

Secret weapons
By Wirewolf

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“No.” Jaffray shook his head. He set the dented gray box back on the rotating display table in the center of the stall. The price the wizened Nefrodian trader quoted was not overly unreasonable. His interest in bartering, however, had diminished and the decaying-meat smell the trader exuded was almost enough to make him bolt. “It’s damaged, the wrong model, and it’s older than you are.”

The Nefrodian stared directly at Jaffray’s forehead. Direct eye contact to her kind was a dire insult. “Then why have you come back?” she pointedly asked.

He suppressed a frown. Experience prevented him from openly showing his dismay. His return to the trader’s dingy collection of scrap items was a matter of desperation. No one else had what he needed.

“To see if you’ve come to your senses. Thirteen fifty. And I’m doing you a favor. No one else is ever going to want it.”

“You want it, that is enough,” was the smug reply. “Eighteen ten. The crystals in it are still good. You tested it yourself. And the crystals are the only thing you want from it, yes?” She sucked briefly on the grimy puttha stick in her hand. Saliva ran thinly down her three-fingered hand.

It was too much. With a disgusted grunt, Jaffray turned and headed for the door. He managed only two steps between him and the foul confines of the Nefrodian’s stall before he felt a brisk swat to the side of his head. It was followed by an angry, high pitched chittering in his ear. He stopped and glared at Temm, clinging to his shoulder pad and staring back with its four black, glittering eyes. Thin leathery wings swatted at him again before folding up against the thin reptilian body. Temm berated him a moment more before settling down, directing its gaze to the doorway. Welsum the Nefrodian stood there, grinning wide enough for the baleen plates to fold down from the roof of her overlarge mouth.

“Your pet, she tells you Welsum is a fair trader, asks a fair price, yes?”

The words “It said-“ were all he produced before Temm’s whip-thin tail lightly circled his neck as mild warning. He ground his teeth, crushing his first response until he could speak with civility. “I still have to get the crystals out. Too much work for more than fifteen ten.”

Welsum absently pulled a remnant of her last shedding from her forearm and flicked it away. Jaffray kept his eyes focused on her forehead and ignored his stomach.

“Must pay for work, yes. You pay me for the time it took to get that regulator out of the wreckage. Many hours in vacuum. Sixteen eighty. I hate hardsuits.” She pulled a face that made her blunt features even more unappealing.

“And I hate buying a whole regulator when all I need are the crystals. Fifteen fifty.”

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The Nefrodian clasped her hands behind her and studied the scarred plasticrete in front of her stall. She only took a moment to decide. With another gaping smile, she brought her hands into view. One held the regulator, the other a padlink.

Jaffray took the padlink and brought up the Daedalus' accounts. Once the transfer was completed and sealed with his DNA scan, he handed it back to Welsum. She confirmed the movement of funds into her account before handing the heavy metal box to him.

Jaffray wandered through the crowds without really concentrating on where he was going. Ordinarily, he enjoyed working his way through open air markets. Today, the horde of beings trading goods was nothing more than a place to lose himself. He would have to return to the Daedalus sooner or later, but he wanted to postpone it as long as possible.

He eventually wound up next to an information kiosk. Gazing at the holographic display, he sought listings of food vendors among the winding paths of the market map. He hadn't thought about eating since entering the Nefrodian's stall. Now he realized he was quite hungry. "I want something to eat. How about you?" he asked the small, brown-scaled creature on his shoulder.

Temm used a thin, clawed forelimb to point briefly at a section of the map. Jaffray frowned, then ducked his head. It was a gesture that he used in place of a shrug, which would upset the Poacthreed's balance. Quaalian food was not his favorite, but it was manageable if one asked for spices to add.

The vendor's counter was nearly empty. Few land-borne species cared for the edibles offered by the semi-aquatic Quaalians. Temm was partial to some of the live food they offered. When they approached the counter, three thick tentacles reached up from the floor of the stall and grasped the gridwork overhead. A long, rubbery body lifted itself into view. The ring of eyespots around the center of the body hovered just above the countertop while tentacles from the other end of the body rose. The Quaalian adjusted the fluid-filled breather mask strapped over its gills before gesturing to Jaffray.

Using the few hand signals he knew, Jaffray ordered a thick broth with extra spices and a bowl of railfish hatchlings for Temm. The Quaalian dropped to the floor and pulled itself to the back of the stall.

Jaffray turned his back to the vendor while Temm slipped gracefully from his shoulder to the counter. He removed the stiff pad and put it on the ground between his feet along with the regulator. While he moved his arm around to ease the kinks he watched the numerous different species that were walking, slithering, flapping or crawling by the stall. Many wore breather apparatus of some kind. Few species could tolerate the specific mix of gasses that humans preferred.

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It wasn't unusual to come across a familiar face in the markets, so Jaffray didn't think too much of the large, heavy-boned humanoid staring at him from a stall across the way. The thick column of a man most likely had mistaken Jaffray for someone else. Jaffray was certain he had never seen the person before. He was mostly human, by the looks of him, but there were physical traits that spoke loudly of some alien material spicing up his personal genetic brew.

The vendor placed their order on the counter with surprising dexterity while hanging from only one limb. Two bowls, one still and dark and the other full of small, darting crustaceans, were placed before them. Another tentacle held a padlink for Jaffray to thumb. After paying for and spicing his broth, Jaffray looked behind him. The man across the way had vanished. Jaffray ducked his head, unconcerned.

It was almost a surprise, then, to find that same face gazing at him from an arm's length when he turned back to the counter. He covered his reaction well, sighting this new variable in his life with only a few rapid eyeblinks. The voice that assailed him was harder to take in stride.

“You are from the Daedalus.”

