

"It's been too long since we've had a really kickass space opera."

—George R. R. Martin

LEVIATHAN WAKES

J A M E S S . A . C O R E Y

BONUS MATERIAL INCLUDED: THE FULL TEXT OF THE DRAGON'S PATH BY DANIEL ABRAHAM





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LEVIATHAN WAKES

BOOK ONE OF THE EXPANSE



JAMES S. A. COREY



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*For Jayné and Kat, who encourage me
to daydream about spaceships*

The *Scopuli* had been taken eight days ago, and Julie Mao was finally ready to be shot.

It had taken all eight days trapped in a storage locker for her to get to that point. For the first two she'd remained motionless, sure that the armored men who'd put her there had been serious. For the first hours, the ship she'd been taken aboard wasn't under thrust, so she floated in the locker, using gentle touches to keep herself from bumping into the walls or the atmosphere suit she shared the space with. When the ship began to move, thrust giving her weight, she'd stood silently until her legs cramped, then sat down slowly into a fetal position. She'd peed in her jumpsuit, not caring about the warm itchy wetness, or the smell, worrying only that she might slip and fall in the wet spot it left on the floor. She couldn't make noise. They'd shoot her.

On the third day, thirst had forced her into action. The noise of the ship was all around her. The faint subsonic rumble of the reactor and drive. The constant hiss and thud of hydraulics and steel bolts as the pressure doors between decks opened and closed. The clump of heavy boots walking on metal decking. She waited until all the noise she could hear sounded distant, then pulled the environment suit off its hooks and onto the locker floor. Listening for any approaching sound, she slowly disassembled the suit and took out the water supply. It was old and stale; the suit obviously hadn't been used or serviced in ages. But she hadn't had a sip in days, and the warm loamy water in the suit's reservoir bag was the best thing she had ever tasted. She had to work hard not to gulp it down and make herself vomit.

When the urge to urinate returned, she pulled the catheter bag out of the suit and relieved herself into it. She sat on the floor, now cushioned by the padded suit and almost comfortable, and wondered who her captors were—Coalition Navy, pirates, something worse. Sometimes she slept.



On day four, isolation, hunger, boredom, and the diminishing number of places to store her piss finally pushed her to make contact with them. She'd heard muffled cries of pain. Somewhere nearby, her shipmates were being beaten or tortured. If she got the attention of the kidnappers, maybe they would just take her to the others. That was okay. Beatings, she could handle. It seemed like a small price to pay if it meant seeing people again.

The locker sat beside the inner airlock door. During flight, that usually wasn't a high-traffic area, though she didn't know anything about the layout of this particular ship. She thought about what to say, how to present herself. When she finally heard someone moving toward her, she just tried to yell that she wanted out. The dry rasp that came out of her throat surprised her. She swallowed, working her tongue to try to create some saliva, and tried again. Another faint rattle in the throat.

The people were right outside her locker door. A voice was talking quietly. Julie had pulled back a fist to bang on the door when she heard what it was saying.

No. Please no. Please don't.

Dave. Her ship's mechanic. Dave, who collected clips from old cartoons and knew a million jokes begging in a small broken voice.

No, please no, please don't, he said.

Hydraulics and locking bolts clicked as the inner airlock door opened. A meaty thud as something

was thrown inside. Another click as the airlock closed. A hiss of evacuating air.

When the airlock cycle had finished, the people outside her door walked away. She didn't bang to get their attention.



They'd scrubbed the ship. Detainment by the inner planet navies was a bad scenario, but they'd all trained on how to deal with it. Sensitive OPA data was scrubbed and overwritten with innocuous-looking logs with false time stamps. Anything too sensitive to trust to a computer, the captain destroyed. When the attackers came aboard, they could play innocent.

It hadn't mattered.

There weren't the questions about cargo or permits. The invaders had come in like they owned the place, and Captain Darren had rolled over like a dog. Everyone else—Mike, Dave, Wan Li—they'd all just thrown up their hands and gone along quietly. The pirates or slavers or whatever they were had dragged them off the little transport ship that had been her home, and down a docking tube without even minimal environment suits. The tube's thin layer of Mylar was the only thing between them and hard nothing: hope it didn't rip; goodbye lungs if it did.

Julie had gone along too, but then the bastards had tried to lay their hands on her, strip her clothes off.

Five years of low-gravity jiu jitsu training and them in a confined space with no gravity. She'd done a lot of damage. She'd almost started to think she might win when from nowhere a gauntleted fist smashed into her face. Things got fuzzy after that. Then the locker, and *Shoot her if she makes a noise*. Four days of not making noise while they beat her friends down below and then threw one of them out an airlock.

After six days, everything went quiet.

Shifting between bouts of consciousness and fragmented dreams, she was only vaguely aware as the sounds of walking, talking, and pressure doors and the subsonic rumble of the reactor and the drive faded away a little at a time. When the drive stopped, so did gravity, and Julie woke from a dream of racing her old pinnacle to find herself floating while her muscles screamed in protest and then slowly relaxed.

She pulled herself to the door and pressed her ear to the cold metal. Panic shot through her until she caught the quiet sound of the air recyclers. The ship still had power and air, but the drive wasn't on and no one was opening a door or walking or talking. Maybe it was a crew meeting. Or a party on another deck. Or everyone was in engineering, fixing a serious problem.

She spent a day listening and waiting.

By day seven, her last sip of water was gone. No one on the ship had moved within range of her hearing for twenty-four hours. She sucked on a plastic tab she'd ripped off the environment suit until she worked up some saliva; then she started yelling. She yelled herself hoarse.

No one came.

By day eight, she was ready to be shot. She'd been out of water for two days, and her waste bag had been full for four. She put her shoulders against the back wall of the locker and planted her hands against the side walls. Then she kicked out with both legs as hard as she could. The cramps that followed the first kick almost made her pass out. She screamed instead.

Stupid girl, she told herself. She was dehydrated. Eight days without activity was more than enough to start atrophy. At least she should have stretched out.

She massaged her stiff muscles until the knots were gone, then stretched, focusing her mind like she was back in dojo. ~~When she was in control of her body, she kicked again. And again. And again,~~ until light started to show through the edges of the locker. And again, until the door was so bent that the three hinges and the locking bolt were the only points of contact between it and the frame.

And one last time, so that it bent far enough that the bolt was no longer seated in the hasp and the door swung free.

