

Race For Life

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A story written from Shade's point of view.

His on/off girlfriend Ann is kidnapped during the chaos after a race and is held at ransom.

Everything (c) me (Amy)

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1 - GSR

I sat in the cockpit of my newly upgraded fighter. I'd been given it when I was kicked out of the Shadow Stalker academy, the unexpected gift courtesy of my mum. The woman who'd adopted me when I was still curled up in an egg, taken me away from extreme danger and raised me until I was old enough to look after myself and to make my own decisions. I love her with all my heart, like most sons do. And now I'm sat here, looking at the flickering dashboard in front of me, waiting for the internal stability system to come online, to tell me I can get the ex-fighter off the ground and back into the races. It'd been a while since I'd raced and this ship had been put through hell, its gun metal black surfaces scarred beyond recognition in some cases, but always coming back, most of the time stronger than ever, some of the times sitting at home, in the garage or back at the Shadow Stalkers' HQ in a lift lock out of the way in the main hangar planetside waiting to be repaired.

Of course, there are times when I have to wait to be repaired too. Sitting in a hospital bed, usually on an unfamiliar planet somewhere waiting to be fixed is boring as frack, and something I try and avoid. But the Galactic Space Races or GSR as it's commonly referred to, isn't a friendly sport. A sure fire way to win is to be ruthless, even if it is against the rules. If you're good enough, you won't get caught fiddling your neighbour's ship whilst it's still sat in its hangar or in its lift lock in the pits. Get caught though, and to say you're fracked is the sugar coated term. Caught fiddling with the other racer's ships, you can get kicked out of the racing season, or worse; Perma-banned from racing, you're record permanently marred. So I tend to stay away from that kind of thing. I just stick to drugging the other pilots, spiking their drinks, etcetera. Though that's only when I'm in a pinch, when I'm having to face some of the toughest courses and racers in the history of the GSR. Hence why I have to watch what I drink too. I'm one of the most popular racers alive today. It's not something I asked for and it's definitely not something I relish in, even though it does have its perks.

I'm not the kind of guy to flaunt my money, show off in front of the ladies or boast about my wins. I'm just a regular guy who likes to race. I didn't intend on making a living out of it, but here I am, sat in my newly refurbished cockpit of my old ex-fighter, still waiting for my internal stability system to come online. That'd make it twenty minutes that I've been sat here, freezing my tail off as my ship's black and light blue colours are being covered with a thin white layer of snow. The pits are quiet, most of the racers and their crews are inside, keeping warm. But I don't have a crew. Only two other mates who're also racers. Lucas Mew, a psychic and Annette Burrows, an Ant with an attitude, especially when she gets all riled up. She's also my on/off lover. None of us have a crew. We take care of each other and look after ourselves and our ships. Lucas' out in the cold too, but he's also sat in his cockpit, his ship with the rest that'll be racing in two days; firmly in the grip of the lift locks that line the edges of the high up pit lanes. Qualifying tomorrow. The best lap times get furthest up front. But if this snow gets any worse, the race'll be cancelled.

It may be called a space race, but that doesn't mean we're only meant to stick to space. We get sent all over the place some times. Some times, the course, or track, is just in space; a race from planet to planet, or around the planet that's hosting it. Other times, it's strictly planetside, the course weaving through various disaster areas such as valleys, old machinery factories, quarries and across plains. The plains part sounds easy to fly across, huh? That's what I thought when I did my first plains race. It's as

treacherous as a mine run or a factory run. Even though it's classed as a sprint, whoever's in charge generally sees to it that we get more of a challenge other than trying not to get shot down by the other racers; we have drones sent after us. Robots or remote controlled fighter ships adding to the stress, I've been through it all, but everytime, something's different. Either that, or I've been through so much shoot in the past I really can't remember the flight or attack patterns that the different planetary race councils like to use. What can I say? I may be young at just over three hundred and fifty years old, but that's a shootload to remember.

The lights stopped blinking and stayed on, a bleep and my onboard computer announced it was ready and able to take off. But I didn't. Lucas was knocking on the thick glass of my cockpit, a long scarf wrapped tightly around him, his paws tucked firmly in his arm pits. I shut down and climbed out once the lid had slid back. A gust of wind caught my wings and nearly sent me over the edge, but I kept a firm grip on the cold ship as I climbed out, my claws clicking on the icing metal surface of the pit lane.

"D-d-dude! It's f-f-fracking freez-zing out here!" He chattered, a visible shudder wracking his small frame. "Then get inside, prick!" I hissed through the cold, dragging him behind me by his scarf.

Sometimes I envied the way his feet never touched the floor, then I remembered about the whole being psychic thing. I don't think I'd be able to shut out all those alien thoughts coming into my head and messing with my mind, never knowing what thoughts were mine and what thoughts weren't. And everytime Lucas would tell me how to block out other's thoughts, like I could read minds. Sure, I can talk to people through my mind, but that's only if they have the power of mind speech. If I try tapping into someone who can't use the whole mind speech thing, I'd only end up giving myself a headache.

The racer's cafe. Ordinary in every way, except the blessing that there were no members of the public or press allowed in. Even the staff were part of the racing society and had to sign a contract about secrecy before they were even accepted for the job. Ann was sat at a table in the far corner, looking out the window at the snow, ignoring a fat onnotian in a too-tight flight suit. It'd didn't take a psychic to figure that she was one step closer to nailing the guy between the eyes with with her heavy coffee cup. I walk up behind him, Lucas trailing after me and tap him on the shoulder, clearing my throat. He turns around, some of the thick leathery dreads being pulled across his left shoulder as he looked over his right. His forehead creased.

"What?" He grunted.

"Why don't you take a hint and leaver her alone?" That wasn't exactly a question, but he took it that way anyway and turned back around.

Apparently Dragons don't worry him all that much. Especially ones breathing down his neck, grinding their teeth. But I wasn't in the mood for causing a scene, so I let Lucas do it instead.

A light blue aura surrounded the Onnotian and he flew sideways and hit the far wall where he stayed for a few moments. I righted the chair as Ann sighed with relief, pushing her empty cup aside. Everyone in the cafe turned back to what they were doing, ignoring the Onnotian as he stamped over to us, his light brown colour turning angry red. Lucas looked at him and grinned. He knew this racer. He was cocky, thought he could always get what he wants. Spoiled and cocky. Hasn't won a race for three years though. Lucas coughed and the Onnotian fell over backwards, cracking his head on the floor. A coupled of his team mates walked over to him and dragged him away through the tables and other racers as if it wasn't anything new. Of course they probably did it on a regular basis. I'm just looking forward to when he comes to.

"The guy couldn't take a hint even if it smacked him repeatedly in the face." Ann grumbled and hunched

over the table, her head resting on the knuckles of her left hand, tracing patterns in the spill of coffee granules and sugar with her right hand.

"How long you been sat in here?" I asked, mainly out of boredom.

She shrugged half heartedly and yawned. "Since lunch time I think."

"A fair few hours then." Lucas said, curling up on his chair next to me, left leg tucked beneath him and right knee holding his head.

"Heard any news about what the weather's gonna be tomorrow?"

She shrugged again. "Snowing. But they say it's not gonna be as bad as today."

The snow outside was getting heavier. I hoped she and the weather reports were right. I need to win this race. I really need the money otherwise I won't be able to keep my ship in the air or to pay my rent on my apartment back home.

2 - Qualifying

The lift lock detatches from my ship and I'm free, floating through the air towards the starting and finishing line on quarter power and G-Diffusers. This race is planetside only, a somewhat pleasant change from the last twelve races I've competed in that have been orbital and in-system races only. The start line's marked by floating red lights. They act as traffic signals, turning blue when we're allowed to go. Only fifty foot off the ground, not the lowest point in the track. The lowest points being a mere five foot off the ground, the highest being seventy thousand. Today is qualifying. We race, but only too see who can get the lowest time. One ship at a time around the course. No traps. Just plain sailing all the way. Hopefully. I came in fifth in the last race, so I'm the fifth one out. I can hear Race Control counting down over my ship's com and the beacons along the edge of the track go green. I open the thrusters and I'm gone, three quarters of the way down the first straight within ten seconds. It's a big course. I need to keep this pace up if I'm to get a decent time.

Through a tight valley, into an open cave and out again, going straight up. Twenty minutes of flying high and I'm forcing my ship into a nose dive, back towards the snow covered plains below. A tight turn, flipping my ship upright and straight and I'm finally on the last leg of the course, weaving between the low buildings of a long dead town, the old abandoned cars sent skittering and rolling in my wake as I pass by low, taking a hair pin too hard, grinding the undercarriage of my ex-fighter along the bleak face of an old shopping centre. An alarm bleeps in a steady rythm. I'm venting fuel through a tear in the primary tank. The gauge is dropping fast, but I keep going, persuading myself that I can see the finishing line in the distance. But I can't. I have a nasty feeling I won't make it. I'm losing too much fuel and the spray is being ignited by my exhaust fire, fattening the thin stream of white flames dangerously. I look down at the fuel levels again. The alarm's still going off and I'm red-lining already. I push my ship harder, the engine sputters and complains, but I can now see the finishing line. My ship gives one last sputter and drops past the line like a brick and I take the fifty foot drop, knowing that I've gained a place in the top ten of tomorrow's race, but unsure of whether I'll be in the race, able to fly. The landing was hard. Dirt and snow and bits of winter greenery went up around me. The ship hissed; The last sound I heard.

My back hurts. My head hurts. I think I have a broken wing. I can smell fuel. But that's the least of my worries. I sit up straight on the khaki coloured cot in the cubby hole that's at the back of my hangar. My head spins and nausea strikes, threatening my breakfast. Rocket fuel isn't the nicest smell in existence. I look up at Ann who's standing over me with a bucket. Always thinking ahead that girl. Makes me wonder why I haven't given our relationship a proper go.

"Y'gonna be sick or what?"

"I think I'll take the 'Or what?' option." I said queasily.

