

Incitatus

by Jakub Wisz

Chapter 1

The ship slid through the void, dark except for an occasional flash of manoeuvre thrusters correcting its course. Its main engine was cold, having done its job many weeks ago - double rows of rocket exhausts idle. The rocket formed the core of the ship, with the crew quarters set on protruding columns forming an axis on which the bulbous hull rotated slowly. Overall the ship resembled a giant, pale mushroom with a conical cap.

Its grey carapace was pockmarked with multiple impact scars and burns, having been in service for decades, but still, it endured, traversing the unending ocean of the Oort Cloud.

Inside, the alarm clock rang - fast-paced guzheng melody breaking the silence of a simple square cabin, empty except for a bed in the centre. Zhenya Yuan opened his eyes immediately awake. His cybernetic eyes flashed yellow, dark straight hair self-adjusted into a knot. He got up from the bed, which slid back into the cabin floor. He walked towards a wall, which immediately polarised into a mirror, a sink extruded quietly from the wall to meet his hands.

The short, slim man quickly washed and put on a black jumpsuit with silver details waiting for him on the hanger. Zhenya hung his night suit on the hook, which slid back into the wardrobe, and left the cabin. The slow rotation of the living quarters created pleasant 0.5g, allowing Yuan to quickly push through the spherical pipe-like corridors crisscrossing the ship towards the command centre located

in the top of the dome. There were no visible markings or directions anywhere on the dull grey metal, but he hardly needed them. He moved with grace and certainty of a man traversing the same route every day for years - in fact, he didn't see the corridor at all.

Zhenya was preoccupied entirely with images displayed in his cybernetic eyes, a bright HUD displaying a constant stream of data about the ship's position and status, performing a routine check-up on the way to his work station - he wasted no time on a commute that could be used for tasks not requiring his full attention. Of course, watching the diagnostics program flash by day after day was also terribly dull, and the man had better things to do with his time. A small window in the corner of the HUD display in his eye played a re-run of an old sitcom about a Terran and an Outer sharing a cabin on a space station, disagreeing on everything in every matter.

He entered the ship's command centre with a well-practised slide, hanging on to the round door frame for balance and launching straight onto his chair. The command centre was, in fact, a shallow niche of a cabin, dark and empty. Displayed on his cybereyes' HUD however, he saw an entirely different room. Instead of the grey wall, Yuan saw a brightly lit booth with a long, oval table, surrounded by chairs. The crew sat in the chairs, looking at him expectantly - six seats taken by five other men and women only virtually present in the same space as their captain.

'Good morning, crew,' began Zhenya. 'How are we all feeling today.'

'Very well, thank you, captain' replied everyone in unison. The crew of *Yǔsǎn* were all career officers of Zhengdao Corp, and as such followed strict „informal” protocol at all times.

'Glad to hear that, dear friends,' stated Yuan and highlighted the first crew-mate in everyone's HUD's. 'How are matters, dear colleague Lei Chen?'

'Everything progresses according to estimates, captain,' answered the woman with a bow of her head. Her eyes flashed yellow as her internal computer sent data straight to Zhenya's HUD. 'My prospector crew is almost done with their excavation, we should be heading back to the *Yǔsǎn* within weeks with a full hold.'

'I'm delighted to hear that.' The captain surveyed the projection

sent by his underling, quite pleased. The morning started with good news was a good sign for the rest of the day. He selected the next officer in line. 'And how are you, dear colleague Xue Zheng?'

'We're having a bit of trouble with the local Ranger station in the sector, captain.' Officer's voice was full of shame - real or faked. 'They're still arguing our right to mine in the asteroid field, claiming the rocks were claimed by an independent survey crew. But we will work around the issue. Already an inquiry has been made to local vagrants to arrange for a random pirate attack... that would free the field from any claims aside of our own.'

'I'm looking forward to hearing of your success and progress, dear colleague.' The captain finished reading the report and laid his eyes on the next chair in line. He sighed heavily and paused his sitcom.

'Yǔsǎn to officer Xuan Fu, repeat, Yǔsǎn to officer Xuan Fu,' he hailed the missing officer twice before the chair blinked with static and finally the young officer responded. Xuan Fu sat hastily down on the chair, fighting with the sleeve of the uniform jumpsuit, sunglasses and a cowboy hat on his round face outlined in a messy stubble of facial hair. Fu's chubby body barely fit on the projector chair, and his elbows kept disappearing every now and again.

'Good morning, *junior* officer Xuan Fu,' said the captain with a forced smile. 'How are matters progressing?'

'Umm... Everything's dandy, cap. How's it hangin' up on the mushroom?' Replied the younger man awkwardly, his eyes flashing with data. His omission of the protocol earned him hostile glares from other crew officers. The captain gave him a stern look, but the humour of the moment was not lost on him.

'Data shows you're significantly off course,' inquired Yuan. 'What are you doing outside of your assigned sector, if I may ask?'

'Oh, you see, sir... We have a good tip on real once in a lifetime treasure, see, cap?' Fu waited for the captain to acknowledge the data and nod. 'Sooo, we talked with the guys... and girls, of course, not to be impolite to our dear ladies...'

'Please be concise, junior officer, we haven't got all day' interrupted Lei Chen, to a murmur of support from other officers.

'But dear Lei Chen, let him speak.' The captain waved her protest

away, hiding his amusement. 'Please go on, dear Xuan Fu, you were explaining to us why you and your crew took your vessel almost out of range of the mothership?'

'Oh yeah, see... the thing is, it's a mutiny,' replied Fu apologetically. 'We figured we're gonna try our luck on our own. Umm, sorry.'

'This is an outrage, junior officer!' yelled the captain. 'You will return to Yūsǎn immediately and answer for this insubordination! Xuan Fu, go...'

'No, cap, you go,' interrupted the young man with a sudden grin. 'Go Fu yourself!'

His image distorted and blinked out of existence, leaving only an empty chair and an astonished silence.

Xuan Fu turned off his HUD and got off the chair. He turned around, barely fitting inside the shallow niche of communication room, and left. Immediately he was met with laughter, his crewmates floating in the corridor, patting him on the back and cheering.

'Go Fu yourself,' cried Zhenya Shao, iridescent hair floating around her head as she laughed uncontrollably. 'That was brilliant, Fu!'

'Yeah, I thought you'll chicken out until then,' added Bai Fen, the crew engineer, shaking his bald head.

'You know, I had to sell it right. We don't want them to come looking for us.'

