

Chapter 1

"Wow, what were the chances of that?" said Chief Petty Officer, Alessandro Cavallo, as he surveyed the damage. Cavallo had a habit of running his hands through his thick black hair when he was distressed. His hand went to his head but he had to settle for absentmindedly drumming his fingers on top of his space helmet.

"I think micrometeor is selling it short, Chief. Looks like it was the size of a football." Captain Elena Alexandrova Stepanova replied as she looked at the place where the primary laser communication mast used to be. *Rio* had been performing a turnover prior to a maneuvering burn that would take her into orbit in the Jovian system when she collided with the football-sized article that had been moving so fast it had not shown up on the anti-collision radar before the ship began to turn. The object had sheared off the ten meter tall mast just short of the base, entered the hull at a very oblique angle, partially disintegrated and the remaining ten or so fragments then exited the hull. Luckily the angle had been such that only the one compartment was voided to space; one of the water tanks.

Stepanova, Cavallo and a machinist's mate were outside the ship surveying the damage in order to determine if repairs could be made so *Rio* could continue her cruise or if she would have to make for Deimos.

"Si Captain. One water tank we can live without. We may have some problems with heat exchange. We have the spare laser unit in stores. But, as you can see, there is not much to mount it to. We will have to weld it in place and rotate the ship to get the transceiver on target. All in all, we are quite lucky. If we had not been making the turn, we would have taken it in the stern, possibly a mortal blow. Odd how it did not show up on anti-collision instruments. Must have been moving pretty fast. Extrasolar origin maybe. Quite lucky." Mused the Chief.

"Too true. *Ochen Pravno*," Answered Stepanova. "Thank the gods of probability and chance. Take all steps to effect repairs as soon as possible. How long, do you suppose until we get the secure link back up?"

"I would say eight to ten hours Captain. I will have the spare roused from the hold and we will begin immediately." Replied the Chief who then switched from the suit-to-suit circuit back to an Engineering channel to begin to get things moving.

Stepanova turned away from the stricken destroyer and enjoyed free fall outside, orienting herself towards Jupiter which only appeared as big as Luna did at this distance. A few kilometers back the expanding cloud of water vapor and debris from *Rio* formed a pretty little mini-nebula. Anyone who had been in the United Nations Space Navy for a few years probably saw enough of the stars and solar system to become

jaded by the majesty of it all. Elena never got that feeling. She just bathed in the ineffable sweetness of it all; a street punk from Vladivostok now master and commander of a ship of the line floating in open space gazing at the Great Red Spot with her naked eye. She had never even seen the Milky Way until her fifteenth birthday when her Uncle Ivan had taken her on a transatlantic cruise. *Here I am floating among the stars close enough to touch. Thank the gods of probability and chance indeed.*

Ah yes, master and commander. Elena's dutiful nature called her from her reverie and she gave a tug on her tether that brought her back towards the aft hatchway.

"Captain coming back aboard." She relayed to the airlock crew.

"Aye captain. Outer door is open." Was the response.

The exact nature of Elena's duty now presented her with a bit of a quandary. *Rio* had been dispatched from *Deimos* with orders to search for what were suspected be a pair of Chinese Triad vessels that had been identified with a brazen act of piracy against an South African mining operation in the Belt. The mafia ships had destroyed the station, killing many of it's staff, made off with a finished load of beryllium ore, the ore carrier and a number of the state-owned mining company's female employees.

This had the dubious distinction of being the first *recorded* act of actual piracy in space. The Triads as well as

the Yakuza and the American Mob all had their presence in extraterrestrial society but thus far had confined themselves to their core competencies of protection, bookmaking, and prostitution. This bald faced act of piracy had raised some in Geneva and Captain Stepanova and several other ships had been dispatched on the UNSN's first anti-piracy cruise.

Her mission was to search the Jupiter system, particularly in and around the Chinese bases on Europa for any signs of the Triad ships or of what the UN suspected was on-the-sly support for the Triad's activities by officials of the People's Republic. China was not a member of the Reformed United Nations and resolutely refused to acknowledge the UN's role as de-facto supreme authority in extra-terrestrial matters of law and order. The PRC would not openly attack anyone - why beg trouble? But most in the UN Armed Forces High Command suspected they were backing anarchist elements such as the Triads as a way of demonstrating that the UN, in addition to not being empowered to apply its writ in space was also incapable of doing so.

The untimely demise of the laser communications mast from the "particle" strike would not have been as worrisome if the second laser transceiver had not been offline for the last week after stubbornly resisting attempts at repair. The laser relays provided the only certainly sure method of Secure Interplanetary Internet Protocol communication with UNSN Sector Headquarters on Deimos. Without it Stepanova would

have to rely on ordinary, encrypted, tight-band RF transmission. The Navy was reasonably sure its cryptosystems were uncompromised. This was the age of open information and essentially free computing power however, so the Navy frowned upon using RF transmissions for extremely sensitive information.

Furthermore, Stepanova's orders specified that she was to remain as covert as possible within the Jupiter system due to the China's recent more than usually prickly nature regarding their "possession" of Europa. Now Stepanova had to decide to whether to make a sitrep in the open, risking detection; make hasty and possibly only temporary repairs and continue on; or scrub the mission and return to Deimos, possibly losing the trail of the Triad ships.

She hadn't even completely shed her outdoor suit before she came to her decision. The damage did not threaten the ship or the mission. They would continue with repairs and re-establish communications once the secure laser relay was up again.

Elena proceeded to her cabin and took an unreasonably long shower. It would be the last she and any of the crew would see until they docked again at Deimos. The loss of the Number-Three water tank saw to that. She checked in with the bridge and received a status report; the board was green, the spare laser transceiver was being brought into the loading bay

and ready to be maneuvered outside. She switched her view screen to a camera in the loading bay.

There, she saw a gang of men manhandling the bulky four-meter laser out of a crate and preparing to mount it to the robot lifter that would take it outside. The men were deliberately moving the laser by steps; up out of the crate, rotate left, forward to the robot, up to the robot arms. They appeared to be chanting something that was helping their timing. She punched on the audio.