Man, I hate the smell of rocket fuel. It's disgusting. Alas, it's one of the only fuels strong enough to get the engines working on a space ship. And my ship being practically ancient now, still drinks the old school cocktail. No shiny power cells for me thanks. Can't afford it. Well, not yet anyway...

Ann Hmpfed and dropped the bucket down.

"You're ship's being fixed. Then being refueled. Depending on how you feel tomorrow, you'll be in at second on the starting line." She said.

Second out of thirty five. Not bad. Not bad at all. Certainly a damnsight better than my previous

qualifying times of this season.

I swing my legs over the side of the cot and flex my wings, stretching all the muscles I can in my back. A few pops and clicks and everything's back in place where it should be. I live to fly another day.

"Oh. I should warn you. I've heard that one of Quicksilver's accomplices is in the race. I think he's at fourth."

That has my full attention.

"Know who he is?"

"I think he's that Onnotian from yesterday..." She replied uncertainly.

"shoot."

That she agrees with.

"What position you and Lucas in?"

"I'm in third and Lucas' in sixth."

That puts the cocky fracker between us all. Easy targets. Not something I wanna be coping with right at the moment, but something I have no choice in.

It's typical of Diamond. If he's been disqualified, he'll find another way in, generally through other people or his alter-ego Ju'ahn Lextra, who's presumed dead after last year's major pile up on the Soo'daht race-way. That was hell. I dunno what happened exactly, but the last thing I know, I'm being pried from my ex-fighter by a couple of emergency teams. And I was caught up in the tail end of the smack, the more pleasant area. Quicksilver was in the thick of it. Or Ju'ahn, should I say. His body was never recovered. But I know he's still alive. The beginning of the year, he'd turned up, ready to cause trouble. But that's something else entirely. Ann looked at me, her hand on mine as she sat next to me.

"You alright?"

I breathed deeply and exhaled slowly, like I'd been doing for the past couple of minutes.

"Just tryin' to keep my breakfast down."

"Get up and get your coat on." She ordered, standing up.

I looked up at her, looming over me, my coat now firmly in her grip. I did as I was told and I slid it on, fidgeting with precision to get my wings out the back of it as I walked with her across the hangar. Lucas was under my ship, welder in paw. Torn pieces of black metal lay off to one side and the part he was working on was a shiny silver. I'd have to spray it once he'd finished with it, otherwise it wouldn't look right.

I stood outside the hangar on the pit lane walkway, looking past the curled in lift lock at my feet that was built into the side of the pit lane floor and down, into the valley fifty foot below. The snow had stopped, was going hard, turning to ice as the temperature continued to drop. My feet were freezing, but I wasn't paying much attention to that as I inhaled the cold air, letting it chase away the remainder of the rocket fuel smell that burnt my nostrils and wind pipe and lungs. If I were to sneeze now, I'd probably ignite myself. One of the curses of being a Dragon who hangs around highly flammable substances twenty-four-seven. Ann was stood next to me, her arms wrapped around my left arm, huddling close to me, trying to keep warm.

"Oh m-man I hope it c-clears up t-tomorrow." She shivered and moved closer.

"At this rate, I don't think it will." I said running a foot over a patch of ice on the metallic surface that held us and everything else around us up.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the Onnotian looking at us from his hangar door. I don't know what he has in mind, but I could guess that it's something I won't appreciate very much.

3 - The Race

Once again sat at the starting and finishing line. The count down's just started, the crowd are in their seats and the camera ships are in position, ready to try and keep up with us. The course markers go blue and every ship flares into life, powering forward. I'm surrounded and overtaken from all angles, trying not to get taken out so early on in the race. Usually it's the first lap that's the most dangerous. But in this race, it's all the laps. sixty laps of pure adrenaline keeping you on your toes, eyes everywhere and fingers on the trigger. Number eighty five, Boomer, is right behind me, trying to get past. But he's not succeeding. I'm countering his every move, blocking the way ahead. He goes down, I go down. He goes up, I go up. I'm back up to fifth, behind number seventy one, Dawn's Beauty, Ann's ship. And she's letting no one by. I take a pot-shot at her, clipping her right wing and a string of obscenities crackles over the com to me. She speeds up and so do I. Boomer's trying hard, but his exhaust flares violently and he goes down trailing thick black smoke. I use the moment to slip past Ann, banking hard, tipping the ship on it's side before righting it ready for the entrance into the open caves.

It goes dark. Then a red glow illuminates the caves. Three routes. I take the one on the left, like I did in the qualifying lap, avoiding the mass of ships that have opted for the central route; the shortest with the least twists and turns. A sprinter's route. My ex-fighter shudders and the shields rippled light green showing it's honey-comb energy structure. A sleek, silver and blue striped ship comes up behind me, it's weapons heated and trying to get a lock onto my engine. I see a series of splits in the cave wall where stalagmites and stalactites have merged together to my right and a blur of racers go past on the other side. I bank hard and roll into the central tunnel narrowly avoiding a wrecked engine and almost colliding with two more ships, numbers eleven and one hundred. Naturally they shoot at me, but I fight back, braking hard, watching them split, sparks flying as they run across the icy walls, metal grinding against sharp rock. Eleven bounces roughly across the central cave's floor trailing smoke and flames, hitting a large stalagmite and finally stopping dead. One hundred is right beside me trying to run me into the wall. I tilt onto my side again and speed up, squeezing out every bit of power my ex-fighter has, hitting the boost, the secondary engine propelling me forward faster and faster for a precious few seconds opening a gap between me and one hundred.

I finally make it into second just as the sun light blinds me. The ship's auto-tint darkens the cockpit window and I can see again. I pull up hard, ignoring the headache settling behind my eyes and follow the beacons to level out at seventy thousand. The highest point on the course. No clouds make for relatively plain sailing. Until I see the leader. A larger, more powerful ship than my own, it owns half of the width of the course. It was the Onnotian. I urged my ship to go faster, lining up my crosshairs with his exhaust, trying to get a clear shot, but the exhaust flame was too big to pin point the area I needed to hit to down him in one shot. I didn't recognise the type of ship, so I didn't know it's weak points in the shielding. I opened fire anyway. His shields flared but he continued. I tried again and he still didn't stop. A camera ship pulled up alongside me on the other side of the course's floating marker beacons catching everything on film. I followed him down to the snowy plains below, past the crowd stands and through the old town, snow being kicked up in our wake. I couldn't see a thing through the snow debris. All I had was a 3D wire-frame map to follow that reminded me of old 16-bit games, but without the skin. Just a green mass of wire work on a black background to guide me.

The pit lanes whipped past in a blur and it was onto the next lap. Still can't catch up with the Onnotian. Still can't break through his shields. There's nothing more I want right now than to see him crash and burn. The caves come into view again, the snow disappears as the red glow fills my cockpit. I take the central route. The cave's too narrow for him, so he has to slow down a bit, allowing me some time to catch up. I'm right behind him now, my heat shields glowing from his exhaust.

"Give up little Dragon! You ain't never getting past me!" He growled over the com.

I ignored him. I was going to get past him, no matter what. Lucas came up behind me and I went into a quick roll, trying to avoid his shots. I took a couple of hits, but the rest landed on the Onnotian's shield. The auto-tint came into play again as the caves ended sending us upward again. I used the momentum to my advantage and squeezed past him, leaving Lucas sat behind the wide load as I powered onward into the cloudless sky. There was no way he was getting past me now. Not in a ship that big. Not without doing himself some serious damage.

Two laps to go. Three pit stops under my belt. Now in third place with Lucas and ship twenty two in front of me. No sign of the Onnotian. Out of the thirty five ships in the race, only thirteen remain.

I slip past twenty two, letting off a shot as I go, making her flinch to one side. Her nerves are showing. But then, so are mine. The race hasn't been as brutal as I expected it to be, but drones and remote controlled fighters or not, it's still been pretty fracking tough. My heart's hammering as I go into the final lap. I hear the crowd cheering and screaming as I go past them, trying desperately to catch up with Lucas. But the little bastard's been on a roll this season. If he wins, this'll be the eighth fracking time in a row this season. I can see him ahead of me as we near the end of the cave, but he's keeping his pace even and fast, the gap between us never getting any shorter, even as we take the nose dive down towards the plains. I think I have him going through the dead town, but I get over enthusiastic and my wing scrapes horribly across the remaining front of the building that took out my fuel tank. The wing survives, but just barely. My ship's leaning, pulling to the left slightly as the wing tip G-Diffuser fails forcing me to be heavy and early with my steering on the right bends and tentative on the lefts.

I use another boost on the final straight that contains the finishing line, the chequered banner squirming in the snowy wind. I get up alongside Lucas, the nose of my ship levelling with his rear dorsal wing. I blink once and the race is over. Lucas slows and diverts around to the area behind the pits, as do I. Eight more ships come in. None of them's Ann. Or the Onnotian. I look around. If she crashed, someone would be here waiting for me. Or she'd be here herself, waiting in the gaggle of different races and species, her hands planted on her hips ready to blame me for her losing. But I didn't see anyone looking for me. And I didn't see her. The Onnotian was nowhere to be seen either, but he was probably off sulking somewhere. Me and Lucas are hauled up to the raised podium along with a gilled Humanoid with three eyes, and put on the specified steps, reethes of greenery hanging around our necks, large bottles of champagne shoved in our grasp and trophies at our feet. The three eyed Humanoid in third, me in second and Lucas in first. A large crowd beneath us and a cameras pointed towards us. I don't much care for this bit at the moment. Usually I'd be celebrating having survived long enough to be in the top three along with Lucas and the other guy, but not this time. I still couldn't pick out Ann from the crowd.

I looked at Lucas and noticed he was paying more attention to the crowd than usual.

"Where's Ann, d'you know?" I hissed above the din.

Lucas shrugged and shot a look my way, forcing a grin for the cameras.

"Last I saw her was around the twenty fifth lap. Then I left her behind. Ain't seen her since..."

"frack. Something's wrong."

