THE END OF THE WAR

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Officially, the little short-range clearwaves are forbidden, for obvious security reasons. I don't think any operator leaves for her second tour without one, though. Sometimes it's just to hear another voice out in the black, no matter who it belongs to. It can make the difference between finishing the tour and coming back a ghost.

Mine is a junky little affair duct-taped to the side of my main console. I hesitate a bit before hitting the switch, but my spin-up mobs are reporting the hull composition on this piece-of-shit drifter is even worse than I predicted. I've adjusted the build profile for a low-rez encounter, but even so I've got some time. I click the clearwave on, hoping for a familiar voice. It would be nice to talk to Ledra again, or Molly. Anyone but that bitch Andrin.

"Hello, hello," I say, my voice coming back tinny where the clearwave is patched into my suit audio. "Anybody out there?"

There's a long stretch of nothing. I can hear the whirr of the suit fans, the deep rumble of my own mobs chewing into the skin of this ancient hulk. The latter sound isn't real, of course—no air within a million kilometers to carry it—but the mobcom's external sensors pick up vibrations in the hull, and the suit translates it into audio so I can make full use of my precious human sensory integration. That is, after all, why I'm here, why it's worth hauling canned spam like me across the Solar System to rendezvous with flying junk. There are some things we still do better than machines.

I know there's another mobcom on the wreck. I wonder if it is Andrin after all, and she's refusing to speak to me on principle. Or someone else, a newbie who hasn't

learned the tricks yet, maybe doesn't even have a clearwave. I could be transmitting into nothing. The first scouts tumble out of the spin-ups, tiny mobs the size of grapes with nothing more energetic aboard than a little compressed gas. I key in a pattern from my library, and they jet off into the dark, changing direction with tiny puffs and caroming off the walls of the dead ship's corridors. The map on my console, based on old specs, begins to light up and update itself with real-time data.

"Hello," comes a voice from the clearwave. A man's voice.

I raise an eyebrow, pointless as that is in my black-helmeted suit, itself wrapped in the spider-like metal skin of the mobcom. There aren't many male operators. Not the fault of the men, of course, they're as patriotic as the rest of us, but they're just made differently. The male psyche doesn't deal well with the waiting, the confinement, the high-G transits. I've spoken to only a couple of men in the black from our side, and never to a Minoan.

Maybe this encounter won't be as dull as I thought.

"How's it going?" I keep my voice deliberately casual. No sense in raising the gender issue right away. He might get offended, and it's not like there's anyone else to talk to.

"So far, so good," he says. "You?"

"About the same. What's your name? I don't think I know you."

"It's Garret. I don't know anybody yet."

"I'm Miranda. Call me Myr."

"You may as well call me Gar, then."

One of my scouts rounds a corner, about halfway up the ship's length, and vanishes in a spray of vaporized metal. The mobcom analyzes telemetry, determines it was hit by a big laser, fusion-powered. He hasn't been here long enough to crank out any really big mobs yet, and there's not enough extra power in this dump to run them in any case. So that's his mobcom. I draw a circle around the spot on the map and retarget the scouts, curving them around through the ancient, torn decking to try and get a better view.

A few seconds later, one of the little mobs drifts down through an old ventilation shaft and gives me a few frames of video before he blasts it. He's in a big old Mark IV, like a hexagonal slab of metal with eight spider-legs on universal joints. Twice the size of my Mark IX, but with half the output. It carries a lot more armor, not that that matters. I can see his spin-ups on the walls around him, worm-like tendrils tipped with the blue-white sparks of plasma drills, digging through the hull of the old ship for the materials they need. One of them is halfway through building a big, spider-legged mob. I recognize the silhouette even before my console flashes up a recognition. An Afterburner III, at a guess, maybe a IV. Not a great choice for this shitty hulk.

"First tour?" I say. My hands fly across the console, adjusting my build profile to something even faster and more aggressive, trading off power for speed. Some operators don't feel like it's polite to rush a newbie, but I've always been of the opinion that what's important is to win, and fairness be damned.

"Second," he says. "Didn't see a lot of action on my first, though. Three aborts."

I wince. Everyone hates an abort. It means twice as much time in the gel before you get a break. "Did you get to see any action at all?"

"A couple of encounters out near Coldpoint. Got my ass kicked."

"Who was it?"

"Arisa and Gemmelia."

"Ha!" I grin. "Let me guess, Gemmy got you with a big tunnel swarm, right up through the floor."

"Absolutely." He doesn't sound too embarrassed, which is good. It's important to be able to laugh at your mistakes.

"She loves that trick. Gemmy's great." She and I have tumbled a few times, when we were on the same ship. Gemmy fucks the way she fights, in an all-out attempt to batter her partner into submission. It's good fun, but exhausting.

"She seemed like a fun girl," Gar says. "Do you go for tunnelers too?"

"Now, you know the rules." I put a bit of tease into my voice. "No digging for tactical tips."

"Sorry."

I've got a few small tunnelers in my mix, actually, but more roaches and froggies. A spin-up reports a lucky find—an old emergency battery, with a cache of exotica still inside it. Not enough to build any decent ranged weaponry, but plenty for a batch of Bouncing Bill IVs. One of my favorite mobs, cheap and efficient for quick work. They pour out of the spin-up's hatch, notched oblong things with a magnetic grapple at one end and a bouncer at the other. Like all froggies, they use these tools to alternate pulling themselves toward walls and pushing away, moving on bouncing, irregular paths. A few roaches are ready, too, scuttling insectoid things that stick to any surface they touch.

"So is this your first round on this tour?" I say, as I marshal my mobs.

"Yeah. Ten days in goo to get here. You?"

"This is day ninety-five. Five encounters so far, four wins."

"Damn," he says. "Just my luck to meet someone on a hot streak."

"Actually, I'm just coming off the loss," I say. "So I'm in a bad mood."

"Even worse."

I send out three groups of mobs, following the paths my scouts relay. The first one is a feint, straight at him, moving slow so he'll see it in plenty of time. The other two hook wide, one crawling up through a hole in an old service duct, the other out through an impact crater onto the outer hull of the wreck, under the fast spin of the stars, and then back in through a shattered laser lens.

Another scout dies. I get a glimpse of the Afterburner from its last moments—definitely a III, not a IV—crawling down the corridor with its muzzle smoking like an old-fashioned slug-thrower. It's headed right for my feint, and I order the mobs to scatter into an ambush formation. My other two groups are worming their way toward Gar's mobcom, roaches cutting through the decking with their integrators when ancient battle damage doesn't provide a convenient route.

