

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG



How the 'Cats Got Their Claw

By Rebecca Jayne Chadwick



“The secondary fuel tank is leaking, Cait.”

‘Killer’ Cait Grimalkin, captain of the Hellcats—and currently of the worst ship in the Outer Rim—gave a loud, drawn-out sigh. “Of course it is. We were running out of parts that still worked.”

Dawn, the current pilot, gave a hollow laugh. “We’re down to the bare essentials. If anything else goes *ka-put*, we’re genuinely screwed.”

“I reckon we should set a course for the nearest space station.” That was Sparks, the navigator, from where she was sitting next to Dawn. “I know it’ll be a pain, but we’re going to end up stranded at best and blown to pieces at worst.”

Cait sighed again. She was fully aware of that, of course, but the last thing she wanted to do was broadcast the fact that the best pirate crew in the solar system was currently sailing a ship that hadn’t been flown since the last century.

It was all a bit of a screw-up, really. The Hellcats’ last outing had gone slightly... wrong, to put it mildly. They’d ended up stranded on one of Jupiter’s smaller moons without a ship. They had to hike across the moon’s surface to try and find help, and finally, after a few days’ wander, they’d come across a spaceship graveyard. Axe Boden and Flameout Jackson, the best technicians on the crew, located the least beat-up ship and got it to fly again.

The ship was a relic from the 23rd century, a tacky, overdecorated Earther affair that Flameout reckoned had been shot down when it flew into Cartel airspace over Europa. The massive blaster hole in the ship’s body was what gave it away, apparently. All five of them had to work together to patch it up. And everyone did a fine job, but the ship had clearly never been that good to begin with. It was cramped and dirty, not to mention its general un-flightworthiness. They decided to name it the *Reagent’s Reject*, after Gareth Reagent, the corrupt billionaire CEO of one of the many shipbuilding companies of the 23rd century. Not the most catchy of names, but they weren’t intending to keep the ship for very long.

Since leaving the moon, they'd been slowly heading for their headquarters on the space station *Themis*, but it was still quite a way away, and Cait was beginning to think the *Reagent's Reject* would fall apart before they got there. Sparks was right, they needed to find a port or space station somewhere. But that would come with a hell of a lot of embarrassment. And, sad as it is to say: when you're a group of women pirates, you don't really need any more embarrassment than what everyone else manufactures for you.

"The *Mandrake* is nearby," said Sparks, anticipating Cait's response. "We can be there in just over thirty hours."

"That's not bad," Axe put in, from underneath the floor grate. She was practically having to hold the fuel cables together with her bare hands. "Her crew isn't too likely to spread the news of our predicament to every arms dealer who drops by for a refuel."

Cait struggled to repress a third sigh. "Yeah, you're right. Set a course for the *Mandrake*, Sparks."

"Aye, Captain."

Sparks began to set in the coordinates, and Dawn gradually pulled the ship to the left. Everyone else held onto something; the ship's stabilisers were barely functioning.

"Hey," said Flameout suddenly. Cait swivelled around in the captain's chair to face her. "Didn't Jack say he was making a run to Saturn around this time?"

"Oh, he might've done," agreed Dawn.

"Hey, Axe?" Flameout stretched out her leg and tapped the grate above Axe, who obligingly poked her head up. "You remember Jack telling us he was headed to Saturn?"

"I, uh—I don't remember that, no," said Axe.

"Sure you do, it was when we were all—"

"Doesn't matter," said Axe hurriedly. "What's your point?"

“We could ask him to give us a lift to the nearest shipyard, is what I was going to say.”

“No,” said Cait immediately.

Everyone turned to her. “What’s the problem?” said Flameout.

“I don’t really want the crew of the *Raider* knowing we’re flying this lump of junk. Not if I can help it.”

“Oh, come on,” said Flameout. “This ship’s about to fall apart. I’d rather lose my pride than my life.”

Cait shrugged. “We’d never hear the end of it. I mean, not that Jack’s crew are *not* nice, but you know what they’re like. They’ll take the piss.”

“You’re probably right,” said Axe.

There was silence for a second. Dawn said, “It’s your call, Captain.”

“That’s right,” said Cait.

#

They were about half a day’s flight from the *Mandrake* when Axe, who was the only one in the cockpit, noticed something in the distance.

The fact that she saw it with her eyes was very strange. Normally, in space, the scanners pick up objects and tell you about them. Her scanner didn’t tell her anything about the giant asteroid directly ahead of them.

