Motherload

by David Collins-Rivera

2007

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License.

Normally, the sitting and the waiting were bad. This time, they were brutal.

There are always things to do on an old Bechel if you want the boat to keep running, but that's usually just maintenance stuff. It all falls into a routine pretty fast, and no matter how anal or conscientious you are, pretty soon you end up with time on your hands.

It was for exactly this reason that Sally caught a flux in the reactor's mag bottle that first month out. It was a little thing; diagnostics didn't even flag it. She was already so bored, she decided to run a sim based on the fluctuation's wave frequency and fractal quality. She was surprised at the result, and ran it again since she still didn't have anything to do. When it came back the same way, she called a crew meeting, and all four of us sat down in the common room for the bad news.

"Eighty, maybe a hundred hours, tops, at fifty percent throttle. Less at more, more at less."

"What'll happen, exactly? Will we explode?" Bayern asked. *Captain* Bayern when he was pissed-off or just wanted attention.

Sally stared at him for a moment like he smelled. "No, we're not going to explode. That doesn't happen when the magnetics go. The reactor'll shut down cold. We'll be on batteries then, but they'll drain out before we're even half-way back to Deegman. We'll either cruise through its orbital plane at a dead coast if our aim is good, or we'll impact it hard, at a dead coast, if our aim is *too* good. Either way, we'd never know, because our

life support will have given out, oh, say, fifteen days before either of those scenarios."

"So you're saying we should turn around now, and head back?"

Sally looked at Genness and me for help -- but what could we do?

"We *can't* turn back now, is what I'm saying! We did a two hundred and twenty six hour burn on our way out before we even made the first major course correction, and then we ran it eleven days straight after that."

Bayern frowned at her tone, but was much too conscious of the fact that we could see he didn't quite grasp the situation to immediately comment.

"Can you repair it?" Genness asked, stepping in, his soft voice putting the tension a little further off. He was forever calming things down between Sally and Bayern, who clashed like orange on blue. She didn't suffer fools gladly, while Bayern had no choice, being one himself. The fact that he was, at least nominally, the boss, only made it worse for her, and Gen seemed to understand this.

"Yeah, I can fix it. But I have to shut the power plant down while I'm working. That means batteries for a couple of days, if the problem is what I think it is. If not, we'll have to play it by ear."

"But you'll be able to start it up again? The reactor I mean." Bayern had a forced grimness to his tone, trying hard to seem like he was on top of this now.

"Why would I shut the flaming thing down if I didn't think I could bring it online again?!"

"Hey, watch the attitude! We have a serious situation, and as captain, I need everyone at his or her best. Now, what we need is for you, Sally, to get right on those repairs. Do you want help? Who has tech experience here?"

"You know I'm Secondary Engineer," I said, with a look not far behind any of Sally's. This was getting on my nerves too: there were only four of us on the dang boat, including him, and he was supposed to be in charge. He'd had weeks to go over our backgrounds and should've known our secondary assignments before he even stepped aboard. For crying out loud, we might have only been a slapped-together crew, but he could at least have read the mission package the company had put together for our run: an itemized breakdown of all our anticipated shipboard duties for four months time, out past the gravity shadow of the system's orange star -- out where inbound ships would arrive from starjump; backgrounds and basic info on the hired crew; an overview of *Dame Minnie*, and highlights from her forty-eight year career; an explicit overview of our primary responsibility: namely, to screen any and all inbounds, and meet and repel suspected corsairs; and finally, tips on how to make nice-nice with each other until our run was over. I wished Bayern had read this last part most of all.

"Good. You help out in Engineering, Ejoq, and I'll cover gunnery duties until the crisis is over. Any questions?"

There were several, but they didn't amount to much, really: was Sally sure we had enough life support to get us through the situation? (Yes, batteries should last for weeks on standard power rations.) Were there any expected escorts out, or challenges coming in, during our anticipated down-time? (A small trader named *Pocky* or *Ponte* or something was outbound from Deegman right now, but we would most likely be up and running again before it reached the system starjump point.) Would our bosses back on Deegman give us crap over all this? (Probably.)

I was hungry, so I heated up a frozen meal after the meeting broke up and followed Sally down to Engineering

with it. Her domain was a cramped space of pipes, cables and creepy shadows; not to mention a nagging bang-BANG-zap-hiss from the small atmosphere exchange unit, underscored by a discordant two-toned hum that set my teeth on edge from both the drive system (on idle right now) and the power plant in question. I bumped my head painfully on a projecting bolt while climbing over a large duct to get to Sally's desk, and swore blue thunder.

I hated this job, truth be told. Oh, not the temporary reassignment to Engineering so much: I had minored in Ship Systems in higher-ed, and had maintained a partial interest in civilian-class defense boats -- of which our tiny *Dame Minnie* was one. And not because I'd be helping Sally out: true, I preferred working alone on my Primary assignment, but then we all did -- Sally with her engines and systems; Genness monitoring and maintaining comm and computers; Bayern with whatever it was he did all shift (no one was quite sure, even him); and me, with my defensive systems and combat sims. Besides, even though Sally had fifteen years on me, she was in really great shape, had a sexy potty-mouth when she was pissed-off, and a good brain at all times. I didn't expect anything to come from my personal observations, because she and Genness had been together since about a week after we left Deegman, and he was younger than me, danged handsome, quiet, and in great shape himself; while I was short, kind of fat, and prone to complaining and getting the horns when I was bored -- which can happen a lot on extended picket duty.

And this was exactly what irked me the most about this job: it was mine.

Three months before, the big corporate freighter I'd been signed to was hauling Fleet supplies, and it had just arrived on Deegman when the news caught up that its parent company had been bought out. They have SOPs for these sorts of things, one of which is to immediately downsize the crew. I got a good reference, a crappy severance, and the ax. My luck running to type, the piracy problem in Rilltule started getting bad right about then, and the big outfits just stopped coming. Traffic from privately-owned ships was up for a while, but even that started tapering off. I was left sitting on my ever-widening posterior watching vids, running scenarios on my tiny wrist comp, and filling my face with the spicy fried food the locals seemed to love. Deegman imports almost everything it needs, which means almost everything it has to offer is at robbery prices. Six weeks and my savings started getting tight. By ten weeks I was facing homelessness -- which is one harsh prospect on a vacuum-wrapped planet, believe you me.

An acquaintance of an acquaintance tipped me to the fact that the mining interests on Deegman had gotten together in secret and bought a used Bechel, which they wanted to crew and launch in the next couple of months. As a privately-owned vessel, it fell outside the boundaries and direct control of the Deegman Security Corps, which was more police force than military body, anyway. SecCorps had Deegman and the other inner-system settlements covered nicely with a moderate collection of mismatched orbiters and transports, and they did a respectable job of keeping the peace. They had nothing for command and control of Rilltule's jump point on the outer edge of the small system, though -- exactly where pirates had been hitting. One old Bechel wasn't much of an improvement on that situation, but they had to start somewhere, I guess.

I wasted no time and applied, and while I might not be much to look at, my resume is a killer. I was hired on the spot. Sally said later that she had quit her previous position on a medium-size freighter a couple weeks before this, over advancement issues, and had already been signed to *Dame Minnie*'s first run by the time I showed up. Genness told me he'd been knocking around town for some time, and had been on starcouriers before that. Bayern flew a transport for one of the mining outfits, and was the company man on board. He was a last-minute replacement, but, to be fair, he was a great pilot and never dumped a lot of rah-rah go-company crap on us -- which is not to say he was easy to work for. He seemed as bored and miserable as we were in his own way, and he even told me once, about three weeks out, that he missed his little shuttle job dreadfully.

Ostensibly, we were pacing Deegman in a solar orbit of our own around Rilltule -- out beyond where that small queasy orange star's gravity shadow extended into extra-dimensional space -- and thus where ships traveling to or from Deegman via starjump had to show up before continuing on. The fact that there was

nothing else of any interest here besides the mining town on Deegman that had hired us and a few settlements on space stations further in, made our present general locale the only area worth guarding. Of course, we'd had to weave in and out of many orbital trajectories in the weeks we'd been out here so as to (sort of) keep pace with Deegman, half-a-billion kilometers closer in-system, but all outbound vessels were told to rendezvous with us first before making starjump. That meant any "unconfirmed contacts" (read that: pirates) would have to go through us in order to pick off one of the little freighters with their small but extremely valuable cargoes. Since free-traders had to buy their loads outright instead of getting anything on spec, and Bechels like *Dame Minnie* had no starjump capabilities whatsoever, everyone was kept fairly honest.

Actually, in my free time that month, I'd developed a scenario wherein a gunboat like ours, doing our job, could waylay the cargo ship it was intended to protect, board her, coldwalk the crew, and then take off with it to parts unknown. This was just professional speculation, of course: you'd need conspiring crew mates without any morals; some rather specific training in shipboard combat techniques; and all the command codes needed to override the target ship's computer. This last was the hardest of all to manage, which was why my little scenario, or any variation thereof, virtually never occurred. Oh, people had tried it before, but only a legendary few had ever succeeded. Studying this sort of thing was my bag, and, lustful fantasies of my shipmates aside, I knew the difference between speculation and reality. Besides, I liked wargames and simulations, but I had admitted to myself long before that I just wasn't cold like that.

"He's a bleeding pile." Sally didn't elaborate because she knew I understood. Instead, she motioned with her hand to wait for something, so I waited.

"There...that's what I'm talking about. See what I mean?"

"Not a clue."

"You didn't feel that? The mags were spiking. It's like a wave passing through you."

I shook my head. "Sorry. It must be one of those educated palate things. You said that even the computer didn't pick it up."

"No, it does register, it's just that diagnostics doesn't rate it highly enough to consider it a problem. Even a well-balanced mag bottle has a range of variance that includes occasional peaks and valleys -- small ones, anyway. If we were involved in combat, or training maneuvers, or really anything at all that could have been a distraction, I doubt I'd have pursued it myself. Most variances are due to outside causes, like power draws elsewhere in the vessel, or even solar flair activity, if you're close enough -- which we're not. This flux is from the magnetic field propagation array, which is in the early stages of failure. Now, with the big boys, like those solid state Kategils or Magnars they use in the Fleet, this would never be a problem. Even their small gunboats use Vlassingweil magnetics -- which do have arrays, but the entire works are external from the power plant itself. You still have to shut everything down, but it's just swaptronics, so you're up and running again in an hour or two."

My eyes must have been glazing over, because she frowned and then waved at the fusion plant.

"Anyway, these cheap Value Power jobs aren't really made to be fixed by the user. You're supposed to sign a service contract with the dealer, and then pay through the colon whenever something goes wrong, because, of course, nothing that's likely to go wrong is ever covered. That's not an option for us. *Dame Minnie's* gone through a lot of hands, but this power plant is the original unit. It doesn't owe anybody anything, I guess, but that still leaves us with a big stripdown and reassembly."

"Where do we start?" I asked, finishing up my dinner.

"I want to do a full service test on the entire battery bank, so we don't have any nasty surprises when we shut down the plant," she answered, leading the way.

"Each battery? Can't you just run diagnostics? It'd be a lot faster."

"Oh, I already did that, and they look fine. But the battery monitor sub-routine is some homegrown thing one of the previous owners wrote, and I just don't want to trust some yo-yo's tollhouse cookie program on something this vital. Don't know what they did with the factory-issued routine, anyway -- it comes with the package."

I didn't have any answer to that, of course.

"Those god-fisting, mother-mating shysters!! What the flyin' fornication are we supposed to do now...?!"

I didn't have any answer to that either.

One battery at 57%, another at 31%, a third at 18%, and the remaining seven all flatlined. Meanwhile, the diagnostics said there wasn't one battery in the entire bank under 94%. At least now we knew why they'd installed their own routine: to sell an old Bechel to a bunch of rubes without having to replace the emergency standby batteries. Replacing an entire bank would've taken a deep bite out of any profits, while a fake diag program might not have cost anything.

Sally seemed madder at herself than anyone else. "I should've done this check before we left Deegman, but I was going crazy getting the main drive ready." She cursed steadily for several minutes, before tapering-off to a mutter.

"Can we still do the repairs if we work fast?" I asked her. "How long will the power from those three last?"

"Not long enough. If we shut down now, we'd normally have a week or more with this much juice. But these batteries'll drain out a lot faster than normal -- they've been undercharged for so long they won't be able to hold what little they've got. Hell, I'll be needing to use heavy tools too: the bench drill and the laze on the emitters that we take out of the power plant -- that'll eat a lot of juice right there. Then we have to reinstall, run a diag of the whole magnetics system with the installed package for the power plant -- which I hope to crawling saviour we can trust -- and then take them out again and fine-tune the work. And we'll probably have to do all this several times over to get it right."

"Then we'll just have to be extra careful the first time, right?"

She shook her head as if I were vexing her on purpose. "No, Ejoq. We don't have precision tools onboard. IF this works at all, it'll be a process of elimination. Nip and tuck here, check it; nip and tuck there, check it; until we get it exactly, precisely right. This old tub isn't much, but it's still a far cry from some broken-down aircar you could tinker with in your back yard. The fusion reactor won't work at all if the mag bottle isn't right, and the bottle won't form until the emitters are right."

"In other words, it'll take as long as it takes, no matter what our battery problems are," I translated for myself. She just grunted, and turned back to the bank.

After a moment, she said, "If we cut the dead units out of the system, we'll probably gain a few kilowatt hours from the resistance we'll save. That's better than nothing."

"That doesn't solve the problem, Sal."

"I know what the fornicating problem is, Ejoq! Don't ride me like some low-rent Bayern, all right? I need your help in this, and right now you can help me most of all by shutting up. I have to think..."

