

MAIDEN VOYAGE

A FRONTIER/ELITE UNIVERSE STORY

by
Vasquith de Havilland

Based on Frontier: First Encounters by Frontier Developments
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Prologue

“And you say she’ll reach orbit?” Vasquith de Havilland cast a weary eye over the ship. An Adder. 15m long. A displacement of fifty five tonnes.

And covered head to toe in rust.

“Don’t let her looks fool you. The engines are sound,” said Steve Wormsley, duty manager of the New Rossyth Shipyards, run by Argent Aerodynamics Amalgamated Inc.

“It’s her structural strength I’m worried about.” The pair moved around the ship. De Havilland gingerly reached out to touch the ship, afraid she would collapse into dust at his touch.

“You’re the engineer. Do some calculations or something,” said Steve. De Havilland saw him look at his wrist-chrono again. De Havilland was holding him up – they were moving the Adder to the wreckers to make way for an experimental Saker. One way or another, the Adder had to leave in five minutes. “Look, do you want it or not?”

De Havilland grimaced. She wasn’t a pretty ship, but Steve’s boys had given it a quick once over. He wouldn’t try and sell it to de Havilland if he wasn’t sure it would fly. He wasn’t that kind of friend.

No, he didn’t really want it. But he couldn’t afford a brand new ship. Not even a refitted and serviced one. It was this or nothing. He had already handed in his notice to Kane Scott, his manager at the AAAI Advanced Research and Development centre.

“Yes.” He turned to face Steve, who had a credit transfer module in his hand. De Havilland inserted his credit disc into the slot and watched a life of savings disappear. A flash, a beep, and it was done.

He was broke. Not a single credit to his name. Just a piece of shit Adder with a tonne of hydrogen fuel in the engine. He had no choice now. He was committed. He hadn’t made a jump like that since he was 18. Was it the right decision?

“Ok, Dev, take care of yourself.” Steve extended his arm. De Havilland took the hand, grasping it firmly

“Thanks for your help Steve.” They locked eyes. Steve gave a muted smile.

“You’re not coming back, are you?”

de Havilland smiled and slapped Steve on the back. “I’d better get this rust bucket out of your way.” With a nod, he turned and ascended the boarding ramp.

The cockpit was smaller than he imagined. The interior was dark, lined with burned out light globes. He wedged his big frame into the pilot’s acceleration couch and strapped himself in. He ran a hand through his fiery orange hair, forcing it off his face. It needed a cut. He studied the controls, looking for the buttons he had seen in the quick simulation he had done earlier. This was going to be his first flight. Ever. He had been playing in the deep end all his life though. He found the button labelled ‘VTOL – IGNITION’ and pushed it down.

A rush of air filled the ship bay as the Adder jumped into the air. De Havilland saw the exhaust billowing around the confines of the bay, coming up over the view windows of the cockpit.

His radio cracked into life. “Let me get the doors for you, Dev.” It was Steve, though his voice was a little strained. De Havilland looked up and saw the roof slowly separate and fold away.

Oops.

“Thanks, Steve.”

The Adder continued to rise until it cleared the building. Now de Havilland wanted to fly forward. He found the controls next to the ignition: THRUSTERS. He pushed forward on the lever slightly.

The ship lurched, pushing him back into his seat. The city disappeared below him as he raced across Argents Claim, the most populated planet in the Alioth System, despite being a terra-formed world.

He pulled back on the controls. The terrain slipped away until all he could see was the blue sky.

Then clouds, then darker blue, and then black.

He was in space.

Chapter 1

The outdoor planet of New World was a cool world, with an average temperature of five degrees. It was the second rock from the type 'K' star Hoessbe, seventy five lightyears from Sol. It was the true frontier – a colony world of prefab buildings and wide eyed pioneers etching out a living.

De Havilland brought the old Adder down slowly towards Jeffries Luck, the only starport village on the planet. He kept a delicate hand on the controls, jogging the thrusters ever so slightly. He squeezed his lips together in concentration. His newfound skills came from necessity – his rusting ship would fall apart if stressed too far. Especially after that last tangle with a pirate.

That was the reason he was visiting the planet: Replacement hull panelling and armour. The landing skids contacted the solid terra-crete landing pad. The ship slid down another metre on its struts until the suspension equalized.

De Havilland turned the ship off with a smile. Sighing steel and coolant valves voiced their own opinions, giving the ship an almost life like quality. He patted the controls. "Well Mary Jane, You got me here in one piece. Now it's my time to do you a favour."

He opened the outside doors and a blizzard of snow and dead leaves burst inside. De Havilland stepped back in surprise. His cold weather gear consisted of the vest he was currently wearing. He held his arms across his chest then ducking under a bulkhead, walked down the landing ramp onto terra firma.

The slow blinking lights of the control tower were dead ahead. Below the tower was the multi storied hub of the starport – customs, stockmarket, shipyard and a transport terminal to the city proper. De Havilland made his way through the snow, leaning into the wind, teeth rattling like an old alarm clock. The starport doors opened automatically. A sheet of hot air blasted down on him, smothering any lingering thoughts of hypothermia. His skin tingled, coming back to life. He shook the snow from his orange hair, flattened from the weight of the snow, and moved into the building.

The first floor was quiet and mostly deserted, but a look at the local clock indicated why; it was midnight. His own wrist-chrono was seven hours ahead, but he knew that outlying planets shunned Mean Galactic Time, especially if it was noticeably different from the local solar day.

It was a large, open expanse, wire ropes cordoning off several areas, indicating where cues should form. This was the customs and ticketing floor. A bald man yawned behind the customs desk to his left. All other official areas were dark, shut down for the night. As de Havilland approached, he noticed the crisp uniform, but saw a vacant expression in the mans eyes. Perhaps he was high, or dreaming. Not caring either way, de Havilland stopped at the desk and put his ID on he counter. The customs official's eye's focused then panned over to look at the ID. He scanned it and the computer emitted a pleasant beep. The officer looked at de Havilland, gathered himself then spoke in a lazy drawl. "Landing fee of one credit."

De Havilland shrugged and counted through his hard currency. Two months ago, he didn't have a dollar to his name. Now he could docking bills and a little extra. He placed a bronze coin on the counter.

"Business or Pleasure?" De Havilland raised his eyebrows then pursed his lips
"Pleasure?" He asked, looking outside. The officer grunted and entered something into the computer. "Have a nice day."

De Havilland stared at him for a second before giving another shrug. "Sure."
Local time had moved on two whole minutes. 00:08. He suppressed a yawn while he looked for the transit bay. He wanted to get into the city and find a real bed and some real food - two fundamentals to life the holovids of space travel managed to gloss over. He followed the signs back out into the harsh elements and onto a bitterly cold platform. At the terminal sat an old 3290's model PL-train. Passive Levitation. Nice engineering, but design aesthetics had moved on in the last fifteen years, making it a cheap but reliable machine for a frontier colony. De Havilland gave a mental salute to the city engineer as he climbed aboard. His added weight didn't even so much as rock the behemoth, its cushion of magnetism powerful enough to ensure it never fell to earth. The maglev was empty and dim, every second glow bulb dark. The darkness tempered by the overhead gas giant gave the scene an eerie feeling.

Minutes passed with no movement or sound. The mag-lev finally shook and a steady whine built up as the primary systems activated. De Havilland realised the mag-lev had programmed departure times.

The ride into the city was brisk and uneventful. Snow covered the landscape. Multi story hotels confronted him on exiting the city terminal, flashing prices indicative of the distance from the core. Life was cheap on the rim. Shivering from the snow, he hurried to the closest hotel.

The cold blizzard looked glorious the next morning. The snow had melted away, the sun shone bright and the city looked crisp and clean. It would never reach tropical temperatures however. People were on the streets, moving at a slow pace. The odd ground car drove along the roads. It was nothing like the hustle and bustle of New Rossyth, back in the Alioth system. He hailed a taxi and told its AI the address he had been given. Satisfied, he settled in for the ride.

The small colony city disappeared behind the rolling hills of yellow tussock grass and farmland with sporadic farm houses dotted across the otherwise mundane landscape. Native animals grazed freely with no visible fences. They stayed clear of the road however, seeming to know it wasn't their territory. The houses became simpler the further he went, but the vehicles and farm equipment all looked new. De Havilland knew that that was only because it was a new colony. If he came back in a hundred years, he would probably see the same equipment rusted and inoperable.

