

THE SILENT WAR

Book III of the Asteroid Wars

**BEN
BOVA**



THE SILENT WAR

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THE
SILENT WAR

Book III of The Asteroid Wars

BEN BOVA



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

THE SILENT WAR: BOOK III OF THE ASTEROID WARS

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ASTEROID 67-046

To the memory of Stephen Jay Gould,
scientist, writer, baseball fan,
and an inspiration to all thinking people

Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult. . . . War is the province of uncertainty; three-fourths of the things on which action in war is based lie hidden in the fog of a greater or lesser certainty.

—Carl von Clausewitz,
On War

THE SILENT WAR

ASTEROID 67-046

"I was a soldier," he said. "Now I am a priest. You may call me Dorn."

Elverda Apacheta could not help staring at him. She had seen cyborgs before, but this...person seemed more machine than man. She felt a chill ripple of contempt along her veins. How could a human being allow his body to be disfigured so?

He was not tall; Elverda herself stood several centimeters taller than he. His shoulders were quite broad, though; his torso thick and solid. The left side of his face was engraved metal, as was the entire top of his head: like a skullcap made of finest etched steel.

Dorn's left hand was prosthetic. He made no attempt to disguise it. Beneath the rough fabric of his shabby tunic and threadbare trousers, how much more of him was metal and electrical machinery. Tattered though his clothing was, his calf-length boots were polished to a high gloss.

"A priest?" asked Martin Humphries. "Of what church? What order?"

The half of Dorn's lips that could move made a slight curl. A smile or a sneer, Elverda could not tell.

"I will show you to your quarters," said Dorn. His voice was a low rumble, as if it came from the belly of a beast. It echoed faintly off the walls of rough-hewn rock.

Humphries looked briefly surprised. He was not accustomed to having his questions ignored. Elverda watched his face. Humphries was as handsome as regeneration therapies and cosmetic nanomachines could make a person appear: chiseled features, straight of spine, lean of limb, and an athletically flat midsection. Yet his cold gray eyes were hard, merciless. And there was a faint smell of corruption about him, Elverda thought. As if he were dead inside and already beginning to rot.

The tension between the two men seemed to drain the energy from Elverda's aged body. "It has been a long journey," she said. "I am very tired. I would welcome a hot shower and a long nap."

"Before you see it?" Humphries snapped.

"It has taken us more than a week to get here. We can wait a few hours more." Inwardly she marveled at her own words. Once she would have been all fiery excitement. Have the years taught you patience? No, she realized. Only weariness.

"Not me!" Humphries said. Turning to Dorn, "Take me to it now. I've waited long enough. I want to see it now."

Dorn's eyes, one as brown as Elverda's own, the other a red electronic glow, regarded Humphries for a lengthening moment.

"Well?" Humphries demanded.

"I am afraid, sir, that the chamber is sealed for the next twelve hours. It will be imposs—"

"Sealed? By whom? On whose authority?"

"The chamber is self-controlled. Whoever made the artifact installed the controls, as well."

"No one told me about that," said Humphries.

Dorn replied, "Your quarters are down this corridor."

He turned almost like a solid block of metal, shoulders and hips together, head unmoving on those wide shoulders, and started down the central corridor. Elverda fell in step alongside his metal hal-

still angered at his self-desecration. Yet despite herself, she thought of what a challenge it would be to sculpt him. ~~If I were younger, she told herself. If I were not so close to death. Human and inhuman, a~~ in one strangely fierce figure.

Humphries came up on Dorn's other side, his face red with barely suppressed anger.

They walked down the corridor in silence, Humphries's weighted shoes clicking against the uneven rock floor. Dorn's boots made hardly any noise at all. Half-machine he may be, Elverda thought, but once in motion he moves like a panther.

