

Vishalya Neda, Vice Admiral Malinsky, the Unification Movement, the Wormdrive, the Terran Unified Government, the TUG Götterdämmerung, the TUG Doomsday and the TUG Petrograd is © Joan Jacobsen, 2011. All other characters appearing in this story, except where otherwise specifically noted, are likewise © Joan Jacobsen 2011.

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III

"Don't be silly, Heinrich. Look again," I said.

The Götterdämmerung.

Clearly he was letting his fear get the better of him. That ship had been lost for over two hundred years, and even though every pilot in the fleet knew exactly what it looked like, and even though stories sometimes surfaced about a sighting, it was clearly due to pilots snapping under stress or sensor officers misreading their scanners.

The Götterdämmerung had been fifteen times larger than the largest mother-ship in the entire navy, and that was exactly why it had gotten lost. It was *too* big. Even now, two centuries later, no wormdrive could create a stable hole large enough for a ship of that size. There was no chance that what Heinrich was seeing was that particular ship. It had been lost in the Dark Matter sector where it had tried its maiden jump, and by all accounts it was either still drifting there, a dead hulk in the endless, eternal darkness, or it had been torn apart by whatever forces Dark Matter really consisted of.

Sighing, I shook my head. I wouldn't have thought Heinrich would panic that swiftly.

"Vishalya, I swear!" he said. His voice was hoarse and he sounded terrified. "I wish I was wrong, but it's right there, beneath us. It just came out of ... of *nowhere* ..."

"Pull yourself together man!"

"I AM! It's *right there*! I can read the name across the bow, alright? I can see the gunbanks. Please ... please don't do anything to make them angry, okay? I've never *seen* so many guns in one place!!"

The note of panic in Heinrich's voice was reaching a pained crescendo. I didn't know what he was looking at, but I knew I wouldn't get him to shut up unless I inverted the

bomber. That way I'd be looking at whatever he was seeing, and he'd have empty space above him.

I tapped the scanner. It showed nothing out there except space. I pondered telling Heinrich this, but if he was hallucinating, it wouldn't change anything. He'd say the scanners were wrong. Instead, I simply decided to invert the Hammer. Releasing the tiniest amount of air through one of the TMEs, I rolled over, stabilizing with a similar release once I was in my new position.

I took my eyes off my instruments and tried leaning my head back a bit. It wasn't easy. The cockpit of a Hammer had never been designed for comfort, but for stable flying. Having the pilot tossing and turning left and right during a bomb run was not advisable. When firing a torpedo at a distance of thousands of miles, even the slightest deviation from the course could mean a missed shot. Almost no shots were fired with targeters and homing devices on. Countermeasures were too effective for that kind of thing nowadays, and most bombers fired direct. That meant the pilot had to fly straight and level and consequently, I was strapped into my seat so tightly I could barely move at all. My hands had free reign and a lot of the computer systems were voice activated and linked to my Heads-Up Display, but I wasn't able to turn to look behind me for instance. It wouldn't have done me any good anyway. I would've been staring at an engine cowl or my wing. At that moment, though, I really wanted to look above me.

There was nothing to it. I had to turn the bomber a little more, dipping the nose towards the area where Heinrich would have been looking.

"SHIT!!!"

"I told you. I TOLD you!"

Right there in front of me was the largest ship I had ever seen. It was bristling with guns. Three massive wings on either side, set behind each other towards the aft of the ship supported missiles big enough to make a mockery of a whole squadron of Cap-Ships and the engine cowls were as large as frigates. It even had engines halfway up the hull of the ship for further thrust. I couldn't even begin to imagine the speed it would fly with.

