

In a distant galaxy, Humans are on the run...

# AMP 1

## Messenger



Stephen Arseneault



***AMP***

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(Vol. 1)

# **Messenger**

**By: Stephen Arseneault**

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*"We live on a tiny spec of a world, in a small galaxy, in this massive universe. Are we alone? In our lifetimes, will we be able to reach out and travel to a distant world? To interact with alien lifeforms? That which is physically impossible today, is always possible within our imaginations. Let's take on a new galaxy... shall we?"*

S.A.

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# Chapter 1

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*In a single event, every Human was transported away from the Earth to a distance galaxy. A galaxy dominated by beings bent on conquest. It was not a journey of our choosing. All references to our precious Earth's name and location were wiped from our memories, the event itself forgotten. For Man, our origin was now a thing of mystery and rumor. For a thousand years our home had been an immense space station called the Grid.*

*The Grid was a globe like structure, as large as the Earth's moon, built by others who were unknown to us. It had the capacity to sustain a billion Human lives. Its ultra-fast gravity drive was like none other in the galaxy, powered by hydrogen that had to be constantly mined and stored.*

*The first in our lineage did what they could to record all that could be remembered. A massive effort to archive our knowledge had been undertaken shortly after our arrival on the Grid. That undertaking had been cut short after an attack. A hostile species wanted us dead. We had done nothing to provoke their anger, but we were on the run. Much of our Human knowledge was lost with each passing generation as we struggled to survive. After a thousand years, our knowledge of history was now limited to the study of the archives by our scholars or those looking for some other meaning in their lives. Our new history began with life on the Grid.*

*The archives contained references to four other stations of equal size. Three had been destroyed in early battles, killing billions of our kind, the fourth had gone missing, further fragmenting our knowledge of the past. We were Humans without a history, wandering through a galaxy we did not know, while hostiles pursued us, threatening our very existence.*

*Since our arrival, we had been on the run from an alien species, the Milgari, who were bent on our annihilation, chasing us with a relentless rage. They conquered every species in their path as they pushed to extend their growing empire.*

*For a decade we had found peace in a new sector, but war was again coming. And we were not prepared. Our politicians had grown lazy and corrupt. Spies for the Milgari... filled our halls. Only those true to the Human cause could save us, courage and fore-thought were our only hopes.*

*The Grid was our home, our life, our refuge. We would fight to protect her from harm. We would fight for our species to survive. Our fate would rest with our own actions...*

~ ~ ~

"Frig! Get that Bilson wrench over here!" He was a good engineer, but sometimes easily distracted deep in his own thoughts.

Frig replied, "I am bringing it now Sir. Just a moment..."

It was one of those irritating qualities that you had to put up with to have good, loyal help. Frigbimifier, I called him Frig, had a low forehead with bulgy eyes and a wide mouth. He was a species we called the Gambit that had come from a swampy world we came across in our travels.

I could not understand why it was that he had left his people. I knew the allure of space travel to a

planet-bound species, but I had trouble with the thought of leaving everyone and everything you knew to explore with those who were not of your kind. Especially, when given the fact that those other beings were constantly at war. The six other Gambits that had chosen to follow were aboard the Grid. Frig rarely socialized with them. He seemed to prefer the company of Humans.

"Here Sir, your Bilson wrench. I took the initiative to clean and oil it. You really should take better care of our tools Sir."

I looked up with a sarcastic scowl and then got down to the business at hand. The ionic power feed to the nav system was leaking. The ion leak, while of no danger to us or the ship itself, came with the problem of an automated computer shutdown. That meant we weren't going anywhere at present. And if we weren't moving, we were prime targets for the first pirate vessel that happened our way.

The pirates had been a plague on our existence for as long as I could remember. I had lost two friends in the last four years alone; both Messengers like me, both attacked when they had ship trouble at just the wrong time. And the pirate activity in the Mensa Sector, our current location, was particularly bad. We had been in the sector for seven years. In my opinion, it had been seven years too long.

We were Humans, drifters really. Our home was a space station called Grid-4. As a species we were in search of a planet we could call home, a planet where our children could play on firm ground, a place where we could build long lasting defenses against the evil species that inhabited the galaxy.

Our history logs went back just over a thousand years. There was no record of our existence before that time. Rumors of our humble beginnings constantly circulated, many were wild tales.

Some said we came from a green planet, covered in buildings with spectacular white spires that reached to the heavens. Others believed our ocean world had been destroyed when our Sun transitioned into its red giant phase. And still others believed we had taken to the stars to escape the wrath of an invading alien species, much like the one that pursued us. Often, discussions on the subject led to heated exchanges. I made an effort to not get involved in the politics of it all.

Frig had been my engineer for nearly a decade. I had struggled through seven others in a year before finding him. His ability to keep the Swift together and flying was nothing short of a miracle. It was a bucket of rusty bolts that was constantly on the verge of breaking down, only Frig's tenacious obsession with keeping anything mechanical running, had kept us from being killed or sold into slavery at some back-world pirate auction, neither outcome of which held much appeal.

