

INTO THE VOID

By Carl Smith

Llewellyn sweated. Scanning the digital readouts on the console, he edged the XV-1 into raw space. For a moment the old panic of being in charge and the pressure of lives depending upon him returned. If he judged wrong, a torpedo or burst of fire from a laser battery would leave him and the survivors from the freighter dead and charred in space. What if the Sathar attack ships expected the freighter to jettison the prototype, or what if some of the Sathar mercenaries aboard the *Prachil Star* had communicated with the warships outside and were waiting like carrion crows?

Chewing his gum fiercely, Llewellyn squinted at the console lights, taking the escape vessel out the jagged hole. Not too close to the edges, or he'd open the prototype like a can of sardines. He had seen the effects of explosive decompression on humans and felt that it was one of the uglier ways to die. Gently his fingers touched the control panel, and the XV-1 slipped forward.

A drop of sweat slid down behind his head, and ran down his neck, making him think of the centipedes on Pavan. Swallowing to clear his throat, he announced, "We're just about to clear the freighter. Once we're free of it, I'm going to goose this and get us going."

A bright light flared to the port side of the XV-1 and he flinched. Dammit, he thought, this is no time to let the pressure get to you. You've been shot at before and you've been hit. Of course, that was small-arms fire and if a gun this big hits you, you'll never know it.

Eyes slitted against the glare of another close miss, he nudged the XV-1 free of the wounded *Prachil Star*. Those Wormies



weren't good shots. Either that or they were missing on purpose — and that didn't make sense. He'd never heard of Sathar taking prisoners.

He wanted to slam the void drive on and put light years between himself and here, but he fought the impulse. Take it easy, make sure you have everything ready. . . .

Another close shot rippled the blistered hull of the freighter, registering on the XV-1's screens. Today had started out no worse than a hundred other days, he told himself, reaching for the protective cover of the void drive and flipping it open.

Thinking about it, today had promised to be another in a long string of dull days.

A Sathar loomed close, firing. The screens of the XV-1 deflected the bursts from the Sathar's laser batteries. Checking the console, everything seemed in order, and he punched in the void drive. Today had sure gone to hell in a hurry.

Routine governed Dai Llewellyn's life, from roll-call to lights-out. Part of him detested the regimen while another, more secret, part loved the security of an ordered society. That was what the Pan Galactic Corporation was all about — order. But even order had its limits . . . and guard duty aboard a transport was one of them.

Dai scratched his chin with the back of one hand, and wished the PGC did not have the standing order making twenty-four hours a year of duty in exo-suits mandatory. Sure, they did deep space duty occasionally and wore the suits, but most of the time the PGC pulled duty on a planet with some sort of atmosphere. Outside the ship, the bulky space suits saved lives. Inside a

controlled atmosphere, the suits were as cumbersome as power-armor. The system of gaskets and self-sealing joints insured that the exo-suit was uncomfortable, but the training manual said twenty-four hours a year, and twenty-four it was.

Colonel Gaedynn, head of security aboard the freighter, briefed Llewellyn's watch. Ever a man for regulations, Gaedynn called roll, waiting patiently for the slow Dralaste to answer, nodding at the precision of the Vrusk's answer, and ignoring the measured insolence of Viyizzi the Yazirian's answer.

As Viyizzi's commanding officer, Captain Llewellyn started to reprimand her, but caught himself. The Yazirians were a proud race. They looked like so many tall, skinny monkeys to most humans, but they could glide between trees, were loyal to their friends, and carried a long grudge.

Earlier this year, Gaedynn had chewed Viyizzi out on the small-arms range. She had been showing off, firing both pistols from the hips and knocking down targets as soon as they popped up. Unquestionably, she was the best shot in the squad, but the small-arms range was not a place for showing-off.

"Here . . . sir," answered Viyizzi with measured disrespect. Yoe, the other Yazirian in the squad, flinched and elbowed her. Yoe was the pilot and ship's gunner. In contrast to Viyizzi's whiplike gauntness, Yoe was so heavy that he could glide on only the lightest-gravity planets.

Not to be outdone, Viyizzi jabbed back at him with a sharp elbow. Llewellyn liked her for all her brass — she didn't let anyone put anything over on her and she didn't take anything from anyone either. Yoe ignored her. Colonel Gaedynn continued with roll call, calling Sergeant Slard's name last.