He nodded before we got escorted off our podiums and ushered down a set of cold steel steps that were crunchy beneath our feet where someone had thrown grit onto them to stop them from icing over. "You keep the cameras sweet and I'll go have a look for her." Lucas said and left me behind to face a crowd of news crews from all over the galaxy. They asked the usual questions. Questions like "Do you think you'll be able to beat Lucas Mew before the final race?" and "Now you have three weeks of free time before the final race, what do you intend to do?". Most questions that have nothing to do with racing. I brush them off, making up excuses so I can go and find Lucas and Ann. I find Lucas first and his tiny body is sagged and his toe nails are dragging across the floor as he floats toward me.

4 - Hostage

"Find her?"

"Sort of..." He replied.

I growled at him suddenly finding myself in a bad mood. He dragged me into his hangar and handed me a note. It was hand written and from the Onnotian. I read through it three times. The motherucker had Ann and was holding her hostage. He wanted something that I couldn't give up in return for her safe delivery back to me. He'd enclosed a picture of her, bound and gagged in his ship.

"Once you have the ship, contact me. The code is A77-889-B3."

The note crumpled in my fist. I wanted to turn it to ashes, but knew I couldn't. I'd need it for the code. And possibly for Lucas to see if he could get anything more from it. I handed it to him. He held it a moment, his eyes closed. He shook his head.

"I dunno where they are. I'm getting nothing from it. Sorry dude. Looks like we're gonna have to do it the old fashioned way."

We watched as a small group of bots hauled his ship into the hangar, set it up on it's umbilicals and left. I guessed mine would be in on it's life support by now.

"What's our first move, boss?"

I looked down at the note he'd handed back to me.

"We go pay my mum a visit. He wants something she uses on a regular basis. So we need her opinion on the situation too."

I managed to get an audio message through to the Shadow Stalker HQ. I wasn't expecting an answer anytime soon, but three hours passed and I got one back. It was my mum. Apparently she'd told General Newark about it and they'd discussed the outlines of a plan. I had to meet her on the newest station, Mid-Space. This is the first I've heard about Mid-Space. She said it was a public oriented station for travellers and businesses alike to stay a while and refuel. Once Lucas had got back from his public grilling by the press and his loyal fanbase that had turned up to the live show, I played the message for him.

"So I gotta sit in on this too?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I dunno what they got planned, but we better leave first thing."

He sighed and leaned back in the chair he was sat on.

"We're gonna have one of those weeks, huh?" He yawned.

I nodded, feeling fatigue setting in.

Three rings and a central disc. Outer ring - Docking. Secondary ring - Public accommodations and small businesses. Inner ring - Crew accommodations. Central Disc - The bridge, offices, engine room etcetera. Two days in hyper space had brought us this far, into previously unclaimed territory. Now two old enemies work together, peace treaty and mutual respect in place, a new space station finally up and running. Three years to build and this was the first time I'd ever seen it. I'd heard about it, but never seen any pictures of it. It was an amazing sight. The station rotating lazily as ships of different shapes, sizes and varieties came and went. Me and Lucas were ordered into docking bay seven where our ships were guided in by a short row of lights either side, a lift lock being guided down, clamping onto the area of various grooves just behind the cockpit. I climbed out landing on the smooth docking bay floor, looking a

female Equine dead in the eye. Lucas, however, was looking at something just below her neckline.

"My face is up here, Mew." She said smoothly.

He looked up, a sheepish grin on his face.

"You're Commander Ironclaw's son, right?"

I nodded, the Commander part still floating on the outskirts of my mind.

The last time I'd spoken to my mum, she was a sergeant. I wondered what had happened to JD to promote her to being second in command, then wondered if Chief Coltan meant that she was the second in command on the station. Chief Coltan walked in front of us. Lucas' eyes had strayed south again, and I can guarantee that it wasn't her tail he was infatuated with. She led us down a series of corridors and into the inner ring. She left us at a door, waiting for whoever was inside. I pressed the button on the frame once and the door slid open. My mum was sat at a desk. On the wrong side. She looked over her shoulder at us and forced a smile. I didn't smile and her own slid from her face. She stood up and walked to me, pulling me into a tight hug. I breathed in her scent deeply and a flood of memories came back. Mainly from my childhood. Hunting lessons. Games we played. Stories she'd told. And the places we'd lived until I was old enough to make my own decisions. I didn't want to, but I pulled away, looking at her scarred face, her left eye slowly dulling, the old wound finally taking full effect of blinding her.

"Heard any more from this Onnotian or Ann?" She asked.

I shook my head.

Lucas flopped down onto the chair at the side of the room.

"Who're we waiting for?"

"The General. He's tending to some business right now, but he'll be here within the next couple of minutes. I hope." She said.

"So. I hear you're a Commander now?" Lucas said, changing the subject, trying to lighten the mood.

My mum nodded.

"JD left the team. Dunno where he is. But he left Spirit in charge and she told me that I was gonna be the new second in command."

She sat back down and I took up the chair next to her.

"So you're still on the Stalkers team?"

She nodded.

"And we're gonna help you get out of this mess." She smiled.

Not teasing, but a reassuring smile. One that I'd missed so many times.

I hated relying on her, but sometimes she has the resources and connections that I don't have. And right now I need her more than I ever have. Because I was beginning to figure out which woman I'd slept with meant the most to me.

An old Bear walked into the room. He was in full uniform. General Newark. Head of the Shadow Stalkers. He sat down behind the desk, paws entwined and resting on the smooth black surface. He looked at us. From Lucas, to me and to my mum. It's hard to tell what he's thinking. He's unpredictable. His face always neutral and calm, even when he's pissed off.

"I heard about your predicament Shade." He said calmly. "And rest assured, we have a plan. Although, it will require you to carry it out on your own."

I looked at Lucas. He fidgeted.

"We will be sending you with the ship he wants. You will hand it over in exchange for the girl."

My jaw tightened. He noticed.

"I haven't finished yet." He said flatly and continued.

5 - Stalker Mk II

I looked up at the black ship with its green markings. The only physical difference between this Stalker and my own was not only the age difference, but this one was sleeker, its exhaust pipe smaller, therefore harder to target. This is the one I'm going to be flying. This is the one I'm going to trade for Ann. And if the trade doesn't go to plan, if Ann's dead. Then the ship goes boom. Disintegrated into dust by its powerful self-destruct circuitry. And if she is alive and I manage to get out alive with her, it'll still be destroyed anyway. I should've seen this coming really. General Newark and the rest of his crew aren't ones for bragging about their technology, nor are they keen on the idea of other people using it. It's not selfish. They have their reasons. Perfectly valid reasons. The ship's lowered from its place in the roof, the lift lock extending downwards. This is my mum's ship. I can smell her in the cockpit. A part of me can't believe that she'd give up a part of her job for someone she barely knows, but the rest of me accepts it, knowing what she's like. I'm one of the few people in existence who truly knows what she's like. I climb in. The set up's the same as in the older model, the one I have. I start it up. Register myself as a secondary pilot so I can get it off the lift lock without it thinking I'm trying to steal it and having it blow up in my face, taking half the station with it.

The control panels light up and the engines hum into life. The cockpit closes, seals and pressurises. Lucas is already out there, just beyond the traffic boundary. Possibly winding up traffic control with his acrobatics. My mum's in a specialised two seater in the lift lock next to me. Ann's gonna be riding with her and I'm gonna be riding with Lucas once this one goes up in smoke and metallic dust. Or at least that's how I'm hoping it'll turn out. I launch first, taking the route traffic control is giving me, my mum following closely behind, her military status giving her the leeway to do as she pleases amongst the freighters and various other ships. The coordinates to the planet Rylgarr are in the onboard computer. Ann's being held on the orbital station there. It's a three day journey, one that I intend to make without fuss. Lucas is up beside me on my right. My mum is on my left, our three ships forming a tiny V formation. They're letting me lead. It's weird. I'm so used to flying solo or in a muddled group with no formation. It's strange to see Lucas keeping pace with my mum. She's used to flying in formation. I think it's become a habit of hers, one I hope doesn't rub off on me or Lucas.

"Three minutes 'till the inner jump point." Mum announces over the com.

I tap in a short code and a green light comes on, blinking steadily, telling me the hyper drive's online and ready. Mid-Space is being quickly left behind, a flickering dot in the distance, joining with the rest of the stars. We jump into hyper space when my mum gives the signal and the black space scenery ripples and stretches into a bright white stream around us, the center point a small black dot. I can't see the others around me. No active ship shares the same slip stream. The navigational computer is trying to keep up with the ship's location, flashing error every now and then before finding out where it actually is and carrying on like normal. There's no radar in the slip stream. The weapons don't work either and it's a straight jump, point to point like a dot to dot. You can turn a ship once you engage the hyper drive, but the force of the slip stream'll end up tearing it apart the seams, no matter how well built and strong the vessel is. So it's best not to try. If you end up with difficulties in the slip stream, it's best to drop out and pray to your god of choice that you don't collide with something. I may be a space racer, but that doesn't make me perfect. Of course I've hit my fair share of objects in the past when making an emergency drop-out. I've collided with other ships, satellites and meteors. Plus I've landed myself in a dense field of

space debris, causing more damage to my ship than I intended. But that's the way of space travel. It's not all shiny and fun, like it's depicted in TV shows and some books. It's hard and it generally demands a natural talent for Rodent-like survival in any situation. A talent that most people don't have.

I put it into auto-pilot and let the ship's navigational computer follow the set course and set amount of time for the slip stream duration and kick back. I think about Ann. What's happening to her and why that bastard Onnotian decided to take her hostage. His demand for a Stalker fighter ship only reinforced the theory that Quicksilver was behind it. I could feel my eyelids dropping. I didn't want to sleep now. Not with so much on my mind. But the slip stream and cockpit faded to black.

