

The Allday Gift

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Nova Montreal

‘It’s just maths,’ Dorcas said.

‘Everything is just maths,’ Qaqqaq muttered.

It was the morning after Nbaro’s wedding, and no one was thinking or moving at full capacity except, naturally, Horatio Dorcas. And to him was due the idea. Or perhaps it might be called THE IDEA.

‘Listen,’ he said to a magnificent suite full of drunk spacers. ‘Right here—I’ll show you—a Hin ship took a full radiation dose. Watch it—I’m running the simulation on your tabs but its all data downloaded from *Athens* and confirmed from *Dubai*. Morosini and Saladin both confirm my maths.’

Nbaro, who had had other plans for her wedding night than a lecture on the mathematics of spaceflight from her new husband, sighed. But rather than struggle, she rummaged in the velvet couch on which she was lying and found her loyal tab.

Her neural lace didn’t change the reality of the affect of alcohol on her system. She was slow, and it took her a long moment to get the gist of what Dorcas was saying.

‘Hin ship?’ she asked. It was mostly incomprehensible. But she got it out.

Dorcas took a breath. ‘In the fighting at Medullah, a Hin ship took a lethal does of radiation from a nuclear mine that Morosini had inserted into our launch package of sand and other ablatives.’

Thea Drake groaned. But Richard Hahn, her new husband, indicated understanding. He waved.

Dorcas went on, 'That ship could be salvaged.'

Nbaro was almost instantly more sober. 'Salvaged,' she said. 'A Hin ship.'

'Totally intact,' Qaqqaq said.

'Salvaged,' Nbaro said again.

'It's just maths,' Dorcas said.

#

It was not, at is proved, just maths. Very quickly, it became politics.

Marc Nbaro had been married to Horatio Dorcas for less than a full day when she found that Dorcas had arranged for them to have dinner with the owner of the New Ontario Line, the largest freight and passenger concern that ran out to the Anti-Spinward fringe besides the DHC itself. Headquartered in Nova Montreal, and supported financially by the DHC, the New Ontario Line was rumoured to have 'advantages' over its rivals. They had certainly armed their freighters very quickly and many of their ships had served well in the 'Non-War' out on the Fringe.

'We tell her what we want, and bargain,' Dorcas said.

Marca Nbaro had spent years learning to act like a DHCMAS officer and not a feral animal, but she had not yet begun to struggle with the reality of being a DHC patrician. She'd had glimpses of Dorcas's levels of aristocratic entitlement on board *Athens*, but they were infrequent, as he was, for the most part, dedicated to the mission.

Now that he had an idea fixed in his head, though, he seemed to act as if it was his right to get what he wanted, and Nbaro was a little annoyed, a little frightened, perhaps, to see this side of him. Also, dinner with the CEO of a major shipping firm was not the way she'd expected to spend her long-planned, long-anticipated leave on Nova Montreal, the third-largest station in the whole of the Human Sphere. They took the ring-rail around the shipping ring in a transparent xenoglas car, and she watched the docked ships and the colourful crowds as they rushed along. Every docking bay was full, all the way around the ring; the end of the Non-War and the return of *Dubai* and *Athens* with their holds full of xenoglas was like a catalyst in a reaction; trade was exploding out of the centers of manufacturing, and every ship that could haul a cargo was headed out into space. The two great ships had forced a reshuffling of the docking, as they had to be placed opposite one another on the ring, the huge mass of their hulls balanced against each other so that the spin of a station, even a huge station, remained stable.

It was all beautiful, as far as Marca was concerned.

'Why do we have to spend tonight with Erna Robinson?' she asked. Her head was clear. She wasn't in uniform; instead, she was in a cocktail dress imposed by Thea Drake. She'd drawn the line at makeup.

Dorcas sprawled across two passenger seats, his length, which was almost that of the spaceborn and the gynés, somehow untidy, like a collapsed scarecrow.

She'd had to look up scarecrows on her lace, and now she rather fancied them.

'Hardly the entire night. Ms. Robinson is a very important person, and the Robinsons are friends of my family and should be friends of yours.'

'Sure,' Nbaro said. 'But tonight—'

Dorcas smiled. ‘This is not one of my ‘little enthusiasms,’ he said. ‘Listen.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘Out there beyond Medullah is a dead Hin ship, moving along at a predictable course and speed through the galaxy. We need to get there first and learn its secrets.’

Nbaro smiled. ‘I’m really quite intelligent, remember? I got that part.’

Dorcas nodded. ‘Era Robinson has a pair of super freighters—almost half the size of greatships. Brand new. She had them built as a reckless bet on the success of the DHC in the non-war and she’s now set to make a killing shipping main freight between Nova Montreal and New London.’

Nbaro didn’t like wearing a dress and she kept adjusting the way she sat. Thea had insisted she was ‘beautiful’ which hadn’t helped at all. Dorcas and Drake had both refused to let her wear her now three year old silk flightsuit. Nonetheless, she too in what Dorcas was saying.

‘You think she’ll loan us a super freighter?’ Nbaro asked her new husband.

‘It depends on what we offer her,’ Dorcas said.

‘What can we offer?’ Nbaro asked.

‘A share in the technologies,’ Dorcas said.

In fact, dinner was very pleasant—even amazing. They dined in a restaurant that slid out of the hull on rails once the guests were seated; a xenoglas canopy that allowed every guest to feel as if they were eating under the stars.

The food was very good; a fusion of the latest PTX cuisines with some Old Terra favourites; a fish course, a noodle course, and a tofu course flavoured with cuttlefish that Marca particularly enjoyed.

Eran Robinson was a short firebrand of a woman; determined, quick, decisive, and a little too loud; her laugh, which had an element of the banshee to it, made other diners turn their heads.

‘You’re about to be the most famous person in the DHC,’ she said. ‘You ready to deal with he horseshit?’

Nbaro almost choked on her wine, but she decided to meet Ms Robinson on her own ground. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I hate all that. I want to stay in the DHCMS and be Master of the great ship.’

‘But, that’s not going to happen, is it?’ Robinson said.

‘Nope,’ Nbaro said.

Robinson nodded. ‘So, you’re going to be House Nbaro. And you are a war hero. And you married my closest allies, the Dorcas Clan, and Horatio, here, is going to be House Dorcas.’ She smiled, and her face grew gentler. ‘So, what do you want?’

‘A super freighter,’ Dorcas said.

‘Almighty,’ Robinson said. ‘What for?’

Nbaro looked at her new husband. ‘Saving the human race,’ she said.