The taxi AI changed the power ratio of the wheels to climb a steep hill. As the taxi reached the crest, de Havilland saw a valley spread out before him. A river came in from the eastern hills and ran parallel to the road. De Havilland stared at the water, slowly winding its way through the valley without a care in the world.

There was something in the field ahead. As they got closer it began to take shape, from a dark lump of nothing into a low slung triangle with an aft section full of manoeuvring thrusters. It was a tricked out Mamba Racer and it was just sitting in the field, minding its own business.

But as they got closer, de Havilland saw that it wasn't parked at all. In fact, it probably hadn't flown in a good thirty years.

It was a wreck. Gutted by fire, it was little more than a hollow shell. More ships became visible until de Havilland saw an entire fleet of wrecks lying in fallow.

A small farmhouse squatted between the ships. The taxi slowed and pulled into the driveway, stopping near the front door. The AI's electronic voice buzzed the price of the fare. De Havilland reached forward and swiped his card and climbed out of the taxi. The taxi backed out behind him, but de Havilland didn't even notice. He was too busy looking around the junk yard. Whole ships, parts of ships, components, equipment, he could have a field day in their, playing, fixing, scavenging.

The ships surrounded the house like metallic hawks. A bird screeched in the distance, making de Havilland jump. He gave a final look at the closest Osprey starship then made his way towards the house door.

He door opened to reveal a small old and white haired man. He wore gumboots and overalls, a beard and a toothy smile.

"You'll be that young de Havilland then," he said with a slurred, throaty voice. It sounded like the sun had parched his voice box dry. de Havilland pushed his hair off his forehead.

"And you'll be Mr Peterson." De Havilland reached out and the two shook hands.

"Pleasure, pleasure. Please, come in." Peterson turned and led de Havilland through the hallway to a small wooden table tucked into the corner of the kitchen

"Take a seat, please," said Peterson. De Havilland sat down then saw Peterson dive into a high cupboard.

"If you don't mind me asking, what would a struggling colony need with old ship hulls?" De Havilland asked. Peterson came back to the table with an unlabelled glass bottle and two ceramic cups.

"I always like to do business over a drink," he said with a grin. He poured the pale brown fluid into both cups.

"I wouldn't have it any other way." De Havilland kept his features relaxed as he moved the drink to his lips. It smelled like grease stripper, possibly one of the ingredients. He closed his eyes and took a decent swallow.

Fire raked his throat and he thought he was burning from the inside out. He coughed and spluttered, collapsing on the table. He took a few deep breaths then levered himself upright. The old man looked slightly blurry, like the rest of his kitchen.

“Might need to tweak that homebrew, old man,” de Havilland whispered through his coarse throat.

“On the contrary, I like a drink that separates the men from the boys.” There was an edge to his voice. A challenge. De Havilland wasn’t going to hide from it. Focusing his coordination, he grabbed the vessel and brought it to his face. He locked eyes with Mr Peterson and tipped the rest of the drink down his throat.

He was lying down on something cold and hard. Dirty white above him. The ceiling. He was on the ground. Peterson appeared above him.

“A struggling colony doesn’t need ship hulls, but they do need metal. Fibre optics, super conductors, high tensile steel, you name it. The local handyman can find everything he needs on a starship. Not a bad business, actually.”

De Havilland rolled his eyes to get some focus. Peterson shook his head. “You shouldn’t drink that much at one time, lad. It’ll kill you.”

The old timer wasn’t wrong. De Havilland felt like he had just run this head through a trash compactor. He took Peterson’s offered hand and carefully pulled himself back into his seat. He held his head with one hand and grasped the table with the other, afraid of falling again. A million hydrohammers were pounding away in his skull, rocking, shaking, destroying his brain from the inside out. He couldn’t think straight, let alone get any words out.

“Ahh, don’t feel bad, lad. She gets easier with practice, but you did ok. Once your mind sorts itself out, we’ll go looking for that Adder you inquired about.” De Havilland tried to look at Peterson, but just saw a haze of colour. He hoped he nodded before collapsing back to the table.

Chapter 2

The Adder looked in good nick, despite its obvious age. To de Havilland's left, there was an old Eagle Mk I with a gaping hole through the right wing nacelle. To his right, Cobra Mk I sat in near perfect condition, save for the fact it was missing a cockpit. The last owner must have jettisoned in an escape capsule, possible to escape pirates. Given the ship had survived, the pilot must have jettisoned his cargo. How it had ended here was an interesting story in itself.

The Adder looked flawless on the outside. Peterson led him up the open boarding ramp to find a completely empty ship. No equipment, no bulkheads, no wiring, no insulation. It was just a superstructure, painted in the standard primer grey. He walked into the centre of the ship, looking around, imagining. Instead of using these hull panels on his ship, he could just transfer the innards of his ship to this hull. That way he could customise the entire ship.

But that would take money and time, and he didn't have either. He could probably disassemble a good portion of the derelict's hull and store it in his cargo hold. Then he could do work at his leisure. It was the best option.

"Ok, I'll take her."

"Great. How did you want to move her out?" De Havilland rubbed his chin then flicked his hair out of his face.

"Maybe I could bring my own ship over and do the work here?"

Peterson pursed his lips for a moment and shrugged. "Ok, why don't we talk about it over a drink."

De Havilland sighed. The cost of doing business.

The moment the world went dim, old survival reflexes kicked in and de Havilland suddenly wished he hadn't returned to town. He leapt out of the taxi and looked up.

Tens, hundreds of spaceships screamed across the city at high altitude, blocking out the sun. De Havilland instinctively knew something was wrong – Too many ships for such a remote system. And they were flying an aggressive formation. Concentrating on the high fliers, de Havilland took a moment to register another, closer noise. Loud, thunderous, coming from the left. Fast.

A slim, small triangle zoomed past, almost scraping the rooftops, kicking up dust and rubbish along the street. De Havilland's clothes rustled and whipped in the wind which threatened to knock him over.

Then his instincts kicked in. Ones he hadn't had to use in over ten years.

Danger.

His hand went for his gun but clutched at air. His head flicked down in panic. His weapon wasn't on his belt, but in the cockpit of the Mary Jane. He cursed at himself. Always be prepared!

It was too late for regrets. He had to find another weapon. Another two ships roared by overhead. De Havilland threw his body around a drainage conduit as his hair and clothes tried to escape and follow the ships.
BOOM!

The eastern sky went white, then coalesced into an orange fireball. The ground shook rumbled as if from an earthquake; Roars and squeals of vertical thrusters and retracting landing gear filled the air.

It was an invasion!

So where were the defenders? All starports had a small quota of Viper Defence craft, if not a few Pulse-Flak cannons. He spun around, scanning the sky for any clue of retaliation, but saw none. His eyes settle on the starport control tower. That was where the local police was station.

De Havilland broke into a sprint, heading for the city mag-lev terminal. Ships hurtled past in there tens, losing missiles or firing their laser weapons. Flames reached up for the sky as the city shook again.

De Havilland leaned forward and doubled his speed. Buildings collapsed from missiles and bombs, blowing their innards out like a shrapnel grenade. De Havilland put his hands up to shield his face as the bottom floor of a

building blew out in front of him, knocking him sideways, caking him in dust. Coughing, he weaved through the debris.

He reached the maglev terminal out of breath. You've gone downhill, mate.

The train was still and silent, parked against its stop. There wasn't a single person around; they had likely fled to their homes. De Havilland stopped and thought. He could just get a taxi, get back to his ship and get the heck out of the system. But he wouldn't be able to pilot through a throng of pirates. One pirate was challenge enough.

Give me a laser rifle or a knife any day.

He took a step forward, gritted his teeth then forced the sliding doors of the train open. He stumbled in, but didn't stop, bumbling along the trains corridor in the dark. He slammed aside a door labelled 'Keep out – Authorized Personnel Only'. A computer module greeted him with the slow blink of a red standby light. The system was designed to operate autonomously, but a backup control system for humans was always a design prerequisite. He ran his hands over the dark controls. He found and pushed a sliding switch. The overhead lights flickered into life. The control board began flickering with new colours and noises.

