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about 13,100 words

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Judging Men

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Hugh looked up the length of the pipe. From his position, it really could be considered “up” because centripetal acceleration was at a maximum here. The pipe was a uniform two meters in diameter, and it ran from where he stood, on the inside of the outermost wall of the crew habitat, all the way to the engine. The crew habitat of the interplanetary space ship *Maine* was like a large, circular bicycle wheel with a long metal cylinder, about a fourth its diameter, running through and perpendicular to its center. The crew habitat spun relative to the cylinder, which was the unmanned, fusion-powered engine of the *Maine*. One end of the pipe Hugh was in terminated when it reached the engine cylinder. The other end of the pipe terminated in the iris door that Hugh currently stood on. When the *Maine* was in “dry-dock” for engine repairs, and the crew habitat wasn’t spinning, the pipe could give quick access to an entry hatch on the engine. When the crew habitat was spinning relative to the engine, the entry hatch could periodically be seen by an observer inside the pipe as it passed over the hatch, but it would be impossible to open in the short time it was in proper position.

While the ship was traveling in space, the pipe Hugh was in served a less glamorous function. All along the pipe were small openings that allowed the material collected from the ship’s human-waste-removal units to empty into it. Centrifugal force and air pressure than forced the waste material towards the iris door, which was periodically opened to empty the

material into space. It was Hugh's job to see to it that the tunnel remained clear of obstructions and clogs. Every Tuesday, Hugh would clean a different section of the pipe, 15 meters ahead of the section he had cleaned the previous week. By custom, all of the apprentices on ship were supposed to take turns at this weekly duty, but the Junior Crewman in charge of making the duty roster each week had decided that Hugh would always clean the pipe. The J.C. had a grudge against Hugh because his father had once been laid off by the company Hugh's father used to own, before the Chinese Prosperity Alliance Space Expeditionary Force had annexed the Earth's moon and nationalized all non-C.P.A.-owned businesses.

Hugh didn't complain about the injustice because he didn't want a reputation as a "tattle-tale", whining to the senior officers about every minor transgression against him. The Junior Crewman, Thomas, was visibly angry about it now. Hugh knew the J.C. had wanted to get a reaction out of him, but Hugh had quietly obeyed the duty roster every week, refusing to play Thomas' game. Today, as Hugh put on his cleaning suit and breathing unit before entering the waste pipe, Thomas had declared, his face red:

"If you don't like cleaning it every week Richie," which was Thomas' nickname for Hugh, "you can go and stuff it."

"I haven't complained have I?" Hugh had said, looking him in the eye.

"You think this act is going to make me feel sorry for you?" Thomas had then turned and stormed out of the locker room.

Hugh had finished cleaning this week's section of the pipe, and had climbed back down, using the rungs attached to its inner wall when "gravity" got too strong. Near this end, there was also a small hatch on the curved wall of one side of the pipe that allowed entry back into the ship's crew habitat. Hugh entered this side hatch into a small chamber that decontaminated his suit before allowing entry through another hatch into the habitat.

As Hugh took off his suit in the locker room, Hugh's friend Larry Chang, another ship's apprentice from the asteroid mining engineering department came into the locker room.

"Did you clean the waste pipe again?" Chang asked, with disgust in his voice.

"Yes, sir!" Hugh said, with feigned enthusiasm.

"Thomas is a major bastard. Why don't you complain to the officers?" Chang said with a touch of anger in his voice.

Hugh knew that Chang had his own reasons for disliking the J.C. Thomas had once called Chang a racial slur, and accused him of being a C.P.A. spy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Chang's family came from Taiwan, one of the few nations in Asia that remained independent of C.P.A. political domination.

There probably would have been a fistfight if not for the fact that a senior officer had overheard Thomas' comment, and intervened before the situation could escalate.

"Hey, guess what I found while I was cleaning in there today." Hugh said, changing the subject.

"Feces?" Chang asked with a grin.

"Yes," Hugh responded, ignoring Chang's sarcasm, "but I also found a small panel that could probably be removed from outside of the waste pipe. If I took the panel off, I think I could fit through the opening."

"Hmm..." Chang said as he put on his jumpsuit. "Is that portion of the pipe accessible from inside the ship?"

"Yeah, I just looked it up on the ship's blueprints. The irony is that the panel is located on the portion of waste pipe that runs through the Infirmary. I never noticed it because the opening on the pipe faces towards a corner, near the ceiling."

"It was probably used when the ship was constructed," Chang muttered as he finished lacing up his boots. "You up for cards later?"

"Yeah, Doctor Sloan said my quarterly apprentice's examination would have to be postponed until next week, so I'll be free." Hugh said as he finished stowing the biohazard suit in its locker.

"Alright!" Chang said as they both headed for the exit. "Looks like there'll be enough people for some serious poker tonight!"

Chang went back to Astrogeology, and Hugh went back to the Infirmary. Hugh had been the ship's apprentice medical doctor for about six months now. He had arrived on the ship penniless, with nothing more than a few books and the clothes on his back. For several years now, Hugh had wanted to be a doctor, and he had planned to go pre-med at Sam Adams University on the Moon before the C.P.A. invaded. Except for his father, his family had fled the

Moon with almost nothing, rather than live under the thumb of the C.P.A. occupation military government. His father had stayed behind to fight for the Lunar Free State Militia in a war of attrition against the C.P.A. Hugh had wanted to stay too, but his father had insisted that he leave with his mother and sister for Mars. Hugh had thought his career plans would have to be put on hold indefinitely since he could no longer afford the tuition at a university, and merely earning a living was going to be rough for a few years.

When Hugh had arrived on Mars, a message from his father had been waiting for him, telling him that he had purchased Hugh a one-way ticket to Alpha Station near the asteroid belt. Hugh was to be picked up by the *Maine*, to begin a five year medical apprenticeship under Doctor Sloan. His father had explained in the message that he had called in a favor with the current proprietor and captain of the *Maine*, who had borrowed the money to buy the ship, at bellow-market rates, from Hugh's father several years earlier. This was the last time Hugh had heard from his father, who was missing in action and presumed dead after a major battle with C.P.A. forces a few days later.

Working and living on the *Maine* wasn't easy, especially compared to Hugh's lifestyle before the war, but he had always had a personal ambition not to take his father's wealth for granted. His past self-discipline meant that Hugh had a good work ethic, and personal habits of frugality that served him well in his present state of poverty.

Dr. Sloan was in the Infirmary. He looked up from a monitor as Hugh entered. Dr. Sloan was in his late seventies, but he had the physique of a fit fifty-year-old. He was one of the smartest individuals Hugh had ever met. In addition to being a great medical doctor, he was also knowledgeable on many other subjects, and could converse for hours on philosophy, art, dance, or basketball. Hugh felt a warm sense of admiration and respect for the Doctor whenever he was in his presence, but he also felt completely at ease around him, and that he could really be himself.

"Are you here to do that dissection assignment?" Dr. Sloan asked as he went back to looking over a patient's chart.

“Yeah, I decided to get it over with.” Hugh said casually. In reality, Hugh hadn’t been able to think about doing anything else since Dr. Sloan gave him the assignment yesterday, but his work schedule had made it impossible for him to do it until now.

“Well, as long as you’re here, I need to ask you for a favor.”

“Sure.” Hugh said with genuine enthusiasm at an opportunity to show Dr. Sloan his gratitude for all that he had done for him.

“Today we picked up a few passengers.” Dr. Sloan said.

“What do you mean?” Hugh asked, incredulous that anyone would be coming onto the *Maine* in the middle of the Asteroid Belt on a prospecting mission. Hugh knew that it would only occur if something extraordinary had occurred.