I send a Bouncing Bill around a corner, straight at the Afterburner. The spidermob blasts it into a swathe of superheated ions, and the exotica inside escapes its bottle and detonates when it touches vacuum. The explosion isn't close enough to take out the Afterburner, but it blanks the thing's sensors, and the roaches move in, hopping off the walls to cling to the larger mob. They've only got integrators to fight with, little nano-tech mouths that start stripping off the Afterburner's armor, but that's not really the point. I want Gar's attention fully devoted to his big, stupid mob, as it flails in place and twists its legs to knock the persistent little things away. Another burst vaporizes a pair of roaches, but I've already moved on to the main event.

My two flanking groups pounce, roaches in the lead, Bouncing Bills ricocheting in a complex pattern designed for maximum confusion. His mobcom's lasers stutter, sweeping patterns in the air, and my mobs die one by one, but he's got nothing but his integral weaponry to work with. It's not enough to stop them all. One of the Bills dives in among his spin-ups and ejects its exotica, and my display goes white with multiple explosions.

"Ouch." Gar's voice is rueful. "Nice shot."

I flick a scout out of cover to survey the damage. A little bit of exotica isn't enough to seriously damage a brute like the Mark IV, but Gar's spin-ups are all blown to hell, and his external weaponry and sensors are probably seriously degraded. If he

sticks around, he'll be at my mercy, since I'll have time to build some seriously dangerous mobs while he fumbles about trying to restart his harvesting.

"Sorry about that," I say. No harm in being polite, after the fact. "Are we done here?" "Yeah, I think so. Nicely done."

"Try not to let yourself get distracted by the big nasty mobs, especially in a low-rez environment," I say. The urge to give advice trumps the thought that I'm helping out the enemy. "A nice swarm of little ones can be a lot more effective."

"I haven't got the compute power aboard to handle much of a swarm," he says, a little defensively.

I wince; if his Mark IV's processors haven't been upgraded, he's probably right. That's a serious disadvantage. "I'm surprised they send you out like that."

"Needs must. You know the drill." He sighs. "All right, I'm out. Thanks for the chat, Myr."

"Likewise. Talk to you soon, maybe."

My scout watches as his mobcom ignites its torch, blasting the decking underneath it to glowing vapor. In a few seconds, he's gone, accelerating out through the skin of the wreck and into the black toward a rendezvous with a waiting corvette, and probably a dress-down from whatever passes for a superior officer on the Minoan side of the line.

Victory, as easy as that. I heave a sigh, punch up my long-term build and harvesting profiles, and lean back in my gel-seat to wait.

Twenty hours later, corvette 1121 matches course and speed with the wildly tumbling wreck. In the meantime, my mobs have been busy. Huge ship-killer lasers have blossomed across the derelict, like ugly scabs on the torn skin, each a one-shot exotica-powered weapon capable of blasting an approaching vessel into scrap millions of klicks away. Another factory has been hard at work constructing thrusters, which will fire the harvesters' discarded scrap at high enough velocity to change the course of the wreck to something that will come close enough to our fleet to grab.

1121 only began its approach when I notified it that the ship-killers were in place. Functional ships, even corvettes, are too precious to risk the possibility of enemy presence.

The salvage isn't anything to write home about. It's a seventh-generation wetship, probably a destroyer. The second- or third-generation ships were profligate with materials—heavy metals, exotica, even organics—and are thus the most valuable targets for harvesting. By the seventh generation, resources were already getting scarce, and there's less worth digging out of the old hull. Command probably wouldn't have sent me after it if it hadn't been on a congenial course, not requiring much energy to make the intercept.

I satisfy myself that all my mobs know what they're supposed to be doing, then push myself away from the wreck with my own fusion torch. The mobcom bursts free of the tattered metal skin of the old wetship, spinning off into the black. I kill the spin with a motion as reflexive as scratching an itch, and jet toward the corvette.

1121 is a coldship, of course. No biosphere, no humans aboard. The actual working part of the vessel isn't much bigger than my mobcom, though it's packed full of a lot more compute power and weaponry since it doesn't have to carry all the support systems to haul around a bag of meat. The secondary and much larger part of the corvette is storage, where it keeps all the energy and raw materials it needs to top me off after a fight. I let the mobcom talk to it, working out the details of intercept and material transfer, and check the corvette's memory for new orders from command.

Sure enough, they've got another target for me. Not much of a hop, only six days transit. I run the numbers in my head. That'll put me at day one hundred two, which

means they'll probably try to squeeze in yet another encounter before my hundred and twenty days of tour are up. It's a depressing thought. When I started as an operator, a tour longer than sixty days was considered a hardship post. Now they're doing studies to see if we can handle a hundred and eighty days in the black. Someone at command is running the equations, figuring out how much combat effectiveness we'd gain versus how many operators would ghost out. I have a nasty feeling I already know what they're going to come up with.

A few hours later, I'm all tanked up, with fresh spin-ups loaded and a disposable booster strapped to my rear. Drugs flood my system, working their weird magic, and the gel-seat reclines into a couch. The suit floods all my inner cavities with padding. Then the booster ignites, and acceleration rolls onto me like a crushing, familiar

blanket.

I lose the next encounter. It's on a sixth-generation cruiser, big but still low-rez, and my opponent is a woman named Nina. She natters on over the clearwave, all about her partner back on the Minoan Ark and how well they get along. Personally, I think she's a bit of an idiot, but I leave the transmitter on. Company is company, however inane.

Maybe her casual front lulls me into a false sense of security. She pulls a beautiful trick, giving one of my scouts a look at her early on, with the seeds of a second-tier economy already planted. Then her perimeter firms up, and I can't get another picture. I figure I've got some time, and go for second-tier myself, only to find her swarming me with cheap, fast mobs. She must have switched paths right after I got my pictures, converting from tech to rush. I fight back, improvising frantically. I go down harder than Gar did, but in the end I go down.

I offer Nina more or less sincere congratulations as my mobcom blasts away, already wondering if I can steal her trick for myself. Without a booster, it's another three days before I make intercept with a corvette, 1703 this time. It reequips me and bangs the dings out of my mobcom while I download new orders. As expected, there's another assignment. I glance at the parameters and swear.

"Seventeen days transit! You fuckers." That would put me well over one hundred twenty days when I have to fight. Very much against regs, "Bastard vacuum-sucking whoredaughters."

But of course, command is several hours distant by laser, and there's no point in shouting at the corvette. Or, indeed, in arguing at all. That's the thing about being an operator. You can ghost, or you can do as you're told. And I'm not going ghost anytime soon.

