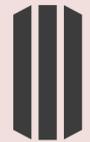


He pulled his PDA comlink from his pocket. It was a new Arcane 9.1 and he had bought it only three months ago. It was tough and sturdy.

Fortunately, the standard equipment in the spacesuit's pockets included enough tools to make destroying the comlink quite easy.



He decelerated successfully, but this did not stop him from slamming into the hull. Without, however, killing himself, or breaking anything.

He grunted, and with accelerated breath desperately felt around him before managing to grasp hold of a rail. He pulled out the safety cable and ascender and rapidly began to haul himself, hand over hand, over *Adamcak's* hull.

Only now did he realize how horribly exhausted he was.

And just this morning he had thought that a long flight on a luxury yacht would be tiring!

His muscles ached. And, what was worse, they were starting to give out on him. Pain can sometimes be ignored, but total exhaustion cannot.

On several occasions, he only grasped the rail on the second attempt. In at least half a dozen instances, he would have floated off

into space if he hadn't had the cable and ascender.

He went on and on, and finally reached the reactor dome. The yellow panel on it was exactly the same.

He no longer had the strength to be afraid of letting go of the chip. He was at the port when he realized that his fatigued muscles could cause a tragedy.

Then the chip was in place.

Suddenly it was all over. Maybe it was really all over.

He tried the spacesuit's internal transmitter.

"Calling *Adamcak* station, do you hear me? *Adamcak*, Nick Gramo here, journalist... well, no matter. I'm in spacesuit number NKM-4518"—he read the number from his helmet's HUD. "I'm circling round *Adamcak*, but I flew over from *Nelson*."

"*Adamcak* space traffic control here," said a voice after a while. A male voice sounding like someone who had just woken up at their own funeral. "Mate, you have no idea what just happened to us on the station! We just started a mass evacuation, the reactor was in the shit, communications too..."

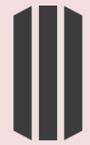
"Yeah, I know, believe me."

There was a short silence. "Our sensors are picking you up at the reactor. Did you fire it up?"

"Well... no. Three hackers on *Nelson* helped me remotely."

“Stay where you are. We’re sending someone for you.”

“Thanks. I don’t think I have the energy to go anywhere now.”



It is common knowledge that the muscles hurt most on the second day after great exertion. Nick Gramo was in a position to confirm this. When they’d rescued him on *Adamcak*, massive commotion was reigning everywhere. The stations were jointly coordinating the solution for this unprecedented cyber-attack. The *Gloriana* had gotten involved too. Henry was still sailing on her and had destroyed his comlink, following Amira Angami’s instructions.

Carol and Oliver had eliminated the last traces of the hostile AI virus from *Nelson* and, to be on the safe side, they had sent the same antivirus systems to *Adamcak* too. Now they were reviewing everything.

Twenty-two people had died aboard *Adamcak*, most of them reactor staff and a few people who had broken their necks when the gravity was restored. More than one hundred twenty were wounded, mostly fractures, dislocations and the like.

Nick was actually lucky that only his muscles ached. But for all that, they ached terribly, and he was immensely grateful

when Mr. Henry invited him to sit down, again in the *Gloriana’s* observation lounge, after the *Gloriana* had finally docked at *Gar K. Nelson*.

“My comlink was responsible for everything!” said Henry baldly, a combination of rage and chagrin in his voice. “It must have gotten into it when I was in an unsecured network... yes. Every Tuesday I go to the same restaurant for lunch and of course I check my messages and the datanet when I’m there. And last time, when the waiter brought my food, I remember he spilled the drink. He apologized over and over, but I realize now that he also touched my comlink while all that was going on. He must have hacked it with something. Goddamn it!”

“I think you have bigger problems with cyber-security than you thought,” Nick couldn’t refrain from saying.

“Trust me, I’m taking this very seriously indeed.”

Nick was more than willing to believe him. He knew that Mr. Henry hadn’t wanted this. But he also knew that this wouldn’t help the dead. Not to mention the fact that, because of Henry, he had had to fly through space like some difficult-to-control lump of rock.

“Do we know who did it?” he asked instead. “Who was responsible for the cyber-attack?”

“There are a bunch of possibilities,” said Henry. “What’s left of our enemies from the New Protectorate, some internal cabal in the Imperium that does not want those colonies, even a competitor. Bunch of possibilities.”

“Something tells me that we’re going to need extremely good cyber-security for this entire expedition.”

“Yes, Mr. Gramo. And that is actually the reason why I invited you here. The representatives of the three companies on the shortlist. How did they seem to you? Amira Angami, Oliver Forman and Carol Laut?”

“Without any one of them both stations would have been destroyed and your colony expedition would be in ruins,” said Nick baldly. “I’m planning to state this in my report too. My editor-in-chief has promised me the main slot on this evening’s broadcast.”

“That’s good, and yes, all three of them acted commendably. I hear that they will all receive the highest civilian honor, maybe even from Emperor Daniel himself. But that does not solve my problem. I would still like to hear your recommendation. Which company should I hire? What is your opinion, Mr. Gramo? Will it be Tambor Security, Bohemur Inc. or Pisces Interstellar?”

“Do you really want to hear my honest opinion?”

“Yes. And not just because I promised to get you onto the colony



expedition. I want your opinion because you and those three representatives saved not just one but two space stations. What do you recommend?"

"My recommendation is simple. Hire them all."

"All three companies?"

"Yes. Those three hackers complemented each other excellently and their firms will certainly do the same."

Doug Henry smiled. "And don't you think that will be very expensive?"

"I think that Henry Corp.'s travel budget will barely notice it. And it will definitely be cheaper than a new colony fleet!"

"You're absolutely right there, Mr. Gramo. Absolutely right."



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VALAKOR

PALAWAN

NOOK

BORNHOLM



LASIAN  
LASIANS

DAVENPORT

RAHI

FOLNA

TA LA BAR

BARRONDO

KONSTANTIN

NEW PROTECTORATE →



500ly



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAN KOTOUČ



Jan Kotouč is a Czech author of space operas, military SF and alternative history. His first novel was published in 2009 and since then he has written a number of novels in Czech. He is one of the handful Czech writers who has found success on the English-speaking market. Apart from writing, he teaches at a university and is a popular speaker at a number of conventions.

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