It was a raw, crushing voice that Jaffray could actually feel in his own chest. He was certain that if the man had shouted everyone around him would have gone deaf.

Jaffray took his time responding. He did his best to give the appearance of sizing up the newcomer. In truth, he was wondering if perhaps he should politely take his leave. The man was, quite simply, too powerful for Jaffray's peace of mind. His frame was thickly clothed with muscle in a way his loose body suit could not hide. His right hand, perched casually on the counter, looked capable of doing unspeakable damage to a body all by itself. Even the skin gave the impression of being tough as any plasti-ceramic. Jaffray might have even considered the possibility he was looking at a construct. The all-too-organic smell that accompanied him was enough to convince him otherwise. The scent was not as strong or offensive as a Nefrodian's, but it was normal among human/Vetin hybrids. The odor and the bony plates that covered his short neck marked him as being of that particular mixture.

Despite his misgivings, Jaffray answered, “Yes.” If there was business to be gained, ignoring it would not make his return to the Daedalus any easier.

“I will charter your ship.”

Again Jaffray paused, slightly perturbed by this man's manners. His certainty of obtaining a berth on Daedalus might be the measure of a forceful personality. It might also have been a warning of serious conflicts to come. To forestall any misunderstandings, he calmly said, “Possibly. Where to?”

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“Athric.”

A private colony and resort rumored (correctly, Jaffray knew) to have an active market in illegal trade items. Not an alarming destination, by itself.

“Payment?”

“Consortium-issue credits.”

Another ambiguous clue. The sixteen worlds that made up the Consortium were stable enough. Their currency was valid, even this far from their borders.

Jaffray weighed the idea. Ferrying a passenger would be a welcome distraction, in light of recent events. There were other considerations, though.

“I’ll have to consult my partner. How soon do you have to leave?”

His question was met with a silent stare. For a second, he wasn’t sure what that signified. He sensed no hostility from the man. It seemed more likely that the idea of rejection had never been contemplated. -Eventually the rumbled words, “Tomorrow evening,” bounced off his chest.

“We’ll let you know before then. Where can we reach you?”

“Kenasorrol House.” He leaned forward, and Jaffray caught a whiff of sour breath. “Do not keep me waiting.”

That was a stroke against him, in Jaffray’s reckoning. Still, he gave a small, tight smile and asked, “Whom should I ask for?”

“M’tunn.”

Jaffray nodded once, and the living pillar left without another word.

Once M’tunn was out of sight, he retrieved his padlink from a closed pocket. The scanner in it had stored an image of M’tunn as well as a recording of their conversation. He linked to the city’s database and began a search on all references to their possible fare. He noted the icon flashing at the bottom of the holographic display with satisfaction. Anyone could run such a search, but few beings had access to the detection programs he had. Any falsified records he retrieved would raise a flag. He slipped the padlink back into his pocket while it ran the search. He turned back to his meal.

“I don’t think I like him,” he muttered. A glance at Temm told him how the small reptile felt about the encounter. Its wings were partly spread, ready for flight in an instant. Jaffray couldn’t blame it.

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He got off the shuttle that ran from the central terminal to dock19 and headed for pad 4. The trip back to the ship had seemed short. Jaffray had been lost in thought, reminiscing about his childhood. He had grown up on a planet much like this one. His home world, however, hadn't been nearly as prosperous as New Gretti. Lack of opportunities meant few kids could to move on to better things.

As a boy, he had wanted nothing more than to be a pilot. His daydreams had centered on him either guiding hulking luxury cruisers from one exotic port to another or flying a single seat fighter for the Union navy, depending on his mood.

As he sighted the Daedalus, he almost wished he had followed one of those paths. Being a secondary gunner and engineer on a successful independent courier ship was something he liked. The pay was good, he met interesting beings and he traveled as much as any two luxury cruiser pilots. There were drawbacks, though, and the prospect of facing Trevin with his news was one of them.

He stopped at the security scanner at the gate of pad 4. The pale orange sun was highlighting the Daedalus' massive engines, glinting off the shiny surface of the four protective cowlings. The effect reminded Jaffray of the smoldering remains of a fire. A fitting image, considering the amount of power that could be channeled through the enormous apertures at the end of her thick, barrel-shaped body.

Temm had no such poetic inclinations and grew impatient. With a sharp push against its perch, it launched itself into the air, displaying the grace and power that made its species such amazing flyers. It snapped its wings several times to pick up speed, and headed for the open hatch under the ship's blunt nose. It coasted until it was near the ship, then flared its wings to reduce its speed. An arrogant flip of its prehensile tail was all it needed to manage the turn after entering the hatch. Jaffray shook his head, briefly caught up in the familiar mix of awe and amusement at the way Temm ignored both gravity and common sense. He moved through the scanner, waiting for the security hardware to figure out that the regulator was not dangerous.

Once he was through the ship's hatch, he felt his gut clench at the memory of his scavenger hunt's conclusion. He sighed and slipped off the shoulder pad. Before he could find an excuse to avoid talking to Trevin, there was a loud crack from down the corridor. A bright strobe of light told him where he was. He glanced at his purchase, frowned, and turned down the corridor that lead to the engine room.

His troubles were temporarily forgotten when he smacked his forehead against the end of an antigrav platform. He staggered back a step, pressing his new bruise with his free hand and swearing vigorously. His black words were matched by the man using the platform. He put the regulator down and pressed both hands against his head, wondering how much damage he had done to himself.

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“You all right, Jaf?”

Jaffray looked up, still grimacing. Trevin was studying him with vague concern, his eye shield turning clear after he shut down the welder. His brown eyes lingered only briefly before noticing the object on the floor.

“What’s that?”

