

Ezekiel

The *Ezekiel* is a small merchant ship. Her previous owner'd had a biblical bent, hence the name. When I first bought her I'd scarcely had money leftover for food, let alone a new paintjob. By the time I did, I'd gotten a bit superstitious about the whole thing, so the name stuck. Now I kinda like it. Figure Ezekiel's a prophet or a saint, or maybe an angel; never bothered to check. But it's good to have something like that watching over you. Jason, the only Catholic on board, always gives me a heap of shit when I wax too heretical, praying to the *Ezekiel* whenever we're in a tight spot. Well, we're in a bit of a tight spot now, so *Ezekiel*, if you've ears to listen, hear these prayers.

...

We were due to land at Hannover Port. An underwhelming, dingy waypoint with few amenities, as my memory served. It orbits a sparsely populated and, frankly, shitty little planet out at the edge of this solarsystem. I hadn't wanted to take the job, honest as it seemed. The pay was alright, and I'd made plenty of longer trips for less, but I guess I just had some sort of feeling about this one. It was Cerna talked me into it. She can be... persuasive. No, not how you're thinking. Maybe I should just say stubborn. She sets her mind on something, you're not talking her out of it.

"Come on, Davresh, it's good money. Well, it's alright money. A job's a job!"

I'd merely looked at her, an eyebrow raised.

"Oh no, I'm in no mood for another one of your sudden-onset fits of superstition. Either accept the job, or I'm gonna whack you over the head with this wrench and accept it on your behalf."

Like I said. Persuasive. And now here we were, docking at Hannover Port. Everyone was excited to step off the ship. It had been a long, tedious trip out here. Then again, that's usually better than the alternative. There's always a million things can go wrong when you're talking about humans hurtling through space in a glorified hunk of metal.

"Everyone, I want you to have your radios, and I want them on." I addressed the crew as we stood waiting for the airlock to open. "I know it's been a long trip, but the client's in a hurry. They'll probably want to leave pretty soon after we meet up. So be ready to get your asses back here quick." I gave Erdem a

pointed look and he grinned sheepishly. A year or so ago he'd met up with an old flame while on shore-leave and "hadn't heard his radio" when it was time for the crew to embark. Almost cost us a pretty lucrative contract, waiting on his ass. Everyone still gave him shit about it.

The airlock finally finished pressurizing and the door hissed open.

Down in the streets I grimaced. Yep, just how I remembered it. Most ports are like megastores, full of all the things you could want and more. They thrived on parting foolish sailors of their hard-earned pay in a thousand different glittering ways. And we sailors don't mind it either. Only thing keeps you sane sometimes, splurging on food and other delights you've no business tasting. Well, compared to all that, this grimy place was like a dilapidated corner-store in a rundown neighborhood. Nothing much good to eat. Virtually no entertainment. We were supposed to meet our buyer, fellow by the name of Mert, at the only bar in the whole port, a place without even a name. Everyone just calls it "The Bar at Hannover Port." We were about forty meters from the place, me, Cerna, Jason, and Kuzey, when we all stopped in our tracks and threw hands to our ears. We weren't the only ones either. A half dozen or so other people out on that sorry excuse for a street were plugging their ears and looking around wildly. A very loud alarm had just began, and it drilled through all our heads. It was repeating the same message in a number of different languages. Finally it got to one I understand, and my face probably turned a bit grey as I was swamped by a wave of panic.

"Fire in segment four," the voiced had droned. "Containment procedures unsuccessful. All personnel evacuate immediately."

Kuzey, our "logistics expert", usually has a much cooler head than I, and this was no exception. He was already hunched over away from the alarm speakers, yelling into the radio for all crew to get back to the ship ASAP. Though they probably didn't need to be told.

Fires in space are the worst. First fire eats through air like you wouldn't imagine. There's usually a limited amount of air kept in reserve aboard most ships and stations. Regulations call for great quantities of it, but in reality that shit is expensive: Difficult to synthesize, costly to ship across space, and bulky to store too, even in the compressed tanks. With a little port like this, barely limping along as it is, there was no doubt in my mind: they had the bare minimum stocked away. But that was a minor issue compared to the more immediate dangers a fire poses. First, the hulls of stations and ships aren't as tough as you'd think. I've heard more stories of fires melting through hulls, causing pressure to be lost and ships to crumple like aluminum cans, than I'd care to think about. And then finally the greatest fear of all: the fire somehow reaching the air supplies. Again, measures should be in place to make that impossible. But a ramshackle little port like this? You never know. So the same thought was going through the head of every single person on that station, I've no doubt: If I don't get off this port immediately, I'll either suffocate, be crushed, sucked

into space, or explode.