“Today, we responded to a distress call from a disabled civilian craft, and took on its passengers. One of the crew members was a young man about your age whose father owns the craft they were in. The Captain needs someone to keep an eye on him while he is onboard, and I volunteered you for the job.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” Hugh responded. He knew it would be a lot of extra work, but he was willing to endure a lot to please Dr. Sloan.

“You’ll be responsible for him even in your off hours. I know it’s a lot to ask, so I saw to it that all of your usual duties, not related to your studies, would be handled by others for the duration of this voyage. Also, I understand that you have cleaned the waste pipe for the past three weeks in a row, despite ship’s custom on the matter?”

“That’s right.” Hugh said, offering no explanation, and keeping his voice unemotional. Hugh was not going to complain about his problems to the Doctor, if he could help it.

“I don’t know why you didn’t tell anybody about this irregularity, but cleanup of the waste pipe will now be in the hands of Junior Crewman Thomas for the rest of the voyage. Since he saw fit to break custom on the matter, the Captain and I decided that it would be acceptable to disregard it entirely this one time and allow a J.C. the privilege.”

Hugh thought he could detect a hint of sarcasm in the Doctor’s voice, but he could never be sure with the man, since he rarely smiled or otherwise compromised his stoic demeanor.

Hugh rang the doorbell to the captain's office. After a few seconds, the door slid open, allowing Hugh to enter the room. The captain sat behind his desk. Sitting in a chair across the desk was a teenager about Hugh's age.

"Hugh, this is Ted Stevenson." The captain said as he stood up. Hugh walked across the room and held out his hand, which Ted took after what seemed like a moment's hesitation. His grip was limp and his hand was clammy.

In the back of his mind, Hugh thought that there was something wrong with Ted, but he pushed the thought out of his mind because he didn't believe in prejudging people based on his initial feelings, when he had no hard evidence of their character. Then Hugh recognized the last name.

"Are you the son of Robert Stevenson?" Hugh asked, with awe in his voice.

"Yes." Ted answered, sighing heavily.

"You're familiar with Mr. Stevenson?" The Captain asked Hugh.

"Sure," Hugh said excitedly. "He's the CEO and majority shareholder of First Space Industries Limited, one of the largest ship construction companies around. The ship construction techniques he developed have revolutionized the industry, cutting production time and costs nearly in half!" As Hugh finished speaking, he thought he heard Ted mutter something under his breath, but the Captain didn't say anything, and Hugh had been too absorbed in what he was saying to be paying enough attention to be certain. Hugh thought he saw a flicker of annoyance cross the Captain's face, but he couldn't be sure. After a few seconds of silence, the Captain addressed Hugh.

"We were planning to take Ted back to Alpha Station after we finished our normal prospecting expedition, but the elder Mr. Stevenson has agreed to compensate us generously to return him by the end of this month. Mr. Stevenson also requested that we assign someone about his son's age to watch out for Ted while he was with us. He has also agreed to compensate us generously for this extra courtesy."

As Ted and Hugh walked back from the Captain's office to Ted's new room, he looked over at Hugh, seemed to consider something for a moment, then spoke.

"Is the Captain always that way?"

“Always what way?” Hugh asked, as he shifted Ted’s suitcase to his other hand.

“Oh...I don’t know...just...sort of *mean*...” He said this last word with emphasis, as if it had special significance.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hugh said in an unemotional tone, although he could feel himself getting angry.

“I just mean, he didn’t seem upset about the people who died in the engine room of my dad’s ship when it melted down, or whatever it’s called when that happens...he just doesn’t seem to have any...*compassion*.” He said this last word like he had said “*mean*”, as if it were a secret code-word that meant something else that Hugh would understand.

Hugh thought about the time the Captain risked his life to save some crewmen who had been trapped in a burning room on the ship after a pipe had unexpectedly ruptured.

“Here’s where you’ll be staying.” Hugh said to change the subject, and pointed to a door that was next to the door of his own small room. Hugh was beginning to suspect that he was going to have to put up with a lot from Ted, but since this was part of his job, he would try not to let the kid draw him into pointless arguments.

“We’re mostly interested in asteroids with gold and platinum,” Larry Chang explained to Hugh and Ted as the three of them entered the Astrogeology Department.

There were over a dozen people working on the A.D., mostly on computers, since the actual prospecting for precious metals on individual asteroids was done by hundreds of computer-controlled unmanned drones that were released by the ship whenever it reached a particularly promising-looking location in the Belt.

“There are several different types of asteroids,” Larry continued. “The most common type in the Belt are C-type, or carbonaceous, asteroids. These make up about 75% of the belt asteroids. They can be mined for water, which is useful for some of the Sol-orbiting colonies.”

Hugh could tell by the look on Ted’s face that he didn’t care at all. Hugh had hoped that if he showed the kid around the ship, he might take an interest in something productive and curb the defeatist attitude which seemed to infest his outlook on everything. It didn’t seem to be working.

Hugh refocused his attention on what Larry was saying:

“We aren’t interested in C-type asteroids, mainly because the profit-margin is too low for a small operation like ours. We are looking for S-type and M-type asteroids that make up less than 8% of the total in the Belt. These siliceous and metallic asteroids can contain gold and platinum, although they are usually made up mostly of iron and magnesium.”

“Yes, we must keep those profit-margins up,” Ted mumbled.

“That’s exactly right!” Larry said, acting like Ted’s comment had been serious. “I don’t care what you say Hugh, this kid is sharp!” Larry said, with deliberately over-expressed innocent joy in his voice.

Hugh could see by the look on Ted’s face that this infuriated him. Ted expected everyone to play his game of double-talk, in which words took on different meanings based on the tone of his voice.

“Anyway,” Larry continued, “what the guys here in Astrogeology do is use a variety of the tools on the unmanned probes that we send out to analyze the composition of different asteroids as they fly by them at close range. Usually this involves an analysis of the asteroid’s absorbance spectra. Radar is also used to get an idea of the rock’s density and composition. Over the years, based on prior experience, we’ve developed idealized models of what a platinum or gold-bearing asteroid will look like in terms of the data the probe collects in a flyby. Based on that prior knowledge, if the asteroid looks promising, then the drone will go in for a closer look, and make actual core samples. If the core samples look good, then we mark the rock with a beacon and send the unique number associated with the beacon back to the Asteroid Claims Office on Mars. Legally, we have a year to start processing a staked asteroid, although our particular operation just sells the beacon’s unique number to a processing company on one of the open exchanges.”

“Why don’t we just do the processing ourselves?” Hugh asked.

“It’s a function of the economics of the situation,” Larry said. “The hard part in terms of human thought and ingenuity is finding the asteroids with high precious metal contents. Actually processing the asteroids is a highly automated process, and it is best done by a large corporation with a large fleet of drone-processing-ships. This economy of scale allows them to reduce their over-all unit costs of production to extremely low levels. That’s why the legal regime is set up the way it is. Processing asteroids is easy and highly routine, so most of the value created actually comes from finding the really rich, high-precious-metal-content asteroids

in the Belt. Most of the market price for platinum or gold on the exchanges represents the knowledge and expertise that went into finding it in the belt, not in extracting it. So, the Martian government and the Uranian Moon Confederation agreed by treaty that property rights in the Belt should be established to reflect this fact by allowing prospectors to stake a claim with a beacon. However, they also recognized that you actually had to mine the thing at some point to derive any value from it, so they gave prospectors a one-year limitations period to begin processing it. Before actual processing begins, other prospectors can stake claims on the same asteroid by registering the claim with the Asteroid Claims Office on Mars, and if the first prospector to plant his beacon doesn't begin processing within a year, then the next person in line with a claim has the right to do so."

"How come there are usually only one or two secondary claims registered after the primary claim is made at the A.C.O.? Wouldn't everyone just put a secondary claim on every asteroid that is discovered?" Hugh asked.

