

***The Odyssey  
of the  
Bard Refuge***

A Traveller story by Peter L.S. Trevor

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A note on dates: Dates are typically expressed in the form ddd-yyyy where ddd is the day of the year and yyyy is the year of the Imperium. All Imperial years are 365 days long (no leap years) and the Imperium was formed in 4521 AD. For example 123-1116 is the 123<sup>rd</sup> day of Imperial year 1116 ... or 5637 AD.

# 1 Awakening

**Location: Unknown**

**Date: Unknown**

The man awoke. It felt like he was on a padded table of some kind with a pillow under his head. His eyelids were gummed together preventing him from seeing. Each breath he inhaled had a freshness that seemed painfully intense. His muscles felt heavy and weak, reminding him of the extreme exercise drills he'd undergone back in ... in ... He couldn't think straight. He realised not only did he not know where he was, he didn't know who he was. There was a gentle, reassuring hum of machinery all around him and he focussed on that.

Time passed.

The man managed to rub his eyes, enough so he could open them though it felt like someone had thrown a bucket of sand in his face. His bleary eyes made out a white ceiling less than arm's length above him. A wall to his left contained diffuse lighting panels. To his right was a glass door, hinged at the top, through the cold glass he could see a darkened room beyond. It contained several cryogenic capsules, or 'cold berths' as they were called, arranged three high, bunk-bed style. He realised that was what he was in.

The man tried to peer down at himself. He was in a uniform ... an undress uniform of the Imperial Navy. Below the Imperial sunburst logo on his left breast was a name, his name. He struggled with the upside-down letters for a few moments before reading 'DAVI'.

Davi's memory started to return. He was Jürgen Davi, a Lieutenant Commander in the Imperial Navy. The Imperial Navy protected the interests of eleven thousand worlds and had done so for eleven hundred years. He was on 'Frozen

Watch' assignment, one of a number of personnel frozen for a year and stored on various ships as emergency replacement crew. Under normal circumstances he'd expect this to be uneventful and he'd wake up in a naval base medical centre (in time for his fortieth birthday). But this was not a naval base medical centre, this was some ship's armoured cold berth compartment. Therefore the ship must be in trouble.

As this thought crystallised inside Davi's mind the door of his capsule slid up and open. A breath of cooler air caressed him. The other capsules were opening too, and emergency lighting spluttered to life.

Davi watched as another man rolled out of his capsule and made a semi-controlled fall to the deck floor. The other stayed partway to his knees, leaning heavily against the bank of capsules and breathing hard. Then he rose and straightened, obviously a Herculean effort of willpower. Davi judged him to be in his mid-thirties even though his hair was thinning.

Despite his protesting muscles Davi decided to emulate the other. Before he realised what was happening he was on his hands and knees on the deck. The surface was hard and unforgiving. A wave of nausea engulfed him and he was shaking uncontrollably.

“Good man.” The other said approvingly, holding out a 50 centilitre water bulb to Davi.

Davi grabbed the water bulb gratefully. “Thanks.” he croaked.

The other, rummaging around in a locker, produced another water bulb and two high energy candy bars. Slouching down besides Davi he handed over one of the candy bars ... chocolate and berry. “You can take your time, it looks like the others will be a few minutes.”

Davi sipped his water and ate the candy bar. The nausea and shaking subsided and he started to feel almost human. He started to take more of an interest in his surroundings.

There were nine cold berths in all, and a bank of small lockers that would be holding their personal



effects. At one end of the compartment was a heavy duty hatch, the only way in or out, at the other end was just a bulkhead wall. But crudely taped to the bulkhead was a wooden pole roughly two meters in length. It was a red hardwood with a deep polished finish and the markings along its length showed it to be a 'vaothoi': a quarterstaff typically carried by the religious advisors of his homeworld, Yori.

According to his uniform the other sitting beside him was named 'TAM' and he wore a lieutenant's rank insignia on his collar. Davi reached up to straighten his own collar, his rank insignia temporarily obscured by the folds, when he was interrupted by another person slithering out of their cold berth. The thirtysomething woman collapsed unceremoniously besides them. "Well that was fun" she managed.

Tam stood up and retrieved another water bulb and candy bar. He handed them to the woman, the name 'GREY' stencilled on her uniform, and surveyed the remaining occupants.

Clapping his hands loudly he balled “Okay, people. This isn’t a vacation. Move it.”

He was answered by groans from the other cold berth occupants, there were five of them, but they all stirred and before long everyone was up and recuperating. There were two more humans (Li and Padalecki), two canine-like Vargr (Tgeath and Rngoeuzl), and a large reptilian Zhurph (Hegeh) from Davi’s homeworld. There was also one corpse ... surviving a cold berth was not guaranteed.

“Right then,” said Tam commandingly, “I am Lieutenant Sir David Tam. Obviously we, the Frozen Watch, are on a ship of some kind, status unknown but no doubt very bad. First thing: before we open that-” he gestured to the sealed hatch, “do we have any medics?”

“I’m a doctor.” one of the humans said, a faint drawl in his voice. “Lieutenant Morgan Li.” He was in his forties, had a well-trimmed beard, and had that rugged outdoors look about him. Coming from the medical branch made his rank inferior to Tam’s.

Tam's eyes narrowed slightly. "Efatian?"

"I reckon I am." said Li, thrusting out his chin and staring back defiantly. "I reckon you are too, but from the cities." He made the word 'cities' sound like a swear word.

Davi tried to recall what he knew of the world of Efate. A major world ... moderately high population ... industrial ... on-again, off-again civil war going back many years ... terrorists ... something between the city dwellers and those who lived in the country ...

"And what about engineers?" asked Davi, trying to head off a situation.

"I'm an engineer." responded Padalecki. He was a thirtysomething going on twenty, looked like he regularly worked out or did open air beach sports, and had an enthusiastic yet naive grin. His rank insignia showed him to be a Senior Chief Petty Officer.

"I also have some skill at engineering." said Hegeh. The Zhurph was a Chief Petty Officer.

"Thank you, Davi." said Tam sarcastically,

tearing his gaze away from the doctor. “Who put you in charge?”

“The Imperial Navy did.” replied Davi.

Tam’s eyes flickered down to Davi’s rank insignia and went wide. Eventually he spat out a muted “Yes, sir.”

Davi addressed the group. “I am Lieutenant Commander Jürgen Davi. As I appear to be the highest ranking officer here I am in charge. Grab your gear and let’s go see what’s up.”

They had to line up and take turns to get to their personal effects locker. Inside each found a pressed and folded dress uniform, toiletries and underwear, and some keepsakes. Most of this they left for now.

Davi’s only keepsake was a shankril: a small bag containing a pebble from the shores of the Great River of Yori and hand-etched with an inspirational word, in this case ‘*Success*’. It had been a gift from his parents when he was a teenager, a symbol of their hope for him. He held it in the palm of his hand for a moment, squeezing it, feeling its weight

and solidity. “Success” he whispered to himself like a prayer, renewing the vow.

As expected, Hegeh took the vaothoi from the wall.

Davi activated the compartment hatch and it slide aside allowing them into the next room. It was a ready room, a staging area for the awakening crewmembers. Opposite, there was a door to a second cold berth compartment, and to the left there was a large airlock door giving access to the rest of the ship. The room was dominated by two large army-style equipment bins latched to the floor. Additionally, there was a large display screen that was intended to show the current status of the ship and list any and all emergencies going on. Except it was blank and unresponsive.

Davi reflected that larger ships would need larger frozen watches but putting them all in one place could be self-defeating if a single lucky shot in combat destroyed them all. Thus the frozen watch would be distributed throughout the ship. No telling how many there were on this ship. Or how

big this ship was.

After a gesture from Davi, Li and Grey opened the bins and started to inventory the contents. The first contained space suits, flashlights, and hand computers ... enough for nearly twenty people. One of the space suits was larger than the others and looked like it would fit Hegeh, another was small (as if for a child). The other bin contained an assortment of wall patches, breaching charges, cable, and tool sets. There was also an extensive medical trauma kit and a 9 millimetre snub revolver with six rounds.

Davi eyed the door of the other compartment, wondering if there was anyone alive in there. Noticing his gaze Tam approached the door and tried to activation plate: nothing. “Padalecki?” he called.

Padalecki grabbed one of the smaller toolkits and joined Tam.

Watching from the storage bins Grey lent towards the doctor and quietly asked “So, what’s with you and the Lieutenant?”

Li glanced at her. “What’s it to you, ‘Freckles’?”

“Come on, Doc, there was something back there.” She said ignoring the faux familiarity.

“He’s from my world. He and his kind think they should run things. Because they’re superior, better than.” he replied. There was an undertone of anger in his voice. “They want to keep everyone in a hive. Controlled. Real men can’t live like that.”

“His kind?” she asked.

“Born to lead. Raised to it. Guaranteed a seat on the elite ruling committee. But out here the Navy doesn’t care about that. Out here your birth counts for nothing. Hell, one day I could outrank him.” He paused. “I already outrank you.” he reminded her with a grin.

They were interrupted by a metallic screech as the second chamber door slid reluctantly aside.

Davi craned round Padalecki to see inside. In the dim light he could make out six figures slumped on the floor looking back at him. Four humans,

another Vargr, and a small bat-like Droyne. And three more corpses, Davi thought to himself, that made four dead so far.

From behind him Li caught sight of the diminutive Droyne, “Well that explains the kiddie suit.”

“The door was stuck.” said one of the humans. “We thought we were going to die in here.”

It took another ten minutes for everyone to sort themselves out and introduce themselves. They were all ratings, no officers. The humans were Hasaan, Malahyde, and Kralik, and an attractive young woman called Coltan. The Vargr was Ghraangk, and the Droyne’s name was Smyuetx.

“Okay,” said Davi, “let’s find out what’s going on.”

“That’s kind of obvious, ain’t it?” piped up Li, “We’ve been abandoned.”

Davi stared at him blankly.

“What makes you say that?” asked Grey, surprised.

“Simple, sweet-cheeks.” replied Li, “There’s



enough power for artificial gravity and some life support, though for how long is anyone's guess, but we've had four cold berth failures and the monitors ain't working. Add to that that we're supposed to be awoken in an emergency but we've heard nothing from the rest of the ship. The ship's dead!"

Davi opened his mouth to say something but Tam interrupted. "He's right, Lieutenant Commander. I didn't want to say anything just yet, but there have been no discernable course changes since we've been awake. We would have felt them." His sounded like he was explaining something to an inexperienced teenager.

"And what does that mean?" asked Davi, a little annoyed at the tone.

"It means we should probable explore the ship wearing space suits. In case of sudden decompression." said Tam.

"Very well. But helmets off until needed. I don't want anyone's suit air depleted unnecessarily.

Everyone started to put on space suits and share out the equipment. Davi took the revolver.

As Coltan was suiting up she asked “If we’ve been abandoned, whatever happened to the motto *‘Leave no man behind?’*”

“That’s the Marines. You’re in the Navy.” replied Hasaan.

“So, what’s the Navy motto?”

“*‘In space no one can hear you scream.’*” interrupted Li grinning.

She shot a sour glare at Li, a single eyebrow arched beneath her blond curls. But the slight crinkling at the corners of her eyes belied her real mood.

“Thank you, so much.” said Hasaan sarcastically.

“That’s not helpful, Doctor.” snapped Tam.

“Oh, humour not approved by the ‘committee’, Lieutenant?” Li rounded on Tam.

“Not that kind, no.”

“Well ain’t that a shame.”

“Stow it, Li.” ordered Tam getting angry.

As Tam strolled away, Coltan asked quietly “I’ve heard that line before. It’s a quote from

something?”

“Hell if I know.” replied Li watching Tam’s retreating back. “But, yeah, it’s famous.”

Davi, who’d overheard the exchange and even liked Li’s joke, wondered if he’d have to keep Tam and Li separate.

It was another twenty minutes before everyone was finished getting ready. Padalecki checked the air seals for any pressure difference and, at a nod from Davi, cracked open the airlock door.

It slid aside revealing an inky blackness. The light behind them spilled out and illuminated a small patch of floor, broken up by their long shadows. In the light there were a few metal tables and chairs, enough to identify this was probably a canteen. There were no smells and the temperature felt the same as the ready room, and yet ... Davi remembered Li’s comment about this being a dead ship and felt a shiver go up his spine.

Several flashlights snapped on as the group emerged and started to explore. At first they couldn’t even see the far walls but eventually they’d

spread out through the whole room. The canteen was several meters wide by more than twice that long. It was clean and everything was in its place. Somehow this made it more eerie than if there had been signs of a hasty departure.

Suddenly the silence was pierced by a squawk. Everyone's attention was immediately on the source, Smyuetx. "Me find something, I think." she said.

Davi and Tam quickly moved towards her while everyone else held their positions. She was reading a paper menu stuck to the wall. The menu itself was not what was interesting, it was the heading. "CF 6405 Bard Refuge, Deck 19 Mess" Smyuetx read out loud.

"CF ... A frontier cruiser?" pondered Davi.

"It's an Azhanti High Lightning class." confirmed Tam. "Sixty thousand displacement tons. Decks arranged perpendicular to normal convention."

"About 80 decks?" asked Davi.

"Yes." replied Tam., "About that."

Davi glanced at Tam. “Have you been on an Azhanti before?”

“When I was 14 my father took me on a tour of the Imperial Navy Ship ‘Children Of The Marches’ while it was in orbit over my homeworld.” He replied.

“14? Do you remember much?”

“Of course.” said Tam with surprise.

“Then I’m thinking this is a crew deck and we’re not going to learn much here.”

Tam nodded.

Davi continued “There are two key objectives here: the command systems ... bridge, main computer, captain’s cabin ... to find out what’s going on; and engineering ... to take real charge of the ship.”

“I agree.” said Tam sounding slightly impressed. “You want to split up?”

Davi looked round the room, calculating. Looking back at Tam he nodded. “Yeah. I want you to take the engineers and get the power back on. That’s Padalecki, Malahyde, Coltan, and

Ghraangk. I'll take the others up to the bridge.”

“Sounds like a plan. We can use the access shafts adjacent to the main lifts ... er, that way.” said Tam pointing and starting to walk off.

“Two other things,” said Davi, halting him. “We only have one gun. If we run into trouble I have Hegeh with his vaothoi and a couple of Vargr for protection. You take it.” He held out the revolver to Tam, butt first.

Tam hesitated for a moment, then took the weapon and checked it. “What’s the other thing?” he asked.

“Where is the bridge?”

Tam smiled and replied “The main bridge should be two decks up from here.”

\* \* \*

**Location: Jewell Naval Base, Jewell**

**Date: 123-1116**

What a tragic world this is, thought Davi,

looking out the window. The rain was falling hard from yellow clouds that stretched to the horizon. All that water but its polluted by their industry. For a moment he was back on his homeworld, Yori, a desert planet but one with a great river of deep azure. He brought his thoughts back to the present.

Commander Thur Minka, Duty Assignment Officer of the 125th Fleet sat opposite him. Her current role, he knew, was to get spacers like himself to accept a year in the Frozen Watch. To be cryogenically frozen and stored aboard military ships as replacement crew in an emergency. Of all the assignments the Imperial Navy made, this was one that could be turned down. Minka had to convince him not to.

“So, Lieutenant Commander, I see you’ve had a fairly busy career already.” said Minka. Her grandmotherly face smiled out at him from beneath a mop of gray hair.

“We are here to serve, Sir.” he replied. He knew roughly what she’d say but hadn’t decided what he thought about it yet..

“I’m particularly interested in the incident aboard the Legionnaire, during the war.” she went on brightly.

“Yes?”

“Yes. According to my records, when the war started a Zhodani surprise attack left you temporarily in command of the Legionnaire ... a Gionetti class cruiser.” she paused.

“That is correct.”

“That’s quite a big ship for a -” she glanced at her screen, “I believe you were a Sublieutenant at the time?”

“Yes.” said Davi. He hadn’t intended to be quite so monosyllabic. Hastily he added, “But it's only a light cruiser. That’s not so big.”

“Oh, come, come.” she retorted, “It's still thirty thousand displacement tons. That’s pretty big compared with what you were used to.”

Davi didn’t answer.

“So what happened? Tell me about it.” she asked.

Davi sighed. “We were in orbit over Vreibefger,



supporting a minor troop operation of some kind. I was in engineering, running a diagnostic on the ship's manoeuvre drive computer, the ship's senior officers were all on the bridge for the morning briefing. We received high-G missile fire and the bridge was instantly destroyed. I found out later it was a Zhodani raider, running with a false transponder that identified it as a merchant ship. One of many such attacks that day. As the most senior officer present I rallied the engineering crew to me and we started to secure the ship. Standard damage control procedures as per our training.”

Minka pursed her lips. Evidently this wasn't quite the answer she was looking for. “So ... you were just following your training then?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And why did you enlist in the Imperial Navy in the first place?” asked Minka.

“Eh?” said Davi, momentarily thrown by this abrupt change of tack.

Minka waited.

“My homeworld follows the wishes of the god

Zelodeous, the Deep One of the Undersea. It is He who commands me to go out into the universe, learn new skills, and bring them home for the service of our people.” Davi stopped, noticing the look of confusion on Minka’s face.

“Aren’t you from Yori? I thought that was a desert world. What’s this ‘undersea’?” she asked.

“Yori was once rich with water but much of that was lost many millennia ago. Some of it was lost into space, but much of it seeped below the surface. Vast underground rivers and lakes still flow to this day. And of course not all of Yori is desert, there is Scarland with its great river. It is only beyond the cliffs of Scarland, and away from the mountains, that the sand dunes prowl and the salt wind will leach a man’s body of water.”

Minka leaned forward in her chair and in a low voice asked “And what does Zelodeous say about the Frozen Watch?”

Davi hesitated. He had expected some entreaties to his sense of duty as an Imperial officer, some reasoned argument about how a tour

in the Frozen Watch could enhance his career. He closed his eyes and looked deep into his being, where his heart was still. Sighing he replied “I’ll go.”

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 17, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (1 hour after awakening)**

As the maintenance hatch fell out, Davi had a clear view of the security compartment, it was well lit. He had a clear smell, too: death!

The security compartment guarded entry to the ship’s bridge deck: the central computer, the senior officers’ quarters, and the bridge itself ... nerve centre of the ship. It was several meters long by maybe 5 meters wide with bare walls and contained the two primary lifts, a security workstation, and, in this case, a corpse.

Davi moved to the centre of the room and watched Doctor Li and Chief Hegeh as they

approached the body to investigate. The others remained in the maintenance crawlspace. “Well?” he asked.

“Multiple smallarms hits. Close range. Probably an SMG.” observed Li crouching over the body. It was wearing the uniform of a corporal in the Marines. Carefully he pulled the small chain from around the dead man’s neck and removed the ident chip that hung on it. In past eras the ident chip would have been referred to as a dog tag but this electronic device was undeserving of the name. Besides the Vargr found the term offensive. “Corporal Anaton” he read out, then quietly added, “Be at peace, Marine.”

Hegeh removed a 9mm submachine gun from the dead man’s hands and checked it. Empty. “It looks like he died defending his post.”

Davi looked round the room. The wall near the corpse, a bulkhead, was pock-marked by smallarms fire. The rest of the room was unmarked. “Defending it from what?” he wondered. “How long ago, do you reckon, Doc?”

Li paused, considering. “I’m no forensics expert, but I’d guess ... given the ambient temperature and humidity, the lack of animals and insects to speed decomposition ... I don’t know, a couple of weeks, maybe?”

Davi nodded to the others to come in and crossed to Hegeh who was now examining the damaged wall. He watched as the Zhurph’s scaly hand traced the scars and indentations, delicately as a lover’s touch.

“There was much pain and fear in this man’s death.” said Hegeh sadly.

“Krohm, I seek your guidance” said Davi in a low voice.

Hegeh stiffened at the use of his religious title. “I am not Krohm here.” he said, and thrust the recovered submachine gun into Davi’s hands.

“I need you to be. This ship, empty like this, yet we are left behind. And this man, shooting at ... what? Nothing? Krohm, doesn’t this remind you of something?”

“But I was a monk,” protested Hegeh, “Before

joining I worked in a monastery, I cannot be your Krohm.”

Davi grabbed the Zhurph’s arm to stop him shying away. “Nevertheless, Hegeh, this reminds me of ‘The Ordeal Of Tricore’, the story from the old scrolls. Doesn’t it you?”

Hegeh sighed. “Yes. Very much so.”

“But I only know the people’s version, you’ve seen the original. You’ve read the A’chim. What can you tell me?”

“No I haven’t” insisted Hegeh urgently, “I was a novice. I’ve not seen the A’chim.”

Davi waited, pointedly.

“If this were ‘Tricore’” continued Hegeh “then we should beware the corrupted servant of Tino: one of us who will betray us into danger.”

“And how do we redeem him?” asked Davi.

“In the story he cannot be redeemed.”

Davi and Hegeh stared at each other for a long moment. Eventually Davi said “You are Krohm.” and released Hegeh’s arm.

Sublieutenant Grey came over. Davi had

noticed that she'd been keeping her distance whilst he'd been talking to Hegeh, and had evidently judged it safe to approach now. "We can't get access to the rest of this deck." she said. "It's depressurised."

"Very well." said Davi. Raising his voice he called out "Okay, people. Suit up."

It took several minutes for everyone to don their helmets and gloves, fiddle with their life support units, and double check each other. After the maintenance hatch from which they'd emerged had been re-sealed, Davi gave the go ahead for the door to be opened. They stood in silence while the air bled from the room, their suits swelled at the pressure difference.

Swallowing hard again and again to pop his ears, Davi called for a radio check. Without air it was the only way, short of touching helmets, for their voices to carry. Satisfied they were ready he gave the nod to Grey.

The air-tight door cycled open to reveal a scene of carnage. Lights flickered intermittently, but

enough to illuminate the twisted metal bracings and smashed consoles that were strewn about. Power cables hung from the ceiling in long lazy loops, and where the main bridge view screen was supposed to be there was a massive rent in the outer hull dozens of meters long revealing open space beyond.

To Davi this was the Legionnaire all over again. The bridge destroyed in a Zhodani surprise attack that, for him, heralded the start of the war. In a trance he moved towards the nearest mass of debris, to check for casualties. Hegeh held him back, shaking his head inside his helmet.

Davi snapped back alert. He nodded to Hegeh and over the radio said “Let’s get to the central computer and find out what the logs say.”

They moved around the deck until they reached the computer room. It was a fair sized room made to seem diminutive by being nestled up behind the ship’s structural members and protected by a triple layer of reinforced hull armour. It appeared unscathed. A simple mechanical door, much like that found in submarines of old, gave them access.



Inside was dark and cramped. Banks of status boards and monitors, purporting to tell the condition of the ship, covered every centimetre of wall space. Most were dark. The main console was on, but its sight dismayed them. A large glyph, the letter omega, dominated the screen. Underneath was written simply “Program Omega: complete.”

The Droyne, Smyuetx, pushed forward. “What does it mean?” she squeaked, her voice tinny on the suit radios.

“It’s a security protocol.” replied Grey. “It means that all the volatile memory has been secure-wiped.”

“All the memory’s gone?” asked Smyuetx.

“Well, the operating programs are still there, the basic stuff we need to run the ship. They’re all hardwired. But there are no logs. Nothing to explain what happened.” Grey paused, then “Ugh! And the nav. charts will be gone, too!”

Smyuetx was puzzled, “Why I not know this?”

Grey smiled at her, “It’s not exactly a secret, but if you are not a bridge officer, why should you?”

“At least they had time to start Omega,” interrupted Davi, “Maybe most of them had time to evacuate. Lets press on, I want to check the Captain’s stateroom and the senior officers’ wardroom before we rejoin the others.” He looked at the group. There were too many in too tight a formation. “Right. Li, Hegeh, and Hasaan: you’re on me. The rest of you hold here. Grey, you’re ‘Top Hat’ until I return. And remember: there were hostiles on board, maybe still are, so stay alert”

Davi consulted the personal computer strapped to his arm. It was building up a map as they moved. From what he had so far he made a guess as to where to go next and the four of them moved off in that direction.

Away from the damaged section the lights were working normally and it was a short distance through the senior officers’ quarters to reach the Captain’s stateroom. More than a mere stateroom, the Captain of a cruiser rated a palatial suite of private rooms, including a day room, an office with

antechamber, and a private bedroom. Davi hoped there might be some clue here, not affected by the Omega protocol.

The antechamber was quickly discounted ... a small collection of chairs, fastened to the deck, made this little more than a waiting room. The office was likewise soon passed ... the workstations here displayed the Omega symbol, and the data tile shredder was efficient. The group next moved on to the day room, a private den in which the ship's Captain could relax when off duty. Here they found an expensive-looking sofa and matching reclining chairs, made from some antique leather well oiled, a small but up-market holovid display and a stack of tiles.

Hasaan picked up the tiles and flipped through them. "They are all entertainment tiles, no personal data." he reported. "There's some good ones here ... hmm ... a couple of episodes of 'Pirates of the Blood Asteroids' I haven't seen, 'Extreme Point', 'The Shark Has No Teeth' -"

"Mr Hasaan?" said Davi, not really asking a

question.

“Sorry, Sir.” said Hasaan hastily returning the tiles to the table as if holding something hot. The pile collapsed sending several spinning to the floor.

Davi glanced at Li. Suddenly, over Li’s shoulder he saw a figure standing in the doorway of the bedroom. Davi’s hand flashed to the gun at his side, the thick gloves getting in the way of his fingers as they tried to get into the right position. He was still fumbling to hold the gun properly as his arm raised it into the line of sight to fire. Li’s eyes opened wide, first in surprise, then in horror as he realised Davi was looking at something behind him. Li lurched to one side, out of the line of fire, spinning to face the threat as he went.

Davi froze, arm outstretched, the sights of his gun locked on his own reflection in the full-length bedroom wall mirror. Heart pumping wildly and ears ringing, he focused for a moment of returning his breathing to normal. Finally he exhaled. “Vech!” he spat out emphatically.

“Yes. Thank you so much for that.” said

Hasaan sarcastically, and that broke the tension. Davi chuckled and Li grinned in relief.

Hegeh, who'd stood watching the whole time, asked "You do remember there is no ammunition in that gun?"

Davi winced. He'd reacted blindly without thought.

"Act, don't react." admonished Hegeh in his role as Krohm.

Davi holstered the weapon and they moved into the bedroom. The room was dominated by the double bed, but its style was surprising. The bed itself was covered in rich silks of red and gold. While above it hung a rainbow of pastel-coloured veils: pinks and greens and yellows and blues. They draped across the bed like ... like ... Davi wasn't sure like what.

"This is a Captain's bed?" asked Li, not taking his eyes off it.

"Yeah" replied Davi hesitantly. He was equally mesmerised.

"Okay." responded Li, even more hesitantly.

There seemed little else to say.

“What is wrong with you two?” asked Hasaan completely unfazed. He brushed past them and opened the bedside cabinet. He rummaged for a moment and then stood up holding an orange mission pack wrapper.

A mission pack was a specialised computer tablet. It had no tile reader but its integral memory would hold instructions, maps, and related data to the current mission. They were usually kept in orange heavy-duty all-weather canvas bags. Hasaan held this one open and Davi and Li peered inside: empty.

They all exchanged glances. “This is starting to bug me, now.” commented Davi. “There have got to be some answers somewhere on this damn ship.”

“The officers’ wardroom?” asked Li.

“The officers’ wardroom.” confirmed Davi, though he was beginning to think it was a long shot.

They traipsed out and Davi led them round until they reached the senior officers’ wardroom. It was essentially a private dining room for the senior

officers of the ship. There they could either relax, or discuss ship's business over a meal. The sight that greeted Davi was far from this civilised image. As the twin doors slide aside the interior lights came on illuminating a scene more in keeping with something seen in a charnel house.

“Zelodeous protect us!” exclaimed Davi, shocked.

The room was about five meters wide by nine meters long with the doorway situated at one end. A large polished wood dining/conference table was at its centre surrounded by a dozen or so chairs. There was a food preparation and heating bay at the opposite end. Around the walls hung commemorative plaques and 2D pictures of inspirational events from the Imperial military past. But the floor was obscured by a mass of blood and flesh. It was a single amorphous mass composed, so Davi estimated, of around 30 bodies, but torn apart and heaped together so that it was impossible to say where one body ended and another one started. There were a few body parts on the table

too, a human leg and several organs, and copious amounts of blood had been thrown against the walls.

The four of them stood rooted to the spot for a long time, no one daring to breathe a word. Eventually Davi found his voice. “Doctor, have you ever seen anything like this before?”

Li shook his head, still struck dumb.

“I have.” said Hasaan.

Slowly they all looked at Hasaan in surprise.

“Well, sort of.” he amended, “‘Extreme Point’ had a scene like this in one of the early episodes, but it was cut for being excessively graphic and unrealistic. I saw it on a documentary about the show. The episode story was about a guy with uncontrollable psionic abilities and the Ine Givar’s attempt to steer his destructive impulses for their own ends.”

“Anyone else see anything like this,” asked Davi “Apart from in a cheap holodrama?”

No one had.

Davi turned back to the doctor. “What could



have caused this?”

Li shrugged weakly.

Hasaan reached down and retrieved something from the gore. The others watched in horrid fascination as he tried to clean it. After a moment he declared “Nine mil’ round.”

Davi said “Yes, no doubt they were able to fire off a few rounds before whatever happened ... happened”

“This one’s not been fired.” said Hasaan holding it out for Davi to see.

Davi knew they had precious little ammunition. “Errm -” he said hesitantly, “Any more?”