We raced back toward the hangars along with maybe a hundred of our best friends, everyone trying not to get trampled.

“Fire has reached segments two and three,” droned the alarm in a dozen different languages.

It wasn't easy to get through the crowd of terrified people, but we somehow made it back to the airlock connecting to our ship. To my great relief, though it seemed all but impossible to me, all the other crew were already there or onboard. Those still outside the airlock had formed a cordon and were guarding the airlock from the desperate mob. A contingent of the port police were trying to orchestrate an organized evacuation, assigning people to different pods and ships, and failing miserably. By law we were required to take on as many people as we could, prior to leaving.

“Fuck the regulations,” screamed Cerna into my ear. “We need to get the fuck out of here!” I agreed. We got the airlock open, got inside. A few of the more bold or frightened managed to make it in with us before we got it closed again. Fine by me. In under a minute the docking clamps were released and the Ezekiel was ready to take off. I gave the order and Erva, the most skilled of our two pilots, began steering us away from the station about as fast as she could, her sister Mira ready in the copilot's chair and me watching over their shoulders anxiously. We were still too close when it happened.

“Oh shit,” said Mira. “Wha—” I began to ask, but cut myself short as the screen Mira had been watching—the screen showing a view of the port—suddenly lit up blinding white. The fire had somehow, impossibly, reached the air-facilities where the various components that make up breathable air (oxygen, nitrogen, etc.) are stored in separate tanks and then mixed as they're pumped into the air-vents. Of course Nitrogen isn't flammable, but you apply enough heat to an already pressurized tank of it and it will definitely explode. And of course you know what happens with pure O₂ around fire and other flammable materials. The explosion was large but brief. And it was enough to breach the station's hull. The three of us watched as the pressure differential caused what had a minute before been a shiny, lumpy sphere, dimly lit by the light of the distant sun, to implode into a twisted, crumpled ball of metal, suddenly much smaller. I thought of being crushed in that thing and retched. So did Mira. Somehow the station managed to implode and explode at the same time. We were showered with debris as we continued to flee.

“Well, now what?” Cerna asked me, several hours later. Along with a few other ships that had escaped the station, we'd helped collect escape pods. We had a hold full of survivors and now Bozkurt, the ship's main doctor, was attending to the wounded, most of whom had acquired their injuries during the mad rush to escape the port. “Now we wait for that damned ship to arrive and take all these poor fucks off our hands.”

“I meant after that.”

I’d known she had too; I was putting off answering her real question. Now that my nerves had had a minute or two to begin settling, I’d found that a terrifying thought had flashed into my brain. I tried to dismiss it as pure paranoia, mixed with a healthy dose of the narcissism that Cerna frequently calls “my best quality.” And I wasn’t overlooking my overly superstitious nature either. But knowing, and in fact hoping, that this sudden, horrifying idea was most-likely bullshit did nothing to drive it away. The thought had its icy tendrils in me and I couldn’t shake free. I shook my head like a dog trying to dry itself, not caring that it showed everyone sitting around how rattled I was. “Cerna,” I said, forcing my voice to be steady. “Something’s just occurred to me.” I stood. “Can we talk privately?” She saw how serious I was. Nodded and stood up. The others, Kuzey, Erva and Mira, eyed us both askance, but said nothing either. I own this ship, the *Ezekiel*, and I’m nominally the captain too, but we usually end up making decisions as a group, discussing things openly amongst ourselves. So they were none too pleased as Cerna and I left the hanger where we’d all been sitting and headed to the bridge. My idea was just too insane to air openly. And for some reason I trusted Cerna the most. She’s no-nonsense and a lot more objective than I usually manage to be. She’d pat my shoulder and tell me I’d been through a lot, and it was no wonder that my brain was searching desperately for some way to make sense of what had happened to Hannover Port and most of the people on it.

“What is it, Captain?” she asked me, eyeing me steadily. We had the bridge to ourselves. I swallowed, forced myself to begin talking.

