

Lady Be Good by John G. Hemry

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Illustration by John Allemand

You can't have everything you want, but you can make the best of what you have....

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There's a place, they say, where sailors go when their last voyage ends, when their ships come apart among the drifting reefs of an asteroid belt or vanish in the great dark between the stars that light worlds. A place where the engines never falter and the hull never cracks, where particle storms never rage in sudden fury that pierces shielding to shred the workings of machines and men and leave lifeless wrecks in their wake. A place where every sailor has a safe posting and a fair wage and every Captain sees a decent profit from a hard run. A place where the bars are cheap and honest, the planet-tied greet sailors with open hands and hearts, and every ship finds welcome and a safe berth.

The place is called Haven, they say. No chart shows you the way, no sailing directions offer guidance, no star map carries the name. But when the need is great and the time is right, a true sailor will find it. Or so they say.

"Bunch o' crap," Dingo mumbled around his beer mug as the old drunk at the next table kept talking about the mythical sailor's paradise known as Haven. Dingo drained the last of the brew and banged his now-empty mug on the table. A passing waiter paused just long-enough to slop more beer into the mug, allowing a big head to form, and tapped the counter on his waist racking up Dingo's tab. Dingo grunted with disgust and blew off the foam, squinting at the actual beer level. "They do that on purpose."

"Really?" I pushed a lot of sarcasm into the word so that even Dingo would pick up on it. "When'd you figure that out?"

"Go to hell, First Officer Kilcannon, *sir*," Dingo suggested. "They're cheating us, is what they're doin'."

"And they do the same damn thing in every damn bar in every damn port from here all the way back to Mother Sol."

Dingo drained his beer again, belched, and got another partial "refill" almost as fast. "That's what I mean. That attitude. What makes them think they can get away with that?"

"Experience with dumb sailors."

"Screw you, Kilcannon."

"No, thanks. I've already had that taken care of today."

"Then why're you bein' such a wise-ass? Wasn't it any fun?"

I shrugged. "It was business. Services paid for, services provided."

"Saints, but ain't you in a foul mood. Have another beer." Dingo flopped backward and smiled loosely. "Works every time."

It did for Dingo, anyway. I looked at him, sagging into his battered chair, his eyes glazing over as the alcohol from several earlier beers finally hit his system. Dingo didn't believe in Haven, maybe because he thought he could find it in every bar. As long as his money held out and I got his drunken carcass back to

the ship afterwards. "Don't forget we're sailing tomorrow."

"Why do you think I'm getting this drunk?" Dingo stared blearily at his beer mug, as if uncertain whether it still held liquid.

"I'm going to need you functioning tomorrow. We've got three new hands coming onboard."

"Hah! How'd you swing that? Lie about our next port?"

"Yeah."

Dingo began laughing silently, his sides shaking and an enormous grin splitting his face. He bent over, gasping for air. "They'll kill ya when they find out, Kilcannon," he finally managed to stammer. "I swear they'll kill ya."

"I'll worry about that when the time comes."

"You do that." Dingo raised his mug, tipping it vertical to get every drop. It fell back onto the table again, but before the waiter could slosh any more into the mug I slapped his hand aside. "Hey. I ain't done."

"Yes, you are."

"You ain't my mother and you ain't the Captain and dammed if I'll let you nursemaid me, Kilcannon! I quit!" Dingo struggled to his feet, his hands clenched into fists. I stayed seated, just looking back at him. "Get up! Damn ya, get up! When I'm done there won't be enough of ya left to run through a recycler."

"Right." I stood slowly, keeping my hands lowered. "Let's go."

"I told you I quit! I ain't goin' on this voyage! I never aimed to and I won't! Not there!"

"Okay."

My answer took a moment to penetrate through layers of alcohol-soaked brain cells, then Dingo lowered his fists a little and stared at me. "Okay?"

"Sure. Let's get your stuff off the ship. You'll need it."

Dingo grinned broadly, wavering on his feet. "Now that's a saintly way to be, Kilcannon. I was wrong about you. Sure I was."

I plopped a credit chip on the table and steered Dingo out of the bar. We wended our way back to the ship, dodging other drunken sailors as we went. Every once in a while, the orbital port's gravity would stutter a little in our area, making me waver on my feet as badly as Dingo for a moment. That's one of the hazards of being in the low-rent areas of any port off-planet. Outside every bar in the area near the port were other hazards, men and women who looked young and cheap and pretty in the dim lighting, beckoning and calling invitations to visit the particular establishments where they got kick-backs for luring in customers. I fended off all of them.

Our IDs got us onto the pier and onto the ship. Dingo paused outside his quarters, swaying on his feet as if our ship was riding on a planetary ocean. "Ya sure this is okay, Kilcannon?"

"Yeah. No problem."

"I'm gonna get my kit."

"You do that." I gestured him inside. Dingo grinned and staggered into his quarters. I waited until he was almost to the bunk, then keyed in the security override on the hatch. Dingo was still turning his head to see what the noise was when the hatch slid shut and locked. I heard a roar of anger, followed a second later by the impact of Dingo's body against the hatch. Silence followed, so apparently Dingo had knocked himself out. Hopefully he wasn't hurt too badly. I had no intention of cracking that hatch before the ship was safely underway tomorrow. "See you in the morning, Third Officer Dingo."

I walked down the passageway, easily seeing dark patches of mold on the overhead even in the dimmed night lighting of the ship. The *Lady Be Good* badly needed a full-scale fumigation, but that was just one of the things she badly needed that she wasn't going to get any time soon.

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The port inspector arrived half an hour late to give us departure clearance. As far as I knew, Dingo still hadn't awoken and started demanding his freedom, and none of the three new sailors had shown any signs they suspected our destination wasn't the same one they'd signed on for. The inspector gave the entry lock of the *Lady* a sour look, but she couldn't flunk us on the basis of that lock. I kept that working even if it wasn't pretty.

The inspector ran down the checklist. "You claim you've signed on enough new sailors to meet minimum crew requirements."

"That's right." You couldn't be too subservient or the public servants would ride right over you, but you couldn't dis â€œem either. Not if you were smart. "You can confirm they're onboard from the pier access records."

"There's ways to gimmick those records."

"I wouldn't know anything about that."

"I bet you don't." She picked a name at random. "I want to see Able Spacer Kanidu. In person. Here."

"Okay." Odds had favored her picking one of the new hires, but I'd still worried she might ask to see Dingo. Dingo would come around once we were underway. He always did after any little misunderstandings while he was drunk. But right now he'd still be a bit upset with me.

Kanidu answered the hail quick enough. Short and stout, she gave the inspector a bland look and confirmed all of her qualification data. Finally satisfied, the inspector let the sailor go. "I need to verify your cargo manifest."

"Sure." I let her plug into the ship systems and check the cargo containers. A really good inspector would've suited up and crawled over the big cargo containers fastened around *Lady's* core, even opening the loading doors to check that the contents matched the manifests. But really good inspectors didn't work the early morning weekend shifts and didn't bother with small freighters like *Lady*, so it'd been safe to assume we'd just get a manifest check.

I'd been assured the inspector wouldn't be able to spot that the manifests had been falsified. I mentally crossed my fingers and hoped the assurances were accurate.

Apparently they were. The inspector moved on to more items on the checklist, mostly dealing with equipment. "It's been a long time since your last engine certification."

"We're within limits."

"Time-wise, maybe." She gave the entry lock another look. "How well does your gear still work?"

It wouldn't take a lot of experience for her to guess our gear wouldn't pass a certification test right now. "It works fine."

"Maybe I ought to look at it."

Maybe. I knew what that meant. "Hey, I just remembered something. Can you hold here just a sec?"

She gave her watch an annoyed look and nodded. I went straight to my quarters. In the bottom of one drawer, well wrapped, I found the bottle and carefully carried it out. "I've got a friend in port I meant to give this. But I forgot. Could you get it to him?"

"I suppose." She took the bribe, examining the label as if ready to reject it, but then her face cleared. "From Mother Sol?"

"Yeah." Mother Sol was a long, long ways from the port of Mandalay orbiting the planet of the same name orbiting the star humans had named Ganesha. Anything from Sol, even rotgut, had the exotic aura imbued by great distance, and this wasn't rotgut. "From Martinique. That's an island. It's good rum. You ought to try some."

"Maybe I will. I guess this friend isn't that special if this is all you got him."

I shrugged and gestured at the entry lock. "Funds are pretty short right now. It's all I could afford."

"Okay." Cover story for the bribe established for the benefit of any hidden recorders, and her questioning whether we could give her a bigger payoff also fielded, the inspector pocketed the bottle. "You're cleared for departure. But I've tagged your ship entry. Next time you hit this port you'd better have a recent engine certification or we'll do a full inspection."

