

ASSUMING COMMAND

Seth Jackson stretched his long legs out in front of him. The terminal's plastic seats were too small and his legs had begun complaining. It wasn't long before Seth was pacing up and down in front of his kit. Seth slowly became aware of stares from other passengers in the terminal. The stares were neither long nor intense, but in Seth's eyes they were both. Afraid he was bringing an undignified air to the European Space Forces uniform, Seth forced himself to sit down and remain still until his flight was called. But even as he left the terminal Seth thought he could hear voices, lowered to whispers, critical of his impatience. On the shuttle flight to Habitat Troy, Seth was aware of the two ladies seated behind him. They had spoken to each other about Seth's Captain's uniform. It was quite clear that the two ladies were proud of the ESF. Seth bit his lip at the moment to come as the flight steward came to Seth's seat.

"Is there anything I can get for you, Captain?" The steward asked. Seth shook his head, but the steward wasn't so easily deflected. "Are you sure? A disk to read? Coffee?"

"No, thank you." Seth answered. Seth's voice, with his strong midwestern accent, silenced the steward and the two ladies. The steward moved on down the aisle. The next word Seth heard from behind him dripped with disgust.

"Yank." The woman said to her friend, neglecting to whisper.

#

Commander Bartholmew Lislyn was conducting his weekly inspection of the ship's engineering spaces. He was not happy. It was not the results of the in-

spection that distressed Lislyn, but that it was the last he would do for his captain. Lislyn knew that his new captain would never fill the shoes of captain Horwel. Lislyn stopped in front of the engineering officer, commander Maximilian Roth.

"Everything's perfect, as usual, Max." Lislyn said.

"Captain's come and go, but the engines stay the same." Roth turned and looked at the field generators. The compartment housing the main drives was the sole place in the ship where it looks as if space had been wasted. The Compartment was several decks high and so wide that it caused the ship to appear as if it had been over inflated. In the center of the compartment, surrounded by empty space, were the field generators and antennas. Roth watched as crewmen went about their jobs maintaining the drives.

"The crew's not happy about a yank being put in command." Roth said.

"It's not their place to be happy." Lyslin snapped, "But if it makes you feel any better I don't think he'll last more than one tour."

"I still can't believe the admiralty gave the Churchill to him." Roth said.

"After the battle of neo-Nippon, they couldn't ignore him." Lyslin answered,

"But they'll jump on any mistake he makes to take it away."

The intercom sounded for Lyslin's attention. Lyslin spoke for a few moments, then turned back to Roth.

"Jackson's gig just cleared Habitat Troy. He'll be here in half an hour."

Seth loved the Churchill from the moment he saw her. The over all impression of the ship was slim, even with the bulge in the center of her torpedo-like

shape. Seth's eyes swept over the hull taking in every detail. The ring of docking ports running along her center line, bisecting the ship fore and aft. The missile launchers exposed at the bow and stern. The Churchill would be a fast deadly shark in combat. For one brief moment Seth felt completely at peace, but he knew that would not last. Seth knew who and what he was. He knew that the crew would have no love for him. If he could not win them over during his tour, there would be no more commands. The ESF did not have ships to waste on captains who could not lead, and Seth was not sure he could. Seth pushed the doubts out of his mind. He set his mind, stubbornly, at winning the crew over.

Captain Horwell stood patiently by the hatch. Lyslin was next to him, as a good executive officer should be. Horwell was a veteran of many battles in space and a well -- decorated officer in the ESF. Standing in his full dress uniform he appeared almost gaudy, but not quite. He had the presence of one who commands.

Pipes sounded through the passageway. A spaceman stepped forward and undogged the hatch of the airlock. Seth stepped through onto the Churchill.

"Permission to come aboard, sir." Seth said as he saluted Horwell.

"Permission granted." Horwell replied. Horwell then stepped forward and shook Seth's hand.

"She's a good ship, Jackson," Horwell said "she'll serve you well."

"I'm sure she will, sir." Seth agreed. Horwell swept his hand to indicate Lyslin.

"This is Commander Lyslin," He said, "your x.o."

Seth dutifully shook hand with Lyslin. I'll never win his trust. Seth thought, then again, shoved the thought out of his mind with sheer stubbornness to do just that. Seth had learned long ago to ignore the voice in his head which doubted everything he did. He just wished he could find a way to silence it. "I've set change of command for sixteen hundred hours." Horwell said, "That should give you plenty of time to get settled in."

"More than enough, thank you." Seth replied.

"I'm having a final diner in the wardroom at thirteen hundred, I think it would be a fine time for you to meet you officers." Horwell said.

"I would be happy to accept."

Horwell signalled at a waiting midshipman. The midshipman came forward and, taking Seth's duty kit, lead Seth to his quarters.

Seth navigated the tight passageways and steep ladders with a skill born of living in spaceships for more than fifteen years. The passageways of the Churchill were barely wide enough for one man. With all the piping, wiring, and conduits running along the bulkheads, the passageways were a mechanical maze. The overhead was much lower than any tall man would have liked, but Seth no longer noticed this. He ducked and swung he head out of the way of numerous projections with unconscious ease. Spaceships were home to Seth and he noticed their tight quarters and discomforts as much as he noticed the air he breathed.

The midshipman stopped and opened a hatch. Seth thanked him and got to work unpacking in his new home.

The department heads were relaxing in the wardroom, waiting for Captains Horwell and Jackson. There was an ease in the air that was never present when the commanding officer was around. The men here shared the camaraderie of rank and service. The hatch opened and Lyslin stepped into the wardroom.

"Barth!" Franz called out, "come have a drink with us!" Lyslin took a seat as he accepted a drink from the weapons officer. Lyslin noted that it looked as if Franz had been drinking a little more than his ration. He's got reason to. Lyslin thought. Anyway Franz can handle his drink.

"I can't believe they gave us the bloody yank." The operations officer, Noah Slattery, complained.

"It's your fault." Philippe LeBrock, the legal officer, responded.

