

Prodigal Sun: Zwischenzug *

Yanick Champoux <yanick1@sympatico.ca>

June 1, 2001

“The Suns aren’t fading. They just don’t want to get involved.”

- Erik Theolark, Charioteer Hong
Leader

Everything began when I stubbed my toe.

Well, okay. Not everyone agrees with that. The Church is of the opinion that everything began with the Word. And the Word was the Pancreator, and the Pancreator was with the Word. Which begs for many questions. Does it mean that the Pancreator had nothing to do but talk to Himself until he got around creating stuff? And what about the Verb? And the Adjective? So much important questions that the Church is unable to answer. Or doesn’t want to. Or maybe I’m just plain unlucky and felt on a bad lot of priests more prone to excommunication than deep theology.

And while the Church goes for the lone man in the sky theory, the Supreme Order sings a totally different song. If they are to be

*In the game of chess, a move played in response to a capture which is not a recapture, but which forces the opponent to make a reply which cannot avoid eventual capture. Most Zwischenzugs are checks. Or marriage proposals.

believed, everything began when nothing exploded spontaneously in a multi-dimensional everything made of pure energy that later congealed into the physical, low-dimensional-count everything that we live in. The theory goes further and has some real interesting corollary (or so the Engineer was affirming as I was running away), but basically the idea is that everything is a beef-steak with onion that has been forgotten on a stove that has been turned off billions of years ago.

Contrasting with the Supreme Order’s view on the universe, the nobles’ opinion is refreshingly simple: everything begins, and ends, with them. Period.

So *perhaps* I’m a little bit presumptuous in saying that *everything* began when I stubbed my toe. But I assumed that it was doing a catchier opening sentence than *‘Not that it’s important, but I happened to stub one of my toes, once’*. In all cases, this story begins with this event. At least, narratively it does, because chronologically-speaking, there will be some flashbacks later on that will complicate things. But this is a cheap pulp fiction melodrama, not some post-modern auto-reflective essay, so I guess I shouldn’t even be explain-

ing this to you and will stop right now and return to the story. Just play along with me, and accept it when I say that

Everything began when I stubbed my toe.

Yet unaware of this event that would change my life for several minute, I was sleeping, blissfully dreaming of giggling nubile maidens. Their naked skin, covered with the text of a thousand cocktail recipes, was glistening as they were swimming in a river of lukewarm molasses under the benevolent gaze of elderly rhododendrons. I was about to propose a game of water domino to the giggling group when, suddenly, my brain barged in this most pleasant fantasy, blabbering something about the nerves reporting some impact injury from the lower limbs. The details were precipitated and muddy, but the general meaning perfectly clear: toe has met hard surface, toe has bent in a direction that was not within its usual range of operation, and now toe was outraged and would not stop sending waves of agonizing pain until matter would be resolved.

I was tempted to turn my back at the desperate plea of the mistreated extremity. To remains on the shore of the river of molasses, and to frolick with maidens and old, wise shrubberies... Hard it is for a man to refuse such pleasures. But I did. I did because I knew that somewhere, not six feet away, an innocent appendice was hurting. A toe, a good toe, a toe that always did its best, was unfairly suffering, victim of some unknown (but painful) prejudice. This, I knew, could not be tolerated. I had to do something.

So I awoke screaming, grabbing my hurting foot with both hands.

As the bright, shrieking pain subdued into something a trifle more bearable, I became aware that something was wrong. Not a big, capitalized *Something Is Wrong* feeling, like the feeling that washes over you seconds before you open the door and surprise your wife and dog sharing a bath full of whipped cream, but rather a lower-case *something is wrong* feeling, just like when you wonder what happened to this sandwich you never brought home, but never ate either. This subtle sensation of wrongness, in its most benign incarnation, along with the simple but yet unflawed reasoning that something must have caused my toe to suddenly turn into an effective (but painful) alarm clock told me there was no turning back, that I would have to go above and beyond the call of duty. I had to do something more.

So I opened my eyes.

I was floating in the middle of my cabin, or would have floated in the middle of my cabin if it had been big enough to afford a middle. My bunk, solidly bolted to the floor, was a couple of feet under me, and the air of the cabin had turned into a most peculiar seascape. The scum that I forgot to drain from the sink the night before was now floating everywhere, the dirty, soapy water and beard stubbles agglomerating into little urchin-like balls. The remains of my previous supper (the cook insisted it was spaghetti in a spicy sauce; my personal hypothesis was more along the lines of guts of a dead thing in half-congealed stuff the guys drained out of the hydrolic system) was also afloat, like an exotic jellyfish. Socks were gathered into a multi-colored school. Even the bed sheets on

my bunk were adding to the general illusion by moving like kelp, lazily showing in turn green and grey sides that once were white.

By the time I took in all the details of the aquarium my cabin had turned into, I was fully awake and memories were flowing back. I was on the *Could Be Worse*, independent freighter under the commandment of Captain Vandemar. We were traveling the Irulan solar system, on a salvaging mission. Someone probably had turned off the artificial gravity grid while I was sleeping, which resulted in me drifting around in the cabin and slamming my feet in the first hard, sharp-edged surface that came my way.

It was a little bit my fault, I guess. While artificial gravity was enabled for the most part of Void travel, it was part of Charioteer's regulations to always strap oneself to one's bunk when going to sleep. But I was still a wee bit sore, both figuratively and literally, from my misadventure at the Madame Gilbert's (rather misnamed) House of Pleasures, and was reticent to be tied to anything horizontal.

However, my fault or not, Charioteer regulation or not, someone would have to pay for this. Justice and sensibility are luxuries that one can only afford after a first mug of coffee. Beside, I was admittedly a little cranky. When stuck in a too small environment for too long, rats are known to go mad and lend themselves to all sort of unwholesome activities, like attacking the living and raping the dead, whereas humans submitted to the same conditions turn into morons, forget to wash, sing loudly dirty limericks all day long and discuss for hours on how cool their next tat-

too will look. After more than four weeks on the *Could Be Worse*, I was excruciatingly aware that I was belonging to the worse species.

In a rather foul mood, I dressed up, dodging the sea urchins and jelly-fishes floating around me. I caught *The Jaw*, my faithful *Urthquake*, as it drifted in my direction and slipped it in my hip holster. I looked myself in the mirror. Hair like a storm, eyes where white was fighting an uphill battle against black and red, mouth compressed into a thin line ready to spit curses, hiss snide remarks and list dubious lineages. Good. I was looking every bit as bad as I felt. Determined to avenge the atrocity committed toward my still throbbing toe, I punched the cabin airlock's pad and stepped – floated, really – into the corridor.

And almost bumped into a *Gannock*.

For some reason, at least half of the ship's crew was made of those small smelly talking baboons. Vandemar also managed to hire two *Voroxes* as enforcers. The poor beasts were sharing a cabin as big as mine and, we discovered a few hours after take-off, were suffering from latent claustrophobia. As far as I knew, they had spent so far the whole trip curled into tight, six-armed balls.

The rest of the crew, exception made of *Jira*, was human – if one was ready to stretch the definition of humanity a little bit. The *Gannock* before me was a typical representant of his species. Small, sturdy, and grinning like a *Decados* with a pantsfull of weasels. He was obviously unaware that he had foolishly stepped right into the path of ire made (stubbed) flesh.

I glared at the degenerated chimp. He con-

tinued to smile widely at me, glazy eyes showing no reaction to my evident displeasure. He was playing the innocent one, trying to calm me down. Clever fellow, but it was not working.

“You!” I barked, putting more hatred in this single word than one could find in an Avestite’s lifelong achievement.

The ugly bastard didn’t stirred. The grin remained on his lips.

“Oh yes! Grin, grin you deflated runtish excuse of a gorilla,” I hissed between my teeth, “Grin, you shameful bastardly byproduct of an illegal union between a mentally-unstable ourang-outang and a unwashed Kurgan kitchen rug. Grin all you like, you smelly proof that the Pancreator get drunk too. Grin, but tell me who gave the order to turn off gravity, and maybe I will not feel the need to shave your with duct tape.”

