

BOOK ONE OF THE VALE SERIES
ARK OF SOULS

SAMPLE

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Chapter One

The *FSS Berlin* exited hyperspace in a discharge of exotic energy. Her braking thrusters fired to stabilise her forward velocity as she broke free of her faster-than-light envelope.

Her sudden arrival scattered the pirate squadron, driving them away from a crippled freighter. The *Berlin's* forward turrets targeted and fired at the aggressors. Three of the fighters exploded in quick succession. One survivor was caught in the blast, its ion engines flamed out and the ship tumbled in the void. The remaining pair built hyperspatial envelopes and engaged their faster-than-light drives.

The warship's turrets retracted as she matched the relative velocity of the stricken cargo vessel.

Berlin was an old ship, one of the last three Europa class vessels in fleet service. Like her sisters, she was seeing out the twilight of her career patrolling the outer edges of human space.

Despite her immense size the *Berlin's* crew accommodation had been a secondary consideration to housing her propulsion and weapons systems. Officer's cabins were no exception. They were small enough to be uncomfortable yet large enough to allow for crucial equipment to be lost.

Mira had started to lose a lot of things. She hoped it was not a sign of further short-term memory degradation, preferring to blame the clutter of her cabin for her inability to keep track of her belongings. It was an easy, comfortable delusion.

She rummaged through the pile of discarded clothing on her bunk before dropping to the floor and peering into the dark, dusty space beneath. She located the beeping com-link. It lay between an illicit stash of pain killing medication and a pink rabbit.

She keyed the tiny in ear device to receive the call.

"Thorn."

"Commander, Central Ops." Suzanne Walton, the ship's Executive Officer omitted to mention the delay in Mira's response.

"We are conducting an anti-piracy operation and have intercepted a vessel in distress. We have dealt with the insurgents and the sector is secure. The Captain has assigned you to lead the inspection team."

Mira sighed; inspections were a tedious reality of deep space patrol. Most of the time they were fruitless searches through cargo holds on squalid ships while equally grubby crew looked on.

"Understood," Mira replied. She slipped an eye patch over her left eye socket with a fluid and practised motion. She checked it was in place by touch. Her fingers lingered on the scars that ran like a road map over one side of her face. She shook her head and her still damp raven hair fell forward. The non-regulation style obscured the worst of the damaged tissue.

"What type of vessel is it, Sue?" she asked.

"Corporate, it's a Kobo, registered to Lightfoot Developments. We can't raise the pilot and the ship has sustained severe damage. Captain Adams will brief you before you leave. He is waiting in bay three."

Corporation vessels were always preferable to independents as they usually complied with government hygiene and safety standards.

“When do I go?”

“Captain wants to launch in 15.”

“Roger, understood. Thorn out.”

And I was hoping for an easy day.

Instead of the calm, predictable peace of the flight deck she would be spending the next eight hours rummaging through the hold of a freighter loaded with anything from manufactured goods to bio waste.

This would be Mira’s first inspection in three months and she had to admit it was probably overdue. She had been pulled from the last one due to a minor medical issue and Alex Kite had been sent in her stead. Kite had contracted a skin infection so severe he had been confined to medbay for three weeks. While the rest of the crew had enjoyed a week of leave at the Proxima Anchorage, he had spent his downtime in an iso-booth.

Kite was an academy golden boy with straight firsts in every discipline. He should and would have had her job had she not been assigned to the ship’s crew two years ago. Mira knew Kite resented her yet she tolerated his passive aggressive snipes and his thinly disguised put downs. He was both the best and the worst the academy could produce.

Mira understood his ill feeling. Kite was a gifted officer with a bright future. She was a broken drop ship pilot who held onto her commission by virtue of her combat record. It did not take two eyes to see their careers were heading in different directions.

She unzipped her fatigues, kicked off her boots and tossed them to one side, further adding to the chaos of her cabin. She shivered in her underwear and danced from one bare foot to the other.

