

1 - Mat

"Apex Mining CEO Alexandria Reinhardt says that mining on Ganymede is the next natural step, not just for the company but for everyone. UN Council Deputy Secretary-General Saddler confirmed Apex Mining's charter to establish an outpost on Ganymede but did not comment on the large private security escort that Apex contracted with to protect the miners. In an interview earlier today Reinhardt stated that an increase in security was necessary because of the escalating piracy out-system."

Matthew Middleton sipped his coffee through the straw of the drinkbox and watched the screen. The image of the newscaster changed to the bulky, ubiquitous ore haulers of the out-system, these bearing the Apex Mining logo. A dozen other ships that were military in design, but not quite military spec, hovered around them. On the side of the screen a still shot of the platinum blond Reinhardt appeared.

"I think the question that everyone wants to know is who does she mean by everyone? The Martians ... Earthers? Or the mining consortiums?"

Now there were two newscasters, throwing questions at each other. Mat liked to stay informed, but his attention had drifted from the newsfeed to his reflection in the screen. There was some gray in the five o' clock shadow covering his chocolate face. The same for his close cropped black hair.

"In other news, Martian Governor Shultz is hopeful that the UN Council will come to the table and discuss an open market for raw ore ..."

Today was his birthday. He was forty-three. Twenty years ago he would have been described as good-looking. *It's been awhile since that mattered*, he thought and grinned at himself in the screen.

The handcomm in the pocket of his coveralls beeped and he fished it out. "Go ahead."

Haydon's image appeared on the small screen and he said, *"Boss, the last canister is full."* The ex-soldier and somewhat mechanic was leaving the Flight

deck, heading to the main access tube, the *clicking* sound of his magboots snapping on the deck as he went carried over the handcomm.

In out-system there was a lot of time for self-contemplation. He could continue this session for the next several days, but later.

"Okay, wake Yuri and have him pull us up. I'm going outside to check the clamps."

Mat sucked down the last of his coffee and left the *Sadie's* small galley.

The aft maintenance hatch was two decks down, in Engineering. As a recourse of physics and money— mainly money— mining ships tended to be cramped, its space given over to fuel and thrust. The *Sadie* was no different— as a recourse of Mat's money. Engineering occupied the full twenty meters of the forward section, but it was less than fifteen meters floating down from the galley and through the cargo deck.

Mat pushed himself down to the deck, activated his magboots, and walked to a monitoring terminal. Everything green, the system confirmed the clamps were holding tight. But, Mat was a hands-on kind of guy, and he would go out and check them.

His handcomm beeped again. This time it was Yuri, bleary eyed but sober. Mat couldn't quite bring himself to keep all the alcohol off the ship, but if he bought too much the depressed Russian pilot would drink himself into oblivion.

"*Hold on, kep,*" Yuri told him, his Kasimov accent coming through.

Mat planted his feet apart and grabbed a handhold next to the terminal. On his worst day Yuri could fly the *Sadie* in a straight line without turning them in to marbles in a tin can. There was a brief shudder and a jerk as Yuri fired up the main drive, then the ship began to move. A couple of minutes later the maneuver was done.

In the one-man airlock Mat pulled his vac-suit's helmet down and watched the HUD come to life. He cycled the airlock and waited for the status light to turn before working the lever to release the hatch. When it opened he was staring into the hazy stratosphere of Saturn. Yuri had pulled them up perhaps five-hundred kilometers from the uppermost layers of atmosphere, where the buzzard collectors sucked in the gases and sorted them into the canisters. The *Sadie's* aft section, a fuel tank and massive thrust assembly, was directly overhead. Below him the planet stretched in all directions.

Climbing out of the hatch he clipped the safety line from the leader on his suit to the handhold just to the side, on the hull. Then, testing his footing, he turned away from the planet to walk toward the ship's forward section. Somewhere deep down he considered himself to be a romantic, and would like to say that space held some wonder for him, but he was born and grew up on the Moon. Space was the black sky of death, and experience had taught him there was nothing loving, forgiving, or beautiful about it. When he crested the Engineering deck's hull two of the giant, cylindrical canisters came in to view, surrounded by that black sky.

The *Sadie* was at least thirty years old when Mat bought her, and the years of exposure to the cold of the void, run-ins with dust and debris, and the pressure of high thrust, had been taking its toll. Her hull plating was showing signs of stress, and every time he sat foot out here a mental image of his bank account flashed in his mind. A worrying image.

A two meter gap ran between each canister and formed a natural path across the hull. Girders welded to them kept them flat against the hull. Making his way forward, Mat walked by each clamp on the girders, checking its status light. He was walking back, between the number two and number three canisters when Yuri's face suddenly popped up in his HUD across the open channel. If the *Sadie* was showing her thirty years, Yuri's glassy eyes and grizzled face was showing his fifty. Haydon was behind him, bent forward, his head out of the camera's view.

"Are you sure you're reading it right," Haydon said.