'Exactly. If we'd just go silent the firm would send an emergency crew,' stated Shao, more serious now. 'And we can't have that. Mai, how's the ETA?'

'We should be latching in about an hour,' replied a female voice over the ship's intercom. 'Let's hope your „sure thing” is not a scam, Zhenya.'

'It is a sure thing, Mai,' replied Shao. 'And please can you stop calling me that?'

'Nope, it pisses you off too much.'

Fu called back his HUD to look at the outside of the ship - Mai has

already started the docking procedure. The long, ovoid shape of *ZMV 174844B12*, their mining ship, was slowly preparing, its hull opening like an umbrella, revealing that it was in fact mostly hollow, except for a crew cabin - a round bulge at the top of the ship. Hydraulics pushed the segmented scales of the craft apart, forming a thin, but near-impregnable hood, ready to embrace an asteroid tightly or swallow it whole if it was small enough. External cameras gave Fu a good view on the arms, as well as multiple drills and inflatable storage compartments spread evenly along the sleeves and centre of the mining vessel, slowly nearing their target.

But the young officer was focused on their destination visible in a separate window of the HUD - footage from prospecting drone they sent ahead days ago. It looked just like any other asteroid to him - icy shell with a metallic core. A decent goal for strip mining, but hardly worth risking careers for.

The mining ship's main engine came to life, a long blaze of burned deuterium propelling it towards the distant rock. Fu and the rest of the crew hurried to their stations as the acceleration started to build up gravity on the ship. He managed to squeeze his body into the chair just as they reached one gee, and tightened his seat belt and cushions.

Soon, the asteroid was clearly visible on external cameras, and the mining vessel recalled the drone. The rock was tiny compared to some of the Oort Cloud's rubble, but still dwarfed the approaching ship like a mountain. Slowly, with arms spread almost horizontally in relation to the cabin, *ZMV 174844B12* touched the icy surface in a spot designated by the onboard computers. Clouds of helium ice instantly evaporated in contact with metal, surrounding the ship in a quickly freezing mist. Clasps and drills pierced the rocky surface beneath, attaching the mining ship securely to the asteroid. When the arms were firmly in place, they flattened, and the thin hood's side stiffened, soon forming a tight and sealed dome on the rock's surface, with the crew section on top - a tiny bubble on top of the regular mound.

Inside the perimeter, the bubble's underside detached and rotated, revealing a flat lens of a mining laser. Lights inside the ship flickered as it charged, then a bright-blue beam shot towards the surface. As soon as it touched the asteroid, the rock collapsed and imploded,

filling the inside of the dome with rubble.

‘Fen, shut it off!’ shouted Fu in his chair. ‘Shut it off now, god damn it!’

‘Already did, dude,’ replied the engineer over the comms. ‘Relax, Fu, sheesh.’

‘What the hell happened?’ asked Mai. ‘Any ideas?’

‘It’s almost like the ground just blew up...’ replied Fu. ‘Or imploded. I can’t see anything there.’

‘Hold on, I’ll clear it out,’ said Bai Fen. ‘Gently and steadily, don’t you worry.’

The engineer inputted a command and a swarm of drones released from the arms of the ship, quickly scooping all of the material into the storage compartments, inflated slightly with the weight - but not nearly as much as Fu expected.

‘I thought there’s going to be more rubble in this... rubble,’ he said.

‘Beats me,’ replied Fen. ‘Maybe we hit a gas pocket, and it ripped?’

‘So much for the treasure then...’ sighed Mai.

‘No, wait,’ interjected Shao. ‘There’s something there!’

With the rubble cleared, the cameras showed a large crater under the dome, few hundred metres deep, and very narrow. The Collector drone sent down the shaft by Fen slowly worked through the rubble, but its sensors detected a solid object at the bottom of the shaft. The engineer manoeuvred it carefully closer to illuminate the depths of the crevice. The spotlight caught a small, metallic object resembling a capsule. It reflected the light with a gold gleam, no hatches or damage visible - it looked like a drop of liquid metal, less than two metres long.

‘What is that?’ asked Fu rhetorically. ‘Get closer, Bai...’

‘Working on it, dude,’ answered the engineer. ‘Just gotta wiggle over that rock...’

‘Is that a torpedo?’ asked Mai. ‘It looks like a torpedo.’

‘You’re a torpedo,’ snapped Shao. ‘It’s what the guy was talking about, the treasure.’

‘You’re a treasure, bitch,’ Mai attempted a comeback. ‘Wait, that didn’t come right...’

‘That’s what she said,’ cut in Fen joyfully. ‘I’m gonna try to bring

the thing up, hold your thumbs.'

They watched intently as the drone descended down the tight shaft, trying to get near enough to the mysterious object. Ben used the drone's sensors to scan the object making sure it was safe to approach. He ordered the machine to attach itself to the reflective surface with suction arms - they were made to gather precious asteroid dust particles, but they held on to the mysterious find well enough. As soon as he attempted to lift it, Fen realised the capsule is very light, with barely any mass. Still, traversing the jagged tunnel upwards was quite a challenge, and the drone almost crashed a few times on its way up towards the surface. Eventually, it was free and made its way back to the ship, delivering its cargo to the main hold of the mining vessel. Fu and the rest of the crew immediately rushed down there, stopping only to don their black vacuum jumpsuits and gathered around the capsule. Released from the drone's grasp, it was floating in the cargo hold, weightless and serene in zero-g. Fen approached first, slowly circling around it.

'How do you wanna go about it, dude?' asked Bai Fen hesitantly, careful now that his real body was potentially in danger.

'Dunno, maybe we should just leave it alone?' pondered the young officer, leaning in to inspect his own image in the capsule's reflective surface.

'No way, we came all this way,' gasped Shao, her colourful hair flashing with red under her suit mask. 'We're opening that thing.'

She made a step forward, reaching for the plasma cutter on her belt. Fu moved to intercept her, in his rush touching the capsule's surface. It immediately became transparent, stopping everyone in their tracks. They stared in astonishment, petrified by the view.

'What the...' gasped Mai, her round face suddenly pale.

'Is that...' gasped Fu, then fell silent again.

Inside the capsule, curled in foetal position, a dry and wrinkled mummy stared back at them with unseeing eyes. Light grey skin with darker spots was pockmarked with direct computer interface ports and other implants of unknown function. The body was humanoid but seemingly atrophied and dishevelled, contrasting all the more with the massive head. Lack of any visible mouth or nose made the dark,

bulging eyes stand out - but the most striking feature was a circular set of short, gold metal rods piercing the skin around the cerebellum, like a crown.

