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Unification War

Stray Dogs

Dedicated with respect, and without authorization, to Joss Whedon, Jane Espenson, Tim Minear and the other scribes who breathed life into my favorite playground – The Verse.

Chapter One – An Unexpected Gift

Erupting up through the desert on an otherwise bright and unblemished stretch of sand, a column of hardpacked dirt pointed skywards like an accusing finger.

On its crest was a brush of dry grass that formed a blind for a hole burrowed into the column's top. The air stirred slightly in an uncommon breeze, causing a nose to poke briefly out of the hole, testing the shifting air. A moment later the nose was followed a pointed face and brown-furred body.

The Jumprat didn't like the searing daytime heat of Persephone's Ashlake desert. But the freshening air had brought with it a new and unidentified smell that demanded investigation.

Back on Earth That Was, the Jumprat's ancestors were sewer rats. And like the human inhabitants of Persephone, those rats had taken what fate and terraforming had given them and made the best of it. The result was a sewer rat that looked and acted very much like the Kangaroo Rat of Old Earth.

For Persephone's human population the changes were perhaps of a less physiological nature. Some would say the inhabitants of Persephone had gotten a bit feral in the decades since their arrival on that world. But was only because they didn't have much use for anything that didn't bring them profit or another day of breathing. And these days, sitting as they did on the very line dividing two sides in the greatest civil war in human history, both those things were becoming increasingly difficult to secure.

The air, that a moment before had been gently strumming the grass, was now thrashing it. The Jumprat stood on it's hind legs as tall as it could, still unable to detect threat on the air, but definitely scenting something.

And so it was that a little brown rat stood on the highest point on that expanse of empty desert, perfectly positioned to be sucked into the starboard engine of a Firefly that roared into existence, wearing a hurricane like a hat.

"Gorramit, Maxi! What in ruttin' Hell you playin' at?"

A pudgy, bespeckled, black-bearded man looked up from the pilot's controls to another man who was currently addressing him – or more to the point, dressing him down with an expression that said violence might ensue at any moment. The pilot made every effort to appear nonchalant – as if there was nothing out of the ordinary in the current situation. Which, truth be told, there wasn't.

"Aw c'mon, Case. Tommy bet me I couldn't dot the 'I' on the next 10 termite mounds we passed. Couldn't rightly turn down the challenge, what with the honor of The Big Dog on the line and all." Maxi looked past Casey to a young, dark-skinned man built like a bunch of sticks tied end-to-end. He was sitting at the tactical station at the back of the bridge, wearing a long brown duster and a wide grin.

When Tommy did nothing but smile, Maxi continued as if he'd been vindicated by the Supreme Committee of Parliament. "Besides, it's not like we've done a gorram thing for goin' on two hours but circle these ruttin' *chang xing xing tun* valleys."

"We're circling because, until you can conjure something better, this is the only way I know to find something that's good and hidden and don't want to be found," Case snapped.

"We ain't finding nothin' because there's nothin' to find. Nothin' but termite mounds, sand and – oh wait! More sand." Maxi said as he pointed out of the bridge's windshield with dramatic flair.

"What a *jean ta ma chun* waste of time this whole mission is." Maxi continued his rant. "Where'd these orders come from? Who said there was anything out here? I'd like to drop the genius that sent us on this ferret hunt in the middle of this *shang di-qie bu mao zhi di* and let them tell us where this... whatever it is." With that, he turned back to yoke and grabbed on hard in a gesture that he hoped expressed righteous annoyance, rather than a desire to protect his nose from a punch should one be heading his way.

"Listen you *fen-fer-brains*, we're here to do a job and near as I can tell tormentin' the landscape ain't going to get it done any quicker. And we don't get to go back to base until we're done out here. We clear?" Case said, the gravel in his voice grinding with every word.

He waited a full 10 seconds to see if there was going to any more protests; there weren't. "Now keep your eyes open. Cut five degrees north; bring her down to two-kay. Tight and slow to Fang Rock, if you *please*, Lieutenant Greenfield."

"Sure, why not?" replied Maxi, clearly in the mood to argue more but thinking better of it. Case had a good 20 years more living under his belt than the pilot, but he also had a good 10 centimeters on him, too. Maxi was a smart ass, but not an overly stupid one.

"We're there – again. Still nothin' to see here."

"Then circle back – again. They're here somewhere; our friend said so and she ain't been wrong yet," Case observed.

"'Yet' bein' the operative word," Maxi mumbled.

Case ignored the pilot and moved back toward a bank of oblong screens that cast shifting

yellow light over Tommy's face. "Anything on LIDAR or comms?"

"Nothing particular," Tommy said in a voice that sounded like it should be narrating a documentary, not commenting on sensor scans. "Not much out here," he continued, slow and careful, as he scanned the screens while his fingers danced a jig on an ancient-looking dashboard full of mismatched keys. "There is some wave traffic, but it looks civvy. I'm picking up some metal... barely enough to make a decent latrine, though."

Long pause. "Maybe they're screening?" Case said.

"Or maybe there's nothing to scan," said a new voice, accompanied by the thump of boots coming up the steps to the bridge. Back on Earth That Was, the voice's accent would have been described as lower-class Brit. In The 'Verse, most would have called it Dyton Colony. In both places, it would be said to be a woman's voice, silky with a bit steel in it, shiny and sharp.

"*Feh wuh*," Case muttered, absorbed in studying all the glowing dots on Tommy's screens. Then, after a long pause, the big engineer seemed to come to a decision.

Over his shoulder to the pilot: "Maxi, take us down to one-kay. circle slow and easy... and ship the guns."

There was silence on deck as both Maxi and Tommy turned to stare at the man as if they'd suddenly lost their hearing – or he his mind. In that moment, Corporal Moria Patel – small, wiry and olive-skinned, with bands of muscle wrapping her bare arms like corded rope – came up the last step and onto the bridge.

"Say again?" Squeaked Maxi, most of the testosterone draining from him in an instant.

"Take us low – real low – get us just one step up from a hover, and stow the guns. I want it to look like we got so frustrated looking for these ratbags we got stupid and sloppy."

"Look like?" Maxi squeaked again. "And how is tucking our only defense snugly away and making ourselves a target so big and slow you couldn't help but hit it with a blind pigeon? How exactly does this *not* make us stupid?" Maxi's voice was developing an edge of panic as he finished laying out the impending scenario.

"Because if they're out there, they're not going to be able to resist such a tempting target. You want to go home? Well this'll smoke 'em quicker than sin. Way I figure, they got themselves well-hid and this is the only way we're going to see something other 'n sand and scrub brush today.

"Sides, according to you there ain't nothing out there to find. So what're you worried about?" For the first time that day, Case smiled. "And if there is, don't we got us the best air tank jockey in the entire 12th Cavalry at the helm? Maybe the entire war? Seems to me you've said so yourself –"

"– A hundred and thirty-seven times –" Chimed in Tommy and Twitch, like they'd all been keeping count, which they had.