The Swift was an old Blevin class Defender. It had been out of service for over a century before I acquired it from a junk dealer on the Grid. It took three years of scrounging parts from various sources, some not so reputable, before I had a ship worthy of taking into the Messenger Service.

The Messenger Service was a collective of private ships that were used to ferry anything from sensitive diplomatic information to parts needed for the Grid's maintenance. Our destinations ranged from planets, to colonies, to the occasional hush-hush clandestine meeting with an unknown ship. I tried not to ask too many questions as being nosy would only keep you from collecting a paycheck. The pay wasn't great, but being your own boss had its appeal.

Over the decade that had followed, Frig and I added many improvements to the Swift. Those improvements had saved our hides on more than one occasion. Our ion drive had been ramped up with quartz anodes, giving us a 15% boost in potential speed. Speed, in the dead of space, was your best defense.

The drawback to the quartz anode was that running in boost mode would occasionally cause a

crystal to fracture, giving you only a few minutes to change it out before the speed advantage was lost. We had scrambled through one such fracturing instance with pirates in chase. After a narrow escape I swore to never use boost again unless death was imminent. The quartz anodes remained in place and always at the ready, but never used.

A second improvement, adapted from technology on Frig's home world, was a signal inhibitor that would make us undetectable by all standard sensors, except for optical. We were a small ship which meant our visual signature was equally small. Unless you were close where you could physically see us, you had no indication that we were there. Ion leaks however, were a signature that could not be masked.

The Swift had very little for weaponry. We added a pea shooter of a coil gun some years before, with the excuse of needing to blast menacing space debris. Something the size of a marble or less that happened to be in your path would bring nothing but quick death. Traveling at 132 times the speed of light meant a strike from a small stone could easily disable or destroy you. The thin layer of Tantric armor on the ship's nose and forward surfaces did well to deaden the impact of a strike, but its effectiveness would only go so far.

During my years in the service I had encountered two such strikes that shook the ship to its core. Even though the armor had done its job of keeping the ship together, my confidence in our nav avoidance system had been shaken. It took six months of pay to acquire a military grade sensor and nav computer link that would keep us safe at that speed. It came from a nefarious source and Frig had done an excellent job of disguising its appearance should we ever happen to be searched by the SCore.

The SCore was the Grid Security Corps. They kept their nose in everything related to anything, particularly when it came to the business of Messengers. Our interactions with other species were always regarded with suspicion, and rightly so. Twice there had been incursions on the Grid that had only been enabled by corrupt Messengers giving up information on our defenses. Both captains, after lengthy trials, had been summarily executed by ejection into space. It was a cruel death, and when given a helmet it was less than instantaneous.

Our historical logs had references to four other Grid stations. Three were known to have been destroyed during pirate or hostile species encounters while the remaining Grid, Grid-1, had gone missing. Grid-4 had been our home, Man's home, for a thousand years. Life on the Grid was a constant struggle to survive.

The ion leak was coming from a coupler feed that was just at the far end of my reach. Frig had removed the deck plate closest to the problem coupler. I had my wide shouldered upper torso, stuffed through the deck opening, dangling upside down, with my right arm stretched out to its fullest. Every turn of the wrench was a painful exercise in space mechanics. It seemed the Blevin class designers had made every effort to place the most likely to fail parts just out of reach. On more than one occasion I had cursed at Frig for having such short stubby arms.

As I extended my arm in an attempt to make another turn with the wrench, Frig began to poke at my ribs with one of his bony fingers. "Sir, we have a problem. Sir..."

I reacted in a bad way, agitated to the point where I attempted to swat back at him with my left hand. The result was a loss of my balance, causing me to drop further into the deck hole, striking my forehead on a cross-member as I shifted. In anger I writhed and pushed until I emerged from the hole with a mean grin on my face. "You better have a good reason for irritating me this morning. That leak already has me worked up. I am real tempted to just..."

Frig cut in, "Sir, we have an incoming ship alert. I thought you would want to know."

I picked myself up from the deck and sprinted the 18 steps to my console. A lone craft, almost double our size, was almost upon us. I tried in vain to restart the nav computer, each attempt was a failure. The ion leak continued to cause an immediate safety shutdown. With no propulsion we were the mercy of those who approached.

I raced back to the cargo hold and pulled two blasters from my locker. I tossed one to Frig as I again made my way back to the console. "Hope you remember how to use that. Whoever this is, they are coming in hot."

Frig tucked the blaster into his belt as he stepped up behind me to look at the proximity screen. "I remain proficient with a Blaster Sir. Just as I was the last time I outscored you at the target range."

Frig had a way of phrasing his responses where they were extremely polite and at the same time you had the feeling he had just smacked you in the face. I often found his delivery to be irritating and at the same time I likened it to the sarcastic humor that I loved.

"5509... 5509. This is Captain Michael Felix of the Deveroe. Are you in need of assistance?"

I rolled my eyes. Of all the ships to come to my aid it had to be Felix. He was my nemesis in the Messenger Service, always plying for the good contracts and usually talking his way into them. He was the one person standing in the way of me making a good living as a Messenger. And he was always smug about it.

