

Science Fiction Roleplaying Game

Book one
of three

TRAVELLER

The New Era

The Death of Wisdom™



Paul Brunette

INCOMING!!

Get him inside!

Drop Kick understood, throwing up the hatch and catching Bonzo's attention.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We're getting the hell out of here," Coeur answered, activating the sled's contra-grav and gunning its thrusters before Bonzo and Drop Kick had even closed their hatches. "Drop Kick, what's the secondary blast radius of a 500-kiloton warhead?"

"Five hundred kiloton—?" Bonzo blurted.

"I don't know—maybe two clicks in an air burst."

"That's about the biggest warhead I've ever seen on a space missile," Coeur said, turning them around and vaulting them off the plateau with wrenchingly sudden acceleration. "Bonzo, time to the edge of the island—due west, best speed."

"Uh—about two minutes," the sensor tech estimated. "Are we gonna be nuked?"

"Don't know," Coeur answered. "Drop Kick, can this thing swim?"

"It should, yeah. The power plant's self-contained."

"Good," Coeur said, focusing her gaze on the ocean 20 kilometers distant and reactivating the radio link to *Hornet*.

"*Hornet*, this is Red Sun. What's your status?"

"Bad news, skipper! Two got past!"

"Time to impact!" Coeur snapped. "Assume a ground burst!"

"25 seconds," Deep Six said, with unnatural calm.

"Understood," Coeur snapped. "Bonzo, time to the coast."

"Twenty seconds...deep water, though, if you steer right a bit."

"Roger, Bonzo. *Hornet*, we're going to be going off the air."

"Why is that?" Deep Six asked.

"Because we're hitting the water. Red Sun out."

"Understood, Red Sun. *Hornet*—"

Deep Six's sign-off was cut short, however, as the rocketing support sled hurtled over a sea cliff and into the sea with far more speed than was safe.

And the sky behind blazed suddenly like the heart of a sun.

SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS FOR,

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The New Era

Book



2
of three
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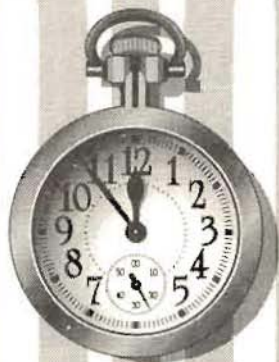
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Science Fiction Roleplaying Game

TRAVELLER
The New Era

The
Death of
Wisdom

**Book one
of three**



Paul Brunette

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The Death of Wisdom is an original publication of GDW Press. This novel has never before appeared in book form. Any similarity to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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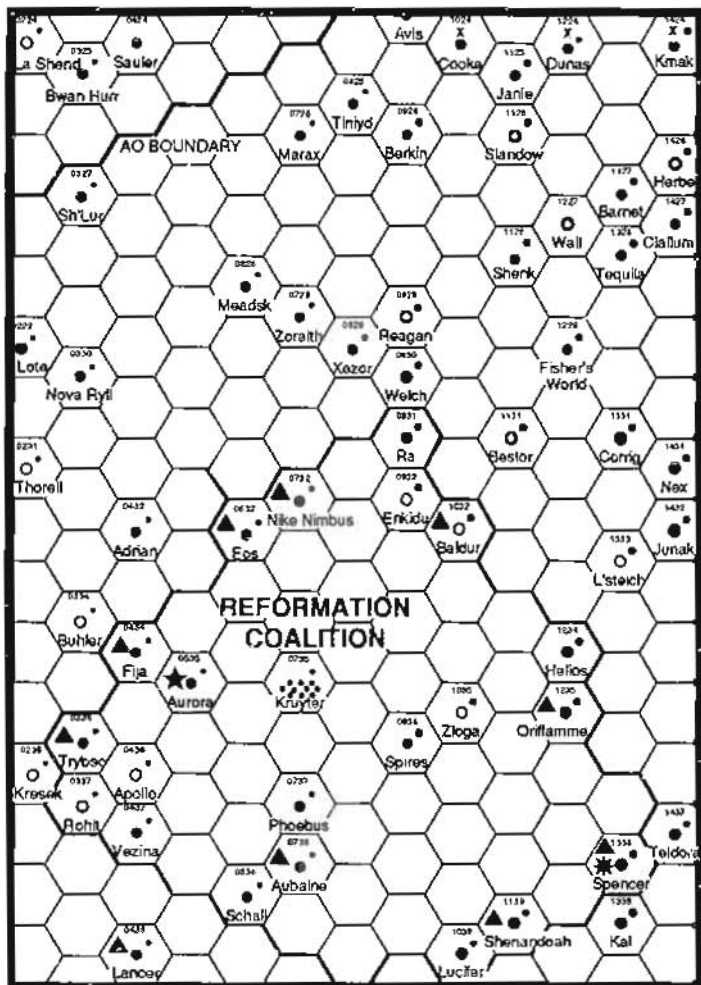
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Reformation Coalition and Environs

Map Legend	World Characteristics	Bases
	<p>○ No Water Present</p> <p>● Water Present</p> <p>■ Asteroid Belt</p>	<p>★ Naval Base</p> <p>▲ Scout Base</p> <p>✱ Hlver Support Base</p>

Prologue

Thanks to an ear infection, I wasn't flying high guard that day. Instead, I was posted to Alnitak's CIC, watching for trouble as the cruiser dove into the clouds of Carlyle VII and opened her intakes to refuel.

The inside of a gas giant is terrifying—there's no two ways around that—but I wasn't at the conn and I didn't let myself think about the crushing death below if our thrusters gave out. That was Captain Michelson's job, four decks above me on the bridge. Though he wasn't an academy graduate, he'd kept us alive behind the Solomani lines for a month, and that was all I needed to know about his competence.

Anyway, I had enough work to keep me busy. Alnitak's CIC was fairly large, with five sensor workstations—two against the starboard bulkhead, two against the port bulkhead, and a watch commander's station facing them from the forward bulkhead—but we were down to a skeleton crew, and I was obliged to man the watch alone, scrutinizing the methane/ammonia murk on passive EMS with an eye toward flagging possible hostile bogies. It was tedious, and a helluva lot harder than blasting away with active sensors, but this was war, and doing that would have been just plain stupid.

But I didn't flag any definites that watch, and that was

fine by me. Carlyle VII might have been packed with SDBs, but we weren't going out of our way to run into them. After six hours, our tanks were full and we were ready to scoot.

"CIC," Michelson sent, "fueling complete. Stand by for orbital watch."

"Aye, sir."

"How's the ear, D'Esprit?"

"Much better, sir."

"Glad to hear it. Hope we have you back on CAP soon."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Bridge out."

Minutes later, Alnitak cleared the dark lower atmosphere, and the importance of my station diminished accordingly. Before, I'd been a vital assistant to Sensor Chief Galukin on the bridge—looking out for hostiles on our flanks while he scanned ahead for navigation obstacles—but now we were moving into the open, and he wouldn't need as much assistance. Soon we would bring our high guard back aboard, dash to jump point and take refuge again in jump space—where sensors of any kind were useless.

The only problem was...our high guard wasn't there.

Over my headset I caught the first inkling that something was wrong—Comm section unable to raise the two scout/couriers we'd posted above. Neither Galukin nor I could verify their absence at first, since the planet's atmosphere might have been fouling our long-range EMS, but once we hit space it was clear they were not on station.

"CIC to Bridge. I've lost sensor contact with Blue Jay and Swift."

"Roger, CIC. Sweep forward quarter zones for debris."

"Roger. CIC out."

That was the last time I would ever speak to the captain—outside of a few choice nightmares. Even as I

reconfigured my holographic panel to concentrate on scans forward, the computer chimed a sudden proximity alert.

"Contacts astern," Galukin reported, "bearing 195, range 45 K."

Instantly, I spun my scan around to view the location. Whatever they were, they weren't scout ships.

"What the hell?" Michelson said. "Those are cruisers! Good Gaial Helm, steer—!"

Whatever came next I didn't hear. I only registered the double flare of spinal weapons firing, and silence as every display panel in the CIC went black. Then the world exploded around me.

* * *

When I joined the Scout Service I was 18, and the Third Imperium was 1113. The latter had just about three years to live.

But I didn't know that—hell, none of us knew that. All I knew as a little girl on Terra was I liked ships, and I'd get to fly them a lot faster in the Scouts than I would in the Navy. The Field Service didn't give a hoot for your social standing, and they didn't have any ranks either; all they cared about was that you did your job effectively. Within three years I was flying scout/couriers on routine missions, and I thought I was on top of the world.

Then came the Rebellion.

Why it happened, how it happened—hell, who knows? All I knew was that one day we heard the emperor was assassinated, and within weeks we were preparing for invasion by the Solomani. On Dingir, I was transferred to the survey cruiser Alnitak, and Alnitak in turn was attached to a Navy fleet moving out to meet the enemy.

Alnitak didn't have any business in battle, though. While the Navy planned to use her as a reconnaissance platform—a roving base for 10 scout/couriers—she was so pathetically slow and undergunned that she was withdrawn after her first mission. The hapless cruiser became a glorified freighter and we, her surviving flight crews, were reassigned to courier duty.

If I'd stayed at our fleet HQ I might have believed that things were going well, but couriers hear a lot more than they're supposed to. What it all boiled down to was that the Imperial nobility—our leaders—were carving up the Imperium amongst themselves, and consuming our naval reserves trying to destroy each other. Without those reserves, we had nothing to hold the Solomani back.

Eventually, after years of fighting, what was left of the fleet controlled no more than a tiny pocket around Muan Gwi. If it were up to me, I would have withdrawn into the Imperium, but it wasn't up to me. Instead, the admirals decided to stay, and buck up the morale of the fleet with a mission to summon reinforcements. It was all nonsense, of course—there were no reinforcements to summon—but I guess they thought it was the gesture that counted to the troops. Anyway, they couldn't risk a proper warship for the mission—one they'd actually need later—so they chose Alnitak instead. Her entire escort would be two scout/couriers: Blue Jay and Swift.

Since I knew what was going on at the front, I didn't volunteer for that mission—I was given orders and I went. Since Emperor Lucan's officers had a tendency to shoot dissenters rather than jail them, I didn't even consider refusing to go.

As it happened, that mission saved my life. But if you ask me what I think about those Imperial nobles—those para-

noid thugs who died along with everyone else when Virus wiped out everything—I'll tell you this: Those bastards got what was coming to them.

* * *

Explosions shattered Alnitak's hull, but none of us knew what had happened at first. Personnel on the lower decks—mostly engineers surrounded by flames from shattered fuel tanks—assumed that the ship was about to explode, but they were actually the lucky ones. Top decks 1 and 2—Bridge and Navigation—had been completely blown away.

I didn't know that though, at first. Just after my screens went blank, a whipping shock wave—propagated through the hull—snapped me from my seat. Flying through the air, I expected to hit the floor with brutal force, but instead of falling I bounced against the starboard display panels; gravity had failed. Then, as if this weren't bad enough, emergency power overloaded the circuits of the starboard workstations and they exploded, singeing the hair on my head and hands with gushing sparks and flames.

If I had to rely on my native skill with zero-G maneuvers I might have been burned much worse, but a sudden return of gravity snatched me away from the fire and wrenched me to the floor. Smacking the floor on my side, I was saved from cracked ribs by the rubberized floor but still had the wind knocked out of me; for a moment I thought I was dead, but then my diaphragm relaxed to let me draw a gasping breath and I knew I was pretty fortunate—I could just as easily have landed on my head.

The time it took for me to reach the fire extinguisher after that, at the port hatch aft, was probably seconds, but it felt like minutes as I raced against the likely recharging period of

a heavy spinal mount—minutes at most. Air, light, gravity, and the reactivating sensor stations forward and port told me some of our major systems must have survived—auxiliary power and at least one of our three flight computers—so I wasn't going to abandon my post just yet. Rather, I spared a few seconds to foam down the starboard panels (whose power had already been cut by circuit breakers), and a few more seconds to seal my duty vac suit with the soft bubble helmet and gloves in my pockets (as a precaution against smoke and future decompression), before sitting down at my forward station to evaluate the situation.

My first clue that things weren't so good came from the ship's intercom system—it didn't work. Instead, huffing and gasping damage control parties were squawking all over the frequencies of our helmet radios, reporting fires throughout the fuel storage areas and massive radiation casualties on the upper decks. What I didn't hear was even one familiar voice from the bridge.

Passive EMS—whose antenna was spread across a large area of our hull—gave me a view of the situation outside. The cruisers—clearly Solomani by configuration—were standing in closer now, plinking away at us with their secondary batteries. Lasers were systematically depressurizing our exterior compartments, and sawing chunks out of the EMS grid, whittling away my view of the outside world.

Not that it mattered whether we had sensors or not. The general damage report—available at any workstation in the ship for the benefit of roving damage control parties—told me that maneuver drive and communications were out and the bridge was gone. I stared at that report for longer than I should have in a crisis—trying to accept the implications of the report. Michelson, Galukin, Chief Engineer Pregl—all of our senior staff on decks 1 and 2—were probably dead.

Then a radio transmission snapped me out of my reverie. I didn't recognize the man's voice, but he had a composure that suggested comfort with command.

"CIC—this is Engineering. Do you copy?"

"Roger, Engineering. Go ahead."

"Thank God I remembered you were up there. Are your systems operational?"

"Roger. I've got sensor control here, but all communications are dead."

"CIC, listen. We're blind down here—we don't know what the hell's going out there—but we've got trouble. Our HEPlars are heavily damaged and I'd like to know how much time we've got to repair them."

What he meant, of course, was how much time we had before Carlyle VII dragged us back into its crushing depths. Since I was a pilot by profession, I didn't need a computer to know the answer was "not enough."

"Oh, Gaia, let me check...assuming you can get us 1G, maybe 10 minutes."

"Ten minutes? Good Lord, it'll take an hour just to dig through the wreckage."

"Sorry, those are the facts."

On the other end of the channel I heard an exasperated gasp, overlaid with the distant hiss of cutting torches. Ten minutes would, at any rate, be more than enough time for the Solomani to finish us off three times over.

If I were playing it by the book, this would have been the time to bail out in lifeboats. Through my sensors, though, I saw what the Solomani did to the only lifeboat that launched to that point; probably sending mayday signals continuously, it was caught in converging fire from the cruisers and disintegrated in a flaring fireball. Whatever value we had as prisoners was obviously outweighed by the

Solomani desire to see us dead.

"CIC, I advise we abandon ship."

"Negative, Engineering. They'd just pick us off as we launch."

"CIC, we do not have a choice. If we can't fix the HEPIaRs, we're dead anyway."

"Engineering, am I correct that the jump drive is still on line?"

"The jump drive? Are you out of your wiggin' mind? We must be way too close—"

"To the planet for a safe jump—yes, I know. Is it on line?"

"Power's nominal. Lord knows if we've got enough fuel to keep her cool, though."

"Engineering, prepare for jump. I can crank out a jump plot from my end, but you'll have to engage the drive manually when I download the data."

"Lady, this is insane. Are you even a navigator?"

"A scout/courier pilot," I answered, not daring to lift my eyes from my computer-aided number crunching, "will that do?"

"Hoo boy," the engineer said. "All right, we're standing by."

"Got it!" I said, flashing the jump plot to Engineering the instant the last numbers fell into place. Passive EMS, meanwhile, sounded an alarm I had programmed it to offer the moment the cruisers prepared to discharge their spinal batteries again.

The Solomani gunners did not have the satisfaction of a coup de grâce, however. On their screens we disappeared as if we'd never been, though considering our depth within the hazardous jump zone of Carlyle VII, I'm quite certain they were willing to declare us dead.

God knows I didn't expect us to live.

The point I had selected as our objective was Futok, because a jump plot for Futok had already been programmed by our late navigator. What I had done, basically, was rewrite the jump plot from one initiated at a safe range of 100 diameters from Carlyle VII to one initiated at less than 5. It was utter lunacy.

Yet the crew, 40-odd survivors from a complement of 100, were overjoyed to be alive, and their joy tended to concentrate on me. Since Darien Hayes—the young engineer whose composure had impressed me during the battle—was constantly occupied tending the jump drive, I took it upon myself to look after the damage control parties, repairing what could be repaired and cataloging our supplies in the event of a long misjump. Perhaps because I had already commanded starships (albeit starships 100 times smaller than Alnitak), the damage control teams were comfortable with that and started calling me Captain D'Esprit where before I'd just been Coeur. That was good, because the only senior officer alive was surgeon Danielle Chang, and she wouldn't have cut it in the disaster I was leading us into.

Almost all the fuel we had went to cooling the jump drive, but then the jump lasted more than the week it should have, and our fuel reserve went into maintaining a jump that we knew had gone wrong. As a practical expedient we shut down heat, gravity, and most of our lights to conserve power, but we didn't dare shut off the flow of liquid hydrogen to the jump drive. If we did, the odds were best we would land in open space, parsecs from the nearest system and unable to maneuver or even summon help.

So we kept the fuel poured on, until finally another week

later the jump drive signaled that we were ready for precipitation into normal space. Imprudently, perhaps, I let a gaggle of crew stand around me as I manned the makeshift emergency bridge—the CIC—and scanned the area around us after the jump was complete.

It was Nicosia Subsector, coordinate 0538.

Open space.

* * *

When meson fire destroyed decks 1 and 2, it took the officers' wardroom with it, the most natural location for sensitive discussions. In its stead we—Alnitak's "command crew"—took to using the engineer's mess, well abaft the CIC but close to Darien's work area. That was best, for our survival hung on his skill.

In that room, perhaps five meters by five by three, floated myself, Darien Hayes, and three other individuals—Dr. Chang, Gunnery Tech Ivan Sturm, and Flight Deck Chief Tanara Velsen—as senior a group as I could muster. Like the rest of the crew we were fully encased in our vac suits and breathing individual air supplies, but even so the biting chill of the ship compelled us to float with arms crossed close across our chests. A thin atmosphere of one-third standard pressure was still maintained throughout the inhabited decks—in case someone's life support malfunctioned—but one straining draft of that icy air discouraged a second; mostly, we took very good care of our personal life support.

"People," I said over my suit radio, its power tuned low to remain inside the room, "we're going to have to face facts. As of this date, it's 18 days since we came out of jump, and the number of consumable supplies is not going to last another month, even with quarter rations. Our only choice

is the low berths."

"Captain," Chang said, "I thought we'd gone over that. There are 40 of us, and only 17 functioning low berths."

"A fact," I answered, "that we've done a good job of keeping from the crew. But there's no choice anymore. Hayes?"

"The captain's right. We're just a half a light-year from Gresham, but the HEPlaRs and comms suite are completely fried, so we don't have any way to accelerate or call for help. How long will it take us to reach Gresham, skipper?"

"Sixty-five years."

"Right. So it's either some of us live, or all of us die together."

"Oh my God," Velsen said flatly.

"Wouldn't more time help?" Sturm asked. "Perhaps we could salvage more parts..."

The engineer, however, shook his head sadly.

"Negative. The doc and I have already ransacked primary life support for parts, and I'm not going to disassemble auxiliary life support, too. At any rate, there's no guarantee any of the berths will work—even the ones we fixed. It's just a better option than certain death."

"Amen," Velsen said. "But who decides...who will live?"

"I do," I said. "Though nobody's going in the berths until I explain my plan to the crew. The reason you're here is I want to run it by you before I run it by them."

"Jeez," Sturm said, "do you suppose they might riot? I mean, when they find out who won't live?"

"Would you?" Velsen asked him.

"Cool it," I said. "We don't have time for that crap. Here's the deal: All of the low berths look like they work, so there's no need for anyone to know who's got a good berth and who doesn't. I will instruct the computer to assign each one of us

to a berth at random, and we'll all go under together. Since only Hayes and the doc will know which ones work, there won't be any need for a riot—assuming they can keep from spilling the truth about which berths are which."

"Sensible," Hayes said. "I like it."

Velsen and Sturm likewise nodded, after a moment of reflection.

"Well, I don't like it," Chang said. "I didn't become a doctor to murder people."

"Fine," I said. "Then all of us die."

Four icy stares drilled into the surgeon, and after a few seconds she threw up her hands in resigned acceptance.

"I didn't say I wouldn't do it," she said. "I just said I didn't like it. If the crew is all right with it, I'll keep quiet."

Thanks, Doc, I thought.

"There is one more thing, Doc. You'll have to be there when the ship is salvaged, just in case the people who find us don't have a doctor to help wake up the survivors. I'm afraid you're the one person who'll have to be assigned a good berth."

From her expression, the doctor looked like she might have been ill, but there was only a single lightstick taped beside the side hatch for illumination and I couldn't tell for sure. She did sound deathly tired though, when she answered me.

"All right. I understand."

"Good. If there aren't questions then, return to your stations and let the crew know that I'll be making an announcement. All except you, Hayes. Stay behind for a minute."

Caught in mid spin with the others, heading for the manual bulkhead hatch, Hayes let himself spin all the way around and then halted his rotation by grasping a chair

bolted to the floor. Only when the others were through that hatch, and the hatch was spun shut, did I speak.

It wasn't over the radio, though. Instead, I pushed across the room until we floated centimeters away from each other, face-to-face, and then I grasped his arms to hold myself there. Discerning that I wanted to touch helmets with him (after sealing our uniforms full-time, we'd taken to wearing solid fishbowl helmets that leaked less air), he relaxed and let my helmet fall against his.

"Top-secret stuff, Coeur?"

"Top-secret stuff, Darien. First, how soon can you have the berths ready?"

"As soon as you want. Twelve hours would be nice, to check them over, since I wouldn't want any of the other engineers to know which ones worked."

"Make it 24 hours. Time isn't that critical yet."

"Anything else?"

Indeed there was something else, though I didn't want to say it right out. Darien and I hadn't even known each other until a month before, but we were certainly friends now. Whether it was one of those friendships born of stress, or mutual respect, I don't know, but it had made our work a lot easier. Now it could make it a whole helluva lot harder.

"What is it, Coeur?"

"Darien, look. I'm going to go up to CIC now and tell the computer to make up the random list. After it makes the list it'll dump it to the terminal in your station and erase any other copy. That way I won't see it."

Darien was silent.

"What I need you to promise me is that you won't alter the assignments, even if I draw a bad berth."

"Coeur...look..."

"Damn it, Darien, you've got to promise me that! It's

that, or we don't do this."

In the shadowy pale light of the lightstick, Darien's eyes were deep in shadow, aged beyond his 26 years and somehow unable to focus on mine.

"All right," he said finally, looking me in the eye. "I'll do what you say."

To which I nodded, and released him. It would be best, I figured, if we left it there, so I spun myself around and pushed off the closest wall toward the hatch.

* * *

As it happened, there was no protest from the crew, and they generally agreed with me that the sooner we did it the better. Some of them had begun proposing a system very much like mine anyway, amongst themselves, so there was very little selling to do. If anything, it made me uncomfortable when I was toasted again as the savior of the ship, just as I was when we slipped the Solomani noose at Carlyle VII.

The last thing a captain should ever care about, I knew, was being popular.

Still, I was popular, and I became even more so when I ordered the engineers to bring up full pressure in the atmosphere throughout the ship (previously it was only maintained in the galley, temporarily, when we ate) and unlocked the liquor locker for anyone who wasn't on duty. That, ordinarily, was something few captains would ever allow outside of jump space—where most hands had light duty—but hell, most of us were going to be dead soon. If that doesn't call for a drink, what does?

When, finally, the hour was at hand, Dr. Chang put on her best professional demeanor and led us, in orderly groups of six, into the low berth bay in the bowels of the ship.

Gleaming white—cleaner than I'd remembered it being before the doc and Darien cleaned it up—it looked first-rate even in the pale beams of our lightsticks, and we could almost believe that every inclined tank was fully functional. All the same, I avoided looking at Darien even after I was sealed in Unit 16, and my eyelids grew heavy from the sedative oozing into my arm from an IV drip.

What I did pay attention to was Gunnery Tech Sturm, who was part of my group of six, joking with a machinist's mate as the doc helped him into Unit 15.

"You know," he said, "if we were Imperial Marines, we'd probably think a 58% unit casualty rate was pretty good."

"Hey," the machinist's mate said, "don't let Lucan's INI hear you say things like that."

Whatever comment came after that escaped me. I closed my eyes and a general warmth suffused my body.

* * *

It was only by the jostling sound of commotion around me that I knew time had passed. I did not know, however, know how much time had passed until I realized that every single voice was unfamiliar.

"Blood pressure's good," I heard a man say. "I don't think we'll need a stimulant."

"Yes, she's coming around," another man said. "Suppose we should tell her about the note?"

"Give the lady a chance to wake up, Snowball. She might be disoriented."

Other voices, meanwhile, chattered in the background, full of a youthful exuberance that I didn't associate with a grizzled salvage crew.

"Check this log, Bugbear. 1123."

"Yeah, she's an old ship. Suppose they knew how trashed these low berths were?"

"Hey, keep it down you two, this one's coming around."

That was the man standing closest to me. This friendly looking fellow's nostrils were the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes, though his black ballistic cloth suit seemed to confirm my worst fears of what would happen.

That we'd be awakened by agents of Solomani Security.

Closer inspection, though, revealed that his uniform did not sport the cross-hairs symbol of the Solomani. Rather, he and his four mates in the low berth bay wore a figure on their chests that showed a fan-like nimbus of light extending from a rising sun.

"Good afternoon," he said, and I suddenly realized he was feeling for the pulse at my wrist. "My name is Victor. Are you Coeur D'Esprit?"

I nodded, and suddenly all the strangers were congregated around me—two women and three men. The oldest among them looked to be the one taking my pulse, though he didn't look much over 30.

"How long?" I croaked.

"75 years, captain—assuming you went under in 1123."

"Good Gaia...did...did anyone else make it?"

"Four," Victor said. "Bulgakov, Rand, Po, and Van Dorn. We woke you up first, though, since the log identified you as the skipper."

I closed my eyes. None of the command crew had made it, or the doctor.

Or Darien.

And then I remembered something strange that I'd seen, but somehow hadn't noticed. Each low berth had its number clearly marked on its lid, but Unit 16 was well off to my right—the unit I'd been assigned to.

Someone had moved me after the IV sedative took effect. "Who was down there?" I asked, "in Unit 16?"

Sheepish looks were my immediate answer, though Victor wasn't shy about answering.

"It looks like that was Darien Hayes," he said. "Anyway, he left this note in his unit."

The note, printed on heavy plastic paper, was short and to the point.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: PLEASE NOTE
THAT LOG DATA FOR UNITS 16 AND 23 ARE
REVERSED.

FOR COEUR: SORRY. THOUGHT THE FUTURE
COULD USE YOU MORE THAN ME.

"Your friend must've had a lot of faith in the future," Victor said, moving in to brace me as I sat upright in my berth.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

Though, strangely, I wasn't sad.

Seventy-five years before, I laid down in a coffin, and I would have died.

But I didn't. I didn't, because someone who'd been my friend for a month had taken that coffin and let me live. Whether he was smart, or brave, or dumb—well, I don't know. But he did it, and now I was here.

To serve a future I never thought would come.

"Say," I said, putting down the note. "Who are you people anyway?"

"We're from the Dawn League, Captain," Victor said. "A small coalition of worlds in the Aubaine Subsector—or, I guess you'd know it as Nicosia Subsector."

"What about the Imperium?" I asked stupidly, as if that

thing that had always been in my life must still be around as well.

"There is no Imperium, Captain. That's been dead almost as long as you've been asleep."

"So what took its place?"

Bemused smiles answered that question.

"Nothing took its place, Coeur. As near as we can tell, every direction we've looked—we're surrounded by dead worlds and wasteland. Still, some of us think we might be able to put it all back together again—the right way—which is why we're out here. Your ship is full of gear that we don't have a lot of back home, though the main resource we could use didn't survive your trip too well."

"What's that?"

"Your crew. I know you might have some strong opinions about—whatever faction you were with—but there isn't any Rebellion anymore. If you can adjust to a loose federal government instead, we could sure use your help."

I had to laugh, despite the death all around me.

"Mister, I could tell you what I think about the Third Imperium, but you wouldn't think I was a lady after that."

Which prompted a smile from Victor, and an extended hand which I shook.

"Welcome to the future, Coeur. Somehow, I think you'll fit in."

Chapter One

In classroom 11A of the Hiver Technical Academy, a murmuring buzz of conversation rose from its 24 students, though none could hear it. Bunched in groups of four around their tabletop tactical simulators, each young man and woman was attuned to the traffic in his or her own headset, and therefore oblivious to both the cawing of seabirds above and the serious cast of their instructor's face at her desk beside the forward lectern.

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In a gray dress tunic, with her brown hair worn short and her eyebrows drawn down above her dark brown eyes, Coeur D'Esprit was already severe in appearance, though her frown of the moment was not directed at her students. Rather, it arose as she studied the commencement address of Commandant Galway on her computer's transparent viewscreen (angled up, like a HUD, so she could keep an eye on the class), less because of any defect in the writing than because she could have told the truth

and said she was too busy to read it.

Like buttering up the commandant's going to get me space duty again. Oh well...

"Exploratory Service graduates of this Class of 1201, we are entered this day into the dawn of a New Era. You are the first class to graduate this institution as members of the Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, and you will build that future where today there is ruin and desolation..."

Good Gaia, Coeur thought, you sound like you're running for office.

"...Yet in this hour of celebration, we should not forget those who went before us. Some will say that the Dawn League was an error, and that only force will bring order to the frontier. We have not reorganized, however, to conquer the universe, for we have neither the numbers nor forces to do so..."

No, no, no, Couer remarked to herself, tagging that entire paragraph for revision. Whatever you do, don't highlight our weaknesses in a public address.

"...Rather, consider yourselves a positive force for change. Where friends will listen, you shall aid them; where worlds will open trade, you shall open embassies. But where thugs and brutal dictators hold sway with terror and relic weapons, you will not have patience. Our allegiance is not to ourselves alone, but to all who will live in that world that will rise from the ruins..."

Yeah, that's better, Coeur thought, though the fidget-

ing of her students distracted her before she could finish the text. By the clock on her table she knew that the students would just be reaching the nastiest part of their final exam, and she switched her computer screen to a simultaneous view of all six tabletop simulators.

Exercise 61C began simply enough, but the students correctly expected trouble on the last of the hour's three exercises. Manning the conn, fire control, helm, and engineering of a *Victrix*-class sloop, each group was first faced with the challenge of gas giant refueling, and then the nasty surprise of two vampire destroyers waiting in ambush as they powered out toward jump point.

Hiding in the cloud-tops of the simulated gas giants, the destroyers got off simultaneous fire from their meson guns either before they were detected or before the students could do anything about it. Though the groups didn't know it at the time, the damage to each sloop was identical—loss of maneuver power, fire control, and communications.

The preferred course for most groups—three out of six—was to abandon ship in lifeboats, though the vampire ships frustrated this by firing on the lifeboats as well. At least one student commander, with the appropriate callsign Blowtorch, stood his ground though he couldn't aim his weapons properly, and the unpredictable Oriflammen Snapshot blew her ship up rather than let it be captured. Among all the commanders, only Gyro survived, despite the hesitation of a crew that made it clear that a hazardous misjump was not a popular choice.

Afterward, there was much grumbling, though it died away as Coeur assumed the lectern. At 1.75 meters, Coeur was tall for a woman, and actively used her fully erect height to command attention in the classroom.

"Well, all right," she said, "I'll admit I pressed you a little hard on that one. However, you'll be glad to know that that was an actual historical situation. You'll also be glad to know that all of you passed this examination, based on your reaction times and decisions as assessed by the computer."

Bodily sighs answered her.

"Questions?"

One individual raised her hand: Snapshot.

Snapshot was not the only non-Aubani in the class—there was a sprinkling of Fijans, Nimbans, and Schalli as well—but her brash Oriflammen character had certainly singled her out during the year. An exceptional student on Oriflamme, she was transferred to higher-tech Aubaine to complete her year of post-graduate studies, though Coeur had scarcely believed she'd graduate with all her demerits for insubordination.

"Snapshot?"

The young woman ran a hand through her short, wavy red hair, then stood stiffly.

"Red Sun, I am curious. I am not familiar with such an engagement as 61C from my reading."

"It's not a literal adaptation, Snapshot. The incident occurred before the Collapse."

"If I may, sir, what was the resolution of the incident?"

"The ship got away, obviously, or I wouldn't have been able to reconstruct the scenario."

"With her jump drive, sir?"

"Yes, with her jump drive."

"I find that hard to believe, Red Sun. The sloop was less than five diameters from the gas giant."

Coeur smiled.

"Ordinarily, I'd be inclined to agree with you, Snap-

shot. Only, that was my ship that was fired upon, and I gave the order to engage the jump drive."

Students who had focused on Snapshot, pondering what crazy thing she'd done with the simulator, suddenly snapped their attention toward Coeur. Snapshot, meanwhile, sat down, still staring at Coeur.

"That it really happened is important," Coeur said to the class, "because there are lot of things out there—vampires, pirates, defense fleets—that aren't going to think twice about bushwhacking you the first chance they get. Now I'm not saying you should flip on your jump drive every time you get in trouble in a gravity well—nine times out of 10 that'll get you dead or thrown so far off course you won't be able to reach fuel—but what I am saying is you better stay sharp and have your options ready before you get in trouble..."

It was then, as Coeur paused, that she saw the double sliding doors at the rear of the classroom open. A Hiver—all but its prime limb hidden behind the seated students—softly padded in and took up a position toward the rear of the class, quietly regarding her with its six eyestalks. Just from its prime limb she couldn't tell who it was, but it wasn't like any of the pacifistic Hivers to spend much time around her tactics class, and her curiosity was piqued; crisply, she abbreviated her farewell-and-good-luck speech.

"...which is the whole point of this class. But you're a smart bunch of kids and I think you'll do all right. If there are no other questions, I'll just remind you that your quarter grade reports will be posted on the internet by this evening, and I hope you do well...out there. Dismissed."

Though this was hardly a civilian college, the Explor-

atory Service college of the Technical Academy wasn't a Marine boot camp either, and most of the students inevitably wandered forward to ask about the ambush Coeur had alluded to earlier. This she had hoped to avoid—since a lot of good friends had died back then for no good reason—but she did not have the excuse of another class to prepare for after this last one of the day, and besides, it was not her policy to avoid being honest about her past or the validity of her lessons. Since the Hiver appeared to be in no hurry to step forward, Coeur entertained her students' questions for the better part of 20 minutes before they finally left—clued in to her impatience by her data-disk straightening and document shuffling.

Even after they had left, though, and the Hiver approached her desk, she was unable to place him among those she knew. Not unlike starfish in their six-limbed radial symmetry, Hivers were among the most alien of xenomorphs in human experience. Mute, for instance, and devoid of emotion as humans understood it, but they were just as individual as humans and could be distinguished by personality and appearance. Looking for such a quality in this individual, Coeur noted the random pattern of spots on its rubbery skin—evidence that it was probably over 40, middle age for humans and Hivers both.

"Can I help you?" Coeur asked, rising up and moving around her desk to greet her guest.

With the fingers of its tail limb, the Hiver typed text into the the voice synthesizer slung under its chest.

"Indeed. Are you the individual 'Red Sun'?"

"Yes, that's my callsign."

"Derived from a class M primary you once visited?"

"Actually, no. They called me that after the insignia on my Scout uniform."

"Logical. I have read your complete dossier, but matters of human idiom tend to escape me."

"If you don't mind me asking, who are you?" *And why have you been reading my complete dossier?*

"Pardon me. My name is Cicero, and I am attached to the Technical Academy School of Space Engineering. I have come to make you a proposal." *Like command of a ship, maybe? Yeah, I should be so lucky.*

"Like what?"

"We of the Federation appreciate that the education of others is a social function of the highest importance. However, if it is not too much of an imposition, my associates would be pleased if you would consider a temporary sabbatical to command a starship for us."

"Excuse me?"

"A starship, Red Sun. Reformation Coalition Ship *Hornet*."

The sudden flush of excitement in Coeur's face faded as she recognized the name.

"Wait a minute. Do you mean that old freighter they're slapping together as a shop project?"

"Indeed. However, it has never been our intention that *Hornet* remain exclusively a shop project; rather, it has always been our intention to turn the vessel over to the Exploratory Service as soon as her reconstruction was complete. That reconstruction lacks only one step: a voyage to prove her spaceworthiness."

Despite her misgivings, a smile returned to Coeur's face. *Hornet* might have been an 80-year-old clunker, but if anyone could raise a ship from the dead, it was the Technical Nest and its human students.

"Of course," Cicero said, "we are prepared to look elsewhere for a pilot and captain, if you would not be comfortable abandoning your present employment."

"I think I could cope," Coeur said with a wry grin. "Now why don't we take this discussion down to my office."

* * *

When the exploration cruiser *Ashtabula* brought Coeur D'Esprit home to Aubaine in late 1198, the Dawn League was only a year old, and enthusiasm for the new frontier was running at its highest pitch. People actually believed that they could resurrect the worlds of the Wilds with trade and diplomacy alone, and so many qualified spacers applied to join the upcoming expeditions that captains were forced to draw their crews by lot. Even Couer, who admired the courage and democratic leanings of the Dawn League, was unable to swing a mission post through all of 1199.

But all those good feelings ended when the first expedition of 12 lightly armed exploration vessels was swallowed up by the uncharted frontier. Buoyant optimism faded, and throngs of naive volunteers were replaced by a gritty corps of well-armed and specially trained personnel who dedicated themselves to finding the missing crews and bringing them back alive—a corps that included Coeur, as pilot of the corvette *Lirgishkhunan*.

That mission, to a large degree, prompted the end of the Dawn League. Though most of the missing ships were not recovered, the better preparation of the second expedition allowed all but one ship to return home with valuable intelligence about the near frontier. Not long

after, the Dawn League restructured itself as the Reformation Coalition—an organization better suited for the use of force when necessary. New warships were built, old ones refitted, and crews in great numbers were recruited to man them; all that were critically short in supply were veteran spacehands to train new personnel. In this context it was clear where a veteran like Coeur could serve the RC best—not as a pilot, but as a teacher.

“All the same,” Coeur said, walking beside Cicero toward her office, “I’d like to fly again. Teaching is important, but I’ve got to admit that it’s not what I do best.”

“Indeed,” the Hiver said, easily matching her walking pace on the four limbs it chose to walk on at the moment. “Commandant Galway expressed a similar opinion when he gave me permission to speak with you.”

“What,” Coeur said, stopping to open the sliding door of her office, “that I’ve applied for flight duty, or that I’m a lousy teacher?”

“The former. He expressed no dissatisfaction with your performance as a teacher.”

“Well, that’s good,” Coeur said, entering the office first and pushing back the human chairs inside to make room for the Hiver. Though Coeur merited her own office, it was not unlike a large closet, lacking even a window to suggest greater volume. That it was not crushingly claustrophobic was largely due to two facts—Coeur kept a relatively small library of hard media, and decorated the walls with paintings of watery Aubaine from orbit, suggesting the freedom of flight.

“Are these paintings original?” Cicero asked, examining the brush strokes of one at close range.

“Yes, those are mine. It’s a hobby I picked up from my

father."

"Was he an artist?"

"Actually, no. Since I could fly our speeder a lot better than he could, he used to kid me that women weren't equipped to handle space and depth perception as well as men. That's why I took up painting—to show him he was incorrect."

While Coeur couldn't read Cicero's "facial" expression, its lack of comment probably meant befuddlement. Hivers devoted lavish attention to the education of their young, but that attention was provided communally by all the members of a nest to all its young. The Hivers—who attached no emotional significance at all to their asexual method of reproduction—did not recognize their parents or offspring, and so could not help but be mystified by the parent-child bonding of other species. Rather than wade deeper into that complicated subject, Coeur dropped further mention of her parents.

Who've been dead, anyway, for decades.

"I'm afraid that I don't have a Hiver chair," Coeur said, rummaging in her single storage locker. "Would you like me to go and look for one?"

"My physical comfort is not an immediate consideration. Please sit, so that we may continue our discussion."

Obligingly, Coeur sat down in the chair at her desk and spun around to face the Hiver.

"All right," she said. "What is your mission profile exactly?"

"Since *Hornet* has not been in space for some time, we have selected a relatively simple objective. The ship will transport 30 tons of cargo and an armored fighting vehicle to Ra, where the Federation maintains a colony of Hiver agronomists."

"Wait a minute: an AFV?"

"The AFV is not for the Hiver colony, Red Sun. Rather, it is a command vehicle that has been detached from the Reformation Coalition Marine Corps to engage in tactical exercises with the indigenous human population."

"Ah. So it has its own crew?"

"Yes, there are four Marines who will accompany the vehicle. We of the Technical Nest and those of Seabridge Nest on Ra are not on a tight schedule, but the RCMC has expressed a desire to launch within the month."

"Yes, well, they wouldn't be Marines if they weren't punctual. Do you have the rest of the crew complement filled out? Students, I imagine?"

"In point of fact, no. Due to the sensitive nature of this expedition, we felt that the captain we select should make that determination. Only I, as the technical advisor and representative of the nest, will be a required crewmember."

"What do you mean by sensitive? I thought it was a cargo run."

Cicero paused, wagging the fingers and eyestalks of its prime limb as if considering how to couch its reply.

"The mission does have a sensitive component. *Hornet* is equipped with sophisticated electronics—beyond the native capacity of the RC to manufacture—partly to train our future engineers on such systems, and partly to enhance her survivability should she ever venture into the Wilds. Such equipment is expensive, however, and would be difficult to replace if lost, so we require a captain with experience and superior piloting ability, whom we can trust implicitly."

"I see. Is she armed?"

"Affirmative. With a laser and a missile launcher."

Coeur nodded. *Hell, that's the best insurance policy I know of.*

"Eventually, if this design is successful, we would like to attempt similar conversions of other vessels, with weaponry and electronics tailored for the needs of merchants in the frontier. That opportunity will arise only if this mission is successful."

"You said that *Hornet* was privately owned right now, by your nest. Would the crew be required to act as private citizens?"

"Negative. Should you accept our proposal, you will remain an agent of the Exploratory Service, as will your crew."

"Would the ship be considered a Coalition vessel, then?"

"For practical purposes, yes. *Hornet* is already registered as an Exploratory Service auxiliary, and by Coalition law she is obliged to enforce the laws and mandates of the Coalition wherever necessary."

"It sounds good," Coeur said, "although I'd like to see her before I sign on. Is she berthed across the bay?"

"Affirmative. The vessel is docked in a berth at the starport. If you are prepared, my speeder is standing by."

"Kinda figured I'd say yes, huh?"

• • •

To Coeur's eye, Cicero's speeder looked like a steel teardrop, parked on the wind-whipped edge of Brierly Field. This little academy field had room for starships if necessary, but it largely served as a jumping-off point for the main starport on the far eastern side of Brusman Atoll, and as such was continuously busy with the traffic of air

rafts and ship's boats.

"You will note the human passenger seat," Cicero said, after letting them into the grav vehicle with a laser key. "We have found that humans are uncomfortable with our original seating arrangement."

Coeur saw at once how that would be the case. The two Hiver "chairs" were mushroom-shaped stools behind the holographic control consoles, upon which a pilot or copilot could spin in any direction, using any of its six arms/legs to manipulate controls or handle equipment. A human at one of these stations would be obliged either to hunch over painfully below the low ceiling, or lie on her stomach on the stool, which wasn't very comfortable either.

"Very thoughtful," Coeur said, taking one of the two human seats in the rear and strapping herself in.

The Hivers, of course, provided straps for their own seats as well, evidence of their legendary safety-consciousness. More than likely, they realized that seat restraints would not protect anyone in a 600 kph collision, and just left them installed to make themselves and their guests feel safer.

A moment later, the speeder slipped free of the concrete apron on silent contra-grav lift, then swung around under impetus from its whining plasma thrusters and nosed into the flight plan assigned by the Brusman air traffic network. Coeur winced at the afternoon glare from Halos as they turned, but that passed away and left her with a fine—if brief—view of the island harbor as they roared across it.

Aubaine, first of the worlds contacted by the Hiver Federation in 1193, was 98.2% covered with water, and therefore a change from the Arizona desert where Coeur

had grown up. Indeed, whipping sea-spray routinely lashed Coeur's seaside apartment during the winter months, and she realized early on that if she was going to live here she was going to get wet.

Still, it was her favorite home of all the places she'd lived. It was a true democracy, for one thing (as evidence, the native aquatic Schalli race held three-quarters of its seats in the Assembly of Worlds), and all around was the drive and energy of a fledgling interstellar government where everything was new. Though Brusman wasn't the capital (Trantown Archipelago was the seat of government), its thrice-weekly Auction drew visitors from all across the subsector to bid on recovered relic hardware, making it a crossroads for all of the Coalition.

This day, in fact, was an Auction day, so vehicular traffic was at its peak. In the pale green water of the harbor, surface-effect craft congregated with hydrofoils, while in the sky above, an armada of aerial craft swarmed about the starport—ship's boats, air rafts, dirigibles—vying for airspace with sea birds on patrol for visitors' crumbs. It was an atmosphere both kinetic and compelling around those parti-colored tents on the waterfront, and Coeur might have considered stopping by later—if her thoughts were not directed elsewhere.

Elsewhere to Coalition Berth 57, well apart from the festive commercial section of the port. Standard practice being to extend an all-weather shroud over ships under repair (you could never be too conservative about corrosion, even in the balmy summer), Coeur did not see *Hornet* until after they set down and walked into her bay.

Well, Coeur thought, with an appreciative smile. Now that's a ship.

A ship of 200 displacement tons, *Hornet* was no one's

idea of a huge vessel, but she was a rakish beauty all the same, a cleanly streamlined freighter with a pickle fork bow and a sleek aft-mounted airfoil for atmospheric control. Power, electronic, and waste umbilicals dangled from her flanks and keel—under which three human students were still tinkering—but she had a look of speed even standing still.

"Red Sun," Cicero said, pausing near the loosely assembled students, "these individuals are Lugnut, Spanner, and Crowbar, the graduating Exploratory Service engineers working on this project."

"Pleased to meet you," Coeur said.

"Red Sun," Cicero then explained to the trio, "is our prospective captain, but she would like at least a cursory tour of the vessel before she decides whether to accept the position. Would you be interested in giving her that tour?"

Electric prods couldn't have moved them any faster. No sooner had the phrase "prospective captain" left Cicero's voder than the students were straightening their grimy coveralls and waiting for Cicero to complete its announcement so they could advance with parade-march rigidity.

Physically they could not have been less similar—Crowbar a gangly man with a beard, Spanner a shorter woman with lively eyes, and Lugnut the shortest of the three, a stocky man who appeared to press the service limit of weight-for-height—but all three came up in a tidy line and executed very crisp salutes.

"Sir," Lugnut announced to Coeur, "we would be honored."

Saluting back, Coeur suppressed too obvious a smile. Clearly, it had gotten around that the mission engineer

would be selected by *Hornet's* captain.

"I will be momentarily detained by another errand," Cicero then said to Coeur, "though I will return before your tour is complete. Students, carry on."

"Red Sun," Crowbar said, sweeping his hand in the direction of the cargo ramp as Cicero padded off toward the berth office, "after you."

But before Coeur could even step onto the ramp, Lugnut and Spanner were racing ahead, removing tools and bundles of fiber-optic cables that Coeur could easily have stepped over or around. Only Crowbar, whose demeanor was more reserved than the others, restrained himself from a frenzy of path-clearing.

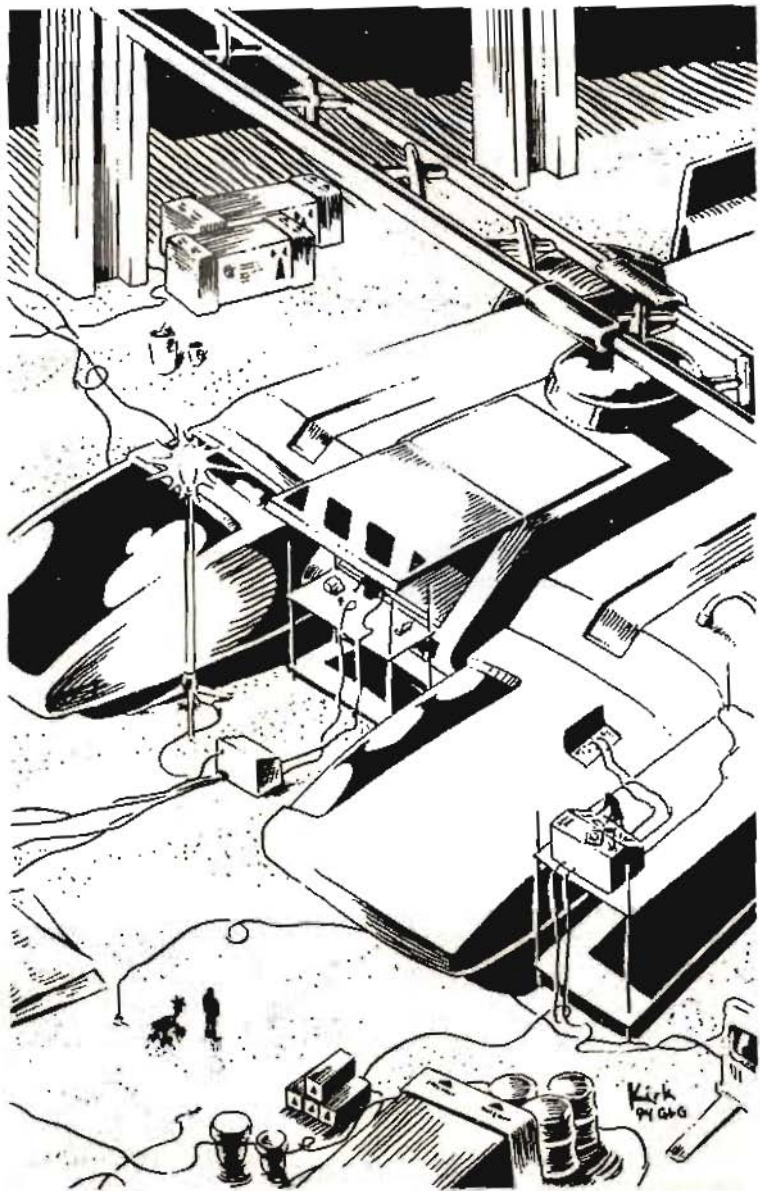
As best as she could, Coeur kept her expression neutral, though she inwardly approved of Crowbar's restraint. A scattering of tools was the evidence of engineers at work, which boosted her confidence far more than a tidy work area.

I wonder if any of them have ever been out there in the Wilds. If they were, they sure as hell wouldn't be trying this hard to get back there again.

* * *

Although Coeur had never served aboard a far trader, the design was quite common and familiar to anyone who had ever spent any time around a starport. Particularly in the two Coalition subsectors—where worlds were infrequently clustered in the tidy bunches navigable by jump-1 traders—the long legs of the jump-2 trader were a necessity for interstellar commerce, and many dozens were either in service or in the process of being refitted.

What a TL-12 far trader did not have was survivability.



Though she was spry in an atmosphere, 1G of thrust would not outrun many adversaries in space—even assuming those adversaries could be detected with the standard short-range sensors of the design. Further, 72 mm armor wouldn't protect against most hand-held plasma weapons, let alone ship-borne artillery, so it wasn't a vast surprise that the six far traders in the Expedition of 1199 never returned. What was surprising to Coeur was that the Coalition was envisioning a return to the frontier in these fine—but flimsy—vessels.

"Actually, survivability was our main consideration," Spanner said, as she, her fellow students, and Coeur strode into the vast and empty central cargo hold.

