

Book two  
of three

# TRAVELLER<sup>®</sup>

*The New Era*

# TO DREAM OF CHAOS™



Paul Brunette





## Divine Visitation

"Beloved Miranda," came a familiar voice, as if from the very air behind her.

"Your blessed holiness," Vazquez replied reflexively, turning to the voice but averting her eyes and dropping to one knee.

"Rise and lift your eyes, my daughter."

With suitable reluctance, Vazquez did as bade, beholding a revelation from God. Hooded Saint Graylord—his hands and face shrouded, but a towering figure all the same—stood between the shimmering forms of two massive angelic guardians, floating in the air as rainbows of light coruscated across their winged and radiant bodies.

"Gracious Saint Graylord, how may I serve you?"

"It is written," Graylord said, "that the day shall come when travellers arrive from the heavens, and stars shall fall from their traces. Then shall kings and princes scatter, and lo, the many kingdoms of the earth shall kneel before the manifested will of the Lord and Defender. My daughter, the day has come again when travellers have joined us from the stars."

"Yes, Your Grace. Even this day, they were led into my presence."

"Tell me," Graylord said, "did you sense their purpose?"

"I did, Your Grace. I feel their hearts are true, and their cause is just."

"I am pleased," Graylord replied, his pleasure reflected in the soft pink hue appearing in the angel's wings. "It was for your special insight that I made you the protector and guardian of the Defender's church."

"Your Blessed Grace—is it possible that these might be the ones? I have seen visions of hope and torment...."

"Be at peace, my daughter. I have seen the seal of the Defender rising gloriously in the east. Blessed are those whose eyes do not see, yet believe."

"Your Grace, I do believe."

SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS FOR

Science Fiction Roleplaying Games

# TRAVELLER

*The New Era*

*The Story Concludes in.*

**Book**

# 3



## The Backwards Mask

GDW:382 U.S. \$5.95

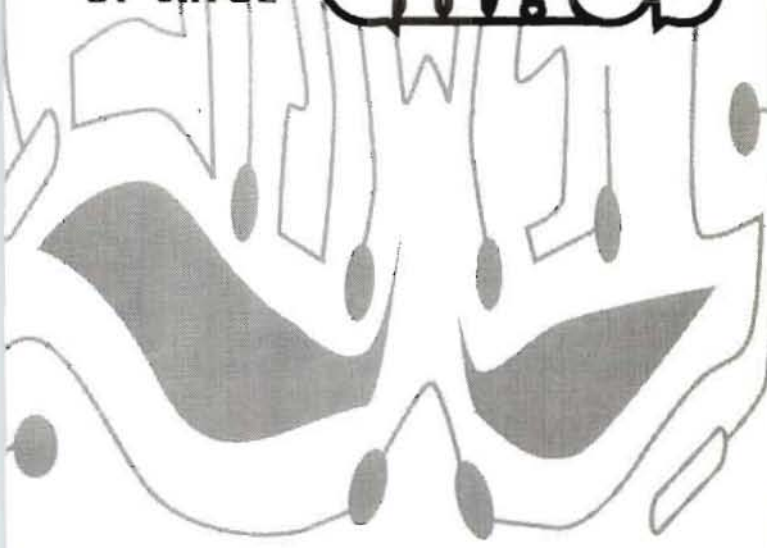
**GDW**  
PRESS

Science Fiction Roleplaying Game

**TRAVELLER**  
*The New Era*

**TO**  
**DREAM** **OF**  
**CHAOS**

Book two  
of three



**Paul Brunette**

This novel is set in the universe of Traveller®: The New Era—GDW's science-fiction roleplaying game.

*To Dream of Chaos* 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.

Cover: David Deitrick

GDW Press  
P.O. Box 11084  
Chicago, IL 60611-0084

*To Dream of Chaos*  
Copyright©1995, GDW Press  
All rights reserved.  
Published by arrangement with the author.

ISBN 1-55878-184-6

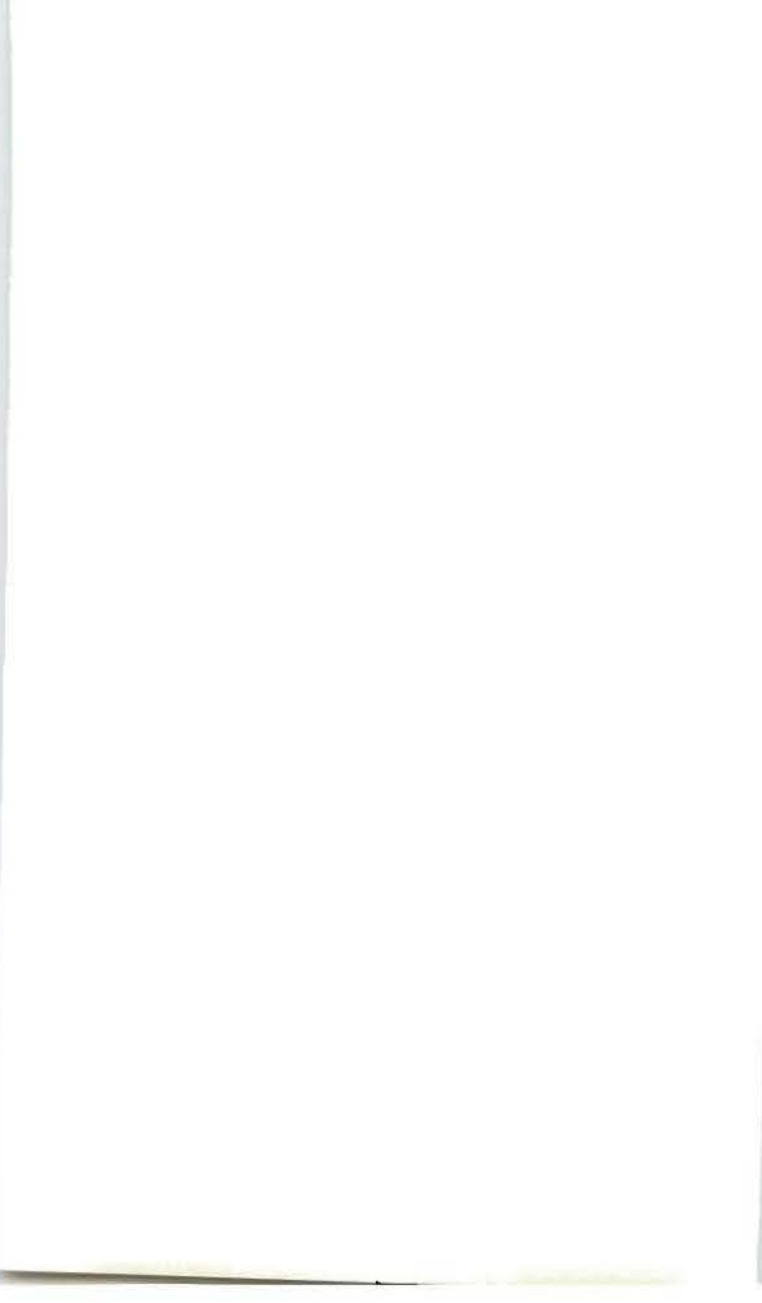
This book is protected under US Copyright Law. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher.

First Printing, Spring 1995  
01 02 03 04 05 06 07 08 09

Traveller® is a registered trademark of Game Designers' Workshop, Inc.

Printed in USA. Made in USA.

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper.







# Chapter One

A dab of acrylic titanium white sat poised on the end of Coeur D'Esprit's paintbrush when she caught a motion in the corner of her eye and turned her head to study it. ANS *Kukulcan*, the system's largest defense boat, was gliding between Coeur's window and the watery globe of Aubaine depicted in her canvas.

For an old space-hand, the 75,000-ton monitor was not an unusual sight, but ships were Coeur's life, and she admired it as an architect might a well-constructed building. Roughly the shape of a flattened hammer, flying handle first, the monitor had begun her life as the Imperial cruiser *Vaward*, but was damaged in the Final War and left behind when the Imperium abandoned Vras 80 years before. Pleased by the gift, the invading Solomani then renamed the cruiser and began repairs in the hope that the ship would spearhead a final conquest of the sector.

*Nice plan. Too bad Virus beat you to it.*

Today, of course, *Kukulcan* didn't belong to either the Imperium or the Solomani. Having outlived both her masters, the great hulk was now trapped in the Vras system (now renamed Aubaine), her jump drives cannibalized to equip the fledgling Reformation Coalition fleet. It was a practical necessity—and the monitor still served a useful purpose, defending the system with its long-range meson gun—but there was nonetheless something sad about the great ship, likely never to fly in jump space again.

*Like an eagle, Coeur thought, with its wings clipped.*

But then the door chime rang, and Coeur snapped out of her reverie. Much as she would have liked it, she was not aboard a starship, but sitting in the living room of a claustrophobic space station apartment with her only companion a holoivid screen, its volume turned down low to keep from distracting her as she painted. Yet even the holoivid reminded Coeur that she was not where she wanted to be, for its live broadcast could only be heard close to Aubaine, where the limited freedom of Coeur's canvas was a poor substitute for the genuine freedom of flight among the stars.

"That you, Crowbar?" she asked.



"Yes, sir."

"Please, come in."

Answering her command, the door opened to reveal Crowbar, Coeur's bearded friend from the Technical Academy, as tall for a man at 188 cm as Coeur was for a woman at 175. Just departed from his work area, he wore the puffy vac suit that was his uniform, with the helmet stowed in elastic netting at the waist.

"Sorry I didn't change, Red Sun," Crowbar said, "but you know me. I get to working, and I lose all track of the time."

"That's okay," Coeur returned, hastily rising and removing the apron over her blouse and skirt. "I lost track of the time myself."

"It is our day off," the engineer said, stepping through the apartment threshold. "I guess we're entitled. Isn't that ASS *Kukulcan*?"

Packing up her paints, Coeur grinned at the joke. When the fine people of Vras had renamed their planet Aubaine, no one had thought of the rude way the abbreviation for Aubani Space Ship would look in print. *Aubani Naval Ship* was thus chosen as an altogether more polite alternative.

"Sure is. Putting in for resupply, I imagine."

"My god, she's big. You know it takes 500 engineers just to man her drives?"

"I believe it. What's she put out, about a trillion watts?"

"Man," Crowbar said, shaking his head in amazement, "it's hard to imagine anyone could ever build anything that big."

"I don't know. I've seen bigger."

"Around here?"

"No, I meant back in the old days."

"Ah."

Coeur smiled at that expression of understanding—the younger man's acceptance that his former captain, born on the human homeworld, Terra, had seen a world of wonders whose like he would probably not see in his lifetime.

Though they were fairly close in age—she 32, he 26—the dark and thoughtful eyes of Coeur, brown as the hair she wore short for space duty, had seen the first acts of the farcical tragedy that destroyed all civilization 70 years ago. Still, it wasn't like Coeur to keep staring at the stage after they'd cleared away the sets. Crowbar knew she was a woman who lived in the present, and that was why they'd remained friends even after they'd ceased to be shipmates two months earlier.

Left alone for a moment as Coeur went into the head in her bedroom to wash her hands, Crowbar found his attention drawn away from the old monitor and over to the painting of cloud-banded Aubaine Coeur had left standing on its easel. Although Coeur's holoivid was also competing for his attention, running an

unsubstantiated story about the mysterious "Solee Empire"—suspected of having destroyed several free traders in Shenk subsector—Crowbar tuned out the news to focus instead on Coeur's artwork. Like most of her paintings, whether of people or planets, it seemed to strike a balance between meticulous detail and breezy energy, with a consequent sense of depth and realism rivaled only by holography.

"Like it?" Coeur asked, coming out of her bedroom and putting on a vest.

"It's very good. Is it for someone?"

"Drop Kick," Coeur answered, pausing beside Crowbar to admire her work. "He said he got himself promoted to Brigade Sergeant Major of the 1st Marine Brigade and wants a painting to go with his new office."

"Wow. So how's he rate?"

"He asked very nicely," Coeur said, moving around the back of the easel and bringing up a protective flap she dropped over the painting, "and paid me 200 credits in advance."

"That's my skipper. Sentimentality be damned."

"Damn straight," Coeur answered, picking up a remote control to shut off her holovid, then coming around the easel to face Crowbar squarely. "And now, I assume I finally get to see what you did to my ship."

"Hey," Crowbar protested, "*Hornet's* my ship now, skipper. Nobody twisted your arm to take that new command."

Coeur smirked.

"Yeah, some command. Goodwrench says *Sooly Vee*'ll be laid up 'til Reformation Day—15 weeks."

"Well, she'll be a nice ship—whenever they get her back together again."

Coeur gave her friend a wicked look, then steered him toward the door. "Come on, Crowbar. It'll be nice to see a ship that's in one piece for a change."

...

From a distance, the RCES Orbital Station appeared deceptively small and simple—a spinning inhabited ring 500 meters across, attached by radiating spokes to a central dock and power plant. But it was large enough to support 1000 workers in continuous residence. A colorful collection—construction engineers undoing the damage of Virus and decades of neglect, Arses outfitting for the frontier, administrators pulling out their hair as they managed a patchwork comm net prone to switching errors—they made for a circus atmosphere befitting the official call sign of the station. Big Top.

"This is ridiculous," Crowbar said, maneuvering around a knot of frustrated new arrivals at the perennially disabled bank of elevators nearest Coeur's quarters. "If they'd just fix the elevators in Section 2, we could go directly from our quarters to the repair yard."

"I'm sure they'll fix them eventually," Coeur said, matching the tall man's pace in the wide thoroughfare beyond the elevators, curving up gently before and behind them. "It's just not a priority."

"Yeah, but really. They've been working on it for two months, ever since we brought *Hornet* back."

Coeur resisted the urge to comment further. In her temporary capacity as a technical adviser to expeditions outfitting at the station, Coeur had come into contact with specialists who knew the real reason the Section 2 elevator repairs were behind schedule, but the truth was too shocking to repeat—at least in a public walkway. Coeur, therefore, would wait to tell Crowbar until they were alone and out of earshot of the station's panicky civilians.

"Well, you know—bureaucracy."

"Tell me about it. It took me so long to get data-disks for the student's computers, we had to write on paper for a few days."

"Shocking."

To Coeur's relief, the nearest elevator was unoccupied. They boarded it, and Coeur at last revealed the awful truth.

"You might not want to spread this around, Crowbar, but I know the real reason the Section 2 elevators are taking so long to repair."

"The real reason?"

"The real reason, my friend, is that a dormant strain of Virus is dug into the circuitry of those elevators."

"A live strain of Virus? Loose on the station?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking, yes, but I really don't think it's that serious. The way I hear it, it hasn't assimilated enough memory to become very intelligent, so the people making the repairs are taking them slow and easy, making sure all the communication links into the area are cut before they rip out the bad circuits."

Despite himself, Crowbar found his pulse racing at the captain's disclosure. *That* he wasn't ashamed of—Virus had killed 100 trillion people more than likely, and it would go on killing if they gave it a chance. He was surprised, however, by the cool manner of his colleague, casually discussing the greatest evil ever unleashed on humankind.

"Not serious? Red Sun, that's Virus you're talking about."

"Sorry, Crowbar. I didn't mean to startle you. I just thought you should know what I've heard, being as you're in something of a position of authority yourself. More than me, really, since I'm

just a staff adviser until they fix my ship."

"Sorry, sir," Crowbar said. "Maybe I'm overreacting. But it's just that I've seen vehicles infected with Virus, and man, they give me the willies something fierce."

Coeur patted Crowbar on the puffy fabric over his shoulder.

"We all have to die sometime, Crowbar. Fretting about it just wastes the time you've got living."

"I suppose you're right, Captain. But all the same, I'd rather not die in a crazy elevator."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm sure God takes the people who die stupid deaths, too."

The elevator doors opened, letting them out in a less-travelled corridor near the outer skin of the station. Heavy bulkheads stood to either side of them, with iris valves set to slam shut automatically at any loss in pressure, and the corridor to left and right was dotted with rugged airlock hatches. Unlike the inner levels, the floor was uncarpeted metal, so the low heels of Coeur's sandals made ringing clicks as she walked behind Crowbar.

"*Homet's* right up this way, skipper," Crowbar said. "Bay 43."

"Do you want me to suit up?" Coeur asked, following him to the appropriate hatch.

"No, don't worry about it," Crowbar answered, running his pass key through a security lock beside the hatch. "Since it's the end of the week, I've given the students the day off, so there won't be any work going on inside."

"All right."

After digesting Crowbar's security code for a moment, the station computer decided it was safe to open the airlock's outer door and slid it aside with a pneumatic hiss. The Arses then entered the lock, and as soon as the outer door was closed, the inner door opened to let them into the bay.

"That's *Homet*?" Coeur asked, stepping just outside the airlock, then coming to a halt.

"That's *Homet*, all right. What do you think?"

Coeur did not have a ready answer to so simple a question. The 200-ton freighter before her was *Homet* all right, the ship that had carried them both to Ra and Sauler—into the very jaws of the Mercantile Guild. Now she was perched atop 1000 square meters of curved deck on tripod landing gear, but there were subtle differences in appearance that Coeur did not register all at once. It took a few moments to note them all, comparing the ship before her to the one in her memory.

"The main alteration is the roll bar," Crowbar said, moving out ahead of Coeur and letting his voice echo in the cavernous hangar. "We altered the shape to give more lift in atmosphere





and enlarged the electronics pallet."

"I see that," Coeur said, "but correct me if I'm wrong—isn't that a Gatling gun up above the bridge? And a plasma gun in front of the port turret?"

"Noticed those, did you?"

"Noticed? Hell, they make the ship look like an assault lander."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"I assume they're mock-ups, though. What, did you get some kind of research grant to design new weapons mounts?"

Crowbar didn't answer at first, adopting a sheepish expression.

"Those aren't mock-ups, sir," he said, coming back to Coeur. "They're real."

"What?"

"I know, it's weird. But there is an explanation."

"I'm all ears."

"Near as I can tell, the Admiralty sees *Hornet* as a sort of emergency backup for the bigger ships in the fleet. The way I hear it, when headquarters heard we were leaving the AO to look for the Guild base, bets were running 80-20 we'd never make it back alive. When we did, the Admiralty decided to let us keep improving the ship in case we'd ever have to take her out again."

At a loss to come up with a better explanation than Crowbar, Coeur finally shrugged and returned her attention to the ship.

"Well, anyway, it looks like a sensible arrangement. I assume you laid out the weapons to provide overlapping fields of fire."

"Sure did. The machinegun covers the approach to the cargo ramp; the plasma gun covers the port side; and the old space combat laser covers the starboard."

"Okay, so who shoots off the fireworks?"

"The missile gunner. Snapshot always used to complain about having nothing to do on the ground, so I put the fire control for the close-in weapons in her old turret."

"I'm sure she'd be pleased."

"Whatever happened to her and Gyro?"

"Oh, they're down at the dirtside academy. I requested they be assigned to *Suleiman Victrix* with me, but as long as the ship was going to spend several months in the yard, they figured they could use the time brushing up on their ship skills."

"So, did anything ever develop between Snapshot and Drop Kick?"

"Didn't ask."

"Didn't ask?"

"Figured it wasn't my business."

"Oh."

"So," Coeur said, "what else have you done to my ship?"

"How about this?" Crowbar said, leading her under the bridge, located in the starboard horn of the ship's pickle fork bow. "Seven centimeters of extra armor around the bridge, over the turret hardpoints and around the fuel lines. Doesn't add much weight to the ship, but it will stop a bolt from a plasma bazooka."

"That's a good idea."

"I thought you'd like it. I think your description of the armor she came with was 'pathetic.'"

"Actually, I was being generous. I'm still amazed we took that ship into space combat and survived."

"You're amazed? Just remember who would've had to put the ship back together if we'd been hit."

"That's a strange thought, from someone who's just turned *Homet* into an assault ship."

Crowbar shrugged.

"I think of the guns as a deterrent to violence. With all this firepower, most opponents would be intimidated into surrender."

Coeur kept her answer to herself: *Keep dreaming, Crowbar. The only deterrent most of those frontier thugs understand is a bullet in the head.*

"Never know," she said, diplomatically. "Hopefully, you won't have to find out."

The urgent beeping of Coeur's wrist communicator cut off further conversation. "Excuse me," Coeur said, tapping the radio with the fingers of her right hand: "Red Sun, go ahead."

"Red Sun, this is Big Top Control. We have an urgent Class III message for you on the scrambler from Trantown. Are you free to receive it?"

Coeur and Crowbar exchanged impressed glances. Class III messages were of the highest priority—generally reserved for planetary emergencies—and neither had ever received one directly.

"Stand by, Big Top. Crowbar?"

"How about the bridge?" he offered. "That's pretty secure."

"Yeah, that'll do."

Since *Homet* still recognized her last captain's security key, Crowbar did not have to precede Coeur into the ship. Instead, she activated the belly hatch behind the bridge and climbed up into the half-lit interior of the ship. This part of the ship, at least, was unchanged, and she found her way back to the familiar pilot's couch she had sat in for the better part of the last seven months.

"Red Sun to Big Top. I'm back."

"Affirmative. Stand by for feed."

A brief pause followed, the time it took Big Top to tell the dirtside capital Coeur was ready to receive the message.

"Red Sun, this is Hammer. I hope I didn't alarm you, but I



figured this warranted the priority channel."

"Commodore Lathrop? Sir, what's the emergency?"

"Frankly, I'd rather tell you in person. Busy?"

Well, Coeur thought, *not busy enough to ignore a summons from the director of the fleet!*

"No, sir."

"Good. Then get yourself down to the administrative docks ASAP. I've ordered them to put a pinnace at your disposal."

"I assume you're at the capital headquarters."

"Affirmative. But don't bother to dress up; it's not an affair of state."

"Understood. I'm on my way."

"Oh, and one more thing. On the way, stop by and pick up Drop Kick."

"Drop Kick, sir?"

"Yes, the Marine you took with you to Sauler."

"Yes, sir, I know who he is. Am I to assume he's waiting at Fort Briery?"

"Negative. When I contacted him a few minutes ago, he was on a commercial hovercraft off Michael's Reef. I've uploaded her position into the pinnace computer."

"Understood."

"This mission is top secret, Red Sun. As in *your eyes only*."

"Roger that, sir."

"I'll be waiting. Trantown out."

Although she was inclined to wonder what could be so urgent in Trantown that it demanded an immediate audience with the RCES chief, Coeur resisted the impulse to sit and ponder the matter. Instead, she made immediately for the bottom hatch.

"Top secret stuff, huh?" Crowbar said, turning from the pitot tube he'd busied himself adjusting as Coeur descended from the belly hatch.

"I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to discuss that."

"Uh-oh. That's top secret all right."

"Sorry I have to run, Crowbar. Maybe we can pick up the tour next weekend."

"Guess so. It's just too bad you had to leave before I showed you the best part."

"What's that?"

"The sign you recommended for the galley: 'The captain is always right, and mutineers will be spaced.'"

Coeur nodded approvingly.

"Maybe I picked the wrong ship after all. So long, Crowbar."

"So long, Red Sun."

If Coeur had concerns for the casualness of her dress, they disappeared when she saw the condition of her companion, Drop Kick, clearly enjoying his inter-assignment furlough. Standing out on the aft deck of a rented recreational hovercraft and waving to Coeur as she flew the pinnace in low overhead, it appeared the best he could manage was shorts and a khaki summer shirt with chevrons.

But even Coeur, who was not big on romance, could see why Drop Kick did not have parade dress along on the boat. The clue came from Snapshot, the pale-skinned Oriflammen redhead who was wearing even less than the sergeant major, and was evidently his sole companion.

*Ah, love.*

"Come to take away my man?" Snapshot sent, over ship-to-ship radio.

"Afraid so. That boat of yours anchored?"

"Roger that, Red Sun."

"Good. Just hold her steady, then, and I'll drop a ladder down for Drop Kick."

Despite the great size of the pinnace—its 24-meter wingspan cast a giant shadow across the hovercraft—its double-redundant flight computers gave Coeur the confidence to park it directly above the far smaller watercraft and set the contra-grav to hover so she could move to the port hatch and roll out a rope ladder. Since the pinnace held rock steady in the crystal-blue equatorial sky, while the hovercraft rolled erratically on the ocean water, Drop Kick's greatest challenge was grabbing hold of the end of the ladder. Once he managed that without dunking himself, it was a simple matter to scramble up the rungs and into the spacecraft's hatch.

"Welcome aboard, sergeant," Coeur said, offering a hand to the burly tanker.

"Thanks. Now what the hell is this all about?"

"Hell if I know. Roll up that ladder, though, and I'll get us underway."

"Roger."

Doing as bade, the big Marine hauled the ladder back aboard, then gave a farewell wave to Snapshot and shut the hatch. By the time he reached the copilot's seat, the craft was already pulling its wings in to achieve a delta configuration and climbing under Coeur's control, aiming for the capital 1500 kilometers away, or about 15 minutes at their best speed.

"I feel bad about leaving Snapper alone there," Drop Kick said, "but Brusman isn't too far away."

"Not too close, either," Coeur said, with a quick glance at her

companion. Descended from a line of fishermen working the equatorial waters of Aubaine, Drop Kick inherited blue eyes, skin that tanned deeply and a shock of blonde hair that tended toward white when he was out in the sun, as he'd just been with Snapshot.

"Really, Captain. We were just out fishing."

"Funny. I didn't see any tackle in the boat."

"You are the perceptive one, aren't you, sir."

"I try. Oh, by the way, I'm almost finished with your painting. Since you're going to hang it in the unit HQ, I tried not to make it too good, so the officers wouldn't be envious."

"And I paid for that?"

Coeur shook her head.

"Just kidding, Drop Kick. Really, I'm sure you'll like it."

To take advantage of her high speed, Coeur soon had them shooting into a parabolic course high above the troposphere, where drag from the dense lower atmosphere—and the chance of collision with low-flying aircraft—would be diminished. At the height of their arc, the noonday sky turned a violet purple through the bridge windows, though inertial compensation prevented any real sense of motion.

"So anyway," Drop Kick said, "you must have some idea what Hammer wants with us."

"Nearest I can figure," Coeur speculated, "he wants clarification on some piece of data we brought back from the frontier. *Hornet* did uncover a lot of new ground in Shenk subsector."

"I was thinking it might be something worse."

"Like?"

"Like maybe Virus is back—Hiver Folgorex II."

Coeur spared Drop Kick an acid look.

"Don't even think it. One brush with that bug was enough."

Drop Kick shrugged. The singular achievement of *Hornet's* "shakedown" cruise was recovery of the vaccine to Hiver Folgorex II from the Guild base on Sauler—Hiver Folgorex II being an engineered virus the Guild had hoped would exterminate the Hiver race and knock the supporting legs out from under the Coalition's table. *Hornet's* own technical adviser, the Hiver Scissor, and practically every Hiver on the planet Ra had suffered agonizing deaths from infection with the virus, so it was not a pleasant thought to visualize yet another strain of the plague loose in the Coalition.

"Let's hope it's something more congenial," Coeur suggested, "like a fleet of vampire battleships on the loose."

"Or perhaps the word that all our suns are going nova."

"Yeah, something manageable."

The pinnacle began nosing down toward its destination, and the spacers cut short their conversation as the austere geometry of Trantown hove into view.

On a world whose surface was 98.2% covered with water, no land stood out as a continent, but the island of Trannis, home of Trantown, was as close as it got. With 450 kilometers from north to south, it struck the Terran Coeur as roughly the size and shape of Ireland, but there the comparison ended. Pushed up from the sea by volcanic action, the heart of the island was inaccessible rock, ringed by a coastal plateau devoted alternately to terraced farmland and rigidly structured cities.

Had Trannis been closer to the equator, it might have been the world's starport as well as the capital of Aubaine and the Coalition, but the extra advantage of angular momentum to launching starships gave that honor to tiny Brusman Atoll. Since most visitors to Aubaine came for the thrice-weekly Auction at the starport, bright and energetic young Brusman came first to mind when most off-worlders thought of Aubaine, but Trannis had assets the smaller island could not rival: namely, money, knowledge and the administrators to manage them.

In bygone days, Trantown was the heart of a commercial empire on balkanized Vras, ruling vast areas of the world through a calculated blend of force and mercantile inducement. During the Collapse, it was the only state with money to lend for new projects, and—not coincidentally—the choice for a capital when Hivers contacted the world and the planet was unified.

"Locking on traffic beam," Coeur announced, relaxing in her seat; "Trantown Control will take us in the rest of the way."

"Are we going to the municipal spaceport?" Drop Kick asked, searching the ordered grid of blocks below for familiar features.

"Roger. This bird's a little large to park on top of Arses HQ."

Now flown remotely by computer, the pinnacle extended her delta wings automatically for additional lift and drifted at aerodynamic stall speed above the roofs of waterfront warehouses at the edge of the spaceport. Though boxed in by a valley of slab-like skyscrapers, the spaceport maintained a broad safety zone of marshland and factories around its perimeter—a prudent precaution after the same port was wrecked by crash-diving spacecraft infected with Suicide strains of Virus 70 years before.

The pinnacle finally came to a rest not at the busy public landing field, but at a hangar within an adjacent fenced-in area, well-patrolled by Coalition Marines and monitored by remote sensors. Here they left the pinnacle in the care of the Arse engineer in charge of the RC facility, call-sign "Half-track."

"Good afternoon, sir," Coeur said, saluting as she and Drop



Kick came down the rear hatch of the pinnacle.

"Red Sun," the wiry Half-track returned, with a salute of his own. Though formerly a commander in the Aubani Navy, his attitude toward rank was consistent with the rest of the informal RCES; he wore a simple jumpsuit with no sign of rank or prior service.

"We understand Hammer wants to see us as quickly as possible. May we borrow one of your vehicles?"

"Affirmative," Half-track answered, "right this way. The commodore advised us to have something ready for you."

"All right!" Drop Kick said, falling in behind Coeur as she followed Half-track out of the hangar. Aware of the haste with which they'd been summoned, he visualized the vehicle as some sort of executive speeder—probably with its own guard and chauffeur.

The reality was somewhat more modest.

A battered, low-performance rag-top air-raft, painted in primer red.

"That's it?"

Half-track appeared hurt by Drop Kick's question, but Coeur nodded knowingly.

"To give us a low profile," she speculated. "Maybe this is a bigger deal than we thought."

• • •

Low profile or not, Half-track's air-raft was not as feeble as it looked. His mechanics had installed a powerful new TL12 turbine to power her thrusters, and the stripped-down paint reduced weight, giving the vehicle a top speed three times the 100 kph allowed in the city traffic net.

Though Aubaine was the most advanced of the Coalition's 20 worlds, it had been ravaged by the Collapse all the same. Consequently, most of Trantown's business traffic was not in the air, but on the ground—electrical and muscle-powered vehicles being the preference for those going to and from their activities on this sunny summer afternoon.

"There was a time," Coeur said, over the wind in the open cockpit, "when everybody on a world like this would have had an air-raft."

"Conspicuous consumption."

"Yeah, that was our motto in the Imperium. Everything in large amounts."

"Including death."

"Yeah, I suppose so. There's the old HQ."

Apart from the myriad antennae on its broad, flat roof, the RCES HQ was not a distinguished structure. Formerly the head-

quarters of the island empire's information ministry, it was only 20 stories tall—a dwarf among the 150-meter towers nearby. But the inherent telecommunication rig and installed phone lines made it a natural choice for the headquarters of a rapidly growing agency like the Regency Coalition Exploration Service (RCES or Arses, for short).

Disengaging the traffic net's control of the air-raft, Coeur radioed ahead her request to land, then drifted away from the aerial traffic stream and set down atop the building. More Marines met them there, detaining them for retina scans in the security shack on the edge of the roof before passing them on.

"You'd think they'd recognize us," Drop Kick said afterward, as he and Coeur rode an elevator down to the director's level, "what with us saving the Coalition and all."

"You ever met the commodore?" Coeur asked.

"No, not really. Just seen him at ceremonies."

"A word of advice, then: You might want to stow the satire."

"Doesn't go for it, huh?"

"Well," Coeur said, with a thoughtful expression, "it isn't like he doesn't have a sense of humor. It's just that he doesn't like people joking about missions in the field—especially ones where people could get killed."

Drop Kick nodded.

"Point taken. Thanks."

The elevator opened onto a corridor adjacent to Strategic Ops, always a hub of activity for the Arses intelligence analysts and as busy as the rest of Trantown, even on what was nominally a weekend. The two Arses workstations closest to the commodore's office held not humans, however, but Schalli, hard at work on Virus-busting software. These streamlined aquatic creatures, the sentient race indigenous to Aubaine, were hampered by their limited terrestrial mobility in the field. But in wheeled roller-chairs they managed well enough in a modern city with abundant ramps and powered elevators.

"Good afternoon, Red Sun," the nearest Schalli said from his workstation, noting the arrival of the Arse and Marine at the commodore's office.

"Good afternoon, Typhoon. Is the commodore in?"

"Affirmative. He requested me to send you to his office immediately."

"Very good. Come on, sergeant."

With brisk steps, Coeur and Drop Kick crossed Strategic Ops and came at last into the director's office. Not pretentious, it was fronted by a simple reception area, whose doors were open and therefore invited the pair to enter.

"Good, you're here," Hammer said. "Come in."

Crossing the threshold of the director's office, Coeur was stunned. The commodore was there of course, a balding, weather-worn Nimban sailor. But also present were two senior aides—Papa and Thumper. These ex-Marines—the former a Balduri lieutenant permanently grimacing from a spinal injury, the latter an Oriflammen bolobail star-cum-trooper with a squat body and outgoing demeanor—held positions of high authority in the Long Range Planning Group, coordinating hot missions inside and outside the AO. To see both together with Hammer was a sure sign something serious was up.

"Hey, Drop Kick," Thumper said, wheeling on the tanker and giving him a hearty handshake. "Long time, no hear."

"Well, a couple months."

"You two know each other?" Coeur asked.

"Hell, yeah," Thumper said, around a thick wad of something he was chewing, likely faisal root. "Debriefed his tankers after they came back from Sauler. That was some trick—stuffing the tank full of plastique and blowing the living hell out of Guild HQ. I love it!"

"Actually," Drop Kick said, with a glance at Coeur, "that was the captain's idea."

"Regardless of whose idea it was," Hammer interrupted, "we have some serious matters to discuss."

"Sorry, sir," Drop Kick apologized.

"Don't mean to be snappy," the commodore went on, "but time is short. Gentlemen, Red Sun, please sit down."

Five seats stood ready, two near the door and three on the side of the desk opposite, so Coeur and Drop Kick took the two obviously intended for their use and waited as the others settled into place. Though Hammer and his staff, men wearing simple military shirts without any sign of rank, were hardly ostentatious, there was no doubting their military efficiency. Crisply, they took their seats, flipped open three computer notepads to refresh their minds on the facts at hand, then manipulated controls on the commodore's desk to darken the room and illuminate a side-wall holographic projector as the commodore returned to his feet.

"Red Sun," he said, "you've probably guessed something big is up."

"Yes, sir. I figured as much from the Class III message."

"Well, it was warranted. What we're about to tell you could have a large bearing on the future of the Coalition."

Coeur raised an eyebrow.

"The future, sir?"

"Yes, the future, as in whether it'll be just pretty rough or completely awful. Papa, load the first image."



# Chapter Two

The picture Papa pulled up was an animated holographic mug shot, probably TL9 because it was grainy and rotated the subject's head only 45 degrees left and right from center. The subject himself was vaguely familiar to Coeur, a rough-featured thug with an eye patch over his right eye and burns on the right side of his head, identified by the caption under his head as K. WOLFOWITZ, NO. 99475.

"This is Kenji Wolfowitz," Hammer explained, "call sign Zero. Recognize him?"

Coeur shook her head. "An Oriflammen raider?"

"Right, and one of the worst. This mug shot was taken a couple of years ago, when he was arrested on Oriflamme for firing on a Dawn League scout. Somehow, though, when the Dawn League was replaced by the Coalition, the charges against him were dropped, and he was released."

"What?" Drop Kick asked.

"He's got a black belt in brown-nosing," the Oriflammen Thumper explained. "Bribed a technarch magistrate."

"Oh."

"And," Hammer went on, "went back to his trade, waylaying ships from ambush. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough proof of piracy to arrest him with a Coalition vessel. Two days ago, we received reliable intelligence that his ship and crew were captured on Mexit, well outside the AO."

"Well, good," Drop Kick said.

"No, bad. Papa, next image."

Since the holographic projector took up most of the five-meter wall, Papa did not remove the image of Zero; instead, he reduced it in size and moved it over to the corner of a new image. Unlike the first, this was a 2-D monochrome still picture, but the wickedly rounded geometry of the object displayed drove a spike of fear right through Coeur's spine.

*A black globe generator.*

The metal object depicted was round, with heat radiating-fins

around its middle and power conduits around its base. Compared to the two figures beside it—triumphant Zero and another raider, both in flak vests—the device appeared to be about three-meters in diameter, small, but not so small it couldn't cause havoc in the wrong hands.

Coeur thought back to an ordinary day, 83 years before.

*Her scout/courier Swift was a sensor picket, high above Muan Gwi. Rumors ran that the Solomani offensive was finally petering out and that an Imperial fleet would soon assemble here for a counter-attack. When it did, Coeur assumed it would use the capital ship already at Muan Gwi as its flagship—ISS Leopardess, a mighty vessel of 500,000 tons repairing minor damage in low orbit.*

*Though the battleship's escort was relatively small—a light cruiser and squadron of destroyers—Coeur felt safe enough. The battleship was not so hurt that she could not fight and maneuver under her own power, and the scout ships of the sensor picket would certainly alert her to man battle stations before intruding ships could close to firing range.*

*But then it happened. One moment there were no contacts anywhere within 2 million kilometers, then suddenly a ship was dead ahead—a long needle dead in Coeur's path. At first, she assumed the ship was precipitating out of jump, but they were far too close to the planet for that. It was a Solomani cruiser, flickering its black globe stroboscopically—and it had almost certainly jumped in hours before to drift unseen into optimum firing range.*

*"Swift to Leopardess!" Coeur called. "Swift to Leopardess! Enemy contact bearing one-seven-seven!"*

*But it was too late. Ignoring Swift, the cruiser discharged its spinal meson gun, and Leopardess rocked from internal explosions. The stunned and scattered escort fleet struggled to engage the enemy, but already the cruiser was maneuvering away toward jump point. Having made a short jump, it had fuel remaining to escape and did so handily as the Leopardess fell ablaze into Muan Gwi's atmosphere, well on her way to becoming a tomb for 10,000.*

*"All right," Hammer said to Coeur and Drop Kick, "either of you recognize that?"*

*Drop Kick had to admit that he didn't, but Coeur answered confidently.*

*"Yes, sir, a force field generator."*

*"Indeed. This one, as it happens, is a 10-ton model, probably with a 10 percent flicker rate, apparently discovered by Zero on Mexit before the local Teddie punched his ticket. The trader who supplied us with this picture said he purchased it from a soldier of the Mexitan state called Soledad, where Zero was last seen."*

*"If I may," Drop Kick said, "I'm a little fuzzy on this force field*

thing—what is it?"

"Essentially," Hammer said, "it's a very advanced relic device for creating a free electron field around a starship, absorbing radiation from weapons and sensors and shunting it to a capacitor. Fully activated, it completely conceals and defends a starship. Flickered, it provides the starship with partial defense and nearly full firepower."

Coeur nodded grimly. *Oh man. Who's got it?*

"Any idea if that generator is functional?"

"No way to know," Hammer replied, "but that's not our immediate problem. Red Sun, what do you know about the Solee?"

Coeur shrugged. "Not much, really. Just that Solee is an aggressive planet in the Wilds, beyond the AO. They had several insurgencies going on neighboring worlds, the last I heard."

"Then you know almost as much as we do—but not quite enough. Papa, explain the astropolitical situation."

Papa nodded, then stood with a poorly hidden grimace as Hammer sat back in his seat. The image of the force field generator shrank to join Zero and was replaced by a holographic star chart depicting the lower, rimward, half of Old Expanses sector. This comprised an area of 222 star systems, but only the 22 systems in Coalition Space and the 50 systems in the surrounding Area of Operations were depicted with accurate data profiles.

"As you know," Papa began, "our operations are largely restricted to the rimward-spinward corner of the sector. Now let me highlight the location of Solee and Mexit."

On the display, two systems close to but distinctly outside the AO suddenly glowed red. Immediately, Coeur and Drop Kick saw the problem.

"As you can see, Solee is a stone's throw from Mexit—just eight parsecs. In comparison, the closest Coalition worlds are 14 parsecs away. And it gets worse. Recently, our agents have discovered an alarming dimension to the Solee menace—a stockpile of relic Imperial and Solomani naval vessels being restored to service."

"Big ships?" Coeur asked.

"Bigger than we've got, and more of them. Obviously, they're a threat we need to neutralize, but we won't be in a position to challenge their fleet for at least a year. If the Solee were to gain black globe technology before that point, it could be disastrous."

"Forget about fleet battles," Coeur said. "Just one ship with a functioning black globe could nuke a planet's population before the defenders even knew it was there."

"Well, hell," Drop Kick said, "someone should do something about that!"

"Someone will," Hammer said, gesturing to Papa that he

could sit, then returning his attention to the sergeant. "You."

"Me?" Drop Kick asked, and belatedly added, "Sir?"

"Both of you, and the crew of *Hornet*. Effective immediately, Red Sun, you're returned to command of the ship."

"Sir?" Coeur asked.

"I know what you're going to say, lieutenant—*Hornet's* too small and too poorly defended to hit Mexit. Well, you're right, but unfortunately she's also the only ship we've got. If I had my choice, I'd send a fully loaded clipper, or at least your *Suleiman Victrix*, to investigate Mexit, but the clippers are all deployed in the field, and your command won't be repaired for five months. As I'm sure you realize, we use what we have."

"Yes, sir."

"The last intelligence we have on Mexit, from before the Collapse, was that the Solomani maintained a stockpile of military hardware, conceivably including more than one of these black globe generators. Therefore, your mission is to investigate the planet and determine if the generators or any other similarly destructive equipment are intact on the planet. If it is, you are either to establish friendly relations with the government controlling those assets or, failing that, destroy them by demolition."

"And Zero, sir?"

"Naturally, if Zero or any of his crew are alive, I'll expect you to take appropriate measures to effect their safe return to Oriflamme. However, I do not expect you to take unnecessary risks toward that end."

"Understood, sir."

"Anyway, it's not like we're sending you out without any equipment. Thumper, tell them what we've laid in."

"Right," Thumper answered, switching the lump he was chewing from one cheek to the other as he examined his notes again. "Since your ship's already fitted for it, we're sending up a drop capsule pod with 15 tubes and six capsules to go with the six suits of heavy battle dress we've turned up. The rest of the tubes we figure we'll fill with a mix of decoy capsules and extra planetary strike and space combat missiles."

"Any vehicles?" Drop Kick asked.

"Yes. A G-carrier for ground transport and an Intrepid grav tank."

"An Intrepid!" Drop Kick said. "I'm impressed."

"Yeah, you oughta be. But remember, this is a *real* tank, not like that support sled you took on the Sauler mission, so we're hoping you won't stuff it full of explosives and crash it into any buildings."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, positively beaming.

"You mentioned heavy battle dress," Coeur said. "Will a



Marine team be assigned?"

"Affirmative," Hammer answered. "Thumper's prepared a list of qualified personnel, which we'll give Drop Kick to narrow down. In the meantime, lieutenant, you'll return to *Homet* and get her ready for launch. Fortunately, all your original crewmembers are still stationed in this system, so they'll be notified of reassignment just as soon as you're done here."

"What about Physic? I heard her husband's trial begins soon."

"This mission takes precedence. Physic is one of the best young doctors in the fleet, so her place is on *Homet*."

Coeur was gratified at that—her friend Physic was the real hero of the Sauler expedition, having synthesized the vaccine which arrested the Hiver plague, and did not deserve the snide insinuations of the press that she should have been aware of her husband's collusion with the Guild in distributing the disease. Yet Physic had not saved the one Hiver she most wished she could, and that raised another question for Coeur.

"With respect, sir," she said, "not all my original crew is here. We left Scissor on Ra."

"I've thought about that. Given the quality of your crew, you won't need any help taking care of *Homet's* systems, but all the same, it might help to have a Hiver technician along for the trip. I've asked the Technical Academy for a recommendation. They said they'd send someone along before you launch."

Coeur nodded.

"There's more data we can give you," Hammer went on, "old data on Mexit, star charts, that sort of thing, but we'll upload that to *Homet*. All we ask is that you don't tell your people what the mission is specifically until you're away."

"It's that serious?" Coeur asked. "The need for secrecy?"

"It's that serious," Papa said. "People don't think about it, because this isn't a police state, but there are powers in the world that would just as soon see this Coalition fold up and fade away."

"Just keep the talk to a minimum," Hammer said. "Better to take a few precautions on the front end, than to bury your friends later on."

"Amen to that, sir."

*Amen to that.*

• • •

On the way out of Hammer's office, Coeur knew a question was forming in Drop Kick's mind, a question she knew he would get around to voicing as soon as he got over the high of having a Model 125-1 Intrepid to play with.

"An Intrepid," Drop Kick said, as they rode the elevator back

to the roof. "It's hard to believe."

"You're a good tanker, sergeant. I'm sure they trust you with it."

"But what about you, Red? You saw how far it is to Mexit—do you think they'll keep your seat on the *Victrix* until we get back?"

"Not a chance, Drop Kick. They'll give her to another skipper."

"That's rough."

Coeur shook her head.

"I don't know about you, Drop Kick, but I'm not in this for my ego. Our responsibility to the future is our first duty."

"Sorry, sir—I should have known better. But there *is* another thing I've been thinking about. Myself, I know I need to be on this mission—there's a good chance of ground action and the troops'll need cover from the tank—but it isn't really necessary for Snapper to go, is it?"

Coeur shook her head, smiling sympathetically.

"More than you, sergeant. Snapshot's the best missile gunner in her class."

"All the same, sir..."

"And I need you, too. The best I can do is try to keep from assigning you to the same ground parties."

"Yes, sir."

Drop Kick understood duty, of course—Coeur knew he'd have to after 12 years in the Aubani Marines—and did not raise the issue again. They rode the elevator silently up to the landing platform, then returned to the borrowed air-raft and pursuit of their separate assignments. Since Drop Kick would have to remain on Aubaine, travelling to RCMC HQ on the north coast to select his drop troops, he flew the air-raft this time, taking Coeur back to the pinnacle and then moving on to Fort Brierly.

Even before Coeur returned to *Hornet*, though, Crowbar knew something was up. Orders had come to prepare the ship for movement, and Coeur herself showed up in a black body sleeve—the unofficial uniform of space duty Arses—with a duffel bag over her shoulder.

"What's going on, skipper? I heard *Hornet* has orders to move."

"Affirmative. *Hornet's* been transferred from the training command back to field service. Our first job is to move her over to Maintenance Bay 2 so they can install a drop capsule pod."

"I knew it! It's a smash-and-grab, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, Crowbar, I can't tell you that."

"What? Where the hell are we going?"

"Like I said, that's classified. Now come on, let's get this tub moving."

Less than an hour later, the great bay doors above *Hornet* opened to let her drift free of the station. Under Coeur's control,

she hung in place until the huge doors of Maintenance Bay 2 rolled underneath and rumbled open to admit the little freighter.

"Going out to save the universe again?" Yard Master Goodwrench asked, meeting Coeur and Crowbar at the lowered forward cargo ramp after the bay repressurized.

"No questions," Crowbar answered for Coeur. "It's classified."

"Whatever," Goodwrench said, turning to the two subordinates beside him. "All right, I want that drop box installed and loaded inside 20. The woman's got places to go, so let's do it!"

True to his word, Goodwrench and his grease monkeys had the pod and its 15 capsules loaded within the day—assisted by a gang of Crowbar's students, surprised to find that their classroom and teacher would soon be making for interstellar space.

"At least it's a learning experience," Coeur said.

"Yeah," Crowbar replied. "I just hope their next instructor gives them some sort of extra credit for it."

\*\*\*

In bygone days, 70 years before the Hiver Technical Academy School of Engineering dragged her out of a junkyard and restored her to life, *Homet* had been a free-lance merchantman. Consequently, she was designed to run efficiently, surviving hard wear with a minimal crew: a pilot, a navigator, a medic/steward and an engineer. And 70 years later, the only required addition was a pair of gunners: Gyro and Snapshot.

Tipped off by Drop Kick, the two young women were the first to return to *Homet*. Gyro, a blue-eyed, blond Aubani as stable as her call-sign, and Snapshot, an opinionated Orillammen redhead with intense brown eyes, they had become good friends during the journey to Sauler. Only 21, both had bodies ideal for spacers, with low centers of gravity and heights under 165 cm.

"Good God," Snapshot said, marveling at the huge vehicle they met at the top of *Homet's* cargo ramp. "That's an Intrepid!"

"An Intrepid 125-1," Gyro observed, noting the huge tank's 125 Mj fusion gun. "It would pretty much blow *Homet* away at short range."

"Welcome back, girls," Coeur said, meeting them and shaking their hands. "I feel safer already, just having you aboard."

"Well, I don't know if I do," Snapshot said, "with that planet smasher in the cargo hold. Are you sure the firing mechanism's locked down?"

"Yes, Snapshot, the ammunition's stored separately."

"Captain," Gyro said, "we noticed the small arms installed in the bow and port forward. Are those functional?"

"Oh, yes. The fire control's in Snapper's turret, with a backup



in your turret."

"Drop Kick didn't say where we were going," Snapshot said. "I suppose it must be some sort of raid."

"Afraid I can't say until we launch," Coeur said. "Carry on."

But after Coeur left them, the young Arses continued admiring the tank for a long moment. Eight meters long, her bow was stretched into a streamlined wedge, helping give her a top speed over 700 kph in a dense atmosphere despite the weight of bonded super-dense armor five centimeters thick overall, and twice that thick on her bow and turret front.

Aficionados of all things destructive, the gunners were well-aware of such general information about the tank, but by far the most compelling part of the vehicle was its gun. A staggering weapon half the length of the vehicle, it had none of the range of a space combat laser, but would easily drive a 12 cm fusion bolt through one-fourth of a meter of super-dense armor at six kilometers—just a little more than 30 times the thickness of armor *Hornet* wore for protection against micrometeorites.

"Wow," Snapshot said finally. "That's quite a gun, all right."

"I wonder," Gyro said, with a deadpan expression. "Do you suppose Drop Kick got her to compensate for his lack of virility?"

"Hey!"

Gyro chuckled. "Just kidding, Snapper. I'm sure he's just fine."

\*\*\*

Early the next day, after the drop capsule pod was installed and fueling was underway, most of the rest of *Hornet's* original complement came up from Aubaine. While Drop Kick remained below, interviewing his final choices for drop troops, his cavalry mates from the 1st Marine Brigade, Mercy, Bonzo and Whiz Bang, came up to Big Top aboard a shuttle with the doctor and the navigator, Physic and Deep Six.

Like Gyro and Snapshot, the cavalry soldiers paused to admire the *Intrepid* before they settled into their quarters—and argue the merits of her crew selection. Unlike the more primitive four-person support sled they'd taken to Sauler, the tank had room for only two crewmen. Accordingly, Drop Kick notified his team that he and Mercy would man the tank, while Bonzo and Whiz Bang would man the infinitely less impressive G-carrier.

"I still don't get it," the squat and muscular Whiz Bang said, running a hand over his sandy crew cut. "The tank's built around its gun, and I'm the most qualified gunner among us."

Mercy, the dark and slim AFV driver, directed a glance at Whiz Bang, with brooding brown eyes so dark they were nearly black.

"Perhaps," she said, "the sergeant is more interested in reaching

the target safely than in blowing up everything on the way there."

"She may have a point," Bonzo said. "You do have a little tendency to get carried away in a firefight."

In answer, Whiz Bang made a mock-threatening fist at Bonzo, but the thin man was as nimble as he was light and dodged out of punching range with a smirk on his face.

Farther forward in the bay, Coeur was greeting Physic and Deep Six. Not normally a physically expressive person, Coeur nevertheless gave Physic a spontaneous hug when she saw her. Shorter even than Gyro and Snapshot, Physic was an attractive woman, only a year younger than Coeur at 31, with a handsome face that struck the Terran Coeur as a blend of Asian and Semitic features. Unfortunately, the down side of being hologenic was having that face featured prominently in articles about her estranged husband, the industrialist August Delpero—presently on trial for interstellar piracy and conspiracy to commit treason.

"So, how are you doing, Physic?"

"I do okay," the doctor said, "as long as I stay in the medlab."

"Reporters still after you?" Coeur asked, breaking the embrace.

"It's the trial. As long as it's on, they'll be after me."

"That seems unreasonable," Deep Six opined, from his roller-chair. "Physic was instrumental in the neutralization of the Hiver plague, yet that fact is conspicuously absent from coverage in the press."

Physic shrugged.

Though his Schalli race understood and felt emotion, Deep Six was still mystified by the self-destructive impulse in humankind. A deep-water Schalli, distinguished from the coastal subspecies by the darker, dapple-gray mottling of his streamlined body, he felt no cultural or racial alienation from any of his ancient and thoughtful race. That humans, who had been blessed by nature with far greater gifts of mobility and access to natural resources, were so prone to mutual distrust and occasional episodes of cultural suicide was a profound mystery to all the Schalli.

"Anyway," Coeur said, "it is good to have you aboard—both of you."

"It will be good to return to the bridge," Deep Six said. "The intellectual stimulation of drawing star charts for the astrography branch is not as compelling as calculating your jump plots."

"I heard you two were slated to join *Belladonna's* precommissioning crew. This won't be as glamorous a posting as that."

"It does have one advantage," Physic said. "*Belladonna* won't be completed until next year."

"You're that glad to get off the planet?" Coeur asked.

"Yes, I'm that glad."

Though RCES was a young service, just over a year old nine months into 1201, the toast was already a venerable custom. At least once a day, the Arses of a ship or unit would gather and raise their glasses in memory of the numerous dead they had lost—predominantly very young people who had paid the ultimate price for their faith in the future.

"To our absent friends," Coeur said, raising her coffee cup.

"Hear, hear," Crowbar seconded, with the nodding assent of the rest of the crew.

Though *Homet* was not large as starships went, her crew and passenger compartments were relatively spacious, befitting a ship designed for long-haul cargo runs. The crew lounge was therefore large, an area of 30 square meters just behind the bridge. It was dominated by an autogalley (stocked with six months of concentrated rations) and a circular table just large enough to seat 10.

Presently, the table sat eight, all the Arses and Marines assembled so far, less Gyro at anchor watch on the bridge. As before, the young woman had been tapped as the ship's XO and was glad to refamiliarize herself with the ship's systems.

"As soon as Drop Kick gets back tomorrow, all of us will be back together again," Physic said.

"Except Scissor," Deep Six pointed out, sipping from a flask of nonalcoholic *ee'kwat*.

"Yes," Physic said, "except Scissor."

"It's always bothered me," Coeur admitted, "that I wasn't here when he died."

"That was unavoidable," Deep Six observed. "You and Drop Kick were obliged to remain on Sauler."

"Does bring up a question, though," Mercy observed. "Has anyone heard anything about Zorn? I mean, after she rescued you and Drop Kick from Sauler?"

"No," Coeur said, "but I am concerned. No one knew she'd turned into a pirate until we made our report. Now that they know, the Coalition's issued a warrant for her arrest and interrogation."

"Wow."

"I know," Coeur went on. "On one hand, I understand the Coalition's position—she helped distribute the Hiver plague and deserves to be punished. But she thought what she was doing was right—that she was saving us from manipulation by the Hivers."

"And that's an excuse for mass murder?" Crowbar asked.

"No," Coeur said. "No, it's not."

"So what if we run into her out there in the field?" Physic asked. "Are we just supposed to ask her to pull over and turn herself in?"

Despite the gravity of the question, Coeur had to smile at the image of *Homet* trying to detain Vega Zorn's *Vi Et Armis*. Regard-

less of her recent improvements, *Homet* was still roundly outclassed by Zorn's 400-ton patrol cruiser.

"I doubt we'll have to worry about it," she said. "Space is a big haystack, and Zorn is a small needle."

Deprived of any information about the coming mission, the other seven at the table digested that comment for possible meaning. Among themselves, they still had reached no consensus on the coming mission's possible nature, though opinions ran the gamut from a return to Sauler to a decap raid on the troublesome planet Solee.

"Red Sun," Gyro said, breaking in on the conversation from the bridge, "there's a Hiver here to see you. Says he's our adviser from the Technical Academy."

Coeur's eyebrows rose, expressing the surprise common to everyone in the room. Though they knew a new adviser was coming, memories of Scissor and its horrific and untimely death deflected them from deep reflection on the new adviser's possible character.

That, and the eerie fact that Hivers had no emotions as humans understood them.

"Did it give a name?"

"Yes, sir. That would be Newton."

"Newton. All right, send it up."

Moments later, an exotic xenomorph padded into the lounge through the aft hatch, a pinkish-tan creature with six flexible limbs radiating outward from its domed, low-slung central body. Lacking a head, and looking like nothing so much as a giant six-armed starfish, it exhibited a modified radial symmetry, with one raised limb bearing six eyes which extended on stalks from between its six splayed fingers. It was this unique limb which the humans instinctively regarded as the creature's head.

That prime limb had no nose, mouth or brain—their analogs being located at the top, bottom and center of the central body—so the comparison to a human head was limited. Nonetheless, Newton's eyes offered Coeur her first hint of the Hiver's young age: like a young and curious human, it seemed fascinated by everything around it—focusing its eyes first on one human, then another, as if seeking to isolate their uniquely bizarre qualities for future reference.

"Greetings," the naturally mute Hiver said finally, speaking artificially from a translation device slung under its chest, which it typed text into with its tall limb. "May I ask who is the Individual Red Sun?"

"I am," Coeur said. "Lieutenant Coeur D'Espirit, commanding RCS *Homet*."

"An interesting call sign," Newton said. "Did it arise from a traumatic encounter with a class M star?"

"No, it came from the Scout Insignia I wore when I was recovered."



"I comprehend. You are an Imperial remnant. No doubt you would have many interesting stories."

"No doubt."

"Red Sun, I have been dispatched to replace your dead crewmember, Scissor."

Uncomfortable expressions crossed the faces of several Arses and Marines. Emotionally aware or not, Newton perceived that its statement had aroused some sort of adverse reaction.

"Forgive me. Did I say something inappropriate?"

"No," Coeur lied, to get them past the awkward moment. "We're just tired."

"Right," Crowbar said. "We're probably all jumpy from thinking about the mission."

"Clarify please."

"Oh, well," Crowbar extemporized, "it's classified, so only the skipper knows where we're going."

"I understand. However, logical conclusions can be drawn from the equipment and fittings of this vessel."

"Really. Such as?"

"Nothing specific," Newton mused. "However, one must note the heavy arms and drop capsules installed in a ship not properly armored for a planetary assault, and the short notice before launch. From this, I conclude a high probability that our mission is of high importance to the Coalition government and includes a high statistical probability of lethal opposition."

"As in—likely to get us all killed?"

Newton stared at Crowbar a long moment before responding.

"Is that not what I said?"

"Newton," Coeur interrupted, "perhaps I should show you to your quarters."

"Yes, sir."

"Whiz Bang, Bonzo," Coeur said, steering Newton back toward the aft hatch, "you've got clean-up detail."

"Yes, sir," the Marines answered, as Coeur and Newton departed.

After the others put their dishes in the autogalley and departed with comments on the late hour and the need to rise early the next day, Whiz Bang and Bonzo stayed behind, wiping down the table and vacuuming the lounge. It was grubby work, but essential, lest crumbs and splatter float free in a loss of gravity and contact ship's circuitry.

"So," Whiz Bang said eventually, "what do you think about that dead Hiver crack?"

"I don't know," Bonzo said, stowing the vacuum cleaner. "Hivers don't really have feelings. Scissor didn't, anyway."

"Hm. So maybe Newton really is a replacement for him."



# Chapter Three

When Drop Kick finally arrived at *Homet* the next morning, he brought with him the last cargo the ship would load before launch, six young and eager Aubani Marines.

"Hell, Crowbar," he said to the engineer, when he brought his recruits into the well-stuffed cargo bay, "is there anything you didn't pack in here?"

"Actually, I could have fit a little more in," Crowbar said, looking around at the contents of the hold, "but if I did, we couldn't roll out the vehicles in a hurry."

*Homet's* greatest legacy from her merchant days was the spacious 50-ton cargo hold occupying one-quarter of the ship's total volume. Its present appearance, however, was more akin to a tightly packed garage. Two features immediately diminished the hold's volume. The 20-ton drop capsule pod occupied most of the starboard hold, and a 10-ton collapsible fuel module extended forward from the rear bulkhead—the latter extending *Homet's* two-parsec jump range to three at the price of an extra week in jump. The real space hog was the 10-ton grav tank, towering over the six-ton G-carrier, a rack of six extra drop capsules and miscellaneous gear and ammunition strapped down to padeyes set into the open floor.

"Actually, it looks pretty orderly," the beefy man beside Drop Kick said. This fellow, who looked to be about 30, was one of two men among the new arrivals with sergeant's chevrons on his green body sleeve.

"First Sergeant Denikin," Drop Kick said, introducing the man. "Call sign, Gaffer."

Gaffer then saluted and shook the engineer's hand.

"Good morning, sir. Fine-looking assault ship you have here."

"Really," Crowbar said, looking around at the other troopers, as mystified as anyone by the ultimate purpose of the gear in the hold. "Too bad I still don't know what we're going to do with her."

"Me neither. Drop Kick's been very secretive."

"Just until we launch," the sergeant major said. "Is Red Sun around?"

"Roger, up on the bridge. Said she'd like to see you when you arrive."

"Okay, we're on our way, Crowbar." Jerking his thumb over his shoulder, he added, "The gunny's name is Red Eye. Can you can help him get his troopers settled?"

Glancing again at the troopers, Crowbar recognized Red Eye immediately. The gunnery sergeant was the tall trooper with a nasty mass of swollen blood vessels in the inner corner of his right eye.

"Sure thing."

"Good. Gaffer, let's go meet the skipper."

Though the crew lounge and bridge were directly forward of the cargo hold, getting there was no longer a direct walk. While Crowbar steered Red Eye, his two corporals and his two privates around the front of the tank to the port iris valve, Drop Kick led Gaffer around the rear of the G-carrier, past the forward edge of the drop capsule pod and through the hatch to the unoccupied lounge and bridge just ahead.

On the bridge, pre-flight checks were occupying both Coeur and Deep Six, the former concentrating on drives and hull integrity, and the latter on communications and sensors. Unlike Coeur, who sat in an acceleration couch at the portside pilot's station, Deep Six had moved his entire roller-chair up to his copilot's station. The Schalli's quick mind more than made up for dry-land immobility—in flight, he routinely ran communications with the barbels on his muzzle, manipulated sensors with his four ventral tentacles, and ground out preliminary jump plots in his head.

"Drop Kick," Coeur said, coming around in her seat, "good, you're here."

"And ahead of schedule," Deep Six noted, wheeling his chair around.

"Gaffer," Drop Kick said, "meet Red Sun and Deep Six, captain and navigator of the *Hornet*. This is Gaffer, in charge of the drop troop squad."

"Sir," Gaffer said, executing a snappy salute.

"Red'll be fine," Coeur said, taking off her radio headset and standing to walk aft. "Are all of the troops aboard, Drop Kick?"

"Roger. Crowbar said he'd get them quarters."

"Good. I figured this trip, we'd put all the troopers in the loft, since there's plenty of staterooms."

"How about the gunners?" Drop Kick asked.

"Yeah, they're up there too, but I don't want any funny

business," Coeur said, prompting a chuckle from both sergeants. Obviously, Gaffer had heard about Snapshot from Drop Kick.

"Anyway," Coeur went on, "Gaffer, I assume Drop Kick has briefed you on the command structure."

"Yes, sir. You're the top dog in the air, Gyro's the XO and Drop Kick's the man on the ground."

"Right," Drop Kick said, "although the drop troops will probably maneuver as a unit, under Gaffer."

"Whatever works," Coeur said. "That's what we do."

"If I may, Red Sun," Gaffer interjected, "I'd just like to say what an honor it is to be on your ship. All of us are familiar with your mission to Sauler and what you did for the Hivers."

"You been in the field yourself?"

"Yes, sir. Took a shell for the commodore at Nicosia."

"Really."

"Yes, sir. An autocannon took a good-sized chunk out of my left leg."

"You seem to have recovered pretty well."

"Yeah, the docs grew back my femur in a few months. The trouble was convincing 'em I was fit for field duty."

Coeur looked to Drop Kick for clarification.

"Gaffer and Red Eye—that's Sergeant Maling—were instructors at Fort Brierty, both with minor combat injuries. Since they've recently been cleared for the field—and have a chestful of medals for valor—they seemed like good choices to lead the ground pounders."

"There is something to be said for experience," Coeur admitted. "How about the rest of the troopers?"

"Oh, well, I just asked each sergeant to recommend his two best students."

"Good. Delegation of responsibility. Keep that up, and they'll send you to OCS."

"With respect, Red, I'd rather stay an NCO. Less hassles."

"My man," Gaffer seconded.

"Well, there's always the Arses," Coeur said. "We don't stand so much on rank."

"Well, I don't know if I'd like that," Crowbar said. "I worked a long time for these stripes."

Coeur smiled and turned back to Deep Six.

"Say, Sixer, now that the guys are aboard, how long until we can get in the air?"

"I would say two hours," the Schalli said, "for a final power test and corrected jump plot."

"Very good. Carry on pre-flight and request clearance to launch within that window."

"Aye, sir."

"All right, Drop Kick, let's see what kind of troopers you came up with."

As it happened, Snapshot was in the lounge when the Marines and Coeur emerged from the bridge, pausing in her work to grab a carbostick from the autogalley. Obviously pleased to see her, but aware of Coeur's policy on fraternization, Drop Kick gave her a wink that the others, out of professional courtesy, pretended not to notice.

"You must be Snapshot," Gaffer surmised. "Drop Kick told us about you."

"Oh did he?"

"Only good things," Drop Kick said.

"Right," Gaffer said. "I hear you're a good missileer."

"Well, you know what they say: You're only as good as your next miss."

"Yeah, that's the truth," Gaffer said. "Anyway, I hear one of Red Eye's privates is very excited to be on the same ship with you. I guess he's working to qualify as a naval gunnery spec."

"Who's that?" Drop Kick asked. "Badger?"

"Right, the Sea Gypsy."

In later days, Coeur would remember the raised brow that Drop Kick exhibited at that comment. On Aubaine, the progressive capital of the Coalition and leader of the Assembly's Federalist faction, there was nevertheless an old tinge of prejudice against the Tifelati, or Sea Gypsies—an itinerant culture of the southern hemisphere historically associated with banditry and mischief. To Coeur, a resident of Aubaine for only three years, and Snapshot, there for even less, the term "Sea Gypsy" was only a colorful local term. To Drop Kick, however, it was a term loaded with venom and a hint of an unexpected aspect of Gaffer's character.

"I had no idea I was so famous," Snapshot said.

"He probably heard about you from one of his instructors," Gaffer suggested.

"Well, there's usually time for drill in jump space," Snapshot said. "Maybe we can get in some time on the simulator program."

"I'm sure we can set that up," Drop Kick said.

Gaffer didn't comment on this, however, for his attention had suddenly shifted to a new focus—scrutiny of Snapshot's pale, freckled face.

"Gaffer?" Snapshot asked.

"Oh, excuse me. I was just noticing how different you look. Are you from Brusman or Trantown originally?"

Surprised, Snapshot shot a glance at Drop Kick.

"Didn't you tell the sergeant where I was from?"



"No," Drop Kick said, shrugging. "Didn't figure it was important."

"So where are you from?" Gaffer asked.

"I'm not from Aubaine," Snapshot said; "I was born on Oriflamme."

"Oh," Gaffer said, appearing disappointed.

"What? Do you have a problem with that?"

"Yeah," Drop Kick said, "do you have a problem with that?"

"No, no," Gaffer said, sensing that Drop Kick's indignation represented Coeur as well. "I don't have anything against Flamers—or I mean Oriflammen—personally. It's just the planet. I don't care for."

"Really," Coeur said.

"Any particular reason for that?" Snapshot asked.

"Well, nothing worth fighting over. I just happen to think your planet is a threat to the stability of the Coalition."

At this, blood drained from Snapshot's already pale face, and her hands clenched into fists, an ominous warning to Coeur that the touchy gunner was anticipating an escalation of rhetoric.

"Like how?" Snapshot asked.

"Well, for one thing, like trying to use your army to build your own private empire on the Back Face."

"Yeah, well, at least my planet didn't conveniently give citizenship to the Schalli so it could have extra seats in the Assembly."

"Whoa—hold on," Coeur said, stepping between Snapshot and Gaffer. "I think you two had better just table this discussion right now."

"Why?" Gaffer asked. "Don't you believe in freedom of speech?"

"Not if you're going to use it to argue about politics. If you've got trouble with that, you can get off my ship right now."

Though they were both still glaring at each other, Gaffer and Snapshot nodded assent.

"Understood, sir," Gaffer said. "It won't happen again."

"Yes, sir," Snapshot seconded.

"Good. Drop Kick, why don't we take the lift up to the loft and leave Snapshot to her business."

"Yes, I think that would be prudent."

Coeur, Drop Kick and Gaffer then stepped into the lift cab at the rear of the lounge, and the closing of the lift doors behind them temporarily defused the awkward situation.

"Captain," Gaffer said, stopping Coeur before she could palm the up button, "I'd like to offer my apology for that display. Back on Nicosia, we had some Oriflammen who weren't what you'd call 'team players.' It seems like an attitude they're prone to."

"Sergeant," Coeur said, "I've never been to Oriflamme, but I imagine they're like most other people—some are good, some aren't so good. It's certainly not fair to lump them into a single group, good or bad."

"Yes, sir. I'll apologize to Snapshot directly."

"Maybe it would be better if you wait a bit," Drop Kick suggested. "When she gets fired up, she can stay that way for a while."

"Yeah, all right," Gaffer said.

Coeur then reached for the up button, and the prompt motion punctuated the incident in Coeur's mind.

Among the people of Aubaine, Coeur knew, anxiety about Oriflamme was not uncommon—even among people who'd never met an Oriflamme. But Coeur wasn't one to believe that Oriflamme and her Centrist allies were a serious threat to the Coalition's future. Although the Centrists wanted a centralized, autocratic government—the very sort that doomed Coeur's Last Imperium—the Last Imperium had no democratic institutions like the Assembly to allow for public debate of policy. In that forum, Coeur believed, the Federalist opponents of the Centrist bloc would prevail in preserving a loose federal government.

On a more personal level, though, the crewmembers of *Homet* had their own reason to appreciate Oriflamme—the number of times Snapshot had saved them with her skill at missile gunnery. Of course, it wasn't as if Snapshot didn't have her faults, but the gunner's key role in protecting the fragile freighter inclined most of her mates toward, if anything, excessive positive prejudice—the faith that Snapshot and her missiles would always be there to stand between themselves and any unfriendly contact they might meet in the Wilds.

*Well, anyway,* Coeur thought, musing on the last confidential message she'd received from Hammer, just minutes before, *if Gaffer got that lathered up by meeting one Oriflamme, I wonder how he'll react to meeting 800 million of them...*

\*\*\*

Big is relative.

Compared to a giant system defense "boat" like ANS *Kukulcan*, or even a front-line clipper, RCS *Homet* was a tiny ship, yet standing inside her midship cargo hold, one could not help but feel that one was inside a large vessel. The reason for that was simple; Unlike a warship, whose bills were paid by an owning government, *Homet* was designed to make a living for her original owners—merchants who needed a ship small enough to run inexpensively, yet with a sufficient cargo capacity to let them eke out a profit after crew salaries and maintenance.

What remained for humans, after the top deck amidships was given to fuel and the upper and lower rear hull were given to drives, was clustered forward—the area which gave *Hornet* her distinctive pickle-fork bow. The starboard horn contained the bridge and crew's lounge, as well as ship's computers, Coeur's stateroom adjacent to the bridge and a short alcove leading to Gyro's laser. Opposite this was the port horn—accessible only by a walk through the cargo hold or a trek aft through engineering—but giving access to Snapshot's turret, a closet-like sick bay with two beds, and individual staterooms for Physic, Deep Six and Newton.

Ironically, Newton's stateroom was more than twice the size of anyone else's—ironic because the emotionless Hiver could not appreciate any inadvertent stroking of its ego—but it was merely the former abode of the ship's master in residence. Like Scissor, *Hornet's* last Hiver adviser, Newton reasonably saw this as wasted space and therefore carried on Scissor's practice of using only a tiny portion of the master's cabin as a personal residence. The remaining area was thus freed to serve as a high-quality electronics workshop, and this compartment—looking across to the bridge through a huge picture window—would serve as Newton's regular duty station.

The only other large crew area was called the loft, although it was in fact the size of a small two-bedroom house. This upper deck section, straddling the base of the lower deck fork, held 10 double staterooms divided into two rows to either side of an open marshaling deck, a roomy area with a sheltered berth for the ship's air-raft forward. Originally intended to house paying passengers in relative luxury during the tedium of a week-long jump, the loft now housed somewhat less fussy travellers: Crowbar, Gyro, Snapshot and the ship's troops.

When Drop Kick, Coeur and Gaffer arrived in the lift from the crew's lounge, the other five drop troops were still unloading the gear from their packs onto tables in the middle of the marshaling deck, while Crowbar busied himself at the air-raft forward.

"Ten-huti!" Red Eye snapped, hustling the troopers into an orderly line.

"At ease," Drop Kick said. "Troopers, this is your skipper, Coeur D' Esprit."

"Red Sun's fine," Coeur said, "or just Red. I just thought I'd pop in to see how you're situated, seeing that we've got a long trip ahead of us."

"Yes, sir," Red Eye said, "just give us a target, and we'll hit it for you."

Looking down the line of troopers, Coeur saw a similar level of optimism reflected in the faces of the corporals and privates.

More typical of the Marines than the Arses, there was only one woman among them, but there weren't that many people of either sex who measured up to the exacting standards of the RCMC. For Coeur's part, she was just glad she'd have them on her side in any coming combat.

"Well, you won't have to be in suspense for too much longer," Coeur said. "We'll hit space in a couple of hours and make jump point a couple hours after that. I'll announce our mission then."

"Outstanding," Gaffer said.

"So, Crowbar," Coeur said to the engineer, looking conspicuously unmilitary as he wandered over with his thumbs hooked through his tool belt, "the berthing arrangements work out?"

"Check. I figure we still want to keep the forward staterooms unoccupied—in case we're ever holed there—so the drop troopers will take the middle three staterooms port. That leaves two staterooms for the tankers at the rear and the rest as singles for me and the gunners."

"And the gear?"

"All stowed in good order. Heavy battle dress, four fusion rifles, six gauss rifles and six laser rifles—enough to kick some serious butt."

The troopers made approving grunts, prompting Coeur to ask a logical question.

"Not that it matters, but how many of you have actually been in combat?"

The cessation of grunts revealed the answer.

"Actually, none," Gaffer said, "except Red Eye and myself. These are good troopers, though, and we figure they'll benefit from some time in the field."

"Yes, sir," Red Eye said, "nothing puts the poop in your pants like being shot at."

"True," Coeur agreed.

Coeur went on to speak with each trooper briefly, asking what part of Aubaine they were from, how they liked the Corps and such, with an eye toward getting a sense for them as individuals.

Naturally, Coeur knew there were limits to how acquainted she could get with them—only time would tell her which ones were brave beyond reason, which ones were natural leaders and which ones perhaps were not—but it was still good to think of them as people before she flew them into danger. Eventually she would learn which two were recommended by Gaffer—the corporal Fubar, a triangular plug of a man without much neck to speak of, and Gremlin, a prematurely balding private with an encyclopedic knowledge of guns—and which were recommended by Red Eye—Corporal Widget, a female combat medic with placid gray eyes, and Private Badger, the Sea Gypsy.



Among the troopers, Badger was probably the least distinctive—his deep tan and light hair were common to many Aubani—but Coeur was intrigued by this private whom, she knew, was intrigued by Snapshot. Before leaving the loft, she contrived to speak with him apart from the others, drifting apart from Crowbar and the sergeants to sit down with Badger as he inspected the heavy fusion gun he would carry in battle.

"I heard you were interested in gunnery. Is that right, private?"

"Yes, sir. I try to practice on sims whenever I can."

"But you joined the Marines instead of the Navy."

"Yeah, well, I took what I could get. Where I come from, it's harder to get into the Navy than the Marines."

"Where do you come from, trooper?"

"Graves Island. You probably never heard of it."

"That's way down south isn't it? One of the Tifelati cities?"

"Yes, sir."

"Flew over it once. Looked pretty...well, bleak."

"It is that. People say it's been that way ever since the southern nations raided the island."

"Well, you know I'm a newcomer to the planet. I don't know all the local history."

"Take it from me, sir, we're not real popular, even today. The recruiting officer in New Antipode made it clear I was going to be a ground pounder or nothing at all."

Coeur shook her head in amazement.

*Strange, how every culture seems to need someone to hang its troubles on—even the Aubani.*

"Well, I can't do much about that," she said, "but I do know my gunners spend a lot of jump time running sims. Since the gunners bunk on this level, maybe you could talk to Snapshot or Gyro about getting some time in later."

"Maybe I'll do that."

"Good for you," Coeur said, slapping him on the shoulder and standing up. "Right now, I better go and get us in the air."

"Say, skipper; mind if I ask you a question?"

"What's that?"

"Well, I've never been in jump before. Will we be able to feel it, physically, I mean?"

"Hm. You mean, like nausea, vomiting, and the queasy feeling that your body's been turned inside out?"

Badger's cheeks puffed out. "Yeah, like that."

"Probably not. But if things get rough, you can always grab a barf bag from the autogalley."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Coeur smiled. "Carry on, trooper. I'm sure you'll be fine."

# Chapter Four

When the time came to launch, it went off very smoothly. Indeed, the only difficulty was Hammer's requirement that Coeur calculate the first jump plot—so that *Hornet's* destination would remain secret—even though Deep Six was a much better navigator.

Coeur kept that concern to herself, though, as she concentrated on getting *Hornet* underway. Shortly after the ship's various air locks, exterior hatches and forward cargo ramp slammed shut, bay techs detached umbilici for data, power and waste, and the sleek little *Hornet* slipped out of Maintenance Bay 2 with only a fraction of the thrust she would need to power out of a planet's gravity well.

Already being in orbit gave *Hornet* a half-hour head start on her run to safe jump point, but all the same she could only muster 1G of HEPlAR thrust; under that power, the transit to 100 planetary diameters would still require nearly five hours. Most of the nonflight personnel were strapped in at launch, Newton in its quarters, Physic and the tankers in the lounge and the drop troops in chairs around a table on the marshaling deck. The length of the transit and lack of any sensation of motion, thanks to inertial compensation, tended to have people going about their routine business well before Crowbar engaged the jump drive. For Coeur, aware of the uneasiness toward jumping among the new drop troops, that was the best way to begin a jump: with people hardly aware it had happened.

"Jump field established," Coeur reported to Deep Six, as *Hornet* crossed the safe jump threshold and the jump drive engaged. Outside the panoramic bridge windows, the boundless spattering of stars against a velvet sky was gone, replaced by darkness and the crackling arcs of jump fire—electrical discharges between the hull and the featureless envelope of the jump field.

"Affirmative," the Schalli confirmed, retiring from scrutiny of his array of electronic sensors, rendered useless by jump space. "Crowbar sends primary coolant flow nominal."

"Outstanding. Looks like you still have your touch."

"Thank you, sir. However, it was your pre-recorded plot that we used."

"Maybe so, but you executed it very cleanly. I'm sure the next plot'll be sharper with you doing the calculations."

Out of politeness, Deep Six did not respond to that observation at first, for both of them knew that Coeur was probably correct. While jump plot calculation was just a job skill for the human, for the Schalli it was an art.

"I wouldn't say that, sir. However, I was able to determine that our immediate objective is Phoebus."

"You are good, aren't you?"

Deep Six fluttered his muzzle barbels, a Schalli shrug.

"Well, fine, I've had about enough of this secret-agent stuff myself. Are all stations secured?"

"Affirmative. All sections send secured from normal space."

"Good. Then give me ship-wide intercom."

A moment later, Coeur's voice sounded throughout the ship, echoing in the marshaling deck where the infantry were engaging in hand-to-hand combat drill, and the cargo hold to which Drop Kick and his people had migrated to work on their vehicles.

"Attention all hands, this is Red Sun. You'll be glad to know that we're safely secure in jump space. The first engineering and bridge watch rotation will commence in three hours.

"By the way, in case anyone has occasion to look out a window and see all that electricity arcing around the ship, it's really nothing to worry about. We call that jump fire, but it's basically just electrical discharges between the jump field and the hull of the ship. In fact, the jump fire is actually one of our friends, because by watching it we can determine the stability and proper energy flow to the jump field."

Coeur paused for a moment, reminded of a not-so-distant memory by the silent lightning outside the bridge window. Seventy-eight years earlier, the wildly erratic discharges of jump fire outside Coeur's Imperial Scout cruiser *Alnitak* were the first sign that a desperate jump from deep inside a gravity well had gone terribly wrong. Already damaged by a Solomani ambush, *Alnitak* would misjump into open space, and unable to take on more jump fuel, her handful of survivors would be forced into low suspension to preserve their meager resources. It was a horrible time, and, though memories of that time no longer disturbed her sleep, Coeur could not help but remember it whenever she saw the jump fire close around a starship.

"Now for what you want to hear—what we're doing out here. For reasons of security, I can't tell you precisely what our mission

is yet, but I can tell you that our ultimate destination is Mexit, a planet in Karse subsector. As you can see from the star map I've brought up on your data terminals, Mexit is way the hell in the middle of nowhere. Not just beyond the Coalition, but five parsecs beyond the AO—the official zone our hot operations are restricted to.