I paused to catch my breath. I wasn’t expecting my harangue to make him break into uncontrollable sobs, sporadically intermitted by pleas of mercy. But I was expecting *something*. The Gannock was still wearing his grin. He didn’t even blinked once.

I was beginning to suspect something.

I pushed myself forward. the Gannock didn’t move. I stared at him for a full ten minutes. He hold my gaze, unfaltering. I growled, patted The Jaw on my hip. He didn’t made a sound. Just kept on grinning. My suspicion growing stronger and stronger, I raised a hand, folded all fingers but the index that stood tall, rigid and inflexible as a Reeve negotiating the renewal conditions of a second mortgage. In a bold, forceful motion poked the Gannock in the eye.

* * *

“What is this?” I bellowed loudly, hurling the still-grinning but now one-eyed Gannock into the ship’s post of command.

Without gravity, the Gannock drifted into the room until he hit the captain’s chair, with which he made contact with a soft *schlop*. Vandemar looked down at the Gannock. He removed a huge cigar from between his lips and shrugged.

“It’s a dead Gannock,” he said, “Why?”

Francis Vandemar hasn’t been born ugly. He had worked on it over the years. He was well into his sixties. Bald, except for a few patches of hair that hadn’t understood yet that there is no shame in abandoning a hopeless fight, he was sporting a goatee that was suspiciously looking like a postiche, or a dead gerbil. His eyes were small, red, and were giving the lasting impression of not being of the same size.

Having spent most of his life in the Void, and liking more the pleasures of the flesh than its exertion, he had grown fat in surprising and unexpected manners. Because, again, of his endless wandering between the stars, his skin had take a white-blueish tone that was not unlike the color of milk you can’t bring yourself to trust. A patchwork of scars and burned flesh, an eloquent (although esthetically disputable) testament of his long and lively career, was nicely completing his look.

The vast majority of Wheelers have a healthy respect for pure air. It’s one thing you develop when spending most of your time in a metal box billions of kilometers away from the nearest atmosphere. Vandemar,

however, wasn't sharing this respect. No, the man was a cigar cognoscente. Constantly puffing on one of them, he was perpetually cloaked in a yellow-greyish fog. Indeed, the very walls of the bridge had turned of this color of wonderfully unappetizing color.

But under this walrus' body was hidden the brain of a fox. This man had survived more than fifty years on his wits alone, bamboozling his way through all planets known to man. To boot, he had the most amazing contact network you could imagine. Not a little factor in this network was the vast number of bastards he had scattered across the Known Worlds. Ever heard of sailors having a wife in each port? For Vandemar, it was in each port, train station and bus stop of the whole frigging Known Worlds. How the man managed it, I would never know, but the fact remained that he deserved respect. Kind of.

I flayed my arms dramatically. "A dead Gannock!" I sputtered.

"A dead Gannock," he acquiesced.

I turned my eyes to the crew on the bridge.

"A dead Gannock!" I told them.

"A dead Gannock!" they echoed back in a perfect chorus. Three of them, Gannock themselves, left their station to go play hot potato with the corpse while Marco, the helmsman, merrily sung the first notes of '100 Gannocks on a wall'. Jira, at her position, didn't even look over her crossword puzzle.

I closed my eyes and slowly counted to ten before speaking.

"Vandemar, far from me the thought of declaring the death of a overblown rhesus monkey a tragedy but I was entertaining, perhaps wrongly, the idea that the news of the

passing of a crew member would be met with more sobriety."

The captain smirked around his cigar. "Why? If we were to scream and run in circles each time one of the hairy fellas was kicking the bucket, believe me we would do nothing but jog all day long."

I eyed the old captain with suspicion. "You're not pile-stocking bars of unstable unhexium in open cargo bays again?"

"Nah. The first five times were lesson enough. No, right now the cargo bays are filled with six hundred and thirteen crates of perfectly harmless wrist timepieces. I got them at a bargain price at Shaprut, because of a slight fabrication fault they have. They chime the hour every three minutes. And the arms are not moving in the right direction. But it's nothing that can not be salvaged by a little marketing spin." Vandemar's cigar moved to the other corner of his mouth, "But I'm digressing. What I wanted to say is that we are dealing with perfectly normal death. Y'see, these Gannocks are, how could I say, slightly past their prime years?"

I motioned him to elaborate on this notion of Gannock being beyond their expiration date.

"Y'see, it was a few months ago. I was on Bannockburn and fairly low on crew members. Stupid accident with the airlocks. Anyway. I did some business with a local tribe, and found out that they were ready to sell me their elders for a fairly reasonable price. I bargained a little bit and, well, got myself a whole new crew." A satisfied smile curled his lips.

"You are running around in a rust bucket

operated by senile slave-labor ready to croak at any moment?”

“We are running around in a rust bucket operated by senile slave-labor ready to croak at any moment,” he corrected. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. Gannocks live to tinker. For them, to die in the Void a wrench in hand is the noblest way to go. I mean, look at them. Do they look miserable to you?”

I watched the corpse being used as a surf board by the bridge crew. The old walrus had a point. If the Gannocks were appalled by their fate, they were doing a wonderful job of hiding it. “I guess you are right,” I conceded. A thought crossed my mind. “The bodies. What are you doing with them?”

Vandemar smiled around the stub of his cigar. “We stuff them.”

I was regretting having asked the question. But, as they say, in for a sin, in for a shame. So I opened my mouth again. “What?”

“Stuff them. Stuffed Gannocks sell pretty good.”

“That’s immoral,” I objected. Not that it was truly an argument against doing it, but I felt it had to be told.

“Only if you consider the mounting and re-selling of sentient being as tacky items of decoration as objectionable.”

My killroy blood suddenly burned bright in my veins. “I should report you to the Charitoer Board of Ethic!”

Vandemar was unfazed by the threat. “You should keep your mouth shut, if you want a bribe of 200 firebirds to land in your pocket.”

“You are vile, amoral and despicable. 300 firebirds.”

“225 firebirds, and I’m too good.”

“190 firebirds, and one stuffed colorless mandrill as a bonus.”

“Deal. You are a hard man, Zek.”

Almost two hundred birds in my pocket, along with a jumbo-sized brush I could use to buff my boots with. Not too bad. This unexpected source of income almost cheered me up. But I wasn’t so easily sidetracked, and Vandemar wasn’t off the hook yet. “By the by, Vandemar. Artificial gravity. Is there any reason why it has been cut of?”

Vandemar ordered his crew to move the dead Gannock off the bridge before answering me. “A technical accident. Nothing really. A coolant injector broke. My mechanics are going to fix it as soon as they find a spare part.”

I sat in an empty chair. “It’s so hard to find one piece in all of your spare parts?”

The fat captain laughed. “We don’t have spare parts. But Gawah, the head mechanic, told me we could do without the redundancy systems on life support. I can’t believe we will not find at least one coolant injector in there.”

When would I finally learn not to ask questions I don’t really want answers to?

A little *zgee-dah-blee* sound chirped on the panel of the helmsman, almost immediately followed by a more ominous *zgee-dah-bloo*. Marco punched in a few commands, then let out a shrill shriek of excitement. “Oh boy, oh boy oh BOY! Capt’n! I’ve got news here, and golly gosh are they EXCITING! Wanna hear them, uh, do you do you do you?”

Marco ‘Happy’ Joneson, the helmsman of the Could Be Worse. A few years back, he bought some euphoria-inducing drug from a scraver. Only thing, the scraver forgot to

mention that it was an Ukari drug. Anyone who ever met one of those guys would know that it takes a lot to put them in a giggling mood. In all cases, the drug had quite an impact on Marco's human body, and the effects never wore off.

Since we are talking of Marco, perhaps I should also introduce Jira at this point. Not that there is much to say about her. She was just your average, out-of-the-mill, bespectacled pregnant female renegade Hironem with cybernetic legs and an alternate lifestyle. She was also the Could Be Worse's pilot. What is the difference between the duties of a pilot and a helmsman? There is none, but it was saving us the trouble of wondering if we should call her helmsman or helms-she-lizard.