Julie shot from the locker, hands half raised and ready to look either threatening or terrified, depending on which seemed more useful.

There was no one on the whole deck: the airlock, the suit storage room where she'd spent the last eight days, a half dozen other storage rooms. All empty. She plucked a magnetized pipe wrench of suitable size for skull cracking out of an EVA kit, then went down the crew ladder to the deck below.

And then the one below that, and then the one below that. Personnel cabins in crisp, almost military order. Commissary, where there were signs of a struggle. Medical bay, empty. Torpedo bay. No one. The comm station was unmanned, powered down, and locked. The few sensor logs that still streamed showed no sign of the *Scopuli*. A new dread knotted her gut. Deck after deck and room after room empty of life. Something had happened. A radiation leak. Poison in the air. Something that had forced an evacuation. She wondered if she'd be able to fly the ship by herself.

But if they'd evacuated, she'd have heard them going out the airlock, wouldn't she?

She reached the final deck hatch, the one that led into engineering, and stopped when the hatch didn't open automatically. A red light on the lock panel showed that the room had been sealed from the inside. She thought again about radiation and major failures. But if either of those was the case, why lock the door from the inside? And she had passed wall panel after wall panel. None of them had been flashing warnings of any kind. No, not radiation, something else.

There was more disruption here. Blood. Tools and containers in disarray. Whatever had happened it had happened here. No, it had started here. And it had ended behind that locked door.

It took two hours with a torch and prying tools from the machine shop to cut through the hatch to engineering. With the hydraulics compromised, she had to crank it open by hand. A gust of warm wet air blew out, carrying a hospital scent without the antiseptic. A coppery, nauseating smell. The torture chamber, then. Her friends would be inside, beaten or cut to pieces. Julie hefted her wrench and prepared to bust open at least one head before they killed her. She floated down.

The engineering deck was huge, vaulted like a cathedral. The fusion reactor dominated the central space. Something was wrong with it. Where she expected to see readouts, shielding, and monitors, a layer of something like mud seemed to flow over the reactor core. Slowly, Julie floated toward it, one hand still on the ladder. The strange smell became overpowering.

The mud caked around the reactor had structure to it like nothing she'd seen before. Tubes ran through it like veins or airways. Parts of it pulsed. Not mud, then.

Flesh.

An outcropping of the thing shifted toward her. Compared to the whole, it seemed no larger than a toe, a little finger. It was Captain Darren's head.

"Help me," it said.

A hundred and fifty years before, when the parochial disagreements between Earth and Mars had been on the verge of war, the Belt had been a far horizon of tremendous mineral wealth beyond viable economic reach, and the outer planets had been beyond even the most unrealistic corporate dream. Then Solomon Epstein had built his little modified fusion drive, popped it on the back of his three-man yacht, and turned it on. With a good scope, you could still see his ship going at a marginal percentage of the speed of light, heading out into the big empty. The best, longest funeral in the history of mankind. Fortunately, he'd left the plans on his home computer. The Epstein Drive hadn't given humanity the stars, but it had delivered the planets.

Three-quarters of a kilometer long, a quarter of a kilometer wide—roughly shaped like a fire hydrant—and mostly empty space inside, the *Canterbury* was a retooled colony transport. Once, it had been packed with people, supplies, schematics, machines, environment bubbles, and hope. Just under twenty million people lived on the moons of Saturn now. The *Canterbury* had hauled nearly a million of their ancestors there. Forty-five million on the moons of Jupiter. One moon of Uranus sported five thousand, the farthest outpost of human civilization, at least until the Mormons finished their generation ship and headed for the stars and freedom from procreation restrictions.

And then there was the Belt.

If you asked OPA recruiters when they were drunk and feeling expansive, they might say there were a hundred million in the Belt. Ask an inner planet census taker, it was nearer to fifty million. Any way you looked, the population was huge and needed a lot of water.

So now the *Canterbury* and her dozens of sister ships in the Pur'n'Kleen Water Company made the loop from Saturn's generous rings to the Belt and back hauling glaciers, and would until the ships aged into salvage wrecks.

Jim Holden saw some poetry in that.

"Holden?"

He turned back to the hangar deck. Chief Engineer Naomi Nagata towered over him. She stood almost two full meters tall, her mop of curly hair tied back into a black tail, her expression halfway between amusement and annoyance. She had the Belter habit of shrugging with her hands instead of her shoulders.

"Holden, are you listening, or just staring out the window?"

"There was a problem," Holden said. "And because you're really, really good, you can fix it even though you don't have enough money or supplies."

Naomi laughed.

"So you weren't listening," she said.

"Not really, no."

"Well, you got the basics right anyhow. *Knight's* landing gear isn't going to be good in atmosphere until I can get the seals replaced. That going to be a problem?"

"I'll ask the old man," Holden said. "But when's the last time we used the shuttle in atmosphere?"

"Never, but regs say we need at least one atmo-capable shuttle."

"Hey, Boss!" Amos Burton, Naomi's earthborn assistant, yelled from across the bay. He waved one meaty arm in their general direction. He meant Naomi. Amos might be on Captain McDowell's ship; Holden might be executive officer; but in Amos Burton's world, only Naomi was boss.

“What’s the matter?” Naomi shouted back.

~~“Bad cable. Can you hold this little fucker in place while I get the spare?”~~

Naomi looked at Holden, *Are we done here?* in her eyes. He snapped a sarcastic salute and she snorted, shaking her head as she walked away, her frame long and thin in her greasy coveralls.

Seven years in Earth’s navy, five years working in space with civilians, and he’d never gotten used to the long, thin, improbable bones of Belters. A childhood spent in gravity shaped the way he saw things forever.

At the central lift, Holden held his finger briefly over the button for the navigation deck, tempted by the prospect of Ade Tukunbo—her smile, her voice, the patchouli-and-vanilla scent she used in her hair—but pressed the button for the infirmary instead. Duty before pleasure.

Shed Garvey, the medical tech, was hunched over his lab table, debriding the stump of Cameron Paj’s left arm, when Holden walked in. A month earlier, Paj had gotten his elbow pinned by a thirty-ton block of ice moving at five millimeters a second. It wasn’t an uncommon injury among people with the dangerous job of cutting and moving zero-g icebergs, and Paj was taking the whole thing with the fatalism of a professional. Holden leaned over Shed’s shoulder to watch as the tech plucked one of the medical maggots out of dead tissue.

“What’s the word?” Holden asked.