Axe quickly commed Cait to inform her of the asteroid, before trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with the scanner. It was possible that it had just conked out, like everything else on the damn ship, but a few hours back it had detected a couple of unmanned meteoroid harvesters just fine. Maybe it was the actual asteroid that wasn’t registering?

Which could only mean one thing: it wasn’t any old asteroid. It was a space station.

Axe thought they were rather cool, really. A few years back, someone had the idea to capture large asteroids, hollow them out, install an engine, and turn them into portable space stations. The Hellcats’ HQ, *Themis*, was

one. The Accord, the gang of Maverick overlords who ruled over most of the Outer Rim, owned a *lot* of them.

Cait came into the cockpit, yawning and rubbing her eyes. “What is it?”

“There’s a space station up ahead.”

“The *Mandrake*?”

“No, we’re nowhere near that yet. This is something else.”

Cait frowned and tapped the scanner. “What’s—”

“Not registering,” explained Axe.

“So the space station is powered down,” said Cait. “Do we know which one it is?”

Axe shook her head. “I don’t recognise it. Not at this distance, anyway. But I reckon it’s one of the Accord’s.”

The look on Cait’s face told Axe they were both thinking the same thing:

What was one of the Accord’s asteroids doing drifting all the way out here?

#

About thirty minutes later, the Hellcats boarded the space station *Wolfhound-3*.

Cait had identified it once they’d gotten a bit closer. Axe was right, it did belong to the Accord. Large but nondescript, to the untrained eye it would seem like an asteroid just hanging there in space. That is, until you looked closer, and saw the thrusters attached to its sides and the weapon systems poking out of the top.

The *Wolfhound-3* was still not giving off any signal, even at a much closer range, so Dawn had to dock the *Reagent’s Reject* alongside her manually. The docking bay wouldn’t open, so Dawn tethered the ship alongside the asteroid, and they all spacewalked across to the airlock. It was only a few metres, which was good, because Cait wasn’t convinced

the primitive spacesuits from the *Reagent's Reject* would be very effective at keeping them all alive.

Still, they all made it inside in one piece. They'd decided to board the asteroid in the hopes that Axe and Flameout could fix it up and they could fly back to *Themis* in it. It was a much better mode of transportation than the *Reagent's Reject*, that was for sure. Plus, if the Accord had lost it, somehow, returning it to them would mean that they owed the Hellcats a favour. And being owed a favour by the Accord is a pretty good ticket to have in your spacesuit pocket.

Once inside, all five of them removed their helmets and attached them to their waists with cord. It was pitch dark. Cait looked around, using the torch attached to her wrist for light. They were standing in the middle of a shiny silver corridor, probably near to the engine room, as there were huge grey pipes lining the walls and ceiling. The corridor was fairly narrow; they were probably in the maintenance sector, a place where the majority of the station's crew would never have to go.

"We'll split up," said Cait. "Axe and Dawn, you find the bridge. It's that way, I think." She pointed to the right. "See if you can figure out what happened here. Flameout, Sparks and I will do a sweep and see if we can find any crew."

There were murmurs of "Yes, Captain" from everyone. Cait took a personal communicator from her pocket and handed it to Dawn, then took out a second one, checked it was working, and replaced it in her pocket.

"Stay on the bridge," she told Axe and Dawn. "We'll come and find you once we've finished having a look around."

#

Cait led Sparks and Flameout through a series of short corridors until they came to the crew's quarters. This was another corridor, except both walls were lined with closed black doors, four on each side. Cait went up to one of them and pushed on it lightly. Locked.

"Flameout, can you get these open?"

“Sure,” said Flameout. She knelt down next to Cait and took an electronic lockpick out of the pouch attached to her spacesuit. Five seconds later, the door was open.

“Do the others for me,” said Cait, going past her and into the first room. A quick sweep with her torch told her it was pretty standard: plain walls, a cupboard, a wardrobe, bunk beds. Cait went over to the cupboard and opened it. Empty. She checked the wardrobe. The same.

“They packed up their stuff before they left,” she called.

Sparks, who was in the room opposite, replied, “Yeah, same here.”

Cait closed the cupboard and went back out into the corridor. “So what was so urgent that they had to leave the asteroid floating through space, but had time to collect everything first?”

Sparks shrugged. “Maybe it got damaged somehow, and the Accord sent a ship to pick everyone up.”

