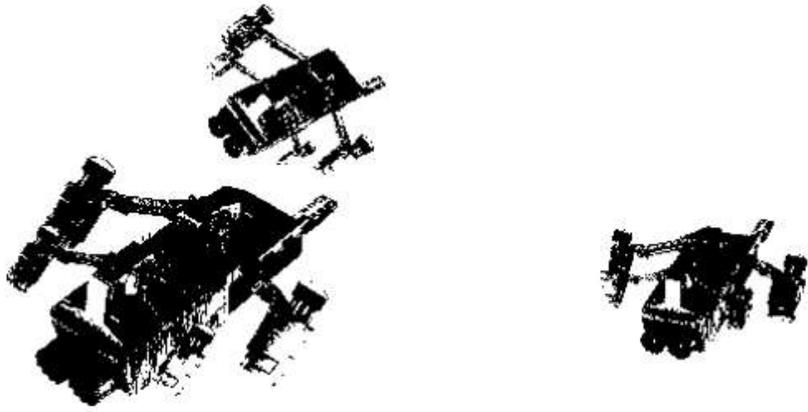


Combat Salvage 2165

by A.D. Bloom
2014

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Table of Contents

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

Epilogue

As the 'War Against Alien Aggression' enters its second year, Privateer attack carriers and UN capital ships struggle to push the Squidies farther from Sol, but the battle lines at Sirius verge on collapse. Should they fall, Earth's days are numbered.

Privateer warships as big as two city blocks soared over Tig's head, rising into a leaden sky. They rode the spaceport's artificial gees to orbit, and the rivers of rainwater that sluiced off them fell upwards.

"Where is little Tiggy?" The accented, growling voice bounced off the fast-printed slums at the Staten Island Spaceport's southern tip. Bilkor was close. Tig looked over his shoulder for his pursuers through the shuffling crowds that filled the Freshkills streets. Sweat mixed with rain stung his eyes.

He pushed his way through until he could sprint down the ten-meter-high wall separating the slums from the spaceport and the launch pads. Two minutes later, he'd found the maintenance access door. His lungs burned as he held the rig he'd made close to the door's interface panel so it could sniff the internal RF leakage and spoof a valid 'handshake' with the lock.

The tape-bound, match-soldered cracker opened the hatch doors on Staas Powerlifters, rental IC Hoppers and half the Staas Company vehicles or systems he'd ever tried it on. Staas Company made the fifty-year-old spaceport door in front of him, too and he knew with a little time he could open it, but a launching ship overhead prematurely flared its main engines inside the clouds and bathed the spaceport and half of Staten Island with an eerie, pale luminescence. It cut through the dim from all sides at once and left no shadows to hide in.

"*There* is little Tiggy!" Bilkor shouted from a block East. "I see you!" His two thugs wore boxy raincoats. The streets thinned and emptied around them.

Tig blinked and spat rainwater. He shouted into the hissing rain, "Bilkor! I can make up the money you lost!"

"No, Tiggy. You can't. And now..." Bilkor drew a short, broad knife and held it up for him to see. "Now, I skin you."

The spotlight beam shone down from almost directly above Tig's head, and, like an idiot, he looked up so it stabbed at his eyes and half-blinded him. Red lights and blue lights flashed and reflected off every wet surface. When the shiny security drone floated down to hover in front of the maintenance door, Tig knew enough to raise his hands slowly and step back.

The meter-wide, half-barrel of a drone hovered on its own artificial gravity, maneuvering on six little nacelles. It bristled with whip antennae on all sides except underneath where it carried a turret-mounted microgun like a stinger. Its voice boomed. "You have attempted to gain unauthorized access to a restricted area. Please lay down with your hands over your head. Failure to comply will be met with appropriate force."

He weighed felony arrest against whatever Bilkor meant to do to him and it was an easy decision. By the time the security drone was done with its speech, Tig was already on the ground. He looked up from the wet just in time to see one of Bilkor's goons pull something big from under his raincoat. The drone saw the fat, tri-barrel anti-tank weapon, too.

The microgun firing on auto sounded like someone shuffling a deck of cards in his ear. Bilkor's goon with the heavy weapon jerked and danced before the 50 or 60 tiny rounds the drone had fired detonated inside him. Fluid overpressure made him burst, and he popped like a squeezed tomato. But not before he fired.

Multiple flashes dazzled Tig's eyes, and streaks of fire shot up into the rain, high and off target before the missiles corrected for the dying user's aim and pointed their noses at the drone. When the first of them hit, the initial flash of detonation burned the image on Tig's retina. With his eyes squinted shut, he saw one of the missiles stuck in the drone's side like a fat arrow.

The concussive wave hit in that same moment, searing him with pressure-heated air and crushing him down into the wet street. Pieces of something spinning fast ripped above just before more blast-waves slammed him.

