

All The Marbles: First Conflict

Prologue

They were alone in the universe.

From nearly a light year away, the D'Amassa Triangle looked like a band of light, stretched across the stars. Captain Joseph Buckley watched it through the holographic display for a long moment, before reluctantly switching the display to the standard tactical display. There was little point in the action – the ship's AI would have immediately switched the display back to tactical if another starship had appeared within their operations area – but it made Buckley feel as if he was getting something accomplished. It was a rare feeling on Triangle Patrol.

He studied the display and tried to keep his feelings off his face. The twenty-one officers and men onboard the PKS *Verhoeven* had been assigned to patrol the Triangle – the most dangerous area of space in the Confederation – to prevent anyone from entering the gravity tides and energy fluctuations that had swallowed hundreds of starships without trace. The Triangle seemed completely inexplicable, an area of space that was implacably hostile to starships and stars alike. Indeed, the natural laws of physics seemed to break down in the Triangle. A mental command into the display brought up an image of a star, slowly coming apart into a nebula of hot burning gas, as if gravity itself no longer had any control within the Triangle. Thrill-seekers loved to probe the outskirts of the Triangle, pirates tried to use it as a hiding place...and the *Verhoeven* was supposed to stop them. Buckley had realised long ago that Peacekeeper Command had agreed to conduct the patrols for political reasons; the Triangle, an area of space roughly five hundred cubic light years in size, would be easy for anyone to reach without any change of being intercepted. They could jaunt up to the boundary and enter the Triangle without Buckley and his crew even seeing them...

“Captain,” Lieutenant Rochelle said, “Commander Janice would like to take the stellarcom offline for repairs.”

Buckley nodded. The *Verhoeven's* stellarcom was an older modal, one due to be replaced the next time the cruiser entered a proper shipyard, and, so near the Triangle, it was having problems maintaining a link to Peacekeeper Command. It was easy to think that Peacekeeper Command wouldn't even bother to investigate if they lost contact with the *Verhoeven* – between the Triangle and the outdated communicator, it was harder to get a message out than it would be anywhere else in the Confederation – but Buckley knew it was important to let them know what was happening. Maybe it would get them recalled to a shipyard sooner rather than later.

“Send a standard notification to the fleet base and then tell Janice that she can proceed,” Buckley said, turning his attention back to the display. There was nothing within the *Verhoeven's* sensor range, apart from a comet that had somehow broken free of its star uncounted millennia ago and was on the verge of drifting into the Triangle within the next few thousand years. “Inform me if anything changes.”

An hour passed slowly as the *Verhoeven* continued its lonely patrol. Buckley felt more isolated than ever, now that their link to Peacekeeper Command was broken, but the feeling was purely imaginary. No one in their right mind would come near the Triangle – most starships wouldn't even try to jaunt near it – and there were few human settlements within a hundred light years. Heinlein was the closest human settlement; Buckley found himself

wondering if he could find an excuse for the *Verhoeven* to visit the settlement and give the crew some shore leave. It wasn't as if there was anything for them to do...

Ping!

"Report," Buckley snapped, as the warning blinked up in his inner eye. "What do you have?"

"I have one starship, barely ten thousand kilometres away, on approach vector," Lieutenant Ajkan reported. A new note of alarm entered his voice. "Captain, I am not picking up any traces of Hadenashatar Radiation from the ship!"

Buckley stared at the display. "Show me," he snapped. Hadenashatar Radiation was *always* present when a starship jaunted into normal space; it was a natural product of a starship passing through another universe and materialising somewhere else. A red icon appeared on his display and he cursed; the absence of Hadenashatar Radiation indicated that the starship, far from jaunting into their position, had been cloaked nearby. It had been watching them...

"Sluggo, bring the ship to Condition Beta," Buckley ordered the AI. A low drumbeat echoed through the ship, awakening the sleeping crewmembers and sending them running to their emergency stations. "Dave, get me some identification!"

"I am unable to identify the starship," Ajkan said. Buckley started in disbelief; a starship that close was almost within visual range...and it was closing in on the *Verhoeven*. "The starship's drive signatures does not match anything known to us...Captain, that starship is *alien!*"

"Are you sure?" Buckley demanded, trying to keep the surprise and delight out of his voice. In nearly five thousand years of space exploration, the human race had met precisely no alien races; they hadn't even found *traces* of any long-dead civilisations. And to think he'd been cursing their useless patrol; if the newcomer really *were* alien, Joe Buckley and the *Verhoeven* would go down in human history. The first starship to encounter another intelligent race...!

"Confirmed," Ajkan said, as an image blinked up on the display. It was strange, almost spidery in shape and form...and as alien as hell. "The unknown vessel does not match any known or speculated human design."

"Transmit the First Contact package," Buckley said, visions of fame and glory shimmering in his head. Peacekeeper Command could hardly deny him a proper mission after this...even if he wasn't appointed humanity's ambassador to their new alien friends. "Engineering, spin up the stellarcom and..."

"Unknown vessel is scanning us," Ajkan snapped, suddenly. Buckley whirled around and stared down at the display. "Tactical Comp calls them targeting sensors..."

"Red alert," Buckley snapped. In a flash of clarity, he saw it all; the unknown ship and its crew had waited patiently, hidden behind their cloak, until the stellarcom had been deactivated...and then it had moved in for the kill. The *Verhoeven* could fight...but she couldn't run...and the alien starship out-massed her three to one. Not First Contact then, but

First Conflict, the war that humanity had never believed could happen. “Bring up our weapons arrays and prepare to take evasive action...”

