

Incitatus

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Chapter 2

The missiles cut through the darkness of space, leaving behind a wisp of smoke. Deadly nuclear warheads aimed at the bright dot thousands of kilometers away in the void. The dot was an oval, flat corvette, shaped like a saucer bent in the rear, on board which alarms blazed in a flurry of light and sound. Dozens of holographic consoles displayed alerts, warning the crew about incoming nuclear missiles, as well as about lasers hitting the ship's sensors, energy usage and a plethora of other problems.

'Somebody shut that fucking noise down!' shouted captain Lederman. His face was red in anger, blue eyes tossing glares at the crew scurrying about in a hurry. He wiped his well-kept brown beard with a gloved hand, fixed the coat with a practised shrug and sat on the chair.

'Seriously, disconnect that crap,' he yelled. 'It's giving me a migraine.'

'Sorry captain,' replied the short Outer navigator, Dassler, then pressed a few buttons that silenced the noise. 'Damn pirates, firing salvos at people before second coffee.'

'Yeah, speaking of, maybe shoot those things down, will ya?'

'On it, boss,' saluted Dassler, took off his baseball cap and smacked the women passing him by with it. 'You heard the captain, Tomasson.'

Lara Tomasson ducked, grabbed the cap and put it on her head.

'It's mine now,' she said, sitting down on her chair. 'Told ya I'm

taking it if you ever do it again, Henrik.' The blue cap was too big for her, and the locks of red hair spilled on her neck when she dodged the navigator's grey hands, fumbling to get the hat back with no success.

'Come on, you two!' roared Lederman. 'The missiles!'

'Oh, yeah, on it,' retorted Tomasson, winking.

'Like gods damn children,' sighed the captain. 'Fabian, evasive maneuvers!'

Fabian Van Alst didn't reply, focused on the HUD displaying data on his plastic, green eyes. The pilot's gray, rubbery face was tense in focus, cables connecting his forehead to the ship's mainframe. The Outer pilot's frail body was strapped to the chair, while he was plugged to the cybernetic interface, busy operating the engines and plotting the trajectory.

The ship trembled when the main engines kicked in unison with the port thrusters. The corvette's flat hull rotated under the twin flames of nuclear fusion forcing it to slow down and fight the inertia that pushed it right in the path of the missiles, still minutes away from reaching their target. After what seemed an eternity of hanging in the balance, the thrust won against the craft's mass, and the corvette juttled forth, like a rock cast on still waters. Laser batteries sent short bursts toward the distant missiles and a flower of nuclear explosion grew in the blackness of space - enormous balls of fire and radiation barely tiny flickers from a distance.

'Got them, captain,' said Lara Tomasson calmly and blew a balloon from her chewing gum. 'Easy peasy - no idea why they even bothered.'

'Doesn't matter,' replied Lederman. 'Fabian, get the engines rolling and get close enough to board.'

'Aye, sir,' vocalized the pilot through the ship's loudspeaker system.

'Give me comms, Das,' commanded the captain. 'This is the Ranger corvette IRC Europa, captain Manuel W. Lederman speaking,' he began as soon as the navigator gave the thumbs up. 'Unregistered vessel, broadcast your IFF and prepare to be boarded.'

The captain repeated the call two more times, but no reply came.

'All right, the hard way it is,' he concluded. 'You know what to do, Fabian.'

The pilot didn't respond, but the corvette gained velocity rapidly and charged towards the pirate ship. As it flew, Europa shot out flak bursts to create a screen against the enemy laser attacks, while its own turrets pincushioned the enemy vessel with laser bursts. The pirate craft was much larger than the Europa, a bulky freighter jury-rigged with missile and laser turrets fired volley after volley of laser fire at the corvette closing in rapidly, trying to blind its sensors. No more missiles have been launched - sensor arrays of the pirate vessel were far from the full working condition and were disabled by the corvette's precise beams. The freighter tried to move out of the way of the laser bombardment from the smaller assailant, but the barrage was relentless, and soon the pirates were firing completely blind. Within half an hour the saucer-shaped ship flew over the pirates at a short distance of merely few hundred kilometers, launching volley after volley of explosive ordnance at the blinded foe. Blind and crippled, the pirate ship took the beating, many turrets destroyed when rows of explosions shook the ship. The Europa sped up and departed, the pirate vessel slowing down to turn around and give chase. A small, tear-shaped boarding shuttle clinging to the freighter's hull went unnoticed.

Attached to the larger craft's starboard like a leech, the shuttle was abuzz with activity. Six round combat drones cut a path through the metamaterial armor, plasma-torches extended on segmented arms melting the thick protective plates with an intense blue flame. Within minutes the breach was made, and the atmospheric pressure exploded from the freighter in a momentary rush of air. Drones rolled into the corridor, laying down suppressive fire and forcing a couple of men wearing mismatched armored jumpsuits to withdraw behind the corner.

Lederman, Tomasson, and Dassler followed behind the drones, wearing dark blue protective jumpsuits, each armed with a bulky rifle and a solid metaluminium shield. Their magnetically charged boots stuck securely to the deck, despite gravity being close to non-existent in the slowly accelerating spacecraft.

'Fire in the hole!' informed Dassler before launching a small grenade after the retreating crew. Oblong explosive bounced off the

wall, following the heat signatures. After a few seconds, a concussive blast of air shook the deck, and the three Rangers moved in to secure the unconscious ruffians protected by drones rolling in front of them, ready to fire at anything that moves.

‘Aight, bag ‘em,’ commanded Lederman. ‘We gotta move. Which way’s the bridge?’

‘That’d be... forward and the second left,’ replied Dassler, looking at a scan result displayed on his visor.