He couldn't hear anything but ringing, but when he realized he was still alive, he lifted his face

out of the puddle and looked up. Smoke and steam filled the air, but the red and blue lights were all gone. So was the drone. Twisted pieces of it steamed in the water where they'd fallen against the maintenance door, right next to the big hole in the security wall...the new one...the meter-wide hole into the spaceport that hadn't been there only seconds ago.

Tig rubbed the oily saltwater out of his eyes to make sure it was real. It was. Bilkor's man had missed the drone at least once and blown a hole through the wall. Tig sprung up from where he lay and took the second chance he'd been given. While blood-spattered Bilkor screamed pidgin curses at him, Tig shot through the hole and into the Staten Island Spaceport.

He ran through stacked engine parts and rolled around stomping knuckledragger mechs and made for a 600-meter transport ship he saw lined up for orbital ascent. It loomed above like dripping, charred steel cliff. He sprinted to the first one in line and ran through the sluicing waterfalls coming off the hull. He ran right under it. That ship was about to launch. The artificial gravity pad under it blinked dirty yellow and black stripes at him and warning sirens blared as he ran across.

The voice was automated. "Launch in progress. Warning. Get clear. Inverse gravity field will activate now. Get clear. Warning. Launch in progress."

His plan had been to run as fast as he could across the pads and make it to the other side just before the ship launched. Tig figured if Bilkor and his remaining man followed, then they probably wouldn't make it. If they *didn't* follow him, then the lead he'd gain by forcing them to go around would be big enough that he'd have a good chance to lose his pursuers once he got off the pads.

It was a good plan except for two things. One, he hadn't counted on Bilkor forcing his man onto the active launch pad at gunpoint. And two, Tig couldn't run as fast as he thought he could.

The launch pad's inverse gees kicked in before he could make it across and out from under the transport. First, he felt his organs lift inside his body. Then, his feet lost contact with the launch pad. He spun slowly, arching over, upside down and backward, trying not to lose his last meal as he lifted off with the rising ship.

After seconds of slow free-fall, he hit the ship above hard enough to stun him. Tig rolled to his stomach and pushed off and got to his knees, now feeling himself pressed to the hull by the inverse gravity. He was right-side-up, but the spaceport and the Earth hung upside-down above him. Overhead, the spaceport and the glitter of the Freshkills towers were shrinking fast. The temperature dropped every second as launch vortex winds tried to blow him over and pressed his clothes to his body.

The first exploding rounds struck the hull next to him, snapping like firecrackers and sparking so bright he jumped up in the air to get away from them. The landing gears that promised cover were all too far away to reach and they were already being withdrawn into the hull so Tig sprinted across the patch-welded keel side of the ship, making for the raised elements he saw thirty or forty meters off. He thought he saw portholes and what looked like an emergency airlock door. Already, the launching transport was a few kilometers over Staten Island and the air was getting thinner fast.

He couldn't crack the airlock door locks with someone shooting at him, so he ran around the L-shaped structure to get away from the bullets. The hired gun chased him, but the thug must have run the other direction around the structure because Tig rounded a corner and plowed right into him without even meaning to.

Tig was skinny, but taller, and his bony shoulder caught the man's jaw. The killer teetered off balance, bent backwards over the edge of a steep section of hull. His raincoat snapped in the wind and his eyes went wide just before Tig gave him the final shove he needed to start sliding down the hull's steep slope like he was riding a playground slide.

If he screamed when he saw the edge coming, Tig couldn't hear it over the wind. Bilkor's thug slid off into the air next to the hull and fell upwards. He tumbled with his limbs extended, cartwheeling. As long as the inverse gravity well from the spaceport was on and he didn't drift out of the projected field, he'd fall upwards with the rising ship, all the way to orbit.

With spots in front of his eyes and a gray mist clouding his vision, Tig and his decoder finally

cracked the emergency airlock hatch. "Welcome," it said as he collapsed on the deck inside the transport. The hatch closed behind him and sealed. "Staas Company Security has been notified of your presence."

Three months later.
Sagan Shipyards, Lunar Lagrange, 384,403 kilometers from Staten Island

The blank-faced recruits clogging the tube in front of Tig and Parker wore cheap, animated street clothes. He could see these cuffies were fresh off the boat. They'd wandered into the Staas Technical Training Station and stopped right in the middle of a three way ITC junction, lost and gawking like it was their first time off-world.

Tig said, "You think we should tell them where to go? Raw recruits reporting for greasing go straight to 9c for delouse."

"Let 'em figure it out," Parker said. "When *we* got here, some graduating AMTS sent *us* to the waste reclamation modules."

Three months ago, Tig and Parker had been reporting for training just like that lot. Parker had signed up with a Privateer recruiter right out of school. For Tig it had been a simple choice between signing on with the Staas Company Privateers or going to jail for a long, long time. They tested him and told him he'd get to work on spaceships if he joined up as a redsuit. Three months later, Tig was a crewman graduate of the TTS, Staas Company's Technical Training Station, basic training for an astronautics maintenance technical specialist, an AMTS m-13-05, a redsuit.