“It’s looking pretty good, sir,” Paj said. “I’ve still got a few nerves. Shed’s been tellin’ me about how the prosthetic is gonna hook up to it.”

“Assuming we can keep the necrosis under control,” the medic said, “and make sure Paj doesn’t heal up too much before we get to Ceres. I checked the policy, and Paj here’s been signed on long enough to get one with force feedback, pressure and temperature sensors, fine-motor software. The whole package. It’ll be almost as good as the real thing. The inner planets have a new biogel that regrows the limb, but that isn’t covered in our medical plan.”

“Fuck the Inners, and fuck their magic Jell-O. I’d rather have a good Belter-built fake than anything those bastards grow in a lab. Just wearing their fancy arm probably turns you into an asshole,” Paj said. Then he added, “Oh, uh, no offense, XO.”

“None taken. Just glad we’re going to get you fixed up,” Holden said.

“Tell him the other bit,” Paj said with a wicked grin. Shed blushed.

“I’ve, ah, heard from other guys who’ve gotten them,” Shed said, not meeting Holden’s eyes. “Apparently there’s a period while you’re still building identification with the prosthetic when whacking off feels just like getting a hand job.”

Holden let the comment hang in the air for a second while Shed’s ears turned crimson.

“Good to know,” Holden said. “And the necrosis?”

“There’s some infection,” Shed said. “The maggots are keeping it under control, and the inflammation’s actually a good thing in this context, so we’re not fighting too hard unless it starts to spread.”

“Is he going to be ready for the next run?” Holden asked.

For the first time, Paj frowned.

“Shit yes, I’ll be ready. I’m always ready. This is what I *do*, sir.”

“Probably,” Shed said. “Depending on how the bond takes. If not this one, the one after.”

“Fuck that,” Paj said. “I can buck ice one-handed better than half the skags you’ve got on this bitch.”

“Again,” Holden said, suppressing a grin, “good to know. Carry on.”

Paj snorted. Shed plucked another maggot free. Holden went back to the lift, and this time he didn’t

hesitate.

The navigation station of the *Canterbury* didn't dress to impress. The great wall-sized displays Holden had imagined when he'd first volunteered for the navy did exist on capital ships but, even there, more as an artifact of design than need. Ade sat at a pair of screens only slightly larger than a hand terminal, graphs of the efficiency and output of the *Canterbury's* reactor and engine updating in the corners, raw logs spooling on the right as the systems reported in. She wore thick headphones that covered her ears, the faint thump of the bass line barely escaping. If the *Canterbury* sensed an anomaly, it would alert her. If a system errored, it would alert her. If Captain McDowell left the command and control deck, it would alert her so she could turn the music off and look busy when he arrived. Her petty hedonism was only one of a thousand things that made Ade attractive to Holden. He walked up behind her, pulled the headphones gently away from her ears, and said, "Hey."

Ade smiled, tapped her screen, and dropped the headphones to rest around her long slim neck like technical jewelry.

"Executive Officer James Holden," she said with an exaggerated formality made even more acute by her thick Nigerian accent. "And what can I do for you?"

"You know, it's funny you should ask that," he said. "I was just thinking how pleasant it would be to have someone come back to my cabin when third shift takes over. Have a little romantic dinner of the same crap they're serving in the galley. Listen to some music."

"Drink a little wine," she said. "Break a little protocol. Pretty to think about, but I'm not up for sex tonight."

"I wasn't talking about sex. A little food. Conversation."

"I was talking about sex," she said.

Holden knelt beside her chair. In the one-third g of their current thrust, it was perfectly comfortable. Ade's smile softened. The log spool chimed; she glanced at it, tapped a release, and turned back to him.

"Ade, I like you. I mean, I really enjoy your company," he said. "I don't understand why we can't spend some time together with our clothes on."

"Holden. Sweetie. Stop it, okay?"

"Stop what?"

"Stop trying to turn me into your girlfriend. You're a nice guy. You've got a cute butt, and you're fun in the sack. Doesn't mean we're engaged."

Holden rocked back on his heels, feeling himself frown.

"Ade. For this to work for me, it needs to be more than that."

"But it isn't," she said, taking his hand. "It's okay that it isn't. You're the XO here, and I'm a short-timer. Another run, maybe two, and I'm gone."

"I'm not chained to this ship either."

Her laughter was equal parts warmth and disbelief.

"How long have you been on the *Cant*?"

"Five years."

"You're not going anyplace," she said. "You're comfortable here."

"Comfortable?" he said. "The *Cant's* a century-old ice hauler. You can find a shittier flying job, but you have to try really hard. Everyone here is either wildly under-qualified or seriously screwed things up at their last gig."

"And you're comfortable here." Her eyes were less kind now. She bit her lip, looked down at the screen, looked up.

“I didn’t deserve that,” he said.

“You didn’t,” she agreed. “Look, I told you I wasn’t in the mood tonight. I’m feeling cranky. I need a good night’s sleep. I’ll be nicer tomorrow.”

“Promise?”

“I’ll even make you dinner. Apology accepted?”

He slipped forward, pressed his lips to hers. She kissed back, politely at first and then with more warmth. Her fingers cupped his neck for a moment, then pulled him away.

“You’re entirely too good at that. You should go now,” she said. “On duty and all.”

“Okay,” he said, and didn’t turn to go.

“Jim,” she said, and the shipwide comm system clicked on.

“Holden to the bridge,” Captain McDowell said, his voice compressed and echoing. Holden replied with something obscene. Ade laughed. He swooped in, kissed her cheek, and headed back for the central lift, quietly hoping that Captain McDowell suffered boils and public humiliation for his lousy timing.

The bridge was hardly larger than Holden’s quarters and smaller by half than the galley. Except for the slightly oversized captain’s display, required by Captain McDowell’s failing eyesight and general distrust of corrective surgery, it could have been an accounting firm’s back room. The air smelled of cleaning astringent and someone’s overly strong yerba maté tea. McDowell shifted in his seat as Holden approached. Then the captain leaned back, pointing over his shoulder at the communications station.

“Becca!” McDowell snapped. “Tell him.”

Rebecca Byers, the comm officer on duty, could have been bred from a shark and a hatchet. Black eyes, sharp features, lips so thin they might as well not have existed. The story on board was that she’d taken the job to escape prosecution for killing an ex-husband. Holden liked her.

“Emergency signal,” she said. “Picked it up two hours ago. The transponder verification just bounced back from *Callisto*. It’s real.”