‘Roger, roger, head out, people,’ confirmed the captain and all three proceeded down the hull. The pirate freighter was dilapidated, walls covered in vulgar graffiti over apparent signs of a gunfight that must have taken place at least a few months ago. Damaged decks were full of various trash - plastic bags, food packaging, drops of oil and water floating through the hallways. The boarding party crossed multiple sections reinforced with rebars and beams, many holes patched up with sheets of mismatched armor plating, multiple pipes passing the sections without apparent reason - the freighter has clearly been repurposed for combat outside of a drydock and has seen numerous skirmishes. Tomasson, leading the party with a rifle at the ready right behind the drone line, stumbled onto the enemy group first.

The pirates didn’t notice the boarding party at first. A dozen of them were busy trying to patch up a gaping hole left in the hull by Europa’s flyby bombardment. Ranger officer left them no chance to surrender or orient in the situation - she opened fire. Drones immediately followed suit, a barrage of supersonic pellets hitting the enemy’s shins and knees knocking them off balance. Tomasson stepped forward, calmly taking aim at floating pirates and shooting them right in the solar plexus one by one with a short burst. Plastic rounds designed to flatten for maximum impact kicked the air and will to fight out of them in an instant, and Dassler rushed to disarm and tie the unlucky marauders together.

Soon after, a hastily built barricade composed of various computer parts, chairs, locker doors, and similar junk blocked the boarding party’s advance. Pirates clad in metal plates attached to their patched jumpsuits with wiring and plastic straps immediately opened fire at them, railguns destroying three of the drones with the first

salvo. Rangers retreated behind the corner, just as the next salvo of magnetically propelled spikes rumbled on the deck wall, piercing the rusty pipe.

‘Let me guess; it’s the only way to the bridge?’ asked the captain rhetorically.

‘Sure looks like it,’ confirmed the female Ranger. She fired another concussive grenade around the corner - the rush of oxygen expanding in the tight quarters ruptured the thin atmosphere, but failed to stun the resistance. Another salvo of rails thundered on the deck, followed by a frag grenade that almost got the Rangers by surprise and cost them another drone blown to pieces by the explosion when Das drove it on top of the explosive in last second.

‘I’m on it, hold tight,’ said the navigator, his almond-shaped, pitch-black eyes following a frantic stream of data on the face visor. The Outer’s helmet display erupted in a flurry of numbers and colors as he hacked into the spaceship’s mainframe. Tomasson shot a couple of bursts from her rifle at the barricade, using the wrecked drone as cover. Suddenly, the anti-fire systems in the freighter’s ceiling came alive, flooding the deck with a thick, non-flammable foam. Tomasson, Lederman and the remaining drones charged towards the barricade as soon as Das gave them the go-ahead.

Pirates raised their railguns to open fire at them regardless of the foam obscuring their vision. As soon as they pulled the triggers; however, they realized the weapons are jammed, their electronics not responding. Before the ruffians had a chance to understand what’s wrong, the Rangers crossed the blockade, and at that moment the pirate visors became opaque, displaying error messages in a blur of psychedelic colors. The two officers had no real difficulty incapacitating the defenders anymore - and after a quick exchange of blows, the defenders floated in the air with their hands and ankles tied together behind their backs. Dassler ordered the drones to cut down the closed hatch leading to the bridge.

As soon as the plasma torch created an opening, the Rangers burst into the cabin, weapons ready to fire.

The bridge was dark, filled with machinery in varying degree of disrepair. Many panels have been stripped, likely recently. A vortex of

assorted trash floated in the cabin, slowly rotating in a chaotic spiral has been disrupted by the Rangers taking a position in the center of the cabin, ready for an ambush. No attack came, however, and the only person outside of them was sitting motionlessly in a captain's chair, hands raised in surrender.

The obese woman wearing a jumpsuit with skull insignia had a scarred face, clearly visible thanks to a light inside her helmet. Black hair fell on her face, over a prominent nose, cybernetic eyes looking at the Ranger party – with visible annoyance.

'Fine, fine, I surrender. Jesus, talk about overreacting.' she said snarkily.

'Good, lay down your weapons and disable the ship's AI,' started Lederman. 'You're under arrest for piracy and attempted murder of the crew of MV Gloria.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know. Been there,' replied the pirate captain dismissively. 'Been there, you know - also I already said I surrender, are you deaf?'

'I was just stating that for the protocol,' retorted the Ranger. 'Gotta file the paperwork.'

'Yeah, yeah, fucking bureaucracy,' snorted the ruffian.

'I know, right?' agreed Lederman. 'Anyway, we're gonna haul you to the station, and leave a buoy so somebody can come to pick the ship up.'

'Thanks, wouldn't want anyone to steal it.' The pirate rose from her chair, paying the Ranger no mind despite the guns trained at her chest. 'Let's get on with it - the name's Pam by the way.'

'You're not the one giving the orders here, Pam,' interrupted the captain.

'Ok, what do you want to do then, boss?' asked the pirate ironically, putting her muscular arms on her hips. Lederman stared at her in confusion, red on the face. Dassler chuckled quietly in his helmet, Tomasson just rolled her eyes.

'Oh, just shut up,' said the captain exasperated. 'And tell me how did you even know the mining ship would be going to the Helikaon station through this relay.'

'Which is it, then?' chuckled the pirate.

‘Both!’ growled Lederman angrily.

‘Well, obviously - I was sold the intel.’ Shrugged the obese woman.

‘By whom? Who even knew it would be here?’ asked Tomasson, surprised.