Robinson rubbed her chin as if she had a beard. ‘I assume we’re beyond lying and deception here,’ she said.

Dorcas nodded. 'I assure you, Marca is very direct.'

Robinson nodded. 'If I were to hand you a super freighter, I'd be cutting in half the enormous profits I planned very carefully to make off the end of your war.'

Nbaro made herself smile. This was a whole new kind of battlefield, and she needed to get used to it. 'Ma'am,' she said, 'I can offer you a couple of clues, and my word to work to make it worth your while, but in the end, the question is, if you will accept our word that it's about the future of humanity—what use your profits if the Aliens come and destroy everything we've built?'

There was a long silence.

Robinson ate some more cuttlefish and played with her chopsticks for a while. Then she ordered more wine.

'Okay, I have to assume you two are serious. I know more than most DHC citizens about what happened at Medullah. You think—they can come and wipe us out?' her voice was thick, as if she'd had too much to drink.

Dorcas leaned forward. 'Erna—it's happened before. The Starfish destroyed an entire spacefaring civilization. The Circles. You can probably learn all you need from your tab, although the theory that the Starfish were the executioners is not widely accepted—yet. It will be when certain new data from the Anti-Spinward marches reaches the xenoarchaeologists of Palace, Old Terra and New London.'

Robinson grunted.

Dorcas went on, 'The aliens are locked in an endless war, Erna. And we're in the middle.'

‘And one of my superfriegers will save us?’

Marca thought she had the measure of the woman. ‘No. But it could help keep us in the game.’

‘Any way you could tell me what this is about?’ Robinson asked.

Dorcas looked at his new wife and shrugged. ‘It will take a couple of months to put this together,’ he said. ‘I imagine by then you’ll be fully briefed.’ He paused. ‘Saladin and Morosini are behind this.’

And that night, after they’d joined dozens of *Athens* spacers at a dockside bar and she’d lured Dorcas into *dancing*, Dorcas said, ‘We need Qaqqaq.’

‘We always need Qaqqaq,’ Nbaro said, and when her new husband vanished into the packed crowd, she scooped Storkel off the bar and danced with him.

‘You smell like hydraulic fluid,’ she said.

Storkel laughed. ‘Working on *Silver Star*. I’m trying to buy her.’

Nbaro whirled him past a pair of drunken spacers trying to make the rapid beat into a slow dance. ‘I know,’ she said.

‘You’re wearing a dress,’ Storkel said, as if the sky was falling.

‘I know that, too,’ Nbaro admitted, and then Dorcas was back with Qaqqaq. They carried Qaqqaq out of the bar, almost literally, and so, on the second night of their marriage, they sat in their very expensive bridal suite with Qaqqaq, and the small, Inuit woman was plugged in to her tab, looking at Dorcas’s maths and Morosini’s plot.

She looked at it all twice, and then she sat back in the velvet cushions. ‘It can be done,’ she said.

And so, it was.

#

The New Ontario Line super freighter *Toronto* was, next to the great ships, one of the largest spacecraft humanity had built; four and a half kilometers of cargo holds, held together with a minimum of structure and some very powerful engines. She wasn’t built to make long insertions, and she had very stubby drive vanes.

Qaqqaq didn’t exactly take command. The command of the vessel rested with a NOL captain, a veteran DHC officer named Leto Bonhomme, from one of the oldest and ablest of the New Montreal shipping families. Leto had served an entire rejuv, forty years, in the DHC, rising to command a large freighter, before going home to command ships for the New Ontario Line. He was a big man with a big, flat nose a wide forehead, and a whole personality that seemed to be based on joviality and good humour. He claimed to be descended from French Canadians and fur traders, and his cabin was decorated with First Nations art from old Canada.

Qaqqaq, who feared conflict from a ship’s skipper, was pleasantly surprised at his willingness to help. He welcomed her onto his ship and, after a tour of the bridge and his ‘reading room’ as he called it, off the bridge, dominated by a painting of a Cree woman hauling a basket across the snow, he brought her to her own quarters, which were palatial by the standards of the DHCMAS; she had a portal looking out into space, a beautifully comfortable looking acceleration couch, a desk, and her own in-flight suite of personal services.

‘I could get used to this,’ she said while the ship’s captain went over some of her plans.

‘But you will rebuild my whole ship?’ Bonhomme said, looking at her incredibly detailed day-by-day schedule for their first five months of their mission.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid it’s necessary.’

He shrugged. ‘This is exciting,’ he admitted. ‘I thought I was condemned to years of running from New London to Montreal, and here we are.’

‘Indeed,’ Qaqqaq said. ‘We live in exciting times.’

She then began to detail, system by system, the entire redesign of the *Toronto*, starting with the installation of new, super-secret, PTX style insertion vanes based on the ‘tails’ of the latest PTX ships.

‘So we are going to make a long insertion,’ Bonhomme said.

‘We’re going to Medullah,’ she said. ‘And we’re going to attempt to make a very unique insertion from New India to Medullah, so we come in on a particular course and speed, well out from the star and well below the ecliptic.’ She smiled. ‘I suppose, technically, we might *not* be going to Medullah. But what’s a few billion kilometers between systems?’

‘That’s six months away,’ Bonhomme protested. ‘Minimum.’

‘Just so,’ Qaqqaq said. Nbaro liked to say ‘Just so.’ Qaqqaq shrugged. ‘Skipper, we are going to go fast, and we’re gong to have fuel waiting for us all across DHC space, because we’re in a race.’

‘A race?’

Qaqqaq had a device that Lt. Smith had given her that allowed her to feel secure about snooping. She turned it on.

‘Somewhere outside the Kuiper Belt of Ultra-Medullah is the wreck of a Hin ship, hurtling out of the galaxy at about three hundred meters per second.’ She showed one of her projections. ‘That ship is dead; it took a massive radiation burst from a nuke and we monitored her for several weeks without seeing any transmissions of any kind, nor a change in her engines. Sometime about week five, she ran out of fuel and stopped accelerating, or so we posit. None of this is—set in stone.’

Bonhomme nodded. ‘I think you will have to read my astrogator into this,’ he said.

‘Absolutely,’ Qaqqaq said.

‘So, we are going to rendezvous with a dead ship, and strip her for technology?’ Bonhomme asked.

‘We are going to rendezvous with a dead ship, and take her entirely,’ Qaqqaq said. ‘We’ll put her into the newly rebuilt main hold, shore up the alien ship, and turn for home.’

Bonhomme blinked.