"Hello, Felix. What brings you to grid 144? I thought you would be out making baby-bottle runs to Amerex-6. Grid 144 is bit of a tough place for a polished boot like you."

Felix was a stickler when it came to going by the book. Grid-4 protocol stated that Messenger Service pilots were obligated to assist stranded ships so long as doing so did not compromise their own safety.

I was sure Felix found it irritating to offer a hand to the one Messenger who had kept him from unionizing the MS. He had plans of having access to all the information that came to and from the Grid, and of controlling that information in a way that would only work to increase his power and prosperity. If anyone on the station was bent on a conquest of their own, it was Felix. He lived to control.

Felix replied, "Mr. Grange. Are you in need of assistance or am I wasting my time here? By the way, I logged four Rythium Snatchers in Grid 143. As much as I don't care for you Mr. Grange, I would not want the Messenger Service to get a black eye from a Rythium encounter. It would be an embarrassment to us all."

The Rythium pirates were particularly nasty if you happened to be unlucky enough to fall into their hands. Their ships were large. A ship the size of the Swift would easily fit into their cargo hold. They were also heavily armed, but slow. And the Rythium themselves were not very bright. They did however, take immense pleasure in torturing other species. I had seen their cruelty first hand from one of my two friends, he had died a painful death as a result.

After numerous beatings and other abuses, a Rythium captain would sell you to the owner of the ship's lounge. They would chain you up to a wall. Patrons would be charged a fee to fire a tiny needle at you from across the room. The needle had just enough velocity to fully penetrate the skin. The tail of the needle contained a coagulant; it would keep you from bleeding out. Death was imminent, but would sometimes take weeks or longer.

Mason Brown had been captured by the Rythium four years before. They had been so impressed with his ability to survive, that after nine weeks of needles, they stuck him in a life pod with a beacon

and fired it into a sector where they knew he would be found. After doctors on the Grid removed 26 pounds of needles from his body, an infection planted by the Rythium, took its toll.

I spoke, "Thanks for the heads up Felix. We just stopped to take a tea break. We will be on our way soon enough."

I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that we were broken down. It was sure to be thrown in my face back on the Grid when negotiating for a contract against him.

Felix replied, "5509, this is Captain Michael Felix, since you are not in need of our assistance today we will be on our way. And good luck with that ion signature you are emitting. I hope it attracts the attention you deserve."

With that the Deveroe turned and sped off towards its destination. When I turned towards Frig he was frowning. "It must be devastating for you to have that man come to your rescue Sir. He is the one man who seems to continually best you... Sir."

I gritted my teeth as I restrained my fist from poking Frig in his wide, flat nose. I then walked back to the opening in the deck plating to continue with the task at hand. Half an hour later the ion meter read "Clean".

The nav computer restarted without incident and we were soon on our way to the second moon of Malcon. We had a contract to pick up a shipment of refined Tantric ore for delivery to the Grid. The ore was very expensive and difficult to come by. I was a bit suspicious when given the contract without the promise of an armed escort. The pay was lucrative and as always, I wasn't the one to speak up if it meant losing out on the equivalent of four month's pay for a three week run.

When we arrived, I was swept through the colony's customs area without so much as a look at my credentials. The buyer of the Tantric ore was supposedly a private ship builder who had close ties to the Grid military. From the looks of it, he also had connections throughout the sector that would do his bidding. As the ore was being loaded I made my way to the local dive while Frig remained with the ship.

The Rubious Lounge was about as backwater as they came. The clientele were mostly deep-hole miners who had come from Malcon. They were anything but friendly. A quick DNA scan told the barkeep what liquors were compatible with a Human and I soon had a red Brivad ale in my hand. The taste and consistency was more like cough syrup than an ale, but the affects were the same. If not for my large stature, and the years of practice consuming almost every known concoction of alcohol, I would have been stumbling out of the joint after my second serving.

As I took a sip from my third glass a Durian approached me at the bar. The Durians were a very secretive species. They wore a dark gray cloak and it was rare to ever get a solid glimpse of their scaly blue face. They moved quietly and never stayed in the same place for any length of time. The timing of his approach and the nature of my cargo had me on edge.

The Durian spoke, "I understand that you are a Messenger. If so, I may have something of interest to you; for a tidy fee of course."

Of course there would be a fee attached any time a Durian was involved. Normally I was not a sucker for mysteries, but something told me that I wanted to hear what it was that the Durian had to offer.

We moved from the bar to a dark booth in the corner. I had to chuckle at the stereotype of a clandestine meeting in a dive bar. The encounter had every aspect of clichéd written all over it. As I sipped on my ale he rolled out a document with letters that translated to EID printed in bold on the

front page.

He quickly flipped through the document to give me just a taste of its content. EID stood for Enhanced Ion Derangement. He claimed the document was for a ship's drive alteration and that whatever it was that I flew as a Messenger, could be greatly enhanced with the addition of a single EID to the ion recombination chamber. His claims of nearly doubling my current speed had my full attention. The Durians operated outside of the law, it was something that everyone knew, but they had the reputation of delivering on whatever was promised. That reputation was the reason why their products and services always came at a premium.