"– at least. And if that wasn't just you givin' your shipmates another source of humor at your expense, you'll be making sure we're somewhere else when they open fire. *Dong ma?*" Casey took a step back, crossed his arms and leaned against the bulkhead. Moria, to his immediate left, uncrossed her arms and shoved her hands into her pants pockets, a

lopsided grin forming on her face as she leaned against Casey's shoulder. Tommy, as usual, said nothing. But he, too, started to smile.

Max looked at the faces now lined up against the back wall and realized it was either his pride or his hide, and he had to choose. The struggle between the two played out on his face. It was touch-and-go for a minute, but in the end, a look of determination formed. Ego had won out, but only just.

He turned back to the pilots console, cursing eloquently in Chinese. Everyone on the bridge felt the familiar lurch as the inertial dampers struggled to keep up with a sudden lose of speed and altitude.

Looking straight ahead, Twitch whispered loud enough so only Casey could hear her. "You know, this *is* five kinds of stupid, right?"

Casey paused. Then: "I'm an old man, Twitch. I'm tired of standing around doin' nothing, I'm tired of taking *goh sa* from our lieutenant here, and above all, I'm tired of being in charge. I want this over so we can go pick up our shiny new brass and I can get back down to my engines – and my hammock – where I belong."

"You know you're not the ranking officer onboard either, right?" Twitch replied.

"What, you want Mr. Greenfield there to be in command?" Casey responded.

"Not for a gorram second. I'm just saying, that's all." Twitch, changing subjects, continued: "And what if they do open up? What then?"

"Then we know where they are. And that's when 'Plan B' goes into effect," Casey said.

"We got a 'Plan B'?" Twitch said, eyebrows raised.

"We always got a 'Plan B'."

Captain Margaret Jane Casteel, recently promoted, stood ramrod stiff on the landing platform as little whorls of sand blew across it. She looked composed, at attention even at rest, impeccably dressed in her button-down uniform, long brown duster and wide-brimmed tan hat with one side folded up. Nothing about Captain Margaret Jane Casteel suggested she was anything except what she appeared to be – a well-trained officer, a disciplined and by-the-book kind of hard ass that most Browncoat volunteers found to be just a little too straight and way too narrow for their tastes.

But upon closer inspection, assuming you cared to look, you might see some slight inclination of a brow or tightening of her lips that suggested something more was going on, just below the surface.

Captain Margaret Jane Casteel was 20th generation military, running all the way back to Earth That Was. She was the only offspring of Colonel Jonathan Montgomery Casteel, who had served the Alliance with distinction during the border skirmishes 20 years earlier, that historians would later say were the precursors to the current War of Unification. Back then, though, all Colonel Jonathan Montgomery Casteel cared or knew is there were men to kill in far away places. And he couldn't be happier.

Captain Casteel once noted to a friend that she hadn't chosen a career in the military – it had chosen her. Only offspring of the thrice-decorated Colonel, she had been left little other option. It was simply not to be tolerated that a single Casteel generation skip service. And so it was at age 14, when fancy clothes were just becoming an item of interest and boys were still Science Fiction, little Maggie was shipped off to the Luxor Marine Academy on Osiris.

It was small comfort for her lost childhood that she was likely to be last generation of Casteels to have military service thrust upon them. In fact, it seemed very likely, considering the high-risk nature of her new assignment, there would be no more generations of Casteels, period.

You see, Captain Margaret Jane Casteel, in a single act of defiance in a life otherwise dominated by unquestioning obedience, had signed up for active duty the second hostilities broke out – for the Independents.

Choke that down, you gos se-eating, goa tsao de old bastard, thought Captain Casteel.

And somewhere deep inside, little Maggie smiled.

Several minutes later, her position and posture unchanged, Captain Margaret Jane Casteel shared her first words of the day with the empty landing platform:

"Where the ruttin' Hell are they?"

There was all manner of criminal activity in The Verse. You name it and someone, somewhere, was doing it, selling it or at the minimum considering what profit might come of it. This had been true before the war and it would be true afterward. But like throwing booster fuel on a pleasant little campfire will transform it into an inferno, so too did war enhance the opportunities for those who plied their trade in dark alleys, deserted warehouses – and dirty little holes in the desert.

In this particular dirty little hole men and women wrapped in layers cloth that covered them almost entirely made their way through paths cut deep into the sand. The paths moved this way and that, some ending in open chambers, others descending deep into cave-like openings. All around were haphazardly-piled boxes, machinery and crates, some with Alliance logos, some with the Independent's star and triangle, some with Blue Sun badges. All around the walls were lined with weathered metal plates. And stretched over everything – just above the residents' heads – was a patchwork of sand-colored roof tarps that looked to be made of muslin and electrical wire. The wires, which formed a grid, sparked occasionally with little arcs of blue lightening.

If you were to pull those tarps away and view the whole thing from overhead, the Streeter hideout would most resemble an oversized ant farm.

In one of the rounded chambers, several figures gathered around a hodge-podge of cable and softly-glowing displays. The figures' bodies were completely swathed in tan wrappings except for a set of black goggles with tiny red and green lights dancing on them. Based more on the tension in their bodies than their muffled words, the figures seemed to be arguing. The language they were using was a pidgin of Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, German and English that was referred to as Street Speak by those who didn't speak it. Those who did didn't have a name for it, because they were smart enough to know Street

Speak varied so widely from planet to planet, city to city, sometimes even street to street, that naming it would be pointless.

Something else those fluent in this patios also knew is that Street Speak wasn't language, it was code. It was a way for the various gangs to talk among themselves – even in public – and still ensure a modicum of privacy. Plus, it drove the Purple Bellies and Browncoats equally crazy when they tried to monitor their wave traffic, all of which was in the open and on civilian channels. Anthropologists routinely pointed to this particular data point as conclusive evidence that, if nothing else, Streeters had a sense of humor.

The argument got more intense, with the occasional German or Chinese swear poking recognizably above the melodic din of Street Speak. Three figures in particular were gesturing toward one of the larger displays, clearly disagreeing over something.

The argument was sufficient distraction that none of the clustered figures seemed to notice one of their own, standing alone toward the back of the chamber, occupying itself rearranging a stack of crates. Had they been paying attention, they might have noticed a lock of bright blonde hair slip free of it's fabric bonds and being hastily shoved back in place. Or the fact that the lone figure had restacked the same crates five times and was working on a sixth.

As a rule, Maxwell Greenfield was not a competitive man, nor one who sought power. In fact, some people might (and some had, included his own sainted mother) describe the pilot as lazy. As a lazy slob, in fact (thanks, mom). He preferred to think of himself as having differing priorities. And those priorities did not include a starched uniform, a crisp salute, or shaving, if it came to it.

He was more than happy to let others lead. Especially in a multipurpose front line unit like a gunboat crew, being in charge meant being a target, as the Cerberus' succession of brass attested to. How many captains had they saluted since he'd come aboard? Four? No, five. He forgot that guy who got himself pinioned on the business end of a shiv in Eavesdown, second night after taking command. He'd died of an acute case of stupid – having neglected to take his rank and insignia off before partaking of the local color. People that stupid shouldn't be in charge – Hell, people that stupid should be prevented from breeding. Which, come to think of it, was exactly how things turned out. Just nature's way of keeping the gene pool clean, he reckoned.

