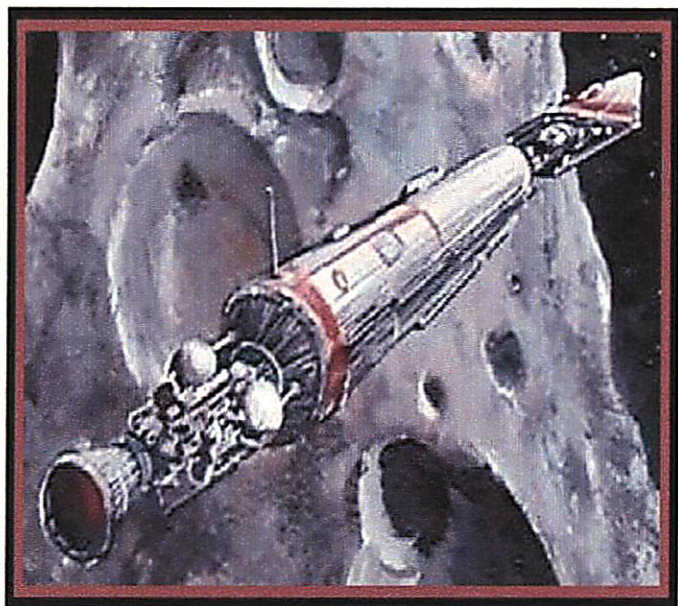


FORCE OF DESTINY

Dale L. Kemper



CARGONAUT PRESS

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by

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CREDITS

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Note: The Jump Torpedo and a Psionic Amplifier/Transmitter are both mentioned in this novel. While both are arguably a part of *Traveller* "canon" (or were when this novel was originally written in the early 1980's), there are those who will likely reject and argue against their inclusion. I have not edited them out of the novel due to a desire of presenting the novel complete as written and because both items are mentioned only in passing and play no major role in the plot. It should also be noted that terminology is not uniform throughout Known Space as this novel illustrates. For instance, the term "Jump Space" is generally used in and around the Third Imperium while those states bordering on the Zhodani Consulate in the Far Frontiers sector commonly use the term "Shift Space." In either instance, both terms refer to the same phenomenon.

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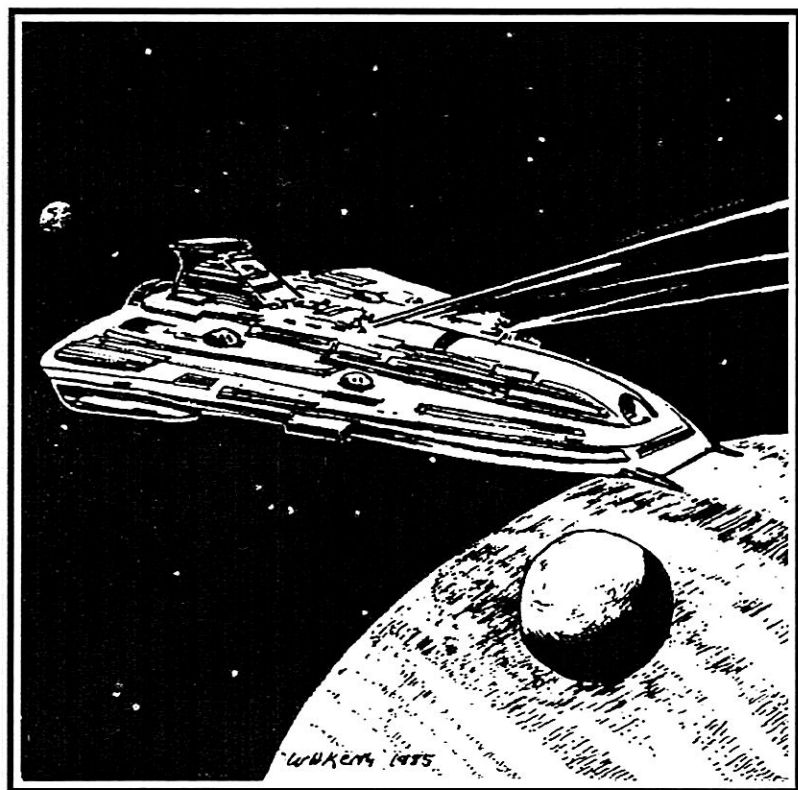
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CHAPTER ONE

SPEEDY

The couriercraft materialized before Phais Eisert too far out-system. There was nothing to do but plod ahead on maneuver drive. It was a wonder that the courier had been able to make a shift at all. With its hull cratered and pitted it resembled more a derelict than an active starcraft. But on the lower hull aft the thrusters continued firing at maximum in the ship's engine pod.

The pilot eased the throttle into the red zone as he glanced through the cracked and burnt bridge viewport. She had been living in her vacuum suit for over three weeks now as the ship's atmosphere slowly bled through the hastily repaired flash and blast holes on the hull. Ahead she could just make out the larger mass that was the Phais Eisert primary. There was nothing to do now but wait. Slowly the pilot slid into a more comfortable position on the command couch. Next to her, the two other couches sat empty, one a black mass of melted plastic and charred control units. That was where her gunner had sat. The port side couch used to be the Navigator's. He never had a chance to put his helmet on when the Tallamatrixian destroyers attacked. After the first few hits all that mattered was to shift out before a final salvo could be unleashed. The Navigator had chosen to feed the shift parameters into the computer rather than to finish suiting up. The shift point had almost been reached when the last enemy missile caused the bridge compartment to explosively decompress. The pilot shuddered uncontrollably as she remembered the bubbling look of horror that came over the navigator. There was nothing she could do but keep on the shift point, the enemy warships almost intercepting them before the courier slammed into shift-space.

The pilot shook herself out of the torment that was ready to engulf her. With a slow breath that fogged her filthy vacsuit helmet she set about her duties. It was a stroke of luck that the communications gear hadn't been severely damaged in the ambush. With strained movements she worked the manual controls to aim the ship's antennae in-system. A tired sigh escaped from her parched lips as she started the pre-recorded computer tape. It would take over five hours to reach the system's gas giant and any ships there. Quickly she hit the transmit button.

"TO ANY PROTECTORATE VESSELS IN THE PHAIS EISERT SYSTEM, THIS IS THE COURIERCRAFT 'SPEEDY' HEADING IN-SYSTEM ON HEADING 432.5. DANGER. PRIORITY MESSAGE FOLLOWS..."

The pilot smiled as she slowly got out of the command couch and headed for the storage bin for a fresh suit tank of air. After that a nice tube of Stimuline would put her back in shape. Slowly, the pilot made her way back to the command chair and some long overdue rest. There was no point in worrying. She hadn't even expected to get this far. Now, with luck, there

wouldn't be any of the enemy here to receive the message. But as she looked around the realization struck that so far luck just hadn't been on her side.

DESTINY

"Scoops down. Barnes, you can start the pumps." Captain Royce Decameron turned away from his engineer's station and peered at the forward viewscreen. The upper atmosphere of the gas giant seemed to boil around them as the DESTINY shuddered and groaned under the strain of skimming through the vapor enveloping her. Huge sparks and lightning flashes erupted beneath them as the scoop pumps sucked in the raw hydrogen to be processed by the ship's engineers. Amid silent thunder DESTINY drank her fill from the gas giant's immenseness.

"Readings are coming in, Cap'n. The tanks are filling."

"Affirm."

Decameron smiled at the First Officer as the refining plant engaged and began to draw in the hydrogen that would refuel the DESTINY's massive power plant. "Here we go, Ontara, ten hours on the skim-run and we'll be topped up, ready to rejoin the squadron."

Lt. Commander Ontara Mitchell smiled back at the relief she saw on her Captain's face; a moment ago the CO's gaze had been as hard as stone, directing his vessel into the tricky eddies and currents of the gas giant's atmosphere.

The computer readouts reflected on her tight fitting uniform in the dimly lit bridge compartment, turning her figure into a surreal numbers display and hiding the beauty Decameron knew was there in the gloom.

"I might be able to cut that to eight hours, Captain. Engineer Barnes and I were able to finally finish the overhaul on the refining plant's control circuits yesterday. We can increase the flow back at your command."

Decameron's smile broke into a silent chuckle as he walked back to his command chair. "Well done. That'll be the fastest fill-up we've been able to pull since the Dalberon raid. See to the increase but keep a close eye on it. You know the trouble we've been having with that system. Give it your usual care and we shouldn't have any problems."

"Affirm." The pleasure in Mitchell's voice because of the compliment could not be hidden. But she quickly got her rushing thoughts under control. As the only female executive officer in the whole Marauder Squadron, she knew her feelings always had to come behind her duty. To show any part of her real affection for her Captain anywhere, but especially on the bridge, could jeopardize her career.

The only way to deal with her emotions was to be the best First Officer in the Protectorate Navy. But the agony of Mitchell's pent-up feelings still came to the surface when she least expected it, even while she was in control of the difficult operation the DESTINY was now involved in.

For the tenth time, Mitchell punched up the system schematic. The screen before her glowed while the computer digested her request, then brightened as the system position map snapped into view. The blinking dot

representing the DESTINY continued to skim through the upper atmosphere of the planet known simply as Phais III, the only gas giant in the Phais Eisert System. Except for two small vacuum worlds and two asteroid belts farther out in the system, Phais III was the only planetary body of any size. And because of it, the Phais Eisert System, although unpopulated, was one of importance among the shift planes of interstellar travel.

Mitchell scanned her readouts for any sensor contacts. During peacetime there were ships entering the system continually in need of Phais III's atmosphere to refuel for the next shift. There had been talk of building a Protectorate outpost here but except for a defunct mining operation in the outer asteroid belt, nothing had been done. When the major Protectorate worlds of Tallamatrix, Marsus, Bestus, Goggic, and Bindar rebelled against the Protectorate Council travel through the Phais Eisert System became very dangerous to vessels of both sides.

The presence of Marauder Squadron III of the Protectorate Navy accented this truth. Mitchell had a good sensor fix on their position. Closer in-system from Phais III the other destroyers of the squadron drifted in a loose formation, waiting for their sistership to complete refueling.

Mitchell started to relax as the first processed fuel began to register on her readouts. Before the refining plant's holding tank became a quarter full, she started the pumps that would send it on to the DESTINY's main fuel tanks. Almost six months of continuous operations in enemy-held territory had taken its toll on the squadron. With no maintenance facilities readily available the crew had held their ship together with jury-rigs and supplies they had taken from waylaid merchant vessels. DESTINY's refueling system had broken down three weeks ago and Mitchell had helped Engineer Barnes nurse it along. The other ships of the squadron were in the same situation, with anything from hull strain to battle damage to food processor breakdown. Commodore Maston aboard the flagship ENMITY had sent his last shift-capable couriercraft to the squadron's home base on the planet Bossilwick but it had not returned at the scheduled rendezvous. So, until further communications could be initiated the Commodore had decided to continue to carry out his last orders: Harass the enemy until relieved.

Captain Decameron sat in his command chair studying more of the endless stream of forms and reports that it took to run a vessel like DESTINY. His profile was etched in the brilliant colors that streamed from the forward viewscreens as the ship plowed through raging gas streamers. Mitchell saw the high forehead above those deep, blue eyes, with a youthful, healthy complexion that seemed to belie the fifteen years he had spent in space. She remembered the first time they had met when the DESTINY was fitting out some two years before, her in the newly bought uniform of a Lieutenant Commander and him with his new Captain's stripes. There was a grudging acceptance from Decameron that he was to be one of the first Captains in the Protectorate Navy with a female First Officer. The male-dominated social traditions of the main planets in the Interstellar Protectorate had been a major factor leading up to the present civil war. Even with the easing of certain restrictions acceptance of a woman in a command level position had come grudgingly. Early on Decameron had ordered Mitchell about like a common spacer, but he soon began to realize her worth when it came to running a ship the size of the DESTINY. She was more than

competent in doing the thousand and one activities an exec must find time for. With tact, ability, and perseverance Mitchell won both Captain and crew over to accepting her. Together they had worked the DESTINY to the heights of Protectorate Naval efficiency. That had helped to keep them alive since the rebel sneak attack and capture of the Protectorate capital planet of Caractacalla.

Now, after six months of hit-and-run actions, the Captain, his exec, the crew, and the DESTINY herself were very, very tired.

"How's the fuel situation, Ontara?"

"Fuel tanks at 12%. Flow is nominal, sir. Say, another 7.4 hours."

"Excellent."

Mitchell still found the informality Decameron was able to project strange for a ship captain. Even in the most difficult of situations, Decameron never changed.

Mitchell strove hard to avoid any reciprocation of Decameron's attitude. But it was difficult. The use of her first name, especially during duty hours, had caused more than one of the bridge crew to wonder about the Captain and his First Officer. But the informality wasn't limited to Mitchell, so these wonderings were mostly left unsaid.

"I'll be in my quarters, if you need me," Decameron said as he lifted himself out of the command chair. As regulations dictated Mitchell unstrapped from her station and moved toward the command chair as the Captain cycled the floor hatch, which led to the main corridor below.

"I relieve you, sir."

Decameron smiled as he lowered himself down the hatchway ladder. "I stand relieved." With a hiss the hatch closed and he was gone.

Mitchell slaved her station to the command controls. She could still monitor the refueling operation and a number of other activities besides. On Lower Deck, a weapons crew was fine-tuning the aft ventral laser turret, damaged by a near miss two weeks before. Nearby, Lower Engineering was a bustle of activity as the Duty Engineers kept a close watch on the Scoop-Refueling system in operation. And up on the Missile Deck in Loading Bay 14 Chief Gunner Falco was hard at it, drilling his loading team to the point of exhaustion. Mitchell nodded her head. Falco was the most feared man aboard. The Captain was apt to give crewmen the benefit of the doubt. Chief Falco made sure the crew never abused his trust.

A sleep period was beginning for the off-duty portion of the crew and the command monitors around Mitchell showed which of the crew were hitting their graybunks and which were heading for the mess lounges. As the ship silently screamed through a gaseous hell, one third of the crew fell asleep.

The rest of the bridge watch sat idly at their stations. All except the Engineer, Lieutenant Artie Barnes, whose complete attention was set on the status boards of his fuel scoops. The Duty Weapons officer, Lieutenant Brenda Scott, stared at the pyrotechnics on the viewscreen, half-mesmerized. Clad in her usual dumpy jump suit, her plump face glittered with the reflected light show from the screen. She was pretty in a plain sort of way but disdained to attempt any improvements. Scott was from the planet Goggic, which had sided with the rebels, and Mitchell knew her sadness when she thought of her friends and family who were part of the

Planetary Navy of Goggic. The Weapons Officer knew she had officially forsworn any planetary loyalties when she joined the Protectorate Navy, but who could have foreseen the turn of events that they now all found themselves in. For now, Mitchell had no doubt of Brenda Scott's loyalty. In the many actions of the DESTINY she had performed admirably and without hesitation. But so far, they had not been engaged with any warships of Goggic.

"You seem never to get tired of that sight, Lieutenant Scott," Mitchell said as she motioned toward the viewscreen.

Brenda smiled. "It is very beautiful. Sort of grabs you and holds your attention, doesn't it?"

"If you let it."

"You know, Commander, I guess we've scooped more than a dozen different gas balls since this thing started and I'm always amazed that there are never two that look alike."

Mitchell nodded. "That makes sense. Different hydrogen percentages, different trace elements, different dive speeds and scoop levels, they all contribute to change what we see on the screen."

"I guess you're right," Brenda agreed.

Ensign Macaffrey, the ship's Communicator swiveled his chair around. "Brenda just likes anything that might make her watch go faster. I once saw her counting how many times the status lights on the Weapons Board blink per minute just to pass the time," he said mischievously.

Brenda smiled back. "Well, what do you do, Mr. Macaffrey? I've seen you twiddling your thumbs at your station plenty of times, that is when you weren't humming to yourself or doing some silly drumroll with your fingers."

Macaffrey shrugged in good-natured agreement, but then the playful look vanished from his face and he was all business once again.

"Tight-beam message coming in from ENMITY."

Mitchell turned back to the Command Console. "Lock on and put it through the screen, Ensign."

"Aye, aye."

The snowy picture on the Communications Monitor slowly dissolved into the face of a balding man at a Command Station similar to Mitchell's. It was Commander Bert Javisson, the executive officer on board the flagship.

Javisson smiled as the picture cleared. "Hello, Ontara. How's the refueling going?"

Mitchell remained unsmiling. "We expect completion of the operation within seven hours, Commander."

"Sounds like you've cut a few hours off your projected completion time. The Old Man will be glad to hear that. You know he wants to get to the rendezvous point to see if our courier ever made it back."

"Yes, that is what I understand to be our next destination."

Javisson continued smiling. "Well, I'll inform Commodore Maston that the squadron can head for the shift point in about two hours. You can join up with us there."

"That's affirm, Commander."

"I don't mind telling you I'll be glad to get out of this system. The squadron is just too vulnerable here, too close to the rebel home systems. It's been keeping us on our toes."

Mitchell ignored the comment. "We will be ready for rendezvous at the shift point, sir. Is there anything else?"

At this Javisson almost lost his smile as he shook his head. "No, nothing else, Lieutenant Commander Mitchell. ENMITY out."

As Mitchell signaled Macaffrey to cut transmission, her face flushed in anger. As far as she knew Javisson was only trying to make conversation but experience had taught her never to let her defenses down with other officers of the squadron. More than once stories had gotten back to her that she was considered little more than the Captain's concubine within the squadron's command circle. She couldn't understand why they felt so threatened by her. She had earned the right to be the executive officer of the DESTINY. But Mitchell would never give any of them cause to look into her true feelings for Decameron, for to do so would mean disaster.

The end of the bridge watch was rapidly approaching. Engineer Barnes was scheduled to have the Con next. This was fine by him, since he had intended to stay on the bridge to monitor the refueling anyway. As Mitchell rose from the Command Console to let Barnes slip into her place Lieutenant Scott spoke up from the Weapons Station.

"Squadron is moving out of the inner system toward the shift point, Commander Mitchell."

Ontara acknowledged. In her mind's eye she could see the five sleek warships accelerating away from DESTINY toward the asteroid belts. ENMITY would be in the lead followed by AUDACITY, RAPIDITY, SAGACITY, and TENACITY. Mitchell would be glad when the DESTINY was once again with her sister ships.

The relief formalities over, Mitchell cycled the bridge hatch and clambered down the ladder to the Main Corridor below. She noted Brenda Scott's relief was late and made a mental note to talk to him about it. But now she had to hurry to the officer's messroom if she was to have a chance to eat. The Captain's Mast she had to conduct was less than an hour away.

The messroom was nearly deserted when she entered, the only occupant being the ship's Chief Medical Officer, Lieutenant Commander Sergei Kamakawa quietly enjoying a flask of coffee at a corner table. He waved at Mitchell as she headed for the food dispensers and she smiled back. Kamakawa was the only other officer aboard the DESTINY that Mitchell felt even remotely close to. He was a personable middle aged man with a shining goatee and eyes that seemed to glitter when he spoke. Ontara had heard that Captain Decameron had personally requested that he be assigned to the DESTINY when she was commissioned. They had been good friends for years and knew each other quite well.

Mitchell pulled her steaming tray from the dispenser and headed for the Doctor's table. "Your up late, Doc. Been making housecalls?"

Kamakawa shook his head. "You know I can't sleep on these refueling runs, Ontara. All the creaking and groaning from the hull keeps me up."

Mitchell nodded sympathetically. "At least you'll be able to rest on our way to the shift point. I doubt if there will be much to do in the Medical Department."

"Let's hope so. Is the Captain still on the bridge?"

"No, he went down to his quarters a little while ago."

Kamakawa smiled. "He must really trust you. I remember when he was in temporary command of the old escort AVENGER some years ago. I don't think he left the bridge more than ten minutes at a time, and never during an operation like refueling."

Mitchell shrugged noncommittally. "I suppose everyone is a bit overcautious when it comes to their first command experience. You get used to delegating some of the responsibility in time."

Kamakawa smiled to himself. "I suppose that's true."

Mitchell ate in silence for a few moments, then finally asked, "What was the Captain like when you first met him?"

"Oh, brash, energetic. We met at a bar in the starport on Bossilwick. He had just graduated from the Protectorate Naval Academy in the Calamain System and was finishing up his leave visiting his parents. I had started a Medical practice near the Government Center but my dream was becoming a ship's doctor. Royce told me how I could go about doing just that. I followed his advice, was accepted by the Protectorate Navy and never looked back. About a year later I was assigned to the HELVION and Lieutenant Royce Decameron was the Weapons Officer. He hadn't changed that much, a little more rugged and confident in himself. We've served together quite a few times over the years."

Ontara finished up her meal as the Doctor went to get another flask of coffee from the dispenser. "Well, Doc, I've got to run the Captain's Mast in a few minutes. Hope you finally get some sleep. You never know when you'll be needed."

"Don't worry about me. I'm the classic insomniac. I've been known to go sleepless for three days and no one even notices."

Mitchell smiled. "If you say so. Take care."

As Kamakawa raised his flask in farewell she left the messroom and headed for the enlisted men's decks.

There was no one to be seen as Ontara walked aft toward the central gray-lift. Off-duty personnel would be in their bunks or on the recreation-deck, duty personnel at their stations. As the lift glided down its shaft, Ontara was able to collect her thoughts in solitude, preparing for the Captain's Mast ahead.

The duty of conducting the Captain's Mast has been the responsibility of the executive officer of ships down through the centuries. Answerable to the Captain for the maintenance of discipline aboard ship, the Exec presided over the hearing for various defaulters and wrongdoers that had been reported by the ship's department heads and petty officers. The executive officer decided on a punishment or, in more serious matters, brought the accused to the attention of the Captain. It was a duty that Ontara Mitchell did not relish, especially now with tempers flaring from the extended duty.

The gray-lift silently stopped at the Main Corridor of the ship. This narrow walkway ran the length of the vessel, occasionally bisected by blast doors and bulkheads. The DESTINY was literally built around the Main Corridor. A ship of 10,000 tons, she was designed for a crew of 89 men and women and was built for one purpose: combat. As a raider, as an escort, she was the top of the line as far as light warships were concerned in the Protectorate Navy. Studded with laser and missile turrets as well as

defensive weapons, she appeared as a squat, oblong projectile some 110 meters long. It was said that not since the halcyon days of the Terran Union had such a ship been built.

The After Conference Room had only four crewmen in it when Mitchell stepped past the door. All of them instantly snapped to attention.

"Let's get started, shall we?" Mitchell said as she eased herself behind the raised computer desk in the front of the compartment.

Chief Falco came up and began to look through a list in his hand. He was a short, barrel of a man, stocky and gruff. Mitchell had heard some of the crew say that he gargled with gravel.

"First defaulter," rumbled Falco. "Missile Tech, Second Class Jaycee Adams. Disorderly conduct and disrespect to a superior officer."

"What's the story, Adams?"

The young girl looked up sheepishly at her executive officer. "No excuse, Commander. I just had enough of Chief Williams and his badgering."

Mitchell punched in a few code keys and watched her computer screen as the data on Jaycee Adams began to come in. She was 22 years old, right out of the PNA tech schools before her assignment to DESTINY. More importantly, she was from the Protectorate capital planet of Caractacalla, now under occupation by rebel forces. Mitchell knew the stories that were being told of the harshness of that occupation from the various merchantmen the squadron had come across. It was enough to work on anyone's mind.

"Very well, Adams. Three weeks extra duty. Dismissed." Mitchell sighed. That should keep her mind off things.

Falco continued as he pointed to the two other crewmen in the compartment. "Engineering Techs. Smaltz and Webby. Fighting while on duty."

Mitchell punched in the two men's codes. "You men have been up before the mast a number of times before. What's the problem?"

Both men tried to talk at once before Mitchell raised her hand, then pointed to Smaltz. The big man began again. "Webby is always gettin' in my stuff, Commander. I tell him to vac-off but he don't listen till I bust him one."

"Your stuff!" cried the other man. "Why, you big Wograt, you know I lent that stuff to you!"

Mitchell raised her hand again to get quiet. "What stuff are you talking about?"

The two men looked at each other, then back to Mitchell. Finally, Webby spoke. "Why it's our shift bar collection, Commander."

Mitchell blinked for a second, not understanding. Then she remembered. Shift engines contained a small control rod in their drive unit, which kept the shift generators tuned to a proper setting. Made of Pergatorium Steel similar to the ship's hull, these rods tended to warp and distend after about ten shifts and had to be replaced. Normally they were discarded but some engineers keep them as momentos or to sell to planetbounders who would love to own something that was created in shift-space. Some of these rods warp in fascinating ways like loops or squiggles. Many planetary art galleries had displays of shift bars in their collection.

Mitchell saw the solution to this problem immediately. "Chief Falco, confiscate the shift bars hoarded by these two and hold them until we get back to base. We'll see how they handle themselves until then. And you two better stay in line. I've got plenty of extra cells in the ship's brig."

"Yes, Commander." said the two Engineers.

Mitchell dismissed them and slowly stretched back in her chair. "I wish all Captain's Masts could be this easy, Falco."

Chief Falco smiled. "It has been a pretty good week, Commander. We've been keeping them busy so there's no time to get into trouble."

"Keep it up. We never know when the rebels could catch up to us. Refueling should be done in a few hours. After that we rejoin the squadron and see what the Commodore has in store for us."

"I doubt if it'll be anything exciting," Falco said.

"You never know, Chief. You never know."

CHAPTER TWO

DESTINY

The ship was preparing to raise herself out of the boiling mass of Phais III's raging atmosphere. Her fuel tanks were nearly topped up and the crew were all at their stations in preparation for the final and most tricky phase of the refueling operation.

Captain Decameron sat in his command chair after five hours of rest in his quarters. He looked over to Mitchell as she quietly communicated with Engineer Barnes about the refueling. Decameron couldn't believe his luck in getting so dependable an executive officer. True, he had had plenty of misgivings in the beginning. But these were all in the past and now all he wished was that he had more like her.

"Status, Ontara?"

Mitchell looked over to her Captain. "Tanks at 99%. Scoop controls positive function. Mr. Barnes says ready whenever you are, Captain."

Decameron smiled back at her. "Excellent. Give me positive thrust and take us out of the gas giant's atmosphere. Achieve a standard orbit while we plot a course back to the squadron."

"Aye, sir," said Mitchell. "Going up now."

The DESTINY began to plow her way out of the stormy depths of the atmosphere's maelstrom. About her lightning and static charges ripped through the gaseous hell.

"All fuel valves closed," Barnes said. "Purging the Refining Plant now. All stations ready to retract scoops."

"Execute," ordered Decameron as he watched the readouts on his command screen.

As the DESTINY climbed out of the writhing atmosphere the two fuel scoops in her belly slowly retracted into their compartments, their job done for the time being. On the Engineering Deck the fuel techs and engineers on duty watched their monitors as the steady whine of the lifting machinery was heard beneath their feet. It seemed as if the entire deck vibrated, negating the grav plates under the flooring. They had all experienced the sensation before and many lacked forward to it for the muscle relaxing qualities it contained.

The flash of fire that erupted from the port scoop took everyone in Lower Engineering by surprise. In an instant what had been an organized and precise operation turned into a raging inferno as the blast smashed through the armored floor plates above the scoop and raged through the cluster of engineers at their controls. Those that weren't caught by the initial explosion were thrown into their equipment by the shockwave. For an instant there was complete silence, then the screams of burning men could be heard above the roar of escaping air. The doomed crewmen who were still conscious watched as every loose object in the large compartment shot toward the now shredded scoop hatch and out into the thinning gases of

Phais III. Soon, even they began the inescapable trip toward the scoop hatch and the vacuum that waited beyond.

The shock came to the bridge as a slight bump, then a slip sideways as the whole ship shuddered.

Decameron knew there was trouble. "Find out what that was. Damage Control report status."

Instantly, Mitchell accessed the Damage Control Status Display on her console. Grimly, she looked over at the Captain. "We've got a hull breach in Lower Engineering, Sir. I'm sending a team down."

Barnes broke in. "Explosion in the port side scoop compartment! I don't get any response from Lower Engineering."

Amid all the confusion, the DESTINY continued its steady rise out of the gas giant, its port side aft slowly streaming a burning flare of brilliance behind it.

"Damage Control reports that the automatic bulkheads have sealed off the aft areas of the Lower Engineering deck, Captain. We can't get in."

"I've closed all connections between the scoops and the fuel holding tanks," said Barnes. "We'll just have to let the residue in the port scoop burn itself out."

Decameron nodded. "That's affirm. What in hell happened?"

Mitchell turned to face the Captain. "It could have been an electrostatic charge, Captain, more powerful than usual. It must have gotten passed the dampers and ignited the raw fuel vapors inside the scoop compartment. That's what got the PERSEVERANCE about five years back."

"Yea, I remember," Decameron said. "The explosion ripped the ship in half. I guess we were lucky. Barnes, how many men were in Lower Engineering?"

Barnes looked down at his readings. "Six, sir. Most of them at the scoop controls. I doubt if they had time to react at all."

"Damn. Ontara, let me know when Damage Control can get in there and check it out. Right now let's get out of this blasted gas ball!"

DESTINY swam up through the last thin wisps of atmosphere and into the black void of space with no further incident.

"Send a message to ENMITY, Ensign Macaffrey," Decameron said. "Advise them of our situation. Tell them that we are still checking on the damage."

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Commander Mitchell, send out a probe drone to check our exterior damage." Decameron slowly flexed his hands into fists, squeezing out the strain. Mitchell averted her eyes as she punched up the probe display on her monitor.

"Probe drone, positive function, sir. I'm opening the bay now."

Far below the bridge deck in the forward cutter bay two clamshell doors began to open to the starry blackness before them. Before they had completely opened a small silver pod with various appendages shot forth into the void, clearing the DESTINY's bow in a winding arc toward the after portion of the ship. With attitude jets spurting it into position, the probe slid into darkness under the bulk of the DESTINY's hull.

"Probe in position, Captain," Mitchell said. "I'm getting a picture."

Mitchell hit a switch that sent the probe's signal to the other stations

on the bridge. In silence everyone watched as the image brightened in the drone's lighting units. It was slowly moving aft toward the Lower Engineering section. With a gasp some of the bridge crew saw the first signs of damage. The lip of the fuel scoop had been peeled back from its support girders by the force of the explosion. In place of the neat, orderly scoop hatch was a black hole filled with torn and shredded metal. The rear part of the hatch was buckled and bent over itself and hung by its massive hinge joint out of the Engineering compartment itself.

Decameron stared at the picture like a professor analyzing formula on a blackboard. "We'll never be able to shift with that hanging out there. The stasis envelope would never hold. Ontara, get Damage Control to organize a work party for EVA. We'll need an interior crew suited up to work in the Lower Engineering compartment as well."

"Affirm."

"Get the fabrication boys to work up some kind of patch for the hatch opening. The sooner we can repressurize the compartment the better."

"Yes, sir."

"And let me know what Damage Control finds as soon as they can get into the compartment. There might be... survivors."

Barnes shook his head. "Little hope of that, sir."

Decameron tried to smile at his Engineer. "When there's hope nothing's impossible, Mr. Barnes. Someone might have gotten to one of the airtight supply rooms or machinery hatches in there. I want a search for survivors."

Mitchell finally looked up at her Captain. "You'll have it, sir."

Decameron smiled. "Fine, Ontara, that's fine. Well, lets get to work."



The work crews found no survivors. Only one body was discovered of the six crewmen lost. It was pinned in the remnants of the scoop controls. Mercifully, it seemed that the force of the explosion had killed the young engineer before the horrible effects of vacuum could achieve the same goal. The certain fact of the deaths of six crewmen affected everyone. In the twenty-odd actions that the DESTINY had been in since the outbreak of the Civil War there had never been a fatal casualty before. Now in a standard refueling procedure, six crewmen had lost their lives.

Decameron beamed a message to Commodore Maston aboard the ENMITY, which was now approaching one of the shift points in the Phais Eisert System. "We can't shift until we repressurize Lower Engineering and jettison the damaged scoop hatch," Decameron said to the aging figure in the monitor. "I estimate at least eight hours before we can join you and be shift-capable."

Commodore Maston's wrinkled and worn brow grew even craggier as Decameron's words traveled to him through the void. He was no longer a vibrant and upcoming squadron commander. On the monitor in front of Decameron was a shrunken old man, too long on extended duty.

Maston finally spoke. "Captain Decameron, I know it was a bad break for you and your crew, but I can't let this accident change my plans. You have six hours in which to complete your repairs and rejoin the main force. After that this squadron will be shifting to Rendezvous Point Alpha in the Dobbyn System. If you can't join us and be shift-capable by then, you'll just have to catch up when you are able."

