[**SFX:** *Ambience of a spaceship, like a low mechanical humming, air filters, interrupted by a loud "clunk" of space debris colliding with the ship*]

"(*sharp intake of breath, tired groan, speaking blearily*) …what…? What is…"

[**SFX**: *Rope being pulled taut - the BOUNTY HUNTER is restrained in a chair, fabric rustling as he struggles*]

"Ah - these are the restraints I used on you. Is that - are these human bitemarks? Were you trying to *gnaw* through them before? That is - well, I am going to decline to comment on that. I am aware of my current position versus yours. I will be thinking about this moment for quite some time. That's all I'm going to say on the matter."

[**SFX**: *Another loud "clunk" as more debris hits the ship*]

"What was - "

[**SFX**: *Several smaller "clunks." The automated voice announces, "Rear stabilizer array: damaged. Port thruster: operating at reduced capacity. Advising course correction."*]

"(*incredulous*) Is that - are we - are we in an asteroid belt?"

[**SFX**: *One last heavy "clunk"*]

"...We are in an asteroid belt."

"How long was I unconscious?! We should be - no, never mind, it doesn't matter. Listen to me - whatever you are doing, I need you to stop doing it now. Urgently! Here is our situation - I will explain it to you very quickly, and it is imperative that you listen. Based on our previous trajectory, I can only assume that we are in the Hedrolla Belt. The Hedrolla Belt is the densest asteroid cluster in this quadrant. I know this because I specifically plotted our route to avoid it for navigational reasons that have surely been made obvious by now."

"The hull on this ship is good - it is a good hull, I like this hull, but it is rated for *incidental* debris impacts. It is not rated for the Hedrolla Belt. It is not rated for sustained, repeated impacts of this size, at this frequency. Soon, we are going to start seeing serious structural failures - again, *failures*, not warnings, not advisories - *failures*, and possibly even a breach, which would be a very quick, very unpleasant end for both of us."

"And the oxygen - please consider the oxygen. We were already running a longer route than I'd planned for. My ship's reserves were calibrated for a specific journey, and this is no longer resembling that. Every minute we spend hurtling in the wrong direction, we are burning through our reserves. I don't recall the exact margins, and I won't attempt to calculate them while bound to a chair, but I can tell you with confidence that they are slimmer than I'd like."

"Listen to me. I don't mean to frighten you, but we are running out of time and air. I can get us out of this - I have navigated worse conditions than these in the past, and I believe I can safely steer us back. It will require some finesse with the port thruster, given that it is currently operating at reduced capacity - not pointing fingers - but that is something I can account for. We have a narrowing window here, is what I am saying. I need you to untie me *now*."

[**SFX**: *The BOUNTY HUNTER tests his restraints again*]

"Yes, yes, I understand your hesitation - believe me, I do. But I hasten to remind you that you are still in possession of my stun baton. And you have demonstrated quite recently that you are not afraid to use it. No, no, I am not litigating that right now. Keep it. Consider it insurance. Please, just untie me - I will not take us to a bounty outpost, I will not attempt to subdue you. You have my word. You have established that the conversation around your contract is more complicated than I initially understood. I am willing to revisit it with you, but I can't do that if we are both dead. Please, let me steer us out of the Hedrolla Belt before it is too late. *Please.*"

[**SFX**: *The ship's automated voice chimes in, "Structural compromise detected in cargo bay. Advising immediate course correction."*]

"(*to the ship, frustrated*) I am trying!"

[**SFX**: *LISTENER unties the restraints*]

"(*deep sigh of relief)* Thank you. Thank you - "

[**SFX**: *Footsteps as the BOUNTY HUNTER scrambles to the pilot's seat, the sound of him rapidly pressing buttons and working controls*]

"Hold onto something!"

[**SFX**: *Engines surging to higher power, loud mechanical groaning*]

"(*muttering*) The damned port thruster! Just give me twenty percent boost - or fifteen, ten.

Anything…!"

[**SFX**: *Several loud "clunks" from a volley of asteroid impacts*]

"Just a little more!"

[**SFX**: *Ship winding back down, the BOUNTY HUNTER slumping against the controls*]

"(*long, shaky breath*) …That was the worst of it."

"(*to the ship*) Status report."

[**SFX**: *Automated voice: "Hull integrity compromised in cargo bay. Rear stabilizer array: offline.
Port thruster: operating at ten percent capacity. Oxygen reserves sufficient for approximately
sixty-two standard hours at current consumption. Propulsion: stable."*]

"...Sixty-two hours."

"That is - that is not ideal, but it is workable. The nearest port is fifty-five hours at current speed,
which gives us a margin of - yes. That is fine. We should be fine."