Mira opened the gear locker at the foot of her narrow bunk and removed the base layer of her battle suit. She pulled the heavy blue garment up over her lower body before wriggling her arms and shoulders into it. Once it was secure, she pulled her tactical webbing over her shoulders and attached her body armour. She double checked the catches and powered up the electronics. Now sweating she welcomed the suit’s cooling circuit kicking into action. She retrieved her helmet. Putting it on, she ran a system check before removing it and attaching it to a utility loop on her webbing. Satisfied the suit was operating correctly, she checked her sidearm and holstered it on her hip.

Mira glanced around the cabin and promised to tidy up when she returned. It may be small but it was home. A faded Union Jack and Namibian flag adorned the bulkhead above her bunk, below them was a mosaic of two and three dimensional photographs; thirty years of memories clinging to the wall of an ageing cruiser at the edge of humanity’s realm.

She walked to the vibrant, haphazard collage and removed a crumpled two-dimensional picture of a young woman standing on the Seattle waterfront. The girl had tanned skin and brown eyes. Her smile was devoid of cares. Mira placed the photo in her utility pocket. She turned on her heel and left the cabin, her professional mask falling into place.

The *Berlin*’s corridors were lit by dim red light emanating from concealed panels. The ship was in her night cycle. Combat vessels operated at a full state of readiness at all times yet maintained the practice of delineating time into day and night. Navy studies had found it enhanced the mental well being of the crew. The fleet worked to Greenwich Mean Time. Every ship and station would operate the same procedures regardless of where they were in the galaxy.

Mira checked her wrist computer. It was just before 2am.

She walked past the bank of elevators and ducked into a stairwell leading to the hangar deck. It was a roundabout route, but the movement would loosen her taut muscles and the kinetic energy she generated would give a boost to her suit’s battery pack.

After six flights of steps she cut through the engineering section. The roar of super-heated plasma flowing through the overhead pipes was deafening. If the reactor was the heart of the ship, those pipes were her arteries, and the pulsing vibration of the deck her heartbeat. Old ships like the

Berlin were almost alive, their unique quirks and personality known to their crew and passed on generation to generation. These great lumps of metal were as much a vibrant organism as the humans who rode aboard them. Mira had only been with the *Berlin* for two patrols yet she understood the affection long serving crew felt for *Old B*.

Mira arrived at bay three in a more upbeat mood than she expected. A marine at the guard station saluted and waved her past. She returned the salute. It occurred to her that the higher the rank one attained, the more salutes it garnered. Mira had every respect for the Navy's traditions but found the constant formality increasingly tedious.

A low rumble came from a tug's star-drive while faint jets of vapour vented from the vessel's cooling system. The ugly craft comprised a boxy fuselage with a pair of Honda XF450 ion engines attached to a network of aluminium struts. *Berlin* carried three tugs; this one bore the number two in pitted red paint on its stubby nose.

Captain Marcus Adams stood at the foot of the entry ramp, talking with a pair of marines whose battle armour was dark olive compared to the blue of Mira's suit.

Adam's tall, thin physique hinted at his childhood growing up in the low gravity of the Luna colonies. His light skin and slight frame stood in sharp contrast to Gunnery Sergeant Rich Barnes' dark complexion and muscular physique.

Barnes was a giant of a man with the swagger earned from a lifetime of service. He shared a joke with Adams, and both men were laughing at the punch-line. A second jarhead stood behind Barnes. Mira could not remember his name; he was one of the *New Guys*. A head shorter than Barnes he still towered over Mira, who barely met minimum service height. Gunny Barnes nodded to her and concluded his conversation with the captain. Both marines made their way up the ramp and disappeared into the tug.

"Commander Thorn, you are looking like a boss today," Adams said. "It suits you. We should get you off the ship more often."

The captain's voice was deep and resonant. It seemed at odds with his build. Adams had the quiet authority shared by all senior officers. Mira wondered if they learned it on an admiralty course.

"Don't try too hard, Captain. You know my position on inspections. What can I look forward to?"

"This was a straightforward interception. We took out three fighters, two bugged out, one is disabled. Roland will recover it while you poke around on the target vessel."

"What's he carrying?" she asked.

Captain Adams shrugged.

"We haven't been able to raise anyone onboard. The ship is badly damaged. I suspect the communications system is down."