She went to her desk and began to check some numbers, adding and subtracting on a calculator program to one side of the screen, while she studied a schematic of the power plant. She mumbled, swore to herself, and even punched the flat screen at one point and spat, "Oh, you son-of-a-mutt!" I went and got coffee for us both, but she let hers get cold by her elbow as she worked. Finally, after nearly an hour of concentration she turned back, a little calmer than before.

"Okay, here's what we do...we shut everything off -- and I mean everything -- except heat, air, and the main computer's core functions. We rewire a few of the backup power packs for specific systems into the main trunk line, to help feed that crappy battery bank. We work without break until the job is done, you and I, and we just might do it."

"Now, don't yell Sally, but, wouldn't just shutting off the AG be enough? That's a big draw right there."

She sighed, but kept her temper. "Artificial Gravity uses a lot of power, yes, which is why we'll shut it down too; but we're probably going to eat up most of anything we save there by running the power tools -- they weren't designed to conserve energy, keep in mind. If we have to use them three or four times before we get it right, then we sure-as-defecation better have the power we need."

"What about the restart?" I asked her. "We'll need a couple of megawatts to bring the system back up to critical."

"Only as a surge at the beginning, to stabilize the waveform. We'll run a jumper outside to one of your neupacs. Weapons-grade accelerators use capacitors for instant power for the first round, so we'll just wire out that part of it from the aft gun. Then, when we're ready to start, you fire the thing off, and the surge goes directly to the power plant down here, instead of running through the weapon's system. I'll just have to monkey-up a regulator of some kind to rectify the gun surge with the power plant's needs."

"Should we tell the others?"

"Probably, but I can't deal with Bayern right now. You run and give them the basics, while I disconnect the dead batteries. And tell them not to bother me for a while. This will be hard enough without an idiot's questions." And she gave me a hard look.

It was actually easier dealing with the captain than I expected, because I kept the conversation on the technical side and he just nodded sagely and acted like he understood and approved. Genness, on the other hand, who was usually so nonplussed, seemed genuinely disturbed.

"We have to at least keep emergency comm open," he protested, "in case we can't fix this problem."

"Who are we going to call, Gen?" I responded with a shake of my head. "We're too far out for anybody to come get us in time. The only shot we have here is for this to work, and it can only work if we have all available power. Besides, we can always scrape together some juice for comm, if it comes down to that. We'll want to tell Deegman what's happened before we shut down, and what we're gonna to do about it. Once the power plant is back up, we'll have to return to port ASAP -- without a decent set of emergency backup batteries, we don't want to meet up with any bad guys out here."

"Can't we keep passives online then? They hardly pull any juice at all on their own. I realize we'll be keeping computers down to minimum levels, which means no sensor analyses, but I can handle those myself if I have a little time. I mean, if we do get visitors, we ought to know about it."

That seemed reasonable to me, but Sally had to think it over once I relayed the request. Sensors on a Bechel are bundled together in two preinstalled packages, with passives and actives sprinkled rather equally along the port and starboard sides. Cut power, and they both go. She ruminated for a bit, then said she could run a shunt to passives through comp, since we'd be keeping low levels there active anyway. This way we could still tap the tiny backup power cells in the sensor suite (actually located in a bulkhead amidship), while still keeping one eye open. This was a good idea, but I couldn't help but be a little irritated: if anyone but Genness had asked her for this, she'd have dismissed it out of hand and spat rivets.

Disconnecting dead batteries is just a matter of rerouting a few cable connections, so she was ready with the shutdown at this stage. We set everything up for manual deactivations, and made sure everybody onboard had a flashlight or headlamp, had some water and ration bars handy, and had gone to the fresher recently (we would have to use emergency biowaste bags until this was done). Then we started pulling plugs.

It really takes longer than you'd think to shut down systems that were never meant to be shut down while in flight. There were virtual and physical failsafes to bypass; checks and double-checks to make of each system's own backup power supplies (if applicable); and, in two particular cases, replacement of failing small, though vital, components that had yet to show up on diagnostics. In a few hours, we were floating in zero-g, draped in darkness, and swallowed in silence. Actually the other two guys aboard were swallowed in silence -- engineering was still subject to the bang/hiss of the atmosphere exchanger.

The inner core of the power plant had an emergency vent to the exterior, so as to blow plasma or super hot vapors out to vacuum should it ever be necessary. Sally used it this time, however, to simply cool off the core -- now shut off, but still lethally hot. When that looked good, she took a cordless vibrosaw and began cutting through the reactor housing. She wasn't kidding about Value Powers not being meant to be fixed! As she worked, periodically having me hold or fetch something, she explained how the small reactor would normally have been serviced and rebuilt in the factory: giant automated prying tools would pop off the housing case; other tools would extract each integrated component and test it; the faulty emitters would be replaced; and the whole thing would have been reassembled in a matter of minutes. An easy process, apparently, for a robotic factory. Not so easy for people using hand tools, and who were weightless, in the dark, and had a really final deadline hanging over their heads.

Despite our best intentions, we did end up taking a ration bar break after a few hours. We'd made coffee before the shut-down, and had insulated cups of hot joe to wash the dry, tasteless things down. A little-enough reward, maybe, but it picked up my spirits some.

Bayern had popped in periodically over the previous few hours, always saying something inane meant to bolster our morale, and then withering fast under Sally's sarcastic responses. He chose this moment to float in again for an update.

"We've opened the array," I told him. "Now we have to start working on the emitters themselves."

"Well, that's pretty good," he replied, pleased. "Sounds like we'll be up and running soon."

"This was the easy part," Sally corrected, burning her tongue as she checked her coffee. "Ouch! Dang it! We have days of hand-machining and testing ahead of us yet, so just hold your water! We'll be done when we're done, and not 'til we're done, savvy?"

"You know, Sally," he said, trying to sound like a concerned manager, "we would all get along better if we could just be a little more polite to each other."

"What's this 'we', Bayern -- you have multiple personalities? If so, do you have one that's *not* an idiot?"

"See, now that's what I'm talking about..."

"If everybody in this tub just did their fornicating jobs, and let everybody else do THEIR fornicating jobs, we'd all get along just fine! Keep bothering us down here, and none of us -- not one person -- will have to worry about getting along with anybody ever again! Is that polite enough for you Captain Bligh?"

Bayern looked at me, but I just held up my hands. As he turned to go, he motioned me to follow him out to the companionway.

"I'm concerned about Sally," he stated grimly, once we were alone, still in manager mode. "Do you think she's up to this?"

"Look, don't take it personally," I replied, steading myself in the weightlessness, "you just get under her skin."

"It's not her engineering skills that are in question here," he went on, as if I hadn't spoken, "it's her ability to work under pressure. Can she handle the stress of our current situation, or should I be thinking of change?"

"Think whatever you want. Our lives are riding on Sally right now, because nobody else aboard -- myself included -- can hand-machine those spheres without ruining them. Just give her some space, Bayern, and she'll get us home."

He chewed it over like he had a choice and then shook his head with a sigh.

"Okay, Ejoq. But I want you to watch her closely. If she starts to crack, we have to be ready to take action."

He shoved off and floated down the companionway until he had to take a corner, then smacked right into the bulkhead with a painful oomph. After that he floundered off out of sight. I'd known bigger fools in my time -- even ones who were ostensibly in charge -- but this was an emergency. If he kept bugging Sally, we'd have to tie him up and gag him.

She was still fuming when I returned to Engineering.

"Is Bayern talking fecals about me, Ejoq?! I'll space him, I swear it!"

"Sally, please don't sweat a moron. I mean, why does he bug you so much?"

She grumbled inarticulately, and turned away to the exposed magnetics. I thought that would be her only reply, but after nearly a minute of silence, she spoke again without turning around. Her voice was quiet and sounded fatigued, as if she'd been running a marathon.

"Every time I look at Bayern, I see my first husband. He was shorter, maybe, and with dark hair instead of fair, but I'm telling you, they could be brothers. I come from a gravity well named Waverley. I met Binn when I was fresh out of school and still a kid. I had stars in my eyes and vacuum in my head. Binn was born in jumpspace, and had never lived on a planet in his life. He was everything I wanted to be -- if you could overlook a few flaws. Seems he had a taste for Slicker -- you know, that nasty rotgut from Barlow they distill from used cooking oil -- and he was a mean drunk. It might surprise you to hear it, but I wasn't always the kind of person I am now. He bounced me off the bulkheads for three solid years. His family owned the ship we were on --the *Haster* -- and he was being groomed to take the center chair someday. Naturally, then, it had to be his lazy groundpounder of a wife's fault every night, right? Even I believed it. I wanted to be a spacer so bad, Ejoq, you can't imagine. I wised-up eventually, but it took cultured bone grafts in my jaw and right cheek to do it. Each time Bayern says something stupid, I just want to lay Binn's head open with a tube bender."

"Sounds like unfinished business," I said quietly.

She turned back to me at that, now with a sad grin. "I jumped ship at Sandlewood, over in Manas Sector, and showed my purple face to a local magistrate. She annulled the marriage on the spot. She tried to have him arrested too, but under the Alliance treaty, a free-trader is considered a sovereign nation, and no reason short of direct military or commercial threat from said can justify violating sovereign territory...etc., etc. They couldn't go in after him. She was so pissed-off she pulled some strings and had *Haster's* contract with the local trade commission pulled. A minor thing, on the surface of it, but Sandlewood was part of their annual route back then. I figure the loss adds up to a couple of million by now, so maybe there's some justice in space after all."

"If there was," I replied, "you wouldn't still want to beat the guy to the floor, via Bayern. Looks aside, don't let our current boss get to you, Sally -- he's pretty close to useless and he knows it, so he asks a lot of questions and gets under our feet so he can pretend he's contributing something. If you just tell him to shut-up and leave it at that, we won't have to mutiny. I don't want to lose my bonus."

She laughed and gave me a quick hug. "I'll do my best, Ejoq. Just do your best, and keep him out of here. And pass me that microspec over there. I need a close look at this crap."

She spent the next hour or two examining the surface of the fist-sized emitter spheres, cursing twice on the third one, which she put aside before continuing on. None of the other fifteen seemed to offend her, though, so she put them back inside the housing carefully. She then held up the flawed sphere as if I could see what was wrong from two meters away.

"They sure don't make 'em like they used to...especially at Value Power! What a piece of copulating diarrhea! Look at this thing: instead of a composite shell of iron-carbide and titanium-tungsteel crystal -- which is the very minimum that Alliance construction regs allow for, by the way -- we have what looks like a hollow aluminum shell coated with a thin layer of iron in a polymer base. There are two scratches in this paint job: here, and here. I figure a couple of specks of this cheap paint must have come off under the magnetic field, and they, in turn, gouged away more of it. Doesn't seem like much damage, does it? If the paint kept eroding, which'd be inevitable in my view, the mag field would have deformed and been unable to maintain the fusion reaction. No reaction, no power. And worse yet, in the milliseconds between the drop of the mag field and the end of the controlled reaction, the hot plasma would have flashed out to the inner edge of the frame holding the spheres."

"And...?"

"Well, in a quality power plant, nothing: the magnetics fail, there's a flash inside the casing that nobody sees, and the system switches to standby batteries with maybe, at most, a flicker of the lights to show that it happened. Nothing inside a good unit could be hurt, and whoever services it after that finds everything fine and dandy -- except for the original problem, of course, whatever it was. In this piece of bowel business, though, we'd have a flash, and the distinct smell of burning plastic, and maybe even some visible smoke. Open it up, and you find sixteen blackened and stinking spheres, good for absolutely nothing now that their polymer coatings have been charred off by the plasma flash."

"In other words," I commented, "there'd be no way to fix them at that stage. I suppose I can take it as a given that there isn't a bucket of this paint just lying around in stowage somewhere?"

She chuckled mirthlessly. "No, and it wouldn't work that way anyway. That polymer would have to be applied by a computer that could spread a uniform depth with a uniform distribution of iron atoms over the entire surface. We couldn't hope to match that here, even if we could whip up a batch of the stuff -- which we can't."

"Can't? We can't fix those scratches?"

"I don't know yet... lemme think..."

That was Sally-speak for "Don't bug me for a while", so I took the opportunity to update the others. I found them both to the fore, in the little cockpit that stood in for a bridge, and I hung out in the hatchway while I talked. Bayern clucked and fretted, wondering aloud if he should step in and handle things personally. Both Genness and I ignored him, and I think he ignored himself too. I was about to leave when I noticed a flashing light on Genness's board. It was a proximity alert.

"What's that?"

He looked over and hurumphed, then jumped screens a few times.

"Hello..." he muttered, "...and where's my audible tone...gone with the power-down? How long was this flashing, Ejoq?"

"I just noticed it now. I take it it's new?"

"Maybe," he replied, while focusing the boat's full suite of passives on the coordinates.

"What's wrong?" Bayern asked, confused.

"What was the trigger?" I wanted to know. "What's prox-sen 5 set to? Infrared?"

His brow furrowed uncharacteristically as he pulled up the sensor datalog on one side of his screen. "Graviton," he replied.

We had company from outside the star system.

Bayern appeared grim and focused, which meant he couldn't follow this at all.

"A ship," I told him, by way of explanation.

"A pirate...?" He suddenly looked anything but mean and determined. "Do we have missiles active yet?"

"We can't open the hatches on the any of the bays without power. It's way too early to fret over, anyway -- we don't have any idea who this is. What's their transponder say, Genness?"

He had a deep frown on his face that I didn't like while he checked his boards.