"No problem."

She grinned at what we both knew was a lie, then headed off, patting the place where she'd stashed that rum. Damn. I'd been saving it for a special occasion. But like just about everything else, I'd had to use it in an emergency.

I checked the lock's log to confirm everyone was aboard, then sealed the lock tight. "Able Spacers Kanidu, Jungo, and Siri. Meet me in the crew's mess."

The two tables grandly labeled the crew's mess had plenty of empty places even when breakfast was supposedly being handed out. Dingo wasn't here, of course, but we had a lot of unfilled slots. We couldn't afford to pay for a full crew, but then again that wasn't really a problem because it was so hard to get sailors to sign on to a ship in *Lady's* shape that recruiting just enough to meet minimum standards was a big enough challenge.

Kanidu eyed me in a disinterested way as I assigned her to engineering and pointed her toward Chief Engineer Vox at one of the tables. Vox just nodded silently when Kanidu reported to her.

Jungo was a tall, slim guy with an eager smile who'd been happy to sign on. I wondered what he was hiding and who or what he was running from. I gave him to the cargo section.

Last came Siri. She was a small woman, thin and shivering slightly, carrying every indication of being a star dust addict. No wonder no other ship had taken her on. She'd go cold turkey for certain on our voyage, which wouldn't be pretty, but the worst that could happen was she'd die and then we wouldn't have to pay her. I gave her to ship's systems, because she'd been certified a System Tech Second Rate at one point. Maybe her dust-addled brain still remembered some of that.

I stopped next to the Chief Engineer. "We okay to go?"

Vox nodded wordlessly again.

"Anything I need to tell the Captain?"

Vox dug something out from between her teeth before answering. "Refit."

"I know we need a refit. As soon as I can--"

"Shipyard."

I stopped talking and just nodded back. The *Lady* needed a full engineering refit in a shipyard, nothing less. The Chief Engineer had a responsibility to remind me of that. I couldn't do a thing about it, but I had to be reminded of it.

I went forward, trying to figure out where I might be able to get the *Lady's* engines looked at for something less than cut-rate prices. Maybe an under-used maintenance facility at a middle-of-nowhere star would be willing to give us a break for the sake of keeping their hands in. It was worth a try.

Captain Jane Weskind sat in her still-darkened cabin. She'd gotten dressed by herself but didn't look good this morning. "We're cleared to leave," I reported, standing in front of her desk and touching my brow with my right hand.

A long moment passed. Weskind's face cycled through a half-dozen emotions before she caught it and froze it in a shaky grin. "No problems?" It was what she always said, now.

There wasn't a thing she could do about engineering and she'd already been told we were overdue for a yard period. "No problems."

"Good work, First Officer Kilcannon." She lowered her voice, as if sharing a secret. "The *Lady* needs work. I know it." A long pause. "A good profit on this run. That's all we need. One good run." Another pause. "Right, Kilcannon?"

"Right, Captain." She always said that, too. Just one good run. That wouldn't be enough, of course, but with the profit from one good run we could set up an even better run and then we'd be on our way up again. Dingo might think Haven was in the nearest bar, but Captain Weskind clung to it being one good run away. It seemed it had always been one good run away and maybe it always would be one good run away. Maybe not, though. This run did promise a good return. Not without risk, of course. I smiled and nodded at Captain Weskind's words because this really could be the one good run we needed, and because I was sure Captain Weskind needed to believe that run would happen and needed to know I believed it, too. "Will you be on the bridge when we leave port, Captain?"

More expressions chased their way across Captain Weskind's face. "I ... have work, First Officer Kilcannon."

"I understand, Captain. I'll take the ship out."

"Thank you, First Officer Kilcannon."

I saluted again and left, making sure her hatch was set to notify me if Captain Weskind left her cabin. It didn't happen much nowadays, but I needed to be there if she needed me.

Leaving port was the usual mix of tension and boredom. Tension because things could go wrong. A

blown directional vector or an aging control system sending the wrong commands could result in a painful meeting of ship and some other object. *Lady* wasn't the smallest freighter running between stars, but she wasn't all that big, either. Odds were if we hit anything *Lady* would be the loser.

But it was boring, too, because the procedures were ones we'd run through a hundred times and they didn't change all that much from port to port. Same old drill, often in different places, but always the same old drill.

Then we were out of the confines of the port and running free down the outbound shipping lanes, heading outward past planets and rocks and comets, aiming to get far enough from the gravity well of Mandalay's sun, Ganesha, to start our jump. Systems, especially inner systems, always felt cramped and crowded when you were used to the wide open freedom of the big dark. Nearly a hundred suns held human colonies now, and even after so many years of sailing between them I still felt a moment of wonder at the thought that the *Lady* could carry me to any sun and planet I chose. In theory. In practice, we could only go where the paying cargo runs took us. The roads between the stars aren't free, no matter what the poets dream far away on Mother Sol.

Here, close to port, the inbound lanes passed near the outbound. I watched the big ships coming in. Sol Transport, Vestral Shipping, Combined Systems, Great Spinward. The ships belonging to the giant companies seemed to glow on our screens, all their systems registering in top shape on our readouts. I fought down a wave of envious anger. With a fraction of what the big companies spent to keep those ships of theirs shiny I could get *Lady* back in shape. But it wouldn't happen. *Lady* was beneath their attention. The ports *Lady* called at were often beneath their attention. The cargo *Lady* carried usually wasn't worth it for the big carriers. So I watched the big ships pass and wished for more of their leavings.

Maybe some of them were watching old, small, battered *Lady* heading out. If they were watching, I could too easily imagine what they were thinking. I wished the wrath of the saints on smug company spacers and went to let Dingo out of his quarters.

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I double-checked the jump solution while Dingo glared at me. The lump visible on his forehead hadn't aided his forgiving me for tricking him last night. But he'd done his job right. A short run to Wayfare, then a middling run to a nowhere star named Carnavon that didn't see much traffic and wouldn't have any local authorities asking awkward questions, and finally a long run into Fagin. The circuitous route should bring us into Fagin along routes a fair ways from the usual inbound and outbound channels for that system. "Looks good."

"As if I didn't know this job better'n you, Kilcannon!"

"Dingo, somebody has to double-check things like this. You know that, too."

"Oh, I know lots, Kilcannon. Did you tell them new ones yet where we're goin'?"

"No." Jungo, nearby, looked over with ill-conceal alarm.

Dingo grinned nastily. "Where d'they *think* we're goin'?"

I didn't answer, so Dingo looked at Jungo, who swallowed nervously. "Polder," he half-whispered.

"Polder! Hah! Try Fagin, lad."

"Fagin?" Jungo paled. "But ... the war."

"Yeah! Civil war! Brother against brother! The best kind. And the best rates for those willing to try to run

cargo in through the privateers roamin' the spaceways."

The crew would've heard sooner or later, but I still wasn't happy having it spilled now, days before we'd get far enough out-system to enter jump to Wayfare. "Shut up."

Dingo just grinned at me. "'Shut up,' is it? And what'll you do if I don't, Kilcannon? Shanghai me on a voyage to a war zone in an old tub that should've seen the wrecker's yard a handful of years ago?"

Jungo was shaking his head. "I signed on for Polder." His voice wavered. "My contract says Polder."

I shook my own head. "Your contract contains a necessity clause which allows the ship to change destinations if required. You ought to be grateful for that. We won't meet any arrest warrants on any of our crew that've been forwarded to Polder. Right?"

Dingo laughed again, Jungo looked stricken and relieved at the same time, and I ignored both of them.

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So many ships. I keyed the transmitter again. "Wayfare System Control, this is *Lady Be Good* still awaiting authorization to clear system."

I sat back to wait. Spacer Siri was at the auxiliary control panel on the bridge, shivering constantly, her eyes going into and out of focus. Withdrawal from star dust wasn't pleasant to watch, but watching was all anyone on the *Lady* could do. It'd either kill her or leave her clear. So far, Siri had been able to follow orders when I snapped them at her.

A babble of messages from other ships to Wayfare System Control and each other flowed in after I stopped transmitting. The authorities at Wayfare were obviously overwhelmed again. Why one of the most often used relay stars couldn't upgrade its system control was beyond me.

Lady was skating along the fringes of Wayfare, just heading for the jump point to Carnavon. A slightly unusual route, but I knew from experience that Wayfare System Control would be too busy to worry about what one little freighter was up to.

And I was right. "*Lady Be Good*, authorization granted to clear Wayfare." I punched in the jump commands, secure in the knowledge nobody was paying attention to *Lady*.

Nearby, Spacer Siri shivered. I dug a packet out of one of my pockets and tossed it to her. "These'll help." She caught the packet automatically and stared at it. "Somebody I knew beat star dust. They said that stuff helped a lot."