‘Did we just find an alien?’ asked Bai.

‘There are no aliens,’ snickered Mai. ‘But look at that cyber. What in the fuck?’

She pointed at the equipment implanted into the creature. The engineer examined it closely, curiosity getting the better of his fear.

‘No idea what it is, but it’s gotta be worth a fortune.’

‘Told ya,’ said Shao. ‘Let’s bag it and move, we have a train to catch!’

The station’s massive, gothic silhouette dwarfed everything around it but still looked insignificant on the backdrop of the Milky Way. Tall spires of thermal exhausts and defensive laser turrets made the irregular core of the megafactory resemble a place of mad worship. Double rings surrounded it, rotating slowly around the station’s body, their protruding docking stations busy with the commotion around a few dozen cargo vessels and freighters of various sizes. Small defensive platforms in orbit around the refinery gleamed with armaments, watchful for any and all danger - every now and again a laser beam shot out into the void to intercept an asteroid or a piece of cosmic trash on a collision course. Few thousand kilometres away, a waystation hung in far orbit, its ring surrounded with its own ecosystem of service platforms, refuelling departing ships and providing essential commodities and venues - restaurants, medical clinics, bars and gambling dens. Tiny, one-man vendor crafts swarmed around a line of ten or so freighters awaiting launch clearance like flies, each broadcasting loud and colourful ads to push their wares and services - from hot dogs to whores.

The waystation’s single lens dish aligned with an invisible point in the vast darkness of space. The lens flickered as the station emptied its energy reserves to power the multi-megawatt laser and a bright beam of light shot into the void. The station’s computer tracked the

data package it received all the way from the Solar System months ago - a waystation hundreds of AUs away sent a vessel through the NavNet system, along with a message containing a precise calculation of its course. The beam shot towards the incoming craft according to that data and if the predictions were correct, it would hit the open sail, slowing it down. The system was usually precise - if it weren't, the incoming ship would be lost in the Oort Cloud forever.

Few minutes passed and the beam ceased, and a sleek, white corvette came to a halt inside the waystation's ring, its silvery solar sail almost wholly hidden inside its hull. Three short wings on its sides fired the jets of manoeuvre engines, and the spaceship gently came to a halt relative to the waystation. The Waystation had only a skeleton crew and no designated tower operator - each of the six crew members took turns checking in incoming traffic.

Short-range radio dishes inside the ring turned towards the corvette, establishing a connection at the same time as the defence turrets locked onto it. Dave Matthews, a short, stocky man wearing a blue t-shirt and teal cargo shorts floated through the comm room towards the computer terminal. His bare feet easily found footing on the floor as he pushed few buttons. He sucked on the coffee tube, making sure to close the cap afterwards and combed through his short ginger mane with his fingers.

'This is Cloud Waystation Twenty-Six, sector D, repeat this is Twenty-Six D,' he said to the microphone mounted on the table. 'Incoming craft, state your business and broadcast the IFF, over.'

A few seconds passed before a response came through.

'This is the *Flamingo*, captain Ned Ibolya speaking,' responded a deep, confident voice. 'We're carrying energy cells and sentenced crew to the Helikaon station, on contract. Transmitting IFF and licence now.'

Matthews looked through the data, checking it over with anti-forgery software. It seemed real enough.

'Aight, captain, stand by for a drone control, repeat - stand by for drone control.'

'Standing by, Twenty Six D. You mind sending a couple of beers over while at it?'

‘Want some fries with that?’ asked the technician. ‘You can get chow and supply once you’re through customs.’ *Damn truck drivers*, he thought, *smartasses and comedians, the lot of them*. He pushed another button, and a holographic projector displayed the footage from the drone. It was in a white cargo hold stacked full of crates. Two men in civilian-looking red jumpsuits were standing in front of the camera. The taller man with a brown goatee grinned and showed the drone a middle finger, while the shorter visibly sighed and displayed cargo manifest toward the sensor. Matthews ran the data through the system, then examined each crate’s contents, scanning the barcodes on the side with various telemetric devices installed on his drone. Eventually, he was content that everything was in order.

‘All right, *Flamingo*,’ he said. ‘You’re cleared for ingress, see you on your way out.’

‘Looking forward to it,’ came the reply. ‘Want something from the grocery store?’

‘Nah, all good here, boss,’ chuckled Dave. ‘I do have one more question though.’

‘Shoot’

‘What the fuck’s a flamingo?’

The only reply was a burst of hearty laughter, and the comms channel has been closed. Figures, thought the technician. He watched on his display as the spiral coil at the back of the corvette spun with increasing velocity. The spaceship gently pushed ahead until it was out of the ring, then launched forward towards the refinery in the blink of an eye as soon as it was clear.

Stepan’s body shook violently in a tube filled with inertia gel as the ship decelerated rapidly. His tattoo-covered body lost a lot of muscle mass during weeks of forced stay in a tub, but his cybernetic arms and legs retained of all their bulk - after all, graphene, servomotors and artificial skin don’t need exercise. His head was shaven bald, along with his once proud moustache, seemingly days ago. Tight, uncomfortable

breathing mask sealed his mouth and nose, intubation pipe delivering sustenance for his body. Various tubes were inserted under bright yellow prison shorts to ensure hygiene, IV's injected into his veins pumped drugs to keep him docile during a long journey. Through the almost opaque green gel, he could barely make out transport tanks similar to his.

He fought to free himself as he had tried many times during the journey, but the gel held him tight - electromagnetic pulses emitted from braces mounted on his wrists and ankles prevented his limbs from reaching any significant power. Having completely lost track of time, he had no idea how long was his imprisonment, or the journey. In fact, Stepan wasn't even entirely sure how he ended up in the tank. The last thing he recalled clearly was waiting for someone in a cargo bay, next to some containers. There were some other men there - soldiers like him. *Where was it, he pondered, ah, yes - Tortuga. Feels like years ago. Could it be though? I guess it'll come back.* A sudden flash of light interrupted his thoughts. A silhouette entered the room - ex-soldier couldn't make out the details through a thick layer of green goo holding him in place. *Definitely a woman*, he thought. He was proven right, when the person walked right next to his tank - his cybernetic eyes fought to focus the lenses and enhance the image with some degree of success. Stepan clearly saw platinum-blond hair tied in a tight ponytail, regular face with regular, almost perfect features, full lips, large eyes and a perky nose.