“But why leave the asteroid? These things cost a hell of a lot. Besides, out here, anyone could nick it.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Uh, Captain?”

Cait turned. It was Flameout, staring into one of the rooms at the other end of the corridor.

“What is it?”

“I think something bad *did* happen here.”

“Why?” said Cait, but her question was answered when she peered into the room Flameout was looking into. It was identical to the others, with one slight exception.

On the wall next to the door, there was a tiny, but perceptible, streak of dried blood.

#

“Here we are,” announced Dawn.

Axe looked around. Well, tried to. She couldn't see much without the main lights on, although she could tell they were standing in a large space, not the same narrow corridors they'd been walking through for the last twenty minutes. "You sure?"

"Positive." Dawn walked forwards and Axe tried to follow her footsteps. "See, here's the main console." She tapped her fingers against something metal.

"If you say so," said Axe, feeling her way along the console. "Oh, wait, I recognise some of these controls. Let me find the lights."

"If the asteroid is out of power," said Dawn, "you won't be able to..." She trailed off as Axe pressed a few buttons and the lights came flickering on. "...turn on the lights. Huh."

"I guess the power was switched off before everyone left the asteroid," said Axe with a shrug.

"Weird," said Dawn. "I assumed the *Wolfhound-3* had been attacked by Gongens or something, but I suppose not. I mean, if people are coming to kill you, you're racing to the escape pods, not worrying about conserving power."

Things were getting stranger by the minute, thought Axe. If the space station had been attacked, that would at least have explained why it had been left in deep space.

Now able to see, she examined the console properly. It was a jumble of buttons, switches, and dials, of all different colours and sizes, stretching all the way from one side of the bridge to the other. In front of it was a giant screen. It was off at the moment, but Axe guessed that when it was on, it showed a view of the outside.

"Axe, look at this."

Axe turned to Dawn. She was squinting at a tiny screen on the console.

"What's that?"

“Station log. It might tell us what happened here.” She looked up at Axe. “It says that the last entry was six months ago.”

“Six *months*?” said Axe. “That can’t be right.”

Dawn shrugged. “That’s what it says.”

“But why would the Accord abandon an asteroid out here for six months?” said Axe. “If it broke down and the crew needed to be evacuated quickly, fair enough. But then why not send a team to tug it back to Titan? Even if it was destroyed beyond repair, they would have junked it, not left it out here where it could easily drift into Gongen territory.” She paused. “Plus, wouldn’t we have heard about it?”

“Not if they didn’t want anyone to know. They’re good at covering things up, you know that as well as I do.”

“Maybe.” Axe’s eyes drifted over the console. “I think we need to get some intel. Tell you what, you read the logs and see if they can shed any light; I’ll do a scan for any ships nearby that might know what happened here. Maybe Jack Wilgress is around somewhere.”

Dawn raised her eyebrows slightly. “Why Jack Wilgress?”

“Or anyone,” said Axe, refusing to take the bait.

“Shouldn’t we ask Cait if we want to start hailing other ships?”

“Who said anything about hailing them?” said Axe irritably. “I just want to scan for them. Cait won’t mind.”

Dawn shrugged.

“Help me get this thing powered up, then,” said Axe.

#

Cait, Flameout, and Sparks were heading towards the escape pod bay. After finding the blood, Flameout had the idea to check if the escape pods were gone. If they were, then the crew must have escaped. If they weren’t, then either a ship had come to pick them up, or they’d all been killed. Even though Cait had told the others that such a small amount of blood didn’t necessarily point to foul play, she had her doubts.

“What are we going to do if we don’t find anything, Cait?”

Cait turned to Sparks. “What do you mean?”

“Well, are we going to get back in the *Reagent’s Reject*, or are we going to try and fly this thing?”

“Oh.” Honestly, Cait hadn’t thought about it. “Until we find out what happened here, I don’t think I want to risk flying the *Wolfhound-3*. Who knows, it might explode the second the engines come on.”

At that moment, the lights came on.

“Huh,” said Cait.

“Must be Axe and Dawn,” said Flameout helpfully.

“Let’s hope my theory about the whole exploding-asteroid thing turns out to be wrong,” said Cait.

They continued to walk down the corridor until a few minutes later, when a hum of electricity suddenly started up. They all paused and looked around. On the wall a little way ahead, a screen switched itself on, and data readouts began to scroll across it.