Tig carried his helmet under his arm as he and Parker made for the launch pads in red exosuits so new, the intensity of the cherry color almost hurt the eyes. "Still wish they gave us cool names like the pilots get."

She smiled and imitated their DI for the last three months. "Redsuits don't get cute names. Redsuits don't get no glory. Redsuits get shit done!"

"Make a hole, cherry." A senior weapons maintenance specialist in a charred, blood-red exosuit shoved Tig aside with his forearm and continued down the hallway. That red had two meters of clearance on either side. He just wanted to hassle cherries.

"Hey! Thank you!"

"Stifle it, cherry!" the lug shouted without looking back.

Even after becoming a full-fledged redsuit, AMTS 3rd class, he and Parker were still stuck being called 'cherries' and getting shoved out of the way by veterans. "I still hate it when they do that."

Parker shook her head. "You never learned to work within the SOP, Tig," She said, "Standard operating procedure says 'shit rolls downhill'."

"What the hell does that even *mean*?"

"This," she said, eying another group of fresh-off-the-boat pre-cherries just a few meters down the passageway. Seconds later, Parker said, "Make a hole," as she walked through them and nearly knocked one of them over.

"Hey! What the hell was that for?" the preemie shouted after Tig and Parker had passed.

Parker stopped and Tig stopped, and she smiled before she turned around. She was on him in two steps. Her gloved index finger extended and stabbed into the recruit's chest. He was all dressed up in cheap animated fabric like he belonged in a nightclub. "Let's get one thing straight before you get hurt." Her other hand gestured between herself and Tig, "Him and me? *We* are redsuits. But you..." She stared each of them down in half a second like a Training Chief out to break them. "*You* are nothing," she said. "No. You are *less* than nothing because you're a preemie. When you see a real redsuit coming, then you get the fuck out of the way. Three months from now, if you can hack it, then you'll be an AMTS like me wearing a red exosuit like me and you can shove some preemie newb like you out of the way. But. Until then, when you see us coming..." She punctuated each of the following words with a finger stab to the preemie's chest as he winced. "*Make...a...hole.*"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did you say "ma'am"? Are you a UN swabbie? We don't say "sir" and "ma'am" in the Staas Privateers." If he'd had a helmet on, she would have cuffed it.

Down the passageway, after they took the next turn on the way to the O-sec B launchpads, Parker almost doubled over laughing. She said, "See, Tig? Let it roll *downhill*. Now, don't you feel better?"

He laughed just because he was disappointed how he actually did. He hoped it wasn't going to be like that on *Hardway*, because as cherries aboard an attack carrier, they'd be the lowest form of life among the ship's salty reds.

Not many cherries got assigned to *Hardway*. Tig and Parker pulled the assignment everyone had wanted: SCS *Hardway*, the most famous ship of the war, the ship that fought the Squidies first, the ship that had served up more death and destruction to the alien aggressors than any other in any fleet.

The carrier had been holding station off the far side of Sagan for three hours, but he still hadn't managed to get a good look at her with his own eyes yet. The space station was as big as a medium-sized city and it didn't matter if that carrier was a kilometer-long or not, unless you were on the right side of the station, the view was perpetually blocked by the towers, like a pair of broad, skyscraper-filled, city skylines above and below the space station's equatorial frame.

A few redsuits and a senior chief waited at the pads along with the six other cherries *Hardway* was picking up from Sagan, but Tig didn't even notice them. He finally had a clear view of the attack carrier and now, all the other people in exosuits waiting for transport were just reflections in the diamond-pane glass distracting him from the view of *his* new ship.

Even from a distance he could see how some sections of the carrier didn't reflect as much light. The armored hull there was charred and pitted from endless hours of high-speed particle bombardment. Some sections were shinier. They looked almost new. Those were sections that had been damaged so badly they'd simply been removed and replaced. After the routing the UN fleet took the first day of the war, Privateer carriers like this one were the only thing holding the Squidies back.

Railgun batteries bristled on *Hardway's* bow and from midships towers, but it was the launch bays that caught Tig's eye first. Each of the two launch bay modules presented six, 70-meter bays on four sides for a total of 48 bays. From so far away, the open bays looked like tiny lit windows and the 50-meter junks inside were specks. All he could see of the F-151 Bitzers, the fighters patrolling around the ship in echelon, were their streaking, pale blue engine flares.

The carrier's command tower had been set behind the primary bays and it rose hundreds of meters above and below her spine. Tig had stared at the limited deck-plans he could find on the TTS server for hours. Behind the ship's command tower was another hab module, a medical module, and engineering, where the armor was the thickest. The five reactors housed there were protected by meters of it. *Hardway's* five hearts had to be huge to power all her systems including the Novalifter engines. They were probably powerful enough to tow Sagan Station if you could rig up the lines and yoke the attack carrier like a tug.