A woman's back in sights of his Nakato-ZX railgun, her face towards a white corvette. Trigger pulled, explosion - woman flies through the air in low gravity, a bloody gap where her shoulder blade was, rest of the group scatters in panic. Stepan tried to grin at the woman, a futile effort against the force of the breathing apparatus on his face. *I remember you*, he thought.

The woman caught his gaze, her face flinched. She spat on the floor with disgust, took a step back. Inertia tanks shook and begin to slide on the floor towards the exit. They passed multiple closed cabin doors on their way until they reached a vast open hall, where two men in jumpsuits overlooked a dozen drones unloading crates of some cargo. They wore no helmets and Stepan could just about make out the faces

of a young man with black hair and an older guy with a goatee and shaved head. The line of holding tanks passed through the cargo hold quickly, entering an expansive, slightly curved hangar where a crew in brown jumpsuits operated magnetic forklifts, taking away the crates put on the floor by the drones.

Some informational signs were hanging from the ceiling, too high for him to read. The convict could hear noise coming from the outside but dulled and almost inaudible inside. He was utterly helpless and could do nothing but watch the road ahead.

They passed a worn-looking airlock, then drove through a long, slightly curved corridor for at least half an hour - many people were going about their business, wearing all kinds of jumpsuits and even regular clothes in what seemed to be about 1g. *We must be on some sort of space station*, he concluded, *not Tortuga though, too clean*. The prisoner line took a large cargo elevator down a few levels, accompanied by a couple of forklifts carrying cargo and random passers-by on wheeled buggies.

When the massive elevator gate opened, Stepan saw yet another wide bay full of cargo crates and crowds.

Drones flying overhead were scanning the cargo, directing it to one of the dozen or so large hatches on the walls, autonomous forklifts and transmission lines slowly processing the traffic. There were maybe thirty people on the platform overall, seemingly from different crews - Stepan saw various makes and colours of jumpsuits worn by regular humans as well as a large number of Outers, whose bioengineered features easily distinguished them in the crowd.

The gel tank line he was at the lead of was scanned by a drone flying nearby, and seemingly directed to some sort of fast traffic lane because in a matter of minutes they were in front the rightmost hatch. He saw the woman again, stepping in front of the convicts and approaching an Outer man in a brown uniform. She exchanged a couple of words with the official, who scanned a tablet she presented him and came closer to examine the tanks. The prisoner met the Outer's stare through the gel - he tried to look intimidating to no avail, judging by the bored expression of the official's grey, rubbery skin and lack of interest in his large, almond-shaped eyes.

The bureaucrat made a vague gesture, and the whole line of containment tanks moved towards the hatch. Stepan's tub was first up the ramp - the circular door opened sideways, and he felt his tank fall onto the side. The prisoner tried to look back into the cargo bay, but as soon as the drone carrying his tank left the compartment, the hatch closed again. He managed to see a small light above the door on the inside change from red to green, and the tank started moving upwards on a transmission line, towards an unknown destination. *I'm in a fucking airlock*, thought Stepan. *They're going to space me!*

Suddenly, the man felt the pressure of a sudden acceleration softened by the inertia gel in the tank and was launched into space before he knew it. Free floating, he could see the station for the first time, sprawling before his eyes as the tank rotated in space. The station's outer ring slid away clockwise, multiple mass-driver barrels like the one ex-soldier was just launched from sporadically spewed out crates towards the station itself.

The refinery's enormous silhouette rose into view, sprawling multiple vents, turrets, spires and hatches. The tank spun again, Stepan could see other tanks floating in a scattered line behind him, the bright carpet of the Milky Way. *Yup, definitely not in Kansas anymore*, he thought.

Without warning, the tank spun back rapidly, commanded by the centrifugal force. The refinery station was once more the centrepiece of the stage, but this time the prisoner realised where he was headed. The structure of the inner ring, rotating counter clockwise, was similar to the first - a massive round cylinder, multicoloured lights dotting its surface. A couple of freighters were docked to it, but most of the protruding docking stations were empty. A barrel-shaped transport ship zoomed past, manoeuvre engines on its brightly coloured sides bursting with flames as the craft headed out into the void.

As Stepan's tank drifted closer, a silhouette of a larger vessel docked to the ring slowly dawned from behind the station's body - its hull was almost half as long as the entire segment of the cylinder it was moored to. The craft seemed to be massively armoured, almost like a bunker, deeply concaved along most of its length. Stepan thought the ship is embracing the ring's cylinder, but he soon realised it was in fact

docked merely in parallel to it. A swarm of drones, visible only thanks to their position lights flickering to and fro, busied themselves with attaching large cisterns and containers the size of an entire freighter in the space between the ship's boards.

A dozen smaller ships looking as if they were made of mostly to hold the engines hung around the humongous U-shaped vessel like little birds, and soon the tank carrying Stepan was past them. The prisoner was obviously heading straight for the craft carried by the mass driver's launch energy and centrifugal force. Just as he was only a few kilometres from his destination, Stepan realised what bothered him about the behemoth of a spaceship - it had no visible drive system.

As soon as the containment cylinder entered the niche, eight graphene, segmented legs caught it, and the caretaker drone jetted between the containers in the canyon, manoeuvring with ease among the mess of chains and other drones. Jet engine exhausts on each side of the hexagonal body of the machine ignited seemingly at random as the drone took twists and turns rapidly moving at high speed. Suddenly it rushed straight down towards the bottom of the concave and fell into an airlock. The drone's arms released the gel tank, just as the machine rushed off into space to fetch the next item on its work list.

The airlock closed behind the drone, leaving the tank in the dark confinement for a minute before the hatch on the other side opened. The cylinder floated aimlessly in the lock before it was shot with a grapple, and hauled inside the bay. Two armoured men armed with rifles dragged the tank out and released the grapple.

Stepan felt the gel soften and retract for the first time in weeks if not longer. His body collapsed when muscles long unused immediately cramped all at once, and he didn't fall only because of lack of gravity. The prisoner fought to compose himself and relax his muscles but didn't get the chance. All at once, pipes controlling his bodily functions and the tube feeding his all this time were pulled out along with the breathing mask, leaving the man vomiting violently. Then the IVs popped out, disconnecting him from the gel tank's system altogether. Gasping for air and fighting shock, Stepan didn't at first realise the room has started spinning until he landed gently on the cold floor

tiles. A rush of cold, foamy liquid striking his back from the ceiling flattened the man on the white tiles, violently washing the grime and leftover gel away.