I grunted awake as an alarm went off. I grabbed the control stick as the slip stream vanished, melted back into the black space that I recognised all too well. My radar blurred then cleared and I looked around. Lucas was up ahead a little way and my mum appeared just behind me from a twisted spider web of white. Another alarm went off. Four larger ships appeared on the radar and the computer instantly recognised them. A corrupted ID beacon on each ship, each one hacked into and changed so that the real owners couldn't locate their goods or ships. Assuming the owners had been spared. They were trying to box us in from different angles.

"Fight or flee?" Lucas asked over the com, clearly itching to fight and blow some shoot up.

"I'm always in the mood to smack someone about. You?" Mum asked over the com.

"If it means they won't chase us, then I dunno why we're still floating about here."

Lucas and mum boosted off in opposite directions, weapons heated and shields at full capacity. I went straight forward, taking the larger ship in front of me on head first.

"You will surrender and die." Snarled the captain of the ship I was racing towards.

I ignored his request and let off three shots, the three twin blasts hitting different areas of the ship's shields as I flew low over it. I turned and came back at him from behind, rolling out of the path of a missile. An old ship. It was a converted frieghter with old weaponry and poor shields.

I had an energy bomb to drop and this pirate's weakest point was my target. I got his portside air lock in my cross hairs and watched as the white hot ball of energy was shot out of the hidden cannon in the nose of the ship. It ripped the pirate's shielding apart, the energy sending a power surge into the shield generators, leaving the ship open to attack. Four well aimed shots and the outer air loack door crumpled and was sucked from it's hinges into the abyss of space. I passed by low over the ship again, taking more shots at it, sending up small explosions that were big enough to screw up the crew's plans. I inadvertantly took out one of the top-side gun turrets in my random reign of fire, but I didn't care. I wanted to take out my stress on someone and kill. I came back round again, doing the same before lining myself up with the damaged air lock. Sure the pirate's were fighting back, but their weapons were slow and weak. Their missiles were easily avoided with a sharp eye and my own shields withstood the fire power of their remaining gun turrets. A twin shot landed in the back of the inner air lock door and several bodies were sucked out into the vacuum of space along with the crumpled lump of metal. But I didn't stop. I kept shooting, destroying what I could before getting bored with the pot shots and opening fire on the exhaust, ripping through an exterior fuel pipe, igniting the ship. I watched it get ripped apart by the explosion. I looked at the radar. One ship remained for a few more seconds before it flared violently and vanished. Nothing in this area of space now, but a mass of old debris.

We re-grouped and figured out how much further we had to go. We were a quarter of the way to Rylgarr. Half a tank of fuel left, just enough to get us to the next out post station. A quick check in, a status report

and we're off again, engaging our hyper drives, surging onwards, back into the slip stream powering on towards the next out post station. Another eight hours and we'd be able to have a decent meal and a rest and have our ships re-fueled. I close my eyes again. But that's it. I can't sleep, so I just sit back and listen to the low whistling hum of the Stalker's engines. But it's sod's lore that when you say you're not tired, you generally catch yourself drifting off. And lo and behold, ten minutes later, I'm falling asleep.

6 - Aster-985

Aster-985. A beaten looking station on the outskirts of Aster space territory. Suffered many attacks by rogues and pirates over the years, but has survived, fighting back with it's ever growing heavy weaponry. A safe house for all kinds of people, it's the perfect place to get your mitts on all kinds of things from slave girls to fully fledged warships complete with crew. The patrol forces gave up on this place long ago. Not surprising really. This is where half of their stuff came from, so now the station crew do the policing of the surrounding space ways all by themselves. My mum flies on up ahead, talking with traffic control. According to her, we're a trio of rogues looking to start up a new business in ship selling on the inter-galactic black market. Something both me and Lucas have been involved in before, so it's no skin off noses, since we like to keep up to date with what ships are what and when the new grades are coming out etcetera. Helps us keep on our toes during the races. And as for my mum. Well, she's had a long, sometimes shady, life. So keeping on top of these things comes naturally to her. Come to think of it, that might be where I get my talents from. If any of us have to fleece an innocent bystander to prove ourselves to someone less caring on this station, then we will without a second thought. It's something you have to learn to do out here, otherwise you won't last very long.

I guide my ship into the docking bay behind mum and Lucas, landing it next them within a yellow painted square on the floor. Six orange suits sidle up to us and my mum gives them the low down on the ships. They tamper, they die a painful death. She just has to look at them and they swallow their come backs, nod and get to work setting up the umbilicals, connecting them to the ships. A grey skinned woman comes up to us, her lycra tight uniform the same shade as her skin. She wears part of a suit of armour, officer grade. She addresses mum, giving the occasional glance towards me and Lucas.

"All things are being taken care of. Your credit chips have gone through and you have one hundred credits on your tab to spend as you please. You will be sharing the same quarters, a three single bed room up on the sixth arm of the station. You can get to it via lift one, taking it up to the third deck. Go left out of there and your quarters are sixty seven A. Enjoy your stay." She said and bustled off towards another ship, it's small crew loitering around, watching the orange suits do their thing.

"That's something you don't get every day." Mum said under her breath.

"What?"

"Short, sweet and straight to the point." She replied and walked off.

We followed her, looking around, taking in our surroundings. Not the tourist kind of taking in our surroundings, but searching out the short cuts, hidey holes and exits, mentally mapping our route, working out ways of getting back to our ships quickly if need be. All kinds of shady characters line the route to our quarters. People selling everything and anything. So-called miracle cures for the common cold, warship blue prints and even the warships themselves. You want it, someone on this station has it. For a price, of course. We stop outside a door. 67-A is printed on the grey panel doors in white spray paint. A swipe with a key card and the door slides open on well oiled tracks revealing the room beyond. It has a round window opposite the door, not offering much of a view, since the initial view was of the exhaust pipes of various ships. Three narrow beds were lined up against the far wall and through a doorway to the left led into the bathroom, which was just as cramped as the main room. We dumped our bags on our selected beds, mum between me and Lucas. She went and pulled a chair up to the table in the middle beneath the window and pulled an electronic pad out of her coat pocket and started tapping

away. Probably nothing Stalker related. You don't want something like that onboard a place like Aster-985. Our ships were an exception though. No Stalker Fighter Mk II, no Annette Burrows. So it was something that needed to be risked.

"War Bird Mk 5's are being sold on the black market for just under three hundred and fifty thousand Niahrs." Mum said, not looking up from her pad.

"Empty or full?" I queried.

"Full. Three torpedo launches, ten standard turrets and a plasma cannon. Says here, the engine's fully operational and the slip stream drive's still intact." She mused.

"Three hundred and fifty? Damn, that's cheap for a warship like that." Lucas said, rolling onto his stomach as he lay on the bed.

"Aye. But there's bound to be something wrong with it." I said.

"We could always go have a look at it. It's supposed to be docking here in two hours." Mum said. "In the mean time, we can have something to eat."

My brain ticked over for a few moments. It was just the other week that me, Lucas and Ann had been discussing getting ourselves a carrier so we didn't have to live out of our racers. The War Bird was sounding very tempting. But then, for a high class warship at that price, it would be tempting, wouldn't it? I put the thought aside for now and stood up. My stomach's twisting itself around my spine and I'm sure the other two are just as hungry as I am. Lucas' the first at the door, sticking his head out into the hallway and having a good look. I dunno why he decided to do it, anybody'd think we were on someone's hit list. Well, we probably are and someone on this station is probably looking to kill someone for fun. Which doesn't surprise me. You get that a lot in places like this.

We looked around at the bar. We took up a seat at a round table in the corner, my mum with her back to the wall where she was in a position to be able to get a decent view of the goings on in our current surroundings. Our plates are empty, the remnants of our meal smearing the surface of the stainless dull silver metal of our plates and bowls, the cutlery dropped onto them, most of our proper table mannerisms gone out the air lock. It was hard to stay reasonably polite in an atmosphere like this. People getting swindled and looking or starting fights all around us. No matter where we looked, something interesting was going on. Two Lo'gars were having an argument across the other side of the bar in the games corner. Things started getting interesting when the one with the money in his hand got lynched by the other, being dragged to the floor and beaten, a crowd quickly swarming to watch and, possibly, placing bets. We watched from our table, patiently waiting for eight pm to roll around, the time of the War Bird's supposed docking. We could afford the ship if we liked it, assuming the price hadn't been hiked upwards in the intervening time of the advert being placed on the black market's business network and its arrival. All three of us, me, Lucas and Ann had opened up a new bank account into which we put a little bit of our winnings so we could try and save properly for anything we might need. A team account is a more simpler way of putting it. I know we're not a team, but that's besides the point. We enter virtually all the same races, so it's only simple logic that we travel together. Only this time, we're after proper lodgings instead of having to sleep in our cockpits and places like this on a regular basis. A warship of that calibre only needs filling up a couple of times each half-cycle. The maintenance checks and upgrades are once a cycle, or year, depending on where you come from.

The fight ends, no one won, and we stand up and head for the exit, making for the docking desk, the place where you need to be to know what ships are in, due and departing. A creature with a small white face that's black insectoid eyes nearly dominate looks at us expectantly. It's eight pm.

"Is there any Kenemian War Birds docking or currently docked at the station?" I asked.
The creature looks down, it's spindly fingers moving across a flat keyboard interface and then it looks up.
"One Kenemian War Bird is currently docked. It arrived five minutes ago."
"What's it's current status?" Mum asked.
"Being re-fueled. The ship is also for sale. The captain and current owner will still be down there. The dock is fifteen C. Anything else?" It said and watched us, the same expectant look on it's face.
"No, that's all thankyou." Lucas said and we headed off towards dock fifteen C."

7 - War Bird

We looked at the exposed part of the dark blue hull. The docking bay tube was clamped firmly around the main hatch to the old ship, the door open showing a tiny part of illuminated innards. The owner beamed at us and the captain just stood by silently.

"Well, come on in! Take a look around!" The owner, Benny he'd said to call him, chimed.

He was either very confident about the ship or very desperate to get rid of it. We stepped into the warship. It looked like a waterworks on the inside. All pipe, metal grate walkway and yellow lights illuminating it. We headed to the front, guided by the captain.

