



TRAVELLER[®]

Science-Fiction Adventure in the Far Future



TRAVELLER'S AIDE #2

GRAND ENDEAVOR

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GRAND ENDEAVOR

*Based on the award winning TRAVELLER science fiction universe
by Marc Miller*

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Travellers' Aide #2! This volume is not a Traveller supplement as such, but a collection of short fiction set against the Traveller background. The material herein has several uses; it can serve as an introduction to the game setting, or to illustrate certain concepts important to the game. It may spark adventure, character or setting ideas. Or, just possibly, it might even be read for enjoyment!

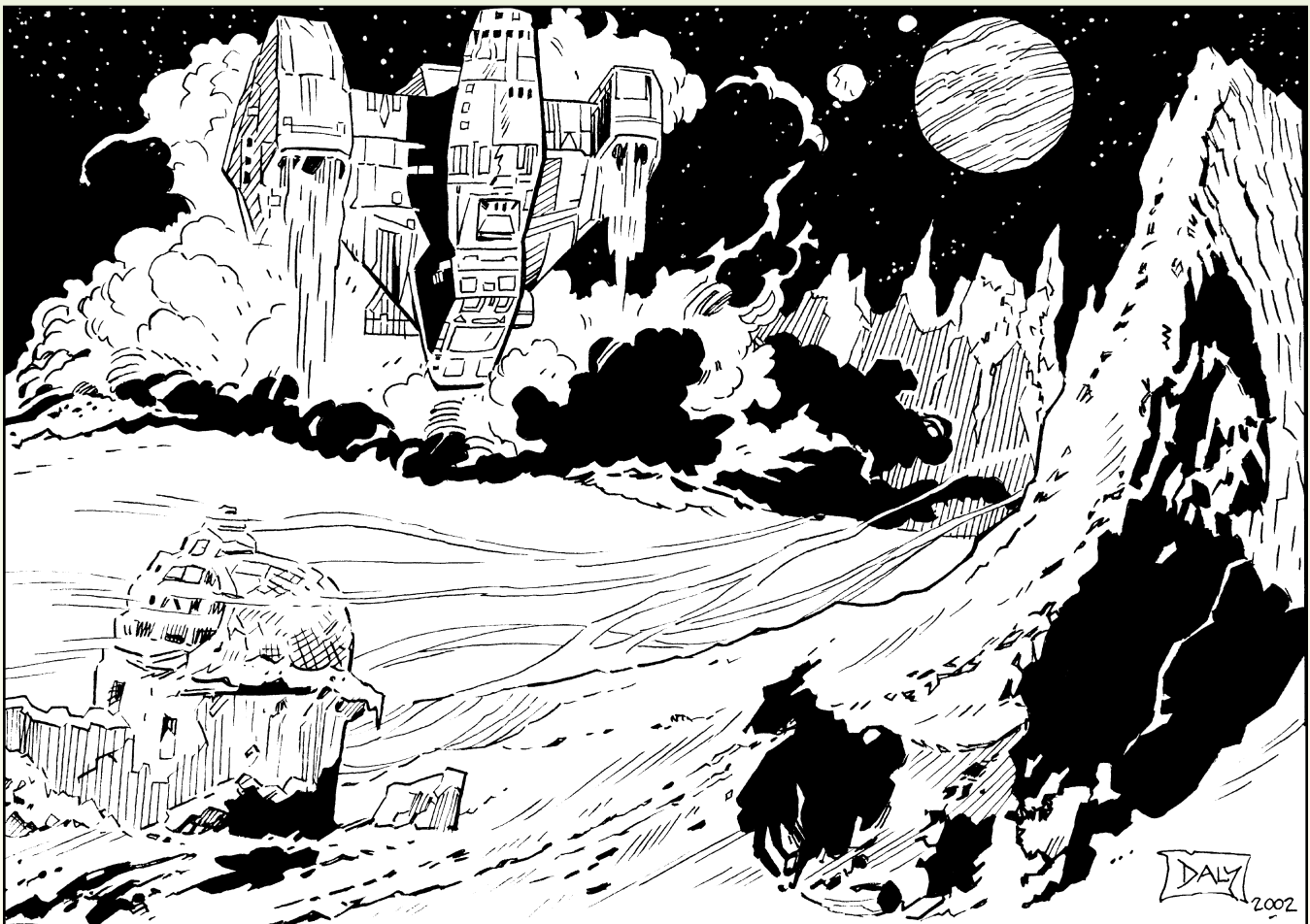
Each tale begins with a brief introduction, detailing the era and region in which the piece is set. For this volume, this is not critical, since all pieces found herein are set against the backdrop of Gateway Domain in Year 1000, in the Third Imperium of the Official Traveller Universe. Future collections will visit other eras, such as the Interstellar Wars, the Long Night and the Founding Years of the Third Imperium, and the Spinward Marches in the last days of the Imperial Golden Age. Forays will even be made into the period after the fall of the Third Imperium: the Hard Times, the Collapse, the Recovery and the founding of the Fourth Imperium.

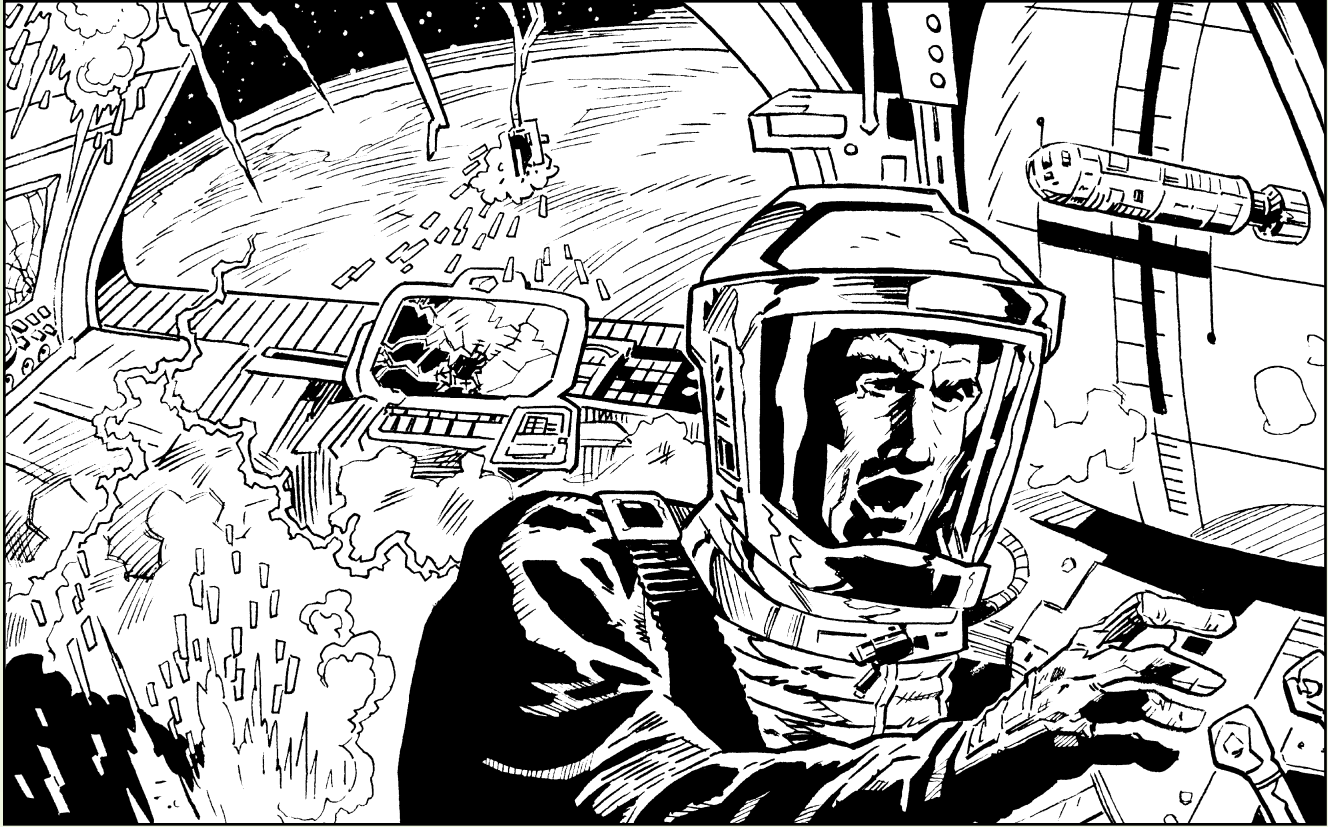
At the end of each piece is a brief discussion of one or more key concepts addressed by the story.

But what of the characters, the starships and the places in the stories? Some are already detailed in the game materials, or will be presented in forthcoming supplements. Others represent an opportunity to have some fun and maybe grab some freebies. When each Travellers' Aide fiction is released, QuikLink Interactive will run a competition, inviting fans to submit stats or designs for the people and ships contained within the story. The winner's version will be placed on the QuikLink website as the official version of that person or ship's stats, and will be rewarded with credit towards QuikLink game products. Honourable Mentions will win credit or the next PDF free.

But enough of that.

It is the dawn of Year 1000. Despite the Solomani Rim War raging to Spinward-Rimward, the Imperium-wide millennium celebrations have been a huge success. The parties are finally dying down and, amid sector-class hangovers, people are going back to work. And Travellers are boarding starships, bound for adventure...





GRAND ENDEAVOR

It is Year 1000 in Ley Sector of Gateway Domain. The free trader Eternal Optimist has just put down at Breton Starport on Raa, a backwater world well of the main trade routes. Despite a recent upturn in the ship's fortunes, the Eternal Optimist is still short of funds and in need of an overhaul.

Paulo Danilo, Master of the Free Trader Eternal Optimist, shifted his weapon belt, pushed his battered old Navy cap back on his head, and hit the stud to open the main cargo doors. As the door retracted and the ramp slid jerkily down - another thing on the list for the refit they couldn't afford - Paulo sniffed the chilly, dry air of Raa and gazed out at a widening view of the port.

Even at the fullness of noon, Raa's dim red primary could not manage much of a glare. Paulo took his sunglasses out of his tunic pocket and slipped them on anyway. Beside him, Maris Duffey, ex-Imperial Marine and now second engineer aboard the Eternal Optimist, settled her cutlass belt more comfortably, swearing at it as a matter of principle.

Unlike Paulo's dress sword - which was in his cabin - Maris' weapon was a working blade; a self-defense weapon that served well on all occasions that didn't require her Advanced Combat Rifle. Within hours of coming aboard as second engineer, Maris had appointed herself as Paulo's very own Marine bodyguard. She took the role very seriously.

The ramp finally hit the ground, and the pair strode down it, onto the cracked and weed-dotted landing apron. "Even less impressive from the ground," Maris observed, referring to some earlier comments she'd made. "You bring us to all the best places."

Paulo glanced around at the clustering of prefab huts, the skeletons of half-cannibalized All-Terrain Vehicles and heaps of broken-down starship components. One other space vessel graced the landing apron; an incredibly battered Modular Cutter with a bent landing leg and obvious signs of running repairs. A gang of techs clambered all over it, welding and cutting. A couple glanced over at the Eternal Optimist with a complete lack of interest. "Well, they're not exactly overwhelmed with enthusiasm, are they?" Paulo said, setting off for the aerial-festooned prefab that grandly called itself the Starport Administration Building.

Breton Starport was, to put it nicely, a dump, Paulo reflected as he walked slowly across the landing apron towards the so-called administration buildings. At his side Maris muttered some Marine-issue comments on the world, the starport and her captain's business sense, pausing to sneeze as a sudden breeze blew cold, dry and dusty air over the perimeter berm.

Paulo chuckled, glancing at his companion. "Was that a comment or a statement?" he asked with a wry smile.

"Anything you want it to mean, Glorious Leader," Maris responded. "Oh look, the tech crew have finally stirred themselves."

Paulo glanced to his right, to where half a dozen of the techs had left the cutter and were manhandling a service cart out of its bunker. It was a standard model; electrically powered and fitted with tools for routine service tasks. Paulo was willing to bet the motor had been cannibalised to power something else, leaving it as nothing more than an unwieldy trolley. He tapped his wrist comm's quick-connect, already programmed with the Eternal Optimist's intercom frequency.

"Captain?" said Haiiz's voice in his earpiece.

"Tech crew inbound. Please don't point and laugh," Paulo said aloud. His words were picked up by his collar mike and relayed automatically.

"Understood."

Paulo and Maris paused a moment before the Admin building doors, then shrugged and strode in. The inside was as unimpressive as out. A few chipped and worn desks supported communications gear in mountings that had clearly been temporary for the past two or more decades. The room's sole occupant, an ageing male Vargr in a surplus Scout Service cover-all, looked up from his console and nodded an offhand greeting. "Captain Danilo?" he said in only slightly accented Galanglic.

"You recognised me among this enormous throng of starfarers?" Paulo said with a wry smile. "I'm suitably impressed."

"That's what they pay me for," the Vargr replied with a twitch of his ears that signified amusement. "You're carrying our ICO shipment?"

"Yes. Plus a ton of sundries. No passengers, which is hardly surprising." Paulo handed over a manifest reader as he spoke.

The Vargr took it and quickly scanned the list. He nodded, obviously disappointed but not surprised. "This is in order. The Colonial Office has sent us pretty much what we were promised," he said. "Though naturally not what we asked for - or needed."

Paulo nodded. "There's no money for colonial support, not right now. Everything's going to the war effort down in the Rim."

"To the Navy, you mean," the Vargr replied sourly, gesturing with his snout at Paulo's Navy cap.

Paulo said nothing.

"Well, not your fault. I'll comm the Executive Directors and get your payment cleared... and no doubt take some abuse because we've not been sent what they asked for. We'll warehouse your cargo straight away; the Directorate will have to send someone down to verify and distribute it whenever they get around to it. Not your problem."

"I detect a certain world-weariness...." Paulo said.

The Vargr growled and looked down at the floor for a second, parodying a Vargr expression of extreme anger.

"That bad?" Paulo asked.

"Believe it," the Vargr replied. "But I'm being rude. I'm Harg'vgn Garrnough... Usually go by 'Gav' among flatfaces, for obvious reasons." Gav stuck out a graying paw, and Paulo shook it.

"You know me; this is Maris, my very own Imperial Marine Corps escapee," Paulo said, as Gav and Maris greeted one another.

To Paulo's surprise, Maris suddenly said, "You any relation to Gunnery Sergeant Garrnough? Err... Jarrlag Garrnough?"

Gav shook his head. "Don't think so. Friend of yours?"

"Kind of," Maris replied in a tone that suggested the discussion had just ended.

"Look, it'll take hours to round up anything resembling an unloading crew, and we're not exactly overflowing with handler bots," Gav said after a moment's silence. "I'll put in a request to the Port Director, assuming he visits his office this week, but until then we might as well find something to do."

"You're not the director?"

Gav shook his head. "I'm the ICO representative to the Port Authority; an advisor. But for the past year I've pretty much handled the port on behalf of the Executive Directors. Not that there's much to do."

"Why? I mean, why is the port so neglected?" Paulo asked.

"Hah. This place was quite important way back before the Imperium; in the Rule of Man. During the Long Night Raa survived by going self-sufficient. Tech dropped right back to oexplows. It's climbed back up to middling industrial level, but the locals are pretty isolationist. We're off the trade routes here..."

"Are we NOT!" Maris said. "We had to use fuel bladders to get here."

"Precisely. We're an isolationist world off the main routes, Jump-3 from anywhere except a trivial little stopover point at Dimurkash a parsec over. Nothing comes in here that isn't hired by the Colonial Office, lost, or on maneuvers." Again Gav looked significantly at Paulo's hat. "And then we got Amber Zoned."

"My library program just mentions isolationism," Paulo said. "Why the Amber Zone?"

Gav cocked his head in an I-know-something-you-don't sort of way.

"Okay; name a restaurant and we'll buy dinner," Paulo said.

"Deal," Gav replied.

Maris triggered her comm "Haiiz, it's your turn for shipboard watch. Everyone else get over here; we're going to dinner." She looked out of the prefab windows at the sorry dump that was Breton Starport, and went on, "Formal dress will not be necessary."

With Haiiz standing - more correctly, lounging - bridge watch back aboard the Eternal Optimist, the remaining members of her crew seated themselves around a table hand-carved from local wood, and listened to Gav's catalogue of woes over three courses of distinctly unusual local dishes.

"The government had collapsed in all but name by 956," Gav said around a mouthful of spiced noodles and chunks of some sort of half-raw desert creature. "Though it wasn't that obvious. Seven hundred million people actually managed a decent job of governing themselves. Old culture, ingrained values and so on."

Paulo nodded understanding as he chewed slowly, so that he'd only have to eat a little of the undercooked animal. Maris and Jarrsoegh, the Optimist's Vargr engineer, did likewise. Only Daanai, the ship's ersatz medical officer and dogsbody-general, attacked the food with relish. "This stuff is great!" he announced between great mouthfuls. "What say we stock up before we leave, Captain?"

Paulo wrinkled his nose, nodding to Gav. "Sorry. Do go on."

"Not much to tell really. Businesses and neighborhoods went on running themselves. The essential services like firefighting and refuse collection went into a decline, but self-interest took over. Local groups started handling services on a voluntary bases - or coerced businesses into paying for it. Pretty soon the entire world was as Balkanized as you can get, fragmented into neighborhood and regional blocks. No effective government, no organized groups of more than five thousand people. And you know what?"

"Manifestly not," Daanai said, downing his overworked fork. "You guys going to eat that, or what?"

As Daanai's plate vanished under a mound of food generously donated by his crewmates, Gav went on, "It worked."

"You're kidding," Maris said. "That's anarchy..."

"Pretty much, but it was an evolved anarchy, resulting from a century of failing government. People got along, learned how to do what governments normally do. Oh, they fought among themselves a bit. But mostly it worked. Until ICO came along and tried to help," Gav tapped his chest as he spoke.

"Clumsy intervention?" Paulo asked.

"Sort of," Gav said. "Everyone on-planet knew that the World Government was a joke, a day job for people too incompetent to actually run anything folks depended upon. Everyone ON planet knew that. ICO didn't."

"Uh-huh..." Paulo said, beginning to understand.

Gav went on, "The World Government asked for Colonial Office support. They drew up a plan, and ICO actually approved it. They sent advisors, experts and a whole bunch of other people, who tried very hard to implement the plan. Unified defense, law enforcement and refuse collection. Regional directors overseeing the local community committees. You can imagine how well THAT went down.

"Violence?" Maris asked.

"Not really. But complete non-co-operation. So now we have a team from the Colonial Office advising a bunch of incompetents who don't run the planet on how they should be running it. The great reconstruction plan is still going on, despite the fact that the locals already have a working system. There's some friction but it's mostly passive resistance. The locals are really, really good at ignoring people," Gav said with a gesture of amusement.

"And you're stuck in the middle of this... but why the Amber Zone?" Paulo asked.

"Because people who don't know the locals see them as a bunch of surly isolationists - quite well armed at the personal level, too - who are obstructing an Imperial office in its attempt to help them..." Gav said.

"Pretty much true so far as I can see," Paulo said.

"I suppose so, but that's the point. In fact they're friendly and self-sufficient. So long as you pull your weight and don't interfere with the common good, they're great people. And all they want is to be left alone."

"So why are you still here?" Paulo asked.

"Because the buffoons on the World Government want ICO to give them real power, and ICO listens to world governments. Not to a Port Director's Advisor... me... who has clearly gone native."

"What a mess. Why..." Paulo said, but before he could go on, Gav's comm chimed. Paulo stiffened, recognising a Most Urgent message.

Gav listened for a second. Then his ears went flat and he growled, a Vargr's instinctive reaction to adrenaline.

"What is it?" Paulo asked.

"We have a Jump Emergence at three hundred diameters. Big; maybe two thousand tons." Gav scrambled to his feet

and headed for the door with the others in pursuit.

"What are you expecting?" Paulo demanded as they rushed outside and jumped into Gav's battered Port Authority Air/Raft.

"Not a thing. There's no ship due for weeks" Gav said, crash-starting the vehicle as the others piled in. "And she's coming in dead; no power, no maneuver, just a distress beacon."

"Course?" Paulo asked, but he already knew.

Gav hammered the Air-Raft into a violent turn and streaked for the port. His ears were flat with more than the wind that lashed the open-topped vehicle.

"She's coming right at us."

* * * *

"This is what we know," Gav addressed the gang of excited techs and the crew of the Eternal Optimist. "The ship is an ICO transport, the Grand Endeavor. She's due here in six weeks. Maybe they upped the schedule or something, but whatever happened she's clearly in trouble. We're getting a broken signal on a different band to the distress beacon, but we can't make it out. Telemetry suggests battle damage and a bad Jump emergence. I'm guessing she crash-Jumped to escape a commerce raider and came out on a collision vector. What little we can make out from the beacon suggests that she has power, but no maneuver capability and only partial life-support. Her manifest says she has five hundred ICO construction workers in Low Berths. They may still be alive."

A ripple went through the techs as Gav went on. "She will hit atmosphere in three hundred minutes or so. Parts of her will reach the ground. We've predicted her impact point... and it's inhabited. If we can, we have to divert her. And if we can't, then no matter who's on board... We'll have to destroy her." After a moment's silence, Gav added in a small, dead voice, "If we can."

Paulo was, for a moment, somewhere and someone else. A young gunnery lieutenant with the power of the gods under his hand. A plague ship in his sights, the crew and two thousand passengers infected with a terrorist bioweapon, minutes from entering atmosphere. Planetary governors begging the Navy to help, pleading with the plague ship to turn away. Eight hundred million lives at stake, but Paulo's captain dithered. The Navy didn't fire on civilians; the plague might be curable. Two thousand lives against eight hundred million. Seconds to act and no orders, the ship coming on in a last rush for the illusion of salvation.

A young officer screaming rage at the gods, at his captain, at himself, as six nuclear warheads bracketed the plague ship and burned her to sterile dust. The blessed numbness of the surgeon's needle, the court of inquiry and the Thanks of the Emperor. A Sword of Honor, promotion and choice of assignments. And the quiet resignation of his commission.

The Navy needed men like Lieutenant Paulo Danilo, they said, men who were not afraid to act for the greater good. But the Navy had broken him. No, he had broken himself. He had done right, and they showered him with glory. But he could not forgive himself for what he'd done to two thousand people whose only crime was that they were already victims.

And now it was happening again.

"This is not going to happen," Paulo grated. "Can that cutter lift?"

"Soon," one of the techs said. "But we can't take five hundred people off in it, awake or frozen."

"I know," Paulo replied. "But we're going to try. Eternal Optimist will lift immediately. We will board and Daanai will crash-wake the low berth personnel. We'll get as many as we can aboard, and see if we can't find a way to divert her into orbit or at least into an uninhabited area. Follow as soon as you can in the cutter."

Some of the techs, and most of the crew of Eternal Optimist, looked puzzled at the sudden tense energy in Paulo's voice. But not Maris. Maris knew why. She knew what Paulo was going to do, and she knew she had to let him do it, no matter what the cost.

* * * *

Fittings rattled as the little Free Trader clawed her way into orbit. In the pilot's seat Haiiz hunched over the controls, struggling with all her impressive skill to find more thrust from somewhere. Paulo paced, fiddling with his vac suit belt pack as he watched the range closing far, far too slowly.

"Still no communication from the cripple, Captain," Maris said. "I've lost that broken signal altogether."

"Never mind, we'll board and make a physical search. What's the cutter status?" Paulo said.

"Gav just signalled; he's lifting off now."

"Keep me informed," Paulo said, and went back to fretting. Minutes crawled past.

