

The Exchange

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“Will you make up your mind already?”, said the bulky man to the small group of interested though taciturn buyers.

The trio of men wore black, unadorned exo-suits. Optical augmentations of varying quality featured prominently on their faces. They had been meticulously examining the article on sale for what seemed to be an inordinate amount of time, while one of them had communicated a single word. Neither spoken nor transmitted, in any single language or wavelength. Gretchetna was evidently growing impatient, and put down his chopsticks and bowl of arsubuta before assuming a faintly sour expression:

“It might be the pork, but I’m smelling something sour. If you’re here to waste my time, buzz off. If you’re here to buy, then buy. Am I getting through to you? Is your auvosense busted or something?”

The irate commentary did not appear to have much of an effect on them, nor the rude gestures that accompanied it. These by no means ordinary customers seemed to be looking for something particular, running meticulous scans with

some kind of sensory equipment that looked delicate, expensive and very sensitive all at once. They had largely ignored Gretchetna and that was perhaps the real reason he looked like he was about to explode from frustration.

He decided it was about time he made his point a little more convincing, so he reached for his amada gun below the counter, and clicked the on switch. The characteristic low-pitched harmonics were heard, and the trio were suddenly but calmly becoming aware that some kind of important event had just occurred. They momentarily stopped fiddling with their equipment and the box on sale, and slowly lifted their heads to look at Gretchetna. A radiant smile had appeared on his face, and he seemed to be enjoying the fact that he finally had their attention, even for a little while:

“You said you wanted a look-see. Fine, you looked at it. You can probably just make a copy by now, with all that scanning. The point is, are you buying? ’Cause if you’re not, I’d like to be compensated either way. I got a Lambda-Lambda here which says you’d be happy to reimburse me, unless you feel strangely attracted to plasma projectiles. Still want to play dumb and mute?”

The trio exchanged some silent, unemotional looks. One of them made a small step forward, his hands half-raised in a non-threatening gesture. For the first time, he spoke with a dry voice and a heavy mandarin accent:

“We do not wish to buy.”

Gretchetna’s smile widened to an impossible grin and he aimed the LL-type amada gun directly to the small-framed man:

“Do you wish to be evaporated? I don’t mind the cleaning-up later. Pay up. Next thing I know, you’ll be selling these cheaper than hamps.”

“We wish to destroy it.”

Gretchetna’s fingers twiddled with the side-switch settings, amping the power to the megawatt scale. The humming noise from the amada gun became a loud buzz, an onerous cacophony that usually implied something was about to catch on fire, explode, or probably both. The moustache on Gretchetna’s face seemed to droop somewhat, barely moving with each word:

“Pay up first, buddy. Last chance before you get to see the Big Bang from real up close and personal.”

All three men were facing Gretchetna now with hands outstretched, as if they wanted to show they meant no harm. Their palms seemed to glow faintly. The one who had spoken up first, continued:

“You have been tainted. This is nothing personal.”

Gretchetna had time enough to see the glow from their hands turn into a searing beam of light. His unaugmented nervous system barely had time enough to let his finger squeeze the lambda-lambda’s button. The superconducted mass driver unit on the amada gun started discharging, accelerating the tungsten-beryllium projectile to near-escape velocity. The tiny projectile turned into plasma, illuminating the shady emporium of Gretchetna as if an exotic aurora had manifested itself. At the same time, a searing pulse of light came out of the men’s palms, a blinding blue and white illuminiscence filling the space between them and Gretchetna.

When his body hit the floor, there was no blood to speak of. There was, in fact, no sign of Gretchetna’s upper torso. The three men though, seemed quite unharmed. There was a passing smell of ozone, and the quite distinct acidity of burnt human flesh. As the three men once again approached the box, this time they each produced a small metal object,

each different in shape and size.

One of them made a sudden alarmed motion with his head and an intricate sign with one hand. The one who had spoken before did so again, his voice unnatural, icy and dry:

“Assemble the device. I will take care of that.”

While he started walking towards the entrance to Gretchetna’s emporium, the two other men complied with speed and precision. They made adjustments to the metal objects with their hands. The pieces interlocked, a perfect fit. Then, they placed the resulting object on the box that was so misleadingly plain and ordinary that Gretchetna had been using it as a bench.

The large emporium echoed suddenly with the massive thumping and ricocheting sounds of a hail of bullet rounds. Immediately, they stepped right in front of the path of some incoming stray shots to protect the device they had just assembled.