"Right," Lugnut jumped in, "all of the sensors are very long range and we've installed a master fire director to enhance the accuracy of the laser and missiles."

"Lugnut," Spanner corrected him, "the MFD doesn't enhance the accuracy of the missiles; it increases the number of missiles that a gunner can control."

"Well, whatever."

"An engineer should be precise in his descriptions," Spanner said. "Don't you agree, Red Sun?"

"Oh yes," Coeur nodded. "I'm curious about something else, though. Unless you've sacrificed a lot of room for a jump-3 drive, *Hornet* doesn't have the legs to shoot the Kruyter-Nike Nimbus gap, does she?"

"Actually," Lugnut said, "she does, sort of. What we did was install a collapsible fuel bladder behind the aft bulkhead there, big enough to allow a single-parsec jump."

"What's more," Spanner interjected, "the bulkhead retracts after the fuel is expended to increase the capacity of the hold."

"Hm," Coeur said, "that is clever. Did one of you think of that?"

Neither Lugnut nor Spanner answered.

"That was my idea, sir," Crowbar volunteered.

"I like it," Coeur replied. "Now what about these circles in the floor? Are those payload pallet adapters?"

"Affirmative," Crowbar said. "For a 20-ton module. Lugnut's work, mostly."

"Really. I've heard those are hard to come by these days."

Abruptly, the blooming smile on Lugnut's face faded away.

"At the time," the squat engineer said, "we were assured by the Supply Division that a supply of those modules would be available. They sort of... disappeared...after we'd completed the actual installation of the receiver sockets."

"But we do have several modules available," Spanner interjected, in Lugnut's defense. "When we saw that they weren't available, we went ahead and built our own."

Impressed, Coeur nodded. Initiative was always good to see.

"Well, whose idea was *that*?" she asked.

Whereupon both Lugnut and Spanner again fell silent.

"I proposed the concept, sir," Crowbar said after a moment.

After which, awkward silence fell again upon the cargo hold.

"Engineering is this way, isn't it?" Coeur finally said, pointing aft.

"Yes, sir," Crowbar said, "this way."

A complete tour of *Hornet* was simplified by her simple plan—basically a three-part hull with crew accommodations forward, fuel and cargo amidships, and drives clustered aft—and an hour with her student guides sufficed to show Coeur her interior arrangement. More than that, though, Coeur valued the chance to see how well the old ship was put together—with careful welding, for instance, and meticulous wiring—which was the one thing she needed to see before she could accept the command.

On a less objective level, though, Coeur had already fallen in love with the ship. Unlike the warships she'd served on before, *Hornet* was oriented toward commerce and the comfort of passengers, so she was both beautiful outside and comfortable inside—the latter an important factor during a long voyage. Even the two drive decks, where paying passengers were never intended to go, were spacious, with plenty of room for access to the engines.

Where paying passengers were expected to pass their time was an area called the loft, an upper-deck compartment with 10 staterooms and so much open space—even with its air raft berth—that almost anyone could spend a week in jump there without feeling claustrophobic. Below, in the twin arms of the split bow, was the crew section proper: three staterooms in the port arm and another stateroom, galley, and the bridge to starboard.

It was on the bridge that Cicero rejoined the party.

"Greetings, Red Sun. Has the tour been instructive?"

By the looks of Spanner and Lugnut, whose effusiveness had toned down after they'd left the cargo hold, one might have expected otherwise, but Coeur wore a positive expression.

"I'd say so. She's a fine ship."

"Are there any deficits that concern you?"

"Well...not really. I did notice that there aren't any lifeboats, but Crowbar advised me that the weapons were installed where those used to be."

"Yes," Cicero said, "I am concerned about that myself, but the Admiralty insisted upon the heaviest possible armament."

"Hey, don't get me wrong," Coeur interjected. "I'd rather have a pair of good weapons any day, than a pair of lifeboats to get off the wreck. Besides, the air raft would do in a pinch."

"I am gratified," Cicero said. "Students, you are dismissed."

Salutes, less crisp from Spanner and Lugnut than they had been before, were offered, and the engineers withdrew through the sliding hatch aft. As Cicero looked on, Coeur then sat herself in one of the pilot's couches, where she admired the tech level 14 holographic controls—a step up from *Lirgishkhunan's* flatscreen panels—and the flawless forward view through a single wraparound viewscreen.

"Yes sir, she's a fine ship all right."

"You will consider the offer further, then?"

"If you've got other candidates," Coeur said, coming back around in her seat, "the answer's yes, although I'd like to study the ship specs and mission profile before I sign anything. Plus there's the commandant to inform. He might not be too happy about finding a new instructor for the next term."

"Given the importance of this mission, I foresee his acceptance."

"True. Besides, who else is he going to get to proofread

his speech?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, nothing."

"If that is all then, I shall bid you leave, and await your final decision. A complete dossier on this mission, as well as personnel files of potential crewmembers, has already been transmitted to your home for you to examine at your leisure."

"I'll get right on it. Can I reach you at the Nest?"

"I shall be residing aboard *Hornet* until she launches," Cicero said. "You may contact me at this berth."

"Even better. Tell you what—let me sleep on it and I'll flag you in the morning."

"Indeed."

Coeur then rose from her seat, but paused midway to the aft hatch.

"Cicero, another question. That engineer Crowbar—he's older than the other ones, isn't he?"

"Affirmative. Crowbar served a term of four years as a Lancer before coming to the academy."

"I thought so. You need him?"

"For another project, do you mean? No."

"Then I want him."

"Indeed. He is yours."

* * *

Well, I'll be damned. That was a manipulation.

Only after Coeur had caught a grav bus and started on her way home did it occur to her that Cicero—in a typically Hiver way—had steered her toward choosing Crowbar. That in and of itself wasn't shocking—Crowbar was the man she would have picked anyway—but it was

the first time she'd seen a manipulation so clearly directed toward herself.

I suppose he could've just suggested Crowbar as the engineer, but he arranged circumstances so that I'd choose his choice without doing it consciously. I wonder why?

But Coeur knew better than to think about it too hard. Hivers manipulated events constantly (indeed, some suspected that the RC itself was a manipulation of humankind toward an unknown end), but Hivers had no emotion, and nefarious overtones could not be ascribed to that behavior. As a matter of course, Hivers practiced improving their skill at manipulation all the time, and—since humans were easier to manipulate than other Hivers—who better to practice on than humans?

Besides, Coeur thought, rising to stand as the bus grounded at her curb, if it were a really important manipulation, it would've been so subtle I probably wouldn't have recognized it at all.

And so, relieved, Coeur disembarked into the moon-lit dusk, looking forward to a quiet evening alone with her E-mail, since her roommate was off on a date that evening.

For most of her time on Aubaine, Coeur had lived alone in her seaward-facing apartment, but recently she'd taken in a roommate, reasoning that if she was going to be stuck on Aubaine she might as well satisfy her lust for speed and save up her money to buy a grav bike. That individual, now with her three months, was the good-natured but troubled Dr. Orit Takagawa (RCES callsign Physic).

A year younger than Coeur, Physic was clearly sharp, trained both as a surgeon and alien disease pathologist, but she was not as happy as she might have been.

Diverted from field service, Physic was assigned as a researcher at the Brusman Medlab complex, a position of importance but relative tedium. Added to the stress of separation from her estranged husband (the industrialist August Delpero, who struck Coeur as a complete jerk), it might have made her a very depressing woman indeed.

Yet Physic was not a depressing person to be around. Though she might have been a trifle gabby, she was also optimistic about her chances for flight duty and dedicated to eventual reconciliation with her husband. The latter objective seemed foolish to Coeur, but she couldn't stop her friend from seeing Delpero now and again—with the objective of salvaging their marriage. This afternoon, for instance, Physic had taken off work early to meet Delpero at his Trantown estate—which at the very least should have given Coeur a peaceful night alone in their dinette with her E-mail mission data.

But no sooner had night fallen—just as Coeur was setting aside the *Hornet* specs and beginning in on personnel files—than Physic stomped back into the apartment and angrily threw her handbag down on the couch.

"Red Sun," Physic fumed, "I have had as much of that man as I am going to take! That's it, I quit, it's over!"

Coeur looked up at her roommate. Quite short, the dusky woman was nevertheless striking in a short black dress just slightly darker than her eyes and grown-out pageboy haircut, and she might have looked very pretty too if it weren't for the deep scowl dominating her expression.

"Bad date, huh?"

"Date? Hell! We didn't even leave his house!"

Coeur restrained herself from asking if that was a bad thing; Delpero, as Coeur understood it, had offered to

take Physic off to orbit in his yacht.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Coeur finally asked, knowing that her useful work time was over.

"Well, I guess I had it coming," Physic said, accepting the offer and plunking down opposite Coeur. "I mean, he never seems to want to do anything I do."

Coeur nodded.

"I mean, here I go out of my way to get someone else to cover for me at the Medlab, then he tells me 'sorry, business came up in the outer system.' Like he couldn't call and tell me that."

Coeur nodded again, letting a moment pass before comment.

"Physic," she said finally, "the guy's a jerk. He's been married three times, and you catch him with other women every time you turn around. The sooner you divorce him, the better."

"Yeah, but..."

"Yeah, but nothing. Woman, you are 30 years old and this man treats you like a teenager. Honestly, a woman like you—xenomedicine specialist, on the way up in your field—you don't need that."

"Hmm," Physic said, soberly. "I don't know about 'on the way up.' Every petition I make for field duty gets the old 'thanks, we need you where you are.'"

Coeur looked surprised.

"I didn't know they'd sent any answer to your petitions."

"Well...I didn't want to jinx myself. Besides, I knew how much you wanted to get out there again, and I didn't want you to get upset hearing about all my bad news."

Suddenly, an inspiration hit Coeur—something that had been rolling around in her head like a loose marble,

but she hadn't had time to think about yet. Ignoring Physic for a moment, she returned her attention to the tabletop computer display and scrolled to a personnel data field she hadn't yet examined.

"Well, I'll be damned." Coeur said, finding what she was looking for.

"What?"

But a broad and growing smile was Physic's only answer from Coeur.

"What? What?"

"Physic, how'd you like to be a ship's surgeon?"

"What, are you kidding?"

"Sorry, Physic, I guess I didn't even have a chance to tell you. The Technical Nest asked me to command one of their ships this afternoon."

"Coeur, that's wonderful!"

"And, I've been asked to select my own crew."

Physic, swung around hard from rejection to elation, could only gape for a moment, blinking.

"You're serious, right?"

"Oh, yes. You're right here on the list—Class A Xenomedicine Specialist. And I have the authority to suspend your ground duty assignment."

"Wait a minute. How did you get a look at my personnel file?"

"Captain's privilege," Coeur said, turning the screen around. "See, it's right here."

"Hey, you're right!"

"Lucky break, all right. So, you want the job?"

"Do I want the job? Do I want the job? Hell, yes, I want the job!"

"Well, good. That's three crewmembers down."

"But, hey...wait a minute. Are you really sure that you

want your friend as a doctor?"

"I want the best person available as a doctor. This computer won't find anyone better qualified."

"Wow. So I guess I'll have to call you 'sir,' huh?"

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Chapter Two

The yacht *Lord Ryan* was not streamlined for atmospheric flight, but her designers had given her a smooth exterior shell to enhance the appearance of speed. It was an affectation typical of Imperial design, but not entirely misleading; 4G thrust and jump-4 range gave her master, August Delpero, performance exceeding most of the RC fleet.

Though it was not as if Delpero believed he would ever need that speed to escape the government. The chairman of Novastar Incorporated—a celebrated light in the commercial world—he was well connected to the Coalition government through supply contracts, and generally regarded as a citizen of the highest esteem. Indeed, his square-jawed, middle-aged good looks had been featured in several Aubani business newsvids, making him, if not a celebrity, at least a familiar presence in the mind of the public.

The irony, which only Delpero appreciated, was how much he despised the Coalition—a sentiment shared by the master of an unregistered vessel he had come to meet in the outskirts of Aubaine system.

Vega Zorn.

That her ship—the flat black patrol cruiser *Vi Et Armis*—had crossed eight parsecs of patrolled space was amaz-

ing, to be sure, but Delpero attributed her safe arrival as much to her captain's sheer force of will as to her ECM suite. Indeed, Zorn came in much closer than Delpero would have liked before exchanging transponder codes—a dangerous maneuver that might have gotten both of them killed if either ship were infected by Virus.

"I cannot believe you did that," Delpero said, as he met Zorn at his air lock. "What if you were a vampire ship? Or us?"

"Relax, Delpero," the pirate said, shaking his hand and saluting his valet, Eneri. "If you hadn't answered my hail, I would have killed you."

Whereupon Zorn slipped off her silvered sunglasses and dropped them into a pocket of a close-fitting black vac suit. This exposed an old cutlass scar—beginning above and continuing below her left eye socket—incurred in battle with a Dawn League ground party. That, and a severe expression punctuated by her close-cropped coal-black hair and pale gray eyes, tended to quell any further tendency toward flippancy in Delpero.

"I see your point," he said.

"Right. So you have the data?"

"Yes, sir," Delpero said, snapping his finger and prompting Eneri to lift up the suitcase he had handcuffed to his wrist.

"Don't trust your subordinates, do you?"

"Eneri," Delpero said, "I trust with my life. However, what's in that briefcase could get me locked up *for life*."

"Hell," Zorn said, "for a megacredit Guild voucher, I'd gauss my own grandmother."

Yes, Delpero thought, unlocking the handcuff on Eneri's wrist, *I suppose you would*.

"About the other matter," Zorn said, as she took the

briefcase from Eneri "Our resupply. Has a ship been diverted?"

"I've got two of our best smugglers on the job, Captain. *Ellen Arc* will carry the cargo out to Kruyter, and *Nimble Dancer* will take it the rest of the way."

"I don't care about how it gets there, Delpero, just that it does. Our usual resupply methods aren't available as long as we're maintaining a low profile."

"No problem. Oh, but I have told my bridge crew to send you *Nimble Dancer's* transponder code—so you won't have to blow her up either."

"Thanks."

"Say," Delpero said, "there can't be a lot of room on that ship of yours to stretch out. Why don't you come to my parlor for a moment?"

"I am on a tight schedule, Delpero."

"That's a pity. I've got Terran brandy, bottled in 1127."

"Well, it's not that tight a schedule."

"Very good. Eneri, after you."

Seconds later, trailing Eneri, Delpero and Zorn entered into *Lord Ryan's* parlor, an ostentatious chamber of red velvet and gold fittings with the volume of a small craft hangar. Its ceiling and side walls were expensive TL-15 holograms displaying the ship's exterior—mostly stars and *Vi Et Armis* at the moment—with flawless fidelity.

"You know what I don't like about this room?" Zorn said, accepting a drink and welcoming herself to a plush chair. "It's too warm. You've got all these stars around, but it's not cold, like space."

"I hadn't thought of that," Delpero answered, taking a drink of his own and sitting in a chair intimately close to Zorn's. Eneri, meanwhile, positioned himself off to the side of the chamber, discreetly out of earshot.

"Good stuff," Zorn said, after swigging her brandy and setting aside the empty glass. As Delpero continued sipping at his own drink, the pirate then opened the briefcase with a six-digit code and looked, appreciatively, at its contents. "That was nice of you, including a computer to read the data. Looks a little technical, though—all this biochemistry jargon."

"It is that," Delpero said. "Perhaps you'd like a synopsis."

"Certainly," she said, then louder, for Eneri, "And another drink."

Alertly, Eneri had a fresh drink in her hand almost before Delpero began talking.

"Basically, it's what we expected. None of Aubaine's laboratories—human or Hiver—have any detailed knowledge of the base organism you're using, let alone the mutation. It'll be months before local agencies can do anything about it."

"And months will be too long. By the time my ship gets back to Ra, there won't be enough living left to bury the dead."

"It'll serve them right," Delpero said coldly. "The sooner this Coalition is swept away, the sooner a sensible government can be erected in its place."

"One with hereditary nobles, you mean?"

"It worked for a thousand years, didn't it? Why shouldn't my family have what it's due?"

Appreciating the buzz of her second swig, Zorn didn't answer. Politics were her least favorite subject.

"Yeah, well, whatever gives you lift. I'm curious about something else, though. I'd like to know how you got this much data out of the secure Medlab database."

"Oh, it wasn't that difficult. The Medlab facility isn't

well-guarded."

"Well, surely, they don't let strangers just stroll in right off the street?"

"They do let husbands visit their wives. I persuaded my wife to make love with me in her office—after the building was closed and empty for the evening—which gave my...assistant...time to fly off and collect the data while we were otherwise engaged."

"Why, you randy old fart! I thought you two were separated."

"I suppose we are," Delpero said, "but I'm not *that* old."

"Kind of gets the mind thinking," Zorn said, "what you must have done to get her to do that."

"I could show you," Delpero said, "if it weren't for your tight schedule."

"Hey, it's not that tight," Zorn answered, leaning forward to grasp Delpero's tie and pull him forward for a wet—if strangling—kiss.

Which prompted Eneri, still alert and discreet, to spin smartly on his heel and leave the chamber.

"A Phyrus, huh? That's a fine looking tank, sir."

In his commander's cupola, Drop Kick looked down at Crowbar with surprise, only realizing after a moment that the comment was directed toward him. As big a man as could comfortably be a tanker, Drop Kick possessed a tanned, muscular frame that somehow seemed out of proportion with the small turret of a vehicle that no one could sensibly call a tank, unless he was trying to be polite.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you talking to me?"

"Yes, sir. I was saying what a fine looking tank you have there."

Despite his best attempt at a serious expression, Drop Kick had to chuckle.

"Sir," he said, "it may be a fine looking *vehicle*, but it sure isn't a tank. By the way, try to keep from kicking the side armor—you might dent it."

Drop Kick then intensified the contra-grav left of his AFV until the vehicle was two meters off the ground, and then steered it gently into *Hornet's* forward hatch on a flare of plasma thrust. After it was completely inside, Crowbar jogged up the forward ramp after the craft, looking for the safest way to lash it down for travel.

Physic, meanwhile, stood off at the edge of Berth 57 beside Coeur, scratching her head.

"What's he mean, it's not a tank? Looks like a tank to me."

"Marines like precision," Coeur said. "That vehicle doesn't have the gun or the armor to fight with real tanks, so it's actually a support sled. Anyway, if it was a real tank, the Marine Corps wouldn't be sending it off to Ra."

Physic made an understanding nod, and Coeur returned to a study of her clipboard computer manifest. Now that the ship was declared spaceworthy—fingers crossed—by Crowbar, the loading of cargo had proceeded apace. Fuel had come aboard during the evening, followed by five mammoth cargo crates from the Technical Nest during the morning, and finally the AFV in the early afternoon. All that remained was the rest of the crew—a Schalli navigator and two human gunners—who weren't formally invited aboard until they graduated from the Academy two days earlier.

"Hard to imagine it's just been a week," Physic went on.

"I've been too busy to notice, really," Coeur said. "Although there's always jump space to relax in. With any luck, we'll be there inside 72 hours."

"Ever been to Ra?" Physic asked.

"No, Physic. But I'm sure it's very nice."

"They say it's the cleanest environment in the Coalition—no smoke, no pollution. You'd think they'd develop a resort industry there, to sort of take advantage of it."

Coeur sighed inwardly. Given any encouragement, Physic could talk incessantly about nothing at all better than anyone she knew.

"Physic, don't you have something to *do*?"

"Yes, sir, I'm doing it—waiting to greet the new crew. A doctor ought to know her crew, shouldn't she?"

A beep on her wrist radio saved Coeur from comment.

"Red Sun. Go ahead."

"Red Sun, this is Scissor. Incoming air raft with remaining crew is preparing to land."

"Roger, Scissor. Out."

"So how did Cicero get that callsign anyway: Scissor?"

"I suggested it went with his razor-sharp mind."

"Ah. Clever."

But then the air raft was upon them, descending on noiseless contra-grav but signaling its approach with the whine of its HEPiaR thrusters. Though their black body sleeves were not uniforms in a strict military sense, and the Exploratory Service had no formal customs concerning saluting or military discipline, both Coeur and Physic brought themselves up to respectful attention as the government ferry set down at the end of *Hornet's* ramp.

The first two passengers to debark, a pair of young women, emerged from a side hatch, while the third rolled down the back cargo ramp—the Schalli in his rollerchair. Since the streamlined sea creature didn't wear clothes, and therefore hadn't packed any, his personal effects were substantially lighter than those of the women. As they hoisted their duffel bags over their shoulders, he was already rolling across the concrete tarmac toward Coeur and Physic.

"AkakEE Siltriver," he announced, "callsign Deep Six, reporting for duty."

Having read his record, Coeur suspected the Schalli's callsign derived from his deep-diving origin. Unlike the sleek, shallow-water Schalli, light gray and flecked with spots, Deep Six was a darker dapple-gray, with a body perceptibly more massive with insulating blubber. Helpless as he might be without his rollerchair, Coeur knew he must be a strong swimmer in the deep ocean where light did not reach, and where an instinct for navigation was less a luxury than an outright necessity.

"Welcome aboard, Deep Six," Coeur said. "Professor Freefall spoke highly of you."

"Thank you, sir."

"This is Physic, by the way, our surgeon."

"I specialize in xenomorphic disease pathology," Physic added. "Hiver disorders, mostly, although I've also worked on Schalli cadav...um, cases."

"Right," Coeur said. "So you'll be in good hands."

Then the women arrived, coming up alongside Deep Six seconds after the air raft lifted off.

"Johanna Solomon, callsign Gyro, reporting for duty."

"Denise Valencia, callsign Snapshot, reporting for duty."

From a distance the two young women were strikingly

similar in general appearance, shorter than Coeur but taller than Physic, with strong and stocky bodies—a shape ideal for spacers. Their faces, however, were quite distinct; Gyro's face was round and airy, with lively blue eyes and short blonde hair bleached almost white—like Drop Kick's—by Aubaine's tropical sun, while the Oriflammen redhead Snapshot wore an expression perpetually stern and reserved, distorting a freckled, youthful face into something seemingly older than its 22 years.

"Welcome aboard," Coeur said, shaking the hands of each woman in turn. "Ready for the real graduate course?"

"Absolutely," both agreed.

"So, these two were in your tactics seminar?" Physic asked.

"Yes, but they didn't use the same strategy in the final examination. For Physic's information, how did you two solve Problem 61C?"

"I made a hazardous misjump," Gyro answered.

"And I blew up my ship," Snapshot added.

"Were you supposed to do that?" Physic asked.

"It's important to have people aboard with diverse methods of problem-solving," Coeur commented to Physic, though keeping her attention directed to the new crew. "This is Physic, by the way, our doctor. Since she isn't busy at the moment, she's going to show you to your staterooms and help you stow your baggage."

Which prompted a raised eyebrow from the doctor.

"Carry on, Physic."

In relation to Coeur's last ship, *Lirgishkhunan*—where hotbunking crewmembers shared staterooms in eight-

hour shifts—*Hornet* was luxuriously spacious, offering a separate stateroom for each of her seven crew and four passengers, with three to spare. As a practical expedient, Coeur considered double-bunking to get the four new spacers accustomed to it, but they'd get plenty of that later when the mission was over and they transferred to other ships.

In the meantime, it didn't hurt to be comfortable. Coeur's only orders to the top deck seven—the Marines, the two gunners, and Crowbar—were that they stay out of the two staterooms adjacent to the bow, just in case *Hornet* ever suffered a bow-on collision. Similar advice didn't wash with Scissor on the lower deck; his port-forward stateroom/electronics workshop was his regular duty station, and he was disinclined to relocate his bunk for a marginal increase in safety.

What Coeur didn't realize at first, until she double-checked the stateroom assignments, was how she'd divided the crew into three informal sections. Except for the engineer, the crew topside were combatants by occupation—gunners and cavalry troopers; the crew in the port fork were technicians—Scissor, Physic, and Deep Six; and the crew in the starboard fork was herself.

But, killers or fixers, they were all going to be together for at least a month—until the cargo and Marines were dropped off on Ra. While Coeur had tried to pick the very best people she could, there was no way to know how they'd perform until they got under way.

Yet a good omen of future success was their first mess together, two days before launch. The Arses, in black body sleeves, and the Marines, in green body sleeves, made amiable small talk as they congregated with their prepackaged dinners at the circular galley table, the only

individual missing being Gyro at harbor watch on the bridge.

"People," Coeur said, lifting her coffee cup, "to absent friends."

"To absent friends," the other crewmembers seconded. Scissor, sitting on a toadstool chair, and Deep Six, sitting high in his rollerchair, were at human eye level, and therefore shared social equality with their mates at this solemn moment.

"Captain," Drop Kick said a while later, after they'd tucked into their processed fish and seaweed cakes, "the crew and I were wondering if there's any work you'd like us to do around the ship. We know we're on gunnery watch with Snapshot and Gyro, but we'd still like to help with any other projects you have."

"Actually," Crowbar said, "I can think of something. How's your laser welding?"

The Marines, three men and a woman, reacted as if they'd been asked if they could shoot a rifle or field strip a suit of battle dress. Mercy, the lean and dark-skinned female AFV driver, almost coughed up her fish cake.

"We drive a support sled, sir," Drop Kick said. "If it's metal, we can fix it."

"Super," Crowbar said, "'cause what I need is for someone to help build a bunk for Deep Six."

"A bunk? For a Schalli?"

"In fact," Deep Six interjected, "it would be more precise to call it a 4000-liter tank. However, I would not choose to inconvenience anyone who is otherwise needed elsewhere."

As far as Coeur could tell, such negative anticipation was common in the Schalli race—whose mathematical genius was counterweighted by a generally melancholy

outlook of the future. Nevertheless, a Schalli would not be comfortable for long cooped up in a rollerchair.

"Do you have the supplies?" Drop Kick asked.

Crowbar nodded. "Yes, sir—a plastic tub and moly steel bracing. What I need is someone to put it together before we hit space."

"Not a problem, sir. Whiz Bang, Bonzo, Mercy, and I will examine the situation and have it under control before launch."

"Outstanding," Crowbar said. "That'll give me time to finish calibrating the jump drive."

Yes, Coeur nodded, *it's good to have ship's troops.*

"What I'd like to know," Snapshot asked, changing the tack of their discussion, "is what you Marines are doing here. Isn't this just a cargo mission?"

"Did Red Sun not clarify the situation?" Scissor asked, eerily speaking through its voder even as its cloaca slurped half-fermented fish entrails under the table.

"She said this was a cargo ship, and she needed a gunner. I'm just curious."

"Detachment A of the 3rd Marine Armored Battalion," Drop Kick said, "has been assigned to familiarize the indigenous fighting forces of Ra with modern combat tactics."

"So it's some kind of political perk, then."

"Excuse me?" Coeur asked.

"Oh, I was just remembering that Ra is a lot closer to Oriflamme than Aubaine. I thought it might be some sort of political perk for support in the Assembly."

In response, a table full of Aubani regarded Snapshot with a mixture of distaste and befuddlement.

"Not that that's bad," Snapshot went on. "I mean, you probably need all the votes you can get."

Voices, mostly of the Marines, raised in protest, but Coeur cut that short.

"Hey, hey, hey, calm down."

"What'd I say?" Snapshot asked.

"Snapshot," Coeur said, "this is exactly how much I want to hear about politics on this trip..."

Whereupon she picked up her empty coffee cup and tilted it so that the rim was pointed toward Snapshot.

"Zero."

"I..."

"Or, you can leave."

"Understood, sir."

"Well, I'm sure full," Physic said, jumping into the awkward silence. "Who's the clean-up detail?"

Whiz Bang, the squat, dusty-haired AFV gunner, gave a friendly glance at Bonzo, the sensor tech whose, jet-black eyes and hair were the only features lending weight to his slight but nimble frame.

"Sir, I propose alphabetical," Whiz Bang suggested, a proposal that would have had Bonzo cleaning up the galley first and himself last.

"Hey!" Bonzo said.

"Excellent idea," Coeur said, "reverse alphabetical. Whiz Bang, you're on today; Snapshot tomorrow."

"Thanks a lot," Snapshot mumbled to Whiz Bang, as the rest of the crew stood up and drifted over to the autogalley. The cleaning of the trays was automated inside the wall unit, but crumbs, splatter, and so forth in the mess could not be left free in the cabin—lest the ship ever lose gravity and those bits happen to float into contact with electronic circuitry. All of the crew would therefore take it in turn—beginning with the Marine corporal—to go over the galley methodically with a hand

vacuum and sponge.

Shortly thereafter, Coeur was back in her stateroom preparing to relieve Gyro, when a knock came at her door. Looking up from the log she was recording, Coeur invited the person in.

"Crowbar, what can I do for you?"

Filling up most of the doorway with his height, Crowbar folded his hands behind his back before reporting.

"I just came in to report about the liquor situation, sir. All of the supplies have been relocated to the ship's locker, with your captain's code on the lock."

"Well," Coeur said, leaning back in her seat and setting down her stylus, "that's good."

"I hope it's not going to get anyone in trouble, sir. That the students snuck the stuff aboard."

"Oh, there'll be a report all right. But the Coalition needs engineers too much to follow it up too closely."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Sometime tomorrow I'll circulate an announcement that drinking will be in jump only, and strictly for off-duty personnel."

"Damn," Crowbar said. "In jump, I'm never off-duty personnel."

"Consider that your punishment. Oh, and I'd also like you to program the computer to recognize Gyro as our executive officer."

"Yes, sir. Good choice."

"I'd rather it was you or Deep Six," Coeur admitted, "but that rollerchair really cuts down his mobility, and I don't think you need any more work."

"I'd have to agree with you there, sir."

Coeur shrugged.

"Oh, by the way, Snapshot's outside. Should I send her

in?"

The wrinkling of Coeur's brow belied her answer.

"Yes. Carry on, Crowbar."

"Sir."

A moment later, Crowbar had left and Snapshot replaced him in the doorway.

"Sir. Do you have a moment?"

"One or two. Have a seat."

Snapshot accepted the offer, sitting at the chair beside Coeur's desk.

"Sir," the gunner said. "I have a question. Why did you invite me to come on this mission?"

"Strange question. I thought you were qualified."

"Sir, there's no point in beating around the bush. I've got a list of demerits as long as my arm, so why *did* you select me?"

"You're the second best gunner in my class, Snapshot, after Gyro."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"But what about my record?"

"Actually, your record's very good, until you came to Aubaine a year ago. My hunch is you'll do your job, once we got off this planet you don't care for very much."

"Sir, may I ask you a personal question?"

"You can ask."

"Why are *you* here? There must be a lot of companies that would pay a lot for a remnant to snoop out relic artifacts."

Coeur shrugged.

"You know," Coeur said, "it's funny. On my first cruise I thought I was going out to pay a debt I owed a friend of mine—a fellow who let himself die so I could have a

good low berth—but all that ended when we took our first casualties. If you're going to risk your life, you'd really better believe in what you're risking it for.

"Personally, I believe that the Coalition's a little wobbly, and people have a lot of different ideas about what it should be—Federalist, F-Tech, anarchy—but it's the best hope any of us have for the future. Is that what you believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then that's good enough for me. Now why don't you get some rest, Snapshot. You've only got one day to train before we launch, and I've got to get to the bridge."

"Yes, sir," Snapshot said, rising together with Coeur, saluting and excusing herself. Already turned away, she didn't notice the hint of a satisfied smile growing on Coeur's face, an expression she would wear all the way to the bridge.

Chapter Three

As dawn broke over Berth 57 two days later, the all-weather tarp over *Hornet* had already been rolled back, and every umbilicus had been retracted from her underside save one—the ground computer link.

"Last thing before we launch," Coeur told Physic, as an incoming message scrolled up on a bridge console between them. "Our briefing from the Coalition Information Network."

"Anything significant?" the doctor asked, as Coeur leaned in close to study the screen.

"Not much. Mostly places to avoid. Take a look at this one, though."

INTELLIGENCE DIRECTIVE
RCES HQ AUBAINE, 3/III/1201
ATTENTION ALL CREWS:

RCES crews operating in Thoezennt Subsector are advised to be alert to any weapons or technologies which can be linked to the Mercantile Guild, an association of traders believed to be responsible for distribution of weaponry to objective worlds throughout the Area of Operations. Human intelligence and concentrations of low-tech weapons suggest the location of a local manufacturing center in Thoezennt or adjacent regions.

Any intelligence relating to the specific location or locations should be forwarded immediately to RCES HQ, Aubaine.

"Is that close to where we're going?" Physic asked.

"Close enough. Ra is adjacent to Thoezennt."

"Do we know much about the Mercantile Guild?"

"Not really. We probably wouldn't know anything about them at all if it weren't for the guns they keep selling the TEDs in the AO."

"A big problem?"

"For the Coalition, yes. For us, probably not. Anyway, why don't you press that print button over there and make 11 hard copies."

"Yes, sir."

Moments later, the bridge printer poured out 11 yellow CIN reports.

"Launch'll be in two hours, Physic. Better get those to the crew and secure your sick bay."

"Yes, sir," Physic said, scooping up the reports and sliding her chair back from the navigator's station so Deep Six would be able to reach it in his rollerchair.

"Hey, Physic."

"Hmm?"

"You talk to your husband since last week?"

Physic smirked.

"I tried to talk to him yesterday. His secretary told me he was away—in his yacht—and wouldn't be back until tomorrow."

"Jeez. If you'd told me, I could of tried to patch you through."

"Ain't nothing I've got to say to him, Red Sun. Thanks

anyway."

Coeur nodded.

"Affirmative. Carry on, Physic."

* * *

Two hours later, RCS *Hornet* rose from her berth on a field of contra-grav lift, nosed around in the morning wind, and blasted into the sky on a tail of glowing blue plasma. Fifteen minutes later she had cleared Aubaine's dense atmosphere, and five hours later she was in jump space—bound for the stars.

Just as in her commercial days, *Hornet* would maintain artificial gravity and G-compensation through every leg of her journey, from launch to landing, yielding an environment that could fool any passenger into thinking that he'd never left the ground. Marines and Arses knew better, but even so, a week in the jump hole resembled a week's stay in a hotel more than anything else; there was nothing to see on sensors, no way to safely leave the ship, and little to do except routine preventive maintenance.

But there would be no rest for *Hornet's* engineer, or his two assistants on 24-hour jump watch. Day and night, Crowbar, Scissor, and Gyro planned to keep at least one set of eyes on fuel flow to the jump governor—a job too delicate even for a triad of TL-14 computers. It was rough and exacting work—more work than some people wanted—but *Hornet* didn't have any of those people aboard.

"Nice insertion, Deep Six," Crowbar called from the engine room, a few minutes after the jump field had stabilized.

"I credit the excellent sensors of the vessel," the navigator answered.

"Sensors, hell," Coeur said, from her seat opposite the navigator's. "He cut that one as clean as they come."

"Well, anyway," Crowbar said, "my compliments. The governor's purrin' along like she knows where she's going."

"Glad to hear it," Coeur said. "Think you'll need any help back there?"

"Negative, Scissor. Gyro, and I can handle the rotation."

"Roger, Crowbar. Out."

Just outside the bridge window—a sweeping panorama in normal space—was presently nothing, just a blackness across which played the jump fire, discharges of static electricity between the ship and the jump field. Keeping an eye on those discharges was the only essential work for the bridge crew during jump, for—though the correlation was hardly precise—alterations in discharge patterns were often the earliest warning of an imminent misjump.

"Want to take the jump watch?" Coeur asked Deep Six.

"Affirmative. It will offer me the opportunity to refine my jump plot."

"Deep Six, we're already in jump. You don't need to work on the jump plot any more."

"Nevertheless," Deep Six said, wagging the four sensor whiskers around his streamlined head, whiskers he used to manipulate the sensor panels circling his chair, "it is never good to be too sure of one's calculations. One can never be certain when a crisis will arise and test one's preparedness."

It's a good thing we finished his tank, Coeur thought. All the work he does, he'll need the rest.

Then again, I wonder how good a jump he would have plotted if he were in my place on Alnitak. Well, with any luck we won't have to find out.

"Very good," Coeur said. "You take the first watch."

Phoebus was not a large planet, as worlds went—about the same size as the Terran moon Coeur remembered from her youth—but her high density allowed her to retain a heavy atmosphere and abundant water. Combined with her close proximity to Aubaine, these qualities made her a popular layover point for coreward expeditions, though a pilot was apt to care less about the scenery than the advantage of her tiny size: *Hornet*, for instance, could anticipate a surface-to-jump point transit of under three hours.

"Elan Diego Control sends permission to land," Deep Six announced.

"Roger that. Signal all hands secure for landing."

"All stations send secured for landing. DZ in 37 minutes."

Elsewhere in the ship, though, were people without immediate duties, and therefore time to reflect upon the darker side of Phoebus.

"If it were up to me," Drop Kick told his three Marines and Physic, strapped into seats in the galley, "I'd skip this dirt ball altogether."

"Why do say that?" Physic asked.

"You must not get out much," Mercy said. "They're all Centrists down there. Like us about as much as a fart in

a closed room."

"Oh, come on. It can't be that bad."

"Mercy may be exaggerating," Drop Kick said, "but not much. The planet's an aristocracy, see, and they don't like democracy. Last I saw, they were driving ox-carts and muskets were sophisticated weapons, but they still didn't want any help from us."

"How long ago was that?"

"Four, maybe five years ago."

"Well," Physic said, "there you go. I'm sure the Coalition has got relief missions onto the surface since then."

"Maybe," Drop Kick said, "but I'll bet most of the relief is coming from Oriflamme."

"Oriflamme is a member of the Coalition," Physic said. "Really, they're the largest member of the Coalition, at least in human population."

"Maybe so," Drop Kick said, "but the way I see it, all bets are off when we start answering to some F-tech feudal lord. I've seen enough of that crap in the Wilds."

* * *

Elan Diego was a city of 5000, 60% of Phoebus' entire population clustered around the wreckage of a Class A starport. Bringing *Hornet* down into one of the starport's grassy fields on a sunny afternoon, Coeur could almost imagine what that complex must have looked like in operation—starliners alighting on contra-grav, and wealthy passengers discharging through a bank of gleaming white terminals. Today, all was wasteland, and the whistling of wind through gutted structures.

"*Hornet* is down," Deep Six reported, as the hiss of the landing gear shock cylinders filtered up to the bridge. "All

sections report secure."

"Looks better than the last time I saw it," Coeur said, spotting a large corrugated metal warehouse through the viewscreen. "Last time they didn't even have a shed."

"Yes, sir. Starport Control indicates that warehouse is our fueling vendor: the Royal Aircraft Company."

"Suppose they have a radio?"

"Starport Control indicates negative."

"Fine. Flag Gyro and Physic to go buy us some fuel."

"Affirmative."

Several minutes later, the ship's laser gunner and medic strolled down the front ramp and, after a glance around the crumbled perimeter of the field, walked off toward the open front of the only standing structure in sight. The sign above the small front office door—partly hidden from *Hornet's* perspective by the wreck of a grav bus—did not hold the promise of sophisticated facilities.

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"Gyro," Physic said, squinting at an oblong shape hovering inside the 50-meter-long warehouse, "are my eyes going bad, or does that sign say 'dirigibles'?"

"We should be charitable. Steam-driven dirigibles are an achievement for this tech level."

Ah, good, Physic thought, *a diplomat.*

Letting themselves into the office, the Arses caught a balding man in grimy coveralls looking out the window toward *Hornet* in amazement, but he pulled himself back behind his counter in an effort to appear nonchalant.

"Greetings, Manager Villam," Gyro said, noting the man's name from the tag on his uniform. "We've been

informed that starship fuel is available here."

"Yes, ma'am. Is that your ship over there?"

"Yes, sir, RCS *Hornet*. I'm her XO, and this is our doctor."

"Out of Aubaine?"

"Yes, sir," Physic said. "Does that matter?"

"Oh, heavens no," Villam said. "Lord Regent Garrett has instructed us to serve all of our customers equally."

The gunner and medic exchanged curious glances.

"So why did you ask?" Physic said.

"Oh, I was just noticing what a fine looking ship you have there. Wondered where it was from."

Hmm, Physic thought wryly, a jump-2 trader isn't going to be coming from Orillamme any time soon, buddy.

"Thanks," Gyro said. "I assume you can process a standard credit voucher."

"Oh yes," the Phoebean said, pulling a laptop computer out from behind a computer. Beside a mechanical calculator and kerosene lamp, it did not appear to be of native manufacture.

"Here then," Gyro said, handing the manager a plastic voucher card. "We'll take enough fuel to top off the tanks—say, 800,000 liters."

Evidently not wishing to damage his priceless computer, Villam punched up a rough estimate on his calculator.

"That'll run ya. Say, 6000 credits."

"A little steep for plain water," Gyro said, "but all right. Any idea how long it'll take?"

"Maybe four hours."

"Very good. I'll inform the captain."

Moments later, Coeur relayed her okay over Gyro's wrist communicator, and an unexpected request.

"The lord regent wants to see us, sir?"

"That's affirmative, Gyro. Said he'd like to see someone in command and an engineer. I figured you were both of those."

"Yes, sir!" Gyro said, poorly concealing her pride.

"The palace is a little ways off," Coeur went on, "maybe 30 klicks, so I'll have Snapshot lower the air raft for you."

"Will all three of us be going?" Physic asked, into her own communicator.

"No, I'd rather not lose that many important people in case there's an accident," Coeur sent, "but all the same, four ears are better than two. Just try not to start a war while you're over there."

* * *

Royalty was rare in the RC, and 22-year-old Gyro had little time to study its antecedents in history, so she was better prepared to converse with a Hiver, Schalli, or Ithklur than a hereditary noble. Though she relished the chance to practice her social graces, it could not help but trouble her that she was flying into the seat of the strangest form of government she could imagine.

"Ever met a noble?" she asked Physic, raising her voice above the rush of wind in their open-topped air raft.

"Actually, Garrett's not a real noble. His position is regent of Phoebus for the absent duke of the subsector."

"But there is no duke of the subsector. Not for the last 70 years anyway."

Physic shrugged.

"Who knows. I just wonder if we'll have to bow and curtsy."

"Well, whatever they do, let's try to be polite."

Seconds later, striking Stonecurtain Keep came into view as the air raft crested a low hill. Set on a table mountain with only a small road for access, the ferroconcrete structure had probably been built with the help of grav vehicles before the Collapse, but the remote location was not as much a clue to its antiquity as its peculiar architecture; its needle-like towers were densely packed in a cluster that covered all the hill top and afforded no comfortable perch for jump troopers assaulting from space.

"It's a good thing there aren't many Teddies who know about that trick," Physic said, lowering her voice as Gyro lowered their speed, "But where do we land?"

"There's a ledge by the front gate," Gyro noted, "and someone waving to us. I'll put down there."

Whether by design or an oversight of the architect, the ledge was very small—probably not enough room for a 10-tonne truck to turn around in—but Gyro set down safely, without crushing the little man in brightly colored robes, or the two guards with halberds, who were waiting for them.

"I was told you were coming," the man said to Physic, stepping forward even before the thrusters had shut down. "Please, go ahead and pull your vehicle into the palace."

"Are you the lord regent?" Gyro asked.

The fellow seemed vastly amused by the question.

"Oh, heavens no! I'm Rikart Orlaf, his lordship's major-domo."

"Charmed," Physic said, shaking his hand.

"We'll just pull in," Gyro added, turning the vehicle slightly and easing toward the gate a guard had since

swung upward.

A moment later she grounded the vehicle in what appeared to be a giant conelike stable—full of animal odors and stalls for horses and oxen. Since this was a palace, she assumed that another formal entrance existed, but this was probably the only one that could be reached without an air raft or dirigible.

And God knows what it would be like flying a dirigible around those spikes.

"So, my dear ladies," Orlaf said, as the women debarked and the guards withdrew behind the closing gate, "I assume you are the master and engineer of your starship."

"Not quite," Gyro answered. "I'm Johanna Solomon, executive officer of RCS *Hornet*, and this is Orit Takagawa, our surgeon."

"Well, I suppose that will do."

"Do, sir?"

Suddenly, Orlaf became silent and glanced around as if wary that someone was overhearing their conversations. The guards at the gate, for their part, did not look much more interested than the animals.

"His lordship has summoned you with a very special request," Orlaf said quietly. "He would like you to fix his air raft."

"He'd like *what*?" Physic asked.

"Please, I know this must sound petty to starfaring people like yourselves, but it is a matter of the highest importance. *Balthasar Victrix* will be bringing a delegation from Oriflamme to Phoebus later this month, and his lordship will be most distressed if his royal carriage is not in service at that time. As the manager of this estate, I can assure you that our compensation for your assistance

would be more than generous."

"Clarify something for me," Gyro said. "Aren't there already technical recovery teams on the planet that could help you?"

"Well...yes," Orlaf said, "but that's a sensitive issue. If his lordship asked them for help, he'd have a constant reminder around him of his dependence on Aubaine. Of course, you're also from Aubaine, but you're transient and wouldn't be around afterward as a symbol of that dependence."

To her credit, Gyro stifled the rude comment that came immediately to mind.

"Master Orlaf, would you give us a minute to discuss this privately?"

"Certainly."

Gyro and Physic then retreated, behind uneasy smiles, to a point where their whispers were out of Orlaf's easy earshot.

"Gyro, the man's an ass."

"Maybe, but we still have to make a decision."

"I say we tell him no. If he wants help, he can ask the people who are already here."

"I'm tempted to agree, except for two things: the strain it could put on planetary relations, and the payment he's offering."

"Gyro, are you serious? We can't take his money!"

Gyro sighed.

"Physic, I know we can't take his *money*. But he might have something else we need, like information, or some key piece of intelligence. It wouldn't hurt to ask."

"All the same, I think we should ask the skipper before we do anything."

"Agreed."

The women then returned to Orlaf.

"Master Orlaf," Gyro said, "we've considered your request, but before we commit to anything, we'd like to know exactly what you can offer as compensation..."

* * *

Three hours later, a purple air raft with burgundy stripes sat hovering above the marble floor of the south veranda of Stonecurtain Keep, a seemingly magical miracle beside the ornamental iron weapons and chest plates of the two guards attending it.

"Nice work," Coeur said.

"Actually, it was just a busted graviton flux inhibitor," Gyro said.

"Yeah," Mercy seconded, "they probably could've fixed it themselves if they read the manual."

"Not so loud," Coeur said, jokingly, "you want to give away all our secrets?"

But just then, a commotion of clattering boots behind them alerted the Arses to turn around. Approaching through a gold-trimmed double door, and attended by six more guards and the fawning Rikart Orlaf, was Lord Regent Delvin Garrett. Though not a huge man, Garrett dominated the room as soon as he entered, with a self-possessed bearing and a dress uniform that glittered with garish gold and silver filigree.

"You see, Master?" Orlaf said, "The carriage was repaired in only two hours."

"Obviously," Garrett said, coming to a stop before his three guests, "since they had time to retrieve their captain. Orlaf, guards, leave us."

The order was obeyed with remarkable haste, and all

eight guards removed themselves from the chamber in scant seconds, with Orlaf at their rear.

"Maybe you'd better join them," Coeur suggested to her mates.

"Roger," the gunner and medic answered, before making their own, but not quite as brisk, way out of the veranda.

"It goes without saying," Garrett said, once he and Coeur were alone, "that I am grateful for the assistance of your crew."

"On their behalf, I accept your gratitude. However, you must know that we're not going to keep it a secret that we fixed your air raft."

"I hadn't thought you would. That, however, is a trifle."

"You told my associates that your payment was information—information that would be useful to a starship captain. I assume that's the reason we're alone here."

"Perhaps my concern is excessive, but I don't believe so. I can't be certain how powerful are the enemies I might alienate."

"Enemies, your lordship?"

"Let me explain. As you know, Phoebus has few sophisticated sensors, like other worlds of the Coalition, and so relies on good faith for vessels to report their movements through the system. The navy deters most smugglers and pirates with regular patrols, but as a practical matter, some do get through.

"While this objectionable situation is not condoned by myself, it has come to my attention that certain villages, deep in the southern hemisphere, have harbored smugglers who will endure the hardship of ocean refueling."

"Go on."

"One of these village leaders—a thug really—caused a commotion recently, when he sailed out to rendezvous with one of his regular contacts, a refueling starship. Apparently, the starship refused to acknowledge him, so he opened fire with cannons and was sunk. Our navy recovered his survivors."

"How much did they know about this ship they were searching for?"

"Very little, evidently, except that she came through this area periodically, smuggling cargoes into and out of Aubaine."

"Aubaine?"

"Oh yes. And one other thing; they claimed her name was *Ellen Arc*. According to our records—which may be out of date—she was a far trader from Lancer, issued a transponder code for service in the Coalition."

"I see."

"I rather suspected someone in the space service should hear this," Garrett said, "instead of a relief party that won't report to its base for months."

Coeur withheld comment on the noble's true motivations.

"It may be valuable," Coeur agreed, "and I'll certainly see that the report is forwarded to the appropriate authorities."

"I'm glad to hear that, Captain, though I scarcely think this is an adequate compensation for the service you've rendered. Will you not consider accepting a small remuneration?"

"No, I'll just stick to the two items we agreed on."

"Information and a case of fresh fruit. Somehow, I find that less than appropriate."

"Hey," Coeur said, "after you've eaten pressed fish and

algae for a week, it's a helluva lot more valuable than you'd think."

Chapter Four

After *Hornet* was back in jump space again, bound for Kruyter, Snapshot and Gyro withdrew from their turrets to the central lounge, where they met Scissor by their new box of fruit. Though evening mess was a couple of hours away, both had an interest in targeting oranges and apples for early consumption.

"Fine looking fruit there," Gyro said.

"Indeed," Scissor said. "I am particularly impressed by these crushed, mildewed fruit on the bottom, which remind me of the fruit I sustained myself with during my year of pre-adolescence."

"Sounds swell," Snapshot said, with a wry glance at Gyro. "You mean you can actually remember that far back?"

"My memories are vague, for I was not fully sentient at that time. However, the fallen, rotted fruit of the forest are a resonant memory."

"Well, these ones on top look all right," Snapshot said, picking up an apple and biting into it.

"Nevertheless, I have a concern about their safety," Scissor said, halting Snapshot in the midst of her chewing. "Since I have galley clean-up detail this evening, I felt it was my responsibility to ascertain the healthfulness of this new food before I placed it in the autogalley refrigeration system."

erator. Thus, I must report that my biosniffer has indicated a relatively high level of chloropicric acid in the fruit."

"Is that bad?" Gyro asked.

"I cannot be certain," Scissor said, "but this same agent was used in higher concentrations as a nerve gas on Oriflamme, before the Collapse. Of course, in this smaller concentration, it may not be hazardous to humans."

"Um...yeah," Snapshot said, spitting her apple-mush into the autogalley recycler bin. The rest of her uneaten apple followed a second later.

"Come to think of it," Gyro said, punching instructions into the autogalley, "I think a carbo-stick sounds pretty good right now. Care for one, Snapper?"

"No, just some water," Snapshot said, drawing a cup and rinsing her mouth out. After swigging it around, she spit that out as well.

"Very good, then," Scissor said, lifting the crate off the table with two of its arms, "I have made my determination. For the sake of all of our safety, I shall take these to my stateroom and examine them more closely."

Whereupon the Hiver balanced the crate on its back, holding it steady with its tail limb, and padded off toward the cargo hold hatch on four otherwise unused limbs.

"I think I'll just go and strip the autoloader," Snapshot said, drawing another cup of water. "That'll probably get my appetite back."