"When was she last in for an upgrade?" Mum asked, running a claw along a pipe before it disappeared around a corner.

"The start of this cycle, miss." He said.

I looked at Lucas. Being a psychic made him a top notch lie detector and he was showing no signs of distress. Another truth being told.

"Everything still working then? No faults?" She asked.

"Well, you might want to get the resistor coils checked out before you set off anywhere. That is, assuming you decide to buy it." Another truth.

"How did you get your hands on a warship, may I ask..?" I asked. The question had been niggling me since I saw it docked.

Benny went quiet.

"Erm..." He said. We all looked at him. "It's sort of complicated, so I won't bore you with Kenemian politics, so here it is in a nutshell: After her last battle, the battle of Kensar, she, and the rest of her sisters, as we put it, were taken out of commission. You can still get parts for 'em, of course. They're still being made, since the ship's only a few two full cycles old. So they either went into haulage or orbital patrol."

Lucas didn't twinge. So far, the guy hadn't told a single lie. Which was rare.

We came onto the main bridge. The back was raised and in the depression were three seats, the two nearest the front having their own consoles. The same decor was in here too. Industrial looks, yellowish lighting. I walked down the front of the bridge and stood at the main viewer window. It dominated a large portion of the bridge, but it was something I liked to see on any ship. No radar or scanners? You had to use your own eyes. Panoramic viewing was good for survival. I turned to the captain and the owner.

"How many Grade A fighters can it carry?" I asked.

"Up to ten at a time, sir." The captain said. He was a stout man, with a scruff of beard and bald head rimmed with white hair.

"How do we get to the docking bay?" Mum asked.

"This way." Benny said, making a sweeping arm gesture towards the bridge door.

He took us back into the hallway and down the narrow corridor that was directly to our left. We stepped onto a lift and went down a couple of decks right into the bowels of the ship. We stepped out into a white light filled area, ten lift locks all paired in twos down towards the rear of the ship. All locks were lowered and ready to accept any incoming ships.

"All the umbilicals are within the lift locks' casing. Once the locks are in place on the ship, the umbilicals will attach themselves automatically, unless a malfunction occurs." The captain said. "Each lift lock can withstand up to fifteen tonnes and you can use multiple locks for the same ship." He added, pointing

up at the complicated network of rails that held the lift locks up.

Lucas nodded thoughtfully. "More than enough room for what we need. I take it the engine room access is further down..?"

"One of the access routes, yes. You can get to the engine from three levels. Deck one, near the bridge, deck three, opposite air lock three and just up the back there. Of course, the formal route is the bridge route. But that's up to you lot if you decide to purchase this ship." The captain said.

"How much would it take to get someone to run all this? I mean, full time engineer, commander, pilot etcetera" Mum asked curiously.

"I'm currently out of the job, as it were, since I was decommissioned along with my ship. So I could stay on long enough for you to find a new pilot and a commander. Although, if you don't mind my saying, I'm willing to take on the task as commander or pilot." The little man said.

Benny was watching the exchange carefully. I nodded, taking this into consideration.

"Was this your ship to begin with, or...?"

"No. I was stationed as captain of the Starless Thunder. Unfortunately, she was destroyed in combat and only a handful of my crew survived. Some went on to other ships, the rest retired." He said honestly.

"Do you mind if we have a look at your systems and main computer?" Mum asked. It was more of an order rather than a request.

Benny and the captain nodded.

"The console over there'll give you access to all parts of the ship. I unlocked everything when I heard we had potential buyers, so feel free to poke around." Benny beamed.

"If any of you would like to see the engine room..?" The captain said.

Lucas nodded and followed him. I stayed behind and had a poke around the rest of the ship with Benny. It was all very impressive. Could carry a crew of thirty. Comfortable quarters. There were two holoreams and a rec room that reminded me of the bar on the station. Top of the range replicators had been installed too. I was very tempted. Then I was shown the offences and defenses. Everything a strong and reliable warship should have.

An hour later we walked back onto the station, having told the Captain and owner that we would have a think about it. It was certainly a ship we could use to full effect and more. The captain's offer of staying on board until we got things sorted out properly was more of a generous offer than the asking price for the ship. We sat in our assigned quarters, discussing what we'd seen, listing the pros and cons of the ship and it's systems. We had an hour to figure it out before someone else could put in an offer.

"The resistor coils do need a bit of tweaking, but that's nothing I can't handle. It's a simple fix and we could run the ship's engine on a quarter whilst I'm working." Lucas said.

"There're some spare parts and resources in hold two. It's not much, but it comes with the ship with no extra charge." I said.

"There's a few bugs in the computer system, so the whole thing'll need to be rebooted before the ship leaves dock. But again, like Lucas said, it's not a big job. The bugs only got in there because of the system unlock and are relatively easy to remove." Mum added. "So, the next question is: Do you have the money for this old bird, or what?"

I thought, trying to recall the current balance of the team account. We had just over two hundred thousand, so buying the ship wouldn't ruin us.

"All right. I'm in. Lucas?"

Lucas grinned broadly.

"Count me in."

Back at dock fifteen C, the captain and Benny were sat on a crate, playing cards. They looked up, watching us expectantly as we walked down the ramp towards them.

"The original price of three fifty still standing?" I asked.

They nodded.

"Good. How do you want it payed for? Account to account or cash in hand?"

Benny jumped up from his crate and clapped his hand around mine, a massive grin on his wrinkled face.

"Account to account will do just fine, sir!" He beamed.

The captain made a noise in his throat.

"We've accepted your offer to stay onboard until you find another ship." Mum said.

The captain looked more relieved than anything. "Thankyou. I am captain Me'rass." He said and took a slight bow.

"There's a bank just down the way. I can have the money transferred immidiately. Uh, how're you getting home by the way?"

"I'm getting a passenger ship to Alton 3. I'm opening up a new business there, selling second hand ships and ship parts. You should drop by sometime." Benny grinned.

I turned and walked back up the ramp and exited the docking bay to go and get some money transferred. Once that was done, all that would be left to do is sort out the niggles in the ship and get our own, much smaller ships set up in their lift locks. We still didn't know what we wanted to do about the ship's ID beacon. We could get it replaced, so that we wouldn't be mistaken for anyone from Kenemia. We might keep the ship's name if we do end up changing the ID, I dunno yet. But those are things to worry about at another time. Possibly when Ann can have a say in all this.

8 - Nea'Kemna

Lucas was down in the engine room fixing the resistor coils and I was seeing to our fighters, setting them up with the old warship's systems, something I can make light work of. My mum was on the bridge talking to captain Me'rass, who had just informally de-ranked himself to commander. Apparently, his reasons were that he wasn't the one running the ship, just giving out orders to the crew. A crew we haven't gotten around to scrounging up yet. But I'm sure something can be sorted once we get to Rylgarr. The preparations are almost complete. The computer systems are back online with all new safety and lock out codes. We each have our own override code if things ever get intense and we're under heavy fire or mutiny and someone's trying to hijack the ship. So far, no word has been said about changing the ship's name or ID beacon. We might alter the ID a little bit, but the ship's name stays as it is. I like it and so do the others. Nea'Kemna seems to fit all our bad tempers. It's Kenemian for fury, so if anyone attacks, that's what they'll get. And trust me, that's not something you want to happen, especially with Lucas on board. Just because he's small, doesn't mean he's not capable of wrecking an entire city. I climb down from my ship, having finally sorted out it's sytems and aligning them with the Nea'Kemna's and Lucas appears next to me, smiling from ear to ear.

"Done it, I'm assuming?"

He nods.

"We're all set to go get Ann. Oh, I can't wait to get to Rylgarr to watch the fire works." He grins and makes his way out of the docking bay.

I'm sat on the bridge, at an ensign's position. Wouldn't be the first time I've been in a position like this, but at least this time I wasn't ordered to take up the post. I made the choice myself, in a bid to familiarize myself further with the ship. An ensign has to do a bit of everything, so it's the best place to start, really. Lucas is in the seat next to me, also doing some ensign work. Something he growled at me for, until I persuaded him that you can still keep an eye on engine functionality from there. He grudgingly agreed, growled at me once, gave me a nasty image in my head and settled down to exploring the ship from his console. My mum was stood at the back, working away at one of the rear consoles. She looked at home back there, so I said nothing and let her get on with whatever it was she was doing whilst I guided the ship and Lucas scanned for any signs of enemy activity. We didn't exactly know who the enemies were, but travelling in space, that's a common thing. You generally never know who or what's coming after you until it de-cloaks and is right on top of you, ruining your shields. That's another thing we need to do. We need a cloaking device. Some of these ships, Me'rass said, were installed with cloaking systems, but this one was one of the many that were at the bottom of the waiting list and the Battle of Kensar ended before it made it anywhere near the top for a fit. I looked back down at my console and something showed up on the long scan. I looked into the ID of the vessel and it read as a galactic cruiser, class B. A loud bleep and Me'rass spoke from behind.

"Open the channel."

I opened the channel and a tall, wiry woman with round rimmed glasses on looked at us. She looked as if she didn't know whether to be relieved or scared. She was definately of the Human variety. And she was in a blue and white captian's uniform from the Xanaar sector. She was a long way from home.

"I am captain Jenkins of the passenger liner White Rose. We are in dire need of assistance." She said.

"What kind of assistance?" Me'rass asked.

"We have been attacked by pirates and our lower starboard decks have been sealed off due to decompression. At least fifty six of my passengers and crew alike, have been reported injured or dead."

"Is your ship holding it's own? Or is the damage spreading?"

"It's holding. But we need to get back to T'rarn. I don't suppose... I'm sorry to ask this of a warship, but our engines are down." She fumbled with her words.

I looked over my shoulder at Me'rass' questioning look.

"We can give you a tow." I said. "But we're the only crew aboard."

A look of relief flooded Jenkins' face and her posture sagged briefly.

"Thankyou. Your assistance is very much appreciated." She said and the channel went blank again.

