it without ya, kid. So I want to thank ya. Me daddy gave me an “insurance fund” in case the mine went bust or I lost ol' Bessie. Kept a stash of credits in a scanner resistant canister and dropped it in deep space. Gave me the coordinates. So, I'm givin them to you.

Joseph was shocked. “Really?”

“Why not? The space it's in is pirate space, and I have no intention of going anywhere near it. The money's a drop in the bucket compared to what I got in the bank. So if ya can find it, ya can have it.” He gave Joseph the coordinates. Joseph didn't know how to thank him.

“I'd be dead if it weren't for ya, so don't worry about thankin me. 'Sides, getting them credits won't be a walk in the park. But I saw you fly, you'll do fine.”

Bala Gi's Joy was technically pirate space, but it really wasn't heavily patrolled. He set course for the given coordinates, noted a couple of stray pirates but didn't bother to harass them. Not if the old man had been right about the money waiting for him.

The container must have been really shielded, because his Triplex scanner didn't pick it up until he was almost on top of it. He scooped it up and counted it as soon as he reached a Free Trading Port.

A quarter of a million credits.

Joseph smiled. He composed a message on his datapad.

Dear Ran

Get your pilot license ready.

Joseph

CHAPTER 7 – RAN AWAY

Joseph reached Argon Prime a couple of days later. He had contacted Rudager to let him know his intention of buying a freighter, and the old space hound was waiting for him on the Dockyard spacer's bar. It seemed like every station had such a bar, or a cafe, or at least a restaurant. After all, where else could pilots rest and hang out?

There was no hot chocolate waiting for him. Instead it was spacefuel, a potent alcoholic beverage known for being even more potent among aliens, hence their tendency to ban the stuff.

“A man's drink?” Joseph ventured.

“Nope, to kill the pain. If you're getting a Mercury you're not only going to triple your profits, but your headaches as well.”

“Don't you ever have cheerful news?” Joseph asked.

Rudager grinned. “You're too damn cheerful as it is. I'm giving you a dose of reality.”

“So what happened to you when you got your Mercury? The journal you gave me ends about the time you had enough for it.”

Rudager shifted uneasily on his stool. “Let's just say my personal life and my business life became estranged. Eventually I just pocketed what cash I

could and walked away from it. You might end up doing the same, who knows?”

Joseph shrugged. “Not really interested in just trading from place to place. I just figured the Mercury could go about doing its own thing while I go off exploring. That way I'll always have repair and upgrade money on hand, right?”

“Not exactly, kid. Not unless you get yourself a CPA.”

“CPA?”

“Certified Personal Accountant, it's part of the MK3 trading software package. You see you can't just leave a pilot to go off and do his own thing. Not if you want to make proper money. You have to have an accountant on board who can scan for best buys and best sells, make the deals, make the contacts. The MK3 software is tied in with the Internship program of the local universities. So you not only get the software what you need to organize a galaxy-wide corporation, but someone to run it as well. Half the cost of an MK3 goes to the CPA actually.”

“How much does it cost?”

“Half a mill.”

Joseph nearly shot the spacefuel out his nose.

“Half a million credits?!”

“It's worth every cred, let me tell you. Without it you'll find you're stuck playing babysitter to your freighter all the damn time. You'll have to keep constant tabs, tell them to buy and sell and it's just a real headache, let me tell you. You get yourself an MK3 just as soon as you can, drop them in a good self contained system they can make some money with, and let them get experience. When they're good enough, let them expand their scope so they can explore for new markets. It pays for itself very quickly, let me tell you. There is just one

small downside...”

Joseph knew there had to be a catch. “What is it?”

“Well you better make sure you get yourself a really dumb pilot, one with no imagination. Otherwise they get bored and start taking risks. Next thing you know you're getting a message saying your freighter was destroyed by Xenon in some god-forsaken place and you're wondering why they hell they were out there in the first place! The CPA does what he can, he'll set money aside for fighter drones, a decent turret and a jumpdrive if you let him. But unless you have a pilot you can trust they're going to get into trouble. They always do.”

“Kinda like Tango's,” said Joseph.

“Kinda like Tango's,” said Rudager.

In the large holographic display room, Rudager and Joseph looked at full size holographic representations of ships for sale. Like the one in Kingdom's End, you could take a virtual walk-through tour of a ship if you so desired, though the holograms here were translucent and occasionally flickered. You could also buy upgrades for your ship right away. “So how much money do you have?” Rudager asked.

“Just under three hundred thousand, all told.”

“You might be able to get the L class Mercury. Have you got a pilot hired?”

“No, but I have one in mind. Problem is, I haven't been able to reach her.”

Rudager smiled. “Did you pay in advance? She might have taken the money and ran.”

“No, she's a friend of mine, the one I told you about. We've talked about

this for a while. Of course, I don't know what she'll think about captaining a giant brick.”

“I'd say you were a low down piece of scum and you should rot in hell. Or at least heck. The nicer side of heck.”

It was Ran, wearing a flight suit that hugged her hips in a way he'd never seen before. She walked over and punched him playfully in the shoulder.

“Where were you? I've been paging you for two hours,” said Joseph.

Ran smirked. “Staying one step ahead of the game, that's where I've been.” She looked at the giant Mercury hologram. “Nice ship. Yours?”

Joseph couldn't help but have a bit of pride in his voice. “Will be. I was hoping you'd pilot it.”

To his surprise Ran laughed. “I thought you were JOKING when you said that? THAT? No way in hell I'm flying a brick.”

“Look, I know it's not much to look at, but it's only until we start making some serious money, then we can buy whatever other kind of ship you want.”

“Sorry, pal. Beat you to it. You were taking so damn long to come back for me I had to take matters into my own hands.” She tapped on the holographic console and a tiny M5 Discoverer appeared. On its side was painted a pair of dice and the words “Ran Away.”

“They're doing the paint job now, isn't it great?”

Joseph was stunned. “You're flying an M5? You've got to be kidding me. It's too dangerous!”

Ran raised her head up haughtily. “It's my money I can buy what I want to.”

“You bought that yourself?”

“You weren't the only one with a savings account, you know. Plus my parents kicked in a few grand. Granted you got a better ship on the TANG

grant and all, but that Discoverer is all mine, and I don't owe anything to the Fleet. She's got four Beta IREs, three 1MW shields and engines and thrusters maxed out. I'll be able to take on M4s no problem, and can run like hell from the M3s."

Joseph still looked disappointed. "It just takes one good hit to get you spaced, Ran."

Rudager put a hand on Joseph. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. Just stick to safe space till you build that fortune, right?"

"I suppose," said Joseph, then realized he had a new problem. "Oh great, I still need to get a pilot for the Mercury."

Rudager smiled. "Well, it just so happens I know someone I can recommend highly."

"Yarp?"

"Joseph, meet Barl. Barl, meet Joseph."

"Hello."

"Yarp."

Ran leaned over to Joseph and whispered, "Are you sure we need a pilot this bad?"

Rudager could sense their lack of faith. "Don't worry, Barl is a very reliable pilot. He worked for me for two years before I closed down the fleet. He's been doing odd jobs lately, but hasn't worked under contract since working for me. He used to be quite the greenhorn, but he's a reliable, and more importantly, unimaginative pilot. Isn't that right, Barl?"

"Yarp!"

"Is that the only word he knows?" asked Joseph.

Rudager leaned in close. "Yes, but you have to note HOW he says it.

Believe it or not, the CPA he used to fly with had long conversations about the geo-eco-political situation of the Argon-Boron Alliance with him.”

“You did?” Ran asked Barl.

“Yarp,” said Barl with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I must be going mad,” said Ran. “Because I could swear I understood what he meant by that.”

Rudager bid farewell to them after helping haggle a better price on the Mercury. Joseph joined Ran at the docking pylon as she got into the cockpit of her ship for the first time.

“Feels good, doesn't it?” said Joseph over the intercom.

“Mmmm, you have no idea. You got a *used* Buster. My Discoverer was custom built. Still has that new ship smell.”

“That's probably mildew.”

“You're just jealous.”

“A little.”

“Well don't just stand there, let's get this show on the road.”

“Hey, Ran?”

“Yeah, Joe?”

“I kept my promise, you know. Well, technically.”

“I know, thanks. It means a lot to me that you did.”

“Hey, I always get there in the end,” said Joseph with a smile.

CHAPTER 8 – COST INEFFECTIVE

Ran protested, but eventually allowed herself to fly escort duty for the Mercury transport – which Barl had renamed MFC First Choice for some reason. MFC? Mossfoot Cargo? Barl responded with only a “Yarp” when asked, but he got the impression that it was the name of the first freighter he'd captained for Rudager, it held sentimental value for him in a galactic environment where the value of money outweighed the value of the human spirit, and acted as a reminder never to give up on your dreams or regret your choices in life.

How did Barl DO that?

“Like it's fair that you go gallivanting around the universe on your own while I'm stuck babysitting the giant man-child! No offense.”

“Yarp.”

“It's just for a little while. Till you get comfortable with real space flight. I've been out here a couple of months already, and I've already made some contacts. The Mossfoot Marauder is kitted out to best handle fast emergency cargo runs as well as dangerous taxi jobs. Barl will be doing profitable cargo runs in Boron space, and even though it's heavily patrolled,

some raiders get desperate and make a hit and run attack there. So you might find more action than you can handle after all.”

Ran smiled sweetly. “Who, me?”

Joseph rolled his eyes. A couple of weeks of real spaceflight would hopefully kill the “it's-all-just-a-fun-game” part of her spirit that had nearly gotten him killed himself several times over. She skipped off to the docking ring to get into her ship.

“Yarp,” said Barl, putting his hand on Joseph's shoulder.

“Yeah, I know you'll take care of her,” said Joseph. “I just wish she'd take care of herself.”

Joseph kept in touch with the First Choice via satellite relay. He let Barl handle affairs for the most part, but restricted him to Boron space for the time being. Right now the freighter had even weaker shields than the Marauder, and he wouldn't feel comfortable sending it further afield until it had something much stronger.

For the most part he stuck to emergency transport missions. They paid well and his ship was fast enough for the job. Sometimes people were really desperate for energy cells, and offered fantastic bonuses for those willing to take on the tedium. Xenon missions were becoming scarce, and those that were available wouldn't settle for anyone short of ex-Fleet veterans. Barl by far pulled in more credits per day than Joseph, but obviously Joseph saw more action – a fact not missed by Ran in her daily messages.

He never missed an opportunity to harass pirates, especially if they were attacking someone. Scouts ceased being a problem for him or, if he was honest with himself, a thrill. Climb, dive, shoot, kill. Those that bailed out generally left the ship in such bad shape it wasn't worth repairing, just setting the

autopilot for the scrapyards and collecting the fee.

Medium fighters were pretty easy to deal with, unless they carried missiles. Those things scared the crap out of him. Fortunately his missile defense system took care of that. Mosquito missiles were fairly useless in ship to ship combat, but were excellent for shooting down other missiles. He'd even take on Talaidi Falcons, an M3 class heavy fighter, because it didn't have a rear turret to make his life miserable.

Joseph received an SOS in Ore Belt from a fighter in trouble, and rushed to the rescue. He wondered about that lack of thrill he felt. Was it a good thing? Maybe keeping dispassionate kept his reflexes exact and head clear, or maybe he'd just get lulled into a false sense of security.

As the Nova heavy fighter opened up with its rear turret he realized the latter was clearly the case.

“HOLY CRAP!”

“Shields Critical.”

Joseph veered off at full speed, hoping to heck it didn't blast him as he ran away.

A voice came over the comm channel, a young voice. Younger than his, if that was possible. “Wait, please! My engines are gone. Please help, I can't run!”

“Sorry, that Nova's chewed up my shields, I wouldn't stand a chance. I'll get the authorities here as fast as I can.”

“That will be too late!”

The pirate decided to eavesdrop on their chatter and add his two bits. “Just take a walk in space, kid. It's your ship I want!”

The kid was on the verge of tears. “This ship cost me every credit I own! I can't just give it up!”

Something stirred inside Joseph, overriding every safe instinct he had. “Leave the kid alone, pirate, or I'll blow you out of the sky.”

The pirate snorted. “Big talk. You're just a kid yourself. Run home to mommy before I decide to space you as well.”

Joseph's eyes hardened. “Coming about. Kid, if you've got any maneuvering thrusters left, I suggest you target that pirate and help me get him in a crossfire.”

The pirate stammered, “What? Hey, wait minute!” Then he was rocked by a volley of PAC fire from the Marauder. It swerved trying to avoid the incoming fire from the Marauder and the crippled scout.

“Frak! Don't just sit there, Gunny, open fire!” the pirate yelled, forgetting to cut off the comm channel. Joseph had hoped to take it out before it could bring its turret to bear, but it was too late. His shields dropped and Joseph broke off the attack before he took any hull damage.

“Coming about for another pass, how are you doing, kid?”

“I.. I think he's just avoiding me, you're the bigger threat.”

He waited for his shields to charge a little before turning back into the fray. As he saw the turret's incoming fire he remembered.

STRAFE!

He slammed his foot on the peddle and activated the lateral thrusters, pushing his ship out of the way of the incoming fire, while giving him every opportunity to fire into the Nova. It's shields dropped and it's rear turret, though extremely powerful, was too slow to track the Marauder as long as he stayed a good distance away.

“Frak!” the pirate yelled. He hadn't realized until it was too late that the scout's weapons were also having an effect. “Okay! We're breaking off! Cease fire!”

Joseph ignored him and fired everything he had at the pirate, even the mosquitoes he saved for missile defense. The Nova bloomed, flared, and died. He heard heavy breathing over the comm. The kid still couldn't believe he was alive.

“Th-thanks, mister.”

“How the hell old are you, kid?”

“Twenty.”

“You know I have a voice stress analyzer on board. I can tell you're lying.” He didn't, but the kid didn't know that.

He gulped. “Sixteen.”

“How did you get your license? Hell, how did you afford a ship?”

“I've been saving up for a long time! And... and I used my college money.”

Joseph sighed. “Maybe you should sell that ship and go to college, huh?”

“No! This is what I want, what I've always wanted. If I go to college I'll only end up out here anyway afterwards. Why not start now?”

“Getting blown away by a Nova might be the answer to that question, kid.” The kid looked crestfallen, and Joseph felt sorry for him. Hell, he admired him. He had wanted to be out here at his age as well, after his parents had died, but got talked into taking a “normal” job at the factory instead. It wasn't till ten years later he had pulled himself out of that rut. He checked his credit account, checked some recent price listings, and smiled.

“Hey, kid, how would you like a job?”

The kid's name was, remarkably, Kid. At least, that's all anyone ever called him, he said. He was an orphan, raised by the State. He said the college money he got was from a dead uncle, of which he was sole inheritor. It wasn't

that much, but enough for a Discoverer. Of course, that Discoverer was more scrap than ship now. Even a stray rock would blow it to pieces. It was better just to scrap it.

“Don't worry. I got a way for you to earn your wings in a safer environment.”

Ran stormed into the pilot's lounge on Seizewell's shipyard. Behind her she dragged Kid by the ear.

“What the hell is this? Barl and I dock here as you asked and this snot nosed little punk says, 'Wow, great ship, is that what I'll be flying?' That's MY ship, Joe. I paid for it with my own money! You can't go giving it away!”

Joseph smiled. “Please let go of Kid's ear.”

Ran forgot that she was still holding it. She let go, and Kid rubbed it furiously.

“Sit down.”

She did, disarmed by his cool manner, but wary for some kind of sneak attack. Joseph tossed a datapad to her. She picked it up and looked at the schematics it contained.

“I thought you might want to trade up a bit.”

She looked at it. “You're kidding me?” Joseph shook his head. “This cost twice as much as my Discoverer.”

“True, but it's a fraction the cost of a full sized M4 like mine. I figured it would make you happy until we can get you into a Buster of your own, or perhaps something bigger.”

Ran looked at the datapad again. A Taladi Harrier was considered slow for a scout fighter, though still faster than any M4. What set it apart was two things – it carried a 5MW shield and four PAC cannons, something only

medium fighters could do. The Harrier was called by many the “poor man's M4.”

“You're giving me this?” she asked.

“In exchange for your Discoverer, yes. I want the kid here to fly escort for Barl from now on. He'll get to see the universe in a safer way, and learn the skills he'll need to survive.”

“And what about me?”

Joseph smiled. “I want you to be my wingman.”

The Mossfoot Maruader and the newly christened Ran Far Away hung in Teladi space, an endless stream of transports and escorts passed by on all sides. The First Choice and its Discoverer escort, now called Red 1 pulled away from the spacedock and headed for the gate. Far below, the planet rotated beneath them.

“Okay, now what?” asked Ran.

“Now we go find a job.”

A wingman makes your life a lot better, Joseph reflected. For one thing you're not bored traveling from station to station on cargo runs. Ran and Joseph talked about everything in their trips across the long dark. Of course, they'd been friends since childhood, but somehow talking about old familiar stories in unfamiliar space made them new and vibrant again.

For another, combat became dramatically safer. The two had played sims so often together they could practically read one another's minds, and pirates didn't stand a chance. Heavy fighter turrets weren't quite as scary, but you had to remember to never underestimate your opponent. Even a crippled fighter could get a lucky shot on you if you weren't careful.

But Ran was good, really good. She made her Harrier do things he didn't think was possible in an M5. Her time with Barl babysitting the First Choice had been a good experience for her. She didn't showboat in battle, she simply got the job done.

Still, they tried not to bite off more than they could chew, and stuck to harassing groups they knew they could handle – solo pirates, strike groups and the occasional mixed group.

Most of the time abandoned ships were too shot up to do anything with but scrap, but one Harrier pirate left his ship in surprisingly good condition. They set the autopilot for Argon space, where they could get it fixed up.

“But now we need to hire a pilot for it.”

Ran shrugged. “Maybe not. Combat computers are pretty competent these days. There are plenty of cargo haulers whose entire escort is computer controlled.”

“You're thinking of fighter drones,” said Joseph.

“No, I'm not. I noticed the Boron using them a lot, especially those heading to Teladi and Split space. Bunch of M5 fighters flying around them in a slightly too precise fashion. I made some inquiries, and yeah, some freighter companies too cheap to hire pilots but wanting something more intimidating than drones will use drone software in M5 scouts. Works pretty well for them. Why don't we try it?”

Joseph figured it couldn't hurt. After all, it meant one less live person to put at risk. After fixing up the Harrier at the shipyard they installed drone software at the equipment dock. The mechanic said he did this sort of thing all the time, but didn't recommend it.

“In a real fight, you can't beat a proper pilot behind the controls. Even top notch A.I. tends to have a one-track mind. You only have to see the Xenon

in action to know that.”

He had a point there, but it was more like the fighter, now christened “The Gimp” would be useful simply through its presence. It would give the enemy one more target to worry about, and it's not like they'd know it was a bot, not with two real pilots alongside it.

It was useful for all of two trips, when it failed to slow down and smashed headlong into a station. All that was salvageable was a single mosquito missile.

Joseph's jaw dropped as the last of the oxygen burned off the wreckage.

“Um... real pilots next time?” asked Ran over the comm.

“Real pilots.”

From the trade-run side of things, Barl had steadily accumulated a small fortune. Kid didn't resent escort duty the way Ran had. He was learning a lot about flying, and realizing he had a lot more to learn still.

It didn't take Barl, already familiar with the BoGas run, long to make enough for them to hire a CPA intern. He was a Boron named Boso, and his idea of adventure was finding the missing credits in a business-level spreadsheet, which suited Joseph down to the ground. He felt comfortable turning over complete control of the First Choice to his capable hands, er, tentacles.

But it turned out Boso had more initiative than Joseph expected, or wanted. Joseph noted that his credit limit was often very very low, because it was all taken up in stock on the First Choice. On top of that he noticed that Boso had taken it upon himself to upgrade the ship without asking. This became clear when he got the message from Kid: *What am I supposed to do now?*

Checking the navigation maps he noticed that the First Choice and Red 1 were about six sectors apart. Red 1 desperately tried to catch up with the First Choice, only for it to disappear and reappear somewhere else. He called Kid in to rendezvous with Ran and himself down in Paranid space. His current goal was to try and get on their good side so he could open up a trade route with them for the First Choice.

“So he says he doesn't need me any more, very sorry, and goes off with Barl in a flash. He says I just slow him down!”

They were on a Paranid trading station, one of the few that welcomed unknown outsiders. Ran and Joseph had been doing their damndest to get on their good side, but with the Paranid it was especially difficult. The Split might be warlike, but at least they respected a good fighter. The Paranid were xenophobic religious types, and so everything boiled down to rules that had to be observed, anyone not observing them were outsiders, even their own kind.

Even the station they were on, they were isolated from the main section. The visitor's center was impressively high-tech and well maintained, but clearly it was not meant for people to stay in for long periods of time. Get in, drop off your goods, get out. They didn't even provide crash cubes for weary pilots.

Joseph shook his head at the kid's story. Boso had bought a jump drive and a dozen drones on his own authority. He was tempted to fire his rubbery ass, but Barl hadn't complained, and his account was rising steadily, although every time it seemed like he had a small fortune, it was gone again as the Boron found something more expensive to trade in.

“So I guess that's it, huh, sir?” said Kid. “I have to say, thanks for the experience, it helped me a lot.”

Joseph waved his hands. “Hang on there, who says I want to fire you?”

“Well, I can't really help you anymore, can I?”

Joseph thought about the disastrous droid experiment. “I dunno. I guess Ran and I could use another wingman.”

Ran smiled and nudged the kid a little, “You know the saying, kid. If you think you can do a job with one ship, take ten instead.”

CHAPTER 9 – TO LOSE IT ALL

The Mossfoot Marauder and its wingmen soared through space on a mission. It was an emergency supply run at the edge of Paranid space, but with a difference. If completed on time, the manager had promised to put in a good word for them, and the rest of Paranid trade space would be opened to them. The potential profits were staggering, and too good to resist.