"Mainly because the A.C.O. charges a hefty fee for doing so, and that fee increases for each subsequent claim that is made." Larry considered the question further for a few seconds, then continued:

"Not every asteroid that is claimed turns out to have a lot of precious metal content. We don't know for certain that the asteroid will be a really rich one until it is actually processed. People who stake secondary claims have developed a lot of methods for trying to determine whether a claimed asteroid is going to be productive, and whether the primary claim holder is likely to actually process the asteroid in the year allotted to him." Then Larry grinned before adding: "There's a market for secondary claims too..."

"So what do they do with the fees paid to the A.C.O.?" Hugh asked.

"They use them to fund its operations, and the rest is ear-marked for funding the Asteroid Belt Patrol, whose primary mission is to protect the integrity of the whole system of property rights by catching claim-jumpers, corsairs, and other criminals." Larry explained

"Have we found any good asteroids lately?" Hugh asked.

"A few that look promising, but the profit margins are really tight this year because of the higher cost of Helium-3 for the fusion engines."

"At least you can still get H-3," Ted interjected. "On Earth, I've read that there are waiting lines for H-3. It's causing blackouts in the cities of the UN-countries...you know, the

corporate greed of the H-3 company executives really disgusts me. They're all a bunch of hyenas, feeding on the misery of others."

Hugh noticed that the only thing Ted seemed to like to talk about was the "political issue du jour", and he always seemed to take the "party-line" expressed by the New Social Democratic Party, which had been in power at the U.N. General Assembly for almost 50 years now. Hugh suspected that this was why so many people in the more technologically and industrially advanced member-nations of the U.N. were emigrating to the colonies at an "alarming rate", as the U.N.-owned news channels were putting it.

Larry looked at Hugh, and rolled his eyes.

"Anyway, I've got to get back to work," Larry said as he turned and walked away.

"Ted, Larry's father just happens to be one of those 'hyenas'. Are you trying to insult everyone on the ship?"

"I'm just speaking the truth," Ted said with what would commonly be called "righteous indignation", but Hugh thought a better description would be "intellectual bullying".

"It would be one thing if you were right, but you're not," Hugh said with quiet ferocity, feeling a little bit of anger after having listened to Ted's nonsense for several days now.

"It's true, I just saw a documentary about it on the B.B.C., and since that channel is non-profit, they don't have any reason to lie."

"The reason there are shortages of H-3 on Earth is because the U.N. imposed a price ceiling on the sale of H-3 in the Earth markets that is lower than the actual market price."

"What? They had to impose price controls to prevent corporate war profiteering in light of the C.P.A.'s embargo of lunar H-3 exports to the U.N.-aligned nations."

"The Earth could get all the H-3 it needs from the Uranian Moon Confederation."

"The Uranian corporations are too greedy, and won't ship enough H-3 to make up the difference from the lunar embargo." Ted said with a sarcastic tone of voice. Hugh suspected that its purpose was to silence all opposition or criticism of Ted's statements.

"If it wasn't for the price controls on Earth, that 'greed' you speak of would ensure that Earth got all the H-3 it was willing to pay for. Higher prices on Earth would mean more profits for the Uranian H-3 corporations, so they would start shipping more H-3 to Earth."

"Why should people on Earth have to pay higher prices? You're just *mean*."

Hugh decided to ignore the personal insult, saying: “Prices for H-3 on Earth would start to fall as more was imported, until the price reflected the normal level of profit and costs.”

“You’re world is really black and white isn’t it?” Ted said with mock-incredulity. “People don’t always follow your pet economic theories, they have something called free will. An emotionally suppressed person, like you, probably wouldn’t understand that, though.”

Hugh noticed that when Ted couldn’t win an argument on the merits, he usually resorted to personal insults disguised as psychological evaluations. He decided that further argument was pointless.

“I think it’s about lunch time. Let’s see what’s on the menu.” Hugh turned and walked out of the room. He didn’t look back to see if Ted would follow him.

About a week after their tour of the Astrogeology Department, Hugh’s room was broken into. What little cash Hugh had was stolen. As Hugh left his room to report it, Ted poked his head out of his door.

“Where are you going?” Ted asked.

“I have to go see Officer Smith.”

Ted stepped out, closed his door and followed Hugh down the hall to the elevator that would take them away from the outer part of the spinning crew habitat towards its central hub, where Smith’s office was located. The elevator door opened and they both stepped in.

“Who’s Officer Smith?” Ted asked.

“He’s in charge of ship’s security.”

Hugh had learned to give Ted as little information as possible, because he would invariably try to find something in Hugh’s words to use as the basis for an argument with him. The elevator began to “ascend” towards the hub, and the pseudo-gravity generated by the centrifugal acceleration lessened, causing a sensation of freefall in Hugh’s stomach. When the elevator stopped, the door opened and they walked down the curving hallway to Smith’s office. Hugh knocked on the door.

“Come in.” Smith said from behind the door. Hugh opened it and they walked in.

“Sir, someone broke into my room and stole some money out of it.” Hugh said after closing the door.

“Damn,” Smith said, pounding the desk with his fist. “That’s the third time since he’s been on board.”

“I’m sorry sir?” Hugh said, not understanding.

“The Captain decided to give one of our new crewmembers, Markov, who works in the cafeteria, the benefit of the doubt, despite his criminal record. Before Markov came on board, this ship hadn’t had a theft incident in years, and now we’ve had three in only a few weeks. It’s too much of a coincidence not to be Markov. He was the only new crewman that we brought on board recently. How much did he steal?”

“I didn’t have that much cash in there. Maybe a couple of hundred.”

“I’ll investigate, but I doubt that we will have enough hard evidence to arrest him. Your money is probably gone for good, I’m sorry to say. I know this won’t be much consolation, but I will be filing a formal report with the Captain regarding Markov. I’m going to recommend that he be discharged from employment when we return to port next week. I’m sure that the Captain will agree in light of the evidence.”

As they left Officer Smith’s office, Ted spoke up: “It’s not fair that this crewman, Markov is being blamed. The evidence is circumstantial, and even *Smith* admitted that he probably didn’t have enough evidence to make an arrest.” Ted said Officer Smith’s name with a touch of disgust in his voice.

“You heard Officer Smith. The thefts started as soon as Markov came on board, and we hadn’t had *any* thefts for years before that.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. People have free will, and another crewman could have just decided to start stealing things. Markov probably had a tough life, and now he’s being discriminated against by that rent-a-cop just because of his past troubles. *It’s possible that Markov could have changed, so who are they to blame him?*” Ted practically yelled. “People accused of a crime have to be proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt!”

Hugh thought about what Ted had said for a moment, then said: “Yes, that’s true, there isn’t enough evidence to justify arresting and convicting Markov of anything, but there is enough evidence for the Captain, as the owner of this ship, to decide that he doesn’t want to employ Markov any longer. The Captain isn’t going to arrest Markov -just fire him. It’s true that Markov could have changed, but the evidence points to the fact that he hasn’t changed, at least for the purpose of making a decision about whether to continue to employ him on this ship.”

“Just because he was a thief in the past doesn’t mean he still is today!” Ted stubbornly repeated.

“That’s true,” Hugh said, “but the evidence is sufficient to say that he’s the thief for our purposes.”

“You just don’t-.” Ted’s sentence was drowned out by the deafening sound of the ship’s alarm. The Captain’s voice came on the ship’s PA.

“ATTENTION! THIS IS A CONDITION RED! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! ALL HANDS TO YOUR STATIONS.”

“Shit! Come on!” Hugh said as he turned and ran back to the elevator. Ted followed him.

“What’s going on?” Ted cried out.

“We’re being boarded by corsairs.”

“By what?”

“Space pirates,” Hugh yelled. “Follow me, and don’t cause any trouble or so help me, I’ll tie you up and put you in the closet.”

“Where are we going?” Ted asked as they ascended the elevator back “up”, towards the crew habitat’s hub.