Oh, whiskey is the life of man, always was since the world began.

Whiskey oh, Johnny oh, rise 'er up from down below!

Whiskey, whiskey, whiskey, oh!

Up aloft this yard must go, rise 'er up from down below!

Oh, whiskey gave me a broken nose, and whiskey made me pawn my clothes.

Whiskey oh, Johnny oh, rise 'er up from down below!

Whiskey, whiskey, whiskey, oh!

Up aloft this yard must go, rise 'er up from down below!

I thought I heard the first mate say, "I treats me crew in a decent way.

Whiskey oh, Johnny oh, rise 'er up from down below!

Whiskey, whiskey, whiskey, oh!

Up aloft this yard must go, rise 'er up from down below!

As the laser was finally positioned into the jaws of the robot, the machinist's mate who was calling the cadence, an Irishman named McKenna, naturally, gave a shout,

"Whoo! Up she flew!"

Stepanova smiled to hear the old shanty. Was it any wonder the Navy was a staid institution that laid so much credence by tradition. The lot of the ordinary seaman (or woman, at least that much had changed) was still often one of labor. Loading stores on and off the ship's cramped spaces was one that had to be done by hand.

Stepanova then went to work on the numerous, minute tasks that constituted the routine duties of a ship's captain. There were personnel reports to be approved and signed, duty and sick roster, and victualling reports. To the last end, she issued an order to Aubrey, the ship's AI to reduce each crewmember's personal water allocation by one third. Presently Aubrey's voice broke in softly.

"Pardon the intrusion Captain but I should like to remind you that the dinner hour approaches and you have been invited to dine with the gunroom." Came the soft, baritone, and English-accented voice.

Damn the British, their "humor" and their traditions.

"Please tell the Noncom's I will be there." She muttered.

"Yes ma'am." Came the implacable reply.

When the United Nations was re-formed following the wars, plagues, and famines of the early 'teens, the United States, Russia, and The People's Republic of China, among others had refused to "surrender their sovereignty" and join the rejuvenated organization. Thus, when the UN Armed Forces were formed the professional core of its trained professional soldiers and sailors came chiefly from Europe. In the case of the seagoing navy and thus, for the later space navy, this meant England and to some extent India -- who barely counted since all their traditions stemmed from the English anyway; and the country had been decimated by the aforementioned wars, plagues, and famines.

It was some English programmer's idea of a joke to program the ship's Artificial Intelligence - part purser, part communications officer, part tactical analyst - with the persona of a fictional British frigate captain from the Napoleonic Wars. The silly traditions of pomp, ship visiting, private dinners and social intercourse that were the reality of an officer's life in the UNSN were bad enough. But, to be hectored by voice that spoke like some long-lost meta-Captain made her grind her teeth.

Stepanova was neither rich nor well bred enough to appreciate them the "time-honored" traditions of naval life. Not that she was a social misfit; she spent her adolescence as a Navy brat, had the benefits of the finest private secondary

education, and had graduated near the top of her class at the UN Military Academy in München. She just found idle chitchat, ship-visiting, and meal planning a profound bore and waste of time.

Doubly so, the tradition of the junior officers and enlisted crew holding the captain in a somewhat holy, Godlike fear and distance during such affairs. At dinner, guests (most especially junior officers and non-commissioned personnel) were enjoined from speaking unless addressed by the captain. She found the duties of being hostess and toastmaster far beyond her capacity for inanity and therefore, dinner in her presence was either a rather tense, sad affair or a dry symposium on technical or professional matters.

Fortunately, dinners in zero gee were by necessity rather informal. Even more so today with the absence of several of the senior non-commissioned officers either standing watch or attending to repairs. Only Alavés, the boatswain, and Yamamoto, chief electrician, and Gunnery Sergeant O'Leary of the *Rio's* small Marine contingent were there to dine with her.

"Good evening Captain. I know you will excuse the absence of CPO Cavallo and Chief Donaldson." Said Alavés as she floated in.

"Not at all Señor. The ship's duty and all that. Thank you for your kind invitation nonetheless."

A steward floated in with a tray of dinners and beverages. When under boost, the cooks prepared food like

madmen, creating dishes to be freeze-dried and then reheated during the long periods of zero gravity. Dinner tonight was a rather nice lamb in rosemary and mushroom sauce that suffered a bit from a lack of mint jelly, baked sweet potatoes, rice pilaf and –a bit of old English naval tradition that Stepanova did enjoy – a delightful currant pudding.

“Mister O’Leary, refresh my memory, what is the charming name the British have for this pudding?” Asked Elena in what she hoped was a open and friendly tone as she poked at the intelligent membrane that kept the pudding and syrpy from floating off her tray and smelled her dessert.

“Spotted Dog, Ma’am. A recipe as old as Rum, Sodomy and the Lash.” Replied the Yorkshireman.

Stepanova smiled at that. “Just so. Well, I think we could all agree there are some traditions the modern navy could do without, but this one I approve of,” and raised her glass.

“Just so, Ma’am,” replied the Sergeant-Major less amused than she had hoped.

“I agree with you heartily Captain,” added Yamamoto gamely. But it was to no avail. Past dinners had not gone well and Elena’s reputation as a bit of a cold fish prevented any spark of joviality from lighting. And dinner plodded along in silence and small talk of sports and popular culture.

“Well gentlemen, if our repairs go smoothly, I think we will have a proper sit-down lunch tomorrow.” Stepanova

sallied one last time as she licked the last of the spotted dog from her spoon."

"That would answer quite nicely I think Ma'am." O'Leary smiled wanly back.

Hideki Yamamoto took the bull by the horns and attempted to steer the conversation in a more productive direction.

"Captain, do you give any credence to the theory that the People's Republic is giving overt support to these Triad pirates?"

