

Rendezvous with Fortune.

By J. Ross Keverne.

Author's Note:

This story takes place within David Weber's Honorverse (As created for her Honor Harrington series of novels). The storyline itself and all characters are of my own creation; additionally some elements of the Honorverse have been adapted for dramatic purpose.

The briefest instant of movement that wasn't movement, a wave of nausea and the courier boat passed through the normal-space threshold into the twisting vortices of hyperspace. The woman in the Commander's uniform let her hands fall from the control consoles and slumped back into the pilot's chair.

"On reflection that probably could have gone worse." Danielle allowed herself a smile at the thought. There had been a bit of trouble on the way out but the courier boat, little more than a fuselage and an engine, not even big enough to warrant a real name, was built for speed and that had seen her through safely. Reasonably safely. Her eyes flicked to the display by her left arm. A slight power fluctuation on one of the Nodes in the aft Alpha Array, shouldn't be a problem, and if it did develop into anything the backup Beta Array was still intact and would take over.

The courier boat had been designed to ride the most powerful hyperspace currents. That was why she'd chosen her, that and the significant level of automation. Once she caught the right current nothing would be able to stop her short of her destination. Only another courier boats would be able to match her acceleration and none of them were armed. The best anybody could do now was attempt to follow her, which in itself wasn't particularly straightforward, given the head start. Not that it really made a difference. Despite her precautions her destination should be alarmingly obvious at this point; pursuit was a certainty. The chances of anything reaching her were slim, but if the situation were reversed she knew what she would do: pursue. Given the stakes a slim chance was one worth taking.

Acceleration was building. If her calculations were correct she should pick up the gravity wave inside six minutes. Provided everything went well, and she was able to manage the transition successfully, she would catch the hyperspace wave head on.

Flowing through hyperspace in a torrent of charged particles the wave would accelerate the courier boat to a relative point six light speed, which would equate to a normal space velocity of several thousand times that.

She flexed her fingers, her neck. She needed to get up, the uniform was starting to itch, she'd been wearing it for over thirty six hours; it would have to last for a little longer yet. Her destination was twenty one light years away, virtually next door in galactic terms, but still a journey that would take at least fifteen hours.

Danielle pushed herself back into the chair, running her hands along the arm rests. She could just stay there, sleep in the chair, she'd done it before and she was so very tired. When had she last slept? Three days ago? Four? It was hard to remember. Her eyes drifted up to the central view screen, and the twisting ever changing patterns of hyperspace. It was easy to get hypnotised studying it, though technically there wasn't an *it* to study. In purely scientific terms there was nothing there to see, just an endless ocean of multi-dimensional noise, which the human brain formed into a seething mass of light and colour.

"Stop it!" She sounded different. Strained to breaking point with the stress of the past few days her voice echoed in the empty cabin. She couldn't risk falling asleep, the boat was automated but navigating hyperspace was as much intuition as science. Each wave felt different and if you weren't paying attention the warped gravity would tear the boat into pieces the size of cosmic dust.

She shook her head, planted her hands firmly and forced herself to her feet.

There'd been no time before to study the interior properly, not that there was much to see any way. Courier boats weren't designed for comfort; were barely designed for human habitation. The control consoles and displays dominated the fore of the cabin, with stations for the Pilot and Navigator behind them, separated by the access terminal for the computer core and its several Exa bytes of encrypted data storage. The head and a small food processing station were in an annex to the starboard, opposite the exit hatch and secure storage boxes. A pair of two tier bunks flanked the rear bulkhead and the hatchway through to the cramped engine compartment. Empty. She'd checked that the moment she came about, she hadn't expected anybody but after the incident with the young Lieutenant she'd known better than to assume anything.

Danielle carefully removed her Pulser Pistol from its holster. She had nearly decided against taking it. Armed Naval personnel weren't unheard of onboard a repair station, but neither were they particularly common and she couldn't afford to draw attention to herself. It would have been better if she'd had more time to spend on her preparations. Biosculpt would have alleviated a lot of the potential risks but in the end the choice of when to act hadn't really been down to her, and she couldn't afford the weeks of recovery the surgery would have required.

If only she'd kept moving. The Lieutenant had recognised her but seemed uncertain. She'd seen his eyes flicker to her uniform and he was about to open his mouth when she'd fired. If they'd been alone in that corridor she felt sure she could have dealt with him without resorting to violence, but it seemed Lady Luck had been looking elsewhere.