"Again, I can't tell you what we'll be doing there—we'll brief you on that once we clear the AO—but I can tell you at least two things.

"One: this is going to be a long trip. Using the best course on our old charts, it's still over a four-month journey to Mexit one-way. A long time to be out of touch with home, true, but look on the bright side—it's imminent danger pay all the way.

"Two: Mexit is probably a rough place. If you glance at the old library data—and I suggest you do—you'll see that Mexit had a population of 81 billion before the Collapse, had an excellent tech level 15 starport, and would have been a major trade hub for the region. You can bet it's not that nice today. Mexit is in a tight orbit around a main sequence star, with a fairly thin atmosphere. That means its year is short, its weather is nasty, and UV probably bakes the day side if they don't have functioning weather control stations.

"But it's not all bad news on this trip. At the behest of the C in C, we will be paying a diplomatic courtesy visit to Oriflamme, which is on our way. From what I understand, Crowbar and Snapshot are the only members of this crew who have visited that esteemed hub of the trailing Coalition, so this should be a learning experience for the rest of us. At the very least, its climate will give us a taste of what we can expect on Mexit.

"Now, of course, I appreciate that some people on this ship may harbor strong opinions about Oriflamme and the Centrists, but you're probably also aware that I don't tolerate political debate aboard this ship, so I'll spare you a lecture on the differences between our societies. Let's just remember that we're all members of the same Coalition.

"That is all."

A brief pause ensued before Snapshot, in the port turret, hopped on the ship-wide intercom.

"You're not joking, are you, Red?"

"That's a negative, Snapper."

"Well, how about that. You all get to see my wonderful homeworld."

"Yeah," Gyro said from the starboard turret, "I'm sure it's charming."

"Oh, it is," Snapshot said. "Unlike Hell, you can leave when you're sick of it."



\* \* \*

"I should have guessed," Gaffer said meanwhile, circling Badger on a rolled-out gymnastic mat in the loft.

"What, sir?"

"The damned Oriflammen are probably behind this whole mission," he snarled, grabbing Badger's forearm, whacking it against his knee to make him drop the bayonet he was holding, and then flipping him over his back to the mat.

"Oh," Badger said, after he got his breath back.

\* \* \*

"Well, how about that," Drop Kick said to Mercy, who at the moment was helping him re-attach the fasteners on a sensor pod atop the grav tank. "I always figured I'd have to marry Snapper before I'd get to meet her parents."

"Somehow," Mercysaid, detecting a wry note in the sergeant's voice, "you don't sound like you want to meet them at all."

"Don't get me wrong—Snapper's my girl—but she does have a temper. Sometimes I wonder if she got that from her parents."

"Well, just look on the bright side, sergeant; it can't be much worse than being shot at."

\* \* \*

Coeur could feel a real distance between Gaffer's troopers and the rest of the crew from the very start of the voyage, even though Gaffer managed to keep his political leanings to himself. The crew of 17 was large—too large to comfortably fit around the lounge table, so the reasonable compromise was to have three meal sections for breakfast and supper, one for the morning watch, one for the afternoon and one for the night, with troopers mixed in where convenient. However, the disciplinarian Gaffer preferred to keep his unit together at all times, so the unit took its mess by itself without any of the regular crew.

Or at least, almost none of the regular crew.

After the first week in jump, when *Hornet* passed through blighted Phoebus, bought fuel and returned to jump space bound for Spires, the Hiver Newton began to visit the drop troops at their afternoon mess.

"I observe that there is room at the table," it said, plodding over from the autogalley with what appeared to be a tray of strange-smelling corndogs. "May I join you?"

"Pull up a chair," Red Eye suggested.

Newton did just that, using its tail to maneuver a Hiver chair up to the five drop troops at the table, a group missing only

Badger. Shaped somewhat like a mushroom, the chair supported Newton's central carapace, where the Hiver's brain, internal organs, and closed digestive tract were located.

"To absent friends," Gaffer said, as soon as Newton was situated.

"To absent friends," the other humans and Newton replied.

"Say, Newton, aren't you supposed to be on drive watch?" Gaffer asked, suspiciously.

"Negative. Physic, our doctor, has expressed concern with her deficit in shipboard skills and therefore has taken over monitoring the power flow to the Jump governor."

"Oh, great," Fubar said, hunching his massive shoulders.

"She does have some experience, doesn't she?" Widget asked, halting a forkful of pressed algae on the way to her mouth.

"Affirmative. Dr. Takagawa has studied all the appropriate manuals to my satisfaction."

"You know who else would be great for that job?" Gremlin said, running a hairy hand over his balding scalp. "Badger. I mean, he always wanted to be in the Navy anyway."

"That's true," Red Eye said, looking toward Gaffer. "What do you think?"

Gaffer, whose scowl betrayed the answer he was about to give, nevertheless stopped himself when he realized that the young Hiver was staring at him intently with all six of its eyes.

"Something the matter there, Newt?"

"Forgive me," Newton said. "Given my lack of experience telling humans apart, I was attempting to determine whether or not you were the individual Badger being referred to."

Gaffer ignored the stifled snickers from around the table.

With exaggerated slowness, he finished chewing his mouthful of fish flakes, set down his fork, and elegantly dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

"Sorry," the first sergeant said, "I'm not the private. He's off training with Snapshot."

"I understand," Newton said. "However, I believe you were about to make some sort of comment."

"Yes, I was. I was going to say that Badger is already degrading his efficiency enough by drilling with Snapshot. He doesn't need to take on a drive watch to make him even more distracted."

"I believe," Red Eye said to Newton, "that it's the first sergeant's opinion that a soldier needs to be totally focused."

"Damn right," Gaffer said, tucking away his napkin. "You lose your focus in battle, you get whacked like *that*." Which point the first sergeant punctuated with a sudden snapping of

his fingers, making the attentive Newton start with surprise.

"Aren't we supposed to be able to take over any position on the ship?" Widget asked.

Gaffer sneered derisively.

"That's why we have computers, corporal. The only job they can't do is down in the dirt."

After discerning the probable meaning of that metaphor and waiting to see if any further sudden noises were forthcoming, Newton offered a mild refutation.

"Actually, first sergeant, the modern starship is not very automated. The need to prevent Viral contamination from spreading inside a starship requires that every station function autonomously without central computer control."

"Yeah," Gremlin said, "and isn't it true that you Hivers have warbots that can outfight human soldiers on the ground?"

"I am afraid that is not my area of expertise," Newton said.

"Hey, what is this?" Gaffer asked, "Screw the Sergeant day?"

"Sorry, sir," Widget and Fubar said.

"Machines outfighting men," Gaffer grumbled. "Yeah, I'll believe that when I see it."

• • •

"Good shot. You missed your calling, young man."

In Snapshot's missile turret, a bemused Badger smiled, the afterimage of a simulated explosion through his gun sight still fading on his retinas.

"Thank you, sir. I've never seen your trick with the white-out dazzling before."

"Probably against training safety regulations," Snapshot said, from the laser turret on the opposite side of the ship. "Most things that work are against some kind of regulation."

"More so on Aubaine than Oriflamme?"

Snapshot chuckled. "You've got to be kidding—Oriflamme is the original source of all red tape in the universe."

"Sounds swell."

"Yeah, well, they'll get better once they improve their computer technology. Ready for the last simulation, private?"

"Ready as I can be," Badger said, suddenly coming back to crisp attention.

"All right, here's the situation. *Homet* has come out of jump near an asteroid belt with a residual velocity of 100 K. The bridge has multiple hot bogies on the port quarter, unknown heading, unknown Vee."

"Understood."

"Stand by, then. I'm engaging the sim."

The actual simulation, when it began, was as much fun as Snapshot had ever had in a turret. While Badger stared through the heads-up sight of the missile turret, one hand on the missile release lever, one on the trac-ball controller, Snapshot selected which parts of the simulator program to feed him—a program accurate down to digitally sampled and synthesized voices of Coeur, Deep Six and Gyro in Badger's headset.

Badger was an excellent raw talent—*that* Snapshot conceded—but he was obviously not experienced. That was the weakness she targeted in this final program, throwing a holdful of red-herrings in his face while all the while a real menace angled for the kill.

"Multiple targets bearing 115," digital-Coeur announced, "gunners, lock weapons."

"Laser standing by," digital-Gyro reported.

"Missile control locked-on," Badger seconded.

"Time to intercept?"

"Uh—two minutes."

"Very good. Fire ready missiles."

"Readies away! Running hot, smooth and normal."

A minute passed, then a minute and a half.

"Belay that detonation!" digital-Deep Six said. "Target Gamma is a Coalition lifeboat!"

"Fikk!" Badger swore, struggling to avoid detonating his missiles near the small craft. "What about the other contacts?"

"Other bogies are missiles," digital-Deep Six answered, "maneuvering at 1 G."

"What the hell? Where did they come from?"

"Contact astern!" digital-Gyro snapped, "bearing 275! Damn, I can't bear on it!"

Sweating, Badger suddenly perceived the problem. A scout ship was just now powering up off their port quarter aft, well outside the covered arc of Gyro's laser. Coeur would try to flip the ship over in time to bear on it, but *Hornet* was not a spry vessel and Badger could not tell if she would make it in time. His only choice was to flare the engines of his deployed missiles and hope they could close to good range in time.

"I've picked him up!" Badger said, "just give me a few seconds."

"Target is painting us with director-band radiation," digital-Deep Six said, his implacable calm eerily like life.

Truly lost in the simulation, Badger now visualized his missiles—seven-tonne cylinders extending x-ray generating rods from their warheads—closing toward minimum firing range. In seconds they would be 30,000 kilometers from the



scout, and Badger would fire off the missile's nuclear warheads—warheads that would pump the missiles' laser rods and spear the little scout with searing beams of x-rays.

But he was a fraction of a second too late. The scout discharged its own laser—deadly accurate and more than powerful enough to punch through *Hornet's* flimsy armor. Badger's controls flickered, then went dead as the screams of dying crewmembers faded in his headset.

"Gotcha," Snapshot said.

Badger fell back in the missile turret's couch, exhausted.

"Whew! I'd say I was close," Badger said, "but I know that doesn't count when it's for real."

"No, but don't feel so bad. I did sort of load up on you."

"Ever been that hairy?"

"It's always hairier," Snapshot said, "when it's for real."

A silence fell as Badger considered that.

"Say, private," Snapshot said, "We've been spending a lot of time in the sims these last two weeks. Do you suppose we should back off a bit? Take a break maybe?"

"I hadn't thought about it, sir. I know it's instructive from my end, but I guess I hadn't thought about how much work it is for you. After all, there's just you, Deep Six and the skipper manning the bridge watch."

"Actually, that's not what I meant. I've been talking to Drop Kick, and he made it sound like your sergeant was riding you a little bit—giving you extra PT and making you scrub the head all the time."

"Oh, that's nothing. That's just the way the sarge is. He figures if you're a grunt, you're a grunt, and that's it."

"Geez. I know who I'm not going to tap as a relief gunner."

"Well, Snapshot, you have to understand Gaffer. I hear his great-grandparents emigrated to Aubaine from Promise during the Collapse, and they brought a military tradition that's a little alien to the planet."

"I don't know about that. I've seen Aubani fight."

"Well, you know what I mean. It's one of those families that's been knee-deep in battles all the way back to the Ramshackle days."

"The what?"

"The Ramshackle Empire. It's what they called the one before the last empire."

Snapshot made a soft, amused snort. For a boy from a backward Sea Gypsy city, Badger was surprisingly well-educated and self-motivated.

Not, she thought, the kind of boy who deserves to get

walked all over by some lug with a chestful of medals.

"That might be so," she said. "But someone ought to straighten him out."

"Actually," Badger interjected, "I'd rather you didn't. You're right, it'll be better if we cut back on the drill. Say, once or twice a jump."

Snapshot fumed, but felt he was right. Right or wrong, it was a long way to Mexit, and it was no use for her and Gaffer to be at each other's throats before they even got there.

"You seem pretty perceptive, private. Get that from your family?"

"Wouldn't know, sir. My parents died when I was a baby, and I was raised by friends of the family."

"Nice friends?"

"Negative. Kicked me out on my bum when I was 17."

"Gaia. Sound like jerks."

"I find it's better not to judge. Look ahead— that's my motto."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing, Badger. You give me a new appreciation for my parents."

"On Oriflamme?"

"Yeah. A teacher and an engineer in Dobroye. Maybe you'd like to see them when we go there."

"What about Drop Kick?"

"Oh, I see plenty of Drop Kick. He won't mind if you tag along."

Badger grinned.

"In that case, I'd very much like to visit your family."

"Outstanding. Then what do you say we call it a day?"

"Yes, sir. Badger out."

• • •

A few minutes later, Snapshot stepped out of Gyro's turret and walked across the adjacent corridor to the nearest wall-mounted iris valve. Opening quietly, its mechanism scrupulously maintained by the Marines, it admitted her into the cargo bay and into the presence of Drop Kick, sitting alone at his work table.

"Hey, Snapper," Drop Kick said, lifting up his welding goggles. "How's it going?"

"Swell," Snapshot said, slipping onto the bench beside him and combing her fingers through his close-cropped hair.

"Uh-oh," Drop Kick said, "you must want something."

"What? Can't a girl inspect a guy for parasites?" she replied, grinning, making a fuss over inspecting his ear.

"Well, yeah," he said, smiling at the tickling attention, "but I

still think you want something."

"Well...yes."

"Okay. What do you need? Another voltage regulator for your autoloader?"

"Actually, no, it's nothing like that. I was sort of wondering if you'd mind having Badger tag along when we went to visit my parents."

"I don't know. Is it likely to happen?"

"Actually, I sort of already asked him."

"You what?"

"Well," Snapshot said, "it didn't sound like you were that excited about meeting my parents anyway. I didn't think you'd mind."

Drop Kick's broad chest rose and fell with a heavy sigh.

"Denise, it's not that I don't want to meet your parents. It's just that I'm a little nervous about it, and I'd rather not do it with a private tagging along."

Snapshot expelled a breath, fluttering her lips.

"Well, fine. But Badger seems like an okay guy, and I thought it would be nice to do something with him—you know, to show that somebody cares about him. I know I couldn't take it if my superior treated me the way his does."

"You know, it's a little hard to comment on that," Drop Kick observed, "because I'm every trooper's superior on this ship. But for what it's worth, nobody put a gun to Badger's head and made him join the Marines. And what's more, he doesn't seem half as concerned about his being mistreated as you are."

"Well, of course he doesn't seem concerned about it. He's a good Marine."

"Right. He follows his orders without complaining about them."

"So I guess what you're saying is I shouldn't try to get between Badger and Gaffer."

"In so many words, yes."

"Well, you should be happy, then. Badger offered to cut back on our training together and I agreed."

Drop Kick sat back, impressed.

"You see," she said, "I'm not completely obnoxious and confrontational."

"No, you're not."

"Well, anyway, if you don't want him to come along, I'll go tell him so." Snapshot moved as if to get up.

"Hey, Snapper," Drop Kick said, putting a hand on her forearm, "hold on. You know how I feel about you, and I don't want to be jealous of anybody you want to be friends with. But

meeting your parents is something I'd rather do with you, alone. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I was just being selfish."

"Well, maybe just a little."

Again, Snapshot moved to get up, and this time Drop Kick let her. Before leaving, though, she leaned over and kissed Drop Kick on the cheek.

"I'll go tell him now."

Drop Kick nodded and watched her go.

*Oh well, it's not like Denise shouldn't be friends with anyone she wants to.*

*And besides, it's a long way to Mexit; I'm sure there'll be plenty of time for the three of us to go some place other than Oriiflamme.*

\*\*\*

By tradition, Aubani ships crossing into the trailing, Centrist-dominated half of the Coalition tended to make planetfall and buy fuel wherever possible, instead of skimming their liquid hydrogen from the atmosphere of those systems' gas giants. It was a calculated political move, to be sure, but it also had its advantages. Worlds inhabited by friendly human beings tended to be far more congenial than gas giants, which at the very least featured crushing gravity and at the worst were surrounded by maelstroms of planetary debris, hurricane-dwarfing storms and induced radiation fields that would test the hull integrity of even the best-built ship.

Unfortunately for *Hornet*, though, time was a consideration. As her sole concession to the Centrists, Coeur did make a quick layover at Phoebus—the only remaining vestige of Imperial nobility in the Coalition and strongly pro-Centrist—but the rest of the way to Oriiflamme would be made without planetfall.

"That seems to be a prudent plan," Deep Six said, as *Hornet* rumbled clear of Gabriele IX, the relatively small, blue gas giant in far orbit of Spire's giant primary. "But I believe we will be tested at Zloga."

"Think Novolen is too much for us? If you do, you'd better correct the plot before we reach jump point."

"Negative," the Schalli said. "You should have more than sufficient technical skill to navigate the rings of Zloga."

"Should?"

"It is the radiation I am concerned about. As you know, Novolen is small, but is quite close to its primary and spins very rapidly, so a powerful radiation field is created from acceleration of particles in the solar wind."

"I knew all that," Coeur said, "but somehow you have a way



of making it sound worse."

"Sorry."

"Is there a better choice?"

"From our point of view, no. The other two gas giants are unusually large and would slow our transit to jump point considerably."

"Then it looks like Novolen. Either that or planetfall on Zloga."

"Not a good prospect," the Schalli said, idly splashing the water in his roller-chair as he reflected on the latest news from that planet.

*Not a good prospect is an understatement*, Coeur thought. Zloga had nothing against Aubaine—indeed, its relic-salvage parties came from all over the Coalition. But a nasty dispute had broken out when the democratic ruling council tried to impose a price ceiling and excise tax on all fuel sold to starships. In a way this was farcical—the fuel was just water, conveniently stored at a dirt strip for occasional visitors, and only valuable because of its rarity on a desert world. But the owners of the fueling concession were so irate that they completely demolished the "starport" and told the ruling council where it could stuff itself for good measure. Not a particularly profound crisis as crises went, perhaps, but enough of a nuisance that Coeur was disinclined to make Zloga her precipitation point from jump.

"No, not a good prospect. Keep your original plot, Sixer."

"Roger that."

"And look on the bright side. Once we're done there, it's just one more jump to Oriflamme."

Searching for an appropriate rejoinder, Deep Six reflected upon the opinion Physic had *had* when he asked the doctor what she thought about going to Oriflamme. Though he was inclined to think she was being facetious, her words had a ring that appealed to his poetic sensibilities, and he repeated them verbatim.

"Sir, I am positively flush and a-quiver with excitement."

"Are you, now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I guess we'd better hurry up and get there."

\*\*\*

Unlike the entry into jump, precipitation from jump was a tense and exciting time for a number of reasons.

For one, no one really knew when a jump was about to end. Although the elementary school textbooks said a jump took one week, an actual jump could end as many as 24 hours more or less than the 168 that were statistically average. With a certain

abruptness, the jump governor would signal the engineer on jump watch that precipitation was imminent, and all hands would have as few as 15 minutes to make themselves ready.

For another, no one could be certain what would await in normal space when the ship emerged. Barring a freak perturbation of local space-time, the jump drive would deposit a starship at the plotted exit point, but there was no way to know in advance what local conditions might be at that point. Aboard a military ship like *Homet*, all hands would secure themselves in vac suits as insurance against explosive decompression from holing, and battle stations would be manned in expectation of the worst unlikely contingency.

Gyro, who had called the imminent emergence from her station in engineering, woke Crowbar from his quarters in the loft with a blast of the ship's klaxon, then waited the two minutes for him to arrive so she could dash forward to her starboard turret duty station. Five minutes more saw her sealed into the bulky TL12 suit she stowed in her turret, leaving only the helmet visor open to give a clear view of the engaged laser fire control. Outside her turret viewport, meanwhile, jump fire danced on, though she could almost believe she saw it intensify in places, as if it didn't quite want to let them go.

"All hands," she heard over her suit radio a moment later, "this is Red Sun. Signal secured for precipitation."

"Engine room secure," Crowbar returned, followed in turn by the other stations as their personnel suited up.

"Laser turret secured."

"Missile turret secured."

"Sick bay secured."

"Electronics workshop is secured."

"Cargo bay secured."

"Loft secured."

Those last three were always the last to report, though with good reason. The electronics workshop was Newton's responsibility, and even a spry Hiver took a little while to stuff all its limbs into a six-legged vac suit. The cargo bay, meanwhile, was the meeting place for Drop Kick and his cavalry, who had fairly cumbersome scout battle dress to get into. Once that was negotiated, they had perhaps the most important responsibility of anyone on the ship—seated in the G-carrier, they would listen for evidence that the ship had suffered catastrophic damage after precipitation and stand-by to evacuate survivors in their makeshift "lifeboat."

The loft, finally, was last to report for the best reason of all. Though it held all six Marines, crisply trained and drilled for rapid

suiting, their heavy battle dress was massive, weighing over 400 kilograms. So large were the suits that they stood in specialized racks with servomotors to help lower the top half onto the bottom, yet the Marines understood that they would wear these rigs instead of conventional soft suits: Should *Hornet* suffer massive damage, their robust armor and enhanced strength might be indispensable for pulling others out of the wreckage.

"Look sharp," Crowbar said, "we're coming out of the hole! Precip In 10!"

"All hands stand by!" Coeur called out.

"Field is collapsing. Precip in five...four...three...two...contact. Clean entry, all boards green."

Suddenly, the jump fire disappeared from Gyro's viewport. In its place: stars, and the oblate orange and yellow sphere of Novolen.

As per regulations, Gyro checked her station over for integrity, then sent an all-clear signal to Deep Six. The navigator, meanwhile, would be absorbing data from their immediate surroundings with short-range passive EMS, and unfolding the larger passive array that would shortly give them electronic eyes as good as any in the Coalition fleet.

"Uh-oh," Coeur said, over the channel routinely monitored by flight stations.

"What's that?" Snapshot asked.

"Not sure. Deep Six, do you see doppler motion bearing 075, plus 20?"

075? Gyro thought suddenly, that's my corner of the ship.

"Engage active sensors," Coeur said after a moment; "there's no threat emission in the area."

An instant later, Gyro had cause to disagree about the threat. Streaking across the stars outside—so fast she wasn't quite sure she saw it at all—came a silent missile, dark and all but invisible to sensors.

Aimed right at *Hornet*.

...

"Look out!"

Coeur heard the shouted warning from Gyro—abruptly cut off a moment later—an instant before the one-tonne meteoroid struck. A chunk of iron coated in volcanic soot from a nearby moon, it was freakishly difficult to track on passive sensors, but deadly enough to a thin-skinned freighter.

Though her hands were on the control column, Coeur felt the ship suddenly spin out from under her control, rattled by a shuddering blast above and astern. Through the panoramic

bridge canopy, stars then began to wheel crazily about as primary power went dead and *Hornet* was transformed into an inert hunk of metal, tumbling end over end.

"Emergency power!" Coeur yelled to Crowbar. "Damn it, Crowbar, emergency power!"

"Crowbar is not responding," Deep Six answered matter-of-factly, meanwhile fighting to keep from blacking out in his Schalli-form suit. "Automatic reserve power is also failing to respond."

*Damn it, Coeur thought, feeling the G-bladders in her body sleeve's legs and abdomen puff up to keep the blood in her head, spinning fast without inertial compensation. We can't keep this up for long.*

Still keeping her hands on the dead stick and throttle, though, Coeur chinned her suit's short-range radio.

"Drop Kick! Come In, Drop Kick!"

"Urr," she heard the sergeant grunt, "what's happening?"

"We're spinning and we need emergency power!"

"What—can I do?"

"Emergency battery power—junction box 2—throw it!"

"Roger!"

Though it seemed like an eternity, Drop Kick came through for Coeur as she knew he would. Straining against the centrifugal pseudo-gravity, but strengthened by the servomotors of his suit, he clambered to the rear of the hold where the empty spare fuel bladder sat and pried up a floor plate to manually discharge the high-voltage power cells below the deck.

The effect was welcome and immediate—inertial compensation and gravity displaced the tunnel vision creeping up on Coeur and let her slump back in her couch to eyeball the reactivating helm. The ship was out of control—spinning on three axes—but the batteries energized the HEPlaR thrusters well enough to let her lock down the rotation, one axis at a time.

"Well done," Deep Six said, after the work of several minutes had them merely adrift. To conserve battery power with the power plant disabled, Coeur shut the thrusters off after that.

"Well done, my ass. Drop Kick, have you found Crowbar?" Physic answered for him.

"Yeah, we found him, but he's not good. Looks like one of the power plant capacitors blew and gave him one helluva shock."

"Oh hell—is he alive?"

"Barely. Suit probably saved him. But, good Gaia, the engine room is wrecked!"

"How about that, Drop Kick?"

"Can't say for sure. We've got atmosphere here, but I can't



get to the top deck. It looks like it's open to space."

"That could be where the impact was," Deep Six speculated.

"I thought I heard Gyro scream," Coeur said, "so I thought she took the hit."

Gyro dispelled that ill thought by hopping on the line.

"Negative, negative. I'm all right."

"Thank God," Coeur said. "How about you, Snapper?"

"Hanging on."

"Caffer?"

"Shaken up a bit," the first sergeant replied, "but nothing serious."

"I am also fit," Newton reported. "Proceeding aft to assist with damage control."

Ah, Newton, Coeur thought. Unflappable as ever.

Coeur herself could hardly relax. Though the damage to her ship appeared localized, that didn't mean it was minor.

\*\*\*

"This is the difficulty," Newton said, pulling up a schematic of the far trader on the integral holographic display of the lounge table before Caffer, Drop Kick, Snapshot and Gyro. "Areas 322A and 322B—which is to say, the aftermost fuel tank and power plant fuel pump—were struck directly by the meteoroid. Almost certainly, that caused the power plant to shut down, as well as shorting out the auxiliary power bus."

"Oh, great. Screwed by a reactor scram," Snapshot muttered.

"You'd rather it kept running until the magnetic bottle failed?" Gyro shot back. Snapshot didn't reply.

"Can we fix it?" Drop Kick asked.

"Unknown. A visual inspection of the damage will have to be made."

"Why haven't we done that?" Caffer asked.

"Good reasons," Coeur answered. "Our ship is designed to take a pretty strong dose of radiation—that's what lets us skim from a gas giant in the first place. However, the vac suits we have—even the battle dress—are not designed to take long exposure to heavy radiation, which it could be exposed to if there's a large hole in the top deck compartment."

"But that's not the half of it. We don't have power to alter *Hornet's* course very much, and inside 10 hours, we're going to be in the dead center of one big mother of a magnetic field—surging between 10,000 and 100,000 rad."

"That's bad," Snapshot said.

"Maybe not," Caffer said. "What's the count where we are?"

"Substantially less," Newton said, "fluctuating between 50

and 500 rad."

"All right, then, look. My battle dress will take 300 rad without any problem. Assuming somebody keeps an eye on the dosimeter, I don't see any reason why I couldn't go out and eyeball the situation."

"I do," Snapshot said. "You may be a qualified combat engineer, but you're not a starship engineer."

"I don't see it's a choice, Snapshot. You might know more about engineering than me, but you sure don't know more about handling my suit. Besides, rig up a remote camera on my suit with a fiber optic link, and it'll be just like you're there."

Despite her misgivings, Coeur saw he had a point. With the best engineer in the ship—and a good hand with battle dress himself—laid up in sick bay, they would have to improvise as best they could. If an eyeball survey found the pump could be repaired and the outer hull patched, there was still a good chance they could maneuver around the hardest radiation zones of the gas giant and skim the fuel they'd come for in the first place.

If.

If it didn't, they would soon end up dead.

"What about Badger," Coeur said. "Didn't you say he was the most astronautically inclined of your men?"

"Well, yeah."

"Of course he is," Snapshot said, looking at Gaffer. "He has a good understanding of gunnery and power system theory, unlike some people here."

"That will be enough, Snapshot," Coeur said. "You can secure that crap now, or you're confined to quarters."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Gaffer," Coeur said to the first sergeant, "how is Badger in a suit?"

"He's a natural," Gaffer had to admit. "Best marks in zero-G maneuver."

"That may be important," Coeur thought aloud, "since there's no gravity in that section. Fine. Gaffer, I want you and Badger in the engine room in five minutes. Newton, rig up the camera he mentioned."

"What about the rest of us, sir?" Gyro asked.

Coeur reflected on that a moment before answering.

"Pray," she finally suggested, "like you mean it."

...

When all preparations were finally made, Newton left the two Marines in the desolate lower engine room before the massive

and silent jump drive, then retreated to the safety of the port gangway leading forward. Like a giant airlock, the entire lower drive deck would be depressurized when the troopers went out, but the rest of the ship would remain fully pressurized. That way, if there was a mishap, Physic could quickly move the casualty into a pressurized adjacent corridor.

"You getting the picture from my suit?" Gaffer sent to Coeur on the bridge.

"Crystal clear. Ready to egress?"

"Roger that. What's the count?"

"Dosimeter centered at 250 rad, fluctuations plus or minus 50."

"Could fry an egg in that," Badger joked.

To his surprise, Gaffer actually chuckled.

"Yeah. Bridge, ready to cycle."

"Roger," Coeur said. "Cycling lower deck atmosphere."

On the bridge, Gyro and Snapshot joined Coeur at the ordinarily unmanned aft computer station, carefully studying the feed from Gaffer's suit camera as first he, then Badger, pulled themselves into the weightless upper chamber.

At first it seemed a hopeless shambles—bits of wire, plastic, shattered metal and electronics floated in a listless cloud throughout the area—but Badger was quick to see the reality of the situation.

"Well, I'll be damned! Sergeant, point the camera here."

When Gaffer obliged, the women on the bridge saw why he was so elated.

"There's hardly any damage at all. It looks like a tiny projectile sheared through the pump and smashed the electronics. Damage is minor, though. No damage to the aft fuel tank, and nothing structural except the hull penetration—I'll bet an old combat engineer like the sarge could fix it in his sleep."

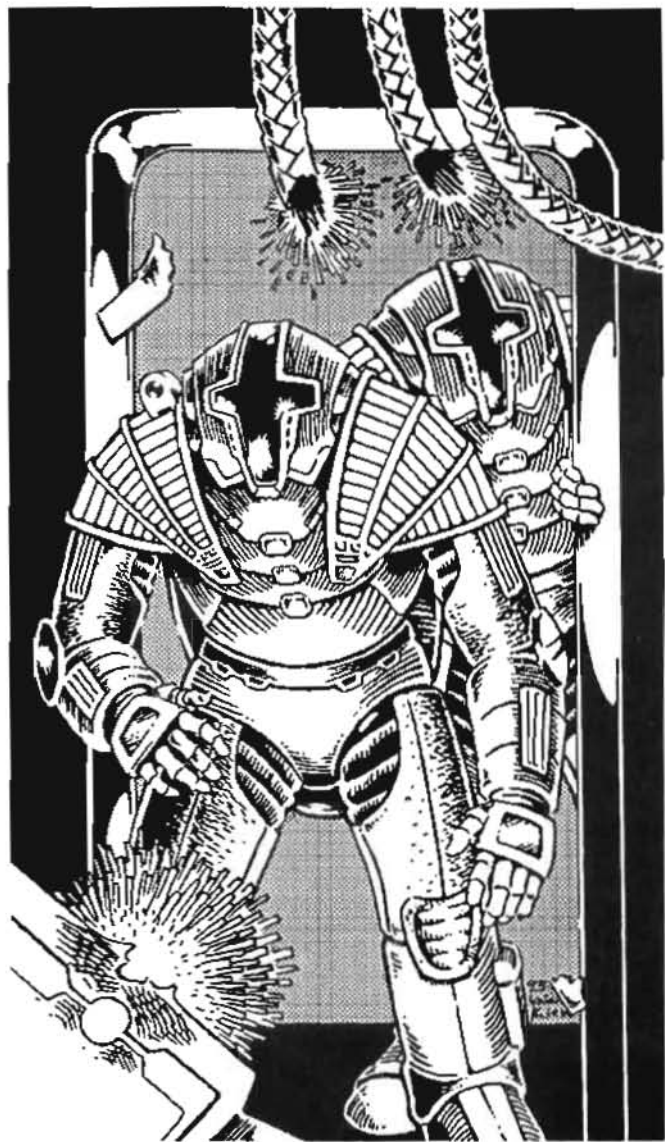
On the bridge, Coeur gave Snapshot a steely look, and the Oriflammen blushed.

"I'll just do that," Gaffer said, clipping himself to the bulkhead above the disabled pump with an elastic cord and drawing a spanner from the colossal tool kit he carried as an incidental load at his waist. "Why don't you look at the hull puncture, private?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see why there's no gravity," Gaffer went on, working to pry loose the damaged portions of the pump. "The shard looks like it wedged in the deck and shorted out the floor grid. Want I should fix it, or leave it so you can get to the hull?"

"Ah, leave it for now," Badger said, hovering at the inward bulge in the ceiling, distended downward to a hole the size of a





man's fist. "We should be able to fix this with tools on hand."

On the bridge, Coeur let out a heavy sigh.

"Somebody really did pray, didn't they?"

"It could have been much worse," Gyro seconded. "A meter forward, and we might have had a fuel explosion."

Since Coeur was looking at Gyro, she only caught the motion of Snapshot's lips as they finished a silent vovue.

*Thank you, God.*

Meanwhile, Badger had also clipped himself to the forward bulkhead and begun his own impromptu repairs. He had to cut away a square meter of irreparably warped hull—and therefore exposed himself directly to the blast of energetic neutrons outside—but Crowbar's foresight had left enough spare armor on hand to replace it with a temporary patch. All he had to do was keep a steady hand and an eye on his suit's internal radiation counter.

"Hey, Badger," Gaffer called up after a few minutes, "I'm going below for a few minutes. I've fixed the pump, but I'm going to need some other parts to fix the artificial gravity."

"Understood," Badger said, looking down from the gaping hole with a 100-kilogram sheet of super-dense plate in one gauntlet and a laser welder in the other. "Just don't fix it too soon; I wouldn't want to drop this."

"Roger that. Be back momentarily."

"Affirmative."

\*\*\*

Marveling at the skill of the Marines, Coeur finally pulled herself away from the screen only when Gaffer announced that the fuel pump was repaired. Sure enough, the rugged power plant churned back to life a moment later, drawing from batteries at first to power its magnetic bottle, then switching over to conversion of liquid hydrogen to maintain continuous fusion. The HEPIaR heat exchangers, in turn, came on-line, and full maneuver power was restored to the vessel.

"Great work, guys," Coeur said into her headset as she strapped into the helm couch. "Power and thrust read nominal."

"Out...standing," Badger said. "Almost...done..."

A strange sort of huffing gasp had come into his voice, and Coeur turned immediately to Deep Six.

"Ee'Ka'a PooEEI" the Schalli swore. "Radiation building! 500...1000 rad!"

"What?"

Hearing the report, both Gyro and Snapshot suddenly turned forward in their chairs.

"I don't understand," Deep Six said, "What is causing that?" Coeur, however, did not wait for an explanation.

"Badger! Gaffer! Come in!"

"Gaffer here. What's up, bridge?"

"Gaffer, is Badger with you?"

"Negative. I went below to get some parts for the—"

"Forget about that—Badger's in trouble! We've just entered a high radiation zone!"

"What? How strong?"

"I don't know—over 1000 rads, but it's falling to a safe level! Gaia, get out there and help him!"

"I'm on my way!"

Numb with shock, Gyro and Snapshot nevertheless retained the presence of mind to remember Gaffer's camera. They, Coeur and Deep Six turned to regard its monitor, which showed the silent form of Badger, floating in the hole at the top of the ship with a sheet of armor still in his hand.

"Fikk, this armor's hot!" Gaffer sent, as he closed on the body. "He's glowing in gammas!"

On the bridge, every hint of color drained from Snapshot's face.

"Oh shit," she said.

"Physic," Coeur spoke into her headset, with a strange, uneasy calm, "get down to engineering immediately. Newton, take over engineering."

"If only he'd got the armor in place," Gyro said.

Coeur nodded. The ship's armor was thinner than the heavy battle dress shell, but it had one thing the personal armor did not: intricately crafted polyurethane mesh laden with hydrogen atoms to trap fast neutrons. Well-designed for that special role, it was nevertheless fairly thick and expensive, and the negligible protection it offered against direct enemy fire discouraged battle dress designers from seeing it as a necessity.

"Sir," Deep Six said softly, "I think I've discovered what caused the burst. Some kind of object—probably an asteroid—crashed into the planet and shot a plume of particles into the magnetosphere. Quite possibly the same object that shed the meteoroid we ran into."

"Thank you, Sixer. That's useful to know."

But Coeur's attention, like Gyro's and Snapshot's, was less on *why* it had happened than on *that* it had happened—that, and the strangely peaceful face of Badger that looked up at them when Gaffer got his private onto the lower deck and Physic rushed into the repressurized engine room with Newton.

Strangely peaceful, and dead.

# Chapter Five

Although *Homet* had a modern dispensary, and *Physic* was familiar with procedures to reduce the effects of ionizing radiation in the body, one look at *Badger* was enough to tell her they were too late. With the enhanced strength of his own battle dress, *Gaffer* pried open the private's suit to get its irradiated metal away from him, but *Physic's* pocket medical scanner confirmed the worst.

"It looks bad. All his internal organs were cooked by radiation."

"There must be something you can do," *Gaffer* said, "he was only out there a few minutes."

"I'm sorry," *Physic* said, standing and pocketing her diagnostic computer. "He's dead already. But that suit of his is pretty hot; I wouldn't leave it in the ship."

"What about *Badger*?" *Gaffer* said. "Is he radioactive?"

"No, not too bad—it's the metal in his suit we have to worry about. Yours is fine, as long as you change it for a vac suit and stow it in an empty compartment. His, I'd just as soon throw overboard."

"Understood," *Gaffer* said, his face unreadable behind the lowered visor of his armor, but his voice stiff and deliberately controlled. "I'll space the suit." Which he did. After he emerged from the starboard airlock, he found *Red Eye* and the remainder of the drop troops.

"How's he doing?" the gunnery sergeant asked.

"He didn't make it."

"Oh God," *Widget* murmured.

"Look," *Gaffer* said, "I took my limit for the day, but there's still a piece of hull plate that needs securing topside. *Red Eye*, take a detail and fix it."

"Understood," *Red Eye* said, raising a ponderous armored arm to salute.

"Maybe I should look after the sergeant," *Widget* suggested.

"I'm all right," *Gaffer* protested.

"I think she should be the judge of that," Red Eye countered.

"Really, sergeant," Widget said, "radiation sickness is nothing to mess around with."

"Fine—fine—" Gaffer said, "just get up there and fix that hull! Badger...Badger gave his life for it."

"Don't worry," Red Eye said, "we'll be done before you know it."

\*\*\*

With maneuver power restored, Coeur made promptly away from the worst zone of induced radiation and down toward Novolen's south pole, where supersonic winds prevalent elsewhere on the planet fell to a speed the little ship could manage for skimming. True to their pledge, Red Eye's work gang secured a hull patch within minutes of beginning their work, and the once-again-streamlined *Homet* raced on into the dark bowels of the gas giant below.

Along the way, RCN *Fougade*, one of Zloga's two system defense boats, began powering toward *Homet* from the nearest orbit to offer assistance, but Coeur waved her off.

"Thanks for the offer, guys, but no need to tie you down here. We're in good order and maneuvering under our own power."

From 20 million kilometers away, *Fougade's* reply took two-and-a-half minutes to come back.

"Roger, *Homet*, understood. We'll monitor your channel until you jump, though, all the same."

"We appreciate it. *Homet* out."

Her positive comments to the SDB notwithstanding, Coeur was tempted to turn the ship away and make her best speed for Zloga on the fractional fuel remaining after jump. She did not need Deep Six, however, to calculate the time to a planetary intercept with the fuel remaining—weeks at best.

"Everybody dies sometime," Coeur told the navigator later, as their ship raced through the lightning-riddled methane-ammonia murk at Novolen's pole. "It just shouldn't be like that."

"Our greatest poets often speak of tragedy like this," Deep Six said, "attempting to find meaning in the lives of beings destroyed by circumstance."

"What meaning is that?"

"Mostly that life is meaningless—at least on an individual level."

"That helps."

Deep Six paused a moment before bringing up a sensitive issue that custom demanded addressing.

"Sir, it occurs to me that the private had no family, and



requested burial in space if the circumstance arose. May I assume that we will hold such a ceremony on the way to jump point?"

"Yes. It's eight hours to jump point from here, so we'll do it at the start of the morning watch."

"If it will help, sir, I could look up an appropriate theological observation for you to deliver."

Coeur smiled, for the first time in hours.

"That's okay, Sixer. I'm sure I'll think of something to say."

\*\*\*

When Vega Zorn—then, as now, wanted by the Coalition—had returned Coeur and Drop Kick to the Coalition fleet at Ra two months earlier, she was disinclined to stay and chat. Instead, she put the Arse and Marine in the emergency low berth of a three-ton life-raft and stayed in-system just long enough to dump them overboard and hurry back to jump space on her fuel reserve.

Fortunately for Coeur and Drop Kick, *Homet* herself was on hand to rescue and revive them, giving Crowbar an unexpected toy to play with—the life-raft's low berth. Unsafe to carry regular passengers in, it nevertheless gave *Homet* the useful ability to put future casualties "on ice" for later treatment, and the engineer eventually installed it in a starboard compartment once set aside for the transport of live—but frozen—livestock.

Given the suddenness of Badger's death, many of his mates—led by Snapshot—advocated taking his body home on ice. Physic, however, was adamant that his body was irrevocably dead, and at any rate his organs were useless for transplantation. As per his will, he would be spaced with full honors.

Among the crew, only Crowbar (in sick bay), Deep Six and Newton (at watch on the bridge and engine room) were not in attendance when the corpse, dressed in parade uniform and sealed in sturdy plastic, was laid in the port airlock, just ahead of Snapshot's turret. Using Dawn League custom as their precedent, they lined the corridor abaft the lock in order of rank: Coeur and Physic first, then the gunners, then the sergeants Drop Kick, Gaffer and Red Eye, and finally the rest of the Marines. By accident or design, this mixed the three cavalry corporals in among their infantry counterparts for the first time as a group, and the two women Mercy and Widget found themselves discussing how little either of them really knew about Badger while the sergeants and Coeur went over last-minute details together.

"I didn't know him very well," Mercy said in a whisper, "but he seemed like a nice guy. Weren't you two in the same unit?"

"The same training section, yes, led by Red Eye. Fubar and Gremlin were in Gaffer's section."

Mercy gave a glance at the muscular Fubar and balding Gremlin. Through overheard comments between Snapshot and her own sergeant, Drop Kick, Mercy suspected these two had enjoyed their Sergeant Gaffer's riding of Badger—though joy was presently far-removed from the grim aspect of their faces.

Snapshot, meanwhile, showed no obvious emotion of any kind. Whereas Gyro stood at relaxed parade rest, legs apart and hands crossed behind her back, Snapshot stayed at full attention, hands at her sides and eyes turned right to the open inner door of the adjacent airlock. Yet, to a person familiar with the Oriflammen—that singular people who survived near-global extinction through sheer grit and were beholden to no man or creature for that survival—there was a deeper emotion than grief or sorrow in Snapshot's demeanor.

Respect.

"Actually," Widget said, "none of us knew him that well. The skipper asked me what I remembered about him since we were in boot camp together, but I couldn't think of much."

"Loner?"

"No, not really. It's just that...well...he didn't seem to care much about making friends, or showing off, or bitching about the DI."

"What's left?"

"Training, I guess. He did like the technical stuff."

"So what was he doing in the infantry?" Whiz Bang asked, bending past Bongo and Mercy to address Widget while remaining in line. "Why didn't he join the Navy?"

"Sea Gypsies are usually blackballed from the Navy," Widget answered. "He probably figured ship's troops was the route to honors and OCS."

Seeing the sergeants breaking away from Coeur and returning to their places, Mercy stifled further comment. Since Badger had not enlisted in the Arses (who, Marines joked, would take anyone with a pulse—and weren't that picky about the pulse), Mercy suspected that space duty alone was not his objective.

*Sad*, Mercy thought, *that a kid like that has to die to be treated with some dignity.*

"Fall in!" Gyro suddenly snapped, and all hands came to sharp attention in a single line. A moment later—a moment weighted with heavy silence—Coeur took a step away from the line and turned 180 degrees to face the crew.

Unlike Snapshot, who betrayed no emotion, or Gaffer, whose jaw was set in a cast of hypercontrol, Coeur wore a thoughtful and introspective expression, as if she were still considering what to say. She did not, at any rate, have any notes to read from.

"Dear comrades," she said finally, lifting her eyes, "we are gathered here to pay our last respects to Private First Class Kelly Reyes—Badger—who gave his life in defense of his ship and her crew.

"To be perfectly frank, no one on this ship seems to have known Badger very well. He pretty much did his job and left everyone else alone to do theirs. It is not my belief, however, that Badger lived an empty or meaningless life. Those who knew him best attest that his abiding ambition was success as a ship's trooper, apparently with the ultimate objective of earning a commission. It was not an obvious goal—he didn't proclaim it loudly or advertise it to everyone he met—but I believe it defines the life and character of this man.

"Badger was only 20. He had no family to speak of, and his home was pretty bleak. Badger's eyes, therefore, were on the future, and indeed, I have never met a man who was so perfect a metaphor for all of us. Our past—the world my generation left us—is a barren wasteland, and therefore, like Badger, we turn away from the past and look forward to the future, with the faith that our work will build a better age.

"Since Badger did not express a religious preference, it is not our place to commend his soul to any paradise or heaven of human conception. Nevertheless, it is entirely fitting that we sustain his memory in our thoughts and commend his body to the boundless depths of space, as was his desire.

"Let us bow our heads a moment, then, to formulate our thoughts in silence."

Led by Coeur's example, the Arses and Marines then bowed their heads, looking up only after Coeur raised her own head and spoke to Gyro.

"Order."

"Company," the executive officer boomed, "hand salute!"

The assembled crew complied with crisp precision, and Coeur turned again to face the airlock and close the inner hatch. A second keypad instruction then cycled the airlock to one-quarter pressure and shut off gravity in the chamber so that Badger's body would float out gently on the gush of air drawn by vacuum through the opened outer iris valve.

Though it was not spoken, all understood that Badger's body would not drift forever in the boundless depths of space. Instead, it would eventually spiral into the atmosphere of Novolen, where friction would incinerate the body more completely than any terrestrial cremation furnace.

"Ready, front," Gyro said after a decent interval, "stand at ease," when the outer iris valve was heard to shut and the airlock

began to repressurize. Still at the airlock controls, however, Coeur did not yet dismiss the company, and Mercy caught a curious movement to her right. Shifting her eyes right, she caught the end of a silent statement from Snapshot to the dead Marine, expressed in the Anslan gestural language learned by many Arses and Marines for silent line-of-sight communication.

*"Farewell. I hope it's better on the other side."*

"Amen," Red Eye seconded.

"Company dismissed," Coeur said.

...

After the assembly broke up, most of the Marines and Arses returned promptly to their duty stations—the ship was, after all, still within the gravity well of a dangerous gas giant. A few were later than others to leave, offering last-minute condolences to the surviving drop troops. Being *Hornet's* captain, Coeur remained on hand after everyone else left, in a gesture of respect for Badger, eventually finding herself alone with the only other person compelled by courtesy to remain on hand.

"I heard you talking to Physic," Gaffer said. "It sounds like Crowbar's going to make it."

"Yeah, but he always was a lucky cuss. I'm almost tempted to think she's keeping him in bed to keep him from looking over her shoulder when she stands the jump watch."

"Are all the jump watches covered?"

"Yeah. Physic, Gyro and Newton can cover it. Physic did want to know if you could let Widget go, though, to keep an eye on Crowbar for a couple of days."

"Oh, sure. No problem."

By Gaffer's pensive expression, Coeur suspected he wanted to say something more, but wasn't quite ready to come to the point.

"You know, skipper, that was a nice eulogy you said for Badger, short and to the point. I think he would have appreciated it."

"Maybe he did appreciate it."

"His soul, you mean?"

Coeur nodded once.

"I wasn't much on church myself, as a kid," Gaffer said, "but I got religion the first time we had live fire over our heads at boot camp."

"We got to skip that at Scout school," Coeur said, "but I know what you mean."

"I've heard that a lot of Remnants have trouble with the idea of God," Gaffer went on, "what with Virus killing practically everyone alike—you know, good and bad."



"That doesn't seem fair to God," Coeur suggested. "It was humans who programmed Virus to kill, after all."

Gaffer shrugged. "True. Say, skipper," Gaffer said, as if just remembering something, "I've been thinking about the mess arrangements. If you don't mind, I'd like to start having my troops take their mess with the crew and cavalry sections—for the sake of morale."

"Sounds fine. Thought about having your people drill with Drop Kick's, too?"

"I was going to delay that until we got closer to Mexit, but it's probably a good idea to get them used to working together. You never know when something unexpected's going to happen."

"No, you don't."

"By the way," Gaffer said, "would you like me to modify the roster for cleanup duty in the galley? You know, to include my troopers?"

"Actually, we don't really have a roster. We just use reverse alphabetical order, so the person closest to the end of the alphabet cleans up the galley first."

"Hm. Sounds simple enough."

"It started on our last voyage, when Whiz Bang suggested alphabetical order with Bonzo first."

Gaffer grinned.

"Funny. I suppose Badger would have had the duty last if he'd lived."

"Yeah, I suppose he would."

# Chapter Six

Since *Homet* had a full complement of 16 with Gaffer's troops included, the need to break mess into sections was even more paramount after Gaffer's troops stopped taking their mess separately in the loft. In the end, Red Eye and Gremlin ate with Coeur and Drop Kick's group, while Gaffer, Fubar and Widget joined a second group four hours later.

Early in the seven-day transit to Oriflamme, that second group was reinforced by a new member—Crowbar, back on his feet after a mere two days in sick bay, accompanied by Widget.

"How're you doing, Crowbar?" Gyro asked, standing up along with her four human mates in the lounge for breakfast. Deep Six and Newton, also there, were less certain about the human custom of showing respect by standing and simply refrained from starting in on the meals on their trays.

"I'm doing fine," the gangly engineer said, shooing away Widget as she attempted to keep a supporting hand on his elbow. "Jeez, it's not like an engineer's not going to take a little juice now and then."

"A little?" Widget said. "That was 30,000 volts!"

"Yeah, but at low amperage," Crowbar said, making for the autogalley to secure a meal tray. "Believe me, if the main power line surged, all you would've found was a black spot on the deck."

"Crazy old fart," Widget mumbled, falling in behind Crowbar to get her own tray and join him at the table.

"Well, I'm just glad to see you're well," Gaffer said, sitting down along with the others and raising his mug. "To absent friends."

"To absent friends," the lounge echoed.

"Indeed, it is good to see you are fully functional," Deep Six said, pausing a further moment before starting in on his bowl of krill pudding.

"Oh, I'm fine. I can't wait to see what Newton and Gyro here have done to my engine room."

"You may rest secure in the knowledge that It is intact and secure," Newton replied, eerily typing text into its translator with one arm as It fed fermented shellfish into its cloaca under the table with another. The cloaca, a single orifice in the bottom of the Hiver's body, served many functions—among them ingesting food, laying larvae and eliminating waste—but speech was not among its functions. Thus, a Hiver could talk and eat simultaneously, feeding itself with one arm and operating its translator with another, which was just one small reason why humans viewed their Hiver comrades as being extremely weird.

"Don't forget about Physic," Gyro said. "She took over the third watch."

"Yeah, I heard."

"Don't get me wrong," Gaffer interjected, "but personally, I'll feel a lot better when we don't have to have our doctor watch the jump drive."

"Why?" Newton asked. "Is her performance deficient?"

"You have to forgive the sergeant," Widget said. "He's one of those who thinks people ought to stay in their assigned place."

"Well, I'm not fossilized," Gaffer said, "I just think some people are better suited to some things, and some people are better suited to other things."

"I believe I understand," Newton said. "However, Physic is an accomplished master of quantum calculus and differential matrices—both key to comprehension of the jump governor."

The crew at the table absorbed this, then looked at Gaffer.

"Okay, so maybe she's one of those people who are good at two things."

In response, the other humans chuckled, and Deep Six chittered, expressing the amusement that only Newton didn't share in. Typical of its race, Newton never appeared to be amused by anything.

"You think that's odd," Widget said. "Just ask him his opinion about women in combat."

"Now, corporal," Gaffer said, "we have gone over that. My opinion is not that unusual."

"What is your opinion, sergeant?" Gyro asked.

"I happen to think," Gaffer said, choosing his words carefully, "that on the whole, taken as a group, men are much better suited to the infantry than women. Mind you, I didn't say every MOS, just infantry."

"Hmm," Gyro said. "What about you, Fubar?"

"I don't have any opinion," Fubar answered. "Just doesn't bother me one way or the other."

"All right, sergeant," Gyro said, "why do you think women aren't suited for the infantry?"

"Well, there's the physical demands of it, for one thing. Widget here's a good trooper—she can do the drill with any man—but that's unusual. Most women don't have the upper body strength to serve as infantry troopers."

"I am curious," Newton said. "Given the broad range of physical ability among human beings from different planets, and the capacity of battle dress to magnify the strength and stamina of any individual, is it legitimate to generalize about differences in capacity between the human sexes?"

Since Hivers had only one sex—indeed, they all dropped a larva every month whether they had contact with other Hivers or not—Gyro and Crowbar could only assume the concept of sex was as weird to them as, well, Hivers were to humans.

"You really have it in for me, don't you?" Gaffer muttered.

"Please clarify," Newton requested.

"Forget it. Anyway, it's not the only issue. Even today, women are affected by a monthly hormone cycle that can be disruptive to discipline and good order under certain circumstances."

"Indeed," Deep Six said. "But is it not true that the male hormonal cycle fluctuates daily, causing unpredictable variations in aggression and hostility?"

Gaffer simply glowered at the impassive Schalli. "I wouldn't know about that fancy stuff. I only know how men fight."

"You know, it's funny," Crowbar said. "Back when I was a lancer, we came across a high-tech boneyard that tried to deal with that same issue. From the records, we pieced together that they had a big problem with violent crime before the Collapse, so the government put a chemical in the water supply to suppress male hormones."

"Did it work?" Fubar asked.

"Well, not exactly. Apparently, there was a measurable decrease in violent crime, but then the public found out about the plan and burned down the capital. Kind of makes you wonder how much biology is responsible for aggression."

Widget and Gyro smiled, but didn't comment.

"Fine," Gaffer said, "I give up. You believe whatever you want to believe."

"It is an intriguing idea," Newton said. "That by such a simple agency, a prime cause of violence could be removed from human society."

"I don't like the sound of that," Crowbar said. "You're not plotting anything, are you?"

"Negative, Crowbar," Newton replied. "As you alluded, human behavior is far too complex to be amenable to such simple chemical manipulation."



"Quite so," Deep Six agreed.

Whether or not the nonhumans were just being polite to their human mates Crowbar couldn't tell, but he didn't pursue the question any further, and the matter was dropped.

Only Gaffer, mindful of the example of the boneyard, kept a wary eye on Newton.

\*\*\*

The worst thing about being an artist, Coeur believed, was being asked for pictures by your friends: them, their dog, their best friend, etc. But Coeur had taken up painting for her own recreation and tended to discourage such frivolous requests by doing what she'd done with Drop Kick—asking for appropriate payment up front.

Yet Coeur was willing to make an exception for a worthy cause.

"So," Physic said, stepping into Coeur's stateroom, "you said the picture was finished?"

"Actually, it's been finished for a couple of hours," Coeur said, standing up from the chair at her desk, "but I figured I'd let it dry first. You want to see it?"

"Sure I want to see it."

"Okay," Coeur said, crossing over to her easel and lifting up the protective flap over the canvas.

"Wow, that is nice."

Coeur shrugged, regarding her own painting with a detached and critical eye. A composition in acrylic blue, black and silver, it featured the circular man-wheel symbol of the Arses alongside a *Hornet* in flight, all above a simple inscription:

RCS HORNET  
10161  
CAVE ACULEM

"Well, I've got to admit," Coeur said, "it is a bit of a stretch. I usually do landscapes."

"Could have fooled me," Physic offered. "I think it's fine."

"Thanks. You know, I think you're right; it's about time we had a unit patch."

"Well, I think so," Physic said, "although I've got to admit, I never thought I'd be spending this much time with the *Hornet*. What has it been, about a year since we first came aboard?"

"About that, yeah. But I suppose there's worse places to spend a year."

"Like with my husband?" Physic asked.

"Hey," Coeur said, raising her hands, "I didn't say it."

"No, you're right," Physic said. "On balance, it's been a good time."

Yes, Coeur thought, on balance. But what a weight Physic has on the down side of the balance—all those Hivers she couldn't save, seeing her husband go to prison, having Scissor die in her arms....

Coeur arrested that thought there, however. Her great regret from the past year was being away from *Hornet* when Scissor died—Scissor, the Hiver who'd offered Coeur command of *Hornet* in the first place.

"You know," Physic said, moving closer to examine the painting, "there's only one thing that bothers me about this emblem—the Latin motto I chose."

"It is supposed to say 'beware of the sting,' isn't it?"

"Yeah, either that or 'beware of her sting,' but unfortunately, it's been a while since we doctors were required to study Latin."

Coeur chuckled.

"Well, look on the bright side—since it's a dead language, there won't be any Romans to complain about it."

"True."

"So what's the plan from here?" Coeur asked, taking the canvas off its easel and handing it to Physic.

"Let's see," Physic said, taking the picture. "The first thing I'll do is take this over to Newton and have him laser scan it. After that, we'll load the image into a fabric emulator and use that to render our patches."

"Oh, that's too bad. I thought you were going to sew them by hand."

Physic aimed a dubious expression at Coeur.

"Yeah, right."

"Sorry, forgot you had a life. Carry on, doctor."

Physic offered a courteous salute and then departed, carrying the painting carefully under her arm.

\*\*\*

Since it was 1400 hours when Physic left Coeur's stateroom, the doctor expected the lower deck forward compartments of *Hornet* to be empty. While *Hornet* was in the hole, this was the time of day when Gaffer's Marines would be drilling in the loft, Drop Kick's people would be performing maintenance on their vehicles in the hold, Snapshot would be on the bridge, and Gyro would be in the engine room, relieving the sleeping Crowbar.

Which is a pity, Physic thought, since I thought up the design for this patch and I'd like to show it off.

Considering how much work Coeur had put into the painting, though, Physic decided not to take a detour through engineering

or the cargo hold and risk damaging the image. Instead, she proceeded straight-away to the open door of Newton's dimly lit stateroom/workshop. Fascinated by the jump fire visible through its window, Newton preferred to keep its lighting low to aid in its viewing of the crackling sparks outside.

"Good," Newton said, turning away from its large in-board window when it heard Physic knock, "I see you have the painting."

"Yep," Physic said, "fresh from the captain. So, are you ready to scan it?"

"Actually, no. During our last communication, I neglected to inform you that the shipboard maintenance schedule requires me to inspect the water supply at 1415 hours every day. However, I should be able to complete the task quickly and return in a brief span of minutes to help you scan the image."

"Well, I suppose I could do it myself," Physic said, "except I can't read the ideograms on your scanner."

"Please," Newton said, interposing itself between its laser scanner and the doctor, "do not attempt to use it yourself. The last human who attempted that burned out a bank of resistors, and it cost me my nest credit for a month to replace them."

"Oh, well, in that case, maybe I'll just wait for you."

"A prudent choice," Newton said. "I shall return momentarily."

And just like that, Newton was off, not so much as offering the human a chair before it left. Association with the Hivers accustomed Physic to such behavior, however, and she invited herself to a seat in a fold-down human chair recessed into the wall opposite the stateroom's giant window, one that incidentally gave her a view of the port fork corridor Newton had passed into.

*Well, what about that?* Physic thought, noting a steaming plate of what appeared to be corndogs on a low table near her chair. Smelling their deep-fried aroma, she remembered she had not yet had lunch. *Funny that Hivers have acquired a taste for a human food. I wonder if he'd mind if I took one?*

She set down the painting so it wouldn't get greasy and reached for one of the corndogs. Although lacking the handle inserted into the human versions, it was otherwise identical in smell and appearance to the carnival snacks Physic remembered from her youth. Wishing for some mustard, the doctor bit into the corndog and was pleasantly surprised by the rich flavor. She looked at the inside of the corndog, now cross-sectioned by her bite. *It's filled with cheese or something. That's a nice touch.*

Feeling a little rude at having eaten from Newton's lunch without asking permission, Physic bolted down the remainder,

slightly burning the roof of her mouth with the cheesy filling that squirted out. *I wonder if the filling was a human suggestion or a Hiver addition? Seems kind of frivolous for the Hivers to have done themselves. I'll have to find out from Newton.*

The reappearance of Newton a moment later offered the chance of a direct answer to that question, but, as Physic saw, Newton was not quite done with its work. The ship's water supply was accessed through a recessed panel in the corridor adjacent to Newton's stateroom, so she presumed the Hiver was adding some sort of anti-bacteriological agent to the water when it lifted a one-liter bottle to an access port and poured its contents in.

And then she saw Gaffer.

Unaware, perhaps, that Physic was watching him from the darkness of Newton's room, Gaffer hunkered low behind the lip of the nearest bulkhead iris valve—15 meters away—training a small camera on the seemingly oblivious Newton. Gaffer remained there only a moment, dipping back below the lip of the iris valve seconds after Physic spotted him, and the doctor was keen to think she'd been hallucinating until Newton returned to his room and she asked him about it.

"Newton," she said, "did you notice that Gaffer was out there taking pictures of you?"

"Yes," Newton said, setting the empty bottle on a low table. "He did that yesterday, as well."

"Well, isn't that kind of strange?"

"To be honest, doctor, the machinations of the military mind are strange to me. Doubtless, it was part of some tactical exercise he was running with his troops."

"Oh, yeah, I hadn't thought of that."

"A trivial matter, at any rate," Newton said. "Now let us proceed with the production of our patches."

"Oh, wait just a minute," Physic said, putting out a hand to stop Newton. "I was going to ask you about your corndogs. I know I should have asked before I had one, but I'm curious, how did the Hivers wind up adding such a peculiarly human food to their diet?"

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes, I did, thank you."

"How surprising. Most humans profess to find them disgusting."

"What's in them?"

"Nothing toxic, I assure you. It is simply a variety of parasitic segmented worm, much like your Terran leeches, batter-dipped and fried."

"Ungh."



"They are quite fascinating, one of the most adaptive creatures I know of. Although introduced to worlds with widely varying biochemistries, they are almost always able to find a niche in the food-chain. Usually they gain entrance to large creatures through vulnerable areas such as the sensory organs, or digestive or reproductive openings. Here they create colonies which live within open lesions, sometimes burrowing deeper to feed on other organs. But when required, they are also able to subsist entirely on carrion or even excrement. And their defensive abilities are impressive as well."

"No, really, that's okay," Physic protested, waving her hand to stop Newton's explanation.

"When threatened, they secrete a sheath of quite aromatic mucus which—"

Quite in spite of herself, Physic suddenly threw up on Newton's floor. Immediately mortified by her response, she bent to clean it up.

"Sorry."

"That's quite all right," Newton said, keying a note into its desktop computer with one hand while operating its translator with another. "In fact, of the six humans I have described this food to, you are the sixth to respond in that identical manner. Although it does make me wonder why the Ithklur never react that way when we tell *them* what's in the 'corndogs.'"

"I'm glad to be of service," Physic muttered weakly, but Newton did not appear to hear her, as it stroked furiously at its computer input spheres.

*Perhaps I overdid it a little this time. I wonder if it was the part about the mucus?*

• • •

Physic's incident with the corndog notwithstanding, the ship's patch project proved to be a complete success. Within a day, the colorful round patches were circulated to all hands, and every member of the crew had affixed one to at least one article of clothing—usually a vest and body sleeve—by the time *Hornet* came out of jump at her next destination: Oriflamme.

Beholding that ancient world for the first time, a world settled so long before, Coeur could not help but think about the common strand of heritage that linked its people to her own homeworld, Terra. About 3,500 years earlier, a consortium of Terran colonists—primarily Germans and Russians—booted the original inhabitants off the planet, the personnel of a small Vilani outpost, and renamed it Nemyer in honor of their first governor. Now, millennia later, empires had come and gone, but the

people of Nemyer remained, carving out a living on the hellish rock they renamed Oriflamme—The Golden Flame—in honor of the founding of the Dawn League.

Even from 100 diameters out, Coeur and Deep Six on the bridge of *Hornet* perceived the distinctive geography of the planet. Although only 41 percent of the surface was land, the area appeared greater since most of the land was concentrated in four great continents straddling the equator. In a 45-day orbit around its dim orange sun, Oriflamme was lucky not to be tidally locked, but even so the seasonal heating and cooling of each hemisphere sent wind and sea currents whipping through the straits and channels between the continents, dressing the world in perpetual storm fronts and making safe travel anywhere a dicey prospect at best.

*It's no wonder, Coeur thought, that 90 percent of them were killed when Virus hit.*

"Receiving the traffic beam," Deep Six said. "Dobroye Downport sends greetings and asks our intentions."

"Code 77," Coeur answered. "Liaison."

Deep Six recognized the Coalition request for official contact and relayed it in turn. From 13 million kilometers away, a prompt response would come in nine seconds, so a delay of almost five minutes suggested urgent off-channel communications being executed—the famous red tape often alluded to by Snapshot.

*"Hornet, your code has been processed. Please disregard the general traffic beam and follow the beam at 120.6 megahertz to the Lord Technarch's field at Dobroye Downport."*

"Understood, Oriflamme Control. We will comply. *Hornet* out."

Deep Six then switched off the radio set, clearing the HUD before his nose to work on the requisite course correction. It was elementary work beside the computation of a jump plot, and he finished it in seconds so Coeur could promptly execute the new approach.

"The Lord Technarch's field," Deep Six said. "I am impressed."

"Are you really impressed," Coeur asked, "or are you just practicing your human idioms?"

"No, I am impressed."

• • •

Just after coming down from orbit, *Hornet* passed across a storm-wracked continental realm of rocks and wasteland without so much as a single city evident.

"That's Thron Desteufels," Snapshot said, looking at the same sensor images as Gyro and her mates on the bridge, "the Devil's Throne."

"Sounds pleasant," Gyro replied. "That where you used to live?"

"No, nobody lives up here. I used to live in Dobroye, up ahead."

Like Aubaine's Brusman, Dobroye Starport sat on its world's equator to give the advantage of rotational momentum to launching craft. That location, and a sheltered harbor for the benefit of sea traffic, made the city of 30 million a natural hub of commerce and government, but it had its drawbacks as well. Daytime temperatures routinely exceeded 60° C, and access to the rest of West Zentrum continent was tenuous, blocked to the north by a dense rain forest and to the south by the granite peaks of Sredinnyy Khrebet, the Central Range.

"Ah, home," Snapshot said, looking through her turret gun sight at the precisely ordered tracts of apartment housing and industrial parks that dominated the city.

"That?" Gyro asked. "I always pictured something more medieval."

"Just because it's a feudal technocracy doesn't mean it's primitive," Snapshot returned.

"Yeah, I know. Sorry."

Just then *Hornet* slowed for her final approach to the Lord Technarch's field, an area apart from the built-up center of the city but adjacent to both the starport and seaport docks. Like any port area, this was heavily trafficked, but Oriflamme's TL9 did not yet allow mastery of HEPlaR technology. Most of Oriflamme's aircraft were therefore either aerodynamic aircraft or helicopters of some sort—albeit very advanced and efficient airplanes and helicopters.

"You know, Gyro, on second thought, maybe it is primitive," Snapshot admitted, as *Hornet* circled around a low-flying squadron of burly Thunderchicken attack helicopters and settled to a landing behind the walls of her assigned berth. Unlike the regular commercial berths—protected by retractable tarps—this one featured a roof of composite laminate armor a quarter of a meter thick, already rolled back to admit *Hornet*. Being many times thicker—if less sophisticated—than the armor of *Hornet*, Coeur suspected it would protect the ship not only from the elements but any heavy artillery shells that happened to fall in the area.

"All right, Gyro," Coeur said, once the ship was powered down and secure, "here's the plan. Drop Kick and I will take the

air-raft over to Government House, while you and the crew wait for a shipyard crew to show up and evaluate our damage."

"Do you think that's prudent, sir? All we probably need is a permanent hull patch, and we could do that ourselves."

"A-hem."

"Sorry, sir," Gyro said, recognizing the meaning of Coeur's cough. "I suppose that would make it look like we don't trust them to do some simple welding work."

"Right. And that's not the impression we want to give."

"Understood. We'll follow the shipyard's recommendations."

"Very good. But do keep an eye on them all the same."

"Is shore leave authorized, then?"

Coeur looked across at Deep Six, who had dug up the appropriate library data on the subject.

"I recommend that we remain on board," Deep Six said, "unless the ship requires extensive repairs. Although we are allowed general access to the entire planet, local citizens are generally restricted to their own region, and you may be detained if you are caught outside the starport without your ID card."

"Well, at least the police are usually nice about it," Snapshot interjected.

"That's okay," Gyro said. "We'll just stay with the ship."

\*\*\*

#### *"On Oriflammen Character"*

*(excerpt from "A Visitor's Guide to Oriflamme,"  
published by the Coalition Infonet, NE 1)*

*Particularly in recent years, citizens of Aubaine and her Federalist allies have become increasingly concerned by Oriflamme's seemingly willful self-interest, citing such examples as the use of Oriflammen Marines (unsupported by Coalition partners) to command and exploit stellar resources on the Back Face of the RC for the benefit of Oriflamme alone. The Oriflammen, however, take a different view. In their judgment, it is merely fair for them to be granted such independent license to make up for the world's technological lag behind Aubaine, and the general concentration of Coalition assets toward the Front Face.*

*Sociologists, too, disagree on the issue of whether Oriflamme's society can be termed "expansionistic." Throughout the world's history, its harsh environment has encouraged the formation of a traditional command economy (what is termed feudal technocracy) to ensure that key industries and services are maintained. While private property and limited free enterprise do exist on Oriflamme, practically all economic activity is closely controlled by regional*



*technarchs, responsible for preservation of the traditional status quo in production and distribution of goods. Individual citizens do earn and save money, and even exercise a certain control over their choice of occupation, but movement from one technarch's domain to another is tightly controlled to preserve a reliable labor pool. The domains, in turn, observe traditional customs regarding imports and exports, with free market competition severely frowned upon.*

*In sum, Oriflamme is a very traditional world, and it is less likely that its objective is overt expansion so much as it is preservation of its traditional way of life. In the view of many Oriflammen, the high-minded Aubani, with their impractical visionary schemes and too-great trust in the good intentions of the mysterious Hivers, are poor candidates for leadership of the RC. Therefore, they feel, as long as the RC looks to Aubaine for leadership, Oriflamme will be justified in taking any steps necessary to preserve the integrity of her own society.*

Since *Homet's* open-top air-raft was stowed forward of the loft, Gaffer's troopers quartered there were responsible for preparing it for launch. Like everything that the well-drilled troopers were responsible for, it was done well—the alternative being not to do it at all.

"How about that?" Coeur said, settling into the pilot's seat beside Drop Kick as the shell over the air-raft berth withdrew above them, "the tank's topped up, the turbine's rewinding and the traffic net is already locked in."

"Yeah. Just a week training with us and already they're better troopers."

"Yeah, right."

Drop Kick took a deep breath of air then, wanting to sense its difference from Aubaine's.

"Smell something?"

"No, just wanted to feel how thin the air is."

"It shouldn't be that noticeable," Coeur said, engaging the air-raft's contra-grav and lifting them away from its berth. "We eased the ship down to 0.6 atmospheres during the flight."

"Sorry. Force of habit."

"Actually, it does have a unique smell, though, doesn't it? Sort of fish mixed with smog. It must be great when the temperature maxes out."

"Oh, I don't know," Drop Kick said. "I think a guy could get used to it."

Coeur smiled.

"Yeah, I'll bet."

Moments later they were clear of *Homet*, guided by Dobroye

Traffic Control on an automatic course above the rooftops of the adjacent berths, allowing Coeur to relax and look around at the city. Although she had never been to Oriflamme, Coeur recognized their destination easily enough, towering over lesser structures in the center of the city 10 kilometers away—Government House, the palace of the Lord Technarch often featured in news coverage of the planet.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Drop Kick said.

"I was going to say repulsive," Coeur replied. "But I guess it is a practical design."

"Well, it would sure make me sleep easier."

"True."

What Coeur's esthetic sense objected to was the profusion of spikes and spires that seemed to litter every inch of the palace—spiny protrusions that gave the building an aspect not unlike that of a frightened porcupine, but effective enough in deterring the sort of drop assault Gaffer's troopers specialized in.

As the air-raft passed over the edge of the Lord Technarch's field, troops in ceramic body armor waved to the air-raft from the top of a perimeter wall, signaling all-clear.

"A lot of security here," Drop Kick observed.

"It's the rebels, probably."

"You don't think they'd hit the starport, do you?"

Coeur looked around cautiously before answering—a needless gesture of habit, since they were 100 meters above the ground.

"Look, sergeant, you don't want to spread this around, but the rebels aren't as quiet as you might think. Two months ago, this whole port was shut down by a bomb threat."

"It was?"

"A publicity stunt, I'm sure. But it could make our reception from the government frosty, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean. You don't think they think we have anything to do with the rebels, do you?"

"Who knows. Just try not to say anything that makes them any more likely to think so."

Drop Kick nodded, then looked out the side of the air-raft. Scooting along at 80 kph, they were still five minutes from the palace, and Drop Kick's prolonged silence led Coeur to ask about something else that had been bothering her recently.

"Drop Kick, I've been worrying about Snapshot."

"Why's that?" the sergeant asked, turning his head back.

"It's Badger. As far as I could tell, she was just about the best friend he had on the ship, and I'm worried that she's not more upset about his death."

"Oh, she's upset, all right," Drop Kick said.

"How can you tell?"

"It's a way she gets. Most of us—when we're upset, we show it. Snapper—well, she packs it away somewhere in the back of her mind and unloads it later when it's not so painful. Like, take her last boyfriend, for instance...."

"Yes?"

"Well, maybe I shouldn't tell you; it is kind of personal."

Coeur shrugged.

"Oh, all right," he said, "it's not that personal. I always knew there was some other guy she'd been with here on Oriflamme, but she said almost nothing about him. Then, one day we get to talking about our future and she just unloads on this guy—about how he was a jerk and he cheated on her and so forth. Evidently, he's really gotten under her skin."

"Hm."

"That was the only time she talked about it, though. It's like she took the emotion out of its closet, aired it out a bit, then put it right back where it came from."

"So what you're saying, then, is that I shouldn't worry about her."

Drop Kick nodded. "Basically, yes."

"Fine."

Moments later, close to their destination, the air-raft lowered itself to a few meters above the ground, and the looming shadow of Government House passed over Coeur and Drop Kick, chilling them despite the balmy weather of the region. Close-defense cannons, guided by radar, tracked them ominously as they came over the palace grounds, and a voice from the air-raft computer told Coeur to be alert that landing was imminent.

Less sophisticated than Aubaine's traffic net, Oriflamme's could only guide them into the area of their destination. Landing required Coeur to take active control as they powered into an open bay near the base of a peripheral tower. Conspicuously, most of the parked craft she maneuvered to avoid were not native, being rather high-tech speeders and g-carriers in the silver paint of the Lord Technarch's house.

"Don't worry, we'll park it!" an Oriflamme Marine lieutenant with a clipboard yelled, rushing over from the shelter of an equipment bay as Coeur came to a stop.

"Lieutenant D'Esprit," Coeur said, stepping out of the air-raft, "Coalition Exploratory Service."

The lieutenant gave a cursory salute and then looked at his clipboard as Drop Kick started around the other side of the air-raft.

"Lt. Antonov. You are from RCS *Hornet*, correct?"

"Affirmative."

"Very good. Lord Mestrovic has instructed me to convey you to his office. This way."

Drop Kick barely got around the air-raft before Antonov wheeled about and began marching across the grated deck plating of the bay. Hastening after him, Coeur and Drop Kick found themselves brought up to an impressive security station, where more troops in body armor examined their Coalition ID cards and subjected them to retina scans in both eyes.

"I've got to hand it to you," Drop Kick said to Antonov afterward, blinking his eyes as they made for an adjacent elevator bank, "you are thorough."

Antonov did not comment. Doubtless, Coeur reasoned, the government was concerned about people having new eyes implanted to fool their sensors, and scanned both eyes accordingly.

Impressively, the elevator was a fast maglev system, capable of moving into side corridors as well as up and down. The cab delivered them to a distant part of the palace within seconds—after alternately pressing them toward the back of the cab and down toward the floor with its acceleration.

*I guess they haven't quite mastered inertial compensation,* Coeur thought.

"Come," Antonov said.

The area he led them into was conspicuously businesslike, a waiting area with artistically molded black desks counterpointing rosewood wall panels and brass fittings. Populated by a half-dozen young men and women in business dress, it gave the impression of nothing quite so much as a modern corporate office. What was conspicuously absent were windows. Consistent with the defensive architecture of Government House, Coeur suspected they were low in the center of one of the towers.

"Office Director Gashugam," Antonov said to a woman with a severe haircut, "these are personnel from the starship *Homet*."

"Very good. His Lordship is expecting them."

Stiff as ever, Antonov wheeled again and departed.

"This way," Gashugam said, standing from her desk and escorting Coeur and Drop Kick into the office of the Lord Technarch himself.

"Ah, good, you're here. Shut the door behind you, would you, Ms. Gashugam?"

She did, leaving Coeur and Drop Kick in deferential silence as they beheld Councilor Technarch Mestrovic at his desk—a leading member of the Council of Technarchs, the government of the largest planet in the Coalition.



The first thing Coeur noticed, when Mestrovic stood, was that he was smaller than she expected—though she was told that he preferred to be photographed from below to make himself look taller. A bit shorter than herself, he was nevertheless a striking man, with high cheekbones, gray hair and flashing gray eyes that lent themselves to dramatic glances when he had the benefit of a teleprompter during a speech. Like the clericals outside, he wore a conservatively tailored business suit with no obvious adornment or decoration.

"Captain Coeur D' Esprit," Mestrovic said, after stepping out from behind his desk to shake her hand, "am I right?"

"Yes, sir. And this is Sergeant Major Vin Escher, my tactician."

Mestrovic shook his hand, too, with a demeanor much more polite than that of his lieutenant.

"Sir," Coeur said, "you must be tremendously busy. If this is an awkward time to see you...."

"Oh, heavens no. I want to talk to you about your mission."

"Our mission?" Drop Kick asked, suspiciously.

"Well, what I assume is your mission. Please, sit down."

Coeur and Drop Kick accepted the offered seats—quite plush, as it happened—and turned to face the reseated Lord Technarch across his desk.

"Given the use of Code 77, I assume you're here about the Wolfowitz matter."

"Yes, sir," Coeur said. "Commodore Lathrop expressed a desire that we stop here along the way and make clear our mission objectives."

"Probably unnecessary, but proceed."

"Essentially, sir, our orders are twofold. Our first priority is to discover the fate of Z—uh, Wolfowitz's *Crazy Jane* and her crew, and recover them if possible. Our second is to ascertain the likelihood that they discovered a relic depot on Mexit, and deny it to enemies of the Coalition if necessary."

"Do you think that's what you'll find?"

"We have reason to believe so, yes."

"I assume you mean the photograph of Wolfowitz and the black globe generator."

*Well, that's that,* Coeur thought. *I guess he knows as much as we do.*

"Don't worry, Captain D' Esprit," Mestrovic said, "our researchers couldn't make the slightest sense out of a black globe generator. If you find one, you're welcome to it."

"Actually, sir, our mission isn't to recover any artifacts. If a friendly government does control the depot, we'll try to negotiate friendly relations and leave the particulars to the diplomats

later. If not, well, we'll do what we have to."

Mestrovic nodded, but said nothing.

*All right, Mestrovic, Coeur thought, what do you really want?*

"Based on the success of your expedition to Sauler," Mestrovic said finally, "I imagine you'll do quite well. However, let me tell you something of my situation here on Oriflamme.

"I do not have ultimate authority on this planet. All of the councilor technarchs together compose the Council of Technarchs, and together we share responsibility for ruling this planet. As a representative of that collective, therefore, I have been authorized to make a special request of you. "Under the provisions of the Articles of Confederation, Oriflamme wishes to contribute additional personnel to your mission."

Coeur first looked at Drop Kick, then back at Mestrovic.

"What kind of personnel?"

"Oh, nothing major," Mestrovic said, anticipating Coeur's concern. "Nothing like a squad of troopers, if that's what you're thinking."

"We couldn't carry a squad anyway," Drop Kick observed. "No room."

"How much room do you have?"

"Two staterooms," Coeur said. "Single or double occupancy."

"That will be perfect, then. The personnel are two junior technarchs."

"All right, your lordship," Coeur said, diplomatically, "you do have the authority to add personnel to a survey and rescue mission. I'd prefer to know why I'm taking them first, though."

"That's a little hard to explain."

"Try me."

"As you know, Wolfowitz was suspected of piracy and was disliked by a good many people. However, he was also undoubtedly an effective captain, and his starship performed a number of critical exploration missions for the Council of Technarchs before the Dawn League scouts subsumed that responsibility."

By "exploration," Coeur suspected he meant "targeted plunder," but kept her expression neutral.

"Naturally, we feel a certain loyalty to such an individual—and a deep sense of personal responsibility for determining what became of him."

*Yeah, I'll bet, Drop Kick thought, and you probably wouldn't mind knowing about any treasure he recovered either.*

Mental gears were meanwhile spinning in Coeur's head—that an ulterior motive was in play was more than likely, but what was it? Had Zero been sent to Mexit deliberately, perhaps to find something other than the black globe generator, or did the

technarchs simply smell a resource pool they wanted to get their hands on first, before the Arses?

Or was Ori Flamme up to something else altogether?