The First Choice was still making trade runs in Argon space, raking in a steady stream of income. Things seemed to be going smoothly, until his computer trilled:

“One of your ships is under attack in... Farnham's Legend.”

Joseph's eyes widened. Farnham's Legend? That had to be... he checked the navigation computer and zoomed in on Farnham's Legend. The First Choice was surrounded by M3 pirates, a Hammer group, probably two. The First Choice desperately tried to make it to a nearby station for safety.

“DAMMIT!”

“I see it, Joe,” said Ran. “We better get over there.”

Joseph shook his head. “No point, Ran. We'll never get there in time. If they make it to the station, they can wait until we arrive to provide her escort. For now all we can do is watch and wait.”

They watched the nav computer intensely. The shields on the First Choice dropped, dropped dropped. Hull damage. Severe hull damage.

“Come on, guys!” said Kid. “You can make it!”

The green light disappeared. Everyone's hearts skipped a beat. Joseph checked the ship list and breathed a sigh of relief.

“It's okay. They made it. They docked. I'm telling them to sit tight till we arrive.”

They finished their mission and proceeded with all haste to Farnham's Legend.

“You going to be okay, Kid?” asked Ran.

“I... I think so.”

“Just remember, keep moving. Don't be a sitting duck for them. Let me worry about hitting them hard, you worry more about distracting them.”

“Sure thing, sir.”

“Don't worry, Kid, I'll cover ya.” said Ran.

One jump away from Farnham's Legend they saw a pirate convoy leaving for another gate.

“That's probably them,” said Joseph.

“Should we ignore them?”

Joseph grimaced. “They attacked a helpless freighter intent on killing Barl and Boso just for a handful of credits. I don't want them doing that to me or anyone else again. Act casual, like you're just heading for the gate yourselves. When you're close enough, break and attack. I'll take on the M3.”

“Roger.” said Kid.

“Got it.” said Ran.

The three fighters closed to firing range, waited until they were right on top of the fighters, then opened fire. The Buster at the rear was crippled immediately, the pilot bailed out in a panic. The heavy fighter in front of it turned to bear its weapons on them only to get taken out by their combined firepower. After that it was a dogfight, and after taking a few bumps and bruises, Joseph and his companions were the only ones left standing.

“Nice work, people.”

“But, those people,” said Kid, his voice wavering. “All those people.”

“Those people wouldn't think twice to do the same thing to you, Kid,” said Ran.

“She's right, Kid,” said Joseph, “Pirates don't generally go for mercy. You're worth more to them dead than alive. Don't forget what they would have done to Barl and Boso.”

Kid sighed. “I know. But why do they do it?”

On the monitor Ran shrugged. “Some are desperate, most are just greedy. After a while you stop seeing other pilots as people and just as targets.”

“But won't we start just seeing pirates as targets, too?”

Joseph was going to answer that, but realized what the answer was: he already did.

They rounded up what salvage they could from the debris, then glided to a motionless hulk. Joseph got out of the Marauder and floated to the Buster he capped at the star of the battle. He set the computer to his navigation network and set the autopilot for Argon Prime, when it eventually limped there, the shipyards could put her right again in no time.

“Now let's go rescue our transport.”

It wasn't going to be easy. The convoy they had intercepted weren't the

pirates that had attacked the First Choice. Those were Novas, and they were still lurking around the station in wait.

“Oh crap,” said Kid. “I hate Novas.”

“Just keep moving, you'll be fine. Still, couldn't hurt to try and even the odds a little. I was saving these for a special occasion. This is as special as it gets.”

Joseph fired off four hurricane missiles at one of the Novas, and watched in disappointment as they were all shot down by its rear turret.

“Great.”

“Got any better ideas?” said Ran.

“Don't go easy on them. Let's do it.”

It was a battle Joseph should never have gotten into. He'd become too bold after his recent victory and didn't realize until too late the odds were against him. He strafed and fired till his guns were dry. The Novas didn't hit often, but when they did it packed a hell of a punch. His guns were running on empty faster than he thought they would.

Before he knew it he was taking hull damage, and only one Nova was down.

Kid's voice crackled over the comm, “She can't take more of—” and was no more.

“Kid!”

“Joe! We gotta fall back!” said Ran.

“I know! Get out of here. I'll try and—”

The Marauder shook and Joseph saw his right wing blown clean off. His cockpit cracked, fractured, shattered. He thanked the Goners he was in a spacesuit and ejected. His ship drifted at full speed for a kilometer before the reactor blew. The Mossfoot Marauder was no more.

Joseph spared himself a moment for regret. “Damn...” He looked up the Nova swing around to face him. All Joseph could think was “So this is how I'm going to die.”

Then another fighter dropped down in between them. “BACK OFF!” said Ran. “We're leaving. I'm taking him with me.”

The Nova captain snickered. “You're both leaving, alright. In bodyba—” he didn't finish the sentence as Ran opened fire with all four PAC cannons. The Nova veered away as it's shields dropped, and the rear turret blasted into her ship.

“RAN! GET OUT OF HERE!”

“Not without you!” she yelled. But she had been stationary and didn't have the speed to avoid the incoming fire. Her ship was torn in two, the rear half exploded, the front half drifted forward towards the planet. The Nova was crippled, and limped away, unable to continue the fight.

For a moment she saw Ran in her spacesuit, pounding against the canopy of her ship, unable to eject. She stopped and looked at him. He looked at her, his spacesuit unable to catch up to the wreckage. He could hear her voice in his spacesuit, breaking up as the batteries died on her vessel.

“Guess I should have ran, huh?” She laughed weakly. The ship rotated away, and he couldn't see her. It completed its rotation, and she seemed so much farther away now.

“Don't blame yourself. I couldn't leave you here. I'm sorry. I wasn't fast enough.”

“Just try to get out of the cockpit, Ran! Maybe they'll leave us alone, we can get to the station, we can start over!”

“Canopy's jammed, Joe. Sorry.” the ship rotated around again. By the time he could see her again, he could barely make her out in the cockpit. “You

know, I always wanted to see space, even as a kid.”

“I know, Ran.”

“The thing is, I never wanted to see it alone. Thanks for being there for me, Joe.”

Joseph's lip quivered. “Ran.”

“It's okay, Joe. It's okay. Get to the station, get the hell out of here.”

The radio died, and the ship rotated away, slipping closer to the planet's atmosphere. He couldn't see her anymore.

Joseph turned his suit around, and headed for the station with the First Choice docked.

When he got within a couple of kilometers he contacted Barl.

“Barl, come pick me up.”

“Yarp.” He clearly had seen what had happened on his console.

The First Choice was a klick away when an M5 pirate swooped in laughing and opened fire.

“YARP!”

It's 25MW shield had been damaged in the last battle, and the M5 easily tore it to pieces. The M5 screamed past, laughing, and almost rammed Joseph in the helmet.

With only the sound of his air regulator running, Joseph realized just how alone he was in the universe. He'd lost everything he'd worked for, and everyone he'd cared about.

The pirates didn't seem interested in capturing him, they had gathered closer to the planet's atmosphere for some reason. He weighed up his options. He could dock at the station, book passage back to Argon Prime, and maybe call it quits. A life in space had cost him too much already and he didn't have enough credits for a new ship.

He could go home, go back to his job.

Without Ran.

Joseph sat there in space for a moment. What was the point now?

His spacesuit's nav unit beeped. He checked it. The captured Buster was awaiting further orders. He checked it again. He couldn't believe it, he still had a ship! The Buster was busted up, down to half its hull, but it still flew.

Joseph didn't have enough credits for a new ship, but he did have enough credits to fix up an old one.

CHAPTER 10 – STARTING OVER

It was a long and slow trip home. The Buster was beat up and almost as slow as Joseph in his space suit. It took a good hour for the two to rendezvous in space. He breathed a sigh of relief as he climbed into the cockpit and carefully make his way back to Argon Prime.

By the time he fixed the Buster and had it armed and equipped similar to what the Marauder had been, he was almost broke.

He sat at the bar closest to the docking pylons, in full view of both Argon Prime and his new ship – the Mossfoot Marauder II. This time the bear on the side held a blaster pistol and the motto underneath him said “Never Forget!”

Someone sat down beside him and ordered a double shot of spacefuel.

Joseph turned. “Rudager?”

Rudager nodded, and took a hit of the vile drink. “Sorry to hear about your crew. I should have warned you better. But you wouldn't have listened.”

“Warned me about what?”

“Kid, what happened to you out there? You're not alone. It happens to everyone, sooner or later.” He took a drink. “It happened to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

There was anger in his voice now. “You going off acting the hero. Going to clean up space single handed. You ever stop to think that once you were on the pirates' radar they'd be gunning for you? Did you ever stop to think that what happened to your freighter was a trap?”

Joseph blinked, not understanding. Rudager sighed. “You wanted to know what happened to me, well here.” He tossed Joseph a crystal. “This is the rest of my journal. For all the good it will do you. After you read that you'll see why I'm happy just flying about doing a bit of trading instead of trying to save the universe.” He raised his glass and said, “To Barl. Best damn dumb freighter pilot I ever had.” He didn't wait for Joseph to join in, instead downing the rest of his drink, slamming it down on the counter, and leaving without another word.

Joseph turned the crystal over in his hand. What had happened to Rudager?

It all fell apart in Danna's Chance.

The Mossfoot Fleet was 3 freighters strong with decent fighter support. Discoverer M5s mostly, but my Pirate Nova and two Busters along for heavy support.

I got word of a score to be made in Thuruk's Beard. A factory was overloaded with quantum tubes because of pirate raids coming out of Teladi space. I also knew of a factory in Argon space in desperate need of quantum tubes.

I decided it was worth the risk and gathered all my freighters to

Thuruk's Beard. We loaded up on our cargo and took on a passenger who was going in our direction, putting him on the MF Third Charm. Every ship I had flew escort, and at first things seemed to go well, except for some strange static coming from the Third Charm's communications system.

Once we entered Danna's Chance the pirates struck. I was one of the last to jump in system (the Nova being the slowest of the fighters) and by the time I arrived half my fighters were down. Kenn was desperately holding off some strange fighter I'd never seen before, M3 class but the computer said it had shields three times stronger than any M3 I'd seen before. It had four wings, of sorts, all at right angles to one another.

I tried to regroup what was left of the fleet. The Cargo ships were best off making a run for it while the two remaining Discoverers, Kenn's Buster and I tried to hold the pirates off.

We didn't last long. The Discoverers were blown out of the sky by the M3, I'd never even had time to get to know the pilots, but it bought me enough time to hit it from the side while it was distracted. On top of that, a dozen pirate Busters darted around and left the fray to take on the cargo ships.

"The shields are too tough on that thing, and I'm out of missiles!" said Kenn

“If we turn our back on it, it’ll shoot us down before we can reach the convoy. You’re the only one fast enough to catch up with those Busters. Break off, and leave this monster to me.”

Kenn broke off the attack and I did what I could to harass the M3 pilot, trying desperately to avoid his rear turret’s line of sight as well as his forward guns.

“Why not jump out of that ship and we’ll fight mano et mano in spacesuits, huh?”

I heard the distinct throaty laugh of a Paranid as a reply.

Dodging behind an asteroid I spun around hoping to give it a blast as it turned the corner then run like hell before it could return fire.

Then it simply vanished. A jump had been detected.

“Had enough, huh? Well, that’s hardly surprising.” I said to no one in particular.

I checked the triplex scanner to see how the rest of the fleet were doing, then kicked my engine into full throttle when I saw the debris.

The Second Thought had been blown out of space. Busters

were scooping up cargo containers.

Kenn was nowhere to be seen, nor was the Third Charm.

“Rudager to Mossfoot Fleet, call in!”

“Yarp...” said a familiar voice. The First Choice was still making its way to the next jump gate.

“Sir?” said Sten. “The Third Charm has left the field of battle.”

“It made it to the jump gate before you?”

“No. It... it jumped, sir.”

I cocked my head. Only the First Choice had a jumpdrive at this point, and 25MW shields. I had planned on taking the profits from this run and outfitting them all with better shields and jumpdrives.

“That’s not possible.”

“I’m afraid it is, sir. We had a brief mayday from Third Charm then it switched channels and direction. One of the Busters dropped an object and it scooped it up. Shortly after that it disappeared. The Busters then attacked the Second Thought

and destroyed her... I'm afraid... I'm sorry, sir. Kenn didn't make it."

I felt all alone in the universe just then. Almost everyone who was under my command, who believed in me, believed I wouldn't give them a bum steer... gone.

"Um... sir? I don't wish to disturb you in this rather unfortunate moment but... would you mind saving us?"

I snapped out of it and realized the Busters had turned their attention to the First Choice.

I grit my teeth and snarled at the viewscreen. "Turn her hard about, Barl! Bring her back towards me!"

With her shields fully upgraded, the First Choice survived the battering it took from eight Busters for quite some time. Until I got there and turned that eight into four in one swoop. The others turned their attention on me, but that's what I wanted. I wanted them to know who sent them to meet their maker.

Hi. I'm Rudager. The last living person you will ever see.

The fight didn't last long. Rage and adrenaline took the place of common sense and tactics. I rammed one whose shields were down and burst through its fireball like an angry god. One

tried to run but I shot him down like a dog. A third threw everything it had at me, I took it, it wrecked my shields and my hull, blew out my rear turret and sucked the gunner into space, a kid who had just wanted to see the stars and see some action. But he couldn't cut his engines in time and swung in front of me. And the last? The last didn't know how damaged I was and after a few desperate blasts surrendered. He fled in his spacesuit for the nearest station.

He got about ten meters before I vaporized him.

Thanks for the ship.

The Nova was a wreck, and the money made from the one surviving cargo ship could barely repair it. I sold it for scrap instead and took over the Pirate Buster. Sten and Barl found me tinkering with her engines in a closed hanger. While most cargo and passenger transfer was handled outside via docking pylons and airlocks, sealed bays were still used, particularly for pilot aiming to do a bit of DIY modifications. As a result, fire rescue teams were often stationed nearby as well.

“Um... sir? I figured with the money made from the quantum tube sales, we could—”

“I don't want to hear about it.”

“But I think we can afford another transport and—”

“And what? Let me lead them into another trap?”

Sten had nothing to say.

Barl said “Yarp?”

“That’s right, a trap! That passenger we took on board back at the quantum tub fab? A pirate plant. He killed or incapacitated the crew, sent the signal for the pirates to attack, and picked up a jump drive one of the Busters dropped off for him. Must have been a tech wiz as well to set one of those up so quickly. Then he zips off with the cargo, and according to the logs that’s the same time that weird M3 took off as well. He must have been the leader. The Busters were just expendable flunkies. We got screwed royally. And people died because of it. Kenn died because of it. I gave the pirates an ultimatum to try and get Warrant back, and in return they almost destroyed me. I should have known better.”

I took a deep breath. Sten and Barl said nothing.

“Look. Forget about it. Just go about trading like you normally would. If you can buy another Mercury and hire a CPA to go with it, do it. I just need some time alone right now.”

Sten nodded and left with Barl. "Er... yes sir. Sorry sir."

Joseph wondered if this was what Rudager had been referring to. He'd been harassing pirates for some time, and rather than face him in an obvious head on confrontation they'd hit him in a way that really hurt. It wasn't just about victory, or money, but "getting one over" on your enemy.

Had the attack on the First Choice been made for the express purpose of drawing his resources out, so they could hit them all at once? It seemed improbable, but it was clear the pirates were cleverer than he'd given them credit for. The decimating of Rudager's resources had crippled him for months, and the attack on himself had left him penniless and almost dead. Almost. They could have killed him if they wanted to, but it was clear they didn't want to.

They wanted to send a message: Do not mess with the pirates. We will take from you everything you hold dear. Run home, boy, live a long life, just spread the word.

Joseph grit his teeth. He had nothing worth running home to. What he'd wanted most had been taken from him, and he'd never told her how he felt.

He felt a coldness inside him as the words sank in. He had nothing left worth running home to.

He heard Kid's voice in his head, "But won't we start just seeing pirates as targets, too?"

He remembered what the answer to that was: he already did. Now even more so.

He no longer cared what happened to him. There was only one thing left in his life: revenge.

CHAPTER 11 – CENTERING

Joseph returned to the Mossfoot Marauder II with death and destruction in his heart, only to find the ship had been impounded by the Argon Police.

“Impounded? Why?”

The guard by the airlock wasn't in a talkative mood. “I'm just here to make sure you don't board this ship. You can ask your questions to the duty officer in sector 7G.”

In the light gray and spartan duty station, the duty officer listened patiently to Joseph's heated demand for the return of his ship, then calmly said, “Only it isn't your ship, is it?”

“Of course it's my ship!”

“You are Joseph Davidson, of Tallus, Argon Prime?”

“Yes!”

“The ship YM4TG-61 is registered to you, this ship's registration is YV3R4-93. It's also been recorded as being involved in raider activities. Are you stating that you are a pirate?”

“What? No! Look, I captured that ship in battle. I have a security license – JD-140012.”

The duty officer tapped in the information. “Yes, that all checks out. As

does the capture. But I'm afraid we can't let you have your ship back.”

“Why?” Joseph's frustration increased.

“It's been reported being involved in pirate activity AFTER you captured it.”

Joseph's jaw dropped. “What?”

“We sometimes have false reports filed by anonymous sources like this. Surviving pirates or their clan trying to make your life miserable. We just need to check into it.”

“How long will that take?”

“About two weeks.”

“TWO WEEKS?!”

“Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to lower your tone. This is standard procedure, our hands are tied on the matter.”

“Isn't there any way you can speed things up?”

The duty officer's eyes narrowed. “Was that an attempt at a bribe? I do not look kindly upon such things. If I say two weeks, I *mean* two weeks.”

Joseph couldn't believe it. Two week's he'd be out of space, unable to take revenge on the bastards that did this too him. It was more than he could take. He kicked the desk and nearly broke his foot.

“SIR. Desist at once or I will have you removed from this station.”

“It's not fair! Dammit! Why are you doing this to me?! You goddamn data pusher!”

The duty clerk waved and two guard grabbed Joseph on either arm.

“Until this matter is settle you are officially restricted from Argon space. You will be escorted to the planet's surface and will not be allowed to return until this matter is settled. Do you understand?”

Joseph stopped struggling and sagged, then nodded.

As Joseph was lead out of the office the duty officer smiled, leaned back, and tapped the comm system.

“Rudager, it's Mart.”

“What happened?”

“Pretty much what you thought would happen.”

“You send him planetside?”

“He sent himself there, though I did act the dick enough to give him an excuse. Why did you want him marooned for two weeks?”

Rudager frowned. “The kid needs to cool off, or he'll get himself and everyone around him killed.”

“What do you care?”

“Remember the Marauders, Mart.” he said it like a mantra.

Mart nodded and held up a fist. On his third finger was a silver ring like Rudager's. “Remember the Marauders.”

Joseph returned to Tallus. He didn't want to, but he realized there was something now he had to do. Tell Ran's parents.

The thought made him sick. His own parents had died ten years ago in a maglev wreck, it was part of the reason why leaving home for good had been so easy. He'd much rather go out and track down her killers than have to do this. He'd known the Jesson family since he was a child. He used to play in her backyard, she used to play in his. She beat up the local bully who had been hitting him, he'd helped her pass her math exams. They went camping every summer and looked up at the stars at night, talking about what went on out there. Wars and battles, exploration and adventure.

Joseph had completely missed Ran changing from a girl to a woman, he

just never saw her “that way” until they met again on the shipyard over Argon Prime. In hindsight he realized his mind had been turning that way for some time.

It was all he could do to keep himself from crying as he walked up the driveway to Mr. And Mrs. Jesson's house, and faced one of the worst moments of his life – the tears of parents who had lost their only child.

One would think such an experience would only harden Joseph's heart for revenge, but it didn't. Perhaps it was how frustratingly understanding Ran's parents were. They were torn apart, of course, Ran's mother had to leave the room. But they didn't blame him the way he thought they would. The way he blamed himself. They had shown him the letters she sent since she bought the Ran Away, and when he had given her the Ran Far Away. She had never been happier in her life.

It reminded him how precious life really was, how each person lost in the vacuum of space was someones daughter or son. He still vowed to fight piracy wherever he saw it, but the fire from the vendetta had gone out.

He spent the next week traveling around Argon Prime, he had enough credits left over to slum it in cheap hostels and use third class maglev fare. He spent two days hiking to the top of Mount Koleho, the tallest mountain in the southern continent. Though tall, the incline was shallow enough to hike up with just a walking stick, and many Goners climbed to the temple at its summit in pilgrimage every year. From the top it almost looked like the horizon from space.

It reminded him just how big each world was. Most of them he had seen only high in orbit, and never actually traveled to their surface. It was common among spacers, yet the very reason he had traveled was so he could see these

worlds, not just in orbit, but up close. But there had always been another job, another thousand or ten thousand credits to be made. In fact, he had been running himself ragged trying to make a buck since he'd started out.

He'd forgotten why he'd gone to space in the first place. Now, from the top of Mount Koleho, he remembered.

When he got back into space the next week he was calmer. He wasn't going to spend his life just rushing from one job to another, he was going to enjoy himself. Or at least try.

He hadn't even left Argon Prime space before he got picked up on another Tango run. Most of the time these were boring and uneventful patrols, necessary duties, but not worth putting front line troops to do. This time it was different, as the Tango patrol encountered another Kha'ak patrol in Home of Light.

Joseph found himself somewhat detached from the battle. He didn't feel the adrenaline rush he once did. Instead he simply picked his targets and took them out. He hated the Kha'ak Kyon emitters – how can you dodge something like that? – but scouts were pretty worthless in a fight unless they outnumbered you five to one. Then they were deadly.

After serving his time – he volunteered to do his full weekend early – he got back to business. He worked like a dog once again, but with a goal in mind. He wanted another Mercury with a CPA on board. Only this time he'd make sure they stuck to the safe lanes. And then he'd take his time, go from world to world while they made a steady profit. Explore the different sectors out there, learn the different cultures, do what he always wanted to do.