He paused. It was possible, just, that they were wrong...and that the alien sensors weren't hostile. The Peacekeeper Regulations flatly refused any authority to open fire first, and yet, he knew just how close they were to the unknown. If the aliens opened fire, the *Verhoeven* would have hardly any chance to escape...and it would take minutes to spin up the jaunt drives and escape. Minutes he suspected they didn't have. They didn't even have any jaunt-capable drones they could launch to warn the Confederation...

“Alien has opened fire,” Ajkan said. Buckley spared him hardly a glance. He was so *young!* Ajkan should have his entire career ahead of him. “Incoming missiles!”

“Point defence, *engage*,” Buckley thundered. Even as he spoke, he knew it was too late. “All stationed, cleared to engage...”

Four singularity missiles slammed into the *Verhoeven*. A tidal wave of energy smashed through the shields and destroyed the starship, blowing it into radioactive plasma. Buckley and his crew died without knowing who had attacked them, or why. His last thought was that humanity's golden age, a thousand years of peace and prosperity, was over.

Chapter One

First Admiral Andrew Ramage strode into the Combat Information Centre and took his seat directly in front of the main display. The hologram appeared as soon as he took his seat, showing the inner system...and the thousands of starships gathered around the flagship. The Peacekeepers had arrived at Terra-Prime in strength; two thousand cruisers, one hundred battleships and fifty fleet carriers, all intended for the grand formation display. There had been over a thousand years since the last major conflict and the Confederation wanted to celebrate.

Andrew smiled to himself as he fired requests into the system through his Peacekeeper implants and the results appeared in front of him. The starships had formed into their designated locations and their crews were currently updating their computers about holding formation. It was a shame the cruisers couldn't fly really close to one another, like starfighters might on display, but even with Confederation technology, the odds of a collision would be too high. The Peacekeepers might be one of the few avenues to any kind of status in society, but even so, there was a permanent manpower shortage...and losing the starships would be irritating as well. He was more nervous than he cared to admit; two hundred years of excellent service to the Peacekeepers would be forgotten in a moment if the grand display went wrong.

"Report," he said. "What happened to the 77th Cruiser Squadron?"

There were only three other people in the room, all fleet coordination officers, charged with taking Andrew's commands and transmitting them to the starships. The massive battleship, despite its size, carried only a tiny crew; the mixture of automation and the ship's AI saving the Peacekeepers from having to deploy more than a hundred people to a starship five kilometres long. The CIC, with its massive displays and control systems, could – in theory – handle well over two thousand starships, but no one had deployed so many ships since the closing days of the Thule War, over a thousand years ago.

"Captain Timov sends his regards, but they're still engaged on that outer-system patrol at Hong Kong," Commander Lucy Wong said. Lucy had been with him since he'd been promoted to Vice Admiral, even in the glacially-slow Peacekeeper promotions department, and he regarded her as his right hand. It still surprised him that she hadn't sought a command of her own; she was definitely more than qualified. "Someone picked up what they thought was a Thule battlecruiser and panicked."

Andrew kept his face blank. The rumours about Thule having somehow hidden a Lost Colony world sometime in the closing days of the war refused to vanish, despite a careful search of every star within ten thousand light years of Thule...or the expanding nebula where Thule's star had once been. The Thule War had been the defining event of the galaxy, with a combined death toll well in the trillions, and the merest suggestion of a rogue Thule starship was enough to give panic attacks to otherwise reasonable people. It didn't help that there were thousands of ex-Thule starships in the hands of pirates, independent contractors, touring museums and even in various planetary navies...and someone seeing one of them might well panic. Most of the time, the panic abated quickly once they realised that the ship wasn't actually attacking, but sometimes it remained long enough to waste Peacekeeper time. Nine cruisers, which should have been at Terra-Prime, were instead scanning the outer edges of a

star system that had once been a major target in the Thule War...when their target, assuming that it even existed, could have jaunted out and left them to search empty space.

“Tell him not to worry,” Andrew said finally. They couldn’t talk directly to the squadron, not while they were searching for the rogue ship, but they could have a message relayed through the stellarcom network. “If they make it here in time for the parade, that’s fine; if not, there’s no point in sweating about it.”

He looked up as the display switched back to the overall galactic display, studded with tactical icons and updates. The Confederation covered nearly two-thirds of the galaxy, a mass of Integrated and Associated Worlds, surrounded by a blur of Isolated Worlds and the handful of worlds that hadn’t been Contacted or brought into the Greater Confederation. Humanity might have reached further into the galaxy, or even out towards other galaxies, but there was no way to know. The Confederation scouted out likely colony worlds and often discovered worlds that had been settled without the Confederation’s knowledge, but there were no real threats out there. The Confederation’s leaders talked of a thousand years of peace, but Andrew knew that there had been skirmishes and tiny wars, fought out there on the Rim. He’d fought in some of them himself.

“Contact 7th Fleet’s commanding officer and tell him I want an update on that situation regarding the search for those missing children,” he said, recalling something else to mind. A group of children had taken a starship and gotten lost somewhere in interstellar space...and were probably lost forever. Even Confederation tech couldn’t locate a starship that had run out of power somewhere in the gulf between the stars. “He’s to let me know if there are any changes.”

He sat back in his chair and composed himself. It was easy – too easy – to meddle...and in the CIC, it was easy to convince himself that he could run the entire Peacekeeper organisation from his command chair. It hadn’t been any easier for his predecessor, or indeed anyone since the stellarcom had been invented; the people in command wanted – needed – to feel that they could do more than just wait, even if it was just demanding meaningless updates. Back in the Thule War, the fleets had been out of contact since they had been launched at their targets...and all the commanding officers could do was wait until they heard back, victory or defeat. Sometimes they hadn’t known anything until the enemy’s counterattack arrived.