“I’m fine,” Jaffray answered. “But I must have left a dent somewhere.”

“What is it?” Trevin asked again.

Here we go, Jaffray thought. “It’s a Kiersing field regulator.”

Trevin’s expression grew still. His disapproval was obvious. “Where did you get it?”

“Found it in the open market.”

Jaffray met Trevin’s stare. It was almost like staring into a mirror. Their kinship was obvious to most humans. His brother, however, was much more convincing when he was showing his anger.

Trevin clenched his jaw, his expression growing darker. He hated having to worm information out of people, especially Jaffray.

“And why didn’t you see Eijaan? He should have had what we need, and for less than you paid for that antique, I’ll warrant.”

For a brief moment, Jaffray was glad he could meet Trevin’s anger with words that would burn through the mild disdain that sat between them. Then his own feelings about that morning swallowed his thoughts and weakened his voice.

“Eijaan’s dead.”

Denial rushed across Trevin’s features. It was replaced just as swiftly with something kin to grief. That was a feeling Trevin regarded as a weakness, and it withered in the heat of new anger. The liquid slide of emotions ended there. He mechanically slid off the platform, removed his welding equipment and stalked silently out of the corridor. Jaffray waited for, and heard, the outer hatch close as Trevin left the ship.

His own feelings were becoming confused. He was surprised and relieved that the confrontation was over. He even felt some sympathy for his brother. At the same time, he was still minutely pleased to have taken some of Trevin’s smugness away, if only for a moment.

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Mostly, he was puzzled. Trevin had never expressed any real concern for the welfare of their father. He couldn't understand why his death would produce such a reaction now.

Jaffray reached up and shut down the antigrav platform. He watched it settle silently to the deck.

It was well after night had crawled over Daedalus, painting her in the color of her rightful environment, when Jaffray finally extracted the crystals from the old regulator. He gave a small grunt of satisfaction. The crystals were, indeed, in good shape. They were close to being the correct shape and size, too. A few minor modifications would match them to Daedalus' primary inertial dampers. He picked up the bracket holding the old crystals, disturbing Temm. "Excuse me," he said softly.

Something about the crystals enthralled the Poacthreed. It had been staring at them since Jaffray removed them from the inertial dampers. Temm had exhibited the same behavior the last time the crystals were changed. Trevin had been doing the work, and hadn't tolerated the reptile's scrutiny for long. Jaffray saw no harm as long as Temm didn't try to actually touch any of the replacement crystals.

Jaffray gently removed the old crystals from their brackets. Countless microscopic stress fractures darkened their centers. He shook his head. They had put this repair off far too long.

Setting down the old crystals, he began the tedious process of shaping the replacements. He glanced at Temm. The sharply pointed snout that hovered over the discards opened minutely, then closed. The lean body shifted slightly, then the mouth opened and closed again. Temm wanted the old crystals. Jaffray had no idea what the Poacthreed would do with them, but they were useless to the ship now. With a slight grin, he said, "Go ahead. Take them. Just don't let Trevin know."

Temm looked up at Jaffray. It cocked its head slightly.

Jaffray motioned to the discards. "Go ahead."

With an explosion of movement, Temm grabbed all three crystals, one in its mouth and one in each of its nimble forepaws. A snap of its wings sent it flying out of the engine room. Jaffray chuckled.

At the end of his day, Jaffray was sitting in the small lounge, browsing the contents of the net feeds. He was about to head to his quarters when he heard the outer hatch open and close. He waited, watching the doorway. Within moments, Trevin walked by without saying anything or even looking in his direction.

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He didn't seem drunk. Too much alcohol gave Trevin the excuse to start fights with anyone he could find. He looked undamaged, and his gait was steady. Once past the doorway, he went directly to his own quarters and closed the door.

Jaffray listened for any other sounds from his brother, but there was nothing beyond the endless chatter of the net. He ducked his head and shut off the monitor.

It was well into the next day, local time, when Trevin sat down at the controls of his ship. He felt strung out from lack of sleep. He knew how to deal with that. What he couldn't get a grip on was his anger. All his plans, all his arrangements; they had been for nothing. Everything the old man had accumulated was gone, swallowed whole by some worthless dirtside government. The one being he had counted on to alert him against such injustice had disappeared. Inquiries as to Sumpors Numn's whereabouts yielded nothing except rumors. Supposedly, she had recently been placed on the local government's seizure list.

Eijaan hadn't been worth a lot, but his meager business had been worth enough to keep the Daedalus' accounts from showing a loss anytime soon. Trevin had been counting on those funds to restore their finances to the state they had been a year ago, before their encounter with Cecca IV's state sanctioned piracy. The loss of their client's cargo had been bad enough, but the damage to their reputation was far worse.

Trevin's fists clenched as he fought to keep his anger under control. He remembered well enough what happened the last time he had slammed a fist against the control board. There were other ways of dealing with his problem.

He turned to the ship's computer and opened a series of files in preparation to sue New Gretti's government. There wasn't much chance of winning, he knew, and lawsuits were a cold and unsatisfactory way to get what he wanted. There were no other options left to him.

A few minutes into his work, Trevin noticed the memo file with Jaffray's icon attached. He frowned as he opened the file. Jaffray was of little use in dealing with the real threats to them and their ship. Granted, he could hit almost anything that might shoot at them and could keep Daedalus running with critical systems damaged or offline. He was also completely ignorant of the possibility of going bankrupt on some world where seizure of property was a common penalty for breaking a contract.

