



Posted on FurAffinity
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Chapter 1 *James Madford. Mechanic, Third Class*

"Hand me a hydro-spanner?" I yelled, waving my arm out blindly in Wilkson's direction, hoping he was still back there.

I had my head stuck through a maintenance panel in the roof of the hallway, and it was taking everything I had not to come crashing down. The *Serius*' artificial gravity was on the fritz half of the time, but never when I could use it.

"What the hell is a spanner?" One would never accuse Fred Wilkson of being the sharpest cutter in the kit, but I'd assumed he could at least pass me a tool.

"It's the red one. Just hand it over."

"I know that, you moron. I just want to know what a spanner is. And why the hell is it a hydro?"

I could feel the weight of the heavy metal tool slap in my palm as he spoke around the cigarette in his mouth. There were strict rules about smoking on any space going vessel, but Fred lit up every time he got out of sight of Chief Engineer McAlaster. Not that getting out from under the Chief's thumb from the Chief was a common occurrence.

"It's just another term for a wrench, thicko," I grunted as I had to all but perform half a chapter from the *kama-sutra* just to get the spanner in place to tighten the bolt that sat there, taunting me. "And as for the 'hydro' part, I haven't a clue. Must have some hydraulics in it somewhere for all I know."

A few seconds later I could hear the screech of unlubricated metal begin to turn in the distance. This bucket of bolts freighter was older than dirt. It was just an amazement that it didn't fall from the stars.

I hung in the maintenance panel until the screech rose in pitch enough that it faded from hearing, becoming nothing more than yet another vibration in the ship's hull. I had no idea what it was I'd just fixed, but the Chief Engineer had sent the two of us all the way down the ten kilometre spine of the *Serius* to do it. It must have been important.

Well, not *that* important. He had sent the two of us.

I lowered myself from the hatch, hearing the clunk of my standard issue faux-leather ship boots on the deck of the corridor. We were the only ones for miles. The *Serius* was a bulk hauler, kilometre after kilometre of unpressurized cargo modules, with only the single spinal hallway that the two of us

were in leading from the bridge and living quarters up in the bow to the engines on the stern.

It was a good thing too, considering how ancient those Cardiff style engines were. I didn't want to be spending too much time close to them. Not if I wanted to keep my hair and teeth from falling out.

I sat down on the metal grating, resting my head against the unpainted steel wall as I worked the kinks out of my spine. I'd spent the last twenty minutes rooting around in that bloody hatch, and right now every joint seemed to ache.

This was *not* what I had signed up for.

Well, okay, maybe it was, *but that's not the point!* My official title on the ship, like Wilkson, was 'Hey You'. We were the dogsbodies, the gophers, the poor saps who got to do the jobs that no one else wants in exchange for free passage while the *Serius* makes its run from Plumeal to Venalicium.

I'd played this game before, a dozen times on a dozen different ships, hopping my way halfway across the known galaxy. I normally lucked out with star liners or big multi-cluster voyage ships. Those types of barges were always looking for a load of dogsbodies to work the galley and wash the walls. This was the first time I'd actually had to put any of my limited mechanical knowledge to use.

I should have known to run the moment I met captain Bulla. He (I think it was a 'he') was Solken, a thick and overweight lizard of some sort. I'd only ever heard a few things about the Solkens, and none of them good. They would just as likely sell their own brothers and sisters still in the egg if they thought they could make a profit from it.

Not that any of the rest of the crew were much better. First Officer Crit was a right bugger, and Chief Engineer McAlaster was the only human officer. That spark-plug of a man spent more of his day yelling at Wilkson and I than he did looking after that precious reactor of his.

"Aren't you going to put the cover back on?" Wilkson asked, poking me as he took another drag on his cigarette.

"You do it," I replied, forcing down the urge to deck him. "You haven't done anything but smoke the entire time we've been down here. I don't see a single splotch of grease on *your* hands."

The thin man just snorted and blew some smoke in my direction. "Not my fault that it was you the CE ordered to fix the problem. He just told me to go with you."

"And you don't figure that he meant for you to help?"

He just snorted. "He didn't order me to, so I won't." He tossed the butt of his cigarette into an air filter on the wall and reached to light another one. "Better hop to it, rabbit. That hatch ain't putting itself on."