"MY fault?!" Slattery said.

"He's got English citizenship, your country, your fault." Philippe argued.

"It doesn't matter." Lyslin said. Lyslin had seen enough of the bickering between these two to know that he didn't want to see any more. "Jackson's here and we've have to deal with it."

"How long to break him in?" Roth asked Lyslin.

"A yank? I'm not sure it can be done." Lyslin replied, "They're a stubborn lot always wanting things done their way."

The hatch opened and a midshipman stuck in his head.

"They're on their way, sir."

The officers quickly set the wardroom to order and took their seat like good officers. A moment later Captain Horwell and Captain Jackson opened the hatch and entered the wardroom.

"Who was watching for you today?" Horwell asked as he took his place at the head of the table.

"Verhoven, sir." Lyslin replied.

"Good lad. You have to watch out for these pirates, Captain." Horwell said, then quickly added. "Joking aside, these are a fine set of officer." Horwell turned and started introducing his officers and their departments, "You've met Lyslin, starting on your left you have, Magenheimer, weapons; Lawrence, deck; Slatery, operations; Roth, engineering; McShane, ships doctor; Petti, your legal officer; and LeBrock, navigation."

Seth knew it would take him several days to learn the names with the faces. He would feel lost until then. Horwell tried to make conversation during the diner, but it never got beyond the polite stage. Seth knew he was not welcome there.

"...take command of the European Space Force Cruiser Churchill." Seth folded the orders and placed them into his breast pocket. He was now officially the captain of the Churchill and responsible for every man aboard her. A tremendous pang of doubt leapt into his mind as he thought about that, then quickly he shoved that thought aside.

Horwell stepped to address the bridge, and by intercom, the entire crew. As he spoke it was evident to Seth that not only was Horwell touched by the change of command, but the crew were as well. Seth knew he was following in the

steps of a popular captain. He could see the devotion in the eyes of the men on the bridge.

There was silence, as Seth realized that Horwell had stopped speaking, and the crew was waiting to hear from him, the new captain. He found that he had no words to say. He cursed himself for a fool, then shoved that aside for later. He stepped to mike.

"Men," Seth said, "...I'm a simple man of few words. Do your duty and this ship will live up to her fine name." Seth signaled for the tech to turn off the intercom. Seth could see from the reactions around the bridge that his speech had not gone over well. Another failure. He thought, and was instantly adamant to prove he was not a failure, that his command was not doomed.

"Captain." Horwell said to Seth, "Permission to disembark."

"Granted." Seth said automatically, lost in ideas for winning the crew over.

"Sir," Lyslin said interrupting Seth's thoughts. "with your permission I would like to escort Captain Horwell to the gig."

"Very well." Seth said. After they had left by the aft hatch, Seth wandered over to his command chair and sat.

"I'm going to miss you, sir." Lyslin said to Horwell.

"I'm not dying, man!" Horwell replied.

"Still, this ship isn't going to be the same without you."

"This ship's performance better be." Horwell growled.

"Sir, I can't.." Lyslin started to plead.

"I don't want to hear it! I know how you feel Barth, but your feelings don't matter. It's your duty to give the captain a ship AND crew that's ready for action."

"I'll give it my best, sir." Lyslin said weakly.

"See that you do." Horwell said.

Seth punched in the combination to the safe in his cabin. He then submitted to a thumbprint and retina scan. After the computer was satisfied, it opened the little safe. Seth reached in and took out the sealed orders for the Churchill.

The orders in his hands could send the ship almost any where. The orders could be for a hit and run raid into the Asian Stellar Prosperity Sphere, defending vital convoys from privateers, intelligence gathering duties, anything was possible. Whatever the orders read, it would be Seth's first test as Captain.

Seth defused the self-destruct and then tore the packet open.

Seth's hopes were dashed as he read the orders. Blockade duty! The Churchill was going to spend the next six months patrolling the translation point in the Carpaithian system. Seth sank deeper into despair. Granted, there was a translation point in the Carpaithian system that connected with ASP space, but it was unstable. No one uses the Carpaithian hole! Seth thought, No one sane. There's not even a chance of action. Suddenly Seth saw the reason for it all. The Admiralty was keeping him out of the way. They didn't trust him with a mission of importance, and so he was being sent to Carpaithia.

It was Seth's nature to see what was worst for him. It never entered Seth's mind that perhaps members of the admiralty thought six months of duty in the Carpaithian system would give Seth the time he needed to bring his crew to-

gether. Seth only saw the possibility that the command wanted him out of the way. Seth wallowed in his depression only for a few moments. Then he was up and on his way to the bridge.

"Mr. LeBrock," Seth ordered as he stepped through the hatch onto the bridge. "start plotting a course for the Carpaithian system."

"Aye, aye, sir" LeBrock answered. LeBrock turned and consulted with the ship's computer. Seth turned and faced Lyslin.

"Blockade duty." Seth said cheerfully, "This will give us a chance to polish the crew."

Lyslin's agreement was purely ceremonial.

"Course plotted, Captain." LeBrock said, "Four translations"

"Mr. Lyslin, take us out of system." Seth ordered.

The ship, under Lyslin's direction, changed orbits and started for an intercept with the orbiting translation point out of the terran system.

"Show me you work." Seth said to LeBrock.

LeBrock punched up his figures and programs on the computer and displayed them for Seth to see. On the little data screen beside him, Seth examined the figures that described the motions of the translation point they needed.

"Put the system on the tank." Seth ordered. LeBrock complied. The holotank in the center of the bridge came to life. There, in miniature scale, was a moving map of the terran solar system, planets in black, ships in yellow, and translation points, with the most complex orbits, in blue. Seth noted that the New London translation was currently inside Jupiter.

"Good work, Mr. LeBrock."

"Thank you, captain." LeBrock said. I know my job! Is what LeBrock thought.

"We are ready for translation." Lyslin said to Seth.

"Sound, "stand by for translation"" Seth ordered. Lyslin touched a control and filled the ship with an electronic warbling. Through out the ship, loose items were secured, hatches were dogged closed, and the crew prepared for the trip through the translation point.