Making such potential trouble more dangerous was the fact that the Daedalus wasn't actually theirs. They had signed with an anonymous partner who controlled 75% of the ship and its revenue. Their quarter share of the ship and its income, plus the wages they earned, would eventually bring them a ship of their own. That could only happen if they kept their losses to an absolute minimum. Jaffray didn't seem to be able to grasp this, or

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the importance of their lost inheritance. Trevin doubted he knew the value of Eijaan's property at all. He also doubted Jaffray would have even cared if he did know.

It was all the more surprising, then, to find a potential contract waiting for him in the memo. It was a small contract, but real work all the same. The details were few, just ferrying a single passenger to Athric. He saw the results of Jaffray's search linked to the memo. The search engine had finished its job only a few hours ago. He opened that file, too.

Trevin grimaced. M'tunn's files were completely false. Nothing the city's computers had on him was genuine. He gritted his teeth and cursed his luck.

His hand was inches away from deleting the memo and its accompanying search results. He stopped. The idea blossomed into shape within a few seconds. It was perfect. His expression narrowed as he studied the video of Jaffray's meeting with M'tunn.

The man was big, and that was a worry, but they would scan him for weapons when he boarded. With the stash of semi-legal weapons Daedalus had, it would be easy to keep the muscled hulk under control.

He started another search, this time in the city's criminal records. The search was a short one. M'tunn was not his real name, of course. His birth name was unknown, but he most often went by the name Cheevis Cha Raspailli. He had a history of minor offenses and a few arrests. There were suspicions of more serious offenses that had yet to be proven. New Gretti's transportation ministry was trying to build a case against him. They suspected him of being involved with a group of thieves that had successfully hijacked several small ships.

Trevin raised an eyebrow. M'tunn/Raspailli was after the Daedalus?

That would require a complete takeover from the inside, perhaps with help from another ship. It would most likely happen en route. He checked the charts to see what the route from New Gretti to Athric would look like. He found a single spot that looked promising. They would pass near an uninhabited system centered on a large, dying star. The immense amounts of radiation would block any calls for help and separate them from the sensor beacons that lined the space lanes.

He worked at it for half an hour, figuring out the details of Daedalus' supposed hijacking. When he was sure he knew how events would unfold, he smiled grimly and called Kenasorrol House.

A deep, resonant vibration coursed through the bulkheads as the lifter engines were brought to full power. Daedalus surged up through the atmosphere and into the liberating

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arena of space. Trevin sat in the pilot's seat, guiding his ship through the traffic lanes with little effort. On his left, Jaffray watched the engineering readouts. He paid special attention to the stress indicators that monitored the crystals he had installed in the primary inertia dampers. He was satisfied with the results.

On his right, Temm watched both men. Its four lidless eyes glinted dully. It crouched in its special sling, an arrangement that allowed it access to certain controls for the ship's systems. Several special interfaces were clipped to the sling, waiting for use. Temm stretched its wings, flapped them once, then settled into its sling with a muted chirrup.

Twice during their departure, traffic control notified them of necessary course changes. Two enormous freighters were being directed to an orbiting space station and surrounding traffic had to make way. Otherwise, their exit from the system was unremarkable.

Trevin set course for Athric and voice locked the controls. A check of all systems went as smoothly as four years of practice could make it. Once the checks were confirmed, all three left the cockpit. Trevin locked the door and they went about their other tasks.

Trevin was in the lounge, running through the checklist he had created on his padlink when M'tunn walked in. He looked up long enough to nod a greeting to the big man, then concentrated again on his work. It had been a slight shock, seeing their passenger and would-be abductor in person. The padlink recording hadn't done justice to the startling *presence* of the man. Trevin had suffered a moment's doubt, wondering if even getting M'tunn through a security scan would be enough to prove him controllable.

Still, M'tunn was at a serious disadvantage. Trevin knew his plans and had made arrangements to counteract them. Trevin had access to weapons and M'tunn did not. M'tunn was outnumbered. Trevin also suspected he had never before fought against a Poathreed. As small as it was, Temm could be lethal in a close-quarters scrap.

Above all, whatever forces were brought to bear against them from the outside would find Daedalus a daunting target. Trevin firmly believed in having as many secret weapons as possible.

M'tunn sat across from Trevin and began sorting through the contents of his own padlink. Trevin spared him a quick glance. He wondered what plan he had to get himself to safety if the hijacking didn't work. 'It had better be a good one,' he thought smugly.

He was still debating with himself about when to tell Jaffray about their passenger. His brother would undoubtedly be upset about taking on a potentially dangerous client. That was why he hadn't told him in the first place. He would almost certainly have insisted on

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leaving M'tunn behind without ever considering the restorative effects bringing him in would have on their professional reputation.

Trevin called up the Daedalus' navigational charts on his padlink. According to nav's calculations, they had 17 hours before they were in range of the Geberrtta system. He had gone over the route several times and still could see no place else that offered such an effective striking point. Sometime in the next 17 hours, then, he would tell Jaffray.

As if conjured up by Trevin's thoughts, Jaffray stepped into the lounge. Temm came zipping in a moment later, coming to a stop by snagging the back of the couch. It folded its wings, watched Jaffray intently as that one took a seat on the couch beside it.

"Everything's double checked and in order.. The hyperdrive and the dampers are working fine." Over his shoulder, Temm squawked a harsh note. Jaffray looked up at it distractedly. "Hmm? Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot." He dug into a shirt pocket and produced a small chunk of dried meat. He gave it a casual toss into the air. Temm launched off the couch and intercepted it before it could even reach the peak of its arc. Having caught its treat, it lighted back on the couch and gnawed on the tidbit.

After watching Temm's display, M'tunn looked at Jaffray. "Who flies the ship?"

"Computer's handling it," Jaffray responded easily.

Their client's voice was something else that the padlink recording had failed to capture with any realism. To say he had a deep, penetrating voice was to leave out the flutter one felt in the chest, or the slight vibration in any nearby flat surface. Trevin looked up when he heard their client address him.