Yeah, being in charge could be a real pain in the gut – literally. Other people could have it, as long as they didn't get him killed on their way to doing themselves in.

Which was exactly why he was in such a foul mood.

"We've been hoverin' like a target drone fer 5 minutes now," he said to the bridge's windscreen.

He swiveled around to face Casey who was standing between the pilot and co-pilot station, arms crossed and staring out at the featureless landscape. "Maybe instead of cannons we should drop trow and moon 'em out the gun ports? They sure as Hell couldn't resist that target," the pilot observed.

"Yeah and if they tried to target us, the shine comin' off your behind would surely blind 'em," Casey replied, unmoving. the sound of a snort came from the tactical station; Twitch

hid a smile behind a browned and callused hand. "Now turn back to your station. They're just thinkin' it over. We need to give 'em time to make up their minds. When they do, we gotta be ready to rocket."

Maxi turned back around. "This ain't no rocket, it's a big floating tub this close to the ground. No way I can dodge a shell at this altitude."

"Assuming they're even using shells," Twitch interjected. Both Casey and Maxi turned to look at the weapons specialist. "What?" She said defensively.

Maxi turned back to Casey. "This is just a stupid waste of time. Wait, did I say stupid? I meant stupid and suicidal. What good is it going to do us to find 'em if we're all blowed up into little bits?"

"Sides, they ain't there anyway. And you're just too stubborn to admit it." The pilot concluded, punctuating his last comment by pointing out to the desert that stretched for miles around them.

"Um, guys?"

"Yeah?" Case and Maxi said in unison.

"I think...something's moving down there," Tommy continued.

Maxi snapped back around to the controls, ready to put any and all of the Cerberus' trust into a quick and – he prayed to any gods listening – unpredictable getaway.

"What is it?" Casey snapped, running over to tactical.

"I'm not sure, but I'm thinking maybe Twitch is right," Tommy replied.

This last got Twitch's attention. "How so?"

"They ain't usin' shells."

Oh the bridge of the Cerberus, several things happened at once:

Maxi got a hard look on his face as he started throwing switches, pressing buttons and pulling levers like a man with eight arms instead of the usual two.

The Cerberus herself lurched in a reality-distorting collision of forward thrust, reversing gravity envelope and overtaxed inertial dampers. For one stomach-wrenching second, the ship felt like it was trying to go all six directions at once, and depending on where you were standing, you either went freefall or sailing toward a bulkhead at double your usual G-mass.

In that same moment, Twitch floated into the air, got caught in the midriff by one of a gravity wave and flew straight into the weapons control station on the opposite side of the bridge. She struggled up into the seat, still getting pummeled by invisible mule kicks, and belted in. She started throwing her own switches, trying desperately to unship The Big Dog's autocannons.

Casey, the second biggest man in the crew (the biggest being the cook who was planetside at the moment), did the only thing he could and dove for the deck, grabbing hold of the rails that led down to the forward-most part of the ship. A gravity wave passed directly over

him, ruffling his steel-grey hair. But before he had a chance to congratulate himself on his fine luck, another wave came at him sideways, wrenching free his grip, rolling him over and slamming him head first into the co-pilot's station.

And then it was silent.

The chamber cut out of the desert had become oddly quiet. Most of the streeters had cleared out, going to "battle stations" or, more likely, hiding in the deepest hole they could find. Just the three by the control console remained, each facing forward and poking madly at a keyboard.

So intent on whatever it was they were doing, the three streeters didn't hear the box-stacker come up behind them. Now standing straight, three things became immediately obvious about their mysterious comrade:

- He was much taller than the other streeters.
- He moved absolutely silently, even in the layers of heavy desert wear.
- He was a she.

Appearing seemingly from thin air, the figure now had two flat-bladed knives in each hand. The knives were made of black ceramic and were lined-up directly behind the two outer figures' throats.

"Howdy, boys," came a sweet-sounding voice, almost musical despite the layers of fabric it passed through. "What'cha y'all doin'?"

Although caught off guard, all three figures twirled around instantly, ready for a fight. Normally, this would have been a perfectly appropriate way to respond. Unless, of course, your assailant has two razor-sharp knives at exactly the place your Adam's Apple is going to be when you're done turning around.

The left and right figures dropped to the ground, gurgling, two black hilts protruding from their throats. The center figure, becoming wary after seeing all the unexpected bleeding his colleagues were doing, stopped – just long enough for his attacker to deliver a knee to his groin so quick and hard, it lifted him a good three inches off the ground. He slid off and fell back against the console.

"Oh my, darlin', that does look painful," the figure said, addressing the man she had just dropped. "It's okay, you should be able to move again in an hour or two, which is a might better than your friends are likely to do."

Grabbing him under the armpits, she dragged the curled up figure over to a corner. "Now, you be a good boy and lie real still over here," she said, her voice dripping with honey. "And before you know it, you'll be back to beating up little old shop owners for protection money." The figure didn't respond, but also didn't move. And his attacker judged it good and started back for the control console, unwrapping the desert scarf from around her head. A cascade of startling white-blonde hair fell loose around the woman's shoulders. She shook her head once, mentally shaking off weeks of wearing the stifling garment.

She arrived at the console, gave it a quick appraising look, then began punching keys. When these failed to produce the desired effect, she stepped back, hands on hips, and studied the rat's nest of cables that connected the consoles together. After a moment, she

shrugged her shoulders, went behind the console array, grabbed the biggest cable she could find – a coiled conduit as fat around as a sewer pipe – and yanked hard. The conduit came free with a shower of sparks and the power died out on the console. The figure threw the conduit aside, pulling loose two meters or more of conduit sleeve from the wiring harness in the process.

At just about the same moment, a faint whirring sound in the distance started to become a lot less faint. As the sound increased, so did the frequency and strength of the electrical discharges on the cloaking net in the tented ceiling.

The woman looked up and watched as the blue lightening became so fierce it began arcing down to the chamber floor. The whirring sound had grown into a metallic shriek, not unlike the sound a really big electrical turbine makes when it's magnetic bottle fails and it's spinning at full bore.

Which was exactly what was happening.

"Ah am so humped," the woman said, and dived for the only cover she could see.

Plasma cannons were nothing new. They had, in fact, been successfully tested as far back as the late 20th Century on Old Earth. The principal was simple – superheat a packet of gas to a plasma state and fire it at ultra-sonic speeds at a target whose armor would be of little use against a substance that broke the bonds of matter at a subatomic level. Nevermind that such an exotic substance could only exist for a fraction of a second before dissipating. A fraction of a second was all it took to boil through a meter of the toughest armor. If you could get close enough to hit the target before the gas became inert, there was no defense against a plasma cannon.

The Cerberus herself had just such a cannon atop midships which she used to take on (often successfully) capital ships many times her size. Her packet plasma cannon used a terawatt generator to supercompress helium and then magnetic coils, similar to her railguns, to instantly accelerate that packet to .3 of lightspeed. The effect was instantaneous and only a really big ship could hope to survive a direct hit from a plasma packet.