Crude and cheap, kinetics were quite efficient for most rough types of troublemakers. To Vic’s surprise though, these men were not the usual kind. Vic had just unloaded a full box of 20mm caseless on them, and they had actually got in the way on purpose.

“Oh, fuck me,” Vic said quietly to himself, the twin muzzle from his CK-auto making the air sizzle.

Instinctively scrambling to reload, Vic didn’t have a chance to see the blurry shadow that hit him with enough force for his ribcage to shatter and his body to be send flying across the emporium, only to have his neck broken on impact with the aerogel walls.

Momentarily assessing the badly lit corridor outside, the talkative member of the trio asked the other two:

“Is the Exagrammaton aligned?”

They had been merely looking at the box and the device attached to in a sort of hallowed silence. After a small amount of time had passed, as if they counted every millisecond with atomic precision, they replied as one man, with one voice and one mind, as if they were nothing but automatons:

“The Exagrammaton is aligned. What about the rest of them?”

“Trivial,” the one they seemed to defer to as their leader replied, while the one who had never spoken a word said with what a careful voice stress analysis could identify as a hint of worry:

“Leave now, and let us remain.”

The man who had led Gretchetna and Vic to their untimely deaths, was now wearing a grin that felt completely out of place with the rest of his face, as if someone had painted a smile on a jagged piece of granite:

“A touch of Anxiety, Dispatcher?”

To which the man promptly answered while bowing his head only slightly, an almost imperceptible gesture of subservience:

“Only for success, Exchequer.”

The man they called Exchequer nodded briskly and said:

“Move. We are done here.”

He then suddenly turned into a transparent shadowy figure that challenged any eye, even augmented ones, to an impossible task. The other two men also seemed to quickly vanish into a wispy shade, and then they blended into nothingness. Even their footsteps seemed to be echoes of ghosts. The only sound that could be heard was the repeating welcome message, blowing over the ceiling soundbands, in a rugged but hearty voice:

“You just made the smartest choice, mister!”

* * *

“Sam, I know it’s going to sound old, but.. What have we got here?”

Sam smiled with a slight hint of irony before assuming a business-like manner and answering with a voice that could have easily belonged to a first-gen android, flat and almost emotionless except for boredom and the occasional hint of irony:

“I thought noticing stuff was your job, detective Bodereau. Two victims. One and a half, actually. The one behind the reinforced bench is semi-evaporated. High-yield high-frequency lasers, most likely. The other one seems beaten to death. Got a broken neck. Medbots are sweeping for the details you never really care about.”

Bodereau’s gaze ran around the points of interest that Sam, the forensics officer, had brought up. He seemed to look around as if he was another customer, and not the detective on the case. After a small period of silence, he asked Sam, his words heavy with dissapointment, floating on the vapors of cheap liquor:

“That’s it? No DNA on the perps? Something I could use so I can post a warrant and let the ’forcers handle it? Doesn’t seem they wanted to keep the place clean..”

Sam lit up a cigarette, the homegrown-in-orbit variety, which made Bodereau reach out and grab it from his mouth just when he was taking his first draw. Sam instantly became pretty full of emotion:

“Hey! Hey! Fuck you Bodereau!”

“Why, won’t it grow back? You’re messing with the crime scene, asshole.”

“That’s bullshit. As if someone cares for a smuggler like Gretchetna and the likes of him. Who probably wiped him ’cause he owed them money. Or because he owed them, same deal.”

“Do you want my job, Sam? Because if you got it all figured out, I can go home, and you can fill in the blanks, do the monthly report and yeah, you can have my implant too.”

“I’m fine with letting the robots cut up the corpses, thank you.”

“Then stick to your end. Gretchetna had a good name, as good a name as they come down here. Every dealer in the market has had tradings with him, and word is he kept his word, which in this line of business is kind of like sainthood or something. I don’t think his esteemed colleagues did it.”

Detective Bodereau started to stroll around the emporium, noticing the signs of the firefight: intense heat marks from the amada gun, chipped off blocks of aerogel and polysteel from the kinetics, clean-cut holes from the lasers. Not much in the way of looting; that made him pause and think.