"I understand, sir. We'll do our best." Currently, their best was a slow acceleration toward the squadron's shift point. But unless they could get the outer hull damage repaired and increase speed they had no hope of reaching the other ships in the allotted time. Decameron stood at rigid attention in front of the communication monitor. He didn't really know Maston that well, as the Commodore had never really encouraged ship to ship contacts. Decameron knew the other ship's captains in passing from the numerous staff meetings that the senior officers of the squadron endured when they were at their base on Bossilwick. When on patrol communication was limited to duty requirements. Decameron had hoped that he could get closer to his fellow commanders, get to know them better, but there never seemed to be enough time to do all the things that needed his attention. Looking at his Commodore now made Decameron realize just how little he knew about the man.

Maston's features softened somewhat. "Royce, I don't want you to think I'm leaving you out on a limb like this for any reason other than the well-being of the squadron. You know my main responsibility lies to Marauder III as a whole. We've got to find out what's been going on these last few months. Hell, the bloody war could be over for all we know! I've got to get to the rendezvous point and see if that last courier has returned."

Decameron relaxed a little. "I understand, sir. We should be all right."

Maston smiled. "Fine, fine. In any case we'll be returning this way if you don't make it to Dobbyn within a reasonable time. Depending upon the news I hope to head back to refit at Bossilwick as soon as possible."

"That sounds real good, sir. Have I your permission to inform my crew of that fact?"

"You do."

Decameron literally beamed at that, "Thank you, sir!"

Maston quickly got back into his usual glowering visage, "Good luck to you, Captain. ENMITY out."

The screen flickered as the signal died. Decameron turned to look at the bridge crew with a smile on his face, "You heard?"

Ensign Macaffrey could hardly contain his excitement, "We certainly DID, sir!"

"Then pass the word." Decameron looked over to Mitchell at her station, "Ontara, double up those work parties. I don't intend to be left behind now or ever. Let's see if we can't shave those two hours off our projected repair time, shall we?"

"That's affirm, sir."

Decameron headed toward the bridge deck hatch, dreading his next responsibility, "I'll be at Airlock Four. I want a full report on the repairs as soon as I'm back."



Airlock Four was on the port side of the ship just forward of the second dorsal laser turret on DESTINY. The other three airlocks were in constant use as repair crews entered and exited the ship on their way to or from the damaged scoop bay. Around Airlock Four, however, there was nothing but silence as all the men that could be spared from repair duties, about twenty in all, stood around Captain Decameron as he read from a worn and frayed old-style book.

"...and we commend their bodies to the Void, so that they might be one with the universe. Company, ATTEN-SHUN!"

With a snap the gathered crewmen came to attention. Decameron signaled to Engineer Barnes, who started to engage the purge controls of the airlock.

With his emotions under a tight control, Decameron continued, "Engineering Technician Alover Onsell, Chief Tech. Huel Bonigan, Ensign Rork Sedley..." Decameron looked around as he continued. The men and women standing at attention around the airlock looked out into nothing, remembering their lost comrades. A wild leave here, a favor given there, all came back as the names went on. In front of the others he saw Lieutenant Scott, the Weapons Officer. She looked like she was in shock, tightly staring at the airlock. He could understand why. Sedley had been the only other crewmember from Scott's home planet of Goggic, now in rebellion. He had no doubts about her loyalty but knew the pressure that could be put on someone if they were forced to fight their families. And now she was completely alone. She'd never talk about a problem such as this to others that weren't in the same situation. Now there was no one to share her thoughts with. As he continued Decameron made a mental note to ask Doctor Kamakawa to have a talk with her. Behind him the airlock controls beeped their purge signal as Barnes activated the door mechanism. "...Engineer Second Class Kristen Kalloway, Life Support Tech. Errick Admara, and Engineer First Class Ronda Fellamar. May they all be at peace."

Decameron closed the worn book as the airlock signaled purge completed. Shooting out into the Phais Eisert System, one tightly wrapped bundle and five silvery metallic nameplates spun through the darkness. In seconds they were gone.

"Dismissed." Decameron walked over to Barnes as the rest of the gathered crewmen exited the outer airlock chamber and headed in various directions down the ship's corridors. "Artie, how's it look in Lower Engineering?"

Barnes turned toward Decameron as he finished securing the airlock controls, "Not as bad as I had thought, Captain. We should be able to finish the patch and repressurize in a little over an hour."

"Good, good. I'll be on the bridge. Let me know if there's anything you need."

"Aye, sir."

Decameron quickly made his way back to the bridge, passing crewmen hurrying to complete their tasks before the rapidly approaching deadline. As he slid into the command station, Decameron switched a number of outer viewers on and was able to see four different angles of the repairs being conducted on the bottom of the hull. On the screens before

him laser torches and manually operated hydraulic claws seemed to be fighting each other around the damaged scoop hatch as the tiny suited figures, mostly tethered to the hull but some on jetpods, worked at a feverish pace to cut the damaged portion of the massive hatch away from the scoop bay. Amid the blinding laser light and the hull floods Decameron noticed a familiar red-suited figure. Turning abruptly toward the executive officer's empty control station confirmed his suspicions.

"Ensign Macaffrey, give me extra-ship communications." The Communication's Officer hit the necessary switches and suit static filled the bridge.

"All right, now Jones, put a little more strain on that claw. Keep burning, Wilson, we've only got about four hours left."

"I'm just changing bottles, Commander."

"Well, do it faster! We're not going to be left by the squadron. Not now, not ever!"

Decameron smiled as he hit his call button, "Decameron to Mitchell, Why aren't you at your post on the bridge, Commander?"

The red suited figure froze at the end of her tether as she heard his words. "I, ah, I was just taking a first-hand look at the repair progress, Captain."

"Well, get back up here. The crew chiefs can handle matters out there. I need you on the bridge when we increase acceleration for the squadron shift point."

"Affirm, Captain." Slowly, the red-suited individual wound up her line and headed for Airlock Two.

It didn't take long for Mitchell to arrive on the bridge, her hair a bit disheveled from her suit helmet. Quietly she stepped out of the floor hatch and went to her station.

Decameron didn't bother to turn from his perusal of his readout screen. "How are the repairs going, Ontara?"

Mitchell tried to be her businesslike self as usual. "Coming along fine, sir. As soon as we get the damaged section of the scoop hatch jettisoned we can begin the repressurization of Lower Engineering."

"That's good news. Tell Engineer Barnes to be prepared to go to maximum acceleration as soon as we are able. I don't want to keep the squadron waiting at the shift point too long."

"No worry about that, sir," Mitchell said, smiling. "I'm sure the Commodore will be more than ready to shift out the instant we seem shift capable."

"Yes, well, I guess we all are looking forward to refitting and recreation time," Decameron said. "After these last six months even Bossilwick will look pretty good I think. With this scoop damage we might even need the dry-dock depending on how much structural damage we took. That would mean extended leave, maybe even a transfer for most of the crew to active vessels." Decameron stopped in mid-thought, then continued in a milder tone. "If we get a big influx of raw recruits transferring into the crew I'll need a top executive officer to whip them into shape. I'd hoped to recommend you for command after this tour, Ontara. But maybe you'd consider staying on with me for a little while longer? Think it over, will you?" He hesitated. "I need you."

Mitchell was surprised at the sudden request and yet pleased at the same time. Containing her racing thoughts, she fumbled for a second with her reply. "Aye, sir," was all she said. "We should be able to--"

With a squawk the Communications Station signaled for attention. Ensign Macaffrey turned away from listening to Mitchell and Decameron and checked his readouts. Quickly he turned back to the Captain.

"Sir! I've got an incoming message from out-system. Its in real-time, in standard Protectorate code G-3."

"Get the translation program working on it and feed it to my station," said Decameron, using his command voice once again. Almost immediately, the words of the message began to appear on his communication screen:

"TO ANY PROTECTORATE VESSELS IN THE PHAIS EISERT SYSTEM, THIS IS THE COURIERCRAFT 'SPEEDY' HEADING IN-SYSTEM ON HEADING 332.5. DANGER. PRIORITY MESSAGE FOLLOWS... TO ANY PROTECTORATE VESSELS IN THE PHAIS EISERT SYSTEM. THIS IS..."

Decameron looked over to Mitchell as the message repeated again. "Ontara, get a fix on that message. Macaffrey, hail the ENMITY and see if she has intercepted this transmission."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Captain Decameron shook his head as he looked back to Ontara. "I'd say our conversation was a bit premature, Lieutenant Commander Mitchell. We might not be seeing Bossilwick for awhile now."

Mitchell looked him straight in the eyes, all her confusion of the past moment gone. "It doesn't matter, sir. They'll have to do better than offer me a command to get me to transfer from DESTINY. She's my home. I belong here, with you." The last two words were spoken so softly not even the Captain heard them.

Slowly, Decameron turned his seat away from Mitchell and toward the Weapons station. Feeling his eyes on her back, Lieutenant Brenda Scott looked over at the Captain as he began to speak. "Lieutenant Scott, I'll want a weapons check shortly. I hate hunches, but if I'm right we might be needing your services soon."

Scott could only nod in return.

CHAPTER THREE

DESTINY

Decameron's expression was more of surprise than alarm, and certainly no evidence of urgency appeared in his manner as the courier's second message slowly crawled across the screen:

"ENEMY BATTLEFLEET OF 20+ DEVASTATORS, 25 CRUISERS, AND 50+ LIGHT GRAFT AND AUXILIARIES ARRIVING PHAIS EISERT SYSTEM WITHIN TWO HOURS. ENEMY WARSHIPS ARE SUSPECTED TO BE MAIN BODY OF REBEL FLEET HEADING FOR CARACTACALLA SYSTEM TO REINFORCE THEIR INVASION FORCE. COURIER 'SPEEDY' INTERCEPTED BY ENEMY DESTROYERS IN MALTHUS SYSTEM AND SUSTAINED HEAVY DAMAGE. NOW HEADING IN-SYSTEM AT BEST POSSIBLE SPEED FOR REFUELING. DO NOT REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE! PROBABILITY ENEMY FLEET WILL HAVE IN-SHIFTED BY TIME OF RECEIPT. COURSE OF ACTION RECOMMENDED: WITHDRAWAL FROM SYSTEM TOWARD PROTECTORATE FORCES AROUND BOSSILWICK SYSTEM. PLEASE FORWARD THIS MESSAGE TO GNA HQ."

*— PILOT CAPTAIN ALATHONIA DEXTER
PROTECTORATE COURIER 'SPEEDY'*

Decameron remained silent as the message repeated itself. The bridge watch turned as one to their Captain, waiting for him to speak.

Decameron slowly let out a sigh as the message finally disappeared from the screen and automatically was recorded in the communication computer's memory. How long had he waited for such a message? There was a feeling that had been growing in him lately of having waited all his life, with everything that he had done to this point only interludes or stages to some climax that might now be close at hand. Ewer since the refueling accident Decameron had felt an upsurge of excitement for no real reason, a sense of an approaching moment of fulfillment. Newer before in his naval career had this feeling been so profound.

The bridge crew tensed as Decameron slowly swiveled in his command chair to face them. "Ensign Macaffrey, get me a tight beam to the ENMITY. The rest of you carry-on. The excitement's only beginning."

The Captain's words seemed to galvanize his officers into action as they turned back to their stations and continued the bridge routine. It didn't take long for the crew belowdecks to get the news of the courier's message.

"Commodore Maston coming on-line, sir," said Macaffrey as he initiated the laser link with the flagship.

Maston appeared even more careworn than during his last transmission. His silver hair was a bit disheveled and the strain around his eyes showed that he hadn't slept for some time.

"I suppose you've seen the SPEEDY's message, Captain Decameron," Maston began. "How soon can you rejoin the squadron?"

Decameron quickly checked the damage control status monitor before he said, "We'll be maneuverable in less than an hour after we get the remains of the scoop compartment hatch burned away, sir. After that we can get to the shift point at maximum acceleration in some 4.78 hours."

Maston shook his head. "Too long, Captain, too long. I can't risk the squadron being detected at the shift point. Distant scan already has possible contacts out-system. I'm sorry, Captain Decameron, we'll have to leave you behind."

Decameron was puzzled. He stared at the image of Commodore Maston on the screen for a moment before he quietly said, "I had thought that the squadron might engage the enemy leading elements, sir. At least we could give them a bloody nose before we withdraw."

Maston's eyes snapped back to the screen from talking to one of his officers behind him. "What's this, Decameron? Are you mad? Didn't you see the fleet composition in the SPEEDY's message? Over TWENTY Devastators! Any one of them would be a match for this entire squadron! No, we must withdraw and inform Bossilwick headquarters. Follow when you can, Maston out."

Decameron continued to stare at the blank communication screen after the Commodore's image faded. Withdrawal. It seemed that the Protectorate Navy had been doing nothing else since the Civil War started. Decameron thought back on the raids that Marauder Squadron III had conducted. Many had been successful, but whenever enemy warships had appeared on the scene that had been the command: Withdraw.

As if poured out of a pitcher, Decameron felt his hope leave him. He clenched his fists, near despair. The moment that he had been waiting for for so long seemed to fade about him. Was there to be more waiting in his life? More stages to an unknown goal that might never arrive? Decameron took a deep breath and then slowly let it out. No. Sometime you had to make your own moment. Sometimes waiting wouldn't do.

Instantly, Decameron made a decision and, just as quickly he was himself again. "Ontara, get me a distant scan of the out-system area. I want to know as soon as you spot something. Barnes, what's the verdict? Can we make the shift point undetected and follow the squadron?"

Barnes turned toward his Captain. "I don't see why not, sir. The repairs are coming along. The work crews are just finishing up cutting away the hatch debris. We should have the patch in place and Lower Engineering pressurized in a half-hour. After that we'll be fully maneuverable and able to head for the shift point at maximum G. That is, if you still want to."

Decameron smiled at his Engineer. "That remains to be seen, Mr. Barnes."

"Contact, Captain! Small vessel heading in-system at low acceleration," Mitchell almost shouted her report.

"Probably SPEEDY."

Mitchell nodded her head. "That's affirm, sir. Also, probable multiple contacts some distance behind her, numbers increasing all along that vector's shift point."

"It would seem our guest's are arriving," murmured Decameron.

"Yes, sir."

The operations of the bridge crew stopped as every one of them waited to hear their Captain's next words. Decameron looked about them, from one to another, using the moment to heighten their anticipation as a stage actor would. Slowly he turned to his second in command.

"Ontara, give me a projection of the SPEEDY's damage, and if she'll be able to refuel and reach the shift point before being intercepted by the enemy fleet."

Mitchell shook her head as the readings appeared on her screen. "She'll be overtaken well before reaching the gas giant, Captain. Enemy lead elements appear to be destroyers of the HARLEQUIN Class, the fastest ships in the Teltamatrixian Navy. SPEEDY won't have a chance."

Decameron sighed. "I figured as much. I wonder if the Commodore has thought of any of this."

Macaffrey turned toward the command chair. "The squadron just gave the shift preparatory, sir. They'll be gone in less than a minute."

Mitchell saw the Captain's face grow slightly reddened as he attempted to keep his temper. "Send a parting signal to ENMITY," snorted Decameron. "Inform Commodore Maston that DESTINY will be following the squadron as soon as all Protectorate personnel have been accounted for in the Phais Eisert System. We are heading out-system toward the SPEEDY to ascertain her situation."

The message was sent just seconds before the ships of Marauder Squadron III blinked off all the bridge sensors. There was no reply.

The silence was deafening, only the slight clicks and beeps from the bridge consoles interrupting it. Then slowly Engineer Barnes turned from his station. "We're shearing the last pin off the scoop hatch, sir. I've ordered the repair crews to start fitting the patch. You'll be totally maneuverable in thirty minutes."

"Very good, Mr. Barnes," said Decameron. "Ontara, announce to the crew that we will be going to battlestations in about an hour. They better get prepared."

"Yes, sir."

Decameron stretched in the command chair. "All we do now is wait."

As the reverberations of the inter-ship speakers shouted out the Executive Officer's announcement below decks a slow rumble could be heard even through the sealed bridge hatch. Soon it grew, drowning out Ontara's message.

Macaffrey smiled his mischievous grin at the Captain. "They're cheering, sir! I'd say your announcement has met with approval."

The Captain stared down at the command console, deep within himself. "I wonder if they'll still be able to cheer over it tomorrow."



As the announcement ended echoed by the ragged cheers of the crew Engineering Techs Smaltz and Webbly strode to the messroom with most other off-duty crewmen to eat their fill. Experience had shown that the

time before battlestations should newer be wasted. In some raids the entire crew had to put in over 24 hours duty before Decameron felt that they could relieve their intense state of readiness. When the ship was at battlestations the crew had to survive on the emergency rations in their battle suits, along with the meager sanitation facilities built into them. In spite of their excitement over going into possible action none of the crew looked forward to long hours at their battle positions.

"What do ya' think about the squadron shifting out without us, Smaltz? Kinda makes you feel lonely, don't it?"

Smaltz shook his head at Webby as he punched his selection into the food dispenser. "It don't make me feel lonely. If you ask me I doubt if the other ships in the squadron could keep up with us anyway, especially with old Maston in charge. I've never seen him order an attack on any place defended by enemy ships."

Other men near Smaltz nodded in agreement. "I guess you're right, Smaltz," Webby said. "We're probably better off by ourselves."

Missile Tech. Jaycee Adams looked up at the engineers from her meal. "It doesn't matter whether the squadron stayed or didn't stay."

"What's that, Adams?" Smaltz said.

"Didn't you hear the size of the rebel fleet that we're up against? TWENTY Devastators! A hundred escorts like DESTINY wouldn't be enough against them."

The others about the mess table fell silent for awhile, thinking on this. Finally Smaltz said, "Well, Adams, I wouldn't worry about it. Between the Captain up on the bridge, Wobbly and me down in the Engineroom, and you and Falco up in the weapons section we shouldn't need any other support, eh?"

With a grin, Adams nodded and quietly went back to eating. She still didn't seem convinced but would never think of showing fear to her messmates.

"I suppose you're right," she whispered, then continued with more life. "But you just make sure those engines of yours keep us away from any Devastators."

Smaltz nodded in agreement. "Too right, Techie. Too bloody right."



Doctor Sergie Kamakawa was just cleaning up one of his examining tables in sickbay when Chief Falco came in. The Doctor's smile vanished as he saw the tight-lipped and pain-filled face of the man. In spite of his discomfort, Falco tried to make conversation.

"Have some customers, Doc?"

Kamakawa turned away and dropped some refuse in the wall bin. "Just one crewman with partial depressurization. Ripped the arm of his suit while he was on the repair team. No real problem, Chief. His arm will be mighty sore for a few days but he got inside in time."

Falco leaned against the bulkhead as he quickly changed the subject. "I need some stronger pills, Doc."

Kamakawa knew it was coming. Slowly he turned to the weathered

old man, who had seemed to shrink before him in the last minute. "The attacks," he said. "They haven't stopped, have they Chief?"

Falco thought about trying to lie, but then knew it would be useless. "They did for a while, Doc. But I had a big one about an hour ago." Falco's eyes were almost pleading. "I can't be feeling like this at battlestations, Doc. I have to be in top shape. You understand, don't you?"

"All I understand is there is a certain senior Chief aboard this ship who should have retired about five years ago. You know I won't be able to help you much longer. It will become apparent to everyone soon that you just can't function efficiently aboard a warship. The high-G maneuvers and accelerations soon won't just black you out, they'll kill you."

Falco nodded. "Just one last time, Doc. Then I promise you I'll turn myself over to sickbay and you can do whatever you want. I just have to make it through this last operation. Just one more time. Not for me, for the ship."

Kamakawa knew he couldn't say no. Quickly he went over to one of the dispensers built into the wall. He punched in the code as he said, "These tabs will keep you going for at least another 24 hours. There is a chance of internal damage when using them for so long a time but you figured that out, didn't you?"

Falco nodded.

Kamakawa handed the vial to the Chief. "Put them in the stimulant pouch on your battlesuit. No one will know what you're taking."

Falco sighed in relief. "Thanks Doc."

Kamakawa looked sternly at the man. "Don't thank me Falco. I'm not doing you any favors with this. It could kill you faster than your weak heart. You just make sure you get back here after this operation. If you don't I swear to you that this time I'm going to the Captain."

Falco nodded once again. "I understand. But don't worry so much, Doc. I've got a feeling that after today a lot of us won't have anything left to worry about."

Kamakawa turned back to finishing up around the examining table. "Time will tell Chief, time will tell." When he looked up once again the man was gone.



Lieutenant Brenda Scott was still in her quarters when the battlestation preparatory signal sounded. Twenty more minutes before she would have to report to her Weapons Station on the bridge. Slowly she tightened up the seals about her wrists and ankles on the battlesuit that she had been wearing for the last hour. Slightly armored and reinforced, it might give her the protection she would need if the hull was breached in the bridge area. The battlesuit could be worn for days in a vacuum, in safety if not in comfort. They all had their own supply of emergency oxygen and rations. Each suit contained enough to keep you breathing for twelve hours, and keep you from starving for four days. The crews were usually connected to ship's oxygen during extended stays at battlestations so tapping into the suit's resources was rare. Brenda's suit was a newer model, with medical and drug pouches on the sleeves.

Scott turned towards the compartment hatch as she picked up the suit's gloves and helmet. Her eyes wandered about, taking in the little bits of life aboard the DESTINY that she had experienced here and saved in her mind. Near the bulkhead gray-bunk was the picture of her home on Goggic. Brenda remembered that Rork Sedley had shown her a picture of his lodgehouse on their planet, and had said that he always kept it in his tunic close to his heart. Now the picture and Sedley were gone. There was nothing left but her memories and duty to the Protectorate Navy. Everything else must be forgotten.

Finally, Scott opened the hatch and stepped out into the corridor amid other bustling crewmen, dumpy in their own battlesuits. Brenda gritted her teeth. She would forget. Her planet and her family were all rebels and traitors now to the society that she had sworn to defend. She could not forget that no matter what. Goggic was no longer her home. She had to force herself to think that way because, in the end, that was the way it actually was.

With a new force and added purpose Lieutenant Brenda Scott strode the corridors of her new home amid her new family and headed for the waiting station on the bridge.



On the bridge, Decameron busied himself with the normal duties. No shows of alarm or agitation were permitted as the DESTINY readied itself for battlestations.

With a smile Chief Engineer Barnes turned towards his Captain. "Patch has been sealed on the scoop hatch in Lower Engineering, sir. Ready for maneuver whenever you are."

"That's fine, Barnes. Ensign Macaffrey, signal the crew to battlestations, if you please."

"Yes, sir."

As if from a great distance the squawking alarm sounded throughout the corridors of the ship. Crewmen who hadn't been as prepared as most ran to their stations in haste. In less than five minutes over eighty crewmen were at their posts, suited up in battle gear, and ready for action.

Ontara turned to her Captain. "Crew closed up at battlestations, sir. All weapons and defensive stations manned and ready."

"Excellent, Ontara. Give my compliments to the crew on their performance."

"Yes, sir."

Decameron swiveled in his seat towards the Engineer. Barnes saw the questioning glance of his Captain and smiled. "Yes, sir. We are now capable of battle maneuvers. Repairs have been completed."

Decameron nodded as he said, "Let's try two G's, Lieutenant Commander Mitchell. Accelerate out-system toward SPEEDY's sensor contact, if you please."

"Yes, sir!"

With an almost imperceptible shudder, the DESTINY changed course to another vector heading out-system. Stretched before her the path

of the SPEEDY and her multiple pursuers was calculated on the navigation computer monitors. Soon they would show up on the sensor screens of the in-coming ships unless Decameron changed course.

"What's the projected time of visual contact with SPEEDY?"

Ontara checked her readouts before replying. "Some 3.2 hours, sir. We'll be able to synchronize velocities and match up a tight beam signal laser to SPEEDY in 52 minutes. The enemy units accelerating behind the courier will be in firing range in less than five hours. That's more than enough time for us to come to her support."

Decameron smiled as he gazed at his first officer. "That's fine, Ontara. Plot a course change that will put us between SPEEDY and the Inner Asteroid Belt. The sensor distortion may force the rebels to use a few more minutes to identify us unless..." Decameron stopped, and suddenly a smile blossomed on his face. "...Unless we give them something else to look at. Let's see if we can speed up our contact with SPEEDY. Barnes, give me full acceleration, will you please?"

"Aye, sir."

In an instant the bridge crew was thrown against their couches as the DESTINY leaped toward the outer system. Slowly the gravity dampers equalized the initial pressure and normal movement could be continued. Decameron turned towards his Weapons Officer. "Lieutenant Scott, when would you suggest we begin to release missiles?"

Brenda was taken by surprise by the question. "Uh, it's better to begin initial barrages at the longest range, Captain, especially with the computer guided types."

"Long range fights always have seemed to me to be anti-climactic. Let's wait until we can get in close."

Scott looked startled. "How, sir? They enemy will start firing as soon as they have us identified."

Decameron shrugged. "If they can't identify us, Lieutenant, they can't lock on to us. Let's see what we can come up with to assure that that situation occurs, shall we?"

"I-I suppose so, sir."

"Excellent. Let me know when you are able to try for a good targeting fix on the lead enemy vessels."

As the crew of the DESTINY hurtled toward the little Protectorate courier and her pursuers, Decameron stretched in his Command Chair. Suddenly he gave out a laugh that stopped the bridge crew's activity to stare at their commander. Stilt smiling, Decameron said, "Yes, we just might be able to come up with a tactic to keep the rebels guessing. If SPEEDY will help, that is. And then maybe the DESTINY can live up to her name for all of us, eh?"

No one answered as the ship sped onward.

CHAPTER FOUR

The First Class Devastator TELLAMACHIA, flagship of the Combined Tellamatrixian Fleet, silently headed into the Phais Eisert System in the middle of an armada of over one hundred ships. Resembling a kilometer-long tin can, she bristled with weapon's pods and defense bays. The flat bow contained her most potent weapon; a spinal accelerator cannon almost as long as the ship herself. Closer to the side armor near the bow the TELLAMACHIA's group of Ramguard Space Fighters were berthed in their launching bays, ready to screen the flagship in defense or streak to the attack. She was in Readiness Condition Alpha-One; the same defensive status the entire fleet had assumed upon shifting into Phais Eisert only an hour ago.

Deep inside the TELLAMACHIA's hull in the most heavily armored section of the vessel Fleet Admiral Lord Adolphus Onacker of the Burckoldt Range looked down at the Control Deck of his flagship. From the Command Bridge railing he could see the various fleet, squadron, and vessel status stations with their glowing monitors and readouts. The twenty officers on duty conscientiously studied their boards even though each of them could feel the eyes of the Fleet Commander looking down on them. Onacker peered at each of the stations on the Control Deck in turn, noting such things as one officer drumming his fingers on his seat, another with a tunic button undone. Onacker would report these transgressions to the watch duty officer in good time. The Fleet Admiral was known for the absolute concentration that he expected of his officers, especially when he was in the sort of mood he found himself in at present. Finally, Onacker gave up his perusal of the Control Deck duty personnel and turned to his Fleet Command Station. Slowly, he slid into the well-cushioned chair, upholstered with a real Snaptiger skin, which Onacker had shot himself. With a twist of his hand he activated the bank of command monitors above him. As he looked up the screens showed various images of the fleet around the flagship. From memory Onacker could recite the various squadrons and ships he saw before him. The 22nd Destroyer Squadron of Commodore Bellock led the armada. Composed of the newest and fastest warships of the Tellamatrixian Navy, it was used primarily as the pursuit and scouting arm of the fleet. Behind them the fourteen Devastators of the First, Third, and Fifth Battle Squadron headed toward Phais III in formation. Surrounding TELLAMACHIA and the other heavy ships the four cruiser squadrons of Tellamatrix and two from Goggic were stationed in defensive screening positions. Trailing these the other destroyer and escort squadrons shepherded the troop transports, supply tugs, and other auxiliaries in the fleet. Onacker frowned. The Devastator REGAL VOYAGER was out of station. Angrily, he flipped on his communicator and selected the Stationkeeper's post on the Control Deck. Instantly, a frightened Lieutenant came on the screen.

Onacker looked sternly at the image on his monitor. "Mister Murrock, any problems with our disposition?"

The Lieutenant's eyes rapidly scanned his board. "No, sir, Admiral. All appears normal here."

"Then why is the REGAL VOYAGER some 200 clicks out of station?"

The Lieutenant looked confused then frightened. "I-I'm not sure, Fleet Admiral. I'll check on it immediately, sir!"

"See that you do, Murrock. And if I find anymore stationkeeping problems that you can't seem to figure out for yourself, I'll see that you're transferred down to the Maintenance Section!" Onacker snapped off his communicator in disgust. There were far too many politically appointed officers in his flagship for a mission as important as they were on. Why didn't the High Command realize that? The Fleet Admiral sighed in resignation. There was nothing to do but carry on. Slowly, he turned and flipped the security switch on his personal computer bank.

"Personal Log, Fleet Commander Onacker. We have safely shifted into Phais Eisert and in spite of our premature detection in the Malthus System I have decided to continue the planned reinforcement of our Invasion Fleet around Caractacalla. Latest Intelligence estimates received by my flagship before shift-out told of increasing Protectorate Naval raids on our forces within that system to the point that Admiral Valon has been unable to continue orbital close support missions since he needs those vessels remaining to protect his auxiliary and supply vessels. With our troops still fighting remnants of the Caractacallan Army and the Planetary Defense Redoubt still operational this is a serious blow to our efforts to subjugate the planet. Therefore, my reinforcement fleet must get through. In spite of my disagreement with the handling of this whole affair by the Baron and his henchmen, now that we are mixed up in a Civil War I feel I must do my utmost to protect Tellamatrixian interests. Still, I sometimes wonder just what IS in Tellamatrix's interest. Anyway, the fleet will refuel at the gas giant here in the Phais Eisert System and head on to the Kerrone System; our last shippoint before Caractacalla. Onacker out."

When the Fleet Commander had filed the log entry into a secure database he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. Deep down his heart wasn't in the present conflict. The Baron was just too much of a shady character to have the interests of Tellamatrix come before his own. There was something wrong here but Onacker couldn't put his finger on it. Life had never been easy in the Tetlamatrixian Planetary Navy, nor would Onacker have wanted it so. But now, with Baron Rolf Von Toerbach in power, life could be hell.

The Admiral remembered when he had been granted a personal interview with the Baron. Well, it had been as personal as interviews with the Baron ever get. Onacker was led to a small reception room within the confines of the Hall of State on Tellamatrix. There before him stood a raised platform totally surrounded by chrysalis curtains. Onacker could only see a shadow seated on the raised platform as he stood at attention. Then suddenly the shadow began to speak.

"Admiral Lord Onacker," the Baron's voice whispered. "I have decided to give you command of our reinforcement fleet bound for Caractacalla."

Onacker was stunned. He had never been a supporter of the

Baron. He couldn't believe he would get such an important post. All he could say was, "Why me?"

The Baron gave a low, throaty chuckle and the curtained shadow nodded its head. "You are one of our best fleet commanders, Admiral. And while you lack a certain appreciation for political matters, I am sure you will do your duty, for Tellamatrix, at least.

Admiral Onacker said nothing.

The Baron had continued. "I understand you, Admiral. You have no secrets from me. You WILL do as I command. Your opinion in this matter has no consequence. You are the best available for the job and I give it to you. Now go."

Onacker had slowly backed out of the audience room. He couldn't quite understand what had just happened. But he did know one thing. The Baron had been right about him. He would do as he was commanded to do. He was incapable of anything else.

Admiral Onacker stopped his reverie as he heard someone approaching behind him. He turned just as Flag Captain Gustus Revack saluted.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Admiral but..." Revack hesitated.

Onacker's bushy eyebrows furrowed as he looked at his Flag Captain. Not one to sport the flashy dress uniforms of his staff officers Onacker simply wore a standard officer's jumpsuit with the six pointed stars signifying his rank attached to the collars. The Flag Captain was dressed in a different fashion; his finely creased dress pants and service jacket brimming with medals and citations made those about him think he was headed for a royal pageant. Flag Captain Revack was in fit shape, with only the wrinkles in his face hinting at his middle age. He was the model of efficiency. But those that knew him knew that that efficiency stemmed from ruthless demands upon himself and his subordinates. He was not liked. Admiral Onacker had grown tired of him long ago. With a sigh the Admiral spoke, "What do you have for me, Revack?"

"It's as we suspected, Admiral," said Revack. "The courier we engaged in the Malthus System has preceded us here. Our Sensing Station has picked up trace ion patterns from a ship heading in-system that jumped into Phais Eisert only hours ahead of us. The fleet disposition you planned with our HARLEQUIN Class Destroyers in the lead was an excellent idea. Shall I have Commodore Bellock order his squadron to give chase?"

Onacker rose from the Fleet Command Station and turned away from his Flag Captain. Slowly, he walked to the railing above the Control Deck and began to peer down on the duty stations once again. He saw more than one officer at his post below stiffen under his gaze. Slowly, Onacker leaned against the railing, rubbing his hands together as he thought. Finally he said, "Not the whole squadron, Revack. Tell the Commodore to detach DOCHENDAL and FENSTER to pick up the ion trail at maximum acceleration. That should be enough strength to deal with a crippled courier, don't you think?"