Engines hadn't changed much over the last two hundred years. Barely at all, in fact. The bridge rose from the hull three quarters of the way towards the aft as well. It was a sleek ship. It looked slender, even though it was obvious two mother ships like the Doomsday could have been placed side by side inside it, and still left room to walk past without touching the hull. Ten 'Doomsdays' would fit inside it if placed stem to stern along the length of the hull. Then again, the Doomsday was a bulky, ugly thing. This

ship was absolutely beautiful. The slightly dipping bow, almost like a hawk's beak, the long, elegant lines and the sheer power of those gigantic engines ...

Heinrich was right.

Humanity had only ever built one ship like that.

"I ... I'm ..." I said, blinking in disbelief as I spotted the barely illuminated name across the side of the bow.

This was, indeed, the *Götterdämmerung*.

Heinrich was calmer again now that he couldn't see the leviathan out there. "I think you're looking for the word 'sorry', Vish ..." he said. His voice was still hoarse, but resigned rather than panicky. "Don't worry about it. I don't think I would have believed me either."

"What I can't believe is the *size* of that thing..." I whispered into the com. It was true too. It was hard not to reject what my own eyes told me.

"Can you remember what the crew compliment on that ship was supposed to be?" Heinrich asked. "I mean ... that's a whole naval squadron ... in one ship!"

I couldn't possibly disagree with that. We'd all been told the story of the *Götterdämmerung*. How it had been the largest ship humanity had ever built and how it had been meant to be able to fight off anything hostile it came across. Back then, when deep space exploration was a brand new concept, many still feared what we'd come across. If there were other races out there. Intelligent, possibly belligerent beings who would harm us. So far, no such life forms had been encountered. It didn't exclude the possibility of there being other forms of sentient life in the universe, of course. Humanity had really only seen a very, very small part of it so far.

"Do you think it's a ghost ship?" I asked, without answering Heinrich's question. To be honest, I couldn't remember how large the crew of the ship coming up under us had been, but surely, they were all dead. Two hundred years in Dark Matter? There was no chance anyone could survive that long. The oldest human being on record had died at the age of a hundred and seventy two, and she had been so senile in the end that there had barely been anything to Upload. Most people thought getting that old was a horrific prospect. Dying at the age of a hundred and twenty was considered a good, long lifespan, but those growing older than a hundred and thirty were generally pitied.

"It can't be," Heinrich said. From the sound of his voice, he was getting terrified again. "It came out of a wormhole. It can't do that without someone steering it."

"How though?" I wondered aloud.

I didn't get an answer. Instead, I watched as the gigantic ship slid closer and closer to us. I was about to ask Heinrich something else when the computer told me I had been scanned. At least that comprehensively answered the question of whether we were in danger of getting run over by a ghost ship, or whether it had crew on board. Sighing, I told Heinrich what had happened.

"Why are you sighing?" he asked, forcing his voice to sound cheerful. "It means we're about to be rescued!"

Groaning, I rolled my eyes and wished I could have slapped Heinrich across the neck for that. "Would you please hook up your helmet to the main power-grid and reboot your brain?" I chided. "Try to think for a moment."

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't they rescue us?"

"Because in all likelihood, they are Rebels. They must have somehow come across the ship and put it through a refit. It's the only logical answer to why we're seeing this."

Heinrich fell quiet for a moment. Then his voice came back on the com. "I was going to ask why it couldn't be our side that found it ... but we'd have heard about it then, wouldn't we?"

"Exactly," I answered.

So this was it. They probably wouldn't even waste a recoilless burst on us. They'd just fly us down.

Unless we were *really* unfortunate and they *did* decide to rescue us. Falling into captivity would be a fate a lot worse than dying in space. The Rebels didn't exactly pull punches on their prisoners. On the other hand ... neither did the Navy interrogators. I had never actually witnessed an interrogation, but I had heard the stories. I'd seen the interrogators too. They stuck to themselves, most of the time. They didn't exactly win popularity contests with anyone outside their own little circle.

Butchers, they were called.

And other ... more descriptive things.