The trick to avoiding instant death from the business end of a plasma cannon was distance. Plasma cannons were useless over a click. You might as well be tossing water balloons beyond that.

Ground-based plasma cannons were an entirely different matter, however. Because a ground-based plasma weapon was literally surrounded by ammo, superheating the gas inside the cannon chamber wasn't necessary. Instead, you replaced the coils with a big, fat microwave generator. Rev up your capacitors, ping a laser off your target to gauge range, and then cut lose. The microwaves superheat the air right next to a target, and the vacuum created by the sudden compression of the gas does the job of pushing the packet straight through the target for you.

There were only two problems with ground-based plasma cannons – they weren't much use against fast-moving targets – which is why they were used almost exclusively on fixed or slow-moving targets. And it took a couple seconds to spin up a microwave projector.

Problem Two was the only reason the Cerberus didn't have a big gorram hole burned through her already.

For what seemed like forever, no one on the bridge made a sound – except Case who groaned softly.

Maxi, Twitch and Tommy's eyes were locked on the embedded monitors at their workstations, which pinged and whirred, little dots chasing each other across softly glowing grids, as if all was right and proper in The Verse. Two of the storage lockers had burst open in the chaos, spreading their contents every which way. Now the doors creaked as gravity gently sloshed around the deck. Clearly, the stress of Maxi's maneuver had been too much for the grav dampers and they were now truly shot to *goh sa*.

As it became apparent they hadn't been immolated in a fireball of superheated gas, the bridge crew let out an almost simultaneous sign of relief. Except Casey, who let out a moan of pain.

Twitch spoke first: "Weapons are online, ready to fire. Shall I rain down upon the heathens Momma Patel's just and righteous anger?"

"Hold on," croaked Casey, sitting up and rubbing his head as if to check it was still properly attached. "They were going to fire they woulda by now. Tommy?"

A momentary pause. "I'm... pretty sure they had a firing solution," Tommy replied.

"And I'm guessin', despite Maxi's stroke-inducing maneuvers, they didn't just miss, right?"

"No, they never fired."

"What's going on down there now?" Casey turned back toward Twitch.

"Um, nothing?" Twitch responded. "The cannon's pointed precisely where we were before Maxi gave us a right shaking. I'm reading that their generators are all spun up – it's ready to fire. It just... hasn't."

"Any other activity down there?" Case asked.

"None I can see."

After a moment or two, Casey smiled and said, mostly to himself, "My angel." Grabbing the co-pilot's chair, he hoisted himself up into the seat. He winced at the sudden movement, then looked over to Maxi. "That was a mean bit of flyin' there, Mr. Greenfield. That'd be one Hell of a carnival ride, if it weren't likely to kill most of the patrons."

Maxi turned and looked at the engineer, incredulous. "I... but, I..."

"Don't get me wrong," Casey cut the pilot off. "If they had taken the shot I think you're pilotin' woulda been the only thing between us and whole lotta fiery death. Nice work."

The sudden and unaccustomed swerve into praise left the pilot speechless.

"Now, why don't you lower us back down so Twitch can get a nice point-blank bead on their camp. Twitch – make sure you got us set up for a wide firing arc. I want to make sure we got cover from any small munitions in case some *shao tong* gets ideas."

"What about the cannon?" Twitch asked.

"I don't think that's gonna be a problem anymore," Casey said, smiling.

The deck of the Cerberus shifted as the pilot brought the ship down to just 200 meters above the ground, pivoting the ship so the forward weapons had a clear shot at the camp. Various bits of debris either rolled, bounced or floated, depending on where they were in the damaged and still-fluxing gravity field on the bridge.

Casey took note of this and shook his head. "And I just got those dampers tuned up."

A moment later, the ship was in position and everyone was busy at their stations, when Twitch looked up and rotated her head slowly back and forth. "What is that?"

"What is what?" Casey replied.

"That sound. Kind of a high-pitched keening. That damper's not going to do anything inconvenient like explode, is it?" she said pointedly to Casey.

"Naw. Compression coil'd have to be physically removed before there'd be any danger of that," Casey said, then listening. "I don't hear anything."

"I do," Tommy said. "Just now. Like metal grinding on metal... really fast. I think it's getting louder."

They all sat listening. But it wasn't long before they could all hear it just fine. And it wasn't long past that before even covering their ears wasn't enough to blunt the deafening squeal.

"What in the name of *foo zu de nai nai* is that?" Maxi was yelling to be heard above the cacophony that seemed to be coming from everywhere. In reality, the sound was originating from outside the gunboat (managing to penetrate several centimeters of armor plating) and it had risen to a shriek in a matter of seconds.

"I got no ruttin' idea 'cept it ain't comin' from our boat. Nothing on The Big Dog could make a sound like that. I'm thinkin' minimum safe distance is what we should be establishing right about now," Casey screamed in response.

Hands dancing across the controls, Maxi said, "And what'cha think that might be?"

"As far away from here as we can git before whatever's buildin' up finishes!"

"I'm with ya on that," Maxi said. The Cerberus rolled to port and the main engines engaged. Everyone on the bridge grabbed something as the Law of Motion – now fully in effect – attempted to dislodge people from their stations.

With the Firefly's reactor positioned between the desert hideout and the rapidly retreating bridge, the crew could no longer see what was happening behind them. If they could, they would have witnessed a depression in the air forming around what could now be discerned was the center of the hideout. A swirling magnetic field had developed just above Ground Zero that was distorting the air itself. The air spun faster and faster, coalescing the desert's meager water vapor as the temperature inside the funnel dropped below freezing. If it hadn't been for the keening squeal that was just now passing the range of human hearing (it was said later that dogs halfway around the planet had all started barking at precisely

that moment), the whole thing would have resembled an upside down Ice Swirly, like they sold at carnivals all around The Verse.

Just when it seemed the air couldn't spin any faster and the squeal became something you felt, not heard, the plasma cannon reactor's final failsafe failed, and it all came to an abrupt stop. In dead silence, a huge circular wave of electromagnetic force spread from the center of the hideout. And where ever it passed, things sparked blue, caught fire or just plain blew up.

The Cerberus looked intimidating as Hell sitting on the white hot sands, bristling with guns. In the air, the ship resembled most any Firefly, a somewhat ungainly thing that none-the-less moved with surprising grace and speed. On the ground, though, it was huge and black, like a cross between a vulture and a squad of armored tanks. If a Firefly gunboat was a deliverer of fire and death when airborne, on the ground it was a dark and brooding fortress, the mere of sight of which would suck the fight out of any but the most seasoned soldiers.

As if to put in perspective exactly how big a gunboat was, Private Tomlinson walked directly under the port engine, demonstrating that even if his twin was standing on his shoulders, the top twin would still be at no risk of a head injury. And Tommy was a good two meters tall in his stocking feet.

Tommy's demeanor was relaxed, almost serene, as he meandered past the outer edge of the engine module, then turned and walked slowly to the bow of the ship, eyes always on the Big Dog. Casey appeared from around the starboard side, walking quickly and with apparent agitation, but still reaching the front of the ship at the same time as the taller man. As both men stopped and turned, looking back along the length of the boat, Twitch came down the portside gangplank of the payload bay. She was carrying a huge, black RBG (Really Big Gun), half as tall as she was and made up of a bunch of smaller tubes bundled together into a cluster as big around as one of her thighs.