"All departments signal 'ready for translation', sir." Lyslin reported.

"Mr. LeBrock, take us through."

The Churchill moved forward from the acceleration provided by the KIFF drives. The translation point looked to the eye like any other point in space. That is, it looked like nothing, but as it passed through the Churchill, the ship was violently moved across light years of space.

Aboard the Churchill, the translation was felt, heard, and seen through out the ship by the crew. The whole ship vibrated as through it was earth bound during an earthquake. The bulkheads groaned as they were stressed by the forces of translation. The air was filled with a single clap as the shock wave passed through the ship. Then all was quiet. Seth turned to Lyslin and waited.

"All departments reporting no damage." Lyslin reported.

"It'll take us one week to reach the next translation, sir." LeBrock reported.

"Very well," Seth replied. "Stand down from translation."

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In the forward missile room, the spacemen were busy cleaning for the weekly inspection. Rather, they should have been busy. Two spacemen were relaxing on the missile loading racks. A third, an NCO, checked the work done so far. "Good enough for American work." The NCO proclaimed as he joined the other two. The NCO had just settled when Commander Magenheimer came in. The three spacemen leaped to their feet's and waited as Magenheimer inspected the compartment.

First, Magenheimer inspected the vital equipment for loading and firing the missiles. In this time of war with the ASPS such things could not be left to fate. Satisfied with what he saw, Magenheimer turned his attention to the incidentals of the inspection. He noted that the deck did not shine as it had once do so. The bulkheads were not as clean as before. In short, the space was ready for combat but performance was slipping.

Magenheimer thought briefly about have the men start over, but then he thought. It's good enough for American work.

"You pass." Magenheimer said as he left the compartment.

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"Clear for Action; Rig for vacuum." Seth ordered as he stepped through the hatch on the bridge. It was the middle of the mid -- watch, two a.m. by the ships' clock. Ensign MacPheron nearly leaped out of his uniform as the order was snapped. MacPheron quickly recovered and passed to order over the ships' intercom.

Klaxons sounded through out the ship. Men were roused out of sound sleeps to hurry towards their battle stations. Suits were jumped into and helmets dogged down tight. Lyslin appeared through the forward bridge hatch, his helmet already smartly secured. Within minuets Seth began hearing the whine of the ships' atmosphere being evacuated. Just a little over a quarter of an hour after he had stepped onto the bridge, Seth heard Lyslin report.

"Ship cleared for action and rigged for vacuum, sir."

Of course, Seth heard this over the radio in his helmet as the ships' interior was now as hard a vacuum as the space beyond the hull. It was a standard precaution among warships to prevent damage from explosive decompression.

"Fifteen minutes twenty seconds, Mr. Lyslin." Seth said.

"A definite improvement, sir."

"But not good enough," Came the curt reply, "I want this ship able to clear and rig in under ten." Seth turned and started off the bridge.

"Too many of these damned drills." Lyslin complained, forgetting that his radio was still open. Seth turned and faced his executive officer.

"Command circuit." Seth ordered. Lyslin switched his radio to the private channel for command officers.

"Damn it, Lyslin!" Seth snapped, "Don't you ever undercut me in front of the men!"

"Yes, sir." Lyslin answered demurely.

"You might be thinking that you can get away with sub-standard performances, well you can put that right out of you head! It's going to be the opposite!

I don't want to ever hear a rumor that another ship can clear for action faster than we can! Do I make myself understood Mr. Lyslin?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"I'll try to remember that when I make out your evals." Seth threatened as he left the bridge. Lyslin turned to face the embarrassed men on the bridge. There hadn't been a man who wasn't thinking the same thing as Lyslin.

"Secure from action; rig for atmosphere." Lyslin ordered.

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The ship shook as it cleared the last translation point and entered the Carpaithian system. Lyslin again reported to Seth that no damages were reported from the translation.

Activating the quantum effect of translation was always risky. Minor errors in field calibration produced rough damaging rides. Major errors had reduced ships to rubble. It was an operation that required the utmost attention.

"Mr. Slattery, a tactical please." Seth said.

The tank lit up with a map of the Carpaithian system. Seven planets and two translation points. The translation point connecting to ESF space had a stable orbit, and the other, leading to ASPS space, was just the opposite. The orbit traced out for the dangerously unstable translation point danced all about the system.

Anyone trying to come through that is completely daft! Slattery thought as he scanned the system. Slattery's earpiece spoke softly into his ear.

"C.I.C. reports negative contact with Hotspur, sir." Slattery reported.

"To be expected." Seth said, more to himself than to the other officer present.

"Take us to blockade station, Mr. LeBrock. Mr. Slattery start broadcasting our recognition codes at these co-ordinates."

Seth lit areas on the tactical where he thought the Hotspur could orbiting. Half an hour later contact was made with the Hotspur. Codes were exchanged and plans made for matching orbits near the blockaded translation point. A little over a week later the two ships were orbiting near each other.

"Captain Forester, it's good to see you again." Seth said to the man on the screen.

"Captain Jackson, it good to see that the admiralty hasn't lost it eye for talent." Forester replied.

"I got lucky."

"I won't accept that Captain Jackson anymore than I would accept bad luck as a reason for failing."

"I would be happy if you joined the wardroom and I for dinner before you leave." Seth invited. He desperately wanted Forester to accept. The wardroom had become a place of tormenting silence.

"I can't, but I look forward to seeing on you Earth when you return. Don't let the boredom kill you out here." Forester cut the channel and soon the Hotspur was accelerating toward home.

For more than a month the Churchill was on station sunward of the translation point. Nothing had happened and no one expected anything to happen. The ship followed its' orbit, day after day, week after week.

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Seth was standing on the recreation deck. Gathered here were his department heads. As well as men from their departments guilty of minor mis -- conducts of all nature. This was the captain's mast as system of justice going back hundreds of years. Seth turned his gaze to the spaceman recruit standing before him.