"I'm not getting a transponder. A quick diag says...no, we're good. They just don't want anybody to know they're here. No active sensors from them either." He swore, and turned to Bayern at last, saying, "I don't like this. These guys are acting shady. This might be the real thing after all."

I swore too. Bayern looked like someone told him nine months after a really bad bender that he was a father; and I, anyway, felt like I'd been punched in the stomach.

"We're in a bad way right now," I said, knowing even then just how inane that was. "Genness, what's our EM output?"

"...uh, I don't know. How...?"

"Set your general passives all the way up and key a full-spectrum run, but zero-out the bogey."

He played with the keyboard for a while.

"Um...I read 7.85% of normal. I assume that's us, but...?"

"Okay, no output...or dang little output, anyway. Bechels have an average of seventeen centimeters of polynium alloy for the hull and another twenty in composite armor -- all the wrong stuff for a stealth vessel, but maybe it's enough to scatter our signature right now...especially if that ship out there is only using passives like we are..."

But then I thought of something scary, and turned to kick off down the companionway, back to Engineering. Bayern grabbed my calf, and stopped me.

"What's going on, Ejoq?" He looked genuinely scared and perplexed.

"They don't want anyone to know they're here, right? Well, neither do we!"

I was gone from there before he could reply with something insipid, hoping against hope that I'd be on time.

Sally was just switching on the laze when I came in, the errant emitter sitting under it like a diseased grapefruit. The cramped space hampered my movement, so all I could do immediately was scream at her to shut it down, which she did with a startled jump.

"Ejoq, what the flux...?!"

"Pirate! Inbound. I don't think he's made us yet because of our power-down, but any big draw might flag us."

Her eyes were big and very serious then, as she looked around at the gutted mess that Engineering had become.

"How far off?"

"Not far enough. Maybe two light seconds it looked like -- spinward/thirty degrees off-plane. Tell me you can work magic, Sally..."

"In my cabin, maybe! If they catch wind of us now, we're stool-out-of-luck, Ejoq, and no mistake!"

A graceless bump and an umph at the open hatch behind me announced Bayern, who'd followed me down.

"We need power, Sally!"

"I know, Bayern..."

"No, I'm not kidding around! We've got a hostile out there, and we need power right now!"

"Get him out of here, Ejoq."

"Didn't you hear what I said?! It's a pirate!"

"*Now*, Ejoq, or I'll kill him!"

"We need weapons! We need engines! We're sitting ducks here!"

Sally snatched up a chem torch and began to go around the ducts and draping cables with a scary sort of blankness on her face. I was closer though, so I brachiated my way through the intervening space, and hustled Bayern back out into the companionway.

"If you ruin Sally's concentration now," I told him with a hard grip on his earlobe, "I'll glue your hands and feet together and dump you in your cabin. Get out and stay out...or better yet, do something useful, like running vector sims: use the realtime data from Genness' passives, and you'll be ready for trouble."

He slapped away my hands, and canted backwards out of my immediate reach, anchoring himself to one of the handholds -- a look of stark terror and fury written plainly on his broad face.

"Who...who do you think you are?! *I'm* the captain of this boat..!"

"Then you better bleeding act like it from now on, or there's a field demotion by popular demand in your future."

"That's mutiny, Ejoq -- don't you dare threaten me!"

I grabbed his shirt and drew him close again, eye to eye. He must have seen something there he didn't like, because his own eyes bulged in sudden apprehension.

"I'm not going to die out here because of your stupid crap, Captain Bayern, *sir*. Stay calm. Sally knows what needs to be done; and if it *can* be done, she'll do it. But, if you continue to be a liability on this cruise, I'll throw *you* at the pirate...savvy?"

"You...you're crazy, Ejoq," he whispered in horror, "you're absolutely crazy."

He turned too quickly to escape my insane clutches, and did an impressive pirouette until he got himself under control. He flailed his way forward, muttering that we (presumably Sally and I) were going to get everyone killed. I remember hanging there, musing that if he kept on thinking like that, and especially, if he'd finally developed a strong opinion as to who we were going to start with, then he might just give us the space we needed to work.

Not that I had any idea what work there was to do at this point, with no engines, no weapons, no communications, restricted sensor systems, and what would probably have been an impossible repair job even if we didn't have a raider on our doorstep.

"I better not see him again," was all Sally had to say when I came back in. She was already back at the work bench, hovering over the sphere. I came up beside her and said nothing for a long time, but my thoughts must have been loud, because she looked over at me at length, and said, simply, "What?"

"We can't fix it. Am I right?"

"Yup. It's plain impossible here -- especially without the laze. Maybe even with it. I was gonna to try electroplating it with superconductive nanotubes: did that by hand once, back in school -- works decently for magnetic propagation, too. I just don't know what to do now..."

"What about rearranging the order of the emitters, leaving the bad one out? We could overlap the field influences so that the entire reaction area is covered. Then we run it underpowered, maybe, and..."

She shook her head, and pointed to the casing that held all the other emitter spheres in place. "That was computer designed, computer constructed, and computer installed. If we're off by so much as a millimeter -- which would be an impossibly good error factor -- the magnetic bottle will fail. Besides, firing up the reactor, whether to bring it online, or just to test the work, will light us up like a spotlight to the sensors of any nearby ships."

She looked up with a bleak stare that convinced me at last, and that's when I really got scared.

"Well, can't we just put this one back in, then, and run the power plant until it fails?"

She had a sour face as she replied. "The flaws in the magnetic coating are direction-specific -- we'd never be able to put this sphere back into the unit in exactly, precisely the way it was installed. The scratches would be off from where they were before, which would deform the field immediately. It would fail simply because of the unbalance there. I mean, it should have failed some time ago."

"Okay, um...what about shielding the laze for EM leakage? I mean, we could use it if gave off no detectable energy signature, right? There's all that trash EM wrapping that the dock crew left aboard, back at Deegman -- remember, I had to find a place to stow it all, and I was honked-off? We could wrap the laze with that stuff and..."

"The laze isn't the only problem, Ejoq. Even if you shield it all over, the batteries emit an EM field when they're used. The wiring in the bulkheads do too when electricity runs through them. There's a voltage regulator, and a small junction redirect, and..."

"Okay, okay, I get it." I hesitated to keep brainstorming, partly out of fear of exasperating Sally, and partly out of fear of where my thoughts were headed. She kept staring at me, though, knowing somehow that I wasn't done talking. "That leaves us with only one option...we fight."

"We fight? How? You'd get one burst from the neupacs and then the capacitors would be drained, and you'd need more than that just to get a bead on their ship. Am I right?"

"Yep. We'll use missiles only," I told her. "There must be some way to get the tubes open; if we take that bogey completely by surprise, we might not need more than a single well-placed shot. And it would only need a tiny bit of juice to autoprep and launch."

"A sneak attack?" She shook her head. "That's iffy, at best. If we don't take them out with the first salvo, we're dead, since we can't do much to get out of the way of any return fire. And what if they're just having tech problems, like we are? How can you justify firing unprovoked? I'm not comfortable with that, Ejoq."

I held up my hand to ward off her disapproval. "You shouldn't be, Sally. I'm only listing options. The other idea is to send a team over and surveil the ship for evidence of illegal activity or intent. If it's legit, we ask for help. If it's a raider, we board and take possession."

She stared blankly for a moment, as if waiting for the punchline. But there wasn't one. I was serious.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm serious."

"You're crazy."

"Careful, now, you're sounding like Bayern."

"Ejoq, there are only four of us. We could all be Fleetmarines, with powered armor and weapons, and we'd still be ess-o-ell. Four people can't take a pirate vessel by force."

"I disagree."

She shook her head, rummaged through a stowbox, and came up with a biowaste bag.

"I presume you have a plan of some kind?" She then floated off towards the fresher.

"Actually, yes. Want to hear it?"

"Want to give me a procreating minute here?!"

During that minute, Genness floated to the door. He looked around carefully, then asked me, "Is it safe to come in? I hear tell you're a bunch of loonies."

"You hear right. What's the latest?"

"They're using reaction thrusters to take a new heading...slowly, though: they plan to do some work in this neighborhood, for sure. I calculated their course and projected it. At present speed, they'll intercept that free-trader, *Ponte*, that's outbound from Deegman right now, in about, oh, seventy-seven hours. This raider has a stealth suite of some kind -- but not a good one; I can still track it since I know where to look. If *Ponte* goes off on an oblique angle now -- or really soon, anyway -- it'll make starjump safely. They'll need a heads-up, though, because they won't see these guys coming until it's way too late."

"Can we use a tight beam? We can't let the bogey know we're sitting here behind him."

"Truth. Lasercom it has to be. Um, I'll need some power for that, of course."

That wasn't much of a problem, I didn't think, and, when she came out, Sally agreed that a short message wouldn't draw too badly. We did a few reconnects, in Engineering and up on the Bridge, and started to leave Genness to it, but Bayern wanted him to be sure to make the point that *Ponte* couldn't rely on us for any more help than this; and, most especially, that none of this was our fault. Then he started to dictate the message itself, but I could see a growing flash in Genness' eyes of what Sally and I had already displayed, so in the end we had to bar the captain from his own Bridge. When he was finally left on his own, Genness finished up quickly, then called us to say we could pull the plug again. He hadn't waited for a reply from *Ponte*, though he had received a general acknowledgment of the message, he said. We had done what we could, anyway.

We were all pretty punchy by this point, and we'd been up for nearly three shifts straight. I, for one, tethered myself to the corner of my bunk in my cabin and was dead to the galaxy for several hours. Sally hadn't acted like she was going to go to sleep at all, and maybe she didn't, because she and Genness where floating at a suggestive angle and giggling like school kids when I finally drifted back down to the engine room. The dark rings were gone from under her eyes, anyway, as was the pressed look of strain. I ducked out again and went to the galleyette for a couple of cups of coffee, hoping they'd take the hint. They did, and Genness passed me in the companionway with a friendly smile.

"Anything new out there?" I asked.

"Nothing. The bogey hasn't made any changes. Neither has *Ponte*. Either they didn't understand the message, or they didn't believe us. I even had Sally power us up about an hour ago, so I could send it again. This time I waited for a reply, but all I got was the same auto-acknowledgment. Honestly, I just don't get it."

I refrained from remarking that he was the only guy on this tub who *was* getting it, and, instead, floated back to engineering.

Sally took one of the coffees gratefully, then checked systems. That took all of two minutes with nothing running, and then she turned to me.

"So...what's the plan? After reflection, I still think you're crazy, but let's have it."

"Well...I have a few items I didn't put on the personal manifest when I came aboard. Shape charges, two assault rifles, and a fair amount of ship-rated ammo." I held up both hands to deflect her commentary, though her face spoke volumes. "I just didn't want the SecCorps johnnies finding it all in a random locker check while I was out here...I never declared any of it when I first landed -- they'd have impounded the stuff, and maybe fined me to boot."

"Where in purgatory did you get those things? Don't tell me they're from your previous job...?"

"Actually, yeah. I...all right, I was really pissed about being laid-off, so I helped myself to a few items from the cargo bay on my last berth. I was about to sell it all for emergency cash, when this job came through."

"Ejoq...! Why you little thief!"

"I won't deny it, but my severance was only *half* what my contract stipulated, Sal! Company procedure, they said. So, yes...I pilfered a few things. But they'll come in handy now if we pursue this idea. And we *have* to pursue it if we can't do the repairs. You see that, don't you?"

"We have life support for another couple of weeks if we stay powered down," she countered. "Other ships might come by in that time. We could even put out a distress call to Deegman, and have them send out a tetherboat. Might take some time, true, but..."

"And what about *Ponte*?" I asked. "For some reason, she doesn't believe us. I don't know why: our codes are valid, and she knows enough to expect us out here. But either way, she doesn't deserve to get picked off. Some really rough characters have been playing out this way lately. You've read the reports, Sal: cargoes waylayed; crews tortured and spaced; ships blown when it's all over. We might not be much -- especially now -- but we're all *Ponte's* got."

She shook her head with a sour smile, but let me go on.

"Okay, here it is...we strip off the armor and insulation around the feed lines to the main drive output -- that'll precool the waste exhaust enough that it probably won't be detectable if we're careful to face ourselves perpendicular to the bogey. We keep it below, say, forty-percent power and do a short burn up to 10 kps; we'll get to within a hundred kilometers of them in ten hours, undetected, if they stay on course..."

"And *if* they continue to lay off their active sensors," she injected. "This'll kill the battery bank, too."

"Which means we just have to win fast. We can cut away one or two missile tube hatches while we're outside working on the main drive -- that'll give us our big stick if we need it."

"And then what?"

"When we're close enough, we go over quietly and set the shape charges on the bogey's drives, and outside the engine room on the hull -- if we can find it. Then we talk to them."

Once again, she floated there waiting for a funny line I didn't have. At length she just shook her head.

"I'll tell you what, Ejoq. You go explain it to the others, and if they agree -- if Genness agrees to that lunatic plan -- well...ahhh..." And she waved me away.

It was an incredibly tense couple of shifts. Sally and I did a hasty EVA to rip off the housing around the feed lines to the plasma exhaust. We used hydraulic grippers and vibrosaws that the others said had made a heck of a racket inside. The job, once done, was really messy. It would be a costly repair for the consortium that owned *Dame Minnie*, but I figured we weren't going to be hired again anyway, so whatever.