She joined her two crewmates. "How's she look?"

"Fine, far's I can see," Tommy replied. "We know some internal systems are down, but nothing that wasn't already on the verge of going anyway. Might be a bumpy ride home ..."
He trailed off, looking at a distracted Casey, waiting for him to chime in.

When he realized both we're expecting him to comment, Casey said, "Nothing we can't handle."

"Case, you okay?" she asked the taller man. While Casey might run the show when they were airborne, Twitch was in charge dirtside.

"Dandy. Can we get going?" He was clearly upset about something, but also clearly not in the mood to share. She moved on.

Twitch pulled back a lever on her RBG and locked it in place. It rewarded her with an electric purr as the mag coils heated up. "You boys are armed, right?"

Case and Tommy looked at their sidearms, which suddenly seemed... inadequate next to the little woman's Really Big Gun. "Thought so," Tommy said, looking dejectedly at his chrome-plated Border Eagle. "I'm not so sure anymore."

Twitch smiled and patted the tall man's cheek. "It's okay, luv. It's not how big it is, it's how you use it that counts."

Tommy snickered but Casey only had eyes for the hideout's entrance, about 100 paces ahead of the Cerberus. Before they could move toward it, though, Maxi's voice boomed from a loudspeaker like the announcer at a speedball game: "So, you all gonna stand around comparing lengths all day or are you goin' in there?"

A murderous look on his face, Casey pressed the "speak" button on the communicator box stuck to his left shoulder strap. "Nice going, you *du yan biao zi de yin jing!* Way to maintain the element of surprise."

Maxi replied, this time using the communicator: "Surprise who? After the ELM pulse that collapsing reactor ran through that place, there ain't nothing above ground left movin' and you know it."

A pained expression crossed Casey's face, and he took a breath before replying. "Right. And what about below ground? These *hun dan* have been here a while. Sure as a companion likes pretty dresses they got themselves all kinds of hidey holes."

"Then let's just blow a new hole in this *fen ken* and be done with it. Not like anyone's gonna notice one more crater on this rock." Maxi replied. "Or let's go back to base and pick up a marine squad and come back tomorrow."

"Actually, that's not such a bad idea, Case," Twitch interjected. "A mechanic, a navigator and one heavy weapons tech is hardly an expeditionary force, you know. Could be all kinds of unexpected trouble in there we're not equipped to handle." She said, as gently as she could. Something was making Casey want to storm this particular castle. What it was, she couldn't hazard a guess. But she needed to remind him others lives were on the line here, too.

A look a betrayal briefly visited Casey's face, but he wiped it off with his left hand. "Twitch, whatever they were going to all this trouble to hide might be important enough not to give it time to walk away," Casey said.

"Aw, c'mon, Case!" Maxi said over the comm. "There ain't nothin' left breathin', much less walkin' in there. Let's let Support Ops do the clean-up. It's their job, anyhow."

"I ain't got time for this, Maxi," Casey shouted into his comm unit. "Just shut your *man zui pen fen* and keep an eye out. We're going in; call us if anything moves that shouldn't." Casey paused, then added, "And if something does move, don't shoot it until I say so, *dong ma?*"

A crackle of static over the communicator was followed by a grumbled "whatever," then silence as the channel was closed.

Casey held his gun at shoulder height in both hands, sighting it along his extended arm and started for the ramp down into the Streeter base.

"Hey Case, why don't you take point?" Twitch commented under her breath. "It's always good to have the ship's mechanic lead the way in a ground op." She gave Tommy a quick look who shrugged. After a moment, they both followed, weapons ready.

The interior of the base was both better and worse off than what you might expect after seeing the exterior. Better, in the sense that most everything was still intact. It was true that anything electronic in nature was now fused solid and that fires had made short work of the canopy. However, once the fires had run out of fuel they extinguished themselves quickly enough. Most anything of value was sealed up in sand-proof hard cases which were also fireproof. The result being the base itself was largely undisturbed, with stacks of untouched contraband everywhere.

The worse of it was anything organic was fried to a crisp. As the three moved from chamber to chamber, they were greeted by the charred corpses of dozens of streeters, cooked from the inside out. Even for veterans like Casey and Twitch, this level of carnage was a new experience. And the smell – the smell was something that would decorate their most colorful nightmares for years to come.

The deeper they went, the darker Case's mood became. Twitch and Tommy were both disturbed by what they saw, and Tommy had wretched so hard at the sight of the first pile of exploded bodies it seemed he was throwing up meals from a month ago. But for Casey, it was more than the horror of death by microwave, it seemed personal.

When they reached the first underground entrance, there was movement in the dark below. Case dove directly into the cavern without even the benefit of a light. Luckily, whatever fight might have been in the survivors was now completely gone. And as he rifled through the dozen or so dazed and disheveled streeters, they simply staggered up out of the hole, shielding their eyes from the light and their noses from the stench.

When he'd run out of live streeters, Casey came up out of the hole, the look on his face even darker. He started down the next unexplored corridor, not waiting for his companions. Without a word, Tommy led the survivors back out and Twitch followed Casey.

They found two more underground storehouses (that's what they were being used for), but none with as many survivors as the first. In the end, the Cerberus would only be returning with 18 prisoners out of the hundreds of streeters who'd been at the base.

After what seemed like days of searching, Case, Twitch and Tommy – who had since rejoined his crewmates – reach a deadend chamber at the outer edge of the base. This chamber was dominated by a large cluster of terminals at it's center which, unsurprisingly, were blackened and smoking.

"Weapons control," Twitch observed, and moved quickly to the consoles. Tommy started to walk the perimeter of the room, checking under piles of debris for any signs of life. There were two charred corpses by the control cluster, and another under a pile of boxes to one side. And lots of cables, crates and conduit scattered everywhere.

Casey leaned against a wall and holstered his gun. "Guess that's it, then," he said, looking at the ground like it might at any moment tell him a story.

"I don't understand what's gotten under your skin, Case," Twitch said as she inspected the base's weapon controls. "I mean, it's horrible. But these were no angels and would have happily cooked us all like a Blue Sun Instameal if their weapon hadn't backfired so epically."

At the word, "angels," Case put hand to his face. "Don't matter none now," was all the big man said.

A long silence ensued as Twitch finished her inspection of the console and Tommy kept moving along the outer edges of the room.

Finally: "I think I see what caused their weapons malfunction," Twitch said. But when she said it, she wasn't looking at the console, but the two corpses laying at its base. "Seems the operators pushed the 'stab me with razor-sharp knives' button by mistake."

Casey's head snapped up and he charged across the room. He inspected one of the corpses and, after a moment, extracted a steel shiv from it's neck. The other corpse had a similar bit of neckwear. He stood, looking the blade over, but before he could comment, Tommy spoke up from the far end of the room.

"I'm no Academy electronics genius or anything, but I'm pretty sure conduits aren't supposed to breath."