* * *

My suit's ping pulls me from the drug-addled reverie in which I spend most of my acceleration time. Still five days to the target, the booster consuming itself as it slows me down to match velocities. Not much to do—not much I can do, given the Gs I'm pulling, stuffed full of gel like an overfull cargo pod—but the suit tells me another mobcom is coming into range on a tangent trajectory. They're hard to detect, by design, when they're not boosting, and so it only warns me a couple of minutes before my colleague comes into laser range.

I check the IDs, it's Annie. An old friend. We have a window of a few minutes before

our diverging paths take us out of easy communication range.

"Annie!" I say, or rather subvocalize, my body pinioned as it is. The suit is smart enough to fill in the audio. "It's been ages. Have they got us on opposing schedules or something?"

"Heya, Myr." Annie's voice is real; she's in the zero-gravity coasting section of her flight. "Something like that. How's tricks?"

"Five and two this run. They've got me staying out past the end of my tour, but this should be the last one."

"I'm jetting off to a fresh start!" she says, with mock enthusiasm.

"You sound terribly thrilled."

"First days of a tour are always the worst. I spent the last week in bed with Micah and Jane, and now I'm back out in the black with nothing but my poor fingers to keep me company."

I chuckle. Annie is speaking metaphorically, of course. We can't use our fingers with the suits on, but—like the clearwaves—no operator goes out on her second tour without making a few surreptitious modifications. There's damn little else to do, blasting through the black with the weight of a mountain on your chest.

"You made it all the way back to the Ark, then?"

"Yeah," Annie says. "Took up half my leave with transit time, but it was worth it to see a bit of green. And for a week of nonstop sex, of course."

Annie can be worse than Gemmy. Still, she's stuck to her partners, which is more than most operators can say. Relationships are hard when you spend two-thirds of your time hopping from derelict to derelict, with only your mobs at your side.

The suit pings. Two minutes.

"So what's the gossip?" I ask.

"The usual. Long tours and lots of grumbling. You want the good news or the bad news?"

"Since when is there good news?"

Annie sighs. "Two more ghosts came back. Beatrice and Iffie."

I'm silent for precious seconds. "Shit."

"I know. I saw it coming, with Beatrice at least. You know what she's—what she was like."

"Yeah, Still,"

I pictured a mobcom making an automated rendezvous with a wetship, hatches opening up to reveal . . . what? Either nothing—a cockpit that had been cracked up to the black—or else a limp body, still swathed in its suit. A ghost.

Everyone knew how to do it, if you couldn't take it anymore. It was easy enough to override the suit's safeguards, make it give you whatever cocktail of drugs you wanted. Or else to just pull off your helmet and open the hatch, and get a look at the stars first-hand. I always thought that was what I would do, if it came down to it. It seems more honest than dreaming my way out.

The mobcom can find its own way home, of course. Operators can be replaced, but nobody's making fusion bottles anymore.

"Well," I say, after a few more seconds have slipped away. "Is there good news?"

"Depends if you believe the rumors."

"Sounds juicy."

"Maybe." Annie seems dubious. "Apparently the high muckety-mucks at command are all in a tizzy. The science types are supposed to have come up with a new weapon. Some kind of tachyon wormhole something something, I don't really remember. They say it could end the war, blast the Minos out of the system once and for all."

I snort. "I've heard that before."

"Me too. But there were certainly a lot of uniforms running around."

"Well, I'm not going to start planning my retirement party just yet." The suit pings. Thirty seconds.

"Me either. You headed back to the Ark after your tour?"

"Probably not." There's nobody waiting for me. Easier to spend my fleeting free time on the closest wetship and not waste most of it in transit.

"Pity. It really is nice to see the plants and such. Micah and Jane would probably have you over for dinner."

"I'll think about it." Five seconds. "End of window. Catch you next time, Annie."

"Zap some Minos for me."

The connection cut. I would take a deep breath, if my lungs weren't full of gel.

End the war, she says. Like that hasn't been tried before. I remember at least a little bit from school. Dropping rocks on Minoa was supposed to end the war, but they just did the same to us. Each big battle was supposed to end the war, wrecking more and more ships until there weren't enough left for more battles. Just us, operators in mobcoms blasting through the black, scrabbling in the rubble.

Thinking about it takes me down to a dark place, the kind of place that makes people ghost out. So I don't think about it. I turn on my suit's unofficial enhancements, feel a pleasant buzz, and drift back into fantasy. Lying between Annie and Gemmy, trading off kisses, fingers tangled in my hair and running hot across my skin. Trees around us, open sky above, a warm breeze and the smell of salt water.

It's just a fantasy. It can be as impossible as I want.

* * *

"Hello out there."

"Hello again." It's Gar.

"Fancy meeting you here."

We're on a big chunk of a sixth-generation cruiser, larger than our previous battle-field but still low-rez. There aren't many high-rez wrecks still out there, at least not where we can get at them, though periodically the unpredictable orbits of the debrisstrewn inner system will spit one out in our direction. I load my usual profile into my spin-ups and try to work myself into a fighting frame of mind.

"I thought you would have been off shift by now," Gar says. "Unless I counted

wrong."

"I ought to be. Command asked me to stretch myself a bit."

"Ouch. My sympathies."

"Yeah. Well. I'd appreciate it if you could make this as quick as the last time."

He laughs. "Double ouch. I mean, if *you* just want to roll over, I wouldn't object . . ."

Every operator has been tempted, at some point. It would certainly be a lot easier if we could just trade off, instead of fighting it out every time. But command won't have it, and it's common knowledge that our mobcoms spy on us, upload our out battle records into the big iron back on the Ark. A little unauthorized communication is one thing, but throw a fight and there'd be hell to pay.

My spin-ups report that there are more trace metals in the skin of the hulk than I'd anticipated, and sensors show a few exotica-trap batteries still active. I make the call to go for second tier, devoting half my resources to building a defensive perimeter while the rest go into putting together fancier factories and harvesters, bootstrapping my construction ability beyond the primitive tools I'd brought with me.

"Can I ask you something?" Gar says.

"Sure, unless it's tactical."

He chuckles. "Why'd you become an operator?"

I blink, taken aback. "I . . . you know, I'm not sure I remember? It seemed like a good idea at the time." It seems like a thousand years ago, though it's barely a dozen. "I should ask you the same thing. You must have had more options than I did."

Most women—Circean women, anyway, I have no idea how the Minoans run things—serve somewhere out in the black. There are never enough crews for the wetships, vacuum mechanics, salvage experts, a thousand other specialties, all in dire demand. The men, by and large, stay on the Ark, taking care of the food and run-

ning the creches. A few serve on the wetships, where the accelerations are lower and there's room to move around.