The missile tube hatches proved much easier to deal with, since they were designed to be removed for maintenance. The dorsal and ventral bow tubes seemed to be the most useful and convenient to work on under the circumstances, and we were even able to save the hatches themselves and stow them aboard. All of that took six hours, and Sally and I were exhausted when we were done. I wanted to rest, but time was racing. We killed the coffee instead of grabbing some sleep, because we still had to reconnect the drives to the battery bank and restore juice to some higher function comp systems. We powered nothing else up, least of all artificial grav or inertials, so we had to strap down carefully when we gave Bayern the go-ahead to fire it up.

He had actually been a much easier sell on the whole idea than Genness, who proved to be strangely adamant. Bayern seemed relieved to be taking any kind of action at all, and even inflated a bit when we let him give us some minor orders; but Genness called it a fool's errand, and wouldn't endorse it on any level. Sally had come along for the meeting, and didn't comment at first; she grumbled heartily when Genness finally asked for her opinion point-blank, but it was plain she deeply loathed the idea of standing off and doing nothing while a pirate took a ship we were supposed to be protecting. Since our command structure had, by now, deteriorated into a democracy, Genness was out-voted. At length, he agreed to help, but made it well-known we were doomed -- an opinion I think we all shared.

The run towards the bogey's track was edgy to say the least. I dug out my goody bag from deep stowage. Bayern had almost as much EVA time as Sally and I, but I didn't trust him with either firearms or explosives; and anyway, he was Secondary Gunner on this cruise, and someone had to be in a position to fire on these guys at all times. I did tie the arming controls for the defense suite into my suitcomp, though, just to keep ol' Sureshot on a leash; and while I could theoretically do some rough targeting remotely as well, there was actually an interface problem with *Dame Minnie's* sensor software, so I'd be shooting almost blind. I figured I'd let Bayern get first crack at it anyway.

Sally and I went over a few offensive procedures, but any hardcore plans still had to wait. I only had three charges. Placement was vital, and I just couldn't figure that part until we got a visual. I guess that was the scariest aspect of the whole thing for me: there actually weren't many big raiders out there, since Fleet would hunt down anybody who had the firepower and lawlessness to be a potential military threat. Still, even a small ship could drop an entire world-full of hurt on us if it got the chance; and the mere fact that this one was running with a stealth suite of some kind opened us up to the possibility of more surprises.

At an odd moment when I should have been resting, I went over Genness' data from the passive sensors. There wasn't much to it, but with some old formulas I still had in my handcomp from gunnery class, I was able to roughly calculate the bogey's size based on the reaction mass they'd used to adjust course -- just a few quick puffs from their attitude thrusters here and there, but it was enough to get an impression of a ship that was roughly half-again as massive as *Dame Minnie*. That was do-able. Maybe.

We had to perform a one-eighty before we crossed their trail, then we held our breaths and braked hard, hoping for all we were worth that the drive exhaust, now facing away from the bogey in the other direction, was precooled enough to go unnoticed as it spread. I had them on a missile lock the entire way, based on the nearly ghostlike data from our passives, and finally picked them up on light amplified opticals as we crossed

by. I didn't know the type, but it vaguely matched the profile in *Dame Minnie's* database of an old Corporate trader called a Maccarri. It was listed as having a moderately large cargo bay for vessels of its mass, but this had to have been a different model, because the Maccarri wasn't supposed to have a dorsal docking platform -- a dock currently hosting a tiny vessel I couldn't resolve well enough to really see, but which was more diminutive than any useful cargo shuttle I'd ever heard of. There were other differences, too, but they seemed more like upgrades: the stealth suite, of course; port and starboard external pods, which suspiciously resembled fighter-style weapon bays; a bigger starjump array than I would have expected -- implying an extended FTL range; and a ramped-up sensor suite, including what could only have been a military-class tracking dish in the bow, near an armored blister I took to be the bridge. If they popped on their active sensors, we'd never be able to shake them.

As pirates went, she was small -- but she looked mean as a hornet.

To give him his due, Bayern handled our Bechel like he was born to it. The man really had some talent after all. We were approximately eighty-five kilometers ahead, and twenty or so below the Maccarri, and we were matched in velocity. Our two bow tubes were facing them, and I took the liberty to return power to my targeting comps, which were tied into the sensor feed. If those pods held energy weapons, we'd never know about it until we died; but missiles would give us a heads-up of about twenty seconds.

I had a pretty good auto-firing program on a datacube I owned -- something a real chiphead I worked under, several jobs before, had written. I'd never had any need to use it, but it simmed well. I plugged it in now, debugged the interface, and put in a short list of behaviors that would seem threatening under the circumstances to give us a little attack redundancy. If both Bayern and I crapped-out, or if something happened too quickly for us to react to, *Dame Minnie* would still get her two shots in. What can I say? I'm a sore loser.

After an hour it seemed likely that we hadn't been noticed. We held another meeting just to make sure we all understood our jobs. We let Bayern give us a pep talk, which boosted *his* morale anyway, and then got started. Sally and I suited up again and clipped on a couple of scoots. We both took extra cases of reaction mass (dry ice, which the scoots would melt and jettison as needed), while I carried the shape charges, and Sally brought along a bag with a variety of tools. We both had our rifles secured carefully to the tops of our environmental packs.

We had nearly a hundred kilometers of open space to cross in those tiny scoots, which were only meant for tooling around the outside hull. They would be up for it, certainly, since we weren't going to be running under constant acceleration, but they weren't the height of luxury or safety: just a foldable tube frame with a little control pad on the front, and a main thruster and "fuel tank" (that was to say, an icebox) on the back. There were tiny thruster nozzles all over the frame, too, for maneuvering. Scoots weren't fast, but they were fairly agile.

We'd reconnected comm for Genness, who would be monitoring us all the way, and then shifted to a channel he said wasn't likely to be monitored. Communications would be going over on one rotating modulation, while piping real-time data to us from the boat's sensors on another. Then we waved to our shipmates, stepped into the port airlock, and cycled. In three minutes we were in open space.

"What are the odds, Ejoq, that they'll have proximity sensors or external cameras running?" Sally asked almost immediately, sounding like she'd only thought of it now and was suddenly terrified.

"If they're really intent on ambushing *Ponte*," I replied, "they won't have any actives running at all, even prox. We're not hot enough to show up on passives until we're really close, and we'll be coming up on their aft, directly through their thruster exhaust trail, so we might not register at all. As for cameras...well, they're usually just used for docking purposes: pretty-much only the pilot on-duty during berthing ever looks at them,

and then only to make sure the ship is coming in straight. No one would be watching now."

She was silent for a moment.

"You have no idea, in other words."

"Not a one."

More silence.

"You're an unwashed sphincter, Ejoq!"

"I guess so, but I'm also right."

"How do you know that?! How many times have you done this, before? Wait, I'll tell you...zero! Nobody's *ever* done this before! You know why? BECAUSE IT CAN'T BE DONE!!!"

"If you want my opinion..." Genness chimed in.

"I already know your opinion," I shot, maybe a little harsher than I should have. "Let us work this out, okay?"

I could hear Sally breathing hard for long moments, then I finally ventured, "Feel better?"

"I...don't know. This is beyond crazy Ejoq."

"We can always turn around Sally. You call it."

"Oh, now it's *my* decision?! It's your maternal-mating plan! Are you saying it won't work now?"

"No, it'll work, but only if you're committed to it. I need you, Sal. I need everyone. And *Ponte* needs us. Okay! Okay! We're in a remote corner of a bleak system, in a broken-down boat, and not one of us is getting paid what we're worth. But *Ponte's* going to get hit if we don't do something. Maybe we're losers, but we have a job to do; whether or not *Dame Minnie* is up to the challenge, *we* have to be. This might not work -- okay, it probably won't work -- but I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror if I sat on the sidelines now. We signed up to fight off pirates. If we're not gonna to do our jobs, then why do we even have them? Why did we even apply?"

"You really believe that, don't you?" Her voice was strained, harsh. "You have a soldier complex, Ejoq: you want to be a fragging hero, and you want us to go along for the ride!"

This was getting on my nerves. What I *wanted* was to concentrate on the situation ahead, and this was not helping.

"Why are we having this conversation now, Sally?"

"Because I'm traveling through deep space on a scoot! Because I'm not a Fleetmarine, but I'm part of an attack team! Because that attack team consists of just *two* people! Because I very much believe I'm going to die a very violent death very soon!"

"The fact that no one would ever try this," I countered, starting to lose my cool, "is exactly why it *can* work! If you're really not up to it Sally, tell me now, before we get someplace where I'll need to rely on you."

"Now that's not fair, Ejoq! None of us signed on for this -- including you. Everything we're doing here is purely optional. Considering the circumstances, nobody would ever ask us why we didn't try to take that bogey down."

"*I* would ask!" I shouted at last. "Every day of my life, I would ask why! Why I turned and ran. Why I didn't want to do my job. Why *Ponte* was dead! You're wrong, Sally: I *don't* want to be a hero...I just want to sleep at night."

We were both silent for a while after this.

"Sooo...what's it going to be, folks?" Genness eventually asked, more to fill the radio void, I thought, than anything else.

"I guess we're turning around," I replied curtly, and started to brake the scoot.

"No," Sally cut in, "we're going on."

Genness sounded upset when he replied. "Are you sure, Sal? You know this is crazy, there's no way the two of you can possibly..."

"I'm well aware of what we're doing here, Genness," she said, a real tone of finality in her voice. "We're taking this thing down."

"Sally...you...why...?" he responded faintly, with exasperation.

"Just keep this channel open, and the chatter down, okay?"

"Yeah...yeah, okay." I could hear sadness in his smooth tone, and I was sure she did as well.

"Thanks, Sally..."

"You too, Ejoq. Let's just do this."

In ten minutes, we picked it up on suit lightamps: a bulky shape, seen from behind, with three main engine nozzles and a spidery jump array spanning out like gossamer. The pods stretched out angrily, and the mysterious little vehicle mounted on top was just as mysterious from even this proximity.

We both keyed our suitcams, now that there was something to see, and I zoomed in on the piggy-backer.

"You getting this Genness?"

"Yeah. That auxiliary boat there. Any ideas?"

"I was hoping you'd seen one before."

"No, sorry, I...what? Um, hold on a second...Bayern...uh, Bayern says -- okay! -- Bayern says that's an automated probe...a mining probe, maybe, or general science. He says he's hauled them out to the asteroid belt for the company prospectors before, but that this one looks modified."

"Modified how? Put him on." There was a pause, and some inarticulate conversation as the channel went live on the pilot station.

"Captain Bayern, here."

"No stool, you muttonhead!"

"Sally, please. How is *this* thing different, Bayern? What do you think these guys use it for?"

"Well...uh...hmmm...the RM tank is missing, for one. No reaction mass, no mobility. It's a waste of hardware."

"Anything else?"

"Not that I can see...wait! Can you beef up your contrast, both of you? More. Yes, good. Now, Ejoq, zoom into that box on the back of the probe...no, the small one. A little closer...okay, yes. Ah-hah."

"What is it? What's it for?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Sally cursed, and shouted at him to get the unpleasant afterlife off the Higher Power spiritually condemned channel, and added some funny, though improbable things about his sexual proclivities.

"Could it be an explosive of some kind, Bayern?" I asked when she took a breath.

"A bomb...? I doubt it. No one would buy a probe like this, just to blow it up: they're too expensive. Even the cheapest mining probes go for as much as a decent boat -- you could buy a brand new Bechel for what one of these cost."

"What if they stole it from somewhere? Would it be worth blowing up then? What do probes go for, used?"

"Well...probes can really take a beating out here. I've never seen a used one for sale, now that you mention it."

"In other words, there's no market for them used. Let's err on the side of caution then, and assume they stole it and couldn't find a buyer, so they turned it into some kind of weapon. These things have AI's installed, right?"

"The ones I've seen do, yes. Specialized AI's, dedicated only to one job. You can't have real conversations with them, but they know an awful lot about their prime functions. But what difference does it make? Missiles cost a fraction of the price of one of these -- and they're much faster than any probe. And I don't think this one can move at all, anyway."

"Would the AI be active right now?" I asked.

"Um...well, when they ship out from the factory, they're not activated. They don't even have prime-function software installed -- it's a separate purchase, and it's up to the buyer to program the thing however it's needed. "

"Hmm...that's not this situation...Sally, what do you think?"

She was quiet for so long I thought at first she hadn't heard. She puffed her way slowly closer to the probe, and I followed warily. At length she said, "You can't just turn an AI on and off whenever you want. They break down fast like that. By the same token...once they're on, they're dangerous to leave sitting idle -- they can get it into their brains to implement their programming at really inconvenient times. If I were *these* guys...I'd put it into some kind of non-repeating simulation mode. That way it would keep busy doing what it wants to do without causing any trouble; you could store it like so much baggage; and yet you could use it at a

moment's notice."

"It wouldn't be running its own sensors then, or be getting a live feed from the ship?" I tried to clarify.

"In the scenario I just described, no. But I might be wrong, Ejoq. I'm probably wrong. There's too many variables here, too much we don't know."

"Let's assume you're right, for now. Genness, any changes...any sign they've noticed us?"

"Nope. It's like they're dead. I really hate this whole predator/prey thing."

"You and me both," I muttered, helping Sally maneuver back around the probe with an extra hand, that, in turn, set me to wobbling. I had to drift out a bit to get the room to stabilize, and then I scooted over to the starboard weapon pod. It was an irregular mass of metal and plastic points and cables, two or three meters across and extending out a few meters on a thin, tapering triangular spar. A forward-facing missile five-pack and a stubby particle beam stood out sharply in the lightamp of the suit's optics. The missiles were an unknown quantity until they were used, but the p-beam was of a pretty common civilian type I'd studied and simmed before. It was strictly a close-range item; *Dame Minnie* could be hurt by it where she was parked -- maybe -- but *Ponte* would be safe until it got much closer.