"How late were you in relieving the watch?" Seth asked. The recruit trembled, slightly. Onboard ship a captain was almost a god, and one rarely spoken to.

"Fifteen minutes, sir." The recruit replied, trying to act like he wasn't scared.

"Why?"

"Sir," The recruit stammered, "it was my birthday the day before and...um..well.. some of the guys and me got together and...well..I hit my ration a little hard, sir."

"Were you drunk on duty?"

"No, sir!" The recruit exclaimed, "I just overslept a little, sir."

Seth could see that the man before him was no abuser. Seth was angry that the problem had been brought to him at all. Now there was no choice in what had to be done.

"No rations for a month." The man's chest fell. Most spacemen would rather loose rank or pay than have their beloved alcohol rations taken from them.

Seth dismissed the captain's mast.

An hour later Lyslin knocked at the hatch to the captain's office.

"Enter!" Seth called out. Lyslin came in and closed the hatch behind him.

"Reporting as ordered, sir."

"What the hell was that man doing at my mast?" Seth demanded.

"Sir, he was negligent in his duty. I thought..."

"That's the one thing you didn't do, Lyslin, THINK! He was no lush and you knew it! Part of your duties as x.o. is to screen out cases like that and not waste your captain's time!"

Lyslin stood there as silent as a space.

"Unless of course, you don't think my time is valuable." Seth commented.

"The captain's time is always valuable, sir." Lyslin answered with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, but only a touch.

"Then perhaps you can explain this?" Seth asked as he pointed to his desk, filled with papers and forms. Lyslin was silent.

"Captain Horwell gave you four -- oh marks," Seth said referring to Lyslin's evaluations, "But I don't see it! If you don't start doing your duty, Commander, I'll see to it that you never get a command!"

"Permission to speak freely, sir." Lyslin said coldly.

"Granted."

Lyslin took in a breath to speak, but before he could the intercom in the office came to life.

"Bridge to captain!"

"Jackson, here."

"Sir, we have a contact trying to run the blockade!" The Officer Of the Deck reported. Seth was shocked into disbelief for a second, then into action.

"Clear for action; rig for vacuum!" He ordered, then he and Lyslin hurried for the bridge.

Seth and Lysin hurried through passageways filled with men. Everywhere in the ship, men were hurrying to their stations. Air tight hatches were being dogged down, valves beings closed. Over the speakers and the interior radio system the order was being passed.

"This is not a drill, this is not a drill. All hands clear for action; rig for vacuum!" By the time Seth and Lysin reached the bridge, they both had their helmets on and dogged down tight.

"Report." Seth snapped as he stepped onto the bridge.

"Contact is a single ship, under no acceleration." Slattery reported.

"LeBrock, best time to intercept?" Seth asked. LeBrock was already at work on the problem and answered quickly.

"Eight hours thirty seven minutes, at full acceleration, sir."

Provided the contact did not change acceleration itself, Seth thought. If the contact chose to engage the Churchill, that time would be cut dramatically. If the contact chose to avoid the Churchill the case could last days.

Seth looked at the tactical display in the tank. The contact was in a line between the Churchill and the translation hole. Beyond the Churchill was the primary for the Carpaithian system, exactly as Seth wanted it. Seth opened the intercom to engineering.

"Roth, what's the plant at?" He asked.

"Thirty five percent sir, I can give you ninety right now and one hundred ten in fifteen minutes."

"Stand by." Seth replied. Turning off the intercom he turned to Lyslin. "At thirty five he could very well miss us in the background from the primary."

"Sir, shouldn't we intercept the contact at once?"

"It doesn't make any sense to send a single ship through. It's making too much noise for an intel ship. Let's see what it's up to. Meanwhile you, Magenheimer, and LeBrock start projecting orbits and firing positions if he decided to run for the hole out."

Lyslin turned to the weapons and navigation officers with a little respect growing for his yank captain.

If I'm wrong, and it gets away, the admiralty will have my head. Seth thought gloomily. He pushed the thought out of his mind and sat down trying to puzzle out what had come into the system.

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Matsumoto Kenjiro looked at all the flashing lights on the display. On one hand he was alive and the little cutter was intact. Kenjiro gave thanks for this. On the other hand, every system in the little ship was off line, dead. The hull had split during translation and now the compartment was in vacuum. Kenjiro again gave thanks that he had worn a suit through the translation, but the life support of that suit would be exhausted in twelve hours. He had expected, hoped, that a Euro ship would be blockading the hole. If there wasn't a ship near -- by, then the chances taken would have been for nothing.

Suddenly Kenjiro knew a ship was near by. Kenjiro relaxed and swore to himself he was going to resist the temptation this time.

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"Contact remains under no acceleration." Slattery reported. It had been four hours since the contact had translated into the system. The craft had not been under any acceleration during that time.

"Sir," Slattery added, "there is high confidence that the contact does not have an active fusion plant." Slattery hedged his bet by reporting to his captain as 'high confidence' instead of a certain determination.

Crippled, Seth now knew that the unstable translation had severely damaged the unknown ship. Someone had taken a big chance and lost. It was likely that all aboard were killed, but not certain.

"Mr. LeBrock, an intercept course. Mr. Lyslin, stand the men down from action stations, but I want them back there an hour before intercept." After passing these orders Seth retired from the bridge.

"Good God! That's not even translation capable!" Slattery exclaimed. Everyone on the bridge was silent as they got their first look at the contact.

"Someone modified the hell out of it." Roth commented, "That's a Tanto class ship."

"Looks like the modification didn't work." Magenhemer noted.

"Mr. Lyslin, prepare a boarding party." Seth ordered. Lyslin had just turned to start obeying the order when Slattery exclaimed again.

"I'm getting a SOS!"

We have to rescue that poor man!