"Here, sir," Slard was too crisp, too polished, almost too perfect. Dai could not nail down what it was, but there was something about Slard he did not like.

The Sergeant spent too much time with the XV-1 — it seemed almost an obsession with him. Why, Llewellyn couldn't figure out. Machines were tools, nothing more and nothing less. Some people personified and romanticized robots. Hota Lea, his squad robotics expert, was like that. Dai couldn't picture himself getting excited over a hammer, and couldn't fathom Slard's fascination with the experimental vessel.

Roll call finished, Colonel Gaedynn paused and flipped to a new page on his clipboard. "As you know, we are aboard the *Prachil Star* to escort our . . . cargo . . . to homeworld for evaluation. Possibly it will be adopted for use after testing. What happens after it arrives, we cannot control, but that is not why we are here. We are to guard the XV-1. As you know, the Sathar have intruded in this area before, but it has been quiet for the

last two weeks. From all appearances, this old freighter will get us to homeworld with no problems. We might be transporting history."

Abruptly, he changed the subject: "Anyway, you have your assignments. They have not changed in the last five days. This is a security area. No one is to enter this cargo hold without a pass. No unauthorized personnel are allowed in the same area as the XV-1. You are not to leave your posts unless officially relieved. Any questions?"

Llewellyn would have been surprised if there had been. For the last week in-transit they had heard the same speech twice a day, once on each four-hour shift. Gaedynn called them to attention and then turned them over to Llewellyn, who dismissed them.

Hota Lea stopped to pull out her compact mirror and check her make-up. Passing close by, Viyizzi joked, "Prettingy yourself for Vi?" and took up her post by the XV-1. Hota blushed slightly, snapping the compact shut.

Dai caught up with Hota before she entered the XV-1 and whispered, "How about a date — dinner perhaps when we arrive homeworld?"

Hota Lea flushed. "Sir, officers do not date subalterns, not until they are lieutenant j.g., anyway." She spoke loud enough for others close by to hear, but then dropped her voice to a lower tone, "It is a nice thought . . ."

Llewellyn grinned. "The offer goes — as long as you don't bring Violet."

Immediately Hota became defensive. "What's wrong with Violet?" "Nothing, absolutely nothing. She's perfect. Never makes a mistake." He shrugged, "I prefer your company to that of our robot medic." His voice took on a more serious tone. "In the corporation on Pavan, we didn't have them. The sand screwed up their circuits."

Hota grew a little angry. "If more people took a lesson from robots . . ."

Llewellyn shook his head. It irritated him that she was so close to the robot.

"Who wants to be a robot? It puts my teeth on edge when you treat it like it's human. People are people and . . ."

Hota's grin was sharp enough to cut. "I know . . . and robots are robots. We've had this discussion before, Da . . . Captain Llewellyn."

Llewellyn realized he had blown it again. "Let's get Violet aboard the XV-1 and check out the life support systems." If they had checked it once, they had checked that damned experimental escape vessel twenty times. For all he knew, the thing could punch its way through the hull of the freighter like it was paper, and jump the void to wherever they wanted to go.

They checked the sublight drive, the void drive to jump into the void, the laser cannons mounted in the bow, the sub-space and void-communication systems,

the three life support systems, both exo-suits in the weapon's locker, the grav-couches, and the reprocessing plant for food. To get at these systems, Dai had to remove a score of access panels, crawl through the engineering rear section, and plug Violet into the XV-1's main computer. As usual, all worked. Leaving Hota Lea working with Violet inside the craft, Dai popped a piece of gum in his mouth. He offered some to Dorf the Dralaste and Viyizzi who stood guard by the XV-1's port hatch.

Viyizzi grinned evilly. "How's the fairy princess?" She was clearly referring to Hota Lea. Dai tried to fight a smile and only partially succeeded.

"She's all incensed about a remark I made."

With her usual insight, the irrepressible Yazirian chuckled. "You knocking her tin head again?"

As usual, she was on target. Llewellyn shook his head, amazed at Viyizzi's perception. "How do you do it?"

She chewed her gum noisily, smacking her lips. "Do what? I just watch you humans and grin. You're easy to read — and amusing."

Dai nodded in agreement. "I'll try to pay more attention."