"AMTS, Tig Meester," Parker said, "I do believe you've got a hardon for that ship." Parker's reflection laughed in the diamond-pane window.

It wasn't just the ship. He just couldn't believe how much of a difference a few months could make in his life. Three months ago he'd been breaking into the spaceport's storage units and stripping stolen intercontinental hoppers for parts to resell. Now, they were going to let him work on *Hardway*. Tig knew he possessed a rare talent with machines, but in his short life, things had gone the right direction for him so infrequently that he almost couldn't recognize it when it was happening. But not this time. This time, he knew he was going to the right place. *Hardway* could use his talent, he thought. The way the war was going, they needed all the help they could get.

Parker said, "You hear about Horcheese?"

"What the hell is a Horcheese?"

"Not what; whom," Parker said, and he winced a little. She and her expensive education were

always correcting him. "Our new Operations Chief is Horcheese and *Chief Horcheese* is legendary."
"Yeah?"

"Hell, yeah. Lives for the job. Turned down free regrows and got herself four artificial limbs just so she could portage a mining junk with one hand and crush armored Squidies with the other."
He said, "No shit," and she confirmed the story was true.

"No shit. That's how hard the Ops Chief is. And she just loves taking cherries on a cruise."
Tig was paying attention to all the flight activity in *Hardway's* bays. He missed the sarcasm.
"Really?"

"No, Tig. No. She hates dumbass cherries. Prepare yourself for ungreased reaming. That's what Devon said." She thumbed over her shoulder at him.

"Dev throws scuttlebutt," Tig said, "but he never really knows spit."

"I heard that," Devon said. He leaned out from the huddle of cherry-red exosuits a few meters away. They were looking at the carrier, too. "I don't know how you got this assignment, Tig."

"I don't know how that carrier survived this long without me."

"See," Devon said. "*That's* why nobody likes you, Tig."

"Parker likes me."

"Nope. Sorry, Tig," she said. "I just got partnered up with you on the first day and I hate quitting things. I can't stand you either."

The longboat came in hot. Over the pads, it rotated its nacelles and blasted, but still set down three-times faster than any regulation landing. It practically slid sideways into the airlock docking ring. The shock absorbers took the hit, giving over a meter with the impact.

"Pilots don't fly like that around here much," she said.

"Must be *Hardway* pilots."

Once they got through the locks and stepped into the narrow transport, Tig glanced forward to get a gander at who was driving. All he saw were the shoulders of their Staas Company blue exosuits and the backs of their helmets.

Parker sat next to Tig in the second row of seats. The other six cherries bound for *Hardway* sat behind them. The senior reds, the Chiefs on-board, took the front row, talking amongst themselves in low tones. He couldn't hear them, but from where he sat, he had a good view of the brunette.

She got on just before the longboat launched, wearing street clothes that set off her hips...a tight-fitting top, something plain and long-sleeved made of real wool, maybe...thick, but revealing. She carried her exosuit in a bag over her shoulder, helmet and all, like it was a dead body. The way she shifted her weight made him hear the music from the strip clubs back on Staten Island, or the bass, at least.

Measured toe to crown, she wasn't over two meters, but if you cut a piece of line and ran it up over the curvier parts of her body, then stretched it out, that line would have been three meters, probably more. She didn't take a seat or strap in. She leaned her exosuit up against the bulkhead and stood behind the pilots with her hands on their seat backs. That should have been his first clue. That, and her eyes. They were milky like some kind of synthetic opal, clearly artificial, and not trying to look like anything else.

Parker said, "You going to tip the lady or just stare at her?"

"She definitely gets the tip."

"Check it out," Parker said. "I got our longboat's comms with Sagan. The tower is taking it personal." She held her helmet in her lap and even without putting it on, he could hear the voices.

"*Hardway* longboat zero-six, you violated five station protocols."

"Uh...copy?"

"I've got your number from your IFF and I'm reporting you for that landing. And the flyby. And the near miss. You'll get 6 points on your CPL for this." She meant his commercial pilot's license. Tig couldn't hear any actual laughing on comms, but up in the front of the longboat, both pilot's shoulders

hunched repeatedly like they were either laughing or crying. The brunette thought it was funny.

"Sagan Tower, *Hardway* longboat zero-six copies that loud and clear. Anything else before we skip this floating hunk of rear echelon junk and go back to fighting the war?"

"You have priority clearance for ascent and return vectors."

"Roger *that* and thank you, Sagan. Have a nice, safe day."

The *Hardway* pilots made sure that their takeoff was as exciting as their landing, but since little boats like that longboat didn't have powerful inertial negation systems, the acceleration gees pushed Tig into the seat hard.

The brunette didn't fall in the inertial gees. She held on to the straps until the boat was clear of the station's artificial gravity and then floated in zero-gee next to her wrapped-up suit.