I suppose the Rebels were no worse than us, really. Not much of a comfort, though. But what were our options? There was no way we could outrun a ship the size of the *Götterdämmerung*, after all. A mere hiccup from those gigantic engines would send it hurtling along at speeds a Hammer couldn't hope to match.

"Fight or flight, then?" Heinrich asked, nervously. I could tell from his voice that neither option seemed particularly appealing to him.

"Fight with what? Most of our ordnance is gone..."

"Flight then?"

"Heinrich, look at the engines on that ship!"

"I can't. You turned us around, remember?"

I sighed and closed my eyes. "We can't run. They'd catch us even if they were flying *backwards*."

The sound of Heinrich removing the safety on his sidearm could be heard clearly through the com. I couldn't blame him. At least a bullet through the head meant a painless, swift death. Not exactly what we could expect if we got captured. I took out my own gun. My hands and lower arms were free to move and if I released the harness I was strapped in with, I could move enough to actually shoot myself. Of course, if I disconnected the harness, there was no way for me to get strapped back in properly. I didn't like the idea, but ... what other option was there?

For the first time I actually felt that the cockpit of a Hammer was badly designed. Why wasn't there a button for me to push, to release some kind of painless poison into my bloodstream instead? Instead, I had to spend several minutes unhooking myself from the system so I could shoot myself. Plenty of time to have second thoughts.

Damned design flaws ...

"It's been nice flying with you, Vish ... " Heinrich said, quietly. He sounded resigned to his fate.

I wished I could be as calm about dying, but something told me to wait a little longer. Just a little longer.

"Wait just one more minute," I said, observing the gigantic ship outside.

"Why? What's happening?"

"You have better eyes than me ... "

"That goes without saying. I wouldn't be a bombardier otherwise."

I nodded. Bomber pilots needed good nerves and swift reactions, but the bombardiers needed eyes to shame a hawk and steady hands. Heinrich had both. In fact, if he had wanted to, he could have made it as a FAC-jock but he always preferred heavier ordnance. In any case, he would be able to see what was out there far better than me. Notice details I couldn't.

Slowly, I started turning the Hammer again. I wanted to keep an eye on the giant vessel outside, but right now, Heinrich was a better choice for the job than me. "I need you to tell me what you see on the side of it. Possibly on the wings. I think he's turning alongside."

"Whu ... ? He's going to *broadside* us? What's the point of wasting ammo on a ship as small as ours?"

I didn't answer. I didn't *have* an answer. All I could hope was that Heinrich would spot something that would give us some answers. I wasn't even sure what he should be looking for. Just something ... anything that would give us something to go on.

As I turned, so did the *Götterdämmerung*. It came up alongside us. Both Heinrich and I would be able to see some part of the ship, but he would have by far the better view. That was good. I had outstanding eyesight, as did any pilot, but his was still better. And I didn't want any detail to remain undiscovered.

"What do you see?" I asked, probably impatiently. I had barely given him ten seconds to get his bearings.

Chuckling despondently, Heinrich told me to wait a few moments. I felt like I was sitting on pins and needles, but he was right. There was just too much to take in for him to give me any kind of answer that quickly. I honestly don't know how long it took before he spoke up again, but it felt like hours.

Considering we didn't have air for that long, I suppose it was probably just a couple of minutes.

"They are not drawing a bead on us," he finally said, sounding surprised. "I can't see a single battery turning towards us. In fact ... in fact it looks like they are all turning *away*."

"That doesn't make sense!"

Heinrich's voice betrayed his own confusion when, after another few moments to check the veracity of his own statement, he answered. "No. No sense at all. If they are planning on bringing us in, wouldn't they actually do so after pointing every available gun at us to show us the futility of resisting?"

"Yeah, or running," I said. "Can you see any markings on her? I mean, a ship that large? Surely it's got to have some kind of markings?"

"Except for the fact that it looks like it's taken a trip through the asteroid belt, I can't see any markings at a ... wait ..."

"What? WHAT?"