“I have to go to the Infirmary to treat any injuries, and I can’t leave you alone.”

They arrived in the Infirmary in less than a minute, out of breath. The alarm was still blaring out in the hall, but the empty Infirmary was deadly quiet after the door shut. Hugh pulled out a chair and pointed.

“Sit here, and don’t move,” Hugh commanded.

Hugh turned and began pulling out the medical supplies and drugs that would probably be needed to treat the injuries commonly associated with close-quarters combat on a spaceship.

Hugh wondered where Doctor Sloan was. After he had finished his preparations, Hugh decided to see if he could find him on any of the cameras located throughout the ship. He sat down in front of the Infirmary’s terminal. It was a limited access computer, but Hugh thought it would have sufficient access permissions for the job.

Hugh heard Ted get up out of the chair and stand behind him.

Hugh pressed a button to cycle through the different cameras. Most of the ship seemed empty, but the sixth camera view revealed a smoke-filled scene with two groups of men engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

Hugh recognized some crewmembers. They were fighting men Hugh decided must be corsairs. There was no audio on the cameras, which made the life-or-death struggle seem surreal—like a silent movie from the early twentieth century. After a moment, Hugh noticed that Doctor Sloan was one of the crewmembers fighting the corsairs. Hugh also realized that this battle was happening on this level of the circular crew habitat, only a few hundred meters away. There was a flash and more smoke in the scene, and Hugh lost sight of Dr. Sloane.

“What’s going on? Why are they fighting?” Ted’s voice was about two octaves higher than normal.

“Corsairs have boarded the ship, and are trying to take over.” Hugh tried to sound calm, but he wasn’t sure that he succeeded in keeping a quiver out of his voice. His mouth was dry, and he was having trouble keeping his hands from trembling as he worked on the computer. He knew what would happen if the corsairs took over the ship. They would take the surviving crewmembers off to be sold into the illegal slave trade on one of the various rouge solar-orbiting space stations. Slavery was supposed to be illegal, but that didn’t stop outlaw colonies from keeping people in various degrees of involuntary servitude.

Hugh heard the door of the Infirmary open, and spun around, thinking that it would be corsairs, but it was Doctor Sloan, being held up by another crewmember. Doctor Sloan’s shirt was soaked in blood. Hugh jumped up and ran to help him to a bed.

“Don’t leave this room, and lock it after I leave,” the crewman said as he turned to rejoin the fight outside.

Hugh did as he was told. He then turned back to tend to Doctor Sloan. He prepared a hypo of medical-nanobots, and walked over to inject them into the Doctor. He was still conscious. When he had finished injecting him, the Doctor tried to speak between coughing fits.

“Hugh....”

“Try not to speak,” Hugh said with tenderness in his voice, as he adjusted one of the robot arms attached to the edge of the bed over the Doctor’s wounds. The robot was programmed to diagnose the wound and perform the surgery. Medical Doctors still knew how to

do surgery “the old fashioned way”, but it was fortunate that the robots were here, since Hugh had not advanced sufficiently far in his studies to know how to perform the surgery himself.

“No...I...need to tell you something...before...I’m put...under...” The Doctor coughed several times, then continued:

“When...the order to...abandon ship comes, you need to get yourself...and the Stevenson kid to an escape pod. If the ship and crew is lost...many of their family members...will be destitute...most of them don’t have life insurance...”

The Doctor’s voice began to fade as the anesthetic began to take effect, but he was able to continue: “Stevenson will have to pay you as ship’s representative...under...the Deep Space Crimes Bounty...and...Rescue...Act...that money will keep the family members of the dead crewmen ...will need...it...”

The Doctor fell unconscious. At first Hugh didn’t understand what the Doctor had been talking about, but then he remembered that the Deep Space Crimes Bounty and Rescue Act was a law that said the parent or guardian of any minor or other dependent rescued from captivity by corsairs would have to pay one hundredth of their income, or net worth, whichever was greater, for that year to those who had saved their child. Since the corsairs would hold Ted for ransom by his father if he were captured, the law would say that the crew of the *Maine* would be entitled to several hundred million if Hugh could successfully get Ted back to Alpha Station in one of the ship’s escape pods. This amount of money would be enough to ensure that at least the family members of the lost crewmen, many of whom probably didn’t have piracy insurance, would not be destitute.

Hugh hoped that the crewmen would defeat the corsairs, and that he wouldn’t have to undertake such an ordeal, but he also knew that if the order to abandon ship came, he would risk his very life to fulfill what could be the last request of a man that he respected only second to his own father.

As the robot worked on Doctor Sloan, Hugh went back to the Infirmary’s terminal. He queried the computer regarding the number of unauthorized individuals on the ship, and their locations. After a few seconds a schematic of the ship appeared on the screen. There were approximately 50 red dots at various locations on the map. Those red dots represented unauthorized individuals on ship.

Hugh felt his heart begin to sink. The particular level of the circular crew habitat they were on had over 15 corsairs patrolling it. Many of them were located near the elevators, meaning that it would be almost impossible to get to the hub of the habitat, where the escape pods were located. Hugh cycled through the cameras on this level. He didn't see any more fighting –or any living crewmembers. Hugh knew this meant the corsairs had gained control of this level. He also noticed on one of the cameras that the corsairs were going door-to-door, looking for any remaining crewmembers. He jumped up when he realized that the scene in the camera was only a few doors down from the Infirmary.

Hugh ran to the door and pulled a manual lever next to the door, causing bolts to lock it shut from the inside.

“Why did you do that?” Ted seemed to demand and plead an answer at the same time.

“I locked the door from the inside, making an electronic override from the outside of the door impossible. Now they'll have to cut their way in with a laser, which will take some time.”

Hugh went over to a drawer and retrieved a 20th-century-era slug-thrower that Doctor Sloan kept as a curio. Doctor Sloan had let Hugh target shoot with the “revolver” in the nature area of Alpha Station once, and he was a pretty good shot. It wouldn't do any good against the monofilament body armor of the corsairs, but Hugh might be able to fire at an exposed head or neck. He put the revolver in his waistband, and went back to the terminal. The corsairs had arrived at the Infirmary door. One of them seemed to be preparing an electronic override.

“They're outside,” Hugh said to Ted.

“Oh Jesus, what are we going to do?” Ted pleaded.

“Relax, it'll take them at least an hour to cut through the door, even if they started right now. Hopefully, the crew will retake this level by then.”

Hugh switched to other cameras on the ship. He could see that things were not going well for the crew. It looked like the only resistance left was near the hub of the crew habitat, where what was left of the crew seemed to be located. Hugh felt a cold knot in the pit of his stomach, because he knew that they would only retreat towards the hub if they didn't think they could keep the ship. The hub was where the escape pods were located. Hugh realized he wasn't going to be able to depend on the crew to save them. Any escape pods that launched would most likely be captured by the corsair's ship, meaning the crew was as good as captured. Hugh switched to a camera in the hub. He could see the crewmembers launching themselves through

the microgravity environment towards the airlocks of the escape pods. As Hugh watched, the announcement to abandon ship came on over the PA.

Hugh switched to one of the external cameras on the ship, located near the launch bay doors of the hub. The camera computer compensated for the spin of the ship, giving him a steady view as the escape pods began to launch. Hugh watched as the first group of pods to launch headed towards a cluster of nearby asteroids. The corsair ship came into view, and headed for an intercept with one of the pods. The corsair ship would capture as many of the crew pods as possible. It easily captured the first two pods in the group, but Hugh thought the lead one might actually make it to the cluster of asteroids, where it would have a chance to evade the corsair ship. Hugh brought up a couple of proximity displays on his terminal screen. The corsair ship was 250 meters and closing on the pod. The pod had 85 meters to go before it reached the cluster of asteroids. Hugh watched as the ship closed to 175 meters, while the pod still had 50 meters to go. At this rate, they wouldn't make it. His heart sank as the ship closed to 25 meters, with the pod still having 35 meters to the asteroids.