De Havilland frowned. For a machine which could only go forward or backwards, there were way too many controls. His eyes darted across the controls, searching for something which resembled a 'GO' button.

There! A speed lever and direction knob. He selected forward then gently pushed against the lever. The train groaned then idled forward, sounding as if awaking from a deep sleep. De Havilland pushed the lever to its stop.

The train broke out of the blocks, throwing him back. He grabbed a hand rail and leaned forward, looking skyward through the front view pane. Ships streaked across the sky like choreographed dancers in a light show, complete with smoke and sound effects.

De Havilland mentally urged the train faster; he felt exposed out in the open. He was breaking all the rules he had been taught. He just hoped it wouldn't cost him.

The train ripped to a stop, the tracks magnetism easily coping with the trains momentum. De Havilland hit the platform running. The attacking ships were concentrating over the starport. Their primary target?

The hub doors opened automatically for de Havilland who raced through, nostrils flaring. It took him two steps to register the scene before him:

A flock of people on their knees, hands behind their heads, huddling in a group.

Surrounded by big, rough men. Men with weapons. Weapons as dangerous as their operators.

De Havilland analysed the scene in a heart beat. He didn't stop running. This was exactly what he had been trained for, all those years ago: Urban tactics and hostage 'negotiation'. He sped up.

Straight towards the closest pirate. The pirates turned, took half a second to realise what was happening, another half second to override the shock and tell their arms to move. Their weapons turned to face de Havilland. The closest pirate was faster than the others, brining his weapon up to de Havilland's chest, but his face went pale. His firing finger froze for the faintest of a moment as determination turned to fear.

It was all de Havilland needed. He took a final step then launched forward! He rammed into the pirate shoulder first and grabbed the pirate's lapels as they crashed into the floor. De Havilland didn't miss a beat, using his momentum to roll the pirate on top.

THUMP! Two laser blasts tore into the pirates back. The pirate screamed and went limp. De Havilland's hands moved on automatically, old reflexes taking control. He reached out and grabbed the pirates carbine, an old 250Z, with one hand, while he used his other to lever the cadaver up to protect him from the rear. He grasped the trigger and fired.

Someone screamed and collapsed. De Havilland didn't savour the moment. His body was running purely on reflex. No thought, no emotion, just action. He twisted the carbine around and up. The weapon centred on the stomach of the second pirate. De Havilland pulled the trigger while the weapon was still moving, cutting the pirate in half.

He kept the weapon spinning in the same arc, pulling his body around and dumping his human shield to the floor. He screamed. Loud, angry, wild. He locked eyes with the closest surviving pirate who just stared at him. The pirate

had his weapon aimed, but his trigger finger loose. De Havilland smiled inside. Never underestimate the shock factor.

THUMP! The pirate flew backwards, his head snapping backwards from the blast. The body skidded along the shiny floor. De Havilland's scope panned to the last pirate, who dropped his weapon and put his hands up.

De Havilland fired. The pirates face froze in shock, a question left unanswered on his lips as he crashed to the floor.

De Havilland slowly brought his weapon hand down, breathing hard, letting the adrenaline flow out of his body. He was aching. That had been easier when he was younger. He got to his feet. He felt the rise and fall of his chest, his tingling nerves, the light-headedness. The cowering people began to get to their feet and move around, throwing nervous glances in de Havilland's direction, talking hurriedly amongst themselves. De Havilland looked at the pirate bodies, rerunning the fight through his mind. Yes, he had been a bit sloppy, a bit slower than he should have. Fortunately the pirates had been even sloppier – they were rank amateurs. Their formation had practically invited attack.

Yes, his days of running head first into danger were over. He shook his head, still a little giddy from the adrenaline.

One of the pirates moved. Not a nervous twitch, but a slow shake of a man in pain. De Havilland moved to the pirate. It was the one he had shot in the foot. He was struggling, clutching for his weapon, mouth stretched open in pain, his eyes barely open. De Havilland stared back, wiping all emotion from his face. He brought the rifle down, barrel first, mere centimetres from the pirate's forehead.

"Don't – he's unarmed." A voice from behind. De Havilland narrowed his eyes and fired. The backwash of the shot blasted over his face and hair.

The entire starport hub went silent. Someone began to cry. De Havilland ignored the people, collecting the weapons from the dead pirates. Their kit was all rubbish, but it was better than nothing. Especially if more of them came along. He strung the weapons over his shoulders and moved to the closest door, checking outside for hostile activity. He heard footsteps and turned to see a man with a large barrel chest approach. He had a blue uniform and a red face.

"Why haven't the Vipers launched?" De Havilland asked quickly before the man could say anything.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" The man waved his index finger at de Havilland's chest, as if he wanted to poke him. De Havilland rose to his full height, clenched his teeth and narrowed his eyes. The finger retreated, but the red face did not.

"You just killed an unarmed man and a man who had surrendered to you. Doesn't that mean anything to you? You're under arrest."

De Havilland smiled. He knew this cop. Made from the same mould as million other policeman. Short sighted, letter-of-the-law types. There was no reasoning with them. A fist to the chin or an elbow to the ear usually sorted them out. His eyes drifted to the people beyond the policeman: mothers, children, families. A little ginger kid ran to his mummy, who dropped to her knees, crying. They didn't need to see any more violence today. De Havilland leaned forward, nose wrinkling at the cop's breathe.

"Touch me and I'll kill you," he whispered. He moved back, turned to the windows and looked skyward. "So why haven't the Vipers launched?"

The cop ground his teeth together. "They damaged the launch bay. The first thing they hit. We're helpless."

"What do they want?"

"They're pirates. What do you think? Ships, precious commodities, credits, you name it."

"So where are the rest of them?" As if on cue, the pirate bodies began to splutter and splurge static. De Havilland rushed over and grabbed one of their radios. The static cleared and a triple set of long beeps echoed through the hub, followed by two short and another two long.

"They're pulling out," said de Havilland. "We'll be safe if we just wait here for them to leave."

"But they're going to take everything!" Someone said. De Havilland turned to face the black haired man, whose moustache reached his chin. "Can't you do something?"

“Why the hell should I? It’s not my problem.” That quietened the people. He hadn’t rushed in to fight the pirates for their sake – he just wanted information. Answers.

The window went dark from a shadow. He saw an old Python, probably full of stolen goods, blasting upward. It was flying for something at high altitude. It looked like a telegraph pole with stumpy ends. He taps his fingers on the carbine and waited.

Chapter 3

Gratuitous destruction. It wouldn't be mercenaries, armed forces or rogue police; only pirates could engage in such an orgasm of pillaging.

Most buildings lay in ruin. They had gutted the starport, plundered the city stocks and raided people's homes. There was nothing left. Nothing to eat, nothing to trade. The Federation rarely helped out the independent colonies. A most dire outlook.

But it wasn't de Havilland's problem. He had nothing to gain by hanging around. He stood at the centre of landing pad 1, surrounded by the other starport survivors, looking at the lingering smoke and shattered buildings.

It was time to leave. He shrugged the weapons on his shoulder off, keeping a carbine and pistol and pushed his way through the people back toward the starport.

"Wait, can you help us?"

"No." de Havilland didn't turn to face the speaker. This wasn't his fight. He had fought enough of other people's battles. He wasn't going to do that again. Ever.

"Please, we need your help." A woman this time, her voice pleading to the man within de Havilland. He slowed. Something inside struggled to say no to a lady in need. He realised he had changed his pace, cursed himself and sped back up.

*

Mary Jane was gone. So were all of Peterson's wrecks.

The fields were deserted.

"Shit."

The sound of crunching gravel behind de Havilland made him spin around, pistol out at waist level. Peterson yelped and put his hands up. "Watch it, lad."

De Havilland grimaced, then put returned the pistol back in his belt. "Sorry, old man." Then he turned serious. "Where did all the ships go?"

"They took them."

"They?"

"The Kildred Clan."

"Pirates?"

Peterson nodded. "The biggest in the quadrant." De Havilland pursed his lips and looked around the empty fields. The taxi sat in the driveway, the engine slowly ticking over. He gave the fields a final look and sighed. There was nothing to do but head back to the city.