"No one else on board?"

"No," Trevin answered. "No one else aboard." He smiled openly, enjoying the sense of foreknowledge.

M'tunn stared at him a moment. He finally said, "Must be lonely sometimes." He briefly turned his attention to Temm's vigorous snacking.

"We find ways to pass the time," Trevin explained. M'tunn nodded as if to say he expected nothing else.

"You play nospen?"

Trevin had to fight to keep a grin off his face. "I've been known to play occasionally."

"You have a board?"

"Of course."

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“We’ll play.”

Trevin was both irritated and amused. Being told they would play was irksome. Knowing he would gain an insight of what tactics M’tunn might favor helped to lessen his annoyance. The knowledge would be useful.

Trevin brought out the nospen board given to them as a gift by an Othrodian diplomat. They had once been called on to bring the esteemed ambassador to an emergency council between two warring species. Two ships had tried to stop them, one from each side of the conflict. They had failed, and the ambassador had been generous in her thanks for a safe trip. The board was suitably trimmed with semi-precious metals and featured voice activated controls for beings with digits too large to work the buttons.

M’tunn did not seem attracted to the board itself. Trevin wondered if their client was uninterested in such baubles or simply accomplished at hiding his petty lusts. He watched as thick, powerful fingers deftly arranged the small game pieces on the circular board. Once the game began, M’tunn appeared to concentrate solely on the miniature battlefield that sat between them. Trevin split his attention between the game and his opponent.

The opening moves were uninspired, childish even. Neither man was willing to display his prowess too early in the match. Eventually M’tunn turned his hand to forming a strategic offense. It wasn’t much of a strategy; a simple arrangement of forces designed to bludgeon the enemy into submission. Trevin countered with an equally uninspired defense that he knew would, ultimately, cost him the game.

As the contest concluded, Trevin could see that M’tunn was deliberately leaving openings in his arrangement of pieces. A clever player could use such openings to prolong, or even win, the game. He decided to play along, to a degree. Pouncing on one opening with tempered determination, he fought with only enough energy to seriously diminish M’tunn’s forces without actually changing the outcome of the game.

With the last of his three citadels weakened and surrounded, Trevin acknowledged his defeat with an air of frustrated acceptance. When he looked up at M’tunn, that one was staring at him with an unreadable expression. Trevin did his best to project forced good humor. He congratulated him on his win.

“Again?” the hulk rumbled.

Trevin appeared to hesitate a moment before agreeing. It was time to see the other side of their client.

Their second game started with M’tunn using a slightly subtler offense from the beginning. He was trying to test Trevin’s perception, he knew. Trevin had other ideas for the game, however. He easily kept his defense from suffering any serious losses

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while gradually wearing away at the weaknesses in M'tunn's attacks. He kept the balance of loss for both sides even, with M'tunn always a few turns behind, a few pieces short.

At the end, Trevin used a tactic the Othrodian diplomat had applied against him. M'tunn was suddenly and unexpectedly forced to scramble to cover the holes being punched in his weakening defenses. When it became obvious that defeat was inevitable, M'tunn calmly surrendered his remaining citadel. Trevin studied his opponent.

"Giving up?" he asked with mild surprise.

M'tunn stared at the board, ignoring the question. "You played much better that time." He looked up. "Much better."

They stared directly at each other. Trevin wondered if perhaps he had tipped his hand a bit. The closed expression M'tunn wore gave no clue as to what he knew or thought.

With marvelously dramatic timing, the computer chose that moment to announce a general proximity alert. There was another ship in the lanes with them, and it was too close.

With a twinge of concern, Trevin said, "Time?"

"Twenty one seventeen hours," the computer told him.

Seven hours too soon.

Trevin's brow furrowed as he tried to envision where they were in relation to any nearby systems. He heard Jaffray say something. "What?"

"Do you want me to check it out?" Jaffray repeated.

His thoughts quickly focused. 'Stay in control,' he told himself. "Yeah. It's probably some private vessel moving to pass us." He kept his voice neutral.

Once Jaffray was on his way to the cockpit, Trevin glanced at M'tunn. The man was still staring at him. Keeping his tone light, he added, "Happens sometimes. Someone misjudges the distance between the ships."

"How did you do it?"

Trevin took a breath while he tried to decipher the question. "What do you mean?" He did his best to keep his voice level.

"How did you beat me so easily?"

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He took another breath while he relaxed and figured out the best response.

“I just took advantage of what I had learned from the first game. I try to be observant.” He even managed a little smile. “It doesn’t hurt to have a little luck, too.”

“Was I so obvious?”

Trevin shook his head. He didn’t want M’tunn to get spooked before making his move. “Not obvious, no. As I said, observation and luck.”

A long, silent pause ended with, “You have very good luck.”

Trevin almost frowned again. He wasn’t quite sure what M’tunn meant by that. He was spared any more thought on the subject when Jaffray called.

“Trevin, would you come up here, please?”

Trevin took his leave with a thin, tight smile and a quiet, “Excuse me.”

In the cockpit, Temm and Jaffray were both looking at the tactical scanner. Now Trevin did allow himself a frown. The frown deepened into a scowl when Jaffray said, “We have company, and I don’t think they’re friendly.”

The tacscan showed not one or two ships, but four. They were on an intercept course, moving in formation. “Any comm traffic?”

“No. There’s no one else in the area.”

The ships were closing in fast. They were all small, private vessels, but that meant nothing. A luxury yacht could house a single, large gun and be moderately shielded. Two of the newcomers actually were small yachts. The others were slightly larger, high-speed freighters, the kind used to move small amounts of goods in a hurry. Trevin thought about their options for a moment. Fighting would be difficult against such small ships, but not impossible. The problem was not knowing what weapons they carried

“Jaf, send a friendship greeting. Temm, get wired.”

