

OUT ON THE RIM

By Romall H. Smith II

The stars are bright, but out on the rim, against the icy void, they glow like a million bonfires with no invitation. Not that any of the Korrina's crew had ever been to a bonfire. The aged freighter rarely encountered anything but ice on its mining trips. Once a bright crimson, the Korrina rust colored hull had been bleached by decades of solar radiation. Holding a position near the edge of an asteroid belt, the aged ship opened its flight deck doors. Their pitted surfaces, marred by over a century of mining asteroids, pushed against vacuum of space.

"Open her up, let's see what you can do," said Commander Aiyana. "Just think about going faster and the Q will do the rest for you."

Standing on dimly lit the flight deck, Rylin looked up. Asteroids of ice and rock spun about one another, barely visible in the shadow of the freighter. This was the chance he needed to transition from deck loader to Q pilot.

"Yes ma'am," Rylin said. His pulse quickened and beads of sweat dripped from his brow.

He tightened his fingers around the orb shaped controllers pressing them forward. The bio-luminescent fluids flowed through the Q-Engine's inner workings, glowing a bright blue. The conversion of action and thought into energy engaged the thrusters jolting him forward. Rylin's palate filled with the taste of acid and last night's freeze-dried pizza. "Wow, I wasn't expecting that," he said.

"That Q-engine you are strapped into is the newest piece of hardware to hit SERCORP. Everything from its bio-lum innards to its polyethylene shell is connected to you in some way. so, watch out for debris."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Bad day to be Jenson, great day to be the next man up, you ready to pract-"

Aiyana's voice was cut off by a proximity alert.

"Tri-dimensional gate opening to port. Looks like we have company," said Captain Grey, his deep voice boomed over the intercom.

"Of course, hopefully it's not another Fedstar shakedown," said Aiyana.

"Those are not Fedstar vessels. We are reading 4 Qs and a Frigate. However, we are not getting any recog signals. Move to intercept," said Captain Grey.

"Pirates?" Rylin asked.

"Gotta be," said Aiyana, her attention on the incoming vessels.

"Our 3drive is spooling up now," said Captain Grey. "You have to hold them till we are ready for a Trispace jump"

"Stand down and prepare to be boarded. By order of Admiral Blackstar," an unknown voice commanded over the com system.

The pirate frigate and her compliment of Q's were retrofitted units. Their bio-lums and thrusters glowing a bright orange, as they accelerated. Gun ports on the frigate opened bringing cannons to bare on the Korrina.

"I have only ever done this in simulations," said Rylin. "Do they take prisoners?" He laughed nervously.

“Incarceration isn’t living.” Aiyana jolted her Q to the left. “It’s a prolonged death sentence.” A bolt of plasma ripped through space where she had been, just a second ago. “No thank you,” she said with a quick squeeze of the controller. The arms of her Q-engine lifted and unleashed a volley of plasma bolts. The blue energy zipped across space in an instant, shredding through a pirate vessel’s polycarbonate shell. “Got him.”

“Your Q can’t take all of us, stand down. We just want your cargo,” said one of the combatants.

“I have faith in my engine, but I have none in your words,” she said.

Aiyana’s grip on the orbs tightened till her knuckles whitened. *The Korrina can’t hold out forever.* Her fingers cramp. *It’s now or never.* She pressed her hands forward engaging maximum thrust. *The universe is so vast, yet here we are...* Tiny pieces of debris impacted her Q. *Out on the rim of known space...* Bruises and blood spots formed on her legs and arms. *Fighting like we never left earth...* She shut her eyes, the proximity alert ringing as she closed on the pirate frigate.

"Stand down commander, tridimensional gate opening to aft, eight vessels," shouted Captain Grey. Aiyana opened her eyes and looked toward the second gate.

“Never thought I would be happy to see the feds!”