I vaguely considered throwing my spanner at the smug git's head for a moment. Well, he wasn't going to do any work, and that left me to get it done.

My joints popped and clicked as I stood up.

Like everything else on this death trap of a ship, the panel was age worn steel and battleship grey ceramic. The *Serius* must be two hundred years old, eight times my own age, assembled back during the Thorien reconstruction. It was designed to be able to physically land on a planet, load up an entire city's worth of raw materials, then use its massive internal nullifiers to get spaceborn again. A ship like the *Serius* could carry enough resources to construct an entire colony in a single trip.

I shoved the panel back in place and began walking down the hallway to the nearest intercom

station. The spinal corridor was laser straight, not even the curve of a planetary horizon to obscure the view in either direction. If my eyes were good enough I could see all the way to the bridge, and the impatient red faced Chief Engineer waiting there, scowling at me.

The intercom was a good fifty meters away, they only placed them every two hundred meters or so – and only half of them worked. This one, thankfully, did.

"Hello? Hello! Anyone there?" I punched the red button on the wall and shouted into the small pickup beside it. For a moment there was nothing but static.

A second later I could just hear the Scottish (or fake Scottish, I think he was putting us on) clip of the CE from the other end.

"Madford! Are you two lowlifes done back there yet? We're already behind schedule and the captain 'll have your hides for dinner if we fall any further."

"Yeah, yeah." I let a smile creep to my lips as I rested my head against the cool metal. "We're ready to go. Whatever that thingamajig is that you broke, it's whirring now."

"Fine." His voice was gruff and tiny over the speaker. "We don't have any more time to waste. Strap yourselves in. We're going to transit."

Ah, bugger. Transit jumps always made me sick, and I hadn't thought to take any vomit bags with me when we set off for back here.

"Wilkson!" I pushed away from the intercom and shouted to the man still smoking down the hallway, "Grab onto something, were going to-"

I never even got the chance to finish my warning. A second later the floor dropped out from under me as the anti-gravity switched off. We always lost gravity right before a jump, the energy was shunted into the transit drive.

No one quite seemed to be able to explain how the whole 'transit' thing worked. It was a magic black box to everyone but a few scientists who studied quantum mechanics. All we knew was that it could jump you between two neighbouring systems in the blink of an eye, even when light took centuries to do the same.

The drive was up near the bridge of the ship, sandwiched in next to the reactor. It would just take a few seconds for the charge to build high enough for the breaker to trip...

I almost had the time to count to five before the lights blinked out around me, plunging us all into total darkness and silence.

This had scared me senseless the first time I'd taken a transit. One of the effects of the drive was to knock out artificial power sources when it catapulted our particles from one side of the cosmos to the other. I'd even heard once that it had an effect on the human nervous system.

Maybe that was the reason why every time, without fail, I was violently sick.

It's not exactly an endearing trait for someone who's made a hundred transits in the last three years, but there it is. Every time I make another step in my grand mission to slum my way across the galaxy I end up tossing my socks. I'm normally a touch better prepared, with a vomit bag and all, but not this time.

Being sick in zero-G adds a grand new level to terrible. But at least the vomit generally moves away from you.

I'm betting right now that Wilkson was more than happy he was a good fifty meters down the hallway from me.

I'd just had the time to wipe the yule from my face when the reactor came back on with a burst of light from the overhead lamps. The gravity followed a second later, pulling us unceremoniously to the floor with a thud. I could hear the wet sound of my vomit following.

That was the reason they still use scary matter/anti-matter reactors like the one here – they're quick to relight after the transit is over. Just let the two sides touch and *whoosh*.

Anyone watching would have seen us light up as bright as a supernova on any scanner, the ignition of a reactor is hard to hide.

"Systems are nominal... reactor is on-line... waiting for nav computer to confirm our location." The raspy voice of Captain Bulla was echoing from every intercom on the ship, standard regulation after a transit. The jump was so jarring on people that spacing law stated that you had to announce post-jump check and confirmations across the whole ship.

"We are arrived. Welcome to NXX-1401." The Captain never smiled, but I could detect a note of relief in his voice.