A bell rung somewhere, and the cabin door opened. A short, stocky Outer woman entered with a wry grin on her rubbery features. Her cybereyes' blue lenses ran up and down the naked body as the prisoner shook on the floor. She wore a blue uniform with a large belt and knee-high boots. Stepan quickly gathered details about her - crested horse-head insignia on her chest, right next to a pocket with a rolled notepad tablet and electronic metal pen, leather gloves tucked in behind the belt, keycard holder and a pistol sheath on her hip.

'Welcome to the *Incitatus*, Stepan Milosh - or should I say: *convict*,' she said with a sardonic smirk. 'I hope you enjoyed your shower after a long journey.'

Stepan tried to reply, but his tongue refused to form words, numb from all the time in the gel, all he managed was a grunt.

'Don't bother,' she added. 'This is not a conversation. My name is Warden Delacroix, but you can call me god. From now on I'm responsible for your rehabilitation and work on this ship. You'll be told more when you recover from decompression.'

Two guards entered the room behind her, followed by a four-legged walker drone topped with a stretcher. The men grabbed the prisoner and strapped him to the machine, then led it down the labyrinth of narrow, brown corridors. Their magnetic boots held them on the floor in zero-g, the drone just floated behind them, using its long legs to push off the surface and keep up.

'You must be wondering what's gonna happen to you now,' she said. 'Well, you'll be serving a sentence of twenty years of labour on-board the *Incitatus*. As you can probably guess, it's a prison ship. It's bound to launch towards Jupiter soon, carrying the sector's entire five-year production, as well as raw materials mined throughout the sector. It's a very profitable venture, but as I always say, completely safe to put in the hands of convicts.'

'A-a-a,' Milosh tried his best to reply.

'Aren't I afraid you and other lowlives will do away with the ship and become pirates?' she asked melodramatically, exaggerating each

word. ‘No, no I don’t. The ship doesn’t have any engines or defence measures. What’s gonna happen is, we’ll drag it out to the waystation, and shoot it towards Jupiter, letting inertia take you all the way there, bouncing off of the gravity of planets and moons along the way like a rock skipping on water. You do know what rock skipping is, yes? Doesn’t matter. Your journey is going to take years, but the waystation doesn’t have enough power to move that kind of mass with normal speed. Even if it had it would be too expensive. In any case, the ship has no steering, no weapons, no way to slow down and practically no signature so nobody will find it. Space is big you know. Even if somebody had found it, protector drones are more than capable of dealing with a pirate boarding party... or mutiny.’

As she talked, the man finally felt his muscles start to obey him. He was still weak, and his augmented limbs were restrained to the level of a regular person, but he could move. Taking advantage of the woman’s monologue, he shifted slightly. Luckily for him, the guards didn’t notice - they seemed to have heard that speech way too many times to pay attention.

‘H-h-h... how fun,’ he managed to say. ‘Listening to you talk is the torture on the way, right?’

‘How dare you?’ gasped the warden. ‘I’m taking my precious time to educate you as to the circumstances of your rehabilitation, scum!’

‘Better just shoot me right now, please,’ he replied. ‘Way more humanitarian.’

One of the guards couldn’t help but snicker. The warden’s face grew black with a flush of anger.

‘Convict scum,’ she shrieked. ‘Careful, you might just get what you wish!’ The woman stopped in her tracks, about to punch him. Bed-drone and guards stopped too, uncertain of what to do.

‘You think you’re so tough,’ she ranted on. ‘I could break you, right now!’

‘You won’t even take me out to dinner first?’ asked Stepan. ‘Then again, I lost my appetite looking at you.’

The warden shrieked with rage and leaned down to punch the laying man. Milosh was waiting for just that - the bed jumped as he launched himself upward, headbutting the warden. She collapsed on

top of the stretcher, dark crimson blood from a broken lip flowing out, bubbling before her face as she gasped for air in shock. After a split second of surprise, both guards jumped in to help their boss, reaching for their stun batons. One reached out to tug the warden into safety, away from the convict's strapped hands, the other thrust his baton at the stretcher. The prisoner twisted in his bed – strapped both ankles and feet prevented him from pulling with force, but it was enough to overturn a light-weight drone. The machine twisted and rotated, baton hitting the chassis under the bed instead of Milosh.

Electric shock caused the locks to release. Before anyone realised what happened, Stepan pushed himself strongly off the stretcher and wrestled the first guard into a wall, quickly twisting the baton from him when they hit the wall. Milosh tapped the guard's face with the wand and bounced towards the ceiling, leaving the guard behind. The man trashed uncontrollably, floating to the middle of the corridor. The warden desperately tried to gain footing. The second guard managed to shove the stretcher drone aside just in time to meet Stepan's charge head-on. The man steadied himself on the ground to block the convict, who pushed himself off the ceiling and swung the baton at the guard. Sticks clashed with a crackle, their charges instantly depleting as they jolted each other. Milosh swung his weapon like a bat now, momentum tossing him around uncontrollably as he pummeled the guard's parry with mad strikes. He didn't have the strength or speed to break through the defence, but the guard had no space to counterattack and was slowly being pushed back towards the opposite wall.

Just as the guard's resolve started to waver, a small dart hit Milosh's back, and he immediately fell limp. Delacroix shot the convict again, just for good measure, and sheathed her hold-out tranquilliser pistol.

'Must I do everything myself?' she asked the remaining guard, then turned towards the pair of new coming security workers as they turned around the corner. 'And you took your time, eh? Did you have to finish taking a dump?'

'No ma'am, sorry, ma'am,' they replied.

'Whatever,' she scowled. 'What was that moron even thinking, there is no way he can escape the ship.'

The survivor of Milosh's onslaught let go of his useless baton, took off his helmet and swiped sweat from his grey forehead. His rubbery skin pale from the exhaustion of recent combat. Panic in the guard's black eyes turned to anger he landed a couple of powerful kicks on the convict's paralysed body, sending it flying towards the newcomers.

'Dunno ma'am,' he said. 'Looks like he wanted to make a run for it before we depart.'

'Before the ship departs, you mean,' she grinned. 'I intend to take the commercial flight to Europa and cash in, don't know about you, Stan.'

'Of course,' agreed the man. 'It was just a matter of speech.'

'Don't get mouthy with me, boy,' threatened Delacroix jokingly and turned to the other two guards. 'Take that trash to the rest, I think I'll skip the rest of the meet and greets.'

'Of course, ma'am,' said the guards in unison, catching Stepan as he neared them.

