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78,100 words

Ghost: Athelstan Cying

**by
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He awoke slowly.

As if arousing from a long dream and an even longer sleep, he became slowly aware of everything around him.

At first, all he could make out were bright points of light swathed in darkness. Like holy fires, they blazed clear and undisturbed. In time, he detected their slight movement, but the motion was so minute he came to believe this was his imagination and not his senses. He felt as if time itself had stopped.

Time. What was time? The moments seemed to spread into undiluted millennia. For an eternity, his thoughts dwelt on nothing but perception, but with indeterminate increase, his cognition grew and turned slowly into awareness. He felt as if he were locked into the moment before sleep. A moment when he could not yet dream, would not awake, could not move, could not think, but his mind was aware. And he perceived through some invisible eye. He felt as if, long ago, while falling into sleep, time had come to a halt and was now slowly starting up again. His perceptions were fathomless; they produced no thought. And, his greatest desire was for any change.

After what he accounted a millennium, his viewpoint began to slowly encompass other objects. These things grew gradually from nothingness. They entered into his perception like the petals of a flower opening around him. At first they entered into his view slowly, then faster and faster. Around the bright points of light, he perceived a frame. It outlined and separated the light from the dark shadows closer to him. Eventually, he discerned a structure surrounding and, at least, partially enclosing him. Within the darkness of this tomb, he could now make out closer metal solids and protuberances.

As if a momentary wrench of his thoughts decoded everything to him, he realized he sat at the controls of some vessel. The awareness animated his intellect. Time expanded for him as if he finally caught up with it—as though time finally caught up with him.

He occupied the bridge of a starship—by its fittings, a small corvette. He knew it. And, as yet, he could discern nothing more than the star-lit front viewscreen and the instruments of the pilot's console. Somehow, he knew this was the proper place for him. He had sat, in life, so many times at this station—the familiarity was a relief to his dislocated mind.

“Life,” why had he thought that?

Why had he assumed death and dislocation? He couldn't remember death, though he remembered deaths. He contemplated them now; this vessel held how many deaths? He remembered seven—seven of the old order who outgrew their usefulness. They represented aristocracy and age—the last of those engineered for rule. He laughed soundlessly. They were faulty, every-one: unable to bear children, physically incomplete, but they were all leaders, psionic masters, rogue talents. He couldn't dispute the decision of the parliamentary council. The power of the minds of the men and women on this ship along with their lineage made them dangerous—perhaps the most dangerous humans in Imperial space.

The Rule of Man, the Republic, the Reps forced them to flee, and the haste of their departure coupled with an accident of fate pushed them beyond the borders of the Empire into open space. It was both a death wish and a death sentence. A sentence cruelly fulfilled by time.

Yet, somehow—he was still aware. Not alive in any sense he knew; he could feel nothing. His form incorporated no physical substance. No, he was not alive in any sense he knew, but he could think and see and understand everything around him.

How many eons had he sat in contemplative study of the stars? He explored the possibility of changing that scene. With the force of a thought, like twitching an unknown muscle, his field of view suddenly moved from its timeless station. He felt released. Movement returned to him, and like a specter, a ghost of eternities past, he moved through the silent ship—the ship that once served him and failed him so well.

From the small bridge, the corvette spread back in splendor. At one time, it was the most modern of small Imperial courier ships. He paused by a scattered heap of gray dust on the deck. Had this been Mara—here by the lock? His unseen hand touched the cinders of her remains on the gray cerialast of the crew bunk. Time burned her body into only the vaguest human shadow. Mara, his love. His mental sigh seemed to shift the glaze of dusty decay where he last remembered her. He could not remember her death, only the stillness of her body.

Her name was the only one he could remember. And, though, after this, he sought for an unknown length of time through the dead ship, he couldn't discover his own name. In his awareness, it was strange to have no name. Each thing had a name; he could, even now, perceive that fact. Those friends, whose names he had forgotten, he knew they had names. He remembered their minds, their faces, their thoughts. He remembered them, but he did not know himself. He could not ever remember having a name. He could not remember a mind or face or a thought that was uniquely his—he only remembered.

The corridor to the bridge opened eventually into a large common room. When he reached it, the doors wouldn't open to him, but this halted him only momentarily, instead of opening them, he slipped through, immaterial, like a specter of legend.