‘That’s for me to know and you to find out, if you ask nicely’ chuckled the pirate. ‘Maybe take me out to dinner?’

‘The only place you’re going is the brig,’ the captain cut her short. ‘Take that garbage in, I’m done talking.’

Zhenya breathed out the air, his eyes closed. He stepped slowly forward, sword raised, bare feet gently touching the cold floor. Music of ghuzeng chimes washed over his ears, blood seemingly pulsing to the rhythm of a quiet drum. He let the darkness envelop him, breathing deeply - meditating in motion, swapping from one tai-chi pose to the next with fluid grace. The attack came without warning, from both sides at once. Blades swung with lightning speed aimed toward Yuan’s neck and waist. Without opening his eyes or losing the rhythm of his meditation, the attacked man parried both blades, his inhuman reflexes making the attacking men’s perfectly honed technique look clumsy by contrast. In a swift, dance-like motion Zhenya leaped into the air, pushing himself off of an opponent’s thigh with a kick. Cracked bone sounded like a gunshot amid the chimes’ rapid crescendo. Zhenya swirled in the air, cutting down with force. Hapless attacker parried the swing and stepped back, his curved blade swung in a quick riposte, but Zhenya bent his back towards the floor as he landed. His foe’s blade cut millimeters away from Yuan’s face, but the attacker had no chance to cut downwards - Yuan’s foot kicked under the man’s kneecap, which cracked with a loud, gut-wrenching noise. Zhenya jumped back on his feet, assuming the final tai-chi pose and opened his eyes.

‘Good training, esteemed colleagues.’ he said. ‘Please, feel free to visit the infirmary.’

‘Thank you, captain’ replied the men in unison, and allowed the medical drone to lift them. Both were sweating profusely from

the strain as well as the effort of hiding their pain. Zhenya paid no more attention to either of them. He sheathed his sword and left the training room, headed towards the showers. Just as he left the room, however, a message notification popped up in his vision. Without slowing down, the captain displayed it on his cyber-altered eyes.

‘Dear captain, forgive the intrusion on your daily schedule, but we have arrived at ZMV 174844B12’s landing site,’ said the captain’s adjutant, his young face hovering to the left of Zhenya’s vision.

‘Very well, dear colleague,’ replied Yuan. ‘I assume you hailed the crew already?’

‘Of course, dear captain. There is no answer. It would appear to be abandoned.’

‘Interesting. I will join you presently and lead the contact team.’

‘Is that wise, captain?’ adjutant’s face expressed nothing but concern.

‘Please refrain from questioning my orders, dear colleague.’ Zhenya’s quiet answer was leveled and polite, but it electrified the adjutant immediately.

‘Of course, esteemed captain, my apologies,’ he said, bowing deeply. Yuan frowned at the display.

‘Must you expose me to the top of your head unbidden, dear colleague?’

‘My apologies, captain. I meant no offense.’

‘None taken, dear adjutant, none taken,’ replied Zhenya, closing the connection. One must always keep the underlings on their toes, lest they walk all over you, he thought.

After a short visit in the gym’s locker room, Zhenya quickly headed towards Yusan’s hangar bay, sending directives and orders through his HUD. Grey corridors passed before his eyes, virtual arrows pointing towards the destination, even though Yuan knew the way by heart and paid no attention to the ship’s systems’ attempts to aid him. Within minutes, the captain emerged from the elevator in the ship’s cavernous hangar bay. A squad of ten troopers, armed with state-of-the-art railguns and wearing white armored space suits was already waiting in front of a predatory-looking angular boarding shuttle, as well as the captain’s adjutant and a suit of command powered armor

hanging from a sturdy loading frame. Bulky battery with a laser sail panel on the armor's back as well as the general bulk of the massive suit reminded the captain of early, 20th century space suits used by the USA back in the day - resemblance was uncanny, except the ancient space suits were not two-and-a-half-metre tall armored monsters armed with missile batteries and lasers. Bulky charging drone armed with a microwave laser battery stood on six thick, segmented legs right behind the armor frame. Zhenya knew the powered armor suit was an unstoppable weapon, but it only carried a limited amount of power in its battery. It needed to be recharged from the ship's reactor often else the suit runs dry and turns from a pinnacle of infantry warfare into so much scrap metal.

'Isn't this a little too much, dear adjutant?'

'It's protocol, esteemed captain,' replied the man, bowing slightly, heavy armored suit obstructing his movement. The captain observed his aide with narrowed eyes. The red light of the suit's HUD gave his face a sinister look, contrasting the immaculate white of his vacuum suit. Zhengdao Corporation's logo shone brightly on his chest, neon yellow and blue flashing as he moved.

'It's a mining crew gone rogue, not a pirate corvette armed to the teeth,' said Zhenya, but stepped into the open suit of armor waiting for him. Immediately the harness inside the suit tightened itself around him, and he could hear the quiet whirring of servomotors as they adjusted to his body. Suit's systems came online one by one, replacing his normal, simple cybernetic heads-up-display with a complex array of windows informing the wearer about the state of the suit, ammunition, comm relays between the commander and the ship as well as squad channels and links to each soldier separately. Energy level scales, tactical maps triangulated by the armor's sensors, ZMV 174844B12's schematics and camera feeds from the shuttle and soldiers overwhelmed Zhenya's vision for a moment before he adjusted and minimized unwanted panels. The captain's aide waited until his supervisor is fully suited.

'It's true, we're not expecting much resistance,' he said finally. 'Nonetheless, the crew declared mutiny, and as such should be treated with extreme prejudice, according to the protocol, esteemed captain.'

‘The protocol is there for a reason,’ agreed the captain. ‘But it’s more of a general guideline. In some cases, the economy of action and prudence take precedence over established routine, dear adjutant.’