"I'm going to go get my ship back," de Havilland said slowly. Peterson's jaw dropped fractionally, but he nodded and went back inside, closing the door softly. De Havilland briefly wondered what would happen to the old man. It would be a shame for him to go under. He pushed the thought from his mind and climbed into the taxi.

*

It was a colony meeting, held in the only open space left – the starport. De Havilland caught snippets of conversation indicating the pirates had kidnapped several colonists. Some thought they would be used as slaves and whores. Killed for sport said others.

De Havilland mulled it over as he worked his way through the crowd standing before a makeshift stand erected at landing bay 3. The pirates couldn't sell the slaves to anyone but the Empire, which was too far away to be profitable. Well, they could sell the colonists to other pirates, de Havilland conceded. Otherwise they would keep the colonists for themselves. It depended on the number taken versus the pirate clan's size.

A man walked onto the stage, stopping by a voice reproduction system. His noise banged out through the noise-globes beside him. De Havilland kept walking forward, only half listening to who he assumed was the mayor of the city. He talked of crop seizure, stolen money and commodity theft. The mayor explained how this left 'very little' – spin for 'nothing'. A murmur spread through the people. De Havilland could feel the negative energy. Concern turned to fear, which grew into anger – anger at the situation and the pirates. People moved, pacing, stomping, yelling, as if the physical activity could dull the pain. The barrel chest cop approached the voice system. His uniform looked clean and tidy now; his hat keeping his bald head warm.

"We can't let the Kildred Clan get away with this. We need to fight back!" The cop bellowed through the sound system. "Once we fix up the Viper launching bay, we'll have a whole squadron to strike back with! We will claim back what they stole from us!"

Some people booed. Someone yelled out 'Suicide'. Those that cheered the policeman's speech retaliated with 'doing nothing is suicide'. De Havilland agreed, but suspected the reason the police were telling the populace was because they needed volunteers.

The cop confirmed his suspicions. "Unfortunately, many of our police officers fell in the raid. We don't have enough manpower for a counterattack. We need every able bodied man to join us in our crusade to reclaim what is ours."

The crowd went silent. All the men sounding brave a second ago had gone quiet. De Havilland snorted in disgust. He had no time for cowards. If you weren't man enough to stand up and protect your own family, you didn't deserve to have one.

De Havilland reached the stage and hauled himself up next to the cop. The pair locked eyes. The cop's lips curled up in a snarl; de Havilland narrowed his eyes to slits. The cop took a step back, yielding the voice system to de Havilland.

"You're all cowards!" He screamed. The crowd visibly flinched, but apart from a few gasps, they stayed silent.

"The men out there who won't do everything they can to protect their loved ones isn't a man at all. Even an animal shows more backbone! You're despicable! All of you!"

The men began to move. Some fidgeted, some raised their clenched fists, cursing at de Havilland. He knew that testosterone and trampled egos made a bad combination. Another lesson he had learned, the hard way, in his old life.

"Hypocrite!" Spat the cop, pushing de Havilland back a step. "You speak of cowards, yet you won't even try to help the weak and defenceless. Get out of—" de Havilland's hand shot out and he squeezed the words from the cop's throat. The cop gasped, taken by surprise. His face went red. He lashed out, trying to dislodge the hand on his throat, but de Havilland was ready, warding off the blows before palming the cop in the nose. He let go and cop crashed to the stage. The cop squinted daggers at him, but didn't move, save to massage this Adam's apple.

"I gave ten years of my life fighting your wars. Ten whole years! I spent my prime defending the weak, preserving democracy and making sure all of you could go to bed safe at night," cried de Havilland, swinging his finger at the crowd, stopping on the cop.

"Now its my turn. It's my time to live my life as I want, not as dictated by the greater good or our governments, and you dare call me a coward?" De Havilland forced his shaking fists open, barely able to control the rage growing inside him. He could feel his chest expanding and falling as blood and adrenaline flowed through his body. Ready to fight. Ready to survive. He turned back to the crowd.

"They stole my ship. I'm going to get it back. Get me into their base, and I'll show them what happens when you cross the 301st."

The crowd burst into noise and movement as people whispered to one another, pointing toward de Havilland, explaining to one another who the 301st were.

Marines. Federation Marines. A legend made at the insurrection of Alioth and continued through the Tihalia rising and the Cassiopeian incident.

De Havilland had honoured that legacy with ten hard years of his life. He had earned his freedom, peace, and the right to be a selfish bastard. Now a two-bit pirate gang thought they could take that away from him.

They were wrong.

Chapter 4

Two in the morning. The mayors office. A council of war. A council of civilians. Apart from de Havilland, there wasn't a single ex-military in the entire room. Their only asset was Jeffrey, the man with the barrel chest, who was actually the police chief. The man had some previous training in tactics, buried somewhere under his bald scalp.

But tactics and experience meant nothing without relevant intelligence, which was something they were lacking. The only information they had was a hyperspace entry cloud remnant and a grainy picture of a Lynx Bulk Carrier – de Havilland's telegraph pole ship

"Interpol has been looking for the Kildred clan's base of operation for years. They've never found it, because it didn't exist," said Jeffrey. He tapped the picture of the Lynx. "This is their base of operations. They keep moving, staying one step ahead of the law." Jeffrey turned to another policeman, Dave, and motioned him forward. Dave cleared his throat and glanced at his datapad. "The Lynx made a hyperspace jump to the Ninalin system. It has a single red dwarf star and a few small rocky planetoids. A useless system."

"They may have made a misjump," said one of the men behind de Havilland. Dave nodded thoughtfully.

"Entirely possible," he said. "Given the mass of the Lynx however, it won't arrive at its destination for several weeks. This gives us time to check the target and surrounding systems. Wherever we find the hyperspace exit cloud, we find our Lynx carrier."

"Bit hit and miss," de Havilland noted. Jeffrey turned to de Havilland with a snarl on his face. "We might not be the 301st, but we're going our best."

De Havilland put his hands up in mock surrender. "Just saying, is all. You're right, it's the best option we have."

"And once we find them?" Asked Mayor Gordon, who had kept silent up till this point. "Get me and some volunteers on board and we'll rip them a new one," de Havilland said, folding his arms across his chest.

"The police vipers can keep the pirates busy, while Mr 301 flies into their base and acts like a barbarian," said Jeffrey, voice laced with scorn.

"We can outfit one of the Vipers for you, Vasquith," said Dave.

"I'm not a combat pilot," said de Havilland. "Better get a pilot for that Viper." The room went quiet. Everyone looked at De Havilland, a silent question on their lips.

"What?" He asked. "I've been in space for two months, and I survived that long by avoiding combat." He shook his head, voice sombre. "I'm not a super hero. I'm just a man who was forced to kill as a young man. Get over it already." The room stayed silent for several moments. Dave cleared his throat.

"I think I have just the pilot for you."

She was tall, blonde, well toned and strutted around the pilots briefing room with her head held high, as if nothing could touch her. Dave seemed a little nervous around her.

"Name's de Havilland," said de Havilland, hand out for a friendly shake. She took it with a firm grip, crushing his fingers. De Havilland's jaw dropped but he moved straight into a smile. "Nice."

"Nothing nice about me, sugar." She squeezed his hand again, but de Havilland was ready this time and replied in kind. A test of wills.

"Sarah."

"Sarah," echoed de Havilland slowly, trying out the name on this tongue. He grinned at her. She maintained her hold on his hand.

"You don't have the stamina, old man," she said, the words dancing from her gorgeous lips. Her cheeks were a pale pink, her eyes deep ocean blue. They called out to him. She was teasing him, he had no doubt about that. Hot, saucy and intimidating. Dave had been right; she was perfect for him.

"I'd like to think I'd give you a run for your money," de Havilland replied, unable to wipe the schoolboy smile from his face. He hoped he wasn't drooling.

"I'll leave you two to sort out your entry strategy for the pirate hideout," said Dave.

Sarah licked her lips, eyes locked onto de Havilland. "Indeed." Dave's face went red and he backed out of the room.

"He's a good kid. You should go easy on him," de Havilland told her.

"I do. I only go hard on those that like it."

"Careful now. You're going to give an old man a heart attack."

"At least you'd die happy," she said.

"At least." Sarah slinked forward, her chest pushed out, her eyes alight with fire.

She smiled and licked her lips again. De Havilland held his ground.

