

SU – 2226

A gleaming black shape which resembled a devil bird, right out of hell. Based on the way they fought, it was an apt description. Its dark wings were folded back against its body like it was in a dive.

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Master Ensign Ratra stared at the radar screen. His eye ached. Sometimes, with the green glow of the display screen, he thought he was going blind. The sudden appearance of a blip convinced him otherwise. "Captain, enemy contact bearing one, two, five mark four."

"Heading?" Captain Bras inquired.

Ratra checked the reading. The *Corsa* had only been a month out of space dock and he still wasn't sure if the instruments had been calibrated correctly before they left. The tiny room made movements difficult. The compartment was stuffed with controls, monitors, and lights. Almost every inch had something in it. If you moved more than a few inches, you bumped into someone else. Ratra had never expected space travel to feel like living in a crowded closet.

"Well," the captain demanded briskly, "Where are they're heading?"

The radar operator's voice betrayed his nerves. He'd never been in combat. Not with the enemy. Everyone said they were relentless and utterly lacking in mercy. And more dangerous than anyone the Space Service had ever encountered. "I not sure of my readings, Chief Captain."

"What do they tell you?"

"It's heading right for us."

The captain cursed silently and glanced at the control console. "System's Engineer Jauzun, bring the ship to a dead stop. Weapons, bring missiles one and four to bear."

Weapon's Officer Uruhov sounded as nervous as everyone else. "Aye, Captain. Bring weapons one and four to bear." The officer slid his key into the firing panel and turned it. The indicator lights went from red to green. Then he turned to look back at the captain. "Captain." the officer reminded him, "your key. To arm the warheads."

The captain placed his key in the panel and turned it. The light also changed to green and a blue bar appeared, spreading its glow over the tiny control room. "Weapon's safety released. Missiles one and four armed and ready."

Ensign Ratra's strained voice climbed an octave. "Sir, the enemy has fired."

The captain seemed unphased. "Release weapons one and four."

Uruhov pressed a large red firing button. It was an odd feeling. A long time ago, everyone had always assumed these devices would destroy the planet. Now they were being used to save the planet from an implacable enemy. It was an odd turn of events. "Weapons away, sir."

The captain looked disappointed. "End the drill." He demanded.

All the lights in the room shifted back to station and the glow changed from blue back to red. Even in a drill, it was comforting to see the red glow of the safeties in operation. Flying around with more bombs on board than crew always made everyone nervous. Still, if one of them blew up, they'd never feel a thing.

The captain frowned. "Too slow," he insisted. "Do you want to get blown up?"

Everyone shook their heads.

“We’re not shooting at something halfway around the planet.” Captain Bras growled. “If you let them get too close then we get caught in the blast.”

Political Officer Gusk looked equally grim. “Chief Captain, the men have been under quite a bit of strain. It’s their first patrol.”

The captain came close to losing his temper. “It’ll be their last patrol if they don’t get this right. I have a responsibility to the state to return this ship and its crew intact,” he growled. “Do you not agree?”

“No, Chief Captain. I mean, yes, Chief Captain. It’s your duty.”

The captain was resolute. “This ship has to be ready. There’s a war on. How will we ever know how the crew will perform if we don’t push them?”

Master Ensign Ratra slapped his hand on the radar screen. “Captain, enemy contact.”

The captain’s voice was beyond strained. “Who told you to start the drill again?” he demanded.

Ratra’s face was white. “It’s not the drill, captain. Enemy contact bearing two, seven, five exactly.”

“Heading?” Captain Bras inquired.

This time the ensign had the answer. “It’s heading right for us.”

Uruhov didn’t even wait for the command. He slid his key into the firing panel and turned it. The indicator lights changed from red to green. The captain was next. His key slid right into the panel with one smooth motion and he immediately turned it. The lights changed to green and the weapon’s active blue bar returned. “Weapon’s safety released. Missiles one and four armed and ready, sir.”

Before the captain could even react, an alarm sounded. Everyone looked around desperate to locate the problem. “Fire in the forward control room, sir.”

“Get someone on ...”

“Fire teams are responding, sir.”

The blue light disappeared, and the room went back to the hellish glow of the red lights. “Somebody get me a report ... now.” The captain turned to Ratra. “What is the enemy ship doing?”