“Ah,” Holden said. And then: “Shit. Are we the closest?”

“Only ship in a few million clicks.”

“Well. That figures,” Holden said.

Becca turned her gaze to the captain. McDowell cracked his knuckles and stared at his display. The light from the screen gave him an odd greenish cast.

“It’s next to a charted non-Belt asteroid,” McDowell said.

“Really?” Holden said in disbelief. “Did they run into it? There’s nothing else out here for millions of kilometers.”

“Maybe they pulled over because someone had to go potty. All we have is that some knucklehead is out there, blasting an emergency signal, and we’re the closest. Assuming...”

The law of the solar system was unequivocal. In an environment as hostile to life as space, the aid and goodwill of your fellow humans wasn’t optional. The emergency signal, just by existing, obligated the nearest ship to stop and render aid—which didn’t mean the law was universally followed.

The *Canterbury* was fully loaded. Well over a million tons of ice had been gently accelerated for the past month. Just like the little glacier that had crushed Paj’s arm, it was going to be hard to slow down. The temptation to have an unexplained comm failure, erase the logs, and let the great god Darwin have his way was always there.

But if McDowell had really intended that, he wouldn’t have called Holden up. Or made the suggestion where the crew could hear him. Holden understood the dance. The captain was going to be

the one who would have blown it off except for Holden. The grunts would respect the captain for not wanting to cut into the ship's profit. They'd respect Holden for insisting that they follow the rule. No matter what happened, the captain and Holden would both be hated for what they were required by law and mere human decency to do.

"We have to stop," Holden said. Then, gamely: "There may be salvage."

McDowell tapped his screen. Ade's voice came from the console, as low and warm as if she'd been in the room.

"Captain?"

"I need numbers on stopping this crate," he said.

"Sir?"

"How hard is it going to be to put us alongside CA-2216862?"

"We're stopping at an asteroid?"

"I'll tell you when you've followed my order, Navigator Tukunbo."

"Yes, sir," she said. Holden heard a series of clicks. "If we flip the ship right now and burn like hell for most of two days, I can get us within fifty thousand kilometers, sir."

"Can you define 'burn like hell'?" McDowell said.

"We'll need everyone in crash couches."

"Of course we will," McDowell sighed, and scratched his scruffy beard. "And shifting ice is only going to do a couple million bucks' worth of banging up the hull, if we're lucky. I'm getting old for this, Holden. I really am."

"Yes, sir. You are. And I've always liked your chair," Holden said. McDowell scowled and made an obscene gesture. Rebecca snorted in laughter. McDowell turned to her.

"Send a message to the beacon that we're on our way. And let Ceres know we're going to be late. Holden, where does the *Knight* stand?"

"No flying in atmosphere until we get some parts, but she'll do fine for fifty thousand clicks in vacuum."

"You're sure of that?"

"Naomi said it. That makes it true."

McDowell rose, unfolding to almost two and a quarter meters and thinner than a teenager back on Earth. Between his age and never having lived in a gravity well, the coming burn was likely to be hell on the old man. Holden felt a pang of sympathy that he would never embarrass McDowell by expressing.

"Here's the thing, Jim," McDowell said, his voice quiet enough that only Holden could hear him. "We're required to stop and make an attempt, but we don't have to go out of our way, if you see what I mean."

"We'll already have stopped," Holden said, and McDowell patted at the air with his wide, spidery hands. One of the many Belter gestures that had evolved to be visible when wearing an environment suit.

"I can't avoid that," he said. "But if you see anything out there that seems off, don't play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home."

"And leave it for the next ship that comes through?"

"And keep yourself safe," McDowell said. "Order. Understood?"

"Understood," Holden said.

As the shipwide comm system clicked to life and McDowell began explaining the situation to the crew, Holden imagined he could hear a chorus of groans coming up through the decks. He went over

Rebecca.

“Okay,” he said, “what have we got on the broken ship?”

“Light freighter. Martian registry. Shows Eros as home port. Calls itself *Scopuli...*”

Detective Miller sat back on the foam-core chair, smiling gentle encouragement while he scrambled to make sense of the girl's story.

"And then it was all pow! Room full up with bladeboys howling and humping shank," the girl said waving a hand. "Look like a dance number, 'cept that Bomie's got this look he didn't know nothing never and ever amen. You know, que?"

Havelock, standing by the door, blinked twice. The squat man's face twitched with impatience. It was why Havelock was never going to make senior detective. And why he sucked at poker.

Miller was very good at poker.

"I totally," Miller said. His voice had taken on the twang of an inner level resident. He waved his hand in the same lazy arc the girl used. "Bomie, he didn't see. Forgotten arm."

"Forgotten fucking arm, yeah," the girl said as if Miller had spoken a line of gospel. Miller nodded and the girl nodded back like they were two birds doing a mating dance.

The rent hole was three cream-and-black-fleck-painted rooms—bathroom, kitchen, living room. The struts of a pull-down sleeping loft in the living room had been broken and repaired so many times they didn't retract anymore. This near the center of Ceres' spin, that wasn't from gravity so much as mass in motion. The air smelled beery with old protein yeast and mushrooms. Local food, so whoever had bounced the girl hard enough to break her bed hadn't paid enough for dinner. Or maybe they did, and the girl had chosen to spend it on heroin or malta or MCK.

Her business, either way.

"Follow que?" Miller asked.

"Bomie vacuate like losing air," the girl said with a chuckle. "Bang-head hops, kennis tu?"

"Ken," Miller said.

"Now, all new bladeboys. Overhead. I'm out."

"And Bomie?"

The girl's eyes made a slow track up Miller, shoes to knees to porkpie hat. Miller chuckled. He gave the chair a light push, sloping up to his feet in the low gravity.

"He shows, and I asked, que si?" Miller said.

"Como no?" the girl said. *Why not?*

The tunnel outside was white where it wasn't grimy. Ten meters wide, and gently sloping up in both directions. The white LED lights didn't pretend to mimic sunlight. About half a kilometer down someone had rammed into the wall so hard the native rock showed through, and it still hadn't been repaired. Maybe it wouldn't be. This was the deep dig, way up near the center of spin. Tourists never came here.

Havelock led the way to their cart, bouncing too high with every step. He didn't come up to the low gravity levels very often, and it made him awkward. Miller had lived on Ceres his whole life, and truth to tell, the Coriolis effect up this high could make him a little unsteady sometimes too.