He grimaced as Hasaan got on his knees and started to sift the fleshy mess with his gloved fingers. To try and take his mind off this he again turned to Li.

“Well, doctor? I didn’t get an answer.”

Li took a deep breath. “Most of the injuries are consistent with extreme G forces or acceleration. How that could have happened in here I don’t know. And it doesn’t explain how nothing else in

here was affected, nor does it explain body parts actually on the table.” He pondered for a moment. “Perhaps some kind of organic acid that only eats skin and connective tissue ... followed afterwards by someone deliberately moving some of the parts.”

Hasaan froze in his gory search and examined his gloves. “This acid, Doctor, could it eat suit material?”

Li surveyed the mass again. “Sure, I guess. If that’s what it was. I don’t see any clothes.”

Hasaan deposited his find ... four bullets so far ... on the table and tried to wipe the blood off his gloves as best he could.

“Okay,” said Davi, “I’ve seen enough. More than enough, in fact. Let’s get back to the others.”

He picked up the bloody bullets from the table and slipped them in a pouch on his equipment belt ... they’d need to be cleaned before they could be used. They backed out of the room and started to walk back the way they’d come.

As they reached the damaged bridge area they saw the others had not been idle. The two Vargr

were searching the debris and passing anything interesting to the Droyne for closer examination. Grey was standing back and coordinating, and Kralik seemed to be on lookout duty. “They’re back.” said Kralik simply.

Grey turned round to Davi. “Sir. While you were gone we -” she stopped as she caught sight of Hasaan and his bloody gloves.

“Yes?” prompted Davi.

“We, er, we thought we’d search the bridge workstations for any data tiles.”

“And?”

“Nothing yet.” Grey paused. “And you, Sir?”

“Some dead bodies, but no answers.” he replied.

Davi considered their situation while the others stood expectantly. “Right, we might find an undamaged tile in that lot,” he nodded to the debris, “but if there is one it could take some time. Meanwhile we’re vulnerable. There could still be something hostile on this ship and we are practically unarmed. We’re also blind without internal sensors. So priority one has got to be to

restore basic systems. Hopefully Tam will have reached Engineering by now and will be able to get power back online. Rather than mooch around the ship until we blunder into whatever it is I think we should all get to Engineering and we secure that. With internal systems back online we can see what we're dealing with." He looked at the gash in the outer hull. "And we'll be quicker if we walk along the outside."

There seemed to be general agreement and they all moved towards the gash.

\* \* \*

**Location: Jewell Naval Base, Jewell**

**Date: 124-1116**

The rain had finally stopped and a golden light shone brightly through the grimy window of the little office. But Sir David Tam had no appreciation of that. He eyed the data tile before him as if it were something he'd just found stuck to

the bottom of his shoe. “I don’t understand.” he said.

“You have been assigned to the frozen watch.” repeated Commander Minka. She nudged the data tile, which contained his new orders, a little closer to him.

“Has my performance been unsatisfactory?” he asked, sounding puzzled and annoyed in equal measure.

Minka signed. Efatian nobility could be so touchy sometimes. “On the contrary, Sir Tam, you are an excellent officer. While it is rare that the Frozen Watch is ever used, when it is we need exceptional officers to take charge in a crisis.”

Tam stared out the window for a long moment. Calculating.

“If nothing happens you wake up with a year’s extra pay in your account.” Minka went on, “But if something does happen, then that can really put a shine to someone’s service record.” She glanced at his record on her terminal: five or six years of command experience but he was still only a

lieutenant. Maybe this was the key.

“The money means nothing. Will I be able to choose my own team?” Tam asked.

“What? No, no. It doesn’t work like that.” She said, a little flustered despite herself. Where had he got that idea from? “You’ll be put in a pool along with others here at the base. A computer will select the optimal mix based on ability and the type of ship. Besides, if you are needed you won’t know in advance how many of the original crew will have survived.”

“But I will take charge of the situation and save the ship.” Tam said, almost to himself.

“The stuff of legends,” she said. She knew she had him.

“Very well, I accept.” said Tam, sweeping up the data tile. He snapped off a smart salute, wheeled on the spot, and marched out.

“The base med centre, this afternoon at 1300,” she called out to his retreating form. She stared at the closed door for a while feeling bemused.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 41, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (3 hours after awakening)**

The maintenance hatch fell out and Tam emerged onto the deck holding the revolver in one hand and a flashlight in the other. The emergency lights were working here and he could see the supervision station ahead of him, its reinforced sweeping observation windows were dark revealing nothing. Either side were a series of small workshops. Several meters to his left and right were balconies beyond which he could see the tops of the two great fusion generators that were the still heart of the ship. He took a deep breath, the air was clean and, for the time being, fresh.

Padalecki stepped out behind him and offered a hand to assist Coltan. Malahyde and Ghraangk followed carrying toolkits from the Frozen Watch ready room.

“Well, Padalecki?” asked Tam, holstering his

gun.

“I’d like to start with a visual inspection of the generators before bothering with the diagnostics.” he said. “I suggest we focus on getting just one working for now.”

“Good. Any preference?”

Padalecki shrugged. “That one?” he said pointing to his right.

“The port generator it is.” accepted Tam.

They moved to the balcony overlooking the generator. It was a huge column of high tech machinery and pipes, about ten meters in diameter and nearly twice that tall, passing through a number of decks. Holding the railing they looked down, in the dim light they could make out little on the bottom deck far below them.

“It’s a big bugger.” remarked Ghraangk in a low guttural voice.

“Don’t think you can handle it, Ghraangk?” chuckled Malahyde.

“I can handle anything you can, ‘pinkie’.” growled Ghraangk angrily.



“Able Spacehand Ghraangk!” snapped Tam, “Do you want to be on report? You will show proper respect to Petty Officer Malahyde. Is that understood?”

Ghraangk jerked to attention as if on unseen wires. “Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. I meant nothing.”

Tam stared at Ghraangk for a long moment, the Vargr kept looking straight ahead not meeting his gaze. “Okay, Padalecki.” he said. “This is your show.”

“Er, yes, Sir.” said Padalecki. He glanced at the generator. “Malahyde, I need to inspect the cap ... find me a gangplank and a safety line. Ghraangk, you help him. Coltan, help me remove this safety rail.”

Malahyde and Ghraangk moved off in the direction of workshops. Coltan started to select some basic tools from one of the kits they’d brought with them.

“Ghraangk is a Vargr.” said Tam watching Padalecki. “They respect the dominant pack leader. You have to show them who’s the boss.

Now, explain to me what your plan of action is.” Tam gestured towards the generator.

“Yes, Sir. Well I want to make sure each major component shows no obvious signs of damage. Here at the cap we have the ignition module. Below that-” Padalecki explained the layout of the generator and its basic components.

When he was done Tam said, “Let's see if I've got this straight. To cold start this thing, assuming it's not damaged, you need CNO catalyst, a deuterium reserve, and enough of a charge in the ignition module.”

“And a fuel supply.” said Padalecki.

“And a fuel supply.” echoed Tam.

Meanwhile, Malahyde and Ghraangk approached the port row of workshops. The doors were all open and they entered the first one. It was obviously for electronic devices, there were test rigs and dozens of small draws of components lining the wall. Malahyde opened a cupboard and half-heartedly looked inside. “You know I didn't mean to get you into trouble back there.” he said without

looking round. “I was just joshing you.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” growled Ghraangk.

Malahyde looked up. “No, seriously, man.” He paused. He didn’t want to make an enemy of the Vargr. “Where you from, anyway?”

“Spirelle” grunted Ghraangk.

“Spirelle? Where’s that?”

“The Lunion subsector.”

“The Lunion subsector, huh? You got family there?” asked Malahyde trying to draw him out.

“I was an orphan. I never knew my parents, nor what became of them.”

“Oh, that’s rough, man.” said Malahyde sympathetically. “Well right now, on this ship, we’re your family. That makes me your brother. Anything you need ... you know?”

They moved to the next workshop. This one appeared to be a mechanical workshop. There were hooks and attachments on the walls for a variety of large tools ... all empty. One was even labelled ‘safety line’.

Ghraangk sucked up his determination and growled “And where are you from?”

“Me? I’m from Glisten.” said Malahyde. “Capital of the Glisten subsector. It’s an asteroid belt. Grew up on a station amongst spacers, belt miners, and staff from the local naval base.”

“And do you have family?” growled Ghraangk.

“Had. Past tense. Parents died in the war. They were beltters but got caught in a Zho raid.” said Malahyde. “Never was the marrying kind, so there’s no one else.”

“Then you also are an orphan, like me ... brother.” said Ghraangk.

Malahyde smiled at him as they moved to the next workshop.

Some time later, Malahyde and Ghraangk returned carrying a steel gangplank between them. It was six meters long but only half a meter wide.

“We couldn’t find a safety line.” said Malahyde. “Half the equipment’s missing. Maybe on the next deck down?”

Tam considered this. The truth was they still

had no idea what was going on, what dangers there might be onboard, and he was loathed to split up more than absolutely necessary. He looked at Padalecki.

“That’s okay.” said Padalecki, seeming to read Tam’s mind. “I can make do without.”

By now Coltan had removed a section of the balcony’s safety rail by herself and they all pitched in to manoeuvre the gangplank across the gap between the balcony and the top of the generator. It fell into place with a loud resounding clang that seemed to echo on into the depths. Tam hoped there was no one down there for now they’d clearly announced their presence.

Padalecki sorted out some electrical tools. He nimbly crossed the gangplank and grabbed a firm hold on some pipework. Now on the generator itself he clambered round until he reached a maintenance plate. He flipped it open and reached inside.

Coltan picked up some tools and joined him. Step by step the pair worked their way around the

structure moving lower as they went, calling to each other with technical jargon. Tam was reminded of kids on a climbing frame, they seemed oblivious of the dangers of a fall.

After awhile Tam realised they were going to have to go down to the next level if they were to stay with the pair of climbers. The other two engineers picked up the remaining tools and Tam led them back to the maintenance hatch they'd used to enter this deck.

And so it continued until, eventually, they all reached the base of the generator. Here, a maze of fuel pumps and pipes connected this generator to its twin on the starboard side. Tam and the others watched as Padalecki and Coltan reached the bottom and stepped off. They were both sweating and panting hard.

“Well ... the good news ... is there's no ... signs of damage.” gasped out Padalecki.

“And the bad news?” asked Tam.

“Don't know yet.” said Padalecki. “Need to run diagnostics ... check fluid levels.”

“Okay. Well, take a moment to catch your breath. You two have worked hard. Maybe the rest of us can help.”

Nodding, the pair of them sat on a nearby pipe. “Malahyde, can you check the catalyst?” asked Padalecki.

“Sure thing.” said Malahyde.

“And Ghraangk, can you check the deuterium reservoir?”

“Yes.” said Ghraangk.

“Right, Lieutenant. Let’s go check the controls.”

Padalecki got back to his feet, helped pull up Coltan, and the three of them moved off.

Tam was still uncomfortable about members of his team going off on their own, but by now he was impatient to restore power and he said nothing.

The computer controls were in a reinforced room three meters by five. Inside, Padalecki flipped the large switches to active the monitors. All the controls were designed to be usable by someone sealed inside a space suit. Within

moments the monitors and readouts came to life.

Tam watched as Padalecki and Coltan pressed large buttons that elicited more information. To his relief Malahyde and Ghraangk quickly showed up and reported that everything looked good.

“Ah, but that’s not good.” said Padalecki pointing at one of the readouts.

Tam looked but was none the wiser. “Report.” he snapped.

Padalecki replied, “The generator’s in good shape. We have CNO catalyst and a deuterium reserve. We can’t tell at the moment how much fuel there is onboard, but there looks like enough at least for short term operations. The problem is that it looks like the emergency power supply has been on for some time, the batteries are almost completely drained. There’s not enough power for the ignition module. So we can’t start up the generator.”

“What about the other generator?” asked Tam.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s on the same circuit.”

Tam digested this. “So what’s the answer?”



Padalecki and Coltan exchanged glances.  
“There isn’t one.” said Padalecki.

# 2 Company

**Location: Deck 69, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (4 hours after awakening)**

The hanger, where the ship's fighters were stored, was three decks tall ... the upper two were little more than gantries. The inner door of the massive fighter recovery airlock cycled open and Davi led the nine of them back inside the ship. It had been a strange trip, marching down the outside of the hull. The vents, radiators, sensor assemblies, and other protuberances, all in eerie starlight, created an alien landscape ... a close-up view of the ship not usually seen by most crewmen. Apart from the rent in the hull on the bridge deck there had been little sign of damage, combat related or

otherwise.

It was the starlight that had shocked them first. Instead of just a myriad of stars and the ethereal ribbon that was the Milky Way galaxy seen edge on, there was an impossible number of stars and the ethereal ribbon was a wall filling half the sky. No one spoke. The twilight of starlight had helped them navigate their expedition but its meaning chilled Davi's heart.

Davi had also been a little perturbed when they saw the external cradles for the fuel shuttles were empty. While a ship like the Bard Refuge could theoretically refuel by skimming the atmosphere of a gas giant for hydrogen fuel such operations were fraught with danger. Instead that role was delegated to four specialised shuttle craft that would ferry back and forth until the mother ship was satiated.

Here on the hanger decks there was air. The group removed their helmets and looked around. All three dimly-lit decks were given over entirely to the fighter hanger, there was machinery mounted

floor to ceiling for moving and parking scores of fighters. Except there were none here now.

“I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised they got all their fighters away before running the Omega protocol.” said Davi a little frustrated. “It’s just that it would have been nice to have had ... something.”

Doctor Li looked down into his helmet and said “Considering what we saw in the ward room I think we should be grateful that most of them seem to have gotten away.”

“Hmm.” Davi agreed absently.

They started to pick their way through the machinery towards the central core.

“What is that?” asked Smyuetx, pointing to one corner of the hanger.

They all looked. Half hidden behind wire and support beams was a single craft, a smallish cylinder with stubby wings standing on its tail. It had been partially disassembled and was still attached to a battery of diagnostic equipment.

“A light fighter, Rampart RF 128.” said Grey “I

guess one got left behind. Good eye, Smyuextx.”

“Yeah, but it ain’t exactly space worthy!” remarked Li.

“That’s probably why it was left.” said Davi. “Hegeh, do you think you can get it going again.”

“And go where?” Li’s voice was scornfully.

“What do you mean?” asked Smyuextx.

Li stared at the little Droyne and for a while nobody spoke. “Why don’t you tell her, Sir?”

Davi sighed. Evidently Smyuextx hadn’t realised the significance of what they’d seen. “All those stars out there, their configuration, it means only one thing:” he started. “We’re near the galactic core.”

Smyuextx looked from one to the other of them. After a moment she asked simply “Misjump?”

Davi was a little taken aback. He’d expected a bigger reaction, but he pondered her question doubtfully. He knew little of the inner workings of the hyperspace jump drive save what everybody knew from high school: that depending on the size of the engine and the amount of fuel available the

theoretical maximum distance of any one hyperspace jump was six parsecs. He'd heard of misjumps being greater than that but not by much. The galactic core was thousands of parsecs from known space. And since each jump took about seven days regardless of distance travelled, plus time in-between each jump to refuel, it was going to take a very long time to get back. Eventually all he could do was shrug.

“Let me get this straight.” said Hasaan. “There are fourteen of us, alone on a ship that normally has a crew of ... what, several hundred -ish? The ship is thousands of parsecs from home. The computer memory, including navigational charts and any explanation of what the hell is going on, has been wiped. The bridge has been destroyed and all the fighters are gone. Does that about sum it up?” Hasaan's voice had a faint edge of hysteria.

“No, you forgot about the dead Marine and the pile of mutilated bodies.” reminded Li. “And we only have two guns and almost no ammunition.”

“Okay, Doctor.” snapped Davi. “Hasaan, you

need to calm down.”

“But he’s right.” growled Tgeath. “We’re royally screwed!”

“Something stinks here.” agreed Rngoeuzl with a snarl. “And if there’s a hostile onboard we should be hunting it instead of sulking around in the dark.”

“Everybody calm down.” order Davi glared at them. “We’re not hunting anything until we’re better armed and in control.”

Tgeath snarled wordlessly.

Hegeh stepped forward and stood beside Davi. He rapped his vaothoi quarterstaff on the deck hard and the sharp crack, like a gunshot, compelled their attention. “We will find the enemy and rip his heart out, but at a time of our choosing not his.”

There was a sullen silence.

Davi looked back at Hegeh and quietly asked, “So, what do you think about that fighter?”

Hegeh shook his head, “Sorry, Sir. Not my speciality. Perhaps Chief Padalecki or one of the other engineers could do something.”

Davi nodded and looked back at the rest of the

group. “Now. Lieutenant Tam and the others are somewhere above us restoring power.” He continued in a louder voice. “In fact I would have expected something by now. So we’ll have to climb up the maintenance access way again, just like we did to get to the bridge, and see what’s keeping them.”

“Sir?” called out Grey.

“Yes, Sublieutenant?”

Grey pointed at a control panel on the wall. “This comms unit looks to be working. We might be able to raise the others on it.”

They all clustered around to see. It was a ubiquitous comms relay unit that would interface a short range radio on one deck with another on another deck via a fixed wire, thus allowing communication between decks through all that deck plating metal. Davi retrieved his hand computer and set it for a frequency scan. It soon locked into an open channel and he called Tam.

\* \* \*



**Location: Jewell Naval Base, Jewell**  
**Date: 122-1116**

Li looked down at the data tile in his hand. “The Frozen Watch?” he asked.

“That’s right, Doctor.” said Minka. “It should be fairly obvious to you why we need medical personnel, like yourself, in the Watch.”

“During a war, sure, I can see that. But this is peacetime, or it’s supposed to be, and there are a lot of places that need my expertise right now. Not sleeping for a year.” Li thought of Nurakita, an island on Efate where his hometown was. It had been a tropical paradise with its fishing boats and freedom. But it had also been a backwater, deprived of even basic medical supplies by the distant, yet oppressive, Efatian government, walled up in the ivory towers of glass and concrete and so very many people.

“You may be right, god knows the system isn’t perfect.” sighed Minka. “But did you know more than twenty percent of all Frozen Watch activations

are during so-called peacetime?”

“I could still do more good awake than in the Watch.” countered Li.

Minka cocked her head slightly. “It's not an age thing is it?”

“What?” asked Li, alarmed.

“You are 43. And still a frontline doctor.” went on Minka. “Many doctors your age would either be settling down with a small practice somewhere, or running a department in a hospital facility.”

“Well you're no spring chicken yourself, if it comes to that.” spat back Li.

Minka seemed not to notice the insult. “You know we have an out-placement contract with First Medical, they're a company that have been setting up and running medical facilities linked to starports across the quadrant. Their quota is full for now, but I could get you onto the waiting list, if ...”

The unfinished sentence hung in the air.

“If I play ball.” finished Li sourly.

“There are no guarantees, of course, but this would go a long way to proving you can be a team

player.”

Li felt sick. This was just like the condescending attitude of the Efatian urbanities towards the ruralites. What he was trying to get away from ... what he was running away from. He considered ramming the data tile down her throat. Yet at the same time she was right. What was he going to do when his enlistment ended? The Navy had become his home. The Navy and the ubiquitous Brubek's bars that popped up in every other startown he'd encountered. The fires of his anger receded. “Done.” he said simply.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 46, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (4 hours after awakening)**

“That's unacceptable, Chief.” said Tam. “This is a sixty thousand ton ship. There have to be other sources of energy onboard you can use to start the generator. Could we rig up a big enough solar

panel, perhaps?”

“I don’t know what to say, Sir.” responded Padalecki. “I think we’ll have to send out a distress call and hope there’s someone friendly around who can assist us.”

“What about ...” started Coltan before lapsing back into silence.

“What?” asked Tam.

“What about the shuttles?” she continued. “Doesn’t the Azhanti class carry a bunch of refuelling shuttles?”

Tam stared at her uncomprehendingly.

“If they have generators we could get those going.” continued Coltan. “They’d be easier to start because they’re smaller ... and use them to recharge the master batteries.”

“Enough to restart the main generator?”

“Yeah, more than enough.” jumped up Padalecki excitedly. “The difficult part will be running a cable that far. I’m not sure we have anything suitable onboard ... we may have to cannibalise something.”

“No, man.” interrupted Malahyde getting equally animated. “The ship’s power distribution network can do most of that. It’s already rigged to get power to the shuttles for maintenance. All we need to do is bypass a few junctions and cutouts-”

“And reverse the flow ... out of the shuttles and into the batteries.” finished Padalecki.

Tam was a little taken aback by the sudden rejuvenation of his team’s moral, but pleased none the less. “Let’s do it.” he commanded.

Padalecki stepped forward and started to give out assignments. “Coltan? Check the main breakers. Malahyde? Find a suitable circuit we can use and isolate it from the rest. Ghraangk? Run a patch from said circuit to the battery return line. I’m going to write a command sequence for the generator restart.” He paused for a moment. “Sir? When we’re ready here we’ll need to go the fuel shuttle.”

Tam nodded and everyone moved off on their assignments.

Several minutes later and Tam was beginning to

wonder if he should be doing anything when his hand computer beeped at him. It was an incoming communication. A little surprised he accepted the transmission.

Davi's face appeared on the tiny screen and Davi said "Ah, good. Lieutenant, the bridge was damaged so we're now down on the hanger deck, er-" Davi looked away for a second, hunting a sign, "Deck 69. What's your report?"

Tam quickly brought him up to speed.

"Well, you can forget the fuel shuttles." said Davi. "They're gone. But we might have an alternative."

"Good timing. What is it?" asked Tam.

"There's a damaged fighter here. All wired up as well."

"Damaged? Damaged how? Can you power it up?" Tam was dubious.

"I don't know." admitted Davi. "We could probably do with an engineer down here."

"Okay. I'll send someone." Tam looked round at his team. He was pleased with Padalecki, and

Padalecki and Coltan seemed to work well together so he didn't want to split them up. "Malahyde." he said, deciding.

"Fine." said Davi. "But don't send him alone. We've seen evidence there were hostiles aboard. Maybe still are."

"What kind of evidence?" asked Tam.

"A number of dead crewmen. No real clue as to what's going on so stay vigilant. Who can you send?"

"The dog-" Tam caught himself, "Vargr can go with him." He mentally kicked himself. He glanced round but Ghraangk seemed not to have noticed the slip. He was starting to feel tired he realised. It had only been a few hours since they had been revived but cold berths take their toll. They'd all need to rest soon. Davi was saying something so he refocused on the little hand computer's screen.

"-good when the power's back up. Moral is starting to get a bit frayed around the edges."

"Yes. Our blood-sugar levels should be

dropping. Finding food will shortly be a priority. Tam out.” Tam disconnected the call. He wondered what Davi’s leadership skill was. Just because Davi had the senior rank didn’t necessarily mean that he was experienced at command, whereas Tam had been raised to lead from birth. He already felt cheated at not being in charge, if he had to nurse maid an amateur as well ...

“Okay, people.” he called out in a loud voice. “New plan.”

He had their attention.

“It seems the fuel shuttles are not an option, but we have a fighter on deck 69 that we can use instead. Malahyde and Ghraangk, I want you two to go down and set it up at that end. The rest of us will keep work on this end. Any questions?”

Everyone looked at each other and Malahyde shrugged. Then he and Ghraangk picked up their tools and headed for the maintenance hatch they’d arrived through.

As they left Tam tried to remember what he knew about this class of ship. There would be a



hydroponics section somewhere onboard, where food was grown from waste products. Would it still be operational, he wondered? Packaged food supplies were a better option in the short term. They'd have to check each crew quarters deck.

\* \* \*

**Location: Island of Nurakita, Efate**

**Date: 140-1086**

Li took another swig from the half empty bottle of brandywine and let his face mask slip back into place. He was sitting on the jetty of the little fishing harbour near his home, his bare legs dipping into the sea water, the sun blazing down. This was where he always came when he was being truant from school. He wore cut-off jeans, light t-shirt, and an oxygen mask. Efate's atmosphere was low in oxygen, so a mask was required when outside. Li didn't mind, his mask was good for a couple of hours more and he had other things on his mind.

His similarly dressed companion, a girl from school called Judith, reached over and took the bottle from his grasp. She pulled her mask aside, flashed him a coquettish smile, and brought the bottle to her mouth. His teenage hormones surged as he watched her moist lips enveloped the end of the bottle and she poured the contents over her tongue. Her bare arms and legs were bronzed and limber.

“So tell me about Morris.” she said, passing the bottle back.

“Er ... what?” said Li, his fantasies momentarily derailed.

“Your new uncle.” She giggled through her mask.

“He seems okay.” Li looked out at the boats bobbing on the water. “He was a doctor in the Imperial Marines. Retired now.”

“So why’d he want to retire here for? It’s so boring.”

“To be near family I guess. And Dad could use the company since Mom-” But he didn’t want to

talk about that. Not here, not now.

They sat in silence, the mood of the lazy afternoon broken.

Judith splashed the sea with her toes and complained “There’s nothing to do around here.” Then, more wistfully, “When I’m done with school I want to travel the stars.”

“I’m done with school right now.” said Li, snaking an arm around her waist.

“I bet you are.” she said, playfully batting him away. “So, tell me, what are you going to do?”

Li lay back on his elbows, enjoying the sun on his face. “I figured I might join up, be a Marine.” he said.

“You? Taking orders from somebody? I’d like to see that.” she laughed, reaching for the bottle again.

He gave her a jab in the ribs and she squealed. “And what about you? What’s your great plan to escape the tedium of Nurakita?”

“Oh I’m going to be a holoivid star.” she said with conviction. “I hear it’s easy to get a job on

screen on Regina, they're always looking for a fresh face." She drained the bottle. "Got another one?" she asked.

Li got to his feet. "Yeah, I'll go get it." He glanced out to sea. "There's a fishing boat coming in."

"Uh huh." She replied lazily.

He walked back along the jetty to where he'd left his bike and their things. Just as he got there he heard Judith's agonised scream. He turned quickly and saw the fishing boat had arrived ... and Judith still had her legs dangling over the side of the jetty.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 57, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (4.5 hours after awakening)**

Like a word repeated over and over loses its meaning the repetitive cycle of going deck by deck was starting to get to Malahyde. The central core

was divided into a series of small compartments, an airtight hatch and a ladder between each deck.

Check pressure in next compartment. Open floor hatch. Descend ladder. Close hatch behind. Repeat.

If not for the deck number stencilled on the wall he might think they were trapped in a never ending nightmarish time loop. He paused for a rest, slumping against the wall and Ghraangk dropped beside him. They'd gone eleven decks, not even half way, but it felt more like fifty. Why did he feel so weak? The Vargr's mouth was open and he was clearly panting.

“How are you doing, Ghraangk?” he asked.

“Don't worry about me, brother.” growled the Vargr with a sneer. “I can match you deck for deck. But you look beat. Maybe you need a little nap time.”

Malahyde gave a half laugh and looked around. Catching the Vargr's expression he asked “Hey, man. What's eating you?”

“Man?” echoed Ghraangk. He glared at

Malahyde. “Well the Lieutenant’s a racist, and I’m not too sure about you, either.”

“What are you talking about?” Malahyde was shocked.

Again Ghraangk hesitated for a moment. “When Lieutenant Tam was on the comms link he referred to me as a doggie. Thought I hadn’t heard, but I did.”

“Aww, crap! Well I don’t know about the Lieutenant but I don’t feel that way.”

“No?”

“No.” insisted Malahyde.

“Yet sometimes you call me ‘man’. Maybe I’m an exception in your eyes, an honorary human, not like the other ‘doggies’.”

There was silence as Malahyde and Ghraangk stared at each other. “Bullshit!” spat out Malahyde eventually.

“Shh...” said Ghraangk.

“What?” asked Malahyde, confused.

“Shh!” said Ghraangk more urgently, tilting his head back and forth.

Malahyde listened, straining to hear anything.

Ghraangk whispered “There’s someone here. I can hear them moving about on the other side of this wall.”

Malahyde felt the hairs on his neck prickle and his throat was suddenly dry. With wide eyes he watched the Vargr silently select a wrench from their toolkit.

“What are you doing?” whispered Malahyde, shaking his head.

“Looking for answers.” whispered back Ghraangk as he slid over to the maintenance panel that gave access to the rest of the deck.

“Maybe there are some survivors from the crew onboard.” whispered Malahyde hopefully. “Or maybe there’s another Frozen Watch section.”

Ghraangk ignored him and carefully removed the bolts securing the panel one by one. Once released the panel popped out silently and he carefully lowered it, peering through into the corridor beyond.

What he saw was like nothing he’d seen before.

Not more than a few meters away stood a figure. No skin, per se, but a mound of what looked like exposed flesh arranged in a vaguely humanoid shape about two meters tall. Its muscles were permeated by masses of tendrils that writhed and pulsated obscenely, each one moved seemingly independent of its brethren. Somehow it sensed their presence and turned to look at them ... except it had no face! There were no eyes or ears or other discernable features, yet it clearly saw them. The thing started to lumber towards them, its legs thumping the deck hard with each step.

Ghraangk yipped and hurriedly pulled the panel back into place. He held it there and barked at Malahyde “We are leaving. Now!”

Malahyde needed no prompting. He quickly opened the floor hatch as something crashed into the panel, distorting it noticeable out of shape. He dropped the toolkit down and jumped through. A second forceful blow landed on the panel, further buckling it and half knocking down Ghraangk. The Vargr abandoned the panel and dove head first



through the hatch, Malahyde quickly closing it behind him. It was almost completely closed when a mass of alien flesh pressed into the gap and started to force its way through. Malahyde looked down but Ghraangk had already got the next hatch open and was going through it. Malahyde gave up trying to close the hatch above and slid down the ladder to the next deck. It was a chase.