This time he'd do it right.

Chapter 12 – A Pirate's Interlude

Tect Feckson didn't become a Pirate Lord by being fair, and he didn't stay a Pirate Lord by being stupid. Once upon a time if someone challenged the Pirate Lord, wishing to take his place, that Lord would face them in battle, daggers in hands, till only one of them remained standing.

As the janidroid swept away the pile of ash and half disintegrated boots, Tect wondered when the rest of the pirates would get the bloody memo that he did NOT roll that way.

Tect didn't dress like a pirate, preferring instead a light gray business suit with an Armani leather belt and holster for his sidearm. The briefing room looked anything but the medieval hall it had once been. Now it was well lit and clean, with Paranid oak furniture for all of the clan chiefs to sit in along a long table. Which made the leather clad cybernetic nut brandishing a serrated knife who challenged him to single combat look only all the more ridiculous. Killing him had been a mercy.

He holstered the disintegrator and waved over his chief accountant, who coolly handed him this month's plundering reports.

Tect analyzed the data. Unlike his predecessors, Tect had a head for business, not just looting. He was as cunning as he was ruthless. When his

pirates took out a station supplying a valuable component, it wasn't so he could plunder said component (though he let the police believe this all they wanted) it was because he wanted a particular other station to run out of that component at a certain time and because he had his fingers in the only other stations within jumping range to resupply it. He made ten times the amount this way than simply by looting the station debris.

His raids on convoys and fighters were similarly diverting from their actual goal. They separated the Delaxian wheat from the chaff in his troops. Darwinism in action. Those that survived their assignments had their performances reviewed and were reassigned fighters based on it. Those saddled with an M5 Harrier with only a 1MW shield for protection quickly understood that this meant “needs improvement.”

Tect realized that even a pirate operation could be run as efficiently as a business. Just as Sun Tsu's “The Art of War” had been used for centuries by corporate businessmen, he had found that Bill Gates' “My Way or the Internet Superhighway” was just as applicable to warriors.

His accountant looked dispassionately as the janidroid left, its task efficiently completed. “Sir, I don't think some of your more... rambunctious employees will ever cope with your new restructuring.”

“I am optimistic enough to believe that if you have sound facts, you *can* put a sound policy into effect,” said Tect, still reading the monthly report.

“I agree, however, some of our employees are... how shall I put this? Too stupid to complete the basic business practices course you've made mandatory. It's causing aggravation.”

“In the digital age you need to make knowledge workers out of every employee possible.”

The accountant sighed. “Yes, sir.”

“The CEO's role in raising a company's corporate IQ is to establish an atmosphere that promotes knowledge sharing and collaboration. It's simple logic, Hampstead. If we have smarter pirates, we will have more efficient piracy, fewer losses in manpower or credits, and the ability to expand our influence further. Those who cannot keep up have no place in the new company structure.”

Hampstead had heard this before, and he was right. It was working. Pirate influence was on the rise, the stupider pirates were treated as the cannon fodder they were, leaving a hard core, educated and loyal elite. That reminded him of an order of business he did not wish to bring up.

Tect spared him the task for a moment. “Hampstead, are you sure these figures are accurate?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

Tect frowned. “I thought the Marauder problem had been taken care of.”

“They were, sir. You saw the footage of the battle in Farnham's Legend yourself. Rudager left a broken man.”

“Then why, tell me, do I have him taking out TWO of my convoys the very next day? He should not have had enough credits to buy another ship so quickly.”

“Perhaps it was one of the other Marauders? We did not kill them all.”

“Perhaps.” But Tect wasn't convinced. After the events in Bandit's Remnants, he'd thought he'd seen the last of the Marauders. They had been broken. Their leader, Rudager Tice, had been broken. There had been rumors he still flew the spaceways, but never flew with a wingman, never organized a hunt.

Then two months ago he began receiving reports of a green Buster with

the logo of the Mossfoot Marauders on it attacking his Strike teams. The ships and men were easily expendable and indeed intended to be lost sooner or later, but it concerned him that Rudager might in fact be growing a spine once more.

Tect kept a close eye on the situation, and soon it became clear he was building a small fleet. He had changed his name and even the registration number of his vessel, but the fool had clung to sentimentality and had kept the logo on his ship.

But as so many things did in life, this worked to his advantage. For some time he had sought to build bridges with the Yaki, pirates who embodied much of what he aspired to. They had received him warmly, not as a ruffian but as a prospective equal. Discussions had been friendly and productive, lines were shown, promises were made not to cross them, and a possible alliance was in the works, should he prove himself worthy. And the possible return of the Marauders had provided such a test.

Hampstead couldn't wait any longer to get the bad news over with. "Sir. I'm afraid you have a holo from the Yaki. Brought by special courier. I really must show it to you at once so he can return with your reply."

Tect raised an eyebrow. "Holo?" Not sending a flesh-and-blood representative was a clear sign of disapproval. What had he done wrong to warrant this? "Very well, play it at once."

Hampstead placed a small dome shape device on the ground, making sure it faced Tect properly. A crisp and lifelike hologram appeared, probably stolen Boron technology, showing a man in a white suit, hands folded in front of him.

"I am second-tier representative of the Yaki, Nomo Kasushi. Am I speaking to pirate lord Tect Feckson?"

Second tier? This was worse than he thought. "I am Tect Feckson."

The holo beeped, recognizing the voice print and proceeding to the next stage of the message.

“Many apologies, Lord Feckson, but I am afraid we cannot accept your request for an alliance with the Yaki at this time. We wish you all success in your endeavors.”

“Might I ask why?”

The holo beeped again, recognizing the question, and skipping to the appropriate section. “You were given a task. A simple task by our standards. You had proven yourself clever and intelligent when you destroyed the Marauders a year ago. When we tasked you to destroy what was left of them, we were disappointed that you did not.”

Tect arched an eyebrow again. “Did your Lord not receive the holo I sent showing the battle at Farnham's Legend?”

Another beep and the disk skipped ahead. “He did, and was disappointed that you did chose to leave their leader, Rudager, alive.”

Tect wondered if the Yaki truly understood how power must be wielded. “A dead man would serve no purpose, while a broken man serves as a warning to others.”

Another beep. “An animal is most dangerous when it is wounded and cornered. Did he not take out two of your convoys the next day?”

“Enough of this. I will not banter idioms with a machine. If I track down and kill this Rudager Tice, will my request for an alliance be reconsidered?”

Another beep. “It would be considered.”

“Very well. Consider it done.”

The hologram bowed deeply and switched off.

“Return the hologram to the courier when we are done, Hampstead.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Walk with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

They left the briefing room and headed to the observation deck. Tect and Hampstead discussed what to do with captured freighter crews, and which mines to assign them to. Outside, pirates worked in spacesuits carrying out a variety of repairs. A spine of support structure surrounded her. The Dreadnought, as Tect had renamed her, was in a chrysalis awaiting her metamorphosis.

“What was the Dreadnought originally, Hampstead?”

Hampstead had a photographic memory for such things. “She's made up primarily of the Vengeance, an Argon Capital Carrier ship, and the Profiteer, a Teladi Albatross station transporter. The Profiteer had been destroyed during the Kha'ak war in an adjacent system. You know how we captured the Vengeance.”

Tect nodded. “Do you know what the word Dreadnought means?”

“Old English, I suppose, sir.”

“It means 'fear nothing.' The Dreadnought was the name of the first battleship of the Terran oceans. In the three Terran world wars, do you know how many battleships were destroyed in direct combat?”

“Many, I would assume, sir.”

“Virtually none,” Tect corrected. “Battleships were far too valuable to actually USE in front line battles. Everyone had them, yet everyone was afraid to use them. Because to use them meant they might lose them, and that would be devastating. In the first world war not a single battleship was sunk by another battleship. In the second, there was the famous battle of the Bismark, in which it was proved to be far more valuable in tying up the Allies resources

trying to hunt it down than as an actual weapon of war. This was surpassed only by her sister ship, the Tirpitz, which sank nothing but tied up more enemy resources just by trying to find and sink her than virtually any other weapon in the history of Terra. The Yamato, the largest ever made in any of the Terran wars, saw very little combat. It was sunk in a suicide run against the Americans at the end of the war. They stopped making battleships after that, at least, until the modern age that is. They simply aren't cost effective. Do you know what the lesson of all this is?"

"Don't build battleships, sir?"

"On the contrary. The lesson is, if you build one, you must know how to use it *properly*."

The Yaki courier ship flew to the jump gate.

"I don't suppose the courier could have missed what we're doing here, could he?"

Tect smiled. "Oh dear. I suppose he'll end up reporting this little construction project to his superiors."

CHAPTER 13 – BIRTHDAY BOY

Joseph had finished a three day layover on Kingdom End. It was as beautiful on the surface as it was from space. He'd visited the Queen's Palace, which was open to the public only two days of every year, and their museums had strange but beautiful abstract art that dated back to the pre-Argon era. The special tourist nose filters sold at all spaceports managed to remove the smell of ammonia, but the air still left an unpleasant taste on his tongue.

Having returned to the Mossfoot Marauder II, he found a message on his computer. Rudager wanted to meet him in Seizewell's main dockyard. It was a good two day journey, but he hadn't been in Teladi space for a while, and it was about time he re-established his contacts there.

He felt a twinge of nervousness as his ship docked, amongst the other vessels at the pylon were two small freighters, wide at the back with the head fashioned like space helmets, with just a hint of a death's head about them.

Pirate freighters.

They were of an obsolete design. Most pirate shipyards had been destroyed years ago. These days they flew the same transports as everyone else to avoid attracting attention. However, the Teladi were flexible when it came to

piracy – after all it was just another form of profit making – and so they tended to give the pirates greater leeway unless they actively attacked Teladi ships. In return, the pirates tended to leave the Teladi alone. The other races were anything but happy about this arrangement, as it only made piracy a bigger problem than it was, but there was little they could do about it.

Joseph stared at the death helmet ships across from him and scowled. There was little he could do about it, either.

Rudager was waiting for him at the local bar, one that was a bit rougher than the ones he was used to. Spacefuel was the most popular drink here, which affected the Teladi worse than just about any other species.

There was something different about Rudager today. Maybe he was just drunk, but he looked more confident than usual, pleased with himself. The lights barely illuminated the plain metal table he sat at.

“There you are. I had already left when you messaged me to tell me you were on your way. Had to rush back.” He gestured to a chair, which Joseph took.

“Sorry, was enjoying the sites on Kingdom End.”

“Good man. Good man. How goes business?”

“Slow. I'm not rushing anything this time.”

“Again, good man.” He paused a moment and looked at the ice in his drink. Unable to find more small talk, he pushed a sheet of paper to him.

“Here.”

Joseph picked up the paper and looked at the numbers on them.

“It looks like a start up code?”

“Two of them.”

“For what?”

Rudager looked out the window to the docking pylon, where the two death helmet trading ships were still berthed. Joseph couldn't believe it.

“For those?”

“Happy birthday, kid.”

“But it's not my birthday.”

“It will be someday. Shut up and enjoy.”

Joseph still didn't understand. “Why? How?”

“Why is easy. You lost everything at Farnham's Legend. I can relate to that. I figured they owed you a ship. But hey, those pirate transports hold frak all, so I figured they owed you two. As for how,” He paused a moment, “I'd rather not go into that. Let's just say I came out of retirement for a while.”

“Well, thanks. I mean it. But won't I get in trouble using those?” he gestured to the ships and just how obviously piratey they were.

Rudager shook his head. “Naw. Ever since the main pirate dockyards got smashed by the Argon Fleet, they've been phasing them out, selling them when they can. You'll find them in private hands every so often. I've taken the liberty of changing the registration codes on them, but that brings me to my next point.”

“Which is?”

“I want you to stay in safe space. You know, places heavily patrolled by the local governments. Don't go into lawless space at any cost and avoid the border sectors if you can.”

“That's what I planned to do, but why—?”

“You want the long or the short version?”

“Short.”

“Pirates are stupid.”

“Long.”

“Back when you were doing a bit of pirate fishing, some of the pilots bailed and escaped, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, when they got back and reported what happened to them, they naturally told them what they saw – a heavily armed Buster with a green teddy bear on the side had swooped in and ripped them a new one. That triggers a few memories. They look into it, and find your ship registration and the name – Mossfoot Marauder. That triggers more memories. Sure the registration number is different and the pilot's name is different, but—”

“They think I'm you?”

“Yeah, I think they do.”

“But you're still flying around, how come they haven't found you?”

“See, I've been laying low ever since... well, I haven't fished or hunted in a long time. I got a device, special for Argon cover ops, which changes the registration ID on a regular basis. My ship uses Boron paint, partially organic and changes when electrical current is passed through. When I have to fight it's all black to help hide it against the stars, make visual confirmation difficult.”

He stopped and looked down. He fiddled with the silver double-M ring on his finger. “I didn't get those ships for you because *they* owed them to you. I got them because *I* did. I should have told you to get rid of the logo. But I didn't think... well, that's just it, I didn't think. I thought the Marauders would be forgotten by now, or that they wouldn't jump to the conclusion that someone with the same paint job was one of us. Was me.”

“Thing is, I made sure they knew it was me when I took their ships this time. I couldn't leave well enough alone. So they'll be on the lookout for you. I'd suggest ditching your paint job, changing registrations, taking those two freighters and make a nice easy fortune over the next few years. Forget about

the rest of space, the corner you're in could keep you occupied for decades and you still wouldn't see it all.”

Joseph nodded. It was pretty much what he had wanted to do anyway. He doubted he'd stray far from safe space for quite some time, if ever again. Rudager and Joseph talked for a while longer, and once again Rudager gave him part of his journal, a fragment this time, so he could see what the Marauders had once been. He got up and left, leaving Joseph to read the datapad at his table.

It certainly helped explain the long memory of these pirates. Not only had Rudager taken to raiding pirate convoys, but he used their own ships against them!

I looked over the fighter. The pirate's version of the Buster was actually quite impressive. So much untapped potential. They had stripped away everything they felt was unnecessary, only they failed to realize they could use that saved weight and space for even more improvements. It only had two 5MW shields instead of three, and sadly I doubted it could be fitted with more, but the engines were replaced with something larger and potentially much faster than any other M4 out there, and could be more maneuverable to boot. While it couldn't carry Beta pulse cannons like my old Buster, only the weaker Alphas, it had a much hotter reactor, which meant it could fire those guns longer. With the time and money to invest in her, only an M5 could catch up to her (which generally weren't a threat) and only an M3 could beat her (which were easy to run away from).

A cold grin grew on my lips. The pirates had no idea what they had created in the hopes of saving a few credits.

Their own destruction.

“Here comes another wave. Same tactics as before. Take out the Falcons and Harriers first if you can. Force the Busters to surrender, cap the ship, space the pilots. No prisoners. No survivors.”

We were called the Marauders. From my one Buster I had forced two others to surrender, and two more. It seems the pilots tend to panic when they assume they have a third shield slot and suddenly realize they're taking hull damage.

For my new captures I found pilots like myself. Traders who had been ravaged by pirate ambushes, who had lost their fortunes or loved ones because of them. Pilots who wanted revenge. The pirate Busters were just the trick too, we danced in dogfights like spaceflies, the heavy weapons couldn't touch us, and the lighter weapons didn't do enough damage before we could turn on the shooters and fry them.

I tried to keep Barl and Sten out of the loop, keep my business life separate from my privateer life. When Sten inquired about

the money I had been withdrawing, I told him I had a side endeavor planned. And when money started flowing back in thanks to salvage and captured ships, he stopped asking questions. I had gained good favor with many of the local races and purchased law enforcement licenses for me and my gang.

We got lucky this time. Two of the Falcons surrendered. As far as M3 class heavy fighters went these were some of the worst, without even a rear turret for defense to make up for its crappy speed. But taken almost completely intact? They were worth half a mill credits each.

Hitting their raiders like this was all well and good, but I still wanted to hurt them like they hurt me.

"See if you can download any information about their convoys on those Falcons," I said to my wingman. "I want to start hunting bigger fish."

We cracked open a crate of spacefuel and celebrated like we had won the Xenon war. The Marauders had their first major victory today. We destroyed the pirate base in Atraeus's Clouds. It had been cobbled together from the wrecks of large transport ships and an old Teladi carrier, and was the primary source of pirate activities in Boron space. It also acted as a stopover

point for pirates from Teladi space heading into Argon territory.

It was surrounded by laser towers, but a surprise missile attack took care of them quickly. After that it was a matter of taking out the fighters they launched and hammering the place into rubble. We lost a single ship but recovered the pilot. The reward alone was enough to buy him a new ship.

All in all it was a good day. We toasted to our victory and those yet to come.

“This, my friends, is only the beginning!” I said confidently to loud cheers of approval.

Joseph noticed that Rudager hadn't included how it all came to an end in the journal. But for months the Marauders had been a huge threat to pirates everywhere. And they only got bigger. Every successful strike got them more capped ships, more reward, and as their reputation grew volunteers from across the quadrant sought him out to join. Pirates made few friends, but many enemies. All the police and security forces respected the Marauders because they never crossed the line, and often did what the police could not.

Rudager had been the rallying force behind the Marauders, and the pirates knew this. If they had thought Joseph was Rudager, and he was not only back hunting pirates but also building up a fleet, they'd want to nip the threat in the bud. But if they killed him, well then he was just a martyr. The police would probably come down on the pirates hard in revenge.

Joseph scowled, and for the first time since his break on Argon Prime, felt angry. Ran had died because of a goddamn paint job! Kid and Barl and Boso, all dead because the pirates were too lazy to do any fact checking. He rested his forehead in his hands. He was even angry at Rudager. All the while he had been giving him advice and he didn't once think to say, "Oh, by the way, I pissed off half the pirates in the galaxy so you might want to consider a different paint job."

The two ships out the window weren't even a down payment for what he had been through. Now he'd have to find a pilot for them.

A large figure stood in front of Joseph, and he started, thinking it might be pirate thug after his hide. The man was bald and vaguely familiar, and a man almost as big and just as bald stood behind him. The front man handed Joseph a note.

Joe

Thought you could use a couple of pilots.

Rudager

Well, that solved one problem. He looked back at the bald man. "Um... so... can you tell me your qualifications?"

"Garp."

"Larp."

"You have GOT to be kidding me."

The pilots were Carl and Anaplasmosis Commodious, or Anap. How the hell Anap got his name was anyone's guess, even he didn't know. They were, as Joseph guessed, relations of Barl, his brother and his cousin. They were, in fact, a bit more articulate than their relation but still largely used single syllable utterances. Like Barl they had a way of making one word do the work of a hundred. It had to be the strangest human family he had ever come across.

When they heard of the death of Barl they had contacted the one person they knew had associated with him, Rudager, and asked him for details. It was shortly after this that Rudager had 'acquired' the two freighters, which they were now happy to pilot. Whether they were paying off some debt or looking to avenge their brother's death Joseph had no idea. But for now they were content with doing simple trading in the ill-gotten vessels.

Joseph renamed the first of the two trading ships "Ran's Memory." He wanted to always remember why he had these ships, and what it had cost him. He sat down at the controls of the trader to test it out. Simple controls, small cargo space, but still larger than what an M3 could carry. The weapon's loadout was what he expected, just a rear turret and... wait a minute. Six gun mountings on the front? Joseph checked it again, but it was true. The front of the vessel could carry six guns, and could carry anything up to High Energy Plasma Throwers. HEPTs were slow but packed a devastating punch. Close up they were lethal against fighters, and at range they were ideal for attacking capital ships. Six of them. Joseph smirked as he realized what the second ship *had* to be called.

"Ran's Revenge."

CHAPTER 14 – TO SINK THE MARAUDER

Joseph had sent Ran's Memory and Ran's Revenge back into Boron space for some nice safe cargo runs but stayed in Siezewell for a couple of days to visit the planet and reestablish acquaintances. Before he left, he hung out at the bar again when he heard a familiar voice.

“An' then these whipper snappers, they start shootin me up, thinking they're goin to separate me from me precious cargo!”

It was impossible to mistake that voice. It was the old prospector he had saved what felt like a lifetime ago. When he had finished his story, Joseph came over and reintroduced himself.

“I thought you'd retired?”

“I thought so to,” said the prospector, “But you know how space is. It gets in your blood.”

Joseph nodded. It certainly did.

“Oh I gots me a nice summer home on Argon Prime likes I said, but it gets boring staying there all the time. So I comes out here and sticks to the safe lanes, swappin stories and making money... usually losing money but I gots more than I needs. So how's life treating you?”

Joseph didn't know if he should tell him, but he did. How the old man's

generous gift had allowed him to buy a freighter, how he had lost everything and everyone, and how he was starting up all over again.”

The prospector shook his head sadly. “Them’s the breaks, them’s the breaks. But look, if you’re interested, I gots me another of them security boxes floatin around out there. Ya can have it if ya want.”

Joseph frowned. “Why? I haven’t done anything for you.”

“Nope, but it’s deep in pirate territory, Danna’s Chance, so there’s no way I’ll be going to go after it. I get enough excitement jes hangin in Teladi territory. Besides, ya can pay off my bar tab as a sign of appreciation if ya like.”

“Sure.” It was a hell of a bar tab, but chicken feed compared to the prospect of another quarter million credits. He got the coordinates, fired up the Mossfoot Marauder II, forgot everything Rudager had warned him about, and left.

En route to Danna’s Chance he came across a small Kha’ak invasion force. No cruisers in the region, just two clusters. He was just grateful he wasn’t in Argon territory or he’d have been conscripted on the spot. The clusters broke apart and a couple dozen scouts flew about around. On the sector navigator they seemed to swell and swarm like angry bees, bees with a hell of a sting. They blocked the path to the south jumpgate, so all Joseph could do was sit and wait. Freighters and fighters were slaughtered from the coordinated beam attacks of the Kha’ak until the larger ships could arrive.

His frustration overcame common sense and he joined in the fray, taking down a couple of scouts before the heavy fighter got on his tail and tore his shields to shreds. Strafing just didn’t work against beam weapons. His rear engine took a hit before Joseph could get behind the vessel and take it down.