Stepanova examined Yamamoto as she considered her answer. Hideki was a one of the most precocious young non-coms she had ever met. He had joined the UNSN straight out of a Nipponese merchant academy. Dedicated and technically adept, he would not spend long in the non-commissioned ranks. In fact, in her computer were the notes for his review, to take place in three weeks time that recommended him for officer's training. He was an intense and studious young man not without humor, but with a professional temperament that reminded Elena of herself. It was this that prompted her to give a candid reply.

"Well, Mister Yamamoto, I think that given the track record of the People's Republic in general, and of the Communist Party of China in particular over the past hundred years and more, that it is almost a certainty. The Triad perform a useful task for the Chinese in undermining the perceived ability of the UN to police the outer system."

"Captain, what if we find the Triad ships in the company of Chinese vessels, what then?" Inquired O'Leary.

Stepanova had to turn a bit to face the big Marine. She had heard that the Yorkshireman was quite a wit, but he generally clamed up in her presence. He commanded *Rio's* tiny compliment of ten Marines who functioned as damage-control and gunnery personnel when at general quarters. Their true mission, like Marines since time immemorial was security, and suppression of resistance aboard captured or boarded vessels. His question implied an answer that was an act of war that would have grave consequences for his brother and sister Marines.

"Our orders are to seize the Triad ships wherever and however we find them, Sergeant. Full stop. The incident with the South Africans is simply beyond the pale. Murder, rape and kidnapping on top of full-blown piracy. It cannot be tolerated by any decent society."

"I agree with you there Ma'am, no error. I just wonder about the wisdom of provoking the Chinese."

"Mister O'Leary, while I think we would all agree that the People's Republic have every right to go where they will and to claim whatever resources they can legitimately lay claim to; whatever their beliefs about the legitimacy of UN authority beyond Earth orbit; nothing excuses offering aid and comfort to pirates. Any country that does so is not worthy of the respect and deference of civilized peoples." Elena

replied, rather a bit too forcefully. She couldn't help it. Most career UN officers held the same beliefs, the UN was the glue that was holding the world together. If it failed, so too did most of humanity's chances.

"Hear-hear." Chimed in Alavés.

A somewhat diminished O'Leary merely muttered, "Of course." And then found something fascinating in his dinner tray. Dinner then petered out and, after a brief toast to the service, Stepanova departed feeling, as she often did, a rather helpless frustration at her inability to get along socially with her senior crew.

Am I really that much of a bitch? She wondered. Or is it that forced distance that prevents them from getting past my bitchy exterior - to which I freely admit - to get to know me as a person?

The next morning found her on the bridge sipping coffee and dictating a situation report to be sent back to Deimos on the jury-rigged laser. After that *Rio* would turn over again and resume her belated burn to enter the Jovian system. The delay caused by the repairs now put *Rio* on the outward side of the gas giant's miniature planetary system. It would take more fuel to shape her orbit more nearly elliptical and closer in among the Galilean satellites that made up inhabited areas of the system. The good news was that Europa, Callisto, and Ganymede were all currently masked by the planet's bulk. Thus, much of *Rio's* burn would be masked from sensors there.

"All stations report secured for boost, Captain," came the voice of Aubrey on the bridge's PA.

Ensign Mbekei at the communications console reported that she had a lock on a laser transponder and was ready to transmit the ships signals.

"Transmit when ready, Ensign," Stepanova replied.

"Bridge to CIC."

"CIC here." Came the reply of Lieutenant Slava, the executive officer, over the loudspeaker from the Combat Information Center, buried in the core of the ship's hull.

"Mr. Slava, light up the tracking and defensive radar. I want a clean sweep ahead before we make the turnover."

"Aye, aye ma'am. Initiating now."

Presently, Mbekei reported that all signals were completed and Stepanova gave the order for the ship to come over. Attitude jets fired and *Rio* swapped ends neatly.

"Mr. Aubrey, sound prepare for boost." Stepanova announced.

"Aye, aye Ma'am," replied the computer.. Throughout the ship blue lights flashed on and off and Aubrey's voice announced in a proper sea-going shout, "All hands, all hands, prepare for boost."

"Helmsman, you may light the main engines. Take us to one-half gravity."

"Light the engines. One-half gravity, aye," replied one of the two ratings who "drove" the ship. An almost

imperceptible vibration began, like a tingling as the valves to the tritium were opened and the small kernel of plasma that was all that was required to run the ship's systems flared into life. The excess energy was propelled magnetically out through two nozzles in the aft, lighting up the sky with hard radiation for hundreds of miles.

Weight came back onto bodies gently, like a smoothly accelerating train until the helmsman reported, "One-half gravity and in the slot."

"CIC to bridge," came Cavallo's voice.

"Bridge here," replied Elena.

"Power plant and engines running nominally captain," he reported.

"Outstanding. Bridge out. Mr. Aubrey?" said Elena.

"Ma'am?" came the disembodied voice over the loudspeaker.

"Please inform the galley staff that we will be under gravity for the noon and evening meals." Stepanova announced.

"With pleasure Ma'am," Aubrey answered. The announcement brought a noticeable degree of cheer to the bridge. This also meant hot, gravity-fed showers. Abbreviated or no, they would be most welcome after weeks of nearly drowning in zero-gee showers.

Stepanova released those of the crew not engaged in vital duties to take advantage of the solid meals and hot showers. Before she left to get the same for herself, she scanned the signal packets *Rio* had picked up during her burst

transmission; messages that had been forwarded to network nodes in her area of operations, waiting for her to establish a link. Sadly, there was no further intelligence on the whereabouts of the pirates in question, only routine ALLFLT communications.

Just as she was going to unbuckle herself to go aft for her own lunch, Aubrey broke in on her private channel.

"Captain, I have been going over our sensor take from the sweep prior to our turnover and I have some targeting information."

"Oh?" she replied into her headset.

"I have long range radar returns on four ships. Three ships in company ahead and in a lower orbit. One ship, dead ahead." Aubrey reported. "Ahead" in this case used the reference of the direction of the ship's travel, which was actually aft. The massive radiation from the drive engines made it impossible to get sensor readings as long as the ship was boosting. Thus the comprehensive sweep prior to the turn. This massive collection of data was then analyzed by the AI and anything that leaped out from those scans was then brought to human attention, as it was now.