After they'd rapidly descended a few more decks Malahyde found his voice. "What is that thing?" he called out to Ghraangk.

"Unfriendly." replied the Vargr, grimly opening the next hatch.

\* \* \*

**Location: Island of Nurakita, Efate**

**Date: 140-1086**

Li was scared. He'd witnessed the accident that injured his friend, Judith, and had helped get her to Morris's house. His jeans and top were stained

with her blood. Now he stood in the middle of Morris's living room.

"That's it?" demanded Li angrily.

Morris sat drinking his beer, staring into space. "What do you want from me?"

"She should be in a hospital. Her legs are crushed and all you can do is give her first aid."

"I did a damn sight more than 'first aid', boy!" snapped back Morris defensively. "I've repaired her legs, the next 24 hours will show if that was enough."

"But they have better facilities in a hospital." insisted Li.

"That's as maybe, but they won't take her."

"Because she's not an urbanite." spat Li.

Morris took another swig of beer and said nothing.

"They'd deny her proper medical care for that?"

"Look, it is what it is. Sometimes you just have to make do with what's at hand and quit belly-aching."

Despite not having grown up on Efate Morris

seemed to understand and accept the rampant class discrimination between the urban city dwellers and the rural inhabitants more readily than Li. Or perhaps being older meant he was tired of fighting against people's prejudices.

Li's face was a grimace. There was so much he wanted to say he thought he might explode but he didn't have the words. He just stood there silently shaking.

Morris finally looked up at him as if seeing him for the first time. "Let it go, Morgan." his voice softening. "Judith's got a good chance thanks to you."

"Yeah, but those *jävla* 'termites'-" began Li.

"As you go through life you'll encounter far worse, believe me." said Morris putting down his beer. He picked up another bottle, cracked the seal and handed it to Li.

They both drank in silence.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 69, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (5 hours after awakening)**

Davi and the others were sat around the deck a short distance from the fighter, resting.

“You know,” started Li, “We’re going to have to get food soon.”

“I know, Doctor.” sighed Davi. “But once the power is up we’ll be able to use internal sensors to find any hostiles. Until then it’s too dangerous.”

“Hmmm...” responded Li, lapsing back into silence.

After a while Li looked round. “Hey, Hegeh. You’re some kind of priest on your homeworld? A holy man or Buddha or something, right?”

“A monk.” confirmed Hegeh cautiously.

“Well why don’t you tell us something about your religion.”

“Are you a religious man?” asked Hegeh.

“No, just bored. Figured it might pass the time, is all.”

“Doctor.” called out Davi. “Try to show a little

respect.”

“Absolutely. But if ‘Friar Tuck’ here has the secret of eternal life I think it’s only fair he shares it with the rest of the group.”

Davi opened his mouth to snap at Li but was interrupted by Hegeh. “It’s okay, sir.”

“I would like to hear, also.” said Smyuex

Hegeh looked round and saw he had everyone’s attention. “I, like the Lieutenant Commander here, believe in a religion called ‘Wakshe’. In Wakshe we believe in an afterlife, or heaven, and to enter heaven you must pass a powerful supernatural being, or god, who decides who is righteous and worthy and who is not. However, there are many gods and each one has a different set of principles. Now only one god will be in ascendance at any one time, so only one set of principles are important at any one time, but which can and does change. When I was growing up Chaarni was in ascendance. Chaarni promoted enlightenment through exploration and the pursuit of truth. Then, at about the turn of the century,

Zelodeous came to the fore. Zelodeous promotes piety through self-reliance, anti-materialism, hard work, and self-sacrifice for the good of the community.”

“And how long will he be in charge?” asked Grey. “It is a ‘he’ isn’t it?”

“Zelodeous is a ‘he’, yes.” continued Hegeh, “As for how long he will be in ascendance, no one knows. A council of religious academics, whose job it is to study the holy writings, will make an announcement when the time is right. They are also the centre of the world government.”

“Well ain’t that a cosy deal.” smirked Li. “Your leaders change their minds on something and can put it down to a new god rather than a political u-turn.”

“Theoretically true.” conceded Hegeh, “But ‘political u-turns’ don’t have the same fallout they seem to have on other worlds. Policy making has a more scientific approach rather than just be the by-product of a popularity contest.”

“Yeah, well my homeworld ain’t a democracy

either. Our ‘leaders’ are born and bred for the role.”

“Yet they still face credibility issues over major policy changes?” asked Hegeh rhetorically.

“Hey, I thought we were talking religion. How come we’re talking politics?”

“On my world they are the same thing.”

Before anyone could continue there was the clang of a door being flung open and Malahyde and Ghraangk burst into the hanger. They half ran half staggered over to the group, obviously exhausted.

“Behind ... behind us.” gasped Malahyde. “Something alien ... chased us.”

Everyone immediately looked at the doorway through which the pair had emerged. Davi stood up and slid his gun out, flicking off the safety in one smooth movement and aiming at the doorway. Hegeh also stood up, his vaothoi at the ready. There was a long moment of silence in which everyone strained to hear any sound over Malahyde and Ghraangk’s panting.

“Thank you so much!” said Hasaan sarcastically,

suspecting a practical joke.

“No, man-” started Malahyde. “No. There was something behind us.”

Davi relaxed his stance slightly and pointed his gun at the roof ... but kept staring at the doorway.

“Okay, what did you two see? Report.”

“We were half way down-” started Malahyde.

“Deck 57.” interjected Ghraangk.

“And we stopped for a moment.” continued Malahyde.

“And I heard something moving.”

“So we opened the maintenance panel out onto that deck and there was this, this thing-”

“Large, humanoid-” Ghraangk flailed his arms trying to convey the size.

“Unlike anything I’ve ever seen before.”

“An air of malice.”

“And it chased us.” finished Malahyde.

Davi asked “A large humanoid alien. Can’t you describe it any better than that?”

Ghraangk pondered this and replied “Think of a giant human with his skin turned inside out. A sort



of shambling mound of writhing flesh.”

“Er ... right ...” said Davi contemplating this. “We need those internal sensors. We need the power back on.”

Grey jumped up. “Come see our new toy.” she said to Malahyde and Ghraangk as she walked over to the fighter craft.

Malahyde picked up their tool kit and the pair followed her.

Davi turned to Hegeh and said “We better secure that doorway as best we can.”

Next to the fighter Malahyde ran an appraising look over it. “Well looks like a straight forward ‘Rampart’ single-seater. I wonder what’s wrong with her.”

“A problem with the drive.” responded Ghraangk.

Malahyde looked at his Vargr friend. “How’d you figure that?” he asked.

“Look where the diagnostic cables are attached.” replied Ghraangk pointing.

Malahyde and Grey both looked and saw that

the engineering equipment attached to the stubby little fighter only connected to its rear section. Malahyde gave a begrudging shrug and stepped aside to let the Vargr forward.

Ghraangk stood besides the craft and started to follow the cables with his hands. As he traced each cable to its end deep in the bowels of the fighter he muttered to himself. "... rear gyro compensator circuit ... port thrust constriction control ... main thruster cross feed ...” And with each named assembly a diagnostic cable fell to the deck.

When he was done he turned to Malahyde and Grey and said “No real clue what the problem was, they had the whole engine pretty much wired up. But the good news is there was nothing on the power plant. For our purposes she should be good to go.”

The cockpit, a couple of meters above them, was already open and Grey looked around for a ladder or something. There wasn't anything to hand but before she could comment she felt Malahyde take a strong grip of her belt and the collar of her

uniform.

“Excuse me, Sir.” he said, and in one fluid motion lifted her above his head, arms locked straight.

She squawked in surprise. It felt precarious but from that height she was able to wiggle into the fighter pilot’s seat. Once in she was able to boot up the onboard computer and run some simple diagnostics on the power plant. Not seeing anything untoward she called out “All green by the board.”

There was a slight delay while Malahyde and Ghraangk ran an extension cable from a nearby junction box into the guts of the fighter. But when they called out “Okay” she ignited the power plant and the fighter hummed with life.

Meanwhile Devi and Hegeh had been looking at the doorway. They’d actually moved further and had reached the maintenance compartment at the ship’s core. The hatches both up and down were both closed and they stood for a moment trying to hear any movement. There was no way to lock the

hatches so eventually they retreated and closed the panel that led to the rest of the deck.

Davi looked at Hegeh and said “Krohm, am I failing this crew? I can’t see how this is going to play out.”

Hegeh flinched at the sound of his religious title but when he looked back at Davi he saw the suppressed self-doubt on his face. He thought for a moment then said “Remember your parables? *The present is made possible by the ghosts of the past. And because there is a present there will be a future. The past, therefore, is where the future begins.*”

“Meaning?”

Hegeh continued “We were in cold berths when this all started. And the Omega protocol erased all the records. Which means we don’t know what the past is. So how could you possibly be expected to know the future. That is not a failing on your part, it’s just the way it is. You’re doing fine.”

“I almost wish someone had betrayed us. If we were following ‘The Ordeal of Tricore’ at least I’d

know what to expect.”

“Be careful of what you wish for.” admonished Hegeh.

“I said ‘almost’.”

Davi grinned to himself. Nothing had changed but he found having someone quote scripture at him oddly reassuring. He wondered why Hegeh was so reluctant to be Krohm. “Come on, we’d best be getting back.” he said.

\* \* \*

**Location: Island of Nurakita, Efate**

**Date: 039-1088**

The air in the hut was quiet and still. The only light came from the open doorway. The only sounds were the faint hiss of the oxygen compressor, and the breathing of the two occupants. Morris lay on a cot in the middle of the room, each shallow breath was a struggle. He was old, he was dying, and he knew. He turned his head

towards the teenager standing beside the cot and tried to smile.

“So, Morgan Li, have you come to see an old marine off on his final mission?” he asked slowly.

Li didn't know what to say. Eventually he said simply “Don't go.”

“Not my choice, boy. Got my orders from the Almighty himself.”

“But we need you.” said Morgan, “I need you.”

Morris smiled again, gathering strength. “No, boy. Its time you went out into the universe and find out who you are.”

Li said nothing but stared out the open door. Eventually he looked back and said “I want to be a Marine like you.”

The old man struggled to a half sitting position. “I'm also a doctor. You could be too.” he said urgently. “The universe has too many warriors, be a healer not a fighter.”

“How can I afford med school?” shot back Li, miserably.

“I know you. If you put your mind to it you'll

find a way.” Morris collapsed back into the pillows. “Your biggest problem, as I see it, is you. Your lack of belief in yourself. If you can overcome that then you’ll go far.”

There was a long silence and, after awhile, Li realised that Morris had stopped breathing. He was gone.

“It's not me I have difficulty believing in.” said Li to the corpse, “It's everyone else who lets me down.”

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 69, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (5 hours after awakening)**

Thud! ... and a set of lights came on. Thud! And another. Thud! And another.

A weak cheer went up from the group and Davi let out a sign of relief.

Davi pulled out his hand computer and called Tam.

“We’re getting power down here now. Good work, Lieutenant.” said Davi when Tam’s face appeared on the small screen.

“Thank you. I take it that Malahyde and Ghraangk’s little friend hasn’t made a reappearance?”

While they had been waiting Davi had called Tam to warn him about the encounter.

“No. I’m going to start a search using the ship’s internal sensors.” replied Davi. It occurred to him that Tam’s response was a little informal given that he was Tam’s superior.

“About that, we have another problem.” said Tam.

“Oh?”

“When the ship was abandoned the crew ran the Omega protocol.” continued Tam. “That protocol wiped out the access data file. None of our security permissions are valid.”

Davi touched the ident chip hanging on a chain round his neck. “Vech!” he sighed. He hadn’t the energy to say it with more emotion.



“Well, a lot of systems seem to have reset back to their baseline configuration. So you might still be able to do something.” Tam added.

“You’re familiar with this class of ship. Does it have a second bridge?”

Tam thought for a moment. “Yes, actually.” he said. “There’s an auxiliary bridge right on top of the generators. Deck thirty-, no, deck forty.”

“Okay. When we walked down the outside of the ship we didn’t see any sign of damage other than to the main bridge. So I’m going to assume that the auxiliary bridge is intact. Now that there’s power we’re going to take the central lifts there, hopefully avoiding our visitor.” decided Davi.

“I suggest our ‘Chief Engineer’ stays with the generator for now.” said Tam referring to Padalecki. “But he could probably use some security.”

“I guess that would be Malahyde and Ghraangk again. We could drop them off on the way.”

“What about Hegeh as well?” asked Tam.

Davi thought about it. He was reluctant to be

parted from the big Zhurph, the reminder of home was more comforting than he cared to admit. Besides he wanted to know why Hegeh had such an issue with being Krohm.

“What is it?” asked Tam.

“Nothing.” said Davi slightly flustered. “Er, yes. I’ll send Hegeh as well. Davi out.”

After shutting down the fighter and disconnecting it. The group wandered over to the main lifts. Watching their lethargic movements brought home to Davi the importance of getting some food soon. It was the fact that their appetites hadn’t kicked in that was deceptive, a side-effect of the cold berth suspension, but there was no mistaking their performance was really dropping.

The lifts appeared to be working normally and were large enough that one car could hold them all. Davi stood in front of the door with his sidearm, just in case. When they reached deck 46 they were greeted by Tam who, as Malahyde, Ghraangk and Hegeh got off, joined them for the trip to deck 40.

The auxiliary bridge was an exact duplicate of

the main bridge save for one important detail: this one was fully intact. There was a central raised dais with seven key workstations and a captain's chair in the centre. Outside of this there were about another thirty workstations laid out in various functional groups ... a combat information centre, environmental and damage control, flight control, and gunnery and fire control. A giant viewscreen occupied the stretch of wall where, on the main bridge, there had been the hole into space. Davi's ident chip was able to gain them access to the bridge but little else, all the controls remained obstinately unresponsive.

“I need to recreate an access file for us.” said Davi. “While I'm doing that the rest of you can spread out and search this deck for any food rations ... there are some officers' staterooms on this deck. Grey, you're with me. Collect everyone's ident chips and meet me in the computer room.”

For a moment no one moved and there was some hesitant shuffling of feet. Seeing this, Davi checked the safety of his gun and handed it to Tam.

“Go with them, Lieutenant. See they’re safe.” Tam accepted the weapon with a raised quizzical eyebrow.

In the end no one needed to worry. It took more than an hour for Davi and Grey to convince the backup computer that they, and the others, were part of the bridge crew, and to share this with the main computer on the other bridge. In that time the others were able to search the rest of the deck without incident. They accumulated a small hoard of food: several packets of tasteless food cubes, four ration bars, and a bottle of red wine.

With their new security status they were able to coax the bridge controls to activate and run a systems diagnostic. While they waited for it to run its course Davi divided their feast out evenly, keeping some aside for Padalecki and the ‘generator crew’ as he was beginning to think of them. Then they dined in relative silence, chasing the last morsels with a swallow of wine each, swigged from the bottle.

Later, from one of the environmental and

damage control workstations Grey called out, “Well, Sir. There’s good news and there’s bad news.”

“Let’s start with the bad news, Sublieutenant.” decided Davi.

“Okay. The bad news is that more than two thirds of the internal sensors are down. Probably just local cut-outs have tripped. That being the case they’re easy to fix ... just not from here.”

“And the good news?” asked Davi.

Grey looked up with grim satisfaction. “I’ve found our little friend.”

They crowded round Grey to look. There on the display was the creature Malahyde and Ghraangk had described: like a nest of snakes conspiring to give unnatural animation to a rotting cadaver. Despite the image on the display being barely 10 centimetres tall Davi found it nonetheless creepy.

After a long pause Davi managed to ask “Has anyone seen anything like that before?”

There was a general shaking of heads.

Davi looked back at the display. “What section is that in?”

“Deck 41, right below us.” replied Grey.

“And on top of the generator where the others are!” reminded Smyuetyx alarmed.

Davi punched the communicator button on the workstation. “Chief Padalecki, are you there?” he barked.

Padalecki’s face appeared on another display.

“There’s a hostile on deck 41” interrupted Davi before Padalecki could speak.

Padalecki instinctively looked up to the top of the generator.

“Where are your people?” asked Davi

“Er, we’re all here on 46.” Padalecki looked worried. No doubt the other two engineers had told them their story by now.

“I may have a solution.” volunteered Tam.

Davi turned to look at him. “What is it?”

“The main lift system runs the length of the ship. We can override the controls from here. If we can get that ... thing ... into one of the lift cars

we can take it down to the bottom deck and eject it into space.”

Davi considered this. “How do we eject it?”

“The floor of the lift car comes away.” explained Tam. “It's used to jettison rubbish.

Davi looked round at the others. “Anybody see a problem with this?”

He turned back to the workstation. “Chief, did you hear?”

“Yes. Sounds good to me.” Padalecki responded, still craning his neck for any sign of the intruder.

Davi turned back to Tam. “Looks like it's your show, Lieutenant.”

Tam sat down at another workstation and logged in using his newly upgraded ident chip. A few deft flourishes of his hands and the workstation reconfigured itself to the lift controls. A display showed the interior of the lift car. Within a moment it was on deck 41, its doors opened invitingly.

“How do we get it to go in?” demanded Doctor

Li, voicing the question in Davi's mind. His voice was a mix of contempt and exasperation.

Tam, ignoring Li's tone, considered this for a moment, unsure.

"Why don't you turn on the audio link in the lift?" suggested Smyuex.

Tam smiled and reached for a control.

"Now what?" asked Davi, wondering if the creature would be able to understand his words.

The response was immediate. The creature's head quickly rounded on the source of the sound and it started to ambulate towards the open lift, a juggernaut gaining speed. It crashed through the doorway with palpable rage, spreading itself wide to grapple with the lift car's supposed occupants. The lift door slid shut behind it and Tam sent the car hurtling down at speed. The creature, realising it had been tricked, started to smash itself against the door and walls, trying to escape its trap, and for a brief moment Davi worried it might succeed. At the end of its journey the lift car stopped abruptly and the floor fell away. With nothing to hold onto



the creature shot from view, falling into space.

Everyone cheered and looked extremely pleased.

Davi gave them a moment to enjoy the sense of victory before saying “Okay, okay. Let’s not let our guard down just yet. We’re assuming that’s the only one but we don’t know that for sure.”

“Thank you so much!” retorted Hasaan sarcastically. It had become his stock phrase. He gave a little shiver and rubbed his arm against the cold.

Davi mentally reviewed the situation.

“We’re going to have to sweep the ship, deck by deck, restoring systems and making sure we have no other intruders.” Davi decided. “Until that’s done no one should wander off on their own. In the meantime, Smyuetx, I want you to take the food rations down to Chief Padalecki and the others.”

Smyuetx dispatched, Davi strolled over to the Captain’s workstation in the centre of the raised dais in the middle of the room. He sat in the wide chair and logged in to workstation. “Let’s ensure

there are no immediate external threats.” he ordered.

The two Vargr, Tgeath and Rngoeuzl, turned out to be the sensor experts. They logged in at their own workstations and soon the Bard Refuge’s passive EMS arrays were scanning the heavens, pulling in every stray photon to paint a picture of their surroundings. Gravimetric sensors contributed their data. The computer annotated results formed in the large viewscreen on the wall for all to see.

“A simple system.” growled Tgeath. “A medium-sized, habitable planet fairly close to us. Looks like it’s got water. I’m also detecting some surface radioactivity but no signs of civilisation. The rest of the system just seems to be rocks, I can’t see any gas giants at the moment.”

“No signs of civilisation apart from a radio beacon on the planet.” added Rngoeuzl. “But look at this.” She touched a control and a new image formed in the viewscreen. It was a ship of some kind, though Davi didn’t recognise it.

“Its approximately forty thousand displacement tons ... two thirds our size.” continued Rngoeuzl. “Still about thirty light-seconds away, but closing with us.”

Davi studied the image of the ship. It looked ... old.

Hasaan walked across the bridge to where Doctor Li stood, a worried expression on his face.

As if on cue an alarm chimed urgently at Rngoeuzl’s workstation. She studied the readouts for a moment before announcing “I’m detecting what appear to be active sensor locks from that ship. And their infrared is spiking ... I’d say they were charging weapons.”

“Doctor?” said Hasaan quietly.

“What’s the status of our weapons?” demanded Tam.

“You can’t be serious.” burst out Li incredulously, ignoring Hasaan.

“Shut up, Doctor.” snapped Tam. “You don’t belong on the bridge.”

“Gentleman, please!” said Davi trying to restore

order. “Sublieutenant Grey, what is the state of the engines? Can we run if we have to?”

Grey moved to the pilot station and scanned the readouts. “Theoretically, Sir.” she answered.

“Right then. Try and get us underway.” ordered Davi. “Make for that nearby planet.” He glanced back at Tam and Li, both staring at each other with balled fists but neither willing to make the first move.

A few feet away stood Hasaan, ignored and unnoticed. He was staring in sick fascination at the skin of his forearm which was undulating as if there were worms underneath.

# 3 First Contact

**Location: Deck 40, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (6.5 hours after awakening)**

The Bard Refuge hummed as energy coursed into the ship's great thruster plates accelerating it towards the nearby planet.

“All green by the board.” reported Grey from the pilot's workstation.

Lieutenant Tam logged into one of the damage control workstations and started to run diagnostic checks. As no one knew what state the ship's weapons were in he'd find out for himself.

“They're altering course.” announced Rngoeuzl from her sensor position. “Adjusting to intercept us.”

“Keep pouring it on, Sublieutenant.” Davi commanded Grey with more calm than he felt. “So, how are the weapons?” he asked turning to Tam, they might need to fight after all he thought.

“What good are weapons going to be with no one to man them?” remarked Li.

“I can’t get confirmation on the spinal mount.” Tam responded ignoring the Doctor. The spinal mount was their main weapon, a giant particle accelerator that ran the entire length of the ship. “We’d have to turn and face them to bring it to bear anyway. I think most of the laser batteries are operational but Def-Tac is down.” he continued, referring to the defensive targeting computer. “Twelve missile bays read as operational but I have no data on reloads. And thirteen sandcaster batteries read as ready.” The sandcasters were purely defensive, they’d deploy a cloud of prismatic ‘sand’ particles that would interfere both with incoming missile targeting and enemy laser beams.

“Are the missiles nukes?” asked Davi hopefully, meaning did they have atomic warheads.

“Oh yes.” said Tam with smug satisfaction.

“Okay, prepare a nuclear missile salvo and stand by to deploy the sand.”

“Sir?” called Rngoeuzl, “The other ship seems to be a carrier. It’s launched sub craft.”

Davi blinked. On the tactical display the blip that represented the other ship had blossomed into sixteen new blips each annotated with a small block of numbers. He waited for the data blocks to update. They indicated the new ships were 1200 displacement tons a piece ... some sort of destroyer escorts perhaps thought Davi. On separate screens were fuzzy close up images but a glance at those added nothing new. They looked neither like any Imperial ship he knew nor anything the Zhodani Consulate, the Imperium’s enemy, might have.

“Independent vectoring but all are on an intercept course to us.” added Rngoeuzl.

Damn, thought Davi. He could feel the situation slipping away from him. “Go active on sensors. Do we have ship to ship comms?”

“Sensors active, Aye.” Rngoeuzl confirmed.

“Ship to ship comms at your command.” added Tgeath. A small panel at Davi’s workstation lit up.

On the hull of the ship the sensors responded by beaming pulses of radar energy at the target, illuminating it. Minutes passed while the radar beams crossed the vast space and returned before, on the bridge, additional details appeared in the appropriate data blocks.

“Anything?” asked Davi.

“They’re still coming, Sir.” growled Rngoeuzl checking her instruments.

“We can’t fight the state we’re in.” exclaimed Li. “We don’t even know the status of half our own god-damned ship.”

Davi took a deep breath and punched the transmit button on his workstation. “This is Lieutenant Commander Davi of the Imperial Navy commanding the cruiser Bard Refuge. To approaching ships: state your intention.”

Everyone waited.

“Twenty light-seconds away and closing.” updated Rngoeuzl needlessly, everyone could see



the figures in the display counting off the distance.

“You’re going to have to fight.” Tam muttered quietly.

Davi thumbed the transmit button again. “Be advised we are prepared to use force to defend ourselves. Break off your approach.”

They were well inside each other’s weapon ranges now but the other ships hadn’t fired yet. Were they intending to board, wondered Davi. He looked at Tam. “Do you have a firing solution?” he asked.

“On the mother ship, yes. I can only target one vessel at a time.” admitted Tam. He waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the other workstations on the bridge, now empty.

“We need more crew.” translated Rngoeuzl needlessly. There had been an element of truth in Li’s earlier criticism.

Tgeath yipped. “Transmission from the planet surface!” she cried.

“Let’s have it.” responded Davi. *Now what?* Davi realised he badly needed to gain the initiative.

“It’s in standard format audio. On speakers now.”

Chirps, squawks, trills, and whistles filled the air. It was meaningless, and yet there was something vaguely familiar about it thought Davi.

“Now picking up missile launches from the planet” growled Tgeath starting to sound a little panicked.

“You need to do something.” demanded Tam. He looked like he was gearing himself up to assume control.

“The smaller alien ships are still coming but the alien mother ship is reducing speed.” announced Rngoeuzl. “I think its breaking off its approach.”

That’s it, thought Davi with a burst of hope. “Sublieutenant Grey, cut thrust and flip the ship. Bring the spinal mount to bear on those hostiles. Lieutenant Tam, stand by to fire missiles.”

“We’ll be a sitting duck for those planet-based missiles.” said Li horrified. The infra-red from the ship’s engines would be perfect for hostile missiles to lock onto. Their first priority should be to get

out of the crossfire, he thought.

Davi felt the humming in the deck fade away as Grey throttled back the engines as ordered.

“Missiles have cleared the atmosphere.” announced Tgeath. “They’re acquiring ... vectoring in our direction ...”

“Not us.” corrected Davi. “They’re targeting the alien ships. We’re between them and the planet. The missiles will go right by.” He desperately hoped he was right otherwise this was going to hurt. The massive ship started a lazy cartwheel through space, rotating end over end to face backwards and towards the approaching aliens. Stars span crazily past on the viewscreen and he felt a momentary lurch as the inertial dampers struggled to keep up. There were worrying metallic groans as the superstructure flexed and for awhile everyone froze, all wandering if the ship would snap in two.

“Alien ships moving into a screening formation.” barked Rngoeuzl.

“Maybe we should launch sand. Give us some

protection.” said Tam referring to the prismatic ‘sand’. There was a note of doubt in his voice.

“Can’t.” bit back Davi, studying the displays. “Those missiles are going to pass too close. If we screw up their aim we could end up taking one up the chuff.”

He swiped his ident chip across his workstation console, authorising the use of the spinal mount and a single guttural note barked from a siren. A set of aiming crosshairs appeared on the main viewscreen.

The ship completed its manoeuvre without ripping itself apart.

“Lieutenant?” Davi gently prompted Tam.

Tam grimaced, turned back to his workstation, and mirrored Davi’s action with his ident chip. A second guttural note, slightly higher in pitch, sung out. They saw the power indicators on several empty workstations begin to climb as the electromagnetic accelerators along the spinal mount’s length charged up.

“Grey, target the spinal mount on the mother

ship.” ordered Davi. “Tam, you have the choice of those secondary ships for a missile salvo but wait until the spinal shot has cleared.”

Grey swiped her ident chip to the sound of a third and final guttural siren bark, higher in pitch and more urgent than the previous two. With the controls of the main weapon finally released it still took tense minutes as Grey and Tam concentrated on their respective tasks. The two Vargr continued to fine tune the sensor readings and fed a constant stream of data to help them. Space combat was never as fast as in the movies.

“It won’t lock.” Grey eventually spat in frustration from her workstation. Her face was grim and determined as she glanced back at Davi. “I can do it manually, Sir.”

Davi nodded. “Do it. Fire when ready.”

He watched as the image of the alien mothership slid around the display while Grey tried to compensate for all the different vectors. Suddenly it seemed to become stuck in the centre of the crosshairs.

“Got it!” cried Grey. She stabbed her thumb on the firing button-

The ship lurched and everything went dark, including the main display. A moment later the emergency lighting kicked in. A sea of red indicators flared on everyone’s workstations.

“What the hell?” exclaimed Grey.

“Active sensors offline.” declared Rngoeuzl.

“I’ve lost tracking on the planetary missiles.” added Tgeath.

“Well don’t we look bad-ass.” said Li, his voice a mix of sarcasm and frustration. “No one will mess with us now.”

Davi turned to Tam. “Report.”

“I’m reading an explosion mid-way along the spinal mount weapon.” said Tam urgently. “One of the accelerator stations blew. Deck 25, 26 and 27 ... they’re venting atmosphere. The power distribution network has crashed, switching to auxiliary.”

“We’ve lost the manoeuvre drive.” said Grey regaining her composure. “I’m using the station-

keeping jets to keep us aligned.”

“That shouldn’t have happened.” snapped Davi. He turned to Tam. “What about our missiles? Do you still have a firing solution?”

“I’m not sure.” said Tam pursing his lips thoughtfully. “They’re self-guiding once launched. If we’ve not moved too far they should still find their targets.” He quickly typed in commands to his workstation. Across the ship missile after missile slid from its rails and boosted into space. “Launching missile salvo.” declared Tam.

Li just shook his head.