Yuri was irritated. *"Yes, yes, now give me some room."* He checked his screen then looked back at the camera. *"There is another ship ... burning hard toward us. Coming up through the atmosphere ..."*

"What's the ID?"

"They are not transmitting one," Yuri told him. In the background Haydon suddenly pulled back in to view and put his hands to his head.

"Pirates," the mechanic declared. *"It was bound to happen. I said we shouldn't be this far out. I said we should stick near the Belt ... there's more UN patrols."*

Yuri simply shrugged at Mat through the camera. For the first three years Mat had the *Sadie* hauling water-ice from the Belt to the various ore drop-off stations scattered further in-system. For the last two years they collected rare gases, Apex Mining paid more for it. It was just math. This was their eighteenth run to the ringed planet and the first time for something like this to happen. Haydon's paranoid warnings suddenly seemed valid.

Mat's heart immediately started hammering. Already following his safety line back toward the hatch, he said, "Haydon, get on the gun." Haydon's second job was security, on and off the ship, and the *Sadie* had a single barrel flak gun mounted on the nosecone. They were called anti-pirate guns and most miners had them, if just for show. Considering the last time the gun was fired was as a test on the day he made the down payment on the ship it might just be for show.

"Yuri," he continued. "When they brake we'll boost. Try to put some distance between us and them."

"They are braking now," Yuri told him, his eyes flicking to his screens.

Mat cursed under his breath. It was still a good fifteen meters to the hatch. Vac-suits weren't made for running. "Are they committed?" He asked Yuri.

"Thrust just flashed ... I think they are flipping ..."

There was a growing knot of tension in the pit of Mat's stomach. The UN didn't just let you buy a ship and fly off. That's not the way it worked. You had to take flight lessons, safety lessons, crisis lessons— that last one said the best defense against a possible pirate attack was running.

"*Mat ...*" Yuri prompted.

They had to leave, now, but he was never going to make the hatch. He felt sweat start to bead on his head ... then sudden inspiration. Pulling line from the leader on his suit he sat down next to the girder holding canister two in place.

"Yuri, when I say, take us to three-gees." He ran the extra length of line through the girder and turned to brace his back against it.

"*Uhh ... while you are still out there?*" Yuri's voice was incredulous. In the background he heard Haydon cuss like a military man.

"Just do it, Yuri," he said, wrapping more line around the chest of his suit. He tied the line. "Do it now!"

He had to give Yuri credit, when he understood the order he did it without hesitating. The hull vibrated and the main thruster ignited, a plume of fire shot out from behind the ship over a kilometer long. Then every law of physics landed on him.

Red lights flashed on his HUD ... heart rate, blood pressure. Warnings. Fifteen seconds passed and his vision began to narrow ... someone was yelling at him. There was a sudden pain in his side ... the line, was the line cutting in to the suit? He knew he should panic but it was all he could do to breathe.

The acceleration wouldn't last more than a few minutes but each second felt stretched out ... then he woke up. His breathing was ragged and Yuri was telling him something. He glanced aft, and above the thruster assembly he saw the blue glow of charged ions. The acceleration was done and Yuri had switched over to the ion drive.

"Kep ... Mat, can you hear me ..."

"*Suit says he's still alive,*" he heard Haydon say in the background.

"Yes," he answered. His side hurt and the helmet's HUD was flashing red where the line was tied across his chest. Taking a breath, with shaky hands he tried to pull the knot loose.

"We have a scope on them," Yuri said. *"It is a heavy tug ... no markings from this angle, but I see turrets."*

Mat's vision was still a little blurry and Yuri's face was too big in the HUD's video link but he suddenly jerked back from the camera and started focusing on his terminal. *"They are flipping again! Message coming in ... text only."*

It took a monumental effort to pull the line loose. With heavy breaths he asked, "What'd they say?"

"They say to cut velocity and drop the cans ... and they will let us live."

Of course, Mat thought. "Can they catch us?"

"It is nothing but a Flight deck attached to a giant torch, they will catch us."

Next to Yuri, Haydon's face appeared. *"We can't drop the canisters, let's flip and I'll shoot every bullet we have at them."*

Haydon's determination was understandable. He and Yuri both had a stake in the ship— if they lost the gas harvest they lost their pay, and the canisters were leased from Apex Mining. They would have to take out a loan to pay them off. Though, he suspected Yuri would probably opt to drop them and hope the pirates kept their word.

"They won't take a shot at us as long as we have the canisters," Haydon was saying. *"They'll try to board us and force us to release them."*

"Unless you start shooting at them first," Yuri said, then looked directly in the camera. *"I do not want to die out here, kep. I have something to live for."*

If he let them, they would argue right up until the time the pirates were on them. Fighting the pain in his side and trying to stand he asked, "How long until we're in range of those turrets?"

"Maybe thirty minutes ... give or take."

"Alright," he said. "Haydon meet me in Engineering. Yuri, tell them we're cutting velocity."

Something Haydon said gave him an idea. Neither of them would like it, and it was going to be expensive. He began the painful process of walking and pulling himself back to the hatch.