The asteroid's inherent gravity was so slight that Humphries needed the weighted footgear to keep himself from stumbling ridiculously. Elverda, who had spent most of her long life in low-gravity environments, felt completely at home. The corridor they were walking through was actually a tunnel, shadowy and mysterious, or perhaps a natural chimney vented through the metallic body by escaping gases eons ago when the asteroid was still molten. Now it was cold, chill enough to make Elverda shudder. The rough ceiling was so low she wanted to stoop, even though the rational side of her mind knew it was not necessary.

Soon, though, the walls smoothed out and the ceiling grew higher. Humans had extended the tunnel, squaring it with laser precision. Doors lined both walls now and the ceiling glowed with glareless, shadowless light. Still she hugged herself against the chill that the two men did not seem to notice.

They stopped at a wide double door. Dorn tapped out the entrance code on the panel set into the wall, and the doors slid open.

"Your quarters, sir," he said to Humphries. "You may, of course, change the privacy code to suit yourself."

Humphries gave a curt nod and strode through the open doorway. Elverda got a glimpse of a spacious suite, carpeting on the floor and hologram windows on the walls.

Humphries turned in the doorway to face them. "I expect you to call for me in twelve hours," he said to Dorn, his voice hard.

"Eleven hours and fifty-seven minutes," Dorn replied.

Humphries's nostrils flared and he slid the double doors shut.

"This way." Dorn gestured with his human hand. "I'm afraid your quarters are not as sumptuous as Mr. Humphries's."

Elverda said, "I am his guest. He is paying all the bills."

"You are a great artist. I have heard of you."

"Thank you."

"For the truth? That is not necessary."

I was a great artist, Elverda said to herself. Once. Long ago. Now I am an old woman waiting for death.

Aloud, she asked, "Have you seen my work?"

Dorn's voice grew heavier. "Only holograms. Once I set out to see *The Rememberer* for myself, but other matters intervened."

"You were a soldier then?"

"Yes. I have only been a priest since coming to this place."

Elverda wanted to ask him more, but Dorn stopped before a blank door and opened it for her. For an instant she thought he was going to reach for her with his prosthetic hand. She shrank away from him.

"I will call for you in eleven hours and fifty-six minutes," he said, as if he had not noticed her revulsion.

"Thank you."

He turned away, like a machine pivoting.

“Wait,” Elverda called. “Please—how many others are here? Everything seems so quiet.”

“There are no others. Only the three of us.”

“But—”

“I am in charge of the security brigade. I ordered the others of my command to go back to our spacecraft and wait there.”

“And the scientists? The prospector family that found this asteroid?”

“They are in Mr. Humphries’s spacecraft, the one you arrived in,” said Dorn. “Under the protection of my brigade.”

Elverda looked into his eyes. Whatever burned in them, she could not fathom.

“Then we are alone here?”

Dorn nodded solemnly. “You and me—and Mr. Humphries, who pays all the bills.” The human half of his face remained as immobile as the metal. Elverda could not tell if he were trying to be humorous or bitter.

“Thank you,” she said. He turned away and she closed the door.

*Her quarters consisted of a single room, comfortably warm but hardly larger than the compartment on the ship they had come in. Elverda saw that her meager travel bag was already sitting on the bed, her worn old drawing computer resting in its travel-smudged case on the desk. She stared at the computer case as if it were accusing her. *I should have left it home, she thought. I will never use it again.**

A small utility robot, hardly more than a glistening drum of metal and six gleaming arms folded like a praying mantis’s, stood mutely in the farthest corner. Elverda studied it for a moment. At least it was entirely a machine; not a self-mutilated human being. To take the most beautiful form in the universe and turn it into a hybrid mechanism, a travesty of humanity. Why did he do it? So he could be a better soldier? A more efficient killing machine?

And why did he send all the others away? she asked herself while she opened the travel bag. As she carried her toiletries to the narrow alcove of the lavatory, a new thought struck her. Did he send them away before he saw the artifact, or afterward? Has he even seen it? Perhaps...