"So," Havelock said as he punched in their destination code, "did you have fun?"

"Don't know what you mean," Miller said.

The electrical motors hummed to life, and the cart lurched forward into the tunnel, squishy foam tires faintly squeaking.

"Having your outworld conversation in front of the Earth guy?" Havelock said. "I couldn't follow

even half of that.”

“That wasn’t Belters keeping the Earth guy out,” Miller said. “That was poor folks keeping the educated guy out. And it was kind of fun, now you mention it.”

Havelock laughed. He could take being teased and keep on moving. It was what made him good at team sports: soccer, basketball, politics.

Miller wasn’t much good at those.

Ceres, the port city of the Belt and the outer planets, boasted two hundred fifty kilometers in diameter, tens of thousands of kilometers of tunnels in layer on layer on layer. Spinning it up to 0.3 g had taken the best minds at Tycho Manufacturing half a generation, and they were still pretty smug about it. Now Ceres had more than six million permanent residents, and as many as a thousand ships docking in any given day meant upping the population to as high as seven million.

Platinum, iron, and titanium from the Belt. Water from Saturn, vegetables and beef from the big mirror-fed greenhouses on Ganymede and Europa, organics from Earth and Mars. Power cells from I Helium-3 from the refineries on Rhea and Iapetus. A river of wealth and power unrivaled in human history came through Ceres. Where there was commerce on that level, there was also crime. Where there was crime, there were security forces to keep it in check. Men like Miller and Havelock, whose business it was to track the electric carts up the wide ramps, feel the false gravity of spin fall away beneath them, and ask low-rent glitz whores about what happened the night Bomie Chatterjee stopped collecting protection money for the Golden Bough Society.

The primary station house for Star Helix Security, police force and military garrison for the Ceres Station, was on the third level from the asteroid’s skin, two kilometers square and dug into the rock so high Miller could walk from his desk up five levels without ever leaving the offices. Havelock turned in the cart while Miller went to his cubicle, downloaded the recording of their interview with the girl and reran it. He was halfway through when his partner lumbered up behind him.

“Learn anything?” Havelock asked.

“Not much,” Miller said. “Bomie got jumped by a bunch of unaffiliated local thugs. Sometimes a low-level guy like Bomie will hire people to pretend to attack him so he can heroically fight them off. Ups his reputation. That’s what she meant when she called it a dance number. The guys that went after him were that caliber, only instead of turning into a ninja badass, Bomie ran away and hasn’t come back.”

“And now?”

“And now nothing,” Miller said. “That’s what I don’t get. Someone took out a Golden Bough purse boy, and there’s no payback. I mean, okay, Bomie’s a bottom-feeder, but…”

“But once they start eating the little guys, there’s less money coming up to the big guys,” Havelock said. “So why hasn’t the Golden Bough meted out some gangster justice?”

“I don’t like this,” Miller said.

Havelock laughed. “Belters,” he said. “One thing goes weird and you think the whole ecosystem’s crashing. If the Golden Bough’s too weak to keep its claims, that’s a good thing. They’re the bad guys, remember?”

“Yeah, well,” Miller said. “Say what you will about organized crime, at least it’s organized.”

Havelock sat on the small plastic chair beside Miller’s desk and craned to watch the playback.

“Okay,” Havelock said. “What the hell is the ‘forgotten arm’?”

“Boxing term,” Miller said. “It’s the hit you didn’t see coming.”

The computer chimed and Captain Shaddid’s voice came from the speakers.

“Miller? Are you there?”

“Mmm,” Havelock said. “Bad omen.”

“What?” the captain asked, her voice sharp. She had never quite overcome her prejudice against Havelock’s inner planet origins. Miller held up a hand to silence his partner.

“Here, Captain. What can I do for you?”

“Meet me in my office, please.”

“On my way,” he said.

Miller stood, and Havelock slid into his chair. They didn’t speak. Both of them knew that Captain Shaddid would have called them in together if she’d wanted Havelock to be there. Another reason the man would never make senior detective. Miller left him alone with the playback, trying to parse the fine points of class and station, origin and race. Lifetime’s work, that.

Captain Shaddid’s office was decorated in a soft, feminine style. Real cloth tapestries hung from the walls, and the scent of coffee and cinnamon came from an insert in her air filter that cost about a tenth of what the real foodstuffs would have. She wore her uniform casually, her hair down around her shoulders in violation of corporate regulations. If Miller had ever been called upon to describe her, the phrase *deceptive coloration* would have figured in. She nodded to a chair, and he sat.

“What have you found?” she asked, but her gaze was on the wall behind him. This wasn’t a pop quiz; she was just making conversation.

“Golden Bough’s looking the same as Sohiro’s crew and the Loca Greiga. Still on station, but... distracted, I guess I’d call it. They’re letting little things slide. Fewer thugs on the ground, less enforcement. I’ve got half a dozen mid-level guys who’ve gone dark.”

He’d caught her attention.

“Killed?” she asked. “An OPA advance?”

An advance by the Outer Planets Alliance was the constant bogeyman of Ceres security. Living in the tradition of Al Capone and Hamas, the IRA and the Red Martials, the OPA was beloved by the people it helped and feared by the ones who got in its way. Part social movement, part wannabe nation, and part terrorist network, it totally lacked an institutional conscience. Captain Shaddid might not like Havelock because he was from down a gravity well, but she’d work with him. The OPA would have put him in an airlock. People like Miller would only rate getting a bullet in the skull, and a nice plastic one at that. Nothing that might get shrapnel in the ductwork.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “It doesn’t smell like a war. It’s... Honestly, sir, I don’t know what the hell it is. The numbers are great. Protection’s down, unlicensed gambling’s down. Cooper and Hariri shut down the underage whorehouse up on six, and as far as anyone can tell, it hasn’t started up again. There’s a little more action by independents, but that aside, it’s all looking great. It just smells funny.”

She nodded, but her gaze was back on the wall. He’d lost her interest as quickly as he’d gotten it.

“Well, put it aside,” she said. “I have something. New contract. Just you. Not Havelock.”

Miller crossed his arms.

“New contract,” he said slowly. “Meaning?”

“Meaning Star Helix Security has accepted a contract for services separate from the Ceres security assignment, and in my role as site manager for the corporation, I’m assigning you to it.”

“I’m fired?” he said.

Captain Shaddid looked pained.