'I'm going to freshen up and get off this damn death trap,' added the warden. 'Are you coming, Stanny? I think you earned a *personal* reward...'

'Umm... Yes, ma'am,' answered Stan hesitantly. 'If you say so, ma'am'.

'I say so. Now come.'

Remaining security guards put electronic cuffs tying the convict's ankles and wrists together, then pushed him down the corridor. Milosh watched them angrily, still unable to move.

'Poor Stan,' said the first guard, shaking his head. 'I bet he wishes he got mauled to death by that Terran now.'

'You said it, Lee,' chuckled the other. 'What a cruel fate.'

Laughing, the two guards hauled their charge down the corridor casually, letting the lack of gravity do the work for them.

Once at their destination, they opened a holding cell door. Inside a group of other prisoners sat on benches, shackled to the seats about a meter from one another. The group consisted of four Outers and two Terrans in yellow prison suits, tattooed and scarred.

'Ahoy there, mateys,' chuckled Lee. 'We brought company for you, pirate scum. Make him feel at home.'

‘Yeah, he’s the warden’s special friend,’ added the other guard. ‘Very special.’

Other prisoners glared at Milosh angrily as the guards busied themselves with strapping him on the free spot on the end of the bench, right next to a huge Outer man. An elastic line stretched from Stepan’s wrist cuffs behind the seat down to his ankles. Milosh started to move and strain, the paralysing agent’s force subsiding. Giant sitting next to him growled menacingly. His red cyber eyes glowed, sharpened chrome teeth bared. His flat, scarred face bore the expression of pure hatred.

‘Calm down, Otis,’ scolded him, Lee. ‘You’ll have plenty of time to get to know your new friend during the journey, don’t worry.’

‘Oh, we’ll take good care of him,’ added a skinny, almost skeletal looking Outer, narrowing his slanted black eyes, his lips curled in a cruel smirk. ‘Don’t worry about that, good sir.’

‘Oh, I’m not worried,’ replied Lee happily. ‘The warden would be furious if something were to happen to her boy toy, I’m sure you can respect that.’

‘We sure can,’ cackled a red-haired pirate on the opposite end of the bench. ‘We’ll throw him a real party.’

The guards left the holding cell, closing the hatch behind them. Prisoners waited in tense silence for a while, staring at Milosh. He stared back defiantly, only his right hand was twitching and jerking in rapid motion, opening and closing his palm. The staring contest between Milosh and the remaining six became palpably intense - five men leaning forward in their benches to see him over Otis, whose giant body obstructed the view as he leaned over the smaller Terran.

‘So, what did you do to piss Delacroix so much?’ asked the giant eventually in a surprisingly gentle, low baritone.

‘Let’s just say it wasn’t love at first sight...’ replied Milosh carefully, his hand still twitching rapidly.

‘You must have really stepped on her toes,’ said Otis, raising his hairless eyebrow.

‘Yeah, something like that,’ agreed Stepan, shrugging.

‘The guards sure did pull off a nice show to antagonise us to you,’ interjected the thin prisoner, eyeing Stepan up and down as much as it

was possible. ‘They think we’re all a bunch of primitive nincompoops, surely.’

‘Yeah, that’s demeaning,’ shouted the red-haired pirate, rattling his manacles.

‘To be honest, you’re not making the best first impression,’ stated Milosh. ‘You might as well have gone with a *yarr, shiver me timbers*, and all that.’

‘Hah, t’was but a ruse, ye landlubber,’ giggled the third Outer, tattoo of a spider web on his rubbery lips stretching with his smile.

‘You forgot the ahoys, Pie,’ chuckled Otis.

‘My bad,’ apologised Pie. ‘Ahoy.’

‘Anyway, the name’s Harvey Otis,’ introduced himself the huge Outer. ‘The skinny one’s Stick, the tattooed smartass is called Spider, but we call him Pie for short. Then there’s Chatty, we call him that cause he doesn’t talk. The other two guys are from a different crew.’

The Outer pirates nodded and waved when mentioned by the giant.

‘Oi, the name’s Muldoon,’ introduced himself the redhead. ‘And my buddy over there is Allison.’

‘Call me Al,’ said the dark-skinned man seriously.

‘Yeah, you best do that,’ agreed Muldoon. ‘Or he’ll slit your throat in your sleep. The two of us aren’t pirates like those schmucks, we’re respectable businessmen’

‘You’re a pair of smugglers,’ interrupted Pie. ‘Don’t act like you’re better than us.’

‘Hell yeah, we are,’ roused Muldoon. ‘We’re just delivering good from A to B, nothing wrong with that.’

‘So do we,’ laughed Sticks. ‘Except point A is the sucker’s cargo hold, and point B is our pockets.’

‘You don’t even have any pockets,’ argued Muldoon.

‘But if I had, I’d keep my booty in them.’

‘Keep your booty in your pants, pal,’ chuckled Al. ‘Also shut up, and let our gues introduce himself, god damn it.’

‘Nice to meet you fellows,’ pretend-bowed Stepan, his hand constantly twitching. ‘The name’s Milosh.’

‘All right, Milosh, come clean,’ urged Otis. ‘What did you do to the warden? And don’t even bullshit me, security wouldn’t throw you

under the bus without reason.’

‘Why not, they looked easily irritable?’ asked Stepan, smirking.

‘That may be, but they’re also lazy,’ said Pie. ‘Spill it, or we really will give you a warm greeting.’

The whole ship shook before Stepan had the chance to answer. Prisoners in the holding cell felt the acceleration push them into the benches, the hull moaned and creaked, protesting such treatment. The shaking grew stronger, almost painful, forcing the breath out of their lungs. After what seemed like an eternity, the tremors subsided but the feeling of acceleration remained, steadily increasing.

‘Looks like we’re on our way,’ Milosh stated the obvious. ‘That should mean the warden and the guards are off this boat, right?’

‘I guess so,’ Muldoon shrugged. ‘What does it matter? There’s still combat drones on security detail.’

‘Yeah, we’re still in the shitter,’ added Pie. ‘And still tied to the wall.’

‘They’re gonna take us to the cells eventually,’ said Al hopefully, puffing to remove a wild strand of long, black hair from his eye.

‘So what, who cares?’ disagreed Pie. ‘They’ll keep us in the handcuffs all the way no matter what.’

‘Quiet,’ shouted Otis, silencing the argument. ‘Enough stalling, Terran. You’re starting to piss me off.’