Viyizzi gave a little shrug. "Yazirians and humans aren't so different. You could have been just like me — if your ancestors hadn't been thrown out of the tribe for taking too many banana breaks." She grinned to show that no real disrespect was meant.

The ship rocked. Llewellyn was knocked to the floor. The sound was felt more than heard. Lumbering to his feet, Dai bellowed to Viyizzi, "Stay here. Tell Hota and Vi to stay put." Viyizzi had her weapon out. She hesitated and then nodded.

Pulling his 9mm pistol from his holster, Dai ran to the doorway. He pushed the button and stepped cautiously into the corridor. A beam of light flickered by him, drilling a neat little hole in the metal by his shoulder. Figures were moving down the corridor, firing. Someone knelt ahead of him.

"Slard?"

Starled, the kneeling figure turned, laser drawn. For a moment Dai thought the kneeling Slard was going to fire at him. Then Slard turned away, squeezing off a shot down the corridor. Llewellyn noticed the prone form of Colonel Gaedynn.

"How is the Colonel?"

"Dead."

Crouching, making his way to Slard, Dai checked the Colonel. His body was still warm, but he was dead. A neat little hole exited his forehead. There were no burns on his forehead, so it had to be the exit wound. Dark shapes filled the corridor, coming towards them, firing lasers. Slard returned their fire. Both he and Llewellyn saw his hasty shot splatter

harmlessly off an albedo suit.

"Damn," Slard muttered.

Llewellyn slapped him on the shoulder. "Let's get inside the cargo area. In there we can link up with the others and then we can hold them off. . . ." a bolt from a laser made him shift nervously. He snapped back a shot. The 9mm slug slapped the firer down. Albedo suits weren't worth a damn against projectile weapons.

"Cap'n," Slard said, "I've got an idea. How about you taking the others and heading up the corridor. I'll stay in the cargo area and hold off these pirates. . . ."

Orders were orders — and orders were that no one who was unauthorized would get their hands on the XV-1.

This suggestion surprised Llewellyn. He was not sure why, but he had never thought of the Sergeant as the heroic type. Maybe he had underestimated the man. Still, the suggestion did not feel right coming from Slard.

Llewellyn pulled the trigger again. "Get in the cargo area. I'll cover you."

"Sir, I'll cover you."

"No, get moving, Sergeant!"

"Sir, why don't. . . ."

"That's an order — move out!"

Llewellyn heard the squeak of Slard's boots as the Sergeant obeyed.

An eternity later, Slard yelled, "I've got you covered. Come on."

Dai fired again, whirled, and dove at the door. Slard fired down the hall, one of his shots ricocheting where Llewellyn had stood an instant before.

Rolling through the cargo bay doors, there was a whine and a hiss. The triple-plated cargo doors slid shut as the floorplates quivered. A grenade launcher, most likely, Viyizzi was there and helped him up. He looked at Slard, wondering about the close shot, but dismissed it as an accident.

Viyizzi had her gun drawn, "Having trouble. . . sir?"

"Thanks," he answered, and then yelled to members of the squad standing around the XV-1. "Get inside the vessel."

"Why'd you do that?" asked Slard. "I thought you liked my plan to. . . ."

"We can't. I got a look at that metal mess that was our escape route. Nothing short of a Mark VII Hover Panzer could get through there." Llewellyn did not add that they were stuck here.

Llewellyn wondered who the intruders were, not that it made any real difference.

Orders were orders — and orders were that no one who was unauthorized would get their hands on the XV-1. If these were pirates, they'd leave once they'd lost a few men, but if they were Sathar or mercenaries, they'd fight until the last one was eliminated.

From outside there were dull whumps against the door. Whoever was out there wanted in badly enough to throw some pretty heavy firepower against the cargo door.

Viyizzi was beside Dai, her gun ready. She was making a low growling sound in her throat.

"Viyizzi," he said, "get me a helmet

for this exo-suit." An idea was forming. It might not be necessary to do what he had in mind, but it never hurt to be prepared.

"Just where do you think you're going. . . . sir?"

"Nowhere right now, but I think I know how to make things rough for our visitors."

Gun in hand, he watched the door. While she was gone, he tried the communicator by the door, but could get only static on it. In a minute, she returned with his helmet. Dai snapped it in place with her help and then he cut on the intercom.