The medbots were hovering a few feet away, humming vibrantly like giant worker bees, their sound unobtrusive yet prevalent. At length, Bodereau took notice of the box lying almost in the middle of the emporium, not far from Gretchetna’s bench. Sam was standing at a corner, trying to light up another cigarette without being noticed, taking advantage of Bodereau’s unusually deep frown, the tell-tale mark of some serious thinking going on. Even while Sam savoured the first few puffs, Bodereau started talking without taking the box out of his gaze:

“Do you hear that?”

Sam looked at Bodereau through a tiny smoke mist. He didn't seem to understand the question at first. He blinked before replying in a breathless voice, somewhat dizzy from the cigarette.

"What, the medbots?"

Bodereau had his eyes fixed on the box. His voice came out suddenly diminished, faint and trembling:

"The voices, Sam. Can't you hear them? Dear God, there's so many."

Sam furrowed his brow in disbelief. He then nodded to himself and grinned, the cigarette hanging languidly from his lips:

"Medical discharge on grounds of mental instability. Can you put on a good enough act for the tribunal? You can get the Farm for that. Wouldn't be nice, all those tubes hanging off you."

Strangely attracted to the box, Bodereau was running his hands around it, caressing it as he would a marvellous sculpture or the body of a beautiful woman. He seemed to revere it, as if it was something hallowed, sacrosanct. His hands were trembling and his mouth was quivering, unable to speak a word. The sight alone gave Sam a chill down his spine. It looked too bad for a joke or an act.

"You can cut the crap, Bodereau. The tribunal won't eat it up. You'll get the Farm for that kind of bullshit, not a discharge man," said Sam, this time sounding really worried, realising something was really happening. Something not good.

"I can hear them, Sam. They're wonderful. They're so vibrant. So real. It's a damn shame."

Sam dropped his cigarette and put it out. He walked towards Bodereau, his expression a worried mix of anger and nervous bravado, all signs of grinning long extinguished.

“Bodereau, what the fuck? Snap out of it. Are you on something? It’s bad enough with the drinking, don’t tell me you started doing trippers or sky now. Hey, man! Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

Bodereau did not turn to face Sam. Nor did he stop his weird show of adoration towards the box. Bodereau became ever more attracted to the box, almost hugging it now. Sam decided to do something so he took a deep breath and punched Bodereau on the face. Bodereau took the punch without so much as a whince and started mumbling in a low-keyed voice. His eyes had now taken an otherworldly gleam, their focus somewhere beyond the walls of the emporium.

Sam was now genuinely scared. In fact, he felt an uncanny sensation of fear running down his spine, that chilling sensation that made your hair stand up. Fear.

He took a step back before touching his armband’s interface to select the Emergency tab. He then hurriedly brought up the Officer Assistance dialog. He picked two enforcer droids and a class-II medbot, complete with table and restraining harness. This was not an act. Maybe it was some new drug, maybe it was the job finally getting to Bodereau. Perhaps it shouldn’t come as a shock, with all of Bodereau’s history and his psych profile. But to see a man break down just like that; it was an enlightening experience that reminded Sam about an early retirement plan.

As he stood there pitifully unable to understand what had happened to the mumbling, hunched form of Detective Bodereau, he heard a voice speak to him as if out of nowhere. It was the voice of an angel, or perhaps the voice of the heavens. It sounded like a sweet melody, not a real voice. There were no words, only chords of blissful sounds. It was like everything around him vibrated with music, but somehow given

meaning. He could still see Bodereau hugging the box as if they were some sort of incompatible lovers, his lips moving endlessly to a rhythm that now Sam could suddenly understand.

It was a joyous sound. It was a meaningful answer, an answer to everything. Sam's heart and mind were now brimming with the feeling that everything could be explained; that everything could have an absolute, infallible meaning, even to someone as plain and ordinary as himself. The sensation of wonder and amazement was mind-numbing. Sam could now see more clearly than ever. He could now feel everything around him intertwine and connect with dizzying detail and clarity. A cosmic awareness seemed to envelop him, and caress his soul and mind like only a mother should.

Then he heard a clear voice bright and mellow like the sun, ring clear in his head:

“Will you have us?”

Sam felt tears of joy running down his cheeks, like icy rivulets on a desert bedrock. Even though he felt he should simply accede to this fabulous existence, he still possessed a clarity of mind and enough of a sense of self to ask with his mind's voice:

“What about Bodereau? What about me?”

The voice then spoke with a enchanting timbre; it was simply meant to be heard in nothing less than awe and tearful marvel:

“He is spent. You are not. Will you have us?”