"Belay that!" Seth said, he turned on the intercom. "Mr. Lawrence I want the contact brought into the boat bay. This is a rescue, so time matters. Dr. McShane, we're going to have a patient for you in the boat bay." Seth turned off the intercom and left the bridge quickly. Lyslin, Slattery, and Roth all turned to their task in helping Mr. Lawrence bring the craft in. Only Magenheimer heard, and forgot in the hectic business, the mutterings of an NCO electronics technician.

"We have to rescue that poor man!" The NCO muttered.

The little ship was brought into the tight confines of the boat bay. Marines stood ready as the hatch was cut open. They were not needed. Kenjiro was already unconscious. Dr. McShane performed a quick examination, then had Kenjiro moved to the sickbay.

"Report." Seth said as McShane came out of his treatment room.

"He's in good shape, all things considering." McShane said, "He passed out, but the oxygen levels never had a chance to get to dangerous levels."

"Did you check for nanite or viral mods?" Seth asked.

"Yes, sir." Is what McShane said. I know my job. Is what he thought.

"All right, Lyslin, have him brought in." Lyslin waved to the marine guard standing outside the treatment room. In moments Kenjiro was brought into the sick bay reception area.

Kenjiro's eyes swept over the compartment, taking in every detail. Seth was at first overcome with the feeling that Kenjiro already knew all about Seth and the other men of the ship.

He seems like a rather likable man.

Seth didn't understand what it was about Kenjiro he liked, but there was that thought just the same.

"Please, sit down." Seth invited.

"Domo," Kenjiro said as he sat down.

"Dr. McShane said that you've come through your ordeal rather well."

"I am deeply grateful for your assistance. Without you or Dr. McShane I would have been less fortunate." Kenjiro replied. He bowed forward slightly as he gave his thanks to the officers.

"Why were running the blockade?" Lyslin asked.

"It was not by intention to elude you. It was my attention to find you. I seek asylum in the European Space Commonwealth." Kenjiro said. There was a silence in the room. It was true that individuals from ASPS had sought asylum in Euro -- space, but never had they done so by way of Carpaithia.

"Why here?" Seth asked.

"It was not my choice, Captain. I am...I was an auditor for the government. I was sent to make a report of the status of the fleet. Routine, I was to check for theft, waste and other violations. I had entertained the idea of asylum for some-time. Somehow this became known, I knew that was going to be arrested, so I convinced an engineer to modify a ship's boat, and here I am."

"Viral modification?" Seth asked. McShane gave Seth a brief, but intense stare.

"None, Captain. There is no genetic adjustment for bureaucrats." Kenjiro joked.

The rest of the de -- briefing took more than two hours. Questions were asked on nearly all subjects, and many answers were cross checked to ensure that Kenjiro was giving truthful answers.

"Have Roth double check that ship." Seth told Lyslin, "I believe him, but there's no use leaving anything to chance. Go ahead and put him in the flag quarters. He should be comfortable enough there until we get back to Earth."

"Yes, sir. Where will he be eating, sir? Enlisted mess?"

"No, we can't do that, too much of a chance of trouble. No he'll have to eat with us in the wardroom." Seth turned and left.

Seth was sitting at his place in the wardroom, not eating his food. He was slowly coming to realize that he didn't like Kenjiro at all. There was something Kenjiro reminded him of, but he could remember what.

Kenjiro was in the middle of delighting the officers with the tale of his escape.

Kenjiro was a good story teller, pushing the drama and pulling his audience along. Occasionally Kenjiro's eyes would rest on Seth, then he would look to the other officers again.

I should check on the bridge.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have some duties on the bridge." Seth said as he excused himself.

"You must count yourselves lucky to have such a captain." Kenjiro said after the hatch had closed.

"Oh yes, very." Slattery said dryly. The other officers were just as enthusiastic.

"You can talk to me, gentlemen. After all we all know how yanks are." Kenjiro said.

Seth was sitting on the bridge trying to remember why he had come here. He remembered thinking that he had to check on the bridge, but there was nothing that needed his inspection. Seth started to get the same nervous feeling he got whenever he was about to enter battle.

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Kenjiro was delirious. All the officers held some measure of scorn for Captain Jackson. Kenjiro's vow to control himself was now forgotten. He was lost amid the pleasure and the possibilities. That Seth was American made things all the better for Kenjiro. Americans earned a special hatred from him.

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"This ship's performance is unsat." Seth said to Lyslin. Lyslin stood silently in front of Seth's desk. Seth looked back to the data screen reporting the latest weapons trials. Lyslin remained silent.

"Don't you have anything to say?"

Not to you, you damned yank!

"Not to.." Lyslin snapped his mouth closed before he stepped over the line.

"What were you going to say?" Seth demanded. Lyslin thought quickly. The truth would be nothing but a violation of regulations. A serious one at that.

"Not to make excuses, sir. That's what I was going to say."

"Damn it man! I almost expect an ASPS officer would be more helpful than you!"

Perhaps so, sir

"Perhaps so, sir." Lyslin said without thinking.

"Commander, you are dismissed!" Seth growled barely above a whisper. Lyslin left wondering why he had endangered his career over such a minor conflict.

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Magenheimer and LeBrock were enjoying their off duty time in the wardroom. Kenjiro was there, reading a popular story on the computer. Magenheimer threw down his cards in disgust.

"I don't know how you do it!" He complained.

"Superior skill from a superior mind." LeBrock taunted.

"Now I know why we've invaded you twice in as many centuries." Magenheimer commented.

"Franz, that's not funny. Anyway it's only a game."

One you're cheating at!

"One you're cheating at!"

I'd expect that from a German pig!

"I'd expect that from a German pig!"

Magenheimer grabbed LeBrock and pulled him across the table. Magenheimer had nearly fifty kilos on LeBrock, manhandling the Frenchman with ease. As the two senior officers fought and kicked each other on the deck of the ward-

room, Kenjiro watched and giggled. Suddenly, Kenjiro stopped giggling and moved towards the two fighting men.

"Please! Please! Stop fighting!" Kenjiro shouted.

The hatch opened and Lyslin stepped into the wardroom. He shouted, and dove into the melee, breaking up the fight.