As Jaffray sent the message, Temm squirmed into the modified sling it used for combat. Trevin helped it get the connections hooked up and carefully slid the small hood over its head. Two manipulators were strapped to its forepaws. The sling itself was connected to the floor and ceiling with thin metal cables. Sensors would detect movement of its wings and body as it ‘flew’ in place, held by the sling. The video feed to the hood on its head would give it the information it needed to see the ships outside and their relative position. The manipulators controlled the weapons systems; one particle laser, one ion cannon, and the illegal missiles concealed in a false cowling on Daedalus’ belly.

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As far as Trevin knew, no one else had thought to allow a Poacthreed to fly a ship. Not just fly it, either, but also fight it. Doing so was most likely illegal in most systems. Luckily, the anonymous owner was wisely uninterested in Trevin's methods for keeping Daedalus safe.

He got on the intercom and told M'tunn that it would be best if he moved to his quarters. All he got in response was a grunt. Trevin pursed his lips in mild, grim amusement. The doors to the cockpit and the engine room were locked. There was no place critical he could go.

The approaching ships were almost in range of Daedalus' weapons. Trevin wondered briefly if it would even be necessary to tell Jaffray about their client when the whole episode was over. He could profess ignorance of M'tunn's intentions, saying the records had turned up clean. He disliked lying to his brother, but occasionally it was better if Jaffray simply didn't know all the details.

"Any answer?"

"No," Jaffray said. "They're jamming the frequencies."

"Fine. Temm, it's yours."

The little flying carnivorous reptile squawked harshly, extended quivering wings, and turned the Daedalus into a huge extension of its fierce fighting instincts. As the distance closed between them and their pursuers, Trevin shut down the hyperdrive and engaged the Daedalus' sublight engines. The throbbing that had marked their passage through atmosphere returned, doubled as he gave full control of the throttles to the Poacthreed. Temm opened them wide, drawing the power it needed to make Daedalus match its commands.

Three sharp thrusts of its wings pulled its sling taught against the restraining cables. Daedalus mirrored its actions, swinging her blunt nose around until she was facing the approaching ships. The motion could barely be felt as the new crystals in the inertial dampers soaked up the destructive g-forces.

The four approaching ships opened fire simultaneously, battering the courier with an assortment of beam weapons ranging from a multi-frequency laser to a cannon firing high energy packets of plasma. Daedalus soaked up the fire, her defensive screens flaring brightly. With the last possibility of disengagement gone with their attack, Temm eagerly sought to cripple their newest enemies.

A twitch of its wings and a flip of its tail sent the Daedalus into a rolling end-over-end spin that brought her into line with the nearest yacht as it passed. A swipe of its forepaw triggered the ion cannon. Its bolt of focused energy spiked directly into the yacht's engine. The yacht immediately lost power, drifting out of the combat area along her last powered trajectory.

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Whoever was commanding the attack group was quick on the uptake. All three remaining ships tried to use Daedalus' own tactics against her. Temm, however, was much too fast. Its razor sharp instincts and nimble flying kept Daedalus from getting hit anywhere critical. Temm had taken out one of the fast freighters when it noticed the other yacht had stopped some distance away. It took advantage of the still target, sending several volleys of laser fire into its forward screens. As it worked its wings to bring Daedalus around, it noticed a flash of sharp blue light. It felt Daedalus lurch, and was aware of alarms sounding in the cockpit. It heard Trevin's voice shouting.

“Rail gun! That's a rail gun!”

A ship-mounted rail gun was the only projectile weapon, aside from missiles, that could do serious damage to another ship in space. It fired tiny slugs of some heavy metal, usually thorium or uranium, at velocities approaching half the speed of light. Such 'half C' weapons were highly illegal in most systems but that didn't stop certain people from using them.

Temm quickly checked the brief display in front of one eye that showed the damage Daedalus had taken. They had been lucky. The shot had gone through one of her main engines, destroying it. If they were hit in the crew area, the bulk of the ship would be crushed. Temm put all his effort into avoiding the range of the yacht with the rail gun. He had only minimal luck.

The second yacht fired several more times. Temm was hard pressed to avoid being hit. Dodging the projectiles was simply impossible. When the yacht fixed on Daedalus again, the rail gun fired and they lost another engine.

Jaffray had been busy using the particle laser to pound on the remaining freighter. He changed targets when he realized that the second yacht was their primary concern. Moments after losing the second engine, Trevin came to the same conclusion.

He could see that winning this fight would take much more than he had anticipated. He also saw that they had only one opportunity left to win without losing more of the Daedalus. He moved to the pilot's seat and took over the controls. Both Jaffray and Temm voiced their opinion of having control taken away, but he wasn't listening. He was trying to get Daedalus lined up so the remaining freighter was directly between them and the yacht with the rail gun. Before he could reach that relative safety, they lost a third engine.

Temm lay in its harness, waiting for Trevin to realize his mistake. Jaffray moved to the engineering interface to see what damage had been done to Daedalus' main engines. Arguing with Trevin was useless once he made up his mind.

Luck was with Trevin. He had his ship lined up with the two remaining enemies, keeping the one with the rail gun opposite the second freighter. He turned to the

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weapons controls and started the sequence that would launch one of their few missiles. He was almost ready to fire when he heard a loud squawk from Temm. Trevin looked up at the tactical display. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The yacht had opened fire on the freighter, puncturing the crew compartment. The projectile then slammed into Daedalus, hitting one of the dead engines. The debris that sprayed from the freighter hit them a second later.