Then she saw her reflection in the mirror above the wash basin. Her heart sank. Once she had been called regal, stately, a goddess made of copper. Now she looked withered, dried up, bone thin, her face a geological map of too many years of living, her flight coveralls hanging limply on her emaciated frame.

You are old, she said to her image. Old and aching and tired.

It is the long trip, she told herself. You need to rest. But the other voice in her mind laughed scornfully. You’ve done nothing but rest for the entire time it’s taken to reach this piece of rock. You are ready for the permanent rest; why deny it?

She had been teaching at the University of Selene, the Moon being the closest she could get to Earth after a long lifetime of living in low-gravity environments. Close enough to see the world of her birth, the only world of life and warmth in the solar system, the only place where a person could walk out into the sunshine and feel its warmth soaking your bones, smell the fertile earth nurturing its bounty, feel the cool breeze plucking at your hair.

But she had separated herself from Earth permanently. She had stood on the ice crags of Europa, from a frozen ocean; from an orbiting spacecraft she had watched the surging clouds of Jupiter swirl the overpowering colors; she had carved the kilometer-long rock of The Rememberer. But she could no longer stand in the village of her birth, at the edge of the Pacific’s booming surf, and watch the so

white clouds form shapes of imaginary animals.

~~Her creative life was long finished. She had lived too long; there were no friends left, and she had never had a family. There was no purpose to her life, no reason to do anything except go through the motions and wait. She refused the rejuvenation therapies that were offered her. At the university she was no longer truly working at her art but helping students who had the fires of inspiration burning fresh and hot inside them. Her life was one of vain regrets for all the things she had not accomplished for all the failures she could recall. Failures at love; those were the bitterest. She was praised as the solar system's greatest artist: the sculptress of *The Rememberer*, the creator of the first great ionospheric painting, *The Virgin of the Andes*. She was respected, but not loved. She felt empty, alone, barren. She had nothing to look forward to; absolutely nothing.~~

Then Martin Humphries swept into her existence. A lifetime younger, bold, vital, even ruthless, he stormed her academic tower with the news that an alien artifact had been discovered deep in the Asteroid Belt.

"It's some kind of art form," he said, desperate with excitement. "You've got to come with me and see it."

Trying to control the long-forgotten yearning that stirred within her, Elverda had asked quietly, "Why do I have to go with you, Mr. Humphries? Why me? I'm an old wo—"

"You are the greatest artist of our time," he had answered without an eyeblink's hesitation. "You've got to see this! Don't bullshit me with false modesty. You're the only other person in the whole whirling solar system who deserves to see it!"

"The only other person besides whom?" she had asked.

He had blinked with surprise. "Why, besides me, of course."

So now we are on this nameless asteroid, waiting to see the alien artwork. Just the three of us. The richest man in the solar system. An elderly artist who has outlived her usefulness. And a cyborg soldier who has cleared everyone else away.

He claims to be a priest, Elverda remembered. A priest who is half machine. She shivered as if a cold wind surged through her.

A harsh buzzing noise interrupted her thoughts. Looking into the main part of the room, Elverda saw that the phone screen was blinking red in rhythm to the buzzing.

"Phone," she called out.

Humphries's face appeared on the screen instantly. "Come to my quarters," he said. "We have to talk."

"Give me an hour. I need—"

"Now."

Elverda felt her brows rise haughtily. Then the strength sagged out of her. He has bought the right to command you, she told herself. He is quite capable of refusing to allow you to see the artifact.

"Now," she agreed.

Humphries was pacing across the plush carpeting when she arrived at his quarters. He had changed from his flight coveralls to a comfortably loose royal blue pullover and expensive genuine twill slacks. As the doors slid shut behind her, he stopped in front of a low couch and faced her squarely.

"Do you know who this Dorn creature is?"

Elverda answered, "Only what he has told us."