As I began to haggle with the Durian he became skittish when two Malcon guards passed the entrance to the lounge. I took it as a sign that he was wanted by someone and was eager to leave the lounge as soon as was physically possible. I leaned in close, and despite his bad breath and decrepit smell, I made a low-ball offer of 2500 credits, the equivalent of about two week's pay. It was an attempt to get a base price out of him, so that real negotiations could begin.

To my surprise he pushed the document towards me and then held out a credit store in the palm of his hand. I punched the numbers into my own and then watched as the credits vanished from my account. The Durian quickly stood from the booth and moved over to the bar. Seconds later he disappeared through a back door as the barkeep pressed a button behind the counter. I stuffed the document into the zippered pouch on my leg, downed the rest of my ale and then headed back to the Swift.

Frig had handled the placement and tie-down of the ore load in our hold and was prepping the Swift for departure as I boarded. I asked for the copy of the manifest that came with every haul to which he responded "Sir, I think we need to be going. There is no manifest and the port captain stopped the customs agent as he was coming over to check the cargo. He seemed irritated at first, but after a word from the captain, he walked away smiling. I think it is in our best interest to leave quickly... Sir."

I generally did not second guess Frig's judgment. I rechecked the tie-downs and we soon departed from the colony spaceport, leaving just before the moon's dawn. As always, just after liftoff, I dropped a snapshot transmitter onto the moon's surface. It would relay a warning to us if any other ship left the port heading in our direction. It was a trick I had picked up from a fellow Messenger who would often take on cargo that was of a black market nature.

Privateers found you to be an easy mark if they could snatch a cargo that would never be reported as stolen. I was transporting a load that was of more value than anything I had ever hauled. The contract paperwork looked legit, the job however, appeared to be anything but that. And for our return trip, we had been directed to travel through grid 279, an area well off any normally traveled path and at the edge of uncharted space.

As we cruised towards the outlying grid, Frig called out an alert from his console. "Sir, our snapshot shows that just over an hour after our departure from the colony, a second ship lifted off, heading in our direction. It has been shadowing our heading for the last six hours. Should I lay out some decoys Sir?"

I turned back to my console and brought up the transmission data from the snapshot beacon we had dropped. The ship was a new Delta Runner class that could travel at nearly 30 light years over our top speed. It had superior shielding and an armament of four particle streamers that could rip through the archaic shielding of a Blevin Defender. Even with the enhanced coatings I had purchased and applied to the Swift, she would only be able to withstand a handful of hits from the Delta's weapons. If the pilot of the Delta Runner wanted our cargo, our ship would be no match in a fight.

I replied, "Send out a passive probe. Let's see if our signal jammer is having issues or not. We have made several course adjustments since we left the port, if we are being followed, they are following a signal."

Frig stepped back to the hold and placed a passive Matrix probe into the side launch port. The Matrix had top-of-the-line sensors that would detect a signal if we were indeed leaking one. A buzz and flash of light from my console told me when it was away.

Frig replied, "I will scan all the standard frequencies for anomalies Sir. If a signal is coming from our ship... we will know."

I nodded my head in agreement even though Frig was not turned my way. If there was a signal coming from our outer hull, or from the 1,800 pound cargo container in our hold, Frig would find it.

As we continued on our pre-planned path out to grid 279 I turned my attentions to the document that Durian had sold me. It looked legit. "Frig, you ever heard of an EID enhancement to the recombination chamber?" I turned to look for an answer to which he cocked his wide head slightly to one side.

"Why do you ask Sir?"

"I asked you if you knew anything about an EID. Do you know anything or not?"

Frig hesitated for several seconds "The rumor of an EID has been making the rounds for several years now. It was said to be stolen from an unknown traveler after he was unwittingly befriended by a Harken trader. The trader supposedly killed the traveler when he was told of the advanced technology aboard his ship. But no evidence of any such technology has ever become public, and no word of its existence has surfaced since the initial rumor. Again, I ask the nature of your inquiry?"

I told Frig to continue with his signal scan and that I had heard the same rumor. I then got back to the study of the document and of thinking about what it would mean to a Messenger to break 250 times the speed of light. The highest known speed of a craft, 207 times light speed, had come more than 70 years before when a Mellian Cruiser had used its ultra-high temperature plating to swing in close to a brown dwarf star during a slingshot maneuver.

I was sure the Grid military had ships that would approach that speed, but a ship capable of more than 250 times the speed of light would make its owner a very wealthy man. Contracts for almost every sensitive or premium cargo would be easily won, and with the speed in question, double the run could be made. My mind ran wild as I thought of the possibilities.

Those thoughts were soon broken as Frig completed the initial phase of his task. "Sir, I have detected two instances of an encrypted micro-burst transmission originating from our location. It is at an extreme low power level and the two broadcasts have come at an interval of several hours apart. If not for my photographic memory I would not have detected the emergent pattern at that large an interval. I feel I can safely state that we are indeed being tracked."