"I can see the Craft Ident Number. It's TUG-CB-1415. Can you run that through the computer?"

"I don't need to, Heinrich ... it's the right number," I said. So it was true then. If I had really needed any more evidence, then this was it. I still didn't understand how it could be, though. Nothing made any sense. Nothing on that ship should still be alive, but it was maneuvering, so clearly someone was at the helm. And since all the batteries were turning away from us, they had to be manned as well.

Frankly, I still didn't know if we were in mortal danger.

"Hey, they are opening the doors to a landing bay. Right down there! Look! I guess they want us to come and say hello!?" Heinrich said, excitedly. "It's right there, down by the foremost wing on this side."

I nodded to myself. Either that, or they were about to send haulers out to get us. I didn't say as much. Heinrich was excited, and for some reason I didn't want to ruin his elation. Perhaps for a moment he'd forgotten his fear at the prospect of seeing the insides of the greatest ship ever built by human hands.

"Do you think we should?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Heinrich's answer came in the tone of voice children throughout the ages have used to address excessively stupid parents. "How much air do we have left?"

Shrugging very slightly, I had to concede the point. If there was even the most remote chance of salvation, I'd take it. And the Götterdämmerung still sported her original CIN.

TUG-CB-1415.

Terran Unified Government - Carrier Battleship - 1415.

The number wasn't too important. The first armed vessel had received number 01. As far as memory served me, that had been a very crude vessel, used to haul loads of raw materials from the asteroids to Earth. It had been armed so that it could shoot apart small, incoming asteroids. It hadn't worked. The point was the *Götterdämmerung* was armed vessel number one thousand four hundred and fifteen.

The CIN of the Doomsday had been TUG-CV-9447, and *that* had been an old piece of shit.

No ship was built these days without armament. Not with the war and all. Even the smallest, two-person transporter had some kind of armament. Pleasure-yachts used for traveling around the Solar-system carried recoilless guns...

There had been a *lot* of armed ships over the last two hundred years.

And now this ancient behemoth was inviting us in. It was frightening, and at the same time it was terribly tempting.

Not even tempting. I had already made up my mind.

"Well then...let's go say 'hi', shall we?" I asked and reactivated the dormant engines.

The sound of Heinrich clicking the safety back on his sidearm was one of the most comforting I've ever heard. I gave him a few seconds to grab a hold of his supports down in the bomb-bay, before I hit the thrusters. Slowly, I swung the Hammer around. I made sure to go in a large, slow circle to show the crew of the *Götterdämmerung* that I wasn't making an attack run.

As we approached the open landing bay hatch, I was able to fully understand the sheer mass of the ship in front of me. I had never seen anything so enormous and yet so stunningly beautiful. Even marked as she was by so many small asteroid hits, she was the most beautiful ship I had ever laid my eyes on.

Ships weren't built for looks anymore. Just for efficiency.

For the first time, I understood how stupid that *really* was. I had never been proud of the Doomsday. It was just a ship. The ship on which I did my job, but I held no particular love for the ugly old thing. But while I had never set foot on the

Götterdämmerung, I felt my heart swell in my chest at the mere thought that humanity had built something like that. I would have been proud to be a part of her crew.

Heinrich obviously felt the same way.

"I can die happy now, Vish..." he whispered. "I don't think I've ever seen anything this awesome before."

"You may yet, my friend. We don't know if we'll be landing in front of a firing squad," I chuckled as I maneuvered to make a slow, manual landing.

Heinrich actually laughed. "If we do, then they'd better be wearing suits! We'll be landing in an old fashioned, open bay, remember?"

Smiling crookedly, I hadn't actually given that much thought. I had only made that kind of landing a couple of times before. It was always a bit harrowing. It felt like landing in space. Of course, in the strictest sense of those words, that was precisely what I was doing. Still, the doors would hopefully close behind us and we'd have air to breathe in moments.