‘That is a fair point, esteemed captain.’ The aide bowed again, politely. ‘I simply presumed it would be unwise to seem weak in the face of a blatant mutiny, in front of the crew as well as the board of directors.’

‘Very well, Mister Sun,’ the captain gave up with a sigh, using the adjutant’s name for the first time. ‘Let’s head out with the entire execution platoon, nuke them from orbit while at it, why don’t we?’

Jin Sun watched Zhenya lead the squad into the shuttle calmly, struggling to hold the smile of triumph at bay before following them into the craft. As soon as everyone was on board, the assault shuttle rotated on a platform to face the opening hangar bay. The vessel’s white armor contrasted with the darkness of space, juxtaposing the bright holographic Zhengdao Corp. logo jutting out of the armored hull, cutting between the black void and the clean hull. Magnetic rails on which the boarding ship rested powered up and shone with a red of warning lights for a few seconds. As soon as it reached the full power, the mass accelerator released the charge, tossing the shuttle into space in the blink of an eye.

Despite its enormous velocity, it took the shuttle over an hour before the mining vessel docked to an asteroid thousands of kilometers away. The Yusan kept its distance to remain outside of the harvester’s sensor range, making sure that whoever waits in the silent miner is unaware of the shuttle speeding towards it through the void.

Zhenya stood in the shuttle’s boarding bay, comfortable in his armored suit. The soldiers on both sides were submerged in tanks of inertia gel, protecting them from the rapid acceleration of many g’s, that would otherwise crush their bodies into a bloody pulp inside their armored vacuum suits. The captain himself was unmoved by the acceleration pushing on his armored suit - the inside of the suit was not only filled with gel, but his own body was also strapped tightly in a battle harness. The suit’s armor rivaled that of the shuttle, but guaranteed better protection, due to the powered armor’s smaller frame. Yuan silently listened to the soldiers’ nervous chatter - the

troops were tense, as always before boarding a potentially hostile vessel. The captain had no reason to share their anxiety - not only he didn't deem the mining craft's crew an actual threat, but he was also much safer in his command suit than the troopers. Even if the rebellious employees mounted heavy weaponry on their ship and fired it successfully, destroying the assault shuttle, Zhenya would most likely survive the blast. Zhengdao Corporation's executive command power armor line was the definite top of the line in personal protection.

As they neared the lonely asteroid, the captain brought up the sensor readings onto his HUD. The harvester sat quietly on the rock's irregular surface. Shuttle detected a steady pulse of the locator beacon broadcasting the target's position to any Zhengdao vessel in range, but the ship was cold. Sensors reported no visible damage or aberrant energy signatures, but the mining ship didn't react in any way or respond to hailing, besides the automatic greeting from the onboard computer.

'Esteemed captain, we're in boarding range,' reported the squad leader, a serious woman who didn't participate in her troops' conversation during the flight. 'Should we cut through directly to crew quarters as per protocol?'

'No need, squad leader Shao,' replied Zhenya before his adjutant had time to cut in. 'The airlock will do fine.'

'But esteemed captain, what if the rebels set up an ambush?' protested Jin Sun.

'Then the soldiers will deal with the situation or die trying. I find your assessment of the situation to be overly dramatic, dear adjutant.'

'Very well, esteemed captain,' acknowledged the woman. 'You heard the captain, colleagues. Get ready to knock on the door.'

The soldiers exited their capsules and set up in assault formation as their ship docked to the larger vessel. They waited in silence as the atmosphere and pressures on both vessels adjusted. The airlock doors opened eventually, revealing a dark corridor of the ZMV 174844B12's main deck. Flashbang and smoke grenades launched by the assault squad rained down the empty deck, filling it with dense smoke among the concussive flashes. Boarding squad ran right into the chaos, their

railguns prepped and ready to fire at the smallest sign of movement or resistance - but encountering none. Sarah Shao released a dozen round scout drones which immediately dispersed propelled by their small jet engines, searching every nook and cranny of the mining ship while the squad set up a defensive perimeter. Zhenya stepped onto the deck, followed by his aide and the charger drone. He watched the video footage and atmospheric sensor readings fed onto his HUD by the drones flurrying about.

‘It would seem your worries were indeed unfounded, my dear mister Sun,’ said Yuan on an open channel, for all the soldiers to hear. ‘Perhaps it would be wise to leave complex matters in proper hands in the future?’

‘As you say, esteemed captain,’ replied the aide through his teeth. ‘This could very well have been an ambush; I was merely following protocol. I deemed it wise to be cautious, regardless of whether or not your...’

‘That is quite enough, dear mister Sun,’ interjected the captain. ‘You deem and presume far more than is healthy for a man in your position.’

‘Apologies, esteemed captain.’

The drones finished their run over the vessel, reporting no activity whatsoever and only the nominal power levels of a ship on standby. The troopers dispersed in pairs, scouring the entire vessel, but finding nothing. The whole crew of the ZMV 174844B12’s was gone, along with their belonging and food supplies. Zhenya spent some time examining the hole drilled into the asteroid surface in detail, while his aide cataloged the ship’s inventory to determine what went missing exactly. Empty corridors and decks of the mining vessel have been very clearly abandoned, but not in a rush. Someone took their time stripping the ship of any supplies but didn’t salvage the electronics or half-full cargo hold, all the drones were also in place, performing their usual maintenance duties or waiting on standby mode. The only piece of hardware missing was a small jumper craft used for emergencies and supply runs during long deployment periods when the harvester was strip mining an asteroid.