Siri nodded, tearing open the packet with trembling hands. I went back to studying my control panel. Somewhere aft, one of the engines groaned into momentary instability that made my stomach flutter. A moment later, Chief Engineer Vox called the bridge. "Bad."

"Can you hold it together?"

"Yeah."

"How long?"

"Depends."

"Give me as much warning as you can."

"Just did."

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Carnavon was small and dim. For a star, that is. No other ship beacons flared on our scans. Quiet and isolated, just the place for a small ship looking to avoid awkward questions.

To get the right arrival angle on Fagin we'd have to fall through the Carnavon system and climb out the other side, a time-consuming pain in the neck under any circumstances.

"Hey, Kilcannon."

"What, Dingo?"

"On the bridge, sweetheart."

I made my way up there, wondering what Dingo could have to talk about that needed me on the bridge in person. Most of the possibilities weren't very good. But Dingo didn't seem worried as he pointed at the scan. "What d'ya think that is, Kilcannon?"

I peered at it, checked readings, then thought about it. "What do you think it is?"

"I asked first." Dingo smiled with derision. "Don't know, d'ya? How long ya been a sailor, Kilcannon?"

"Long enough." I frowned at the scan. "It looks like a dead ship."

"Not bad! It's a ship, alright." Dingo's smile vanished. "She ain't dead. Not yet." He tapped a blunt nail on some of the readouts. "It's real faint, but there's still a heat source active in there, and leaking atmosphere."

"Saints. Are you saying there's someone still alive on that thing?"

"Could be."

A wreck would've been interesting as a possible source of parts, though probably not interesting enough to warrant a diversion from our course. Wrecks tended to be stripped before we ever saw them. But if some of the crew had holed up in the interior ... "There's no distress beacon."

"Nah. Which tells you and me how that wreck got in trouble, right?" I immediately checked scan again, but Dingo was already grinning at me. "I checked. As good as I could with this tub's instruments. There ain't no other ships burning engines in this system right now. Either the pirates or privateers are sitting quiet in ambush, or they've left."

I scowled at the display. "Getting to that wreck will take us way off our track."

"Yeah."

"If somebody was waiting to ambush any rescuers, they'd have left the distress beacon working to lure people in, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah."

"But anybody still onboard it is most likely already dead."

"Yeah."

"But if anyone finds out we disregarded a ship in distress they'll take the *Lady* and our licenses."

"Yeah. But if any survivors die they won't be telling on us, will they?"

"Damn you, Dingo. Get us over to that thing." I turned away. "I'll brief the Captain."

"Yeah. You do that."

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It was a big one. Once *Lady* got close enough we could read the registry. *Canopus Rising*, one of the Vestral Company's ships. But she wasn't bright and pretty anymore. Somebody had kicked *Canopus Rising* in the butt and kept kicking.

"Engines slagged," Chief Engineer Vox grunted, pointing to the image. Somebody had hit that part of the *Canopus* with heavy artillery while the engines were running, adding the suddenly unleashed power of the ship's own engines to the destruction the weapon wrought.

I exhaled as a slim hope vanished. "What're the chances any parts in those engineering areas are salvageable?"

"Zilch."

I brought us as close as I could. We were still picking up faint leakage of heat and gases, so whatever survival space the crew must have rigged up still existed. Whether there was anyone left alive in it was another matter. "Dingo, take the lifeboat over. Take three sailors along to help."

"You're not going yourself?"

I gave Dingo a level stare. "I have to stay with the ship. And keep the Captain informed."

"Ah, yes, so you do. Can you walk with me to the lifeboat?" I went along, knowing Dingo wanted to say something where we couldn't be overheard. "Kilcannon, there's a chance they're still alive, and if they're still alive, there's a chance they're in bad shape, and if they're in bad shape then there ain't much you or I can do for them."

I pretended to study the readouts on the lifeboat access. "And?"

"Do we haul â€˜em here and wake â€˜em up enough to know they're hurting so they can die?"

I took a deep breath, thinking. "Yes."

Dingo shrugged. "You're the boss."

"Dingo, it's up to the saints whether or not they die. I won't make that decision for them."

Another grin. "The saints don't like to be crossed, do they? Ah, here's my crew. Strap in."

I reported to Captain Weskind, then went back to the bridge and watched the lifeboat match velocity, roll and tumble to the wreck. Whatever his limitations as a man of culture, Dingo was a sailor's sailor who knew how to drive even a lumbering lifeboat.

I'd learned patience on many long watches between the stars, and I needed it now. I knew Dingo and his crew were working their way inside the wrecked ship, but *Lady* couldn't afford fancy communications and tracking gear. All I could do was watch the lifeboat where it rested on the hull of the *Canopus* and wait.

It took an hour. "Ahoy on the *Lady*, this is Third Officer Dingo."

"This is Kilcannon."

"We got â€˜em. Six souls. They're all walkin'."

Six sailors. Maybe Vestral would cough up a reward. "Anything we can use onboard?"

"Nah. The bastards who done â€˜er in stripped â€˜er good. All we're gettin' out of this one is happy points with the saints."

"Most likely." Perhaps ten more minutes passed, then the lifeboat detached from the wreck and made its slow way back.

I was at the access when they arrived. Curiosity aside, protocol demanded it and I wasn't going to let any company sailors say the *Lady* hadn't done things right.

Two officers, three able spacers, and one woman who wasn't wearing a crew coverall. The senior officer extended his hand to me. "First Officer Chen. We'd about given up hope."

I shook his hand and smiled politely. "I'm glad we were able to help." Behind Chen, the junior company spacers were gaping around in obvious dismay at the condition of the *Lady*. The other officer and the woman showed better manners.

Chen gestured to his companion. "Third Officer Constantine." Constantine nodded her head, giving me a grateful smile.

Then Chen pointed to the woman who wasn't dressed like crew, but before he could speak she came forward. "Halley Keracides. Thank you, Captain."

I shook my head. "I'm First Officer Kilcannon. Captain Weskind couldn't be here. She sends her apologies. What happened to you all?"

Chen grimaced. "When we came out of jump here in Carnavon there was a pirate right on top of us." Dingo frowned in disbelief. I imagine I did, too. "I know the odds against that. But it turned out our Fourth Officer had sold our jump calculations. Perfect place to betray us, a system where the odds of anyone stumbling across the attack would be almost zero."

"I take it that's why the Fourth Officer's not with you."

Another grimace. "Him because he sold us out, and most of the others for ransom from Vestral. But the pirates didn't have enough space for all of us, they said, so they left us six behind. Me and Constantine with the sailors because they said we had bad attitudes."

I imagined the Captain of the *Canopus* had displayed plenty of bad attitude as well, but they would've needed him or her for any ransom demand. I looked at Halley Keracides. Neither she nor her clothes bore signs of anything beyond a middle-class income. "I guess they didn't think Vestral would cough up any money for you."

She gave me a flat look back. "Why would they?"

Then again, maybe she'd had a bad attitude, too. I faced First Officer Chen. "Our crew's not at full strength so we've got some spare accommodations. You can have our Second Officer's quarters."

Chen nodded politely, keeping to himself whatever thoughts he might have about a ship that was sailing without a Second Officer onboard. "Thank you for the offer, but I feel Ms. Keracides should have those

quarters."

It didn't matter to me. "Fine. Dingo, show everyone to their quarters."

"I got a lifeboat to stow, darlin'." I counted to five slowly, letting Dingo see how I felt. He shrugged. "Fine. I'll do it later. Come on, you."

Chen must have talked to his sailors, because the next time I saw them they were pretending not to notice what bad shape the *Lady* was in. Chen offered on behalf of all the sailors to work for their room and board until I could drop them off in port, which offer I cheerfully accepted. I could use skilled sailors, especially ones I didn't have to pay. "What about Ms. Keracides? What's she do?"

Chen dropped his eyes and shrugged. "She's a manager of some sort, I understand."

"Then she doesn't do much."

This time, Chen grinned. "Probably not. Uh, I don't want to imply anything, but I do know something about engineering..."

"Our system's badly in need of overhaul. I know."

"I might be able to help. I asked your Chief Engineer about it, but she didn't say anything."

"She usually doesn't," I advised Chen. "Just show up and do whatever you can."

I was on the bridge, picking at my lunch, when Halley Keracides came up. She peered around. It wasn't the blank surface examination of someone out of their depth, though. She apparently knew something about ships. "Mind if I sit down?" she asked.

I indicated the observer's chair. "Feel free."

She twisted the chair, giving me an arch look as it protested swiveling. "I wanted to thank you again. It was getting very bad in the survival compartment the crew had rigged up. I was getting ready to greet the saints."