When we approached the location of the White Rose, we could see the extent of the exterior damage.

There was no rear side left of the ship. It had been torn open completely, revealing the a quarter of the rooms of three decks. A force field shuddered around the tear and the walls of the rooms had been covered by metal sheeting.

"Right, let's get a beam locked on and tow this thing to T'rarn." I heard myself saying.

I knew this was the least of my worries. Hell I shouldn't even be helping, I should be carrying on towards Rylgarr with nothing weighing us down. But my more civilised side told me help. After all, Rylgarr was on the way to T'rarn. And we might benefit from this good deed, adding another white point to counter our black ones. We manouvered Nea'Kemna into position with ease and locked onto the White Rose. The ship shuddered as we slowly powered forward, the massive space liner being dragged along behind us. I was hoping the ship's operations computer wasn't lying to us when we read up on how much the ship could pull without the engines blowing up on us. We slowly gained more speed and leveled out at just above half power. It'd cost us a little time if we kept up this pace, but I'm superstitious, and believe in the whole karma thing, having experienced it many times before, almost getting killed in horrible ways more than once. I'd rather go out feeling numb or in a quick, painless explosion during a race. Something for the media to chew on for a while. The communication channels stayed quiet for a while. We kept a constant check on the White Roses' systems to make sure that we weren't gonna be caught up in any explosions. The start of the day, three hours away from Aster-985 and already we were being slowed down. At this rate, it'd take us a day to get to one of T'rarn's maintenance stations. A pit stop we could just barely afford, but at least it gave us something other than Ann and the Onnotian to think about.

Five hours passed in near silence. Each hour, captain Jenkins would contact us with an update on her ship's condition. It was steadily declining and the in the last report, she'd announced that the containment shields were starting to fail and that she'd estimated their survival time at twenty three hours. That's not good, especially with over a hundred rich bastards on board. One family alone could put the company in ruins. Not a pleasant thought really. But that's the way you had to think out here, especially in a situation that she was in. If you didn't think like that, then you'd only be speeding things up by not motivating your crew properly, because without the right amount of terror, you could end up dead very quickly. Usually not in a nice fashion, either. I looked over at Lucas. He was tapping away at his console, his face locked in concentration.

"I thought you'd done with browsing the ship's systems?"

"I have. I'm just trying to see if we can go into hyper space with the liner in tow."

"Without destroying us all, I'm assuming?"

He nodded.

"Another hour and I should have it...." He said.

I don't quite know what he's planning to do, but I was sure I had a fair idea. A ship that's being towed by

another can enter the same slip stream together. Only some ship's aren't equipped with the correct equipment to do it. And I didn't know if this ship was capable of pulling such a feat without one of us or both being torn apart. That was a worrying thought. I decided to stare out of the window, empty headed. Something I'd learned to do many years ago.

An hour passed. Lucas nearly shrieked with triumph. Jenkins contacted us again.

"Things have destabilised quicker than we expected. We've lost three hours in the last hour. I'm afraid it's beginning to look like we're going to need to abandon ship."

"But you've lost half of your escape and run around shuttles." Me'rass said.

Jenkins nodded.

"That's why we're arranging a lottery. Some crew members have made the choice of staying behind on the ship, to make more room for the civilians, so if you can, please sever your beam from my ship and we will slow you down no longer. You're obviously in a hurry, and I am deeply grateful, as are everyone else, for your assistance."

There was a moment of silence.

"Wait! I think I've figured a way that we can get to T'rarn within seventeen hours." Lucas said, breaking the stunned silence.

Everyone looked at him.

"If I can extend the shields and bring you in closer behind us, that'll slow down the containment shield's failure. And, being within our shield, that should allow you to be pulled through the slip stream with us. That is, assuming you can get one of your hyper drives back online." He said.

The man was a genius. Although, I'd only be shooting myself in the foot if his plan failed. I agreed to give it a go and so did mum and commander Me'rass after a moment's heated debate. Captain Jenkins was all for it, her philosophy being that if it didn't work, it wouldn't really matter, since our survival rate for an in-slip stream accident was in the eighties somewhere. Something that my brain just barely agreed with.

"We shall give it a go." Jenkins said and the channel closed again.

Half hour later, the channel was opened again.

"We have our secondary hyper drive back online. It isn't very strong, but I'm sure we can keep up."

Jenkins said, a small amount of relief settling on her taught features.

"Then we shall commence at once." Me'rass said.

I watched on the radar as the White Rose edged closer and closer to our exhaust. Once we felt they were in close enough, our shields were raised, enveloping the liner, and our hyper drive brought online. Nea'Kemna Protested with a groan and shudder as the hyper drive flared into life, but soon stopped struggling as White Rose engaged her own hyper drive. The bright light of the slip stream wrapped around us. I looked down at my console. The liner was still there, close enough to show up on our near scan, showing the usual amount of stress it had been for the hours before. As long as those readings didn't change, we were sound. If they changed for the worse, we had to drop out of the slip stream immediately, and possibly flee for our lives. Really depends on how good your reflexes are. I stood up and stretched, trying to stop a yawn and failing. I'd gotten little sleep last night. Aster-985 isn't the quietest of all stations I've been on. My mum walked up beside me.

"Why don't you go to bed? I'll take over here. Same with you Lucas. You look just as tired." She said.

I shook my head.

"I'm fine."

"Bed. Now." She said in a voice that I knew all too well. It was the voice any mother used to send their disobedient child up the stairs and into bed.

"Okay. Fine. Just lemme know if anything happens." I grunted and walked off the bridge, ignoring the

commander's slightly amused expression.

9 - T'rarn Maintenance

I woke up face down in my pillow, cover hanging over the edge of the bed. It was a spacious room. One of the officer's quarters. A small double bed, a decent sized window, a low table with two grey upholstered chairs similar to the couch that ran the length of window wall and a small shower room. It's the first time in ages I've been this comfortable on a ship. I looked at the time. And sat bolt upright. I'd slept two hours longer than I wanted. I didn't know if the liner, White Rose was still being successfully towed through the slip stream of hyper space. I looked out the window and saw that we were back in ordinary space. A red dot flashed rythmically in the distance. I had a quick wash and pulled my clothes on, stepping out into the yellow lit hallway of the old war bird. This felt strange. I was so used to waking up in the cockpit of my small racer. Stepping into the industrial-esque hallway of an ex-warship knowing that it was now mine and Lucas' and Ann's was very strange. I walked towards the bridge. Lucas wasn't there. Neither was commander Me'rass. My mum was sat at Lucas' console up front.

"Lucas still in bed?"

She nodded.

"Yup."

I walked up to my own console and took a seat. I saw that the liner was still in tow, but a little way behind again.

"How're they doing?"

"They pulled back from our shield as soon as we came out of the slip stream, which was two hours ago. Since then, they're containment shield has gone back to steadily declining."

"How far 'till T'rarn?"

"Not far now. About two hours. I can already see their main beacon." She said, looking up and out of the main viewing window that stretched halfway around the bridge. "The T'rarn orbital maintenance yard has been alerted to our situation. They're now clearing a large enough dock for the White Rose and organising transport and lodgings for the crew and passengers."

That was a relief. Get the liner into dry dock for repairs and we can be gone, on the last leg of our journey. One step closer to Ann. I tried to force her back out of my current train of thought and concentrated on checking the ship's systems. Even if it didn't need it, it gave me something to do for the next two hours.

The next time I look up from the console, the mainanence station's there, in plain view. Four tugs show up on the radar.

"Nea'Kemna, please proceed to uncouple yourself from White Rose." Said a voice from over the com. It was male, and sounded as if it needed sleep.

So we did as we were told. We let the liner float free and we foolowed the coordinates that were sent to us, moving out of the way into a position that gave us the pefect view to watch the whole operation. The four tugs were dwarved by the White Rose as they sidled up alongside her, using their own beams to manouver her towards the maintenance station. It wasn't something you got to see everyday, unless you worked on one of these space bound rigs. The containment shield was flickering angrily now, threatening to shut down at any moment. The station's own shielding flared as they passed through it, only settling down when they were on the other side of it, the liner being docked. As soon as it was firmly in place, a swarm of people disembarked onto the dockside, getting off the ship just in time for the

containment shield to fail.

"Nea'Kemna, please hold your position." This voice was different. Still audio only though.

We sat for a few minutes. Mum was contacting Me'rass and Lucas and they appeared on the bridge within a few minutes of being called.

"What's the problem- Oh. She made it then, with no more casualties?" Me'rass said, still obviously very tired.

"If she's safely in dock now, why ain't we going anywhere?" Lucas yawned.

The pair were stood between us, looking out of the window at the swarms of shuttles moving about the stricken ship and departing the station.

"Station captain ain't letting us go. They told us to hold our position." I said.

A few more minutes of waiting and the channel opened fully. Captain Jenkins was stood in a station side office, a mass of station workers going about their business behind her.

"I would just like to thank you, Nea'Kemna, for your help. You have no idea how grateful I and the rest of the crew and passengers are. If there is anything we can do to pay you back, please do not hesitate to ask. The Star Cruises Head Office is based on Hendar two. I thank you again." She said and bowed. The channel closed and went blank. Then that tired male voice came back on audio only.

"Nea'Kemna, you are clear to resume your course. Good day."

"Such a nice woman. I wonder if we'll get a free holiday out of it...?" Lucas mused.

"My guess is yes. But will we be able to take them seperately, or will we have to holiday together?" Me'rass said.

I shrugged.

"Dunno. But let's hold 'em for the favour. At least until we really need it."

"Good idea, kid." Mum said.

"Right. Shall we resume our course for Rylgarr, then?" Me'rass said.

I put the ship back on course without hesitation.

"You can go back to bed now, if you want." Mum said.

"I think I may just do that, commander Ironclaw." He said, stifling a yawn.