"I've checked him out. My staff in the ship has a complete file on him. He's the butcher who led the Chrysalis massacre, six years ago."

"He..."

“Eleven hundred men, women and children. Slaughtered. He was the man who commanded the attack.”

“He said he had been a soldier.”

“A mercenary. A cold-blooded murderer. He worked for me once, long ago, but he was working for Yamagata then. The Chrysalis was the rock rats’ habitat. When its population refused to give up Lars Fuchs, Yamagata put him in charge of a squad to convince them to cooperate. He killed them all; slashed the habitat to shreds and let them all die.”

Elverda felt shakily for the nearest chair and sank into it. Her legs seemed to have lost all their strength.

“His name was Harbin then. Dorik Harbin.”

“Wasn’t he brought to trial?”

“No. He ran away. Disappeared. I always thought Yamagata helped to hide him. They take care of their own, they do. He must have changed his name afterwards. Nobody would hire the butcher, not even Yamagata.”

“His face...half his body...” Elverda felt terribly weak, almost faint. “When...?”

“Must have been after he ran away. Maybe it was an attempt to disguise himself.”

“And now he is working for you again.” She wanted to laugh at the irony of it, but did not have the strength.

“He’s got us trapped on this chunk of rock! There’s nobody else here except the three of us.”

“You have your staff in your ship. Surely they would come if you summoned them.”

“His security squad’s been ordered to keep everybody except you and me off the asteroid. He gave those orders.”

“You can countermand them, can’t you?”

For the first time since she had met Martin Humphries, he looked unsure of himself. “I wonder,” he said.

“Why?” Elverda asked. “Why is he doing this?”

“That’s what I intend to find out.” Humphries strode to the phone console. “Harbin!” he called. “Dorik Harbin. Come to my quarters at once.”

Without even a microsecond’s delay the phone’s computer-synthesized voice replied, “Dorik Harbin no longer exists. Transferring your call to Dorn.”

Humphries’s gray eyes snapped at the phone’s blank screen.

“Dorn is not available at present,” the phone’s voice said. “He will call for you in eleven hours and thirty-two minutes.”

“What do you mean, Dorn’s not available?” Humphries shouted at the blank phone screen. “Get me the officer on watch aboard the Humphries Eagle.”

“All exterior communications are inoperable at the present time,” replied the phone.

“That’s impossible!”

“All exterior communications are inoperable at the present time,” the phone repeated, unperturbed. Humphries stared at the empty screen, then turned slowly toward Elverda Apacheta. “He’s cut us off. We’re trapped in here.”

SIX YEARS EARLIER

SELENE: ASTRO CORPORATION HEADQUARTERS

Pancho Lane tilted back in her sculpted chair, fingers steepled in front of her face, hiding any display of the suspicion she felt for the man sitting before her desk.

One of the two major things she had learned in her years as chief of Astro Corporation was to control her emotions. Once she would have gotten out of her chair, strode around the desk, hauled the lying turkey buzzard up by the scruff of his neck and booted his butt all the way back to Nairobi where he claimed to come from. Now, though, she simply sat back in cold silence, hearing him out.

“A strategic alliance would be of great benefit to both of us,” he was saying, in his deeply resonant baritone. “After all, we are going to be neighbors here on the Moon, aren’t we?”

Physically, he was a hunk and a half, Pancho admitted to herself. If he’s here as bait, at least they sent something worth biting on. Strong, broad cheekbones and a firm jawline. Deeply dark eyes that sparkled at her when he smiled, which he did a lot. Brilliant white teeth. Skin so black it almost looked purple. Conservative gray business cardigan, but under it peeped a colorfully patterned vest and a soft yellow shirt opened at the collar to reveal a single chain of heavy gold.

“Your base is going to be more’n four thousand kilometers from here, way down at Aitken Basin.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, with that dazzling smile. “But our base at Shackleton will be only about a hundred clicks from the Astro power facility down in the Malapert Range, you see.”