I nodded. "You're welcome."

"Where are we going?"

I'd been waiting for that question, but I guess Chen had been hesitant to ask. I balanced truth and falsehood for a moment in my mind and decided the truth didn't matter at this point. "Fagin."

"Fagin?" she questioned. Then she repeated it, her voice sharper. "*Fagin?*"

"Yeah, Fagin."

"That's a war zone."

"That's why we're getting paid well to run this cargo in."

She watched me for a moment. "Why are you going to Fagin through Carnavon?"

So Ms. Keracides really did know something about ships. Or about the routes ships took between stars, anyway. "We needed a different approach path in-system." I couldn't tell how much she understood what that implied.

Her eyes narrowed. "You'll be out of normal transit lanes."

She understood a lot. "We want to avoid privateers. All three sides in the civil war have issued letters of marque."

"You'll also be avoiding peacekeepers, won't you?"

She understood entirely too much. "It's a calculated risk. Perhaps you're unaware of the realities of operating for a ship like the *Lady*. We don't have company contacts and company contracts. We get by on what the big companies don't want to bother with. That means we end up taking chances."

"There's nothing dishonorable about working a smaller ship," she stated, answering the thing I hadn't said.

"No, Ms. Keracides, there isn't. I'm sorry we're taking you into Fagin. But once we drop off our cargo we'll be able to get you to a peacekeeper station. Vestral ships help supply those, right? So you'll be okay. It'd only take a few more weeks to pass through Carnavon, then a little while in jump."

"We appreciate the service, First Officer Kilcannon," she stated dryly.

After Halley Keracides had left, I wondered for a moment why she'd lumped herself in with the Vestral employees with that "we."

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A week later to the day, Halley Keracides was leaning against the entry to my quarters, her arms crossed over her chest. "I just learned a funny thing."

I sighed and leaned back to look at her. "What's that?"

"First Officer Chen saw a part in your engine room that looked a lot like something Vestral uses. Proprietary design. It'd been modified to fit your system."

I pretended to think about that. "So?"

"Vestral doesn't sell those parts. Where'd you get it?"

"A bulk salvage supplier. He gave us a clean bill on it."

"Uh-huh. What'd he charge?"

I let annoyance show. "I'd have to look that up."

"Don't bother. I bet it was fairly cheap, right?"

I stared down at my desk. "We could afford it. The supplier gave us a clean bill."

"Kilcannon, I'm not an idiot and neither are you. That part was obviously stolen property."

I looked back at her, keeping my expression controlled. "The supplier gave us a clean bill," I repeated.

"And you expect me to believe that you never suspected the part was stolen."

"I'm not a cop and I don't have the time or money to do the cops' jobs for them."

"An ethical sailor wouldn't do that kind of business," she shot back.

"Some kinds of ethics are luxuries, Ms. Keracides. We can't afford a lot of luxuries on the *Lady*."

Her face closed down and she started to spin away, then stopped herself and eyed me. "'Some kinds of ethics are luxuries,' you said. Just some kinds?"

"Other kinds are necessities. I haven't forgotten that." I rubbed my lower face with one hand, looking away from her again. "I believe I'm still an honest person, Ms. Keracides. And I know the *Lady* is still an honest ship. Captain Weskind wouldn't have it any other way."

"I'll have to take your word for that, since I've yet to meet her."

"I'll try to set up a meeting."

"Thank you." She was silent for a long time, and when I finally looked back at my entry I saw she'd gone.

* * * *

Two days shy of jump I felt the shock of something, then the *Lady* shuddered and bucked. I was halfway to the bridge before the motion damped out. One scan of the instruments told me where the problem was. "Engineering? Are you okay down there?"

"Yeah."

"What the hell was that?"

Chen came on. "The primary waste heat vent has blown."

I dug my knuckles into my head, trying to think. The engines couldn't run long with the primary vent out. If we didn't get it fixed soon the engines would overheat. Then we either let them blow or shut them down, in which case the radiation shields would drop and the high-energy particles being hurled out by Carnavon would fry us in short order. Unlike the *Canopus*, the *Lady* didn't have a radiation-shielded citadel where we could hide for a while. "How long to fix?"

"You tell me. That's an external job. What shape is your external repair â€˜bot in?"

I almost laughed at the question. "External repair â€˜bots are for company ships. Ships like the *Lady* can't afford that stuff."

Chen took a moment to answer. "You'll need to send a sailor out. It's hazardous, but there's no alternative"

"Yeah."

"He or she has to know the equipment and how to replace the vent and be qualified for external repairs underway. I'm afraid my own sailors don't know your layout well enough."

"I wasn't going to volunteer them." Maybe my reply had come out harsh. Chen didn't talk again for a while. "There's a couple of people on *Lady* who can do it." Yeah. Two of us.

Fifteen minutes later, Dingo checked the last seals on his suit and gave me a lop-sided grin. "Gonna make me earn my pay this time out, eh?"

I tried to smile back. "You know how to do this, Dingo. Better than anyone else on the ship. I talked to the Captain and we agreed you were the only one who could do it."

"Yeah. Sure. You're gonna keep them engines goin' while I'm out there, ain't ya?"

"We don't have any choice."

"Gonna be no fun, Kilcannon. Not hangin' on the outside while the engines are goin' and me wrestlin' with that duct."

I nodded. "I swear, Dingo, I'd go if I could."

"If something happens to me before I finish the job you'll *have* to go. And good luck trying to finish it yourself. You're not half the outer hull rider that I am. Not half the sailor, neither, though you'll never admit it. Tell you what, Kilcannon, when we hit the next port you pay for the beers. And no bitchin' from you on account I'll be drinkin' the good stuff. Deal?"

"Deal."

"And if worst comes to worst, you put in a good word with the saints for me."

"I'll do that."

I watched the lock mechanism cycle, not knowing what else I could do, while Dingo exited the lock and headed aft along the outer hull. At some point I realized Halley Keracides had come up to stand nearby. "I understand the primary waste heat vent blew," she stated softly.

"Yeah."

"I've never heard of that happening."

I gave her an icy stare. "Not on a Vestral ship, I'm sure. But if you go long enough between engine overhauls it can happen."

"Saints, Kilcannon, it takes more than a missed overhaul to lose a primary waste heat vent."

She was right, which made me wonder again just what kind of 'manager' Halley Keracides really was. "The part was reworked. We got it quite a while back."

Her voice stayed soft. "That's one hell of a way to keep a ship running, Kilcannon."

"It's the only way I've got."

Instead of answering she just stared at the airlock controls along with me. In my mind, I traced the path Dingo would be taking, out the airlock and crawling up over the last row of cargo containers strapped around *Lady* like a huge belt. The containers that came carrying our cargo tended to be old and poorly maintained, so handholds were often loose or missing entirely. After getting over that obstacle, he'd have to work his way back down onto *Lady's* hull to where the vents lay not far from the stern. Even in dock the trip could be a pain in the neck. Out here it'd be, as Dingo had said, no fun at all.

Given that, I wasn't surprised it took another couple of minutes before Dingo called in. "Hey, on the *Lady*. You there, Kilcannon?"

"I'm here. How's it look?"

"Like hell's own mess."

"Can you fix it?"

"If I can't, no one can."

As the minutes crawled by I tried not to think about Dingo out there on the hull, the energies of the

engines thundering not far from him. Even the tightest grip on a hull felt too light when your ship was running through the dark. But Dingo would have to anchor himself using tethers and employ both hands to replace the failed sections of the vent, wrestling with warped metal in the dark and the cold, wearing a suit I knew was too old and too worn. "Dingo."

"Waddaya want?" Dingo sounded out of breath. Tired.

"Maybe I should swap out with you."

"Hell, no. It's almost done."

I checked with engineering. "We've got thirty minutes until shutoff will be required. That's plenty of time for you to get in here and rest and me to take care of what's left to do."

"Not your bloody damned job, Kilcannon! Shut up and let me work. It's almost done."

Halley gave me a questioning look and I shrugged. I couldn't go out and drag him back. We waited.

"Almost." Dingo's voice sounded ragged now.

"Kilcannon, this is Chen in engineering. We're getting a heat spike."

Whichever saint had been watching us had just looked away. "Dingo, drop it and get inside. Now. We've got a heat spike."

"I drop it now and we'll lose it."

"That's an order, Third Officer Dingo."

"Didn't hear it."

"Kilcannon, this is Chen. We have to vent that spike. We're holding down the overrides, but the safeties won't let us do that much longer. If the heat spike vents through the secondary it may blow."

"Dingo, damn you--"

"Got it!"

"The safeties overrode our commands! They're dumping the spike!"