In this place, most of his friends met their quiet end; quickly dead the first, and a lingering death for those who were left. They were as silent in their deaths as the empty space that

surrounded the ship. He met no other spark of thought like the entity he had become. He perceived no being like himself, only the silence and mental emptiness of the ship.

To either side of the common room, eight cabins, four on each side walked back toward the thick bulkhead concealing the ship's powerful engines. Except as the tombs of his friends, the rooms were long unused. Long ago, he arranged their dead bodies in those cabins and sealed them. Now, in this spectral form, he revisited each cabin and in his limited memory, he sought for something unknown.

In one cabin, a wound penetrated the ship. A ragged hole acquired when they blasted away in their escape from the planet Arienth. The gash communicated from the sterile vacuum of space into the bowels of the ship. The cabin's door was sealed, and in spite of the damage, the atmosphere of the corvette still held after all these years. That was all Mara's doing. In the blackness of that cabin hovered a grisly shape: the mummified remains of the first of their number to taste death. The body bobbed weightless and menacing in its separate tomb.

The companions he remembered were dust. He counted them all, the fine siftings and shadows that perhaps thousands of years ago had been breathing human beings, yet he caught no glimmer that they, like he, had retained a similar tenuous throttle-hold over their existence. Neither could he determine which pile of dust made up his remains.

Why was he still existent? What sudden turn of improbability left his mind alive—his thoughts confined to a plain of existence he long ago desired to leave?

Deliberately, he investigated the rest of the ship—the systems, wires, conduits, hardware, dormant reactors that were her sleeping life and the space immediately around her. Then, after a season, he returned to his seat in the bridge to meditate, again undisturbed.

Strangely shaken out of contemplation, he noticed a baleful red light blink on. It was the only indication he had seen of the ship's life. Then, suddenly, grasping at the last of the reactor's core, the chatter of falling relays announced long inactive systems of the ship cascading into readiness.

With a trained eye, he scanned the patterns—defense. The ship's defensive systems all activated. Why? He tried to reach out to the controls and adjust them, make them follow his desires, but his fingers were as unusable as they were immaterial.

On the corvette's defensive scanners, he recognized another ship approaching, and with forbidding, he heard the whine of his vessel powering up its offensive weapons. The reactors had difficulty charging the main gun batteries, but one after another, two banks of baleful ready lights winked on.

He watched helplessly as a large trading vessel grew in the scanners. The corvette's computers analyzed and appraised the larger ship. It couldn't identify the trading vessel, but an enhanced picture rotated on the overhead panel. Symbols describing the trader's specifications surrounded the diagram. The computer must have made up its mind because a message scrolled across the screen, "Commercial vessel. Intruder. Annihilate without warning." It was the defensive program he setup himself—how long ago?

Again, his invisible hands reached frantically and unproductively across the controls. Whatever attackers, whatever circumstances he prepared the ship against millennia ago, time changed that decision. The corvette no longer contained any lives to protect, not even his own. Unconsciously, he resolved, this ship wouldn't be the death of anyone else.

He couldn't physically manipulate the controls, so he tried something he hadn't believed possible without the force of a physical mind. He imagined the schematics of the systems controls and focused on the microswitches that controlled the offensive weapons. He concentrated on the tiny switches in the ships electronics, and attempted to psychically turn off the weapons and curtail the ship's offensive response.

Without success, he watched the trader come closer and closer in the screens—closer and closer to annihilation.

“Den, what's going on?” Steven's voice, thick with sleep rose from his bunk. “Is the ship on alert? What's happening?”

Den answered as he Velcroed his boots, “We're out of null drive; the ship's sensors detected a derelict. We're matching velocity, and Johan's called both of us to report as part of the muster crew.”

Steven groaned and rolled over. Half asleep, he sat up on the edge of the bunk. He didn't have time to ask another question before Den rushed out of their small cabin. Steven would get little more out of Den anyway. Steven was lucky he awoke in time; his roommate hadn't passed the alert to him. “So like Den,” Steven spat out loud. Without wasting another second, Steven reached for his utility suit.

As Den walked down the ship's corridor toward the main locks, he caught sight of the ship's youngest master astrogator, Natana Kern. His lip curled disdainfully. “The daughter of the ship's chief astrogator,” he snorted under his breath. Natana jogged up the passage toward him. When she recognized Den, her bright features slipped into blankness. Just as she reached him, Steven, out of breath finally caught up from the lower corridors. Natana was dressed in battle garb—apparently headed for duty in the command center of the ship's bridge.