"But, sir, there could be other vessels in-system. We're still too far out to sense any targets near the planetary masses. What if our two destroyers are intercepted without support?"

Onacker sighed heavily as he turned slightly to look at his Flag

Captain, focusing on the man's shiny four-pointed star rank insignias on his shoulder boards. After some seconds he said, "Revack, we've just begun a long campaign against the Protectorate. I don't intend to strain the power plants of ten destroyers on a search for a wrecked couriercraft. If there were any ships in-system you can be sure that the courier has alerted them to shift out by now."

Revack nodded his head. "I agree, sir. But what if there is a war squadron ahead?"

"Then we shall crush them. And as for DOCHENDAL and FENSTER, they will have the honor of sending off the first shots and fighting to the death, if necessary. Are my orders clear now, Revack?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then see to them immediately. Oh, and send for the Control Deck duty officer. There are a few things I wish to discuss with him."



Flag Captain Revack was once again seething under the calm mask he forced his face into. As the hatch from the Command Bridge closed behind him, he began to walk rapidly down the corridor toward his quarters. He could hardly contain the urge to smash his fist into a bulkhead. The fool! The old dottering fool! Fleet Admiral Lord Adolphus Onacker had certainly been a poor choice for command of so important a mission. He wasn't even from the founding families of Tellamatrix. Just from one of those upstart communes along the Burckoldt Range. Revack finally smiled as he keyed the door code to his quarters. If Onacker only knew his special instructions from the Baron, he would be treating his Flag Captain quite differently.

Revack locked the door behind him as he entered the compartment. Quickly, he moved to the Gravlight game built into the small four-seat conference table near the far wall. As he pressed his two thumbs down on different parts of the table edge a soft hum came from beneath the gameboard and a red glow filled the room. Quietly Flag Captain Revack spoke, "Contact Revack, Communication Number 46, ready to report."

The hum seemed to stop coming from the table but seconds later was replaced by a low, throaty voice, slowly enunciating every word, "Report, Contact Revack."

"The fleet has shifted into the Phais Eisert System, My Lord Baron. But not undetected as we had hoped. The courier we engaged in the Malthus System arrived here shortly before we in-shifted. It is logical to assume it transmitted a system-wide warning."

The voice of Baron Rolf Von Toerbach said nothing for a moment. Then he began to reply almost in a whisper, his voice seeming to come from all about the compartment, "And what of the Fleet Admiral? What does he intend?"

"He sent two destroyers after the ion trail leading to the damaged couriercraft. The rest of the fleet is heading into the gas giant for refueling on a direct trajectory. I feel that Admiral Onacker is being somewhat premature in assuming that this system is undefended. His incautious approach seems to me to be dangerous."

"Dangerous, yes," the Baron whispered. "The Fleet Admiral is known to favor dangerous approaches." After more moments of silence he continued, "Carry on with your duties Contact Revack. Report again before leaving Phais Eisert."

Slowly the red glow faded from the room until all seemed normal. For some reason Flag Captain Revack was in a cold sweat as he always was after talking to the Baron. Who was Rolf Von Toerbach really? No one ever saw him. He seemed to have gained control of Tellamatrix remarkably fast through the use of political henchmen and rabble-rousers. And no one could say they had ever seen the Baron himself. This civil war the Protectorate found itself in was more the doing of Baron Rolf Von Toerbach than any other. It was he who had organized the Tellamatrix, Marcus, Bestus, and Goggic alliance that had started hostilities with the sneak attack and occupation of the Protectorate capital planet of Caractacalla. But throughout all the Baron's dealings with allies and underlings all communications was through intermediaries, curtained audience halls, or devices similar to that which was in the Flag Captain's quarters.

Revack walked to the fresher station and threw some cool water on his face. He still didn't really know why the Baron gave him this special contact assignment. And just what was that communication apparatus that had been built into his conference table? It certainly wasn't a microlink transmitter or the detection center on board the flagship would have picked up his signals. Revack shook his head over the puzzle for the hundredth time. Communication signals couldn't be sent through shift space except by message torpedoes so it was possible that the Baron was actually aboard some ship of the fleet. Or maybe the table was a sophisticated computer designed to give the impression that a contact was talking to the Baron. But there seemed to be no real reason for that. Revack rubbed his eyes as he thought about the possibilities. Could the Baron be psionic somehow and the table some kind of thought amplifier? No, that was too much! Angrily Revack picked up his immaculate uniform dress hat and left his compartment. Clearing his mind of his racing thoughts about the Baron he headed for the Control Deck. The TELLAMACHIA would be nearing the gas giant within ten hours and he would have to organize a refueling schedule for the fleet before then.



"That's your orders, Captain Fasak. As senior commander you will take command of both the DOCHENDAL and the FENSTER. We want that courier intercepted and captured or destroyed. She's fouled up the plan enough."

Captain Pavel Fasak peered intently into the communications monitor on the bridge of the DOCHENDAL. Grimly, he nodded his bald head at the figure looking at him from the screen. "Do not fear, Commodore Bellock. We will have that courier in our grasp within twelve hours."

Bellock looked unimpressed. "See that you do. After your mission is completed accelerate into the gas giant as soon as possible. The fleet should be skimming within ten hours so you'll have to catch up."

"I understand, Commodore. My ships will be going to maximum acceleration on the courier's vector within five minutes. Is there anything else?"

"Just don't screw it up, Fasak! If you do it won't be just me you'll answer to. The Fleet Admiral will be monitoring you."

Fasak's face showed nothing. "We will do as ordered, Commodore," he said simply.

"See that you do. Bellock out."

Captain Fasak turned to his communications officer on the bridge of the DOCHENDAL. "Signal to the FENSTER, Lieutenant. Maximum G's in four minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Fasak checked his own acceleration straps as the Acceleration Warning blared throughout the ship. He looked around the crowded bridge, noted the routine manner his command crew took the signal and strapped down accordingly. Elsewhere on the DOCHENDAL, the rest of the crew would be doing the same. Even with the most sophisticated gravity dampers yet devised fifteen G's would kill anyone not properly protected.

"One minute to max. G," the speaker sounded. "All decks report ready to proceed."

As the seconds ticked by Fasak sat watching the engineering monitor as the maneuvering engines began to heat up. Suddenly the numbers on the computer screen read 0:00 and he simply said, "Execute."

Like a shot out of a cannon the acceleration hit the crew. Those that had been careless in their preparations would soon be bruised and bloodied. Soon the DOCHENDAL and FENSTER were only bright spots of light ahead of the Tellamatrixian fleet. Soon even that was lost from the sight of all but the magnification sensors of the large Devastators before long.

Feeling the blood pounding in his head as it was squeezed back into his acceleration couch with the rest of his body, Fasak carefully scanned his command monitors for anomalous readings. Everything looked alright. In less than five minutes the acceleration let up and the two warships began to maneuver into position for the decelerations that would allow them to match course and speed with the proposed position of the crippled Protectorate Couriercraft. Fasak smiled as he thought about the efficiency of his crew. Not many ships could accelerate at the rates that the HARLEQUIN Class was capable of. And not many ship's crews would be able to take these kind of maneuvers in stride as he had trained his crew to do. Captain Fasak leaned forward in his couch, loosening his acceleration straps as he did.

"Give me a contact report as soon as you have tracked the enemy courier, Ensign Actul. I'll want an interception vector as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir," replied the Ensign. "I'll have it to you soonest."

"Very well."

Fasak smiled once again. It would be good to get some target practice in on a helpless courier before the real fighting started. All there was to do now was wait. About him the ship's speaker came to life once again. "Twenty minutes to deceleration maneuver." Fasak leaned back and silently waited.

CHAPTER FIVE

SPEEDY

Pilot Captain Alathonia Dexter had finally decided what to worry about most. Her crippled couriercraft was completely open to vacuum, she was on her last intact storage bin of emergency suit tanks, and she had been forced to disable all the safety shut down programs for the over-thrusting engine pod. The readouts suggested that the power plant was already well on its way to a catastrophic energy release. All these things Dexter merely shrugged over. What really worried her was the Shift Indicator; the last piece of sensing equipment functional aboard the SPEEDY. On that device some hours ago the telltale signal of an active shift point had beeped at her, showing a number of vessels in-shifting into Phais Eisert. Dexter had no doubt who they were, even though all her other sensors were inoperative. She couldn't tell who was behind her and she couldn't tell who was in front of her. All there was to do was to keep accelerating in-system and hoping that the engine would hold out long enough to decelerate into orbit around the gas giant.

For hours, Dexter stared at her Shift Indicator, picturing in her mind the rebel fleet closing in, surrounding her. They would probably try to take her alive to see what little information they could wring out of her brain before they blew her body out of the most convenient airlock.

With an exasperated growl, SPEEDY's Captain stood and began to pace about the damaged bridge. She was sick of it all! She stank so bad in her overused vacuum suit that even she couldn't stand herself. Her hair had become so unmanageable and grimy that it interfered with her feeding tube. Now she had to suck at dirty hair as she took what little sustenance the bridge emergency rations had to offer. To think that there was a wide assortment of tube food down in the small ship's galley some ten meters below her feet. Unfortunately that last Tallamatrixian missile had turned the access ladder and hatch into scrap. She might be able to squeeze through the twisted metal. But then again, the risk of puncturing her vacsuit far outweighed the desire for new tube food. It was a pity she hadn't checked the bridge emergency food locker on their last overhaul on Bossilwick. For some reason it was stocked entirely with a case of reprocessed squeeze tube turkey; something Dexter never cared for when she had a choice.

In silent, stinking rage, Dexter quietly began to laugh to herself, putrid breath making her eyes water. Blinking away the tears, the laughter turned into sobs. "Damn, Damn, DAMN!" She shouted in her helmet, "Catch me or don't catch me, but let's get this kankin' thing over with!"

Pilot Captain Dexter sat on the blackened mass of the gunner's acceleration couch until her sobs began to diminish. Her grimy vacsuit gloves flaked away the durofoam covering, now shriveled from the heat of the explosion. "It was my fault," she said slowly. "My fault..."

They weren't even on a scouting mission at the time. SPEEDY had just delivered a message packet to the Protectorate garrison commander still

in control of the mining complex on Malthus V. There was no hint of danger and no sign of any rebel ships. Ensign Kelly, the SPEEDY's navigator, had thought Malthus a rather pleasant place if you liked quiet. But the ever-present hint of ammonia even in the scrubbed air of the mining complex told of the massive ammonia ice glaciers of the planet, and into which nearly all of the Malthus mine shafts ran. Dexter didn't like it at all.

The lift off-planet had been uneventful. The starport facility, run by the Malthus Metals Conglomerate, was quite efficient, as corporate ports go. Dexter and Ensign Kelly covered the pre-flight checklist as the SPEEDY was automatically shunted to the waiting elevator ramp. The elevator would take her out of the hangar area and up to the launch station on the surface of the ammonia glacier. Gunner McNair, the third member of the SPEEDY's crew, snored away in his acceleration couch as he always did on take-offs.

The countdown had been a simple "Three-Two-One-Go" and the SPEEDY was lifted out of the atmosphere on the top of the starport's launch booster, which then quietly detached itself from the courier and serenely angled down to the starport once more. SPEEDY didn't leave automatic control until they were well out of the Malthus gravity well and heading out-system.

That was when Dexter had done it, the fatal error. In most other runs into Malthus V the SPEEDY had given the outer asteroid belt a wide berth. Dexter had been willing to spend the extra fourteen hours the detour took rather than face the reduced maneuverability that the proximity of the outer belt necessitated. But this trip she decided to save those fourteen hours to the shift point and plot their course right through the outer belt. Ensign Kelly looked at her dubiously but shrugged his shoulders at the decision. He had always trusted Dexter's judgement before. This mission was as routine as the last sixteen they had done together, wasn't it?

Their sensors picked up the three HARLEQUIN Class rebel destroyers when they were already well within missile range. The dust and debris of the belt had masked their presence until the last moment. But that wasn't all. As Dexter changed vectors as rapidly as she could, the ship's sensors picked up more vessels, even larger. It had to be the Tallamatrixian relief force that had been anticipated for so long.

The rebel destroyers changed vectors with SPEEDY as they began to jam any transmissions from the courier back to Malthus. The enemy fleet must have quietly captured the outer belt mines in order to secretly refuel as it continued on the way toward the captured Protectorate capital planet of Caractacalla. There, Dexter knew, the rebel invasion force and orbital support fleet was hard pressed, fighting off the remnants of the planetary navy and the units of the Caractacallan Planetary Army. The relief fleet assembled here would ensure the final capture of the Protectorate capital planet once and for all.

Dexter had little time to dwell on the enemy strategy. SPEEDY's sensors already noted that the rebel ships had a targeting lock on the courier. It would be tough to loose those big ships even in the rockpile that was the outer belt of Malthus.

Gunner McNair had charged up the weapon's board. There was little they had in the way of offensive armament since couriers were not designed to fight. Defensively, however, they had an ample array of weapon's systems.

"Give 'em a brace of chaff missiles," Dexter had said. "That might knock the tracker off of us so we can run and hide."

As the chaff detonated in their ion wake one of the rebel ships did seem to loose them. But contact was quickly regained as the other destroyers simply directed their companion's tracking computer with their own. The range was too great for accurate laser fire so two of the destroyers started the uneven battle with three N-tipped missiles each.

"Missile launch!" Kelly shouted. "Estimated eight minutes to our current position."

"Fire the shotguns and give me more chaff. Let's get the hell out of here."

McNair's fingers danced across the weapon's board and instantly the SPEEDY's launchers had fired two more chaff rockets as well as three shotgun missiles. As the shotguns came into the flight path of the incoming nuclear tipped missiles, they exploded, sending thousands of centimeter-sized pellets racing through the vacuum. The pellet cloud virtually shredded four of the enemy missiles, turning them into inert bits of heavy metals. The other two kept heading in.

"Activate the point laser and give me full power on the nullifier," shouted Dexter. "I think this is going to be a close one, folks!"

The SPEEDY lived up to her name as she tried to outrun the two missiles gaining on her from behind. The point defense laser bathed one of the incoming rockets with its intense light and the enemy weapon shut itself down. The final missile homed in but seconds before its thermonuclear burst would have vaporized SPEEDY and the two rocky asteroids nearby, it was caught in the field generated by the courier's nuclear nullifier. The missile detonated, but its force was severely debilitated and only managed to melt away the SPEEDY's external sensor array.

The explosion did cause the pursuers to loose contact with the courier for a few precious minutes. It was long enough for Dexter to change vector once again and head straight for the shift point at a speed that would surely cause the engine pod to eventually burn through to the crew section.

Everything happened so fast after that. They were nearing the shift point with two following destroyers attempting to track them. The alarm that signaled an enemy lock-on sounded as Lieutenant Kelly began to set the shift coordinates. Then another rebel destroyer was detected ahead. For some reason, Dexter had never thought about the third enemy vessel making an end-around maneuver. The rebels had to know where they were headed. It was a simple matter of getting to the shift point before SPEEDY could arrive and waiting for her. Mistake Number Two, Dexter thought. She should have never headed directly for the shift point.

The two anti-ship missiles were meant to disable them for capture, and they almost succeeded. Dexter and her two cremates were struggling into their vacsuits as the destroyer ahead launched a brace of them. Mistake Number Three. Dexter's crew had not been in their vacsuits before the encounter. The attack had been so sudden, and the pursuit so active that Dexter had had no time to order Kelly or McNair into their suits. They, in turn, were too busy to think about it.

It only took one of the A-S missiles to wipe out her crew. The second one didn't even explode, apparently. The enemy missile detonated

within a kilometer of the SPEEDY, sending jagged pieces of itself into the hull on McNair's side of the bridge. With the rush of the ship's atmosphere escaping, the weapon's board that the Gunner was hunched over exploded, turning him into a fiery apparition, dead almost instantly. Dexter was saved from being hit by the armor plate on the back of her acceleration couch.

Unlike McNair or Dexter, Ensign Kelly still had not gotten his vacsuit helmet on when the missile hit. Absorbed in the all-important job of entering the shift parameters into the navigating computer, Kelly didn't have a chance to grab for the suit headpiece before it was thrown aside and smashed by the impact. Dexter watched him gasping at nothing in the vacuum. The once rugged face now contorted in horror and panic at what was happening to him. Dexter could do nothing but watch. After what seemed an eternity, the gray-plates failed and Ensign Kelly ceased his bubbling convulsions and slowly settled to the deck of the now weightless compartment. All Dexter could think of as the SPEEDY finally limped into shift space was that she would have to take a look at the gravplates under the bridge first thing when she started repairs.

Dexter had had to dispose of the bodies all by herself. It was easy to say a small prayer for Kelly as she manhandled his lifeless form to the bridge escape hatch. But McNair had been a different matter. What was left of him had fused to the deck in a stomach-churning pile. Despite the sickening sensations she was feeling, Dexter managed to get McNair's remains to the escape hatch as well. It would have been far worse to leave her crew on the bridge.

When the escape chamber had been purged, there was nothing left for Dexter to do but wait until the SPEEDY had completed the shift and entered the Phais Eisert system. She hoped that the nameless void that her crewmates had materialized in would keep them safe.

Pilot Captain Dexter jolted herself back into the present to look about at the devastation that was once a ship's bridge manned by a happy crew. She wished she could rub her eyes but it was impossible through the helmet. All she could do was continue to chew on her dirty hair and keep the SPEEDY heading toward the Phais Eisert gas giant.

Staring out at nothing, she silently said, "My fault."

DESTINY

Just on the edge of the inner asteroid belt, the Protectorate escort reduced her drift near the debris field. Slowly, a small dish rotated on the dorsal communications array. It finally locked into place, aimed toward the outer system.

"Ready for transmission on your command, sir," On the bridge, the intent face of Ensign Macaffrey peered at his Captain from the Communications Console.

"Affirmative," Decameron said. "Ontara, pull us up out of the debris field and get me a line of sight to the SPEEDY."

"Maneuver thrusters on-line, Captain. Going up now."

With just the hint of thrust, the DESTINY eased herself out of the

shadows as if she was an errant rock smashed out of a perfect orbit. There was still little possibility of the rebel ships detecting her but there was no point in taking chances.

"Beam aligned, Captain," Macaffrey said. "We've got a good bead on the target."

"OK, begin transmission."

"Affirmative. Laser energy on--now."

The tight beam commlaser was tuned to perfection. With the DESTINY's sensors compensating for the ever-changing bearing of SPEEDY's receiver it was only a matter of time before the bounce wave returned. The commlaser was targeted perfectly down to the centimeter. With confirmation of lock-on and positive receiver functions it took only a microsecond to transmit the message in one, rapid burst. The computer predicted a 98.7% chance that the SPEEDY's receiver target had caught and absorbed the signal. Bleed-through was infinitesimally small and would dissipate quickly in the ion wake of the target. It had been a perfect transmission.

"Transmission complete. I'm breaking the link, Captain." Macaffrey shut down the commlaser controls and finally relaxed.

"Well done, Ensign," Decameron smiled. "Now let's get back into the debris field."

With almost no chance of detection, the DESTINY slowly sank back into the inner asteroid belt of Phais Eisert.

SPEEDY

The incoming signal alarm buzzed above Dexter's head, but it was some minutes before she noticed it. With glazed eyes, Dexter simply stared at the wreckage that was the bridge compartment, willing the buzzer to leave her alone with her misery. But it didn't. Finally with stow, awkward movements, Dexter rose up from her crouch and slammed the alarm into silence. "What do you want with me now, you rebel scum," Dexter snarled. "Surrender, most likely. Not on the bloody grave of the Regalian martyrs, I won't!"

With the flip of a switch the still functioning communication's computer gobbled up the stored message burst and translated it into understandable terms. Within seconds the monitor above Dexter's head came alive.

The screen cleared to show the figure of an alert-looking man wearing a Protectorate Naval vacsuit with Captain's tabs emblazoned on the shoulders. A vacsuit helmet sat in his lap as he sat in the command chair of what obviously was a warship's bridge. Behind the figure could be seen a bustle of activity as other bridge officers sat at their stations, vacuum battle suits on but not buttoned up. Condition Red Two, thought Dexter. If only she had given that order before the rebels had caught up with them. If only...

Still staring at the pickup, the seated figure began to speak, "Protectorate Naval Administration Ship DESTINY to Protectorate Courier SPEEDY. We have intercepted your system-wide transmission and have

registered the in-shift of a large force of rebel vessels into the Phais Eisert System. Our sensors have also detected an advance force of pursuit craft--destroyers, most likely-- accelerating in the path of your ion trait. There can be no doubt that you are their target. Estimate that they will intercept you some three hours out of Phais III refueling orbit. Accordingly, P.N.A.S. DESTINY is heading out-system to your support. We estimate that you will pass our position within the inner asteroid belt right after your initial deceleration maneuver. We request that you open your exhaust dampers and give the area a good ion splash so as to distort any sensor contact within the belt." At this, the face of the Captain broke into a grin. "Just like they taught us not to do back at the Academy. We shall engage the pursuit force, which should enable you to refuel and head to a safe shift point, where you are ordered to immediately shift toward the Bossilwick System. Our squadron will, ah, be in position to support you then. We will follow after you have safely left the system. Do not attempt to reply to this message. Our position relative to you places several asteroid fragments in the path of any tuned laser communication and any bounce effect may be detected." The Captain smiled again. "Go on home, Captain Dexter. From the looks of your ship I'd say that you have done enough for the Protectorate cause right now. Royce Decameron, Captain, P.N.A.S. DESTINY, end of transmission."

Dexter continued to stare at the monitor long after the screen went blank. Someone was coming to help her. It seemed rather humorous, but Dexter just couldn't laugh. Like a lifeline to someone who is drowning, Decameron had given her something to hold onto. Nearly running to the computer log terminal, Dexter punched in the code for the Protectorate Naval Register. Quickly scanning the information, she soon discovered the entry that covered DESTINY. She was an ENMITY Class escort ship, fairly new, fairly efficient. Dexter couldn't believe it. Go on home the DESTINY's Captain had said. Go on home while he faced up to a massed armada of a hundred rebel ships, nearly all of which were many times the size of an escort. It was hard to believe such irresponsible courage.

Continue on course, Decameron had said, run to the gas giant, refuel, and shift out. It was the logical thing to do, especially in the present condition that the SPEEDY found herself in. Yes, Dexter silently said to herself, it was the logical thing to do.

Then her eyes turned to the blackened remains of her bridge; to the ripped acceleration couches and shattered instruments. The burnt and melted controls on the weapon's board looked as if they had been smashed together in a gelatinous mass. Slowly, Dexter ran her tired and dirty-gloved hands on the debris that once were control boards. Wiping it away, she smiled to herself. With two easy tugs, the top of the board was pulled up and out to reveal the damaged internal workings of the weapon's system. Grinning with determination, Pilot Captain Dexter reached for the electrical toolbox and began her work.

CHAPTER SIX

DESTINY

"SPEEDY nearing point of closest approach. Now some 11,246 klicks to port. Well clear of the debris zone." Ontara continued to stare into the navigation monitor as she gave her report. Her eyes blazed with the reflected light of the screen, giving her the appearance of an angry goddess.

"Thank you, Ontara," said Decameron. "Status of the ship?"

"We've maneuvered into the Inner Asteroid Belt without detection. DESTINY is now some 22.6 klicks from a Class IX asteroid. It's enough to shield us from any sensors the rebels have pointing our way," Ontara turned to Weapons Officer Scott, who nodded in her direction. "We can fire the first missiles whenever you are ready, Captain."

Slowly, Decameron put his hands together near his chin, as if in prayer. Finally, he said, "Let's wait a bit longer. I want to see if SPEEDY received our tight beam transmission. It shouldn't be long before Pilot Captain Dexter gives us that ion splash, and I would rather our rebel friends didn't see what was coming at them too soon."

"That's affirm, sir. All stations standing by."

In silence, the bridge crew studied their sensor monitors, waiting for the first indication of ion splashing. It was an old tactic from the interplanetary war era, when ion maneuver dries were more prevalent than the now common fusion drive. It was simply a matter of shutting down the dampening fields on a spate vessel's engine pod for a fraction of a second, causing the controlled radiation of the power plant to be released in a burst. A series of these releases could effectively place a "smokescreen" in the wake of the vessel, treating an area where sensors and tracking devices could not penetrate until the ionization dissipated as it expanded. Although now rarely put to use, ion splashing was still as effective as it had ever been.

Decameron breathed in and out slowly, closing his eyes in relaxation now that every eye in the compartment wasn't on him. It would be the last moment of calm he would be able to indulge in for quite awhile and he savored its peace. About him, DESTINY seemed to hold her collective breath as she drifted near the asteroid, with only station-keeping thrusters holding her in position. Decameron's hands gently stroked the arms of his command chair. The steady thrum of the ship's power plant could be felt even through them. It was taken for granted by the crew since it was always there; but Decameron noticed it nonetheless. To him it was the heartbeat of his ship. And now at the approach of battle, he thought the energy surges had quickened, like a warrior's pulse when the adrenaline starts to flow. Decameron nodded to himself and let his senses become part of his ship. Mast would say she was just a pile of organized metal. But Decameron knew, as so many had discovered before him, that that was just not the case. Any type of ship was no better or no worse than the crew she carried. They made her what she was, and she made them what they were. There was a symbiotic relationship of sorts between the DESTINY and her crew and none of them would deny it.

As the life force of his ship vibrated under his fingers, Decameron knew that the DESTINY was ready, crew and ship fused together as one.



Throughout the ship, other crewmembers felt it too. In the sickbay below the bridge and through the Main Corridor, Dr. Kamakawa sat in his acceleration couch waiting. Sickbay was located in one of the safest areas near the central part of the ship, but that wasn't very reassuring just now. Kamakawa's fingers drummed on the table before him, near the various instruments of his trade laid out for use. The Doctor had nothing like the facilities that could be found on battlecruisers and other large vessels, where the death of wounded battle casualties could be stopped by instant cryo-freezing until such time as the medical staff could get around to working on them. Kamakawa had simple hand-held instruments; cautersprayers, plasma inducers, rebreathers and the like. On a ship the size of the DESTINY, most casualties, if they survived to get to sickbay at all, would be in some form of vacuum shock from depressurization. For that all Kamakawa could administer was anesthetics to deaden the pain of ruptured blood vessels and distended internal organs and place them in emergency pressure packs or vacuum screens. That way, even if sickbay depressurized, the casualties wouldn't.

Kamakawa strained to keep his face an unmoving mask. He always felt like this before an action, totally calm on the outside, but with a writhing torrent of emotion filling him inside. Sometimes, to keep from giggling or grinding his teeth from the pressure, he would bite the inside of his lip, often drawing blood in the process. Ail through the waiting his main effort was devoted to keeping his emotions from being seen by the two orderlies strapped in their acceleration couches near him, their vacsuit helmets still attached to their belts. Even with massive concentration, his nervousness could still be discerned by the occasional tic that afflicted his left cheek muscle; something he tried to ignore but with little effect. Kamakawa sighed as he always did when this dread came over him. The calming effect that brought about did little to lessen his internal feelings. But it did keep up appearances for his staff.

Kamakawa stretched. If only there was something to DO rather than all this waiting for the battle to start.

One of the orderlies finally broke the silence. "Do you think this one'll be bad, Doc?"

"Who knows, Thomas," Kamakawa replied. "From what I hear the odds aren't quite on our side."

"Yea, that's what I heard, too. Maybe the Captain is taking on more than he should?" The worry in the young man's face mirrored what Kamakawa felt.

The Doctor put on his paternal all-knowing smile. "I think that the Captain knows what he's doing. He won't get us into a situation he can't get us out of." 'I hope,' Kamakawa thought silently. "And if any lucky shots come in, you, me and Jeri will take care of it, eh?"

Thomas looked over at the tall female orderly beside him as she

slapped his back with a meaty hand. "Not to worry, eh, Tom?" she said. "We'll just do what we were trained to do and leave the rest to others."

Silently, they all nodded in unison. But each of them was wondering the same thing; whether or not that training was going to be good enough.

Kamakawa leaned back in his acceleration couch, flexing his leg muscles under the restraint straps. It wouldn't do for crewmen to be slammed into bulkheads during combat maneuvering. Talking at least made the wait more bearable.

"One thing for sure," said Tom. "This action won't be like the ones we had before. No more cuts, scrapes and bruises. This is for real."

Kamakawa nodded. "It's for real, ail right. But remember your training. Most of the battle casualties we'll have coming in here will be decompression cases. Anybody too badly injured after their suit is punctured won't even make it to sickbay. On a ship this size I think it's going to be a minor casualty or a fatality. So you think about that."

Thomas did, silently. Kamakawa saw that the words had done nothing to calm the young man but at least it had used up more waiting time.

With a snap of her body harness, Jeri unstrapped herself from the acceleration couch and stood up in sickbay, her two-meter height nearly brushing the overhead. Smiling, she said, "Since this is so real, Doc, I think I'll check the emergency compression kits one more time."

"Not a bad idea, Jeri. Make sure that the vacuum screens are ready to be deployed, too. And while you're at it, how about bringing some of those emergency rations over to us. Might as well stay off of the suit food as long as possible. We could be buttoned up for a long time."

"Too right."

After the compression kits and vacuum screens were checked one last time, the medical staff of the DESTINY sat down to what was probably their last solid meal before Condition Red One was signaled throughout the ship and they were forced to put their vacsuit helmets on. Silent once again, Kamakawa wondered if it would be their last meal. There were no answers. Sighing again in resignation, Kamakawa ate without tasting. His inside continued to howl with the pent-up emotions they contained. Calmly, and with deliberation he shoveled the food into his mouth, his stomach protesting all the way. Without him even noticing, the muscle tic in his cheek continued to twitch.



One deck below the bridge and some fifty meters aft, Chief Falco sat strapped to his battlecouch in the Weapon's Control Room. Here with his crew of five seated around the compartment, Falco controlled the various laser and missile cupolas that girdled the DESTINY. Being of a fairly new class of Protectorate escort, she embodied the current theory of over-gunning that the Protectorate Naval Administration supported. Six twin laser turrets circled the DESTINY's hull; two each on the dorsal and ventral hardpoints, and one to either side amidships. This gave her all round fire from eight lasers and ten to each broadside. Her long-range weapons were various farms of missiles, fired from two arrow turrets on each end of the

vessel fore and aft. The automatic loading sequence was initiated from the Weapon's Control Room but there was also secondary crews at the launchers for manual loading control, just as there were gunners in each of the laser turrets. If necessary, any mounting could fire independently even though their range and accuracy would be greatly hampered without computer control. Except for anti-missiles, the only defensive armament that the DESTINY carried was her Null Field Generator. Her designers considered no other defensive measures necessary. They could never have foreseen a set of circumstances that would force an escort to fight a superior force rather than run from it.

Chief Falco surveyed his display board for the hundredth time. The Weapon Control crew's main responsibility was the missile load status of each launcher and the continued energy flow to the laser turrets. All would ultimately be fired from the bridge by the Weapon's Officer. If the bridge were disabled, however, Falco also had a weapon activation board that could fire the ship's armament.

"We should have fired by now," said one of the missile techs next to Falco.

The Chief breathed deeply. "Just you wait until the bridge gives the word, Higgins. If we are holding fire, then there's a pretty good reason for it."

"Right, Chief. It's just all of this waiting that's getting to me."

"You and everybody else. If you want something to do why don't you go below and recheck that loading hatch from the after magazine. If that thing jams like it did at Dalveron, we'll lose reload capacity for half of the arrow turrets."

Higgins nodded. "I'm on my way." Unstrapping from his battlecouch, the missile tech cycled the deck hatch and slid down the ladder, his belt-mounted vacsuit helmet banging the hatch coaming as he descended.

"Adams, take over Higgins' station," Falco ordered.

Lifting herself from the standby-couch, Missile Tech, Second Class Jaycee Adams walked over to the unoccupied battlecouch next to the Chief. Strapping herself in, Adams repositioned her frame, making the vacsuit she wore more comfortable. Checking the missile loading board in front of her she nodded her head. "Missile load status all in the green here, Chief."

"That's affirm," said Falco, then more quietly. "How are you holding up, Jaycee?"

Adams smiled, her perfect white teeth seeming to brighten the whole compartment. "Better than I thought I would. Thanks, Chief."

Falco smiled back. "No thanks needed. I'm just checking out the status of my crew is all."

Adams smile disappeared. "This could be a nasty fight, couldn't it, Chief? No more hit and run raids on orbital outposts and supply stations. There's a whole fleet out there this time." Her voice was almost a whisper.

"Well, don't worry about it. It's a big system. We'll never be in action with more than one or two ships at a time."

She turned away from him to stare at the missile control board. "And what if one of those ships is a Devastator?"