In an instant Casey ran to where Tommy was standing and started sawing through the conduit with a shiv. Tommy followed suit with his belt knife while Twitch took a step back and leveled her RBG. The nickel titanium ribs that ran the length of the conduit, normally used to cinch wires and piping in place, had contracted way beyond their design spec due to the overload of electricity. As a result, the conduit looked like a giant silver burrito with a roughly human-shaped lump in it's center.

After a few moments of enthusiastic cutting they had it open, and from it's center, emerging like a fairy princess from a peapod, was a stunningly beautiful woman of truly Amazonian proportions.

Twitch lowered her gun and gaped. Tommy just gaped. Case cracked an enormous grin and went to help the woman up, but she held him at bay with one hand while dusting herself off with the other.

"How truly disheartening to be such a mess when two fine gentlemen come to my rescue," the woman said. After a moment of additional primping, including one dramatic hair flip, the woman judged her appearance acceptable and removed her hand from Casey's chest. "Come here, you," she demanded, grabbing Casey's bicep and pulling him into a generous hug.

Casey whispered "Angel," and the sense of relief flowed off him like water.

After a long moment of trying not to stare and failing miserably, Twitch cleared her throat: "I hate to interrupt this touching moment, but I'm imagining some introductions – if not outright explanations – are in order right about now."

Casey and the woman parted, both smiling warmly at each other. They stood apart, the woman continuing her personal inspection while Casey turned to his two crewmates.

"I'm sorry. Let me introduce you to the deadliest –"

"– and most stunning," the woman interjected without looking up.

"– and most stunning operative in the entire Independent Militia; Corporal –"

"- Sargent," she added, earning a raised eyebrow and sideways glance from Casey.

"- Sargent Gloria Dey."

"Gloria Dey?" Twitch asked, incredulous. "Really?"

"Yep. But y'all can call me 'Blue'," the woman purred.

"Riiiiight." Twitch responded, then turned on Casey, giving him a look that could decalcify the spines of lesser men. "Okay, explain. Make it good and make it quick."

Casey stood speechless for a moment, realizing for the first time that not everyone was as happy as he was with the surprise inside this particular king cake.

"Oh Honey," Blue said with a laugh at Casey's hesitation. "I'd do what she says. Annoyed and heavily armed is not a good combination in a lady." She paused, and then, "I speak from experience."

"Well, um..." Casey stalled, as his mind raced, trying to come up with a version of the truth that would keep all his man bits attached and functioning. "Remember how I mentioned we had a Plan B?"

"Yes?"

"Angel, um, I mean, Blue here was it."

"It, what?"

"Plan B," Casey replied, attempting a disarming smile that somehow failed to disarm the weapons specialist.

"Okay. I think I'm going to need a little more explanation than that," Twitch said.

"Yeah, well..."

"Oh dahlin', by the time you tell the story, war'll be over and we'll all have solid gold pagodas on Sihnon," interrupted Blue. Turning to Twitch, she continued. "You seem like a young lady who appreciates brevity, so I'll cut to the episode summary: Case and I go way back - more on that later, if you really want to hear it, but the only thing that matters is I've known the man long enough to know there ain't no better to have your back in a situation. And as for situations, you might say that's my line of work - creating them and ending them."

"She's an Operative," Tommy interjected, with a look of awe.

"Oh honey," Blue said, running hand down Tommy's cheek, "you been subscribin' too many action waves. Let's just say when the Independent brass want something done quiet and quick, I'm their girl."

"Not so much with the quiet this time," Twitch observed.

"Yeah, well, that wasn't the plan," Blue responded. "Case and that big ole bird of yours was supposed to distract the residents so I could get into some of the more secret places in this here base without drawing undue attention to myself."

Twitch gave Case an absolutely foul glare. "Happy to help, *Blue*. Oh wait! That's right, we had no idea we were helping. Biggerall, Case."

Casey opened his mouth to say something, but Blue cut him off. "Oh sugar, he couldn't say anything. This is all covert – need to know and all that. Hell, I couldn't say anything, but I needed that distraction and Case is the only man on Persephone I trust as far as I can peg him with a knife.

"And, if you pardon me for sayin' so," she continued, "that boat of yours is totally SI – standard issue – if you came stumbling across a hidden bootlegger hideout while on a patrol, well, it wouldn't look too suspicious. Of course, going in I had no idea these *shu-lian chou shi dan* were packin' such heavy artillery." She laughed, "Just shows you really can't judge a man by his hands."

"You could have signaled Case, warned us off," Twitch observed.

"No, she couldn't," Casey said, finding his voice. "These are Steeters. No comms but open civilian comms. She brought a keyed communicator in here, she would have lit up their detection grid like New Year's fireworks."

"So, all was left for me to do was take out their weapons crew before they could fire on you," Blue added.

"A bit late on that, weren't you?" Twitch said.

"Yeah, well, it's a big place and I didn't have a reason to reconnoiter weapons control until we were in the moment," Blue countered. "But once I got here, their boys already had the gun primed and on autofire."

"So you're only remaining option was to blow the whole gorram place up?" Twitch said, her voice elevating, the tour of Hell they'd just taken fresh in her mind.

For the first time, Blue's smile faded and she looked at the ground. "That wasn't the plan, either. But I'm more the human resources type; don't know much about weapons systems and such. Pushed a few buttons at random, saw the clock was almost to zero, so I yanked out the biggest bunch of cables I could find."

Blue paused, then: "I'm real sorry about that. They were bad guys, but this weren't no right way for anyone to go."

There was a moment of silence as Twitch, hands on hips, stared down the blond Valkyrie a good half-meter taller than she was. Then she smiled and relaxed her stance. "Oh bollocks, that! If you hadn't done what you did, we wouldn't be here to give you *da tiao*."

"Besides," Twitch continued. "At least it wasn't a calculated act and you're not one of those perfect little –, " she paused, slowly looking up a half-meter of Blue, "–perfect *big* military types, always with the plan that doesn't give a *jean ta ma cao dan* who gets humped in the process. There's more than enough of that type in this war."

"Just glad to see you're as big a screw-up as the rest of us," Twitch concluded.

Tommy snickered and Casey cracked a big grin. But Twitch turned on him, poking a finger into to his broad chest. "Don't assume this gets you off the hook, bucko, not by a long shot."

She may trust you like Buddha himself, but you got yourself a mighty five-course dinner of crow to eat before you get back in my good graces."

Tommy, sensing the need for a subject change, asked, "So, if it's not classified, what were you in here to find?"

"Not entirely sure," Blue responded. "Intelligence heard rumor of this base, but were at a loss to explain how a bunch of streeters got the kind of scrip it takes to set up digs like this, so they sent me in to reconnoiter.

"I was here a couple days and got into most every nook and cranny, but didn't find a thing outside what your friendly neighborhood blackmarket runners would have," she continued. "Just don't add up."

"But then..." Casey prompted.

"But then," Blue gave him an electric smile, "I got clear of the idea of looking at what they were guarding and started looking for what they weren't."