Den halted. He was wedged between his two greatest banes on board the Twilight Lamb. Natana excelled at everything Den's father hoped Den would be successful in. She was bright and sure of herself. Since childhood, she soaked up the skills necessary to pilot a spaceship from

star to star. Natana was the ship's brilliant darling, while Den was a failure at everything he had tried—command and astrogation.

Den's father, Captain Protania was the Captain of the Family Trading Vessel, Twilight Lamb. In spite of Den's family's encouragement, he failed at everything relating to the complexities of navigation in space. In fact, he failed at every field he had been apprenticed in. Den was a source of tension between all the ship's families, and he still studied outside his capabilities now—to be a shuttle pilot. He felt the ship owed him that, but then there was the other bane, his roommate Steven. Steven succeeded where Den could not. Steven, Den's younger by a year, was already a journeyman pilot though Den was still only an apprentice. Steven tried to help him, but Den was too jealous and contentious to allow them to be friends.

Den looked at the girl. Natana was beautiful in a way. Unconscious of her own attractiveness and hopelessly an intellectual, Den knew she viewed him as a familiar, once childhood friend, but not a friend now. Natana and Steven did not approve of Den's current friends, but Natana and Steven shared few interests with Den anyway.

"Natana," Den frowned, "The ship's already come out of full null drive;" he could hear the drive engines still winding down, "So, what's your control seat?"

"Pilotage: calculations and sensors," she replied with a cautious smile only slowing her fast walk a little. "You're muster?" she shared the smile between Steven and Den as she pushed by them. "Good luck. I'm late already," she hurried on happy to have an excuse to continue.

The two men continued to the main lock and swung through the shuttle docking port. They quickly found their suit racks and began to don their vacsuits.

They raced with trained precision through the drill. The top half of the suits was mounted on the wall, the bottoms on a waist high ledge in front of the tops. First, with a chin-up on a ceiling mounted bar, Den pulled himself up and slid into the bottom section of the vacsuit. Then, crouching, he stuck his head and arms into the upper half of the suit. The suit joined at the chest, and as soon as he activated the connections, with a faint hiss and a stinging taint of pure oxygen, the suit sealed itself. Den checked the connections then looked at the systems checklist on the

helmet faceplate display. Den worked diligently through the checklist that prepared the suit for an excursion in space:

Battery switch - On, check charge

Warning lights - Test

Intercom - Activated

Comm - On, check cameras, lights

Thruster fuel - Quantity checked

Oxygen pressure - Checked, quantity checked

Seals - Checked, caution lights out

Caution panel - Caution lights out

Computer - Master on, ready

Den, noted with silent pleasure, he finished before Steven, then he pulled his suit backpack from the wall where it was Velcroed. With amazing dexterity, in relation to the bulk of the suit, Den walked quickly through the lock door and seated himself on the left-hand bench. Steven immediately followed him and sat on Den's right.

Den turned his attention to the other men in the muster. They all held ratings as ship excursion specialists or shuttle pilots. Every one of them, except him was a journeyman. He begrudged them that as well as the half-wage of muster pay he would receive to their full-wage. Unconscious of Den's scrutiny, the men wordlessly shrugged on their suits and turned the lifeless white skins into motive human spacecraft.

The modern vacsuit was light and strong, much more mobile and flexible than those of even a hundred years ago. The ceriplast fibers in the layers of the suit provided great strength yet were very light weight. In addition to external toughness, these suits were military surplus and incorporated a layer of quickseal. If anything pierced the suit, the quickseal layer would immediately fill the opening and solidify, leaving the vacuum tight seal intact. Unfortunately, the quickseal layer made the suits bulky, and much of the suit's flexibility had to be recovered by the computer control of a microscopic muscle enhancement structure. Using a computer to

coordinate and predict the motion of the suit's occupant, the suit's systems directed compensating hydraulic pressure to pseudomuscles to enhance the motion and dexterity of the occupant. The same pseudomuscle structure supplied tactile feedback to the crewman and gave him some sense of touch through the layers of the suit. This structure also allowed the suit a nearly skintight fit and yet provided a constant millimeter of airspace between the inner layer and its wearer. Along with compensation for the quickseal layer, the refinement provided added comfort and cooling in the suit. The only hardened portions of the suit were the backpack support areas and the clear ceriplast helmet. All in all, the vacsuits were very comfortable, safe, and simple to use.