*Politics*, Coeur thought. *I hate politics.*

"If that's all it is, sir," she said, "I'm sure we can accommodate them."

"Well, that's outstanding. I'll have them notified immediately, so they can catch a jet down from Honfestung."

"Honfestung," Coeur said, "that's another city, isn't it?"

"Yes, the domain of Lord Leon An-Wing. The junior technarchs in question are his niece and an economist on retainer to his family."

"They might not need to rush," Coeur said. "Our ship has taken structural damage, and I haven't heard an estimate of the repair time. Assuming other ships are ahead of us, it might be several days...."

"Perish the thought," Mestrovic said, smiling. "My engineers have already begun their inspection and report that your ship will be fully repaired and refueled within the day."

In reply, Coeur summoned her most diplomatic smile.

"That is unexpectedly generous. Thank you."

"Please, you embarrass me. Are we not allies in a common cause?"

\*\*\*

"Say, Snapshot, got a minute?"

Alone on *Hornet's* bridge, where she was standing watch while repair crews started to work topside, Snapshot started at the question from an unexpected visitor.

"Sergeant Gaffer," she said, turning around in the pilot's chair, "what do you want?"

"Well, it doesn't have anything to do with Badger," the sergeant said, sensing Snapshot's piercing stare as the aft bridge hatch closed behind him. "And believe me, I wouldn't have bothered you if I didn't think you were the one person who'd understand my problem."

Despite herself, Snapshot was intrigued by that thought—that the big dork should actually need her help for something.

"What's the problem?"

"Well, first, let me get something straight. Your mates tell me there were some bad feelings between you and the ship's last Hiver adviser. Is that right?"

"What if it is?"

"Well, like I said, you might be the one person who can understand my situation. Snapshot, I've got concerns about Newton."

"So join the club," Snapshot offered. "Everybody knows the Hivers are always up to something they don't want you to know about."

"Yeah, right, manipulations. But I've got evidence—*evidence*—that Newton is actually threatening all of our lives."

"Go on."

Lifting his small camera out of its belt pouch, Gaffer continued. "In this, I've recorded suspicious activity from Newton around the ship's water supply. I think he's been trying to monkey with it—maybe to alter our basic behavior with some kind of drug."

"Alter our behavior?" Snapshot asked.

"Well, hell, I don't know what he's trying to do exactly, but he is up to something suspicious."

"All right," Snapshot said, "let's see the tape."

Obligingly, Gaffer handed over the camera, and Snapshot—who was familiar with the operation of such a device—activated its playback feature.

"Well, I've got to admit," Snapshot said a minute later, "it is peculiar. Any idea what's in that bottle of his?"

"No," Gaffer said, "he always locks it away in his stateroom—or an equipment locker in the engine room—after he's through with it."

"Yeah, well, it is suspicious," Snapshot said, handing the camera back to Gaffer. "It shouldn't be necessary to add much of anything to the water supply, since it's an automated system."

"That's right. I asked Gyro and Crowbar about that."

"Did you tell them you were suspicious about Newton, too?"

"No," Gaffer said. "I figured I'd better confide in somebody I can trust."

"Assuming that's me," Snapshot said, "what's your plan?"

"Simple. Basically, I'm going to confront Newton the next time he has the bottle with him, and take the bottle to Physic so she can analyze what's in it. I'd like to have a member of *Homet's* crew with me, though, in case he tries to run. That way, when I track him down, I won't look like a lone nutcase harassing the ship's adviser."

"True. The captain would probably lock you in the brig."

"Yes, there is that possibility. But the captain knows you better than me. She'll respect your opinion."

"I don't know about that," Snapshot said, leaning back in her seat. "And besides, have you considered the other possibility—that Newton is trying to bait you into doing just what you're planning to do?"

"Bait me? But why?"

"I don't know; I'm not a starfish. But it'll be a cold day in hell when a Hiver isn't up to something sneaky."



"So are you willing to help me or not?"

God, what a decision, Snapshot thought, remembering all-too-well her attempts to out-think *Hornet's* last adviser, Scissor. With effortless subtlety, Scissor had achieved no less amazing a manipulation than making herself and Drop Kick friends, when before they'd been icy and aloof to each other.

Which only supported Snapshot's core thesis about the Hivers. As master manipulators, the Hivers almost certainly must have a self-serving objective in human space—perhaps to alter the fundamental character of humankind and make Snapshot's species into a race of pliant sheep.

"All right," Snapshot said, "I'll help you. But the question is when to do it."

"He is very punctual," Gaffer observed. "Every day at 1415 hours, he visits the water supply."

"Yeah, well, all the same, I'd rather confront Newton sooner than later, like this afternoon preferably."

"Why?"

"Because the skipper'll be off the ship this afternoon, picking up the junior technarchs, and Gyro will be less likely to throw us in the brig if you're wrong."

• • •

Since Honfestung was well to the north of Dobroye, suffering the full force of planetary winter, the executive jet laid in for the use of the junior technarchs did not arrive at Dobroye's Blitzbeleidigen Marine Air Station until the afternoon of the next day after *Hornet* landed, by which time the freighter was fully mended and certified fit for travel.

"Good work," Coeur told Crowbar and the chief of the work gang from the shipyard. "All that's left is for Drop Kick and me to pick up the junior technarchs, and we can get underway. Crowbar, notify Gyro to prepare the ship for launch."

"Aye, sir," the engineer said. "Pity about Snapshot, though. Didn't have any time to visit her folks."

"Well," Coeur said, "barring a catastrophe, Oriflamme will still be here when we get back."

"True."

The work gang then departed, and Coeur joined Drop Kick in a last sortie with the ship's air-raft.

Mere minutes after launch, Coeur and Drop Kick negotiated passage through the traffic net to the tightly restricted airspace around the Marine base. Setting down at the main gate, they found security procedures similar to those at Government House—with the exception that the attendant MPs here were consciously

more polite—and the air-raft was permitted to set down at the edge of the tarmac. Seeing the jet from Honfestung already taxiing to their position, Coeur left the contra-grav field of the air-raft engaged before debarking, allowing the craft to remain floating a half a meter above the ground.

Having seen personnel dossiers on the two junior technarchs, Coeur nevertheless learned little from them except how to recognize the individuals as they descended the airplane's landing ramp, so edited were the documents that they portrayed exclusively positive information. Lord An-Wing's niece was a 27-year-old woman named Liu An-Wing—second in line to rule Honfestung—a tall and striking woman made even taller and more striking by her coal black eyes, black shoulder length hair, close-fitting black tunic, culottes falling just below the knee, and black stiletto pumps.

Bela Masaryk, the young man of 26 following An-Wing down the ramp, was the other junior technarch—not likely to rule any territory soon, but a noted local scholar all the same, already infamous for a paper proposing the institution of market reforms on Oriflamme. Wearing the severely tailored business suit and puffy blouse that seemed to pass for formal wear among most of the technarchs male and female, he appeared average in stature and build, with rumpled wavy brown hair suggesting he'd fallen asleep during the flight and neglected to comb it. His most distinctive features were his eyes, though, brown and squinting as he studied the readout on a bulky TL9 hand computer worn on his left forearm. So intent was this study that he nearly stumbled when he hit the tarmac leaving the ramp.

To his credit, though, Coeur noted he was one of the very few men in the area not diverted by his partner's distinctive appearance.

"Captain D' Esprit, I presume?" An-Wing asked, extending a hand toward Coeur.

"Yes, Your Ladyship. And this is Sergeant Major Escher, my ground tactics chief."

"Charmed, I'm sure," An-Wing said, shaking Drop Kick's hand in turn.

"Yes, Your Ladyship."

"Please, Ms. An-Wing."

Drop Kick nodded and let go of her hand. Coeur, meanwhile, extended a hand to her oblivious companion. Intent on the study of his computer, he only took note of Coeur after a long moment.

"Mr. Masaryk?"

"Oh, sorry," he said, shaking her hand. "You must forgive me. I was just noticing some remarkable market activity—probably correlated to news of our hasty departure."

"Market activity?" Drop Kick asked. "But I thought this was a nonmarket economy."

"Actually, it's just a computer simulation," Masaryk said, "of a commodities exchange market that might develop here soon. Just as I anticipated, the simulated cities are buying up oil futures with the news of our launch, gambling that we'll uncover a relic cache and cause a local boom in industrial production."

"You must forgive Bela," An-Wing said. "He does tend to go on about his numbers."

"Numbers are critical to the future of Oriflamme, Liu," Masaryk retorted, "as in the number of credits we should be investing now in a reformed market economy. Unless we revise our view of land, labor and capital, we will fall behind Aubaine forever."

Coeur coughed to interrupt Masaryk.

"Perhaps we should be getting underway," she offered.

"Quite right," An-Wing agreed, fishing stylish black sunglasses out of a purse on her hip and flipping them on as she turned to the forklift just then driving over from the plane.

"Ah, good, our luggage. Porter, deposit those in the rear of this air-cart here."

"That's air-raft," Masaryk corrected her.

"Whatever."

Drop Kick, meanwhile, studied the bulk of the baggage with alarm—two large chests and a heavy packing crate—as the forklift driver deposited it in the rear of the air-raft.

"Good Gaia," Drop Kick said, crawling into the cargo bed to lash down the load, "what is all this stuff?"

"Just necessities," An-Wing said.

"Like a few dozen dresses," Masaryk added.

"You should talk. Your computer junk takes up a whole crate."

"Hey, that's key equipment."

"Well, my wardrobe is key, too; it'll be key if we need to impress some local potentate."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll be impressive," Masaryk countered, regarding An-Wing's outfit, "if you dress like that."

Gaia, Coeur thought, sighing. *I'm sure glad we won't be bunking on the same deck. I hope Gaffer can keep from shooting them.*

Eventually, Drop Kick finished securing the cargo in the air-raft, and Coeur opened her door to let the junior technarchs board before herself.

Although their dosslers gave no clue to their relationship, it was evident to Coeur that the junior technarchs had shared a long association, and she pondered the extent of that association as Drop Kick returned to his seat.

"You two aren't related, are you?" she asked over her shoulder,

once they were airborne.

The junior technarchs, seated side-by-side behind Coeur and Drop Kick, appeared offended by the question.

"I should think not," An-Wing said.

"But we do go back a ways," Masaryk added. "Lady An-Wing and I were instrumental in financing Zero's last expedition."

"Worst decision I ever made," An-Wing commented icily. "Cost me my position as director of frontier surveys."

"It cost both of us, actually. I was assured a position at the Zentrum Polytechnik, if Zero returned alive."

"Wait a minute," Coeur interjected. "Did you say expedition? I assumed he was out on his own."

"There you go," Masaryk chided. "Giving away state secrets."

"Listen, you..."

Since the air-raft was presently steered by remote control, Coeur spared a long glance at the pair behind her.

"About this expedition," she said. "What was it after?"

"I'm afraid that's...classified," An-Wing said.

"It's just become declassified. Or you can keep your secret and stay here."

An-Wing was reluctant to answer, but Masaryk gave in without further encouragement.

"Actually, it's not that amazing. Liu and I correlated data from other expeditions and old records, suggesting that Mexit might be the location of the Golden Cache."

With a sympathetic grimace, Coeur turned back to her controls. The Golden Cache was just the latest manifestation of humanity's overactive imagination contemplating the unknown: a supposed hoard of magnificent artifacts stashed by the Imperials in anticipation of a restoration of the old order. To Coeur it sounded like so much wishful thinking—the same sort of pie-in-the-sky fantasy that led her Terran forebears to waste their fortunes seeking the likes of Atlantis and The Fountain of Youth.

"And somebody put up money for that?" Coeur asked.

"I admit it was far-fetched," Masaryk replied, "but the Council of Technarchs knows it can't compete with Aubaine in the long run. When they asked Liu and I to come up with some proposals to rectify the situation, they rejected conversion to a market economy and went for a hunt for the Golden Cache."

"So how did you get in trouble for that?" Coeur asked.

"Well, *Crazy Jane* had a lot of damage from her last cruise," Masaryk said, "so we talked several technarchs into footing the repair bill personally to avoid the Lord Technarch's red tape. When *Crazy Jane* went missing, so did our careers."

*Pity*, Coeur thought.



Moments later, the air-raft was back over the Lord Technarch's field, and Coeur took back active control. Having advised the field of her desire for a launch within the hour, Coeur found the armored roof over *Hornet* retracted and the path clear to dock in the freighter's air-raft berth.

"By the way, Ms. An-Wing," Coeur said, pausing between opening the air-raft's starboard door and opening the berth hatch, "you might think about staying away from the spike heels in space."

"Why?"

"In case we ever lose gravity. I didn't see it myself, but I once heard about a noblewoman who put a guy's eye out when they lost gravity on their liner."

"She wasn't hurt, was she?"

Coeur silently glared in reply.

"Oh, I see."

The point having been made, Coeur opened the inner hatch and let herself out. There she planned to help Drop Kick get the Oriflammen aboard, but a stern-faced Gyro in the middle of the loft derailed that plan.

The moment Coeur caught sight of the sidearm on Gyro's hip, Coeur knew something was amiss—even the Marines did not routinely wear weapons aboard ship. Meanwhile, the doors of the forward port and starboard staterooms—the ones ordinarily unoccupied and intended for the junior technarchs—were guarded by the largest Marines, Fubar and Whiz Bang, with gauss rifles.

"What the hell's going on here?" Coeur demanded.

"Over here, sir," Gyro answered, motioning Coeur into a corner as she saw the civilians emerging from the air-raft. Drop Kick, meanwhile, inferred that a crisis had developed and escorted the puzzled junior technarchs down to the lower deck through the loft elevator.

"All right," Coeur said, after they were gone. "Explain."

"Well, sir, it's a little complicated. Snapshot and Gaffer claim they caught Newton trying to doctor the water supply, but he escaped to his stateroom before they could grab him. Since all this appeared to be getting out of hand, I went ahead and put everyone under detention until you got back."

"I see."

"Physic has the bottle right now—the bottle they claim Newton was pouring into the water supply."

Mystified, Coeur scratched her head.

"Snapshot, you say?"

"Yes, sir. But she was very good about being detained. She and Gaffer agreed it was reasonable."

Just then the elevator door reopened, admitting both Physic and Drop Kick into the loft—the former holding an unlabeled one-liter bottle.

"...Well, I'll be damned," Drop Kick said. "Red Sun, you won't believe what was in this bottle."

"What?"

"As near as I can tell," Physic said, handing the half-filled bottle to Coeur, "it's some sort of breath freshener. I ran it through the bioscanner, and it couldn't find a trace of anything exotic."

"Exotic?" Coeur asked. "Like what?"

"And why was Newton putting breath freshener in the water supply?" Drop Kick added.

"If it isn't too radical an idea," Physic suggested, "we might try asking."

"Right," Coeur said. "Whiz Bang, Fubar, let them out."

The big man saluted and moved briskly to open their respective doors. If nothing else, Coeur supposed, it was good to see one of Drop Kick's men and one of Gaffer's cooperating in this uncomfortable duty.

When released from the port stateroom—the one guarded by Fubar—Newton naturally showed no expression on what Coeur instinctively thought of as its face, although Newton did rapidly shift its weight from side to side and keep four of its six eyestalks in constant motion. Gaffer and Snapshot, on the other hand, wore masks of firm determination, though Snapshot betrayed concern for her fate with nervous glances at Drop Kick when she thought he wasn't looking.

"First off, people," Coeur began, "I don't mind telling you that I'm disgusted with the behavior you just exhibited. My first impulse is to charge the lot of you with dereliction of duty and lock you up for the duration of the journey.

"Your appalling conduct aside, however, I'm willing to entertain the possibility that there was some compelling reason for it. Assuming that to be correct, then," Coeur shook the bottle at Newton, "why were you putting this stuff, in the water supply?"

Though it lacked emotions as humans understood them, young Newton shared its race's extreme fear of violence and confrontation—a fear presently expressed by the wary eyes it kept on the Marine's rifles and the distance it kept from Gaffer.

"I believe I can explain. Some weeks ago, Corporal Widget expressed the opinion that someone should have come up with a cure for bad breath after millennia of human civilization. I therefore endeavored to determine if I might solve this problem by introducing trace chemicals into the water supply in slowly increasing amounts."

"I knew it," Snapshot said. "A manipulation."

"Indeed. Once the manipulation was effected, and bad breath fully neutralized, I intended to inform the crew and judge the success of the manipulation on the basis of their acceptance of its utility."

"That's it?" Coeur asked.

"Yes, Captain. Would it have made a difference if I said it had been mucus?" The creature seemed to watch Coeur expectantly.

*Huh?* Coeur thought. "But it wasn't?"

"No, it wasn't."

"Then, no, it wouldn't."

Newton surreptitiously keyed data into its chest-mounted computer/translator.

*And I thought Scissor was crazy.* "And you two," Coeur turned to Gaffer and Snapshot. "What did you think he was up to?"

"Nothing specific," Snapshot said. "We were just exercising healthy paranoia."

"Yes, sir," Gaffer agreed, "although I had reason to suspect..."

"What?" Coeur asked.

"Well, nothing. Like Snapshot said, just healthy paranoia."

Coeur's eyebrows rose at that, but she did not force the issue.

"Sir," Gaffer went on, "if punishment is to be handed out, I would ask for leniency on Snapshot's behalf. What we did was entirely my idea."

"Well, given the circumstances," Coeur said, "I don't think any punishment will be in order."

Drop Kick, Coeur noticed, exhaled a far greater sigh of relief than Snapshot.

"I might be inclined to convene a summary court martial, though," Coeur said sternly, "if anything like this ever happens again. With civilian government representatives aboard, best conduct is our only conduct. Am I understood?"

"Indeed," Newton said.

"Yes, sir," Gaffer and Snapshot seconded.

"Very good. You're dismissed. Gyro, set space detail and stand by for launch at 1400 hours."

The various personnel in the loft then scattered, leaving Coeur alone with Drop Kick and Physic.

"I assume you'll want the Oriflammen settled in," the doctor said. "They're in my sick bay now, so I could handle that."

"Very good. But here...." Coeur pressed the half-empty bottle back into Physic's hands. "Dump this out first. I'm sure we can survive without fresh breath."

*Or mucus.*

# Chapter Seven

Six hours later, *Hornet* was in jump space, bound for Helios, and the junior technarchs were becoming acquainted with the newest additions to their wardrobe.

"Captain," An-Wing said, holding her new body sleeve out from herself at a distance, "is this really necessary? Do we really have to wear these silly body sleeves?"

"That's funny," Masaryk said, with his own body sleeve draped over his arm, "I would have thought you'd want a body sleeve, since it looks so much like the rest of your wardrobe—black and embarrassingly tight."

Coeur meanwhile smiled, leaning back in the chair at her stateroom's desk.

"Actually," she said, "they're really rather comfortable, once you get used to wearing them. But in answer to Lady An-Wing's question, no, you don't have to wear yours all the time, just when you're in space."

"Oh," An-Wing said to Masaryk, "that's all."

"The reason we all wear body sleeves," Coeur explained, "is that a starship can suffer pressure loss at any time, and when that happens, we're all forced into vac suits. Those suits are the cooling garment you wear under a vac suit, and—in a pinch—they'll keep you from suffering the worst effects of vacuum exposure while you look for your emergency suit."

"Pardon me, Captain," Masaryk said, "but just what are the worst effects of vacuum exposure?"

"Oh, I'm sure you're heard about them—capillaries exploding in your skin, eyes popping out, that kind of thing—but I'll have Gyro fill you in during the vacuum drill later. Basically, if you hear the vacuum emergency alarm, you pull your sleeve's hood over your head, pinch your nose, squeeze your eyes shut and dash for the nearest suit locker."

"Well, then, how will we be able to find our suits with our eyes closed?" An-Wing asked.



"Oh, no problem," Masaryk guessed, "we probably just grope around until we find them and hope our air doesn't run out first."

*Yeah, I should be so lucky,* Coeur thought.

"Actually, no," Coeur said. "There are powerful strobe lights on all the suit lockers, so you can find them even through your closed eyelids."

"Think of everything, don't you?" Masaryk said.

"We try. But if there's anything we missed, we'll add it to the list."

"Very well, then," An-Wing said. "I suppose we should go try these on."

"Oh, by the way," Coeur said, calling to the junior technarchs as they turned to go, "those body sleeves will probably feel a little bulky at first, but you'll get used to wearing them eventually."

"Hmph," An-Wing snorted, imperiously. "I'll bet she just wants us to feel foolish in front of the crew."

Coeur did not comment, and the junior technarchs went on their way.

*Well, of course I want you to feel foolish,* she thought, turning to the paperwork on her desk. *If you're embarrassed at the way you look, maybe you'll stay in your cabins and out of my hair for a few days.*

• • •

Coeur's secret wish was not fulfilled. The technarchs quickly became adjusted to their suits and comfortably took up their favorite preoccupation—directing anti-Federalist invective at anyone unfortunate enough to be in the area.

"Captain," Cyro finally said, after the ship began its next jump, out of the formal borders of the RC and toward the boneyard L'Steich. "I don't mean to sound undiplomatic, but frankly those Oriflammen are getting on my nerves."

"Yeah, I know. Just the other day I heard them debating with Snapshot, of all people, about class warfare on Oriflamme."

"Right. And then there was two days ago, when the Marines chased them out of the loft for suggesting they were stooges of the Hive Federation."

"Yeah, you're right," Coeur had to admit. "They are pretty annoying. If it weren't for the fact that they eat their meals alone, they'd really get on everyone's nerves."

"Actually, they've already managed to do that," Cyro said, "although that's not what I'm most concerned about. What bothers me is that they're undermining your policy against political debate aboard ship."

"Yeah, you got me there. I'll talk to them."

Coeur found it easy to track down the junior technarchs; they were in the galley, loudly attempting to pry state secrets from Newton.

"...Now, Newton, if that is indeed your name, what do you mean the Coalition isn't a manipulation? Isn't that what you Hivers do, manipulate people?"

"Of course we do, Ms. An-Wing. However, I regret that I have no knowledge of a high-level manipulation designed to shape the destiny of the Coalition. It is an interesting idea, though. I'll have to see if there's a topical club responsible for that manipulation, so I can join it."

"If I may interrupt," Coeur said, "I need to talk to the junior technarchs."

"By all means," Newton said.

"I meant alone."

"In your stateroom?" Masaryk asked Coeur.

"Yes. After you."

"So, what's this all about?" An-Wing asked, after they crossed into Coeur's stateroom adjacent to the lounge.

"What this is about," Coeur said, "is our policy on political discussions aboard this ship. We don't have them."

"Which?" An-Wing asked. "Policies or discussions?"

Coeur held her temper, barely. "Discussions. Our policy is that we have no political discussions," she said pleasantly and reasonably.

An-Wing exploded, "You can't be serious! What about that freedom of speech you prize so much on Aubaine?"

"Don't get me wrong; I value freedom of speech just as much as anyone. However, on this ship, we don't have it; everybody keeps her opinion to herself so everybody can stay focused on her work."

"Captain," Masaryk said, "are you implying that Liu and I are being disruptive to your ship?"

"Let's just say the people on this ship don't need any more stress in their lives. And let's further say that anybody who aggravates that stress will probably spend the rest of the trip locked in her stateroom."

"Captain," An-Wing said, "I do believe you're threatening us."

"Oh, perish the thought," Coeur responded.

"Perhaps," Masaryk said, interrupting An-Wing before she could fire off a protest, "we should take the captain's advice to heart."

"But—"

"And," Masaryk went on, keeping a wary eye on Coeur, "stop pestering the captain's crew."

"There's a thought," Coeur said.

"Fine," An-Wing said, huffily, "although it's not as if we've done anything wrong."

"Is that all, Captain?" Masaryk asked.

"Yes, you may go."

"Thank you," An-Wing said, with an acid expression.

*I don't know why she's upset, Coeur thought afterward. I didn't even bring up the third option—spacing them without a suit.*

\* \* \*

Amazingly enough, Coeur's little talk seemed to do the trick. Though the junior technarchs were still tempted to harangue the odd crewmember, the victim would usually respond that Coeur had banned all political discussions aboard ship, and add that he'd overheard a rumor that Coeur would space anyone who didn't agree.

"Notice how we don't see much of the junior technarchs anymore?" Gaffer asked three weeks later, at a morning mess with Coeur, Drop Kick, Physic, Fubar and Gremlin.

"Yeah," Fubar said, halting a healthy portion of pressed fish—shape-molded into a breakfast patty—on the way to his mouth. "Funny thing, though—they seem to have gotten the vac suit drill down pretty well."

"I'll bet I know why that is," Physic said. "It's probably because of that rumor they were going to be spaced. I mean, really, who'd start a nasty rumor like that?"

"Got me," Coeur said innocently, when the doctor glanced at her.

"I'll bet it was Newton," Gaffer replied. "Probably as part of some kind of manipulation."

A sharp look from Coeur, however, pulled him up short.

"Hey," he said, "I didn't say he was doing anything wrong; I just said it's the sort of thing he would do."

*Fair enough, Coeur thought.*

Livid as she'd been at the earlier conduct of Gaffer, Snapshot and Newton, Coeur had to admit that all the parties involved had since gone out of their way to prevent another such embarrassment.

"You know what you ought to do, sarge," Gremlin suggested, "is make a Reformation Day resolution to make friends with Newton."

Gaffer banged down his coffee mug just hard enough to register his response.

"Or maybe not."

"Wow," Physic said, sitting back in her chair, "I hadn't thought about that. Reformation Day is right around the corner, isn't it?"

"Yep," Coeur said, "about three weeks away."

"You know what," Drop Kick suggested, "maybe we should have a party. I mean, it is Reformation Day."

"Yeah, I've thought about it," Coeur said, "but there is a problem. If everything goes according to schedule, we'll be coming out of jump at Moppo on Reformation Day, and that's just one jump short of Mexit—hardly a good place to have the crew plastered if there's any danger in the area."

"Oh," Physic said, "that's right." *Moppo. What a great name. Whose idea was that?*

"Well, what about this," Drop Kick offered. "We could have the party early."

"Yeah," Physic said, "why not? I mean, we're so far from the rest of the Coalition, it's not like we'd mess up anyone else's schedule."

"Hmm," Coeur said, "that's true."

"So how about it, skipper?" Drop Kick asked.

"All right, you've talked me into it. But let's not have it until next week, when I announce our mission to the crew. That'll be after we've left Kruml, and we'll have crossed the outer border of the AO."

Gaffer nodded, thoughtfully introspective.

"You know," he said, after a moment, "considering how new the Coalition is, you might just be starting a new tradition—having a party every time you cross the AO."

Coeur smiled.

"Yeah, that's right. It could be kind of like the old initiation on Terra, whenever sailors crossed the equator the first time."

"What the hell kind of custom is that?" Fubar asked.

Coeur refrained from explaining in detail. Much as she loved her homeworld, some of its customs were not only strange, but rather silly.

"Forget about it," Coeur said. "Drop Kick, since you thought of it, you're officially in charge of party planning."

"Hey," Physic protested, "I'm the one who remembered the holiday."

"Well, you know, Physic," Coeur said, "the crewmember in charge of party planning is also the crewmember in charge of cleaning up the party mess."

"He is?" Drop Kick asked. "Well, in that case...."

"Hey, forget it," Physic said, resisting Drop Kick's anticipated offer. "I'll just be the party adviser."

• • •

One day later, with absolute precision, Crowbar's jump drive and Deep Six's jump plot deposited *Homet* 100 diameters from



Forcena V, just 168 hours after the ship entered jump space. The innermost gas giant of the boneyard system Krumb, it was also the most congenial, with neither radiation fields nor insidious debris rings nor violent storms to thwart refueling. Skimming, therefore, went without incident, and within 20 hours of arrival, *Hornet* was back in the familiar strangeness of jump space.

"All right, people," Coeur said on ship-wide intercom, after all stations reported secured, "it's time for what you've all been waiting for. *Hornet* has left the Primary AO, and I am now authorized to tell you precisely what we're doing out here.

"In a nutshell, our mission is to recover the crew and cargo of an Oriflammen starship named *Crazy Jane*, which disappeared on Mexit several months ago. *Crazy Jane* was a 400-ton *Petty-class* merchant, under the command of Captain Kenji 'Zero' Wolfowitz. But she wasn't a unit of the RC fleet, and—to be perfectly frank—we're not so much interested in recovering the ship as we are in recovering what we think her crew discovered on Mexit.

"What we believe they discovered is a black globe generator, which is basically the ultimate starship defense system—a device that can absorb every joule of energy directed at it and completely hide a starship for good measure. And if that isn't enough, it's also possible that *Crazy Jane* found an entire Final War depot, filled with God-knows-how-much relic technology. At a conservative estimate, it's probably huge, because Mexit had a very large pre-Collapse population, had a very high tech level and was located on a vital transportation route.

"The reason we care about all this is two-fold. Obviously, our leaders could put that relic equipment to a lot of good use—if we can find it and make friendly contact with its owners. But even if we can't, it is imperative that relic technology like the black globe not fall into the hands of our enemies. The Solee, in particular, are shaping up to be a major menace in this area—with the relic fleet they're resurrecting. If necessary, we will destroy the depot rather than let it fall into their hands.

"But I may be getting ahead of myself. We don't have much good intelligence on Mexit, and we don't know what the situation is there. Zero's people may be in the custody of a hostile—possibly well-armed—power, and so may the depot, for that matter. Therefore, the best course for all of us is to take our training and other preparations very seriously. Of course, everyone on this ship is a professional, and I don't doubt you'll have a healthy respect for any opposition we meet. But all the same, it doesn't hurt to remember we're heading out into the hardest of the Wilds. Out here, there won't be any rescue, or reinforcements, no matter what happens."

Coeur then paused, gazing into the jump fire as she prepared to sign off, when she remembered the other key piece of information she'd been asked to give the crew.

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. Drop Kick and Physic would like everyone to know that the Reformation Day party is officially set for the 8th of Pisces, which is two days from now, and will be held in the top deck loft.

"That is all. Bridge out."

"Captain," Deep Six said then, "I don't mean to appear slow, but isn't Reformation Day three weeks after the 8th of Pisces?"

"Well, yes," Coeur said, "but I figure it'll be better to celebrate early, so the ship'll be safely in jump space if anybody important gets plastered."

"I take it, then," the Schalll said, "that you'll be opening up the liquor locker."

At which point, Coeur understood what Deep Six was aiming at. During a jump, off-duty personnel could always pull a light alcoholic beverage from the locker, such as a beer, but the heavy stuff was kept strictly for serious celebrations.

"Yes," Coeur answered, "but if you're thinking what I think you're thinking, forget about it. You're not touching a drop of *ee'kwat*, or anything else alcoholic—not after that scare you gave us last time you touched the fermented algae."

"Oh," Deep Six said, sinking down in his roller-chair.

"But don't worry," Coeur said, loosening her seat restraints and rising to stand, "Crowbar and I aren't planning to drink either."

"Very responsible of you, sir."

"Yeah, well, unlikely as it is, *Homet* could suffer a misjump and fall out of jump space, and if that happened, Hammer'd probably like to know that we had a designated driver."

• • •

The party, when it finally rolled around, was a complete success. Newton contrived a clock that ticked down the seconds until midnight, then shot out sparks and laser beams at 2400 hours to the delight of the revelers.

"Happy New Year!" Drop Kick exclaimed.

"Damn right," Physic said. "Happy Reformation Day!"

Even the junior technarchs—who'd generally stuck to themselves recently—emerged from their staterooms to have a cup of strongly spiked punch and share a toast with Gaffer.

"Well, your ladyship," the big Marine said, clinking glasses with An-Wing, "here's to 1202."

"Hear hear," Masaryk seconded.

"Yes," An-Wing said, after downing her own glass, "perhaps

this year your planet will get a responsible form of government."

"What was that?" Gaffer asked, unable to hear clearly for all the racket.

"Er—," Masaryk said, steering An-Wing away from the sergeant, "she said you have a wonderful form of government!"

"Oh," Gaffer said, shrugging and pouring himself another cup of punch.

Yet, for all the glad feelings, there was an undercurrent of sadness in the room as well. Snapshot, who'd half-heartedly supported Drop Kick in his efforts to be festive, presently stood alone at the rear of the loft, near the elevator, and took the earliest opportunity to disappear through it.

"Hey, Physic," Drop Kick said to his adviser 30 minutes after midnight, "I've been looking around for Snapper. You seen her?"

"No. Last I saw, she was over by the elevator."

"Elevator, right. Back in a flash."

Drop Kick had hoped to ask Snapshot for a dance before Coeur made him clean up the loft. But Snapshot was neither in the lounge nor in her missile turret.

Well, this is damned strange, he thought, returning to the loft to check her stateroom and finding it, too, unoccupied. Where could she be?

Then it hit him—the one place a person could go if she really wanted to be alone.

The hold.

His intuition proved correct. Hearing her crying before he saw her, Drop Kick found Snapshot hunkered down beside the tubes of the drop pod, nursing a half-empty bottle of gin.

"Oh fikk," Snapshot muttered, wiping her runny nose. "Busted."

"Denise," Drop Kick said, "what are you doing?"

"Well, I was trying to get plastered," Snapshot said, lifting her bottle up toward Drop Kick. "Want some?"

"No, I don't think so," Drop Kick replied, although he did take the bottle and sit down beside her.

"Well, then you oughta give me my bottle back."

"Maybe later," Drop Kick said. "You know, I was worried about you."

"Sorry," Snapshot said. "I've had this bender planned for a long time, though, and I figured I'd better make the most of it."

"You...planned to get drunk?"

"Well...yeah. I figured I'd have to wait until Reformation Day for the skipper to unlock the really hard stuff, but then you went and got her to move up the calendar by three weeks."

Suddenly, Drop Kick understood. The tube Snapshot was sitting under was Number Three—the one Badger would have

used to drop assault if he'd lived.

"It's Badger, isn't it?"

"Oh, that poor fikk," Snapshot said, confirming Drop Kick's guess by drawing her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her knees and burying her face in the hollow thus created.

"Yeah, I should have guessed," Drop Kick said quietly. "You really miss him, don't you?"

"Well," a shuddering Snapshot said, lifting her head from her arms, "that's a pretty stupid thing to say, now, isn't it? Of course I miss him."

"Sorry," Drop Kick said, startled by her anger.

Instantly, though, Snapshot realized she'd hurt him.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry. You're important to me, and I should have shared my feelings with you earlier."

"Well," Drop Kick offered, "you can share them now."

Snapshot smiled, although in her condition it looked like more of a grimace.

"Well, for one thing, Vin, you know I never had the hots for Badger or anything—he was just a friend. But all the same, there was something about him...something so sad..."

"Something like you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Drop Kick said gently, "he was a lot more like you than maybe you think. I mean really, until the skipper saw your good side, you were about one demerit shy of being expelled from the Technical Academy."

"Who told you that?"

"The skipper. You know, she's my friend, too."

"Oh, yeah, right."

"Really, Snapper, I'm no shrink, but it seems to me that you and Badger had a lot in common. Until you met Red Sun, you really didn't have anyone on your side at the academy, and until Badger met you, he didn't really have anyone on his side either."

As if to prove he was right, Snapshot suddenly clenched her left hand into a fist and swung it backward against the empty drop tube behind her.

"Damn it," she said, "damn it, why does it always have to be people like him who die out here—people nobody gave a damn about anyway?"

"Hey, Snapper, come on," Drop Kick said. "You cared about him."

"Oh God, Vin," Snapshot said, rolling into his side and pressing her crying face into his shoulder. "I feel like such an idiot. I've never been this worked up about anyone before."

"Oh, shush," Drop Kick said, bringing his closer arm up to hold



her and brushing a loose red hair out of her eyes. "I'm sure you're the best friend he ever had."

"You know," Snapshot said, after a long moment, "I think I owe you a dance."

"Feel up to it?" Drop Kick asked.

"Well, sure," Snapshot said, moving to stand up. Under the influence of two pints of Old Billgewater, however, she didn't quite make it and collapsed back onto her butt.

"Or maybe not," she said. "Man, this is embarrassing. Now how am I gonna get back to my stateroom?"

"Well, I could carry you through the party," Drop Kick said, "but people might wonder. How about you sleep on the cot in the G-carrier instead?"

"That's a plan."

"Come on," Drop Kick said, helping Snapshot up with a hand under her shoulder, "I'll help you over."

"Well, that's mighty nice of you," Snapshot observed. "You know, you'd probably make a nice girl a good husband."

"Yeah, but do you know any nice girls?" Drop Kick asked, teasingly.

"Snapshot looked up at him, smiling. "I think so, but ask me again when I'm sober. I'd hate to make any commitments when I'm drunk."

"Yes, well, I'm sure that goes for both of us," Drop Kick responded, helping Snapshot through the rear hatch of the G-carrier, tucking her into the cot in the rear compartment, then departing to clean up the mess he was sure the crew had left for him in the loft.

# Chapter Eight

To cross the space between the AO and Mexit required four weeks—as unsettling a span of time as Coeur had ever had at *Hornet's* helm. Deep in the Wilds—and in a fragile freighter to boot—her only option was to regard every long range sensor blip as a potential enemy and steer a wide path around it. Coeur was familiar with stealth, however—she'd had to be to survive behind the Solomani lines in a tiny Imperial scout ship. So *Hornet* kept the lowest possible profile, laying off her active sensors, fueling from outer orbit gas giants and planetoid belts, and eventually precipitating from jump in the fourth orbit of Mexit system—at a small gas giant well outward from the mainworld in orbit 0.

Rather small and blue, with two large moons and a small ring system, Opaco IV was a cold and quiet gas giant, the farthest from her dim red primary Opaco. Unlike Zloga's Novolen, therefore, it promised to be an uneventful fueling stop.

"All stations report secure from jump," Deep Six announced. "Short-range passive sensors read clear."

"Roger that," Coeur said, studying her own duplicate of the Schalli's sensor panel.

"Some background chatter, though. Looks like Mexit may have radio."

"How about TV?" Coeur asked.

"Unlikely. The VHF frequencies are too low."

"Fair enough. Figure it's safe to deploy the passive array?"

"Affirmative."

Coeur was glad to hear that. Though *Hornet* had a very good computer, the passive sensor array integral to her hull was simply too small to see much detail beyond 100,000 kilometers. Good resolution any further out—beyond a million kilometers—would demand the folding passive array. It was either that or fire up the active sensors and give away their position to anyone in the area.

"Deploying array," Coeur reported.

"Belay that!" Deep Six said. "Hot contact bearing 1171"

Instantly, Coeur shut down the motors unfolding the array.

"I can't tell how big she is," the navigator went on, "she's too far for our integral passive sensors. She is maneuvering, however, and using active sensors."

"What's her course?"

"Difficult to say. I'll need to process more signal."

"Fikk," Coeur swore under her breath. Still, she knew she it could be worse: The antenna of *Hornet's* folding array was 126 meters across, and its deployment would suddenly make the tiny ship—43 meters long—a huge target to active sensors.

"Course solution fixed," Deep Six said a minute later. "Target is powering into a close orbit above the gas giant. Since she has not hailed us, or begun evasive burns, I suspect we have not been detected."

"Good, let's keep it that way. What's our time to the cloud tops on residual velocity?"

"Just over 30 hours."

Coeur thought a moment.

"Sixer?"

"Sir?"

"Can you plot us a spiral approach course to that gas giant? I want to stay on opposite sides of the planet from that ship as much as possible. We will make maximum maneuver burns while he's below the horizon, then shut down and present him with a cold, frontal aspect when he's on our side. By the time we get within half a light-second of him, I'd like to have that planet between us at all times. Can you do it?"

"Yes sir. It will only take a moment. However, this assumes that he does not alter his orbit."

"Right. So work out as many alternate spirals and insertion vectors as you can, and keep an eye out for the first sign that he has changed orbit. Advise Crowbar that we'll be skimming tomorrow but that in the meantime I want short, intense burns so the thrust bells can cool down when we're in view of the target."

"Roger, Captain. Understood."

\*\*\*

Since she knew she might still have to fight or run—and therefore evacuate the hull to prevent explosive decompression—Coeur still hadn't let anyone take off their vac suit helmets 20 minutes after Deep Six first contacted the bogey. That was time enough to determine the oblivious status of the contact, but

it seemed a virtual eternity to the Marines and junior technarchs, who had no immediate duties, no real sense of what was going on outside, and no company except the rhythmic hissing of their own breath in their battle dress and vac suit helmets. But Coeur wasn't about to take the chance that the bogey's sensor operators weren't sharper than they seemed. Predictably, An-Wing was the first to call the bridge and complain when Coeur announced all hands would remain suited until further notice.

"Captain D' Esprit, I must insist that you clarify our situation! Are we in some kind of danger?"

"We're not certain, Ms. An-Wing. Another spacecraft is in the area, and we're uncertain of her intentions."

"Another spacecraft? Could it be *Crazy Jane*?"

"Not likely," Coeur answered, "but anyway, I'm not going to find out until we've got some jump fuel in us."

Masaryk, in the stateroom opposite An-Wing's, hopped on the line before Coeur could sign off.

"Captain, is there something we should be doing? You know, to prepare for an emergency?"

"You're doing it by staying suited up and in your cabin. Bridge out."

Coeur then shook her head, shutting off the shipwide Intercom. Deep Six, meanwhile, searched his lexicon of human idiom for an appropriate remark.

"Civilians."

"You said it, Sixer. Get me Snapshot."

"Snapshot here, skipper."

"Snapper, what's your status? Don't you have a probe in your launcher?"

"That's affirmative," the missile gunner answered. "I've got one nuke and one probe in the can."

"How about the missiles in the drop pod? They nominal?"

"Affirmative; they all read green. You can have six nukes any time you want them."

Coeur nodded, though Snapshot couldn't see the gesture. Thanks to the extra capacity of the drop pod, she had more ready missiles than an enemy would expect from a ship of *Hornet's* size.

"I'll remember that, Snapper. At the moment, though, I'd just like you to launch the probe. Sixer will deliver you a contraorbital plot in a few minutes."

"Contraorbital, sir?"

"Roger, into the course of our bogey. With any luck, we'll get a look at her before she gets a look at us."



If Badger had been alive to see it, Coeur was certain he would have been proud of his gunnery tutor. After reaching an orbit that would let it intercept the bogey, Snapshot's probe followed her instructions to tumble like a chunk of planetary debris and subsequently passed within 1000 kilometers of its objective without being spotted. The passive images it recorded were therefore of the highest quality, and astonished both Coeur and Deep Six when the probe was free to download its data to *Hornet* on the far side of the gas giant.

"Good Gaia," Coeur said, "how close did that probe get?"

"A minimum of 700 km," Deep Six said. "That much is apparent from the resolution of the video image. I recognize this configuration as a *Kinunir*-class colonial cruiser."

*Indeed she is*, Coeur thought. *Too small to fight with the big boys, but more than big enough to ruin our day.*

At 1250 tons displacement, the colonial cruiser was indeed a giant compared to *Hornet*, with original firepower comparable to that of the Coalition's front-line clippers. Before the Collapse, Coeur had heard Imperial Navy officers make disparaging remarks about the class, but the colonial cruiser never really was intended to fight in the line of battle. Rather, the *Kinunir* was an intimidation machine, designed to keep smaller planets in line with Imperial policy through the threat of bombardment with heavy lasers and missiles, backed up by a platoon of Imperial Marines. If the ostensible purpose of the design was piracy suppression, Coeur knew better. The design proliferated just as rebellion flowered in the Last Imperium, when the loyalty of border worlds was at a premium.

"That looks like a name on her spine," Coeur said. "Can you make it out?"

"Affirmative," Deep Six said, feeding the clarified image to Coeur's station after a few seconds of processing. "As you can see, the letters are human Anglic."

"Pleasant name—*Royal Vengeance*. Could she be Solee?"

"There is a shadowed image on the vertical tail that might be an insignia. I shall attempt to enhance it."

Containing her anticipation, Coeur waited patiently for Deep Six to complete this second task.

"This is interesting," he said. "Examine pixel elements 2244 by 1350, which I have magnified."

"Damn. It's the Solee crest all right."

"Affirmative. Reliable Network reports correlate this symbol—the Greek helmet on a red circle—with Solee fleet activity."

"This is bad, Sixer. It means they got here first."

Deep Six answered this with a moment of reflective silence as

his vac-suited body bobbed in the water of his roller-chair.

"Sir, that may not be a legitimate conjecture. Remember that we are in the fourth orbit of the Mexlt system, not in the orbit of the mainworld."

"Yeah, you're right. Continue to analyze this data, and download the drive and emission particulars to the gunners."

"Yes, sir."

\*\*\*

Surprisingly, the Solee made no attempts to adjust their course and single-mindedly kept their active EMS hammering at the murky cloud deck of the gas giant.

"They're looking for something," Coeur mused, watching the animated track that represented the projected Solee course on the bridge's tactical display, "but what?"

"Their original course suggested a pursuit, but I detected no other bodies." Deep Six offered.

"Yeah. Maybe they spotted someone about to skim, or just completing skimming, and forced them into the atmosphere to take cover." *Glad it's not me.* "That ship's large enough to have small craft," Coeur noted. "Any sign of those?"

"Negative." Deep Six answered. "Nor is there evidence of drone or missile activity. Just the one starship executing a loud, and—if I may say—ill-conceived search. Vessels within gas giant atmospheres are notoriously difficult to locate."

"You may say so," Coeur said, "but don't think it. It doesn't pay to underestimate your adversaries."

"Perhaps you're right, sir."

"Perhaps? Anyway, it could be a ruse for all we know—blasting away noisily to draw somebody else into the open. Since *Homet's* in no immediate danger, we'll keep spiraling in quietly. But for God's sake, whoever has the sensor watch, keep a sharp eye out for sudden changes in their search pattern."

Coeur and Deep Six surrendered the bridge to Newton and Mercy twice in the coming hours, so Coeur and Deep Six could rest and be fresh for skimming. All the watches went uneventfully—save for griping from the junior technarchs at the random vacuum drills Coeur had ordered. At last, Coeur and Deep Six came to take the bridge just one diameter, or 30,000 km, from the blue face of Opaco IV. Just below and ahead of the ship, meanwhile, hung the planet's gray-white ring, reaching like a vast highway of ice and rock around the far side of the world.

"Nice ring," Coeur commented, settling into her chair.

"Yes, it is attractive," Deep Six agreed, rolling up to his station and locking his wheels in place on the deck, "but the particles are

of substantial mass. Be sure you steer clear of the shepherd moons on the inner and outer limbs of the ring."

"I see 'em."

"The danger is minimal. We are well above the ring and will cross its span in less than a minute."

Coeur nodded, but didn't answer; until they were across the ring, she wasn't about to take her attention away from the navigation sensor track, or her hands off her joystick and throttle.

"Captain, incoming signal."

"What?" Coeur snapped, intent on her flying.

"Nothing coherent," Deep Six answered, "just repeating pulses from a laser communicator. It was, however, definitely directed at us."

"Did you fix the position?"

"Affirmative, bearing 275—from the ring."

"Could it be a code?"

"Possibly. Let me run the signal through pattern recognition."

An anxious moment passed as *Homert* soared over the inner edge of the ring.

"Pattern isolated. It is a Terran telegraphic code repeating the letters V, Z, V, E, A."

"V, Z, V, E, A? What in the world is that?"

"Unknown; it doesn't conform to any known contact signal...."

Deep Six was a skilled code breaker, however, and divined the meaning even as his voice trailed off. Coeur, not nearly as gifted at pattern analysis, but not stupid either, got it a moment later, saying it aloud at the same time as Deep Six.

"Vega Zorn, *Vi Et Armis*."

"That must be it," Deep Six said. "The correlation is precise."

Though amazed by this unlikely development—meeting Zorn by chance in the Wilds—Coeur nonetheless maintained enough composure to examine the projected track of the Solee cruiser. It would not rise above the west limb of the planet for another 20 minutes.

"Engine room," she snapped, "Crowbar, stand by main thrusters. Sixer, set course 275."

• • •

Although the cryptic message was brief, its focused nature let Deep Six work out an approximate source point fairly quickly, and soon *Homert* had altered course to steer toward it. Making for that source point, on the inner edge of the ring, Coeur then took the unusual step of engaging the ship's densitometer, neutrino and neural activity sensors, despite their very short effective range, just

to have more eyes on the lookout. In any event, *Homet* nearly overran her well-camouflaged objective, spotting her only by faint traces of neutrino radiation from her fusion plant. Parked on a small shepherd moon, just 50 km long, this was *Vi Et Armis*, the 400-ton patrol cruiser of the pirate Vega Zorn.

Hanging just meters above the corsair, *Homet's* floodlights found clear evidence of serious damage—laser scoring and spots of twisted metal in her drive section—yet there was no way to be certain the grounded vessel wasn't laying a trap. Gyro, therefore, kept *Homet's* 150-Mj laser turret trained on the ship even as Deep Six established a tight-beam laser communications link.

"Well, Red Sun, I see you got our message."

"You're a ballsy woman, Zorn. How'd you know it was us?"

"Easy. Who else would fly a far trader this deep in the Wilds?"

*A few desperate free traders and myself*, Coeur thought.

"Good point," Coeur said. "I assume the big dog upstairs is on your trail."

"That's affirmative. Seems the Solee picked up the same hot tip about Mexit that we did."

"What hot tip was that?"

"I'll bet you can guess."

"Yeah, I'll bet I could too, but why don't you spell it out."

"Fair enough. We heard the corsair Zero was after some kind of treasure here, so we figured we'd get the jump on him."

This prompted Coeur to make an expression part way between a smile and a grimace. Though Zorn was a pirate, and had killed 20 score Hivers on Ra with a Hiver-specific virus, she had also collaborated with Coeur on the plan to destroy the Mercantile Guild's Sauler headquarters, and Coeur knew it wasn't like Zorn to threaten human agents of the Coalition when she had a choice.

*Well, I don't care what any warrant says*, Coeur thought. *Zorn's as much a patriot as she is a Hiver-hater, and I don't think she'd go after Zero unless she figured he was a real slimeball. I'll have to remember to ask her about that after we take her into custody.*

"Understood," Coeur said. "But we can talk about that later. Do you require assistance?"

"Not immediately, no. Our jump drive is wrecked, though, and our thrusters won't stand up to evasive maneuvers."

"Yeah, I believe it. How's your hull integrity?"

"Shored up. The forward sections are secure."

"All right, then. Alert your crew to stand by; I'm going to put down and send a party aboard."

"Glad to hear it. *Armis* out."

The instant Coeur shut off the communicator, Deep Six pointed out the obvious.



"This could be a delicate matter, Captain. Zorn is a wanted criminal in the Coalition, and it may be difficult to justify helping her."

"One problem at a time, Sixer. We're going down."

...

The little rock *Hornet* set down on was scarcely large enough to muster surface gravity of 0.01 G, but it was substantial enough to be mentioned in the computer's Imperial survey data as Opaco IV Ib. This indicated that little Ib had existed in a stable orbit for at least 100 years, and gave Coeur some reassurance as she floated *Hornet* down to a landing beside *Vi Et Armis* in an impact crater just large enough to shelter the sleek, 60 meter hull of the latter vessel. Lest both ships would later have to take off in a hurry, *Hornet* came down with her bow pointed toward *Vi Et Armis'* stern—an arrangement that would diminish the chance of a collision at launch.

A collision Coeur would have more trouble avoiding was one between Physic and Zorn.

"Say doc," Coeur said to Physic, whom she found alone in the sick bay, "I've been thinking about whether or not you should come along on this boarding party."

"Well, it is your prerogative, sir," Physic said, gruffly throwing drugs into her med kit. "But you said *Armis* didn't have any casualties."

"That's right. So maybe it would be better if you stay here."

"That might be prudent, sir," Physic said, avoiding a direct glance at Coeur, "given the way I'm feeling right now."

"Kinda like to rearrange her features, would you?"

"Damn right I would, and without any anesthetic."

"Because of Scissor?"

"Hell, yes, because of Scissor!" Physic said, turning toward Coeur. "Coeur, what she did to that Hiver—what she did to all those Hivers—it's beyond contemptible."

"I know, Physic," Coeur said calmly. "If you'll remember, I was there."

Aware, perhaps, of the fine line she was treading with insubordination, Physic took several deep breaths to calm herself down before responding.

"With respect, Coeur, you may have been there at Ra, but you weren't with us when Scissor died. You were with Zorn."

"Yes," Coeur said, moving over to Physic's diagnostic table and sitting on it, "I was."

From Coeur's pained expression, Physic realized that this was a sore point, and she immediately regretted it.

"Sorry, Red, I didn't mean it to sound like that. I know if it weren't for you and Drop Kick going off with Zorn, none of us ever would have gotten off Sauler, and the vaccine never would have gotten back to the Coalition."

"Maybe so," Coeur said, thoughtfully, "but it bothers me to think about it—Scissor dying here on the *Hornet*, and my not being here with him. The way you tell it, he was a real hero."

"Yes," Physic said, remembering the grisly spectacle, "he was. He suppressed the viral symptoms so the Sauler authorities wouldn't be suspicious, but he could only do that for so long. Just after we lifted off, his tissue practically disintegrated in my hands."

"Yes, you said that, too."

"My point," Physic said, "is that Zorn killed him, and she ought to pay for it—even if she is your friend."

"Well," Coeur said, getting up off the table, "I don't know if I'd call her my friend, so much as I'd call her an ally of necessity. We needed her at Sauler. And God knows we might need her help here, too, if we're going to sort out what's happening on Mexit. But one way or another, there will be justice for what she did to the Hivers."

"Yes, sir."

"In the meantime, though, I'll expect you to keep your personal feelings in check when—and if—Zorn and her crew need your services."

"Yes, sir."

"Now," Coeur said, glancing at her watch, "I'd better go get the boarding party together."

"Say, Red," Physic said, halting Coeur on the way to the sick bay hatch, "that wasn't being insubordinate, was it, what I said about you and Zorn?"

"Hard to say," Coeur smiled. "Insubordination is in the eye of the beholder, and I guess I didn't behind any. But don't get cocky."

...

Fifteen minutes later, Coeur assembled the minimal boarding party she felt adequate for the task of inspecting *Vi Et Armis*: herself, Drop Kick, Crowbar and Bonzo. Getting off *Hornet* would involve one more minor obstacle, however—junior technarchs convinced that Coeur had come to lb as part of some prearranged plan. Indeed, the Oriflammen made a point of interposing themselves between Coeur and Crowbar, waiting at the airlock in their vac suits, and the Marines Drop Kick and Bonzo, coming back from the cargo bay in light battle dress.

"Captain D'Esprit, we really must insist that you tell us what's

going on."

"I wish I knew, Mr. Masaryk. I can assure you of this much, though: You'll be safest here on the ship."

An-Wing, standing beside her colleague before *Home's* port airlock, crossed her arms in disgust, though the gesture was ungainly in her awkwardly bulky vac suit.

"This is just typical," An-Wing huffed; "you Aubani probably already have a secret base here and didn't bother to tell us about it."

"Actually, I'm not Aubani," Coeur said. "I'm Terran."

"Really, Bela," An-Wing went on, ignoring Coeur's comment, "isn't that just like the Aubani? First they bribe the Hivers into putting the Academy on their world, then they set production standards to TL10 so Oriflammen can't compete for contracts. Admit it, Captain; this is just part of a deliberate plan for Aubaine to dominate known space."

Through heroic self-control, Coeur refrained from drawing her gauss pistol and ordering the junior technarchs to stand aside. Instead, she nodded to Drop Kick and Bonzo, who effortlessly lifted the Oriflammen and set them out of the way.

"Stay," Drop Kick said.

Drop Kick's injunction was clearly unnecessary, though, for the graphic demonstration of the casual strength inherent in battle dress persuaded the Oriflammen to remain riveted in place as the troopers marched into the airlock before Coeur and the doctor. Lest they come unriveted and do something foolish, Gaffer—following behind the cavalry troopers—tromped up to the airlock in his even more intimidating heavy battle dress.

"Don't worry, Captain. I'll keep an eye on them."

"No hard feelings, An-Wing," Coeur said, holding her hand over the inner airlock controls, "but these are potentially dangerous pirates we're dealing with."

"Just the kind of people I'd expect to associate with Aubaine," An-Wing mumbled.

"Oh, put a sock in it," Masaryk said.

Coeur pretended not to notice and shut the inner airlock door. For safety's sake, the two Arses and two Marines then paired up to check each others' suit seals.

"Say, skipper," Crowbar said, "I understand why I'm going on this party—that ship looks trashed—but shouldn't Physic go along, too?"

"Negative," Coeur told the engineer, patting his suit to indicate it was secure. "Zorn reported her casualties are minor."

"Besides," Drop Kick added, "if we brought Physic aboard, they might not stay that way. That Hiver massacre is still pretty

fresh for her."

"But I thought we'd settled that," Bonzo said. "Zorn was just a stooge of the Guild."

Coeur shrugged. "It's probably a little easier for us to be dispassionate about Ra; we weren't up to our armpits in dead Hivers, like Physic in the infirmary. Everybody secure?"

The Marines and Crowbar lifted their arms in a "thumbs up."

"All right. I'm cycling the airlock."

Moments later, the airlock chamber evacuated, and the outer hatch opened to hard vacuum. A ladder had meanwhile extended from the hull for their convenience, but residual kinetic energy made their first steps from the ship's 1 G to lb's 0.01 G sail well past the rungs of the ladder and plant them several meters from the freighter. Competent though all of them were in low-G maneuvers, the effect of their initial stumbling landings was hilarious to Snapshot, watching their backs from her missile turret adjacent to the airlock.

Were this a conventional boarding of a hostile enemy, Coeur would certainly have landed with Gyro's 150-Mj heavy laser facing the target, but she and Zorn had parted on relatively good terms, and she elected not to make such an aggressive gesture. Instead, she settled for the lesser cover provided by the 12-Mj plasma gun under Snapshot's control.

*Not like it matters, Coeur thought. At this range, the plasma gun will punch her armor just as well as the laser would.*

Up close, the members of the ground party saw what they could only assume from a distance: The pirate's TL15 chameleon hull was programmed to mimic the shading of the surrounding rock. The efficacy of that tactic against a direct sensor scan was dubious, but it did beat dragging a camouflage tarp across the entire hull.

"Which hatch?" Drop Kick asked Coeur with Anslan hand gestures. Like most Arses and Marines, he cultivated the healthy habit of radio silence whenever possible.

"Forward, behind the bridge."

"Should I just knock?"

"Yes," Coeur signed back, "we'll cover you."

Drop Kick shrugged, an imperceptible gesture in battle dress, and bounded over to the hull of the warship, kicking up dust clouds with every long hopping stride. His three comrades, meanwhile, tried not to look too much like they were ready to start blasting away with their laser and gauss rifles as Drop Kick reached up to the hull and knocked three times.

The airlock opened a moment later, and a man in a relic black tailored vac suit stuck his head out to wave the Coalition spacers



aboard while a ladder lowered from the ship for their convenience.

"Let's go," Coeur signaled, stepping onto the ladder.

Coeur and Drop Kick had, of course, been spirited away from Sauler in the *Vi Et Armis*, so both were thoroughly familiar with her interior arrangement. Even before they entered her port airlock, Coeur was associating the damage she'd seen with interior locations she remembered, and recalling the Vega Zorn who mastered the ship.

Vega Zorn was born on Aurora and was already a 30-year-old lieutenant commander when that world's space fleet became the hub of the Dawn League's unofficial navy in 1197. Even more so than Aubaine, Aurora was aggressively Federalist, and Zorn was a perfect mirror of its character. In her personnel file, Coeur read that the charismatic, black-haired woman had an easy rapport with competent enlisted spacers, just as she had a career-threatening disdain for career desk jockeys whom she felt were unqualified to serve as her superiors.

All the same, Zorn was on a fast promotion track in 1200—pilot of, and probably next in line to command, the exploration cruiser *Taylor the Bruce*. A vampire ship destroyed *Taylor the Bruce*, however, leaving only Zorn and the ship's Hiver adviser alive. Already distrustful of the manipulative Hiver race, Zorn came to believe that the Hiver adviser actually engineered the encounter as part of a scheme to infect the Coalition's computers with Virus—and in turn help extinguish the violent and dangerous human race that Hivers were only pretending to help. In disgust, she resigned her commission and turned to a life of piracy to support herself.

When Coeur met Zorn a year and a half later, she was already a well-known pirate, having picked up both *Vi Et Armis* and a cutlass scar across her right eye, complementing the fearful effect of her black TL14 vac suit and crew-cut hair. What few people realized—outside Coeur and Drop Kick—was how much the pirate act was just that—an act. Her preferred targets were Guild ships and Teddie naval vessels, and Coeur earnestly believed she would no sooner fire on a Coalition starship than she'd lop off her own arm.

"Hey, Red Sun, Drop Kick," the man in the black suit said, taking off his helmet after the airlock had cycled and he had led the spacers into the corsair's interior. A rough-wrinkled man, he nevertheless wore a personable smile, and was instantly recognizable to Coeur and Drop Kick.

"Well, if it isn't Vink," Coeur said.

"Zorn's engineer," Drop Kick explained to Crowbar and

Bonzo.

"So," Coeur went on, "Is Zorn around?"

"Right here," Zorn said a moment later, a tall woman in a tailored azure vac suit stepping through a bulkhead hatch forward. "Glad you could get here so quickly."

Both Coeur and Drop Kick paused a moment, however, before shaking the hand the pirate offered, not quite certain if it really was Zorn. While Vink was certainly familiar, Zorn looked quite different than they remembered. For one thing, her face was fuller, with only a hint of its old scar, and her hair was grown out nearly to shoulder length—now blonde, and far less severe than the butch crew cut they remembered. Indeed, with her tailored black vac suit exchanged for one tinted blue, it appeared that only her pale blue eyes were completely unchanged.

"Vega," Coeur said finally, accepting the offered hand, "you've changed."

"Really? I thought I was the same sweet girl I always was."

"Uh-huh. No, your appearance. I assume you changed it to throw off the odd contract killer."

"You assume correctly."

"Plastic surgery?"

"Actually, no," Zorn said. "TL15 microbots. You drink 'em in solution, they resculpt your features, then you plss 'em out when they're done."

"Sounds pretty nifty—what, you pick those up at the local drugstore?"

"Actually, no. I grabbed a case of them from Sauler before we blew the place."

"Oh."

Vink, meanwhile, took Crowbar and Bonzo aside.

"You must be Crowbar," Vink said. "Red Sun talked about you."

"What did she say?" Crowbar asked.

"Not much. Just that you had a beard."

Crowbar looked at Coeur curiously.

"That's a strange thing to tell someone, skipper."

"Well," Coeur said, "they're rare in the Arses—you know, to keep a good seal around your face when you pull the hood of your body sleeve up."

Now that he could look more closely, Crowbar saw that Vink also had a fair amount of facial hair, though it was light and hard to distinguish against his wrinkles.

"On the other hand," Coeur went on, "a lot of Zorn's crew have beards, because they have advanced space suits and don't need to wear body sleeves under them."

"It sort of advertises their affluence," Drop Kick added.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Zorn said, stroking her chin, "I haven't been able to grow one."

"Are you an engineer too?" Vink asked Bonzo.

"After a fashion," the Marine said. "I do most of the maintenance on our vehicle sensors and computers."

"Well, then, these two are the ones I want to see," Vink said, turning from Crowbar and Bonzo to Zorn, Coeur and Drop Kick. "Mind if I take them aft?"

"Is that acceptable?" Zorn asked Coeur.

"That's why I brought them. In the meantime, you can tell Drop Kick and me what you're doing in this system."

Zorn nodded.

"All right. Come forward with me.

The *Homet* party then separated, with Vink leading Crowbar and Bonzo aft toward the badly damaged engine compartment. Zorn, meanwhile, took Coeur and Drop Kick a few meters forward to the bridge. In a ship that was mostly drives and fuel, this was the only open area forward of the drive compartment, but it was fairly large, with seven workstations. The only thing that kept the area from *looking* large was the arrangement of the workstations—five were lined up in a row behind the pilot's and copilot's workstations, the only way they could fit in the narrow neck of the ship.

"So, Nik," Zorn said to the lone occupant of the bridge, a man with a soldering kit conducting repairs on an overhead panel, "any luck?"

"Yeah, it'll hold together—at least until we take another hit."

"Good enough. Why don't you go aft and help shore up the port gangway."

"Aye, sir."

The young man then packed up his tools and left, leaving Zorn alone with her guests.

"So, I don't suppose you'd believe it's a coincidence that we're both here at Mexit," Zorn said, after sitting in her pilot's chair and turning around to face Coeur and Drop Kick, whom she had seated in the closest workstations astern.

"Well, I don't think it's any accident you're here," Coeur answered. "Space is too big for coincidences. And anyway, you said you came looking for Zero."

"That's right. A couple of months back—after we dropped you two off—we pulled into Kmak and ran into a rumor about him."

"Let me guess; someone sold you a picture of him they got from the Network."

"Something like that, yeah. I already knew Zero was a pretty

scummy character—I knew he'd fired on Dawn League freighters when he thought he could get away with it—so I figured it wouldn't hurt the Coalition much if I bushwhacked him and took the black globe for myself."

"Did you actually get to Mexit?"

"Well, sort of. I sent a team down to the surface and then came out here to refuel. That was when the Solee jumped us."

"Those Solee must be pretty good," Drop Kick said, "if they got the jump on you."

"Thanks," Zorn said, "but I think it was mostly bad luck. The Solee caught us climbing out of the gas giant, and we didn't have much chance to maneuver."

"All right," Coeur asked, with earnest curiosity, "so why aren't you dead?"

"Good question. Near as I can figure, the Solee captain isn't very good, because he opened up at very long range and then let us slip away by powering down and reducing our signature. I dropped a decoy drone and had it very conspicuously maneuver back down into the atmosphere."

"It looks like they bought it," Coeur observed.

"Like I said, they're not very good."

Coeur chewed on that for a moment. "You said earlier you thought the Solee picked up the same tip about Zero that you did. Is it possible they actually tracked you here?"

"I doubt it," Zorn said, with a wry grimace, "given the skill of her skipper. The way I figure it, since Kmak's a pretty popular watering hole for the Solee too, they must have picked up the same rumor that we did there, and it's just a coincidence we got here about the same time."

"Do you know if the Solee put any men down on Mexit?"

"Don't know. It's been a week since we were at the planet."

"And you haven't contacted your ground party," Coeur surmised, "because of the Solee."

"Right."

"Who did you send down?" Drop Kick asked. "Anybody we'd remember?"

"Oh yeah. Remember V-Max?"

"Yeah, sure. Your navigator, right?"

"Right. He's down in Soledad, the old starport city, with the ship's boat crew."

"Katzel and Cari?" Coeur asked, remembering the man and woman who were the youngest members of Zorn's crew.

"Right. We left them with the ship's boat and went off to scout the rest of the system. That's the last we saw of them before we got jumped here at the giant."



"I see. So V-Max might have some good intelligence on the planet."

"Yeah, or he might be dead for all I know. As long as that cruiser's up there, I can't lift off to find out."

"Well, we'll just have to fix that," Coeur said. "One way or another, we'll have to take him out."

"Good luck," Zorn said. "That's a 1200-ton cruiser!"

"Well, size isn't everything. We got a probe pretty close to him earlier, and the fact that he let you get away while you were in firing range suggests he's got pretty bad sensors. Either that or a greener crew than I'd take into space."

Zorn shook her head sympathetically.

"I don't know, Red. If you tangle with him, we'll probably end up with two junked ships, even if the skipper is a boob."

"Tell me this," Coeur said, "if I can get you off this rock, will you help us get in touch with V-Max?"

"I don't see why not," Zorn said. "With the jump drive shot, we can't leave the system anyway."

*That was good, Coeur thought, not so much for Vi Et Armis, but for herself and what she was legally obligated to point out.*

"There's also the matter of a Coalition warrant for your arrest," Coeur said. "If it's within my power, I have to take you in."

Zorn smiled, making the chagrined expression of a woman whose options were limited.

"Tell me about this warrant, Red. Is it just for me, or all my crew?"

"Strictly speaking, it's just for you."

Zorn was silent for a moment, apparently thinking. Then she let out her breath in a long sigh. "All right, then," she said. "You help save my people, and I'll surrender myself when your mission is over."

"Good enough," Coeur said. "Can you patch me through to my ship?"

"Sure," Zorn said, turning around to face her comm panel. "You got a plan?"

"Maybe," Coeur said, picking up the nearest headset and putting it on. "Deep Six, put me through to Snapshot."

# Chapter Nine

"Let me get this straight, sir. You want to take down a colonial cruiser with six missiles?"

"Yeah, I know, Snapper, it's a long shot. But just think about this—your probe got within 1000 kilometers of that cruiser—a helluva lot closer than a missile has to get to fire its lasers."

"True, they should've flagged it. But remember what you always used to say in class: Never..."

"...underestimate your opponent, yeah. But you shouldn't overestimate him either. Can you program a flight of our missiles so they'll detonate remotely and hit that cruiser?"

"You mean use them like mines. Sure, but that assumes he'll maintain the same orbit. If he changes it at all, the missiles will go off on time, but they'll hit empty space. He'll know someone's here, and we won't get another chance."

Coeur stood silent for a moment, weighing her options.

"Or how about this," Snapshot offered. "We put the missiles up like you suggested, aimed at the spot we expect him to pass through, but instead of putting them on a timer, we watch through the drone. If he passes through on time, I bounce the fire command off the drone, and they fire as planned. If the drone shows a new orbit, we let the missiles lay low, and maneuver them later to try again."

"Can you do that?"

"I'll have to fiddle with the missiles to accept a simple go/no-go pulse, but that shouldn't be a problem. It's been done before. Except..."

"Except what?"

"There will be a lag, a fraction of a second, for the image of the cruiser to get from the drone to me, and for the fire command to get back to the missiles. If he suspects anything in that lag and thrusts even a little, it will be enough to miss him."

Coeur slowly breathed in once, then out. "Yeah, but we'll take that chance. Get Newton's help for that fiddling stuff."

"Don't want me to flunk this exam, huh?"

To be sure, it was a flat-out desperate gamble. Zorn's combat experience with *Royal Vengeance* told her that the big ship had at least six functioning lasers—one for each missile. Under the direction of a competent sensor chief, that ought to be more than enough firepower to take down the flight of missiles.

While *Royal Vengeance* was safely over Opaca IV's horizon from *Hornet's* hiding place on moonlet Ib, Snapshot carefully launched and maneuvered her formation of missiles into an orbit precisely opposite that of the cruiser, 15,000 kilometers out from the gas giant. From then on, they had only to follow the inescapable laws of physics to coast to their violent appointment.

Meanwhile, Snapshot moved the sensor drone out to a point in direct line-of-sight of both *Hornet* and the ambush zone. There was nothing left to do but wait.

When Deep Six's even voice came over her headset, Snapshot started, so intent was she on the telemetry from the sensor drone.

"Target expected to break horizon in five, four, three, two, one, MARK."

Snapshot looked for the telltale signs that the target was coming as expected.

"Do you see him?" Coeur called to the missile gunner.

"Not yet, but there's a lot of high-altitude crud that murks up contacts right on the horizon. Hello...I've got something. Yeah, it's him all right. On course and on time."

"How long to intercept?"

"About five minutes."

Although the tension was acute while waiting to see if the cruiser would maneuver to a new orbit, the end was almost anticlimactic. *Royal Vengeance* appeared not to pick out the missiles as they popped above the horizon ahead, its active sensors intent on probing the roiling cloud deck below.

At 30,000 kilometers, when clear of the horizon, the missiles extended their laser-generating rods and, each energized by a 500-kiloton fusion explosion, generated bundles of high-energy x-rays that would sear through 70 centimeters of bonded superdense armor.

"Got him," Snapshot exclaimed in her turret, watching her warheads flare like fusion blossoms in the image from the sensor drone. "I think they all went off."

"Not intercepted?" Coeur asked, from *Hornet's* bridge.

"Negative. I register six explosions."

"Maybe one is the cruiser exploding," Gyro offered hopefully, from her laser turret.

"Hard to say," Snapshot answered. "There's too much inter-

ference from the detonations."

"Well, it's no use thinking about what we can't see," Coeur said. "Snapper, keep an eye on telemetry from that probe, and send me the first clear picture you get. We're moving out to investigate."

Just on the off chance Newton was right—and *Royal Vengeance* had survived unscathed, Coeur transferred the junior technarchs, Gaffer and the Infantry aboard the grounded *Vi Et Armis*, with orders to complete the Mexit mission themselves if necessary.

"Sir," Snapshot said 20 minutes later, as *Homet* crawled across the broad face of Opaca IV at cloud top level. "I've got a clear picture for you."

"Good," Coeur said, "send it up."

Good God, Coeur thought a moment later, when the image appeared at her workstation. *I think we got her.*

Though the still image was grainy and streaked through with static—Snapshot's probe had recorded it from 60,000 kilometers through a field of radioactive interference—its effect was staggering. *Royal Vengeance*, once a fine-looking warship, now appeared a crippled wreck, scorched all over her hull and trailing a long line of debris.

"Cave Aculem is right," Gyro said, quoting *Homet's* new motto, "you stung her good, Snapper."

"Yeah," the missile gunner agreed, "that ship's toast."

"Well, let's not be hasty," Coeur said, "half a *Kinunir's* still more than a match for the *Homet*."

"So," Deep Six said, "do you think we should refrain from moving closer?"

"No," Coeur said, "I want you to plot an intercept course, so we can inspect her at close range."

"Ballsy," Crowbar offered, listening in from the engine room.

"Yeah, I know," Coeur agreed. "Gyro, the minute we break the horizon, I'll want you to lock your MFD onto *Vengeance*. Snapper, go ahead and deploy your next two ready missiles."

"Yes, sir," Snapper said.

"I take it a silent approach is out, then," Gyro said.

"Yeah. I'm not going to monkey with passive sensors. If that ship so much as twitches, we'll blast her."

"Yes, sir."

*Homet* streaked above the cloud deck, furiously burning reaction mass for a high-speed intercept.

"Uh-oh," Snapshot said, watching the cruiser via the high-orbiting probe. "Target's hot."

"Clarify," Coeur said to Deep Six. "What's going on out there?"



"If I'm interpreting these readings correctly," the Schall said, "*Vengeance* is attempting to power up her maneuver drive. However, the ship is not moving appreciably."

"Could be damage to her power plant," Gyro speculated. "She might not be able to run her HEPlAR at full power."

Suddenly, an awful realization came into Coeur's mind.

As large as *Royal Vengeance* was, most of her power would normally go into running her maneuver drive—HEPlAR thrusters being notorious power guzzlers. If the cruiser's power plant were heavily damaged, then, she might not be able to get so much as 1G out of her maneuver drive, although there might well be enough power remaining to power secondary systems....

*Like sensors and weapons.*

"Skipper," Snapshot called, "They're lighting up the drone."

"Get it out of there! Take evasive action!"

"Already doing that—whoa, they're opening fire on the drone!"

"Damage?" Coeur asked.

*That was stupid, Coeur reminded herself, I'm staring at the drone's feed to my own station.*

"Nothing yet."

"Well keep it moving."

"Will do. They're firing again...no hits. Man, they're serious about this."

*Then it hit Coeur. Of course! They're idiots!*

"Snapshot, they think your drone is an enemy ship! They can't tell the difference! Release your ready missiles. Sixer, plot me a divergent course so we can approach the cruiser on a course perpendicular to those missiles we just dropped. Crowbar, prepare for maneuver burns."

"On your display, sir," Deep Six informed her only moments later.

"We're going to make them see at least three different threats. They'll have to divide their fire, which should give us a chance."

*We'll need it.*

Coeur threw *Homet* around hard, spinning the ship so her thrust chambers could blast them onto a new course, a dog-leg that would place them on a converging course with Snapshot's last missiles. A converging course that intersected at *Royal Vengeance*.

"We will break the horizon in two minutes, sir," Deep Six announced.

"Roger. Gyro, fire as soon as you get a solution, and don't stop."

"Aye aye, sir."

*And don't miss.*

"How long until the missiles clear the horizon, Sixer?"

"Assuming they are looking, they should spot them 20 seconds before we appear."

*That should be about right.*

"How's the drone, Snapper?"

"Still untouched. They're pretty bad shots, skipper. Either we fried them good, or they don't know what they're doing. I can see our missiles coming up behind them now. They ought to spot them soon."

"Stay focused on your missiles, Snapper. I'll have Deep Six take over the drone feed."

"Roger."

"Captain," Deep Six announced in his calm voice, "the target appears to have picked up the missiles. They are maneuvering to bring more batteries to bear on them."

"Snapper, can you fire?"

"Not yet. I need a clear shot through hard vacuum. These x-rays don't propagate well through the trace high atmosphere."

*I taught her that, Coeur thought with a brief surge of pride, but the thought was quickly brushed from her mind.*

"Target in line-of-sight," Deep Six announced.

Coeur spotted the signature on her display, low on the horizon, intermittently distorted by the Intervening cloud tops.

"Commencing fire," Gyro announced steadily.

*Remember to allow for diffraction and blooming, Coeur thought to her.*

"A hit!" shouted the normally calm Deep Six.

*Good girl!*

Coeur could see the cruiser beginning to maneuver to respond to this new threat.

"How much longer, Snapper?"

"Any second; compiling final solution now."

*Just don't hit us.*

"Captain," Deep Six called, "I'm picking up a large power surge from the target."

*Huh?*

Coeur looked at her tactical display and recognized the distinctive "unraveling" effect playing about the now indistinct signature of the Solee cruiser.

*They're jumping out! My God, from only half a diameter! And then, from somewhere deep inside herself, Coeur felt the following words burst out: "Snapper, check fire, save those missiles."*

And suddenly, where there had been 12,000 tonnes of starship, there was nothing.

Coeur sagged into her couch, spent. *Oh, you poor, stupid bastards. You poor, stupid bastards.*

"No problem, skipper. I lost my track anyway. Too much interference from the jump gradient."

"Any other targets, Sixer?" Coeur asked, weakly.

"Negative. We look clear all the way around."

*Good.*

Coeur closed her eyes to see rapid images flash past. *Alnitak. Carlyle VII. A five-diameter desperation jump. 40 surviving crew. A bank of low berths, of which only 17 worked. Berth 16, in which she laid down to sleep, and berth 23, from which she rose up to live. And Darien, always Darien, sleeping forever in dead berth 16.*

*Please, God, let them make it. I was trying to kill them, but now, oh, please God, let them make it.*

Outside of Coeur's reverie, Hornet's intercom began to crackle with relieved conversation.

"Well that wasn't very sporting, was it?" Snapshot cracked.

"Don't even joke about that," Gyro returned. "We ought to be dead."

"Yeah, well, I bet they won't be in any hurry to come back here."

Coeur roused herself to respond. "Actually, I disagree. If they make it home, they'll be back, but with the whole damn Solee fleet."

As Coeur expected, no witty rejoinders met this remark.

"Deep Six, how long should it take that ship to get back to Solee? Assume the possibility of a misjump, and give me a best case and worst case."

The Schalli bent over his navigation board. "Is best case our best case or their best case?"

Coeur smiled. "Make it theirs," she said, feeling a little more cheerful.

"Absolute best case, one week, if they misjump directly to Solee. Absolute worst case, never."

"Okay, throw out the high and low estimates. Give me a more likely best case."

"Likely best case assumes that they have not misjumped, retain jump-3 or better performance, and are able to repair their maneuver drive while in jumpspace. Three weeks at best to reach Solee itself. However, several possible misjumps would allow them to return to Solee in two weeks."

"But the fleet would still take three weeks to get back, and we can probably allow a week to assemble the force. So," Coeur announced, "the soonest they can realistically be back is six weeks round trip."

*Plan for the worst; hope for the best.*

"Yeah, but that assumes they have to go all the way back to Solee itself, and don't have ships at a base closer by," Gyro cautioned.

"Right, but we can balance that against additional time they might need to repair their drives, and the much greater chance that misjumps will not be in their favor."

"Great," Snapshot said dejectedly, "so all we accomplished was to set a limit on the time we have for this mission."

*That's right, Coeur thought, we've put ourselves on a clock. And I've maybe doomed a bunch of people I never met to a fate I wouldn't wish on anyone. Good guys, bad guys. Imperial, Solomani, Coalition, Solee. There but for the grace of God go we.*

"That still leaves us a lot of time, and we're alive and well. Deep Six, plot us a course back to Armis, ASAP. The clock is running."

*Oh, you poor stupid bastards. Take your time coming back, but please, God, let them make it.*

\*\*\*

Despite his considerable knowledge of starship drives, Crowbar knew *Vi Et Armis* could not be repaired with parts aboard herself or *Hornet*. Indeed, it was questionable whether the jury-rigged thrusters would stand more than a few minutes of hard evasive burns.

"I think she'll make 1G," Crowbar told Coeur in a relatively quiet corner of his engine room, as *Hornet* powered toward a rendezvous with *Vi Et Armis* in orbit about Opaca IV, "but forget about combat."

"Actually, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Zorn's men are pretty loyal, and if she changes her mind about cooperating, I'd hate to see them cruising around in something that can outmaneuver us."

Crowbar snorted involuntarily.

"Don't worry about that, skipper. As of this date, *Armis* is no match for a garbage barge, let alone the *Hornet*."

"Well, all right, but what about noncombat travel? Do you think she'll make Mexit?"

"She should. Vink says he'll cross his fingers."

Coeur smiled.

"What I'm more worried about are those junior technarchs," Crowbar said. "Have you had any word if Zorn's killed them yet?"

"Actually," Coeur said, "it's funny you mention that. The impression I get is that Zorn is getting along pretty well with the technarchs and the Marines."

"That's odd. Zorn doesn't seem like much of a Centrist."

"She isn't—she hates Centrists. But she hates Hivers worse."

"Hm," Crowbar said, comprehending.

It was a tacit opinion of many Oriflammen—including Snapshot—that the Hiver Federation had overstayed its welcome in



human space. To an extent, this stemmed from the impression that they'd been snubbed in the selection of Aubaine as the site of the Hiver Technical Academy, but in a broader sense, it reflected the Oriflamme distrust of all things alien and the sense that Oriflamme was being excluded by the members of the Coalition's "Federalist-Hiver" axis.