The system of NXX-1401 was about as backwater as you could get while not straying too far from the standard space lanes. There wasn't much here except for a single marginally habitable planet that the codex listed as undergoing long-term terraforming. Bulla was sneaking us through here in an effort to save a few days' worth of fuel on his trade run.

Something was odd though... the voices that came through the intercom were rougher and more static wiped than was normal for even this bucket of bolts. Oh well, some stars played havoc on electrical systems, I guess this was just one of them.

The next voice over the com was First Officer Crit. As always, his growl was somewhere between a wanna be aristocrat and the annoyed whine of some oversized feline. "The long range sensors are down, and the short range are showing nothing but static. Do we have a malfunction?"

"Ignore it," Bulla said. He didn't sound concerned. "That's why no one comes here. Set course to the next way point and prepare to make underway."

It must have taken a good ten minutes to get myself cleaned up. The grey ship uniforms they give us are ugly as sin, but at least they don't tear and don't keep stains. I could just as well use the jumpsuit to patch a hull breach as clean up a spill in the galley.

Wilkson never stopped smoking the entire time. He must have burnt his way through a whole pack.

I'd just snapped my toolbox shut and begun making my way towards the zipline when the deck rocked beneath me. Now the *Serius* is an old ship and the odd tremor was hardly anything out of the ordinary, but there was something *wrong* about this one. I'm not sure what it was, the rattle was far more subtle than the lurches and starts that run through the hull when the engines are at full cruse, but this one sent the hairs on the back of my neck straight up.

Call it streetsence, but something wasn't right.

Toolbox still in my hand and bumping against my hip, I turned and pressed the scuffed cherry red button of the intercom.

I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to say, but my words were lost when I heard people screaming.

There were only three people on the bridge at any time, the room wasn't big enough for any more. Captain Bulla, First Officer Crit, and whoever the helmsman was for that shift.

I could hear Marcus, the poor sod they had at the wheel, screaming.

"--They've killed them! Oh God, we've got a hull breach! Someone's shooting at us, someone--"

And that was all.

"Hello? Hello! Marcus, are you there?" My gut felt like someone had just force fed me all the ice on Ornassis. No one answered.

Wilkson had walked up behind me, his eyes wide.

"We're under fire!? What the hell is going on? We're just a merchant ship! And not a big ticket one at that!" His voice sped up with every word. He was twitching now, almost looking ready to fall off his feet.

"Move it, Fred," I elbowed him aside as I spoke. "We need to get to the bridge."

He laid a hand on my shoulder as I passed, clutching me so tight in his white knuckled grip that my arm almost went numb.

"We can't go up there, man. They're shooting up there." He spoke in a whisper, lips barely moving as his eyes shook. "People are dying up there, James."

"Let go of me." My voice was level, but my heart was racing at a million miles an hour. I'm not a brave man, but I couldn't cower here while people were dying just up the hallway. Even people I didn't like.

"You can't..."

He'd just begun to lecture me when the lights cut for a moment. Now, it's normal to see the lights fail when we're getting ready for a transit, but at any other time that's a *really* bad sign. You need to keep in mind that a spaceship is nothing more than a tin can set adrift in the void. Everything from our lights to our air and gravity is completely dependent on a steady stream of power from the reactor. The possibility that there could be something wrong with the reactor was one of those 'worst case scenarios'.

And then the gravity cut out.

Artificial gravity is one of the most difficult and finicky things to produce in even a brand new, state-of-the-art spacecraft, likely so much as an old freighter like this.

Both Wilkson and I instantly scrambled for any handhold in reach, and that was the only thing that saved us.

One moment we were standing with our feet planted firmly on the floor, the next we're floating weightless in the corridor. Less than a minute later our nice flat hallway was suddenly a ten kilometre drop.

The artificial gravity had kicked back in, for sure, but it was at a ninety degree angle to what it should be. This was supposed to be impossible – if even one of the AG generators was out they were

all supposed to stay down. I'm guessing that the safety interlocks were one of the many things that Bulla had skimped on over the years.

There were three AG generators: one near the bridge, one in the center of the ship, and one near the aft engines. Each one manipulated gravity around it to make the floor always feel like 'down'. They were finely balanced against each other to interplay and keep us grounded.

I'm guessing that all the generators except the aft had failed. Now Wilkson and I were hanging on for dear life by our fingernails as the ten klick spinal corridor of the ship had gone all a kilter and become a sheer drop.