“There we go, then,” said Cait. “Looks like this rock will be an alright ride, after all.”

Flameout smiled at her, but Sparks pointed down the corridor, back the way they came. “Look.”

Cait turned. A few metres away, a door was sliding open.

“That’s weird,” said Flameout, frowning. “The power outage must have automatically sealed it. I wonder why.”

“Pretty easy to find out,” said Cait. “Come on.”

Cait led them towards the door. Her fingers danced over the weapon at her waist. Slowly, she peered through the doorway.

It was the docking bay. A giant hangar-type room, big enough for one large ship or two smaller ones. It was grey, like the rest of the space station, but the walls were lined with black and white cupboards—

presumably for storing tools—and the bay doors at the other end of the room were painted bright yellow.

“Holy smokes,” said Flameout, gaping.

“I know, right?” said Sparks.

Cait could only stare.

It wasn't the room they were reacting to. It was what was in it.

In the middle of the docking bay was a ship. An *enormous* ship. It was a beautiful shade of red, but Cait hardly noticed the colour. It had the most magnificent thrusters she had ever seen, a superbly streamlined body, and even what looked like a hatch for a grapple claw. It looked brand new, barely out of the shipyard.

In a word, it was perfect.

“Not often that the captain's speechless,” said Flameout, elbowing Cait.

Cait ignored her. “I want to get inside that thing.”

#

“Uh, Axe?”

“Hmm?”

“You might want to take a look at this.”

Axe groaned. She was currently flat on her back underneath the console, poking around in its innards. It was some nice tech, but the cables could really do with some TLC. She shuffled out and pulled herself up.

“What is it?”

“Well, the station log cuts off abruptly with no indication as to what had happened. So, I decided to take a look at some of the systems data.”

“And?”

Dawn pointed at the screen. “Internal radiation levels.”

Axe leaned forwards to have a look. The numbers were off the scale. “That's not good.”

“No,” said Dawn grimly, “it isn’t.”

“What’s causing it?”

“I don’t know. But see how it’s steady, then suddenly jumps really high?”

Axe squinted. “Oh, yeah. When was that? No, don’t tell me,” she said before Dawn could answer. “Six months ago, right?”

Dawn nodded.

“Can you locate the source?”

“I should be able to, yeah.” Dawn pressed a couple of buttons on the console. “Okay, the source is starboard... towards the back... in the docking bay.”

#

In the docking bay, Flameout had managed to open the mysterious ship, and the three of them were exploring it. As Cait had thought, it was *perfect*. Way, way better than the ship they had left behind on that moon of Jupiter. It had enough rooms for all of them, plenty of space to store their ill-gotten gains, and an engine that would get them around at least fifty percent faster than any ship Cait had ever seen. Also, it looked brand new, barely flown. There wasn’t a scratch on her.

Cait wondered where the Accord had gotten it. Wherever it was from, it was clearly the only one. The Accord’s ships were the best in the Outer Rim—in general, anyway—but even theirs were nothing like this. Nor had they put any ships like this up for sale.

Maybe it was a captured Earther ship. No, no one on Earth had such good craftsmanship anymore. Gongen, then. Cait still wasn’t sure. She’d never heard of any Gongen having such a good ship.

She was currently examining the storage hold, which was empty, but in her mind’s eye she could picture where she would put everything. *We could build a weapons rack over there. That space in the corner is big enough for larger items.* She imagined what the ship would be like as hers.

Cait took a few steps backwards until she was back in the main body of the ship, and called, “What do you guys think?”

Flameout, who was poking around in a fuse box, said, “Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Genuinely. No hyperbole.”

“It’s like nothing else,” agreed Sparks, who was examining the flight controls. “Cait, we need this ship.”

“Hell yeah we do,” said Flameout.

Cait shrugged, a smile playing on her lips. “Well, if the Accord insists on leaving such a nice ship all the way out here for anyone to get their hands on...” She took her communicator out of her pocket and commed Dawn.

“Hey, Captain,” answered Dawn after a few seconds. Her voice was quiet and crackly. “We were just about to comm you; there’s something you need to know.”

“Dawn, listen,” said Cait. “We’ve just found an amazing ship in the docking bay, so what we’re going to do is this: you two come here, then Sparks and I will go back to the *Reagent’s Reject* and—”

“You’re in the docking bay?” Dawn interrupted her.

“Yeah, why?”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you,” said Dawn. “Cait, you have to get out of there.”

“What?”