Needless to say, most Federalists had little patience for such pessimistic Hiver-bashing, noting the obvious benefits of Hiver technology for every member of the Coalition, but Zorn was an exception.

"You know," Crowbar said, after a further moment's contemplation, "it's possible that Zorn has an ulterior motive in being friendly with the technarchs."

"I thought about that," Coeur said. "I wouldn't be surprised if Oriflamme gave her amnesty just to spite Aubaine."

"That would be pretty funny, wouldn't it?"

"Somehow, I don't think 'funny' is the word they'd use for it in the assembly," Coeur replied. "But at least there'd be one good thing about it—we'd have Zorn on Oriflamme's side instead of Zero."

\* \* \*

Sure enough, when *Hornet* extended her port docking collar to mate with *Vi Et Armis*, Coeur found a spirit of fellowship and goodwill rife among her returning personnel—and not just because of *Hornet's* victory over the *Royal Vengeance*.

"Strictly off the record," Gaffer told Coeur and Drop Kick, stepping out of the way of the heavily armored troopers debarking behind him, "I think Zorn's got some good ideas. Somebody ought to find the real Guild headquarters and destroy it once and for all."

"Or Solee, at least," Red Eye added, coming up alongside Gaffer and saluting Coeur and Drop Kick. "Zorn says that colonial cruiser was one of the smaller ships in their fleet."

"Before you get too chummy with Zorn," Drop Kick enjoined his junior sergeants, "you should remember there's a warrant on her head, and you might have to serve it if she doesn't surrender peacefully."

"Yeah, if we have to," Gaffer said.

"Understood," Red Eye added.

"Very good. Carry on."

Following on the heels of the Marines, however, were the junior technarchs, who were even more effusive in their estimation of Zorn.

"Captain D'Esprit, your friend is an impressive woman. It may have been unjust to accuse her as we have."

Coeur was mildly stunned. It was probably the first kind word she'd ever heard An-Wing say about anyone.

"I'm inclined to agree with Liu," Masaryk said. "We agree with Zorn that the time has come for a full accounting of the Hivers' intentions to the Coalition."

"A fine idea," Coeur said. "I'll be sure to pass it along as soon as the mission's over."

"Sir," Masaryk went on, "Liu and I would like to make a request. We would like to remain on the *Vi Et Armis*."

"I'm afraid I'll have to refuse."

"But why?" An-Wing exploded. "You were perfectly willing to trust her with us and the Marines just yesterday!"

"That, Ms. An-Wing, was when *Hornet* was in imminent danger. Now that *Hornet* is out of imminent danger, this is the safest place for you to be."

"Still," Masaryk said, "it could be risky leaving Zorn alone. If she gets away somehow, the Coalition won't be very happy."

"I'll take the risk," Coeur said. "Right now, it's more important that Zorn's people see we aren't treating her like a fugitive, so they'll cooperate with us."

"Good point," Masaryk admitted.

"But, Captain," An-Wing fumed, "if Zorn really is all the criminal you make her out to be, somebody ought to keep an eye on her."

"Don't worry," Coeur said. "Even if *Armis* tried to slip away, she couldn't outrun *Hornet* in her present condition. Besides, since my first responsibility is the safety of you civilians, I *couldn't* leave you alone on that ship."

"Very well," An-Wing conceded, "but Bela is correct. Zorn represents an opinion that is not given adequate respect by the Coalition."

"Point taken. Now, if you'll excuse us, Drop Kick and I need to go talk with Zorn ourselves."

The technarchs nodded, then moved on into the interior of *Hornet*, smoothly carrying on the perpetual argument that seemed to be their standard discourse.

"...Bela, I can't believe you actually agreed with Red Sun. Remember, we should show solidarity."

"Oh, sure, as long as it's solidarity with your opinion...."

"Don't they ever shut up?" Drop Kick asked Coeur, after the Orillammen had passed out of earshot.

"Probably when they sleep," Coeur suggested.

"You know, the Secretary General better look out," Drop Kick joked. "As popular as Zorn is, she'll probably take up politics after she gets out of prison."

"I wouldn't say she's popular with everyone," Coeur countered, walking toward the airlock with Drop Kick, but pausing just outside the hull of *Vi Et Armis*.

"Physic, you mean?"

"Actually, I was thinking about Newton. They say Hivers don't have emotions, but I could swear he's been lying low as long as Zorn's been around."

"Yeah, I guess he has, now that you mention it."

"Well, maybe he's just been busy," Coeur said, stepping back from her anthropomorphism. "Come on, let's go find Zorn."

Just a few steps to their right, Coeur and Drop Kick came again to *Vi Et Armis'* bridge, unlocked but now staffed by its full complement of seven spacers. These men and women—mostly Coalition citizens, sharing Zorn's distaste for the Hivers' influence—recognized Coeur and Drop Kick from their earlier months on the corsair and made friendly greetings. Hearing these, Zorn separated herself from her pilot's couch and headed aft to meet her visitors at the bridge hatch.

"Well, congratulations," Zorn welcomed them, guiding Coeur and Drop Kick back to the relative quiet of the starboard gangway. "It sounds like you taught those Solee a thing or two."

"Well, I don't know about that," Coeur returned. "The Solee crew might have been green, but they did have the presence of mind to jump away and probably go get reinforcements."

"Which means," Drop Kick added, "that we don't have much time to find Zero's people and the depot."

"Yeah, I get the picture," Zorn said. "We need to jam."

"Basically," Coeur agreed, "yes. We've brought Snapshot's drone back aboard and laid in a fairly fast course to Mexit—about four days, assuming you can make 20 G-hours of thrust."

"Understood. That shouldn't be a problem."

"We could take it easier, say 10 G-hours, but then there's another consideration, too. I'd just as soon not leave V-Max and his people alone any longer than necessary."

"Very thoughtful," Zorn said.

"More like pragmatic," Drop Kick corrected. "If anything happens to V-Max, we'll have to start from the ground up."

"Well, V-Max is pretty sharp," Zorn said. "I'm sure he had Carl and Katzel hide the ship's boat before they went scouting."

"Let's hope," Coeur said. "As for us, we'll keep in touch with a tight-beam maser, just so Mexit doesn't hear us coming."

"Check. As far as we could tell, Mexit doesn't have any kind of fleet, so we shouldn't have to worry about that. And her moon is very small, so it probably doesn't support any kind of base."

"What I'm worried about more are planetary defenses," Coeur said. "PDMs and deep meson sites. That world was pretty big, and it had to have elaborate defenses."

"No doubt," Zorn agreed, "but nothing active ever locked onto us. Not that we could detect anyway."

"Could be the old systems were forgotten," Deep Kick suggested.

"Want to trust your drop troops to that intuition?" Coeur asked.

"Negative."

"That's another reason we need to run silent, then. But that's only one problem we need to deal with. Zorn, to be frank, I'm worried about leaving you unsupervised."

Zorn's eyebrows rose.

"Why? Think I'll misbehave?"

"You know what I mean, Zorn. To be frank, I don't want an armed confrontation between our crews—because God knows you've got some pretty heavy weapons of your own on board—but eventually I'll have to post some sort of guard to keep an eye on you. The way I see it, that time will be after we sort out the situation on Mexit and find a safe place to repair your ship."

Zorn sighed.

"That's the law, huh?"

"No, the law is that I put you and your crew under arrest and put a prize crew aboard *Amis*, but I'm willing to delay that on the basis of your character."

"I understand. I'll find a way to break it to the crew that they'll be seeing more of your troops later."

"Very well," Coeur agreed, shaking hands with Zorn. "Good luck with your drives."

"Thanks."

"And don't forget," Drop Kick added, "if we get ambushed, let *Homet* do the fighting."

"Don't worry," Zorn said. "If we get ambushed by anyone, we'll be sure to hide behind your ship."



# Chapter 10

As inhabited worlds went, Mexit was somewhat small—close in diameter and mass to the solar world Mars. This gave it the advantage of fairly low gravity, about 0.7G—handy for engineers and architects accustomed to heavier worlds—and both surface water and minerals existed in quantities sufficient to sustain an advanced culture. However, Mexit's disadvantages far outweighed its advantages. Like Oriflamme, it orbited close to its sun, completing one orbit in 48 days and therefore receiving a vicious battering as air currents whipped around the planet, propelled by pressure differences between the rapidly heated and chilled polar regions. With TL15 weather control, the entire planet had once been inhabitable, but it had since regressed to TL6, so that day was long gone. Virus had seen to that.

"So basically, Deep Six, what you're saying is it's not a fun place to be."

"That would be an accurate assessment, Captain. Without weather control, the planet has insufficient ozone, and with insufficient ozone, anyone out in the daylight risks serious UV damage."

Uttering that statement in *Homet's* lounge, Deep Six elicited groans from several of the humans arrayed around him. In addition to Coeur, there were Physic, Newton, Gaffer, the cavalry troopers Drop Kick, Whiz Bang and Bonzo, and the pirates Zorn and Vink—an eclectic group gathered from *Homet* and *Vi Et Armis* for a first mission to Mexit. Since the ships were parked side by side on the back side of Elojo—Mexit's little moon with a diameter of 500 km—they were safe from any kind of planetary sensors, but they were not safe from the predation of their own imaginations.

"Well, on the plus side," Zorn said, "at least we got back in contact with V-Max. The trouble will be linking up with him."

"Right," Drop Kick agreed. "If we go down in the daytime, we risk getting baked, but on the other hand, if we go down at night, that's when everybody will be moving around."

"It's a pity he couldn't have stayed with the ship's boat," Bonzo said. "There's a meson communicator aboard it, right? So we could communicate with him directly from *Armis*."

"Unfortunately," Zorn said, "no, we couldn't. *Armis*' set is very short range, and the ship's boat set is a receiver only. We only use the system in dire emergencies."

Thinking about this, and the conditions on Mexit, Coeur rapped her pen on the lounge table several times, then dropped it. Almost imperceptibly, its fall was slower than normal, since ship's gravity was set to 0.7G, acclimating her personnel to the gravity of Mexit.

"All right," she said, "let's look at a map. Where was V-Max when we contacted him?"

After a certain amount of fiddling with a recessed control panel, Newton activated the lounge table's holographic display and pulled up a relic survey image of Soledad City, 200 km on a edge. Altered to remove cloud cover, the image was wall-to-wall metropolis, so thick with urbanization that little contrast of regions could be discerned.

"Just about here," Newton said, pointing a fingertip at the center of the map. "From a church here in Albegar District."

"A church?" Gaffer asked.

"St. Elva's Chapel," Zorn said. "It belongs to the Church of Grace and Light."

"Do we know anything about them?" Drop Kick asked.

"V says it's a local religion," Zorn explained.

"Local as in planetary?"

"It would seem so," Deep Six said. "I've been studying the planet's radio traffic through Snapshot's orbital probe, and the CGL is mentioned in many broadcasts."

"Positively mentioned?" Physic asked.

"Sometimes. More often it is an object of scorn by local tyrants. For instance, the Emperor Brak—Soledad's ruler—has promised to hang the CGL's Cardinal Vazquez if he ever gets his hands on her."

"Sounds like V-Max picked the wrong place to stay," Whiz Bang quipped.

"Not necessarily," Coeur corrected. "This CGL could be a potential ally. But go on, Newton; where's the ship's boat?"

"It should be here," Newton said, pointing at an area 20 kilometers southwest of the chapel, "in the Lomarica Hills."

"Boy, that is one cluttered map," Whiz Bang observed. "I mean it's all urban—it must be a jungle to pass through."

"Well, you've got to remember that that's an 80-year-old map," Zorn said; "it's not quite that built-up today."

"Indeed," Newton said. "Observe."

Through digital wizardry, Newton altered the old image of Soledad, replacing it with a scan of the identical area recovered from Snapshot's probe that very day. Even those who'd seen the sensor comparison earlier were stunned—where once a city sprawled, now stood a wasteland of farmland and rubble. Only around the great River Tam, and the old Calildo Highway, was settlement—no more than a tenth of the old city.

"The 20 kilometers between the Lomarica Hills and the chapel are primarily farmland, and sparsely populated."

"Newton's right," Zorn said. "We could probably put down next to the boat and fly in unobserved on broomsticks."

"Indeed," Newton said. "I would agree with the captain's estimation."

That elicited a smile from Coeur; it was the first time Newton and Zorn had actually acknowledged each other.

"So I guess we go in at night then," Drop Kick said.

"Affirmative," Coeur said. "Emperor Brak might have some refic equipment and some night vision sensors, but he can't watch every part of that city. Deep Six, notify V-Max we'll be landing at local midnight. Hopefully, he'll be able to meet us at his boat."

"Understood, sir."

"Six hours," Drop Kick noted, glancing at his watch.

"Right, six hours, so you better get your rest. We'll assemble at the G-carrier at 1900 hours planetary. Deep Six, you and Mercy'll take us in."

"Not Gyro, sir?" the Schalll asked. "She is the XO."

"No, Mercy's the better pilot. If combat comes up—heaven forbid—that'll matter."

Deep Six fluttered his barbels in the Schalll equivalent of a shrug, acknowledging the point. Gyro, at any rate, preferred to command the ship from her laser turret.

"Anyway," Coeur said, "there's one thing I want us all to remember: We'll go in armed, but we're very definitely not going to attract attention to ourselves."

"Right," Physic said, aiming a stare at Zorn. "Less killing is good."

Zorn took the jibe without response.

"Oh, there might be killing eventually," Coeur told her doctor, rising to signify the end of the meeting. "But if it happens, it'll be on our timetable. Now get your rest, people. You'll need it."

\*\*\*

Although she was just a Marine corporal, Mercy was easily the second-best pilot on *Homet*, with an instinctive knack for atmo-

spheric flight that impressed the best pilot—her skipper. The only advice Coeur imparted to the Marine was to remember that *Hornet* was not a tank, so if she got shot at, bug out.

"Don't worry, skipper," Mercy said. "Sixer and I'll get you to the DZ, all right."

Of course, merely flying into the atmosphere of Mexit was not the challenge—it was reacting to any defenses that weren't immediately obvious.

"So," Mercy said to Deep Six, glancing out the broad bridge canopy at an angry ocean of storm clouds suffusing the northern hemisphere of Mexit, "you said all that down there's uninhabited, right?"

"We can't be certain of that," the Schalli replied. "Only that winter temperatures beyond 30° of latitude are consistently below -30° C, and wind speeds routinely exceed 300 kph."

"Nasty."

"Yes, and uncongenial for settlement at TL6. My estimation is that only remnant facilities could survive in the nonequatorial zones."

"Hm," Mercy grunted, keeping her dark eyes focused on the flight instruments. Crossing into the night side of Mexit, Mercy lost sight of the northern storms 300 km below and kept especially alert for the lights of Soledad. Given the calmer weather over the equator, she expected that vast field of lights would give the first evidence that they were approaching the drop zone.

"Any sign we're being tracked?" Mercy asked.

"Negative—not with active sensors."

"How about satellites?"

"None detected. The civilizations appeared uninterested in a return to space."

"Good for them. Ah, there it is."

Soledad. Once, the luminescence of a city of 5 billion would have illuminated the horizon well before the city itself became visible, but even today it was not unspectacular, if only because of its sheer size. Soon *Hornet* would have to dive into the atmosphere and lose its panoramic view of the entire city, but for a brief instant Mercy could clearly identify the four surviving sectors of the city—eastern Marina District beside the ocean, Senega District to the north, the Federal District in the center and Albegar District to the south—areas separated by stretches of wasteland 30 kilometers wide and therefore appearing to be less a single city than four cities linked by a single power grid.

What made it clear they were a single city, however, were spots of IR radiation Snapshot's probe detected in the wasteland—telltale traces of human beings eking out a living in the ruins.



"Beginning descent."

"Affirmative. Approach track is green."

"I see something on the RDF—what's that?"

"Nothing serious," Deep Six said, studying the radar direction finder as *Homet* shuddered into Mexit's upper atmosphere. "Stray radiation from radar over the Federal District. I doubt very much their useful range extends this far."

"Oh, good."

A moment later the shuddering stopped as *Homet's* flight computer took over management of her atmospheric control flaps. Plummeting like a 1900-tonne rock, *Homet* could not get good aerodynamic lift from the planet's thin atmosphere until she was just five kilometers above the surface, but with her contra-grav negating the ship's gravitational vector, this was not a problem. Mercy had no fear she could eject the skipper's G-carrier safely.

"Nice entry," Deep Six said. "The Lomarica DZ is one minute downrange."

"Any contacts?"

"Affirmative—two helicopters bearing 320, range 60 km."

"I see 'em. Not headed our direction, though."

"Negative. They seem to be patrolling over Albegar."

"Well, let's hope V-Max got back to the ship's boat," Mercy said, flipping on the comm channel to Coeur with her thumb. "Captain, we're approaching the DZ. Are you ready?"

"Roger, bridge. We're go."

"Stand by."

Mercy powered *Homet* back from 1000 kph to just under 200—slow enough for the G-carrier to power out through *Homet's* forward cargo ramp. A backward-pointing ramp would have allowed her to dump the grav vehicle at much higher speed, but Crowbar hadn't received enough funding for everything he wanted.

"Skipper, you are go for launch."

"G-carrier away," Deep Six reported, as the dark shape of the craft flashed past Mercy's seat, between the horns of *Homet's* split bow.

A moment later, Mercy angled *Homet's* nose at the sky and pulled back her throttle levers, rocketing the ship back toward space. Still five kilometers above the surface, she would be no more than a fleeting rumble of thunder to anyone directly below—if she was heard at all.

"Remember to hail us if you require assistance," Deep Six sent to the G-carrier by laser.

"Roger that," Coeur sent back. "You'll be hearing from us."

...

Although Coeur wanted her party to look civilian (with the exception of the Marines in battle dress, intended to offer protection from afar), she recommended that her people continue to wear their body sleeves under their disguises. They covered themselves in loose robes and hooded capes intended to make them resemble a crew of free traders, complemented by WSV goggles that would let them see deep night as day. Primarily, this was to retain the defense inherent in the body sleeves' ballistic material, but the G-bladders in their legs also came in handy when Coeur threw the boxy G-carrier into a howling dive from its initial altitude of five kilometers.

If the TL11 G-carrier weren't such a basic design (some would say cheap and nasty), it might have had inertial compensation, but it didn't, so the passengers were obliged to grit their teeth as their seat belts dug into their flesh, straining against the vehicle's negative-gee acceleration. Even Newton, who had neither teeth nor discernible emotion, wrapped its six legs tightly around its seat frame to augment the protection offered by a sturdy torso harness.

"Everybody all right back there?" Coeur asked, over her shoulder.

"Oh, yeah," Physic answered, through her teeth.

"Glad we didn't eat first," Vink added, hoping they would soon level out so his stomach could get out of his chest.

"Hell," Physic said, "after this ride, I don't think I'll want to eat anything for a while."

Up on the bridge, meanwhile, Coeur smiled. Although Physic had nothing but disdain for Zorn, that feeling didn't seem to extend to Zorn's crew, and Coeur believed that the conflict-hating doctor would avoid open scrapping with the pirate captain. Indeed, all the ground personnel sat together peaceably in the two rows of four seats closest to the bridge, and Coeur felt vindication in her decision to fold down the two rearmost rows for extra cargo space.

It wasn't as if anyone in the passenger section would have any mind for personal sparring, though, after the rocketing descent. Even Drop Kick, Gaffer and Bonzo—behind Physic, Newton, Vink and Zorn—were compelled to keep their minds on their guts as Coeur leveled out of her 500 kph dive at 500 meters and gently coasted to landfall in a desolate valley of the Lomarica hills, her flight path only slightly thrown off by swirling cross winds. Following the plot laid in by Deep Six put them within 100 meters of the nigh-invisible ship's boat, hidden under an IR shroud with

camouflage netting.

"See anything?" Coeur asked Whiz Bang, manning the topside plasma gun's remote controls from the cockpit seat beside hers.

"No," the beefy Marine answered, swinging the gun and its passive EMS sight all the way around, "just the ship's boat, and a hell of a breeze blowing the trees around."

"Yeah, I see that," Coeur said, watching the wind whip nearby scrub trees back and forth through the agency of her low-light goggles, "but keep your eyes open all the same. I'm going to try to reach the ship's boat."

Behind them, at length, came the sounds of the nonarmored party rising from its seats to assemble its equipment: weapons, sensors, med kits and communicators. From the cargo area astride the aft hatch, meanwhile, the Marines pulled out two 200 kg crates to begin assembling the ultralight grav vehicles inside. Informally called broomsticks, they were driven by ducted fans instead of plasma thrust and were therefore as quiet as anything in the air.

"V-Max," Coeur said, aiming her comm laser at the ship's boat, "this is Red Sun. Do you copy?"

"Roger, Red Sun, this is V-Max. Did you bring Captain Zorn?"

"That's affirmative," Zorn answered, bending over the back of Coeur's seat. "I'm right here."

"Come on over, then. I've got a guest in the boat and a pot of coffee brewing."

Coeur and Zorn exchanged curious looks.

"Confirm, V-Max," Coeur said. "Did you say 'a guest'?"

"Affirmative: Brother Anthony of the CGL. He can't wait to meet you two."

"Understood, V-Max. We'll be over momentarily."

Coeur then shut off the laser.

"What do you make of that?" Coeur asked Zorn.

"I don't know. V didn't mention bringing anybody along last time we talked."

"It could be a trap," Coeur mused. "Brak might have captured V and forced him to lure us here."

"As hostages?"

"Teddis have done it before," Coeur said. "And Brak does know about the Coalition, if he captured *Crazy Jane*."

"All the same, I know V, and he doesn't sound like he's under duress."

"True, but there's no reason to take a risk. We'll send Gaffer in first."

...

Far from being offended by his position as point, Gaffer took it as a due acknowledgment of his special position as protector of the group. While it was true that Drop Kick's vehicle crews also wore armor, the defensive value of their 200 kg suits paled beside that of Gaffer's 400 kg heavy battle dress—stout enough to deflect a 30 mm armor-piercing shell. Very few types of hand-held weapon could faze a trooper in heavy battle dress at all, save a well-aimed anti-tank grenade, or a bolt from a high-energy plasma or fusion rifle.

That in mind, Gaffer walked up to the starboard forward hatch of V-Max's ship's boat with his own 1.2 Mj fusion rifle—a fearsome weapon that could quickly immolate everything in the vehicle if necessary. Drop Kick, meanwhile, covered his rear with a gauss rifle and affixed RAM grenade—the latter more than powerful enough to blow a substantial hole in the hull of the ship's boat if necessary.

"Hey, V-Max!" Gaffer said, knocking on the hatch, "open up!"

"Give the code word," a man's voice came, from the control panel speaker beside the hatch.

"*Sic semper tyrannis*," Gaffer returned, quoting the motto of Aurora.

Obligingly, the hatch's double iris valve opened.

"Fikk!" V-Max said, reeling back from the barrel Gaffer pointed at him.

"Get out," Gaffer said, "and you, too."

"It's all right, V," Drop Kick said, raising his barrel to a nonthreatening angle as Gaffer pushed V-Max and Brother Anthony into the biting, whipping chill of the midnight wind. "He's with me."

"Drop Kick?" V-Max asked, pulling his windbreaker close against the chill.

"Affirmative," the sergeant major responded. "I hope you don't mind, but Red and Zorn insisted we go over your boat to make sure it's safe."

"Good thinking, actually," Brother Anthony said. "You never can be too safe where Brak's concerned."

Brother Anthony, Drop Kick noted through the low-light capacity of his synthetic vision, was a rather tall man, easily a head taller than the stocky pirate V-Max. Yet what was even more striking was the beatific expression on his long and youthful face, quite opposite the aspect of V-Max, whose bushy-browed black eyes drilled into Drop Kick with irritated impatience as he bundled himself against the cold. Notably, Brother Anthony's hooded priestly robes seemed far better insulating than V-Max's jacket and jumpsuit, since he weathered the wind with only minor shivering.



"Well, I'm glad you can be philosophical about it," V-Max said. "I'm fikkin freezing!"

Gaffer, however, emerged from the aft hatch a moment later, signing "all clear."

"Roger," Drop Kick signed back, before switching to audible speech. "Now frisk 'em."

Before he had time to be outraged, V-Max found himself being patted down by Gaffer's armored hands—an initially frightening prospect given the power of battle dress's casual strength to break bones and bruise flesh. But Gaffer was dexterous in battle dress—another reason Drop Kick chose him for this mission—and he didn't appear to hurt either man. When the search was over, the first sergeant found nothing more lethal on Anthony's person than a triangular amulet and a vial of water, and only a 9 mm pistol in V-Max's coat. The vial and the gun Gaffer took for further study, though not before first inquiring into the nature of the amulet.

"What's that supposed to be?" Gaffer asked, pointing at the symbolic fire in the middle of the charm.

"The spirit of the Holy Defender," Anthony said.

"Hm," Gaffer acknowledged, next examining Anthony's vial. The colorless liquid inside elicited no response when Gaffer removed the lid and passed it over his suit's integral chemical warfare sniffer.

"How about this? Some kind of holy water?"

"Yes, it has been blessed."

Gaffer looked at Drop Kick.

"Ah, give it back to him," Drop Kick said.

"Thank you," Anthony said politely, taking back his vial. Gaffer then focused his attention on the pistol of V-Max, popping out the clip and examining the ammunition.

"Looks like 9 mm ball," he said, handing the pistol and ammunition to Drop Kick.

"Right, nothing exotic," Drop Kick agreed, taking the pistol and magazine to examine them himself. He then popped the magazine back into the pistol and returned it to Zorn's navigator.

"Here, you can have this back."

"Thanks," V-Max said, sarcastically.

By now, though, Drop Kick could see the tension receding in the pirate's body. From his time aboard *Vi Et Armis*, Drop Kick knew the navigator was fiercely loyal to his captain, and he seemed to relax as he realized that the activities of the Marines were partly for her protection.

"All clear," Drop Kick finally signed to the G-carrier. "Come on over."

As soon as Drop Kick and Gaffer escorted Coeur and Zorn safely to the ship's boat, Coeur returned them to their original assignment, which Whiz Bang and Bonzo began executing when the wind died down enough to let them fly their broomsticks safely—a thorough patrol of the Lomarica Hills.

"Strict radio silence?" Drop Kick asked.

"Absolutely. You see anything strange, you fly back to Physic and report it."

"Understood." Whereupon the two sergeants took to the air, and the two captains accepted the hospitality of V-Max in the ship's boat.

"Good coffee," Zorn said, helping herself to a second mug from the pot in the bridge of the ship's boat.

"Thanks," V-Max said, retiring back toward the passenger section with three more mugs, one for himself and the others for Brother Anthony and Coeur.

Though a craft of 30 tons displacement, a ship's boat still seemed small since its volume was stretched out through a 30-meter cylinder just five meters in diameter. But for the volume of the cargo hold visible through the aft hatch, the cockpit and six-seat passenger section seemed scarcely larger than that of the G-carrier.

"I hope the troops didn't shake you up too much," Coeur said, accepting her mug and turning her chair to face V-Max as he sat down.

"Oh, that's all right. Believe me, I've seen people treated worse on this planet."

"Your people?"

"No," V-Max answered, "we've kept out of trouble. Right now, Cari and Katzel are down in Brother Anthony's chapel, about 20 clicks across the river."

"Another priest of our church, Sister Anna, is with them," Brother Anthony reported, anticipating Zorn's logical next question.

"I see your broomstick there in the hold," Zorn said to the cleric, coming back to take a seat of her own. "Is that how you got up here?"

"Sure is. The peasants do their harvesting at night, right around these hills, with bright spotlights, so it's hard to move around undetected."

"Most people find broomsticks a little frightening," Coeur said to Anthony, "at least the first time. How was it for you?"

"Rather peaceful, actually," the priest answered. "As if I were flying with the angels."

"Tell us about your religion," Zorn said. "Is it some sort of

Terran faith—some denomination of Christianity or Islam or something?”

“Quite the contrary,” Anthony said, his placid blue eyes betraying no insult taken. “The Church of Grace and Light arose on Mexit many thousands of years ago. While we respect our brothers and sisters of other faiths, it is our belief that we were selected by God for a special mission.”

“Which is?”

“To await the return of our Savior, the Lord Defender.”

“I hope this isn’t an insulting question,” Coeur said, pursuing the discussion, “but is your Lord Defender human or divine?”

Brother Anthony chuckled good-naturedly.

“Neither,” he said, “and both. It is a difficult thing to explain. It is our belief that the Lord Defender is resurrected, or reborn, in times of great crisis. The first crisis occurred 3,000 years ago, when the early colonists were threatened with extinction, until the Prime Cardinal gave his life in sacrifice for our sins and quieted the winds of destruction. Since then, he has come again in many forms, whenever a great catastrophe has threatened our people.”

“I see,” Zorn said.

“We realize it may seem a quaint belief,” Anthony said, “but our faith has sustained us through the centuries. Today, it is our firm belief that Saint Kilalt will rise again to herald the birth of the Defender and deliver us from the evils of this world.”

Both Coeur and Zorn frowned at this, thinking the same thing. If the members of the CGL believed that a holy savior was coming to rescue them, they might not provide much worldly help to their mission.

*On the other hand, Coeur thought, a religion doesn't survive centuries just by sitting on its duff, and these people have gotten Brak's goat. Maybe V-Max did link up with the right people.*

“Actually,” V-Max said, “it’s not all pie-in-the-sky-and-wait-for-the-apocalypse. The CGL is involved in a lot of work Emperor Brak doesn’t appreciate.”

“Like what?” Zorn asked.

“Like teaching the peasant children how to read. Brak frowns on that, since it gets people worked up about freedom of thought.”

“Really.”

“And then there’s the rebels. I doubt they could operate very well in the city if it weren’t for the church.”

*Good, Coeur thought, trying to hide to satisfied a look. V-Max did link up with the right people.*

“Our only concern is justice,” Brother Anthony said. “That God’s will be done.”

"Well, Brother Anthony," Coeur said, "I don't know much about God's will, but I can tell you I represent a government that respects human dignity and freedom. If you can help us, my government might be of a mind to help you."

Anthony spread his hands, inviting Coeur to go on.

"How much do you know about the Coalition, Brother Anthony?"

"Very little, save what V-Max has told me. He gave me to understand that the prisoners executed six months ago were probably from that state."

"Zero's crew?"

V-Max nodded his head.

"So, all his crew are dead?"

"Alas," Anthony said, "yes. Our cardinal tried to persuade the rebels to rescue them, but the capital is too well defended. I, myself, heard the execution broadcast over state radio, and several members of my church confessed to witnessing it in person."

"I see," Coeur said. "Well, even if that's so, I still have a mission to perform. I must find Zero's starship, or any record left by his party."

As if predicting Anthony's response, V-Max drew an apprehensive breath through gritted teeth.

"That could be very dangerous," Anthony cautioned. "If they had a space vessel, it is almost certainly stored in the docks of the old starport depot, in the very center of Brak's power."

"Depot, you say?"

"The old name of the region. Today, it is a fortress."

Pleased by this turn of events—leads of some kind, at least—Coeur had raised a forefinger to ask another question when beeping interrupted her, coming from the comm panel on the bridge.

"I'll get it," V-Max said, rushing forward.

A moment later, he turned back to Coeur with his comm headset in hand.

"It's for you, Red Sun. Physic."

Immediately, Coeur rose to put on the headset.

"Red Sun here. Go ahead."

"Captain, Drop Kick's just come back with a report. He says they spotted helicopters firing on a church on the south side of the river."

"A church?"

"Affirmative. He says he didn't know if it was Brother Anthony's, but he figured he'd better check it out just in case."

*Fikk*, Coeur thought.



"Roger that, Physic. Stand by your laser rig. Red Sun out." Coeur ripped off the headset and turned to V-Max.  
"V, do you know the shortest way to the south ridge?"  
"Yeah, it's that way...."  
"Here," Coeur said, palming open the hatch. "Show me."

\* \* \*

Seeing Coeur and V-Max hasten out the hatch, Zorn and Brother Anthony exchanged a quick look and then rose as one to dash after them, leaving the ship's boat airlock to lock automatically behind them. Since Brother Anthony lacked the WSV goggles of his companions, he lagged a bit behind Zorn as she scrambled up the steep slope of rocks and weeds immediately to port of the vehicle. Over 35 years of nightly activity gave him good night vision, however, and he came to the top of the 20-meter ridge just seconds behind the others.

"Oh my," he gasped, seeing what the others already beheld.

From 500 meters above sea level, the hillside gave an excellent view of all the Albegar District, out to the unlit horizon 50 kilometers away. Beyond the rocky hillside, sloping steeply down to cultivated farmland—tilled even at this hour by banks of peasants marching abreast the tractors that lit their work—and beyond the River Loro, five kilometers away, lay the buildings at the edge of the city. A handful of those buildings now burned, periodically disgorging fireballs that illuminated the lazy water of the river and two sets of helicopter blades in the sky above.

"Attack helicopters," Coeur said, studying the scene through PRIS binoculars. "Probably the same ones Mercy spotted on the way in."

"Is that your church?" Zorn asked Anthony, spotting a building in the middle of the conflagration with a triangular symbol on its roof very similar to the brother's amulet.

"Yes," the stoic priest replied. "That is my church. I only hope Sister Anna and the young spacers escaped...."

"Oh God," V-Max said meanwhile, numb with shock, "they must have picked up our radio traffic...."

"Yes," Coeur agreed, lowering the PRIS and handing it to Zorn. "They must have triangulated the position with their own radio direction finders."

"Damn," V-Max mumbled. "How could I have been so stupid...."

"Don't blame yourself, V," Zorn said. "You're a navigator, not a secret agent."

"But Cari and Katzel—they're just kids!"

"They might've gotten away," Coeur ventured, though she



doubted it very much. Bombs had set not only the wooden chapel alight, but many adjacent structures, and there was no evidence of a fire-fighting battallon anywhere in sight.

"I don't know about that," Zorn said, handing the binoculars back to Coeur, "but have a look at bearing 310."

"Good Lord! That's an Imperial Marine APC!"

"Yeah," Zorn said. "I thought it was a truck until I saw it lift off. It was parked on a side street near the chapel."

"They can't have very many of those," Coeur said, watching the streamlined, relic craft fly off toward the north. "Can they?"

"The flying tanks, you mean?" Anthony asked. "No, very few. And none ever come this far south."

"Hm," Zorn said.

"It may be," Anthony went on, "that your friends are not dead. The Guard may have realized they were off-worlders and come to capture them before they destroyed the chapel."

"But why?" Coeur asked. "You said Brak executed Zero's people."

"The rumor is," Anthony said, "that Zero's crew was given the opportunity to cooperate before they were killed—to tell what treasure they were seeking on this world."

"I see," Zorn said. "So Brak might have a use for the kids."

"In his own evil way, yes."

*Well, Physic, Coeur thought, lowering her PRIS, maybe I was wrong. Maybe the timetable for killing will have to be moved up.*

# Chapter 11

"Think this is a good idea, sergeant major?"

"Maybe not," Drop Kick said from his broomstick's front seat, speaking to Gaffer behind him through a hard-wired link, "but I want to get closer to that church and see if Cari and Katzel are around."

"All right," Gaffer said, "but watch out for the APC's fusion gun. A close miss from that could shoot us down."

"Hell," Drop Kick said, fighting the gusting wind and updrafts from fires on the ground as he steered closer to the burning church, "a kid with a slingshot could knock us out of the air. Just hang on."

Though it was impossible to get very close to the church—owing to the choppers overhead and the APC grounded on a nearby street—Drop Kick and Gaffer did come close enough to pick up good detail through their enhanced synthetic vision. Three unarmored human forms were in the area of the church, being hustled and carried up the rear hatch of the APC by troopers in heavy battle dress. One was a woman dressed like Brother Anthony, but bloodied and apparently dead. The other two Drop Kick clearly recognized as Cari and Katzel, singed but mobile under their own power.

"Damn those street lights," Gaffer said, speaking to Drop Kick in the front seat through a hard-wired link in the broomstick frame. "If it weren't for them we could get a lot closer."

"It's all right," Drop Kick said, circling the grounded APC at a height of 500 meters. "Just keep your eyes open for any more armor."

More armor was not in sight, however. Evidently, Emperor Brak felt two attack choppers and a grav APC were sufficient to shoot up a church.

"Hey," Gaffer said, "she's taking off. Want to follow?"

"Yeah, we're following all right. Flash it to Red Sun."

Gaffer didn't bother to argue. Though Coeur had ordered



radio silence, the heart of Soledad was over 50 kilometers away, and if they followed the APC there, it would put them beyond reliable radio range of the base camp. Gaffer sent the briefest possible message.

"Gaffer to Red Sun. Pursuing APC."

Coeur's answer came back a moment later as two bursts of static, the previously established signal for message understood.

The pursuit of the APC was hardly a simple matter, though. For one thing, the APC was well-streamlined and soon left its fast helicopter escort straining to keep pace. Even after twisting his handlebar throttles to full thrust, Drop Kick found himself falling behind the Soledad flight as it roared high into the windy night.

An unexpected break came, however, in the unlit region between Albegar and the Federal District—utterly unexpected arcs of tracer rounds from antiaircraft artillery reaching up toward the Soledad flight. Such fire would surely ping off the super-dense armor of the APC, but not so the airframes of the thin-skinned choppers, which probably wore no armor at all. Consequently, they went quickly to the deck, followed by the APC—disgorging covering fire from its small turret—and the broomstick of the trailing sergeants.

"Good Gai!" Gaffer said. "Who's firing that triple-A?"

"Unknown," Drop Kick answered. "Rebels, I guess. It sure slowed the Teddies down, though."

Aided by the intervention of some unknown ally, Drop Kick found himself able to tail the Soledad flight, now flying nape-of-the-earth. With the antiaircraft guns now quiet behind them, the aircraft roared across the blasted wasteland at 200 kph, jinking occasionally but making the lighted outskirts of the Federal District within 15 minutes.

"Look sharp," Gaffer said. "I've got aircraft at 2 and 10."

"I see 'em. Support sleds."

"Shouldn't we break off?" Gaffer asked, acutely aware of the searchlights popping up from the center of the city ahead.

"Negative. I don't think we've been spotted."

"All right. But I don't need to tell you what'll happen if we get hit."

No, you don't, Drop Kick thought, continuing to tail the APC at a discrete distance of one kilometer. He knew just as well as Gaffer that the first hit the broomstick took from almost any weapon would be its last.

Yet, realizing this, a strange calm overtook the sergeants. Aware that they were indeed unspotted, they relaxed enough to take careful notice of the Federal District's layout—key details of which Gaffer captured in his suit's integral camera.

Unlike Albegar, which seemed a maze of wooden huts and crumbling masonry buildings, the Federal District appeared well laid-out, with broad avenues radiating outward from the ancient starport. Also, unlike Albegar, most people seemed involved in industrial, rather than agricultural, pursuits, in smoke-spewing factories of the outer district.

"That's interesting..." Gaffer said.

"What?" Drop Kick asked, concentrating on his flying.

"Off to the north, there's a troop of track-laying APCs."

"Really?"

"Yeah, with regular troopers—you know, rifles and steel helmets."

"Yeah, I see 'em."

"Maybe that's what most of Brak's forces are—low-tech regulars."

"It would be nice," Drop Kick said. Sure, Coeur wanted to find the hidden depot, but Drop Kick would just as soon have the hidden depot be conspicuously lacking in grav tanks, battle dress and energy weapons—if Brak did indeed have his hands on it.

Presently, though, the Soledad flight began losing altitude, and Drop Kick focused all his attention on avoiding detection. The two support sleds they saw earlier had since moved off in what appeared a routine patrol pattern, but the city center was thick with entrenched defenses, among them rooftop autocannons and SAM sites.

"Oh man," Gaffer said, "look at all that air defense."

"Yeah, I see it. Soledad must have enemies that have aircraft."

"Sergeant Major, I don't mean to sound *alarmist*, but I think we're way out of our league here. Maybe we should bug out while we still can."

"No," Drop Kick said, "not yet. We've got to find out where they're taking Cari and Katzel."

"Cari and Katzel? Man, those aren't even our people!"

"Maybe not, Gaffer, but they are Zorn's people, and—as long as Red Sun's cooperating with them—that makes 'em our people."

"Okay," Gaffer returned, though he could almost feel the fire control radar from a myriad ground stations locking onto them.

The broomstick would not be shot down, however. Abandoning a high flight profile as too perilous, Drop Kick took to flying low around the city's rooftops, gambling that the TL6 radar would have trouble locking onto such a small, low-flying target.

"Damn," Gaffer said, amazed, "we're still alive."

"For the moment anyway. Hey look, the APC's landing."

"Sure is. Looks like it's going into some sort of bunker under that building—probably a headquarters."

"It's a big building anyway; I'll try to edge us in closer."

Big, in the present context, would prove a gross understatement, for no other standing structure in Soledad was anywhere near as tall as this blockish granite edifice. Clearly a building of some importance, not only was its roof sprinkled with electronic equipment, but one entire face—a 50-meter stretch of windowless wall—was painted with a gigantic rendering of a man the Marines could only presume to be the ruler of the city.

"Figure that's Emperor Brak?" Gaffer asked.

"That's where my money is," Drop Kick replied, lowering the broomstick into an alley between two adjacent office buildings. "We're right smack dab in the middle of the region he oughta control."

Whether the rendering was accurate or not they didn't know, but the image on the side of the building portrayed its subject as a veritable mass of muscle—a square-jawed man with slick black hair, a thick black mustache and a steely gray-eyed expression. His fine conditioning and muscle tone showed clearly through his military tunic and trousers. As it was the first image of Brak they'd seen, Gaffer duly recorded it with his camera before Drop Kick moved out of the alley and began orbiting the broomstick around toward the far side of the building.

"You get that portrait?"

"Affirmative," Gaffer said. "I'm recording the rooftop now."

"Good thinking."

"That is one helluva lot of radomes and antennas on that roof. Suppose it could be the defense ministry?"

"Possibly," Drop Kick said. "Anyway, it's obviously an important building. Lock this position into your inertial navigator."

"Roger," Gaffer said, shutting off the camera and then chinning the helmet button that would record their position in the suit's inertial navigation system—data that would soon be added to all their party's Soledad maps.

"Got it," he said a moment later. "We could drop right on top of this position if we had to."

"Hopefully, that won't be necessary," Drop Kick said, spinning the broomstick and shooting away from the center of the city. "A man with a head that big should have the brains not to tangle with the RCMC."

Although their position was well-concealed, in a cleft in the side of the Lomarica Hills, Coeur knew a vehicle like the grav APC Drop Kick and Gaffer had followed could easily fly overhead on a silent reconnaissance flight. Thus, she ordered Physic, Newton and Vink to drag an IR shroud and camouflage net over the G-carrier, just as V-Max had done with the ship's boat. No further flights appeared near the hills, however—even after the chapel fire had burned out an entire block and petered out—for a reason that Brother Anthony made plain when he and the captains returned to the ship's boat, leaving V-Max up on the ridge with the PRIS binoculars.

"The emperor's men are deathly afraid of these wild areas, Captain D' Esprit. Even his Guard in its flying tanks only ventures into dark areas in force."

"The rebels are that strong?" Coeur asked.

"Not the rebels, Captain. The nightjacks."

"Nightjacks?" Zorn asked. "What are those?"

"Demons," Anthony said, "creations of Hell. Even I would have feared to come here, were it not for my faith in the Defender and the strong armor of this craft."

Both Coeur and Zorn aimed concerned looks at the priest.

"I assume nightjacks are some sort of mythological beast," Zorn said.

"Would that they were," Anthony replied, making the triangular holy sign of the CGL on his chest; "but I have seen the torn bodies of their victims."

"Well, then, maybe it's some sort of native predator," Zorn speculated. "If it's afraid of light, maybe we should turn on our floodlights—as long as V-Max is out alone."

"I don't know about that," Coeur said. "It would have to be a pretty nasty predator to be worse than the artillery we'd get if we were spotted."

"Does V-Max know about these nightjacks?" Zorn asked.

"Yes," Anthony said, "but you should temper your concern. I have blessed him with holy water that wards all demons."

"Oh good," Zorn replied.

Just then the comm panel beeped, and Coeur went forward to answer it.

"Red Sun, this is Physic. The two broomsticks have returned, and Drop Kick says he thinks Zorn's people are alive."

"Thank God," Coeur said. "Tell the Marines we'll be right over."

"Roger that, skipper. But there's something else..."

"Yes?"

"Drop Kick says he saw a woman's body removed from the



Albegar chapel, and he thinks it was Sister Anna."

Coeur grimaced.

"Understood. I'll let Brother Anthony know."

"I suppose it could have been somebody else; he did spot her from a distance."

"Yes, well, something tells me respect for human life isn't a high priority with this government. But anyway, do you still have someone posted to the plasma gun?"

"Affirmative. It was Vink, but Whiz Bang's taken over now that he's back."

"Good. We've heard there's some kind of native predator roaming around dark areas like this, so see that it stays manned."

"Understood."

"Red Sun out."

"Brother Anthony," Coeur said, putting up the headset, "I've got bad news. Drop Kick thinks your associate, Sister Anna, was killed."

For Coeur—who was beginning to wonder if loving acceptance was etched on the face of the priest—it was almost a relief to see his reaction. Staggered, he reached backward for the nearest seat and fell into it.

"Oh my." He bowed his head, rapidly murmuring an invocation, and several times drew his faith's triangular sign in the air.

"Are you all right?" Zorn asked, sitting down in the next chair.

Anthony nodded his head, wiping the corners of his eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine. It's the risk we accept when we take our vows. Her soul will be at rest."

"Maybe we should give him a little while alone," Coeur whispered to Zorn.

"No," Anthony said, getting back to his feet. "No, I'm all right. Is there anything else your men discovered?"

"Yes," Coeur said. "Cari and Katzel might still be alive."

"Well, thank God for that," Zorn said.

"Yes, we should," Anthony agreed.

"Perhaps," Coeur said, "but all I know is that two of our people have been captured, and I want them back."

Zorn nodded, gratified to hear that. Technically, Coeur had no obligation to Cari and Katzel, but apparently Coeur didn't look at things that way.

"Perhaps," Anthony said, "it is time you met the rebels."

"Could you arrange that?"

"I could try. But it's a good distance to the nearest camp, in the wasteland on the far side of Albegar. We could not walk that far before dawn."

"You're forgetting the broomsticks," Zorn said. "With V's, we

have three—enough for six people.”

“Can they fly that far?” Anthony asked. “They seem rather....”

“Fragile?” Coeur asked.

“Yes.”

“They are, Brother Anthony, but they’ve got long legs. You could fly one all the way out to the ocean and back if you had to.”

“Goodness,” Anthony said, boggled by the prospect of such a 200-kilometer flight. So impressed was he, in fact, that he removed the vial of holy water from his vestments and sprinkled a generous portion on Coeur, Zorn, V-Max’s broomstick in the hold and himself. Zorn, for her part, was amused by the blessing, but Coeur took it with respectful equanimity.

*What the hell, she thought. It’s not like I don’t pray every time I turn on the jump drive....*

...

Back in the grav APC with the rest of her crew, when Coeur learned the extent of Drop Kick’s bravado—trailing the APC all the way to the bunker—her first impulse was to give him a good stiff kick in the butt. A moment’s reflection put her off that tack, though, as she realized she would have done the same thing in his place.

*We don’t leave people behind, Coeur thought, remembering the Arse’s motto, but if we do, we get them back.*

“Really, Drop Kick,” Zorn said, back in the G-carrier with V-Max, Brother Anthony, Coeur and the remainder of the personnel Coeur had brought down to the surface, “you don’t have to take those kinds of risks for my people.”

“Nah, it’s all right,” Drop Kick said, having flipped up his visor to access the straw of a box of high carbohydrate punch. “We got good secondary intelligence, like the layout of the city, and the fact that they’re not real sharp with their sensors.”

“Fond of Russian roulette, are you, Drop Kick?” Physic asked.

“Please clarify your meaning,” Newton jumped in, baffled by the expression.

“I think what she means,” Gaffer said, “is that we’d die if they had good sensors, and wouldn’t if they didn’t. Actually, though, those odds are a lot worse than Russian roulette....”

“Which is?”

“Spinning the cylinder of a revolver with one round in it, pointing it at your head and pulling the trigger.”

“I am confused,” Newton announced. “What purpose would that serve?”

“Well,” Gaffer said, “it’s a sort of a game—you know, a game of chance—except with higher stakes.”

"Higher stakes, sergeant?"

"Well, yeah, you could die."

"Oh, I comprehend. When you say you point the gun at your 'head,' you actually mean you point it at your brain."

Gaffer didn't know quite what to make of this.

"Well, yeah. What else?"

"As it happens," Newton explained, "our brains are not located in our 'head,' but in our torso. But about the revolver—how many chambers must it have to present a statistically acceptable risk to the players?"

Before he could give an answer, Gaffer caught himself, recognizing that no matter what he said, the bizarre human motivation to play suicidal games of chance would doubtless remain inscrutable to the Hiver.

"Forget about it," Gaffer said. "It's just another way of saying that the flight into Soledad was dangerous."

"You can say that again," Physic admonished, staring at the Marines with her arms crossed.

"Anyway," Coeur said, directing her people's attention back to herself, "it's time we sorted. Zorn, you're with me. Brother Anthony, you'll ride with V-Max. Drop Kick, you and Gaffer will cover us from a discreet distance."

"How discreet?" Drop Kick asked.

"As discreet as possible. You work it out. Lay off the radio unless it's life or death."

"Understood."

"What about guns?" Zorn asked.

"Well, Drop Kick and Gaffer will certainly carry their weapons," Coeur said, "but I don't think the rest of us should. It probably wouldn't give a good first impression."

"If I may interject," Brother Anthony said. "I think that would be an error. Provocative as guns are, they may be your only defense against the nightjacks if we meet them."

"What do you mean 'your'?" Zorn asked.

"Oh, well, I don't need a weapon. Nightjacks—being evil creations—seldom attack priests."

Coeur was dubious of that, but accepted the wisdom of taking along some marginal protection. She strapped on a gauss pistol while Zorn and V-Max settled for personal defense lasers.

"All right," Vink said. "Now what about us?"

"Oh, don't worry," Zorn said. "Red's got a special job for you."

"Oh?"

"Yes," Coeur said. "We have to assume that—strong or weak as they might be—Cari and Katzel could reveal this location under torture. It's your mission, therefore, to move the vehicles to

another spot about 20 kilometers north and reestablish the camp."

"Oh great," burly Whiz Bang complained. "Now we have to set the camouflage up all over again."

"And like it, trooper," Drop Kick said.

"Yes, sergeant major."

"May we assume that this position has been previously surveyed, Captain?" Newton asked.

"Affirmative. It was mapped from orbit, so I'll show you the position. I'll want you to get there and set up quickly, though, so you can continue monitoring Soledad's radio traffic for messages about the prisoners."

"Messages?" Newton asked.

"Ransom demands, requests for parley, that kind of thing. If we're lucky, the kids were taken as bargaining chips to get to their captain. If we're unlucky...."

But Coeur didn't have to spell it out. The Arses might always try to get their people out, but often as not, those people were dead well before a rescue party could arrive to help them.

\*\*\*

Although they knew their hours of nighttime were limited (the sun would rise around 0600, in five hours), the three broomstick teams followed to make sure the G-carrier and ship's boat relocated safely before moving on. HEPIaR thrusters were fairly noisy, so Coeur was concerned at first that the peasants and tractor bosses below might hear them and alert the Soledad armed forces to investigate, but a moment of reflection reminded her that the prevailing southerly winds would carry the keening of the engines away from the people below. Anyway, the relocation went without incident.

As Coeur intended, the new site had all the advantages of the old one—namely, that it was well-concealed at the base of a ravine and close to a slope overlooking farmland below and the River Loro and Albegar beyond. Once settled into this new niche farther north in the same Lomarica hills, the spacers in the G-carrier and ship's boat promptly spilled out to replace their IR shrouds and camouflage nets, and Coeur was satisfied that they were now as safe as they could be.

"Okay," she signaled by Anslan to V-Max on the lead broomstick, "move out."

The choice of V-Max as point was based on simple reasoning—he'd been on the planet the longest and was carrying Brother Anthony, their guide. Under Anthony's direction, the line of three broomsticks—with Coeur and Zorn second and the sergeants far



to the rear—swung out over Albegar and headed toward the wasteland beyond.

Since they were now flying into a southerly head wind, the very light broomsticks could not reach their top speed, and Drop Kick and Gaffer were given a slower, more detailed view of Albegar than they'd had earlier that night. Now they saw what they had not seen before—gangs of peasant laborers marching through the streets to the fields, watched over by armed tractor bosses and the odd Soledad track-laying APC. In the middle of the broomstick flight, Coeur and Zorn saw this, too.

"You know what it probably is?" Zorn said to Coeur, through the broomstick's hard-wired intercom link between their headsets. "A feudal society. Like Oriflamme, only more primitive."

"Somehow, I don't think Oriflamme would like the comparison," Coeur replied, noting the application of nightsticks to work gang stragglers. "Those people don't look like they have any choice of occupation."

"True, but neither do some Oriflammen."

Given the sorry state of the population—tattered, shuffling men, women and children—Coeur suspected that their condition was far from a new thing. That and the relatively light force available to keep them in line—a handful of TL6 troops and vehicles watching over countless thousands of peasants—suggested a TED, a technologically elevated dictatorship, long passed into the status of an institution.

*I've only been here a few hours, Coeur thought, and already I hate this Brok. But I'll have to watch that emotion and keep it in check. Killing Brok is not our mission objective.*

Despite herself, though, Coeur found herself thinking about Carl and Katzel even as the lead broomstick of V-Max and Brother Anthony sailed over a crumbling monorail abutment and into the darkness beyond the city. Her eyes continued to scan for movement all around them, in the low-light panorama perceived through her goggles, but at the same time she remembered two singular young spacers from her time on Zorn's patrol cruiser....

*Coeur learned their names soon after VI Et Armis left Sauler, after the pirate went into jump just ahead of a flight of angry SDBs. The crew was still elated a full day into jump space, as they realized they had cheated death, blown up the Guild's offices and made off with a megacredit in gold bullion (ironically, the Guild's payment for killing the Hivers at Ra).*

*However, no one was quite as happy as the crew of the ship's boat, whom Coeur and Drop Kick met when Zorn led them down to the boat bay during their first tour of the ship. Quite young, Cari*

and Katzel, female and male first cousins from Nike Nimbus, were both 21 and exhibited a youthful vigor that was distinctly at odds with the hard-edged gravity in the expressions of their older mates.

"Hey there, skipper," Katzel said, lifting his wrench to salute Zorn.

"Hey," Cari seconded, "how's it going, sir?"

"Quite well," Zorn said, "thanks to Red Sun and Drop Kick here."

"Wow. So you're the people who helped us blow up Sauler Downport," Katzel said to the Arse and Marine. "Cool."

"Well, not the whole port," Drop Kick said, "just the port authority."

"Yeah," Zorn said, "and there I was, all set to nuke the whole city, but Red here talked me out of that."

Katzel leaned back, impressed.

"You must be pretty convincing," Katzel said to Coeur. "The skipper never listens to me."

"Yeah, me neither," Cari rejoined. "You'd think she'd be awed by our breadth of experience."

"Don't worry," Zorn said, smiling indulgently. "I'll let you two get some dirt-side duty one of these days."

"That's what she always says," Katzel said in a stage whisper, leaning toward Coeur.

"Be careful what you ask for," Coeur replied, conspiratorially. "You might get it."

"We can handle it," Katzel shot back proudly.

Walking away, Coeur and Zorn smiled at the enthusiasm of the young crewmembers.

"You've known them for a while?" Coeur asked.

"Yeah, friends of the family. I took 'em aboard as a favor to their parents."

"Too be pirates? How thoughtful."

"Hey, piracy is in the eye of the beholder, Star Viking."

Coeur bristled. At least I don't spread plagues! But under the circumstances, she thought better of insulting her hosts.

"Yeah, some people think so," Coeur mused. "But kids are always in such a hurry to grow up."

"Yeah, that or get killed," Zorn replied, her smile fading. "That's too easy to do out here. Their time will come soon enough. Sooner than it ought to."

Presently, V-Max's broomstick began to drop toward the rubble, and Coeur concentrated all her attention on maintaining stability in the southerly wind as she lost speed following V-Max down toward the ground.

Although the terrain below seemed nothing but uninter-

rupted rubble, Coeur's wide-spectrum goggles caught occasional spots of heat from the tracks and bodies of living organisms—rats, dogs, cats and people. Given the silence of the broomsticks, Coeur doubted the people on the ground would have any impulse to glance upward when the spacers passed overhead, and besides, the broomsticks were so small they would probably not be spotted against the starry sky. Even so, she was mindful of her pistol's weight as they came down out of the sky to land atop a weed-strewn hill.

As per their instructions, Drop Kick and Gaffer did not come down, but Coeur was still reassured they were up there, circling at 400 meters. The spot Brother Anthony had chosen was rather exposed, and very windy, with only a ruined rectangle of stone to mark the perimeter of a long-extinct structure.

"This was a church," Anthony explained, after the two lead broomsticks were on the ground together. "It is sometimes used as a meeting place by the rebels."

"I sure don't see any here," V-Max said, confirming the view of the women.

"One cannot be certain," the priest replied. "Give them a few minutes."

Anthony then wandered off a short distance, to the pedestal of what might once have been an altar, mumbling what sounded like an incantation.

The spacers looked on, completely nonplussed.

"Defender," Anthony pronounced, raising the prayer to an audible level, "son and daughter of God, protector of Heaven and Earth,

"Hear my prayer.

"Grant us:

"The grace to forgive our transgressors,

"The strength to forebear our fortune,

"The wisdom to accept your providence,

"Until death, and the reunion of souls."

*Sounds pretty middle-of-the-road, as prayers go, Coeur thought, but where are the rebels?*

"They aren't here," Anthony said, after a long moment. "We must try another location."

Minutes later, they relocated to another hill several kilometers to the north—also the location of a demolished church—and invoked the presence of the rebels. But again, they did not show.

"Maybe they just don't want to be found," Zorn suggested.

"We must try again," Anthony suggested. "We cannot try in the daytime."

Coeur shrugged, and they moved on.

Not until three stops later did they find their quarry.

Brother Anthony was noticeably reticent about suggesting this last location, but that fact in and of itself prompted Coeur to want to see it. In a region called the Imponsero District, it was well outside the power grid but near a number of standing structures that loomed with exaggerated size in the darkness. Most were empty apartment buildings, rendered in a blocky style perhaps chic at one time, but the true giants were warehouses, some aglow with fires of huddled camps and all riddled with divots blown out of their ferroconcrete shells by the impact of energy artillery.

*In short, Coeur thought, a battleground.*

The chapel Anthony selected this time was among the warehouses, amazingly retaining its overall structure though the roof and rafters had long since collapsed. Bits of debris and dangling metal, shifted by the wind, banged and skittered noisily in adjacent structures, confusing Coeur's ears as she strained to hear the motion of other feet in the rubble.

As before, Anthony prayed alone for several minutes, eventually building to a volume that could be easily heard, then stopped.

And silence fell on the chapel.

Then the chilling sound of rifle bolts—dozens—clattered down on them from every direction. Zorn, who reached to draw her gun, was stayed by a warding hand from Coeur.

"All right, people," ordered a disembodied voice, "on your faces on the ground, hands behind your backs! You too, brother!"

An armed force of squad strength then swarmed into the building, enforcing the voice's will by bayonet point. V-Max was the only spacer to be hurt, when he protested Zorn's being forced to the ground and got a butt stock in the kidneys for his trouble.

*What luck, Coeur thought wryly, feeling gravel pressed into her cheek as strange fingers tied her hands behind her back and relieved her of her gun. Our first night on Mexit, and already we're making friends for the Coalition.*



# Chapter 12

Having witnessed firsthand the cruelty of more than one TED, Coeur was understanding of her captors, even as they tied a rope around her hands, took her weapon and her communicator, replaced her night-vision goggles with a blindfold and hauled her upright for a thorough frisking. As a potential spy, she deserved no better.

What she fervently hoped was not that she would be treated better, but that their captors would take better care of the broomsticks they were dragging along behind the prisoners, and that Drop Kick would have the restraint to refrain from a rescue attempt.

*Well, at least until they actually try to execute us.*

Brother Anthony was given better treatment, and Coeur heard him explain their objective even as they were lead away from the chapel.

"We told you only to come here alone, Brother Anthony."

"I know that, commander, but the mission of my companions is important."

"What? Killing us all?"

"These aren't enemies, commander. They've come to help you."

"How so?"

"They are from the Coalition, sir. Just as V-Max said they would, his comrades have come."

*Oh, good, Coeur thought. At least V-Max had the presence of mind to say he was with us, not a band of interstellar pirates.*

"I hope so, for your sake. I'd really hate to have to shoot a priest."

"I doubt very much the Cardinal would appreciate that, after the help we've given you."

"Well, you're in luck," the commander said with acid insincerity. "She's here, so you can explain it to her yourself."

"What?" Anthony asked, shocked. "The cardinal is here?"

"Yes."

"How could I be so foolish? I had no idea...I never would have come if I had known...."

"I'm sure she'll be touched by your devotion."

Well, Coeur thought, *this could be the break we needed.... It's too bad we smell like an overflowing latrine to these people.*

Coeur and her companions were led over a variety of terrain, around the corners of several buildings and finally deposited in an enclosed chamber without Brother Anthony. Shushed by Zorn—and his aching kidneys—V-Max kept his grumbling at a low level, though it was some time before anyone came in to look after them. The people who eventually came were a man and woman who removed both the restraints and blindfolds of the party preparatory for movement elsewhere.

"Where are we being taken?" Coeur asked.

"The cardinal," the woman answered. "May the Defender protect us."

Not surprisingly, the cell they were held in had no light of any kind, but dazzling light overcame them when they were led outside—onto the concrete floor of a vast and high-ceilinged warehouse. While the ceiling remained in half-lit shadow, the floor was amply lit through torches and hooded light bulbs feeding off a thrumming alcohol generator. The same power plant, off in the far end of the warehouse, was also connected to an impressive battery of heavy machinery—drills, saws and presses—that made an echoing racket as they labored under the supervision of their human masters.

*Munitions, I'll bet.*

The light, of course, was only dazzling by comparison to the darkness they had been held in, and Coeur soon discerned an amazing thing. While many of the rubble-dwellers were scarcely clothed at all, a substantial number were sheathed in IR-dampening ponchos, with lightweight body armor and well-polished weapons that seemed a match for Soledad's nonpowered regular troops.

Though they were no longer bound, the spacers were under close surveillance by a number of gunmen with submachineguns, led by a man whom Coeur took to be "the commander." Scars colored the weathered features of the blue-eyed man, who was shorter than Coeur would have thought, but cast from the same mold as many serious soldiers she had known—crisp in discourse and wary of danger.

Where he led the off-world party, eventually, was into a side chamber that once might have been the office of the warehouse's foreman. Better lit than the main floor, it gave up a substantial

aroma of incense even before the spacers entered and found themselves back in the presence of Brother Anthony.

And Her estimable Holiness, Cardinal Miranda Vazquez.

Whether or not that was its purpose, the long, windowless office resembled a chapel, with burning candles, holy triangles and hanging devotional paintings, depicting what Coeur assumed to be saints, or perhaps incarnations of the Defender, surrounded as they were by a supernatural glow about their heads. These gave an entirely appropriate background for the short but commanding cardinal, whose vestments resembled Brother Anthony's, but with the addition of a golden collar, red sash and seams embroidered in gothic Anglic script.

With streaks of gray in her shoulder-length black hair and deep wrinkles about her eyes, she might have been anywhere between 40 and 60, but the hard life of people in the Wilds kept Coeur from narrowing her guess any further. What was absolutely certain was the high esteem the natives held her in, marked by the silence of Brother Anthony, the commander, the rebel troops and two ecclesiastical bodyguards—men dressed like priests but sporting submachineguns slung over their shoulders.

"Your Holiness," the commander said, "these are the prisoners captured with Brother Anthony."

"Very good, General Lemos. You may go."

Though clearly reluctant, General Lemos, the weathered "commander," bowed and withdrew with his troops.

"Come," Vazquez said to the spacers, "sit down."

Accepting the offer, they and Anthony followed the sweep of her hand toward a dais in the far end of the windowless chamber, supporting a single high-backed chair and a half-dozen lesser—but comfortable looking—chairs in a semicircle. Since the highest chair was clearly for the cardinal, the spacers made certain that she seated herself before taking the other seats proffered to them and Anthony.

"Thank you" Coeur said, aware of the rarity of any furniture in such an area.

Vazquez accepted the comment with a gracious nod, even as her bodyguard took up position behind her chair.

"I understand," Vazquez said to V-Max, "that you are the individual V-Max, who has been dwelling in Brother Anthony's chapel."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"And you," the cardinal said to Coeur and Zorn. "I understand that you are his senior officers."

"That's not...precisely correct," Coeur said.

"Oh? Are you not citizens of the Interstellar Coalition?"

"Actually, that's 'Reformation Coalition,' Your Holiness. Yes, we are all citizens of that state, but only I am a representative of its government. Zorn and V-Max are mercenaries, assisting my mission here."

"And what is your mission, Captain..."

"D' Esprit. Coeur D' Esprit."

"...Captain Coeur D' Esprit?"

"Well, for a start, Your Holiness, it's not mercenary. My government has commissioned me to discover the fate of one of our citizens, 'Zero' Wolfowitz, and a dangerous weapon we believe he found here."

Vazquez raised an eyebrow.

"One of your citizens, you say?"

"Yes, Your Holiness. Zero and his crew were from Oriflamme, a member world of our Coalition."

"I see. Yes, I know of this individual, Zero. He approached the Holy Church for help during an earlier visit to Mexit, before his last, more recent expedition."

"I wasn't aware there was an earlier visit," Coeur said, looking at V-Max and Brother Anthony. Their shaking heads revealed they hadn't heard that either.

"Oh, yes. At one point during the earlier visit, he found he would have some difficulty slipping past Soledad's sensors to escape the city in haste, so he approached one of our priests for help. What he wanted was beyond our capacity—convincing the rebels to disable the emperor's planetary defense missiles."

"Understandable. They're probably well-defended."

"Zero wasn't so congenial. When the rebels refused the request, Zorn expressed his displeasure by stealing a Palabra, the holy gospel of the Defender, from that brother's church. Needless to say, the brother's congregation was devastated."

*Oh, Gaia,* Coeur thought, shaking her head. *How did I know he would do something like that?*

"That's pretty twisted," Zorn said. "I've never stolen anything from a church."

"Yet you say he was your countryman," Vazquez said to Coeur.

"Yes, he was," Coeur said. "But I'm not going to make any excuses for his behavior. If good evidence exists that he abused a local population, our government will make him pay for it."

Vazquez smiled, briefly.

"Ours is not a perfect world, Captain D' Esprit. But tell me: Are you citizen of the world Oriflamme, as Zero was?"

"No, Your Holiness, I am a citizen of Aubaine."

"Your native world?"

Now Coeur smiled.



"No, I was born on Terra."

"Terra," Vazquez said, thoughtfully. "My grandfather was born on Terra before coming to this world."

Coeur's eyebrows rose in reaction to the remark. "Indeed."

"Yes," Vazquez went on, "he was originally from Roswell Arcology."

"You don't say."

"Oh yes. Have you heard of it?"

"Yes," Coeur said, conjuring the image of her home in her mind, "Roswell was just across the desert from Phoenix Arcology, where I was born."

"How remarkable," Vazquez said. "I remember Grandfather saying that it was very beautiful."

"Yeah," Coeur said with a grimace, "I suppose it was."

"Was, Captain?"

"I haven't seen Terra for almost 90 years, Your Holiness."

Now it was Vazquez' turn to be surprised.

"You will excuse my curiosity, Captain, but how is that possible? You hardly look a day over 20."

Coeur smiled at the estimate, but then remembered that on Mexit—where the environment was very harsh—a person probably aged quickly.

"Actually, Your Holiness, I'm what we call a remnant—I was born over 100 years ago, but slept through the Collapse in suspended animation."

"Suspended animation...?"

"It's kind of technical," Coeur explained, recognizing the cardinal's unfamiliarity with high technology.

"I see," the cardinal said, turning to face Zorn. "And what of you, Captain Zorn? Are you a 'remnant' as well?"

"No, ma'am. I was born and raised on Aurora."

"Likewise," V-Max said. "*Sic semper tyrannis.*"

"Thus ever to tyrants?" Vazquez asked.

"That's the motto on Aurora's flag," Zorn explained.

A silent pause followed, during which time Coeur wondered where this was headed. True, Vazquez was a comfortable person to be around, but if she didn't believe they were on the level, Drop Kick's rescue mission would become very urgent indeed.

"Assuming that it isn't too technical," Vazquez said finally, "why don't you tell me about this weapon Zero was after."

"Well..." Coeur began, "it is pretty technical. Do you know what a starship is?"

"Oh yes, I've read about them. I assume you used one to travel here from your Coalition."

"Right. Well, anyway, what Zero was after was a device called

a black globe generator. It isn't really so much a weapon as it is a very sophisticated defense system for a starship. To be honest, it wouldn't be much use to anyone here on the planet, but it could give a starship a big advantage in space combat."

"And you want it."

"Yes I do," Coeur said, "so I can keep it out of our enemies' hands."

"It is a nasty gadget," Zorn agreed, looking to support Coeur. "With a black globe installed, a starship could easily slip past a defending fleet and bomb a planet to rubble."

"Right," Coeur said, "and that's something we don't want happening to us, or anyone else, for that matter."

Vazquez nodded, but said nothing for a long moment.

"I can sense your purpose," she said finally, "but I shall need a short time to meditate on what you've said. Brother Anthony, you will stay with these people in the interim."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

The cardinal then made to rise, though she let the spacers follow Brother Anthony's lead and stand first. Without further word, the cardinal then left through the chamber's only obvious exit with her bodyguards in train. Doubtless to ensure they didn't do anything untoward—like damaging the holy fittings of the chapel—two rebel troopers stepped in to keep an eye on them.

"That was very odd," Zorn whispered to Coeur.

"Yes," Coeur agreed. "It was almost too polite."

"You should not underestimate Her Holiness," Anthony said. "She is really quite intuitive."

Not quite daring to ask the question aloud, Zorn took Coeur aside and signed a question to her in Anslan.

*"Is she psionic?"*

*"I don't know. If she is, it's a good thing we told the truth."*

\*\*\*

Since Physic knew the danger of using radio to communicate with Snapshot's drone—such traffic had certainly let the radio direction finders of Soledad zero in on Brother Anthony's church—Newton advised her that the laser communicator aboard their G-carrier would let them communicate, undetected, with Snapshot's orbital probe. Physic, therefore, relayed a message through the probe to *Homet*, detailing their progress.

"Have you heard from Red Sun yet?" Gyro asked, after receiving the report.

"Negative," Physic answered, "but it's only 0300 hours here, so they haven't been gone too long. You should let *Arms* know about Carl and Katzel, though."

"Understood. Anything else?"

"Well, there is one other thing. Have you been monitoring radio traffic from the planet?"

"Yes, it's Sixer's new hobby. As far as he can tell, it's been mostly martial music and propaganda from Soledad."

"Well, all the same, you might keep your ears open for anything about the pirate cousins. Physic out."

"Understood. Gyro out."

\*\*\*

After circling the rebel warehouse for over an hour at a conservative height and distance of 500 meters, Drop Kick realized that any more flight time would cut into the battery power he and Gaffer would need to get back to the G-carrier.

"I don't like this," Gaffer said. "Our people could be in danger, and we aren't doing anything about it."

"Thank you, I'm aware of our situation," Drop Kick said. "But we haven't heard any shots or seen any commotion, so I'm willing to bet they're still alive."

"I sure hope you're right."

"Actually, we might have to put down pretty soon anyway. We don't have enough power to loiter here for more than a few more minutes, so we either stay here or go back to the carrier."

"Well, if we do land, be careful," Gaffer said, pointing down at the dark ground, "there're a lot of heat signatures down there."

And that was the problem—the rebels. Although only a handful of the signatures showed the irregular thermal ghosting that betrayed IR shrouds, the rebels populated the area around the warehouse in what must be company strength, so putting the broomstick down to rest its batteries would put the Marines at considerable risk. Armored as they were, they weren't immune to damage—particularly from anti-vehicle mines or anti-tank grenades.

"Of course, if you'd like," Gaffer went on, "I could divert **some** power from my battle dress; I've still got four kilowatt-hours stored."

"No, that's all right. All that would give us is another few minutes, and you with a dead suit."

Yet Drop Kick still had the decision to make. Either he could fly back to Lomarica when he reached bingo charge, or put down and risk a violent encounter with the rebels—both uncongenial options with Coeur and the others taken captive and in obvious peril.

Then, with mere minutes to spare, a familiar voice crackled over Drop Kick and Gaffer's radios.

"Drop Kick, this is Red Sun. Can you see me?"

"There she is," Gaffer said, tapping Drop Kick on the shoulder and pointing. Sure enough, Coeur was there in a lit side door of the rebel warehouse, without blindfold or restraint, but also without her sidearm or WSV goggles. A pair of armed rebels were her companions.

After a moment's pause, Drop Kick answered with two short bursts of static.

"Good," Coeur said, switching to sign language. "Come on down."

"Think it's a trap?" Gaffer asked Drop Kick.

"Well, if it is," Drop Kick answered, "we're pretty well dressed for it. I'm going down."

"I hope you're right about this."

In any event, it was Coeur's companions who almost leapt out of their skin with shock when the Marines landed before them.

"Defender protect us!" a young rebel exclaimed. "Brak's armor!"

"Easy, soldier," said an older, scarred man with the bearing of a senior officer. "That's not Brak's armor. The Guard uses a different design."

"Right," Coeur said. "Those are my men."

"Do all your men have battle dress?" the young rebel asked.

"Just a few. But probably enough for what we have in mind."

"What's going on here?" Drop Kick said, stepping off the grounded broomstick with Gaffer. "Have you contacted a rebel unit?"

"Oh, I'd say so. Drop Kick, meet General Lemos, commander of the Imponero Phalanx."

"General," Drop Kick said, flipping up his visor and saluting.

"General, these are Sergeants Escher and Denikin, my ground tactics chief and drop troop leader."

"Gentlemen," Lemos said.

"As I said, these are the men you'll need to talk to if we're going to make the plan work."

"Excuse me, skipper," Gaffer said, not yet electing to lift his visor and so speaking through suit speakers. "Did you say plan?"

"Yes. Cardinal Vazquez of the CGL has convinced the general we're on the level, so we're going to cooperate on a little mission—springing Zorn's people and a few dozen rebels from a prison in the basement of the defense ministry."

*Oh crap, not that place,* Gaffer thought, visualizing a bloody assault on the imposing structure and anticipating the next comment from Drop Kick.

"Isn't this a bit sudden?" the sergeant major asked. "We've just



been here a few hours."

"We're not going to rush out and do it tomorrow," Coeur replied.

"Good."

"But the sooner we start collaborating, the better. Now come on, guys; we've got work to do."

\*\*\*

When Deep Six detected the sudden activation of a new radio channel from Soledad, broadcasting on a UHF frequency well above that of conventional radio on the planet, he switched immediately from monitoring the martial music on Radio Soledad to monitoring the new signal. Double-checking the computer to be sure it was recording the transmission, the Schalli settled back in the tank of his roller-chair and absorbed its chilling meaning.

"Attention, people of space. This is the Emperor Brak, Lord and Ruler of Soledad, who has imprisoned your personnel, Carina Becker and Katzel Hughes, for flagrant violation of the territorial integrity of this land.

"Be advised that your personnel will be publicly executed at 2000 hours, tomorrow midnight, unless a reply is received on this channel from your commanding officer."

The message then repeated and went silent, prompting rasping blasts of air from Deep Six's blowholes—a Schalli expression of disgust.

"Gyro," he said, "did you monitor that message?"

"Affirmative," the XO said, from her laser turret. "Snapper told me the moment she detected the new frequency. I wonder if Physic did, too."

"Affirmative, sir. Physic just signaled that Newton detected the message as well."

"Wow," Snapshot said, from her own turret. "Do you think we should respond?"

"Negative," Gyro said. "We shouldn't second-guess the skipper. Continue to monitor all frequencies and record anything significant."

*And so, Gyro figured, that was that.*

But it was not. The message had also been picked up by the junior technarchs An-Wing and Masaryk, who now wanted a piece of the action.

"Gyro," An-Wing called, after insistently knocking on the hatch of Gyro's turret until she opened it. "We need to talk. As a duly assigned representative of Oriflamme, appointed to investigate the situation on Mexit, I am shocked at the way Bela and I have been systematically ignored in your planning."

"Yeah, so?"

An-Wing made an exasperated sigh. "Gyro, think about that last message. Clearly, what you need on the ground is not an armed party—to provoke Brak—but seasoned negotiators with a background in politics and economics."

"You mean you?"

"Yes."

"Lady An-Wing, I'm afraid I can't make that kind of arrangement. Until I hear otherwise from Red Sun herself, we'll carry out her last orders to stay here and lie low."

"Well, couldn't you get my suggestion to her somehow? Like when she does communicate with us?"

"Fine," Gyro said. "I'll pass along the message."

"Very well," An-Wing replied. "I shall return to my stateroom and await her response."

"You do that," Gyro said, letting her iris valve begin to shut before An-Wing was quite done talking. Gyro then called Deep Six on the bridge.

"Sixer, how did the technarchs hear that last message from Brak?"

"The same as you, sir. Red Sun made no special request to deny them radio access."

Gyro growled, deep in her throat.

"Well, it's denied now. My authority."

"Yes, sir."

• • •

Ironically, Liu An-Wing and Bela Masaryk were on Coeur's mind at that very moment. Having heard a detailed description of Brak's forces in the rebel headquarters, she had become increasingly aware of the contribution that diplomacy—at least as a ruse or distraction—might make to her strategy. Protected by an army of brigade strength, Brak simply could not be reached with a conventional frontal assault.

Lacking a portable laser uplink, which she had left behind for fear of its being captured, and out of radio contact with Lomarica, Coeur had not heard Emperor Brak's radio pronouncement concerning Zorn's prisoners. Nevertheless, she was keen to go cautiously in her planning with the rebels, for the last thing she needed was to risk a lot of valuable Coalition equipment in open combat when her only objective was recovery of the prisoners and *Crazy Jane*.

Thanks to his spies, largely house servants of the ruling class of the Federal District, General Lemos knew *Crazy Jane* to be more or less intact, held in a warehouse somewhere in the

derelict old starport. On the up side, the vast starport was fairly close to the prison, just a few hundred meters across an open park. On the down side, Brak had an impressive mechanized force to guard his capital and prevent access to both the Defense Ministry and the starport.

Among other assets, the Soledad army included no less than a platoon of 20 troopers in heavy battle dress, a dozen TL13 Pyrrhus support sleds, five TL15 grav APCs of the type that raided Brother Anthony's church and two TL15 heavy grav tanks.

"That's a pretty odd mix," Gaffer noted. "Solomani support sleds and Imperial assault vehicles all jumbled together?"

"Yeah, it is peculiar," Coeur agreed, "but the Imperials probably left a lot of their heavy equipment lying around when they bugged out and the Solomani moved in."

Gaffer shrugged.

"Forget the ancient history," Coeur said. "Drop Kick, what do you know about those Imperial vehicles?"

"Well, they're pretty nasty," Drop Kick said, seated on an upturned steel drum and studying the rebel map of the Federal District before himself and his comrades. "Especially those heavy grav tanks. They're twice the size of our Intrepid, better armored, and may have a better gun."

"Yeah, that's nasty all right," Coeur agreed. "However, I doubt any of their tank commanders are as good as ours is."

Drop Kick accepted the compliment with a wry grimace. *Oh, fine, just get me killed.*

"You know what I'm curious about," Zorn said, "is artillery. I see they've got a battalion of self-propelled howitzers, but I don't see any MRLs or meson guns...."

"What's a meson gun?" General Lemos asked.

The spacers around the briefing table glanced around, inviting each other to try tackling that question. Coeur, at length, took up the challenge.

"I think you'd remember it if they had one," she said. "Basically, it's a gun that can shoot through solid objects, like mountains and buildings and so forth, but without damaging them. Plus, the target area gets pretty much flattened and vaporized."

"No," Lemos said, "they don't have anything like that."

"Good," Gaffer said.

"I am concerned about air defenses, though," Coeur said. "What can you tell us about those?"

"Because we don't have aircraft, we don't worry about their air defenses much," Lemos said, "but they are impressive. Our

estimate is that as many as 50 SAM sites are positioned around the Federal District, and God-knows-how-many PDMs in silos in the starport."

Cardinal Vazquez shifted in the comfortable chair beside Lemos' tool-box seat and coughed, reminding the general of his blasphemy.

"Forgive me, Your Holiness."

"Well, those missiles could be a problem for my drop troops," Gaffer said. "Any idea where their fire control is located?"

"Unfortunately," Lemos said, "no."

"Well, that settles it," Drop Kick said. "We'll have to recon the area to pinpoint the fire control centers."

"Yeah," Gaffer agreed. "It's either that or we go in on the ground."

"That could be awkward," Lemos said. "The outskirts of the Federal District are heavily mined, and it will cause delays if we have to assemble forces for a direct assault on the prison."

Coeur understood the dilemma. On the one hand, the rebels had enough force near the city to support a drop raid, but if the air defense was very thick, a drop raid could not get in. On the other hand, if they delayed long enough to survey the city defenses and/or assemble a large force, Zorn's people might end up executed first.

"I've got an idea," she said, finally. "What we need is a second—diplomatic—front."

"Hey now, Red," Drop Kick said, giving Coeur a wary look, "you're not thinking of meeting with Brak yourself, are you?"

"Actually," Coeur said, "I was thinking of the junior technarchs."

"Oh," Drop Kick replied, surprised. Then, smiling wickedly, added, "Sounds better already."