"All right. Put this up on the main screen." Elena flicked an optic switch in her eyepiece and got on the private channel to Slava. "Bridge to CIC."

"CIC here captain," came the Lieutenant's instant response.

"Misha, Mr. Aubrey has something for us. Go ahead Mr. Aubrey."

Up on the main display tank the tactical schematic of the local area appeared with Rio's position and vector in green, the bogeys in red.

"Scans picked up radar returns of four vessels. Bogey Alpha, Bravo and Charlie are in close company at our eleven o'clock, **one million kilometers** below. We are closing **at thirty kilometers** per second, less one half gee per second. Range **one-point-six million**. Bogey Delta is dead ahead, about **one hundred thousand** kilometers higher in orbit, closure **eight kilometers** per second, less one half gee per second. **Range three hundred thousand**.

"Clearly we are not in an optimum commercial approach orbit thus I do not think this could be normal commercial traffic. In addition, I would suggest to you Captain, that the tactical positioning of Bogey Charlie is that of a picket vessel for the three ships in the lower orbit." Finished Aubrey.

Aubrey's outlining of the situation was somewhat redundant, as Stepanova's mind instantly translated the symbology of the tactical readout into possible intercept and maneuvering options in her head. She gazed almost trance-like at the display as Aubrey summed up.

"Captain, I concur with the computer. This is worth checking out," agreed Slava at the end of a similar mental process.

"Mmhmm. This fits." Elena said. She felt a flutter of excitement in her gut as she suddenly realized that after almost three years in command of the little destroyer, she might actually be facing a naval action. She struggled to compose in her head the things that needed to be done without a moment to waste. This data was already more than ten minutes old.

She spoke out loudly, in a seagoing voice, "Helm!" Fortunately the automated volume monitoring in the headphones prevented permanent ear damage to Lieutenant Slava on the other end of the private connection.

"Helm aye." Came the surprised call from the helmsman.

"Prepare to cut thrust."

"Ma'am?" The startled helmsman turned to look at Stepanova caught the look in her eye and simply turned back to her controls. "Prepare to cut thrust, aye, aye Ma'am."

She spoke directly into the mike again, "Sound General Quarters. Crash stop."

"Ma'am, yes Ma'am. CIC out." Slava closed the channel. He had to get things together in his department.

Klaxon's sounded throughout the ship, red lights blinked rapidly and Aubrey's voice blared in every corner, "Now hear this, now hear this. General Quarters and prepare for crash

stop," he repeated three times. The crew would have exactly one minute to turn off all water, and flush or cover any liquids or food and then secure it and anything else that threatened to move around in zero gee. Not everything would make it. But nano scrubbers and autonomous filters in the ventilation system would take care of any stray organic or liquid matter.

Now Elena's mind began to race. The drive had to be shut off and the sensors trained aft. *Rio's* drive flare would have advertised her presence and the ships ahead, if hostile, now had the advantage of ten minutes and counting to act. Even now, missiles might be streaking towards *Rio*. If so, it they would be highly speculative shots, even from the closer vessel.

She also had to get the ship trained to send a contact report. Even though it would be at least two hours before she could hear anything back, assuming she had the luxury of remaining oriented to a network node with the jury laser.

"Captain, fifteen seconds to engines off," Lieutenant Yamamoto, who had appeared to take his place in the OOD chair next to Elena, announced quietly. He appeared calm, if somewhat out of breath after making a dash up from the galley.

"Put me on All Ship, Hiddeki," She asked him.

He had just finished putting on his headset, and he flicked an eye and blinked to set a switch. "Go ahead Captain."

"Now hear this. This is the Captain. We have contacts ahead and below that fit a suspicious profile. You know our orders regarding the pirate vessels which we are seeking, once a visual match with the ships is established we are to capture, board and/or destroy them.

"I am going to issue a heave to order and proceed to inspect these craft visually, and if need be conduct on-board inspections. Once we are in zero-gee, be prepared to man battle stations. That is all," she finished and nodded to Hiddeki to cut the circuit.

Only a few moments passed and the vibration and subtle hum of the main engines cut out.

"MECO Captain," announced the helm.

"Sound Battle Stations," she brought up the CIC link.
"Misha, light 'em up."

"Coming up now captain. Waiting for returns." Slava responded. In the background, she could hear the quiet intraship communications as the crew worked in the CIC receiving reports from the various ship's stations. The CIC, buried deep in the center of the ship and heavily armored in it's own right, was the true nerve center of the ship. The bridge was merely the pilot house. The polymer and self-polarizing windows a concession to Navy demands that, should the worst happen, the ship could be navigated by sextant and handheld computers.

The bridge waited in silence for electrons to make their way from *Rio's* transmitters over the hundreds of thousands of kilometers to bounce off objects and return. Those electrons then had to pass their energy on to still others that wound their way through several more kilometers of nano-processors and network to the humans, waiting anxiously to turn them into data necessary for their survival.

"Okay, Captain. Bogey Delta is boosting two gees on an opposite vector and is moving to intercept. No missiles in the air. Range is eighty-three thousand. Closure rate is now..." he consulted the screen in front of him, "twelve kilometers per second-per second. One hundred fifteen minutes to closure."

"Mr. Slava, please put my mike on transmit mode to broadcast on all international frequencies." Stepanova told him.

"Coms, open channel to captain on all international frequencies." He paused a beat. "Ready Captain."

"This is the UNSS *Rio De Janeiro* we are on patrol seeking two ships wanted for piracy, murder, kidnapping, rape and grand theft. Please send your IFF indent codes, and certificates of registration and heave to." In space, "heave to" merely meant stop your engines and wait for our instructions."