She'd shot to wound, the shock and trauma would incapacitate him for long enough to allow her to escape. He would have to live with an artificial arm, but he was alive. The same could not be said for the Public Security Corporal who'd been following her. The super-sonic darts from the Pulser were enough to destroy an entire arm with a single hit, and the damage from a point blank burst to the chest didn't really bear thinking about. It wasn't the first time she'd killed, but she'd never had to witness it directly before. The thought filled her with disgust and maybe a little satisfaction. She wasn't about to feel sorry for a thug like that.

Holstering the weapon, she crossed to the food processing station. Normally crewed by four, the courier boat's standard stores would have included enough provisions for several weeks, unfortunately the rather unanticipated nature of this trip meant only the most basic supplies were stocked. This, she discovered upon opening the storage cabinet, consisted of four water bottles and matching sets of emergency rations. Pulling one of the bottles down she broke the seal and emptied two thirds of the contents in a single gulp. It was warm, slightly metallic, and after two days surviving on adrenaline and stomach acid nearly made her gag; still it helped. The rest of the contents she splashed over her face and head, which helped more.

The engine status display was flashing an amber warning when she re-entered the main compartment. Power levels for one of the Nodes were fluctuating again. Everything was still within the safety margins but she would have to keep an eye on it, losing a Node in the middle of a gravity wave could be fatal.

In hindsight she'd been lucky to get away without sustaining more damage. The alarms had started as she was sealing the hatch. If the courier boat had been inside one of the stations boat bays she would never have made it. As it was this particular vessel had been sitting at one of the external moorings. Unattended and awaiting a minor refit. Five minutes to warm up the engines had felt like an eternity. The status lights had barely switched to green before she was banking hard under the station, on a shortest time course for the hyperlimit.

The station itself only mounted point defence lasers clusters, but even a grazing shot from one would be lethal. So she'd kept as close to the station as she could, a little closer than she really should. Coming out from under the shadow of the huge maintenance facility she'd nearly flown straight into a support tug. The stressed gravity bands created by her Impeller drive had very nearly passed through those of the tug; if they had both vessels would have been torn apart by gravitational shear. Adrenaline and luck had combined to enable her to alter course with seconds to spare; though not before a gravity spike had nearly blown out her engine. After that it had been a long quiet flight to the hyperlimit.

The boat had never been designed for combat operations and she'd had to rely on the navigation sensors which only served to give her the vaguest idea of the panic she'd left in her wake. At least two large vessels had started moving away from the station following her course, but their acceleration was too low to ever reach her before she was free of the local star's gravity and able to translate into hyperspace.

She could see the edge of the gravity wave now on the navigation display. Right where she'd predicted it would be. There were no other gravity signatures behind her, not that it meant much. Sensor quality and range degraded rapidly in hyperspace and anything beyond about five light minutes would be effectively invisible against the tumult. Provided she maintained her velocity she looked likely to make a clean getaway.

Danielle collapsed into the pilot's chair as a wave of fatigue rolled over her; the adrenaline was finally running out. She needed to hold on for just a little longer. She shook her head, she must concentrate. A flick of her fingers and the status screens closed in; engine diagnostics, and navigation. Eighty seconds until she reached the gravity wave, her left hand moved, decreasing power to the forward Array in preparation for the transition.

Sixty seconds; she reduced power to the aft Array to match; waited.

At twenty seconds her hand moved again. The forward Array dropped off completely as it reconfigured from Impellers to Sails. The stressed gravity bands generated above and below the courier boat morphing, shifting to project outwards on either side, giant immaterial sails; ready to "catch the wind" of charged particles inside the Hyperspace wave.

Ten seconds out she powered down the aft Array, the damaged Node dropped off a little too rapidly causing the courier boat to shudder slightly before it settled.

The displays flickered and she felt the barest quiver run through the boat as the forward sails started to feel the tug of the current. Her fingers moved again and the aft Array reconfigured bare seconds before the forward sail actually caught the edge of the wave. For an indefinable moment she was balanced on the threshold. An instant later and the transition was complete; the barest moment that had seen her cover a normal space distance of several billion miles. The quiver subsided; her acceleration began to climb exponentially.