“The Mountains of Eternal Light,” Pancho murmured, nodding. The Japanese called them the Shining Mountains. Down near the lunar south pole there were several peaks so tall that they were perpetually in sunlight. Astro had established a solar power center there, close to the deposits of frozen water.

“The facility that we are building will be more than a mere base,” the Nairobi representative added. “We intend to make a real city at Shackleton Crater, much like Selene.”

“Really?” Pancho said, keeping her expression noncommittal. She had just been informed, a few minutes earlier, that another Astro freighter had disappeared out in the Belt: the second one in a long many weeks. Humphries is at it again, she thought, nibbling away. And if this guy isn’t a stalking horse for Humphries, I’ll be dipped in deep dung.

The other major thing that Pancho had learned was to maintain herself as physically youthful as possible. Rejuvenation therapies that were once regarded as expensive extravagances for the vain and famous video personalities were now commonplace, especially among the viciously competitive power brokers of the giant corporations. So Pancho looked, physically, much as she had when she’d been thirty: tall, leggy and slim. She had even had the tattoo on her buttocks removed, because board room politics sometimes evolved into bedroom antics, and she didn’t want a teenaged misjudgment to become a whispered rumor. She hadn’t done anything about her face, though, which she considered to be forgettably ordinary except for its unfortunate stubborn, square jaw. Her only concession to the years was that she’d allowed her closely cropped hair to go totally white. The beauticians told her it made a stunning contrast to her light mocha skin.

Pancho made a point of going counter to the fashionable styles of the moment. This season the emphasis was on bulky pullovers and heavy-looking sweaters with strategic cutouts to make them interesting to the eye. Instead, Pancho wore a tailored pantsuit of pale ivory, which accented her long lean figure, with highlights of asteroidal jewelry at her wrists and earlobes. Her office was particularly large, as corporate suites went, but it was sumptuously decorated with modern furniture and paintings that Pancho had personally commissioned, and holowindows that could display scenery from half a dozen worlds.

“Pardon me for asking a foolish question, I’ve never been to the Moon before. Is that real wood paneling?” her visitor asked, wide-eyed.

Aw, come on, Pancho groused silently. You can’t be that much of a rube.

“And your desk, too? Did you have it flown all the way here to the Moon?”

“In a sense,” Pancho answered evenly, wondering how much of this guy’s naïveté was an act. “Our biotech division sent up a shipload of engineered bacteria that produce cellulose. Same things they do, at the cellular level.”

“I see,” he said, his voice still somewhat awed. “The bacteria produce bioengineered wood for you.”

Pancho nodded. “All we bring up from Earth is a small sample of bugs, and they reproduce themselves for us.”

“Marvelous. Nairobi Industries doesn’t have a biotechnology division. We are only a small corporation, compared to Astro or Humphries Space Systems.”

“Well, we all had to start at the beginning,” Pancho said, thinking that it sounded fatuous.

Her visitor didn’t seem to notice. “However, in exchange for help in building our base here on the Moon we offer a unique entry into the growing markets of Africa and the Indian subcontinent.”

The Indian subcontinent, Pancho thought grimly; between their nukes and their biowar there isn’t much left for those poor bastards. And Africa’s still a mess, pretty much.

“We are also developing strong ties with Australia and New Zealand,” he went on. “They still hesitate to deal with Africans, but we are overcoming their prejudices with sound business opportunities for them.”

Pancho nodded. This guy’s a stalking horse, all right. Whoever he’s really working for thinks he’s damned smart sending a black man to make this offer. Thinks I’ll get all gooey and not see past the trap they’re setting up.

Humphries. It’s gotta be Martin Humphries, she reasoned. The old Humper’s been after Astro for years. This is just his latest maneuver. And he’s started knocking off our freighters again.

As if he could read her thoughts, the Nairobi representative added, in a confidential near-whisper. “Besides, an alliance between your corporation and mine will outflank Humphries Space Systems, to speak. Together, we could take a considerable amount of market share away from HSS.”