"I have the Grand Endeavor on thermal. We'll have a visual in a moment.... Visual contact established," Maris said. "She

looks to be hurt pretty bad.”

That was an understatement. The transport's forward command area - the bridge, avionics and officer's accommodation - was gone, chewed away by heavy laser fire. Burns and scars showed all along her hull, and there was a blackened, melted pit where one of her turrets had been. The other five were slewed round on a common bearing. The Grand Endeavour had fought for her life, and in the end she'd made a desperate lunge into Jumpspace to escape. Paulo mentally saluted her captain and crew, and the people who'd built her too. Half her controls gone, lashed by laser fire, and still she'd carried the survivors out of danger without a catastrophic Misjump.

“That's a fine ship,” Paulo said softly as Maris peered at the telemetry readouts. After a moment he glanced across at her. “What do we have?”

“Engineering and main hold seem relatively intact, Captain. There's some power to aft systems, but it's patchy. And I've got that signal again. It's a suit radio, being fed through a shipboard antenna.

“Play it,” Paulo said.

Static blared across the Free Trader's bridge despite the computer's best efforts to clean up the signal. As Paulo and the others winced, a strained and weary voice spoke from the stricken ship. “GK. Repeat Signal GK. This is the ICO transport Grand Endeavour calling any vessel. We are in distress. Our drive is crippled, bridge is gone. Requesting assistance from any vessel... please help us, for all the gods' sake. This is ICO transport Grand Endeavour calling ANY vessel, even you Solomani Carushas. I am junior deck officer Liam Nichara, sole survivor. I am injured. Bridge is gone, captain is dead... Drive is inoperative. Sensors are inoperative. Request assistance... please. Mayday... we are declaring an emergency... This is ICO Transport....”

Paulo broke into the dreamy litany. “This is Free Trader Eternal Optimist, responding to your GK signal. We are coming alongside to render assistance. Do we have permission to board?”

There was no need for Paulo to ask permission to board a crippled vessel requesting assistance, but the request seemed to drag the survivor back to himself, reminding him that he was a starfaring officer.

“Permission granted, and thank you...” Liam said. “Be advised that we have a bulk low berth aboard. I believe that many berths are still functional.”

Technically that made this Liam Nichara incorrect in claiming to be a sole survivor, but Paulo wasn't going to pick nits. “We can revive your personnel and take them off. What is your own status?”

“I'm in the aft engineering crawlspace, under the Jump drive. I can't get out,” Liam answered.

“Why not? You that badly hurt?” Paulo asked.

“No... I welded the hatch up. To keep them out....”

Paulo and Maris exchanged a look as Haiiz broke in, “Who? You said you were alone.”

“I am now, now that they're gone....”

Paulo nodded, understanding. Liam was hurt and alone, and he'd just spent a week in Jump with a shipload of dead men. If something had become misaligned in the frantic Jump attempt, then Liam would have had a very strange time of it indeed. Jumpspace could be freaky enough when the drive worked properly. Paulo had seen the effects of a slight Misjump on some of his crewmates; Liam probably had experienced far worse.

And of course, there were always the wild tales of “Things” that rippled beneath the surface of Jumpspace. But that was just scuttlebutt.

Probably.

“Bring us alongside,” Paulo said. “Jarrsoegh will assist Daanai in crash-wakening any survivors aboard the wreck and transferring them to the Optimist. And yes, I know some of them will die from hibernation shock. We have to save the greatest number.... That's an order, people.”

Haiiz and Jarrsoegh looked at one another, surprised. Paulo didn't normally use those words or that tone with his crew. But this was no ordinary day. He went on, “Maris and I will free the survivor, then attempt to gain control of the ship using the emergency conn in engineering.” He hoped to all the gods that the transport had one. “Haiiz will remain aboard the Optimist and monitor our distance to atmosphere. That's it. Let's do it.”

* * * *

Inside the Grand Endeavour was a complete mess; worse than outside. Dim, low-power striplights cast a spooky half-light over silent corridors and shattered cabins as Paulo led his crew aft. Everyone took care to avoid sharp edges that might rip even their tough, top-of-the-line vac suits.

From the lack of loose objects, Paulo guessed the transport had been bushwhacked without any warning, breached while she was still full of air, and suffered explosive decompression. Most of the crew would have died a horrible death in space or in suddenly evacuated work and living areas. He did not stop to look at the bodies he saw. There was no point;

anyone without a suit was dead, and looking at the results of explosive decompression would be disturbing. It would certainly not serve any useful purpose.

Reaching an intact bulkhead, Paulo noted that the environment panel showed that the far side was pressurized. "Our first piece of luck," he said as Jarrsoegh began to assemble the plastic emergency airlock on the outside of the bulkhead's iris valve. After a moment the Vargr stepped into the lock and zipped it shut behind him, checking the seal it made against the bulkhead before hitting the control stud on the iris valve.

The valve opened slowly but smoothly, indicating that the ship's reactor was still functional. One by one the crew passed through into the remaining habitable part of the Grand Endeavour.

There were bodies here, too. Some were shattered by spallation - flying fragments of hull and deck plate loosened by the sudden heat-stress of laser fire. Some were burned, some electrocuted. Some seemed to have been asphyxiated by fire-suppression gases. And a few had gunshot or blade wounds.

"The ship wasn't boarded. How..." Maris began, but Paulo shook his head.

"Doesn't matter, and maybe we'll never know. Jarrsoegh and Daanai, get through there." Paulo pointed to the low berth area, "Begin crash-waking the survivors. We'll shove them in rescue balls and float them across to the Optimist. Maris and I are going aft."

As the engineer and doctor began the grisly task of sorting the dead from the hibernating among the low berth passengers, and then the worse job of deciding which were most likely to survive the wakeup process and therefore who to abandon, Paulo and Maris broke out an emergency rescue kit and cut their way into the aft engineering crawlspace.

A pitiful sight awaited them. Junior Deck officer Liam Nichara was a slender individual of about twenty years old, encased in a vac suit that was far too big for him. The helmet lay on the floor beside him, and as he turned to face his rescuers, his big, frightened blue eyes seemed to bulge from his hollow-cheeked face. Without taking his eyes off his rescuers, the boy edged his left hand towards a big wrench that lay close by on the deck. His lips moved almost soundlessly, mouthing a patchwork litany of distress signals.

Maris ducked into the crawlspace, batted the wrench away and, to Paulo's surprise, flung her arms around the terrified survivor. After a moment's fierce struggle, he burst into sobs that shook his entire body, and clung desperately to the ex-Marine. Paulo saw that his right hand was missing all the fingers, and the suit had been clumsily sealed with Patchtape. Paulo knew instantly just how rough things had been - Liam's hand had been severed by contact with Jumpspace. That meant that the survivors had spent a week trapped in an unstable Jump bubble that had intruded inside the ship. No wonder some of them had shot one another.

"Captain," came Haiiz' voice over the suit radio as Maris half-dragged Liam out of the crawlspace. "The port cutter is inbound. Gav says he has some techs aboard."

"Excellent. Tell him to send anyone who knows about starship engineering Aft, and set the rest to work evacuating the casualties."

"Understood."

Paulo took a deep breath of tasteless suit air, and nodded purposefully at Maris. "Get him to safety," he said. "Then come back here. If we can reactivate the drive, this ship doesn't have to die."

"Aye, sir!" Maris said with an approving grin. She looked like she might actually salute, but the deadweight of the survivor was too much. Instead she supported him gently, saying to him the words that had reassured countless survivors over the centuries.

"It's going to be all right, son. The Navy's here!"

But as she spoke, Paulo understood that today those words meant something entirely different.

Gav looked up from the emergency conning position. He, Maris and Paulo were alone in Engineering, the techs having proved more useful in the evacuation attempt. "That's it. I have helm," Gav said. "Intermittent, though."

"Will it do?" Paulo demanded.

"We can maneuver a bit. Can't miss the planet though," Gav said softly.

"Could we get remote control from the cutter or the Optimist?" Maris asked. "That way we could guide her in somewhere uninhabited."

"Not in time," Gav said. "Brave try, though."

"It's not over," Paulo replied. Give us what you have, try to get us some time. We still have more than half the casualties to evacuate."

"Captain, the Optimist reports that she is full," Maris said.

"Paulo to Optimist,"

Haiiz' voice responded instantly. "Optimist here."

"Get clear with what you have. The rest will go to the cutter," Paulo said.

Nobody commented on the fact that the cutter could hold less than half the remaining low berth evacuees.

Paulo moved to the helm controls and seated himself. "All hands, prepare for acceleration," he announced. There was really no need. The thrust he controlled was weak and jerky, a feeble shuddering rather than the powerful acceleration they needed to avoid destruction. All the same, Paulo implemented a course change and gave the battered ship her head, trying to gain enough velocity to establish some kind of orbit. It was hopeless, pointless, but still he wrestled with the erratic power supply, battled the wild yaw resulting from damaged control pathways. The gallant ship had too little strength left to save herself, but Paulo gave her every chance to try.

Suddenly, the acceleration increased and the yaw stabilized. Paulo grinned, then frowned. There was no more power, no more thrust. Then how..?

"Cutter here," came the answer over the radio. "We're almost full. We're giving you all the help we can while we're here."

"You're doing great, but watch the couplings," Paulo replied, though he could see from his display that great wasn't good enough. They couldn't reach orbit, nor even miss the main inhabited belt. All they could do was prolong the inevitable and maybe shift the impact point.

It wasn't enough.

Maris, Gav," Paulo said. "The drives are the most solid part of the ship. Can you rig them to blow?"

"Not explode, no," Maris said. "Fusion reactors don't do that." She didn't waste time wishing for a nuclear demolition charge or two.

"I'm thinking that if we can overload the reactor it'll fill this part of the ship with plasma. Weaken the structure so that the Optimist's guns can break her up. More of the ship will burn up...."

Maris nodded, knowing what it cost Paulo to say those words. In a small ship it was impossible not to know that the captain woke up every night from terrible nightmares; that in his dreams he killed a starship over and over again. Maris knew what Paulo might have been if it hadn't been for the breakdown, and what he had still managed to achieve. She couldn't help but admire the way he fought back the bleak madness every single day... but neither could she help him in any way.

Maris and Gav worked feverishly for a few minutes, then stepped back. "This might or might not work," Maris said.

"The reactor will go into massive overload, at which point it might or might not rupture. We've disabled the safety interlocks, but there still might be a shutdown we've missed. And a rupture might or might not weaken the hull sufficiently."

"Too much might," Paulo said.

"It's what we have, Captain."

Daanai's voice came over the radio. "Captain, the cutter is full. There are nearly two hundred potential survivors here... Can the Optimist reach us in time?"

"No. She's offloading now. She can't reach us before we hit atmosphere. Get to the cutter, Daanai," Paulo said. "No arguments."

There was no answer for a long moment, then Jarrsoegh's voice spoke harshly in Paulo's ear, "Complying." There were sounds of a struggle in the background.

Paulo nodded. "Time to go," he said to his companions. Get to the cutter. I'll set the reactor and follow.

"I'm demo qualified," Maris argued. "I should..."

"Take Gav to the cutter. I'll be along."

"Sir!" this time Maris did salute, for she knew as well as Paulo that he wasn't coming. And she knew that this was something he had to do; the act of redemption he'd sought through all those long nights. "Godspeed, Captain," she said crisply, grabbed Gav by the arm and marched out.

Alone in the emergency conning position, Paulo continued to fight the controls as the cutter separated and sped towards the planet and safety. He watched the readouts as the Grand Endeavor fought her hopeless battle for life. The equation was merciless. Two hundred workers still hibernated in the hold, oblivious as the ship skimmed into Raa's atmosphere. A belt of cities stretched away below, cities filled with teeming life. With millions of good-natured isolationists who just wanted to be left alone to pursue their affairs.

It was a no-win situation. The ship could not reach orbit, could not even make a powered descent. Grand Endeavor was going into the ground no matter what Paulo Danilo did. All he could do was choose where she struck. He could maybe keep her up a little longer, clear the city belt and possibly even put her down into water. He couldn't survive and he couldn't save the ship or her passengers. He'd really thought he could do it, and he'd been wrong. He laughed bitterly as the realization finally sank in that he'd lost. Maris had known it was hopeless from the start, but he'd wanted to win so badly that he'd blinded himself to reality.

Well, there was only one thing to do now. Pay the price. He'd overload the reactor, find the best vector he could, and give the ship to her fate. Once again he'd kill a ship to save lives below. But this time there would be no more nightmares. This time he'd ride her into the ground and share her fate. Maybe there was some Naval Valhalla for people like him. But whatever happened, this was redemption. This was freedom from the nightmares. This, in a perverse way, was not defeat after all. Paulo gritted his teeth and triggered the reactor overload.

And nothing happened.

After a moment it sank in that Maris' jury rig had failed. Paulo split his display screen, calling up a program chart. Flying the ship with one hand he began to work feverishly to find the problem, struggling to find a way to blow himself to oblivion. The Starport fell away behind as the ship screamed through the upper atmosphere, growing hot with friction and compression heating. Antennae sheared away, along with fragments of the shattered bridge.

Below, the Eternal Optimist rose from the starport pad with Maris at the guns. She sped away on an intercept course. The citizens of Raa listened to news broadcasts and struggled to decide whether to flee or to simply hope the ship would strike elsewhere.

And above, Lieutenant Paulo Danilo of the Imperial Navy reached once again for the reactor controls. He smiled, almost wistfully, as his hand closed on the final switch. His life might be over, but he'd end as his own man, free at last from the world of nightmares. This was victory of a sort. This was redemption.

"It's going to be all right," Paulo said aloud to the world below. "The Navy's here."

He closed the switch.

* * * *

A crowd had gathered at the Starport after the Eternal Optimist left. Gav stood among a horde of techs and local citizens, relaying the news from his headset to the masses.

"Fireball on the horizon," Gav said. A sigh came from the crowd. "No, heat trail. Infrared tracking shows a heat trail. Headed this way. Less than a kilometer up."

The crowd tensed, but Gav went on, "She's going to fall short. We're safe."

A long moment passed, then Gav said disbelievingly, "Her vector is changing. She's coming right at us. We're tracking the Optimist but she's not firing... why's she not... Take cover! Take cover!"

People fled yelling about the landing apron, seeking shelter that was simply not there. Realizing the folly of his momentary panic, Gav forced himself to stand still. There was nothing solid enough to save them from the blast if the ship came down nearby. He turned his attention back to his relay, shouting out updates for the benefit of the few who were not crawling under dismantled ATV carcasses.

"The Optimist is falling behind. The Grand Endeavor is under power! One point three g's! That's more than her drive rating..." Gav suddenly barked in triumphant understanding. "Half the ship's gone and the reactor didn't blow - it's running at overload and she's got all the thrust she needs!"

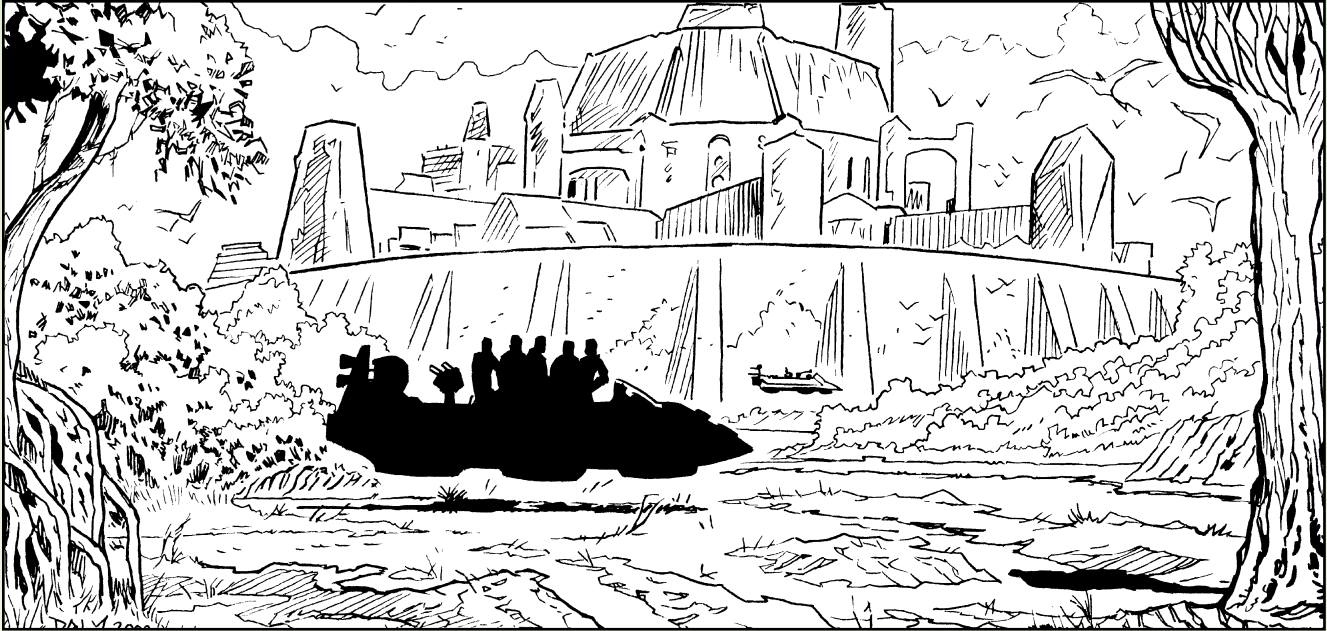
With the little free trader in pursuit, the Grand Endeavor bottomed out of her dive at half a kilometer, right over the Starport. Gav crouched snarling as a hot wind ripped across the landing apron, a tearing roar that became a cheer as the crippled transport passed by overhead.

Then, with a majesty that befitted her heroic efforts, the ICO Grand Endeavor turned her battered and melted face towards the stars and began the long climb back to orbit.

Not all adventures involve blazing guns or strange alien relics. Far more often, Travellers are caught in the middle when mundane events go badly wrong. As normal people take cover and wait for "someone to sort it out", Travellers plunge into the fray and do their best. Responses are usually improvised and sometimes even ham-fisted, but when there is no-one else to step up to the line, then, in the hour of need, Travellers will heed the call to adventure.

Many adventuring groups possess a Free Trader, a small merchant starship. Often lightly armed and in rather less than perfect condition, keeping such a ship running becomes a major focus for the group. Trader crews tend to engage in speculative trade, never knowing where the next refit is coming from. Their diverse and multiskilled crews are ideal for adventuring. Sometimes a Trader crew will be poor enough that they have to take whatever dubious jobs come along. A GK (Distress) signal, an anomalous sensor reading, or a rumor picked up in a starport bar, can all lead to adventure.

And sometimes, adventure just comes calling.



IN WILDER PLACES TOO...

It is Year 1000 in Ley Sector of Gateway Domain. Tal Peters, a talented but poorly trained psionicist, and his hard-case buddy Jandro Dalden, are a pair of scam artists and petty larcenists passing through Dhariik Terminal, a backwater spaceport with little to recommend it. As seems to be the nature of this pair, though, they have managed to get into trouble within minutes of entering the Planetfall Bar & Grill.

Bone crunched as Jandro's right fist connected with the big, blond port-hand's cheekbone. The cargo handler staggered back, raising his fists to cover himself. Jandro followed him, leading with a long left to the solar plexus. He let fly a massive right hook as the port-hand's guard went down.

That pretty much ended the matter.

"Next Victim Please!" Jandro called out joyfully, turning to look for someone else to pummel. There were plenty to choose from; cargo handlers and merchant crews, a gang of Belters blowing off steam after three months on some outsystem asteroid mining claim. Pretty much everyone was fighting.

Jandro spotted a Belter on the floor, getting turned into meatpaste by a squad of dockers. He piled in, not out of a sense of justice but because the three dockers represented the nearest target. One was bowled aside by Jandro's rush (and a sneaky elbow in the ribs). He crumpled with a gasp. The second barely had time to register he was under attack before Jandro's scarred forehead slammed into his cheek. Jandro grabbed the docker's shirt front and butted him twice more, then dropped him beside the battered Belter.

The third docker leaped on Jandro's back. Jandro stepped forward and twisted his impressively muscled shoulders, sending the docker crashing to the ground. Jandro booted him, stamped on the downed Belter to make the point that he had nothing to be thankful for, and rolled away across a table to seek new opponents.

Right into the stun-baton of a Port Security guard.

Both men paused. The guard looked down at his baton, which should have both clubbed Jandro senseless and stunned him with an electric shock to boot. Jandro eyed the impressive phalanx of beefy security personnel, spotted his sidekick Tal writhing frantically in the gasp of a female Vargr guard, and brought his fists up. He grinned.

"Come quietly," the nearest guard said with an odd lack of conviction.

"Yeah, right!" Jandro replied, and punched his lights out.

A handful of the guards spread out and began pacifying the room with liberal applications of boot and baton. The other six piled into Jandro.

That made for more or less a fair fight.

* * * *

"What a pair," the security director said, eyeing the two miscreants handcuffed together in front of her desk. Jandro, squat and muscled like someone who wrestled bears for fun, was battered and bruised, his scruffy gray coveralls stained with spilled food and other people's blood. Tal, tall and slender, with long curly brown hair and deep, soft eyes, was immaculate in his black pseudoleather trousers and crimson tunic. His only mark from the fight was scuffed knees suffered while gallantly crawling under a table.

The Director shook her head, deeply unimpressed. "Not counting various warrants from other localities, which do not concern me..."

"I can explain that..." Tal weaseled, but the Director cut him off with an upraised finger.

"Explaining will earn you an increased sentence. You're already looking at the salt mines for six months," she said evenly.

"You people have salt mines?" demanded Jandro.

"For the likes of you, yes. Machines can do the work better and faster, and anyway we have a state-of-the-art desalination plant. But mining salt by hand has excellent... reformatory... possibilities."

Tal gulped and looked down at his slightly awry clothing. It wasn't too bad, he decided. Not that he could do much straightening with his hands cuffed. But the Security Director wasn't bad looking at all, and even if she had been... better than six months in a salt mine with Jandro. He straightened and turned on the famous Irresistibility.

"Don't you dare," the Director said in a tone like a snapping cable. "You will not charm, you will not weasel, you will not attempt to explain. You will listen. Or you can go to the salt mines for the next nine standard months."

"But..." Tal said, then hurriedly clamped his mouth shut.

"Good. You're learning. The higher animals can do that, I'm told." The Director paused for a long, long moment, then went on. "You two are wanted for all kinds of things, all over the place. I don't care. All I care about is that you started a barfight on my turf. Fortunately for you, I have a problem you can help me with."

Tal and Jandro exchanged resigned looks. "Good, you agree then?" the Director said.

"We don't even know what the task is!" Tal blurted. "How can we agree?"

"Because you really have no choice," the Director replied, and sat back in her big chair, savoring the moment. "Now listen closely. Here is what you're going to do."

* * * *

"You're WHAT?" the beefy, shaven-headed merc said, straightening up from the pile of supply crates he was manhandling into a battered air/raft.

"I said, we're your planetside liaison," Tal repeated. "As required by Security Ordinance 219/978."

The merc scowled. "I dunno nothing about any..."

"Ordinance 219/978 clearly states that parties armed with military hardware - even accredited mercenary groups such as yours - must be accompanied by representatives of Planetary Security except during actual combat situations," Tal said, letting the old Iridium Tongue work its magic. He was making this all up off the cuff, but damn, did it sound good! "You're just lucky we were available, else you'd have been delayed quite a while."

The merc shrugged helplessly. Jandro noticed his eyes flick sideways to the Advanced Combat Rifle lying in the back of the air-raft. Some military regulation about not shooting people - even annoying people - just outside the main starport concourse prevented him from reaching for it. Instead he carried out the enlisted man's other reflex.