"Or the crew are dead," Mira replied.

"Or that. In which case I'll send in Doctor Garret with a specialist team."

"Understood. How long have I got?"

"As long as you need. It will be a minimum of an hour to recover and secure the pirate vessel so take your time, enjoy yourself."

"I'll have a ball." It came out more sourly than she intended.

"One more thing Mira." Adams moved closer and dipped his head. "I received your most recent psyche assessment yesterday. You have made significant progress since you came onboard. I want you to know how pleased I am. If you need anything just ask, okay?"

"Thank you, Sir. I appreciate it." She tried her best to sound sincere. Mira figured she was the ship's screwball or sympathy case; which one depended on who you asked. She believed Adams was in the latter group, which was certain to be the minority.

Mira locked his steel-grey eyes with her sole green one.

“I mean it, Captain, your support means a lot.” Mira had to admit she was feeling better than she had in a long time. Aside for the odd memory lapse she was convinced the tide was turning for her.

He straightened; his expression warmed. Marcus Adams was one of the old school; he treated his crew like his extended family.

“Good hunting, Thorn. Cheer up. You're the face of the Navy.”

Mira marched up the ramp. She stopped at the top snapped off a salute before the hatch slid closed.

Face of the Navy? she thought. *My mug will hardly make it into a recruiting vid anytime soon.*

Barnes and *New Guy* were already in their seats. As she passed she glanced at the man's name stencilled on his armour. PFC Ethan Tate, a stylised spanner in a clenched fist told her he was a combat engineer.

Tate was a generic marine. His close-cropped hair was on the fairer side of brown, his blue eyes eager and alert. Like Barnes he appeared as if he were about to burst out of his armour at any moment. There was a softness to his features. He appeared almost thoughtful as he clicked his restraints into place.

Mira strapped herself in opposite the marines. Barnes was checking his weapon over; the name Babs was stencilled in red ink on the side of the barrel.

“Are you still naming your weapons, Gunny?” Mira asked.

“Only the ones with personality, otherwise people would get the wrong idea,” he replied. He pulled out his sidearm. “You've met Babs; this is Carol.” He flipped it so they both could see the name on the butt.

Private Tate looked uncertainly at Barnes.

“Babs is his ex-wife, Private,” Mira explained.

Barnes grinned.

“A fine woman who I loved most dearly.”

“And Carol?” Tate asked.

“She's the reason Bab's his *ex*-wife,” Mira replied.

“Another fine woman who I loved most dearly.” Barnes laughed as the tug lifted off the deck and exited the landing bay.

Mira closed her eye and rested her head on the bulkhead. A headache was growing; the pain drilled through her skull. She reached into her armour for two white pills and popped them into her mouth. She fought back the gag reflex and dry swallowed them. They blunted the pain but did not banish it. Today was set to be a long day.

They covered the 20 kilometres from the *Berlin* to the stranded ship in five minutes. As they approached Mira made her way forward to the cramped cockpit and peered through the viewports.

The pilot pointed to scorch marks on the light grey hull.

“They landed some good hits after they burned his shields away,” he said without taking his eyes off the ship.

The hull damage was severe, but Mira was more concerned by the plasma leaking from one of four ion engines.

“It's messy,” she observed. “They must have hit him with some high wattage weapons. Military grade kit by the look of it.”

“It's only a thin skin hull. Solid ordinance would have torn through it in no time. The pirates knew what they were doing. He was lucky,” the pilot added.

“Can you spin us around Roland?” Mira asked. The pilot rotated the tug on its central axis while continuing with forward velocity. The corporate logo on the Kobo's anhedral tail fin was different to the standard Lightfoot Developments motif. This one featured the usual single planet

orbiting a stylised star but carried the tag line that read '*Building the Future, Learning from the Past*'.

"He's attached to their Astro Archaeological Division," Mira said.

AstroArc was a smokescreen the corporations used for acquiring non-human technology. The MegaCorps supplied universities and museums with cultural relics and kept high tech finds for commercial advantage.

"A professional hit like this has to be down to the Blades," Mira whispered.