"Come on!" Hugh yelled as the ship closed to within 10 meters. Hugh slammed his fist against the desk. He knew they weren't going to make it.

Then there was a flash of light as the escape pod exploded, followed by a secondary explosion, as the engines on the corsair ship went. The camera went static for a few moments, and when it came back on, there was no sign of the pod or the corsair ship. The ship jolted as gas, debris, and plasma from the exploded ship hit the *Maine*, throwing Hugh and Ted to the floor. Hugh stood up. His forehead was bleeding.

"YES!!" Hugh yelled, ignoring the pain. "Brilliant!"

"What? What is it?" Ted demanded as he stood back up.

"The escape pod was loaded with explosives! It just blew up the enemy ship!"

"Explosives?" Ted said with incredulity and disgust. "You aren't allowed to have explosives on a civilian ship! It's a violation of The Space Weapons Treaty of..."

Ted's voice trailed off. Hugh was considering hitting someone without provocation for the first time in his life, and it must have shown on his face.

Hugh knew that the only ships that treaty prevented from having weapons were the law-abiding ones for defending themselves, but he didn't bother to explain that to Ted. Instead, he

put a gauze bandage over his scalp wound, then turned back to the computer. He watched as more escape pods launched from the hub of the *Maine*, free from the fear of capture now.

Hugh hoped that the escape pods would get within range of Alpha Station or a passing ship to call for help from the A.B. Patrol before the corsairs on the *Maine* could disable the ship's electronic identification beacons. Once the beacons were deactivated, the Patrol ships wouldn't be able to find them. He knew that he had to make alternative plans in case the Patrol didn't rescue them, but he still couldn't think of anything to do other than sit in the Infirmary and hope that the corsairs onboard wouldn't cut through the door. If they did get through, they would most likely kill the Doctor, since a wounded man wouldn't fetch them much at the auction block.

Hugh had researched the activities of the asteroid belt corsairs when he had first come on board the *Maine*. He knew from the reports he had read that if they didn't think you could be of value as a slave or as a hostage for ransom, then they would simply kill you to save life support resources, most likely by spacing you out an airlock.

Hugh knew that the primary goals of the corsairs on the ship would now be to pacify any of the remaining crew and deactivate its electronic beacons. They would then fly the *Maine* to one of the illegal, hidden space stations in the asteroid belt and put it and the remaining crew members up for auction. Hugh wondered if the corsairs could be convinced or tricked into leaving the ship in its remaining escape pods, but that seemed like an impossibility under the current circumstances.

"Hey kid, why don't you do us all a favor and OPEN THE DAMN DOOR!" Hugh was startled from his thoughts by the rough-sounding voice that came on over the intercom. At first he couldn't believe that they were talking to him, but then he remembered that there was a camera in the Infirmary, and that the corsairs would have access to the surveillance systems without the need of a password or user ID.

Hugh looked around and found the Infirmary camera. He stood up and walked towards it, grabbing a towel off of a table, which he threw over the camera.

"Maybe we should just do as they say..." Ted said, his voice quivering. "They're going to get in anyway, and if we don't resist then maybe they won't hurt us..." Ted's voice trailed off when he made eye contact with Hugh.

“I’m only going to tell you this once.” Hugh said, his voice deadly calm. “If we let them in here, they’ll either kill me and the Doctor or, worse yet, sell us into slavery. Then they’ll take you, and cut off either your ear or your thumb, and send it to your father with a ransom demand. When they get the money from your father, they’ll probably kill you, if they haven’t already. I’ve studied the belt corsairs. They cannot be trusted to keep their word, and they will kill anyone that gets in their way. We will *not* open that door, do you understand?”

“Y...yes, okay...” Ted said without much conviction.

Hugh looked at him for a moment, wondering how much he could trust Ted, but then he decided that anybody, no matter how stupid they seemed to be, would understand that negotiation with criminals like these was out of the question. Their history of treachery was common knowledge, inside and outside the belt. In the back of Hugh’s mind, he remembered the arguments he had had in the past with Ted about politics. He quickly put the thought out of his mind, because he couldn’t see how it was relevant.

Focus, Hugh, he thought to himself as he turned to check on the Doctor.

“Hey, kid,” the corsair’s voice came on the intercom again. “The rest of the crew is gone, man. You’re the only ones left. We’re gonna deactivate the beacons, and fly this ship home, man. We’ll get you out of there eventually, and the longer you wait, the worse it will be for you when I do get my hands on you. If you come out now, I promise you won’t be hurt. All we care about is getting out of here before the patrol gets here, man. If you come out now, we’ll even let you leave in an escape pod. You have my word.”

“Maybe...” Ted began.

“Shut up, Ted,” Hugh said without looking at him, as he looked over the Doctor’s medical-readout. It looked like the Doctor had come through the surgery, and the prognosis was good. “It looks like the Doctor is going to be okay, he-.” Hugh turned around to see Ted pulling the lever to unlock the manual bolts on the door.

“NO!” Hugh yelled. He drew out the revolver, but before he could level it on Ted, he had unlocked the door, which slid open.

Hugh pivoted to face the door. He took aim at the head of the entering corsair, and began to squeeze the heavy trigger of the gun, but before he could finish, a blast from the corsair’s neural stunner hit him in his dominant arm, causing intense pain. Hugh reflexively lost his grip on the revolver, which fell to the floor with a thud.

Before Hugh could bend over to pick up the gun with his other hand, the corsair kicked Hugh into the wall directly behind him, knocking his breath out. Hugh slid to the floor in pain, then the corsair savagely kicked him several times. Hugh did his best to protect himself from injury with his arms. The corsair let forth a string of profanities directed at Hugh as he continued to kick him.

“Hey, you heard the *Jefe*. Don’t hurt prisoners. We may need them!” Hugh heard another voice with a Spanglish accent call out. The kicking stopped.

“Oui, but he did not say anything about the wounded, no?” Hugh’s attacker said with a thick French accent. He turned away from Hugh, towards where Doctor Sloan lay. The corsair leveled a weapon at his unconscious form.

“NO!” Hugh yelled, and grabbed the revolver with his non-dominant hand. He leveled it at the Doctor’s attacker and fired at the same moment the corsair fired his weapon at Doctor Sloan.

In the back of his mind, Hugh was thankful he wasn’t able to see what the corsair’s weapon did to Doctor Sloan, but he did see what happened to the murderer’s head as the slug of the .357 caliber revolver impacted it.

“Son of a bitch!” The other corsair yelled as he quickly wiped his accomplice’s blood and brain matter off of his face.

Hugh saw him level his neural stunner, but he didn’t have time to take aim with the revolver before the blast from the corsair’s weapon hit him square in the chest. An intense pain went through his body, rendering Hugh unconscious.

“We’ll need these boys alive for now,” a gravelly voice said as Hugh regained consciousness.

Hugh tried to open his eyes, but everything was a blur. He knew that a direct hit from a neural stunner wouldn’t cause any permanent damage, and that he would recover from its effects in about an hour. His ribs hurt badly from his earlier beating, and he suspected that a few of them were broken.

“We need someone to treat our wounded, and this one here is the medical appren’ice. Sergio kill’d their doc’ before this brat splattered his brains all over the room with a slug thrower.”

“That’s no loss,” another voice said. “If he hadn’t shot Sergio, I would have. I gave orders that there was to be no killing until our situation was secure. What about this other kid?”

“The computer sez he’s the son of *the* Robert Stevenson.”

“Good. The money Stevenson will pay to get his kid back will probably make up for our losses. You got access to the ship’s computers?”