Sam closed his eyes and accepted blindly and wholeheartedly, in what he believed was his last act of completely free will. He knew then that he had no other choice. As the enforcer droids entered the emporium with the medbot quick about their trail, Sam disappeared as if he had never been

there, as if he was less than a mere illusion. Alongside with the box.

The small device the three men had left behind gave off a flash of light, but the droids' advanced sensors registered nothing at all. As if released from the heart of a blistering sun, an impossibly huge stream of high-energy particles ensued only nanoseconds before the orbital was utterly obliterated, vaporized into a cloud of ionized plasma. The hollow absence of the sound of its demise was not unlike the death shriek of a small star in the sky.

Sam was looking up into the bright mauve sky, his feet firmly planted in a sandy stretch of land. He saw the small cloud shine like an iridescent pearl, its glow slowly fading away until nothing but a faint, hazy shadow remained in place, like a ghost image of its former glory. He was still himself, he thought. And then he heard the voice once again, crystal clear and much less monumentally awe-inspiring:

"Welcome to the Exchange, Sam," the voice said, with the vague impression of a smile forming afterwards.

Sam felt a strange serenity at hearing these words, as if a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders. He took a moment to absorb the alien scenery before him: a grim world, filled with craggy rocks, dirt and sand, seemingly bereft of any life other than himself.

"What now?" he said, as if talking to an invisible friend of his. In the distance, stormy gusts of wind swirled the sand around as if it danced to a violent, gritty tune.

If the voice could have belonged to a man in the flesh, born of woman, he might have been smiling while the words flowed like an icy winter spring in Sam's head:

"Now Sam, we walk."

* * *

“Zortania. Three times in a row. Without using a booster. You know the chances of that happening in a single round?” said a voice belonging to what could be easily mistaken for a mere man with an evident penchant for crude augmetics and non-existent mouth hygiene. Around those parts of the ship, he was known as ‘Alloy’ and he had a rather nasty habit of spacing certain kinds of people. Namely, those who were unlucky or stupid enough to cross him.

Sam smiled as innocently as possible. “One in four point seven billion? Give or take a few million, I think. Guess the universe isn’t so uncaring to some, right?” he said while reaching out to grab the holochip in the middle of the zort table. A ring of quite unhappy-looking faces directed their collective gaze towards Sam as if instantly magnetised.

The zealous augmetics user had substituted his jawline with a nanoengineered-alloy prosthetic. It looked like it weighed half a ton and gave the impression someone could chew through a ship’s hull with it. When it moved again, the man with the bulky augmetics said through a wisp of cheap Altreidian cigar smoke, the kind that clogged air filters with frightening ease:

“You’re cheating. I don’t know how, but you are. I can’t allow that. You’ll forfeit.”

Sam’s hand froze an inch before it touched the holochip filled with enough credits to buy himself a small Tremaran fast enough to outrun Navy pickets. He seemed to have reluctantly realised there were some standing issues with the ‘Alloy’ when he asked with the slightest hint of annoyance and just the right touch of brusqueness:

“What, you mean forfeit the game?”

The answer was quickly followed by the unmistakably harrying sound of a rapidly charging plasma carbine:

“I mean forfeit life.”

Sam had time enough to utter a few words for his ears alone, “Told you it was too obvious,” before he suddenly jerked sideways at an inhuman speed, letting the plasma burst make a roughly head-sized hole at the bulkhead behind him.

He could now clearly see that the people around that table had begun to realise what was going on, but they were frightfully slow to do anything about it. ‘Alloy’ was still grinning with all the excitement from the rush of a sure and easy kill, even as Sam’s hand reached for his sternum. As the burly man’s biomechanical heart was ripped away from its sheath, blood and bioservo fluid spurted freely, making an almost complete mess of those standing next to him.

The mess would be made complete by Sam’s hands, moving at speeds that imparted more than enough energy to break someone’s neck. He did so, twice, before his heightened senses had given him ample warning of a Double-Z pistol being raised by someone with fast reflexes but a mind too slow to realise he was the one outgunned.

Sam delivered a back kick that made the man’s wrist break in four places while the pistol fired out of control in full auto in an backward spiral; another three men were shot through with pin-prick sized holes, wishing they had chosen an easy night at the sex domes in bay 7 instead of a really unlucky game of Zort.