Vandemar sighed. "I have a bad feeling about this. Okay, Happy, what's the news?"

Marco smacked his lips in delight. "Our scanners just picked up a signal from an object in orbit around the third planet. It's, we are so LUCKY, on a Laplace point. And, are you prepared?, its signature matches the one of La Niña's! It's immobile and we only pick minute electrical emission. Not enough for life support. Isn't that COOL or what?"

Vandemar smiled. "Indeed it is."

Marco clapped his hands. "But WAIT! There is more!"

Vandemar's smile froze.

"We picked *another* signal. A ship came through the jumpgate a few hours ago."

Bad.

Marco looked at the screen before him. "Yup. We have a positive lock on her signature. She's a medium-size warship. A Decados Bloodhound hunter-killer."

Worse.

"Ooooooh, you will not believe this! Unless mistake from my part, she's no other ship than... The Jackal, commanded by Ivanova Decados!"

Lovely. Things couldn't be worse.

By now, Marco was literally hopping up and down his seat in excitement. "And by our last reading, she's heading straight for the object in orbit! At full thrust! She knows it's there!"

Couldn't fate recognize a rhetorical question when it hears one?

Vandemar and I exchanged a look. The old captain took out the remnant of his cigar of his mouth and stubbed it on the arm of his chair. He fished a new one from the front pocket of his jacket and lighted it. "Ezekiel, my friend, this could be bad."

Indeed.

The Decados Bloodhound warships. Sleek, fast and armed up to the gills. Only a hyperactive nymphomaniac on amphetamines freshly out of twenty years of reclusion in an Almathean nunnery could screw you faster than one of those ships.

And it had to be the Jackal...

You see, most Decados are sick, pathetic wankers. Perverted sensualists who read too much of the divine marquis for their own good. They like to think themselves as wicked and evil. But if wearing black clothes, fish-net, too much mascara and getting pleasure off doing horrible things to white fluffy kitten make you evil, then not only I know a girl in Bannockburn that can be eviler than any Decados I ever met, but she can do it for less than five talons too.

The 'ain't we wicked' gig alone is quite unnerving, but they had to raise the antes by finding a copy of 'Machiavelli's The Prince' and decide that playing with other peoples is even funnier than playing with themselves. Now, you just know that something is terminally rotten in the gene-pool when a bunch of guys proclaim themselves subtle corrupters and masters of manipulation, and then turn around and name themselves, with a perfectly straight face, Decados. Rather like a one-man orchestra trying to be a ninja assassin.

Fortunately, when all is said and done, they are pretty harmless. As long as you have a lead pipe near by and aren't afraid to use it.

Unfortunately, this is only true for *most* Decados. A few of them, the ones holding the House together, are of a whole different breed. Unlike their inbred cousins, they were the true descendant of those ancient lords that ruled, a long time ago, over hostile snow-covered lands of ancient Urth. Harsh lands, lands where no human should have lived, but did all the same. And paying a terrible price for it. Those humans wanted to tame the land, but the land made them wild. To survive these humans learned to be cold, to be ruthless, to be as unforgiving as the land itself, becoming much like the beasts roaming its dark forests. And by this I mean the stepwolves, not the arctic chipmunks.

Thousands of years have passed since they left old Urth, but the old lesson was never lost. Survive, no matter what. Those Decados were not defining themselves as evil. And they are not. They are something far worse, far more dangerous. They are pragmatics.

I now give you three guesses to find out to which breed Ivanova Decados was belonging to.

I never met the woman myself, but I had heard plenty of tales and rumors. Reputed to be an excellent captain, she was renowned for her nerves of steel and utter ruthlessness in combat. The prowess of the Jackal against Hazat ships in the various border squirmishes that kept erupting between the two Houses were told in many a tavern in the Known Worlds. It was also said that, curious thing coming from a noble, she was respectful of the many unwritten rules of Void. I have heard from some reliable source that, in her youth, she had anonymously joined the Charioteers and worked with the Wheel for many years before returning to her House.

"Aye," I agreed, "This could be bad. There is no reason for a Decados ship to be in this system. Unless they know the Hazat ship is around. Since they are rushing in its direction as we speak, I guess they indeed know. Which is impossible. No scanner could possibly pick its signal from the jumpgate. Heck, they must barely catch us."

Vandemar nodded. "But they know. And if they get to the ship before us, we will have spent the last weeks wandering the Void for nothing." He turned to Marco, "Happy, how long for us to make it to the Hazat ship?"

Marco keyed in a few commands. "This is *SO* exCiting! We can make it in four hours if we go full speed. And by the way the Jackal is accelerating, she will not be far behind us!" He smiled radiantly. "Sounds like we're gonna have a RACE!"

Vandemar sucked pensively on his cigar. I

knew exactly what he was thinking. We could retreat right there and then. We would risk nothing, but also would gain nothing. Or we could try to make it to the derelict before the Decados. The Could be Worse was not sufficiently armed to challenge a noble House warship, but the Hazat ship, if we could put it online fast enough, could. It was an awful lot of ifs. But the payback...

“Happy,” said Vandemar, “set us in an intercepting course with the derelict. Let’s accelerate at 1:50 ¹.”

Marco’s fist pumped in the air. “YES SIR!” He turned on the ship’s internal communication channel. “Rise aaaand SHINE, fellow crew members, for this is the proBABLY the last day of the REST of your LIFE! Ship’s gonna accelerate at 1:50 in now plus thirty seconds. Everyone in position... This is going to ROCK!”

Cheers came back from the speakers. There was a slight pause, then “wait a second. Did he said *last*?”

I installed myself in my chair as comfort-

¹An explanation is probably required here. Whereas noble Houses and regular Charioteer ships use the well-known metric system, it goes otherwise for the various independent ships wandering the Void. As it is not unusual for those ships to have damage sensors and capricious engines, it is often pointless to try to achieve any type of absolute acceleration. For this reason, the betting scale has been introduced. The idea is simple: the ship is to accelerate until the odds given by the ship’s crew meet the desired ratio. So, for example, if the given ratio is 5:1, the ship is to accelerate until the odds are 5 against 1 that the ship will make it to destination. Aren’t Void sub-cultures fascinating? Okay, enough education for now. go back to the story.

ably as possible. We would accelerate for the next few hours, and there was nothing I could do but soak in the G’s and think happy thoughts. I closed my eyes and left my mind drift back to the day when everything began.²

* * *

Leiguehelm, guilds homeworld. I was on site to report be debriefed of my last case. I was looking for a nice couple of months of vacations at the sunny world of Vera Cruz. Hunting that homicidal Ukari had not been an easy task, and now everything that stood between me and hot sun, beaches and scantily clad waitresses was quickly Commander Erik Theolark, an upstart Hong leader that had called me to his office.

Erik Theolark’s office was large and obviously designed to impress its visitors.

On a wall was a large Hawkwood tapestry depicting a scene where, as far as I could judge, damsels wrapped in yellow curtains where dancing with shaved bears at the sound of two-nosed minstrels playing some kind of instrument made of dead octopuses.

On the other wall, paintings of the most popular artists of the Imperial court. For reasons better left unknown, the utmost trend at the court in matter of paintings were clowns. Traditional clowns, modern clowns, guildmen portrayed as clowns, nobles portrayed

²No, not when I stubbed my toe earlier. I’m introducing a flashback. And yes, there can be two events where ‘everything began’. It’s called artistic license. It’s not good, granted, but hey, if you wanted good style, you would probably not read this in the first place. So stop nitpicking.

as clowns, clowns portrayed in non-clownish ways. Clowns standing in front on breath-taking landscapes. Clowns sitting in dark, grim closets. Clowns painted on canvases of white velvet. Clowns painted using only clown make-up. And this particular wall, of this particular office, was a perfect retrospective of this movement, called Neo Buffoonism.