It was the news that I was hoping to not hear, but I was glad that I had. We had other contracts, in the past, where the clients were of an unlawful ilk, but I always had an idea of who might want to have a crack at jacking my cargo. The stuff we were currently carrying... was something that everyone wanted.

I spoke, "See if you can focus the sensors back to where we just came from. Maybe we can get lucky and get a lock on our tail. Might be useful to know when they try to make their move. When you finish with that... well... I may have another task for you to tackle."

We continued on our course for three full days before reaching the edge of grid 279. It was a dead

space with only a few star systems within it. Each system had been explored by probes without any returning with signs of life. The planets that had been identified, all had low grade radioactive ore deposits, making them unfit for both habitation and mining.

I could only reason that grid 279 had been selected for our path home as there would be little chance of a pirate encounter. No one ventured there as there was nothing to be had. That fact had made me all the more suspicious of our tail.

Grid 279 was on the edge of the arm of the spiral galaxy we inhabited. The space beyond held an ionic wall of highly charged particles and then nothing but the black emptiness of space for millions of light years distance. It was a scary place for a ship's captain. If a breakdown was to occur, there would be little chance of rescue. Our forms of communications would not penetrate the ion wall. Beyond the wall was truly a place of nightmares, a place of being alone. Our planned path was taking us right to the edge.



## Chapter 2

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Frig continued to drop Matrix probes every few hours. The third sensor tagged the Delta Runner with a visual confirmation giving us a tail number. Frig ran it through our less-than-lawful database of ships. "Sir, I believe we might have a problem with the Delta who is following us. The number displayed does not match up with the ship directory."

I replied, "And what does that tell us?"

Frig continued to peruse the data. "Well Sir, it generally means that the ship is being used for another purpose entirely. We really only have one of two options. It is either owned by a wealthy individual who likes to take chances with his money, by flagging the ship as something that it is not, or it is property of SCore."

Again, I rolled my eyes. The job was getting worse by the minute. If SCore was involved we would likely be heading to the Grid's prison, it was not a friendly place. If on the other hand, the Delta was being operated by a crew functioning outside of the law, we were being set up for a good-ole galactic mugging. I wondered which game we were in for.

While Frig had been busy with his tracking of our tracker, I continued to dig deep into the EID document I had purchased. I entered the parts required to build an EID into the ship's computer. A quick inventory check had the answer to a question I had been asking myself, did we have the parts on-board required to construct an EID.

I spoke, "Frig, I have a new task for you. This is something you are really going to enjoy my friend. It's an enhancement that could make our troubles go away, if we are able to put it in place quickly. Have a look at this design and tell me what you think."

With that I handed the document over for evaluation. If there was an engineer in the galaxy that could pull off building the contraption in that document, that engineer would be Frig.

Grid 279 would take a full day to cross before reaching the outer edge of the galaxy. I settled in for a nice game of Bollox against the ship's computer as Frig disappeared into the hold. He would begin his study by gathering the parts on the list. That task would be followed by arranging them neatly on the floor in a pattern. It would give him insight as to how the device worked. I could almost see the little wheels turning in his wide, flat brain.

Bollox was a game of skill and timing. I would be flying a simulated version of the Swift through a number of scenarios where I was tasked with anything from gathering intel to fighting for my life. Frig never understood the draw of the game, it was addictive; I sometimes played for hours on end when on a long run. Frig preferred to remain productive.

I attempted on more than one occasion to express to him that the practice I received while running the game would assist in the alignment of my thought processes should I encounter similar situations during our travels. He was not a believer in my methods. As I lifted off from the Grid on my first Bollox mission a proximity alert sounded.

We were only four hours from the ion wall and a second ship was fast approaching. Frig spoke, "Sensor initial scans are pointing to a rather large ship approaching."

I looked over my shoulder as I exited the game. "How big are we talking, container ship or battle cruiser?"

Frig hesitated before he responded. "Think bigger Sir... much bigger."

There were only two ships bigger than a battle cruiser. The first was a mining colony ore hauler, the other was a full on Grid military battleship... a Dearth class Disruptor. The Disruptor was the flagship of each of the 20 Grid fleets. Its shielding, weapons and speed were unmatched by any other vessel the Grid had previously encountered. The ship was expensive, only 20 of the Disruptors existed. The fact that it was traveling hurriedly in our direction... was not a good sign.

I adjusted our course, placing us on a direct path to the ion wall. I had no desire to enter the massive field of super-charged particles, but I would if I had no choice. The Disruptor quickly changed course to match our trajectory. The sensor information we had gathered over the few minutes of contact confirmed our suspicions that this was not a chance encounter. No flagship would ever travel without its entourage of support vessels. This Disruptor traveled alone.

When the next signal was emitted from the container we carried, the Delta Runner changed course in our direction and then slowed to a stop. It seemed the appearance of the Disruptor was not something they had planned for. They would remain in position, silent and unknown to the massively larger ship.

I walked back into the hold where Frig had an array of parts laid out neatly on the deck. "How's it looking? Did I blow 2,500 credits on a scam or what?"