Captain Darius Garsys’s hologram flickered into existence beside him. “The *Peacekeeper* is ready to lead the parade,” he said, his face unable to hide his private glee at having had his command ship placed in the lead. The officer in command of that ship would be noticed right across the Confederation. Like almost every human who grew up within the Confederation, his features were classically handsome and dignified, but Andrew could see the delight bubbling under his skin. “At your command, Admiral...”

He broke off. “What the hell...?”

Andrew saw it as the display automatically switched to tactical mode, showing the green icons of the Peacekeeper ships, the blue icons of the various planetary navies that had been assigned to join the parade...and red icons flickering into existence, too close for comfort. There was no Hadenashatar Radiation, part of his mind noted grimly; instead of coming out of a jaunt, the starships – the unknown starships – were coming out of cloak. Alarms were

ringing now, though the massive starship, and he tuned them out...who the hell were they? If they were decloaking *that* close, that meant...

“Incoming missiles,” Lucy snapped, her voice shocked. The display flickered and almost overloaded as it struggled to update with the new information; the unknowns were *opening fire!* Andrew struggled to comprehend the sudden shock; the unknowns were actually firing on his ships! “I count over a thousand hostile starships, unknown configuration!”

Darius’s image vanished as he took direct command of the starship. “Red alert,” Andrew ordered, training asserting itself and forcing him into taking action. Whoever was attacking them, and why, would have to wait; they had to defend themselves. The Peacekeeper rules of engagement insisted that they take all precautions to avoid conflict, but if the enemy fired on Peacekeeper starships, they were authorised to return fire at will. “Bring up the point defence network and return fire!”

The wave of missiles slammed into a hundred Peacekeeper starships. Andrew’s mind noted with numb shock that the enemy ships were targeting the command ships and the fleet carriers, which were trying to launch all of their fighters before they were destroyed. It was sheer luck that they had even had some fighters in ready-position; they hadn’t been expected to have to fly until after the main parade, where they would have shown off their flying skills to an impressed population...and probably convinced thousands of children that they wanted to become fighter jocks. It was the one branch of the Peacekeepers where there were more recruits than fighters.

“Get a warning out through the stellarcom,” he ordered, forcing himself to remember that he was the commanding officer of the entire fleet and not just the ships gathered near Terra-Prime. “Warn them that we may need them to deploy...”

“The stellarcom is down,” Lucy said, sharply. Andrew looked at the display and saw that she was right; the unknowns, whoever they were, had knocked out the stellarcom orbiting near the edge of the system just after they had launched their attack on the fleet. He saw starships burning in the night, their shields battered by singularity warheads and old-fashioned antimatter warheads until they were knocked down and exposed to the vacuum of space...and blown apart by direct hits. The loss of the stellarcom, their link to the rest of the Confederation until they span up a communications singularity themselves, meant that there would be no help from outside the system. “The enemy warships are targeting this ship specifically...”

The display altered as the enemy warships sliced closer. They were coming into energy weapons range, not fleeing or even holding the range open, and he felt his face twisting into a nasty smile. They’d hit the Peacekeepers hard, and destroyed over two hundred starships in their opening blows, but the remainder of the fleet was pulling together. He saw them returning fire, pounding at the enemy warships; his mind linked into the command network through his implant and followed a swarm of missiles as they impacted on one of the enemy starships. Their shields didn’t look to be much better than the Peacekeeper shields, if at all; singularity warheads roared their fury, almost audible even though the vacuum, punched through and blew the enemy starship apart.

“They are entering energy range now,” Lucy said. “The cruisers are opening fire.”

Andrew nodded. Implosion bolts, laser cannons and gravity waves were lashing out now, hammering at the enemy starships as they closed in, sweeping through the Peacekeeper ships as if their starships were nothing more than starfighters. The Peacekeeper ships spread apart to let them pass, firing all the time and breaking through their shields...all the while taking a pounding themselves. Starships on both sides were dying, but it was possible, just possible, that the Peacekeepers numerical advantage would start to tell. It would be useless to give orders now, he knew, but he wanted to issue them...

“New incoming,” Lucy snapped, and Andrew felt his heart sink. “I have over two hundred bursts of Hadenashatar Radiation...”

Andrew cursed as new icons appeared on the display. The other enemy starships were comparable to Peacekeeper cruisers; the newcomers were larger than the battleships...and armed to the teeth. They seemed to pause, just long enough for the Peacekeepers to get a good look at them, and then they belched a massive swarm of missiles into the Peacekeeper fleet. Andrew watched as counter-missiles, energy weapons and force shields strove to form a defence...and knew that it wouldn't be enough. The Peacekeepers were going to take a beating...

He slipped his mind back into the computer network. The AI's were incapable of shock or terror; they could - and would - continue working while their human masters were trying to grasp the sheer scale of the disaster. He saw their conclusions about the power of the enemy newcomers from the sensors, heard their mutter of instructions to the point defence weapons, and knew that they wouldn't be able to stop the wave of missiles from striking his ships. The Peacekeeper formation might have beaten off the smaller craft, but their larger brethren were still going to hammer them.

“Pull the fleet into a Rampart Formation,” he snapped, trusting Lucy to handle the task. The starships would have to cover one another while allowing the heavy-hitters to strike back at the enemy ships. The fleet carriers had taken a pounding; half of them had been destroyed, mostly without launching more than the ready fighters. There should have been over ten thousand starfighters with the fleet, but the tactical display suggested that only a thousand had been launched since the battle had begun...before their motherships had been destroyed. The enemy commander, whoever he was, knew what he was doing. They barely had the starfighters they needed to cover themselves, let alone launch strikes against the enemy ships...