\* \* \*

**Location: Somewhere on Fulacin**

**Date: 140-1115**

The short octagonal tower was perched in the open atop a granite crag yet its exposed black stone walls were impervious to the constant buffeting of the howling wind. Jagged mountains loomed on

opposing sides and tattered clouds raced across the sky. The stony ground was slick with rain and mist.

The little figure, draped in a heavy hooded cloak against the cold and the wet, struggled up the uneven path to the tower's solitary entrance. Pausing for breath it looked around in the twilight at the desolate landscape before finally staggering in.

The interior was a large room, a reception area of some kind. The stone buttresses holding up the ceiling formed regular alcoves of shadow. On one side there was a timber beam stairway leading up to the next level. In the centre of the room was a fire pit in which burned some small logs. The fire crackled invitingly, wisps of sweet aromatic smoke escaping through the chimney hole above.

The Droyne let the cloak fall from her unregarded as she moved towards the fire's warmth.

"I trust no one saw you?" said a man's voice from the shadows.

"No." answered the Droyne, seemingly



unsurprised at the other's presence. She was shivering as she held her hands out to the flames.

"You are looking well, little one." continued the other.

"Thank you, Papa."

"Do you know why I am here?"

The Droyne finally looked up from the fire. "You have a new game for me?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course." chuckled the human.

The Droyne started jumping up and down with glee, her vestigial wings unfolding in excited anticipation.

Admiral Chienjistebr of the Zhodani Consulate stepped out of the shadows grinning and offered her a data tile. His smart blue uniform looked out of place in these surroundings.

"How long have me got?" she asked.

"Oh, you have a few months yet to get into position aboard the warship 'Bard Refuge' at Jewell. After that ..."

"Yes, Papa?"

“... it takes as long as it takes.” he finished.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 69, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (7 hours after awakening)**

Having delivered the food and watched the engineering crew eat Smyuetx had been about to leave when the ship was rocked by the explosion. Electricity momentarily arced from a nearby distribution node to the deck with a sharp crack, its brightness leaving an after-image on the retinas of all those who had been facing it at the time.

“No, no, no, no, no-” cried Padalecki as he sprinted to the generator control room, picnic items scattering everywhere.

“What was that?” Smyuetx asked Coltan, startled.

“Power surge.” she answered, climbing to her feet to follow Padalecki.

“Why was that?” asked Smyuetx to her

retreating form. There was no reply.

The main lights died, leaving the emergency lighting and all the monitors.

“Main PDN down.” called out Padalecki, referring to the Power Distribution Network. “Malahyde, try and reinitialise it from the secondary control.”

“Right, Boss.” shouted back Malahyde as he swung up a ladder to the next deck.

Smyuetx looked at Hegeh and Ghraangk. “Are we under attack?” she asked. She had not expected this.

The three non-humans, the hulking Zhurph, the canine Vargr, and the small bat-like Droyne, stared at each other for a moment.

“We will find out in due course.” said Hegeh.

“You are very calm.” she commented.

Hegeh shrugged.

“If we are under attack we may need weapons.” growled Ghraangk looking around.

Coltan came running back out of the generator control room and headed for the damaged

distribution node. “Ghraangk, I need your help.” she said quickly, and soon the two engineers were involved in pulling apart the metal housing.

“Don’t worry, I have my vaothoi.” said Hegeh, patting his quarterstaff.

Smyuetx ignored him, spun around, and headed for the lift.

“Smyuetx-” called Hegeh to no avail.

The lift appeared to still have power and moments later she was back on the Auxiliary Bridge deck.

As the doors opened she was confronted by Daniel Kralik standing in the half shadow as if on guard. He held a knife in one hand and it occurred to her that she’d not even spoken two words to him since they had awoken. She knew nothing about him, save the pips on his collar identified his rank as Petty Officer Third Class. She didn’t think anyone else onboard knew him, either. He stared at her, contemplating. *What does he see?* she wondered. He bowed his head slightly and with a grin that was cold and empty waved her out of the

lift. She scuttled onto the Bridge.

She could see Davi and Tam were having some sort of discussion, punctuated by unhelpful comments from the Doctor. She could feel the tension between them. She slipped around to where the two Vargr, Rngoeuzl and Tgeath, were trying to work the passive sensors. She could see the active sensors were offline.

“There it is again.” said Tgeath adjusting one of the controls. There was a burst of chirps and whistles from the workstation speaker.

“That is Droyne speak.” said Smyuetx.

There was silence in the room. Rngoeuzl and Tgeath were staring at her.

“What did you just say?” asked Davi, rising out of his chair.

“That is Droyne speak.” Smyuetx repeated uncertainly.

“Translate it.” commanded Tam.

“Er, me not sure me can. Me know not that dialect.”

“Try, Smyuetx. Anything you can give us.”

soothed Davi.

She concentrated and said "... Greetings ... warning ... assistance."

"So that's 'Hello. You are in danger from those aliens. We will help you.?'?" asked Davi hopefully.

Smyuetx shrugged.

The main screen flickered and came back on along with the normal lights. Power was restored.

"Thank you, Mister Padalecki." breathed Davi with relief. In a louder voice he continued "Okay, guys, what's going on out there?"

The two Vargr poured over their workstations, struggling to work up a coherent picture of the world outside the ship.

"Negative contact on the alien ships." said Rngoeuzl.

"Negative contact on the planet based missiles." said Tgeath.

"... or on our missiles." added Rngoeuzl. "I am picking up a sizeable debris field."

"Ha." snorted Tam. "We got them."

"With a lot of help from 'downstairs'."

reminded Davi.

“I’m not so sure.” Rngoeuzl interrupted. “Even if missile strikes were that ... thorough ... as to not leave any burned out hulls, and they’re usually not, there’s no way there’s enough debris to account for all those ships.”

Davi looked back at the main screen and squinted. “Where are they then?”

No one had an answer.

Davi looked back at Grey sitting at the pilot’s workstation. “Have you got those atmosphere leaks under control, Sublieutenant?”

“Yes, Sir.” Grey responded. “Internal bulkheads are holding and have minimised the loss. There’s no indication of structural damage.”

“Are you ready to re-align the ship?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then let’s face the planet, Mister Grey.”

As Grey started the process of rotating the ship so that it faced forwards again Smyuextx pondered Davi’s use of the word ‘Mister’. In most human civilian cultures it was used exclusively to address

males. Her own Droyne culture, with three genders, had no such word. Yet the Imperial Navy, an organisation dominated by humans, had chosen as a matter of policy to use the word when addressing personnel of any gender.

Smyuetyx looked round the Bridge again. Something wasn't right. But what? The way the ship groaned was disconcerting enough but then it was over. Once the ship had 'righted' itself Smyuetyx waited for Hasaan's inevitable catchphrase.

Silence.

"Where is Hasaan?" she asked.

Li glanced at her, then looked around, startled.

"He was here just a moment ago." he said.

"Didn't he want to ask you something, Doctor?" piped up Grey.

"Yeah, that's right." agreed Li, vaguely remembering.

Tam looked coldly at Li. "That was an hour ago."

"Where's Kralik?" asked Davi.



“Kralik guards the lifts.” answered Smyuetx.

“Okay.” said Davi slowly, pondering. If Hasaan had deserted his post ... or at least wandered off without permission then he was going to regret it once Davi caught up with him. “Lieutenant Tam, you have the Bridge. If you get a chance see if you can find out what happened to our spinal mount. Smyuetx, I want you to stay here in case there are any further transmissions. Doctor, you come with me. Oh, and Tam, I best take the gun.”

Smyuetx was secretly glad. She wanted to stay here so she could follow what was going on.

The pair of them, Davi and Li, moved out of the Bridge towards the lifts. As they approached Kralik drew himself to attention, the knife still in his hand.

“Mister Kralik, have you seen Hasaan?” asked Davi.

“Yes, Sir. He said he was feeling tired and went to try one of the officers’ staterooms.” Kralik gestured along the corridor.

Davi raised an eyebrow at this but said nothing.

As they approached the first stateroom door

they heard movement inside. That was easy, thought Davi. He burst into the room without knocking ... and promptly wished he was someplace else. A couple of meters away from him stood Abdul Hasaan: his eyes rolled back, his mouth hung open slack-jawed, and one arm swelled to hideous proportion with writhing tentacles. There was a rustling sound like a mound of maggots digging into dead flesh and a smell ...

The apparition sensed their presence and started towards them.

Davi didn't hesitate. The revolver came up and he squeezed the trigger four times, all the shots hit centre body mass.

Hasaan, or whatever he had become, stopped and crumpled to the floor. He was still breathing but with difficulty.

In the silence that followed he could hear Kralik's running footsteps approaching.

"Get back! Get back!" ordered the Doctor, galvanised into action. "He might be contagious."

Davi allowed himself to be dragged out of the

stateroom.

Li slammed the door shut, breathing hard with the adrenaline, and snarled “We have to quarantine him until I can find a cure.”

Davi remembered the words Hegeh spoke, when talking about the ‘Ordeal of Tricore’: *‘We should beware the corrupted servant of Tino: one of us who will betray us into danger ... he cannot be redeemed.’*

“... he cannot be redeemed.” echoed Davi to himself out loud.

“Then we find out if we’re goin’ to get what he’s got.” responded Li, anger in his voice.

\* \* \*

**Location: Sampson Hotel, Jewell**

**Date: 123-1116**

Fat drops of rain fell from the sky and slid off roofs to form oily puddles in the road. The other Droyne stood in the cover of a nearby ally as

Smyuetyx left the hotel. She watched as Smyuetyx jumped in a waiting taxi and it sped off into the rain in the direction of the naval base.

The other Droyne had been tailing Smyuetyx for nearly a week now, learning her habits, her mannerisms. She'd learned that when between assignments Smyuetyx evidently preferred to live off base. At the same time the other Droyne had been trying to break into the naval base computer over the local communications net. She had been a little surprised that the base computer had links to the local net but she was grateful for the security oversight. Once in she'd arranged for Smyuetyx to be selected as a candidate for the Frozen Watch and to meet with Commander Minka.

From her quick study of Smyuetyx she felt fairly confident of that meeting's outcome. It was a bit of a gamble, but so too would going to the meeting herself. She had met the Commander before, during the war, and couldn't be sure that she wouldn't be recognised.

She entered the hotel towing a large trunk. If

she'd been human she'd have been indistinguishable from all the tourists but she was a Droyne. However this gave her other options. She concentrated on being unseen and managed to cross the hotel lobby towards the lifts without being noticed. It wasn't true invisibility just a little mind-control trick common to all her people. Moments later and she stood outside Smyuetx' room. With some surprisingly simple tools she defeated the lock and gained entrance.

Once inside she opened her trunk and retrieved several items including a portable desk computer. Powered up it didn't take long for her to find her way back into the naval base computer. She scanned Smyuetx' personnel file.

The other Droyne frowned, it was unchanged. Well, it's still early, she thought to herself.

She busied herself going through the wardrobe and pulling out Smyuetx' undress uniform. She tried it on. As expected it was a near perfect fit: there were a dozen Droyne currently at the base and Smyuetx had been carefully chosen because of

her close physical match.

The other Droyne changed back into her own clothes and continued with her preparations.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 40, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (10.5 hours after awakening)**

It was more than three hours later and Smyuetyx watched as Grey finally piloted the Bard Refuge into a stable orbit around the target planet.

In that time Tgeath and Rngoeuzl had refined their picture of the star system they were in. There was little of significance to add to their original assessment. A single M class star, cool (as stars go) with a salmon cast, weakly lit several barren rocky planets and one habitable world. And that habitable world was unremarkable too: mid-sized, half covered with water, plenty of vegetation in evidence. From the energy scans there was just one point on the planet that was inhabited, but by what

they couldn't say.

In that time Doctor Li had been sequestered with poor Abdul Hasaan. Smyuetx wandered what was happening to the man? Was it contagious? Were they all going to end up like that? And if it were a disease then who was it, really, that they'd flushed into space? Kralik had been assigned to the doctor for security.

In that time Chief Padalecki and his engineering crew had run diagnostics on the ship's systems, building an impressive list of minor and not so minor repairs that were needed. On his recommendation the manoeuvre drives were not to be run on more than half power. The hyperspace jump drives could not be used without a thorough overhaul (and the fuel tanks needed filling). And the biomass in the food recycling system was a write-off ... it needed to be completely purged, scrubbed down, and restocked. Getting the great spinal mount weapon working was a relatively low priority. On the plus side Padalecki had been able to restart the second generator stack ... though

there was little need for the extra power at present.

In that time Lieutenant Commander Jürgen Davi had sat in the Captain's chair. The crew, if a dozen personnel on a ship this size could be called such, seemed to accept him readily enough thought Smyuetx, except perhaps for Tam. Davi appeared grateful for Hegeh's presence, once Hegeh had returned to the Bridge. Seeking the council of a trained monk didn't seem that strange to Smyuetx but she could see it would grate with Tam. Of course Chief Petty Officer Whoohsh Hegeh was not onboard to serve as a monk but as an engineer, a gunner, and a soldier.

"Hegeh," started Davi slowly, "Were there any variations in 'The Ordeal Of Tricore'?"

"None that I know of." responded Hegeh.

"And all that has transpired here is like Tricore?"

Hegeh puffed out, considering. "Only in the loosest sense." he said dismissively.

"Any other stories with possible parallels?" Davi pursued.



“No ...” said Hegeh

“What is this ‘Ordeal Of Tricore’, please?” asked Smyuetyx.

“Movement from the planet.” Tgeath interrupted from the sensor station. “Two small ships ascending ... approximately 100 displacement tons each.”

Davi called up the sensor’s visual data on his workstation and Smyuetyx looked over his shoulder. They looked like three-pronged throwing stars lazily wafting up from the planet surface. From their size she imagined they’d be similar in function to the ubiquitous Imperial Suleiman class scout/courier.

“The rear deck of this ship has a variety of docking ports.” Davi mused. “We’ll have them come aboard there. I’ll greet them myself.” He looked around. “Lieutenant Tam, you will monitor from the Bridge. Smyuetyx, I want you and Hegeh with me. And the Doctor too.”

“The doctor has other duties to attend to.” pointed out Tam.

Davi sighed. It was time. He activated an internal communication channel. “Doctor Li? Report please.”

Morgan Li appeared on the screen. From the wall behind he’d evidently found the ship’s sick bay. “Hey, Cap’n.” Li said, a little too familiar. “Well its slow going, what with no proper staff, but Hasaan seems to be recovering well from being shot. His other problem is not so good. I’ve taken blood from both his infected and un-infected arms and both samples appear normal. No sign of bacteria under the microscope. Tissue from his bad arm seems to be fine other than its appearance. But you put it with normal tissue and the normal tissue starts to look weird too. Even with viral inhibitors. Yet sometimes the weird tissue reverts to normal, just like that, for no reason. I ain’t seen anything like it before, and I’m willing to bet no one back home has.” By ‘back home’ Smyuetx felt he was referring to the Imperium not just his homeworld.

Evidently it was more or less what Davi had expected. “I hear you, Doctor. Given the limited

resources I don't think there's much you can do for him. Maybe with a full medical research facility he might have a chance but we don't have one of those to hand."

"Yeah, I agree. I'll put him in cryogenic freeze, then." said Li.

Davi's face hardened. "You misunderstand me, Doctor. He's too dangerous to us, even frozen."

Smyuetx could have sworn the temperature suddenly dropped a few degrees in an instant. Everyone on the Bridge pretended to be engrossed in their work.

On the screen Li stared at him in stunned surprise. Then it sunk in. "Why you heartless son of a-

"Doctor!" snapped Davi. He spelled it out, "You will terminate Petty Officer Second Class Abdul Hasaan and eject his body from the ship. On my orders. Immediately."

Li was shocked. Finally, through gritted teeth he was able to answer "Yes, Sir." And closed the link.

Davi looked around at the others.

“A hard decision.” commented Tam with grudging approval.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” replied Davi trying for a note of offhand sarcasm. Smyuetx saw the tension in his back and realised he was more rattled than he was letting on. She also noticed that when he glanced at Hegeh the big Zhurph wouldn't meet his eye.

“The approaching ships will be here in 15 minutes.” Tgeath updated them.

“Good.” said Davi getting out of the Captain's chair. “Light up the docking area. Let's go, Gentlemen. Tam, make sure the Doctor joins us.”

\* \* \*

**Location: Jewell Naval Base, Jewell**

**Date: 123-1116**

Smyuetx sat uncomfortably in the big chair. There wasn't a problem with the chair, it was a

regulation chair in a regulation office. The source of her discomfort came from the unwavering glare of Commander Minka, seated opposite her. It bore into her as if the other woman were trying to scan her soul. Outside the dirty rain beat against the window. Inside the air seemed listless, thick, and oppressive.

“You’ve been in the Frozen Watch before?” Minka asked.

“Yes, Sir. Five years ago.” Smyuetyx squeaked out.

“Anything happen at that time?”

“No, Sir. I slept for a year, I did.”

“But you have had combat experience?” The contempt in Minka’s voice was easy to pick up, even for a non-human.

“Yes, Sir. During the war I saw much combat.” Smyuetyx considered adding that she’d been awarded the Medal for Conspicuous Gallantry three times during the war in addition to the Meritorious Conduct Under Fire decoration she had from before, but judged that this would just

further antagonise the human. Besides, Minka had access to her service record via the base computer and could have just as easily read it for herself.

“Quite so.” came back Minka’s response.

Smyuetx hesitated, the drumming of the rain being the only sound. She wondered what the source of Minka’s displeasure was. She asked, “Pardon, Sir, but you not liking me much. Offense, I have given you?”

Minka’s left eyebrow arched. “I’ve met your kind before.” she said. “We had a Droyne aboard my ship during the war. He turned out to be a spy and a murderer. Shortly after we found out, my ship was destroyed over Mithril. The captain and most of the crew perished.”

“Oh.” said Smyuetx deflated. There didn’t seem to be anything else to say.

“And do you know what, Smyuetx?” continued Minka, “You all look the same to me.”

“But I’m not that Droyne, Sir,” Smyuetx protested weakly, “My loyalty to the Imperium has always been.”

“We’ll see.” said Minka. She ejected the data tile from the tablet and tossed it across the desk at Smyuetx. “You are to report to the base med centre at 1300 hours tomorrow.”

“But I is loyal,” said Smyuetx desperately, wondering what else she could say. If her previous service record wasn’t enough, what would it take to convince this human? “Ever since my casting ceremony I sought to serve the protectors of my Oytrip, my tribe. I prove it to you.”

“Really?” asked Minka, the scorn in her voice was very clear. “And just how do you propose to do that?”

Smyuetx had no answer.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 84, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (11 hours after awakening)**

The two mystery vessels, responding to the docking lights that had been activated, had clamped

on to the rear of the ship like limpets. They were lined up with one of the docking tubes that could extend from the Bard Refuge's boat deck. Smyuetx, Davi, and Hegeh had picked up Doctor Li and Kralik on the way down and the five of them watched apprehensively as the pressure in the docking tube equalised with the ship's internal atmosphere. The tension between Davi and Li was palpable, Smyuetx noted, yet it was Kralik that looked ... satiated? She realised with a start that, in some ways, Kralik was like her: a killer.

The airlock door of the docking tube clanged, then hissed as it cycled open to reveal ...

Four Droyne stood before them, Smyuetx' own diminutive race. One of them stepped forward, hands open and down, and spoke a string of chirps and whistles.

“Well ain't that pretty!” exclaimed Li. For a moment he seemed genuinely happy, his anger forgotten. “A bunch of little bat-people. We can't be that far from Imperial space after all.”

“Doctor.” admonished Smyuetx. “Many



Droyne worlds in Imperium, yes, but not all. Remember evidence of own eyes when outside.” She was referring to the pattern of stars they’d seen outside that identified that they were somewhere near the galactic core.

Li glowered back at her but said nothing.

The other Droyne took in this aside and started to whisper to each other.

“Mr Smyuetx. What are they saying?” asked Davi thinly.

“Er, me not sure, Sir.” she responded.

Turning back she took a deep breath and tried a simple greeting in her own tongue. For a moment there was no reaction, then the visitors started to talk amongst themselves in some consternation.

They waited while the Droyne contingent argued itself to some sort of consensus. Finally, the spokesman for the group turned back and said something to Smyuetx.

“Me think they want us to go with them to the planet.” she translated. “They will take us before their ‘Aykrusk’, their leader of leaders.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a hot idea.” mused Kralik.

“What’s to worry about?” asked Li with false joviality. “They’re friendly.”

“Under the circumstances I’m not sure we have much choice either way.” said Davi. “How many of us do they want?”

“You, me, and Chief Hegeh” replied Smyuetx. “And one of their ships will stay here as hostage until our return.”

“Why him?” asked Davi nodding towards Hegeh.

Smyuetx turned to look at Hegeh and said “Me think they think he is in charge. Or at least important.”

Hegeh looked at her, then the Droyne delegation, then back to her. But he had nothing to say.

It took a few moments to relay this all back to Lieutenant Tam on the Bridge. Tam muttered some reservations as to the plan’s wisdom but Smyuetx wasn’t convinced that he was hoping

Lieutenant Commander Davi never returned. But in the end Davi was right: they had no choice under the circumstances.

The trip down took less than 30 minutes which was fortunate. The visiting ships might have been spacious by Droyne standards but for humans they were cramped. For a Zhurph like Hegeh ...

Smyuetx tried to get a feel for the ships. They weren't that old and their technology seemed slightly less advanced than common Imperial standards. She was fairly certain they had jump drives too. That confirmed them to be interstellar scouts being used as orbital shuttles. She said none of this to the others.

After they had touched down the landing pad they were on descended into a rocky cavern below the surface of the planet. They disembarked to a waiting squad of Droyne soldiers, each equipped with some sort of short six-barrelled rifle, and were led off down a side corridor. As their group marched on she noted scores of wooden crates, some obviously of food stuffs, haphazardly stored

along the corridor. Other groups of Droyne scampered passed in a seemingly agitated state, many openly stared at Hegeh. More than once Davi and Hegeh exchanged glances but said nothing.

Eventually they entered another cavern. There was a sizeable crowd of Droyne here but in the middle sat one Droyne on what Smyuetyx could only think of as a throne. The crowd parted for them and as they reached the king-like Aykrusk their escort stopped and took up a 'parade rest' position. For a throne room it was quite close to the landing pads and seemed makeshift.

The Aykrusk eyed them up and down and then addressed Hegeh with the same unintelligible whistles, tweets, and hoots that they'd heard before.

Davi glanced at Smyuetyx.

"Er ..." she started. "Me think he was saying his name is Othix and that he is Aykrusk, or Leader of Leaders."

Davi turned back to the Aykrusk. "I am Lieutenant Commander Jürgen Davi." he said in an

authoritative voice. “I am in charge of the Imperial warship, the Bard Refuge, currently in orbit.”

The Aykrusk sat back in his throne and seemed a bit surprised. He muttered some words to a courtier by his side and moments later a small box was brought forth and presented to Davi.

Hesitantly, Davi took the box and opened it. Inside was a matt silver-grey ball the size of an orange, devoid of any markings. Davi took the ball out of the box and squinted at it. It was warm to the touch and faintly tingled.

“What is this, Smyuetyx?” he asked, handing it over to her.

“A gift?” she said eyeing the thing dubiously. Then, “An exchange of gifts at the start of opening diplomatic relations.” she concluded, satisfied.

“Hmmm ... Except I haven’t got anything to give in return. I don’t suppose you have anything?”

She thought for a moment and then retrieved her hand computer.

Davi stared quizzically.

“Mine has data tile.” she explained. “‘An

*Introduction to the Third Imperium*’. It was in my personal things. Good for first contact if they can translate it.”

Davi nodded and took the computer. Then he presented it to the Aykrusk.

The Aykrusk took it without comment and handed it over to an aid.

“So far, so good.” muttered Davi under his breath.

Next a serving platter was produced and offered. As one Smyuetx, Davi, and Hegeh looked down at the small pile of delicacies arranged upon it. They appeared to be a sort of locust-like insect fried in oil. Davi picked one up and popped it in his mouth. Smyuetx and Hegeh followed suit. They were hot. As expected the exoskeleton was largely tasteless, save for some saltiness in the oil, but the flesh was definitely peanut-y.

“Mmm.” said Davi appreciatively, crunching on a second.

“You like?” asked the Aykrusk.

Davi stopped. “You speak our language?”

“No.”

“But I understand you.” he pressed, licking his fingers. There didn’t seem to be any towels or wash bowls to hand.

“You speak common now.” replied the Aykrusk.

Hegeh was starrng at Davi in surprise. “How did you do that?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Davi answered.

“We give you translator.” said Aykrusk pointing at the ball.

Davi looked at the ball and paled. “It must establish some sort of psychic link” he said to Hegeh.

“For me also.” said Smyuetx.

“Well I’m not getting anything.” said Hegeh.

“You did not touch.” Smyuetx observed holding it out to him.

Hegeh regarded the ball suspiciously but did not reach for it. He evidently shared the common Imperial view that psychic powers were abhorrent and not to be trusted.

“I am Lieutenant Commander Jürgen Davi, in command of the His Imperial Navy’s ship the Bard Refuge.” Davi began again turning back to the Aykrusk. “I must thank you for helping us. We are new to this area of space and know little of the dangers we may encounter.”

“As are we.” replied the Aykrusk.

“Oh?” prompted Davi.

The Aykrusk regarded them thoughtfully for a moment and eat an insect from the platter. “This was new colony, recently established by five thousand refugees fleeing Korsung Empire.” he began.

Smyuetx had heard of the Korsung Empire but she very much doubted Davi had.

“One day was a terrible storm.” continued the Aykrusk. “It came from nowhere, no warning. We lost contact with orbital facilities, and winds were so great we could not launch anything. We took sanctuary below ground. A week passed then it stopped. Most of surface facilities were gone and the sky was wrong.” He took another insect.



“The sky was wrong?” asked Davi, puzzled.

“We are in new place.”

Davi couldn't digest this.

“Me think he says planet moved.” Smyuetyx offered.

Davi stared at her. “That can't be it, it's not possible to move a planet.”

“Yes, planet moved.” confirmed the Aykrusk. “And there was wondrous ship above us. So wondrous and terrible. It probed us, probed our minds, dissected us. Some of us went mad.”

The Aykrusk looked up involuntarily at the memory. “It left. And some of us became sick. New ships would appear and take the sick by force. We fought them but more of us got sick. When only one thousand of us left a new ship appeared. It fought passed the sickness ships and crashed here. Pilot was mechanical. Offered us cure, protection from sickness.”

“A ‘mechanical’? You mean a robot?” asked Davi.

The Aykrusk made a gesture that Smyuetyx

thought was probably equivalent to a shrug.

“When we saw you,” the Aykrusk continued, “The sickness ship was moving towards you. So we help.”

The Aykrusk sat back in his chair, the story apparently at an end. Smyuetx watched Davi mulling it over, she could see it was a lot for him to take in.

Davi paused. “May I ask,” he began, “Why don’t you go back to your home space. It is clearly hazardous here.”

The Aykrusk sighed. “To go we want, but we have not many ships.”

“What about this ‘mechanical’? Couldn’t it help?”

“Mechanical died. Its ship badly damaged. We have its heart now, powers this place it does, but without rest of ship we cannot return planet.”

*Ahh, thought Smyuetx, this mechanical’s heart must be a powerful energy source. The first part of my puzzle.*

Davi had raised an eyebrow. Clearly he was still

trying to wrap his head around the concept of a moving planet.

“Lieutenant Commander,” said Smyuetx, “May I have a word with you?”

Davi glanced at the Aykrusk who repeated his ‘shrug’ gesture from before.

They walked a few steps away leaving Hegeh now the centre of attention.

“What is it, Petty Officer?” he asked quietly.

“Sir, me just wanted to point out that we need a crew and they sound like they need passage away from here. If there is only a thousand of them they should fit.”

“It’s a nice idea, Smyuetx, but the security concerns would be mind boggling. Us Imperials would be outnumbered a hundred to one.”

“Not necessarily, Sir.” she continued, the idea blooming in her head. “You could make their world an Imperial member. Then ‘draft’ them all into Imperial Navy.”

“Ha, that might work on paper.” laughed Davi, “Actually, I’m not sure it would. But that doesn’t

change the reality.”

“It would for them, Sir. And that’s what counts. Trust me on this.”

Davi sobered. “You are serious about this. Could it really work?”

“Sir, you know where we are. We cannot get ship back alone. You have to scuttle, no choice. But with full crew then could get ship back. If doesn’t work could still scuttle later, but at least you tried.”

Davi rubbed his eyes. If Smyuetyx read his face correctly he was still fatigued from the cold berth.

“No.” he said at last. “There’s still the fuel problem. We have now practical way to refuel the ship even with a full crew.”

“Maybe.” she said. “What about this ‘mechanical’ heart? Sounds like powerful energy source. Maybe use instead of jump fuel.”

“And where would you put it? I imagine it’s quite large and we’re not a cargo ship.”

“The fighter bays are empty.”

Davi stared at her for a moment, then said,

“This is insane!”

“You have better idea, Sir? At least explore possibilities.”

“This cannot possibly begin to work.” said Davi wheeling on the spot and marching back to the Aykrusk. “Lord Aykrusk,” he began.

“Please, I am Othix” interrupted the Aykrusk.

“Othix,” Davi started again. “Your ships use something we call ‘jump drive’ do they not? So does mine. You understand something of the power required to make it work. Would this mechanical heart produce enough energy to use on my ship instead of fuel?”