After the pilots pulled the boat up and over and over again, Pardue elbowed him. "Look." She nodded out the porthole. "Breaching ships."

The wagon-wheel hulls of the interstellar breaching ships held station together five Ks off the docks.

"Never seen five of them together like that," he said. "You only need one to breach space." He knew *Hardway* would ship out soon with one of them, maybe two, but what were the others doing here? Those ships were so valuable that when they weren't going somewhere, they stayed under heavy guard in Earth orbit. *Hardway* was the only ship scheduled to depart. What the hell did the carrier need five breaching ships for? He thought she was only stopping at Sagan as a matter of routine to pick up supplies and ordnance and personnel like Tig and Parker and the others, replacements for broken machines and dead crewmen.

The longboat turned to fly out past the shipyards and put *Hardway* directly ahead. He watched it grow larger in the pilots' canopy. Closer now, he could make out not only the F-151 exo-atmospheric fighters and a few QF-111 Dinges in the open bays along with the mining junks, but also tiny figures there, smaller than ants, so small he couldn't give them a color, but he knew they were redsuits. So were the drivers of the knuckledragger mechs puffing around the ship, spot welding and hosting teams working the exterior of the kilometer-long carrier. Those were redsuits, too.

"Isn't that?"

"Holy hell," Tig said when he saw them. Their arrival hadn't been on any schedule and the reach of Sagan's towers had blocked them from Tig and Parker's view until the longboat got a few Ks out, but *Hardway* wasn't the only carrier at Sagan today. Her sister ships, the attack carriers *Araby* and *Pont Neuf* had arrived sometime in the last half hour and now held station off the starboard bow.

"If you like that, you're going to love this." Her finger stabbed the porthole as the longboat turned for *Hardway* and when he looked, he saw an armored mountain hanging against the starry black. Crowded railguns rose off her steep sides like copses of trees densely packed around the launch tubes. It was the most massive ship he'd ever laid eyes on.

"UNS *Tamerlane*." It was the last ship he expected to see. Past a cluster of accompanying, 500m cruisers, the newest capital ship of the UN fleet steamed a few Ks back, dwarfing every gunboat holding station in sight of her.

"UNS *Bull Run*... UNS *Highland*..." Devon said two rows back, "I can't see the others well enough to say."

"Who the hell cares about the UNS gun-buckets. Look at that *beast*." *Tamerlane* was 600 meters across 500 deep and 900 meters long. "That armor is five meters thick. She can actually fire all those railguns at once. Must have a hell of a reactor cluster."

"The cruisers have 3-stacks."

Tig said, "You *would* know about piss-ass UN cruiser specs, Devon. I bet you secretly wanted to join the UN Navy swabbies and wear a sailor outfit instead of an exosuit."

The brunette up in the front of the longboat heard that and she laughed. It wasn't loud, but he glanced her way before it was over and saw her floating breasts shake with humor.

Hardway was beginning to fill the canopy in front of the pilots and Tig decided time was running out. "Excuse me," he said to Parker as he unstrapped, pushed off the seat, and made controlled contact with the bulkhead over him.

"Tig. No. Come back," she whispered, but he'd already pushed off. He flew over the Chiefs in front of him and managed to catch a rung near the brunette with one hand and stop himself like a pro.

"I'm Tig Meester."

She looked him up and down. "And you're going to *Hardway*." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. So are you." He leaned in and held the eye contact. Tig was feeling pretty good about himself today. Why shouldn't she feel the same way? He raised his eyebrows just a little after he asked himself that question. The girls back in Freshkills would always get the idea when he did that.

She must have got the idea just like they had because she looked at Tig in what he took for wide-eyed amusement. That must be a bite on the line, he thought. Sort of. Probably just surprised because she's a few years older and this doesn't happen as often. She suddenly scowled, and Tig decided that was encouragement to sell himself harder. "I'm a redsuit now, but I've always had the touch. I can fix anything. I've got magic hands." He smiled.

The brunette actually looked like she felt sorry for him for a second. "No." That was all she said, and she shook her head slowly when she said it, leaving no room for error just in case he was deaf and couldn't read the word on her lips.

Tig tried hard not to glance back into all the sets of eyes looking his way when he pushed off and made for the second row and his empty seat next to Parker. The Chiefs in the front row didn't eyeball him, but they shook their heads as he flew over.

"Longboat 3-2, this is *Hardway* AT, be advised the Bay 17 LB docking ring is still fully jaxed and non-op. If you ain't got a suit and helmet, then you're out of luck for a few minutes until we can clear another bay for you. You want to wait?"

"Negative, AT. This flight is all redsuits. We live in full gear and helmets. We'll be fine without a docking ring."

The brunette set her fists on her hips and aimed herself at the Chiefs in front of Tig and Parker. She spoke to them like they were cherries. "Is Chief Bradley yours?" One nodded. "Why the hell hasn't he fixed that docking ring yet? That's his bay. He begged me for it. Now, he's got it and it's falling apart."