"Done Captain." Slava told her. They waited some more. Stepanova had grown up watching old *fin de siecle* two-dee

space movies, like *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and *Star Rangers*. They always depicted space combat as a combination of old World War Two aerial dogfighting and The Battle of Jutland. The reality had more in common with the not-so Cold War between the Russian and American submarine in the second half of the Twentieth Century. In space warcraft played hide-and-go seek in a game where not being found was the number one priority and if battle came, missiles closing in from thousands of miles away would announce potentially imminent sudden death with plenty of time to lament one's short life.

Slava's voice came back on the headphones of Stepanova, Yamamoto, and the helmsman. "We have a separation between Bogey's Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie. Bravo and Charlie are large craft and are boosting on reciprocal vector to us, headed into a lower orbit. Range one point-oh-nine million. Boosting at one point-two-five gee, closure twenty-six minus delta-vee. Alpha is smaller, and boosting *three gee* on intercept course. Range nine-nine-one thousand, closure thirty-two plus delta-vee."

While Slava was speaking, the tactical display updated with the new data. It would stay current as long as the sensors kept supplying data. The meaning was obvious, as she could tell by the stress creeping into Slava's voice. Elena's mind automatically changed the ships' classification from unidentified "bogey" to hostile "targets," two targets moving to intercept. Two targets hoping to escape. Probably a good

hope as *Rio* would be forced to engage Charlie and Delta. The two big ships would get a good separation velocity built up and then "go dark," shutting off drives and all active sensors, hoping to look like fast-moving rocks, difficult to distinguish from the tens of thousands of rocks Aubrey had to deal with to avoid a tragic collision.

No sooner had Slava finished than Yamamoto spoke up.

"Captain, request permission to orient the ship to transmit our contact report."

Fortunately, that would merely require an axial rotation. She could keep sensor's trained on the targets.

"Yes, make it so." And Elena softly dictated a Captain's report into the mike that would accompany the report that Aubrey would generate, containing all their current sensor take.

Rio De Janiero's armament consisted of guns and missiles. Her main weapons were the Long-Lance standoff missile. *Rio* had two launch tubes, each of which could release a missile fore or aft. The Long-Lance was a big, expensive stealthy missile. It was powered by a fusion engine that didn't bother to make any electricity. All the energy produced by the fusion reaction went right out the tailpipe and thus had an extraordinary rate of acceleration and an effective range of forty thousand kilometers. At the terminal end of it's flight it released two independent kill vehicles that took divergent paths to the target before detonating their 350 kilogram

shaped charge warheads. *Rio* also carried nuclear warheads for the Long Lances but there was no authorization for them on this mission. *Rio* carried eight Long Lance missiles.

For closer work, she mounted four rapid firing 90 millimeter cannons two firing forward and two aft. The great thing about good, old-fashioned projectile weapons; they just kept going. They did not dissipate with the square of the range like beam weapons did. They fired thirty rounds a minute and could be aimed to send a cloud of high-explosive or armor-piercing rounds towards a target's likely position hundreds of miles away and just pound it to bits.

For point defense she also carried four dual-mount 20 millimeter rotary cannon that would put a solid wall of depleted uranium in front of any oncoming missile.

Her armor belt consisted of an outer hull of ten centimeters of ceramic and carbon nanotube fabric laminate with another fifteen around the tritium tanks, drive, CIC and life-support areas. This would stop a 100 mm shell travelling at eight kilometers per second, the muzzle velocity plus a nice closure rate. The closure rate of target Delta was already twelve kilometers per hour and *Rio* had not even started boost to try to catch the two escaping ships yet. A rock thrown from one of the targets would go through her like a chopstick through rice paper.

Elena dictated the dry, canned prose of a situation report to be sent to Mars, but then came to a crashing halt. as she came to the bit where she was to state her intentions.

"Pause record," she whispered sotto-voce into her mike. She focused her mind on the tactical display and rolled the options over in her mind. The two big ships, they were the key. She would bet anything that one was the South African ore carrier and the other a proper Chinese vessel. She keyed her mike to the CIC circuit.

"Lieutenant, what do you have on our targets' IFF beacons and registry?"

"Captain, um, *bogeys* Charlie and Delta are transmitting IFF codes and registry for *Ille de Fountanbleau* and *Monsterrat*, light freighters with registry in the Seychelles, no matching records in *Janes*. Alpha and Bravo are claiming to be Xinhua Heavy Industries Ore Carrier, *Xian Min* and *SNS Tian Ha*, state-owned research and transport vessel, PRC. *Tian Ha* matches records in *Janes* and intel places that ship in the Jovian system as part of the European operations. *Xian Min* also matches *Jane's* registry information but recent movements are not available."

"Seychelles? What a bunch of crap." Commented Yamamoto.

Elena turned her head to Yamamoto and gave him a stern raised eyebrow, but no remark. "Thank you Misha. All stations ready?"

"Aye, Ma'am. Battle stations manned and ready. The board is green."

"Thank you. Stand by for orders. Bridge out." She turned to Yamamoto.

"Mister Yamamoto, I think we should get the bridge crew into space-suits."

"Aye, aye Ma'am," replied the young man. And bellowed to the bridge crew. "Bridge crew, by turns fall out and don combat suits!"

Each station had a two-person crew. First the junior members of each crew left their station and went to the lockers at the back of the bridge where the combat suits were kept. The combat suits were lightly armored to prevent punctures from flying debris. The points where the bodies came into contact with the seats had adaptive gels that would cushion the body and prevent blood from pooling during high-g maneuvering. Once the entire crew was confirmed suited up, the ship would be pumped out to a half-atmosphere to reduce the chaotic effects of decompression during a hull breach. This was the final step in readying *Rio* for war.

Elena agreed with Hidekki's appraisal of the target's false flag gambit. There were any number of countries that served as flags of convenience, but the Seychelles barely existed as a country anymore. It was a lame attempt at best. The Triad pirates must be confident in their chances against

Rio to try such an obvious dodge. It would gain them two or three minutes at best.