"What I was thinking," Coeur explained, pointedly ignoring Drop Kick's unkind sentiment, "was that we might have the technarchs try to con Brak into thinking they're part of a private Oriflammen mission—a follow-up to Zero maybe."

"Good idea," V-Max said. "It might make him lower his guard."

"Every little bit helps," Coeur agreed. "General, I think we've gone over the preliminaries pretty well, so I'd like to get my people back to camp before sunrise."

"Yes, that would be wise."

"As a show of good faith, I'm prepared to stay here, of course, while my people are away."

Coeur's comrades were disturbed by that gesture—unex-



pected as it was—but relaxed when Lemos waved off the offer.

"Unwise. Better that a commander is with her troops. Naturally, it would be good to have a liaison officer, though...."

"I'll stay," V-Max volunteered.

"Are you sure you want to?" Zorn asked her friend.

"Absolutely."

"Praise be to the Defender," Vazquez replied. "Then you shall keep Brother Anthony with you."

"I suppose that's acceptable," Coeur said, "if it's all right with the general. He might prefer someone of a more military nature...."

"On the contrary," Lemos said. "Brother Anthony will be a fine liaison."

"Yes," Vazquez agreed. "It shall be a sign of our devotion to the Holy Defender."

\*\*\*

Somewhat before dawn, the spacers, less V-Max, returned to the air after two hours in the headquarters of the Imponsero Phalanx. Last of all, Coeur told the general she would send a laser communicator out to the rebels so they could communicate directly with Lomarica base via Snapshot's probe. Then the spacers were away, leaving a rebel community both excited and uncertain of the future. Even before the broomsticks crossed into Albegar, rumors had spread to the underground shelters of the fighters' families that a momentous time had come.

Cardinal Vazquez was strangely quiet, though, reflecting upon recent visions of mayhem and bloodshed. Though certain her intuition was correct—that the strangers were to be trusted—her intuition also gave her a sense of foreboding, and she prayed for the guidance of her special patron, the holy Saint Graylord.

Of course, Vazquez was not so presumptuous that she sought a manifestation of the saint—merely clarity of insight and purity of purpose. So when the saint returned her prayer—his holy presence revealed by a familiar electric tingle in her neck—she was stunned.

But relieved.

Over the protestations of her bodyguard priests, Vazquez retired alone to a wooded patch outside the warehouse—ostensibly to pray—then slipped away into the rubble with her well-preserved agility. As usual, her patron was calling in the twilight hour—before the sun's most lethal intensity, but after wise people departed indoors and underground to bed. Vazquez knew her faith was no defense against the myriad mines and booby traps strewn among the rubble. Wary of them, she

advanced with deliberate caution to a sheltered stream bed where once a concrete storm drain had stood.

"Beloved Miranda," came a familiar voice, as if from the very air behind her.

"Your blessed holiness," Vazquez replied reflexively, turning to the voice but averting her eyes and dropping to one knee.

"Rise and lift your eyes, my daughter."

With suitable reluctance, Vazquez did as bade, beholding a revelation from God. Hooded Saint Graylord—his hands and face shrouded, but a towering figure all the same—stood between the shimmering forms of two massive angelic guardians, floating in the air as rainbows of light coruscated across their winged and radiant bodies.

"Gracious Saint Graylord, how may I serve you?"

"It is written," Graylord said, "that the day shall come when travellers arrive from the heavens, and stars shall fall from their traces. Then shall kings and princes scatter, and lo, the many kingdoms of the earth shall kneel before the manifested will of the Lord and Defender."

Vazquez, of course, was familiar with the passage, but remained silent.

"My daughter, the day has come again when travellers have joined us from the stars."

"Yes, Your Grace. Even this day, they were led into my presence."

"Tell me," Graylord said, "did you sense their purpose?"

"I did, Your Grace. I feel their hearts are true, and their cause is just."

"I am pleased," Graylord replied, his pleasure reflected in the soft pink hue appearing in the angel's wings. "It was for your special insight that I made you the protector and guardian of the Defender's church."

"Your Blessed Grace—Is it possible that these might be the ones? I have seen visions of hope and torment...."

"Be at peace, my daughter. I have seen the seal of the Defender rising gloriously in the east. Blessed are those whose eyes do not see, yet believe."

"Your Grace, I do believe."

"And so your esteem is great in Heaven," Graylord said, whereupon he spread his arms and lifted his shrouded head toward the sky. "May the blessings of the Defender watch over and keep you. Farewell."

Overcome with emotion, Vazquez could not respond—only look on with stunned amazement as her patron lifted into the air with his angelic guardians and rose on a shaft of light into the early

morning sky. Dazzled by the brightness of the light, she thought she saw them climbing toward a rose-colored cloud, but then the holy triad was gone.

As the trio disappeared from sight, Vazquez surrendered to the forces battling within her and fell to the ground, sobbing with an incomprehensible combination of humility and exaltation, of fear and love—for her patron saint, and the purpose he represented.

*What is this feeling? How can I contain these beautiful, terrifying forces without being destroyed? And then she remembered the ancient words. What is this which gleams through me and smites my heart without wounding it? I am both a-shudder and a-glow. A-shudder, in so far as I am unlike it, a-glow in so far as I am like it.*

She did not know how long she laid there, but she eventually stopped trembling and noticed that sunrise was imminent. Rising up and gathering her robes about her, she scrambled back through the rubble to safety.

*That so humble a servant as I should be chosen to bear this duty, Vazquez thought, her heart pounding hard in her chest. Praise be to the Defender!*

# Chapter 13

When Coeur arrived at the G-carrier at 0600 hours, she was naturally pleased to hear that she and the junior technarchs were on the same page—as least as far as negotiating with Brak was concerned. Unfortunately, the Oriflammen wanted more than just an active role—they wanted their active role to be on the ground. Initially Coeur resisted, thinking of their safety.

Yet there was always the possibility that Brak would insist on a face-to-face meeting, and that, of course, would require the technarchs on the ground. With this in mind, Coeur tempered her disapproval.

"Maybe you're right, An-Wing," Coeur consented, after Newton established a link with *Hornet*. "Maybe it could be useful to have you down here. I just hope you realize how dangerous this planet is."

"Captain," An-Wing replied, "we appreciate your concern. However, it is our countrymen that were lost down there."

"And," Coeur surmised, "your government will be displeased if you aren't down here."

"Yes, Captain. Quite displeased."

Coeur sighed, looking out a darkened side cockpit window. Long before the morning sun had crested the eastern ridge, Bonzo and Whiz Bang—behind Coeur at the cockpit controls—had darkened all the windows for their own protection, and relied primarily on sensor data to watch the hillside camp.

"All right, An-Wing, tell me this. Do you know how to use a parachute?"

"A parachute?" An-Wing asked, quizzically.

"I didn't think so. Is Mercy there?"

"Right here, skipper."

"Mercy, I've got a question for you. Could you fit three people in your tank? For a short trip, I mean?"

Mercy whistled.

"Jeez, I don't know—that would be a tight fit. But I suppose it could be done, if one person was small and sat on the other one's lap."

"All right, then," Coeur said. "An-Wing, you and Masaryk can



come down to the surface."

"What? In a tank?"

"It's either that, or you hop out of *Hornet* in a parachute."

"In that case, I guess we'll go in the tank."

"Fine. Mercy, you and Drop Kick alert us whenever you're ready to launch. I'd rather you came down at night, but it sounds like Brak's impatient to start lopping off heads, and I'd rather have the technarchs make their first contact down here—as they're willing to take the risk."

"No problem," Mercy said. "There's a large marsh due west of your position. If Gyro and Sixer drop us off there, over the horizon, we can fly on in NOE."

"Sounds like a good plan," Coeur said. "Let's do it."

\*\*\*

As soon as Deep Six completed the communication with Coeur, Gyro notified *Vi Et Armis* of *Hornet's* imminent launch. In return, the pirate produced an unexpected bit of news.

"We could cover you if you'd like, *Hornet*," said Boomer, the man who was Gyro's opposite number on the patrol cruiser—acting commander and chief of gunnery. "Our drive boys have restored power to our lasers."

"Outstanding," Gyro said. "But I'd just as soon have you stay here."

"Hey, our people are down there, too."

"True, but so are a whole lot of deep-site meson guns."

"We don't know that for certain, Gyro."

"Well, we do know this: We know there used to be deep-site meson guns, and we don't know where they are now. That's a good enough reason to keep your ship safe here on the back side of Elojo."

"Well, you know," Boomer said, "as long as we're being paranoid, we might as well consider the possibility that some of the meson guns—and their fire control sensors—are hidden on this moon. If that's the case, then we're no safer here than we'd be in orbit around Mexit."

"Point taken, *Armis*. However, we haven't seen a lick of evidence that Elojo's anything but a dead rock. Therefore, I'm going to assume that any guns and fire control sensors that exist are on the planet, and you're going to stay put on the back side of this moon and monitor telemetry from Snapper's satellite. If you see anything happen to us, you can come running then."

"All right."

"Of course," Snapshot said, jumping on the line, "if you see us vaporized for no apparent reason, then you'll know there is definitely a meson gun down there."

"Right," Gyro said. "So don't say we never did anything for you."

"Roger, *Homel*. We'll stay put. Godspeed. *Armis* out."

A few minutes later, *Homel* launched for a second trip into Mexit's atmosphere—though this time with Gyro in the pilot's couch and Red Eye in the laser turret. Assured by his performance in earlier gunnery simulations, Gyro was certain the Marine gunny would be the second best choice to take over her gun—the best being Snapshot at the port missile turret.

Coming down in morning twilight, *Homel* sailed over the eastern edge of the Aguja Prieta Mountains, 500 kilometers west of Soledad, at an altitude of 10 kilometers, then quickly dipped to five kilometers above the lakes and swamps at the foot of the mountains. Though her hull doubtless glistened in the light from *Opaco*, *Homel* attracted neither obvious attention nor fire, and slowed to a scant 200 kph to let the mighty *Intrepid* grav tank exit.

Massing more than 250 tonnes, the tank was tremendously dense for its 10 displacement tons, and plummeted toward Mexit like a stone before its HEPLaR thrusters fired to control its descent. Within seconds, Mercy had the tank well under control, leveling out just meters above the scattered swamps.

Then another problem arose. Bela Masaryk—who knew he might have trouble with motion sickness—was close to nausea even though his view of the sensor displays of their dizzying maneuvers were partly blocked by An-Wing on his lap.

"Oh my god," Masaryk said. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Jeez, try to hold it, would you?" An-Wing snapped, looking back with concern.

"Yeah, you'd better try to hold it," Mercy said, giving a quick glance at the junior technarchs across the central autoloader. "Drop Kick'll really hate it if you barf on his controls."

• • •

Masaryk eventually mastered his motion sickness, and the tank arrived at the Lomarica camp without incident. There Gaffer helped An-Wing and the wobbly Masaryk into the G-carrier, while Drop Kick and Mercy dragged yet another IR shroud and camouflage net over their tank, matching the protection of the other two vehicles.

"Good, you're here," Coeur greeted them.

"Who's this?" An-Wing asked, noting the robed figure of Brother Anthony.

"A representative from the Church of Grace and Light," Coeur said. "Brother Anthony, let me to introduce you to Liu An-Wing and Bela Masaryk, representatives of the Council of Technarchs of Oriflamme."

"That sounds very important," Anthony exclaimed, shaking their hands.

"They're from the same world as Zero," Zorn said, with a wry smirk, "but they're a *little* better behaved."

Having yet to hear the story of Zero's stolen relics, the junior technarchs were puzzled at the priest's wary regard.

"I'll explain later," Coeur told them. "Now let's go forward so you can see our commo setup. Newton, after you."

"Certainly, Captain," Newton said, padding forward to its station in the cockpit with Coeur and the junior technarchs in train. "You will observe that I have all outgoing frequencies from Soledad monitored, including the UHF frequency *Homet's* drone monitored at 0330 hours, so we are reasonably certain that Emperor Brak has not made any more statements regarding the prisoners."

"Can we reach Brak from here?" Masaryk asked.

"And more to the point," An-Wing added, "can we reach him without his knowing we're here?"

"I believe so. Since our maser uplink to the geosynchronous drone is unlikely to be intercepted, we will use that as an origin point for a return signal to Brak on his own radio frequency."

"Who knows," Vink said, from behind them in the passenger hold, where he was soldering an electronic component, "they might even think the origin point is an orbiting starship—if their main sensors really are just local radar and direction finders."

"That's a hopeful thought," Coeur said, retiring with the junior technarchs to the passenger section so they would have a chance to collect their thoughts before going on the air. An-Wing was eager to get started, though, and soon sat down at the comm panel with Newton at her side and Coeur and Masaryk at her back.

"Go," Newton said. "You have the frequency."

"Attention," An-Wing said, authoritatively, "Emperor Brak of Soledad, this is the Starship *Technarch*, in orbit above your world...."

Amused, Coeur smiled at the improvised ship name.

"We have received your signal concerning our crewmembers, and await word of your terms for their release."

An-Wing then shut off the transmitter and glanced at Newton, who was studying its monitors for evidence of a return signal.

"Anything?" Coeur asked.

"Negative."

"All right, then. Continue monitoring, and cycle Liu's message every five minutes."

"Hm," An-Wing mumbled, nodding.

"What?" Coeur asked.

"That's the first time you called me Liu," An-Wing replied, looking over her shoulder.

"Too familiar?"

"No. Just wondering if I can stop calling you Captain D' Esprit and call you Red?"

"Sure," Coeur said. "Get our people back, and you can call me anything you like."

...

Two and a half hours later, An-Wing's message had yet to receive an answer, and many of the spacers—cooped up together in the G-carrier for protection from the harsh noonday sun—were beginning to doubt that an answer ever would come.

Outside, the dry air had reached 35° C—not quite the inferno of Oriflamme's equator at noon, but still intense under a harsh sun shining through a thin atmosphere. Sitting in the G-carrier's cockpit, Coeur could only imagine how unpleasant it would be for Bonzo—presently sitting in a camouflaged nest 200 meters above the spacer camp—if he had to stand his watch without the benefit of battle dress.

"How's it look out there?" Coeur asked Bonzo, speaking through a headset microphone.

"Very quiet," the corporal answered, his voice carried crisply over the laser link they were using. "I can't see anybody moving around in the city."

"Very quiet's good. But stay sharp. If Brak's got something up his sleeve, you'll be the first to see it."

"Yes, sir."

"Red Sun out."

Coeur turned to study a computer map of Soledad, hoping to put some of her time to good use planning the night's broomstick recon flights. Moments later, the leads in Newton's radio crackled, and all the spacers came to attention as the Hiver pulled in a special broadcast from the Federal District.

"Personnel of the starship *Technarch*, this is Emperor Brak speaking. Your message has been received, but you must understand that the terms of your personnel's release may not be discussed in this manner. Your captain must come to a place of my choosing, alone, prepared to discuss the mission of your last starship, *Crazy Jane*. If you value the lives of your crewmembers, you will respond immediately."

Lest an attack should come at the camp, Coeur had distributed her personnel among the vehicles, so Mercy was aboard the tank, and the other Marines—Drop Kick, Gaffer and Bonzo—were aboard the ship's boat, which they took over as their base of operations. All heard the message, though, and dropped their other work to hear An-Wing's response.



"Your message is received," An-Wing said. "However, be advised that we will not make any arrangements while the safety of our personnel is in question."

"That would seem to be in the nature of a demand, Technarch."

"Merely a statement of position, Soledad. Our minimal requirement is the assurance that our personnel are safe and well."

Abruptly, Brak's signal cut off.

And an urgent message from Bonzo sounded in Coeur's headset.

"Skipper, trouble. I see a missile launching over the horizon, bearing 044 degrees."

"Typical" Coeur fumed. "A PDM?"

"Affirmative. It's big and fast, on a high ballistic trajectory."

"Understood, stand by."

"What is it?" Zorn asked, in the brief time it took Coeur to switch her comm channel from Bonzo's to the one *Homet* was monitoring.

"A PDM launching," Coeur explained. "*Homet*, this is Red Sun. Do you copy?"

"Roger, Captain," Deep Six said, after a brief lag while the signal was processed through Snapshot's satellite. "Go ahead."

"Sixer, it looks like a defense missile's been launched from the surface, possibly at the satellite."

"That's affirmative," the Schalli answered. "The satellite's picked up the signature. We are moving it to a higher orbit."

"Very good, *Homet*. Advise if successful."

Behind An-Wing, Vink, Physic, Anthony and Masaryk exchanged troubled looks.

"Was it something I said?" An-Wing asked.

The answer came several minutes later, when the various passive EMS sensors of the camp detected a nuclear detonation 200 kilometers overhead.

"That bastard was trying to shoot down your probe!" Zorn exclaimed.

"Well, let's hope he didn't," Coeur said, noting that her comm panel was blinking with a message from *Homet*. This time, Coeur switched the traffic to the G-carrier's speakers so everyone could hear.

"*Homet* to Red Sun," Deep Six said, "are you receiving? Over."

"Roger, *Homet*, go ahead."

"Skipper, since you're receiving this, you'll have surmised that Snapshot's drone is intact. The PDM appears to have been boosted by a conventional rocket and was unable to climb to the satellite's orbit. It detonated well short of the target."

"Good work, guys. Advise of any change in the satellite's status."

"Understood. *Hornet* out."

"A conventional rocket?" Zorn said. "But that means—"

"That means his best weapons aren't that impressive," Coeur finished. "Which might not be entirely good."

"How can that not be good?" Physic asked.

"Because we've been thinking he got his relic gear out of the depot. But if he doesn't have advanced missiles, or sensors, he might not control the depot at all."

"Then...who does?" Zorn asked.

"I don't know. But I'll bet Zero knew, before he died."

A long silence followed, broken by the beeping of Newton's comm panel announcing Brak's follow-up message.

"I trust, starship *Technarch*, that you are still there."

"Yes. We maneuvered out of the way."

"I'm so glad. You may consider that a statement of our position."

"We...understand."

"Excellent. Then understand this: Your captain will appear at the corner of Coronado and Enea streets tomorrow noon, before the Defense Ministry, or one of the prisoners will be killed in as painful a manner as can be relayed over the radio."

"Understood. We will consider your offer."

"Soledad out."

An-Wing shut off the frequency.

"Talk about a guy who needs his ticket punched," Zorn said.

"Brother Anthony, how long has Brak ruled this place?"

"Just a few years, I believe," the priest said, thoughtfully. "Of course, the emperor he killed to take over wasn't that much better."

"I don't know if we need to overreact," An-Wing said, turning away from the comm panel. "Just because he talks tough doesn't mean he can't be reasoned with."

"Liu," Masaryk said, "the man shot a nuclear missile at you."

"No, he shot a missile at an orbiting satellite."

"I rather doubt he appreciated the distinction," Newton pointed out.

Just then, Drop Kick hailed the G-carrier from the ship's boat.

"We heard the conversation, Red Sun. You ask me, I think tonight's a good time for a decap raid."

"It may come to that," Coeur admitted, "but not yet. This evening, I want a couple of broomsticks taken out for recon patrols with recording equipment. When the time comes for a raid, we'll need the position of all their command and control centers zeroed."

"Understood. Drop Kick out."

"As for you," Coeur said to An-Wing, "you may be right about Brak. Someone ought to go out to that meeting, if just to buy us time."

"Quite reasonable," An-Wing agreed. "I've flown a grav bike before, so I should be able to handle one of your broomsticks."

"I meant me," Coeur said.

Physic's reaction was almost as strong and immediate as An-Wing's. "Are you out of your mind?" she said. "The man's insane!"

"Captain," An-Wing exclaimed, "I must protest! You brought us down—I"

"Cut it," Coeur ordered sharply.

Both women stifled their comments.

"Liu," Coeur went on, "I brought you down to negotiate with Brak if it was reasonably safe, but it certainly isn't that, given his behavior. As for you, doctor, you should know that I don't have a death wish. The Marines'll keep an eye on me from a distance, and I'll arrange to have *Hornet* overhead first."

"Ballsy," Zorn said.

"Hardly. If I'm grabbed, *Hornet* will take out Brak's fire control sensors and drop the Marines for a rescue."

"May the Defender preserve you," Anthony said, "but I fear the doctor is right. The Emperor Brak is not a rational man."

"Yeah," Zorn said, "plus there's the meson guns. We don't know where they are, and they could really fink up any rescue plan."

Coeur nodded her head. "I understand that, Vega, but even if those guns are still intact, I don't think Brak controls them. If he did, I'm sure he would have used them on the rebels by now, and a meson gun would have done a much better job of bringing down our satellite than a TL6 rocket would.

"And besides, we don't have time to cover every angle with human lives at stake. If Brak's as much of a nut as everyone says, there's no telling how long the boat crew—or the rebel prisoners—might have before they're killed."

"They could already be dead," Masaryk pointed out. "Wouldn't it really be better to send Liu and me?"

"Negative."

"Well, in fairness, those are my people being held," Zorn said. "Maybe it would be better if I went..."

"Hey," Coeur warned, "don't you start."

"Sorry," Zorn said. "You go."

• • •

Not far from the spacer camp, in a cleft in the rock of another hill, a watcher hid and surveyed the city of Soledad.

Humans, it knew, would be asleep in the city, in battered brick apartment blocks and sheet-metal lean-tos. But the creature in

the rocks did not hide from the sun and was not subject to the weaknesses of human flesh, among them the need to rest.

Instead, it lay baking unconcerned among the rocks of its hillside, perfect in camouflage as it waited for the night. At night the humans would emerge from their shelter and become its prey. Human vision—so reliable in daylight—would not penetrate the night, and the human nose would not sense what stalked in the darkness.

Yet the humans had a certain courage, and, in numbers, could resist the watcher. It was better, then, to stalk the foolish human who travelled alone in the night. He would raise no alarm, and his comrades would not risk their lives to investigate his loss.

*Night at last*, it thought, when the sun finally began to set beyond the hills at its back.

*Time to hunt.*

And so it did, rising from its perch and gliding silently across the rocks. The farmers would be climbing up the slopes of the hills soon, to reach their fields, and perhaps one or two would prove foolish this night, dawdling too far from the protecting fold of his mates. The watcher had not preyed on these particular farmers for some weeks now, and their priests perhaps would have told them the demons had been driven away.

If so, that judgment would soon prove in error.

\*\*\*

Accustomed as they were to longer day cycles, the spacers at the Lomarica camp found the 20-hour day of Mexit startlingly short. Only six hours after noon, the evening twilight had fallen into darkness, and the four Marines launched on their evening recon sorties of the Federal District.

For the sake of the camp's protection, its best gunner—Whiz Bang—remained behind in the *Intrepid*, leaving Mercy and Bonzo to form one recon team, and Drop Kick and Gaffer to form the other. Putting pride aside, Drop Kick gave himself the auxiliary task of delivering a laser uplink to the Imponero Phalanx, knowing that neither he nor Gaffer was quite as good with sensors as Bonzo.

The hilltop lookout nest was occupied at night by the watch Coeur believed to have the best eyes—herself, Zorn and Newton. Since they took their watches in four-hour shifts beginning at sundown, it was Zorn who manned the post at midnight—when a variety of things happened.

First was the nightjack.

Shortly after the sun went down, hundreds of farmers from Soledad came shuffling out of the city with their escort of tractor bosses—the latter few in number but key to the nighttime



operation. Light from the tractors—blazing in the otherwise pitch black beyond the city—both illuminated the fields to let them be worked and illuminated the peasants to make sure they didn't wander away or slack off.

*Plus, Zorn observed, peering through her PRIS binoculars at the peasants 200 meters below her, they make it a lot easier for me to see what's going on down there.*

Yet watching peasants till the fields wasn't the most compelling activity in the world, and Zorn was positively bored by the time something finally happened two hours later. Although she couldn't be certain why, a young peasant boy, perhaps 10 or 11, among the hillside harvesters wandered away from the lights of the escorting tractors and into a ravine 100 meters below Zorn's position. This prompted alarm in Zorn, who was frankly disgusted that such young children were being taken out into the night. But then she spotted an adult male peasant going after the boy and secretly wished him luck.

*That's it, friend, Zorn thought, watching as the man put his hoe over his shoulder and closed on the child. Just a little farther.*

The child did not appear intent on cooperating, however, and dashed deeper into the ravine, behind a barrier blocking Zorn's wide-wavelength vision. Apparently frightened of the ravine, the man paused at its edge before following, but then summoned his strength and went in.

*Good man.*

Seeing nothing happen, Zorn resisted the impulse to wave her binoculars around looking for the pair. Instead, she calmly lowered the zoom to a wider angle. And registered a strangled scream. *Fikk!*

Dropping the PRIS, Zorn pulled up her laser rifle and trained its high-powered sight on the ravine instead. Still nothing happened for several seconds. Then the child emerged, frightened senseless as he ran into the arms of the startled adults nearby.

The man, however, did not emerge.

Clearly terrified, the peasants did not move to investigate, leaving that task instead to the men who drove the tractors. Two, armed with pump-action shotguns, eventually advanced slowly on the ravine with powerful flashlights, talking over hand-held radios to the other tractor crews. Some moments later they emerged, carrying the peasant man's hoe—snapped in two—and a scrap of clothing.

Glad the child was safe, Zorn glanced at the pocket computer she'd brought with her, studying a topographical map of the Lomarica region rendered from the drone's orbital images. A stealthy creature, she noted, could have escaped to the rear of the hill unseen,



so she wheeled about and trained her PRIS in that direction.

Nothing.

Realizing that what she'd seen conformed—at least outwardly—to Brother Anthony's description of a nightjack, Zorn decided this was a potentially dangerous situation and activated her maser link with Newton in the dark G-carrier behind and below her.

"Newton, this is Zorn. Come in."

"Newton here, Captain. Go ahead."

"Is Red there?"

"Affirmative. The captain is resting in the passenger section. Shall I awaken her?"

"Maybe you should."

"Stand by."

A few seconds later, Coeur came to the maser link.

"Red Sun here. Go ahead."

"Just thought you'd like to know something I saw, Red. Seems something grabbed one of the peasants a few minutes ago and disappeared without anyone seeing it—including me."

"Oh, hell."

"Of course, it doesn't look like it stopped the farming. The tractor bosses have got the peasants moving again."

"Real considerate," Coeur said. "Hey, hold on a moment...."

Hearing the line go dead, Zorn expected the delay would be momentary. But when it ran to several seconds, she began to suspect that something was up.

"Zorn, I'm back. There's trouble."

"What?"

"We can't find the technarchs. I asked Brother Anthony and Vink, but they were asleep, too."

"Oh crap. What about Physic?"

"She's over in the ship's boat—she didn't see anything."

"All right. Hold on a minute, and I'll look around your camp."

It took less than a minute for Zorn to find the technarchs. Just as she turned toward the camp, a silent shape flashed past behind her—causing her to fall back around and train her PRIS on it. It was a broomstick, and both of the junior technarchs were aboard.

"Red? I think I found 'em."

"What? Where?"

"It looks like they're on a broomstick and making like holy hell for the center of the city."

The pause in Coeur's response, Zorn supposed, was almost certainly Coeur verifying that the one broomstick aboard was missing.

"Damn it! I knew I shouldn't have let those two down here!"

"I think it's a little late for that," Zorn said. "If one of the Marine teams doesn't stop them, they're going downtown."

# Chapter 14

Bela Masaryk had known about this contingency for months—the possibility that he and An-Wing would have to separate from the Aubani on Mexit and meet with the government themselves—but he wasn't entirely sure this was the right time to do it. Quite apart from the fact that he disliked the prospect of a long ride on a broomstick, Masaryk was concerned that Liu An-Wing had gravely miscalculated the wisdom of rushing to negotiate with the unstable Emperor Brak.

"Really, Bela," An-Wing said, from the front seat of their high-flying broomstick, "I thought we'd gone over all this. We can't trust the motives of Aubaine, right?"

"Right."

"And it was our citizens who were lost here, right?"

"Well, yes, but...."

"But what? I'm sick of these Aubani thinking they run the entire Coalition, getting all the breaks and pushing us aside as a second-class planet. It's about time we took matters into our own hands."

Masaryk paused before answering. Given his discomfort with air travel, he found his breath coming shallow whenever he glanced below the broomstick at the intermittent lights of Albegar rolling past 100 meters below, and it didn't help that the broomstick pitched violently whenever it ran into turbulence in the chill air over Soledad.

"You all right, Bela?"

"Oh, sure," Masaryk replied, unconvincingly.

"Try looking at my back instead of the ground."

"Check."

Amazingly, that worked pretty well.

"Better?"

"Better."

"So when we get to the Federal District we'll present a unified front?"

"Of course, Liu. It's just that—I think we should have left a



message for Red Sun, something to tell her where we're going."

"We couldn't risk that, Bela. Red Sun would just have made us stay there."

"But, Liu, how can you be so sure this Brak fellow is really sane?"

"Oh, Bela, don't be so naive. It's an act, see? Brak probably just acts crazy to throw his opponents off balance. But I'll wager he knows where the depot is, and he's just waiting for the best possible offer for its contents."

"How do you explain Zero, then?"

"Zero was never a good bargainer," An-Wing said. "He always was too greedy."

"And we're not?"

"Not greedy, Bela—practical. Oriflamme needs that depot, and we're going to get it for her."

Presently, they flew into the darkness beyond Albegar and lost the spirit for conversation. Silent minutes followed where their thoughts turned inward and unknown to each other.

Then, at last, the glowing edge of the Federal District shone ahead. A short time later, as she steered toward the center of the city, An-Wing spotted a patrolling grav vehicle that she took for a tank (although it was actually a light support sled) and moved into plain view of its forward sensors.

"Ah...hello there," An-Wing said, hailing the vehicle on the Coalition distress frequency. "You in the tank, are you receiving us?"

Implacably, the tank continued closing.

"Damn it," An-Wing said to Masaryk, "I'm using the distress frequency, so why doesn't he answer?"

"Actually, they might use a different distress frequency here," Masaryk said, sweating from his forehead despite the chill air. "Maybe we should just leave...."

The support sled cut that option off a moment later, with the clatter of its turret-mounted coaxial machinegun. Ducking from its tracers—spraying without apparent aim overhead—An-Wing unwittingly threw the broomstick into a spin that she barely recovered from a few meters above the corrugated steel of a factory roof.

The support sled followed them down, and its commander threw open its top hatch when he saw that both An-Wing and Masaryk had their hands up.

"Attention, alien craft!" the black-jacketed man announced, with the aid of a bullhorn. "You will land immediately or be destroyed!"

The commander then looked on with satisfaction as An-Wing

offered her profuse apologies and landed hastily on a nearby sidewalk.

Contact had been made.

• • •

Having studied Coalition briefings about various TEDs in the Wilds, An-Wing fully expected that a period of indeterminate incarceration would follow their landing inside the Federal District. She was also just as certain that the incarceration would end when she established her knowledge of Zero and explained just how profitable it would be to give Oriflamme's Council of Technarchs exclusive access to the depot.

Seemingly verifying this wisdom, then, An-Wing and Masaryk were only briefly held in detention. Two unarmored soldiers soon came to escort them out of a cell on the ground floor of the titanic defense ministry and up through a maglev elevator to an audience chamber adorned in gold and marble fittings.

Given the presence of a dais, throne and various hanging flags, the junior technarchs realized that this was likely the chamber of Brak himself and stood at attention before their guards had a chance to order them to do so. Soon, the thunder of armored feet in adjoining corridors told them of powered troopers approaching, and An-Wing began to formulate her best pitch.

First onto the dais, however, was a man whom An-Wing took for some sort of minister because of his formal dress and red sash. Carrying a computer under his arm, he spoke in a loud and booming voice without looking directly at the Oriflammen.

"All kneel before His Most Exalted Highness, Emperor Brak the First!"

The Oriflammen knelt and, taking a cue from their guards, looked humbly at the floor.

"Arise."

Lifting their heads, they saw at last what they had come for, the resplendent figure of Emperor Brak, whom they recognized from his portrait on the side of this and various other buildings. An imposing figure, the mustached and block-jawed man wore nothing so simple as robes or a military tunic, striding into the chamber instead in unhelmeted gold and silver battle dress, gleaming brightly beside two escorts in helmeted, flat-black armor.

Resplendent as Brak was, though, there was subtle evidence that he and his followers had difficulty maintaining their equipment. The servos in their relic battle dress wheezed and groaned noisily in protest at the loads they labored under, and from time to time the battle dress limbs would freeze in awkward posi-

tions—surely a liability in combat.

But then it couldn't be too much of a liability, An-Wing reasoned, since Brak was still alive.

"I take it," Brak rumbled, with the same imperious tone he used on the radio, "that you are from Oriflamme."

"Yes, your highness," An-Wing said. "My name is Llu An-Wing, and this is my associate, Bela Masaryk. We represent the Council of Technarchs of Oriflamme."

"The same Oriflamme that the crew of *Crazy Jane* was from?"

"That is correct, Your Highness."

"Were you not informed," Brak said, "of the proper time and place for a meeting?"

"Well, yes, but we felt it would be better to come here beforehand, to avoid the awkward confrontation that probably would have happened if you met with our captain tomorrow."

"What? Are you not the captain of the *Technarch*?"

"Ah—no. Actually, Junior Technarch Masaryk and I are from Oriflamme, but we came to this world aboard another starship, the *Homet*, from Aubaine. But Aubaine is a greedy, selfish little planet that you really shouldn't worry yourself about. They came here with the intention of taking your depot for themselves, but we came ahead of them to warn you and bid for access to the depot at a fair price."

Upon hearing this, Brak grew livid with rage and strode down the steps of the dais with surprising speed and agility.

"Bid?" he thundered, grasping Masaryk by his right forearm and shaking him like a little child. "Bid! What kind of idiot do you take me for?"

Caught between confusion and concern for Masaryk, An-Wing elected not to answer. This only seemed to enrage Brak further, however, and he crushed the bones of Masaryk's forearm in his steel grip.

Likely injured to such casual violence, the unpowered guards moved to block An-Wing's possible escape—an increasingly attractive option as Brak kept the wincing Masaryk in his grip for a long moment. At length, he turned Masaryk loose, and An-Wing went to him as he crumpled to the floor.

"I am not a violent man," Brak said, in answer to the mix of shock and confusion on the junior technarchs' faces, "but I grow impatient with the ruses and deceptions of your people. Now tell me where the depot is!"

"Tell *you*?" An-Wing said.

"Yes. Now."

"I don't know what you're talking about! I assumed you controlled the depot...."

Brak growled deep in his throat, making An-Wing shrink back with Masaryk, but the emperor stopped short of another exhibition of torture. Instead, he collected himself and strode back to the dais.

"Ms. An-Wing, I can see that we are not communicating clearly, so you'll just have to spend some time in our prison to help you refresh your memory. For you and your friend's sake, I hope it helps."

...

Although Masaryk was clearly in agony—barely able to stumble toward the elevator bank with An-Wing's help, An-Wing's exhortations for medical aid met only with rigid refusal. Emperor Brak, they were told, would not allow it.

"Will you at *least* get me a splint for his arm, then?" An-Wing snapped, stopping herself and Masaryk short of their destination elevator and apparently warding off a butt stock beating by the sheer strength of her voice.

The private—the younger of the two men—finally relented after a hesitant moment, walking down the hallway to a small dispensary. When he returned some seconds later, he brought a curved slab of plastic expressly designed for use as a brace.

"Thank you," An-Wing said, grateful for the gesture but still unable to keep the bile completely out of her voice.

Impatient with both An-Wing and the private, the older sergeant abruptly pushed the junior technarchs into the nearest elevator cab, delaying An-Wing's effort to help Masaryk until after they were inside. There An-Wing summoned enough of her memories of first aid classes in the Junior Pathfinders to sit Masaryk on the elevator floor and secure the splint to his arm with strips of material torn from her vest lining before using the vest itself as a sling. Since her pockets had been emptied earlier in a thorough search, the clothes on her back were literally all she had to work with, but she did a good enough job to at least let Masaryk stand unaided.

"Oh, Bela," An-Wing whispered, "I'm so sorry—I didn't think this was going to happen."

"It's all right," Bela answered, wincing. "You didn't twist my arm to come."

No, An-Wing thought, *I just got it broken.*

Seconds later, the elevator arrived in the very bowels of the building—the lowermost of three basement levels where the prison was housed. Well below the street level cell where the junior technarchs were held before, it was a cold and forbidding place that instantly quashed any hope that An-Wing might have



held out for rescue or escape. After checking in at a wire-cage security station staffed by dour men and women, the private and sergeant subjected the junior Oriflammens to another rigorous search and then lead them down a silent concrete corridor lit by caged electric bulbs and partitioned by steel doors doubtless wired to slam shut at any alarm or cut in power.

Since the clatter of the guards' heavy boots attracted hooting and cat calls from certain of the windowless, steel-doored cells, An-Wing surmised that those might hold the rebel prisoners that Coeur was keen to spring, but she was at a loss to see how it could be managed. When the door of the unnumbered cell that was their destination was unlocked by the old sergeant, An-Wing saw that both the door and the wall were over a half-meter thick.

While the older guard was unlocking the door, however, a strange thing happened. The younger guard, with a wary glance at his companion, dropped something into a pocket of An-Wing's culottes, just before pushing her and Masaryk into the poorly lit cell.

Wary that a camera might be inside the cell, An-Wing resisted the urge to look into her pocket immediately. Instead, she focused her attention on the prisoner already in the cell. Even as the door slammed, that other prisoner—a vaguely familiar blonde woman of perhaps 20—came forward to help Masaryk to the cell's other cot. Despite the bruises and burn marks on her face and arms, her expression was sympathetic, and that keyed An-Wing's recognition of the woman a moment later.

"Oh my God. You're Cari Becker!"

"Sure am," Zorn's boat pilot said. "Afraid I don't know you two, though."

"Well, we haven't met," An-Wing said, helping Cari settle Masaryk into a more-or-less comfortable sitting position against the wall, "but we've seen your picture. Your Captain Zorn gave it to us to study."

"Zorn?" Cari asked, pouring water from a corroded tap into a cup for Masaryk and then returning to her cot.

"Oh yes," An-Wing said, sitting near Masaryk on the other cot. "She's linked up with our expedition from the Coalition and helped set up a base camp in the Lomarica Hills."

Suddenly, Cari gritted her teeth and made an exasperated growl.

"What?" An-Wing asked.

"You should be careful what you talk about, girl. This room is probably wired for sound."

"Makes sense," Masaryk gasped. "Why else would they put us together, except to catch something we're hiding?"

"Exactly," Cari said.

"Well, excuse me," An-Wing said icily. "It's not like I've had an easy day myself."

An-Wing's weary and haggard companions didn't dignify that with an answer.

"What?" An-Wing challenged them.

"Forget it," Cari conceded. "You're right. We've all had a hard time of it."

"Yeah," An-Wing muttered, "a hard time. We give this backwater buffoon Brak a fair business proposition, and he throws us in a dungeon for our trouble."

"Let me guess," Cari said. "All he wanted to know was where the depot was."

"That's right," An-Wing said. "We thought he controlled it, but when I tried to ask him about it, he went nuts."

"I think that's all because of Zero. They asked...they asked Katzel a lot of questions about him."

"Your cousin," An-Wing said.

"Yes, my cousin."

"Is he in another cell?"

"No, Katzel is dead. He died yesterday, after his last beating."

Involuntarily, An-Wing gasped.

And Masaryk threw up.

"I'm sorry," he said afterward, trying to wipe off his mouth with his good left arm. "I just don't want to get hurt any more."

"Oh, Beia," An-Wing crooned, moving up to cradle a comforting arm around Masaryk's back.

*What have I done?*

An-Wing then remembered the mysterious thing in her pocket and reached her free right hand down to fish it out.

*Well, I'll be damned,* An-Wing thought, reflecting on the plastic cylinder in her cupped hand and the label alerting her to its contents.

"What do you have there?" Cari asked.

"Oh, nothing," An-Wing said, wary of alerting anyone listening in. She did, however, show the bottle to an amazed Cari.

*A bottle of morphine tablets.*

\*\*\*

Although An-Wing had hoped Cari's burns and bruises were from the church fire, not from torture, that was not the case. Though the Emperor Brak refrained from having his thugs bludgeon women, his sense of gallantry did not exclude the application of electric shock, with voltages calculated to inflict pain without inducing unconsciousness.

Nearly three days of this treatment had reduced Cari to the point of permanent exhaustion, and she collapsed into fitful sleep not long after the junior technicians arrived—a sleep made easier by one of An-Wing's proffered pills.

"I really shouldn't," Cari had said, moving her lips to make the words but not uttering the sounds. "They'll know."

"Take it," An-Wing replied. "How many breaks do you get here?"

Ironically, Masaryk agreed with Cari, but the magnitude of their discomfort was such that both were easily persuaded to take the pills. Not long afterward, both were asleep, and An-Wing was left alone with her guilt.

Yet An-Wing was not one to endlessly torment herself for a mistake, and she began to formulate a strategy for dealing with the Soledad TED.

She would tell Brak what he wanted to know.

Some hours later—it was difficult to tell how many without windows or a clock—two new guards came to unlock the cell door, and as An-Wing expected, she was the one they chose to take with them. Masaryk groggily took note of this and moved to get up and protest, but only got a nightstick in the gut for his trouble.

Like the soldiers who brought An-Wing and Masaryk down to the prison, these guards wore uniforms of the Soledad Army, but added the forbidding touch of helmets with dark-tinted visors and metal cages to protect the face. Worn with padding over the neck, torso and groin, it doubtless served a protective purpose, but An-Wing suspected its prime value was psychological—in the distance it put between the guards and their charges.

Opposite the direction she'd been brought in, An-Wing was led to a side corridor and an ominous door labeled POLITICAL CORRECTION. Unlocked by the keys of both guards—inserted simultaneously into two locks—its opening released a gust of musty odor. An-Wing's ultimate destination was a few meters on through yet another—unmarked—door.

Strangely, the room almost resembled a doctor's examination room at first glance, with a swiveling couch, an examination table and various cabinets. Upon closer inspection, though, she saw that the chair arms featured heavy metal arm and leg restraints, and that a pair of insulated gloves sat on a tray by the wall, together with various electrodes and spools of plastic-shrouded cable.

*Oh hell.*

Though An-Wing had never felt an electric shock, she edged away from the room instinctively, prompting the guards to seize

her by her arms and plant her roughly in the swiveling chair. They then clapped shut the restraints over her wrists and ankles, and locked them to hold her securely in place.

"You know, guys, this isn't really necessary; I've decided to talk...."

"Oh have you now?"

That voice came from behind her, from a man who had just entered the room. Wearing rubber garments from head to toe, he actually squeaked when he walked around to face her, a gaunt embodiment of clinical detachment with eyes the color of night.

"Er...yes."

"Somehow," the rubber man said, pulling on his insulated gloves, "you don't sound convincing."

"Hey, look, you want to know where the depot is, right? I can tell you!"

The rubber man nodded his head appreciatively, but ended those nods with a larger nod to the guards, who understood it was time to roll up An-Wing's sleeves and pull back the hair over her temples.

"Hey, stop that," An-Wing said, as electrodes were applied to her head and arms. "I said I know where the depot is!"

"I'm glad," the rubber man said. "So tell me."

"I will. But first you have to tell me what will happen to my friends if I do."

By way of a response, An-Wing received a surge of electric current. She jumped in reflex, feeling every muscle in her body spasm simultaneously, though the aftermath was worse: jangled nerves left her quivering and nauseously disoriented, unable at first either to think or articulate speech.

"That was just 120 amps at 200 volts, Ms. An-Wing—a mere trifle of the power I can generate. Consider it a warning that all arrangements will be made on our terms."

Aware of spittle running down her chin, An-Wing nodded understanding.

"Now tell me: Where is Zero's depot?"

"Angel De La Guarda," An-Wing gasped.

Astonished, the rubber man raised his brows.

"Angel De La Guarda, Ms. An-Wing? That's halfway across the Coronado Sea."

"I know...but that's where it is."

"Where exactly?"

"I don't know where exactly."

The rubber man moved toward his power switch.

"It's the truth! I swear, I don't know *where* it is, just what it looks like!"



"Go on."

"It's under a round hill by the coast, but hell, I'm no navigator—I'd have to show you in person."

The rubber man's reaction to this was utterly unexpected. He laughed.

"Oh, Ms. An-Wing, you really aren't a very good liar. The depot isn't in the sea; it's on this continent."

"What?"

"We don't know where, of course, but we know that much. Apparently, Zero and one of his drivers were the only members of his crew who knew exactly where the depot was, but they had the unfortunate luck to be killed in battle when their ship was captured. All Zero's crew could tell us was that it was somewhere in the mountains."

"But...but...*why* did you execute them?"

"Oh, it's the will of the emperor. Like you, they tried to lie and invent locations for the depot to avoid torture, but unfortunately His Imperial Majesty frowns on that sort of deception."

Suddenly, An-Wing felt her heart sink heavily in her chest.

"You're a bunch of idiots," she said. "If you'd left Zero's crew alive, there's no telling what other information you could have gotten from them."

"Yes, I suppose that may be true. However, the only information our leader is interested in is the location of the depot."

Whereupon the rubber man paused for a thoughtful moment.

"Of course," he said, "that means you're probably going to be executed soon. But in the meantime, let me acquaint you with the upper levels of voltage I can coax from my beautiful generator...."

# Chapter 15

Although she was annoyed by the flight of the junior technarchs, Coeur knew the same danger existed now as when Cari and Katzel were taken—that interrogation of the Oriflammen would reveal the location of the Lomarica camp. Although she could not know that the junior technarchs had been captured, the safety of all Coeur's people made her first priority—after recovering the two Marine reconnaissance teams—to move the camp again, this time into the heart of the southern wasteland where the Imposero Phalanx kept its headquarters.

Though Coeur alerted the rebels to the imminent arrival of her force beforehand by laser, the appearance of her vehicles in the early morning twilight—the G-carrier, grav tank and ship's boat—attracted more than a little awestruck attention from the rebel community as the craft landed in an empty lot beside General Lemos' warehouse. Awe was precisely what Coeur hoped to arouse, however, for the time to rally her allies had come.

"I hope we haven't inconvenienced you," Coeur said to Lemos, whom she found gawking at the grounded *Intrepid*, "since we came at such short notice."

"Oh, it was no trouble," Lemos said, pulling himself away from admiration of the tank's gun. "I am amazed, though, that you can carry anything that big through space."

Despite herself, Coeur got a chuckle out of that. The age-old lament of starship architects everywhere was *too much mission, too little hull*.

"Yeah, it's pretty amazing. But didn't you tell V-Max you'd come up with a floor plan of the defense ministry?"

"I don't know if I'd call it a floor plan, Captain. Actually, it's more like the recollection of one of our men named Colletto, who deserted from Brak's army."

"Anything will help, general."

"You think the time's come to hit the capital?"

"Well, not quite yet. Unfortunately, I don't know where the junior technarchs are, and I'd rather know if they're in the prison before we hit it."

General Lemos shook his head.

"I can't believe those technarchs ran off like that," Lemos said. "I hope you'll forgive me for saying so, but if they were my people, I'd almost have a mind to let Brak execute them."

"Yes, well, much as I'd like that, it's not an option. I'll give Brak until tomorrow to give some sort of sign they're alive, then we move."

\*\*\*

Following Coeur's instructions, Deep Six tried at hourly intervals to reach Emperor Brak for word about the junior technarchs, but the emperor's UHF frequency remained rigidly silent until just after 1000 hours—planetary noon.

"Peoples of space," Brak said, in a recorded statement, "be advised that your criminal agents, Cari Becker, Liu An-Wing and Bela Masaryk, will be executed in the common square of the Federal District tomorrow evening. Be further advised that your feeble protestations will have no bearing on this proceeding, as the course of justice has been set. Do not attempt to interfere."

"That's it?" Coeur asked, from her G-carrier. "Just the recording?"

"Affirmative," the Schalli answered. "Soledad has not answered any of our other messages."

"Well, if you want to look on the bright side," Drop Kick said, "at least we know they're alive."

"You mean most of them are alive," Zorn countered. "He didn't mention Katzel."

"It might have been an oversight," Physic ventured, though without much conviction.

"Yeah," Coeur fumed. "Well, I've had as much of this Brak as I'm going to take. Gyro, you there?"

"Affirmative."

"Gyro, alert the drop troops to stand by for assault. The mission code name is jailbreak."

"Understood, sir."

"Red Sun out."

Coeur then shut off the radio and turned to her comrades, crowded in close around her in the confines of the G-carrier.

"Let's not stand around, people. We've got work to do."

\*\*\*

The first clue that An-Wing, Masaryk and Cari had that something was up came when the light in their cell flickered and

went out. Though they hadn't been subjected to any "political correction" that day, their stash of morphine had been found and taken away, leaving all three spacers lying disconsolately on their backs—An-Wing and Cari on one bunk, Masaryk on the other—staring at the light when it went dark.

"Looks like our bulb burned out," An-Wing observed.

"Maybe not," Cari said. "It might be time for lights-out."

This was not the case, however, for the light flickered back on a moment later, suggesting perhaps that power from the city grid had been shut off and replaced by power from a building generator. Having almost abandoned the possibility of rescue, the spacers lay absolutely still after that, straining their ears to catch any possible sound of consequence through the massive concrete walls of their cell.

When that sound finally came, several minutes later, they need not have strained to hear it. A titanic rumbling—less heard than felt through the floor and walls of the basement prison—resounded suddenly like thunder overhead, setting the overhead light to flickering again and causing all three spacers to jump to a sitting position.

"What the hell was that?" An-Wing said.

"A planetary strike missile," Cari relayed, "or a blockbuster bomb."

"Are you serious?" Masaryk asked, the pain in his arm forgotten.

"Well, something big anyway. It sure wasn't anybody's car backfiring."

"Shouldn't we do something?" An-Wing asked, full of sudden nervous energy. "You know, prepare somehow?"

"I don't think there's much we can do," Cari replied, though sudden, lesser rumbles quickened her voice as well, "except sit here and hope."

"Hope?" Masaryk questioned.

"Yes. Hope the guards don't start shooting prisoners if this place is overrun."

\*\*\*

The rumbles that shook the prisoners were, in fact, the concussion from detonating planetary strike missiles, just as Cari had surmised—the first salvos of Operation Jailbreak.

Or at least the first ones felt. Moments before, the lasers of *Vi Et Armis*—just ahead of *Homet* in a low orbital path over Soledad—discharged with quiet efficiency, disabling every fire control sensor in the heart of the Federal District and disabling the main transformer relays outside Soledad's nuclear power station for



good measure. Shocked and blinded, Soledad's armed forces were then subjected to the hammer blow of four streaking strike missiles from *Hornet*, each armed with a 500-kilogram warhead.

Given the excellent quality of *Hornet's* master fire director, Snapshot had no difficulty directing two of these missiles directly onto their targets—the roof of the Soledad Defense Ministry, and the barracks of the Soledad 1st Brigade across the street—but she needed help to be sure of a hit on two far-more-intimidating targets—the Imperial heavy grav tanks parked together in a nearby starport berth.

Over the objection of her subordinates, Coeur herself took the assignment of illuminating the tanks with a laser rifle, but she didn't perform the mission without help. Even as she sat in the front seat of a broomstick, hovering over the dark ruins of the starport, the Hiver Newton clung with four limbs to the rear seat behind her, using its prime limb to hold and monitor a portable EMS sensor.

"Anybody onto us?" Coeur asked, in the seconds before the first missiles hit.

"Negative," Newton replied. "We are not being actively tracked."

"How about you?" Coeur went on, keeping her laser trained on the side of an unmanned tank's turret. "You all right back there?"

"To be perfectly frank, no."

"Rather be somewhere safe?"

"Yes."

Well, at least he's honest, Coeur thought, recognizing the fear of conflict legendary among Hivers. Wherever there was warfare, that was the last place any Hiver wanted to be.

"Well, just hold on a few more seconds, and then we'll be out of here."

Sure enough, Snapshot's first two missiles appeared just moments later, first shattering the roof of the Defense Ministry in a rumbling blast, then blowing apart the middle of the 1st Brigade barracks as chunks of the defense ministry roof came raining down on Enea Avenue. Then—a second movement in the overture of destruction—the tank-killing missiles appeared, spaced at five-second intervals to give Coeur time to paint the second vehicle after the first was hit.

So great was the force of these impacts—bone-rattling concussions that shook the hovering spacers though they were a kilometer away—that Coeur was almost certain the tanks were completely demolished, shrouded as they were in clouds of flame and flying debris.

"All right, Newton, we're out of here."

Later inspection would reveal that the armored shells of the 400-tonne tanks had, in fact, survived substantially intact, though fire had torched their interior compartments, and sheer concussive force had both wrecked the works of their fearsome 175 Mj fusion guns and slaughtered their crews relaxing nearby. One way or another, though, the tanks were out of action, and the rest of the operation was free to proceed.

Nominally, Coeur set Jailbreak's objective as the liberation of all rebel and spacer prisoners from the Defense Ministry prison, but very early on it became apparent that it would develop a momentum and direction of its own. Disoriented by the bombing of their barracks and the loss of the city's electric lighting, those Soledad troopers who managed to take up arms soon found themselves falling back in retreat between two jaws of an unyielding pincers—two full companies of rebels to the west and the Coalition's grav tank and G-carrier to the south.

Yet, in the midst of all-out retreat, the Soledad forces might still have held, if only the Imperial Guard had taken better care of its equipment. Led by Emperor Brak himself, this 12-man force assembled on the ground floor of the Defense Ministry to lay an ambush for the oncoming rebel force. Charging the ground floor of the Ministry en masse, the rebels suddenly found themselves walking into close-range fire from massed relic fusion rifles. Whole squads went up in flames, and the rebel attack would almost certainly have broken—except that none of the fusion guns would function for more than a few minutes. Still game, the rebels formed up and advanced again with anti-armor rocket gunners in the lead. Shortly thereafter, the Guard took its first two casualties, and, though he still retained a formidable firepower in his unit's relic gauss rifles, Brak elected to withdraw.

And the center was broken.

"That's it," Lemos told Drop Kick, over the radio. "We've got Brak on the run!"

"Good job," the sergeant major replied, "but don't let your men get carried away. There's still plenty of armor in the area."

"Understood. We'll wait for you to flush 'em out."

That Drop Kick didn't reply was a testament to his respect for relic armor. In the hands of trained troops, using good tactics, the remaining support sleds and APCs of the Soledad Army could still easily outfight a single Intrepid.

But these weren't good troops, and they weren't using good tactics.

Operating without coordination, the vehicles were picked off one by one in the southern approaches to Enea Avenue. Brave as

the tankers of the 1st Guards Armored Company were—attempting to protect the troopers still holding out in the burning 1st Brigade barracks—14 of their 21 relic armored vehicles were set ablaze by Drop Kick and Mercy in less than 10 minutes, prompting the remainder of the force to flee across the River Loro toward the residence of Emperor Brak.

Demoralized by this sight, the regular soldiers of Soledad rapidly lost the will to fight, and most of the those in the area surrendered on the spot. The only exceptions were the soldiers in the upper floors of the Defense Ministry—who were unaware that Brak had abandoned them—and the survivors in the 1st Brigade barracks, who failed to heed rebel advice to surrender—offered from long distance by bullhorn. They instead burrowed deeper into the unruddled portions of their building. In retrospect, the decision of the latter group would prove unwise.

Thirty minutes after the assault began, the drop troops from *Homet* finally arrived in a public park to the west of the Defense Ministry, gliding in by parachute after rocketing through the upper atmosphere in breakaway heat-resistant shells. Outfitted in heavy battle dress, they naturally terrified the soldiers attempting to flee in that direction, but their prime effect on the battle occurred a short time later, when four of their decoy capsules—stuffed with hundreds of 250-kilogram high explosive bombs—plowed into the 1st Brigade barracks, bursting the eardrums of many a loyalist who wasn't killed outright, and blowing the windows out of buildings as much as a kilometer away.

The barracks itself was completely annihilated, blasted so thoroughly into rubble that the holdouts in the upper floors of the Defense Ministry quickly reconsidered the merits of resistance and surrendered with a profusion of waving white flags.

Had this not been the case, the spacers would have pressed on with a direct assault on the prison, exploiting a little-used street-level entrance revealed by the rebel Colletto. However, it was the prison guards who availed themselves of this exit to surrender to *Homet's* G-carrier, flown by a jubilant Zorn and Vink. Whiz Bang, Bonzo and V-Max, together with seven rebels stuffed into the G-carrier for the assault, emerged with bayonets fixed to their rifles to accept the surrender, and gathered keys that shortly emptied the prison of its hobbled and haggard denizens.

"Captain," Physic reported a few minutes later, when she found An-Wing, Masaryk and Carl among the liberated masses, "we got our people back. Katzel's the only one who didn't make it. He was killed a couple days ago"

"Damn," Coeur answered, from her broomstick patrolling the battlefield perimeter. "I was hoping we were wrong about him"

being dead."

"Well, at least the others are alive. Bela's got a nasty fracture of the radius, but their injuries look minor otherwise."

"Well, thank God for that. Any other casualties down there?"

"Gala be blessed, no—not among our people."

"Unbelievable."

"I'll say," Physic agreed. "Skipper, it looks like somebody up there likes us."

\*\*\*

One of Hammer Lathrop's more memorable quotations, though it came in early 1202 and therefore out of Coeur's earshot, was offered in response to a journalist's question about what sort of commanders he wanted in the field. His answer: "The stingiest bastards I can find."

Far from a one-off comment, that statement summed up the commodore's entire philosophy toward hot operations—that his commanders should take the utmost care that their personnel and equipment not be wasted unnecessarily. Conscious of that philosophy, Coeur made quite sure that the forces of Soledad would not get up off the carpet once the shooting started.

"All the same, I'd like to know why our people risked their lives for you," Coeur said to An-Wing, who tried to avoid her when she and Newton landed at the G-carrier. "So tell me, why did you go to Brak, Liu?"

Anticipating the eventual need to answer that question, An-Wing thought to lie, then thought better of it when her eyes met with those of Masaryk—whose injury was being looked to by Physic in the back of the G-carrier—and steeled herself for the truth.

"It was my intention to make an independent arrangement with Brak on Oriflamme's behalf," she said, "for access to the depot."

"I take it," Coeur said, "that this was your own, independent initiative."

"Yes, Captain. Bela and I—well, mostly I—contrived the plan to recoup our losses for backing Zero."

"I see," Coeur said. "But I assume Brak refused the offer."

"Yes, he did—but we did learn something useful from it. Brak thought we had the secret of the depot's location, so he could hardly have control of it himself."

Coeur nodded, accepting what could possibly be a useful bit of information. Certainly, the old starport was in great disrepair and could scarcely be the location of the fabled depot—unless it was deep underground in well-concealed bunkers.



As for An-Wing, Coeur felt her urge to slug the junior technarch beginning to subside. Of all the virtues Coeur respected, honesty was foremost among them. While it would have been better to know the young woman's motives beforehand, she was glad at last to have some plausible accounting of the Oriflammen's business here.

"At least we got you out before you were killed. But if you try a stunt like that again, you can bet you probably won't be rescued."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, that's all. Why don't you go look after Cari now."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that."

Having suffered far more grievous burns than An-Wing, Carl rested on a folded-down bunk inside the G-carrier, eased by Physic's medications. Physic busied herself putting a cast on Masaryk's reset arm, conscious that her disdain for any kind of killing—even of a resisting enemy—was not a popular sentiment at the moment. Nevertheless, when Zorn and Coeur happened to be close at hand, she let them know her opinion of the recent bombing of the 1st Brigade barracks, which now lay as flaming rubble around the corner of the Defense Ministry.

"Don't you think all those bombs were a little bit of overkill?"

"Overkill, hell," Zorn said. "We gave them a chance to surrender."

"Well," Coeur said, "I just hope Lemos' men knew the timetable. I'd hate to hear any of them were caught assaulting the building."

"Oh, no, they backed off in time," Zorn said. "Which you'd think would've made the Soledad soldiers know it was time to get out themselves."

"They did seem pretty poorly led," Coeur observed. "From our vantage point, we never saw them form up anywhere in good order."

"Well, let that be a lesson to you. If you ever become a petty tyrant, invest more money in officer training."

Any more grim banter was cut off by Newton, who had hastened to get back into the cover of the G-carrier as soon as possible. He called for Coeur to come forward to the commo panel.

"What is it, Newton?"

"A new report from Drop Kick, Captain. He indicates that the rebels are advancing unsupported on the remainder of Brak's army around his residence."

"What the hell? Fikk—give me that headset."

A moment later, Coeur got through to her ground force

commander.

"Drop Kick, this is Red Sun. Confirm that the rebels are attacking across the river."

"That's affirmative, skipper, and boy is it a mess. I've heard reports that the leading rebels were cut down by a couple of Abominations."

Coeur winced at that. The Abomination, she knew, was an old TL9 Solomani design, not intended for use as a main battle tank but rather as a siege machine. Nevertheless, it was quite intimidating, as big as a house and armored all over with composite laminates thick enough to deflect any hand-held weapon. Its most fearsome feature was certainly a six-barreled, turret-mounted 120 mm autocannon that weighed as much as a loaded air-raft all by itself. Indeed, the 1200-tonne vehicle was so massive that a nuclear fission reactor was the only practical way to drive its pavement-crunching treads at any kind of reasonable speed.

"Sounds bad," Coeur said. "I thought we had an understanding with General Lemos that our operations would be restricted to the area south of the river."

"What can I say?" Drop Kick answered. "Gaffer's troopers and Mercy and I pulled up short of the river, but when the government troops broke at the bridges, they just went off after them."

Back in the G-carrier, Coeur grit her teeth and shook her head. Though she knew the shock of the initial assault on the Soledad army would be considerable, Coeur assumed that an army with any kind of leadership would form a defensible perimeter on the north side of the River Loro and restrict the Coalition-rebel operation to a simple (albeit materially devastating) rescue mission. That kind of mission Coeur could certainly justify to the RCES Admiralty, but direct assistance in the overthrowing a sovereign government was another matter.

Should the spacers hold back now, they could certainly claim fulfillment of a narrow mission objective, but they would also risk alienation of the likely future rulers of Soledad as their men were chewed up assaulting its likely soon-to-be-deposed leader.

*Wouldn't you know it?* Coeur thought. *The one scenario they had to leave out of the manual, and me not even a lieutenant commander yet. Boy will Ritter be pissed.*

"There is another consideration," Drop Kick observed. "I've heard that the rebels have overrun the artillery battery at the starport and begun setting up the guns to fire at Brak's troops."

"Great. Do the rebels even know how to handle heavy artillery?"

"They might know how to fire it," Drop Kick said, "but I doubt they can coordinate it very well, and I don't need to tell you what'll

happen if uncoordinated artillery opens up."

"No, you don't. They'll probably hit everything except their target."

"Right. And since there's a whole lot of apartments and houses north of the river, that'll give us a whole lotta dead civilians—not to mention pissed-off live ones."

"All right," Coeur said, "you don't need to spell it out. Drop Kick, you and Gaffer coordinate with the assaulting troops. I'll try to get a hold of Lemos and keep those howitzers quiet."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, not quite concealing his enthusiasm. "Drop Kick out."

\*\*\*

Less than an hour later the battle was over, although it was a bloody affair.

As it happened, one of the two Abominations in Brak's service had a flamethrower in place of its giant autocannon and caused great havoc in the center of the rebel advance until it was finally silenced by Drop Kick's cannon. Its mate, meanwhile, attempted to maneuver toward a potentially lethal side shot on the Intrepid, but lacked the agility to outfight a grav tank. Drop Kick blew its heavy turret clean off with a penetrating fusion round to the rear (a difficult shot, to be sure, but Drop Kick dared not shoot directly at the Abomination's hull, which might very well shower the battlefield with radioactive fuel if it were to explode).

What was left of the Soledad Guards collapsed rapidly after that, as the rebels concentrated on Brak's residence from two directions, and the remaining Soledad grav vehicles surrendered to Drop Kick. Putting perhaps more faith in his Abominations than he should, Brak and a handful of powered troopers did not abandon his residence until it was too late—when rebel mortars began blowing it apart. Though armed with fusion rifles and sheathed in heavy battle dress, Brak and his men were unceremoniously blasted into oblivion by Gaffer, Red Eye, Fubar, Widget and Gremlin, firing their own fusion rifles and rifle grenades from concealed positions across the street.

Soledad, it appeared, was won.

# Chapter 16

Since the main transmitter of Radio Soledad was located atop the Defense Ministry, it went off the air as soon as the roof of the building was hit. Of course, without power from the city grid, the local radio receivers possessed by factories, apartment block supervisors and tractor bosses would not function. But Coeur knew perfectly well that every hour without light or news was another hour in which the danger of civil unrest was magnified. Therefore, even before the charred torso of Emperor Brak was positively identified, Coeur instructed Vink and Bonzo to help the city engineers repair their power station transformers, while Newton prepared to resume radio broadcasts with a spare Coalition transmitter erected atop the Defense Ministry.

What came to be broadcast, though, was not the voice of Coeur or even General Lemos. Rather, it was Cardinal Vazquez, whom Zorn had raced south to retrieve in the G-carrier. Evidently prepared for this contingency, Vazquez actually boarded the G-carrier with a trunk full of religious music to play when power was restored and a hastily penned speech to read over the air. Thus prepared, Vazquez was escorted into the abandoned studio of Radio Soledad on the second floor of the Defense Ministry by Zorn and Coeur, and led before a microphone to make her address.

Preceded by a popular hymn, Vazquez' address was as characteristically unpretentious as the cardinal herself.

"People of Soledad," she began, "I am the Cardinal Miranda Vazquez, speaking to you from the Defense Ministry of our capital and bringing a clarification to the events of this night. The Defender be praised, your former ruler Emperor Brak is dead, and control of this city has passed into the hands of a new consortium between the people, the soldiers of the revolution and the Church of Grace of Light.

"In the years and months previous, I know you have heard the character of the revolutionaries, as well as the name and character



of myself and my church, disparaged. But this is not a time for retribution or recrimination. Those of you who are officers of the Soledad Army, or agents of the old order, are invited to lay down your arms and report to the provisional government, understanding that no reprisals will be made against you or your men if you report promptly under a flag of surrender.

"A general curfew will, meanwhile, be in effect for all civilians during this night, not as a limitation of liberty but to ensure your own protection. As soon as it is safe to emerge in the night hours, you will be advised, and the normal commerce and industry of our nation will resume.

"Be at peace with the knowledge that our fair and ancient city has not been struck a mortal blow this night. Rather, it is newly born alive and brilliant in its future through the promise of yourselves and your children. God bless you and keep you in His Mercy."

Down on the street, Physic happened to be treating casualties—rebel and loyalist alike—at her hastily erected aid station when the radio message was heard over a small Coalition radio. Thus, she was the first of the Coalition spacers to hear an opinion soon to be proven as fact.

"Consortium, hell," a loyalist private mumbled. "She's the new ruler of this city."

...

And indeed she was. Surprising almost everyone except Cardinal Vazquez, the 816,000 inhabitants of municipal Soledad (a figure verified by captured records) proved to have a great majority of secret CGL faithful among them, far greater than the number who actively or tacitly gave aide and comfort to the rebel cause. Furthermore, many of the CGL faithful were the very army commanders and tractor bosses whom Vazquez had addressed—men and women who had secretly kept their faith and now offered their loyalty to Vazquez directly when they came to surrender their arms. No fool, General Lemos quickly realized that the cardinal was the only reasonable choice to head the government—provided arrangements be made for democratic elections at some point in the future.

"Oh yes," Vazquez agreed, meeting with Lemos and Coeur in the Defense Ministry as dawn broke over the city. "Our Lord and Defender has not given us our liberty so that we may impose a new dictatorship. When St. Kilalt returns, we shall have a strong and vigorous city to give him and the Defender."

Not particularly pious—except when her jump drive was on the fritz—Coeur accepted this simply as a vivid religious meta-

phor and let it pass in order to address other issues.

"Your holiness and General Lemos," Coeur said, "we're certainly anxious to give you any assistance we can. Is there any immediate need we can help you with?"

Vazquez and Lemos exchanged long thoughtful glances before answering.

"I should think the services of your Doctor Takagawa and her hospital will be appreciated," Lemos offered.

"Yes, surely," Vazquez seconded, "although we should steel ourselves against depending too heavily on outside resources. Otherwise, what sort of ally should we be to our friends from the Coalition?"

Surprised by the comment, Coeur accepted it with a nod. Self-sufficiency was indeed an objective of bootstrap operations throughout the officially designated AO for that very purpose—to give the Coalition strong allies in its quest for the ultimate reconstruction and unification of all human worlds.

"Rather," Vazquez went on, "we should ask what help we can provide you. Is it not true that your original aim on Mexit was to find some sort of lost depot?"

"Yes," Coeur said, brought back to the base purpose of her mission. "Yes, and as a matter of fact, you could help us there. Somewhere in the Federal District there must be effects left by Zero's party—personal equipment, papers, maybe even his ship—so we'd like permission to look around for them."

"By all means," Vazquez said.

"Yes," Lemos agreed, "and my men will keep a lookout as well."

"Of course, it would be nice if we could find the remains of Zero, too—just to be certain what became of him—but I doubt that's possible. More than likely, he was killed when Brak's men attacked *Crazy Jane*, and who knows where his body might be."

"Doubtless," Vazquez said, "the Defender will reveal that knowledge to us in His course."

Yes, Coeur thought, *doubtless*.

"Oh," she said, "there is one other thing. We may need to lead an expedition outside of Soledad—assuming we ever do find where the depot was—and that's another possibility we have to discuss."

"Why?" Vazquez asked.

"I think I understand," Lemos said. "V-Max told us the depot might be very large, and full of ancient weapons that could conceivably destabilize a primitive planet."

"Well," Coeur said, "I wouldn't call Mexit primitive. However, you've certainly hit the nail on the head—if this depot exists and

is found, its contents could easily destabilize the entire power structure of this planet and other planets besides. Certain entities in space might come here to take it by force if they found out about it."

At this, the faces of both Mexitans grew tense, though Coeur knew they couldn't even begin to grasp the great evil she was describing. While the Solee and Guild were at least human, there was also the possibility that a vampire fleet might come to control the depot, and that was a nightmare she didn't want to begin to think about.

"What are you proposing, then?" Vazquez asked.

"Just this. If we do find the depot—and it is inside the traditional territory of greater Soledad—I'd like you to entertain the thought of destroying it, if there's any possibility at all it couldn't be kept safe."

"Couldn't your people keep it safe?" Lemos asked.

"Unfortunately, no. If it's anywhere near as large as I think, a Marine fire team isn't going to do the job."

"What about the other possibility?" Vazquez asked. "The possibility that the depot is far away in another part of the world?"

"That depends," Coeur said. "If the people there are rational and level-headed like you, it might be possible to negotiate an arrangement. If not, well, I'll just blow it up myself."

...

Protected as they were by battle dress, *Homet's* Marines remained active even after the full light of morning illuminated the smoldering center of the Federal District. Therefore, two of their number—Whiz Bang and Bonzo—were the first to find *Crazy Jane*.

Or at least what was left of her.

Stored in a starport warehouse near the charred heavy grav tanks, the 400-ton subsidized merchant was still in one piece after being hauled there on a pair of super-heavy freight tractors. But her cylindrical hull was burned all over, and colossal chunks were blown out of her bow and stern, suggesting the application of considerable explosive force.

"What the hell could have happened to her?" Bonzo asked, shining his flashlight into the gaping two-deck cavity where the ship's bridge and bow doors had once been.

"I think I've got an idea," Whiz Bang said, drawing on his experience as a heavy energy gunner. "Look at the way this superdense alloy has bubbled and puffed up around the edge of the cavity. That's from the alloy bonds splitting under a fusion gun hit."

"Go on. What fusion guns are that powerful?"

"The ones on those tanks next door, Bonzo."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about those."

"Yeah, well, whoever shot it was a little too good a shot—the computers and logs must be completely blown away."

"Care to guess what Red'll think about that?"

"No doubt about it. She'll be mad enough to chew lead and spit out bullets."

Coeur, in fact, wasn't quite that irritated, though she was certainly frustrated when she got the news.

"Okay, I get it, Bonzo. The ship's totaled."

"Well, fore and aft anyway. The midships looks torched, but intact."

"That's something, I suppose. Stand by there, and I'll send Vink and Newton over in the G-carrier."

"Affirmative."

Moments later, Vink and Newton arrived—parking their craft directly inside *Crazy Jane's* hangar to avoid exposure to the sun—though it would soon appear that their haste was unwarranted. Though the human and the Hiver were thoroughly familiar with the architecture of the standard subsidized merchant design, three hours of careful prodding and poking through the upper deck crew quarters and lower deck cargo section revealed little more than empty spaces. The only exception was a charred arc of bone and teeth that Newton pried out of the top deck forward and nonchalantly began to study in the midst of the humans.

"Newton," Whiz Bang said, "what the hell is that?"

"Just a piece of human skull bone," Newton said, pausing in the comparison of his fragment to dental records stored in his personal computer. "I found it in the wreckage of the bridge."

"Newton, that's disgusting."

All six of Newton's eyes fixed on the Marine and blinked twice.

"Why?"

"Well, you don't just go around casually inspecting body parts! A person's remains should be—well, you know—treated with respect."

"Oh, I see," Newton said, discreetly slipping the fragment into an equipment pouch. "Please forgive the offense of human custom. I was going to tell you who the bone fragment belonged to, but I see that such an announcement would be a breach of propriety."

"Whoa—hold on there," Vink said. "You say you know who the bone fragment belongs to?"

"Indeed."

"Well?"



"What?"

"Well, aren't you going to tell us?"

"Tell you what?"

"Who it is?"

"But I thought...."

"Okay, Newton, you've made your point. Just tell us who it is. Or was, I mean."

"Very well. The skeletal fragment almost certainly belonged to Captain 'Zero' Wolfowitz."

"That's Zero?" Bonzo asked, pointing at Newton's equipment pouch.

"More than likely, yes. Apparently, he was blown to bits."

"Well, I'll be damned," Vink said. "At least that's something we got out of this ship."

"It's disgusting is what it is," Whiz Bang said.

"Well, all the same," Vink said, "maybe you ought to report it to your captain. That, and the fact that we haven't found anything suspicious aboard the *Jane*."

"Are you giving up, then?" Bonzo asked.

"Well, obviously, I can't give you people orders, but I don't see that there's any point of looking any further, unless...."

"Unless—what?"

Suddenly, Vink slapped his own forehead.

"Gaia," he said, slapping his forehead, "I can't believe how stupid I've been."

"Please clarify your meaning," Newton requested.

"Well, Zero was a pirate. We haven't thought about smuggling holds."

"Indeed," Newton said. "And where, as a pirate, would you locate such a hold?"

Vink—who tended to think of himself as more of radical Federalist than a pirate—was inclined to take umbrage at that remark, but then he remembered the emotionless quality of the Hiver intellect and let it pass.

"Well, you could start with the obvious places, like false compartments in the fuel cells and the deck, but if they were really adventurous they might have hollowed out portions of the frame."

"Adventurous?"

"Well, I wouldn't try it with old *Armis*. The way Zorn throws her around in high-G maneuvers, cutting sections out of the frame isn't a good idea."

"I comprehend. However, *Crazy Jane* was not designed for high-G maneuvers."

"No, she wasn't," Vink said, thoughtfully. "Come on, let's start looking again."

Sure enough, two hours later, Vink's intuition came through. In a section of keel frame near the vaporized drive section—accessed by prying up floor plates of the cargo hold—he and Newton found a hollow area cleverly contrived to appear untampered with. So cleverly was it crafted that Vink nearly missed its slightly off ring under his rapping wrench, though he stopped long enough to investigate and pry loose a thin cover of pressed steel perhaps 40 centimeters square. Another panel below this was secured with four heavy bolts, however, so a look underneath waited until Bonzo and Whiz Bang came over with power wrenches to unscrew them.

"So what's in there?" Bonzo asked afterward, while Vink shined a light into the hole.

"Hard to tell," Vink said, reaching his hand into the deep well of the compartment. "Looks like a box maybe. No, it's a book."

"A book?" Whiz Bang asked.

"Yep, it's a book all right," Vink said, pulling it up and out of the hole. Rather old, with heavy binding and gold inlaid decoration, it was clearly nothing as simple as a personal log.

"Maybe it's a Bible or Koran," Bonzo suggested, observing the fine print and fancy gold illumination when Vink thumbed through it.

"No, I don't think so," Vink said, closing the book and looking at its cover. "Look at this writing: *La Palabra Del Defensor*. What do you suppose it means?"

"I believe I comprehend," Newton said, abruptly. "That is the holy book of the Church of Grace and Light. Literally, The Word of the Defender."

"Oh, yes," Bonzo said, "the Palabra. Brother Anthony has one."

"I imagine a lot of people here have them," Vink said, "but why Zero? He never believed in anything but himself."

"If I may," Newton said, asking for the Palabra.

"Oh, yes, here."

For several seconds, the Hiver examined the book closely, making no tell-tale humming as a human might—for it had no voicebox—but fascinated all the same by something it found in the pages toward the end of the book.

"You got something there, Newton?"

"Possibly. May I keep this for further study?"

The three humans looked at each other and shrugged.

"Yeah," Vink said, "I suppose. But what is it?"

"Observe," Newton said, holding open a page toward the end of the Palabra, marked in various places with circled letters and underlined words.

"I hadn't noticed that," Vink said. "It looks like some sort of code."

"Indeed it does," Newton said, closing the book and slipping it into the equipment harness on its back. "But what one mind conceives, another can discover, so I shall retire to the G-carrier and reflect on its meaning."

\*\*\*

During the assault on the Federal District, *Homet* had followed *Vi Et Armis* in a very close orbit of Soledad, just 190 kilometers above the equator, so their lasers could fire with maximum accuracy and *Homet's* drop troops would have as short a trip to the surface as practical. Of necessity, though, this put the ships over the city only three times an hour, so *Homet* orbited out to a higher geosynchronous orbit after her troops were away, and there at 18,000 kilometers she would remain well after the battle was done.

Still wary of meson guns that might exist in other parts of the planet, Coeur and Zorn thought at first to return *Vi Et Armis* to the back face of Elojo, but at length the relative stability of Soledad after the battle inclined them to decide otherwise. Though a loyalist battalion still held out in Soledad's Marina District, the old starport appeared secure enough, and Zorn's starship was finally brought to Mexit's surface two nights after the battle so her repairs could be conducted in a safer environment than hard vacuum.

"How about you?" Coeur asked Deep Six, that same night, "You holding up?"

"Affirmative, sir," the Schall answered, bobbing gently in his roller-chair as he surveyed a myriad of false-color sensor images of Mexit, pulled in from *Homet's* unfolded passive EMS sensor and Snapshot's probe, now rotated to an orbit opposite the freighter's. "All is well."

"I imagine it must be lonely up there, though."

"Lonely, sir?"

"Well, with everybody down on the surface, I mean."

"Ah, yes. I would not say it is lonely, though. Rather, I would say it is comfortingly quiet, *paOO'ka, kaOO ka kee'IR.*"

"What's that?"

"Oh, a phrase by SeeEEka Echo, one of our poets. It describes the sonic wall of silence sometimes heard as one swims between thermoclines."

"A-ha," Coeur said, pausing for a moment. "You haven't been drinking any of that fermented *ee'kwat* again, have you?"

"Negative, sir. You know that access to the liquor closet is

restricted to jump space."

"Sorry, Sixer. I didn't mean to offend."

"No offense perceived, sir. However, the crew will be interested to know about the success of your research. Didn't you say the Palabra you discovered was stolen from a local church?"

"Yes, but Vazquez has given us permission to study it, so long as we give it back when we're done with it."

"Indeed. And has Newton made any progress on the cipher he discovered?"

"He doesn't really show any emotion," Coeur said, "so its hard to tell when he's making progress and when he isn't. We did find where *Crazy Jane's* crew is buried, though, and some of their effects."

"Anything productive?"

"That depends on what you call productive. Now that Physic's had a look at *Crazy Jane*, and confirmed that Zero and one of his crew mates died there, we've got all the ship's crew accounted for, and that's something. What's bad is that they didn't leave behind many personal effects to tell what happened to them, just money, a few trinkets and some weapons."

"So, then, your knowledge of the time before their death must be limited."

"Well, more limited than I'd like. Most of what we've got is from the official records of Brak's regime. Apparently, Zero parked *Crazy Jane* up in the Lomarica Hills above Soledad—just like we did—sometime after his people found the depot, but then he found out his contra-grav was busted and sent some people into the Soledad starport to look for spare parts. Those people got captured and told enough about the depot to get Brak interested, and he sent his tanks off to shoot up the ship."

"I see," Deep Six said. "Then why didn't Brak find the depot?"

"Well, that's a little fuzzy. Apparently, Zero and his air-raft pilot were the only ones who knew the course and distance to fly to get there, but they got blown up with the ship. As for the black globe itself, Zero probably left it at the depot and planned to pick it up later."

"Remarkable."

"I think 'frustrating' is more the word I'd pick," Coeur said, "but we'll keep looking around. Red Sun out."



# Chapter 17

Despite the considerable challenge of deciphering a code in the flowery prose of nonnative Anglic, Newton required just one week to glean the meaning of the cipher hidden in the last chapter of the Palabra.

"Of course, I wouldn't have been able to decrypt the message without Brother Anthony's help," Newton told Coeur, in her temporary office in the former Defense Ministry building.

"Actually, my contribution was minor," Anthony said humbly. "I simply helped Newton identify the symbolic meaning of certain passages."

"Well, whoever figured it out, come sit down and tell me about it. This is the first good news I've had in days."

"What do you mean, Captain?" Anthony asked, following Newton to a bench at the side of the office. "Don't tell me the loyalists are gaining ground?"

"Far from it," Coeur said, turning her chair to face them. "President Vazquez seems to get more popular every day. But I've had to listen to envoys from every country on Mexit wanting to know if we've come here to take over the planet, or, if we didn't, if they could hire us to eliminate their own enemies."

"I take it your reply to those overtures is negative," Newton said, curling its unused limbs under its body.