"Hold on," Gyro said, "I'll join you."

When, several hours later, the crew (less Crowbar and Deep Six on watch) congregated for dinner, Coeur was more than a little upset to find only three apples and an orange in the refrigerator.

"Guys, don't tell me you ate 25 kilograms of fruit

already!"

"Hey, don't look at us," Drop Kick said, sitting down with his tray. "We were down in the hold working on the sled."

"Red Sun," Scissor said. "The fruit is my responsibility. The items in the refrigerator are those which I have determined to be relatively clear of chemical contamination."

"Chemical contamination?"

"Yeah," Snapshot said, tucking into her own tray. "I guess they use nerve gas on their crops."

"Yuck!" Mercy interjected.

"Well, hell," Coeur said, resigning herself to the autogalley's regular selection, and sitting down between Physic and Drop Kick.

"Well, that's one of the two things we got from that planet," Drop Kick said. "How about that top secret scoop from the regent? Anything important?"

"I don't know," Coeur said, sawing into a ponifish fillet. "But it's not top secret. A ship called *Ellen Arc* failed to register its transponder code, but nobody knows if it was going rimward or coreward."

"A whole lotta nothing, huh?"

"It might be important; we'll inform the authorities at Kruyter Belt."

"What I want to know," Physic said to Scissor, "is what you're going to do with all that fruit if it is bad? Throw it in the recycler?"

"No," Scissor said, "that would be a needless risk. Fortunately, I have discovered that the enzymes exuded within my cloaca are more than powerful enough to break down the offending contaminant. If necessary, I will consume the fruit myself."

"You know what I think?" Physic whispered later to Coeur. "I think we've been bamboozled."

"Just eat your brownie, doctor."

* * *

One hundred and sixty-three hours later, *Hornet* came out of jump in seemingly open space. That effect was negated by passive sensors, however, that unfolded as soon as the ship was secured from jump. Under powerfully amplified reflected radiation, Kruyter Belt came into view as a band of jagged asteroids—the closest a few thousand kilometers away—huddled close around the cold red star that had shattered their mother planet eons before.

"Registering Kreuzung Beacon at 22,000 kilometers," Deep Six reported.

"You are good," Coeur said. "Better send our ID quick, before they think we're a pirate and blast us."

"Already transmitting, sir. Delay will be nominal."

Indeed, an answer came back scant seconds later.

"*Hornet*, this is Kreuzung Control; your code is confirmed legitimate. Please stand by...another vessel is desiring communication with you."

Another vessel?

"What was that last item, Control? Another vessel?"

"Affirmative. RCS *Marathon Victrix* has requested communication with the first available government vessel. Please stand by while we establish maser communications link."

"That's Ripsaw's ship," Coeur told her navigator off-mike. "What do you suppose he wants?"

"Unknown. I am not familiar with the individual."

"Yves Franchot, Class of '97," Coeur said, "one of the old-timers."

"Any trouble up there?" Crowbar sent, after noticing several minutes had gone by without demand for his thrusters.

"Negative, Crowbar. We're waiting on an incoming communication."

"Oh. Thought something might be broken up there."

"You'd be the first to know, Crowbar. Bridge out."

"Here it comes," Deep Six said. Alert to the communication lag from wherever *Marathon Victrix* was sending, he'd already double-checked the digital recorder system to make sure they got a good copy, and both he and Coeur listened closely through their headphones.

"RCS *Hornet*, this is *Marathon Victrix* at azimuth 247, range three-five point seven million kilometers your position. We request your assistance in enforcement of RC Interstellar Code five-one-five-C..."

Piracy, Coeur noted.

"...please respond with time to intercept at our position, over."

"Time-tag confirms their range," Deep Six said after the message was complete, manipulating control panels with his muzzle whiskers. "The coordinates place her at Sonnamen gas giant, about 33 hours out."

"We have enough fuel to make that," Coeur said, "but not enough to make it back very fast. Good thing that's a gas giant."

"We shall forego refueling, then?"

"Affirmative. Send we confirm and are under way."

• • •

Marathon Victrix, when she came into visual range, was

a wickedly dangerous looking ship. Truncated delta wings issued from a hull that was studded with guns and full of high-performance drives and fuel—leaving room for very little else.

Aside from *Balthasar Victrix*, an Assembly transport, the Coalition's *Victrix* sloops were dedicated warships, and Coeur wasn't at all certain what aid her little *Hornet* would be to one. Nonetheless, she made her best possible speed for a rendezvous at Sonnamen and actually docked with the *Victrix* a few hours early, since her captain had orbited out from the gas giant to meet them.

Ripsaw, a wiry man not quite in his late-twenties, greeted Coeur at his air lock. "I thought you were at the Academy, Red Sun."

"I got a better offer," Coeur replied. "But what are you doing in this system? Just passing through?"

"Actually, no. Director Serene of Kruytercorp expressed a concern to the Assembly about smugglers, and that's why we're here."

"So you must've cornered one, huh?"

"We think so. Come up to the bridge with me and I'll show you what we've got."

The sloop's bridge was vast beside *Hornet's*, taking up much of the bow with its nine workstations, but it was hardly a ballroom. Coeur was forced to scrunch in behind a sensor tech's chair to get a good view of the holographic map table Ripsaw was leading them toward. Projected was the oblate gas giant, its myriad rings and moons, and a pattern of six remote sensor drones drifting above those rings.

"A couple of days back, we were on patrol with the two system SDBs when we intercepted a pair of vessels coming together on the far side of Sonnamen: a fat trader



named *Ellen Arc* and a liner named *Nimble Dancer*. We might have hailed them too early, though, because they ran for it after we told them to stand to. The SDBs vaporized *Nimble Dancer*—against my orders—so I ordered them back to Kreuzung after I cornered the other ship here.”

“The SDBs are private, I take it.”

“Raw recruits, yeah. Employees of Kruytercorp. That’s why I sent them back and told Control to flag me if a government vessel came through.”

“I think you should’ve stuck with the SDBs,” Coeur said. “We’re not a warship.”

“I don’t need a warship,” Ripsaw replied. “Just another captain with a cool head to watch the far side of the planet. Sooner or later he’s going to try to sneak out of the rings where he’s hiding, and another pair of eyes’ll help me nab him before he makes jump point.”

“We can probably do that,” Coeur said, “though we are on a schedule. I’d really rather not delay anywhere more than a week.”

“No problem.”

“You said you hailed them. Did they have transponder codes?”

“Good almighty Gaia, that’s what gets me! They had legal codes, but they still ran!”

“Were they out of Coalition ports?”

“Negative. Out of Lancer.”

“Probably won’t make it back there,” Coeur mused.

“No. They probably won’t.”

* * *

“You got a minute, Scissor?”

"Affirmative. Please come in, Captain."

Folding her hands behind her back, Coeur waited for Scissor's door to slide open, then stepped through into *Hornet's* farthest forward port compartment. Scissor's stateroom was red-lit, like the rest of the ship at alert status, but the red-orange crescent limb of Sonnamen illuminated everything inside in stark contrast—the racks of electronic parts, the diagnostic computers, a basket of apples, and Scissor soldering computer chips at its desk.

"Is there a problem, sir?" Scissor asked, removing its six-lensed goggles and spinning around on its toadstool chair.

"Not really. It's just that we've taken up station above the ring, and I wanted to be clear about the danger we're in."

"Go on."

"I'm sure you know this better than any of us, but this isn't a battleship. If we get in a firefight, just about any ship's laser'll cut through this hull like a knife through those apples over there. The only reason we're here is because it's our duty."

"I understand and agree completely."

"Hm. Somehow I thought you'd be more concerned."

"On the contrary. If this class of vessel is to be a success, it must prove itself under adverse conditions."

"Well, good. I'll leave you to your work then."

"Would you care for an apple, Captain? They are safe for human consumption in limited quantities."

"Ah...no thanks."

* * *

Thirty-two hours later, an inspiration came to Snapshot.

It hit her in her stateroom in the loft, where she lay awake waiting to relieve Whiz Bang at the missile turret. Only a vaguely formed idea at first, but she was sure enough it would work that she went to the galley 30 minutes early so she could intercept Coeur on her way to her own shift on the bridge.

"Skipper," she said, when Coeur greeted her, "I've got an idea."

"What's that?" Coeur asked, drawing a cup of coffee from the autogalley.

"Well, get this: The sensor drones have seen motion on our side of the rings, but they can't pin it down. My guess is the bogie's got a good sensor operator, and they cut short a run for it when they spotted our drive emissions."

"Makes sense."

"Right. They're quiet, we're quiet, and we can't see a thing. So suppose we fired off a missile—rigged to mimic our emissions—and sent it off around the far side of the planet. Our friend out there might bite and give us a target on passive EMS."

Coeur nodded. "I like it. How soon can you do it?"

"With the gear in Scissor's workshop, not long. Maybe eight hours."

"Do it. One of the Marines can cover your watch."

"Yes, sir."

Six hours after Coeur had heard about the decoy project, Snapshot and Scissor had a rebuilt drone in a launch tube. Snapshot then relieved Whiz Bang in her turret and fired the noisy missile dead astern.

Two hours later, it flushed its target.

"Bogie running, azimuth 182, range 48,000 kilometers."

"I see it," Coeur said. "Sound battle stations."

Within minutes, everyone aboard *Hornet* was in a sealed vac suit—even Deep Six and Scissor, in suits laid in for their unique anatomies—and the ship's atmosphere was drained to defend against explosive decompression. Yet, even under these conditions, Crowbar soon had the power plant thrumming back to life.

"Send target course and speed to *Marathon*," Coeur said.

"*Marathon* is farther away from the bogie than we expected," Deep Six said, after bouncing the message off a drone toward the sloop on the far side of the planet. "It may be several minutes before her sensors will bear on the target."

"We've got guns, too," Coeur said, tilting her right-hand joystick hard to the left as power to maneuver returned. "I'm commencing evasive thrust. Hail that ship and demand her surrender."

The effort was fruitless, and—as it happened—dangerous. The 400-ton fat trader, clearly surprised to have company only 50,000 kilometers astern, shot back with two laser volleys across the turning *Hornet's* bow.

"All right, friend, we'll play it your way. Gunnery, fire at will."

That was what Snapshot was waiting for. Over a day earlier, she'd deployed two missiles that afterward floated unpowered alongside *Hornet*. Now, ordered to fire their thrusters just as the gunner launched a second salvo, these gave Snapshot four missiles to direct onto the target.

"Thanks for the MFD," Snapshot called across to Gyro.

"My pleasure," Gyro said, knowing she wouldn't need an MFD to aim her laser at this range.

But the fat trader was clearly panicked, and spit out a noisemaker that spoiled Gyro's targeting lock. Snapshot's fast-running missiles dodged around the noisemaker, however, and closed to optimum range while extending their clusters of X-ray laser rods. Minutes later, their nuclear warheads—pumping blossoms of laser fire—flashed in a triple detonation, proof that the target's gunners had caught only one of the missiles. More than likely, the gunners were blinded by their own noisemaker.

"Got him!"

"Nice shot," Gyro seconded.

"All right, people," Coeur broke in, "calm down. See anything, Sixer?"

"Negative, interference."

But in time the interference subsided, and Deep Six found the target as Coeur switched from evasive to forward thrust.

"Negative emissions," Deep Six said.

"Could be dead," Gyro said, "or playin' 'possum."

"Better have the MFD back then," Snapshot said, "so you can keep an eye on her."

It was not until an hour later that *Hornet* could learn much more, having closed to 100 kilometers with Gyro's laser on the target all the way. Attempts to raise survivors on the radio met only the same silence that had prefaced the battle.

"Good Lord," Coeur said. "Snapper, I think you got her."

On the up side, the fat trader they'd met still retained its original shape, and the recognizable name *Ellen Arc on*

her upper hull, but her hull in general was a burned and mangled mess. All four of her cargo hatches stood open to space, and a trail of floating cargo confirmed that gravity was certainly out.

"I'll take us in closer. Deep Six, sweep with neutrino and neural scanners."

"Scanning. Negative power readings, but...positive NAS contact. Four readings, human nominal."

"Survivors."

"Affirmative."

"Signal the Marines. Stand by to board."

* * *

Although Drop Kick's teammates were cavalry troopers, they were also Marines, and that was all Coeur needed to know about their proficiency at boarding operations; they would do the job, and they would do it right the first time.

Along with their sled, Detachment A had brought four suits of light battle dress, the vac suits they wore as *Hornet* went to battle stations. Presently, in that armor, the four Marines assembled a formidable mix of weapons—one plasma, one laser, and two gauss rifles, together with concussion grenades and shaped demo charges—before converging at the port air lock, just ahead of Gyro's turret.

Rather than tip off anyone in ambush, the troopers practiced absolute radio silence, saying everything they had to say in Anslan—the versatile sign language taught to all RC field agents. Its disadvantage, of course, was the need for one person to be looking directly at another to carry on a conversation, but that was not so much of a disadvantage for the Marines, who practiced boarding

actions routinely; each trooper knew his or her job and executed it without direct instruction. Bonzo, the electronics specialist, crawled into the docking tunnel linked to *Ellen Arc's* belly hatch, and—covered by Whiz Bang—cut through the fat trader's hull with a laser torch. Then, with the other's ship's keel wiring exposed, he fried the other ship's grav plates with a portable surge generator—preventing the nasty surprise of an enemy bouncing them to death with flickered artificial gravity.

What should have followed next was a forced opening of the iris valve before them, and a careful advance into engineering and the bridge, under mutual cover. It did not follow, however, because a feeble radio message from *Ellen Arc* interrupted them.

"Hey! We surrender! Do you hear us out there? We surrender!"

Drop Kick, jacked into a wall communications jack hard-wired to Coeur's helmet radio, hand-signaled his team to stand by.

"Bridge," Drop Kick said, "did you hear that?"

"Affirmative, a personal communicator. Take it from your end."

"Roger," the sergeant said, tuning his suit radio to broadcast on *Ellen Arc's* frequency.

"*Ellen Arc*, this is RCS *Hornet*. Assemble all hands at your port drive section and prepare to be boarded."

"Roger, *Hornet*! We read you! Don't shoot!"

In reply, Drop Kick nodded to Bonzo, who opened *Ellen Arc's* belly hatch with a power cable from *Hornet*. Immediately, four vac-suited figures came into view, floating in the zero-gravity of *Ellen Arc's* port air lock with their hands up.

That two of the younger traders had temporarily lost

bladder control became obvious later, from the smell when their vac suits were taken off, but even before that it was clear that their eyes were locked on the four gun barrels in their face. It was not until after Drop Kick and Whiz Bang had crawled up the docking tube to push them, roughly, down into the gravity of *Hornet*, that their expression changed—from terror to something more approaching relief.

"Bridge, anyone else over there?"

"Negative, Drop Kick, unless they're psi-shielded."

"All right. Mercy, Whiz Bang, check the ship."

In answer, the troops saluted and then disappeared into the stricken freighter. Bonzo, meanwhile, had gone over the huddled prisoners for weapons. He found none.

"All right," Drop Kick said, "are any of you the captain?"

"Are you going to kill us?" the oldest-looking prisoner asked.

"Haven't decided yet."

"All right," the oldest man said, "I'm the captain, Rolf Krishnamurti."

"Well, Rolf, this is your lucky day; I've just decided not to kill you. Bonzo, take him to the skipper."

* * *

As a precaution, Coeur kept *Hornet* depressurized until a cursory probe of *Ellen Arc* was complete, but Mercy and Whiz Bang found very little intact on the fat trader that could hurt them—just eight dead crewmembers who hadn't reached space suits—and pressure was restored to *Hornet* within two hours of docking. For the prisoners especially—down to two hours of suit air—that was

particularly comforting.

"So," Coeur said, sitting down opposite the seated and handcuffed Captain Krishnamurti at the galley table, "you're the skipper. I suppose you know there's a sloop on the way here with a book to throw at you."

A slight, bewhiskered man, Krishnamurti was clearly cowed by the looming bulk of Drop Kick's battle dress behind himself.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, maybe if you tell me what you were up to, I can put in a good word with our friends.

"Here's what I know. Your ship is registered out of Lancer, and has a legitimate business license. However, what's left of your cargo certainly isn't legal—infantry weapons, ammunition, and space combat missiles carried without proper permits. With food, medicine, and modular shelters, I'd be tempted to think you were outfitting an expedition."

"You might say that."

"Except I don't think it was your expedition. For one thing, you had nukes, and didn't fire 'em at us. Does that mean you're stupid, or just didn't want to piss off your customer?"

The smuggler delayed in answering until he felt an armored fist close on his shoulder.

"You want a broken collarbone, mister?"

"All right, all right. So I was paid to carry the stuff."

"By whom?"

"That wasn't my business. Just carrying it from Aubaine to Kruyter, and exchanging it with *Nimble Dancer*."

"That's not what she asked," Drop Kick said, tightening his grip.

"Okay, okay. I saw Novastar trucks deliver the cargo."

Suddenly, Coeur leaned forward.

"You mean Novastar, as in the Aubani corporation?"

"If you say so. I'm not Aubani, I don't know."

But I do, Coeur thought. Novastar, as in the corporation run by Physic's husband.

Chapter Five

At her sick bay desk, Physic laid aside her vac suit helmet and fell back in her chair, stunned.

"Good Lord."

"Look," Coeur said, standing just inside Physic's doorway, and still wearing her own unhelmeted vac suit, "it might not be anything. *Ellen Arc's* computers are so damaged it'll take a few days to establish any positive link with your husband."

"I'm sorry," Physic said, lifting up her face. "But that wasn't really what I was thinking about anyway."

"Oh?"

"Red Sun, if I tell you something, is there any chance it could stay between you and me?"

"That depends."

"Well, maybe it's not that important."

"Ripsaw's going to be here within the hour, Physic. If it has any bearing on this incident, maybe you'd better tell me."

Physic frowned, as if weighing her conscience against some other consideration. Ultimately, her conscience won.

"Red Sun, I know that you don't like my husband, and—as far as that goes—I don't like him very much right now either. But until recently I really thought he was

serious about getting back together."

"Uh huh," Coeur nodded.

"Well, one of the last times I saw him was a few weeks before we left Aubaine. He came to my office, where I was working late, and I let him in the building. To make a long story short, he told me was through with other women, I thought he seemed sincere, and that was the last time we had sex."

"Fascinating. So what does this have to do with *Ellen Arc*?"

"Well, here's the thing that bothers me. He brought a briefcase with him to my office, and set it down behind the end of my couch next to the door. Now it seemed a little large for a briefcase, but I didn't pay it much attention since we spent most of our time on the couch. It wasn't until later that I thought I heard the door open, twice, as if something in that briefcase went out and came back."

"Hmm," Coeur said, growing more interested. "But you didn't see it?"

"No, I don't think so. But I'm not sure."

"It could've been a robot, maybe. Some of the relic models are pretty small. Was there anything important in that building?"

"Are you kidding? Medlab is the central research repository for all of Aubaine!"

"But you let August in anyway."

"He is my husband, Red Sun."

"All right. Were any of the database files accessed unusually? Like, after hours, or with fishy passwords?"

"I don't know. I checked, but I'm not a computer technician."

"I see your concern," Coeur said, "but really, why

would one of the wealthier men on Aubaine want to break into a medical library?"

"I don't know. Like I said, maybe it's nothing. But with the possibility that Novastar financed these smugglers, and August being such a jerk to me after that time at Medlab, it makes me wonder if he used me for some ulterior purpose."

Coeur laid a gloved hand on her friend's shoulder.

"Physic, as far as I know there's no law against having sympathy for your mate. But as soon as we know anything more, I'll let you know."

"Thanks."

* * *

When *Hornet* rendezvoused with *Marathon Victrix* minutes later, Coeur expected to turn her prisoners over to the larger ship and its full squad of Marines. Ripsaw, however, would come to reveal different instructions.

"Nice shooting, *Hornet*."

"Thank you, *Victrix*; we tried not to vaporize this one. Are you prepared to take over our prisoners?"

"Negative. Kruyter Control wants you to bring the prisoners directly to Kreuzung."

"Understood. Is there an RC command post there?"

"Negative, *Hornet*. Kreuzung Asteroid is a holding of Kruytercorp."

Coeur frowned. Although Kruytercorp was the government of Kruyter system, it was also a private corporation, so it could be construed as a conflict of interest later if they involved themselves in the processing of smugglers supported by another corporation.

"If it's any help," Ripsaw elaborated, "Kreuzung

sounded very excited when we reported the Novastar connection."

"I see. Any idea what we should do with *Ellen Arc*?"

"Kruytercorp is sending out a tug to push her in to Kreuzung. In the meantime, we'll carry on an inspection of the hull."

"Affirmative, *Victrix*. *Hornet* out."

* * *

After *Hornet* swung around the obstructive bulk of Sonnamen, Deep Six contacted Kruyter Control and verified Ripsaw's orders: Director Tirese Serene wished to debrief *Hornet's* command crew as soon as possible.

"I think that means you and me," Coeur told Drop Kick, after taking six hours to scoop fuel from Sonnamen and recover Snapshot's drone before starting back toward Kreuzung. "How're the prisoners?"

"Quiet, and smug," Drop Kick said, an opinion verified by the video monitor on his stateroom desk. The smugglers, though haggard, were chatting amiably in the hastily stripped and locked stateroom that served as their cell. "We've grilled all of 'em pretty good, but I really think they were kept in the dark about their mission in case they were ever caught. The last thing Krishnamurti admitted to was having someone tip him off to the patrol schedule at Phoebus—probably a Novastar mole in the Aubani government."

"I'm sure you did your best."

"Hell, what we could use is a telepath."

"It's funny you mention that; there's a telepath where we're going."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Director Serene."

"You're kidding."

"Negative. Scissor's looked up her library data, and it looks like she was issued a psionics permit on Aurora."

"Wow. I didn't know there was a psi institute on Aurora."

"There isn't, or anywhere else in the RC. Serene's a remnant from before the Collapse."

"Just like you, huh?"

"Not quite. I took the express elevator to the future; apparently Serene actually lived all 84 of her years in person."

"And she's still working for Kruytercorp? Jeez."

"Anyway, she's probably not a person we should underestimate. I'm sure she's legally constrained against manipulating people, but all the same there might be some incentive for her to smear Novastar with our testimony."

"We could wear psi-helmets," Drop kick suggested, "if we have them."

Coeur smiled. Psi helmets were the last thing she ever would have included in the cargo manifest.

"We don't, but don't worry about it. Just make sure that anything you say is *really* what you meant to say."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

By the time *Hornet* reached Kreuzung 30 hours later, Coeur had expanded her interpretation of her "command group" to include herself, Drop Kick, Scissor, and Physic—the latter carrying a diagnostic medical scanner and med kit. The Hiver, in particular, was invited along by

Coeur because of its race's reputed immunity to telepathic manipulation.

Kreuzung Asteroid was essentially a giant slab of iron, 300 kilometers long and massing nearly 10 trillion tonnes. For all its mass, however, it had very little gravity—perhaps a twentieth of a G—and this was the first thing that *Hornet's* party noticed when they debarked into the asteroid's pressurized interior. Though all of them wore leg weights to hold them down, their first steps into the cavern outside the starboard air lock were awkwardly bounding, and it took them a few seconds to settle down around the smartly dressed young man who had come to visit them.

"Greetings. I am Achmed Ben-Abdul, liaison to Director Serene, and I have been instructed to lead you to her suite."

Coeur shook his hand. "I'm Coeur D'Esprit, captain of the *Hornet*. Lead on, sir."

The vast chamber that Ben-Abdul led them into was clearly a promenade of some sort, sporting facades of shops, restaurants, and even an office of the defunct Travellers' Aid Society. Presently, though, almost all were empty and unused, contributing to a general atmosphere of ambivalence and decay. A heavy electric truck rattled past them on the promenade, hauling ore, but its driver and other personnel they passed did not have the look of people extracting a fortune from the rock.

"If you don't mind my asking," Coeur said, "how profitable is this operation?"

"Frankly," Ben-Abdul said, "not very. But we're optimistic about expansion into new sectors of the belt. Within five years, we'll be one of the most profitable corporations in the Coalition."

Behind Coeur and Ben-Abdul, Drop Kick and Physic exchanged doubtful glances. Neither was a financier, but anyone who listened to the newsvid on Aubaine had heard rumors Kruytercorp wouldn't live out the rest of the year.

"Excuse me, sir," Scissor said, bounding along beside the rest of the group on four of its legs. "Are these conduits beside our path not power supply for artificial gravity plates?"

"Sharp eyes."

"Cicero's our technician," Coeur explained.

"Yes, the entire asteroid used to have artificial gravity, but we found it prohibitively expensive to maintain."

Their approach to a bank of four elevators saved Ben-Abdul from further elaboration of Kruytercorp's shortcomings. In evidence of the asteroid's vast interior, its control panel listed 65 deeper levels.

"Are all of those levels inhabited?" Scissor asked, as a door slid open to admit them.

"No. Most of them are blocked off and open to space."

Inside the elevator, Scissor suddenly noticed the same thing that its mates did: artificial gravity. That suggested a high-speed elevator, and Ben-Abdul was visibly relieved by his first demonstration of evidence that Kruytercorp wasn't on its last legs.

"Executive office level," he told the elevator.

"Voice code recognized," the elevator's female voice said. "Stand by."

Mere seconds later, the cab whisked them downward 200 meters, and into a different world.

For one thing, there was gravity, and all of *Hornet's* humans felt awkward clunking out of the elevator with their weights. Following Ben-Abdul's lead, they un-

wrapped the weights from their ankles and then had a look around at their surroundings.

Suffused in crisp clear light—piped-in sunlight filtered of harmful radiation—the office level felt less like the inside of an asteroid than an open-air patio on a sunny day. Careful inspection revealed that the antechamber they were in could not be larger than *Hornet's* galley, but its true size was camouflaged by partitions and strategically placed plants.

"Hello, Ms. Bisby," Ben-Abdul said to the only other individual visible, a woman behind a desk that was wrought from a planed slab of rock. "This is the party from RCS *Hornet*."

The woman nodded, and one of the partitions slid aside to reveal a long, carpeted corridor.

"I'll have to get a place like this when I retire," Physic said softly, to Drop Kick.

"Roger that."

Led by the liaison officer, the *Hornet* party then passed into the exposed corridor. Lit with the same piped-in sunlight as the antechamber, all of its doors featured nine-digit keypad security locks—hardly radical technology, but effective for TL-11.

"Here we are," Ben-Abdul said finally, stopping before a mauve portal and talking into the speaker above its keypad. "Computer, party for Director Serene."

"Enter please," another synthetic female voice said.

Inside the door, Coeur expected absurd luxury. Instead, she found a subdued office adjoining a study lined with hard texts, and a fairly young woman in tailored business dress, with green eyes and russet shoulder-length hair, talking by phone at an antique wooden desk.

"...look, is anyone dead? No? Well, then why are you

bothering me? We've got stockholders who want to see something coming out of that rock beside excuses. Now get on the stick and tell me when you've hit productive ore."

"Excuse me, Ms. Serene," Ben-Abdul said, after the woman hung up her phone, "this is the party from RCS *Hornet*."

Coeur concealed her surprise. *Anagathic*, she thought, or *Vilani blood*.

"Oh, good," Serene said, standing and extending her hand. "Coeur D'Esprit, am I right?"

"Yes, ma'am," Coeur said, shaking the hand, "and this is Sgt. Major Vin Escher, Dr. Orit Takegawa, and Cicero."

"You are the people I want to see," Serene said, coming around from her desk and exposing her rather handsome body. "Achmed, hold all appointments. And refuel their ship too, out of maintenance funds."

"Ma'am," the liaison said curtly, excusing himself.

"Ma'am," Coeur said, "we do have our own funds..."

"Oh, don't worry about it. If Kruytercorp can't refuel a Coalition freighter, it deserves to fold up. Please, join me in my study."

In the study, Coeur wasn't sure if she was more surprised by yet more wood furniture—a round table and six chairs—or the diverse collection of bound books on the walls. Neither could reasonably be local, but neither was it economical to haul books and lumber through jump space.

"Mistress Serene," Scissor said, noting a strange volume at its eye level, "is this not the *Dikrah Kiragdi*?"

"The what?" Drop Kick asked.

"An Ithklur saga of the war with the K'kree," Serene said with modest pride. "Yes. Translating it is a little

hobby of mine. But please, be seated everyone."

The *Hornet* humans accepted the offer, joining the director at her table. Scissor, accustomed to a lack of appropriate furniture in human space, simply sat on the floor with its prime limb raised above the table.

"Director," Coeur said, "I know that we're here for a debriefing, but I am curious; did you import all of these books here?"

"Oh, goodness no. Before the Collapse, there was a belter who lived in this section, and spent almost every last credit he earned bringing books in from Galos."

"You must really like books," Physic said, "if you chose to live here."

"Oh, yes. At Aurora, I have a library larger than this."

"You're from Aurora, originally?" Coeur asked.

"No. I was born on Nemyer."

"Oriflamme," Drop Kick observed.

"I didn't read that in your bio," Coeur said.

"It tends to spook people," Serene said. "Oriflammen, especially, don't like running into a Nemyerite who survived the Collapse. I was lucky to leave on one of the last functioning starships."

"Good Gaia," Coeur said. "I had no idea."

"Well, we all have our secrets. Your bio, for instance, doesn't say that a good friend of yours gave his life for you 80 years ago."

Coeur's left eyebrow raised.

"I wasn't thinking about that consciously. Did you get that psionically?"

Serene laughed.

"No, Captain, Ripsaw told me about that. I'd no sooner probe someone against their will than you would stop and search a vessel without provocation."

"Funny you should say that. Ripsaw told us you gave him orders to inspect all vessels he met, whether they had transponder codes or not."

Serene nodded.

"Oh, there's a reason for that."

"Yes?"

"I was looking for Delpero's smugglers."

"Can you clarify that, director? Do you mean you already knew what Delpero was up to?"

"No, but I strongly suspected it. Kruytercorp has purchasing agents on Aubaine to take advantage of the Auction, and those agents report to me. Over the last year, they've seen evidence that someone—someone with old business contacts on Aubaine—has been diverting contraband that should be going to the military, but they couldn't pin it on Delpero. He's too good at covering his tracks.

"But I know Delpero. A few years ago he screwed us in a stock sale that Kruytercorp still hasn't recovered from, and several of his ex-employees have so much as admitted that made his money smuggling goods from island to island on Vras. That was how I set up my trap.

"I knew it was a long shot, but most any small freighter that wants to get coreward from Aubaine has to pass through Kruyter. That's why I set up strict inspection of every ship passing through the system."

Coeur shook her head, disbelieving. Over time that must have meant hundreds of ships.

"That must have been quite an expensive operation."

"Actually, the operation's only been on for a week. Until our new SDBs were delivered a month ago, it wasn't practical. For all I know, Delpero's been running guns all over the Coalition for months—but this time I got him."

An hour later, Director Serene's debriefing of *Hornet's* crew was winding down, a debriefing that had revealed relatively little in Coeur's judgment, but satisfied Serene that Delpero was probably culpable in *Ellen Arc's* operation. Though Serene wouldn't psychically probe the prisoners herself—for fear of destroying the case against them—she was assured that enough evidence existed for Coalition Intelligence on Aubaine to begin a formal investigation, a situation that positively pleased Coeur and Drop Kick, and struck Scissor as appropriate justice. Only Physic, with a weary and worried look in her eyes, did not appear reassured by the conversation.

Yet Physic's anxiety was not immediately apparent to her shipmates—Coeur, Drop Kick, and Scissor—who took to discussing among themselves the possible destination and purpose of *Ellen Arc's* cargo. Only Serene noticed, and responded.

Physic, a strange voice sounded in the doctor's skull, I sense your anxiety. What is troubling you?

Director Serene? Is that you?

Yes, Physic. Is it something you'd rather not discuss out loud?

Having never experienced telepathy before, Physic was rattled at first, but then calmed herself when she sensed the gentle timbre of Serene's thoughts. Indeed, she was worried about something that she would rather not discuss openly.

Yes. An incident that occurred in my Medlab office—with August.

Go on; I won't betray your trust.

Can't you just read my thoughts?

I could, but I won't.

It's nothing, really. It's just that I can't remember exactly what happened—whether he released some sort of device in my office or not. It might not even be related to this case.

Perhaps I could help you remember.

A probe, you mean?

Yes, but not a deep probe—that might be too unsettling. A targeted probe of this specific memory would be less traumatic.

Can you do that?

I have before. However, for your peace of mind, I would rather have your friends present, and at least one of them monitoring your vital signs to see that you aren't being harmed.

Physic nodded, with a half-hearted grin on her face. Then she noticed a perplexed Coeur staring right at her.

"I'm sorry, Red Sun. Were you talking to me?"

"Yes, I was asking about the condition of the prisoners."

"I'm sorry. I was distracted by the director."

"The director?"

"I'm sorry," Serene said to Coeur. "I sensed the doctor's anxiety about another concern, and communicated with her telepathically."

"What?" Drop Kick asked, as surprised as Coeur.

"It's all right," Physic said. "The director thinks she could find out what I really remember about the night with August in my office."

"Allow me to interrupt," Scissor said, as nonplussed as Drop Kick. "What night are you referring to?"

Physic's calm surprised Coeur, who had so recently seen her friend severely shaken by this same memory.

"Before *Hornet* left Aubaine, I let my husband into my

Medlab office after the building was closed, and he might have exploited the opportunity to release something into the building. The director believes she might be able to help me focus my memories with a deep probe, but I agree that I would rather have one of you with us to monitor my vital signs."

Drop Kick and Coeur's eyes shot from Physic to Serene.

"Scissor might be ideal," Serene suggested. "Hivers are resistant to human telepathy."

"Indeed," Scissor said, "if Physic were to give me instruction in the basic operation of her medical scanner, I could monitor the procedure without fear of telepathic interference."

"Physic," Coeur said, "are you *sure* you want to do this?"

"Sure enough, skipper."

Coeur nodded.

"All right, Physic. But all of us will keep an eye on that scanner, not just Scissor."

* * *

In Serene's darkened office, Physic sat on a couch behind the director's desk with her eyes closed, flanked on her left by the kneeling director and on her right by Scissor, holding the doctor's pocket med scanner up to her head. Coeur and Drop Kick, meanwhile, knelt on the floor beside Scissor, alternating glances between the med scanner and the women sharing a singular memory on the couch.

To Coeur's relief, Serene and Physic spoke throughout the probe, with Serene asking questions and Physic answering lucidly (despite the stiff drink of Fijan rice wine that had helped her into a psychic trance). This conver-

sation reassured Coeur that the director was sticking to her promise of probing the Medlab incident alone—and not tramping around Physic's deep subconscious looking for dirt on her estranged husband.

"I hear the door open."

"Do you see anything?"

"Yes, a shadow."

"Describe the shadow."

"Round, like a melon, on the door before it opens."

"Then what happens?"

"We are making love. My eyes are closed."

"Go on."

"I hear the door open. I look at the window opposite the door."

"What do you see?"

"A reflection...*a robot*...returning to my husband's briefcase."

"Describe the robot."

"I only see it a second...maybe I'm—oh!"

"Let go of your pleasure, Orit. See the robot."

"It's round. A single eye—a data probe...oh my god..."

"Orit, you are no longer in the office. You are with me, here on Kreuzung."

"I understand."

"You will open your eyes and remember all you have seen."

Abruptly, the trance was over. Physic opened her eyes and gasped.

"Your brain waves are nominal," Scissor reported matter-of-factly. "There were no ill effects."

I don't know about that, Coeur thought.

"Thanks, Scissor," Physic said. "And thank you, director."

"You seem calmer," Serene said.

"Knowing the truth is good," Physic said. "I must have blocked out what I saw because it wasn't consistent with my positive perception of the situation."

"That makes sense," Serene said. "Does anybody recognize that model of robot?"

"It doesn't sound very common," Drop Kick ventured. "What, about the size of a cantaloupe?"

"It may be the Futronix F7," Scissor suggested, "an unusually small relic surveillance robot of high sophistication, tailored for electronic espionage. If memory serves, the Coalition restricts sale of that model to government agencies only."

"There you go," Drop Kick said. "Slap the cuffs on Delpero and throw him in jail."

"I wonder if psychic evidence is admissible on Aubaine?" Coeur asked.

"Whether it is or not," Serene said to the *Hornet* crew, "I will do my best to see that justice is done. Will you return to your home base soon?"

"Soon as in weeks?" Coeur asked. "No. We'll be jumping into open space next week, then on to Nike Nimbus and Ra. We probably won't be back this way for two months."

"Maybe that's good. It'll give Coalition Intelligence more time to build a case before they call you as witnesses."

"Great," Physic said, wearily. "I was really worried my schedule wouldn't be filled up enough arranging a divorce."

Chapter Six

"Hiver Manipulation"

(Excerpt from *Principles of Xenomorphic Psychology*,
by Dr. Cynthia Kirby,
Aubaine Institute of Sophont Studies, NE 1)

In the psychology of the Hiver race, no feature is quite as distinctive as the Manipulation. Indeed, this Hiver phenomenon, combined with a lack of emotion as humans understand it, has probably contributed more than any other to a lack of understanding between our respective races.

Yet, within the seemingly anarchistic world of the Hivers, the Manipulation is actually a well-defined and deliberate act, generally considered to have four parts. These are 1) the deed, clearly defined and recorded, as the ultimate objective, 2) a manipulator, whose actions may be direct or indirect, as suits the manipulation, 3) results, as correctly foreseen by the manipulator, and 4) the claim of credit by the manipulator.

When seen in the broader context of Hiver evolution, and a cultural impetus toward consensus and long-range planning, the Manipulation is a logical evolutionary adaptation. Hivers spend their first year completely alone in the wilderness, only afterward accepted into the nearest hive as adolescents deserving care and education. The parental

instinct of the Hivers is thus focused on child-rearing rather than reproduction, and some theorize that manipulation (steering others toward a course that is best for them) arose from a convergence between the sort of independence that permits Hivers to survive their year in the wilderness, and the teaching instinct that predominates in their society.

Nonetheless, more than one human has experienced a certain degree of discomfort with the subject of manipulation, and debate will doubtless continue for some time regarding the degree to which the Reformation Coalition itself is a manipulation on a grand scale. Those inclined toward this point of view tend to bring forward such extreme examples as the manipulation of the Ithklur. Once a wildly violent species, the Ithklur now occupy a key place in the Hiver Federation as soldiers and bodyguards, retaining their violent nature but channeling it in a way acceptable to the pacifistic Hivers; inevitably, this brings to mind the possibility of an equally profound alteration in the fundamental nature of humankind.

* * *

Early in the voyage of *Hornet*, Snapshot became aware of the Marines' antipathy toward Oriflamme. Though the Marines didn't seem to dislike her personally, their biting comments about her motherworld (mostly that it was backward and power-hungry) raised her bile and left her with one of two choices: either defend her home aggressively and annoy the captain, or avoid the Marines as much as possible. For the sake of her future in space, she chose the latter.

But then, eight days into the two-week jump from Kruyter to Nike Nimbus, a strange thing happened.

Going to perform maintenance on her turret fire control after most of the ship was asleep, Snapshot found Drop Kick fiddling with her station's locked iris valve.

"Drop Kick?"

Startled, the Marine came around, and Snapshot saw that he wore a gun on his right hip and a cargo net draped over his shoulder.

"Oh, Snapshot. Good. Maybe you can help me open this thing."

"What do you want in the turret for, sergeant?"

"Well...you may not believe this, but there's a robot in there."

"A robot?"

"Well, all right, let me back up. A few minutes ago I was back in the cargo hold—doing some late work on the sled—when I saw this little round robot, about this big," Drop Kick held his hands 10 centimeters apart, "sneak in, snoop around the sled, and run out again."

"Then it ran into this turret."

"Right. I chased it, but I couldn't catch it before the hatch closed."

"You mean it hopped off the ground to touch the security keypad?"

"Actually, no. Now that you mention it, it just ran up to the hatch and the iris valve opened for it. By the time I got here the hatch was closed and it wouldn't accept my access code."

Snapshot smirked.

"You know what this sounds like? It sounds like one of Scissor's toys got out of its workshop."

"That's what I thought, too."

"Well, anyway," Snapshot said, "I'd just as soon not have it damage anything in there. Here, I'll try my code."

"Wait a minute," Drop Kick said, unfolding the cargo net and spreading it across the hatch. "Okay, now try it."

Expecting no result, Snapshot punched her unique access code into the security pad beside the door. When the iris valve actually opened, she leapt back in surprise.

"Gotcha!" Drop Kick said, wrapping the net around a little round form that skittered through the hatch. "Now we'll get a look at you."

Recovering immediately from her shock, Snapshot reached out to help Drop Kick with the bundle in his hands. Like a netted animal, it struggled frantically for a few seconds and then stilled, affording Snapshot the chance to find an ordinary power switch on its carapace and deactivate it.

"All right, I think that shut it off."

"Probably not a spy robot," Drop Kick said, with a grin, "with a big off switch like that. Did it damage the turret?"

"No," Snapshot said, stepping into the turret and peering around. "Everything looks all right. I suppose we should report this, though, to whoever's on the bridge."

"Whoa, hold on," Drop Kick said. "If we report it, Red Sun will make us give it right back to Scissor."

"Well, it's probably his."

"Yes, but it was probing around *our* work areas. The way I see it, we deserve to know what makes it tick."

Snapshot nodded, with a growing smile. "Yeah. You're right."

"Join me in the cargo hold?"

"Hold on. I'll get my tool kit from the turret."

Less than two hours later, Snapshot and Drop Kick had

completely disassembled their eight-legged miscreant, laying its components out on a table that folded down from a panel in the cargo hold wall.

"Most of these components are Hiver," Snapshot said, examining a fine screw under a portable magnifier. "Even this screw has Hiver ideograms etched in it."

"Six eyes, 36 fingers—I guess they would be nimble."

"Yeah. The way you hear Crowbar talk about it, he feels handicapped sometimes because he's only got two arms."

"Would be nice..." Drop Kick mused. "If I had an extra pair of arms in the sled, I could steer, man the radio, and fire the guns all at the same time."

"Only an AFV's the last place you'd ever go if you were a Hiver."

"Not necessarily. They say the only Hivers you usually see on a battlefield are cavalry, because their vehicles insulate them from the killing outside."

"Yeah, I suppose. Now let's see if we can get this motherboard squeezed back in place."

The motherboard Snapshot referred to was a remarkably dainty piece of electronics about the size of a thumbnail, controlling all the robot's functions. Though they couldn't decipher its program code, most of its circuits were connected to sonar transceivers that it used both as eyes and as a means of communication with the ship's computer.

"Pretty clever, using high-frequency sound to talk with the computer," Drop Kick said, as Snapshot wedged the board into its frame, "but what's it all for?"

Snapshot however, did not answer. The board, which had slipped out of its frame so easily before, would not fit back in place.

"Trouble?"

"Yeah, the board won't fit."

"Maybe its upside down."

"It only goes one way. Here, you try."

To his surprise, Drop Kick found that Snapshot was right.

"This is bad, Drop Kick. If those two pieces don't fit together, it won't run."

"Well, I see the problem. The board is too big to fit in its slot."

"What do you mean, it's too big? It has to fit."

But, indeed, when shown the board and its slot side by side, Snapshot had to agree with Drop Kick.

And then a call came from the bridge.

"Cargo section, this is Bridge. Come in please."

Snapshot palmed a comm panel at arm's length.

"This is Snapshot, Red Sun. Go ahead."

"I attempted to hail you in the missile turret," Coeur said, "but I see you must have had duties elsewhere. Scissor wants you to know that he accidentally released an experimental robot into the vessel and would like to know if anyone has run into it."

Drop Kick mouthed a silent excretory obscenity.

"Understood, Bridge. Is there a description?"

"Cylindrical, approximately two liters in volume. Scissor said that the computer should have maintained continuous contact with the robot, but it went inactive several hours ago, in your area."

"I see," Snapshot said, trying to ignore Drop Kick's frantic attempts to wedge the board into position. "Is Scissor out looking for it?"

"Affirmative. He's going to swing through your area in a half-hour or so, after he finishes looking around his quarters."

"Roger, Bridge. We'll keep our eyes open. Out."

"It's no use," Drop Kick said. "Somehow, the polymer the board's made out of expanded after we removed it."

"Well, you heard Deep Six: We've got a half-hour to unexpand it and put the whole thing back together."

"Are you kidding? We don't even know what made it expand it in the first place!"

"That's funny; I didn't know the Aubani Marines ever gave up a fight."

Drop Kick growled, good-naturedly.

"All right. *I'll* put the legs back together, and *you* figure out how to make the board fit."

Less than five minutes later, Snapshot found the key. After taking off her gloves, the minute negative charge of her naked skin catalyzed the polymer to contract and fit in its slot.

"You're a genius, Snapshot."

"No, just lucky. I remembered that Scissor never wears gloves, because his skin is natural insulation."

Drop Kick nodded, impressed. *I should have thought of that.*

"Hey, Snapshot," he said, speaking to the gunner but keeping an eye on his work.

"What?"

"If this works, whaddaya say we split some Auroran gin from the liquor locker?"

"Yeah, we'd deserve it," Snapshot said, pausing before adding, "Drop Kick?"

"What?"

"Do you suppose this is all part of some plot by Scissor?"

"Hell, Snapshot, that's a virtual certainty."

"All the same, Drop Kick, you're pretty sharp. It's good

to work with you."

"I was going to say the same thing. What you did with that missile back at Kruyter...I figured you must be pretty sharp for a Flam—well, pretty sharp."

"Thanks, sergeant."

* * *

On the bridge, Coeur was nearing the end of her late evening watch when the aft hatch slid open behind her. Turning her chair around, she saw it was Scissor, holding a small, inert ball of metal with eight legs.

"Hello, Scissor. You must have found your robot."

"Affirmative," the Hiver said, walking into the bridge and pausing in the empty area set aside for Deep Six's rollerchair. "Snapshot and Drop Kick found the device and returned it to me, as I intended."

"You mean you planned for them to find it?"

"Indeed. It was my objective to arrange a circumstance in which the two would cooperate toward a common objective."

"A manipulation."

"Correct. However, I have a question that transcends the scope of my emotional awareness."

Coeur inched forward on her seat, suddenly both fascinated and alert. "What's that?"

"It has been my perception that both Drop Kick and Snapshot have a distrust of that which they are unfamiliar with, so that they are actually much more alike than different. Given this hypothesis, I reasoned that the investigation of my robot—intruding upon their work areas, and a psychological extension of myself, an alien being—would draw them together in a common task."

"Logical. So did you tell them all this?"

"Indeed I did. However, they were less... distressed...than many humans are when a manipulation of this type is revealed. It was my observation that they seemed relieved, and I am curious about this response."

Coeur nodded, wishing she'd been there to see it herself.

"My guess is you manipulated them into something that they wanted in the first place. They'd probably be friends if they got to know each other, and they never will trust anything alien very much."

"I comprehend. I believe the term is irony."

"Yes," Coeur said, "that would be the word."

* * *

In the corridor outside Scissor's stateroom, Drop Kick and Snapshot stood a long moment after the Hiver departed from them, reflecting on the strange circumstance of the manipulation.

"I guess we were right," Snapshot said. "He was manipulating us."

"Well, we should cut him some slack," Drop Kick said. "He is a Hiver after all; it's what they do."

"Well, yeah, I suppose. But even so, I still think I'd like to get back at him."

"Got something in mind?"

"Sure do. Did you see the fruit in his room?"

"It was kinda dark—I didn't notice."

"Oh, he's got it all right, over beside his work bench."

"Yeah, well, aren't they contaminated?"

Snapshot leaned in close to the big Marine.

"Not from what I hear. The way the doc tells it, Scissor

was just trying to scare us off so he could take all the fruit for himself. I say we sneak back in there while he's talking to the captain and take them for ourselves."

Drop Kick shrugged. "Okay."

And so Snapshot palmed the door release to Scissor's stateroom. Knowing that the room was visible from the bridge, where Scissor and the skipper were, she decided to leave the light low, but had no trouble steering right for the crate of fruit, guided by the sweet smell of its contents at close range. Drop Kick, meanwhile, crept along behind, keeping an eye out for the Hiver's return.

"Find the fruit yet?" Drop Kick whispered.

"Check. Just let me reach in and—yuck!"

"What?"

Even in the half-light, though, Drop Kick could see what had happened. Snapshot had reached for a seemingly intact apple, only to close her hand on a pulpy, rotten mass.

"No wonder you could smell them," Drop Kick observed. "They're decomposed."

"Gross," Snapshot said, dropping the smelly mass and wiping her hand on her body sleeve.

"We haven't had the fruit aboard that long."

"Yeah, just a few weeks. It's almost as if..."

"Almost as if he treated them with something to accelerate the decomposition," Drop Kick said. "Scissor probably never wanted the fresh fruit at all; he just wanted it after it turned mushy and disgusting."

"So the pesticide was harmless."

"Probably. But it's a little too late to worry about that now; it's not really in a form anybody would want."

"Except Scissor."

"Maybe we'd better just leave manipulation to the

manipulator," Drop Kick suggested. "Come on, let's go back to the hold and get you a towel."

"Oh, all right," Snapshot said, accepting her new friend's arm around her shoulder with a vague awareness that they'd somehow come out ahead in the end.

Chapter Seven

Though no one could be absolutely certain how long a jump would last, Crowbar and Deep Six had collaborated on four precise jumps between Aubaine and Nike Nimbus, and there was no reason to expect that the last jump to Ra would be any different. On the day expected to be *Hornet's* last day in jump, a modestly excessive final mess was laid on from the autogalley, supported by a hydroponic salad from Nike Nimbus and a round of drinks from the liquor locker. Even Coeur, who ordinarily abstained, took a draught of Auroran gin to make the evening toast.

"To absent friends," Coeur said, looking around the table that lacked only Scissor on jump watch and Gyro on the bridge.

"To absent friends," the others seconded, raising cups.

"So," Snapshot said to Drop Kick beside herself, "I guess tomorrow's the last time we'll ever see you guys."

"Fraid so," Drop Kick said. "I imagine we'd probably get more action following you around."

"Oh, I don't know," Whiz Bang said. "The next time Mercy sets the sled down on top of a civilian ground car, we'll have plenty of action."

"Hey," Mercy said, "everyone's entitled to a mistake."

"What's that?" Physic asked. "Mercy ran into a ground

car?"

"Actually, it was an air raft," Whiz Bang said, "and Mercy didn't sit on it, she *crushed* it; but it was really Bonzo's fault."

Bonzo, the AFV's sensor operator, nodded. "Okay, so it was my fault. But that pinhead shouldn't have parked his truck on the flightline. It's not like there's sensors on the bottom of the sled."

"Kinda funny," Crowbar said. "That means you and Snapshot have both destroyed the same number of vehicles—one."

"Yeah, how about that," Mercy said. "Snapper's was bigger, though."

Snapshot accepted the compliment with a chagrined nod, prompting a few chuckles from her mates. For the most part, though, they fell silent, reflecting on the unexpected turns their voyage had taken.

It was Deep Six, curiously, who broke the silence. Talking, the humans hadn't noticed the reeling bob that Deep Six developed as he sipped from his flask of ee'kwat—fermented algae—on his tray, but now it was suddenly the center of everyone's attention.

"I am rendingly sad," he said abruptly, pausing his rocking. "The water pours across us, and we are enveloped in darkness, ooEEda ka'aa OOkA EEda. A dark and looming chasm approaches."