He yelled for the officer, turned his back, and went back to work.

The officer was not what Tal expected at all. At well over two meters she was as tall as Tal, and much more solidly built. Even her shapeless paramilitary fatigues could not disguise an impressive figure. The hair, drawn back in a ponytail under a dark green beret with Lift Infantry insignia, was dark brown, long, and shiny. For a moment Tal forgot how to speak, but fortunately Jandro came to his rescue with a vicious dig in the ribs.

"Ah... uh... yes, you'd be Sir Caide?" Tal said.

The officer gazed the two interlopers up and down, noting the dark gray Port Security uniforms (Tal's was embellished with crimson braid and an cummerbund of the same color; Jandro's was already stained with coffee and some unidentifiable component of his lunch). She contrasted the two; one tall and... there was no other word for him but 'pretty'... armed with a foil and a long-barrelled Navy Model gauss pistol, the other short, square and scruffy, with more stubble on his chin than his head, and armed with what appeared to be the fruits of a hurried shoplifting foray in a gun store (this impression was in fact correct).

"I am Sir Janice Caide, Ex-3896th Lift Infantry, Major. Retired. Currently commanding officer of the Starmerc unit Caide's Commandos. And you are... what, exactly?"

"Captain Tal Peters and Leading Enforcer Jandro Dalden. We're your planetside liaison," Tal began again. "Under Ordinance...."

Caide held up a hand. "I was warned I was getting liaison. Suppose it could have been worse," she said. "Though I really don't see how. You know how to use your weapons?"

Tal tapped the long gauss pistol on his right hip, "I have a permit..." he said. That was factually true, thought he documented, signed by two Archdukes and a minor Imperial Princess, was as bogus as a document can be without actually violating the laws of physics.

"I asked if you could use them!" Caide snapped.

"I have a marksman's rating," Tal said with pride. He did too, it said so on his weapon permit. In reality his expertise extended to knowing where the trigger was, but nobody had to know that.

"You?" Caide demanded of Jandro.

Jandro looked momentarily offended that she'd even need to ask. "Yeah, I can shoot. I can kick, punch, club, butt and bite too," he snarled. "Wanna see?"

Caide smiled, a scary, almost predatory smile. "This isn't as bad as I thought after all," she said. "Stow your gear and we'll talk."

Jandro hurled their two overnight bags into the air/raft, following them with his ammo bag, carbine, shotgun and a couple of loose ammo boxes he found on the ground, then turned back to Caide. "Stowed," he said, daring anyone to say different.

Sir Caide didn't bat an eyelid. "This is what you need to know," she said in the direction of Tal and Jandro, but not really caring if they heard properly or not. "My team is providing security for an archaeological expedition. Actually it's more of a rapid retrieval mission, since we have a very narrow window of opportunity created by unusual natural conditions. In short, a severe drought has exposed what may be a very old ruin on the far coast of this continent. If this is the case then a major expedition may be funded. However, this will require proof. To this end, a team of four scientists from the Imperial Planetological Society will enter the suspected ruins and retrieve artefacts that may be used to prove the need for a more extensive expedition."

"And you need mercs for this?" Tal asked.

Caide shrugged. "The far coast is pretty wild. There are rumors of primitive tribes and some very hostile wildlife. The IPS decided to hire security, and they hired the best. Us."

"Right," Jandro said derisively.

"We have three air/rafts; two stretch models and a standard," Caide went on. "My team provides a pilot and a guard/vehicle commander for each. The scientists have one of the stretches; I and one of my team ride the other, which carries our heavy equipment. The third 'raft, the standard model, carries sundries and supplies. That's your ride. You might find you need to restow your gear... or you can sit on it right across the continent for all I care. Be aware that your vehicle commander has authority over you, and that I have authority over everyone on the mission in matters of security. That means I'm always in charge, no matter what anyone else may tell you. Ask any of my troopers to explain that to you if you don't understand, but what it comes down to is: Get in the way and you'll get hurt. Disobey an order and you'll get hurt. Annoy me and you'll get hurt. That's everything you need to know."

And with that, Sir Caide turned and strode away.

Jandro eyed her back with venom in his gaze. "I'll give these pansies restow our gear..." he muttered.

"There's eight of them, Jandro," Tal said quickly. "And they have really big guns." He paused for a moment, then went on, "Jandro... if you were a Starmerc, what would you refer to as Heavy Gear?"

"Oh, missile launchers, support weapons and stuff," Jandro said, grinning enthusiastically. "Or maybe fusion guns. Those things are cool! They can...."

Tal sucked in air through his teeth. "Jandro, why does a security team on an archaeological dig site need stuff like that?"

"Dunno...how're we gonna find out?" Jandro said.

"I really, really, hope we aren't," Tal said, but without any real conviction.

* * * *

The three air/rafts sped over the dense forest canopy, just a hundred meters above the treetops. Tal suspected that

the pilots were staying low just to that their passengers got a really good impression of how fast they were going. He bit his lip and fought the urge to burrow into the seat. It really wouldn't do any good if they hit something anyway.

The air/raft suddenly dipped and accelerated, veering sharply away to the right. The other two were doing the same, Tal noticed, but he was more concerned about the way his internal organs seemed to make the turn a good second after the rest of his body. He fought the queasy feeling and leaned across to Jandro, who was grinning like a kid on a fairground ride.

"What's going on?" Tal demanded of his companion.

"I think we just dived into sensor shadow... we're off the radar!" Jandro replied.

"Why?"

"Somebody doesn't want to be tracked!" Jandro said, nodding in the direction of the lead 'raft. And that most likely means...."

"... that what we're doing is illegal," Tal finished the sentence. "This just gets better."

The pilot poured on even more acceleration, taking the 'raft right down to the treetops. Branches whipped and hissed with the wind of their passing. Startled birds took flight - though well after the three humming 'rafts had slashed by overhead. Then the 'raft dipped again and they were screaming along between the trees. After a moment, it percolated into Tal's panicked consciousness that they were in a river valley. It was fairly wide and straight. Logic told him that terrain-following radar and collision-avoidance software could get them safely through here, even at this speed. But all the same... Tal gave up the fight and began trying to wriggle his way inside the 'raft seat.

"I see water!" Jandro said loudly, pointing ahead. Sure enough, the trees ended at a wide sandy bowl around a lake. The water level had clearly been much higher until very recently. The lakeside shelved steeply, and among the jumbled rocks and waterlogged debris uncovered by the receding waters there lay two long, curving walls that began as piers out in the lake. They curved inward to meet at a cluster of large buildings centred on a cathedral-like structure. The space between the walls was cluttered with ruined buildings and rubble that had fallen from them.

The air/rafts streaked straight in, over the walls. The two stretch models stayed high, and Tal saw the convertible top of one was down. A merc stood up in the back, training some kind of support weapon around. Their own raft continued to descend, heading for an open space close to the water's edge. The top began to retract, and the vehicle commander spoke to his passenger for the first time in fifteen hundred or more kilometres.

"Defensive posture immediately we ground!" the merc snapped.

"Wha..?" Tal replied.

"Means we jump out and look mean," Jandro translated. "Draw your gun, Tal!"

Jandro paused for a moment, trying to decide between his weapons. After a moment he slung the shotgun awkwardly across his back and cradled the carbine in his arms. Tal slid the long navy gauss pistol from its holster and fiddled with the buttons.

The 'raft grounded; fast, but gently. The pilot kept the lifters hot as the commander vaulted out over the side, dropping to one knee and scanning the ruins with his ACR sights. Jandro leaped out the other side of the 'raft, tracking his carbine around from rubble pile to ruined building.

Tal started to vault, thought better of it, and opened the door instead. He stepped down, turned an ankle on the damp, slick rubble, and fell back into the 'raft. After a moment he re-emerged, swearing and red-faced, to see the other 'rafts coming in to land.

"Send the dummies in first and see what jumps out at us, is that it? Well, it's nice to know we're so expendable!" Tal said with a rude gesture at Sir Caide's 'raft. "I bet you're just disappointed nothing tried to eat us!" He turned away, gazing at the nearest fairly intact building and wondering if it might be dry inside. As he calmed down and his senses became more attuned to the place, Tal realised that while he was dead right about his expendable status, that didn't mean he wasn't wrong about the other thing.

* * * *

The mercs fanned out from their grounded vehicles, covered by the very impressive support weapon mounted on an improvised rail in Caide's 'raft. The mercs operated in pairs, making the most of their advanced multi-spectrum sights to penetrate every nook and cranny. One cleared, one covered. It was impressive and professional, right up until one of the mercs sprayed half a dozen rounds into the rubble near his feet.

"Snake!" the merc said with a hint of embarrassment. "Dead now."

Tal and Jandro exchanged a worried look.

After a few minutes, Sir Caide declared the immediate area to be free of onrushing alien hordes or bug-eyed monsters,

and allowed the science team to step out of their vehicle. Immediately, the four scientists began unfolding an array of sensor equipment, then fell to arguing about what its readouts meant.

Tal and Jandro lounged by their air/raft for a few minutes, until Caide caught them at it and set them to assisting the scientists in their work. After a while the scientists asked them to stop helping, so they went back to lounging. Even that became boring after a while, so they started rifling the supplies stored in the air/raft.

"What's this all about?" Jandro demanded of his friend, around a mouthful of self-heating Emergency Stew that tasted like it'd been canned sometime during the Long Night.

Tal shrugged, throwing aside one of the ration-candy bars he'd pilfered. "These things taste like sawdust. And as to this..." he waved a hand at the activity around them, "No idea. Science stuff, I guess."

"Don't concern yourself," Sir Caide said. Tal and Jandro started guiltily, having been completely unaware of her approach. "The less you know, the better."

"That's cheerful!" Tal said. "Did we step on your goldfish or something?"

"What?" Caide demanded.

"You're very mean to us. What did we do?"

Caide looked genuinely puzzled. "You didn't do anything. It's merely that you're here and that raises... complications. However, my troops will protect you if you can't pull your weight. We're an honorable unit. And no, we're not going to abandon you here so you can't talk, or anything like that."

"Hey, I never..." Tal said, then changed his mind about lying as Caide raised a finger. "Well, okay. I was worried."

"You have no need to be," Caide said.

"Fine," Tal broke in. "But tell me; just what are Caide's Commandos - or rather, a small and select detachment drawn from its ranks - doing here, now? And why?"

"I told you. All you need to know is that we're providing security for an artifact-retrieval mission."

"Maybe that's what we need to know, but what's the truth?" Jandro said.

"The truth is not your concern!" Caide replied, turning away.

Tal watched Sir Caide's departing rear view - not without some admiration - and then slowly turned to his friend. "Jandro, we're in big trouble," he said slowly.

"Huh?" Jandro replied. "What makes you think that?"

"The scientists are getting excited... that means they've found something. And besides... this place. It gives me the creeps."

"Why's that? It's a bit overbuilt, but it's okay," Jandro said, gazing about him. True, Jandro wasn't big on imagination; nor on table manners for that matter. But even he could pick up the vibe the city was giving out. The heavy, squat black stone architecture; the strange not-quite-straight streets. There was something menacing about the place. All the same, Jandro wasn't going to be intimidated by mere architecture. "Really. It's just some dead city!"

"That's the point, Jandro," Tal said as the penny finally dropped. "This place isn't dead. It isn't dead at all."

"What's that mean? We've not seen anyone!" Jandro countered.

"No, but all the same..." Tal said.

"This place has been under a lake for the past gazillion years!" Jandro said with a dismissive gesture. "It's a soggy ruin, soon to be flooded again. There's nobody here, Tal! The place is dead!"

Tal licked suddenly dry lips, sure now of what he sensed. "No it isn't, Jandro," he said. "This place is very, very much alive. And it's hostile."

As his friend gave him a you're-a-madman look, Tal went on, "This is a very bad place, Jandro. And Caide knows it."

* * * *

Leaving two of the mercs to guard the transport, the rest of the team began picking their way towards the cathedral-like building at the apex of the two walls. Two mercs probed ahead, ACRs tracking across the rubble-strewn streets in constant readiness for extreme violence. Tal and the scientists formed an equipment-festooned huddle in the center, shepherded by an ACR-armed Sir Caide. A merc on each flank and one in the rear completed the defensive formation.

Jandro ambled along behind the rear merc, humming to himself and kicking small stones. Occasionally he picked up a larger rock and shied it at one of the buildings, calling out, "Come and eat us, then! Here we are, nice and tasty! Come and get it if you think you're tough enough!" Even the mercs had given up trying to get him to stop. Or maybe they thought any threat would take him out first.

Which, at that moment, might have been a blessing.

After fifteen minutes' walk, the party halted in an open space in front of the Apex buildings. The science team immedi-

ately began taking samples of everything in sight; the slimy, half-dried lakebed mud, the rocks, even the air. Densitometers and multi-spectrum interferometers were pointed at buildings, and voices rose in disagreement. There was no disagreement about one thing: which one was the most important building in the city. The cathedral-like structure that lay at the apex of the triangle formed by the outer walls was just too gigantic and scary for that.

The Apex was shaped like the city itself; a not-quite-triangle, equilateral sides bulging in outward curves. The entrance was an enormous archway in the middle of the facing wall. A pair of curved stairways ran along the front wall, creating a platform in front of the vast archway where visitors could pause, reflect, and be properly intimidated. It had apparently been created from huge blocks of black basalt, smoothed by fusion cutters and joined seamlessly to forever cut off the light from this place.

And it was very, very old.

Sir Caide snarled at the scientists to be quiet and to get off the stairways, then conferred with them in hushed tones for a while. She turned back to the group, saying, "Reiss, Kineer, take up position as rearguard here. The rest of us are going inside. That includes you two." The last sentence was accompanied by a nod at Tal and Jandro, who were quietly edging away into the shadows.

Mercs shepherded Tal and Jandro up the black, slimy stone steps to the very entrance of the Apex building. As he climbed the steps, Tal was overcome with a feeling of intense foreboding and - he could think of no other word for it - evil. His gait was that of a man crossing a minefield in heavy rain; hunched up, each step gingerly placed as if it might trigger his destruction.

"Really, really dark in there," Jandro said cheerfully, sticking his head around the enormous basalt pillar the framed the entrance. "Gimme a lamp!"

One of the scientists passed Jandro a handlamp and, with it in one hand and his carbine waving around randomly in the other, he stepped into the Apex. Someone nudged Tal from behind and he followed, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists. He paused, trembling, at the very edge of the daylight spilling in through the titanic doorway as the scientists barged past and began chattering and pointing excitedly. The mercs shadowed them, panning gun-mounted lamps around, their eyes hidden by light-amplification goggles.

Tal hunched up, trying to make himself as small as possible. The terror he felt was indescribably - even for Tal, who was something of an expert on the subject of terror - intense. It wasn't just fear of the dark, or a strange place. No, it was more than that. There was a feeling of power here; of dark, ancient energies flowing up from the lake, through the vast piers and into the Apex, and meeting... there!

Almost against his will, Tal began to walk slowly forward into the darkness.

The science team fanned out into the vast building, their puny handlights flickering as they scanned and sampled, collected and bagged everything in sight. Lake-mud squelched underfoot as they moved out into the darkness, mapping out the chamber.

Tal spied huge figures ahead; statues, over five meters tall. They looked like humans, but like everything else in this place, the proportions were subtly wrong. He threaded between them, sparing hardly a glance at the colossal robed figures. This was the place; this was where the dark energies met and flowed into...

Tal stopped at the lip of a pit filled with the utterest blackness. His handlamp beam seemed to fall into the pit and be swallowed. It failed to illuminate the pit sides or its bottom - if there was one. Behind him, Tal heard the scientists getting ever more excited about the statues, but his attention was on the pit and nothing else. Couldn't they feel the energy flow? Couldn't they sense the hideous threat that lurked at the bottom of that pit? How it fed on the energy streams rising from the lake? How it slept, but lightly, awaiting... what?

Fragments of conversation reached Tal's ears from behind:

"... true form of the Ancients..."

"... human remnants; worshipping their departed masters..."

"... some kind of psionic phenomenon? Perhaps a temple..."

"... carvings, look...gods and humans..."

"... destruction..."

"... unknown aliens..."

"... Ancients!"

"... highly unlikely..."

"... some kind of warning..."

Tal bit his lip. Could they not sense how much danger they were all in?

Apparently not. And not just the scientists, either. Jandro sauntered up to the pit edge, his carbine slung and a rock

bouncing in his hand in its place. "Jandro, no..." Tal said urgently.

Jandro grinned.

"No, really," Tal pleaded. "Don't throw that rock in the pit!"

Jandro paused for a second, then nodded. "Okay!" he said cheerfully, and flipped the rock over his shoulder.

Tal went limp with relief, then howled in disbelief as Jandro produced a survival flare, twisted the end to initiate it, and tossed it into the pit. He leaned out over the pit and watched it fall, spitting after it.

"It's just a big hole, Tal! Bit odd that it's not full of water, but it's just a hole..." Jandro said with an airy wave of his hand. Then he froze and added in an urgent, strangled tone, "... with something moving at the bottom!"

Something changed in the atmosphere of the Apex, as if a call had gone out... but a call to what or whom? Tal felt it; Jandro got it second-hand from Tal. Both of them edged back, away from the pit towards where the scientists were arguing over the meaning of the carvings.

"... a highly psionic culture..."

"... this was a sacred place..."

"... no, a bad place... evil..."

"... built to pen their evil gods..."

"... rubbish... repository for psi-based weapons left over from some war..."

"... fallen civilization... half-understood science..."

"... must never see the light of day... wonder why?"

"... think of the advances in counter-psi..."

"... inside track on the Zhodani..."

"... just some superstitious primitives..."

"... with fusion cutters?"

Tal and Jandro edged past the scientists, moving towards the entrance. As they passed the last statue, Tal was seized by a sudden thought. "Jandro, did you see the snake that merc shot?" he whispered.

"Nope," Jandro replied. "But it must have been snake-paste by the time he'd finished."

"See any others?" Tal pressed.

"Nope."

"See anything alive at all in this place?" Tal pressed as they sidled towards safety.

"Nope, not now you mention it."

"Then why was there just one snake in the middle of what was, until a few days ago, a lakebed?"

"Dunno," Jandro conceded.

"And why is it that just one merc saw it, blasted it... and nobody else even laid eyes on the remains?"

"Dunno," Jandro said again.

"I do," said Tal with sudden, awful certainty.

"Huh?"

"Test run," Tal whispered.

Jandro paused and looked across, puzzled, at Tal. Then the penny dropped. "Oh," he said softly.

Although only one of them was telepathic - and he only marginally so - Tal and Jandro knew one another well enough that their response was as synchronous as the finest machinery. They performed a combat maneuver that had served them well many times in the past, and they did it like real pros.

They ran for it.

One of the mercs turned and, seeming to see some threat where none existed, swore as he raised his rifle. The ACR spat flame, cutting down his nearest comrade from behind. A split-second later the other rifleman, who had barely begun to turn, was slashed to the ground. The merc, wide-eyed and white-faced, hosed the remains of the magazine into the defenceless scientists. He jerked the weapon sideways as the last of them crumpled, sending the last few rounds scything though empty air where Tal and Jandro had just been standing.

White-hot basalt chips and stray rounds ricocheted around the immense Apex chamber as Sir Caide snapped her ACR up to bear, unhesitatingly blasting one of her own men down in a brutal survive-and-question-later reflex. The merc spun to the ground as Caide's burst sawed him off at the knees. Despite the goggles he wore, she saw the stark, desperate terror on his face as he tried to reload his weapon. Whatever he was seeing, it wasn't his commanding officer and comrade of several years' hard campaigning.

In that instant, Sir Caide understood what was happening. Something was playing with this man's mind, just like it'd

made him see a snake in the rubble earlier. He wasn't to blame for reacting to what he thought he saw. If whatever influence was causing the hallucinations could be removed, the downed merc might be returned to normal. But he'd slapped in a new magazine and was bringing his rifle up to aim at her... and she didn't want to die.

Knowing exactly what she was doing and how much she'd pay for it later, Sir Caide clamped the trigger down and gave him the whole magazine.

Tal and Jandro skidded to a halt outside the Apex. Daylight blinded them but that wasn't why they stopped. The Apex steps curved away and down to either side. In front was a drop of some two meters or so to the muddy ground. Behind, the crawling darkness (and the sounds of a gun battle) made the hair on the back of their necks stand up. Both Tal and Jandro wanted nothing more than to leap down from the steps and flee. But that would have meant going through the two Starmercs who were slowly backing up the steps... and the horde that was creeping slowly after them.

The open space in front of the Apex seemed to be crawling with ape-like, shambling humanoids. They wore clothing of crude hides and furs, and more importantly they hefted stone-tipped spears and crude clubs. Not one of them made a sound as they advanced menacingly, herding the Travellers back into the Apex.

"Let me guess," Jandro said, unslinging his carbine. "They're gonna kill us and eat us?"

"No, they're going to club us down and chuck us in the black pit to appease their gods. Who are very angry, apparently," Tal said shakily.

"Huh? Who told you that?"

"They did," Tal replied with a nod at the horde below.

"Telepaths?"

"Seems that way,"

Jandro digested this information, then shrugged. "There's plenty of them."

"That there are, Jandro."

"Looks bad,"

"Can't argue..." Tal replied.

"Better get ready to kick some butt, then!" Jandro said, raising his carbine.

"Wait!" one of the Starmercs snapped, reaching the top of the steps where he crouched, weapon ready. "I've called in the support raft..."

"Good," said a voice behind them. Tal and Jandro turned to see Sir Caide crawling out of the doorway. Her fatigues were covered in filth. "Dropped my lamp... couldn't seem to see the entrance... had to crawl around the wall till I found it... lost my rifle too," she said, putting one hand to her pistol holster.

Jandro shook his head, offering his carbine. Sir Caide took it, along with a bunch of magazines, with a curt nod of thanks. "Here's the support 'raft," she said, glancing at the skyline.

"And here's the mob," Said Jandro, unslinging his shotgun.

"Reiss, cover the right-hand stairs. Kineer, the left," Sir Caide ordered. "Tell the 'raft gunner to clear us a path and the pilot to stay airborne until we call him in. We don't want that mob rushing our only ticket out of here."

"Don't much want them rushing US!" Jandro grouched, racking the shotgun slide to chamber a round.

"No choice about that!" Tal said, aiming his gauss pistol into the mob around the base of the steps. "Here they come!"

"Okay then!" Jandro yelled, blasting his shotgun into the horde. "Let's rumble!"

* * * *

They couldn't miss; not with that horde pouring towards them. Reiss and Kineer, one on either stairway, snapped off short bursts that toppled three or more of the humanoids each time. The powerful ACR rounds ripped right through the first target they struck, and maybe the second too. The survivors hurdled their brethren and came on, unconcerned. Caide knelt beside Reiss on the right-hand stairway, firing a steady stream of semi-automatic shots from Jandro's carbine. On the left side, Jandro's shotgun boomed again and again, smoking cartridges spinning to the black basalt. Tal's gauss pistol cracked burst after burst into the mob from where he stood in a white-faced, two-handed combat stance.

It wasn't enough.

"Loading!" snapped Reiss, reaching for a full magazine.

"Covered!" replied Caide, pumping out fast, aimed shots.

Jandro's shotgun clicked dry just at the same time as Kineer's rifle. As the merc knelt to load, Jandro passed his weapon

to Tal and dragged a pair of autopistols from his belt, blazing away into the teeth of the horde. Tal holstered his pistol and began wrestling with the ready rounds stored on the shotgun's sling, fumbling them into the breach.

It was nowhere near enough.

The mob was almost at the top of both sets of steps as, almost simultaneously, both ACRs opened up on full rock 'n' roll. The front of the humanoid wave was swept away in a maelstrom of upflung limbs and spraying blood. Those next in line tripped over their comrades, creating a space.