The ensign stared at the radar screen. He whipped off the moisture off the glass with his hand, but the reading did not change. “She’s holding position directly in front of us sir. 4,000 yards. You should be able to see her out of control view window.”

The captain looked up. The bridge was a windowless space crammed with hardware and monitor screens, but nothing that showed you outside. Yet, above his head was a crawlway to a viewport. He pushed off with his feet and slowly rose toward the hatch. He flipped the highly polished bar and the hatch opened with a hiss. He pulled himself up using the provided handrails. The window was now above his head. It was miniature thing, just big enough so your eyes covered the glass. As soon as his eyes cleared the bottom edge, he could see it.

The sun was reflecting off its surface. It was an enemy vessel all right. A gleaming black shape which resembled a devil bird, right out of hell. Based on the way they fought, it was an apt description. Its dark wings were folded back against its body like it was in a dive. But its weapon tubes were facing in the wrong direction. The *Corsa* was over the top of the ship, the enemy vessel couldn't fire at them even if she wanted.

"What is it, Captain?"

"It's one of theirs all right, but she's sitting there, laughing at us."

"Fire's out in the forward control room. Shall we fire our weapons now?"

The captain shouted down the tube. "Of course not. They are too close; the missiles would incinerate both of us."

The next several hours were a nightmare of waiting. The enemy ship sat frozen before them. One blast of the engine and they could ram her. But they probably wouldn't survive the encounter. Still, the captain was considering it. What was she doing? Why was she simply sitting out there taunting us? Everyone stood around silently. You could cut the tension with a knife. The worse part was they were trapped. If they engaged the engines, they might simply crash right into this alien monster machine.

Not unexpectedly, it was the captain who broke the silence. "Lieutenant Doút, break out the spacesuits. We're going for a little stroll."

Doút's face had the same blank stare you saw when a doctor informed you of a fatal disease you'd acquired. Going outside to visit an alien spaceship wasn't something he'd even remotely envisioned when he had signed up. The prospect almost made him vomit. Doút started thinking about the last letter he'd sent home as he pulled the suit over his legs. It was only occurring to him now ... it might be the last message he'd ever send home. You don't think about such things until it's too late. Your mind is filled with all the things you should have said. All the things you wanted to talk about with your family but now will never be able to convey. He almost screamed in panic when the helmet was lowered over his head.

"System check."

The captain's order snapped him out of his panic attack. "System's read nominal, sir."

"Close the inside hatch."

Doút pressed the button and the hatch sealed. Air started pumping out of the room at once. "Hatch closed."

"I was getting married when my tour was up," Doút murmured.

Captain Bras gave him a nod. "You'll be fine son. Just breathe like you're going to a game."

The image was a comforting one. It flew in the face of the oxygen indicator on the wall. The falling red level looked exactly like it was bleeding to death. When it reached the bottom, the outer door opened silently. It was unnerving. You couldn't hear it because there was no air. The logic centers of your brain told you as much. It was the primitive parts of your brain which ended up screaming – run.

The captain floated out the hatch, dragging Doút out behind him by the safety line which connected them. Doút desperately tried to grab the hatch on the way out, to stay with the ship. But the hatch slipped right past his gloved fingers. He was now out in space. Cold, unforgiving, deadly. He could almost feel the icy vastness of empty space. His face turned green.

He finally got his breathing under control when the sun rose and illuminated the enemy ship. The devil bird shape awakened every nightmare he'd had as a child. It had to have come right out of hell. His breathing rose to a rapid staccato. He waved his arms as if attempting to swim back to the ship. It was a good thing the captain's attention was riveted to the enemy ship or he was sure to end his days court-marshaled.

"Calm down Lieutenant." The captain voice had a unique calming effect. "If they were capable of killing us, I'm sure we'd be dead already. The enemy is not known for his mercy."

The horrid bird ship grew larger as they approached. The black sides filled their vision and blotted out the stars. The captain smashed into the dark hull, but there was no loud thud. Only silence. Doút seemed to bounce off the hull when it was his turn to make contact. It seemed flexible, rubbery as if it was constructed out of something besides metal. It was eerie. Doút thought ... well he thought the surface was warm. the captain must have been thinking the same thing.