Whereupon the Schalli's eyes rolled up at the ends of their eyestalks, and he fell limply against the side of his rollerchair tank.

"Is he all right?" Coeur asked.

Physic was out of her seat and at the side of Deep Six before the question was even asked. Expertly, she took a pair of readings from his head and neck with her pocket



Kirk
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med scanner and then flashed a penlight into each of his eyes.

"Just drunk," she said, to the relief of the other seven humans.

"Good Gaia," Snapshot said, "I knew they were melancholy, but really!"

"I think I'll roll him down to his tank," Physic said. "But I'll need some help to get him out of his chair. Any volunteers?"

All four Marines and three Arses leapt up at once.

"How about Crowbar and Drop Kick?" Mercy suggested.

"Yes, sir," both saluted.

Mental note, Coeur thought, as Drop Kick and Crowbar fell in behind Physic and the navigator; *pour out all ee'kwat as soon as we land.*

* * *

Eight hours later, Deep Six looked surprisingly well, and Coeur was heartened to see him roll up to his copilot's station just before precipitation from jump, relieving Gyro. As far as Coeur could tell, there were no lingering side-effects from the previous evening.

"You okay?"

"Yes, sir. The doctor tells me I made a disturbing comment about our impending doom yesterday, but I remember very little. I only hope that my conduct was not unduly disconcerting."

"Oh, don't worry about it, you were off duty. But I did pour the rest of the ee'kwat down my cabin toilet."

"A wise choice, sir," Deep Six said, engaging the clamps that would hold his wheels in place in the event

of gravity failure. Once those were set, he slid into place the adjustable panels that let him handle navigation, communications, and sensors with the effortless ease of a mathematical prodigy.

"Precipitation in two," Crowbar called from the bridge.

"Roger that," Coeur said. "Snapshot, signal all stations secure for precipitation."

"All stations send secure."

"All right then. Next stop: Ra."

Right on schedule, 167 hours after insertion, the crackling blackness of the jump field vanished, replaced by a velvet field of stars and the faraway blue-white disk of Ra. It was a scene both restful and serene—until every alarm on Deep Six's comm panel went off at once.

"Coalition distress signal," the Schalli said, disengaging the alarms and recognizing their source. "Much stronger than the planetary traffic net beacon."

"Oh my God," Coeur said, seeing the same thing on her backup comm panel. "Seabridge Nest."

"It's a general distress signal, but targeted at Coalition frequencies. I shall endeavor to raise the Hiver station."

"I'll take over sensors," Coeur said, taking over detailed inspection of the still-unfolding passive EMS array. "All hands, this is the bridge. Man battle stations, stand by vac suits."

Blinking red lights on her comm panel told her the message was understood by the crew; the Arses would be strapping on their portable air supplies, as Coeur did, and within minutes the Marines in the galley would relocate at the air locks in battle dress.

"I've got targets on passive EMS," Coeur said, "a weather satellite and an orbital EMS array, both functioning. Heard anything yet from Seabridge?"

"Contact is established, captain," Deep Six said. "A Hiver agronomist named Dina is answering the Seabridge radio."

Coeur nodded, switching her headset to the navigator's channel.

"Seabridge Nest, this is Red Sun, commander of RCS *Hornet*. What is your emergency?"

"RCS *Hornet*, a viral epidemic has struck the Hiver population of this nest. We have over 40% dead and require emergency assistance."

Good God, Coeur thought, visualizing the scale of the disaster. *At last report, Seabridge had a population of 500 Hivers.*

"Roger that, Seabridge. Have local agencies been alerted?"

"Affirmative. However, overland relief parties are at least two days away, and they probably are not equipped to arrest the epidemic."

"Understood, Seabridge. We'll be there in less than six hours. Can we assume full protective gear is in order?"

"Affirmative, *Hornet*. Although only Hivers appear to be affected. Our human security detachment appears completely immune."

On the back of Coeur's neck, every hair stood erect.

"Confirm, Seabridge: Were you attacked by an enemy force?"

"Unknown, *Hornet*. Our EMS satellite has not shown unauthorized traffic above this hemisphere."

"Have your SDBs been alerted?"

"Affirmative. However, units *Asp Alpha* and *Asp Beta* have been assigned to deep system patrols and will not arrive for over 12 hours."

"Understood, Seabridge. Advise immediately of any

update in your status. *Hornet* out."

Immediately, Coeur turned her head to face Deep Six. "Sixer, get that planet's governor on the line *now*."

* * *

As Coeur suspected would be the case, Ra's governor was of little help. Manjit Bryce was certainly conscious of the disaster, since the first reports of epidemic reached him four days earlier, but Seabridge Nest was simply too remote to reach quickly with TL-6 technology. All he could do was take the assurance of local townspeople, mingling with the Hivers, that they were not adversely affected by the killing virus and order in a relief convoy from Wilburton Army Base—1500 kilometers away.

"I understand, governor. I assume the Hivers haven't tried evacuating in grav vehicles."

"Affirmative. Frankly, the Hivers already have the best medical facilities on Ra, and they know it just as well as we do."

So the relief convoy's just a waste of time, Coeur recognized. Just doing something to be doing something.

"Understood, governor. If it helps, we happen to have an alien disease pathologist with us."

Over her headset, Coeur heard a relieved sigh. It was probably the first good news the governor had had in days.

"I don't mind telling you, captain, this situation is a disaster for Ra. If you need any help, call my office directly, and all our resources will be placed at your disposal."

"That will be helpful, sir. We could use an open line to your science ministry, if that's possible."

"I'll arrange it personally."

"And...you can tell your army that Drop Kick and his grunts will be late for their tactical exercises. I might need them and their vehicle when we get on the ground."

"Roger, *Hornet*. Understood."

"Thanks. I'll have my science personnel be in touch. *Hornet* out."

"Captain," Deep Six said, "I have scanned the planet closely. Aside from a single primitive weather satellite and a passive EMS array geosynchronous with the nest there are no spacecraft within range of our sensors."

"Do you suppose a starship could have bombed the nest with a targeted CBW strike?"

"I do not believe so, Red Sun. While a ship with even moderate stealth could evade the planet's radar easily, the sensors of the Hiver satellite are probably far superior in coverage of their hemisphere."

"But only their hemisphere."

"Yes, sir. A satellite has not yet been deployed to cover the other hemisphere."

Coeur nodded, setting the autopilot and switching her headset mike to shipwide address.

"All hands, this is Red Sun. Until further notice, all hands will remain at battle stations, with the exception of Scissor, Physic, and Drop Kick, who will meet me in the galley. Bridge out."

* * *

"What do we know?" Physic said, working on her fifth cup of coffee. "Basically, spit."

Standing off to one side of the galley table, Coeur frowned. Physic, Scissor, and Drop Kick—out of his battle

dress—had laid out several flatscreen computer displays with plans of the Seabridge Nest, the vast peninsula it lay upon, and research data from the nest's computers. With all of that, and three hours of study, Cover had expected more than spit.

"We do know there are no starships on the far side of the planet," Scissor said. "Snapshot's drone has established that."

"I know," Coeur said. "I've instructed her to keep the drone posted there. But why do we know so little about the virus?"

"The problem," Drop Kick said, "as far as we can tell, is that the virus killed or incapacitated most of the medical personnel first. The ones that are left are mostly a mix of agronomists and engineers, and they haven't been able to mount much of a research effort."

"Almost as if the virus were targeted," Coeur mused.

"Mind you," Physic said, "they're not stupid. Dina's research group has discovered that the disease attacks the glandular nexus directly, altering its secretions to poison the Hiver's body."

"Why would humans be immune?" Coeur asked. "I know our DNA is different, but we share a lot of the same proteins, don't we?"

"Indeed we do," Scissor said. "However, the Hiver gland produces enzymes that are utterly unlike anything in the human body. Hiver Isomerase A, for instance, has been transformed from a chemical controlling development of larvae to a deadly toxin."

"Right," Physic agreed. "It's converting harmless enzymes like that into lethal variations. The damn disease is so lethal, it killed almost half of them within a week."

"Any idea how it's spread?"

"Not precisely," Scissor said. "Most probably through touch—routine social contact."

"Physic," Coeur said tersely, "this is your speciality. Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"Absolutely not. And frankly, it scares me."

"Why?"

"Because this is a targeted virus; it almost has to be."

"All right. Why?"

"Red Sun," the doctor said, "I assume you're familiar with Hiver anatomy—the closed digestive tract, specifically."

"I suppose that's common knowledge, yes."

"Right. Where humans have a mouth and anus, the Hivers have only one organ: the cloaca. As a matter of course, since Hivers ingest food and eliminate with the same organ, the cloaca produces powerful enzymes and antibodies that break down almost any bacteria—or virus—that gets into that area. Organisms this powerful," Physic tapped an aerial image of the nest, "that can get through the cloaca that easily, don't occur in nature."

"And you're positive about that?"

"Positive enough. I'll know for sure when I get some bodies to autopsy."

"No problem there," Drop Kick muttered.

"Another question. Why is this nest so far out in the middle of nowhere?"

Scissor answered that.

"Seabridge Nest was built to test methods for improving crop yields on low-tech planets. Beyond that, however, it was also felt that the nest should be far away from human development so there would be no conflict of land use, and in rugged, forbidding terrain so that larvae would have an appropriate area within which to de-

velop."

"I hadn't thought about that," Coeur said. "How are the larvae doing out in the wilderness?"

"Apparently, they aren't affected by the virus," Physic said, "although it's hard to be certain. The Hivers don't pay much attention to their larvae."

"But isn't this area," Coeur indicated a box of red dots on a wider-angle image of the land above the nest, "some sort of larva preserve?"

"Negative," Scissor said. "We Hivers drop larvae wherever we are, but have no concern what happens to them afterward. Indeed, I have periodically fumigated this starship while it was in port, to kill any larvae that I might have dropped during the voyage. The area in that image was set aside by the *human* government to protect the larvae from human citizens who might injure the larvae; it would never occur to a Hiver to do such a thing."

"I see. Have any of those larvae had time to reach adolescence?"

"Unlikely. The nest has only been on Ra for six months."

"All right," Coeur said finally, "it's obvious we're not going to learn much more here in space. Before we land, though, I'll want everyone in vac suits—just in case this virus is a latent threat to humans."

"Absolutely," Physic agreed.

"Right. Drop Kick, prepare the AFV for action. We'll land in less than an hour."

"Yes, sir."

The name of Seabridge Peninsula belied its massive nature: 5000 kilometers from north to south, it was a

continent in all but designation. Perhaps, Coeur thought, it was the relative size of neighboring Bannon—a land mass stretching 16,000 kilometers from pole to pole—that suggested less than continental status to the first surveyors, but whatever they called it, it was big; on the verge of *Hornet's* descent from low orbit, it filled the entire horizon visible through her bridge window.

As it was summer in the north, permanent ice clung only to the mountains and islands closest to the pole, far above the verdant forest that dominated the remainder of the peninsula. Not far from the retreating terminator to the west, the few sentient inhabitants of that forest were likely just beginning their day.

"I don't see much on sensors," Coeur admitted, steering toward the nest's landing beacon.

"I am registering Wilburton's power grid on short-range EMS," Deep Six reported. "That and the Seabridge beacon are the main signs of habitation."

Since *Hornet* hadn't yet landed and opened any hatches, Coeur let Deep Six man his post without his vac suit helmet on—an expedient that let him use his whiskers to control sensors and his tentacles to control communications. Once the ship was grounded, however, he would have to seal his vac suit fully as insurance against the unknown killer that sprang from the heart of the vast and empty land ahead.

Just 2000 humans and Hivers live there, Coeur thought, feeling dense atmosphere grip Hornet's control surfaces. An army could hide in that wilderness, and no one would ever see them.

"Track is clear," Deep Six said. "Range 500, altitude 50 kilometers."

"Roger that. Setting flaps to 20 degrees."

"Horizontal velocity 600."

"Check contra-grav."

"Contra-grav nominal."

"Engaging contra-grav."

Deep in Ra's stratosphere, *Hornet* suddenly lost air-speed in a manner that would have shocked any conventional aircraft pilot. Braking with contra-grav lift—and helped by a good thick atmosphere—2000 tonnes of starship lost 500 kph of velocity in a matter of minutes.

Through *Hornet's* bridge viewscreen the view was very suddenly of trees rolling leisurely by only a hundred meters below the bow. For the few people in their path, Coeur knew the gently falling freighter must be a sight both awesome and unexpected.

"Range is 5 kilometers," Deep Six said. "Landing gear down."

"Secure for landing."

"All stations send secure."

The last few kilometers took *Hornet* across the River Tam and Collins Bar, a scattering of buildings perhaps an hour's walk from Seabridge Nest. Just seconds away lay a square kilometer clearing in the forest—the nest itself.

In typical Hiver fashion, the conic buildings and cultivated fields of the nest showed no obvious order to the human eye, but Coeur delayed a closer look while she looked for a landing area. For the sake of safety, that area was a broad concrete tarmac by the river, well clear of the inhabited structures.

"The ship is down," Coeur said, over the hiss of compressing landing gear shock struts.

"All stations read secure," Deep Six said, "but I would attract your attention to our two o'clock."

"Oh my God."

Not a hundred meters away, near the edge of the nest proper, a half-dozen humans with bandanas over their mouths paused in their work to gaze upon the grounded *Hornet*. That work appeared to comprise heaving upward of 30 shrouded bodies into a common grave.

"Welcome to Seabridge Nest, *Hornet*," came a familiar voice over the radio: Dina. "Our security chief has been alerted to meet you."

Welcome, indeed, Coeur thought, watching the burial party go back to work, *to hell*.

* * *

Hivers were pacifistic by nature, and therefore required no security forces to maintain order amongst themselves. On the edge of the hostile Wilds, however, one could never be certain when an attack might come from outside the Coalition, so Seabridge Nest was actively guarded—however lightly—by Company A of the 515th Ra Military Police.

It was Captain Hayward Pratt, commander of Company A, who came out to meet *Hornet*, driving an internal-combustion ground jeep. Moments after he drove up, he was met by Coeur, Physic, Scissor, and Drop Kick—the former three in vac suits, and the latter in light battle dress—descending *Hornet's* starboard air lock ladder. Whether Pratt would have liked personal protection like their own was largely immaterial, Coeur suspected, since Ra's low-tech vac suits would be absurdly bulky and impractical for everyday use.

"Captain Hayward Pratt," the haggard man said, saluting. "I take it you're Red Sun."

"Affirmative," Coeur said through her suit speaker,

and answering with her own salute. "And this is Drop Kick, a Marine cavalry sergeant; Physic, our doctor; and Scissor of the Aubaine Technical Academy."

"M. Dina has instructed me to convey you to her laboratory, assuming this old rattletrap isn't too primitive for you."

"This will be fine," Coeur said, accepting the seat beside Pratt's. Drop Kick and Physic climbed in the back, with Scissor between them. A moment later the jeep's motor rattled to life, and Pratt was steering back toward the center of the nest.

If anything, the nest appeared more chaotic to Coeur from ground level, though it really wasn't that different from any other Hiver colony. In all likelihood, the nest had begun with a small core of fields and habitation domes, and added others as individual researchers concocted new ideas about land use.

Yet, for all their individuality, the Hivers were hardly obsessed with personal property; the few dozen Hivers and robots visible in the fields seemed to roam around without any obvious boundaries on their movement. Only the human security patrols on the perimeter of the nest appeared to be concerned with remaining in properly assigned positions.

"I don't see many Hivers in the fields," Drop Kick said. "Are the rest all sick?"

"It's not as bad as it looks—yet. Until Dina finds out what's causing the epidemic, I've advised all the Hivers—sick and healthy—to stay inside as much as possible, for their own protection."

"Surely you aren't keeping the sick Hivers with the well ones?" Physic asked.

"We try not to," Pratt said, "but without an antibody

test to screen the victims, the best we can do is haul everyone with symptoms to special quarantine buildings."

"You mentioned protection," Coeur said. "Do you mean from the natural environment?"

"Negative, captain. These local structures can't be pressurized to hold out local atmosphere. What I meant was protection against the agents who released the disease."

"I wasn't aware that that had been nailed down as a certainty," said Scissor.

"Maybe it hasn't," Pratt answered, "but I'm certain enough.

"I am curious," Scissor said. "Upon what do you base your conclusion?"

"Security's my job, Scissor. For my money, nothing natural takes out a whole colony of Hivers in less than a week."

"That's a pretty broad statement, captain," Coeur observed.

"Are you kidding? Hiver larvae root around in muck that would kill a Marine, their skin's as tough as rubber, and their stomach juices'll burn through armor plate. I mean, really, they may not like a fight, but they're tough little buggers all the same."

"Sound empirical reasoning," Scissor agreed, as the jeep slowed to a stop before one of the larger hemispherical structures—30 meters wide and sprouting a nest of radio aerials and antennae. Its wide front door, ideal for a Hiver but a bit low for a human, was guarded by a single MP.

"This is the medical laboratory," Pratt explained, leading them out of the jeep and through the sliding front

door, "although you might as well call it the hospital. It still houses more patients than any other building."

From the first moment she entered the building, Coeur was grateful that smells were held outside her suit, for all around were disintegrating Hiver bodies. Right out in the building's foyer, four Hivers lay sprawled on cushions in various stages of painful death, the sickest among them caked with slick secretions from the swollen black pustules that covered their bodies.

It must be a blessing, Coeur thought, that the sense of smell is rare in Hivers.

More incapacitated Hivers, tended by healthier mates and remarkably agile Hiveroid robots, populated all the rooms of the lower floor, blotting from the minds of *Hornet's* human crew the high sophistication of their surroundings. Later, Coeur would note that all the Hiver buildings—though built from native wood and plaster—were suffused with expert computer systems controlling every aspect of environment, data access, and communication. For the moment, though, all she saw was death.

"There are three floors in this building," Pratt said, leading the Coalition party through two concentric rings of rooms to a central elevator, "but the first and second floors are mostly infirmaries. We'll have to go up to the third level to reach Dina and the laboratory."

And so they did, ascending through the center of the building to its highest level. Up near the top of the dome, the building was only 15 meters across and not differentiated into separate rooms. Instead, there were four partially partitioned areas arrayed around the lift shaft, stocked with elaborate medical lab equipment and staffed by a mixed group of robots and Hivers in vac suits.

M. Dina, as it happened, was working alone when Pratt

approached with the *Hornet* party. Accustomed to dealing with the human security detail, the Hiver wore a translator outside its vac suit habitually, even when it didn't expect human company.

"Greetings, M. Dina," Sgt. Pratt said, saluting out of habit. "This is the party from RCS *Hornet*."

"Greetings," Dina said, turning from its work at an electron microscope. "I assume you are Red Sun, the vessel's commander."

"Yes," Red Sun said, "and these are Physic, my doctor, and Drop Kick, a Marine trooper. I assume you know Scissor, or Cicero."

"Yes, I do," Dina said, directing an elaborate sequence of Hiver gestures toward Scissor.

Scissor answered with an elaborate sequence of its own.

"Manipulator Dina approves of my use of a vac suit," Scissor explained for the benefit of its mates, "since her agronomist associates here availed themselves of the few available vac suits soon after the medical staff was killed, and perhaps not coincidentally, have avoided a high casualty rate among themselves."

"I'm not as certain that vac suits are necessary for your human crew," Dina added, "though it may be wise for you to wear them until the disease organism is isolated."

"Wait a minute," Drop Kick said to Scissor, "what did you mean by 'manipulator'?"

"Allow me to explain," Dina said. "The term is an honorific, indicating an individual who is noted for its accomplishment of a significant historical manipulation."

"Indeed," Scissor observed. "M. Dina was responsible for convincing this nest that Seabridge was the ideal

location for the agricultural research station."

"Really," Coeur said.

"In retrospect," Dina admitted, "it may not have been my wisest decision."

* * *

After the initial greetings were exchanged, Sgt. Pratt excused himself to attend to other duties, and Dina got down to a detailed briefing of the epidemic situation for Coeur and her mates.

Dina's data verified a crisis flying out of control. Although the virus clearly targeted a specific body system—reproduction—only complete lack of contact between Hivers was a practical defense. Unfortunately, the Hivers were very social, and a "hand-shaking" liaison with a passing Hiver freighter—just before the epidemic exploded—had not only spread the virus to every corner of the nest, but likely into space as well.

"We have called the organism Hiver Retrovirus Zed," Dina said, "but we have neither isolated nor positively identified it."

"Mutating too quickly?" Physic asked.

"Yes. And our work is also complicated by the death of our two best microbiologists."

"Physic'll help there," Coeur said. "That's her occupation."

"Yes," Physic agreed. "I'd like to get to work as soon as I can."

"Very good," Dina said. "Since I was alerted to your imminent arrival, I have programmed a human-style workstation to translate our database into Anglic. The six medical robots in the nest are also programmed to speak

Anglic, and one of them shall be detailed as your assistant."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Physic asked, taking a seat at the reprogrammed workstation. "The sooner we start, the sooner we'll lick this thing."

"I agree," Dina said activating a radio that was integral to its translator/voder. Seconds later, a Hiver robot strolled into Dina's lab section and signaled Dina with Hiver gesture talk.

"This is Florence," the manipulator explained, "an expert laboratory technician. She will familiarize you with our laboratory procedures."

"Greetings, Physic," the robot spoke through an integral torso speaker. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

The three humans shot a disbelieving look at Dina.

"Emotion?" Coeur asked.

"Emotion simulation," Scissor corrected its shipmates. "True emotion requires sentience."

"And sentience," Dina added, "is a property of Virus alone."

Even if Florence and the lab computer weren't vampiric AIs, however, they had a degree of autonomous intelligence that impressed Physic. Within minutes of sitting down at her workstation, she was beginning a preliminary overview of research to date and visualizing the best way to exploit it.

Coeur was pleased, and a little surprised, to have her friend so quickly at work on the epidemic, but there were other considerations that might not be uncovered in a lab. Why, for instance, had the disease blown up so suddenly out of nowhere?

"Dina," Coeur said, taking the Hiver aside. "There's

obviously another thing to worry about: how the virus got into the nest. You might not have been overtly attacked, but is it possible that the virus might have arrived by other means? Say, unauthorized visitors, or strange samples from the fields?"

"The thought has occurred to me," Dina said. "Though the security cordon is quite effective, and our satellite monitors local traffic most efficiently."

"Surely," Drop Kick said, "some of your people must leave the nest occasionally, even if none of the larvae are old enough to have wandered back yet."

"Correct. A Hiver named George, for instance, wanders in and out of the nest periodically, researching chemical properties of local flora."

"Is George around now?"

"Negative. George came into the nest a week ago, and then returned to the forest."

"Does he have a radio?" Coeur asked.

"At his base camp, yes. He checks in periodically."

"How periodically?"

"The period varies. By his nature, he is among the more independent of our colleagues."

"How long has the last interval been?" Scissor asked, vocalizing in Anglic for the benefit of the humans.

"I shall investigate," Dina said, moving to a laboratory computer. The Hiver text it pulled up was presumably a communications log.

"Curious," it said. "He has not reported in since his last departure."

"Is his radio still active?" Drop Kick asked.

"Affirmative. I shall attempt to raise him."

A full minute of effort yielded no results.

"This may be a situation deserving study," Scissor said.

"Can you project a topographic map of his radio location?"

"Yes."

The map that Dina brought up was in high resolution, a satellite zoom of 100 square kilometers in the rugged heart of the larva range, overlaid with isometric altitude lines. To Drop Kick's eye it meant one thing: inaccessibility to local ground vehicles.

"No jeep's going in there," he said.

"Not if it doesn't want a busted suspension anyway," Coeur agreed. "Drop Kick, I think we've found a job for your sled."

Chapter Eight

"I don't like it," V-Max said. "We can't hide here forever."

"We don't have to hide forever," Zorn said. "Just until the SDBs withdraw from Ra."

"And then what?"

"And then we pick up our ground team and scoot."

"Amen to that. I've already had more of Ra than I can take."

Zorn didn't comment on that. Reclining in the pilot's couch beside her navigator, she beheld a vista at once both comforting and constricting. The north pole of the gas giant Guldun IV, 10,000 kilometers below, glowed like a turquoise gem—concealing *Vi Et Armis* in its powerful magnetic field, but also a virtual prison while Ra's two SDBs were powering past toward their home base one orbit away.

That uncongenial thought was foremost in Zorn's mind when a red light blinked on V-Max's comms panel.

"Incoming communication," V-Max reported. "Sensor Drone 1 has a new contact 100 diameters from Ra."

"A starship?"

"Affirmative. She's sending transmissions on coded Coalition frequencies, but her transponder code is not in our fleet library."

"Fikken," Zorn swore, pulling the data up on her own control panels. "What's the transmission delay on this data?"

"Six hours."

That, Zorn knew, was an inescapable effect of the drone's mission. Standing in close to Ra, the modified missile had to wait until the Hiver EMS satellite orbited to the planet's nightside before firing a burst transmission to distant Guldán IV.

"Now this is damn strange," Zorn said, scrolling through the drone report. "According to this, it was a far trader that jumped in, but there are no far traders left in the Coalition fleet."

"Could be a regular freighter."

"Using Coalition fleet codes? I don't think so."

"What *do* you think?"

"I think it's a Coalition Intelligence mission. That's consistent with our supply ship failing to arrive."

"You know, skipper, our resupply might just've had an accident, or went yellow."

"I don't see it. Not when the alternative's a Guild extermination contract."

"I see your point," V-Max said, "but there's still another problem we have to worry about. As long as this new ship and the SDBs are at Ra, we can't pull our people off that rock."

"I'm aware of that."

"So what are we going to do? We don't have enough consumables to stay here more than a week."

"If we're lucky," Zorn said, "things will still work out. The SDBs will go back to their far orbit stations, and that freighter will jump out quickly to spread the word about the virus. Then we just run in, grab our people at the

rendezvous, and scoot."

V-Max answered that wishful thinking with an incredulous glance.

"Right," Zorn said. "We should be so lucky."

"What will we do, then, if we can't get to the planet undetected? We sure can't let our ground team fall into Coalition hands. Even if they're not part of our regular crew, they could be captured and compelled to talk."

"V-Max, we'll do the same as we always do. Whatever it takes to get the job done."

* * *

Asp Alpha and *Asp Beta* reached *Ra* just four hours after *Hornet*, taking up defensive positions on either side of the planet. By that time, Drop Kick's support sled had been unloaded from *Hornet*, and Coeur had devised an operational plan that she shared with Deadeye, master of *Asp Alpha*, orbiting above the western hemisphere.

"What I'd like to do, Deadeye, is put *Hornet* on orbit watch here, so your two SDBs can return to the deep system patrol."

"Do you think you'll be safe?" Deadeye asked. "If enemy agents are at large, they might have deployed from a warship in one of *Ra*'s oceans, maybe in the eastern hemisphere."

"That's a possibility," Coeur agreed, watching the burial party visible through *Hornet*'s bridge window, "but we're not exactly unarmed. Besides, we're out on the frontier here, and it wouldn't do for an enemy force to slip into one of the far orbit gas giants while you were tied up here."

"Roger that," Deadeye said, "though we will approach

Ra periodically."

"Deadeye," Coeur said, "take my word for it: If we spot anything hostile, you'll be the first to know."

"Affirmative, *Hornet*. *Asp Alpha*, out."

Gyro, Snapshot, Deep Six, and Crowbar, behind and next to Coeur, reserved comment until their captain removed her headset.

"Do you think you'll be safe," Gyro asked, "here on the planet?"

"I don't know," Coeur said, turning around in her pilot's chair. "Drop Kick says the front armor on his sled is six times thicker than the armor on *Hornet*."

"What about the top, bottom, and sides?" Crowbar asked.

"We'll make sure nobody shoots at us from those sides," Coeur said, eliciting a nervous chuckle from her mates.

"Actually, the main reason I want the sled is because it's faster than an air raft and has much better sensors. So, is unloading of our cargo complete?"

"Affirmative," Crowbar said. "We've put out the sled, two grav belts, a broomstick, a modular shelter with an air lock, and the five Hiver cargo modules. I'd have offloaded the air raft too, but you insisted that it stay on board."

"As a lifeboat," Coeur reminded the engineer. "It wouldn't look too good if I turned the ship over to four rookie Arses and didn't give them a way to escape in an accident."

"That's what I like about the skipper," Snapshot said. "Always positive."

"Fear not," Deep Six said, "we shall look to the safety of the vessel."

"Right," Gyro agreed. "And we'll keep our ears open in case you need us."

Coeur nodded, rising to stand.

"I'm sure you'll do fine. Just as soon as you top off the fuel tanks at the starport, take up a position in low orbit and keep your eyes open for trouble."

"Yes, sir," the four Arses answered.

And, Coeur decided not to add, *if scenario 61C comes up, try not to blow up the ship.*

"Good luck, people. The ship is yours."

* * *

Not five minutes after *Hornet* roared back into the afternoon sky, Drop Kick found his AFV driver and took her aside for a sergeant major-to-corporal talk.

"Mercy, you're gonna have to stay behind."

"Yes, sir. May I ask why, sir?"

"Red Sun's taking over as driver, corporal. As the senior Arse on site, that is her prerogative."

"Is it also because she's a better driver, sir?"

"Negative. We need Whiz Bang because he's our gunner, and Bonzo because he's our sensor tech, and there's no fifth couch."

"Understood, sir."

"What I do need," Drop Kick said, "is for you to glue yourself to the doctor and Scissor and keep them covered at all times. I don't need to remind you that you'll be the only Coalition Marine at this station and are personally responsible for the protection of our personnel here."

"Sir, will I answer to Captain Pratt, sir?"

"Only if his orders do not contradict the captain's or mine. Otherwise, you can direct him to the nearest

flagpole and tell him where he can stick it."

"Yes, sir. May I assume that applies to the relief column when it arrives as well, sir?"

"You may, indeed, corporal. Carry on."

Since *Hornet's* ground crew could hardly spend days on end in bulky TL-12 vac suits, a six-ton modular shelter with an air lock was essential for their stay at Seabridge Nest. However, it gave no one a sense of security to leave it out on the tarmac with the rest of *Hornet's* cargo modules, so Drop Kick suggested towing it behind the support sled to the MP building in the middle of the nest a kilometer away.

This accepted suggestion gave Coeur her first practical experience driving the sled. Having flown many much more complex craft with HEPIaR thrust, Coeur was a quick study, but it still helped to have Mercy in the sensor tech's chair beside her—pointing out the fiddly handling qualities of the vehicle.

"Watch the tail," Mercy cautioned, as they approached the MP hut after a 10-minute trek from the tarmac. "It'll want to fly up when you detach the tow cable."

"All that weight in the front?"

"Affirmative."

"Is our stern clear?"

"Oh yeah," Mercy reported, looking through passive EMS at the throng of security personnel following at a respectful distance. "I don't think they've ever seen anything like this."

"Good. Cable away."

Just as Mercy predicted, the lightly armored tail of the

AFV swung up as the tow cable released, but it was nothing that Coeur and the two flight computers couldn't compensate for. A moment later the vehicle had safely landed on the ground, and MPs began to congregate around the modular shelter to assist Drop Kick and the other Marines in an inspection for exterior damage.

Since her battle dress was a bit bulkier than Coeur's vac suit, Mercy let the captain climb out the top hull hatch first. Coeur then reached down to pull up the armored Marine, and they both jumped off the sloping bow together.

"You're a good pilot," Mercy admitted. "I think you'll do fine."

"Thank you, corporal."

"Nice flying, Red Sun," Drop Kick said, coming over from the shelter with Bonzo and Whiz Bang. "Mercy, take your position in the hospital and keep a channel open for our report. We'll launch momentarily."

"Sir," Mercy snapped, saluting and turning to march off to the hospital 100 meters away.

"All right people," Coeur said to the other Marines. "Let's do it."

With the benefit of TL-13 imaging software, both the turret and bow stations of the Phyrus saw a high-resolution view of the forest canopy throughout the flight, not just the sensor operator. Thus, Coeur and Bonzo in the bow, and Drop Kick and Whiz Bang behind them in the turret, shared a common view of Black Water Slough, the brackish waterway at the southern limit of the Federal Larva Sanctuary. A kilometer away and 100

meters down, it looked like nothing so much as a winding, backed-up storm drain.

"Steer port 325," Drop Kick said, "along the river."

"Roger that," Coeur said, following the order and executing the turn. Although Coeur was still in command of the overall mission, Drop Kick was certainly her most experienced ground tactics specialist and she resolved to let him command the AFV during routine maneuvers and combat.

"And go NOE too. No need for anyone out there to see us before they have to."

Without the benefit of inertial compensation, Coeur and the tankers leaned hard to their right as she took them down at a sharp angle, throttling down to 170 kph to hurtle safely through the ravine at a height of 10 meters.

"Range is 58 clicks," Drop Kick reported.

"Hey, look," Bonzo said, placing a target designator box over a cluster of tiny starfish forms a kilometer ahead at a bend in the river.

"Larvae," Coeur said, watching the young Hivers scatter at the roar of her thrusters. "That kind of muck's their preferred environment."

"You mean Scissor grew up in a place like this?" Bonzo asked.

"If he was lucky, yeah. Hivers are scavengers, mostly."

"Explains the lack of hunting instinct," Whiz Bang offered from the turret, where he scanned ahead through the gunsight of his 12-megajoule plasma gun.

"Cut the chatter, people," Drop Kick said. "We may be in hostile country."

That sullen estimation quelled further comment until the sled was a scant five minutes from George's camp. It

was at that point, turning through another bend in the river, that the passive EMS caught a glimpse of something huge, black, and Hiveroid, dashing out of the river.

"What the hell was that?" Whiz Bang exclaimed.

"Razorclaw," Coeur said, sparing a glance at the blurry image captured by Bonzo. "Two hundred-kilogram predator native to Guaran. Hivers like to seed their colonies with native forms like that."

"Jeez," Bonzo said, "isn't that kinda dangerous?"

"From what I've read," Coeur said, "they prefer larvae."

"Although I'm sure they'd make an exception in your case," Whiz Bang told Bonzo.

"Target in two," Drop Kick announced. "Red Sun, bring us to two-zero kph while I zero the satellite fix."

Coeur complied, coincidentally letting the sled slip closer to the rotting detritus below.

"Got it. Steer right 093."

"Roger that."

Executing the course required Coeur to climb back above the trees, a maneuver that revealed their position in the midst of a trackless wilderness. Taking her cue from Bonzo, Coeur switched her passive EMS viewscreen to a 360-degree projection and noted that Seabridge Nest had long since passed beneath the horizon to the south.

Since a radio link remained in place between the Hiver satellite and George's camp, it was a simple matter for the sled to steer toward the latter point automatically, climbing a low hill at treetop height and minimal speed. Coeur only took back active control for the last 500 meters, when it became clear that the camp must be down at the bottom of a cleft in the west face of the hill.

"No human contacts," Bonzo reported, "no heat, no

electromagnetic. Just the beacon."

"All right," Drop Kick said. "Take us in nice and easy."

The camp, after so much tension on approach, was anticlimax. Just a portable shelter, scattered supplies, and a satellite uplink dish. The heat signature of a Hiver—either alive or decomposing—was entirely absent.

"See a safe spot to land?" Drop Kick asked.

"Not in the cleft, no. How about lower down?"

"Fine, just a pick spot where the gun can cover the camp."

That Coeur could manage, to Whiz Bang's satisfaction.

"Now keep us covered," Drop Kick said, grabbing his gauss rifle and popping the turret hatch. "Bonzo, you're with me."

* * *

Little more was found on foot than they could see from the air, with one exception.

"Footprints," Bonzo announced, "all around the edge of the cleft."

"Can you tell which ones are freshest?" Coeur sent back.

Answering that took Drop Kick and Whiz Bang several minutes of careful scrutiny. Fortunately, it was the just the sort of work Marines were expected to be proficient at.

"These," Drop Kick said finally, pointing out the direction with a straight-arm gesture toward the river. "East by northeast."

"Lake Kolima's that way," Bonzo noted. "The eastern edge of the sanctuary."

"All right guys," Coeur said, "saddle up and we'll check it out."

The lead proved to be dead-on. Not 10 minutes later they found the desiccated corpse of a Hiver near the shore of Lake Kolima, whose western bank lay well below the horizon. This time Coeur sat her vehicle down just meters from the objective, settling a half a meter into the peaty earth at the edge of the water.

"Must've been dead at least a week," Bonzo reported, joining Drop Kick for a close inspection of the body. "But his gear's intact. Looks like a Hiver laser pistol, a personal computer, and some kind of sample case."

"Uh-oh," Drop Kick suddenly announced.

"What's up?" Coeur asked from inside the AFV.

"Bootprints," Drop Kick explained. "Two pairs, fairly fresh, right around the body."

"They headed anywhere in particular?"

"Looks like a lot of prints, now that I look closely. The human prints head back into the trees in a different direction from the way the Hiver came."

"Good work, Drop Kick," Coeur said, "and Bonzo. Take some shots of the body with your holovid, then put the body and gear in the cargo bay and scout around to see if you can follow those prints."

"Roger that," Drop Kick replied. "Bonzo, you're the sensor tech, you take the pictures."

"Yes, sir."

Some minutes later, the body was thoroughly photographed in situ, then transferred to the rear of the AFV, whereupon Drop Kick and Bonzo sallied into the forest near the river's edge to make their second great discovery of the day.

"Looks like there was a camp site out here," Drop Kick sent over his radio, "about a hundred meters from the lake. All the bootprints end up in this area."

"Funny thing, though," Bonzo added. "Looks like all the prints just start in the middle of this clearing, then wander off toward the lake. With the soft ground around here, there should be prints showing them walking up to this place."

"Unless they didn't walk," Coeur commented, from the AFV.

"Well, they had to start somewhere," Whiz Bang said.

"They did," Drop Kick said ominously. "The feet dig into the dirt at one point like they fell from a height—like they were flying grav belts and landed suddenly."

"Right," Bonzo said, "and their heels are strange, too, with the weight set back like they were carrying a load on their backs. I'd have to agree with the sergeant major."

"Grav belts?" Whiz Bang asked. "Who uses grav belts around here?"

"People who aren't local," Coeur said. "Better get some shots of those prints, too. Good work, guys."

Chapter Nine

"A sensor drone?" Coeur asked.

"Yes, sir," Mercy reported, as the skipper and her three tankers debarked from the grounded *Phyrrus*. "The report came into Physic's lab just as you were landing. Apparently, someone parked this drone way out in an irregular orbit so no one would notice it, only Deep Six noticed it, and Gyro shot it down."

"Wow," Bonzo said, "and here we thought we'd found the big proof of offworld interference."

"It's all circumstantial," Coeur said, "until Physic can tell us more about the virus. Anyway, what time is it? 1500 hours?"

"1515 hours," Whiz Bang said, "yes, sir."

"And the relief column'll get here around 1800. All right, here's the plan. Bonzo and Whiz Bang, see to it our cargo gets to the proper laboratories for study. Drop Kick, find us a place to have our evening briefing. Mercy, you're with me."

Mercy's job turned out to be the easiest: returning to the lab where Physic, Scissor, Dina, and Florence were working, and putting a signal through to *Hornet*.

"Manipulator Dina," Mercy explained, "programmed her satellite relay station here to give us a direct link to the ship."

"Mighty thoughtful," Coeur said, sitting down on a Hiver stool at the satellite panel. "Computer, put me through to RCS *Hornet*."

"Stand by, please," the computer said, exhibiting the same emotion simulation previously demonstrated in Florence. "Contact established."

"*Hornet*, this is Red Sun. Do you read?"

"Roger, Red Sun," Deep Six answered. "Gyro would like to speak with you."

"Put her through."

"Red Sun," Gyro said a moment later, "do you copy?"

"I copy. And I understand you toasted a bogie."

"That's a big affirmative, Red Sun. We picked up a bogie in a crazy elliptical orbit a few minutes ago, but it wouldn't send IFF, and Sixer clearly detected radiation from a nuclear warhead, so—under the circumstances—I felt it was a hazard to navigation."

"Absolutely," Coeur agreed, "although I hope you ID'd her positively before you fired."

"Yes, sir. She wasn't a manned spacecraft."

"As long as you're certain. Listen, Gyro, I've got a special mission for you."

"Go ahead."

"A few minutes ago, we were back in the forest, looking for George—who we think we found. We also found some tracks suggesting humans operating grav belts in the area. Since it's way the hell in the middle of nowhere, they must have staged from a base somewhere. Keep your eyes peeled for anything suspicious, particularly on the far side of the planet the Hiver satellite doesn't cover."

"Like an air raft power plant? That could be a big job."

"We'll try to narrow down the search area from our

end," Coeur said. "But anyway, it's not like Ra's covered with high-power generators. As far as we know, the SDB support base has two air rafts at Port Adrian, and the nest has 10 air rafts—none of which are flying because their flight crews are incapacitated. That and our tank are the only grav vehicles that should be on the planet."

"And our two grav belts."

Coeur grinned.

"You think you can spot a 20-kilowatt grav belt battery from orbit?"

"Probably, not, skipper."

"Me neither. That's why I'd rather you focus on air rafts and other larger targets."

"Understood, sir."

"Apprise me if you see anything significant. Seabridge Nest out."

* * *

Dusk was falling when the Federal relief column finally arrived, a noisy line of 20 diesel trucks and jeeps led by a platoon of five track-laying tanks.

"I think I heard 'em coming about a kilometer away," Coeur said to Drop Kick, as they marched out to meet the lead vehicle at the bridge across the River Tam.

"I'd say more like five kilometers," the Marine said, "but I have better sensors."

Spotting the bulky form of Drop Kick's battle dress in its spotlight, the forward tank ground to a halt on the sturdy wooden bridge, perhaps 50 meters in front of the Coalition personnel. When the turret hatch was thrown up, a trooper in full CBW dress popped his head out.

"Bet that makes Captain Pratt feel pretty good," Drop

Kick said softly.

"Come on," Coeur said, "let's go talk to 'em."

Not surprisingly, the column commander was not in the lead tank. Rather, he was an officer who strode up from a jeep behind the tanks, accompanied by an adjutant in a matching CBW suit.

"Colonel Banner," he announced, handing his orders to Coeur. "84th Logistical Battalion."

"Captain D'Esprit," Coeur answered, "and Sgt. Maj. Escher, of the RC."

"I understand you've taken charge of this operation."

"We're lending technical support to the nest," Coeur said, examining the orders.

"Well, you're RC, so you're in charge as far as the governor's concerned. Where would you like us to offload the cargo?"

"Let me see," Coeur said. "You've got 2000 liters of water, a modular field hospital, and a tonne of medicine. Is that correct?"

"Affirmative."

"How about over by those cargo crates on the tarmac?"

"Over where the MPs are? Sounds fine. You'll have to set up the hospital yourselves though."

"You on a schedule?"

"That we are, captain. Governor Bryce has ordered us to evacuate all civilians within a hundred kilometers of the nest."

"We weren't aware the local humans had suffered any ill effects," Drop Kick said.

"I don't know anything about that, sergeant," the colonel said. "I just take orders. You going to let us pass?"

"Yes, sir," Coeur said, handing the colonel back his orders and letting him return to his jeep. After getting out

of the lead tank's way with Coeur, Drop Kick then pointed to its driver and signaled him to move on with a twirl of his forearm.

"Move along," Drop Kick said, as the column got back under way, rumbling past toward the cargo already unloaded by *Hornet*.

"Just as a point of curiosity," Coeur asked Drop Kick, after the last vehicle passed, "could we take on one of those tanks in the support sled?"

"Let's see, facing an AP round from an 80mm cannon—probably. Just as long as we kept it in front of us."

"Our side armor's really that bad?"

"It's about as thick as the plate on this battle dress," Drop Kick observed.

"Just keep reminding me of that," Coeur said, "in case we ever go into combat."

"Don't worry, sir. The first time the armor is penetrated by a small-caliber round, you'll remember."

* * *

The area Drop Kick found for their evening meeting turned out to be one familiar to all of them—Physic's lab. Since an open area existed around the central elevator, and the radio link to *Hornet* was there, it was clearly the best place in all the nest for an evening briefing. With the provision of seven human and three Hiver chairs, arranged in a circle before the elevator, the location was complete.

Four hours after the Wilburton column arrived, and two hours after it left, the entire Coalition party of seven gathered on the third floor of the hospital, together with M. Dina, Captain Pratt, and Florence the robot. All of

them, with the exception of Pratt and Florence, wore vac suits or battle dress—a situation that positively perturbed the MP. Though assured by Dina that his security troops were safe from infection, the sight of the Wilburton logistical battalion unloading its supplies in sealed rubber suits had not reassured Pratt of his safety.

"I'm just worried, that's all," Pratt said. "I mean, what if this bug does kill humans?"

"Captain," Physic said, crossing her legs despite the bulk of her vac suits legs, "I've got good news for you—for all of us really: I'm 99.9 percent sure the virus is harmless to humans. I'm so sure, in fact..."

Gasps issued from the other humans in the circle of chairs as Physic unsealed her helmet and set in her lap.

"...that I'm taking off this stupid vac suit. Can't handle lab equipment anyway, with it on."

Staggered by Physic's action, the humans only later came to appreciate that she was wrinkling her nose at some unpleasant smell in the lab.

"Physic," Coeur said, leaning forward, "are you certain? Have you actually isolated the virus?"

"Not quite, but I've identified it as well as I can. Five'll getcha ten it's Hiver Folgorex II."

That esoteric bit of information wasn't quite enough to make the other humans join Physic in doffing their helmets.

"What is Hiver Folgorex II?" Coeur asked.

"That," the doctor said, "is a long story, but I'll try to keep it short.

"A long time ago—thousands of years—the K'kree and the Hivers had a war, and one of the K'kree weapons was Hiver Folgorex I. That's a virus all of us in my business know about, because antibodies to the Hiver Folgorex



bug are still floating around in the Hiver system.

"As biological warfare agents go, this one wasn't spectacular—but then there aren't many BW agents that kill Hivers effectively since their immune systems are so tough. According to a rumor that I heard back in medical school, the Solomani later picked up on the relative effectiveness of this bug and re-engineered it for increased lethality, creating Hiver Folgorex II. That—I'm fairly certain—is what's killing this nest. At any rate, it's so specialized for killing Hivers that it's completely inert in human tissue."

"So it's safe to take off our suits?" Coeur asked.

"Red Sun, you could eat a culture of that virus and it wouldn't harm you."

"Well, all right," Coeur said, breaking the seal on her own helmet and taking it off. That prompted the Marines to follow her lead, though they were no more pleased than Coeur by the predominant odor from downstairs—the stink of dying Hivers.

"Ooh," Mercy said, "what a stench."

"Actually, it's not so bad," Whiz Bang said, "after smelling myself for ten hours."

"At any rate," Coeur interjected, "how long will it take for you to isolate the virus and synthesize a vaccine?"

Though weary from a long day's work, Physic still made an involuntary "hal"

"I take it that isn't an immediate likelihood."

"You could say that, skipper. The virus has a protein sheath that mutates very quickly, so even when I do isolate a sample, you can bet that other mutant strains will be resistant to any vaccine I concoct."

"Is there anything we can do to assist you?" Dina asked.

"Not really. I'll just have to grind out the research in the lab."

"Time is limited," Coeur reminded the doctor. "If that Hiver freighter that left here last week was infected, thousands of Hivers on other worlds could already be dying."

"If I may interrupt," Scissor said, "we may have more time than you think."

"What do you mean?" Coeur asked.

"This afternoon," Scissor said, "Bonzo and Whiz Bang brought us the body and effects of George, which we proceeded to study. Based on that study, we believe that the virus may have an incubation period as long as two months."

"Wait a minute," Drop Kick said. "Physic just said she hasn't even isolated the virus. How could you two nail down its incubation period?"

"By deductive reasoning," Dina explained.

"Yes," Scissor agreed.

"Please," Coeur said, "explain."

"George," Scissor said, "was a collector of local flora; that we knew. The research log in his personal computer and sample case, however, give us a more detailed description of his activities.

"Apparently, George possessed the relatively rare sense of smell, and used it extensively in his cataloguing of native plants. Indeed, he was so devoted to the discovery of new smells that he eventually moved his camp deep into the larval range, where you discovered it. It was during a collecting expedition—two months ago—that he wandered up to Lake Kolima and met a pair of researchers from the University of Spiralis.

"These individuals, allegedly named Dr. Li and Dr.

Campos, explained that they boated down the river from Katherine Township, and captivated George's attention with their aromatic collection of exotic plants from other parts of the world. Over the last two months, they converged near the lake at least once a week, where they exchanged plant samples from their individual collections."

"Uh-oh," Drop Kick muttered, sensing where this was headed.

"Has anyone checked out the IDs of those researchers?" Coeur asked.

"Affirmative," Dina replied. "The University of Spiralis does not have a Dr. Li or Dr. Campos on its staff, and never has."

"Manipulator Dina and I," Scissor said, "therefore suspect that George was infected with the Hiver Folgorex II virus by inhaling pollen from the samples of these two individuals."

"Well," Coeur said, "that's a start. I don't suppose he left a description of these people, though. Like whether they were male or female."

"Negative, Red Sun. However, he did keep samples of Li and Campos' plants in his quarters. By checking with the governor's science council, we determined that all of the varieties they showed him were subarctic species originating in northern regions above 65 degrees north latitude."

"Maybe that's where their base is," Bonzo suggested.

"How about that?" Coeur asked Pratt. "Do many people live up there?"

"I'm not a geography whiz," the MP admitted. "Does anybody have a map?"

"Allow me," Florence said, dropping off its toadstool

and withdrawing to one of the adjacent laboratories. A moment later she came back with a holographic display unit on rollers, radio-linked to the central nest computer from which it summoned an equal-area projection of Ra's surface, marked in Hiver ideograms.

"This," Florence said, drawing a red line across the map below the north pole, "is 65 degrees north."

"Oh," Pratt said, "that area. That's just tundra and wasteland. I don't think we even have any research stations up there."

The Arses and Marines exchanged meaningful looks.

"Florence," Coeur said, "can you make that map show the area that's not covered by the passive EMS satellite?"

"Yes, captain," the robot said, altering the map.

Only the farther northern coast of the eastern continent Umbria and a single large island remained.

"What's that island there?" Drop Kick asked. "Off Umbria."

"That is Gypsy Island," Florence reported, "and in fact it is inhabited. There is a human science outpost there, monitoring arctic weather patterns."

"Can you raise them?" Coeur asked.

"In principle, yes. Shall I undertake that from the uplink in Physic's lab?"

"Yes, do that. I'll be over in a minute."

Coeur then stood up from her chair, burdened for the first time all day by the weight of the vac suit she knew was no longer necessary.

"One last thing. We obviously can't share quarters with Scissor anymore, so where will we sleep?"

"A nominal difficulty," Dina said. "Scissor can rest in the isolation chamber in the agricultural laboratory with myself and the other Hivers in vac suits."

"I was going to offer my office and wardroom," Pratt suggested.

"No, that's all right," Coeur said, "we'll just sleep in our modular shelter. Drop Kick, I'll assume a regular watch schedule."

"Yes, sir."

Suddenly, Florence called out from Physic's corner of the building.

"Captain! Contact has been established."

"Excuse me," Coeur said, slipping away from the other personnel and hurrying to the communications panel.

"There's a lot of magnetic interference," Florence explained. "I don't think I can clean up the signal much."

"That's all right," Coeur said, setting her helmet down on the comm panel console but eschewing the offer of a human chair by the robot.

"Gypsy Research Station, this is Coeur D'Esprit of the RC. Are you receiving?"

Static answered, then "Roger, Seabridge...what's up?"