"What the hell were you two doing?" He demanded once he had them separated.

"It was over a game of cards." Kenjiro offered, "They became very excited and angry."

Lyslin looked at Kenjiro. Kenjiro was quite small and it was clear that he couldn't have stopped the fight.

"You had better return to your cabin." Lyslin said to Kenjiro. Kenjiro bowed and left. Once he was far away from the wardroom, then he let himself laugh out loud.

#

The next evening in the wardroom was worse. The officers not on watch were enjoying the evening meal. Seth would have hardly used the term enjoyment to describe how he felt, but he could not let Kenjiro know how badly his command was going. As well as being stubborn, Seth was a pridefull man.

"We should space the cook," Slattery complained, "he's ruined these rolls."

Good enough for American work.

"They're good enough for American work." Petti said.

"That phrase is not acceptable on my ship, Mr. Petti." Seth warned.

If the shoe fits, yank!

"If the shoe fits..I'm sorry captain I was speaking without thinking." Petti stammered.

"There's been a lot of that lately. Mr. Petti you'll do without your ration for the next month."

"Captain! I apologized. I don't know what came over me!"

"I'm not interested in apologies, Mr. Petti. Only your deeds matter to me."

The rest of the meal proceeded in silence as each man thought to himself. Almost each man.

#

Lyslin looked about the quiet bridge. It was the late watch and Lyslin was enjoying the peace. A few enlisted were on the bridge monitoring their stations, but they were paying him no attention, which is how Lyslin wanted it. The forward hatch opened and Kenjiro stepped onto the bridge.

"Kenjiro," Lyslin said, "you can't be here."

"I'm sorry, I did not mean to violate security." Kenjiro turned and started to exit the bridge.

Kenjiro's no spy!

"Is there something bothering you, Kenjiro?"

"That is the question I came to ask you, Mr. Lyslin."

"Call me Barth. You sound like the yank when call me Mr. Lyslin."

"Mr..Barth, you seem on edge lately. Is there something the matter? I feel a great debt to you and the other officers. Is there anything I can do?"

Lyslin wasn't aware of just how at ease he was being with Kenjiro. Lyslin had spent nearly twenty years in space fighting the Asian Stellar Prosperity Sphere, but he was quickly forgetting all of it. All Lyslin really knew is that something was telling him to trust Kenjiro.

"It's nothing you can do, Kenjiro. Changing commands is always difficult."

"Tell me about it."

Lyslin found himself confiding fully in Kenjiro. Lyslin told Kenjiro how close the friendship between he and Horwell had grown, and how much it had hurt to watch his friend leave. Lyslin also confessed to the anger he felt at being passed over for command of the Churchill. He told Kenjiro how that anger had grown finding out Jackson was getting the ship.

"Captain Jackson seems so young." Kenjiro said, "Does he have friends in your government?"

"No, he got lucky." Lyslin answered.

"I don't understand."

"He's the hero of Neo-Nippon." Lyslin said sarcastically. Kenjiro was suddenly very angry. Lyslin mistook Kenjiro's silence for ignorance of the battle. Lyslin had forgotten to whom he was speaking.

"All the senior officers of the flag ship had been killed." Lyslin explained,

"Commander Jackson was left in command. He turned the battle around."

Sheer luck, I guess

"Sheer luck, I guess" Lyslin said bitterly.

Later in his cabin, Kenjiro thought about the luck that had come his way. The battle of Neo-Nippon had been a humiliating defeat. Ministers had lost their heads because of it. Now Kenjiro was in a position to extract some small payment for it. Kenjiro was no traitor to his nation. In fact he loved his nation. It was his source of amusement that drove him from his home. Kenjiro tossed aside anymore thought of playing with the officers. Now he concentrated his planning on Seth. Kenjiro smiled to himself. When this was all over, Captain Jackson's command and his career would be over. Kenjiro slept very well that night.

#

"Stop cutting corners, Mr. LeBrock." Seth snapped.

"My significant figures are within regulations, sir." LeBrock replied.

"Our computations will exceed minimum requirements."

"My computations, sir"

"You know very well what I mean." Seth snapped as he returned to his seat on the bridge. LeBrock turned his attention back to the navigation display.

Mr. LeBrock you will stop sulking!

"Mr. LeBrock, you will stop sulking!" Seth ordered.

"I'm not sulking, sir."

"Don't argue with me, Mr. LeBrock."

"How else.." LeBrock stopped himself before he crossed the line. LeBrock was shocked at what he had thought about saying.

"You were saying, Mr. LeBrock?"

"Nothing, sir. I apologize for my outburst." LeBrock said unconvincingly. LeBrock turned and resumed working on the navigation problems.

This command is falling apart. Seth thought, then his stubborn nature returned and pushed him even harder to prove that he could command.

Lyslin stepped into the missile compartment. Nearly all the other department heads were already here. Lyslin closed the hatch and all was quiet for several seconds.

"Are we sure we want to discuss this?" Lyslin asked.

"We have to Barth," Roth said, "the ship can't take this much longer."

"I knew there'd be problem with a yank captain, but not anything like this."

Magenheimer said.

"The enlisted are starting to show a lot of stress." Slattery commented.

"The enlisted are going to get their cues from us," Lyslin replied. "If this command keeps fighting itself. We could all end up dead if there's an encounter."

"Jackson was ranting on the bridge earlier today." LeBrock added. He went on to tell a very opinionated story of the events on the bridge.

"IF he starts having a breakdown, I could pull him out of command." Dr.

McShane said, "But the doctors at Earth would have to verify it."

"If it comes to it doctor, we'll back you up." Lyslin promised.

Kenjiro relaxed and let the sweat roll off him. Keeping all the officers keyed up at the same time was a strain. He hoped they would not call too many of these meetings before they acted. Kenjiro peeked into Seth's mind and found doubts chasing doubts. Kenjiro again relaxed and went to sleep.