Being an operator means being out at the sharp end. Only a few have the right profile to spend their lives locked inside a tiny mobcom. On the other hand, paradoxically, it's a lot safer to go into battle in a fusion-powered autonomous factory, surrounded by armor and failsafes, then it is to be a mechanic on a wetship, crawling over rusty metal with only a salvaged suit and a frayed safety line between you and the black. More operators ghost out than die in combat or by accident.

"Not really," Gar says. "No options at all, actually. My psych test said I had the profile for this. I was as surprised as anyone."

"Lucky you."

"It's not so bad. Though I guess that's my abnormal psychology talking." He sighs. "It's just strange, talking to the other operators. Back on the Ark it's all 'Remember Naviento!' and 'Death to Baby-Killers!' and everyone hates the Circeans. Out here . . ."

I smile in sympathy. We all go through this realization, sooner or later. "Out here it's just a job," I finish for him. "I know. That's the secret of the operators. Weird, isn't it?"

"I trained for years, but nobody told me that."

"I'm not sure they know, back on the Arks. Or if they can believe it." Command has always been excellent at ignoring inconvenient facts. "What about you? Do you hate Circeans?"

"Not particularly. I've never been very war-like. Until psych testing I wanted to be a creche-instructor."

My suit pings. Mobs incoming. Gar and I are playing out the oldest variation in the operators' book: rush versus tech. He went for a quick swarm, I'm building for a long game. If my perimeter holds him back long enough, my bigger, meaner mobs will crush him. If not, it'll be a short encounter after all.

Gar learns quick, I have to admit. His tactics have a subtlety he didn't display the last time we met, curving his mobs to probe my defenses from multiple angles. I hold chokepoints in the corridors with laserbugs, little turrets that burrow into the fabric of the walls to protect themselves. He swarms them with roaches, bright flashing beams carving his mobs apart until they close to use their integrators. I fall back to a second line, leaving behind exotica bombs that vaporize the leading edge of his forces.

His equipment still isn't up to snuff. The Mark IV's limited compute power can only push the swarms in a straight line, not deploy them in writhing formations to maximize sensor confusion. We've passed the point of no return, and I'm not sure he even knows it. My tier-two factories are online, hulking, efficient matrices that crank out larger mobs.

I assemble a squad of Stalker Vs, big caniform brutes with power claws and reactive armor. They bound out on magnetic pads, loping through the ongoing skirmish, scattering the roaches. When the smaller mobs try to grab on, the Stalkers' armor pulses hot and spiky, and ruined roaches fall away.

"Oh, shit," Gar says, laughing. "That can't be good."

The Stalkers fight their way to his mobcom, tearing apart whatever he throws in their way. When they reach him, one of them staggers under the impact of the mobcom's lasers, but doesn't fall. The others tear into his spinups, wrecking his ability to produce mobs, and circle around the mobcom itself.

"Done?"

"Done," he says. "One more question, before I go?"

I give an exaggerated sigh. "If you must."

"Have you ever killed anybody?"

I pause again. I'm not sure I want to answer the question.

We're supposed to, of course. More accurately, we're supposed to take every opportunity to destroy irreplaceable enemy mobcoms. The death of the operator is a strictly secondary concern. But precisely because the mobcoms are so valuable, chances to destroy them don't come along very often. If I unleashed the Stalkers on the Mark IV, they could certainly take it to pieces eventually, but it takes only a flick of a torch to blast away from a wreck at a speed no mob could hope to match.

"Not recently," I say. "You need a high-rez battlefield to even give you a shot at it." "But you have?" he says.

"Twice." It's something I think about to this day, when I'm out in the black, for all that it was my patriotic duty.

Gar is quiet for a while. Then he says, "Okay. Thanks."

His torch ignites, and I'm alone on the wreck with my mobs. I wonder what he wanted. We all get a little philosophical sometimes, it's one of the hazards of the profession, but too much of it puts you at risk of ghosting out.

I find myself hoping that's not where Gar is heading. It'd be nice to get the chance to talk to him again.

* * *

When I make the rendezvous with the corvette, it informs me that my tour is over—at last—and asks if I want to take my leave on the Ark (current transit time, thirty-five days) or on the nearest wetship, a little more than two days away. I opt for the latter, and it makes me a small booster, just enough to make the intercept with the cruiser.

Like all wetships, it's enormous, a fat-bellied behemoth of scarred metal and ceramic that dwarfs my spidery little mobcom. Even the corvette would look like a minnow beside it. Once my booster uses itself up and ejects, the cruiser takes me in its grip, pulling me gently but firmly into its maw with invisible lines of force. It's hard to escape the sensation of being eaten alive.

Getting out of the mobcom, on the other hand, is a little bit like being born. First the suit has to retract all the wriggly adaptors it has plugged into every orifice; it's surprisingly easy to forget that they're there, out in the black, and the sudden reminder is disconcerting. Next I get out of my gel-seat, moving my legs for the first time in a hundred and twenty days. Drugs and artificial stimulation keep the medical effects of prolonged immobility at bay, but it still feels like rediscovering a limb I didn't know I had. Then the main hatch opens, and I pull off my helmet and take an actual, oxygenated breath.

Procedures for dealing with returning operators are clear. There is no one waiting for me, just an empty room with a storage locker. It smells like mold and failing air recyclers, but the very fact of smell is another revelation. The suit pulls away from my skin with the wet sucking sound of breaking seals, and I leave it in a rubbery pile on the floor. A band of black, skin-tight stuff remains, tight around my wrist; that's the pharmacopeia, which will keep supplying the drugs I can no longer live without.

One corner of the room is equipped with a shower head and a drain, and I stumble underneath it and turn the water on full blast. The screaming, stinging sensation on my skin makes me want to curl into a ball, but I force myself to stay upright, tears filling my eyes. They have to fall the normal way, instead of being wicked aside by hair-thin suit fibers.

After a long, long time, I turn the water off and open the storage locker. I dry myself with the fluffy towel inside, then remove the uniform they've fabricated for me. It's just in my size, of course, but it takes me a while to remember how clothes are supposed to work. The thing has *buttons*. Honestly.

Once I've got it sorted out to my satisfaction, I open the outer door and step into the cruiser's hold. It's full of all kinds of junk, broken machines, wrecked equipment,

a few other freshly fabricated structures. Two officers, a man and a woman, are waiting for me, wearing the same black-and-gold uniform as I am. They bring their hands up in salute, and long-dulled training makes me return it. I can't stop staring at them—the little folds of their skin, the flickers of their eyes, the slight movements of their faces. I remember vaguely that this is rude, but I can't bring myself to care.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant Commander Miranda," the man says. "I hope you had

a successful trip."