Their aim was clear to her now. They were boosting for all they were worth to intercept Rio and prevent her from closing on the two freighters. Her duty was clear; fight through the two armed ships and get to the booty aboard the merchantmen, even a solid visual confirmation of identity would serve to confirm Chinese involvement in this sordid affair. She was sure the two pirate ships would do all they could to prevent that eventuality.

Hidekki helped her into her suit and she resumed her seat and finished her brief. She motioned to Yamamoto that he was clear to turn the ship and transmit the sitrep, then opened a channel to the CIC.

"Misha?"

"Yes Captain?"

"I think that the eagerness of *targets* Charlie and Delta to move to cut us off from Alpha and Bravo indicate that the merchantmen are the key to what is going on with this piracy ring."

"That's the way things look to me as well," Slava responded.

"Good. Then here is what we're going to do. Shape course for a high-speed intercept of Alpha and Bravo. Charlie and Delta have already committed themselves to intercepting us far away from the merchantmen on an obtuse vector. This will

give them only a short time on target before they must maneuver to match with us. That gives us plenty of time to close with the merchantmen before dealing with the pirates. We have the weather gauge of them. Ha, ha, what do you think of that Aubrey?" she said. The adrenaline rush of imminent combat had her a bit giddy.

"Why Captain, I believe you have assessed the situation perfectly." Answered the AI "The weather gauge and plenty of sea-room. Indeed."

"Da. Captain. I'm looking at the numbers now. I would say a two point-two-five boost rate would put us on top of the merchantmen with several hours to spare."

"Good. Sound secure for boost."

The familiar alarms rang out. *Rio* reoriented herself, pointed downward towards Jupiter, now visible in the bridge ports a little smaller than the palm of Elena's hand. The drives belched forth and pressure built up steadily; first a comfortable half-gee, then the normal feel of bodies sitting in Earth gravity, then more. One and-a-half gee, the feel of an aircraft on takeoff; two gees and finally two and-a-quarter. Hard on the body but the combat seats and suits were designed for this. Sailors trained to take such conditions for hours, days if necessary.

This still took a toll on ship operations; most would now be conducted by remote-control or autonomous robots. Ship's crew were restricted to acceleration couches at their duty

stations. Only the engineers and damage control personnel were permitted out of their seats. They were equipped with specialized powered and cushioned suits that would allow them to get about the ship in up to three gravities.

The communications officer, linked to the CIC called for Elena's attention. "Captain, signal incoming from contact Bravo, *Tian Ha*. Her captain would like to speak with you."

"Put it through, main screen."

The tactical display disappeared, replaced by the head and shoulders of a distinguished-looking Chinese woman of middle age. Elena spoke first.

"This is Captain Elena Stepanova, Commanding the *UNSS Rio de Janerio*. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"Captain Stepanova, I am Captain Fan Xi of the *People's Ship Tian Ha*. Might I inquire why you are attempting to pull over sovereign vessels in open space?" Xi asked, in a no-nonsense tone delivered in perfect American English.

The camera depicted a woman sitting in an acceleration couch under gravity. She was wearing a tidy naval uniform, not a space suit. By contrast, Elena Stepanova must have looked to Fan a good deal more in earnest. Her features somewhat distorted by gravity, wearing an armored space-suit and helmet, albeit with an open face-plate. If Fan was under any illusions regarding whether or not this was just a routine UN exercise of its open space police powers, this image probably dispelled them. Nonetheless, she looked relatively

unpreteredbed as Elena waited out the five second delay to make sure that her own picture got back to Fan and for Fan's reaction to make it's way back to her. It made for an awkward silence.

"Captain Fan, five weeks ago two ships attacked mining settlement of the asteroid, AMS-19045, destroyed most of its equipment, killed most of it's staff, stole an ore-carrying vessel fully laden with processed beryllium and abducted a number of female station personnel. The few surviving eye-witnesses confirmed that the crew of these pirates were Chinese and that the ships boosted towards the Jupiter system."

The pause Elena had allowed to occur to exchange non-verbal signals with Fan had rendered their distance-delayed converstion out of sync. Now Fan began responding in Stepanova's apparent silence.

"What is the meaning of this? We are conducting routine atmospheric studies of Jupiter. The People's Republic does not recognize the authority of the UN in these matt..." She stopped as she realized Elena has started speaking before her.

"My orders are to detain any and all shipping matching a general size and power plant profile and inspect them at close range. You were sighted in company three spacecraft which match the profiles of these pirates and their captured ship. Two of which are closing on my vessel in a rather threatening

manner. I do not accept the dubious credentials of those two ships and would appreciate some clarification from you on their origins and intentions.

"Therefore, pursuant to UN Code of Space, section 401 I order you to shut down main drives and prepare for close inspection."

Another uncomfortable pause ensued while this made it's way to Fan and Fan waited to see if Elena was finished. Elena put the tactical display up on a secondary monitor on the bridge. Target Bravo was still closing on an direct intersecting course, the mutual closure rate was ticking up rapidly in the display. They would be in range of the Long Lances in about five minutes.

"As I said, we do not recognize the UN's authority to stop ships in open space. We are conducting detailed study of Jupiter's atmosphere and magnetosphere. *Xian Min* is a cargo ship ferrying supplies and *Ille de Fountainbleau* and *Monsterrat* are independent vessels under contract to the Institute for Planetary Science in Hong Kong. We know nothing of your story of pirates. You madam, are the one engaging in piratical acts if you are threatening to stop and inspect.

"I suggest that you and your ship disengage and resume your duties rescuing inept space farers. Our security and traffic control have given us no information regarding pirates nor have they given us instructions to cooperate with UN forces for looking for stolen property. If you would be so

good as to discontinue your dangerous high-speed interception, I will consult with the authorities on Europa and forward any clarification on this matter to you in a couple of hours."

"She's playing for time," Slava whispered into her ear from the CIC where he was watching and listening in. She stole a glance over at Yamamoto who nodded and gestured to the tactical display.