"Blades? I thought Rhodes was out of the piracy business. I heard he was dabbling in Frontier politics."

"An organised fight with high power weapons. This has all the hallmarks of one of Rhodes' operations," Mira said, continuing to study the crippled starship.

"They targeted the shields and the sublights. They wanted the ship intact." Roland pointed out of the window with a gloved hand. "Look at the condition of the engines."

The damage was worse than Mira first thought. Sparks and vapour escaped into the vacuum from many ruptured pipes. Xander Rhodes and his Blades had always been a potent threat on the Frontier; they were a match for Navy pilots against larger targets. Although Mira had to admit she had heard little of the Blades in recent years. Roland might be right; this could be the work of a new outfit.

Mira shrugged, finding out who was responsible for the attack was not her problem.

"Take us in on the top airlock, Roland."

Mira floated back to the crew cabin. There was a muffled, metallic *thunk* as the tug connected with the Kobo. Barnes and Tate released their harnesses and floated out of their seats. In single file they propelled themselves to the lower airlock.

Mira cycled the controls to pressurise the lock before hitting the hatch release. She put on her helmet and activated the camera. Both marines followed her lead.

The connecting tube between the vessels was three metres long; the hatch at the far end opened to reveal a featureless grey airlock cubicle.

"Want me to go in first?" Barnes asked.

Mira shook her head. "No, I've got this."

She swivelled to enter the airlock feet first. Unlike the tug the target ship would be operating an artificial gravity field. Landing on her head was a rookie mistake Mira had no intention of making. She passed through the second hatch and into the Kobo; her feet connected firmly with the rungs of the entry ladder. Her stomach lurched as she traversed from free fall to normal gravity. She took a second to allow the nausea pass.

She drew her sidearm and waited for Barnes and Tate to descend. Once the airlock was sealed, she contacted the tug pilot who silently disengaged from the vessel.

The marines readied their weapons. Mira operated the latch and the inner door irised open. A blast of warm, humid air filled the airlock. She wrinkled her nose. The smell of burnt wiring and melted components was pungent. Beyond the airlock the ship was dimly lit with flickering emergency lighting. A faint blue mist hung in the air.

Mira shuddered. The atmosphere was oppressive, the air heavy and charged. She tried to push the sense of dread away, but it lingered before fading into the back of her mind.

"The reactor must be offline. The air scrubbers are not working," Barnes said.

Mira stepped out of the airlock and swept her sidearm left to right. The barrel light cut through smoke, revealing nothing but an empty corridor.

"Clear!" she reported.

The flight deck lay to her right and the habitation section to her left. Mira coughed, the acrid fumes catching in the back of her throat. Her eye watered and she blinked it clear.

"Hello?" she called, once she caught her breath.

"Is anyone home?" Barnes yelled from behind her. His deep voice echoed off the steel walls.

"I guess not," Mira said when no answer was forthcoming. If the ship were abandoned they would have to secure the vessel, alert the owners and attach a tracking beacon to the hull. If they found bodies, they would need to gather and catalogue evidence for a potential criminal investigation.

"Gunny, I want you to go aft. Check the habitation section."

She looked at the other marine; she couldn't remember his name... Alan? Edward? No, it was Ethan, definitely Ethan.

"Ethan... let's go forward. We'll try to break into their flight log."

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied.

"What about the lower deck?" Barnes asked. The standard configuration for a Kobo was a twin deck freighter. The upper section contained the crew quarters, the lower was devoted to cargo space and engineering sections.

"Let's secure this deck before we go below," Mira said.

Barnes hefted his weapon and moved aft, whistling tunelessly. Mira looked at Tate.

"After you, Private," she said

They walked to the flight deck in silence, the thick carpet and padded walls absorbing the sound of their movement.

"It's well-appointed for a hauler. More like a star liner than a freighter," Tate said.

Mira glanced around her. He was right. The carpet was deep blue and flecked with gold stars, the walls textured with decorative padding.

"I'll take your word for it, Private. I'm on a Navy salary, after all."

Tate looked uncertain, like he'd spoken out of turn. "No... I mean... I was just..." His voice trailed off when he picked up on Mira's failed attempt at humour.