The most charred redsuit Chief up front said, "I'll find out." Then he put his helmet on and he must have got on comms because Tig couldn't hear him, but he could see his jaw moving inside that helmet and that Chief was chewing someone's ass.

Tig already had creeping suspicions about who the brunette was, but when she freed the exosuit she'd carried onto the longboat from its bag, the first thing he noticed was that it wasn't new. It was a deep, dirty red.

One of the Chiefs asked her, "You have enough time at Sagan for 'em to tweak your suit like you wanted?"

"Yup."

Tig got a look at the hash marks and patches on that suit and cringed. The rank insignia said she was a Senior Chief. That was enough to put the pucker in him. But when she began to strip off her street clothes to put on her liner and suit, he got another surprise. After he'd been gawking at her ass for a few seconds, he realized the skin below it, on her thighs, looked different. The color didn't quite match what he saw of her buttocks. The texture on her legs was smoother, but it was too perfect somehow. He knew why right away. Her legs were artificial. Her arms were artificial, too. There was more under the surface. The way the overhead light hit her, whatever new parts were under the skin there like a second ribcage drew a shadow across her back and shoulders, from one to the other, connecting them. She probably had a second spine connected to reinforced hips, too. She'd need it to support all the power in those limbs.

Parker said to Tig, "Since your mouth is hanging open and you're all pale and sweaty, I'm going to assume you now *fully* understand who's leg you just humped." This was the Chief Parker told him about - the one that loved cherries.

The brunette didn't announce her name until once they'd landed and were in the airlocks, cycling through. "I'm Chief Horcheese," she said. "You call me Chief or you call me Horcheese." Once they'd passed through the lock from the bays and taken off their helmets again, she stomped her foot three times on the belt-iron steel deck hard so it rang. She said, "Welcome aboard the attack carrier *Hardway*. 96 fighters, 36 junks, and a small pack of good 'ol QF-111 Dinges make up the air wing. We keep 'em all fueled, loaded with ordnance, and running smooth along with this entire ship. The greensuit, glow-pecker, reactor tenders stay aft, locked up in a section called engineering, but the redsuits are the *real engineers* on any ship. If it breaks, a redsuit fixes it, usually while it's still on fire."

"Cherry, cherry, cher-RI!" Whoever said it behind them said it like a farm hand calling a hog.

"Just look at 'em... Fresh for the roasting'." As they passed with their flight helmets under their arms, Tig saw it was a pair of Bitzer interceptor pilots.

Horcheese ignored them so he did, too. "*Hardway* is Harry Cozen's ship. Chief Lee is the Master Chief and the red in charge. But I'm Operations Chief. I'm the red in charge of *getting shit done*, from damage control to ordnance loading, to making sure the hatches on the 151s don't squeak and upset our primadonna pilots. That's what *I* do. But you... *You* are cherries. Your job, for today, is to get squared, watch closely, and stay the fuck out of the way."

The red that stepped next to her just then stretched his suit some around the belly. Close-cropped gray hair fringed his round face. His pink mug popped out the top of his exosuit like it was being squeezed out. "Don't let Chief Piatrow's proportions fool you," she said. "He can't fit inside the six-way junction port of a Bitzer anymore, but in zero-gee, he's a dangerous bastard. Follow his orders."

"Listen up, cherries. You're on a Staas Privateer," he said. "You don't have to call anyone Sir or Ma'am like you would in someone's Navy. But. If you don't follow orders, then I will put you out the airlock, proceed to the midships mess without a second thought, and fully enjoy eating a plate of burger-filled buns for lunch. Are we clear?"

Six hours later, *Hardway* steamed for the outer system with a fifteen ship battlegroup and a convoy of ten haulers. The UN cruisers that had briefly dropped anchor at Sagan now accompanied *Hardway* and two, sister carriers along with several destroyers and the dreadnaught, UNS *Tamerlane*. The mountain of armor rode on the port side of the formation. Between her and the carriers, under as much protection as the battlegroup could deliver, no less than five breaching ships flew together like a flock of spoked wheels on long, fire-spitting axles.

The only destination of note in the direction they headed was the Sol-Procyon transit. There hadn't been any official announcements, but Tig knew something big was going down on his first day. Parker said Devon said he heard from a turret gunner that they and the whole convoy were going deep into enemy-occupied space.

The comms chatter of the Combat Air Patrols played in Tig's helmet along with local comms, over which Raleigh narrated the proper reassembly and priming procedure for a maneuvering thruster plasma shunt on a QF-111 Dingo. Tig stood under the curving, pilotless hull of the autonomous combat drone in Launch Bay 47 and wondered if its AI felt anything with Raleigh pokin' around up there. AMTS Raleigh's whole torso was up inside the junction M-port and Tig could distinctly see movement in the AI's spider-like eyes, at least the ones that faced out the open bay doors where UNS *Bull Run* and SCS *Araby* were visible cruising a few Ks off *Hardway*'s keel along with a pair of jumbo haulers.