‘Sixteen of your new spacers are DHC marines,’ Qaqqaq said. ‘They’re under command of Mr. Drun, who is a lieutenant in the DHC Marines. They’ll be responsible for security, both outward and of the wreck.’ She smiled as best she could. ‘Several of them are skilled welders. Six of them are sensor technicians who can operate the extensive sensor suite I’ll be installing. And—I’m sorry--there will be no shore leave or ship-visiting.’

Bonhomme sat back. ‘A long, hard cruise.’

‘With major pay bonuses,’ Qaqqaq said.

‘Well Commander—’

‘Call me Naisha,’ the smaller woman said. ‘We’re in this for the long haul.’

#

The *Toronto* swept into Tamil Nadu on a precise insertion. Within four days, it had matched velocities with a DHCMS refuelling tanker, an in-system hauler filled to the stop-cocks with refined hydrogen. The *Toronto* refuelled while decelerating for her next insertion and was gone.

It was the first public performance of the DHCMS’s new capability for inflight refuelling of large vessels, and the fact that a previously unknown New Ontario Line super freighter was refuelled gave weight to wild rumours and caused an eventual fluctuation in the New London Exchange, eight systems away behind the onrushing *Toronto* and in a different time bubble altogether. The *New London Register*, an unjuried crypto-blog given to financial rumours, dedicated a whole issue to the idea that the New Ontario Line had discovered an new source of xenoglas in the Anti-Spinward marches.

Captain Bonhomme ignored dozens of calls on various frequencies, because he’d come to agree with the ‘no communications’ policy; his communications officer, an old DHC veteran called Lusha N’gora, a short woman in her second rejuv with crisp white hair framing her dark planar face, became adept at providing minimal clearance information.

‘I’ve never had such a dull life,’ she complained in the mess. Ordinarily, the Comms Officer on a big ship was the clearing house for a variety of personal communications and even gossip;

they would chat with the Space Traffic Control officers on the stations, gleaning local news, trading cargo gossip.

None of that was happening this trip. And until Tamil Nadu, the *Toronto* was her own herald. She was moving so fast that there wasn't much news of her approach—until the refuelling in Tamil Nadu.

If Second Officer N'gora was bored, no one else was. The New Ontario Lines regulars quickly came to recognize that they had a cadre of DHC marines among them, and the relentless Lt. Drun tended to 'motivate' any crewmen he worked with, regardless of whether they were 'his' or not.

In the first three systems they replaced the insertion vanes with the new PTX style tail; complicated and dangerous as it sounded, the reality was a series of black boxes being installed and repeatedly tested by Astrogation, in the form of Second Officer Terry Dasilva, a New Azores native with a gift for maths and a workout habit almost as ferocious as 'Mister' Drun's.

The New Ontario Line didn't run to marines, and the spacers aboard *Toronto* were not entirely sure what to do with them, or with Drun; he wasn't even pretending to be a New Ontario Line officer, he had no apparent rank, and yet he was frequently in charge of things. Qaqqaq they called 'commander' because that was her DHCMA rank, and because, as one wag quipped, it summed up her role.

'Bonhomme may be captain,' the spacer said, 'but Qaqqaq's in command. She's the 'commander.'

'She's only an engineer,' muttered a lowly third officer, newly minted from the merchant marine academy on Nova Montreal. Unfortunately, this comment, muttered within earshot of

Second Officer and ship's engineer Marie-Anne Flobert, resulted in a long stint spent watching the functioning of number four ion engine for the young gyne.

Qaqqaq found it all surprisingly different from the DHC merchant service; remarkable, in some ways, as the New Ontario Line had a high reputation among DHC officers. *Toronto* was a tight ship, but her gynes, women and men were far more talkative than a DHC crew and more given to biting back at authority; Qaqqaq was taken aback early in the tail's installation to hear a senior spacer tell her to 'mind her own work and let him do his.' It wasn't said with anger; she let it ride, and the man did a fine job.

The food was superb, by DHCMA standards. The crew expected fresh food at all times, and their quarters were larger, better designed and just—better. Many cabins had portals that looked out into the cosmos; as the ship had never been expected to exceed the capability of its antigrav, there were desks and chairs. Off duty spacers expected to be comfortable.

And yet—after three successive high-g boosts, no one complained. The crew knew they were on an historic mission, and they also knew they were getting *double* pay.

When the tail was installed, they tested it on a short insertion and DaSilva, the astrogator, began to breathe more often.

Then the rebuilding of the cargo spaces began.

'I don't even know the exact length,' Qaqqaq said to her work crews. 'As far as DHC intel can determine, every Hin ship is built by hand, individually, the way their marines build their space armour. There's very little duplication. We really can't tell what is standardized; fasteners, almost certainly, but major structural elements? Prefabricated modules?'

One interesting aspect of the all civilian crew was how fascinated they were. Qaqqaq was sure that any normal DHCMAS crew would be half asleep by now. Aliens? Alien tech? What's for dinner? Did you hear about Darcy? The New Ontario crews were *intensely* interested.

By the underway refuelling at Tail Nadu, they'd rebuilt most of the aft cargo holds, adding structure to the outer hull to strengthen it, because they were removing essential structure from the centerline to make room for a big ship.

'How will this change performance?' Bonhomme asked at the outset, and she spent a day with all the helmspeople, reviewing the secs on the ship and her changes.

'It shouldn't change anything,' she said. 'We're moving from a central spine to an exoskeleton, which will increase our mass, and cost fuel, but it shouldn't make the ship weaker in a maneuver.'

The installation of the tail had been a top secret project that was technically easy and very exciting for all hands. The rebuilding of the aft centerline of the ship was the opposite; an endless drudgery of cutting and welding in a meticulously planned pattern so as not to endanger the ship during reconstruction. Drun's marines proved to be expert welders, as were a portion of the ship's crew, selected for this back at Montreal, and the work moved in pulses as the ship moved in straight lines between insertions, each pulse of work planned to be complete before the next three dimensional maneuver was required.

Qaqqaq lived amidst an engineer's endless anxiety about completion dates, materials, fuels, and worker stress. Things went wrong—they'd shipped far too few portable fuel packs for the welding torches, for example. Solutions had to be found, day by day, watch rotation by rotation.

But it happened. And in near record time, they were entering New India system.

#

Qaqqaq had made the insertion in the comfort of her quarters and she came too as the new ‘end of insertion’ drugs hit her—nicknames ‘the breakfast cocktail,’ the new drugs smoothed the process. Qaqqaq was not a particularly good ‘inserter’ and she struggled muzzily to comprehend what she was seeing nt he repeater in her acceleration couch.