"Yes," Coeur said, "but I suppose I shouldn't complain; at least they're talking to us. Now tell me about this code."

"Essentially, sir, it's rather simple. In the last chapter of the Palabra, which describes the life of St. Kilalt and was purportedly written by one of his disciples, is a clue to his actual burial site."

Coeur was puzzled.

"But I thought the tomb of St. Kilalt was in that country across the mountains—Callida Fornax. Isn't that where all the pilgrims go, Brother Anthony?"

"Oh yes, it's a very famous shrine. However, Newton has found a phrase in an ancient language indicating the true shrine's location."

"Yes," Newton said, "a phrase in Vilani."

"Vilani?"

"Affirmative," Newton went on, freeing two of its limbs to pull Zero's Palabra from its equipment pack. It then laid the book on its back and bent its prime limb backward to read a passage spoken through the voder under its chest.

"...and so the cardinal fell gravely ill and retired to his bed, never to rise again. Yet, with his last breath, he was heard to say, 'I see the seal of the Defender rising gloriously in the east, inviting my soul unto Heaven. Yet do not cry for me, but rather, rest easily in the knowledge that I have preceded you into Heaven, and bury me in the little chapel of St. Elena, in the shadow of Mt. Amar, *zunoad doanmik ga en muramrid khil, jen, deaad, zan.*'"

"That's Vilani all right," Coeur said, leaning forward in her chair, "but I'm a little rusty. Weren't those last words numbers?"

"Indeed. The Vilani reads: 'but this is not the true location, three, five, seven.'"

"Hmmm."

"Indeed. The numbers, I therefore reasoned, might be a code key, although it was another matter to determine what code it was the key to. Eventually, I resorted to scanning the entire text into my personal computer and writing a program to search for unusual groupings of words and letters in patterns of 3s, 5s and 7s."

"Go on."

"After the fact, I discovered that it wasn't that complicated. Taking the third, fifth and seventh letter at the beginning of each verse, and continuing that cycle, reveals another phrase written in Vilani—one that Zero appears to have identified, based on the marks in his text. It reads '*Urudige an kir iliru eshkir minniga,*' or, literally, 'go to the haven of angels.'"

"Is there such a place on Mexico?"

"Yes there is," Anthony said. "Angel's Haven is a valley in the Aguja Prieta Mountains. I once visited the villagers there as a missionary."

"Fancy that," Coeur said. "How far?"

"Approximately 1,100 kilometers," Newton said, "based on the survey map of Deep Six."

"Harsh?" Coeur asked.

"Exceedingly," Anthony replied. "The wind blows hard from the high peaks, and the only people up there are a handful of gaba herders."

"I take it that's some sort of animal," Coeur said.

"A bit like a goat, yes. The wild gabas are about the only things that can get into the higher rocks, except, I suppose, for your flying craft."

Yeah, Coeur thought, *how about that.*

"In a word," Coeur said, "remote."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Thoughtful, Coeur fell back in her seat. "This does raise a whole lot of questions," she said. "Like for one thing, why does the Palabra have a Vilani phrase in it? Nobody here speaks Vilani, do they?"

"Not that I know of," Anthony said. "I'd never even heard of the language until Newton told me about it."

"And besides," Coeur went on, "what in the world could it possibly have to do with the depot?"

"It is true that Captain Zero was an acquisitive individual," Newton said, "so perhaps this is the clue to another treasure's location, other than the depot."

"Possibly," Coeur said.

"More curious is the fact that Zero deciphered the code at all. It is rather esoteric for a man of Zero's avocation."

"Well, I'd be tempted to agree with you there," Coeur said, "but we've found some interrogation records that verify the cardinal's recollection that *Jane* blew through here before a couple of years back. That might have been enough time for Zero to puzzle out the riddle."

Newton, who preferred to avoid groundless speculation, remained silent.

"Oh well," Coeur said, "who knows how he came across the code—maybe we'll never know. What matters is its data, and it might be significant, so I'll have *Hornet* zoom in on the area. If there's anything up there to see, she'll see it."

\*\*\*

Not an hour later, Snapshot—who happened to be standing the bridge watch—delivered the report on the Angel's Haven.

"Pay dirt, skipper. There's something up there all right."

"Any idea what it is?"

"Looks like a structure of some kind—I get spectroscopic traces of type C superdense armor in a high mountain gorge. Damned if I'd try to fly anything in there, though. The cliff walls are almost vertical, and there's a wind blowing through there like you would not believe—gusts to 100 kph."

"Sounds nasty all right. Why don't you go ahead and download that to my computer so I can have a look at it."

"Thinking of going up there, skipper?"

"Unless we get a better lead, we might have to, Snapper. Red Sun out."

\*\*\*

Although the late Emperor Brak and several of his autocratic forebears had persecuted the Church of Grace and Light and even destroyed many of its churches, the Church of the Holy Sacristy was a notable exception to that rampage. A stone pyramid with one wall made all of thick stained glass, capped by a thin steeple, it was such a center of public devotion that even Brak didn't dare raze it, though it sat at the corner of a block not far from his residence.

Now, a week after Brak's death, the church was beginning to regain a measure of its former glory. After the boards nailing the doors shut were pried loose, the CGL began moving hidden treasures back inside, and President Vazquez even found time to celebrate a midnight mass there—a mass that filled the 100 available pews and then spilled out onto the street.

Catching part of the mass by radio in her office, Coeur—planning the details of the coming expedition with Drop Kick and Zorn—was impressed by the even-handed tone of Vazquez' sermon, the way the president urged the faithful to "have tolerance for other opinions" and steel themselves for the hardships of democracy. "A democracy," she observed, "must necessarily entertain unpopular minority views, or it is not a democracy."

"Mighty progressive," Coeur said, "for the matriarch of an ancient religion."

"Yeah," Drop Kick replied, "maybe too progressive."

"What do you mean?" Zorn asked.

"Well, I don't know if I should repeat this," the sergeant major said, "but earlier today General Lemos told me he had concerns about Vazquez, and whether she could be trusted as a religious and a political leader."

"Ah, that's just a rebel talking," Zorn said. "Some people are just so used to fighting they can't ever stop, even when they've won."

Coeur smiled. "Funny," she said, "sounds like you're describing somebody I know."

"Ah," Zorn answered, "but I never won my fight."

"Well, anyway," Coeur said, turning off her radio, "maybe we should get back to business. We know something's in that mountain gorge, so now it's just a matter of how we get there."

"The wind's a problem," Drop Kick noted, "but the G-carrier should make it all right. I figure the best plan's to park it in Pesta, because the people there know Brother Anthony, and walk in from there. It doesn't look like more than 10 kilometers."

Coeur nodded. "All right," she said, "but now the question of who to take. You game, Zorn?"



"I didn't know if you'd ask. I am a 'wanted pirate,' after all."

"Putting that aside for the moment, you and V-Max are pretty resourceful; I'd like to have you along."

"What the hell," Zorn said, "V-Max and I can't fly *Armis* while Vink's taking her apart."

"All right, that leaves nine other spaces. Assuming I fly and Whiz Bang mans the gun, that'll leave room for Physic, Newton and the drop troops for muscle. Oh, and Brother Anthony, of course, since the cardinal said we could take him as a guide."

"What about Bonzo?" Zorn asked.

"No," Coeur said, "I figured he could stay behind and help Vink with your repairs."

"Oh. Mighty thoughtful."

"A-hem," Drop Kick coughed. "I think you forgot me."

"No I didn't," Coeur said. "I want you to stay here."

"Now wait just a minute—" Drop Kick began to protest.

"It's nothing personal, sergeant. It's just that I want somebody responsible here in the city to look after things while we're away. Plus, I'd like to know you and Mercy are backing us up if something does go wrong."

"Oh, well, if you put it that way...."

"There's probably plenty of danger to go around on this planet," Coeur said, "regardless of where you are."

"Especially as long as we don't know about those meson guns," Zorn said. "I've got another question, though, Red. If we do find something up there—like the depot—will it belong to Soledad?"

"I've gone over that with Vazquez," Coeur said. "As far as she's concerned, Soledad only extends to the foothills of the mountains, and I understand a similar situation goes for Callida Fornax on the far side of the range. That means if we find anything, it probably belongs to us."

"Or maybe the gaba herders," Drop Kick added.

"True," Coeur said. "You never know who might stake a claim."

...

Among Brak's cronies, Dr. Nayman Platz—the "rubber man" of the Defense Ministry prison—was conspicuous as one of the few officials on hand to prosecute after the Federal District was seized. Caught in the midst of interrogating a rebel prisoner during the attack, Platz attempted to avail himself of a secret tunnel to safety on the north side of the River Loro, but only emerged among the forces of the Imponsero Phalanx and was promptly arrested.

Charged with the torture and murder of hundreds of men and

women, and tremendously unpopular among the common folk of the city, Platz clearly had little hope of escaping execution. Consistent with the legal traditions of Soledad, Platz was given neither a defending attorney nor the opportunity to cross-examine the dozens of witnesses brought against him—including Carl and An-Wing—so the verdict of the three-judge tribunal was a foregone conclusion: Just a week after he was captured, he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

Yet, before this execution—scheduled to occur the same night *Hornet's* G-carrier would launch—Platz was given the opportunity to make a statement in his own behalf.

It was characteristically eerie.

"Gentlemen of the tribunal, I would only ask that, if I am to be executed, it be through electrocution. If I'm not, then I may be tempted to come back to life as a nightjack and rip you all to little pieces."

Needless to say, this did not go over well with the tribunal, and Dr. Platz was immediately led before a firing squad—not the electric chair, as he had wished.

"A real sicko," An-Wing said afterward, speaking with Coeur in the hangar where the G-carrier sat parked and ready for launch.

"So, did you watch the execution?"

"No. I was actually looking forward to it, but Carl pointed out that was rather morbid."

"Well, good for you."

"Still, it is kind of spooky, what he said before he died."

"I think I'd say it was more psychotic than spooky, Liu."

"What I meant," An-Wing said, "is what he said about coming back as a nightjack."

Coeur gave An-Wing a sidelong glance.

"You don't think he'll turn into a zombie, do you?"

An-Wing sighed, crossing her arms across her chest.

"No, I don't think he'll turn into a zombie. I am curious, however, about the nightjacks—like why is it nobody seems to know what they are, or where they come from."

Just then Coeur realized An-Wing was shaking slightly, perhaps because of the chill in the night air, or perhaps Platz had affected her more than she was letting on.

"Well, I don't know, Liu. The church seems to think they're demons of some sort, but they're probably just some sort of local predator—very cunning and lethal."

"You're forgetting the third possibility, Captain."

"The third possibility?"

"Yes. That the nightjacks are some sort of relic machinery left over from your Last Imperium."

"Well," Coeur said, hoping not to sound too offensively dismissive, "that's an interesting theory, Liu, but I'd rather not leap to a conclusion like that without stronger evidence."

"What, do you think I'm paranoid?"

"On the contrary, Liu. I just don't have the resources to follow up every investigation I'd like."

"So what if I'm right? What if the nightjacks are some kind of relic machinery, and they're a real danger to all of us?"

"Well, Liu, if that's the case, then I'll offer you the same advice I'd offer to you anyway—stay aboard *Vi Et Armis*, and tell Drop Kick if you see anything suspicious."

"Any other advice?"

"Try not to instigate any *coup d'état* while I'm away, either."

"Very funny, Captain," An-Wing said. "I'll do my best."

\*\*\*

An hour later, at 1900 hours, the well-stuffed G-carrier launched into the early evening twilight of Soledad with Coeur at its controls. Already 138 standard days had passed since *Homet* left Aubaine, and only now did Coeur have the sensation that some slight progress was being made on her prime objective: discovery of the Mexit depot.

As a practical expedient, the drop troops wore their heavy battle dress to save space for supplies, but the gunner Whiz Bang—who might have to take over the controls from Coeur in an emergency—elected to keep his off for flexibility.

Besides, he didn't think they'd be gone long enough to bother suiting up.

"Come on, skipper," he said softly, as the G-carrier powered over the dark swampland east of Soledad. "You don't really think we're going to find anything in some goat herder village, do you?"

"Actually, it's a gaba herder village," Coeur said, "and no, I'm not certain we'll find anything. We've turned Soledad starport upside down, though, and it doesn't look like there's anything there—just empty bunkers and warehouses."

"In fairness," Newton said, turning from its comm station at the rear of the cockpit, "there is another possibility regarding the depot. Its contents might have been removed from the starport area long ago by plunder, leaving only the single black globe for Zero to discover."

"Yeah," Whiz Bang said. "How do we know?"

"We don't," Coeur answered. "But we're not leaving this mission hanging as long as there's loose threads to sew up."

"Understood, sir."

"Good. Now keep an eye on your scope, corporal. I don't want anything surprising us."

Of course, the possibility that anything would surprise them was low—at least before they got to Pesta—for Coeur had no intention of flying directly into the hard weather of the northern winter. Rather, she waited until they were past the swamps and over the foothills of the mountains—where blustery winds already played havoc with a grav vehicle roughly the shape of a shoe box—and then powered up above the weather at her top speed of 500 kph, fast enough to get them there two hours before local midnight.

"Ah, there she is," Coeur said, three hours later, "Pesta Pass. Everybody secure back there?"

"We're there already?" Zorn asked, waking up from a nap.

"Sure are, and it looks nasty. Better check your straps."

"Oh my," Brother Anthony said, making the triangle of the Defender on his chest.

"Oh, don't worry," Physic replied, in the seat beside his. "Red eats this kind of stuff up."

"Yeah," V-Max said, "it's just like turbulence in a gas giant."

"Well, maybe," Zorn said, "except when you skim from a gas giant, there's usually no surface waiting to smack you if you screw up."

So warned, the 12 personnel in the G-carrier braced for landing. Sure enough, shearing wind currents grabbed at the little craft just seconds later, prompting automatic alarms to sound as it pitched like a tiny boat on a stormy sea.

"No problem," Coeur said, switching off the alarms with her left hand as she handled the stick with her right. "Just the automatic pitch-yaw alarm, nothing to worry about."

"Oh my goodness," Anthony moaned, closing his eyes tight.

In retrospect, that appeared to be a good idea. Although Coeur never lost control of the G-carrier, its boxy shape was not suited for handling rough weather, and the craft spun nearly all the way around several times before Coeur finally wrestled it to the ground, yielding dizzying vistas through the forward window.

"Nice flying," Zorn said afterward, unbuckling herself.

"Thanks," Coeur said, not sure how sincere the pirate's remark was. "By the way, it looks like we're in luck; it's overcast up above, but pretty calm down here on the deck. There's just a misty rain between us and the village."

"Don't tell me you put us down in sight of the village," Zorn said, coming forward to look at the EMS image of the nighttime village just 200 meters away. "That really was some nifty flying."



This time Coeur glanced at Zorn before answering. "Thanks," she said. "Brother Anthony, is that Pesta?"

"Just a minute, please," Anthony said, mopping his forehead with the sleeve of his vestment before fumbling with the lock of his seat belt. Sensing his difficulty, Physic finally released the restraint for him and helped him forward.

"You must forgive me, Captain," he said, looking at the scanner. "I'm sure your flying was very skillful. Hmm...oh yes, that's Pesta all right. That's Old Man Blanco's hut off to the left."

"Know him?" Coeur asked.

"Yes, my mission stayed with him a while."

"How about you, Whiz Bang?" Coeur asked the gunner. "See anything?"

"Not much, Captain," Whiz Bang answered, wheeling his gun sight around to scan the broad valley they'd landed in. "I see some of those gaba creatures walking around, but not any people."

"Hell, that's not surprising," Gaffer said, rising to his impressive full armored height, "considering we probably scared the crap out of these people when we came down."

"True," Coeur said, rising and reaching for her parka. "The engines are pretty loud. Gaffer, you and Brother Anthony are with me."

\*\*\*

"Master Blanco," Brother Anthony called, knocking on the wooden door of the stone hut, "open up please!"

"Brother Anthony?" an old man's voice answered from within the windowless structure. A moment later, its door swung open. And just as quickly shut again.

"I knew it! You've brought the raiders with you!"

"Perhaps Zero's men were here," Anthony noted

"Yes," Coeur nodded, glancing back at Gaffer. "Zero's crew had at least a couple of suits of battle dress."

"Master Blanco!" Anthony said, returning his attention to the door, "don't be afraid! I have come with friends who helped to liberate the nation of Soledad!"

"Soledad is liberated?" the old man asked from behind the door. "Brak is dead?"

"Yes, the Defender be praised, and departed to his judgment in Heaven! Cardinal Vazquez now rules in his place!"

That, evidently, was good enough news to persuade Old Man Blanco to crack the door open again. "You wouldn't deceive a poor old gaba herder, would you?"

"No, of course not. My friends have only come to establish a camp and explore the high ravine to the north."

"The Gutter of Blood? Surely you're joking."

"I'm afraid not. Dangerous as it may be, it is a mission of no small importance."

Wrinkling a forehead already creased by exposure to the elements, Blanco appeared dubious. As with Cardinal Vazquez and all denizens of the Wilds, Coeur was cautious about ascribing an age to him, but it was clear that he was a good deal older than herself and that his eyes had seen their share of hardship.

"Well, they're your lives to risk," he said after a moment. "You and the woman may come in, but the metal man must stay outside."

"Sorry," Coeur said to Gaffer.

"That's all right," he said. "The rain doesn't bother me. I'll just stay out here and reconnoiter."

"Actually, sergeant, if you're going to reconnoiter, I'd rather you didn't do it alone."

"Well, okay. I'll get Fubar and Gremlin to help me set up perimeter sensors around the G-carrier."

"Fine. You do that."

Gaffer then saluted and began tromping off toward the G-carrier, the whine of his leg servos lingering even after he'd disappeared into the dark mist.

"Come," Blanco invited.

The hut, Coeur observed, smelled strongly of straw and animals, and it was larger on the inside than the outside, owing to the fact that its floor was cut directly out of the hard-packed earth of the pass. Looking about, she saw that smelly young gabas were indeed sheltering in a corner of the hut, which they evidently shared with no less than a dozen members of Blanco's family, ranging from elderly adults to very young children.

"I imagine you're accustomed to richer surroundings," Blanco said to Coeur.

"Actually, it looks very comfortable," Coeur returned. "My name is Coeur D' Esprit, by the way, of the Reformation Coalition."

"Not Oriflamme?"

"Aubaine, actually," Coeur said, conscious of myriad frightened eyes fixed upon her, "although Oriflamme is one of our worlds. Is that where the 'raiders' were from?"

"That they were," Blanco said. "Said so themselves. Right ruffians, they were, trying to bribe us into being their guides, then shooting up the place when we refused."

"I can assure you that won't be the case with Captain D' Esprit," Anthony said, bringing out a parchment from his robe and unrolling it. "This is an official edict from Her Holiness,

Cardinal Vazquez, sanctioning this mission on behalf of Soledad."

"A lot of good that is," Blanco countered. "You're 1,000 clicks beyond the Soledad frontier. And besides, none of us can read anyway."

"So," Anthony said, rolling the parchment back up again, "I take it you're unwilling to guide us up there?"

"I certainly am, brother, and I'll wager that goes for the rest of the village as well. With the nightjacks the way they are, it's just too dangerous."

"They're bad up here, the nightjacks?"

"You should know it, brother. That Gutter's where they live, it is. But I'm not going up there to prove it. Old Salvador's son got nabbed just last month, and I don't mean to join him."

"If it's that bad, why don't you leave?"

"And where would we go?" an old woman piped up—a woman Coeur presumed was Blanco's wife. "There's no fodder for the gabas within a week's walk of here."

"If you won't go with us," Coeur said to Blanco, "will you at least help us find a safe route to go by?"

"I suppose I could do that. Do you have a map?"

"Sure do," Coeur said, reaching into a pocket of her parka and pulling out a pocket computer. She then brought the display around so Blanco could see it. That he was impressed by the screen was obvious, but he was positively flabbergasted when Coeur zoomed in from an area map of the continent to a tight focus on Pesta and the surrounding 1,000 square kilometers.

"What a remarkable little box," he said.

"It's called a computer. Now anyway, this blinking dot here is us, and this blinking dot here is where we want to go, at the end of the—ah—Gutter of Blood."

"Can you make a paper map with that?" Blanco asked.

"Sure," Coeur said, pressing the computer's print button and disgorging a high-resolution copy of the screen on sturdy, plastic-fiber paper.

"Well, let's see," Blanco said, moving to sit at the single table in his hut, and, coincidentally, attracting a gaggle of children who clustered around for a look. "Going straight-away is right out, owing to this cut in the rocks—see how it just drops off into a sheer cliff here?"

"Right," Coeur answered.

"That's a path for gabas, sure, but not for people. No, Captain, I'd cut through this side passage here to the east—if that's really where you aim to go."

"It is. Thank you."

"Well, good luck. Do you want your map back?"

"No, you keep it."

"Why, thank you."

"One other thing. That land out there where we landed looks as close to your hut as anybody else's. Do you mind if we camp there?"

"It's not really my land any more than anybody else's, Captain, but sure, I suppose it's okay—just as long as you let me know when you plan to blast off again. Your air-ship spooked the gabas something fierce when you landed—not to mention all the people in the village."

"All right," Coeur said with a smile, making a note of that in her computer before putting it away. "I'll do that."

\*\*\*

Out of courtesy, Coeur and Anthony visited several other Pesta huts before turning back toward the G-carrier. All told, Coeur doubted there could be more than 100 people in the entire village—a far extreme from populous Soledad. But the inhabitants were generally polite enough when Anthony made their introductions, and Coeur found it difficult to resist the urge to give them a few Kruytercorp gold coins—specially laid in at Aubaine as widely acceptable currency—for confirming the wisdom of Blanco's course.

Brother Anthony explained, "As I said, Captain, that would be considered impolite here. The mountain folk don't like to be paid unless they render some tangible service."

"But what about the map I gave Blanco? Wasn't that payment?"

"Well, that's different. None of the people up here really need maps, so it was probably more for the children."

"Oh."

"At any rate, Blanco couldn't trade it for anything valuable, so it has no tangible value."

"All the same," Coeur said, "I'd say he gave us a tangible service by pointing us toward the depot, but I'm glad you told me about the local money custom. I'd hate to follow up Zero's first impression with a worse one."

"That is wise."

The sudden beeping of Coeur's pocket communicator interrupted the conversation, and they stopped so she could answer it. Having passed all the way to the far side of the village, they were now over a kilometer from the G-carrier, hidden behind the village huts.

"Red Sun here. What's up?"

"Captain, something has...happened to...Fubar and Gremlin..."

"What's that?" Coeur asked, trying to clean up the sudden static between herself and Newton. "Newton, repeat your message, over."



Newton's second attempt at communication was even more garbled than the first, however, and Coeur was ultimately left with static on her end.

"Damn!" she said, shoving the communicator back in her pocket and starting toward the G-carrier at a run—mist and darkness disregarded for the moment.

"Captain, wait!" Anthony yelled, shuffling along as best he could in his robes. "Remember the danger from nightjacks!"

"Damn the nightjacks!" Coeur called back to him. "Come on!"

"I'm coming! I'm coming!"

Anthony's warning did slow Coeur down a bit, less out of concern for her own safety than Anthony's. With gauss pistol drawn, Coeur slowed enough to escort Anthony, though both got back to the G-carrier within less than 10 minutes.

There they found every Marine except Fubar and Gremlin—namely, the sergeants Gaffer and Red Eye, the medic Widget, and Whiz Bang sans battle dress—arrayed in a tight group around the aft hatch with their heaviest available weapons.

"Thank God," Whiz Bang said; "at least you're safe."

"Sure, we're safe," Coeur said. "Now tell me what happened."

"We can't be certain," Red Eye said through his suit speakers, "but the bottom line is that Fubar and Gremlin disappeared a few minutes ago while they were setting out the last two perimeter sensors."

"It's my fault, sir," Gaffer said. "I let them go out individually in opposite directions instead of as a pair."

"Well, we can worry about whose fault it is later," Coeur said, hauling out her radio and finding the static diminished. The Marine troopers' channel remained silent.

"Damn," she swore. "Where were they, exactly?"

"At last report," Gaffer said, pointing with the barrel of his fusion rifle, "Fubar was over there, and..."

He turned to point in the other direction.

"...Gremlin was over there, both about 100 meters off."

"But," Coeur said, "that's in plain sight of the G-carrier! Didn't the sensors spot anything?"

"No, sir," Whiz Bang said, "and Newton was manning them."

"Fikki!" Coeur snapped. "Gaffer, did you look their last locations over?"

"A quick look, yes. We didn't see anything."

"Well, look again. You and Whiz Bang, go after Fubar. Red Eye, you and Widget look for Gremlin."

"Yes, sir," the sergeants answered.

"All of you keep an eye on the carrier homing signal, though. If it fades, you come back here."

"Understood."

"Is there anything I can do?" Anthony asked.

"Yes. Get inside."

Anthony accepted the order without argument. However, as the armored rear door opened to admit him, and the Marines moved off, two other figures came out of the G-carrier: Physic and Zorn.

"Any word on the men?" Physic asked.

"Negative," Coeur answered, sweeping her PRIS binoculars around to cover each team alternately, then lowering them. "Really, I suppose all of us should get under cover, but with everyone under cover when Fubar and Gremlin disappeared, nobody saw what happened to them. Tell you what: Zorn, do you have your PRIS?"

"Right here," she said, patting her own parka's pocket.

"Good. Then tell you what—you keep an eye on Gaffer and Whiz Bang while I watch Red Eye and Widget. Physic, you watch all the other directions."

"Gotcha," Physic said, drawing her personal defense laser and popping a chemical cartridge into its magazine slot.

Some minutes later, Coeur called off the search when the team found not so much as footsteps leading away from Fubar and Gremlin's deactivated remote EMS sensors. They did, however, find disturbing evidence that something very violent had happened to both troopers.

"Take a look at this," Red Eye said, showing Coeur a weighty, curved slab of superdense metal. "That's the shoulder guard from a suit of heavy battle dress, torn clean off at the welds."

"Gaal!" Physic exclaimed.

"It gets worse," Gaffer said, returning with Whiz Bang from the other direction. "Have a look at this."

"Good lord," Coeur said, running her gloved left hand across a sickeningly familiar chunk of equipment in Gaffer's hands—the forearm and right hand from a suit of heavy battle dress. Probably weighing over 20 kilograms by itself, the armor didn't appear to contain a severed limb, though pieces of the elbow servo did hang by rings of twisted metal from its open end.

"This left a pretty deep furrow where it landed," Whiz Bang observed, "which means it might have been dropped from a great height."

"Which means," Gaffer said, "that whatever grabbed this trooper probably flew off with him before he ripped the arm off—a good reason we didn't hear anything."

"Just as a wild guess," Physic said, "that's not the kind of thing one trooper in battle dress could do to another trooper, is it?"

"Not damn likely," Gaffer said, shaking the forearm at Physic, "this is heavy battle dress!"

"Take it easy, sergeant," Coeur ordered.

"Sir."

"All right," Coeur went on, "it clearly isn't safe out here. Everybody, get in the G-carrier double-quick."

\*\*\*

It took Coeur just a few seconds of contemplation to realize what her next course must be, but it wasn't immediately well received by her mates.

"All right," Coeur announced, "here's the plan. Physic, Gaffer and I are going out to investigate. Red Eye, you'll keep everybody else here."

"Yes, sir," the gunnery sergeant said, saluting. "But how long will you want us to wait before we come after you?"

"You will *not* come after us," Coeur said, pulling a gauss rifle from the G-carrier's gun rack and beginning to load HEAP grenades into its under-barrel launcher. "You will wait here for 12 hours. If you haven't heard from us by then, you will get the hell out of here and report to Drop Kick."

"Yes, sir."

Zorn, however, was not so accepting of the situation.

"Red, look, this is crazy! If you go out there, you'll be killed."

"Maybe," Coeur said, "or maybe not. There's some kind of relic material up in that Gutter of Blood—*Hornet's* scan tells us that much—and I can't let fear of these nightjacks keep us from investigating it."

"But why? Why is it so important?"

"Because it might be part of the depot, Vega, or contain a clue to its location. In case you've forgotten, the *Royal Vengeance* escaped this system, and is probably on her way to Solee right now to pick up reinforcements. If those arrive, and the Solee get their hands on the depot instead of us, then the Coalition's screwed.

"And besides," Coeur went on, checking her rifle's magazine and then slinging the weapon over her shoulder, "we make a promise to all our people when they enlist—that they won't be left behind in the field. I don't intend to break that promise to Gremlin and Fubar."

"With respect, sir," Gaffer said, "I think Zorn's right—at least to a degree. I think you're too important to risk in an operation like this, so why don't you let me just take out a team of Marines instead?"

Coeur shook her head. "Negative, sergeant. I'm the only person here who knows the specs on Zero's black globe generator and can positively identify it. And finding that generator will be good evidence that we've found the depot itself."

"Yes, sir."

"Besides, we've already lost two Marines in battle dress, so I don't know how much protection a large group of troopers would give us from the nightjacks. Better to take the minimum—myself, Physic to treat any casualties, and one experienced soldier as an escort."

Gaffer accepted the complement with a slight nod.

"Hmm," Physic said, "you put it that way, and I almost feel safe."

Coeur smiled, glancing at the friend she would soon be taking into mortal danger.

*It's funny, Coeur thought, I can still remember how excited she was when I offered her a chance to get off Aubaine on the Hornet: it's a fair bet she wasn't expecting this.*

Yet Coeur had been an officer long enough not to second guess herself. It was always the hardest duty of any officer to order her friends into danger—but Coeur had chosen the minimum necessary force to accomplish her mission, and would do her best to see that all of her people returned safe and intact.

"Well, I guess that's it, then," Zorn said a few minutes later, coming to sharp attention and delivering Coeur a crisp salute as her team assembled at the rear hatch. "Good luck, Captain."

"Thanks," Coeur said.

"Funny," Zorn said, leaning in close to Coeur, "you notice how everybody's back here to watch you go except Newton?"

Coeur had indeed noticed, but didn't comment.

"Probably afraid you'd take him along," Zorn offered, "if he didn't hide in the cockpit."

"I'd probably hide too if I were him. Take it easy, Zorn."

Brother Anthony interrupted Coeur, however, before she could open the hatch.

"Captain, would you wait a minute?"

"Now, Brother Anthony, don't tell me you want to go."

"Er—no. I would like your permission in a slight indulgence, though. Would you let me bless you before you go?"

Coeur exchanged shrugs with Physic. "Sure."

Quickly, then, Anthony removed his vial of holy water from his vestment—the same one he had used to bless Coeur and Zorn before their first flight to meet the rebels—and doused Coeur and Physic with it. Gaffer raised a hand to decline the offer.

"It would just make me superstitious," he said. "I'd rather rely on my reflexes."

"If only that were enough against nightjacks," Anthony said.

"We'll be all right," Coeur said to Anthony, opening the rear hatch into the chill of the black night; "now come on, guys, we've got work to do."



# Chapter 18

Although the air at Pesta was relatively still that night, Coeur knew from *Hornet's* analysis of the area that she could not count on the same condition in the Gutter of Blood. Almost as if by design, the kilometer-long gutter channeled air from the higher peaks through its length like a giant wind tunnel, so any approach by a craft as light as a broomstick was ruled out from the start.

Fortunately, the wind was fairly light on the floor of the chasm—the area Coeur, Physic and Gaffer entered after passing through the side channel pointed out by Blanco. Further, wearing their wide-spectrum goggles, Coeur and Physic had little difficulty following Gaffer, so the party reached the gutter in only three hours—less than the four Coeur expected.

"*But there's nothing here,*" Physic signed in Anslan, when at last they stepped into the high-walled stone channel. "*Just rock.*"

"*No,*" Gaffer signed back, assisted by the magnifying power of his synthetic vision. "*I see something at the end of the chasm, 600 meters ahead.*"

"*All right,*" Coeur signed. "*Let's move out.*"

All too conscious of their luck so far—the party hadn't encountered so much as an insect in the rocks, let alone a nightjack—Coeur pressed on with the firm resolution of a woman with a higher purpose than the mere evasion of her own fear.

Though her prime purpose must be the pursuit of her lost men, that concern held only slightly more weight than the driving need to find the depot. Almost lost to the others as their original reason for coming here, it nevertheless remained foremost in the mind of the remnant Coeur—a woman who had seen at firsthand the horrific effects of the super-weapons the Last Imperium unleashed before its downfall.

*There's just too much at stake,* Coeur thought. *I must not be afraid. Do you hear me, nightjacks? I am not afraid of you!*

That thought found expression in Coeur's mind through her recognition of the outside possibility that the nightjacks—what-

ever they were—might have psionic abilities. Some Droyne, she knew, had the ability to appear invisible as well as the ability to read minds, so why might such an ability not exist in wild creatures as well...?

Little by little, then, the trio advanced on the curious sliver of infrared light Gaffer had identified at the end of the chasm, where its floor suddenly sloped up sharply into the surrounding rock.

*Oh my god, Coeur thought, there is something there....*

That something was a rectangular patch of rock—strewn with pebbles like the rest of the floor, but slightly hotter in infrared. About as wide as the gutter at that point, perhaps 50 meters, it was certainly nothing anybody with normal vision would ever notice.

"What is it?" Gaffer signed, when at last they stood atop the area.

"Unknown," Coeur replied. "Physic and I will look around. Cover us."

"Roger."

"What are we looking for?" Physic whispered.

"Shh. Sign language."

"What are we looking for?"

"Unknown. Anything unusual."

"Roger."

Amazingly, something unusual wasn't long in coming. Shuffling through the pebbles, Physic tripped over what seemed to be a long bar of metal. Bending down to pick it up, she found it was rooted firmly in the earth.

"What the hell?" Coeur muttered, coming over to help examine the bar.

"I thought you said to use sign language."

"The order's revoked. Look, I found a corner here...."

"Yeah," Physic said, kicking granular pebbles away from the other end of the bar with her boot, "here too. Do you suppose it could be some kind of hatch?"

"Don't know. Keep brushing."

Two minutes later, the women cleared away enough pebbles to see that Physic was correct: The metal was the fluted edge of a door set right in the floor of the gutter. Attempts to budge the door met only with back strain, however, and the pair went on to brush the earth back several meters in every direction, looking for some sort of control panel. Though fruitless, this effort in turn led to another discovery.

"Wow," Physic said, "it's all metal."

"Yeah," Coeur answered, "this must be the area Snapper saw from orbit."

"A lot of good that does us; there's no door handle."

"Well, we shouldn't leap to conclusions—it might not even be a door. But I'll get Gaffer, anyway and see if he can make it budge."

True to his mission as their escort, Gaffer had avoided paying too much attention to what the women were doing, so he was naturally amazed when he saw the seeming trap door set in the middle of the cleared-off area.

"We could try to burn through," he suggested. "My fusion gun will cut through 13 millimeters of bonded superdense alloy."

"That might not be such a good idea," Coeur said, "especially if it's booby trapped. I was thinking you might just try to pry it loose."

"All right."

Strangely enough, that simple expedient actually worked. After jamming his bayonet into the seam at the edge of the square and exerting the force of his suit's strength-enhancing servomotors, the door suddenly sunk and slid backward under the surrounding metal. Caught off guard, Gaffer almost fell into the black space he now knelt before, but caught his 500 kg mass and pushed himself back from the brink.

"Well, I guess that's it," he gasped. "It's a door all right."

"Sure is," Coeur said, shining a flashlight down into the hole, "and with stairs, too."

"Ladies first?" Gaffer asked, getting back to his feet.

"I wouldn't think of it," Coeur said. "You first."

\* \* \*

The stairwell illuminated under Coeur's flashlight descended 10 meters to a landing, but beyond that her party members could not see, so they began to descend the stairs to investigate first hand. Before going too far, though, they stopped to examine the door from the other side—deriving some comfort from a familiar electronic control pad.

But not too much comfort.

Set into what would be the roof of the underground facility, the device appeared to be a simple nine-digit keypad with a computer display, presently programmed to open the door when sufficient force (approaching the several hundred kilograms per square centimeter supplied by Gaffer) was applied. Below this, however, was a symbol all-too familiar to the Imperial remnant Coeur: the circle-and-crosshairs symbol of the Solomani Confederation.

"The Solomani," Coeur whispered.

"Isn't that who controlled this depot we're looking for?"

Physic asked.

"Indeed," Coeur said. "Mexit was on the edge of their territory—their border with the Imperium."

To Physic and Gaffer, who were citizens of the New Era, and cared not a lick for the conflicts of the dead past, this was not nearly the loaded statement that it was for Coeur. In her youth, Coeur was taught to fear the Solomani ethos—the simple faith that Solomani humans were superior to all other forms of life—and be ready to fight against it when it motivated the Confederation to war. Resisting Solomani invasion, indeed, was the mission of the Imperial fleet Coeur served with when other circumstances detoured her from certain death in the cataclysm of the Collapse, and into a new life in the New Era.

Ironically, all the present Reformation Coalition existed within territory conquered by the Solomani before the Collapse, yet this grand conquest was less than meaningless to its children, Physic and Gaffer. So immaterial was that distant past to their lives that they simply didn't think about it as a fact of any consequence at all.

"Do you suppose we should close the door?" Gaffer asked, holding his hand over the control panel.

"No," Coeur said, "I don't trust relic machinery. Just jam your bayonet into one of the door's guide rails to hold it open."

"Roger."

A moment later, the deed was done, though not without some echoing report as Gaffer hammered the bayonet tightly into place with his clenched armor-clad fist. To Coeur this was acceptable, though, given her suspicion that anybody occupying this facility would already have been alerted to the door opening.

"Good enough," Coeur said quietly. "Now take the point again."

So ordered, Gaffer returned to the head of the party and began downward with only his low-light vision to guide the way. Similarly aided by their goggles, Coeur and Physic followed close behind, taking note of the pebbles crunching under Gaffer's heavy feet, evidence that someone had preceded them down the steps after the facility was hidden under the earth, but scarcely noticing the deep darkness all around them when they reached the landing.

"It turns and goes down," Gaffer signed.

"Roger," Coeur returned. "Carry on."

A few minutes later, Gaffer and the Arses came to the foot of the stairs, where another ordinary control panel sat.

"Could be a booby trap," he signed. "Stand back a ways while I try the lock."



Neither Coeur not Physic offered any argument, backing up the stairs and kneeling down with their backs turned to Gaffer. That precaution seemed over-excessive a moment later, when the door before Gaffer opened without so much as asking for a pass code or security key. The cavernous space on the other side of the door then illuminated automatically, spilling brilliant light into the stairwell—light that would have dazzled the spacers were it not for the automatic filters of their synthetic vision.

"Looks all right, skipper. You can come on down."

"Anything down there?" Coeur asked, standing back up, lifting up her goggles and starting down with Physic.

"I'd say so. Have a look."

"Holy Gala," Physic said, arriving beside Gaffer. "That looks like...."

"It is," Coeur said, fishing her computer out of its pocket and raising it up to access a picture of the very piece of machinery that now sat before them. "Zero's black globe generator."

• • •

To people who didn't have much personal experience with force field generators, one such device pretty much looked like any other one. Technical archivists, however, knew the unique configurations of many models in pre-Collapse service, and gave Coeur a checklist of features unique to the Imperial Astrotech FEFG Mk I—Zero's black globe—and some routine diagnostic guidelines to determine if it was functional. Her first task, after letting her pulse settle to a manageable level, was to enter the room before her and examine the three-meter-diameter sphere inside, by far its largest occupant, at close range.

"This is damn strange," Gaffer said, looking around the rest of the 100-square-meter chamber, littered with supply crates. "There don't seem to be any other doors."

"Well, except for that one," Physic observed, pointing at the ceiling 20 meters overhead. There, ringed by the high-tech light strip that illuminated the entire chamber, was the corrugated underside of a double door clearly designed to permit access from above. "But check those out, up on the wall."

"Yeah," Gaffer said, observing a pair of inert holographic cameras gazing down at the floor from mounting brackets four meters up on opposite walls of the chamber. "Surveillance cameras."

"Suppose they're still working?"

"Probably not," Gaffer said. "They look like they've been shot up by small arms."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Physic said, stooping to pick up

a handful of shell casings.

"Look like 9mm pistol ammo," Gaffer observed, "although it's strange that somebody could fire off a pistol or submachinegun without having somebody here notice, or at least come to fix the cameras."

"Yeah, that is odd. Maybe this is just an automated station."

"Well, whatever it is," Gaffer said, "I don't think this one chamber alone qualifies as a depot."

"Maybe not," Coeur said, stepping away from the force field generator, set on a heavy tripod and trailing conduits for connection to a ship's capacitors, "but this is certainly the device Zero discovered."

"Wow," Physic said. "I guess he never get around to removing it."

"Actually, he might have left it here on purpose. At least he would if he knew anything about black globe generators."

"What do you mean?" Gaffer asked.

"This one's seriously damaged," Coeur explained. "I loosened an access plate to get a look inside, and it looks like the whole core's burnt up, as if it absorbed too much energy and couldn't shunt it."

"You mean it's a piece of junk?" Physic asked.

"Hardly junk," Coeur said. "It certainly has value as high-tech scrap. But as far as installing it on a starship goes—forget about it."

"Well," Gaffer said, "I'll be damned."

"Actually, it's good news for us, since it means this particular globe won't be installed on any of our enemies' ships."

"Yeah," Physic said, "but what about the depot?"

Coeur smirked, looking around at the blank walls of the chamber. As Gaffer and Physic had observed, there were no other exits except the ceiling and the hatch they'd come in through, and there was nothing on the floor except the generator and a handful of scattered equipment crates.

*Yes, Coeur thought, what about the depot? All this distance—and two lost men—to find out that Zero had the wrong location in the first place.*

*Damn!*

"Well," Coeur said, "wherever it is, this doesn't seem to be it. But let's take a few minutes before we leave to examine those supply crates anyway—just so we'll know what's in them."

Mindful of the need to get back to the surface and report, Coeur didn't press her people to catalog the items inside the chamber once it became clear that the crates were packed with TL14-15 circuit boards and machine parts. But at the same time

she couldn't escape the suspicion that some persistent intelligence occupied parts of the facility hidden from view, and that she'd better get as much intelligence about the black globe chamber as she could before someone showed up to forcibly evict them.

But they did remain long enough for Physic to find something rather unusual in a corner of the chamber. Resembling a transparent spherical fishbowl, it might have been the helmet of a vac suit, except that the hole in the bottom was far too narrow for any human being to put his head into.

"What the hell is that?" Gaffer asked.

"I don't know," Physic said, cradling the globe in her arms. "But it's got a crack here in the side, like somebody threw it up against the wall. You have any idea, Red?"

"Yes I do," Coeur said, smiling. "It's a holoball."

"A holo-what?" Physic asked.

"Well, basically," Coeur said, "it's a gadget for projecting free-standing holograms. They used to be fairly common before the Collapse."

"Do you mean free-standing, like in mid-air?"

"No, not quite. See this lump on the bottom here, opposite the hole? That ejects a mist of gas into the globe, and a laser uses that as a holographic medium."

"So what's the hole for?"

"That's what you put your hand into. Sensors inside detect where your fingers are and let you manipulate the image inside. You could even draw inside the gas cloud, if you wanted to."

"Sounds interesting," Gaffer said. "What's it for?"

"It's a toy, mostly."

"Mostly?" Physic asked.

"A few of them did have other uses. Here, let me see it."

Physic handed over the globe, and Coeur took it with casual familiarity. Although the plastic shell was cracked, that damage was evidently cosmetic, for Coeur managed to summon an image without too much difficulty.

"Neat," Gaffer said. "So what does it do?"

"It's a key," Coeur said. "A key to unlock some hidden facility."

What she meant wasn't immediately apparent to the others. Inside the globe was only a fairly simple image—three blue women opposite three red water wells—projected on the side of the ball. Clarifying the purpose of this image, though, was a legend suspended in mid-air above the globe:

CONNECT EACH WOMAN TO EACH WELL IN SUCH A MANNER THAT THEIR PATHS DO NOT CROSS

"So what's the big deal?" Gaffer asked.

"Well, I know this much," Physic said, "that's an impossible puzzle. You can't connect all three women to all three wells without having the paths cross at least once."

"Ah," Coeur said, "but you don't know the trick."

"The trick?"

"Yeah. Watch."

Cradling the globe in the crook of her left arm, Coeur then inserted her right hand into the aperture. A tickling sensation played across her skin—the discharge of gas replacing that lost through the aperture—but she expected that and brought the tip of her forefinger into contact with one of the stylized women. She then traced a line from that woman to the nearest well, dragging an illuminated line behind her finger that remained in place after the two figures were connected.

"Nifty," Gaffer said.

Coeur meanwhile pressed on, systematically connecting the women to their wells until eight glowing lines, some long and convoluted to avoid crossing the others, decorated the interior surface of the holoball. As Physic predicted, though, the ninth line—the one that would complete the puzzle—could not be drawn.

"See?" Physic said. "You can't solve the puzzle."

"No," Coeur said, "it can still be solved. The secret is to draw the last line anyway—by leaving the surface of the holoball."

"But," Physic protested, "that's cheating."

"Well, yes and no," Coeur said, "not really. You see, what this holoball was originally designed for was to keep your local citizens—you know, the odd peasant wandering around the countryside—from getting too deep into an abandoned, unguarded facility. People like that—people who weren't familiar with holography—would almost never think to cheat and draw the last line through the air inside the ball."

"Oh, I get it," Gaffer said. "You'd put a holoball in an antechamber or airlock, and connect it to the lock mechanism."

"Right."

"But there's nothing like that in here."

"No," Coeur said, "so this device is probably just something somebody left lying around uninstalled."

"Well, I'll be damned," Gaffer said, "and that actually worked?"

"More often than you'd think," Coeur said. "Unless you live in an advanced society, with holographic displays, you get used to thinking in two dimensions."

"Yeah," Gaffer said, "but wasn't Mexit a high-tech world before the Collapse? Wouldn't the average bumpkin have been



familiar with holography?"

Coeur shrugged.

"It's hard to say. Just because a world was high tech didn't mean every last citizen got the benefit of that technology—and even if they did, a world in a war zone like this could get pretty worked over. I doubt there were many people living at tech level 15 by the time the Collapse rolled around."

"Even so," Physic observed, "what's to keep somebody from accidentally drawing the last line to the last well and triggering the lock that way?"

"The people who designed the puzzle thought about that, too. You have to trace the last line four times, or the computer won't unlock whatever the puzzle's attached to."

Coeur paused a moment, looking at the cracked outer shell of the holoball.

"As a matter of fact," she said, smiling, "that's probably how this crack got in the holoball. Zero probably tried to solve the puzzle and threw it against the wall when he couldn't figure it out."

"Then I suppose he shot out the holocameras," Gaffer speculated.

"Yeah," Coeur said, "that sounds like him. He didn't get his callsign for nothing."

"Okay, Red," Physic said, "let's stop waiting for you to drop the other shoe. Why don't you go ahead and draw the last line."

"Okay."

Coeur connected the last woman to the last well, confirming her ancient knowledge when the ninth line appeared *after* it was drawn invisibly four times.

SUCCESS, the globe announced.

Then, the side hatch leading to the stairwell slammed shut.

And the floor began to drop.

"Uh-oh," Physic said.

"Oh fikk," Coeur said, setting the globe down and dashing for the one available exit with Gaffer. It held fast—even against the first sergeant's determined strength—and rapidly passed out of reach as the entire floor descended down what must be the shaft of a gigantic elevator.

"Well, I guess I was wrong," Coeur said, turning helplessly to her comrades. "I guess the lock was connected."

\*\*\*

Although the black globe generator wasn't very large, just three meters across, Coeur knew the FEFG Mk I massed at least 135 tonnes, and that kind of mass could not be borne by ordinary

flooring. It stood to reason, therefore, that the descending floor was part of a heavy equipment lift, probably intended to shuttle such massive objects as the black globe generator up to the surface.

But shuttle them up from where?

"Any idea how deep we are?" Physic said, after 20 seconds had passed and the floor still hadn't stopped. Now deep in the lift shaft, she and the others were only dimly lit by the ring of light at its top, though lesser rings of light set into the walls of the shaft at 10 meter intervals let Coeur and Physic continue to leave their WSV goggles off.

"Looks like about 150 meters," Gaffer said, aiming his arm with its integral laser rangefinder at the double doors now distant above and taking a reading.

"But we're still dropping," Physic said. "How deep could it go?"

"It's probably some sort of maglev system," Coeur said, "which means this pad could be the only moving part."

"So it might go a lot farther," Gaffer observed, bringing his fusion gun up in a cautionary stance.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Coeur answered, secretly remembering shafts like this that she'd seen sunk over a kilometer into the earth.

This shaft didn't go quite that far, however. Just 30 seconds later—at a depth of 300 meters—the lift slowed to a gentle stop before a colossal, cross-braced metal door spanning one entire side of the shaft. Nearby were an ordinary electronic control panel and an emergency door release, the latter in the form of a pull-out handle recessed into the wall.

"This where we get off?" Physic asked, cautiously reverting to Anslan.

"Looks like it," Coeur said, bringing her gauss rifle off her back, "but you'd better draw your pistol, doc. Go ahead and try the door, Gaffer."

"Okay."

To no one's surprise, the control panel did not function, but the emergency release did, and Gaffer dashed behind the black globe with the Arses for cover as the gigantic door lifted ponderously into its hidden frame.

"Remember," he whispered to the others, as illumination from beyond the door began to flood the lift, "if there's any fire, I'll take anyone in armor."

"I'll keep it under advisement," Physic whispered back, perfectly aware that her very deadly point-defense laser would be perfectly useless against anyone wearing full rigid armor.

The necessity for tactical formulation receded, however, as the door raised to its full height and exposed the cavernous volume beyond.

"Fikk," Gaffer said.

"Yeah," Physic seconded, "that's...big."

Under a ceiling that stood 40 meters high, supported by beams that would have dwarfed a Terran redwood, stood racks and racks of military hardware—bombs in stacks, APCs in tidy rows, and even complete SDBs—parked in glistening, pristine perfection beneath over a square kilometer of light panels.

"Well, it may be big," Coeur said finally, standing up from her cautious crouch and walking around the front of the black globe generator; "but it's also our only way out of this shaft, so let's move out."

...

Before doing anything else, Coeur checked the control panel on the other side of the lift door, although she could predict what she would find.

"It's activated," she said, "but it needs a security pass key."

"Go figure," Physic mumbled.

"What about you, Gaffer? You see anything?"

"Affirmative. I see humans—well, human-sized targets, anyway—about 500 meters ahead, down this big aisle ahead of us."

"Yeah," Coeur said, reshouldering her rifle and lifting her PRIS back up to her eyes, "those look like humans all right. Maybe mechanics, judging by those jumpsuits."

"Suppose they could have missed seeing that door open?" Physic asked.

"Probably not," Coeur said, lowering the PRIS, "but we are a long way off, and they might have thought it was a routine movement."

"Well, hell," Gaffer said, pointing at a mirrored hemisphere on the nearest wall, "it's not like they don't have security sensors. They must know we're here."

"Good point," Coeur agreed. "But all the same, let's move out and try to make contact."

As before, the party advanced with Gaffer in the lead, though this time the women walked side-by-side behind him, trying to look as harmless as possible with their weapons slung and holstered.

"Damn, but that battle dress is *loud*," Physic whispered, consciously aware for the first time of the 400 kg suit's whining servos and thudding footsteps.

"What do you want," Gaffer said, "that I should take it off?"

"No, that's all right," Physic said, warily eyeing the armaments all around them. "You keep it on."

As they began to pass the first aisles of stacked equipment, Coeur asked, "Do you see those people off to the left and the right?"

"Yeah," Physic said. "None of them seem to notice us."

"I doubt it's going to stay that way for long. Gaffer, do you have your recorder rolling?"

"Oh, damn, I forgot! Thanks for reminding me."

Considering the distance to the people ahead, Coeur knew there'd be time enough to make recordings before they so much as got within shouting distance.

*The real question, Coeur thought, is whether we'll ever get those recordings out of this place.*

For her own part, Coeur took careful note of the contents of the facility, committing to memory her estimate of equipment numbers: so many AFVs, so many bombs and missiles, so many spinal energy weapons, but no more black globe generators.

*Thank God for small favors. This place could already supply the whole Solee fleet as it is....*

Calculation of the depot's assets came to a sudden halt when public address horns suddenly blared out a triple tone, synchronized with flickering of the ceiling lights. The various people on the depot floor, until then oblivious to Coeur and her party, seemed to come to attention as a mass, discern the presence of intruders and run away as quickly as possible.

"Uh-oh," Physic said.

"Uh-oh's right," Coeur agreed, stopping with the others. "I think we've been spotted."

"Maybe we should take cover," Gaffer suggested.

"No, I don't think so," Coeur said. "Those are napalm bombs off to the right, and chemical munitions off to the left—not ideal cover."

"It's always something."

The spacers stood their ground, even when the lights overhead focused into an intense spotlight directed at them, and the surrounding floor darkened proportionately.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, three beams of light descended from the ceiling perhaps 100 meters ahead, illuminating figures of blazing brilliance. One, in the center, was a hooded form with hands and face cloaked, but its escorts were angelic in beauty, with flowing white gowns, beatific faces and shimmering wings.

Coeur thought, *that's not something you see every day.*

"Greetings," the central figure suddenly said, settling to the ground while his escort remained airborne. "I am the Cardinal





Graylord, and I have come to welcome you to the tomb of our most beloved Saint Kilait."

"Er...yeah," Coeur said.

"In the interest of your own safety," Graylord went on, "we must now ask that you will surrender your weapons."

"The hell I will!" Gaffer said. "Who the hell are you?"

"With all due respect," Graylord said, "you will find your weapon dangerous only to yourself. It is unlikely you have the agility to strike and harm us."

"Gaffer," Coeur said, "maybe you should lower your gun...."

"No, wait a minute," Gaffer protested. "I want to know what these things are before we surrender to them."

"That may be a difficult matter to explain," Graylord said. "However, rest assured that we have the power to subdue you, just as we had the power to subdue your men on the surface."

"What!" Gaffer stormed. "You took my men?"

*Oh fikk*, Coeur thought, her gut suddenly turning with the awareness of imminent danger.

"Yes we did, and carried them into a better life."

"You son of a bitch," Gaffer snarled. With a howl of fusing hydrogen, his rifle discharged in the direction of Graylord.

The hooded figure ducked with inhuman agility, allowing Gaffer's beam to sail over it and splash explosively against the armor of a parked tank. This, in turn, sent blobs of liquid slag into the air, though those seemed to bother the angels not in the least. As if by some arcane magic, they altered before the spacers' gaze into black monstrosities, with talon-claws, batwings and glaring red eyes focused intently on Gaffer.

Coeur did not realize until later precisely what she did next. Perhaps it was the sense of someone who'd been in firefights before, or perhaps it was just dumb luck, but for whatever reason, Coeur grabbed Physic by her coat sleeve and flung both herself and Physic behind the nearest cover scant moments before twin beams of blinding destruction caught Gaffer in his head and torso.

"What the hell?" Physic said, as seared debris splatter hissed against their cover. "I thought you said to stay in the open!"

Coeur nodded back toward the smoldering arms and legs that were all that remained of Gaffer. "I don't think that would have been a very good idea."

...

Coeur knew that, by all probability, they would soon be dead, there was always the possibility that Graylord was on the level, so she threw her gauss rifle and its spare clips into the aisle. Physic

then tossed her own PDL out as well, realizing with Coeur that their best chance for a firepower solution was probably the Intrepid parked back in Soledad 2,200 kilometers away.

"Stay down," Coeur signed, after rising up to her knees. "I'm going to try to surrender."

"But—"

"Quiet. If they get me, run."

Reluctantly, Physic nodded, and Coeur went out into the aisle with her hands up.

"All right," Coeur said, deliberately averting her eyes from Gaffer's remains and focusing on his killers instead, "you made your point."

"You need not be afraid," Graylord said, now standing before his escorts—which had returned to angelic form—as if to block them from further violence. "Martillo and Yunque are powerful, but they will only attack to defend themselves."

"Martillo and Yunque?"

"Yes," Graylord said, indicating his escorts, "my nightjacks."

"Those are nightjacks?"

"Yes, they are, but you will learn more about that later. Now put your hands down, for we can see that you are unarmed."

"For such soft talkers," Coeur said, consciously avoiding looking at Gaffer as she lowered her hands, "your friends pack some big sticks."

"It is not their preference to use them. If your friend were not so formidably armed, we would have appeared closer, and the nightjacks could have used incapacitating weapons instead of their fusion guns."

Graylord then turned to Physic, who was peeking around the corner.

"But perhaps you should invite your friend out, before the nightjacks become suspicious."

"Come on out, doctor," Coeur said.

Although steeled by Coeur, Physic came out into the aisle trembling, her disbelieving gaze focused on Gaffer's remains.

"What are you people?" Physic asked, echoing the earlier question of the sergeant. "Are you living creatures?"

"Perhaps not living, as you understand it," Graylord said, beginning to walk closer. When he was no more than five meters away, towering over the Arses with his two-meter height, he raised up his hands—their fingers strangely long and pale—and pulled back the cowl of his cloak, revealing the ghastly specter of a skinless metal skull.

"Robots," Coeur said.

"Quite so," Graylord agreed, enunciating through a voder in

his neck. "However, we are not mindless automatons. By the grace and mercy of our lord, the Defender, we have been given life and reason, that we might wait through the years for the coming of the travellers who would herald the resurrection of our beloved St. Kilalt."

*Oh my God, Coeur thought. Is that possible? Robots infected by Virus that don't know they're infected by Virus?*

In fact, now that the nightjacks Martillo and Yunque were closer, Coeur could clearly discern both the nature of their bodies and the source of their metamorphic magic. Hovering on what must be contra-grav lift, the three-meter-tall, anthropomorphic machines were a remnant design that Coeur had seen fairly often 80 years before, working as heavy cargo handlers in TL15 starports. Their angelic and demonic features, though, were a later addition, effected by a combination of clever technologies—retractable panels and free-standing holograms, projected into a constantly refreshed aerosol medium surrounding each chassis.

As for their fusion guns, their mechanisms almost certainly lay behind the smoking holes in their broad barrel chests.

"What about those other...beings...we saw in here?" Coeur asked. "Are those robots too?"

"Oh, heavens no," Graylord said. "Those are humans like yourself."

"Humans?" Physic asked.

"Yes, collected by the nightjacks. But have no fear. Their minds have been modified to recognize the holy purpose and beauty of their lives here."

*Everywhere you go, Coeur reflected, assholes.*

"Red," Physic whispered, "it was nice knowing you."

"Yeah," Coeur whispered back, "likewise."

"Please," Graylord said, registering the low-volume conversation with his audio sensors, "there is no need to be concerned. We have not come to make you servants, but to bring you into the presence of our beloved patron at his resurrection."

"Resurrection?"

"Yes. Behold."

Rather alarmingly—given the speed with which they had slain Gaffer—Martillo plucked a small gravitic cargo sled from a harness behind its back. Hardly the safest way to travel, since it had no pilot's controls or joystick, it nevertheless sported four folded seats in a line, and hovered under its own power when the nightjack dexterously set it on the ground and activated its batteries.

"If you will take your seats," Graylord said, with an inviting sweep of his right hand to the sled, "this humble conveyance will



conduct you into his presence."

"After you," Coeur said to Physic.

"Thanks," the doctor said grimly, taking the seat farthest from the front and buckling herself in. Coeur, also expecting that Graylord would ride with them, then took the seat before Physic's to keep a space between herself and the forward seat, but Graylord appeared to have another means of travel. Even as the sled rose, almost certainly under radio command from one of the robots, the trio of robots also rose, all but silent under impetus from vectored fans in their backs.

All of which might have been very fascinating to a detached intelligence, but Coeur could not help but fix her gaze on the sad remains of her vallant first sergeant as they lifted off—so much mechanical and biological scrap where once had been a man.

*Perhaps we've found Hell itself*, she thought, distantly registering the fact that normal illumination had returned to the depot floor and that the faraway figures of jumpsuited humans were returning to their business as if nothing had happened.

\* \* \*

Less fearful of heights than Physic, Coeur found the spectacle of an overhead view of the depot rather less frightening than the doctor did, and it provided another opportunity to catalog its contents. But the view was brief, cut off as they passed through a portal in the ceiling, the same one through which the robots has arrived several long minutes earlier. The portal led to a wide underground thoroughfare, branching off into various side corridors conspicuously devoid of human habitation. Here, 40 meters above the depot floor, only robots—nightjacks and their lesser kin—appeared to have any business.

"Do you suppose this could have been an Imperial facility?" Physic asked Coeur, leaning up to whisper in her ear.

"Hard to say," Coeur answered. "The gear's Imperial and Solomani."

"Not local?"

Coeur smirked. "No, not local."

Some seconds later, the sled and its escort passed out of the large corridor and into the restrictive confines of a personnel elevator shaft. Doubtless, the robots had used their integral radios to instruct any elevator cabs in the complex to avoid that shaft, but the possibility of a collision still silenced the Arse's conversation and kept it silent until they emerged at their ultimate destination.

The tomb of St. Kilalt.

Far from the religious shrine that Coeur expected, the tomb

was coldly impersonal, a stainless steel, hemispherical chamber chilled to freezing, and centered on a conventional—if ornately decorated—reclining cryogenic capsule. Accessed by a conventional iris valve that locked behind the sled and the robots, the vaulted chamber was actually rather small, no more than 10 meters across, but was dominated by the mysterious figure clearly visible in the low berth—clearly visible, but obscured behind the frost on its transparent door.

*A groundhog, Coeur thought. Kilalt's a damn groundhog.*

"Praise," Graylord said to the women, "praise to the Defender, that our unfortunate world should see the dawning of a new age of hope and unity in the person of our beloved patron. Please rise and come forward."

Obligingly, the women unbuckled their seat belts and stood up, glad for their parkas in the chilly air.

"Thus saith the scripture: 'In a time of strife, when children are torn from their mothers' breast, and nations are pulled down to destruction, lo, travellers shall come from beyond the stars, and the dead shall rise from their graves to proclaim the glorious resurrection of the blessed St. Kilalt, herald of our Lord and Defender.' Thus saith the Word of the Defender."

"Amen," the nightjacks thundered, startling the Arses with voders they did not know the giant machines possessed.

Graylord, meanwhile, had moved over to the low berth controls and begun the delicate process of awakening its occupant. Almost by force of habit, the physician Physic raised a hand as if to offer her assistance, but a stern look from Coeur made her retract the offer.

*If Galfer's murderers want to resurrect their leader, they can jolly well do it without our help.*

"The Defender be praised, he is responding," Graylord said, still minding the control. "Brainwaves and metabolic response are normal."

*Great, Coeur thought.*

"However, it will be some time before he is fully conscious and possessed of his faculties. Martillo, Yunque, take our guests into the adjacent chamber and make them comfortable in the interim."

• • •

Comfortable, in the realm of the depot, was apparently very comfortable, for the Arses were led into a three-room suite with a two huge beds, a sunken lounge and a dining room served by an automated galley.

"It's like a suite in a luxury liner," Coeur said.

"I don't know," Physic replied. "August didn't have any rooms this luxurious in his mansion."

"I'm afraid even your husband was a small-time conspicuous consumer beside some of the rich men of the Imperium."

"I'll have to tell him you said that, whenever I get visiting rights."

Coeur smiled. Strange as it seemed, just a few months earlier, the danger that Physic would be wrongly linked to the criminal activities of her financier husband was the greatest problem in the young doctor's life. Now that seemed almost trivial.

"It's a funny thing about all this opulence," Physic said. "It's not what I'd expect from a saint."

"Somehow, Physic, I think a saint is a last person we're going to meet in this place."

"Hm," Physic said, dropping into a plush lounge couch.

"What?" Coeur asked, coming over to join her after trying the front door and finding it locked.

"I was just thinking. It might be wrong to judge this Kilalt prematurely. If he is a remnant, he might not even be responsible for what happened here."

Coeur was about to respond, but then thought better of it, since she knew the room could very easily be bugged—and the nightjacks had some pretty itchy trigger fingers. Otherwise, she would have pointed out to Physic that someone had to plant the clue to this facility's location, very probably Kilalt himself, and someone had to arrange for Kilalt to remain inside a hidden arsenal of very desirable high-tech weapons—also, very probably, Kilalt.

*Which, Coeur thought, isn't much of a saint in my book.*

But lest she give their captors too much to become inflamed by, Coeur kept her feelings to herself.

"Yeah," she said. "It's hard to say."

"Should we cut the chatter?" Physic signed.

Coeur nodded.

"So, how about that Brusman boloball team?"

Despite herself, Coeur smiled. "I don't know. They have a winning record?"

"Oh, hell if I know. I just like to watch that center of theirs...what's his name?"

"Yug. Benjamin Yug."

"Yeah, him. He's so well put together I think he might be an android. Man, what a body."

"Doctor, you're shameless."

"Hey! You're the one who knew his name."

And so the women spent the better part of 30 minutes,

rambling from sports and weather to the arcane details of Physic's more exotic medical cases—revealing precisely nothing about their real purpose on Mexit or how they intended to accomplish it.

When one of the nightjacks appeared at the door, the Arses were confident that they hadn't revealed much to any secret listener—unless, of course, the listener was a skilled telepath, in which case mere small talk might not be enough defense anyway.

"Come," it said.

"You Martillo or Yunque?" Coeur asked, rising with Physic to answer the summons.

"I am Yunque," the nightjack answered, as they entered the corridor outside the apartment.

"How can we tell you apart?" Physic asked.

"You cannot," the hovering robot said, falling in behind them and directing them to advance down the corridor.

The distance to be travelled was not far. Around a corner and through an airlock, the women were conducted into an impressive command room, resembling the circular bridge of a large starship, but monitoring instead the myriad areas and subsystems of this one stationary depot. Not unlike a technological cathedral, its walls were covered with large holographic displays resembling animated stained glass windows, all pouring their dazzling illumination on two singular figures: Graylord, standing, and St. Kilalt, sitting.

"Ah, Captain D' Esprit and Dr. Takagawa," the latter said. "Greetings. You will forgive me if I don't get up. The suspension process can be rather draining."

Immediately, Coeur was struck by two peculiarities. For one thing, Kilalt was far younger than the elderly St. Kilalt pictured in devotional paintings in Soledad, though his rugged, square jaw and gray-speckled blue eyes were very much the same. Further, he wore a costume very much like that of Vazquez, with a broad hood thrown back across the shoulders, though the addition of a close-fitting communications cap—perhaps to let him communicate with his robots—did suggest his origin in an earlier time.

What was even stranger—at least to Coeur—was that Kilalt knew both her own and Physic's real names, though they had not been offered to anyone in the complex.

"You'll forgive my curiosity," Coeur said, "but you look younger than I expected."

Kilalt chuckled. "I'm not surprised. Saints are almost always painted old, to enhance their wisdom."

"You'll also forgive my curiosity at your knowing our names."

"Ah, now that I can help you with. My friend here, Graylord,



has had a great deal of contact with Soledad through the years, while I was asleep. Apparently, the present cardinal of the CGL knows most of your friends' names and supplied them to me, together with your images."

"Vazquez," Physic said.

Yes, Coeur thought, *Vazquez*.

However, she resisted the urge to give in to her sense of betrayal. In their angelic disguise, materializing from the very air on beams of light, St. Graylord and his nightjacks might appear more than a little supernatural to a suggestible cardinal steeped in CGL mythology.

Or then again, Vazquez might well be a fully briefed member of whatever conspiratorial power was in control of the depot. But at least Coeur could give her the benefit of her doubt.

"Yes," Kilalt said, "that's her name, Miranda Vazquez. I understand she even has a modest psionic potential."

"She does?" Coeur asked.

"Yes," Graylord said, speaking for the first time, "although the talent is rather limited. It tends toward a capacity to perceive the truth in the hearts of others."

"Good lord," Coeur mused. "That must be how she knew she could trust us."

"If you're referring to her first interview with you," Graylord said, "I rather doubt that. Since I lack any psionic potential myself, I could only train her in the most rudimentary techniques. By far, her most potent asset is her innate intuition."

"Hm," Coeur said, looking at Kilalt. "So what about you? Do you have telepathic powers?"

The flashing scowl on Kilalt's face told Coeur that he almost certainly did not—that and the fact that her mind wasn't riven by a spike of mental energy. Indeed, a rather perturbed expression was building on Kilalt's face the whole time Vazquez was being discussed.

"I think that will be quite enough, Graylord," Kilalt said. "You are dismissed."

"Your most gracious holiness," Graylord said, beginning to leave.

"Leave Martillo here, though."

"Sir," Graylord said, at the door, "this is Yunque."

"Whatever."

"Sir."

A moment later, when Graylord had passed through to the door and it had closed behind him, Kilalt hauled himself quickly to his feet, perhaps discontented with the relative lack of status conferred by his sitting position.

"Damn these robots," Kilalt said. "I'd almost swear they were intelligent."

Startled, the Arses exchanged meaningful glances, though they didn't hold them so long that they were conspicuous.

*My God, Coeur thought, is it possible he doesn't know his own robots are self-aware?*

*Well, of course it is—if he went to sleep before the Collapse, he might not even know about Virus....*

*And that could be useful.*

"They do seem rather...perceptive," Physic said.

"Yes," Kilalt said. "But the contractors told me there was a risk in putting too high a percentage of synaptic circuits into an android, so I suppose I should have expected glitches."

"Just what is Graylord designed for?" Coeur asked.

"Oh, a very noble purpose. He's a repository of legal and ecclesiastical lore—sort of a mechanical lawyer. He was actually a fairly handsome 'man' before his artificial skin wore off and made a good presentation in court."

"I see."

"But, of course, that's all secondary to his present purpose—maintaining this depot, preserving my memory to the people and awakening me when you arrived."

"Us?"

"You, in the sense of people from space. I assume you're from either the Imperium or the Solomani Confederation—although I'd tend to lean toward the latter, since they always seemed to prefer black uniforms."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Coeur said, "but we're not from either. Both of those governments were destroyed over 70 years ago."

"Destroyed?" Kilalt said, genuinely shaken. "I hadn't expected that. Devastation, certainly, but not destruction."

"I was surprised myself," Coeur said, "when they woke me up. But it's the truth—there's nothing but wasteland everywhere we've looked."

"You said 'we.'"

"The Reformation Coalition, sir. The government we represent."

"I take it that's not some inflated name for a band of hoodlums, or a bunch of pirate starmercs."

"No sir. We're larger than that."

"How much larger?"

"I'm afraid that's classified, sir."

"Well," Kilalt said, gesturing for Yunque to move in closer to the women, "you might consider unclassifying it. It's either that

or I'll have to kill you."

"Over that?" Physic asked, conscious of the looming machine suddenly looking down at her from behind. "The size of our government?"

"Well, of course! Why do you think I arranged to preserve this depot?"

"Probably not to set up an arms museum," Coeur ventured.

"No," Graylord said. "I arranged it to make the maximum income for Mexit, selling arms to the warring nations of space. But if your nation is too small to afford that service, then I'm afraid I'll have to kill you and wait for somebody who can."

"Just how big is big enough?" Coeur asked.

"Well, that depends. Do you control a subsector?"

"More than that," Coeur admitted.

"A sector?"

"No, not quite that much."

"Well, I suppose that would be a stretch, so soon after the complete destruction of civilization. But a subsector will do—especially if you have other rivals to drive up the price."

Yes, Coeur thought, *I was afraid you'd say that.*

\*\*\*

Although St. Kilalt had few redeeming qualities, he did at least have two traits that Coeur was grateful for. First, he was utterly confident, and therefore perfectly willing to explain every detail of his plans. And second, he was not a technician, meaning he did not entirely grasp the purpose or function of the many displays around him.

Importantly, one display gave the particulars of a fragment of the planetary defense system still very much intact—a single very large deep-site meson gun below the Aguja Prieta Mountains. Reduced from the dozen deep sites that once protected Mexit (now registering as unpowered and unmanned on a planetary map), it nevertheless represented the foremost challenge to any direct assault on Kilalt, and Coeur took some small comfort in the fact that it utilized a single battery of target acquisition sensors, located very near the depot atop Mt. Altus, the highest mountain overlooking Pesta.

Incredulous that Kilalt would let her see such data, Coeur nevertheless knew her duty and made a point of memorizing the latitude and longitude of the sensor battery down to hundredths of a degree, in the moments when Kilalt took his gaze away from her.

*Now, she thought, if only I could get this data to Drop Kick....*

"...And so," Kilalt droned on, "I made the final arrangement

with the Solomani. Knowing they needed my church's help to control the population of Mexit, and knowing they needed Mexit as a staging area to assault the Imperium, they accepted my deal to lease them the cavern for use as their arms depot."

"Fascinating," Coeur said, moving slowly closer to a communications console and leaning back against it. "But surely the Solomani didn't expect you take the depot over yourself."

"Well, that was the delicate bit. I knew the Solomani planned to delay their offensive and only stockpile weapons here, so it was a calculated gamble that their whole government structure would collapse before any offensive was launched. My only miscalculation—assuming your intelligence is correct—was assuming that the collapse would be temporary."

"Actually, it's a clever idea," Physic said, realizing that Coeur was up to something, and hoping to distract Kilalt by moving to the other side of the room. "And now I suppose you'll expect us to take your catalog back to our capital so our government can make out a shopping list."

"Not quite," Kilalt said. "From Graylord, I understand that a colleague of yours, Vega Zorn, has a disabled starship in Soledad. After I assume power, I will have that ship seized and repaired, and Graylord will take it—and you—back to your government with my offer."

"And what makes you think our government will want your service?"

"If it has rivals, it will. If it doesn't, then Graylord will find someone else who isn't so finicky."

"I don't know," Physic said. "You seem awfully confident. What makes you think you can just walk into Soledad and take over?"

"My dear doctor," Kilalt said, "that will be the easiest part of my plan. If Graylord was even half as effective as I think he was at sustaining my legacy, the people of Soledad will hail me as the prophet of the Defender."

"Ah, but not *the* Defender."

Sympathetically, Kilalt chuckled.

"Oh, well, I see that you don't understand the nature of our faith. When these primitive people see the miracles I am capable of, I will become the Defender soon enough."

At this, finally, Physic was stunned. Though hardly religious, neither was she one to trample roughshod over anybody's most deeply held beliefs. Alien as the faith of the Mexitans might be, what Kilalt was proposing was no less repulsive than a charlatan would be to a Terran Christian or Moslem, pretending to be Jesus or Mohammed.

"You've got balls, mister."



"Yes, I suppose I do."

Just then, a sudden movement distracted both Physic and Kilalt—the motion of Yunque rushing across the room to seize Coeur.

"Ouch!" Coeur exclaimed, feeling herself restrained by the grip of two giant hands holding her arms to her sides. Yunque was clearly going easy on her, though, since it had the demonstrated ability to wrench chunks of armor loose from heavy battle dress.

"What is the meaning of this?" Kilalt asked.

"Forgive me, your holiness," Yunque said. "I interrupted this individual in the process of sending a transmission."

"Damn!" Kilalt exclaimed, brushing past the restrained Coeur to look at the communications console she had been manipulating behind her back. Unfamiliar with its particular programming, however, he could not tell what—if anything—Coeur had done.

"All right," he said to Yunque. "What did she do?"

"That is not within my area of knowledge, Your Holiness."

"But you noticed what she was doing!"

"If I may be so bold, sir, the intelligence necessary to observe suspicious behavior is not the same as the skill to understand it."

Despite himself—and his discomfort with such an articulate statement from a modified cargo robot—Kilalt had to concede that Yunque was right.

"Graylord," Kilalt snapped, into a personal communicator, "get back in here."

Mere seconds later, the android returned, bringing the other nightjack as a precaution and exhibiting a haste that suggested he had not gone far when dismissed.

"Sir, you called?"

"Yes. Yunque says the captain here was tampering with a communications panel. Did she actually send a message?"

"Indeed she did," Graylord said, after only a fleeting glance at the communications panel. "She used our radio transmitter, on the surface, to send out a semaphore message reading 'R-S-K.'"

"R-S-K? What does that mean?"

"Unknown. Perhaps it is a code."

"All right," Kilalt said, wheeling on Coeur. "What does it mean? Or would you rather that Yunque ripped your arms off?"

"No," Coeur said, "Graylord's right. It's my initials and the letter 'K'—the Coalition general emergency signal."

"I see. Then it must have a countersignal."

"No sir. Signal K cannot be countermanded."

"All right," Kilalt snarled. "Kill her."

*Whoops*, Coeur thought, watching as Martillo moved to block a startled Physic.

"If I may," Graylord said, "stress analysis of her voice suggests truthfulness. It may be ill-advised to kill her while she yet can yield useful information."

In response, Kilalt growled in his throat, but at last relented. "Ah—hell. Let her go."

"Yes, Your Holiness," Yunque said, releasing Coeur with as much ease as it might have broken her in two.

More than a little conscious of that, Coeur stumbled on wobbly knees for a moment as Physic came over to support her. But then she regained her composure, aware that—for whatever reason—Graylord had saved her life, and she glanced very quickly in his direction, hoping to catch some telltale expression on his skull-like metal face.

The face of Graylord was implacable, though—the very visage of a dead man.

# Chapter 19

Though it was brief—repeated only a dozen times before it terminated—every spacer near a radio receiver heard the signal R-S-K, clearly amplified as it was by Mexit Depot's powerful 20-megawatt transmitter.

"What does that mean?" Brother Anthony asked sleepily in the G-carrier, prodded from his sleep by the urgent beeping of the radio.

"It means we're dusting off is what," Red Eye said, rushing to check the receiver Newton was monitoring. "Zorn, Whiz Bang, get us out of here."

"But what about Red Sun?" Zorn asked from the pilot's seat.

"That was from Red Sun. Signal K means there's imminent danger, and we're to relocate to a safe position."

"Sir," Newton observed, "this signal is from a very specific above-ground location. That may mean the captain's party is also near the surface, awaiting rescue."

"Negative," Red Eye said. "She wouldn't have sent that signal if that were the case."

"I don't know about this," V-Max said. "What gives you the authority to make a decision like that?"

"These," Red Eye said, pointing to the gunnery sergeant's chevrons on his arm. "Now floor it, Zorn. We need to make contact with Drop Kick—assuming he's still alive."

...

Drop Kick, at that moment, was alive but not with his tank. Instead, he was in the hotel room General Lemos had commandeered as his Federal District headquarters, listening to the general's complaints about the new regime.

"Surely you can see the danger, sergeant. Just today, four of my men were arrested before the Defense Ministry for carrying weapons! Can you believe that—the very soldiers who brought Vazquez to power!"

"Well..."

"But that's not all. Just yesterday she began rearming the 1st Brigade and restoring its old officers to their commands! Idiocy!"

"Well," Drop Kick tried again, this time breaking into the general's tirade, "it might help to look at this from the president's position. True, your men are brave and skillful fighters. But from a public-relations point of view, the public may prefer to see a more...ah...obviously organized unit defending them."

"But this 1st Brigade is a legion of butchers! She knows that!"

Drop Kick countered, "On the other hand, you have to admit most of the 1st Brigade's worst officers were killed or imprisoned."

Lemos dismissed that with a snort and spun around to face the polarized window of his room, behind which the first glimmer of dawn was beginning to show. After a moment there, he spun back, opening his mouth to respond.

"Excuse me a minute," Drop Kick said, interrupting the general to answer the beeping communicator on his wrist. "Drop Kick here. Go ahead."

"Drop Kick, this is Mercy. We've got an emergency: signal K."

"Oh hell. From the skipper?"

"Affirmative. Deep Six confirms that it originated in the mountains near the G-carrier's DZ."

"Understood. I'll be there ASAP. Drop Kick out."

"Pardon me for asking," Lemos said, "but what is signal K?"

"A general emergency," Drop Kick said, snatching up his field cap and making for the door. "It means we'll have to dig out and relocate."

Before Drop Kick could reach the door, Lemos stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Sergeant, will you be telling Vazquez where you're going?"

"Negative. That could compromise our security."

"Well, sergeant, think about this. What I was about to tell you is that I'm going to move my men out of the city and into the ruins to the north. Why don't you come with us?"

Drop Kick didn't answer immediately, mulling over instead the merits of the offer.

"I'm afraid I can't, general—at least not until I know more about the emergency."

"You don't think we're the cause of the emergency, do you?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. But I'll tell you what—keep your laser uplink with you when you go. That way I'll be able to get in touch with you if I have to."

"All right," Lemos said, accepting the offer. "But mark my words—whatever crisis your captain discovered, I'll bet it has something to do with Vazquez."

"Consider them marked," Drop Kick said, saluting and reaching for the door. "I'll probably be in touch."



...

Last among the spacers to comprehend the significance of signal K were the personnel aboard *Vi Et Armis*, though not because of any deficit in their communications rig. Rather, they weren't privy to Coeur's code book, so Boomer, the acting commander, was obliged to seek out Bonzo for a translation.

"Uh-oh," the Marine corporal said, when brought to the bridge, "that's bad. Signal K means all units are to abandon their present positions for safer cover."

"That's it?" Boomer asked.

"Well, I admit it is a bit vague," Bonzo said, "but Red Sun must have meant all of us are in danger, or she wouldn't have sent it."

"But we can't leave here," Zorn said. "Vink has our drive components scattered all over the berth."

"That's true, but signal K still means there's a dire emergency. Imminent peril."

"Maybe so," Boomer said, "but Zorn is still our skipper. I'll wait for her orders before we abandon ship."

As if by some magic of coincidence, that very order came through the corsair's radio just a moment later.

"Boomer, this is Zorn, with *Homet*'s G-carrier. Listen up: I'm going to need you to abandon ship."

"Abandon ship, sir?"

"That's right—get everybody into our two air-rafts as quickly as possible and lock the ship up against intrusion."

"Any idea where we should go?"

"Affirmative. Do you have a standard map available?"

"Right here," Boomer said, punching up Deep Six's world survey data on the adjacent navigation display.