Pancho felt her eyebrows hike up. “You mean the asteroidal metals and minerals that Earthside corporations buy.”

“Yes. Of course. But Selene imports a good deal from Humphries’s mining operations in the Belt too.”

The big struggle, Pancho knew, was to control the resources of the Asteroid Belt. The metals and minerals mined from the asteroids were feeding Earthside industries crippled by the environmental disasters stemming from the greenhouse cliff.

“Well,” said the Nairobi executive, with his gleaming smile, “that’s just about the whole of it. Does it strike any interest in you?”

Pancho smiled back at him. “ ’Course it does,” she said, thinking about how the kids she grew up

with in west Texas would cross their fingers when they fibbed. "I'll give it a lot of thought, you can believe me."

"Then you'll recommend a strategic alliance to your board?"

She could see the eagerness on his handsome young face.

Keeping her smile in place, Pancho replied, "Let me think it over, get my staff to run the numbers. Then, if everything checks out, I'll certainly bring it up before the board."

He fairly glowed with pleasure. Pancho thought, Whoever sent this hunk of beefcake didn't pick him because he's got a poker face.

She got to her feet and he shot up so quickly that Pancho thought he'd bounce off the ceiling. As she was, he stumbled slightly, unaccustomed to the low lunar gravity, and had to grab a corner of her desk to steady himself.

"Easy there," she said, grinning. "You only weigh one-sixth of Earth normal here."

He made a shamefaced smile. "I forgot. The weighted boots aren't all that much help. Please forgive me."

"Nothing to it. Everybody needs a little time to get accustomed to lunar gee. How long will you be staying at Selene?"

"I leave tomorrow."

"You won't be talking to anybody from HSS?"

"No. Mr. Humphries has a reputation for swallowing up smaller corporations rather than helping them."

Maybe he's not from Humphries after all, Pancho thought.

She asked, "So you came up here just to see me?"

He nodded. "This alliance is very important to us. I wanted to speak to you about it face-to-face, not by videophone."

"Good thinking," Pancho said, coming around her desk and gesturing toward her office door. "The three-second lag in phone communication is enough to drive me loco."

He blinked. "Loco? Is that lunar slang?" With a laugh, Pancho answered, "West Texas, for crazy."

"You are from Texas?"

"Long time ago."

Pancho played it cool, watching how he tried to maneuver their conversation into a dinner invitation before she could shoo him out of her office. He smelled good, she noticed. Some sort of cologne that reminded her of cinnamon and tangy spices.

Finally he got to it. "I suppose a person of your importance has a very full calendar."

"Yep. Pretty much."

"I was hoping we might have dinner together. Actually, I don't know anyone else in Selene City."

She made a show of pulling up her schedule on the wallscreen. "Dinner engagement with my father's director."

He looked genuinely crestfallen. "Oh. I see."

Pancho couldn't help smiling at him. "Hell, I can talk to her some other time. Let's have dinner together."

His smile grew even wider than before.

And he was good in bed, too, Pancho discovered. Great, in fact. But the next morning, once he was on his way back Earthside and Pancho had fed herself a breakfast of vitamin E and orange juice, she called her security director from her kitchen and told him to check the guy out thoroughly. If he's not from Humphries, maybe somebody else wants to move into the territory.

She chuckled to herself as she headed for her office that morning. She had forgotten the man's name.

TORCH SHIP NAUTILUS

The ship had once been a freighter with the unlikely name of *Lubbock Lights*, plying the Asteroid Belt picking up ores mined by the rock rats and carrying them back to the factories in Earth orbit and to the Moon. Lars Fuchs and his ragtag crew of exiles had seized it and renamed it *Nautilus*, after the fictional submersible of the vengeance-seeking Captain Nemo.