All she could do now was monitor the status displays, respond to any changes in the wave and hope nothing went wrong. From here out everything else was fully automated, following the flight plan she'd worked out days previously and laboriously hand programmed in during the hours it had taken to reach the system's hyperlimit. It wasn't the fastest flight plan the boat could managed but it was the fastest she could risk without a dedicated navigator or engineer onboard

Getting through the security checkpoints had been risky enough without trying to smuggle any data drives. Anything she took with her that wasn't part of the uniform had to be in her head. If she'd made a mistake in either her initial calculations or if her programming wasn't as good as she hoped, she'd find out soon enough. Either the craft would tear itself apart crossing out of the wave, would never decelerate at her destination leaving her stranded, or she'd survive and translate back to normal space. She felt unusually calm. There was clarity in knowing her fate was now locked down to one of three possibilities. Two really, either she would die or in about fifty hours she would arrive.

She felt the tug of the view screen, the maelstrom of colour pulling at her, swallowing her senses. The cold was starting to seep in, the last dregs of adrenaline leaching out of her. She shock herself, if she let herself close her eyes now, even for a moment she might never open them again.

* * *

The warning alarm shrieked at her, breaking though the litany of mental exercises and partially remembered song lyrics she'd been using to stave off sleep. The entire craft started vibrating. Instinct and training hit with a force her conscious mind could never have mustered and Danielle's eyes snapped to the navigation display; still riding the gravity wave, and a bare two hours from her destination. So close. But it might as well have been two years, the aft sail was rapidly losing power, the unstable Node was within minutes of giving out entirely. If it did she would lose manoeuvrability and begin to accelerate uncontrollably. With only a single sail she'd be unable to react to any changes in the wave, the slightest variation in the current would tear the courier boat into pieces.

Adrenaline flooded back with a vengeance, everything suddenly in perfect focus. She still had time. Her fingers stabbed at the keypads mounted in the armrests, she brought up the engine diagnostics display and lowered the power to both sails. Cancelled the current flight program and replaced it with a thirty degree descent, ten degree bank bringing her out of the gravity wave as quickly as possible. Lady Luck was watching her this time, and the boat reacted almost instantaneously.

The boundary of the gravity wave was visible on the navigation display now. It was going to be close...

The unstable Node gave out utterly mere seconds before she reached the edge of the wave, taking the entire aft Array with it. Forward momentum spiked as the current tore at the remaining sails. When it came, the transition was unpleasant but survivable. Bile clawed up her throat, she chocked it back, rubbed her eyes to clear the spots from her vision. The courier boat bucked heavily as the varying gravity threatened to sheer it in two but it held. The stress of translation had caused minor damage to the forward Array, but unlike its wayward twin it was holding stable. A twitch of her fingers and it powered down smoothly, the sails folding back into twin bands bracketing the boat; leaving it floating in hyperspace as a torrent of charged particles raged above.

The status displays were a spectrum of warnings lights. There was no Impeller over the rear of the boat. The damaged Node had caused a power spike in its neighbours. Combined with the damage sustained exiting the hyperspace wave the aft Alpha Array was probably going to require an entire rebuild. No warnings lights on the backup Beta Array but she couldn't be certain until she actually brought it online. A number of Nodes

in the forward Array were flashing an amber warning, but the rest were steady and again the backups appeared undamaged.

She couldn't stay here. She'd barely had time to register before, but she was no longer alone, a single gravity signature had materialized at the very edge of sensor range. Her pursuers must have removed all the safety restrictions from their engines. A potentially fatal action in hyperspace but it looked to have worked; they'd caught up and were getting closer with every moment she wasted. Compounding that, her original plans had an inbuilt time pressure of their own; the window of opportunity would only remain open for another four hours. If she didn't get there within that period, it would all have been for nothing, there would be nobody there.

Slowly she brought the forward Array up to full power, watching for any fluctuations. Whatever problems had occurred exiting the gravity wave had settled and within seconds the forward Nodes were at full power; the status display a solid green bar. She started to ease on the power to the aft Beta Array, a flash of an amber warning, then solid red. The entire aft Array was down, there was no power getting to any of the Alpha or Beta Nodes. The boat wasn't going anywhere.

Danielle slumped into the seat, her legs like stone, it was even a struggle to lift her hands. Everything blurred. A constant throb just behind her eyes. She squeezed them shut, desperate to ease the pressure increasing between her temples. The planning, the preparation, she'd thrown it all away because of that one report, she'd made her move too soon and now it was over. She should have stuck to the plan, her husband had always berated her idealism.