Falco didn't have much of an answer. "Well then, let's just hope that the other one is between him and us." The jest didn't seem to have an effect

on the worried missile tech. Finally Falco continued. "There's no point in worrying about it, Jaycee. By the time the action starts, we'll all be too busy to worry about much more than our jobs anyway."

Adams nodded, then changed the subject. "And how are you holding up, Chief?"

The fierce stare that Falco gave her almost made her wince with pain. "What do you mean by that?"

"N-Nothing, Chief. But for a few minutes there you looked kind of, you know, sick, out of breath. I Just wondered if everything was Okay."

Falco willed himself to calm down. He had taken the pills only an hour before but already felt as if he needed more. "It's nothing for you to worry about. I just didn't get enough sleep these last few cycles what with the fuel scoop repair and all." He finally smiled. "I'm not getting any younger you know. Us old men need our sacktime."

Adams smiled back with her dazzling smile. "It's not just the old men, Chief. None of us have gotten any sleep since we entered this vexing system."

"Too right," said another weapon's tech on the far side of the compartment.

As the weapon's crew chuckled, Adams said quietly to herself, "I just hope that sleep is all that we lose here."



Down in the Lower Engineering spaces, Engine Techs Smaltz and Webbley sat grinning at each other. They were designated Damage Control Team Two during battle and were festooned with the tools of their trade affixed to the crossbelts they both wore on their green vacsuits. Spread about their acceleration couches were the larger damage control equipment lockers containing such things as quickseal sprayers and fire retardant bombs. With the hum of the power plant around them, the two continued their before-battle banter.

"Action," said Smaltz. "Boy, do I love action."

Webbley nodded agreement. "Yea, at least it gives us something to do instead of just checkin' gauges and dials."

"How do you think this op will go, Webb?"

"A lot different than the last few, I can tell you that! Remember the run in on that convoy in the Charon System a few months back?"

"Yep."

Well, this one will be like that, I think, except that finally we'll be able to get into attack position and DO something!"

"Yea," replied Smaltz. "Maston sure isn't what you'd call one of your fire-breathin' Commodores. It's a wonder they gave command of a Marauder Squadron to somebody so, uh, shy."

"Shy ain't the word for it Smaltzie, but who knows if the commlink is open or not so I ain't sayin' what the right word is."

"I hear you, Webb," Smaltz said knowingly.

"Yea," said Webbley as he stretched his big frame across the acceleration couch. "It sure is a pity that of Commodore Maston decided not

to take in this show. It could be one helluva party."

"And when it's over, we can head back to Bossilwick in style!"

"AND get that Shift Bar collection of mine back."

"Yours! You know as well as I do that I pulled those Shift Bars. They're more mine than yours!"

"There you go, starting again! If I told you once, I've told you a thousand times, you lost the collection to me on a Roughball bet!"

"Then I won it back after that drinking contest on Malthus!"

"What drinking contest? You're such a liar, Webb."

"Oh, Yea? Well, we'll see what Lieutenant Commander Mitchell says when all of this is over, Smaltzie."

"Yea, she's got the Shift Bars now. Boy, I hope they're in a safe place."

"I hope WE'RE in a safe place!"



"There it is."

The entire bridge crew seemed to breath a collective sigh of relief as the sensors reported the ion trail spewing out of the SPEEDY's engine pad into her wake. Within minutes the tracking images of the two pursuing Tellamatrixian destroyers faded from the DESTINY'S screens as the ion splashing distorted all contact. Their courses had been noted, however, and the computer continued to track them by probability alone. Unless they turned around DESTINY would still have their approximate positions.

Just as the bridge crew had earnestly watched the sensor repeaters far the SPEEDY's actions, now they turned back to Decameron, waiting for his next order.

The Captain looked at everyone of them as if retarding their expressions for all time; Ontara, at her station, her jaw set with the determination that he had come to count on, Ensign Macaffrey, smiling ever so slightly as he monitored the inter-ship communications from the various battlestations, Artie Barnes, his gnarly hands still caressing the controls of his engines and power plant, and Lieutenant Brenda Scott, whose duty it would soon be to unleash a torrent of destruction on their unsuspecting enemies, some of which could be her planetary comrades. There was a sadness in her eyes that, in some ways, Decameron understood. But there also was the fierce blaze of willpower that convinced the Captain that she would do her duty.

There was no time for a speech. With a nod to Mitchell, the Captain simply said, "Let's get started."

The bridge officers quickly turned back to their stations as Macaffrey hit the inter-ship comm override, drowning the babble from various departments. "All stations, Condition Red One! I repeat, Condition Red One. Button up and prepare for battle!"

Decameron reached down to his belt and unsnapped the waiting vacsuit helmet. With a sliding click he clamped it down over his head and waited as the suit pressure gauge read normal. All over the ship, men and women were doing the same. Still attached to ship system air through a self-

sealing hose, the crew was now at least protected from the horrors of instant depressurization.

"Lieutenant Barnes," said Decameron. "Give us maneuver thrusters. It's about time we left the shadow of this rock."

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Scott, I'll want a barrage of missiles on my command, normal spread and pattern."

"Affirm, sir. Ready whenever you are!"

"Then let's go."

There was nothing more to say.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DOCHENDAL

"Something strange on the sensors here, Captain." The Tracking Officer turned towards the command chair with a perplexed look.

Captain Ocht Fasak snapped his head around and glared at the young officer sitting at his duty station. "Be specific, Ensign Actul. Just what is strange?"

The Ensign looked confused. "I don't know, sir. One minute I had the damaged courier on sensors as she went through the asteroid field, and the next minute all I get is static."

"Slave the sensors over to my station," Fasak ordered.

As the Ensign complied, a series of fuzzy dots appeared on the monitor in front of Captain Fasak. These were the nearest asteroids that could be detected. But between them there appeared to be a glowing cloud, blocking the view that DOCHENDAL's sensors were receiving of the crippled couriercraft's vain attempt to reach the gas giant for refueling.

Behind Fasak, the ship's Engineer spoke up. "It looks like a cloud of charged particles, Captain. Perhaps the courier blew her engines trying to reach the gas giant before she was caught."

Fasak turned to look at the Engineer, one eyebrow lifted in doubt. Finally he said, "You may be right. But what if it was done on purpose to shield something else from our sensors?"

The Engineer looked incredulous. "An ion splash? Captain, that maneuver went out with ion thrusters. No, I'd say that courier is on the other side of that cloud, out of control and with no power. There'll be no problem in catching her now!"

Fasak leaned back, pondering. "That may be. That may very well be. But there is no point in taking chances." He turned to the Bridge Communication Station. "Give me a tight beam back to Commodore Ocht Bellock in the MORDRECH."

It took a little time to make the connection and get the Commodore on the screen. With the distance between the two destroyers there was a thirty-second delay between transmission and reception, providing even more tension and irritation to the communication. Finally, the beam was centered and cleared. "What's your report, Fasak?" were the first words out of the Commodore's mouth.

"We've plotted interception courses on the couriercraft, Commodore Bellock. FENSTER is doing an end around maneuver during our current deceleration while our ship is heading straight in. This will put the target between us. The pincer tactic should make it possible for us to capture the enemy vessel intact."

Fasak waited through the time delay, watching the bored expression on the Commodore's face on the screen. Finally, a new message began. "You mean you haven't taken it already? Fasak, I don't care if the courier is captured or not, but do it quickly! The Admiral has been on tight

beam to me twice now for updates. And I still have nothing to tell him." The image seemed to grow darker as the Commodore growled, "You're making me look bad, Fasak. And if I look bad, you'll be made to pay for it."

"I understand, sir. But there now appears to be a, uh, change in the situation."

The delay went on interminably. Then Bellock's image said, "What now?"

"The courier has disappeared from our sensors behind what appears to be a particle cloud of some kind. Her engines may have been disabled or... or it may be an ion splash."

Bellock was silent even longer than the normal delay. Then he said, "That changes nothing. Capture or destroy the target immediately."

"But sir, what if the courier is attempting to hide something from us? We still don't know if there are any enemy warships in this system. The prudent course would be to hold back and scan the entire area, checking behind the gas giant and the larger asteroids in the field."

Bellock hardly waited for the message to come through. His face turned sinister as he said, "Captain Fasak, the prudent course for you is to obey orders! I suggest you do so, or I'll find someone who will to take over your command! I don't want to hear from you until the target is eliminated, understand?"

"Yes sir," Fasak said. "DOCHENDAL out." He signaled for the Communications Officer to cut the beam and cursed Bellock under his breath. With resignation, he turned back to the Engineer. "Well, it seems that we've been ordered to ignore this little occurrence and carry on."

The Engineer smiled enigmatically. "It does make sense, sir. Even if the courier didn't blow her engine, it would be the kind of tactic she might try to get any pursuit to be cautious and slow down. That just might enable her to get to the gas giant and refuel."

Fasak sighed in resignation. "I suppose you're right. Still, if it isn't a ruse we could be in trouble isolated from the fleet like this. But orders are orders, eh?" The Captain turned back to the Communications Officer. "Signal FENSTER to keep on the end run. We'll maintain course and try to catch the courier on this end."

"That's affirm, sir."

Fasak put his hand to his eyes, rubbing some of the tension out of them. Quietly, he murmured, "I only wish Bellock's butt was on the line instead of ours."

TELLAMACHIA

Flag Captain Gustus Ocht Revack watched silently as the fleet formation monitor moved the tiny named blips into their new positions.

The Tellamatrixian fleet was already strung out in the beginning maneuvers of their refueling formation. Admiral Onacker wanted the evolution to be done as quickly as possible so that the fleet could head to the shift point and their next destination. The screen formation had dissolved to allow the larger vessels to lead the fleet. They would take the longest to complete refueling so would be the first to start. The TELLAMACHIA led the

formation with the other Devastators of the Battle Squadrons following her. The various cruiser squadrons of the fleet trailed the Devastators with their accompanying destroyers and escorts. Finally the auxiliary craft of the fleet brought up the rear. By the time the fleet arrived at the gas giant these hundred-odd vessels would be strung out into one single line of ships. Then, the entire force would slip into high orbit until they nearly ringed the great planet with their numbers. Alternating squadrons would take their turns as Overwatch Guard. Then they would systematically drop into the gaseous atmosphere and begin to fill their hydrogen fuel tanks while another squadron kept a watchful eye out for any incursion into the system. It was a standard maneuver for large fleet operations.

Revack peered over at his Admiral on the Command Balcony of the Control deck. His eyes missed nothing. Fleet Admiral Ocht Onacker appeared to be his usual unruffled self to the duty officers and staff about him. But Revack could see that he was nervous. The capture of the crippled courier in this deserted shift transfer star system had taken on an importance that far exceeded its apparent actuality.

Revack smiled ever so slightly. It would be a pleasure to report the Admiral's uneasiness to the Baron. But with the thought of the Baron in his mind, Revack's smile vanished. It was with relief that the Admiral took his mind off this new direction.

Striding toward his Fleet Command Station, the Fleet Admiral viciously punched up the Communications Center. From where he sat Revack could see an attentive Lieutenant peering out at his superior. "Any communication from Commodore Bellock, Mr. Rhest?"

"Negative, sir. We did however, pick up some tight beam signals from the MORDRECH which were probably from the DOCHENDAL or the FENSTER. But as yet, the Commodore hasn't reported in."

The Admiral turned to stare out on the Control Deck below, with the Communications Officer waiting for his dismissal. Captain Revack could almost read his thoughts. They were less than five hours from the initial orbital maneuver that would place the fleet in the refueling sequence; a situation that could be extremely dangerous, especially since they knew as much about the stellar system as they had when they shifted in. To start refueling without the entire system being scanned would at best be dangerous to their time schedule and at worst -- what? For some reason, Commodore Bellock was keeping to himself whatever he had heard from his two destroyers. Those vessels were on the TELLAMACHIA's sensor screens, still in the middle of their deceleration maneuver. All else was blotted out by the myriad of objects in the debris field of the nearby asteroid belt just out from the orbit of the gas giant. Revack was almost sympathetic. As far as could be ascertained everything was going according to plan. But why was it taking so long?

The Admiral had had enough. "Get Bellock on the screen, Mr. Rhest," he commanded.

"Yes, sir."

It didn't take long for Commodore Bellock to appear on the Command Center's commscreen. Revack almost snorted in disgust as the Commodore snapped to attention in the manner of the old Tellamatrixian warlords, his fists bunched at his sides. Then he sat at his own command

chair, allowing the video pickup to zoom in on his features.

Admiral Onacker got right to the point. "What news from our advanced scouts, Commodore?"

Bellock seemed nervous. "Nothing to report, Admiral. Captain Fasak in the DOCHENDAL reported in recently. He has ordered FENSTER to perform an end-around run during deceleration. They should have the courier between them when they close with it."

"Commodore Bellock, this is taking far too long. I want this system secured before the fleet starts to refuel."

"Yes, sir. That is just what I explained to Fasak. He seems to think that caution is in order but I've commanded him to take out the courier immediately."

An alarm seemed to go off within Onacker. He jerked upright and snapped his next words at the Commodore's image on the screen. "Caution? Why does he feel there is need of caution against a crippled couriercraft?"

Bellock shrugged. "DOCHENDAL's sensors have lost the target in an ion cloud. His vessels are now projecting the courier's course to the gas giant. My experts here calculate that the crippled ship's engines have probably incurred additional damage from the run in-system and are now venting unshielded radiation. Captain Fasak, however, feels that the sensor distortion may be an ion splash."

Admiral Onacker gripped the control desk with both hands. Revack had seen this before and wanted very much to be someplace else at the moment. Instead of the explosion he had expected, however, the Fleet Admiral's voice remained calm. "Bellock, you are a fool. Pull your squadron out of the refueling sequence and max-G to the last known position of DOCHENDAL and FENSTER. You will hear more from me on this later." Without waiting for the reply, Onacker snapped off the transmission himself and brought the Communications Officer back on-screen. "Mr. Rheist, How long before you can get a tight beam on to DOCHENDAL or FENSTER?"

"It'll take a few minutes to set the computer up to track them, sir. I'll do it as fast as I can."

"Do it faster." Onacker snapped off the commscreen and finally looked over at his Flag Captain.

"Do you really think that it was an ion splash, sir?" Revack said. "It's a pretty archaic maneuver."

For once Onacker accepted the comment from his staffer without a retort. "I'm almost sure of it, Captain Revack. Ever since we accidentally met up with that courier in the Malthus System I've felt it. There is something going on here that fate hasn't left to chance. There is something in-system that we don't know about and I don't like that." The Fleet Admiral shook his head. "Whatever happens, it certainly will foul up our timetable."

The Stationkeeping Officer suddenly appeared on Onacker's commscreen. "Sir, the vessels of the 22nd Destroyer Squadron are leaving their assigned refueling stations and accelerating in-system as ordered."

"Excellent, Mr. Murrock. Keep the rest of the fleet on-station and heading into the gas giant but cancel the refueling readiness condition and resume Condition Alpha-One. We may have a battle on our hands here."

Murrock's mouth flew open in surprise. "Yes, sir! At once, sir!"

As Murrock's face faded from the screen the Communications Officer's appeared. "We're fine tuning the tight beam to DOCHENDAL now, sir. Should have it in about a minute."

"Thank you, Mr. Rhest. Let me know when it's ready."

As the announcement of the battle readiness condition was sounded throughout the flagship, the Fleet Admiral seemed more at ease to Revack. He understood. It was always better to be doing something in this kind of situation. "I'll be heading for the Battle Bridge then, sir," said the Flag Captain.

Onacker even smiled at him. "Yes, Captain Revack. I'll keep you informed of what is going on from here."

"That's affirm, sir." As Revack got up to leave amid the bustle of the battlestation duty men running to their posts around him he began thinking deeply. Onacker was acting correctly after all. That fact wouldn't be very enjoyable to report to the Baron. Now, if only the Admiral had acted in time.

DOCHENDAL

"We're almost in position, sir."

Captain Fasak nodded as he peered at the sensor screen in front of him. They were fast approaching the area where the ion cloud had first began. FENSTER's computer enhanced image could be clearly seen further ahead and to high port of Fasak's own destroyer. He smiled grimly. Perhaps it would work after all. In a few seconds they would be past the particle disturbance and in a clear sensor area to make the final adjustments on the courier they were targeting. "Let me know as soon as we have confirmed targeting data," Fasak ordered his Weapon's Officer.

"Yes, sir."

"Missiles! I have enemy missile tracks leaving the null sensor area," shouted the Defense Control Officer. "Confirmed! Definite missile tracks!"

Fasak slammed his fist into the control board in front of him, sending a pain-filled jolt up to his shoulder. "I knew it! I knew it! Give me Evasive Maneuver Five! Immediately!" He turned to the Communications Officer. "Signal FENSTER to pull back. No telling what the Protectorates have behind that cloud."

"Evasive!" screamed the Defense Control Officer as loud klaxons sounded throughout the ship. The DOCHENDAL angled nearly 180 degrees as maximum force maneuver thrusters changed her vector.

"Full power acceleration!" ordered Captain Fasak as he tightened his restraints.

The bridge crew was thrown back in their seats as the Engineer struggled to re-snap his seat clamps. He had already hit his head somewhere and a small trickle of blood flew from his forehead toward the high aft bulkhead, splattering from the acceleration.

"No reply from FENSTER, sir," shouted the Communications Officer.

Ensign Actul, what do you make of her?" asked Fasak.

The young Tracking Officer studied his screens for a moment amid

the roar of the full power engine pods. Then he said, "I read vector change on FENSTER also, Captain, but I'm also getting five plus missiles tracking in on her. I don't think we were the initial target. It must have--"

All the sensor screens about the bridge suddenly erupted in a blaze of light. There was no sound save for the steady blast of the DOCHENDAL's power plant. Actul screamed and covered his eyes as the computer-adjusted screens blanked out, then seconds later came back on with filter shields in place.

"Keep trying to raise FENSTER!" ordered Captain Fasak. Do we have a target yet?"

"Negative, Captain," replied the Weapon's Officer. "The missiles were fired from the other side of the ion splash."

"Well, they sure didn't come from that courier! Give me a projected release point and fire a brace of N-tipped missiles at it. Maybe we can stir them up a bit."

"Affirm!" The Weapon's Officer pressed a series of buttons before him. "Missiles away, sir."

"Excellent."

Ensign Actul was still rubbing his eyes as he peered at the sensor screens again. "I'm not getting any reading on FENSTER, sir. She may be on the other side of the ion splash or..."

The Captain completed his sentence. "Or she got bracketed by some nukes that were too close for her null field generators to compensate for. All right, we'll consider her out of action for now." He turned back to the Communications Officer. "Send a broad band message to the fleet. Give them the situation, tell them that I'm engaging."

The Communications Officer hesitated briefly, then simply acknowledged.

"All right," said Fasak to everyone in general. "Let's go see what we're up against."

The DOCHENDAL abruptly ceased her furious evasive maneuvers and again centered on a course toward the ion cloud, now dissipating in front of her. At five-second intervals, she began firing spreads of four missiles of varying type ahead of her into the cloud, hoping that some would find something to lock onto.

It wasn't long before the Defense Control Officer shouted again. "Missile track, Captain! Three of them to the low port. They've locked onto us!"

"Damn!" said Fasak. "Automatic Defense, Evasive Six. Will someone find me a TARGET!!"

The missiles homed in on the rapidly maneuvering destroyer. Anti-missiles flew out of the ship, trying to home in on the enemy shots and detonate in their path. One tracking missile blundered into their explosion radius and was vaporized. The final two plunged in toward their target as computer controlled laser turrets began to pulse their energies toward them as they approached.

"Null Field Generators on emergency full!" roared Fasak. "Give it all we're got!"

One of the homing missiles was damaged from a laser, its electronics fried by the blaze of light. It could be seen to slowly cure away

from the DOGHENDAL's course on their sensor screens. The final missile ran true and finally its computer brain signaled that indeed it was close enough to do harm. In a blast as silent as it was deadly, the missile detonated. A fireball erupted in space, rapidly approaching the fleeing DOGHENDAL. As the explosion leaped out to embrace the destroyer the powerful emissions from her Null Field Generator seemed to gently push them back, so that all the vessel received was a light caress from its shock waves of energy.

But it was enough. All about the DOCHENDAL's hull sensor and communication antennae were melted away, along with the ship's first few layers of ablative armor. Two of her laser turrets crumpled as if a massive fist had smashed into them. Like a torch blown out in a high wind, the telltale exhaust flames from her engine pods shut off unevenly, giving the ship a sickening spin away from the asteroid field. Inside the bridge all was sparks and flames as various control stations overloaded from the electromagnetic pulse of the detonation. As the emergency lights came on, Fasak swore loud and long.

"No! Not this way!" shouted Fasak. "I'm not going down without even knowing who hit me!" Give me a damage report, fast!"

But none of the bridge crew replied. They were slumped in their console chairs dead or unconscious or vainly trying to put out the blast fires smoldering in the bridge electronics.

Viciously, Fasak slammed his fist down on his inoperable bridge communicator. "Damage Control, report! Give me an estimate, damn you! Get me back in the fight!"

But there was no reply. Careening wildly, the DOCHENDAL spun and staggered away from the missile attack, her hull streaming frozen fire and unrecognizable bits of wreckage. Behind her, a Protectorate escort left the protection of the dissipating particle cloud. After the escort's sensors ascertained that the DOCHENDAL posed no immediate threat, she turned away. Soon the Protectorate ship began to accelerate toward the rebel fleet now stretched out in one large line. For everyone, the waiting was over.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SPEEDY

The proximity alarm brought Dexter's fatigue-soaked brain back on-line. Without thinking, she hit the execute key on the navigation computer and went on replacing the severed wire relay in the weapon's control board. SPEEDY began its programmed sequence into the gas giant of the Phais Eisert System, the strained and damaged engine pod now shunting power into the maneuver thrusters that were still functional.

Dexter didn't notice. Her grimy and worn gloved hands were sunk deep into the bowels of the weapon's console. The sweat dribbled down her forehead within the steamy vacsuit helmet. All she could do to keep it out of her eyes was shake her head around, flinging the droplets onto the inside of the face shield. It was a poor solution. Now she had to contend with the aggravation of her eyes constantly stinging from the sweat salt and the poor visibility that her encrusted grime caused.

Finally, Dexter pulled away from her embrace with the control board and plopped down onto the bridgedeck now littered with tools, wire and refuse. It wasn't working. Savagely, she threw the circuit wrench in her hand slamming against the far bulkhead. The tool hit noiselessly in the near vacuum of the shattered bridge, then slowly sank to the deck in a slow arc. 'Huh,' thought Dexter, 'Gravity plates going out too along with everything else.'

Calm once again, the courier pilot thought about her next choice. There was only one thing that could be wrong with the Weapon's Control Board and Dexter knew what it had to be; the power cable was severed, probably within the main control cable housing that ran parallel to the Bridge Access Shaft. She looked over to the hatch that led to the Access Shaft. It was still open from where she had attempted to make her first food run. The damage and debris within the shaft had stopped Dexter then. It wouldn't stop her now. Dexter sighed in fatalistic acceptance. 'Ah, well,' she thought, 'maybe I can get some better food along the way.'

When she looked down into the shaft, however, it was still as packed and cluttered with jagged bulkhead supports, locker struts and warped deck plating as it had been on her first inspection. It looked like the entire lower compartment had been forcibly blown up through the shaft. Experimentally, Dexter yanked at the top portion of the debris. There was some movement, but the metal she had grabbed onto was just too bunched in with other material. It caught on nearly everything around it as she pulled. It was hopeless doing it this way.

Dexter sat next to the hatch coaming and silently pondered the problem. There weren't many choices and no set solutions. Finally with a stony, determined look set on her dirty face, Dexter got up and walked to the command station. With the flip of a series of buttons the remaining gravity generators in the ship were shut down. The initial sickening feeling of weightlessness hit her like a kick in the stomach. But as Dexter watched, the

various items she had carelessly thrown about the bridge began to drift toward the far bulkhead as the vibration and rumbling deceleration of the SPEEDY's maneuver drives shook them off of their resting places.

Dexter hated zero gravity. Her breasts were always uncomfortable in it, even more than her stomach. Nothing ever seemed right in zero-G. But she ignored all of these feelings as her body floated back to the bridge hatch. Bracing herself against the coaming and the nearby navigation console, she heaved at the piece of metal that barred the way. With less effort than before, it broke away from the debris beneath it and floated up out of her grasp and into the overhead plates. The ricochet off of them was distorted by the ship's deceleration. The plate headed back down at an angle only to be caught up again by Dexter before it could smash into the Navigation Console beside her. Within seconds she had the jagged metal plate secured in the bridge wastebin and went to work on the next item blocking her path. Grunting with exertion, Dexter next pried an equipment strut slowly out of the mass below.

As the strut began to come free, Dexter's attention was caught by a familiar tube that came loose from the debris within the shaft. It slowly cartwheeled toward her in an arc, just begging to be caught. Stopping instantly, Dexter grabbed the tube and read the label. "Ham and Beans," she shouted out loud. "Oh, God. It's Ham and Beans!" With a quick jerk of her gloved hand Dexter tossed the half-eaten tube of Turkey paste out of her helmet feeding assembly and inserted the newfound supply. Slurping happily she got back to the work of clearing the access shaft. A small smile grew on her face until it turned into a chuckling grin. Things were definitely looking up for Alathonia Dexter.

DESTINY

"We're clear of the enemy missile barrage, Captain," said Brenda Scott at her Weapon's Control Station. "That last one targeted in on the asteroid behind us."

Captain Decameron nodded his helmeted head toward her station in acknowledgement, his attention too riveted on the screens before him to answer verbally. Finally, he said, "Weapon's status?"

"All missile tubes reloaded with the ordinance ordered, sir," Brenda continued. "I would suggest that we reduce the initial barrage amount and conserve our diminished missile stores."

"Decameron nodded, "Make it so. Reduce initial barrage to 75X. of original number."

"That's affirm, sir," said Brenda as she re-entered the barrage calculations into her targeting computer. In seconds she looked up from her board. "We are ready to proceed, Captain."

"Second target destroyer is drifting away from our path of travel," Ontara reported from her sensor station. "She looks like she's out of it for at least awhile. We're just about to pass through the vaporization cloud of the first destroyer."

No one spoke for a few seconds, all of them thinking of the 150

men and women of the enemy crew, their atoms now scattered like so much cosmic debris. Decameron slowly tapped his gloved fingers on the armrest of his acceleration couch.

"At least it was quick for them," Engineer Barnes sighed.

"Damn quick," Decameron said under his breath. They weren't the first opponents he had killed in battle and, as he looked at the mass of enemy ships on the sensor screen, he was sure that they wouldn't be the last.

Shutting his mind from that thought-line, Decameron turned back to Ontara and said, "Is the enemy fleet still on the refueling run?"

Ontara gave an almost imperceptible nod within her red helmet, "As far as our sensors can determine, sir. They've been changing formation lately but we still read that they're using a variation of Fleet Refueling Maneuver 'B'; the Devastators are going to dip in first while the lighter vessels are screening them. Transports and auxiliaries should refuel after all the warships have topped up. Projected completion time will be somewhere over 21 standard hours after the first Devastator enters the gas giant's atmosphere, which should happen in about twenty or thirty minutes."

Decameron itched his nose with his top lip; a skill he had learned in his suited-up cadet days. Slowly, he said, "Give me the point of least concentration. When will the most warships be refueling within the gas giant's atmosphere?"

Ontara smiled grimly. "That would be 8.8 standard hours from now, sir. That should be the time of the smallest Overwatch Squadron. We'll only be outnumbered about twenty to one then."

Engineer Barnes grunted from his station. "And some might be only our size, The rest..."

"The rest will be twice our size or larger," interrupted Ontara. "It should be quite a fight."

"Affirm," said Decameron. "And that's if the enemy does just what we expect him to do; something I certainly don't intend to count on." The senior officers on the bridge nodded in agreement. The Decameron continued. "Let's give the rebels some leeway. Veer off course away from the enemy fleet until their initial refueling procedure begins. I don't want to look like a threat, which shouldn't be too hard. What's the position of SPEEDY?"

Ontara scanned her screens. "She's still on her refueling run for the gas giant, Captain. I'd expect her to hit atmosphere about an hour after the rebels start to refuel on the opposite side of the planet. I guess Captain Dexter plans to scoop enough hydrogen to shift out then max-G it out of the area." She sighed and shook her head. "I don't think she'll have enough time for that."

"Let's get a tight beam back onto SPEEDY and see if we can't get this Dexter fellow to talking. What's the delay at this range?"

"Less than a second, sir," said Ensign Macaffrey.

"Line it up as soon as you are able."

"Aye, sir."

It took over ten minutes for the computer to line up the beam and anchor it to the decelerating remnants of the courier SPEEDY. Finally, all was ready. On the communication repeater monitors all about the

DESTINY's bridge a fuzzy transmission picture began to brighten and solidify into the shattered remnants of a tiny command bridge littered with torn wiring, burnt-out control panels and other unrecognizable wreckage. Strapped to an acceleration couch in front of the video pickup could be seen a figure in a dirty and worn-out vacuum suit, the helmet visor pitted with scratches and glazed with the sweaty, humid air within its interior. As the DESTINY's bridge crew watched, the strapped-in figure carefully pulled a feed-wire out of the comm-rack beside the acceleration couch and inserted its jack into the side of the helmet. A tiny voice finally came through the audio pickup. It was distorted but with a start Decameron realized that it was entirely female.

"Yeah, that's better. Ah, SPEEDY to DESTINY, I just picked up your comm signal and was able to patch up my transmitter. The audio's shot so I've boosted my suit radio into the ship's comm gear. Clever, eh?"

The bridge crew stared at their small communication monitors slaved to their stations. No one had ever heard of a female Captain on any ship of the Protectorate Navy before. Things must have surely changed since the Squadron had been out of touch with their base.

Decameron recovered quickly and smiled. "Affirm that, SPEEDY. Glad to get you into two-way finally."

"Yeah. So, how was that little ion splash that you cooked up, Captain Decameron? I almost had to look the term up, it's been so long since I've heard it."

"We were able to destroy one of the pursuing craft and disable another through your cooperation."

"Great! That only leaves about 150 or so to go."

Decameron ignored the witticism. "Please inform us of your current situation."

A high pitched chuckle seemed to rasp through the suited-up figure in the picture. She waved her arms about the SPEEDY's bridge. "Well, from what you can see of it, I'd think you'd have a pretty good idea of my current situation. SPEEDY is a wreck, my crew are all dead. I'm decelerating into an automatic refueling orbit that I programmed into the undamaged memory of my navigation computer. I've been too busy repairing my weapon's control board to worry about doing it manually."

"Affirm your refueling orbit, SPEEDY," Decameron said. "We scan that at best you'll be able to do a quick run into the gas giant's atmosphere, but will not, repeat, will not have enough time to fill up to a shift capable level before the rebel fleet reaches your position."

Captain Dexter shrugged in her Vacsuit. "Yeah, I figured it would be something like that."

"What is your supply situation?"

"I've got about thirty hours of air left before I'll have to try an EVA to clear the tower hatch opening. I was able to repair the weapon's board power supply in the bridge access shaft but that was as far as I got. The access corridor to the lower superstructure is gone, I'm afraid. But it's no problem. If I pull an EVA and get through there I'll be able to get to more air and supplies than I'll need for a round trip to Bossilwick. Let's see, what else? Oh, yeah. I have no sensors functioning except for my shift designator, and I haven't noticed any in or out-shifting from this system since the enemy fleet showed up."

"Affirm, SPEEDY. I suggest you scoop as little as possible on your present run and change vectors heading toward the asteroid field behind us. We'll try to cover you by making a run in on the enemy fleet."

The suited-up figure on the acceleration couch jerked upright. "You haven't been listening to me, have you, Captain Decameron? I'll see you in hell before I break off my refueling run and go hide out in some damned asteroid field!"

Decameron was taken aback. "But why? Surely you can see that you'll never be able to refuel enough to shift before what's left of your ship is blown out of existence. Your only hope is to withdraw while we keep the rebels busy."

"Captain, my only hope is that my missile ejector is aligned properly. I don't intend to attempt to shift out of this system. I'd expect old SPEEDY would implode long before the shift envelope formed. Scan me. See if you can figure out just what is holding the superstructure to the engine pod. It sure isn't the support members; they're fluttering out behind me like a torn sunsail. No, SPEEDY won't ever shift again, Captain, and I have no navigational instruments left that would keep me from hitting all those protective asteroids if I got near them. I intend to fight."

The silence on DESTINY's bridge was deafening, broken only by the steady hum of the ship herself. Finally, Decameron spoke. "You're a fool, Captain Dexter. What kind of suicide is this?"

"The same as yours, Captain Decameron. Just why did you turn back after you received my warning signal? What are you risking your ship and crew for?"