They were virtually surrounded near the insertion point by small craft, and every one of the in-system boats carried various media personalities broadcasting about the DHCMA’s ‘super-secret’ mission. The *Toronto*’s hull was bombarded with queries like radiation in a solar storm. N’gora earned her pay, crafting carefully worded statements for the press and for everything from navigation beacons to the Space Traffic Controllers at the massive station.

And one of the social media influencers thought that their career might be furthered by keeping their small ship between *Toronto* and her refuelling ship, the DHCMA Auxiliary *Sicilia*, left for just that purpose by Admiral Pisani when he took his squadron of DHCMA warships to Anti-Spinward.

Qaqqaq took this in and tried to process it as she drank a bulb of coffee. She pulled on a flight suit and went to the bridge, where she found Drun, whom she still thought of as ‘Gunny,’ with Bonhomme and DaSilva.

N’gora was speaking in real time. ‘Stand clear, *Torquay*. You are in my danger zone.’

‘Tell me why you’re here and I’ll get out of the way,’ said a high-pitched voice.

‘*Torquay*, you are in violation of a dozen DHC regulations and you and the master of your vessel are in danger of losing your citizen rights. Please put the legal master of your ship on this channel.’ N’gora smiled thinly.

‘Anything else we can do?’ Bonhomme asked.

N’gora shrugged. ‘Sir, I took the liberty of sending a legal complaint to the New Ontario Lines legal office on Mumbai Above Orbital.’ She made a face. ‘Maybe the threat of a lawsuit?’

‘Well done, comms,’ Bonhomme said.

‘Dworkin,’ said a voice on comms. ‘I’m the sipper of this tub.’

‘Mister Dworkin, this is Captain Richard Bonhomme of the New Ontario Line. Please clear my hull for the refuelling ship or I will move you out of the way with a close in weapons system. Copy?’

‘If you fire on me—’ Dworkin began.

Bonhomme cut him off. ‘I’ve already launched a legal action on Mumbai above and I’ve asked for deadly force from headquarters,’ Bonhomme said. ‘Please stop fucking around, Mister Dworkin.’

It took almost forty minutes. During that time, DaSilva had already plotted her next course and Drun had a work schedule ready for Qaqqaq ro sign. Qaqqaq was more concerned with finding Pisani’s squadron gone from their station. Pisani, formally Master of the *Athens* and now ‘admiral’ of the Anti-Spinward squadron, was supposed to be *here* at New India, keeping former rebels in line. Instead, he’d taken his whole force ‘down the line’ to New Shenzhen, leaving his auxiliary to refuel them and no reason why.

Something was wrong.

Something big enough to cause Pisani to sail away into the Anti-Spinward fringe.

‘We’re clear,’ DaSilva announced as the *Torquay* finally moved away from their hull. The social-media influencer’s catalogue of self-important injuries continued apace like music in the background.

‘Let’s maneuver onto our course and then commence refuelling,’ Bonhomme suggested. Qaqqaq agreed; she never interfered with routine ship handling. It was a little like being a squadron commander, and if she was honest, she really enjoyed it.

The holds were rebuilt, including an extensive series of mobile beams that could act like a series of hundreds of workbench vices, grabbing her eventual capture and holding it steady through future maneuvers. It was an expensive solution in terms of welding and electrical power, but it relieved them all from guesswork as to their quarry’s actual size. They had latitude of almost forty percent on length and twenty percent on volume, and as they had optical and other sensory records of the ship in question, Qaqqaq thought it unlikely their estimates would be outside of the parameters she’d set.

It was all just maths. And a lot of work.

#

The media ships stayed with them all the way across the New India system, and after a very fast passage to New India, they had to take weeks, mostly because DaSilva wouldn’t be rushed on her calculations. Non-spacers tended to forget that planets moved, stars moved, star systems

moved—everything moved. Now that they were just one insertion from their potential target, DaSilva took her time checking her computer and AI data against actual observations, both her own and those from New India astronomers.

The *Toronto* had an actual AI, a twin of Saladin who called themselves Nuredin. Nuredin was careful about revealing themselves to the crew due to notions of secrecy, but they were almost chatty with DaSilva, and the two of them recalculated everything that Dorcas and Morosini had originally done several dozen times.

Unfortunately, what they found made minute changes in the flight plan, which then changed a number of other factors. Details added up.

They ended up with an ellipse roughly a light year long and a third of a light year wide, a three dimensional shape like a symmetrical egg. The dead Hin ship was almost certainly within this volume of space. Unfortunately, the volume of space was vast. Fortunately, the volume of space was absolutely empty except for a couple of proto-cometary bodies and some dust. The volume, which the crew began to think of as ‘The Volume,’ was in the dark between the stars.

Nuredin and DaSilva had a slight difference of opinion as to where to start their search. The major issue was the exact timing of the dead Hin ship’s drive running out of fuel. The *Athens* hadn’t observed the ship constantly; in fact, it had only checked occasionally. Eventually, the *Athens* made a routine check for the heat of the drive and found nothing. There was a difference of several weeks in potential boost numbers.

Otherwise, it was a moving body on a predictable course. Nuredin wanted to start with the most likely location. DaSilva wanted to start with the best optimal search pattern for the whole

volume. Each agreed that the other's point of view was rational. Both plans had problems that had to do with fuel and return paths.

So, forty hours out from insertion, they had a command meeting in the captain's 'reading room' off the bridge.

Qaqqaq settled the matter. 'Go with Nuredin,' she said. 'We're in a race. If there's a chance we can just win, let's take it.'

Bonhomme nodded, but said, 'You have used the race metaphor before. Who are we racing?'

Qaqqaq raised an eyebrow. 'Best case—technology. We're racing the Hin and the Starfish, who are fighting each other and might choose to pick on us instead. We need a new generation of ships to face them.'

Bonhomme nodded, impressed. 'Ouch,' he said. 'I hadn't realized that it's that bad.'

DaSilva also winced. 'Some secrets I don't really want to know,' she admitted.

'It's that bad,' Qaqqaq said. 'That's why we're spending money like water and political capital too to get this wreck. Okay?'

'Mais oui!' Bonhomme said with his jovial smile. 'And worst case?'

Qaqqaq grunted. 'Worst case, there's someone on it already, and they don't like us.'

'Fringers?' Bonhomme asked. 'I need to know if we're going to fight. My beautiful ship has teeth, yes, but my crew are not DHC spacers.'

‘Fringers, pirates, New Texas activists, a rogue PTX crew, a PTX intel operation—’ she shrugged. ‘I can work up a froth of anxiety about all of them.’