“Okay, like I said, something occurred to me in the past hour or so. Something I can’t quite shake off, no matter how insane it sounds. I know you’re gonna laugh, and tell me I’m a self-absorbed prick. Hoping you will in fact. But I gotta tell someone just the same.”

She smiled slightly, but her eyes were serious. “Okay then,” she nodded her chin at me. “Let’s have it.”

“Well, doesn’t it seem just a bit *too* coincidental that this fire occurred only a half an hour after we landed? Hell, we’ve been travelling for months. Could’ve happened any time. Or it could have happened an hour or two later, after we’d met up with Mert and finished this damned delivery. But no, it happened right before we were able to find this Mert fellow.”

She saw where I was going, but to my surprise she didn’t interrupt me. “Hell, if I was someone looking into this I’d blame it on *us*! We’re probably the only ship that docked at Hannover Port today. Maybe even this whole week. Damned suspicious looking.”

I paused, waiting to see if she wanted to interject. She didn’t, so I continued.

“So there’s that. Maybe someone set us up. If that’s so, I have no idea why, and even less of an idea what we should do. If we hightail it out of here, we’ll

only look more suspicious. But even worse, what if it's not about setting us up. What if someone started the fire to prevent us from finding Mert? From making the delivery in the first place?"

"Bit extreme," she said, finally. "All we're delivering is those weird pearls, right?" I nodded and she continued. "Of course they're valuable, but not anywhere near *that* valuable. You don't kill for a dozen boxes of pearls. You don't blow up a fucking space-station."

Of course I had to agree. "So I'm just being crazy, right? It's not like we have enemies. No real ones that I'm aware of anyways."

"No," she said, nodding. "No real enemies." She was thinking. I let her, sitting silent, trying to keep my face a mask of calm.

"Just this once, Davresh, I think there's a chance your paranoid ass might be onto something."

"Broken clocks." I said with a weak smile. Cerna entertaining my fears had only made them more tangible.

"At the very least, there's some things we should check out."

I agreed, stood up. "First, let's have a good close look at that cargo." She nodded smartly, started back toward the cargo holds, talking as she walked.

"If there's something we need to do, we don't have that much time to do it. That relief ship will be here in a matter of hours. And then you can damned well bet there are going to be some questions. Maybe some detentions. Even if they do conclude this was only an accident."

I agreed. We rounded up the core members of the crew; the ones usually in on the decision making: Kuzey, Erva, Mira, and Jason. Bozkurt was still busy dispensing medical care. We didn't tell them anything, not yet.

"We're going to go have a look at our cargo," I announced instead. We paraded down to the third cargo hold: the one where we kept the most valuable stuff. We hadn't let any of the survivors into this one, and two crew stood guarding the doors. They nodded at me and opened them for us. We went through the crates in question, one by one. There wasn't a single thing out-of-the-ordinary about any of them. Each was full of cases of *Opulent* brand pearls, grown special in a factory on a small moon on the other side of the solar-system, as I understood it. Expensive? Yes, extremely. Rare on this side of the system? No doubt. But not *that* rare; not *that* expensive. We locked them all back up, stored them securely like they'd been before.

"What's this about?" asked Kuzey, and I could tell he had some idea already. So I began to explain my suspicions to them, Cerna interjecting helpfully from time to time. They'd begun to get the idea when we were interrupted. One of the men guarding the cargo hold called my name and stepped in, Dr. Bozkurt on his heels.

“Captain”, Bozkurt addressed me, always one for formalities though we’d known each other for years.

“What is it?” I asked him. I’d expected the wounded to keep him busy for another hour or two at least.

“There’s a man among those we rescued who says he needs to speak to you. Says his name is Mert. That he was our buyer on Hannover Port.”

This was classic Bozkurt. He’d been there when I’d told the whole crew the details of the rendezvous. He’d heard the name Mert and should’ve known exactly who the man was, but as usual he must have been daydreaming. He tends to only be interested in things related to medicine.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“I brought him along just in case. He’s outside.”

We filed out of the cargo hold and were confronted by a tall, lanky man of rather pallid complexion. When he opened his mouth I could see that his teeth were crooked and rotting. A rarity now with dentistry so cheap, effective and, mostly, painless. One would almost have to willfully ignore every opportunity to address the issue, to get teeth to such a state.

“You are Captain Tosun,” he stated. I nodded, extended a hand. He ignored it.

“You and I must speak.”

“That we must,” I agreed. He eyed the others, looked back to me.