Tommy raised an eyebrow, "What they weren't guarding?" But this time it was Twitch who came through with the assist:

"Sure. The best way to hide something no one expects you to have is to pretend you don't have it," she said. "Guards and security are as good as hanging a sign out that says, 'valuable and/or illegal stuff, inquire within'."

"So, all I needed to do was to watch what places they they were going to pains to pretend weren't important to them, and more than likely, that's where their most important stuff was," Blue concluded.

"So, the whole diversion – us buzzing the base for hours – was so you could go check those places out?" Tommy asked.

"That *was* the plan, honey" Blue replied. "But then y'all got them just a tad bit too riled, and violence, as it so often does, ensued."

"Okay, I get all that," Tommy said. "But we've been through this place one end to the other and haven't seen anything out of the ordinary – besides piles of charred streeters, that is."

Blue turned to Casey. "You been in all four vaults?"

"We've been in all three vaults," Casey replied.

"Ah, well then, that there would be your problem," Blue observed, her voice mellowing to a purr. "There's always one hole they keep so well hidden, even most of their own people don't know about it."

"And you know where it is?"

"And I know where it is." With that, Blue started walking out of the chamber.

As it turned out, the fourth vault was in a big camp kitchen at the center of the streeeter's

warren, under a particularly imposing refrigeration unit. It took Blue, Casey and Tommy (with Twitch in her usual "shoot anything suspicious" pose a couple meters back) to move the heavy metal box, exposing the trap door underneath.

"How... the Hell... did you ever... find this?" Casey said out of breath and hands on his knees, pausing every couple of words to pant.

"Oh darlin', did you ever know me to meet a man I couldn't get what I wanted from – one way or 'nother," Blue said, standing tall and as composed.

Everyone waited a moment longer for the engineer to recover, and then Blue said, "Let's open our Christmas present a bit early, shall we?"

Everyone took positions without hesitation: Twitch on point with her gun pointed down at the hatch, Case and Tommy pistols drawn and to either side of Twitch. And Blue with her hand on the handle, standing behind where the hatch would open.

On a silent count of three, Blue yanked the hatch wide open and Twitch hit the thumb switch on her gun, casting a bright beam of light into the hole.

A quick sweep of the vault showed several large crates, shadows and nothing else.

"Sorta anticlimactic," observed Tommy, who was now looking down into the opening along with everyone else.

"Ah'll say," Blue agreed. "Anticlimactic and more than a little bafflin'."

"There's nothing for it, then," Twitch said. "Let's get down there and see what's in these innocent looking boxes that was worth so much trouble to hide."

A few minutes later all four had descended the metal ladder and spread out around the room. The vault was much larger when you were standing in it than when you looked down from above, so each turned on a flashlight and took a corner.

For the next while not much was heard except the cracking open of crates. Once or twice an appreciative "hm" could be heard. But without further comment it was understood by all four the item might be valuable, but wasn't significant.

Then...

"Um, Case," Blue said. "When you got three black pie slices pointing at each other with a circle in the middle, does it always mean what I think it means?"

Blue's three companions stopped what they were doing and turned slowly around, casting their lights on her. "They, ah," Twitch coughed, swallowed hard, and started again. "You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure, yeah," Blue replied.

Casey was silent, so it was left to Tommy to say the word none of them were anxious to hear: "They got a *nuke*?"

"Alliance nuke by the look of it. Got their ugly buzzard all over the casing," Blue observed.

"Ah," Casey croaked, "guess the important thing to know is it, you know, armed?"

"Not so's I can tell. But like I said before, big weapons aren't really my department," Blue replied. It was clear from her complete lack of movement that she really *wasn't* sure, and was going to great pains not to confirm her guess the hard way.

Twitch began to walk – slowly, carefully – in Blue's direction, reciting a sonnet of Hindi curses. Casey raised an eyebrow at this, but said nothing. He knew Twitch only cursed in her native tongue when she was really, really pissed – or scared out of her wits.

It seemed like the longest walk of her life. But Twitch finally arrived at the crate. Blue was still frozen in place.

"Okay, I need you to move very slowly away so I can get a full view on the interior. Can you do that for me?" Twitch's tone carried neither fear nor anger, but was cool and professional. Blue complied, barely lifting her feet as she crept back a meter to the wall of the vault.

Twitch slid the flashlight attachment off her gun before gently laying the weapon on the ground, and then proceeded to examine the contents of the crate. After several moments during which nothing moved but her light, Twitch lowered herself (she had been on tiptoes to see inside), and hit the Talk button on her shoulder comm.

"Maxi? This is Twitch. Looks like we're going to be setting two extra places at the dinner table tonight." A blast of static and something like words came through the speaker, but apparently only Twitch could make them out.

"Well, one I'm guessing you're going to be *very* happy about," she looked meaningfully at Blue. "The other... let's just say you'll have a great story to tell your grand kids, assuming you ever procreate... and assuming we survive the trip home."

Lux was just beginning to set beyond the landing platform, the endless desert striped with shadows. And there, still standing upright and alone, was Captain Casteel. She'd been standing there for hours, moving only occasionally, either trying to raise her new command or just to keep her legs from locking in place. But they were out of range or not answering, neither of which explained why they weren't where they were supposed to be – parked, on the ground, in front of her, *hours* ago.

The Captain was a patient woman and waiting did not in of itself present a problem for her. Until she officially took possession of her new ship and crew, there was literally no other place for her to be. And she wasn't entirely idle during the long wait. No, it gave her ample time to devise many, many ways to thank her new team for leaving her baking under Persephone's protosun in the middle of nothing.

Fact was, she felt like a gorram idiot. But she'd be damned if she'd call the TCO for a ride back to base. She didn't care how long it took for her command to show up; even if it meant they'd find nothing but her skeleton, standing at attention and scoured cleaned by the desert winds. Their first sight on stepping down the gangplank would be her unhappy, possibly skeletal, face.

Then, when it seemed she might have to build a campfire and settle in for the night, the roar of jets came seemingly from nowhere. And a giant, black Firefly settled gently on the landing mark.

She smiled to herself. Now she would be paid back in full, with interest, for her wasted day.

Little curls of smoke rose from the ground as dust devils careened madly across the platform. The big outboard engines completed their shutdown cycle and rotated their business ends up and level with the ship. A minute or two passed interrupted only by the pings of cooling metal. And then, with a burst of air from hidden hydraulics, the starboard-side gangplank dropped slowly from the payload bay, exposing the boat's darkened interior.

First down the ramp was a small, dark-skinned woman with long, midnight black hair held back in a red bandana. She wore a black tank top and olive green fatigues with a pair of dog tags dangling loose around her neck. Her brown leather belt had a standard-issue holster with a totally non-standard Callahan MaxLoad cradled inside. She wore big, black-lensed sunglasses, the kind that would ensure she'd be able to sight a weapon even in the brightest glare the desert sun could muster. Although she was small, she was lean and tightly-muscled. She moved with an economy of motion that suggested she got that way through rigorous training and daily exercise. Everything about this woman said she went first into a situation, and for good reason.