“It’s additional duty,” she said. “You’ll still have the Ceres assignments you have now. It’s just that, in addition... Look, Miller, I think this is as shitty as you do. I’m not pulling you off station. I’m not taking you off the main contract. This is a favor someone down on Earth is doing for a shareholder.”

“We’re doing favors for shareholders now?” Miller asked.

“You are, yes,” Captain Shaddid said. ~~The softness was gone, the conciliatory tone was gone.~~ Her eyes were dark as wet stone.

“Right, then,” Miller said. “I guess I am.”

Captain Shaddid held up her hand terminal. Miller fumbled at his side, pulled out his own, and accepted the narrow-beam transfer. Whatever this was, Shaddid was keeping it off the common network. A new file tree, labeled JMAO, appeared on his readout.

“It’s a little-lost-daughter case,” Captain Shaddid said. “Ariadne and Jules-Pierre Mao.”

The names rang a bell. Miller pressed his fingertips onto the screen of his hand terminal.

“Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile?” he asked.

“The one.”

Miller whistled low.

Maokwik might not have been one of the top ten corporations in the Belt, but it was certainly in the upper fifty. Originally, it had been a legal firm involved in the epic failure of the Venusian cloud cities. They’d used the money from that decades-long lawsuit to diversify and expand, mostly into interplanetary transport. Now the corporate station was independent, floating between the Belt and the inner planets with the regal majesty of an ocean liner on ancient seas. The simple fact that Miller knew that much about them meant they had enough money to buy and sell men like him on open exchange.

He’d just been bought.

“They’re Luna-based,” Captain Shaddid said. “All the rights and privileges of Earth citizenship. But they do a lot of shipping business out here.”

“And they misplaced a daughter?”

“Black sheep,” the captain said. “Went off to college, got involved with a group called the Far Horizons Foundation. Student activists.”

“OPA front,” Miller said.

“Associated,” Shaddid corrected him. Miller let it pass, but a flicker of curiosity troubled him. He wondered which side Captain Shaddid would be on if the OPA attacked. “The family put it down to a phase. They’ve got two older children with controlling interest, so if Julie wanted to bounce around vacuum calling herself a freedom fighter, there was no real harm.”

“But now they want her found,” Miller said.

“They do.”

“What changed?”

“They didn’t see fit to share that information.”

“Right.”

“Last records show she was employed on Tycho Station but maintained an apartment here. I’ve found her partition on the network and locked it down. The password is in your files.”

“Okay,” Miller said. “What’s my contract?”

“Find Julie Mao, detain her, and ship her home.”

“A kidnap job, then,” he said.

“Yes.”

Miller stared down at his hand terminal, flicking the files open without particularly looking at them. A strange knot had tied itself in his guts. He’d been working Ceres security for thirty years, and he hadn’t started with many illusions in place. The joke was that Ceres didn’t have laws—it had police. His hands weren’t any cleaner than Captain Shaddid’s. Sometimes people fell out airlocks.

Sometimes evidence vanished from the lockers. It wasn't so much that it was right or wrong as that it was justified. You spent your life in a stone bubble with your food, your water, your *air* shipped in from places so distant you could barely find them with a telescope, and a certain moral flexibility was necessary. But he'd never had to take a kidnap job before.

"Problem, Detective?" Captain Shaddid asked.

"No, sir," he said. "I'll take care of it."

"Don't spend too much time on it," she said.

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

Captain Shaddid's hard eyes softened, like she was putting on a mask. She smiled.

"Everything going well with your partner?"

"Havelock's all right," Miller said. "Having him around makes people like me better by contrast. That's nice."

Her smile's only change was to become half a degree more genuine. Nothing like a little shared racism to build ties with the boss. Miller nodded respectfully and headed out.



His hole was on the eighth level, off a residential tunnel a hundred meters wide with fifty meters of carefully cultivated green park running down the center. The main corridor's vaulted ceiling was lit by recessed lights and painted a blue that Havelock assured him matched the Earth's summer sky. Living on the surface of a planet, mass sucking at every bone and muscle, and nothing but gravity to keep your air close, seemed like a fast path to crazy. The blue was nice, though.

Some people followed Captain Shaddid's lead by perfuming their air. Not always with coffee and cinnamon scents, of course. Havelock's hole smelled of baking bread. Others opted for floral scents or semipheromones. Candace, Miller's ex-wife, had preferred something called EarthLily, which had always made him think of the waste recycling levels. These days, he left it at the vaguely astringent smell of the station itself. Recycled air that had passed through a million lungs. Water from the tap so clean it could be used for lab work, but it had been piss and shit and tears and blood and would be again. The circle of life on Ceres was so small you could see the curve. He liked it that way.

He poured a glass of moss whiskey, a native Ceres liquor made from engineered yeast, then took off his shoes and settled onto the foam bed. He could still see Candace's disapproving scowl and hear her sigh. He shrugged apology to her memory and turned back to work.

Juliette Andromeda Mao. He read through her work history, her academic records. Talented pinnacle pilot. There was a picture of her at eighteen in a tailored vac suit with the helmet off: pretty girl with a thin, lunar citizen's frame and long black hair. She was grinning like the universe had given her a kiss. The linked text said she'd won first place in something called the Parrish/Dorn 500K. He searched briefly. Some kind of race only really rich people could afford to fly in. Her pinnacle—the *Razorback*—had beaten the previous record and held it for two years.

Miller sipped his whiskey and wondered what had happened to the girl with enough wealth and power to own a private ship that would bring her here. It was a long way from competing in expensive space races to being hog-tied and sent home in a pod. Or maybe it wasn't.

"Poor little rich girl," Miller said to the screen. "Sucks to be you, I guess."

He closed the files and drank quietly and seriously, staring at the blank ceiling above him. The chair where Candace used to sit and ask him about his day stood empty, but he could see her there anyway. Now that she wasn't here to make him talk, it was easier to respect the impulse. She'd been

lonely. He could see that now. In his imagination, she rolled her eyes.

~~An hour later, his blood warm with drink, he heated up a bowl of real rice and fake beans—yeast and fungus could mimic anything if you had enough whiskey first—opened the door of his hole, and ate dinner looking out at the traffic gently curving by. The second shift streamed into the tube station and then out of them. The kids who lived two holes down—a girl of eight and her brother of four—met their father with hugs, squeals, mutual accusations, and tears. The blue ceiling glowed in its reflected light, unchanging, static, reassuring. A sparrow fluttered down the tunnel, hovering in a way that Havelock assured him they couldn't on Earth. Miller threw it a fake bean.~~

He tried to think about the Mao girl, but in truth he didn't much care. Something was happening to the organized crime families of Ceres, and it made him jumpy as hell.