"We've got the coordinates," said Jeffrey, pointing to a galactic map on the war rooms central table. Sarah, Dave, Gordon and de Havilland leaned in closer.

The Exano system. De Havilland hadn't been there before. Not that he, or anyone else would ever bother. The system was devoid of anything bar a red 'Flare' dwarf binary and an asteroid belt. Even miners would probably stay away. It was almost too perfect a place for a pirate gang. It was too obvious. But then, de Havilland wasn't a pirate. Maybe they were plain stupid? That would explain their behaviour at any rate.

De Havilland mentally shrugged. Regardless of how the pirates thought, the Viper scouts had found the correct hyperspace cloud. The Lynx Bulk Carrier would be there in four days. Enough time for a squadron of Vipers to hyperspace in and setup an ambush.

De Havilland was nervous, despite a long history of planning attacks. The police officers and volunteers weren't trained professionals. They may have fended off the odd pirate, but they had never gone into the belly of the beast, straight to the lowest levels of hell. Would they survive? Could they stomach what had to be done? Did they have the skills, trained into them hour after hour, day after day to make reaction a reflex, to make them respond to danger without thought? De Havilland didn't think so.

He could walk away right now. He would be minus his ship, his money and everything he had ever owned, but he would be alive.

No. That was pure cowardice. The act of a yellow bellied chicken. He had ventured into the stars to find peace, but if he had to fight one last battle to get it, then so be it.

Chapter 5

“So what’s with the eyes?” Asked Sarah. De Havilland studied the sensors for a moment before looking up. They were floating in the target system’s asteroid field, along with the rest of the Viper Squadron. They couldn’t mount a serious ambush, but to Jeffries credit, he did the best he could with what he had, given that Interpol’s promises of food and manpower were ‘to arrive at a later date’.

“Don’t people have irises on your home planet?” She asked. De Havilland reflexively put his hand to his eyes. He always forgot that his eyes were different.

“I have blue irises.” Sarah narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. De Havilland sighed. She wanted more explanation.

“It was a drug overdose.”

“Oh.” The ship fell into silence. Sarah fidgeted. It was subtle, but it was there – a natural part of the point immediately before the battle. Checking and rechecking readouts, flicking switches, venting tanks, running diagnostics, anything to keep the mind busy so it couldn’t think of what was about to happen.

“I’m attracted to tough guys,” she said finally. De Havilland smiled.

“Yes, I gathered that.”

“So don’t let me down.”

De Havilland gave her a nudge on the shoulder. “One way or another, I’m getting my ship back.”

“And then what?” She made it sound like an honest question, but de Havilland saw the hidden look in her eyes, her lips drawn together tight, almost pleading. She wanted something from him. Something more.

No, it was just lust. She liked tough guys. But tough guys got boring. A dozen failed relationships told him that much.

“And then we’ll see what happens.” It was as much commitment as he could give, but he didn’t think it would be enough. If she made things awkward before they finished their mission...

But she smiled and returned to the control board. De Havilland released the breath he was holding and turned to his own co-pilot controls, running through his crash course in gunnery. He didn’t want to get them killed before they landed on the Lynx.

Sarah was doing the hard work of course. She seemed suited to it. She was a hard, iron-ass woman, though he knew how to make her melt.

Stop it. De Havilland shook his head. He knew how that road ended.

“I’m going to check on the guys,” he said, getting up and walking to the back of the ship to the armoury, where a group of colonists, kitted out in police vests and weapons, sat still and quiet. They didn’t talk or move. They looked like mannequins at a military surplus depot. Jesus, were they actually scared stiff? He tried to catch each individual’s eye as he thought of suitably encouraging words.

“Get back up here,” yelled Sarah over the ship comm. “It’s starting!”

The hyperspace cloud pulsated, changing shades from dark to sky blue. Lightning forked out from the event horizon. The Lynx Bulk Carrier suddenly materialised from the cloud and moved away at a steady pace. The reflected lightning gave the Lynx Bulk Carrier an ominous look.

“Have they given the command?” Asked de Havilland, referring to Jeffrey’s signal to start their attack.

“Not yet. He’s ordered us to wait until they pass us so we can attack when they are at their closest.”

“But they might not fly past us! They might jump again as soon as their engines recharge. We should attack now, while their escort is out of formation.”

Sarah shrugged. “I’m just a pilot. I do what my boss tells me to do.” De Havilland’s eyebrows jumped up. “I thought you were the kind of girl who did what she wanted?”

“That’s after hours, honey,”

“Noted.”

They waited in silence, eyes on the local area scanner. The Lynx lumbered around the asteroid field’s perimeter, with no clear destination in mind. As the Lynx edged closer, de Havilland saw several points of light shoot out of it.

“Escort ships,” Sarah said. She ran an ID scan on them. “Kraits, Mambas, Sidewinders, a few Adders.”

“Will they be a problem?” De Havilland knew all about Adders, but hadn’t come across the others. He hadn’t even heard of a Mamba before.

“The Mamba and Sidewinder are more agile and faster, but the Viper is tougher. We’re quite lethal when not taken by surprise,” she said with a grin. De Havilland could see the calculations behind her eyes: which ships would be easy prey, who she would target first, what manoeuvres she would use. She was in pilot mode now.

“They haven’t made Mambas in over a hundred years. The EJ20 Viper is only five years old. Our tech is way more advanced. It’ll give us the edge.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said aloud. Inside, he was worried. I’m going to have to ditch Mary Jane sooner rather than later.

“They’re changing course!” Sarah yelled, hands flying over the controls. The system map appeared on the main screen. The Lynx carrier was a grey circle. A solid line showed where it had come from, a dashed line its projected path.

But that grey circle was moving away from the dotted line, and more importantly, away from the asteroid field.

“They saw us?” De Havilland asked, pushing his hair back off his face. Damn he needed a haircut. His eyes darted between the sensors and the map, but he couldn’t make sense of what was happening. His hands clenched around an imaginary .350 Carbine, his old weapon from the Marines. Give me an enemy I can look in the face.

Every second took the Lynx further from their ambush point. That meant more flight time in the open, giving the Lynx’s gunners and escort pilots more of a chance to kill them. “We’ve got to go now,” de Havilland urged, leaning forward to bring the engines up from standby. Sarah grabbed his hand in her powerful grip, restraining him. De Havilland looked up, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Not until the boss says so.” Her expression was granite – unreadable, unmovable.

“Your boss is an idiot.”

“Boss’s always are.”

De Havilland looked at his arm. He could rip free and activate the engines anyway, but it would just piss her off. They needed the other Vipers for protection anyway. Sarah sensed him relax his arm and let go.

“What’s taking him so long?” De Havilland leaned forward, concentrating on the map. The grey circle was moving in a parabolic arc, already doubling its distance from the Viper squadron. De Havilland gritted his teeth. Every moment of hesitation lessened the chances of survival. His knuckles went white as his eyes flicked from the screen to the radio and back, mentally pleading for the speaker to crackle into life.

Silence. Waiting for days in a trench or bush, under fire, unable to move a muscle without the risk of being shot had taught de Havilland patience. But that had been a long time ago. Age had made him understand how limited his time was.

“Goddamit it,” de Havilland said as he reached forward for the comm. unit.

“Wait,” Sarah ordered, her voice quiet, clear and calm. De Havilland froze. He looked at Sarah and followed her eyes to the system map.

The Lynx was turning. Slowly and through a large arc due to its mass, it was nevertheless changing direction, back toward the asteroid field.

That was a hell of a risk, de Havilland thought. If the pirate’s initial manoeuvre was designed to panic ambushers and draw them out, then Jeffrey had just called the bluff.

The arc tightened, then straightened up. It began to build speed along its current vector. With speed, any change in direction would take time. The Lynx was primed for an attack.

“All ships, attack!”

Chapter 6

They screamed away from the asteroids, engine wash spraying backward over several hundred metres. The fighter escort ships immediately flipped and fired their prime movers, forcing them in an arc towards the Vipers. De Havilland frowned. Such rapid response didn't bode well for him and Sarah. Who trained these pirates?

"Don't worry hon. I've got them." She gave de Havilland a wink then turned back to her controls, knuckles white, eyes unblinking. They were in the centre - back of the arrow formation, protected by the others in the Viper squadron.