Decameron hesitated, knowing that all eyes on the bridge were suddenly on him instead of the comm screens. "It was my duty, Captain Dexter, to ascertain the status of all Protectorate vessels within this system. That was you. I now officially order you to break off your refueling run and withdraw towards the asteroid field!"

It was as if Dexter hadn't heard the command. "My duty was to my ship and to my crew, Captain Decameron. I've let them both down. There is only one more duty left to do." Slowly the gloved hand rose up from the acceleration couch on the screen and pulled the audio jack from the suit helmet. With the stab of finger on control board the video broke up into snow.

"A/V signal lost, sir," Ensign Macaffrey said. There was no reply.

Decameron sat staring at the snow on his comm repeater screen and quietly said, "She's a fool, a bloody fool."

Only Ontara heard him. "A brave fool, sir."

Decameron turned to her. "Yes, a brave fool. Just like we are, I suppose. But whatever she does won't bring back her crew. Our foolishness is for a purpose, at least."

Ontara knew what he was thinking, but didn't quite know what to say. Finally the silence was broken as Brenda Scott spoke up. "We shouldn't waste an opportunity like this, sir. If SPEEDY intends to sacrifice herself we can either use that to screen our attack on the refueling ships--or use it to withdraw to the shift point ourselves."

Ontara was shocked. "Lieutenant Scott, do you know what you are saying?"

Brenda nodded. "That's affirm, Commander Mitchell. I am merely pointing out the two opportunities that the SPEEDY is giving us. Both have advantages and... disadvantages."

Decameron ended his silence. "I quite agree, Lieutenant Scott. And I will decide which course it is that we shall follow. Commander Mitchell, have the rebels begun their refueling maneuver yet?"

Ontara turned back to her sensor board, somewhat uneasy about the Captain's new formality. "The first Devastators should be making their initial plunge about now. I'd say about another five minutes before they're fully committed, sir."

"Fine. Then let's head her around and make for their refueling formation at max-G. I want the initial missile barrage ready for release instantly."

"You already have it, sir," said Brenda Scott calmly.

"Excellent!" The excitement in Decameron's eyes was catching. "Ontara, signal the crew that we're heading into the enemy fleet while they're refueling to mix 'em up a bit. We then intend to pull away toward the shift point, rescuing SPEEDY if we can."

"Affirm, sir."

As the message was broadcast throughout the ship, everyone began to strap down securely once again for max-G acceleration. The mood on the bridge had turned from apprehension to expectation once again. Decameron rubbed his hands together as his smiling face was turned towards the Engineering Station. "What do you say, Barnes? One good fool deserves another, right?"

Barnes nodded vigorously. "That it does, sir. That it does. But does a big fool deserve a bigger one do you think?"

Decameron laughed out loud at this. "I don't know, Engineer, but I'm sure we will soon find out!"

CHAPTER NINE

SPEEDY

The evidence of power surging through the weapon's control board made Dexter smile in satisfaction. She quickly ran from the makeshift power cable coupling near the now-cleared hatch and sat at the weapon's console. Its bright blinking controls seemed to confirm that everything was as it should be. Dexter experimentally flipped a series of switches and was relieved to see the missile toad status lights blink on. Happily, she went about preparing the remnants of SPEEDY's armament for battle.

"I wonder what a full missile discharge will do to the rebel's refueling order," Dexter said to no one in particular. "Might as well go all out since I probably won't have time for another shot."

With the heavy damage that the weapon's board had sustained in the first attack against SPEEDY, it was difficult for Dexter to tell if the missile launcher was ready to fire or not. No matter, she thought. If the launcher failed to operate she'd simply jettison the ship's entire stock of armed missiles and hope that they locked onto something. Dexter had no way to target them with all her sensors gone, but with the DESTINY far behind, there was nothing left to home in on except enemy ships.

As Dexter sat and studied the readings on the weapon's board, the navigation computer began to buzz for attention. Dexter tried to ignore it but the machine became more insistent. Finally in exasperation, she slapped the override to stop the distraction. It seemed only seconds before the warning buzzer sounded again. Another damn malfunction, thought Dexter. She got up from the weapon's board but before she could cross over to the navigation computer the SPEEDY began to shudder and yaw in turbulence.

"The gas giant's atmosphere!" Dexter whispered to herself. "Damn if I'm not still on that bloody fuel run!"

With a groan of protest the SPEEDY entered the gas giant's atmosphere and the computer automatically began to refuel the ship, ignoring the fact that most of the systems needed to purify the incoming raw hydrogen were damaged or destroyed. Dexter snorted in disgust at her automatic machinery and slapped down on the computer override button. "I have to do everything myself around here! Jeez, you'd think the computer would have warned me about the atmosphere proximity before this. What a piece of junk."

As Dexter strapped herself into the command seat once again the entire ship lurched and a growing rumble grew beneath her feet. SPEEDY was tearing herself apart in the eddies and currents of the atmosphere. Quickly but carefully, Dexter began to fire the maneuver thrusters to pull SPEEDY free from her deadly embrace with the rocky turbulence.

"Come on, babe. Just a little more now. We've got a fleet to catch!"

SPEEDY was rising amid the tumult. Slowly, she changed her vector to gain a more stable orbit about the gag giant. Dexter was almost relaxed when a final pressure wave struck the courier and sent her rolling out of control.

The stress ripped the final support element between the ship's superstructure and the engine pad. With a silent groan of protest, the pod tore away from its anchors and broke free of the rest of the ship. Both superstructure and engine pod began a tumbling dance about each other on the last vector that SPEEDY was on.

Dexter was shaken but unhurt. She realized what had happened before the null power readings swept across the control board and darkness settled onto the remains of the bridge. The ship was still in an unstable orbit about the gas giant and it could be no more than days before it would once again sink into the thick atmosphere in an uncontrolled re-entry, this time to burn up upon contact. Dexter sighed in resignation. She was helpless except for the armed missile salvo that still waited in the launcher. The only thing to do was hope someone took a shot at her if she approached an enemy ship. Then the missiles could be jettisoned on manual control. It would be up to their internal computers to see if they could home in on a target. With so many rebel ships out there, the refueling formation had to be spread over a good part of the gas giant. She was bound to come across something before she burned out.

Dexter sighed to herself as the remains of the courier spun about each other. Nothing had changed. The objective was still the same. She shook her head in resignation. "Good thing not much more can happen, or I might go to pieces too."

TELLAMACHIA

"Sir, I can't lock onto either the DOCHENDAL or the FENSTER." The Communications Officer looked up timidly toward the Command Bridge where Admiral Ocht Onacker was standing at the rail.

"Keep trying, Lieutenant." Onacker turned to the sensor station. "Mr. Murrock, do we have any sensor data from that far in-system?"

"There is too much interference from the asteroid field sir. I expect that--"

"Missile detonation in Sector Nine!" The startled sensor operator blurted out his report as all eyes turned to his station. "Admiral, I read a definite multi-burst from nuke-tipped missiles in Sector Nine, just past the asteroid field."

Onacker nodded. "I'd say DOCHENDAL and FENSTER found more than they were looking for." Turning toward his Command Station, the Admiral punched up his communication line to the Battle Bridge. Instantaneously, Captain Ocht Revack's face appeared on the screen. "Captain, have you heard?"

"Affirmative, sir. I don't think that the rest of the 22nd Squadron will get to the asteroid belt in time."

"I agree." The Admiral rubbed his chin absently as Revack waited patiently for him to continue. Finally, Onacker went on. "Captain, prepare to pull the TELLAMACHIA out of the refueling cycle. I want the other Devastators to continue their refueling run. Pull out the 14th Goggic Cruiser Squadron as well as the 35th and 39th Destroyer Flotillas to act as our

screen. I intend to find out just what is going on in-system and I intend to do it myself. Order the rest of the fleet into immediate refueling. We will cover them if it seems necessary. I can't afford to waste anymore time in this system, do you understand?"

Revack nodded vigorously. "Yes, sir. I do."

"Good. See to the orders then prepare the flagship for immediate vector change. We're leaving the formation."

As Revack saluted and broke the connection, the Admiral started to pace the Command Station. The rest of the bridge crew tried to unsuccessfully ignore their commander as he slowly walked above them. Onacker worked the situation over in his mind. Just what was out there behind the system's asteroid belt? It could be an entire Protectorate fleet just waiting for him to commit his entire force to refueling. But how would they have known he would choose this system as his route to Caractacalla? The Protectorate was pushed to the limit in this war, just as Tellamatrix was. They couldn't possibly cover every path to the capital system. Well, one Devastator, four cruisers and fifteen destroyers should be enough to slow down any attack until he could get the rest of the fleet up to support him. If time weren't so important, he wouldn't have to take chances with the fleet flagship like this. But he had sent those two destroyers out there alone. It was only fitting that he go and ascertain their situation. And there really was no one else in the fleet that he could trust with the job.

Onacker balled up his fists at his sides. He had to get the majority of the fleet into Caractacalla before the Protectorate counter-offensive was able to push the rebels off of the capital planet. If that happened then the days of the rebellion AND of his home planet were numbered. It was a chance he had to take. And he was willing to put himself and his flagship on the line to insure that the chance was worth taking.

"All personnel to maneuver stations!" shouted the speaker above Onacker's head. "Prepare for vector change and new formation data."

The Admiral slowly walked to his acceleration couch as the rest of the bridge crew strapped themselves into their duty chairs below him. With deliberation, he tightened the webbing about his shoulders. He checked the status displays on the command consoles before him one last time before the thrust began.

"Maneuver Preparatory!" blared the speaker. "Vector change in ten seconds."

Onacker sighed but refused to tighten up as so many younger crewmembers did. As far as he was concerned, the hard part was over. Right or wrong, a decision had been made. Now all he had to do was see that it was carried out. Regardless of all else, it was better to be doing something than to just roil with the tide of events. Admiral Ocht Onacker's face was calm as the TELLAMACHIA's engines fired and her maneuver thrusters forced him back into his seat.

SPEEDY

Dexter was getting sick. The tumbling motion combined with the

uneven pulling force of the functioning gravitic dampers still on battery power were enough to make even the stoutest stomach beg for release. And Dexter's stomach was never known to be the stoutest. She had taken some Dalvoline from her suit medkit, hoping that would alleviate some of the motion sickness that enveloped her, but it had only seemed to make her sicker. She swallowed hard and tried to take a deep breath but the stale suit air only made her wretch. Sometimes Dexter nearly fainted but the thought of the missile jettison button near her fingers always forced her back to consciousness.

Dexter closed her eyes for a minute and felt slightly better. 'Gee,' she thought, 'If I heave in my helmet I'll probably drown.' She tried to smite. The hope of action with the rebel fleet brought some new life into her battered body. It would mean that these disgusting feelings in her gut would stop, one way or the other. That was something she just had to hang on for.

"Come on, you guys," she whispered. "Even your sensors should be able to find me. Come on in and check me out and I'll give you a pretty present."

Slowly, the dismembered pieces of SPEEDY rolled and tumbled their way in a loose orbit about the gas giant.

DESTINY

"We're got an enemy forte coming up from the Phais III gas giant." Ontara's report seemed to take everyone on the bridge by surprise. "I read four, no, fire destroyer types."

Decameron turned to his executive officer. "Hare they spotted us yet?"

"Negative, Captain. They appear to be heading for the asteroid belt with most of their sensors turned to that area. If they widen their search area they're sure to spot us, though."

"That can't be helped now," Decameron said. "Any further sign of the SPEEDY?"

Mitchell shook her head. "She was lost off of our sensors when she plunged into the gas giant's atmosphere. It was a pretty bad angle. I doubt if a vessel with that much damage could have survived."

"Who Knows, Ontara? That Dexter character has surprised us before. Somehow, I don't think we've seen the last of her. But it doesn't change our situation here. Lieutenant Scott, are we still at Readiness Condition One?"

The Weapons Officer looked at her Captain. She realized that he already knew the answer but was trying to bring her into the conversation. "Yes, sir. All systems are operational. Missile launch controls positive. Laser Turret Control on automatic." She sighed. "We're ready to go in."

"Then I suggest that we do so." The Captain turned to Mitchell. "Take her in, Ontara. We'll make a high speed pass of their refueling formation and see if we can break it up before those destroyers they sent out to get us figure out we're not where they think we are."

"Aye, Captain. Changing course now." Mitchell entered the

maneuvers into the navigation computer and the ship once again swung into life.

"Maximum acceleration in ten seconds," blared the DESTINY's speakers and the crew tensed for the rough ride ahead.

Captain Decameron flexed his right hand into a fist as his lips turned up into an evil smile. "It's showtime. Now let's see what she can do."

Without a sound, the Protectorate escort shot off toward the gas giant.

TELLAMACHIA

"TARGET!" shouted the Sensor Officer on the control bridge. "I've got a target bearing into the Phais III gas giant at high speed! Definite, I say again, definite hostile. No transponder reading and Friend or Foe Signature."

Admiral Onacker nodded from the railing of his command station. "Thank you, Ensign. Stand-by for a full weapons discharge as he gets into range."

"Yes, sir," responded the Weapons Officer. "Weapons tracking and on-line. I can give you full discharge anytime, Admiral."

Onacker nodded again. "Signal the rest of the formation to lock onto our sensors and arm all weapons. Stand-by to fire on my command."

DESTINY

"New contact, Captain!" Mitchell had to shout to be heard over the rumble of the escort's main engines. "We've got ten plus vessels right in our path. They've locked on!"

"Damn!" snapped Decameron. "Evasive! Change vector immediately!" Decameron could barely move his head to look at Mitchell strapped into her station as the G-forces pulled at his body. "No wait, Ontara! That's just what they think we'll do. Maintain course and speed. We'll barrel right into their formation and see what they do about that!"

Mitchell smiled back at her Captain. "Shall I abort the attack procedure on the refueling fleet, sir?"

"Negative, Ontara. If we survive their initial barrage our speed should save us from another and we'll be past them. Lieutenant Scott, hold your fire. Save the missiles for the refueling ships but see if you can't lock a few laser turrets onto those guys out there. Fire as they bear."

"Aye, sir."

"Hold on folks, this is going to be one fast and furious little skirmish!"

TELLAMAGHIA

"FIRE!"

"Missile launch positive," reported the Weapons Officer.

All along the Devastator's side tiny pinpricks of missile engine ignitions could be seen from the sensors of her escorting ship. Then they, in turn, fired their salvoes. As the launchers were cleared, missile reloads dropped down into place and were prepared for their own launching.

"The target is not turning away, sir! She's coming straight for us!"

"What?" Onacker shouted. "She's not evading?"

"No, sir. I suggest we use a pattern detonation of N-tipped warheads before the target slips past the barrage."

"Pattern Detonation approved," replied Admiral Onacker. "Initiate at your discretion."

"Yes, sir. Missiles are attempting to home in on target. Speed is increasing. Some of the missiles are falling back out of position. They've lost the target."

"Are we within range for laser battery fire yet?"

"Negative, sir. Wait one. The target has increased speed! More missiles are loosing their lock-on."

"What about that Pattern Detonation?"

"Yes, Admiral. Ah, missiles in range. Pattern Detonation accessed-- NOW!" The Weapons Officer slammed his hand down on the row of blue buttons on his control board and the sensor screens that were aimed toward the target blossomed with billowing fire.

DESTINY

"Enemy missiles in range now."

"Barnes, is that all the backups?"

"Engines are on max-full power, Captain. We're well into the red."

"Brenda, fire when you can!"

"I'm on it, sir."

The DESTINY was almost past most of the enemy missiles when they were ordered to detonate. Even so she was bathed in a blinding radiance that overloaded every sensor screen on the bridge. Automatically, the screens shut themselves off long before the radiance could have been able to burn out the eyes of the bridge crew. Most of the outside communication and sensor aerials and dishes on the outer hull simply burned off before the null generators could kick in and limit the field of expanding radioactive gas that threatened to engulf the escort. But before anything else could occur, the DESTINY was past and streaking toward the enemy formation that had fired the missile barrage.

"Lasers firing now," said Brenda Scott as she calmly sat at her weapons control station amid the smoky, ozone-filled bridge compartment. Above and beneath her, the automatic tracking turrets swung out of their protective armor shields and locked onto a rapidly approaching enemy vessel. With five rapid pulses each laser scored a path of destruction across the back of the enemy ship moving on the opposite vector. And then DESTINY was passed and nearly out of range before the enemy formation returned her laser fire.

"Turret Two is jammed, Captain. I'll get a crew on it immediately."

"Very good, Lieutenant Scott," said Decameron. "And fine shooting on that enemy vessel. Estimate of damage?"

"Probable HOCHT Class Tellamatrixian destroyer, Captain," Mitchell added from her station. "Severe hull damage with some weapons destroyed. We can't be much more specific with most of our sensors out."

"Never mind. It'll do until we rig the backups. Stay on course for the refueling point of the enemy fleet. Begin deceleration as necessary, Mr. Barnes. And turn on the atmospheric cleansers to get this smoke out of the bridge compartment, will you?"

"That I will sir."

TELLAMACHIA

"Did we get it?"

Captain Ocht Revack tried to appear calm on the communication screen but it was a losing battle. "Yes, Admiral, the target sustained definite damage. But I'm afraid that it was moving too fast to be destroyed by our Pattern Detonation. Fleet Ops have reported multiple laser hits on the destroyer ONTURACH in the formation screen. She's lost ten crewmen and had two laser turrets knocked out of action. Probably some engine damage too, since she's falling behind. Sensors tracked the target past us and it is now heading for the gas giant."

"And the refueling fleet!" added Onacker. "Signal all ships to decelerate and reverse course."

"But what of the enemy force near the asteroid belt?"

"There is no enemy force except the one that just got past us! Do you think any Captain with some kind of support behind him would try a maneuver like we just saw? He's working alone and is willing to take chances. That makes him dangerous."

"Yes, sir."

"Order that fool Bellock to withdraw from his search of the asteroid belt and to fall back on us. If he had discovered this enemy ship in time, none of this would have happened."

"Immediately, Admiral."

"Just what kind of ship was that, for Koron's sake?"

Revack looked down at another screen to his side. "Sensors reported it to be an ENMITY Class Protectorate Escort."

"JUST an escort?"

"That's what the computer says, sir."

"What kind of madman would send an escort ship out after us? These people don't seem rational."

"Agreed, sir. Or perhaps it is another example of how desperate the situation has become for the Protectorate that they must now resort to suicide tactics."

"You may be right, Captain. But desperation or not, I'd like to meet the commander of that ship someday. Too bad I'm going to have to kill him before that is possible."

CHAPTER TEN

DESTINY

Falco slumped in his battlecouch in the weapon's control room, gasping for breath inside his steamy vacsuit but trying not to show it. The maximum G acceleration had caused him more pain than he could have imagined. Doctor Kamakawa's medication had proven to be ineffective. He had nearly blacked out when the order to engage had been given. Adams had shook him when she saw what was happening and that had been enough to keep him conscious. But that was all. He couldn't even remember doing his status checks before the automatic fire control began to pump laser shots into the Tellamatrixian destroyer. Falco prayed no one would ask him a question. He would never be able to reply.

The Chief turned to look over at Jaycee Adams studying the readings on her missile control board. All the indicators were green, showing full load status. He could see her cautiously looking over at him to see how he was doing, but was wise enough not to say anything. The rest of the weapon's control crewmen were too busy at their stations to notice anything. One of the laser turret techs had gone down to damage control to help them with the jammed turret housing and his control board had been slaved to Adams' board. Falco didn't remember ordering that so she must have done it on her own initiative. Smart girl.

Falco's breathing had slowed now that the ship was preparing to decelerate. He wondered why he had never ordered her back to her own missile load control board after Higgins had returned from checking the after magazine loading hatch, but now he understood. For some reason, the young woman had a calming effect on him. Sitting at his side, he almost felt as if she was in charge.

The Chief shook his head inside the helmet, clearing his thoughts. He felt like his body was floating but could see that the acceleration couch straps were secure and the gravplates in the floor were working perfectly.

"Status on the turret jam, Adams," he croaked, barely able to get the words out of his mouth.

"Damage Control reports one of the bearings was sheared off, probably by some of the debris from the hull sensor dish array that was destroyed in the enemy missile blast. They'll have it cleared in another half an hour, Chief."

"Fine. Let me know when they finish up."

Adams nodded, but then reached out a hand to grasp Falco's knee. He jumped at the contact but turned to look at the Missile Tech next to him. No one else saw anything. Adams said nothing that the rest of the control room crew would hear, but her eyes seemed to show an understanding of what Falco was going through. They seemed to offer the help that Falco knew he would need to get through the coming battle and not let the ship down. Without a word spoken, the Chief nodded to Adams, who smiled and nodded back.

Falco leaned back as Adams released his leg and turned back to monitor her control board. The various updates and orders from various parts of the ship streamed through his helmet receiver but he paid little attention. For the first time since entering the Phais Eisert System, Chief Falco felt like everything was going to be alright.



"A little harder on the left ring, I think, Techie," Smaltz was behind the Laser Tech in the turret access shaft as he attempted to pry the damaged bearing assembly out of the rotation ring housing.

"I know my job, Smaltz. Just keep passing me the tools when I ask yuh'."

Smaltz turned his helmeted face down the access shaft and snorted at Webbley, now surrounded by tools from the Damage Control repair kit. Webbley merely shrugged at his partner in resignation.

"So Webb," said Smaltz, patently ignoring the grunts coming from above him. "How do you think the other Damage Control parties are gettin' on fixing those sensor and communication arrays?"

"I dunno, Smaltzie. The outer hull is still pretty hot from the radiation. I'd say they won't have time to get more than half of the sensors on-line again."

"Pass me a double-niner electro-spanner," shouted the Laser Tech from the turret above. "I'll get this krankin thing this time."

Smaltze held out his gloved hand as Webbley picked up the tool from the pile on the floor and passed it up to him. The Laser Tech grabbed it without a word.

"Yep, we sure are lucky to get the in-ship damage control," Smaltze continued. "Far better than crawling all over the hot hull scraping metal droppings off of sensor relay points. And the company we been keepin' is just too much for me to handle, yes sir."

"Will you two quit yappin' and hand me up that replacement bearing. I finally got this little bugger loose."

"Good job, Techie! I knew you could do it," said Smaltze with a wink to his comrade below. As he handed up the replacement bearing the electro-spanner came crashing down the access shaft, barely missing the face shield on his helmet. The spanner clanged down on the deck at Webbley's feet. "What's the idea, Techie?" shouted Smaltze. "The grav plates are still on, in case you haven't noticed."

"Oh, sorry. Guess I just got carried away by your fascinatin' conversation."

"Yeh, well just fix the krankin" rotation ring so we can get back to Damage Control, OK?"

The Laser Tech turned back to his job with a smile on his helmeted face. "Sure, Engineer Tech Smaltze, sure thing. No trouble at all. No sir."



"Watch out for that hot spot on the port aerial sponson." The static almost overpowered the communication signal from Doctor Kamakawa's helmet transmitter as he maneuvered the Damage Control repair crew away from the dangerously radiated areas of the DESTINY's outer hull. The sensor and communication aerial repair had been going on for three hours now and the five-man crew was almost worn out from crawling along the jagged debris and melted equipment points caused by the blast effects of the enemy missiles. The Null Field Generators had dissipated most of the radiation but Kamakawa still went out with the crew and scanned their work area with a hand-held radiation detector. He was connected to one of the surviving tether bolts near the dorsal airlock as the Damage Control crew scampered about the hull, scraping off residue and fitting new sensor and communication gear.

The Damage Control crew chief turned to Kamakawa. "We'll rig that last dish and hit the 'lock for a rest, right Doc?"

"Sounds like a good idea. I haven't been in a vacsuit this long since training."

DESTINY was still heading toward the Phais III gas giant at a fast, but constant speed. Kamakawa had heard the Captain signal to the Damage Control chief that as soon as the outside repairs were completed, the ship would begin her deceleration maneuver, putting her in a high orbit about the great planet now beginning to loom above them again like a writhing technicolor nightmare. The sight frightened the Doctor more than he would have thought possible. He had never taken the time to suit up and experience the sights outside the ship before, not realizing how poorly the ships sensors and camera pickups showed what the naked eye could present in full wonder. As the Damage Control team finished up repairing the communication dish, Kamakawa simply stared at the immense ball of swirling gas before him.



"Damage Control reporting in, Captain." The strain of the many hours of bridge duty was beginning to show on Ontara's face as she gave her report. "They've entered the dorsal air lock for a rest. I don't think we'll have time for another repair run if we're going to decelerate into orbit."

Decameron frowned through the visor of his helmet. "How far did they get?"

"Preliminary reports show that we have about 65% of our sensor and tracking ability back on-line. We can receive incoming transmissions but can only send communications out on a wide band. The tight beam laser equipment was fried and we don't have any spares for that."

"So if we have to talk to somebody, chances are that the message will be intercepted."

"That's affirm, sir."

Decameron shrugged. "No big deal, I suppose. Who would we talk to besides SPEEDY? That is, if she's still in one piece."

Mitchell didn't reply. Everyone on the bridge knew that SPEEDY probably hadn't survived her passage through the gas giant's atmosphere. There wasn't much to say about it.

"Signal the Damage Control team to report back to their station," Decameron continued. "They've done enough repair to the outer hull equipment to get us through our next little altercation. Initiate deceleration preparatory. Tell the crew to strap back in."

"That's affirm, Captain," replied Mitchell.

"Mr. Barnes, are your engines ready for reversal?"

"On command, sir."

"Excellent. Lieutenant Scott, status of the enemy fleet?"

The Weapons Control Officer turned from her station to look up at the Captain. "The main enemy fleet has begun their refueling operation, Captain. From the sensors I have on-line, it looks like they've almost all entered the gas giant's atmosphere to refuel at ante. They've only left a squadron or less as an overwatch."

"Not very cautious, are they? Must be in quite a hurry to take chances like that."

"Yes, sir," agreed Cassidy. "The force that we engaged is behind us. But they have reversed their course and are accelerating toward the gas giant also. After our orbital deceleration maneuver, we should have time for at least one pass on the refueling fleet before they come into orbit."

"If they come into orbit," added Mitchell.

"I think they will, Ontara," said Decameron. "If they pass the gas giant by at speed they won't have another opportunity to get at us before we can break orbit after our run in with the refueling fleet. We could hit them and get away with it. Providing the refueling fleet doesn't hit us back too severely. No, the pursuit force has to orbit. If we engage their refueling ships too closely, they'll come up on our rear and we'll be boxed in. This operation will definitely take some careful timing."

Mitchell looked down at her control board. "All stations report ready for deceleration, Captain."

Decameron pulled on his restraint straps, as did everyone else on the bridge. "Then let's get on with it. Full deceleration power--now."

TELLAMACHIA

"Any news on the target yet?" Admiral Ocht Onacker's pacing about the Command Bridge made the entire duty crew more nervous than usual.

"The Protectorate escort is decelerating into orbit about the gas giant, sir," said the Sensor Officer. "We won't catch up for another hour yet, relative time."

Onacker turned on the Communications Officer as if his body was a gun turret. "Have you been able to signal the fleet?"

"No, sir. The overwatch squadron is still in high orbit on the other side of the planet. Those vessels of the fleet that are skimming fuel on our side of the gas giant must be too deep in the atmosphere for our communications signal to reach them."

Onacker began to pace again. "This is wonderful! A fleet of over a hundred ships and we're helpless against a lone escort vessel!"

"But sir," continued the Communications Officer. "Surely the

Overwatch Squadron will be able to deal with such a light vessel before any harm could come to any of our ships still refueling."

"I hope to Koron you're right, Lieutenant. But that's just what I thought about our force out here and that blasted Protectorate blew right through us, crippling a destroyer as she went by! No, I'll not underestimate that escort or its commander again. Keep trying to contact any vessels in the refueling fleet or the overwatch squadron. And let me know when Commodore Bellock's squadron begins its end run."

Onacker turned away from the bridge duty stations and walked back to his Command Console. Punching the proper button, the image of Captain Ocht Revack on the Battle Bridge came onto his viewscreen.

"Captain Revack, I assume you've had time to analyze the situation and my response to it."

"Yes, Admiral. I have."

"Well, I await your report."

Revack took a deep breath before he continued. "As far as our information goes, Admiral. I believe that your choice of tactics is sound. Our force should enter a high orbit about the gas giant as soon as possible, following the Protectorate escort around the planet toward the major part of the refueling fleet and the overwatch squadron. The enemy will not be able to lock on to specific targets that are refueling within the atmosphere, especially with the considerable sensor damage that we probably inflicted with our missiles. The target will therefore orbit near the area of the gas giant's atmosphere where her sensors detect the most numbers of metallic hulls and begin a generalized bombardment of that area. By that time, Commodore Bellock's squadron minus FENSTER and DOCHENDAL will have accelerated out to the opposite side of the planet and be able to engage the enemy before the Overwatch Squadron would come into range. With our force coming up from behind and other ships rising out of the atmosphere after refueling, the Protectorate vessel will be boxed in completely."

"Excellent! Now, what can go wrong?"

Revack looked confused for a second, but bravely continued his report. "Sir, ah, we can't predict the actual activity of the enemy. As with all plans, there is no guarantee that the Protectorate vessel will do what we expect."

"Exactly!" replied the Admiral. "That is why we must come up with contingency plans to cover as many of the hypothetical variables as possible. This Captain is not of an ordinary sort. I expect that whatever we come up with will only approximate what will occur, if we can even get that lucky. But, no matter. With the preponderance of force on our side and an equal amount of determination we shall still force that commander to meet his destiny head on!"

"I understand, sir."

"Signal me when you have the projections worked out, Revack. I think I'll take a walk to my quarters. I can't remember when I saw them last."

"Yes, sir. A sonic shower would probably do you good."

"Yes, it might," replied the Admiral. It just might at that."

SPEEDY

Dexter was once again amazed at how anyone could get used to anything if given enough time and determination. The gyrating motions of the remnants of the courier SPEEDY had continued unabated and yet Dexter hardly noticed them now. Strapped into the command couch, she had gotten used too simply waiting, thinking back on the events of her life and wondering about the future. Dexter had finally found a talent that had always alluded her in the past; patience. She was in no hurry to be discovered by the vessels of the enemy refueling fleet. It seemed almost a given that that would occur eventually. Encased in the spinning superstructure section of her stricken vessel, she was helpless to affect any of the situations occurring around the gas giant. Or was she?

Dexter stroked the missile launch controls for the thousandth time. She would merely wait for the situation to affect her and then respond to it. The idea of uncontrollability of events gave Dexter a strange sense of peace within her. She was content to let the other participants in this interstellar battle of wits call the shots and to let the forces of the universe decide the outcome.

Just for a distraction, Dexter had popped off one of the armored plates that had covered one of her three viewing ports in the bridge compartment. At first she could barely look at the dizzying spectacle of the swirling gas clouds on the immense planet below popping in and out of view every few seconds. As the bridge section continued to roll in orbit, however, Dexter began to stare at the spinning scene in wonder. Now she was able to gaze in amazement and pick out what details that she could in the rapidly moving picture. Occasionally she could see a glimmer of the SPEEDY's engine pod still gamely rolling along with the superstructure section. That the two sections collapsed in on themselves and, in so doing, spun about a similar axis, was a freak event, which Dexter found hard to believe. But it was comforting to realize that, even in the act of tearing herself apart, the ship had still remained together.

The viewport had also brought Dexter the only sensor information that she had left. Occasionally, she could see the straight lines of white or yellow contrails within the immense proportions of the gas giant's atmosphere. They were from the refueling operations of the enemy fleet. Down far below the spinning wreckage that she looked out from, the refueling vessels continued passed her position unknowingly. If only she had control of the missile targeting system, she could have launched what she had in the racks at the refueling ships and gave the Teltamatrixians something to think about. But with only jettison control, Dexter had no way to signal the missiles to home in on such a distant target. The internal sensors of the missiles simply wouldn't detect anything except ships within close range.

There was nothing for it except to sit back and enjoy the show. Tilting her head back, Dexter stretched in her dirty vacsuit as much as the seat restraints would permit her. Sitting relaxed and half asleep, it took her several minutes to notice the tiny group of light points that seemed to be moving with the SPEEDY's wreckage against the starfield that raced across

the viewport with every rotation. Dexter smiled lazily and stroked the missile jettison control buttons at her side again.

"I see you," she whispered as the points of light appeared in the viewport again. "Come closer, my friends, and I'll give us all a pretty surprise."

Dexter gazed at her targets as they appeared in the viewport over and over again. The light points were growing larger and were formed up to head into orbit about the gas giant.

"That's right," said Dexter. "Come on in. I've got just what you guys need, believe me."

The missile jettison buttons seemed to glitter and pulse beneath Dexter's fingers.

"Not yet, not yet. A little closer, I think. We can wait a few minutes more, can't we?"