Jandro dropped the magazines out of his autopistols, stuck one under his arm as he reloaded the other, then repeated the process. Behind him, Tal yelled as something grabbed his ankle. Instinctively, he turned and stamped on the matted and hairy head of an enterprising humanoid who was scrambling up between the stairways. He fell away, but others were following.

Tal blasted the shotgun empty in a quick salvo, then threw it down among the mob. He saw arms flung up to a smashed face and felt grim satisfaction. Then his foil rang from its scabbard and he plunged it into the nearest of the attackers. The long, slender blade punched through hide clothing and flesh beneath. There was a howl, and suddenly there were no more attackers.

The support raft came in low, at an oblique angle to avoid endangering the embattled Travellers on the steps. The support gun opened up, scything bursts of gauss needles across the bottom of the stairs, hurling flesh and body parts into the air along with makeshift clubs and spears. In an instant, the left-hand stairway was almost clear.

"Leaving!" Jandro yelled, striding forward at the few humanoids remaining in front of him with pistols blazing. Kineer advanced beside him, cutting a path through the horde with neat, sharp bursts of ACR fury. Tal banged Caide on the back with his left fist, then, drawing his gauss pistol wrong-handed, ran after his comrades.

The three plunged down the stairway, shooting, stabbing or just plain barging their way past the remnants of the mob. Behind them Caide and Reiss backed up, trying to keep the horde at bay with firepower. For a moment they succeeded, aided by the VRF gauss gun overhead.

Then, without any warning, the air/raft slewed sideways and nose-dived into the rubble-strewn courtyard. The support gunner, despite his improvised safety harness, flipped over the side and crashed to the ground. The mob were upon him in seconds, clubs and spears rising and falling in silent murder. A rifle barrel poked over the 'raft door frame, but not aimed at the mob. A wild burst slashed between the retreating companions, narrowly missing all of them.

Except for the single round that slipped in just over Kineer's chest armor and blew his throat out the back.

Reiss, Caide and Jandro volleyed the 'raft pilot with everything they had. His rifle barked again, but this time it was a wild spray into the sky. The pilot fell back into the 'raft.

For a long moment the four survivors faced the horde. Reiss scooped up his dead companion's rifle, levelling an ACR in either hand at the mob. Jandro slipped new magazines into his pistols. Caide slapped in the last carbine magazine. Tal sidled quietly away in the direction of the other two 'rafts; just minutes away and their only ticket out of this hellish place.

The tableau broke; a silent roar of anger and hate filled Tal's mind as what remained of the horde charged across the blood-slick and reeking mud. Reiss brought up both ACRs and fired them dry, then flung them down and turned to run. Caide and Jandro took a moment longer to empty their weapons, then followed with the mob hard on their heels.

Tal, not by inclination an athletic man, was in a class of his own at one field event - the Don't-Wanna-Die Desperation Sprint. Now he broke all his previous records as he streaked through the slippery mud towards the safety of the 'rafts. His pistol he managed to stuff into his belt, but the foil was too awkward to sheathe. Just as well.

As he hurdled a pile of tumbled stone and rounded the final curve, finding yet greater reserves of terror to give wings to his heels, three humanoids seemed to rise up out of the mud in front of him. They waved spears and clubs menacingly. Tal tried to stop, but succeeded only in turning his run into an arm-flailing side. Narrowly avoiding a spear thrust, he crashed into the nearest primitive. Both of them tumbled to the cloying mud.

Tal rolled desperately over, smelling damp fur and badly-cured hides, and feeling a soul-deep hatred emanating from his foes. He came upright as the second humanoid charged in. Tal screwed his eyes shut and thrust out his foil, feeling it scrape on bone. The primitive lunged right up the blade and tried to grapple with him, but too late. The blade had pierced his heart.

The humanoid slumped to the ground, and Tal wrenched to flee his weapon. It jerked loose as he ducked a club swing and thrust his strangely ill-balanced blade, realising with horror that it had snapped off a hand's width from the hilt. Another swing came in. Tal ducked again and, driven beyond reason by his fear, lashed out with a clumsy right hook that had his heart, soul and all his aspirations for the future behind it. And also the hilt of a broken sword acting as a knuckle duster.

The humanoid crashed to the ground and Tal took off running, throwing aside his hilt as he leaped into the nearest 'raft and fired it up. The 'raft had just begun to lift when the last of the primitives jumped onto the hood. He was snarling in rage



and covered in mud from where Tal had knocked him over. He'd also lost his spear.

As the humanoid tried to scramble into driving compartment, Tal yanked his gauss pistol out of his belt left-handed and triggered it, sawing his attacker more or less off at the waist. For an instant he clung, disbelieving, to life and to the 'raft windshield. Then he toppled slowly backwards, slid over the side, and vanished from sight.

Tal spun the 'raft and engaged neutral lift as Reiss, Caide and Jandro ran up with the mob on their heels. A Circus Imperium display team couldn't have managed a better synchronized hurdle than the three of them as they leaped into the 'raft, and Tal gunned it as soon as he felt the lurch of their landing.

Not quite fast enough.

A few of the horde managed to scramble aboard, swinging their clubs with gusto. Tal squeaked and ducked down in his seat, hoping the others could deal with it, as he frantically engaged the throttles and sent the 'raft rocketing skywards.

Behind him, Jandro had lost his autopistols but stood with one foot on the back of Tal's seat, a huge revolver in one hand and a tiny body pistol in the other, blasting away at three humanoids who'd managed to cling to the hood and windshield of the 'raft. Behind him, Caide was engaged in a club fight with two of the primitives, using the empty carbine as a weapon. Reiss had drawn his long fighting knife and was stabbing a humanoid to death with it in the bottom of the passenger compartment. The 'raft rocked alarmingly as battle raged within it.

Jandro's guns blasted empty, and two of the humanoids tumbled from the hood. The third lunged at Tal, but Jandro pistol-whipped him, then dropped the revolver and grabbed the primitive by the hide jerkin and head-butted him several times. The humanoid went limp, and Jandro threw him overboard.

Behind, Caide had clubbed one of her assailants unconscious before the other grabbed her and dragged her down. The pair of them crashed down into the footwell on top of Reiss, engaged in a private death-wrestling contest. Jandro dived in,

wielding a wicked punch-dagger he'd produced from somewhere. Fists rose and fell, and suddenly it was all over.

The air/raft's drive howled as Tal kept the throttles wide open, streaking away up the river valley in the direction of civilisation, sanity, and a hot shower. It was some time before the others felt inclined to suggest he ease up on their break-neck pace. When they did, he ignored them. Eventually they had to prise his death-grip off the throttles, but by then the city and its strange inhabitants were far behind.

* * * *

"So, the scientists thought the place was a repository for psionics-based weapons built by some long-vanished civilization. The primitives were probably a remnant. They worshiped the place but they'd forgotten what it was," Tal said. "We think there was some kind of psionic defense mechanism that caused hallucinations. It affected some of us more than others; made a couple of the mercs turn on the rest of us."

The security director shifted in her comfortable chair. "In other words, you found out absolutely nothing. Did you manage to retrieve anything?"

"Just our skins," Tal said.

"Then you were lucky, it seems. Sir Caide and the other surviving Starmerc?"

"I told you. We brought nothing back but mud... copious quantities of mud," Tal replied. He'd showered three times and changed his clothes, but still he could feel that mud clinging to him, slowly drying out as it had during the long flight back.

"And you're sure that Sir Caide was acting independently?" the director asked.

Tal and Jandro exchanged a worried look. They could see where this was going. After a moment Tal said, "We're pretty sure that some of what they told us wasn't true. Caide's people were hired as security for an IPS science team, but I get the impression that the mission was Caide's idea, not theirs."

"Good." The director leaned forward in her chair. "You've done passably well; I suppose I'll have to keep our bargain and drop the charges against you. Now, as free agents, would you care to make a very large amount of money?"

Tal licked his lips. "Let me guess," he said. "The water level in the lake is still very low, there's time to launch a second expedition. A better equipped, better prepared expedition. With us as guides."

"That's right. I can arrange to have certain aspects of your, shall we say, personal histories, amended. Get rid of a few of the warrants. And that's in addition to a very large cash payment."

"Not a chance. That place should not be messed with," Jandro said harshly. "Let the lake cover it up again. Better yet, nuke it until it's a glowing crater."

The director sighed. "The expedition is outfitting even as we speak. It will go ahead with or without you. There will surely be fewer casualties if you go along, and you stand to make a fortune. Think about it gentlemen!"

Tal and Jandro exchanged a look; one of those almost-telepathic moments. When they answered, it was as one.

"When's the next ship off this rock?"

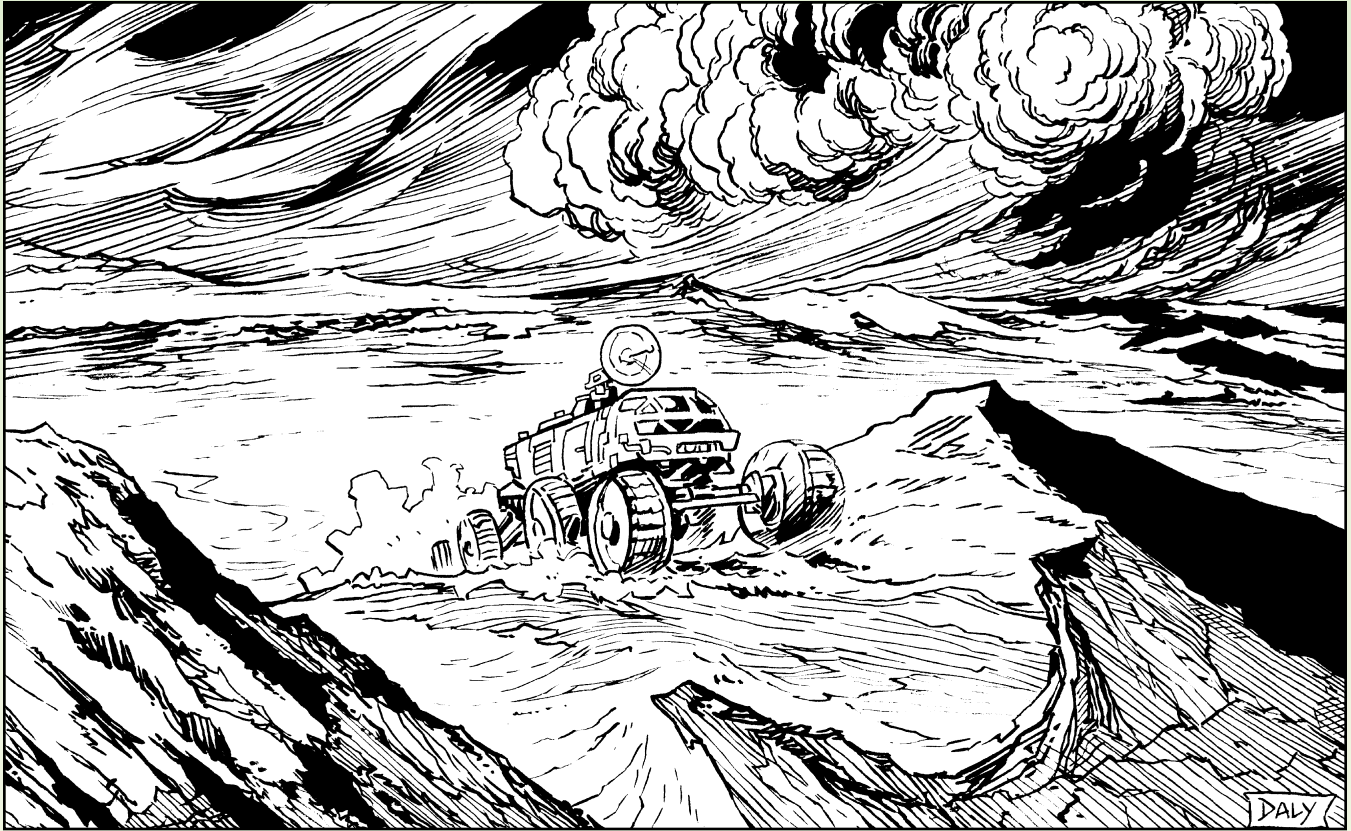
The Imperium is anti-psionic in outlook. One result of this attitude is that those with the ability, like Tal, often receive only partial training in covert institutes, or from "masters" that understand little of what they teach. Another consequence is that psi phenomena are little understood.

It is thought that the mysterious Ancients were able to wield psionic powers, and other races throughout Charted Space can certainly do so. The Imperium's great rival and occasional enemy, the Zhodani Consulate, makes extensive use of psionics. Thus psi-based artefacts or even weapons that may give an edge over the Zhodani are eagerly sought after. This is what Caide sought to do; to secure a source of psi artefacts and sell them on to Imperial researchers. A high-risk undertaking, given how little is known of psionic phenomena, but one with the potential to be very lucrative.

Adventurers will often follow up vague rumours where serious scientists do not have enough evidence to justify an expedition. Adventurers are also known for plunging into highly dangerous situations hoping to find that "big score" that will set them up for life. Usually they find nothing but a site of minor archaeological interest, and sometimes there is nothing there at all. But in a few, rare instances, Travellers may discover something strange, wondrous, and potentially lethal.

They may never fully understand what they have found, and sometimes the "big score" can be less important than just getting out alive.

REACTIVATION CLAUSE



REACTIVATION CLAUSE

It is Year 1000, in Ley Sector of Gateway Domain. The community of Pender's Hope serves as a communications hub for outlying mining settlements across the Great Bryhal Desert. Like many small frontier communities, Pender's Hope cannot maintain formal rescue services. When things go wrong, individuals must improvise a solution and implement it as best they can.

Former Scout Kye Roberts pushed the cat off his lap and struggled to his feet as the comm alarm sounded. Like Kye, the little tortoiseshell was ancient, a relic of past times living out her final days in sleepy retirement in a place just the far side of nowhere. A place called Pender's Hope.

The cat - Emma was her given name, though she usually answered to "Nuisance" - mewed reproachfully and began to wash her already-immaculate paws as Kye limped over to the comm panel and lit the screen.

"Oh, hello Jakob," Kye said, recognising the eldest son of his old friend Johann Guildsmann. "What can I..." Kye trailed off as he saw the tension in Jakob's expression.

"Kye... I've got a storm front on radar. A big one. Coming in fast."

Kye sighed. There was nothing on the radar at Pender's Hope, which meant this was one of the sudden, incredibly violent storms that came out of nowhere and wracked the region for a few days or weeks each year. Somebody died in almost every one.

"Dust Season's coming early, then," Kye said. "Got any details?"

Jakob nodded. "We'll be under it in about fifteen minutes; we'll lose satellite comms for several days and maybe local radio too. Should hit you about an hour or two after we go off the air."

"Bad?"

"Class Two," Jakob said grimly.

"Can you get everyone in?"

"Already sent a warning and recall. Everyone's responded; they'll come running. But..."

Kye bit his lip as Jakob went on, "There's a prospecting party out by Yeilter's Ridge; one vehicle, six people. We can't

get a raft to them in time, and they won't reach shelter before the front hits them. This one looks set to blow for days. They can't survive out there for that long."

"Someone went to lead them in?" Kye asked, knowing the answer already.

"Dad took the big crawler out. He said to tell you he'll run it up Trevv's' Peak and crank up the transmitter. The team can use him as a beacon. If they manage to get into range."

"He's going to be stuck up there all week. He'll be cranky when he gets home, Yakob," Kye said.

"Don't I know it. Better get battened down, Kye. And good luck."

Kye nodded soberly. "You too, Yakob. Give your dad - all your family - my best. And stay safe."

"No fear, Kye. We're running Disaster Protocol as of now. We're bomb-proof."

"Stay that way," Kye said, and cut the link. As he tapped out the code that would send a weather warning and routine notification to every settlement in the hemisphere, he couldn't help but think of Joharn Guildsmann, keeping a lonely vigil by the radio in the hope - the vain, stubborn hope, that the prospectors from Yeliter's Ridge might make it into radio range.

Kye called up a map display and sighed. There was no way, no way at all that they'd find their way through the storm to Joharn's beacon. The storm would cut radio reception right down. If the beacon could extend three, four times as far, then they might have a chance. But that would only happen if some lunatic went out to get them. Nobody would volunteer for a suicide mission like that.

But for some it was not a question of volunteering; it was their duty.

Kye had been such a person once; a member of the Imperial Interstellar Scout Service. He'd served in the Exploration branch. A daredevil he'd been back then, a risk-taker who'd hospitalised himself many times and escaped death by the skin of his teeth so often he'd lost count. Now he was just an old, old man suffering from the legacy of his many injuries. He limped, he stooped, his hands sometimes shook. His hair was gone and his hearing wasn't too great either. Now the best he could do was to tend the comms office and make sure the cat got fed.

The IISS had a policy that nobody ever left the service. You went on "Detached Duty" instead. That meant that ex-Scouts could be reactivated at any time if they were needed, whatever they might be doing. In practice, it was those who'd left the service while they were still young and fit that got the call. Useless old men weren't reactivated unless there was nobody else.

Kye looked over at Emma, who'd jumped into his chair and was pretending to sleep. "I really don't want to do this, Emma," he said. "But there's nobody else. Nobody at all. Come on; let's go and see Sara."

* * * *

Former Scout Sara Liimki blinked in disbelief at the old man who stood on the doorstep of her home. Gone was his comfortable cardigan and slippers. He'd donned his old gray coveralls; the tough field uniform that all Scouts were supposed to wear on duty, and crammed his feet into his boots. His uniform looked sad and pathetic on him, hanging from a shrunken, bent frame that had once been powerful and straight. He had that ancient cat of his cradled in both arms, and it looked like he was having trouble holding even her tiny weight.

"Kye, you can't do this," Sara said. "You have no right."

"I have to, Sara," Kye said sadly. "I've voluntarily reactivated myself. That gives me the right and the duty to invoke your Reactivation Clause, even if you won't."

"Kye... Even assuming an ATV could even make headway in that," she jerked a thumb at the storm-shutters that covered the windows of every building in the settlement, even though the storm front had not yet arrived. "Even then, the chances of finding those people are virtually nil. It's almost certain suicide, and for what? We can't help them, Kye!"

"We're Scouts, Sara. It's our duty to try."

"Scouts!" she snapped, "What we are is an old man and a single mother with two young kids. What about my duty to them? How can you ask me to go out in that when I've got a family to protect? You think a Class Two storm won't tear this place up? Do you?"

Kye raised his hands defensively. "I know. That's why I'm not asking you to go. Under the settlement's charter the senior Imperial representative is responsible for damage control and rescue coordination. That's me. I need you to take that over to free me... Sara, I'm not asking you to go out there. That's my job."

"Oh... Kye, I misunderstood. I'm so sorry."

"I know... Don't worry about it. Just look after these people for me until I get back, okay?"

"I accept reactivation, and will take responsibility for the safety of the settlement," Sara said. "Are you taking someone with you?"

REACTIVATION CLAUSE

Kye smiled wryly. "Just Emma. Nobody else wanted to come," he said, and shuffled off in the direction of the settlement's vehicle park.

People rushed about inside the settlement's perimeter berm, battening down against the storm front that was just an hour away. Sara watched Kye walk quietly among the frenzy, place his little friend into the ATV cab, then climb slowly and painfully up beside her. He waved in salute as the heavy door slid closed. After a moment the ATV's eight huge wheels began to turn and it rumbled slowly out of the settlement, out into the desert to find those who were lost. Sara watched as the vehicle threaded through the berm gap and disappeared from view. She was pretty sure she wouldn't be seeing it again.

Sara turned back into her home and slammed the heavy steel door. "Come on, you two" she called to her kids. "Let's get your stuff into the basement. There's a storm coming."

* * * *

Kye was tired beyond belief as he halted the ATV behind the crest of a low hill. Partially sheltered yet parked as high as he could get her to improve radio range, the ATV would serve as a beacon for the lost prospectors. At the extreme edge of radio range, back towards his homestead, Johann and the crawler formed the next link in the chain that would lead the prospectors to safety - if they could find any part of it. Kye knew the chances of that were remote, but this was the best he could do.

If he went out any farther, he'd lose the beacon and become lost himself. And besides, he was so tired. He settled himself more comfortably in the ATV's driving seat and listened to the howling wind outside. The rocking of the ATV was soothing, and there was nothing much on the radar display - nothing at all out of the windows except blasting sand and dust. Emma curled up in his lap and he petted her absently. He'd sleep for a little while, he decided. Either the prospectors would find the beacon or they would not. It was in the hands of the gods now, but nobody could say that he'd not done his duty.

Kye grimaced. He'd done his duty, maybe, but he'd not done enough. The prospectors were still as lost as before, and sitting on this hilltop wasn't going to change that. Forty years ago he'd have plunged on into the storm, trusting to dead reckoning to get him back to this point. And two times out of three he'd have succeeded.

Two out of three. Kye doubted the odds were that good, but with half a dozen lives at stake and nothing to lose but one old man and a cat, maybe the gamble was worth taking. No backup, no chance of rescue, slim odds of success and lives at stake. Just like the old days. Only this time he probably wasn't coming back, and chances were good that nobody would ever know what happened to that foolish old man. Was he just trying to relive the glory days? Or was there really a chance to save lives?

It didn't matter, Kye decided. His motto had always been, "You only lose when you give up or they kill you", and he wasn't giving up. "You're going to have to kill me to stop me," he said to the storm. "Let's see if you can!"

Emma dug her claws into her master's tough coveralls and clung on as Kye engaged the drive and headed out into the unknown, staking all on one final throw against the odds.

* * * *

The ATV rumbled on for an hour; two, as Kye became increasingly weary. The effort to keep the vehicle straight despite the wind, while maintaining a dead reckoning course and making sense of terrain radar that could see little further than the naked eye, was becoming too much for the old man. It was almost with relief that he felt the vehicle start to slide sideways as it crossed a treacherous slope. Kye instinctively knew that the combination of wind, slope and the lack of purchase would prove too much for his powers. This was the end; he'd lost the final gamble.

Nevertheless, Kye fought it to the very last, wrenching the ATV round to face upslope with an effort that strained him to his very bones. He launched the rocket-powered winch, but there was nothing for it to lodge in. He fought the slope, alternately spinning the wheels and applying the brakes in the hope the tires might bite into the loose surface. But in the end, he lost the battle.

The ATV turned sideways as it slid, then rolled over and over, crashing to a halt on its side at the base of the hillside.

Half-dangling from his crash harness, Kye turned his head and focussed blurry eyes on Emma where she'd been flung against the far door. The little cat was sprawled on the cracked windowpane that was now the ATV floor. She didn't seem to be moving. Kye's own state was little better. His left arm wouldn't move and there was a lot of pain in the shoulder. His ankle had struck the sidewall of the driving compartment. He didn't have to wrestle his boot off to know it was broken. Kye could feel shock setting in; the drop in blood pressure a familiar sensation from the old days.

Automatically, his right hand went to the belt medipack, triggering autoinjectors to numb the pain and keep him conscious. Reaching out his right hand to the console, he triggered the comm unit's record-and-transmit function, and sent his final message.

"This is Scout Kye Roberts, out of Pender's Hope. I am seriously injured and my vehicle is disabled. Dead reckoning coordinates follow; they will lead you to a second vehicle acting as a beacon. You are advised not to attempt a rescue. I think it'll be pointless shortly. Follow my coordinates as best you can. It's your best chance. I don't think there's much else to say." He paused a moment, then paraphrased from the IISS Service for the Fallen, "We found those who were lost; we brought aid to the needy; we gave hope to those in despair. And now we go before you into the Last Unknown. Say of us only that we did our duty."