They lapsed back into silence.

As they approached the flight deck, the luxury gave way to a more utilitarian style of décor. Rubberised flooring replaced the carpet, and the walls were bare painted steel. The flight deck was well equipped, yet small and continued the stripped down aesthetic. The pilot and co-pilot's chairs were positioned in a slight hollow in front of a curved viewport. Touchscreen displays and banks of switches surrounded each station. Mira moved forward and gazed into the void. The *Berlin* was visible just off the starboard bow. The warship's outline picked out in dots and dashes of light spilling from her windows while powerful spotlights lit her slate-grey hull. A ripple of homesickness washed over Mira as she stared at the isolated island of humanity. It was unusual and not unwelcome. It occurred to her that reconnecting to humanity could be a real possibility. She recalled something her therapist had said at their first session: "*The journey would be one of small steps. You won't realise you have reached your destination until the day you arrive.*" She was seeing the wisdom in the bald, bug-eyed psych's words. Her demons were a long way behind her but she knew she had to keep taking those small steps, lest they catch up and consume her.

"No one is home," Tate said.

His voice pulled Mira back to the now. She shook off the low melancholy that had fallen over her.

She scanned the flight deck. Not only was it deserted, it showed no signs of life. The detritus usually found on the flight deck of a long-range hauler was absent. There were no empty mugs or half eaten snacks stashed between equipment. No family photographs or pinups were stuck to the consoles. Either no one had been on the deck or the crew suffered from extreme OCD.

"If anyone was onboard, I would have expected them to be here," Mira said.

She slid into the pilot's chair. It was deeply padded and the seat bolsters firmly gripped her body.

"Perks of the private sector," she said absently.

Mira tapped into the ship's main computer and pulled up the recent log entries.

"He left Tellerman Gateway a week ago en route for... Tarantella."

“The pirate system?” Tate asked.

Mira continued to drill into the database.

“Harsh,” she said. “It’s lawless and not what you’d call on the grid, but it’s still a legitimate outpost... at the moment, anyway.”

The legal status of Tarantella was a subject of debate. A free trade agreement existed between the station's Trade Guild and the Federation. Tarantella was subject to Federal Law, but the lack of Federal presence allowed it complete autonomy.

In recent years the authorities had ignored the outpost, preferring to concentrate on expanding the Frontier. It made sense to Mira; if the government came down hard on Tarantella, they would have to act against countless other rogue outposts on the inner and outer frontiers.

A flash illuminated the flight deck. She twisted in the seat. Ethan Tate wore broad grin, his hands inside an inspection hatch.

“That should do it,” he said. The main lights flickered on, followed by the faint hum of the air scrubbers kicking into life.

“Nice work, Private.”

Mira continued to read the system logs. They were straightforward aside from containing no sign of human interaction.

Then she saw it.

“The ship has been on an automated flight-path since it left Tellerman Gateway. The program was uploaded to the NaviComp remotely,” she said.

She keyed her com-link.

“Rich have you found anyone?” The link crackled with interference, then cleared.

“Negative, Mira. The upper deck is deserted. This isn’t a standard freighter either. I bet it’s an executive transport of some sort. You want me to go below?”

“Not yet I want to talk to the captain; something isn’t right.” She closed the link and changed channel.

“*Berlin*, Thorn.” She waited for a reply.

“CentOps, go ahead Mira,” Sue Walton answered.

“It looks like we have a ghost ship. The upper deck is deserted, and the log shows the ship left from Tellerman and has been on auto ever since. I will scope out the cargo space but this ship is beaten up. The drive core is offline and I think the sublights are fuc... non-functional. I recommend we bring her onboard.”

There was a pause; the captain came on the line.

“Mira, if we bring her aboard, we have to divert to the nearest port.”

She didn’t know quite how to sum up her unease.

“Captain nothing adds up... The ship was on an automated course for Tarantella.”

A pause.

“I see.”

Mira heard a muffled conversation in the background.

“Prepare the vessel for towing. Roland will be with you in an hour. I’d be grateful if you could update me on the contents of the hold. I need to know exactly what we’re bringing aboard.”