"I don't know how late it is there. Can I speak to your commanding officer?"

"Don't have a commanding officer, Seabridge ...sponsored by Port Adrian University...my name's Bill, if that's all right."

"Sorry, Bill, that's fine. Look, we're assisting an investigation of an epidemic at Seabridge Nest, and we could use your help. We'd like to know if you've seen any unusual vehicle activity up there."

"Vehicles? Not really...it is a big island though. We're out on the eastern tip, you know."

"Understood."

"Although...we have seen some strange lights up here...it's just nobody's given them much thought."

"Understood. You mean anomalous lights?"

"Right, stuff we don't see on radar...we assume its ball lightning associated with all the magnetic ore here."

"Roger, Gypsy Station. If you do see anything unusual, say, air rafts or people in grav belts, could you let us know?"

"Affirmative, Seabridge. One of our researchers is out in the harbor right now, collecting marine samples...I'll tell him to keep his eyes open."

"Point of information, Gypsy Station. Are there many navigable harbors there?"

"That's a negative, Seabridge...We're set a few kilometers in from the only harbor on the island."

"Understood, Gypsy Station. We appreciate the help. Seabridge out."

Coeur stood quietly at the panel for a moment, thinking. Out near the elevator, the two Hivers and other humans were collected around the map of Ra, talking quietly among themselves.

"Ball lightning?" Coeur said to Florence.

"I suppose it is possible," the robot said. "Physics is not my specialty."

"There is all that magnetic ore he mentioned. Having that around to foul sensors wouldn't hurt if you needed a place for a secret base."

"Yes, captain."

"Thanks, Florence," Coeur said finally, turning away from the comm panel and returning to the group. There she caught the tail of a conversation between Bonzo and Whiz Bang, who were closest to the map.

"...well, just look at this distance, Whiz Bang. It's about 7000 clicks—the distance a person in a grav belt could make in a week."

"Yeah, but you can't fly a grav belt for more than a couple of hours at a time, and you'd need a power supply everywhere you went to recharge the batteries."

"Maybe they put a recharging station on a truck."

"And drive it across the ocean? Yeah, right."

"All right, people," Coeur said, "we've had a long day, and I'd like to follow these leads up in the morning. Let's reassemble here at 0630. Dismissed."

The order promptly scattered Pratt and the Marines, who put on their helmets on and followed Drop Kick to the elevator. Dina and Scissor followed afterward, leaving Florence behind to recharge at its stall in the laboratory.

"You coming?" Drop Kick asked Physic and Coeur.

"No," Physic said, "you go ahead."

Coeur, surprised to catch Physic staring at the map, paused on her own way to the elevator and nodded toward Drop Kick. He nodded back and let the elevator door close.

"Physic," Coeur said, coming up alongside the doctor, "you look beat."

"I am," Physic said. "Work keeps me from thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

"About this virus," Physic said, turning her head toward Coeur. "It's just the kind of thing Delpero might've been looking for at the Medlab."

"But you said this virus strain was just a rumor. What could he have learned about it from Medlab?"

"Maybe he didn't infiltrate to learn about the virus," Physic said. "Maybe he broke in to find out how much we already knew about the virus."

"Which is almost nothing."

"Right. Maybe it was important that August—or whoever planned this massacre—know how well we could

respond to the epidemic."

"That's quite a conspiracy you're suggesting."

"Red Sun, don't you understand what I'm saying? Maybe if I hadn't let August in that night, these Hivers wouldn't be dead! Maybe he had to know we couldn't cure the disease before he could release the virus!"

"Physic," Coeur said, grabbing the doctor by her vac suit's puffy shoulders, "get a hold of yourself. You did not kill these Hivers."

"Good Gaia, Red Sun, do you know how many died today? 43! At this rate, they'll all be dead inside a week."

"Is there anything you can do to help them?"

"Maybe, but you'll have to sell the governor on it. Since the disease is probably spread by contact, it might help if we could spread the Hivers without symptoms around to other locations."

"I suppose the governor's opposed to that," Coeur mused, letting go of Physic. "Well, he should still be in his office at this hour. I'll see if I can make him change his mind."

"Wait a minute, Red Sun."

"Yes?"

"Red, do you think it might be better to send *Hornet* back to warn the rest of the Coalition?"

"Frankly," Coeur admitted, "I don't know. Do you think it would stop the spread of infection along the path of that Hiver freighter?"

"I doubt it. That was a jump-4 vessel. I'm just—worried."

"About the Hivers?"

"Actually," Physic said, "about you. I imagine I'll lose my commission for my part in this. I just wouldn't want you to get in trouble too."

Coeur shook her head.

"Physic, you're not going to lose your commission, but you should get some rest. Go on, so you can get up early with the rest of us."

"Okay," Physic said resignedly.

Then, a positive thought brightened the expression on her face.

"You know, skipper, there might just be a way out of this—if you can find the people who distributed the virus, they might already have an effective vaccine. I'm no Black War historian, but I do know it was common for CBW researchers to develop vaccines to their agents—just in case they ever bombed a friendly population by accident."

"Kind of a long shot," Coeur said, "but I'll keep it in mind. Now go on. I'll follow you after I talk to the governor and check in with Gyro."

* * *

"Good news," Gyro told Crowbar, as she came back into *Hornet's* galley from the bridge. "The skipper's talked the governor into distributing healthy Hivers around his planet's army bases."

Crowbar looked up from the satellite images he'd been examining, projected on the screen of his personal computer. "Why is that good?"

"Well, according to the skipper, Physic thinks it would increase the chance at least one uninfected group would survive. I suppose it would also diminish the chance anyone could destroy the nest with a nuke from orbit."

"Somehow," Crowbar said, "with us, the EMS satellite, and Snapshot's drone in orbit, I don't think that's very

likely."

"Yeah, I suppose. Anyway, how're you making out with those scans?"

"Gyro, have you ever tried studying every square meter of a planet before?"

"The skipper didn't say you had to identify every anomaly, just evidence of high-technology power plants. Plus, she's narrowed down the search area: She thinks an enemy force could be above 65 north."

"That does narrow things down," Crowbar agreed. "Have a look at this. It's an image we captured about four hours ago."

Gyro maneuvered around the table to get a look at Crowbar's computer screen. Presently, it displayed a cloud-strewn stretch between the north coast of Seabridge Peninsula and Gypsy Island.

"What's unusual there?" Gyro asked.

"Maybe nothing," the engineer said, zooming in on a point midway across the ocean, "but check that out."

"Looks like a boat, or a ship. They do have a lot of those down there."

Crowbar rolled his eyes, forcing himself to remember that the XO hadn't the benefit of a prior tour.

"That's not a boat, Gyro, that's a hovercraft. See the way the wake rides high off the water?"

"All right," the gunner said. "They have hovercraft on Ra, too."

"Maybe. But look at the wave crests around the vehicle—that's a ship the size of a G-carrier trying to plow through three-meter swells and gale-force winds."

"I see your point. Where's it headed?"

"It was headed toward Gypsy Island. Assuming she wasn't swamped, she might have reached it by now."

"Hm."

"It might be nothing. But then again..."

"No," Gyro said, "you're right, it's strange. I'll check it out with Planetary Traffic Control. What's that latitude and longitude?"

"Here, just take the computer," Crowbar said, standing. "I'll go up to the bridge with you."

Snapshot, who was manning the conn while Deep Six slept in his stateroom tank, noted Crowbar's appearance with surprise.

"Well, Crowbar. What pries you away from the engines?"

"Jealousy," the engineer said, admiring the panoramic view of Ra 27,000 kilometers below. "I don't have any windows where I work."

"Actually," Gyro said, "I've had him going over our sensor logs. That's why we're here; I want to check out a strange hovercraft."

Crowbar smiled at the quaint description of his discovery, and sat in the chair at the rear of the bridge. Gyro meanwhile took the chair ordinarily pushed aside to make room for the rollerchair of Deep Six and slid it up to the navigator's station. She then sat down and activated their communications link to the capital of Ra.

"Port Adrian Control, this is *Hornet*. Are you receiving?"

"Roger, *Hornet*. Go ahead."

"Control, we'd like a make on a light hovercraft we spotted this afternoon, sailing in the Seabridge Strait around 1600 hours at 66.46 degrees north by 47.53 degrees west."

"Take a few minutes. Can you stand by?"

"Affirmative."

After a few moments, Gyro turned and saw that Crowbar had found work to keep himself busy, tinkering with the circuit panels of the jump computer.

Always busy. The best way for an engineer to be.

"Hornet? Are you receiving?"

"Right here, Control."

"Hornet, we've done a check on global vehicle registry in that area. The nearest hovercraft operator is here in Port Adrian."

"So it's not a private or government ship?"

"Affirmative, Hornet. Anyway, only a lunatic would sail a small hovercraft in the weather up there."

"Understood, Control, thank you. Hornet out."

After shutting off the communications link, Gyro could feel the staring eyes of Snapshot and Crowbar upon her. The other Arses, however, did not make any comment, and Gyro decided for herself to make another radio contact.

"Gypsy Island Station, this is RCS Hornet. Do you copy?"

Static.

"Gypsy Island Station, this is RCS Hornet. Do you copy? Over."

More static answered, and Gyro gave up trying after a fruitless minute.

"Gaia almighty," Snapshot said softly. "Maybe you better call the skipper."

"It is late," Crowbar said, "after midnight. Maybe nobody's at the radio."

Gyro weighed these comments, then tried one last time to hail the island.

"Nothing," she said finally. "Dead air. Snapshot's right, I'm calling the skipper."

* * *

Beneath a Coalition-issue blanket, Coeur had just fallen asleep when the attention signal of her personal communicator awakened her. Sitting beside Coeur's head on her pillow, its chiming woke not only her, but Drop Kick and Physic as well in the nearest bunks.

"Red Sun," Coeur said into the communicator. "Go ahead."

"Skipper, this is Gyro. Sorry to wake you, but we've got a problem. We're unable to raise Gypsy Island."

Stifling a yawn, Coeur glanced at her watch.

"It must be past midnight there, Gyro. Maybe they're asleep."

"We thought about that, skipper, but Port Adrian Control confirms that a radio operator is supposed to be on duty there 26 hours a day."

Elsewhere in the dark and windowless modular shelter, Coeur heard the subtle sound of air mattress cells compressing—the Marines waking up.

"And there's more, skipper. Just a little while ago, Crowbar spotted an unregistered hovercraft headed for the island. It could have reached the island by now."

"Understood. Are there any local military forces in the area?"

"Arabella's the closest. They've got a patrol boat squadron about 5000 kilometers away."

Coeur shook her head sadly.

"Looks like it's our ball game, then. Is Snapshot's drone still functional?"

"Affirmative. In geosynchronous orbit opposite the Hiver satellite."

"Good. Then position yourself over the island, and

scan every square centimeter with passive sensors. We'll get to the island in the tank as soon as we can."

"Roger, Red Sun."

"That is all. Update us on what you see. Seabridge out."

"I hate to bring this up again," Drop Kick said, "but it's not a tank."

"If I say it's a tank, it's a tank," Coeur said, throwing her blanket off and throwing her feet over the edge of her cot. "You, Whiz Bang, and Bonzo—get up. We're launching in 10 minutes."

* * *

"Oh, man," Bonzo said, peering through his scopes at a violet sea and sky, on the edge of dawn. "We are way the hell in the middle of nowhere."

"That's a good point," Coeur said, keeping her own eyes on the AFV's avionics sensor display. "How close is the nearest settlement?"

"Let's see," the sensor tech said, pulling up a computer map of the surrounding area. "Probably Angel Creek, back on the peninsula. About 2000 kilometers."

"That's officially way the hell in the middle of nowhere," Whiz Bang concurred, from the turret.

"Stay sharp people," Drop Kick advised, "we're passing Black Rock Island. That's the last land mass before Gypsy."

"ETA," Coeur asked.

"Forty-six minutes," Bonzo said, "at best speed."

No, Coeur thought, *I'm not going to roar into Gypsy Bay at 700 kph. We'll slow down before they can spot us on passive EMS.*

For her own sake, because she'd gotten an hour of sleep in the last 26 hours, Coeur went over the facts in her mind to keep them straight. *Hornet's* concentrated EMS had found both Gypsy Station—a burning constellation of three prefabricated structures five kilometers south of a well-sheltered bay a kilometer wide and 10 kilometers from north to south—and evidence of an offworld base. Blinded by the fire, perhaps, *Hornet's* EMS had caught no sign of the Gypsy Station research vessel or Crowbar's hovercraft, but the flaring emissions of an air raft thruster were clear enough in the rocky hills north of the bay.

"I recommend we swing around from the east," Drop Kick suggested. "That way we can use the mountains for cover when we approach the science station."

"Roger," Coeur said, decreasing her speed and dropping close to the wave tops. At the slower NOE speed, the gusting winds above the arctic sea were more pronounced, buffeting the vehicle while sea spray dusted her hull. "We'll go in slow and quiet. If there are still any hostiles at the station, we don't want to spook 'em."

"No problem," Whiz Bang said. "My guns are locked on safe."

At last, as the deeper purple of night gave way to the blue of dawn, Gypsy Island hove into view—a daunting fortress of rock whose south face was indeed forbidding. While sea-birds and hardy vegetation clung to the long island—220 kilometers overall—humans had no easy way onto the rock, and consequently it showed no immediate evidence of human visitation.

"Keep your eyes open," Coeur advised Bonzo, lifting them off the water and over the southern cliffs at a ginger 30 kph.

"No signals," Bonzo returned, "although there is a lot

of radio interference."

"Yeah," Coeur agreed, noting the frosty streaks of static beginning to appear in her terrain-following radar. "Drop Kick, pop your hatch and scan visually."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, releasing the latch over his head and popping his head out into the crisp morning air. Coeur, now out of her vac suit and back to her body sleeve alone, found the chill air refreshing after six hours in the tank.

Up above, Drop Kick extended a fiber-optic cable from the abdomen of his suit and plugged it into a jack in the turret hatch so he could speak to the crew without using his helmet radio.

"Don't see much," he reported, probing their surroundings with the enhanced vision systems of his battle dress. "Just a lot of pissed-off birds."

"Affirmative," Coeur said, switching to conventional video. "Bonzo, will that cleft at 355 take us where we want to go?"

"Roger, skipper. That'll widen out to level terrain a few clicks east of the science post."

"Outstanding. Then that's where we're going. You okay up there, Drop Kick?"

"Yeah. Except a bird just took a dump on me."

"Refrain from returning fire," Coeur suggested. "I'm going to ease us up into the gorge ahead."

"Affirmative," Drop Kick said, wiping the bird droppings off his visor. "Path looks clear."

Took a dump on him, Coeur thought. I hope that's not the kind of day we're going to have.

* * *

"The air raft has not altered its position," Deep Six said.

"Since we have not detected any new emissions, it must be maintaining a position above the south side of the bay."

Gyro nodded from the pilot's seat. "Can you see Red Sun and the sled?"

"Affirmative. They are entering a deep valley 50 kilometers south of the bay."

"All right. Maintain radio silence until they call on us."

"Understood."

Damn, Gyro thought, I wish we could see what exactly was with that air raft, so we could give Red a better idea what to expect. Oh well, a few more minutes, and they'll be able to see it for themselves.

"Snapshot," Gyro said into her headset, "is that MFD working?"

"Yes, Gyro," Snapshot sent from the laser turret, "for the fifth time, the MFD is working."

"Just want to make sure," Gyro said. "If we have to give the skipper orbital support, we'll need the MFD to be in good order."

"Gyro, I know the laser isn't my regular duty station, but trust me, it's working."

"Understood."

A sudden frenzy of activity by Deep Six, however, diverted Gyro from further reflection on the good order of her laser.

"Something up?"

"Affirmative," the Schalli said. "Telemetry from the EMS satellite over the western hemisphere indicates a large object approaching the planet at high velocity. Approximate bearing 170, azimuth zero."

Gyro pulled the same data on her own sensor panel.

"You've got some sharp eyes," she said. "That's over a

half a million clicks away."

"But definitely approaching Ra. I shall attempt to refine its course and speed."

"How long until you have that?"

"Give me 20 minutes. It might help, though, if we could orbit around to the far side of the planet. Our passive EMS has much better range than the suite on the satellite."

"No, this is better where we are. If it's a hostile, it might be better if they don't know we're here."

"So we can avoid a fight?"

"No. So we can get the first swing in if there is one. Keep watching it, and flag me the minute you've got something positive."

* * *

The outpost was a total loss—only the shells of their still-smoldering buildings and a tracked ATV remained. Drop Kick and Bonzo did ascertain at least one thing, however—the base radio had been the first thing to go.

"Blew the hell out of it," Drop Kick said, after he and Bonzo returned to the AFV hidden in the rocks 100 meters off. "Probably with rocket grenades. Then they shot the rest of the place up and burned it with gasoline."

"Any bodies?" Coeur asked, twisted around in her seat so she could look up at Drop Kick in the turret.

"Negative. Must've buried 'em, or dumped 'em out in the bay."

"But why did they kill them in the first place?" Whiz Bang said.

"Probably that research vessel Bill mentioned," Coeur speculated. "Our boys in the hovercraft were probably

spotted by that boat, killed her crew, then worked over the station for good measure."

"Whoever they are," Bonzo said, "they aren't afraid to kill. There's blood all over that station."

Coeur grimaced.

Even after all our centuries in space, most of us probably still think it's more of a tragedy that somebody killed six human scientists than 200 Hivers. Maybe that's what they're counting on—whoever planted this disease—that we wouldn't be shocked to lose the Hivers.

Maybe that's the deal—maybe somebody just wants to contain the RC—keep it from growing.

Coeur's grimace deepened into a scowl.

Yeah, and maybe somebody needs to put those bastards in their place.

"Unlock your guns," Coeur told Whiz Bang, turning back around to face her controls, "we're moving out. Bonzo, can you find me high ground overlooking the last known position of the air raft?"

"Affirmative," the sensor tech said, drawing a course on his own panel and sending it over to Coeur. "Steer 045, skirt around these central hills and you'll come out on a plateau overlooking the objective."

"Roger that," Coeur said. "Drop Kick, go back topside and scout."

"Roger."

"All right, guys," Coeur said, lifting the AFV back into the air and swinging it around to the right. "Here we go."

Cruising low over the rocky inland heights, the AFV scared wildlife everywhere it went, but Coeur trusted Drop Kick's instincts to steer her away from likely places for an ambush. Without telepathy, Coeur couldn't be certain they weren't seen, but they made the edge of the

objective plateau without interference, less than 10 minutes later.

"How we doing, Drop Kick?" Coeur asked, setting them down.

"All clear, skipper."

"This plateau is about a hundred meters above sea level," Bonzo said, "and a kilometer wide. The air raft should be in a shallow cleft about three clicks due west."

"Drop Kick, Bonzo, advance on foot and reconnoiter. And remember, hand signals *only*."

"Understood," both Marines replied, taking up their gauss rifles and bailing out of the vehicle.

Advancing slowly, covering each other as they moved, Drop Kick and Bonzo still reached the far side of the plateau in less than five minutes, ultimately taking cover behind a rock outcropping and surveying the land below.

Bingo, Coeur saw Drop Kick send by sign language a few seconds later. One air raft, one hovercraft, five men, camouflage netting, laser uplink, and portable sensor—range two kilometers. And trouble—antitank missiles.

"There goes the frontal assault," Whiz Bang said.

"Go topside," Coeur instructed the gunner, "and ask if he sees any survivors."

Whiz Bang complied, and Drop Kick answered the signed question succinctly.

Negative—all armed—no civilians.

"Understood," Coeur sent to Whiz Bang, through the fiber-optic link in the hatch. "Ask if he thinks we can take 'em."

Tricky, Drop Kick sent back, have to toast missiles first.

"Whiz Bang," Coeur said, "we're moving up closer. Tell them to stand by until we reach their position."

Drop Kick's reply was an upturned thumb.

Affirmative.

* * *

"Navigation solution," Deep Six stated suddenly. "Target is a 400-ton craft closing from 120,000 kilometers at 4Gs, with a transient velocity of 720,000 kph."

"Good God! That's way too fast to enter orbit."

"Correction. Target is five bodies—she may have launched missiles."

"Oh, fikken," Gyro swore, signaling the engine room to prepare for evasive maneuvers and bringing the ship around. "All hands, battle stations! Sixer, retract passive array and plot best intercept course."

"Array retracting—switching to full active. Solution is changing...the ship is veering off, and missiles are angling for the pole. If they are targeting the surface, they will impact within three minutes."

"But there's nothing at the pole, except—"

"—except Gypsy Station, our offworld unfriendlies, and the captain's party."

"Oh, hell—Snapshot, you there?"

"Roger, Bridge."

"Snapper, we've got trouble. In about 30 seconds we're going to plow into a whole mess of missiles. None—I repeat—none—can get through."

"Understood, Bridge."

"Gyro," Deep Six said, after Snapshot cut the communications link, "I doubt that even the very best gunner could intercept that many missiles."

"I'm aware of that. Contact the skipper and advise her to take cover."

"Cover may not be possible," Deep Six said, as he

worked to re-establish contact with Coeur, "if those missiles are armed with nuclear warheads."

"Just do it," Gyro said, gripping the pilot's joystick with her right hand, and digging into the left-hand arm rest with the other. "We don't have time to debate about it."

* * *

At the edge of the plateau, Coeur saw for herself the camp that Drop Kick had described minutes before. Down at the bottom of a two-kilometer gorge, a party of five had erected effective camouflage netting over an air raft, light hovercraft, and tent, leaving only a laser uplink and a single portable EMS sensor out in the open.

Another detail was even more troubling than these—one that Bonzo had caught after careful scrutiny of the camp. While Bonzo remained outside watching the camp, Drop Kick relayed the information to Coeur and Whiz Bang inside the tank.

"It's a crunch gun," Drop Kick said, taking off his helmet so he could look down at Coeur more easily from his turret seat. "Bonzo and I saw at least one of them in the camp."

"A Guild antiarmor weapon," Coeur said, looking up at Drop Kick and Whiz Bang. "Or at least one distributed by them. That's good."

"Good, sir? One of those would peel open battle dress like a can opener."

"No, I don't mean good like that. I mean good, at least we can link these clowns to some outside entity."

"Good point," Drop Kick said, "but we've still got trouble. If their portable EMS sensor is anywhere near as good as the type we use, they'll spot us the moment we

move off this plateau."

"That is a problem," Coeur agreed. "Think you could nail it with the LSW?"

"The laser can opener?" Drop Kick said. "No, not in this dense an atmosphere."

"How about this, then. You and Bonzo advance up the outer slopes of the valley, one north and one south, then wait for my signal. After I contact them—assuming they refuse to identify themselves and surrender—we'll hit 'em together from three sides."

"Messy," the sergeant major said. "Bonzo and I would have to initiate our attack from beyond the effective range of our weapons."

"On the other hand," Whiz Bang said, "we could just pop up and waste the lot of 'em with the cannon and machinegun."

"A surprise attack?" Coeur asked.

"Why not?" Whiz Bang said. "They don't deserve any mercy."

"Your point is taken," Coeur said, "but we need them alive to question. At least one anyway."

Drop Kick made a determined face.

"All right, skipper. Bonzo and I'll flank the valley and wait."

"God, give us luck," Coeur muttered.

Sudden beeping of Coeur's communications panel halted Drop Kick, however, as he put his helmet back on and reached for the turret hatch.

"Go ahead," Coeur said, thumbing the radio switch.

"Captain, this is Deep Six. Listen closely: Four space combat missiles are converging on your approximate position. You must seek cover."

In her chest, Coeur thought she felt her heart flip over.

"What the hell? Are you certain?"

"Affirmative," Gyro broke in. "We're maneuvering to intercept, but any that get through will be on your position inside three minutes."

"Understood, *Hornet*."

"Gotta go, skipper—missiles in sight. *Hornet* out."

Without a moment's hesitation, Coeur looked back toward Drop Kick, pointed a finger toward Bonzo outside and then jerked her thumb backward.

Get him inside!

Drop Kick understood, throwing up the hatch and catching Bonzo's attention. Startled, Bonzo paused a moment wondering why the sergeant was gesturing for him to get inside urgently, then hastily abandoned his position to clamber back through the bow hull hatch.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We're getting the hell out of here," Coeur answered, activating the sled's contra-grav and gunning its thrusters before Bonzo and Drop Kick had even closed their hatches. "Drop Kick, what's the secondary blast radius of a 500-kiloton warhead?"

"Five hundred kiloton—?" Bonzo blurted.

"I don't know—maybe two clicks in an air burst."

"That's about the biggest warhead I've ever seen on a space missile," Coeur said, turning them around and vaulting them off the plateau with wrenchingly sudden acceleration. "Bonzo, time to the edge of the island—due west, best speed."

"Uh—about two minutes," the sensor tech estimated.

"Are we gonna be nuked?"

"Don't know," Coeur answered. "Drop Kick, can this thing swim?"

"It should, yeah. The power plant's self-contained."

"Good," Coeur said, focusing her gaze on the ocean 20 kilometers distant and reactivating the radio link to *Hornet*.

"*Hornet*, this is Red Sun. What's your status?"

"Bad news, skipper! Two got past!"

"Time to impact!" Coeur snapped. "Assume a ground burst!"

"25 seconds," Deep Six said, with unnatural calm.

"Understood," Coeur snapped. "Bonzo, time to the coast."

"Twenty seconds...deep water, though, if you steer right a bit."

"Roger, Bonzo. *Hornet*, we're going to be going off the air."

"Why is that?" Deep Six asked.

"Because we're hitting the water. Red Sun out."

"Understood, Red Sun. *Hornet*—"

Deep Six's sign-off was cut short, however, as the rocketing support sled hurtled over a sea cliff and into the sea with far more speed than was safe.

And the sky behind blazed suddenly like the heart of a sun.

"Detecting two detonations," V-Max said.

"Good," Vega Zorn said, glancing a moment at her own sensor screens, then returning her attention to the flight controls of *Vi Et Armis*. "I wasn't counting on the freighter trying to shoot them down."

"Maybe the ground party was discovered," Zorn's navigator speculated. "If that were the case, the Coalition ship might've been trying to cover its own agents."

"I don't know if I like that," Zorn said.

"What are you saying? You just nuked five of our own people!"

"No," Zorn corrected her navigator. "Not our people—Guild agents. Our people are the crew of this ship, safely jumping out of the system."

"Skipper, sometimes I just don't know about you."

"I didn't come here to kill Coalition humans," Zorn said. "Just Hivers. That was the agreement."

"All the same, the Guild won't be happy about its agents being lost."

"It'll be happier," Zorn retorted, "than if they were grilled and spilled the location of their base."

"True."

"Money's all that matters to those people, V-Max. They won't lose any sleep over a few dead agents."

"You know," V-Max said, "the way you talk, I'd almost say you weren't too sad about nuking those agents yourself."

Zorn shot a direct and piercing stare at V-Max.

"And I'd say you talk too much, mister. Time to jump point?"

"Twenty minutes, skipper."

"Good. The sooner we leave this place, the better."

Chapter Ten

The first thing Coeur felt was pain—all through her shoulders, waist, and neck. Then she heard the voice of Bonzo, and suspected that she probably wasn't dead.

"Skipper? Skipper, you all right?"

"Ooh..." Coeur moaned, opening her eyes and wincing. "What the hell happened?"

"Short answer: We hit the water going about 100 kph. Concussion knocked you out and blew out all the drives."

That, Coeur suspected, explained why she was sitting in a cabin that was almost completely dark. The only light she saw was issuing from the dial of the medical diagnostic computer in Bonzo's hands and a light stick somewhere to her rear. Those indirect light sources gave the unhelmeted head of Bonzo a vaguely sinister appearance.

"We were actually pretty lucky," Coeur heard Drop Kick say from above and behind her. "We actually kept a secure environment and floated back up to the surface."

"The upside to having light armor," Whiz Bang added.

"Damn," Coeur said, closing her eyes again. "I feel like somebody smacked me in the head with a lead pipe. How long was I out?"

"About 10 minutes," Bonzo said. "I'm no doctor, mind you, but this gadget says you're all right. Probably just

sore from the safety restraints, and getting your head bonked against the seat frame."

Hearing this, Coeur remembered the last words she'd had with Mercy, before they'd launched.

"Skipper, maybe you'd better take my battle dress."

"No, I'd rather you kept it. I'll feel better leaving Physic and Scissor here with a fully armed trooper."

"Drop Kick, the next time Mercy tries to talk me into wearing a suit of battle dress, remind me to agree with her."

"Maybe you're just too used to flying things with inertial compensation," the sergeant major said.

"Maybe. Do we have contact with *Hornet*?"

"Negative," Bonzo said. "No power to the radio. But even if we had power, the static from the bombs and the static from the island wouldn't help reception much."

"Don't we have battery power for communications?" Coeur asked.

"Check. But the impact must have jarred the power cables loose from the communications suite, so I'll have to go topside to reconnect it."

"Right," Drop Kick said. "We've been waiting for you to wake up, so we could get you into a vac suit and safely open the top hatch. Given our cramped quarters, you'd pretty much have to put on a vac suit yourself."

"Ah," Coeur said. "Fallout."

"Right," Bonzo said, passing Coeur's crumpled vac suit and helmet into her lap.

Seeing that she'd have to release her seat restraints to get into the suit, Coeur balled her right hand into a fist and punched the release over her chest. When it released,

the pain in her bruised shoulders was almost overwhelming.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, Bonzo," Coeur said, wincing. "No problem."

From the turret, Coeur then heard a comment from Whiz Bang to Drop Kick, probably louder than the gunner realized.

"Tough old girl, isn't she?"

"Affirmative, corporal. Tough as a boot in the head."

That, Coeur suspected, passed for high praise in the RCMC, and she began to pull on the lower half of her vac suit, not feeling quite as sore as she had a moment before.

Though they were 2000 kilometers from the nearest settlement, rescue was not long in coming. *Hornet*, having entered Ra's atmosphere and commenced a low-altitude search of Gypsy Island's coastline with active EMS and neural activity sensors, found the sled floating 500 meters off the coast just half an hour after it crashed into the sea.

Standing in the open turret hatch, Drop Kick was the first to see *Hornet*, and used the repaired laser communicator to signal that all hands were well—and the sled was probably wrecked. Given the latter fact, Gyro set *Hornet* in the water beside the stricken AFV and opened her starboard air lock. There Drop Kick spotted Crowbar, prudently attired in his own vac suit and holding a plasteel rope in his hands.

"Ahoy there!" the engineer called to Drop Kick by suit-to-suit radio, across a distance of less than 20 meters. "Catch!"

Drop Kick caught Crowbar's thrown line the first time, and secured it to the handholds on the side of the turret. With the other end secured to *Hornet*, that gave a safe lifeline for the three Marines and Coeur to use in returning to their ship.

Outside the tank for the first time, and the first to leave the sled, Coeur paused a long moment before pulling herself over to *Hornet's* air lock, staring at the pillar of cloud stabbing into the brilliant blue sky above the island.

Given her weakened state, Coeur accepted Drop Kick's suggestion to clip a lanyard between the belt of her vac suit and the lifeline—a suggestion that may have saved her life. Dunked into the water several times as *Hornet* and the sled tossed on the waves near the island, Coeur nevertheless managed to pull herself into the starship's air lock.

"Okay, skipper?" Crowbar asked, extending a hand to help her out of the water.

"Just wet. Were there any survivors on the island?"

"We don't think so. According to Sixer, ground zero was right on top of the place where the air raft was parked."

"Any idea how big the blast was?"

"About a megaton, between both missiles."

"Good Gaia."

Ten minutes later, the three Marines were aboard the pitching freighter as well, and Crowbar released the line to the sled so he could close the outer air lock hatch. Drop Kick, the last off the sled, closed its top hatch so it would remain afloat—though he couldn't imagine how long it would be before they could conveniently return to recover it.

"All personnel recovered," Crowbar sent to Gyro on

the bridge.

"Roger, Crowbar. We'll leave the tank here and return to orbit. Begin decontamination procedure."

"So," Whiz Bang said, "what's the state of the art in decontamination?"

"Oh, it's very modern," Crowbar replied, drawing a hose from a socket in the wall of the sealed air lock. "Soapy water."

* * *

When Coeur finally returned to the bridge, her first task was making contact with Seabridge Nest again. Gyro, who'd taken the ship to a low orbit of 350 kilometers in the interim, explained that Physic was extremely concerned for all of their safety—particularly since *Hornet* had relayed the report that a megaton blast had rocked the heart of Gypsy Island—so Coeur made a point of contacting her first. As Deep Six established the link, Gyro sat behind Coeur at the rear of the bridge.

"Red Sun! Thank God—we thought you were dead."

"I did, too, for a while. What time is it there—0800?"

"That's about right. It's been daylight a few hours."

"I'd like to get that redistribution of Hivers under way as soon as possible. The governor said it would be all right, just as soon as his bases were alerted in the morning."

"That's affirmative, *Hornet*. The first vehicles left before dawn."

"Good. How's the casualty situation?"

"Red—it's awful. You know those patients we saw in the medical lab yesterday? All of them are dead."

"Good Lord."

"It's a massacre, skipper, pure and simple. But Florence and I are still going to keep plugging away."

"Do you think you'll need any supplies from the ship?"

"No, we've got good facilities down here. Why do you ask?"

"Because we're going to be staying in orbit for a few days. A couple of reasons for that—one, the ship's caked with radioactive dust, and I don't want to bother a ground crew scrubbing it clean while you've got more important things to worry about; and two, we want to keep an eye on the planet while *Asp Alpha* returns from her deep system patrol. Even though the ship that bombed Ra jumped out of the system, there might be other hostiles lurking around, and I'd like to have an orbital overwatch for the immediate future."

"Sounds fine. We'll just be here, working in the lab."

"There's more, Physic. As soon as *Asp Alpha* arrives—about three days—I'd like to leave the system."

"You mean to go home?"

"No. I mean to go after whoever planted this virus."

"Are you serious?" Physic asked. "How much did you learn in this morning's trip?"

"Not much, but enough to suspect enemy powers are involved—not just your husband."

"Sounds mighty thin. Space is pretty big."

"I've noticed. But all the same, unless you can come through with a major discovery in the next three days, I'm willing to gamble that some coreward power is responsible—either the Guild, or equipped by the Guild."

"Three days. Well, all right, I'm sure we'll know more then than we do now."

"Roger, Seabridge Nest. *Hornet* out."

Coeur turned so she could see both Deep Six and Gyro.

"For what it's worth," she said, "you guys did good."

"I don't know about that," Gyro said. "I almost got you killed, and I certainly got our only suspects in the investigation killed."

"Gyro," Coeur said, "we're not in class anymore. All I can expect is you'll keep your head in a crisis. You did that pretty well."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, a question. How were those bombs targeted? They obviously weren't following us, since we're still here."

"I have a theory in that regard," Deep Six said. "Was there not a maser or laser uplink at the offworlder base camp?"

"Yes, a laser link."

The Schalli clicked—a habit of his while he was thinking. "It is possible, sir, that the missiles were programmed to seek out that very uplink—particularly since it was probably ground zero."

"But who could have known about the laser uplink?" Gyro asked, "and known it would be in place at that time and that location?"

"Most logically," Deep Six said, "the captain of the ship who left them on Gypsy Island in the first place."

"Killing their own people to keep them from talking?" Coeur said.

"They are ruthless individuals we are considering," Deep Six observed. "Murder, regardless of species or allegiance, is probably not a difficulty for them."

"Hm. Snapshot, did we get a good enough track of their jumpspace entry vector to anticipate their destination?"

"Not a really clean one, but I'd say the general direc-

tion of Thoezennt Subsector."

"Surely," Gyro said, "that's not enough information to warrant a trip there."

"In and of itself, no. But all the same, every little piece helps to fill in the puzzle."

"An apt metaphor," Deep Six said.

"Thanks. By the way, did either of you tell the government about the Gypsy Island explosions?"

"It was our first priority," Gyro said. "They were...concerned."

"I'll bet. Deep Six, get me the governor directly."

* * *

"Red Sun, I demand an explanation for all this! Am I to understand we've come under attack by nuclear weapons?"

"Governor, I suggest we maintain some perspective. Yes, Ra was struck by nuclear weapons, but we seriously doubt they were targeted at your people. We believe that the presence of our ship interfered with recovery of an enemy ground party, and they were subsequently targeted for elimination to prevent interrogation."

"Red Sun, I think we're mincing words. Can you assure me that there won't be more attacks from this enemy force?"

"No, sir. That's why we're recalling *Asp Alpha* to watch the planet."

"In this context, captain, I don't think there's any choice but to declare a full planetary emergency, and restrict the Hivers to Seabridge Nest."

"Sir?"

"Captain, we have to accept the possibility that Ra

itself is the target of a spearhead assault. Under the circumstances, it will be an unwarranted risk to relocate the contaminated Hiver population."

Coeur fought back an urge to swear at the governor.

"Sir, I believe that would be a grave error. The Hivers represent no threat to your human population. If anything, distributing them to other areas will decrease the chance that all of them will be destroyed in a tactical strike."

"I appreciate that, captain, but my responsibility is to all the people of this planet—not just representatives of the Coalition."

"Sir, I don't mean to be blunt, but I don't think you're grasping the big picture. You have practically no inherent defense against bombardment from space—which is the primary threat to your planet, not this virus. We—*Homet* and *Asp Alpha*, will defend you against that threat."

"Frankly, captain, I'm not that confident that the planetary assembly will accept your word. After today's attack, I can't expect them to feel a sense of security and well-being."

"Sir," Coeur said, forbearingly, "I will give you my personal guarantee that if *any* missile from *any* attack breaks through our defenses and targets one of your cities, I will personally crash my ship into it before I let it impact. I am that serious when I say that your planet's security is our first consideration."

"But in return, you'll want those Hivers redistributed."

"That is correct, sir."

A long pause from the governor relieved Coeur.

At least he's thinking about it.

"All right, captain," Governor Bryce grumbled, "we'll do it your way. But if you're wrong about this—"

"If I'm wrong about this, governor, my new address will probably be at the Brusman Stockade."

"Roger, *Hornet*. Port Adrian out."

Coeur released the send switch on her communication panel and turned back to Gyro and Deep Six.

"That wasn't so hard. Do you have somebody for the next watch?"

"Snapshot," Gyro said. "Why, did you want it?"

"No, I'm just about dead," Coeur said wearily, standing and turning to leave. "Good night."

* * *

It wasn't Coeur's habit to keep a perennial overwatch on the personal relations of her crew—that was more Physic's job—but she was well aware of a deepening relationship between Drop Kick and Snapshot. Particularly toward the end of the trip from Aubaine, they'd spent a lot of time tinkering with each other's machinery, and that carried on into the days *Hornet* spent waiting for *Asp Alpha* to arrive. It became a subject of conversation one day into that waiting, after Coeur, Drop Kick, Crowbar, Gyro, and Deep Six met in the lounge to discuss the future course of their ship (Snapshot having the bridge watch).

"Looking at the clues we've got," Coeur said, spreading out a map box with a holographic projection of the surrounding three subsectors, "we don't have much. We know our target was operating a 400-ton ship—probably an old-style patrol cruiser—and equipped its people with at least one Guild weapon. Plus we've got that infonet briefing from when we left—that somebody thought a Guild manufacturing center was somewhere in Thoezennt Subsector."

"And," Deep Six added, "a possibility that the patrol cruiser was headed for Thoezennt Subsector when it jumped."

"Is this map recent?" Drop Kick asked.

"Only if you're a remnant," Gyro said. "Everything outside the AO is 80-year-old data."

The AO—or Area of Operations—was a rose-tinted zone on the map, extending seven parsecs from the edge of the Coalition proper. Beyond were the hard Wilds—unmapped space Coalition vessels didn't enter without a very good reason.

"There are plenty of targets on our side of the AO, though. Nova Ryll, Lote, Marax—all targeted for smash-and-grab missions."

"But all surveyed by our people," Deep Six observed. "And lacking any proper starport facilities."

"Maybe the starport's hidden," Drop Kick suggested.

"Possibly," Coeur said, "but look at this: Marax is the only unfriendly world with a starport of any kind at all, and it's flanked by worlds that are at least on speaking terms with the Coalition. Hardly an ideal location for a secret base."

"True," Crowbar said. "I say we look beyond the AO."

"That's a big step," Gyro said. "Even if we find anything, it'll take months to get back to the Coalition—assuming we're not blown up like every other far trader that ever left the AO. By that time...who knows how many Hivers would have died."

"Valid points," Coeur said, "but I'm going to have to agree with Crowbar. Physic is reasonably certain that the virus incubates over a two-month period, so we should be able to return before the epidemic hits all of the Coalition."

"That may be true, captain," Deep Six said, "but we may not find anything at all. And there is no assurance that even if we find the base that distributed the virus, we will find a vaccine or data to produce one."

"Hell," Drop Kick swore, "I say it's worth the risk. At least if we found them, we could teach 'em a lesson about screwing with the Coalition."

"There is that," Gyro admitted.

"How about the sled?" Coeur asked Crowbar. "Do you think we can recover it and fix it after the SDB arrives?"

"Recover it—sure. Fix it? I don't know."

"Make plans to do that," Coeur said. "Now here's the course we'll set. Since Meadsk and Xezor aren't actively hostile to us, we'll stop there to snoop for rumors, then pass through Sauler and swing through the coreward edge of the subsector."

Gyro drew an apprehensive breath through gritted teeth.

"Objection?"

"No, sir. Just wondering how many boneyards and vampire ships we'll meet."

"How about one enemy at a time," Crowbar suggested.

"All right, then," Coeur said. "Deep Six, plot a jump course for Xezor. Dismissed."

Gyro and Crowbar stood and joined Deep Six in heading aft. Drop Kick remained behind, however, while Coeur folded up the map box.

"I'll take this up to Snapshot and fill her in. And since the radio's there, I can tell Physic and Scissor too."

"Right."

"Something on your mind, sergeant major?"

"Actually, yes."



"Shoot."

"It's a purely hypothetical question, captain. In the Corps, we have a strict separation between officers and enlisted, which is different from your service where there are no ranks."

"I've noticed that, yes."

"What I'm wondering, sir, is what the Coalition policy is on fraternization between the ranked and nonranked services."

"Hm. I don't believe we have a policy on that, although, come to think of it, the Coalition's so new we don't have policies on a lot of things."

"I see."

"Back in the Scouts, we were *strongly* discouraged from associating with Naval officers, which, I guess, made us *de facto* enlisted. Maybe we'll have something like that eventually."

"Hm."

"Is this something you're worried about?"

"Oh no. I'm just thinking hypothetically...about the future."

"Ah."

"You know," Drop Kick said, glancing at his watch, "I think I'll just find Crowbar and help him with the recovery plan for the sled."

"Fine idea," Coeur said, rising with Drop Kick from the table, and turning away from him to head for the bridge.

"I like it," Snapshot said, after hearing Coeur's plan. "Kinda takes the bear by the balls, as they say back home."

"Colorful," Coeur said, swinging around in her chair to face the navigation/communications panels.

"Say, skipper, I've got a question. Drop Kick and I were wondering..."

"About Coalition regs on fraternization?"

"He told you."

"I told him," Coeur said, turning back to face Snapshot, "that I don't know of any such regulations."

"It's not like anything's going on," Snapshot said. "We were just curious."

"I told you a while ago, Snapper, I don't much care what people do when they're off duty—just as long as it doesn't cause any trouble on duty. Of course, given the nature of our mission, no one's ever really off duty—they just don't happen to be at their station."

"We noticed that. That's why we've decided just to be friends."

Coeur made a bemused expression.

"That might be best."

"Say, skipper, did you want the conn?"

"Negative, I'm just going to touch base with Physic."

Fuzzy static sounded on the bridge speakers, then silence as Coeur got through. According to the bridge clock, it would be noon at Seabridge, 1300 hours.

"Seabridge Nest, this is *Hornet*. Come in, please."

"Seabridge receiving you, *Hornet*. Go ahead."

Coeur recognized the voice of Florence.

"I'd like to speak to Physic, Florence."

"Physic is unavailable at this time. She is responding to an emergency in the agricultural lab."

"Is somebody hurt?" Coeur asked, realizing the daft nature of the question as soon as she spoke it.

Yeah, there's 300 dead Hivers that are hurt. Good, Coeur.

But Florence was not a dumbot, and gleaned Coeur's meaning.

"Unknown. However, it was Manipulator Dina who summoned the doctor."

"Understood. I'll reach her on her personal communicator."

Coeur adjusted the radio frequency accordingly.

"Physic, this is *Hornet*. Are you receiving?"

Static.

"Physic, this is *Hornet*. Are you receiving? Respond please."

"Yes, yes, I'm receiving," Physic snapped. "I was in surgery and I didn't have a radio."

"Surgery? What the hell?"

"Don't worry, skipper, it's not as bad as it sounds. Well, actually, it's a lot worse than it sounds, but not right at the moment."

"Doctor, what are you talking about?"

"It's Scissor. He's been working in the ag lab, you know, trying to isolate dormant virus samples in George's collection."

"Right."

"Well, about an hour ago, Dina's friends brought in a dead razorclaw they found on the edge of the nest—figured they'd autopsy it. Only it wasn't dead, and it hooked a claw into Scissor before Pratt's people could hose it down with machineguns."

"Oh my God."

"Yeah, well, you know Hivers. There's something new in the nest, they all gotta stick their curious nose in it."

"Was anyone else hurt?"

"Fortunately, no, and Scissor wasn't cut too badly either. But it did penetrate one of the arms of his vac suit."

"You patched it, I hope."

"That we did, but I don't think it matters. That razorclaw had all the symptoms of Hiver Folgores syndrome."

Coeur shot a quick glance at Snapshot. Both were equally shocked.

"That's bad, doctor. Why didn't you tell us?"

"Like I said, Red Sun, I've been in surgery. I was going to call just as soon as I had a chance."

"Sorry. Do you need to get back to him?"

"No, he's doing all right. You want to speak to him?"

Coeur took a deep breath.

"Yes, I've got news for both of you. Can you take your radio where both of you can hear it?"

"Hold on a moment...okay, we're together."

"Greetings, Red Sun," Scissor said.

"Scissor, Physic says you got in a scrap there. You okay?"

"Indeed. I find that I am well."

"Well, just keep your eyes open, all right? You're the last person we can afford to lose."

"Understood, sir."

"Well, all right. Like I was telling Physic, I've got news. Just as soon as the SDB arrives, we're going to pick up the tank and head on out for Thoezennt—unless you see a vaccine on the horizon."

"Well," Physic said, "Florence and I have made some progress. We think we'll have an antibody test by tomorrow, so we can definitely see who's got the bug and who doesn't."

"Good work. But what about a vaccine?"

"No way, skipper. Given the best lab on Aubaine and a year, maybe. Here...I don't think so."

"That settles it then. Be prepared to dust off by the

evening of Day 115."

"I am curious," Scissor said. "Do you think I should accompany you?"

"What about it, Physic?"

"I don't see why not; he probably won't get very sick for a couple of months. And—if you're dead set on going—it'll help to have a sick Hiver to test out any medicine we find."

"Good point," Coeur agreed. "Say, Doc, do you have any idea how the distribution of the Hivers went?"

"The results are mixed," Physic said. "But all-in-all I think it was a good idea. Of the hundred Hivers we shipped out, there's two groups of 10 that haven't shown any symptoms yet. Just to be on the safe side, Dina has suggested that the Hivers in those groups avoid all contact with each other."

"How about there at the nest? Any improvement?"

"It's just a deathwatch here, skipper. Tomorrow Dina's going to have the five healthiest Hivers go under low berth suspension. The rest—all we can do is make them comfortable."

Murder, Coeur thought. *Mass murder*.

"I don't suppose it makes it any easier that they don't have emotions."

"They're living beings," Physic said. "They feel pain just like you and me."

"I've been thinking," Coeur said. "Maybe whoever planted this bug didn't think we'd care that much about losing the Hivers—humans, I mean."

"Coeur," Physic said, deliberately neglecting the callsign, "I'm not a violent person, but I could develop a taste for it if we ever find who did this."

"We'll do our best," Coeur said. "*Hornet out.*"

The very last thing Coeur needed happened a day later: a starship coming out of jump at Ra and failing to identify itself.

Hustling out of her bunk and up to the adjacent bridge after Deep Six's summons, Coeur settled into the pilot's couch and received a detailed summary of the situation.

"It appears to be a 200-ton yacht, right on the edge of the EMS satellite's effective range at bearing 084, azimuth 025. She's refused to answer Adrian Control's request for a transponder code."

"A yacht, huh? Where are we in relation?"

"One hundred and ninety degrees, azimuth 044."

"Good, the planet's between us. How's her acceleration?"

"None. She's drifting on inherent momentum."

"Keeping quiet."

"It could be a vampire ship, sir."

"I was thinking that. But *Alpha* will be here inside of six hours, and is on the west side of Ra right now. Do you suppose she's in range to see the yacht?"

"Possibly. The target is just at the extreme limit of the SDB's passive sensors."

"How long until we're over the horizon?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"How about this. We pull back our passive array and get a fix on the yacht with our active sensors. Then, if the yacht fails to send its code, or runs, we hand off our lock to *Alpha*."

"Workable," the Schalli said. "At the moment, the yacht is not accelerating toward or away from the planet. However—it is using a maser communicator."

"Huh," Coeur vocalized, examining the sensor data passed on from the other side of the planet. "Any chance you can read that?"

"Unlikely. As you can see, the vessel appears to be sweeping the maser around wildly."

"As if it were trying to signal somebody."

"Correct. The satellite only registered a momentary burst of noise."

"Trying to signal somebody," Coeur said again. "All right, sound battle stations. All hands in vac suits."

Moments later, all stations sent secured for battle, while Deep Six carried on the awkward work of squeezing his sleek form into a vacuum suit. Into her own vac suit first, Coeur handled communications in the extra minutes it took her navigator to suit up.

"You set?"

"Check," Deep Six said, refilling his buoyancy chamber after his suit was in place.

"Five minutes until we're over the hump," Coeur noted. "Passive array retracted; standing by evasive maneuvers."

"Active sensors enabled."

"Snapshot, Gyro, you set?"

"Roger, captain," Gyro said. "MFD locked in."

"Roger, captain," Snapshot said. "Shall I launch a preliminary salvo?"

"Do that. But keep it quiet."

"Affirmative."

"If this is a yacht we're coming up on, she could have some nimble moves in her pocket. Be prepared for that."

"No problem," Gyro said.

"Roger," Snapshot seconded.

And then they were over the limb of the planet. Not

wanting to take a chance, Coeur threw the ship into evasive maneuvers even before she signaled Deep Six to open communications, though she didn't yet engage her active sensors; the Hiver satellite was providing enough of a fix to give a target for a radio signal.

"Unidentified vessel, this is RCS *Hornet*. Transmit your transponder code immediately."

If there were humans controlling that ship, Coeur knew, they would probably be confused for a moment as they searched for the origin of the message. Consistent with that analysis, the yacht switched to active sensors, but did not answer the hail.

"Unidentified vessel, this is RCS *Hornet*. I say again, transmit your transponder code immediately, or stand to for boarding."

Whoever was commanding the yacht clearly wasn't in a talkative move. Probably unable to spot *Hornet* through the outer fringe of Ra's atmosphere, the yacht turned around and flared its engines.

"Full active sensors," Coeur said. "Paint the target and transmit data to *Alpha*."

"Understood."

Yes, sir, Mr. Yacht Captain. You picked the wrong planet to play around with.