After Sarah Shao’s final report made it abundantly clear that the

ship was left behind by the mutineers who did nothing to damage the company property except for stealing supplies and the jumper craft, Zhenya brought up the mining vessel's interface onto his HUD. He used the mothership captain's password to override security measures put in place by the crew's network specialist and undelete archived contents, then accessed the logs. He scanned the records quickly, catching the essential phrases from the text, leaving detailed inspection for later. He read about Mai Wren's accidental acquiring of the chart leading to the asteroid, followed by many vivid discussions between the crew. The captain held his disappointment at bay having learned that his daughter was, in fact, the most decisive proponent of mutiny together with the mining ship's network specialist Wren. The two women defeated any counterarguments from the other crew members, instigating Fu's brash message and the act of mutiny. Yuan then observed with interest the camera feed of the excavation and the discovery the crew made under the asteroid's surface, and listened to the recording of their packing and leaving the ZMV 174844B12 behind on board the Songshu. Eventually, the captain logged off and sealed the logs with his password override.

'We're going back to Yusan, dear crew.' he said over the public comm channel. 'There is nothing left for us here.'

'Did you discover anything of use in the ship's logs?' inquired his aide.

'Unfortunately, Fu turned out to be cleverer than we expected.' replied Zhenya, shaking his head. 'He commanded their networker to delete the logs and format the drives. There is no trace left.'

'How shall we proceed then, esteemed captain?' asked Shao.

'Do not fret, squad leader,' reassured her Yuan. 'There is only one place they could have gone...'

The massive hull of Incitatus drifted majestically through the darkness. The triangular vessel took its first step on the long fall towards the sun but haven't yet left the Oort Cloud - it was yet to pass the point of no return before the Great Beyond would cut off the

prisoners from any hope of escape. After short-circuiting his manacles and freeing himself, as well as freeing his co-prisoners, Milosh figured it's probably better to carry on as if the cuffs still held them at bay. The gang spent their time on the ship well, learning what they could about the surroundings and company on board of the prison barge. Under the watchful and ever-present eyes of cameras and security drones and turrets, the prisoners spent their days following an unchanging routine.

After the breakfast in a cantina, together with three other gangs of prisoners, Milosh's group was forced to endure six hours of holostreams, implanting them with maintenance and repair skills mixed with propaganda and a mind-numbing stream of subliminal messaging conditioning them to be docile and curb aggressive tendencies. Stepan's cybereyes served him well, filtering away invisible laser beams carrying the impulses. Giant Outer man, Otis, however, was not so lucky, getting more and more complacent every day. At least Spider, Muldoon, Chatty and Stick also found a way to keep lucid, so Milosh was not entirely on his own.

After the conditioning, the prisoners were always herded towards various tasks on board the enormous vessel; usually, some task requiring a lot of time to finish, and not much in the way of actual skill. Zero-g throughout the ship and lack of mag-boots or other means of securing themselves to the floor caused additional difficulties, but the prisoners had to manage - the drones would not let them return to their cells before the job was done. There was always something leaking and cracking on the decks, and while maintenance biodrones fluttered here and there on their segmented squid tentacles as they went about their business, menial work was left for the prisoners. Mostly to keep them occupied, they were sure.

Any moment free from labor Milosh spent planning and thinking - security drones followed the prisoners everywhere, their simple programming preventing any deviation. Day after day the metal guards followed the gang on their mag-drives allowing them to quickly get everywhere on board to poke the crew with their shock batons and threaten with assault shotguns at any sign of delay or defiance.

Unlike the smart and adaptive biodrones, the security was relatively

simple but effective - don't let the prisoners out of sight and keep them moving so they never get the chance to scheme. Together with the manacles taking away the prisoners' freedom of movement, it was a pretty foolproof system, Milosh was forced to admit. Even with the possibility of removing the manacles at any time, his gang didn't have many options. Security drones and turrets hanging from rails in the ceiling could easily overpower the small group of rebels - and they had a sparse few options to change that dynamic since their contact with other crews was limited to meals in the mess hall, where talking was punished with an instant shock from a security drone.

Stepan and his gang were nothing if not creative, however. As day cycles passed, they devised simple means of communication during mealtimes - writing messages with Milosh's trophy pen on the food trays distributed by biodrones proved to be quite effective as the drones couldn't tell the difference between small objects like forks and pencils. Al being moved away from Stepan's cell and joined with another group helped too - the smuggler slowly but surely found ways to disable the restraints on the rest of the prisoners. Soon they established a slow but effective means of communication and the mercenary learned that the other prisoners were a similar bunch to his own - freelance crews, smugglers, pirates, political prisoners, and mutineers. It was hardly surprising - anybody sentenced to two decades of isolation on board the Incitatus has stepped on somebody's toes quite hard or was a threat to the safety of freight lanes and trade through the System. They just needed to wait for the right moment to break free and take over the ship from their machine wardens.

Milosh's memories were still hazy concerning recent events, and he often wondered which of those categories was he in - and what exactly earned him the spot on the ship. It was a problem for another time; the escape came first. And it must come soon - if the prison barge crosses the line from the Cloud to the Great Beyond, there will be no point in escaping. Vast emptiness between the Solar System and the Oort Cloud spanned many AUs, and it was devoid of any activity beside spaceships crossing it back and forth using the Solar Highway. No waystations, no asteroids, no hope for rescue or accidentally stumbling onto any other vessel, discounting an incredible stroke of luck.