“Naw, just the general access stuff tha’s not password protected. Curly’s still workin’ on gettin’ full privileges on the system. He says it’ll take a couple a’ hours to get access to the navigation and flight control computers.”

“Make sure he understands the need to move fast. We’ve disabled the beacons, but we need to get moving before the Patrol can get here. I’m going to the bridge. Watch these two. I’ll post another man outside the Infirmary here.”

“Sure, *Jefe*.”

Hugh heard the “*Jefe*” leave, and the Infirmary door closed behind him. Hugh knew the chances of a Patrol rescue were miniscule. He tried to get up, and realized he was strapped down. He was finally able to focus his eyes.

The corsair walked over to where Hugh lay and slapped him across the face.

“Hey, you awake yet?”

“Yes,” Hugh said, staring with intense hatred at his captor.

“Don’ be givin’ me the eyeball kid, unless you want me to cut it out and shove it down yer throat. I’m gonna untie you, an’ yer gonna work on our hurt men. Don’ be tryin’ any tricks, un’erstand?”

Hugh didn’t respond, causing the corsair to grab Hugh by the shoulder and squeeze with his metallic prosthetic hand, causing Hugh to scream in pain.

“UN’ERSTAND?” the corsair repeated.

“Okay, I understand!” Hugh said with agony in his voice.

The corsair released his mechanical grip, and proceeded to remove Hugh’s binds.

Hugh sat up. He was beginning to formulate a plan of escape, given the conversation he had just overheard. He’d probably have to kill again, but he wouldn’t mind killing this bastard. He needed to buy some time though, so he decided to cooperate for now.

“Who do you need me to treat?” Hugh said.

Ted didn't say a word, mainly because he had a gag in his mouth. Hugh didn't look at him as he worked. He looked at Ted once when the corsair first untied him, and felt an intense venomous hatred that surpassed his contempt of the corsairs. Hugh had looked away, resolving not to look at him again, for fear of what he might do to Ted if that feeling came over him again. Hugh had made a promise to the Doctor to save Ted, and he intended to keep it, but he would always know that it was Ted who killed the Doctor, as sure as if he had pulled the trigger himself.

Most of the wounded corsairs had superficial wounds, which Hugh could treat himself. The ones with serious injuries, he lay on the operating table for the medical-robot to take care of.

The corsairs apparently weren't too concerned that Hugh would try to escape. The one with the prosthetic arm was his only guard. He stood near the door of the Infirmary and silently watched Hugh work.

Hugh had managed to prepare a hypo of anesthetic that would render the guard unconscious. He had tried several times to get the guard to come close enough to use it, but he refused to budge from his location near the door.

Hugh prepared to move another wounded corsair onto the table, noticing that he was overweight.

"Hey, I need some help putting this guy on the table. He weighs a ton," Hugh said, pretending to try to lift the pudgy pirate.

"You better be able to move him yer-self or I'll come over there and knock the crap outa ya," the guard said, refusing to move.

"I'm not kidding," Hugh said. "Your buddy must have broken something when he beat me. I can't move this guy." Hugh tried his best to make his voice sound sincere and pleading.

The guard seemed to consider this for a moment, sensing a trick, then made a decision. "Get tha' motor-mouth over ther' to help." The guard pointed at Ted, still tied and gagged in the corner.

"You better keep yer mouth shut," the guard said to Ted.

Hugh hoped that he knew Ted well enough to know that he wouldn't be able to obey that order for long. Hugh walked over to Ted, and untied him.

Ted pulled off his gag.

“I’d keep my mouth shut if I were you...” Hugh whispered with a tone of authority. Ted’s look of defiance at Hugh’s command was just what he was hopping for.

Ted was able to stay silent while he helped Hugh put the wounded corsair on the table, but a few minutes afterward he turned to face the guard.

“I just want you to know that if the Patrol catches us, I don’t intend to press charges.”

“I told ya to keep yer mouth shut!” the guard said, advancing towards Ted.

“I-...I just meant that...” Ted stammered, backing away from the guard. “There’s no reason to get angry!” Ted pled as he continued to back away. “I understand your situation.”

The guard continued to advance towards Ted, pulling out a blackjack. As he passed Hugh, he pulled out the hypo hidden in his clothing. The guard must have noticed the motion out of the corner of his eye, because he turned towards Hugh, swinging the blackjack at him.

Hugh moved to his right, and the blackjack hit him on his left arm instead of his head. Hugh gasped in pain and lunged towards the guard with the hypo in his right hand.

The guard backed up to avoid being injected, and raised the blackjack to swing at Hugh again. As he did so, Hugh ducked down low, and lunged into the guard’s body. The hypo made contact with the guard’s left thigh, and almost instantaneously injected its contents.

The guard reached down, and grabbed Hugh by the hair. He raised his blackjack to strike Hugh, and fell backwards as the anesthetic took effect. The guard was unconscious by the time he hit the floor. Hugh turned around and ran to the Infirmary door. He closed it and reengaged the manual lock. He didn’t know if the guard outside heard them or not.

“What are you doing?” Ted finally managed to bluster. “They’ll kill us for sure now!” Ted screamed.

Hugh walked over to him, and punched him in the nose, which cracked and spurted out blood.

“That was for the Doctor,” Hugh said, and turned away, afraid that he might kill him.

“I- I’m s-s-sorry. How was I to know they would kill him?” Ted wailed as he grasped his bloody nose.

Hugh turned back around, and slapped him.

“Shut up! Don’t ever talk to me about it again, or I’ll break both of your arms,” Hugh yelled.

Hugh turned and walked away, trying to get himself back under control. He hated himself for losing control, and he silently swore to himself that he wouldn't ever lay hands on Ted again. He thought of his promise to the Doctor, and it gave him the strength he needed to get through this. He turned back to Ted.

"Sit down in this chair," Hugh said.

Ted did as he was told.

Hugh tied him to the chair. He would never trust him again. Then he walked to a drawer and pulled out a small toolbox. It had an old, manual screwdriver inside. It also had a hammer. Hugh pulled out both tools, and walked over to the corner where the camera was located. He used the hammer to smash it. Once he was certain the camera was nonfunctional, he looked over at the pipe in the other corner of the Infirmary. It ran from the floor to the ceiling, and was about two meters in diameter. Hugh grabbed a collapsible stool and walked over to the pipe.

"Wh- what are you going to do?" Ted asked.

Hugh ignored him as he peered behind the pipe. There was about three quarters of a meter of space between the corner of the room and the pipe. Hugh was able to squeeze between the pipe and the wall and fit into that space with the stool. He looked up, and was momentarily filled with despair. Despite his expectations, the pipe was as smooth and featureless on this side as it was on the other. Then he realized that the pipe was covered with a thick coating of white paint. He stood on his toes, and began scraping paint away from the pipe's surface. After a few minutes, he had scraped down to the metal skin of the pipe, revealing a seam in the pipe's otherwise smooth surface.

It was there.

Hugh opened the collapsible stool, and stood on it. He began scraping away the paint, following the seam, until the rectangular, removable panel was revealed. Hugh was glad that he had spent so much time inside this pipe cleaning it.

Hugh removed the panel from the pipe, and was greeted by the smell of filth. He held his breath, and took a quick look inside. The pipe was completely dark. Hugh stood back before he breathed in, but he began to gag nonetheless. He put the panel back on. They were going to need supplies to do this. He squeezed out from behind the pipe, and began searching for what they would need.

Hugh knew that they were going to need something to prevent the smell from suffocating them to death, and remembered the biological emergency suits in one of the closets. All ships carried them. Every few years, there would be a story in the news about a mutant strain of biological pathogen developing on a ship and spreading like wildfire due to the close-quarters conditions found on a ship. In the event of such an outbreak, the medical personnel had to remain uncontaminated while they treated the crewmembers, or at least not infect healthy crewmen while they worked on the sick ones. The suits contained filters that Hugh thought would remove enough of the deadly odor, as well as prevent infection from contact with so much fecal matter.