Bonhomme crossed himself. ‘I do not like this world we’re discovering,’ he said.

‘We live in interesting times,’ Qaqqaq said. ‘But I think this world has always been right here with us. It’s just that we’re finding out the cost of ‘not knowing.’

DaSilva added the other complication—fuel. ‘Once we insert,’ she said, ‘We’re on our own, and we’re a *loonngg* way from home.’

Qaqqaq nodded, as it was all in her orders. ‘There should be an insertion point—’ she began.

DaSilva shook her head. ‘If there isn’t, we’re six months from another—depending on where we are in our search volume, we will have to run all the way to New Bengal, change vecors, and come back into the insertion point for Ultra-Medullah,’ she said.

‘We need some luck,’ Bonhomme said.

‘There is no luck in maths,’ DaSilva snapped. ‘This wreck is either there or it isn’t.’

Twenty hours from insertion, the *Sicilia* came alongside again and filled their tanks to capacity, as well as passing a physical cargo of food and other necessities as well as a few luxuries. Qaqqaq could remember her first leap into the deep black years before, and the corridors of the *Athens* full of pallets of everything from coffee to greenstuffs. This was the same; by the time the *Sicilia* had emptied her holds, there was scarcely room for a spacer in an EVA suit to move on the main corridor. As they’d had to remove the spinal elevators to make room for their hoped-for quarry, the crew grumbled about the difficulties of moving around the ship, and also grumbled about the likelihood that they were going to have to eat all that food our

in the deep black. Their grumbling was to some extent alleviated by the news from the cargo handlers that there was a whole sub-hold dedicated to tons of material labelled ‘Allday.’

Long spaceflight tended to rob crews of their ‘natural,’ that is, dirtside, schedule, but the presence of cargo labelled ‘Allday’ caused everyone aboard to note that, in ship’s relative time, Allday was forty-one days away.

They hit insertion for the deep space between Ultra-Medullah and New Bengal nineteen days ahead of the original schedule.

#

Space is not flat. Scientists had known that for centuries, both in a real, direct way that indicated fluctuations in the way ‘space’ formed, right down to the quantum level, and in a macro-modelled way, where large objects exerted gravitational pull on other object with mass, even far out.

One of the reasons that the target of their search might have raced out of a fairly narrow band of space, a plottable path, was that it had passed through not one, not two, but three micro-gravitational bands created by large bodies—larger than most asteroids, smaller than planets—as it raced out of the system. It was the bad luck of the AI Nuredin and the navigator, DaSilva, that the interaction of weak gravity fields, some solar wind, relativistic speeds and some doubt as to the last few observations combined to offer a wide range of possible courses. The Battle of Ultra-Medulah and the death of the Hin ship were both more than two years in the past by the time the *Toronto* extracted from Artifact Space.

Qaqqaq roused herself from her insertion drugs with a feeling not unlike a hangover, which made her careful because she disliked seeming surly. When she was clean and neat in a fresh flight suit, she made her way to the bridge.

No one was celebrating.

‘Welcome to the Empty Quarter,’ DaSilva quipped.

The bridge had a traditional screen, although every acceleration couch had a variety of repeaters, and, as a new ship, V/R helmets that were almost as good as neural laces. The whole crew for a four-kilometer hull was less than a hundred, and Qaqqaq missed the small town nature of a great ship. A hundred people was too few to face the void.

She didn’t need to think about facing the void—that was her post-insertion depression.

‘I gather it’s empty?’ Qaqqaq asked.

‘As empty as a politician’s promise,’ Bonhomme said.

One of the first alterations to the super freighter had been a full suite of detection devices across every spectrum that human scientists could measure.

‘It’s had two years to grow cold,’ DaSilva said.

Qaqqaq thought the other woman had expected her calculations to work—head expected to come out of Artifact Space and find the hulk floating in space.

Qaqqaq had never expected such a miracle, mostly because, as an engineer, she never expected anything to work the first time, and she secretly thought that most miracles were accomplished by hard work.

Way back at Nova Montreal, in the first days of The Plan, Dorcas had envisioned a great ship, perhaps the Athens, sweeping a vast volume of space with its' full space wing deployed. That had proven impossible for reasons both practical and political.

So now they had four pinnaces, capable spacecraft, and the *Toronto* herself, searching space for a single moving object, something almost as cold as space itself, something whose primary difference from the void would be its velocity.

The obvious solution was to use active radar and ladar. If there was someone else out here, that would give them away, and neither Bonhomme not Qaqqaq were anxious to start by broadcasting their location.

But after three watches of careful observation suggested the entire volume to be empty, Qaqqaq was ready to take the plunge.

'Let's radiate,' she said.

'Then everyone knows we're here,' N'gora said. 'In a year or two, that signal will wash up in New Bombay and people will work it out.'

'I'm okay with that,' Qaqqaq said.

'What if something is out there?' Bonhomme asked. 'Someone?'

'Do you really think there's someone so subtle that they're lying cold and silent, and it will make a difference when we shine a laser or a radar on them?' Qaqqaq was dismissive. 'If they have good instruments, and they're here, they saw us arrive. Cherenkov Radiation, fusion drive heat—need I say more?'

'We're running silent now. If they didn't catch us entering the area—'

Qaqqaq crossed her arms. ‘Will it make a difference?’

Bonhomme raised a hand like a student making a point. ‘May I request we wait four more watches? Just—just give the potential pirates a chance to lose their nerve.’ He pointed at DaSilva. ‘I’d like it if we could wait until Terry finds us an insertion point for New India, or at least Ultra.’

‘I’m looking,’ DaSilva said, somewhat pettishly. But then, ‘The tail is incredible when it comes to tracking particles. We never had this kind of resolution.’

Qaqqaq didn’t want to tangle with the captain. It wasn’t mission essential, and she could see his point.

By the end of six more watches, the silence of the *Toronto* had begun to wear on everyone. The cabins and staterooms were getting chilly; everything was running on the lowest possible setting, and Qaqqaq thought that the air smelled funny. People spoke in low voices, as if the adversaries could hear them outside the hull.

She went up to the bridge every watch she was awake, to find various sensor operators—most of them Drun’s—watching the space around them on various passive detection systems. They’d dropped dozens of system probes, which were gradually forming an enormous antenna for detection of electro-magnetic signals across the spectrum.

She let them go on, silent and cold, for ten watches. They didn’t even have an alarm. The space around them was empty, a vast void down to the froth at the quantum level. Optical had detected a single rock well off to spinward, a tiny planetoid on its lonely journey between the stars.