I took out one of the dinner plate sized shape charges from the box I was carrying, peeled off the plastic sheet from its adhesive backing, and stuck it to the spar. That was one down.

Sally came floating up into my view. "Want me to set one on the other side?"

"Have you ever set a charge before?" I asked.

"No."

"It's not so easy."

"Really? Looks like you just peeled it off and stuck it on...or am I missing some highly technical procedure here?"

I handed her a charge. "Yeah, smartbutt, don't bang it into anything."

She scooted over the dorsal ridge of the ship, while I scooted under and towards the back. I found a sealed hood that looked like a main drive access panel. Trying to open that would kick on their automated anti-intruder systems for sure. I figured though, that it was a reasonable assumption that a maintenance hatch would be located in a spot where maintenance was needed; and, that nothing that needed a lot of maintenance would be built into a ship to begin with unless it was really important. This close to the main drives, I further assumed that the hatch opened up on a juncture of some sort in the piping for the fuel. As good a spot as any. Another charge went there, right over the seam of the hatch and the hull, where the extra armor would be weakest.

"I'm done," Sally announced. "What's next, oh mighty Caesar?"

"Think that armored bump-thing up front is the bridge?"

"That or a fueling dock."

"Fueling dock?"

"Yeah...they use 'em in the Papal Territories. They have a union or guild or something that does nothing but refuel ships. Most boats and ships built over there have a dock installed just for that -- makes the mass transfer go smoothly, or so I've heard. This looks kind of like one of those, but these guys are a long way from home, if that's the case."

"Aren't we all," Genness added, quietly.

"Status, Gen?"

"No change, Ejoq. I'll let you know."

"Yeah. Sally, if that is a fueling dock, then there has to be a valve or something over there?"

"Yeah, that and manual controls for the onboard fuel transfer pump."

"Manual? As in on/off switches? That's idiotic. Are you sure?"

"Who am I -- Bayern? Yes, I'm sure."

"Sorry, didn't mean to be insulting."

"Come on, people, I'm right here," Bayern said in a hurt voice.

"Er...sorry. Sally, you mean to say that there's a way to physically access the fuel line from out here?"

"Maybe. The guildies over there don't let anything become automated that might take control away from their little monopolies. Leastways, I've seen manual valve controls on their ships before. Let's take a look here."

Sure enough, we found a small access panel on the bump in the armor, which Sally stated for sure was a fueling station. Would high temperatures right there do anything for us?

"No," she replied, "there are safeguards against fires and explosions during refueling. You wouldn't ignite the fuel tank aboard, anyway, if that's what you're after. There's no oxygen, for one thing."

"I'm thinking more along the lines of *simulating* a fire so as to trigger a fire suppressant sequence in their systems. That'd lock 'em up for a bit if they don't have weapons running hot already. It could be a good distraction for getting inside. I mean, we're in agreement here, right? These guys aren't legit?"

"No they're crooked, all right. I just don't see how you think we can get inside fast enough to surprise them. We could cut through a hatch pretty quickly and gain access to an airlock, but we couldn't use it to enter without depressurizing the ship -- which'll cause an emergency lockdown inside and...ah, okay, I get it now."

"Get what?" Bayern and Genness asked simultaneously.

"You open a ship up to hard vacuum," I explained, "and it closes off all emergency iris valves and pressure hatches inside, effectively cutting off the crew from us and each other. That can be over-ridden easily by the captain, though. Not so with fire-suppressant sequences. Layer the two, and they'll be wasting a lot of time just figuring out what's going on. Meanwhile, you guys call them and tell them to stand down or else. If they're surprised -- which we're counting on -- they'll lose even more time trying to confirm everything. While they do all this, we cut through to the next section -- hopefully a central corridor, which will prevent overrides of the lockdown, since the comp won't allow anybody to open a hatch onto vac without inputting a suit's clearance code first."

"They might be in suits already," Genness observed, "or have them ready."

"If we were trying this closer to *Ponte's* interception time, I'd agree with you, since an experienced crew going into a potential battle might take those kinds of precautions..."

"Hey, that's a good idea!" Bayern injected.

"But these guys won't have them handy yet, I'm thinking. The suits will be in stowage somewhere, as isolated from the crew as the crew will be from each other."

"But how do we take the ship then? They won't be able to open the doors to the bridge or engineering even if they want to."

"We can do temporary patches on all the holes we make, if it looks like we're getting somewhere with them, but we won't re-pressurize right away. Their internal sensors will register that they still have an air loss that way, but we can negotiate a surrender. If they think a bunch of us have gotten inside, and that we're willing to open them up to space, they'll have to give it up."

"And what happens when they learn it's only the two of us?"

"We'll have them disarmed and locked up by then, hopefully. It's mostly bluff. Just act mean, Sally."

"That won't be hard," Bayern muttered.

"Their internal sensors -- cameras or whatever -- will show that it's just the two of us. It's hard to bluff somebody who knows what cards you're holding."

"We say that the rest of our people are still outside -- doesn't make any sense, I know, but they'll be upset, and maybe not thinking logically. They'll be checking sensors and looking to confirm what we are saying. It's a timing thing: we work fast, act tough, and we lie through our teeth; by the time they realize that we're full of crap, we'll have them. Think it'll work?"

"Not a prayer. Let's get started."

Sally brought her oxytorch out and got ready to go at the fuel intake. I scooted over to the side hatch -- a standard looking airlock -- and got my big plasma saw out too. We 1-2-3'd it, then started cutting. I really wasn't sure what Sally had in mind for the fuel duct, but she at least acted like she knew what she was doing, which more-or-less made me believe that she did -- and in that sense I was in the same boat as, hopefully, the pirates would be.

I cut through the locking mechanism for the external hatch, knowing sensors were probably tripping like crazy inside there. I imagined a crew of unwashed desperadoes scrambling now for vacsuits, weapons, sensors, etc., and I worked faster than ever.

"Pop on actives, Genness. Tell me what's happening."

"I'm on it..."

"And call them on standard channels and order a stand-down. We're going in!"

Cutting through a polynium door mechanism doesn't take long if you know where to put the hole. I was done in less than a minute, and had the lock itself exposed. A twist here and spin there with a z-g ratchet, and the

heavy airlock door popped open, easy as you please.

"Sally, I'm in! You ready?"

"Yeah, yeah...their heat sensors'll be registering a fireball at the intake valve -- they're closing up in there right now -- feel those vibrations? Emergency lockdown's in progress, hatches and valves shutting, everything. It's working!"

Not surprisingly, I couldn't feel anything, so I took her word for it. As I waited for her to scoot over, I asked Genness, "What's the word? They panicky yet?"

"Um...hold on..."

"There's no time, Gen! What are they saying?"

"I'm not sure...I'm getting something weird here..."

"Patch us in," I told him, and, after a moment, there was a soft, ponderously calm voice speaking in completely unimpressive tones.

"...emergency attack sequence challenge...negative...full sensors engaged...one contact registered..."

"They just hit actives, people!" said Genness. "We're in the spotlight now!"

"...no further vessels detected within standard weapons range...conclusion: vessel previously detected 115.22 coreward subjective, 17.35% of ecliptic potential, has initiated attack...weapons coming online...target lock confirmed..."

"Sally! Stay clear! I'm blowing the weapon pods!"

"Hold it -- I'm exposed...!

"...final missile diagnostic 100%...firing in five standard seconds..."

"Okay, I'm clear!" She cruised down from dorsal, and grabbed at a handhold near me.

"Blow 'em! Blow 'em!" Bayern shouted, and for once I obeyed him.

There was a yellow flash on our side of the ship, and then nothing more. The one pod we could see from our P.O.V cartwheeled off into the blackness, and was invisible almost immediately. The calm, strangely resonant voice continued without pause, no hint of surprise evident whatsoever.

"...all weapons offline...running diagnostics...particle beam loss port and starboard confirmed...missile loss port and starboard confirmed...calculating tactical information...87.5% chance of successful undetected strike upon this vessel..."

"That's a machine, Ejoq!" Sally said. "They have an AI in charge of this thing!"

"...all systems on standby...external opticals confirm two personnel contacts at starboard airlock...loading anti-hijack programming...programming loaded and implemented...lockdown redundancy due to fire-suppressant protocols...standing by..."

I'll admit, I was at a complete loss for a minute there.

"Where the hell are the people?!" I yelled. "This thing didn't jump in on its own, did it?"

"Maybe they've let the AI take over while they're getting ready?"

"That doesn't make any sense, Sal -- they're pirates, aren't they? Nobody who boards and takes ships and cargoes would let a machine call the shots. And which AI is it? That probe's up top? Do they have the ship slaved in to it, or is there another one inside too?"

"There's no reaction mass on the probe," Bayern reminded, surprising me by his relevance.

"Yeah, and that big box on its back...not a bomb, but a bypass or circuit shunt or something? Let's search this ship."

Getting into the airlock took some doing, since we couldn't fit the scoots in, even after they were folded, and, exasperatingly, we had no easy way to tether them -- I mean, I couldn't think of *everything*, right? In the end, we actually glued them to the bogy's hull with vacgap filler from our tool pouches. We had the kind of grip/scrape tools required to break the hold when it was time to go, so we just left them near the airlock, and proceeded inside.

We opened the main door in the same manner in which we had opened the outer airlock hatch, and a fast, almost explosive rush of crystallizing atmosphere buzzed out for a few seconds as soon as a hole had been made. To the unfamiliar, cutting through locked polynium doors on space vehicles might seem like it should be hard to do -- and such a supposition would normally be warranted. But they weren't complex, and other than a few after-market lockout doohickeys, there wasn't anything unusual here to slow us down. Under normal docking or spaceport circumstances, a klaxon and computer alert to the yokel badges would eat up all the time it would reasonably take to do the work -- long, dirty cutting work without the right tools. We were in space, though, and were using plasma vac-saws for this (which you can't fire up in an atmosphere without also plasmizing the air immediately around -- and thereby *cooking* -- yourself while you work). In fact, this ship had easier doors to open than even our crummy Bechel did, and that wasn't uncommon. My "plan" had counted on this -- though it was now beginning to look like a lot of planning for nothing. We unslung our rifles anyway, and had them ready.

"Hatch open," I announced as we swung the rounded rectangular door inward. "No lights on...hmm...amplification isn't worth much in here. Switching on suit floods -- how much of this are you guys getting?"

"Looks good," Genness replied, "Is this a central companionway? Are those hatches on the sides?"

"No we're in a connecting corridor," Sally answered. "Looks like it right-angles with the ship's core. Got another door to go through on the far end. Artificial gravity is off...typical antihijack protocol. These narrow hatches on the sides look like stowage lockers...and...yeah, they're locked, but not pressure-capable. Not big enough for somebody in a suit to hide in, either. Moving on."

The internal door proved to be even easier to open, taking thirty seconds to crack. Another sparkling hiss of escaping atmosphere preceded our swinging it open, this time lasting a minute or so, after which we were greeted by more blackness. A few tiny unit lights of varying colors peeped and blinked here and there along the walls on various switches and controls, but nothing more. Floods revealed a wide central corridor that looked like it had been either designed for, or converted to, rec room use. Things were packed neatly away, game sticks and touchballs in convenient racks on one bulkhead, a dark, mute entertainment center mounted along the other. Cushioned seats that locked in place on floor tracks sat off to the sides, leaving the central

way clear.

"Compulsive neat freaks?" I muttered.

"Yeah," Sally agreed, "it's awfully clean in here for a sudden emergency lockdown. But why would they send this thing into jump empty? What good's a pirate ship without any pirates?"

The ship's logo was on the wall, near what looked like a beverage dispenser.

"Gen, look this up in the ship registry database -- it's not in Ingliss. What is that...Latin?"

"Lowspeak," Bayern injected. "It says, *Daaf'Qa*. It means, 'Preparedness' or 'State of Readiness'."

"You can speak another language?!" Sally was flabbergasted

"Some. You guys aren't from around here. Deegman gets a lot of traffic from over the border. We have to deal with guildies all the time."

I caught a glimpse of Sally's expression through her helmet, and she seemed amazed and maybe (just a little) impressed.

"I've got a *Daaf'Qa* listed here as...ship-type just says it's a far-trader," Genness said. "It looks like...ah...okay, it says it was built by the 'Most Honorable Spacial Mercantile Collective of the Beneficent Hyrondua State of Rhykertov Within Far Reach And...' it goes on and on -- just a shipyard in Churchspace....it was built for a noble shipping family...in service for ten years...ah, looks like it changed hands two more times. Pretty typical, over all. It's currently owned by an investment consortium in the Corporate Territories."

"When was that listing updated?" I asked. "Legit corporations don't go in for piracy -- too much liability. This thing must be stolen."

"No, it's current -- last update was, ah, 74 hours ago. Just before our little problems started."

"Well, still..."

"Ejoq," Sally said, "the mods on this ship would've taken weeks at a shipyard, or even longer if they did it on the sly. And they're expensive, too. If that listing's up to date, then this thing -- as is -- belongs to that company."

"Oh, man...then it's Corporate trouble...that's all we need! Let's do a fast sweep through the ship, Sal, then check Engineering for something we can use on *Dame Minnie*. I don't want be here now even more than I didn't want to be here before."

A quick look around revealed a ship perfectly packed up, as if awaiting its first crew. Not a soul to be found. We didn't have time to try to crack the computer, which would've been futile anyway (military-grade decryption was usually required for that sort of thing, as opposed to outmoded, second-hand civilian-class gunboat decryption).

"Bring her over, Bayern. Park as close as you can."