I should say something, shouldn't I? The physicality of the conversation, without the intervention of suit and clearwave, is distracting. "Thank you." That's usually safe.

Nothing happens for a while. That may have been the wrong thing to say after all. Then the man coughs.

"Lieutenant Goshawk will take you to your quarters."

"Follow me, sir," the woman says. I trail behind her, moving like a recently reanimated corpse.

I rate a room with a bed and a table, my own toilet, and a companion. Mine is a boy named Varn, wearing a private's uniform and an expression of unshakable determination. He bustles around me, offering me food and water like he was a personal servant, but we both know what he's there for and before long I'm eager to get down to business.

I wonder if there's a creche-school back on the Ark where they train these boys, or if it's just part of the standard military program. It seems like it would be a lesson worth sitting in on. I can't help but imagine a grizzled drill-sergeant coaching his pupils in the finer points. However he was instructed, Varn clearly was near the top of his class, and he leaves me sweaty and aching pleasantly. When we're finished, he dresses quietly and slips out. He'll be at my disposal for the duration of my stay; rank hath its privileges, I suppose.

Later, I sleep. I must sleep while I'm out on tour, but it happens during the drugged reveries of transit, so I'm never aware of drifting off or waking up. If I dream, I don't remember afterward.

This time, though, I dream. I blame Gar.

I remember my first kill-shot, almost an accident, back on my second tour. I was still half-green, and up against a veteran named Lily, but she'd arrived at the wreck nearly five minutes after me, and she was struggling to overcome the handicap. That's unusual. The big iron on the Ark plays the great chess game of dispatching mobcoms against its Minoan counterpart, and since all the pieces are public—hard to hide it when a fusion drive lights up—encounters are usually evenly matched or they're not fought at all. Lily probably should have cut her losses and run, but she told me she was on a bad streak and didn't want another failure on her record. She waited too long. I latched a crawler pregnant with exotica on to the underside of her mob, set it off, and the blast cracked her fusion bottle. Nothing left but vapor.

I never dream about the second time. There are places even my subconscious doesn't want to go.

Over the next few days, I wander the cruiser, exploring. Like all wetships, it's an ancient amalgamation of designs and repairs, full of unpredictable passages and detours. Everything has been fixed or replaced a hundred times over, and nothing works quite the way it should. Most of its bulk is devoted to the maintenance of a livable biosphere for the thirty or so crew members, who spend almost all of their time tending the machinery that keeps them alive and breathing. That's the problem with canned spam in the black—it takes so much effort to keep us going there's no time left for anything else.

As I shake myself out of my daze, I become ravenous for human contact. That's half the reason companions are provided—otherwise operators would be forever dragging crew members into dark alleys when they have duties to attend to. I alternate between fucking to exhaustion and grilling him about what's been going on back on the Ark, less because I want the news and more for the simple pleasure of conversation. Much of what he has to say is banal, but he repeats what Annie told me, about command's obsession with some kind of new toy.

On the tenth day of my leave, another mobcom arrives. I can hardly contain myself when I see that it's Gemmy, and I'm already making plans for the two of us to seriously test the limits of poor Varn's stamina. She docks, but she doesn't open her mobcom, and for a minute a sudden fear grips me. Maybe Gemmy's not in there at all. Maybe it's just a ghost.

Fortunately, it's not long before I get a call on my room's data system—so strange to have to go to particular place to interface with it, instead of having it all around you—and hear her familiar, cheery voice.

"Myr! Is that seriously you up there?"

"Are you hiding from me?" I tell her, teasing. "Scared to come out?"

"Please. You have no idea how much I would like to wriggle out of this thing."

"What's stopping you?"

She sighs. "Orders. I got a packet from my corvette. You're not going to like them." "*Tm* not going to like them?" A sudden, awful feeling wells up from my stomach. "What do your orders have to do with me?"

But the orders are already scrolling across my screen.

On arrival at cruiser 17, do not disembark. Another operator will be on leave there. Transmit these orders at once . . .

I blink back sudden tears, catching only snatches of the rest.

 \dots proceed immediately together \dots

... utmost importance ...

"Yeah," Gemmy says. "Sorry it was you, Myr."

I'm surprised at the strength of my reaction. It's not so much the thought of getting back into the mobcom—I was going to do that again, sooner or later—as it is the sense of betrayal. Command has pulled some awful shit on me before, but nothing like this. So there'll be no delightful tumble with Gemmy, no more time to relax and enjoy Varn's attentions, nothing but a hustle to get back out in the black.

I could refuse. For once, I have the option. I'm not in my mobcom, with its secret recorders and remote overrides. If I lock the door to my room, what can they really do? Break it down and arrest me? So what?

They can shoot me in the head and feed me to the recycler, is what they can do. I know that, obviously. Refusing a direct order is treason. But the impulse still remains.

"It's not all bad," Gemmy says. "Take a look at the bottom."

I glance down.

Upon the successful completion of this mission, you and the other operator will be eligible for an extended leave of not less than three hundred sixty (360) days.

"Shit." The thought leaves me a little breathless. To have three tours' worth of leave—I could go back to Ark, walk in the gardens, spend some of the ration allocations that pile up uselessly in my account. "They aren't kidding, are they?"

"Nope," Gemmy says. "So I'm also glad it was you waiting for me. You're the best operator I know, and we have *got* to win this one."

* * *

Back into the mobcom, back into the tiny universe of suit and control board, systems flickering to life and running through their bootstrap sequences. Getting in isn't nearly as bad as getting out. The suit is polite enough to grow its interfaces

slowly. I settle back in the gel-seat and snap my helmet in place. The suit overrides my autonomic reflexes, and I stop breathing, tiny fibers snaking through my skin to oxygenate my blood directly.

The cruiser has already built me a booster, a terrifyingly large one. I can see Gemmy's mobcom, similarly equipped, and I bring up the laser link.

"Ready?" she says.

"Just about."

The cruiser pushes us free. As soon as we reach safe distance, the boosters' programming takes over. Once again, I'm packed full of acceleration gel. Fibers snake around my eyes, tweaking the vitreous humors so they don't pop like grapes.

The torches ignite.

"Whee!" Gemmy says, her voice computer-generated now.

Transit time, thirty-six days.