Seth paced his cabin. Back and forth, back and forth. He knew that his command was in dire trouble. If the situation got much worse the crew could turn into a mob. He was used to anti -- American feelings, but this was much worse than anything he had ever experienced. He felt there was some defining point, and that if he could find it, then he would understand what was happening. He had expected the trouble with slipping job performance. Even when no Americans were involved, it happened after a change of command. It was natural for the men to see how much the captain would let them get away with. He thought he had handled that, but having his officers insult him and fight with him, he hadn't prepared for that. Seth came to a hard decision. He needed help and there is only one person on the ship who could help him. Seth looked at the clock. It was far too late to awaken Lyslin. He would talk with him in the morning.

#

"Morning." Slattery said as he entered the wardroom. "Where's Barth?"

"Jackson called him to an early meeting, I guess Americans don't have breakfast." Roth answered.

"Can't afford it I suppose." Magenheimer said. The hatch opened again and Kenjiro entered the compartment. The officers were warm and friendly in greeting him.

This is going to be so easy. Kenjiro thought, then he set himself to work.

"This isn't easy for me, Mr. Lyslin." Seth said. Lyslin stood at attention and still. Seth took a deep breath and crossed the rubicon. "Sit down, I want this

between fellow officers. I want your thoughts, complete and unedited." Lyslin sat, but offered nothing.

"I know how people feel about the United States. I've lived with it for the past sixteen years. I don't make excuses or apologies. Either people are going to accept my results or they don't. Most of the time I can at least get some respect for my skills, but not now." Seth paused, "I expected trouble from this command. I knew performance would drop, but I didn't expect the open disrespect that's happened. I've read your record, Lyslin, you're a good officer, a smart officer. Why are you throwing all of that away over a stupid pettiness?"

Lyslin was rocked by the question. He thought back to the past several days and found that he was shocked at all he was doing. He couldn't understand it himself.

"To be truthful, I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You do see how all this will reflect on you?"

"Yes, sir. But sitting here, thinking about it, I don't know. I know I wasn't being helpful, or even doing my job the best I could, but these other things...It's like the ideas are just jumping into my head." Lyslin said as he stumbled through the explanation. Seth didn't answer at once. His mind was racing on what Lyslin had just said about ideas jumping into his head. Seth knew that feeling. He hadn't found the words for it, but it was how he had been feeling as well. Seth felt he was very close to solving this.

"I don't care if you like me or not. I'm used to people not liking me, but this ship is not going to let the fleet down. It's our duty to see to that." Seth stated flatly.

Lyslin sat there wondering. He knew he had been sulking. He had been sulking about Horwell's transfer. He had been sulking about not getting the command. He had been sulking period, but now he wondered why he had been thinking and acting the way he had. Lyslin knew something was wrong, very wrong. He opened his mouth to apologize to Seth.

Kenjiro sat upright as if he had been shocked. His mind was suddenly very far away from the conversation and manipulations of the wardroom. Kenjiro didn't hear as Slattery asked what was wrong.

Lyslin's mind raced with thoughts. Dark plans and conspiracies battled in his head. He saw how Seth was trying to trick him, trying to take him down as well for Seth's failure at command.

"Nice try," Lyslin heard himself say, "but it won't work. I'm not going down with you, Yank." Lyslin stood and hurried from the cabin before he said any more of the thoughts in his head.

"Kenjiro!" Slattery's voice had grown loud with alarm.

"I am fine." Kenjiro said, suddenly aware of what was going on around him, "I just suddenly remembered someplace I had to be." Kenjiro quickly left the wardroom, heading for Lyslin. None of the officers saw anything wrong with a possible enemy agent having run of their ship.

Seth sat there looking at the hatch that Lyslin had just closed. Seth was confused. He had seen a change come over Lyslin, but he didn't understand it. Seth knew that Lyslin was that close to coming over and helping him. Then, like a switch, he was back to opposing him. Why?

Kenjiro was angry. He was angry at himself for letting Lyslin slip away like that. In a few moments, almost all his work had been undone. Kenjiro knew that he was pushing himself to his limit, but he knew he could not stop. Although he did not admit it to himself, Kenjiro was addicted to the power his talent gave him. Kenjiro could not stop if he wanted to.

"Kenjiro!" Lyslin was surprised to find the one person he wanted to talk to.

Kenjiro joined Lyslin and begun to repair what had been damaged.

#

Seth paced his cabin. He felt that if the deck had been made of anything less than metal, he would have worn through it by now. He knew the answer was near. He knew there was something he was missing. There was a knock at the hatch.

"Enter." Seth said dreading another interruption. The hatch opened and Kenjiro entered.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Captain, but I need to speak with you."

"Sit down, Kenjiro. What can I do for you?" Seth said.

"I'm concerned about your officers." Kenjiro said. Kenjiro knew he was running a big risk coming here, but he also knew that Seth was dangerous. Kenjiro had to settle this quickly.

"What's wrong?"

"I think they're plotting against you. I've heard them talking in the wardroom when you're not there. I'm not sure how, but I think they want to remove you from command."

It fits with the way they've been acting.

Seth pushed the thought aside, trying to listen to Kenjiro.

"They seem to think I will not say anything, but I know it was you who saved my life. I had to warn you." Kenjiro added.

"It seems so fantastic. The ESF hasn't had a single mutiny in its entire history."

"There is always a first time."

Maybe I should just space myself and get it over. Seth thought, then again, started to shove the thought aside.

"No, that's not..." Kenjiro suddenly stopped. He was tired and did not catch his mistake in time. His eyes locked with Seth's. Seth looked at Kenjiro with at first confusion which slowly turned to horror.

"You read my mind." Seth accused.

"That is insane." Kenjiro said. Doubts flooded into Seth's mind. He leaned back in his chair from the sheer volume of doubt he felt. Kenjiro rose and left the room very quickly. Seth grabbed his head and fought the doubts, fought the thoughts. He knew what had happened. All the pieces had now fallen into place.

Seth hurried onto the bridge. Lyslin was over by the holotank. Seth pulled Lyslin to the far side of the small space. In a voice lowered to a whisper, Seth

told Lyslin about the encounter in his cabin, and about his wild conclusion.