The woman came to the base of the ramp and moved to the right five paces where she stood at parade-rest, hands clasped behind her back and staring straight ahead. A couple beats later, another crewmember came down the ramp. While roughly the same height, the man shuffling out of the ship couldn't have been more the opposite of the woman who preceded him. "Man," Captain Casteel thought, only because she knew goblins were fairy stories.

Short, pudgy with an infestation of curly black hair that covered his head entirely and a good portion of his face as well. He wore a tan jumpsuit which looked like it had been dutifully capturing samples of every meal the man had eaten for over a month. To call his uniform a disheveled mess would be an insult to disheveled messes. He was, in a word, an eyesore – it literally hurt to stare directly at him for too long.

He came to the bottom of the ramp with a look of mild confusion until he saw his shipmate standing to his right. He examined her military stance, shrugged his shoulders, and walked over to loiter next to her. He turned to the Captain, making a halfhearted attempt at a smile and wave. When this elicited nothing, he drop his hand and – yes, wait for it – vigorously scratched his rump.

Next out of the ship was a tall, impossibly thin young black man who strode down the ramp with his hands in his pockets and a look of tranquility on his face. Although he moved faster than either of the two before him, something about the way he held himself suggested he was in no particular rush. Once he reached the line-up, he stood, head-and-shoulders taller than his crewmates, but not at attention. No, if anything it was more like how a tree stands. He was just there and if it seemed he was in formation, it was only because people just happened to be lined up next to where he was planted.

When no one else came out, Captain Casteel walked stiffly to the first person in the line and looked her up and down. After a moment, she addressed the smaller woman: "Name, rank and assignment?"

"Corporeal Moria Patel, 12th Cavalry Division, currently serving aboard the I.S.V. Cerberus as Heavy Weapons Specialist and Tactical NCO," she replied.

Casteel nodded slightly, as if this was exactly the response she expected. After a moment's

pause she moved – somewhat reluctantly – to the next crew member in line.

"And who, or perhaps I should be asking what, are you?" She looked down at the man, curling her lip involuntarily as the odor of his last meal wafted up into her face. Beans. Maybe with a side of very old cheese and mashed up garlic?

He looked up and smiled in what he no doubt thought was a disarming manner. "Lieutenant Maxwell Greenfield The Third, Pilot Extraordinaire, sir! T'ain't no one better at teasing the best out of The Big Dog here. At least ways at this ass-end of the war."

The Captain looked genuinely surprised. "Lieutenant ... really?"

"Yes sir. And my momma was so proud when they pinned those bars on me, we all thought she might come right out and smile, though no one had seen such a thing on her face for going on 30 years and then some."

"So, am I to take it you are the ranking officer on this boat?" The Captain continued, choosing to ignore the whole familial aspect of the conversation.

"Yes sir!" Maxi said brightly.

"So, you're in command?"

"No sir!" Maxi replied in the same tone of voice.

"Well ... wait, what?" the Captain stuttered, the conversation having once again left her in the weeds.

"Unfortunately, that singular honor falls to me," came a disembodied voice from the darkness of the hatch.

A moment later, an older man came down the gangway, tall and broad, steel-gray hair, deep-set blue eyes bracketed with lines that spoke of humor and worry. He walked to the bottom of the ramp and stopped, assuming parade rest and waiting for the Captain to recover herself.

She did. She walked right past Tommy to look Casey in the eye. "And you are?"

"Chief Petty Officer Casey Brandice, I.S.V. Cerberus' Engineer and Acting Captain," Casey replied.

"And why, pray tell, is a non-com in command when there's a ranking officer on board?" Casteel said. Yes, she'd been thrown off by the ... unorthodox nature of this new command. But she'd be humped if she was going to let her subordinates run this first encounter totally to their liking.

"What, you want Lieutenant Greenfield there to be in command?" he replied.

Maxi, for his part, was still smiling like an idiot.

"Um, no. I suppose not." Casteel conceded. Then: "Okay, *Acting Captain*, perhaps you care to explain why it is your boat is now..." she consulted the chronometer on her wrist "...7 hours, 32 minutes and 54 seconds late picking up your new commanding officer? Command suit you so well you decide to hold on to it for a while longer?"

"Not hardly," Casey observed. Twitch snorted, Tommy smiled and Maxi guffawed.

"I see you've earned the respect and undying loyalty of your crew, Acting Captain Brandice," Casteel said, then turning to the rest of the crew, "However, I fail to see the humor in this conversation. But maybe that's just me. I hear tell the Persephone sun can bake the humor right out of a person, they stand under it for long enough!"

Twitch snapped to attention. Even Tommy made the effort to stand a little straighter. But Maxi continued laughing like the Captain hadn't said a word.

"ATTENTION!" Captain Casteel bellowed. At that even Maxi got the message, shut up and made an effort to stand up straight, although in his case it was hard to tell.

"I can see we have our work cut out for us," Casteel observed, speaking with authority but no longer shouting. "I know the Independent Militia is largely volunteer, full of true believers, those with nothing better to do and fools," at this the Captain looked pointedly at Maxi. "I know volunteers think that word means they get to choose which rules to follow and which they can cast aside. And I've heard tell that military discipline is a dirty word in the *support* functions, although I'll admit this is the first time I've seen it up close and personal." She stressed the word "support" and got exactly the result she was looking for: The crew bristled. Even Casey stopped smiling.

"But things on this boat, they're going to be different from now on. We *will* follow the rules. We *will* be disciplined. We *will* be in a *clean* uniform and show the proper respect for our superiors and the chain of command!"

"And when we're ordered to a rendezvous, we *will* be on time. Not hours late, not even minutes late, but exactly, precisely on time," she said.

"Because if we aren't, if you don't follow each and every rule in the book, if you don't obey every order I give you like it's God's Holy Word, you won't have to worry what the devil will do with your corrupt and shriveled souls when you die. Because compared to the Special Hell you'll be living in until you do, an eternity enjoying the hospitality of Stan himself will seem like a Sunday picnic."

"Do I make myself CLEAR?" She concluded.

No one said a word as the Captain locked eyes with each of them in turn. After she was done, Casey was the first to speak:

"Crystal clear, Captain," Casey said, a smile returning to his face. "As for us being late, I'm afraid we got all caught up shopping for a Captain-warming gift and plum lost track of time."

For the third time in as many minutes, Captain Casteel was lost. "Present? What? What do you mean?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Casey replied, then, shouting back into the ship: "Blue, can you bring our shiny new Captain her gift?"

A moment later, the blonde warrior woman pushed a hand-truck with a tall octagonal box sitting on it down the ramp. The radiation warning icons and Alliance Eagles could be seen clearly on it's outer casing, along with a big digital display that said "NUCLEAR PAYLOAD:

OFF, LOCKED" in English and Chinese. It also had a big pink ribbon on top and card on the front that had "Welcome Captain!" and "Yes, I'm a Nuke!" handwritten in block letters on the front.

Blue got to the bottom of the ramp and parked the nuke upright, standing to one side and bowing with a flourish. "I also do shindigs and weddings," she drawled, a huge, dazzling smile on her face when she straightened up again.

Captain Casteel looked at the nuke, then at her new crew – now all smiling like cats – then slowly back to the nuke.

"Huh."