Kye cranked the transmitter power right up, hit the Send stud and sighed. Nothing left to do now. Maybe they'd hear him and follow his directions to safety, or maybe they wouldn't. Maybe the coordinates were wrong and they'd die in the desert, but he'd bring them hope for a while. But nobody could ever say that he'd done less than his utmost; less than his duty.

Kye slipped out of the harness and lowered himself agonizingly to sit on the ATV door that now formed the bottom of his world. He put his back to the seat and smiled weakly as Emma crawled into his lap, dragging her hind legs but purring all the same. "We did our best, Emma," Kye said, petting his faithful little friend. "Right to the end. Now we can rest."

Kye Roberts and Emma sat together in the rocking wreck of the ATV, listening to the howling wind and the hiss of sand against the vehicle as the radio blasted out its beacon signal.

And finally, they slept.

* * * *

Jay Keener pushed aside the thought of failure and concentrated on battling the storm. Their chances were fading by the second, but there was nothing for it but to keep driving on blindly and hope for another miracle.

They'd already had more than their share of luck. They'd picked up that crazy old man's signal just in time to realize they were badly off course to the south. It must have been repeating for half a day at least when they'd wandered into range. Without it they'd have carried on into the depths of the desert and nobody would ever have known what happened to Jay Keener and his family prospecting business.

They'd eagerly changed course, and for hours now they'd forged on in the desperate hope of salvation. They were all weary from taking turns at fighting their ATV over the rugged terrain, and now the drive was beginning to malfunction. Once the drive train packed up they'd face the choice of being entombed by debris or going outside and being sandblasted down to their bones trying to repair it. Jay had been outside in the storm once already. It wasn't an experience he wanted to repeat.

The only chance was to find that beacon the old man had directed them to. And it was becoming clear that they'd wandered off course again. They weren't going to find it, and that meant they weren't going to...

Jay's hand flashed to the receiver controls as signal light came on, "Anyone? You receiving?" he said urgently into the microphone. "I'm getting your beacon signal ... anyone receiving?"

A long moment passed, then a weary voice, distorted by the storm, said, "Receiving you. Are you the prospectors? Keener's team?"

Jay whooped, bringing his family and employees running from the rear of the vehicle. "Jay Keener here!"

"You're way, way off course, Keener. Take a bearing off this transmission and follow it to my position."

"Will do!" Jay replied. "You the crawler we were told to look for?"

"You know about the crawler?" the voice said. "Did Kye find you?"

"The old Scout? He found us, yes. Well, in a manner of speaking. He crashed his vehicle at least a half-day before we picked up his signal."

Jay brought the ATV round onto a new heading, feeling new adrenaline burn away the weariness. "Okay, crawler. I'm headed directly for you. Be there in a couple of hours."

"Your signal is very weak... I can barely hear you now. But no matter so long as you can receive. This isn't Joharn's crawler," the voice said. "Joharn is well north of us, and you're way off course. I took a guess and placed myself on the most likely miss vector. Follow my signal and I'll lead you home."

* * * *

REACTIVATION CLAUSE

It was another full day before Jay's ATV rolled to a stop in the wind-lashed compound of Pender's Hope. The radar and radio had long since packed up, and the drive was lurching like every meter would be its last. For the past few hours Jay's entire world had been the rear spotlight of the ATV just meters ahead, his only point of reference and his guide to salvation.

For a moment Jay just sat in the cab, scarcely believing it was happening. Against all the odds the old Scout had found them and showed them the way home. Their vehicle had stood the pounding of the storm-blown sand to carry them to safety. The second ATV had been there to meet them when they'd gone off course.

It was a miracle; but a miracle bought and paid for in courage and determination.

The driver of the second ATV clambered out of the cab and staggered across to Jay's door. Despite the sheltering berm the wind was punishingly strong. Jay could see nothing of the driver's face, not under a hooded sand-cloak and a filter mask. But he recognised the IISS insignia on her coveralls, and silently gave thanks for heroes whose duty it was to find those who were lost.

* * * *

Sara Liimki more or less fell into the ATV cab as the hydraulics struggled to force the door shut against the wind. "Do your people have injuries?" she said weakly, lifting her face mask.

Jay nodded, fumbling with his seat restraints. "A concussion, some flesh scoring from windblown particles, couple of fractures; one serious."

Sara peered into the rear of the ATV at the huddle of prospectors clustered around a shapeless mass huddled in a bunk. Two of them were pre-teenage kids. All the prospectors were worn out, but they went on struggling to detach the base unit of the bunk, to use it a stretcher. Admirable loyalty to their own, she decided. Pity their compassion didn't extend to the old man who'd given his life to find them.

"My radio is out too," Sara said after a moment. But they'll have seen our lights; they know we're coming in. Help will be with us soon. And we have a good doctor. Your people will be all right."

Jay nodded. "You got a vet?" he asked.

"A vet? Yes, but..." Sara didn't dare to hope.

"The old guy's going to be okay, but I think the cat's got a fractured hip," Jay said with a hint of a smile.

Sara felt guilt and relief wash over her, then disbelief. They'd done it after all. Risked getting lost again, staked their lives, those of the two children, to save their rescuer. They'd gone outside in *that* to break into the wrecked ATV and get the crew out.

"I don't know what to say," Sara whispered.

Jay shrugged, and his coverall sleeve shifted. There was a tattoo on his wrist. Sara could see only a little of it, but she recognised the design. A galloping, mounted Poni. The emblem of the Scout Service. And then she understood.

"Say of us only that we did our duty," said Former Scout Jay Keener. "All of us."

The main duties of the IISS - Exploration, Communications and Survey, plus Contact & Liaison, are well known. But there is more to the Scout Service than piloting Xboats and cataloguing asteroids. Scouts are capable and versatile individuals who are often given unusual tasks to perform. Experience gained in the Scout Service can be highly useful in a later career as an Adventurer.

The IISS Reactivation Clause can be a great nuisance for Travellers, who may suddenly be called upon to deal with an emergency or to carry out some mission with a minimum of information and no notice at all. But on the flip side, the Scouts are a siblinehood with proud and honorable traditions that bind them together. Less pompous than the Navy and the Marines, less hidebound than the Army, and infinitely scruffier than all of them, Scouts are most definitely a breed apart.



WHEELMAN

It is Year 1000 in Ley Sector of Gateway Domain. Freelance 'Mobility Expert' Harnagh 'Lifters' Loursegh is between jobs and feeling the heat from his last fur-raising escapade. It seems smartest to keep a low profile while he seeks a new client, money is short and there isn't much to do in mid-tech Rauthermann City, so 'Lifters' decides to respond to a mysterious comm call, sweetened with the promise of credits up front...

Lifters lapped another taste of the bitter black coffee and pushed away his bowl with his left paw. He kept his ears from pricking up as the clients entered the eatery. It wasn't hard to spot them; the fact that they were trying to act nonchalant and not secretive at all made them stand out all the more. Lifters suppressed a growl of laughter. Amateurs, then. Well, the money better be good. He kept an eye on the door in case this was a performance to distract him while Rauthermann Police Department got their act together outside.

One of the pair, a tall, skinny human in a surplus Scout Service coverall - no way had he ever been a Scout, though - ambled over to the counter and bought a cake and coffee. Good luck to hum there, Lifters thought. The other, a beefy Vargr wearing a sky blue and yellow tunic over crimson trousers, all topped off with a crimson jacket and cap bearing Tukera Lines logos, scanned the room and caught Lifters' eye. Lifters nodded slightly and the Vargr stepped towards him, only to pause in mid-step a second later as recognition flared. The Vargr couldn't hide his pleasure, and all but scurried over to join Lifters at the corner table. A moment later the flatface seated himself.

"You're..." the Vargr began, but Lifters cut him off.

“Talk.”

“Uh... right. I'm Jar....”

“I don't care who you are. Now get to business,” Lifters said. He took his right paw out of his carry-bag, off the butt of the Intimidator. He folded his paws on the table, saw the look on the Vargr's face as he realized Lifters had been aiming a weapon at him since he came in the door.

The Vargr tried again. “We need ground transport,” he said.

“No,” Lifters replied in his best ‘you-don't say’ tone.

“We're paying cash. One thousand credits, half up front. It's a lot of money for a morning's work.”

“Details?”

The Vargr shrugged. “We have a courier assignment. It should all be very straightforward, but it might not. If someone tries to slam the door on us we'll need to get back to the 'port sharpish. “

Lifters showed his fangs in a gesture of contempt. “Taxi work. Forget it.”

The human looked offended, but the Vargr shushed him with a gesture. “Two thousand, if you provide a vehicle.”

Lifters considered it for a moment. Breaking cover right now wouldn't be smart, not with everyone from Naval Intelligence to the neighborhood thugs gunning for him. But money was tight, and... well, he was bored. He leaned back in his seat and looked the Vargr over quizzically.

“What do you want, Mr Loursegh?” the Vargr asked at last.

“Passage. And the two thousand.”

“Passage?” the human said.

“Where to?” the Vargr asked, ignoring his companion.

“Next world you get to with a breathable atmosphere and mid-tech or better. For me and one item of luggage,” Lifters said.

“One item?”

“My vehicle.”

“How'd you know we had a ship?” the flatface demanded.

“I have eyes and a brain. Now shut up,” Lifters replied.

“I think an get the Captain to agree to your terms. We'll contact you with details later today,” the Vargr said. Lifters gave him a long look, and after a moment the Vargr held out a paw to his human companion, who dropped his small shoulder bag on the table. It rattled with the pleasing sound of plastic credit plaques.

“You not going to count it?” the Vargr said.

“If it's wrong, I don't show,” Lifters replied. He picked up the bag, slipped it into his own (shifting the Intimidator back to the top) and headed for the door.

The flatface finally lost his self-control, and rounded on his partner. Lifters smirked as the argument broke out.

“You didn't even ask him if he could drive...!”

“DRIVE!” the Vargr barked. “You know who that guy is? Do you?”

“Well, no...”

“That's Lifters Loursegh, All-Sector champion three years running. If it's got wheels, lifters, tracks or a plenum chamber, he can drive the pants off it.”

Lifters pushed the door open as the argument faded behind him. Seemed like he'd made someone's day just by being there. Well, that was nice... then the smirk faded as he realized something.

They'd not counted the money out. That meant they knew in advance exactly what he'd demand for the job. Lifters slipped his hand into the bag and onto the reassuring butt of the Intimidator.

Best be careful on this one.

* * * *

The comm pinged. Lifters reached for his suit jacket, slipping into it and straightening the collar before answering. There was no visual, as he'd expected. Just a recorded artificial voice with a street name and a time. He glanced at the cheap chronometer on the wall of his dingy apartment. They had to be kidding! There? By WHEN? Just as well he was leaving this world; he'd have to just about reach orbital velocity to make the rendezvous.

Despite the ridiculous timeframe, Lifters stuck to his ritual. He didn't bother locking the apartment door - there was nothing left there anyway; all his possessions were in a holdall in the trunk of his car - but he did slip on his black leather driving gloves and the wraparound shades as he walked - walked, not ran - to his ground car.

Lifters swung into the driving seat and started the huge, overpowered internal combustion engine. He gunned the throttle for a moment, savouring the roar and the smell of burnt hydrocarbons. Ah! Grav vehicles were faster, but there was nothing like four wheels and a roaring engine to stir the blood!

Lifters set the chronometer on dashboard, gunned the engine again, then put the sleek black ground car into reverse and dropped the clutch. Tires shrieked as he flung the wheel over, changing into first gear even as the car began to skid round. He floored the throttle and fishtailed out of the apartment car park, skidding out onto the main road between a truck and a family car. He accelerated straight across the crossroads, through a red light and between the crossing traffic. Only now, in the grip of adrenaline and speed did he drop his icy persona and give in to the gasoline joy in his veins.

Lifters Loursegh howled with joy as he hurtled through the traffic. Seventeen minutes to get across town, and where to after that? It didn't matter. The wheelman was back in business.

* * * *

The dash chronometer showed fifteen seconds to spare as Lifters slid to a stop in a cloud of gray-white tire smoke. Two figures approached the car. One, a solidly built woman whose manner and bearing said "Imperial Marines" got in the back. The other, a slighter-built man in civilian tunic and trousers, but wearing a very battered Navy officer's cap and openly sporting a Navy-model gauss pistol, climbed into the passenger seat. Lifters eyed the Intimidator, now sitting in its seat-front holster, but said nothing.

"We're running late," the front-seat human said.

"Your fault. Not mine."

The human nodded, producing a slip of paper. "You know this address?"

"Yes."

"We need to be there twenty minutes ago."

"Right," Lifters floored it, screeching away as if he really could get them to their destination three minutes before he'd left his apartment.

As they screamed round another bend, narrowly missing a furniture van and a parked police car, the front-seat human prized his white-knuckled hands from the dashboard and said, "I'm Paulo; captain of the Eternal Optimist. I can guarantee your passage."

Lifters glanced sideways at his passenger, making Paulo go yet paler. "Uhhh... junction...." The trader captain almost squeaked. Lifters turned his attention casually back to the road and threaded between the traffic without easing up on the throttle. He flung them around an intersection, sliding wildly sideways before the wheels bit and sent them lunging down an alley. "Dumpster...." Paulo said, but by then it was past and they were back on the main road.

* * * *

Lifters sat and listened to the engine. His - slightly pale and shaky - clients had gone inside the warehouse yard a couple of minutes before, looking for the owner's office. Lifters could have told him where to find it; he'd driven for the guy often enough. Word on the street was that the director of Kimsaa Exports was either a cross-border gunrunner or a local agent for Naval Intelligence. Or both. It didn't really matter which; his money was good and he kept his bargains. And when he wanted something done fast and on the quiet, he hired the best Vargr - the best anybody - for the job.

Lifters shrugged his shoulders in the gray suit jacket he always wore to drive; his trademark ever since he became a freelancer. His racing days were over since the crash and the ban; at least officially. Now he raced with the cops and the crime barons' minions. Raced for the big prize - survival. And mostly, he raced with himself, seeking the big challenge.

Today, he realized, might be that big challenge. There was something not right about that van pulling into the far end of the street. And the car behind it....

Lifters went with the hunch. He crashed the car into first gear, hammered the throttle down, and skidded around through ninety degrees. Easing up on the throttle, he let the rear wheels bite. The car surged forward, through the gateway and into the yard where Kimsaa Exports marshalled their goods.

The yard where Paulo and his Marine companion were fighting for their lives.

The Marine had armed herself with a crowbar and was fending off a mob of heavies with it. They'd got her backed up against the warehouse wall though; it was only a matter of time before they brought her down. Her boss was already on the deck, frantically trying to reach his dropped pistol as a couple more heavies pinned him. Two more stood back, subma-

chine-guns ready. Lifters gunned the car at them, sending one diving clear. The other stepped back just out of danger and brought up his weapon. Clever.

Lifters opened his door as he went past.

The subgunner spun away to land in a shattered heap. Lifters yanked the handbrake to lock the back wheels, levelling the Intimidator out of his passenger-side window as the car slid round. The second subgunner rolled to his feet, then froze facing the twin bore of the huge sawnoff shotgun-like weapon. Lifters grinned and waggled his hand cannon. The thug got the message and dropped his SMG.

The Marine burst through the mob, leaving a couple behind her on the ground. She sprinted towards the revving car, detouring to nuke one of Paulo's assailants right in the ribs with her Size 11 combat boot. As the thug flew off him, Paulo got his hand to his gauss pistol and whacked the other heavy around the head with it. Then he was on his feet and backing towards the car, a sharp autofire cracking from the pistol. As Paulo sprayed gauss needles over their heads, the mob dived to the concrete. Paulo ducked into the car, but the Marine ran right past, grabbing the SMG and hammering its owner in the ribs with it. Then she dived into the back seat, and Lifters floored it.

As they screeched around and out onto the street, Lifters took stock of the situation. The road was blocked away to the right by two vanloads of heavies. They weren't in uniform but they looked like soldiers, not cops or gang thugs. To the left there was a van and a car... and maybe just enough room...

More troopers boiled out of the vehicles and levelled their weapons as Lifters screeched between the vehicles. No, there wasn't enough room. His passenger-side mirror was gone. But they were clear and...

"Car!" Paulo yelled, as a cop car screamed out of an intersection ahead. Lifters swerved right, almost into a warehouse wall, then cut hard left around the first intersection he came to. Sirens howled behind as the cop flung his vehicle around to give chase. More sirens sounded in the distance.

"Alright... just what is happening here?" Lifters asked, trying to sound calm and unruffled. He almost managed it.

"We do some odd jobs for Naval Intelligence," Paulo answered, trying to change gauss pistol magazines. "Our contact was Landau Kimsaa."

"Was," the Marine put in from the back seat.

"Right. Mr Kimsaa is dead, along with a couple of his staff. Looks like someone decided to take him down... and us with him," Paulo said. "Someone with a lot of influence. If we hadn't been late..."

Lifters cocked his head, listening to the sirens, then flicked on his highly illegal Police Intercept radio. "I'd guess one of the Sollie covert cells. Those guys in the vans looked like professionals."

Paulo nodded, jamming his pistol under his leg and clutching the sides of his seat with both hands. "Figures," he said. "Mr Kimsaa certainly knew something important. That's why we were handling the drop... so they'd not know he was onto them."

"Didn't work," Lifters said.

"No, but we got the datachip he was going to pass us. Maris," Paulo jerked a thumb at the Marine in the back seat, "Somehow managed to take it off one of the reception party. If we can get to the Optimist we can maybe still deliver it."

"And as a bonus we don't get killed by Solomani agents or the local cops..." Maris put in. "And by the way, we have a tail."

"I know," Lifters said. There's two of them back there - and a roadblock up ahead."

Paulo looked up from urgently speaking into his comm "Do something!" he said.

Lifters bared his fangs, floored the throttle and aimed right at the cop cars blocking the road ahead. Paulo braced himself for impact. The roadblock hurtled closer, but Lifters cut right, up on the kerb. Muzzle flashes sparked among the cops manning the three-car roadblock. The windshield starred, then again. Then they were past, streaking along the roadside walkway until Lifters tickled the car back onto the road. Sounds of screeching tires, then the crash of breaking glass and tortured metal suggested that at least one of their pursuers had tried to follow them through the narrow gap.

And failed.

Lifters took a sharp right, then left, then right again, and began to slow down. He was panting slightly, adrenaline tiring him. The police band was filled with chatter as the cops searched for what someone, probably a dispatcher, was describing as a gang of murderous fugitives who'd gunned down a traffic cop. Paulo and Lifters exchanged a look.

"The Optimist is ready to lift," Paulo said. "We've got to get to the 'port."

Lifters nodded then snarled as an unmarked car hurtled more or less sideways out of a sidestreet, steering into a wild skid as the driver sent his vehicle screeching in pursuit. Someone leaned out of the passenger window, firing a shotgun.

"How'd they find us?" Demanded Lifters, flooring it. "Do we have a flashing red arrow or something?"

Paulo opened the sunroof as pellets rang and sparked from the rear bodywork. A glance up and back told him what he'd

suspected. "Air/Raft," he said.

Lifters cursed, and Maris hefted the SMG. "Permission to return fire?" she said.

Paulo weighed it up for a second, then decided they had nothing to lose. They'd been painted as murderous thugs already. The cops wouldn't hesitate to shoot. And whoever the other pursuers were - Solomani agents was still the most likely answer - they were after blood too. "Permission granted" Paulo said. "But not the cops. We're still the good guys, remember?"

Maris nodded and climbed up on the seat. A moment later the SMG began to bark in her hands, and the pursuing car dropped back.

They raced onward, heading for the spaceport. Lifters' intercept radio enabled them to avoid another roadblock, but by now their pursuers must surely know where they were headed. There were two unmarked cars back there now, keeping a respectful distance. There'd been a third for a while, but the driver hadn't been up to the challenge. An encounter with a lamppost ended the chase for him. The air/raft was high up, keeping tabs on them. It didn't look good.

A cop car pulled out ahead, accelerating hard. The driver swerved in front of them, trying to block their progress. A second car joined from a side road, the passenger firing a handgun at their tires. Lifters hoped they were shooting at his tires, anyway. The two unmarked cars dropped back as the cops closed in, telling Lifters something he needed to know. Two lots of pursuers; one probably a Solomani group, the other cops being fed duff information. That was slightly better than a combined operation.

The two cop cars blocked most of the road ahead. Lifters waited until they split to go around an oncoming removal van, then stood on the brakes as if to dive into a sidestreet. The cops were a good second or two later, turning sideways as they braked. Lifters gunned the engine, deliberately clipping the back of one cop car. It spun out of control as he shot past the other, rounding a long left and onto the spaceport approach road. Ahead, port security personnel had lowered the barriers - a pointless gesture - and parked a fire tender across the road, which was a lot more impressive.

Lifters went left and though the wire fence instead.

Trailing a length of fence, sparks flying, the battered black ground car raced across the landing apron to where the Eternal Optimist lay waiting, her portside cargo doors open. Two cop cars were streaking in to cut them off, another one was closing from behind, and there were now no less than four unmarked cars behind the cops. Plus the air/raft.

Lifters weighed it all up in a split second, and cut right towards where a Subsidized Merchant was unloading her cargo. Ground crew and cargobots scattered as the car hurtled directly towards the giant front cargo ramp.

"You know, I..." Lifters began as they hit the base of the ramp. The car surged into the air with a scream from the transmission. It skipped halfway up the ramp, threatening to skid into the wall of the cavernous cargo bay. Lifters flung the wheel left as they crested the top of the ramp.

"...really hope..." the car became airborne, turning through sixty degrees before it struck the decking. Lifters steered into the skid for a second, fighting the car's tendency to flip over. Then he yanked the handbrake and flung the wheel over.

"... the rear doors are..." they slid past a stunned port official with a clipboard who'd been arguing with the Subbie's purser. As the car turned completely backwards the three occupants got a good view of the yelling, panicked faces of the two men they'd just so narrowly missed. Lifters waved a gloved hand in apology.

"... open!"

And then they were out into the light, flying more or less backwards out of the rear loading doors, down the aft cargo ramp to skid to a halt behind the three-storey cargo ship. Cop cars and unmarked pursuers raced past, braking hard as they realized they'd been had. Lifters floored it and squealed away, back the way they'd come then swerving right towards the Optimist.

The air/raft had come about and was streaking back at them, a rifle firing from the open passenger compartment. Sparks flashed on the landing apron as Maris stuck her head and shoulders out of the sunroof and fired back. Paulo sprayed gauss needles from his pistol in the general direction of the 'raft, knowing there was little chance of a hit at this speed.

Then they were sliding again, a tire blowing out, the car fishtailing wildly. Lifters fought it, tickled the throttle and the brakes, got the skid more or less straightened out. His passengers ducked back inside as they hit the Optimist's cargo ramp. Another tire blew, but they had plenty of momentum. Lifters slammed on the brakes, skidding into the cargo bay to fetch up against a crate of freeze-dried prawns.

Then they were lifting, the port falling behind as the cargo doors slid shut.

Lifters killed the engine and sat quietly for a moment. So did the others. Then Maris said from the back seat, "So, you think there's something on this datachip worth all that?"

"Could be," Paulo replied. "Seems like someone decided to take out the Naval Intelligence presence in the region. Probably a Solomani covert ops cell."

"Among others," Lifters said suddenly.

"Huh?" Paulo replied.

"Your friend Mr Kimsaa was working for two local crime lords, the Sollies, and a cross-border smuggling operation," Lifters replied.

"And you knew that?"

"Yes. Getting proof was going to be difficult," Lifters said, "but I knew. Pretty much everyone in town knew. Except, apparently, your friends in Naval Intelligence."

