

Dreadnaught

By Jeremy Falleta

Tom ran his finger over the ident tattoo on his wrist and frowned. He knew it would scan perfectly. He'd never messed one up, that he knew of.

Of course, he'd also never burned one onto his own skin before. First time for everything, he thought, and almost chuckled. He drew a breath and exhaled it slowly.

On the bench across from him, Racker stared at the floor and sat perfectly still. If Tom hadn't known him since they were in school together, he'd have thought Racker was sleeping. He wasn't.

"Nervous?" Racker asked.

"Nah," Tom lied. "Piece of cake."

"These idents look amazing." Racker raised his wrist in tribute. "Maybe the best I've seen."

"Thanks." Although the telltale scar tissue under Racker's was a slight concern.

Aaron said, "Third one I've had in a month. Fuck if they don't start to hurt like a sonofabitch, you get too many of them." He absently rubbed his own tattoo.

"Fuckin' A right, that," said Trask. He laughed. "But whaddya gonna do?"

"How far's the engine room once we board?" Tom asked. It would be his first time on a Sovereign Dreadnaught, too, but he'd studied the plans. He knew how far it was.

"We get through the airlock, clear ident, two short corridors up to Main Street, then a quarter mile or so walk to our exit. Break left to the central engine room, control systems are only three or four minutes past there. I'd say about ten minutes, we don't have any problems," said Aaron.

Tom nodded.

"Don't worry about that part, Tom," said Racker. "We've got that part cold. Just worry about the objective once we get there."

Trask's head clicked down and back up in mute agreement. "Might be a few marines keeping an eye on the eggheads," he said.

Aaron smiled. "Like Racker said. All Tommy here needs to worry about is what he's going to do once that room is ours."

"Tom is solid," Racker said. "We'll be in and out. You'll be collecting your fee planetside before you know it."

Once the airlock had finished its routine, they heard a voice beckoning them forward almost immediately.

All four men stood and shuffled forward together. They wore gray maintenance jumpsuits; each carried a small bag of personal effects and a toolkit. They looked bored. Racker yawned.

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As they each stepped through into the terminal and extended their wrists for standard onboarding ident checks, Tom became aware of his heartbeat. He forced himself to cool down, knowing that their biometrics were fair game as well. Just here for another two week rotation. Most normal thing in the world. He thought about Abby, reasoning that most workmen would probably be doing the same at this point. He felt himself relaxing by degrees.

Once they got through the access corridors and into the main thoroughfare, he thought: Holy shit, so many people! Dreadnaughts only housed crew, but they were like flying cities. Tom knew there were almost 15,000 souls on board, but he felt like he was seeing every one of them at once. People were everywhere, rushing about. They were all uniformed.

How can I do what I've come here to do, Tom thought. He was not a man of violence. But he thought of Hark, and clenched his jaw. He would do what was required of him, and if that sickened him then so be it.

Suddenly, Tom was aware of a huge mass bearing down on him from his left side. He spun aside a mere second before being knocked out of the way, and turned around in time to briefly make eye contact with the hover's driver. "Watch where you're walking, grease monkey!" the man shouted as he sped on his way.

"Sorry!" Tom shouted back instinctually.

Aaron grabbed his arm. "Are you nuts? Don't draw attention!"

"Just keep walking. Everyone. Come on," Trask muttered. "That mope and every other motherfucker on this hulking piece of shit gonna be vapor soon enough."

There were two marines at the entrance to the central engine rooms. Both had small energy weapons holstered at their hips.

"I'll handle this," Racker said quietly as they approached.

"Hold up," said the marine on the left, showing them a palm. He was a small, rat-faced man with a neat mustache. "We need to see your orders."

Racker unzipped his jumpsuit and pulled a blue envelope from an inside pocket. "Routine systems check and PM," he said as he handed it to the marine.

Tom's mouth was dry. He swallowed and tried to stand still while the marine opened the envelope and scanned the contents. This was the second test of his work in the last half hour.

"All right," said the marine. "Straight through the gangway here, then check in with Sergeant Rell in the outer control shed." I'll radio ahead to let him know you're here. He handed the envelope back to Racker.