‘Really? I was just starting to enjoy our little chat.’ replied Stepan, rubbing his right forearm and wrist forcefully on the bench’s edge.

‘Spill the data, what did you do to the warden?’ asked Otis, menacingly. ‘And the fuck’s wrong with your hand?’

Milosh rubbed the bottom of his forearm on the edge with long, careful motions, but forcefully now.

‘The answers to both your questions... are connected...’ he said through his teeth, straining visibly. ‘You see...’

Stepan’s final motions revealed a small, oblong item stuck deep in a hole right in the middle of his right palm. The opening didn’t bleed, synthetic skin and muscle covering a cybernetic limb. Only some dark green liquid poured out as the object slowly peeked out of the pierced spot. When it was out, Milosh grabbed it with the left hand and presented with the gesture worthy of a magician producing

a pigeon from a hat.

‘I stole her pen,’ he finished, grinning like a maniac.

The flock of guide ships laden with additional fuel tanks carried the *Incitatus* away from the refinery, their engines roaring and straining to pull the massive prison craft behind them. Hauling the two-kilometre-long behemoth filled to the brim with raw materials required vast amounts of fuel, which is why the refinery was a starting point for the journey. Assist vessels quickly burned through the deuterium tanks twice their own size attached to the hulls, detaching each tank as it depleted and leaving it behind to reduce mass. Behind the flock, attached with metamaterial links, the *Incitatus* floated majestically, its U-shaped hull seemingly bucking and rearing on invisible waves. Within hours of flight, the formation reached the waystation. The prison vessel was far too massive to fit inside the transfer ring - instead, the escort flock released the links, and let the now inert and accelerating leviathan to pass it by. A line of freighters and other vessels cleared the departure line led by the flight control’s commands. The event was unusual enough for many captains to hesitate with compliance or go as far as to move closer to observe the launch from a better position. One such ship, a mining trawler’s passenger module belonging to Zhengdao Corporation, as its yellow and black hull suggested, was almost too close. It dodged out of the way in last second, nearly getting crushed by the *Incitatus* speeding by.

The escort crafts dropped their final deuterium tank and detached their external modules around the waystation - each a massive laser fuelled by a battery relay. Having lost most of their bulk, they were no more significant than flies behind the enormous hull of the transport craft. The leviathan pushed on uncaringly, oblivious to the frantic activity behind it.

‘Waystation 26D, this is Remora One, we’re in position’

communicated the assist flock leader.

‘Sure thing, Remora One, 26D ready whenever. Don’t get your panties in a twist,’ replied Dave, watching the spectacle from his control cabin on the waystation while sucking on a smoothie through a straw. The pink bathrobe he was wearing waved slowly around his body, as he dodged out of the way to avoid a bubble of strawberry flavoured liquid hitting it - instead of the robe the smoothie landed on his shorts. Only one of the displays in the room was focused on the data regarding *Incitatus* and the launch - remaining displays were showing a re-run of a talk show, in which a frantic Outer woman explained to the host excitingly how she married an alien and gave birth to baby Jesus.

‘Copy that, Waystation 26D,’ signalled the flock leader. His immaculate uniform bore the horse head insignia. Telemetry and flight control instruments spaced neatly around the cockpit displayed a flood of data. He leaned into one of the screens, then reached for the microphone.

‘Waystation 26D, can you run a scan on the hull for me,’ he asked. ‘My readings are slightly off.’

Dave sighed, and headed for the one screen showing data from the departing ship - the station’s sensor arrays were much more powerful than anything a little spaceship like the Remora, could outfit. He was about to run diagnostics, but then the talk show host introduced another guest - a bearded man wearing a „Lone Gunman” t-shirt claiming vehemently that the Earth is flat and space travel is a hoax. *Ah well, fuck that noise, thought the operator, the stiff just has a glitch on anyway. Probably.*

‘Already did that, Charlie, my man,’ he lied. ‘Everything is five by five, no sweat.’

‘Umm, roger that, Waystation 26D. Fire on your mark.’

The escort flock and the waystation fired the lasers at the exact same moment, millions of megawatts hit the sail at the back of the *Incitatus* at the same time. Almost double the maximum waystation’s power hit the sail, sending the behemoth on its long journey towards the Solar System. The station’s manoeuvre engines kicked off to compensate for the forces involved, but the ring shook and recoiled

violently.

‘Shit, spilt it all over myself,’ exclaimed Dave over the comms, forgetting they were online.

‘That’s what your mom said last night, dickhead’ replied Charles under his breath.

‘What?’

‘What, what?’

‘I thought you said something, Remora One.’

‘Affirmative, Waystation 26D,’ answered the pilot seriously. ‘I was just congratulating you on perfect launch.’

‘Yeah, I’m a pro, dude.’

‘I can hear that, yes. Remora fleet over and out, we’re heading back to base.’

‘Roger-roger. Don’t forget to pick up your trash on your way back.’

The assist fleet pulled their lasers back, then kicked on the engines and flew back towards the distant Helikaon refinery. Traffic around the waystation slowly re-organised itself as the station technicians readied for the next launch. Dave fought with tissue paper in zero-g, trying to clean himself up while the mother of an alien Jesus and the flat Earth preacher got into a loud fistfight, to general rejoicing of the audience.

‘Next on, *Tonight in Our Galaxy*,’ said the host with a wide smile, baring her pearl-white teeth. ‘Are the Wanderers hiding a doomsday weapon?’

Bai Fen waited for the diagnostics to finish, glancing at the rest of his crewmates, remaining in their seats. Shao and Mai sat with their eyes closed, virtual connector port implants in their temples blinking in unison - *probably playing a game or something*, he thought. Fu, however, was tapping his fingers nervously on the control panel.

‘You’re gonna break something like that, you know,’ said Bai, to interrupt the silence.

‘Yeah, right,’ shrugged Xuan. ‘I’m just stressed out, is all.’

‘Don’t worry, buddy,’ told him Fen, although he was also sweating. ‘Just look at the girls, they’re having fun.’

‘I envy their calm,’ agreed the young officer, wiping his round face with his sleeve. ‘I can’t stop thinking what they’ll do to us if we get caught.’

‘I know, but you’re not helping yourself or anyone else with that,’ agreed the engineer. ‘We made the step, now we have to follow through.’

‘Repeat it one more time, and I’m turning this boat around,’ threatened Fu jokingly.

‘Bet you fifty credits you aren’t.’

‘Fifty credits? When we sell the capsule, I won’t get out of bed for less than a million.’