He pulled out of the command network and studied the sensor readings. The unknown craft were...unknown, completely unknown. He'd been thinking about a new attack from the Thule Lost Colony - it no longer seemed so funny - but Thule had shared Professor Hadenashatar's drive technology, the same drive technology that drove the Peacekeeper starships. The unknowns seemed to have radically different configurations, like nothing he'd ever seen before, and that suggested that whoever had built them had followed a very different path. They still generated Hadenashatar Radiation when they jaunted, which was something of a relief, but even so...

Who were they?

“Contact Captain Pollock,” he ordered, forcing the question to the back of his mind. “The *Vanguard* is to jaunt out immediately to the nearest star and warn the Confederation of what happened here. No, repeat no, missions are to be dispatched to our aid, understand?”

He saw Lucy’s puzzlement and clarified. “If this is the opening of a general war, they’re going to have to worry about their own defence,” he said. It was a bitter thought; they had, only an hour ago, been able to talk to the other side of the galaxy. Now, they had to rely on a starship getting enough clear space to jaunt out and hopefully break contact. “What happens if this is happening everywhere?”

The thought was a bitter one. The Peacekeepers had gathered most of their starships together for the celebrations honouring the thousand years of peace...that had just come to such a sudden end. If someone really intended to take on the entire Confederation and win, they had to take out the Peacekeepers first...and the celebrations had provided them with the perfect targets. Whoever they were fighting – and he was starting to have a nasty suspicion that the enemy was something other than human – had planned well...and all he could do was pass on the warning. It might already be too late.

The *Peacekeeper* shuddered as a warhead burst against its shields. Darius, up on the bridge, would be trying to keep the command starship intact; it was the only one left in the fleet. Without it, the cruisers would have real problems coordinating their activities, even the point defence. Andrew checked the display again as the enemy starships pressed home their attacks; both sides were taking damage, but the Peacekeepers, caught out of position and surprised completely, were taking worse. The Peacekeepers had never lost a battle since...since they had been founded; it dawned on him suddenly that he was going to go down in history as the first Peacekeeper Admiral to lose a major battle. The Confederation Parliament would probably want his head on a platter...

“Terra-Prime,” he snapped, remembering. There was more in the system than the Peacekeeper fleet. Terra-Prime, the capital world of the Confederation, was only a few light-minutes away. Normally, the representatives would meet up by sending projections through the stellarcom network, but now, for the celebrations, they had gathered in person on the planet below. The enemy had planned, he saw now, for that as well. “What is their status?”

“Enemy ships are gathering near the planet, but haven’t made any moves towards the surface or the orbital defences,” Lucy said. “I haven’t picked up any signals from the planet itself, but hundreds of commercial ships are breaking orbit and trying to get into a position where they can jaunt out.”

“Smart of them,” Andrew admitted. A battle that could strain the Peacekeepers was no place for civilian craft. He glanced at the enemy icons and made a quick decision; losing Terra-Prime in the opening minutes of the war would be disastrous for morale. “Divert the 12th and 45th Cruiser Squadrons towards the enemy ships and tell them to hammer them enough to buy time.”

“Yes, sir,” Lucy said. The *Peacekeeper* rocked again. “Three enemy cruisers attempted to engage us at close range.”

Andrew blinked. “Why?” He asked. It made no sense. “What were they doing?”

Lucy swore. "I am picking up traces of anti-Hadenashatar Radiation," she said. Andrew saw it at the same time. "They wanted to trap the fleet here."

Andrew felt his blood run cold. The attack wasn't just intended to pound the fleet; the attack was intended to *destroy* it. The use of jamming radiation, preventing the fleet from jaunting out, would ensure that the Peacekeepers had no choice, but to fight it out until the radiation faded away...and that the enemy would have no choice, but victory or death. By cutting off the Peacekeepers from any hope of retreat, they had trapped themselves as well.

"Calculate a location from which we could still jaunt," he said, linking his mind back into the computers and considering several ideas. If they had to retreat, they would have to escape the effects of the jammers, or destroy the jammers completely. Surrender, he suspected, wasn't an option. "Signal the fleet..."

He paused. "Did the *Vanguard* make it out?"

"No, sir," Lucy said. "She was caught and destroyed before she could jaunt."

Andrew shivered despite the heat. The rest of the Confederation wouldn't have the slightest idea of what had happened. All they would know was that they'd lost contact with Terra-Prime...until it was too late.

Chapter Two

There was only one city on Terra-Prime, but it was by any measure the most important city in the Confederation, based around the sole task of providing a government for the human race. The planet had been terraformed back during the early days of the Confederation – the original world had been in neutral territory and so worthless that no one had claimed it – and since then, only the politicians and a small staff of assistants had been permitted to settle on the planet. A handful of very experienced, very senior Peacekeepers and other functionaries were allowed to live on the planet after retirement, but few accepted the invitation, not when they could live almost anywhere in the Confederation. Terra-Prime's population stood at around ten million, not counting the tourists and the AI. The AI, in truth, could be said to be the only permanent resident of the planet. Everyone else left, eventually.

The soft voice woke President Katherine Coynor from her implant-induced doze. “Madam President, it is three hours until the big speech,” the AI said, its voice whispering through her head. “You asked to be awoken in time for the speech.”

Katherine rubbed the side of her head. “How long was I out?”