“Alone. If possible.” I shrugged, led him into the cargo hold again. Cerna followed me but the others waited outside.

“Wait, I said alone,” the thin man protested.

I stared at him with a look which brooked no argument. “She stays.”

His turn to shrug. He glanced at the doors one more time, confirming that they were closed, then began speaking rapidly. His Turkish was difficult to understand, carrying a heavy accent from this side of the solar-system. And it was a bit antiquated, as if he’d learned it studying sources from the old solar system. Then again I was surprised he spoke it at all.

“We must leave this part of the solar system at once. We have to put as much space between us and Hannover Port as possible. We must be on our way at once!” He was excited. But then so were Cerna and I.

“Why?” I asked him, simply. “What’s going on? What do you know?” He could tell I might have some idea already.

“The fire in the Port. It wasn’t an accident. Think about it. It was started practically right after you landed.”

I told him the thought had occurred to us.

“But why?” I asked him. “What does it have to do with us? With you?”

“The fire was to stop us from making contact. To prevent me from reaching you.”

“You reaching us? I thought it was the other way round. But even so, why should anyone care? All we’ve got for you is a few crates of pearls.”

“The pearls are not your real cargo, Captain.”

“They’re not? Well I’m afraid we don’t have much else aboard. Explain.”

“The pearls were a pretext. They’re inconsequential. *I* am your real cargo, Captain. We thought we’d found a way for me to escape from this part of space undetected. But clearly they were able to track me. We must make way at once. The perpetrator of the attack may be aboard this very ship. If not then another of their spies no-doubt is, and has alerted them that I am alive and aboard. We are now all in very grave danger.”

“*We’re* in danger?” Cerna asked him. “No, *you’re* in danger, asshole. This has nothing to do with us. In fact, maybe we should just throw you out an air-lock.” Mert seemed to think it was a serious threat but, alarmingly, he didn’t much seem to care.

“I’m afraid that will accomplish nothing. You see, I’m in possession of certain knowledge. Knowledge that poses a great threat to certain parties. You’ve seen already the lengths they’re willing to go to prevent said knowledge ever spreading. It doesn’t matter that I tell you nothing of the nature of this knowledge, or of the parties concerned. Even if you dispose of me. If they catch you, they’ll simply have no choice but to torture you, to *ensure* I’ve told you nothing. Same with almost every person aboard this ship. And even after they’ve determined that not a single one of you knows a thing, well... they’ll have tortured you. So at that point they’ll have no choice but to discretely dispose of you as well.”

Cerna and I looked at each other. I’m sure my eyes echoed the fear that glimmered in hers. The man was deadly serious and he was convincing as hell. His whole demeanor suggested that he’d already given up all hope, that he was merely going through the motions, because what else could he do? He didn’t even expect to convince us. If it was an act, it was a damned good one. It had layers.

He’d sat for a few moments, giving us a chance to weigh his words. Now he continued, his voice the same mixture of urgency and hopelessness.

“Don’t you find it odd that a relief ship is only hours away? It takes weeks to get here from the main system, even in a much faster ship than yours. So it had to be in the vicinity. Another coincidence?” Again, he had a point.

“Here’s how it will happen. The so called relief-ship will arrive to take charge of the survivors. Only it won’t be just a relief ship. A special unit will be despatched to this ship. And the survivors it collects will be taken to a special ward aboard their relief ship, a quarantine ward, they’ll call it, due to potential

contamination. You and your crew will be included among those survivors, whether you like it or not. Once they're through with you they'll probably cook up some accident for your ship, something to explain the disappearance of you and your crew."

I didn't know what to think. Nor did Cerna, I could see. It sounded outlandish, The ravings of a man multiple times more paranoid than I'd ever gotten even at my worst. Then again, I had heard rumors before... Rumors I'd always dismissed as foolish space-talk. The type of stories they use to scare green recruits their first month in space. It was insane. Then again, so was Hannover Port imploding within an hour of our landing there, after we'd been months in space. I just didn't know. I needed to move; do something.

"Let's go to the bridge," I told Cerna. "You're coming too," I looked at Mert.

But I stopped at the door, suddenly, and got in Mert's face. "I'll tell you one thing. Whether or not you've been telling us the truth, you're gonna owe us a hell of a lot more than what those pearls are worth."

I thought I'd intimidate him, but he only smiled. "Certainly, captain. My associates will reward you all handsomely, should any of us manage to survive this."