When Sam’s heightened senses reported that there remained just a terrified junior deckhand looking positively frozen from shock, he reverted to his more usual self. He wiped his slightly perspiring forehead with a dirty rag lying in front of one of the dead B-deck technicians and sat down in his seat once more, casually picking up and cleaning the by now blood-ridden holochip.

“Thank God these things are waterproof. Yeah, I know. No, it doesn’t matter,” Sam said as he picked up the plasma carbine and placed a shot clean through the junior deckhand’s head. With a casual grin he walked towards the main shaft that lead to bay 6.

“No, no, *we* are a mean son of a bitch. You made sure of that, didn’t you? You sly little devil,” he said, answering the voice in his head while counting with his fingers and grinning under the faint blue-and-white light of the service corridor.

* * *

The captain of the “Incredibly Credible” was having a hard time lighting up his pipe. He looked deeply troubled. A rare silence occupied the bridge; it meant that something unusually serious was happening. The furrowed faces of the executive officer and the navigator were a match; the junior officers exchanged terrified looks but noone dared yet to voice the unthinkable.

It was the captain who did so, with a low-keyed voice that sounded like it belonged to a dead man:

“All hands. Abandon ship.”

The ship’s XO looked at him as if he had just been stabbed in the heart; he couldn’t help but sound moronic:

“Sir? What?”

The captain gave the XO a sullen, weary look and simply said:

“Ephraim, abandon ship. Sound the horn. Let me talk to them.” The XO nodded, his face torn between his sense of duty and his sense of reality. He waved his hands across a series of holodisplays, before a beam of light flashed across the captain’s face, indicating he was now addressing the crew of the “Incredibly Credible”:

“This is Incredibly Credible Actual. All hands, abandon ship. All Master-at-arms, secure the escape pod bays. This is a special emergency, but there is ample time to evacuate. Proceed in an orderly fashion, and godspeed. Actual out.”

The light flickered off; the captain sank back in the relative comfort of his battle manoeuvre couch and the darkness of the command pulpit. His XO was evidently nervous, perspiration glistening across his forehead in the ambient red light that bathed the bridge. He was accompanied by the astronavigation officer when he approached the pulpit and managed to speak his mind:

“Sir, with all due respect, I don’t think this is the correct approach, sir. We could try and contain this person - this thing - whatever it’s supposed to be. Abandoning a frigate without due cause, sir.. That would be the end of our careers, sir. Surely a single man can’t pose such a threat to a ship of this size.”

The XO tried to put a smile on that last sentence, but his face muscles weren’t up to the task. It was painfully obvious he was trying to bend reality to a level he could cope with, a level that tried to match his own sense of reality.

The captain picked up his pipe once more and lit it up; he took a deep puff before exhaling forcefully, the wisps of smoke curling and dancing around him. He simply pointed to the three men standing in one corner of the bridge, seemingly stargazing idly through the port viewport. His words came out dryly:

“See those robed figures over there? These are Monitors. They.. monitor these abnormalities.. these aberrations.. The-”. One of the robed figures interrupted the captain from afar:

“The Exchange. Captain Voronin, there will be no more delays. Allowing your crew to abandon ship is a rarely ex-

tended courtesy. You should be grateful.”

The XO turned to face the figure in a fit of what he probably perceived to be well-deserved indignation. He blared at him, the veins around his throat bulging from tension and strain: “Grateful? Grateful for abandoning a frigate and casting adrift two thousand souls? What gives you the authority, nay, the nerve-”

With a quick nod from the talking robed figure the other two men seemed to instantly vanish and reappear next to the XO, his hands locked behind his back with a terminally sharp object threatening to puncture his jugular in the flick of an eye. The captain stood up and removed the pipe from his mouth unable to mouth his objection, while the XO’s gaze was locked on to the tip of the spike threatening to end his life in a very bloody instant.

The robed figure lowered his hood to reveal a face so featureless that it could easily be forgotten. He motioned with a hand to the men to release the XO from their deadly grip, to which they promptly complied without question. A slight twitch of his mouth was his idea of a smile when he said:

“You’ll have to excuse my Dispatcher. He can be overly zealous. I only meant for him to discourage your executive officer from doing anything that might prove disadvantageous to your safety,” the man said looking at the captain blankly. He then turned to face the XO who was barely beginning to compose himself, instinctively straightening his uniform. The Dispatcher bowed slightly to the strikingly featureless man and said, “Merely trying to serve, Exchequer.”