‘That’s the spirit...’ started Fen, but was interrupted by his terminal beeping. Diagnostics were done, it seemed. He gave a final look to the external cameras - the thin, tadpole-like shape of their ship was holding the dark hull of the *Incitatus*, four limbs armed with electromagnetic trays firmly attached. ‘All ri-ight - Sōngshǔ is locked tight, we can go out.’

‘Finally! I need to stretch my legs - I’ll start working on the door.’

Xuan got up from his seat, squeezed his chubby body between the seats and entered the airlock cabin. Fen watched him put on the jumpsuit, struggle to reach the plasma cutter from the tool closet. Fu then turned upside down awkwardly and opened the hatch in the floor. Bright blue plasma flame lit the cabin as he started cutting the hull underneath them.

‘Aight girls, playtime’s over,’ said Bai poking Shao and Mai in the arms. ‘Back to reality with you.’

They opened their eyes at the same time - retinas rapidly shifting to adjust to reality. Implants flashed once more and went dark when they broke the connection.

‘Playtime’s over,’ repeated Bai, grinning widely. ‘We’re here.’

‘We weren’t playing-’

‘Mind your own business-’ Shao and Mai started at the same time, blushing fiercely - Mai’s cybereyes turning bright pink.

‘Sheesh, give me a break,’ Fen rolled his eyes confused. ‘We’re not in

the corp anymore, if you wanna play video games, play video games.'

'Yeah, you're right,' agreed Mai quickly. 'Video games.'

'Just not now,' said the engineer. 'We're heading out.'

They all got up and joined Fu in the airlock. The officer has finished his work, the cutter neatly placed back on its place in the tool cabinet. The small cabin was filled with various equipment and vacuum jumpsuits hanging on racks alongside the walls. The three crew quickly got ready, put on the vacuum sealed masks and suits and one after another dove into the hatch. The hull on the other side was neatly cut, all sharp edges smoothed out meticulously by Fu. They had no problem getting out, and soon enough the group looked around curiously - they were apparently in some sort of maintenance corridor intersection - pipes, valves and narrow catwalks leading in all directions. The pathways were dark and lit only by the crew's helmet visors illuminating the way ahead.

'You sure this is a safe spot, Mai?' asked Fu. 'What if they find us here?'

'No way,' replied the girl with a smug smile. 'I made a list and I checked it twice, no naughty kids coming 'round the corner.'

'Damn, too bad,' giggled Shao. 'I hope there's some good news, though.'

'You like bad boys then?' asked Bai, smirking.

'She didn't mean bad at life, loser,' cut in Mai sharply, eyes flashing green all of a sudden.

'Damn, what did I ever do to you,' scowled the engineer.

'Cut it out, you two,' interrupted Fu. 'We gotta keep our wits about, this is not a vacation.'

'You're right, sorry, buddy,' quickly agreed the engineer. 'I'll send the drones out, find someplace to lay low.'

He jumped up back to the ship. A few minutes later a dozen tiny, hexagonal drones armed with camera lenses on each side of their small hulls jetted down the intersections, mapping the labyrinth of corridors for the crew of *Sōngshǔ*. They observed the progress and camera feeds on their HUDs and mask displays, learning the layout of cabins and halls in real time as the drones explored the vessel. They quickly realised that they are in fact far from the areas of the

giant ship likely to be visited by the crew of prisoners for any reason. Their intersection was hidden in a maze of tunnels surrounding the hydraulics responsible for releasing and unloading the cargo of hundreds of ship-sized containers and canisters once the ship arrives at its destination. Barring some extremely unlikely malfunctions, there was really no reason why any of the imprisoned convicts would come here. The drones also located one of the ships ration stockpiles, located few hundred metres closer to the crew decks than they would like, but Mai managed to quickly hack the hatches and warehouse manifesto, allowing Fen to set up a drone from their own ship to steal food and water unnoticed. Finally, one of the drones located a tool shed equipped with emergency repair supplies in case of a catastrophic malfunction in this part of the leviathan, and the crew decided that the cabin suits them perfectly. It was relatively spacious, different tool compartments could be easily made to serve as separate bedrooms once the tools were cleared, and last but not least the cabin was nearby the water exchange valve and decontamination showers since it was meant for use during an emergency. The crew scrambled to gather up sleeping bags, portable tablets, tools, and whatever else they could think of from the *Sōngshǔ* but leaving the capsule behind. Finally, Fu sealed the hole in the *Incitatus*' hull with the plasma torch yet again, and they headed out to their new home away from home.

'Goodbye, little squirrel,' whispered Mai, looking back, pale in the blue light emitted by her eyes. 'See you soon.'

'Like hell, you are,' pretend-mocked her Shao. 'That ship's not bound to reach Europa in twenty years.'

'We aren't staying on it the whole way,' argued the hacker. 'Only a few months, 'till we're few sectors away and we can jump off around some other waystations.'

'That's no reason to get sentimental about a thin can,' stated the other female philosophically.

'Watch it, or I'll get sentimental on your can,' Mai's eyes turned from blue to dark red. 'What's your deal anyway?'

'Sorry, it's hard for me too,' admitted Zhenya. 'It feels like we did a ton of work, but it's just a start, kinda overwhelming, is all.'

'Yeah, I get it,' the computer specialist's eyes softened and shifted

back to blue. ‘We’ll make it, nobody will find us here.’

‘Sure as daylight,’ interjected Fen, turning around to face them and walking backwards. The road ahead displayed on his mask HUD, as well as lines of code or writing the girls couldn’t read, Cantonese letters mirrored in the reflection. ‘We’ll hop off this wreck soon, hop to Europa, sell the alien and none’s the wiser. And we’re all living happily ever after on a beach sipping vodka martinis.’

‘Pff, like anyone’s ever gonna sell you alcohol,’ teased him Shao, sticking her tongue out at him.

‘I’ll buy a bar and make them sell it to me,’ shrugged the engineer. ‘We’ll be rich.’

‘Fellow billionaires,’ said Fu, stopping and pointing at the hatch leading to the tool shed. ‘Welcome to your new mansions.’

End of Chapter 1

*“Incitatus” is set in a world of an upcoming tabletop
roleplaying game Project Aphelion.*

*The players take on the role of ship crews and factions making
business, exploring and fighting over vast spoils of the Solar System
in a realistic science fiction setting.*

*If you’d like to stay tuned to the development of Project Aphelion
and future works set in the System, visit:*

www.ProjectAphelion.com