Lyslin tried to think about it calmly, but only one thought seemed to be in his head.

The captain's gone mad.

"You're a loon." Lyslin said flatly. Seth stopped speaking. He knew he couldn't win this battle. He turned and left the bridge without a further word. Lyslin moved to the intercom.

"Department heads to the wardroom. On the double." Lyslin said. Then he headed forward to the wardroom.

Seth heard the order being passed over the intercom. He hurried to the flag cabin. Time was running out. Seth burst into the flag cabin just as Kenjiro was trying to leave it.

"I know about you." Seth said.

"It won't make any difference. Your officers won't believe you, no one is going to believe you."

"I'll make them believe."

"They had a hard time doing that in ASPS space, here with civil liberties, there isn't a chance. No jury, no judge, no one can stop me."

"The captain has gone insane." Lyslin said. There was less reaction from his fellow officers than Lyslin had expected. It was as if they had already known and were just waiting for the news to be confirmed.

"Exactly how has the captain gone mad?" McShane asked.

"He thinks Kenjiro is a telepath and has been mind controlling all of us. I tried to tell him there is no such thing as telepathy, but he wouldn't listen."

"Classic." McShane commented.

"What do you mean?" Asked Roth.

"He earned his fame and command at the battle of neo-Nippon, now cracking under the stress, he's re -- enacting that battle. This time with Kenjiro instead of a fleet. He trying to become the hero again."

Seth knew at once that Kenjiro was right. No legal action was going to stop him. The options went through Seth's mind, and he settled on a solution, damning the consequences. Kenjiro jumped back a split second before Seth made his attack. Seth didn't stop. Seth charged Kenjiro, lifting him up off the deck driving him into the bulkhead. For a moment Seth doubted his course of action, but he stubbornly pushed the doubt aside and pummeled Kenjiro's head against the bulkhead. Kenjiro was dazed and bleeding when Seth stopped. Dragging Kenjiro with him, Seth left the flag cabin.

Kenjiro recovered his wits to find himself being dragged through the ship's passageways. He knew now that he could never take Seth in a fight. Not a physical one.

The idea hit all the officers at once. Several of them spoke it out loud.

"The Captain's going to kill him!"

"Follow me." Lyslin said leading them out of the wardroom. Lyslin started forward toward airlock three, the closest one to the flag cabin. En route Lyslin opened a weapons locker and armed himself with a pistol.

Seth saw airlock three ahead of him. He looked back at Kenjiro. Seth suspected that Kenjiro was awake. Seth slammed Kenjiro against the piping in the passageway several times. At first Kenjiro fought, then when Kenjiro had ceased being able to fight, Seth placed him into the airlock. Seth opened the panel next to the airlock controls and armed the explosive bolts on the outer door. When the indicators flashed their armed status, Seth moved the lever in pre -- firing position. By using the explosive bolts Seth was assured that he couldn't be over -- ridden from some other location. He placed his hand on the lever. "Move away from the airlock." Lyslin commanded. The pistol aimed at Seth added enforcement.

"Put your pistol down, Commander!"

"You're not in command here any longer."

Kenjiro rose in the airlock. He looked out the little window into the passageway.

"If you do not take your hand off that lever, I will fire."

Seth looked long and hard at the pistol. The caseless round it fired was pre -- fragmented, it wouldn't bounce around the passageway, but his survival chances were slim. The small fragments of the shell would bounce around inside Seth. The wounds would be horrendous. There was no doubt that Lyslin would fire. Seth looked at the pistol and knew his duty.

"I'm sorry I can't do that." Seth said as he pulled down on the lever.

The sound of the pistol firing was deafening. Seth felt as though a hot spike had been thrust into his chest. His legs were like rubber. He fell forward. His head hit hard on the deck, and for a moment Seth thought he heard scream-

ing, cursing. The last thing Seth was aware of was the deck covered in his blood.

#

To say the Seth was surprised when he opened his eyes would be an understatement. Seth turned his head, painfully, and found that he was in the sick-bay of the Churchill. Seth tried to sit up, but the pain was too great and he fell back onto the bed.

"You'll get out of that bed when I say so, lad, not before." Dr. McShane said coming into the room.

"What happened?" Seth croaked.

"You blew the little shit out the airlock."

"Why am I still here?"

"Cause you have a talented doctor. Now rest." McShane injected something into Seth's i.v. and Seth slipped into sleep.

#

"Can you talk, sir?" Lyslin asked. Seth opened his eyes and looked at Lyslin. Lyslin looked as bad as Seth felt. It was clear that Lyslin had not slept.

"I can talk. What happened?"

"After Kenjiro went out the 'lock, we all heard him screaming in our heads. It was pretty obvious then. We were afraid we were going to lose you. McShane said it was touch and go there for awhile."

"Just too stubborn to die."

"That's what McShane said. Anyway I've been acting c.o., but now that you're awake you can accept my resignation."

"A quitter too?"

"I shot my superior officer!"

"No, Kenjiro did. That's how my report will read commander. The trouble you caused me before he came, that you'll have to live with, but Kenjiro got all of us."

"Not you."

"I just got lucky."

"That's not what captain Forester would say."

"Forget it! All I want to know is are you going to chicken out and run?"

Lyslin thought about it for a long time.

"No."

"Good, now run along and let me sleep." Seth lay back onto the bed and closed his eyes. Lyslin moved across the compartment to the hatch. He stopped and looked back at Seth.

"Sir?" Lyslin asked.

"Yes." Seth said without opening his eyes.

"You knew I was going to shoot, didn't you?" It was quiet while Lyslin waited for the answer. Just when Lyslin was sure that Seth had fallen asleep, Seth answered.

"The only thing I knew was my duty."

"The ship will be up to speed by the time you are well, sir." Lyslin said as he left.

Somewhere in his sleep Seth heard the order passed for the ship to start drills, and he knew that the worst had passed.

END