Just keep to the rules, he'd said, don't rock the boat and you'll get everything you wanted. He'd meant, *he'd* get everything *he* wanted. If she was being honest she'd always known that. But life with him was easy, safe, predictable. She'd had it all, the respected career, the loyal husband. Ex-husband now. She'd never really been comfortable playing by the rules, but at least she knew what those rules had been.

Then one day it all changed. In the space of a few hours she'd gone from the model citizen to the outsider. From respect to distrust in the time it took to reach her office. Her husband had seen the way the wind was blowing before she had, left her when it became clear the new regime had no place for them. What surprised her most wasn't that he'd left, but that she barely realised he was gone. She'd kept on living, by different rules, but rules all the same. Her new superiors might not have respected her, barely trusted her, but they were intelligent enough to accept they had needed of her. She was good at her job, and they couldn't risk losing that regardless of her personal history, so she'd kept quiet and kept her career, and her life.

If it hadn't been for that one report, she probably would have continued existing that way forever.

It was such a simple thing, an intelligence brief on an enemy commanding officer, just like a thousand others that crossed her desk every day. There'd been something about this one though, something about their history, or their psychological profile, something familiar, relatable. Whatever it had been barely mattered. It had sparked something, been the catalyst she'd been waiting for but never knew she needed.

Her hands were fists pounding the armrests. There was blood in her palms, nails digging into the flesh. She was shaking uncontrollably. A myriad images flashed before her, her life in another place, another time. She gagged, nearly vomiting. It was humiliating, what she'd let herself become because it had been easier than the alternative. But self

indulgence and self pity would get her nowhere, she was a professional and it had been too long since she'd acted like one.

Deep breaths. Danielle eased her eyes open. There was a solution to this, there had to be. Her fingers relaxed, blood flowed back into her hands. "Think about it, there has to be a way to get power to the aft Array but what is it? Work it out, identify the problem and find a solution, that's what you're good at."

She stumbled to her feet. Tripped, caught herself. Clutching the back of the seat she forced herself to remember back to the engineering classes she'd taken at the academy. But it was so long ago, so many years, she'd never been a particularly skilled engineer even then, and the classes had been far from extensive.

"If both aft Arrays are down that means... what? What does that mean?" Danielle's knuckled blanched, her fingers kneading into fabric of the backrest. "Power runs to the aft junction and is split from there, yes..? Right. So if neither Array is getting power it means there's a problem with the aft junction. Power spike must have shorted it... Shit."

The junction boxes used on courier boats were almost identical to those used on warships. Sealed units designed to handle the stresses of a power hungry, military grade Impeller Drive. It meant they almost never failed, but on those extremely rare occasions they did it was impossible to simply swap them out like those on commercial vessels, changing them required a visit to a repair facility.

"Can't replace them. Need to work around the short, reroute power to the Array from somewhere else, but where?"

Danielle finally released her grip, leaned forward and brought up a schematic showing the power routings throughout the boat. Different coloured lines running in abstract patterns across a visual representation of the courier boat. Control feeds, coloured in blue fanning out from the front of the vessel. While a tangle of bright green power lines ran from the engine compartment across the boat to various other junction boxes or to the individual systems themselves.

She stared at the image, the power lines blurring and distorting in her vision. "Computer Core, there's nothing in there, could take power from that..." Her finger traced a line across the screen, "But there's not enough there. Maybe take some more from the food processing station, not like I'm going to need that..."

This was stupid. She'd never be able to transfer enough power by rerouting a sub-system here or there, and she couldn't risk attempting to re-enter the gravity wave with an underpowered Impeller Array.

There was only one option. There'd only ever been one option, and she knew it. She'd known it from the moment she saw the schematic. The only way to get enough power to the aft Array was to redirect it directly from the forward Array.

Maybe if she'd paid attention during those engineering lectures, she'd have been able to find some alternate solution. But right here, right now, there was only one way to get the aft Array powered; reroute power from the forward Beta Array, the backup Array. There'd already been a warning light from the forward Alpha Array and if it failed without the Beta Array to take over that would be it; she'd be condemned forever to hyperspace, to be torn apart by the first stray wave she encountered.

Staying here was no better. The distant gravity signature of the approaching ship was slowly but steadily gaining. Once it reached her she was just as dead. Of course it might

not be a pursuing warship, but the chances of that were much slimmer than she dared consider.