"They know more than you think, Mr Loursegh," Paulo said, climbing shakily out of the car.

"Really?" Lifters stepped out and surveyed the damage sadly.

"Yes, really," Paulo replied. "They knew your cover was blown, Lieutenant."

Lifters' ice-cool demeanor cracked for a second. "What?"

"Lieutenant Loursegh, Ministry of Justice Special Investigations Office... that IS you, right?" Paulo said with a smile.

"Okay, you got me." Lifters shrugged and went on as Maris finally kicked the dented back door open and climbed out, "Do please explain."

Paulo said, "Your operation is even more leaky than ours. Your immediate superior was working for Mr Kimsaa, who in turn was a senior Solomani Security coordinator; possibly the hub of their operation on the entire planet. It's ironic really; I suspect they've just taken out one of their own cell leaders. Such is intelligence work."

"Just as well you hired me... you'd never have gotten out without me!" Lifters declared.

Again, Paulo smiled. "Never intended to."

"Now it was Lifters' turn to say, 'huh?'"

"Just why," Paulo asked rhetorically, "do you think we came here, if not to get you out?"

"Then why didn't we just drive to the 'port and leave!"

"Because there was a hit team permanently tasked with taking you out if you made to leave. We had to throw them off the scent."

"By walking into a trap!" Lifters snarled.

"We were fairly sure we could get out again," Paulo said. "After all, we hired the best wheelman in the business. Isn't that right?"

Lifters' ears flattened as he acknowledged the point. "Okay. You got me there."

"Come on, let's get out of the cargo bay," Paulo said, "We'll need to get you settled into some quarters before we Jump."

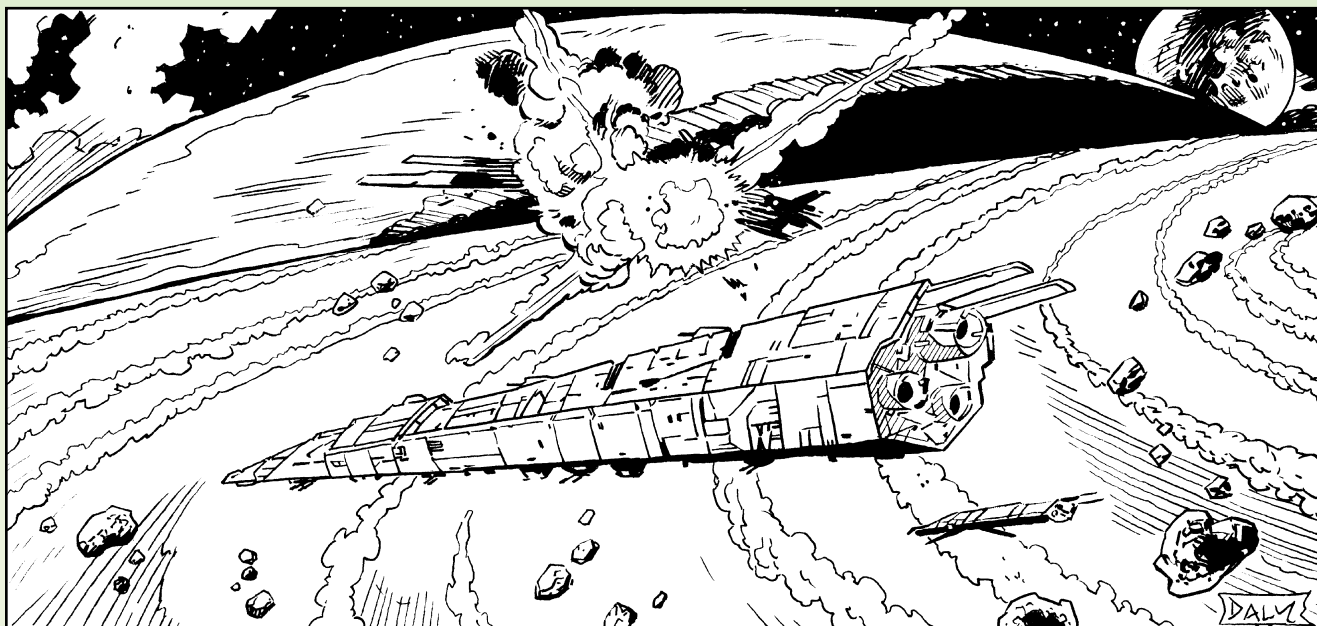
Lifters followed Paulo and Maris out of the landing bay, eyes downcast and tail drooping. But neither of them saw him smirk at their turned backs.

If that was what Naval Intelligence wanted to believe had just happened, that was fine with him... what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

Or him.

Intelligence work is a tricky business, and inevitably the various services within the Imperium will find themselves working at cross-purposes. Fortunately, the situation is little clearer for the opposition. Adventurers sometimes find themselves involved in covert operations, either directly as freelancers hired for their skills (or merely their availability) or peripherally as transport, witnesses or unwitting accomplices. Characters who don't even realize they were involved in a covert operation can still make powerful enemies along the way..

In the Rimward end of Gateway Sector, clandestine operations are rife during the Solomani Rim War as agitators and agents fight their shadowy conflict without rules or quarter. "Dirty tricks" are commonplace, mercy is unknown, and the truth is often the first casualty. In this environment, a maverick agent can be a dangerous liability or a vital asset - usually both.



THE LAST HURRAH

The Last Hurrah is a Full-length Traveller novel set against the backdrop of the Interstellar Wars, as the upstart Terran Confederation takes on the might of the Vilani Imperium. These events take place long, long before the “current” game setting, but they have important repercussions throughout Imperial history.

The novel will be serialized as part of the Traveller’s Aide fiction line.

The Terran Confederation has already fought several wars against the Vilani Imperium, gaining territory and forcing several treaties on the stagnating Imperium. A short period of peace has allowed the Terran Confederation to resume exploration and colonization efforts, but that peace is about to be shattered.

PROLOGUE

Durgha System, 2158AD

“Midshipman Ritchie!” the Master-at-Arms snapped.

John Ritchie stepped forward, out of the front rank of midshipmen assembled in CSS Resolve’s portside craft bay. He clasped his peaked Navy cap under his arm against his grey crewsuit as he crashed to a stop in front of the Master-at-Arms’ desk. He saluted and jerked to Attention.

“Midshipman First Class Ritchie, J, 2802, reporting. Designation Non-Specialist Command Personnel, currently assigned Tactical Studies, Master-at-Arms!” Ritchie snapped. There was a moment’s silence as Chief Petty Officer Torvey regarded him, visually inspecting the midshipman’s emergency air bottle and the gloves, mask and hood secured to his ship-jacket.

Like Ritchie, the Master-At-Arms wore a one-piece crewsuit with a sleeveless ship-jacket over the top as per shipboard dress regulations. But where Ritchie’s crewsuit was unadorned save for a crimson shoulder flash displaying the hollow disc of a midshipman, Torvey’s sleeves bore three inverted chevrons denoting his thirty years’ service and the crossed cutlasses of his special position aboard the ship. There was no question of which of them was the senior man here.

Torvey did not salute, nor did he rise from his seat. Instead he gave the tiniest of you’ll-do-I-suppose nods. Ritchie breathed a mental sigh of relief as he always did, and shifted position to At Ease.

Technically, Ritchie outranked the Master-at-Arms, or would when his commission was ratified by Confederation Fleet Command. On that day, Chief Petty Officer Torvey would no longer be permitted to tear lumps off him for a poorly-secured vacc-hood or a collar left microscopically askew. But even a senior lieutenant - even the Captain - would treat the Master-at-Arms with the utmost of respect if he was wise. A Midshipman was well advised to display holy terror at his approach.

The sixty-four Midshipmen assigned to the elderly battleship Resolve for their final training cruise were the most lowly of all life in the Confederation Navy - no longer senior cadets, yet not fully-fledged officers. They were in limbo, suddenly unsure of themselves. And just plain terrified of the senior petty officers assigned to break them or make them into capable officers.

"Midshipman, is there any reason why you cannot carry out this mission?" Torvey asked.

"No, Master-at-Arms," Ritchie replied. He wasn't hospitalised, and there were few other reasons other than a total break-down, but the question had to be asked. And answered.

"Very well," the Master-at-Arms said. "Assigned equipment. Weapon belt, undress. Navy Issue, one," he handed Ritchie the dull black fake-leather belt, with its snap-fastened holster and magazine holders. Ritchie placed his cap carefully on the desk and buckled the belt around his slim waist, licking suddenly dry lips. There were attachment points on the belt for sword slings, but no ceremonial cutlass would be worn today. This was not ceremony, this was deadly serious.

"Sidearm. Ten-millimeter Mills & Royce semi-automatic pistol. Unloaded."

Ritchie took the heavy weapon, with its under-barrel laser sight and large trigger guard to accommodate EVA gloves. Its dull black surface was chipped and scarred from hard use, mostly in target practice by midshipmen like himself. But only mostly. He clipped the lanyard to his belt and slid the handgun into its holster. Its weight didn't reassure him as much as he'd expected.

"Magazines, twelve-round. Fully-loaded. Three." The Master-at-Arms passed them over. Ritchie slid them into the holders. "Sidearm will be carried unloaded. Orders to load will be issued by the senior officer present or at individual discretion under the Articles of War. Do you understand the circumstances under which you may load or employ your weapon?"

"Yes, Master-at-Arms," Ritchie replied. Of course he did. The Articles were hard-wired into his soul. Articles and Procedures and Protocols. He'd lived by them since he left Serenity City on Luna to join the fleet. And pre-exercise rituals like this one had been his life, too. He'd have thought the Master-at-Arms would be bored with the endless repetition. But no, not this time.

This time it was for real. That accounted for the cold hard lump in Ritchie's gut.

"Midshipman, you are assigned to the Translight Cutter Torchbearer. Your station will be the Emergency Conning Position, from where you and your fellows will duplicate the functions of the main bridge under the command of the Training Officer. You are assigned the post of Gun Captain. Questions?"

"No, Master-at-Arms," Ritchie said formally. Gun Captain was good, third in seniority, right after the First Lieutenant and the Captain - or in this case the Training Officer. But he'd hoped to be assigned as First Lieutenant, to have another terrifying chance to shine. Or look like an idiot, as some of his classmates had done. But better to try than to hide in the pack.

Ah well, the Training Officer probably wouldn't let whoever was acting as First Lieutenant on the training bridge do anything but observe today. This was, after all, a real mission, with the midshipmen along for experience instead of running - or attempting to run - the show.

"Dismissed," the Master-at-Arms said. Ritchie saluted, picked up his cap and placed it carefully on his black-haired head with both hands. He strode quickly to the gaggle of his peers already standing by the aft boarding hatches of the Translight Cutter Torchbearer. Behind him the Master-at-Arms barked, "Midshipman Schmidt!"

The cutter was typical of the type; a stubby cylinder with a rounded bridge end and a blunt stern. She had a pair of fins aft for atmospheric stability; an experimental modification that hadn't worked out but wasn't worth the trouble to remove. Her forward point-defence turret jutted out challengingly below her bridge, while the hatches of her missile bays stood uncovered along her upper sides as the technicians made their final checks. Below that was the engine deck with her triple reactors and Jump-drive assemblies.

Ritchie grinned at his fellow midshipmen, buoyed up as usual by just being near a starship, even a little one like Torchbearer or her sister Lightbringer.

"What you get, John?" asked Vance Reuter, a stocky gray-eyed fellow from the high-gravity Osterberg Colony.

"Guns. You?" Ritchie said proudly.

"Conn."

"Bet you a round of whatever you like that Carl gets First Lieutenant," Ritchie said.

"Taken."

"Here he comes.... Doing the Stony Face... he's got it!" Reuter said.

"Hey, Carl..." Sarah Holmes spoke up. The dark-haired young woman hailed from the poverty-stricken colony at Teucer.

"Old Navy get you anything good?"

Schmidt gazed coolly back at her, dark-tanned features revealing nothing.

"C'mon Carl, spill it!" laughed burly Carter Hughes, assigned as Torchbearer's communications officer.

"First Lieutenant," Schmidt said flatly in his strong Swiss accent. "I think that you should have been chosen, John. You rated more highly in the last few assignments."

"It's how it..." Ritchie began gracefully, then trailed off as Holmes spoke up again. Her tone was harsh.

"John's dad is a Lunar geologist, Carl. Yours commands a light cruiser. And then there's that uncle who got a posthumous flag at Meshan. Oh, and granddad in the Belt War, of course."

Schmidt shrugged. He was well aware of Holmes' resentment. The Old Navy families of Earth enjoyed many privileges, as befitted the heroes of the desperate wars of survival against the Vilani Imperium. Fast promotion was their due. Besides, Schmidt was damn good and he knew it. He'd earned every grade the same as the others. Old Navy got bigger rewards for the same successes, but you didn't get any slack for your family name.

"Let's leave it," Ritchie said, watching slim, blonde Linda Stones approach. "We have to work together, remember?" Schmidt nodded approvingly. Holmes made a sour noise. "And Vance... stop humming," Ritchie said sharply.

Reuter stopped at once and grinned. "Sorry. It's a nice tune."

"How would you know?" Ritchie retorted good-naturedly. "Besides, that song is blasphemous to several major religions, banned by all entertainment networks and also contravenes three naval regulations."

"You just made that up," Reuter said, laughing.

"Made you stop humming, though," Ritchie said. Reuter made to slap him and a good-natured scuffle broke out among the midshipmen. It passed the moments and eased the tension they all felt. Finally, the assignments were complete. The midshipmen boarded Torchbearer and made their way to the emergency conning position, situated right aft.

Their training officer was waiting for them. Sheila Kleist. Or more accurately, Captain Kleist, Terran Confederation Navy. Navy Cross with Swords and Diamonds. Recipient of the Order of Terra for her actions at the Battle of Mars Intercept, and don't-you-forget-it.

If the petty officers who ruled their lives terrified the Midshipmen, Kleist was God Almighty Coming Down In Wrath. There was no scuffling or banter as the trainees manned their posts, checked systems and emergency suits, and settled down to wait in tense silence.

The wait seemed like eternity, but in reality it was scant minutes before Torchbearer undocked and slid out into the endless night of space. She and her sister were large Navy cutters - three hundred displacement tons - but mere specks beside the immense bulk of the old battleship. Ritchie watched the vast ship shrink away into the distance as the cutters accelerated out to do their duty.

"Midshipmen." Everyone turned to look at Kleist where she stood at the rear of the emergency bridge. There was no captain's chair for her to sit in, nor any of the comforts associated with a normal bridge. There was simply no room once the essential systems for gunnery and maneuvering were in place. Even the Battle Plot was projected down from the ceiling instead of above a central pedestal.

"You'll have heard the scuttlebutt while Resolve was in Jump, and no doubt it's as wildly inaccurate as usual. The truth is that we've lost another Deep Survey ship in this region. Chances are that she'd got as far as Miasma or even Jardin before she went out of contact, but we can't be sure. Resolve will drop cutters in Durgha and Miasma, then proceed to Jardin. We will search and rejoin under our own power."

Kleist paused to let the Midshipmen get a grip on what that meant, then stated it anyway. "That means we're out here all alone for a couple of weeks. You will receive Exercise Credit for the mission but I don't care much about that. What IS important is that you will do your jobs like real Navy personnel. There is no margin for error here. Are we clear?"

A ripple of crisp - if nervous - confirmation brought a curt nod from Kleist. She went on, "You will ghost the functions of Torchbearer's main bridge during the search, and those of you without specific posts - that's Braune, Burnand, Carey, Danilo, Holmes, Parke, Williamson and Valperrez - will stand ready for EVA in case the main crew require assistance with any rescue or salvage operations. Now man your posts or watch the repeaters. There may be survivors and we're their only chance. God help them."

The midshipmen turned soberly to their posts.

An hour crawled by, then another, as the cutters quartered, then Kleist cocked her head, listening to her earpiece. "Understood," she said into her headset. Turning to the expectant midshipmen, she said flatly, "The Bridge has informed me that we are to continue the search. Resolve is proceeding to Miasma."

Ritchie felt apprehension tighten his guts. He could see it on the others' faces, too. No longer were they sheltering under the guns of an ageing but mighty battleship. Now the two cutters were out here alone. He tweaked his hat down harder.

"CSS Resolve making signal: See You In Jardin. Godspeed And Good Hunting. She's entering Jump... now," Carter Hughes reported, his big bass voice tight with apprehension.

"Thank you, Mister Hughes. Any sign of wreckage?" Kleist asked.

Ritchie glanced at the battle plot. "No, Sir," he reported, using the non-gender-specific 'Sir' as per regulations.

The cutters searched on, probing the void with their sensors. The midshipmen struggled to remain sharp and focused. "Lightbringer is making signal," Hughes said suddenly. "In code. Message reads: Got Something. Closing To Investigate."

"Acknowledge," Kleist ordered

"Acknowledging signal, Sir. I'm detecting metallic debris along Lightbringer's flight path." A feeling like electricity jolted through the emergency bridge. "I think we've found them."

"Don't speculate, Mister Hughes. Check." Kleist used her mid-level reprimand tone, presumably just for the practice.

Midshipman Andrew Parke suddenly spoke up in his soft Titan Station accent, "Why're they signalling us and not the main bridge?"

Kleist sighed and glanced wearily at Carl Schmidt, who answered easily, "Their bridge comms officer is speaking to ours. Their crew of midshipmen are ghosting, just as we are, so they communicate with their counterparts here." As he spoke, Torchbearer began to turn, accelerating after her sister ship.

Hughes nodded, then jerked in surprise. "Power spike in the wreck! Could be they..." he trailed off, not wanting another reprimand.

"Sir, power leakage consistent with emergency backup reactor or a..." Ritchie frowned at his instruments on the gunnery console, not wanting to believe what he saw. "Or a self-contained weapons unit!"

Someone started to speak, but Ritchie went on, "The wreck has fired! Two, five... seven missiles! Three coming at us!"

"Evade!" barked both Kleist and Schmidt together, both out of habit, and uselessly. The ship was being controlled from elsewhere.

Torchbearer heeled violently to Port and Gold, her turbines whining as she slammed on acceleration. Alarm klaxons blared.

Kleist was talking to the bridge as Carter Hughes reported in a curiously unemotional tone, "Lightbringer is evading. Firing countermissiles. Countermissiles ineffective. Hostile missiles are turning inside her. Characteristics match Imperial weapons. Three still coming at us!"

Ritchie saw the four missiles aimed at Lightbringer leap forward under terminal acceleration. The cutter corkscrewed, spitting fire from her fore and aft point-defence turrets. One missile vanished in a split-second flare of energy. One skimmed past the cutter... and the other two slammed into Lightbringer. High-energy Plasma warheads flared into sun-hot whiteness.

Ritchie saw the cutter stagger as her bridge section was ripped away, her missile deck torn open. Plasma vented from her aft reactor, then ceased as automatic systems jettisoned it. Flames poured from rents in her hull as Lightbringer began to spin, internal fires not yet extinguished by the vacuum of space. Bodies floated free.

Ritchie had seen ships die before, in simulators. This didn't look any different. But it was real and it was happening to people he knew. He wanted to vomit. He clenched his teeth, pulled his hat down still harder and pounded his fist against the console, desperately wanting to order the gun deck to fire countermissiles but helpless, impotent in a world of hell and fire.

"Suits!" Kleist ordered. "Officers at posts, hold position. Everyone else into EVA suits and relieve them once you're suited. Prepare for damage control! This is not a drill!"

"Impact in seventeen seconds!" Ritchie snapped. "Fifteen!"

Three missiles were incoming, accelerating erratically to fool point-defence fire and countermissiles. Ritchie's screen distorted as the missiles' onboard jamming bludgeoned at the cutter's limited sensor net.

Vance Reuter was humming something. Not a blasphemous popular song this time but the Confederation Battle Anthem. He was white-faced, chewing his lower lip, but his hands were ready on the attitude controls just in case he could do some good.

Hughes glanced across at Ritchie. "Signal from Lightbringer! Automated distress beacon and broken audio! Someone's alive over there!"

"Respond!" Schmidt snapped.

"Disregard. Make Signal! General Distress Channel!" Ritchie barked. "Report our situation and request assistance. Reroute to the main antenna and use all the power it can handle."

Hughes began to speak into his headset.

"Good call, Ritchie," Kleist said calmly. "But remember who's in command."

"Sir. Eight seconds to impact. I predict two hits."

"Brace for impact!" Kleist ordered, grabbing a brass stanchion. The missiles surged forward, racing down on the desperately corkscrewing cutter.

"Five seconds... Three seconds.... One!" Ritchie grabbed at the edge of his console, tucked his head in and hunched down into his chair.

Torchbearer shuddered under a crashing, tearing impact, lurching sideways. Ritchie's peaked cap came off and flopped to the deck as he clung to the console. The lights flickered briefly. The Battle Plot faded to a dull gray. Internal gravity fought natural forces as the cutter spun crazily to Starboard. Someone screamed. Spares and tools spilled from a locker sprung open by the impact.

Ritchie clung to his console, eyes closed, head down, as a second explosion rocked the little ship. Spallation, fragments of deck plate hurled loose by the impacts on the outside of the hull, ripped across the bridge. A sound curiously like a sigh escaped Kleist as she crumpled to the deck around a great ugly gash in her abdomen.

"Medical kit!" Carl Schmidt was shouting. "Sound off, by numbers! Go!"

Voices responded; some weak, some panicky.

"Get me that medkit!" Schmidt yelled from the back of the bridge. "Peter's bleeding to death - and get some pressure on Kleist's wound! Leave the fragment in! Pack the wound with your tunic!"

Carter Hughes started to unstrap, standing weakly to leave his post, reaching for the medkit. Ritchie angrily gestured him down. "Damage report!" he snapped. "Carter, I want you to contact all departments. I want a damage report. We still have power. Find out what else we have. Do it!"

Hughes sat back down, jumping to obey that command drilled into them all since day one of their training. Save the Ship.

"Vance. Do you have override helm control?"

"Yes, but without authority...." Reuter's tone was nervous. The emergency position was designed to override a shattered main bridge, but it had never been envisioned that a group of cadets would dare to usurp control of a starship if the bridge crew might still be alive.

"My authority," Ritchie said harshly. "Override helm control. Use the Lightbringer as reference and order the automatics to cancel our spin. Orient on and close Lightbringer."

Reuter nodded and began to obey.

Ritchie went on, "Load sidearms. I am assuming command of Translight vessel Torchbearer, effective immediately."

Reuter looked up from his console as if to argue. Ritchie drew his handgun, slid a magazine home and chambered a round. As he reholstered his pistol, he saw Hughes and Holmes doing likewise. Reuter complied a moment later.

"No response from Command, Technical or the Missile Deck," Hughes said. "I have a response from the Forward Gunroom. Resolve is in Jump. No other vessel has acknowledged our signal."

"Linda," Ritchie said. "Midshipman Stones!"

"Sir?" she responded automatically, looking up as if just awakening.

"Does your repeater work?"

"Yes, John. I mean, Sir."

"Good. The Plot is down; I can't see what's out there. Get me a threat report," Ritchie ordered, running on over her protest, "You have one minute."

"Holmes, Carey, Danilo, Valperrez.... Pair up and check suits. I want a visual survey of the ship. Round up any survivors and see what we have. Report every five minutes."

None of them argued. Ritchie was talking sense while everyone else was yelling in panic. He gave them a job to do and their training took over. The four began to run through suit drill like it was just another exercise, slipping into their heavy EVA kit. Their crewsuits were enough to let them survive a disaster long enough to do something about it, but for any planned excursion into hard vacuum, full EVA protocol was the only option.