“Aren’t we all?” the captain said seemingly out of turn, half-heartedly. The leader of the trio, the Exchequer replied authoritatively, “Sadly, trying is not enough my dear captain. Serving the State is your duty. We, on the other hand, must

answer to a higher authority,” and gazed once more into space and the vast nothingness broken only by the faint dull red glow of a distant nebula. The captain tried to sound derisive, but his voice carried little more than resignation when he asked the Exchequer:

“God then? I thought such nonsense had nothing to do with your kind.”

The Exchequer then swiftly turned about and faced the captain with a stern look, and said with a strict, scolding voice, “I was referring to survival of the species.”

He managed to smile in a sordid fashion that implied a complete lack of scruples. The captain’s vacant stare was matched by his hollow voice when he asked without expecting an answer, “Whose species?”

“Why, the human species captain. Naturally,” replied the Exchequer, slowly raising both hands in the air in an almost vainglorious manner.

“Damned be the day you came aboard my ship,” said the captain almost to himself while the rest of his crew sat in meek, deathly silence, unwilling or unable to do anything but watch. The Exchequer smiled thinly before bowing slightly. He said then:

“Only by necessity, I assure you. Now please, follow the directions of my Dispatcher and his Drone, and make your way to your escape pod.”

The captain said then with what a voice wavering by emotion: “I’ve very little left as far as pride goes, Exchequer, but nothing waiting for me at port. You might have me by the balls and my ship by her helm, but I’ll go down with her if I must. Will you?”

The question was meant to sting but it left the Exchequer and his men quietly indifferent. He shook his head and added

with an air of superb authority, “A quaint thought in this day and age, captain, but I assure you your death will have no impact on the larger scheme of things. You might even prove to be a dangerous hindrance, something which we cannot allow.”

The Exchequer then nodded and still looking at the captain he said, “Dispatcher, if you will,” and the markedly bulkier man moved threateningly towards the captain, who almost spat out the words despite his helplessness:

“No need to sic your dog on us, Exchequer! I realise you’re quite unreasonable. Not unlike your kind at all. You were a mistake. Maybe our last one.”

The Exchequer smiled and the Dispatcher halted and assumed his earlier stance, neutral and indifferent, but alert, slightly edgy, always waiting for an order. The Exchequer went on:

“Ruminate on that in your escape pod if you must, captain. If I hadn’t been waiting for the evacuation to be complete we wouldn’t be having this little conversation. Think of it as another courtesy.”

“I think you’re an arrogant son of a bitch, Exchequer,” said the captain, stressing his last word with a venomous quality. The Exchequer started to pace along the length of the bridge, as if parading himself in front of the crew who sat as if frozen, unable or unwilling to meddle.

“Since I wasn’t actually born, captain, that’s a poor retort, wouldn’t you say?” the Exchequer said with a vindictive smile. The sound of a bell then filled the bridge, but no one seemed surprised. The Exchequer grinned and flexed his neck muscles before adding, “Hear that chime? It’s time”. He then gave a brisk nod to the Dispatcher, who quickly went to the nearest holodisplay and instantly focused his attention on

an array of sensor screens and readouts, his fingers dancing around the hologram with ease.

“I can only hope I never see you or your kind again,” said the captain through gritted teeth. The Exchequer shrugged in a unusually expressive manner and replied with an almost sad voice:

“Hope is after all a purely human condition, captain. I’d expect nothing more of you.”

One by one the crew began to enter the escape pod. The captain hesitated for a moment, but once he and the Exchequer exchanged a few gazes, he shook his head and entered the pod last, his form hunched and bereft of spirit. The escape pod door locked automatically, and after a short countdown the pod launched itself silently into space.

The Dispatcher and the Drone then each devoted a few moments to another array of holographic controls. Symbols and radial charts flickered on and off, huge tree-like representations of mechanism interconnections were lit up branch by branch; a timer could be easily seen, counting down. A hologram had attracted the Dispatcher’s attention in particular. He said to the Exchequer flatly, as if he were a simple automaton:

“He’s moving. Shaft C. Should be here within a few minutes. Standard D pattern?”. The question parted his lips with the same lack of feeling, but the slightest hint of indecision. The Exchequer’s face suddenly seemed caught in a vice as he grunted the words, spit glued on his lips in tiny columns, “I want him caught, Dispatcher. I need to know.”