As Dexter stroked the jettison controls, the SPEEDY spun on toward the enemy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORDRECH

Commodore Rolfe Ocht Bellock was troubled. He knew that Admiral Ocht Onacker was angry with him but couldn't understand why. As commander of the 22nd Destroyer Squadron he had followed his orders to the letter, hadn't he? And yet in every communication he had received from the Admiral he had gotten another tongue-lashing.

The rumble of the MORDRECH's engines jarred Bellock from his introspection. The bridgecrew of the squadron flagship silently carried out their duties as they fought the effects of the extended high-G run toward the Phais Eisert gas giant. Bellock felt it also. His overweight paunch seemed to press against his backbone in the command chair until the feeling became almost unbearable. Sweat poured from his brow and he could only shake his helmeted head to keep the salt from stinging his eyes. But Bellock wouldn't let up. Not this time. He would prove to the Admiral that his opinion was wrong. Even if he had to shake the engines out of the MORDRECH to do it.

It was a long time since the Tallamatrixian Naval Academy scandal. But Bellock was sure every high-ranking officer, including Admiral Ocht Onacker, remembered. His brother, Captain Augus Ocht Bellock, had changed his younger brother's computer ranking for battle simulations so that it appeared that he was in the top 10% of the class instead of the bottom. Family pride, Augus had said. But Rolfe Bellock had to live with the taint of his brother's deed throughout his career, even though the Court of Inquiry had cleared him of all knowledge of the crime. Years afterward, he was still known as 'Cheater Bellock' within the Tallamatrixian Officer Corps. Only the service that so many of his family had given to Tallamatrix kept him from being forcibly retired. And then the Civil War had come giving him one last opportunity to prove himself. Stubbornness and an unwillingness to quit had gotten Bellock this far and now no one, not even Onacker, was going to keep him from an Admiral's star.

"Signal from SHILIGASH, Commodore," said the young communications officer straining to turn her head towards Bellock. "She's blown a vent tube and can't keep max. power."

Bellock tried to shrug but the effort proved too much. "Tell her to catch up when she can. Seven destroyers should be a match for one Protectorate escort, I'd say."

"Yes, sir."

"And signal the rest of the squadron to pull out all the stops. I want us ready for the deceleration to orbit the minute I give the signal. If we do this right, the enemy ship won't even realize that we are right on top of them. And remember, the Admiral will be watching."

"Yes, Commodore. Signal going out now."

Commodore Bellock felt a little more at ease now. Even with the detachment of one of his destroyers, the odds would still be seven to one with plenty of support nearby. Just like the simulation exercises that his

brother had rigged for him, this should be no problem at all.

"Signal the squadron to close up into battle formation. I don't want us strung out when we enter orbit."

"Acknowledged, Commodore."

DESTINY

"Deceleration complete. Standard orbit achieved. Crew closed up at Battlestations, sir."

The reports coming into Decameron's command station rang in his ears like a hammer. The bridgecrew tensely checked their control boards for the hundredth time as the DESTINY moved closer in her orbit toward the dense concentration of enemy ships refueling in the gas giant's atmosphere below. Although he knew it was only mild feedback, Decameron thought he could hear the steady hum of the ship through his helmet earpiece, urging them forward, eager to come to grips with their foe.

"Tracking on-line," reported Brenda Scott at her weapon's board. "I'm getting faint readings on the enemy vessels refueling ahead and below us, sir."

"Any sign of an Overwatch Squadron?"

"Negative, Captain. But standard fleet refueling doctrine dictates that there will be one. We haven't traveled far enough around the planet to read them on the horizon scans yet."

Decameron nodded. "Report as soon as you have the Overwatch on sensors. You can bet that when we see them, they will see us. Keep tracking the refueling ships and feed their paths into the targeting system."

"Yes, sir."

Decameron turned to his executive officer, "Almost time for the fireworks, eh, Ontara?"

Mitchell smiled in her helmet and tried to hide her apprehension. "Ready when you are, Captain."

The stage was set. Only the waiting remained.

SPEEDY

Pilot Captain Alathonia Dexter sat mesmerized on her acceleration couch as she watched the group of enemy ships spinning out of her limited vision. They were still coming closer and closer to the wreck of her command. Ever so gently she gripped the missile jettison board with her fingers and ignored the motion of the SPEEDY's bridge compartment. It had only taken minutes for the enemy fleet to change from a mass of moving pinpricks to blobs of reflected light heading toward the wreckage of SPEEDY. Soon, Dexter could discern some details, especially on the central vessel, obviously a devastator considering its size.

Dexter pointed the next time the ships came into view. "You. You're the one," she said. "Just let me snuggle up to you and we'll see what develops." She looked down at the jettison switches before her. "Old

SPEEDY may not be much of a match for a devastator but I bet we can give you quite a belly ache."

Dexter's giggling filled her helmet as tears came to her eyes. For some reason, the entire situation had become remarkably funny. To be waiting in a wreck for a set of spinning dots to approach seemed like the funniest thing she had ever heard of. As the dots grew larger she only laughed harder at them.

TELLAMACHIA

"Orbital profile complete. We're ready for finale deceleration anytime, Admiral."

Onacker felt at ease in his fresh vacsuit. He had reduced the readiness condition of the ship and opened it at the chest seals as he sat at his command console. Revack had been right. The sonic shower had done him a great deal of good. He almost felt like dozing right there on the bridge, but knew he could never force himself to do so. "Signal the other ships in formation to prepare for orbital maneuvers. Let's do it by the numbers, Commander."

"Yes, sir! Preparatory away."

The bridge compartment rang with the sound of the ship's control officers giving their department personnel final instructions before deceleration. Onacker nodded his head in admiration of their efficiency. In the short time that he had been with the ship, the bridge crew had changed remarkably for the better. They just might need that efficiency in the coming battle to survive.

"All vessels acknowledge preparatory signal, Admiral. The formation is ready for deceleration to orbit."

"Very well," Onacker responded. "Initiate deceleration - Now."

With her maneuver jets operating on maximum discharge the TELLAMACHIA ponderously swung out of the cruising formation she had been in and began her final deceleration into orbit about the gas giant. The four vessels of the 14th Goggic Cruiser Squadron slowly slid into position in line ahead behind her as the escorting destroyers did the same. With a series of thrust and spacing adjustments, the warships were strung out in a single line in a high stable orbit above the gas giant's swirling atmosphere.

Admiral Ocht Onacker breathed a sigh of relief. The bridge crew beneath him were stretching and talking amongst themselves, happy to be back near the fleet and happier still that their Admiral seemed so at ease. With the sound of the sensor proximity alarm the calm was broken.

"TARGET!" screamed the Weapon's Control Officer as he turned back to his console. "Orbiting object coming in at us at angle 318, Deflection 12!"

"Suits!" shouted Onacker, hitting the inter-ship pressurization alarm. As he donned his helmet the bridgecrew did likewise, now straining to continue to scan their monitors.

"Targeting information coming in," said the Weapon's Control Officer in a calmer voice. "Shall I signal the batteries to fire, sir?"

Onacker was about to reply when the Sensor Officer interjected. "Negative target, Admiral. I repeat, negative target. Sensors identify approaching objects as debris."

Onacker hesitated, then said. "What kind of debris?"

The Sensor Officer checked the computer readout before him. "Two metallic objects revolving about a common axis, sir. No power readings or emissions signature. It could be jettison material from ships that refueled here recently."

"It would have to be real recently for the orbit not to have decayed by now," said the Weapon's Officer, his hand still poised on the fire control.

The Sensor Officer shrugged. "There's probably been hundreds of ships through this system in the last month, both ours and the Protectorates. The debris could be just about anything."

Onacker pondered the situation. "How close will the objects get to us?"

"They'll pass right off our starboard bow, sir. Near enough to get a good look, anyway."

"Objects are already too close for nuclear missiles, sir," the Weapon's Officer mentioned. "I'm engaging our laser battery for lock-on."

"We'll wait," decided Admiral Onacker. "If we fire randomly, we could give away our position to that Protectorate escort entering orbit about now. There is no point in losing any of our advantages if we don't have to. Get a positive identification on the objects before we decide to open fire."

"Yes, sir," the Sensor Officer nodded.

DESTINY

"Target data coming in, Captain. I read an eight vessel Overwatch Squadron on the gas giant's horizon, probably heavy cruisers." Like everyone else on the bridge, Ontara's suit was buttoned up, making her voice sound tinny through the helmet receivers of the bridgecrew.

"What about the refueling fleet?" Decameron asked.

"Still only general sensor readings, not enough for a pinpoint bombardment. We could go for a pattern run anytime, though."

Decameron shook his head. "No. It's too random. I want to do some damage to those guys, not just scare them."

"Captain, the Overwatch Squadron has started to maneuver. They've spotted us, sir."

"Just as expected. Lieutenant Scott, estimated time for a pinpoint run?"

Scott turned from her console to look at the Captain. "I'd say at least another ten minutes, sir, if you want maximum accuracy. With our sensor damage it could take longer."

"OK, fire at your option, Lieutenant. The Weapons Board is yours. We'll stay on the bomb run as long as we can. But if it gets hot we'll have to vector out. I want every last missile we've got left to hit that refueling fleet, pattern or pinpoint programmed, understand?"

Cassidy nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Let's hit 'em where we can do the most damage. We sure as hell won't get another chance."

"Sensor contact aft!" Mitchell's voice pierced through the communication channel.

"Identify," said Decameron as he turned away from the Weapons Station to Ontara's post.

"It looks like six, no, seven enemy vessels coming into our orbit on heavy deceleration. It must be that squadron they sent after us to the asteroid belt. How could they have gotten here so fast?"

"By pushing past the limit," Decameron replied grimly. "If they wanted to get here fast they probably had every engine in overdrive. Well, there's a squadron that will need plenty of repair yard work."

"They'll be in missile range any minute, Captain," Brenda Scott said. "Shall I switch targeting information?"

"Negative. Stay on the bomb run. We'll see what they've got and let our anti-missile system handle the incoming. Signal the laser crews to stand ready."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Decameron slowly turned back to his command console, never letting a bit of worry cross his face. 'Nothing worthwhile is ever easy,' he thought.



"Heads up, boys and girls, we'll be targeting on incoming any minute." Chief Falco's voice had gained in strength since the time the DESTINY had entered a stable orbit. All around him, the missile and laser techs studied their readouts. Falco's board displayed the sensor data on the incoming enemy squadron with an occasional reading on the Overwatch vessels vectoring toward them.

Jaycee Adams still sat next to Falco, her old post now taken by Tech Higgins. She quietly monitored the programming data being fed into the loaded missiles to be launched at the refueling enemy fleet below. Falco was amazed. Adams had become an indispensable member of the firing crew in a matter of a few hours.

"Missile feed report," said Falco.

Adams responded without looking away from her board. "Pinpoint bombardment data updating continually. We've got a good lock on three targets now. In range in five minutes."

"Acknowledged. Bridge confirms, first launch in five minutes."

Falco sighed. The dull ache in his chest had subsided but he knew it would never leave him now. Calmly, he turned to look at Adams. She seemed to feel his gaze and looked up from his status display.

"Just like training, eh, Jaycee?"

"Right, Chief. Just like training."

The old man's eyes continued to stare at the young face behind the helmet shield beside him. There was sorrow in her eyes, but no fear.

"Missiles incoming!"

The warning broke their trance as reactions drilled into them for the past two years took control.

"Lasers independent lock," shouted Falco. "Weapons free!"

"Computer tracking on line," said a Tech from the rear of the compartment. "I read 25, no 28 targets heading in."

"No evasive, I repeat, no evasive maneuvering. We're staying on the bomb run. If we don't hit 'em nobody will!"

"Firing now!"

Soundlessly, the multiple laser turrets on the DESTINY's hull began to release their shafts of coherent light towards the oncoming barrage. Some missiles were hit and exploded in a flash while others simply lost guidance and began to vector away from their intended target. Many others charged on towards the Protectorate escort.

"I read fifteen targets left. Second barrage coming in! Twenty more!"

"Keep firing, independent control," said Falco.

"The bridge just activated the null field generators."

"Acknowledged."

As the remainder of the first wave of enemy missiles came in, the DESTINY was encased in a green glow as the null field formed.

"Six missiles still locked onto us from the first barrage. Twelve left in the second. We can't get anymore!"

The first missile detonated near enough to the DESTINY to bath her aft section in seething torrents of radiation. The null field lapped at the explosion as if coaxing it away from the ship. The energy from the detonation fought into the null field, probing for a weakness. As other missiles exploded the pressures pushing into the field found some fluctuation points and broke through onto the exposed after hull section. Ventral laser turrets were ripped off of their mountings and flung away from the ship. Missile tubes were bent into uselessness, their unarmed payloads now trapped and unable to launch. Everywhere, ablative armor seemed to sear off of its plating, leaving a dull metallic mist in its place. It had been less than a second since the initial missile had detonated.

The first hull penetration from the explosion occurred in the upper engineering spaces. In a flash of light the engineers standing at their posts were incinerated or flung lifelessly to the far bulkhead. Engine tubes and power plant machinery was ripped from their supports as debris filled the searing hot compartment. The DESTINY reeled in her agony.

"Three missiles still incoming from the second barrage!" croaked Falco. "Target on them!"

"We've lost power to Turrets Four, Six, and Seven aft. We can't get them all!"

Falco nodded glumly. "That's what I figured."



"Get me a Damage Control report as soon as you can."

Decameron's shoulder hurt as if he had broken his collarbone. The sudden jerking motion had caught him unprepared and had snapped him forward in his acceleration couch. All about him on the bridge, people were shaking themselves back to awareness as the effects of the force of the

explosion left them. Through it all, Brenda Scott still sat peering at her weapons control board.

"First missiles away," said Scott. "I've lost Missile Tubes Ten through Fourteen aft, sir. Entering their targeting data on reloads for the forward tubes."

"Well done, Brenda," Decameron replied, ignoring his pain. Fire it all off."

"Yes, sir."

Beneath the DESTINY tiny pinpoints of light shot out of her hull toward the atmosphere of the gas giant below. Soon the first were lost from sight as more and still more missile shot out of the workable tubes remaining on the escort.

"Barrage will be complete in thirty seconds, sir. All missiles expended."

"That's good, Brenda. That's done at least."

Behind the DESTINY two remaining enemy missiles homed in.

TELLAMACHIA

The Sensor Station Officer on the bridge studied the space debris tumbling toward the flagship. It was larger than most jettison material, almost like wreckage from a destroyed vessel. He was beginning to piece together the puzzle as another sensor alarm went off on his console and he turned his attention away.

"Sensors report multiple missile detonations at orbital grid coordinates 23-AB, Admiral. Looks like there is quite a battle out there."

"Good. That should be Bellock, on time for once. Any evidence that the target was destroyed?"

"No, sir. I can only read the explosions. The last two just detonated and the whole band is saturated with interference."

Onacker turned away from the Sensor Officer, rubbing his chin. Then finally, he said, "We'll assume that Protectorate escort got through the barrage somehow. I under-estimated that Captain once, I'll not do it again."

The Sensor Officer was about to reply when another alarm sounded on his board. "Another series of detonations, Admiral. This time it's sub-atmospheric bursts. I read a forty-plus missile bombardment."

"The refueling fleet?"

The Sensor Officer nodded. "The explosions would seem to be in the probable refueling area of our fleet. Yes, sir."

Onacker turned to the Communications Officer. "Try to get in contact with the Overwatch Commander now. I need to know what is happening out there!"

As the Communications Officer attempted to raise other vessels of the fleet, the Sensor Officer turned back to his board to check on the space debris he had been monitoring. The two tumbling cylinders were closer now. He could see jagged support members stretched out between the two objects as if beckoning to be together. Overstressed plating had buckled and ruptured. Equipment still floated about the two objects in a complicated dance.

The Sensor Operator continued to stare at the image as the tumbling objects rolled over each other again. There, in the stark light from the distant sun, markings could be made out on the surface of the wreckage.

"Admiral! The objects closing are the wreckage of the Protectorate courier that we chased into this system!"

"What?"

"Positive ID, sir! Interstellar Protectorate Courier SPEEDY."

Onacker was stunned but quickly recovered. "I want the close range battery to vaporize that wreck out there, do you hear me?"

The Weapons Officer nodded in his helmet. "Yes, sir. Lasers only. They are too close for the missiles to arm."

"I don't care how, but to it NOW!"

The Weapons Officer slammed his fist on the targeting controls of the ventral laser turrets. "All lasers, FIRE!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

DOCHENDAL

"Another hour should do it, sir. We're fitting the replacement for the shunt coupler now. After that we'll have maneuvering power again."

A grim-faced Captain Ocht Fasak nodded to his Chief Engineer as the tired and dirty officer continued his report. The Engineering spaces that the two-vacsuited figures stood in were a hive of activity. Everywhere crewmen worked to burn away wreckage with vacuum welders or gathered about repairing and rewiring burnt out equipment. The near misses that the Protectorates had inflicted on the DOCHENDAL had all but destroyed her.

Fasak's face had taken on a shadowy gray color that accentuated every wrinkle about his haggard eyes. Since the first few minutes after the missile detonation he had been hard at work assessing damage and casualties and personally examining the hardest hit areas of the ship. This put him squarely on the Engineering decks where the penetrating force of the nuclear missiles had knocked out all ship's power for a time. It was a stroke of luck that the DOCHENDAL had spun out of control away from the Phais Eisert asteroid field. If they hadn't it would be almost certain that the ship would have collided with one of the thousands of rocky objects in the belt and been destroyed.

The Chief Engineer continued. "We'll still be short handed on the control stations because of the casualties but we'll manage, I expect. When the power is back on-line we can check where we might need some fill-in personnel."

Abruptly, Fasak interrupted the Engineer's report. "Will we have enough power to get us back to the fleet before they refuel and shift out?"

The Engineer shrugged. "Hard to tell, sir. After the coupler is in place, power should be no problem at all. But with so much damage to the Engineering decks, we might have trouble with radiation leakage. If that gets too bad we may have to shut down again or risk more casualties."

Fasak's gloved hand grabbed the Engineer's arm. "I'll loose no more men. If there is too much of a radiation hazard, I want to know about it, clear?"

"Y-Yes, sir. But we won't know until we can put the mains back on-line. Then I'll be able to say."

"Fine. Get back to me as soon as you can."

As the Engineer turned away and headed for his work party, Fasak left the Engineering deck through the damaged pressure door that led towards the bridge. He couldn't stop his hands from shaking. The speed and confusion of space combat had never before affected him like this. The only thing to do was keep busy and try not to think about it. But for Fasak, this proved impossible.

The fight to regain control of the damaged destroyer as it spun away from the Protectorate missile attack was still playing back in his mind. The damage had been extensive, with multiple hull breaches about the two

after laser turrets and the engine spaces. Every hit seemed to double the ship's casualties. Over half of the DOCHENDAL had lost atmospheric integrity and been left open to vacuum. Pressure doors and seals had blown even in the undamaged portions of the ship. Fasak had been forced to order the sealing of an escape hatch to ensure that the rest of the ship remained pressurized, thereby condemning the eight crewmen trapped in the After Weapons Bay to a slow death as their suit air ran out in the vacuum-filled compartment. He tried to get to them through the ventilation ducts, but these had also been blocked or automatically closed-off when the damage occurred. He had even tried to reach them by sending parties over the outer hull, but the breached sections of the ship were just too torn up to find a way to the trapped crewmen.

Fasak had been forced to tell the Chief in charged of the doomed party the news. He tried to assure him that every avenue of approach had been tried but they just couldn't be rescued in time. Fasak nearly begged them to forgive him for their deaths. He felt that it was his mistakes that were causing them, just like those that were already dead. They had taken his pronouncement of their death sentence better than he, it seemed, and had given damage reports and evaluations of their weapons status displays through their suit radios until the last one fell into unconsciousness.

As Fasak arrived on the dimly lit bridge, repair teams still scurried about trying to get the Communication and Sensor Board operative. These systems had taken most of the punishment during the attack and DOCHENDAL was still unable to make any transmissions. Nearly all of her sensors were out as well, leaving the ship deaf and blind.

Fasak sat tiredly in his stained Command Chair. Everyone on the bridge knew what was going through the Captain's head and tried to leave him alone. Fasak's body sagged, finally facing the stunning shock that he had kept away for as long as possible. Nearly half of the destroyer's crew were either dead or lying in the overcrowded sickbay below with radiation burns or worse. He knew that it was his fault. What if he hadn't blindly obeyed orders. If he had only believed in his own feelings. If he had broken off the engagement sooner his crew wouldn't have suffered so. If, if, if.

With a rush of static, Fasak's suit radio came to life. "The shunt coupler is in place, sir. We're finishing up the hookup. Ready for the first power-up test in ten minutes."

Fasak forced his mind back into a working mode, sweeping away his agonized thoughts for later. "I'll come down in a minute, Chief. Any news on the other repairs?"

"I've got a party plating up the hull, but it'll take sometime before we can even think of repressurizing. Sensor and communication repairs will be minimal even when we get back power. We're going to need a few months in the space yard to make most of this right."

"Understand," Fasak said. "I'm on my way back down."



The steady vibration of the power coming on swept through the small party of engineers adjusting the coupler like the affects of a fresh

breeze. Silently, Captain Fasak and the repair crew breathed a sigh of relief.

"Readings are nominal," shouted the Chief Engineer. "I think we can go for power boost."

"Affirm," said Fasak. "But do it slowly."

As the Chief Engineer nodded, his crew began to work at their makeshift controls. The vibration of power increased in the silent room. Suddenly, with a rumble of heavy workings, the engine seemed to lurch toward the Engineers. They jumped back in surprise only to see their repaired control board begin to flare and short out. One of the engineers seemed to be bowled over in his vacsuit as a small component of the board impacted his shoulder. Silently screaming, the figure was knocked to the gravplates in the floor, where it stayed.

"Cut power!" shouted the Chief Engineer as Fasak ran to the injured man and tried to drag him clear. As a medical team arrived to carry the engineer to the sickbay, Fasak stood and faced the Chief, now looking at the powerless engine control board.

"That's it," said Fasak. "No more shortcuts. I don't care if we make it back to the fleet before the shift out or not. I want this compartment repressurized before we try any more power tests. Check the entire area for radiation leaks and rewire the control board. Take all the time you need."

The Chief Engineer nodded, "Yes, Sir. We'll get right on it."

"Oh, and Chief?"

"Sir?"

"Tell your men to be careful."

MORDRECH

"Target destroyed, Commodore!" The Weapons Officer spun around in his seat with a beaming smile showing through the faceplate on his helmet.

Bellock nearly chuckled as he rubbed his gloved hands together. "Well done, my lads, very well done. This should make the Admiral stand up and take notice, eh?"

Surrounded by his nodding and grinning bridge crew, Bellock could see the adoration they had for him in this moment of triumph. He nodded silently to himself. No one would cheat him out of Admirals rank now!

With a start the Sensor Officer turned to a new reading on his console. "Commodore, I'm registering multiple explosions within the gas giant's atmosphere. Deep Scan reveals missile detonations across the band. Secondary explosions are registering also."

Bellock was startled out of his reverie. "What could it be?"

"Unknown, sir. The patterns show..." The Sensor Officer read his output again. "It's the fleet, Commodore. The detonation patterns are spread throughout the refueling run of the fleet."

In the stunned silence that followed the Sensor Officer's announcement, Bellock could feel his dream of an Admiral's star exploding just as the bright detonations in the atmosphere below him.

"Signal a change of vector to the Squadron," said Bellock. "We better go down and see what we can do."

As the signal went out the seen destroyers of Bellock's command dropped out of orbit and began their approach to the outer edge of the gas giant's atmosphere. Below them the glitter of deep detonations went on.

DESTINY

The first thing Decameron noticed as he returned to consciousness was that the bridge compartment was completely dark. Even the emergency lighting had failed. All he heard in his helmet was the blood rushing through his veins with a steady pounding that just might send him into unconsciousness once again.

The ship seemed dead. Even Decameron felt that he couldn't move in the Command Chair, his broken collar bone grating against the straps holding him in the seat.

Feebly, the Captain attempted to turn on his suit lights with his good arm. With a shock, he felt another hand pressing on him, then suit lights speared his eyes with their twin beams.

"Who-who is it?"

"It is Ontara, sir. Are you alright?"

Decameron sighed in relief, even though the pain it caused his shoulder was nearly unbearable. "It's my right collar bone," he said through compressed lips. "I think it's broken. I'm glad you made it, Ontara. What about the others?"

Without a word, Mitchell panned her suit lights around the bridge. The Communication Station was a shambles. Ensign Macaffrey was slumped over his console, a thin vapor of blood trickling out of his shattered helmet into the vacuum that encompassed the bridge compartment. At the Weapons Console, Brenda Scott was unconscious but moving. She should be coming around any minute. Engineer Barnes was in worse shape. A fragment of his control board had punctured his suit above the left knee. The automatic sealants had engaged but his leg would surely have to come off. Mercifully, Barnes was still unconscious.

"See if you can get in touch with any other part of the ship, Ontara."

Mitchell shook her head. "No good, Sir. I tried all the intercom frequencies. They're all dead. It looks like we don't have any power at all."

A thought hit Decameron like a dagger. "And what of the enemy fleet?"

"Nothing certain, Captain. But I did see the first missiles detonating on the sensor screen just before we took those last two hits. I think we were right on target."

"I guess it doesn't really matter, now. Let's try to save the ship and leave it at that."

"Aye, sir."

"Help me with these straps, then go below and ascertain the situation. I'll see what I can do for Barnes and Lieutenant Scott. I'm sure Doctor Kamikawa has his hands full. If he made it, that is."

Ontara merely nodded and helped Decameron disengage the acceleration couch restraints. As he slowly floated out of the Command Chair, she cycled the deck hatch manually and floated down into the Main Corridor of the darkened ship.



It was just as dark in the shattered engineering spaces, except for the glow from the gas giant peeking through the gouges that marked the ships skin like a blast from a snubgun.

Engineering Techs Smaltz and Webbley were jumbled up in a disorderly pile next to the far bulkhead of Lower Engineering. It didn't take Smaltz long to come around since Webbley had pinned his airhose against the bulkhead wall and his choices were to awaken or die.

"You Shiftbar Head," croaked Smaltz. "What are you trying to do to me?" With some effort he managed to push Webbley off of him, and the welcome stream of air rushed into his helmet from the suit tank. Webbley was beginning to mumble to himself as he came slowly around.

"Wha-What happened, Smaltzie?"

Smaltz looked over at the drifting figure of his partner and engaged his suit radio. "I'd say that we got hit, Webb, wouldn't you?"

Webbley struggled to turn on his suit lights. When he finally found the switch he regretted it almost immediately. In the glare of the chestlamps, Lower Engineering took on the look of a Tri-D horror holo. Equipment was bent and unrecognizable. The entire outer hull was warped and punctured. And worst of all, a large red cloud enveloped the far bulkhead where the hatch to Upper Engineering used to be. It was all that was left of the Engineering crew and the other Damage Control Party.

For once, neither Smaltz nor Webbley had anything to say. Instead, they stared at the scene before them. Finally their training kicked in and they began their damage assessment.

"Looks like the entire ship is without power."

"Affirmative. Readings indicate minimal power generation at the mains. None of it is getting through to ship's systems."

With a flip of a switch, Smaltz engaged the emergency override and dim lights flashed on in Lower Engineering, illuminating the ghastly scene about the two Techs even more than the suit lights had done.

"Well, we've got emergency lighting down here. Let's see if we can get some juice to other parts of the ship."

The two went to work on the power junction boxes, pulling tools from their belts as they did.

"You know, it's funny, Webb."

"What is Smaltzie?"

"All of those guys in Upper Engineering get scragged, and here we are without a scratch."

"Sometimes you just can't figure it, can you?"

"Nope. Hand me that 5-0 power cable, will you? What's the matter, Webb?"

Webbley had frozen in his movement to reach for the cable as he stared at the red telltale on the power output console next to the junction boxes. The blinking light seemed to be the only functioning indicator left on the whole board, but its message showed passed its glow and into Webbley's face.

"We're dead, Smaltzie."

"What are you talkin' about now, for krinkin' sake! We're moving around, aren't we?"

"For now. Look at the indicator."

Smaltz turned to the power output console that Webbley was staring at. The red indicator light blink at him as the realization hit him, too.

"Yea, uh, I-I guess you're right, Webb. The power generator shielding must be damaged. This whole compartment is hot, real hot."

Webbley looked defeated. "How long do you think we've got, Smaltz."

"Beats me. But we probably can reroute some working power to the rest of the ship and maybe rig some engine juice for this oil tub before the radiation dose us. Who knows, the Captain just might want to go somewhere."

Webbley nodded. "I'll get started on checking out the maneuver drive, then."

Smaltz smiled. "Now you're talkin'. I should be able to get emergency lighting to the rest of the ship in a coupla' minutes."

Webbley started to drift away from his companion in the shattered compartment but suddenly stopped and turned back towards him.

"Smaltzie?"

"Yea, what is it, Webb?"

"I'm glad you're here."

Smaltz nodded and went on with his work. As Webbley moved away he shook his head. "I wish I could say the same. Sheesh."



Ontara floated down the corridor, trying to ignore the debris and the occasional bloated forms in ripped vacsuits along the way. The ship looked dead. Could it be that only the bridge crew had survived?

As she neared the sickbay entrance, the emergency lights lining the Main Corridor finally snapped on, allaying her fears. Someone must be left in Engineering.

Lighted forms moved in Sickbay, as well. Doctor Kamikawa knelt at one of the vacuum-screened bunks, his gloved hands in the vent openings working on the unconscious form before him. Jeri, the Doctor's tall female orderly bent over Kamikawa allowing her suit lights to give him more illumination. Of the other orderly, Tom, there was no sign.

Four or five other crewmembers had drifted into sickbay from other parts of the ship either to help or get minor medical attention. Ontara shivered. It was just like they said in training; a space battle leaves only the dead and unhurt behind. There are never many wounded.

Kamikawa finished up on the crewman in the vacuum-screen and let Jeri snap the glove vents shut as he stood up. "What's the situation, Ontara?" he asked.

Mitchell shook her head. "Unknown, Doc, but certainly not good. Any idea of casualties?"

Kamikawa sighed. "I've gotten reports from a few parts of the ship. Someone has to be alive in Engineering to repair the emergency lights but I've heard from others that there are no survivors aft. Nearly all hull-point compartments have been breached. Most of the survivors are from forward in the Cutter Bay or the Marine Quarters. I doubt if we have 20 effective crewmen left. The rest..." He didn't have to finish his sentence, but instead turned toward the rear of the Sickbay where six forms were bundled up in bright orange emergency bags and attached to the bulkhead. "Those are the dead accounted for as of now. My orderly, Thomas, is there. His seat restraints didn't stand the impact strain and he smashed against the bulkhead. We couldn't get him to a vacuum-screen in time."

Ontara nodded, sharing his pain. "The Captain looks like he has a broken collar bone, Doc. Engineer Barnes has a suit puncture on his right leg and I don't know Lieutenant Scott's condition. Ensign Macaffrey is dead."

Kamakawa nodded. "I'll get up there immediately. Jeri can take care of Sickbay while I'm gone."

"Right. I'm on my way to check out Engineering. Tell the Captain I'll report back as soon as possible."

"Sure. And take care, Ontara."

Mitchell smiled for the first time since the attack. "You know I will."



The steady hiss of escaping air was all that Jaycee Adams heard from the external pickup on her suit helmet as she regained consciousness. The Weapons Control Room was slowly bleeding its atmosphere through the warped bulkhead near the outer hull. Adams could here the sound, but all was darkness in the compartment.

Before another thought was finished, three of the emergency lights flashed on, illuminating the forward half of the Control Room. The other emergency lights had been smashed in the equipment overloads that had followed the last missile detonations.

Adams finally looked about her. The compartment was a shambles. Entire status consoles had been ripped from their supports and flung across the Control Room to smash into other equipment or into the Weapons Technicians sitting at their stations. For some reason, Adams could see that the gravplates under the deck were still on emergency power in this area of the ship, allowing the blood from the other Weapons Stations to make obscene puddles on the floor.

A soft moan coming through her radio snapped Jaycee out of her shock at the scene before her. Turning to her left, she saw that Chief Falco was slowly coming back to consciousness. He was vainly trying to pull at the restraints that kept him in his acceleration couch but, in his half-awake condition, could only tug at them uselessly.

Jaycee slowly released her restraints and leaned over to help Falco with his. Then she saw it. The Chief's Control Console had violently shorted out in the sparking nightmare that had signaled the enemy missile detonations. Components and function boards had shot out of the console with the force of a cannon, many impacting into Falco's couch and lower body. His legs ran with blood. Although the suit seals would engage when enough of the compartment pressure escaped, they could do nothing for the open wounds on his legs that would be bleeding out into vacuum. The suit was far too damaged to help there.