“Put this biohazard suit on.” Hugh said as he untied Ted.

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“We’re going down that pipe I opened up, and I don’t want anything to happen to you until you get back to Alpha Station. Now put it on, or I’ll beat you with that blackjack.”

Ted put the suit on.

Hugh checked the computer on the wrist of Ted’s suit, making a few manual adjustments to ensure proper function, then he put on his own suit. He directed Ted behind the pipe.

“There are hand-rungs inside the pipe,” Hugh said. “Climb up on the stool, and pull yourself up through the hole far enough to find one of the rungs. Then, pull yourself in until you are standing on the rungs like you were on a ladder. After that, move up about 4 feet so that I can follow you.”

“I-I don’t think I can do it...” Ted whined.

“Hey, Ted, this is no time for your bullshit,” Hugh said as he reached up and began slapping on the hood of Ted’s suit. “If you don’t do as I say, I’ll hurt you badly. I haven’t got time for your silliness. Now, move!” Hugh grabbed Ted by the waist as best he could from his side of the pipe, and began pushing him up towards the opening.

“Okay, okay,” Ted said, with anger in his voice. He climbed up and into the hole. After a minute, he found the rung, and pulled himself inside the pipe.

Hugh squeezed behind the pipe, and followed Ted through the opening.

Once Hugh was inside the pipe, he looked up at Ted, and asked him if he was alright. Ted responded sullenly that he was okay.

Hugh activated his flashlight, and pointed it “down”.

“Alright, we’re going to go down to the bottom of this pipe, where there is an exit. I brought a couple of hypos that will knock you out if you get out of line, so follow my orders exactly unless you want to spend some time unconscious,” Hugh said to Ted as he began climbing down on the hand-rungs. After a few meters, he stopped and looked up at Ted, who was following.

They descended the pipe without incident.

“What are we going to do, now?” Ted asked, with worry in his voice.

“We’re going to go out through this airlock here, then we’ll be back inside the crew habitat. After that, we’ll have to make our way back to the hub of the ship, and the escape pods. Escape is the only option for us that I see right now because I don’t know how we could defeat the corsairs on our own. When we exit this airlock, you are not to say a word or I will inject you with a hypo. We are very close to the main bridge here, and there will be a lot of corsairs about.”

“But how do you know there won’t be corsairs waiting outside the airlock?”

“I checked the computer before we left the Infirmary, and I didn’t see any at this location, but if there are any, I’ll have to try to kill them with the slug thrower. Alright, you stay here, and I’ll go through the airlock first, then you will follow, understand?”

Hugh could see Ted nod through the faceplate of his biohazard suit. Hugh turned and opened the hatch leading into the decontamination chamber. Hugh stepped into it, and closed the hatch to the pipe. He didn’t bother with the decontamination procedure. Hugh looked through a small window on the door leading from the decontamination chamber into the locker room, where he used to change out of his cleaning suit after pipe-cleaning duty. That already seemed like another life.

Hugh didn’t see anybody, which made sense, because this was just a locker room. Hugh drew the revolver out from a pouch, and commanded the hatch to the locker room open. He stepped out, and confirmed that the locker room was empty. He closed the hatch, and looked through the window into the decontamination chamber.

Ted opened the inner hatch from the pipe, and stepped in, then opened the outer hatch. They took off the biohazard suits, and stowed them in an empty locker.

“Alright, sit down here.” Hugh said and pointed to a bench.

Ted sat down, and Hugh tied his hands behind his back, and then to the bench. Hugh began to gag Ted’s mouth, and he started to protest.

Hugh slapped him. “You know why this is necessary, so shut up.”

Once Ted was secured to the bench, Hugh headed for the door leading out of the locker room, and to the main hallway on this level of the crew habitat.

Hugh opened the door from the locker room, and peaked outside.

Across the hallway from him was another door with a sign that said: SHIP’S CYBERNETIC SYSTEMS DEPARTMENT (S.C.S.D.).

Hugh stopped for a moment, trying to remember something that seemed important about this place, but he couldn’t remember anything that seemed relevant. Ship’s Cybernetic Systems Department was responsible for maintaining the ship’s computer systems, and had nothing but several terminals for accessing the ship’s computers.

After a few moments, Hugh shook his head, and got back to the task at hand. He looked up and down the hall, but he didn’t see anyone. This section of the hallway appeared empty. Hugh knew that the bridge was on the opposite side of the circular hallway, so most of the corsairs would be concentrated near that area. Hugh went back inside the locker room and untied Ted, but left the gag on. “We’re going to go down the hallway to an elevator, and ride it up to the hub where the escape pods are.”

Hugh led Ted out of the locker room into the hallway. They had walked about 15 meters when they heard approaching voices. Hugh stopped, holding Ted’s arm with one hand. He looked around. There were no doors here, and no place to hide. He turned, and began to run in the direction they had come, pulling Ted with him.

When they got back to the locker room, Hugh stopped. The voices were still approaching from down the hall. He considered going back into the locker room, then turned to the opposite door leading to S.C.S.D. After a moment’s hesitation, he grabbed Ted, and pulled him into that room. Hugh locked the door behind them, and ran to one of the terminals in the room, still pulling Ted with him. After entering his access code, he pulled up the camera for this section of the hallway. He watched on the camera as the corsairs walked passed S.C.S.D. and the locker room, oblivious to their presence. Hugh checked other cameras near the elevator. There were corsairs all around it. He needed a new plan.

Hugh began to think as he tied Ted to a chair.

“I need to get them away from the elevator...” Hugh said aloud. He thought about getting the ship’s computers to issue a fire alarm on this level, but he didn’t have access to any of

the computer's sensitive systems. If he were on the bridge, Hugh thought that he could get full access to all of the ship's systems, and give himself full privileges on the computer. Yesterday, he had accidentally seen the numerical password that one of the senior bridge officers had typed into the keypad at his terminal on the bridge, but the password would only work from the bridge.

Hugh put thoughts of sneaking into the bridge out of his mind. Most of the corsairs were around or in the bridge.

Hugh continued to rack his brain for several more minutes, trying to think of a diversion. Then he remembered a program that Larry Chang had written a few weeks ago, while planning a practical joke. Hugh had convinced Larry that the joke was a bad idea, although Hugh suspected that he had never really meant to do it, and that it was just calculated to get a reaction out of "straitlaced Hugh", as Larry was so fond of calling him.

Larry's joke had involved a program that would make it appear that the ship's autodestruct systems had been activated. Since the self-destruct wasn't really activated, and the program was completely harmless, the ship's computer wouldn't recognize it as a threat, and would allow it to run to the end. It would count down to zero, at which point a little cartoon dog would appear on all of the monitors on the ship, saying: "Surprise!"

Although an experienced technician from SCSD would probably have recognized the program as fake, Hugh doubted that the corsair's computer man would be experienced enough with the *Maine*'s systems to realize it.

Hugh thought for several minutes about what he should do. If he ran this program, then maybe the corsairs would leave the elevator area, but it seemed more likely that it would just cause more corsairs to go to the elevator, in an effort to get to the escape pods before the fake destruct sequence finished. Hugh considered several other diversions, but none of them seemed feasible, then he realized that maybe the fake destruct sequence program could achieve a better goal, one that he had considered impossible until now.

Whatever he was going to do, he needed to act fast, since the computer indicated that the corsairs had gained administrative access to all of the ship's computer systems from the bridge terminal. This meant that the *Maine* would be underway to the corsairs' base soon, and the further the ship got from its pre-logged flight path, the more difficult it would be for the Patrol to find them.

Hugh swiveled away from the terminal to face Ted.