The five other men quickly seated themselves in the lock. They looked eager for action and ready for the lock to cycle. After all, along with the regular work credits, they also earned a muster bonus.

The group's leader was Johan Dirk the pilot master in charge of all extravehicular space operations. Den glanced expectantly at Johan, ready to discover what their muster assignment would be.

Johan was an imposing man. He glanced over the seated men and when the whole muster crew was ready, he stood. His head nearly touched the top of the lock. Through the ceriplast faceplate of his suit, his craggy spacetanned features inspected each man—sought each face. Den imagined Johan's strained features rested on his for just a moment longer than everyone else. Johan stepped to the end of the bench and moved down the two rows checking the external control panel of each suit. He inspected pressure, temperature, and the vital signs of each of his men, noted each was normal and that each suit reported correctly. After he finished with Den, the last in the row, Johan called through the radio, "Muster crew, radio check."

Each man responded with his number "2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7," Den, as usual, was last.

Finally, Johan pressed the command center alerter and input the code sequence to cycle the lock. A green light came on, and indicated the command center acknowledged the lock control request. With a slight shudder, the bench, where they sat, and the floor section slowly moved

toward the outer skin of the Twilight Lamb. The rear lock door closed tightly behind them, and Den heard the pressure seal squeak as the lock began to depressurize. Their suits ballooned slightly before the pressure regulators caught up with the quick loss of atmosphere. Johan stopped the depressurization at 500 millibars, and each man ran through a leak check and gave a thumbs-up before he allowed the lock to continue to cycle.

When the pressure gauge finally read zero, the comm radios sizzled, and Johan began to brief them: “Yesterday morning, we detected a small corvette on our null space route. Since then, and because all our attempts to contact the corvette have been unsuccessful, the ship's council decided to take the Lamb out of drive and intercept the corvette. We have no records of any registered ship lost in deep-space along this route. So, my boys,” and they could hear the smile in his voice, “We may have found ourselves a good salvage for the ship's family. But, be careful!” he cautioned. “You know encounter procedures.” Den could imagine Johan’s eyes on him. “Keep your heads up.”

Den knew the corvette they happened on accidentally was probably lost hundreds of years ago. Only in just the last five hundred years could ships detect bodies while in null shift drive. Before that time, interstellar vessels traveled the great distances of space entirely in null space. Null space prevented the ship from being detected or actively detecting anything. Today's craft alternated phase shift once every second. The shutter drive enabled the ship to remain partially in normal space while quickly traveling the immense distances of the interstellar void.

In addition to allowing their ship, the Twilight Lamb, to change course mid voyage, shutter drive permitted them to place probes far forward of their movement. These probes could detect foreign bodies as small as a starship. This technique prevented thousands of interstellar disasters and opened a new realm of salvage possibilities. The number of unclaimed vessels detected and salvaged in the last five hundred years was staggering. It proved the millennia of human space travel produced more null-space casualties than anyone could have imagined.

Another advantage the shutter drive possessed over the old null shift was that ships could move much easier in intrasystem space. Planetary systems were no longer a problem for

interstellar navigation. Gravity wells that once took days to cross now could be transitioned safety in hours. For military and trading vessels, the advantages of shutter drive maneuvering were manifold.

Johan punched a second code into the lock's controls and a large panel opened in the wall of the lock. Hand weapons and packets of explosives gleamed inside the opening. Johan handed accelerator pistols down the line then took some of the explosive packets for himself and handed two to Steven. Den glanced jealously at his roommate. Each man checked his weapon and Velcroed the holster to his suit belt. Johan and Steven attached the explosive packets to their belts next to their pistols.

The pistols were linear accelerators. They used super-conducting materials to produce a near instantaneous magnetic field. The field could accelerate various projectiles with close to zero reaction force. In zero-gee, the low reaction force prevented the firer from being blasted end over end uncontrollably by the recoil of the weapon.

The pistols, held by the muster crew, were loaded with trader mix: jacks and stars. Jacks were projectiles shaped like pointed tetrahedrons. Stars were flat, star-shaped bullets that could cut apart wiring and ship's control panels. They were good for destroying robots and a ship's other automated defenses.