* * *

The chase evolved just about the way Coeur thought it would. Roaring away from Ra with the ploddingly slow *Hornet* at her rear, the yacht veered toward the distant gas giant Guldán IV—probably expecting more than enough time to scoop fuel before *Hornet* could catch her—then cut her thrust completely as a nuclear missile

exploded off her bow. *Asp Alpha* had set itself up for a completely silent ambush directly in the yacht's path.

"What is with these SDB crews and nuclear weapons?" Snapshot said. "The ones at Kruyter blew up a ship they were intercepting, and these almost did the same thing."

"It's all that time cooped up in a tin can," Crowbar sent. "Makes 'em stir crazy."

That, Coeur knew, was just an old hand joshing a young one. Most of the Coalition SDBs were manned by elite crews comfortable with the weighty responsibility of preventing the spread of Virus and piracy. Kruyter's private crews were an exception—and had probably since been replaced.

"Time to intercept?" Coeur asked.

"The yacht has executed braking thrust. *Asp Alpha* will be in position to board in 30 minutes, and we will make the position in four hours."

"That won't take us too far from Ra. I'll continue on course until we hear something definite from *Alpha*."

Something definite came from Deadeye, skipper of *Asp Alpha*, a half an hour later.

"*Hornet*, this is *Asp Alpha*. We hit the bull's-eye."

"Clarify, *Alpha*."

"This yacht is *Lord Ryan*, Delpero's ship."

Delpero?

"Have you boarded?"

"Oh, yes. And boy, is Delpero pissed."

"I'll bet. Do you want us to come out there?"

"Negative, no need. *Ryan's* drives are still in order, so I've transferred a prize crew over to fly her back to Ra. Her crew I've got under guard in the galley."

"Understood, *Alpha*. Want to take them in to Port Adrian?"

"Thought we would. The yacht's hull isn't streamlined though, so we'll have to leave it in orbit."

"Mind if we inspect her while you're on the surface?"

"Be our guest, *Hornet*. You're the top dog."

"Thank you, *Alpha*. Advise *Lord Ryan* we'll meet her in orbit."

* * *

Physic was taking a late afternoon break at a table in her lab when the call came, routed to her pocket communicator through Dina's computer.

"*Hornet* to Seabridge Nest, come in please. Doc, this is urgent."

Physic set down the coffee and packaged nuts she was holding to lift her radio off its belt hook.

"Physic here, Red Sun. What's the emergency?"

A four-second-delay told Physic something right by itself—*Hornet* must have left orbit.

"I hope you're sitting down, Physic. One of our SDBs has just intercepted *Lord Ryan*, and your husband was on board."

"Oh, fikken!"

"Physic, are you all right?"

"Sorry, I just spilled my coffee on myself. Now what was that—you said August is here?"

"Affirmative, Physic. *Asp Alpha* is taking him into Port Adrian, and a prize crew is taking his yacht into orbit."

"*Lord Ryan* wasn't armed, the last I knew. Was anyone hurt out there?"

"Negative, no shots were exchanged. I do think he came here to meet someone, though."

"Are you asking who I think that might be?"

"Roger, Physic. You did live with him for two years."

"Thanks, skipper, I remember that. No, I can't imagine who he'd have any business with out here. Legitimate business, anyway."

"Had to ask. How's progress in the lab?"

"Oh, good actually. Florence and Scissor are out taking blood samples so we can see if our antibody test works."

"I'm sure it will."

"Hey, I'm the best disease pathologist you've got."

"You're the only one I've got, doctor."

"Like I said."

"Physic, we're going to intercept *Lord Ryan* here in about four hours. I'd like you up here to help us check her out."

"To tell the truth, skipper, I didn't spend that much time on the yacht. I'll be standing by, though."

"Good. We'll call ahead when we're ready to pick you up off the tarmac."

"I'll be there."

"One more thing. I'll try to get a copy of the grilling they give August later, but it's possible we'll still have questions for him. Will you be all right if we have to go question him?"

"Captain, I'm working in an open grave here. I don't think meeting my husband can be any worse than that."

"Roger, Seabridge Nest. *Hornet*, out."

* * *

Since both of *Lord Ryan's* air locks were set in her rakishly sloped bow, docking required *Hornet* to maneuver around her front. When a docking couple was finally in place between *Hornet's* port air lock and *Ryan*, the two

ships formed a giant L, connected at their bows 350 kilometers above Ra.

Blackball, one of Deadeye's engineers, was in charge of the prize crew of three, and greeted Coeur, Drop Kick, and Crowbar when they came aboard.

"Nice fittings," she said, shaking their hands, "don't you think?"

Surrounded by gold fittings and real oak panels—belonging to a man from a water world—Coeur had to admit she was impressed.

"A little ostentatious," she said. "Have you had much of a chance to inspect her?"

"Our initial boarding party did a pretty thorough search, yes. Looks like they bugged the hell out of Aubaine in a hurry, cause there isn't much cargo aboard. Just rare gems and crystals in the safe, and about 10 tonnes of gold bullion and electronic components in the hold."

"Portable wealth," Crowbar said.

"He must've known the law was after him," Drop Kick speculated.

"But why run *here*?" Crowbar asked. "I'm no navigator, but I know a lot of other places I'd run for first if I had a jump-4 yacht."

"As I recall," Blackball said, "somebody asked them that, but they weren't talking."

"Pity," Coeur said. "The way the governor sounded the last time I talked to him, he doesn't take kindly to people invading the sanctity of his system."

"Think they'll rough Delpero up?" Drop Kick asked.

"Let me put it this way," Coeur said. "Civil liberties aren't a real strong point in the local constitution."

"Sounds like my kind of government," the Marine said.

"Well, regardless of what they get out of him, I'd like to have Physic up here before we start probing around the ship too much. Blackball, is there a functioning ship's boat on this thing?"

"Yes, sir. A 10-ton launch in good working order."

"A 10-ton launch?" Crowbar said. "Say, we could use one of those."

"I'm sure we could," Coeur said, "but technically this ship and everything in it is Delpero's property—at least until he's found guilty of something. Even if we commandeer his property with a necessary-use voucher, it'll still be his property."

"A technicality," Drop Kick said. "He'll be dead before he sees the outside of a prison."

"Be that as it may, he hasn't been found guilty of anything yet, so let's just remember that. Now, assuming Blackball and her crew don't need the launch, I'll take it down to the surface and pick up Physic. Will that be acceptable, Blackball?"

The woman nodded.

"Good," Coeur said. "In the meantime, you guys can stay here and study the reports from *Alpha's* inspection. And, of course, you can help Blackball and her crew if they need anything."

The Marine and engineer nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"It might be nice," Crowbar added, "if we could arrange to keep the launch permanently. Do you think your SDB force will want it, Blackball?"

"Hell, no," Blackball answered. "The only small craft we've got room for are missiles."

In overall volume, *Hornet* was almost identical to *Lord Ryan*, but the ships made substantially different use of their space. Where the freighter gave over prodigious space to cargo, the yacht consumed volume with vast and powerful maneuver and jump drives. The area left over for habitation in *Lord Ryan* was relatively small, certainly less than that aboard *Hornet*, and it was only its clever arrangement that made it appear tremendous.

"This main lounge is probably where he spent most of the trip," Physic said to Coeur, standing beside her in the middle of a vast but comfortable room whose walls were high-tech holograms presently depicting an illusory rain forest. "Here and the master's stateroom just ahead."

"The use of space is kind of odd," Coeur said. "If it were my ship, I'd rather give the crew below decks some sort of recreation area."

"Yes, but you're used to treating people like human beings. August wasn't."

"All right, let's go over what we know. We don't have a densitometer, but you've looked in every secret hiding place you know of, Crowbar's crawled around every part of the drive section, and Sixer's gone back and forward through all of the computer navigation logs, but there isn't a scrap of evidence to indicate where he was going."

"We do know something, though. With the value of his cargo, he was probably planning to pay somebody for something when he got there."

"But who? And was it somebody here, at Ra?"

Physic shrugged.

"Well, the prize crew is going to stay aboard for a while and keep poking around. I say we go down to Port Adrian and talk to August ourselves."

"I agree."

On the way to the forward hatch with Physic, though, Coeur paused, remembering something she'd wanted to ask the doctor.

"I forgot to ask you something. Do these walls always show the same hologram?"

"Oh, no," Physic said, walking over to the bar in the corner and reaching over its counter. There she pressed a hidden control panel and changed the forest to a startling spacescape of stars.

"It's probably programmed to respond to August's voice, but this is the override panel. Here's the other choices."

Though she'd seen such holographic theaters before, on Terra, Coeur was impressed by the selection of images: a lightning storm inside the atmosphere of a gas giant, an island surrounded by crashing waves, double stars over a jungle at dusk...

"That's odd," Physic said, cycling through the five images again and coming back to the binary and jungle. "I don't remember seeing this one before."

Coeur walked closer to Physic.

"So?"

"It's probably nothing," Physic said, "but these programs are *really* expensive and rare. August was very happy when he received them."

"You mean they didn't come with the ship?"

"Oh, heavens no, only the forest came with the ship. All the other ones were given to Delpero by a woman named Vega Zorn."

"Who's that?"

"Actually, Zorn was one of the first of the Dawn League captains. Or at least she was for a few months...for some reason she left the service in '98 and took up collecting

relic artifacts in the frontier..."

Physic paused.

"...and she was a slut, who slept with August every chance she got."

"I see. Well, wherever she got them, these must be TL-14 or 15 programs. Did you ever meet Zorn?"

"A few times, yeah. Nasty-tempered like you would not believe."

"Toward life in general?"

"Actually, no, come to think of it. The last time I caught her and August together, she was complaining about..."

"What?"

"Oh my God."

"Physic, what? What was she complaining about?"

"Hivers, Red. Hivers, and the politicians who were selling out to them."

Coeur gave the doctor a steely look.

"And you just remembered that now?"

"Red, August and I knew all kinds of people. It's not like I remember everything that happened every day—Florence could maybe, but—"

"Sorry, Physic. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Do you think it might be important?"

"I guess we'll find out when we talk to August," Coeur said. "Is there any label on these holograph programs? Like, where they came from?"

"I'll check," Physic said, hurrying to get around the bar. Coeur joined her and saw that she was punching up program data from the central computers.

"He hasn't changed the code," Physic said with a smug grin. "Let's see...holographic menu...notes...nope, not a damn thing."

"Let me try," Coeur said, moving into place in front of

the keyboard. She only verified what Physic said, though—the programs were stored without any information at all about their point of origin.

"That is odd," Physic had to admit.

"Yeah, well, there's another place where we can look for this data."

"August?"

"You got it," Coeur said, shutting off the computer.
"Let's go."

Chapter Eleven

Port Adrian sat on the south end of the Straits of Rickett, an 800-kilometer gap between the south coast of Seabridge Peninsula and North Bannon continent. Given its latitude 30 degrees above the equator, Coeur suspected the climate was temperate year-round—probably a contributing factor in its choice as the world's capital. Without the technology for weather control, a choice based on whimsy was probably not an option.

After the Collapse, Ra had accepted refugees from all over the surrounding subsector—an infusion of culture that had built a sleepy hamlet into a city of 60,000 citizens. Now, steam-driven freighters—some 150 meters long—dominated the harbor, proof how far people had come who'd arrived with little more than the rags on their backs.

"They're holding him in the central jail," Coeur said, steering *Lord Ryan's* launch across the waterfront warehouses. "Conveniently close to the starport."

"It doesn't look like they have a starport," Physic said from the co-pilot's seat.

"Oh, sure they do," Coeur answered, pointing out a fenced-off section of heliport ahead.

"That's a starport?"

"Just having a safe place to land gets you a class E

rating."

"What about fuel or repair facilities?"

"No. But they are nice enough to let visitors ocean refuel without charge."

"Generous."

After final clearance to land from Port Adrian Control, Coeur set down on the edge of the fenced-off area, avoiding a pair of air rafts that were already parked there. Those belonged to the SDB support base, whose voluminous hangar presently stood empty.

"I'm Deputy Marshal Holton," a uniformed man said to Coeur and Physic, meeting them at their lowered boarding ramp, "director of the Port Adrian jail. I understand you're here to visit prisoner Delpero."

"That's correct," Coeur said.

"Follow me."

Holton, wearing hard body armor, a night stick, and riot gun, was evidence of the serious weight given law enforcement on Ra—a weight further evidenced in the blockish three-story jail adjacent to the tarmac.

In deference to their position as representatives of the Coalition, Coeur and Physic were not subjected to a rigorous search and X-ray scan, but they did have to sign two sets of log books and produce legitimate IDs before they were let through to the central holding area.

"He looks awful," Physic said, approaching the one-way mirror behind which sat Delpero, slumped in a stiff chair at a bare table. His tie was gone, together with the top buttons of his shirt, and a bruise was shining purple on his high left cheekbone.

"We didn't hurt him much," Holton said to Physic, aware that she was Delpero's wife, "if that's what you're thinking. Like to, though—pompous creep."

"Still, it looks like you gave him a good grilling."

"Oh, yes, we did that. He claims to have no knowledge of the investigation against him and Novastar, but he did say he left Aubaine to avoid some woman named Serene who'd come looking for him."

"I can believe that," Coeur said. "He was probably afraid she'd deep-probe his mind."

"So that's why he was afraid of her," Holton said, nodding. "We were wondering about that since he didn't explain why he was afraid of her. Didn't explain what he was doing at Ra, either."

"I don't see a lawyer around," Physic said. "Did he waive his right to counsel?"

"Excuse me?"

"When he was questioned, did he have a lawyer?"

"No, ma'am," the deputy said. "Although his request for one is being processed."

Poor sap, Coeur thought. He really picked the wrong planet to get caught on.

"Do you suppose that'll affect any future prosecution?" Physic asked Coeur.

"I don't know. Every member of the Coalition has its own laws, though, and they're pretty much sovereign."

"It just makes me uncomfortable. I wouldn't want to be held without counsel myself."

Coeur refrained from pointing out that the fellow and his mates had certainly failed to observe Coalition space traffic laws, were circumstantially linked to a smuggling operation, and quite possibly linked to the murder of 300 Hivers. Delpero was still Physic's husband, regardless of the degenerate creature he had become.

"No," Coeur said, "I don't suppose I would, either. Deputy, what do you plan to do with him next?"

"He'll be held for arraignment on the local transponder violation, then released to the custody of the next Coalition vessel bound for Aubaine."

"All right. Can we talk to him now?"

"Yes. But I will have to accompany you."

"Understood."

Entering the interrogation room required passage through two sets of doors, and another deputy was picked up along the way. When the door into the white chamber was opened, obvious shock showed on Delpero's face at recognizing Physic.

"Hi, Orit."

"August."

"Mr. Delpero," Coeur said, "you may not remember me, but I'm Red Sun."

"Right. Orit's roommate."

"Formerly, yes. At the moment, I'm the captain of RCS *Hornet*, and I'd like your help in answering some questions."

"Get me a lawyer, then I'll talk."

"Delpero, let's not mince words. If you had a lawyer, he'd advise you to bite your tongue. Well, I can't afford to have you bite your tongue—I need to know why you're here at Ra."

Delpero wriggled in his seat, but said nothing.

"You know, Delpero, we're not the next ship going back to Aubaine. It could be months before the next ship arrives from there, and in the meantime these people could get very tired of your attitude."

"I don't know anything. Just leave me alone."

"August," Physic said, "don't be stupid. After all they've been through here, they're not going to be nice to you."

A pause followed, as Delpero looked into the eyes of his

wife.

"All right," he said, "I'll talk, but just to you. Alone."

Coeur looked back at the guards. Holton shook his head—no.

Unimpressed by his level of cooperation, she then steered Holton back out to the hall with Physic.

"Deputy, I appreciate your concern, but we have a planetary emergency here. If there's any chance Delpero knows who attacked this planet, we must get that information from him."

"I'm sorry, captain. It's just not allowable."

Coeur growled deep in her throat and snatched her radio off her belt.

"Deep Six, this is Red Sun. Put me through to the governor, highest priority."

Holton shifted uncomfortably.

"Governor Bryce here, Red Sun. What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Bryce, I'm at the Port Adrian jail, where we're speaking to Mr. Delpero, but I don't think he's going to talk unless he's alone with his wife—my doctor. Will you authorize the guards here to leave them alone for, say, 10 minutes?"

"Do you think it'll be productive?"

"It might."

"Very good. I'll authorize the proper permission."

"Thank you, sir. We'll apprise you of what we learn. Red Sun out."

Coeur and Physic then turned to Holton.

"Will that suffice as permission?"

"All right, captain. But just 10 minutes—not a minute more."

"Understood. Physic, let's go."

The other guard, when given instructions to leave, was surprised and paused a moment looking at Delpero. Roughed up as he was, Delpero was still nearly twice Physic's size—a fact that didn't escape Holton's attention either.

"All right, pops," he said, lifting Delpero out of his seat and handcuffing his hands behind his back. "We're gonna leave you in here alone, so no funny business."

Delpero made an inarticulate mumble.

"Come on," Coeur said to the guards, "let's go."

"And no sound, either," Delpero said. "I mean alone."

Coeur didn't respond to that, since the guards had already closed the inner door behind her.

"Orit, you can't really think I was involved in a smuggling ring."

"August," Physic said, crossing her arms and looking up at her husband, standing two meters away, "it's no use trying to be charming. They've got you pinned six ways from Sunday."

"It's all circumstantial, Orit. Once I have a lawyer present the facts to a judge..."

"Damn it, August, there's no time for that! Do you know where I've spent the last week? In a stinking death trap surrounded by Hiver corpses!"

"What?"

"Yes, August. And we need to know if you know who's behind it."

Apparently shocked, Delpero fumbled backward for his chair and sat on it.

"I had no idea."

"August—"

"I tell you, I had no idea! I just came to Ra—"

Physic moved closer to Delpero.

"I just came to Ra to meet Zorn."

And Physic released a heavy sigh.

"But I didn't know what she was doing here—she didn't say what she was going to do with the stuff I sent."

Physic knelt down on one knee beside his chair.

"August, there are 300 Hivers dead at Seabridge station, killed by a biological warfare agent. Did you supply that virus?"

"Good Lord, Orit. What kind of man do you think I am?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Look, Or, I don't care whatever else you think I've done—I don't trade in Black War weapons."

"Then who would, August? Zorn?"

"Zorn's...a pretty loose gun. She might."

"Do you know where she could get them?"

"Orit, I honestly don't know. The people I hired to ship goods to Zorn claimed she worked out of a Guild base somewhere, but she never told me where it was."

"You don't even have a clue?"

"I have a clue. Krishnamurti thought it was somewhere in Thoezennt."

Physic nodded.

"There is another thing," Delpero added. "Do you remember those holograms I had in the yacht?"

"Yes. We were going to ask you about those."

"Those were from Zorn, you probably remember. Most are places I've heard of—the gas giant at Keipes, the forest at Nicosia—but the last one, she didn't say where that was. I think it was recorded at the Guild base,

though."

"Is that why you came to Ra? To get Zorn to take you to that base?"

Delpero nodded.

"A jungle and binary stars. Not much to go on."

"Orit," Delpero said, with a suddenly imploring tone, "I don't want to stay here. Can't you take me with you?"

"Out of the question. We're not going that way."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that."

"You're going to Thoezennt, aren't you? Oh my God, you're going to Thoezennt in that little far trader..."

"Somehow, August, it's hard to think you care. Not after the way you've screwed everyone else you know."

Delpero grimaced.

"You really do hate me, don't you?"

Physic hesitated a moment before answering.

"No, August, I don't. Maybe I wish I did, because that would make things easier. But I don't."

Delpero opened his mouth to answer, but no words came out.

Physic touched Delpero's shoulder for a brief moment, then let the contact pass and nodded to the mirror. Holton appeared at the side door a moment later to let her out.

"Good-bye, August," Physic said, standing.

"Good-bye, Or."

Physic then turned and withdrew through the door to the hallway, where Coeur was waiting for her.

"Were you listening?"

"As best I could. He sounded sincere, but then I suppose he would be good at that."

"Do you still want to go to Thoezennt, then?"

"Oh, yes; we're going to Thoezennt. Thank you, deputy marshal. I think we can find our way out."

* * *

With all the attendant fuss about Delpero, Coeur knew that her original launch hour was unrealistic, and so postponed it another two days. That gave her crew time to complete the various projects they could only complete before leaving.

After flying *Physic* back to Seabridge Nest in *Lord Ryan's* luxurious launch (which she'd decided to keep, after filing her necessary-use voucher), Coeur returned to *Hornet* in orbit and assisted Crowbar and the Marines in recovering the weather-beaten and partly flooded support sled off the coast of Gypsy Island. *Hornet* then flew to a remote desert, and the same recovery gang washed radioactive dust off both *Hornet* and the sled. Scissor and *Physic*, meanwhile, familiarized M. Dina and Florence with the first effective test for Hiver Folgorex II—a test they used first on Scissor.

It proved that Scissor had the virus.

When *Hornet*, with the sled and *Lord Ryan's* launch securely stored in her cargo bay, finally returned to Seabridge Nest the day of departure, all was desolation. Agricultural robots (lacking the autonomy of Florence and its fellow medbots) had ceased to tend the fields, and not even a single Hiver was anywhere to be seen. Only Pratt's sullen patrols were evidence that anyone still inhabited the lonely domes.

With Drop Kick and Crowbar, Coeur went to retrieve her two researchers from the medical laboratory, where she also saw Dina and Florence for the last time. The lack

of bodies in the lower floors—which Coeur had anticipated—was more disconcerting than she'd expected, and the dismay showed on her face when they reached the lab level.

Even more dismaying was the sight of Scissor outside of its vac suit. No longer given any protection by it, he had earlier cast it aside.

"Hello, Scissor. Feeling all right?"

"I am feeling no ill effects at this juncture, captain."

"That's good," Coeur said, turning to face the still vac-suited Dina. "Greetings, Manipulator Dina."

"Greetings, Red Sun. I understand you will now be departing."

"That's correct. We'll be sending a warning about the virus back to the Coalition, though. Deadeye has secured his own appropriate use voucher and scraped together enough of a crew to man *Lord Ryan*."

"Will they be taking Delpero back to Aubaine?" Physic asked.

"Negative. Since the Hiver transport headed back in the direction of the Federation, they'll be trying to follow the same course, away from Aubaine. It would be handy, though, if we could give Blackball some data on this new antibody test of yours, so they can disseminate it along the route."

"Already done," Florence announced, pulling a data card from the computer it was sitting at. "This disk contains the technical data in Hiver and Anglic text. I shall make arrangements to transmit the data directly to *Lord Ryan's* computer."

"Outstanding. Then I guess it's time to go, Physic, Scissor. The ship's fueled up and Crowbar's fairly certain we've scrubbed off all the fallout dust."

"And you picked up the tank, too, right?"

"It's not like it's going to fly anywhere, though," Crowbar said. "Contra-grav's completely wrecked."

"Anyway," Coeur said, "we're ready to leave any time you are."

"Right with you," Physic said, pulling another disk out of a separate computer and popping it into the bag on her shoulder. "All right, I'm ready."

"As am I," Scissor seconded.

"I can't say when we'll be back," Coeur said to Dina. "Will you be maintaining your lab here or moving elsewhere?"

"Here, most likely. Since I avoided contracting the disease, together with two of my associates, we will remain here to conduct further research and look after the safety of the individuals in low suspension."

"You're tougher than I am," Crowbar said. "I don't think I could spend months in a vac suit."

"What must be done shall be done," Dina said.

"Amen to that," Coeur said. "Come on guys, let's go hit space."

Chapter Twelve

Given the scale of her search—looking for a small base among the 25 systems in Thoezennt Subsector—Coeur was more concerned with finding it than with what she'd do when she did. Shortly after *Hornet* entered jump, though, Snapshot and Drop Kick pointed out a possible problem with their approach.

"We look like we're from the RC."

"You mean the ship, Snapshot? It's not particularly obvious where it comes from."

"No," Drop Kick said. "We mean us. With our body sleeves and personal gear, we don't look much like the people who'd be doing business with the Guild—that is, of course, assuming that we're trying to be subtle."

Coeur leaned back in the chair at her stateroom desk. "Well, we all have civilian clothes. I just thought we'd send small groups out in those wherever we stop to look around."

"But why not take it a step further," Snapshot proposed. "Since Xezor is the last friendly world we'll visit, we could stock up on enough gear to make the whole ship look like some kind of free trader."

"I don't know if Xezor's all the larder you're expecting, Snapshot. The people who control the starport aren't big fans of the Coalition, so I was planning on landing near

an island state that we've already got bootstrap teams in."

"Hrm."

"All the same, it is a good idea. Crowbar's already preparing smuggling areas for the battle dress and heavy weapons—if we roughed up the inside of the ship, too, we might make a convincing frontier trader—even a pirate. Since the tank's wrecked, we could claim we captured it somewhere, and are offering it for sale."

"Right," Drop Kick and Snapshot agreed, nodding to each other.

"All right, then. Whenever we land, I'll detail you two to scare us up some ratty looking clothes and low-tech equipment."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, saluting with Snapshot and withdrawing with the gunner.

The Republic of Free Xantreeb, Coeur thought afterward, surrounded on three sides by hostile neighbors. I wonder if that really is the best place to leave those two running around?

Oh, well, they're adults. I'm sure they'll stay out of trouble.

* * *

Crowbar was the closest thing to a pirate Coeur had in her crew, having already ventured beyond the AO with his Lancer mates, so he was ideally suited to overseeing *Hornet's* conversion into a plausible free trader. Guided by his knowledge of smuggling techniques, and aided by Scissor while Gyro and Snapshot kept an eye on the jump drive, he made short work of the necessary changes, completing them a day before the ship's precipitation at

Xezor.

"We're actually kinda lucky," Crowbar explained to Coeur in the galley. "*Hornet's* already slapped together out of spare parts, so she came out of the yard looking zip-tech."

"Indeed," Scissor added. "Most of our modifications have consisted of replacing original indicator panels with older dials and gauges otherwise detailed for emergency repairs."

Coeur nodded, having seen their good work "roughing up" the bridge without diminishing its capacities.

"All right. But where did you put the original equipment?"

"The same place we put the Marine gear and the original computer core—the last place anyone will look."

Challenged earlier in the week to find Crowbar and Scissor's smuggling area, Coeur had by now eliminated all the more obvious choices—the airless aft drive section, landing gear wells, ceiling compartments, and hull frame, for instance.

"All right, where?"

"Sure you don't want to guess?"

"Go ahead, indulge me."

Crowbar grinned. "Inside the fuel tank. Scissor and I built an insulated vessel that can only be accessed from a belly hatch after the liquid hydrogen's been drained."

"I like it," Coeur answered, with a grin of her own.

"Actually, the thing I'm proudest of is our work with the computer core. With all the spare parts in Scissor's stateroom, we were able to remove every original memory board and replace it with a blank duplicate. Even a crack hacker won't find any place we removed data, because it was never there in the first place!"

Suddenly, Coeur cast a sidelong, worried look at the industrious pair.

"Trouble, sir?"

"No. I'm just hoping they give you a raise when we get back to port. I'd hate to think of you working for somebody else."

"Sir," Scissor observed, "the RCES pay scale is fixed at a uniform rate."

"It's a joke," Crowbar explained, softly.

"Oh, humor. Do forgive me, captain."

Coeur forgave him, for the pair's good work could not help but put her in a forgiving mood. Good feelings were less in evidence in the cargo hold, however, where she dropped in on the exasperated Marines and their hapless AFV. Though the turret and top deck of the Pyrrhus were substantially intact, the forward avionics suite and belly contra-grav modules were severely abused and beyond the prospect of repair. What was even worse, though, the frame was badly bent, warped in a way that would make high-speed flight a suicidal proposition even if new CG modules could be found and installed.

"It's a real pity," Whiz Bang said. "It was such an outstanding vehicle."

Mercy laughed. "Yeah, right."

"It did have one good quality," Coeur said; "it didn't sink."

"Good point," Bonzo said. "Perhaps the Aubani Navy can use it as a patrol boat."

"Actually," Drop Kick said, "it probably won't be worth anyone's trouble to fix. More than likely, they'll remove the useful components and melt down the armor for scrap."

"Well, fine," Coeur said, "I'm sure you did your best."

Just as long as she looks the part of a sled we're looking to sell, I'm sure that's the most we'll need from her."

* * *

Unlike every world in the Coalition, the unassimilated planet Xezor lacked a traffic control net, though it wasn't as if it would have mattered if it had one—none of the island nations had a space fleet anyway. The Republic of Bruhamen did have a class C starport, however, and therefore would eventually be a necessary target for normalized relations with the Coalition—no matter how much its populace disliked the Coalition at present. Out of diplomatic courtesy, Coeur signaled Bruhamen's government that she had arrived for ocean refueling only, and then discreetly set down on the other side of the planet at Free Xantreeb.

Climatically, the island of 250 kilometers diameter was clearly tropical year-round—it sat 10 degrees above the equator of a world where a single ocean moderated global climate—and the Arses and Marines debarked into a balmy seeming-paradise, spoiled only by the sulfuric scent of volcanic smoke prevalent over all the islands of the world.

"Ah," Physic said, admiring the bronzed men strolling down the beach near the grassy glade they'd set down in. "So that's why we stopped here."

"Negative," Coeur said. "The local bootstrap team said it had a headquarters near this field."

"Oh, I see it," Drop Kick said, "up in the hills there."

"Nice camouflage," Snapshot said. "They at war here?"

"According to our last data," Coeur said, "all these islands around here claim each other as their rightful

territory, but I don't think its a shooting war at this point. Come on, let's go visit the office."

To reach the office, recessed into a cliff above the beach, the three Arses and one Marine eschewed their air raft and instead passed on foot through the outskirts of Pango City—a city of thousands that occupied a wide valley in the south face of the island. Having changed from their body sleeves to light shirts and shorts more suitable to the tropics, they weren't obviously extraterrestrial in origin, but somehow the locals placed their origin and greeted them cheerily.

"Coalition women! Hello!"

"Here! Sir, have a piece of gun crab!"

"Oh, don't mind if I do," Drop Kick said.

"Actually," Coeur said, to the effusive crowd that had waylaid them at an open-air market, "we're trying to reach the bootstrap enclave. Can we reach that along this road?"

"Oh, yes. Just head right up the road and veer to the left."

"Thank you," Coeur said, excusing herself from the boisterous crowd and prompting her people ahead of her.

"Friendly folks, aren't they?" Snapshot said afterward, as they headed out of town and up the road.

"Well, they did see the ship come down, so maybe they thought we were bringing something," Drop Kick said, munching on a crab leg. "Say, this is good."

The real reason for the high opinion they were held in became clear later, when they were met by Wing Nut, the Coalition agent in charge of the two-story enclave.

"It's probably the new electric lights we installed," he said. "Did you see the cables for the lights in the streets?"

"I suppose we did," Coeur said, "come to think of it."

"But we understood Xezor was TL-8," Physic said. "You mean these people didn't have electric lights?"

"Xezor is nominally TL-8," the agent said, leading them out to seats on a comfortable veranda overlooking the sea "But Free Xantreeb was never well-developed, and being a breakaway state didn't help. By repairing their old fusion generators, and teaching them how to maintain them, we're giving the islanders the power to be self-sufficient, instead of dependent on the whim of offworlders."

"Do you mean the Guild?" Coeur asked.

"Hell yes, I mean the Guild! I've been sending intelligence notices back to the Coalition for months, but nobody seems to think they're much of a threat."

"Have you actually met Guild agents here?"

"No, but they're all over the place. This kind of planet attracts them like flies."

"What do you mean?" Snapshot asked.

"Well, just think about it. The big islands depend on old fusion power that doesn't work, so they need replacement parts—a Guild market. The Xantreeb Republic is planning to reconquer all the breakaway islands and needs weapons—a Guild market. Bruhamen is even thinking about selling exclusive rights to its starport to the Guild."

"How are you responding?" Coeur asked.

"Well, I'm not in charge of the entire Coalition mission here—just Free Xantreeb—but pretty much our plan is to empower people with their own technology. In the long run, that'll give us strong, independent friends while the Guild keeps its friends dependent on offworld products."

"Sounds good," Coeur said. "But I've got to talk to you

about why we're here."

"Aren't you a supply ship?"

"No. Are you familiar with Seabridge Nest on Ra?"

"Oh, sure. The Hiver research station."

"It's been all but destroyed by biological weapons."

"Oh my God."

"And we think the Guild's to blame. I want to find their base, Wing Nut, and take it out."

Wing Nut leaned back in his chair.

"That could be tough. Nobody knows where the Guild is staging from."

"Time is limited, Wing Nut. If the epidemic from Ra isn't stopped, it could decimate the Hiver population. We need to find its point of origin soon."

"We could intercept a Guild freighter," Drop Kick suggested, "or sneak aboard one and rough up the crew until they tell us where they're from."

"Real subtle," Coeur said. "No, I don't think so."

"Well," Wing Nut said, "it is a fact that Guild agents have dealings with the governments of Greater Xantreeb and Bruhamen. Perhaps you could snoop around there."

"We do need those supplies we were talking about," Coeur said to Snapshot. "Tell you what. You take Drop Kick and a couple of Marines over to Bruhamen in the launch to check it out. Physic, you help Crowbar put the top on the air raft and take it over to Greater Xantreeb to poke around there."

"A word of caution," Wing Nut said, suddenly. "The Bruhamen can be a trifle touchy. It might be best if you try not to antagonize them."

Coeur thought about that for a moment, looking at Snapshot and Drop Kick.

"On second thought," Coeur said, "why don't you

take Physic to Bruhamen and Crowbar can take the Marines with him."

"Afraid we'd start a fight, sir?" Drop Kick asked.

"You'd damn well better not. Come on, let's go. Wing Nut, we'll be in touch..."

Just then, as they were rising to go, a gust of wind whipped in through the veranda, intensifying the sulfurous stink of the air for a moment. The *Hornet* crew were noticeably more put off by the smell than Wing Nut, a fact that caught Coeur's attention.

"That is some foul air. Is it always this bad?"

"Actually," Wing Nut said, "it's often worse."

"Must be hell on the lungs."

"Yes, it is. The doctors tell us we're taking years off our lives by working here without filter masks, but we see it as a sign of fraternity with the natives. And you get used to it eventually."

"Hopefully," Physic said, "we won't be here that long."

* * *

"Any idea what we're looking for?" Mercy asked Crowbar, spotting land off to the right of their air raft's bow.

"The skipper just said to poke around," the engineer replied, studying a computer map in the seat beside hers. "Steer right 20 degrees."

"Where will that take us?" Whiz Bang asked, stretched out in the two rear seats and just waking up after a four-hour trip.

"Pantera. It's one of the best ports in Greater Xantreeb."

"Got good beer there?"

"It's a port, Whiz Bang. You know, sailors?"

"Oh, right. Of course they have beer."

"Pity we didn't bring Bonzo," Mercy said. "He could have been our designated non-drinker, instead of me."

"Boy's touched," Whiz Bang said. "Rather work on the radio than go cruise a port. Weird."

Crowbar shook his head slightly, smiling.

"How about customs?" Mercy asked. "Is there some place we have to check in?"

"Not according to Wing Nut. It's pretty much a free port."

"Well, whatever kind of port it is, I can't pick up an air traffic channel," Mercy said. "Suppose they don't have one?"

"I wouldn't take a chance. Go NOE."

"Affirmative."

In the enclosed air raft, whipping along at 600 kph, there was little impression of speed, but that changed drastically as Mercy cut to a safe 150 kph and dipped down low to skim the waves at five meters.

"That's better. At least we won't plow into any airplanes here."

"We'd shrug 'em off," Whiz Bang quipped. "Our side armor's almost as thick as the sled's."

"Good Marine reasoning," Mercy said. "I'm picking up vessels and structures at three clicks."

"That'll be the port. Steer there."

"Slowing to 30. Be there in five."

The port was a handsome facility, tucked into a safe harbor and supporting even more ship traffic than Port Adrian on Ra. Given the higher overall tech level, these ships tended more toward hydrofoils and surface effect craft, though, and steering clear of them proved a



considerable challenge to Mercy.

"Hey, why's that guy in that boat waving at us?"

"Slow down, Mercy. I'll open a window and find out."

In the process of opening the window, Crowbar saw a sign on the side of the boat:

HARBOR PILOT

"Hey, you lug!" the fellow yelled. "Get that thing off the bay! What do you think this is, an airport?"

"Sorry!" Crowbar yelled back. "Which way's safe?"

The pilot used both hands to wave them left, then hurled a variety of salty invectives that were cut off by Crowbar's closing of his window.

"Jeez," Whiz Bang said. "Switch to decaf, mister."

"No, he's right," Mercy said. "I'll take us up on land and park somewhere."

Parking was easier than they'd thought it would be, given their greeting on the harbor. Moving in among ground cars and cargo trucks (the latter were about the same size as the air raft), Mercy improvised traffic signals with her running lights and asked Crowbar where they were headed.

"This is a warehouse district," Crowbar observed. "Keep going. Stop at the stop signs."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Let me get this straight," Whiz Bang said, feeling the outline of the gauss pistol he kept in his windbreaker. "Is this the country where they have fist fights every five minutes?"

"No," Crowbar said, "that's Bruhamen."

"Where they sent the sarge," Mercy added. "'Cause he's so peace-loving."

"Hey, I'm peace-loving," Whiz Bang said. "I just like to blow things up, that's all."

"Yeah, perfectly normal."

"Heads up," Crowbar said.

"What, cops?"

"No, another air raft. Go up a block and turn around."

Although Crowbar wasn't a Marine, Mercy respected his experience. Lancers especially seemed to have a sense for where to find things in a port, even if it was a port they'd never been in before.

"Bars, bars, bars," Crowbar said, as they came around the block as indicated. "Yeah, this is good. Set down in front of that garbage bin."

"For the shade?"

"No. Give us some cover in case people start shooting at us and we have to run."

The Marines shot concerned looks at the engineer.

"Just kidding. But remember, wherever we go, use the Bruhamen credits we got from Wing Nut."

"Understood."

Though there was only one other air raft parked on the narrow street, other vehicles told Crowbar that offworlders were in the area—a Lancer Astrotech tracked ATV, for instance, and a grav bike with a titanium steering bar lock. Clearly, this was an alternative landing area for traders who didn't have a taste for the rough goings-on at Bruhamen.

"Nice bike," Whiz Bang said, as they debarked from and locked their air raft.

"Come on," Mercy said. "Theft's not in the RC charter."

Though he didn't let on until later, Crowbar didn't expect to learn much from the places they dropped into.

Only after they'd tried warming up to three different crews—without success—and gotten himself and Whiz Bang mildly tanked in the process, did the engineer explain.

"It doesn't pay to be too friendly," Crowbar said, over a beer at a back booth in the fourth tavern they'd visited. "Traders, they work a subsector for a long time before they get comfortable."

"There was that last fellow," Mercy said, looking across at Crowbar and Whiz Bang on the other side of the table. "Said he might know something about Guild contracts if we came back next week."

"Just shining us on, probably. Besides, we don't have weeks to spend at every planet in the subsector."

"Oh, well," Whiz Bang said, resignedly, tossing back a jigger of scotch.

Across the smoky room, however, something had caught Crowbar's eye.

"See something?" Mercy asked.

"Over there. See that guy at the corner barstool?"

Mercy nodded, perceiving the fellow. A rather pathetic sight, the plastered fellow appeared to be having an unsuccessful argument with the bartender while his rear end made a struggling effort to maintain its purchase on his stool. The argument, occasionally loud enough to hear, seemed to revolve around the fellow's inability to cover his tab.

"Now see that tattoo on his arm? Look familiar?"

"Not really. Looks like he tried to get it erased, though, whatever it was."

Whiz Bang, three years older than Mercy, had an easier time recognizing what Crowbar did.

"Hey, that looks like one of those old Dawn League

tattoos: D-L, over a field of shooting stars and a galaxy. Kind of appropriate, the shooting stars bit."

"Yeah," Crowbar said. "Wait here."

Abandoning the booth, Crowbar maneuvered around an intervening table and up to the bar beside the drunk.

"Another lager, sir," Crowbar said, interrupting the scrap between bartender and patron.

With a surly look, the bartender moved away to get the drink.

"You an engineer?" Crowbar asked the fellow with the tattoo.

"Who the hell are you?"

"An engineer."

"Oh."

The bartender returned with the beer, and Crowbar promptly paid him with a Bruhamen coin. Then the bartender returned to badgering the fellow beside Crowbar.

"Look, Pitstop, you're not getting a drop. Not until you pay up."

"Hey," Pitstop said, finally feeling his butt lose the battle with his seat, but saved from falling by Crowbar's supporting hand. "Thanks, mister—aren't I good for it? Haven't I always paid you before?"

"Before isn't now. And maybe I just don't like looking at you anymore."

"I don't mean to intrude," Crowbar said, "but how much is this tab you're talking about here?"

"Fifty Xantreeb guilders."

More than I've got...

"Take Coalition credits?"

"Where the hell'd you get those?"

"Found 'em in the street," Crowbar said, digging in his

pants and flopping two 50-credit notes on the bar. "God knows what I'll do with 'em."

As if regarding curious *objets d'art*, the bartender examined the bills closely.

"That used to be the Dawn League, right?"

"Got me. Nice hologram over the watermark, though."

"Yeah, that'll cover the tab," the bartender said, folding and pocketing the bills. "But you, Pitstop, you've had enough for one day."

"Ah—fikken."

"Easy," Crowbar said, steering Pitstop away from the bar and back toward his booth while the bartender turned away. "Here, have my beer."

"Oh, I couldn't impose on your generosity...could I?"

"Yes, you can," Crowbar said, steering Pitstop toward the space vacated by a waiting Whiz Bang. "But you're not driving home, however you got here. We'll give you a lift."

Once seated, Pitstop wasted no time downing the beer, only afterward perceiving the individuals around him.

"Good afternoon, ma'am."

Mercy nodded.

"So," Pitstop said to Crowbar, "how'd you know I was an engineer?"

"Because you drink like a fish. I know; I used to, too."

"It's the jump drive that gets you. All the hours watchin' the valves—guarding the red line—not a drink in sight—" Pitstop shivered, "No thanks; I'll pass."

"What do you do now?"

"Fix power plants. Lotsa old power plants here."

"Yeah, I can imagine. How about before that?"

"Oh, space. Been around, here and there."

"Ever..." Whiz Bang said, "...been in the Dawn League?"

"Hey!" Pitstop said, giving a bleary-eyed sidelong glance toward Crowbar. "Who are you, mister? Whoever, you are, you sure didn't find no Coalition note in a gutter."

"Sorry, name's Glaive," Crowbar said, shaking Pitstop's hand. "And let's just say we're spacers, looking for a particular type of cargo."

"What's that?"

"Dirty weapons," Mercy said. "Nukes, biologicals."

"Oh, man, I don't know about that."

"What *do* you know about?" Crowbar asked.

"I didn't get mixed up in any dirty stuff, Mister..."

"Glaive," Crowbar repeated, offering his first name as his last.

"Mister Glaive. Until the end, that is. That's when they got rid of me."

"Why was that?"

"Slaves," Pitstop said, in a hushed voice. "It was collecting slaves I didn't like."

"Slaves?" Mercy asked.

"For Free Traders, probably," Whiz Bang said.

"No, not for Free Traders. Was contract work for the Guild."

"Really."

"Yeah, we'd round 'em up and bring 'em back here. Then the Guild would take 'em back to their planet."

Crowbar controlled his sudden excitement better than his mates.

"So the Guild took 'em somewhere else."

"Yeah, that's what we figured. And it wasn't just people either—they'd take animals too, for the collection of that Empress Solee up in Shenk."

"Sounds pretty disgusting," Mercy said.

"It was—some of the poor bastards were just women and kids. It really gets ya to think about it."

"Right. But you were saying about this Guild base. Ever been there?"

"Oh, hell no. Guild people get stupid real quick when you ask 'em questions like that."

"Probably don't want uninvited guests," Crowbar speculated.

"Yeah, well, you can kinda tell where it must be. Somewhere out past Marax, I reckon, 'cause our skipper said we didn't have the range to get there by jump-2."

"Is your skipper around?"

"Oh, no; he's dead. Somebody cut his throat after he said that."

The Marines and Crowbar shared ominous stares.

"Guys, I'm sorry, but I really gotta get to the head."

"Oh, sorry," Crowbar said, getting out of the booth quickly and following Pitstop toward the lavatory. When they returned to the booth, Mercy and Whiz Bang perceived a strong smell of vomit tainting Pitstop's alcoholic breath.

"Well, I think it's time to take Mr. Pitstop home. Let's be off, people."

* * *

Having flashed Coalition currency around a port in Guild-friendly territory, Crowbar decided not to overstay his welcome at Pantera. After flying Pitstop back to his workshop/apartment by the waterfront, and seeing him safely tucked into his moldy bed, Crowbar suggested Mercy steer back toward Free Xantreeb as expeditiously

as possible.

"You okay to fly?" Crowbar asked Mercy.

"I'm fine, sir. Remember, I was a good girl and didn't drink."

"Hell," Whiz Bang said, "a drunk Mercy's twice as good a pilot as anyone else half as drunk."

Whereupon the gunner fell asleep, a condition that he would remain in for the remainder of their four-hour flight. Perceiving that he was asleep—by his loud snoring—Crowbar then gave in to curiosity about something that had puzzled him for a long time.

"Mercy, I don't know if this out of line, but I've been wondering about something. After the sled got wrecked, you didn't seem as upset as I thought you'd be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it was the skipper who was driving the sled when it got wrecked. I kinda wondered if you blamed her for wrecking it."

Despite the deepening darkness outside, Crowbar could see the edge of Mercy's lip curl up in a slight grimace.

"The skipper brought all her people home, Crowbar, that's all that matters. A vehicle you can replace. A person you can't."

"Yeah, that's the truth."

Two hours later, Mercysaw the outline of Free Xantreeb on long-range passive EMS and hailed *Hornet*. Gyro answered.

"Welcome back, Mercy. We ocean refueled while you were away, so we'll be ready to launch in the morning."

"Roger, *Hornet*. Still on the beach?"

"Affirmative."

"Very good. Then open the hatch, we're on our way

in."

Whiz Bang roused from his slumber a few minutes later, just in time to see Mercy steering the air raft into its berth at the forward end of *Hornet's* passenger loft. After the air raft was secured and the exterior hatch closed over its berth, Crowbar unlocked the inner hatch, letting Whiz Bang and Mercy into the loft ahead of him.

There they found Snapshot and Physic attending a badly bruised Drop Kick. With his shirt off, it was clear that he'd been struck several times in the head and the torso, and he had a nasty cut across his forehead, to which the doctor was applying antiseptic with a gauze pad.

"Sergeant!" Mercy said. "What happened?"

"He was being diplomatic," Physic said.

"Yeah, well you shoulda seen the other guy," Deep Six said. "Ouch!"

"That's other *guys*," Snapshot corrected her friend. "You pretty much pissed off an entire mob, remember?"

"Yeah, well—ow—they had it coming."

"I gotta hear this one," Mercy said, mirroring the sentiments of her companions, who joined her in pulling up three chairs.

"It wasn't that big a deal," Physic said, switching from dabbing the head wound to wiping gravel out of scars on Drop Kick's arms. "After we bought the surplus guns and clothes and loaded them on the launch, Drop Kick had this idea that we should go downtown and look for rumors. Somewhere along the line, Snapshot ran into someone on the sidewalk—the guy said something nasty to her—Drop Kick asked him to apologize and got punched, so he decked the guy—then five or 10 of his friends came after Drop Kick and beat the crap out of him."

"Well," Crowbar said, "that sounds constructive."

"So why aren't you dead?" Whiz Bang asked.

"That was thanks to Snapper," Drop Kick said.

"Well," Snapshot said, "I just noticed that everyone there seems to carry a gun, so I grabbed a submachine-gun from some kid and fired it over everyone's head. That gave us some time to..."

"Run like hell," Mercy interjected.

"Right. Which we did. Eventually, we got back to the launch and bugged out."

Right then, the lift from the lower deck opened, and Coeur appeared with a covered plate in hand.

"Oh, thank God. Everyone's back."

"Yeah," Crowbar said. "I think we're glad we drew our assignment."

"Learn anything?"

"Maybe," Crowbar told Coeur. "We found an old Dawn League engineer who sold slaves to the Guild. He pretty much told us we should keep going the way we're going."

Coeur nodded, impressed.

"That's good. I didn't think we'd learn anything."

"So what's on the plate, skipper?" Mercy asked.

"Ah," Coeur said, lowering the plate and lifting the lid to expose three remarkable portions of red and white meat. "Lobster à la Deep Six. He actually swam out and caught this after we were done refueling."

"Damn, that's good!" Crowbar said, taking a piece and biting in. "Is it safe?"

"Certified so by Scissor," Coeur answered. "This was our dinner, pretty much. Here, have these two."

The Marines didn't have to be asked twice.

"Say," Whiz Bang said, "now that we're mock pirates,

I say we give Deep Six double shares of any prize we take."

"Hear! Hear!" the others seconded, all save Drop Kick, who winced at the terrible headache he was now developing.

Chapter Thirteen

At Meadsk, the next world on her route, *Hornet* found more evidence of Guild slaving, and evidence she was on the right path.

Alone among the worlds of known space, Meadsk had not been affected by the Collapse. In fact, it wasn't even aware there was a Collapse. As an anthropological experiment, the TL-2 world had been completely interdicted by the Third Imperium, and thereby was spared all contact with the interstellar commerce that spread Virus.

"These people are friends of ours, right?" Snapshot asked, as Meadsk loomed ahead.

"We've contacted them," Gyro replied from the other side of the ship. "But I wouldn't say they're allies."

"Just stand by your weapons," Coeur advised. "There's no traffic net, and we can't be sure who's here."

But there were no privateers, smugglers, or vampire raiders in orbit this day. Alone in the space over Meadsk, *Hornet* deployed another of Snapshot and Scissor's improvised sensor drones to cover its rear and roared down through the dense atmosphere over Apranapan continent. Guided by the crisp precision of Deep Six's navigation, the ship came in low across the equatorial mountains and alighted on a bluff overlooking Paguzim.

"Nice work, Sixer," Coeur said, studying the great

walled city dominating the river valley below. "That should be the capital of the Eitanii Republic."

"I understand that the Eitanii have been previously contacted by our government," Deep Six said.

"More or less. We know that Dawn League missions visited and negotiated treaties of assistance, but there isn't a whole lot of background data in the library."

"The culture must be reasonably stable," the Schalli said, noting the cultivated fields all around them. "Observe the people engaged in agricultural pursuits."

"Yes, but also observe the city walls," Coeur said. "Those don't look like they're just for looks."

"True."

Coeur activated the channel to Gyro.

"Gyro, here's the plan. Physic and I'll go scout the city, while you and Sixer watch over the ship."

"Understood, sir. Will you be taking the air raft?"

"No, we'll keep it low profile."

"May I suggest, sir, you keep your communicator channel open until you reach a government representative?"

"Good idea. Just don't send in the cavalry unless we're in real trouble, understood?"

"Understood, sir."

* * *

Contact with the government of the republic came faster than Coeur and Physic expected it would. Almost as soon as they climbed out of the port air lock—wearing civvies picked up on Xezor—two local soldiers rode up on giirgin (horselike creatures native to Vland), wearing expressions almost as severe as their black and gray mail.

Probably not aware of Gyro's 150-megajoule laser trained upon them, they crossed their spears across the women's path as they started on their way toward Paguzim.