Adams looked around helplessly. The hiss was growing ever more quiet, signaling that most of the air was already gone. She couldn't even see the compartment escape hatch. It must have been buried under the wreckage and debris. The rest of the Weapons Control Team was either dead or pinned where she couldn't get to them. It looked like a no win situation.

"Jay-Jaycee?"

The croaking voice that came through her helmet receiver seemed almost inhuman in its delirium and pain.

"Yes, Chief?"

Falco's eyes opened halfway through his helmet visor now streaked with his own blood. "It doesn't look like we're doing too well, does it?"

Adams tried to smile. "We'll get by, I guess."

Falco tried to move but failed. The pain it caused him shot across his face before he could hide it. Finally, he gave up and slumped back into the battered acceleration couch. "Try to get out of here, Jaycee," he said. "Make for the Main Corridor. There's bound to be somebody left that can help me and the others."

Adams shook her head. "The hatch is blocked, Chief. The compartment's bled most of the air out of cracks in the bulkhead. I think we're trapped."

"Communications?"

"Nothing's working, Chief. Every console's been skragged."

"Then we'll just have to wait for a rescue team, I guess." Falco's eyes started to close. "Wake me when they're on the way, ok Jaycee?"

"Sure, Chief. When they're on their way."

As Falco slipped back into merciful unconsciousness, Adams shivered in spite of herself. She felt so alone in this dead compartment. But with a sigh she stood up and tried to clear away some of the wreckage around her, occasionally glancing at the airtank gauge on the chest of her vacsuit. It wouldn't be long until the suit tanks would be empty. If she couldn't connect to ship's air by then both of them were finished.



By the time Mitchell had reached the Engineering Section of the ship she had confirmed Doctor Kamakawa's fears; there was very few survivors from the missile attack. Communication was finally established with Decameron on the bridge through Mitchell's suit radio just as she

approached the warped bulkhead that led to Lower Engineering.

The banging she heard from the other side of the hatch confirmed that someone had survived. With the entry mechanism a melted mass of circuitry and the engineroom hatch jammed from the explosion, there would be no way to allow the trapped crewmen inside to escape except to blow it out.

As Mitchell was studying the bulkhead to find the best place to set the explosives, bits of radio chatter began to get through to her helmet receiver.

"Yeah, I sure do remember that Aimar run. Remember when we gave that new Ensign directions to that sleazy dive, Mama Sue's, in Dome Central instead of the Commandant's Protectorate Officer's Party?"

"Or when we found him having a krankin' good time at Mama Sue's after he forgot how to get back to the Starport?"

"Yea, those were the days."

Ontara activated her radio and interrupted this reverie. "This is Lieutenant Commander Mitchell. Can you men in the Engineroom read me?"

There was silence for a few seconds. Then the first voice began. "Engineering Techs Smaltze and Webbley here. Don't try to open the hatch. It's hot in here. Real hot."

Mitchell understood. "What's your situation, Smaltze?"

"Well, Commander, we got emergency power back on-line for you. Now we're working on the maneuver drive. It isn't damaged but we have to reroute a lot of the power cables that burnt out in the attack. We should be able to get everything set fairly soon. After that, you can tell us what else you need."

"Affirmative. I'll relay the information back to the bridge. Oh, and Smaltze."

"Yes, Commander?"

Mitchell started to say what a good job they were doing but it seemed so hollow and meaningless. "Ah, keep reporting in, will you?"

"That we will, Commander. Take care."

"You too."



It didn't take long for Ontara to complete her inspection and return to the bridge. There she found Doctor Kamakawa helping Engineer Barnes down the hatch, taking him to sickbay to treat his shattered leg. Ensign Macaffrey's body had been removed also. Lieutenant Scott had come around and seemed her normally efficient self. She was rerouting some of the emergency power into the Sensor board so they could get some idea of the situation about the gas giant. Decameron had been given medication for pain but it didn't seem to be working very well.

"Report, Ontara."

"It's bad, Captain. I suppose Doctor Kamakawa has told you about the casualty situation." Decameron nodded slowly. "I found seventeen effectives, mostly from the forward part of the ship. Twelve of the Marine contingent survived, an orderly in sickbay, and four of the Cutter

Pilot/Maintenance Techs. There was no response from the Weapons Control Room and no way to get to it. The hatch is blocked with what looks like the remnants of the aft dorsal turret. All of the local turret crews that I could get to are dead also. Two Engineering Techs are left in Lower Engineering. They're trying to get the maneuver drive going. But there must be a pretty bad radiation leak from the drives. I don't know if they can effect repair before they are overcome."

"Anything good to report?"

Mitchell shrugged. "We're alive, sir."

"So far, but not by much. I still don't know why that squadron didn't finish us off."

"Maybe they thought that they did."

"Captain," said Brenda Scott from across the bridge. "I think I've got some sensor function here."

"Can you make anything out?"

"Pretty sketchy, but it looks like some activity ahead of us on this orbital path. Missile and laser fire. I'd say there is a battle going on up there."

Before Decameron could answer, a steady vibration could be felt beneath the bridge. Mitchell smiled. "Maneuver drive. Looks like we're mobile again."

The Captain nodded. "Well, now that we can move, let's see if we can't edge away from the rebel fleet before they notice we still exist. Take the maneuver station, will you, Ontara?"

"Yes, sir."

As the hulk that had once been the Protectorate Escort DESTINY began to accelerate about the gas giant the bright lightshow of overlapping explosions continued ahead of her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SPEEDY

Dexter screamed.

Only she could hear it, but to her it became a strangled battle cry. A high-pitched wail of anguish for her lost crew and her maimed ship. A cry for herself since she was sure she was about to carry out the last duty in her Protectorate Naval career.

Still screaming, Dexter slammed her fist down on the jettison controls as the enemy Devastator's laser turrets began to spew out energy toward the wreck of her ship. Beneath the bridge, the launch controls began to jettison the load of six armed missiles into the void. With silent clicks the launcher cycled until the last long cylinder was shot forth.

None of the missiles had been given targeting instructions from the damaged weapons board on the bridge of the SPEEDY. Their simple computer brains were set on standby, waiting for instructions. But Dexter knew that once the missiles were free of the ship, the arming sequence would engage to fill the void that a negative lock-on signal initiated. They would look for the nearest target and home in.

The missile's computer was intelligent enough not to home in to the SPEEDY, and since there was a far larger target at point blank range, it was no contest to pick the vessel that the missiles chose.

Almost as one, the six fiery darts engaged their maneuver thrusters and charged toward the enemy Devastator.

As the ship's lasers fired at the remnants of the SPEEDY, the missiles angled into their target. Since the time from jettison to impact would be less than two seconds, the Devastator's sensors had little time to identify the threat before the six missiles struck.

Their warheads were a mixed group. Three were nuclear-tipped and would have certainly destroyed the target and the SPEEDY as well, except that the activation distance for this type of missile was far greater than they had traveled. Instead of detonating, they plowed into the armor sheathing of the great ship like a javelin into its target. Two broke up on impact, merely scaring the surface of the vessel. The third impacted at an armor connection point and punched through amidships. It traveled into the hull, smashing through a dozen different compartments and corridors before stopping. The heat of its passage fried those crewmembers unlucky enough to be nearby and emergency bulkheads slammed down against the invading vacuum, trapping many more.

The other three missiles contained shotgun warheads. Normally used as an anti-missile defense or against lighter spacecraft, each one contained thousands of fist-sized metal pellets. Two of these missiles detonated well clear of the Devastator's hull and peppered its surface with innumerable tiny impacts. The final missile slammed into the Devastator's skin first, partially shearing away an armor section from the lower maneuver thruster housing. When the missile exploded, its thousands of pellets blew

off the rest of the armor about the thruster and smashed into the interior of the ship. In less than a second all of their energy was expended. But the lower engineering section of the Devastator was a shambles.

Dexter had not stopped screaming as the enemy lasers began to tear away at the two sections of the SPEEDY drifting in space. There wasn't much that the lasers could do to the inert lumps of metal except cut them with new holes. They were both powerless and already depressurized. But still the lasers began melting parts of the frame away from the wreckage.

Fortunately for Dexter, the spinning engine pod took most of the initial fire. Seared and scared from the earlier attacks, it wasn't long until large pieces of the structure were burned away and spinning off on their own.

But the battered superstructure took its share of punishment as well. Dexter stopped her screaming when a laser blast blew through the bridge bulkhead and seared the frames over her head. She could feel the heat of its passage through her suit and knew that her face had been burnt despite the helmet flash protector. There was nothing she could do except sit in the acceleration couch and wait for a bolt to pass through her chest or some other lethal area.

But the waiting had been worth it. She had seen the explosions on the Devastator's hull. SPEEDY had hit back and that was all that mattered now.

As the laser beams flashed all about her, Dexter smiled.

TALLAMACHIA

"Admiral! We've lost communication with the Battle Bridge. There is no answer from Captain Revack's station."

The Damage Control Officer looked frightened as he looked up at Onacker. His board was showing the red telltales of heavy damage in the after parts of the ship. The amidships section of the board was strangely dark, showing neither well being or damage.

"Do you have any contact with the Damage Control party amidships?" asked Onacker.

"No, sir. We lost contact just after the missile impact. I'm sending a team from the forepeak to check things out but it will be several minutes before they can reach the damaged area."

"Have them try to get through to the Battle Bridge, too. For now we'll carry on from here."

"Sir, we've lost lateral control from the thrusters. I'm having trouble holding her in formation!" The shout from the Assistant Helmsman was just another in the series of reports coming into the Admiral's station at a rapid-fire pace.

"Can't you compensate?"

"Negative, Admiral. The ship is out of control."

"Then cut the thrusters and try to boost us out of orbit. I don't want to run amuck through our own bloody formation!"

"Yes, sir. Engaging boosters now."

"Admiral, target is still closing," the Weapons Officer looked exasperated. "We've hit it repeatedly with laser fire but with no effect. I think it's just a bunch of space junk, sir."

"That space junk just put at least two missiles into us, Lieutenant! Now can you destroy it or not?"

"The lasers are just punching holes in the wreck, sir. Power emanations are nil on the target. Maybe the missiles were fired accidentally when our lasers hit an armed and loaded launcher."

"I don't buy it, Lieutenant. Missiles don't just fire when a laser slices through their control board."

The Weapons Officer sighed. "I can't destroy a target that is already dead with laser fire, sir. If you want the wreck obliterated, we have to back off to a safe distance and hit it with an N-Tipped Missile. That should do what you want."

"Affirmative, Lieutenant. I'll try to get you your distance if we can break orbit."

"Yes, sir."

Onacker was getting edgy. With a grim face behind his helmet shield, he turned to the Communications Officer. "Signal Captain Ravenna in the BARONIA to lead the rest of the ships towards the refueling fleet. We're trying to break orbit until we ascertain damage."

"Acknowledged, sir. Message going out now."

The Admiral tried to ease himself back into his Command Chair and force some calm into his body. The turmoil continued around him like a bad dream. Onacker sighed. He was sure things were going to get worse before they would get better.

SPEEDY

Alathonia Dexter was surprised that she was alive. The bridge compartment was a mass of burnt holes that allowed her to look out into the starry darkness. It was a miracle that none of the high-energy laser bolts had struck her or come close enough to burn open her suit.

The SPEEDY was still spinning. Dexter could occasionally see the gas giant swim into view along with the target of her attentive missiles, now brightly spouting the flame of chemical fires from her after section. Dexter smiled. It had all been worth it. She had mattered.

The bulk of the Devastator loomed ever larger through the peppered holes and shattered viewplates of the SPEEDY's bridge. It was drawing nearing even as the laser fire stopped. Something was wrong with that ship. She was out of control and heading right for the wreckage of the SPEEDY.

"Well, it seems I've done my work too well," Dexter said to herself. Perhaps the end would be merciful after all.

As she peered at the burning apparition looming above her, the bridge gave a lurch as some debris from the huge ship struck SPEEDY's wreck beneath her. Before Dexter could cry out, the bulk of the gas giant was suddenly cut off from her view by the hull of the burning Devastator. It

was heading right towards her spinning tomb and all she could do was watch in awed fascination.

TELLAMACHIA

Captain Gustus Ocht Revack gingerly pulled himself free of the remnants of his shattered Command Station on the Battle Bridge. Located in the heart of the amidships section of the ship, the Battle Bridge was supposed to be one of the most protected spaces in the Devastator, put in use if the Main Bridge in the forward part of the ship was disabled. But the missile penetration had put it out of action as if it were located on the surface of the hull.

The compartment was littered with the debris of the missile's passage. Burnt and seared equipment lay inert in their lockdowns, or floated in pieces in the areas of the compartment where the gray-plates had been damaged. Most of the Console operators still sat in their acceleration couches. Some had their suits severely burnt from the missile passing above them. Others sat motionless without a scratch. All were dead, either from burns, suit penetration, or the massive shock of the missile's passing.

Revack didn't know why he had bent down beneath his command console the instant the missile punched through the far bulkhead. There had been no warning, no telltale roar of approaching doom. He had just bent down and there was a flash, then the fierce wind of escaping atmosphere. He must have been knocked unconscious from the concussion and had no sense of how much time had passed since then.

The gravplates around Revack were still functioning, which had allowed the damaged equipment to pin him to the deck for a time. Finally standing and examining the compartment, he came to one quick conclusion; he was trapped. The Battle Bridge's hatch looked too bent and warped to open and he knew that the emergency bulkheads would have sealed this part of the ship off as soon as they had detected a loss of atmosphere. He was on suit air but that wouldn't last. If he couldn't get in touch with someone outside the compartment, he could be in trouble.

It was then that he discovered that his helmet radio was dead. It must have taken more of a shock than he had.

Revack examined the shattered compartment. Kicking off from one gray plate to another, he examined the wreckage about him. He didn't see anything that would keep him alive remaining in one piece. Revack shook his head and sat down amid the rubble, resigned to his fate. But then he peered at the suit tanks on the back of one of the wacsuited bodies of his bridge crew. Checking his suit air one last time, Revack grimly crawled towards the remains of his men.

DESTINY

"Those explosions up ahead seem to have stopped, sir." Ontara turned towards her captain as she reported.

"Still any idea what they could have been?" asked Decameron.

"Mitchell shook her head. "A battle of some kind, I'm sure. But who would they be fighting?"

With a jerk that sent pain throughout his body, Decameron sat up straight. "Of course," he said. "It's SPEEDY. It has to be. There isn't anything else in this system to fight."

Lieutenant Scott, still groggy from the fierce missile attack, looked up. "But sir, SPEEDY was destroyed when she entered the gas giant's atmosphere."

"That's what we thought, Brenda. But that Dexter woman seemed pretty intent on what she was doing. There was a chance that her ship could have survived. It has to be SPEEDY. Barring a mutiny throughout their fleet who else would they be shooting at?"

No one answered at first. Then Ontara spoke up. "Then we have to see if we can help her."

Lieutenant Scott turned towards her. "With what? We've used all our missiles and don't have a single laser turret in operation. We'll be lucky to be shift capable if we can get away from Phais III."

Decameron looked over to his Weapon's Officer. "That's just the point, Brenda. We can't shift with this kind of engine damage. After the rebels refuel they'll be able to scan for us and will be able to locate DESTINY just by the radiation and debris that we're trailing. We can't get away. And I doubt if the Tallamatrixians are going to be in any kind of mood to take prisoners."

"Then we're not going to make it?"

"No. I don't think so."

Brenda sighed. Then looked about at her two remaining bridgemates. "Let's go ascertain the condition of SPEEDY, Captain. It's what we came here for, isn't it?"

"That's right, Brenda, that is right," sighed Decameron through his pain. "Ontara, change our vector to the orbital area that action was taking place in. Let's see what we can see. Brenda, can you try to rig an outside telescopic sensor? I'll at least want to figure out what's going on if we can make it to visual range."

Brenda Scott nodded. "I'll get on it immediately, sir. I seem to have lost my job at Weapon's Control. Lack of equipment."

Decameron smiled. "We'll put it on the next spares and supply request for you."

"Yes, sir."

Mitchell turned back toward the Captain. I've gotten the message down to the Engine Room, sir. It's affirm. We're on our way."

Decameron nodded slowly without responding. Gently he eased himself into a more comfortable position and waited for his crippled ship to change course.

Groaning, the strained engines in DESTINY slowly headed her back toward the gas giant.

MORDRECH

"Yes, I understand your situation, Captain Ocht Vortrek. But I've still got the SOMINULA in tow. I can't get a ship to you for at least fifteen minutes." Commodore Bellock looked more strained than he had ever been. In the few short hours since they had discovered that the refueling fleet had taken numerous missile hits in the atmosphere of the gas giant, his glimpse of promotion and medals had evaporated. At least twelve ships had simply exploded in the hail of nuclear missile detonations and at least twice that number were damaged severely. Bellock still hadn't been able to scratch the surface of the rescue work needed.

"Commodore, We have lost power and the DINABULA is sinking deeper into the atmosphere. If you don't pull us out immediately, we'll be crushed! Acknowledge."

"I understand your situation, Captain," Bellock repeated. "I will get a ship to you as soon as possible. MORDRECH out."

The Commodore turned to his bridge officer. "What's the status of the squadron, Estan? Can we spare an escort for Captain Vortrek and the DINABULA?"

"Not at this time, sir. All our ships are aiding other stricken vessels. But we have the SHILAGASH and the rest of the Overwatch Squadron coming in to help in the rescue work. They should be hitting atmosphere any time now."

"Assign the first ship in to contact DINABULA and pull her out of the gas giant to a stable orbit. We'll ascertain her condition after that and decide what to do with her later."

"Yes, sir."

Bellock spun around towards the communications officer. "DINABULA again. Now."

"You're on, sir."

"MORDRECH to DINABULA, do you read?"

"This is Captain Vortrek, Commodore. Our situation is extremely grave."

Bellock nodded to no one in particular as the radio feed began to break up in his helmet earphones. "We have a ship coming to your aid, Captain. I'd expect it to be in contact in less than five minutes. Can you hold out?"

"Who knows, Commodore. Who the frack knows? We lost the after bulkhead a few minutes ago. It took out the rest of my engineering crew. I don't know if----."

The transmission was cut off abruptly from the DINABULA as if the wire to his helmet receiver had been sliced through. Bellock looked over to the Communications Officer.

"Get me DINABULA back."

"I'll try, sir."

"Estan, can you get a fix on her?"

The bridge officer nodded in his helmet. "Negative, sir. All that the sensors read near her last reported position is debris. Fresh debris."

"Oh," said Bellock in the dumb silence that followed. Finally he continued. "Then assign the rescue ship to a new cripple. God knows we've still got enough to go around."

"Yes, sir."

Bellock squeezed his eyes shut and clamped his jaw tight to avoid screaming. Promotion seemed farther away than ever."

TELLAMACHIA

"Sir, we can't gain control of the maneuver thrusters in time. We're going to run right into the wreck of that Protectorate Courier."

Admiral Onacker shrugged as he struggled to piece together the damage estimates he had received. "Well, at least that'll save us a nuke. Just get this ship into a stable orbit. And put more men on those fires aft. We're losing more compartments to that than we did from the missiles."

"Yes, sir."

"And signal the collision alarm. It should be a bit of a bump when we obliterate that courier."

As the ship's collision alarm blasted through everyone's helmet radios, Onacker turned to strap himself back into his Command Couch. 'There's more than one way to take out a ship,' he thought. And he had just seen at least two of them.

SPEEDY

Dexter watched in fascination as the details on the forward part of the Devastator's hull grew in size and clarity. Soon the huge ship blocked her sight of anything except its own immensity.

Still spinning, the SPEEDY seemed to be a top revolving under the encroaching weight of an obelisk. The scattered remains of the engine pod struck first, sending showers of additional debris peppering into the superstructure section and further out into the void. The crash, when it came, occurred first on the lower portion of SPEEDY's superstructure, allowing Dexter to feel the steady crushing motions as the remnant of her ship was ponderously squeezed into a further compact size.

The explosions, when they came, seemed small compared to the laser barrage she had suffered through. Brief points of light blinked on and off as chemical tanks and explosive equipment housings were smashed, spewing their insides into the vacuum for an instant. Then the bridge compartment itself began to come apart. Dexter watched in fascination as the bulkhead crumpled and tore away.

But by then the SPEEDY had imbedded herself into the glowering bulk of the Devastator, shearing away sections of the enemies' hull siding also. Except where the SPEEDY came into contact with the Devastator's heavy Pergatorium steel armor plate, she sank ever deeper into the side of the Devastator.

The last thing Dexter remembered was her entire command couch being lifted by an invisible hand and flung through what was once SPEEDY's bulkhead toward the massive side of the enemy ship.

DESTINY

"Did you see that explosion ahead?"

"Yes, Captain. Just to the right of center on the screen. I'll try to magnify."

The jury-rigged visual screen that Brenda Scott had been able to install on the DESTINY's bridge had only been humming with power for a few seconds when Decameron saw the point of light that signaled a detonation of some kind ahead of them. But as Brenda adjusted the controls before her, the bulk of the enemy Devastator could be seen just emerging through a bright cloud of debris. Damaged in her forward and after sections, the Devastator seemed to seethe with internal fires. There were no other ships in sight.

Ontara Mitchell starred at the screen. "That was no missile explosion. What could it have been? An internal explosion?"

Decameron shook his head. "No, Ontara. I expect it was a collision. I think Captain Dexter has gotten her last lick in."

No one said anything on the bridge as they thought about the fate of their would-be rescuee. But then Brenda Scott broke the silence. "We're for it, then. Right, Captain?"

Maybe, Brenda, maybe. But perhaps Captain Dexter has shown us the way."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"We can't get away in DESTINY. But that Devastator has shift-capable cutters aboard her. If we could manage to capture one of those, we could shift out before any of their other ships had a chance to approach."

"You mean board her?"

Decameron shrugged. "That would be the only way I could think of to get at the Cutter Bay."

The two women looked at each other, wondering if their Captain had finally fallen into delirium. Decameron saw their looks and slowly said, "I'm open to other suggestions, if you can think of any."

Brenda and Ontara shook their heads. "We're with you, Captain," said Mitchell. "I'll go below and let the rest of the crew know."

"Fine, Ontara, fine. And break out all the personal weapons we have in the arms locker. This isn't going to be easy."

"Aye, sir, if it was I'd expect everyone would be doing it," Mitchell said as she dropped out of sight down the floor hatch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DESTINY

"That's the story, Engineer Smaltz," Ontara Mitchell leaned heavily on the bulkhead door that led to the deadly chamber that had been Lower Engineering.

"We understand, Commander," Smaltz's voice said through Ontara's helmet receiver patched into the bulkhead speaker. "It doesn't surprise me that the Old Man came up with an idea like this. Nope. Not one bit."

Mitchell smiled in spite of the situation. "Can you two hold out for the duration?"

"Webb and me are getting a bit weak-like, but I think we can last."

"I understand. We'll give you the maneuver signal from the bridge. Until then--," Mitchell hesitated. There was no sufficient way of saying thanks to the two dying men who were making escape possible. None at all. "Until then, carry on."

"That we will, Commander. And take a couple of those buggers out for us, will ya'?"

"If we have to, Smaltz, if we have to."

Mitchell disconnected the lead from the speaker grid and strode forward, stepping over the wreckage in the main corridor as she did so. All the bodies that could be found had been recovered but the DESTINY was still a mess in the half gravity that most of her gravplates generated.

Only Doctor Kamakawa and his orderly remained in Sickbay as Mitchell passed by heading forward. She said nothing, as they were busy preparing the crowded casualties for the rough ride ahead.

Mitchell found the remainder of the unhurt crew members huddling in the corridor near the Outfitting Station. Used as a ready-room and armory for the boarding parties that DESTINY conducted with her small interplanetary cutter, it was a perfect place for the crewmen to begin to put on their battle armor and weapons.

A suited figure with corporal stripes on the top of his suit helmet came up to Mitchell and stood at attention. "Marine contingent ready for boarding, Lieutenant Commander Mitchell."

"Affirm, Corporal Rhodes," Mitchell looked over at the four other survivors of DESTINY's fifteen-man Marine detachment. "Were you able to find enough usable equipment?"

"Yes, Sir! We've been having a bit of trouble outfitting the other crewmen but with a little instruction, we should be able to pull it off."

Mitchell looked through her helmet at the five other crewmen still trying to fit their equipment about their vacsuits with help from the other marines. Lieutenant Scott was the ranking officer but had wisely chosen to allow Corporal Rhodes overall control of the operation. As she struggled to fit her SLAP gun control rod over the bulky ceramic gauntlet on her forearm, Scott looked like a small recruit on her first day at the vacweapons training range.

Mitchell turned back to Rhodes. "Well, Corporal, get them into acceleration couches as soon as you can and then signal the bridge. I'm going forward and start Phase One of the plan."

Mitchell left the Outfitting Room and manually cycled the forward bulkhead hatch that led to the Cutter Bay. Sitting in its cradle near the clamshell doors on the forepart of the ship, the ten-man interplanetary craft sat immobile. If only it had been one of the newer shift cutters that larger vessels carried then this operation wouldn't have to be conducted at all.

Quickly, Mitchell checked the status of the Bay Operation Controls. They appeared undamaged. As she entered new data into the system, the hatch in the cutter's side slowly slid open. Mitchell completed her tasks near the bulkhead and silently climbed the three-rung ladder into the small craft.

In the half-light of the cutter's interior illumination, Mitchell felt as if she had stepped into the access chamber of a executive yacht. The cutter's interior was pristine; the eight battle couches sitting right behind the pilot's and engineer/gunner's seats. Access to the engineering and cargo space was through a small iris hatch behind the last battle couch. Mitchell had to kneel to squeeze through as the iris opened up.

The tiny engineering space closed in on Mitchell as she began to set a series of switches and controls. When she had finished, she irised the door open again and strode down the passageway to the pilot's station. With a few simple commands to the autopilot Mitchell was away again and out of the cutter's hatch, heading toward the bulkhead doorway.

The purge controls on the cutter bay could be operated manually from the small console near the Outfitting Room. Mitchell proceeded to evacuate the atmosphere from the Bay and open the clamshell doors. The rest was automatic as the cutter's cradle moved forward and then descended into the launch shaft. With no sound whatsoever, the cutter was launched and sped away on automatic pilot.

Mitchell popped her helmeted head back into the Outfitting Room to see that the now battle-ready marines and crewmen had strapped themselves into the emergency acceleration couches pulled from their wall recesses. Corporal Rhodes saw her and gave her a thumbs-up sign with his heavily armored hand guard. Mitchell nodded and strode down the corridor toward the bridge.

Decameron was trying to move to a more comfortable position in the acceleration couch as Mitchell cycled the floor hatch and levered herself into a crouch on the deck. She could see the pain fill his eyes as he tried to rest his nearly useless arm on the control console. As Mitchell stood, the Captain looked up groggily.

"We're ready, Captain. The cutter is away and Smaltz and Webbley will be able to give us everything they've got on our signal."

"And the crew?"

"All strapped down and ready for battle."

Decameron nodded and motioned Mitchell over to him. "Secure these items for me, will you? Lieutenant Scott brought them up before she headed down to put on her battle armor."

Mitchell looked in the Captain's lap, seeing two nasty looking Snub Guns nestled there. Grimly, she took them and secured them at her control station.

Finally, Mitchell spoke, "its going to be bad, isn't it, Captain?"

Decameron did not look at her. "No worse than it was for most of the crew when those missiles hit."

"It will be bad," Mitchell repeated. "And I haven't--we haven't had any time. . . for ourselves."

Decameron looked over into Mitchell's helmeted face. "If we make it, I promise you we will."

There was nothing left to say as Mitchell pressed the signal key to Lower Engineering. With a rush of high gravity, the DESTINY's remaining engine power shot her toward the enemy.



Smaltz hit the power switch as the signal came through his hastily repaired control board. The force of the uneven engine acceleration threw both him and Webbley back into their makeshift couches.

"Might as well unstrap and splat against the bulkhead," said Webbley, weakly.

Smaltz nodded under the acceleration. "It would be a bit quicker. But then we wouldn't have a chance to see the final show."

"Yea, I guess you're right, Smaltzie. Maybe we can get to some guns ourselves and take a few of those rebel slugs with us, huh?"

Smaltz smiled through the strain. "That would be nice, Webb, but I wouldn't count on gettin' out of here. We're redlining the power plant now. If she blows we'll never know it. And we'll never slow down, either. If we don't hit that enemy ship, the rest of DESTINY will shoot into that gas giant's atmosphere like a Zyran Candle. We'd burn up in seconds."

"Oh," mumbled Webbley. Brightening, he said, "Well, at least that would be quick, too."

Smaltz shook his head. "You know it, Webb. You bloody well know it."

Faster and faster, the DESTINY accelerated behind her cutter, heading for the burning enemy vessel.

TELLAMACHIA

"We suffered little or no damage from the collision, Admiral. The chemical fires aft are almost under control but we have been unable to regain maneuver control. Our orbit is relatively stable as of now. I'd estimate repairs will take another twelve hours before we can start to move back to the fleet."

Onacker paced back and forth as he heard the Damage Control Officer's report. "Communications?" he snapped.

"All appear normal, sir. Our detached squadron is now entering low orbit on the far side of the gas giant. We've lost touch with most of them. I expect they are beginning to search for the refueling fleet."

Onacker slammed his fists together in his vacsuit gloves. "I need to know what is happening down there! Are we in communication with the Overwatch Squadron?"

"Negative, sir."

"Bellock's destroyers?"

"No, sir."

"Anybody?"

The officer shook his head again. "Since the BARONIA crossed the terminator, we've been out of touch. We're on our own."

"Perfect," hissed Onacker. "The fleet flagship, crippled and on her own. This certainty wasn't in the plans."

The Damage Control Officer nodded in agreement as Onacker abruptly changed the subject. "What's the report on casualties from the missile attack?"

"Ah, We currently have accounted for 41 dead and seen wounded. A further 22 crewmen are missing, including Captain Ocht Revack."

Onacker nodded. "Keep trying to get to those blocked compartments around the Battle Bridge. If anyone is alive in them, their air will be running out soon."

"Yes, sir. I have a crew on it. We also--"

"SENSOR CONTACT!" shouted a crewman below the Command Bridge. "I'm reading a vessel approaching at high velocity. It's heading right towards us!"

"What next?" whispered Onacker. "All batteries lock on and fire! We're a sitting duck here, gentleman. Let's get this one before it gets us!"

DESTINY

"The enemy Devastator has just fired six missiles at the cutter, sir." Mitchell studied the visual sensor atop her control station as the jury-rigged telescope provided a fuzzy view of what was occurring some distance ahead. The elongated dot that was the enemy vessel had just released six pinpricks of light toward the DESTINY's cutter.

"Are we still heading in under the cutter's sensor image?"

"As far as I can tell. The missiles haven't locked on us, yet."

Decameron sighed. "If we can't keep it that way until we're into the safety zone around the enemy ship, we'll never get any closer."

"Yes, sir." A brief blinding light caught Mitchell's eye on the darkened video screen. "It looks like they got the cutter, sir."

"Ok, then let's hammer in! Push it to the limit."

In seconds, the DESTINY charged through the enveloping debris cloud of the missile detonation that had obliterated the empty cutter. When the visual screen cleared, the enemy Devastator was much larger than she had been previously. Her large spinal mounted acceleration cannon seemed to gleam in the darkness as the smoldering gaps in portions of the after hull plating still glowed with internal fires.

"Signal Engineering," shouted Decameron. "Full breaking, NOW!"

As Mitchell gave the signal, she could picture Smaltz hitting the igniters for the remaining maneuver thrusters on the DESTINY's hull. The bridge began to vibrate as the thrusters shook to life, blossoming with fire. Everyone in the ship was pushed into their couch straps as the rapid deceleration began to slow them.

"We've lost Thruster Fourteen!" said Mitchell as she scanned the active portion of her control board. "It must have been misaligned by the missile damage."

"Keep them all going full blast," shouted Decameron, his teeth clenched against the pain the deceleration was causing his shoulder. "I don't care if we rip every thruster out of the hull, we're no good to ourselves if we vaporize on impact with that monster's armor belt!"

Mitchell nodded as the silent rumbling of the crippled ship continued all about her.

"That's right," said Decameron. "Aim for just beneath her hangar deck. Are we still slowing?"

"Affirm, Captain," Mitchell said. "But we may not have the distance left to slow enough."

"That's just great, Ontara. Well, it was a long shot anyway. Oh, hell, signal the collision alarm."

As the siren-like signal shot through their helmet radios, Decameron smiled through his pain. "If we're coming in like a missile, we might as well go out like one."



Lieutenant Scott heard the shriek of the collision alarm through her helmet radio and knew they were in for a rough ride. She already hurt all over. The chafing from her vacsuit was only accentuated by the uncomfortable fit that the battle armor and weapon systems made. Clamped and strapped to her acceleration couch along with the other members of the ad hoc boarding party, Scott thought of herself as a bloated turtleback ready to pop out of her armored shell.