"Forget it, lieutenant. It's black. The surface probably absorbed the sunlight." The captain attached the safety line to a loop that stuck out from the surface. "See if you can find a hatch somewhere."

Doút started looking for anything which might be an opening. He used his gloves to pat the surface, it still felt strange. He couldn't see a seam or an opening anywhere. It was like the whole thing was cast as a single piece ... or grown. The idea caused him to panic. He started to crawl across rapidly, trying to escape.

He fell.

He landed inside the ship. It was as if the hull was there one minute and then not the next. his hands flailed wildly. He could see the sun through some kind of hatch. Until it was blocked out by the captain. Doút was dragging Captain Bras along behind him with the safety line. The last thing he remembered was the captain crashing into him with a thud.



Doút awoke to the captain's face. He was still in his spacesuit, but the visor was open. "Captain!" he yelled.

Bras took off his helmet. "It alright, the air is breathable."

"I thought it was a dream."

"More like a nightmare. How did you get in here?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Let's look around."

“Do we have to, sir?” The way Captain Bras stared back at him, he didn’t need an answer. The ship looked odd. It was very cold. You could see your breath hanging in the air. The room had a lot of exposed conduits and wiring. There was some kind of shiny flimsy metallic material covering some of the components. The lights didn’t shine into the room, they were pointed at the walls. The reflected light gave the room an eerie glow. Odd shadows crept across the walls. On the far side was a hatch with a very small window. The door was round and at least knee height off the floor. You’d have to step over it to get into the next compartment. I opened without much fuss and little resistance.

On the other side was a strange space. Long and narrow – and filled with doors. It was dark. The dim lights didn’t help. All they did was manage to create weird shadows. The two men crept down the long space slowly, expecting, well who knows what. So far, the ship appeared abandoned. There were pipes running overhead and manual control valves everywhere. They were all labeled in the most alien-looking language you could imagine.

The door at the far end opened as they approached. It stooped them in their tracks. What both of them wouldn’t have given for a sidearm. They waited for a few minutes, frozen, but nothing happened. Finally, the captain stepped through the opening. On the other side was a control room. There were screens all over the walls displaying all sorts of views. Some showed the exterior and you could see the stars. Others displayed interior views. There was even a screen on the ceiling and still more behind them.

“I don’t get it.”

The captain gave a wry smile. “They’re directional. The ones on this wall show forward, Port and Starboard to the left and right. Aft views are behind us.”

“No views below?”

“I think we may have found a weak spot in their defenses. A blindside. Think of how valuable this could be if we could get it home.”

“Sir, you’re not thinking?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.” he patted me on the shoulder. “Get a recovery team over here as soon as possible. Make sure Mr. Jauzun accompanies them. I think he’ll find this very interesting. Then tell the Reserve Captain Jadson to take command of the *Corsa*. Have him get a cable sent over so we can haul this thing back.”

“Sir?”

“Just do it, Lieutenant.”

“Yes. sir.”



The crew poured over the strange vessel, trying to learn everything they could.

“Don’t you find it odd, sir?”

“I find the whole thing odd, Mr. Gusk – very odd.”

“I mean where is the crew? There’s no one on board. Not even any bodies.”

“You want to ignore this outstanding gift we’ve been presented with?”

“No, sir – I simply find it odd, that’s all.”

Together they looked at a plaque attached to the bulkhead. It read SV-2226. Gusk almost laughed. “Look at this will ya. They don’t even name their ships. They number them.”

“Well, I hope we don’t meet the other two thousand, two hundred and twenty-five.”

System’s Engineer Jauzun stuck his head through the control room’s hatch. “It has nuclear engines,” he declared.

Chief Captain Bras looked pleased. As if it was the only good news he’d heard all day. “Good. That means they don’t have an advantage in propulsion.”

“Sir,” Jauzun remarked, “I think I can get them up and running. They’re down right now. It’ll take me several hours to get them back up and running, but I think it can be done.”

“Don’t even think about it. It’s an alien spacecraft. We’ll tow her back.”