Trevin shook off his astonishment. He briefly considered turning the ship so the three dead engines were between their remaining engine and the rail gun. Looking at the carcass of the second freighter told him that would be useless. He concentrated instead on aiming their missile.

As the targeting scanners locked on, Daedalus was hit again. The slug tore into the superstructure between their remaining engine and its neighbor. The ship spun, but it didn't matter. Trevin fired their one and only UHV missile.

The illegal and very expensive missile flew in an arc that would carry it to its target. It had no warhead, only a thin layer of thorium for a nose cap, an engine to carry it to its target and a tiny, single use hyperdrive. As the Ultra High Velocity missile closed on its target, Daedalus was spared any further attacks by the rail gun. The last yacht turned its weapon towards the missile. There were only a few seconds until impact.

Those aboard the Daedalus didn't see the missile's impact. They did witness the tremendous release of energy as the missile fired its hyperdrive to ram itself through the yacht at just under the speed of light. Much of the energy released reached into the visible wavelengths. A bright white cone of fire appeared from behind the dead freighter as the yacht was converted to its smallest components in a flash.

With their last enemy dead, Trevin turned to Jaffray and asked, "How bad is it?"

Jaffray looked up at him. "Bad, but I can fix one of the engines with parts from the others. It'll take a while."

Trevin nodded. He moved to where Temm was still hanging in his sling. He removed the hood from its head. "You can start once we take care of one more problem."

"Problem?"

"M'tunn was with them."

The look on Jaffray's face was harder to take than Trevin had expected. "You let him in here knowing this would happen?"

He stared back without apology. "We needed this to restore our reputation. *Think* of it, Jaf! We just fought four ships, one with a rail gun, and we *won!*"

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“We haven’t won anything!” Jaffray protested. “That crusher is still aboard, with us!”

Trevin undid the connectors to the sling and loosened it. Temm began wriggling out of it.

‘So what?’ were the words Trevin didn’t get to say. He was interrupted by the door to the cockpit opening. He immediately knew M’tunn would be armed from their own weapons locker. If he could bypass the lock to the cockpit, the locker was within his abilities. The last thing he considered before he actually saw M’tunn standing in the doorway was how fortunate it was he was carrying his anti-personnel pistol.

The intruder raised his huge fist, clutching an absurdly small pistol. Trevin recognized it. It was Jaffray’s. It fired finger-long needles wrapped in mono-molecular filaments. On impact the filaments peeled back, forming hundreds of razor-sharp strands. A projectile half a millimeter across would leave a hole the size of a fist.

“You fly quite well,” M’tunn rumbled.

“Not me. It.” Trevin nodded toward Temm.

Dark brown eyes shifted, taking in the sling and its occupant. Temm stared back. “Interesting,” was the quiet comment. He gave a slight smile. “Ingenious.”

“Effective,” Trevin countered. He wanted to keep M’tunn calm and talking until he could find a moment to draw on him. “It managed to wipe out all your friends out there.”

M’tunn focused on Trevin. The smile widened. It became an open mouthed grin as a grinding sound that almost passed for laughter assaulted their ears. “No friends.” He held up his padlink. “I flew those ships remotely.” The smile waned. “It has always worked.”

“Until now.”

M’tunn stared at him. “I have what I want. This ship is worth more than those four. Powerful, fast, well armored. A good trade.”

“Why not just kill us and take Daedalus without a fight?” Trevin heard Temm squirming in its sling and wished he had managed to finish unhooking it.

The smile was gone now. “You play nospen. You should understand the need to avoid triggering alarms.”

Trevin nodded. “An obvious battle. Several dead ships, and no Daedalus. We get written off.”

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“Yes.” M’tunn aimed the gun at Jaffray. “And now-“

Trevin’s gut tightened up as he forced himself to calmly add, “You forgot one critical thing.”

M’tunn was frowning now. Without shifting his aim, he narrowed his eyes. “Don’t bother playing stupid games with me.”

“No games.” Trevin nodded to the empty hall behind M’tunn. “You didn’t count on my secret weapon.”

No one breathed. Temm grasped the last strap of its sling with its claws, ready to rip it away. Jaffray kept his eyes to the floor, thinking about how seldom luxury cruiser pilots got hijacked.

Trevin lifted his lips in an ugly grin, knowing that it was almost over. He only needed the brute to shift his aim for a moment.

“No,” M’tunn said, passing judgement. “Not good enough.”

Only Temm was able to follow the sequence of events that followed. It saw the gun fire, aimed at its owner. It knew Jaffray was dead and clawed its way out of the sling while Trevin was only just raising his own gun. Speed and claws were the only weapons it had, and it used them with great effectiveness. Before M’tunn could shift his aim to Trevin, Temm swept past the man’s face. One taloned forepaw raked across the lumbering giant’s left cheek and eye, shredding both. It snapped around and hit him again. Knowing it couldn’t get through the thick plates around M’tunn’s neck, it settled for turning his ear into bloody ribbons.

Trevin winced at the staggering volume of the man’s roar. Temm’s attack, however, had done its job. M’tunn raised his hands to his face, giving Trevin the chance to fire his pistol. Three armor-piercing rounds slammed into the big man’s chest. That should have ended things, but M’tunn had prepared. The armor he wore absorbed the impact of all three shots without breaching. It couldn’t save him from the physical blows, though. The breath was driven from his lungs and he dropped to one knee.

Surprised, Trevin aimed at M’tunn’s head, intending to finish him. Before he could, M’tunn slapped the door controls. The door shut, separating the two sides. The control panel on their side sparked at M’tunn shot into it from the other side. They were locked in the cockpit.