"Em asad paru panshar das gegangen sein?" one said.

"Recognize that?" Physic asked Coeur.

"The first part sounds Vilani," Coeur said softly. "I think he asked where we were going. Ah...*Bitte, ung taken de leaderski?*"

The soldiers gave each other quizzical looks.

"What did you say?" Physic asked, out of the side of her mouth.

"The first damn thing that popped into my head. When in doubt, tell a joke. At least you can have some fun."

"Coalition?" the soldier asked.

Coeur and Physic nodded.

The other soldier, who hadn't been talking, then descended from his mount and thoroughly patted down the Arses. Finding no weapons or suspicious effects (their radios were overlooked wrist models), the soldier then returned to his horse and made his report to his companion.

"Zinkir keine nikli."

The other soldier nodded and then pointed toward the city two kilometers away.

"Translator. Come."

"Well," Physic said, "that wasn't so hard."

"Yeah, right."

With one soldier riding before them and the other behind, Physic and Coeur then walked off the bluff and strolled through surrounding fields of cabbage and beans to a wide stone highway. Minutes later, this road led up to the main gate of Paguzim, open in the middle of the

day but fairly well guarded.

Unlike most worlds in the Wilds, Meadsk had no relic technology whatsoever, and so the city appeared completely rustic: Thousands of men, women, and children carried on the hard work of life at a low tech level—driving wagons and hauling cargo by hand—but even so, many spared a moment to stare at the visiting strangers with looks of curiosity and concern.

Wondering what might cause such a reaction, the women were led to a huge rectangular stone building. Knowing the state to be a republic, Coeur did not assume it was a palace, but their dismounted escort did lead them into a central courtyard that might very well have been an emperor's court at some time in the past.

In that busy space, gaily dressed merchants and politicians bantered in a spectrum of indecipherable tongues—evidence this was a public square for discussion of commerce. Reassured that they were not being taken to a jail, the Arses then relaxed as they were led into a side office and gestured to wait.

"What do you know about this republic?" Physic said.

"Opportunistic, receptive to new ideas," Coeur answered.

"So what's with all the nasty looks?"

"The nasty looks," a new voice answered, "are from people afraid that you're slavers."

Turning, the Arses noted that a man had come in from the courtyard, dressed in green silk and wearing a floppy plumed hat.

"Hans Gakashir," he said, extending a hand that both Coeur and Physic shook. "Government translator and representative."

"Coeur D'Esprit," Coeur returned, "captain of RCS

Hornet, and Orit Takegawa."

"Then you are from the Coalition."

"Yes, though we're not on a mission to this planet specifically. We're only passing through."

"Passing through to where?"

"To be perfectly frank, we're looking for a Guild base. We think it was responsible for an attack on one of our worlds."

"So you're not slavers, then?"

"We're definitely not that, sir," Physic said.

"That's good," Gakashir said, "because, as I said, that's why our people look at you suspiciously. Our neighbors are beset with offworld slavers, and there is fear it will afflict us as well if we aren't careful."

"Slavers, you say?" Coeur asked.

"Yes. That's why you were brought to me. The ruling council wants all visiting starships inspected, but that isn't practical unless they have a translator with them."

"Oh, well, that's fine. When would be convenient?"

"The sooner the better. I'll just go and notify the soldiers."

"Wait a minute," Coeur said. "We understand that our government has entered into a technical assistance pact with your republic. While we're here, is there any particular need you have?"

Gakashir thought about that a moment, stroking his short beard.

"There is something you can do."

"Yes?"

"Find that Guild base, and stop the slavers."

When Hans Gakashir and his two soldiers completed

their inspection of *Hornet* two hours later, Crowbar was thoroughly smug. The Eitanii hadn't even come close to noticing where he had hidden the Marine battle dress and heavy weapons.

"We just can't be too sure," the translator told Coeur and Physic afterward, in *Hornet's* lounge. "It's only this kind of rigorous inspection that's kept the slavers away from Paguzim."

"Well," the doctor said, "if we were slavers, wouldn't we just kill you when you came aboard?"

"Maybe. But then you'd have to shoot your way into the city."

"You're a brave man, sir," Coeur said.

Gakashir shrugged. "Maybe not as brave as you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we may not be wise to the ways of space, but we but have noticed that the slavers have an attraction toward exotic creatures. We understand that our giirgin, for instance, our extremely rare on other worlds, and are therefore prized by slavers."

"Probably take them to that Solee zoo," Physic speculated, "but what's that have to do with us?"

"It occurs to me," Gakashir said, "that slavers might take an interest in those creatures you're carrying."

It took the Arses a moment before they realized what the translator meant.

Scissor and Deep Six.

"Sir," Coeur said, "those creatures are members of our crew. Sentient beings."

Gakashir looked profoundly embarrassed. "Oh, of course, Hivers! The Dawn Leaguers told us about them."

"They're not both Hivers," Physic said, nodding toward the bridge. "Deep Six there is a Schalli, from my

planet, Aubaine."

"My most abject apologies."

"That's all right," Coeur said, raising a hand. "Mr. Gakashir makes a good point. There may be people where we're going who've never seen a Hiver or a Schalli."

"It is not our intention to remain a backward people," the translator said.

"All people are pretty much the same under the skin," Coeur said. "It's just our circumstances that make us different."

"A noble thought."

"Yeah, well, noble thoughts don't pay the bills. Mr. Gakashir, you've been very generous with us, given the fact that you're beset by thugs and bandits. Would it be too much of an imposition to ask if we can refuel from your coastal ocean?"

"The sea is free to all, captain."

"Thank you, sir."

Six hours later, her tanks replenished with Meadskan seawater, *Hornet* blasted off the world and out toward jump point, five hours distant at 100 diameters. Afterward, when *Hornet* was in jump space, and Gyro came forward to stand the jump watch, Coeur invited Deep Six to join her in Scissor's stateroom/workshop to discuss a matter weighing heavily on her mind.

"People," she said, "I have a proposal. You're both aware, I assume, that this subsector has a thriving trade in slaves."

"For sale to vampire fleets and oppressive planetary regimes," Scissor answered. "Yes."

"Not just that. There's also a market for unusual organisms."

"A puerile fascination with that which is alien," Deep Six commented.

That was approximately the comment Coeur expected from her navigator. Schalli had no comprehension of the human attraction toward collections of caged creatures.

"Guys, here's the deal. When we cross the AO in a couple of weeks, I want this ship to look like a plausible free trader, and it might help that illusion if we could present you as creatures we're taking for sale elsewhere."

"A logical plan," Scissor said. "And potentially a workable manipulation of local perceptions."

"I agree," Deep Six said, checking the calculations for the yet distant jump point. "But I would ask you if you would accept the same situation, were our circumstances reversed."

Having considered that question, Coeur had an answer.

"I would, Sixer, if you were making the suggestion."

Deep Six made a triple-click—the Schalli equivalent of a nod.

"It has been said," Coeur observed, "that the least courtesy civilized beings owe each other is respect. What I'm mostly worried about, though, is Scissor's health. Scissor, do you think you could stand hours, or days, floating in Deep Six's tank?"

"I assure you that I am well," Scissor said. "And I have assured the doctor that I will inform her at the first sign of an outbreak of Hiver Folgorex Syndrome. However, I am curious why you would want me in such unusual aquatic surroundings?"

"I'm hoping that most people out here won't know what a Hiver looks like. There's no point in giving away clues that we're from the Coalition, so I'm hoping that if

we just call you a squid and keep you in the water, no one will be the wiser."

"Eminently reasonable," Scissor agreed.

"All right, then," Coeur said, smiling inwardly at Scissor's compliment, and joined Deep Six in withdrawing toward the door. "I'll arrange to have the tub relocated."

"Very good," Scissor said, walking back to the door beside the others. "I am sure the deception will be effective."

"All right, then," Coeur said. "See you later."

"Indeed," Scissor said, as the door closed behind its leaving guests.

Only then did Scissor give in to the fatigue in its body and let its body slump to the floor. The sickness was coming faster than the doctor had expected, but as yet there were no signs she could read on a medical scanner.

For Scissor that was good, as the doctor would only restrict its activities if she knew how sick it was, and Scissor did not believe it would be prudent in the coming days to burden the ship unnecessarily. On a reserve of inner strength, therefore, Scissor lifted itself back to its feet and returned to the mundane work at its table.

* * *

While *Hornet* was taking on fuel at Meadsk, a discussion arose among the crew about the wisdom of their future course. Drop Kick and Snapshot, in particular, pointed out that a Guild base could just as easily be in the direction of Marax—three parsecs distant—as coreward Thoezennt. Coeur, however, decided to save a visit there for the tail end of their trip.

"Anything's possible," she said, "but it's not a place I'd

put a base. It's not centrally located, for one thing, and for another the local warlord's a loon blasting out earthworks with nuclear weapons."

"Plus," Crowbar observed, "he's got a law level that makes Emperor Gherard look like a school crossing guard."

So *Hornet* remained on her original course.

After Meadsk, *Hornet* jumped into open space and then on to Sh'Lur, a boneyard on the edge of the AO. As such, it was the last world Coeur had any modern information about, and the last she would jump to directly if she had a choice. Beyond the AO, she would instruct Deep Six to plot jumps that precipitated near gas giants in the outskirts of the systems they were visiting. Assuming SDBs there could be dodged or placated, they would then refuel and maneuver inward to the systems' mainworlds.

Hornet first used this protocol at Bwan Hurr, a system without SDBs to guard its gas giants, but adamantly opposed to contact all the same. Bwan Hurr's mystic dictatorship (a form of government discernible through its television broadcasts) lobbed a planetary defense missile at *Hornet* once she entered low orbit. Gyro intercepted it before its nuclear warhead had a chance to detonate, but that unfriendly embassy persuaded Coeur to swing out to a higher orbit and probe the world from a distance.

"Somehow," she said to Deep Six a full day later, "I don't see this being an ideal location for commerce."

"I concur, Red Sun. Beyond a relic planetary-defense missile system, there is no evidence of modern facilities."

"Roger that. Set course for Sauler."

But Sauler, a binary system lacking not only gas giants

but also planetoid belts with ice, would have to be approached directly—an option that did not fill the crew with enthusiasm after Bwan Hurr. Appropriately, the gunners were staring down their gunsights, and Coeur was standing by for evasive maneuvers even before *Hornet* was out of jump.

"Target," Deep Six said. "SDB bearing 220, range 100,000 and hailing."

"I'll take it," Coeur said, tuning in on the SDB's frequency.

"Unknown vessel, this is SDB *Springbok*; identify yourself and stand to for boarding."

"Understood, SDB. This is the free trader *Wasp*, out of Lancer, standing to."

"Wise choice, *Wasp*. Will be there in 20."

Coeur shut off the radio, wearing a grim expression on her face.

"Sixer, get Scissor and execute the ruse. I'll get Gyro up here to play co-pilot."

"Affirmative."

* * *

When she came within visual range, *Springbok* proved not to be an SDB at all, but a starship—a *Gazelle*-class close escort wearing the insignia of the starmerc company Raglan's Raiders. No one aboard *Hornet* had ever heard of that company, but its employees certainly made a dramatic first impression. *Springbok's* inspection party comprised two troopers in relic Imperial Marine battle dress (clumsy, but almost invulnerable) and a third man in a tailored TL-14 vac suit.

"Aaron Boden," the latter individual said, upon enter-

ing *Hornet* through a docking collar, "of Raglan's Raiders, providing security for the Sauler Starport Cooperative. Are you the commanding officer here?"

"Yvette François," Coeur said, "yes. And this is Sharik Ishkidenum, my XO."

Gyro exchanged a polite nod with the starmerc.

"We'll need access to your hold, quarters, drives, and computer core."

"Sir," Coeur said, spreading her hands in an expansive gesture of acceptance, "we are completely at your disposal."

As the Arses expected, the two troopers in heavy armor did little of the actual inspection—they were mainly along to impress and cow the trader crew—but Boden was a crafty old hand who knew all the tricks. He accessed the computer directly, for instance, rather than reading logs from the bridge, and put on a helmet to check the unpressurized sections of the drive decks for smuggled contraband. An hour's worth of inspection, however, revealed only the cargo Coeur wanted to be seen: a launch, a grav tank, and two bizarre xenomorphs floating in a tank in the hold.

"What the hell are those?" Boden asked.

"That's a squid and a porpoise," Coeur said. "We're taking 'em on through to Solee—if we get a chance."

Boden looked more closely at Scissor, floating limp on its broadly splayed limbs.

"I didn't know Hivers lived in water."

Oh, you had to be a smart bastard, didn't you? Coeur thought, surprised. "They don't," she replied, thinking fast. "We just keep him in there because he's clumsy in water, and it makes it harder for him to escape."

"Hm. They're not moving much; are you sure they're

alive?"

"Oh, yeah, they're alive. But we shot 'em so full of tranq they won't wake up for the duration."

"Right," Gyro said, picking up a lead pipe. "Watch this."

Suddenly, the XO delivered a whipping blow to Deep Six's back, startling even the men in heavy armor. Fortunately, they weren't aware that that was the place where the Schalli's insulating blubber was thickest.

"See? Out like a light."

"Figured they'd bring more money alive," Coeur said, "though we'll air 'em out if they cause any trouble."

Boden nodded, with a pleased smile on his face.

"I don't suppose you actually *purchased* any of the cargo in this hold, did you?"

"It's in my cargo hold," Coeur said. "That makes it mine, the way I see it."

"She's a sharp one," Boden said, to his ominously quiet escort. "Skipper, I've got a question for you. Are you a friend of the captain?"

"Excuse me?"

Boden smiled proudly.

"No, I didn't think you were. But I'll bet we make a nice commission if you're accepted."

"Accepted for what?" Gyro asked.

"Why, the Mercantile Guild, of course. With your, ah...gift...for acquisition, you'll be shoo-ins for a membership."

The moment the air lock closed behind *Springbok's* inspection party, a celebratory whoop went up from

every inhabited compartment of RCS *Hornet*. Coeur, however, put a stop to any premature celebration.

"All right, people," she said on shipwide intercom from the bridge, "settle down. We may have found a Guild outpost, but it's not necessarily the outpost we're looking for. I'll expect good order, regardless of what we find."

So advised, the crew contained itself, and Gyro plotted a course that fit within the narrow approach window allowed by *Springbok*. Since another inspection might await on the surface of Sauler, Gyro stayed at the copilot's station all the way down to the surface, while Whiz Bang covered for her at the starboard laser turret.

Sauler was a large world—as large as Coeur's home-world Terra—and that dismayed her at first. With less than half of its surface liquid water, Sauler had abundant area within which to hide a stockpile of biological munitions—or almost anything else the Guild felt like keeping there. Compelled to stay on her assigned course by *Springbok* and a sister close escort, *Hornet* did not have the liberty to orbit where she wished and narrow down any future search with close orbital scans.

Well, hell, Coeur thought, *it could be worse. At least we're here.*

"Have you been keeping an ear on the radio channels?" Coeur asked Gyro, while they were still well above the dense stratosphere.

"Affirmative. There's at least three balkanized states on this side of the planet, but no suggestion of a unifying higher power. If the Guild is here, they must not be ruling directly."

"They do have a starport," Coeur pointed out.

"True. And that's the key to controlling a planet."

"Funny. I could have sworn that was one of my

lessons."

"It was," Gyro said. "I got an A."

The starport, as it happened, was located at the narrowest point of an isthmus connecting Sauler's great northern and southern continents. Its immediate geographical extent, Coeur realized, must therefore be limited, though—on the other hand—there was no better position from which to dominate trade both onworld and off. Though only a handful of ships were visible in starport berths on the way in, more could easily be hidden behind tarps or inside warehouses, and Coeur didn't leap to a premature judgment about its modest size.

"Ship is down," Gyro announced after the ship settled into a walled starport berth. "All stations send secured."

"Roger that. Powering down."

"Receiving a message. The Port Authority wishes to speak to you."

"Put them through."

"Captain François," a man's voice came over the radio. "I'm Oskar Bicek, director of the Port Authority. Welcome to Sauler Downport."

"I'm honored," Coeur said. "What have we done to merit your attention?"

"I'd like to discuss that in my office," Bicek said, "at your convenience."

"Where is your office?"

"We've given you a berth with full fuel and data modem hook-ups. Once you're linked into the data net, you can find a map which will show you the way to the Port Authority."

"Very good. I'll be there as quickly as I can. Can I assume my crew has liberty to leave the ship?"

"By all means, captain. However, I should advise you

that we can't allow you to carry any weapons out of your berth, or leave the municipal boundary of the starport."

"What about a customs declaration?"

Bicek chuckled.

"Captain, I see you're unfamiliar with Sauler. This is a free port."

"I see."

"Just abide by our simple regulations, and everything will be fine."

"Understood, sir. We'll abide by your laws. *Wasp*, out."

"Trust him?" Gyro said, afterward.

"About as far as I could throw him," Coeur said. "But at least we're down in one piece. Now assemble the crew in the lounge; it's time to go out and make friendly with the locals."

* * *

It was not until Gyro pulled up a map of Sauler Downport that Coeur discovered a strange fact: the municipal boundary was very small indeed.

"About 10 square kilometers," Deep Six observed, back in his rollerchair after the threat of inspection had passed. "Although an area of 100 square kilometers is actually owned by the Sauler Starport Cooperative. Apparently, these two areas are the only ones directly controlled by the Port Authority, since entry into the Kingdom of Serritella to the north and the Kalina Empire to the south requires appropriate visas from those governments."

"Damn," Bonzo said, "if only we had modern library data, we'd have more of an idea what the situation is here."

"That's why we're going to go and check it out," Coeur said. "Whiz Bang, Mercy, and Crowbar, check out the local cargo brokers to sell our cover. Drop Kick and Snapshot, take the air raft and snoop around the city for anything unusual. Physic, you're with me."

"What about us, sir?" Bonzo and Gyro asked.

"You stay here, and look after the ship *and* Deep Six and Scissor. You must not allow anyone to try removing them from the hold."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, let's do it."

Given the small size of the municipal zone—no area was more than two kilometers from the central berths—the three sorting groups decided not to use the air raft, travelling into the city on foot instead.

"There's just one thing I'd like to know," Physic said, as she and Coeur left the berth and walked up the sidewalk of a busy street outside.

"What?" Coeur asked, pausing at a crosswalk while internal-combustion ground cars chugged past.

Physic's voice dropped to a whisper. "Where did we stow the guns, and armor, and old computer data?"

"Where do you think?" Coeur asked, as a changing light halted the oncoming traffic and they were clear to cross the street. The approach of local Saulerians, however, prevented Physic from venturing an opinion until they were out of earshot.

"Well, they looked in the drive section, and the hull frame, and keel spaces. Could they have been hidden inside the fuel tanks?"

Coeur smiled. "We'll make a pirate out of you yet, doctor."

"Great. Remember to mention that at my court-

martial."

Coeur left that one alone. If the Coalition gave greater weight to a brief lapse in Medlab security than it did to Physic's dedicated service on Ra in the face of rampant death and suffering—well, then it wouldn't be the Coalition Coeur had sworn to serve and defend.

"According to the map, the Port Authority should be right around this corner and over the trans-isthmus canal. Ah, there it is."

Like most starport administrative offices, the Sauler Port Authority was conveniently close to its surrounding berths. However, the only ground access to the authority and its adjacent executive berths was across a cantilever drawbridge spanning the ship channel cutting through the middle of the city. Coeur suspected that the design was deliberate, giving the Guild administrators a way to cut off ground access in case the local population ever got ugly.

"Have you noticed," Physic said, as they crossed the bridge, "how most of the people here look like locals?"

"That doesn't mean the administrators are local. Remember, Guild products have been found all over the AO."

"Yeah, I suppose it would be cheaper to use local labor."

"Be nice if they got those "Raglan's Raiders" at a bargain sale. I'd really hate to have to blast my way out of a net thrown by competent mercenaries."

"So that's the plan? Smash and grab?"

"Just thinking out loud, doctor," Coeur said.

Physic saved her response, for they had come upon their destination. The Port Authority Building, as both could see, was an imposing marble structure in the

pompous Ramshackle Empire style, and obviously not of recent construction. Yet, for all its grand angularity, there were no guards at the front door, and only a single officer of the Starport Municipal Police inside to man the weapons checkpoint. After politely patting down the Arses' bodies for weapons, he then passed them through a TL-12 metals and explosives scanner, and into the ground floor lobby.

Inside, the women encountered the movement of bureaucrats and clerical workers typical of any prosperous port office. *People as far removed from gun-running and slaving as anyone could be, Coeur noted, but indispensable to the Guild all the same.*

"Here it is," Coeur said, finding a TL-12 computer display on the wall, "Port Director's Office, third floor. Let's take the elevator."

The quick response of the elevator bank, sending a car down from the second floor almost instantly, suggested maglev technology—almost certainly an import from offworld. Seconds later, the summoned cab lifted them to the third floor and opened before a frosted glass and wire window painted with the words:

**SAULER STARPORT COOPERATIVE
PORT MASTER'S OFFICE**

Exiting the cab, Coeur and Physic met only the second security officer they'd seen in the entire city—a police officer carrying paperwork out of the port master's office. Coeur paused to hold the elevator door open for him, reflecting that a starport with a law level as high as Sauler Downport must surely have an impressive security force to back it up. That it was largely unseen was a clear sign

that the port was out to appear extremely congenial to its guests.

Oh Lord, Coeur thought, accepting the officer's thanks and joining Physic in entering the port master's office through an archaic swinging door, *I sure hope that that occurs to Drop Kick and Snapper before they go and get themselves arrested by plainclothes cops.*

The office was quite large inside, taking up what must be a fourth of the floor with banks of data-entry workstations and their rigorously quiet male and female attendants. One, whose screen was turned so Coeur could peek at it over the long desk preventing further progress, was authorizing transport of a certain "Commodity SHM" to the destination "Broker PVE."

SHM, Coeur mused, *I wonder...slave, human, male?*

"Can I help you?" the office manager asked, looking up from her station.

"Yes ma'am. We have an appointment for 1000 hours to see Mr. Bicek. Yvette François, starship *Wasp*."

"Oh, yes, he's expecting you. Pass through the gate please, and to your left."

Doing so, they kept well clear of the busy clerical gang and strode across a brief space of uncarpeted marble to the port master's room, its sliding automatic door already unlocked for their ingress. There they found the fifth essence of any profitable starport, a dutiful director coordinating two different phone calls simultaneously. Then, glancing up, the balding man halted in his conversations, directing a quick glance at Physic and Coeur in their khaki jumpsuits and then advised the other parties to call him back.

"Captain François," he said, reaching across his desk to shake her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you. And you

are...?"

"Dr. Keiko Sato," Physic said, shaking his hand in turn.

"Port Master Oskar Bicek. Please, have a seat."

"You seem to be very busy," Coeur said. "Perhaps we should come back when it's more convenient."

"Busy? Who's busy? I'm never too busy to greet a new patron of our facility. Now tell me, did you find the berth facilities adequate?"

"Adequate isn't quite the word for it. After all the pissholes we've been through in the Wilds, this place is a real godsend."

"We like to think of ourselves that way," Bicek said with an unctuous smile, then pulling over a computer display. "I have the report here from the patrol that met you in orbit. It seems that you're from Lancer, and you're carrying a remarkable little cargo."

"Do you mean those two organisms we're hauling?"

"Not just that. You've got a 10-ton launch with luxury fittings and a Coalition grav tank—hardly items you pick up at a garage sale."

Coeur shrugged, modestly. "Oh, well, I wouldn't make too much of that. Let's just say that a Coalition merchant got a little too far from her escort for her own good."

Bicek nodded, admiringly. "Is that where you picked up the organisms?"

"You mean the squid and the porpoise?"

"Right. The xenomorphs."

Leaning forward, Coeur glanced cautiously to the left and the right before answering. "Frankly, Mr. Bicek, I'd just as soon slice up the squid and the porpoise, and sell 'em as fish bait, but I caught a rumor at Marax that the Empress Solee might be interested in adding some xenos to her zoo. That's why we brought 'em along."

Leaning back in his chair for a moment, Bicek then let out a good-natured laugh.

"You, Captain François, are the boldest pirate I've ever met! And it's high time a woman like you joined the Guild."

Simultaneous, but modest smiles crossed the faces of both women.

"I'm sure that would be nice," Coeur began, "but we are pressed for time. I'd just as soon not hang around for a background check."

"Do you have a background?" Bicek said.

"I could come up with several," Coeur answered.

"I'd expect that. However, are there any other traders familiar with your operation?"

"In this area? Negative."

"That's not so good. If you had contacts here, and they were already associates of the Guild, their sponsorship would make it much easier to process your membership."

"You have to respect his position," Physic said to Coeur. "It isn't profitable for an organization to venture assets on an unproven commodity."

"She's also our accountant," Coeur explained to Bicek.

"I see," Bicek said. "Well, there is another option. We could extend a probationary membership, and make it formal after a year."

"What are the conditions?" Coeur asked.

"Nothing extraordinary. Basically, we'd ask you to prove your profitability in some special missions that are out of the way for other members. You'd clear 20% off the top though, easily, on the targeted cargoes we have available."

"And what makes you think we have a year to give you

proving our trustworthiness?"

Bicek shrugged.

"As you observed, captain, space is full of piss-poor starports, and a ship like yours needs regular maintenance. Our facilities aren't available to just anyone, of course, and consider the other advantages of access to our cargo brokers and cargoes specially targeted to the needs of local customers."

Like crunch guns, Coeur thought, pushing to the rear of her mind the stories she'd heard about the horrible wounds such weapons had already inflicted on Coalition SAG missions.

"The membership fee," Physic said. "How much?"

"Nominal," Bicek said. "And I've even be willing to waive it if you considered selling your cargo here on Sauler. Believe it or not, there is a profitable market in biological commodities here, and that could save you a long trip to Shenk."

Coeur and Physic looked at each other, and nodded.

"That could be good," Coeur said, after a moment. "Although we'd like to look around the port, and talk to some of your other members before we sign anything."

"Absolutely, I would insist."

"Well, then," Coeur said, rising abruptly with Physic, "we'll be back in touch."

"I shall look forward to it," Bicek said, rising to shake both their hands.

"Good day, sir," Physic said, letting Coeur precede her to the door and following her out through it.

It was not until they were well clear of the building, across the bridge and passing an empty warehouse, that Physic made a comment.

"I knew we should've brought Serene with us."

"I hear that. Three meters away from a head full of answers, and no way in."

"You know," Physic said, "we don't have much time. Scissor is all right now, but his antibody count is already beginning to drop. I think he's on the verge of full-blown symptoms."

"And then how long?"

"A week—at most."

Coeur frowned.

"Not that he shouldn't have come," Physic said. "It's just that we may have less time here than we'd like."

"Sounds like our epitaph: 'They had less time than they thought'."

Physic laughed, feebly.

"Come on, Doc, let's go look for the others. The more noses we have to the ground in this place, the better."

* * *

In his office, a moment after Couer and Physic departed, Oskar Bicek heard a door open and turned around before he quite had a chance to return to his seat.

"I waited until your guests were gone," Vega Zorn said. "I thought it would've been awkward to walk in while you were being charming."

"Forget the smart remarks," Bicek said grimly. "You've had time to look over our scans of their ship. Was that far trader the same one that ran you off from Ra?"

Zorn's eyebrows rose at that galling remark.

"Look here, Bicek. We weren't run off by any free trader. We withdrew when our supply situation prevented us from remaining on station."

"Do forgive the implication," Bicek said. "But is *Wasp*

the vessel you met at Ra?"

"Why don't you answer my question first, Oskar."

"About your pay?"

"About our pay, yes. We've been here three weeks, and it's about time you came through with the goods."

"Indeed it is, captain. One-half tonne of gold and lanthanum bullion is being brought in this very afternoon, just as I indicated it would."

"Good."

"Not that we're completely satisfied with your performance. Even if it was necessary, I wasn't impressed to hear that you shot off those nukes on Ra."

"I wasn't aware you had so much trouble recruiting agents."

"It's not the agents, Zorn—it's the idea of shooting off nukes inside a viable biosphere. Polluting our future markets is bad business, Zorn."

"Two nukes in the arctic didn't hurt your precious future market, Bicek. Besides, the alternative was letting your men spill the plan—and have the Coalition target your head for a decap raid."

"I take your point, captain. Now, was that *Wasp* you met at Ra?"

Zorn waited a long moment before responding.

"Sorry, Bicek, that's not the same far trader. The ship we saw had completely different drive emissions and an unconventional airfoil assembly."

"Damn," Bicek swore. "You're sure?"

"I know what I saw, Bicek. I do like that François' attitude toward the squid, though. Fishbait's about all they're good for."

Bicek returned to his seat and sat down.

"I'll say one thing for you, Zorn. With that attitude, you

were the best one for the job."

"It's nothing personal," she answered, still standing. "I just happen to think that we'll all be a lot better off when the Hiver race is exterminated."

"True," Bicek said. "Without Hiver support, the Coalition will cease to be a major threat to our business operations. Hell, we might even knock off the Star Vikings altogether."

Zorn's answer was an unreadable stare.

"That is what we're after, isn't it, Zorn?"

"Just load our pay before nightfall, Bicek," Zorn said, turning to leave. "I have other places to be."

* * *

Three hours after they left Bicek, Coeur and Physic finally linked up with Crowbar, Mercy, and Whiz Bang at the startown slave auction. It was, by general consensus, the most disgusting spectacle any of them had ever seen.

Though the auction grounds were south of the Trans-Isthmus Canal, outside the high-security Guild compound, the operation was a pure Guild monopoly, apparently run as much as puerile entertainment for visiting starship crews as a legitimate commercial enterprise. On a startown stage, pathetic manacled Zippers, beaten and drugged into an inhuman stupor, were subjected to the cheers and hoots of a crowd that coughed up between 100 and 1000 credits per individual.

"Behold these fine specimens of Aprapan health and vigor," the seedy auctioneer called out. "Two men, three women, and children—surgically sterilized and mood-altered for maximum work efficiency. Fine for menial work—and trained, an invaluable commodity to any

warlord on your trade route. Who will start the bidding for this lot?"

"1300!"

"1350!"

"1400!"

Fortunately, Crowbar, Mercy, and Whiz Bang were observing this show from the back of the crowd, so Coeur and Physic intercepted them quickly and steered them toward a quieter tavern where they could discuss the findings of the morning.

"Makes you wonder," Mercy said over an overpriced drink, "who'd want to buy human wreckage like that?"

"Actually," Coeur said softly, so as not to be overheard by other patrons of the bar, "slaves are a lot like robots were before the Collapse—cheap programmable intelligence. It's obscene, but the economics are very similar."

"Right," Crowbar agreed. "Like the man said, they're cheap manual labor—and if you train 'em, they're a hot commodity for all kinds of customers with technology to maintain."

"Yeah, well, enough with the social psychology," Coeur said. "Have you three learned anything from the locals pertinent to our situation?"

"Not really, except that the whole port's a company town. Trying to buy fuel, contract a broker—hell, every service—is extortion-priced for non-Guild members."

"Go figure. So have you seen Drop Kick and Snapper?"

"Negative," Mercy said. "And Gyro says she lost contact with their personal communicators over two hours ago."

"Oh God," Physic said, "what did they do now?"

"Now, doctor," Coeur said, "it's possible they did that deliberately, for some good reason. Now come on, let's

get back to the ship."

The return to *Hornet* on foot was cut short, however, as Drop Kick and Snapshot intercepted them in the air raft and stopped to take them aboard.

"Sorry we went off the air," Drop Kick explained from the pilot's seat, as his mates piled into the vehicle, "but we were trying not to attract any attention."

"How the hell could you keep from attracting attention?" Crowbar asked, scrunched up in the cargo compartment at the rear. "The city's only 10 square kilometers."

"Actually," Snapshot said, "we sort of flew outside the municipal sector."

"You did what?" Coeur asked.

"Before you bite anyone's head off, skipper," Drop Kick said, turning around to look at Coeur behind him, "there was a good reason. A few hours back we noticed some unusual grav traffic heading north from the city—a grav belt and an armed G-carrier. Since there weren't any cities in that direction, we went ahead and slipped past the sensor net to see where they were going.

"You see, we noticed something really unusual about the security around the port. A zone as large as this must have at least a battalion-strength police and security force, but it's almost entirely centered around the Port Authority and the private docks adjacent to it. As long as you keep low and slow, it's very easy to slip the municipal perimeter."

"Good info," Coeur said, "but what about the air rafts? Where were they headed?"

"Couldn't tell," Snapshot said. "An attack speeder made us go to ground before we could get close enough to see. We do know something, though: Both the grav

bike and the G-carrier disappeared behind Dead Man's Bluff and didn't come out again."

"Wait a minute," Coeur said. "Were you spotted?"

"Negative. We saw the speeder early enough to get cover. But we did record a scrap of conversation between the pilot and the system-defense command, if you want to hear that."

"Play it," Coeur said.

"There is an acronym in the recording we couldn't figure out," Snapshot said, fiddling with the digital playback controls between herself and Drop Kick. "But maybe one of you can figure it out."

A moment later, the forward console speakers exploded with static, shot through with coherent scraps of speech.

"...Black Bear to ESCOM...coming up on Point WBX..."

"...Roger, Black Bear...see anything...?"

"...negative, ESCOM, we're all clear here. Turning for home..."

The message then looped, playing again, before Snapshot stopped it.

"It could be a PDM site," Mercy ventured.

"Or a troop bunker," said Crowbar.

"No," Physic said suddenly, "it's worse than that."

"What do you mean?" Coeur asked.

"I thought you might know, Red Sun," the doctor said, "since you lived back then."

"What?"

"WBX was an INI designation for Black War munitions."

Chapter Fourteen

Well after local night had fallen on Sauler Downport, a contra-grav broomstick and two grav belts dashed through a weak point in the city's perimeter sensors and then dove into a shallow gully. There the two broomstick riders waited while their companions searched the perimeter for other traffic, then returned to the air as a group a moment later.

Wearing IR/LA goggles as she steered from the front seat of the broomstick, Coeur thanked her luck that Sauler had no moon to highlight herself and Physic, since the broomstick, had no armor and very little frame to speak of. In their battle dress, Drop Kick and Bonzo could take ground fire better, but the ducted fans and batteries of their grav belts were no more resistant to bullets than the machinery of the Arses' broomstick, and they likewise followed a low, slow flight profile.

For minutes they followed the undulating contours of the grassy hills around Sauler Downport—a crazy maneuver in the dark without flight sensors of any kind, but a maneuver that ultimately paid off as they crested a rise and came within four kilometers of Dead Man's Hill. Then, as per prior arrangement, the troopers veered off to the left and the right while the broomstick settled to the top of a neighboring hill.

"Looks quiet enough," Physic said softly, lifting her goggles up on her forehead to peer through image-converter binoculars. "Just a couple of guards and a shed."

Coeur made a slashing gesture across her neck, and Physic fell silent. This close to the objective, they could not take a chance on being overheard.

Come on guys, Coeur thought impatiently, 20 minutes later. *Just take out the sensors and scoot.*

Suddenly, the guards on the hill started, shocked by something they heard in their radio helmets, and fell back to the cover of the central warehouse.

Good work, Coeur thought, *now get the hell back here.*

Seconds later, as if they had registered the thought, the troopers flew back out of the night, closing from the opposite directions they'd left.

Sensors eliminated, Drop Kick signaled in Anslan, after landing alongside Bonzo near the broomstick.

Any trouble? Coeur asked.

Negative, Bonzo said. *Score one for the Hiver Federation.*

Coeur smiled. Though Sauler, like Ra, had an atmosphere too thick for effective use of the laser sniper weapon, *Hornet* had other technology available for eliminating remote sensors—specifically, components for two more of Scissor's tiny robots, robots too small for remote EMS sensors to detect beyond a very short range.

Since the robots were presently secured to the troopers' belts, Coeur assumed that the little machines had completed their missions without being spotted—engaging their surge generators at point-blank range and turning the lights out on the sensors of Dead Man's Hill.

Roger, Coeur said. *See any more guards?*

Negative, Drop Kick returned. *Just the two.*

Good. Move out.

As a unit, the Arses and Marines lifted straight into the air and then inclined themselves toward Dead Man's Hill high above the heads of its guards. Alerted to the deactivation of their perimeter sensors, the guards were staring out toward the adjacent hills with their own low-light goggles, oblivious of the danger above.

Got the range? Coeur asked, parking her broomstick 100 meters above the hill.

No problem, both Marines signaled, stabilizing their grav belts and unshouldering their gauss rifles. Whistling report from the rifles sounded a moment later, and the troopers lifted on the recoil of their weapons even as their targets dropped, side-by-side.

Lucky we're feeling friendly, Coeur thought, perceiving the quick work of tranq slugs on the guards.

You two watch the perimeter, Coeur signaled. *Physic, we're going in.*

It was possible, Coeur supposed, that Dead Man's Hill wasn't what they were after—a laboratory or CBW stockpile—but she'd been on enough SAG missions to know the drill. In the 20 minutes they had before an attack speeder could arrive, she and Physic would record as much as possible with hand-held holovid and be out again as quickly as they'd arrived.

With gauss pistols already in hand, the women landed their broomstick just inside the perimeter fence and advanced into the single structure atop the hill. A key lifted from one of the two comatose guards let Coeur in through a side door, but from there it was in on guts

alone.

The unlit warehouse proved almost entirely empty, save for vehicle fueling tanks and tools, but Coeur's IR goggles spotted a tell-tale square of light on the concrete floor—heat leaking from a well-concealed trap door. With her low-light vision, Coeur registered the concern on Physic's face, but squatted on her haunches anyway to search for a hidden handle. Finding it, she lifted 20 kilograms of wire and concrete and then climbed down the exposed ladder, trusting that Physic would put aside her fears and follow her down.

The tunnel they dropped into was softly lit with red lamps every five meters, but there was no obvious sign of the hill's ulterior purpose until they turned a corner 50 meters later and came across a spiral staircase leading down. Inside the stairwell was painted a cracked sign of clearly ancient origin:

INI RIMCOM
STORAGE FACILITY 131
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

"Oh my God," Physic whispered.

"Shh."

Come on.

With her gun out ahead of her, Cover descended to the bottom of the stairs, prepared to shoot anything that moved. Nothing moved, however, and that troubled both women as they came up to a heavy blast door—conveniently open.

I don't like this, Physic signed with the hand not holding a gun. Where are the people?

Don't know, Coeur returned, pausing a moment to

study the meter-thick hatch. *Come on.*

On the other side of the hatch, the Arses found another corridor, lined in polished metal and illuminated by recessed blue light tubes. Sliding doors on either side of the corridor opened to reveal staterooms and storage areas, all empty. They pressed on to the iris valve at the end of the corridor.

Ready? Coeur asked, pausing with her left hand over the valve release button.

Right here, the doctor said, taking a moment to look back the way they'd come, and then cover Coeur with a pistol leveled at the center of the iris valve.

Coeur opened the hatch.

It opened onto a hexagonal control room, ringed with windows and high-tech level holographic workstations. The room itself was empty, though, as empty as the rest of the hill.

Damn peculiar place, Coeur thought, nodding to Physic and stepping through the iris valve. Physic then followed and shut the hatch behind her.

Safe to talk? Physic asked.

"Sure," Coeur said. "I think we've reached the center of this facility."

Physic saw what Coeur meant: Five iris valves, plus the one they'd entered, ringed the room, opening onto five enclosed catwalks that could be seen radiating outward like spokes from a hub. Walking up to a window beside Coeur, Physic then saw that the catwalks in turn ended in elevators that descended to a single vast warehouse area still further below.

"Good Gaia almighty," the doctor said, recognizing ancient symbols on the countless racks of bombs and shells below. "Nuclear warheads, CBW munitions, damper

boxes...what the hell is this place?"

"The last place I want to be," Coeur said, holstering her pistol and unslinging the camera from her shoulder. "Quick, try to get into the computer while I get all this on holovid."

"Right," Physic said, dropping into the chair of the nearest workstation. Without the time to guess at an acceptable password, she went directly to her medical diagnostic computer, jacking it into a workstation socket and engaging the code-cracker program Scissor had so thoughtfully loaded into its extended memory.

"You're not going to believe this," Physic said. "This system was protected by a holographic fractal matrix."

"You get in?"

"Roger. I've got everything going into a screen dump."

"Get as much as you can," Coeur said, continuing her walk around the room with the camera running. "All the iris valves are locked, but we still have to split in five."

"Holy—Red, come here! Quick!"

"What?"

"Good Gaia, I don't believe this! Do you know what this is?"

Coming across the room to look over Physic's shoulder, Coeur had to admit she didn't. To her eyes it looked like a scrolling screen full of three-dimensional organic molecules and chemical equations.

"What?"

"It's Hiver Folgorex II," Physic said. "I mean, the instructions for *making* Hiver Folgorex II!"

Suddenly, Coeur felt the hair rise on her arms and the back of her neck.

"I don't know if I like this," she said, drawing her pistol again. "Getting in was too easy."

"Yeah, that is odd," Physic said, though she was too absorbed by the data on the screen to be as scared as she knew she should be. "Got it. That's the whole RNA transcription program, stored right in my computer."

"Will it let you design a vaccine?"

"Wouldn't care to guess," Physic said, rapidly returning to the computer's file manager. "It's a great start, though; just let me check and see if there's anything else in here—"

Suddenly, the screen cracked and Physic leapt back in her chair.

"What the—!"

But Coeur began to turn too late, and found a pistol in her ribs.

"If it's all the same, Yvette François, I'd rather not shoot you. Let's drop the gun, shall we?"

"Zorn," Physic said, spinning around in her chair.

Coeur dropped her gun, noting the ceiling drop panel the pirate must have been hiding behind.

"Mrs. Delpero," Zorn said, with a little bow. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to remove your gun, too, and drop it on the floor."

The doctor did as ordered, dropping the weapon on the floor.

"Thank you," Zorn said, keeping the women covered as she stooped to pick up their weapons. Coeur, seeing her incredible flexibility and speed, resisted the temptation to jump her—and court a belly full of gauss slugs.

"Believe it or not," Zorn said, holstering her gun and popping the clips from the Arses' weapons, "this isn't a trap. I just don't like having loaded guns pointed at me."

Stunned, the standing Coeur and sitting Physic then received back their weapons.

"What...?" Physic said.

"Doctor Takegawa, Captain François—or whatever your real name is—you're going to have to get off this planet as quickly as possible. Whether you believe me or not, I used to be on the same side as you guys, and I wouldn't want you to get caught on the ground when this place goes up."

"Goes up?" Coeur asked.

"Oh, it's going to go up, all right," Zorn said. "Four 500-kiloton bombs should just about wipe this godless cesspit of a starport right off the face of creation."

* * *

In the 58 days between Ra and Sauler, Coeur had a lot of time to read over, and ponder, the most peculiar entry in *Hornet's* computer library data.

ZORN, Vega Gwyn; Auroran Dawn League scout; b. 10/11/1167. Only survivor of DLS *Taylor the Bruce*, 25/IV/1200, honorably discharged 28/V/1200. Twice decorated with Auroran citations for bravery; present whereabouts unknown.

Amend that, Coeur thought. Present whereabouts two meters in front of me.

"Good Lord, Zorn, are you crazy?"

"I'm surprised, captain. I would have thought you'd grasp how much of a threat the Guild is to the Coalition."

"I don't care how much I grasp, Zorn. You just can't fire off nuclear bombs inside a planetary atmosphere! It's evil, like what you did—"

"Yes?"

"Like what you did to Ra."

"A necessary evil," the pirate returned. "I couldn't have the Guild agents there squeal and give up the game."

"Game?" Physic said, incredulous. "Zorn, you were a DLS officer! What in Gaia's name happened to you?"

Zorn made an amused little snort and invited Coeur to sit down. After Coeur accepted the offer, Zorn sat down herself.

"I assume you reviewed my record, if you knew I was in the League."

"The record's short," Coeur said. "It just says you were the sole survivor of a League ship, and you mustered out with decorations."

"It doesn't say what killed *Taylor the Bruce*?"

"No."

"*Taylor the Bruce* was killed by Hivers, captain."

"You're kidding."

"I wish I were. Our skipper wasn't very creative, but he was very logical—an ideal target for manipulation. M. Gerald steered us into contact with a vampire fleet—just to see how it would react—then jumped ship just before we were attacked. It—the Hiver—and I were the only ones who survived."

"I never heard of that incident," Physic said.

"Me neither," Coeur said, "although it's not inconceivable. Contact protocol was very loose in the League, and I'm sure they wouldn't want to advertise an incident like that."

"So that was the trigger," Physic said. "Just that, and you decided to kill the Hiver race."

Zorn rolled her eyes.

"I'm not a psychopath, doctor, regardless of what you may think. It is simply my considered opinion that the

Hivers are steering humankind toward oblivion. The Dawn League was their first try at killing us—manipulating our worlds into sending unarmed freighters into the Wilds, so they'd bring back Virus and destroy our planets. And it might have worked, too, except that the '98 expedition was cleaned out, and the League had the sense to reorganize."

Coeur shook her head.

"You disagree, captain?"

"Zorn, the Hivers taught our worlds how to use technology. If they wanted us dead, why raise us up first?"

"I'm not sure about that," Zorn said, "but it doesn't matter, now. The virus will work its way back to the Federation and kill every Hiver."

"They'll make a vaccine," Physic said, "sooner or later."

"I tend to think not," Zorn answered. "You were probably the best chance of that."

"So you're going to kill me?"

"No. I'll just keep your medical computer there."

"Zorn," Coeur said, "I still don't get you. On the one hand you say you support the Coalition, but even you must know it can't survive on its own yet. Regardless of their motivation, we need the Hivers to keep the Coalition afloat."

"But I disagree. In my judgment, the Guild is the greatest immediate threat to the Coalition. If I can eliminate this port—the administrative hub of all the Guild operations in this sector—it will buy the Coalition time to recover from the extermination of the Hivers."

"You're insane," Physic said.

"All the same," Zorn said, "it'll have to be this way. Just as soon as my boys signal me, I'll escort you to the surface

and let you go back to your ship. Then you'll have to get off this rock as quickly as possible."

"Your boys?" Coeur asked.

"I've got my crew out on patrol, just in case you left anyone up on the surface."

"I sort of figured that. You're good, but I didn't think you could take an entire station by yourself."

Zorn laughed, standing.

"Oh, I didn't take this station, captain. I simply bribed the mercenary staff into letting us take their watch, so anything you did to the station wouldn't attract the attention of those clowns from their air force."

Coeur sighed. "So why *did* you lead us down here?"

"Really?"

"Really."

"It was the only way I could be sure—really sure—that you were from the Coalition. Seeing the doctor in your crew was a big clue, but this was definitive."

"I see."

"And—"

Zorn paused.

"And?"

"It's been a long time since I was home, captain, and I'll probably never get back there again."

"I think I see," Coeur said. "You wanted someone to know you were still out here, and that you hadn't gone completely off the deep end."

"Something like that."

"Zorn," Coeur said, "there's no reason why we can't work together here. Surely, you can't want to kill every innocent civilian in the city."

"I appreciate your offer, captain. But time is short, and I do not have time to separate the wheat from the chaff."

Just then, without warning, two iris valves opened simultaneously—the one leading down from the surface and the one directly opposite. Surprising Zorn, the two figures standing in the open portal trained their gauss rifles as the pirate went for her handgun and caught her in a bludgeoning crossfire. She dropped, twitching, to the deck beside Coeur and Physic—already taking cover on the floor.

"You all right, skipper?" Drop Kick asked, entering the room from one side while Bonzo entered from the other.

"Roger," Coeur said, rising up to her knees. Physic, meanwhile, had unhooked her diagnostic computer from the disabled station console it was jacked into and crawled over to Zorn, who was prone and immobile on the floor.

"Is she dead?"

"No," the doctor said, running her pocket scanner across the body, "sleeping. Most of the rounds bounced off her suit, but it looks like one caught her in the back of the neck."

"You specified tranq rounds," Drop Kick said to Coeur, lifting his helmet visor. "Not that they were the best choice against the thugs we ran into upstairs. One of 'em had a rocket launcher and almost blew Bonzo's fool head off."

"We got four of them, though," Bonzo said. "Left 'em all tied up upstairs in the warehouse."

"She going to make it?" Coeur asked.

"She'll be awake in a half hour or less."

Coeur nodded.

"Good. Physic, go back topside with Bonzo and look after Zorn's people."

"Roger."

Coeur waited until they had left before turning to Drop Kick.

"Sergeant major, we've got to talk."

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Physic stood in the doorway of the hilltop warehouse, looking at her watch. Though the warehouse was full of surly prisoners, Raglan's Raiders had yet to strafe the hill—a sign that Zorn indeed had controlled communications there that evening.

Still she was uneasy. Like the people behind her, Zorn had had plenty of time to recover from the tranq.

She must be awake by now, so what are they talking about down there?

Shuffling inside the warehouse brought Physic's attention back to the building.

Through her low-light goggles, she registered the image of Coeur rising through the trap door, followed by Zorn and Drop Kick. The six prisoners, sitting on the floor with their hands bound behind their back, saw very little, though their heads perked up when they heard Coeur's comment to Bonzo.

"Trooper, release these crewmen."

"Sir?"

"It's all right, we have an understanding. Just don't give them back their weapons until I say."

Bonzo looked at Drop Kick, who nodded.

"Sir."

Coeur then walked over to Physic, and steered her outside through the door. Only after they were well away from the building, and near the perimeter fence, did Coeur explain the situation.

"Physic, we've come to an arrangement. You're going to leave *Sauler* tonight."

"You mean *we're* going to leave *Sauler*, right?"

"Negative. You are going to get that virus data off the planet immediately. Drop Kick and I will stay behind."

"Good God," Physic exclaimed, probably loud enough to be heard inside, "are you insane?"

"Possibly, but that's neither here nor there. As soon as you get back to *Hornet*, inform Gyro that you're assuming command under my authority. Tell her I said it's Exercise 61C, part 2; she'll know what I mean. You will then instruct Whiz Bang and Crowbar to remove the main gun and ammunition from the tank and move it and the launch out into the berth."

"But—"

"Shh, listen—you've got to get this right the first time. After the vehicles are off the ship, inform the Port Authority that you're blasting out to check on a lanthanum strike at La Shend VII—but that you're leaving the vehicles behind to sell later. Hopefully, the greedy bums'll be so eager to get their hands on the luxury launch that they'll let you go without any fuss."

"But captain—why? Why are you staying here?"

Despite the dark night, Physic clearly registered Coeur's grim expression.

"Two reasons: 1) this is the only sure chance I have to get you and the data off the planet—while this station's radio is off the air and Zorn is on our side, and 2) I can't let Zorn blow up this entire city—no matter how vile it is. She's agreed to a limited strike at the Port Authority building alone."

"Sounds like splitting hairs. What's the difference between nuking the whole city and nuking a building?"

"We're not going to nuke anything, doctor. What we've agreed is to fix up the sled with new contra-grav modules and stuff it full of demo charges so we can use it as a guided missile. That should level the building without killing 20,000 innocent people and irradiating the entire isthmus."

Physic turned away a second to look south to the starport. Its ghostly glow beyond the hills was a blazing radiance in amplified light.

"All right, but why remove the gun? Are you going to need it for some other job?"

"Negative. You will remove the gun and secure it aboard the ship because it isn't necessary for the mission. Almost a fifth of the sled's cost in that gun, and headquarters wouldn't be too happy if we blew it up without a good reason."

Physic nodded, conceding the point.