Jacks, as the anti-person projectiles were called, made the accelerator pistols an extremely deadly weapon. A vacsuit could be torn apart enough that even quickseal wouldn't hold it together, and its occupant would die from decompression. If the suit did seal the breach caused by the jacks, the shock of the ragged bullets tearing through unprotected flesh caused radical hemorrhaging that killed as rapidly as decompression. Either way, being hit by an accelerator burst was a losing proposition.

Johan commanded the men's attention again, "Scott's carrying the radiation detection equipment onboard the gravsled. He'll scan the surface of the ship. Once we know it's clean, Steven and I will open the lock. We'll use explosives if we have to. Scott will take perimeter on the ship from the sled." He looked at the man, "Use a five minute orbit. Steven and Lokki, hold

the external lock, monitor the ship use precedence 'hold fast'. The rest of you, follow me in and fan out. Our scans show we don't have much to search. Den and I will take the aft part of the interior. Ken and Ranin, you go forward to the bridge. No matter what, stay with your teammate and from the moment we board the gravsled, maintain hot-mic.

“Questions?” he looked them over. None of the men said a word, and he sat down again.

The muster crew tensely awaited the final orders from the command center—the orders that would send them, seven armed children from the belly of the Twilight Lamb.

All the lights of the corvette's offensive console flashed on. Though the small ship's reactor was failing, it had already built up enough power in the energy weapons to wreak havoc on the approaching trader.

The consciousness in the ship was at a loss. He loathed the possibility the trader might face destruction, but he didn't know what to do to stop the corvette. Try as he might, he couldn't touch or affect the controls. The procedures that had been rote in his physical mind became physical impossibilities. He knew which knobs and buttons to touch—which light and wire pathways diverged to control each system. He saw the schematics in his thoughts, the intricate tracery from computer network to fiber optic to electronic interface and circuit relay. The individual computer switches were evident to him. If he cut the current off at this, that, and one other miniature gate, he would shut down the entire system. The strength of his desire to prevent the destruction of the approaching ship lent wings to his psyche. He felt for the power to block that small electrical gate, just to increase the dielectric of the superconductor or perhaps to increase the temperature of the component slightly.

He probed into the system, now indiscriminately trying every mental manipulation he could remember. With a psychic click, like a key fitting a lock, he perceived a change in the electrical flow. His mind caught on to the necessary lever, and like a surgeon's scalpel through live tissue, an explosion of his mental energy sliced molecularly through the circuitry. In a microscopic cascade of sparks, the electrical force flowed from the control systems. He felt an incredible sense of accomplishment as the first bank of lights on the offensive weapons panel winked out.

But that was not enough. With an electrical brightness he perceived, the firing circuitry began to close; a burst of power removed all safeties from the system, and the 'ready to fire' lights blazed on.

His concentration was broken. His experimental manipulations took far too long. In his weary thoughts, he traced the circuits again. Moving as quickly as his mental fatigue allowed, he vainly attempted to recapture the knowledge he'd discovered when he caused the first weapons bank to fail.

The trader was closer now, the corvette's weaponry locked on target when the second row of offensive weapon panel lights finally blinked off.

The main power to the corvette's weapons shut off, but a baneful glow still lit the weapon's ready lights. The ship already programmed the weapon's individual computer controllers, they were ready and directed to fire, and their accumulated charge would be enough to cripple the other ship. Unless he could disconnect the weapon firing synapse, the residual energy in the weapon's accumulators would pour a blast of pure force into the unsuspecting trader. In less time than the fall of the next timing phase of the computer, he grasped for the last switch, a microscopic synapse in the impersonal brain of the corvette that spelled the life or death of the trader and all the people aboard her.

In the Twilight Lamb's command center, Natana observed the electronically silent corvette growing bigger and becoming clearer in her inner probe's scanners. The information matched earlier reports from the outer probe. Finally, at a million clicks, the computer achieved a positive identification scan. Natana let the scanner probe continue toward the corvette, but started it in a deceleration and intercept sequence.

In a moment the computer came back with its pronouncement on the corvette: Terran Empire manufacture by Nasing. Last known vessel laid over seven hundred years ago.

"Old ship. Almost a yacht," she whispered as she relayed the computer data to the bridge and muster crew.

The computer continued to retrieve its information and went on to display ship schematics.

“Scan reveals no movement and no life forms aboard,” Natana continued through the interphone, “But, the ship is alerted.” Alarmed, she turned half around at her console, “Defensive systems are armed. Offensive systems are fully armed. Wait...” She turned back around.

The blazing bank of weapons ready lights blinked out and again the corvette’s bridge went dark.