Frig moved several parts and then picked up one in particular, holding it up in front of his face. "It is actually a fascinating concept Sir. The ionized particles are first fully eviscerated, and then spread into a completely random arrangement before being forced into a collateralized matrix the likes of which I have never seen."

I replied, "Can you put that in layman's terms for me, you know, so the other people on the ship can understand?" I was no slouch when it came to understanding how something worked, I just needed to have it spelled out in my own vernacular.

Frig responded, "We should be able to use one third of the ionized particles to achieve the same output thrust we enjoy today, or we can send a full stream of particles through our ion engines, yielding a threefold increase in speed, theoretically speaking of course."

I leaned over, placing my hands on my knees as I looked over the arrangement of parts on the floor. "You have all the parts. How long do you think it would take to put that thing together and get it installed? And is there anything I can do to speed the process? Because I don't think we have a lot of free time left on our hands. That Disruptor will be all over us in a couple hours."

Frig again moved several parts around on the deck before picking another up. He stared intently at the part with one corner of his mouth turned down. "I would feel comfortable with four hours. But we would have to shut down the ion transducer for at least half of that time. I'm afraid it would not be ready before we are overtaken."

I gave the order to begin the work and for him to do his best. It was a somewhat hollow add-on to the order as the one thing that Frig did was to always do his best. He would not attempt a job if he felt he could not do it in the best possible way. It was one of the things that made him a great engineer.

It would be up to me to give him enough time to do his job. I felt comfortable coming up with the extra hour or two of freedom, but an hour of that would be with no engine and I wasn't sure how I was going to pull that one off. As I looked out the cockpit window, I hoped the ion wall in front of us held the break we were in need of. If not, well... I was not one to fancy the brig.

In the little time I had left I decided it might be best to study up on our pursuer. The transponder

code pegged it as the flagship of the fifth fleet, commanded by Admiral Michael Zimmerman. The data file on the Admiral was a long one. Close ties to the principals of the SCore, our most heavily decorated war veteran having taken out the Gurathian fleet at Dreble-3, and for toppers, he was the second cousin of the current Grid Vice President, Barns Roble. Zimmerman's creds were a mile long.

As I dug further into the data store about the Admiral, I began to develop a fondness for his methods. He had a tendency to act first and answer questions later. His decision making during battle and his open and friendly nature during peacetime had garnered the undying loyalty of his crew. It seemed everyone liked Zimmerman regardless of his sometimes rash behavior. I was sure that having a politician such as Barns Roble in his pocket, was not doing him any harm either.

When the Admiral's ship had closed to within a half hour of our position we received a hail. "5509 5509, this is the Grid fleet vessel Eldridge. Please bring your vessel to a halt. You are in a quarantine military grid sector and are in violation of a number of Messenger Service and contract protocols. The cargo you are carrying is unregistered and therefore unlawful. Again, 5509, reduce your speed or be in violation of Executive Order 395-T."

I looked at the console for several seconds before closing the hail. To answer an order like the one that had just been given, and to then not follow it, gave the Admiral a license to fire, or to take the Swift by whatever means he felt were necessary. I had no doubt he would do that either way, but I was not going to make it any more legal for him to kick my ass than it already was.

I again walked back to check on Frig's progress. "What's your ETC? We are less than a half hour before entering that ion field out there and there is no telling if we will be able to find a place to hide. Comm sensors will be useless, but I am betting their visual arrays can spot and track a dirge bug from a quarter light year. We are small, and the ion wall is as big a place as any, but we are not that small."

Frig continued to assemble the parts in front of him as he squatted on the deck. "The device will be ready in one hour and seven minutes, in line with the estimate I had given initially. There are 16 parts that will require a brush of 442-Resin during the assembly process. The resin takes three minutes, nineteen seconds to properly cure. I have the parts set in the optimum order for assembly. It will be ready for installation at that time."

I was always amazed at how efficiently Frig was able to work. Every project was broken down into the exact number of steps necessary for completion before it was ever begun. His estimates were usually to the minute for tasks lasting several hours or more. He was good, there was no doubt, but I would never sing his praises in front of him as I feared his head would swell to double its size and then burst. He knew exactly how I truly felt and never asked that I show it.

The Eldridge continued to hail and I continued to ignore it. I racked my brain for a solution to our current problem. How could I make us disappear? "Frig?"

"Yes Sir?"

"Do we still have that case of inflatable pallets on-board?"

Frig thought for a moment. "If you check the inventory manifest it will show their location, unless you removed them after our prior run. I believe they were previously in compartment seven. I would be happy to check, but I am currently in a state of curing."

I pulled up the manifest on the console and then headed back to compartment seven. The inflatable pallets came in a slender tube that was about as long as your forearm. They had a timer for a delayed opening or an immediate switch if an instant pallet was desired. The auto-pallets came with a pressure sensor that would keep them inflated to the same height no matter the load. I was counting on that

pressure sensor to do its job in the dead of space.

As I fiddled with my pallet plan an alarm went off on my console. We had entered the ion wall. The Eldridge was now only 20 minutes behind us. I allowed another five minutes to pass before putting my plan into action.