“Affirmative, Captain. We’ll check it out.”

Mira swivelled the command chair. Private Tate was still trying to bring the vessel’s systems online. He was busy checking fuses and re-inserting them into their carriers. Barnes appeared in the doorway.

She told them the captain had agreed to take the Kobo onto the *Berlin*.

“It’s probably for the best. She’s taken a beating and we can’t really be sure how sound the hull is.”

"I guess we check the lower deck and shut the reactor down," Mira said, sliding out of the command seat.

"Looks like you were getting comfortable," Barnes said.

"I was." It had been a long time since she had sat in the pilot's seat and Mira was disappointed the ship was immobile. She yearned for the chance to take the stick one more time.

"C'mon Rich, let's look down below. Ethan, I want you to bring the core functions online. Give priority to the shields. Roland lacks a delicate touch with his towing rig."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said, without looking up.

Mira and Barnes walked aft. When they reached the stairwell Barnes hit the door mechanism. The door did not respond.

"Security locked. Damn it," he said reaching for his com-link. "Hey man, it's Barnes. Can you override the security systems?" There was a pause. A light on the door changed from red to green. Barnes tapped the control, and the door retracted.

"Kid's good," Mira said.

"Top of his class in engineering. I don't understand why he enlisted. He'd be a good fit for the fleet." He ushered Mira through the door.

Mira did her best to conceal her surprise. She had known the big man for ten years and the Marine Corps was everything to him. As far as Rich Barnes was concerned there were marines and there was everyone else.

Before they entered the stairwell, Barnes blocked her path.

"You okay?" he asked. "I saw you popping pills on the way over. It's not the first time either."

"I'm fine, Gunny, just a headache. Standard issue painkillers."

He didn't look satisfied with the answer.

"Mira, you need the doctor to check it out."

"Rich, I'm fine. My sickness level is already too high. I don't want to be grounded, but it's getting to where Monica will have to report me. I don't want to put her in that position."

Barnes shook his head. "You know she'd never do that."

Mira did. Doctor Monica Garret was one of her closest friends, correction one of her only friends. It still did not sit easy with her.

"Okay, when we get back I'll get her to check me over." It was a lie. Mira suspected Barnes knew, but he let it go.

"Come on, Gunny; let's see what's down here."

She drew her sidearm and activated the barrel light; it cut through the darkness of the stairwell. As they descended the light level increased as the corridor curved around the central hold. After ten metres they came across the entrance to the cargo area. It was a large hatchway recessed into the bulkhead. Opposite the hold was a similarly sized airlock. Barnes tried the door control. It beeped, but the hold did not open.

He called Tate. Mira couldn't hear the exchange.

"He can't open it. It uses deep encryption," Barnes said. "He's trying to access the security system to get a visual of whatever is in there."

"Okay, let's move on. I'll look at engineering with you and then secure the upper deck. We'll be turning the gravity off and I don't want the contents of an un-flushed toilet floating around."

Barnes laughed and led the way. They kept their weapons ready but any real intent was lost.

"So why don't you go home, Mira?" Barnes asked.

"What?"

"You have family back home. You're veteran and you've earned a pension. So why not?"

Mira didn't know how to answer. Barnes was right. There were many officers in her position who had cashed in their commissions for easy lives in the Core Systems.

“Rich... after the crash I was going to do just that but with all the shit that followed... I need the distance. Besides, I can't cook and the Navy feeds me.”

Barnes chuckled; it was measured. Mira saw something in his eyes. It wasn't the normal pity she was used to seeing from those who knew her past.

She nudged him gently, with affection.

“Don't worry, Rich, I'm getting my shit together.”

The door to the engineering section was unlocked and opened without aid from Tate. The compartment was filled with thick grey smoke. Mira recoiled as the acrid fumes hit the back of her throat. Her visor automatically lowered, and she purged the fumes from her respiration system. She breathed the pure NitOx mix and waited for the nausea to pass. She had puked in a helmet once and once was enough.

“Is there a fire?” she screamed.