"John!" Carl Schmidt's voice lashed from the rear of the bridge area. "I was appointed as First Lieutenant. I am in command here." He stood up from the bloodstained bundle on the floor as others moved in to take over.

"Sorry, Carl," Ritchie said, shaking his head. "Someone had to take charge. You were seeing to the wounded. That was humane and compassionate of you, and I commend you for your loyalty to your comrades. But my duty is to save the ship and that's what I'm going to do. I have assumed command of this vessel in accordance with emergency procedures and all relevant regulations. You will obey my orders."

Schmidt opened his mouth to protest, angry pride and chagrined understanding warring. "You are correct," he grated at last.

"Thank you. I want you to continue as First Lieutenant."

Schmidt nodded unhappy acceptance.

"Ritchie."

Everyone's eyes turned to Captain Kleist, lying on the deck as Julie Burnand, herself wounded in the shoulder, tried to staunch the bleeding with her ship-jacket.

"Captain," Ritchie responded.

"If the... Skipper was alive..." Kleist's words came in painful gulps. "She'd be doing... something. Assuming she's dead... you're the best man. I'm ratifying your command subject to... oh hell, you... know..."

"Captain!" Burnand said urgently.

Kleist's hand twitched, pushing her peaked Navy cap with its gold-braided brim across the deck towards Ritchie. "Get... them... home," she gasped. Then she was silent.

John Ritchie picked up the hat and put it on.

"John!" Stones' tone was urgent. "I have a partial plot. Look at your screen."

Ritchie did so. His heart stopped.

"Carter, get me the forward gunroom!" Ritchie snapped.

"Gunroom here. Petty Officer Baker..."

"This is Ritchie, Acting Captain. What have you got working?"

"Forward Point-defence and local sensors are down; no power. No contact with Aft Gunroom at all. Missile Deck is open to space. My emergency console says we have one launcher functional - Port Three. There's a countermissile pack on the ramp and ready, but the loader is jammed and I can't launch anything from here without power. Everything else is out."

"Go in and load Port Three manually," Ritchie ordered. "And do it fast. We have a missile incoming."

"Then there's no time to..."

"I said load Port Three, Mister Baker!" Ritchie rapped out.

"Sir."

Ritchie glanced back at the partial Plot. The missile that had skimmed past Lightbringer had swung in a wide arc and now was headed inward at Torchbearer. It was moving at a relative crawl. Ritchie estimated three or four minutes, a long, long time for a terminal run but barely enough time to load a launcher in vacuum.

"Gunroom. This is the Acting Captain. We have a missile incoming in three minutes. Load Port Three and then proceed to the Aft Conning Position. I will conduct fire control from here."

"Acknowledged."

The heavy door slid open to reveal five suited figures. Four were the midshipmen Ritchie had sent out. The fifth was Sublieutenant Eduardo Greener, Torchbearer's Chief Technical Officer.

Greener glanced around at the mayhem of the Aft Conning Position as Ritchie demanded of his midshipmen, "Report?"

"We took three hits; two close together far aft and one for'ard. Internal comms is totally down. Technical is more or less intact. The whole tech crew have survived, with a few injuries. They were trapped by a buckled hatchway and had to fight an electrical fire, but we now have two reactors operational, and both turbines, Sir," Sarah Holmes responded. "There's not much left elsewhere. Some survivors on the Missile Deck, being moved to Technical because it's more or less livable. Aft Gunroom is ruptured. No survivors."

"The Bridge?" Ritchie asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"The Bridge is gone, Sir," Holmes answered as if she didn't believe what she was saying. "I couldn't get through the wreckage so I went out of a breach and eyeballed the damage. No chance of survivors."

"Reckless," Greener suddenly put in. "But never mind. This means I am the senior surviving officer. The only surviving officer. We have Jump capability, assuming we have Helm control?"

"We do," Ritchie said in a neutral tone.

"Then set a course after the Resolve. Prepare for Jump."

"Sir," Ritchie put in angrily, "There are survivors aboard Lightbringer."

"We need to conserve what we have, not go chasing glory."

"There are no other ships out here, Sublieutenant," Ritchie said flatly. "Except whoever killed an unarmed survey vessel and booby-trapped the wreck. You are advocating we abandon the survivors to die."

"No, Midshipman," Greener snarled. "I am ordering it. We must save this vessel." Greener tapped his shoulder flash with a single finger. The silver sword of a sublieutenant glinted there; the sword that was the symbol of all command officers. The gesture was a reminder that Ritchie's suit displayed only a hollow disc. The implication was obvious: Terra had not yet made him one of her swordbearers. He was not fit to command.

"I can kill that missile," Ritchie said

"The risk is too great!"

"They'll die if we don't help them. Better to try."

"Abandon that vessel and withdraw! That is a direct order, Midshipman!"

"No."

"What?" Greener almost squeaked, disbelieving. "That's... mutiny."

"No it is not. I am the commanding officer this vessel, ratified on the authority of Captain Kleist. You outrank me, sir, so I will salute you and address you properly. But you are a member of my crew. I don't give a damn if you salute or not, but you will do as you are told or I will arrest you." Ritchie said, his tone increasingly harsh.

"So that's why you took her hat. Commanding officer indeed! You're an insane Midshipman with delusions of grandeur. Do you know who my father is?"

"Old Navy," one of the Midshipmen said. "So what? John's in command here."

Greener took a long, angry step forward, then froze at the faint sound of a pistol holster unsnapping. "Confederation Navy, Armed Officer! Halt or I fire!" Carter Hughes barked the challenge as he had been taught, even though it was not quite appropriate.

Greener flicked a disbelieving glance at Hughes, who had risen from his seat. He shook his head dismissively and slowly started to move forward again.

"I mean it. Take another step and I'll shoot you," Hughes added, his tone almost dreamy, as if he did not really believe he was saying those words. The gun in his hands was quite real, though. And aimed at Greener's chest.

"Carl," Greener said desperately. His hand slid towards his own sidearm. "Carl, I've known your family for years. We can't let this upstart..." He trailed off as two more figures, both limping and supporting one another, stumbled in through the open door and gazed about in surprise.

Greener glanced round at them. "Baker. Randall. Arrest this mutineer," he ordered, turning back to face Ritchie. His right hand slowly unsnapped his holster.

"Hands clear," barked Sarah Holmes, her weapon coming up to a two-handed stance aimed at Greener's head. "Carter might hesitate. I won't."

Ritchie's hands were empty. "There's a missile incoming, Sublieutenant. I'm going to deal with it. If you draw that weapon, you'll die. If you don't, I'm in command. Make your choice." He turned as he finished speaking, stepped to the gunnery console and called up the targeting prompts. "Vance, bring us port broadside-on."

Behind him, Greener glanced around. His hand rested lightly on the butt of his pistol. They wouldn't shoot him. Baker and Randall would back him. He closed his hand around the butt of the pistol.

Greener eased his weapon clear of the holster, thumbed the safety off. If he made no rapid moves to startle them, they wouldn't fire. With his weapon out he could face them all down. Carl would back him.

He brought the pistol up, aimed at Ritchie's back.

A single shot rocked the emergency bridge, deafening in the small space.

Ritchie flinched at his console and turned. Greener's smoking pistol flew from his hand as Carl Schmidt wrestled him to the floor. Baker and Randall surged forward, then skidded to a stop as nearly a dozen handguns turned their way.

Ritchie fought down a grin of triumph as the missile entered firing range. He turned back to the console, his world narrowing to a single point on the repeater screen. With only half a set of controls he struggled to set up a precision shot that would be difficult with any weapon, at any range.

Imperial missiles were good; very good. Their seeker systems and ECCM were well ahead of anything the Confederation could manufacture. But the designs were old; the attack patterns, while efficient, could be predictable. If this missile was low on fuel it would either save it all for a final sprint, or begin to jink as it hit attack range and come in as a slow but hard target. Which would it be?

Ritchie tugged at the peak of his cap, flipped a mental coin, and laid in a countermissile spread. If the missile opted for a sprint approach, he should obtain at least one hit.

And if it jinked, they were dead.

Ritchie touched the fire stud and in the darkness of the missile deck a cold-launch tube recoiled. Compressed gas threw a squat cylinder free of the ship, then the rapid-burn bus ignited, accelerating the countermissile on its way. The bus dropped away, the warhead broke apart and sixteen hypervelocity Countermissiles streaked out to meet the incoming missile.

It jinked.

Ritchie pulled his hat down hard. A miss. He could see it already. The spread was too high, too wide. He called up a prompt, hit the manual override and put the pipper where the missile might just possibly be in three seconds' time if all the gods decided to extend him their utmost blessing, all at once.

Submunitions slewed violently, their neat dispersal pattern disrupted by the last-second course change. The missile vanished in a dazzling flare of proximity explosions as the countermissiles' microprocessors calculated their closest point of approach and detonated in fragmentation mode.

Proximity detonation was a desperate measure at best, and even before the screen had cleared Ritchie knew he'd failed. The missile continued to jink, confounding counterfire that wasn't happening. It was leaking fuel, but with seconds to impact that didn't matter.

Then Ritchie chuckled in amazed relief as the missile began to wander off course. Its drive fell silent mid-jink, and as the midshipmen watched in awed wonder the missile passed under Torchbearer's stern and drifted onwards, heading for the uncaring stars. The midshipmen breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Damn fine shot, John," Vance Reuter said with an admiring grin. "Worth an A-Plus at the very least! Bet you couldn't do it again."

Ritchie grinned briefly and stood from his console, scooping up his own hat from the floor. A handful of stainless steel nuts had fallen into it when the tool compartment burst open. He made to throw them aside, then hesitated.

There were thirteen of them.

Twelve midshipmen had stood with him against Greener, had believed in him strongly enough to pull guns on Baker and Randall. Even Peter Braune, terribly injured and semi-conscious, had drawn his weapon to defend their self-appointed captain.

"Lock Greener up somewhere. You two? You willing to accept my orders?" Ritchie said.

"Sir," Baker responded for both, if a little uncertainly. "You seem to be in charge. Looks like you mean to get us home alive, so yes."

"Good enough for me," Ritchie said. "Vance. Bring us about and close the cripple. We'll have to EVA across unless we've got a working tether."

"I'll find out," Reuter replied, but Ritchie cut him off.

"Wait. Look at these," he gestured to the nuts in his hat. "There's one for each of us. Let's take one each as a reminder."

"They're just little six-cent lumps of steel, John," Carter Hughes replied.

"Yet you can't build a starship without them," Ritchie countered. "Maybe it's the little things you don't see that really matter." He put down the hat on the console, pulled his Navy ID tags out from his tunic and began threading a nut onto the chain.

"Something changed for us today," Ritchie said. "We'll never be the same. We've saved our ship; we stood together when it mattered. Now we'll go over there to rescue our comrades. If something has happened to the Resolve we'll have a long way to limp home, but I think we'll make it."

"That'll get a bit cosy in this little cutter," Sarah Holmes said with a grin. She took a nut from the hat. Danilo and Hughes did likewise. Hughes passed one to Reuter.

"Today is the beginning. I don't know where the future will lead," Ritchie said as Parke and Williamson took their tokens. Stones took one, and another for Braune. Valperrez and Burnand exchanged a long look, then reached out together.

"Wherever we go, let us never forget today. We'll carry these little pieces of steel to help us remember what keeps us together. I swear to you all... whatever happens I will never forget our friendship." He smiled at Frances Carey as she reached out and took a token.

"I kind of hoped it'd be a ring," she said with a wry smile.

Ritchie laughed, then fell silent, gazing at the one remaining nut. "Take it, Carl. Please," he said gently.

Schmidt stared for a long moment at the piece of steel he was being offered. A silly little token of friendship. As if it meant anything beside the choice he'd made when he'd grappled Greener to the floor. Taking it meant forever admitting he was one of Ritchie's hangers-on in this escapade.

"Whatever happens on the way home, we will face it together," Ritchie said. "As friends. As brothers. To the end."

Not a hanger-on then. An equal in a group united by friendship.

Carl Schmidt reached out and took his token. "Brothers..." he said softly.

"To the end," Ritchie replied. "Now man your posts. Signal the Lightbringer."

"What do I tell them?" Hughes asked.

"Tell them help is on the way."

THE LAST HURRAH: CHAPTER ONE

Off Vander, 2173 AD

Lieutenant John Ritchie peered over the Gun-Captain's shoulder as the Ready lights came on.

"Slew to Port. All weapons will fire as they bear," he ordered, settling his peaked Navy cap more firmly with his right hand as he gripped a brass stanchion with his left. Around him, deck plate groaned as the Terran Confederation Navy Sloop-of-War Saberwolf turned hard to Port, threatening to send her Master and Commander reeling across the bridge and into the

Battle Plot pedestal despite his grip. The compensators weren't working properly, but then nothing else aboard the hard-used vessel was, either.

"Firing!" Lieutenant Israel Jaice, Saberwolf's Second Lieutenant and Gun-Captain, reported. His right fist clenched and unclenched above his repeater screen. Under his black beard, his jaw was tense.

Saberwolf's lights dimmed and her turbines screamed as her Portside battery went to Maximum Rapid Fire, sending a welter of charged particles after the missile salvo already closing on the pursuing Imperial squadron. She rolled to present her Starboard batteries. Again the turbines howled as her medium-weight particle weapons drained their capacitance banks faster than the engines could replenish them. Then Saberwolf was showing her tail again, accelerating hard away from her pursuers.

Ritchie glanced across the bridge at the Battle Plot. He tried to shut out the distant whining roar from the turbines, the harsh smell of ozone and the constant thrumming of the deck. He needed his full attention focussed on the tactical situation. Something was badly wrong here.

Something beyond being ambushed while waiting for a resupply ship. Something more than being picked up on sensors while the squadron lay powered-down, concealed in the ring system of the giant planet Vander, supposedly undetectable. Something more than a losing war against a fanatical opponent whose physical similarity to Humanity belied their genocidal brutality.

More than that.

Ritchie left his awkward position at the stanchion, instead stepping across the cramped bridge to his chair. He seated his tall frame carefully, laying the comforting weight of his Sword of Honor across his knees. It twisted the belt slings out of shape, but he had more important things to worry about.

"Reports?" he demanded.

"Engine room reports all drives running normally, though Reactor Five is giving some trouble," replied the First Lieutenant, David Walker, in his Kentucky accent. "Point-defense is ready. Gun deck is at optimum efficiency except for Port Three. Missile room reports all launchers ready and loaders standing by."

"Squadron?"

"Sir, Puma reports that she has been hit, but not severely. Cheetah and Roskile are undamaged."

"Enemy vessels?"

"Still firing at extreme range. Chances of a hit are minimal."

"Can we outrun them?"

"No, sir. Their speed is at least equal to that of our corvettes, and they're running light. Saberwolf could perhaps escape in a stern chase. The corvettes can't."

Ritchie stretched his long legs, settled his gold-hilted cutlass more comfortably. He frowned thoughtfully, still beset by the nagging feeling that the situation was sliding out of his control. "Mister Walker, what is the correct course of action? The standard Fleet Manual response to this situation?" he queried.

David Walker was not a tall man, but much more heavily-built than his captain. One of the few native Terrans aboard Saberwolf, he was very proud of his Kentucky gentry ancestors. Or maybe just his rich, Old Navy family. For an instant his gray eyes narrowed in puzzled thought, not at the problem the captain had presented him with but that he had asked at all. He forced his attention to the battle plot, as Saberwolf slewed to hurl another salvo at her distant foes.

"Captain, the correct course of action is to do whatever you order," Walker said loyally. He wore the same insignia as his captain; a sword-in-disc and silver starburst. They were both qualified First Lieutenants capable of acting as Executive Officer aboard any ship. The difference was that Ritchie, while he had not been - and probably would never be - awarded the golden starburst of a full captain, was Master and Commander of the vessel. Walker was his subordinate.

There were other differences, too.

"And what should I order, Mister Walker? What do our standing orders say I should do?"

Walker sighed, realizing the captain was leading somewhere. He'd just have to go along and see where. "There are seven enemy craft - six System Defense Boats and a missile frigate," he said thoughtfully. "While we slightly out-gun them, the chances of damage in a close-range engagement are very great, which could leave us stranded in hostile territory. Further, we are fighting a long-range action in which both sides are wasting missiles and not hitting anything."

"You're sure we're not hitting anything? The Plot shows one of the SDBs falling behind her consorts."

"My comments stand, Captain."

Ritchie closed his eyes, trying to blot out the throbbing of the turbines, and tried to pin down what was wrong here. "So what are our options, Mister Walker?" he asked offhandedly.

"Come about and close the enemy squadron rapidly, engage at point-blank range with the main batteries and point-defense lasers. Get this over with before we're pecked to death - risking disabling damage in the process - or admit that we're in real danger and break off completely."

"But won't Fleet Command call that that cowardly, David? A sloop and three corvettes chased off by a local defense squadron?"

"No sir, they won't. We need all the ships we have, and we're pulling back anyway - we're the last picket squadron in this region. Risking a crippling hit for the sake of defeating a few second-line vessels is foolish. We should withdraw and preserve the fleet in being. We're only passing through on the way home anyway. Our orders were to scout and test their strength. That we've done." He laughed wryly, then shrugged and nodded at the Battle Plot.

Ritchie nodded. "I agree. That's the logical choice," he said softly. "Which is why I'm wary about it. Astrogator!"

"Sir?" Petty Officer Michelle Porter, Saberwolf's Astrogator, glanced up from his plot. She was a new recruit fresh from the Naval College at Fenris, an unknown among the veterans of the crew and a potential liability despite her youthful enthusiasm. She was, after all, the only member of the crew who could destroy the entire ship with a single mistake. Other than the Captain, of course.

"How long to safe Jump distance?" Ritchie asked.

"We're running straight out, Captain, but Vander has a steep gravity well. I have several Entry Points marked and laid in - nearest is thirty-five minutes away."

Ritchie glanced at the Plot. It showed the huge gas giant Vander, along with her confused gaggle of moons, and the enemy squadron that had discovered their hiding place in the inner ring system. The enemy SDBs were gaining, but they had the choice of either maintaining full acceleration and firing part of their armament, or slewing as Saberwolf was doing, and losing acceleration in the hope of a lucky hit that might slow the fleeing vessels.

Ritchie knew that in the place of the opposing commander he would opt for full thrust, hoping to catch the Terran ships before they reached an Entry Point and the safety of Jumpspace. Bow chasers or whole salvos, there was little hope of a hit at this range, and a single hit would not be crippling. No, the opposing commander was either incompetent or not really trying.

Ritchie had fought the Vilani for fifteen years, participating in the early actions of the war as a Midshipman aboard the UN battleship Resolve. He had been promoted into dead men's shoes, rising to command first a corvette like Puma and her sisters, then the modern Sloop-of-War Saberwolf. His life had been war, and he knew the enemy as well as any man alive.

The Vilani weren't great fighters but they made up for that with a fanatical determination to exterminate anyone who opposed them. Nobody had ever really figured them out. Sometimes they'd accept a treaty, then launch a new offensive immediately. On other occasions they seemed desperate to avoid conflict, and fell over themselves to yield up a system in negotiations.

But when they did fight they were always extremely aggressive, and sometimes their tactics bordered on the desperate. They were competent, if not particularly brilliant. When they made mistakes, they usually erred on the side of psychotic lunacy and besides, this didn't have the feel of an honest mistake. It was more like cowardice. The opposing commander wasn't trying all that hard to catch up, was he?

Why?

Ritchie stood sharply, almost stumbling as the vessel turned to fire. "Make signal. Squadron To Come About. Sixteen Point Battle Turn On My Lead."

Walker looked up sharply, but Ritchie ignored him, speaking rapidly into his headset as he paced across the bridge. "Gun-Captain: overcharge the main batteries and hold fire." Lieutenant Jaice echoed his order down to the weapons room. Ritchie did not wait for the acknowledgment. "Engine room. I want Overload One on all reactors at my signal."

"That really isn't advisable, Captain," came the response from the comm.

"Do it," Ritchie paced slowly across the bridge, still refusing to acknowledge Walker's frown.

"Battle turn. Commence," Ritchie placed a hand on the Astrogator's shoulder to steady himself as the Sloop-of-War came about. "Full thrust directly at the pursuing squadron. Bring all reactors up to Overload One."

The hollow whine of the turbines grew yet louder as Saberwolf came about and her overloaded engines began to slow her. The Battle Plot showed the defense squadron scattering as the Terran vessels charged directly into the heart of their formation.

"Hold your fire," Ritchie ordered. "For your information, Mister Walker, I believe that the enemy somehow knows our standing orders and fleet procedures. I suspect that they are trying to drive us into a trap. There will be a squadron waiting at our Entry Point, having maneuvered there at idle speed. They'll be undetectable in the background radio noise of the gas giant. We must attack the enemy and defeat him in detail."

Ritchie saw Walker bite down on the words that almost burst out, his training keeping them inside. Not in front of the crew. Instead he stepped to the Sensors position and began to study the screens carefully.

In the Plot, Ritchie watched the enemy squadron decelerating frantically. The Vilani SDB that had earlier lost way now shot past her consorts, unable to decelerate as quickly. The three Terran corvettes opened fire, blasting the luckless vessel apart.

"Make ready for missile salvo," Ritchie directed at Gun-Captain. "Target is the enemy frigate. Salvo fire as weapons show ready."

Ritchie placed his hand upon the golden hilt of his cutlass, presented for his valor at the Battle of Haile Station. As a gunnery lieutenant aboard the armoured cruiser CSS Seydlitz, Ritchie had taken over what remained of her main particle lance battery and kept firing under local control when the bridge and main director were destroyed.

The wild career of the out-of control cruiser took her on a death-ride into the Vilani formation where she was battered to a wreck - but not before shattering a destroyer and putting the enemy flagship's main communications suite out of commission. The ensuing confusion lasted long enough for a Terran counterattack to scatter the invaders.

The accidental death-ride of the Seydlitz made her surviving crewmembers instant heroes, and earned Ritchie his first command. It would likely be as far up the career ladder as he would ever go, no matter what else he achieved. He grimaced slightly at the thought.

The heavy blade rasped slightly as Ritchie drew it from its sheath. Placing the cutlass against his shoulder, Ritchie crossed the bridge in three paces to stand beneath the Confederation Battle Ensign in a piece of unconscious theater.

"Gun-Captain..." Ritchie began, watching the plot. The enemy vessels had slowed, so that the relative velocities of the two squadrons would be almost zero. The short-range gunfight would be brief, but hard-fought for all that.

And the first salvo would tell the most.

The ship shuddered, the hull ringing as hear from several hits stressed the armor plates. "Damage?" Ritchie asked as casually as he could manage.

"Light, sir," Walker responded. "Some slight external damage, a few sprung plates on the gun deck."

"Hold your fire," Ritchie said again. The frigate was clearly defined in the plot, flanked by two SDBs. The display hazed briefly as the three vessels hurled rapid fire at the Imperial squadron.

"Make signal. Battle Turn, Individual. Eleven Points Port, Eleven Gold. On My Lead. Break Through And Make For Alternative Entry Point."

"Signals acknowledged. Roskile reports minor damage," Walker reported calmly, then suddenly started. "Drive signature aft! Two... three... four craft. Three are standard SDBs. The fourth is... my God..."

"I want a report, not a prayer, Mister Walker," Ritchie said around the cold lump that was his heart.

"The fourth is a battleship... no, it's a sublight monitor. Thirty times our size! We'd have run right into..."

For a second Walker and Ritchie locked eyes. The Ritchie broke the silence with a smile and an I-told-you-so cock of his head. "Battle turn. Execute. Open fire."

The decking heeled violently as the Saberwolf came about, yawing to Port and pitching to Gold. The lights dimmed briefly as the guns discharged.