* * *

I spend some of my more lucid moments reviewing information about the target. It's a big one, a third-generation battleship. The *General Randolph*, from back when ships had names. Until recently, it was locked in a complicated, eccentric orbit in the ruins of the inner system, but a recent close pass by still-molten Minoa slingshot it out in our direction. According to preliminary scans, it's almost ridiculously rich in resources—high grade metals, bottled exotica, even a ton of ancient tech, still intact. The ultimate high-rez environment. I marvel at the profligacy of the early days of the war, when such a wreck would simply be left to spin in the black.

The mission profile is odd, too. Normally I skip that part of my orders, because it's always the same. Suppress any enemy presence, construct anti-ship defenses and thrusters, wait for contact. This time, though, we're to concentrate on securing a particular sector of the ship, without damaging it more than necessary, and then deliver a particular payload. Some kind of sensor and comm relay, as best I can tell, from the very old days. We're to hold that sector at all costs, even if it means giving up an advantage in the fight overall.

"Weird," I tell Gemmy.

"Very weird," she agrees. "But this whole thing is weird. You ever done a tandem before?"

"No. We talked about it a little in training, but we're spread so thin these days."

"Me either. Think there'll be two of them?"

"Have to be." Command wouldn't send us in to a mismatch, I hope. The same goes for the Minoans. "Who are you hoping for?"

"Someone new and incompetent," Gemmy says, with a computer-mediated laugh. "Normally I'm up for a good fight, but with three tours of leave at stake, I just want to get this over and done with."

"Likewise." I wonder if Gar will be there.

The second time I made a kill-shot, the time I had a choice, is the one I try hard not to think about. This time I was the veteran, on my sixth tour, and my opponent was a girl just out of her training. Her first encounter, still uncomfortable in the second skin of the suit and mobcom. Someone had given her a clearwave, though, and she introduced herself, hesitantly, as Emily.

I was near the end of my tour. Tired, eager to be home. We were on a medium-rez cruiser, with enough exotica lying around to build some really dangerous weapons. I was pushing her back, corridors filling with blasted mobs and bolts of coherent energy, but it was taking forever. I built a Diamond II, a crystalline mob with an exotica core and focusing lenses to generate a laser from the energy flood. A suicidal charge by a squad of my other mobs carried the thing deep into her defenses, within sensor range of her mobcom.

I had originally intended to use it on her factories, blast her economy to ruins, but I couldn't get near enough to detect them through the jammers she'd set up. Her mobcom stood out, though, fusion bottle humming. The Diamond was stuck in the center of a disintegrating pack of mobs, seconds from getting blasted, and I had a choice.

She should have put up more shielding. An amateur mistake, but easy to make, if all you're used to is low-rez battles with roaches.

I took the shot. The exotica blast destroyed the struggling mobs around it, and pumped its laser far past the range my mobcom could have managed. The beam slashed through the decks and walls like they were made of mist, hit Emily's old Mark III, and punched right through.

It was supposed to end quickly, in a bright flash of fusion. But the Mark III had enough time to eject its bottle, which detonated outside the wreck, and I could hear Emily screaming. The laser had slashed her nearly in half, blood and gore bubbling and freezing as the vacuum rushed into her shattered mobcom and through her ruined suit. It was several seconds before the clearwave cut out, but it didn't seem to matter. I could still hear her shriek of pain and terror ringing in my ears.

Command gave me a commendation, and an extra thirty days' leave.

* * *

We finish our deceleration burn, using up the last of the boosters, and make impact with the *General Randolph*. I try to put us as close to the objective sector as I can, but the ancient ship is tumbling, and it's hard to match up my old maps to its scarred and pitted hull. Gemmy and I end up boring into the maze of room and corridors separated by several hundred meters, and a considerable distance from the sector we've been instructed to take.

There isn't time to relocate, either. Two more mobcoms hit the wreck only seconds after we do; as usual, Minoan command is as astute as ours. I eject my spin-ups, which immediately begin to report the rich concentrations of trace minerals and accessible exotica. Punching up the high-rez build profile gives me an unexpected feeling of nostalgia. It's been a decade since I got to fight in a wreck so replete with material, and watching the plans for high-end mobs slide across my vision sends me back to my days as a recruit, barely out of training.

I shake my head and concentrate on the task at hand. Gemmy and I had talked strategy while in transit. It's the first time either of us has ever had an objective other than flat-out victory, and we agreed it means at least one of us should take a more defensive approach. Given Gemmy's tendency to go straight for the throat, that means me. After my usual burst of scouts—ready in a few seconds, given all the material at my disposal—I start pushing hard for tier-two, plowing every gram of resource I can extract in building bigger, faster harvesters and factories. In theory, pure tech will give you an exponentially increasing power curve, as long as the resources hold out.

And as long as your enemies let you do it. Gemmy sticks to quick and cheap mobs, blasting out swarms of roaches, froggies, and the low-end spinners and spiders. Her horde bounces and scuttles through the derelict's corridors, cutting through doors where ancient failsafes tried to contain the hull breech that ultimately killed the *General Randolph*. They secure the target sector early and push on, toward where the two Minoan mobcoms made entry.

I thumb the clearwave, out of habit. "Hello?"

"Hello, hello!" Gemmy croons, already in the frantically excited state that battle brings out in her. "Anybody out there?"

"I'm here." It's Gar, again. I wonder if command is sending me against him deliberately, because I keep winning. "My colleague is Vivian. This is her first tour, and she hasn't got herself a clearwave yet."

"Aw," Gemmy says. "Poor little girl."

"Hey, Gar," I say.

"Hi, Myr. What are you doing back out so soon?"

"Orders." I heave a sigh, which Gemmy and Gar immediately echo.

"At least we'll get to have some fun for once," Gemmy says. "Plenty to work with. Keep your heads down, kids!"

Not bad advice. The chance of someone getting killed is much higher in a high-rez environment, where the mobs can get large and dangerous quickly. My suit feeds me digests from Gemmy's network, showing her mobs engaging the enemy. Vivian seems to be handling the initial defense, which means Gar is probably following my fast-tech strategy.

They don't seem to be making any special push for the comm station, the critical sector from our orders. I wonder if the Minoans know about whatever's so special, or if they're just here after a rich prize. That leaves me a tactical choice—pretend that sector isn't important, and hope they ignore it, or plant my main defense there?

I decide to rely on brute force instead of misdirection. My tier-twos are online, and I build myself an armada of rolling harvesters and constructor mobs. Then it's time for a very rare maneuver, physically relocating myself. In an ordinary mission, there's rarely a reason to move the mobcom around—it's deadly slow compared to the mobs, and one place is usually as good as another to set up defenses. Today, though, if I'm going to be building my bastion around this comm station, I damn well want to be inside it when we start throwing high-end mobs around.