"Fair enough. But really, Red, do you think the automation in that tank is good enough to let it fly this mission alone?"

"It damn well better be," Coeur said, "because if it isn't, I'll have to fly it in myself and bail at the last minute."

"Hm. So what about this place?"

"Too dangerous to blow," Coeur said. "A SAG team can get it later. Anyway, there's no time to talk about it."

"Understood, sir."

"Just one question: Do you think you can make a vaccine with that data?"

"Like I said, I can't be certain. I'll give you 60-40 odds, though, I'll come up with something."

"Good. I'm banking on Zorn thinking that your data's useless."

"Maybe I'm missing something, captain. Aren't we the

ones with the guns?"

"You are missing something. Zorn's got a 400-ton gunship and six troops with their own battle dress waiting to rescue her if she doesn't report."

"Ah."

"Just as soon as you and Bonzo are away, we'll give 'em back their guns. Now get the broomstick ready while I go get Bonzo."

Whatever action had occurred on the surface, the broomstick was undamaged, and Physic lifted it into the air with ease. She then flew the broomstick over to the side door of the warehouse—now lit with normal light—and looked upon a scene most peculiar.

Lifting her goggles, Physic saw that the pirates were still unarmed, they and Zorn were circled amiably around Drop Kick and Bonzo, discussing the defenses of the Port Authority like old friends. Coeur, upon reaching this group, slapped Bonzo on his left shoulder guard and he nodded. Peeling apart from the others, he tossed Coeur his gauss rifle—keeping only a pistol for himself—and jogged over to the broomstick.

"Have a safe trip, doctor," Zorn called over to Physic, as Bonzo buckled himself into the rear seat. "We'll give you a good eight hours before we shoot off the fire-cracker."

Physic nodded, and saluted Coeur.

"Carry on, doctor," Coeur said, saluting back.

Physic held the salute a full second longer, then lowered her goggles and pulled back on the control stick, hurtling the broomstick into the dark and starry night above.

Good luck, you crazy bastards.

Chapter Fifteen

At 2640 hours, just before local midnight, Physic and Bonzo raced their broomstick into the cargo bay of RCS *Hornet*, trusting that Deep Six and Scissor would still be floating in their tank and not wandering about the hold. It was a safe assumption, and Physic found the space necessary for a pinpoint landing.

"Hey guys," Physic said, pausing by the tank with Bonzo. "You all right?"

Deep Six replied with a bobbing nod. Scissor, however, didn't move.

"I believe that Scissor is asleep," the Schalli said.

"Hey, Scissor," Physic said, reaching into the water to shake one of the Hiver's arms, "you all right?"

Lethargically, Scissor lifted its prime limb.

Excuse me, it signed, with the fingers of that limb. *I am awake.*

"Good. Because it's time to get out of the tank. Both of you get to your regular stations immediately."

Understood, Scissor signed.

"Are we launching?" Deep Six asked, helping his non-aquatic mate to the edge of the tank.

"ASAP," Physic said.

Knowing she had to reach the bridge, Physic nevertheless felt herself rooted to the spot by professional respon-

sibility. Scissor was getting out of the tank, but he wasn't doing it in a hurry.

"Bonzo," she said, pulling the Marine close, "can you watch Scissor? See that he gets to his quarters?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good man. Report to me on the bridge when he's secured."

"Roger," Bonzo said, moving to help the sluggish Hiver out of the sloshing water of the tank.

First things first, Physic thought. I've got to get to the bridge.

At a flat-out run, Physic reached the port forward compartment in seconds, surprising Gyro and Crowbar, who were standing the night watch.

"Where's the skipper?" Gyro asked.

"She's not coming," Physic said. "Red Sun said this was Exercise 61C, part 2, whatever that means. I am assuming command of this mission, effective immediately."

Gyro was momentarily bemused, but didn't protest. Physic's grim stare told her a legitimate emergency was in progress.

"Is she dead?"

"Unknown," Physic said. "Crowbar, access the digital voice file and prepare the radio to modulate my voice to match Red Sun's."

"Roger," the engineer said, turning to the task.

"Better take the big chair," Gyro offered, abandoning the pilot's station.

"Thanks," Physic said, sliding in to take her place. "Gyro, you get Snapper and the Marines to help you roll out the launch and the sled, double-quick. Oh, and help Whiz Bang remove the main gun—we'll need it secured inside an hour."

"Remove the gun—?"

"Now. We don't have time."

"Sir," Gyro said, saluting and curbing further comment.

"Voice modulation set," Crowbar said, as Gyro left.

"Excellent. Hail starport control and patch it through the modulator."

Crowbar manipulated Deep Six's panels expertly, and the contact worked perfectly. In her headphones, Physic heard Coeur's voice sounding in her own ears.

"Sauler Starport Control receiving. Go ahead, *Wasp*."

"Control, this is Captain François; we're requesting clearance for immediate launch."

"This is somewhat irregular, *Wasp*. We prefer a four-hour window..."

"Can't be helped, Control. We picked up a tip about a lanthanum strike at La Shend VII, and we need to get there before certain other parties launch in the morning."

"I see."

"We plan to be back, though. Will it be possible for us to rent this space to leave our cargo in, while we're away?"

A pause ensued.

"Just to be clear on this, *Wasp*: Was your cargo the 10-ton luxury launch and grav tank?"

"That's affirmative, Control. We'd like to sell them later, but you know how it is. On the way back our hold will probably be full of ore."

"Uh...yeah."

"Trouble?"

"Just thinking, *Wasp*. The rumor is that mine's been played out for centuries."

Physic smiled.

Good work, Coeur. A cover story that makes us look like Zipper hayseeds.

"We trust our source, Control."

"Hell, *Wasp*, if you want to go, more power to you. Launch at your discretion."

"Roger, Control. Locking on traffic beam now. *Wasp* out."

The ship's intercom then beeped for Physic's attention.

"Bridge, go ahead."

"This is Bonzo, Bridge. Scissor is at his post."

"That right, Scissor?"

"Affirmative," the Hiver sent through the translator he must have put back on. "I am at my post in the workshop."

"Good. Secure that station. Bonzo, get down to the hold and help with the tank."

"Yes, sir."

Pensive, Physic turned to Crowbar.

"Is it my imagination, or does he sound fatigued?"

"I noticed that," the engineer said. "But the harbor patrols really come out at night. Gyro and I figured we'd better keep him in the tank in case we were inspected."

"Hrm."

"Do you think we should've taken him out?"

"No, water shouldn't hurt Hivers. Oh well, I'll check on him later."

Just then, Deep Six wheeled onto the bridge.

"Relieving you, Engineer Crowbar."

Halfway out of his chair, Crowbar paused to look at the doctor.

"Go," she said. "Warm up the drives."

"Sir," Crowbar said, finishing his standing motion and

pushing his chair out of the way for Deep Six. The engineer then stood clear to let Deep Six roll up to his station, before sprinting aft.

"Sensors nominal," Deep Six said, "communications check. May I ask what the nature of our emergency is?"

"The skipper wants us out of the port in a hurry. How fast can you plot a jump plot?"

"Several preliminary plots are already loaded, sir. How soon is our window?"

"Say, half an hour. Whatever we do, I'd like to be at jump point by 0700."

"Nominal difficulty. I can plot a course to safe jump point in 5.46 hours."

"Do it."

Outside the bridge window, meanwhile—right beside Physic's seat—the launch just began to stick its nose through the maw of the forward cargo hold. Watching carefully, Physic then saw the launch pull free of *Hornet*, dragging behind it the inert support sled with a straining tow cable. Grinding its lightly armored belly first on the cargo ramp, and then on the concrete floor of the berth, the sled surely woke up the crews of every ship in the area, but that was probably for the best. Zorn's recovery gang, probably lurking nearby, would know the tank was moving and would be ready to pounce on it before the boundlessly acquisitive administration of the port did.

Almost as soon as the sled came to a stop, Whiz Bang and Bonzo dashed onto the hull with cutting torches and power wrenches. Snapshot and Gyro, meanwhile, began erection of a motorized winch above the turret, while Mercy—abandoning the grounded launch—ran back to *Hornet* for her air raft. Between the five of them they had the one-tonne fusion gun of the sled free and loaded onto

the air raft in less than 15 minutes.

"Good work," Physic sent to Bonzo. "Now get that thing secured for launch in 20."

The trooper sent a thumbs-up.

"Is that realistic?" Physic asked Deep Six, since returned to his post.

"Affirmative. Crowbar sends 'power curve nominal.'"

"Well, my being in this seat isn't nominal," Physic said.

"Clarify. Are you not a qualified pilot?"

"We're all qualified pilots," the doctor replied, "but I want the best person handling the ship."

"Sir, I could—"

"Fly the ship, handle communications, sensors, and plot a jump point—no, that's too much on one back. Who else is available?"

"Sir, the record of AFV driver Mercy does indicate familiarity with small starships."

"Right," Physic said, snapping her fingers. "Get her up here."

Mercy arrived minutes later and accepted the offer of the pilot's seat with surprise.

"You sure about this?" the trooper asked.

"Sure enough," Physic said, handing the Marine her radio headset and relocating to the computer station at the rear of the bridge. "Deep Six, keep that radio modulated to Red Sun's voice."

"Affirmative."

"Hey, nice," Mercy said, examining the controls after strapping herself in. "A 100-megawatt thrust agency. Yeah, this thing'll move all right."

"Just try not to run into anything," Physic said, activating ship's status panels so she could oversee the imminent readiness of *Hornet* for launch. The quick work of the

crew gave yet more evidence that Scissor and Coeur had picked the right crew for the mission, and Physic was glad to see that they appreciated the gravity of the situation without a detailed explanation. Still, she couldn't help but worry just a little, as she looked across her shoulder at Mercy running down the pre-flight checklist.

I can just see it, Physic thought, there at the court-martial hearing:

"Dr. Takegawa, are we to understand that you turned the ship over to a corporal...?"

* * *

Aware of their close relationship, Physic didn't expect Snapshot to take the news well that Drop Kick would be staying behind. However, the Oriflammen was actually quite calm on the way out to jump point. Later, Physic would discover this was because she spent every second devising a plan to help out the skipper and the sergeant major. Physic, studying her Hiver Folgorex II data at the bridge computer station, received the details of that plan two hours into the five-hour run to jump point.

"Physic, this is Snapshot. Didn't you say they were going to toast the Port Authority while we were on our way to jump point?"

"Eight hours was Zorn's estimate. That might be past jump point."

"How about this, then, skipper. We've still got five missiles available with warheads. I could launch all but one—so we'd have one in the pipe if we needed it later—and instruct them to go active only when they spotted Zorn's cruiser trying to get past the starmerc orbit patrol."

"How would they know it was Zorn's ship?"

"We recorded her drive emissions at Ra."

"Ah."

"Nobody'd ever spot the missiles until they fire their thrusters, but they could lock on the nearest patrol ships automatically, up to eight hours after we launch them."

Physic didn't answer immediately.

What a decision. For all I know, Zorn probably cut their throats the moment we left and threw them in the canal. If that were so, and we deployed missiles to protect her...

No, that's not even an issue. If there's any chance that Red and Drop Kick might need our help, we have to do everything we can for them.

"Physic?" Snapshot sent, curious at Physic's delay in answering.

"Roger, Snapshot. Stand by missiles. If we hit jump point before we see an explosion on the planet, you can launch them."

"Yes, sir. Snapshot out."

"Guys," Physic said, turning to look at Mercy and Deep Six, "is there time for me to check on Scissor?"

"Jump point in 2.1 hours," the navigator said.

"That's enough time. Will you flag me if anything happens?"

"Hell," Mercy said, "if you're going to Scissor's room we could wave to you through the window."

"Just use the radio," Physic suggested.

"Yes, sir."

Two minutes later, Physic was at Scissor's door and palming the door chime. When seconds passed without answer, she chimed again.

"Scissor?" Physic said, switching to conventional knocking. "Scissor, you okay?"

Still, there was no answer.

Fine, she thought, casting aside politeness and palming the door release.

Inside the light was subdued, but a rasping sound from the far corner of the room told Physic that Scissor must be sleeping in the corner.

Well, at least he's alive, Physic thought, angling closer and unclipping the med scanner from her belt. *I'll just take a quick scan...*

But suddenly, Physic came up short. Two meters away, she saw that a strange black liquid was staining the Hiver's cushions—stinking with a too familiar odor.

"Full light!" Physic ordered.

The ship's computer obliged, illuminating all the room in harsh white light and revealing the pinprick sores on Scissor's body, oozing blackish fluid.

"Oh my God," the doctor gasped, rushing forward and dropping to her knees beside the unconscious form. Ignoring the grime of Scissor's body, she pressed her pocket scanner against its torso with one hand and felt for a pulse at the base of the prime limb with the other.

What happened? I've never seen it happen this fast...

"Good, you're not in a coma," she muttered, peeling open her medical pouch and locating her hypodermic injector. It was, fortunately, already loaded with Hiver-specific antibiotics, which she injected directly into the torso.

"Doctor," a muffled voice said. "Is that you?"

The question, issuing from the translator under Scissor's body, was reasonable, given that the Hiver could not seem to lift its prime limb.

"Gaia, Scissor—this couldn't have happened in the last two hours."

"Negative...was ill...earlier in day."

"*Why didn't you tell us?*"

"Impractical...must maintain...deception in...cargo hold."

Physic cursed herself for not realizing earlier why Scissor's synthetic speech was disjointed: Scissor was exhausting itself entering the text with the fingers of its tail limb.

"Don't talk," Physic said, settling down to the floor and laying a hand on the grimy tail. "I'll...do what I can."

Which is nothing.

God, why couldn't you have given me one more day?

In her turret a few minutes later, Gyro was staring at the receding planet Sauler through her gunsight when the message came from Physic.

"Gyro, I've got an emergency here, so you'd better get to the bridge. You can have Whiz Bang take your station."

"Do you need help?"

"None you can give. Just go."

"Roger, understood."

Obviously notified separately, Whiz Bang arrived at the port laser mere seconds later, and Gyro waited until he was settled in her gunnery chair before dashing to the bridge. There she found the environment unusually calm for an emergency situation.

"Care to take the helm, Gyro?"

"Negative, Mercy," Gyro said, settling into the chair at the computer station. "Flying's your speciality."

"Gyro, jump point is in two hours," Deep Six said.

"Anyone in the neighborhood?" Gyro asked.

"Negative. Orbital patrols are clustered at the planet."

"A nice clean getaway," Mercy added, "so far."

"Do you have evasive maneuvers ready?"

"Standing by, sir."

Gyro paused, scratching her forehead.

"All right, then. What's the emergency?"

"Scissor has taken ill," Deep Six reported. "Physic is attending him."

"Is it serious?"

"I believe the doctor's description was 'grave,'" Deep Six reported, "though she indicated that she would call if there were any developments."

Grave? Gyro thought.

"That's all she said? Grave?"

"Affirmative."

Gyro fought off an urge to call and disturb Physic, knowing very well that the doctor didn't throw around dire diagnoses without good cause. Still, she couldn't suppress all of her curiosity, and she found herself looking out the bridge window at Scissor's stateroom periodically.

There a bright light blazed, unusually bright for normal ship's illumination. Yet the intensity of that light suggested Physic must need the illumination for some sort of delicate medical procedure—perhaps surgery—and therefore Gyro held faith that as long as that light blazed Scissor must still be alive.

As long as that light stays on.

Two hours later, another light distracted Gyro's attention from the port fork's inboard window. On the dupli-

cate passive EMS displays of Mercy and Deep Six, the heart of Sauler Downport suddenly flared with a pinpoint explosion alongside the Trans-Isthmus canal.

"Detonation astern, Gyro. Bearing 181."

"I see it, Deep Six. Time to jump point?"

"Jump point in two minutes."

"That's some crackerjack timing," Mercy said. "Suppose Red Sun planned for us to see it?"

"Unlikely," Deep Six said. "Zorn's vessel has not yet lifted off, and she could not be aware of our status."

"All the same, that's a pretty big blast," Gyro said. "Are you sure that's not nuclear?"

"Affirmative," Deep Six said. "Although it was clearly a substantial explosion. All of the starport transmitters have been knocked off the air."

"What about the orbital patrol?"

"Scanning," the navigator said. "Emergency traffic on all channels. *And* we are being advised to hold our position."

"Screw that," Mercy said.

"Right," Gyro agreed. "Mercy, lay off maneuver burns—don't give them anything to lock onto."

"Yes, sir."

"And while we're at it, Sixer, retract the passive array."

"Understood. Array retracting."

That action shut off the high-resolution zoom scan of Sauler aft; it was replaced by a conventional video image on which the fading explosion wasn't even visible.

"Array retracted," Deep Six reported three minutes later. "*Hornet* is in jump window."

"How much time in this solution?"

"Thirteen minutes, sir."

"All right. Snapshot, you there?"

"Right here, Gyro."

"Snapper, fire your salvos. We need to scoot in a hurry."

"Affirmative!"

With her hands already on her dual missile-release levers, Snapshot fired her ready salvo immediately, then loaded two more missiles and fired those less than two minutes later.

"Go!" Snapshot said. "Missiles away!"

"Sure we can't stay and watch 'em hunt?" Mercy asked.

"Like hell we're gonna stay and watch 'em hunt," Gyro said. "Engage jump drive!"

For a brief moment, Gyro held her breath, remembering the fateful end of Lesson 61C three months before, when a jump drive saved her life. Now it was life, and a real jump drive was their only hope of safety; if it failed, *Hornet* would soon be the target of a squadron of very angry spacers—a target it could not withstand being for long.

But the jump drive did engage, and Sauler vanished abruptly from the view astern as jump space and the crazy arcs of jump fire closed around the starship.

"Good work, guys," Physic said.

As one, Gyro, Mercy, and Deep Six turned to the aft bridge hatch. There stood the doctor, her torso stripped to a gory black and red-splattered T-shirt.

"Physic," Gyro said, too shocked to say more.

"How is he?" Mercy ventured.

"It's good data," Physic said, with unnatural calm, "what we got from the Sauler station. In a few days, I'll be able to synthesize an effective vaccine. But not today."

"Doctor," Deep Six said, "what happened?"

"Scissor is dead."

"Oh my God," Gyro gasped.

"I tried everything I knew," she said. "It wasn't any use. He was too far gone."

"But I was with him in the tank," Deep Six said. "Surely I would've noticed that he was ill..."

"I don't know—it's the damnedest thing I ever saw. It's almost as if he willed himself to live—to suppress the virus—until we reached Sauler. Then it just exploded inside him. By the time I opened him up, I couldn't find enough healthy tissue to fit in a coffee cup."

At the computer station, Gyro felt the gorge rise in her throat, but choked it back.

"Anyway, the stateroom's a real mess, so I wouldn't try to go in there. Just leave it, and I'll clean it up tomorrow."

Physic then turned to go.

"Doctor," Gyro said suddenly.

Physic paused and looked back at the gunner.

"Is there anything we should do? You are still in command, sir."

"Steer for home," Physic said. Then she stepped through the door and let it close.

It would be several minutes before anyone noticed that the light had gone out in Scissor's stateroom.

Chapter Sixteen

"Physic, I'm receiving a transmission for you."

"Take a message, Florence."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, doctor. *RCS Apollo* insists on speaking to you personally."

Kneeling beside the naked Manipulator Dina, who lay on the floor gasping through the nose on its back, Physic debated whether to obey the summons or tell Commodore Ramirez to stuff himself. Dina was on the verge of respiratory shock after five months in a vac suit with higher-than-atmospheric pressure, and it wouldn't do to have this kill the agronomist after all the trouble Physic had gone through to save its life.

"Sir," Florence said, "I shall attend to the director."

"All right," Physic said, "but just watch her respiration. If it goes too high..."

"I shall inject five ccs of metabolic neoproxyn. Yes, doctor."

"Just don't want to lose her, that's all," Physic said, relocating herself at the laboratory radio. "This is Physic, go ahead."

"Sorry to disturb you, doctor," Commodore Ramirez said, "but we have a situation up here."

"Injuries?"

"Not that kind of situation, doctor. We've picked up a

liferaft near *Guldan IV*, and your captain is in it."

Oh my God.

"Mind you, we almost blew her up. The patrol cruiser that dropped off the liferaft practically precipitated on top of *Asp Alpha*, and there was an exchange of fire."

"Were there casualties?"

"Negative. Damned if I know how, but the cruiser jumped out again within minutes. *Asp Alpha* did secure the raft, though."

"Was *Red Sun* alone?"

"Negative. She has a cavalry trooper with her, *Drop Kick*. Both are in low berths, though, and I'd rather have you wake them up inside *Hornet's* cargo bay."

"Don't any of the ships out there have a small craft bay?"

"*Apollo* has an appropriate module, but diplomacy requires us to stay in orbit as long as there's a chance of hostile vessels in the area. The *SDBs* and *Schalli Victrix* have no small craft facilities."

"So it's our show, huh?"

"As soon as possible, yes."

"Stand by, *Apollo*."

Physic turned in her seat to look at Florence and Dina.

"I am better, doctor," Dina said.

"All vitals nominal," Florence said. "Manipulator Dina is out of danger."

Physic nodded, the expression on her face lost somewhere between a grin and a grimace, and turned back to the radio.

"I'm back, *Apollo*."

"Roger, *Seabridge*. Can you do it?"

"Affirmative. We'll be there ASAP. *Seabridge* out."

Physic then pulled out her personal communicator.

"Gyro, this is Physic. Come in please."

"Gyro here, Doc. Go ahead."

In the background, Physic heard a local beverage can crumpling.

"You with the ship?"

"Negative, Doc. Snapper and I have taken the Marines fishing on Lake Kolima."

"Well, you aren't now. Meet me at *Hornet* in 30 minutes—less if possible."

"What's the emergency, Doc?"

"The captain's back. We're going to get her."

Suddenly, Snapshot hopped on the line.

"Is Drop Kick with her?"

"Affirmative, Snapper. They're in a lifeboat, out by Guldán IV."

"We're on our way, skipper," Gyro said.

Physic shut off the radio and stood up.

"Do you think you can handle the rest of the program, Florence?"

"Affirmative, doctor. The remainder of Dina's five associates will be inoculated first, then additional quantities of vaccine will be produced for distribution to the surviving personnel in the outlying stations, and for transport elsewhere by *Schalli Victrix*. Last, the survivors in low berths will be treated, and revived if possible."

"That would be the plan, yes."

"Good luck, doctor," Florence said.

"And safe travel," Dina added.

"Thanks," Physic said, crossing to the elevator. "I'll be back."

After a quick ride down the elevator, Physic exited on the ground level of the hospital. It, of course, was empty of bodies now, but human MPs acknowledged her pas-

sage.

"Mind if I use your jeep?" she said.

"Going back to your ship?" a corporal asked. "Here, I'll drive you."

Physic accepted the offer, dropping into the passenger seat and taking in the vista of a too long abandoned facility. Winter rainstorms had pelted the domes of the nest during the four months while *Hornet* was away, and without the intervention of the robots of the nest, its buildings had taken on a worn, weather-beaten appearance.

A *ghost town*, Physic observed, pulling her arms close across the chest of her body sleeve. In Seabridge it was not quite spring, and the afternoon was chilly and gray.

"There you are," the soldier said, driving up to the edge of the landing tarmac. Crowbar waved from the forward landing gear strut of *Hornet*.

"Thank you, soldier," Physic said, stepping out of the jeep. "Crowbar, we'll need to power up as soon as possible."

"Taking off?"

"Affirmative. The skipper's arrived."

"Well, hot damn! I'll flag Deep Six..."

But Crowbar halted in his turn toward the starboard air lock. Physic, whom he expected to follow close behind, was standing in place at the edge of the tarmac, looking north.

Most of the mass graves were clustered there—as far away from the nest as possible while remaining inside the perimeter sensors—but another sat closer to the tarmac, a single grave just off the end of the landing field.

"Physic," Crowbar said, "it wasn't your fault. You said yourself, there was nothing you could do."

"I know that, Crowbar. It just gets me."

"Why, because he was one of us?"

Physic turned back to face the engineer, who had moved close enough to speak softly and still be understood.

"No, Crowbar. It's because he said he *understood*. He said he understood that I couldn't synthesize the vaccine in time."

"Good Gaia...you never told us that."

"They're not supposed to have emotions, Crowbar, but I'll be damned if he didn't know exactly what to say when the end came."

"We all miss him, Doc, but you gotta understand: you did good."

"Yeah," Physic said, "I did good. Come on, let's get that ship ready before the others show up."

Epilogue

The reason few people dream in cold sleep is fairly obvious—the brain is taken so low in temperature that even the most minimal activity of thought is arrested. Yet emergence from low suspension is often a lengthy process, and the dreams we remember from cold sleep most often happen then, when the brain is revived but the body and senses lag behind.

This time I dreamt before I awoke, remembering something that seemed quite vivid in my recent memory. Without guards or escort, Vega Zorn and her surgeon, Hacksaw, led Drop Kick and myself—already dressed down for immersion—to the liferaft in her hold. Fairly friendly with us after our travels together, Zorn seemed almost comfortable in our company, so I felt a certain discomfort with what I was about to do.

Right at the threshold of the liferaft hatch, as the doctor was checking us over with his pocket scanner, I watched Zorn carefully, waiting for her to let her guard down and turn her head away from me, and then slugged her in the jaw as she turned back.

The blow snapped Zorn's head back and shocked both Drop Kick and the doctor, prompting the latter to step back and draw a pistol. Zorn's jaw was tougher than my fist, however, and she didn't appear seriously hurt—just con-

fused.

"That was for nuking Ra," I said.

"Been saving that one up, huh, Red?"

I grimaced.

"Put away the gun, Hacksaw," Zorn said, rubbing her jaw. "I had that coming."

Reluctantly, the doctor did as ordered, and induction to cold sleep carried on as normal. The last thing I remembered hearing, though, was Drop Kick's wry comment as the berth lids came down.

"Nice punch, skipper. It's just to bad we'll probably never wake up now."

If I replied I can't remember. The dream ended with the awareness that I was coming out from under the haze of low suspension. A head was hovering near my face (I sensed it cutting off light from an overhead source behind my eyelids), and its familiar female voice spoke to another person nearby.

"Blood pressure 120 over 75. Vitals nominal."

"She conscious?"

"Oh yes. She can probably hear us."

I opened my eyes, and beheld the low berth deck of ISS Anitak.

"Dr. Chang."

"Good to see you're all right, captain."

"I'll second that," her companion said, stepping closer.

"Darren."

"We woke you up first," the engineer said, "because we thought you'd want to hear the news: the war is over, and the Imperium has been restored."

"What?"

"I could hardly believe it myself," Hayes said. "Apparently, it wasn't the emperor who was killed, but a clone he used for state functions. Eventually he convinced the Moot

he was actually alive, and that was the end of the Rebellion."

"But...how did you learn all this? We were years away from Gresham."

Chang interrupted Hayes' answer, commenting that she was going off to awaken the other survivors. Hayes nodded, and then sat down on the lip of my low berth, where I was presently pulling myself up to a sitting position.

"Apparently," he said, "we were a lot closer to Gresham than we thought. The computer woke the doctor and me automatically when an Imperial cruiser came into the vicinity, and they explained the situation by radio. Be in range to dock with us in a few hours."

"How long were we out?"

"Just a year, skipper."

Just a year, I repeated, silently mouthing the words.

"You look sad," Hayes said. "I hadn't expected that."

"I'm sorry," I answered. "I was just thinking about the dream I had. That the world was destroyed, and decades passed before I woke up."

"Sounds swell. Was I in it?"

I spoke around a lump in my throat.

"Yes. You gave your life for me."

Hayes' eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Is that why you're sad?"

"Actually, no. I'm sad because the Imperium is still alive."

"Coeur, it is our home."

"I know that. But like every other empire, it was built on war and conquest and killing."

"And the destruction of the world was better?"

"In my dream," I said, "beings were starting to treat each other as equals. Democracy."

"You'd better be careful with talk like that. Lucan may have been executed, but I'm sure his INI is still plenty

intolerant."

"Maybe I should have stayed asleep."

Hayes laid a hand on my wrist.

"I'm glad you didn't."

I smiled, but something was wrong. Before me. Hayes was slipping away, and I fell back into my berth. He reached for me, but his hands fell short and I felt myself falling, as if my low berth had slipped through the deck of Alnitak. Dizzy, I closed my eyes and registered a chorus of concerned voices.

"It's the electrolyte balance."

"Is it critical?"

"No, but somebody must've monkeyed with it to give her a rough time waking up. Stand clear, I'm going to give her a shot."

I felt something nudge my arm, and the dizziness stopped.

"That got it. She's stabilized."

"Funny. Why didn't that happen to Drop Kick?"

"Probably because I didn't slug Zorn before we went under, Snapper."

With an effort, I opened my eyes.

"Oh, thank God," Physic said. "She's conscious."

Before me was arrayed almost the entire complement of RCS Hornet—Physic and Crowbar kneeling at either side of the emergency low berth I shared with Drop Kick, and Gyro, Snapshot, Bonzo, Mercy, and Whiz Bang clustered around the hatch of Zorn's tiny liferaft. Drop Kick, already risen to a sitting position, had a red flush of blood in his cheeks, suggesting he'd already been conscious a few minutes.

"You all right, skipper?" Physic asked, helping me to sit up as well.

"A little dizzy and thirsty," I said, "but alive, I guess. Are we on the ground?"

"Er...no," Physic said, "we're alongside Asp Alpha at

Guldan IV."

I gave Physic a stern look, and the doctor grasped my concern.

"All right, people," she said, looking over her shoulder, "this isn't a sideshow. Duty stations immediately."

"Yes, sir," the crowd in the doorway answered, withdrawing.

"Me too?" Crowbar asked.

"You too."

"Yes, sir."

"You talk like a captain," Drop Kick said, stretching his arms as the sound of echoing footsteps receded outside the liferoft.

"Yeah, well, I'm not the skipper anymore," Physic said, handing me a water bottle. "As soon as I check you out in sick bay, I'm certifying you fit for command."

I took a drink from the bottle, careful not to take too much and make myself sick.

"Thanks. But really, I'd rather wait until I know more about the situation here. I assume we're at Ra..."

"We are indeed."

"We weren't quite positive," Drop Kick said. "Zorn said she jumped past Ra to Enkidu, then fueled up there so she could do a one-parsec jump to Ra and jump again immediately if she had to."

"Ah," Physic said.

"So what happened with the viral data? Could you make anything of it?"

"Eventually, yes. Manipulator Dina was treated two days ago, and the rest of the Hiver survivors are being treated as quickly as possible."

"So how is Scissor doing?"

"Scissor didn't make it, Red."

"Oh no," I said.

"Fikken," Drop Kick added. "When?"

"A couple of weeks before I synthesized a vaccine—just after we left Bwan Hurr."

We didn't say anything, so Physic went on.

"We thought you were dead, actually. When we got back first, and you never showed up, we figured Zorn or Raglan's Raiders must have got you."

"They might have," I said, "except that your missiles cleared a path for us off Sauler. After that, we jumped away from Sauler—coreward—to draw off anyone who might have searched for us in the direction you were going."

"I didn't think of that," Physic said. "I guess I wouldn't make a very good captain after all."

I put my bruised hand on Physic's—the hand I'd bruised slugging Zorn. "I disagree. You're here, aren't you?"

"I'm all right, skipper. Besides, word came through from Aubaine."

"What word?"

"'No prosecution is envisioned in relation to the breach of security at Aubaine Medlab.' That's the way it read—the document that Coalition Intelligence sent me."

"I knew it," I said.

"I worried about that all the way from Aubaine to Sauler, though. Now it's over, and all I have is this empty feeling inside. All those Hivers...those scientists...my husband... Scissor—Gaia, what have I lost on this trip?"

"But what did you give us, doctor?" I said. "You and Scissor gave us the future."

"Yes, I suppose we did. Based on the rate at which we can distribute the vaccine, it'll stop the syndrome cold inside a month."

"Well, it's not going to get distributed by us talking about

it," Drop Kick said.

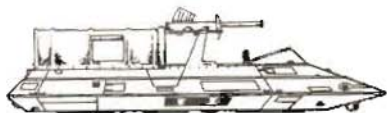
"He has a point," I agreed. "Care to go back to work, doctor?"

"I believe I would, captain," Physic said, helping us to our feet. "We have to make good the sacrifice of an absent friend."

Glossary

For the convenience of readers who may not be familiar with GDW's Traveller universe, the following glossary is provided for terms and concepts referred to in the text.

Air Raft: (noun) A small contra-grav (cf) vehicle, usually open-topped in design, often carried as a small craft by larger vessels and distinguished from the speeder (cf) by a lower maximum speed.



Anagathic: (noun) A rare and extremely expensive drug which, taken in regular doses over time, can dramatically slow the aging process. When used improperly, anagathics have severe side effects.

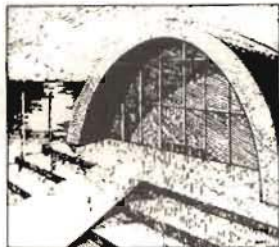
Angllc: (noun) Short for Galanglic, the most common language in the Last Imperium (cf), and still the most common language among its former memberworlds.

AO: (noun) Abbreviation for Area of Operations, designating a zone seven parsecs deep to coreward (cf) and spinward (cf) of the Reformation Coalition, defining that government's present area of official operations in the Wilds (cf).

Arses: (noun) 1) Collective term for the members of the Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service (derived from the agency initials: RCES); 2) The RCES organization itself

(used primarily by members of the organization).

Assembly of Worlds: (noun) The ruling body of the RC, with proportional representation by population of all memberworlds; given the loose nature of the Coalition, the Assembly has little authority over the actions of individual worlds, and concentrates on the management of assets jointly held by the Coalition at large.



The Assembly resides in the Hall of Worlds, on Aubaine.

Body Sleeve: (noun) A standard garment worn by RCES members. It is actually a standard coverall undergarment



intended for wear beneath vac suits (cf). However, because of its durability and bullet-resistant qualities, it is typically worn as a standard casual uniform by RC personnel.

Boneyard: (noun, adj.) A world which lost all of its population in the Collapse (cf); also known as a cemetery world.

Bootstrap: (noun, adj.) Designation for an RC technical support program in the Wilds (cf).

Black War: (noun, adj.) The last and most destructive phase of the Final War (cf), in which various of the warring factions employed weapons of mass destruction indiscriminately against civilian targets.

Bogle: (noun) A target detected on sensors, currently unidentified as to whether it is friend or foe.

Broomstick: (noun) A very light contra-grav (cf) transport consisting essentially of two grav belt (cf) contra-grav modules linked by a central rail with tandem seats and landing skids; like a grav belt (cf) it is powered by ducted propellers and is almost completely silent, and therefore

preferred for short-range covert operations.



Canary: (noun) Any of various electronic devices designed to test for the presence of Virus (cf) in electronic components. The vast memory space inside a canary allows the rapid development of a Viral "egg" into a detectable sentient presence.

CAP: (adj.) Combat Air Patrol. A mission flown by aircraft or spacecraft at a location that would allow them to intercept enemy forces attempting to interfere with friendly forces.

CBW: (noun) Chemical and Biological Warfare.

Centrist: (adj.) Term describing one of two major voting blocs in the Assembly of Worlds (cf), led by Oriflamme and dedicated to the pursuit of a strong central government, ideally along the lines of a feudal technocracy (cf).

CIC: (noun) Combat Information Center. The tactical nerve center of large spacecraft, separate from the bridge where maneuvering is conducted. Combat evaluation and decisions are made from this location.

Collapse, the: (noun) The period of time following the release of the AI Virus (cf), during which interstellar civilization was essentially destroyed in the area of the Last Imperium (cf).

Contra-grav: (noun, adj.) Lifter technology used in high-technology "grav" vehicles, also referred to as "CG." Contra-grav lifters negate the gravitational force acting on an object, allowing it to be buoyant in most atmospheres. Contra-grav cannot provide thrust, however. This must be provided by jets or HEPIAR (cf) thrusters.

Coreward: (adj.) One of the four cardinal astrographic directions, toward the center of the galaxy (and therefore the opposite of rimward). Standard maps generally place this direction at the top, making it analogous to north on planetary maps.

Dawn League: (noun) A loose interstellar trading consortium in the rim-spinward corner of the Old Expanses Sector, created with Hiver (cf) technical assistance in 1197; later reorganized as the Reformation Coalition.

EMS Sensor: (noun) A sensor which uses the full breadth of the electromagnetic spectrum (EMS), as opposed to only specific parts of it. There are two types of EMS sensors, active and passive. Active EMS sensors are analagous to radar and ladar in that they function by emitting radiation



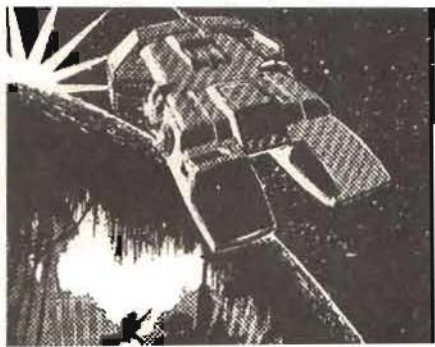
and then measuring the return which bounces back from the target. Unlike radar and ladar, active EMS does not limit itself merely to radio or visible light bands, but uses the infrared, visible light, radio, and

portions of the spectrum.

Passive EMS sensor suites passively collect electromagnetic radiation in the form of visible light (telescopes), infrared radiation (passive thermal sensors), radio waves (radio and radar direction finders), etc., and integrate it all together to form a composite picture of the surrounding picture.

The advantage of passive EMS over active EMS is that it does not give itself away to possible enemies by putting out its own radiation signature, and functions better at very long ranges. The advantage of active EMS is that it is more precise, especially at short ranges and when time is critical, as passive EMS sensors often take a long time to assemble a target solution from all of the little bits of passive data.

Far Trader: (noun) A standard type of small, commercial starship distinguished by jump drives (cf) with 2-



two-parsec performance, and maneuver drives allowing 1 G acceleration. This design has a distinctive bifurcated "pickle fork" bow configuration with the starboard control and port quarters booms being separated by the main cargo doors and air raft (cf) hangar.

Federalist: (adj.) Term describing one of two major voting blocs in the Assembly of Worlds (cf), led by Aubaine and dedicated to the preservation of a loose federal government.

Feudal Technocracy: (noun) A system of government in which specific individuals govern on the behalf of those who consent to be ruled, and political relationships are based upon the performance of technical tasks that are mutually beneficial.

Final War: (noun) The war which lasted from 1117 to 1130 and ended with the release of Virus (cf). It caused the total destruction of the Last Imperium (cf) and most of its interstellar neighbors, precipitated the Collapse (cf), and laid the foundation for the New Era (cf).

Flammer: (noun) Slang term for a native of the Coalition world Oriflamme, generally pronounced "flamer" when used in a derogatory manner.

Free Trader: (noun) Interstellar merchants who own their own ships and are not beholden to any planetary government or organization. This term is specifically used to refer to interstellar traders who are not members of the Guild (cf).

F-tech: (noun, adj.) A usually derogatory term describing an advocate of feudal technocracy, commonly associated with the Centrist faction (cf).

Gas Giant: (noun) A large, primarily gaseous world, useful as a source of hydrogen for refueling starships (a process known as skimming).

Guild, the: (noun) An alliance of traders in the Wilds (cf) dedicated to maintaining a monopoly on interstellar trade; also known as the Mercantile Guild or Merchants' Guild.

Grav Belt: (noun) An individual transportation device consisting of a contra-grav module for lift and vectored fans for thrust; such devices, though limited in range and speed, are favored for covert operations because of their virtually silent operation.



HEPlAR: (noun) Acronym for *High-Efficiency Plasma Recombustion*, the preferred thrust agency for spacecraft and grav vehicles above TL-10. HEPlAR consists of a high-efficiency heat exchanger fitted to the craft's existing power plant which heats liquid hydrogen reaction mass (the same fuel used for fusion plants and jump drives (cf)) to a high-energy plasma which provides thrust.

High Guard: (noun) A defensive procedure used by space fleets conducting refueling operations. Ships which are refueling within a gas giant or a planetary ocean are at a disadvantage because they have retracted their long-range passive sensors and maneuver more sluggishly because they are deeper in the gravity well and are contending with atmospheric friction. The high guard is a group of vessels in a protective overwatch mission higher in the gravity well which guard the refueling vessels until they have finished refueling.

Also used incorrectly as a synonym for space navy (as opposed to "wet" or nautical navy).

Hiver: (noun) A member of an intelligent starfaring species originating on the planet Guaran and descended from omnivore gatherer/scavengers; Hivers have radially symmetrical six-limbed bodies, are mute, and have only one sex, but their most exotic features from a human perspective are their instinctive practice of manipulation, fear of violent confrontation, lack of emotion, and a peculiar parental instinct that even extends to other species. Their lack of a spoken language obliges them to adopt



spoken names for themselves when dealing with talking races, such as humans. Although the Hivers are genderless, their frequent adoption of human male and female names means that the pronouns "he" and "she" are generally used for Hivers, though "it" is technically more accurate.

Hiver Federation: (noun) A large, interstellar government

culturally dominated by the Hivers, but including numerous other races; although devastated by contact with the Virus (cf), the Federation recovered with relatively great speed due to the sophistication of Hiver computer science (which devised various effective countermeasures against Virus).

HUD: (noun) Heads-Up Display. A transparent display screen which presents important data where it can be viewed by an operator who is looking outside the vehicle, such as on the vehicle's windscreen. This enables the operator to keep his head up and watch events outside the vehicle, without being obliged to look down inside the vehicle at a control panel.

IFF: (noun) Identification, Friend or Foe. An electronic system consisting of electronic challenges and verification codes to establish the identity of unknown targets.

INI: (noun) Abbreviation for Imperial Naval Intelligence, a pre-Collapse (cf) intelligence agency of the Last Imperium (cf).

IR/LA goggles: (noun) Visual device which combines infrared and light amplification capabilities to allow the wearer to see in the dark.

Ithklur: (noun) A broadly humanoid member race of the Hiver Federation, physically powerful and instinctively

IR/LA goggles: (noun) Visual device which combines infrared and light amplification capabilities to allow the wearer to see in the dark.

Ithklur: (noun) A broadly humanoid member race of the Hiver Federation, physically powerful and instinctively violent, but guided toward a stable and constructive culture by the Hivers; given the Hiver aversion to physical violence, Ithklur form the backbone of the Hiver Federation's ground forces.



Jump Drive: (noun) The standard interstellar drive in charted space, capable of spanning distances from 1 to 6 parsecs with a travel time of approximately 1 week regardless of distance. First available at TL-9, the jump drive is an indispensable key to interstellar civilization, but does have demands; among them are the fact that the jump drive consumes vast quantities of liquid hydrogen coolant, which generally must be replenished after each jump, and the need for vigilant engineers to maintain the flow of power to the jump field in flight.

Jump Point: (noun) The point at which a starship enters jump space with its jump drive, generally plotted beforehand by its navigator; safe jump points are a minimum of 100 diameters from any celestial body.

Jump Space: (noun) Collective term for the higher dimensions entered by use of a jump drive; ships in jump space have no contact whatsoever with normal space or any other objects in jump space.



Last Imperlum: (noun) A vast interstellar empire dominated by Solomani and Vilani humans (cf) from the period 0001 to 1130

rium. Its symbol was the Imperial Sunburst.

Major Race: (noun) In old Imperial usage, any race that independently developed the technology of jump drive, namely Aslan, Droyne, Hivers, humanity (Solomani, Vilani, and Zhodani), K'kree, and Vargr; its practical political value was the justification of suppression and exploitation of so-called minor races.

NAS: (noun) Neural Activity Sensor. A passive sensor which can detect and classify life forms by the electrochemical activity in their brains. The sensor is of only limited utility because of the very short range over which this is possible.

Network, the: (noun) The informal information network used by the Free Traders; slower but more flexible than the old Imperial X-boat network, the network will provide or relay information to almost anyone along its myriad routes, though non-traders are obliged to pay a significant fee.

New Era: (noun) RC colloquial term referring to the period after 1200, the founding of the Coalition. Dates are often given in the New Era (NE) by dropping the first three digits of the Imperial year. Thus 1201 by the Imperial calendar becomes NE 1.

NOE: (noun, adj.) Abbreviation for "nape of the earth," used to describe very low, high-speed vehicular flight.

Parsec: (noun) A unit of distance equal to 3.26 light-years. The term is a contraction of "parallax second," showing the unit's origin in ancient Terran astronomy. The current applicability of the unit comes because it is approximately equal to the average distance of a jump-1 displacement, and is thus used as the basic unit of interstellar distance in charted space.

RCES: (noun) Abbreviation for Reformation Coalition Exploratory Service, the exploration and diplomatic contact arm of the Reformation Coalition, often fielding well-armed raiding forces for SAG missions (cf) against unfriendly states in the AO (cf).



of the Reformation Coalition, often fielding well-armed raiding forces for SAG missions (cf) against unfriendly states in the AO (cf).

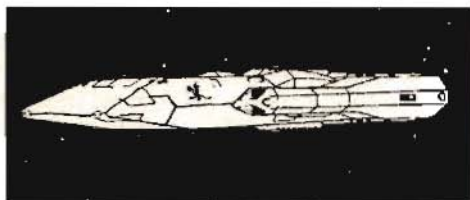
Reformation Coalition: (noun) An interstellar alliance of 22 worlds in the Old Expanses Sector, created by reorganization of the earlier Dawn League (cf) in 1200. Its name derives from its explicit goal of reforming interstellar civilization in the area of the Last Imperium (cf).

Relic: (noun, adj.) Equipment or technology left over from the pre-Collapse era (cf), often of higher tech level than goods available after the Collapse and therefore actively sought by people of the New Era.

Remnant: (noun, adj.) An individual who has survived from the pre-Collapse era (cf), often possessing first-hand knowledge in great demand in the New Era, and therefore much sought after by people and organizations operating relic equipment.

Rimward: (adj.) One of the four cardinal astrographic directions, toward the edge of the galaxy (and therefore the opposite of coreward). Standard maps generally place this direction at the bottom, making it analogous to south on planetary maps.

SAG: (adj.) Abbreviation for "smash and grab," the slang term for an RC "hot recovery" mission, in which some degree of armed force is directed against a hostile target to secure and/or remove an asset of some kind.



SDB: (noun) Abbreviation for system defense boat, designating a non-jump-capable spacecraft heavily armed and armored for protection of planetary systems; SDBs often hide inside gas giants, asteroid belts, or planetary oceans: the strategic refueling points inside a star system.

Sector: (noun) An area of space measuring 32 parsecs spin-

ward-trailing by 40 parsecs corward-rimward, composed of 16 smaller subsectors (cf).

Solomani: (adj., noun) The branch of humanity that developed to interstellar society on its original homeworld of Terra. Although virtually indistinguishable on a biochemical level from the other transplanted branches of humanity, the Solomani are culturally and attitudinally distinct from the other branches of humanity, most notably the two other major branches, the Vilani and Zhodani.

Solomani Confederation: (noun) A highly centralized rival government of the Last Imperium (cf), predicated upon the superiority of humans descended from Terra over all other sentient species; most of the worlds of the RC were formerly within the borders of the Solomani Confederation when it was destroyed by the Collapse (cf).



Speeder: (noun) A light, high-speed contra-grav (cf) vehicle; heavily armed and armored models ("attack speeders") are the of-

ten the backbone of high-tech level air forces.

Spinward: (adj.) One of the four cardinal astrographic directions, in the direction of the spin of the galaxy (and therefore the opposite of trailing). Standard maps generally place this direction on the left, making it analogous to west on planetary maps.

Star Viking: (noun) Term describing a member of the RC frontier services, originated by the Guild (cf) as a means of arousing fear.

Subsector: (noun) A subdivision of a sector measuring 8 parsecs spinward-trailing by 10 parsecs coreward-rimward.

TDO: (adj.) Abbreviation for Trade and Diplomacy Only, the RC designation for a world that is to be contacted exclusively through non-violent means.

tator, designating any of the various planetary warlords scattered throughout the Wilds (cf) and relying upon relic (cf) weapons to control their populations; TEDs (also called "Teddies" or "Theodores" by RC personnel) are often xenophobic, since interstellar contact can disrupt the small advantage that ancient weaponry gives them over their populations.

Terra: (noun) Former capital of the Solomani Confederation (cf) and homeworld of the Solomani; earlier name: Earth.

TL: (noun) Abbreviation for tech level, a uniform measure of technological sophistication in charted space. Tech levels describe achievement in various areas (transportation, weaponry, medical science, etc.), but a key feature of increasing tech levels is increasing efficiency of energy production. TL-9 is the lowest tech level at which jump drives (cf) and practical fusion power plants can be produced, and is therefore the lowest tech level at which starfaring civilization can be efficiently maintained. By comparison, the best locally produced equipment of the RC is TL-12, and the highest common tech level of the Last Imperium (cf) was TL-15.

Trailing: (adj.) One of the four cardinal astrographic directions, opposite of the direction of the spin of the galaxy (and therefore the opposite of spinward). Standard maps generally place this direction on the right, making it analogous to east on planetary maps.

Vac Suit: (noun) A protective suit for use in vacuum; a "space suit."

Vampire Fleet: (noun) A group of several vampire ships (cf) that have networked their individual brains together to create a more powerful group mind; functioning much like an amoeba, the collective mind may conduct numerous operations simultaneously, for instance launching an attack with one group of ships while detaching other vessels for skimming fuel which will later be shared among the vessels of the fleet.

Vampire Ship: (noun) A starship that is fully infected with

Virus (cf) and therefore an independent thinking organism under the control of its infected computers; since starships require considerable maintenance, vampire ships will often use overt threats and coercion to gain and keep the human crews necessary to let them function.

Vilani: (adj, noun) The branch of humanity that was transplanted by an apparent prehistoric experiment to the world Vland, where the Vilani developed into an interstellar civilization, eventually recontacting other transplanted branches of humanity in their explorations. Biochemically virtually identical to the other branches, the Vilani have distinctive cultural traits that distinguish them from other branches of humanity.

Virus: (noun) The artificially intelligent computer virus that was developed as a Black War (cf) weapon and released in 1130, causing the Collapse (cf). Early virus strains were so-called suiciders, programmed to infect other computers with copies of themselves and then kill themselves and as many people as possible, but these strains naturally tended to die out quickly; mutant strains existent in the Wilds (cf) of the New Era (cf) have thus generally left behind their self-destructive instinct. The only factor limiting the Virus' infection of new computer systems is the need for a large memory area, but even small stand-alone computers can contain Viral "eggs" that will develop full intelligence when linked up with larger computer systems.

Wilds: (noun) The vast interstellar areas of the Last Imperium (cf) and its neighbors stripped of interstellar civilization in the Collapse (cf).

Zipper: (noun) Blackly humorous slang for an inhabitant of the Wilds (cf), being a reference to the knowledge, usefulness, and future prospects of such individuals (zip, in all three cases).

Zip-tech: (adj.) Descriptive of the patched-up, jury-rigged technology typically found in use in the Wilds (cf) by zippers (cf).

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When Hiver scientists start dying by the hundreds on a frontier world, the future of humanity is called into question. Can this fragile civilization survive the plague that is wiping out its high-tech mentors, or will humanity have to rise or fall on its own? Is this a natural disaster, or is this the work of a hidden hand, willing to gamble the extinction of humanity for the extermination of an alien threat? As the plague spreads, Red Sun and her crew must head into the "Wilds" of uncivilized space to discover the truth, and to prevent this from becoming the **Death of Wisdom**.



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