“I do not know, this is a matter for technicians.” replied the Aykrusk. “But we need it for our power use. We will not part with it.”

“You may not need to. I wish to propose a-” he glanced at Smyuetx, “A possibility.”

“What possibility?” asked the Aykrusk guardedly.

“We come from a great empire. But it’s far from here and we want to go home. My ship is

missing most of her crew and I have difficulty refuelling her.” Davi took a breath, “You need to leave this area of space and may possibly have a solution to our fuel problem. If that is so then if you would be my crew I could transport you.”

The Aykrusk let out a loud hiss and jumped down from his chair. He flapped his vestigial wings in an agitated fashion and some of the guards looked nervous. Folding them again he glanced at Hegeh then approached Davi, studying him closely. “You could do this? Truly?”

“Probably not.” admitted Davi, “But we’re willing to look into it.”

“Hmmm.” said the Aykrusk non-committaly.

“If this heart thing of yours could be made to work, and that’s a big ‘if’, then you join the Imperium. Then I, as an Imperial officer, help you evacuate this world and transport you all to a place of safety.”

The Aykrusk looked around at the room and his eyes fell on the hand computer that had been presented to him earlier. The words ‘An

*Introduction to the Imperium*' was visible of the screen. He looked back at Davi. Had he intuited the meaning of the title, wandered Smyetx.

“An interesting offer.” the Aykrusk said at last. “Me need time to consider. Go back to your ship. Me will send with you one of my technicians to talk to your technicians.”

With that their audience with the Aykrusk was over.

\* \* \*

**Location: Sampson Hotel, Jewell**

**Date: 123-1116**

The other Droyne studied her own reflection in Smyuetx's eyes as they held each other in a tight embrace. Smyuetx's mouth opened, trembling, but no words came. The only sound, like that made by wet cloth tearing, was the other's knife as it was pushed deeper into the chest. Smyuetx's dead body collapsed onto the plastic sheet the other Droyne

had arranged before their encounter.

The other Droyne, panting heavily, revelled in the exhilaration of the kill. Her knife and hand, her arm, were drenched in gore and she licked the blade slowly ... savouring its slick saltiness.

This moment of dark indulgence over, the other Droyne regarded the corpse in a more business-like fashion. Carefully, so as not to get it covered in blood, she removed the ident chip from around the corpse's neck. The electronic 'dog tags' were the key to establishing and proving identity in the Imperial Navy. A weakness. She inserted it into the waiting computer on the nearby table. A few keystrokes and its very special update program began to weave its magic, replacing Smyuetx's biometric information with that of the other Droyne.

She began the cleanup operation. Methodically removing all traces of what had transpired. If anyone found out while she was cryogenically frozen ...

In addition to the placing of the 'drop sheet', the



plastic sheet that protected the floor from all the blood, her preparations had included bringing a portable fusion incinerator and a wire saw. Piece by piece she fed the corpse into it. It was a tiring job, each piece could be no more than about twenty centimetres long, and absent-mindedly she hummed a little tune while she worked.

Once done she took a quick shower and changed into Smyuetx's spare undress uniform.

Some time later, the computer beeped and she retrieved the modified ident chip, placing it around her own neck. Then the computer, too, disappeared forever into the incinerator. Now everywhere she went she would be identified as Smyuetx and granted the same security accesses.

“Smyuetx is dead.” she declared. “Long live Smyuetx.”

The ‘new’ Smyuetx glanced at the chronograph on the wall. She still had a couple of hours before the appointment at the medical centre. Plenty of time to get rid of the now superfluous incinerator. Her eye spied a menu card for the little cafe near

the hotel. A small cream pastry and a coffee would be delightful, she thought happily.

# 4 Exodus

**Location: Deck 17, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

Davi snuggled back under the bedcovers, luxuriating in the softness supporting his too heavy limbs. Cool silks caressed his skin. His eyes slowly opened and he regarded the diaphanous pastel-coloured veils above him. They seemed familiar yet he didn't think he'd have anything like that in his ...

He bolted upright! He was in the Captain's stateroom, in the Captain's bed, and he was naked.

He vaguely remembered the trip back from the planet, talking with Lieutenant Tam, and feeling very tired.

His sudden movement must have alerted the

occupant of the outer room as a Droyne soon appeared in the doorway bearing a tea tray. He didn't recognise it, it wasn't Petty Officer Smyuetx.

“Ah, you awake now.” it said. “You eat, yes?”

Not waiting for an answer it came into the room and placed the tray carefully on a nearby table. From his vantage point he could see it held a bowl of several egg-like objects, each slightly smaller than a walnut, and an Imperial Navy regulation standard tea bulb in a heater. Wisps of steam were already seeping from the drinking nozzle of the bulb. The Droyne wore a sash across its chest with the Imperial sunburst logo and the letters ASTESEKMYUM ... its name Davi guessed, not sure how to pronounce it. The sash looked hand-made.

“Thank you, ... er-” began Davi.

“ost-a-sek may-hume” supplied Astesekmyum, his male voice rendering the name phonetically. “Lord Othix assigned me be your batsman.”

“Batsman?”

“Yes, that was what Doctor Li said role was

called.” Astesekmyum tilted his head to one side. “He thought it funny. Why?”

Davi sighed.

“Doctor Li has a peculiar sense of humour.” he replied. “Don’t worry about it. How long was I out? What did I miss?”

“Ah, yes, you wait.” said Astesekmyum. He went back to the outer room and returned a moment later carrying Davi’s uniform and a tablet. He hung the uniform on the back of the door, it looked pressed, and handed Davi the tablet. Then he withdrew, closing the door behind him.

Swallowing some tea Davi activated the tablet. It appeared to be loaded with status reports. He quickly scanned them, then went back to re-read key sections in more detail.

He’d been asleep for more than twelve hours. According to Doctor Li’s report his immune system hadn’t fully recovered from the prolonged cold berth sleep and he’d picked up some minor illness whilst on the Droyne colony world. Li had proscribed bed rest.

Davi glanced around and noticed the med-alert monitor beside the bed. The doctor had been keeping an eye on him, then.

And while he had been sleeping Othix had responded to his offer of joining the Imperium with an interesting condition. The crew of the Bard Refuge were to be made honorary members of Othix's oytrip, the Droyne equivalent of a tribe or country. Davi, as acting-Captain, would be in charge of all ship related matters but Othix would retain authority in all 'civilian' matters. That made sense, thought Davi, but the next part made him choke: in recognition of his superior social class Lieutenant Tam would serve as the 'Voice of the Emperor' in any matters that were not directly ship-related. It seemed to be a diplomatic rather than command role yet it made Davi uncomfortable. Sir David Tam had accepted and, with Smyuetx' help, had created an abridged ceremony welcoming the oytrip officially into the Imperium. After which the evacuation of the planet had begun.

In another report Padalecki had apparently had

a long conversation with Othix's technical expert and thought the idea of using their 'Heart of the Machine' to power the jump drives was a possibility worthy of further investigation and testing. He had then set about sealing the hull breaches and repressurising those parts of the ship. Meanwhile as Droyne technicians arrived he had assigned them to inspect the remaining decks of the ship and catalogue needed repairs. In fact 'the remaining decks' meant most of the ship thought Davi wryly.

He reflected that everything seemed to be going quite nicely without him.

Experimentally he bit into one of the egg-like things. It tasted a lot like a hard boiled chicken egg but more creamy. He finished the bowl and washed it down with the last of the tea. Then he quickly washed in the room's small fresher unit and donned the clean uniform.

Leaving Astesekmyum behind Davi made his way to the Main Bridge. It was still out of commission but most of the debris had been swept aside. The hull was sealed but he saw one of the

engineers, Coltan, fussing over where the breach had been.

As Davi approached she came to attention and attempted a salute. A regulation salute was to slap the chest above the heart with a closed fist but with Coltan's arms full of engineering equipment it was half way between that and a shrug. Nevertheless he returned it.

“Well, Coltan, was re-sealing this deck a priority?” he asked.

“Sir. Andy wanted to know what caused the spinal mount to explode and it's easier to inspect without bulky gloves and a vacc suit helmet.”

*Andy?* he thought but let the familiarity go unremarked. “Wasn't that explosion further down the ship than here?”

“Yes, Sir. But we want to check the entire weapon, not just where the immediate problem is.”

Davi regarded her as she stared back, her earnest young eyes peering out from under a mass of unruly blond curls. Painfully cute and with a vulnerability about her that made him want to



reach out and protect her. *Don't you dare hurt her, Andy Padalecki*, he thought. But all he said was "Carry on."

Davi descended in the lift to deck 40 and the Auxiliary Bridge. He wandered where Padalecki was.

\* \* \*

Chief Petty Officer Andy Padalecki was on deck 84, the back of the ship. He surveyed the organised chaos before him. The Droyne colonists had turned the deck into a traffic terminus: as each of their funny little saucer ships brought wave after wave of Droyne and supplies, Lieutenant Tam and Petty Officer Smyuetyx organised them into work details. Some Droyne groups were offloading crates of food and equipment from the saucers and arranging them against a bulkhead. Others were them moving these into the lift where they were taken for storage on other decks. This left a pool of technicians and warriors who were assigned to him.

Padalecki looked down at the two dozen or so expectant faces looking back at him. At least he imagined they were expectant, sometimes with Droyne it was hard to tell.

“Okay,” he started. “I want you in groups of four technicians plus two warriors each. I want-”

He stopped as they all started milling around. In seconds they were in groups of six and he could see that there were two carrying weapons in each group. Actually they appeared to be carrying flamethrowers but Padalecki didn’t want to think about that.

“Er, right.” he resumed. “I want you to go throughout the ship systematically. Start with one team to Deck 1, another team to Deck 2, and so on. When you’re finished with a deck check in with me on the comms and I’ll tell you what the next free deck is.”

He felt like he was talking to a bunch of kids but he wasn’t sure how much they were taking in.

“On each deck I want simple repairs done ... lights, comms, and so on ... and a report of anything

more serious. Any food, data tiles, or mission packs are to be taken to Deck 17. And if you see any creatures then keep away from them and alert me immediately. Don't take any risks, I don't want anyone hurt."

He finished talking and stared at them. They stared back. None of them moved.

"Need a hand there, 'Sparky'?" a voice called from behind him.

He turned to see Doctor Li approaching him.

"Okay, boys and girls." said Li, beaming amiably. He flapped his arms. "Shoo! Shoo!"

The Droyne technicians scattered and headed for the lifts.

"Doctor." acknowledged Padalecki.

"Do you know where all these little guys are gonna live?" asked Li without preamble.

Padalecki looked around. "Well, they'll pretty much fill the ship once they're all aboard. But until we have the ship checked out I've been sending them to the second hanger deck for now."

"That's right, the second hanger deck." said Li,

beaming. “Have you been up there? Recently?”

Padalecki frowned. “Okay, what’s up?”

“If you’ve got a second,” continued Li still beaming, “I got something you’re gonna wanna see.”

Padalecki’s frown deepened.

Li waved him in the direction of an unoccupied lift as if at a formal dance inviting a partner to the floor. They entered and Li punched the button for Deck 71. “To the Bat Cave!” he announced grandiosely.

“Doctor!” bit out Padalecki in a strangled voice. He glanced around but no Droyne seemed to be within earshot and the doors closed.

\* \* \*

**Location: Jewell Naval Base, Jewell**

**Date: 125-1116**

Minka’s brain had stopped working. “Wha-, er, what?” she said.

Padalecki grinned at her. “I said ‘Great!’. It’s about time you people gave me an assignment like this. No disrespect, but I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.” He looked like he’d won the lottery.

“That’s, er, terrific. But why are you so keen to go?” she asked.

“For the challenge. I’m a good engineer, but lately all I seem to do is nurse-maid ships. This is a chance to get into the thick of the action, to make a difference. You know what I mean?”

“I see.” Minka said slowly, still not quite convinced.

“Yeah, the war was fun and all, but since then I’ve done a little bit of training, a little bit of shore duty, then patrol, and patrol, and patrol. Man I’m climbing the walls!”

The way he was bobbing around in his chair while saying this Minka could well believe it. Did he just say the war was ‘fun’?

“You know there’s a good chance you’ll just wake up in a year’s time and nothing will have

happened? The Frozen Watch is a precaution.” she said.

“Yeah, even so-” said Padalecki waving a hand dismissively.

“Okay.” she said guardedly, not sure what else to say.

“And I know it might be physically taxing, too, that’s why I’ve been working out.” he continued. He raised his arm to show his biceps bulging through his uniform. “I lift weights every day, and have a diet high in egg whites.”

Minka had to admit, with his physique he wouldn’t look out of place on a recruitment poster, and his enthusiasm was infectious, if also slightly unnerving. “Right,” she said, marshalling her thoughts. “I’ll book you in for 15 hundred tomorrow for prep and freeze. How does that sound?”

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 71, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

As the lift door slid open Andy Padalecki was confronted with a terrifying site. A haze of hot smoke wafted over them and his first thoughts were that there had been multiple explosions. Packing crates and blankets were strewn everywhere across the two-story hanger deck, and there was a cacophony of chirping and chattering Droyne running back and forth. Hurriedly he opened a comms link to the bridge on his hand computer. “Fire alert on deck 71!” he stammered.

Within the enclosed spaces of a spaceship, fire was a major fear. It not only destroyed material but consumed precious oxygen, and the resources to fight fire were often in limited supply.

“Hey relax, ‘Sparky’.” said Li quietly.

Confused, Padalecki glanced at him, then back to the scene before them.

On second look this wasn’t the aftermath of some terrible accident, this was a refugee camp.

The crates and blankets were shelters ... tents and lean-tos ... arranged into what Padalecki supposed were family groups. Some of the groups had actual camp fires where Droyne appeared to be cooking. Most of the running about seemed to be kids.

Padalecki's hand computer chimed. "How bad is it, Chief?" demanded their pilot, Sublieutenant Grey. Her voice was tinny in the small speakers.

"What are they doing?" Padalecki asked, half to himself, still aghast at the site. "They're not some bunch of low tech primitives. They know how to act aboard a starship."

"I know that, but-" Li replied, his voice trailing off in a shrug.

They could see three Droyne hurrying over towards them.

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Padalecki.

"You're the engineer, you tell me: will life support cope with this?"

"Chief, respond!" came Grey's voice again, more urgently.



Padalecki raised his hand computer and keyed open a channel. “Er, possible false alarm. Give me ten to assess the situation and I’ll report back. Padalecki out.”

The approaching Droyne drew up and snapped off passable salutes. “Greetings, honourable sirs.” said one.

“Hello.” answered Padalecki slowly. “What are you doing in here? You know there are many unoccupied staterooms on other decks.”

“Oh yes, Sir.” said the one that was evidently the group’s spokesman. It bore no identification sash. “But they not suitable, yet. They will need-”

“Remodelling.” prompted one of the Droyne companions.

“Yes. They will need remodelling.” finished the first Droyne.

Padalecki wasn’t sure what ‘remodelling’ entailed but he didn’t like the sound of it. “But they have beds and wash facilities and storage cupboards ...”

“Yes, but they too small.” replied the Droyne.

“Huh?” articulated Doctor Li, caught by surprise. “Well how much space to you need?”

Padalecki thought Li was going to add more, possibly some undiplomatic comment but the Droyne jumped in. “We live in *tyafelm* ... in sixes, like a family.”

Padalecki looked at Li. “I guess a standard stateroom would be a bit cramped for six of them.

Li shrugged begrudgingly. “Okay, so you came here while the crew staterooms were remodelled. What’s with the camp fires?”

“Our young need feeding.” the Droyne spokesman said simply.

Padalecki thought that made sense, but ... “Yeah, but all this smoke isn’t really any good for the ship’s life support.”

“Is no problem.” insisted the Droyne. “We close air vents to trap smoke here.”

“Why?” asked Padalecki.

“Your food recyclers are crap.”

“Excuse me?”

“Completely ka-ka.” volunteered the third

Droyne who had been silent up until now.

“He farmer.” explained the first Droyne.

“Does he have a name?” asked Padalecki.

“He Lurtpyu.” said the Droyne. “And me being called Irtruff.”

“Me also am Yaintreld.” added the second Droyne.

To Padalecki it sounded like ‘lart-pew’, ‘ear-truff’, and ‘yin-trell-d’.

Lurtpyu went on “We clean out vats, restock with new algae, in time we have new food.”

“So how’s the smoke come into this?” asked Li.

Lurtpyu glared at Li as if he were a child failing school. “Not smoke. Smoke by-product of fire. Wood fire make carbon. Carbon make filters.”

“He means they’re making new charcoal filters for the food vats.” added Li helpfully.

“I got it.” snapped back Padalecki.

Padalecki looked around the hanger again with a new eye. Actually, he thought, charcoal filters would make quite a good substitute for the synthetic membrane that was likely to be in short

supply. He wished they had made the charcoal on the planet below, but while they remained in orbit they could replenish the lost oxygen. As for the smoke itself that would settle out in time but the hanger would be a dirty place. On the other hand it wasn't like they needed it for anything.

"I guess this should be alright." he said at last. "Has anyone been assigned to, er, remodelling?"

"Me think not." said Irtruf. "Lord Tam said priority was inspection and basic repairs."

"*Lord Tam?*" asked Li, his voice hardening.

"You mean 'Sir Tam' or 'Lieutenant Tam' don't you?" asked Padalecki.

"Apologies." responded Irtruf nervously. "Translation not always clear."

"Oh, I think that was pretty clear." muttered Li.

\* \* \*

Entering the Auxiliary Bridge Davi saw a dozen Droyne, all wearing sashes like Astesekmyum's, manning various workstations. Petty Officer Kralik

appeared to be lecturing a small group about workstations. In the Captain's chair slumped Sublieutenant Grey.

“Sublieutenant?” said Davi quietly.

For a moment there was no response but then, time delayed, Grey jumped and looked round. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed.

“Good gods!” exclaimed Davi at the apparition, “What happened to you?”

“The doctor said you picked up some minor local infection whilst on the planet. Something contagious that got past the probiotic treatment we had whilst in cold berth.” slurred Grey. “He said you should be all right after a good sleep but I had to stay awake until you were back up. He gave me some stimulants but I think they make me feel worse. I think everyone else has had a sleep and recovered.”

“Then the doctor doesn't think it's anything to do with the illness that ...” Davi's voice trailed off. He felt guilty about Hasaan.

“No.” said Grey. “That was my worry, too. But

no.”

“Then you should get to bed now.” said Davi. Then, in a louder and more formal voice said, “I relieve you, Sublieutenant Grey.”

“I am relieved.” intoned Grey following standard protocol. They saluted and she shuffled off.

Davi dropped into the Captain’s chair and was pleased to see that the chair’s computer circuits had picked up on this ritual and had logged his resumption of active command. He started to scan his workstation’s display for new developments but there didn’t appear to be any. Strictly speaking he should have had Grey give him a verbal report before he relieved her but he didn’t think she was in a fit state. He contented himself with the bridge log instead.

It wasn’t long before Chief Petty Officer Whoohsh Hegeh appeared at his side. “Sir?”

“Good morning, Mr Hegeh.” replied Davi, pleased to see the large reptilian.

“May I introduce you to your guard?”

“My what?”

“Your guard.” said Hegeh gesturing to the six Droyne warriors who’d just stepped up beside him. Large by Droyne standards but Hegeh dwarfed them. Each was armed with a short multi-barrelled rifle like those he’d seen on the planet below.

For a moment Davi wondered if he was still asleep and this was a dream.

“Did I ask for one?” he asked hesitantly.

“With the complements of Lord Othix.” explained Hegeh.

“Ah. Well, at ease, men.” Davi ordered. He wasn’t sure what a Droyne at ease looked like so said nothing further.

Now, he thought. What’s next?

\* \* \*

As he’d already done a dozen times Ghraangk climbed into the maintenance crawlway, this time on deck 56. His current task was to help diagnose the problem with the spinal mount weapon. This

meant he had to visit each substation along its length and match the readout of the substation's local computer against similar readouts on the bridge. Normally such a laborious job was unnecessary but according to the bridge readouts the weapon had been fine prior to it exploding. He also had to make a visual inspection of the substation for any obvious signs of damage. Activating the display panel in front of him he started to check off its settings against those in his hand computer. Everything checked okay. He was about to deactivate the display when he saw it: protruding slightly from the panel's tile reader slot was the edge of a data tile. What was that doing there?

Gingerly, Ghraangk ejected the tile and turned it over in his paw. It had no label or marking.

He inserted it into his hand computer and examined its digital contents. It held a command sequence, a series of high level computer instructions, and Ghraangk followed its logic. It seemed to be instructing the substation's computer



to report default factory settings instead of current settings. Ghraangk's hackles rose as he reset the panel and saw some of the readings jump. According to the new readings if the weapon was fired the energy beam produced would short out at this point. The command sequence made sense in only one context: sabotage!

He sniffed the air. A human had been in here recently. Was one of his crewmates a saboteur? Why?

Feeling vulnerable, confined in the crawlway, he quickly slipped the tile safely into his toolkit and edged back out into the corridor.

As he straightened he heard the unmistakable click of a pistol's safety being thumbed off from behind him. Without thinking he dropped his toolkit and propelled hard off the wall, a shot exploded through the air where his head had been a split second before. He barrelled into his assailant and they both fell to the deck in a sprawling heap. As Ghraangk and the unknown human struggled, Ghraangk managed to get hold of the other's wrist,

preventing the other from bringing the gun round for a second shot. He sensed his opponent reaching for something else, was it a knife? Ghraangk clamped his jaws around the human's throat and bit hard. Hot blood spurting into his mouth and he felt the trachea give way as he tore deeper. His opponent tried to scream but it was too late and after a few more moments he lay very still. Ghraangk remained frozen for a moment longer, then rolled the dead body off him.

Still panting heavily, and with blood dripping from his jowls, he looked at the human. He didn't recognise him, this was someone new. The dead man was bald, heavy set, and on the Imperial Marine uniform he wore was stencilled the name 'DAVIES'.

He glanced up and into the eyes of a second stranger several meters away.

This second stranger, also a human, darted through a bulkhead door. Before Ghraangk could reach it it was closed, sealed and locked.

Ghraangk didn't mind, he grinned in

satisfaction. This was the entrance to one of the ship's numerous missile bays. The only entrance. The stranger was trapped.

He called the bridge. "Intruder alert on deck 56."

\* \* \*

**Location: Sunbright Boys School, El D'Nath**  
**Date: 214-1095**

Andy Padalecki's muscles burned. He liked the sensation and continued to pound the punchbag mercilessly, dancing around in a manner that might seem random to the untrained eye. As the rain of blows continued he slowly circled the punchbag like a predator. The school championship final was in three days time where he'd face his final opponent.

"Andy!" came a shout from across the school gymnasium, echoing off the high ceiling.

He paused and looked up. Giaus Reubin, the Physical Education teacher was strolling towards

him, not looking happy.

*Oh-oh*, thought Andy, *what have I done wrong?*

“Yes, Mr Reubin?” he asked worriedly.

Reubin stopped in front of him. “I have some sad news, kid.” he began.

Andy wiped some of the sweat from his face on his forearm.

“Your opponent has forfeited the match.” said Reubin.

“Uh?” Andy articulated in surprise. He thought back to the last time he’d met his opponent. ‘Garr’, as everyone called him, was a feisty Vargr student. Cock-sure and confident that come the match he’d tear Andy to pieces. Andy couldn’t imagine Garr would chicken out.

“The town patrol picked young Garr up last night for shop-lifting.” explained Reubin. “He’s been suspended from school. As such he’s no longer eligible to fight this Sixday.”

Andy tried to take this in. There must have been some mistake. Despite their rivalry both Garr and himself had been nominated honour students.

Garr wouldn't have thrown that away would he?

"It's not the way I would have wanted it," continued Reubin, "but you are now the school boxing champion by default. Congratulations."

"But I didn't win." said Andy dumbly.

"Hey, you beat all your other opponents fair and square. No one can take that away from you, you deserve the title."

"I guess ..."

Andy thought about it for a while. "Where is Garr now?" he asked.

"You stay away from him, Andy. He's bad news. And that goes double for his friends. Most likely they're the ones who led him into this mess. You stay away from them, you hear?"

"Yes, Sir." said Andy dutifully.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 56, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

Ghraangk's call brought people from all over the ship. First on the scene were Chief Padalecki and Doctor Li. They were quickly followed by Lieutenant Commander Davi and half a dozen armed Droyne warriors, and then Petty Officer Malahyde.

Instinctively Doctor Li dropped down by the body on the floor and checked for life signs. But no one needed a medical degree to know there was nothing to be done.

“There’s one in here.” said Ghraangk, triumphantly nodding towards the sealed door of the missile bay and brandishing the pistol he’d recovered after the fight.

“He’s wearing an Imperial uniform.” observed Padalecki, looking at the dead body in wonder.

Davi stared at Ghraangk and his blood soaked uniform. “Okay, Ghraangk. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on, who’s in the bay, and who that is.”

“I was attacked by that one,” Ghraangk gestured to the body, “Then his friend jumped in the bay. That’s all I know.”

“Was it really necessary to kill him?” asked Li, disgusted.

Ghraangk grinned, showing bloody teeth. “He asked for it, Doctor.”

Padalecki could see that Ghraangk was pleased. The Vargr didn’t know who these intruders were but in killing one and trapping the other he’d been protecting his shipmates, his pack. Evidently the significance of the dead man’s uniform hadn’t registered with the Vargr.

“Ghraangk!” snapped Padalecki, “Is that the way you deliver a report to a superior officer?”

Ghraangk quickly came to attention. “No, Sir. Sorry, Sir.”

“But what were they doing when you first saw them?” asked Davi.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see them before they attacked.” explained Ghraangk.

Padalecki’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why

would an Imperial Marine attack and Imperial Navy engineer? What were you doing?”

“I didn’t do nothing!” protested Ghraangk. “I was checking the spinal mount just like you’d asked.”

Padalecki looked round. This was a weaponry deck, one of several. While the Bard Refuge’s primary weapon was the massive spinal mount particle accelerator, she carried a secondary armament of numerous missile bays. Four on this deck alone. In this case the ‘bays’ were in reality oversized turrets each with its own magazine. Before them was the heavily reinforced door of one such bay.

Davi took a deep breath. “Right, first things first. We can’t leave the other one in there. Chief? Get this door open.”

As Padalecki checked the door panel and keyed in an override code, the Droyne warriors readied their odd rifles.

It didn’t really need an engineer. With the security permissions they had encoded for



themselves the day before, it only took a moment and the door slide aside.

Startled, a young woman in Navy uniform on the other side looked up from what she was doing. Except for the short cut of her blond hair she could have passed for Pale Coltan. Seeing the Droyne with their guns pointed at her, a look of bitter resolve flashed across her face as she thrust her hands back into to open missile on the workbench before her.

“No!” cried Padalecki as he realised what she intended to do. “Stop! Wait-”

The Droyne all fired. It was like a musket volley on a low tech world. Six short rifles roared in the confined space again and again, and then were silent.

Padalecki, his ears still ringing, waved away the hazy cloud of acrid smoke to better see what had just happened. They all peered in. The girl lay a couple of meters away from where she'd been standing, like a discarded rag doll, broken. Her eyes wide and lifeless stared at nothing. Several

points on her body were blossoming red where the bullets had torn into her. Her uniform rank insignia was that of an Ensign and her name tag read ‘AMUIR’.

For a while no one said anything. No one wanted to be the first to break the uncomfortable silence. The Droyne, inscrutable, scanned their guns for other targets.

Davi stepped over the threshold and looked at the open missile, she'd been about to detonate its nuclear warhead. Padalecki wasn't sure if he was angry or relieved at the Droynes' quick action. *Why?* he thought, *if only she'd talked to them.* But it was Davi's fault, he knew, Davi was in charge, it had happened on his watch.

“Chief?” Davi said quietly, almost a whisper. “Secure that missile. And check the rest of this bay. Doctor?” Davi and Li stared at each other. “Find out what you can.” he finished.

Padalecki and Li both nodded without saying a word.

\* \* \*

After Davi and the Droyne warriors had left, taking Ghraangk with them, Doctor Li had gone in search of a couple of stretchers and some assistants. This left Malahyde to help Padalecki in disarming the missile warhead.

“You don’t have to behave like Lieutenant Tam, Chief.” said Malahyde as they worked. “You know he’s a racist, don’t you?”

“Marc, has it occurred to you that the Lieutenant might have a point?” shot back Padalecki. “Look, I know you like Ghraangk but he’s a Vargr. I know about Vargrs, I grew up around them, they’re pack animals.”

“So?”

“So, they follow the pack leader. But they have no moral backbone of their own, they can easily be led astray. That’s why so many of them end up as pirates, or just plain criminals. That’s why most of the governments in the Vargr Extents are nothing more than very successful crime gangs. And that’s

why you have to constantly show them who's boss. Keep them on the straight and narrow.”

“Man, you are wrong.” said Malahyde upset. “The Vargr I've met are better than that. And how's their system any different from human democracy?”

“Hah! I rest my case.” snorted Padalecki. “Yes, many Imperial member worlds are democracies, but just as many aren't. And those that are, they have problems. The Imperium isn't a democracy, you support it don't you?”

Malahyde was silent for a moment. “Different isn't necessarily worse. Or better.” he said at last.

“Okay, look at the Lieutenant and the Doctor.” went on Padalecki. “They're from the same world: Efate. There you have a large, prosperous, central authority governed population. And you have a small group of democracy inspired malcontents who support terrorism. The Lieutenant comes from the central authority, the Doctor comes from the malcontents. You tell me, who's the better officer?”