This thing with Julie Mao? It was a sideshow.

After nearly two full days in high gravity, Holden's knees and back and neck ached. And his head. Hell, his feet. He walked in the crew hatch of the *Knight* just as Naomi was climbing up the ladder from its cargo bay. She smiled and gave him a thumbs-up.

"The salvage mech is locked down," she said. "Reactor is warming up. We're ready to fly."

"Good."

"We got a pilot yet?" she asked.

"Alex Kamal is on the ready rotation today, so he's our man. I kind of wish Valka had been up. He's not the pilot Alex is, but he's quieter, and my head hurts."

"I like Alex. He's ebullient," Naomi said.

"I don't know what *ebullient* means, but if it means Alex, it makes me tired."

Holden started up the ladder to ops and the cockpit. In the shiny black surface of a deactivated wall panel, Naomi's reflection smirked at his back. He couldn't understand how Belters, thin as pencils, bounced back from high g so quickly. Decades of practice and selective breeding, he assumed.

In ops, Holden strapped into the command console, the crash couch material silently conforming to his body. At the half g Ade put them on for the final approach, the foam felt good. He let a small groan slip out. The switches, plastic and metal made to withstand hard g and hundreds of years, clicked sharply. The *Knight* responded with an array of glowing diagnostic indicators and a near-subliminal hum.

A few minutes later, Holden glanced over to see Alex Kamal's thinning black hair appear, followed by his round cheerful face, a deep brown that years of shipboard life couldn't pale. Martian-raised, Alex had a frame that was thicker than a Belter's. He was slender compared to Holden, and even so, his flight suit stretched tight against his spreading waistline. Alex had flown in the Martian navy, but he'd clearly given up on the military-style fitness routine.

"Howdy, XO," he drawled. The old west affectation common to everyone from the Mariner Valley annoyed Holden. There hadn't been a cowboy on Earth in a hundred years, and Mars didn't have a blade of grass that wasn't under a dome, or a horse that wasn't in a zoo. Mariner Valley had been settled by East Indians, Chinese, and a small contingent of Texans. Apparently, the drawl was viral. They all had it now. "How's the old warhorse today?"

"Smooth so far. We need a flight plan. Ade will be bringing us to relative stop in"—he checked the time readout—"forty, so work fast. I want to get out, get it done, and get the *Cant* back on course to Ceres before she starts rusting."

"Roger that," Alex said, climbing up to the *Knight*'s cockpit.

Holden's headset clicked; then Naomi's voice said, "Amos and Shed are aboard. We're all ready down here."

"Thanks. Just waiting on flight numbers from Alex and we'll be ready to go."

The crew was the minimum necessary: Holden as command, Alex to get them there and back, She in case there were survivors to treat, Naomi and Amos for salvage if there weren't.

It wasn't long before Alex called down, "Okay, Boss. It'll be about a four-hour trip flyin' teakettle. Total mass use at about thirty percent, but we've got a full tank. Total mission time: eleven hours."

"Copy that. Thanks, Alex," Holden said.

Flying teakettle was naval slang for flying on the maneuvering thrusters that used superheated

steam for reaction mass. The *Knight's* fusion torch would be dangerous to use this close to the *Canterbury* and wasteful on such a short trip. Torches were pre-Epstein fusion drives and far less efficient.

“Calling for permission to leave the barn,” Holden said, and clicked from internal comm to the link with the *Canterbury's* bridge. “Holden here. *Knight* is ready to fly.”

“Okay, Jim, go ahead,” McDowell said. “Ade’s bringing her to a stop now. You kids be careful out there. That shuttle is expensive and I’ve always sort of had a thing for Naomi.”

“Roger that, Captain,” Holden said. Back on the internal comm, he buzzed Alex. “Go ahead and take us out.”

Holden leaned back in his chair and listened to the creaks of the *Canterbury's* final maneuvers, the steel and ceramics as loud and ominous as the wood planks of a sailing ship. Or an Earther’s joints after high g. For a moment, Holden felt sympathy for the ship.

They weren’t really stopping, of course. Nothing in space ever actually stopped; it only came into matching orbit with some other object. They were now following CA-2216862 on its merry millennium-long trip around the sun.

Ade sent them the green light, and Holden emptied out the hangar bay air and popped the doors. Alex took them out of the dock on white cones of superheated steam.

They went to find the *Scopuli*.



CA-2216862 was a rock a half kilometer across that had wandered away from the Belt and been yanked around by Jupiter’s enormous gravity. It had eventually found its own slow orbit around the sun in the vast expanse between Jupiter and the Belt, territory empty even for space.

The sight of the *Scopuli* resting gently against the asteroid’s side, held in place by the rock’s tiny gravity, gave Holden a chill. Even if it was flying blind, every instrument dead, its odds of hitting such an object by chance were infinitesimally low. It was a half-kilometer-wide roadblock on a highway millions of kilometers in diameter. It hadn’t arrived there by accident. He scratched the hairs standing up on the back of his neck.

“Alex, hold us at two klicks out,” Holden said. “Naomi, what can you tell me about that ship?”

“Hull configuration matches the registry information. It’s definitely the *Scopuli*. She’s not radiating in the electromagnetic or infrared. Just that little distress beacon. Looks like the reactor’s shut down. Must have been manual and not damage, because we aren’t getting any radiation leakage either,” Naomi said.

Holden looked at the pictures they were getting from the *Knight's* scopes, as well as the image the *Knight* created by bouncing a laser off the *Scopuli's* hull. “What about that thing that looks like a hole in the side?”

“Uh,” Naomi said. “Ladar says it’s a hole in the side.”

Holden frowned. “Okay, let’s stay here for a minute and recheck the neighborhood. Anything on the scope, Naomi?”

“Nope. And the big array on the *Cant* can spot a kid throwing rocks on Luna. Becca says there’s nobody within twenty million klicks right now,” Naomi said.

Holden tapped out a complicated rhythm on the arm of his chair and drifted up in the straps. He felt hot, and reached over to aim the closest air-circulation nozzle at his face. His scalp tingled with evaporating sweat.