“About its intentions? Or the orbital?”, asked the Dispatcher with a hurry, as if taking down notes. The Exchequer’s voice seemed suddenly empowered, as if each word was ablaze:

“Everything, Dispatcher. Absolutely everything.”

* * *

Sam was walking towards the access panel that led to the bridge casually, whistling idly a tune that would only seem familiar to someone long ago forgotten in a malfunctioning stasis chamber. The service corridor looked like a prehensile, flimsy thing in contrast to the usually bulky navy constructs; nothing more but a metal grid floor, pipes, cables and a paper-thin outer shell that wouldn't stop a mote of dust without the engine's magnetic field.

He stooped somewhat low and reached for the panel, a large mechanical handle etched firmly onto it. Suddenly then, all around him the light coming in through small observation slits, casting shadows and light like long dashes inside that corridor took on a reddish hue.

"Redshift," said Sam with a voice that was not his own, not entirely, not for some time now. His new friend felt suddenly worried, agitated; it was a very rare and exotic feeling that Sam had only half-hoped wasn't entirely unknown to him, it, whatever one should call it. That had been a matter of perspective as well.

"What does that mean?" Sam said, still unable to comprehend why his hands could not turn the handle at all, even though he was pretty sure that was the intention from the start. His voice became rather guttural, heavy and slow; anger bordering on rage washed over him instantly. He had said something to upset his master, friend or symbiot. Again, a matter of perspective.

"It means the ship's moving at relativistic speeds. It means, I can't jump off this ship!", Sam said spitting out the words. In the flick of an eye, he was given back control of his facial muscles. It was as if he was genuinely schizoid, only he was not. Though it was still a point in question, whether

or not he should have kept his sanity after everything that had happened since the day he and the Trader had formed an Exchange.

“Why are you talking aloud about this?” Sam asked puzzled, but not scared. He really didn’t think there was any reason to be scared when the Trader took over. His face then suddenly spasmed and the Trader was now blaring out loudly, veins sticking out from his neck:

“Because, it means they knew! They somehow knew!”

His punch went right through the panel and into the bridge below. Soft, subdued blue light poured in through the ever widening hole that Sam was ripping apart on the bridge’s neodymium ceiling, while he was asking softly, curiously, without tension:

“About us?”

The answer came in force, and Sam found out it was quite one thing to come prepared for a fight, and quite another to be expected as well. The Exchequer was hovering easily a few feet below while the Dispatcher nudged himself neatly through the hole and grabbed Sam from the neck with a huge metal clamp that closed itself shut with a loud echoing snap. It fit perfectly, allowing only breathing in a very rudimentary sense.

The Trader had been caught off guard because of his lousy temper. As much as he tried to foam through the mouth and irregularly curse in unknown dialects and verses, he had been caught. They, Sam corrected in his mind, had been caught.

He was now trying to pry the clamp open but it did not budge, nor give way. Sam noticed sigils, symbols and drawings, formulas and scripts like some of the stuff he had been dreaming when the Trader left him a few moments peace of mind.

Wards. The clamp was warded. The Exchequer said so as well, only with a terribly oversized grin:

“Wards. I wouldn’t waste any more vitality on that.”

“On what?”

“Escape,” said the Exchequer as all three of them they were being lowered down gently after a nod to the Drone, wielding a small, unassuming device with no visible controls.

“Why would I do that? I came for the ship,” said Sam with a bad smile and a painfully obvious attempt at trying to hustle his way out of what seemed to be a rather regrettable situation, especially for the Trader who felt distant, withdrawn to another part of his mind. Like a child pouting and running away to his room, or a venerable but slightly eccentric lord barring the gates to his throne. with a deep-set frown, Sam was trying to remember where he had seen or heard about the very notion of feudal lords, while the Exchequer was scrutinising his every pore and muscle up close, with an eerily scientific, cold and calculating gaze. His words had a strangely enough mellow tone, almost conversational.

“Don’t you mean ‘we’? Who am I speaking to?” he asked and as they were all now back on the bridge, the Exchequer folded his hands behind his back and waited patiently but intently for an answer, while Sam’s face twitched and sagged, contorted and moved as if didn’t know which way to run.

“Sam,” he finally said, though the voice was not Sam’s. It sounded very much like him, but it wasn’t really him. The Exchequer exploded suddenly, spitting the words wrathfully:

“Not the host! Who are you, really? What’s your name?”