Over the years, Fuchs had changed the spacecraft. It was still a dumbbell shape, rotating on a buckyball tether to provide a feeling of gravity for the crew. It still could carry thousands of tons of ores in its external grapples. But now it also bore five powerful lasers, which Fuchs used as weapons. And it was armored with thin layers of asteroidal copper fixed a few centimeters outside the ship's true hull, enough to absorb an infrared laser beam for a second or more. *Nautilus's* fusion propulsion system was among the most powerful in the Belt. Speed and maneuverability were important for a pirate vessel.

In the ship's cramped bridge Fuchs leaned over the back of the pilot's chair and scowled at the scanner display.

"It is a freighter, nothing more," said Amarjagal, his pilot. She was a stocky, stoic woman of Mongol ancestry who had been with Fuchs since he'd fled from the mining center at Ceres to take up this life of exile and piracy.

"With a crew pod?" Fuchs sneered.

Nodon, the ship's engineer, had also been part of Fuchs's renegade team since the earliest days. He was rail-thin, all bone and sinew, his head shaved bald, spiral scars of ceremonial tattoos swirling across both cheeks. A menacing black moustache drooped down to his jawline, yet his dark brown eyes were big and expressive, soulful.

"A crew pod means that the ship carries food," he pointed out as he studied the image on the display screen.

"And medical supplies," added Amarjagal.

"Both of which we could use," said Nodon.

Fuchs shook his head ponderously. "It could be a trap."

Neither of his crew replied. They glanced at each other but remained silent.

Fuchs wore a black pullover and shapeless black slacks, as usual. He was a short-limbed, barrel-chested little bear of a man, scowling with anger and implacable in his wrath. His broad, jowly face was etched with hatred, thin slash of a mouth set in a permanent glower, deepset eyes looking far beyond what the others saw. He looked like a badger, a wolverine, small but explosively dangerous.

For nearly a decade Lars Fuchs had been a pirate, an outcast, a renegade who cruised through the vast, silent emptiness of the Belt and preyed on ships owned by Humphries Space Systems.

Once he had considered himself the luckiest man in the solar system. A love-struck student riding the first crewed exploratory ship into the Asteroid Belt, he had actually married the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, Amanda Cunningham. But then he became ensnarled in the battle over the riches of the Belt, one man pitted against Martin Humphries, the wealthiest person off-Earth, and h

Humphries Space Systems' hired thugs. When the HSS mercenaries finally cornered him, Amanda begged Humphries to spare his life.

Humphries was merciful, in the cruelest manner imaginable. Fuchs was banished from Ceres, the only permanent settlement in the Belt, while Amanda divorced him and married Humphries. She was the price for Fuchs's life. From that time on, Fuchs wandered through the vast dark emptiness of the Belt like a Flying Dutchman, never touching down at a human habitation, living as a rock rat, sometimes prospecting among the asteroids in the farthest reaches of the Belt and digging metal ores and minerals to sell to refinery ships.

More often he swooped down on HSS freighters like a hawk attacking a pigeon, taking the supplies he needed from them, even stealing the ores they carried and selling them clandestinely to other rock rats plying the Belt. It was a pitiful way to maintain his self-respect, telling himself that he was still a thorn in Humphries's flesh. Merely a small thorn, to be sure, but it was the only thing he could do to keep his sanity. While he almost always attacked automated drone freighters toting their ores back toward the Earth/Moon system, often enough he hit ships that were crewed. Fuchs did not consider himself a killer, but there were times when blood was spilled.

As when he wiped out the HSS mercenaries' base on Vesta.

Now he frowned at the image of the approaching freighter, with its crew pod attached.

"Our supplies are very low," Nodon said in a soft voice, almost a whisper.

"They won't have much aboard," Fuchs muttered back.

"Enough for us and the rest of the crew for a few weeks, perhaps."

"Perhaps. We could grab more supplies from a logistics ship."