The ship jerked and shuddered. everyone was thrown to the deck. The ship was moving. Everyone could feel the motion in the desk plates. The captain eyes burned directly into Jauzun skull. “I thought you said the engines were cold?”

“They were, I’d stake my life on it.”

The captain glanced around at the monitors. “Where’s the Corsa? Get the Reserve Captain on the line.”

Master Ensign Ratra appeared distressed. “I can’t sir. They are out of range.”

The captain glanced at him as if he was a junior deckhand. “That’s impossible. Fix your problem and get me the Reserve Captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

The captain turned to Jauzun. “Show me these engines you will stake your life on.”

“Yes, sir. If you’ll follow me.”

They proceeded to the center of the ship. The compartment they entered was primitive by the standards of the fleet. Manual control switches everywhere. Dials, gauges, and a few instruments for which the captain couldn’t even begin to imagine a purpose. Jauzun held up a hand radiation counter. It read zero.

“You see sir, dead. Barely above background radiation.”

Bras gave him a dour glance. “This is the only power source for the engines?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re a fool, Jauzun” The captain was not being kind. He rammed his finger into the engineer’s chest as if he was trying to collapse the man’s chest. “Where is the *Corsa*? Either see moved or we did. There must be other engines. Or other power sources. Find them.” He turned to Master Ensign Ratra. “Find out where we are,” he ordered crisply.

“How, sir?”

The captain gave him an annoyed scowl. “There are stars out there, you can see them. Figure out where we are.”

“Yes, sir!”

Gusk put his hand on the captain’s chest. “Are you merely assigning make-work projects for everyone, captain?”

The captain brushed off the Political Officer’s hand. “Get out of my way.”

“Sir!” Jauzun shouted.

The edge of the captain’s lips turned down. “What is it now.” As he turned, the captain noticed the labels on the controls. When they’d entered, every one of them was filled with an undecipherable alien script which had looked more like random chicken scratching than a language. Now they were clearly readable. The captain glanced at the engineer.

“I know sir,” Jauzun remarked, referring to the labels.

Gusk joined the captain glancing at the engineer. “Do you think it can read our minds?”

“What?”

“The ship.”

The captain grimaced. “Don’t be an idiot.”

System’s Engineer Jauzun had a gleam in his eye. “Captain, permission to start these engines. When Ratra figures out where we are, then we can plot a course back to the ship.”

“Permission denied.”

“But, captain,” the engineer protested, “the labels. They are all here. I can get this ship up and running in no time.”

“Labels,” the captain shouted, “you speak to me of labels? How do you know they are not misinformation? You turn one wrong knob and this while ship goes up like a thousand sun. This ship is now the property of the state. I will not permit you to damage this ship,” he turned to the rest of the crew, “or anyone else to deny the state her prize.”

The crew stood in silence. “We’ve been here for over twenty hours,” the captain mumbled under his breath. “I’m going to find a nice corner to lie down in and I’m going to get some sleep. I suggest you do the same.” They started to storm out of the reactor compartment. Then he turned back to the engineer. “Don’t touch *anything*.”

The captain found a bunk which turned out to be fairly comfortable. All the amenities including the alarm Klaxon. He jerked awake. The alarm was still ringing. “Damn Jauzun. I told him not to touch anything. I swear I going to throw him out the airlock myself.”

He tried the door, but it was stuck. He jiggled the handle, but it wouldn’t budge. He took a step back. Everywhere blood was dripping. the crimson fluid ran from ceiling to floor and started to collect in puddles on the floor.

He hammered his fists against the hatch, but he could hear no one on the other side. The door abruptly opened, with little or no effort on the captain’s part. Outside in the narrow compartment, it was filled with quant bipeds in ragged uniforms. Only these creatures were nothing but skeletons. The cloth hung from them in strips, rotting. Bras could walk right through them. He couldn’t feel them, and they seemed to give no indication he was even present. He had a distinct feeling they were the crew – or once had been.