Trevin leaned back, taking a moment to steady his breath. He saw Temm light on Jaffray’s stomach and peer into the huge hole in his chest. Trevin felt lightheaded when he looked at the body of his brother. It was like one of those badly acted holo-dramas Jaffray was always watching. The hero would be lying with grievous wounds, reassuring

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those around him that things would work out in the end. Then he would show up in the next episode none the worse for wear.

Jaffray was still and silent. His chest was not moving, except for the few tiny blood bubbles that leaked from his collapsing lungs. Temm looked up at Trevin, its unblinking eyes regarding him without emotion. Trevin stared at the little Poacthreed, not understanding what it might be expecting of him. He wasn't even sure what he felt, except enormously hollow. Some part of him was shocked into numbness, but what might come through when the numbness wore off was beyond him.

He felt paralyzed. He knew Jaffray's death demanded action, but he couldn't manage to come up with any ideas.

"I don't know what to do." He hesitated. "I don't know...I..." He closed his mouth, unable to control what came out of it.

Temm turned and stared at the door of the cockpit. It looked back at Trevin. 'Take care of that one,' he took that to mean.

"How?! We're locked in here now. We can't..." His voice trailed off. He had suddenly become impotent before the cold, uncaring death of his brother. It was a new and bewildering feeling, and the weight of it seemed to crush him.

Trevin's mind was suddenly wrenched from its morass by the sharp slap of small wings against his head. He threw his hands before his face the same way M'tunn had. He was uninjured, but his focus was undeniably taken from his dead brother.

Once Temm had his attention, it walked to the pilot's seat. Trevin stared, confused. Temm *never* walked anywhere. He continued to stare, his confusion growing. With a glance over its narrow shoulder to make sure he was watching, Temm got into the chair. It leaned over the seat and deftly tripped a switch near the base. The curious, low pitched hum of the emergency inertia dampers powering up cleared the fog in Trevin's head. He now saw exactly what he had to do. He looked down at Jaffray's body. That would have to be taken care of first.

It took a few minutes to get Jaffray into his seat by the engineering monitors. By the time the body was strapped in, Trevin had blood all over his hands, arms and chest. He did his best to ignore it. Temm was nestled in Trevin's lap, quietly chirping its complaints about the straps that were pressing it against the human.

Trevin made a few adjustments to the Daedalus' flight systems before he shut down the primary inertia dampers. He activated the small backup system. It created a field around the seats in the cockpit. He could feel the difference between the two systems. The seat dampers weren't designed for comfort. They were meant to keep the crew alive if the primary system went dead. Once everything was ready, Trevin opened the ship-wide intercom.

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“M’tunn,” he called. “Are you listening?”

At first, only the sound of harsh breathing answered him. A pained grunt followed by a curse was next. When nothing else reached them, he said, “I know you’re part of a hijacking ring. I know your name is Cheevis Cha Raspailli. I know the authorities on New Gretti are looking for a way to tag you with other hijackings.”

“You know nothing.” It seemed to Trevin that the man’s voice had lost some of its forcefulness. “There is no ring.” He drew another harsh breath. “I *am* the ring. And this ship is now *mine*!!”

M’tunn/Raspailli’s ferocity only served to quell Trevin’s anger. He suddenly felt very tired. He touched the throttle controls. The Daedalus lurched forward on thrusters. “Do you feel that? The inertial dampers are off. I have control, not you.”

“Not for long,” snarled the intercom.

Trevin’s voice softened, as though he were losing the energy to continue the conversation. “The man you just shot was my brother.”

Silence on the other end.

“I’m taking you as payment for him.”

Still nothing. He glanced at the navigational readout, checking their course. He didn’t know how long it would take to get to Athric with only one engine. “Jaf, check our-”

Temmm looked up at him and chirruped a quiet note. Trevin closed his eyes and tried to stop feeling long enough to do the job at hand.

The Daedalus’ thrusters opened up, propelling her to deadly speeds. A moan went through her superstructure that matched Trevin’s for despair.

The warm Athric sunshine was soaking into Temmm’s muscles as he drowsed. It had been doing a lot of sun-sleeping during the last three weeks, local. It understood that the processes on which it was waiting could not be rushed. It had used the unavoidable wait to relax and plan.

Its nap was interrupted by the arrival of the repair yard’s overseer. The being, a slow moving mass that resembled a mobile hedge, dragged itself across the yard to a derelict ship that had been there since Daedalus’ arrival. The overseer moved around the old ship, a private vessel by the looks of it, several times before calling someone on its

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padlink. Minutes later, a huge breaker platform was settling over the unfortunate ship like a rusting spider claiming a new victim.

A quiet squeal came from Temm's padlink. It had brought it up to the top of the Daedalus while it sunbathed, just in case the call he was waiting for came through.

The message was from the transportation ministry of New Gretti. Temm scanned the document for the relevant items. First was the confirmation that the DNA from the remains sent to Athric's criminal labs belonged to M'tunn/Raspailli. Second was confirmation of the authenticity of the in-ship video feed chronicling the murder of crewman Jaffray. Lastly were their congratulations on removing the criminal from circulation after committing said murder.

Moving further down the document, Temm found the information of concern to it. The transportation ministry had made their report to the insurance providers and, as dictated by Temm's contract, would authorize repairs to the Daedalus.

Satisfied that its ship would be moved to a dry dock within a day or two, Temm began creating an entry in Athric's local job network. It was certain that Trevin, wherever he had gone, was not coming back.

He had no problem coming up with a suitably interesting description of the jobs it had to offer. It used the same enticements that had brought Trevin and Jaffray into its employment. It also specified that all applicants had to have experience in flight combat and personal combat. Temm firmly believed in having as many secret weapons as possible.