“Four hours,” One said. The Terra-Prime AI, One, was the first AI to actually gain sentience and recognition as a living creature in its own right, or at least it claimed descent from the original AI. Katherine had always found that privately funny; the concept of an AI giving birth was oddly amusing. “You have nine hundred and seventeen messages waiting for you.”

Katherine rolled her eyes as she stood up, shucked off her nightdress, and stepped into the shower. One kept a subroutine, an infinitively tiny section of its awareness, following her wherever she went, but she refused to think about it. Most humans preferred not to think about how closely they were under observation on Terra-Prime or one of the Worldships; it wasn't as if the AIs were interested voyeurs or perverts. Their awareness was different to human awareness; she'd once asked One for advice on her clothes and the AI had produced a horribly mismatched outfit and claimed it looked beautiful in the right light. It might even have been telling the truth and though its sensors, the outfit had looked beautiful.

She could have used a sonic shower to shake off the dirt and grime, but chose instead to have a water shower and hope that the cold would wake her up completely. She'd been pushing her body too hard over the last few weeks, trying to get everything ready for the big celebrations to mark a thousand years of peace and prosperity, and it would be ironic indeed if she collapsed as she mounted the Parliament's steps. She could have used her implants to awaken her completely, but she preferred to use cold water; the implants sometimes had side effects, or she would have to sleep for a few days...and if she took that much time off her job, she would be drenched in messages and things demanding the urgent attention of the President of the Confederation. Even daily, even with One's help, it was all she could do to keep up with them.

The thought reminded her. “Is there anything important in the messages?”

“Nothing too important,” One informed her. She'd learned to trust the AI's judgement on that, at least. “They're mainly requests for appearances, several petitions from various Isolated Worlds for direct intervention and a gloating note from the explorers who reached

the Lesser Cloud last month. Personal messages include good luck messages from your family, including your niece, and political opponents.”

Katherine shrugged as she climbed out of the shower and allowed the force fields to sweep all the water off her body. The only things of real importance were the petitions, but she already knew how they would turn out...and how they would be rejected. Unless the Isolated Worlds in question were breaking with the Confederation Ethos, the rules that stated anyone who wanted to leave to the Confederation proper or another Isolated World could leave, the petitions would be rejected. Isolated Worlds showed their right to exist through keeping people there of their own free will; those that failed to make life attractive to people tended to end up depopulated very quickly.

“Prepare a briefing for me and dump them into my implant,” she ordered, as she stood in front of the mirror and examined herself. Tall, long flowing red hair, firm breasts...she was the height of physical perfection, embodying an ethnic stereotype from the days of Old Earth. It was a tradition she wasn't sure she approved of, despite the Confederation Ethos that permitted anything that harmed no one, but it was fairly sure to bring in the votes. Confederation politics were complicated, but anyone could stand for office...only to discover that the offices were sometimes misleading. Confederation Presidents didn't often have to do anything actually presidential; Katherine knew that her term was rated a success, despite her doing little more than appearing at the right meetings.

“As you command,” One said. “And may I extend my own personal congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Katherine said, smiling to herself. One was a good person, if the term person could be applied to a distributed intelligence that was stretched over the entire planet and the massive orbital facilities high overhead. One ran the entire planet so humans wouldn't have to...and she wondered, somehow, how that made it feel. “Can you deploy the clothing?”

An inky black mass appeared around her feet and slipped up her body, covering everything below her neck. The first time she'd worn the clothing material, she'd almost fainted; now, it was second nature. She fired a string of commands into the material's inbuilt processors and it changed its appearance, forming into the black suit, black tie and white shirt worn by the Confederation's elite. Katherine had never creased to find that amusing; she could have given her speech stark naked, and no one would have taken official notice, but if she didn't wear the standard clothing, everyone would make an unofficial fuss. It was something she had the right to wear, just like a Peacekeeper had the right to wear a Peacekeeper uniform, and *not* wearing it at the right events was almost as bad as wearing something she didn't have a right to wear.

“Excellent,” she said. The suit deployed a tiny fraction of itself into a hairclip, which she used to pin her hair back into a bun. “How do I look?”

“Human,” One said dryly. “Of course, you now have two hours, thirty minutes and twenty-four seconds to wait until you have to be in the Parliament Chamber to give your speech.”

“True,” Katherine agreed, without much rancour. One of the many advantages of the clothing material was that it took care of all of her bodily needs without her having to leave the room. “What is happening with the fleet?”

“The fleet is forming up into position and...”

One cut off sharply. Katherine felt a flicker of alarm; the AI, so much larger than her limited human mind could comprehend, shouldn't have had any problems in monitoring the fleet and talking to her – and the entire ten million people on the planet – at the same time. It wasn't human, something that most people tried to forget; there were far too many examples of rogue or maddened AIs taking over planets and trying to exterminate the smelly flesh-bags, or worse.

“One?” She asked. “What's happening?”

There was no reply.

The door hissed open and Katherine came to her feet. Her chambers were supposed to be her private space, completely isolated from everyone else, and only one other person had permission to enter unannounced. Her current partner should have been on one of the orbital stations, but maybe he'd come back to see her...except it wasn't him. Katherine's shock was so great it took her seconds to place the man entering her room; Captain Loyce Burdine, the commanding officer of her protective detail. She should have been safe on Terra-Prime, but there was no shortage of fanatics eager to kill her and strike a blow against the Confederation. Most of them had lost followers to the Confederation and wanted revenge.

“Loyce?” She asked, surprised and alarmed. Three other men followed him in. “What's happening?”

“Check the room,” Loyce ordered his men. “Madam President, we may have a bit of a situation on our hands.”