It takes a few minutes for my mobcom to get there, clanking ponderously on its spider-like legs and burning through hull material with its lasers when it can't fit. The mobs beat me there, and I plant them in a rough semi-circle, facing Gar and Vivian and outside the sector we were instructed not to damage. The harvesters get to work, looting the hull material for metal and exotica, and I direct the constructors to start putting together tier-three factories. The exponential curve ticks up another notch.

In the comm station itself, I send a roach to upload the package command gave us, a dense wad of ancient byte-code. To my astonishment, the archaic machinery hums to life. The comm station still *works*, near-miraculously preserved and powered by a huge exotica battery that must be one of the ship's primary reserves. Suddenly my orders make a lot more sense—we're not just here to salvage an old machine, but to *do* something. Possibilities start to run through my mind, but I ruthlessly shunt them away. Whatever it is, it's not my problem.

My problem is the Minoans, whose swarms are getting nastier by the minute. Their early mobs have been joined by larger tier-two models, armed with lasers and plasma cutters instead of paltry, short-ranged integrators. Gemmy is falling back, frantically upgrading her own plant and picking off her larger opponents by sheer weight of numbers, but it's time I joined the fight. My own tier-two factories are still waiting where I came in, and I set them to crank out a continuous stream of heavy mobs and report to Gemmy. She takes command of a squad of Stalker Vs and sends me a squeal of gratitude, and moments later battle is joined in earnest in the dead corridors of the ancient battleship. Big mobs tear one another to pieces, vaporize one another with lasers, and explode in bursts of released exotica.

The comms machinery is doing *something*, humming away to itself as it executes command's program. My attention is on the defensive line I'm building. I reforge the metal of *General Randolph*'s corridor walls into diamond-hard composites, stretch them into barricades bristling with laser turrets. In front of them my constructors lay traps, exotica bombs and clusters of tiny integrators that can reduce a big mob to gray goo. Behind, waiting in front of the comm station, is my reserve of tier-three

mobs. They're Behemoth IIs, huge things nearly the size of my mobcom, with force shields and multiple adaptive weapon systems. When they move, my suit feeds me echoing *clanks* as the walls vibrate.

"Yee-haw!" Gemmy shouts, launching a frantic assault aimed right at Vivian's mobcom. It's not a tactically sound maneuver, but it catches the Minoans off guard, and for a few minutes all their resources are devoted to encircling and destroying her assault force. In the meantime, Gemmy pulls back, shifting her mobcom so my new barriers will be between her and the enemy. Her new factories are ready, and she starts putting together flying squads of Stalkers and sending them on wide hooks, skirting the main battlefield.

"I like the Behemoths," she says to me, on a private channel. "You've got your tier-three up and running?"

"Full blast. I'm still building out factories." This is beyond even high-rez—my harvesters are sucking in raw material at a furious rate, but the *General Randolph* is a treasure store that I could only dream about in an ordinary encounter.

"There's a trick I want you to try. Build yourself a squad of Diamonds and toss them out through a hole in the outer hull, see if we can get around behind them. The beams are powerful enough to cut in and do some damage."

I blink. It's a good idea. But . . .

"I'm on it." I shake my head again. Not the time for second thoughts.

Gar and Vivian's horde, reinforced and reorganized, goes on the offensive again. They run into my defensive line and the front ranks just evaporate, blasted to vapor by traps and turrets. My fire tears the complicated grid of corridors to shreds, leaving a zone of free-floating debris.

"Ouch," Gar says. "That was like sticking my hand on a stove."

"Is that the best you've got?" I grin inside my helmet.

"Not hardly."

"Bring it on." He yelps. "Shit! You sneaky little—"

"Ha!" Gemmy crows.

One of her Stalker squads got close enough to do some damage to Gar's factories, and he diverts mobs to counter-attack. It's not a devastating blow, not here, with rebuilding so easy, but it slows him down. The comm station whirrs and clicks behind me, sending out waves of unguessable purpose that barely register on my mobcom's sensors. I build a squad of Diamonds, one-shot laser-bombs of immense power, and send them on a complex path that will take them out through a rent in the hull.

Gemmy, safely relocated behind my perimeter, settles down to build a steady stream of mid-range mobs to supplement our forces. Vivian launches another attack on my line, with the same lack of success. When Gar throws a new wave of small mobs against me, I start to guess that they're covering up for some other scheme. Not much I can do, with so many of my resources committed to defense, but Gemmy takes the initiative again, sending a flying wedge of fast-moving spider-mobs deep into enemy territory. Once again, they fight their way in close to Gar's mobcom before his defenses annihilate them.

"Look!" Gemmy crows, shooting me images. "Only one diffuser!"

My suit helpfully highlights known enemy mobs and installations, and I can see she's right. Gar has built a diffuser—a mob that projects a defensive field that spreads out the energy from beam weapons—but only one. Gemmy's brief attack has left the turtle-shaped thing glowing a faint blue-green.

"Five Diamonds ought to be able to punch right through it," Gemmy says. "You can take him out!"

"Risky," I say. My stomach flipflops. "If he's got another one hidden, it'll all be for nothing."

"We're accomplishing our mission just by sitting here," Gemmy says. The comm machinery seems to have finished its task, or else is waiting in readiness for a response. I have no idea how long we were supposed to hold it for. "If we're going to actually win this fight, we need to take a few risks."

I close my eyes. My Diamonds, flying free in the black outside the *General Randolph's* hull, have maneuvered to a position where they have the closest shot at Gar's mobcom. He's still fairly close to the surface of the wreck, with only a few metal decks between him and the outside. Gemmy's right, damn her, damn Gar for not keeping his defenses up, damn *me* for even thinking twice about it.

"I'll try." I twitch my hands, entering the firing coordinates.

Gemmy sends her mobs out, to occupy the Minoan's attention, and the dead corridors of the hulk once again erupt with laser fire and detonations. The Diamonds maneuver a bit into better positions. I thumb the clearwave on, thinking I ought to say something, but click it off again without speaking when I can't think of what.

The first Diamond fires, releasing its exotica and blossoming into a brilliant sphere of energy. Tiny components, in the millionth of a second before they're consumed by the explosion, focus that power into a coherent beam and direct it down into the ancient battleship. The laser cuts the decking into vapor and hits the hemispherical field projected by the diffuser, splashing into a curling, blue-green mist. The diffuser's glow doubles, then doubles again as two more Diamonds fire, the combined energy of their beams coursing through its overworked circuits. The fourth one burns it out entirely, in an explosion that sends fragments pinging off Gar's mobcom.