I glared at him.

The others still waited outside. "To the bridge," I repeated. I didn't say anything else. They could tell I was perturbed. They just followed, even Dr. Bozkurt.

In the bridge I filled them in on everything the thin, sallow man had told us. I think some of them might've laughed, had I not looked so deadly serious.

"Well, what do you think?" I finally asked. For a minute, no one else could think of anything to say. Finally Kuzey spoke up.

"Say we assume this man isn't delusional. That fire is an odd coincidence to say the least. And now he says it was never about bringing those pearls out here, it was about bringing *him* back. Well, let's just say we believe him... What then? What the hell can we even do? And how do we know there's any more money in this than what we've already been payed?"

"We'll have to deal with the money question later. Survival first. But don't think you're getting off this ship without settling your tab, Mert." I glared at him again.

"Whether or not he's right, us running will look all kinds of suspicious. Basically force them to pursue us, bring us in for questions." That from Erva.

"What about a medical emergency?" Dr. Bozkurt asked, surprising several of us. At first I didn't take his meaning.

"Mert here said they might try and quarantine us, make up a story about contamination. Well, how about we beat them to the punch? Say there's been

an outbreak, some deadly disease. I'll find something that fits the bill. We'll talk to the other ships, warn them, and then head at max speed back toward the main system."

"But if we didn't know they're after us, why wouldn't we just wait for the relief ship?" asked Cerna. "They'll have the facilities to deal with an outbreak, so we'd be expected to just wait a few hours for them to arrive."

"Ahh, but you're forgetting," said Mert. "We don't *know* that they're sending such a big ship. Before I spoke to you, you expected a smaller ship, did you not? Just large enough to take on some survivors, give out some medical care and supplies to the other ships."

"You've got a point," I said. "This plan sounds as good as any. If that relief ship turns to follow us instead of continuing to all the other survivors then we'll *know* something's up. And if it doesn't, well, once we get back to the main system we'll realize the outbreak was a complete false-alarm. Whoever these people are, they won't dare anything once we're back among the core planets. Mert, you can make recordings, or records, or whatever sort of insurance you need. Once we're in comm-range you can blast those out, encrypted, to whatever friends you've got. I'm assuming you have some." Mert nodded. I looked into everyone's eyes, waiting, but no one else had any suggestions.

We set the plan in motion. Dr. Bozkurt did some research, found a suitably scary disease, something rare, contagious and deadly but just plausible enough. I talked to the captains of the other ships, one by one, with Cerna translating to Spanish, which most of them spoke. And then we set off. We didn't tell the passengers shit, just in case one of them *was* a spy.

Dr. Bozkurt found me alone on the bridge.

"Captain, I didn't tell the others, but I've got a contingency plan in case our man Mert ends up being a head-case. Say for whatever reason that he's lying. That somehow he made this whole thing up. Well in case the authorities track us down and try to determine why the hell we fled from what is, essentially, a massive crime scene, we'll need some evidence to convince them the disease-scare was the real thing. We'll probably all be questioned ad-naseum, but it may save us from jail time or worse."

"I'm listening."

"Well, that disease I told you about, Mercosis Fever, it just so happens that I have a sample or two of that stored away in the medical facility. If it turns out that Mert doesn't have our best interests at heart, and this whole thing is some massive setup I can't quite comprehend, well, I say we inject him with it and quarantine him. Then they'll see we weren't making it up. We were terrified and running for our lives towards where we thought the nearest help lay."

Diabolical. The thought of giving a man a deadly disease made me feel queasy, but if it turned out we had no other choice, and Mert really had betrayed us,

well. . .

“Any other time, Doctor, I’d be mad as hell at you for even having something like that aboard. But this situation is more than any of us bargained for. If it comes to it, then do it. You have my approval. I wouldn’t tell the others though.”

He nodded.

“Doctor,” I called as he turned to leave, a heavy expression on his face. “You’re sure it won’t get out? We don’t want a real outbreak on this ship, not of something like that.”

He nodded again, curtly.

“Good. Don’t take any chances.”