For the next hour and a half, me and mum sat discussing everything and anything we could think of. Up until the other day, we hadn't seen each other for over a cycle. That was a long time to go with just sending each other recorded messages. Holding a conversation like that didn't work very well. Especially when our working lives are more unpredictable than our non-working lives. She asked me if I was ever gonna get married one day. Not something I'd ever expect from my mum, but then her marriage to Chester was something completely unexpected too. I never had her down as the marrying type. But then, everyone's unpredictable in one way or the other, even the really boring ones who think doing paperwork in the back of a grey office for a telemarketing company is fun. Yes. Even those people can be spontaneous. I looked up at the sound of an incoming message. It was pre-recorded and it was from the Onnotian. The screen flickered on and he stood there, in a forest green flight suit. I couldn't make out where it is he's standing. It looks like a communications booth. A really old communications booth.

"Where are you, Ironclaw? You were supposed to be registering insystem an hour ago." He growled. "If you're not here with the Stalker Mk II within the next twelve hours, I will kill this little Ant of yours. Contact me as soon as you arrive. You have my code." He finished sweetly and the video crackled and ended.

Mum placed a paw on my arm. That was when I realised I was growling and my fists were bunched, nails drawing blood from my palms. He wasn't gonna get away with this. I'd at least get in a few hits

before I leave him to his precious little ship.

"We will get Ann back. I guarantee it, Shade."

I said nothing. Didn't even look at her.

"When have I ever let you down?" She added.

I looked at her then. I looked into those cold black eyes of hers. I saw the fire burning there.

"Engage the hyper drive." I said and the slip stream opened up and swallowed us, the hyper drive pushing us forward through our own piece of untouchable space, towards Rylgarr and the Onnotian and Ann.

I dunno what he was playing at now. He didn't give us a time limit in the letter he left. I just took things as fast as I could. Seems like that liner had cost me more time than I'd liked it to. But then, if it weren't for Lucas' cunning plan, Ann would probably be dead already. But then, there's no telling whether she's still alive or not. That's not a thought I want lurking about in my head, but something I have to keep hold of, incase the fracker has killed her. I stare out the window at the slip stream, trying to think of other things.

10 - Rylgarr

The slip stream evaporated around us as Nea'Kemna's hyper drives shut down. The next thing I did was go to my quarters, leaving mum and Commander Me'rass on the ship. I passed Lucas on the way.

"We're here." I said.

Lucas' eyes widened, a sudden look of alertness flooding his entire body.

"I'm gonna go contact the Onnotian. You go and give my mum a few hours rest so we're all ready for whatever he has in store for us."

Lucas nodded and disappeared, using his teleporting skill to get to the bridge. I rounded the corner and stepped into the lift, heading up to the deck where I slept. Piled up in the far corner of my room was some of Ann's stuff, the stuff she couldn't fit in her own ship, because the vessel was too damned small. And I wasn't about to leave it in the docking bay with our ships, so I brought it up here, with me, until she could choose her own quarters, assuming that she liked the ship and wanted to stay aboard. I pulled up my chair at the table, flipping open the lid of the desktop communicator and typed in the code I'd been given. A77-889-B3. It was an on-ship code. A short, light blue Onnotian appeared on the other end. Not the one I was looking for. But he soon realised that.

"I'll put you through to Captain Son'arh." He said and the screen went blue, displaying the ship's insignia in the center of the screen.

I waited a few minutes, growing more and more impatient. Then the Onnotian, Son'arh, appeared on-screen.

"Took your sweet time, didn't you Draggy?" He said slyly.

I growled. I hated being called that. The last person who had called me that had ended up having to have his nose operated on because I hit him so hard.

"We encountered a few problems along the way." I growled.

"So I see. Having to ask an old Kenemian war bird to ferry you here. Kinda pitiful, really..."

"Actually, the bird's ours. We bought it the other day. And I wouldn't mind testing out her weaponry on a moving target. But that can wait 'till later. I want Ann back."

"You got the ship?"

I nodded.

"All ready to go. Fully fuelled and ready for launch."

He eyed me suspiciously.

"I would like to see this ship."

"Fine. That can be done. Give me a moment."

I wired into the docking bay security and zoomed in on my mum's Stalker that was clamped firmly in its lift lock. Son'arh made a noise in his throat, possibly one of mixed disappointment and triumph. It was hard to tell.

"What about Ann?"

"Fine." He snorted.

An image flickered onto the corner of my screen. She was sat in a cramped cell, knees pulled up to her chest, face buried in her knees.

"She's still breathing, don't worry." He said. "I'll be on the orbital station. Dock there and we can make the exchange." The channel went blank. I growled.

"What's going on, Shade?" Lucas' voice came over the ship's com.

"We need to dock at the orbital station. We'll do the swap there."

I heard my mum swear in the back ground. Apparently Lucas had lost the fight to get her to go and rest up. No surprises there then. I pulled myself upright and walked out of my room, heading in the direction of the docking bay. The self destruct sequence on the Stalker needed re-setting, otherwise it'd take out a large chunk of the station with it. I was expecting the swap to be made ship to ship in a neutral zone, an area of space that hadn't been claimed yet, not on the station. Oh well. Not the first thing that's gone wrong this week. Heavy snow, losing my fuel, nearly breaking my back, losing Ann, getting caught up by a small fleet of pirates and having to rescue a stranded space liner. I can honestly say I've had better weeks. I felt the ship shudder gently. We were gaining speed. Four hours away from the orbital station. That would give me plenty of time to re-set the timer on the fighter.

-Three minutes until docking procedure- The ship's computer said.

Standing on the Observation Deck gave me a brilliant view of the orbital station. It looked kinda like a tree, each of its branches a docking arm. The Observation Deck stretched halfway down the ship. It was the same on the other side of the ship, both long and narrow rooms placed near the top of the ship. I watched as various ships departed and docked from the station. I was more interested in the large dome at the top of the station. It held various buildings. That was the area where I was supposedly meeting up with Son'arh. My gut tightened. This has to be the first time in my life since meeting Ann that I was truly frightened for her. She didn't look too good when I saw her over the com. It's amazing what a few days of kidnap can do to someone. Not the most pleasant thought ever, but I can't help it. That's just how my mind works. I watched as a small tug shuttle came toward us. I didn't know what was being said over the com, but the small ship soon attached itself to us and pulled us in, toward the station. One of the top branches loomed over us. At least I won't have to walk too far to get to my destination. I just hoped he had Ann with him. I noticed his ship not too far away from where we were docking. I squinted hard, trying to see through the larger windows. Nothing. Not a flicker of movement. But at least I knew he was here. Somewhere. A large tube slid into place and locked down. The fuel line. I doubt we'd need much more of it, since we were fully fuelled before we left Aster-985.

-Docking complete-

Thank the various gods for that. Now I can get on the station.

Me, mum and Lucas stepped onto the station. The air smelt fresh. Which is strange for a very active station. It should smell of mechanical things, not forest fresh. I walked beneath a vent that was pumping out the fresh air and got a nose full of pine scent. I sneezed on my sleeve and Lucas squirmed and groaned when I wiped it on him. Now we're even for the race. We stepped onto a turbo lift and took it up to the top dome where Son'arh was waiting for us at a table outside a small cafe. He was alone. I walked up to him, mum and Lucas trailing behind, keeping their distance.

"Well hello." He smiled politely.

"Where is she?"

"Safe. For now. Do you have the ship?" He asked, fingering the lip of his coffee cup.

"I do, but I'd rather we go and make the trade in a neutral zone."

He cocked his head.

"And why would this be?"

"Because this ship is supposed to be a well kept secret." My mum said sitting down next to me.

"Well, it won't be anymore, so I guess you could just hand it over here. I can have one of the docksmen

bring it out and put it onto my own ship."

"No. We go into a neutral zone, or you get no ship. Choice is yours." I growled.

Son'arh leaned back in his metallic chair and rubbed his chin.

"Hmmm... If that's how you want to play it... Fine. We go to Sector Delta-C. We make the change there, then we'll all be on our merry way." He smiled. "I'll see you there, assuming that lump of space junk makes it the rest of the way."

I caught myself growling and stopped as he got up and calmly walked away. Sector Delta-C was a five hour journey, two in hyper space. Only problem was, I had two more hours left on docking. If I pull out now and go back into space, I'd be losing a lot of money. So we decided to wait and see if we could pick up a new crew member once Lucas pointed out the Job Centre across the walkway from us.

11 - Joyce

"I got a bad feeling that something's gonna go down..." Lucas said nervously.

"It's a job centre. You're just picking up loads of tense vibes from everyone."

I was scrolling down the list of names for hire on the console in the far corner of the Job Centre. So far, no one wanted to be hired onto an ex-warship turned racer-carrier. We needed a full time pilot, engineer and navigator. Lucas flinched and jostled me. I lost the place where I was up to on the name list.

"What the hell-?"

A gun shot. Then another. Screams filled the street outside and people went running.

"I told ya summut bad was gonna happen!" Lucas shouted over the commotion.

People were running in here, seeking shelter from the bullets. Someone had just made it into the doorway when blood sprayed from his chest and he slumped to the floor. We hit the deck and watched from beneath the console as more shots were fired and more blood sprayed. I took a quick glance over my shoulder as a door behind me slammed shut. A well built Mammoth stood staring at the gun man, malice in her small eyes. She was wearing a pair of grubby overalls, the sleeves rolled up to her shoulders. Her muscles looked as if they were carved out of rock, not someone you'd want to mess with, even when drunk.

"You go for a piss and all hell brakes loose as soon as yer arse touches the damn seat!" She growled and pulled a large spanner from her pocket.

"What the hell are you doing? Get down!" I found myself hissing.

She looked down at me and the bottom of her long trunk curled slightly.

"Don't worry kid. This ain't the first time he's done this." She said and strode forward.

We continued watching from the floor as the hail of bullets continued to tear through people and objects. But not one was aimed at her.

"Jimmy!" She shouted.