Covering the remaining two walls, mementos of a thousand strange and exotic worlds. There was a set of five massive Kurgan nose rings, a Li-Halan potato slicer, a shrunken head, last vestige of a victim of (the wooden plate beneath informed me) the mad tribe of spleen eater of Tadeth IV, and many, many other such oddities.

Beside a small fireplace bookshelves well-furnished with ancient, leather-bound books whose titles, it would be apparent on closer inspection, has been erased from the spine to make them look more uniform.

And then there was the central item of the room. A desk, huge, big, massive desk made of the finest, purest white marble.

This office, all in all, was the most expensive display of bad taste I ever witnessed of all my life.

Erik Theolark was sitting behind his desk. With a smile, he motioned me toward a chair dating from the reign of the Hazat Count Herold II. The one that got assassinated for his blatant lack of taste.

“Lieutenant Moerae,” he greeted me. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Can I serve you anything?”

I seated myself and nodded. “I would indeed not mind a glass of whatever you have handy, Commander.”

Theolark clapped in his hands. At first nothing happened, then a faint, low sound came to our ears. The sounds intensified until it was clearly audible. It was low, guttural, incessant. The door to the office opened and a tall servant with a sullen face stepped in, grumbling to himself. This grumble, I realized, was the noise we have been hearing for all that time.

The servant walked to a small cabinet, probably brought back from a world where axe-hacking was still a novelty. From it he took a bottle and two snifter. He poured two glasses, one almost full and the other with barely two fingers of the liquor, and brought them to the commander and myself. All this time, he never stopped once to grumble. As one may surmise, I ended up with the almost empty snifter. I eyes darkly the man. He returned the stare, most stoicly and stopped his mumbles long enough to whisper “you will thank me for it” in my direction. Then he left, resuming his endless and wordless woe-ful litany.

“Leonard,” commented my host. “Not the most pleasant of servants, but he has his utilities.” He raised his glass to his nose and inspired delicately. “It is a Li-Halan bourbon, from 4,934. I’m sure you will appreciate.”

Li-Halan? Bourbon? It was telling me something, my brain was telling I *knew* something about Li-Halan bourbon. But the information was lost somewhere in some dusty synaptic closet of my brain, out of immediate reach. It was nagging, like a word you have at the tip of your tongue but which you can not spit out. Notwithstanding this memorial discomfort, I smiled at my host and raised

the snifter to my lips.

It came back to me the second the liquor reached my lips. Li-Halan bourbon, known to the connoisseur as *futsukayoi no aji*. Made of fish oil and fermented squid eyes.

To my credit, I managed to keep the alcohol within. I swallowed down, one of the most difficult things I ever did in my life, and offered a watery smile.

“It’s... a good year.”

The commander took a sip from his snifter. I almost winced. “It indeed is,” answered the man, looking like he was genuinely enjoying the distilled nightmare he was drinking. “You must wonder why I summoned you.”

I shrugged. “Not really. Or maybe, but only in an abstract and uninterested fashion. The same way that, say, I could wonder if a garter belt on an ostrich would look sexy.”

Theolark put his snifter on the desk and reaches to get a thick folder. “Doesn’t,” he said, “Legs are too skinny. The garters just keep flapping around in the most ridiculous manner. But the esthetic impact of fine lingerie on very big chickens is not what I wanted to discuss with you.”

“My files here tell me that you’re just back from your last mission. The retrieval of some Ukari responsible of the murder of a fellow Charioteer. Because of this Ukari many links to the underworld and friends among the nobility, you have been instructed to capture the creature as discreetly as possible, without creating any wave. Is that right?”

I nodded.

“Then, my good friend could you explain to me why it is written here, in this report, that more than a hundred witnesses saw you

beat this Ukari senseless, using a screaming orphan as a bludgeon, in the middle of a market place bellowing, and I quote the report, ‘who is your daddy, eightballs-for-eyes? who is your frigging daddy now? uh? who?’ ”

I shrugged. “It’s one of those things that you had to be there to understand...”

The commander frowned. “Lieutenant, you are a Killroy. A member of the Charioteer’s secret police. Did you ever wondered why we bother to put secret, in front of police? Because, believe it or not, we want to keep our activities hidden from the public.”

Not even bothering to answer, I fished my badge out of my jacket’s pocket and thrown it on the desk. It’s not like I wasn’t used to this routine. Superiors always ask you to put all your heart in your job, but become all indignant when you add third-party viscera to the mix. But they always come back to you as soon as they need you again.

The commander surprised me by throwing me back the badge.

“Not so fast. Despite this indiscretion,” he looked at the file, “And the torched village, the three city blocks you flattened in your pursuit of the outlaw and the extensive casualty list, the council deemed your mission a success. We have received a transmission of the cartel who hired the Ukari. They say that they are sorry, and that they promise to behave real good if we keep the psychopathic rabid killing machine with the asocial tendencies off their world.”

“As a matter of fact, I summoned here to offer you a reward.”

My left eyebrow suddenly felt the urge to gain altitude and make contact with my hair-

line. “A reward?” That was a whole new concept.

The commander took back his glass and, the sick bastard, sipped from it. “Exactly. You see, three months ago a Hazat war cruiser, La Niña, has been reported missing. We just got the word that the vessel is stranded in an uninhabited system. The same source thinks the crew may not have survived. A Hazat rescue mission is planned for next week. But if, just if, a Charioteer ship could find this cruiser before, and if indeed the crew has not survived...”

It was easy to see where the commander was heading. “Then,” I jumped in, “by the laws of the Void, the cruiser would be ours. A House war cruiser. The craft itself is worth a fortune. And I’m not even thinking about the juicy security breach that this would represent to the Hazat.” I paused. There was something suspect there. “Are you telling me that if I get my hands on this ship...”

Theolark laughed. “Of course not. But a large sum of money would be delivered to you, and the possibility of a promotion could be arranged.”

I considered the situation. Find and return a drifting ship. Easy enough. No danger, just a little time limit to consider. And a huge, shiny prize at the end of that road, provided I didn’t screw up like a bloody amateur.

This was good. Too good, even. Back in the days I was a freighter pilot, my captain once told me: “If you find a talon on the ground, luck is smiling at you. If you find a firebird, there is a drooling psychopath with his hands on his belt-buckle that is waiting for you to bend down.”

Words of wisdom. But, nonetheless, a firebird *is* a firebird.

“I will need a ship,” I said.

Theolark smiled widely, as I tacitly accepted the mission. “You will not even have to worry about that. We already requested the services of captain Vandemar and his ship.”

That was fast.

“I know Vandemar. So I reckon he finally got rid of the Could Be Worse and acquired a real ship?”

The commander cleared his throat. “Captain Vandemar still commands the Could Be Worse.”

“Last time I saw her,” I said, “She was a hopeless rust bucket loosing more pieces in a jumpgate jaunt than a comet does at its perihelion. It was seven years ago.”

The commander just smiled. “That’s good. It means she lost all the pieces she had to loose. The mission does not include battles or such things, Moerae. It only requires an engine and scanning equipment. The Could Be Worse has both. She is the only ship we could get in such a short amount of time, so she will have to do.”

I sighed and nodded. They say it takes a thief to catch another thief. So it was making some kind of twisted sense, using a derelict to catch another.

* * *

”CAPT’N!” nearly four hours of constant acceleration obviously hadn’t deterred Marco’s enthusiasm, ”The Decados warship is within radio range.” He peered at the light

that was madly blinking on his control panel. "And guess what? She's hailing us!"

I looked at Vandemar, Vandemar looked at me. "Jira, considering our respective velocities and accelerations, who will get to La Niña first?"

Jira first wrote the last word on her cross-words grid, then keyed in a few commands on his console, humming a merry little ditty. "If we keep at this speed, it will be a mightily close call. The *Jackal* is a few clicks, but she's closing in real fast."