“Great, that'll be at least fifty grand to fix,” he muttered. The debris in the field of battle, mostly unfired missiles, would help offset that cost.

After that it was strangely quiet on the way to Danna's Chance. He passed by a pirate base which didn't so much as bat an eyelash and didn't encounter any hostiles in any sector. Regular trade routes operated as if pirates never patrolled this region of space.

He reached the sector and began to track down the coordinates when a warning beep came over his computer. The largest Xenon craft he had ever seen popped through the adjacent jumpgate and started firing on the trading ships in its path. It was an M6 corvette, bigger than anything short of a carrier or cruiser. Anything it hit flared and vanished.

“Oh hell.”

The SOS's started quickly. There were no fighters in the area other than a few M5, but there was no way they could take a corvette on. Nor could he hope to win against it. They had turrets on all sides to take care of pests like him.

But maybe he didn't need to beat it, maybe he just needed to draw it's fire long enough for the others to get away. He broadcast his intentions to all those available – all vessels make best possible speed for nearest jump gate, do not engage, will try to draw fire – then turned to attack.

It was stupid. It was moronic. It was... not firing on him at all. He blasted it with all PAC cannons. He even put a dent on its shields. But even as he pulled away there was no return fire. Where was the turret fire? He quickly scanned it and discovered to his surprise it had none. No turrets, just massive guns on the front. Bloody single minded Xenon had developed her to take on large ships head on while completely ignoring point defense from fighters.

“All fighters in the sector, the Xenon ship has no turrets! Repeat, no turrets! Attack it from behind! Get those engines!”

A couple of M5s joined in and began a joint attack on the Xenon corvette's blind spot. Then through the jumpgate came three more fighters to join the attack.

Only they didn't fire on the Xenon. They fired on Joseph.

“CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! We have a Xenon threat in system! Cease fire at once!”

The fighters didn't respond. Joseph quickly assessed the threat: a Harrier light fighter, Buster medium and Nova heavy fighter. Standard pirate Mix group formation. He pulled away from the field of battle before he lost his shields. The M5s that had helped him scattered, leaving Joseph stuck between Xenon and pirate fire.

“Ohgodohgodohgodohgod.” Joseph jinked, banked and strafed to avoid the incoming fire, then accidentally ran into one of the Xenon's massive plasma bursts, which knocked out all three of his shields.

“This is not good.”

He turned, aimed and fired on the Harrier, taking it out in a single concentrated burst, then focused on the Buster. If he could get rid of the fast ships he stood a chance of escaping. The Buster's shields bucked and blew. He looked at his damage readout. Both engines had been hit. He couldn't outrun either ship, and he certainly couldn't outgun them.

Then a long, slow, steady stream of yellow plasma poured into the Xenon corvette. Joseph tracked the incoming fire to its source and could barely make out the incoming form of an Argon Centaur corvette. He didn't have long to breath a sigh of relief, however, as the Nova pounced on him once again.

The Marauder and the pirate Nova engaged in a swirling dance of death.

Joseph strafed, trying to keep in the turrets blind spot, far enough back to avoid incoming fire. A massive explosion near the jumpgate indicated the Xenon's demise, which seemed to distract the Nova long enough for Joseph to bring it down.

Joseph listened to the sound of his own breath, reassuring himself he was still alive.

“Ship registration YV3R4-93 please come in.”

Joseph looked at the flaring hulk of the Xenon corvette and the spreading wreckage of the Nova. So close. So close.

“Ship ID YV3R4-93, please respond.”

Joseph snapped out of it, and realized he was hanging motionless in space.

“This is... this is the Mossfoot Marauder II to Argon Centaur corvette. Thanks for the assistance.”

“Marauder II, I believe you were *warned* about entering pirate space.” the scolding tone of his voice sounded familiar.

“Rudager?”

“Negative. This is Captain Sands of the AFC Dauntless. But we do have a mutual acquaintance. Are you in need of assistance?”

Joseph looked at his ship's damage levels. “Um... yeah. I can limp back to Argon space alright, but if I'm attacked again I'm dead.”

“Very well, set your ship to dock with the Dauntless, we'll give you a tow.”

“Thanks Dauntless.”

“And when you come on board, you will *receive* a lecture from me about following good advice.”

15 – ABOARD THE DAUNTLESS

The Dauntless was a Mark II Centaur Vanguard corvette. The Centaur was popular amongst business moguls as a flagship for their CEOs, but the Vanguard was military grade. She had a small crew, and was meant for a different kind of business. She bristled with eight guns on the nose, plus four sets of multi-gun turrets giving it no vulnerable blind spot from attack.

But it wasn't without comfort. It was a beautiful ship. While it was possible to live in a Buster you wouldn't want to do it for weeks on end. Even a cheap bachelor pad had more room. But the Centaur had long range patrols in mind and was built accordingly. As he was escorted from the docking bay to the captain's quarters he passed by the mess hall, recreation facility, and lounge. Only the Boron would have put more emphasis on comfort.

He entered the captain's room, where a middle aged man sat behind a desk. He motioned for Joseph to sit. He steepled his fingers together, a silver ring with a double-M visible on his left hand.

“So, tell me, what are you doing so far from home?”

Joseph sighed, and explained the story. Captain Sands nodded when he finished.

“That's pretty much the story I got from Amos.”

“Amos? The prospector?”

Captain Sands nodded. “Yes. Seems he's run afoul of one of the larger pirate clans in the sector, bad gambling debts or somesuch. They were going to disintegrate one of his legs, but ended up making him an offer instead. They had word that the Mossfoot Marauder, or perhaps I should say *a* Mossfoot Marauder, had been seen in Teladi space. Could be that he spread the tale of how you saved his life to a few too many people and they reached the wrong ears. The 'treasure' was a story they cooked up to get you out here, figuring you'd need funds wherever you could to build up an armada.”

“An ARMADA?”

Captain Sands raised a hand. “Remember, these pirates are under the mistaken impression that you are our mutual acquaintance. Now that he's not hiding anymore, reports are coming in about both him and you and they assume they are one and the same.”

“Swell.”

“Amos did what he was told, and you walked right into a trap.”

“Heh, and a Xenon corvette for good measure.”

Sands shook his head. “That was *part* of the trap. We believe it was captured by the pirates and reprogrammed for their needs. It was meant to be a distraction, to attack trade ships and draw away any potential allied support while their strike team finished you off unnoticed. Never in a million years did they think you'd actually *fight* the corvette. It ended up getting in the way more than anything.”

“So how did you get here?”

“Amos' conscience caught up with him, he felt bad about setting you up and told the Argon authorities. Not before selling everything he owned and heading back into the stars, mind you. When our man in dispatch got word, he

sent the SOS to us, and here we are.”

“Our man?”

“The Marauders aren't all dead, Joseph. We disbanded after...” He twisted the ring on his finger and sighed. “Some of us joined or re-joined the Fleet, helping along official channels - some of us in space, some behind a desk. Others settled down and started up their own space stations. A few couldn't stop fighting and became bounty hunters or mercenaries. Those of us who survived are still around, but we'll never forget *why* we were who we were. So when Rudager told us to keep an eye out for you, none of us questioned him. If he says he owes you, then we all do.”

Joseph didn't know what to say, but realized life had gotten even more complicated.

“So what now?”

“Now? We give you a tow to Argon Prime, and *you* might want to consider retiring. Because of Amos they know what you look like, and they will still assume you're Rudager. If you don't retire, you go back to the safe lanes and bloody well stay there. Just watch your back.”

“Will they keep coming after me?” It was hard to say that without sounding like a child.

“The short answer is yes. You should know that the pirate threat is on the rise. It's quiet overall, but that's because they're consolidating.”

“Consolidating? For what?”

Captian Sands leaned back in his chair. “Something big is in the wind, Joseph. While the Fleet is trying to track down the Xenon homeworld or to stop the Kha'ak threat the different pirate lords out there sense opportunity. Raiding has gone down twenty percent in the last year, but many of the raids that do happen seem to be for materials rather than credits. I suspect it's

because something big is being organized. What that is, I can't say, but I do know that lots of innocent people will get caught in the middle. They always do.”

The Dauntless entered Argon Prime space and his two freighters, Ran's Memory and Ran's Revenge, were waiting there for him. After the Dauntless departed, Joseph was at a loss for what to do. He really should retire. The two freighters would fetch him enough credits to buy a nice house, and he could probably do in-system shuttle work to earn a living on the Marauder II. But he looked at Ran's Memory and realized he wouldn't be staying true to her if he retired, and he looked at Ran's Revenge and realized if he quit now then that meant the pirates won.

No chance.

He knew a lot of places to make good deals in Argon, Boron and even Paranid space. There were always people for whom a fighter's small cargo bay just didn't cut it. They needed a thousand units shipped *now* and they wouldn't wait for ten runs to get it done. The captured trade ships were perfect for these missions, and his contacts on various stations would only do business with Joseph personally, not through Carl or Anap. He let Carl and Anap run Ran's Revenge together, and left the Marauder II in spacedock over Argon Prime.

It seemed luck was in Joseph's favor this week. A few stations desperate for large quantities of power cells, a medical emergency five jumps away, a couple of desperate archaeologists with massive stone statues that needed to be transported to a stasis environment ASAP, and Joseph had made enough to buy a brand new Mercury, plus hire a CPA for it. Rather than fly to Teladi space, where most of the best business colleges were, he went to the TerraCorp station

in Home of Light, which he had heard had an excellent economics college on board.

He put in an order for a CPA intern as part of his MK3 trading software package and waited for the intern at the dock. Eventually a young man in a nice business suit walked over and shook his hand.

“You're Joseph Davidson?”

“Yep. And you are?”

“Sten Axium.”

Sten? Why did that name sound familiar?

“Rudager's told me all about you.”

Ah.

“I had your name red flagged so if you ever came around looking for a CPA, I'd be the first to know. I'd like to help.”

Joseph was confused. “Surely you must be out of internship by now.”

Sten laughed. “Oh, I don't mean me. No, I'm head economics teacher here on TerraCorp station. My time with Rudager was invaluable, though I didn't know about his other endeavors until late in the game.” Joseph noticed the lack of a silver ring on his finger. Come to think of it, Barl hadn't had one, either. “But I did manage to take his single ship and turn it into a thriving business. That's what impressed the Chairwoman here. After Bandit's Remnants, I was offered a seat as economics teacher, and recently was promoted to head teacher.”

“Bandit's Remnants?”

Sten realized he must have said too much. “Oh. I suppose Rudager doesn't talk about that. Not that I blame him. That's where it all came to an end, but I shouldn't talk about that. It wouldn't be respectful. My place is here, and here is where I can help you best. If you are looking for interns to operate

your MK3 trading software, I can supply you with the best, and as many as you need. All my interns are also trained pilots, so you won't need to hire additional ones. Cuts down on your overhead.”

Joseph smiled. “Sounds good. I've got a Mercury here that is just crying out for the best you have.”

Sten smiled back. “You got it.”

Sten's pupils definitely learned from a master, because it wasn't long before his first new Mercury – Second Chance, though he realized later he was taking the naming convention from Rudager's journal – turned into four. The Third Charm, Fourth Base, and Fifth Business were soon flying through the quadrant making him a hell of a lot of money. They were quick studies, but it helped that Joseph knew the best sectors for them to cut their teeth on as well, such as Paranid Prime or Menalaus' Frontier.

Joseph continued to search for special trade runs in Ran's Memory. As he finished an emergency food supply run in Red Light's main trading station he saw someone checking out his ship from the viewport window.

“That yours?” he asked. Joseph nodded, wary of what his motives might be.

“Hell of a ship, those classic traders. Hell of a ship.”

“To be honest I don't think they are all that impressive.”

The man smiled. “You're thinking 'gee, she has plenty of potential firepower on the front, and an engine powerful enough to use it, but boy are they slow and sluggish. Even fully upgraded it couldn't match a Mercury in performance, and held less than half her potential cargo.' Am I right?”

“Something like that.”

“Yeah, but you're missing something, aren't ya? See the engines in the

back? Massive! Yet so little thrust coming out of them. They used a bunch of micro-trust reactors all along the backside. Cheaper, but overall very bulky, once you have enough of them on there. Now let's say you remove those micro-trust reactors with something a bit meatier, eh? She's got the engine to handle it. I could get your ship speed doubled and your maneuverability tripled in just a half dozen tune ups."

Joseph almost rolled his eyes. He was a mechanic looking to offer him a 'special deal.' Almost on cue the man shook Joseph's hand like a used car salesman. "The name's Ronnie. Now I know what you're thinking, but I'm not kidding around. I can prove it. See that Mercury docked beside your ship?"

Joseph nodded, and the man pulled out a communicator.

"Hey, Ronnie. Show the man here what Ginger can do."

The Mercury undocked, spun on a dime, and shot away faster than the his Buster could. It flew to the nearest asteroid and back in no time at all. Joseph's jaw dropped.

"I've never seen a Mercury go so fast."

The man smiled. "That's because her engines are tweaked way beyond design specs. I've been borrowing engine upgrade ideas from the Paranid, Split, even the Xenon when I can get away with it. Ginger here can outrun anything short of an M5 scout, and unless they're packing some badass missiles, there's nothing they can do to stop her. Ain't cheap, though. I figure Betty is worth one, one and a half million credits, easy."

Joseph whistled, that was five to ten times more than her original cost. "Is it worth it?"

"Well, me and Ronnie, we have a business that specialized in high speed, large capacity transport. Of course, now that the Goners are selling jump engines to just about anyone, there really isn't much of a point, is there? Still, I

see your ship and I say to myself 'why let all this great knowledge I've accumulated go to waste?' Surely a man with a ship like that would have *some* kind of reason to want it faster and more maneuverable. Am I right, or am I right?"

Joseph looked out at the Ran's Memory. "Let's talk numbers."

He'd switched ships with Carl and Anap, because his intentions were far better suited for the Ran's Revenge than the Ran's Memory. Ronnie, the mechanic not the pilot, couldn't do the upgrades all at once. He had to replace it section by section and give each part time to settle in. Joseph continued his trade runs as usual, but quickly noticed the difference. After a half dozen set of tune ups, and a few minor setbacks, she was even faster than the Marauder II. It had cost over a million credits, but like Ronnie had said, he had *some* kind of reason to want it faster and more maneuverable. He went to the equipment dock in Argon Prime and brought the Marauder II out of mothballs. He was on good terms with one of the quartermasters there.

The man looked over Joseph's equipment list, then looked on his monitor, which showed the Ran's Revenge docked outside the station. "Are you sure you want to waste 4 HEPT cannons on that?"

"Don't forget the 3 PAC cannons – two on the front, one on the turret."

The quartermaster kept looking back and forth at the datapad and the monitor. They still didn't match up in his mind. "I don't get it. Sure you'll be pretty darn powerful. Could probably take on a corvette with weapons like that. But you'll be a sitting duck for incoming fire. What's the point?"

"Let's just say she's got a little something extra under the hood. Besides, she'll have the Marauder flying escort."

The quartermaster shook his head, "That brings me to my next point.

That Buster of yours is a fine ship, why do you want to go muck it up with a drone pilot? Didn't you already try that? Ended in disaster as I recall.”

Joseph nodded. “True, but I'm going to be extra careful this time. It's all part of the plan. Just trust me.”

16 – THE RENEGADE

Pirate Lord Tect Feckson was growing increasingly frustrated by the title “Pirate Lord.” It smacked of testosterone laden melodrama. He was considering changing his title to Chief Executive Officer instead. But he had already stirred up enough dissent amongst his employees. He supposed a certain amount of machismo was inherently part of the lifestyle, and to take it away would only hurt morale.

The business was going well. The shipyards were now fully operational. New ships were being built to his exact specifications. No more of this Falcon convoy nonsense. Falcons were heavy fighters with large cargo bays, but were insufferably slow and had no rear turret, making them the favorite prey of bounty hunters everywhere. His first job as leader had been to scrap every Falcon in his fleet and replace them with Novas. Convoy losses dropped by over fifty percent.

But he did not intend to stop there. Ship design was a hobby of his. He liked how orderly it all was. You make the best possible product for the best possible price to achieve the best possible means. Always a challenge, but one he reveled in. Now the first of his new designs was ready to begin trial runs in Paranid space.

This was another thing that was going well. Most pirate clans (why call them clans when corporations was so much more appropriate?) set up shop in Teladi space, because of their reputation for going easy on pirate business. Of course, that meant that anyone looking for pirates would make Teladi space their first stop. Not to mention the “fee” the Taladi demanded in exchange for such leniency made it so pirates there made little profit. Not that they noticed. Most pirates were terrible with math, it was why they were pirates and not successful businessmen.

When Tect had been third in command, he found an abandoned jumpgate deep in Paranid territory, at the edge of one of their sectors. It lead to nowhere – a long dead system with only a dead and inhospitable planet and its small unstable moon – it was of no potential interest to the Paranid.

This gave Tect an idea, and it lead to his first diplomatic victory, with the most xenophobic of the five races no less. The Paranid left Bandit's Remnants alone in exchange for not being harassed by pirate shipping and providing some basic services for them under the guise of regular traders. For this Tect had been promoted to second in command. His predecessor had named the sector Bandit's Remnants because the so-called Mossfoot Marauders – who names pirate hunters after a figure from children's vidshows – had been making significant impact on their corpora... clan. But on the upside their successes had given him the leverage he needed for what could only be called a hostile takeover of the clan. His first order of business had been to remove the Marauders, which he had done to spectacular effect.

Now they were back and they were once again a nuisance. The Yaki refused to treat with him unless he eliminated their leader Rudager, and Rudager was proving frustrating to find. From the sporadic reports he had received, it seemed as if he was in two places at once at times – which meant of

course he had a jump drive. He had clearly been building up a fleet, which Tect had dispatched gracefully. Only that wasn't enough. The Yaki insisted on Rudager's death, not his ruination. And it appeared that they were right to do so. Already he was climbing back, taking on trading convoys. No doubt he'd have a fleet in a matter of weeks.

There were those that believed Tect saw himself as the educator of the pirates, but Tect did not see himself that way. To be an educator implied that you knew everything there was to know. He was not an educator, he was a learner. The Yaki were indeed wise, and Tect had much to learn from them. He had thought it as better to beat a man than kill him, but it seemed that while many will retreat when beaten, others became stronger. The wisdom lay in knowing which sort of person you were up against.

There was a polite cough.

“Yes, Hampstead.”

“The prototype is ready, sir. The launch party should begin soon.”

“Of course. Lead the way.”

They walked to the docking bay where a large fighter sat suspended in midair. It was massive for a fighter, bigger than most M3s. It had a turret both above and below, providing all around anti-fighter and anti-missile coverage, and at the front were eight massive gunports, spread out like claws on a striking tiger. She had four 25mw shields, more than most heavy fighters. She was, in his opinion, a bit slow, but she was designed for shock-and-awe attacks. And eight HEPT cannons could shock just about anyone.

“The Renegade, sir.” Hampstead announced.

Lord Feckson nodded his approval. Next to the ramp to the cockpit a man in a spacesuit stood at attention. Tect approached and looked him over. “You're the one who took out a Argon Corvette in single combat?”

The pilot nodded. "That's right."

"Who took on the entire police force in Cloudbase South-East and won?"

"You got it."

"Your record impressed me. That's why you have the honor of taking the Renegade on her shakedown cruise." The man could use a haircut and an improved attitude, but the qualifications spoke for themselves.

"Thank you, sir." Sir. That was more like it, thought Tect. "What do you want me to do with her?"

"First you will put on a show for the rest of the crew, then you are to enter Paranid prime and harass all non-Paranid shipping at your discretion."

"Um... aren't we supposed to leave the Paranid alone?"

"I'm sorry, did I say attack Paranid ships? I thought I distinctly said non-Paranid ships."

"Yeah, but... won't the Paranid government get upset anyway?"

"That is my concern, pilot. You may depart when you are ready. I must rally the troops."

In the large observation deck, Tect put on his game face.

"This is the start of a new era for us!" he said, his gun holster visible and his Armani jacket off as a sign of solidarity to his men and women. His voice carried far more energy and vitality than usual. Normally he considered it a waste of energy. Rational people did not need to resort to such things. But when the purpose of your speech was to make everyone *believe* in you, you had to know how to pump them up. He stood on a podium, his back to the great windows overlooking their territory.

"Two years ago, our shipyards were smashed and we stood on the edge

of ruin. The Marauders had us on the ropes. To destroy the Marauders we demanded new leadership, new insight, new innovations, and you got what you asked for!” Cheers and woofing noises filled the observation deck.

“We fought back, and not just with brawn, but with brains as well. In one swift stroke we reduced the Marauders to the pack of sniveling cub scouts they are!” More cheers.

“But we were hurt. We were almost broken. We couldn't even make ships for ourselves anymore. But here at Bandit's Remnants, where we had our greatest triumph, we began a new task: to turn Bandit's Remnants into Bandit's Empire!” If he could harness the energy in this room, Tect wouldn't need a solar power plant.

“We rebuilt! We became self-sufficient. We no longer raid convoys just to survive, we raid to thrive! We no longer capture ships because we have to, we capture them so we can build our own ships. And we no longer need to build cheap knock-offs of other races ships, or even worse – buy them!” The pirates laughed, he knew that joke would work.

“We've moved beyond copying ships and into creating our own. Better ships, designed for maximum power, maximum mission flexibility, and maximum pilot survival!”

On cue, the Renegade dropped down into full view behind him. There were some gasps of admiration.

“Behold the first of our new ships! Eight heavy cannons mounted up front, capable of holding the most powerful High Energy Plasma Throwers available. Two turrets, above and below, providing maximum missile and light fighter protection. Engines that are faster than most M4 fighters. I give you... the Renegade!”

The Renegade spun around and shot away. Then put on a hell of a show

for the attentive pirates. Giant monitors showed it from all angles as it blew apart several derelicts with ease and did a few simple stunts before using its jump engines and flashing out of the system. The cheers and adulation died down and people went back to their jobs. Overall, quite the success.