"That'll be it for the engines, then," he replied. "There won't be enough power to fire up again after that."

"Doesn't matter. We have nowhere else to go. I'm counting on a miracle on this end, so just get her close."

Engineering was significantly cleaner and more spacious than on *Dame Minnie*, and Sally located their battery bank easily.

"Wow...oh, wow!" she said, after opening the bank casing. "Skartcher Nova Cerampacks! Fully-charged, yet! See? They each have their own diag panel! Oh, man, this is sweet!"

"Are these standard on a ship like this?" I asked.

"These aren't standard anywhere! These are the latest thing! I read about 'em only a month ago. We could run *Dame Minnie* all the way back to Deegman on only two of these -- with normal gravity for the whole trip, and juice left over for a party!"

"They're a lot bigger than our power cells," I pointed out. "Heavier too, I'll bet."

"Not in Z-G, they aren't. Just gotta watch the mass when we're moving them around. They can be programmed for just about any power and waveform output up to their max, so I wouldn't even need to jury-rig a converter. We just have to get them over there, strap 'em down somewhere, and we're back in the saddle again."

"They're expensive, I take it?"

"Oh, mama, yes! They're marketed to elite Corporate security, ritzy private yacht owners, intelligence organizations -- you know, customers with deep pockets."

"How are they going to fit out the side airlock?" Bayern asked.

"What are you talking ab...?!" Sally started to bite off his head, but then looked at the square, bulky things again with a critical eye. "Hmmm...yeah, all right. We'll have to use the cargo doors."

"Aren't those on the bottom?" Genness now pursued.

"Yeah. So? What of it?"

"How do you get them down there? I didn't see anything like a floor hatch or big elevator in your video feed, just that little lift."

"Well, they got the copulating things *in* here somehow!"

"Might have removed the whole airlock frame from the side of the ship during the big refit," I commented. "That's S.O.P. in shipyards, isn't it?" This seemed to curb her enthusiasm a bit.

"You mean, we found the perfect power solution, but we can't get them out of here? I'm not ready to give up yet, Ejoq."

"Neither am I, Sally. We *have* to get these things. The question is how."

"Okay, we're outside now," Bayern announced. "Ten meters off starboard and holding. And I had a thought: can't you just cut a hole in the side of the ship and bring them out that way?"

Sally was getting stressed, so her tolerance level was low.

"With *what*, you ash hole?! You think we brought a whole shipyard of equipment with us out here? Cutting a

couple locks off an airlock isn't like chopping a two-meter-wide hole through armored hull casing!"

"Wait, wait, wait," I said, because their bickering was a distraction. "We're set up for it already."

"What are you talking...? Ah, don't tell me. Ejoq, they'll be wrecked!"

"No, look, Sally -- see? The jump engines are in the way. They'll act as cover...I think."

"Doesn't look that way to me. Where's the ejecta point on this side?"

"Probably right there, along that bulkhead."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, that's the main fuel conduit, right? And there's the branch point for it...and that's the primary fuel pump for the line. So *that's* got to be the spot."

"What're you two plotting?" Genness asked in his smooth tone. "Clue in your loyal crew mates, pray."

"We're gonna blow a hole through the bulkhead, right here in Engineering."

"Fabulous!" Bayern shouted, and then, "Um, I mean, good idea people."

"Oh...Ejoq," Genness muttered, but that was it.

"We could reset it in here," Sally observed. "Then the blast would be mostly carried outside."

"That'd be true if we didn't have those feed lines right there: they're real high pressure, and could actually turn enough of the blast away that it might not cut through the hull. Blow it from the other side, and we're gold."

"Then what about a hole somewhere else, where the feeds won't be an issue? If the batteries get damaged, then all this would be a waste, and we're out of luck."

"Hmm...okay, yeah. Good point. Let's look for a spot out in the main corridor..."

"Uh, guys," Genness interrupted then, "you might want to hear this...it's the AI."

And then the carefully measured voice of the computer came through again.

"...approaching at 0.472 gravities, mark, constant acceleration; spectral analysis of heat trail complete: cross-referencing with Industrial Specification Database For Commercial Propellants and Thrust Materials; comparison complete; match found: Klein-Pretorious Manufacturing product number 1107.975b/e55r Darkheart Compact Missile System; OM installed warhead Motherload Mark VII Tactical Nuclear Defensive Device; Yield Rating: .35 Megatons; Approximate Constant Acceleration Range: 250,000 kilometers; Standing by..."

Needless to say, we'd been in motion from the words: "heat trail".

"Where's it coming from, Gen?!"

"I don't know! Nothing on scans yet...wait! Oh, no! It's *Ponte*!"

"WHAT?! Get them on the horn! Tell 'em to abort!"

"It's off-line, remember?!"

"Hook it back up!"

"How?!"

"For cryin' out loud!" Sally shouted as we made it back through the connecting companionway to the airlock, "Tertiary Power Channel 14, 'Standby-Off-On-Main Comm: Go-"Zero Delay"' -- hold it down two seconds, then 'Commit'!"

"What? Wait! Where's that?" Gen was starting to sound worried, and it was almost scaring yesterday's ration bars out of me.

"Oh, *I* know where that is," Bayern put in, with a confident tone, which actually did make me lose 'em. Thank the Powers for in-suit biowaste bags!

"NO!!" Sally and I both shouted.

"Forget about calling *Ponte*! How much time, Genness?"

"Looks like...oh, man, just over thirteen minutes! Get out of there you two!"

"On our way...no, wait...we still need the batteries!"

Sally looked at me through her face plate with wide eyes.

"There's no time, Ejoq! We have to go!"

I didn't answer, but instead tripped the shape charge with my suit comp. There was a hard shudder in the bulkhead under my gloved hand, but that was all.

"We go with the batteries. C'mon!"

"But, the missile...!" she spluttered, as she followed.

Engineering looked really different now: large and small particles of hull material, gaseous fuel, fire-suppressant foam (instantly freeze dried in the vac conditions), and various machine parts floated in the wide compartment like murky water. A wickedly jagged, but prettily saw-edged hole, just about three meters across, gaped menacingly inward. Stars and *Dame Minnie's* bow were plainly visible beyond in the light of our suitfloods.

"Sally! Ejoq! Can you hear me?! Are you all right?!"

"Shaddap, Bayern!" Sally barked. Then to me, "One...two...ah, six of these batteries are toast. That one's leaking something yellow that's probably super-toxic, so watch the vapor -- we can't do a decent decon out here."

She said all this as we unhooked the two that were best sheltered from the blast by the (now totally wrecked) jump engine.

"Do I turn the clamps this way, Sal? Okay, good, I can do both batteries. Get back to the boat, and run us a power jump to the supply bay, and get it open! Make sure those inertials are ready, too! Move it...I can push these over there myself! And watch out for the loose stuff!"

"*You* watch out!" and then she was gone.

"Ten minutes, people!" said, Genness. "This is crazy, Ejoq! We can still clear off in time on docking thrusters..."

"And die slowly when the power finally fades?"

"*Ponte's* coming," he argued. "She can help us out."

"*Ponte's* trying to kill us! Or she doesn't care if we die. Either way, she's poison. Now shut up, and let me do this!"

It wasn't hard to disconnect them; they were as sweet and sensibly designed as Sally had observed, and every bit as massive as they looked. I heaved hard, with a grunting weightlifter's shout that had everybody screaming my name, and set the first of them into slow motion. It bumped into a few pieces of floating junk, but didn't change direction or slow any further. I jumped up so as to pace it, and pushed again off a spar to do a course correction. It was a sublime moment, and the battery snailed out through the new hole like it was made to do it.

"I see it on monitors," Bayern said. "Sally, get that hatch open, okay?"

"It's opening now! I, uh, I'll try to snag it with a spanner!"

"Negative!" Bayern commanded with more authority than anything else I'd ever heard him say. "Open the hatch and clear out of the way! I can catch it."

"Oh, Bayern," I said, because the thought of him doing something important without screwing it up seemed like a wild fantasy, but I went back for the other one.

"Slower, you sphincter!" Sally yelled.

"Bring it up, Bayern! Up, up!" Gen was plainly scared.

"C'mon, Captain Crunch! Axial spin...now yaw, YAW!"

Sally and Genness suddenly screamed in a pitch of fear, followed by a second of silence that made my heart stop.

"Well I'll be a...you *did* it! Bayern, you really did it! Not a scratch on the thing! Never seen anything like it...hold on, it's bounding up a little, but...GRUNT...okay, snagged it...and...I got a line on it."

I was pushing the second battery up at this point, but it started cartwheeling immediately. I swore loudly, and tried to steady it, but I had no leverage, and I started spinning myself.

"Five minutes!"

I took a precious moment to fume, looking at the huge battery spinning slowly as it knocked small bits of flotsam around like a clumsy whale.

"I can't get the other one over in time," I announced as I maneuvered myself around it. "I'm coming out the hole myself and jumping over. DON'T move, Bayern."

"Take the scoot, Ejoq!" Sally warned, but she well knew there was no time.

"Use your spanner if my aim is off," I replied, as I pulled myself carefully through the maw of the hole. I tapped OFF the floods, and ON the helmet lightamp, and spied Sally holding onto the battery inside the supply bay -- only about ten meters away. She had it secured with cargo straps, and held the spanner in one hand. I jumped, and started to spin like the battery I'd just left behind.

"Oh, for the love of...! Hold on, Ejoq! Hold on! Stop flailing!"

I didn't realize I was flailing because I was too busy panicking.

"Get me! Sally, catch me!"

"Already done..." she said with a heave, and I felt something pull at my tool belt. In a moment, I was holding on to a grip, my head at Sally's floating feet.

I was hyperventilating, but I moved carefully to orient myself to her.

"Take this," she ordered, looking me decisively in the eye, and handing me the jumper connect. It was the right thing to say, because it gave me something simple but vital to do while she turned to the input panel on the battery.

"Close the bay, Bayern. Oh, man, this thing is sweet! Hand me that connect now, Ejoq. Good, good...okay, here goes...1...2...3..."

"Two minutes!" Genness was as panicked now as me.

"And...main breaker is...on!"

We saw no difference down in the bay, because we'd pulled so many system controls -- but we'd put a Main Drive shunt in place before we'd left, which was all that mattered now.

"Punch it, Bayern!" she screamed, but we were moving even before the bay doors were closed.

There was a big bleed-over from inertials; a couple of G's, and we both went flying. If I hadn't had a helmet on, I'd have fractured my skull against the bulkhead -- and as it was, I was seeing so many stars I thought I was still outside. Sally hit off a corner of the battery, then slammed into a storage rack so hard she yelped like a puppy.

Waiting for a nuke to blow has a weird way of simultaneously slowing time to a crawl and accelerating it to light speed; a hideous subjective/objective relativistic melding, with abject terror as an added spice.

There was a sudden shudder that I recognized immediately.

"What the ..." Bayern said, then, "...oh, no! It wasn't me, I didn't fire, I swear it!"

"I know, I know," I assured him. "The incoming has crossed a threshold I listed as one of my autofiring criteria. Our missiles will be tracking back along the incoming heat trails. They're heading out to *Ponte*. What's the ETA on those?"

"Looks like...eleven...no, twelve minutes," Genness replied. "Our toys are a little faster. Just forty seconds until theirs arrives, still on target for *Daaf'Qa*."

"Oh, man. Bayern?"

"Drive's at full acceleration...it'll be close. I just want to say that it has been a pleasure and a privilege to be your commanding officer, and that if we don't make it out of here ..."

"Bayern," I warned, "better shut up with this annoying crap, 'cause we might just live, and then I'd have to beat you with a power cable."

"Uh, um, right ..."

"Fifteen seconds," Genness whispered.

"Ten ..."

"Five ..."

"Impact."

^^

There was a stiff jarring, and the acceleration dropped off immediately.

I waited for something nastier to happen. We all did, because in an atmosphere, we'd have been blown apart like a porcelain jar in a gale; the efficacy of nuclear weapons in vacuum is of a magnitude smaller, though -- and therefore much more dependent upon accuracy.

"Engines are off," Bayern said at last. "I'm getting an EMP warning."

"Oh, yeah...no engine casings," I replied, after a low groan. "The rest of the boat is shielded, though. Computer will run a hard reset automatically. Should just be a few minutes."

"Sensors should do the same, but right now we're blind up here," Genness put in. "If *Ponte's* still moving along the same trajectory, at the same speed, I think we have an ETA of about eight minutes with our missiles."

"Oh, Ponte will be on the move, all right. Get sensors up and running as soon as you can. Sally and I'll get the weapons back online."

Sally's lack of comment made me turn and look. She floated at a weird angle in front of the rack she'd hit, and was unmoving except for a slow drift. I swore and turned her over. Her eyes were rolled back, and she looked gray. I keyed the air cycle for the supply bay, but that was going to take long minutes.

"Sally's hurt! I'll need help down here as soon as we're pressurized!"

"How is she?" Genness asked with tense urgency.

"I can't tell yet...unconscious...maybe a seizure. She hit hard at take-off. Have the shock kit handy, okay?"

"Taking proper hold during movement is a basic responsibility of each crew member," Bayern stated.

"Um...who's the Primary Medic?"

"Sally!" Genness and I both shouted, and I added a few expletives about his management skills that I thought she would appreciate. "I'm *Secondary* Med, and Genness is Tertiary. Genness, we still have four minutes 'til you can get in here. Reset what you can with the sensors, and get those actives up too. Bayern, cover sensors and comm when he leaves, and keep your weather eye open for heat trails."

A few long moments crawled by in silence.