“The corvette now scans normally,” Natana let out her breath slowly. Perplexity was evident in her voice, “defensive and offensive systems aren’t registering at all anymore. No activity, low power, slight atmosphere, no response to any hailing or standard communications attempts. Normal identification emission is weak but the computer can read it. Ship's name, Athelstan Cying. Point of debarkation, none. Destination, none. Crew and passengers, unlisted. No known registry. No listed offensive or defensive systems.”

The bridge and control center became unusually quiet.

“Halt the Lamb at a thousand clicks, Natana,” said Captain Protania.

“Aye, sir.”

The Twilight Lamb slowed to match the Cying's velocity and direction.

Captain Protania spoke again, “Muster crew, use care the ship may be armed. Are you ready?”

“Aye, Captain,” Johan replied.

“Launch the boarding crew.”

“Lock's open, Captain,” said Natana.

The outer lock door slid to one side, and as the artificial gravity cut off in the lock, the men of the muster crew propelled themselves out of the ship.

The muster crew exited on the side of the Twilight Lamb opposite the Athelstan Cying. The tactical maneuver allowed the men to prepare their approach in a position protected from the corvette's weaponry.

Scott opened a hatch below the lock and pulled out a three by five meter frame with gravgrids mounted on it. The men scrambled to their places on the gravsled, and at Johan's signal, the small vehicle began to circumnavigate the Twilight Lamb. The Lamb's high side curved away under them, a soft white belly pocked with viewing ports, antennas, exposed conduits, and maintenance alcoves.

"Go hot-mic," Johan said tersely over the radio.

The men's breathing became suddenly loud over the communication net. It then silenced as the system compensated for the sounds.

Every now and then a face or hand appeared in one of the ports below waving them on. Most of the Family was watching from the observation screens in the recreation lounges. From there, they would get an unencumbered view of the exploration of the corvette.

The gravsled popped over the top of the hull and in seconds, from the bridge, Scott picked up course guidance to the nearly invisible Cying.

The gravsled swung away from the Twilight Lamb and moved silently in the darkness toward the corvette. Braced against the acceleration, Den rechecked his accelerator pistol and took a deep breath. His suit was misting a little. He could feel the damp against his skin. Have to write that one up when I get back to the ship, he thought.

The gravsled vibrated slightly as it accelerated toward the corvette. The vibration stopped after a minute and half, and though the sled was moving at an incredible speed, its passengers had no feeling of motion as the darkness slid by.

Steven touched Den's arm and pointed toward a growing dull white point ahead of them. The Athelstan Cying marked Den. Den turned a little to look behind them. The Twilight Lamb was still vaguely visible, a mote in the darkness. The gravsled yawed 180 degrees and the gravgrids came on to slow them and match vectors with the corvette.

The corvette now grew at a slower rate. It was long and very small—a beautiful ship. It looked barely large enough to contain a weapon system. The Cying had an old single phase shift reaction drive and a high speed reaction drive both separated from the bulk of the ship by a long boom. The ship was designed around atmospheric vessel lines and looked as if it would be equally maneuverable planetside as it was in space. The ship exuded a feeling of speed and maneuverability, of grace and power. Scott brought the gravsled to a halt a thousand meters from the Cying and began a slow orbit as he checked the radiation level.

“Minimum counter level,” was his report.

“Let's go,” announced Johan.

The men disengaged themselves from the sled and fired their suit thrusters to move the final klick to the ship. Almost simultaneously, they fired again to match speed with the corvette.

The ship's lock became visible, a dark tracery on the cream white hull. A nameplate was mounted alongside the hatchway. On it, in age-chipped blue and gold enamel was emblazoned the name Athelstan Cying and the Imperial dragon.

Old Empire, thought Den with excitement. He rotated his body and put his feet below him. The ship's hull zoomed up, and he hit with a thud. His ship's boots automatically locked into the thick synthetics of the hull. Den crouched then dashed for the lock. The other vacsuit enveloped figures landed on either side of him. To stabilize their motion, they froze into position for only a moment then fell into a protective stance.

Beside the lock, Johan waited for Steven. He just finished prying open the hatch's emergency access panel.

“Down!” yelled Johan as he pushed the red cycle button in the center of the panel.

Den flattened himself against the hull where he could just see the lock sliding open. His gun raised, Johan thrust himself partially into the airlock. Den moved up quickly beside Steven and covered Johan from the other side of the hatch.