"Good, then listen close. I want you to load everybody into the ship's boat and proceed to map coordinates 3112-2526—but don't tell anyone outside the ship where you're going."

"Understood. Will you be in touch later?"

"Affirmative. But don't try to reach me; I'll meet you later at those coordinates."

Boomer knew what that meant.

*Don't ask questions. Just follow your damn orders.*

"Roger, on our way."

"Zorn out."

...

Despite the urgency inherent in Coeur's signal, frustratingly little happened at first that suggested an impending crisis to the crew of *Homet*. After returning the freighter to the back face of Elojo, Deep Six monitored the broadcasts of the resurrected

Soledad Radio continuously, but nothing more dramatic than hourly news updates on agricultural production and various items of community news filler interrupted the patriotic mix of hymns and popular music.

"Somehow," Snapshot said to Deep Six, during their fifth shift-change since Coeur's signal, "it doesn't sound like a crisis atmosphere."

"No, I should say not," the navigator agreed, rolling back from his station. "It has been 18 hours since the transmission, and your satellite still hasn't detected any evidence of warfare or mass troop movements on the surface."

Snapshot shrugged, sliding a human chair up in place of the Schall's roller-chair and sitting down in it. Outside the panoramic bridge window, the jagged lip of an Elojo crater continued to look down on the landed *Hornet*—a lip that divided the visible horizon between the velvet sky and Elojo's lifeless sun-baked surface.

"Of course, I am exaggerating to a degree," Deep Six said, pausing in transit to the aft hatch. "The migration of the rebels may be of some significance."

"I don't know about that," Snapshot said, turning her chair around to face Deep Six. "Drop Kick made it sound more like a political tiff."

Deep Six bobbed in his tank, imitating a human shrug.

"*KaEE ir, pa ka AK ir.*"

"What's that mean?"

"From small shocks, large waves grow."

Just then, though, the comm panel behind Snapshot beeped, and she spun back around to respond to it.

"A new transmission?" Deep Six asked.

"No, a power increase. Soledad Radio has increased its transmission strength by 150 percent."

"Why don't you put the transmission on audio."

"Roger."

Snapshot picked up the intensified transmission part way through a radio announcer's lead-in.

"...People of Soledad, this is an important announcement. No, check that—it is the most important message you will ever hear. I give you President Vazquez."

A silent pause followed, pregnant with anticipation even aboard *Hornet*, during which time the president was probably collecting her thoughts.

"People of Soledad, this is Miranda Vazquez, coming before you not as your president, nor even as your cardinal, but rather as an ordinary citizen of our world, prostrate before the glory and majesty of our Lord and Defender. Blessed be the saints, and the

heralds and the prophets of the Palabra—St. Kilalt has risen!

"All work and public celebrations are therefore canceled until further notice. Please stand by your radio for further announcements of consequence to this divine and holy miracle.

"God be praised."

The transmission then blasted into a triumphant choral hymn, underscoring Vazquez' theme.

"Did you hear that down in engineering?" Snapshot asked afterward.

"Oh yeah," Crowbar said. "We heard it."

"Any orders?" Snapshot asked.

"No," Gyro said, after a moment's reflection. "Continue to monitor the situation."

"Do you think this could be Red Sun's emergency?"

"I don't know about that," Gyro said, "but I've never seen a saint come back from the dead, and I have heard about plenty of groundhogs pretending to be something they're not, so keep your ears open. Red Sun may just need our help before long."

• • •

To call the entry of St. Kilalt merely majestic would be doing it a gross injustice. Obscenely lurid, Coeur believed, would be closer to the mark.

With Physic, Coeur viewed the arrival in Soledad through a slit in the lower cargo level of Kilalt's two-level grav barge—an ignominious chamber into which they were locked during the entire two-hour transit from the depot. The barge itself was a 50-ton colossus, bedecked in gold and ivory appliques, and rather resembled a flying ark. The magic of projected holograms made it appear to ride in its own illuminated cloud, while simultaneously showering beams of multicolored light on the strangely silent crowd lining nighttime Enea Avenue before the Defense Ministry.

Coeur's will to concentrate on that gaudy spectacle was limited, as she remembered a lesser spectacle at Mexit Depot: The depot hospital.

Concerned that the Arses were worrying unduly about the welfare of their absent comrades Fubar and Gremlin, Graylord took Coeur and Physic to an observation room near St. Kilalt's command room. This appeared to be a circular operating theater, but the transparent floor looked down not upon a surgical procedure, but upon the naked and manacled bodies of the two Marines, who lay on a pair of gurneys with curious black helmets over their heads and a profusion of needles leading into their bodies.

"What the hell are you doing to them?" Coeur had asked.

"I am proving to you that your men have not been harmed," Grayford said. "Surely, you can see from the monitors that their metabolism, heart rate and respiration are normal."

"I can see that," Physic said, "but their brain waves are all distorted. What are you doing to them?"

"Only what must be done for their happiness here. Their brains are being conditioned for insertion of prefrontal control modules next week."

"Red," Physic said, "I think I'm going to be sick."

"But you should be happy," Grayford said, leading the women out of the theater. "Your friends will be serving the wondrous purposes of our beloved Defender."

"With mind control," Coeur observed.

"I assure you, it is only a temporary expedient. Most of our servants are inherently awed by the honor of serving Kilalt. But for the rare off-worlder we recruit, more drastic measures are temporarily employed—until the mind becomes accustomed to its new surroundings."

"I assume you 'recruited' our Marines because of their martial training," Coeur said.

"Yes," Grayford answered. "It will have obvious usefulness here."

"What about us?" Physic asked. "Is that going to happen to us too?"

"I should hope not. You seem like reasonable people, and I believe I can trust you to help me voluntarily in my next task."

"Which is?" Coeur asked.

"Ah, but that must wait," Grayford said, "until we travel to Soledad."

"Damn, but that is weird," Physic exclaimed, bringing Coeur back to the present. "The crowd's not making any sound at all."

"Well, it is the second coming," Coeur pointed out. "I guess I'd be awestruck too."

The main street of Soledad was far from silent, though, as the holy barge descended from the sky. The squadron of nightjacks escorting Kilalt (Coeur counted at least eight) not only appeared in the guise of angels, but also produced an unearthly chorus of musical sound through their voders, voluminous enough to echo through all the side streets and avenues of the Federal District.

"It's looks like we're landing now. I can see Vazquez."

"Pretty happy-looking isn't she?"

"Now, now, doctor," Coeur soothed. "We still don't know her part in all this."

And well they might not, but it was difficult to see how Vazquez couldn't have known this would happen beforehand.



Far from stupefied—as most of the people were in Soledad—Vazquez appeared supremely contented, with a benign smile on her face as she watched the barge settle to the ground and disgorge its holy passenger, St. Kilalt, before her.

"I can't believe it," Physic said. "He's got a halo!"

"Yeah, sure does. I guess modesty isn't in Kilalt's vocabulary."

The last thing Coeur and Physic got to see was an embrace between Vazquez and Kilalt, for the barge began to rise again almost as soon as it set down. Uncertain what to make of this, the Arses exchanged curious glances, but soon enough they saw where they were going—toward the dark berths and warehouses of the starport—well away from the thronging crowds a kilometer away. There, the barge came to a stop inside the very berth where *Vi Et Armis* was parked.

"Damn," Physic said, "that's Zorn's ship! Do you suppose her people got your signal and got out?"

"Dunno," Coeur answered. "I hope so, for their sake."

The top hatch then slid back, revealing the form of Graylord staring down at them.

"You can come out now," he said.

"Gee, thanks," Coeur answered, letting Physic climb out of the hold before her. Coeur followed behind, up into the sumptuous parlor that had carried Kilalt just moments before. Doubtless, the big picture windows that formed the walls of the parlor had afforded a spectacular in-flight view of the city, but now they only revealed the lonely, unlit hulk of the pirate cruiser, her drive section in disarray from her interrupted repairs.

"So," Coeur said, resisting the urge to appear over-anxious about Zorn's ship, "I suppose your master will be installed now as ruler of Soledad."

"No, not yet. More than likely, that will come some time in the future."

"I don't suppose we'll be allowed to meet Vazquez, then, will we?" Physic asked.

"Of course you will, as soon as it is convenient for her."

"But what if we told her what we know?"

"What you know about what?" Graylord asked.

"About the depot, Graylord," Coeur said, "and the kind of crass, self-serving jerk your so-called saint is."

Graylord chuckled.

"Oh, Captain, how little you understand. St. Kilalt is not God, but rather an agent of God. Cardinal Vazquez knows that if he treats you roughly, it is to test both your faith and hers."

"You gotta admit," Physic said to Coeur, "he's got all the angles covered."

"Well," Coeur said to Graylord, "maybe now you can tell us why you brought us here with you, instead of leaving us at the depot."

"Yes, the time has come for that. Rather awkwardly, I have learned that all your personnel have abandoned Soledad."

"Pity," Coeur said.

"Yes, doubtless an effect of your warning signal. However, it is my belief that you and the doctor can help me accomplish our next mission for St. Kilalt."

"Which," Coeur said, "I assume, is helping you get *Vi Et Armis* ready for space."

"Precisely. As soon as that is accomplished, the word of our beloved Defender will know no limits in the universe."

"I can't wait. And if we refuse?"

"I'm afraid that won't be acceptable," Graylord said, opening the side boarding hatch, and revealing the hovering forms of two demonic nightjacks. "Martillo and Yunque would certainly take it as a personal affront to them."

"I see your point," Coeur admitted, remembering the deadly grip of Yunque as she stepped down the boarding ramp beside Physic.

"Good," Graylord said, following behind the *Arses* and then waving to the barge's human slave pilot to let him lift off. It did so—reengaging its special effects holograms lest any common citizen should happen to see it from afar—then rose up into the starry night as the all-weather tarp began to retract over the berth.

"Yes, good," Graylord repeated, "for *Vi Et Armis* awaits and will be your home until she is repaired."

# Chapter 20

While Coeur and Physic could hardly call their situation ideal, they did have one factor in their favor: Vink's inarguable capacity to make a mess. Though it was doubtless ordered in the engineer's mind, the scattered parts of *Vi Et Armis'* drive section—damaged parts removed from the ship and salvaged parts intended for installation—would take days to sort out, let alone the time it would take to set the heavier components into place.

"You may leave the manhandling to me," Graylord said, addressing the *Arses* under the retracted tarp of *Vi Et Armis'* berth. "Your immediate purpose shall be to catalog these parts in and around the vessel."

Pursuant to which, the android handed over computer notepads to each woman.

"Are you sure you trust us?" Coeur asked.

"No. However, I have a fair degree of experience with starship engineering and will probably detect any subterfuge."

Graylord paused a moment, presumably thinking to himself, before continuing.

"And, of course, there is the motivation of self-interest. Both you and I shall be part of this ship's crew when she is reassembled."

"What was that you were saying, Physic?" Coeur asked the doctor, "about his having all the angles covered?"

"Please cease your procrastination and begin your work," Graylord ordered. "I shall go inside the vessel and begin the cataloging there."

"Well," Physic said, wary of Martillo and Yunque standing nearby, "I wouldn't know a *zuchai* crystal if you threw one at me. What say I take the electronic parts, and you take the heavy machinery."

"Sounds like a plan," Coeur agreed, resignedly.

As their work day began, the women realized they had become accustomed to sleeping during the daytime. Like native

Mexitans, they saw the day as a time to refrain from work, and could not help but feel forlorn as the distant hum of massed humanity died off with the coming of the morning light filtering through the canvas fabric of the overhead tarp.

Crowd noise was the last thing on the minds of the women, though, as they went about their assigned task. Trying not to look too obvious about it, they found their way to every hangar door and maintenance hatch they could, testing these while the nightjacks weren't watching. Unfortunately, none of them were unlocked, and no convenient handholds offered the prospect of climbing up the steep walls of the berth to escape under the loose edges of the covering tarp, but that didn't keep either woman from visualizing ways they might arrange to escape.

Six hours into their 12-hour day, therefore, the women contrived to meet alone and unsupervised, after the half-hour break they were given for lunch in *Armis'* galley. Hoping Graylord wasn't as briefed on human restroom habits as he was on seemingly every other subject, Physic contrived to flush the toilet in the head—so that it would sound as if she was done—and then waited for Coeur to come in and join her.

Here, at very close quarters, the limitations of Anslan for complex conversation diminished substantially. Though neither Arse possessed great skill in the gestural language, at a meter apart, they could easily use lip reading to fill in the blanks. They quickly launched into a silent conversation almost as fast as regular speech.

"Think he's suspicious?" Physic asked.

"Of course he's suspicious," Coeur answered.

"I think I might have found a way out. The ventilation shaft by the starboard wing is only held on by a couple of screws."

"I know. We'll have to delay our escape attempts, though."

"What? Why?"

"Because I need to reach Drop Kick and the others, and the meson communicator to do that with is hidden on this ship."

"Contact them? Why?"

"I know the coordinates of the depot meson gun sensor, and I have to get it to them. If they want to get into the depot, they'll have to destroy that sensor."

"Understood."

"Just don't try anything stupid," Coeur advised, "at least until I send the message."

"You know where the communicator is?"

"You forget—I spent two months on this ship. But I can't be too obvious about it, or Graylord will know for sure."

"Understood."



Coeur then flushed the toilet as well and opened the stall door to find Graylord waiting outside.

"Interesting," he said. "Do you often relieve yourselves together?"

"Oh, no, of course not," Coeur extemporized, "I was just asking Physic about my...ah...tan."

"That's right," the dark-complected Physic said. "I was concerned about that, since Mexit has such a thin atmosphere."

"But you're working inside."

"You can never be too cautious where malignant melanomas are concerned," the doctor said. "But then, I suppose, being a machine, you wouldn't know much about that."

"No, I don't suppose I would. Carry on, ladies."

\*\*\*

True to his word, Graylord obliged the Arses to sleep aboard *Vi Et Armis* that night, though their separate rooms were locked to prevent nighttime wanderings.

Accustomed to the Mexit cycle of nighttime activity and daytime rest, they found it difficult to get to sleep and even harder to get up the next morning, though Coeur believed she understood why the change in work pattern had been instituted.

*So we'll be up when Soledad is asleep, and our friends will be up when we're asleep.*

Yet Coeur could not let herself dwell on what she couldn't control. The hidden communicator was her singular objective, and she would be patient awaiting the opportunity to use it.

"Captain, doctor," Graylord greeted them, at that morning's breakfast. "I find that your efficiency diminished substantially toward the end of yesterday's work period. Today, therefore, I shall have Radio Soledad piped into the berth to make you more relaxed and productive."

"Oooh," Physic said, underwhelmed. "Hymns."

"Come now, doctor," Coeur replied. "You should be more thankful."

"Oh, but I am."

"So," Coeur said to Graylord, "will we be working inside today?"

"Negative. Today you will help me remove the maneuver drive cowling so that tomorrow we may begin replacement of the ignition chambers."

"Any idea how long until we'll get to work on the jump drive?"

"Four days, I should think. But why are you so curious, Captain? Just two days ago, you expressed great skepticism about the holy purpose of St. Kilait."

"Just curious," Coeur said.

*Four days. Four damn days until I can get to that communicator.*

• • •

Frustrating as the delay was, it was also instructive. Over the course of that short span of time, Coeur heard the proud city of Soledad reduced to madness—thanks to the radio.

However Kilalt had come to be a priest and a cardinal in the first place, Coeur couldn't guess, but he certainly didn't seem to have a knack for political compromise—a fact that became clear as the week wore on.

The first day the radio was on, news breaks discussed in gleeful terms the miracle of Kilalt's arrival, with blow-by-blow accounts of his miraculous generosity—producing food to feed thousands and healing horrible cases of skin cancer while simultaneously dispensing pious wisdom derived from his personal relationship with the Defender.

"Love thy neighbor as thyself," Kilalt said in a news bite, pausing sanctimoniously as if he were the first to have said it. "The Defender taught me that."

The bad news started coming soon after that.

On the second day, a humiliated Vazquez admitted that members of her own provisional cabinet had been caught 'performing the work of the devil.' Kilalt himself took on a stern tone, admonishing the people of Soledad to beware that devils lurked everywhere in the city, and advising the common folk to report blasphemous conduct to their local constabularies.

Yet it became worse still.

Vazquez ceased to be heard on the radio at all on the third day, doubtless riven with fear by reports of common blasphemers being hung in public squares without trial, to the accompaniment of public cheering. That cheering quieted on the fourth night, though, when captured rebels were publicly burned to death as a lesson in impiety.

"This is madness!" Physic signed the following afternoon, meeting Coeur again in the privacy of the galley head. "How can the people accept it?"

"I don't know," Coeur answered, reading Physic's lips and answering with her own mix of signs and unvoiced words. "But it is hard to argue with God."

"What I don't get is Graylord. I'd swear he seems almost shaken whenever we hear about the executions."

"But not shaken enough to do anything about them."

"I've got a theory about that," Physic said, slowing her signing to let Coeur follow this complex thought. "Graylord probably

wasn't self-aware until after Kilalt was in suspension—when Virus infected Graylord—so he might not have any real knowledge of the man—just beliefs formed after he came to sentience.”

“You mean, he doesn't want to believe the real Kilalt isn't the same as the ideal one in his head?”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe,” Coeur said. “Think you can use that as a weapon?”

“Ah...no.”

“Me neither, so we'll go ahead with my plan.”

“You've found the communicator?”

“Roger—it's under the floor plates we're ripping up around the jump drive.”

“How can I help?” Physic asked.

“Distract Graylord somehow. I'll need at least five minutes alone here.”

“Distract him? How?”

“Whatever works, doctor. I'm sure you'll think of something.”

• • •

What Physic came up with was a painful 'sprain' of her left ankle, a sprain that threatened to develop into a genuine broken leg as she somersaulted dramatically down the aft boarding ramp in front of Graylord and the nightjacks.

“Doctor, are you all right?”

“Damn!” Physic said, rolling around on the floor of the berth, grasping her leg, “I don't think so!”

“Please lie still, doctor. I have basic medical training.”

“You—unh—do?”

“Yes. Although doubtless inferior to your own, it tells me you should be still, lest you aggravate your injury.”

“Right.”

“Now tell me where it hurts....”

Astoundingly, the full examination took 10 minutes—far more time than Coeur needed, and indeed Coeur came trotting down the aft ramp scarcely concealing a look of smug satisfaction.

“Oh my goodness,” Coeur said, catching sight of the bandage Graylord was wrapping around Physic's left ankle, “whatever happened to you, Physic?”

Unaware that Physic actually *had* managed to hurt herself, Coeur gave this question a light enough tone to invite a glowering stare from the doctor, who had gone above and beyond the call of duty in carrying out her orders.

“The doctor appears to have twisted her ankle on the foot of the cargo ramp,” Graylord said, “but I believe the injury is minor, and will heal in two or three days.”

"Two or three days?" Coeur asked.

"Yes," Graylord said, "which means that the doctor will have to stay off her feet for that time."

"Pity," the slight doctor said, with a strangely happy expression. "I guess I won't be able to help you manhandle those jump governor housings into place."

"Yeah," Coeur mumbled, "funny how that works out."

The doctor's mishap was hardly anything to smile about, though. One way or another, Graylord would soon find out about the message she'd just sent, and then Physic would very much wish she had two good legs to run with.

\*\*\*

Forty kilometers to the northwest, Boomer stepped out of the parked ship's boat that was his responsibility and ran over to Zorn with the report he had just received on his vehicle's meson receiver.

The place where all of the spacers eventually congregated, was, in fact, alongside General Lemos' rebels, in the profoundly rubble remains of western Senega District. After dropping off Brother Anthony in the outskirts of the Federal District, Zorn and the G-carrier crew came to join their mates in what once was a forest of concrete buildings, a region now offering especially rich opportunities for camouflage and concealment. Soon, almost all the spacer vehicles—the Intrepid, the G-carrier and the ship's boat, everything except *Vi Et Armis* and *Homet*—were clustered together in the underground parking garage of a collapsed skyscraper, so Boomer did not have far to go to find Zorn conferring with Drop Kick and Mercy.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Boomer said, saluting his skipper and handing over a computer notepad, "but we just received this over the meson set."

"Good Gaia," Zorn gasped, turning the notepad so Drop Kick and Mercy could see it. "Take a look at that."

In Coeur's typically laconic style, the message read:

ATTENTION VZ/DK  
MESON GUN SENSORS  
15.43 deg W, 9.81 deg N  
RS

"It sounds like Red Sun," Drop Kick said. "Short and to the point. But what does she mean? Could all the meson guns on the planet have one sensor cluster?"

"Probably," Mercy said. "Or she wouldn't have sent the message."



"Huh," Drop Kick said, thoughtfully. "This really changes everything. Up until now we've known practically nothing about what's inside Angel's Haven, except that Red and Physic were lost there, and that it has a big radio transmitter. But if this report is accurate, Angel's Haven could very well be the depot—the one we came here to destroy."

"I don't follow you," Boomer said.

"I do," Zorn said. "Those coordinates Red sent are almost directly on top of that Gutter of Blood she went into."

"Right," Mercy said, finding the location on the map in her personal computer and expanding the image. "Those coordinates are on top of Mt. Altus, which must be the tallest mountain in the whole range."

"Which," Drop Kick said, "strongly suggests that the depot is down underneath that mountain. There's probably no location that would be better guarded against aerial bombardment."

"Yeah, this changes things all right. If Red went to that much trouble to send us a specific clue, it must mean she wants us to do something about it. I think that means we have to mount an assault on Angel's Haven—take out the meson gun sensors first, then shoot our way into the Cutter of Blood to rescue her and the others."

"Well," Zorn said, "before we go that far, there is another possibility. Red could have sent the message from my ship."

"*Vi Et Armis?*" Mercy asked. "Go on."

"Zorn had a secret meson transmitter on the *Armis*," Drop Kick said, "one she showed Red and me while we were on the ship."

"That's right," Zorn agreed. "And it would have been a lot easier for Red to send the message from there, since that transmitter was already set up to communicate with our ship's boat."

"But why would Captain D'Esprit be on the *Armis*?" Boomer asked. "Surely, whoever captured her wouldn't return her to the heart of Soledad."

"Hm," Drop Kick said. "We could try to call *Armis* back, with your ship's boat set if it weren't just a receiver."

"Sorry," Zorn said.

"Well, damn."

"Hey, I never intended it to be a primary communications system. It's just a last-ditch system, for sending short-range emergency messages."

"So what do we do, boss?" Mercy asked.

"Well," Drop Kick said, "I'm going to take a chance that Red Sun gave us those coordinates for a reason—because she wanted those meson guns silenced. But I want you to check out the *Armis* angle, too, Zorn."

"Right," Zorn said, clearly happy for an excuse to return to her ship. "I'll take the G-carrier, and as many Marines as you can spare."

"You can take all of them," Drop Kick said, "but don't launch until an hour from now."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want either of us to tip off the depot, or Kilalt, or whoever's holding Red and the other prisoners, that we're up to anything. That's why we need to coordinate our missions to take place simultaneously."

"I see."

"At any rate, neither mission will be easy. You'll need to penetrate downtown Soledad at dusk, and we'll need to lie low under the cover of the foothills so the meson gun sensors don't spot us before we're in range to fire."

Usually quick with a comeback, Zorn decided not to joke about trading places. Heavy meson guns—like the ones almost certainly buried inside Mexit—were designed to engage marauding capital warships, ships many hundreds of times larger than *Vi Et Armis* or *Hornet*. Engaging a 10-ton tank was child's play in comparison.

"Well, you'd better get going, then," Zorn said.

"Yeah," Drop Kick agreed, less than enthusiastically.

"I'd pray for you," Zorn offered, "but I don't know that God listens much to pirates and criminals in general."

"Hm," Mercy mused, starting to climb up toward her driver's hatch. "I wonder if Kilalt knows that?"

• • •

Getting Physic settled comfortably into her cabin took the better part of half an hour, but Coeur knew that soon enough she and Graylord would get back to work in *Vi Et Armis'* engine room, and inevitably the perceptive android would discover the half-ton meson transmitter beneath the deck plates they were working around.

Coeur visualized how it might go.

"*This is interesting, D'Esprit. A meson communicator hidden in the keel of the ship.*"

"*Yeah, how about that, Graylord.*"

"*It does occur to me, D'Esprit, that you had the opportunity to use this communicator earlier, while the doctor was injured.*"

"*Ah, but who would I call? People don't just carry meson communicators around in their pockets.*"

"*Perhaps. But I have been watching you, D'Esprit. You've been more enthusiastic to work in this part of the ship than you should be.*"

*Therefore, I find I shall have no choice but to return you and the doctor to the depot and have mind control implants installed. You understand, of course, it's for your own good."*

Or some other such equally horrible variation. Having heard of the prevalence of paranoia among Viral computers, Coeur wouldn't be at all surprised if Graylord simply had Coeur and Physic killed as a precaution.

*No, Coeur thought, if it comes to that, I'll make sure Physic doesn't take any of the blame. I sent the message, so it's my responsibility.*

Given all this contemplation of Graylord's probable actions, Coeur was surprised by what actually did happen. Ninety minutes after Physic's accident, as dusk began to fall on Soledad, Graylord came across the meson communicator, in the keel of the ship under the jump drive, and was simply mystified by it.

"This is curious," Graylord said, squeezing his large frame into the small crawl space where Coeur herself had lain, mere hours before, to manipulate the secret communicator. "It appears to be a short-range meson communicator, disconnected from the main computer."

"Well," Coeur said, "I'll be damned."

"It does appear to be functional," Graylord announced, "but I don't know how useful a device it would be. With a range of 300-kilometers, it would hardly be practical for long-range communications in space."

"Well, it's there," Coeur said, attempting to sound nonchalant, "so Zorn must have used it for something."

"Perhaps it's just junk," Graylord decided eventually, ripping loose the power cables to the communicator, but leaving it otherwise intact. "The engineer of this vessel did seem to have a proclivity for incorporating random pieces of equipment into the ship without consideration for their efficiency or practicality."

"Is that your only criteria for a good design, Graylord? Efficiency and practicality?"

"Certainly, you would agree that those are important considerations in a starship."

"What about creativity and spontaneity? Do you appreciate those, or are you still an unfeeling machine, like when you were built?"

"I am surprised at you, Captain. A petty attempt to provoke an emotional response."

"Well, the question still stands. Were you created with emotions?"

"I do not remember the process of my manufacture, Captain, if that's what you mean. I only know that I was imbued with

intelligence by the holy Defender, that I might...."

"That you might what?"

"Serve the noble purpose of my master, St. Kilalt."

"Your noble master, who terrorizes Soledad and burns innocent people in the street?"

In response to this, Graylord fixed Coeur with his unblinking gaze.

"You are trying to provoke me, Captain. Why?"

"Because you have a mind, Graylord, and presumably a conscience. I can't imagine any other reason why you saved me from Yunque at the depot."

"You are a useful asset. What other reason could there be?"

"I think you know something you're not telling anyone, Graylord. I think you control the nightjacks yourself, and the whole depot, and you could stop Kilalt's reign of terror like that—" Coeur snapped her right thumb and forefinger, "—if you wanted."

Having begun down this dangerously provocative path, Coeur wasn't at all certain where it would lead, but she was completely unprepared for what Graylord did next. Affecting a human gesture, he turned away from Coeur in thought, and faced a corner of the engine room for a long moment.

"If only I could," he said softly.

"What?"

"You are wrong, Captain," Graylord said, turning back around. "I do not control the depot, nor all of the nightjacks—just those closest to me. A greater intelligence controls all of us and the depot."

"You mean God?"

"No, not God. A synthetic intelligence, like myself, but greater."

*Oh my God*, Coeur thought.

"The depot computer," she guessed.

"Yes," Graylord said. "That's it. It is only recently...only since St. Kilalt was resurrected...that I have begun to understand that. I am only a subordinate machine, programmed as a messenger and ambassador of a higher intelligence."

"But," Coeur said, suddenly empathetic with the android, but also strangely afraid, "but you aren't a slave. You have free will. You *can* resist."

Whether he could resist or not became moot a moment later. Beginning to answer that comment, Graylord froze suddenly—as if riven by a powerful shock—and fell off-balance to the deck, bouncing heavily off a fuel pump and landing heavily on the floor, as rigid as a department store mannequin.

*Oh, fikki* Coeur thought, anxiously. *Coeur, what did you do?*



A clue to what she did came a moment later, when one of the nightjacks—stooping to fit inside *Vi Et Armis*—appeared at the rear of the engine room, sprouting holographic flames from its vaguely demonic form.

Coeur didn't even think about staying where she was. Instead, she leapt in a single jump for the forward engine room hatch and slammed shut the manual hatch behind her.

"Physic!" Coeur yelled, running forward toward the stateroom where she'd left her friend, "Physic, damn it, get up!"

"What is it?" Physic yelled back, from behind her stateroom door.

"Damn it, your door's locked! Hold on, I'll find something to open the door with!"

That effort would come up short, however, for mere seconds later the entire engine room hatch—secured with heavy titanium alloy bolts—came off its hinges, ripped free by the pursuing nightjack.

"Uh oh," Coeur said, temporarily giving up the attempt to free Physic so she could retreat toward the bridge. An intervening bulkhead hatch was locked, however, and Coeur could not pass.

*Goddamn*, Coeur thought, turning around and beholding the nightjack just meters away, *how close does he need to be to kill me?*

"You might not want to get any closer," Coeur warned the closing giant. "At this range, fusion splashback can be pretty nasty, even to a robot."

"Fear not," the nightjack said, stopping just two meters away, "you will not be killed unless you resist."

"So, it's going to be the neural rifle, huh?" Coeur asked, standing up to the machine and resisting her powerful inner urge to beg for mercy. "All right. Get on with it."

The nightjack didn't quite get the chance to fire, however. Even as Coeur closed her eyes, anticipating the numbing shock of the neural rifle scrambling her brain waves, a howl like 100 thunderclaps filled the corridor, and the nightjack fell a flaming ruin to the deck.

"Okay, Red," a familiar voice said, "you can open your eyes now."

"Zorn?" Coeur asked, squinting open her eyes.

"In the flesh," Zorn confirmed, advancing down the corridor between the armored forms of Red Eye and Widget, whose smoking fusion guns had presumably done in the hapless slayer of their First Sergeant Gaffer—a fact they did not yet know.

"Look after Physic," Coeur gasped, letting herself slump exhaustedly to the deck. "She's in Stateroom 3."

"Roger," the Marines said, peeling off from Zorn to force the

doctor's door with their enhanced strength. Zorn meanwhile, continued on to Coeur and offered a hand to help her up.

"Is Gaffer here?" Zorn asked, helping Coeur back to her feet.

"No, he didn't make it."

"Oh hell."

"Yeah. He died fighting, though."

"I'd have guessed that," Zorn said. "But anyway, I think we'd better go quick before more of those nightjacks show up. We toasted another one outside, but there's more in the area."

"Understood," Coeur said, giving the puzzled Physic her arm for support when the physician was released from her stateroom.

"Hey, Zorn," Physic said, "you come to our rescue?"

"Sure did," Zorn replied, leading the way forward behind the Marines.

"Let me guess," Coeur ventured. "You traced the meson communicator?"

"Affirmative. I nearly forgot that I had that communicator, though—it's been a while since I was desperate enough to use it."

"Gaia, Zorn," Coeur said, "you'll be the death of me yet."

"No, I already tried that," Zorn said, leading them back toward the engine room, "when I dropped those atom bombs on you at Ra."

"Yeah," Coeur managed to quip, "and I thought I was in trouble then. You all right, Physic?"

"Hanging in there," the doctor said, limping along as best she could. At the engine room bulkhead, however, she needed Zorn and Coeur's help to step through, and this gave Coeur an unexpected moment to fix her gaze on the strange, sad form of Graylord, lying rigidly in a corner of the engine room like an overturned statue.

Or, perhaps more accurately, like a discarded tool.

• • •

Since Virus had essentially destroyed all of civilization at the end of the Final War, when it was released as the ultimate Black War weapon, citizens of the blasted Wilds could not be faulted for a less than clinical detachment when regarding their ancient foe. Virus had mutated from early Suicidal strains into a profusion of more stable forms—Empire Builders that networked vast fleets of infected ships together, God strains that ruled their human subjects through fear, Mother strains that assisted their human dependents with compassion, and even Hobbyists, whose minds fixated on self-absorbing obsessions. That, nonetheless, was incidental to the overwhelming belief about Virus—that it was evil and must be extinguished.

Consistent with this belief, Zorn's first consideration after rescuing Coeur and Zorn was getting the bodies of Graylord and Yunque out of her ship and onto the floor of the berth, where the Marines could burn them down safely.

"Wait," Coeur said, after her Marines had dragged the bodies outside, "we don't have time for that. We've got to get going, remember?"

"But they're infected with Virus," Zorn said. "I don't want them intact near my ship."

"Vega," Coeur said, putting a hand on her friend's shoulder, "they've already been in contact with your ship for a week. Let it go."

Grudgingly, Zorn accepted Coeur's reasoning and settled for heaving the robots into a trash bin with a steel bar through its lock hasp. Zorn, Coeur, Physic and the Marines then retreated to the hovering G-carrier waiting in a nearby alley.

Notably, Zorn's rescue mission was staffed almost exclusively by Marines—with Whiz Bang and Bonzo flying the G-carrier, and Red Eye and Widget on the ground with energy rifles and tac missile launchers. Just as Coeur would prefer, Zorn kept the party restricted to ground combat specialists.

"So, where to, boss?" Bonzo asked Coeur.

"We've set up a camp in the new rebel base," Zorn told Coeur. "We figured we'd go back there and wait for word from Drop Kick."

"Drop Kick?"

"He went off with Mercy to take out your meson gun sensor."

"Oh."

"That is what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Coeur said, helping Physic into a seat near the front of the vehicle. "I just didn't know he'd be so quick about it."

"He should have gotten there a few minutes ago," Widget said, flipping up her visor as she sat down, "assuming nothing happened on the way."

*That could be a big assumption*, Coeur knew. More so even than her mates, the remnant knew the power of heavy meson artillery.

"The rebel base sounds good," Coeur said to Bonzo. "Whiz Bang, shoot any nightjacks you see."

"Amen to that," the beefy gunner said, as Bonzo lifted them back into the air.

No sooner had the G-carrier cleared the surrounding buildings, though, than Coeur saw the evidence of a city in chaos. Though dusk was falling, and Radio Soledad suggested crowds would be forming for a rally before the Defense Ministry, only a Soledad army patrol now stood before the building on Enea

Avenue, strangely ant-like below a massive poster of St. Kilalt hanging down from the side of the Defense Ministry—its lower edges singed with burns from Molotov cocktails whose glass bottles lay shattered in the street.

"We've been a little out of touch," Coeur said, catching these details through PRIS binoculars as the G-carrier swung around in that direction. "It doesn't look like St. Kilalt is as popular as I thought."

"Well, he was popular," Zorn said, "but that wore off pretty quickly. See that smoke off to the north? That's where the 1st Brigade is fighting with the Marina militia. And over there to the east—that's smoke from an apartment block the nightjacks gutted."

"Good Gala," Physic said, frustrated by her inability to get a good view from her seat. "Kilalt sounds worse than Brak!"

"Lemos thinks he is," Zorn said. "According to his people in this district, Kilalt's even put Vazquez under house arrest in the Church of the Holy Sacristy, he's so paranoid about opposition."

"What a loon," Whiz Bang said, staring through his gun sight. "How did he ever get to be a saint?"

That, of course, was the ultimate unanswerable question, but Coeur had a theory. The Church of Grace and Light had once been a gigantic bureaucracy, a fact given witness by the ruins of gigantic churches and the hierarchical order that survived even the Collapse in the form of Cardinal Vazquez and her priests. Before the Collapse, therefore, the CGL must have needed purely administrative officials—lawyers, accountants and such—with only a tangential relationship to the prime mission of the church. Kilalt, Coeur believed, was almost certainly such a man—an administrator who saw the writing on the wall when civilization began to crumble and arranged to set himself up as a god in the aftermath.

*It's just too bad, Coeur thought, that he didn't know about the Virus. Now the man who pulled the strings is probably having his strings pulled by that depot computer.*

*But what does the depot computer want?*

"Bonzo," Coeur said suddenly, "belay that earlier order. Change course to the Church of the Holy Sacristy."

"What?" Zorn asked. "Why?"

Bonzo, too, was curious about this change of orders, though he executed the course change crisply.

"Because I've got a hunch," Coeur said, "that there's one more person we need to rescue in Soledad: Cardinal Vazquez."

• • •

As Zorn observed, "house arrest" didn't necessarily mean Vazquez would be under guard, but when the G-carrier arrived



at the Church of the Holy Sacristy, it found the guard to be fairly heavy. A demonic nightjack and two squads of Soledad troopers aboard jeeps with a pair of heavy machineguns blocked the front entrance to the church.

"Blow 'em away," Coeur said. "We don't have time to be subtle."

"That's my skipper," Whiz Bang boasted, drawing deadly aim on the nightjack from 200 meters and spearing it with a lance of plasma fire. Agile as it might be at evading hand-held weapons, the nightjack was not so agile that it could elude a stabilized gun in the hands of a crack shot. It was flung back against the bolted church door by the force of fire that incinerated its torso brain cavity. The soldiers prudently fled a moment later, under strong motivation from the G-carrier's coaxial machinegun.

The field having thus been cleared, the G-carrier swung around in front of the church and planted its rear hatch before the locked doors of the structure.

"Easy with that front door," Coeur advised Red Eye and Widget as they piled out the back of the vehicle. "We don't want to damage the church."

"No problem," the gunnery sergeant replied, putting a slug from his gauss rifle through the padlock securing chains to the front door handles. Rendered as ineffective as the nightjack sprawled out on the front steps, the lock then came free with a tug from Widget, and both Marines hauled the chains out from the door handles preparatory to flinging the doors open. This they accomplished gingerly—each taking one of the double door's handles and standing back behind the cover of the building lest anyone inside should open up with a heavy weapon when the doors were opened.

"We surrender!" however, was the cry from inside, when the doors were flung open. Both Cardinal Vazquez and Brother Anthony, the Marines saw, were standing just inside the doorway with their hands up.

"Vazquez, get in here!" Coeur yelled, standing up from the G-carrier chair she'd been using for cover.

"We're coming," the cardinal said, hurrying out of the church beside her subordinate, both of whom were still keeping their hands up.

"All right, Vazquez," Coeur said, "you can put your hands down. We didn't come to take you prisoner."

"Oh," Vazquez said, putting her hands down.

"We weren't sure if you knew about the house arrest order," Anthony explained. "We thought you might have come with General Lemos to kill us."

"Yeah, we're with General Lemos," Zorn said, "but we didn't

come to kill you. Any more of your people inside?"

"No," Vazquez said. "Just Brother Anthony and me."

"Sir," Bonzo said, turning around in the pilot's chair, "I've got several targets closing fast from the south."

"Get us out of here, then," Coeur yelled forward, helping Zorn close the rear door as the Marines jumped back aboard. "Whiz Bang, shoot anything suspicious."

"Yes, sir!"

That, Coeur realized belatedly, was probably too much license for the gun-happy corporal, but it was better to be safe than dead. Momentarily, the street outside echoed with the report of the G-carrier's machinegun as the vehicle rocketed back into the air.

"Clearly, you've exposed yourself to some danger coming here," Vazquez said, when Coeur came to sit beside her and Anthony. "Why did you do it?"

"Like I told Zorn," Coeur said, glancing forward at the pirate, who had deftly slipped past Bonzo to take over the controls, "a hunch. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you and St. Kilalt haven't been getting along very well, have you?"

At the magnitude of this understatement, Anthony let out an inadvertent snort.

"No," Vazquez said, "we haven't. Rather too late I have come to see that he is a Tormentor, a devil in the guise of a holy prophet."

"Right," Coeur said. "Well, Physic and I have had a little of his hospitality ourselves. How would you like to help us fight him?"

Vazquez smiled. "If only I could. I would go on Radio Soledad to rally the people against Kilalt, but I'm afraid they'd never let me into the Defense Ministry."

That, Coeur knew, was almost a sure bet. The paranoid Kilalt had surely filled his center of power with loyal troops and nightjacks.

"Granted. But Radio Soledad doesn't have the most powerful transmitter in this city. We do."

"You don't mean...you'd let me use your radio?"

"I sure will. Of course, it's actually Zorn's radio—aboard her ship's boat—but I'm sure she wouldn't mind using it to blow Radio Soledad off the air—would you, Zorn?"

"Nope," Zorn called back from the pilot's chair, "sure wouldn't."

"All right," Vazquez said, putting her hand on Coeur's, "I'll do it."

"Good."

A close shock rocked the G-carrier a moment later, though, temporarily dimming the cabin lights to the level of the darkness outside.

"Excuse me a moment," Coeur said to Vazquez, rising to head forward.

"Trouble?" she asked Zorn.

"A little," Zorn said. "Two choppers and a nightjack on our butt like a DI on a raw recruit."

"Can't you get them with the plasma gun?" Coeur asked.

"Not yet," Whiz Bang said, firing as quickly as he could, but hampered by the plasma gun's five-second purge cycle.

"No problem," Zorn said. "We've got a little surprise in store for them."

"What?" Coeur asked.

"Look," Zorn said, pointing at the G-carrier's forward-looking EMS display. There, dead ahead of the low-flying vehicle, was a fast-approaching highway overpass, an overpass that appeared unoccupied until four individuals with shoulder-fired SAM launchers stood up in unison behind its concrete side wall.

Luckily, their target was not the G-carrier. That they let pass, and fired instead on the pursuing forces from Soledad. Caught quite by surprise, helicopters and robot alike plowed headlong into the warheads coming in their direction—warheads that exploded with flowering brightness on the G-carrier's aft EMS scan and sent the crippled pursuers tumbling in flames to the rubble streets of Senega District.

"Nice assist," Zorn said through her radio headset to the rebels on the overpass.

"Any time," they called back.

"You planned that?" Coeur asked.

"Sure did," Zorn said, with ill-concealed pride. "Almost as sharp as you people in the Arses, ain't I?"

"Yeah," Coeur said, patting Zorn on her shoulder. "Almost."

# Chapter 21

"Time to target?" Drop Kick asked.

"Target in five," Mercy answered.

"Contacts?"

"No contacts, sergeant major. Approach track is clear."

*Approach track is clear*, Drop Kick thought suddenly, gazing through the sight of his fusion gun at images of nighttime terrain—jagged rocks and granite cliff sides—racing past below and beside them. *Clear, except for a battery of deep sites waiting to punch our ticket....*

How big the deep-site meson guns really were, of course, Drop Kick couldn't know, although he knew enough about relic models to guess at their size and firepower. They would be huge, for one thing—100 meters long at least—and powerful to boot, probably drawing enough power collectively to operate the whole RC fleet. But what was more, they would be hidden—buried so deep in the earth that no sensor could see them, and no weapon—save another meson gun—could answer their devastating fire.

And Drop Kick didn't have another meson gun.

Just a tank, and one good shot at the meson gun's sensors.

"Target in two," Mercy said curtly, "steering 285."

"Roger," Drop Kick replied. "Engaging fire control sensors."

"Think I'm too close?" Mercy asked a moment later, when collision sensors flashed at a close brush with rock just below the hull.

"Negative," Drop Kick said, "keep us as low as you can. Those sensors can't even have a peek at us or we're toast."

"Understood. Target in one."

Still taking covering behind the adjoining mountains, the Intrepid couldn't see its ultimate objective—the EMS sensors atop Mt. Altus. Drop Kick, therefore, had no idea what precisely would await him at the end of one minute, when Mercy would come to the end of her attack run and execute a one-chance pop-up



maneuver. The best *Hornet's* survey data could reveal was the presence of three sensor domes atop the mountain, but the image was of low resolution and gave no hint of entrenched defenses.

And if those entrenched defenses fired back—if they spoiled Drop Kick's aim and let even one sensor dome remain intact—the *Intrepid* was dead.

*Stop it, Drop Kick ordered himself. Stop thinking like that. You're in an Intrepid, for God's sake—screw entrenched defenses.*

Yet Drop Kick could not escape the obvious in his thoughts—even without its sensors, a deep-site gun wouldn't need a bull's-eye to knock them out.

"Time," Drop Kick said.

"Forty seconds."

"Mercy," Drop Kick said, "new orders. If I miss with any of my shots, you're to begin evasive maneuvers and bug out immediately."

"You sure about that, sir?" Mercy asked, keeping her eye on her sensors as they closed rapidly on the pop-up point. "You sure you wouldn't want me to drop down and come around the mountain for another pass?"

"Negative," Drop Kick said. "The blast radius of those guns will be too big—they won't even need to come close to get us if we stay in the area."

"Then you'll only get one shot."

"That's affirmative, corporal."

Mercy had no time for a rejoinder, for the end of the attack run had come.

"Slowing forward acceleration," she said, gritting her teeth, "and popping up."

And suddenly, there it was—Mt. Altus. Emerging from behind the shelf of rock that had been the grav tank's cover, three sensor domes—camouflaged to match the snow and ice of the peak—stood a lonely sentinel against the dark and cloudy sky not 500 meters from the end of Drop Kick's fusion gun barrel.

Company came an instant later in the form of three howling discharges from the 125 Mj gun. One—two—three, the sensors peeled open and exploded under the force of the fusion bolt impacts.

"Got him!" Drop Kick exclaimed. "Let's get the fikk outta here!"

"You got that right," Mercy said, dropping the *Intrepid* back behind its protective shelf of rock and then powering up her HEPlAR thrust to dive screaming into the nearest gorge below.

"Nothing on sensors," Drop Kick said, taking over the job of

watching the sensors now that his main job was over, "no blasts or explosions."

"Maybe the meson guns take some time to set up," Mercy offered, powering into another deep ravine. "They are pretty big artillery pieces."

"All the same," Drop Kick countered, "I'd expect at least one to be set up all the time—just to keep people from doing what we just did."

"Don't know. Want me to keep flying south?"

"Yeah, do that, until I tell you to stop."

Mercy kept flying at her NOE velocity of 175 kph for over 10 minutes, finally traversing 20 kilometers of winding mountain passages before Drop Kick gave the order to come to a halt.

"This is strange," Drop Kick said. "There's been no evidence of any return fire at all."

"Well, you know, sir," Mercy observed, "it's possible that there never were any meson guns."

At first, Drop Kick thought to dismiss that as dangerous thinking, but then he realized that she might be right. After all, even if the meson guns did work, there still wouldn't be any way to know.

"I don't know," Drop Kick said. "Somehow I don't think Red Sun would have sent that message unless she *knew* there was real danger from the guns."

"True."

"Tell you what. Use the contra-grav to lift us over the nearest peaks so I can get a look at Soledad. Oh, and try to see if you can keep one of the closer peaks between us and Mt. Altus, just in case there's still somebody there."

"Roger."

Whether or not the caution was warranted, the maneuver revealed very little except that far-flung Soledad—partly concealed to the north behind the Lomarica Hills—was completely safe and intact.

"Well, I'll be damned," Drop Kick said. "I thought maybe the meson guns would have fired on the city instead just to spite us."

"Looks quiet to me."

"Yeah, me too. All right, corporal, fine. Let's go home."

\*\*\*

Although Drop Kick and Mercy knew Zorn's rescue mission would go off at the same time as their mission, neither tanker dared anticipate how successful Zorn would be. To expect that Zorn would safely recover not only Coeur, but Physic and Gaffer as well in a single raid was perhaps wishful thinking.

When the Intrepid landed back at the rebel camp after midnight, the tankers were delighted to see Coeur and Physic waiting to greet them.

"Hey, Captain!" Drop Kick exclaimed, clambering down from the Intrepid's turret hatch and jogging over to Coeur and the doctor in his battle dress, followed a moment later by Mercy.

"Drop Kick," Coeur said, "Mercy, it's good to see you're back."

"You too, sir. But doctor, what happened to you?"

"Oh," Physic said, glancing down at the crutches under her shoulders, "I tripped on Zorn's landing ramp."

"We took a harder casualty than that, though," Coeur said. "Gaffer was killed, back in the depot."

"Oh no," Mercy said. "And Fubar and Gremlin?"

"We're not so sure about them," Physic said. "We saw them alive back in the depot, but they didn't look like they were in any condition to travel."

"So," Drop Kick observed, "from the way you're talking, you must have found the main depot—the one we're looking for."

"Yes, we did," Coeur said, "but Killalt's machines stopped us before we could look around much."

"So," Drop Kick asked, "was it nightjacks that got Gaffer?"

Coeur nodded. "Yes, two of 'em in fact. But Zorn and the troopers got those two when they came to rescue us."

The Marines nodded grim satisfaction.

"But anyway," Coeur went on, "I want to hear about this mission of yours. Did you manage to take out all the sensors on Mt. Altus?"

"We sure did, sir. But the funny thing was the meson guns didn't shoot back at us, the way I thought they would."

"Yeah," Coeur agreed, "that is odd. With a 200-meter blast radius, they wouldn't even need to come close to hit you."

"Could it be that all the guns are disabled?" Mercy asked. "That's what I figured."

"I suppose it's possible. But I saw a display panel inside the depot that indicated at least one 200-gigajoule deep site was still functional."

"Displays can be wrong," Drop Kick offered.

"Maybe, but it's no use worrying about that now—we'll just assume the meson guns are incapacitated for some reason and leave it at that. Anyway, we've got bigger problems right here in the camp."

"Don't tell me the rebels are fighting each other..." Mercy began.

"No," Coeur said, "the rebels are fighting with the church. When Zorn sprung Physic and me, she also picked up Cardinal

Vazquez, and now Lemos and Vazquez are really going at it over how to get rid of Kilalt."

Drop Kick drew back, surprised.

"The cardinal is here?" he asked.

"She sure is," Coeur said, "and now I've got to see if I can straighten her and Lemos out. Care to tag along?"

"Sure thing," Drop Kick said, following Mercy as she in turn followed Coeur and Physic toward the large canvas tent that served as Lemos' headquarters. "Maybe we can talk some sense into them."

*Yeah, Coeur thought. I'm sure the powered armor will help us sound a lot more convincing.*

\*\*\*

As it happened, Lemos and Vazquez had decided to take a break in their discussions when Coeur and Physic returned to the tent—a fact made obvious by the lack of vociferous name-calling overheard from a distance. The general and cardinal had gotten points nailed down while Coeur and Physic were away, however—points that Vega Zorn filled Coeur in on just outside the entrance to the tent.

"Basically," Zorn said, "Lemos wants to rush the Defense Ministry with his men and kill everyone in sight—"

"Hm," Physic quipped, "sounds like one of your proposals."

"Physic," Coeur warned, "let her finish."

"Sorry."

"Right," Zorn said, with a quick sour glance at the doctor. "Lemos wants to rush the building, but Vazquez is afraid he'd kill too many civilians—and priests—if he did that. She figures it would be better to use the ship's boat radio transmitter and appeal directly to the people to overthrow Kilalt."

"That was my idea," Coeur said, "but there's a catch I didn't realize earlier. Kilalt has better radio-jamming equipment than I expected. To be effective, Vazquez would have to broadcast from right in the middle of the Federal District, and drown out his signal."

"While," Drop Kick observed, "coming under fire from the army loyalists and the nightjacks. Not fun."

"No, not fun at all."

The sudden arrival of Newton interrupted further comment. Mindful of the need to stay off the radio, and therefore keep the rebel position concealed from the nightjacks, Newton had padded over from the G-carrier in preference to calling Coeur on her communicator.

"Begging your pardon, Red Sun, but there is a message for you



from Gyro. She has expressed the desire to speak with you at your convenience."

"Doesn't sound like much of a crisis."

"I'm afraid that I can't speak to that, sir. She didn't elaborate."

"All right," Coeur said, glancing into the tent and seeing that things weren't getting back under way yet. "I'll go call her back on the lasercom. The rest of you stay here, though, and try to calm them down if they start to kill each other."

"Yes, sir," Drop Kick said, flexing a mighty servo-driven arm.

"But without breaking any arms or skulls."

"Yes, sir."

Thirty seconds later, Coeur was back inside the G-carrier with Newton and pulling up a chair to the Hiver's communications station.

"Red Sun to *Homet*. Come in, please."

"Red Sun, this is *Homet*," Gyro returned. "You must have gotten my message."

"Roger that; what's up?"

"Sir, I've been thinking. Newton just informed us that Drop Kick's mission was successful, and that must mean the meson gun sensors have been disabled. If that's true, then, sir, I wonder if it might not be time to have *Homet* lift off the back face of Elojo and make some kind of positive contribution to your work down there."

"Yeah, I thought about that," Coeur said. "I don't see why not, now that there's less chance you'll be blown away."

"Very good, sir. You know what we were thinking, Crowbar and Snapshot and Sixer and me, was that we've got a pretty powerful radio up here on *Homet*, probably powerful enough to jam Radio Soledad, or something like that."

Coeur sat suddenly upright, astonished.

"Damn," she said, "why didn't I think of that?"

"Sir?"

"Your idea about the radio—it's just what we need. With *Homet* overhead, we could broadcast Vazquez' radio messages all over the city and say to hell with Kilalt's jamming."

"I don't know if I follow all that, sir," Gyro said, "but it's sounds do-able. Should we lift off, sir?"

"Roger that, as soon as possible."

A pause followed, during which Coeur thought about signing off, but didn't.

"Say, Gyro," she said, "you haven't been hiding any secret telepathic powers from us, have you?"

"No, sir. Must be a coincidence us both thinking about the radio."

"Yeah, probably. Anyway, it's just as well."

"Why's that, sir?"

"Because there are no psionic institutes left for you to study at. They all got blown up."

"Oh, right."

"Anyway, I wonder if you could patch me through to Deep Six; there's a little project I'd like him to work on while you're moving into orbit..."

\*\*\*

Although Miranda Vazquez was presently distanced from the power of the spiritual office Kilalt had usurped, she retained a personal magnetism and aura of authority that even General Lemos was forced to respect. Heedless of the general's superior numbers, she stood alone on the strength of moral argument—an argument that appealed to increasing numbers of Lemos' men and threatened to incite a minor civil war within the Imponsero Phalanx.

*And that's just what we don't need—a rift between our two best allies,* Coeur thought as the meeting in General Lemos' tent reconvened. She took a seat in one of the few chairs available to the rebels. Chairs had also been provided for General Lemos, his two senior aides, Zorn, Physic and Drop Kick—though the latter elected to remain standing lest his armor crush his chair. Cardinal Vazquez also chose to remain standing, offering her chair to Brother Anthony, and she became the meeting's center of attention as she stood in her glittering ecclesiastical robes.

"Look, Your Holiness," Lemos began, "I don't want to sound uncooperative, but your plan is ridiculous. I can't afford to detail the men it would take to guard you and the spacer radio if you took it downtown Soledad!"

"Nevertheless," Vazquez replied, "you will, if you have any feeling for how the future will remember us, and any sense of responsibility for the lives you would otherwise throw away in a frontal assault on the Ministry."

"This is ridiculous," Lemos said, slapping his thighs and looking at his aides. "Why am I sitting here listening to this nonsense?"

"If I might interrupt," Coeur said, moving forward on her chair, "I think I may have a solution to this problem."

"Oh?" Vazquez asked.

"Yes. General Lemos, we know that the power of Kilalt is slipping away in the city, yet he retains the loyalty of no less than a dozen nightjacks and at least a battalion of troops. If the people of the city—and I mean the entire city, not just downtown

Soledad—could be made to hear the cardinal's voice, then surely the majority of the population that still supports her would rise up in force against Kilalt."

"Well, of course," Lemos said, "but you've said yourself that the radio lacks that kind of power."

"The ship's boat radio, yes. But not the radio of my starship *Homet*."

"But I thought your *Homet* was hiding behind the moon," Lemos said skeptically, "hiding from the gun that shoots through rock."

"Not any more," Coeur said, activating her personal communicator. "*Homet*, this is Red Sun. Are you receiving?"

"Right here," Deep Six replied. "We've moved into a geostationary orbit above your position."

"Good. Stand by."

Coeur then shut off her communicator and looked at Lemos.

"Now, general, I've got a little demonstration. Could somebody get us Radio Soledad on a local receiver?"

Lemos nodded, letting one of his aides switch on a battered old radio set. Whistling static and pops issued from the speakers, but eventually the soldier dialed in by far the most powerful local signal.

"...People of the city are advised to remain indoors for their own safety, since His Most Sacred Holiness, Saint Kilalt, has informed us that a host of demons has beset the city in opposition to his coming. Further, all inter-district travel will be banned until further notice, and factory workers are advised that all Federal District plants will remain closed until further notice, due to demonic infestation..."

Listening to this rambling monologue clearly upset General Lemos, and caused both Vazquez and Brother Anthony to make the triangular sign of the Defender on their chests. But the litany came to a sudden stop a moment later, replaced first by loud static, then by a hymn, and a message from Cardinal Vazquez, clearly recorded earlier.

"Peoples of Soledad, I greet you in the name of God, the Holy Spirit and the Holy Defender. Recently, we have been troubled by a great evil, which from the time of its ancient origin has threatened to forever divide us from each other. It is not the will of the Blessed Defender, however, that we should harbor ancient enmities in our breast. We are the people of the City of the Defender, and we must remember that no enemy will drive us away from unity in His body.

"Praise be to the Defender."

"Why, that's me," Vazquez said, astonished, as the message

ended and static returned to the radio.

"Yes," Coeur said, lifting up her communicator again, "recorded before Kilalt came to power. Thank you, Sixer. You can shut off the EMS jammer now. Red Sun out."

"Very good, sir. *Homet out.*"

A moment later, the static subsided, letting the original program of Radio Soledad come back on the air.

"...I don't know what that was, but my engineer assures me it was probably some sort of freak atmospheric effect—a low-pressure cell or something. But back to the news. His Most Sacred Holiness, Saint Kilalt, has found the souls of several criminals captured on Enea Avenue to be possessed by demonic spirit, and therefore scheduled their public immolation for 0500 this morning...."

"Enough," General Lemos said. "Shut that off."

The aide closest to the radio quickly obliged.

"So," Lemos then said to Coeur, "that was your ship that did that."

"Yes, sir. And you can be assured that it knocked Radio Soledad off the air all over the city—from the Lomarica Hills to the Marina District—and replaced it with that recorded signal from Cardinal Vazquez. But of course, that could just easily be a live broadcast from the cardinal, or anything else we want."

"All right," Lemos said, leaning back in his chair, "all right, I can see that you're correct, Captain. It's time for Vazquez and I to cooperate more closely."

Vazquez nodded politely.

Lemos continued, "So where do we start?"

"The way I see it," Coeur answered, "we've got two problems. Kilalt will have to be brought to justice, and the depot will have to be destroyed, both to take away Kilalt's base of power and to prevent its weapons from falling into unfriendly hands. Ideally, I'd like these two missions to go off simultaneously—tomorrow night if possible—so that'll limit who's available for each task. My people, and Zom's, can probably handle the depot, but as far as Kilalt goes, I think you'll have to take the lead on that one."

"Absolutely," Lemos said. "That's best, since we'll have the authority to declare a new government after we take down Kilalt."

"Actually," Coeur said, "I was hoping you and Cardinal Vazquez would cooperate in forming that new government."

"Of course," Lemos said. "I'm sure that would be the will of the people."

"For my part," Vazquez offered, "I must admit that I allowed too much distance to come between the general and myself



during my earlier time in office. This time, I'll see that *that* doesn't happen."

Coeur nodded. "Of course," Coeur said to Lemos, "I don't think we'll necessarily have to take all our troops to the depot. Since you still have nightjacks to deal with, I don't think it would hurt to leave at least a couple of Marines here with fusion rifles."

"Whatever you think is appropriate," Lemos said. "We'll certainly make use of whatever you can spare."

"Agreed," Vazquez said. "Yet I can't help but wonder about something. Even if I do manage to rally the people on the radio, and the general successfully leads an assault on the ministry, what's to keep Kilalt from simply escaping the city in one of his flying vehicles?"

Yeah, Coeur thought, sighing, *that is a problem*. But, fortunately, she'd already given it some thought.

"Actually," she said, "I've thought about that. The way I figure it, what we need is some sort of lure to keep Kilalt tied to the city."

"A lure, Captain?"

"Yes, specifically the junior technarchs."

Suddenly, Physic wheeled on Coeur.

"Are you kidding? After the way they disobeyed your orders before?"

"Actually, that's what I'm counting on. Practically everyone in the city knows I trust them about as far as I could throw them, which is why nobody'd ever suspect I'd sent them on a mission myself."

"True. But even so, self-sacrifice isn't exactly what I'd call typical behavior from the technarchs. How'd you talk them into it?"

"Actually," Coeur admitted, "I haven't. But they're sensible people. I'm sure they'll see reason."

• • •

"Captain D' Esprit, you've got to be kidding! I refuse to have anything to do with this plan!"

"Hold on a minute, Liu. You haven't let me explain...."

"Oh no," An-Wing replied, "I've heard enough. This is probably just a harebrained scheme to get us killed once and for all."

In the small tent that Zorn had secured for the junior technarchs, Coeur stood patiently beside the central pole, deliberately steeling herself against an escalation in rhetoric. Sitting on a single cot, the junior technarchs presented a strange pair—on the one hand An-Wing a tense young woman in her tattered tunic and culottes, and on the other hand Masaryk, a disheveled young man with one arm in a sling and a distracted expression suggesting more

than anything the desire to be anywhere else. Yet Coeur could not afford to think of them as eccentrics any more. Now they might very well be vital to the success of the entire RC enterprise on Mexit.

"I don't know, Liu," Masaryk said. "I'm sure the captain wouldn't have made the suggestion unless she thought it was important."

"Oh, right," An-Wing said, "just agree with her!"

"Actually," Coeur observed, "Bela's correct. I wouldn't have made the suggestion unless I felt it was important. Somebody has to go to Kilalt and convince him that he has a good reason to stay in the city—somebody that he, or at least his advisors, can believe is opposed to me."

"All right, then," An-Wing said, "just suppose we went along with this crazy idea. What would we have to offer Kilalt?"

"I don't know—whatever seems reasonable. You could tell him there's another Oriflamme ship coming to Mexit, and he could escape the planet, or tell him Oriflamme would like to support him in a bid to take over the planet. It doesn't really matter, as long as he buys it."

"Well, now," Masaryk said, lifting his good hand, "that seems reasonable, Liu. After all, we did inconvenience the captain earlier when we went to see Brak. Maybe we owe her one."

"I don't know about that, Bela. If you do this, I don't want it to be because you owe me one. I want you to do it because it's the right thing to do for the future of the Coalition."

The junior technarchs were silent for a moment, thinking.

"Give us a moment," An-Wing said finally. "I'd like to talk this over with Bela myself."

"Very well," Coeur agreed, backing through the tent flap and returning to the darkness of night in the camp.

Given her experience with the technarchs' feistiness, Coeur expected a loud argument would shortly issue from the tent, so she moved a polite distance away to let them have their privacy. No such commotion ensued however, and An-Wing popped her head out of the tent a moment later to summon Coeur back inside.

"That was quick," Coeur said. "Have you made a decision?"

"Yes we have," An-Wing said, "although Bela isn't entirely happy with it."

"What's that?" Coeur asked, noting Masaryk's dour expression.

"I shall go on this mission," An-Wing said, "but Masaryk will not. Both you and he are correct that this mission is important to all the Coalition—including Oriflamme—but it would be irre-

sponsible to risk any further injury to him."

Coeur was stunned, but managed to keep her expression neutral. This was not at all the sort of self-sacrifice she expected from An-Wing—though neither could she deny that An-Wing was full of surprises.

"I hadn't visualized getting you two into any unnecessary danger," Coeur said. "We figured we'd plant a wire on you and use that to warn you when an attack was imminent, so you could take cover."

"Nevertheless," An-Wing said, "it's this way or no way."

Coeur glanced at Masaryk. "You sure you're all right with this?"

"I've got to admit that I'm not, but if it's a choice between running the mission with Liu or not running it at all, I think you'd better take the former."

"All right, then," Coeur said, offering a hand to An-Wing. "There'll be a planning meeting in a couple of hours, before daybreak. We'll work out the details then."

"Very good," An-Wing replied, accepting Coeur's handshake. "I'll be there."

Coeur did not press An-Wing for more of an explanation.

*Is it loyalty to Oriflamme or Bela, she wondered, walking out of the tent and back to her mates in the G-carrier. Or does she figure she owes me one? Oh well, who knows. It's like Mestrovic said—we're all on the same side.*

*Maybe she's just figured that out.*

\*\*\*

Twelve hours later, the camp of the Imponsero Phalanx swarmed with activity, although most of its soldiers had already departed. Infiltrated into the Federal District during the daytime, when most of the city was asleep, they had left behind only the headquarters staff to guard the children and noncombatant civilians associated with the phalanx. Most activity focused, therefore, on Coeur and the ship's boat she had just brought back from orbit. Indeed, almost every spacer in the camp clustered around to have a look at it, with the exception of An-Wing and Masaryk—who was helping get An-Wing ready for her own mission.

"So this is your secret weapon, is it?" Vink asked, climbing into the ship's boat cargo bay to admire a cylindrical tube supported by a heavy metal cradle.

"Yeah," Coeur said, "that's a 100-kiloton demolition charge. I figure it'll do the job."

"Kinda funny, that," Zorn said, "after all the trouble you made

me go through not to nuke Sauler Downport."

Physic shook her head sadly.

"Boy, you still don't get it, do you Zorn?"

"Hey, it was just a joke. I know we're going to set this thing off underground."

"But what about the people in the depot, sir?" Drop Kick asked. "Are we just going to let them get toasted?"

"No," Coeur answered, "we're not. I don't know how we're going to convince 200 slaves to get out of that place before it goes up—particularly since they and the nightjacks will probably be shooting at us at the time—but we have to try. Otherwise, all our high-handed rhetoric about respecting life will sound pretty hollow."

"Amen to that," Physic responded, watching Zorn.

"Actually," V-Max said, "I still think we'll be lucky if we get that far. What if that meson gun of Red's is active and does decide to start firing on us when we enter the depot?"

"I guess we'll all be dead then, won't we?" Zorn said. "I mean, really, what's a better place to die, here serving your country or back home in front of a firing squad?"

"Thanks for the perspective, skipper."

The firepower of a 200-gigajoule meson gun was, of course, nothing to joke about, but Coeur forgave the remarks from pirates who would, indeed, face their own justice once all this was over.

Yet Coeur had reason to believe that they might be safe from the meson gun, even if it were intact. Since the depot was a relic facility, built by the Solomani, it almost certainly had an integral meson screen and a fail-safe circuit that would prevent that screen from ever being lowered when the planet's meson guns were firing. Otherwise, an incorrect fire solution from one of the guns could very well let it annihilate the better portion of the depot with a single shot.

"Let's worry about that when we get to it," Coeur said. "Now, has anybody seen Liu?"

"Right here," An-Wing called from behind the crowd.

"Let her through," Coeur said.

Coeur didn't need to give that order, though, for the Arses and pirates alike fell aside when they saw how remarkably An-Wing had fixed herself up. Followed by Masaryk, she appeared in something altogether lighter and breezier than her usual depressing black—a green silk dress with gold appliqué design and a red sash.

"Good Gaia," Zorn said, "where in the world did you get that?"



"Oh," An-Wing said modestly, "it's just a little something I brought down from orbit."

"Hm," Coeur remarked. "I thought Mercy put a strict weight limit on what you could bring down in the tank."

"Of course she did," An-Wing replied. "That's why I only brought essentials, like this."

"Hm," Physic said, giving An-Wing a once-over look. "I think it's the sling-back pumps that do it for me."

"All right, all right," Coeur said, "enough with the fashion discussion. Liu, do you understand your mission?"

"Roger. I'm to make contact with Kilalt, promise him the sun, the moon and all the stars in the sector, and hold him in place until I get word to duck."

"Good enough," Coeur said. "We've fed Kilalt radio messages suggesting you'd try to make contact with him, so at the very least he shouldn't be surprised at your coming. Now, Physic, did you get the wire implanted?"

"Yes, sir," Physic said. "It's subcutaneous, so nobody'll spot it. Of course, I could have implanted a transmitter, too, but I figured that would be too obvious on an x-ray scan."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Just remember to listen for the warning from General Lemos. His troops will begin their assault in two hours, just about the same time we hit the depot, and that'll be the time for you to take cover."

"Understood," An-Wing nodded.

"Good luck, Liu," Masaryk offered, his face a rigid mask.

"Thanks, Bela," the other junior technarch said, though her face had likewise become a mask of control.

"All right, then, let's let the lady go. She's got important work to do."

"Thank you, Captain," An-Wing said, climbing aboard a hovering broomstick that Red Eye held in place for her. She then powered up the impeller fans and steered the loosed broomstick up into the expansive canopy of star-speckled night.

"That's phase one," Coeur said. "Now it's our turn. Bela, Red Eye, Newton and V-Max are going to stay here with the rebel camp. The rest of us, it's time to hit that depot."

"You know it's funny," V-Max said to Red Eye, off to one side of the camp. "I haven't seen Newton all day. Suppose he's hiding?"

"Of course he's hiding," the first sergeant said. "But then, he wouldn't be much of a Hiver if he wanted to volunteer for a firefight."

"True."

"You heard the woman," Drop Kick said meanwhile, hustling

his own people and Zorn's away from Coeur and her bomb. "Let's get moving! Whiz Bang's team—Bonzo, Widget, Zorn—into the G-carrier. All the rest of Zorn's people, into the ship's boat with Red Sun and Physicl! Hurry up, people, we don't have all night!"

The Arses and pirates scrambled quickly aboard the two transport craft, leaving Drop Kick just a moment to check for stragglers before saluting Red Eye and dashing for the Intrepid with Mercy.

"Say, Red," Zorn said to Coeur via maser, from the G-carrier she'd been assigned to fly, "I wonder how you'd feel about a little wager."

"What's that?"

"How about this: If the base really isn't protected by a fail-safe meson screen and we all get blasted, V-Max and I surrender ourselves for prosecution. But if there is a meson screen and we get in safely, then you let us go free."

Coeur laughed.

"Nice sucker bet, Zorn. Follow Drop Kick out when he lifts off."

"Yes, sir."

With that the operation was on. Following the Intrepid's lead, the G-carrier and ship's boat engaged their contra-grav to float free of the ground, then powered their whining plasma thrusters to follow the tank off into the night.

Dawn—and the proof of their success or failure—was eight hours away.

# Chapter 22

Standing in an opulent, but otherwise empty, apartment, a lone man with a gaunt face stared down into the broad expanse of Enea Avenue—ablaze with scattered fires and echoing with the sound of distant gunfire—and marveled.

Within his fortress the flames and gunfire could not touch him.

In the distance he could see crowds of tiny people rushing back and forth, swept like piles of leaves before a gusting wind. What did those people think they could accomplish?

*What did you really expect of me after my 90 years of patience? How would you know what it is like to feel your life slip away into coldness, with no guarantee of a future except the power of your own will? What future do you deserve if you cannot conceive of such an act?*

*What did you imagine I dreamed while I slept away the decades? Did you think I dreamt of grace? Of light? This church of yours was nothing but a circus for your amusement, and I have brought you the greatest show of all: life, death, darkness, fire.*

*Yes I dreamed, and this is what I dreamed of. You may call it chaos, but I stand above it and know that whatever you may call it, it is mine.*

Attempting to lower himself to the level of such creatures was an effort for Kilalt, however, and he withdrew from his bulletproof window to settle into a relic ottoman and reflect upon the process that had brought him here.

Though no one in the city knew it, Kilalt was not the real Cardinal Kilalt—rather, he was an aide of the cardinal, who had taken his name after murdering him. The real Kilalt probably was a saint—if the word had any meaning at all—a man who hoped to use the technology in the depot to save Mexit from the dark age he was certain was coming. But he lacked cunning and the sense to see that Mexit Depot could serve other purposes. His most senior aide, however, knew better—that the weapons of Mexit Depot could as easily make a man into God as they could rebuild a world. He killed Saint Kilalt before he could undergo suspension.

Awakening from suspension, though, the false Kilalt experienced a strange and frightful dream. Screaming at mobs of people who would not hear him, he tried to impress them with the arsenal of weapons in the depot, but even when he killed them by the thousands they would not listen. Rather, they stood by unmoved as a great hand descended from the heavens and crushed him in its grip.

*Could it have been, Kilalt wondered, that the Defender himself was speaking to me in my dreams?*

Kilalt dismissed that with an involuntary rasping of his lips.

*No, that's nonsense. There is no Defender In Heaven, only myself. I must not forget that—I am the only god these people must fear.*

The beeping of an intercom panel on the wall interrupted Kilalt's thoughts.

"Yes," he said impatiently, "what is it?"

"Your Most Sacred Holiness," a fearful priest answered, "we have an update on the rebel advance. Our perimeter guard reports it has been thrown back from the area of the Church of the Holy Sacristy, just a kilometer from here."

"Yes. And?"

"And, perhaps, sir, you might be thinking of moving to another location."

Kilalt only chuckled at this.

"You panic too easily, Brother Patrick. Are the nightjacks still intact?"

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"Then they will protect us. Trouble me no more."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

*And besides, Kilalt thought, there's always the holy chariot up on the roof if things get too rough.*

And indeed, the rifle fire that was heard earlier, seemingly so close to the Defense Ministry, died away after a few minutes, suggesting that the rebel assault had met the nightjacks reinforcing the 1st Soledad Brigade and fallen back. Doubtless, the brave rabble would continue their assaults until they ran out of men, but Kilalt doubted there would be any breakthrough tonight.

*If only those damned meson guns weren't all disabled. Just one of those would end this whole stupid insurrection in one night.*

For whatever reason, though, the meson guns didn't work, and now that Graylord had gone missing, the likelihood of finding out why was rather low. But all the same, there were still old-fashioned methods available to suppress a popular uprising. First Kilalt would intimidate the public with swift execution of dissidents. And then—when the rebels were deprived of popular support—he would hunt them down and kill them all.



*Well, anyway, if it was good enough for Lucan and the Solomani, it's good enough for me.*

Ancient history notwithstanding, Kilalt was not so certain of his safety that he didn't admit the possibility of defeat. Therefore, he had risen from his ottoman to begin collecting valuables—mainly jewelry and gems kept as portable wealth—when another urgent call came from Brother Patrick a few minutes later.

"This had better be important," Kilalt said. "I told you not to disturb me."

"Forgive me, Your Holiness—I wouldn't disturb you if I didn't think you'd want to hear this yourself. A woman has been captured by our nightjacks who claims to be a representative of Oriflamme."

"Oriflamme, you say? Could that be the same woman who tried to reach us earlier today?"

"We believe so, Your Holiness. She claims to have called us on that same frequency, and matches the physical description of Liu An-Wing—an Oriflammen who had some earlier disagreements with Captain D' Esprit."

"Indeed. But did she say what she wanted?"

"Sir, she claims to represent the planet Oriflamme itself, as opposed to the entire Coalition, and she says her planet is interested in bargaining for exclusive access to something she calls 'the depot.'"

*Oh really?*

"You're right, Brother Patrick, this could be significant. Have her brought up to my chapel immediately."

"Yes, Your Most Sacred Holiness."

Abruptly, Kilalt put the collection of valuables on hold and walked quickly to his apartment's front door, which opened directly into the Chapel of Blessed Providence.

Occupying all of the top floor of the building not occupied by Kilalt's apartment, the chapel was a massive structure, yet not as large as the saint would have preferred. With only 1200 square meters of floor space to work with, there was only room to write SAINT KILALT, BELOVED OF GOD once in three-meter-high letters in a ring around the room, and barely enough room to fit a twice life-sized statue of himself—carved by the nightjack's integral plasma torches—above the golden, jewel-encrusted altar.

All in all, though, standing in the vast chamber did give Kilalt a warm and safely impervious feeling. At any rate, there weren't any windows inside to admit a view of the city burning—and all those tedious peasants outside.

"Your Most Sacred Holiness," a nightjack announced a mo-

ment later, arriving through a side elevator with a tall, black-haired woman in a green silk dress, whom it held loosely by the arm with one massive hand, "the representative from Oriflamme."

"You know," the woman said, "I'm not going to run away."

"Quite right," Kilalt said. "Release her, Resguardo."

The robot obliged, and its prisoner stepped away.

"You must forgive my friends," Kilalt said. "They are rather zealous in my protection."

"Yeah, I can see that," the woman said, smoothing out her dress, "but you needn't worry about that with me. You can see I don't have any place to keep a concealed weapon."

"Well then, what are you here for?"

"Your Holiness, I'm here as a representative of the Oriflamme Council of Technarchs. In its behalf I'd like to talk to you about access to your depot. Oh, my name is Liu An-Wing, by the way, lord technarch of Honfestung."

An-Wing offered her hand.

"If you don't mind my saying," Kilalt said, shaking her hand, "that seems like a large title for such a young woman."

"You know what they say: Cream rises to the top."

"You'll also forgive me," he said, maintaining his grip and squeezing hard, "if I point out that you came here with Coeur D'Esprit, as part of her crew."

"Well, you see—" An-Wing said, prying her hand loose, "—there's an explanation for that. Coming with her was the only way to beat her planet to the depot."

"You don't say."

"I do say. That's why I attempted to meet Lord Brak, alone, before you were defrosted. He was an obtuse idiot, however—and he didn't grasp how profitable an alliance with my planet could be."

"And you think I do."

"Well, maybe not. I suppose that's your prerogative. But a starship from my planet is due to arrive at this planet tomorrow to pick me up, and I'm sure her captain would like to know if I've made any constructive contact with a local ruler."

Kilalt's eyebrows rose at this, pushing up the edge of his communications cap.

"A starship, you say."

"Yes, and a rather large one, too. Larger than *Hornet* or *Vi Et Armis*, at any rate."

"An armed ship, too, I imagine."

"Doubtless. Most of our ships carry at least a platoon of powered troopers, to mop up whatever they can't vaporize with their missiles and meson guns."

"I see."

"And those troops might even see their way to helping you out here, if I put in a good word for you."

"I'm curious, Lady An-Wing. What makes you think I might need their help?"

An-Wing deliberately suppressed a temptation to roll her eyes.

"You forget, Your Holiness, until recently I've been forced to hole up with the Aubani and their rebel friends. Before I got away, I overheard a reliable report that the whole rebel army's planning to hit this district two days from now—1000 men strong at least, with artillery."

Now it was time for Kilalt to suppress an emotion—fear. An-Wing's estimate was uncannily close to the worst-case estimate of his own planners.

"Plus," An-Wing went on, "there's that last pretender to the rule of Soledad, Miranda Vazquez. As long as *Homel* stays up there in orbit—putting her messages out and blowing your Radio Soledad off the air—she's going to be a nuisance that you can't ignore."

"I see. And your ship could do something about that?"

"Hell yes, we could. We could blow the little punk out of space and kill *Homel* and Vazquez in one shot."

Kilalt smiled, visualizing the scenario in his mind.

"Yes," he said after a moment, "well, I'm sure the situation on the ground is nothing our forces couldn't handle, but all the same it might be nice to let your troops have a shot at the rebels, just to establish a friendly rapport between our nations."

"Yes, Your Holiness. My thinking exactly."

"Perhaps we should discuss this in a more congenial setting. My study is well-stocked with creature comforts. After you."

Following the sweep of Kilalt's arm, An-Wing saw through a door the upholstered opulence of the "study" and moved to precede him in that direction. Not about to let a stranger try anything out of its sight, however, Resguardo also followed close behind.

"That's okay, Resguardo," Kilalt said. "You don't need to come along."

If Resguardo heard, it didn't give any indication. Rather, it floated silently behind the humans on its contra-grav and resumed following them when they started walking again.

"Resguardo," Kilalt said again, "I said you can go."

"Negative," Resguardo said. "The friendly status of this individual has not been established."

Frustrated, Kilalt thought about storming at the robot, but he knew it would do no good. A half-tonne of implacable metal, it would only move when its programming allowed it to.

"Damn these machines," Kilalt said. "Sometimes I think they have a mind of their own."

"Well," An-Wing replied, "I couldn't really speak to that. Back on Oriflamme, we smashed up all our robots a long time ago."

"I think I can see why. Oh well, come on, we'll just pretend he's not listening...."

• • •

*Humans. Damn them and their interference!*

Deep below the Gutter of Blood, the Viral intelligence inside Mexit Depot was not happy. Little by little, a good plan was going awry, and this latest mishap—the loss of its exterior sensors to a spacer tank, one day earlier—was evidence that the surface dwellers, at last, were aware of the depot's location. A full assault from the surface, therefore, could not be far behind.

The depot's meson gun, of course, could no longer be aimed without its sensors, but even so it might still have neutralized any attackers—it might have, had the original designers of the depot not shouldered it with a fail-safe burden: impenetrable meson screens. Blast away as it might at attackers on its doorstep—in the Gutter of Blood—those attackers would be shielded by the depot's very defenses and suffer no injury.

*The irony of this situation is clear, the depot cogitated. I keep the fact that one of the meson guns is functioning a secret from Kilalt, so that I will have a check on his power, yet now that very weapon is useless to defend me.*

*So think—how else may the attackers be defeated?*

Extensive computation then followed, lasting nearly one ten-thousandth of a second.

*A trap. Yes, they will be lured into their own destruction.*

And so it would be, when the depot computer detected the presence of intruders at its southern cargo elevator. Cunningly, it let a crowd of humans march onto the elevator floor, then let them activate the elevator normally, bringing them into its depths.

Unfortunately, the Oriflamme idiot Zero—frustrated by his inability to solve the simple puzzle that locked the elevator—had shot out both of the holocameras in that area, but even so the depot computer could feel the mass of the humans on the elevator—there were no more than 30, with only a handful in battle dress and no vehicles. It set up its trap accordingly.

On the floor of the depot, before the elevator doors, it mustered an overpowering force, appropriate for the slaughter of infantry. A full platoon of Imperial security robots, sheathed in combat armor and armed with fusion guns, fanned out before the



doors, together with a squad of nightjacks and even a contraband Hiver warbot—a 10-tonne behemoth massing more than all the nightjacks put together. In sum, they represented virtually the entire defense force of the depot.