The prisoners came up with and rejected dozens of ideas, each more outlandish than the next as the days passed - desperation forcing them to consider even the craziest scenarios. Time passed slowly in the dark, claustrophobic labyrinth of scarcely lit corridors, and the plots helped pass the time when the drones herded them from one deck filled with hydraulic piping and machinery to the next each day. Often the prisoners stumbled onto open shelves in supply cabinets, tools and food rations missing, equipment in disarray causing the biodrones to run amok trying to deal with the unexpected. Their squid brains were more adaptive than simplistic programming of the security machines, but they lacked the abstract thought required to come up with solutions to complex problems, so the prisoners were often called in to clean up.

This morning started no different. After the breakfast of dry rations and flat water, Milosh's crew readied for their re-education. Security drone hovered towards them, the low buzzing of the magnetic drive announcing its approach. The drone's broad, triangular body stopped right before Milosh, an array of cameras and sensors glared at the mercenary with its dead gaze. As always, Stepan couldn't help but stare the machine down menacingly.

Milosh fought the urge to slam the heavy shackles into the drone's chassis and followed its lead instead. Rest of his gang followed in line closed by another hovering machine, and the prisoners slowly headed towards today's task, each taking a toolbox from the maintenance cabin.

The party crossed many dark and narrow corridors, escorted by a twin turret following them on a railing in the ceiling. Milosh soon realized they were headed towards a rarely visited area of the ship - the prisoner cells were located near the bow of the barge, and the drones usually kept them there. Ventures deeper into the vast labyrinth of Incitatus's bowels were quite rare.

As far as Milosh could gather, the majority of the ship's mass aside from the cargo were powerful stopping engines and their fuel, intended to activate once the barge arrives at its destination. Maintenance corridors and cabins were relatively scarce there, and the prisoners had no business there unless something severely out of

the ordinary has happened - as it seemed to be the case now.

The drone led the gang up towards the craft's starboard gunnel, to a small hanger filled with forklift drones - their robust frames dark and inert, not intended to activate again until the end of the spaceship's journey. Milosh and his gang immediately realized the reason they were lead there - the entire hold was filled with various tools floating in a cloud, slowly rotating between the forklift charging racks. All of the tool closets were open, Milosh noticed, but the magnetic lock lights on the doors shone brightly indicating they haven't malfunctioned. Oblong bodies of biodrones flurried back and forth in that mess, metallic tentacles grabbing multiple tools at the same time and placing them back on the shelves. The magnetic surface should hold the equipment in place once the doors have been opened, but the locks indicated that they are still locked, despite this not being the case, so tools just floated out of their sockets and back into the hangar. Biodrones lacked the ability to disbelieve the input from the locks and just carried on gathering more tools to put on the shelves - stuck in a loop of repetition.

Security machines displayed the command to clean up the hangar, and the prisoners took to work. Milosh kicked himself off the airlock frame, floating towards the center of the tool vortex. He spotted a motionless oblong shape in one of the shelves, and quickly turned away from it, immediately deciding this is the chance they were waiting for.

With a few practiced maneuvers, Stepan reached his destination, manacles doing little to reduce his agility. The mercenary looked carefully around the bay as he floated, passing a flock of confused biodrones. Muldoon and Otis followed the mercenary and started gathering the tools. Once he was sure the security drones are focusing most of their attention on them, Stepan gestured towards Spider on the other side of the hangar bay.

'Yo, Pie. Check the third closet from the port; I think I see something there,' he said, confident that his comrade would understand the hint while the drone's programming won't see anything wrong with his words.

'Aye, aye, baws,' replied Spider, mock saluting to an extent allowed

by the manacles. He looked inside the shelf, rummaged there for a while, first pushing his toolbox inside so to keep it from floating away. After a few minutes of work, The Outer removed his kit and closed the shelf, with some difficulty. He grinned widely, lifting his thumb towards Milosh.

‘Nothing there, nothing interesting at all,’ he said. ‘Just some rags, baws.’

‘Oh well, such a shame,’ replied the merc. He returned the Outer’s gesture and got back to gathering the tools before the drone poked him with a shock baton. The five-person prisoner gang worked slower than they could - there was no hurry. If they finished the job here quickly, the drones would assign them some other pointless task. The biodrones weren’t smart enough to solve a complex problem themselves, but once they say the humans deal with the situation, they could replicate the results and learned to lock the shelves, which made the work go much faster than Milosh and the gang would have hoped. Once the hangar bay was cleaned, the security drones corralled the workers again, waiting only to let them take their toolboxes before leaving the bay. With some surprise Stepan noticed that the service drones remained in the bay, their tentacles scanning the walls and hatches with short laser bursts - they were clearly confounded. He didn’t have a lot of time to take a good look at what they were doing, however. Security drones shoved him out to the corridor and led the whole group away. Instead of taking them to another place of labor, however, the machines herded the prisoners back to their common cell and left, locking the hatch after them. The prisoners were left alone; the drones didn’t even take the time to make them put away their kits.

‘Well, that’s new’ said Muldoon, breaking the silence. ‘Think it was something I said?’

‘Maybe you offended its mother, or perhaps it’s the body odor?’ suggested Otis, scratching his bald gray head in feigned wonder.

‘They have something else in mind, I reckon,’ added Spider. ‘That mess there was no malfunction. I can tell a hacked terminal when I see one.’

‘Damn right, Pie,’ agreed Milosh. ‘We may not have much time

though; did you grab it?’

‘Sure did, baws.’

‘Grab what, what’s going on?’ interjected Stick, nervously twitching and snapping his fingers. ‘I don’t like this whole business. Smells fishy.’