The vibration from the over-taxed engines seemed to be even greater in the forepart of the ship. It amazed Scott the way the Protectorate Marines were handling the situation. They seemed to be able to move with far more ability than she thought she would ever be able to. Since many of them had nearly lived in their battle armor over the last few months, it was understandable that they could treat it as a second skin. Practice makes perfect.

"Collision alarm people," shouted Corporal Rhodes. "We're going in hot!"

"Hot and juicy," said the marine beside Scott. "Not my favorite, but it has some advantages, eh, Corp?"

"Well, Jonesy, we won't be taking much fire," said Rhodes. "But then, it might not be a very pleasant stop when we hit."

Jones turned to look at the ragtag boarding party and smiled as if the deceleration didn't affect him. "Yea, hot and juicy it is," he said. "I just hope that the juice isn't us!"

Lieutenant Scott closed her eyes in helpless anticipation.

TELLAMACHIA

"NEW TARGET, SIR!"

"By Grendach's Holy Trousers," Onacker said. "This is getting a bit old!"

"Too close for nuclear missiles, Admiral!" shouted the Weapon's Officer. "I'm firing the laser batteries--Now!"

The undamaged portion of TELLAMACHIA's laser mountings that bore on the target fired in unison. Most could not train straight ahead and the speeding craft continued to decelerate toward them. Several lasers hit the crippled escort, adding to the damage already sustained but did little to slacken its speed.

"My God," whispered Onacker. "They're trying to ram! Give me Evasive Plan Alpha NOW!"

"The Engineering Officer shook his head. "We still do not have enough lateral control to evade, Admiral. All we can do is fire the main engines and try to accelerate out of its way."

"Do it!"

As the engineer turned to his control board, the engines of the TELLAMACHIA began to rumble.

DESTINY

Decameron hardly noticed the laser bolts coming towards him on the visual monitor. The ship's deceleration seemed to be pounding him to pieces. He had lost thought of anything except the pain long ago. The enemy Devastator was growing far too large far too quickly. It wouldn't take a genius to figure out what would happen when they impacted.

Decameron was only half-right.

The DESTINY's deceleration on her damaged thruster system was far from complete when her forepeak began to gouge an uneven hole into the lower portion of the Devastator's forward hull. As if in slow motion, DESTINY jammed herself further and further into the crater she was causing. The Devastator's skin peeled back as if an internal explosion had detonated inside. The pressures and obstructive forces were so intense that bulkheads and whole decks crumpled away before the flash friction of the DESTINY's advance.

And yet the small escort drove on into the behemoth that she had speared. Her own hull sheared away in innumerable places, leaving the outer compartments bare and shattered. The surviving thrusters, still vainly trying to slow the ship, were ripped from their remaining struts and sent skittering about the interior of the Devastator like dying holiday sparklers. And still the DESTINY tore her way through the enemy ship.

The Devastator finally reeled drunkenly from the escort's onslaught. On her opposite side, the hull plating buckled and blew out into space as the

demolished bow of the DESTINY crashed through, sticking out into the void like a javelin thrown too hard.

And she stopped. The reverse energy produced by the thrusters combined with the friction-mad assault on the enemy ship had finally succeeded in stopping the DESTINY's charge. Buried deep inside the crippled enemy ship, the wreckage that had been a Protectorate escort steamed and burned from the products of her passage.

Decameron lost consciousness as his ship plowed into the enemy Devastator, thinking that he would never wake up again. It was only with difficulty and not a little pain that Mitchell was able to shake him from his stupor and half carry him towards the bridge hatch. The compartment was already unbearably hot, even through the heavily insulated vacsuits they wore. The bridge was shattered, melting away in many places.

Decameron pointed to the two Snub Guns in their tie downs as Mitchell helped him down the warped hatch ladder to the Main Corridor below. Nodding, she unlatched their straps and snapped each up by their fat barrel. Floating near her shoulder, Mitchell tied them to her vacsuit and vaulted down the hatch next to her Captain.

The ship had failed to stay together in several places, and gaping, burning holes could be seen off of some of the compartments along the warped and distorted corridor. Mitchell dragged and sometimes carried Decameron forward, finally approaching what was left of sickbay.

Dr. Kamakawa was groggily sitting up from his acceleration couch as he peered over at the five vacuum-screened bunks where his casualties still lay. The one closest to the far bulkhead had been shattered on impact, the corpse inside still bloated from decompression.

Kamakawa looked bruised but fit as Mitchell dragged Decameron's form into the compartment. "Take a look at the Captain, Doc," said Mitchell.

Kamakawa rose slowly from his couch as Mitchell lowered Decameron to the deck. Slowly, the Doctor shook his head. "There's nothing I can do with that suit on."

"Do what you can. I've got to check out the rest of the crew forward."

Mitchell nearly ran out of the sickbay refusing to let herself think about anything. The gravity seemed to have stabilized and she realized that most of DESTINY's wreckage must be inside the enemy Devastator. Slowly, a plan began to form.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TELLAMACHIA

The bridge deck glittered with broken monitors and equipment as the crewmen staggered back to the remains of their stations. Nearly everyone who had not been strapped in had been thrown out of their positions from the impact with the enemy vessel.

Admiral Ocht Onacker slowly pulled himself off of the deck of the Command Bridge. He could taste blood on his lips where his teeth had bitten into his tongue. Dazed, Onacker tried to take in the confusion about him.

Get me a damage report!" croaked Onacker. "Where did we get hit?"

"Forward, sir," said the Damage Control Officer. The enemy vessel was decelerating as we collided. If she hadn't been, I doubt if we could have survived the resulting explosion."

Onacker snapped out of his stupor suddenly. "It was that krankin' Protectorate escort, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I believe it was."

Onacker slammed his fist down on the already dented railing along the Command Bridge. Finally he said, "Get me a detailed report on the situation forward as soon as possible, Lieutenant. I want to know just what is going on!"

"At once, sir. I've dispatched repair crews to the area of impact but haven't heard from them yet."

The alarm that sounded on the helmet receivers throughout the bridge was a strange one to many of the crew. Suddenly, they stopped what they were doing to listen and try to place the staccato keening that seemed to pierce their ears with its insistence. Onacker was the first to grasp the noise's implications and slammed his fist down on the railing once again.

"It's the Interior Boarding Action Alarm! Those krankin' Protectorates have boarded my flagship!" The Admiral whipped around until he found the ship's marine commander sitting at his tactical coordination display. "Major Ocht Remsaw, what do you make of it?"

Remsaw regarded his Admiral coolly. "Hard to tell the extent of the attack, Admiral. All of my data feeds have been severed from the fore part of the ship. It could be just a few Protectorate survivors who managed to get out of the wreckage or it could be a full scale attempt to capture this ship."

"Great," said Onacker simply. "Get down there, Major. Get down there with every available man you can find. Keep me advised on the situation and protect all access to the amidships sections of the vessel. I don't want any more surprises, do you hear?"

The Major nodded as he unstrapped himself from his seat and strode toward the bridge hatch.

"Oh, and Major?"

"Yes, sir?" said Remsaw, turning.

"No prisoners, Major. I want no Protectorates alive on my flagship."

Nodding once again, the marine strode out of the bridge.

DESTINY

There was no need to open the airlock hatch to leave what was left of the ship. The boarding party simply walked through what had once been the cutter bay bulkhead and into the cold vacuum-tossed wreckage that was the forward interior of the enemy Devastator. Careful not to snag her suit on any of the sharp debris, Lieutenant Scott barely managed to press through the opening into the enemy ship's hull. Before her was a scene from hell.

"Spread out, people," said Corporal Rhodes. "No tellin' when the rebs will figure out we're not dead yet."

As if in reply, Marine Jones fired a spurt from his SLAP gun at a helmeted figure in the dim remnants of a corridor ahead. Then the head was gone, but the lifeless body of its owner floated soundlessly down to the deck, trailing flash frozen blood particles behind it.

"Deployment Mode," shouted Rhodes. "You crewies stick with me."

At a fast trot, the remnants of DESTINY's Marine Contingent ran up the corridor, stopping when they reached a large intersection. Rhodes and the five members of DESTINY's crew brought up the rear. Suddenly, the wall above Lieutenant Scott's head burst apart, her battle armor splattered with shards of hot metal. Ducking down, the marines ahead returned the fire from the intersection as first two, then four enemy troopers in their own armored vacsuits began to pour fire down the corridor.

"We can't be pinned down here!" shouted Rhodes. "Jonesy, DO IT!"

Silently, Marine Jones rose and charged down the corridor, firing as he went. He was hit repeatedly but his armor dissipated most of the energy from the rounds exploding on his chest. With the rest of the marines following close by, Jones ran at the rebel marines, bringing one down, then another. As the enemy numbers increased down the corridor, so did the firing. Jones staggered, then dropped to his knees. Red splotches had appeared on the surface of his battle armor, showing where some of the enemy fire had penetrated his suit. With a last act of defiance, Marine Jones grabbed the energy governor on the forearm control board of his SLAP gun and wrenched it free. A blinding flash erupted all about him as the full charge from the SLAP gun tore down the corridor and blew through the enemy troops. Three of them erupted in a fiery cloud and the rest ran back down the corridor in the direction from which they had come.

Jones' right arm had been burned away up to the elbow with the energy discharge. He was dead before his body flopped down on the deck of the corridor.

"Secure the intersection," Rhodes said to the remaining Marines. "And see to Jonesy, will you? We've got to find the access to this shift cutter bay around here."

Rhodes shoved Lieutenant Scott and the other DESTINY crewmembers with him back down the corridor as the marines positioned themselves for the next enemy attack.



Mitchell finally pried her way through the wreckage of the DESTINY and into the shambles of the Devastator's interior. The reflections of the SLAP discharges could be clearly seen coming from a still open corridor ahead of her. Deliberately, she primed the booster for her snub gun and headed for the firefight.

It was over before she got there. Corporal Rhodes, Lieutenant Scott and the rest of the DESTINY crewmen met her before she reached the corridor.

"We can't make it to the cutter bay that way, Commander," said Rhodes. "We'll have to double back and try another corridor forward."

"We'll have to do it fast," Mitchell replied. "It won't be long before they figure that we're not here to take the ship and where we want to go. Then it'll be almost impossible."

"I'm on it, Commander. Give me Lieutenant Scott here and we'll find a way to the bay."

Mitchell nodded. "Ok. I'll get the rest of the survivors out of the ship and wait for a signal from you."

"Affirm," said Rhodes. "The rest of you guys cover the other approaches to the ship."

As the boarding party dispersed, Mitchell strode back into the shattered hull of the DESTINY. The going seemed easier than getting out and soon she found herself back in the main corridor of her old ship. When she reached Sickbay, Kamakawa was finishing setting up the portable sleds on which his four remaining casualties lay. His orderly, Jeri, stood next to Decameron in the rear. He looked nearly unconscious but still held on to the Snub Gun Mitchell had carried from the bridge for him.

"Start the casualties moving out of the ship, Doc," Mitchell ordered. "We're still trying to find a safe way to the cutter bay but we may as well evacuate the ship now."

Kamakawa nodded. "Right, Ontara. Uh, which way?"

"There's a large gash forward near the air lock. The sleds should be able to pass through there." Mitchell looked back at the Captain. "How is he, Doc?"

"I don't know, Ontara. He's been in and out of consciousness since you left. There may be more injuries to him than just the shoulder. I-I can't be sure."

"Do what you can. I'm going to check the rest of the ship, then I'll join up with you. Follow Corporal Rhodes when he's found the bay access."

"Right." Kamakawa turned to pull the first casualty sled out into the corridor. Jeri helped the Captain up and he soundlessly followed her out of sickbay. He seemed to be concentrating on something far away, ignoring everything around him.

Mitchell said nothing. Heading aft, she put her mind back to the escape plan. Mitchell knew there was nothing left alive this side of engineering but had to look anyway. The ship was almost unrecognizable. It was as if she walked through a metal cave draped in tattered debris and rubbish. There was nothing to show of the corridor that led to the engineroom except torn beams, supports and force plates. As Mitchell approached the Lower Engineering hatch, she could see that it had been

buckled by the collapse of the after bulkhead. Expecting only silence, she called out to the two techs that she had left there.

"Smaltz? Webbley? Can you hear me? It's Lieutenant Commander Mitchell."

Faintly, a fuzzy voice came through Mitchell's helmet receiver. "Yea, Commander. We're still here. Sort of."

"Can you state your condition, Smaltz?"

"Sure. Webb got pinned by the surge equipment. I don't see how I can get him free. He's not sayin' much but I don't think there is much pain. His suit seems to be holdin' up. We're hotter than ever and I'm pretty weak from it. I don't think we'll be able to communicate much longer."

Mitchell didn't know what to say. What can you say to dead men that helped save your life? Finally, she began. "We're abandoning the ship, Smaltz. We dug deep into that enemy Devastator and are heading for their cutter bay before the crew catches on. You know we couldn't have gotten this far without you two. I, uh, I don't know how to thank you."

"Save It, Commander. We knew the score when we took this little trip. There's nothing you can do for us. Save the others and yourself. We're fine here."

"Is-is there anyone you want me to get in touch with, anyone on Bossilwick?"

"Nope. Webb and me have been loners for years now. The only people we know back at base we owe money. Guess they're going to be disappointed."

Mitchell smiled, but then said, "I'll always remember you, Smaltz. You've taught me a lot."

"No problem, Commander Mitchell. No problem at all."

"I'll be going, then. Thanks, Smaltz."

"Get going, Commander. With the damage in here, this power plant could blow any time. Get clear fast, ok?"

"Affirm, good-bye."

Mitchell nearly ran down the deserted corridor. Suddenly, she stopped as wreckage and debris came streaming down from the overhead in front of her. Suddenly, a vacsuited figure dropped down into the pile. The right arm was outgassing a red stream of air from a gash in the suit. Mitchell immediately pulled the figure out of the piled up junk and slapped her hand down on the tear. Pulling the emergency repair kit from her belt she began to seal it, then finally looked up at the crewman gasping in front of her.

"Adams? Missile Tech Adams?"

The tech nodded. "Affirm, Commander. The Chief! We've got to get back to him! He's still trapped in the Weapons Control Room!"

Mitchell looked up at the debris still falling from the top of the corridor where Adams had crawled. "Is he badly hurt?"

Adams nodded. "He can't move his legs. He might have internal injuries, too, I don't know. But we've got to go back!"

"Adams. We wouldn't be able to drag him through that."

Jaycee Adams' eyes grew wide. "But Commander, we've got to try!"

"We can't. The rest of the crew have already abandoned ship," said Mitchell sternly, then remembered Smaltz's words. "The power plant could blow any minute." Then Mitchell said, more gently, "Jaycee, Chief Falco

understands. He sent you out for help because he knew you'd never leave him otherwise. He knew we could never get back to him."

Adams said nothing, then finally nodded her head in agreement. "But how can we get away?"

"Just follow me," Mitchell ordered. Adams was too weak to protest further. With Mitchell's help, she staggered to her feet and went along with her.

TELLAMACHIA

Captain Ocht Revack was a stubborn man. He had nearly used up two of the air tanks he had taken from his dead Battle Bridge crew when another jarring crash had sent him falling to the deck for the second time. But this had not been a missile. The heavy vibration and deep-seated rumble had continued on and on until Revack could stand it no longer. Then as fast as it had come, it ceased.

Revack looked about him. The Battle Bridge was as before, except for the new gash in the outer bulkhead. Carefully, he crawled over to the new opening. There was nothing to see. Where there should have been storage rooms and compartments there was only wreckage and the distorted, dark opening of a maintenance access shaft. Without thinking, Revack attached the remaining airtanks to his suit and carefully slid through the gash into the waiting shaft. Without even a look behind him he slowly dropped down the dark hole, grimly holding onto the handholds in its interior.



"Any news from the marines, Lieutenant?"

"None yet, sir. After they first engaged the enemy their probes have met with no contact."

"GET REMSHAW NOW! Do you understand me! NOW!" Onacker was shocked at his own rage. Nothing had gone right since the fleet had shifted into this system. He wished he could remove his helmet and calmly bang his head against a bulkhead somewhere. Onacker had always thought of himself as a good commander. The passed hours had seen him make underestimation's and tactical mistakes like he had never done before. And the blunderings from such subordinates as Commodore Bellock hadn't helped things. In the end it was his responsibility and his fault. Even in this time of renewed crisis all the Admiral could think of was, 'It was only an escort. Only an escort!!'

"Sir! Major Remsaw reports that they have been able to approach the enemy escort from another unblocked corridor. She's imbedded between Sections 36 and 44. There is some radiation leakage but there appears to be no one aboard her."

"No one aboard? But where are the boarding parties? Who were we fighting before?"

"The Major reports that a holding force is stationed at a main corridor intersection forward. He is preparing to assault it from behind."

"Good, good. Get me a schematic up on the control monitor, will you. I want to see where all this fighting is going on."

Without a reply the Lieutenant punched up a layout of the forward area of the ship on Onacker's screen. Staring intently, the Admiral could see the swath of destruction and sensor burnout that both the missile attack and the collision had caused. Bathed in red, the damaged area appeared to cover most of the forward area of the ship. The location of the Protectorate escort blinked on the screen, followed by the location of the Tellamatrixian Marine units.

Onacker stared at the screen. Where could the rest of the enemy crew have gone? The Major had set up defensive parties through the amidships section of the ship to protect the bridge and other vital areas. If they weren't near their ship they had to be forward. And the only thing forward of them was... the Cutter Bays.

In the wash of realization, Onacker knew what they were doing.

"Sir, Major Remsaw signals that they have begun the attack on the enemy holding force in the corridor."

"Never mind that! Tell the Major to get a team up to the Cutter Bays as fast as possible! And signal the crewmen in that area to prepare for interior boarding action if they haven't already. Those Protectorates are after my cutters!"



Corporal Rhodes ran down the corridor with Lieutenant Scott right behind just as Mitchell was coming up, leading the Sickbay party and the rest of the battle-dressed crewmen.

"We made it, Commander. The Cutter Bays are just up this corridor. I only saw one Telly crewman and he was trying to repair some kind of leak. I don't think the alarm's been given this far forward."

"Right," said Mitchell. "Call your people back from the intersection and get them here fast. We'll enter the Cutter Bay and secure it until you get back."

"Without a word, Rhodes was running down the corridor towards the remainder of his men.

"Doc, you and Jeri stay here with the casualties. Adams, stay here and wait for my signal. Watch down the corridor for the marines coming back." Mitchell looked down at the resting form of Captain Decameron, still draped with his Snubgun. "And take the Snubgun from the Captain. Shoot any Telly that comes in range. The rest of you, follow me."

The corridor wound on until the small party could see the large hatch leading to the Cutter Bay. Silently, Mitchell ran towards it. Looking through the viewplate, she could see no movement so silently cycled the controls. With a nudge, the hatch opened. Mitchell looked into the compartment beyond. It was an airlock.

Mitchell groaned. Her whole party would have to cycle through since there was no way to open the inner door with the outer corridor still in vacuum. It looked too much like a trap.

Mitchell was about to turn to inform her crew of their predicament when she came faceplate to faceplate with a Tellamatrixian crewman looking at her through the airlock viewplate. Suddenly he screamed something she could not hear into his helmet radio and scrambled for the Velocity Pistol in his belt. Instinctively, Mitchell brought up her Snubgun and squeezed the trigger.

The gun silently erupted in her hands, first pockmarking the viewplate, then blowing it out. A red sheet of blood covering the inside of his helmet quickly replaced the Tellamatrixian crewman's stunned look of surprise.

As the atmosphere began to rush out of the shattered viewplate, Mitchell was knocked sideways, her last shots driving into the bulkhead above her. The rest of the party was knocked off of their feet as vacuum stove to fill the Bay. Mitchell could see equipment and an occasional Tellamatrixian being blown towards her by the pressure. When it subsided enough on her side, she crawled to the inner hatch of the airlock and began to cycle it open.

The pressure had completely equalized as she carefully pushed the airlock hatch free of its clamps. The Devastator's Cutter Bay was a mess. Equipment had been thrown into disarray by the decompression and several unmoving forms of Tellamatrixian crewmen could be seen. But on the far bulkhead, sitting on her loading cradle stood a shining shift cutter.

Mitchell pointed to the craft as she reached for a spare Snubclip. "Lieutenant Scott, check it out. The rest of you, check for other enemy crewmen not as immobile as those on the deck. I'm going back for the casualties."

As her storming party went about their business, Mitchell strode out of the airlock and ran back down the corridor.



"But Captain, I've been given my orders." Missile Tech Jaycee Adams stood looking at the wavering form of her Commander as he attempted to prop himself against the bulkhead.

"No need, Adams. No need." said the Captain slowly. "I'm fully capable of using this weapon."

"But sir, Lieutenant Commander Mitchell said for me to take over until she returned.

"I'm countermanding those orders! Now help the Doctor with the other casualties! Let's start to head for the Cutter Bay!"

Without another word, Decameron took a step and then fell to the deck. No one moved.

"Sir, let me help you," said Adams.

"No, Adams, do as I say!"

"What's the problem, Adams?" The weary voice of Lieutenant Commander Mitchell seemed to ring through the corridor, although Adams knew that it only came through her vacsuit radio.

"Commander Mitchell! This is Rhodes. Can you hear me?" The squeaky, overmodulated voice on high-gain seemed to pierce through all of their helmets as Adams' reply was interrupted.

"Affirm, Corporal. Where are you?"

"Right next to DESTINY, Commander. There's Tellys all over the place and firing coming from the corridor where my men are set up. They're cut off. Get out. Get to the cutter and punch out. We're cut off here." Rhodes' message was interrupted by occasional static wash. Everyone knew it was from the discharge of the Corporal's SLAP gun.

"We can come up to support!" said Mitchell, a bit weakly.

"No time, Commander. There's already a party of Telly Marines coming down the corridor towards you. Get out while you can! I'll hold as---"

The silence in Mitchell's receiver was as loud as a thunderbolt. "All right," she said quietly. Let's get to the airlock."

Quickly, Kamakawa, Adams and Jeri had the casualty sleds moving towards the Cutter Bay until only Mitchell and Decameron were left in the corridor.

"Here, Captain. Let me help you."

Decameron looked up. "We're not going to make it, you know."

"Perhaps," said Mitchell. "But we can at least keep trying. Now come on!"

Decameron looked back down at the Snubgun in his lap. Then, without looking at Mitchell, quietly continued. "We won't make it unless someone holds up their marines. Go, Ontara. Get the others out. I'm staying here."

"No you're not." Mitchell slung her Snubgun around her shoulder and bent down to take Decameron's arms. Suddenly the corridor wall above her erupted in flame, knocking both her and Decameron back to the deck.

Lying on her stomach, Mitchell pulled the Snubgun free of her shoulder and sprayed the mass of enemy marines running towards them with its discharge. Some went down. The rest jumped to cover.

"Go Ontara!" hissed Decameron. "Go or we'll both be cut down here!"

"NO! Not without you!"

Decameron let loose a silent burst from his Snubgun and smiled at Mitchell from inside his helmet. A thin trickle of blood seeped down his chin. "I can't make it to the Bay. It's as simple as that! You can. Get the rest of my people out, do you hear me Commander Mitchell!!"

Ontara couldn't remember when she had heard that tone of voice ever coming from Decameron, especially directed at her. Instinctively, she nodded. "Yes, sir," she said quietly.

Decameron turned back to squeeze off another burst down the corridor. The return fire was increasing again. "I'll fire off a whole clip to cover you. Give me your Snubby." Silently, Mitchell handed him her weapon. She began to speak but he stopped her. "Don't say anymore! Just go! Get away from here!"

Mitchell squeezed her eyes tight and scrambled away from Decameron. She opened her eyes in time to see him spraying fire wildly down the corridor, heedless of his ammunition expenditure. Crouching low, she turned and ran.

Mitchell turned the corner and stopped. She had to go back to him! There was no other way! She turned around in time to see the enemy marines closing in on the Captain. Without looking at them, Decameron lifted Mitchell's fully charged Snubgun towards the overhead and pulled the trigger. The flood of explosive rounds hit just yards above him as wreckage and debris rained down. With one convulsive spasm, large parts of the equipment and deck from above crashed down on Decameron and the firing stopped. The entire corridor was blocked.

Mitchell made it back to the Bay as the last of the casualties were being strapped into the shift cutter. Missile Tech Adams looked up at her ashen white face through her helmet. "Commander," she said. "Where's the Captain?"

Mitchell kept moving towards the pilot's compartment, finally saying, "Captain Royce Decameron is dead, Adams. Dead."

There was nothing but silence in the cutter as Lieutenant Scott charged the thrusters and blew the explosive bolts on the Bay hatch. Forced back into their seats from the acceleration, the survivors of the Protectorate Escort DESTINY shot out of the enemy Devastator.



The jack in Captain Ocht Revack's helmet finally got him in touch with the bridge.

"Revack!" shouted Admiral Onacker. "What happened to you? Where have you been?"

"Sorry, Captain. I've been trapped in all of this wreckage up forward. The marines just found me. What's been going on?"

"Nevermind," said Onacker from the bridge. "We'll trade stories later. Those blasted Protectorates have escaped in one of my shift cutters'. We're targeting missiles on them now. They won't get away."

"Affirm, sir. What are your orders?"

"Check out the wreck of that Protectorate escort. Ascertain if any of the Protectorates are still on board and deal with them. Then get me a damage report as soon as you can. And check on the Cutter Bay. If any of the other ship's boats are undamaged, I'm going to transfer my flag to the BARONIA. I've got to get the fleet out of this system!"

Revack nodded. "I understand, Admiral. I'll keep you informed."



Engineering Tech Smaltz weakly crawled over to his friend and looked through his helmet visor at the waxy image before him. Webbley hadn't been breathing for some few minutes, it seemed.

"Well, Webb," said Smaltz knowingly. "Guess it's just one of those things, you know? Luck of the draw, you might say. And here it is. Lieutenant Commander Mitchell and whoever must have gotten away by now. If not, I don't think they're going to make it, eh?"

Webbley didn't answer as Smaltz continued. "It's about that time, I guess."

Slowly and painfully, Smaltz crawled over to the damaged control board near his acceleration couch. Suddenly, a new voice came through his helmet receiver. "This is Flag Captain Gustus Ocht Revack of the Tellamatrixian Baronial Navy. If there are any Protectorate personnel left aboard the wreck of the escort identify yourself or you will be killed on sight."

Smaltz smiled then said, "This is Engineering Tech Alfie Smaltz along with Engineering Tech Wils Webbley of the Protectorate Naval Administration Escort DESTINY and I'll see you in hell first."

With an agonizing pull of the main control lever, Smaltz slumped back to the floor. Above him the power coupling glowed for a second, then burst.

Lower Engineering was bathed in a bright glow that melted everything. The expanding superheated gas burned through the wreck of the DESTINY in an instant and burst into the Devastator. Tellamatrixian Marines and crewmen burned silently in the sunlike fire. Captain Ocht Revack had no idea what was happening before he, too, was consumed.

They had time to understand what was happening on the TELLAMAGHIA's bridge. The weapon officer's missiles were nearly targeted on the rapidly moving shift cutter when Admiral Onacker's schematic of the foreword part of the ship erupted in white light. He said nothing, but merely leaned back in his command chair, frowning. It took all of ten seconds for the explosion to reach him and his bridge crew.

Far ahead of the expanding gasball that had been the TELLAMAGHIA the captured shift cutter began her run towards the shiftpoint and home.

EPILOGUE

DOCHENDAL

Captain Ocht Fasak sat in his command chair half asleep. The stress of the past two days had finally taken its toll. He was exhausted, both mentally and physically and wanted nothing more to do with anything except see that his ship and crew got back to Tellamatrix.

The DOCHENDAL was finally under her own power and slowly proceeding to her interrupted rendezvous with the gas giant Phais III. Fasak had personally supervised the re-pressurization of the engine decks before any more work was conducted on the engine power boards. This had made the repair job far easier but more time consuming. But it no longer mattered to Fasak; there had been no further casualties.

The ship's communication gear had been haphazardly repaired but it was still only usable at shorter ranges. Fasak had no idea what had happened to the fleet and now, really didn't care.

"Captain, we've got a sensor contact bearing out-system from the gas giant."

The report from the Sensor Officer was enough to disturb Fasak's rest. Unwillingly at first, then with fatalistic resignation, he opened his eyes.

"Can you identify it?"

The Sensor Officer nodded. "I think so, sir. It appears to be a small craft of some kind."

Fasak turned to the Communications Station. "Try to reach them. It may be from the fleet. They might be looking for us."

The Communications Officer bent towards his equipment. "I think I can lock on the commlaser we just repaired, Captain," he said. "At this range we should be able to get a visual."

"Do it," ordered Fasak.

The lock-on took some minutes, then the Communications Officer nodded. "We got a bounce, sir. I can transmit any time."

"Engage, Ensign." At the Communication Officer's signal Fasak began to talk. "This is Captain Ocht Fasak of the Destroyer DOCHENDAL to unidentified small craft outbound of Phais III. We have a commlaser lock on you. Please reply."

There was silence for many minutes, then a reply came. "Lieutenant Commander Ontara Mitchell here, Captain, of the Protectorate Naval Administration Escort DESTINY. We are switching to visual."

The image that appeared on Fasak's commscreen was that of a haggard woman in a dirty vacsuit seated in the navigator's seat of what looked like the interior of a Tellamatrixian shift cutter. Her helmet was off and it was easy to see the strain and perspiration on her dirt-stained face. With some rest, Fasak thought that she could become beautiful.

The two officers continued to stare at each other though their commscreens without saying a word. Movement behind Mitchell showed an

older man tending to some sort of casualties. Fasak was confused. What could have been going on since he had left the fleet?

Finally, the Protectorate Officer spoke. "We intend to shift out of this system as soon as possible, Captain. If you attempt to engage us, we will destroy this cutter. If you attempt to capture us we will likewise destroy this cutter."

The anger in her eyes spoke to Fasak of the losses she must have endured. Losses similar to his own, or worse. "Have you come from my fleet. Lieutenant Commander Mitchell? What has happened?"

"No questions, Captain. And no answers. You should find your fleet still somewhere about Phais III. That's all I can tell you."

Fasak frowned. For the first time since he was given a command, he didn't know what to do.

"Shall I signal the crews to the turrets, sir?" said the Weapons Officer.

"No," snapped Fasak. "No." Then he turned back to the screen. "Go, Lieutenant Commander Mitchell. Go with your Tellatrixian shift cutter. And I'll go to my fleet. I don't know what has been going on but I'm sure I'll find out soon."

Mitchell nodded curtly. "Yes, Captain. I'm sure you will. And ...thank you, Captain Fasak. Mitchell out."

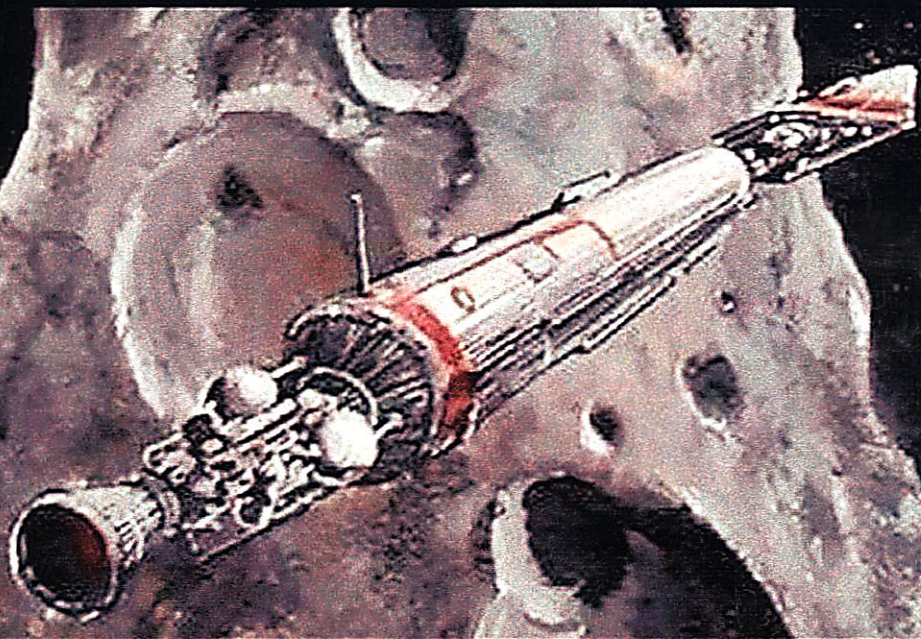
The screen darkened as the visual signal ended. Fasak leaned back again in the command chair and closed his eyes.

"Do you think that was wise, sir," said the Weapons Officer. "Letting them go like that?"

"Wise?" said Fasak. "It is the only smart thing that I have done since we entered this kranking system!"

The range between the destroyer and small craft increased quickly until they both lost each other in the void.

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