Target Delta a.k.a *Mosnterrat*, had shut off her main engines, content to let *Rio* close the gap and save her fuel for maneuvering after the first high-speed firing pass. Target Charlie on the other hand, had rotated her boost vector about sixty degrees. She was now decelerating slightly in relation to *Rio* and was positioning herself for a tail chase once *Rio* went by in pursuit of the merchantmen. Whatever Delta failed to accomplish, if *Rio* closed with the merchantmen Charlie would come up and pour fire into her.

"Do what you wish Captain Fan. I have specific orders to search suspicious craft and your "contractors" are doing nothing to allay my suspicions. We wish you no harm, but we will inspect your ships. Any aggressive actions will be met with force. I suggest for your sake and the sake of the academics aboard your ships that you heave to."

While they waited, Yamamoto spoke into his mike and punched up visual image taken by *Rio's* optics. Now that her drive no longer created a blob of radiation that obscured the small ship in front of it, the so-called *Monserrat* could be

discerned. She was short and stout, implying lots of boost mass and not a lot of cargo spaces. She was painted mostly black, making details hard to make out in the dim light ~~XX~~ AU from the sun. She did, however have the Mandarin character for death painted her nose right above a stylized dragon's mouth.

"Gotcha," he said, grinning like a schoolboy.

Fan continued her dissembling, "You are no doubt aware Captain that my government does not acknowledge the right of the United Nations to conduct inspections in open space without the consent..."

Elena cut her off, "Captain Fan, we have visually identified the *Montserrat* as one of the ships involved in the AS-19045 incident. This conversation is over. Cut off engines and heave to immediately," She turned to Yamamoto, "Transmit this next in the clear, all frequencies."

Yamamoto flicked the appropriate switches and then pointed to Stepanova, you're-on.

"This is *UNSS Rio de Janerio* to *Ille de Fountainbleau*, *Montserrat*, *Xian Min*, and *Tien Ha*. You are suspects in piracy, kidnapping, grand theft and murder. Shut off engines and heave to immediately or face the consequences." She turned to Yamamoto, "End transmission. Close channel."

Yamamoto hit the buttons, and replied, "Done."

"CIC, this is the Bridge. Initiate jamming and phreaking. I don't want them dialing up Reuters crying about excessive force. Load both tubes for forward firing."

"Ma'am, initiate jamming and phreaking. Loading both tubes for forward firing. Aye, aye." Slava replied in a most businesslike way.

Good, Elena thought. Everything businesslike.

She addressed the weapons station on the bridge. From here on, she would fight the ship from the bridge. The CIC would do all the back-office management while she drove the boat and ordered the weapons to fire. "Give me a missile solution on Delta."

The young tech manipulated her gloved hand and replied, "Long Lance seeker heads slaved to targeting data. Locked in and ready for launch. Target Delta in range in thirty seconds."

"Hiddeki, fire off a RF contact report now." She then switched herself to RF broadcast and tried one last time with the Chinese.

"*Monserrat, this is Rio de Janerio.* You are suspected of piracy and are approaching a UN Naval vessel in a dangerous and hostile manner. This is your final warning, cut engines or we will be forced to fire."

A moment later a voice-only response came back in Mandarin.

" 'This is your final warning barbarian. Go mind your own business or go to hell.' " Translated Aubrey.

Up to this point Elena's mind had been racing. Despite all the enforced waiting and delays, it seemed only a handful of minutes had passed. In reality it had been nearly forty-five minutes since they had detected the Chinese ships. Now everything seemed to stop. Elena knew that the next order she gave was going to change everything, most definitely for her and probably for the solar system. It might well mean war. One thing was for sure, some people were going to die very soon, likely people she knew.

"Fire one and two."

"Lance one," there was a bang as explosive gasses blew the rocket out of the tube, "Lance two." The weapons officer recited as the bang was repeated.

Out of the bridge windows the missiles silently sped ahead of the ship. Once they were forty or so meters in front of the ship, first stage chemical rockets fired and they streaked away. Moments later the automatic polarization of the windows kicked in and the fusion engines lit off and the blinding lights shrank within ten seconds to be just the two brightest stars.

The seaman first class at the weapons tracking station started calling the flight of the missiles "One and two running hot and true. Time to target, seventy one seconds."

"Range to target?"

"Two-eight-point-six thousand klicks."

"Ready forward batteries. Fire as you bear."

The weapons officer relayed the order to human crewmen in the 90 millimeter turrets whose jobs consisted of resting in acceleration couches until something went really wrong. In that case they would be expected to fire the gun using local targeting computers and optics or they would be dead. The young woman repeated back to Elena, "Forward batteries ready to fire as they bear."

She watched Aubrey's electronic depiction of the missiles' deliberate march to their target. Despite the crowded state of the bridge and the chatter of background comms Elena suddenly felt totally alone. More alone than she had felt in fifteen years.

Chapter 2

One gray day in April when Elena was twelve, she had stopped by home from school to find her mother dead of a heroin overdose. Her mother's most recent "boyfriend" was standing in the living room with a box full of CD's and her grandfather's silver samovar. He had looked at her blankly and then hurried out, embarrassed as she stared at her mother sprawled half-naked on the couch

She wandered the streets for a couple of days. She did not go back to Svetlana's flat, which is where she usually stayed. Vodka kept her numb to the loneliness. The second night she was nearly raped by two drunken sailors before being rescued by a gang Japanese Viridian Punks who were visiting Vladivostok embracing the decay of the old Stalinist sector and creating environmental art. They took her back to their squat where she stayed for a couple of weeks, learning some valuable lessons in environmental hacking.

On impulse sometime in May she visited her mother's grave site; a small, poor marker on which she coated in bacteria that the Viridians gave her. The bacteria would live off the oxides and other pollutants attracted to the marble and would phosphoresce at night. As she sat on the ground in front of the stone, weeping, a groundskeeper approached her.

"Elena Stepanova?"

Elena's first impulse was to sprint full-speed away from the old man, but she simply stood and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

"Yes."

"Your uncle said you would be here eventually. He gave me this for you." Said the old man who handed her a smart card and turned and walked away without another look or word.