"Viyizzi, get everyone aboard the XV-1 and close its airlock. Have Yoe take the co-pilot's seat. Leave the pilot's seat empty. Have him monitor me — when I give the signal have him blast a hole through the hull."

"That's crazy," she shouted, "you'll be sucked into space with the sudden decompression," and then she added, "sir."

Dai grinned. "I'll be secured, but I don't think our friends outside will be. I think the intruders will be in for quite a nasty surprise." He pushed her toward the vehicle. "Now get ready."

Nodding, she ran off. Dai knew she was worried. When Viyizzi was too upset to make a slur at an officer, she really was upset.

Time oozed by while thumps and whumps came from outside the cargo door. It began to glow, turned a cherry red, then pink, and finally white.

"Ready, Yoe?" he asked into the helmet intercom.

"Ready when you are, boss."

The melting metal ran onto the floor. "Now!" yelled Dai, snapping his safety line onto a stanchion. He heard no sound, but felt a vibration; then he was jerked off his feet and dragged backward until the safety line was taut. Those at the cargo bay door were sucked right through the cargo bay and into the structure of the plate-sized hole into space. Inside their suits, their mouths formed silent "O's" and then they disappeared. Whoever they were, they were gone.

"You OK, sir?" It was Yoe's voice.

Dai ached where he had jerked against the cable with the sudden decompression and no doubt he'd sport a bruise tomorrow. "I'm fine," he said, standing. "Coming aboard. . . sir?" It was Viyizzi.

"Soon, but first I want to find something to seal this hole. Meanwhile, make sure everyone stays inside. I'll keep you informed."

"Whatever you say. . . sir."

Checking the cargo bay was futile. No sealant kits were around, but he was certain some had been loose on the repair table. Most likely, they'd gone out the hole with the intruders. Maybe some were in the corridor emergency locker.

Approaching the melted cargo door, a figure suddenly appeared and Dai hesitated. The others had been mercenaries, but this was a Sathar, the first he'd seen in years. The Sathar fired through the cooling hole in the doorway, swinging his beam weapon in a broad arc. Llewellyn leapt, careening against the ceiling. His 9mm did not have its open-space adaptor on and was useless. Holstering it, he pulled his flechette pistol from his shoulder holster. The figure in the doorway shot again.

Using his feet against the ceiling, Dai avoided the beam weapon's blast which scorched the area where he had just been. Hitting the floor with teeth-jolting impact he rolled and came up firing. Of the three flechette rounds, two were on target. The Sathar exploded in a pinkish mist. The round which had missed exploded against the far bulkhead.

"Pavan's pink moons," growled Viyizzi in his earphone, "what's going on out there?"

"Nothing I can't handle. Is the airlock functioning?"

"I think so." There was a pause and a muddled conversation. In a few seconds Viyizzi's voice was back. "Old Yodler says 'Can do'." She hesitated. "I thought you were going to seal the outer hull?"

"We've got bigger problems than that — Sathar. Tell Yoe to get everyone belted down and get the airlock open."

"Sir?" She sounded puzzled.

"I'm coming in. Then we're going to get out."

Exactly how do you plan to do that. . . sir?"

Dai lost any further conversation as he leapt toward the XV-1. His jump was a

little low, failing to carry him over the top. Rolling over the tear-drop shaped surface, he used a handhold near the airlock to pull himself down.

Pushing the entry button, there was a pause and a hiss he could hear over the suit's audio unit. The outer airlock opened. Inside was just enough room for a man in an exo-suit to stand. Pushing the button, the outer doors closed. Gravity returned, and the inner door opened.

Everyone was in their gravity-couches and they turned their faces toward him. The pilot seat was empty. Stuffing himself into it without removing his exo-suit took some doing, but Dai thought he accomplished it rather well.

"What's happening out there . . . sir?" demanded Viyizi.

"Intruders. They've blown the corridor up and they've burned through the cargo door. We're going to get this vehicle out of here." While speaking, Llewellyn slid his hands over the familiar controls. Although no flyboy by a long shot, he considered himself a fair hand at moving one of these when the occasion arose.

"Would leaving be wise, sir?" Slard's tone indicated that he thought it was unwise. "We don't even know what's out there . . . or even if this craft actually works."

Llewellyn laughed. "We're going to find out."