"Roll. Starboard batteries!" Ritchie snapped, fighting the shift in acceleration that made him stagger. The hull rang dully like some giant misshapen bell struck with a dozen huge hammers. The starboard guns spoke. Ritchie's ears buzzed.

"Mister Walker. Damage report."

"Slight. We have a cracked cooling pipe to Turbine Three, and a crewman down with vapor burns. Doctor Connelly is attending."

"Roll. Portside, fire when ready. Enemy vessels?"

"The frigate is hit. Looks like a hull breach and fuel leak. The SDBs are matching our course, firing rapidly."

The hull rang again, vibrating from end to end as more coherent photons struck the armor plate.

"Engine room. Bring the reactors up to Overload Two," Ritchie said into the comm.

"Captain, I protest that order!" came the reply. "We're still spilling coolant. If we increase the pressure we'll blow more pipes. I need time to make repairs! And Reactor Five has a jammed rod!"

"Oh-Two. That's an order!" barked Ritchie. "Status on the squadron?"

"All intact, staying with us. Puma has disabled one SDB, moving to assist Cheetah."

"Roll. Starboard, fire when ready."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

"Status?" Ritchie demanded, trying to make sense of the fuzzy battle plot.

"Enemy frigate is still firing. Infrared shows internal fires. Wait! She's launching missiles."

"Gun-Captain. Ready countermissiles. Point-defense will fire at discretion to intercept any leakers," Ritchie ordered. "Roll."

"Rolling. Cheetah reports a serious coolant leak. Requests permission to reduce acceleration."

"Denied. What's our coolant pressure status?"

"Poor but holding."

"Where's that monitor?"

"Closing fast. At maximum acceleration we can make the Jump Point before she reaches effective gun range - just."

Ritchie nodded, then gestured with the cutlass, "Make signal. Squadron To Close Formation. Break Off And Make Best Speed For Translight Insertion Point."

"Divert power from weapons?"

"Negative. But signal the corvettes to do so. We'll provide cover. Update on the monitor?"

"Still out of effective range. Enemy frigate is trying to break off. The surviving SDBs are still with us."

"Let the frigate go. Concentrate fire on the nearest SDB. Make them keep their distance."

"Sir," Walker acknowledged.

"Missiles?"

"Still coming. Countermissiles ineffective."

"Time to impact?"

"Fifteen seconds."

"Helm! Random evasive pattern. Ready point-defense!"

Saberwolf heeled, then surged under high acceleration. Ritchie held his breath, fingering the peak of his cap with his left hand, feeling there the double line of scrambled-egg decoration. A full Captain's hat, not that of a mere senior Lieutenant, an acting Master and Commander. He wasn't entitled to wear it, but damn the regs. The hat was a gift made long ago, a symbol of trust.

He'd brought Torchbearer home like Kleist had told him to.

He'd do it again with Saberwolf.

Nine seconds.... eight.

The sloop turned hard to Starboard.

Five seconds.

Thrust shoved Ritchie back against the bulkhead. He jerked his Captain's hat down hard, jamming it on his head.

Two seconds.

Hullmetal clanged as a salvo from the nearest SDB slammed into Saberwolf's hull. The agonizing seconds slid by. Someone said something in Ritchie's left ear... his headset, demanding attention. He must still be alive, then. The evasion had been successful. "Bridge!" Ritchie replied sharply.

"Missile room here. Permission to switch back to anti-ship?"

"Granted. Fire when ready," Ritchie replied. "Squadron status?" he asked of Walker.

"Roskile reports heavy damage. She's lost a turbine and cannot maintain this acceleration. Puma has moderate structural damage. Cheetah reports similar."

"Reduce acceleration to match Roskile."

Ritchie walked slowly to the Battle Plot, taking in the desperate situation with a single glance. The monitor and her consorts were gaining fast. The nearby SDBs had fallen back, their work done in slowing the intruder squadron. They'd paid a heavy price, though. Only two of the patrol SDBs were fully intact, with two more limping away under reduced power. Ritchie calculated the distances mentally. They might just make Jump Point before the monitor reached optimum gun range.

The lights dimmed once again, even though the guns were not firing.

"Drive room! What's happening?" Ritchie demanded.

The reply was shouted through a screeching metallic moan, "Captain! Number Three Turbine has torn something loose! I've shut her down!"

"I need full power!" Ritchie snapped back.

"You just can't have it, Captain. I can't even get at the turbine to make a repair. We'll have to wait until she stops spinning - assuming it doesn't tear itself to pieces in the process. I'll run a crash-cool - say ten minutes - and then see what I can do. Say forty minutes at best for a jury rig. And I can't guarantee the turbine'll be in any fit state to run afterwards."

"We'll be dead in forty minutes, Colin." Ritchie said into the intercom. The screeching was quieter now. "Listen carefully."

"Captain?"

"There's a monitor closing on us. We need to reach a safe distance to escape. And if she gets a hit on us while we're entering Jump...."

"Yes, Captain."

"So what can you do?"

"I can redirect the coolant from Three to the other turbines. Give you maybe ninety percent of normal output. If I take the reactors to Overload Four you can have almost full power."

"I need more. Take the reactors as high as they'll go. That's an order."

"Captain, that's suicide!"

"If they melt, they melt. As long as we get out of here you can fix them in Jump. Do it, Colin," Ritchie said softly. "Please."

"Very good, Captain. Godspeed."

"Bridge out."

Ritchie closed the link. There was every chance that the reactors would overheat and melt their mounts, blowing the ship to pieces. Or the coolant pipes to the turbines would rupture, sending killing-hot vapor throughout the ship. Or the turbines themselves would shatter and hurl fragments more deadly than point-blank laser fire about the ship's interior. But the alternative was certain death by decompression in the shattered hulk of Saberwolf.

Better to try.

"Status?" barked Ritchie sharply as the vessel regained way, surging forward as her tortured engines exceeded their recommended maximums. The throbbing scream of the turbines was unbearable.

"The monitor is still closing fast. The Plot says she'll be in effective firing range as we make Entry," Walker reported flatly. Everyone on the bridge knew what that meant.

"Close everything down. Weapons, air recycling, the lot. We run for the Entry Point and either we make it or we don't. You a gambler, David?" Ritchie said cheerily.

Walker played along for the benefit of the crew, "I'll bet you a month's pay we don't make it."

Ritchie smiled slightly, "We DON'T make it? Your faith is touching."

"Not really. It's just that if we die, I get to be right for a change."

Ritchie laughed out loud at that.

Walker went on, "So how did you know about the monitor?"

"Just a guess. They'd had plenty of time to plot our best escape course while they searched the rings for us, and that little squadron seemed awfully bold in chasing us, then a bit timid in pressing the attack. It was all very suspicious. There was absolutely no reason not to do what the manual says... but all the same...." he shrugged.

"A hunch."

"That's about it," Ritchie replied. "I know you disagreed with me."

"That's my job."

"You were right to question me. You're a good First Lieutenant, David. I'm glad to have you."

Walker glanced sidelong at his captain. "You don't think we can make it, do you?" he said very quietly.

"No, I think this is about as bad as it gets. But while there's a chance to save the squadron - or part of it - it's our duty to try."

The minutes dragged on. Astern, the monitor hurtled closer, blasting out salvos from her bow chasers and spitting missiles. Ritchie felt the tension building until he felt that he must scream. He clenched his fist on the hilt of his still-drawn cutlass as the ship's acceleration fell away.

"Drive room. Colin, what's happening?" Ritchie demanded into the voice pipe.

"Reactor Five has jammed all its rods. I can't regulate it and it's way beyond its design tolerance. I've had to begin emergency shutdown. And I've pulled Number One Turbine off-line to let it cool a bit. You'll have power again in two minutes. The others are holding."

"Can we initiate Jump?"

"Yes, Captain. I've been trickle-charging the field generators. We're almost powered up. Just give the word."

"Astrogator, how long?"

"Still ten minutes."

"Too long. If we don't evade they'll blast us to pieces. If we do, they'll catch us and blast us to pieces," Walker said at Ritchie's elbow. "It was a brave try, John."

"It's not over yet," Ritchie replied harshly. "Helm. Cut drives completely. Come about to broadside position. Guns?"

"Sir?"

"Commence firing with all guns and give me all the area jamming you can. I want missiles launched at maximum fire rate, but coasting until you can get at least two full salvos converging on the monitor. Helm: once the missiles are running,

you are to turn away and try to blind their sensors with our drive signature. They'll be on top of our salvo before their point-defense can get a clear target."

Walker bared his teeth in a distinctly predatory smile, "A month's pay we escape," he said suddenly.

Ritchie clamped down on the sudden fighting joy that filled him, refusing to hope too fiercely. "Commence maneuver. Make signal to squadron. Continue Acceleration To Jump Point."

Saberwolf rolled, fired, rolled, spewing out a hail of carefully-aimed fire. The agonizing seconds trickled away. Ritchie paced the bridge, watching the Battle Plot. The wait seemed endless.

Then the ship shuddered under multiple impacts.

"Report!" Ritchie barked.

"Several hits. Hull penetrated on Engine Deck. Puma reports several hits, serious damage!" Walker replied. "Missiles incoming!"

"Where from?" Ritchie all but shouted. The battle plot was fuzzy with interference.

"Aft Black quarter. Must be another powered-down ship!"

"Turn into them. Maximum power to the drives. Drive room - I need everything you have and I need it right now!"

"Acknowledged. Turbines back on line," the Chief Technical Officer's voice came over the intercom.

Saberwolf slewed violently to Port and Black, Ritchie feeling like his brain was being pushed into the top of his skull. He saw the points appear in the Battle Plot, realized it was too late. Then the missiles struck home.

The hull rang to twin explosions, thunderous noise drowning out even the turbines. Ritchie felt his feet leave the deck, lost his grip on the cutlass. The plot pedestal came up at him, fast. His cheek struck it, snapping his head back. Then twisted gravity had him falling astern as the ship spun out of control, caught in the middle of her turn by the twin warheads. Ritchie crashed against a bulkhead, his head ringing. He fell away, flopped to the deck in a daze.

Saberwolf corkscrewed, her overcharged drives propelling her forward as her spin continued unchecked. Loose objects slid about the pitching deck; a coffee mug, a toolkit, the captain's cutlass. The captain himself lay slumped on the deck, most of the bridge crew strapped unconscious into their positions.

Ritchie's eyes opened. He tried to lift his ringing head, fell back to the deck. Movement caught his half-closed eye as Walker, his hat gone and his ship-jacket torn, crawled across the hot deck plate. He was trying to reach the helm controls.

A voice sounded in Ritchie's ears, or maybe it was just the scream of escaping coolant steam. He saw Walker reach the helmsman's chair, dig steely fingers into the padding, drag himself toward the console. He was carrying out that most basic command, drilled into him many years ago in training and never forgotten.

Save The Ship.

Walker reached the controls, jammed himself into the gap between the helmsman's unconscious body and the console. Corkscrewing acceleration dragged at him, but his hands closed on the controls, began to correct the spin.

A whooshing roar ripped through the bridge, the sound of coolant pipes rupturing. Ritchie raised his head, tried to focus. His headset was shouting at him. He tried to brush the voice away with a bloody hand. He raised it, gazed absently at the gashed knuckles. He must have grabbed something when....

Save The Ship.

Ritchie's eyes focused. Walker was still at the controls. But what was his headset saying? The words slowly began to make sense.

"...Five Reactor has gone critical ...jettisoned it. coolant pipes cracked ...are losing power. Bridge, please respond!"

"Bridge here," Ritchie said weakly. He felt sick, dizzy, sleepy.

"I repeat, Bridge, please respond!"

"Bridge here.... Colin? Lieutenant Downie?"

"Bridge?"

Ritchie realized that the CTO could not hear him. He tapped the headset uselessly, trying to make it work by fiddling with it.

"Captain!" the Gun-Captain gestured sharply for Ritchie's attention. He fought down nausea and glanced across the bridge.

"Heavy casualties on the gun deck. Master Director destroyed. Several of the guns are out, including the entire main Portside battery. Require major repairs."

"What have we left?"

"Just three Starboard particle lances, point-defense lasers, the stern chasers and a few missiles."

Ritchie grimaced. If the enemy hit them as they entered Jump, the result would be total annihilation for the entire ship. If they did not attempt to Jump, the result would be much the same, but at least the squadron might escape. The choice was obvious. There was only one thing to do.

Die fighting, like all the others before.

Ritchie put his bleeding hand to the ID tags around his neck, feeling the lump of metal there. A stainless steel nut; six cents' worth. The captain of one of the corvettes wore one too. The others had fallen in the line of duty or outgrown their friendship, but two had remained true.

Brothers to the end.

Ritchie swallowed the taste of vomit. For Vance Reuter, then.

Ritchie forced his mind back to the present. He spoke into the intercom, "All hands, this is the Captain. The squadron is almost at the Jump point. The enemy is upon us. If they hit us with the Jumpgrid live, you know the result. We will slow the enemy as long as we can, then attempt to escape whatever the risks. All weapons are transferred to local control. Fire at will."

The bridge slowly came to life as crewmen regained their wits.

"Captain, signal from Puma," the signals rating reported bleakly.

"Go."

The ship noise of Puma filled the bridge speakers. Lieutenant Vance Reuter, Master and Commander of that vessel, hailed them personally.

"Vance. Report," Ritchie said.

"Sir, the squadron is about to enter Jump. As senior officer I've ordered the other two corvettes to make their entry. We're turning back to assist you."

"Negative, Puma."

"You need assistance, Sir."

"Save your ship, Vance."

"John...!"

"Puma will enter Jump with her consorts. That is a direct order, Mister Reuter."

"John! We can't!" Reuter snapped. "Our fuel tanks are shattered. We don't have enough fuel to maintain the Jump field."

"You're sure?"

"Sir, of course I'm sure! If we try to Jump then we're dead. We can't escape and you can. We can cover your escape and die like heroes. For God's sake grant us that!" Reuter composed himself, and began again. "I respectfully request permission to engage the enemy squadron to cover your escape, Sir. The Confederation needs your ship."

Ritchie didn't hesitate. Reuter was talking sense and Saberwolf might still fight again. It didn't make the words come any easier, though. "Permission granted, Captain Reuter."

"Captain?" Reuter sounded puzzled. Walker looked sharply at Ritchie.

"Captain. Confirmed on my authority as squadron commander."

Reuter hesitated then answered, "Godspeed, Saberwolf."

"Godspeed," Ritchie responded, and cut the link. "Astrogator, ready the Translight plot. Link to the Roskile and Cheetah."

"Linked. Laid in."

"Begin Jump entry sequence," Ritchie ordered, turning to watch the battle unfold.

Puma streaked by, no longer caring if her drives melted. Bow chasers blazed, then she slewed to fire her main battery at a ship fifty times her size. Coherent photons hammered and tore at her hull, incandescent debris scattering out into space. The corvette shuddered but plunged on, straight into the heart of the Imperial formation, meaning to scatter them and gain time for the escaping Terran ships.

Ritchie watched the Jump countdown as the Vilani ships hammered the tiny corvette. She staggered bodily, spewing air and water from rents in her hull. Unconcerned with saving ammunition, her missile launchers spat a stream of squat tubes that streaked defiantly out at the enemy. Her guns blazed away under local control.

An Imperial SDB broke up under multiple missile hits. Another veered violently away, trailing wreckage. Puma lined up on the monitor, her surviving guns still firing at another SDB.

Another explosion lit her hull, then another. The SDB vanished in a flare of plasma and shattered hullplate, but Puma was nothing more than a flying wreck now. She fired again, a weak Portside salvo, rolled, launched point-blank missiles, fired her one remaining Starboard gun.

THE LAST HURRAH

Then she swung to head directly at the monitor.

"Transmission from Puma," the signals rating reported. "Music... it's the Battle Anthem. And... Captain! Her Jumpgrid is live!"

"Dear God," Walker said softly. His tone changed as he ordered, "The crew will stand."

The bridge crew rose, releasing straps to stand at their posts. Ritchie glanced at the timer. Just seconds to Jump. The viewport shields were sliding closed. As the gap narrowed, Ritchie saw Puma discharge one final shot from her bow chasers at the monitor. Savage fire raked the valiant corvette, but still she came in, unswerving. Ritchie willed her to turn away, to shave close past, firing point-blank into the monitor's hull.

But Puma's Jumpgrid flared still brighter as she drove straight at the monitor. The huge warship fired desperately and began an emergency turn, but she was too big to evade.

"Signal from Puma, Sir," the signals rating said softly.

The Plot broke up as the Jumpfield began to form. There was silence as Walker and Ritchie faced one another across the wrecked bridge. Ritchie heard Walker say softly, "No roses grow on a sailor's tomb."

But Ritchie could say nothing, only stare at the last image graven on his mind as the plot faded. Laser and particle accelerator fire raking Vance's ship. Blue-white fire racing along the Jumpgrid lines, creating a corona of energy, a halo about the tiny ship as she plunged on. Then an eye-searing flash, visible out of the ports without the aid of magnification.

An expanding ball of fire and wreckage, scattering to the solar wind. A crew of nine officers and sixty ratings, gone in an eyeblink.

And the monitor, staggering away too. A second before she had been a fine, powerful warship. Now she was a wreck, shattered by the twisted energies of a close-in catastrophic Misjump. Ritchie staggered to his chair and sat down heavily.

Vance Reuter. Gone. No more to tell tall tales in the wardroom, never again to get drunk and to sing loudly and badly. Nevermore just to be Vance Reuter.

Ritchie tried to make himself believe it, tried to console himself that Reuter had saved many lives by his actions. That he'd just Misjumped his ship right into the halls of Valhalla.

But he could only think of a better time, of a group of young officers, a band of brothers who swore eternal friendship and loyalty to one another.

Vance Reuter had been the best of them, and the last.

"What did he say?" demanded Ritchie of the comms rating. He knew already what Vance Reuter's last words would be.

"Four words, Captain. In clear. Transmission reads...."

"Brothers To The End," Ritchie said softly.

"That's right, Sir. How...?" The rating fell silent as Ritchie turned and walked from the bridge.

Alone.

The Interstellar Wars were a desperate time for the Terran Confederation, and demanded tremendous sacrifices as the Terran Confederation struggled to overcome its internal differences and defeat the infinitely more powerful Vilani Imperium. During these periods, nationality began to become less important than world of origin, though many historical injustices still existed.

One such injustice was the social division that existed within the Confederation at that time. In an era of war, it was perhaps inevitable that military families would rise to positions of power - the worlds of the Confederation owed their very existence to these people, after all. But once in power, the Old Navy families became entrenched and jealous of new talent trying to break through the "glass ceiling" and join the elite. At a time when merit was needed more than ever, this policy kept talented people down.

Fortunately for the Terran Confederation, this monopoly on power was eventually broken when certain influential families began to work towards creating a meritocracy rather than a static oligarchy that - ironically - mirrored the Vilani social structure in many ways.

The powerful changes that swept through the Confederation began in a humble way, with a group of heroes determined not to be kept down, and a few wise and powerful figures determined to let them rise.

In time, they changed the Confederation, and possibly saved it from extinction. History has forgotten their names, but they are still remembered as the "band of brothers" who challenged both the enemy without and the injustice within.

Their symbol was a six-cent starship nut.

AN INTRODUCTION TO LEY SECTOR, YEAR 1000

The setting for all these tales is Ley Sector, which lies on the very border of the Third Imperium. The Imperium is a thousand years old at this time, and has more or less stopped expanding. In all directions lie powerful interstellar states or vast rifts with virtually no stars. The Imperium and its rivals are gradually absorbing border worlds, causing the buffer areas to shrink year by year.

The past thousand years have not been without incident; frontier wars, border incidents, the occasional revolt and of course the massive destruction of the Civil War four centuries ago. Such is the nature of Imperial history. In an area so big (around 11,000 worlds!), there is always something going on.

That is certainly true in Ley Sector. Forming part of the Domain of Gateway, Ley Sector is the only sector of that Domain to actually lie within the Imperium. Bounded on two sides by independent worlds, client states of the Imperium and its rivals, and the territory of some of those rivals, the region is subject to many conflicts of interest.

Three great powers (other than the Imperium) have interests in the region.

The Solomani Confederation, with whom the Imperium is currently at war, has many sympathizers in the region, and frequently conducts covert operations to increase their support. Gunrunners find a ready market among the Sollie sympathizers, while commerce raiders (large and small) cross the Glimmerdrift Reaches, then slip across the border into Ley Sector to raid Imperial shipping.

The Hive Federation, away to Rimward-Trailing, has historically shown little interest in the area, other than some long-range trading. Recently, the number of Hiver ships entering Imperial space has increased somewhat, and a permanent trade mission has been set up just outside the Imperial border. Speculation is rife as to what the Hivers (who are commonly thought of as devious manipulators) might be up to.

The K'Kree of the Two Thousand Worlds, away to Trailing, make poor neighbors. Militant vegetarian herd creatures, they have vowed to destroy all meat-eaters in the universe, though they are willing to maintain relatively peaceful relations with powerful neighboring states such as the Imperium. However, in recent years an extremist (even by K'Kree standards!) group calling itself the Lords of Thunder has broken away from the Two Thousand Worlds and is carving out a small empire among the independent worlds.

Within the Imperium, all is not well, either. With many vessels called away to battle the Solomani Confederation along the main fronts, the remaining warships of the Imperial Navy are hard-pressed to protect the region's shipping. Piracy and privateering are becoming more common, while cross-border smugglers operate more or less at will.

The Imperium does not rule its member worlds (other than a few strategic preserves and military bases), but prefers to dominate the starlanes, thus controlling trade and keeping order among the various planetary governments. However, with the fleet distracted, Imperial power is visibly weakened, and some worlds are flexing their muscles. Imperial Marine and Army personnel are involved in interventions on at least three worlds in Ley Sector, while two others have gone to war with one another.

And meanwhile, the Vilani (a major human race who founded the First Imperium and are now Imperial citizens) are pressuring the Imperial court to censure the "disloyal elements" within the Imperium, meaning those of Solomani-influenced culture. The Luriani (a human minor race, long members of the Imperium) are protesting the encroachment of the Vilani megacorporations into their cultural region, and Imperial citizens of Solomani descent are loudly proclaiming their loyalty to the Emperor.

The Khuur League, the remnant of an empire conquered by the Imperium, is looking beyond its borders for the first time in decades, and the Worldships of the Wanderers are becoming increasingly common in Imperial space. One reaction to these perceived threats is the formation of the Loyal Sector Guard, an illegal organization which nevertheless proclaims loyalty to the Imperium. Its ships and troops are seen ever more frequently in places the Imperial Navy and Marines have withdrawn from. Some view these developments with grave concern, while others are just glad that there is a warship in orbit to protect them.

The recent political rift in the sector has not helped matters. Archduke Nells, long entrenched as the leader of an "Old Guard" of political figures and powerful businesspersons, has been deposed by the Emperor for abusing his Archducal powers to further the interests of his favorites. His replacement, the entrepreneur Marcus Aaron Erechs, is an unknown, with little support among the great nobility and megacorporations of the region. Despite this, Erechs has taken on the Old Guard and worked to break their entrenched monopolies.

The policies of the new Archduke have created something of a boom period in the region's economy, as mid-sized and smaller firms take advantage of the opportunities long denied them. Many of these firms go bust as a result of over-ambition, and the amount of money being thrown around is yet another incentive to piracy and crime.

Yet despite the instability caused by the political upheaval, the economy is in an upswing, and there are opportunities for those with the wit and the will to seize them. The market is booming for freelancers - shipowners, mercenaries, covert operatives, merchants and experts of all kinds. It is a time for Travellers to step forward from the mass of citizens.

It is a time for Adventure!