“I don’t know, I kind a’ like the Doc.”

“But he has no discipline. And in a situation like we’re in that’s dangerous.”

Padalecki could see Malahyde was unconvinced.

Their work done the missile casing snapped shut. It slid off the workbench on runners back into its position in the nearby rack.

Padalecki turned to regard the body of Ensign Amuir, still lying on the floor behind them. He found the similarity to Coltan disconcerting.

“There’s a Naval officer dead here.” he went on, more quietly. “And a Marine dead out in the corridor. Why?”

Malahyde had no answer.

“An accident? A case of mistaken identity? What did Ghraangk do to provoke this?”

Malahyde bristled at this slur on his friend’s name but still had nothing to say.

“If we’re going to survive this, if we’re going to make it home alive, then we need to be more disciplined, more professional.”

“Well, good luck with that, ‘Sparky’.” said Li,

returning with a stretcher and a throng of Droyne workers.

“Doctor.” acknowledged Padalecki, stepping out of his way.

The Droyne chirped to themselves and they began laboriously manhandling the corpse onto the stretcher.

As Padalecki and Malahyde left the bay Padalecki noticed Ghraangk’s toolkit lying abandoned on the floor and he went to pick it up.

\* \* \*

**Location: INS Noel Mungale, Yorbund**  
**Date: 090-1104**

Andy Padalecki had just finished duty on the mid-watch and was alone in the crew common room. As befitted this time of the morning (ship’s time) the lighting was turned down low.

He stirred the bowl of macaroni cheese without enthusiasm, watching as a few sticky pieces

momentarily clung to the side before falling back in. Actually the macaroni was just reshaped food cubes, bland algae matter from the ship's organic recycling tanks, and he didn't want to think what the 'cheese' sauce was made of. He wasn't sure but he didn't think cheese was supposed to fizz on the tongue.

Despite the fine cuisine Padalecki felt content. His recent promotion to Petty Officer Third Class elevated him above mere general maintenance and recognised him as a true engineer, responsible for the ship's drives.

The INS Noel Mungale was a good, albeit small ship. Euphemistically called a 'fleet escort' she was alone in the Yorbund system, on routine anti-piracy patrol.

The door slid open and the ship's Executive Officer, a Vargr called Lieutenant Uekdhaagh, padded into the room. Uekdhaagh ignored Padalecki as he retrieved his own bowl of food from the dispenser and peeled back the lid.

"Macaroni cheese again?" he growled in

disdain.

Clutching the bowl he dropped into a seat opposite Padalecki and attempted a human smile.

“Your first pip.” he said indicating Padalecki’s new rank insignia. “How does it feel?”

“It feels good, Sir.” Padalecki responded.

Uekdhaagh started to snuffle his food.

After a moment Padalecki ventured, “I don’t get it.”

Uekdhaagh looked up from his bowl in question.

“Why are there so many pirates along this stretch of border?” Padalecki continued.

“You mean ‘why do so many Vargr become pirates?’”

Padalecki’s face reddened. “I meant no disrespect, Sir.”

“Of course not.” said Uekdhaagh. “You merely wish to understand the enemy.”

Padalecki stayed silent, unable to read the officer.

The Lieutenant ran his tongue round his lips,



retrieving the last gloop of ‘cheese’ sauce. “Vargr like to follow strong leaders.” he said at last. “It doesn’t matter if the leader is good or bad just as long as they’re strong. It’s as simple as that.”

“But most of the nations in the Vargr Extents have good leaders.” Padalecki continued.

“Maybe. But strength diminishes with distance. Like light or gravity.”

“I suppose.”

Uekdhaagh regarded him. “What use is an absent leader when you have someone in your face saying to do a thing or not to do a thing?”

“But you’re a Vargr and you follow the Emperor, like me. Isn’t he ‘absent?’” pointed out Padalecki. “Why aren’t you a pirate?”

“But I don’t follow the Emperor. I follow the Captain. And as she’s not a pirate then I’m not a pirate.”

“Oh.” said Padalecki, digesting this piece of information

Uekdhaagh belched amiably and went back to finishing his food.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 84, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

As Davi exited through the lift doors he dismissed his guard detail. Reluctantly the big Droyne complied and stayed in the lift.

Across the impromptu traffic terminus he could see Lieutenant Tam, surrounded by a dozen bickering Droyne. As he approached he caught Tam's eye and angled towards a door that led to a maintenance area.

Moments later Tam followed him in and closed the door behind them, shutting out some of the hubbub.

“Sir?” said Tam.

Davi regarded Tam, who looked a little frazzled.

“How's it going out there, Mr Tam?”

Tam blew out his cheeks. “Well,” he began, “we've got most of the families onboard now. And when they said there were a thousand colonists that

didn't include their children. There are five hundred of them. But I think we can manage. Overall these Droyne are fast learners, Chief Padalecki has got some of them organised into engineering teams, so that should help a bit. There's still a fair amount of supplies to load, plus this 'Heart of the Machine' thing. I'm storing its fuel in the forward hanger bay. I suspect it's going to take months before we have any proper order around here."

"Fuel?" asked Davi.

"Yeah, some sort of crystal rock stuff. A bit like lumps of quartz. Strange, but handling's ease, unlike liquids or gas."

"Okay. How are you getting on with Smyuextx?"

"Good. She's been invaluable. Did you know she has training as a liaison officer? Anyway, she started out as my translator but whether they're learning our language or I'm picking up theirs, I don't need her in that capacity anymore."

"That's what I guessed." said Davi. "You should put her on making some kind of induction

video ... safety aboard ship, no go areas, some basic protocols, that sort of thing.”

“Hm, good idea.” admitted Tam.

“Meanwhile, I should tell you: there’s been an ‘incident’.”

Tam raised a querying eyebrow.

Davi quickly filled his second in command in on recent events. He could tell Tam was, by turns, surprised, alarmed, but then thoughtful.

“You know,” said Tam after Davi had finished, “I might have a piece of the puzzle. Earlier in the day we noticed the security surveillance system on this deck had been activated. We thought it might have been a glitch or some of our new friends fiddling with something.”

“Go on.” prompted Davi.

“Well, we haven’t checked all the Frozen Watch compartments yet. Those we have have been empty. But what if one of the unchecked compartments held a security team. They wake up after us, and, because there’s power, are able to access internal sensors. What they’d see was a

largely deserted ship being boarded by hordes of Droyne. Maybe they intended to scuttle the ship rather than loose it?”

“I’d thought of that.” said Davi. “But the first act of sabotage was before the Droyne arrived.”

“Hmm. That we’ve found so far.” admitted Tam, a bit disappointed.

Davi hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Lieutenant, what’s with this ‘Voice of the Emperor’?”

Tam squared his shoulders. “Othix didn’t want to give up his authority over his oytrip and I didn’t want him speaking for the Imperium when we meet other people. This was a way for him to keep his authority over the other Droyne but we represent the Imperium not him.”

Davi blinked at him. “Will that work?”

“Othix only has that data tile of Smyuetx’s to go on when it comes to the Imperium. But it seemed to make sense to him. Just as long as it shuts him up.”

“Very well.” said Davi. He still felt unease.

“By the way, where is Ghraangk now?” asked Tam.

I left him on the Bridge, under Hegeh’s gaze. He can help out there until we figure out what’s what.”

“But Hegeh isn’t an officer. What happened to Sublieutenant Grey?”

“I relieved her. She wasn’t medically fit.” Davi frowned. “Do you have a problem with Hegeh?”

“Like I say, he isn’t an officer. He can’t run the Bridge.”

“Given our numbers I didn’t have a lot of choice. You’d prefer I left one of the Droyne in charge?”

Tam didn’t have an answer.

“So, how long before we can be underway?” asked Davi.

“Hard to say. It largely depends on how soon we can get this ‘Heart of the Machine’ thing running. Say another day to finish loading.”

Davi mulled this over.

Tam continued, “That’s not taking into account

whether we find any more Frozen Watch compartments, or uninvited guests, or acts of sabotage, or anyone else changes like Hasaan did.”

“Still much to do.” agreed Davi.

“Maybe those two you found had the right idea.”

“What do you mean?”

“Blowing up the ship. It’ll be miracle if we make it back. It’s more likely that the Droyne will take the ship for themselves.”

“You don’t trust them?” asked Davi a little surprised.

“You do?” countered Tam.

They were both silent for a moment.

“Sometimes you just have to have a little faith.” said Davi.

“In miracles?” asked Tam.

\* \* \*

Coltan stood back from the resealed hull plate she’d just checked, and sighed. She was exhausted.

It was true she hadn't slept yet, despite the Doctor's orders, but she had always been able to pull an all-nighter before. She felt cold seeping into her bones.

Checking her hand computer she saw that all her assigned tasks were actually complete. She deserved a break. Updating her status on the little computer she started off down the corridor. She walked past several stateroom doors then, at random, tried one. It was not locked.

It had been a female officer's stateroom. *Score!*, thought Coltan.

She locked the door, crossed the room, and pulled open the fresher unit. The shower reservoir was full. Shedding her uniform unceremoniously on the floor she dialled up the shower temperature to its maximum setting.

Later. She stood in the middle of the stateroom. She'd found clothing and effects abandoned by the room's previous occupant that seemed to fit her ... the sleep gown was clean and she'd donned it. Examining herself in the full



length mirror she tried to imagine Andy looking at her. Would he find her pleasing? He seemed to like her.

She regarded herself critically. Her breasts were too small, she decided, letting the gown fall open. But then, did he like big breasts? Many men did but not all it seemed. She paused to look more closely in the mirror ... was one larger than the other? Or was that just the light? She'd never noticed before.

There was a mottled smudge on her forearm. *And what is that?* she worried. *An oil stain?*

Coltan rubbed the patch in case it would come off.

It undulated!

# 5 Jump

**Location: Deck 84, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

Andy Padalecki had just returned to deck 84 when he ran into acting-Captain Davi. Much of the activity from before had died down; the room was starting to look like the aftermath of a carnival or mass rally of some kind. The floor was littered with broken bits of crate and other detritus from the arrival of the colonists. Despite this return to calm Davi, looking pensive and lost in thought, didn't notice him standing there right away. He supposed Davi must have had a lot on his mind but wondered if there was anything fresh to worry about. This mission certainly had more than its fair share of

problems and mysteries.

“Ah, there you are, Chief.” said Davi, eventually.

“Sir.” Padalecki acknowledged.

“So. I didn’t get a chance to ask you earlier, how is everything? Are you making good progress?”

Padalecki hesitated. Was Davi asking for a proper report or just making chit-chat? “I think things are going well, Sir.” he said, trying to gauge Davi’s reaction in case more was needed.

“Good. I’d like to have a staff meeting in two hours time. Can you be ready to report on the ship’s status by then?”

“I think so, Sir.” he said. He hoped he would be ready, he needed to talk to his team before he could be sure.

“It’ll be in the Captain’s day room at-” Davi consulted his hand computer, “- fifteen hundred hours.”

“Yes, Sir. Er, can I ask where Spacehand Ghraangk is?” He held up Ghraangk’s toolkit that

he was still carrying. He'd last seen the Vargr leaving the weapon's deck with Davi and he needed him to continue working on the spinal mount weapon.

“After I took a statement from him I told him to find a fresh uniform and get cleaned up.” explained Davi. “He should be back on duty about now.”

They exchanged nods and, as Davi walked away, Padalecki reviewed the outstanding messages on his hand computer. Scrolling through them he noticed Coltan was taking a personal break. She'd flagged her tasks as all complete but he still wanted to talk to her.

Padalecki thought about Coltan. She was a quiet one, shy, but they'd worked well together on the generator. She seemed able to anticipate his needs as they worked. He also found her quite attractive and he considered getting a food pack for them to share. No, there wasn't time now. After the meeting perhaps. Still, he should talk to her before the meeting to get her input.

There was another outstanding message on his

hand computer, the colony leader, Lord Othix, required a 'throne room': somewhere where he could hold audiences and conduct colony business. Padalecki thought about the hanger deck, now converted into a refugee camp of sorts, but decided that would probably be considered inappropriate. The truth was that just now Padalecki would be happy for Othix to stay far far away. He flipped through some of the survey reports. According to one report, deck 1...the top of the ship, furthest away from where he stood ... was empty. Apparently it was just a large lounge underneath a giant observation dome. Perfect. He attached a note to the request and sent it on to Smyuextx to deal with.

His thoughts returned to Coltan and, rechecking his hand computer, he saw she was on deck 25. He was pleased to see the ship's internal sensors were even able to identify the room she was in. He headed off in that direction.

\* \* \*

Coltan sobbed as she desperately rubbed at the spot.

She remembered Abdul Hasaan. Yesterday, when they had awoken from cold berth, he had been with them. Half a day later he had become ill. And then he'd been killed by those who were supposed to be his comrades and his body thrown out the airlock without a proper burial or anyone to mourn him. Would they be just as callous with her?

Blinking back the tears she tried to focus, she couldn't see any sign of the spot now. Had it been an oil stain after all? Had she imagined it moving? She was very tired.

She half collapsed on the edge of the bed, drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them tightly, rocking back and forth as the adrenaline rush subsided.

Minutes passed as she regained control. Straightening out she re-examined her arm. The skin was scratched raw and had started to bleed ... but otherwise looked normal.

“Silly bitch!” she muttered to herself and gave a

big sniff, “Now you’re seeing things.”

She dried her eyes on the sleeve of the sleep gown she was wearing. Then, retrieving the regulation first aid kit from the wall, she set about dressing her injury. As she worked to clean herself up the word ‘krinaytsyu’ floated into her mind ... it was Droyne for voluntary death. If she were infected could she kill herself for the good of her tribe and spare them the task?

Her mind wandered back to Andy Padalecki. She liked him. She thought he might like her. But was that a good thing or bad? If she was infected and they had to kill her would it be worse to be killed by a friend? Would he be the one to do it or would he just stand by and let someone else do it?

“I am not sick. I am not sick. I am not sick.” she addressed the empty room through gritted teeth as if pure determination alone would have made a difference.

Could she trust him not to hurt her? Could she trust him to do the right thing? And why couldn’t that be the same?

“Get some rest, girl.” she ordered herself.

She set her hand computer to mute, dimmed the room lighting, and crawled into bed exhausted.

\* \* \*

**Location: Kendle City, Jewell**

**Date: 300-1115**

Coltan shrank under Michelle’s angry glare. Their shared apartment had seemed cosy when they’d moved in together six months before. It had a living area with a sofa and kitchenette, a bathroom, and a bedroom. Now she could see it was too small: there was no place to be alone in it.

“But I can’t go out tonight.” she protested weakly, “I have to be on duty in six hours.”

“You can skip a sleep period once in a while.” shot back Michelle. “What is it the Marines say? *You can sleep when you’re dead.*”

“Well, I’m not a Marine.” Coltan said firmly.

“No. And you’re no fun either.” Michelle



stepped across the living room to the front door space.

“Is that all you care about?” asked Coltan exasperated.

“Of course not, love.” said Michelle in a more conciliatory tone. “But we get one go at this crazy life and I wanted to share it all with you.”

Coltan noticed the past tense. “And I want to share my life with you, too.” she said. “I just can’t keep up with you all the time, is all.”

Michelle turned and pulled her jacket out of the closet. As she put it on she said casually “Well I didn’t want to say anything but you’re not looking as fit now as when we first met.”

“What?! Are saying I’m getting fat?” Coltan was surprised. She thought she kept her body in good trim.

“I don’t mind, you’re still pretty good looking. But you have to grab life with gusto and hang on with both arms. I understand if you’re too tired to keep up.”

Coltan was silent. She looked at her reflection

side-on in the hall mirror.

“Look, love.” said Michelle pausing. “Do you want this relationship to work or not?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I have to live my life large, not be held back by you all the time.”

“I’m holding you back?” said Coltan meekly. A revelation: she knew you had to work at a relationship, and she had been tired a lot lately. Had she been failing them? Was this Michelle’s way of trying to get them over their slump?

Michelle sighed. “Oh, come on.” she cajoled, “You have to give a little to get a little. Know what I mean?” She put an arm around Coltan’s shoulders. “Come out with me tonight, we’ll have a good time, put the spark back into things. And tomorrow you can sign up for that fitness club that opened up in the next block. You’ll be feeling your old self in no time.”

Coltan was glad Michelle cared for her so much. She must try harder for both their sakes. Taking a deep breath she flashed Michelle a winning smile

and said simply “Let’s go!”

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 25, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

Padalecki arrived outside the stateroom his hand computer had indicated. Crew compartments were divided into staterooms using simple partition walls, the individual room doors were neither airtight nor particularly sound-proof. There was no sound coming from inside this stateroom.

He pressed the door’s entry plate.

He heard the buzzer sound within the room but beyond that there was no response.

“Pale?” he called lightly through the door.

Still nothing. He rechecked his hand computer: she was supposedly inside.

“Pale?” he called out again, louder.

This time there was a response. He heard a muffled banging and then a voice answered, “Off

duty.”

Padalecki paused for a moment. She was certainly entitled to some downtime unless there was something urgent. He had nothing that justified this intrusion, did he? He remembered Hasaan had disappeared off into a stateroom to transform into one of those creatures and he imagined that happening here: her clear skin moving, ripping apart as vile tentacles corrupted and consumed her from within ...

“Coltan, open the door for a minute.” he ordered.

He heard what sounded like swearing followed by “Go away!”

But he was committed now. He had to see if she was okay. “Coltan, I’m giving you an order: Open this door.”

“Why?”

Padalecki stepped back in surprise. Technically, this was now insubordination. She hadn’t seemed the type, what was going on? Gulping he replied, “Pale, I’m worried about you. I just want to see

you're okay.”

“I'm sorry. I'm just really tired. I need to get some sleep.”

“No, Pale.” he didn't like talking through a door. “I'm taking you to the Doc. Last chance: are you going to come voluntarily or do I force the door?”

He waited apprehensively. Ironically, these simple partition doors posed more of a barrier than the weapons bay door he'd opened earlier: these were purely mechanical, no electronics to override. He was still carrying Ghraangk's toolkit and he looked at it, considering. But eventually he heard fiddling with the latch and the door opened.

Coltan stood there. She looked normal, but the sleep gown she wore emphasised her ashen expression. She was trembling, Padalecki noticed. Then he saw the look of betrayal in her eyes.

He reached forward to help her. “I ... I ...” he stammered desperately.

She shrugged him away angrily. “Let's get this over with.” she said icily and brushed passed him.

\* \* \*

Lord Othix, aykrusk of the Droyne oytrip, surveyed the large room that made up the entirety of deck 1. While most of the INS Bard Refuge was shaped like a brick, several decks at the front formed a goose neck, circular in cross-section, and topped by an observation dome. Thus deck 1 was circular, over twenty meters across, with thick carpet fitted throughout. Indents in the carpet showed where once furniture had been. The domed ceiling, ten meters high in the centre, formed a window out onto space: the globe of their former world filled half the sky. There was a certain majesty to the room that appealed to Othix.

For too long they had cowered beneath the surface of their benighted world, he thought. But now, with these powerful humans added to the oytrip, it was time for true Droyne to resume their place amongst the stars. Let the humans grub around below, here he could see heavens.

He waited until Smyuetx, the human's go-

between, was distracted elsewhere. “Where is Nemuk?” he demanded to his aide behind him, not bothering to turn around.

“He attends Heart of the Machine, Lord.” answered an aide.

Yes, he thought, their side of the bargain with the humans. Not for the first time he wondered what circumstance had left such a large ship in the hands of so few. Still, if his Leader of Engineers could get the Heart plumbed in to this crude vessel then it could be their salvation. He turned his attention back to the present and the ever present aide. “Then you tell me. Is room suitable?”

“Yes, Lord. Most suitable.” replied the aide.

Othix’ ears picked up a note of glee in the aide’s voice. “You have something to tell me?”

“We find control wires in floor. This room meant to be secondary Bridge, but humans maybe change mind, seal over wires and build Bridge elsewhere.”

“Yes.” said Othix. He knew the Auxiliary Bridge, now the only Bridge, was a duplicate of the

smashed original Main Bridge. That had seemed a little extravagant. It now appeared the original builders had initially considered a more humble Auxiliary Bridge here on deck 1. “Control wires?”

“Basic controls only.” admitted the aide, confirming Othix’ supposition. “Simple helm and navigation, basic engineering, some tactical.”

This was interesting, thought Othix. This had ... possibilities.

“Can access control wires?” he asked.

“Yes, Lord. And make workstations with parts found elsewhere.”

Othix was pleased but puzzled. “Do humans not know their ship?”

“Ship old. Perhaps older than some humans. Ship change over years. Maybe these humans not know original design.”

Othix contemplated this. *These humans were strange. Were they so honest, so gullible? If they were then that could endanger the oytrip.* “We control ship from here?”

Now it was the aide’s turn to be circumspect.



“Maybe.” he said at last. “But need to convince ship computer.”

*Ah*, thought Othix. *Not so naive after all*. It would take time to crack the ship’s computer security system, if it could be done at all.

“Make this our throne room.” he decided. “Make your workstations monitor only ... for now.”

\* \* \*

Padalecki and Coltan entered the sick bay. It was little more than an oversized stateroom, dominated by an examining table. Under normal circumstances its purpose was to deal with minor injuries and illnesses, anything more serious and the patient could be frozen in a low berth until a proper hospital could be reached. In ground combat more people were injured than were killed but in space combat the figures were reversed: there were relatively few injuries compared to the dead. Thus an extensive medical facility onboard a warship was largely superfluous.

Daniel Kralik was standing there holding some pre-packed trauma kits while Doctor Li entered their serial numbers into a computer terminal.

“Doctor.” said Kralik quietly, noticing their entrance and nodding in their direction.

Li looked up.

“Hey, kids.” said Li amiably. Seeing Coltan’s sleep gown he asked, “You need some birth control? Or if it’s performance enhancers you’re after I ain’t found any yet so I can’t help you there.”

Coltan glared at him as Kralik tried in vain to stifle a snigger.

“Er no, Doc.” said Padalecki through gritted teeth. “I want you to check Coltan out. I think she might be ill.”

The grin on Li’s face slid aside to make room for a look of sympathetic concern. “Okay, Pale.” his voice softened, “Come sit down here and let’s see what’s what.”

He led her gently to the examining table and helped her sit on it.

Pale looked over Li’s shoulder at Padalecki.

“I’m here now, Chief.” she said coldly. “I don’t need you anymore.”

Li looked from Coltan to Padalecki and caught him wince. “Okay, Chief.” said Li gently, “I can look after things from here.”

“Hmm, right. Er... okay.” Padalecki turned and woodenly walked out.

Li looked back at Coltan and raised an eyebrow.

“I was over-tired.” she explained. “And he woke me up to drag me down here.”

“He was concerned.”

“He was an asshole.” she corrected.

Li said nothing but waited.

“I don’t like to be pushed around.”

“But was he right to be concerned?” asked Kralik.

“No.” she shot back sullenly.

Li caught her eye and held it.

“Well ...” she started, reluctantly, “I thought I saw something, a mark on the skin. But it wasn’t true: I imagined it.”

Unprompted, Kralik handed Li a medical

scanner. “Like Abdul Hasaan?” he asked.

Li accepted the scanner but gestured to the door. Kralik took the hint and left them to it.

\* \* \*

**Location: Kendle City, Jewell**

**Date: 357-1115**

Coltan sighed as she managed to lower herself onto the sofa without further aggravating her injured leg.

All in all it had been a good day. The doctors had told her her leg cast would be coming off by the end of the week but she could go home today. And Commodore Hilyard had presented her with a Commendation Medal, personally. Coltan took the presentation case out of her pocket, caressed it happily, and placed it for a moment on the seat besides her.

She wasn't sure she really deserved it. When the Vargr pirate, escaping from a naval prison cell,

had unexpectedly stumbled into her engineering workshop her 'decision' to attack him was born more from self defence than bravery. And he had been unarmed while she happened to be holding a large wrench at the time.

Coltan looked around the too small apartment she shared with Michelle. It was untidy and the trash bin was overflowing with Michelle's takeout wrappers again. She decided that tonight she'd cook them both something from scratch, something special. It would do them both good. Things had become strained between them lately, Michelle complaining that they were *'losing the mystery'*, whatever that meant. At Michelle's suggestion she'd tried to lose some weight, although she thought her weight was fine to begin with, but the constant stream of boozy nights out that Michelle insisted was part of their lifestyle made that difficult.

On the wall monitor she could see there was a stack of unread messages, some of which were bills in need of paying. She summoned a keyboard to

appear before her and started to wade through them. For the bills she authorised fund transfers from her personal account, she could settle up with Michelle for her half later. It didn't take long and once done she flipped to the local classifieds bulletin board, checking out the rent rates of larger apartments in the area.

She was admiring one possibility ... imaging Michelle and herself enjoying the sunny balcony it featured ... when she was distracted by the approach of a noisy couple. All giggles and dirty guffaws.

With a shriek the door was flung open and the couple practically fell into the room, laughing. It was Michelle! And some other woman that Coltan didn't recognise.

It took a moment for Michelle to realise that Coltan was there, she'd been drinking.

“Oh, you're back.” Michelle said eventually in an offhand sort of way. “But I see you got yourself banged up.” she added before dissolving into helpless laughter with her new found friend.

“Hey!” bristled Coltan stung by the innuendo.

“No, that’s quite alright. Now you have an excuse to be frigid.”

“Michelle?” cried Coltan, “I am not-” She swallowed hard and tried to regain her composure. “So, who’s you’re friend?” she asked with false lightness.

“This is, er, Holly-”

“Dannielle.” corrected the other woman.

“-Dannielle. She’s staying over tonight.” finished Michelle. As an afterthought Michelle gave Dannielle a sloppy kiss.

“You’re going to sleep with someone else?” Coltan was horrified.

“I never said we were exclusive, love.” replied Michelle waving a drunken finger in Coltan’s general direction. “And when are you going to clear up around here, this place is a tip!”

Coltan struggled to her feet, the cast on her leg preventing her from just leaping up. “Michelle, what’s gotten into you? Don’t do this to us. Please!” she wailed.

Dannielle looked a bit nervous. “Maybe it’s just better if I go-” she started.

“There’s no problem.” said Michelle with a honeyed voice, smiling at Dannielle. But she spun on Coltan, grabbed her by the throat and pinned her to the wall. “Listen, kid.” her alcoholic breath wafted over Coltan, “I want some fun tonight and you’re just too ugly. So shut up. Okay?”

“No, I’ve really got to go.” said Dannielle alarmed, “Er, I’ll see you around, okay? Bye.” and bolted out the door.

Michelle forgetting about Coltan, released her and stared after Danielle. Then she shuffled across to the sofa and collapsed heavily into it.

Coltan stood frozen in shock against the wall.

Michelle winced and, reaching under her, pulled out the medal presentation case. Without a glance she tossed it in the direction of the trash bin then rolled over and in moments was asleep.

Coltan’s shoulders shook as silent sobbing wracked her body but the little apartment reverberated to the sound of Michelle’s heavy



snores.

Coltan had once thought the apartment too small to be alone in: now she knew that wasn't true.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 17, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

Davi pulled the tab on his tea bulb and took a cautious sip as he surveyed the faces around him. There were six chairs arranged around the low table in the Captain's Day Room.

Lieutenant Tam, his de facto Executive Officer, sat opposite. *Sir* Tam, Davi corrected himself, born into the ruling elite of his homeworld. Tam stared back at him over steepled hands, like a school master evaluating a remedial student.

To Davi's immediate left sat the diminutive Droyne female, Petty Officer Smyuetx, the now vital Liaison Officer, followed by their pilot, Sublieutenant Grey.

To his immediate right sat Doctor Li, feigning interest in his drink ... coffee rather than tea, Davi noted. Davi had never been able to get the hang of coffee, it seemed to agitate rather than sooth him. Following the doctor was Chief Padalecki, now looking less sure of things.

“Okay, Gentlemen.” began Davi. “Let’s start with a rundown of where we are. Chief, do you want to go first?”

Padalecki cleared his throat and put his tea bulb on the table. “Well the initial sweep of the ship has been finished. We didn’t find any surprises apart from those two on deck 56. There was only one other cold berth section found to have been active ... three survivors, er, to start with anyway.”

Davi counted them off in his head. The three had been the pair who had been trying to sabotage the ship, Ensign Amuir and Davies, the Marine. And whoever it was who turned into the first shambling creature they encountered.

“All the hull breaches have been sealed.” continued Padalecki. “And full internal sensors

have been restored. Apart from several dead bodies in the cold berth section, we didn't find any other dead bodies. We made a collection of data tiles but I still need to go through them and see if any of them are useful."

Padalecki paused, "Er, what else? Oh, yeah, the food recycling system is being rebuilt but in the meantime the new crew seem to have brought fresh food with them. There were some non-perishables recovered from crew staterooms, mostly drink bulbs. One of the hanger decks has been turned into refugee camp until staterooms can be changed more to the new crew's liking. And one of my team, Coltan, is in sick bay."

"Doctor?" asked Davi, frowning.

"It looks like simple fatigue." replied Li. "She ignored my advice on getting some rest. I've taken her off duty for twelve hours to recuperate." Li declined to add that Coltan had been resting when Padalecki had pulled her into his sick bay. It would only have raised more questions and embarrassed the Chief.

“Okay, then that sounds like good progress.” mused Davi approvingly. “What about the spinal mount weapon malfunction?”

“I’m still checking it out but it looks like sabotage.”

“And what about the jump drive?” asked Davi.