Pushing away from the pilot's chair she staggered across the main compartment.

On the floor between the bunks, just ahead of the engine room were a pair of access panels. One each for the junction boxes for the forward and aft engines.

She collapsed to her knees. Hands numb and still bleeding it took several attempts to hook her fingertips under the edge of the access panel. Deep breath, a jerk and the first panel came loose. The second panel was a little easier, and within minutes she was staring down at both junction boxes.

Recessed inside small alcoves under the floor of the courier boat, both junction boxes were identical. A single unit of rubberised black metal, each with a triplet of thick black cables running into it, attached with oversized plastic nuts. A further two cables branched off from the opposite end. Two separate outputs, one each the Beta and Alpha Arrays.

Danielle reached her fingers in and started to unscrew what she had convinced herself was the nut holding the power cable for the undamaged forward Beta Array. Her hands were slick with a mixture of blood and sweat. They were wiped off on her legs several times before she was finally able to unfasten and disconnect the cable. She reached up to mop the sweat from her brow, streaking blood across her forehead in the process.

“Going to look terrible when I get there...” She almost laughed.

Wasn't time to worry about that, she plunged her hands back into the compartment. The second nut took longer than the first and it was nearly ten minutes before she was able to pull the cable free. A few tugs produced some slack, just enough to reach the other junction box. She reached in again, the power input for the aft Beta Array now connected to the feed meant for its forward counterpart.

“Robbing Peter to pay Paul.” She'd heard that somewhere years ago, knew what it meant even if she had no idea who Peter or Paul were.

A further five minutes, she secured the cable, pushed herself back to her feet, dropped heavily into the pilot's chair “Come on, nearly there...”

Her fingers brushed the keypads, a slight change in the software configurations for the control routing through the courier boat; an override to tell the aft Beta Array to accept input from a new source, the forward backup controls.

Changes Accepted. Confirm?

“Not much choice, is there?” She stabbed the accept button; waited.

The new configuration flashed on the screen, snapping instantly from red to amber. Several seconds of bated breath later it switched to green, held steady.

Gently Danielle increased power to both Arrays, around her the various display screens flicked from Standby to Active and the courier boat started to ease forward. Velocity rising steadily, she made slight adjustments in pitch and yaw, she needed to pick up the gravity wave as soon as possible, and this time she couldn't risk anything less than maximum acceleration. Every second she waited the pursuing ship's velocity increased.

Though she would never be able to see it with her eyes, the navigation display told her she was nearing the edge of the gravity wave. She couldn't afford to waste time in the translation but nor could she risk excess stress on either of the Arrays. Timing would be everything.

Unlike her initial translation into the gravity wave Danielle aired much more on the side of speed this time. She decreased power barely thirty seconds out and waited a mere two seconds after reconfiguring the forward Array before bringing up the aft sail. The “wind” caught both sails within moments of each other, a jolt and the courier boat slipped back into the gravity wave.

As her acceleration started to build Danielle settled back into her chair, her eyes fixed on the navigation display. On one side the small, almost insignificant dot that signified her pursuers, and on the other the light years of hyperspace between her and her destination.

Both Arrays were holding and slowly it seemed, maddeningly slowly, the distance to her destination decreased.

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The alarm was supposed to alert her to the fact she’d finally reached the end of the line. She didn’t need alerting, for when the Time To Target readout on the navigation display finally ticked down to 00:00:00, she was staring right at it. Like she had been for the last twenty minutes; she’d run out of song lyrics to recite to herself nearly an hour ago.

The large gravity signature was still back there, ever so slowly gaining ground. Once out of hyperspace her acceleration advantage wouldn’t count for much. The courier boat made a very small target given the expanse of an entire star system but her potential destinations were limited. Whoever her pursuers were they would be armed, they might be slower but they didn’t need to overtake her to stop her. If they successfully predicted her course they could adjust theirs to intercept short of her target. Danielle wondered if they’d even bother asking her to surrender.

She wrenched her eyes away, she’d already delayed too long. Her index finger stabbed down. The alarm cut out, a split second of calm before her vision sheared and the world was torn apart.

Hyperspace translations were supposed to happen with a gradual deceleration, dropping the vessel back into normal space smoothly but at the expense of forward momentum. Instead Danielle had ripped through the hyperspace threshold at nearly full acceleration; it was called a crash translation for a reason.