"Dingo!" *Lady* shuddered again. I waited a long moment. "Dingo. Third Officer Dingo. Respond." Halley Keracides had her eyes hidden behind one hand. "Third Officer Dingo. Respond." I grabbed the other suit and started getting into it. "Dingo. By all the saints, Dingo..."

I'd never realized how slowly the airlock cycled. I couldn't feel anything, including fear, but out of force of habit I made my way cautiously over the battered cargo containers and along the hull as I moved toward the vent. I found Dingo still tethered there. The emergency vent through the secondary had blown away part of its shield, and some of those parts had gone through Dingo's suit and Dingo on their way to forever.

I checked the work on the vent. Dingo had done a good job. Better than I could've done. Then I untethered all that remained of my Third Officer and towed him back to the airlock.

There was a group waiting at the airlock. Dingo had never been a particularly good-looking man. Explosive decompression hadn't improved things any. "Let's get him into the burial capsule." I'd kept one.

I could've hocked it, like I had the others, but was afraid if I got rid of the last one I'd suddenly need it. Now I needed it anyway.

The other sailors wrestled Dingo's body into the capsule. "Drop it into the cold storage bin. We'll hold a service later and send it toward Carnavon." I watched them carry the capsule away, wondering what I'd say at the service.

Halley stood watching me. "Did he have any friends?"

"Who? Dingo? No."

"You're sure? Nobody he went ashore with?"

I managed a short, sharp bark of laughter. "I'm the only one who ever went ashore with Dingo."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I rubbed my forehead, trying to push away the pain there. "Dingo was a drunk, and he'd usually get mean."

"Why'd you go with him, then?"

"Somebody had to. Somebody had to make sure he was okay and get him back to the ship."

"You could've told someone else to do it."

I frowned and shook my head. "No. I couldn't trust anyone else not to ditch Dingo when he started getting mean drunk. And it was just easier for me to keep an eye on him." I looked up and saw Halley still watching me. "What?"

"I was just thinking that Dingo did have one friend. And I think he knew it, too."

I shrugged. "And I was just thinking that I wish I'd checked Dingo's suit before we sealed that capsule to see if it could be repaired."

I don't know what kind of reaction I was expecting from her, but Halley Keracides just shook her head. "You're a damned liar, Kilcannon." Then she walked away and left me standing there alone at the airlock.

* * * *

We made it the next two days without further problems. Before *Lady* jumped for Fagin, I held a brief service for Dingo, going over the standard burial-in-space service and saying some things that were true, like he'd been one hell of a sailor, and some things that weren't so true, like he'd also been one hell of a human being. But the saints expected praise when we sent them a new spirit and Dingo deserved whatever boost I could give him.

The burial capsule dropped back toward Carnavon as we accelerated to jump. In time, Dingo's body would be cremated in the fires of that sun. There are worse grave markers.

It'd be a long run to Fagin, with nothing to do but hope nothing else really important broke. I briefed Captain Weskind again. She told me we just needed one good run. I agreed. It looked like we might finally be getting that first good run.

I took Dingo's watches on the bridge. The other qualified watchstanders were stretched thin enough as it was.

That's where I was one ship's night when Halley Keracides came to see me. "I thought you could use some company."

I let my skepticism show. "That's the only reason you're here in the middle of the night?"

"No." She sat down and stared at the displays for a long time. In jump space, they're mostly blank. Whatever's out there doesn't register. There'd been a time when I'd whiled away boring night watches thinking about what I'd do if something ever did show up on the displays while we were in jump. But nothing ever did, and there were a lot more likely to happen things to spend my time worrying about, and after a while I stopped thinking about it. Halley finally looked back at me. "We need to talk. About what happened to Third Officer Dingo."

I nodded, trying not to look angry or defensive. "Talking won't make it not have happened."

"Kilcannon, you know as well as I do that running a ship with systems this old and in need of repair is just asking for more accidents like the one that killed Dingo."

I kept my voice level, somehow. "It's been a real long time since anyone died on the *Lady*."

"I know. I checked. And, frankly, given the shape this ship is in that means you've been doing an incredible job." Halley paused while I tried to absorb what seemed to be an unexpected compliment. "But no human can beat the odds forever. Not when the odds keep getting longer. Skill and hard work and determination can keep a ship going for a long time even when she's only held together by spit and prayers, but sooner or later the saints get tired of staving off disaster and let the worst happen."

I waited to see if she'd say more but she seemed to be waiting for me. "What do you suggest I do? This run should pay out well. Well enough to springboard us for an even better run. That'll pay for a refit. Not a great one, but good enough."

Halley leaned forward, searching my face for something. "Kilcannon, a ship's only got so much life in her. *Lady's* old. You can't make her new again for any sum of money you're ever going to see running cargos on the fringes."

"She doesn't need to be new again."

"Okay, you can't make her *safe* again. Not really. Not for any sum of money you have any realistic chance of generating on cargo runs."

"One good run. That's all we really need."

"Do you really believe that, or are you trying to believe that?"

I ignored her question. "Then we'll fix *Lady* up and she'll keep taking care of us. That's what Captain Weskind always says. Take care of the ship and the ship will take care of you."

"Captain Weskind." Halley shook her head. "As far as I've been able to determine, she hasn't left her cabin since I came aboard."

"She's busy."

"Does she really know what shape the ship is in?"

I hesitated and I could tell Halley Keracides noticed. "She's been briefed. I brief her daily."

"I see." I couldn't tell from her tone of voice just what Halley Keracides saw. "Does she know her entire

crew could die at any moment?"

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is, and you know it. Those engines are running on borrowed time, Kilcannon. This whole ship is. Sooner or later the engines will fail and you'll never come out of jump."

I pretended nonchalance and shrugged. "I hear Haven's pretty this time of year."

"Haven?" She obviously knew about Haven, the sailor's paradise, which wasn't something you could say about a lot of managers. "Is that where you believe ships go when they don't come out of jump?"

"They've got to go somewhere."

"No, they don't. Not according to the physics. And even if they did, they couldn't go to Haven because there's no such place."

I made another shrug even though I could tell they were annoying her. "It's a big universe."

"Not that big. One single place where every sailor would be happy? No such place could be real." Halley slammed her palm down onto the arm of her chair. "Dammit, Kilcannon, I can't believe this. Why won't the Captain talk to me? I've never seen her and none of the crew will talk to me about her."

"I told you. She's busy. You know a ship Captain's responsibilities."

"I know they allow a few minutes a day to leave her cabin and talk to people her ship has rescued." She fixed me with a demanding look. "The truth, Kilcannon. In the saints' names, what's wrong with Captain Weskind?"

"She's..." I looked away but something made me tell the truth for the first time in a long time. "Multipolar degenerative cognitive disorder."

When I looked back, Halley's jaw had actually dropped in amazement. "Untreated?"

"Yes. No. I mean, we haven't been able to keep the right meds in stock." It wasn't something I got to talk about and now the words tumbled out of me. "The right meds could help her even now, maybe. I don't know. Probably not. But the right meds cost money. A lot of money. So did doctors authorized to prescribe them. Weskind spent the money on the *Lady*, instead. It wasn't enough, but it was more. That's what she said every time I suggested keeping her body on an even keel, and even I couldn't explain how she'd get refills for special meds in some of the ports we hit."

"By the saints, Kilcannon, someone with untreated multipolar can't run a ship!"

"*Captain Weskind can.*"

She sat back, eyeing me with an expression I couldn't read. "You do realize you have a legal responsibility to report a captain who's incapacitated?"

"Captain Weskind is *not* incapacitated!" I realized I'd yelled and my face felt hot. Halley's non-expression hadn't changed, but I tried to speak more calmly. "She needs a little extra help. That's all. She's in command."

"I see," Halley answered again in a tone that conveyed nothing. "How long have you known Captain Weskind?"

I rubbed my face with both hands, feeling embarrassed. "Since Galpin Prime. The *Lady* was in port. I met Captain Weskind there. I was just a kid."

"Galpin Prime." Halley pondered the name. "Not exactly the finest planet in the known universe."

"It's a cesspit. It's where I grew up." I looked away again, fighting off memories. "No hope and no way out. Until I met Captain Weskind. She didn't have to spend a moment on me. Not *one*. But she noticed me. She offered me a job on the *Lady*."

"As First Officer?"

"As a deckhand. I worked my way up. All the way from the bottom. Captain Weskind believed in me."

"She didn't have multipolar then?"

"No. At least, it hadn't manifested itself."

"So, you owe her..."

"Everything."

Halley nodded slowly. "Does she know her ship is running drugs?" I didn't say anything, taking refuge in silence for a moment. "Kilcannon, I can read cargo manifests and I know when they don't make sense. I know what's really in those cargo containers."

I grimaced. "Technically, we're not $\hat{=}$ running drugs."