Small-arms fire pinged on the hull.

Powered, the console lit. With the flick of a switch, the ship moved slightly. Dai found the button he wanted. It was under a protective cover. Lifting it, he pressed the button. Bolts of energized light tore through the soft inside of the freighter's hull, widening the hole Yoe had made earlier and opening an escape route.

"This is insane," yelled Slard, "risking our lives on a vessel we don't even know works! We'd be better off chancing surrender."

With a curled lip and disgusted snarl, Viyizi delivered her answer. "When was the last time you met a Sathar captive? They don't take prisoners, fool!"

"At ease!" Llewellyn ordered. "This is an escape craft," he muttered as much to himself as to his companions, "and that's just exactly what we're going to use her for. We're supposed to keep this out of unauthorized hands, and that's what we'll do. I've been told this is a void-jumper — we may give that a try."

"You intend to jump from inside a freighter?" asked Slard.

"Not exactly. First we get outside, and then I'm going to jump her well away from here."

More shots pinged off the hull. "Pavan's pink moons," cursed Viyizi, "step on it and get us outta here. Going down fighting, or with my boots off in bed is one thing, but strapped down in a grav-couch is no way for this furry female to check out."

Slowly the teardrop-shaped vessel

approached the hole in the hull.

Cautiously it emerged, a featured ballerina in *Swan Lake*, with Sathar warships attending. Clearing the hull, Llewellyn saw three Sathar assault scouts turn toward him, anxious to catch him.

One of the Sathar scouts was faster than the others. It sped toward the slow XV-1. Evidently it was not aware that the XV-1 was armed. Cursing, Dai punched the firing button to the laser cannons. In a white ball of light, the Sathar blew up. Its companions hung back.

Dai pushed the button to lock in the void-computer and then hit the void-drive button as one of the assault scouts fired on the XV-1. The torpedo reached the XV-1 as she leapt into the void. The digital displays blinked as the ship streamlined between space as the crimson ball collided with the hull, shaking the inhabitants in their grav-couches.

Dai's head snapped back against the headrest of his grav-couch. Needles on the screen sensors jumped to the danger line and slowly receded. The ship popped out of being while faerie fire from the near-miss blistered her hull. Dai blacked out.

Ears ringing, the darkness in his mind was traded for the vast darkness of space before his console. Violet, the medic-robot, injected him with stim-dose. Its metallic voice asked, "Are you all right, Captain Llewellyn? Your vital signs read well, but that is never a certain indicator of your mental state, although your alpha waves scan well."

He rubbed the lump left by the auto-injector. "I'm fine, Vi. How're the others?"

"All personnel have been checked, and appear to be in excellent condition, except for Yoe. He is overweight. I have not injected any others yet. Since you are in the pilot's seat, I felt it was logical to revive you first, and then see to the needs of others."

"Good. Vi, can you tap into the ship's sensors and give me a damage report?"

"In a moment sir. I am a Mark V robot, but even I have my limitations. My primary function is to care for the sick and wounded. Once that is finished, I think I can access the data banks and vocalize the damage report." It whirred with a soft, competent tone, sliding over to the others, a metallic Florence Nightingale.

It spent time with each one, pausing over Dorf the longest.

"Is there anything wrong?"

"I do not believe anything is amiss," answered Vi.

"Are you sure?" asked Dai.

"No," said Vi slowly, as if contemplating the idea. "I seem to have sustained a bit of structural damage. I am having a little more difficulty in accessing information about Dralastes than anyone else. That should not be. I seem to have no trouble accessing humans, Vrusk or Yazirians — only Dralastes. That

is curious."

"Can you tap into the computers now?"

"Yes, Captain Llewellyn."

"Would you . . . please?" asked Llewellyn.

"Certainly, sir." Vi removed a service panel; its multi-fingered metallic appendages, remarkably delicate, manipulated several wires and finally attached a jack into its circuitry box. It sat quietly humming for two and a half minutes, and then unplugged itself.

"Well?" asked Llewellyn.

"I know of vessels surviving with much worse damage," was the robot's answer. "The XV-1 seems to have sustained damage to its shields, and is operating at 60% efficiency. The life support systems are functioning well. The subspace communication is in good condition, but the void-communication is gone. I think the torpedo blast did that. Sublight drive appears in excellent shape, but there is some fused circuitry in the void-jump panel and I cannot assess the severity of its damage. The astrogation received some of the secondary effects of the near miss."