‘Oh, that’s just my toolbox,’ giggled Pie, and opened the chest. A biodrone floated out into view; its elongated body motionless, segmented metal tentacles tightly bent in the agony-like state. It’s sensor array bulbs were dim, with no sign of usual activity. The artificial skin of the light-gray chassis was broken by a long construction nail piercing it across the entire width. It was dug in deep into drone’s body, almost all the way through. Thick, oily blood gathered around the wound in an irregular bubble.

‘Damn you, man,’ exclaimed Otis, hopping up in surprise and floating up to the cell’s ceiling. ‘Warn me next time beforehand if you may, I almost soiled myself!’

‘And almost flew away, compadre,’ laughed Muldoon, catching the Outer and dragging him back down. ‘Good thing the window’s closed, or we’d have to catch you on a lasso.’

‘Cut it out, people,’ barked Milosh, gesturing with his head towards the beady eyes of a camera in the corner of the cell. ‘We don’t know when they will come for us, stop screwing around and pay attention. Pie, can you get this thing back online and reprogram it?’

‘Should be easy enough, baws. It’s not badly damaged, looks like it just turned off, so it doesn’t bleed out all over the place.’

‘How did it get spiked is the real question,’ said Chatty, looking at the drone up close.

‘Maybe it got damaged while cleaning the mess?’ wondered Otis.

‘I bet it was geeked by the same people who hacked the shelves,’ retorted Stepan. ‘Questions will have to wait - Pie, get on it, Muldoon, Stick, stand watch. Otis, Chatty, help me with the panel.’

Milosh turned around and gestured the two men to the sides of the bunk. The mercenary then grabbed hold of the frame and strained his cybernetic arms to lift it. Servomotors whirred as he pulled, his leg digging into the deck. Slowly, the two-story double bunk lifted from the ground with a loud creak of abused metal. The floor panel

loosened by the prisoners during long downcycles in the cell released from its bedding and floated slowly up, revealing a crawlspace under the floor, leading into the darkness of a maintenance shaft.

Meanwhile, Spider opened the biodrone's chassis, revealing gelatinous muscles and meat of the creature inside. The squid's eyes and parts of the cartilaginous head capsule have been surgically removed, wires connecting the sensor arrays to nerve endings in the empty eye sockets. The creature's brain was covered with a metallic alloy dome. Spider gently lifted the thin shielding, revealing a living brain lobotomized and connected to a sophisticated computer, processors, and microchips cooled by the drone's blood flow. The Outer spat with disgust, saliva immediately forming a floating bubble, then wiped his tattooed lips.

'I fucking hate biodrones,' he said. 'I mean, look at this fuckin' thing.'

'Looks kinda like my ex-wife,' added Muldoon, squatting next to Spider. 'And smells like her, too.'

'Weren't you supposed to be on the lookout, compadre?' asked Spider, removing his manacles to move freely.

'Riiight, yeah,' agreed Muldoon but didn't move.

Tattooed Outer technician freed from his restraints reached to his temple and unscrewed a cap the size of his fingernail. The cap's tip was disguised like a mole the same color and texture as Spider's rubbery skin and attached to the end of a nanofiber cable. Pie gently pulled, tugging a good half a meter out of the compartment in his head, then pulled the cap away to uncover the universal interface connector at the end of it. He then plugged himself into the biodrone's revealed CPU, and his eyes rolled upwards.

'That's just nasty,' commented Muldoon. Spider didn't reply, his mind jacked into the computer, fingers twitching randomly to the rhythm of electrical impulses. Muldoon watched with a mixture of awe and disgust as the squid drone's metallic tentacles joined the dance, man and machine connected through a neural interface into one being.

'Hurry up, boys,' ushered them Stick, his hands laid flat on the hatch. 'I feel vibrations; the tin-cans coming back.'

‘Almost... done, just... need a minute,’ said Spider, his voice breaking from exhaustion.

‘We don’t have a minute, for fuck’s sake!’ thin Outer twitched nervously, but Pie already dove deeper into his work and was oblivious to his surroundings.

‘We need to put everything as it was, quickly,’ cried Otis with exasperation, pulling down on the bed.

‘What’s the plan? What’s the plan?’ panicked Chatty. ‘Do we have an emergency plan?’

The hatch opened suddenly, sliding aside to reveal the smooth angular body of a security drone. Its sensor array’s glass eye scanned the cell, assessing the situation. The machine’s shock batons immediately sparkled with electricity, the thick barrel of an assault shotgun targeted Spider and the machine’s magdrive buzzed as it charged to eliminate the threat of mutiny. Milosh launched himself, pushing off of the cell wall with both legs. The mercenary ripped off his shackles and swung them at the drone. It parried with a shock baton, the shotgun turned towards Stepan, and a rapid barrage of flak shards rained on the merc’s unarmored body. Giant Otis slammed the bunk into the machine’s chassis, causing it to spin violently. The barrage continued, supersonic flak shards bombarding everything, cutting the bed into shreds in seconds. The thunder of autofire drowned the prisoners’ screams, bubbles of thick blood spread everywhere with a sticky mist. Milosh grabbed hold of the drone and tore the sensors away with his bare hands. Shock batons stabbed into the merc’s gut, causing him to shake and fly away violently. Stepan hit the ceiling with a loud thud, the drone stabilized its flight and aimed at him, ready to send another salvo. Before it could fire, Chatty’s thin body hit the machine from the side.