Katherine looked young, but she was over three hundred years old and had no difficulty in recognising the worry and fear underlying his words. Something was happening, something big, big enough to cause him to break protocol and enter her chambers without permission.

“What's happening?” She asked, using one of her implants to keep her emotions under control. Terra-Prime was supposed to be the safest place in the Confederation. “One's not responding to me.”

“We have a direct link into the Peacekeeper command network in the office,” Loyce said, as two of his men returned from checking the other chambers. Katherine felt a flicker of embarrassment at what they would have seen, before dismissing the thought as unimportant; it hardly mattered under the circumstances. “Unknown starships have entered the system and have engaged the Peacekeeper ships.”

He could have announced that he intended to kidnap her for his wife and Katherine would have been less surprised. “Unknown starships?”

“Yes, Madam President,” Loyce said. “At least a thousand of them, perhaps more; there are definite reports of other starships operating at the edge of the system. The stellarcom link at the system border has gone off the air and is presumed destroyed; we have no communication at all with anywhere outside the system. Other starships are gathering near the planet itself,

well out of range of the orbital weapons or the planetary defence centres, and an attack against Terra-Prime itself is probably imminent.”

He paused. “This is no ordinary pirate raid or wrecker attack, Madam President,” he said. “I think these are the first shots in a war.”

Katherine stared at him. She knew, unlike most citizens of the Confederation, the real strength of the Peacekeepers and the various other defences built into the Confederation. She’d seen the details, knew most of the statistics off by heart...and someone intended to attack them? It was unbelievable.

“A war?”

“Yes,” Loyce said. He cocked his head for a moment as if he were listening to someone else through his implanted communicator. That was rude under most circumstances, but Katherine forgave him for it in an emergency. “Madam President, there are hostile starships attacking Peacekeeper starships and they have taken out the stellarcom, isolating the system from the remainder of the Confederation. The only reasonable conclusion is that they intend to wage a war on us.”

Katherine found her legs shaking and ruthlessly drew on her implants. “A war?” She repeated. “With whom?”

“We are uncertain at present and we don’t have time to speculate,” Loyce said. He leaned closer. “There is a very strong chance that Terra-Prime itself will come under attack.”

“He is correct,” One said, through the speakers. Katherine felt a wave of relief when he spoke. She’d been worried about him. “There is a group of unknown starships forming up near the planet and newcomers are jaunting in all the time. I suspect that they intend to break through the defences of Terra-Prime and attack the world directly.”

Katherine composed herself with an effort. How could everything have changed so quickly? “Can they destroy this world?”

“Possibly,” Loyce said. “Madam President, we have to get you to the command bunker, now, where you can take command of the planet and hopefully make contact with the remainder of the Confederation.”

The urge to giggle was almost overpowering. “What happens if they scorch or shatter the world?”

“Then you die,” One said, severely. “I have scanned my databanks on invasions and all of them were targeted against the people who might have railed resistance against the invaders; the leaders, the military officers, the others who might be influential...and the attack on Terra-Prime and the fleet suggests that the enemy is in it to play for keeps. You are their target, the head of the Confederation Government, and as such keeping you out of their hands remains a priority.”

There was a long pause. “I suggest that you head to the command bunker at once and meet up with Colonel Turner at once,” One added. “I shall endeavour to keep you updated as you move.”

Katherine nodded once. She’d met Colonel Turner and trusted him. “I understand,” she said, grimly. “How do we get to the command bunker?”

“Armour up and follow me,” Loyce said. “We’re going to have to walk there and the corridors are going to be packed.”

The armour slid out of her skin, a tickling feeling that she had never liked, even when she had been implanted with the personal protective armour. It was supposed to be proof against almost anything she might face, from accidental exposure to vacuum to being shot at with DEW systems, but she knew better than to trust it completely. The golden armour sliced through the clothes she’d been wearing, destroying the processors within the artificial material, even as it melded neatly to her body. She looked like a golden statue and, as the protection team armoured up themselves, she looked surrounded by other statues. She was the only one wrapped in gold.

“I have started to clear the corridors,” One said. “The majority of the population is panicking and I have had to use security force fields to protect lives and property from the crush. I suggest that you move quickly to the elevators...”

“Countermand that,” Loyce said, as the doors opened and the lead member of the team went through. “There have already been power fluctuations as power is drained off to the defences. If the power fails entirely, we’ll be trapped in an elevator.”

Katherine watched his silver rear as he ran along the corridor, mercifully empty, and followed him as best as she could. It had been years since she had run while wearing full armour and the effort tired her more than it should, despite the implants helping her to remain moving. The armour felt heavy, as if she was running while dressed in wet clothes, and while she had thought that that was purely psychometric, it remained a problem. They passed a running group of children, who barely had time to get out of the way before they thundered past, and then turned the corner and almost ran into a packed crowd of people.

“Activate stun guns,” Loyce ordered. Katherine opened her mouth to shout a countermand, but it was too late; blue flickers of light struck the crowd and knocked most of them to the ground. Few of them had either armoured up themselves, or had bothered to get the armour installed as part of their implants. The process was free...but so few actually bothered to get combat implants installed. Why should they? It was an oversight, Katherine reflected, that they would come to regret in the days to come.

“I’ve dispatched servitors to help the stunned ones to a medical centre,” One said grimly. Katherine allowed herself a moment of relief; stun bolts were harmless, but someone who had been stunned would be out of it for hours, even with their implants and nanites trying to revive them. “You have to remain alive.”