Vandemar puffed on his cigar stub. "We need to push the engines a little more," he decided. He pushed a button on the arm of his chair. "Boys, can you—"

A strident scream erupted from the speaker, cutting the captain short. "OH sweet mother of *PANCREATOR!* Gregory, fix that *RIGHT NOW*. That valve, someone takes hold of that valve! Jlanek, where is that Gannock? *GAH!* He's having a friggin' heart attack! Milly, give him some cardiac massage, we need him! And *SOMEONE GET THAT VALVE BEFORE IT... DUCK!!!!*"

Vandemar closed the connection. "Forget I said anything."

I sighed and knew that no-one could save the situation, but me. I rose to my feet. "Open the connection," I brazenly commanded before the constant, not to mention forceful, acceleration hurled me at the back end of the bridge, where I met the wall with a loud, meaty smack.

"I'm putting her in," said Jara. "We have still thirty minutes before we reach La Niña."

The forward screen came to life, showing the bridge of the Decados warship. Seated

in the captain chair was a woman. Ivanova Decados.

From the days of her great victories to the present, Ivanova Decados has been a favorite character of Wordsmiths. She's been extensively used for pulp fiction, action novels and, thus is the price of fame, sappy romance books. As one may expect, with time the character has grown into something bigger than the actual person. Don't be fooled; she *was* a most remarkable woman. However, as someone who have known the woman, and not the myth, it is my duty to state the facts as they were.

Next to no pictures of Ivanova Decados has survived the passage of time. But the literature has filled the void, describing the fearless captain as akin to sometime a graceful panther, sometime a ferocious she-wolf, and sometime a fearsome hawk.

All nice comparisons, but none of them actually true. Or even close. You see, Ivanova Decados was not looking like any of those animals.

Ivanova Decados was looking like a chicken.

Don't get me wrong. She was graceful. She was ferocious. She was fearsome. But she was looking like a chicken. A graceful, ferocious and fearsome chicken.

At the time of this story, she was in her prime. Like most Voiders, she was small and lean. She was sporting an unruly crest of red hair. A face cut like a knife blade. Thin lips. Lively, inquisitive smoke-grey eyes. A sharp, pointed nose. She looked like she was ready to peck you to death. A black tattoo, the silhouette of a striking mantis, was covering the left side of her visage, the eye framed by

the insect sharp claws. The tattoo immediately attracted my attention, revealing to me much about its wearer.

She was obviously no idle noble playing captain, but a true professional. No decoration or useless garment on her, just a conventional jumpsuit. At her belt, a tazer and a short, wicked Kurgan blade. Most nobles carries long swords and, worse still, slugthrowers. For close proximity battle swords are useless. If you don't believe me, harm yourself with a six foot-long plunger and try to go fix the toilets of a bathroom where a team of sixty-seven scraVERS are turning the next instalment of 'Shower o' Sins'. That's how unwieldy a sword is in Void fights. As for slugthrowers, on a ship they are nothing but an invitation to Mister Decompression. And you don't want to meet Mister Decompression. Having your internal organs explosively sucked out of your eye sockets is not a pleasant way to die. Don't let anyone talk you into thinking otherwise.

The Decados captain stared at Vandemar. "Captain, I ask you—"

"Tut, tut, tut," interrupted the old walrus, waving a thumb in the direction of the back of the bridge. "It's to him you want to speak."

The Decados' eyes moved from the captain to me. Deep now, I was regretting to be smeared on the back wall like I was. Like it or not, the first image *is* everything.

"Who are you?" asked the Decados, rather sharply.

"I'm Ezekiel Moerae, but you can call me your worst nightmare," I replied.

My words were met with a snort. "Really? Strange. You don't have slimy pseu-

dopods, three heads and don't dance a lascivious polka with sloths caught on fire."

"I didn't knew those were requirements to be one's worst nightmare."

"You obviously never eaten cold Amen'ta borst, Severan cheese and a loaf of black bread before going to sleep, then."

"Cold Amen'ta? With a borst?" I gave a low whistle, "You are obviously a better man that I will ever be."

"And still I don't have to shave nearly as often."

"Yes, but you have those legs to take care of."

"Not since the Engineers did me."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. The Decados captain frowned. I could also see the dialogue replay in her mind. She winced.

"Did my *legs*. My *legs*. Permanent epilation by radiation."

"But enough about my legs. Which are, after all, quite accessory to the current situation. Let's talk about you, mister Moerae. The Mantis has a long memory, and the death of Boyard Gastanov has yet to be avenged..."

Oh hell. Why all our little mistakes have to resurface at the utmost worst time possible? I decided to play innocence. "Boyard Gastanov Decados, you say? I've heard he died of a most unfortunate accident..."

"Indeed. He was clubbed on the head, stuffed into a crate and sent to Agovorox. There, he found himself in the middle of a angorak of twenty-something Voroxes involved in a vigorous mating ritual, dressed in a furry suit and drenched in Vorox musk oil. One witness reported that in the last minutes of

his life he screamed multiple times in Vorox. Unfortunately, it seems that whoever taught the Boyard the rudiments of the Vorox languages made some mistakes. Like mixing up *For the love of the Pancreator, let go of me* and *You big hunk of hairy might, show me the true meaning of ferality.*

I considered feigning sympathy for the late Boyard, but instead decided to keep smiling. Sure, the general rule is that nobles are *no touchies* zone, but this one had it coming. What he did to my friend's herd of goats was simply not something that could be forgiven.

"Poor man. It's always a tragedy when something like this happen. I hope that he didn't suffered too much..."

Ivanova shrugged. "The forensic team is still trying to analyze the facial expression of the Boyard. It is hard to say if it was pleasure or pain, but everybody agrees to say that whatever it is, it was extreme."

I made some gurgling noise that I hope sounded adequately chagrined. "I'm so sorry to hear this... But why are you thinking I am related to this tragedy?"

"Beside the crown of flowers reading *In your face, goat boy!* you sent to his funerals?"

I must admit it wasn't the wisest thing I've ever done. But there was some kind of poetic justice to it. An eye for an eye, a gloat for a goat.

"You know," pursued the Decados, "it's surprising you dared to go attack the Mantis in such a presumptuous manner. Considering who your half-sister is."

...and the lady was doing her homework. This was definitively someone I could grow

to love hating.

"I would prefer to keep my family out of this, if you don't mind," I said, "There is no need to drag siblings in this mess."

The Decados allowed herself a condescending smirk. "Protective of your big sister? That's awfully cute."

"Not at all," I replied, "Pandora is perfectly capable to take care of herself. No, it's just that I don't see any reason to bother anyone while I can perfectly well spank your scrawny behind myself."

Silence greeted me, while we could feel the temperature between the two ships drop to a few degrees below the absolute zero. Jira opened her hand two times. Ten minutes to go.

"But I'm feeling magnanimous today. I know you're not here for me, but for the abandoned ship. Well, I'm offering you the opportunity to turn back right here and now, and I will forget I saw you. How does this sound?"

Ivanova raised a hand and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Let's pause a second. You are sitting in an amalgam of rust and defective pieces that is only refereed as a ship because the Pancreator has imparted humor to mankind. You are wanted dead by my House for the heinous murder of one of its members. I am commanding one of the fastest and well-armed warship there is. We are light-years away of anything. And you want me to turn tail and run?"

I nodded. "That's pretty much the gist of it, aye."

Vandemar choose this moment to take his cigar out of his mouth and raise a finger. "Excuse me, but could I mention here that you

will have to kill both me and my crew to get Moerae?”

Ivanova’s eyes shifted to the old walrus. “I find your devotion to your friend must touching, but—”

“No, no!” Vandemar interrupted, “I was merely stating an unfortunate side-effect that blasting Ezekiel to tiny bloody bits would have. Surely there is a way to avoid such a mess. Like, maybe we could whack Ezekiel ourselves. Or we could eject him through the nearest airlock.”

Good thinking from Vandemar’s part. His bluff was buying us some precious minutes.

“Or we could tie him up and have him delivered to your ship, all wrapped up and topped by a pretty bow. Or...”