The Vipers reached the third-distance point and engaged their retro thrusters. If they didn't, they would fly right past the Lynx without getting a good shot at it. The pirates performed a similar operation. De Havilland watched the two groups get closer and closer, their velocities dropping to match.

Both sides fired.

Beams of red and orange light criss-crossed the cosmos. Ships exploded both close and far away. The lead viper disappeared in a ball of fire, while two attacking Kraits went dark and drifted away, and out of the fight. The Vipers maintained their course, heading straight for the Lynx Bulk Carrier. The pirate ships were directly in their path, flying straight back at them, weapons firing as they juked and weaved. Numbers continued to drop on both sides – none of the ships were big enough for many shield generators.

The two groups of ships were less than half a kilometre away.

"Now?" De Havilland asked? Sarah shook her head, not daring to look away from the screen.

Four hundred metres from the lead pirate to the leading Viper. "Now?"

Three hundred and fifty metres. "We can turn tighter than they can," said Sarah.

Three Hundred.

Two hundred.

"Now!"

The Vipers ahead suddenly split into two, breaking off to both the left and right like a banana peel.

The pirate ships tried to follow, but their turning circles weren't as tight and they went wide, easy prey for the turning Vipers.

And it also left the front door wide open for Sarah and de Havilland's Viper. Sarah spun the ship around so its engines faced the Lynx carrier, then mashed her hand on a button.

BANG! De Havilland's view of the Asteroid belt suddenly shrunk, stars turning into lines as the ship threw him against his harness. The whole ship shook like an acoustic baffle. The Retro jump rockets, a new fitting for the EJ20, threw the Viper through space, covering the 15km to the Carrier in seconds. The retros died out. De Havilland's butt was numb, but his eyes stopped rolling around in their sockets.

They were coasting. Sarah punched the thruster controls. The prime mover roared back into life, slowing them down from their crazy speed. Sarah took a deep breath, smiling like she didn't think it would work. She changed the screen to a rear view. They were less than a kilometre from the Lynx, the boarding doors directly ahead.

They were opening.

"What the...?" De Havilland asked, before he saw the answer.

"Reinforcements," said Sarah. The Lynx was launching more ships to join the fight. A Cobra Mk I was slowly edging into position from the launch airlock. The Lynx's crew obviously hadn't detected Sarah's Viper's presence.

“Say goodnight,” she said through gritted teeth. She spun the ship around, cut the main engines and fired the retros. De Havilland grabbed the weapon controls and fired. A single beam of red light lashed out from the Viper, through the opening doors and straight into the noise of the Cobra.

It took half a second. The pirate ship detonated, throwing shrapnel through the airlock. Fires started but died immediately, starved of oxygen. Sarah spun the ship back around and fired the prime mover. The back wall of the docking airlock loomed up in the rear view. The engine wash played up against the walls, melting signs and sign writing. De Havilland stared, unable to look away. If his kinematic calculations were wrong...

But if this was the end, he wasn't going to shy away from it. Sarah pressed another button. Motors whirred inside the ship and then sparks flew up around the cockpit window. A horrible, piercing shriek reverberated through the hull.

“Lowered the landing gear,” Sarah mumbled. The view window tilted suddenly as something in the landing strut gave way. Sparks and engine wash enveloped the cockpit. The groan doubled in volume. De Havilland thought the ship would rip apart.

The rear wall came closer. Their speed plummeted. De Havilland and Sarah looked at each other, a faint smile on their lips.

They hit.

The ship bucked upwards. The viewscreen showed the airlock ceiling as the ship swung up to sit on its exhaust vents.

But it couldn't quite get there. The Viper hung at a sixty degree angle to the horizontal. Time slowed as the Viper defied the Lynx Carriers artificial gravity.

Then normality returned and the Viper swung like an inverted pendulum, straight for the airlock floor. De Havilland barely had time to ball up into the crash position before the Viper smashed into the floor. The ship hull bounced, banged and screamed and finally came to a rest.

De Havilland waited a moment then uncurled himself. He looked over at Sarah who was also sitting up straight. She was beaming.

“Told you, sugar,” she said with a wink. “Let's get out of here.”

The lift in the airlock floor took the Viper into the bowels of the ship to where the Cobra Mk I had come from. The gigantic room sealed and air circulators drew oxygen in. De Havilland, Sarah and the other volunteers raced out of the Viper and took up firing positions around the sole door into the heart of the Lynx.

De Havilland rested his carbine against his shoulder and an outcropping, focusing his eyes along the sight. He calmed his breathing, watching the sight undulate with his breath.

They waited in silence. De Havilland heard several men scuff their feet, either in anticipation or fear.

The main door exploded inward in a rush of sparks and flame. Trigger finger past the first depression and hovering above the second, de Havilland fired a shot the instance he heard he saw the explosion. He ducked down to avoid the blast of flame and hot air then took aim again.

Laser shots ionised the air, dug chunks out of the walls and filled the room with smoke. De Havilland coughed, yelled at the men and then moved around his covering outcropping, rifle up by his shoulder, firing indiscriminately towards the main door. He felt, rather than saw a laser shot slice past his leg, melting his trouser legs. He skipped forward with a grimace, redoubling his fire rate, swinging the rifle to fire at any shadow he saw. He ran forward, screaming, hoping his men would follow the example. They needed to get out of the dead end docking bay and into the corridors, where they could retreat if they needed to.

Someone cried out ahead of him but was cut short. De Havilland hit the far wall. He stopped and turned, looking for the door.

There, to the right! He rushed forward—

—running straight into someone! They hit the deck, de Havilland on top, bringing his rifle straight down as he fell. The rifle hit something hard, but it gave way with a sickening sound. Blinded by the smoke, he felt for the mans throat.

No pulse. He rolled off the cadaver and dived through the ragged hole that used to be the door.

Two men stood either side of the door. They gasped, swinging their weapons down to de Havilland who was sprawled on the ground. The smoke was clearer outside the docking bay. De Havilland didn't waste any time, rolling toward one of them, while bringing his carbine up to shoot the other. He fired, getting a stomach shot, then swung the rifle up, just as the closer guard brought his own down.

The two weapons clanged together. De Havilland struggled against the guard's strength and height advantage, pushing down on de Havilland's crouched form. De Havilland grunted and groaned, grimacing as he lost position. He wasn't going to win the fight as it was. So he simply let go of his weapon and rolled away.

The guard's rifle smacked into the ground just as de Havilland's right leg swung out and smashed the guard's right kneecap. He heard the bone and shatter as his boot forced the joint sideways. The guard roared in pained and dropped like a log. De Havilland leapt onto him, smashing his fist down on the man's exposed throat. The cartilage snapped and collapsed. The guards face went from pain to surprise then to fear as he tried to draw in breath.

De Havilland looked down at the reddening face without expression, watching him die. He turned back to the ragged door, found the controls to purge the atmosphere and pulled the emergency lever down. Huge turbines roared into life, deafening him. The smoke spun into dust devils and tornados and disappeared through several grated ducts.

The surviving pirates found themselves out in the open, unprotected and exposed. De Havilland whipped up his rifle and shot one in the back. He collapsed with a muted scream and a dull thud. The pirates knew the colonists had trapped them. They threw down their weapons and raised their hands. De Havilland took aim and shot the closest pirate. The colonists took the hint and finished the job, quelling the screams of justice and mercy from the human scum.

The colonists, Sarah and de Havilland regrouped at the door.

"This way," said Sarah, pointing to the left. She and the volunteers disappeared down the corridor. De Havilland remained still, waiting by the door, counting. He wasn't here for their little crusade. He had saved enough peoples life in his career – he didn't feel the need to prove anything any more. He was here for his ship. He gave them sixty seconds and then turned right and ran down his own corridor.

Chapter 7

He took one step too many. The four guards protecting the door to the docking bay control booth were looking straight at him, weapons aimed like they had been waiting for him to walk around the corner. De Havilland's eyes went wide. His reflexes took over and he fell back around the corner as four laser shots tore through the area his torso had been a moment ago. He got to his feet as a small cylinder rattled against the corridor walls and bounced backward, coming to a rest at his feet.

But de Havilland was already moving. Face white, mouth stretched in a scream, he sprinted back down the corridor. Arms pumping hard; legs slamming against the floor. He dived through a door to the left—

BOOM!