Wonderful.

It's not that I'm afraid of heights. Not even the drop. Just the short stop at the bottom. I'm really, really afraid of the sudden stop at the bottom.

"Fred!" My voice was hoarse as I screamed. The fact the lights were flickering again didn't help.

"James?" For once the man sounded collected. "I'm still here. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah. Just peachy." My fingers were jammed into the metal grating of the floor, feeling like they were about to tear clean off while my booted feet scrambled for purchase on the cold, hard metal.

"Get to the wall, James. You're not going to be able to keep it together out there."

I spared a quick glance above me. Wilkson was a good ten meters away, wedged between two panels that used to be part of the wall.

"Okay. Just... give me a second." I took a deep breath and slowly tried to unclench one hand from the hard metal grate. The sharp edges had already begun to cut into my fingers, oozing blood making my grip even worse.

This was not going to go well. I was in the center of the hallway, the walls on either side were out of reach.

"I can't do it, Fred. There's nowhere..." My voice cracked as I could feel my fingers, millimetre by millimetre, slipping.

"You can do it, you bastard. I'm not going to die out here alone." His voice was growing stronger as he inched towards me, down panels that were never meant to be climbable.

It felt like hours as he worked towards me, almost twice falling into the gaping void beneath us.

"Okay, James..." He was panting now, nearly as hard as I, "Just... just reach out and I'll grab you..."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one holding onto your very life with both hands right now."

"Just do it!" He gripped the wall with one hand and extend the other towards me. It was no more than a couple of feet from my face.

"Don't you dare drop me."

I shifted my weight only to feel fire shoot up my arm. Quickly, I thrust my newly freed hand in his direction. I almost missed.

It was only by the sheerest of luck that he was fast enough to snatch my outstretched fingers as my grip on the floor gave way.

I was already on my way down by the time his grip tightened around my wrist. The blood from my numb fingers was seeping down to corrupt his hold. I didn't give it time. My legs were scrambling for purchase, any purchase, on the wall. A few moments later I was comparably safe.

"Let's never do that again, okay?" My voice was rough, breathing shallow as I hung for dear life, arms and legs wrapped around some random tube that snaked down into the abyss.

"You've got my vote on that." Wilkson let out a long breath. "So what do we do now?"

"Ain't that the million credit question," I said, trying to laugh. I let my fingers slowly soften from the death grip they had on the pipe. "All I can see is what I first said: get to the bridge."

"Are you crazy, James? People were shooting up there. We're good as dead if we head that way."

"And we're not right now?" I rolled my eyes, "We're hanging by the skin of our teeth over a drop of what? Ten clicks? We haven't any supplies, not even any air or light for if the systems cut out. And what do you want to do? Just hang here until some knight in shining armour comes to save us? Fat chance. There's nothing here, and nothing but the engines if we go down. The only way is up, back to the bridge to see what happened. You never know, this could all just be an accident."

"Fat chance." He spat into the drop below. We never even heard it hit bottom.

"And you would suggest?" I was becoming impatient now, a growl growing at the back of my throat.

"Fine. Then up it is."

There was a slight problem with getting to the bridge. The bridge was 'up'. It's been a long time since I'd done any mountaineering, and neither of us were exactly in shape for this. The only good news was that the zip line was only a few hundred meters away.

The zip line was exactly what it sounded like, a quick run cable line for getting from one end of the ship to the other. We'd left our harnesses here as we walked the last few steps to the access panel I'd been so recently dangling from.

The contraption was quite simple, just a wire line that ran the length of the ship and a harness hooked to a crawler wheel that could whip you up and down it at a couple of meters a second.

We had just about reached the line when, with a sickening lurch that just about made me vomit again, we were weightless. The two of us hung there for a moment, clinging to the walls, not willing to even think of letting go. Neither of us wanted to risk the AG generators coming back online at the wrong moment and pulling us from our precarious perches.

A few seconds later the lights above us flickered again and, slowly, our feet began to settle to the floor. The right and real floor this time.

The gravity still didn't feel quite right, like I was trying to fall both forward and back at the same time, only the barest of interplay between the forces was keeping me upright. I wouldn't be half surprised if the midship AG was toast, and the fore and aft were battling with each other to try and keep us to the ground.