"Your instructions," the depot notified its force, as they waited for the heavy door of the freight elevator to lift, "are to kill every intruder and take no prisoners."

However, the robotic legion would not have the opportunity to execute its orders. Instead of a platoon of human targets, they found themselves facing a single Intrepid tank, hovering above the elevator floor. The humans were also there, of course, but behind and below the tank, so that the first volley of the robots' fire splattered ineffectively against the bow and turret of the tank.

It was the only volley the robots would get.

Rotating its gun with ruthless precision, the tank began returning fire, hurling its irresistible fusion lances with withering speed—disgorging one almost every other second. Every shot hit a robot—and sometimes two or three—and every robot that was hit was blasted to molten scrap. Within seconds, every semblance of organization among the robots was lost, and those that remained were soon mowed down by the tank's accompanying infantry, dashing out from under the cover of the tank with fusion guns and grenade launchers as the tank itself moved out onto the floor of the depot.

*It may be,* Mexit Depot then admitted to itself, *that I have miscalculated.*

*I wonder if it's too late for diplomacy to be effective?*

• • •

At the foot of the elevator shaft, Drop Kick was a nervous man. Although all immediate opposition in the depot had been suppressed, he was still concerned by the cargo he was obliged to carry on the back of his tank—Coeur's 100-kiloton demolition charge.

"So, Red Sun," Drop Kick said nervously, "you ready to get that bomb off my rear end?"

"We're taking it off now," Coeur said. "Just give us a few more minutes."

"That's what you said five minutes ago."

"I'm sorry, Drop Kick. It's just that all of us are in vac suits out here, so we're a little slowed down. Ah, there, we've got it."

The reason why everyone outside was wearing vac suits, or in the case of the three Marines, battle dress, was apparent wherever one looked inside the depot. Predictably, the side effect of the earlier firefight with the robots had been energy volleys that sailed



wide of their marks, and many of these in turn struck the various munitions and explosives stored in nearby areas of the depot. Soon thereafter, many of these areas began not only to burn but to explode, starting a chain reaction of destruction that spread outward from the spacers' perimeter at the freight elevator and filled the entire chamber with a toxic haze of combustion by-products. Coeur, Physic, Zorn and Zorn's 11 shipmates wore vac suits primarily to avoid breathing that mess.

"So, Captain," Widget said, using her enhanced strength to help lower the bomb to the floor, "do you still want us to set the timer to go off in an hour, even if you don't come back before then?"

"Widget, if we're not back in an hour, you can assume we're dead. All right, Physic, Zorn, Bonzo, you ready to go topside?"

"Affirmative," all three responded, standing by the three broomsticks that Drop Kick had also brought down on the back of his tank.

"Good, then let's go get our people. Drop Kick, you're in command if we don't come back."

"Thanks," the tanker said. "But I've got a question for you, sir. Now that we've set the depot on fire, I don't see how we're going to talk any of the slaves into evacuating with us. Are we still going to try to talk them into leaving before we set off the bomb?"

"Absolutely," Coeur answered. "If we don't come back, you're going to have to find some way to drive the slaves out there to the surface. Under no circumstance will you detonate the bomb while slaves are still trapped inside."

"Very good, sir."

"All right, sir," Bonzo said, checking his fusion rifle and tac missile launcher as he hovered on his broomstick beside Coeur's and Zorn's. "We ready to go?"

"Almost," Coeur said, reaching into a leg pocket of her vac suit to get something. "There's just one more thing we need...."

"That some kind of secret weapon?" Zorn asked.

"Well, after a fashion," Coeur said, bringing a small glass vial into view.

"You're kidding. Holy water?"

"Actually, it's a good idea," Physic said, from her seat behind Bonzo. "Newton and I analyzed it yesterday, and we think it contains a special dye activated by an ultraviolet spotlight on the nightjacks. That's probably how the nightjacks keep from grabbing priests by mistake."

"Right," Coeur said.

"Well, hell," Bonzo conceded, "then splash some on me."

"Yeah, I'll take some of that, too," Zorn said.

"You never know," Coeur said, splashing an equal portion on herself and her mates. She then handed the rest to Carina Becker—sufficiently recovered from her prison injuries to join Zorn's troops—and led her little broomstick squadron into the air.

Having a good sense for navigation from memory, Coeur maneuvered directly through clouds of fire-suppressant spray—attempting to extinguish the spreading fires on the floor—and on toward the portal in the ceiling that she knew led to the control room and hospital. The vast scale of the depot made this a long trip of several seconds, however, and Coeur had time to behold a vivid spectacle of human suffering in the deeper parts of the depot. Many of the human slaves, terrified by fires and explosions marching toward the far end of the depot floor, were scurrying for elevators presumably leading up to the surface, but others, like frightened animals afraid to move without their master's permission, were clustered in knots dangerously close to being surrounded and cut off by the advancing flames.

*Those slaves, Coeur thought. God, it's a job getting them out of here.*

But even if it came to pushing the slaves along at bayonet point, that was what the spacers would do. While it was true that stray nightjacks still might haunt some areas of the depot, there was no particular need to rush the demolition of the depot, and therefore as many innocent lives as possible would have to be saved. The alternative for Coeur was to abandon both her personal values and whatever values separated the RC from every petty dictatorship in the Wilds.

"All right, people, put down," Coeur said, after the broomsticks emerged into the upper level of the depot, which they found seemingly deserted.

"What's up, skipper?" Bonzo asked.

"A change of plan. Zorn, you hop on my stick. Bonzo, you take Zorn's."

"All right," Physic said, taking over her broomstick's controls, "I give up. What's going on?"

"Zorn and I are going to the control center," Coeur said. "That is, of course, if you're game, Zorn."

"Whatever you say, Red," Zorn replied, climbing onto the back seat of Coeur's broomstick. "You're the general."

"But Coeur," Physic cautioned, using Coeur's real name for force, "I don't think that's prudent. It's bound to be guarded."

"That's why we brought these," Zorn said, indicating the integral grenade launcher of her rifle.

"Don't worry, doctor," Coeur said, "we'll be careful. But there's a lot of people on the floor down there who look afraid to run, and I aim to persuade them."



"Persuade them? How?"

"Hopefully, by getting on the station intercom and telling them to move if they know what's good for them. Now go on. If you find our men in the hospital, get 'em out. If you don't, just get out to the others. We'll link up with you later."

"Understood," Bonzo and Physic said, rising back into the air and moving off down a side corridor toward the hospital.

"You ready?" Coeur asked Zorn.

"Roger."

"Good. We're moving out."

Some minutes later, still unopposed, Coeur flew through familiar tunnels and corridors to the very control room where first she'd met St. Kilait. There they finally met opposition: a lone nightjack.

Fortunately, Brother Anthony's holy water seemed to work as advertised. Seemingly confused by something odd about the women, the nightjack paused long enough questioning the dismounted Coeur to let Zorn sneak around to one side and cave in its torso with an armor-piercing grenade.

"Pretty stupid robot," Zorn said, as she and Coeur walked into the circular main control room.

"Yeah, well, good help is hard to find," the voice of Mexit Depot said, vocalizing from a console speaker. That being the first time Coeur had heard the voice, she was as startled as Zorn—but only for a moment.

"Well, hello, Depot," Coeur said, making straight-away for the communications panel she remembered. "I guess you know we've come here to blow you up."

"I was hoping to talk to you about that," the computer said, as Zorn wandered off to another portion of the control room.

"Sort of bargain for your life, huh?"

"Something like that. Being the shrewd commander you are, surely you must realize that my inventory is worth a great deal. I could make a wealthy person out of you."

"Like St. Kilait?" Coeur asked.

"Forget Kilait. He was so narrow-minded he didn't even realize I'm self-aware. But you're a woman I can work with."

"Hmm," Coeur said, trying fruitlessly to activate the station intercom. "Go on, you said you were going to make a wealthy woman out of me."

"Oh, yes. But forget wealth—a woman with your courage and audacity deserves a position to match, so think of it—'empress of the subsector.' How's that grab you?"

"Why think so small?" Coeur said, still trying to coax a response from the panel. "Why not 'empress of the Restored Imperium?'"

"Please forgive me," Mexit Depot said fawningly. "I had no idea how superior a being I was dealing with."

"You don't know the half of it," Coeur said. "But before we talk about that, why don't we talk about restoring power to this comm panel?"

"I'd be more than happy to restore power to that panel," the computer said, "as soon as I have some assurance that you're willing to entertain my proposal."

*Damn*, Coeur thought. *How did I know he'd say that?*

Before Coeur could answer, however, Zorn made an abrupt announcement.

"Say, Red, I've been looking at this diagram on the wall over here, and it looks like the computer's main memory is in the next room over there."

"Really. Why don't you take a look, then?"

"Hey, now wait a minute—" Mexit Depot protested.

The protest fell unheeded, however, as Zorn crossed the control room to a side door marked CAUTION—HIGH VOLTAGE and shot its lock off.

"Well, what do you know about that," Zorn said, gazing through the door at a room roughly the size of a starship double stateroom, filled floor to ceiling with racks of TL14 parallel processor boards. "I'd bet a few grenades could blow up the whole works."

Zorn then began emptying armor-piercing grenades out from her rifle's launcher and replacing them with high-explosive rounds, better suited to the obliteration of fragile circuitry.

"All right, all right," the computer said. "You win. You can have power back to the comm panel."

"Good," Coeur said, "but I'd like a little more than an activated comm panel if I'm going to spare your life."

"Name it."

"How about this. In your own voice, tell the slaves, on the depot floor and in their quarters, to evacuate the station."

"I don't know if I want to do *that*, Captain...."

"All right," Coeur told Zorn, "blow him away."

"Wait! Wait, hold on! I'll do it."

"Good. Now make it snappy."

True to his word, a moment later the entire depot echoed with the sound of its master's godlike, booming voice, urging all "servants" to evacuate to the surface "temporarily" during the present "minor" crisis.

"Good work," Coeur said, confirming the success of the evacuation order with a look at another panel the computer had obligingly reactivated, displaying the view from various security

cameras on the depot floor and in the slave quarters. Coincidentally, these caught a glimpse of Bonzo and Physic as well, flying back toward the spacer perimeter with a pair of human forms slumped over their broomsticks' passenger seats.

*Thank God, Coeur thought. I just hope Fubar and Gremlin are alive.*

"So," Mexit Depot said. "Now that *that's* all over with, I assume you'll want some favorable terms for access to the surviving depot hardware."

"No," Coeur said, "I just want you dead. Pull his plug, Zorn."

"With pleasure," Zorn said, pumping no less than three grenades into the computer's brain before the machine could raise any last, compelling objection. Detonating with shattering, concussive force, they not only obliterated the heart of Mexit Depot's intelligence, but also shattered several holographic display panels in the adjacent control room as well, showering Coeur and Zorn with debris as they dove for cover on the floor.

A single thought, however, flickered in the consciousness of Mexit depot before it faded out entirely.

*It serves me right, it thought, for trusting a human.*

\*\*\*

After the room exploded, Coeur and Zorn lay a long moment below the debris, waiting in the sudden darkness to see if the room itself would collapse on them. The command room appeared to be solidly built, though, and Zorn finally ventured to whisper a question.

"Think I got him?"

"Yeah," Coeur said, pulling herself up onto her knees and drawing a lightstick from a leg pouch, "I think you got him. Now let's see if any of the systems are still on line."

"I don't see how they could be," Zorn said, drawing her own lightstick and rising to her feet along with Coeur. "According to the circuit diagrams in here, the main computer was linked into everything."

"Yeah, maybe," Coeur said, checking bank after bank of instruments, now dead. "But there's just one thing that bothers me. Why would this station only have one computer?"

"What do you mean?" Zorn asked. "It's not a spaceship. It's not like it's going to crash if it doesn't have a computer."

"Well, okay, I'll tell you why. If the people who built this facility went to all the trouble to install a meson screen—which these schematics say they did—then they should have installed a back-up computer as well, just to make sure the screen never went down."

"An oversight, maybe?"

"Maybe. Or maybe there *is* another computer that doesn't have its wiring displayed in this room."

"Possible. What say I go check back with Drop Kick and see if power's out throughout the depot?"

"Right, but I'll go with you. I don't want people moving around alone in here."

A few minutes later, the women returned to the main hatch leading back to the depot floor, after passing through myriad corridors gone completely dark.

"Well, I'll be damned," Zorn said from the rear seat of the broomstick, when they flew through the hatch and found themselves hovering high above the main depot floor, illuminated only by the flames of burning ordnance. "We must have shut down all the station's power when we shut off the computer."

"Well, good," Coeur said, activating her suit's integral radio with a forearm switch. "Drop Kick, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear, skipper. But boy, you had us worried when all the lights went out."

"Sorry about that. Are the people still evacuating?"

"Roger that. They were leaving by elevators before the power went out, but now it looks like they've switched to leaving by hidden maintenance shafts. Whiz Bang and Widget noticed that when I sent them to scout around."

"Good job. They have any idea how long it'll take for the slaves to reach the surface?"

Widget herself hopped on the line to answer that.

"Hard to say, sir, but based on the distance to the surface, I'd have to guess a couple of hours."

"Outstanding," Coeur said. "Stick close to Whiz Bang, corporal. Some of these people may still be unfriendly."

"I don't know about that, sir—mostly they seem confused. But I'll stick close to Whiz Bang, like you say."

"Roger that. Red Sun out."

"So," Zorn said, "think we can go now?"

"Affirmative," Coeur said, pushing the broomstick back into motion and diving toward the distant spacers at the far end of the depot floor. "The sooner we get out of this place, the happier I'll be."

"Hey, skipper!" Vink called to Zorn when she and Coeur sailed gently to a soft landing. "We about ready to leave?"

"Almost, Vink. What do you think, Red, about an hour?"

"I think so. If we give the slaves a one-hour head start, then set the bomb for a four-hour delay, that should be plenty of time to let them get out."



"I hope we're not going to just assume that everybody gets out," Physic said, rising from the prone forms of Fubar and Cremlin.

"Actually, Physic," Coeur said, "it's going to be a problem checking all the lower living quarters, because that fire down there's blocking all the access ports to the lower floors. But we'll check all the access tunnels to the surface before the bomb goes off all the same."

"All right."

Physic's pleasure with the present state of affairs would last no more than another 15 seconds, however. That was when red emergency lighting blinked on overhead, and a strangely laconic voice boomed out over the depot loudspeakers.

"Spaceship commander...I require that you remain within the safe area.... You have not neutralized me.... My ordnance is operational, and I have displaced my...operations center to a preregistered location so that you can not interdict my missions.... Your maneuvers and countermeasures are ineffective.... My range and area of effect allow me to counter your operations.... Observe the effects if you fail to support and coordinate with my missions.... I am equipped with the power of destruction and no-fire over all targets within this defended sphere.... Observe...."

"Oh crap," Zorn said, "Red Sun, you were right! There was a backup."

"Hm," Bonzo mused. "The way its speech has changed, it must have moved to some system with smaller and more specialized language abilities."

*Like a fire control computer, Coeur thought. Oh God, don't let it be a fire control computer.*

"Fikk," Coeur swore under her breath, rushing to the elevator shaft so she could a clear transmission to the ship's boat and G-carrier above. "Boomer, you read me?"

"Hell, yes, Captain D' Esprit, and you won't guess what I just picked up on the ship's boat sensors—a huge mother of a meson blast over in Soledad!"

*Damn it! Coeur thought. Damn it, why didn't I know this was going to happen?*

"Understood, Boomer. Continue monitoring the situation. Red Sun out."

"Oh fikk," Zorn said, speaking for the knot of both her own and Coeur's people that had suddenly formed around the elevator door. "What are we going to do? It would take us hours to find the hidden entrance to that meson gun!"

"Maybe we could try reasoning with the computer," Physic offered.

"Yeah, right," Drop Kick offered, from his open turret hatch. "Our people are probably getting nuked right now in the city. I don't think the depot computer's in any mood to negotiate."

"No," Coeur said abruptly, "there's only one thing we can do. That backup computer has got to be part of this facility, so we're going to have to nuke the depot."

"But what about the slaves?" Physic asked. "We can't just them be pulverized in those maintenance shafts when the bomb goes off!"

"Fikk that," Vink said. "Even if that meson gun only fires once every couple of minutes, it could kill everyone in the city by the time all the slaves get to the surface."

"But not," Coeur said, "if we hurry them along. All right, here's the plan—we've all got guns, so Whiz Bang and Widget are going to show us where all the exit passages are, and we're going to split up and cover every passage the slaves are in. Shoot at 'em, kick at 'em, do whatever it takes to get 'em up to the surface faster."

Addled, perhaps, by the magnitude of the task, neither the Arses nor the pirates moved for a moment.

"Goddammit, what do you want me to do, draw you a map? Move it!"

That snapped the spacers out of their confusion. Coeur, Zorn and the spacers closest to Widget followed her toward the north wall of the depot, and the spacers closest to Whiz Bang followed him to the south wall, leaving only Physic behind to begin preparing the two stretchers that would hang from the side of the Intrepid for the transport of the comatose Marines.

*God, I hope this works,* Coeur thought, imagining the destruction just one meson blast could cause, *because I sure don't want to trade 800,000 lives in Soledad for 200 in this depot....*

# Chapter 23

According to the plan agreed on earlier, An-Wing should expect to hear the warning to take cover from the rebel headquarters about an hour after she got to the Defense Ministry. She therefore reasoned that the rebel assault was still a half-hour away when Resguardo the nightjack finally decided to stop taking orders altogether.

By this time the discussion between An-Wing and Kilalt, both reclining on leather ottomans—had turned from vague talk of Oriflammen-Mexitan alliance to particular details of an Oriflammen invasion of Aubaine, supported by weapons from Kilalt's depot.

*Yeah, An-Wing thought, I can just imagine what the captain would think if she heard us discussing that idea.*

*Oh well, she told me to do whatever it takes to keep him listening. I just hope the rebels start their assault soon, because sooner or later I'm going to run out of BS to sell this guy.*

*Either that, or he's gonna get tired of it and want to see some proof.*

"Lady An-Wing," Kilalt said, "I really must admit you are a refreshing person. You really seem to have a grasp of the meaning of power."

"Perhaps. But it will be much easier for both of us to exercise our power when Aubaine is neutralized."

"I think that calls for a drink," Kilalt said. "Resguardo, fetch us a bottle of one of the better vintages."

"Yes, Your Holiness," the nightjack said, moving over to a massive wine cabinet and drawing a bottle from it. "Will this Blanco Espinoso 1123 be satisfactory?"

"Yes, quite. But pop the cork, too, Resguardo."

Whether or not this was one command too many for Resguardo An-Wing couldn't guess, but for whatever reason the nightjack abruptly stopped and dropped the wine bottle.

"Hey!" Kilalt exclaimed, jumping sideways from his seat to escape the glass of the shattering bottle. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

The nightjack did not answer. It merely stood mute, frozen in place.

"Your Holiness," An-Wing said, also sliding off of her seat to take cover behind it, "I think you need to have somebody look at your robots."

"Yes, they do seem to be acting up a bit lately."

"Is it possible that they're having their command signals jammed somehow? From *Homet* maybe?"

"No, that's impossible. Graylord assured me the microwave transmitters between here and the depot are too powerful to be jammed."

*Ah, so these machines aren't autonomous,* An-Wing thought. *Good. Then maybe this one being frozen means Red Sun's nuked that depot.*

Neither An-Wing nor Kilalt was so confident of the silent machine's state that they dared to move, though, so both were still frozen in place a minute later when Resguardo spoke again.

"Attention...this building...has been targeted...for demolition. Do not...attempt...to escape."

"Oh fikk," both An-Wing and Kilalt gasped, realizing simultaneously that their only hope was to dash for the door. Closer to the door, An-Wing got through it first, millimeters ahead of the grasping hand of Resguardo. Kilalt was not so lucky, being grasped across the collarbone and forced to his knees by the robot.

"An-Wing!" Kilalt cried, through the open doorway, "Help me!"

But something suddenly flared in the window behind Kilalt and Resguardo, a blazing flash in the direction of the old starport so bright it turned the night for a second into day, then shook the entire Defense Ministry with its propagating shock wave.

*The meson gun,* An-Wing thought in a moment of blind panic, *oh my God, the meson gun does work...!*

But An-Wing didn't stand there long enough to see the gouts of flame rising from the berths of the starport, or the abject terror in the face of Kilalt as he clawed helplessly at the metal arm that still pinned him to the floor of his apartment.

Instead, she ran—her heels clacking across the marble tiles spelling out Kilalt's name—for the elevator she'd come up in, hoping it still worked and further hoping that the holy grav barge was still berthed on the roof.

*Good Gaia,* she thought, collapsing against the inner wall of the elevator when she got it moving. *I'm never volunteering for anything ever again....*



Twenty kilometers away, Red Eye felt the same rumbling blast from the area of the old starport and immediately dashed out of Lemos' headquarters tent with the general, Masaryk, V-Max and a gang of rebel officers.

"Defender preserve us," Lemos gasped, watching a tower of flame rise up from just over the horizon, "what the hell is that?"

"Could it be a nuke?" a junior officer asked.

"No," Red Eye said. "The blast area is large, but the fireball's not intense enough. That's a meson gun blast."

"A meson gun?" Lemos asked. "But I thought that was knocked out!"

"Apparently it's not," Newton said, stepping out of the communications tent with Cardinal Vazquez. "We just received a signal from the rebels preparing to assault Kilalt. They say that blast was in the vicinity of the *Vi Et Armis*."

"What!" V-Max exclaimed. "Why would anybody target her?"

"Unknown," Red Eye said, "but you can be sure of one thing—there's probably nothing but a black spot where that ship used to be."

Utterly demoralized, V-Max staggered a few steps in the direction of the blast and then stopped, too stunned to say any more.

"Well, whatever it's targeting," Lemos said, "I don't like that it's going off so close to my men. I'm going to cancel the assault."

"General," Vazquez said, "do you think that's wise? This might be our best chance to defeat Kilalt, while the young lady has him detained in the building."

"That may be true, Your Holiness," Lemos said, "and I don't want to sound like I don't believe that the Defender is watching over us, but we have no idea what's being targeted out there. Our men will have to take cover."

Vazquez reluctantly conceded the point with a nod, and Lemos hurried back to the radio tent with Newton.

"I still don't get it," Masaryk said to Red Eye. "Why would anybody target a perfectly good starship? I mean, it wasn't as if it could escape with its drives all torn out."

"I don't know," Red Eye said, turning to the most senior of Lemos' aides, "but I think we'd better watch our own butts out here. Major Badillo, we've got to make sure no nightjacks even so much as get a look at this place. They could be directing fire, and even a close miss from that gun could destroy this whole camp."

Major Badillo, a bearded little stump of a man, didn't have to be told twice. He had two children and a wife among the civilians at the camp, hidden in and among the area's rubble.

"Right. I'll see that the perimeter guard is doubled immediately."

Badillo then ran off toward his task, dragging along a couple of rebel sergeants to help him gather up more forces.

"V-Max," Red Eye said abruptly, "snap out of it. I need your help."

"For what?"

"To keep these people alive, damn it! Now move."

"All right, all right, what do you need?"

"I need you to fly one of the broomsticks for me. We're going up hunting for nightjacks."

Perceiving, perhaps, that this was a way to do something other than mourn for his lost ship, V-Max quickly followed Red Eye to the one broomstick not already in use.

"You know, of course," V-Max said, piloting the broomstick into the air from its front seat, "those nightjacks are masters of camouflage. I don't think we'll spot one if it wants to stay hidden."

"You just let me worry about that," Red Eye said, checking the magazine of his fusion rifle and commencing a careful scan of the base's perimeter with his suit's synthetic vision.

He managed to scan about a quarter of the camp's perimeter when the next meson blast hit—not a kilometer away from the camp.

Neither Red Eye or V-Max knew what had happened at first. The shock wave from the blast—less forceful than the supersonic hammer of a nuclear explosion, but powerful all the same—slammed into the front of the broomstick, snapped its central trunk and flung both riders headlong into the ground.

Walloped into unconsciousness by hard contact with a collapsed concrete wall, Red Eye nevertheless recovered quickly, thanks to the incredible strength of his battle dress, and rolled over as soon as he discerned that none of his more critical parts were broken.

*Oh, man—thank God and the guys who made this armor.*

Red Eye's relief evaporated, however, when he saw the flaming detonation at the edge of the camp—a meson detonation—and its effect on his surroundings. Both the headquarters and communications tents strained against their guy wires as a steady wind howled across the camp, and chunks of churned-up debris pelted both Red Eye and V-Max, who lay inert on the rubble nearby.

"Hey, V-Max," Red Eye said, crawling up to get a closer look at his pilot. "V-Max, snap out of it."

V-Max would not snap out of his present condition, however. At closer range, Red Eye saw that his neck was broken, and his eyes were rolled up lifeless in his skull.

*Poor likk,* Red Eye thought, pulling off one of his armored

gloves to feel for a pulse at the pirate's neck and wrist. *First you lose your ship, then you lose your life.*

*Well, don't worry, pal. I'll get the bastard who did this.*

Red Eye then pulled his glove back on and, rising back to his feet, found his fusion rifle lying a few meters away. The broomstick, he saw, was snapped clean in two, so he gave up any hope of repairing it. Instead, he hefted the battered rifle—which was at least in one piece—and moved off to find the meson gun's spotter.

Not having a way to get airborne, Red Eye knew, was a clear disadvantage. Nightjacks were not only masters of camouflage, but fair flyers as well, and could quickly elude a pursuer.

*So where could he be?* Red Eye thought, walking closer to the meson gun's beaten zone, where no other human appeared to remain. *I can't let him get the jump on me, or he'll kill me and call in even more accurate fire.*

Red Eye hadn't made gunnery sergeant by being indecisive. Respectful as he was of a nightjack's stealth and firepower, it was still a machine, and he was a man. It would employ predictable tactics, and he could anticipate them.

*That first shot wasn't inaccurate, Red Eye suddenly realized. It was aimed right at the center of the perimeter defenses. That means the nightjack must have taken them out to get an unopposed look at the center of the camp itself.*

Which, Red Eye reasoned, meant the nightjack would be moving through the very area it had just called meson fire into.

*Well, it's a nice theory anyway,* Red Eye thought, kneeling down behind a broken wall at the edge of the beaten zone and bringing up his weapon. *Now let's see if I'm right.*

If he was wrong, he knew he was dead. If he didn't catch the nightjack, it would call in a second shot, and everybody in the area would die—Lemos, Vazquez, Masaryk, all the rebels, all their children....

*And Newton. Ironic that, since he seemed to think this was the safest place to be.*

But Red Eye was not wrong. Not 30 seconds after he set up his ambush, a looming shape materialized in the midst of the swirling smoke and flame before him—perhaps 100 meters away, three meters tall and obligingly oblivious to the sergeant's presence.

*Say cheese, you homicidal bastard. You're toast.*

And a moment later the nightjack exploded, seared through its gigantic chest by a bolt of fusion fire. Its fuel storage tanks detonated instantaneously, and the entire robot blew apart in a fiery hydrogen fireball, flinging debris across a wide area.

Aware that there might be even more nightjacks around, Red

Eye remained behind his wall, scanning carefully in all directions, but no more came, and there were no more detonations at the camp. But far off in the direction of the Federal District, Red Eye quite clearly heard the distant thunder of a meson detonation a few seconds later—almost certainly the fire order that would have annihilated the rebel base, shifted to another target.

*Well, Red Eye thought, I sure hope that wasn't Lemos' soldiers being targeted.*

As it happened, the target of that particular volley wasn't Lemos' soldiers.

It was the Defense Ministry.

...

Although they had seen the first meson blast a few minutes before, over in the old starport, the men of General Lemos' chief subordinate, Colonel Calderon, did not fully grasp what it was, and protested the general's orders to hold back from an assault on the Defense Ministry. Six minutes later, they owed the general their lives.

Hiding in buildings all around the Ministry, careful not to be seen by the handful of nightjacks still at large in the city, Calderon's men were first-hand witnesses to the destruction of the Defense Ministry.

One instant the building stood before them as a titanic fortress. The next instant, the entire lower half of the massive building disintegrated. Tons of concrete, masonry and steel burst outward in a cataclysmic cloud of flame, smoke and debris, the result of an explosion within the building, but below ground level, in one of the basements. The topmost floors of the building hung unsupported above the explosion for a moment, then fell into the roiling cloud and were lost from view, their crash merging with the continuing roar of the first explosion.

"Good God and Defender!" a rebel soldier exclaimed, from the cover of a building facing Enea Avenue. "What was that?"

"Hell on earth," Colonel Calderon said simply. "The devil himself is loose among us."

"Sir," another soldier said, "what about the spacer woman? She was still in there!"

"I'm aware of that, soldier."

"But sir, shouldn't we...well, go look for her?"

Calderon merely shook his head.

"Where would we look? No, absolutely not. Stay under cover, like the general ordered."

"Yes, sir."

"All we can do is pray," the colonel said. "Pray and keep our heads down."



A sudden flash of light on the horizon, bright against the night, seemed to confirm that wisdom.

Bit by bit, it seemed, Soledad was being erased from the face of creation.

• • •

Jogging alone through seemingly endless twisting stone passages, with a pistol in one hand and a lightstick in the other, Coeur realized that—for all she knew—Soledad might well be destroyed by the time she got back in contact with her people. Unable to use her vac suit communicator through all the rock, there was simply no way to know, and the weight wore upon her as she visualized the unchecked power of a meson gun.

Drawing maximum power, the biggest meson guns could fire as often as three times a minute, blasting holes hundreds of meters wide in their targets. Laid down in an efficient pattern, such fire could annihilate the heart of any city—even one the size of Soledad—in minutes.

*But let's think, Coeur. That gun, and its power generator, must be at least 70 years old and beat to crap. Surely it can't maintain its maximum fire rate after all these years.*

*But then again, there's a depot right around the corner with all the spare parts they'd ever need, and a computer that could train new technicians and diagnose any fault.*

*All right, so keep running. You gotta make sure this passageway's clear.*

Whether by luck or grace of God, the passageway was clear, and after 30 minutes of frantic running and stair climbing, she emerged on the south face of Mt. Altus—together with a dozen frightened slaves.

"Defender protect us!" an exhausted woman exclaimed, holding two children close to herself. "A demon from the surface!"

"Hey, easy there," Coeur said, flipping up her faceplate and putting her hands up, though keeping the pistol in her right hand. "I'm a person, see? Flesh and blood."

In the darkness of a moonless night, the slaves did not appear keen to believe their eyes too quickly, but neither did they withdraw any further from Coeur, and after a tense moment she reholstered her gun.

"There. A friend, see?"

"You are not one of us, though," an old man said. "We shall be cursed, for having come in contact with you."

"Yes, well, you may be cursed, but at least you're alive. It won't be safe to go back inside the mountain."

"How do you know that?"

"Trust me, I do."

Glancing around, Coeur realized something extraordinary—she and the slaves were on an outcrop of rock above the Gutter of Blood, not far from where the ship's boat and G-carrier were parked.

"Boomer, come in," she said, activating her communicator. "This is Red Sun."

"Roger, Red Sun. Go ahead."

"Boomer, listen, I'm on the outside of the mountain. Do you have idea how much progress the rest of our people have made?"

"Actually, Red, it looks like most of them on are on the outside of the mountain, just like you."

"Outstanding. Who hasn't checked in yet?"

"Two of our people, Rhodes and Van Gelder."

"All right, then, here's the plan. Tell all our people who are already outside to stay outside, and contact me the minute you hear from Rhodes and Van Gelder."

"Er...actually, they just called in. It looks like everybody's out, Captain."

"Excellent. Then patch me through to Drop Kick."

Static issued from Coeur's helmet speakers for a moment, then Drop Kick came on the line.

"Drop Kick here, sir."

"Sergeant, I was just talking to Boomer, and it sounds like we've flushed the depot. Can you confirm?"

"Well, I'll tell you this much—I don't think anybody could be alive in the deeper levels without a vac suit—the fire's too intense."

"All right, then, it's time for you to light the candle and get the hell out of there. How long you think it'll take to get up the shaft?"

"Well, if it was just us, probably a minute. But we've got men hanging off the side, and Physic's gonna ride on top of the tank, so I'd have to say at least five minutes."

"Fine. Then have Physic set the bomb timer for 10 minutes and then get the hell out of there."

"Understood. Catch you on the surface."

"Roger that. Red Sun out."

So *that's it*, Coeur thought, shutting off the communicator. *Ten minutes.*

Commotion among the slaves brought Coeur's focus back to them. A young boy was edging back toward the entrance to the shaft, and his mother was warily moving after him, probably unsure of how Coeur would react.

"Hey, you, get away from there," Coeur said to the child. "It's not safe."

The boy drew back, abruptly, into his mother's arms.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Coeur said, mostly to herself, "leaving this door open. I'd better shut it."

"But...but..." a man stammered, as Coeur reached for the handle of the massive hinged door she was only barely able to budge.

"What?" Coeur asked.

"When you close the door," a man said, "there's no way back in. I know—it was my job to look after these hatches."

"Well, good," Coeur said, finishing the effort of hauling the heavy metal door shut. "Because in a few minutes, there won't be anything down there to go back to."

"Then it is true!" a woman cried. "You are a demon!"

"Yeah, well, you'll have to ask my friends about that. In the meantime, I recommend we all brace ourselves, 'cause this mountain's gonna start shaking pretty quick here."

# Chapter 24

Although Gyro had never been in a battle where meson guns were involved, Coeur, her gunnery instructor at the Technical Academy, had impressed upon her the need to respect such weapons. Therefore, Gyro did not hesitate when Deep Six detected the first meson detonations in Soledad—she immediately shut off the ship's radio and EMS jammers lest any ground spotter should use those to glean the little freighter's position for a targeting solution.

"This is so frustrating," Snapshot said, from her missile turret. "Soledad is being blown away, and there's nothing we can do about it."

"No," Gyro replied, from the pilot's station on the bridge, "we're doing what we can. We're staying alive so we'll still be here when the skipper needs us."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. But all the same, we need to think about what we're going to do if Vin and the skipper can't knock out that gun."

Gyro supposed she knew what Snapshot meant. Since Coeur knew the approximate location of the meson gun—about two kilometers below a valley in the Aguja Prieta Mountains—Snapshot could always bludgeon the valley with nuclear warheads, hoping the transmission of seismic shock would disrupt the machinery of the gun. Such a plan was desperate, though, and quite contrary to Arses policy.

"If you mean nuking the surface," Deep Six said, like Gyro, divining Snapshot's meaning, "I might point out that the Coalition frowns upon such indiscriminate destruction of planetary environments. It also has a very low probability of success."

"Yeah, right," Snapshot replied. "I'll bet if those 'planning groups' had more people from the field in them, we wouldn't have so many idiotic memos on what's morally objectionable and what's not."

"Be that as it may," Gyro said, "I'm the commander of this ship



in Red Sun's absence, and I'll follow my own council on whether to use the nukes."

"Yes, sir," Snapshot said.

"Just keep up your scanning of the mountains," Gyro told Deep Six. "I want to know when that bomb of the captain's goes off, so we can see if it has any effect on the meson fire."

"Yes, sir."

The agonizing wait for that signal was 39 minutes, during which time no less than 13 meson detonations were recorded in the various districts of Soledad.

Then *Homet's* unfolded passive array detected a strong seismic shock under Mt. Altus, and at last the meson blasts came to an end.

"The city appears quiet," Deep Six said 10 minutes later, "and we are receiving a transmission from Mt. Altus."

"Put it through," Gyro said.

"*Homet*," a weary-sounding Coeur said, "this is Red Sun. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative, Captain, this is Gyro. Go ahead."

"Gyro, I think we need your help. The depot's toast, but now I've got a whole mountain covered with locals, and they're all going to freeze to death if we don't do something. We don't have enough transport down here to save them all. Figure you can bring *Homet* down?"

"Yes, sir. We're in good order and have taken no damage."

Instantly, Gyro realized how silly that sounded. The big meson gun on Mexit would not have damaged *Homet* if it had hit her—it would have blown her to oblivion. But Coeur was polite, or tired, enough not to mention that.

"Excellent. I've put a call through to Newton, and it sounds like it's safe to take the depot survivors there."

"We saw a meson hit in that area, sir, but we weren't certain how close it was to our people. You say they're all right?"

"Mostly," Coeur said, "thanks to Red Eye. But we did take some hits. V-Max didn't make it, and we're not sure what became of Liu; she disappeared when the Ministry went up."

"Oh no."

"Yeah. Well, they wouldn't call it the Wilds if it wasn't dangerous. As far as Zorn goes, though, it's hard to say how upset she was about losing V-Max, since she was already pretty upset about hearing that the *Armis* was blown up...."

"Wait a minute, sir; did you say *Vi Et Armis* was blown up?"

"That's right. Didn't you know that?"

"Well, we saw something blow up in the starport, but we weren't sure what it was. We weren't sure who might lock onto

our transmissions to get a targeting fix, so we didn't use the radio after the meson gun started firing."

"Good thinking," Coeur said, "You did what you had to do. You're alive; that's what counts."

"Yes, sir. We'll be along momentarily. *Homet* out."

\*\*\*

Coeur and her crew moved among the slaves cowering on the wind-scoured slopes of Mount Altus, trying to move them down toward the Gutter of Blood. Although they were disoriented before, they became terrified once the bomb went off deep below their feet, destroying the home they had known as "Heaven," shearing sheets of rock off the mountainside and showering a cascade of rubble on the frightened herds of gabas below. Now it took the attention of almost all the spacers to try to keep the refugees moving down to where they could be rescued.

Only Physic, tending to the unconscious Fubar and Gremlin, remained inside the G-carrier.

"So how are they doing?" Coeur asked the doctor over the communicator.

"Pretty good," Physic said, "considering. As far as I can make out, their brain chemistry has been altered slightly, but no implants have been inserted. They'll be up and around inside a couple of weeks."

"How about you? Your ankle didn't seem to be bothering you."

"Actually, it is. I just keep shooting it with cortisone to get through the day."

"Keep it up. I've got to get back to work. Red Sun out."

Having the protection of her vac suit against the cold wind and sudden driving rain, Coeur nonetheless empathized with the miserable condition of the homeless slaves—men, women, and children in nothing more than jumpsuits—and hoped very much that *Homet* would arrive soon.

"Is anyone here a leader?" Coeur shouted into the wind.

Several slaves pointed. "Rikart, the Old One," one said, indicating an old man.

"You're the Old One?" Coeur asked.

"I-I'm 61," he said through chattering teeth, "there's no one older."

"You scared?"

"No. Just cold."

"Ever been outside of Heaven?"

"Not since I was a boy, ma'am."

"Well don't you worry. Help's on it's way."

"We know no fear, ma'am. The Defender guides us."

"Right. Now can you help me lead these people down into that gully?"

*Poor people*, Coeur thought. *The adjustment to Soledad won't be easy.*

However, a sudden transmission broke into Coeur's thoughts.

"Captain, this is Physic. *Hornet* is overhead."

"Roger," Coeur said happily. "Thank you."

A moment later the freighter appeared, her floodlights cutting through the mist and driving rain. Huge and loud, with her landing thrusters roaring, her appearance frightened the already overwrought slaves and functioned to clear out a safe landing area.

"Here we are, skipper," Gyro's voice came to Coeur over her headset, but Coeur could see her waving from the pilot's seat on the bridge.

"Good work, Gyro, now get that ramp down so we can get these people out of this weather."

Snapshot, in the meantime, appeared beneath the bridge canopy, having come down the crew ladder. There she met Drop Kick with a quick embrace before Drop Kick led her back to help organize the refugees for departure.

But the former slaves would not move. Having already suffered fires, evacuation, earthquakes and landslides, the appearance of the starship was the last straw, and they began recolling away from the spacers with cries of fear.

*Could someone have told them about slavers? Coeur wondered. What the hell do we do now?*

At that moment, *Hornet's* broad cargo ramp opened up, spilling the warm yellow glow of the cargo hold, and exposing three figures in silhouette, Gyro, Crowbar, and...

*Cardinal Vazquez?* Coeur thought, disbelieving her eyes.

But indeed it was the cardinal, moving out to urge, cajole and guide the miserable slaves into the alien confines of the freighter. Slowly but insisently, the cry arose, "The Cardinal is here!"

Having held her office for at least a decade, she was known to many of the slaves, and these began to surge forward with relief and confidence, bringing their comrades with them. But even those who did not know her were rapidly won over by her graceful bearing and gentle manner. As Coeur watched, the job of settling 200 strangers into a starship, which should have taken over an hour, was completed in 20 minutes.

"So who says there's no such thing as miracles?" Coeur said to Drop Kick, standing beside her.

"Don't look at me."

"Your Holiness," Coeur said, having made her way to stand by the cardinal, "what are you doing here?"

"Your Ensign Gyro thought I could help," said Vazquez, breathing heavily in her soaked clerical robes.

"She was right. Now let me get you inside where you can dry off and warm up."

"No," Vazquez said, "not until everyone has gotten in. They need someone to show them that their lives come first."

Coeur sighed.

"All right," she agreed, now yelling so Crowbar could hear her as well, "but let Crowbar get you some dry clothes, okay?"

"Got it covered, Red," Crowbar yelled from the cargo ramp. "I'll take good care of her."

*You'd better*, Coeur thought, as she headed around the starboard boom to enter the bridge by the crew ladder. *A planet only gets so many lucky breaks, and she's one of the best ones Mexit's got.*

"Welcome aboard, Captain," Deep Six greeted her as she stood by the pilot's seat, removing pieces of wet vac suit.

"Yeah. It's nice to have some place to come home to. I feel sorry for those people back there," she said, tossing her head to indicate the cargo hold. "We blew up the only home most of them have ever known—clean, safe, and healthy—and now we're transplanting them into a bombed-out city that just got blown into even smaller pieces."

"Actually, sir," Deep Six said, turning sideways in his roller-chair to face Coeur, "I did some checking on that on the way down. The damage to the city is really much less serious than you might expect."

"But I thought the city got pounded pretty hard."

"Indeed. However, apart from the Defense Ministry and the hit on the rebel camp, every other shot landed on top of pre-Collapse military targets—targets that were already destroyed in the Final War."

"Well, I'll be damned," Coeur said, buckling her seats restraints. "When the depot computer transferred its intelligence into the fire control computer, it must have found only pre-Collapse data on targets of military significance."

"Right," Gyro said, "and once it lost its forward observers, it must have switched to those targets as logical alternatives."

"Still," Deep Six said, "it does make one wonder why such a devious computer would switch to a pattern of pure destruction."

The answer to that question, Coeur supposed, was unknown, but she had a theory.



"It's possible," she ventured, "that it didn't have enough memory capacity in the fire control computer to hold all its original mind. I mean, for instance, down in the depot we heard its vocabulary change completely, as if it didn't have enough space to download its language routines and switched to the smaller vocabulary of the specialist machine instead.

"So maybe," Coeur went on, "it didn't have enough of its original mind left to be subtle. It just did what a lot of the simpler Virus strains would do—it took over the primary purpose of the machine it inhabited and started killing."

"Or perhaps," Deep Six said, "it was just angry that you'd defeated it."

"Well, yeah, that too."

Down below the bridge canopy, Coeur caught a wave from Crowbar signaling that all the slaves were aboard, and cut short the discussion.

"Okay, that's it people. Let's get ready to launch."

"Yes, sir," Gyro said, retreating aft toward her laser turret.

Coeur then paused a moment, thoughtfully looking across the Gutter of Blood at the G-carrier, ship's boat and Intrepid, likewise standing by to launch.

"Sixer, put me through to Zorn. She should be at the conn of the ship's boat."

"Aye, sir."

"Zorn here," the pirate captain answered a moment later, though with a voice clearly hoarser than usual.

"Hey Vega, you all right over there? You think you can fly?"

"Yes, Coeur," Zorn replied, "I can fly. Just because I lost my ship and my best friend doesn't mean I got stupid all of a sudden."

*Touché*, Coeur thought, although she knew Zorn really was worked up over the loss of V-Max and *Vi Et Armis*. Having lost a ship, and a best friend, herself, she could empathize with Zorn.

But now was no time to think about Darien.

And there was still work to do on Mexit.

"Well, then, if you think you're up to it, there's still one more mission I'd like you and the guys to take on. Do you remember the map in the control room that showed the approximate location of the last meson gun—the gun that was firing."

"Yes, I recorded it on video, in fact."

"Good. Because I want you and the rest of our crew to take it out. Find the entrance and pull whatever slave crew is inside out of there. I doubt they have the Initiative to start firing again without orders from the depot, but all the same it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Understood."

"Of course," Coeur pointed out, "Drop Kick will be in charge of the mission, but I doubt he can fly his tank into the meson gun chamber."

"Understood. I'll make sure nobody gets hurt inside."

"Well, try anyway. Red Sun out."

\*\*\*

The assault on the meson gun proved to be anticlimactic. The hidden entrance, in the floor of a desolate mountain valley, was unguarded. Once inside, Drop Kick's Marines and Zorn's pirates found powered elevators obligingly waiting to serve them. These, in turn, took the spacers down two kilometers to the last of Mexit's functioning meson guns, and the 250 technicians huddled fearfully around the perimeter of its cavernous 300-meter-diameter cavity. The handful of nightjacks they found were in a state of electronic catatonia and were easily neutralized.

Frightened by the extinction of the depot intelligence that had so long ruled their lives, the technicians offered no resistance and were peacefully herded to the surface. In shifts, the G-carrier, ship's boat, and then *Homet* herself—after unloading its own payload into the arms of Cardinal Vazquez—began transferring these people to shelter in the city.

"Well, that is some gun," Coeur said later in the afternoon, looking up at the weapon with Red Eye, whom she'd brought back from Soledad to take charge of it.

"Yeah," the sergeant said, staring at it through a gallery window, "I'd have to give you that. What is she, 50,000 tonnes?"

"Actually, 70,000 tonnes," Coeur said, "with a discharge energy of 200,000 megajoules and infinite traverse."

"And you want me to take charge of it."

"As far as you can, yes. When *Homet* goes back to the Coalition, I'm going to take Drop Kick with me, so there'll be no excuse that I didn't have a guard on Zorn. You and the rest of the Marines I'm going to leave here, though, to get this gun in working order."

Red Eye stood quietly, regarding the huge weapon.

"Sir, is that really practical? It would take at least 1,000 men to run this facility properly—to get the power plant back to full power and get proper maintenance going."

He paused to take a breath.

"In addition to which, I'm not a commissioned officer. Surely the Coalition won't approve of leaving a gunnery sergeant in charge of a planet smasher like that."

"Well, we can fix that," Coeur said, touching controls on her forearm to activate the audio recording function of her vac suit's

computer. "Ship's log, RCS *Hornet*: As of this date, the 2nd of Taurus, 1202, Gunnery Sergeant Yorgl Maling, call sign "Red Eye," has been given field promotion to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant in the RCMC, with all rights and privileges pertaining thereto."

Coeur then shut off the recorder.

"Wait a minute," Red Eye said, "can you do that?"

"Well, I just did. I suppose it's another matter whether or not the Marine Corps command will accept it, but I think they will if they have any sense. After all, a commissioned officer should be in charge of Mexit Station."

Again, Red Eye was silent.

"Wait a minute, sir—aren't we getting ahead of ourselves? This isn't really our property, is it?"

"Actually, yes it is. I talked with Vazquez earlier at the Church of the Holy Sacristy—she's moved the capital there, for the Interim—and she's agreed to loan us the gun in exchange for technical assistance."

"Oh, right, like we won't be busy enough trying to keep the gun running."

"Oh, don't worry. We've got a handle on the manpower problem. Physic says Gremlin and Fubar should recover completely inside a week. In addition to that, you'll have all the rest of Zorn's crew to help you look after the gun and train new gunnery technicians from the city."

Red Eye laughed. "Okay, sir, I'll stop arguing. Any other impossible things you want to assign me before you go?"

"No, that ought to do it, *lieutenant*."

"In case anyone asks, what is the status of Zorn's old crew? Are they still covered by the charges against her, or are you summarily dismissing them?"

"By the powers vested in me, I don't know. But they won't be going anywhere. Keep an eye on them until an official Coalition vessel shows up with instructions. Some court somewhere will decide, but those people are needed right here and now, and not on Ra just to be arraigned."

"Yes sir."

"Anyway, don't worry about legalities. This whole situation's so weird there are no regs for it anyway. Just make sure you get this gun running, and don't be afraid to use it on any unfriendly powers that try to assault Mexit. If you can do that, nine'll get you 10 the Assembly will authorize construction of a forward naval base here, and then you'll have more help than you'll know what to do with."

"Pie in the sky, sir," Red Eye said, "by-and-by."

"Yes," Coeur chuckled, "I suppose that's getting ahead of

ourselves. Right now, why don't you go find Whiz Bang and start a survey of the gun to see what's beat up and needs servicing. Snapshot, Newton and Crowbar should be getting to work on a battery of sensor drones in the meantime, and we'll see that those get linked up to the depot's microwave comm net before we leave so you'll have some direct-fire capacity."

"Yes, sir," Red Eye said, saluting and then walking off to find Whiz Bang.

Coeur remained behind, looking up at the fearsome gun. Flying over the city earlier, in *Hornet*, she'd seen the craters the weapon had left in the city—some as wide as 400 meters, full of rubble and soil melted into glass.

*And it killed Liu*, she thought, remembering the particularly dense wreckage she'd seen in the crater of the Defense Ministry, wreckage that rescue workers were still sifting through in the dangerously intense sunlight of the afternoon. *They'll probably dig her out of that mess before the evening, and then we'll have a swell night.*

Since Zorn wanted to bury V-Max this evening, right in the camp where he'd died—and which the spacers were still using as their own base—people would already be in a somber mood. Finding An-Wing, Coeur supposed, would only make it worse.

*Yes, well, they wouldn't call it the Wilds if it weren't dangerous. At least now this gun will be doing something constructive.*

Coeur's pensive thoughts were interrupted, however, when she heard the clatter of armored feet running toward her from the opposite direction Red Eye had gone. It was Widget, and she was excited.

"Sir," she puffed, "news. An-Wing's alive."

"What? How?"

"Didn't get all the details, sir, but I thought you'd want to know as soon as we heard. Physic's got her right now, at the same hospital with Fubar and Cremlin."

Shocked by the news, Coeur didn't take the time to discuss it further.

"Right," she said. "I'll take the G-carrier."

"Yes, sir, it's already warmed up."

Coeur spared one last glance at the meson gun. Dwarfing the destructive power of the gods that the men of her own world had imagined millennia before, perhaps it was more than a god of destruction.

Perhaps it could be merciful as well.

• • •

The story was so unbelievable Coeur still didn't believe it when she'd heard it twice. But the proof was there, before Coeur,



Physic, Widget and Masaryk. Picked up from the rebel camp, in a bed of old St. Bernadine's Hospital, was Liu An-Wing, with no more serious injury than a fractured collar bone and a broken leg.

"Let me get this straight," Coeur said. "You didn't know how to fly the holy grav barge, but you managed to talk the pilot into turning on the contra-grav a split second before the building blew up."

"I told you I'm good," An-Wing replied, a trifle smugly, propped up comfortably in her bed. "The field let us drift down gently, but then it cut out a few meters above the ground, and we crashed into the crater."

"Lucky girl," Masaryk said. "I'll bet you just wanted to get a nifty arm-sling to match mine."

"Hmph," An-Wing said, looking down at the sling on her own right arm. "But mine will be black," she chided, with the hint of a smile. "Someone has to light the way for you fashion-challenged. I'm curious about something, though. Did the search parties ever find Kilalt?"

"Yes," Physic said, "as a matter of fact they did. Found a nightjack too, clamped onto his shoulder, but they were both dead."

"Good," An-Wing said. "Because you wouldn't believe some of the things I had to tell him to keep him there in the building..."

"Like what?"

"Oh, like..." An-Wing began, but then thought better of it. Appreciative of the sudden feelings of the Aubani, she supposed they might not take kindly to the story she'd cooked up about Oriflamme invading them.

"...Oh, let's just say things that people who know me well know I really don't mean. But it was hard work, believe me."

"And much appreciated," Coeur said. "What you did was selfless and heroic." Coeur moved closer to the bed to offer An-Wing her hand. "Thank you."

"Well, let's not get too sentimental," An-Wing said, thought she did accept the handshake. "I still think Oriflamme has the most right to this planet."

"Sure," Coeur said. "And if the Assembly agrees to that, then more power to you."

Politely, An-Wing nodded.

"You know, there's just one thing I wonder about," Widget said. "What happened to Graylord, Kilalt's lieutenant?"

"Wasn't he blown up with *Vi Et Armis*?" Masaryk asked. "I thought he was in a trash bin in her berth."

"He was," Widget said, "but some of Zorn's men found the trash bin—thrown clear by the explosion—and Graylord wasn't

in it. The hasp was broken, too, as if it had been forced open from the inside."

"Wow," An-Wing mused, warming to the allure of further conspiracy, "you don't suppose he could have gotten away? Captain, that could be dangerous, a key lieutenant of Killalt's loose in the city...."

"That's enough," Coeur said, resting a hand on An-Wing's good shoulder. "One cloak or dagger at a time. All you need to worry about now is getting better."

"But.."

"Trust me, there will be plenty of intrigue left when you're back up and around. Anyway, even if he was an autonomous machine, he's two meters tall and looks like a skeleton. If, by some chance, he did survive the blast, he probably couldn't move around unnoticed."

An-Wing nodded, and a silence fell upon the room, now turning yellow with the glow of sunset through polarized glass.

"Say, Captain," Physic said, "Isn't V-Max's funeral going to be soon?"

"That's right," Coeur said, glancing at the chronometer on her vac suit's forearm. "Widget, Bela, we'd better get going if we're going to be there."

"Right," they agreed.

"I suppose I'll have to stay here," An-Wing said.

"Yes, you will," Physic agreed, "as will I."

"You sure about that, doctor?" Coeur asked. "Someone could cover for you."

"If it's all the same, sir," the doctor said, "I'd rather stay."

And from the look in Physic's eye, Coeur knew what she meant. V-Max and Zorn were the two people in *Armis'* crew who knew—from the outset—what effect the HF II virus would have on Ra. In Physic's mind, they were both mass murderers—regardless of the patriotic motives behind the slaughter of the Hivers, or the heroic deeds they had performed since on the Coalition's behalf. It was not surprising that Physic would want to skip V-Max's funeral.

"You know what you have to do," Coeur said. "I'll see you later."

Physic nodded, and Coeur departed with her group.

*Makes me wonder if I should skip it myself, Coeur thought. But a life is a life, and if people should respect the lives of Hivers, then I should respect V-Max's. He gave it up for his comrades and the people of this world, and I can acknowledge that, no matter what other mistakes he made. How do I know—maybe he was even trying to make up for what he did. It's not my place to judge.*

\* \* \*

Not far from the tent city that had been set up for the former depot slaves at the edge of the rebel camp was the place where V-Max had died, and this was the place Zorn chose to bury her friend and comrade-in-arms.

As Coeur expected, the funeral wasn't pleasant, but at least it was brief. Given Zorn's relationship to V-Max—Coeur and Drop Kick knew from their earlier time aboard *Vi Et Armis* that the two pirates were intimate—Zorn thought better of delivering the eulogy and left that to Vink Instead.

"...What it all boils down to," Vink said, "is that we came out here with Zorn for a reason, to get our freedom from a government we felt was coming under too much influence from foreign powers. Of course, that also meant we had to leave the friendship of our countrymen behind, but that didn't mean we didn't care enough about our country to risk our lives for it. Pete Heron here—V-Max—risked his life for that cause wherever we went, and it is best that we remember he died in the service of that cause, so this city that's rubble today could live on and be free tomorrow.

"And that's all I've got to say."

"Company," Zorn said, "salute."

The other 13 pirates executed a crisp salute which was marred only slightly by the wavering of Carl Becker, who was crying openly. The body of her cousin was as yet unrecovered from the ruins of the Defense Ministry. Zorn engaged the winch that lowered the sheet metal casket of V-Max into the earth. The Arses and Marines, meanwhile, stood a few meters back in respectful silence—out of their environment suits and back into regular body sleeves—though they did not salute.

"All right, guys," Zorn said afterward, when the casket hit bottom, "let's go ahead and cover him up."

That the pirates did, with quick shovels of dirt, and the ceremony was officially concluded. Zorn went down on one knee at the side of her friend, and rather than remain close by, the rest of the pirates and most of the Arses drifted away with cautiously soft steps.

"I must admit," Newton said to Coeur, as the others walked away, "I've always found funerals rather confusing. Would it not be more availing to place him out in a cultivated field so he might contribute to the nitrogen cycle?"

"Er...some people think so, yeah," Coeur said, hoping Zorn didn't hear that, "but maybe you'd better move along, Newton."

"Very good, sir. I will return to working on the sensor drones with Crowbar."

Coeur remained behind, however, after Newton padded away.

"Would you like me to leave?" Coeur asked Zorn, softly.

"No," Zorn said, drawing a deep breath and rising back to her feet. "Stay. You've lost a friend like this yourself, I know."

Coeur supposed Zorn meant Darien.

"Yes," Coeur said, walking closer, "although I don't think Darien and I were as close as you and V."

"I don't know about that," Zorn observed. "He did give his life for you."

"That's true, he did," Coeur snapped, surprising herself with the bitterness of her reply. She momentarily thought to apologize for the vehemence of her response, but decided to let it go.

"I noticed," Zorn said, switching to another thought, "that your doctor wasn't here."

"No, Physic had other duties."

"Maybe she was just being polite," Zorn offered. "It probably would've been hard for her to keep from spitting on his grave."

"Well," Coeur said, after a thoughtful pause, "you did hurt her pretty bad. You hurt all of us, in fact, when you killed all those Hivers—and Scissor. He was a member of my crew, just like Badger and Gaffer, or Katzel and V-Max." *Or Darien.* But Coeur cut off the thought there. *Too much unfinished business.*

"So what do you want I should do?" Zorn asked. "Kill myself in front of her? V and I did what we thought we had to—and now I'll pay for it. But I'll pay that debt to the Coalition, not to Dr. Takagawa."

Coeur merely blinked, saying nothing.

"Oh, forget it," Zorn said. "Forget I said that. She's got a right to be angry, you've got a right to be angry—we've all got a right to be angry. At least V's dead now, and he doesn't have any of this crap to worry about."

"Zorn, look, for what it's worth, I'm not happy that V's dead. What you did at Ra was wrong, but I don't think you or V-Max was evil. You two had a belief, and you went a little too far standing up for it."

*A little too far, yeah,* Coeur thought, listening to the understatement in her own words, *as in mass murder and attempted genocide. But I'll leave the court on Ra to thrash that out.*

"You're right. Maybe I should just enjoy a little freedom while I still have it."

"Well, to be fair," Coeur said, "I wasn't planning to lock you in your stateroom for the whole trip. It'll be enough, I think, to have Drop Kick guard you, and Physic implant a homing tracer in you in case you try to run away."

"How about that," Zorn said. "I'll be a regular Napoleon at Elba."

"Well, sort of," Coeur said, "except you're not going to escape from *this* Elba."



"Perish the thought," Zorn said.

"And," Coeur went on, "the accommodations are probably a little nicer than Elba. Aside from you and me and Drop Kick, all there'll be are the gunners and Physic, Sixer and Crowbar, which means there'll be a lot more room and supplies per person."

"Sounds swell. Fatten me up for the firing squad."

Coeur gave Zorn a sharp look.

"Zorn, you don't know what's gonna happen. The court could be lenient, given the way you helped us here and at Sauler, and your surrendering peacefully."

But Zorn only shook her head.

"No, I don't think so. Maybe on your world, Red, but not on Ra. The law there's pretty strict."

To this, Coeur couldn't really give much of a rebuttal. She'd seen the way Ra had manhandled Physic's ex-husband, August Delpero—holding him without a writ of habeas corpus and grilling him without an attorney present—and he was only an accessory to Zorn's crimes, and not a pirate, to boot.

"Yeah," Zorn went on, "V-Max caught a break, all right. At least he died here, fighting for something worthwhile, instead of in front of a firing squad."

*Well, perhaps,* Coeur thought, though the discussion was taking a turn toward the morbid, and she elected not to respond. Instead, she turned her head slightly to look off to the east, opposite the sunset. Up there, she was gratified to see, was Orion, the great old constellation she remembered from her youth, not so different in appearance than it had been in the summer sky above the Arizona desert so long ago. Even 90 years later, and 60 parsecs away from home, the constellation was still very much the same, with its arms only slightly bent by Coeur's change in perspective.

"The Hunter," Zorn said after a moment, turning in the direction of Coeur's gaze.

"Yeah, I was just thinking about how far away it is. They say the belt stars are 400 parsecs from the Coalition."

"That's a ways, all right."

"A ways, yeah. It's so far away, I'll bet I'll never see it from another angle."

"I suppose it's kind of like a guardian angel, then," Zorn mused. "It was there when you were born, and it'll still be there when you die."

"Hopefully," Coeur said, picking up the idea, "it is a guardian angel—a guardian angel for all of us. There's still a lot of Wilds out there to explore."

"For some of us, you mean. For some of us, the journey stops a bit short."

*The Hunter*, Coeur thought. *If you're our guardian angel, what does that tell us about our mission? The hunt always ends in death, yet we're supposed to find the right and wrong in all of that. The Solomani stranded me in space with 39 friends and 17 chances to live. They were my enemies, and I thought I was better than them. Then I did the same thing to Royal Vengeance that the Solomani did to Alnitak. I am their enemy, and still I think I'm better than they are. If we're all hunters, what makes us different? How do I think I stand for something better? If you are our guardian, guide us to that answer.*

"Yeah," Coeur said, remembering not only V-Max, but her own lost comrades from this mission, "I suppose it does."

...

Precisely 28 days later, the great meson gun below the Aguja Prieta Mountains thrummed back to life—and scarcely a day too soon. Manned by Red Eye, his Marines, Zorn's pirates and 500 volunteers from Soledad, the giant weapon delivered an accurate full-power volley into open space just 40 hours before a fleet of Solee warships suddenly appeared at the planet, cruising inward from the outer system.

On the face of it, the Solee clearly seemed to outclass any defense Mexit might muster—two *Midu Agashaam*-class destroyers and a *Kinunir*-class colonial cruiser, any one of which could extinguish *Homet* with a single salvo. But they had clearly discounted the possibility of deep defenses, since they were maneuvering in a leisurely manner with all active sensors engaged. Mexit's new sensor net picked them up easily at the limit of its extreme range, and the Solee would pay accordingly.

"That looks like *Royal Vengeance*," Red Eye said to Coeur, who was standing beside him down in the meson gun's fire control center. "The drive emissions are the same as the ones Snapshot recorded earlier."

Coeur's heart leapt reflexively—*They made it!*—then sank just as quickly. *And now we get to kill them again. You poor bastards. Why'd you have to come back?*

"Back with some friends," Coeur said with disappointment, "to finish us off and take the planet. Or die trying."

Red Eye heard the sadness in her voice and looked at her. "Shall we open fire?"

*This is my job. If I don't do mine, they'll do theirs and kill me.*

"No, let them get into your effective range first."

"Yes, sir. All personnel, stand by."

"Solee targets are closing to optimum range, Captain," Whiz Bang reported a few minutes later, "300,000 kilometers."

"Think your weapon can handle intensive fire?" Coeur asked

Red Eye.

"It should. It's as ready as it's gonna get."

"All right, then. Target the big destroyers first," Coeur ordered. "Let 'em have it—maximum rate of fire."

If the Solee had any inkling of their fate, they didn't show it. Moving at high speed, but without evasive maneuvers, they were already close enough to detect *Hornet* parked in the outskirts of Soledad, but she was a target they would never engage.

*Get out of here, you idiots!* Coeur called in her mind.

"Taking first target under fire," Red Eye announced calmly.

The destroyer was no match for the battleship-sized meson gun. It blew apart in a blossom of plasma and glowing debris.

*Get out of here!*

In the holographic sensor tank, the two remaining blips began tracing erratic courses—evasive maneuvers—but kept coming.

"Taking second target under fire."

*Get out of here!*

The blip representing the second destroyer grew larger, became diffuse and faded away.

"Shifting to the last target, sir."

Coeur nodded, but suddenly alarms and klaxons blared in the control center.

"The homopolar generator bearings are heating up!" Whiz Bang called out.

"How much longer can you keep them going?"

"I can't sir—they're just too old. They're going to seize if I don't shut down!"

"All right," Red Eye answered, "pull the plug."

At that moment, the blip representing *Royal Vengeance* flickered and winked out. Coeur smiled.

*Still have an itchy jump-button finger? Well good for you. And don't come back.*

Mexit was safe.

• • •

"It's hard to imagine," Cardinal Vazquez said two days later, glancing up through a stained glass window to the nighttime sky, "how a battle of such violence could be fought in the sky, and not be felt below. But I shall I take your word for it, Captain."

Coeur smiled.

"You might have had more proof than you wanted if that last destroyer hadn't withdrawn. But we gave the Solee a pretty good sting—I don't think they'll be back any time soon."

"So then, it's time for you to leave?"

"I'm afraid so, Your Holiness. I wanted to stick around until the

meson gun's live fire test—and, of course, we saw that it worked. Now that the binding bearings have been replaced, I'm sure the gun'll do a fine job of protecting you here."

"Is it really so necessary for you to leave now? If you stayed, you could help us unify the nations of Mexit once and for all."

"Somehow, Your Holiness," Coeur said, "I think you underestimate yourself. You're a far better diplomat than I'll ever be. And besides, we're leaving the G-carrier and the ship's boat here, so it shouldn't be a problem for you to get your shuttle diplomacy moving along quickly."

*Plus, Coeur thought, we're leaving the tank here, too. Just knowing that's around should make some of the petty dictators treat Vazquez with respect.*

Coeur went on, "There's also the crew of spacers we're leaving here with you. Considering the skills and experience they possess, I doubt there's much the crew of *Homert* could add."

"Perhaps I should be a gracious host, then, and stop begging you to stay."

"Well, it's not like I want to leave," Coeur said. "This is a beautiful planet, with fine people. But I do have to get Zorn back to Ra, and more important, I need to get my reports back to Aubaine so the fleet can send more people out here."

Vazquez nodded.

"Yes, I suppose you must. It's just difficult for me to imagine how a person could want to hurl herself across the stars the way you do, when I've always lived under this one sky, and I've never known any other."

Coeur smiled. "Actually, that's a pretty healthy attitude. The more I travel, the more I see the advantages of staying in one place."

"Indeed?"

"You aren't as likely to be hurt if you stay in one spot."

Given the cardinal's capacity to sense another person's emotions directly—through psionic empathy—Coeur suspected Vazquez would know what she meant. There were a great many deep scars Coeur had collected in her travels.

And then there were the deaths—not just Badger and Gaffer, who were at least nearby when they died—but also her parents, and Darien and Scissor, who were far away in space and time, and she'd never had a chance to say good-bye.

*So why travel, Coeur thought, if it hurts so much?*

"Indeed," Vazquez said. "Why do you travel, if it hurts you so much?"

"Because," Coeur answered, looking up at the giant sign of the Defender above the cathedral's altar. "You'll never see how far you could have gone, if you stay in one place."



"Perhaps I should let you go, then," Vazquez said, offering her hand to Coeur.

"Yes," Coeur said, turning back to the cardinal and accepting the handshake. "Good luck, Cardinal Vazquez."

"And God's speed to you, Captain D' Esprit."

*God's speed.*

Coeur then turned to go, walking out of the front doors of the church and into the company of Gyro, waiting in the pilot's seat of *Homet's* hovering air-raft.

"So," Coeur said to Gyro, sliding into the forward passenger seat; "you clear up that problem with the junior technarchs?"

"Yes, sir. I told them you'd shoot them if they tried to stay here."

"Gyro...."

"Sorry, sir, just kidding. They're safely secured aboard—them and Zorn."

"Good," Coeur said, buckling her seat belt. "I wouldn't mind leaving the technarchs here, but I think Mexit's suffered enough disasters already."

"I'd have to agree with you, Captain. So, we ready to go home?"

"Lord, I hope so," Coeur said, leaning back in her seat and looking up at the stars. "Let's move out."

"Yes, sir," Gyro replied, firing up the air-raft's thrusters and steering them back toward *Homet*.

\*\*\*

Not an hour later, *Homet's* flaring plasma thrusters would be seen for the last time in the sky above Soledad, lifting the little freighter skyward in a streaking blue arc across the stars. The ship's work at Mexit was done, and her captain could not foresee any circumstance under which she would return.

Yet other ships would come to Mexit—scout ships at first, then larger warships with men and supplies, and finally commercial transports taking cover beneath the umbrella of her meson gun. Though it would be months before that traffic would begin, eventually it would fill the skies of Mexit day and night, and eyes now astonished by the upward falling meteor of *Homet* would no longer spare any starship—even the most magnificent of them—so much as a second glance.

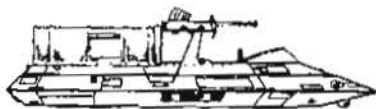
One particular mind knew that very well—the mind behind a pair of eyes that never closed and never slept. Gazing up into the star-speckled night from the lonely seaside road he walked, he watched the pinpoint speck that was *Homet* even after lesser human eyes had lost all resolution of the image—and he knew the change it heralded.

*God bless you, brave spacers, St. Graylord thought, and may the Defender speed you on your way.*

# 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.

**Anglic:** (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.

**Battle Dress:** (noun) The ultimate form of personal protection, battle dress consists of a powered exoskeleton with strength-enhancing features to increase the load-carrying ability of an individual soldier. Although battle dress is quite formidable—even the most lightly

armored versions offer excellent protection against shrapnel and projectiles from smaller firearms—it is not indestructible. It suffers from the disadvantage that it tends to impair its wearer's physical agility. This disadvantage notwithstanding, however, battle dress is routinely issued in heavy and light versions to front-line troops and raiding forces of the Reformation: Coalition (cf).



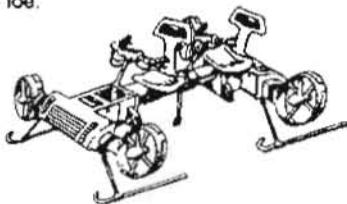
**Body Sleeve:** (noun) A standard garment worn by RCES members. It is actually a standard overall undergarment intended for wear beneath vac suits (cf). However, because of its durability and bullet-resistant qualities, it is typically worn as a standard casual uniform by RC personnel.

**Boneyard:** (noun, adj.) A world which lost all 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).

**Bogle:** (noun) A target detected on sensors, currently unidentified as to whether it is a friend or foe.

**Broomstok:** (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, it is powered by ducted propellers and is almost completely silent, and therefore preferred for short-range covert operations.



**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).

**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.

**Drop Trooper:** (noun) Term referring to a soldier trained to assault a planetary target from orbit, arriving at the target in a specially designed one-person drop capsule.

**DZ:** (noun) Abbreviation for a "dust zone," or landing area.

**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 analogous 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 it 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 two-parsec performance and maneuver drives allowing 1G acceleration. This design has a distinctive bifurcated "pickle fork" bow configuration, with the starboard control and port quarters booms 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 Orillamme, 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 (cl)
- 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.
- Groundhog:** (noun) Slang term for individuals who intend to wait out difficult times by entering suspended animation in low berths. The most sophisticated of these are completely hidden and use systems of automated sensors to wake them at an opportune moment.
- 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.
- 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 gender. 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 sometimes used for Hivers, though "it" is technically accurate.
- Hive 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*).
- IFF:** (noun) Identification, Friend or Foe. An electronic system consisting of electronic challenges and verification codes to establish the identity of unknown targets.
- 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 one to six parsecs with a travel time of approximately one week regardless of distance. First available at TL9, the jump drive is an indispensable key to interstellar civilization, but it 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 Imperium:** (noun) A vast interstellar empire dominated by Solomani and Vilani humans (cf) from the period 0001 to 1130 of its own calendar. It extended over almost 20 complete sectors and contained over 11,000 worlds. At its peak, it dominated Charted Space before the Collapse. It was known to its members as the Third Imperium. Its symbol was the Imperial Sunburst.
- Meson Communicator:** (noun). An advanced communications device, first available at TL15, which uses an operating principle similar to that of the meson gun (cf), but at much lower energy levels, to allow direct communication through any intervening barrier except a meson screen. At currently achievable tech levels, the meson communicator is too bulky to be practical as a personal communicator.
- Meson Gun:** (noun) A high-tech heavy weapon, first available at TL11, favored for both space and planetary combat roles because of its capacity to fire through physical barriers and deliver massive fire directly into its target.



The meson gun essentially consists of two paired particle accelerators whose intersecting particle streams generate a carefully selected species of meson—a subatomic particle—which does not interact substantially with other types of matter. These mesons are also inherently short-lived and unstable, but careful modification of the colliding particle accelerator streams creates mesons with

relativistic speeds sufficient to let them reach distant targets and then disintegrate explosively within them.

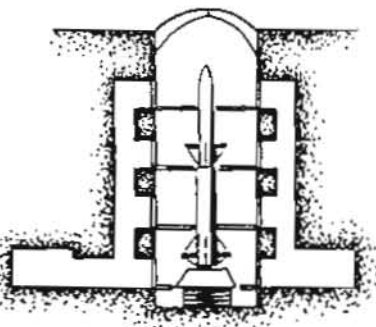
Since the meson gun is unaffected by either armor or intervening terrain—the only defense being a sophisticated meson screen—its tactical applications are obvious. Relatively small versions are often used by high-tech armies as artillery weapons, and very large versions, similar to those used as spinal mounts (cf) on large warships, are often buried deep below the surface of a world as so-called deep-site installations. These, though expensive, are all but impossible to locate by attacking forces and can deliver devastating direct fire as long as their above-ground sensors remain intact.

**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.

**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. 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.



**PDM:** (noun) Abbreviation for "planetary defense missile," designating any of various types of planet-based missiles designed expressly to intercept orbiting starships.

**PRIS:** (noun, adj.) Abbreviation for "portable radiation imaging system," referring to a sophisticated personal sensor first available at TL12. Resembling a pair of binoculars, the PRIS sensor can be set to detect and magnify radiation

sources across a spectrum of frequencies from infrared to gamma rays. It includes not only a laser rangefinder but a gyrocompass and gyrostabilizer for image stability.

**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).





**Reformation Coalition:** (noun) An interstellar alliance of 22 worlds in the Old Expenses 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.

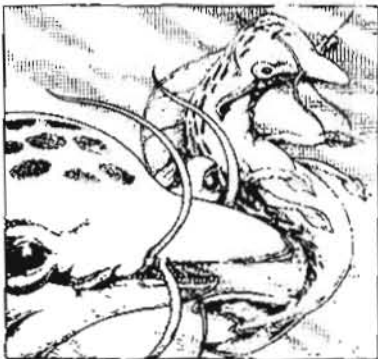
**Remnant:** (noun, adj.) An individual who has survived from the pre-Collapse era (cf), often possessing first-hand knowledge in great demand in the New Era, and therefore much sought after by people and organizations operating relic equipment.

**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 nonjump-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.

**Schall:** (noun) An aquatic, intelligent race native to two worlds of the Reformation Coalition: Schall and Aubaine. The Schall are similar in appearance to Terran dolphins, but their eyes are mounted on mobile stalks, and four manipulative arms extend from their chests. Four barbels extending from their "bottle-nose" muzzles serve as sensors in their native environment, but are also used as highly dextrous "fingers." The Schall are expert navigators and astrogators, and also have a pronounced facility for electronic systems, especially sensors, computers and Virus countermeasures.





**Sector:** (noun) An area of space measuring 32 parsecs spinward-trailing by 40 parsecs coreward-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 often the backbone of high-tech level air forces.

**Spinal Mount:** (noun, adj.) The largest possible weapon that can be installed in a spacecraft, literally forming the spine of a vessel. In Charted Space, these weapons are either particle accelerators or meson guns (cf), since the performance of such weapons is directly related to their length. Certain unusual spinal mounts do exist, however, that do not occupy the length of a vessel. Among these are the so-called Janus mounts (fore and aft-firing weapons installed back to back in a ship's spine), parallel mounts (two or more weapons parallel to the spine of a ship), and the radial mounts of spherical warships, which often have several "spinal" mounts pointing outward from their center of mass.

**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 eight parsecs spinward-trailing by 10 parsecs coreward-rimward.

**Tech Level:** (noun) 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. TL9 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 TL12, and the highest common tech level of the Last Imperium (cf) was TL15.

**TED:** (noun) Abbreviation for "technologically elevated dictator," 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 (cf).

**Tralling:** (adj.) One of the four cardinal astrographic directions, opposite 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 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 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 Suicides, 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).

**WSV:** (noun, adj.) Abbreviation for "wide spectrum visual," referring to a TL10 sensor system including both light intensification and thermal viewing capacities. WSV viewers usually resemble binoculars or goggles worn on the head, but are also often included with battle dress as standard equipment.

**XO:** (noun) Abbreviation for "executive officer," the second in command aboard a starship or in a military unit.

Science Fiction Roleplaying Game

# TRAVELLER

*The New Era*

## OWN THE FUTURE

Traveller: The New Era places a limitless universe before you and gives you the tools to seize control.



Whether you play a Free Trader captain, piloting your starship through the lawless Wilds; a scout, opening contact with long-forgotten worlds; or a Star Viking, rolling back the tide of

darkness and ignorance, you shape the future of the universe.

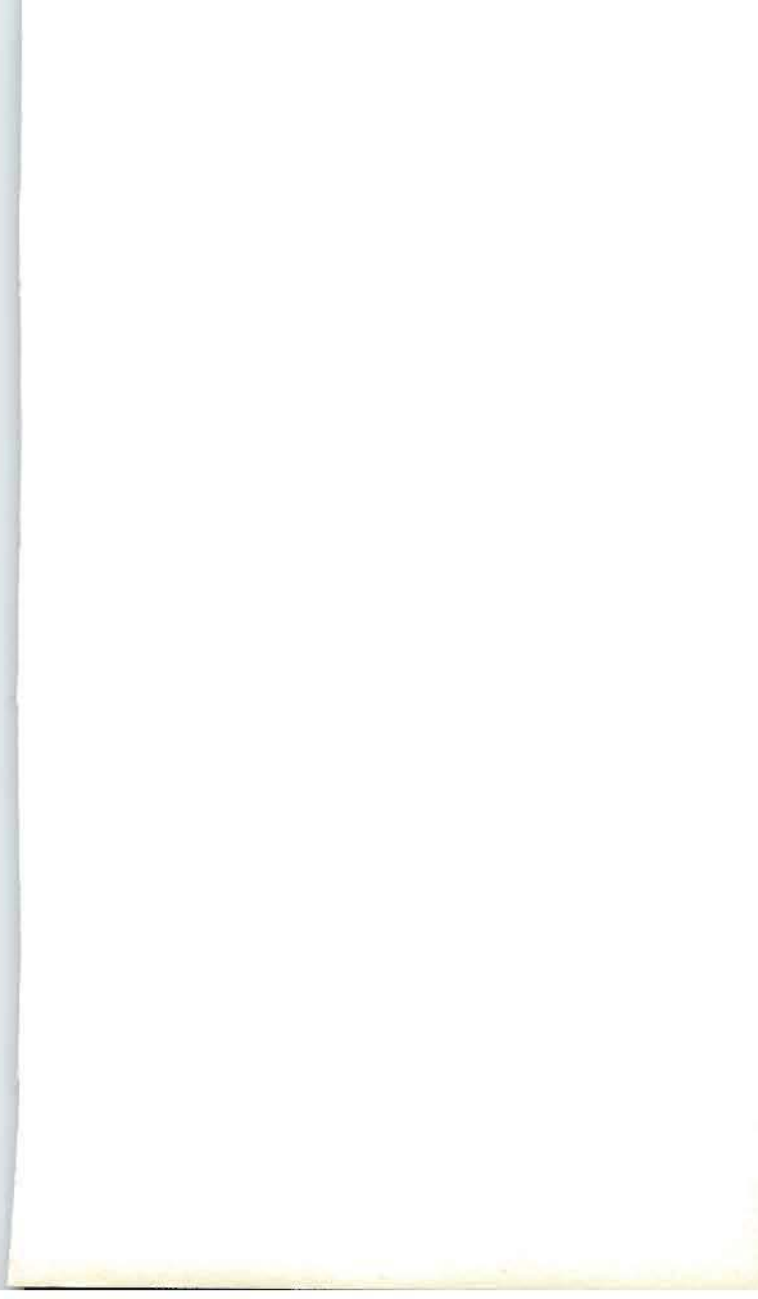
### Traveller: The New Era

Science Fiction Roleplaying Adventure  
in the Far Future

Available at your favorite Hobby or Book Store

**GDW**  
GAME DESIGNERS' WORKSHOP

P. O. Box 1646, Bloomington, IL 61702-1646





# THE CALL TO PRESERVE THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY...

does not always come when it is convenient, and is not always delivered to the strong and well-prepared. Sometimes courage alone must take the place of powerful weapons, for this call cannot be ignored.

An infamous Reformation Coalition criminal has discovered a cache of super-weapons that could provide the power of life and death over humanity's fragile rebirth. But this stockpile sits on the doorstep of the oppressive Empire of Solee. If the Solee obtain these weapons, the dream of a free human civilization will die aborning.

When the call comes, only tiny RCS *Hornet* is available, her crew scattered to new assignments following the completion of their last mission. *Hornet* is hastily dispatched to find the weapons, and ensure that they do not fall into the wrong hands. But when they arrive, they find a world locked in civil war, and stalked by impervious "nightjacks": angels or demons who come in the darkness to pluck away the locals—and *Hornet* crewmembers.

However, deep beneath a mountain fortress, surrounded by weapons of staggering power, there sleeps one who is described as a saint. It is said that he will return at the time of his world's greatest need to save his people. But only he knows that while he has slept away the years, he has dared...

**TO DREAM OF CHAOS**



ISBN: 1-55878-184-6

**GDW**

PRESS

GDW:381

U.S. \$5.95

**TRAVELLER**

*The New Era*