They stopped in front of a vast portrait of one of the Confederation’s founders and Loyce held one armoured hand up to it. A moment passed...and then it slid aside, revealing a flight of stairs descending into the lowest levels on the planet. Her armour compensated

automatically for the lack of light and she allowed it to control her movements, heading further and further down into the bowels of Terra-Prime, until they finally reached the bottom. The lights came on, revealing a set of airlocks, and they walked through the first set into the second, and then the third, being decontaminated all the while.

Katherine frowned. "Isn't this a little paranoid?"

"The designers of this place served during the Thule War," Loyce explained, as they passed through the final airlock. Katherine had never visited the command centre before and, when she had heard of its purpose, she had hoped that she would never have to visit...but here she was. "The Thule were very good at slipping unpleasant surprises past the defenders. Generically-engineered viruses and biological meme viruses were the least of it."

Colonel Turner was standing under a vast display. The room itself was well-lit, revealing consoles and a tiny staff operating them, several of them glancing up at their armoured forms with trepidation. Katherine sent a mental command into her armour and part of it retracted back into her body, leaving her head and hands uncovered. She'd heard enough horror stories about what happened when someone forgot they were wearing the armour and tried to shake hands, or worse...

"Madam President," Turner said. He was an enormous black man, built for strength, not speed, and had once had a career playing rugby. His muscles were all real; the gaming commissions would never have let him play if he had used implants. The others in the room, she realised, were listening carefully to what he had to say...and how she responded. "I think the situation has just gone from bad to worse."

Katherine stared at him. "What's happening?"

Turner indicated one of the displays. "There are seventeen unknown starships heading towards the planet," he said. "We still don't have the slightest fucking idea of who they are, but CIC ran it through a tactical comp and they called it an invasion force...and they're heading directly for the city."

He paused, long enough for her to see the worry on his face. "We're being invaded."

Chapter Three

“Closing in on enemy vessels,” the helmsman said. “One minute to missile range.”

Captain Mija Mallory, known as Cat to her friends and relatives, felt her mind linking into the great AI that controlled PKS *Feline*. The cruiser and the twenty-one men and women who controlled the ship had been expecting a boring parade, followed by a quick return to the Isolated Worlds of Glory and Paradise, where they had been trying to prevent fanatical leaders on both sides from turning Glory and Paradise into radioactive rubble. The two worlds had been settled sometime before the Breakdown – the records had been lost, so no one knew precisely when – and before they had been rediscovered, had fought three wars with each other using technology that would have shamed the old NASA, back before the Jaunt Drive was discovered.

“Prepare to engage,” she said. The *Feline* and her eight consorts had been doing useful work, necessary work, and she had argued strongly that they should be allowed to remain where they were, rather than make the trip back to Terra-Prime for the parade. The First Admiral hadn’t been convinced; the *Feline*’s crew was overdue for shore leave and other ships could keep the peace while the corrosive effects of fabricators and other Confederation technology started to take effect. The faithful would be feeling a lot less than willing to risk their lives in religious war if all their needs were met and the promise of newer and better lives opened up in front of them. It always happened that way; shorn of the force the leaders used to keep the sheep in line, their social systems collapsed and, at best, they became an Isolated World.

She scowled as her mind encompassed the enemy starships. She’d seen starships from all over the Confederation and she’d never seen anything like them before, not even in the weirdest and most deranged starship design facility. Civilians could build almost any kind of starship, and frequently did, but the starships they were facing now looked downright unpleasant. Even Thule hadn’t sought to build starships that actually *looked* unpleasant; they’d gone in for building massive warships and heavy weapons, while the Confederation preferred to build smaller, more versatile starships. The enemy starships...

Crabs, she thought. The larger enemy starships, each one larger than a Confederation battleship, looked like giant crabs; the smaller starships looked like lobsters. The appearance didn’t deceive her for long; the sensors kept updating, reporting on weapons emplacements, sensor turrets and powerful drives, pushing the starships through space towards Terra-Prime. Once they got into orbit...well, human history suggested a wide range of possible alternatives, from simply dusting the planet with a biological weapon – which should be useless against Confederation nanites – to bombarding the planet into submission. Mija knew that her nine ships couldn’t stop them from reaching the planet, but she could win time...and time was the most important thing at the moment.

“Engage,” she said, or ordered through the network; it didn’t matter. The *Feline* was armed to the teeth with missiles and scatter-packs, launched from just inside missiles range, forcing the enemy to deal with a new threat. The crabs didn’t hesitate; they returned fire with their own missiles, forcing the helmsman to send the *Feline* ducking and diving to avoid a swarm of missiles. Mija smiled thinly as their point defence picked off several more missiles that would otherwise have struck the *Feline* and probably destroyed it, before returning her attention to the missiles the cruisers had launched. The crabs were just picking the final missiles off with their point defence.

Their individual point defence is astonishingly capable for craft that size, the AI said, into her brain. Mija, who'd been a point defence officer before entering command track, nodded in understanding; the task of coordinating point defence wasn't an easy one, particularly not in the middle of a confused system-wide battle. The crabs didn't seem to use linked point defence networks, not like her own ships, but instead packed their hulls with point defence clusters and fought as individual units. It suggested that they didn't – or wouldn't – cooperate in their own defence.

“Target Crab #1,” she ordered, through the network. The crabs had ignored them when they had darted back out of missile range; it was time to come in and engage again. The unknowns had to know that her nine ships weren't much of a threat to them, but maybe she could use that against them. The commands raced out through the network and she heard the responses. “Fire!”

Feline jerked as it launched a full spread of missiles, before rolling over, launching a second spread, and then evading a spread of missiles launched by their target crab. This time, nine ships had launched fifty missiles each, all targeted on one of the crabs, just one...and they were racing towards it at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. The crab lashed out with its point defence and missiles started to die, but it couldn't take them all down in time and she felt a surge of violent delight as they started to detonate on the crab's shields. Space rolled and seethed under the waves of energy as the crab's shields collapsed and the ship exploded in a massive burst of plasma.