Her entire body felt wrong. Blood flowing in every direction at once, nerves burning, a thousand and one colours bursting across her vision. Vertigo and nausea smashed into her, over her, submerging her in waves of noise and pain, until she slipped into merciful blackness.

* * *

When her vision cleared, the ringing in her ears had subsided to a faint buzz. The courier boat was intact and accelerating towards the system’s primary. Despite the effect on her own body the boat had handled the crash translation much better and though she’d lost over eighty percent of her velocity she was still travelling significantly faster than if she’d performed a standard translation.

The navigation display was clear, she'd blacked out for over two minutes but her pursuer hadn't yet translated. Whoever was in command apparently didn't want to risk their own crew by following her example. If they were following a standard deceleration model she should have a minute before they made the translation.

A slight course correction and Danielle dropped the power levels to nominal. The reactor was still active, she could reinitialise the Impellers in seconds but for the moment she was invisible to any passive sensors. She was also no longer accelerating, relying entirely on inertia.

The courier boat had been coasting for at least a minute when the navigation display flickered registering the translation of the pursuing vessel. Danielle studied the display intently as the other ship began to accelerate back up to maximum velocity. Given the strength of her Impeller signature and her rate of acceleration she had to be around the size of a Light Cruiser, maybe even a newer model Heavy Cruiser. Either way if she got within range, Danielle's chances for survival were non-existent.

As she watched a swarm of smaller gravity signatures slowly spread out from the cruiser. Eleven, no ten. Sensor drones. Within a few seconds they had coalesced into a broad cone ahead of the ship as it turned onto a new heading. Danielle mentally traced a line across the navigation display calculating the affect of that course correction.

The captain of the cruiser was being cautious, she knew she was in a hostile star system but she still couldn't risk letting her prey escape. In an attempt to fulfil her mission and keep her boat as far away from the inner system as possible she'd plotted a course that would take the cruiser in an arc around the system periphery. At any point she could either tighten the arc and intercept the courier boat as it made for the single inhabited planet, or turn back and escape across the hyperlimit. The cruiser could intercept her well short of the planet, maintain her velocity and carry on through the system for a translation to hyperspace before anybody could stop it. It was a good vector, and one that would be certain to intercept her, if the planet had been her intended destination.

As it was the cruiser's new course was taking her further away with each second, it wouldn't be long before her acceleration was so high it'd never be able to slow down enough to catch her.

Danielle shifted, pushed herself back into the cushioned chair, her arms and legs were like lead. She allowed herself a smile, as her eyes began to close, her chin sinking to her chest. Not only was she going to reach her rendezvous, she was going to do it right under their nose as well. In her mind she could see her projected course stretching out ahead of her. The asteroid belt at the edge of the system contained a number of small mining bases, serviced by slow moving cargo transports and patrolled by Fast Attack Craft. None of which were of any real concern. No, her target should be just on the edge of the asteroid belt. There undergoing a series of post-launch tests, Fortune was waiting.

The moment those deployment orders had landed on her desk she'd known her plans would have to be put into action immediately. The biosculpt would have to be abandoned; she'd never recover in time. That had been a week ago and now here she was light years from where she'd begun both mentally and physically. The vertigo still trouble the edges of her awareness, her mouth was dry, her palms otherwise.

The list of events that had conspired to set her upon this path was manifold. The motive had been growing for years. The means had always been available, especially for somebody in her position. Those final intercepted deployment orders had simply provided the opportunity.

Danielle rubbed her eyes again, before letting them drift back to the dot indicating the cruiser. Already its velocity was up to point four percent light speed. A quick calculation and Danielle's smile broadened, thirty seconds longer at full acceleration and they'd never be able to reverse course in time to intercept her. Momentum was carrying the courier boat forward at nearly half the cruiser's speed, and provided her target was where she expected her to be, she'd rendezvous in approximately six hours. She could stay powered down until the final moments and the crew of the cruiser would never even know what had happened.

There was a distinct appeal to getting away undetected, in the long term it would make things easier if there was no way to confirm her fate. But that wasn't the way it was going to happen, Danielle knew it. After everything that had led to this point she wanted them to know, wanted them to see what they'd driven her to.

A tap of her finger and the Impellers sprung back to life.

Gravity sensors operated at light speed, and at this distance there would be a mere two second before the cruiser's sensors picked her up. Four seconds after that she witnessed their reaction, which wasn't what she had expected.