“I’ve not had a chance to look at that yet.” admitted Padalecki. “Besides, we need to get this ‘Heart of the Machine’ thing aboard and checked out first.”

“It already aboard.” Smyuetyx interrupted with her customary chirpy voice.

“What?” started Tam. “I saw that crystal fuel stuff coming aboard but I didn’t see anything else.”

“No. Not fuel. Components.” explained Smyuetyx.

“It doesn’t use fuel in the conventional sense.” added Padalecki. “According to the Droyne engineers I talked to it uses something called ‘zero point energy’.”

“I see.” said Tam. Davi wondered if Tam really knew what zero point energy was. He wasn’t sure

he did either.

“Well if it’s all aboard then I guess we’ll have to hook it up and see what happens.” concluded Padalecki.

Davi still wasn’t happy about this strange artefact. *How did I get talked into agreeing to this?* he wondered, not for the first time.

“Very well. Mister Smyuetx, would you like to report?”

“Sir.” replied Smyuetx. “Colony and essential supplies now aboard. Some non-essentials being loaded now but could leave now. Colonists live in family groups, need bigger staterooms for each family. So are altering former crew staterooms. Lieutenant Tam asked for induction video, which I will make and give them.”

“Good.” said Davi. “What about security? There are some areas of the ship I’d prefer to have restricted.

“We have no spare ident chips to give them, so access in some areas not possible anyway.”

“That’s true.” admitted Davi.

“You set security in other areas you don’t want them and they not go there without ident chip either.”

“Okay. That sounds simple enough. If anyone has any suggestions I’ll collate them into a security plan. Doctor, you next.”

“Yeah, well, on the surface the crew seems to be coping reasonably well.” began Doctor Li. “There is a minor one-day flu-like illness that has run through more or less everyone. Seems to be fine with some bed rest, though.”

“On the surface?” asked Tam, picking up on Li’s odd choice of words.

Li turned to face Tam. “With the lack of advanced facilities I can’t really be sure, now can I? I’m having to practice medicine ‘old school’.”

“But you have some doubts.” Davi prompted.

“Yeah. Doubts.” said Li as he returned his attention to Davi.

Davi nodded for Li to continue.

“Using a sample of infected tissue from Hasaan I’ve been able to infect tissue samples from other

crewmen. Except for samples taken from crewmen who have had this flu.”

Tam looked alarmed. “Doctor, you should have disposed of all infected samples. It’s too dangerous-”

Davi waved at Tam dismissively without taking his eyes off Li. It wasn’t that he disagreed with Tam’s concerns but he didn’t want to get sidetracked just now. “Are you saying this flu illness confers immunity?”

“Seems that’s about the size of it.” drawled Li, still eyeing Tam.

Davi studied Li. There was something about his demeanour that wasn’t quite right.

“What aren’t you telling me, Doctor?” he asked quietly.

Li returned Davi’s gaze for a moment and it was then that Davi realised that the doctor was scared.

“I haven’t been able to isolate the pathogen.” Li began. “It doesn’t respond to any of our antibacterials or anti-virals. And besides-” Li paused and took a deep breath. “I think the flu

symptoms are a side-effect anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone who’s had this flu can speak to the colonists and understand what they say. Those that haven’t, can’t. Well, often the flu comes shortly after this change but the two things are linked. I think it does something to us, to our minds.”

At this everyone around the table tried to talk at once. Davi opened his mouth to speak but then couldn’t think of anything to say.

Tam rapped hard on the coffee table. “People! People!” he called commandingly.

The hubbub died down.

“Doctor,” interjected Grey, leaning forward. “How do you know this isn’t a coincidence? Didn’t you say that *everyone* has had this flu?”

“Now, yeah.” explained Li. “But even twelve hours ago that wasn’t the case.”

Tam looked unconvinced. “A little convenient, we need to learn a new language and suddenly there’s this new illness that teaches it to you?”

“Gifts!” exclaimed Davi.



Tam raised a quizzical eyebrow. “What?”

“When we first met Othix we exchanged gifts.” said Davi hurriedly. “He gave us a metal sphere. It was fairly light, possibly hollow.”

“That could’ve been the source of whatever the hell this is.” agreed Li.

“So what do we do about it, Doctor?” asked Tam.

“We can do precisely squat about it.” shot back Li. “I ain’t got a medical lab, I’ve got a med kit and some beds. Trauma, I can maybe deal with. Plague, I can’t.”

Tam snorted. “Plague’? That’s a bit strong, isn’t it?”

“Yeah? Well what do call a contagious pathogen that messes with your head?”

“In your case it can only be an improvement.” goaded Tam.

“Gentlemen, please!” barked Davi before another shouting match could get started.

There was a sullen silence.

Davi drew a deep breath and steadied his

nerves. “We have a long journey ahead of us. Perhaps somewhere along the way we will find someone with the facilities to deal with this. In the meantime it appears we’re stuck with it. Doctor, I am unhappy about these infected tissue samples still being aboard but if you promise me you are taking every precaution then I’ll permit it. Now, Mister Grey. What can you report?”

Grey stole a quick slurp from her tea. “Not much, so far.” she admitted. “Using the passive EMS sensor array we’ve managed to identify our approximate position in the galaxy ... and it is our galaxy, by the way, in case anyone was worried it might not be. It looks like we are on the right side of the galactic core too, we just need to travel directly away from it to be heading in the direction of home. But with no navigation maps that’s easier said than done. We’re now in the process of determining what systems are around us but it’s going to be difficult plotting more than a two parsec jump.”

“That’s better progress than I’d hoped for at this

stage.” said Davi. “We’re not in a position to jump yet so you still have time.”

He looked round the table. “Weapon systems should be a priority. It would be nice to be able to jump out of any trouble but since we don’t know this area of space we could jump into worse. That means, among other things, training up the colonists to be gunners for the secondary armaments. Mister Tam, could you set up some sort of training program?”

“Certainly.” responded Tam. “But do you think it wise to give them access to our nukes?”

“We’re going to have to, sooner or later. We’ll try to maintain a central authorisation mechanism and have regular inventory checks, but-”

“Colonists already have nukes.” interrupted Smyuetx.

“What?”

“Remember they fired them at alien ships?”

“Yes, planetary-based missiles.” said Davi.

“They bring them.”

Davi glared at Tam who looked back aghast.

“I never saw any missiles being brought aboard.” Tam declared.

“Not missiles, just warheads.” clarified Smyuetx.

Li opened his mouth to say something, but then thought better of it.

“Perhaps they should be secured in the magazine.” said Davi. “Please make it so, Mister Tam.”

“Yes, Sir.” acknowledged Tam, subdued.

\* \* \*

**Location: Jewell Naval Base, Jewell**

**Date: 120-1116**

“Would you like anything to drink?” asked Commander Thur Minka gently. Without waiting for an answer she poured a paper cup of water from a nearby cooler and placed it in front of Coltan.

“Thank you.” said Coltan. It was an automatic response, but her voice was flat and emotionless.

Outside the office window, pregnant clouds

scurried across the bleak sky. They seemed to catch the mood of the young woman.

“I see from the records that you are currently living in barracks ...” said Minka, pressing on.

“Yes.”

“... but prior to that you had been living off-base.”

There was no reply.

“Domestic problems?” she probed.

Coltan hesitantly reached for the cup and sipped the water.

“Well, no matter. “ Minka went on breezily. “I have your next assignment. Ship duty. How do you feel about that?”

“Fine.” said Coltan without enthusiasm.

“Good. You are a promising engineer, we just need to broaden your skills a bit. How does the Frozen Watch sound?”

“I guess that’d be okay.”

Minka sighed. Normally that would be all she needed or even cared, but the young woman before her was obviously depressed. She wondered if she

shouldn't instead take Coltan off active duty, get her to a councillor. On the other hand perhaps a change of scene was all she really needed to snap her out of this.

“Chances are you'll just sleep for a year and wake up someplace else.” Minka continued. “But it's possible you might awaken to a major damage control incident. Somewhere you could really make a difference. And learn a lot, too.”

“Someplace else?” Coltan asked, finally showing an interest.

“It could be anywhere. Well, almost. It depends upon where the ship you're stored in goes to in that time. I mean you couldn't go as far as the Solomani Rim, or even to Capitol, not in a year. But away from here certainly.”

“Away from here.” echoed Coltan just waking up to the idea. There was the barest hint of a smile on her lips.

Minka, noticing, felt relief. She ejected the data tile from her desk and handed it over to Coltan. “Trust me, everything will be fine. Here are your

orders, Petty Officer Third Class. And-" she paused, trying to smile benignly, "Good luck."

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 69, INS Bard Refuge**  
**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

The hanger on deck 69 was a mirror of that on deck 71. Here, though, Padalecki found not a Droyne refugee camp but a large amorphous crystal structure. The stubby Rampart fighter they'd found the day before was still here in one corner, but the crystal structure dominated the hangar space. Padalecki slowly paced around it, staring up at it uncomprehendingly. It was transparent, clear like glass, and he could see himself refracted a dozen times within. It was like looking into a broken mirror.

The Droyne engineer he'd been dealing with, Engineer Leader Nemuk, appeared.

"Greetings, Creef Paddle." said Nemuk

cheerily.

“Paddle?” Padalecki wandered why the Droyne with the easiest name to pronounce, ‘n-air-m uck’, couldn’t say his own name properly. Or ‘chief’.

“Paddle-echo-y?” Nemuk tried hesitantly.

Padalecki sighed. “Hello, Nemuk.” He looked back at the giant crystal. “So this is it, huh?”

“This Heart of Machine.” said Nemuk proudly. “It all ready. We go now, yes?”

Padalecki peered closer. He had seen some of the crystal being brought onboard, pieces small enough for a Droyne to carry in its arms, but this thing before him looked like a single piece of chaotic crystal. As he circled he came across a point where several cables snaked across the floor from an electrical junction box and plunged into its side. He could trace the cable inside for about a meter before getting confused with the crazy reflections and reflections of reflections ad nauseum. “So, how does it work?”

Nemuk drew a deep breath. “Ah, space full of energy, quantum fluctuations-”



“No.” interrupted Padalecki. “I mean, how do you operate this thing?” He’d heard the theory of zero-point energy before. It sounded kooky to him but he didn’t need the theory to make it work. After all, who really understood hyperspace jumps yet the jump drive was an everyday fact for millions of travellers across known space.

“Oh.” said Nemuk looking slightly crest-fallen. Padalecki wondered if Nemuk just like showing off how smart he was. “You need energy. Heart detects need and gives you it.”

Padalecki wasn’t sure that would work. Most electrical devices worked when you pumped energy through them, they didn’t ‘suck’ energy.

Nemuk was obviously expecting this reaction. He picked up the cable that emerged from the Heart and exposed some contact points. Touching them with his bare hands he said “No energy.”

“Okay.” said Padalecki curiously. He watched as Nemuk crossed to a support column and disconnected its light from the ship’s power grid and reconnected it to the cable from the ‘Heart’.

Almost immediately the light came on.

“Energy.” said Nemuk. “Not too much, not too little.”

“How ...” Padalecki’s voice trailed off. He peered at the light’s connections. Opening the toolkit he was carrying he extracted an electrical probe. The power reading was indeed correct and stable.

“It knows.” said Padalecki half to himself in awe.

Nemuk cackled. “It no knows. It no think. It a machine.”

“Then how?”

“Time funny with it.”

“Yeah, right.” said Padalecki scarcely looking back at Nemuk. It had to be a trick of some kind.

“Paddle. Friend. Look at you reflection. What you see?”

Padalecki looked at his reflection deep in the crystal. At first he could see nothing unusual. But as he started to move he realised that his reflection moved a split second before he did. It was very

odd. He tried to trick his reflection by starting to move one way but suddenly jumping back. After several moments of this he had to concede that his reflection had correctly anticipated every faint.

“Cause and effect no work as should here.” said Nemuk as if that explained everything.

Padalecki saw his reflection look down at the toolkit and instinctively he did the same. It was now that he noticed the data tile inside the kit. He returned the electrical probe and took out the tile. It was unlabeled. This was Ghraangk’s toolkit, maybe it was the Vargr’s private music tile?

He caught sight of his reflection inserting the tile into its hand computer. He looked back at the tile in his own hand and, after a moment’s hesitation, did the same. There was no music on the tile, just a command sequence. Padalecki scrolled through the instructions, there weren’t that many.

“What is it, Paddle?” asked Nemuk.

“Nothing.” spat out Padalecki as he stabbed the eject button. “You finish up here, we can test it

later. I have something I need to deal with.”

And with that Padalecki swept out of the hanger.

\* \* \*

Davi sat in the command chair and surveyed the Bridge around him. There were, he counted, thirty five workstations in all, but over half were as yet unmanned. Those unmanned workstations were the combat ones: gunnery and fire control, flight control for the absent fighter squadrons, and a cluster referred to as the combat information centre. But manned and operational were the helm and navigation, and various engineering workstations.

Sort of operational, Davi reminded himself as he watched one of the Droyne inadvertently power down its workstation for the third time in a row. Hegeh lumbered over to the stricken Droyne to explain the operating procedures again.

Still, training notwithstanding, it was impressive

what they'd achieved in barely a day and a half considering they were so few. Davi felt confident that in another two days they'd be able to break orbit for deep space. The hyperspace jump drive used to cross interstellar distances was strongly affected by gravitational sources, for reasons of safety it was necessary to move at least one hundred times the diameter of any nearby planet before jumping. Actually, the calculation of minimum safe distance was more complicated than that but the one hundred diameter rule gave a rough guide.

His bodyguards were back, discretely lining the walls where they could watch everything, and they unnerved him. He shifted uneasily in his command chair and the aging seat covering made a little brittle cracking noise. All workstation chairs were designed to hold a man in full spacesuit but they made the unsuited Droyne look like children. *The Bridge is run by children*, he thought. He glanced back at the bodyguards. *Children with guns.*

Rngoeuzl, the Vargr sensor operator, looked up from the helm workstation and her eye caught

Davi's. She was filling in for Sublieutenant Grey while the pilot was resting. He could see a Droyne on a comm panel of her workstation. "Engineer Leader Nemuk wants to know when he should make the final connections to the Heart of the Machine", she growled.

Davi was confused. "I thought the Chief was dealing with that. Isn't he there?"

Rngoeuzl dropped her head slightly and stared back at him. "Apparently not." she replied.

Davi sighed and keyed open his open comm panel. "Nemuk, this is Lieutenant Commander Davi." He hesitated, then added "The Captain." While 'Captain' was a rank, one above his own, it was also a role and he was entitled to be called as such. But it was the first time he had addressed himself as 'Captain'. "Have you briefed Chief Padalecki on how this Heart of the Machine works?"

"Yes, Captain." chirped Nemuk. "Creef Paddle now knows all he wants to."

Davi digested this. "Does that mean he's happy

for us to go ahead with the tests?”

Nemuk looked back at him from the panel but said nothing.

“Fine, then.” said Davi. “Go ahead and hook it up.”

He cut the link, not bothering to hear the reply. Where had the Chief got to, he wondered.

\* \* \*

Padalecki found Ghraangk in what had been the original Bridge on deck 17. The wreckage had been cleared away and the large open space now left had become a store room. There were piles of items found elsewhere in the ship (food, data tiles, and personal effects), as well as spare parts cannibalised from the wreckage. A couple of Droyne were sifting through the piles of parts. Near the personal effects pile Ghraangk and Lieutenant Tam were in discussion. Padalecki noticed that Tam had acquired a bodyguard of six Droyne warriors, much like those of the acting-Captain. That suited

Padalecki.

“Hello, Chief.” said Tam as he approached.

“Sir, I think Able Spacehand Ghraangk, here, is a traitor.” he blurted out without preamble.

Tam was speechless. Not so Ghraangk. “That’s a lie!” he snarled instantly enraged.

The Droyne bodyguards instantly came to alert. Their short multi-barrelled rifles in their hands as they tried to access the threat.

“Yeah? Explain this.” shot back Padalecki holding up the data tile he’d found earlier.

“Chief, what do you have there?” asked Tam calmly. He reached over and took it from Padalecki, turning it over in his hand.

“I found it in his toolkit.” Padalecki explained. “It’s a command sequence to override feedback to the Bridge.”

“Hey! I found that.” protested Ghraangk.

“On the spinal mount?” asked Padalecki rhetorically.

“Yes ...”

“What do you mean, Chief?” asked Tam, still



not understanding.

“You tamper with most systems on this ship and it’ll show up on the Bridge.” explained Padalecki. “But with this, inserted in the right place, that tampering is masked. I’ve only just found it in his toolkit, I’ve been carrying it around since his attack. He had been working on the spinal mount.”

“Yeah, I found it.” cried Ghraangk.

“Funny how you didn’t mention that at the time.” snapped back Padalecki.

Tam looked at Ghraangk. “Well, Able Spacehand.” his voice was low and commanding. “Why didn’t you mention this at the time?”

Ghraangk looked sheepish. “I ... forgot.” he said weakly.

Tam stared at him, his face a mask. “You forgot?”

Ghraangk continued “I’d just killed one of those two intruders, and we had to kill the other one, and ... well ... yeah. I’d forgotten about it.”

Tam was still for a moment, considering ...

\* \* \*

On the Bridge, Davi waited until Hegeh didn't seem busy before calling him over. Speaking in a hushed voice he asked "So, how are they doing?"

The big Zhurph looked thoughtful for a moment then replied "They are too fast. They learn quickly yet they are often impatient and insist on cutting corners."

As if to illustrate the point there was a squawk of consternation and the sound of a workstation powering down.

Hegeh's eyes rolled to the ceiling. "Taino save us!" he sighed.

Davi suppressed a chuckle. "You are like *'Lord Ekho and the School of a Thousand Dunces'*." He knew the comparison to the children's story from their homeworld was a little unfair but he couldn't resist.

Hegeh looked scandalised for a moment but then looked around at the recalcitrant Droyne struggling to bring his workstation back online.

“Before this day is out I may very well curve that one’s name into my vaothoi.” he said with faux malice.

At least, Davi hoped it was faux. He had forgotten that darker aspect of the story. “I don’t think it would be a very good idea if you started staving in skulls. Lord Othix might be a bit upset.”

Hegeh said nothing but a wistful look in his eye remained.

“You seem to make a good teacher, or at least our new Droyne friends seem to like you.” said Davi. “Is that from your experiences as Krohm?”

He watched as Hegeh’s customary tension at the mention of his religious title took hold.

“*Experience enables you to recognise a mistake when you make it.*” quoted Hegeh in response.

Davi flushed. Was Hegeh angry, he wondered?

“Sir?” interrupted Rngoeuzl urgently. “The jump drive is fully charged.”

Davi’s head snapped round and he gave an incredulous “What?”

“Energy Sink at saturation point. Cascade

discharge imminent.”

“I didn’t order a jump.” said Davi wildly. The Heart of the Machine must have been pumping energy into the jump drive, powering it up, since Nemuk had made the final connections. *Why had Nemuk turned it on?* And without a proper crew to adequately watch for such things-

*Get a grip,* he thought to himself. Taking a deep breath he mentally reviewed the options. If the hyperspace jump drive’s energy capacitors, collectively known as the drive’s energy sink, were fully charged and that energy wasn’t dissipated quickly they would explode. Those capacitors held enough power to punch a hole out of space-time, the consequences for the ship would be catastrophic. Unfortunately there was only one way to discharge that much energy in the time they had available.

“Vech!” he swore. “Initiate emergency jump procedures.”

He saw that Rngoeuzl was ahead of him. She already had half the necessary command sequences

queued up on her workstation and her paws flew over the controls as more were readied. At the navigator's workstation Tgeath was dumping the raw sensor data from her latest interstellar scan directly into the navigation computers, she wasn't even bothering to plot a proper destination.

"... and pray we don't end up in the *Slave Pits of Korsu*." Davi added quietly under his breath.

Elsewhere, Droyne technicians flapped about. He hoped they knew what to do, it was hard to tell. Too late to worry about it now. The jump claxon blared out of the comm system on all decks.

Davi looked at the main screen, at the colony world it displayed. The minimum safe distance from a planet to initiate jump was roughly one hundred times that planet's diameter. They were in close orbit around this one: a fraction of just one diameter. The planet loomed horribly large on the screen. "Rngoeuzl, any chance we could put some distance-"

She cut him off. "Standby to jump in five ... four ... three ... two ... one ..."

# 6 Jumpspace

**Location: Deck 40, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (1 day after awakening)**

For a moment ... for a very long moment ... Hegeh thought he was drowning. He felt the airways at the back of his mouth involuntarily clamp shut as the sensation of being totally immersed in water swept over him. His logical mind told him it was an illusion, a hallucination of some kind, brought on by the particularly bad entry into jumpspace. But all his senses told him he was underwater and he had to fight the rising instinct to panic.

When Hegeh had first heard of people drowning, coming from a desert world, it had

sounded like such an exotic way to die. Wondrous even. Not that there weren't drownings there too, with the great Scarland River or the caves and tunnels beneath the mountains that led to the Undersea, but they were rare enough to be noteworthy. Now, however, the concept nauseated him. He clutched his vaothoi tightly, as a drowning man clutches a life line, and fought against instinct: forced himself to breath normally. The familiar feel of the polished wood was reassuring, and slowly he discovered the illusion was as ephemeral as a soap bubble. Almost.

Across the Bridge he noticed Davi still sitting in the command chair. Davi was gripping the arms of the chair as though afraid he'd fall out of it, his mouth was set in a tight grimace, and his face appeared to be turning blue. Concerned, Hegeh approached his superior. "Are you alright, Sir?"

"Wha!" exploded Davi, unable to hold his breath any longer. He began sucking in lungfuls of air and seemed surprised.

Hegeh turned his attention to the rest of the

Bridge ... which was in chaos. Some of the Droyne crewmen were overtaken with madness: running about with their vestigial wings outstretched and making hooping noises. Others seemed dazed and catatonic. Rngoeuzl, the Vargr sensor operator, had climbed on top of her workstation and was howling.

“Roz!” Davi shouted at her.

She stared back uncomprehendingly, eyes wild, lost in the moment.

“Petty Officer Rngoeuzl,” Davi bellowed above the din. “What do you think you are doing?”

The howl died in her throat and she stared around herself. Looking sheepish she climbed down.

Hegeh strolled imperiously into the middle of the Bridge and drove the end of his vaothoi down onto the deck hard three times. *Crack! Crack! Crack!* It sounded like pistol shots, commanding attention. “Hear me, and attend!” he boomed.

Everyone froze, even Davi looked impressed.

“Calm yourselves and get back to your posts.”



Hegeh continued, “There is nothing to fear. And get status reports for the Captain.”

Everyone hesitated.

“NOW!” he bellowed.

Some of the Droyne were still hiding under their workstations but others seemed to regain a measure of self control. A sort of normality began to return, if only partially.

Hegeh looked back at Davi who nodded gratefully.

In the end it took almost an hour to re-establish contact with the rest of the ship, everyone else on the ship seemed gripped by the same hysteria. But one by one the other sections of the ship reported in. By the time Doctor Li appeared on the comm panel Hegeh was almost getting used to the strange underwater sensation, but he was glad of something else to focus his mind on.

“As you’ve guessed, it’s a form of jumpspace sickness.” Li informed them.

“Yes, Doctor.” said Davi. “I’ve met engineers who have had it when they’ve had to work on the

hull whilst in jump. I know in extreme cases close proximity to the jump field can lead to psychosis. But I thought normally it was only supposed to cause nausea and vertigo. And we're feeling it throughout the ship, not just near the hull."

"Yeah. Jump sickness screws up your senses. Normally that just means dizziness and you're sick to your stomach, like you said, but there've been cases of full blown hallucinations before. Must be one hell of a misjump."

Hegeh's heart sank at those words. Until someone had actually said it out loud he could pretend. He could still delude himself that the strange sensations didn't mean anything. But no more.

"So, what can we do?" Davi asked Li.

"Not a lot." replied Li. "We're stuck in jump for a week. Nothing to do but watch to see which of us goes b- ... er, loopy."

Davi raised an eyebrow. "Loopy?"

"Well, I was gonna say 'batty' but considering that most of the crew are-"

“Okay, Doctor.” Davi cut him off and closed the connection.

Davi sighed and looked at Hegeh. “If he can still crack jokes maybe it’s not that bad.”

Hegeh shrugged unconvinced.

\* \* \*

Padalecki entered the hanger deck where the Heart of the Machine was. He had intended to storm angrily onto the deck but since the transition to jump space he had felt slightly unsteady on his legs. He needed to confront Engineer Leader Nemuk, to find out what had happened with the jump drive.

He supposed they should rename the hangers now they had been repurposed. This one could be, perhaps, the “Heart Chamber”, and the one with all the Droyne could be ... He couldn’t get the image of Doctor Li out of his mind saying “the Bat Cave”.

As he stepped on deck he fetched up short when he found Nemuk with Lord Othix and a pair of

Droyne guards. They were standing next to the Heart which seemed to have a slight glow. He hadn't noticed any glow before but no one seemed concerned. Was it throbbing?

"Sir." said Padalecki to Othix, uncertainly of the correct etiquette. He gave a slight deferential bow just for good measure. He wasn't sure what business the Droyne 'king' had here.

"Ah, Chief Padalecki." acknowledged Othix. "I see we in jump now."

"Er, yes, Sir."

"This good." Othix turned to Nemuk. "Well done, Engineer Leader."

"Well, not exactly 'good', Sir." said Padalecki. "We misjumped."

"Yes, misjump. Far away."

Padalecki wondered if he needed to explain what a misjump was. He didn't really understand how advanced this colony of Droyne had been. Were they 'primitives' or was this a translation problem. Or was Lord Othix just an idiot? "Lord Othix," he began. "Misjumps aren't good-

“Because you don’t know where you go?”

“Well, yeah. That’s right.”

“But away from there is good. There was dangerous. We safe now.”

Padalecki paused for a moment. This wasn’t the conversation he’d been expecting. He felt off-balance. Or was that just the jump sickness? “We need to jump in a controlled way, a planned way. Or we could end up in more danger.”

“You have star charts of this area, humm?” asked Othix. “You know where is dangerous and where is not?”

“No, but-”

“So how you plan?” Othix stared at him quizzically.

Padalecki opened his mouth, but then closed it again when he couldn’t think what to say.

Seemingly satisfied, Othix strolled off in the direction of the lifts. His guards followed leaving Padalecki and Nemuk staring after him.

After he was gone Padalecki rounded on the remaining Droyne. “Okay, Nemuk. Talk.”

“Most definitely, Creef Paddle. What you want to talk of?”

“How about ... did you know that the ‘Heart of the Machine’ would pump all that power into the jump drives forcing us to jump when we did?” As an afterthought he added “And did Lord Othix order you to do it?”

Nemuk looked nervous. “Creef Paddle ... friend Paddle ... if my Aykrusk orders a thing done then it is done. That is way of things, yes?”

“Then he did order it?” Padalecki was stunned. He hadn’t expected an admission so readily. He hadn’t expected an admission at all. He counted to ten under his breath. “Lieutenant Commander Davi is the Captain. He’s in charge when it’s ship related. What you did was very dangerous.”

“Me sorry, my friend. Me had no choice. Please, you forgive?”

Nemuk looked so crestfallen that Padalecki found he couldn’t sustain his anger. “Okay, Nemuk.” he continued in a softer voice. “What’s going on? Why was the Aykrusk in such a big hurry

to leave there?”

But Nemuk looked even more uncomfortable. “It is not my place to speak of these things. Our journey will be safe, all is well. It was foretold.”

“Foretold?”

Nemuk flapped his wings apologetically.

Padalecki glanced at the Heart Of The Machine, at his reflection who mouthed “Foretold.”

“Foretold.” echoed Padalecki.

\* \* \*

**Location: Salt Top, Yori**

**Date: 005-1100**

On the horizon the bone white plain, baking in the sun, rose to kiss the deep blue sky.

“What is it?” the woman’s voice behind him interrupted.

Hegeh sighed and tore his gaze from the vista. The salt flats stretching out before him were

alleged to be the final remains of Yori's last true ocean. A pilgrimage here was intended to refocus the soul, but he doubted his companion had eyes to see its significance.

He turned to face the woman, a human offworlder in her late twenties. She was several years his senior but might not have known it due to their different races. The simple light cotton of the convict's robe did little to hide her defiant stance. Her hands were cuffed before her. Her brunette hair had been crudely cropped short but, from her file, Hegeh knew she had worn it longer at the time of her arrest.

“What do you not see, my child?” If he had had eyebrows one would have been raised now in query.

“I ain't your child. And there's nothing here.” she responded, uncertain.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “Do you not see the story of this place laid out before you like a book?”

“No.” she glared back sullenly.

Hegeh pounded the hard crystalline surface on which they both stood with his vaothoi. “All this



salt,” he began, “Where did it come from?”

The woman said nothing.

“A long time ago there were vast oceans here. Water as far as the eye could see.” He bent down and picked up a fist sized lump. “One day the gods took all the water away ... and all that remained was the salt.”

He let the rock tumble from his fingers to clatter on the ground.

“So?” asked the woman, a little exasperated. “So what?”

“There is a saying, in my religion: *The present is made possible by the ghosts of the past-*”

“Yeah, I’ve heard it.” she interrupted before he could get any further. “Very pretty. What’s your point?”

“You won’t be able to eat locally grown food ... in the future ... because you can’t grow anything here ... in the present ... because of the water being lost ... in the past.” he continued. “Cause and effect and effect. The point is: what *you* will be able to do in future, what options *you* will have, have been

circumscribed by your past actions.”