We’d been underway for a few hours when we picked up the relief ship. In space travel, you use the gravity of various bodies to slingshot you, and you avoid other bodies that would slow you down. This worked to our advantage. Basically, the path we were taking back toward the main system diverged by a good quarter light-minute from the one the relief ship followed heading out to Hannover Port. Even if they turned, we had the momentum. They’d have a difficult time catching up, even in their faster ship. In fact it would probably be fastest for them at this point to reach the port and slingshot around the planet after us. I watched the monitors for over an hour as our ship and theirs drew closer, then as theirs continued on its way and the distance between the two ships again grew. I was about to cheer, when something happened that I really should have expected. They contacted us.

The message came in a handful of languages, and then, finally, Turkish.

“Merchant ship *Ezekiel*, this is the *UMS Cursus*, please respond.”

For several moments I just stared at the comm board. The message came again, even though there hadn’t been enough time for our reply to have reached them even if we’d sent one.

“Merchant ship *Ezekiel*, this is the *UMS Cursus*. You were supposed to await us at Hannover Port. Your absence will be reported. Please respond.”

I sighed, picked up the mic.

“*UMS Cursus*, this is The *Ezekiel*, captain Tosun speaking. Do you read? Anyone there speak Turkish?”

I put down the mic, waited. The generic message continued to arrive in various languages while our reply traveled the 15 light-seconds to their ship. Then it was silent, so they must have replied to us.

“We read you.” It was a slightly different, more human-sounding voice. Still, probably someone speaking through a translator. “Please turn your ship at once. You were ordered to await our arrival.”

“*Cursus*, I’m sorry but I cannot change course. We have a potential outbreak situation onboard. Mercosis Fever, our Doctor has told me it’s called. Apparently very contagious and very deadly. We’re heading to the nearest medical facility as quickly as possible so that the experts can handle it.”

I waited.

“*Ezekiel*, I am ordering you to alter course and return to Hannover Port. In addition to delivering medical care to the survivors aboard your ship, every person aboard your ship will need to be questioned so that we can determine the nature of the accident in Hannover Port. Your cooperation is absolutely essential in this matter. Failure to comply may result in criminal charges.”

“*Cursus*, I wish I could alter course but my ship’s Doctor has advised me that Regulation 61 B, section 341 is absolutely clear and absolutely inviolable in this matter. Any ship with a potential class C Contagion-Outbreak must self-quarantine and report immediately to the nearest properly equipped medical facility for decontamination procedures. I’ve argued with him but he’s convinced me. We have no choice.”

This time the silence was a lot longer, and not just because the distance between the two ships was growing. My pulse pounded as I waited. The Doctor had rushed up from his ward and was standing by my side now, looking suitably grim. Finally their reply came.

“*Ezekiel*, the nearest qualified medical facility is on Hurgon IV. You will head directly there. After decontamination procedures are complete you will remain at the facility until officials have arrived to question everyone aboard your ship. Those running the facility have been notified to expect you.”

I looked at Dr. Bozkurt, questioningly, my hand off the mic button. How could they get a message back there? It was light-days away, which means way too much interference. Our comms wouldn’t reach even a fraction of that distance in this region of space.

He understood my look.

“They must have been dropping a trail of relays this whole time. They call ’em breadcrumb crumbs. Probably standard procedure for remote emergencies like these, nowadays, to ensure quick communications. They send a message to the closest relay which then passes it along the chain, relay by relay, still pretty close to lightspeed and practically without interference.”

I nodded, switched on the mic. “Copy that, *Cursus*, thank you for your assistance. The survivors at Hannover Port will be glad to see you. They’re lucky you were anywhere near the area. Godspeed. *Ezekiel* out.”

We waited in the bridge for several minutes, eyeing each other, waiting to see if the *Cursus* would send any more missives. They didn’t. I broke the silence.

“I don’t know if we’re anywhere near out of the fire yet, Doctor. Can you check

out this facility on Hurgon IV, see if it's legit? See if it's even equipped for a class B contagious-whatever, like that regulation specifies? Can't say I've ever heard of the place myself. Maybe a moon?"

He nodded. "I'll check it out. Be back soon," and then he stalked out of the bridge. The situation was getting to him too, I could tell.

"Hey Doctor," I called after him. He poked his head back in. "Can you have Cerna bring Mert back up here? It's time I asked him a few pointed questions about just what the hell he's gotten us all into." Dr. Bozkurt nodded again, and disappeared. I sat back and waited, deciding what I was going to say once Cerna brought Mert up here. And then a brand new thought flashed into my mind, a thought so obvious I couldn't understand why it hadn't occurred to me hours ago. If I was right then we were in even deeper shit than we already seemed to be. I had to find out, immediately. I jumped up, raced after Dr. Bozkurt, and was able to catch him just before he entered the cargo bay where we were holding Mert.