The airlock's was dimly illuminated. Inside, lockers lined the walls in front and to the left. About two meters from them, the inner door stood between the lockers.

“Send the others through,” commanded Johan.

Steven stepped out of the way and gave a hand to Den behind him. He saw Lokki on the other side of the hatch helping the other two into the confines of the airlock. When the four men, Johan, Ken, Ranin, and Den were inside, the hatch closed, and a rush of air announced it was cycling.

To monitor communications between Johan and the Twilight Lamb, Lokki and Steven pushed away from the corvette and took positions above the hull. Everything was quiet. Even the radios, after a short burst of initial reports, tuned down to even less than a quiet hum.

Steven carefully scanned the hull; the Cying was a beautiful ship. It was completely whole, a great piece of salvage. He kept his position above the ship for about 20 minutes before he noticed a dark gash in the crew section and moved toward it. He was just about to report the blown out portion of the hull when a startled cry screeched from the radio. Within moments, a gout of vapor and a flurry of movement flashed from the cut in the hull. Steven headed at full thrust toward it.

Propelled forward by Steven, Den scrambled forward through the hatch and rushed to the front of the lock. Braced at the edge of the inner door, Johan stood tensely before him. The last man squeezed into the small space and Johan pressed the inner cycle button. Their suits tightened then settled. Johan's pistol barrel came up, ready. Before the chamber cycled fully, Johan pressed the emergency door lever, and with a slight vapor puff, the inner hatch flashed open.

The Cying's interior was feebly lit; they waited impatiently for their helmets' light intensifiers to partially adjust. The family couldn't afford the most advanced equipment, these were only weak vision enhancements used to compensate and protect the human eyes from the effects of the unfiltered illumination in space. Even when the visors reached their full intensification, the dark interior was still bathed in twilight.

Johan took a quick glance toward the bow then stern and gave a signal. He snapped on his hand light and stepped into the ship toward the bridge. The others turned on their lights and followed at his heels.

The slender beams palely lit the forward cabin crewbunk, unfortunately occupied.

“Plague ship?” one of the men whispered.

Johan stepped forward, “No. I don't think so. The ship's reactors are too drained. Missjump, I think.” Then he said more loudly, “Step lively. Fan out. Let's go. Positions!”

The ship was luxuriously decorated. It looked like an Imperial yacht. Acceleration padding unnecessarily covered all uninstrumented portions of the interior. Crew and instrument stations were redundant and well spaced.

The men turned to the immediate ship's instruments. Passive systems lights blinked solemnly on and off some stabilizing as the atmosphere finally came back into tolerance. Relays like tiny computer mice clicked in the still air, turning the corvette computer's mechanical thoughts into physical operations.

To the left, the passageway led past a crew position console, probably environmental control. The passageway then continued through blast doors to the bridge. The forward cabin was unusually dark. The unnecessary systems were already off or shutting down, only the environmental sections appeared partially operational.

The computer interfaces were not too different from those Den was used to on the Twilight Lamb. Checking the systems operations and ship's status, Johan and the others bent to touch the keys they could identify. Johan backed up the other two men as they moved carefully toward the bridge, while Den turned to the right. He was certain there were more interesting things to explore in the crew sections. As Den separated himself from his partner, Johan, he felt a vague uneasiness. He was resentful of his pairing with the extravehicular master, and wanted to prove his worth through his independence. After all, the ship was dead, and the whole Family was watching their exploration.

As Den headed aft, he passed a navigation and communication station. Probably backup, he thought. The passage continued to the area where the ship widened into the cargo and living quarters. Here, a blast door sealed the passage from the rest of the ship.

Den touched the door panel, and with a hiss and a puff of dust, the blast door opened.

The open doorway exposed a large common area. Before him, lay rich furnishings of couches, chairs, and real wooden tables. In the weak light, he could easily make out their ancient beauty. The colors were pale blue, gold, and black—the colors of the ancient House Imperial.

Den flashed his hand light over the area. In the light, the colors were even richer, more beautiful. He walked forward into the cabin and entered the aft section alone. At the back of the common area, a large wooden table ran along the wall, and through the gloom, he vaguely could make out the galley. In the pale beam of light, Den noted twin corridors on either side of the galley that stretched toward the rear of the ship.

Den entered the galley, but he saw nothing unusual there. Shipboard systems had not changed much, he thought, since this ship was laid down.