It wasn't until the doors were actually coming down behind me that I found myself wondering if two hundred year old, recycled air was actually breathable.

Swallowing back my fear, I looked at the instrument readings on my HUD. "Computer, set for full atmospheric scan on my mark minus thirty. Mark," I intoned, quietly as I glided the Hammer into position and touched down. I barely dared to move. Everything was so quiet out there. Almost *too* quiet.

The bay around me was as awe inspiring as the exterior of the ship. More so in fact. It looked as if the bay had been built days before. Everything was in pristine condition. The paint on the walls included. It was a dull, military gray of course, but the paint wasn't flaking and coming off in places like I would have expected on a ship this old. It dawned on me that something wasn't right. The whole ship looked like it had been cared for and kept in perfect condition but even if the original crew had survived the failed Wormhole-jump, how would they have kept the ship in this condition for so many years? I had served on the Doomsday for three years and the exterior of *that* brute had been repainted shortly after I joined the crew. By the time it got blown to pieces it had been in dire need of a new paint-job. The interior had been repainted twice in that time. It had required stupefying amounts of materials to keep her flying and looking even as shabby as she did. Small scale repairs were always on-going. Replacements of broken engine parts, new pipes being installed, old ones stashed away for recycling ... a ship even of that size was a living

organism, constantly replacing dead cells, much like a human body. The Götterdämmerung was about fifteen times as big. Where did the materials and spare parts to keep her flying come from after all these years?

Did I want to know?

Or had the Götterdämmerung in fact never been lost? Was it all a hoax, and the ship had been kept as a strategic reserve by the government? If that was the case, I doubted I would ever forgive those responsible. This ship could win the war for the Terran Unified Government in a matter of a year or two. It would be able to take on pretty much any fleet the Rebels could scrape together and come out of it unscathed.

No!

I did not believe that such a deception had been played on every soldier and pilot in the Terran Navy. I would not. I *could* not.

Heinrich was unusually quiet. I was about to ask him why when my sensors swept the bay and the resulting information came up on my HUD.

"Oxygen levels," I demanded and was promptly rewarded with a series of symbols across my HUD. Scanner results were usually conveyed in that way. A pilot did not have time to sit down and read a few lines of text, while trying to remember what he'd been taught in basic training, while three enemy FACs were bearing down on him from different sides. A symbol was easily recognizable and swiftly understood. With enough training and enough repetition, the human mind could learn to react instinctively to such things.

In any case, the atmosphere was breathable. I could tell that the mixture was slightly off, and I would probably feel light headed by going out there, but I would be able to breathe. I told Heinrich as much.

He didn't answer.

In all likelihood, he was completely overawed by what he saw.

I know I was.

But I would be able to breathe out there, and that was the main thing. I took one last deep breath and hit the switch to release me from my seat. As usual, it felt nice for about ten seconds. Then the cramps started and I groaned as my legs twitched. The helmet lifted off my head as the cockpit slid open and I looked around.

As of yet, there was no welcoming committee. I wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but I still hopped out of the cockpit. Carefully, so as not to hurt myself when I hit the floor underneath me. I leaned down and waved through the front of Heinrich's window, grinning widely. I think I nearly gave him a heart-attack. He had been so far gone in simply looking at everything that he hadn't noticed that I had jumped out.

He scrambled backwards towards the door, kicking against it from the inside. I obliged him and opened it, letting him out.

He took a deep lungful of air and nodded, as if convincing himself that he could in fact breathe here.

"Don't do that too many times or you'll keel over. The oxygen level is a little bit off but nothing we can't get by on or get used to. Just expect to feel lightheaded in a few minutes," I explained. I probably should have before getting out, but to be honest I had other things on my mind at the time.

Heinrich looked around with a look on his face of a child who just found the keys to the candy-store. "I'm already lightheaded," he said and smiled the biggest, dumbest smile I had ever seen on his face.

I could hardly blame him. "It doesn't seem we're going to face a firing squad when landing, either," I said.