The grenade exploded, throwing a confined shockwave down either end of the corridor. It acted as a bass cannon, amplifying the acoustic shockwave. De Havilland curled into a ball, hands over his ears as the shockwave passed the room he hid in. The room turned into a quarter wave resonator, destructively interfering with the main shockwave.

It passed and the world resolved into silence. He could feel himself moaning, but he couldn't hear anything. He rolled over, eyes dancing around their sockets, as he looked for his gun. He waited a moment for his vision to settle. The gun lay out in the corridor, a good metre from his doorway.

Indecision clawed at him. Should he risk it? Were the guards already out in the corridor, waiting for him again?

Hell with it.

De Havilland dove forward, sliding across the corridor on his chest, hands out in front. It hit his left hand first, which he used to flick the weapon up to his right where he grasped the trigger, angled the barrel slightly, and fired.

His body came to a rest and he looked down the end of the corridor.

It was empty, save for a nasty black burn mark in the centre at head height. De Havilland shuffled sideways against the wall, willing his body to merge into the floor, to reduce his cross section as much as possible. He got a better grip on the weapon. Calmed his breathing and waited for the guards to come out.

But nothing happened. De Havilland counted the seconds. One minute. Two. Three.

He frowned and pursed his lips. What were they playing at? Slowly, he got to his feet and edged his way down the corridor. At the edge of the corner, he took a final breath then ducked his head around. And then he burst out laughing.

The four guards had collapsed on each other. Alive, but unconscious; the stun grenade had backfired, knocking them all senseless. De Havilland couldn't believe it. Some luck, finally. He shot all four in the heart then stole their weapon power cells and security cards. He plugged a fresh pack into his weapon then pushed himself against the wall by the docking bay control door.

He steeled himself and inserted a security card into the slot. The door retracted into the floor with a whomp! De Havilland brought his weapon around slowly, quietly, so the muzzle pointed at an angle across the door. He slid forward, bringing his body around.

He pounced into the room, firing two shots in as he dropped into a roll. He got back up to one knee, weapon up.

The room was empty. He raced forward, hands dancing over the controls. Everything the pirate stole had to go somewhere. Something as big as the Mary Jane could only go in a docking bay, so it had to be somewhere close by, ready to fly.

He found her on a live camera feed from docking bay 3. She was with eleven other ships. On closer inspection, de Havilland realised they were all just wrecks from Peterson's junk yard. The pirates must have assumed the Mary Jane was just another decommissioned pile of scrap. To their credit, they were only half wrong.

He memorised the docking bays location, unlocked the access door and raced out of the room.

*

Footsteps echoed around him. Floor gratings clanged under heavy boots. De Havilland ran hard, sweat dripping down his spine. Down the corridor, to the left, a right, past the lift and to the access ladder. He swung his body over the edge and slid down, letting go half way up. His knees took the impact. He pushed himself up and onward. His breath rasped in his throat. His heart pounded like a drum. The passageways sped by in a blur. One door, another. He stopped at the third.

Docking Bay 4. De Havilland unhitched the carbine from his shoulder. He held it straight out with his right hand while he fed the security card into the slot with his left. The door beeped. It shot into the floor.

There was only partial illumination inside. He could see the Mary Jane about half way down. She sat in the corner, weathered but proud, unwilling to give up too easily. He took a step forward. The nape of his neck itched.

Trap!

He whirled back to the door—

—As it flew open, a fully armed guard rushing through it. De Havilland fired instinctively, but he hadn't lined up the weapon properly. The first shot hit the wall, but the second didn't. The guard depressed his own trigger. De Havilland's second shot entered his right lung, spinning the guard around. The guard's shot went wide, over de Havilland's right shoulder. De Havilland moved forward, shot the man in the face, and hid by the side of the door. He stared at the door, listening with all his senses. He forced long, deep breaths. He checked the power pack and grimaced.

Three shots left. He chastised himself. One shot per bandit, dammit!

His old instructor would have castrated him for his efforts so far. He was getting old. Old and sloppy. He actioned the weapon – a force of habit. He leaned out across the door.

And pulled back instantly. A set of laser shots ripped through the doorway.

Panting from shock, de Havilland shook his head. He shimmied away from the door. He needed more space between him and the horde. They were still waiting outside, scared perhaps. De Havilland could get the first, the second and perhaps the third person to walk through the door.

But he couldn't take all twelve by himself. Not with his current ammo, anyway.

He scanned the bay for answers. His eyes settled on one of the ship hulls. He smiled. Time for a little hide and seek.

De Havilland sprinted forward. He jumped and slid to a stop under the shadow of an inverted trapezium shaped hull. He didn't recognise the ship, but it gave him good cover. He turned and focused on the doorway. One of the soldiers inched through the door. De Havilland lined him up in the scope but didn't fire. He needed more ammunition. He had to draw them in closer so he could steal their weapons. He shimmied backwards. Out of sight he got up and ran to the next ship. The light died away. Hulls became shadows, crates and equipment, spectres.

De Havilland climbed the boarding ramp of a Saker Mk III hull. He crouched down in the darkness, waiting.

Patience was the key. An impatient man would grow anxious and do something stupid: leave cover, fire before ready, or endanger his comrades. De Havilland had all the time in the world. It was his pursuers who had a time constraint. He could wait for them to come to him, to fight on his terms.

He heard footsteps five minutes later. Two pairs. One heavy and long, the other light and short. He heard the mumble of chatter. Bad discipline, poor tactics. Slow, measure steps, hand signals – you had to get the basics right!

A faint shadow extended into the ship from the boarding ramp. De Havilland tightened his grip on the jagged shard of ship frame. Silent was better. The shadow took one step, then another. The footfalls were timid, unsure. Did the person know they were walking into his trap? Probably. But that didn't stop him from doing his duty.

An admiral quality. It was too bad he would have to kill the lad. De Havilland squatted by an opened box of weld neck flanges behind the boarding ramp. The man had his back to de Havilland as he climbed the boarding ramp. He moved one muscle at a time, slowly getting to his feet. He stood there, mouth open, breathing deep, slow breaths.

Then he moved.

A practiced manoeuvre. Like lightning. Forward. One leap. Momentum. Thrust with his strong right hand.

The metal crashed into the soldiers back. About half way up, just out from the spine, under the ribcage at an upward angle. Something gave way inside. His heart. The soldier didn't scream. Didn't make a single noise. Just fell forward, stiff as a brick. The metal floor rang out from the collision. De Havilland held his breath, skin prickling, all senses alert. His cover was blown. The Saker was a dead end. He scooped up the fallen guard's weapon and ran down the boarding ramp. It clanged with every bouncing footstep, but he didn't care. Speed overrode stealth now.

The room lit up as laser shots thumped across the ramp, criss-crossing millimetres behind de Havilland. He dove off the ramp, pulling into a ball as he hit the floor. He rolled away, pushed back onto his feet and kept running. He needed distance between himself and his attackers. He swerved between two shipwrecks then doubled back before taking another right. Angles were the key – They forced his pursuers to slow, decide what to do, which way to go.

He stopped three ships away and turned back the way he had come. He pressed his body against a missile shaped Falcon as he peered around its edge and saw three shadows standing together.

Amateurs. De Havilland brought the rifle up, centred the biggest shadow in his sight. He repeated his firing order like a mantra. Take down the biggest first.

He fired. Before he released the trigger, he was already aiming at the right most shadow. He depressed the trigger. Another flash of light, another boom of bass from the rifle. Another quenched scream. He swung back to the third shadow but it had disappeared. De Havilland dropped to his knees and crawled away. He crossed an open area, making it safely to the shadow of a Gyr. The ship wasn't even clad, just the bare frame. He got into a squat and looked around the docking bay.

No movement. Were they hiding like he was? He held his mouth open to quiet his breathing. There were footsteps in the distance. His carotid spasmed as his heart rate doubled. He spun around. Were they outflanking him? Had he been over confident? He ran a hand through his hair, thinking. He got up and raced from his hiding spot towards the man door.

The guards were running towards the light. Fleeing. But why? A loud groan filled the docking bay. De Havilland had heard that noise before, when launching from a space station. He turned to the far space doors, eyes wide. His heart threatened to explode. Sweat trickled down his forehead.

The main doors were going to open. To the vacuum.