"Wait a second, Doctor," I called. "I think it's time to put that plan of yours in motion a little earlier than we'd discussed."

He was surprised, but all he said was "isn't that a little premature?"

"Here's what I'm thinking," I told him, and drew him aside to explain.

It was Bozkurt, Cerna, Mert and I in the medical chamber. Mert was strapped down in a chair, and for the first time I think I could see real, immediate fear in his face.

"Mert," I began, as Doctor Bozkurt continued to shuffle through cabinets. "I don't think you've been entirely truthful with us. In fact, I think you've deceived us pretty badly." I watched his eyes. Difficult to read.

"In what, regard, may I ask?" His voice sounded calmer than he looked.

"It was you, wasn't it?" As if on cue, Bozkurt lifted up a needle, peering at it. He flicked it a couple of times, spraying a little moisture out the top so there'd be no air bubbles.

"What was me? What's that?"

We ignored his second question. "It was you that started the fire on Hannover Port, wasn't it?"

He managed to look indignant. "No, it wasn't me. If I'd started the fire, how would I have made it to an escape pod on time?"

I actually hadn't thought of that.

"I don't know for a fact that you couldn't have made it. Maybe you had a way. Or maybe you had an accomplice or two."

He just glared at me.

“Okay,” I sighed. “I can see we’re not gonna get any answers out of him this way. Look, Mert. We know it was you. We just received solid proof.” He began to speak but I cut him off. “Which means that your whole story was a fabrication. I can’t believe we were stupid enough to fall for it.”

“I was telling you the truth! I haven’t lied to you about anything!”

I ignored him. “You took advantage of how scared we were. Well now, Mert, we’re in a heap of shit. You convinced us to flee the scene and now we all look guilty. The only thing we have on our side is the story we made up about an outbreak onboard. Mercosis Fever. Do you know what that is, Mert?”

He nodded, started to speak again, but I glared at him.

“Well The Doctor and I were speaking, and we’ve reached a realization. Maybe there is a way out of this for all of us. The only way left. You see, Doctor Bozkurt is a bit of an odd duck. For some reason I can’t fathom, he likes to keep live virus samples onboard. I can’t imagine why. I didn’t even know until he told me this a little while ago.”

Mert’s eyes had widened.

“That’s right, Mert, one of the samples the Doctor happens to have is none other than Mercosis Fever.”

“Look, whatever you’re planning to do, you don’t want to do it. Even if you create an outbreak, they’ll still catch you. And they’ll still torture you too.”

“I wish I could believe you, Mert. Actually, maybe I don’t. I don’t want to be tortured. I’m sorry, but this is the only way. If the timing’s going to be even close to believable, we have to infect you now.”

Doctor Bozkurt moved toward Mert, a grim look on his face.

“Wait! Wait! I have proof!”

I held a hand out for the doctor to pause, and then crossed my arms and eyed Mert.

“What proof could you possibly have?”

“The information. The information they’re so desperate to protect. I warn you now though. There may still be a small chance they’d let you live. But not after you’ve heard this. No way.”

“If you don’t want to be the first victim of Mercosis Fever in twenty years, you’d better tell us, and hope it’s good,” I told him.

“Alright. I’ll tell you. But there’s no going back from this, I hope you understand.”

Each of us nodded, watched him expectantly. He opened his mouth.

Mira burst in.

“Captain, we’re picking up another ship. And it’s closing on us.”

“We’ll have to continue this later. One of you, watch him.”

Cerna caught Dr. Bozkurt’s eye and then followed me out of the medical chamber and back up to the bridge, leaving him to watch the prisoner. The monitors on the bridge confirmed what Mira’d told me: A ship closing fast from our rear. From Hannover Port, no doubt.

“It can’t be the *UMS Cursus*, right? No way she could’ve caught us this fast.”

“Not a chance,” confirmed Erva.

“Then who the hell is it?” I asked to no one in particular. We’d had a good start and we’d been pushing hard, making good time. The *Ezekiel* isn’t the fastest ship, but she’s by no means slow. I didn’t think any of the other ships from the port could’ve gained on us this quickly. To have even a chance, they’d’ve had to leave shortly after us, without waiting for the relief ship.