"Just you wait, they're right behind that pressurized door over there," Heinrich answered with a completely unconvincing expression of worry on his face, before pumping his hand in the air and shouting loudly in relief.

I couldn't blame him for that either. After all, we were safe. We had been waiting to die, and now we were safe on board the mightiest battleship in the history of humanity. It was too good to be true, but it *was* true. We were completely alone in the gigantic hangar. There were no other ships there. No bombers, no FACs, nothing at all. The doors were large enough to accommodate a gunship or even corvette but no ... we were completely alone.

Heinrich was still laughing. It sounded almost like he was close to weeping with relief, despite his laughter, but before I got to ask him, he jumped up and threw his arms around my neck and hung on, shaking like a proverbial leaf in a gale.

"It's not a dream ... it's not a dream ... " he kept whispering, his voice breaking.

I patted him gently on the back. I don't know where I found the strength to be so calm. I think I might have suffered a small shock, and I wasn't really able to grasp everything going on around me. Patting Heinrich's back and hugging him back seemed to be the thing to do at that moment, and so I did.

"No, it's not a dream. We're alive. We're safe!" I whispered back.

Heinrich hung on for a long time. I didn't want to let him go any more than vice versa. We'd come so close. He had removed the safety from his sidearm, in fact ... that's how close we had been. And now we were here, in this hangar. Still with no idea what was going on, but alive and well.

When I finally let go of my bombardier, I looked towards the pressurized door that Heinrich had pointed out earlier. It seemed as good a place as any to start looking for answers and, just as importantly, our saviors. For some reason I didn't think we were in danger anymore. If we were, there was no reason for us to still be alive. Admittedly, our saviors might want to interrogate us, but if that was the case, why hadn't they been ready to grab a hold of us the moment we landed? Once the doors were closed behind us, there was no way for us to run away after all.

I straightened down my flight suit and nodded to myself. Right then. This was it. Whatever lay beyond that door, I'd be face-to-face with it soon. Heinrich followed right behind me. His steps were irregular, like he constantly had to remind himself to keep walking and not stop and gawk at the size of the hangar. I admit I felt much the same way myself, but I forced myself to keep walking with long, steady strides. I honestly couldn't say why. Perhaps it made me feel more in control of a situation that I really had no control over whatsoever. Perhaps. Or maybe I was just eager to find out who had saved us.

The pressurized door slid open a moment before I put my hand into the DNA-scanner next to it. I'm not sure what that would have accomplished anyway, since I wasn't a registered crew-member. Still, the fact that the door opened like that was a bit eerie.

"That was kinda creepy," Heinrich said and came up next to me.

He was clearly experiencing conflicting feelings. His eyes were the size of a Hammer's exhausts and his short hair was sticking out in all directions. He was the only person I knew who could get helmet-hair with a crew-cut. His shoulders were slightly hunched, like he was ready to jump for safety, but despite this, he had a big, relieved smile on his face.

I almost wanted to reach down and scratch his hair. He reminded me of an overeager puppy. Perhaps a slightly nervous, overeager puppy, actually. I restrained myself before I told him not to wet the carpet, and nodded. He was right. It *was* 'kinda creepy'.

Of course, the fact that the hallway beyond the pressurized door was empty only added to the creepiness.

"Left or right?" I asked, hoping to snap my friend out of his resurgent worries.

It worked. I was rewarded with a big grin. "Remember what they taught us about the Hammer's flight characteristics?"

"Sure? What were you thinking of, specifically?"

"You know how it's got a tendency to pull slightly to the left when you take off manually?"

"Ahh, you mean 'good pilots pull right to compensate'?"

Heinrich nodded and promptly set out down the left side of the corridor. Chuckling I followed him. I liked his way of thinking. If the rulebook said 'go right', we'd go left.

It *felt* right ... going left.