De Havilland ran. Not to the guarded man door, but deeper, into the docking bay.

Towards the Mary Jane. He pushed his body hard, slamming each leg down hard. He swore he could hear the sound of Death laughing at him.

Not today, buddy.

He had no intention of sucking vacuum. He pounced sideways around a low slung hull and weaved through the labyrinth of ships and junk, until he saw the Mary Jane ahead.

The space doors opened. An initial creak, then a cyclic grinding of metal.

The wind kicked up immediately, pulling at de Havilland. He focused on the Mary Jane. Fifty metres away. Eight seconds of running. The wind howled and roared, grabbing at every inch of de Havilland's body. It ripped the breath from his lungs, punched him in the stomach and slapped him on the back. His sprint turned into a ballerina dance.

The wind doubled with every second. Piercing talons of air scribed through his body. It threw him, tossed, manhandled and beat him. It picked him up launched him like a rag doll through the bay.

He was flying.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

SMACK!

De Havilland crashed back first into the Mary Jane. He lay spread-eagled across the hull, just above the boarding ramp, head down, held in place by the hurricane-like air. Panic gnawed at his mind, but his subconscious took control. It had had one thing trained into it over ten hard years: Survival. He forced his arm down below his head and over the edge of the hull to where the ramp separated from the ship. Gaining purchase, he moved his other arm down, grabbed the frame and twisted his body around.

Grey spots sparkled across his vision. A vice was compressing his chest. He couldn't breathe.

So he didn't. He just fathomed up all the strength in his arms and with one final effort, pulled his body forward, over the lip. The wind caught his head, pushing him down further until it ripped him clear of the hull and tossed him into the ship, crashing into the far bulkhead. Blackness surrounded him. He couldn't move against the wind. He was dead.

The wind stopped. De Havilland fell to the floor in a heap, gulping like a fish out of water.

There was nothing. A complete absence of feeling. He couldn't feel his skin. Or his eyes, or his throat, or his lungs. He was empty.

But he wasn't dead. Not yet. He pulled himself forward, half of him crying out to stop, to let the darkness take him, the other, angry, determined, uncompromising, pushed him forward, oxygen starved limbs barely able to gain purchase on the floor.

Every millisecond was torture. His body was dying. If he had air to breathe, he would have screamed.

Stars flared and died before his eyelids like a world of fireworks. Oxygen starved synapses dying, he told himself.

He had no sense of time. It could have been minutes, hours days, but must have been seconds before he hit the far wall. He had nothing left to give. He was done.

No! You're going on your own terms! Don't stop, you fucking coward.

He had one move left. His heart was pumping furiously, wanting to get oxygen to his body, but unable to find it. If he didn't die of asphyxiation, he would die of a heart attack.

He reached up the wall, bloated numb hand flailing over the wall. Something gave.

And then he lost consciousness.

Chapter 8

He opened his eyes. Everything was red. Hell? Due reward for a life of killing. He felt cold steel underneath him. His senses expanded with every passing moment. He heard mechanical noises. He felt warmth, tasted oxygen, felt pressure on his skin.

He was breathing! He was in a normal atmosphere! He felt giddy. He was alive! He tried to giggle, coughing instead, and rolled onto his back. He ran his hands over his arms and body, revelling in the sensation. He promised himself he would never take atmospheric pressure for granted again.

He put a hand to his eyes and rubbed. Instead of a quilt of steady red, it was not blurry red threadbare blanket thrown over his eyes.

Burst capillaries? He rubbed them again, savouring the pain until his eyes were clear enough to see. His eyes wandered to the blinking green light by the boarding ramp door.

The last moments of what he could only think of as his death came back to him. He had managed to hit the door controls in his last moments, sealing the ship and venting atmosphere back into the ship.

His chest felt violated; his heart was still pumping furiously, making up for lost time. He briefly wondered what permanent damage he had received before he remembered his situation. If he didn't escape now, he would be one hundred percent damaged. How long had he been blacked out?

His head was swimming, but he shoved the dizziness from his mind, focusing on walking to the cockpit. He stumbled to his seat like a drunk and activated brought the ship out of standby, as he had left it at Jeffries's Luck. He spooled the engines up immediately; he didn't have time for a proper warm up. Hopefully he wouldn't crack the high temperature turbines. They'd probably had worse treatment in their long history anyway. He pushed the VTOL thrusters. The Adder rose above the wreckage of ship cadavers. He spun the Mary Jane around and blasted straight through the open space doors.

Out into freedom.

It was a war zone outside. The colony Vipers were down to half strength. De Havilland was surprised they had lasted that long. Debris littered local space. Blackened hull plates, streams of fuel and unexploded warheads turned the cosmos into a minefield.

But the fight wasn't his concern. Not any more. He had what he came for: his ship and revenge. He plotted a course away from the carnage and accelerated as fast as the Adder's prime mover could take him.

"...Help! Please! I have non-combatants on board! Don't fire!" De Havilland's head jerked to look at the comm. Sarah's voice. Strained, desperate. Scared.

He shrugged. She was a tough girl. She could look after herself. She didn't need him to baby-sit her. He had helped the colonists enough already.

The comm. was still open. She was breathing hard. She repeated the call. De Havilland heard an explosion. The radio screamed. De Havilland leaned forward to deactivate the comm.

Coward

He froze. No, he wasn't a coward. He had faced down more demons than any normal person ever would. He had never backed down and always put his life on the line when needed.

Selfish monster. Coward!

Was he? His reflection in the viewscreen, distorted by the curve of the glass, looked back at him, a look of disgust on its face. Accelerations and distances scrolled away in the bottom right corner.

Was he running away? Was he scared?

No, of course he wasn't scared, it just wasn't his problem. He had solved enough of others peoples problems in the past. He didn't need to do it now.

Who are you trying to convince? His finger wavered and he finally pulled it back. He used to be a good person. He had risked his life for his friends and comrades time and again, just as they had for him. So why was he prepared to leave other people to their deaths now? He took a deep, slow breath. It was inhuman. What had he become? In his quest to leave behind his past, he had thrown away his humanity.

He reached for the controls and flipped the ship around.

Time to make amends.

The Adder roared in at full acceleration. Sarah's Viper was in the midst of a hive of pirate ships. Exhaust plumes blasted from almost every manoeuvring thrusters, like the Viper was the centre of an energy flower.

The pirates stabbed their laser stings at her. Merciless and confident in their numbers. A trio of other Vipers were rushing in to help Sarah, but they were too far behind.

A pirate scored a hit and the Viper listed to the side, venting air. But it didn't stop.

De Havilland focused his laser target on one of the ships. He only had a one megawatt pulse laser – a pittance and not something one would take into war. He wasn't a trained pilot; he had survived this long by running from pirates.

Foreboding ran up his spine. He gritted his teeth and focused on his target. The ship zipped about, but de Havilland kept on him and slammed down the trigger.

A pulse flew out. Smoke exploded from the ship and it spiralled away from the fight. De Havilland ignored him and moved onto the next pirate. His ship's momentum had him flying straight, above the carnage, so he was having to use the manoeuvring jets to spin the ship around to keep his target lock.

He fired two pulses at the second ship, scoring with the second. He shifted to the third. But the pirates had lost interest in the Viper. They had new prey. His Adder.

Time to go!, de Havilland thought, and spun to face the way he was flying and pushed the prime mover as hard as it would go.

Little green, blue and red markers began moving toward the centre of the scanner; right on his six. Red light flashed past his cockpit. He pushed down on the controls, but he was travelling too fast to change his direction noticeably.

"Follow us, Vasquith. We'll protect you," crackled Sarah's voice through the comm.

Brow knotted in concentration at avoiding laser blasts, he actually thought about it. He could see where the relationship went. He looked back down the corridor, imagining the Peterson's hull plates in the cargo bay. He hadn't actually paid for them yet.

His future didn't lie with Sarah. She needed someone a lot less damaged.

"I've got everything I needed from Hoessbe," he said over the comm.

Silence. A laser blast scored a hit on the rear of the Adder. The ship groaned and bucked. He had distracted the pirates for long enough. He activated the navigation computer and selected the nearest inhabited system.

"Good bye, Vasquith."

De Havilland pulled back the levers. The Mary Jane disappeared into hyperspace.