Still clutching to anything within reach, we made the last few steps to the zip line, both of us breathing a sigh of relief as soon as we grabbed hold of the stained and time worn straps. No matter what happened now with the AGs, the zip should be able to get us to the bridge.

"You sure this is a good idea, James?" Wilkson asked. He was already cinching himself into his harness, pulling the synthetic straps tight to his body. We normally rode the line with nothing more than just a good grip, but we'd already had enough excitement for this lifetime.

"And you would do what?" I shrugged into my own harness, yanking the straps so tight they almost hurt. The six point wraparound left me feeling like a stunt pilot, but looking fashionable was at the bottom of my list of priorities.

Wilkson was a dozen or so meters ahead of me as we slowly worked our way forward. The zip line could get us to the bridge in a matter of seconds, but neither of us really felt the need to hotdog it.

The AGs failed a dozen times in the half hour, pinballing us all over the corridor as ceiling became wall and wall became floor. The zipline might keep us from falling into the void, but I still ended up with a bloody nose and more than a few bruises as we tumbled hither and yon.

The shifting forces didn't seem to be playing well with the hull either. Every time the gravity shifted I could hear the entire frame of the craft flex. The superstructure was designed for gravity to either be on or off, not constantly switching in whatever way it felt like. The hull wasn't exactly all that thick on this tub, just the bare minimum needed to pass legal inspection.

"'k, James, we're about there, just another klick to go..." Wilkson said, stepping through another set of the pressure doors that were staggered along the hallway, his boots falling heavily on the floor.

The AGs shifted again, sending us pitching to the side, my shoulder slammed against the frame of the pressure door, almost sprawling me headlong through it. Then something began to hiss from up ahead...

Anyone with even the most rudimentary orientation in ship safety knew that *any* hissing sound was enough to run your blood cold. The best case scenario was something escaping into the ship's atmosphere (not a good thing), and the worst was a hull breach.

This just seems to be my day. It wasn't an internal leak.

The pressure door slammed shut a hair from my nose, sealing off the compartment once a drop in pressure was detected. Well, it was nice to know that at least *one* safety system was working on this ship.

And Wilkson was on the other side, alone with the breach.

Unlike what the serials might show, a hull breach is a 'really bad thing', but it doesn't necessarily need to be catastrophic. Most hull breaches are small, a single section of plating coming loose or weakening enough to bow to the pressure of the ship's atmosphere.

A centimetre or so breach would take at least a minute or so to empty the air from the compartment, and even the *Serius* had patch kits every hundred meters or so. I knew. I was the one who'd had to count them.

Wilkson wasn't dumb; he could keep his head and patch the breach. Then the pressure door

would open once the atmosphere had equalized.

This was not good, but we'd be okay.

I pounded on the door, "Get the patch kit, Fred! It's in the bright red box on the port wall! They're always right next to the pressure doors!"

He pounded back on the door once. A moment later I heard his heavy footfalls as he ran down the corridor, presumably towards the breach.

Lowering myself slowly to the floor, the sharp grating cut into my backside. I pulled off my zipline harness, it wasn't attached to anything now that the pressure door had severed the line. I did however have the presence of mind to grab the nearest handhold in case we rocked again.

Sixty seconds.

Depending on the size of the hole over there, the atmosphere could be anything from a little thin to hard vacuum. I wasn't worried yet... the patch kit took a while to finish up after it quick-sealed the breach.

A shudder ran through the floor beneath me.

No. No, no, no.

I laid a hand on the pressure door. The metal was quickly growing cold. As cold as the void.

Oh God.

Things like this weren't supposed to happen. Hull breaches weren't supposed to grow. All hulls in the last hundred years were made of ceramics that were specifically designed to prevent a tare from growing...

And the Serius was two hundred years old.

A band tightened around my chest as I watched frost grow on the pressure door. That centimetre thick metal was the only thing keeping me safe from the hard vacuum not a foot away.

Frantically, I pounded on the door, screaming at the top of my lungs as frostbite grew on my fingers. "Fred! Wilkson! Talk to me! Don't leave me here all alone! Don't leave me..."

I backed away from the door, eyeing it like it would burst open at any moment. My fingers were already numb, and the cold seemed only to grow.