"Technically. All you've got is the precursors used to make the drugs. Do you think that's going to save your necks if you get inspected by peacekeepers?"

"I don't know."

She looked more exasperated than anyone I'd ever seen. "You're going into Fagin Star System with an illegal cargo. If any privateers try to jump you, which has a very good chance of happening, you won't be able to call for help because the peacekeepers will confiscate your ship once they check the cargo. Then they'd throw you in jail. At least the privateers might let you go if you take off in the lifeboat."

"Look, Halley, you know the *Lady* broadcasts her condition to anyone looking. The engine output, the energy readings, the shield fluctuations, anyone who sees her is going to know she's a tramp. And they'll leave her alone because a tramp isn't going to be carrying anything worth the trouble."

Her eyes reflected disbelief now. "That's your plan? To count on the poor condition of your ship to protect you?"

"We don't have any other choice." I clenched my fists, staring past her. "You said it. The *Lady's* at the end of her rope. We need to make a decent profit on this haul. Enough to get a few repairs done. That's all we need. Just that one break. Saints forgive me, I'm not proud of this. But it's our only chance. The only chance left for the *Lady* and for her crew."

Halley regarded me, her face hard. "And for Captain Weskind. What happens to her if she loses this ship?"

"I ... she won't."

"There are places that would take her."

"It'd kill her." I calmed myself again. "The *Lady's* her life. I'll do what I have to do to save her."

"Anything you have to?"

I sat silent again for a moment. "No. Only whatever Captain Weskind would approve of. Or ... understand." I closed my eyes, not wanting to look at Halley for a moment. "We had offers to run weapons into Fagin, you know. They would've paid better than the cargo I took."

"But Captain Weskind wouldn't have understood running weapons into a place where people are slaughtering each other."

"No, she wouldn't." I opened my eyes and glared at Halley Keracides. "And she taught me there's some cargos you don't touch no matter what."

"She must have been ... she must be a fine Captain."

"She is. Don't tell anyone what I told you about her."

"Captain Weskind? You forgot the magic word."

"Please."

"I promise." She stood up and stared at me. But Halley Keracides didn't say anything else and after a long moment she left the bridge to me and the blank displays.

"First Officer Kilcannon?" Able Spacer Siri stood there, still thin as a refugee but with her eyes clear. "I ... I wanted to thank you." Her eyes shifted and she spoke with almost desperate haste. "The dust would've killed me. Sure as hell. I was halfway there. I knew my only chance was to get away, on a ship where I couldn't get any no matter what, but nobody'd take a duster. Except you. I got clear of it, thanks to you."

I shook my head. "I just needed another spacer, Siri. Thank Captain Weskind. She's the one who gave you a chance."

Siri's eyes shifted again. "Uh, yeah."

"I'll let the Captain know you're grateful and you're clean."

"Uh, thanks."

* * * *

We finally broke out into normal space, high above the plane of Fagin system, looking down on a small area of space where human rationality had been in very short supply for too long. As *Lady* dove down toward the fourth planet in the system we listened to news reports and shook our heads over the latest atrocities.

Two inhabited worlds and a slew of lesser bodies with colonies on them left too much territory for the peacekeeper forces to cover. Watching the news reports, it quickly became clear that whenever the peacekeepers scrambled to halt an outbreak of fighting in one area the people in the places they'd left would immediately start raising hell. From our perspective, that was good. It meant the peacekeepers wouldn't have any leisure time to wander about and investigate the small freighter coming in outside their normal patrol areas.

But everything wasn't great. From our position above the plane of Fagin's system, we could easily see all

the ships operating below us closer to the plane. Two of them, one good-sized and one a bit smaller, showed up as freighters but were loitering not far from the area we'd pass through en route to the fourth planet.

"Privateers?" Halley asked me.

"Yeah. Sure to be. You know as well as I do that freighters hang around ports, waiting to off-load or on-load. They don't hang around the middle of nothing."

"Even with freighter engines they wouldn't have trouble intercepting us. What are you going to do, Kilcannon?"

"Keep going, cross my fingers, and hope they either ignore us as not worth the trouble or something else happens to distract them."

Halley Keracides just nodded and watched the readouts for a while with me.

There's a reason the old saying warns to be careful what you wish for. Less than a day later we were watching news reports of the latest mass slaughter by the good people of Fagin system. There was (or rather, had been) a colony on a moon of the fourth planet, which was (or rather, had been) inhabited by a group most of the people on the fourth planet didn't like for some reason. The peacekeepers protecting it had been drawn away and the fourth planet people had struck.

"Saints, what the hell's the matter with them?" Chen asked, not bothering to hide his revulsion.

"I don't think there're any saints watching this system," Halley Keracides answered.

I was watching something else. "There's a ship heading out our way." They followed my mark. "Looks to be an old freighter. A lot bigger than *Lady*, but a bit older, I think, from the readings we're getting."

Within another six hours we'd seen news reports confirming that the old freighter had come off of the moon where the colony had been wiped out. Nearly wiped out, that is. They'd gotten most of their kids and some of the adults onto that freighter. Its path to the peacekeepers or other safety in-system blocked by hostiles, the freighter had hauled mass out of the plane of the system in the hopes of getting away.

Our two loitering privateers started heading for it. They'd been well positioned for an intercept and they'd catch the fleeing freighter. No question. About two days before the nearest peacekeeper ship could possibly arrive to protect the freighter. And just a few hours before we swept safely past on our way to that fourth planet.

"You've got your distraction, Kilcannon," Halley Keracides stated in a very quiet voice.

"Go to hell."

"What are you going to do?"

"There's nothing we can do. *Lady* doesn't carry weapons. She's old, she's tired and we can't do a damn thing."

Halley nodded, but she didn't seem to be agreeing. "Maybe you ought to brief Captain Weskind."

If I'd spotted even a trace of mockery on her face or in her voice I'd have sealed her in her quarters until we hit port, but there wasn't any of that. "I should," I agreed, and left to do that.

Captain Weskind sat and listened. She always sat while I talked, and after I'd finished I waited. But

Captain Weskind didn't recite her hopes about "one good run." She just sat there, her face flickering with rapid shifts in emotion, and after a while I excused myself and went back to the bridge, wondering if Captain Weskind had taken a turn for the worse, or if she could no longer say whatever else she might've wanted to say.

The two things nightmares have in common with space is that you can fall and never reach bottom, and everything happens in slow motion. The old freighter was running for all it was worth, but the privateers were closing fairly easily, and because of the distances involved it was all taking days to play out. Yet I could read the end without any trouble. I'd been driving ships a long time and could handle relative motion by instinct. I didn't even need to consult the maneuvering systems to know about where the privateers would catch the freighter.

Since the freighter had come out of the area of the fourth planet, the same area we were headed, and had run in our general direction, the privateers would catch it pretty damn close, as space goes, to where *Lady* would pass. They'd be busy killing the kids and looting the ship, of course, so they wouldn't spare a glance at us.

We'd just have to watch it happening.

And Halley Keracides watched me. She didn't say any more, she just watched me and the readouts, where as the hours spun down prey ran and predators chased and the *Lady* got ever closer to both.

There are always points of decision when you're driving a ship. Given your mass and your engines you can tell how long you have to make up your mind before it's too late to be able to do something. We were six hours from the place where the pursuit would end. Halley Keracides and I were the only ones on the bridge of the *Lady*. She stayed silent, but we were coming up on that point of decision soon and I finally had to say something. "Just one good run."

Halley Keracides nodded. "And one more after that?"

"Yeah. That's all *Lady* needs, right?"

"No. Not really. But you've got a clear shot at it."

"At the fourth planet, you mean."

"Yes. If that's what counts."

I kept my eyes on the displays. "And after we deliver our cargo we'll have to find something in Fagin system that people will pay to have delivered to another system."

"The people you deliver that stuff to will have something they want you to haul. Count on it. Whether you want to haul it is another question."

"This is an honest ship. I swear."

"Today, I'll agree with you. Tomorrow, maybe not. What course do you want to steer, Kilcannon?"

"I know what course I won't steer. But ... damn. One or two runs ... we could get them done and then drop that crap for legit cargo again."

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't know."

"What's Captain Weskind think?"

I didn't want to hear that question. But Halley Keracides looked and sounded sincere when she asked it, and I knew it was a question I ought to know the answer to. "I'll brief her on our options."

"So now you think you have options?"

"For a little while longer, yeah."

Captain Weskind wasn't awake but this was a critical time, and any Captain knows they'll be awakened when necessity calls. I talked to her, laying out the situation again. I discussed options, I made a recommendation. I waited.

Captain Weskind sat there. Not a word, and too many changes coming too fast in her facial expressions for me to even try to read meaning. Feeling an ache inside, I prompted her. "This could be a good run. The one we've been waiting for."