With the observation deck all but empty, Tect looked out the window to his simple empire, his composure returned to its calm, unenergetic self. To the galactic south near the blocked-off jumpgate was a solar power collector, gathering power from a dying sun – though it wouldn't actually die for another ten thousand years. Further north were processing plants, Cahoon factories, BoFu, Soja and other materials. His predecessor had a preference for Argon pirates, but Tect preferred a more equal opportunity approach. To ignore the strengths of a race was to waste valuable resources. Killing the crew of captured ships was another waste he had abolished. The ore and silicon mines far to the west were far from fully automated, after all. And people were far less likely to surrender if they thought they would die. Instead, half of those who jumped ship were captured for his own needs, while the other half were allowed to escape. It wasn't charity. It served its purpose.

There was another polite cough.

“Yes, Hampstead?”

“We've had another Yaki scouting party reported near the Dreadnought, sir.”

Tect smiled. “How much did they see?”

“They were close enough to scan her. They know how heavily armed she is.”

“Indeed. Have her move from the asteroid belt in Rolk's Fate to Atrous' Clouds.”

“Sir? There is a small pirate base there.” He then added in case his tone had not been clear enough. “*Not* one of ours.”

Tect raised an eyebrow. “There is? Oh dear. I suppose she'll have to reduce it to rubble then. And if the Yaki track her there, have her jump to Menalaus' Frontier next, and so on in a southerly direction. Any other pirate bases along the way should be removed, provided they are not Yaki. Under no circumstances should the Yaki be fired upon.”

Hampstead tapped the instructions into his datapad. “Yes, sir.” He paused, and Tect looked at him sideways.

“Something more?”

“You asked to be kept apprised of the Rudager situation.”

“And?”

“He's been sighted escorting freighters again. One of *our* freighters, in fact. A run down classic trade ship. He may have other freighters in his possession but for some reason we're finding it impossible to track down accurate information about his holdings.”

Tect nodded. “That would be his friends in action. He has them everywhere, I understand. If they're hiding his assets it probably means he has a lot of them. Still, he continues to appear in the open, rather than hiding under yet another assumed identity. And with one of our freighters, no less. Cheeky, isn't he?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I wonder, Hampstead. What does it take to have a man become unbroken? After we smashed the Marauders, everything pointed towards Rudager retiring, as had the rest of the survivors. Why would he come back?”

“I'm sure I don't know, sir.”

Tect clasped his hands behind his back. “Nor do I. Perhaps we had

unwittingly hurt him recently. Some sort of 'last straw' as it were. But as far as I know it was he who fired the first shot. I had been content with giving him a wide berth so long as he stayed out of my affairs. Still, something does not add up. It makes me glad we kept one of his pilots prisoner. One never knows when a bargaining chip is needed.”

Hampstead's chest tightened. He really hated giving the pirate lord bad news. “Sir, about that prisoner...”

17 – RAN NOT SO FAR AWAY

When the pirate ships had matched speed with her spinning cockpit but didn't finish her off, she feared the worst, and hoped she would burn up in the atmosphere first. After all, attractive woman, captured by pirates, it didn't take a huge imagination to guess where that would lead.

As she broke apart yet another rock with her pulsehammer, she didn't know if she should have been grateful or insulted that she was tossed into the 'slave labor' group rather than 'pirate comfort women' group. What was she, chopped BoFu? So she had kicked one of them in the balls, she thought pirates liked a bit of spirit in their women. She was wondering whether she was losing her looks, but how does that happen to you *before* your reach thirty?

She continued to pulse rock into rubble, the conveyor belt scooping the rubble away to the smelters. For two months she had been doing this. Thirteen hour shifts, with one hour breaks for meals and eight hours for sleep.

It wouldn't be entirely fair to say they were treated *badly*. There were no whips or electric shocks involved, but they were worked very hard, all the time, and nobody left the pirates. Nobody. If a worker ceased being useful, they were spaced. Information about the mines couldn't be allowed to reach outside ears, after all. But there was an incentive plan of sorts. Hard workers

were sometimes offered positions as pirates themselves, even desk jobs, so while spacing still occurred, it was often only the stubborn who ended up that way.

Ran was very stubborn, but she had no intention of ending up spacefly food. It was time to organize a break-out.

“You can't break out, where are you going to break out to?”

The conspirators sat at the cafeteria table during breakfast. There were six of them in all, one had been a freighter pilot, two had been co-pilots, two had been fighter pilots, and one had been a passenger who kept whining he wasn't even supposed to be on board that ship that day. He had been the dissenting voice. More than once, Ran wanted to boot him out of the plan, but he happened to be a computer expert, and she needed one of those.

“You let me worry about that, Tande.”

“Even if you get one of the mining shuttles, it's not like we can reach the jumpgate out. They keep a friggin asteroid in front of it! They only move it if there's an emergency, and none of the shuttles have jump drives!”

“So we get a ship that DOES have a jump drive.”

“And the only place that has ships with jumpdrives is the shipyard,” said Tande, rolling his eyes. They had been over this before.

“So what? We have as much chance docking with the shipyard as we would have had making it to the jumpgate if it wasn't blocked. Stop making this more difficult than it has to be.”

“I'm trying to be the voice of reason in a flawed plan.”

“Split end up being fist in your face if you keep whining,” the Split freighter captain growled.

Ran smiled. “Okay, let's go over the essentials once more and see where

we stand. First, we need an opportunity to get to the shuttle bay to coincide with when we are coming to or from a meal or sleep. Furthermore it has to coincide with a pirate shift change, with are at different times.”

Sorus Sigel was co-pilot of a Teladi transport, “Difffferent, but iss not without pattern.” He explained how once every two weeks the shift change coincided exactly with the start of the dinner break. “Iffff we are going to leave, then thatssss when it must be.”

Ran nodded. “Right. Next, we need someone to hotwire the ship. Tande, that's where you come in.”

“Reluctantly.”

“Now, we need to be able to get to the shuttle. That means taking out the guards on the way quickly so they can't raise an alarm.”

Optikhalakalakikma, or Optik, was a Paranid fighter pilot with a knack for violence. “No problem. Paranid crush heretics of lesser races.”

“Crush, yes, but *quietly*,” said Ran.

The other members of the conspiracy, a Boron female named Oolah who probably wouldn't last another week of hard labour in such a dry environment, and the Split freighter captain Garestal who Ran thought seemed a bit unstable, told her what they had accomplished – namely acquiring sympathizers who would run interference that wouldn't get them in trouble but make sure certain people were in certain places at certain times. Ran herself would provide the key distraction – the cave in.

“Well, that's it. It looks like we're all set. When's our next window of opportunity, Sorus?”

“Two daysssss from now.”

It was a Hail Mary play and they all knew it, but they had become

friends in the past month or so and Ooolah's failing condition spurred them on to take the chance. When everyone was in position, Ran blasted a faulty seam in the ore with the pulsehammer, one she had purposely left alone for two weeks, and started a major cave in just as the dinner break bell sounded.

Guards and safety personnel rushed in. "Is anyone hurt?" one asked.

"I'm fine, but I think there's six people trapped behind the rubble. There was a large stretch of tunnel ahead, I don't think anyone was buried."

"Who was in there?"

Ran pretended to recollect. "I think it was Optik, Ooolah, Sorus, Tande, Garestal, and some really good looking woman, I don't remember her name."

She left in the confusion as the safety officer started checking his to-do list. She had reached the tunnel that lead to the docking bay when the speakers blared "Prisoner shifts Alpha through Delta, report to tunnel 2C-A immediately for emergency rescue operations."

That was their cue. By the time she was at the docking bay, the others were waiting for her. Three had pirate uniforms on, Ooolah and Sorus didn't. Optik gave Ran a fourth. They marched to the shuttle, keeping Ooolah and Sorus in the middle. They met their shift relief on the platform, and handed them the IDs Tande had tried to alter.

"Damn regulations keep getting tighter," said a member of the shift change. "Wasn't too long ago that we just gave each other a nod and went about our business." Ran noticed that he didn't really bother checking the IDs.

"Place is turning more into a business every day," said his partner. "Why the hell do they think I left my job at Argnu Beef International? Not so I could push papers with an eyepatch, that's for sure."

Ran gave a gruff understanding nod. "Yeah, well, the guy up top is always the guy up top. Am I right?" It didn't make much sense, but the pirates

seemed to think it was full of wisdom. They then asked what was being done with the prisoners.

“Prisoner transfer,” Ran said without elaborating. “You guys better get a move on, there's a collapse in tunnel 2C-A. It's chaos down there.”

Once inside, Tande started hacking the system. The shuttle powered up. “Piece of cake. Standard encryption key, but as always they forget to close the back door.” They slowly took the shuttle out and headed towards the pirate shipyards.

Now came the hard part.

The first stage of their plot had actually occurred three weeks ago, when their team of conspirators had numbered eight. Two of them were eligible to join the “brotherhood” as the older pirates called it, or the “corporation” as the younger one were starting to call it. They discussed the possibilities. After all, if they had a man on the inside it would give their plan an even greater advantage. There was just one problem – the “exam.”

When the shuttle docked at the pirate shipyards, they sent the signal and Doogle arrived shortly thereafter. Doogle was a Goner priest. The pirates considered it a joke to offer him a position with them, and were shocked when he accepted. Ran and the others didn't even have a proper plan yet, wouldn't for some time, but Doogle knew there might not be another offer, and Ran needed him on the other side.

The other had been Seph. She wasn't even a pilot, just a passenger in the wrong place at the wrong time, like Tande. But she had youth and reflexes and the pirates felt they could use both (again, thought Ran, what was she, chopped BoFu?). Ran was worried she didn't know what she was getting herself into. At least the priest knew what evil was.

Ran embraced Doogle warmly, and for a moment Doogle returned it. Then he pulled away, and distanced himself.

“I've arranged for a place for you to hide until we get a ship with a hyperdrive. They monitor the gate asteroid too closely for us to try and escape that way.”

“This is a waste of time,” said Tande. “We'll get caught in no time.”

“No you won't,” said Doogle. “This shipyard is built in part from the wreckage of the old one, and is embedded in a dry mine. There are many places that are not monitored, and I know most of them.”

“Great, from one rock to another.”

“I could arrange for you to be returned if you wish.”

“No, no. Here is good.”

Ran rolled her eyes. “Glad to see you made it. What about Seph?”

Doogle said nothing. His eyes flitted down, then he shook his head.

“Frak.”

“I told her not to try. She should have stayed with you.”

“I know.”

“We must go. The alarm will go up and this base will be searched from top to bottom. You must be hidden by then.”

Ran nodded. “AFTER Tande does his magic on the computers here.”

Tande grumbled. “I wasn't even supposed to be ON that freighter...”

It didn't take long for the deception to be discovered on the silicon mine, but by then Ran and the others were hidden. A simple trojan was all that was needed to frak up the security camera records making it impossible for the pirates to know what happened to the fake crew once the shuttle had landed.

Doogle had been right when he said there were plenty of places to hide,

and had even taken the time to create a door that looked like the cave wall to block one such passage. It had been an ore mine, and the remaining trace metals interfered with the pirate's scanning equipment, so there was no danger of their heat signatures being noticed. But unless the pirates thought they had also left the system, they would just keep looking. To that end, Doogle had planted several outgoing ships with transmitters, set to broadcast misleading messages. With a little luck it would lead the pirates to believe that Ran and her co-conspirators had escaped on one of these ships, and the search would be called off.

They sat alone in the darkness for three days, barely risking a whisper or moving. But to say or do absolutely nothing was to invite madness.

“Why's Doogle all bummed out?” asked Tande in a low whisper. “At least he's not stuck in here.”

“Do you know what pirates typically do to initiate new pilots into their ranks?” asked Ran.

“Force them to buy a parrot?”

“They have to kill a civilian.”

Silence in the darkness.

“Yeah, that's right, asswipe. Doogle, a man who swore to never harm another living being, had to commit cold blooded murder or be killed himself. That's the exam. Doogle did what he had to to pass the exam for our sakes.”

“And Seph?”

More silence.

“Shhhhhhhe failed,” said Sorus.

“She thought I was joking about the exam,” whispered Ran. “Trying to scare her off. But how else do you make a pirate loyal? By making them a cold blooded murderer. You can't go back to the world after that.”

“But Doogle did it.”

Ran said nothing. Doogle wasn't going back to the world.

18 – DEATH OF THE MARAUDERS

Joseph still couldn't believe this ship was his. He sat in the damaged cockpit, still in his spacesuit, and replayed the in-cockpit video of its previous owner. It showed a pilot with unkempt hair coldly describing his conquests.

“Renegade test raid number 21, complete. No survivors. Loading cargo. Cargo loaded. Local authorities in pursuit. Avoiding contact. Travelling to south gate. Wait a minute... what's this? Mission profile amended, we have a priority act to take care of here. Scanners have picked up the Mossfoot Marauder escorting a small freighter. Engaging fighter.”

A smile passed over Joseph's lips. He remembered. That ship had come out of nowhere, streaked like a bat out of hell. It almost blew the Marauder away on its first pass.

Of course, Joseph wasn't on the Marauder.

“Hah, this Rudager guy is a pansy. Don't know what the fuss about him is. Okay, just one more minute and I'll have him. One more... closing. Come on... WHAT THE HELL! Incoming HEPT and PAC fire! Shields gone! Hull breached! WHERE THE FRACK? It must be cloaked! Setting auto-destruct! EJECTING!”

Joseph doubted the pilot ever knew it was Ran's Revenge that had taken

him out. The pilot sped away in a rocket booster pack for the nearest jump gate while Joseph maneuvered up for the capture. The ship was unlike anything he'd encountered before. Bigger than a heavy fighter, huge engines, and eight heavy weapons up front, poised like claws.

It's funny, the pilot talked about activating the auto-destruct, but either he was mistaken or it hadn't worked. This ship, the Renegade, was all his. It was beautiful, it was deadly, it was... all so wrong.

The design wasn't like any of the military ships he was familiar with. It was designed for one thing – taking out convoys. The six heavy HEPT cannons on it could reduce a freighter to slag in a single pass. The twin PACs provided dogfighting power. The turrets protected it from fighter, missile, and drone support above and below during strafing runs. The cargo capacity was just right for scooping up what wasn't destroyed.

This was a pirate ship through and through. And it was new. The Yaki made their own ships, but this wasn't of Yaki design. So who made it? Everything pointed to the fact that this was a prototype, and as a result extremely valuable to the owners.

Joseph began to realize just how much trouble he was in.

“Tricky...” that was Rudager's assessment of the situation.

Finding Rudager had been more than tricky. It had been nearly impossible. Only now did Joseph realize that he had never once contacted the former leader of the Marauders, it had always been the other way around. And when he tried to call back to a previous message he realized it was not only encrypted, but had no apparent point of origin. The man knew how to cover his tracks.

Captain Sands of the AFC Dauntless was another matter. He was Fleet

and it was easy to contact him. Remembering how Sands had discussed Rudager in the past, he was sure to only refer to him as “our mutual acquaintance” and asked to arrange a meeting.

Sands apparently didn't waste time, and Rudager was in Paranid space in less than a day. Joseph had explained his modifications to the Ran's Revenge and his little trick which had lead to the capture of the Renegade prototype, and what that probably meant for him.

“Very tricky...” Rudager's voice trailed off as he went deep in thought. His eyes closed and he rocked his ring back and forward using his thumb. At last he opened them.

“I'm afraid you're screwed.”

“Great.”

“They'll never let you go. In fact, by contacting me you gave up your only chance at getting a head start on them.”

“Wonderful.”

“They will hunt you down and kill you.”

“Fantastic.”

“So why don't you let them?”

“Say WHAT?”

Rudager smiled. “I think it's time you closed shop, kid. You're in way over your head. You've made a few bucks, seen the stars, maybe done some good. But if the pirates get it in their head that you're too much trouble...” He stopped.

“What happened to you at Bandit Haven?” asked Joseph.

“Hampstead?” Lord Feckson called.

As always, Hampstead showed up promptly. “Yes, sir?”

“That pilot who lost the Renegade. Has he been reassigned?”

“Yes, sir. He's piloting a scout ship on standard raiding duty, as ordered.”

Tect nodded. “See to it his shields are removed. He has a lot to prove to me after this slip up.”

Hampstead bowed his head. “Yes, sir.”

“How goes the recovery project?”

Hampstead handed him a datapad. “I'm afraid it doesn't look good. It is definitely the Mossfoot Marauder who took out the Renegade, but so far he hasn't left Paranid Prime space. We haven't been able to mount a recovery or search-and-destroy mission yet, and probably won't have a window of opportunity until he leaves.”

Tect frowned.

“If you look on the next page, sir, you'll see the Paranid government is very displeased with you. They accuse you of breaking the treaty with them, attacking over twenty convoys in the heart of their territory, and are threatening to invade Bandit's Refuge in retaliation.”

This he was prepared for. “Do they know that the Renegade was captured?”

“I don't believe so. If they do know that she's docked at their station they may simply assume Rudager is one of us, or that it is his.”

Tect wondered for a moment how to handle this. He could put the blame on Rudager, give them all the information they needed regarding the Renegade, and let them destroy both the ship and pilot for him. But that might not impress the Yaki, letting other people do his work for him. No, better to go with his original plan.

“Point out to the good Priest Duke that not a single Paranid vessel was

put at risk. Ask him if he was impressed by the Renegade's performance. Ask him how he feels his fighters would do against such a ship. Then ask him if he is interested in the complete blueprints. Free of charge.”

“Sir?”

Lord Feckson smiled. “Give them a taste, Hampstead. The Renegade is an impressive ship, but she's not the best we can do, only the first. Our Salamander design improves on the Renegades' strengths and removes her weaknesses. Not that they need to know this right now. No, they will be impressed with the Renegade for quite some time while we build our Salamanders and finish specifications on our new corvette class ship. Then we'll see what comes next.”

He stood from his office desk and walked to the window. Outside in the asteroid field mine's and factories ticked away perfectly. Almost perfectly.

“The escapees?” he asked.

“Still unaccounted for, sir. We believe they may have stowed away on some of our departing ships. We have had signals from some of them in different sectors. It's very sketchy.”

“Or very misleading.” He sighed. “Ordinarily this would be a secondary priority, but one of them was a member of the new Marauders. In our custody she was a valuable asset in case he managed to surprise me. If she's escaped, she is a threat to us. She, as they say in the vids, knows too much. If she's still here...” he did not finish his thought, but it was clear he did not like the unknown variable she represented. He changed subjects once more.

“What of the Dreadnought?”

On this Hampstead was happy to provide news. “She has been only taking low-level engagements and never engaging Yaki, as you commanded. She has come out of each battle unscathed. The other pirate clans are furious

and are threatening to unite against us.”

“But of course that always ends up breaking down into infighting and bickering.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And the Yaki?”

Hampstead smiled. “They are... concerned. They have fighters monitoring her at a great distance, keeping an eye on her actions.”

“Excellent. See to it they continue to be concerned. Have her use her jump engines next, show that she can strike anywhere. The pirate base north of Ore Belt should be adequate.”

“In Argon territory, sir?”

Tect shrugged. “We won't be there long. I would assume they would be grateful.”

Hampstead still seemed concerned. He was often like that. He didn't wish to outright question Lord Feckson's orders – which was wise – but it was clear he didn't exactly have faith in where those orders would lead.

“Hampstead. You weren't with us when I took command of the corpora... clan, were you?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know how I took care of the so-called Mossfoot Marauders the first time? Back when they posed a significant threat to us?” He was sure Hampstead had studied the matter thoroughly, but needed a place to start.

“I am familiar with it, sir.”

Rudager leaned back in his chair on the Paranid shipyard cafe. “The Marauders were once a thousand ships strong.”

Joseph's jaw dropped. That was close to what a small government

would have. More than any pirate clan.

“We had smashed clan after clan across the universe, taken their resources and made ourselves stronger. We were being viewed as heroes, not bounty hunters, but the governments were more than happy to throw money at us for cleaning up their back yards for them. We had nine hundred fighters, a hundred corvettes, and a single Argon capital carrier – the Vengeance. We had a lot of pull with the Fleet at that time, so it wasn't hard to buy her used. We even had a movie series in the works.”

This brought to mind a question that had been prying at Joseph's mind for some time. If the Marauders had been so big, if they had been viewed so heroically, why hadn't he ever heard of them before?

“But there was one clan we had trouble getting at. Someone took over who was especially clever. They managed to avoid our nets, fake us out with distress calls, distract us from their real objectives, and it always seemed that no matter how many of them we took out, they came out ahead. Eventually we found out where they were based in – a dead sector in Paranid space named Bandit's Refuge.”

“What would be your opinion of my operation here before the attack, Hampstead, had you not known the outcome?”

“To be honest, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Ridiculous. Poorly planned.”

“Go on.”

“You had placed what at that time was all our mining resources on the moon, drilling deeper and deeper trying to find ore and silicon, which were only accessible in its molten core, which we could not reach. Yet except for the

shipyard in orbit you had all your other factories much farther away, far beyond even Triplex range, far beyond the jumpgate. It made ferrying materials back and forth very difficult. And you insisted on creating a lavish center of operations on the moon, when it would have been far more useful with the other stations – had they not been so far away. And of course, there was the question of the storage depot.”

“We gathered as much intel as we could about Bandit's Refuge, but they kept things hush hush. Word was they had a shipyard there, and were building a massive fleet to combat us directly. We got all full of ourselves, figuring once we tracked down the sector we could jump in and finish them off in one swift stroke. We didn't have a clue that that was exactly what he wanted.”

“So to all outward appearances,” said Lord Feckton, “It simply looked like my managerial skills left something to be desired.”

Hampstead nodded. “The word among the men, as I understand it, was that you had a head for tactics but none for business.”

Tect smiled. “It seems quite the opposite is being thought of me these days.”

“Well, the men are wondering why you insist on using the Dreadnought in such a limited way, and only on other pirates.”