Viyizi shook her head to clear away night and mental cobwebs. "And just what does that mean?"

Hota Lea answered: "Vi is saying that we cannot tell where we are and that we cannot call anyone to ask for help. Also, it seems to be advising us against using void drive."

"Pavan's pink moons," muttered Viyizi, "first Sathar agents out the kazoo, then warships fire on us and now we're stranded who knows how far from the nearest banana bush."

"Tree," corrected Violet. "Bananas grow on trees."

"Find me one and I'll tell you." The Yazirian lapsed into disgruntled mumbling, the general gist of which was heaven help any Sathar who came her way.

Dai sat quietly throughout the exchange. His eyes met Hota Lea's across the cabin and locked with hers. She returned his look without turning her eyes away.

"Well," Dai asked her, "you're the technician, do you think you can fix it?"

Hota gave a wistful half-smile.

"Anything can be fixed with the right tools and equipment. The biggest problem will be spare parts; I don't think we have any. If we don't have any spare parts, our dilemma is this: Do we suffer along crippled, or do we cannibalize what we've got? We can probably trade off shields for void communication by cannibalizing. But we don't know if anyone we would want to hear us would hear and respond. As far as the damaged void drive goes, trying to fix it blindly would be like trying to invent star drive using a screwdriver and lead pipes."

"We got problems," said Viyizi.

"Very astute observation and summary," commented Violet.

"Troubles ain't all we got," said Yoe. "I've been watching this screen, and I think we're going to have visitors."

Llewellyn returned his eyes to the dull white console. "Visitors?"

"Yup. Sathar, I'd say."

"How many would you guess, Yoe?"

"Looks like one, maybe two in a tight formation, sir." Yoe was silent a moment, then added, "I'd like to know how they found us."

"Just a guess, Yodler," answered Viyizzi, "but I'd say that torpedo must've done enough damage to us to leave a particle trail that even you could follow."

Dai carefully folded a piece of chewing gum and put it in his mouth. He chewed vigorously, but not nearly so fast as his mind raced. If Sathar were here, they wanted this vessel, or they wanted the crew, or both. Any way he looked at it, the crew of the XV-1 was in for a rough time. He reached for the void drive, intent on putting light years between himself and the Sathar and stopped. What had Vi said? There appeared to be a malfunction, something about the circuits. He hesitated, and then he made up his mind. His hand cut on the computer to coordinate the jump, and then reached for the switch to pop them into the void. A chance at escape, any chance, was better than blind acceptance of fate. No guts, no glory.

The computer hummed, cycled, and indicated readiness. He hit the button and the ship lurched. According to his astrogation gyro, they had moved. According to the stars he could see, they hadn't. Something wasn't quite right. The console digitals indicated some void movement, and he stared at them a few seconds, trying to make sense out of what he saw. If anything, he decided, he was farther away from his destination than he had been before the jump. His relative position to certain stars had increased — they had jumped back! The computer verified his suspicion. Damn, this was just great! Here they were, in a battered experimental escape craft, their shields functioning at about half power, and Sathar coming after them. No void-drive, and not enough sublight to outmaneuver the Sathar assault scout.

Yoe nudged him. "Whadda we do, boss?"

"Surrender the vessel," said Slard.

What was Slard saying? Dai turned to face him, and stared straight at the laser aimed partway between Yoe and himself. Slard could move his wrist slightly and burn either one of them.

Suddenly it began to make sense. The exit wound had been in Colonel Gaedynn's forehead. That meant someone had shot him from behind. Most likely, Slard. Chances are, Slard's nearly hitting him in the cargo corridor had not been an accident.

"Why?" Dai asked.

"It pays well," Slard answered with a small shrug of his shoulders.

Slard's fascination with the XV-1 now made sense to Llewellyn.

"Clan-killer!" snarled Viyizzi, half-rising.

"At ease!" yelled Dai, as Slard turned his gun toward her.

Viyizzi gave Dai a murderous look. She was trembling, her hands clenched on the armrests of her grav-couch; but slowly she eased herself down into it. Slard kept his laser pointed in her direction.

"Don't throw your life away, Viyizzi," Dai said. With his hand hidden by the back of the grav-couch, he unbuckled his seat belt, and edged his fingers near his pistol.