“We just found the internal radiation levels. Cait, they’re off the scale. And it’s coming from the docking bay.”

Cait didn’t reply.

“You have to get out of there. Something in the docking bay is leaking radiation like crazy. We’re all exposed to it.”

“But there’s nothing in here except for the ship.”

“Then the ship is the source. Cait, please. The readings are off the scale. I don’t know how we’re not dead already.”

Cait paused, thinking. Then she said, "You and Axe get back to the *Reagent's Reject* and wait for us there."

"Okay, Captain." There was a click as Dawn disconnected.

Cait turned to the others. "Did you get all that?"

"What, that we're all dying of radiation sickness?" said Flameout. "Loud and clear, Captain."

"What are we going to do?" said Sparks.

Cait hesitated.

Sparks blinked. "I assumed the answer to that would be 'get the bloody screaming hell out of here right this second', but apparently not?"

Cait attempted to look apologetic. "Maybe the leak isn't that bad. Maybe we can patch it up and it'll be fine."

Sparks blinked several times and opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish. "Or, we could not do that? Hell, Cait, did you not hear what Dawn said?"

"I'm not leaving a ship like this behind," Cait told her. "Between this and the *Reagent's Reject*, what would you choose?"

"The *Reagent's Reject*," said Flameout without hesitation. "She has her faults, but at least she isn't bleeding radiation."

"Yeah, I'm with Flameout on this one," said Sparks. "I mean, all due respect, Captain, but what the hell are you thinking?"

"I'm *thinking* I'd rather die of radiation poisoning than show my face in that heap of Earther junk," Cait snapped, a little harsher than intended.

Sparks and Flameout looked at each other like they couldn't believe what they were hearing. "You mean, you'd rather us *all* die of radiation poisoning than suffer a little humiliation at the hands of Jack Goddamn Wilgress," stated Flameout.

Cait opened her mouth but couldn't think of a reply.

“No ship is worth our lives, Cait,” said Sparks. “Do you know how many times we’ve nearly died for you?”

“Do you know how many times *I*’ve nearly died for *us*?” Cait shot back.

“And now you’re going to throw our lives away for a piece of *equipment*,” Sparks continued, shaking her head. “Ships can be replaced. Even good pilots can be replaced. But *we* can’t be replaced, Cait. I thought you knew that.”

Cait was silent.

Flameout took Sparks by the arm. “We’re going to find Axe and Dawn and then we’re going back to *our* ship. Come and find us when you’re ready to act like part of a team again. Or don’t. Whatever. Enjoy your radiation sickness.”

And with that, Flameout and Sparks turned and walked out of the ship, leaving Cait behind.

#

Axe and Dawn were legging it towards the docking bay when they rounded a corner and smashed right into Flameout and Sparks, who were legging it in the opposite direction.

On the way, Axe and Dawn had passed the escape pod bay and decided to take a quick look inside. It was empty. All five escape pods were gone.

“That settles it,” Dawn had said. “The crew picked up the ship and put it in the docking bay. Then they found out it was leaking radiation. So they switched off the power and got the hell out of there.”

“Presumably that’s why the Accord left it out here,” Axe had agreed. “It’d be pretty embarrassing for them to admit they’d picked up a faulty ship.”

“Not more embarrassing than for us to admit we’ve wandered right onto it.”

That's what they told Flameout and Sparks, once they'd all picked themselves off the floor. It was only then that Axe noticed Cait wasn't with them.

"Where's the captain?"

Flameout and Sparks looked at each other. "On the ship," said Flameout after a moment.

"The *Reagent's Reject*?"

"The ship in the docking bay," said Sparks.

"*What?*" said Dawn. "What the hell does she think she's doing?"

"She wants to fix the radiation leak," said Sparks. "She really, *really* wants that ship."

Axe frowned. "Didn't you try and talk her out of it?"

"She wouldn't listen."

"Flameout, it's been like..." Axe checked her watch. "Literally three minutes since we got off the comm with you. How much talking did you actually do?"

"It was more like, we said 'We're leaving', she said 'No we're not', we said 'So you value the ship over our lives', and then we left," said Sparks after a few seconds.

"Such a good team meeting, guys," said Dawn, rolling her eyes.

"She can't suddenly start treating us like we're expendable," argued Flameout. "She's meant to be our captain!"

"And we're meant to be her crew," said Axe. "And a crew can't just abandon each other if someone gets on someone else's nerves, or things get said in the heat of the moment. Come on, Flameout. You really just left Cait in a radiation sauna?"