DaSilva had a 'High Probable' insertion point, a 'weak point' in the gri of reality, or that's how one of Qaqqaq's shipmates on the *Athens* had described it. She understood how her Tanaka drive worked, but she didn't really care why. It worked. DaSilva had a solution to the problem of escape from 'the Volume' which was, in terms of navigation, 'nowhere.' It didn't have a planetary mass or a star to aim at—

She didn't want to think about it.

DaSilva said, 'This is as good as it's gong to get—I've logged the location. I think it'll get us clear to New India—a long insertion, but we have our tail.'

Bonhomme emerged from his 'reading room' and stood behind the command acceleration couch on the small bridge. He smiled at DaSilva. 'Well done,' he said. Then he turned to Qaqqaq. 'I'm good,' he said. 'There's nothing more out there out here.'

Qaqqaq nodded. 'But you were right,' she said. 'There was no need for my impatience. This was good procedure.' She glanced at Alain Timoy, on of Drun's marines, also a sensor specialist. 'Let's get set up to do a pulse for both radar and ladar.'

That took less than five minutes. Timoy summoned another marine, Lee Crosi, who joined him at the sensor station.

Qaqqaq glanced at Bonhomme. 'Any reservations?' she asked.

'None,' Bonhomme said. 'Light them up.'

Once they began emitting, and had no immediate hits, DaSilva put them on a short burn to change course, laying more probes, and changing their position so that their energy pulses had the greatest chance of being received if they bounced off something,

Space is large, and attenuation happens at the quantum level, so that when they radiated, their pulses of energy didn't go on infinitely until they reached a body and bounced. On the other hand, they had very sensitive receivers and had now spaced them tens of thousands of kilometers apart.

Finding a needle in the void still took them twenty-nine days. As it proved, on review, they'd been looking at it for several days but it appeared as clutter at the very edge of the attenuated data and they'd turned away from it.

When the report from the bridge was confirmed by several repeats, Bonhomme ordered the crew into acceleration couches and made the hard turn to go 'back' to the location, well out to spinward of their best projected path. It took them another 102 hours to match velocities and courses, a period that seemed endless to both Qaqqaq and to DaSilva, especially the last ten hours as they closed in and still had no visual conformation.

Drun was on the bridge. Qaqqaq was ware—not officially aware but aware—that Drun spent a great deal of time with DaSilva. It wasn't her business. But he was excited—a rare state, for him.

'I know it's a waste of air to tell you this, but you can't really board a Hin ship,' she said.

Drun grinned. 'I know it, Aisha. I was there when Nbaro went aboard the *Beautiful War Dancer*.'

Qaqqaq nodded. 'You just have that glow. Like you're about to suit up and go.'

'Ready if you want me, ma'am,' he said.

'Huh-rah,' she answered. 'But only if we must.'

‘You think it’s the Hin ship?’

Qaqqaq shrugged. ‘I hope so.’

Four hours out, Drun approached her again, in the passageway outside her stateroom.

‘Ma’am,’ he said.

‘Really, Gianni.’ She so seldom used Drun’s first name that it felt odd. The man’s first name was ‘Gunny.’ But he was a lieutenant now. ‘You can just say my name.’

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I want you to see this. Crosi is my best Sensor Tech. Not a bad shooter.’ Drun waved at a tall young man, but most young men seemed tall to Qaqqaq, whose ancestors had not bequeathed her any genes for height.

‘Fine?’ she said. She had no idea what she was looking at, as it appeared to be a tab recording of static.

‘Crosi’s embarrassed that he missed the Hin ship—’

‘If it is a Hin ship—’

‘Whatever. Yes. And he’s going back through the sensor station feeds of sweeps of this area of space since we started.’ Drun handed her his tab. ‘He’s a driven young man,’ he went on as if that was high praise.

Crosi all but writhed in agony.

‘And?’ Qaqqaq couldn’t see what she was supposed to be looking at.

Crosi took the tab from her without asking and ran the vid back. ‘Sorry ma’am,’ he said in a surprisingly husky voice. ‘Here. See the red arrow?’

Do I look old? Or foolish? Now there was a red arrow pointing at—some static.

‘That’s the needle. Sorry, ma’am, we all called it the Needle when we were looking for it.’

‘Sure,’ she said, mostly to indicate that she was still paying attention.

‘Only, this is day six. This is about nine seconds after we radiated. Of course, the energy pulse took a loooong time to reach the needle and another loooong time to get back to our sensor, this being open space.’

‘I’m familiar with the workings of radar,’ she said with some asperity.

‘Right. Sure. So, we didn’t get these returns for two hundred and—hmm—seventeen hours. See the marker?’

She did indeed see the time hack appear, now that they were on the right part of the vid.

‘See, ma’am, the pulse of energy goes out into space—’

‘I built my own space radar when I was ten,’ Qaqqaq said.

‘That’s pretty cool, ma’am. Oh.’ Crosi gulped. Drun grinned, reached out, and gave the sensor tech a light slap on the arm. ‘Stay on target,’ Drun said.

‘Right. Yes, sir. Okay, but--if you look, ma’am—’ Crosi pointed at the time hack. ‘Best I can guess, this is the very moment our pulse reached the needle. See it?’

She did. It was a slightly solid bit of haze. ‘Yes—oh my god.’

She didn’t need the rest explained. Seconds after the hazy spot appeared as a return, something—a shadow—appeared or disappeared next to it.

‘Glitch?’ she asked.

Drun shrugged.

Crosi shrugged. 'I wouldn't know, ma'am. I'm a software guy. But—' he looked up the corridor. 'For my money, that's an intruder.'

#

The *Toronto* didn't have a battle stations signal, or a Tactical Action Officer, or a Combat Information Centre. What it did have was a ship-wide alarm, and the bridge, and some very modern Close In Weapons Systems or CIWS, which, when used together, would be lethal to an adversary at close range because where most smaller ships had four or six turrets, the *Toronto* had sixteen, and due to very competent design, all sixteen could be concentrated directly ahead or astern.

'Show me that again?' Bonhomme asked.

Crosi, now apparently embarrassed by his sudden notoriety, ran the vid on the main screen and explained the time hacks.

'So, we always knew where this damn thing was?' Bonhomme asked.

Qaqqaq interceded. 'No, Richard. Not at all. Now that we know where it is, we can look back and see that we missed it, probably a dozen times. Right?'

Crosi nodded.

'Bien sur,' Bonhomme said. 'Crosi, I'm not going to eat your children. Come here. God— so you are saying there's another ship there?'