I placed a pallet into the launch cylinder and gave it a three minute delay before inflation. I pressed the launch button and the auto-pallet was instantly on its way. Once back at my console I programmed it in a new course, going deeper into the ion wall at a 15 degree angle.

"Sir. May I ask what it is that you are doing? Sir?" Frig did not like to be in the dark. It had always been in my best interest to clue him in as soon as I thought it possible. If a decision was to be made, his input was always of value.

I replied, "I am attempting to give the Admiral and his boys a visual distraction of sorts. I figure that auto-pallet has just about the same size visual signature as the Swift. If we are lucky, it will race away from us at the speed of the ion field and they will take the bait. It may not take them long to figure it out or it may not work at all, but we needed to do something."

Frig was quiet for nearly a minute. "Sir, the auto-pallet as a visual will only offer a 47% signature equivalent. Might I suggest bonding two of the cylinders together? It may just be enough of a match for them to follow until their sensors offer full definition."

He was right of course. Double the size meant a signature that nearly matched our own. I got busy bonding the next five sets of cylinders together. The Admiral's crew would be highly trained at evaluating the data coming from their sensors and the better a match, the better our chances. The auto-pallets would provide us with an 80-20 chance of putting a significant distance between us and the Eldridge, if they were effective. If that distance was significant enough, I felt we might be able to slip away.

I launched a pair of auto-pallets every five minutes until they had all been dispensed. I then watched as they disappeared from every sensor except visual. A final turn took us straight into the ion stream on a parallel path to what our course would have initially been. I crossed my fingers and made a wish for good luck. It was a tradition amongst Humans and even though it was a bit superstitious for my tastes, I was all too happy to have a shot at a little luck.

We continued in the same direction for several hours with no sign of the Grid battleship behind us. The pallet trick had worked. After a check of all systems I turned to talk to Frig. "I can't believe we got away with that one. Zimmerman is probably raking his staff over the coals right now. I would love to be a fly on the wall on that bridge. From his file it looks like he can have a good temper-tantrum every once in a while."

Frig replied, "Sir, might I say that you handled that brilliantly for a mere Human." There it was again, that ever so polite statement that was dripping with sarcasm.

I gave him a wink and then continued. "What's the status on that enhancement? We ready to slap it on?"

Frig replied, "First, slapping it on would not be prudent, Sir. This will require an intricate series of maneuvers on your part. You will need to exactly align the feed injectors with the chamber depressions. I have the tools laid out that will be required to perform this task. The EID should be ready for your efforts in another four minutes."

I replied, "And why is it that you feel I am the one who is required to perform this task? If you know how to do it and you know which tools to use... why are you tagging me with this project?"

Frig tilted his head slightly to one side and let out a sigh. "Sir, how often do I have to remind you of the length of my upper appendages? This task requires another extended stay under the deck plating and it is an impossible task for me to reach the recombination chamber with these arms. Really Sir, I am shocked!"

Frig knew how to pull my chain and he knew just how hard he could pull without pushing me over the edge. I replied, "How about I take your short armed torso and stuff it down through the decking with my boot. I bet if I jump up and down on your ass enough times... you would fit through that hole!"

Frig responded, "Seriously Sir, you are in need of some new material. You have threatened to stuff me through that opening at least a dozen times in the last few months. Perhaps a kind word now and again would be more effective."

After shutting down the ion engine I stepped over and removed the deck plate. I mumbled a few choice words to Frig as I leaned the grate up against the hold wall. When the few minutes had passed I again stuffed my wide shoulders down into the hole while steadying myself with my left hand. Frig began to hand me the tools one by one as he gave concise instructions on what to remove.

The chassis around the recombination chamber took a half hour to crack open and pull free from the chamber assembly. Three fast latches then allowed the removal of the chamber's main body. I tugged at the assembly in question and then grunted as I pulled it up through the grate hole with one arm. The chamber main body weighed 40 pounds.

Frig then began the process of adding the EID to the chamber body. I always found it fascinating to watch him work. Every move had a reason and every reason had exactly one move. The new EID was assembled and attached to the main body in less than three minutes. As I returned to my position in the hole Frig slowly lowered the altered chamber until I had a firm grip on it with my right hand.

I again let out a grunt as I stretched and hoisted the new assembly into place. Feed lines were attached and the chassis casing bolted into place. Several minutes later I emerged from the hole with a smile on my face. "Let's give this puppy a try." I stood and walked to the console with Frig close behind.

Frig spoke, "It will not be a simple start this time Sir. There are a number of status checks that need to be performed before applying full power."

After nearly an hour in the hole I was ready to go. Frig reached for the console. "It would be best if I performed the status checks Sir, perhaps you can press the button when the process is complete."

Again, I wanted to haul off and punch him for his sarcastic delivery, but I knew the restart was a job that only he could safely perform. I stepped aside as I flung an open hand out towards the console and added my own sarcastic remark. "Be my guest, you were the one that did all the light work on this job..."

After a short hesitation I made one additional comment. "I do want to be the one to press the button when you are done though... just so you know."