Supposing that Vandemar *was* bluffing, of course.

Jira raised a hand and wiggled her fingers. Five minutes to go.

“What I mean to say,” was pursuing the old merchant, “is that you can have the Hazat ship. Sure, I will loose a few firebirds over the whole adventure, but it’s no biggy. I’m just an independent little merchant, so who I am to complain anyway? And Ezekiel? You can have him, dear. He’s so much of a problem to the guild that you will probably receive a ‘thank you’ letter from a few Hong leaders to take him out of their hair. It’s hard to guess when you see him, all polite and reserved like he is. But he can be a real pain, sometimes.”

Independent merchant.

Problem to the guild.

The revelation hit me like six tons of wet pillows.

“Turn the ship around!” I screamed.

Marco blinked, and looked at Vandemar. The old walrus was staring at me as if I’ve lost my mind, but he motioned Marco to do as I ordered.

There was a faint tremor as the thrusters turned us around, and then a vicious reversal of gravity as the ship decelerated itself to a screeching halt. Luckily for me, since we had turned upon ourselves the gravity was still pulling in the same direction, and I remained snugly smashed against the back wall.

On the main screen, Ivanova was mute with bewilderment, as one of her officer was telling her what we just had done. She barked an order in Russian. The transmission was cut, and an image of the Void outside replaced it.

“The Jackal just passed us. They are decelerating like mad and turning in our direction,” calmly announced Jira.

Vandemar took a long draw of his cigar. “Ezekiel, my man,” he said while exhaling the smoke, “I dearly hope you have an excellent reason to have make us st—”

That’s when the main screen turned a pure, blinding white. A second after, the shock-wave hit us.

* * *

I picked myself up from the floor and looked around. The lights were still on, which meant the Could Be Worse still had power. Some electronic equipment had exploded, but the bridge was looking relatively unharmed. Marco and Jira were already returning to their station while a few Gannocks were putting out the fires that were crackling here and there. As for the old walrus, he hadn’t bulged from his chair.

“Status, please,” he asked, while calmly lighting a new cigar over the sparks flying of a nest of wires that was hanging a few inches from his face.

Jira took a few moments to gather the information. “ has been badly hit. Our auxiliary engines are dead. The infirmary reports many wounded and more cardiac attacks you can shake a stick at. Otherwise the impact seems to have actually kicked more system back to working order than broke them. I’m getting reports that the espresso machine on deck three is working again.”

Marco took the relay. “It’s quite a sight outside, folks. La Niña went *kabloomey!* She’s gone, and I doubt we will receive a postcard anytime soon. By the reading I have of the sensors, she was filled up to the brim with quality ‘A’ bottled Armageddon. The Jackal was just out of the killing range, and boy does she look like she’s freshly out of an Avestite’s confession box. One of her main engine is dead, and the other one is leaking on all the layers of the spectrum in a most pretty manner. But I still read life signs. They are still kicking in there.” A slight pause. “And probably screaming. And burning. And running. And—”

“Thank you, Happy.” I said, “Jira, scan in direction of the jumpgate. Happy, open the channels between us and the Jackal.”

The main screen flickered to life. The reception was lousy, but it was enough to see that the Jackal had suffered much. Her bridge was in total disarray, only lighted by emergency red lights and the glow of electrical fires. Ivanova was standing in the middle of this high-tech Hades, covered in sooth,

bleeding from a nasty scratch on her forehead. Despite the situation, she was well in control of herself, and was issuing sharp orders to her surviving crew members. Someone off-panel said something to the effect that the communication channel with the Could Be Worse was back on. Ivanova’s attention immediately snapped in in direction of her own main screen.

“You despectably treacherous low-life son of a thousand bottom-feeding mollusks, you scum of the very bott—”

I raised a hand. “You’re not too bad yourself, but stop for a moment. We didn’t, I repeat, *didn’t* know La Niña was rigged until a few minutes ago.”

I explained for both bridges my epiphany. Imagine that you are at the head of an organization and that your are not finicky about little things like morality and fair play. Now imagine that you have an annoying officer. Not that he’s not doing his job. Au contraire. He’s doing it with too much gusto. So you can’t exactly fire him. And he’s known to be hard to kill. But a plan germs in your mind, much like a spud on a potato that spent too much time in the dark. A third party, powerful and always ready to reward acts of sycophanty, is having problems of its own. If you could get rid of the annoying officer, *and* please the aforementioned powerful third party, wouldn’t that be great? So you contact them, and you obtain of them a decomissioned ship that you bring in an abandoned system and convert into a big booby-trap. The trap is set. Now you only have to push the victims in the right direction. Your annoying officer sadly can’t be sent to

his doom on foot, so you give him the second less expensive way of transport: a rust-bucket full of dead-beat independent traders no-one will regret. Then you leak some information in insectile ears. Hazat ship lost in space. Abandoned. But must be quick, for a Charioteer ship is already on its way. The booby-trapped ship is programmed to signal its presence at the arrival of a second ship. It's important that everybody is rushed, that they run to get at the trap without having time to think about it. And when they get in range...

Ivanova rubbed the tip of her nose. She had listened to my explanation, and now she was trying to assess how likely it I was spinning a tale that wasn't too far out of the truth. Marco, at the console, was frantically waving a arm, requesting permission to speak. I motioned him to keep quiet for the time being.

"It's a theory. But it has a serious flaw, Moerae. That 'plan' is entirely revolving around the notion that the bugged ship was to blow us both to smithereens. But no-one but a bloody fool could hope for the two ships to reach the Hazat at the same time. It's too much of a long shot," said at last the Decados.

"Aye," I said, "La Niña was meant to take one of us out of the picture, and perhaps wing the other one. The second ship would have to face the cleaning crew."

Ivanova frowned. "The cleaning crew?"

I turned to Marco. "Happy?" He beamed at me. "Oh boy, you're so GOOD! It's like a magician show! Long scan reports not one, not two but THREE Hazat warships having entered the system. They are coming right

at us. E.T.A. estimated at now plus five hours. Like you said, they are probably here to FINISH us, put us down like DOGS! You were sooooo right. We're all gonna DIE!" He turned to the main screen and addressed Ivanova. "Isn't he just GREAT?"

I let Ivanova get confirmation this with her own scanners, then spoke my piece. "The Jackal seems to have taken the brunt of the explosion. My guess is that you can't move. We can. And since the Could Be Worse doesn't pack enough heat to confront a Hazat warship, let alone three of them, our best option is to move away and let them finish you. But I'm kind of pissed at certain people that thought that an exploding ship, the cream of the Decados armada and a trio of Hazat cruisers would be enough to get the better of me. And the way Vandemar here pulls on his cigar, I think he's not too amused to have been played as an affordable lost either. so I will make you an offer. Let's put all our heads together and cook something up that will really spoil all those bastards' day. What you do you think?"

Ivanova wiped the blood off her face. "How can I trust you?"

"I'm a Killroy. My job is to protect Wheelers. *All* Wheelers..." was my answer.

She remained silent for a moment, then bite the bullet and took her decision. "I've lost a third of my men, at last count. One of Jackal's main thruster, the left, is dead. We can use the second one, but if we do anything but move at crawling speed we will do naught but spin crazy spirals around. Some of the torpedo bays are still online, and I can have my laser batteries ready for when the

Hazat will be in range.”

I nodded and said that we will move in and dock to the Jackal. I motioned Jira to cut the connection and rubbed my hands together.

“You look like someone who has a plan,” said Vandemar around his cigar.

“Aye. It implies the pyrotechnical destruction of the Could Be Worse and of everything it contains.”

A big black hole suddenly materialized in front of my eyes. The hole was surrounded by the barrel of a gun. Behind the barrel, was the gun. And holding the gun, was Vandemar. “Care ’bout saying that again?”

That’s what I liked about Vandemar. Always open to discussion.

* * *

“They are coming in range...”