My head was hurting a little and I realized the atmospheric mixture was affecting me. I felt light-headed and silly. A little drunk, even. I tried to close my eyes for a few moment to get back in control of my senses again. The crew of this ship in all likelihood weren't hostile, but it was still a ship I had never set foot upon before, and I didn't want to accidentally hop, skip and jump into a waste compactor.

Trying to push the ridiculous image of myself as a two foot by two foot cube with arms and legs from my mind, I opened my eyes again. I blinked a few times. Heinrich was evidently experiencing similar effects. He had stopped, leaning against the bulkhead to his left. He sounded almost like he was hyperventilating.

"I wonder where everybody's hiding?" I said, looking around, trying to focus on the matter at hand instead of stupid mental images.

Heinrich stood upright and turned around to face me, nodding. "Me too. But listen ..."

I did. For a long moment, I couldn't hear anything, and I was about to say so when he motioned me towards the bulkhead. So that was why he'd been leaning against it. He had

put his ear against the metal to listen. I did the same and true enough, I could hear distinct sounds of someone walking.

Looking up, wide-eyed, I turned back to my friend. Again I was interrupted before I got a chance to speak. A shudder ran down the length of the ship. Almost imperceptibly, but it was there. I recognized it instantly. The engines had been fired up and we were moving again. This really was something else! Whenever the Doomsday had done the same thing, everyone had grabbed a hold of the nearest immovable object to avoid getting flung to the floor.

"This is pure luxury, Vish," Heinrich said, awe not only in his voice but plain as day on his face. "Did you feel that?"

"Oh yes, I felt that ... "

"We're actually moving. It's like ..."

I looked expectantly at him. Words failed *me*, but if *he* could come up with a good description for what was happening, I'd be very interested to hear it. His mouth opened and closed a few times before his shoulders sagged.

"Alright, you win. I can't think of anything it is like. This is better than the first time I got laid!" he said.

"I know who she was, Heinrich. That's not saying much," I chuckled and beckoned for him to follow.

Heinrich grumbled good-naturedly and punched my arm lightly as he came up alongside me. "No you don't," he grumbled.

"Laurene Dubois from the galley, behind the water recycling installation on the Doomsday."

"Okay, so you do. I was drunk, okay?"

"I should bloody well hope so. Heinrich, Laurene, of all the women in the human race? Miss Round Robin Mk. 4? And the water recycling installation? Good grief, of all the *places...*"

"It was her idea!! She said no one would find us there!"

"No shit? Well ... obviously no shit. Just a lot of pi..."

"VISHALYA! Come on, gimme a break. She showed an interest, alright?"

Snickering, I once again realized the oxygen mixture was affecting me. It wasn't fair on Heinrich. He'd always been shy around women, and at least Laurene had been a good looking specimen. She simply had a problem with her legs inexorably drifting apart as soon as something male came within reach. I tried very hard to recover as I approached the next pressurized door. Presumably, that would lead to a part of the ship with other people in it.

I held out a hand ... and stopped myself just before I reached the DNA-scanner.

Again, the door opened without me taking a part in it.

"Welcome on board the Götterdämmerung."

The voice sounded distorted, but not unpleasant. I blinked and took a step back. The creature beyond the door was wearing a style of uniform that hadn't been in use for over one hundred and seventy five years, and his sidearm looked heavier than anything in use now, including the PS/RP.C-45 ... which quite frankly was what I'd call a Big Bloody Gun. It was standing there, calmly, with its arms behind its back, looking at me with eyes that seemed like holes into an endless, dark void. It smiled in what I assumed was a pleasant, friendly gesture, showing teeth that were too white to look at. They literally *shone*.

Behind me, Heinrich was uttering something I can only assume was a string of obscenities. He was scrambling backwards. I didn't really hear or take much notice.

I couldn't take my eyes off the creature before me.

Apart from the eyes ... and the teeth ... it could have been human ...

... if not for the fact that I could see straight through it.