‘There was,’ Crosi said. ‘No, sir. I mean there might have been. Or it’s an electronic shadow. We were far away—I just don’t know—’

Bonhomme rubbed his hands together and allowed himself to fall backwards into his command couch. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Let’s play safe. N’gora, hit the alarm.’

In three minutes, the civilian spacers of the New Ontario Line impressed their DHC marine guests and Qaqqaq by buttoning up and preparing for General Quarters in under three minutes. There had been drills, but not the daily drills that the veterans of the Non-War had experienced.

Qaqqaq took the XOs’ couch on the bridge—she was, technically, the ship’s executive officer. Drun took the weapons couch; he’d trained for it.

They were all buttoned up, acceleration couches closed and locked; many crew people were in EVA suits inside their couches as a further precautions, and to be ready to perform damage control functions.

Qaqqaq had seldom had reason to function as the ship’s XO during the cruise out—the crew was small and no one needed her, and her engineering projects had captivated her. But now, faced with a new situation, she decided it was in her perview to offer some options.

‘Drun?’

‘Aisha?’ he said. She smiled inside her coffin.

‘What if we put some power on and make a fast pass?’ she asked.

‘I think we’re better with a cautious approach,’ he said. ‘But it would make the waiting shorter.’

‘You don’t seem too concerned,’ she said. ‘Is that just Marine *sang froid*?’

He laughed. ‘Nope. I think whoever was there is long gone. They fled the moment we appeared. Except that—’

There was a pause.

‘Spill it, Gunny’ she said. ‘I mean, Gianni.’

He laughed. ‘If there was another ship, and it did a runner, we can’t see any part of its path. You’d think, if we got a glimpse of it, we’d then see it—you know what I mean? Running?’

She breathed in and out a few times. ‘That sounds like it’s still there, attached to the hull.’

Drun snorted. ‘Waiting to see how much force we have, with no relative velocity and half their sensors blanked by the dead ship’s hull?’ after a pause, ‘not my choice, but aliens maybe.’

Qaqqaq relayed the whole conversation to Bonhomme.

‘Commander, if your mission parameters permit, I’d like to turn away and virtually orbit the thing. Get a lot of radar of that hull. Ping the hell out of it—maybe use SAR.’ Synthetic Aperture Radar was hardly new—it went back to the age of chaos—but it had become an imagine device in the void. The skipper liked it because it provided an image, which he preferred to a ‘ping,’ as he called it.

She nodded, even in the anonymity of her couch. ‘Go for it, Skipper. More data cannot hurt us. Eight hours won’t lose us anything.’

She heard the captain order the astrogator to lay in a course to ‘orbit’ the derelict, if that’s what it was, out of range of known energy weapons—perhaps eight thousand kilometers.

‘We still don’t know that this is the Needle,’ DaSilva said.

Qaqqaq thought she was just stating the obvious. Everyone on the *Toronto* wanted to know if they had the right hulk, or just some odd piece of space junk. It was possible—other wreckage from the same fight might be in the Volume.

They began a set of maneuvers—everyone was buttoned up, so DaSilva burned the ion engines hot, flipped them end-for-end, burned again, slowing them relative to their target and temporarily blinding the *Toronto* to anything happening by the unidentified object.

Ten hours later, Qaqqaq wished she had some of the specialized EW techs from the *Athens*. The marines were fully trained, but they didn't have the range of experience the *Athens* techs had. Qaqqaq had flown with several EW specialists in her *Pericles* flights.

As they got more and more imaging on the target, there were six marine techs comparing every known image of a Hin ship without its protective energy shields—close ups taken at space stations and in battle.

Mostly, they had a long, narrow cluster of 'objects'. At this range, the SAR began to render something like a photographic image, but it was fuzzy.

'Length is right for a Hin raider. Width is right. Shape seems off. Also, there's a very small leak of heat from this end. Stern? If so, there should be the bump of an engine there.' This was Crosi, reporting for the others.'

Bonhomme shook his head. They were not buttoned up anymore—most of them were in flight suits and sitting on their open couches. They could be buttoned up in seconds.

'Anything docked to it?' he asked with impatience.

Crosi shook his head. ‘I can’t bet on it, sir,’ he admitted. ‘But I don’t think so, and neither do any of my mates.’

‘Almighty,’ Bonhomme said. And then, after a lot of time seemed to slip by, he said, ‘very well. Commander, if you have no objection, we’ll head in.’

Qaqqaq nodded. Inwardly, she thought *I’d rather be repairing a live reactor. This is not my thing at all.* Outwardly, she said, ‘Let’s go for it.’

#

It was a Hin ship, and when they were alongside, it was a little anti-climactic. There was no pirate lying in wait; the ship’s strange shape was explained by one of her engine nacelles being *gone.*

That was a puzzle for another day.

They crept in, all turrets live, until they were virtually alongside, although the *Toronto* so dwarfed the Hin wreck that there was no place for another ship to hide.

Then, as they’d always planned, Qaqqaq took command, even as DaSilva began to plot their exit. She’d been looking for insertion points since they’d extracted, now thirty-one days before; she’d found two, or at least, two in potential. Bonhomme was satisfied they could get back to ‘civilization.’

It was ten days to Allday. A tiny tree appeared on the bridge, despite the emergency procedures in place.

And after the pinnaces made repeated scouts past the hull, and after Drun led a dozen of his marines in a fully armoured landing on the outer hull, which they swept from stern to bow in a skirmish line with various close-in detectors, Qaqqaq opened the stern of the mighty *Toronto* and DaSilva and the helmsperson backed the *Toronto* meter by meter until she swallowed the Hin ship whole.

The massive opening in the stern had to be welded shut. That took time, and during that time, Qaqqaq directed dozens of spacers in moving her giant clamps against the alien ship's hull.

It was—eerie. Almost gothic. The Hin ship was matt black, with obvious external damage—antennae mounts melted to slag, for example, and patches burned to an odd, oily consistency. The hull groaned as if it was alive when the clamps tightened against the hull, usually eight at a time in computer assisted opposition.

It was palpably dead. Not evil, but she was subliminally aware that it was full of the desiccated corpses of hundreds of Hin, and she was sufficiently aware of military bureaucracy to know that, as they cut into the hull—and she fully planned to begin that as soon as they'd secured their prize—they would have to deal with the Hin remains.

The welders worked overtime to close the stern.

The clamps moved forward, centimeters at a time.

The marines alternated watches in full combat armour and watches working as welders. Drun made sure they got sleep—a little sleep.

It wasn't combat, but the level of fear was palpable.