The wait was finally reaching its end. I turned my eyes to the main screen. The three cruisers were still fairly distant, but perfectly visible thanks for the Hazat taste for bright red and gold. Most ship running the Void are bland, utilitarian things. The Hazat, however, couldn’t have it that way. Their ships are all magnificent examples of what happens when rococo style gets out of hand. The three approaching ships were designed for war and weighting more than a thousand tons a-piece, but none of them would have looked out of place on a shelf of some old lady living room.

To my everlasting satisfaction, the ships considerably slowed down a few thousand kilometers away from the Could Be Worse and Jackal. La Niña’s explosion after-waves was probably messing their scanning systems

as much as ours, but not enough for them not to detect the small floating objects beeping like clock-work scattered around. Or the fact that the Jackal’s shields and weaponry systems were down. One thing I was sure, though, is that they would not be able to see the cables running between the Could Be Worse and the Jackal. Not that they could make much sense of it anyway.

The ships carefully threaded onward, keeping a safe distance between themselves and the beeping objects. Marco got the time to do a thorough scan of the trio. One toro-class war cruiser and two picaro-class escort, their signatures identifying them as, respectively ‘El Bruto’, ‘Alfalfa’ and ‘Samba del Fuego’. I gave the order to raise the Could Be Worse’s shields.

A console chirped. “They are hailing us,” announced Jira.

I smiled and cracked my fingers. It was show-time. “Open the channel. Sound only.”

A voice immediately boomed out of the speakers. “Independent freighter Could be Worse, this is El Bruto, war cruiser of the magnificent House Hazat, commanded by Don Emmanuel Martinez Alberto Dolores Francisco Pedro Roberto Juan José Maria Javier Diego Alfonso Fernando Pablo Antonio Andrés Gonzalo Luis Miguel Cristbal Lorenz Sebastian Jaime Alvaro Benito Felipe Manuel Agustn...”

Hazat don’t spend their old days running in circle and chanting ’evil’, and thus are *de facto* more likeable than Decados. They are some really good things about them, too. Their food, for example, is simply to die for. As are their women, although they don’t mix

as well with the salsa. But, as it is required by the Board of the Known Worlds' Noble Houses, they also have their obnoxious little quirks. Their brazen taste for the spectacular and tawdry is one. (I mean, come on, who need dozens of golden trumpet-playing cupids sculpted on the prow of your vessel?) Their strict and fanatic adherence to caduc rules of honor and traditions (that are not, you may notice, excluding one of using ships filled with explosives to ruin one's enemies' day)...

"...Domingo Esteban Lucas Simón Toms Carlos Marcos Mateo Nicolas Santiago Hector Jorge Pascual Salvador.."

...and their infinitely irritating pride in their family. Hazat don't have names, they have family trees.

"...Alejandro Rodriguez Pablo Molinero da Silva de las Mercedes Villanueva..."

No, I take that back. They have whole forests. I'm probably prejudiced because my father had a four letters name and no surname whatsoever, but still... I'm all for honoring the name of your father, and of your forefathers, and perhaps of your foreforefathers, but aren't the Hazat realizing that if you push the recursion too far in the past you eventually ends up honoring the name of a small rodent of old Urth's Jurassic era. Anyway... The dude is about to finish his introduction, so we're better go back to the action.

"...de la Peña Sanz del Bosque Escudero Cortés Delgado Galván y de Ybarra Corasone Hazat. We have no quarrel with you. Please step aside and do no intervene as we engage the Decados warship Jackal."

"Hiya, Bob," I greeted with the most cheerful voice I could muster. And considering what was coming down the pipe, it was cheerful aplenty. "You don't mind me calling you Bob, do you? Well, Bob, I'm Ezekiel Moerae, Killroy of the Wheel and temporary officer in command of the Could Be Worse, and I'm afraid that I'll have to tell you a big 'no can't do' about your request. "

"How *dare* you?" erupted the Hazat captain. You could feel indignant spittles hit the transmitter. Hot-blooded, the lord was. All the better.

"Calling you Bob, or refusing to step aside? If you refer to the former, it's because I kind of lost track of your name after 'Alberto' passed for the third time. If you refer to the latter, I'm sorry but the Jackal is heavily damaged and under our protection. As a matter of fact, I'm dully warning you that if you and your escort do not move out of firing range or drop your shields in the next five minutes, I will have no choice but to assume your motives to be hostile and to take appropriate measures."

There was a long silence. "Let's pause a second," slowly said Don Bob, "Your ship is a terminally damaged amalgam of rust and defective pieces that is only refereed as a ship because the Pancreator has imparted humor to mankind. The ship you are protecting is wanted by my House for many crimes against the Hazat House and Hazat protectorate. I am commanding El Bruto, the most magnificent toro-class cruiser there is, and am flanked by two escort ships that outrank your freighter in speed, armor and firepower. We are light-years away of anything that could

save you. And, basically, you want me to turn tail and run?”

“Now, this sounds familiar...”

“Don’t pour salt over the wound, will you,” whispered a voice at my side, “I’ve learned my lesson: it’s not because they are ugly and dumb that they cannot cause lot of damage. Okay?”

“What was that?” inquired Don Bob.

“Oh, nothing. Just the sound of experience being acquired the hard way. To answer your question: that’s pretty much the gist of it, aye.”

Happy motioned me that the Hazat ships were powering up their weapons.

“In this case, Ezekiel Moerae, in the name of the Claw I hereby declare you enemy of all that is decent, good and otherwisely on our side. Prepares to fight.”

“So be it,” I answered, “Do you mind if, before we begin to merrily blow our mutual heads off with naval-sized laser beams, I recite a little bit of the Omega Gospel over the communication channel to uplift the spirits of all our crew members?”

“No, of course not...” said Don Bob. He seemed surprised, and pleased by the offer. Hazat were always big suckers for prayers before and after bloodsheds.

“You are too kind, m’lord,” I said. I coughed, cleared my throat, then recited the old lines.

*“Now is the end come upon thee,
and I will send mine anger upon
thee, and will judge thee according
to thy ways, and will recompense
upon thee all thine abominations.*”

*And mine eye shall not spare thee,
neither will I have pity: but I will
recompense thy ways upon thee, and
thine abominations shall be in the
midst of thee: and ye shall know
who is thine Daddy.*

*An end is come, the end is come: it
watcheth for thee; behold, it is come.*

*Now will I shortly pour out my
fury upon thee, and accomplish mine
anger upon thee: and I will judge
thee according to thy ways, and will
recompense thee for all thine abom-
inations.*

*And mine eye shall not spare, nei-
ther will I have pity: I will recom-
pense thee according to thy ways and
thine abominations that are in the
midst of thee; and ye shall know that
I am the Killroy that smiteth.”*

“And just in case you’re wondering, that’s Ezekiel 7:3. Happy, punch it.”

The Could Be Worse and Jackal engines suddenly blasted to life. Unbalanced by its offline left thruster, the Jackal did not jump forward but sharply turned on itself. The Could Be Worse, linked to the Decados ship by several docking cables, followed.

Now, I will not bore you with details about inertia, momentums and movements in a frictionless environment. You remember that story about David and Goliath? Just picture David’s hand as a thousand tons-plus warship spinning on itself at full thrust, the sling as an array of docking cables a few kilometers

long and the rock in the sling as a decent-sized freighter, its own thrusters adding to the overall acceleration.

Goliath was in for a hell of a headache.

Right on cue, after one revolution and way before the three Hazat ships could have time to react, the cables linking the two ships snapped free, sling-shooting the Could Be Worse straight at the 'Alfalfa'.

The Hazat ship had its shields up. It could have helped it against torpedos or conventional artillery, but against a ship hurled forward at top velocity, it was as efficient as a wall of semi-chewed lettuce leaves. Inexorably, like the clenched fist of a self-righteous Brother Battle smashing into the face of a leprous heretic, the Could Be Worse mercilessly plowed into the Alfalfa. For a moment, the two ships became one. Then the Could Be Worse's engines reached critical mass and exploded, engulfing the two surviving Hazat ships in a ball of solar-strong radiations.