The room was cavernous. On either side of the gangway, huge transformers hummed with immense voltage. The standard adapted helium ionic thrusters on each Sovereign Dreadnaught weren't designed for interstellar travel, but could convert environmental helium into enough energy to power their terrible,

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legendary weapons systems throughout sustained conflicts. Currently in orbit over Goshen and using minimal thrust, the ship was storing most of the energy it produced.

The four of them walked straight toward the outer control shed. They kept their eyes forward and didn't speak. Even if they had, the noise was far too great to hear anything.

They arrived at a closed door and Racker pounded on it twice. It was opened by another marine, this one with two yellow stripes on the top of his right arm. His nameplate read 'Rell'. He had a pulse rifle slung across his back, a small blue light indicating a full charge. He nodded to them and stretched out his hand, palm up.

Racker went through the same routine with their orders. Rell quickly scanned Tom's documents, handed them back, and indicated that they men should step into the shed. He closed the door behind them and Tom heard the lock snick back into place. It was immediately much quieter.

"Maintenance terminal's to the right of the main bank," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. To his other side, four technicians were absorbed with the readouts on their screens. They didn't bother to turn around.

"What's he doing here?" Aaron asked, pointing behind the sergeant.

As Rell turned to look, Trask's fist slammed into his jaw. The marine went down, stunned, but already reaching for his rifle. Aaron delivered a kick to his groin, and Trask fell on him, using his weight to pin Rell to the floor. The rifle was caught underneath him.

Tom looked to the left. The technicians were all staring at the scuffle in alarm. Trask had grabbed the sergeant's collar and was repeatedly slamming his head against the metal floor. Racker was behind him, tugging on the rifle.

Rell went slack. Racker had the rifle out a second later, and trained it on the technicians. "Don't move," he said.

"Whatever you want, don't expect us to help you," said one of them. She was a tall woman with her hair pulled back, her nerve belied by the fear in her eyes. Her hand shook as she pointed a finger at her terminal. "We've already called for help."

"You're bluffing," Aaron said calmly. "And we both know it." He inclined his head in Tom's direction without taking his eyes off the technicians. "You're up."

Tom walked calmly to the maintenance terminal, sat down, and turned his ident toward the scanner mounted on the side. A few seconds later they all heard a short sequence of beeps and he began to tap the screen rapidly.

"This won't take long," he said, navigating to the control pane for energy distribution.

The sharp sleet of the pulse rifle's discharge made Tom jump. When he turned around, one of the techs was on the floor. There was a jagged red cavity on the front of his smock, his eyes glassy. Tom watched, eyes

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widening in horror, as Racker swung the rifle a few degrees and fired again. The tall woman screamed as she went down, and the other two bolted, trying to get to cover on the other side of the main terminal bank.

Racker calmly followed them and a moment later, Tom heard their protests cut off with two more sleet sounds.

"You should probably get back to work so we can get the fuck out of here," Aaron noted.

Tom had just seen his childhood friend murder four people in cold blood. Racker didn't even seem phased. "Come on, Tom. We're counting on you here," he said. He smiled sheepishly.

Tom thought of Abby and Hark again, and he heard the rough tremolo of his father's voice. A man's got to protect what's his, it said. Otherwise he ain't no man.

Tom swallowed again and turned back to the screen. Just be thankful you don't have to do that, he thought. But those people would have died soon enough anyway, and he'd ultimately be the one responsible for their deaths, and for those of every other soul on board.

He wrote a short, efficient routine that would redistribute all of the Dreadnaught's energy stores to its thrusters in one continuous burst, causing first a meltdown and then a small explosion as the remaining surge burst free of the system.

When this blast breached the tanks storing the unrefined helium that had been harvested, the helium would become supercharged and unstable, and then a second, devastatingly large explosion would rip through the massive ship. What remained of the hull and some of the superstructures would be blown into shrapnel and propelled into open space. Everything organic would be instantly erased.

This whole process would only take seconds once it started, so Tom gave his crew a half hour to disembark. If they ran into trouble getting off the ship, they would be vaporized with the rest.

They couldn't leave the way they'd come, because their idents all said they had come aboard for a fourteen day rotation. Getting held up at any of the main airlocks wasn't an option, without any time for them to improvise, and they'd been forced to leave the pulse rifle behind when they hastily hid the bodies of Rell and the technicians and locked the door to the control shed behind them. So fighting was also a non-starter. That left the emergency escape pods.

