Gregory watched engines burn.

The gravity had gone out. In zero-G, fires burned in the sphere instead of a flame. Their color was bluer too. It was almost pretty.

"Aren't flames supposed to burn out in zero-G?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Yeah, I think there's an oxygen leak behind the fire. A slow leak, but enough to keep it fed. With all the system damage, I can't override the safeties and vac the ship. We're going to have to evacuate."

"I wanted the salvage."

"Evacuate, sir. If we hadn't lost gravity, we'd already be dead. This thing is going to blow big."

Warrant Officer Gregory Karpov took off as fast as he could.

Gregory headed for the bridge as fast as he could, cursing the zero-G. The ship was going to blow, and it was going soon. Gregory had to get the pirate ship clear of his own crippled craft before all hell broke loose.

"Computer, give me control of this ship," he demanded as pulled off his helmet.

"Authorization?" the computer responded.

Damn those dead pirates and their paranoid souls, Gregory thought. Hopefully they haven't hacked too deeply into the computer.

"Priority override. Human lives are at risk. I need maneuver control of craft." He had already tried the ailocks, but they were out of computer control

"Nature of emergency?" The computer sounded too damn calm.

"Catastrophic engine failure."

"Nature of human risk?"

"There's a ship off the starboard side. It's crippled. Contains ten life forms." Two of them were lab rats, but what the hell.

"Verifying . . . by the humanities act 2122, control of ship is released."

Gregory was delighted. No simulated intelligence could refuse aid to a human being when their lives were threatened. Locked doors were open in case of fire or vacuum, courses were changed to rendevous with distress calls, and controls were relinquished in event of imminent explosion. If only the computer could access the airlocks, it could over ride the safeties.

He had been afraid the pirates might of hacked the code on their ship computer, but it seemed they hadn't. They probably didn't care.

"Computer, the ship's engines are damaged. What maneuver capabilities remain?"

"Checking . . . emergency maneuver thrust only."

"How long would it take, under maximum maneuver thrust, to get this ship to minimum safe distance from humans in ship to starboard?"

"Eight minutes, forty-seven seconds."

"Excuse me?" It was worse than he thought.

"Eight minutes, forty seven seconds."

"At what acceleration?"

"One meter per second per second."

Gregory felt a cold chill go down his spine. That couldn't be right. There were tons of liquid hydrogen on board the ship, but not megatons. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Computer, take us away from that other ship. Maximum maneuver thrust."

"Unable to comply. I can relinquish control to manual."

"Do so." Gregory started pushing the pirate ship away from his own at maximum acceleration. "Computer, why couldn't you comply?"

"This ship received a great deal of damage before General Markov ordered the boarding action." Gregory hated pirates who gave themselves a trumped up rank.

"But manual still works?"

"Affirmative."

Gregory hit his suit radio. "Lieutenant, you need to abandon ship NOW!"

"Roger, Chief, I'll be right there."

Gregory let that go for a moment. He'd never talk the lieutenant into leaving the ship until he checked in.

"Computer, how long till the engine blows?"

"Ten minutes, fourteen seconds, best estimate."

"Why is the projected blast radius so large?"

"This ship is equipped with anti-matter bottle on UPS. When the engine explodes, the magnetic bottle will detonate. This was installed by General Markov as a posthumous retaliation."

Gregory shook his head in frustration. He had heard of people rigging their ships to explode, but this?

"There must be a way to jettison the bottle."

"Jettison system is inoperable."

"I see."

Gregory was about to say something else when the lieutenant drifted into the bridge.

"Situation?"

"Yes, sir. This ship is rigged to blow big. I only have manual control. Get the men out before we've moved too far away, after I've burned enough delta-V I'll follow."

The lieutenant nodded. "How long til the ship explodes?"

Gregory glanced at the computer. SI's rarely volunteered information. "Twenty minutes," he lied.

"You'll be cutting it close."

"I'll make it. Get the men out of here. Every second we get further away from our ship."

"Okay." The lieutenant looked out the window at the receding craft. "It'll be a long trip on an EVA pack. You'll be okay?"

Gregory checked his vitals. "Full tank of air. Empty catheter. I'll be fine."

The lieutenant nodded and left. Gregory shook his head. He had never lied to the lieutenant before.

"Computer, what was the time to minimum safe distance again. In seconds this time."

"527 seconds."

Gregory watched the ship recede. He could just see the lieutenant and the others heading across the space. He checked the clock. The relative velocity would be about ninety meters per second. It would take a minute and a half for them even match velocities with their ship, much less begin to close.

He watched the minutes pass. Three minutes. Four. Five. Six. The lieutenant would have figured it out by now, but without so much as emergency maneuvering on their own ship, there was nothing they could do.

When the clock hit eight minute and fifty seconds, he stopped thrusting. It took him a thirty seconds to suit up and cycle through the airlock.

530 meters per second of velocity. His suit had four hundred meters per second of delta-v. Even if he survived the explosion, the best he could do was slow himself to 130 meters per second, even if he expended all his fuel.

130 meters per second. A matter/anti-matter explosion. Dwindling air supply. Radiation poisoning. Stiff odds, but Gregory Karpov had never been one to give up a fight.

He stepped off into space.