He started working his way toward the bridge and the rest of his crew, not these dead images. The lights in the compartment had turned green and dim. Bras found himself slipping on the blood which covered the floor. Before he could make the hatch, the lights returned to normal. Most of the ghostly figures were gone, only two remained. One was a bizarre multiarmed creature in a spacesuit. The other was one of the bipeds he’d noticed before. His uniform was crisp and clean. It was all black. His chest was covered in some outlandish multi-colored ribbons. Strange silver shapes adorned the tops of his shoulder and the collar. The biped’s arm rose, and he aimed a gun at the other creature. He fired. Red bursts of blood flew across the compartment. The biped kept firing; ten perhaps fifteen rounds. Only then did the multi-armed creature slump to the floor.

With a wicked smile, the biped glanced back at the captain, malevolence shining from ear to ear. Only then did the room return to the dim green and the skeletal creatures return to roam the open, but now crowded space.

“You’ve got to be fracking kidding me,” the captain spat.

He resumed his journey to the bridge. Once through the hatch, all the consoles seemed alive. Controls shined and lights flashed. Random symbols seem to scroll across some of the panels. But the only ones on the bridge were the skeletal crew. Bras stood in the hatchway in a state of astonishment.

The room changed again. Gone was the long-dead crew. In their place was the recovery crew of the *Corsa*. They were busy examining the controls. All except for Uruhov, who was curled up in a ball on the floor by the hatch, sleeping. The captain did not seem amused. “Where were you?” he demanded.

Gusk appeared puzzled. “Right here. We’ve been here since ... well, since you went to sleep.”

“What happened to the others?”

“What others? What are you talking about?”

The captain never got a chance to answer. Instead, all eyes darted about the compartment. “BANG! BANG! BANG!” The sound echoed through the room. It sounded like a wrench being hammered against a steel plate. “What’s that sound?” the captain asked in a low voice.

Ratra had an intense, panicked look on his face. As if he had seen the skeletal crew who, moments before, had been wondering the ship. His voice trembled. “It’s coming from outside.”

The captain displayed an annoyed expression. “Don’t be ridiculous. There’s nothing out there but the vacuum of space.”

“I tell you, Captain, it outside the ship.”

Bras slammed the hatch and let it bounce back open again. It got everyone’s attention. “Search the ship. find it. If there is someone on this ship ... never mind, just find the damn thing.” No one moved.

“BANG! BANG! BANG!”

“Well,” the captain demanded, “don’t stand there. Find it, Find it now!” It was one of those commands, stated in a way which defied refusal. One simply complied. Slowly the crew started heading for the door.

“BANG! BANG! BANG!”

They all stopped and glanced around with trepidation.

“Get going you fools, find it.”

Bras shut the hatch behind him. He wiped his brow.

“BANG! BANG! BANG!”

“Oh, great,” the captain screamed in the empty room. “Why don’t you keep making your ridiculous racket.” Despite his increasingly desperate protests, they could continue. Bras swore the sounds resolved into a pattern. Three long thuds followed by two sets of three short poundings. It simply repeated itself with annoying regularity. Then the whole ship shook.

“Captain,” a terrified voice erupted out of his suit’s COMM system. “The reactors have started, but all the coolant is gone. The reactor’s overheating.”

He didn’t respond. In a blinding flash, he was through the hatch and headed for the forward reactor. The crew was standing outside the hatch to the reactor room. Jauzun was looking through the window, lights were flashing everywhere. A klaxon was ringing. Even outside the reactor room, you could feel the heat rising. Everyone was sweating. The nervous looks on everyone’s faces were telltale.

“What happened?” he demanded in a brisk tone.

Jauzun was distraught. “I don’t know. We didn’t touch anything, I swear. No one touched anything. The system was off and then ... well, it started acting the way it’s acting now, sir.”

“How long do we have?”

“Until it explodes?”

“Yes.”

Jauzun seemed to be doing some calculations in his head. “I don’t know. Five maybe ten minutes.”

“Well, which is it? Five or ten?”

“I don’t know, damn it.”

The captain’s eyes frantically raced about the compartment? “Can you find some water to flood the compartment?”

“Where,” Jauzun appeared confused, “I don’t know what controls anything. None of these labels are helping. They keep changing.” The engineer appeared distraught.

Bras put on his helmet and lowered the visor, activating the respirator and filling the suit with oxygen. “Get the crew back onto the bridge and seal the hatch.

“Captain,” Gusk complained, “You can’t simply go in there. It could be filled with radiation.”