Tom was confident that if they could get into a pod and seal it, he could force the ejection protocol on the fly. Getting the damn thing close enough to Goshen to figure out atmospheric re-entry was another story, but he had kept that part to himself. No one had asked. Aaron and Trask just assumed that he was capable with all of the technical aspects of the job, and Racker trusted him. And so, a month ago, when he had proposed this method of departure as the capstone on the mission, there hadn't been a debate.

The emergency escape pods were staggered down the length of the Dreadnaught's hull, thirty-six of them in all. They reached an access corridor for one just four minutes away from the engine rooms, but that was far too quick. Once the pod detached, it would be noticed immediately. Undoing the programming that Tom

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had set up would take no time at all if they were found out and someone clever made a couple of quick logical connections. Concealing the plan until the last possible moment was critical. So, they just kept walking.

When the time was right, they were about to turn down the next pod corridor when they heard the exaggerated wailing of klaxon sirens coming from everywhere at once. The bodies had been found. They had waited too long.

"Fuck," said Aaron. "Come on!" He sprinted down the corridor. Trask followed at a jog.

Tom couldn't move. His heart was in his mouth. Racker shook his arm, hard, and he turned to look into his friend's eyes. The mischief was gone, replaced by a strong panic that he was clearly struggling to master. But there was also hope, and Tom knew he had to move, had to get them off and away from this deathcruiser now, if he wanted to have any hope of seeing Abby and Hark again.

Right then, he wanted that more than anything he'd ever wanted in his life. This mission to destroy the Ragnarok, hell, the whole damn rebellion wouldn't mean anything if he lost them. That galvanized him into motion, and he took off down the corridor, Racker keeping up easily beside him.

They joined Aaron and Trask in the airlock and Tom went to work on the control panel. It was just completing its seal when they heard shouts coming from the main thoroughfare. The noise was muffled on the other side of the airlock, but they could see more marines running toward them through the thick glass of the porthole and it was clear that they had been discovered.

The pod side of the airlock hissed open and they boarded the pod immediately. They could hear energy weapons being discharged in the corridor now. Tom raced to the control console and started tapping the screen urgently.

"Shit!" he yelled. "I think they can lock these down remotely. We're too late!"

"I knew we should have taken that rifle," said Aaron.

"Not a justifiable risk at the time," said Racker.

"Fuck your justifiable risks, Racker," said Aaron. "Was getting trapped in this coffin without any weapons a justifiable risk?"

Trask snorted.

"Yes," said Racker calmly. "Tom, come on, brother. You've got to be able to do something!"

Tom's brain was racing as his fingers flew across the screen. He had gotten the console into a manual override, but still needed to figure out how to eject without the usual interface. He had no idea what he was looking for.

Then he had a thought. What if we just don't use the ejection protocol? What if we just turn on the fucking thrusters and GO? It was so simple, he wanted to laugh. They wouldn't be able to get enough velocity to

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get them nearly as far away from the Ragnarok as he would have liked, but it was better than waiting for the marines to board the pod and capture them. If that happened, they'd die with everyone else.

The thrusters were incredibly loud when they fired up. Aaron whirled around in surprise, then broke into a ridiculous grin.

"You're a fucking genius, Tommy! Let's get the fuck out of here!"

"Working on it," said Tom. "It's going to be really close."

When the secondary blast went off and the Ragnarok exploded into a constellation of superheated shrapnel, they felt the heat before they even heard anything. The side of the pod's hull that was facing back toward the Dreadnaught warped and twisted in on itself, but held, somehow. There was a heavy cacophony of metal debris raining past them on its path to eternity, but nothing large enough to damage the pod any further.

Tom vomited on his boots. Racker clapped him on the shoulder and sighed.

He had just ended thousands of lives with a few hundred lines of computer code. The Sovereign must be made to understand their vulnerability if we are ever to achieve independence, Racker had preached. Our children and grandchildren will never be free if we don't stop them.

But all Tom felt now was that they had made a terrible mistake.

Outside the porthole, he could make out Goshen's bright blue arc in the distance.