[**SFX**: *Soft beeping as he inputs coordinates into the navigation system*]

"There. Course is laid in. The nav system will keep us on track. I will only need to check in periodically, but for the moment, we are safe. No immediate risk of a hull breach and only open space ahead"

[**SFX**: *Opening the dashboard compartment and retrieving a flask*]

"(*exhale*) Forgive me. I need to… decompress."

[**SFX**: *Unscrewing a cap*]

"(*long swig*) It is a spirit from my native system. As a general rule, I do not imbibe in the cockpit, but I've just navigated through the Hedrolla Belt while possibly concussed, so I'm willing to make an exception. Extenuating circumstances and all that."

[**SFX**: *Recapping the flask*]

"I would offer to pour you a drink, but - genuinely - I do not know what these spirits would do to a human liver, and I've had my fill of near-death experiences for the time being. When we dock at the next port, I will buy you the most expensive human cocktail on the menu. Hold me to it."

[**SFX**: *The soft click of the compartment closing*]

"But for now, we are adrift in open space for fifty-five hours with no immediate crises. A rare luxury, in your company. So, tell me about your bounty - tell me everything you can. I want to understand exactly what we are dealing with before we reach port."

[**SFX**: *The soft tap of a tablet screen as he pulls up a file*]

"Here, let me open your bounty profile on my holotablet. I will cross-reference your story with what is listed on your profile."

[**SFX**: *Scrolling through the file*]

"...Alright. According to this, you were a Multispecies Resources intern at Interstellar Innovations for eighteen months following graduation. Interstellar Innovations - where have I heard that name? Ah, yes - the corporation that supplies power to maintain artificial atmospheres. Essential infrastructure, yes? And it says here you were terminated following an internal audit that uncovered evidence of embezzlement and the sharing of proprietary data with a competitor. You are telling me that this is fabricated? Why? You were only a junior employee. Why did they stand to gain by targeting you specifically?"

[**SFX**: *LISTENER rummaging through pockets and producing a data chip*]

"What is this? What are you handing me? A data chip?"

"(*nervous laugh*) You will understand if I approach this with some caution, won't you? The past few hours have been very… eventful. You escaped a reinforced holding cell, stunned me with my own weapon, bound me to a chair, and steered my ship into the Hedrolla Belt. Now you are handing me an unmarked data chip and telling me to plug it into my system."

"...Yes, of course I am going to do it! But I am disconnecting the holotablet from the main terminal first. Now give it here… Thank you."

[**SFX**: *Plugging the chip in*]

[**SFX**: *Glitching sounds, fading in on several voices speaking calmly.*]

[EXEC ONE: "- the colonies on the outer belts are the single largest drain on the quarterly budget, without exception. For a population of twelve thousand, the returns for supplying their atmosphere's power is negligible - at best. Sometimes, we're forced to operate at a deficit."

[EXEC TWO: "What exactly are you proposing here?"

[EXEC ONE: "Reallocating our resources. We redirect power from the underperforming colonies to the high-density urban stations, where we can actually see returns from it. The official report will cite infrastructure degradation, which, frankly, will not be difficult to believe. Have you seen the state of those colonies?"]

[EXEC TWO: "What about the people who live there? (long pause, EXEC ONE does not answer) We're talking about twelve thousand people."

[EXEC ONE: "We have run these numbers hundreds of times. The cost of maintaining the atmospheres on these colonies versus the projected losses from - call it what you want - attrition - the math is very obvious."

[EXEC TWO: "What about when this comes out?"

[EXEC ONE: "It won't. As established, it will look like any other grid failure. A great tragedy. People will mourn for a week, and then - "

[SFX: Glitching, recording ends]

"...How did you get this?"

"I see…"

"What is the timestamp on this - four years ago. That is… around the same time your bounty profile was posted. Four years."

"There *was* a power grid failure - on one of the outer belt colonies just last year. The grid went down, and the media blamed the old infrastructure. Oh stars."

"Why have you not leaked this? You have had this recording for this long! Why are you still running instead of - "

"You… tried? …And the journalists. What happened to - "

"...Oh."

"Well, I should not be surprised. They have shown that they do not consider sapient life a serious obstacle to their bottom line."

"(*deep breath*) Here is what I am thinking - I have contacts with the bounty hunter's guild. If I flag your case for re-verification, that will buy some time. No new guild-affiliated hunters can pick up your contract until the investigation is concluded."

"As for the recording, I will not attempt to transfer it digitally. That creates a paper trail, and if Interstellar Innovations are willing to kill to keep this quiet, I am not naive about what attaching my name to this situation could mean."

"But that colony had twelve thousand people living in it."

"…"

"So, I will make a physical copy. Multiple, in fact. And once we dock, I will arrange for some meetings in-person."

"I need a few moments to run diagnostics, and then I will meet you in the break room. Fair warning, the rear stabilizer being offline may have knocked some cargo crates around, so mind your step. Something to take care of later. First, I intend to find the straw-berry setting on the food synthesizer if it is the last thing I do."