“Let them. It's good to be curious.”

“We jumped in expecting a huge fight. We brought in every fighter, every corvette, and even my flagship, the Vengeance into the system. There were maybe a hundred ships there, nothing to worry about. We assumed the fleet had jumped out on a raid. Here was the perfect opportunity to destroy

their base of operations. Their shipyards in a low orbit, and their large moon base. Our fighters swept the system clean of fighters, the corvettes swarmed the dockyards and reduced it to rubble, and lastly the Vengeance was going to come in close to bring its big guns to bear on the central complex.”

“What I don't understand, sir,” said Hampstead, “Was how you got your hands on nuclear weapons. All governments have banned their use.”

“True, but during the first Xenon war some of the governments got desperate. Especially the Paranid. They developed them as a last ditch resort. When it turned out they didn't need them, they needed to dispose of them. I simply knew who, when, and how they would attempt to do so. No government likes to admit they've “lost” weapons they should never have had in the first place. Besides, they sought to dispose of them, and there were quite efficiently disposed of.”

Rudager looked down at his feet. “I should have listened to my science officer. She told me the moon was unstable. I should have pieced it together then, but I didn't. Then she reported the explosions. Hundreds of them, deep underground, near unstable fault lines. When the first cracks of magma appeared on the surface I knew in my gut it was already too late.”

“Have you ever seen a moon explode, Hampstead?”

“No, sir.”

“It's not an easy thing to orchestrate. Gravity, for one thing, tends to hold them together no matter what. But if you get things just right, if you have a network of tunnels deep enough, close enough, and along the right fault lines. If you time your explosions from the surface downwards to cause a sympathetic

vibration effect. If you take a thousand variables into account like this, it can be done.”

Hampstead said nothing, as Lord Feckson smiled and clasped his hands behind his back.

“It was like hell had decided not to wait for us to come to it, so it came at us out of the ether,” said Rudager. “The whole surface cracked glowed and blew out towards us.”

“One sixth of the moon's surface in a cone-like shape shot out, almost exactly the way I had planned. I believe it was described by other as “popping like a champagne cork.” The rest of her broke apart over the next day.”

“It wasn't even the main center of mass you had to worry about. It was the molten spray, rushing out like a water jet, solidifying in the zero of space, and suddenly you can't see it anymore. Your scanners are useless because there is just so much damn STUFF out there, and that's assuming the EMP blast hadn't knocked out your electronics. Jumpdrives were offlined because there was too much proximal mass.”

“There was no escape for the Marauders. The Vengeance was crippled instantly. Her corvettes and fighters popped like popcorn.”

“I had no idea if anyone out there had survived, but the Vengeance wasn't quite dead. We were still in the back, not having started our attack run, and only caught the edge of the blast. I ordered the crew to evacuate. The ships inside that hadn't launched would have been shielded from the EMP blast.

Some of them had jump drives. I had my old Buster on board. Some of us could make it out.”

“I never expected one-hundred percent fatalities, Hampstead. It was much more convenient to me then that there were survivors so others would know how badly they had been beaten. How easily they had been outfoxed. How much we were willing to sacrifice to win.”

“You're referring to the dockyards?”

“The loss of the dockyards set us back over a year, but it was necessary. Everyone expects you to sacrifice a pawn. No one expects you to sacrifice a queen.”

“That's when the Marauders died, Joseph. It wasn't just the loss of ships or manpower. They got us, and we knew they could get us again. Those of us who survived... who got into a spare ship on the Vengeance or who managed not to get hit by the fragments of the destroyed moon, we were broken. Fifty men and women out of a fifteen hundred survived that blast. Thirty ships out of a thousand managed to leave that system, tails tucked between their legs. Every one of us lost someone close to them that day.

“After that nobody wanted to tell our story, and none of us wanted to tell it. We went where we felt we were needed. Some joined the Fleet, became entrepreneurs, or just kept on hunting, but part of us never gave up, and none of us ever forgot.

“That's why you have to trust me, Joseph. Those pirates are not going to stop until you're dead.”

“That is why you have to trust me, Hampstead. In chess, you must plan

your moves three steps in advance. When the first move is taken, it may appear to be a mistake. The network of worthless mine tunnels under the moon, the factories kept far beyond useful range. These seemed to be a waste of energy. But once the moon was destroyed and a rich metal infused asteroid belt was created, we had all the factories we needed ready to be tractored into range to best exploit them. It also resulted in the end of the Marauders.”

“Until now,” corrected Hampstead.

“Until now,” Feckson conceded. “But that too shall pass.” He considered his next move carefully. “I have some new orders I wish you to pass on to our observers in Paranid Prime, and the Dreadnought after it finishes in Ore Belt.”

Ran's Revenge and the Mossfoot Marauder escorted the Renegade back to Argon space, where she could be analyzed and better understood. A thousand eyes watched them as they left the system.

When a small fighter with a dodgy ID signature sped away and jumped as soon as it saw them, none of the ships took any notice. Nor did any notice a different scout fighter trailing them just at the edge of sensor range.

When a huge destroyer jumped in just as they reached the jumpgate and opened fire, none of the ships had a chance to react.

The Dreadnought plowed through the wreckage, and allowed drone fighters to pick up the remains for study.

19 – OUT OF DARKNESS

At the end of the third day Ran heard a tap-tap-tap noise in the outside cavern – Doogle's signal for all clear.

“Itsssss about time.” said Sorus.

“Split say cave too small for Split,” said Garestal. “Split glad he is in open where Split can fight.”

Ooolah said nothing, but her health had improved in the dark moist conditions, and Optik had clearly had enough of the lesser races to last him a lifetime.

“Big whoop.” said Tande. “So we can leave this hole for a bigger hole. Now what?”

“Now,” said Ran, “You work on getting us fake IDs here so we can pretend we belong.”

“Tande, do this, Tande, do that.”

“Tande, shut up.”

Ran regretted that Tande was so important to her plans. He was a weak selfish coward who was number one on her list of “most likely to betray us if it meant saving his own skin.”

Doogle, on the other hand, was so loyal he was willing to damn his soul

forever to get the rest of them out, and perhaps everyone else at the mines as well. She wondered if he had found some way around the “exam” but saw in his eye when he'd greeted them he hadn't. For the past three lightless days she had tried not to wonder what it had been like for him – and failed. Did they gag the victim or allow them to beg for mercy? Was it face to face or from behind? Was it with a blaster or a knife? Did Doogle say a prayer to send their souls to heaven before he sent his own soul to hell?

As they emerged from their hiding spot, Ran met with Doogle to discuss their next step.

“We have to face the possibility that we won't be able to stow away on a ship after all. Is there any way we can get a message out?”

Doogle nodded. “I am ahead of you on this one. It seems the “bretheren” desire more jumpdrives for their ship, and are now organizing a raid on the Goner temple in Cloudbase South West. Naturally I am expected to help.”

“How will you get a message without being spotted?”

“I have a plan,” he said evasively. “I need messages from each of you, as well as whatever data you feel will be helpful. It will not be intercepted, I assure you, and the Goners will ensure they arrive at their intended destinations.”

Ran smiled. “That's some fine good news you have for us, Doogle.”

“Yes, but I am afraid after that you will be on your own.”

Ran's smile fell. “You're not coming back?”

“None of us will.”

“Joseph?” Rudager as usual, appeared out of nowhere. Joseph was busy helping the two Ronnies modify the Ran's Memory into the Ran's Revenge II.

For the money Joseph was offering, they promised to make it even faster and more maneuverable than the first. Carl and Anaplasmosis were given a brand new Mercury Superfreighter to captain, but Joseph had liked what the old style pirate freighter could do.

After he lost the first *Ran's Revenge*, as well as the *Mossfoot Marauder*, he'd felt a weight lifted off of his shoulders. He was dead, at least as far as the pirates were concerned. Rudager's contacts had helped spread the word and they were reasonably sure that the farce of mistaken identity that had ruined his life was finally over. Even his fleet of ships had been "sold off" and rebought by Joseph under a new company name – *To The Stars Ltd*. He vowed never to get mixed up in pirate business ever again.

Perhaps that was why Rudager's voice had an apologetic tone to it. Joseph was instantly wary.

"What?"

"You... you're going to want to see this."

The cockpit of the *Ran's Revenge* was rather spacious compared to any fighter, and had a bigger – albeit older model – vidscreen than Rudager's souped-up *Buster*. Rudager inserted a crystal into the drive, but paused before pressing play.

"This message reached the *Goner Temple* in *Cloudbase South West* yesterday. A group of fighters had flown in, presumably to raid the *Temple* for jumpdrives and transporters. One of them fired a missile, then his reactor blew. The raiders were in a tight formation and his ship had been laden down with heavy missiles to take down the shields with. The blast wiped out the entire fleet."

"Lucky priests."

“It wasn't luck. The missile launched was a dummy. No warhead. It bounced off the shield and was recovered. This crystal was inside. The Goners wouldn't elaborate, but I think the pilot was once one of them, and suicided himself to not only get this message to them, but to save the temple from attack.”

“So why do you have it?” asked Joseph.

Rudager pressed play.

“Is it on? Is it playing? I don't see the red light. Isn't a little red light supposed to come on?”

Joseph's heart stopped. It was Ran.

“We don't have time to edit this,” said someone off camera. “Just start talking.”

“But how do I know it's even recording? A little red light is supposed to come on.”

“I had to put this thing together from spare parts and you expect me to remember to add a red light? Just get started!”

“Fine. This is Ran Jesson. I'm from the city of Tallus on Argon Prime. Several weeks, or maybe months ago, I was captured by pirates and forced to be a concubine for their pirate lord—”

“Ran...”

“Oh fine, I was a slave doing manual labor in their silicon mine. It's not like they NEED to know that.”

“Ran..”

“I COULD have been a concubine!”

“RAN!”

“I have the looks for it, don't I?”

“We don't have unlimited storage on the crystal.”

“Sorry. Six of us managed to escape the mine but are currently trapped on the pirate shipyards. We're hoping to smuggle ourselves out on one of their freighters, but it may turn out to be impossible. We understand the name of the sector is Bandit Refuge and it is somewhere adjacent or within Paranid territory. We implore the Paranid government, any government, to come in and rescue us. There are over a thousand slaves spread out over several mines, and those are only the ones we're aware of.

“I'd like this message to also be sent to my parents on Argon Prime. Please don't worry about me. I'll find a way out of this. I always do, right?” she smiled like the child Joseph remembered, mischievous and cunning.

“I'd also like this message to go to Joseph Davidson, born in Tallus, Argon Prime, but hopefully still out flying the spacelanes. Joe, don't even think about coming after me. It's too dangerous. But if you happen to *know* somebody... hey, it couldn't hurt. Joe. I know you wanted to tell me something back at Farnham's Legend. I just wanted you to know... I feel the same way. Now stay the hell alive or it will all be for nothing. Bye.” A pause. “Okay, is it off now?”

Rudager turned the message off. “There were messages from the other captives making similar pleas. A Boron, a Teladi, a Paranid, a Split and the Argon who was operating the camera. There is no message from the priest who launched the message and sacrificed himself.”

Joseph still couldn't believe it. “Ran's alive?”

Rudager nodded. “Looks that way. I assume you've told Ran about me?”

Joseph thought he'd pick up on Ran's allusion. “Well, yeah, what I knew about you at that time. There's a lot of time to fill when you're flying through space. She probably assumes you have contacts that can help. You do,

don't you?"

Rudager scowled. "I don't know what part of the word *retired* everyone seems to have trouble understanding. That's why I wanted to show you this message." He pressed skip until he reached the spot he wanted, then play.

"Split see great shipyard, building many ship of unknown design. Split think they are heavy fighters and corvettes. Split believes shipyards capable of building many ships very quickly..."

Rudager paused the player. "God bless the Split, almost his entire message was a tactical analysis of the forces in Bandit Refuge, with only a passing reference at the end for forces to be sent, and no reference to help him specifically." He looked at Joseph, eyes narrowed. "Do you see what he's getting at? They're building a fleet, a huge fleet."

"So can't we sent the Fleet in there?"

Rudager shook his head. "The Paranid expressly forbid any outsider race from conducting military exercises within their borders."

"And why don't the Paranid rush in? I thought one of the captives was Paranid, wouldn't that tick them off?"

"It would, if he wasn't an outsider already. Word is the Paranid government is dismissing the vid as a hoax to damage their reputation."

"So nothing is going to be done."

Again, Rudager shook his head.

"Then I'm going in. I've got the perfect cover! This is an old pirate ship. If I can get my hands on a pirate transport ID, I can sneak in as one of them and break Ran and the others out. And if they try to attack me they'll be in for a surprise." He patted the dashboard of the Ran's Revenge II.

"And how do you plan to get there?"

Joseph thought about it. "Well, I figured I'd go in through the jump gate

there, really casual, like I belong.”

“And that would be your first, and last, mistake. There's only one gate, and ever since they blew the moon there, the pirates have kept a huge asteroid in front of it. They only tractor it in and out of position when someone calls with the right codes. Any ship coming through unannounced goes SPLAT.” This meant even his jump drive was useless. Though it didn't require a gate to jump out with, it always needed a gate as a jumping-in reference point.

Joseph felt anger welling up inside. “You come here and tell me my best friend, who I thought was dead, who I discovered only too late I LOVED is miraculously alive, but in the hands of pirates. What do you expect me to do, nothing?”

“Yes, dammit! Because you know she's alive, and that's a hell of a lot more than you had going for you ten minutes ago. Because things have a way of working out if you leave yourself open to the possibilities, rather than rushing in head first. And because I'm asking you to be patient.”

“Patient?”

“Captain Sands has been monitoring a growing pirate war in this quadrant of the universe. One faction has built a Battleship out of the wreckage of several ships... including the Vengeance.” Rudager's voice trailed off.

“Your ship?”

“Yeah. They probably consider it ironic or something. That was what blasted your dummy vessels and the Renegade prototype out of space. It's been hitting poorly defended pirate bases wherever it jumps to and taking them out, but never engaging in large scale hostilities against other pirate corvettes or capital ships – not that they have many of those to begin with.”

“So what does that have to do with me... er... other than the fact that ship was sent to blow me up?”

Rudager rolled his eyes. “There is something larger going on in the universe than you, nitwit! The Xenon are breathing down our necks, the Kha'ak keep coming out of nowhere and ruining our day, and this Pirate War is threatening to destabilize the governments even further. They want to blame the Yaki, since no Yaki targets have been hit. The Yaki claim they're not responsible, so then they start to blame each other – because none of the other pirate factions are organized enough to pull this off.”

“Except the ones in Bandit Refuge.”

“Exactly. All the governments are keeping the message hush-hush, otherwise the pirates will hunt down the escapees before something can be done.”

“Which it won't be.”

“Probably not. But this is what I mean by being patient. If the pirates of Bandit Refuge are planning something big, there may soon be a window which you can use. You with me?”

Joseph sighed. “Yeah, I got it.”

“Good. My guess is things will come to a boil within the month, maybe two weeks. I suggest you keep your comm channel open and be ready to jump at a moment's notice. In the meantime, you do whatever you think is best to prepare.”

Joseph thought about it a moment, then smirked. “I've got a few ideas.”

20 – HOSTILE TAKEOVER

A man dressed in white, came in with a small saucer shaped device in his hand. One of his fingers was missing. He bowed and held it out to Omotu Kenzu, second in command of the Yaki.

“It is from Lord Feckson,” said the messenger.

Kenzu raised an eyebrow. Lord Feckson's reply had come by holo? They had been honorable enough to send a live representative to treat with him this time. This did not bode well. He nodded to the messenger, who set it on the ground, activated it, and left.

A short balding man appeared. Not Lord Feckson at all.

“I am Pan Hampstead, assistant to Lord Tect Feckson. Am I speaking to Omoto Kenzu?”

His... assistant? This was worse than he thought. “I am Omoto Kenzu.”

The holo beeped, recognizing the voice print and proceeding to the next stage of the message.

“Many apologies, Omoto Kenzu, but I am afraid we cannot accept your request for an alliance with the Yaki at this time. We wish you all success in your endeavors.”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

Another beep. “No, sir. It is not a joke. We simply do not require an alliance with you. We are doing quite well now, thank you. How are you?”

“You had all but implored us for an alliance not long ago! We set a task for your Lord to accomplish, and he completed it dutifully. As a result we were most eager to open a dialog. Why this change of heart?”

Several beeps. “Many thanks. As I said, we no longer require an alliance with the Yaki. Perhaps you have heard reports of an unknown Battleship attacking various pirate bases?”

“Yes.”

Another beep. “No doubt you have ascertained that it belongs to Lord Feckson?”

“Yes.”

“And perhaps you have heard of our recent technology exchange with the Paranid, who are producing a new series of anti-pirate heavy fighters called Renegades?”

“Yes.”

Beep. “I understand they are quite formidable, though I'm sure their second generation version will be designed more along Paranid aesthetics. My point is that we are quite self-sufficient now, and will continue to be so.”

Kenzu thought of what this meant. Thus far the Dreadnought had not attacked Yaki targets, but for how long? Their messenger had been to the dockyard where the Dreadnought had been built, and surely it was capable of building new pirate bases to replace those he destroyed. The Dreadnought herself could be ferrying these stations into position this very moment.

Lord Feckson was expanding his realm.

If he was allowed to do this, his production would increase exponentially. Then how long before he turned his eye to the Yaki?

“Very well,” said Kenzu. “We wish you peace, and that our friendship will grow though our alliance will not.”

Beep. Hampstead bowed. “We wish that as well.” The image faded.

Kenzu scowled. He would have to repeat this to his superior, but he knew the feeling he had would be shared. If Feckson was expanding his realm and would not be an ally, then he was an enemy.

Enemies must be dealt with quickly, and harshly.

On Argon Today, they called it The Great Pirate War. Not the most original of names, but it got the viewers to tune in.

Despite a dramatic increase in pirate ships being spotted, attacks on government stations dropped nearly to zero over the next two weeks. Entire fleets of fighters and corvettes were being moved, maneuvered, positioned, trying to corner the Dreadnought and bring her down.

The Yaki had rallied the remaining pirates together under their banner to take on Lord Feckson's forces, and they tried every trick in the book to stop the Dreadnought. They tried attacking her on all sides when they found what sector she was in. They tried using SQUASH mines in sectors they expected her to show up in. They tried establishing decoy pirate bases to attack, actually laden with high explosives, in the hopes of taking her out. Nothing worked. Always she managed to jump before her shields were brought down, and when things got really bad she was able to retreat to Bandit Refuge, where none of them could risk entering. Then an hour later she would strike again, somewhere completely different.

The media had a hard time deciding whose side to be on. Most rallied around the Dreadnought, which had never attacked a civilian station or ship, and saw it as a romantic Robin Hood figure facing impossible odds. Some

suspected the reason why the war had started and figured “better the devil you know” and sided with the Yaki.

Had the media got their hands on Ran's message, perhaps they would have changed their tune. Had the Yaki knew about the tactical information the Split named Garestal had given on the message, they might have been able to anticipate Lord Feckson's next move.

The holo-disk beeped in Kenzu's desk. At first he didn't notice it. He had put it away in case it was needed to glean further information. He was deep in thought. The final stage of this conflict was underway. They had intercepted an encrypted message which had turned the tide of the war. The Dreadnought was trapped in a small sector on the edge of known space. Her jumpdrives were offline, and there was only one gate in the sector. He had ordered every fighter and corvette in the Yaki fleet to converge on her and destroy her before she could repair her jumpdrive.

The disk beeped again, and Kenzu turned his attention to the drawer, opened it, set it on the floor next to him, and let it play.

It was not Hampstead this time, but Lord Feckson that appeared. Interesting. There was no way this was being broadcast here. This must have been set to activate at a certain time.

“Greetings, Omoto Kenzu.”

“Greetings.”

Beep. “You are no doubt wondering why this message has activated. It is because I wished to teach you a lesson in Terran history.”

Kenzu said nothing, but his eyes narrowed.

“Do you know what a battleship is best suited for?”

Again, Kenzu said nothing, but the recording had anticipated this, and

beeped forward.

“Perhaps you think it's most useful for sector domination, or station destruction. Perhaps you think it is most useful in direct combat, taking on vast numbers of other ships. You would be wrong on all counts. Historically, battleships have been kept away from the front ranks of battle. Should a fleet of other ships try to confront her, she would invariably retreat. A battleship is too expensive to sacrifice in anything less than an end-game situation. For the most part they provided what little long range bombardment support they could from nice safe distances.

“So if a battleship is too valuable to actually USE, then what good is she?” He did not wait for Kenzu to reply. “Because she is as much a symbol as she is an instrument of war – both to her side and the enemy's. To you, she represented our growing strength, a strength which you came to fear as she demonstrated in minor but dramatic attacks. To sink her would be to sink the symbol of our power.”

Feckson allowed himself a smile. “But did you ever once consider in a cost/time/manpower basis just how much you have invested to sink this symbol? How much of your resources at this very moment are dedicated to destroying her, far far away from your home base?”

Kenzu felt his heart begin to race. He couldn't be. He couldn't. He began to type into his computer, scanning the sector, checking fleet distribution, what was at his disposal.

“And all this while you've been facing off against ONE ship, with whatever disposable escorts we could provide her. We've been using our time much more wisely than you, Kenzu.”

Satellites reported hundreds of fighters and corvettes in the sector. But they were all Yaki. But they couldn't be, he recognized some of the ID codes,

corvettes he had personally assigned to the Dreadnought hunt. Then the registration IDs changed, and his monitor was filled with red threat warnings.

“The Renegade is a good design, but I believe you'll be even more impressed by our Salamander. It was designed to take on the Renegade should some government have somehow got their hands on the plans. And our new corvette...” he kissed his fingers like a chef who had cooked a masterpiece.

The ship designs were unlike anything he had seen before. The Yaki's sector defense was no match for them.

“Don't think of this as an invasion, Omoto Kenzu. Think of it as... a hostile takeover.”