"Good advice. Listen to him, Viyizzi," said Slard. "The Sathar might kill you, or reprogram you, but you don't know that for a fact. Who knows, they might even make you a very lucrative offer." Slard's tone took on a goading note. "Why die any sooner than you have to?"

"Because I don't want to live like you," she spat.

Whatever else he was, Slard was no fool. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement as Dai jumped from his grav-couch, gun in hand.

Slard whipped a shot at Dai which missed, frying the naugahide on the back of the grav-couch. Llewellyn's 9mm was in his hand. It roared three times, the slugs catching Slard twice in the chest, and once in the forehead. Even as Llewellyn fired, Viyizzi's laser was in her hand. She put four holes in Slard before Dai finished firing. Slard half-sput, half-jerked and dropped like he'd been fileted.

Dai didn't need Vi to tell him Slard was dead.

"Not bad shooting . . . sir," said Viyizzi. "The way I see it is, one down, six to go."

"Six?" asked Hota Lea.

"The assault scout's crew," explained Violet. "We still have to deal with them."

"Buckle in," Dai ordered, sliding into his grav-couch and buckling his seat belt. The Sathar scout closed. He chewed his gum, thinking. It had to be this vessel they wanted. If the Sathar wanted the crew dead, they could easily have managed that without closing. He bet they wanted this vessel intact, if possible. If that was the case, they'd be a little hesitant to fire on it for fear of damaging it. Most likely, the Sathar would try to board and they would accomplish that by approaching from the rear. They wouldn't want to put themselves in front of his laser cannons. They had seen what the little tear-drop shaped ship could do. An idea grew slowly. The Sathar would cut speed and stop, and then attempt to board. If only he could get them in front of his guns . . .

A metallic hiss came over the intercom. He had heard tapes of Wormies' voices

before, and each time it had given him goosebumps. On the astrogation scanner, a blip appeared, closing with the center, his ship. A small trickle of sweat inches its way between shoulders that were hunched with anticipation. Closer, closer, he thought.

"Surrender," the voice said. "Surrender, and you will be well-treated."

In a pig's eye, he thought. Still, he cut the sublight drive off. At the same time, he switched the void-computer on, punching in a small jump forward. The red light on the console winked, blinking steadily. The coordinates were engaged, not that they mattered.

"Captain," Viyizzi asked, "what are you doing?" She was concerned, he knew — she had forgotten to be disrespectful. "I thought we were going to escape, not surrender — you've cut the sublight off."

"Yeah, but I put the void-drive on."

"Sir," interrupted Violet, "perhaps you have forgotten your last little experiment with the void drive. It is not functioning properly."

Llewellyn forced a grin. "I'm counting on the damaged circuits to do just what they did before . . ."

"Wait a minute," Viyizzi scowled, "they didn't jump the void; in fact, we lost distance. How can we escape by moving backwards?"

Dai ignored her. He swallowed, his finger shaking slightly as it hung above the blinking red button, ready to push it and engage the void drive. He watched the blip come closer on the screen. Just a little closer, he prayed. His throat was dry. He strained his ears for the slightest sound.

"Yoe," Dai said, his voice a dry whisper, "engage the target computers."

Yoe gave Dai a peculiar look, but then none of this made any sense to him. Stress did strange things to some men, but he had never known the Captain to panic. With forward-firing guns, and the enemy closing behind, what good would it do to fire at an enemy that couldn't be hit?

"Sir," Yoe began, "do you mean . . ."

There was a metallic scraping, as the Sathar extended a boarding tube. Llewellyn's whisper was urgent, "Gunnery computer engaged?"

Yoe's head filled with questions, but finally his hand flipped the correct switch. "Engaged, sir."

Dai let out a slow breath and punched the void-drive. XV-1 bucked like a turpentine Stillar's Bovine and jumped back. The targeting computer whined, indicating a target and Dai depressed the laser cannons' button twice. The first shot took the Sathar scout in the rear; the second sent it into eternity with a burst of white light.

Viyizzi's mouth hung open. Finally she cleared her throat. "Good shooting, sir." Then she added, "But we're still lost."

Dai shrugged. "We're alive, and now we've got time. That's what counts." ▲



illustration by Clyde Caldwell