But she didn't respond. And I knew I had my answer. Captain Weskind had given me that answer a long time ago, when I was new to the *Lady* and she was teaching me the ropes. Small players in the freighter trade sometimes had to take a flexible approach to rules and regulations. But she always told me there were some cargos you didn't take on, some things you didn't do. And some things you didn't let happen if you could do anything about it.

Halley Keracides was still on the bridge. She looked a question at me, but said nothing. I did some calculations, then I adjusted our course a bit, sat back and waited.

"You're going to come a lot closer to those privateers," Halley observed.

"Yeah." I called engineering. "Vox, I want you to rig the autos so they can best handle all engine functions, even emergency damage."

"Can't."

I muttered a prayer to any saints watching. "You need to do your best."

"Already did."

"In a few hours I'm going to have you evacuate engineering and stand by at--"

"No."

"Dammit, Vox, what's the problem?"

"Saw the course change. Know what you're gonna do. Go help them kids. Gonna need us here. We're staying."

For the Chief Engineer that amounted to a very lengthy speech. "Okay. But when I say you have to go I want you guys out of there as fast as possible. Understand?"

"Aye."

Halley was watching me again. "What?" I demanded.

"Just wondering what you're planning and what I can do."

"I'm planning on using the two weapons available to the *Lady*."

Her eyebrows rose. "I didn't know you had even one weapon on the *Lady*."

"People are clever, Ms. Keracides. We can turn all kinds of things into weapons. As for you, I'm going to have you and the others from the *Canopus* suit up and stand by at the lifeboat."

"Chen will insist on staying in engineering with your people."

"Fine, the other five of you will go the lifeboat."

"Why are we going to need the lifeboat? You're not planning on putting us off while you somehow go into battle, are you?"

I took a deep breath. "No. We're all going to need that lifeboat."

Word spread through the crew. I waited for a mutiny that didn't happen. I told everyone to suit up. Once the privateers figured out that *Lady* might be a threat they'd open fire. It wouldn't take many hits by them for *Lady* to lose atmosphere.

I left Halley Keracides on the bridge for a few minutes while I went back to Captain Weskind's cabin and got her into her own suit, then pressurized it. "I'll be back, Captain. Just wait for me and don't worry."

Halley was in her suit by the time I got back. The Vestral Company suit she wore looked new or very close to it. I couldn't help comparing it to the suit I had on, which in its patches and worn fittings betrayed every hour of too much use over too many years. But if Halley Keracides noticed the differences between our suits she didn't show it.

One hour out. I called for more thrust from *Lady*'s engines, and the old girl started putting on more speed. That called for another adjustment to our course. Down and off to the side we could see the privateers closing on the big freighter. So far they hadn't paid any apparent attention to us. I tried to match a freighter-turned-privateer mentality to my own experiences and wondered how long it'd be before they started worrying that *Lady* was more than just a tramp freighter trying to sneak past them.

By adding speed I'd set us up to intercept the privateers a bit earlier, at a point a little further from the big freighter than before. I didn't want to risk them shooting up the freighter any before I got there.

"Why haven't they opened fire on the freighter already?" Halley asked.

I made a sour smile. "You wouldn't understand, I guess. When you think of spare parts you think of going to a shop and buying them new. Ships like the *Lady* live on what we can salvage. I know what they're thinking. They don't want to damage stuff on that ship. They're going to overhaul that freighter, put in a few well-aimed shots at close range to knock out his ability to maneuver, then board, space the kids and strip everything off the freighter that they can use or sell."

"Why not just keep the freighter?"

"It's too easy to track stolen ships. It's hard to track stolen parts." Halley at least had the grace not to remind me that I'd already demonstrated my knowledge of the illicit parts market.

An alarm pulsed and I watched the readouts tell me a chunk of metal had just raced past us. "I guess that was a warning shot."

Halley nodded. "They're using rail-guns."

"Sure. The electromagnets are easy to build and maintain. And the metal blocks they use for ammo are cheap and really easy to manufacture. Just the thing for a bunch of people who want to keep shooting at each other for a long time."

"What are you going to do about the warning shot?"

"Ignore it. By the time they figure out I'm ignoring it we'll be a lot closer."

"You're going to get a whole lot closer, aren't you, Kilcannon?"

So she'd guessed what I intended doing. "Yeah. I can't act too soon, though. I have to wait as long as possible or they'll be able to get up enough relative speed to dodge us." I checked the distance and the time. Not much than another half-hour. "I want you to get down to the lifeboat now. You, the others from the *Canopus*, and the rest of *Lady's* crew. Get into the lifeboat and stand by."

"How sure are you that the lifeboat isn't going to be hit when they start shooting at the *Lady*?"

Not sure enough. "The lifeboat is out on one side of the ship, and the privateers will be aiming at *Lady's* center to maximize their chances of a hit. The lifeboat should be okay even if the privateers really shoot us up while we're closing on them."

Halley eyed me. "Tell me you're not going to ride *Lady* all the way in."

The thought brought a shiver up from somewhere deep inside me. "Hell, no. But it'll be close. It has to be. I need everyone else at the lifeboat waiting."

"All right. The saints know you've promised to try and make the lifeboat, Kilcannon. You don't want to meet them with a broken promise fresh on your record. Remember that. For my part, I'll keep that lifeboat waiting as long as I can." She hesitated. "Should I get Captain Weskind?"

"No! She won't go with anyone but me. I'll bring her with me."

Halley Keracides looked like she wanted to argue, but then nodded and left. About ten minutes later she called the bridge and reported that everybody was at the lifeboat. Everybody but the guys in engineering, Captain Weskind and me.

A moment later another metal projectile whipped by *Lady*. I wondered how long they'd give me to react this time. But it hadn't been a warning shot. More projectiles came in, aimed straight at *Lady*. I heard and felt the impacts, grateful that the storage spaces in the bow were taking the brunt of the first volley. That's why they were there, to absorb damage if *Lady* hit something or something hit *Lady*.

But storage spaces aren't armor and those metal projectiles were fast and heavy. There was a pause of a few minutes after the first volley, apparently to see if we'd take the hint after actually being hit, then more rounds started coming in. This time they started punching through. Tiny hurricanes roared through *Lady* as the shots from the privateers ripped holes in her. Atmosphere vented from a score of holes in the hull, pushing *Lady* slightly off course as they did so. I corrected the course and watched the instruments report dropping air pressure until every compartment in the ship was in vacuum.

I checked the readouts again, watching the paths the other ships made as they swung through space, and I knew it was time. I brought *Lady* around, finally steadying her pointed at the spot where the smaller privateer would be in fifteen minutes. The barrage of projectiles halted for a moment as my course change avoided shots aimed at the place where *Lady* hadn't gone. In the momentary calm, I popped a

console I'd never opened in earnest and threw two switches.

On the outside of the hull, massive grapples opened and electromagnetic pushers engaged as the emergency cargo jettison system activated for the first and last time on *Lady*. The big cargo containers which ringed the ship at two places were pushed away from *Lady*, slowly spreading out around the course she was on. As the last containers cleared the hull I goosed *Lady*'s engines to the maximum we could manage. The old girl shook and shuddered, but she accelerated away from the containers, leaving them traveling behind us down the same course. As I turned *Lady* slightly again, I watched as the delayed commands I'd fed to the cargo containers activated and they started offloading drums of precursor chemicals through load points located on their tops and bottoms, the drums drifting into the areas between and among the big cargo containers. Good riddance to a cargo I never should've loaded.

In the process of clearing my conscience I'd also created a huge shotgun blast aimed for the point the smaller privateer would reach in twelve minutes. I wondered how long it would take the privateer to spot what I'd done, figure out what it meant and try to alter its trajectory. It shouldn't matter. Freighters, even freighters fitted out as privateers, weren't designed to dodge wide debris fields aimed right at them.

I steadied *Lady* just short of a collision course with the larger privateer. The longer I could leave that privateer thinking I was only planning a close firing run, the better.

Ten minutes. "Vox, evacuate engineering *now*."

"This is Chen. Vox is dead. We took some hits back here and suffered power arcs."

Damn. "The rest of you get out of there and get to the lifeboat."

"How much longer--"

"Go!"

"Aye, aye. On our way."

Lady's hull twitched and rang with impacts as kinetic rounds from the privateers hit again and again. I sat there, watching compartments and systems report damage or just go dead as the solid metal chunks tore into and through *Lady*. I wondered what would happen if a round came through the bridge. Would I have time to realize it or would I just find myself face to face with Dingo, him demanding to know what I'd screwed up this time? Eight minutes. Close enough and maybe too close.