“Get to the bridge, damn you.”

The crew slowly turned and then sprinted through the hatch as the captain watched. After they were all in, they slammed the hatch closed and a hiss could be heard as the door sealed. Watching on the monitors, the crew gasped as the captain opened the hatch to the reactor room and marched inside. They stared in astonishment as he crossed the room right past the reactor. Walking to the far side of the compartment, he opened a hatch as the crew inhaled deeply.

The air in the reactor room rushed through the open hatch and out into space. Bras clawed his way back to the main reactor room hatch, opened it and stepped through. With a flick of his fist, he slammed the hatch closed and sealed it. He stood for a few moments and then appeared to glance at several of the dials and indicators.

Finally, he marched up to the bridge.

The crew froze in terror as the hatch handle slowly turned. Everyone took a step back as the hatch open. The captain stepped through and closed it behind him. Opening his visor with a hiss, he faced his crew. “Damn good thing space is ice cold,” he remarked. “Damn good thing.”

“BANG! BANG! BANG!”

Bras glanced up at the ceiling. “Yea, you’re welcome too.”



Ratra and Dou't searched the ship as the noise continued unabated. “BANG! BANG! BANG!” They hadn’t found a thing.

“It can get in now,” Ratra muttered under his breath.

“What?”

“Whatever is banging outside. It can get in now through the hatch the captain opened in the reactor room.”

Doút laughed dryly. “Ratra, you have an imagination like a little girl afraid of the monster in her closet.”

Ratra didn’t seem mollified. “It doesn’t concern you?”

“What?”

“Whatever it is can get in,” he repeated.

Doút frowned. “Well, if it gets in, maybe it’ll stop all the damn banging.”

The klaxons started blaring again. “Fire!” the COMM screamed.

Ratra leaned down into his microphone. “Where?”

“I don’t know what you call it ...” Gusk’s voice rang out, “the compartment on the far end of the ship from the bridge.”

“Engine room,” another voice called out. “Fire in the engine room.”

Ratra and Doút ran down the long axis of the ship, heading for the engine room. “What do we do when we get there?” Ratra asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what does alien firefighting equipment look like?”

“I have no idea.”

“So, what do we do?”

Doút sneered. “I’ll let you spit on it.”

When they arrived at the hatch, they could both make out the flames through the tiny window in the hatch. It was all over the room.

Lieutenant Doút, pulled down his visor. “Stay here,” he told Ratra. “Close the hatch behind me.”

“What?” Ratra yelled over the noise of the fire.

“Just do it!” He opened the hatch and stepped through it. Ratra closed the hatch as requested. He could see Doút suit engulfed in flames. The lieutenant disappeared behind a wall of flames. Ratra stood at the hatch, ready to open it up again once his friend returned. He stood watching the flames through the little window, growing ever more impatient.

“BANG! BANG! BANG!”

Finally, there was a flash and the flames were gone. In the back of the engine room, Ratra could only see an open hatch. But Doút was missing.

“BANG! BANG! BANG!”

On the bridge, they watched as Lieutenant Doút body floated out into space. It tumbled end over end, arms and legs spread out like he was a bug pinned to a collection plate. At last, they saw his face through his visor. But it wasn't a face at all, only his skeletal remains. Lieutenant Doút had finally joined the ship's original company.

Gusk sounded grim. "We can't afford for anything else to go wrong." He exhaled deeply. "We're going to run out of crew." As he finished his sentence, he turned to face the crew. No one was looking at him. They had their backs to the political officer. All eyes were staring at the forward monitor.

A lone biped stood on the nose of the ship. He was wearing the black uniform Bras has seen when the multi-armed creature was shot. And he wasn't wearing a suit. He was covered in a strange white glow. It surrounded him, like a light bulb. Bras could see the stars float by, right through the uniformed man. He was holding something, but the captain couldn't make out what it was.

The strange biped turned to look at the camera. It was the face of pure evil. At last, he held up what looked like a sign. It had those unreadable chicken scratching of a script on it which was all over the ship. As they watched, the letters moved and rearranged themselves. To their astonishment, they slowly resolved into words. They could see the message now. It read:

"Go home, we don't want your kind. Stay away from Earth. You don't belong there."