Nodon bowed his head slightly. "Yes, that is so."

Despite its name, the Asteroid Belt is a wide swath of emptiness between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, populated by millions of tiny, cold, dark lumps of metal and rock tumbling around the Sun, leftover bits from the creation of the solar system. The largest, Ceres, is barely a thousand kilometers across. Most of the asteroids are the size of boulders, pebbles, dust motes. Trash, Fuchs thought. Chunks of matter that never became part of a true planet. Leftovers. God's garbage.

But the "garbage" was a treasure trove for desperate, needy humankind. Earth had been hit hard by climate change, a greenhouse cliff that struck suddenly, viciously, over a few decades. Glaciers melted, ocean levels rose, coastal cities worldwide were flooded out, the global electrical power network collapsed, hundreds of millions lost their homes, their livelihoods, even their lives. Farmlands dried to dust in perpetual droughts; deserts were swamped with rain; monster storms lashed the frightened, starving refugees everywhere.

In the distant stretches of the Asteroid Belt there were metals and minerals beyond reckoning, raw materials to replace the lost mines of Earth. Factories built in orbit and on the Moon depended on those raw materials. The salvation of the battered, weary Earth lay in the resources and energy of space.

Fuchs gave all this hardly a thought. He concentrated on that freighter plying its way through the Belt, heading at a leisurely pace inward, toward Earth.

"If there's a crew aboard, why are they coasting on a Hohmann ellipse? Why not light their fusion drive and accelerate toward Earth?"

"Perhaps their engines malfunctioned," Amarjagal said, without looking up from her control board. "She's not beaming out a distress call."

The pilot lapsed into silence.

"We could hail her," Nodon proposed.

“And let her know we’re on her tail?” Fuchs snarled.

“If we can see her, she can see us.”

“Then let her hail us.”

“She isn’t transmitting anything except a normal tracking beacon and telemetry data,” said Amarjagal.

“What’s her name and registration?”

The pilot touched a key on the board before her, and the information superimposed itself on the ship’s image: *John C. Frémont*, owned and operated by Humphries Space Systems.

Fuchs sucked in a deep breath. “Get us out of here,” he said, gripping the pilot’s shoulder in a broad, thick-fingered hand. “That ship’s a trap.”

Amarjagal glanced at the engineer, sitting in the right-hand seat beside her, then obediently tapped in a course change. The ship’s fusion engines powered up; *Nautilus* swung deeper into the Belt.

Aboard the *John C. Frémont*, Dorik Harbin watched the radar screen on his control panel, his ice-blue eyes intent on the image of Fuchs’s ship dwindling into the vast emptiness of the Asteroid Belt.

His face was like a warrior of old: high cheekbones, narrow eyes, a bristling dark beard that matched the thick black thatch that tumbled over his forehead. His gray coveralls bore the HSS logo over the left breast pocket, and symbols of rank and service on the sleeves and cuffs; he wore them like military uniform, immaculately clean and sharply pressed. Yet those glacier cold eyes were haunted, tortured. He only slept when he could no longer force himself to stay awake, and even then he needed sedatives to drive away the nightmares that screamed at him.

Now, though, he smiled—almost. He had tangled with Fuchs several times in the past, and the wild outlaw always escaped his grasp. Except once, and that had required a small army of mercenaries. Even then, Humphries had allowed Fuchs to get away alive. It was Fuchs’s wife that Humphries wanted after, Harbin had learned.

But now Humphries had ordered Harbin to find Fuchs and kill him. Quietly. Out in the cold darkness of the Belt, where no one would know for many months, perhaps years, that the man was dead. So Harbin hunted his elusive quarry alone. He preferred being alone. Other people brought complications, memories, desires he would rather do without.

Harbin shook his head, wondering what schemes played through Humphries’s mind.

Better not to know, he told himself. You have enough old crimes to fill your nightmares for the rest of your life. You don’t need to peer into anyone else’s.

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