

Epilogue

The curtain falls on Scumdog's tale, just as yours is beginning...

Jeez, the oxygen meter is so close to zero that there's probably only a few minutes' worth of air left in here. I guess I'd better wrap it up...

Three years after the events I've just described, the Avenger was on patrol near Learned's Star. It was just after the shift change at 1600 hours, and everybody was tired — we had been out there, running cargo and patrol missions through unexplored territory, for nearly a month without any rest. The ship was running under normal alert status, and the crew was more concerned with making it until the end of the shift than tending to their assigned duties. I can't help but wonder what would've happened if I'd maintained a condition of yellow alert and stayed on the bridge like I should've, given the potentially hostile area we were patrolling.

I was in my cabin, dreaming about what I was going to do when we reached Canopus VIII for some shore leave, when suddenly a huge explosion rocked the ship. As the emergency alarms wailed to life, I dashed out into the suddenly dark and smoke-filled companionway. More explosions jolted the ship, accompanied by the sickening screech of rending metal. I sighted a crewer coming toward me out of the smoke, and shouted "What's happening?" at him. "They came out of nowhere, sir!" he yelled back at me, over the din of what I could only assume was a fierce space battle in progress. His face was ashen, like he'd just seen a ghost. "The whole bridge is gone, sir! They just blasted off the whole bow, all the way back to bulkhead C! Engineering's been hit, too — last we heard from Mr. Johannsmeyer, the containment fields were shot to hell and the reactor was about to go critical! We — "

Suddenly, as another explosion slammed the Avenger, the port bulkhead split with a resounding crack of overstressed plastisteel, and the atmosphere began to rush out of the companionway. With a scream, the unidentified crewman was sucked out into the vacuum of space. I managed to grab onto a handhold, and scrambled up the corridor to the nearest comm panel, ordered the crew — those who could hear me, anyway — to abandon ship, and struggled to the nearest escape pod cluster. I strapped myself in and hit the reassuring red button on the console, and a severe jolt pushed me back into my acceleration couch as the escape engine fired.

As I drifted away from the stricken Avenger, now in its death throes, I rotated the escape pod 180° to face the scene of the battle. The ship had been hulled in dozens of places, I saw, with the most extensive damage having been done to the bridge and engineering section, of which the latter was glowing bright red from a reactor meltdown in progress. Finally the containment fields gave out and the Avenger exploded in a white-hot fireball.

I sat there, numb with shock, and tried to figure out who could have perpetrated such a blitzkrieg attack. A mottled red-and-black object flitted overhead at an incredible velocity, and disappeared into the distance. It was then that I realized who had been responsible for the hit-and-run attack on my ship. It was something I had hoped I would never have to witness again. It was...

Oh, damn! The power cell in this damn recorder is about to...