‘Just die already, you piece of shit!’ yelled the pilot, hitting the armored chassis repeatedly with a wrench. The cabin once more drowned in the roar of gunfire, Chatty’s chest exploded into a bloody pulp; muscle and bones strewn all over the cell, bouncing like pebbles off the walls before floating away. Muldoon rammed into the machine from below, once more destabilizing its flight. Red-haired smuggler kicked away from the drone, desperately trying to avoid the deadly

stream of shards, tangled together with it and spinning around the ceiling. Suddenly, a metal bar torn away from the bunk bed slammed into the drone, bending the armored plates and sending it flying into a wall. Milosh followed it with a roar of fury, holding the bar in both hands and mauling the machine like an angry gorilla, servos in his cyberarms whirling loudly. The chassis bent more and more every time a hit landed. Eventually, it cracked, revealing the mechanism inside. Milosh grabbed the edge of the crack with his left hand, surrounded the chassis with his legs and stabbed directly into the blinded drone's circuitry.

Something exploded inside with a thud, and the damaged drone fell silent, inert. Harvey Otis struggled to regain balance, blood flowing from his shredded arm surrounding him in a crimson mist of bubbles.

'Our emergency plan was real shitty,' said Muldoon, breaking the deafening silence.

'Tell me about it,' agreed Milosh, examining his wounds. Stepan's side was bleeding, wounded by the flak from the shotgun. His right arm was unresponsive, electronics probably damaged by the shock, if not worse. Eyes and ears were bleeding, and he could barely hear the red-haired smuggler.

'Could be worse though,' he said finally. 'That thing almost did us in real good, am I right, Otis?' When Harvey didn't reply, Milosh turned to the giant. Otis was drifting aimlessly amid the bloody mess, holding the gore that was Chatty in his arms. Paying no heed to the bodily fluids staining his orange jumpsuit, Harvey cradled the corpse, his tears mixing with the floating blood.

'Shit, man...' started Stick, but fell silent. Muldoon shook his head, pale on his face. Stepan approached the Outer, laying a hand on his shoulder.

'Chatty's gone, Harvey,' he said gently. 'There's nothing we can do.'

Spider unplugged the cable, letting it pull itself back into his skull. The biodrone activated its engine again, spike still in the wound, but no more blood flowing. Outer hacker blinked a few times, then looked around. His jaw dropped at the sight of the carnage around him.

'What the fuck happened here, baws?' he asked, baffled.

'We had company,' replied Milosh in a soft voice. 'We gotta bounce

now; there's more where that came from. We can't take on another one.'

'There'll probably be more than one, I reckon,' added Muldoon. 'Come on, Otis, leave him, and let's go.' When the giant Outer didn't react, Milosh and Muldoon gently wrestled Chatty's remains from his embrace and led to the maintenance shaft after Spider and his biodrone. Stick followed suit, pulling the floor panel back on its place to cover their escape route at least a bit. Chatty's mutilated remains hovered in the cell, spinning slowly. Blood, gore, the security drone's motionless wreck, and the debris revolved around him. The tranquility was disturbed moments later when four more security drones charged into the cell, shock batons and guns at the ready. The machines' glass eyes scanned the room, analyzing the scene - then called the biodrones to locate the prisoners' escape route.

The prisoners crawled through the tight ducts, following Spider's drone leading them to the gunnel of the ship. Narrow pathways filled with pipes and sharp edges tore at their orange prison suits, naked feet and hands soon bled from multiple cuts and scratches. After what seemed like hours, the biodrone stopped in front of a ventilation grate. Its segmented tentacles quickly disassembled the lock, and the gang floated into the hangar bay. Forklifts were still secure in their charging racks, but all the biodrones were gone, and the hall was dark, silent, and cold.

'Aight, Stick, Otis, Muldoon, get us some power tools,' commanded Milosh. 'We need some weapons at least.'

'Are we gonna take on the drones, baws?' asked Spider when the men left to wrench the drawers open.

'Not unless we have to,' replied the mercenary. 'Send your pet to let Al know it's time to bounce, and we're gonna look around.'

'What are we looking for?' Muldoon drifted to join them, hauling a couple of sets of nailguns and plasma cutters.

'First of all, whoever it was that hacked them drawers in the first place,' said Stepan, looking around.

'Why the hell do we care about some stowaways, man?' protested the red-haired smuggler. 'We gotta get the shit outta this can.'

'Exactly, the fuck are some junkies good for us?' joined him Stick.

‘Think for a second. Whoever they are, they got here somehow,’ schooled them Milosh. ‘And that means we can use their ship to get the shit outta here.’

‘The man’s right, you know,’ said Otis in support. ‘We find them, and remove ourselves from the deck before the drones even find us.’

‘What about Al and the rest?’ Muldoon wasn’t convinced.

‘We grab Al and whoever fits on board of whatever the hitchhikers used to tag the barge,’ replied the giant Outer pirate calmly. ‘Chatty would want that.’

‘Yeah, Chatty didn’t die for no nothin’, no way,’ agreed Spider, nodding energetically.

Before anyone could argue any more, they heard the hangar airlock’s outer hatch opened, red light signaling the passage is open, and the countdown is ongoing.

‘Quick, bounce!’ urged them Milosh. ‘The drones found us!’

‘It’s too late; we can’t get back into the shaft!’ whispered Otis.

‘Shit, hide then, over there!’ commanded Stepan and kicked himself off towards the lock. The mercenary took cover behind the airlock frame, high-pressure nailgun in hand. He managed just in time, too - the red light turned into a bright green, and the door opened. A dark shape drifted into the hangar bay, slowly and carefully.

In a split second, Milosh grabbed the edge of the airlock frame, pushed himself onto the intruder with force and fired his nailgun repeatedly. To his surprise, the shape cried out in a high pitched, female voice in a burst of pain and terror. The copper scent of blood filled the room. Milosh lit the nailgun’s beam and looked right into the still, black eyes of a young, olive-skinned girl drifting away from him, mouth open in shock.

End of Chapter 2

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