They must have realised they'd never be able to intercept her, Danielle thought the captain might still at least attempt to bring her back into extreme missile range. If they could manage that, they could saturate space with warheads in the hope of causing enough damage to slow the courier boat allowing for a more direct engagement.

Instead of decelerating the cruiser was tightening its arc, taking it away from the hyperlimit. Their velocity wasn't changing but there was still no way they'd be able to bring her into missile range now. Nobody could have failed to work out Danielle's intended destination by now, but this new course looked like the cruiser's captain wasn't even going to attempt to stop her reaching it.

Danielle's eyes scanned the display, analysing the cruiser's new vector. They'd pass inside the asteroid belt, cutting right through the system and exit back across the hyperlimit. Whoever her captain was they were acting like they still expected Danielle to head for the planet. The new course would intercept her on the far side of the asteroid belt. It made no sense; unless.

Her hands started moving before she'd even registered what the cruiser's new course meant. It had been a long time since she'd seen active combat, but those years were as nothing now. Engineering might never have been her area of expertise but Navigation and Tactics were. And for the first time in far too long she was trusting her instincts.

Unarmed and lacking even the most basic electronic warfare systems the courier boat had but a single defence. The same defence all vessels had; the Impeller wedge. The stressed gravity bands formed above and below the boat warped local gravity to over five hundred gees, nothing could survive such stresses.

The courier boat was spinning and rotating in space even before Danielle spotted what she was looking for. By the time her eyes focused on the tiny Impeller signature that had just appeared in her wake she was already flying sideways. The roof of her wedge between her and her pursuer.

Eleven little gravity signatures, she knew she'd counted right. Ten unmanned drones and something else. The captain of the cruiser was clearly smarter than Danielle had given them credit for. Unsure of the location and destination of their target they'd dropped off one of their pinnacles as they turned onto their new course. That was the only thing it could be, the power of the Impeller wedge meant it couldn't be much larger than her

own boat. Her position meant it must have been launched while the cruiser was starting to accelerate. The larger vessel's velocity acting to throw the pinnacle forward, requiring it's pilot to only power up the wedge once to aim them in the right direction.

As it stood the vector the pinnace was on wasn't optimal for an intercept, but it was good enough, and now that they'd brought their wedge back up they would be able to bring her into range in minutes.

Though not much bigger than the courier boat, and without hyperspace capabilities, the pinnacle was armed. Two spinal Laser mounts, designed for ground support and point defence. Far too underpowered to even scratch the paint of a real warship, they were more than enough to cut through the unarmed hull of Danielle's vessel.

The pinnacle's acceleration started to level off, a burst of speed to close the gap between them and now they were slowing. Giving their crew a longer engagement time; letting them manoeuvre for a better angle.

Projected vectors and probabilities flashed through her mind, Danielle knew it was too late. She'd be able to keep her wedge interposed between the two vessels for a while but eventually the pinnacle would overtake and with acceleration to spare her crew would have all the time in the world to take their shots.

The communications system remained on standby, the pinnacle's pilot wasn't even going to offer her the chance to surrender. Danielle cast her eyes one last time to the central display and the star dotted blackness of space. The asteroid belt was directly ahead of her invisible against the void.

So close. She'd come so close.

Onward the courier boat sped, Danielle's final defensive move meant she wasn't accelerating as fast as she could, but it also kept the open aft of her Impeller wedge away from the rapidly gaining pinnacle; delaying the inevitable for a few moments.

"They aren't there." Maybe they'd never been there. All this for nothing. She'd been a fool, should have known better.

The first shot came at extreme range, it was unnecessary given the situation, but perhaps the pinnacle pilot wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. That way they could shut down the engines and coast through the asteroid belt undetected. They were, after all, in a hostile star system.

The laser came in almost directly astern, striking the wedge and warping into myriad harmless shards of light.

Inside the courier boat the proximity alarms pounded Danielle's ears. There'd been no direct damage but that was only the first shot of many. It was simply a matter of time now.

The alarm had barely silenced when the navigation display came alive. A dozen gravity signatures winked into existence, racing in her direction. Not from the pursuing pinnacle, or even the distant cruiser but from somewhere ahead of her. Somewhere near the edge of the asteroid belt.

Maybe today wasn't going to be her last...