And yet, the Allday decorations appeared in every passageway. There were Menorahs on every bulkhead, and multicolour lights on every free surface; Duwali, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa; a dozen traditions celebrated together in space, sharing spice cider, coloured lights, and bulbs of curry.

Qaqqaq had to admit that she liked it. She began to think that ships on long voyages should have colourful lights in every corridor all the time. Despite the intense work schedule, people became more cheerful.

‘What are you getting for Bonhomme?’ Gianni Drun asked her, as if that was a normal question.

‘Two hours of sleep?’ she suggested, and Drun laughed and raised a fist.

‘I’ll take the same,’ he said.

Six watches before Allday, the stern was closed and the clamps were as tight against the alien hull as Qaqqaq could manage with her guesswork on the working loads of the hull plates.

DaSilva turned them towards their insertion point. She took hours to make her turns, because she didn’t want to test the weight of the alien ship against the bracing they’d managed. It massed more than they’d expected.

Qaqqaq handed the ship back to its proper commander and fell into her acceleration couch, where she slept for almost eleven hours. Out in the passageway, an Aarti hymn was playing; on the mess decks, a large artificial Christmas Tree had been decorated until the dark green foliage was virtually invisible under the weight of lights and ornaments and small presents. The air of the mess decks smelled of pine and cinnamon and curry powder and Qaqqaq, who had grown up

in a traditional and non-Christian family, was delighted by it all—the music of six religions, pumpkin cupcakes, turkey chowder.

She collected materials from the main workshop and went back to her stateroom, where she began to make things. She was good at making things.

She fabricated a tiny model of the alien ship in the main hold for Bonhomme; she made Da Silva a working compass, and N'gora a silver cross, as she was an Old Catholic and there was plenty of silver available in the fabrication lab.

She made Gianni Drun a pair of very carefully modeled grips for his service sidearm. She tok his prints off his hand-exercise ball and used the AI, Nuredin, to plot his exact hand measurements; then she printed them in a pearlescent plastic and polished them to a luster by hand.

She took the time to make them while watching the first tech exploration crews cutting into the hull of the Hin ship. Intel thought that the Hin had matter/antimatter conversion. Qaqqaq agreed—their ships were, otherwise, very small for the power they could generate. Such a power source would revolutionize the human sphere—and render every ship ever built obsolete.

That was the prize they were playing for—a technological revelation that would level the coming playing field. And when she'd finished Drun's grips and put them in some ship-generated tissue paper, she put on her EVA suit and went down to the main bay to participate in the salvage of an alien warship.

Most of the spacers she passed wished her a happy Allday. It would begin officially in another watch, but some spacers, depending who was 'on' and who 'off' and who was on sleep cycle, were already drinking their ration of alcohol or eating special treats or opening presents.

Shipboard Allday wasn't confined to a single watch.

'It looks like they cut an engine away,' Drun said. They were helmet to helmet. 'I don't get it, though. They were all dead.'

She felt her heart rate increase. 'I don't need to tell you to be careful,' she said. And then, 'didn't someone say there was residual heat from this end of the ship?' She played back several conversations, and found the one she wanted—Crosi.

'Length is right for a Hin raider. Width is right. Shape seems off. Also, there's a very small leak of heat from this end. Stern? If so, there should be the bump of an engine there.'

She tabbed Crosi, who was on his downtime.

'Is the heat you detected from the stern of the Needle commensurate with someone cutting away an engine?' she asked.

'Ma'am, I'm not really qualified on that stuff. But—it would have to be a really clean cut. Otherwise there'd have been a lot more heat.'

'Roger, out here.' She turned back to Drun. 'I think we have to consider whether we have a rival here; someone who cut away an engine when we got close, and ran.'

'Ran and is undetectable?' Drun asked. But he nodded.

'Could there be someone still aboard this thing?' she said.

'No,' he said, and pointed to the marines on overwatch—full armour, heavy weapons, and clear views into the holes that were being opened in the hull. 'But if a thousand space zombies explode out of that hole,' Drun said, 'We've got it for action.'

‘Space zombies?’ she asked.

‘That ship is still hot,’ Drun said, pointing at his radiation detector. ‘Nothing on it is alive.’

The ship’s major Allday gift was insertion for New India. Qaqqaq made insertion with the feeling that she’d just found a next of snakes.

#

As she awoke, the ship had emerged into the lively electromagnetic traffic of a busy human star system. They were well above the plane of the ecliptic, and outside the orbit of the gas giant—not a bad insertion for an unknown insertion point and a long jump. By the time Qaqqaq made it to the bridge, Bonhomme had already signaled for the *Sicilia*, which had already refueled at the gas giant and waiting there in orbit. As the gas giant was on their side of the system, it all worked as if they’d panned it, which wasn’t actually the case.

‘Happy Allday,’ Bonhomme said. ‘We just saved thirty days on our trip home.’

‘Every day will count, now,’ she said.

Bonhomme handed her a small box. She smiled.

‘Happy Allday. Here in New India, they celebrate Diwali and it happened eight days ago. Don’t worry—we’re on ship time.’

She opened the little package and found a tiny bottle of a maple syrup liqueur.

‘Oh, my!’ she said. ‘I love maple sugar.’

‘Of course you do,’ he said.

She gave him his present and he opened it and his eyes grew wide.

‘For your ‘reading room,’ she said. ‘So that you will remember this mission.’

‘I’m so very unlikely to forget this mission,’ he said, but he clearly loved his little model.

She was considering going to her stateroom for DaSilva’s present when Drun appeared at the hatch to the bridge. He was wearing only the singlet that went under his armour and he was covered in sweat.

‘Giannis?’ Qaqqaq asked.

Drun was wearing heavy gloves—the sort of asbestos gloves they wore when welding outside the hull, when it could be difficult to tell exactly what was holding heat.

‘Lieutenant?’ Bonhomme asked.

Drun looked at Qaqqaq. ‘Ma’am,’ he said with marine formality. ‘You remember what we found at Tradepoint? The first time?’

Qaqqaq cast her mind back, but Drun opened his hand.

In it was a matt black marble. It was so black it seemed to eat the light.

‘What the hell is that?’ Bonhomme asked.

Qaqqaq did remember them. They’d found several.

‘How the hell did a Starfish get here?’ she asked.

Drun looked at her. ‘When we were at Tradepoint, we thought Starfish,’ he said. He looked as if he’d seen a ghost, and she knew he was a hard man to rattle.

She'd been part of the team that had dissected one. And learned very little.

'Happy Allday,' Drun said. 'I think maybe we have another alien race out here. Watching us all.'