Along either side of the living area stood two closed cabin doors. Den glanced down the right side corridor and noted the cabin doors were repeated twice more. In the left side corridor, the design was duplicated: eight cabins. Den stepped to the first door on the right. The door was closed and appeared sealed. A firm touch on the doorplate achieved nothing. If this was anything like the doors on the Lamb, he should be able to unlock it with the manual latch. He felt around the doorplate until he found the access plate. With a flip of his wrist, he opened the small compartment and revealed the override system. As he reached for the latch buttons, a strong feeling of apprehension came over him, but he shrugged it off and pressed the buttons together. With a gentle hiss, and a cascade of dust, the door opened. Den looked carefully into the room almost afraid to cross the threshold. He could make out nothing from the doorway, so he stepped into the cabin. Strong shadows, dark and flickering unusually, filled the cabin, and something lay on the bunks in the room. These bodies were not fully decomposed like the thing

on the crewbunk, but they were not whole either. The hair on the nap of Den's neck touched the inside of his suit, and he backed quickly out of the room and shut the door behind him.

Den chastised himself for his cowardice and moved on to the next cabin door. He was glad Johan was not there to see his fear. From the radios, Den could tell, the shuttle master was still working with the men on the bridge as they checked the corvette's systems.

Den congratulated himself that he felt no anxiety at the next door. This one opened to his touch on the doorplate, and he stepped through fearlessly. No remains clung to the shadows, but he saw nothing else in the cabin either. It looked unused and empty.

Den moved on to the next door on this side. The cabin door was closed and like the first appeared sealed. Den stepped up to it. The door did not open when he touched the plate, so he opened the plate and again revealed the manual controls inside. He would be undaunted this time. But, his hand still hesitated at the controls. Fear suddenly welled up inside of him. He was unsure, but nothing would stop him. Something called to him, but he ignored it. With a quick motion, he touched the buttons simultaneously, and the shadows seemed to close around him.

Johan finished his operations check of the Athelstan Cying: gravgrids burned out, reactor almost fully stable—one of the crew cabins was depressurized but fully sealed from the interior of the ship. Except for that cabin the ship's atmosphere was solid. Everything else on the small yacht was secure. This ship will be easy to recommission, he thought. And, if we can find the proper buyer, one interested in an antique ship over a thousand years old, every member of the Family would receive a large salvage bonus.

A thought nagged at the back of Johan's mind, in spite of Natana's report on the ship, it was armed, but the ship's automatic defense systems failed to fire. The odd thing was they were still activated when his men came on board. The first thing he had to do was shut down the armament systems, and that took quite a while. Unexpectedly, the weapons systems were turned off while the automatic defensive systems were on. Most likely some failure kept the defensive

panel from commanding the ship to fire on them. They were very lucky; the corvette carried a full compliment of six blasters and two missile launchers. Since the ship did not register weaponry on the initial computer scans, obviously its computer records had been illegally modified.

A hoarse scream echoed suddenly in Johan's helmet, and he turned. The air in the bridge swirled vaporously then dragged him aft. Excited and startled calls blasted over the radios until he snarled, "Calm down." Then, in the abrupt silence, a gasping grunt of pain came to them.

Den pressed the manual release for the door. As the door snapped open, he felt an overwhelming tug on his body, the air whistled around him, and as he was pulled through the doorway, he caught at the sides with hands and feet. Den held for dear life on to the sides of the door, and in the darkness, something fluttered obscenely before him. A skeletal face and body swirled in the backflow of the rushing air. The gruesome thing seemed to embrace him, and unable to resist the pressure of the escaping atmosphere, Den lost his grip. He gave a scream of terror as the suction pulled him into the cabin beyond. A gaping hole appeared before him, and he didn't have the time to realize the cabin was open to space before a sharp tendril of the ship's frame caught and transfixed him. With dreadful slowness, the metal pierced his suit then tore open his side. Den gave a terrible grunt of pain. He felt every centimeter of the protuberance as it cut into him. The keen scythe didn't stop until it grated on the bone of his spine. Den's warm blood flooded the vacsuit, and a few large crimson goblets escaped into the vacuum before the suit sealed itself. Den couldn't breath. His chin dropped heavily against the inside of his helmet. He felt only pain. Far away, a voice he heard once before called to him, but he ignored it and slipped into oblivion. In an instant, his spirit was gone.