Colonel Ivan Shakhalin was her mother's brother, Hero of Russia for saving some power sat from Chechen terrorists. Now he served in the new United Nations Space Navy and lived at UN Armed Forces Headquarters in Sarajevo.

Back at the squat, she slotted the card into one of the computers there. It contained several hundred Rubles and his phone number. She called.

She remembered the handsome face from newspaper clippings her mother had shown her.

"Shakhalin," the face answered formally, then recognizing the face on the other end a smile flowed across the face, naturally filling the channels around his eyes and in his cheeks, "Elena, my kitten. Where are you? Are you all right?"

"I'm staying with friends in Vlada, Uncle. I am fine." She replied neutrally. She had not seen this man since she was a toddler.

"Elena, dear. Listen to me. Your mother, bless her, had a tragic sickness... She was not a bad person. She... She loved you. Do you understand?"

Elena looked down at her keyglove and absentmindedly rotated the view on his camera through its limited range of motion, it showed a comfortable, neat breakfast nook. She felt tears welling up again.

"Christ uncle. She was a junkie and a whore. I know that. Don't treat me like a foolish child. I am not a child. I've... never been a child."

His hand reached out to touch her face in his display.

"You have had a difficult life dear heart. But we are family; all the family either of us have. Please come and live with me here in Sarajevo. You will be safe, have good schools, a chance at a normal life. Leave that unhappy place." He looked at her, his own gray eyes glimmering with tears.

That summer had been the happiest of her life. Uncle Ivan took a month's leave. First they loafed around the beautiful cafes of Sarajevo and got to know each other. Having not seen each other since before her grandparents died when she was seven, they had a lot of catching up to do. She told Ivan that after the death of his and her mother's parents, her Mom had a number of "boyfriends." She frequently did not come home at night. Soon, Elena was staying more often than not with her friend Magdalena Popov, whose parents were kind enough to feed her and had the luxury of an extra bed.

Soon, her contact with her mother was limited mostly to stops home after school. By then whatever man she had brought home would usually be gone and her mother would be awake and sober enough to give her a few rubles for lunch money, clothes, and the like. Sometimes there would be a few days where her mother had some money and they would go out to eat and shop; picnics in the park. At times like these promises were often made.

"As soon as I get a job sweetheart, we will move to a nice place and I will leave all this behind."

"Mama's sick you know, but I will get better I promise."

And so on. Even at eight or nine, Elena knew a junkie when she saw one. There were plenty in the streets of Elena's neighborhood. Every family she knew Vladivostok middle- or lower-class, had at least one member who had succumbed to alcohol or drugs. It was the old Russian Curse. Elena quickly learned the telltale signs of when their mother-daughter idylls had ended; opening the door coming home from school empty bottles on the living room table, overflowing ashtray, Mom either still asleep or stumbling out of the shower. If there were a man in the house, she just turned around and fled down the stairs and took the tram to the Popov's. When she knocked on their door, a place was set for her and no questions were asked. None were needed.

Somehow, Elena had managed to stay in school and (more or less) stay off the streets, mostly through the good offices of the Popovs and her teachers.

As for himself, Ivan described his work on the UN Chiefs of Staff as dull and boring. He told her a little of places he had been and promised to show her the world. And he kept his promise.

After registering for school – a nice private academy for the children of UNAF staff – off they went. First to Italy to see the ruins of Venice, then a train ride through the Alps to Bavaria and the biotech and nanotech wonders of the München skyline, then to sprawling London to see the Women of Arsenal take on Dynamo Kiev in a Women's European Cup semifinal. Elena savored every moment, but she loved the football match above all. The tall, powerful female figures performing such magnificent feats of skill with the ball; international sex-symbols and multi-million Euro athletes all at once. The atmosphere was electric.

Ivan saved the best for last though. After a night at the theater, the next morning they boarded a hyperliner for Quito at Heathrow and four hours later stepped out into the cool, dry Andean air.

"What are we doing here Uncle?"

In response, he just pointed East of the airport. Rising out of the mists just past Pichincha was a huge black tower that rose up out of the mountains and just kept right on going

into the clear sky until it vanished at the limit of sight. The Beanstalk. She stood staring, open-mouthed. After a moment she turned a gaping questioning look to him.

He stood there smiling like an idiot.

"I never get tired of watching people see it for the first time. VR doesn't do it justice. So, fancy a trip to the Moon?"

So, up they went. Just like a train ride, except straight up. She took the spacesickness pills Ivan gave her but was still quite queasy when they stepped off onto Clarke station. But she felt much better after a night's sleep in the half-gravity of their room and even felt well enough to eat at the famous Overlook where the view of the Earth 36,000 kilometers overhead was almost as good as that on her plate.

At Clarke, they met Ivan's colleague Tak Hashimoto and his wife Natalia, a very friendly couple who fairly doted on Elena, and took a shuttle to Eismeer Station at the L3 point. Eismeer was a commercial and UN transit station. This is where one boarded a ship for the rest of the solar system. Here Elena saw the giant freighters and passenger transports bound for Mars, The Belt, Europa, Ganymede. Her mouth was just one big "O" as they made their way through the station bustling with professional spacefarers and emigrant families off to start new lives off-Earth. She was given a tour of the *UNSS Coventry*, a destroyer, where she wondered at the order and organization; the fit and efficient man and women standing

at attention to her Uncle and Hashimoto-san as they boarded in their uniforms. Hashimoto-san, that nice man, was an admiral!

And that was it. She was hooked. At the time all she knew was that she wanted to get as far away as possible from Vladivostok and her life there and this the road to as far as possible, literally. Later she came to understand duty and honor and the grave situation humanity faced and the UN's place in it and her place as a UN Officer.

And she took up that burden gladly. For the first time in her life she had been offered a choice. Elena was used to suffering. That was no problem. Here there was a cost to be paid in her life of loneliness but also a payout. All she had ever wanted was an objective. Here was her future, mankind's future intertwined and she was up to the task.

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