Flameout was quiet.

"I guess we did," said Sparks.

"Then I think we'd better go and get her," said Axe.

#

Honestly, Cait couldn't blame Flameout and Sparks for getting mad at her. In the moment, she *had* chosen the ship over them. But she was thinking clearly now.

And what she was thinking was: if the radiation levels were as high as Dawn had said, how come none of them were sick yet?

She could understand if they weren't dead yet. But they'd be showing symptoms: headache, fever, nausea, dizziness. But no, she felt completely fine. So why was that?

First, she went to the engine room. A brief look told her that everything was fine in there. So she went to the control room to run a systems diagnostic. And...

Nothing. No radiation leaks. No *anything* leaks. The ship was in tip-top condition.

"If Dawn's got us all worked up over a faulty reading..." she muttered. But she paused when she saw a blinking blue light to the right of the console; something she hadn't noticed before. "What are you?" she asked it.

After a few minutes of looking through the computer system, she had her answer.

Cait grinned.

#

Axe, Dawn, Flameout, and Sparks arrived back in the docking bay just in time to see Cait sauntering out of the mysterious ship, as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"You don't look like someone who's dying of radiation poisoning," said Flameout suspiciously.

"Nor do you, funnily enough," replied Cait. "Strange, isn't it?"

Axe folded her arms. "All right, Captain. What do you know that we don't?"

Cait shrugged, the doorway of the ship like a halo around her frame.

“You’re going to tell us that there isn’t a radiation leak at all, aren’t you?” said Sparks with a groan.

“But the readings...” said Dawn.

“At first, I thought the *Wolfhound-3*’s systems were faulty,” said Cait. “But they’re not. They’re working perfectly. So I had a look around the ship. Engines: fine. Fuel tanks: fine. Everything seemed in perfect working order.”

Axe was beginning to get annoyed. “With all due respect, Cait, get to the point.”

Cait cleared her throat. “It was all in the computer system. The ship is more high-tech than we thought: it’s got a bunch of different defences, half of which I’ve never even heard of.”

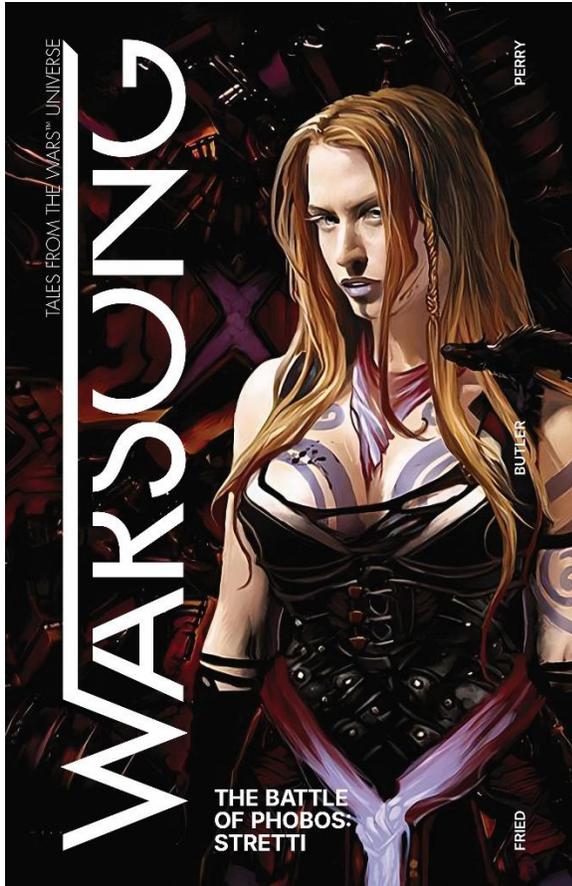
“So, what, the ship leaks radiation in case it’s attacked or captured?” said Flameout.

“Not quite,” said Cait. “The ship *pretends* to leak radiation. It sends false signals to the ship’s instruments to make it think the ship is flooded with radiation in the hopes that it’ll be left alone. Like a poisonous plant, warning away its predators as soon as they take a bite out of it. The asteroid must have triggered it when it brought the ship on board.”

Axe raised her eyebrows. “If you’re right, that is some *serious* tech.”

“I know,” said Cait. She looked at each pirate in turn. “So, who wants to get their hands on it?”

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