“No, the auto system has taken care of it. The air scrubbers are out. The smoke has nowhere to go!” Barnes said.

Mira slipped on the floor. She glanced down to see it was covered in PlastiFoam. The extinguishers had done their job and put the fire out but the remnants posed a serious risk.

Barnes disappeared into the cloud of blue-grey smoke and seconds later it vented away, leaving the compartment clear. Mira checked the air quality, poor but breathable. She opened her helmet. The smell of combustion still lingered in the air.

“A plasma leak,” she said.

Plasma fires smelt similar to rotting fish. The pungent aroma overlaid the smell of burnt plastics.

“Your face when you walked in! I thought you would lose it!” Barnes said. A broad grin lit his face.

“Think yourself lucky I didn't have breakfast, otherwise I would have.”

Mira looked around the room. Dried PlastiFoam covered every surface. The consoles were scorched but appeared to be functional. The damage responsible for the flash fire was obvious; broken tubing and burnt cable still smouldered at the far end of the compartment. Without the plasma feed inductors the ship had no sublight propulsion or hyperdrive.

Barnes was studying readout on a data screen.

“This is just one big lump of scrap. The reactor is offline and we're running on batteries,” he said. “I can take care of things down here if you want to go topside and see if Private Tate can break into the security system.”

“Okay, thanks Gunny.” She left Barnes to finish securing the drive section. The stink of burnt plasma seemed to follow her up the corridor.

* * *

Romain Vincent watched as the tug grew from a tiny moving speck of light into an ugly slab of metal and girders. His ship was spinning lazily on its central axis. The drive system had dropped into a fail state and all but life support was functioning. A shudder ran through the hull as the towing harness was attached to his fighter. The tug moved away, pulling the smaller ship behind it. Romain slapped the bulkhead with a gloved fist. It was his third interception with this crew and now destined to be his last.

Why did they have to take this job?

The past four years of Romain's life had been spent working for Xander Rhodes, as one of one of the legendary Blades; the scourge of the frontier. Unfortunately Rhodes was a prick, a hollow echo of the stories told about him. There were plenty of raids, plenty of liberated cargoes, yet Romain had seen nothing more than his basic wage. When a young crew approached him with the offer of a big payday for a small job he had signed on willingly. Only now he realised he had signed his life away.

Once aboard the Navy ship he would be taken to the nearest outpost, processed through the system and sentenced to a prison facility in a federal backwater. Unlike Eden and Freddie he had no opportunity to amass a fortune that would await him on release. They had shown their true colours and jumped away. All Romain could do was sit in his cockpit and watch as he drew closer to the naval vessel and a certain future.

As the enormity of the situation dawned on him he shivered. His stomach churned into a knot.

Fuck you Rhodes. Fuck you Eden and fuck you Freddie.

An idea formed, *The Dead Man's Hand*. He might just be able to bring his jump drive online long enough to leap away; half a light year in any direction would be enough.

Romain cycled through the ship's manual on his knee mounted datapad. The fighter's cannon used a plasma accelerator to generate energy. If he were to force an overload then the warship's sensors would detect an energy spike. It would appear to them as if his ship were about to explode and it would if he could not dump the excess energy. He would have to vent heat and plasma into space but if he could route it into the drive subsystem, he might kick-start the FTL drive. It was an old trick often spoken of in seedy Frontier bars and UniNet chat rooms. It was a gamble; the odds were against him, but Romain had always been a man to play the long odds.

The tug moved onto an approach vector for the cruiser's docking bay; as it did so Romain switched his weapons system into maintenance mode and set off a chain of commands that would cause the plasma accelerator to overload. Warnings flashed on his HUD; he overrode them and waited. A trickle of stone-cold sweat ran down his neck. The plan unfolded as the tug engaged reverse thrust and pushed back; it released the towing bar as it did so. Romain was now moving backwards relative to the cruiser. He entered the override code to halt the reaction and used his residual power to flip his ship onto an escape vector. The weapon system did not respond. Frantically he retyped the override instruction. The temperature was now critical, a chain reaction running out of control.

Three seconds later Romain Vincent's pirate career ended in an expanding ball of super-heated plasma.