The missiles raced past the courier boat. A couple even came close enough to trigger the proximity alarms again. But they weren't targeted at her. She could practically see them in her mind, hurtling through space at velocities no manned vessel could ever hope to achieve.

The pinnacle's pilot must have realised what was happening, but seemed in two minds about what to do. By the time they had finally decided it was already too late. The pinnacle pulled sharply around starting to accelerate back towards the cruiser, rolling along her length at the same time to interpose her wedge between her and the approaching missiles. It was a manoeuvre that made sense, for the crew it was really the only thing they could do; it was still not going to save them.

The missiles had been programmed with almost perfect precision, and, Danielle accepted, she should have expected nothing less. In reality there had only ever been six, but the first pair carried decoy warheads that produced a mass of ghost signatures spread out in a wave giving the pinnacle no obvious direction of escape. Once they reached terminal range the decoys stopped accelerating and were rapidly overtaken by their more aggressive peers. The two pairs adjusted course, separating. Seconds later they crossed above and below the pinnacle, detonated.

X-Ray lasers exploded outwards from each warhead. A scant few were caught in the pinnacle's Impeller wedge and distorted and deflected away. The rest punched into the fuselage. Lasers designed to melt the armour of a Dreadnought flashed through the pinnacle, vaporising metal and flesh in the blink of an eye.

Silencing the proximity alarm, Danielle watched the cruiser change course. For the briefest moment she thought they might try and brave the missile fire and close to finish what the pinnacle had started. Instead the captain turned back towards the hyperlimit. In minutes they'd be free of the star's gravity well and able to translate out.

Even before the cruiser translated, a second gravity signature appeared on the navigation display. Deep in-system the ship responsible for saving her life had started to move.

She blinked at the screen, something didn't make sense. The ship was too far away, she knew that Manticorian sensors were good but at that range the missiles must have been in flight for a full ten minutes. Meaning they'd been launched even before the pinnacle had fired. They must have been travelling ballistic for over half their flight time. Sailing through the vacuum unpowered, saving all their acceleration for their final minute of life. Something that made their initial targeting all the more impressive.

Her eyes flicked to the communications display. If they'd fired her missiles that early then...

The display screen flickered into life, the inky blackness replaced by the interior of a ship, and the face of a woman. Dark cropped hair framing a slightly rounded face. Piercing brown eyes that stared straight through her. A face Danielle had seen before countless times in her intelligence file. Her voice sounded strange, she'd know roughly what to expect given her planet of birth, but the soft, yet precise, tones still sounded strange to her ears, exotic.

"This is Captain Kathryn McGrane of the Battlecruiser HMS *Fortune*, to unidentified ships. You have entered restricted Manticorian space. You will strike your wedge immediately and identify yourself." The time coding on the message indicated it had been sent nearly eleven minutes ago, barely a minute before they'd had launched their missiles, around the time she'd powered up the courier boat's engines.

Clearly whatever sensors were feeding them data had a far faster response time than anything she'd witnessed before. She'd heard about such technology, and had a vague idea as to how they had managed it. But witnessing it first hand was still astonishing. Equally astonishing was Captain McGrane's response. Even with light speed sensors she'd taken barely thirty seconds to evaluate the situation and react. She hadn't even

waited to see what the cruiser would do, she'd made a judgement call and acted immediately.

The time it would take the missiles to reach them and the distance her courier boat and the pinnacle would cover in that time was such that, even if they were able to update the missiles in flight, a few degrees out would have seen them detonating far beyond the range of either vessel. Regardless the target selection had been flawless. It looked like McGrane really was as good as her intelligence profile suggested.

Danielle reached forward and with one finger cut power to the engines, striking the wedge. The gravity bands dissolved instantly; the universal sign of surrender.

She sat back in the seat, clicked her neck and reached up to flatten her hair, wipe the blood from her face. Automatically her other hand moved to straighten her uniform. She nearly laughed; it had never been her uniform but it had served her well enough. Her pulse was racing; she'd done it, after so long. Her skin prickled, suddenly cold, the stress of the last few days draining away. She cleared her throat, opened a communications channel to the approaching HMS *Fortune*.

"Captain McGrane. This is Rear-Admiral Danielle Noble, of the Peoples... I'm sorry," she actually did laugh this time. Such a silly mistake, so predictable and yet so easy, "of the Republic of Haven, Naval Intelligence. And I wish to defect."