"I...I have actives," Genness finally announced. "You're right, *Ponte's* accelerating, and...NO! Those dirty backstabbers! I count two...check that, three inbound heat trails...and they have a lock on us already."

"What?! Already?! That's impossible! Get down here, Gen! Thirty seconds until the pressure cycle is done. Sally needs help, but I have to reconnect the weapon power nodules as soon as I can get inside!"

Half a minute, and it crawled. Sally's breathing seemed labored; mine *certainly* was. Gen, headset on and wired for sound, was at the window in the airlock door, looking almost as pained as Sally did, while Bayern was acting way too take-charge for comfort up there in the cockpit. The moment the pressure indicator showed green, I tore open the door and pushed passed Genness. I popped my face plate as I swam through the main companionway to the correct maintenance hatch, then popped that too and sent the plastic covering sailing down the main companionway like a discus. I heard Bayern yelp and swear through the open hatchway to the bridge, so my aim was good, anyway. I only hoped that it would hold.

"How's Sally?" I asked as I worked.

"Doesn't look good, Ejoq. I've given her something for the shock, but I think she has a concussion. There might be other problems, but I can't tell while she's in the suit. I need help here."

"We all need help here. Do what you can. Where're those incomings right now, Bayern?"

"Uh, ETA...looks like six minutes. They're moving really fast, and still gaining. Can you intercept them?"

"I'm gonna try, but our ordinance isn't rated for anti-missile defense. These incomings may be nukes too, in which case they'll blow when they're within 100 meters of us; but if their onboard nav gear is any good at all, they might hit spot on, and at these speeds they wouldn't even need warheads to splatter us. What's *Ponte* doing?"

"Looks like they've changed course a little, and are outward bound under full drive power. Their flight path...er ..."

"What is it? Don't waste time!"

"Well, if I didn't know better, I'd say *Ponte* was getting ready for starjump. That doesn't make sense, though: they're still inside the gravity shadow. There's a good chance of a misjump if they go now."

"They want out of here in a big way. Real pirates would be more willing to fight. This whole thing's a setup!"

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. How are engines?"

"Looks like...yes! Online! Do we run for it?"

"Negative! The missiles are too fast. Just watch the sensors, and power-up engines. Be ready for evasives on my call!"

I'd been talking as I brought up my tactical boards and fire control interface, and began running them through a quickie diag. Everything looked good enough to offer hope, which, therefore, made *me* hope I still had room in the biowaste bag. The gloves were in the way, so I spent a full minute disconnecting them and sending them off; by this point we had so much unsecured stuff floating around, I didn't care about it. I was acting and reacting, but I had no illusions.

Not anymore.

I tweaked one of our two outgoings towards a point I thought *Ponte* might want to reach before risking her jump. The other one, I throttled back for ten seconds, then brought up its propellant burn again, along with a tiny course correction. That put the first missile in front of *Ponte's* projected path, and the other one right on target but delayed just enough to give them time to make a rash decision: if the risk of a misjump was higher for them further in, then that's exactly where I wanted them to try it.

"Ejoq...I'm reading a graviton discharge from *Ponte*," Bayern said. "They're jumping. I just don't get it...it's way too early."

"They don't have a choice. What are the odds of a misjump from there?"

"I have no idea but...okay, here's the spike. Good jump or bad, they're gone."

So that was that. I spared the vindictive space of a heartbeat hoping *Ponte* and her crew had been torn apart at the molecular level and scattered across years of time and parsecs of space, as was theorized to happen in catastrophic misjumps. Then I had the incomings on a hard lock, and was gratified to see a close formation, even after all that distance. I rotated *Dame Minnie's* forward missile packs in both tubes, and fired simultaneously. I held my breath for a count of eleven, then hit the autodestruct for them. They disappeared as tight contact points from my screens, and became widening clouds.

"Oh, Ejoq! I'm gunning it!" Bayern had seen our only defensive weapons just blow up on sensors, and had a terrified echo in his voice, like a scared bird singing.

"Wait for it!"

"But..."

"I said *wait*!"

And then two of the three incomings on the tacboard winked out when they hit my impromptu debris field. The third one, though, slipped through it like a ghostly thing, and I shouted hard.

"Now, now, now!"

I was slammed against my harness hard, inertials bleeding shamelessly, then mostly felt my stomach get tossed to the side, up, down, and over.

"Bayern!"

"Hold on!"

Then my spleen and eyeballs alike tried to jump out of my body, and I could only hope that Genness had secured Sally well. A serene, agonizing silence followed for several seconds, wherein I fully expected to become part of a rapidly expanding ball of plasma, but I finally let out a sigh when it stretched on. The tacboard showed a small mass of debris on the final missile's former track, moving out obliquely in a messy wave of scrap.

"What happened to it? Bayern...?"

"I'm not sure...I was dodging, but it kept compensating, so I pulled a tighter angle. It altered course again on a wide arc, and then just fell apart."

"Ha! Gee strain! Fantastic job, Bayern!"

He coughed in shock, and I think, appreciation, and then immediately launched into a sermon about teamwork. Genness cut him off before I could.

"All clear? If so, get down here, Ejoq. Sally's not looking good, and med isn't my bailiwick."

It wasn't mine either, but I'd had some training. I couldn't do much for her while I was still in the suit, so I took the time to get out of it, telling Genness to do the same for her before I got back down to the big stowage bay. She was in her skivvies by the time I did arrive, and pale, though her breathing was more regular. She moaned, but wasn't quite conscious.

"Watch the right arm," Gen said. "She cried out when I took the suit off. I think it might be broken."

The funny angle she held it at spoke of volumes of pain.

"It's dislocated," I said, but I checked for breaks anyway. Finding none, I told Genness to hold her tight. I grabbed her arm and pulled, and she screamed and seemed almost to come to, spitting my name and cursing soundly. She was out cold for sure after that, though, and Gen and I moved her back to her cabin. I gave her a shot for pain, mixed with a sedative, and we left her bungeed to her bunk, fully asleep at last.

There was a lot of work to do before any of us could take the time to stand vigil. I drafted Genness because I needed an extra pair of hands in a couple of places. We worked in silence for the most part, except when I gave him instructions on what to hold, or press, or lift. My intention was that with just one of these batteries aboard, I'd focus on getting the basics up and running again before pressing for convenience. Plumbing and general power access would be next. Gen was still quiet.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked at last.

He replied quickly, and with conviction, though he didn't look at me at all.

"I said that we shouldn't do this from the start, and now Sally's been seriously injured. Don't be silly, Ejoq, of course I'm mad at you."

"You ought to know...I'd never intentionally hurt her," I countered with embarrassment, because I found myself choaking up suddenly. "We needed that battery, Gen. What choice did we have? Besides, *you* of all people have no right to complain about putting others at risk!"

I hadn't meant to say it just then...I'd wanted to wait until we were back, and say it to the proper authorities.

He stopped holding and stared at me for a long moment.

"Do you want to *qualify* that?" he asked, very low and very evenly -- almost flat.

I didn't, but now I had to.

"*Ponte* knew *Daaf'Qa's* location well enough to target it. Their missile had a lock from the start. At their distance, with *Daaf'Qa's* stealth suite, and as powered down as we were, they'd have needed military grade scanning equipment to detect either of us. But a quality analysis of their sensor wash showed that those guys were just using off-the-shelf stuff -- and no matter what kind of enhancement algorithms they might have had running, it wouldn't have been enough for combat purposes on the fly like that. Not unless they knew exactly where to look."

"They could have been tracking our personnel comm signals, despite what I thought," he replied in the same dead voice. "And we'd contacted them directly several times as it was."

"Tight beams only, which are easy enough to draw a bead on, but we changed directions after that. *Ponte* didn't have a basis for triangulating our signal. Or did they...?"

"There are a dozen ways to figure out a spacecraft's location that I can think of just off the top of my head. You're talking nonsense."

"Probably, in which case you have my apologies. But if I'm not, Genness, then I only have one question...why did your partners on *Ponte* double-cross you?"

Dead.

Silence.

Easy-going Genness suddenly wasn't easy or going; he stood there like a storm cloud: dark, patient, quiet but for a distant rumble.

"I don't know what you're talking about Ejoq."

"I think you do. *Ponte* may not have had a great sensor suite aboard, but *Daaf'Qa* sure did, along with a bona fide AI to analyze the readings. Even powered down like we were it should have picked us up on its passive systems immediately. I'm guessing that it did, but that it had been told not to bother us unless we bothered it. We bothered it, so it tried to fire on us. But *you* run the sensors. *You* run comp systems. If I hadn't spotted that proximity alert by accident, *Daaf'Qa* would have slipped in completely unnoticed, and could have met up with *Ponte* without the rest of us ever knowing about it until we got back to Deegman. I *did* notice it though, and you knew I would have followed it up if you'd tried to play it off as a ghost contact or a glitch, so you had no choice but to treat it as seriously as we did."

I took a breath to gauge his reaction, but he still had none. I went on.

"If it all went well for you, it would have been a big knock against the fledgling Deegman defense program, and *we* would have been at the center of the storm. Well, some of us, anyway: I'm thinking you have another identity to step into back there, or maybe a ticket off-planet. The point is, there was a fake pirate attack planned. *Daaf'Qa* jumps in on its own, and *Ponte* purposely meets up with it. They send out bogus distress calls to Deegman. Then they shift their cargo load to the other ship, and the crew messes up the interior to look like a struggle occurred. Maybe they concoct some internal data records to make it look like the pirates got inside; or perhaps the crew donates a couple of cc's of blood each, and splatter it around for good effect; stuff like that. However it gets rigged, *Ponte* is abandoned, and the crew transfers to *Daaf'Qa* and jumps away, easy as you please. I'm willing to bet that most, if not all, the attacks have been scams since the

beginning. A campaign like this must have been planned a long time in advance, so you guys probably had to think of something fast once it was made public knowledge that a Bechel was being outfitted for anti-piracy. Maybe *Daaf'Qa* couldn't be reprogrammed in time, or maybe you were worried about it getting damaged in a real engagement with *Dame Minnie*. Why bother with violence at all, though, if you could pull your scam again *and* discredit the defense program at the same time? I figure that that's where *you* came in: your job was to make sure this all went off without any interference from us."

"Why would anyone go to the expense and trouble of staging a fake attack?"

"Business, of course. A campaign like this just might be part of some company's long-term strategy. I haven't had time to research the consortium that owns -- or, rather, owned -- *Daaf'Qa*, but I'll bet they're in a sweet position to profit from the fear produced by all the so-called pirate attacks here. Maybe they sell private security services; maybe they sell insurance; who knows? Any way you cut it, scared, desperate people are willing to spend freely for peace of mind, and Deegman's economy is starting to dive because of this climate of fear."

"That's all wild conjecture, Ejoq," he responded, no more life in him than before, and I've got to admit, his deadpan was starting to get creepy. "You can't prove a word of it."

That was true enough, but I do stupid things when I'm pissed off -- like tell the truth.

"No? Well, weapons weren't the only toys I had in my duffel, Gen. I jacked a bunch of inline microcorders into the comm and comp systems all over the boat back when we were still doing the outbound shake-down. See, I thought they'd be a good insurance policy for us poor working slobs in case the owners tried to withhold our bonuses by claiming that we hadn't been doing our jobs out here; it's happened to me before. When Deegman admin downloads *Dame Minnie's* records, the recorders will dump their data too as backup files. Any discrepancies between the logs entered by the crew and that backup data will get flagged and displayed first thing. And since portside S.O.P. is to download a vessel's mission data during its final approach, Deegman Security Corps could easily have an unfriendly welcome party waiting for us when we dock."

He seemed to be thinking about it very, very carefully. Then, slowly and deliberately, as he floated silently in the companionway, he took out a short serrated knife from a sleeve pocket of his jumper. It might have been small, but it looked sharp and cruel to me, as did Genness now.

"And where *are* all those microcorders?" His soft tone held a sector of menace in it, even though he hadn't changed or modulated it in any way.

Even so, I smiled. Not because I was felt cocky or thought the situation was especially funny, but because I was relieved: until that moment, I really had no idea if I was right. I'd felt guilty for thinking ill of him, half-believing that it was jealousy over his relationship with Sally. But now I felt vindicated.

"Put the knife down, Genness. *Dame Minnie* needs a crew, and we're still a long way from home."

"I'm rated for more skills than my *curriculum vitae* would have you believe," he replied. "Running this boat by myself would not be impossible -- merely difficult. And, truthfully, killing you wouldn't even be that. But if we can come to an agreement, we can avoid unpleasantries. You're very resourceful, Ejoq...I have to say I'm quite impressed. Your skills and ingenuity, to say nothing of your leadership capabilities, could fetch an impressive pay rate in the right circles, and I can make those kinds of introductions."

"If I keep my mouth shut, you mean. I'm not a pirate, Genness. *Is* it Genness, by the way?"

"No, of course not. This isn't piracy -- that's rarely profitable, and certainly inelegant. For now, let's just say

we're contractors who specialize in...situations requiring finesse."

"And you think of nuclear weapons as the tools of finesse?!"

He gave a sigh and a slight shake of his handsome head.

"For the record, *Ponte* was piloted by its original crew, *not* colleagues of mine. They were in trouble with their finance company, and amenable to a deal. Recruiting them like we did was a service to Deegman, really: *Ponte* had done its share of real piracy in the past to make ends meet, and I believe they came to Rilltule for that purpose from the onset. But civilians -- corrupt ones, especially -- are unreliable. I signaled them to sit tight and wait for my all clear, but they must have panicked. My employers don't care for loose ends, so if *Ponte* somehow survived that jump, it will be tracked down and confronted in due course."