Kenzu called his ships back from the Dreadnought hunt, but they were so far away even the ones with jump drives would need to refuel and make a second jump. And there would not be enough of them. Kenzu scowled. Lord Feckson had him. But it would be an empty victory.

“You are too confident, Lord Feckson.” said Kenzu aloud. “Our fleet easily outnumbers this invasion force. Even if you destroy us, when the rest of the fleet eventually arrive and retake the sector. Your forces will be crushed.”

A couple of beeps from the disk. “I am assuming you just made some kind of standard 'you shall not prevail' comment. Let me assure you I will. I could tell you what I have planned, but allow me to show you instead.”

The holo switched to an image of open space. At the bottom the words “Simulation Only” flashed repeatedly, as if it was required for legal reasons.

The Dreadnought was there, listing in space, as the Yaki streamed into the sector. They formed a blockade and began to prepare the attack lines. The Dreadnought, desperate, turned to the gate and gunned her engines, hoping to break through the blockade and escape. The Yaki surrounded her and pelted her on all sides with HEPT fire, dropping her shields. The Dreadnought fought

back, taking out as many Corvettes as she could. As she neared the gate, a hundred M5 scout fighters launched in a moment of last minute defense.

Only they didn't. They didn't defend the Dreadnought, they ran straight through the gate at top speed as the Dreadnought tilted ever so slightly upward.

And crashed into the jump gate.

It was almost impossible to destroy a jump gate. Almost. But it had been done in the past, and a ship of the Dreadnought's size should do the trick. The simulation ended.

“At least, there's a 90% chance it will turn out that way. Nobody really wanted that sector, anyway. I suppose I should add that the Dreadnought specifically targeted only ships fitted with jump drives, preferably corvettes. Once this unpleasantness is over, I'm sure a rescue operation can be organized to pick up those stranded, and they can be integrated into the new corporate structure.”

Again Lord Feckson allowed himself a smile. “I am glad you've seen this recording and haven't thrown in it away, Kenzu. It makes this moment that much more satisfying. Oh, I do not think your superior will be pleased with your performance report. I believe we have an opening in the mail room.”

21 – THE ARMADA

The Great Pirate War began almost the day after Rudager had shown Joseph the recording from Ran. At first he thought Rudager had made a mistake, talking about things coming to a boil in two weeks to a month, but as the attacks escalated each day he realized Rudager wasn't talking about the start of the war, but the end of it.

He was not idle in this time. He'd been shy about taking on pirates before, but now did so with a fervor, using the Ran's Revenge II for hit-and-run raids against whatever he came across. His goal: capture as many ships as possible.

In the meantime he had his freighter corporation work overtime, making as many trades as they possibly could. When the word was given, their last acts would be to sell their transports at the nearest shipyards. He needed money, lots of money, and fast.

Three weeks into the conflict, Rudager sent Joseph a short message:

Endgame in progress. Strike Bandit Haven in two days. Godspeed.

Rudager

Granted he would have liked a bit more to go on than that. Like perhaps a detailed map of just where the hell Ran was, or a promise of backup. But as it was there was nothing.

But he sure as hell wasn't going in alone. That had been the other project he had worked on in this time.

“What makes you think I'll fly for you?” the barrel chested pilot looked like he wouldn't fit in an M5 anymore, but his face indicated that just meant he flew bigger and deadlier ships.

He was on an old dilapidated trading station, refurbished into the headquarters of one of the Bounty Hunter guilds. Captain Sands had told him this was where he could find some of Rudager's crew, and the silver MM ring on the man across from him told him he'd found his man.

“Because you want payback,” said Joseph.

The man snorted. His name was Penna, and he had been Rudager's third in command. Now he was the defacto leader of those who had become bounty hunters or mercenaries. “Payback? I've paid those bloody pirates back ten times over, and will do so ten times again. Easy paychecks. I love it when they try to fight back. Sometimes I even let them hit me a few times. Let them think they actually have a chance for a moment before I blow them to hell.”

“Blow them to hell? Don't you have to bring them back alive?”

“Depends on the bounty. Plus the big wigs never travel without protection. Hired guns who think they're God's gift to space.”

Joseph wondered how to rephrase his request. “Wouldn't you like to get back at the guy who organized the destruction of the Marauders?”

“Lord Feckson?” Penna seemed to mull this over a moment.

“Tempting. And from what I hear he's vulnerable right now. Word is that the Yaki have him on the ropes, hunting down that battleship of theirs right across the galaxy. Getting into his sector is a problem, though. But why should I just help you just so you can rescue your girl?”

“She's not my girl,” corrected Joseph, then added, “That's not all that's at stake and you know it. There are a thousand or more prisoners in their sector of space. You'd be rescuing them as well.”

“Still, I got a reputation to maintain, I need to hear the rattle of coin before I side with you.”

“You've got a reputation to regain, if you ask me,” countered Joseph. “Bandit's Refuge made you their bitch and you've been trying to avoid picking up the soap every since.”

For a moment, he didn't know if Penna would laugh or hit him. Fortunately it was the former. “You got a point there. A real good point. But still, Hunter's Honor. I need payment.”

“But—”

Penna held up a hand. “I won't fight for you for anything less than one credit.” Joseph cocked his head. Penna smiled. “I said the rattle of coin. Singular. I can get you as many pilots as you need as well. One credit each, and that's my final offer.”

There was a time where Joseph would have thought a million credits was a lot, and by the time the last of his freighters had been sold he had over ten times that amount. But the money was spent so quickly it was like he never had it to begin with. But he got what he wanted. What he needed.

A fleet.

Joseph would have liked to have called it “The largest fleet since the

Xenon War,” or “The greatest anti-piracy armada since the Marauders,” but he couldn't. What he had really shouldn't be called a fleet, it could barely be called strike force, but he was out of time and it was all he could afford.

The fleet consisted of two dozen captured fighters, fifty M4 medium fighters and two surplus corvettes. The corvettes were Mark I Centaurs, the precursor model to the Dauntless. They were ugly as sin – flying bricks their were often called, but they could each take on a squadron of small fighters and had the guns to reduce a station to rubble. Plus they each carried a special surprise inside. The last of his credits put to a good cause.

Penna had been good to his word and had gathered those Marauders who had become bounty hunters, mercenaries, even assassins to his side. Each of them, in turn, could call in a couple of other friends into the fight as well, and most of them brought their own ships. In total he had perhaps a hundred ships under his command. It was far from huge, but it would have to do.

Joseph stood on the bridge of the Ran's Rescue, one of the old Centaurs, and surveyed the fleet.

“Not much to look at is it?” Joseph said doubtfully.

Penna, who would be commanding the Ran's Rescue, stood next to him and said, “Er, at a time like this it's generally customary for the commander in charge to be *optimistic* of their chances. You know, for morale.”

Joseph saw the crew looking at him and realized what he was doing. He was about to apologize when inspiration hit. He turned on the intercom so the entire fleet could hear him.

“I'm standing here on the bridge of this beat up old corvette, looking out to the rest of the fleet and I'm thinking, 'It's not much to look at, is it?' And when you get down to it, it's not. A fifth of the fighters I see out there have their hulls scorched with blaster fire and have been pounded back into shape.

The rest were bought second hand at the shipyards. They're meant for freighter escort, not dedicated military duty.

“But if there is one thing I have learned out here it's that looks can, and should, be deceiving. I look out there and I think 'It's not much to look at,' but I've met who's sitting behind the controls of those ships. I met who's manning these corvettes. I've looked into your eyes and I know you are not ordinary pilots. Many of you once flew with the Marauders. Those who haven't have distinguished careers in their own right. All of you have reason to hate the pirates, and I know each and every one of you is worth five of them. With the bulk of their forces away, we have a perfect window of opportunity to not only strike a crippling blow to them, but to bring freedom to those they have enslaved! I've met each of you before signing you on, and I know if anyone can pull this off, it is this crew, and it is this fleet!”

There was no wild applause or loud cheers, these men and women were far too professional for that. They solemnly return to duties, but perhaps there was a bit more enthusiasm in their voices now as the comm chatter increased on the bridge and everyone prepared to move out.

“Not bad,” said Penna, hands around his waist belt. “Are you sure you don't wish to stay on board the Ran's Rescue? You'll be safer here.”

Joseph smiled. “No, thank you. I'm sure I would be, but Ran's Revenge is key to our plans. I feel it's only right that I fly her. Besides, I said looks are deceiving, and the Revenge is the most deceiving ship I've ever come across. She'll get the job done.”

Penna held out his hand. “Good luck, sir.”

Joseph shook it. “Good luck to us all.”

22 - RAN'S RESCUE

As events unfolded around them, Ran and her fellow escapees had more pressing matters on their mind – namely surviving and not getting caught.

Tande had managed to get forge low-level IDs for them. The pirate dockyard and headquarters were so large it required a large maintenance staff. Most of them were prisoners who were deemed unfit for mining duty but not quite useless enough to space, and so were kept alive to do the crap jobs other pirates couldn't be bothered to do themselves. Hiding among them meant it was very unlikely anyone would rat them out.

For days under this guise they managed to explore most of the facility. Ran had hoped to find a secret way out, but found nothing. The only way in or out was on board a ship, and stowing away on one of those was extremely risky.

There was another problem as well. Word amongst the maintenance slaves on board the headquarters was quietly but rapidly spreading. This was a worry because it meant one of the pirates might hear about them any day now. It also meant that they had a lot more support and resources at their disposal, but that support came with a price – they wanted a way off as well.

Ran ran through several plans in her mind. Hiding the escapees in cargo canisters and be shipped to another sector. Taking out the crew of a ship and

posing as them, like how they got out of the mining facility. Hiding on the ship then hijacking it in mid-flight. Simply hot wiring a ship and hoping to God they could jump system before being shot to slag.

None of these were deemed an acceptable risk. Security was too high and would remain so for who-knew-how-long. As time went on her plans became even more risky and less likely to succeed. When she found herself considering using a jump drive not attached to a ship and simply jumping a section of the base into a friendly sector – hoping the air locks would hold and the air in the section would hold out long enough for a rescue – she knew she had to step back and reconsider their position.

The problem was only exasperated by the slaves who knew of Ran's group. They wanted to come with them, and that just wasn't possible. A half dozen escaping, yes, but fifty? A hundred? A thousand? She had to try and convince them that their best bet was to let a small group escape and bring back a large rescue force.

Many saw the logic in this but others feared for their lives, and fear makes fools. It was the fools Ran worried about most. If they didn't feel some kind of progress was made then it could ruin everything.

This was when the Great Pirate War started, and Ran saw an opportunity. With so many of Lord Feckson's forces focused on the war it was more unlikely than ever to slip away on a ship – and even if they did there was no way it could take them any place safer – but it did give Ran an idea.

Gremlins.

She decided to curb frustration from the ever growing underground by focusing their attention on little acts of defiance. Nothing overt, nothing major, but create minor complications that would take time and effort to repair. It would let them think they were doing something useful and who knows,

perhaps they were. It might at least create an opportunity at some point in the future.

It's unlikely that the Gremlins slowed down Feckson's war effort or in any way affected the outcome, but it did mean that Ran had a large network of inconspicuous operatives at strategic points throughout the facility. Her mind turned towards how she could use it should the opportunity arise.

Joseph's plan was foolhearty, as all simple and direct plans are. Since there was no way to bypass Bandit's Refuge's jumpgate without military grade targeted jumpdrives he'd need to take the direct route. The problem was everyone knew that the gate was blocked on the opposite side by a massive asteroid. Any ship coming through would crash into and be obliterated. The only way through was to send coded signal using the right password and ships on the other side would tractor the asteroid out of the way.

This was why Joseph spent so much time hunting trying to capture pirate vessels. Every one was an additional ship to his fleet, but with a bit of luck one of them would have a current code and password available for when Rudager sent the signal.

His luck came in the form of a pirate Nova captured in Paranid space. Rudager had noticed a number of Renegades now flying under the Paranid banner. Joseph knew from his conversation with Rudager that he couldn't count on them for backup, but this worried him more. What if the Paranid were cozy enough with Feckson that they would feel obliged to defend him rather than let their complicity and even support leak out?

He tried not to think about it as the Ran's Revenge II and several captured pirate fighters followed him to the jump gate – those he was fairly confident hadn't been recorded as captured by any authorities. As he

approached a lone vessel contacted them on the coded frequency and challenged them. Joseph supposed they didn't need more than one sentry. Shooting the ship would solve nothing and the asteroid would stay in place on the other side.

“What's your business?” the scout fighter asked.

“Cargo delivery and damaged ships coming in for repair,” said Joseph. He changed his freighter's registration to that of a known pirate vessel he destroyed en route to this sector. He hoped the fraud wouldn't be noticed until it was too late. His fighter escort certainly looked like it had been through hell, though they were all in fine condition he hadn't bothered repainting any of them.

There was a pause then the sentry said, “Transmit identification and password.”

Joseph prayed the information he had was current. He also hoped the sentry didn't scan his ship's fighting capability too closely. It was just an old pirate freighter, barely a threat, honest.

A grunt then, “Go on through.”

For one terrifying moment Joseph realized there was no reason for the sentry to say the same thing even if their passwords didn't check out. They'd fly through, go splat, problem solved. He swallowed hard, and imagined his escorts were doing likewise as they passed through the glowing center of the ancient ring.

Ran was busy cleaning the men's washroom next to the hanger bay when the alarm klaxon rang. She came out wet and smelling of recycled bean burrito as unkempt pilots in far too formal corporate pilot uniforms rushed by, ignoring her completely.

“What happened?” asked a straggler.

“Someone's unblocking the jumpgate,” said another. “Small group, took out one of the tractor beam ships and is pummeling the other. Go on, MOVE!”

Ran's eyes widened. Had the tide of the war turned? It was impossible not to hear the scuttlebutt, there were rumors of the Dreadnought drawing away Yaki forces and Feckson had sent off his armada to Yaki space that morning, leaving only a moderate defense force behind. Had the Yaki outmaneuvered him and sent their own strike force to his base?

She had to find out and worked her way down to the control center to see if she could find out more.

The control center was surprisingly underguarded. Though she couldn't get inside, she could hear much of the chatter inside. She opened a water pipe access panel and began to do routine maintenance.

“Arson squadron, lead Broadside squadron to the target area. Chaos and Draco squadron to stay behind and defend base.”

A voice crackled over speakers, for some reason it was being broadcast rather than relayed over headsets. “Understood. Any idea who the perps are?”

“Negative Arson Leader. Ship ID was faked. Proper ship ID reads as 'Ran's Revenge II.' She's not one of ours and she's not Yaki. Other than that we have no idea.

“And those fighters?”

“Intel believes they were captured recently.”

“Roger, consider them dust.”

Ran gasped, then continued to work. Ran's Revenge? Who would name their ship that? Either this was a hell of a coincidence or... “Joe,” she whispered.

“Speakers off,” said a calm voice inside the room. “Spong, please focus

on finding out who owns that freighter. The others can handle coordinating the battle. I suspect this is important.” Ran had never met or heard Lord Feckson, but had heard much of his personality. This voice fit it to a T.

“Who do you think it is?” This voice was more animated, but sounded like it was used to speaking in conversation with Feckson. Ran heard his assistant's name was called Hampstead.

“Ran's Revenge. It's an odd name, isn't it?” said Feckson.

“Yes, sir.”

“Not exactly a common name.”

“No, sir, but...”

“Do you recall the name of the Marauder pilot who escaped recently?”

“Ran Jesson,” Hampstead said automatically. “Do you think this is her?”

There was a pause. “It's possible. We have some reason to believe that she and the others may have escaped in the past month. Whether or not it is her, I believe the same person is behind this attack.”

“The Marauders?”

“A sad last attempt at revenge, no doubt. He has only a dozen fighters with him.”

“That freighter is impressive, though.”

“Yes, it is, isn't it? Who would have thought about loading so many heavy weapons onto the front of a freighter. And the engines... very impressive. Comm, please inform Arson squadron to attempt to disable the freighter rather than destroy her. I would like to have a look at her.”

“Yes, sir,” said the comms officer.

“Still,” Feckson said almost to himself, “It's not like Rudager to attack with such a weak force. And he's trying to keep the asteroid clear. There must

be a larger force. Spong, do you have anything yet?"

"Sorry, sir. I can't track down ownership or assets for the Ran's Revenge pilot. I'm still trying."

"Do keep in mind your job is on the line, Spong, and we do not have a favorable retirement package."

"Yes, sir."

Ran's mind was racing. Was it Joseph? Had he come for her? Goddammit she told him to stay away, why couldn't he listen to simple instructions? Stupid idiot was going to get himself killed and she'd be left feeling guilty for it.

She closed the access panel and tried not to hurry down the hall. She had to find the others. She didn't know what she was going to do, but whatever it was would have to happen soon.

Lord Feckson frowned at intel officer Spong. Spong could sense the frown even though his back was turned. The frown burned through his skull and into his brain, reminding him what failure meant. At last, he had inspiration, tried a different tact, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Sir, I have the information on the ship."

"Good. How did you find it?"

It seemed odd to ask that first, but Spong obeyed. "Well, like I said the freighter history is a complete blank. No way to trace it. But I thought maybe some of his escort weren't as careful. They were all registered as salvage within the last week, but the registration process was being held up on purpose. I was able to find a whole mess of connections that way."

"And?"

"They're connected to a large purchase of surplus military hardware

bought during the last month. Over a hundred ships. Two of the ships are Mark I Centaur corvettes, one of which is named Ran's Rescue.”

Feckson's eyebrow raised. “Rescue? So she hasn't escaped. She's on board this station now. Alert security, I want this place searched from stem to stern. If she knows about the rescue attempt she'll have to come out in the open to escape. Spong?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Good job. This will look favorably on your year end performance review. You might even win the Christmas ham this year.”

Spong breathed a deep sigh of relief. Getting to live AND a Christmas ham? Life was good. “Thank you, sir.”

Feckson sat down and steepled his fingers. He supposed his men required some kind of confidence boost, so he spoke what he knew to be the truth. “Fear not. I have no doubt whatever the outcome of the battle is, we will survive.”

23 – FEINTS AND FORTUNES

It wasn't enough to simply destroy the freighters tractoring the asteroid in and out of position. The moment they were through they began pushing it back into place, and by the time they attacked it covered enough of the gate to give his corvettes a very bad day if they tried to come through.

With one of the ships down, Joseph had his fighters focus on defending him as he used Ran's Revenge to pummel the second freighter into submission, being very careful not to hit the aft section where the tractor beam was housed.

When the crew saw it was hopeless they wisely abandoned ship. Joseph swooped in a practiced recovery maneuver; he barrel rolled in from behind and hit the breaks so his ship was upside down, and lined up cockpit to cockpit. It made getting from one ship to the other by spacesuit that much faster.

The hull had been breached on the fore section – one of the crew hadn't reached his helmet in time and floated dead in the airlock. Joseph pushed past and made for the rear turret.

He hoped there was enough juice left in the engines to get the job done. He powered up the beam and began to pull, only to realize that the asteroid wasn't coming closer to him – he was coming closer to the asteroid!

“Dammit! Engines!” He forgot that without thrust the standard laws of

physics applied. Each would be drawn to the other in proportion to their mass, which meant his tiny ship would move a klick before the massive rock moved a meter.

He kept the lock active and rushed back to the cockpit, where he set the engines to whatever thrust it could manage. The two ships continued to close, but the asteroid moved more now. He set the ship on autopilot and bailed back to Ran's Revenge.

His "rogue pirate" squadron had lost two ships in the meantime, but had wiped out half the base defenses. The others had fled back to base. Joseph joined the rest of the squadron.

"Good job, guys. That looked easy."

"It was," said Wallace, one of the pilots. "I've fought Feckson before. Those were pilots on punishment duty. They're typically given light ships and aren't expected to survive."

There was a flash of light from behind. Joseph looked back and saw an orange blossom on the side of the asteroid – the freighter had finally crashed into it. He only hoped it had nudged the asteroid out of the way enough.

"More hostiles coming in!" said another pilot. Joseph looked at his scanner. These weren't scouts. They were heavy fighters. He checked the profile of one – it was a Renegade. Many of them were Renegades, and some were of a design he didn't recognize, X shaped wings, faster, and heavier shielded.

"Alright guys," said Joseph. "Form up on me, claw formation. Hold the line, no matter what!"

The heavy fighters outnumbered his forces twenty to one. He grit his teeth as the blips came closer and closer on his gravidar.

"Steady. Hold position. Steady."

The fighters were almost in firing range.

“Ready... wait for it... RUN AWAY!”

As one the turned on their axis and hit the boost extension of their ships. The heavy fighters unleashed a massive withering barrage of HEPT and PAC fire, but nothing found their mark. Few of the rogue pirate squad were using heavy fighters, and those that were had overtuned their engines, so they easily outdistanced Feckson's forces.

“Head for the asteroid, use it for cover and try and take pot shots at them when you can,” said Joseph.

“It won't be long before they call the scout fighters back and use them to lure us into the open,” said Wallace. “Or just surround the asteroid from all angles and close in with the heavies.”

“We don't need a lot of time. Only enough.”

Joseph and the rogue pirates flew behind the asteroid near the jumpgate and waited for attacks of opportunity. They didn't come.

“Looks like I was right,” said Wallace, and more scout blips hit the gravidar, closing fast. “The heavies will just sit back and wait till they get a clear shot at us.

Joseph smiled. “Let them.”

Ran knew a “now or never” situation when she saw it, and this was one of them. She didn't know for sure what that stupid moron Joseph had planned, so she'd have to make it up as she went along.

Her first stop was her fellow escapees. Ooolah and Optik were working in the mess hall, Tande was working on the gravity generators, Garestal was grumpily scrubbing decks and Sorus was doing inventory at the quartermaster deck.

“Spread the word, we're breaking out now,” she said, and explained what she overheard at the control center. She embellished a wee bit on how many forces Joseph had brought with him. But surely he had brought more than just a couple dozen fighters, right?