* * *

I fiercely gripped the arms of my chair as the shockwave washed over us. The spectacle was pretty, but it was not time to throw roses on the scene yet. "Happy, status of the enemy ships. Now."

Marco's fingers danced on the console. For someone who never never had boarded a Decados ship before, let alone used their equipment, he was doing quite good. "Alfalfa's begun a new career as an asteroid cluster. Samba's shields are down and its core reactor is sputtering like a Supreme Order Hoovercraft three days past the guarantee. El

Bruto is groggy, but she's coming back online pretty fast. Даша, Тчіс Сугіддіс кеубоарп is sooooo СООГ!"

I smiled. "Fire everything that we have at the Samba and open a channel with the El Bruto. Put us in audio-visual."

Someone raised a hand. It was Ivanova. "Halt. If we do that, it will take us several minutes to recharge. We will be at the mercy of El Bruto."

"El Bruto will not fire," I said, confident. "Trust me."

"You're using that argument a lot, you know?"

"It was that, 'you got to believe in me, Ivanova' or 'shut the hell up, daddy's working'. I thought 'trust me' was the worst of the series."

"You have a point there. Okay, blast the bugger off."

The Jackal fired everything it got. It wasn't much, considering the expensive damages on its power grid and the poor state of its torpedo bays, but it was enough. The volley pegged the Samba squarely, sending her out for the count.

That's when the main screen switched to a view of the bridge of El Bruto. Sitting on the captain chair was a tall noble. He was dressed smartly, and was sporting a truly awesome handlebar mustache, the kind one must wax three hours each morning and protect with little plastic bags when sleeping. At the moment, however, his regal appearance was a trifle spoiled by his goggling eyes and the brick red turning on black color of his skin. He gawked at the image that was displayed before him. "You..."

“...are alive and well, sitting in the Jackal’s bridge rather than being dead and in little pieces in the few thousand kilometer-cubes of Void that was the Could Be Worse’s. Remote controls, aren’t they fun?” I completed. The poor man was visibly in shock, helping him a little bit was the least I could do.

The Hazat lord blinked, then said again. “You...”

“...annihilated one of your escort, and just killed the second. Not to mention that El Bruto herself seems to suddenly have a bad hair day. Is that red lights I see blinking all over your helmsman’s console?”

“You ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO THROW SHIPS AT YOUR ENEMY!” finally managed to spit out the Hazat captain. “It’s again the rules of war. It’s again the regulations. Nobody does that!” He frantically reached for a big volume resting on the arm of his chair. Interesting. I knew that the Hazat were playing it by the book, but I was under the impression that it was only the Hawkwood that were actually always carrying it with them. He flipped through the pages, looking inches away from an attack of apoplexy. “See. In weapons, they talk about missiles, torpedos, lasers, artillery, batteries, mines. But. No. Mention. Of. Ships! You were *not* permitted to do that.”

“This is all very interesting, Bob. Now listen. El Bruto and the Jackal are approximately in the same bad condition. If we fight, it’s a 50-50 probability to who will win. So instead, you and your men will all go stuff yourselves in escape pods and will abandon ship.”

The Hazat stopped reading his book. He looked up. “What?”

“You heard me.”

The lord jumped to his feet and threw the book on his bridge with a grandiloquent gesture. “A Hazat, turns his back to a battle? A Hazat, surrender? You are raving mad, fiend! We will fight until our very last breath! We will leave this battle-ground victorious or dead. You may rob us of our lives, but you will never rob us of our honor and glory.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Really? Then, tell me, dear Bob. Where is the honor in fighting under *that* kind of music?”

I signalled Jira to puts the recording on all channels. It was a recording of the infamous drunken sybil of Stigmata, singing a rather boisterous drinking song narrating the adventures of a muster with severe bowel problems.”

The Hazat lord winced. “Stop... *this*.”

“And, tell me, dear Bob.” I pushed on. “Where is the honor in fighting adversaries like *these*?”

Everyone on the bridge took their headsets and put them on.

The Hazat lord made a low gurgling noise. “What...”

“Bunny ears,” I helped him, flicking one of mine. “Rather cute, no? Oh, and the bleeping objects you mistook for mines, all around us? Well, ask your helmsman to give you a visual...”

The scream that the Hazat captain produced as he saw that the space around the ships was not filled with mines, but grinning, stuffed Gannocks wearing cheap wrist timepieces was later reported to have been heard

on no less than ten different worlds spread across seven solar systems.

By that time, the Hazat captain was covering his eyes and crying bitterly, repeating forever 'stopitstopitsopitstopitstopit' like some kind of mantra. One of his officers stepped forward and hugged the broken man, trying to comfort him. He looked reproachfully at me. "Mister Moerae, you are no gentleman. You should be ashamed of yourself."

I nodded. "Indeed. I am not and I should. So, shall we fight, now?"

The wretched remnant of man that once have been the Hazat captain moaned. "Not with that music... and those ears... and the smiles... the smiles, Carlo... Take the smiles away..."

The officer hugged the captain more tightly and threw a dark glance at us. "You have won, Moerae. We will leave the ship. But this is not over. The Claw has a long memory, and does not forgive easily." With a grim expression, he cut the connection.

Of course, the threat would have been more potent if the man hadn't been holding his crying superior. But hey, you do with what you have.

* * *

Ivanova removed her bunny ears. "Tell me, Moerae, how did you know I once was a Wheeler?"

I smiled the smile of a satisfied cat. "Four things. First, I've heard rumors. Second, it shows you spent lot of years in the Void learning the right stuff. Third, the Engineers only offer epilation to fellow guilders. They say it's

because the nobility is not ready to deal with that level of technology. And fourth, that nice tattoo on your face. It looks a lot like this one." I rolled up my sleeve and revealed the black silhouette of a striking snake.

"The Midgard Serpent..." breathed out Ivanova. "So I'm not..."

I slowly shook my head. "No you aren't, and aye, the time will soon be upon us."

Vandemar loudly cleared his troath. "Sorry, but could you two spare us the hooks for a sequel and pass on more pressing matters? Like docking against my all new Could Be Worse so that I can inspect my new propriety?"

Ivanova sighed. "Can someone reminds me why I will actually give a Hazat ship to this man, and not just kill the whole lot of you?"

I grinned. "Simple. Because if you bring the Hazat ship back at your superiors, you will get a pat on the back. If you give it to Vandemar, you will win a friend with big guns. In the long term, the second option is clearly more advantageous. Beside, you don't know if there's no more Hazat ships that are ready to jump in the system, and you don't have enough men to man both ships. You still need us."

"And you really think your guild will let your friend keep a Hazat warship to peddle junk across the Known Worlds? There's also the Hazat that will be on him like fireflies on an Avestite."

I dismissed those arguments with a flick of the hand. "Back on Leiguehelm, I will report my mission as a failure, and I don't think Theolark will be able to say anything about the new and improved Could Be Worse. Al-

though I hope that he tries... As for the Hazat, to come after Vandemar, they have first to admit that we took possession of the ship in the first place, *and* how we won it. No, I don't think the Hazat will try anything public against him anytime soon."

Ivanova slumped in her chair. "All right, all right. You have the ship."

"Y'know," piped in Marco, "if we were in one of those pulp fiction stories, now would be the moment Ezekiel and the capt'n (the lady, that is, not you boss) realize that despite the incessant bickering and different social positions and adversity and everything, or perhaps because of it, they have come to understand and respect each other, and even fell in love." He paused. "That's how most of the stories end, anyway. The rest of the time, a funny sidekick tells a stupid joke and everybody laugh."

I quirked an eyebrow.

Ivanova scratched her nose.

I looked at her.

She peeked in my direction.

My chest heaved.

She licked her lips.

I nodded at her.

She nodded back.

We both leaned forward. "The joke," we ordered Marco in perfect unison.

"Fine by me. So, there's a Hawkwood, an Amalthean and a Muster are in a bar. Then, enters an Avestite. The Avestite walks to the bar and says..."