I laughed, and actually started working on the water pipe again. "And you really think I'm strack enough to be a merc?"

"Part of the rank and file? No. But that would be a horrid waste of your talents, anyway. You positively excel at the unexpected, and that's a rare gift. Now, I won't lie to you...about this anyway...my mission is a flop precisely because of *you*. But there's still a little hope for some personal profit: we get a recruitment bonus for bringing good people into the company. It's a really progressive outfit. We have above-standard pay rates, full life and medical coverage, profit sharing, and a lot of little incentives like this recruitment thing. People like you and me, we'd be on our own most of the time. Good teams even form their own tactical approaches to the company's strategies. It can be a nice life, Ejoq."

The knife he still held at the ready had a another thing to add about signing on.

"You'll be wanting the microcorders, of course," I responded, at last.

"Yes, that's certainly a condition. But I can even get you a quick ride off Deegman, once we get back...a company transport is in dock now -- not that anyone knows it as such -- and it'll be leaving soon after *Dame Minnie* docks, whenever that turns out to be. Top accomodations, with a cabin of your own; 'Associate' status, which entitles you to a pay differential for the trip out, regardless of whether or not you get hired; and, believe it or not, some half-way decent ship food."

I have to say, that sounded sweet. A good gig that tapped my skills *and* respected my abilities? One that maybe payed well? One that would get me out of Rilltule system for good, and with some pocket change yet?

"What about the others? Even assuming we actually get our bonuses from this cruise, money on Deegman doesn't last long."

"Well, Bayern's a fine pilot," he replied with a shake of his head, "but I mean, really! The man could exasperate a corpse without trying -- or even knowing it. This is a company of people, and he's just about the worst people person I've ever met. Anyway, he has ties here...an active career and such."

"Okay then, what about Sally? She's really good, and she'll need the work."

He didn't respond right away, and then sighed again quietly.

"I was going to approach her about it when we were on our way back to Deegman. Honestly! I've grown quite fond of her these last couple of weeks...and I have nothing but respect for her skills and courage. But now that she's been hurt...well, I don't know. The company won't hire somebody who's wounded. It's a policy. I mean, as employees, we're always on the go. No company can afford to bring someone in who can't pull a profit

right away. I mean, they just wouldn't go for it."

"It's only a dislocation, I think. Well, maybe a slight concussion too. She can be up and running in no time."

"Ejoq, if it were my call, there'd be no question. But I don't do the hiring, and, ah...there's this secrecy policy in place. If I bring someone in who can't possibly be hired, well..."

He let that hang, and I let it go.

"That's not the only reason, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"C'mon! You're a good-looking guy, half her age. You don't bunk alone when you're back with the company fleet, am I right?"

At least he had the decency to blush a little.

"Ejoq...this job isn't always easy. I mean, you have to see that. Yes, there is...someone. But a domestic partnership among professionals is always a challenge."

"So Sally gets left behind on an airless rock simply because she'd make you feel uncomfortable? Are you really that much of a heel?"

"Please, I intend to put some money into her account so she can book passage elsewhere...it's not like she'd be a vagrant or something."

"That's not what I'm talking about, and you know it."

"I know you're in love with her yourself, Ejoq. But you can't let that cloud your objectivity. You could have a stellar career with us, but the plain fact is that everything has a cost. Honestly, I don't understand the implied point, and this shouldn't be a hard decision for you. A professional does what needs to be done. But it takes more than skill and ingenuity to be one. You have to think like one."

I kept working for a long time, running through the plumbing resets, and doing diags, and I didn't even stop working when I finally answered.

"No I don't. In fact, I *won't*. Kill me, and you'll never find all the recorders, no matter how hard you try. That's a guarantee. And you'll have to kill Sally and Bayern too, because there's no way to hide my death. You say you can fly the boat alone? Well, super for you. But you can't stop an inquiry without *me*. Maybe you're thinking that you'll figure out a way to get at the boat's core records. But you won't. Better minds -- an army of them, over the course of generations -- have dedicated themselves to the security of core records on space vessels. You can destroy the data block, maybe, but you'll never breach it. And destroying it in such a way as to convince everyone back on Deegman that *Dame Minnie* got hit in the fight would be a long shot at best. Either way, you'd miss your flight out...and I'm guessing there wouldn't be another."

He pursed his lips, in a sour face, and thought for a bit.

"What do you want, then?"

"Sally and Bayern get ten times their *Dame Minnie* sign-on pays deposited into their accounts before we dock."

"Be serious! I don't have that kind of money..."

"Then *make* it happen! You steal it, get an advance from these great employers of yours, or sell your soul -- whatever it takes. They deserve it, and you're going to give it to them. Bayern's a numskull, but he came through for us when the heat was on. And Sally is good people -- the best, in fact...even if she has rotten taste in men."

"And what do *you* want? Blackmail is a bad way to apply for a job."

"You make it sound like an exclusive club," I replied tightly, "but if they'd hire *you*, they're just a bunch of pirates after all. Do this for Sally and Bayern, and you get the recorders. Nothing more out of you, nothing less out of me."

His frown held for long moments, but at last he pursed his lips and slid his little knife back into his sleeve. "This will nearly wipe me out, Ejoq. No mission bonus, no recruitment bonus, and most of my savings. Plus, we're sure to lose the contract with the investment consortium who hired us. It puts me in a tight corner. You're not being fair."

That did it.

"Don't you *dare* try to play the morality card here! I don't offend easily, but that would really push it! You've been playing everybody for a patsy from the very beginning: from those mining jamokes on Deegman, all the way up to the woman you've been sleeping with -- and whose life your actions imperiled. You have *no* high ground here to argue from; just drop it so we can get some bleeding work done, alright?! That water line needs adjusting -- hold your end up. Higher. Higher, I said! And use both hands..."

He was looking very unhappy, even sulky, but he'd put away his weapon, held the line like I told him to, and, overall, seemed a lot less menacing.

I picked up a medium spanner and tested its size on the water line. It was too big for that job, but not the one I really needed it for.

I smacked "Genness" in the left temple as hard as I could manage, but he had the kind of reflexes I could only dream about, and was able to pull back from most of the blow. He rebounded off the bulkhead, and I hit him again across the back, though I started spinning. I steadied myself with my free hand, and he struggled to do the same. He was groggy, but he sure had experience, because his knife was out again immediately.

He lunged wildly, and I was able to push him away with the spanner. He was getting his full senses back fast, though, which was bad news for me.

"That was stupid, Ejoq, but cunning. My...compliments. I take it you actually *don't* like the idea of a deal." He jumped for me, but I retreated.

"Oh, I could live with one, if you'd let me. You can't afford to do that, though. You'd show me some bank statements that would "prove" you'd coughed up all the money. I'd give you the recorders. We'd file our carefully written reports and go through our debriefings. Then, a week or two after we got back, I'd get a knife in the back, and Sally would still be poor and stranded. Go ahead and tell me I'm wrong."

I had kept moving slowly, but I was at the main corridor now, with a lot more room for him to move. Blood streamed off his head, and clung to his thick, tangled hair for a bit before detaching itself and floating away in heavy red globules, like misshapen berries. His face was pale, and deader than deadpan.

"No sense in that. We have trust issues, you and I."

Then he slid at me through the air like weightless oil, and I batted at him like a dying willow in a stiff breeze. He didn't go for the kill immediately, so I thought he was wary of the spanner. But I was watching the knife as he moved, and I didn't see his free hand until it sort-of blurred in front of me, flipping the spanner out of my white-knuckled grip as if we'd rehearsed it. It clattered against a bulkhead, and cartwheeled away -- and as I watched it go, I felt a cold thing at my throat.

"Ah...yes! Well, you got me! Ha-ha! Sorry about that, but I had to try, right?"

"No, you didn't, though I'll admit your reasoning was sound. So...it's sooner rather than later for you? Just as well."

No twitch or change in his expression. No sneer or angry smile. The small cold thing he held under my left ear became a point of absolute and total concentration, and it went from being simply cold, to being hot and edged in a millisecond.

And then there was a loud, crackly snap from behind us, and the man before me just dropped back with clenched eyes, like a stressed rag doll. He drifted at an angle, but didn't otherwise move a muscle. Further down the companionway, Bayern sidled out from around a corner. He held a small stunner in a classic one-arm-out-supported-by-the-other pose, made famous by an age of adventure vids. His face was set, and he didn't waver a centimeter in his aim at the man who called himself Genness. He moved closer, coming up behind and touching his target gently with one foot, stunner still set to fire. There was no reaction. The knife drifted freely nearby, and he caught it deftly and pocketed it. He then took out some tapecuffs from a leg pocket, and cinched the stunned man's hands and feet together. He glanced at me a few times while he worked, but didn't say anything. The silence was deafening, and I was exhausted.

"So, you really *do* have multiple personalities. You're, what...a secret agent?"

"Deegman Security Corps. We had intelligence that indicated there was a piratical agent aboard this cruise, but we didn't know who. His background checked out, just the same as yours and Sally's, so the only thing to do was to put someone in undercover."

"How long did you suspect him?"

"I didn't. I suspected *you*. I heard raised voices, and came to look...and listen. When did you figure him out?"

"When *Ponte* opened fire, I knew he must have been talking to them."

"That could have been me, perhaps."

"Yeah, well, no offense, but the dumb guy act was pretty convincing."

He smiled wryly, but declined to comment. We stowed Genness, or whatever his name was, in a small maintenance closet amidships until we could do a thorough search of his cabin for any hidden weapons or comm devices (and we found several of each). I was dead on my feet, and figured *Dame Minnie* could wait a sleep shift or two before throwing any more surprises at me.

I looked in on Sally before racking out. She lay strapped to her bunk, sleeping almost serenely, unmoved from the last time I'd seen her except for a glob of spittle that hovered near her slack jaw. I left in a hurry when I realized that the bad guy had been right.

I expected to hear a lot of flack over all the damage to the boat, once we started making reports back to Deegman, but we got just the opposite reaction. We began tight-beaming as soon as we had all the basic systems online. I didn't want to risk draining the battery out by putting AG back on, but Sally did some number crunching, and decided that we could run at 1/2 G and still have a healthy safety margin.

She was up and at 'em again within two shifts, despite her injuries -- which is good, because I slept for three straight. I let Bayern fill her in on what happened when she got up, at least the broad strokes. I wondered what her reaction to a competent and intelligent Bayern would be. I wondered what *mine* would be, since we still had weeks ahead of us together.

It turned out that he was a pilot in the SecCorps' investigative branch, and had seen his share of bad guys closer in. This was his first assignment so far out, but not his first undercover operation. He had a dry sense of humor, and an appreciation for the delicacy of the relationships involved. In other words, he was a completely different guy, and I liked him.

Bayern had shifted "Genness" back to his own cabin while I was asleep, and he used a Captain's Code I never knew about to lock him in. The two of us delivered the prisoner's meals and took his dirty linens for the rest of the cruise. He was well-behaved, but sang his job offer tune a couple more times, to no effect. Sally never saw or spoke with him again, that I know of.

She did think of him, though, I'm sure. We all had lots of time to think. That is, until we got closer in to Deegman, and the time lag in communications shortened to a reasonable level. Then we had more and more live reports to file. We were actually debriefed a half-dozen times before docking, and it was just the beginning.

But it wasn't the only one.

Bayern made a point of apologizing to Sally for his asinine behavior on the way out. She didn't believe him at first, and continued to treat him like an annoying bug for a while, but eventually she saw a different guy in place of her ex-husband's foolish lookalike. By the time we docked, they were inseparable.

We got paid our contract fees, plus a triple bonus for cracking the so-called pirate ring. We were minor celebrities for a while; you know, the avengers of Deegman, saviors of the spacelanes, blah-blah-blah. They put the guy who'd called himself Genness in an isolation cell so fast that I'm not sure he ever got a trial -- nobody asked *me* to testify, anyway.

They wanted to send the rest of us back out as soon as *Dame Minnie* got all her repairs completed (along with some much-needed upgrades), but our contracts were for one cruise only, and I'd had enough. So did the others, it seemed, because the owners ended up recruiting a whole bevy of eager beavers from which they could crew *Dame Minnie* indefinitely -- local talent all, and, I guess, bona fide patriots.

Rumor at the time had it that the companies that owned *Dame Minnie* intended to buy a couple more old junks and build themselves up a defense fleet. They were certainly overdue for a more serious view on the issue of self-protection; and a victory, even a little shabby one like this, seemed to be just what they needed to fan the limp spark of national pride.

Whatever. It was still a backwater to me, and I wanted a ticket to civilization. It wasn't long at all before shipping got up to speed again, and I got myself a position on a corporate superliner (helped considerably by a frothing reference from Deegman).

I called Sally before I left. I figured she might want a job, and I thought I could probably get her something on the same ship. Bayern was there with her when she picked up, though, and he'd had her laughing about

something, so I just turned it into a goodbye call. As it turned out, he had already gotten her a really good spot with SecCorps maintenance -- a steady, permanent position watching over the contracted civvie schnooks who did all the upkeep on their vessels. The two of them wished me the very best, and begged me to come back for a visit someday. I promised that I would, and we all smiled at the lie.

The superliner didn't seem to really need me, truth be told. I was given the title of 'Third Assistant Defensive Officer', or some nonsense like that, and I did little more each work shift than show up and run simulations. I used the gym regularly, and lost some weight. I sat and let the days, and then the weeks, and then the months pass.

I don't know why, but this time, the waiting wasn't so bad.

END

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License.

2 RTEXTR*ch

A free ebook from http://manybooks.net/