"Here," Raleigh said.

"What." Tig said it without looking. Like the drone, he watched the ships outside. Shadowing someone else doing basic maintenance he could do in his sleep was already killing him with ennui.

"Stupid cherry!" Raleigh blindly waved the burnt-out tri-joint shunt assembly under the lip of the maintenance port where Tig now noticed it. "Take it!"

He took it from Raleigh's gloved hands and stepped back and looked inside the pipes. This piece was meant to help shunt the Dingo's engine plasma where it needed to go, but the superheated gases had vaporized holes clean through the walls of the pipes separating the thrust channels "Feed split's melted out," Tig said. "Ceramics must have had a defect and failed."

"No shit, cherry." Raleigh dropped himself down out of the MSys junction port and stood on the deck next to him. "Why you think I *removed* it?" Tig liked Raleigh less when he could see his face. The man had beady little eyes that caught the lights inside his helmet like a rat's eyes. "We don't have any more of these units up here. Have to go down to B6 and get another."

"The 56-ACB shunt assemblies they use on the longboats are almost identical. Same fittings and everything. Good ceramics, too. I saw a heap of those in MB2. They had more than *Hardway*'s longboats could use up in a year. There's even some on the cart right over there." He nodded his chin at the SC-66 longboat service kit, sitting just a few meters away. "We can use one of those."

"The day I cherry-rig a plane with a bullshit fix like that is the day I vent my suit. And if I want to hear your opinion... no... forget it. I won't. *I'm* going to get the part. You stay here and don't touch anything." Raleigh made for the lock and left him standing under the drone.

He heard a double beep in his helmet...Parker opening a private, line-of-sight comms line. "I think Raleigh is sweet on you," she said as she appeared from under the drone. "We're all done with the ESys back there, Rampone is sealing the EIA panel. How much longer are you grease-eater, MSys, boneheads going to take on one thruster junction?"

Tig glanced at the airlock. Raleigh would be gone for a good fifteen or twenty. "About sixty seconds," he said. He was already moving for the longboat's service cart. He knew the 56-ACB shunt assembly in there would do the job. He'd have that Dingo fixed up before Raleigh even got back.

"The hell are you doing?"

"I can fix this thing without Raleigh."

"Raleigh's not going to like it."

"It'll work just as well. It'll work better."

"I'm not saying it won't. I'm just saying..."

"Nobody's giving me a chance to show 'em what I can really do, Parker. I can do more than..."

He tried to find a way of saying it nicely. He couldn't. "I can do more than this bullshit." He had to crouch and then bend and then rise up inside the Dingo's thruster assembly to mount the 56-ACB in place. It fit perfectly of course. These fittings had been standardized for decades. "I can do a lot more around here than anyone's letting me."

She said, "Yeah, I know what you can do..." Now that he was inside the assembly and she was outside it, he couldn't see her face anymore, just hear her voice in his helmet, and from the hesitation he wasn't sure if she *did* really know. How could she, really? She'd never even seen one of his custom jobs. Only smugglers, blockade runners, and a select few criminal denizens of SI City had seen those. "I ever tell you about the first hot rod I built?"

"About 16 times."

He crouched and bent again to extricate himself from the thruster assembly and rose next to Parker. "Made it from three anti-grav whizzers I stole from some polo-sissies at SI Prep when I was 12." The next part they said together. She mocked him, but he said it with pride. "That baby did 400kph." Parker rolled her eyes. "All decked out in Vanta Black. Made runs over the border at will for a month and then traded it for a used Intercontinental Hopper. If it flies, Parker, then I've ripped it, stripped it, and made it into something faster. I should be doing more than swapping parts on a Dingo 111."

Three minutes later, Tig, Parker, and two whole service crews watched the QF-111 Dingo hover and rotate on its jets as it tested its newly repaired maneuvering thruster assemblies. Raleigh started shouting from the other side of the bay when he came back and saw the 111 in the air. "What the hell is that thing doing?"

"I put in the longboat ACB like I said, and it works great." The 111 rolled, pitched, and yawed, turning in place. It almost looked happy. "We've got to talk, Raleigh." Behind Raleigh, Parker waved her hands to stop him. He ignored her. "I can do more than swap parts on a QF-111, but you won't give me a chance."

At first, he thought all the red he saw in Raleigh's face was reflection off his exosuit, but then he realized the color he saw was Raleigh's blood rising. "It's the wrong part," Raleigh growled at Tig with his helmet centimeters away. "Take it out."

"What? Why? You've got loads of these and they work better," Tig said. Behind Raleigh and the veins now throbbing with fury at the senior redsuits' temples, Parker mimed shooting herself in the head and then walked away.