I made a small course correction, finally fixing *Lady* onto a collision course, then I locked the docking system onto the big privateer and deleted the engine braking and maneuvering overstress limitation sequences. *Lady* would steer herself directly at the privateer, engines going full blast, as long as her systems still functioned. I stood up, fighting for balance as *Lady* jerked to maintain her lock on the big privateer, and stared at the screen where the shape of the privateer loomed. Then I ran for the Captain's cabin.

Captain Weskind was there. Face down on her desk. She'd opened her suit. There wasn't any time to see how long it'd been open and how badly she'd decompressed. I sealed the suit and repressurized it and sat her limp body on the edge of her desk and turned my back to her and draped both her arms forward over my shoulders and grabbed her hands and lifted her on my back and ran for the hatch.

I staggered down passageways that swung wildly as impacts and sharp maneuvers to keep the ship aimed at the privateer altered *Lady*'s motion. The lights flickered, caught, then finally died, leaving dim patches where the few working emergency lights came to life. What must have been a metal projectile

from one of the privateers burst through a bulkhead three meters in front of me and went corkscrewing on, chewing another hole through *Lady's* guts.

Ten meters from the lifeboat access, the deck suddenly bent and rose on one side, then the bulkhead slapped me. I hit the other bulkhead, my vision graying out, then managed to get to my feet again, Captain Weskind still a dead weight on my back. Something inside *Lady* screamed as it tore under stress, the sounds transmitted through her structure and into my suit. She was dying. Saints forgive me, she was dying. I stumbled down the weirdly narrowed passageway to the junction, then one more meter to where outstretched arms waited.

Captain Weskind was pulled from my back and then I was pulled in as well, the lifeboat hatch slammed shut almost on my feet. I felt the hard deck beneath my back and remembered the lifeboat was overcrowded. People were screaming but my head was swimming too much to understand. Then a great hand pressed on me as the lifeboat accelerated away from what was left of *Lady*, putting everything it had into getting away. I struggled to breathe as a couple of bodies lying partly across me tripled in weight.

A black fringe grew around my vision as I lay there, but I kept my eyes fixed on the display screens at the front of the lifeboat. The one in front of the piloting station showed only the spinning star field, but the auxiliary screen was locked on the area where *Lady* was still heading.

The big privateer was accelerating, trying to get up speed, finally realizing *Lady* was playing for keeps, but its own mass and inertia were holding it back. *Lady* came down on it, moving so much faster under her long acceleration that the old freighter seemed like an arrow. The privateer was still firing, but the shots were only chipping pieces off *Lady*. They couldn't stop or divert her.

Lady roared down from above like the angel of death and struck across the privateer at an angle. I fought back the blackness and what might have been tears as *Lady's* old hull bent around the point of contact. The privateer's hull bent, too, curving upward on either side of the impact. I could see hulls shredding, compartments blowing open under the stress and spilling their contents into space, countless minor detonations rippling through the merged wreckage as systems and structures failed explosively. A cloud of vented gases blocked direct view of the wrecks as they spun off, locked together in their death throes.

Off to the side, the slower-moving cargo containers and cargo drums were coming down on the smaller privateer. It was moving, too, trying to dodge the field of debris. It almost made it. Drums hit, denting the hull or punching through, but the smaller privateer managed to hold its course. Then a big container clipped its bow. The privateer shuddered and lurched off to one side under the impact, directly into the path of another container. The second one hit aft and hit hard. I watched energy flare and knew the privateer's engines had slagged. The smaller privateer staggered into an erratic roll, taking more glancing impacts as it spun away.

I couldn't see the refugee ship. I couldn't remember where it was supposed to be relative to us now. I tried to find it but my head hurt and I felt very tired and it was too hard to keep that blackness out of my eyes, so I let it fill my eyes and my head and let the pain go away.

* * * *

I opened my eyes and saw light again. Smooth light, steady light. I blinked, turning my head to see what looked like a very well appointed sick bay. I turned my head the other way and saw Halley.

She nodded at me wordlessly, waiting for me to speak.

"This doesn't look like a peacekeeper prison infirmary."

Halley twisted her mouth into a sardonic smile. "No. The peacekeepers figured they owed you one. You're on the Vestral ship *Fenris Rising*. Outbound from Fagin."

"Oh." I thought about that. "*Lady*..."

"The collision totally destroyed the larger privateer. The smaller was knocked completely out of commission by the impacts of the cargo containers. The peacekeepers rounded it up a few days later."

"A few days later." I lay back, feeling a lot more tired than someone who'd been asleep for at least that long ought to feel.

"Peacekeepers picked us up. Good thing. That lifeboat of yours wasn't in very good shape. Neither were you. Concussion, a few broken bones. That kind of thing. The refugee ship made it, by the way. They're safe."

So *Lady's* sacrifice hadn't been in vain. I nodded.

"Captain Weskind would be very proud of you, Kilcannon."

"Captain Weskind--" The question stalled as I saw the look on Halley's face.

"She's dead." Whatever Halley saw in my expression made her lean forward a bit and squeeze my hand. "You did everything you could. Her suit must've been open at some point. Yes? She'd suffered too much decompression. You got her onto the lifeboat, but it was too late."

I was silent for a long time, letting the sorrow roll through me. And the guilt of relief. Captain Weskind had died on the ship she loved. Maybe she'd understood enough of what was happening to make that decision. Now she'd no longer have to face a universe her mind couldn't deal with anymore. Now she wouldn't have to try to go on without the *Lady*. But when everything else had passed, one thought still stung. "I think I remember her being pulled on the lifeboat before me."

"That's right."

"The Captain should've been the last one to leave the ship."

Halley leaned back again and regarded me. "The *Lady's* Captain was the last to leave the ship."

"You just told me you took Captain Weskind onto the lifeboat first."

"So I did." I waited, but she didn't explain her statement. "Any more questions?"

"Yeah. Who the hell are you?"

Halley gave me that twisted smile again. "I have a confession to make, Kilcannon. Keracides isn't my real name. My actual name is Halley Vestral."

"Vestral?" The name took a minute to connect. "As in Vestral Shipping?"

"Yes. My mother's the majority owner."

I inhaled deeply. "I wondered why First Officer Chen deferred to you. As if you weren't just some passenger."

"He knew who I was and so did the Captain of the *Canopus*. Nobody else on the ship did. Mother and I often travel under false names for security reasons."

"Good thing, I guess. Why tell me now?"

"Because I want to offer you a job, Kilcannon. After consulting with the Vestral Shipping officers and sailors who observed you on the *Lady*, my mother agreed without reservations."

A job. With Vestral Shipping. On a bright, clean ship. "That's ... thank you. I, uh, know I'll need to work my way up from whatever I'm hired at--"

"The job offer is for Captain of one of our ships."

I just stared for a long moment. "I'm not qualified."

"We think you are."

"I've never served as a Captain."

Halley started to speak, then paused. Eventually, she just nodded. "We think you're qualified," she repeated.

"What about the rest of the crew from the *Lady*?"

"I knew you'd ask about them. We'll find positions for all of them." Halley paused again. "That System Tech. Siri. Some people were panicking while we waited for you in the lifeboat, trying to get us to go. She kept her body across the lifeboat hatch so no one could close it until you got there. She's awful strong for such a small girl."

"I'll have to thank her, if I ever see her again."

"You will. She's signed on as crew on this ship." She saw my face. "She's clean now and deserves the opportunity. It's the least I could do, Kilcannon."

"Uh, thanks." The word felt so hopelessly inadequate, but what could I say that would convey what the offer to me meant? I wouldn't be roaming the docks, trying to find another old ship willing to hire me on as, maybe, Third Officer. Instead, I'd be Captain of one of the bright, shining ships of Vestral. With a full crew and a maintenance budget. Good runs to good planets.

I ought to feel something.

I leaned back against the bed, wondering why everything seemed so empty. Here was everything I'd ever dreamed of, everything I'd ever envied, everything I'd ever wished for. I had it. "Why aren't I happy?"

I hadn't realized I'd spoken that until Halley shook her head. Her eyes were looking right into mine, as if she could see something there. "I'm sorry. You aren't happy because you know the odds are vanishingly small that you'll ever find Haven again."

"Haven? What are you talking about? I've never found Haven."

She smiled that not-a-smile again and shook her head once more. "You still don't know where Haven is?"

"I've never known where Haven is. And I thought you said Haven isn't real."

"No, I said there isn't any *one* place which *all* sailors could call Haven. But it does exist."

Riddles. I couldn't handle them at the moment and broke eye contact with her, staring up at the

overhead. "Then where is it?"

"Kilcannon, you fool. Haven is that place you most want to be, the place that holds everything important to you."

When I looked down again she was walking away. I wondered what she'd meant.

Saints, I miss the *Lady*.