“Trader,” said Sam as his hands moved slowly but surely towards the clamp. The Exchequer smiled thinly while the Dispatcher grinned knowingly. The Exchequer said, “I told you, there is no hope of removing that clamp. Your ampli-

fied physical abilities will not help you against the wards,” to which the Trader, and definitely not Sam, replied with a venomous smile and a shiny, wild look in his eyes:

“Against, what, exactly?” he said and crushed the metal clamp open, tearing it apart. The Exchequer, superbly grown from superior stock was not dazed and leaped away gracefully and cat-like, even as Sam the Trader went for his jugular with a furious, wide sweep of his arm. The Dispatcher blinked out of the visible spectrum for mere moments, while the Drone silently but deftly took out a sharp, jagged bony instrument that seemed designed to be wielded like a weapon.

Indeed, even as the Exchequer cried out “For the State!” and drew a magnificent monomolecular-edged blade, the Dispatcher reappeared in front of Sam just in time to block his path for the tiniest fraction of a second, a fraction long enough for the weapon that the Drone wielded to reverberate ominously even as it ripped apart space and time in a very fine and delicate way, its ruinous stream targetting Sam.

“You should have stayed hidden, sleeping, dead! Now comes oblivion for you, demon!” cried the Exchequer fervently, flustered with long ago hidden emotion that broke out like a torrent from within.

As the stream of undoing rippled across the bridge, light and sound twisted and turned with a sickening effect even as it hit Sam head on. Bright light and untold darkness flickered around the whole bridge at random, as if someone was playing with a switch. Sam was engulfed in a white-fiery ball that completely vaporised the Dispatcher, the layers of his body crumbling away like old paint.

Even the Exchequer had to shield his eyes from the intensity of the light, while at the opposite end of the beam, the bridge was completely unscathed, cold and utilitarian like be-

fore. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Sam, the Trader, still standing and not a singed hair on him, not a blister or a burnt patch of skin.

The Drone mindlessly tried to switch to his portable plasma gun. Even as the Exchequer ran towards Sam muttering syllables whose meaning was lost long ago, ready to swerve the blade in his hand for a killing blow, Sam had gruesomely detached the Drone's head from his shoulder, his torn windpipe the most savagely striking feature.

With a grunt and a primal scream, the Exchequer went for Sam's spine, leaping right at his back, the blade poised to cut him in half with a powerful, precise sweep. Much to his amazement, rare though as it was a feeling for the Exchequer, the killing blow never connected. Instead, Sam fell instantly flat and with an impossibly fast motion, gripped the Exchequer's head with his legs, forcing him to roll over and fall on the floor of the bridge, right beside the main holographic display.

As he tightened his grip over the Exchequer past the choking point, Sam the Trader told him with all the calm acceptance Sam, the real old Sam, could muster:

"Not much of a fighter, eh? Well, I'm not one myself, but then again I sometimes wonder who I am," he said and laughed despite himself, his gaze momentarily out of focus. He went on even as the Exchequer writhed and spasmed, trying to release himself:

"You see, you set me free thinking you could use me. Thinking you could learn about me. About us," Sam said with mounting indignation.

The hold on his neck was such that any extreme movement would snap the Exchequer's neck. That was why even himself, a being engineered to hunt down things like the

Trader, something grown on a vat, conditioned, trained and honed to perfection, was still at the mercy of Sam, catching his last breaths.

“Do you have a soul, Exchequer?” asked Sam with a playful grin. The Exchequer blinked ‘no’ furiously, his face pale as mist in the winter. As he died, his mouth twitched violently and his face contorted in an frozen mask of pain. Sam then said with a hint of sadness:

“We did have something in common then, didn’t we?”

“What now?” asked Sam in his own voice, as he peered around him and saw nothing but vast empty space, glowing with a dull redness in the large viewscreen. The answer came in his mind, like the first time:

“We have a deal, remember? I’ll grant you immortality in the flesh, and you’ll make me ruler of the cosmos.”

Sam sat upright, stretching his arms. He felt a bit sleepy, which was very unusual since he never slept nowadays. He asked then, letting his voice echo faintly around the empty ship’s bridge:

“Why are you doing all this?”

He then started laughing maniacally despite himself, and in the voice of the Trader he said to himself alone:

“Why shouldn’t I?”