Then the fifth Diamond goes off, its beam sweeping a narrow arc in the fraction of a second of its existence, slashing a path of destruction through Gar's exposed factories and harvesters in a wide semi-circle and missing his mobcom by meters.

There's a long moment of silence. Then-

"Shit," says Gar. "Shit."

"Myr?" Gemmy says. "What the hell happened?"

"He's crippled," I say. My Behemoths lurch into motion. "Hit him now!"

She sends her mobs forward, too, but I'm not sure it'll be enough. Normally, blasting an enemy's factories to bits is enough to win an encounter, but with all the resources he's got in easy reach Gar will be able to bootstrap himself back up again in no time, especially with Vivian to help. And with so much of my force locked into a static defense, I'm not sure Gemmy and I can overwhelm him.

Still, no regrets. I had a choice, and this time I made the right one.

"Myr?" Gar says, as the Behemoths join the battle.

I wonder if he knows what I did. I don't want to talk about it, not with Gemmy on the line. "What?"

"I'm really sorry about this."

I have only an instant to grasp what happens next. A tunneler mob, digging through solid metal, slipping between decks and insinuating itself past all my barriers. Not enough payload for more than a nuisance attack, except that my mobcom is sitting in the comm station, and under that comm station is one of the biggest exotica stores on the whole derelict ship. The tunneler must have attached itself ages ago, working with its integrator to turn the battery into an enormous bomb. Now my sensors pick up the swelling energy, far too late to do anything about it.

Still, no regrets.

The world goes white.

* * *

I open my eyes. I must not be dead after all.

My suit confirms this. There's no link to the mobcom, no network or even clearwave connection, but it flashes diagnostics for my stupid, fragile meat-body. One leg

broken, soft tissues all over damaged by shockwave. Nothing it can't fix, given time, and it's already made a good start. I've been unconscious for nearly five hours.

I'm floating free, an odd sensation. All our encounters take place in null gravity, of course, but I'm usually strapped securely into my gel-seat. Now I'm in a small, dark space, lit only by dozens of flickering indicator lights. By their faint glow, I can make out a control console, a seat, and a suited figure. I'm inside a mobcom, but not a familiar one. Someone has plugged my suit into a power line—it can keep me alive indefinitely on its own, as far as food and water and medicine goes, but it needs external power to do it.

I wonder if I'm a prisoner. I've never heard of an operator being captured before.

The suited figure, seeing my movement, beckons me over. I pull myself toward the console, and there's a comm cable waiting. My suit isn't designed to interface with Minoan equipment, but the other operator has been making some basic modifications, and it fits the jack on my gauntlet.

"It's me," Gar says. "Are you all right?"

"I'll live," I say. "What happened?"

"Your mobcom was cracked wide open, but it managed to eject its bottle before it went up. I had some mobs take a look, and when they saw your suit was intact, I brought you back here." There's something tight and unpleasant in his voice.

"Lucky me." I mean that. The mobcom has all the armor—the suit isn't designed to do much without it. The difference between a blow that would break the mobcom open and one that would break it open *and* turn me into paste is only a hair's breadth. "Did you pull your punch?"

"What?" He shakes his helmeted head. "Oh, no. I wish I . . ." He pauses. "Listen.

There's something you need to see. We got a broadcast an hour ago."

Video flashes into my vision. I recognize the jagged lines of the Minoan Ark from a hundred propaganda videos, the sinister face of the enemy, as seen from an escorting cruiser. Then a tiny spark of light blossoms in the center of the screen, rapidly expanding into a roaring ball of energy that must be hundreds of kilometers across. The huge, ancient ship shatters into a thousand spinning pieces, fragments blasted free just ahead of the all-consuming sphere of light.

I blink, trying to understand what I'm looking at. The Minoan Ark. The last bastion of their civilization. Where they keep their factories, their food supplies, their command. Their children and their creche-schools.

The end of the war.

"I . . . "Tears are welling in my eyes, wicked away by my faithful suit. "I don't . . . "

"That's not all," Gar says. "Here."

Another video. This time, it's home. The smooth curves of the Circean Ark, as friendly and familiar as the inside of my mobcom. The tiny world on which I was raised, with my creche-brothers and sisters, where I hoped to go walk in the gardens if I could ever get enough leave.

The same tiny spark of light, the same expanding sphere. I close my eyes before I can see the end.

"They were developing a new weapon," I say, dully. "Something . . . complicated. A wormhole tachyon something something, Annie said."

"Apparently, the comm station here on the *General Randolph* painted a target on the Ark," Gar said. "A few minutes later, that thing went off. As best we can tell, the same effect happened on your side, at the same time."

"They lost control." I want to cry, laugh, and curl into a tiny ball of guilt all at once. "Those stupid, stupid bastards. They built a new toy and they let it get out of control."

"That's what my side thinks, anyway." He shakes his head again. "Either way, it hardly matters what happened now."

Nothing matters now. The war is over. No one left to fight.

There's a long interval of silence. I can hear Gar's ragged breathing over the open channel. I wonder if he's been crying.

"What happened to Gemmy?" I say at last.

"She pulled out after the explosion. I don't blame her, you ought to have been dead. When these images came through, I sent her a message telling her I'd picked you up. Last I saw, she'd turned her torch around and headed back this way."

"Why? What are we going to do now?" What was there to do, except ghost ourselves

and be done with it? My suit could still manage that much.

"Vivian is off building out our anti-ship weaponry. We've got plenty of energy here." He sounds almost shy. "When we're ready, I'm going to broadcast an invitation to both sides. Everyone who's left."

That might amount to a few dozen mobcoms, a few cruisers, some corvettes. "To do what?"

"To build a new Ark."

"Here? Both sides?"

He nods.

"Do you think they'll listen?"

"The operators will," Gar said. "You told me the secret. It's just a job for us, and now the job is over. Time to move on."

"The officers on the cruisers might object."

"Have you ever thought about what a mobcom could do to a cruiser, if you decided to take it apart?"

I'd never even considered it, but the answer was obvious. Cruisers were fat, fragile wetships, and their tiny crews would be no match for a gang of mobs.

"You really think it will work?" I say.

"It might. We'll have the mobcoms' fusion bottles, all the resources of the *General Randolph*. We can take the cruisers apart, if necessary. Go and fetch more wrecks. Figure something out." I can tell, somehow, that he's smiling. "It beats the alternative."

"Yeah," I say after a minute. "I suppose it does."

Another silence.

"I saw what you did," Gar says. "With the Diamonds. I wanted to say . . . thank you. For not taking the kill-shot."

"I thought about it," I say. "But—"

"And I really am sorry for taking mine."

"Don't worry." I shake my head. "I won't take it personally. It's only a job."