Power was applied to the channel couplings and the recombination chamber sensors were soon spitting out data. After several minutes of stable transmission, Frig punched in a one percent burst. The ship's position monitors showed a slight move forward. The process was repeated until a five percent level was attained.

Frig turned to me with a wide grin "The channel alignment appears to be optimal and sensor data is heavily in the green. I believe we are ready for a test run Sir."

It was an exciting thought to have the chance to travel in a ship at a speed that had never before been achieved by anyone in our species. If the addition worked as advertised, I would be piloting the fastest known ship in the galaxy, only exceeded by the gravity drives and the Grid.

I put my hand on Frig's shoulder. "If this works, you and I are going to be very wealthy individuals and very soon. I would love to see the look on Felix's face when we start taking all his contracts."

I was so excited that I decided to let Frig run the test. He had earned it, just as he had earned my friendship. As he reached for the throttle the proximity alert again sounded. The Admiral had found us and was fast approaching.

Frig pushed the throttle to 15% and the ship lunged ahead with a smoothness that I could hardly feel. The normal vibration that came from ramping up an ion engine was no longer present. Frig remarked that it was possible the alignment we had done, reduced the harmonics of the recombination but it was very likely that the EID removed those harmonics altogether. It was something that he would have to study.

At 15% throttle the Admiral was still gaining on our position. Frig moved the throttle up to 40% and we had soon matched the speed of the battleship that followed us. We were traveling at 158 times the speed of light. The Admiral's crew then pushed their ship to its maximum speed of 186 SOL. Again, they were closing quickly on our position.

Our throttle was pushed to 60% and the ion engine responded quietly as it pushed our speed to 223 SOL. It was faster than any known ship had ever traveled. I grabbed Frig by the shoulders and shook his bulbous frame as I belted out a loud "whoo-ha!" and laughed. "Eat that Zimmerman!" As I continued my mini-celebration the console lit up with flashing red lights. The engine had gone into a safe mode shutdown.

"Sir, I am afraid the feed couplers have overheated. It was a problem I thought we might have. The alignment of the ion paths does have the consequence of expelling heat."

I looked Frig in the eyes. "And you didn't mention this before because of why?"

Frig returned my stare. "I only knew that it was a possibility Sir. Without a full analysis of the diagrams and without doing the alignment myself, I believed the probability to be low."

We were dead in space. The military vessel that had been pursuing us was again gaining fast.

I spoke, "You better get your suit on. And make it fast. I'm dumping the cargo. If it is really what they are interested in I'm hoping they will just leave us alone."

Within minutes I was latching the helmet onto my extra-vehicular suit. When I heard the latch on Frig's helmet lock I began to reach for the cargo controls.

Frig placed his hand on my shoulder and spoke, "Sir, I would advise against opening that door while we are riding in the ion wind. Our suits are not adequately shielded for such a situation. We would be cooked from the inside out before the container was fully released."

I replied, "Well, we can't just sit here. They are going to be all over us in a few minutes. What would you suggest?"

It was not a comfortable situation, but it was our only choice. Frig pushed and pulled the small door closed behind us, "I can't believe we are going to get caught hiding in the can. I mean, if I'm going to go down in a fight I don't want it to be from here... and if they decide to take the bait, I can't believe they will just let us go. I should have never let you talk me into adding the EID thing. Gonna get us killed."

Frig grumbled as he brought up the remote console on his sleeve. The cargo hatch opened to a deafening roar and a metallic screech could be heard as the 1,800 pound container of refined Tantric ore slid out into the rampaging ion field. My heart sank as I thought of the consequences of losing such a cargo.

It happened once before with a cargo worth far less, the result of which was a three week suspension from contracts and a dent to my reputation. The container was not properly sealed and the live eel delicacy that I was carrying was dead before I arrived at the destination. I found the ensuing legal claim to be beyond my ability to pay should I have lost in court, so I settled on the suspension instead. I had not hauled a live cargo since.

When the cargo door closed and the chime of the seal went off I squeezed back out of the john and popped off the grate covering. The feeds were still glowing red. I turned back to Frig to request a liquid nitrogen canister. He was standing behind me with one in his hand. The content of the can was emptied bringing the temperature down just enough for an engine restart. I energized the feeds and then slowly pushed the throttle to 30%.

Frig spoke, "Sir, at 30% throttle, we run a 68% chance of once again overheating. I did the math in my head as you were busy dumping our cargo. I believe we should limit the throttle to 24% for now."

I turned back to Frig and pointed to the hold. "How about you go back and see how many cans of nitrogen we have. Keep an eye on those feeds and maybe spend a can or two to keep them cool. And connect the empty to the enviro-recycler. It should be pulling that excess nitrogen out of the air in here as we speak."

As we sped away from the Tantric container I again set the ship's direction at an angle as we were heading towards the outer part of the ion wall. The stellar winds were strongest there and I hoped the Admiral would lose interest in the chase once he had his cargo.

When we punched through the heavily ionized stellar winds of the outer wall and into the clear, calm, empty space beyond, there was no sign of the Eldridge behind us. They had their prize and the two-bit Messenger that had escaped... was of no value.

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