"Now hear this, now hear this." The XO's voice boomed in his helmet. "*Tipperary* is at T-minus ten minutes to discharge and breach. *Hardway* will transit to the Procyon system in ten. That is all."

Chief Horcheese's voice came on next. "This is the Ops Chief. All cherries to the bow decks if you want your eyeful. *Tipperary* is going to breach space and open the hypermass transit to Procyon. Since you've never seen it happen, *this*, people, *this* is your *one* chance to gawk."

A few hundred meters up the ship's spine to the bow gunnery decks was where the saltier reds said to go for the best view. By the time he and Parker and the others made it there, the show had almost started.

The twenty-five ships of the battlegroup had already come to a stop out past Saturn's orbit, where a pair of 2000m Paul Bunyan class blockade guns stood guard in the starry blackness. A herd of torpedo mines surrounded the same, empty region of space at which the absurdly large railguns had been aimed. The breaching ship *Tipperary* flashed them all as she came to full-charge.

She held station 5Ks ahead of the battlegroup like a burning wheel, sheathed in zero-gee plasma and crackling with lightning. It danced over the 375m diameter, ring-shaped bow section that housed her capacitors. The seeping discharges arced from the ring out to the five spokes and down her axle-

shaped main hull. The lightning jumped and crackled out from the ring to arc and skate along its surface and pool up and down its length.

And then, in an instant, all that zap, all that seeping charge disappeared, leaving *Tipperary* darker than every other hull in the battlegroup before she suddenly released all the energy she'd been storing up and used it to hyper-accelerate five streams of heavy nuclei on a collision course.

Five, luminous shafts ripped out of the emitters near where the spokes met the ring and lanced out so razor thin, that in the first moments they fired, Tig wasn't entirely convinced he saw them at all. But he saw where they collided.

Tipperary's five particle streams smashed into each other at close to lightspeed, hurling high-energy spray in all directions. It was so bright that it took Tig a whole second to note how, where the streams collided, a ball of white-hot fire had formed out of burning plasma so dense and brilliant as to defy his eyeballs' scrutiny. It appeared as a featureless white opposite of the dim vacuum of space. It was energy; it was mass. As the streams continued to collide, the nascent inferno grew. The ball of hell swelled outwards, feeding off the energy released by the streams as they crashed into each other from five directions without pause.

What had begun as a burning point in the black had become a kilometer-wide sphere of swirling destruction until all at once, it was as if the insides of it drained out... like they somehow *fell* inward and imploded. All that energy... all that mass... it was gone now, leaving only a ghostly, hollow sphere, a thin curtain of fire over a spatial membrane so thin, they said it actually only *had* one side. The membrane ruptured. It withdrew suddenly from all sides like the skin of a torn balloon to reveal a hell-mouth passage between star systems.

Tipperary had breached space.

He pressed his fingertips to the porthole. The fire-ringed, unknown constellations Tig saw through the transit, at the other end, were the stars as seen from Procyon, twelve light years away.

As *Hardway* boldly led the ships of the battlegroup and the convoy through the threshold and into the transit, her hull pierced a secondary spatial membrane over the threshold where something that looked like fireflies skated, trapped by unseen forces. The exotic particles splashed onto the carrier's bow and ran down the barrels of the railguns and flowed towards the stern of the carrier like a sparking liquid.

The warped and blurred stars shone faintly visible through the waving walls of the hypermass transit as *Hardway* raged down the narrow passage. That's when Harry Cozen chose to speak. His voice came over the squack channel, booming out every speaker and filling every helmet.

"This is Harry Cozen. As you all know, the battle along the Sirius Front has raged since the first months of the war. What you do not know, is that the third UN battlegroup, charged with holding the Sirius end of the Sirius-Sol Transit, has been routed. The Squidies control that end of the transit now. Task Force 223, the combined Privateer/UNS battlegroup on operations in that sector is now cut off from all reinforcement and logistical support."

Parker's eyes widened in her helmet. The significance of what Cozen had said wasn't lost on Tig either. They had a lot of ships at Sirius.

"Without support or a path to retreat," Cozen said, "their position is untenable. The enemy forces now flooding Sirius are superior in number and 223 cannot retake the system. Intel indicates that in order to win the battle at Sirius, Squidy rushed most of his fleet there and left the backfield open, hoping we wouldn't notice. Knowing he had only a limited time to exploit this weakness before enemy forces could maneuver to counter him, UN Admiral Ming plunged his task force deep into Squidy-occupied space. Task force 223 is currently fighting its way through Regulus, making for the Squidies home system. Admiral Ming's force isn't large enough or well-supplied enough to drive all the way there. That's why we're going to rendezvous with the task force and drive to the enemy's home together, like a single dagger into Squidy's heart." Cozen let that image sink in. "You're going to hear scuttlebutt saying that without Sirius, Earth can't last more than six months. It's true. But we're going to drive hard

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