“The entire heathen Argon fleet, you say?” said Optik.

“Yep.”

The Paranid raised all three of what passed for eyebrows. “For once, I am the unbeliever.”

Ran shrugged. “Well, maybe not the *entire* fleet. But it's a huge fleet.”

“Sssssso there are enough to carry ussss all?” asked Sorus, referring to all the slaves on this station and the others.

“Sure looked like it to me,” Ran lied through her teeth.

“I tttttthhink you are not telling ussssss the truthhhhhh.”

“Matters it does not,” Garestal said with a practical detachment.

Ooolah nodded in agreement. “What matters is that the others believe it to be true.”

At least someone understood. One way or another this was the best chance everyone had to escape. Even if there were no more ships and only Ran and her friends got out, they could come back with a bigger fleet in short order. There would be no way all the races would stand idly by once actual eyewitnesses came out and told their tale. Would they? Any which way it didn't matter. Before this they had zero chance of escape. Afterwards they would also have zero. Even if they only had a one percent chance of success, it was better than zero.

Tande sighed. “I guess this is the part where you tell me how I have to put my life on the line yet again.”

Ran smirked. “You know me so well.”

In the control room, Hampstead sat in a chair examining twenty monitors. The one directly in front of him continued to change every two seconds to a different camera within the station. Feckton listened to the comm chatter and looked at the three dimensional gravidar image in center of the room. The battle around the asteroid was going well. Rudager's forces were pinned, unable to reach the gate to escape, harassed by scout fighters, and one by one were getting picked off by his Renegades and Salamander fighters.

Unfortunately he knew it wouldn't last. He checked his watch.

“Withdraw all fighters back to base. Now.”

No one questioned the orders, they simply relayed them to the squadrons, who in turn obeyed without question. Just as they left weapons range a corvette jumped through the gate, followed by fighter after fighter, then another corvette, and more fighters. Had Feckson's forces remained they would have been caught in a devastating crossfire.

Had he been organizing this his forces would have arrived five minutes earlier, but the attack thus far had shown a degree of rushed desperation to it. Perhaps that wasn't it. Perhaps it was inexperience. Odd, given the fact Rudager had been doing this for years. Whatever the reason, he factored it in when planning the next move.

“Let him come to us.”

Joseph checked in with the fleet once the last ship darted through the gate. They were all accounted for.

“Commanders,” Joseph said over the intercom. “Glad you could join us.”

“Glad to be here,” said Penna.

The captain of the other corvette, Loose Ends, was less enthusiastic. “Let's get on with it.”

Joseph had lost two more pilots waiting for them but it was worth it. He didn't know how Feckson knew they'd be arriving, but the timing in which he withdrew his forces made him take pause. He didn't have an inside source, did he? He shook away the thought. Everyone, especially Rudager, had warned him how Lord Feckson was a master strategist.

It was foolhearty to think he could out plan Feckson. The man had single handedly plotted the destruction of two thousand ships in a single blow.

But then, on board the Ran's Rescue, as he went over scenarios with Commander Penna, something occurred to him. It was simple, but it was brilliant. Penna nearly fell over laughing when Joseph explained it to him. But then the best plans were the ones that were obvious, out in the open, and yet completely hidden from sight.

“All right then. Commanders. Launch drones.”

Half the station controllers thought they were going to have a heart attack when the scouts Triplex gravidars picked up hundreds, then *thousands* of blips.

“There's thousands of them!” exclaimed one.

Feckson said calmly, “Two thousand, one hundred and nineteen.” He didn't miraculously count this in a glance, he simply checked his computer for an accurate count. “You may calm down now, two thousand of them are merely drones.”

“Drones?” someone whispered.

Hampstead, on the other hand, *was* good at taking in large amounts of information at a single glance and making instant calculations. He had been

checking every checking every face on the station faster than even the computers could. He coughed politely.

“Sir? I found her.”

“All right. All fighters listen up. You have ten drones pre-assigned to your ships, which will now be rendezvousing with you. Set them to attack whatever your target is. Then set your scanners to ignore all drones and fight as you normally would. Don't forget your wingmen.”

Like a swarm of bees, the cloud of drones drifted away and encircled every fighter in the modest fleet. Those left over gave point defense for the corvettes themselves.

“You realize if those pirates stock Shockwave generators, those drones will be less than useless,” said Wallace.

“Maybe. But they'll serve their purpose no matter what. Now, all units, **ATTACK!**”

The pirates who had a moment ago outnumbered the invaders twenty to one were now themselves outnumbered ten to one. But drones were used by freighter pilots for basic pirate defense, which meant that every pirate knew how to deal with them. They were weakly shielded and armed, posing no threat individually. Even ten to one it wouldn't take long to take them out. Feckson certainly didn't view the drones as a significant threat. They merely cluttered up his gravidar screen. The problem was, in trying to take them out, the controlling fighter could then get behind a pirate and blast them out of the sky. And the pirates guarding the base were not his elite, those had been sent to the Yaki Takeover mission.

Lord Feckson had called for reinforcements the moment the battle

began, but it would take time for them to arrive. In the meantime, it appeared that these new Marauders were hell bent on a frontal assault on his headquarters. He had no choice but to draw all his forces around the base and defend it. Even if his forces were destroyed, they would never be able to destroy his base's shields before the reinforcements arrived. It was simply impossible. A noble last stand with such limited resources, for sure, but futile nonetheless.

But it wasn't a last stand, was it? It was a rescue mission.

Lord Feckson looked down at the monitors, which showed his guards surrounding that troublesome gremlin, Ran, in a hallway. He suspected she had been behind the increase in disruptions on the base. As she was knocked to the ground and handcuffed, he wondered what would be the best way to use her. After all, it was just as important knowing how to use a bargaining chip as it was to actually have it.

24 – A SIMPLE PLOY

The battle raged around the pirate headquarters. Renegades and Salamanders found themselves swarmed by drones, drawing away their turret fire and leaving their aft sections vulnerable to attack. If they ignored the drones and focused on the attacking ship, all too often they failed to realize how those weak blasters when combined could reduce their shields.

Joseph had his forces focus on the heavy fighters. They couldn't afford to ignore them while picking off the scouts. Ran's Revenge darted and dove in and around the station, taking out any targets of opportunity, while the corvette Ran's Rescue moved closer to the external docking ring, holding off fighters on all sides. Of course, she had no intention of docking with the base, and wouldn't be able to without the shields down anyway.

Joseph, on the other hand, could dock Ran's Revenge in the fighter bay. That was the another advantage of the classic pirate freighter design, it wasn't much larger than an oversized M3 heavy fighter. It would be a tight fit, but he could pull it off. He hoped.

With attention drawn to the corvette, Joseph was able to bide his time until another wave of fighters left the docking bay, then slipped – more like crashed – through, scraping along on all sides and pinning a scout fighter to the

far wall of the hanger with its helmet like cockpit.

Joseph slumped against the control panel, then pushed himself upright. He shook himself and unbuckled himself from the captain's chair. "Well, on the upside, it will probably look like an accident." He grabbed a blaster and did the stupidest thing he'd ever done in his life – look for Ran alone.

He was pleasantly surprised to find absolutely no one took any notice of him. He was alone and in a pirate outfit, so everyone assumed he belonged there. No one would raid a pirate base by themselves, after all. It was so close to impossible that it simply didn't register to anyone as a possibility. Besides, they were too busy trying to defend their base.

Now, how the hell was he going to find Ran?

"Brandy?" offered Lord Feckson. "I know it's a cliché to offer a hostage and drink in situations like this, but I see no reason to be rude just because I need you to ensure Rudager once again fails to stop me."

Ran tried not to blurt out "Rudager?" and instead became calm. "I'd love some brandy."

"Excellent. You don't mind if we watch events unfolding here? I do need to keep informed, given that your employer is destroying millions of credits worth of my equipment."

"Of course." They were in the control room and the large three dimensional gravidar showed the battle in astounding detail. It seemed like Feckson was outmatched, but as blips disappeared, she noticed more of Joseph's blips were vanishing than Feckson's. Most of them were drones, but not all.

"Do you mind if I ask what you intend to do with me?"

Feckson examined the gravidar for a moment. "At this rate I predict Rudager's forces will overwhelm mine. He'll probably have fifty fighters and

one corvette left.

“Well, you could still surrender,” Ran said with a smile. She took the brandy but didn't drink.

“Thank you for the offer, but no. A thousand of my elite troops are on my way. I'm afraid he'll be quite trapped here. Oh, I'm sure many of them will jump out of system, but ultimately this will just be yet another failure for him. You, however, will be used to stall for time until they arrive.”

“You know, I don't do the whole damsel in distress thing.”

Feckson almost smiled. “No, you've been trying your best to make yourself an annoyance, haven't you? I still haven't been able to figure out exactly *how* you caused so many little problems. Have you ever considered joining my corporation? Your talents are wasted with the Marauders.”

“No thanks. Call me old fashioned, but I prefer not to murder people for their money.”

Feckson scoffed. “Murder? You speak as if human beings actually have higher principals rather than just maintaining the illusion of them for the sake of social construct. No one is opposed to murder if it gets them what they want, and they are assured of not being blamed. Do you think two lions fighting to become the leader of a pride care if they kill one another? Not in the least. They rarely do so, however. As do we. All I ask is that each and every one of my men be prepared to do so if necessary.”

Ran's jaw dropped. She knew Feckson's type, but only in the vids, not in reality. She expected him to reveal a massive news super weapon and plans for global domination next.

Luck was on Joseph side, as he overheard two guards talk about the prisoner they took up to Lord Feckson in the control room. He knew it had to

be her, he was counting on it. He didn't name his ships Ran this-and-that for nothing. Either she'd have remained hidden or, if caught, Feckson would have brought her out for negotiations should the battle go poorly.

As if things weren't already risky enough, things were about to get riskier. He needed to find a secluded room with a communications channel and someone who knew how to contact the control center. He spotted a reedy little technician working on a computer in a room. The room had only one door and no windows. Perfect.

Joseph shut the door, locked it, went over and slammed the kid's face into the keyboard.

“Listen up, kid. I need you to get me a communications line to the control room, and I don't want it traced back here. Screw the computers, I'm talking using the hardwired intercom. If you can't do that you're not useful to me, and you want to be useful.”

“I can do it.”

“Good. Get started.”

He grumbled as he got up and opened an access panel. “God, why today? I'm not even supposed to BE here today,” said Tande.

“Lord Feckson.”

The voice boomed over the control room's speakers. Everyone looked around like God had just spoken to them. Everyone except Feckson, who kept his eyes on Ran and simply lifted an eyebrow.

“Yes?”

“I believe you have one of my pilots in your custody.”

Feckson's voice remained even, with a hand gesture he made it clear to the crew they were to trace the communication. “I have many pilots in custody.

Can you be more specific?"

"Ran Jesson."

"Oh, yes. She is sitting across from me right now."

"You will release her and allow her to leave. If you do so my forces will withdraw. We'll call it even."

"Interesting proposal. But I think I will instead savor wiping you and your fleet out."

"That would be a mistake. Last time I checked you were losing."

Feckson noticed something about the voice. "You're not Rudager. Who is this? If you wish for me to comply you will answer."

A pause. "Joseph Davidson."

"Are you an employee of Rudagers? A message boy?"

Ran rolled her eyes. "Don't you get it, moron? It's not Rudager out there! Rudager has nothing to do with this! Your men made a mistake! You thought Joseph was Rudager, and you've kept on that same goddam mistake without once wondering if you even had the right man! Everything that's happened has been because of a case of mistaken identity! RUDAGER IS NOT HERE!"

For the first time ever, Lord Feckson showed doubt.

"Um, Ran?" said Joseph over the intercom. "That's not exactly true."

The doubt melted away and smugness returned. "Well, that's that then."

"Lord Feckson. Release Ran and we'll leave. Don't, and your organization will not recover."

"Mister Davidson. If some kind of mistaken identity has lead to our current impasse, I do apologize. But you must understand that I cannot simply give up the only thing I have that will ensure you won't destroy my base. I am rather fond of it." He looked to the communications crew, but none of them

could find where the voice was coming from.

“Well, once we wipe out your defenses we could just batter your shields, send in boarding parties, and tear this place apart looking for her.”

“I assure you, by the time you can do that, most of my fleet will have returned from Yaki space and destroy you. A thousand ships in all. They should be here any moment.”

“I don't think so. You might want to look at your jumpgate.”

Feckson frowned. None of his ships were close enough to the jumpgate for it to show up on the gravidar. He had to check it visually with optical enhancers.

The asteroid was back in place.

Rudager leaned back in his chair and smiled as orange glow after orange glow burst against the side of the asteroid.

“Oooh, that was a big one. Must have been a corvette.”

When Joseph had contacted him with the idea, Rudager had insisted he be allowed to fly this part of the mission. He hadn't jumped through the gate until Joseph's fleet had surrounded the headquarters. A small insignificant freighter would draw no attention whatsoever, especially if it's only armament was a lousy tractor beam.

More bursts splashed on the side of the giant rock, and Rudager lit up a cigar.

“Payback's a bitch, Feckson. Payback's a bitch.”

Lord Feckson steepled his fingers once again.

“I see.”

He considered his options. The battle, as it stood, would come out in

this 'Joseph' person's favor. His ships could not enter the system and in fact according to his readout were throwing themselves at the asteroid like so many lemmings over a waterfall. He sent a cease-and-desist order the moment he saw the asteroid in place, but it was too late. Hundreds of his best ships would be destroyed, and with the asteroid in place and Joseph's forces in control, they were the only ones who could remove it. He was at their mercy.

He could kill Ran, but that would accomplish nothing but his own death in retribution. He could order his men to fly out and capture the freighter to pull the ship away, or perhaps destroy the asteroid with their combined firepower – but they would probably be wiped out before they reached the gate. He could stall for more time, hoping the battle would turn out differently or his men would find an ingenious solution to the asteroid problem, but neither was likely under the circumstances.

“Very well. Ran, thank you for your company. You are free to go.”

“What? Just like that?” Ran couldn't believe it.

“I do not fight battles I cannot win, Miss Jesson. You leave me little choice.”

“Have her go to docking bay 94. There is a ship waiting for her there.”

“She will not be stopped. You may go now.”

“No,” said Ran.

“What was that?” said Joseph and Lord Feckson.

Ran's eyes hardened. “I'm not going alone. There are over two hundred slaves on this station and a thousand in your mining operations. They're coming with me, or I swear I'll have this station reduced to slag, with me still inside if necessary.”

Feckson sighed. He could always get more slaves, but she was really hurting his manpower capacity. Still, so long as he could regain control of the

asteroid, they could rebuild. As long as the dockyards remained intact, they could make a huge profit providing the Paranid with ships. And with the Yaki vanquished it was unlikely they could make trouble for Feckson for quite some time. In fact, if Feckson moved fast enough he could move his men into Yaki space and use their territory to start anew.

“How about it, Lord Feckson?” said Joseph.

“I believe we can consider the workers here to have all earned a nice retirement package. I will order my men to stand down and lower the shields so your corvettes can dock.”

Ran made her way to docking bay 94 without escort. She entered and saw a battered classic pirate ship, its helmet like cockpit crushing a small fighter like it had given the ship a massive head butt. It barely fit in the fighter hanger. Joseph stood leaning against the open airlock, smiling.

“Need a lift, stranger?”

She rushed over. He stretched out a hand and helped her up inside. “You know, I could have got out of here on my own.”

“Sure you could have.”

“I had all my people in position. We were going to shut down the entire station.”

“Sure you were.”

“And I distinctly remember telling you not to come after me.”

“Really? That part of the message must have been garbled.”

“Thanks.”

“You're wel—”

Ran stopped him mid-sentence with a kiss. Joseph's eyes widened, then he held her tight. She was really here. She pushed herself from him and

smiled. "Let's get out of here, flyboy."

Taking their seats in the cockpit, Joseph started up the engines.

Ran looked worried as the ship began to scrape against the hanger walls. "We're wedged in pretty tight. I don't think the thrusters are strong enough to get us out. Maybe we should just get on board one of your other ships?"

"Don't worry," said Joseph, "These thrusters have a bit more of a kick than you'd expect."

He kicked the thrusters to full reverse and Ran's Revenge popped out of the hanger like a cork.

Joseph hadn't expected Ran carrying out a mass slave exodus, but with their cargo bays emptied of drones he was fairly sure the corvettes could hold the slaves long enough to reach safe space. Feckson's remaining fighters stood down and retreated from the station, allowing Joseph's forces to pick up slaves from all of the stations in the system. When the corvettes filled up, Joseph's fighters took the rest.

"Now what?" asked Ran. "Do we just leave? Shouldn't we blow him to hell?"

Joseph listened to something over his headset, then shook his head. "Even if I hadn't given my word, even if he does deserve it, the fact is we'll be lucky to get out of here alive."

"Why's that?"

"Because Feckson's fleet has figured out a way through the asteroid."

Rudager scowled. From his glorious side angle view of the gate, he had watched ship after ship crash into the asteroid. That had ended some time ago. Oh well, he thought, all good things come to an end. But he kept watch

nonetheless until the mission was over.

Then five minutes ago the missiles started coming through.

Firing energy weapons through a gate was useless, hyperspace simply absorbed it like a sponge. Shields were useless in hyperspace, and residual energy from thrust was similarly absorbed. Firing missiles through a gate were similarly useless, because they would lose whatever lock they had going through. Most warheads were proximity based and required a lock to detonate. Most missiles launched into the asteroid from the other side of the gate wouldn't have time to lock on and would crash into it before they had a chance to arm.

Dumbfire warheads didn't have this problem. They exploded on impact. At first just one had come through, making no significant impact. Then two. Five. Ten. They were too weak to do any damage to an asteroid this size on their own... but launched from a hundred ships? Two hundred? Rudager had no idea how many ships had survived Joseph's ruse, but judging from the endless stream of missiles now pouring through he was sure the asteroid's minutes were numbered.

Time to go.

25 - HAPPY VAPOR TRAILS

All of Joseph's ships had jumpdrives fitted, since a hasty retreat had always been likely. The surviving drones were left behind. As one by one and en-mass the ships blinked out of Bandit's Haven and into Cloud Base South-East, their rendezvous point.

Goner transports took the slaves on board their temple where they would be treated and returned to their homeworlds in due course. Tande, after explaining his connection with Ran, had been let go and escaped with Ooolah and the others. The comm channel beeped, and Joseph tapped it on. It was Rudager.

“Good job there, kid. The Marauders would be proud of you.”

“Thanks, Rudager. But you know I didn't want things to come to this.”

“I know, we never do. Life just has a way of changing plans on you, that's all. It's up to us to get things back on track. Remember that.”

“Thanks, I will.”

An Argon carrier, the Renown, was in system as was the AFC Dauntless, both of whom provided whatever support they could. Captain Sands wanted to congratulate Joseph on a successful mission as well, but Joseph wasn't interested. He was just tired. He switched off the comm and looked

over to Ran.

“It's good to have you back.”

She lolled her head on the headrest and looked back at him. “Good to be back. So, what are you going to do next?”

Joseph shrugged. “Well, I've got two corvettes and fifty ships to my name. I could start a decent anti-piracy group. Do some good, clean up the spaceways.” He laughed at the thought. “I'm not sure fighting is my thing, though. I could sell those ships and start another shipping fleet, but to be honest I wouldn't really have anything to do with that other than taking my share of the profits. I keep thinking about why I came out here in the first place. I didn't come out to make a fortune or fight the good fight. I came out here to see what was out there. I still do.” He paused for a moment, then looked at her again.

“What about you, what do you want to do now?”

Ran said nothing, but stared off into the blackness of space.

The asteroid glowed, fractured and blew apart. For a while the missiles continued to pour through, since the ships on the other side had no way of knowing for sure if the path was clear. Eventually they sent a drone through.

Hampstead thought Feckson would have been pleased, but he only sat at his chair looking over at his remaining ships on the gravidar, as if desperately looking for a new strategy.

“Sir? Aren't you pleased? Your fleet has arrived.”

“No, Hampstead. They haven't.”

He didn't understand, so Feckson explained. “How did they get past the asteroid?”

“Missiles, but—” his voice broke off and his eyes widened.

Feckson did not believe in using missiles. They were always a poor return on investment.

The first of the ships came through the now cleared jumpgate. Being outside of any nearby gravidar scanner range, Hampstead looked at the ship configuration through the optical enhancer.

Yaki. A second ship jumped in, then three more.

“They must have been organizing a counterattack even as our fleet conquered their headquarters,” said Feckton.

“And when you sent the SOS having them return here? The ships that crashed?”

“I have no doubt that the majority of those were ours.”

For the first time, Hampstead's faith faltered. “We're doomed.”

Feckson said nothing to agree or disagree, he only stared at the gravidar. “How many ships do we have left?”

“About fifty,” said a controller.

“How many of those drones were abandoned?”

“A couple hundred.”

“With their host ships out of range we should be able to take over their signal. Capture them and assign them to our fighters.”

Feckson stared impassively at the gravidar as the Yaki ships entered the edge of its range. There were at least a couple hundred of them, and no way to know if more were on their way. He wondered how many of his own ships had avoided crashing into the asteroid, how many would return to base by other means? There were many variables at play, and though the odds were greatly against him, for once he had no idea what the outcome would be.

“This should be very interesting,” he said, as the Yaki entered firing range.

Joseph asked her again. “What do you want to do now?”

Ran stretched in the cockpit chair. “Now? Sleep for a week.”

He could believe that. He was exhausted. “And then?”

She smiled and held a hand out to him. Joseph took it.

“Wake up next to me and find out.”



Joseph Davidson has saved up for years for a chance to go to space. He's played every simulator and watched every vid. He thinks he's ready for anything.

He's wrong.

In short order he finds out he's bitten off more than he can chew. As he tries to earn enough to buy his best friend a ship, he ends up drafted into Naval service, fighting off alien invasions, and being mistaken for a retired pirate hunter.

Having a ship is freedom, but is the price of that freedom too high when it means losing everything you care about?