“I’ve activated the ship’s self-destruct sequence,” Hugh said to Ted, who was still bound and gagged in his chair.

Ted’s eyes bulged like they were going to pop out of his head. He began mumbling and groaning through his gag in protest.

This satisfied Hugh that Ted believed him. Now if he could just count on Ted to behave like Ted. It was a risk, but Hugh didn’t see any better options. Hugh decided to embellish his story a little bit more:

“Unless the corsairs leave the ship in the remaining escape pods, I don’t plan to stop it. I don’t intend to live the rest of my life as a slave. I’d rather be dead.”

Hugh gave Ted what he hoped was a look of desperation and madness. All of the emergency lights on the ship were flashing red, and a computerized voice was declaring over the PA that the ship would self-destruct in one hour. Hugh dialed up the bridge on the communication’s panel.

After a few moments, a man answered it. His olive-countenance was rough, pock-marked, scarred, and, most importantly, scared.

“Who the hell are you?” the nervous corsair asked.

“I’m the person who activated the self-destruct sequence, and I don’t plan to deactivate it unless all of you leave the ship in the escape pods,” Hugh answered. “Unless I download the program in this stick,” Hugh paused and held up a memory stick to the communication panel’s camera, “from the bridge terminal in one hour, this ship is going to explode. You guys better get going.”

Hugh hung up the phone before the corsair could say another word. Hugh turned to Ted.

“No reason to keep you tied up now, since we’re probably going to die anyway,” Hugh said with a tone of voice that reflected the interest he might show for a sale of women’s shoes at Macy’s.

“Look Hugh,” Ted said as soon as his gag was off. “I know that you and I haven’t always gotten along, but this is insane. We’ve got to find another way.”

“I’m pretty confident that the corsairs will leave the ship in time for me to deactivate the autodestruct with this,” Hugh held up the memory stick, then put it down on the computer desk.

Hugh saw Ted glance at the stick furtively, and could tell he was calculating in his mind how to get it away from Hugh.

“What if they don’t? What if there aren’t enough escape pods, or what if they just aren’t that smart?”

“That’s just a chance we’ll have to take...” Hugh said, with pretended doubtfulness now filling his voice.

“That’s your problem Hugh,” Ted said, with greater confidence, now that he mistakenly believed that his message was getting through to Hugh. “You always assume that you can reason your way out of anything, and that others are going to act a certain way just because it fits one of your syllogisms.”

“Maybe you’re right...” Hugh said, his voice trailing off. “Maybe I should have a backup plan.” Hugh pretended to think for a few seconds. “I could go back up the waste pipe, and see if the guard that was posted outside the Infirmary door is gone. Then we could use the elevator from that level to get to the escape pods.”

Hugh finished untying Ted, then stood up.

“You better stay here. I can get back to the infirmary faster on my own,” Hugh said.

Ted nodded, his eyes darting to the memory stick still sitting on the desk. Without another word, Hugh turned and ran out the door, and back across the hallway to the locker room.

Hugh opened a small storage closet in the locker room, and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He decided to give Ted 15 minutes before going back across the hallway into SCSD.

Fifteen minutes later, Hugh crept back into SCSD. He brought up the hall camera next to the bridge just in time to see Ted run into the bridge. Unfortunately, there weren’t any cameras that Hugh could access given his current password, but he was confident that would change in a matter of minutes.

The memory stick that Hugh had shown to Ted and the corsairs actually contained a program that would transfer all control from the bridge terminal to Hugh’s terminal in SCSD. Hugh had written the program and incorporated the access code that he had seen the bridge officer use the day before. The bridge officer’s access codes only worked from the bridge terminals, so Hugh had needed a way to download it from a bridge terminal.

Given his past behavior, Hugh had been confident that Ted would take the memory stick to the corsairs. Of course, Hugh couldn't be certain that Ted would behave this way, since people did have free will, but most of the time, Hugh found that people's past behavior was an excellent guide as to how they would behave in the present.

About a minute later, Hugh's terminal notified him that he now had full control of the ship's computer systems. He worked quickly. First he closed and locked all computer-controlled doors. Then he ordered the ship's navigation computers to set a course for Alpha Station. Since Hugh was concerned that the corsairs might do something rash if they remained conscious, he commanded the ship's environmental computers to adjust the pressure of all areas but SCSD down by a sufficient number of bars to render everyone on the ship but Hugh unconscious. The pressure change wasn't enough to kill anyone, but it would cause a few bloody noses and headaches when the corsairs, and their enabler, Ted, woke up.

It wasn't long before the *Maine* was found by the Patrol once it started its route back to Alpha Station. Hugh told the Patrol ship *Hunter* that he was a member of the *Maine*'s crew and that he had neutralized the corsairs. Of course, since the Patrol had no way of knowing whether he was telling the truth, they boarded the ship under the assumption it was full of hostiles. Hugh watched from his terminal in SCSD as they came storming onto the *Maine*. They looked very impressive in their black, mechanically augmented, hard pressure suits, with Mark I laser rifles at ready. After a few minutes they found Hugh in SCSD, and ordered him to the floor.

Hugh complied, knowing it was standard procedure for the Patrol to treat everyone as a potential hostile in this sort of operation.

Once the rest of the *Maine* was secured, and Hugh's identity was ascertained, he was allowed to transfer over to the *Hunter*. When he got there, he was greeted by the Captain of the *Maine* and its bridge officers. Larry Chang was there too.

"Hugh you're alive!" Larry said and grasped Hugh, hugging him in a sincere embrace. Hugh was surprised that Larry didn't have anything sarcastic or funny to say, but it was clear from the tears in his eyes that he was too overjoyed from seeing his friend alive to display his usual verbal witticisms.

The Captain of the *Maine* grasped Hugh's free hand and shook it vigorously.

“The Captain of the *Hunter* has told me that it is because of your courage that I have my ship back.”

“I just did what was necessary, sir,” Hugh said, embarrassed at so much attention.

The Captain of the *Maine* leaned close to Hugh, so that only he could hear him amongst all the chatter and celebration. “That’s true, but many men can’t even recognize what is necessary, much less have the resolve to see it through. I am forever in your debt.” The Captain then stepped away from Hugh, and allowed the other crew members to crowd in on Hugh. They all wanted an opportunity to shake his hand.

A few hours later, Hugh went to eat dinner in the officer’s dining room of the *Hunter* with its Captain and the Captain of the *Maine*. After they finished eating, Hugh explained to them how he had managed to recapture the *Maine*. Hugh started from the time that he had first heard the alarm over the PA announcing a corsair attack. When Hugh told them about how Doctor Sloan had died, he had had to stop for several minutes to regain his composure.

Between his sobs, Hugh heard the Captain of the *Maine* swear under his breath: “That little bastard,” in reference to Ted.

The two captains sat patiently as Hugh began the process of recovering emotionally from the Doctor’s death. Once he had wiped his tears away, Hugh continued with the story, explaining about the escape through the waste pipe, and how he had eventually managed to trick Ted and the corsairs on the bridge into unwittingly giving him control of the ship’s computer systems.

“But how did you know for sure that Ted would take the memory stick to the corsairs?” the Captain of the *Hunter* asked.

“It’s obvious Phil,” the Captain of the *Maine* responded before Hugh could answer. “Ted had shown himself to be a pathological appeaser, so it wasn’t too much of a stretch for Hugh to assume that he would do so again if given a chance. Ted could have chosen to behave better, but under the circumstances, Hugh was certain that Ted would do exactly what he did.”

“Certain?” The Captain of the *Hunter* asked skeptically.

“Given the choices available to Hugh, he was certain.” The Captain of the *Maine* said confidently. “What else could Hugh have done to avoid slavery or death? He made the best choice available to him under the circumstances.”

The Captain of the *Hunter* opened his mouth to respond, but then he closed it. He stroked his beard thoughtfully.