The Ferret-like creature glared at her and raised his gun. I didn't quite catch what happened. There was a moment of ginger-brown blur and then the spanner was lodged in the gun man's head, blood spurting from around the piece of metal as he crumpled to the floor. Me and Lucas looked at each other and slowly stood up. The Mammoth looked over her shoulder at us and grinned.

"He had a mark on 'is head. Now I can quit this lousy, one-rail job without having to worry about where my next pay cheque's coming from."

She grabbed the dead man by his collar and pulled out the spanner from his head and wiped it on her clothes, before replacing it back in her belt. She hauled him over her shoulder and walked out to where the station police were now stood. The body thumped down wetly on the bonnet of one of the police buggies and one of the coppers gagged and turned away.

"Lucas!" I called.

Lucas was already out the door and striking up a conversation with the Mammoth. I pulled myself upright and went after him, not too enthusiastic about hearing what he was saying to her, bracing myself to hear his bones being crushed. But she just smiled and ruffled his hair with her trunk as if he was a small child. He looked at me and grinned.

"What've you said or done now?"

"This is Joyce! She's our new engineer!"

She held out a large hand and I took gingerly, hoping and praying that my bones won't be crushed. But,

to my surprise, my paw came back to me intact.

"So, that old Kenemian war bird's yours, eh?"

I nodded.

"Pretty little ship that. Won't ever let you down, if she's taken care of properly." Joyce said.

"You better go get your stuff. I'll be over at that cafe, so come find me when you're ready."

"Uh, and make it quick. We still have some important business to take care of."

Joyce nodded and hurried away.

Mum was back on the bridge. Had been since Son'arh scurried off. Me'rass was in the command chair, overlooking the goings on in the engine room from his command console, watching as Lucas introduced Joyce to the ship and explained the current situation to her. I took a sneak peek at the small screen. She seemed to be absorbing everything he was saying. That was good. I looked up at the sound of mum's voice.

"Preparing to go into Hyper Space.." She said as her paws glided over her console.

The white of the slip stream enveloped us once more. I was only an hour and a half away from getting Ann back.

"I'll take over if you wanna go see to our new crew member."

To my surprise, mum stood up and exited the bridge without fuss. Usually she'd have a few things to say before she left, but not this time. I sat down in her seat and looked over the ship's systems from my console. Everything looked normal. I was just hoping that the next hour and a half would fly by. I want all this to be over with. I want a break before the final race. But as usual, that's too much to ask for.

"We will get Ms. Burrows back." Me'rass said from behind.

"Oh, I know we will."

The slip stream evaporated. Son'arh's ship showed up on the radar. He was sat still, weapons and shields down. We were all alone in Sector Delta-C. This should be easy enough. Or at least I'm hoping. Swap the Stalker Mk II for Ann and get the hell away from here before it blows. The main com flickered on and the Onnotian commander came onscreen.

"Pull up alongside and we'll start the trade." He said and the screen went blank again.

Lucas looked at me.

"Does mum know we're minutes away from the trade?" I asked. He nodded.

"She's down in the docking bay now, readying her ship for transport. And she's impressed with Joyce. That woman knows her way around an engine."

Lucas continued to guide Nea'Kemna towards the Loranz. We sidled up to the other ship and Nea'Kemna shuddered as a docking tunnel was extended towards us, clamping around one of our air locks. The screen flickered on again. It was the commander of Loranz.

"Prepare to be boarded."

"No one's doing any boarding. Send the girl across and you'll get your ship via teleport transit." I snapped.

There was no way in hell I was having one of the frackers on my ship. The commander snorted and his face creased slightly. I heard Me'rass behind me trying not to laugh. Lucas wasn't doing anything to hide his amusement though.

"Very well." He grunted. "Have someone to meet one of my crew halfway in the tunnel. You will remain there until the fighter is onboard."

The com when blank again.

"Who's going?" Lucas said.

"I will."

"No." Me'rass said.

I looked at him.

"Lucas will go. He will see to it that Ms. Burrows gets onboard safely."

I looked from Me'rass to Lucas. Lucas shrugged.

"In a way, I know what he's getting at. Soon as you see that Onnotian guy, chances are, you're gonna make a mess of him and you'll probably end up losing Ann in the process because Son'arh has more people power than we do."

"That, and if anything does happen, Ann has a better chance at survival with him."

I sank down into my seat. I knew what he meant, and it was true. I want to tear the Onnotians apart so much right now, I can't put Ann's life at risk anymore than it already is.

"I'll be back before you know it." He said and vanished.

"The ship's ready for transit. Lemme know when Ann's onboard." Mum's voice came over the in-ship com.

"Will do. Lucas is heading down there now to get her, he'll let you know when."

I altered the mainscreen on my console and tapped into the security camera for that particular deck. The camera gave a partial view of the inside of the air lock, no more. That'd have to do until we could get it sorted out. I'd really like a better view, but for now, it'd have to wait. The inner door slid open, a small puff of steamed air coming from the points where the top and bottom tracks were as the heavy door rolled back. A red light flashed, signalling the opening of the outer door. Lucas appeared, waiting almost impatiently as the outer door slid back. Then he disappeared into the air lock. I didn't know what was going on, there was no sound. We waited for a few minutes longer. Then the security camera flickered violently, nearly blanking it out. Something flashed within the confines of the air lock, the camera only picking up the edge of whatever it was. I saw Ann stumble into the corridor, wiping at her bleeding nose with bound hands, then Lucas came back out, an energy ball erupting from his palm and into the tunnel. The air lock doors slammed shut and a faint metallic grinding sound echoed up the ship.

"What's going on Lucas?" Me'rass demanded.

Apparently, he'd been watching too.

"Nothing much. They just decided they wanted to kill us as soon as the Stalker arrived in their docking bay."

"Get us out of here."

I didn't hesitate. My paws moved quickly across the console face and Nea'Kemna shuddered back into life, leaving Loranz behind.

"If you think we're gonna let you get away so easily, you're sorely mistaken." The Onnotian commander snapped over an audio only channel.

Loranz was quickly gaining on us as we made our way back towards Rylgarr space. An alarm bleeped and the dim yellow lighting changed to a dull red as the ship shook. I looked at the engine stats. Our Hyper Drive had been knocked off line. Lucas appeared next to me in a short blue flash. He threw a grin my way and the ship shuddered again as another shot, this one weaker, hit us. The shields were immediately brought online and we turned hard, coming back on them. A hail of yellow shots erupted from above, nailing Loranz across it's side in one smooth motion, it's shield flaring bright white. Looks like mum's just found the primary turret.

"Ready the forward cannons."

"We have cannons? I thought we just had the one? Oh never mind..."

Lucas turned back around in his seat and a light lit up on my console. Indeed, there were two cannons. Streams of yellow shots kept on battering Loranz' shields. Nea'Kemna vibrated a couple more times as they returned fire. We stayed close, chipping away their shield's energy, slowly weakening it.

"Fire the forward cannon."

"Firing the cannon!"

Lucas took aim and a bright white oval shot out from beneath us and took Loranz' shield down to twenty percent from eighty. I'm really beginning to like this ship.

"When's the self destruct set for on that Stalker?" Me'rass asked.

"Should go off in a few...." I took a quick glance at the time as another enemy shot hit us. "seconds." The timer I'd set up on my console was now in the red, showing ten seconds.

"Take us three hundred tecks away from Loranz and hold position."

I did so. Two seconds. The portside of Loranz' docking bay was ripped open. Their shields failed and debris was pulled out into space.

"And that little ship did all that...?" Lucas asked staring at the destruction.

I nodded.

"They're still moving. Charge the forward cannon again and take us back in."

The cannon charged and we sidled up along side the damaged vessel that was still trying to shoot at us. The com flickered on.

"How dare you go back on a deal!" The Onnotian commander snarled.

"How dare us?" Lucas retorted angrily. "You're the one who declared war on us!"

The commander snarled. "Lower your weapons and shields, and we'll let you go."

Me'rass grunted and Lucas laughed.

"Fire the cannon." He said and cut off the com.

Another oval of white finished the job, tearing through Loranz. We were sat in a field of debris, the remains of an armed racer carrier manned by fifty Onnotians. Job well done, I say.

"If we're all done here, I'd like to go now. I have a job to do and no ship to get back to Nuam in." Mum said over the inner-ship com.

"We have to go past there for the next race anyway, so make yourself comfortable." I said.

"The Hyper Drive'll be back online in about three hours. That's the best I can do, sorry." Came Joyce's voice.

Then the com clicked back off. I turned to Lucas when I set our course for Nuam.

"Where's Ann?"

"Sick bay tending to her wounds. Hey, don't gimme that look. She wouldn't let me anywhere near her."

"I'll go see to her."

The sick bay was a decent size. Ann was sat on a tall stool at the furthest counter looking through the ship's systems. She flinched and nearly took my head off when I touched her shoulder.

"Holy Hell! You scared the frack outta me!" She gasped.

"What the Hell happened?" Was all I could say.

"That bastard Onnotian took me down with him. He dragged me from my wreckage then bound and gagged me. Next thing I know, I'm on his space tub being held hostage. And yes; I'm fine. A few cuts and bruises and a tad hungry, but otherwise peachy."

I sighed and sat down on the stool next to her.

"What d'you think of the ship?"

"Please tell me you and Lucas didn't buy it."

"You could always travel around and live in your tiny cockpit again..."

"It's nice. But I won't say any more until I've seen the rest of it and met the people who're doing the skivvy job of keeping it intact."

"We only have two. Commander Me'rass and Chief Engineer Joyce. Who doubles as security..."

Ann looked at me through bruised eyes.

"Don't ask how we found her or what Lucas said to her to get her to join because I don't know either.

And Me'rass comes from the same planet as this ship. He captained her sister ship."

Ann paused. "I'm curious... What does Nea'Kemna mean..? Because all Kenemian ship names have some meaning behind them."

"It means fury."

She blinked. "Sounds about right for you lot... Anyway. I'm going to bed. Comming?"

She got up and walked towards the door, curling a finger, gesturing me to follow. Well, I do have to show her the cabins, don't I?