“I don’t think so.” shot back the woman. “What restrictions you place on me when my time’s served will be what restrictions you choose to place when that time comes.”

“Hmmm ...” mused Hegeh. “So tell me, why did you try to kill Dieter Campri?”

“Who?”

“That Imperial Marine officer in the starport?”

“Was that his name? I didn’t know. Anyway, I said all about that when I was arrested.”

Hegeh waited pointedly.

“Because he was scum and he deserved to die.”

“Hardly a reasoned argument.” Hegeh pointed out.

The woman looked out towards the horizon. “It’s hot here.” she complained.

“Answer the question. Please.”

She regarded him for a moment, deciding.

“Okay” she said at last. “These ain’t my original legs.”

“I’d noticed the limp when you walk.” he

admitted. “It’s very slight. Some accident in your youth?”

She nodded. “My government refused me medical care. I almost died.”

“Go on.” Hegeh prompted gently.

“It’s a bad regime on Efate. Always puttin’ us down and the like. Anyways, I eventually got the treatment I needed because of the Ive Givar.”

“The terrorist group?”

“Yeah, shows what you know.” she spat back.

“Sorry. Please continue.”

“They weren’t no terrorist group, that’s just government propaganda. They help people. They helped me.” The woman took on a far away look as she remembered. “The Imperium labelled the Ine Givar as a terrorist organisation, and us as sympathisers. They sent the Marines in to burn us out of our homes.”

“So it was revenge?” he asked.

“I prefer to think of it as ‘Justice’.” She glared back at him, defiantly.

“I’m sure you do. But why him? Why now, on

this world?”

“Why not?” she shrugged. “You don’t expect us to take on the mighty Imperial forces head on, do you? We’d get stomped on just like the bugs they think we are.” She leaned forward to emphasis her point, “Any Imperial officer we come across, anywhere in space, is a legitimate target.”

“So, they hurt you, you hurt them, they hurt you back ... stop me when you see a pattern.” Hegeh sighed and kicked the salt rock. “And all that’s left is the salt.” he muttered to himself mournfully.

“Oh, and I suppose we should all turn the other cheek? Hmm? Roll over, play dead? You’re pathetic!”

Without warning Hegeh’s vaothoi scythed out, one moment ploughing into the back of the woman’s legs, then next bearing down on her chest. The woman squawked as she suddenly found herself lying on the ground, the priest’s quarterstaff across her windpipe and Hegeh leaning over her.

“Did I say that?” Hegeh hissed angrily into her face from only a few centimetres away.

“N-, no.” she stammered, fear robbing her of her self-assuredness.

Hegeh glowered at her for a moment, then eased back. “Enemies must be opposed. But you must know and understand your enemies.”

She said nothing, made no move to get up.

“Perhaps this place is the wrong metaphor.” he admitted to himself. “Come.” he said holding out his hand.

Warily she allowed him to help her back to her feet.

“Over there, to the west, is a different kind of sea.” Hegeh began. “A dune sea. Hills of sand are forced to move by the wind. Yet the wind has to go around the hills. Both oppose, yet at the same time are limited by, the other. They define each other. Do you see?”

“I guess ...” the woman said slowly, unsure where this was going.

“That’s you and the Marine.”

She looked at him blankly.

“You said it yourself: ‘It was a bad regime’.

Campri is just as much a pawn in this as you are.”

“Hey, I’m no pawn-” she blurted, stung into a response.

“Of course you are.” he cut her off. “The question is: who’s? Is this situation between you and your government, their apathy towards you, just something that happened? Or are both sides being manipulated from behind the scenes?”

“Should that be my defence in court: that I was just a pawn?” she asked, sarcasm starting to seep back into her voice.

“In court?” asked Hegeh, derailed from his chain of thought.

“At my trial.” she clarified. “You know: judge, jury, executioner ... well, hopefully not ... but prosecution and defence.”

“Ah.” said Hegeh, finally understanding. “We don’t do those here. At least, not in that form.”

“Not in that form?” she echoed, “Then in what form?”

Hegeh said nothing.

“Wait a minute.” she said as realisation crept

over her. “This? This is my trial? Then you-”

“- are your judge, jury, and executioner.” he finished and flashed her a crocodile smile.

\* \* \*

**Location: Deck 17, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (2 days after awakening)**

In the security office Hegeh activated the main view panel showing the interview room. It had that Spartan aesthetic common to all interview facilities: a plain rectangular table in the middle with two simple chairs, one on either side. There was nothing else present with which the room’s sole occupant, Ghraangk, could distract himself. No view panel, window, or decorative picture broke the monotony of the walls. No tile reader or other reading material lay about. Ghraangk looked decidedly unkempt, thought Hegeh, as if his very skin and not just his clothes had been lived in for just a bit too long.

It hadn't occurred to Hegeh to wonder who had been doubling up as custody officer. That was, not until Tam had requested that someone sit in on the interrogation as an official monitor. Ghraangh had been in there for more than a day. Meanwhile the rest of the crew had struggled with their duties, slept, and life onboard had continued. And now they were all experiencing jump sickness. He didn't doubt that for Ghraangh the solitude would have felt like an eternity.

The single door to the room opened abruptly and Lieutenant Tam walked in carrying a tablet. In contrast to Ghraangh's dishevelled appearance, Tam was pristine.

Tam didn't say anything, just glanced at Ghraangh and took a seat opposite. He placed the tablet on the table in front of him and started to read to himself.

Hegeh could tell Ghraangh was furious. This snub, on top of the long wait, pushing the Vargr to breaking point. Presumably, thought Hegeh, this was a calculated ploy by the Lieutenant.



It was both standard practice and common sense to have someone monitor an interrogation. Hegeh had been a little surprised when Tam had requested him for the role but now he wondered if his size and perceived ability to best a Vargr in combat might have had something to do with that. The Lieutenant would have wanted capable backup near to hand.

Tam, finishing his reading, looked up at Ghraangh thoughtfully. “So, Able Spacehand Ghraangh. It seems we have ourselves a little problem.”

Ghraangh glared across the table but said nothing.

Tam continued, “You failed to disclose a vital piece of evidence, and now the Chief suggests you might be a traitor.”

Still Ghraangh said nothing but Hegeh fancied he could hear a faint growl from the Vargr’s chest. He adjusted the volume control, straining to hear. *Come on*, thought Hegeh. *You know what’s expected of you. You can’t bring yourself to say it,*

*can you? Can't admit to this human that you'd made a mistake.*

“Relax, Ghraangh. I understand.” said Tam, softly, unexpectedly sympathetic.

For a moment Ghraangh seemed caught off guard. Then Tam asked, “So, did you enjoy killing those two Imperial officers?”

“I was defending my ship!” Ghraangh barked indignantly, finally goaded out of silence.

“That’s not what I asked.” Tam shouted back, half rising out of his chair. “Did you enjoy it?”

Ghraangh’s lips curled and he snarled but said nothing. He had enjoyed it immensely, Hegeh realised, but so what.

“You see, the problem I have,” continued Tam more conversationally as he sat back down, “Is that you didn’t even realise that they were Imperial officers until someone pointed it out to you, did you? Even then you didn’t seem to care.”

“What has this got to do with anything?”

“Bloodlust?” suggested Tam.

“Bloodlust helps me defend my ship.” spat back

Ghraangh.

“Apparently it also made you forget that you had that data tile. Apparently it blinded you to the possibility of taking those two prisoner.”

“Ha! Extra mouths to feed are the last thing we need.”

“And answers are the first thing we need.” Tam snapped back, rising out of his chair again.

They glared at each other for a long moment, but it was Ghraangh who was the first to look away.

*Good, thought Hegeh. Dominance is the Vargr way.* He could almost hear Ghraangh’s thoughts as he took on this new perspective. He had screwed up, big time. He had failed his shipmates, his pack.

“Sir, I ... I’m sorry, sir.” Ghraangh stammered at last. Cowed, he hung his head.

Satisfied, Tam resumed his seat. “Okay, Able Spacehand Ghraangh. I’m going to release you.” He paused to catch Ghraangh’s eye. “But you think long and hard about what happened, and see to it it doesn’t happen again. You are a serving member of the Imperial Navy, start acting like one.”

“Then you don’t believe I’m a traitor?” Ghraangh asked meekly.

“No.” sighed Tam. “I don’t.”

Ghraangh started to smile, relieved.

“But you were a bloody idiot!” spat Tam in disgust.

“Yes, Sir.”

Tam retrieved the tablet he’d entered with. “Now, let’s go over the details of your report. From the beginning ...”

\* \* \*

Hegeh opened his eyes and rose from the cot. The large room had stone pillars supporting a vaulted ceiling, all in white. There were no walls and natural light came in from all sides. He was in a daugu, a communal farm house common on Yori. Looking around, he could see it was a particularly hot day outside but here in the daugu the shadows were cool and refreshing. He wondered where everyone was, he seemed to be alone.

He heard a crashing noise outside and, wrapping himself in a sheet from the cot, went to investigate. The claws of his bare feet made little tapping sounds as he padding across the flagstone floor.

Outside, the harsh sun beat down mercilessly and there was a hot wind that felt like it came straight from a blast furnace. Hegeh tilted his head back, allowing the sun the shine over his leathery face. It felt good to be warm.

There was another crash, the sound of crumbling masonry, this time from close by and beside him. Hegeh spun around and cried out as he saw ...

Hegeh cried out and bolted upright from his bed. He was in his stateroom, or at least the stateroom he had assigned himself on the Bard Refuge. It was dark.

“Light” he demanded and the room controls rewarded him with soft half-strength illumination.

He was panting heavily from the adrenaline

rush. *It had just been a dream, a silly nightmare.* He'd not had one of those in a very long time.

Hegeh chuckled at himself but it came out sounding hollow. He tried to remember what he had seen just before waking up but the dream was fading now, as dreams do. The pressure on his skin, his ears, the back of his throat, still reminded him of being underwater. *Still in jumpspace*, he thought to himself. Why hadn't he had a nightmare about drowning? That at least would have made more sense.

He checked the ship's time on the wall display and decided he might as well get up anyway.

After the morning ritual of washing and dressing was complete, Hegeh made his way to the Bridge where he found Lieutenant Tam in the command chair.

"Morning, Sir." he said trying to sound amiable.

"Good morning, Mr Hegeh." replied Tam. Tam looked completely at home in the command chair, much more so than their acting Captain. And if he

was suffering from jump sickness he didn't show it.

“Mr Hegeh. I've been thinking about our discipline problem.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, the propensity of our new recruits to act independently of the proper chain of command.”

“Well it is a new way for them to operate.” Hegeh said thoughtfully. “It'll take time for them to acclimatise.”

“I think the circumstances surrounding our current jump show we don't have the luxury of time.”

“That may be so. You have an idea in mind?”

“You seem to have become our defacto drill sergeant.” Tam pointed out. “I think a boot camp is in order.”

Hegeh thought about this. He tried to envisage a thousand Droyne doing calisthenics in drill formation or running obstacle courses. The image was slippery in his mind.

Tam continued, “An accelerated program ... simplified and condensed.”

Hegeh looked around the Bridge. He noticed a Droyne at one of the engineering workstations talking to a couple of others. The first Droyne he vaguely remembered from yesterday ...

“Maybe a pyramid scheme?” he suggested to Tam.

“Huh?”

“We teach one hundred Droyne, and they teach more, who teach more.” Hegeh explained.

“Yes. Good idea. Check with Petty Officer Smyuetx and set it up.” Tam looked around the Bridge. “Where is Smyuetx, anyway?”

\* \* \*

Smyuetx entered the ship’s canteen and looked around. Fully lit the room looked quite different to when they had emerged from the cold berth compartment. That seemed another lifetime. Now the neat rows of alloy tables and benches gleamed in the bright lights. The colonists seemed content to confine their off duty hours to the former hanger



bay and had no use for the canteen. Most of the crew were currently engaged elsewhere but two figures, Kralik and Coltan, sat in separate islands of isolation.

A buffet had been set up on one side and, taking a tray, Smyuetx helped herself to some of the food the colonists had brought with them. A slab of congealed animal fat was quickly rendered liquid in a little oven and she poured this like a sauce over a mix of hard-boiled eggs and cracked nuts. In her life she'd sampled many different cuisines, this didn't seem very odd, but she wondered what the humans made of this dish.

Coltan was hunched over her food, aggressively shovelling it in to her mouth. She seemed upset about something. Kralik, on the other hand, was a study of relaxed, clearly enjoying his leisurely meal time, if not the meal itself.

She took a seat opposite Kralik and offered a cheery "Hello."

Daniel Kralik looked up from his meal, pretending to only just have noticed her, though

she knew she'd been studied when she had been at the buffet counter. "Smyuetx." he acknowledged with a smile.

She scooped up some food and began to eat. She had expected it to be sweet but instead found the 'sauce' to be quite salty. Kralik's smile bothered her, he wasn't a good actor and she'd seen more sincerity on the face of a corpse. "You normally eat alone?" she asked between mouthfuls.

Kralik paused, his spoon half way to his mouth. His attention seemed torn between her and Coltan. Was he interested in Coltan, she wondered. "Yes." he said at last, responding to her spoken question.

She had hoped for a little more information than that. She tried again. "Why you eat alone?"

"I like it that way."

"You not want camaraderie with fellow shipmates?"

"What for?"

Smyuetx was disquieted. What was it about this human? What was he hiding? Could he be a threat to her? "You isolate yourself from others. That no

way to live.”

“I do what I must to survive.” He placed his spoon into the now empty bowl before him. Finished. “What’s it to you, anyway?”

“Like I said: That no way to live.”

Again Kralik paused considering, considering her she realised, his gaze never wavered. “And what about you?” he asked, “You pretend to be everyone’s friend, but I see you. It’s an act.”

“Really?” she laughed nervously. “And why would that be?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’m going to find out.”

Had she had made a mistake approaching Kralik, Smyuetyx wondered. Now he was suspicious of her. She considered what kind of accident she could arrange for him. She glanced around and noticed that Coltan had also left.

\* \* \*

As the lift doors parted on Deck 19 Hegeh exited, and almost collided into Coltan coming the

other way.

“Oh, excuse me, Sir!” she said. Then she corrected, “I mean, Chief.”

“Coltan.” he acknowledged. “Have you seen Smyeutx around here?”

“Sure, Chief. She’s in the mess.”

Coltan started towards the lift but the doors slid shut before she’d taken more than a step. “Damn!” she muttered under her breath.

Hegeh glanced at the lift doors. The petty frustrations of mundane life were universal, he reflected. “I’ve been meaning to ask, Pale, how are you holding up?”

Suspicion snapped into her eyes.

“I mean no disrespect.” he went on. “But I did used to be a counsellor of sorts. If you need someone to talk to.”

“Have you been talking to Andy?”

“No. Should I have done?”

This wasn’t the conversation he had been planning. He wanted to talk to Smyeutx about setting up a training class. But Coltan clearly

needed to talk. And equally clearly she didn't want to, at least not to him.

“Well when you do you can tell him that the Doc has cleared me to return to duty.” she continued huffily.

“I see.” he said, a little perplexed. “‘Andy’?”

“What?”

“You said ‘Andy’. Not ‘Chief Padalecki’. His concern for you is personal rather than professional?”

“You were a priest before you joined up, weren't you?” she shot back. “You want to be my confessor?”

“Do you need one?”

They were interrupted by the lift doors reopening and Sublieutenant Dana Grey exiting. Coltan pushed passed her and into the lift, stabbed at the control panel. As the doors closed Hegeh thought he saw her mutter something under her breath. He wasn't sure but thought it might have been “Get stuffed!”

“What was that all about?” asked Grey in

surprise.

“A personal matter, Sir. It is of no consequence.”

“Right.” Grey didn’t sound convinced.

“Personal relationships are getting a little frayed.” he explained as they started to walk towards the canteen.

“Sometimes it’s best not to have those.”

“They can be a source of strength.”

“Or a source of pain.”

Hegeh glanced at the Sublieutenant. “That’s a little negative isn’t it?”

Grey shrugged.

“Someone hurt you?” he probed.

“Someone died. People do that, you know.”

“The war?”

“No. Yes. Sort of. Anyway I’m not talking about it.”

As they entered the canteen, passing Kralik as he left, Hegeh spied Smyeutx. “Excuse me, Sir.” he said to Grey and moved towards the Droyne.

\* \* \*

**Location: Big Rock Mountain, Yori**  
**Date: 171-1101**

Meekly, Hegeh entered the underground office of his boss, Advisor Prader Synnko. Electric lamps bounced soft light over the cool carved rock walls. It was a measure of Synnko's importance that he rated an office so deep inside the mountain, away from the harsh sun. Although Zurphani often liked the warmth Yori's human co-inhabitants seldom did. He regarded the stone pillars that formed a wall behind the great desk that dominated the room: Monks from past generations had polished them smooth and carved parables into their flanks. In his seminary days, Hegeh had written a term paper on those very carvings. At the time he only had access to rubbings, now he could see them first hand. He could even touch them ... caress the silky smooth stone and feel the sharp edges of the lettering. He resisted the urge.

Prader Synnko gnome-like visage rose from behind a pile of packing boxes besides the desk and he favoured Hegeh with a malicious stare. The Advisor was shorter than was average for a Zurphani male and looked older than his years.

“Ah, Krohm Hegeh. There you are.” Synnko’s voice was distinctively low and gravelly.

“Yes, sir.” responded Hegeh, trying not to make it a timid squeak. He always felt intimidated by the Advisor.

Synnko put down the clipboard he had been holding. “This may very well be the last time met, Krohm.”

“Advisor?”

“I have been given a new assignment.” he explained. “I am to be the Director of the Blephos Archive.”

Hegeh was impressed. The Blephos Archive housed some of the rarest cultural records of the planet. Located in a small retreat in the Claw Mountains to the north, access to the Archive was heavily controlled and restricted by the Advisors’



Council. Of course, he realised, this raised the issue of his own position. As a Krohm he drew his authority from the Advisor's office. Would Synnko's replacement want him to stay on or would he be forced into some other service to the community? Perhaps Synnko could be persuaded to take him with him ... that wasn't without precedent and it would be quite a boost to Hegeh's career in the priesthood.

"Congratulations, sir." stammered Hegeh.

"Indeed." Synnko replied slowly. "I would have liked to have left this post with a shining, untarnished record of achievement."

Hegeh felt a growing sense of unease at the use of the past tense and the faux wistfulness.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Synnko seemed to deliberately wait until the tension built to breaking point, then simply said in a quiet voice "Marine First Lieutenant Campri."

"Sir?" Hegeh was confused.

"He's DEAD, Krohm!" bellowed Synnko angrily.

Hegeh shrank back involuntarily at this outburst. “How, Sir?”

“A bomb in his air/raft. The Ine Givar are claiming responsibility.”

Hegeh was at a loss.

“It seems that damned Efatian woman wasn’t quite the reformed character you believed her to be.” continued Synnko, his voice once more icy. He slid a flimsy from the desk and held it out to Hegeh.

“Well, do they know it was her? For certain?” Hegeh panicked. He snatched the proffered document thinking it was some kind of incident report. He distinctly remembered writing that she had made progress towards reform, that she might soon be safe to return to the community.

“What does it matter? An Imperial Officer is dead. One whom this office had assured was safe. And it is your fault, your mistake.”

“My mistake?” Hegeh said in bewilderment half to himself.

“Well it certainly wasn’t mine!” snapped Synnko angrily.

Hegeh looked at the flimsy he was holding: it was a formal 'Document of Direction' from the Advisor's Council, more specifically from Advisor Synnko himself. He was released from the service of the Advisor's Council, stripped of his title as Krohm, and 'advised' to report to the Imperial Navy recruitment office at the starport immediately.

Hegeh looked up at Synnko, but Synnko had returned to his packing boxes, Hegeh's presence already dismissed from his mind.

\* \* \*

Hegeh opened his eyes and looked around. He was in a Yorian daugu and he could see it was a particularly hot day outside. He seemed to be alone in the cool shade.

Before he could think on this there was a crashing noise from outside and he went to investigate. He crossed the threshold into the outer courtyard and felt the harsh sun warm his face.

There was the sound of crashing masonry nearby and he spun and saw a hoard of dark figures, like blackened corpses, swarming over a low stone courtyard wall. Parts of the wall had collapsed under the weight of their bodies. Their clothing was little more than rags, their flesh sagged from their bones and appeared to have begun to decompose, and their faces were blank and unseeing ... completely devoid of emotion.

Hegeh cried out for light and bolted upright from his bed. It had been another nightmare and he was in his stateroom on the Bard Refuge. As the adrenaline rush started to fade and he regained control over his breathing he decided enough was enough: time to see the doctor.

They had been in jump for four days now and were starting to establish a routine. He and Lieutenant Tam had, after a few false starts, managed to get a training program of sorts going for the Droyne. They had started with some basic drills, just like in Navy basic training, but the

Droyne turned out to be quite adept at circumventing almost every lesson. One time, the Lieutenant had been marching a squad of Droyne back and forth to assess their physical endurance only to discover that he had ended up with a completely different group to the one he started with. Hegeh had been watching closely the whole time but had no idea how or when the substitution had been made.

And every night he'd had a nightmare.

Hegeh entered the sickbay to find Doctor Li, sitting in a chair and hunched over a desk. So intense was the Li's study of the tablet before him that he didn't realise he was no longer alone.

"By all that's holy-" gritted Li in suppressed frustration.

"Doctor?"

Li jumped in his chair and almost toppled over. "What!" he yelled.

"Calm yourself, Doctor. It is only me." Hegeh held up his arms placating. "What have you got

there?”

“Who is ‘me’?” muttered Li darkly. Without further word he slid the tablet over.

Hegeh picked it up and tried to make sense of the tables, graphs, and chemical models that densely filled the screen. He looked back at Li and gave a slight shake of the head.

“It’s the samples.” Li said as if that meant something. “The infected tissue? The samples I took from Hasaan?”

“What about them?”

“They’re all wrong.”

“We already knew that.” Hegeh pointed out.

“No. I mean they ain’t infected anymore. Which is wrong ‘cos they should be.”

“Then that flu-like illness you spoke of before really is the cure. That’s good isn’t it?”

“There’s no cure. Only death.”

Hegeh wondered if Li was starting to buckle under the stress ... or was this the first signs of jumpspace psychosis? “Doctor, You’re not making any sense.”

“I was running an experiment when we misjumped. I had some infected tissue that had not been ‘cured’ and was trying to measure the speed of infection.” said Li.

“Go on.” prompted Hegeh.

“It looks like being in jumpspace inhibits it. Infected tissue behaves itself. Doesn’t act weird, doesn’t infect other tissue.”

“Since we entered jump. Is that permanent?” Hegeh wanted to know. “What happens when we exit jump?”

Li glared at him. “I don’t know!”

“Maybe it just got contaminated by that flu virus thing that’s making us immune?”

“No. I don’t think that’s it. It stopped right at the same time we jumped.”

Hegeh digested this for a moment. “Coincidence? Anyway I don’t see why you are so worried. If it does resume after we exit jump then we are no worse off than before.”

“That ain’t the problem. It’s the new tests I’m running.” Li, staring intensely at Hegeh, leaned

forward and touched the tablet's screen. "I have some other tissue samples here and I can't find any DNA in 'em."

"So the disease destroys DNA?"

"Looks that way. But which disease?"

Hegeh waited for the Doctor to explain.

"This sample," Li said touching the tablet screen again, "Is 'immune' tissue."

Hegeh suddenly realised what the doctor was getting at. "Are you sure?" His eyes flicked away from Li and onto the tablet screen. "But we're all immune now, aren't we? Why aren't we all dead?"

Li gave an exaggerated shrug. "Look, I'd need a top flight research lab and a full staff just to figure half this shit out. All I got is a first aid station. Give me a break, okay!"

Hegeh's brain hurt. The mysteries seemed to be piling up like a freeway groundcar accident, mystery after mystery careening into a humongous mess.

"Okay, Doctor," he began, "Let's see if I understand you. Whatever happened to Hasaan is infectious. Except that infection has stopped since



we entered jump. Then there is a second disease, with brief flu-like symptoms, that confers immunity from the first disease by destroying all the DNA.”

“Which should be fatal, except it ain’t.” finished Li.

Hegeh looked back at the tablet. “Are you working on this by yourself? Do you need a hand?”

“No. Kralik’s been volunteering some of his time. Bright kid. A little odd, but bright.”

“Hmm. What about those bodies we found in the ward room, any connection? Were their cells normal?”

Li looked thoughtful for a moment. “You know, I’d forgotten about those guys. I’d have to check. But I don’t see what difference it makes: we’re walking dead.”

“Clearly not, Doctor.” Hegeh tried to reassure him. “You said it yourself, all you have is a first aid station, not a top-flight research lab. Maybe we do still have DNA, maybe it’s just being masked somehow from your instruments.”

“Hmm...” said Li unconvinced. But he did

appear more thoughtful.

\* \* \*

**Location: Geronemo Field, Yori**

**Date: 174-1101**

Hegeh checked the cheap map in his hand and compared it with the starport concourse before him. Most of the starport facilities were housed in the sandstone and plasticrete wall that encompassed Geronemo Field. The starport concourse, situated on the ground floor of one section, had a substantially lower ceiling than was typical for a starport concourse. Some people found it a little claustrophobic.

In addition to the standard features, like ticket sellers, customs advisors, and freight haulers, there were rows of shopping boutiques ... the same brands as could be found in any city on Yori but with inflated prices. There was also a fast food area and billboards advertising short term debit cards

for offworld visitors. It could have been a monument to consumerism if not for the fact that more than half the shops were closed.

Then he spied it: nestled between a branch of House of Coal and ReID was the Imperial Services Recruitment Office. Yori wasn't big enough to warrant separate recruitment offices for the different services. Even this combined office seemed more of a gesture than a serious recruiting effort. It looked small, dwarfed by its companions, and its windows was decorated with garish posters offering a 'New Life' in the services. Inside he could see a smartly dressed but bored-looking Marine officer working at a keyboard.

Hegeh shifted the weight of the duffle bag on his back and started towards the little office. But as he reached the door he was intercepted by an old woman.

"Please, Krohm, can you spare some time to help out an old sinner?"

"I'm sorry, but-"

"Just a few minutes." she begged. "I just need

someone to help mediate a small dispute. A simple matter." She beamed at him hopefully.

"I am not a Krohm."

She stopped and looked at his clothes in confusion. He was still wearing the robes given to him when he became Krohm but that was only because he had no others. And he was loathed to be parted from his vaothoi.

"I was Krohm," he explained. "But no longer."

The old woman's face clouded over as she digested this. "They kicked you out?" she guessed.

"Yes." he admitted hesitantly.

"Then you are a failure." she spat in disgust. "What use are you to anyone?"

Stung, Hegeh could do nothing but stand there. What was worse was that he agreed with her: now that he wasn't a Krohm what was he? What use was he? "None." he answered.

With a sneer the old woman turned and left, leaving Hegeh at the threshold of the recruitment office. He glanced around and saw the Marine staring at him in bemusement. With burning

cheeks he continued inside.

The Marine officer tried his best to look fatherly. "Hello. Gunnery Sergeant Daniil Shaw. How can I help you today, son?"

"I've come to sign up."

Shaw pointed invitingly to a chair. "Okay. Well we offer a wide variety of choices. What kind of things interest you?"

\* \* \*

As Othix stepped out of the lift into his 'throne' room he saw that the domed ceiling had been rendered opaque. The strange appearance of jumpspace was too disturbing on the eyes of the weak, he supposed. An empty void that fizzed with twinkling lights as if filled with glitter dust, like being trapped in an infinitely large snow globe. The edge of which was both infinitely distant and yet curled and caressed a ship's hull a bare meter from its surface.

Othix saw his aids, fussing over their newly built

workstations that now monitored the ship's operations. And he saw one other.

He motioned the other to wait as he strolled across the room to the only chair. He still felt a little lightheaded from the misjump and didn't want the indignity of falling over. A Captain's workstation made a fitting throne, he thought as his eyes ran approvingly down the telltales and display panels of the chair. They whispered to him of the rest of the ship and he felt now somehow a part of it.

Concluding his inspection, he turned his attention to his visitor.

"Greetings, my Lord." said the other as they approached.

"Ah, Astesekmyum. How goes it with you?"

"Well, my Lord." replied Astesekmyum, and without further preamble said "I now have the Captain's access codes." He held up a chain, a precious ident chip dangled on the end.

Othix eyed it with interest. "He won't miss it?" All thoughts of discomfort temporarily banished.

“It is a copy, my Lord, made this morning while he slept. It was not hard, they are very trusting.”

“Excellent.” said Othix, pleased. He leaned forward and took the prize, examining it as if it were a priceless jewel. “Irtruf?” he called out.

Another Droyne appeared at his side. “Yes, Lord?”

“Irtruf, how goes the dialog with the ship brain?”

“Slowly.” Irtruf admitted. “It is most stubborn machine.”

“Will this help?” asked Othix holding out the ident chip.

Irtruf eagerly took it and sighed happily. “Most definitely, Lord.”

“Am I to continue as the Captain’s batsman?” asked Astesekmyum.

“For now: yes.” said Othix, dismissing Irtruf with a wave of his hand. “It may be a little time yet before everything is ready.”

# 7 Port Of Call

**Location: Deck xx, INS Bard Refuge**

**Date: Unknown (x days after awakening)**

Xxx x xxxxxx ... xxx x xxxx xxxx xxxxxx ... Xxxxx  
xxxxxxx xx xxx xxxxxxxx. Xx xxxx