~~If you see anything out there that seems off, don't play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home. Those were his orders. He looked at the image of the *Scopuli*, the hole in its side.~~

“Okay,” he said. “Alex, take us in to a quarter klick, and hold station there. We’ll ride to the surface on the mech. Oh, and keep the torch warmed up and ready. If something nasty is hiding in the ship, I want to be able to run away as fast as I can and melt anything behind us into slag while I do it. Roger?”

“Got it, Boss. *Knight*’s in run-like-a-bunny mode till you say otherwise,” Alex replied.

Holden looked over the command console one more time, searching for the flashing red warning light that would give him permission to go back to the *Cant*. Everything remained a soft green. He popped open his buckles and shoved himself out of the chair. A push on the wall with one foot sent him over to the ladder, and he descended headfirst with gentle touches on the rungs.

In the crew area, Naomi, Amos, and Shed were still strapped into their crash couches. Holden caught the ladder and swung around so that his crew didn’t look upside down. They started undoing their restraints.

“Okay, here’s the situation. The *Scopuli* got holed, and someone left it floating next to this rock. No one is on the scopes, so maybe that means it happened a while ago and they left. Naomi, you’ll be driving the salvage mech, and the three of us will tether on and catch a ride down to the wreck. Shed, you stay with the mech unless we find an injured person, which seems unlikely. Amos and I will go into the ship through that hole and poke around. If we find anything even remotely booby trap-like, we will come back to the mech, Naomi will fly us back to the *Knight*, and we will run away. Any questions?”

Amos raised one beefy hand. “Maybe we oughta be armed, XO. Case there’s piratey types still lurking aboard.”

Holden laughed. “Well, if there are, then their ride left without them. But if it makes you feel more comfortable, go ahead and bring a gun.”

If the big, burly Earther mechanic was carrying a gun, it would make *him* feel better too, but better not to say it. Let them think the guy in charge felt confident.

Holden used his officer’s key to open the weapon locker, and Amos took a high-caliber automatic that fired self-propelled rounds, recoilless and designed for use in zero g. Old-fashioned slug throwers were more reliable, but in null gravity they were also maneuvering thrusters. A traditional handgun would impart enough thrust to achieve escape velocity from a rock the size of CA-2216862.

The crew drifted down to the cargo bay, where the egg-shaped, spider-legged open cage of Naomi’s mech waited. Each of the four legs had a manipulator claw at the end and a variety of cutting and welding tools built into it. The back pair could grip on to a ship’s hull or other structure for leverage, and the front two could be used to make repairs or chop salvage into portable pieces.

“Hats on,” Holden said, and the crew helped each other put on and secure their helmets. Everyone checked their own suit and then someone else’s. When the cargo doors opened, it would be too late to make sure they were buttoned up right.

While Naomi climbed into her mech, Amos, Holden, and Shed secured their suit tethers to the cockpit’s metal cage. Naomi checked the mech and then hit the switch to cycle the cargo bay’s atmosphere and open the doors. Sound inside Holden’s suit faded to just the hiss of air and the faint static of the radio. The air had a slight medicine smell.

Naomi went first, taking the mech down toward the asteroid’s surface on small jets of compressed nitrogen, the crew trailing her on three-meter-long tethers. As they flew, Holden looked back up at the *Knight*: a blocky gray wedge with a drive cone stuck on the wider end. Like everything else humans

built for space travel, it was designed to be efficient, not pretty. That always made Holden a little sad. There should be room for aesthetics, even out here.

The *Knight* seemed to drift away from him, getting smaller and smaller, while he didn't move. The illusion vanished when he turned around to look at the asteroid and felt they were hurtling toward it. He opened a channel to Naomi, but she was humming to herself as she flew, which meant she, at least, wasn't worried. He didn't say anything, but he left the channel open to listen to her hum.

Up close, the *Scopuli* didn't look all that bad. Other than the gaping hole in its flank, it didn't have any damage. It clearly hadn't hit the asteroid; it had just been left close enough that the microgravity had slowly reeled it in. As they approached, he snapped pictures with his suit helmet and transmitted them to the *Canterbury*.

Naomi brought them to a stop, hovering three meters above the hole in the *Scopuli*'s side. Amos whistled across the general suit channel.

"That wasn't a torpedo did this, XO. This was a breaching charge. See how the metal's bent in all around the edges? That's shaped charges stuck right on her hull," Amos said.

In addition to being a fine mechanic, Amos was the one who used explosive surgery to crack open the icebergs floating around Saturn and turn them into more manageable chunks. Another reason to have him on the *Knight*.

"So," Holden said, "our friends here on the *Scopuli* stop, let someone climb onto their hull and plant a breaching charge, and then crack them open and let all the air out. Does that make sense to anyone?"

"Nope," Naomi said. "It doesn't. Still want to go inside?"

If you see anything out there that seems off, don't play hero again. Just pack up the toys and come home.

But what could he have expected? Of course the *Scopuli* wasn't up and running. Of course something had gone wrong. *Off* would have been not seeing anything strange.

"Amos," Holden said, "keep that gun out, just in case. Naomi, can you make us a bigger hole? And be careful. If anything looks wrong, back us off."

Naomi brought the mech in closer, nitrogen blasts no more than a white breath on a cold night. The mech's welding torch blazed to life, red hot, then white, then blue. In silence, the mech's arms unfurled—an insectile movement—and Naomi started cutting. Holden and Amos dropped to the ship's surface, clamping on with magnetic boots. He could feel the vibration in his feet when Naomi pulled a length of hull free. A moment later the torch turned off, and Naomi blasted the fresh edges of the hole with the mech's fire-suppression gear to cool them. Holden gave Amos the thumbs-up and dropped himself very slowly into the *Scopuli*.

The breaching charge had been placed almost exactly amidships, blasting a hole into the galley. When Holden landed and his boots grabbed on to the galley wall, he could feel flash-frozen bits of food crunch under them. There were no bodies in sight.

"Come on in, Amos. No crew visible yet," Holden called over the suit comm.

He moved off to the side and a moment later Amos dropped in, gun clutched in his right hand and a powerful light in his left. The white beam played across the walls of the destroyed galley.

"Which way first, XO?" Amos asked.

Holden tapped on his thigh with one hand and thought. "Engineering. I want to know why the reactor's off-line."

They took the crew ladder, climbing along it toward the aft of the ship. All the pressure doors between decks were open, which was a bad sign. They should all be closed by default, and certainly i

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