“Gotcha,” someone carolled, through the network. “We nailed the bastard!”

Space flickered and a force of cruisers jaunted out, coming right at them. *Feline's* crew fired automatically – no one had any business jaunting that close to them unless they were enemy ships – and nailed two, before the remainder got their shields up and closed in on Mija's cruisers. The tactic was a good one, she ruefully admitted; the larger crabs couldn't avoid her or capture her, so logically they had called in reinforcements. The smaller cruisers would either be able to force her to withdraw or to concentrate on them, leaving the larger crabs to engage the defences of the planet below.

Shit, she thought coldly, as the cruisers closed into energy range. Both sides had been spitting missiles at each other as soon as the enemy ships recovered from their jaunt, but now the enemy was deliberately seeking an engagement at energy range...unless they were just hoping to scare her into running. It wasn't an unknown tactic, but she was determined that it wasn't going to work; she fired engagement orders into the network and watched as the other eight ships bunched up around the *Feline*, daring the enemy to engage them.

“The enemy craft are now entering energy weapons range,” the tactical officer said. “All weapons are primed and locked on.”

“Fire,” Mija ordered. She saw, in her mind's eye, the starship unleashing a hail of implosion bolts, directed energy weapons and pulsars. “Concentrate on one target and take it down!”

The enemy starship writhed under her fire. Implosion bolts drew on the fabric of space itself to cause limited energy surges; directed energy weapons and pulsars burned away at force shields, causing them to struggle to protect their hull. Most Confederation Peacekeeper-grade

military shields could redirect or handle eighty percent of the fire hurled at them, but even that meant that there would be twenty percent of the energy left disrupting the shields and breaking down the shield generators. The enemy shields didn't look to be much better than the Confederation's shields and...

The enemy craft exploded. "We got him," the tactical officer said, stating the obvious. *Feline* shook suddenly as an implosion bolt struck the shields and almost broke through. "Switching targeting to the second ship now..."

Mija almost shook her head. The main force was approaching the planet now, entering the planet's engagement envelope, and her force was almost trapped.

"I scanned the debris of the unknown starship," the sensor officer said. "I detected several unknown elements and other known elements in strange configurations."

"Any sign of a surviving body?" Mija asked. She would have been astonished if there were one, but the question had to be asked. "Anything we can use to find out who these bastards are?"

"Negative," the sensor officer said. "The readings I'm getting don't make a lick of sense."

Commander David Carr stared at the screen as the massive alien force bore down on the planet. Defence Station One was one of three stations intended to protect Terra-Prime from any external threat...and he was already mortally certain that they didn't have the firepower to stand the enemy force off the planet. The Peacekeeper fleet, light-minutes away, was taking a beating...and he didn't have anything he could use to help them or protect the planet below. Defence Station One was armed to the teeth, but the unknowns were also armed to the teeth; never in his worst nightmares had he anticipated an attack on such a scale.

"Ramp up the sensors to significant degradation point within a week," he ordered, as his training reasserted itself. There would be only moments to react to any enemy missile launches against the planet itself; the unknowns, whoever they were, would hardly be insane enough to try to invade. Colonel Taylor thought differently, but even so, Carr had some problems grasping the concept. The last interstellar invasions had been during the Thule War...and those had rarely been great successes. "I want all of the planet's defences tied into this station and configured to warn off a scorching attempt."

"Yes, sir," his tactical officer said. "The enemy will be within range of our outer missile envelope in thirty seconds."

"Fire as soon as they enter missile range," Carr ordered. A starship commander might let them in closer, and if Terra-Prime had been an empty piece of rock Carr would have done the same, but with the planet behind him, the vital need was to keep the unknowns as far away from the planet as they could. If they started to pop off missiles aimed at the planet from their current position, the defenders had a good chance of knocking them all down before they struck the planet.

He leaned back in his chair and accessed his direct link to One. “They might start bombarding the planet now,” he said, urgently. “You have to get the President off the planet *now*.”

“That may prove difficult,” One said. It was hard to pick up on the AI’s feelings – if it had feelings – but Carr was convinced that it was worried. He didn’t blame it; antimatter bombs exploding on the surface of the planet would be extremely bad news for One personally, as well as the remainder of the population. “My simulations suggest a less than forty percent chance of successfully getting the President off the planet and to a more secure location.”

Carr glanced up at the display. Mere seconds remained.

“I suggest you take the risk,” he said softly. “There may no longer be any other choice.”

An alarm sounded as the lead crab belched a hail of missiles. Their drives ignited, forcing them down towards the planet; if they hit the planet at that speed, they shouldn’t need any antimatter to inflict serious damage. Others followed, launching hundreds of missiles towards the planet. . .no, he realised in a sudden flash of understanding, towards the orbiting facilities. One of the missiles was struck by a point defence buoy, revealing that it carried a singularity warhead, and Carr swore aloud as the massive explosion glared in the display.

Madness, he thought, as the point defence system updated rapidly. A strike on the planet’s surface with a singularity warhead would devastate the planet. The point defence network was reprioritising quickly, classifying everything, but the planet itself as expendable. There was no choice, he knew. . .and yet, he also knew that that was what the enemy had intended. They were launching more missiles now, targeted on the defending facilities, and they were only covered by the pulsar cannons. The pulsars were useless for covering the planet – their range was far too limited for anything other than close-in point defence – but that close. . .the explosion would still damage the shields. *We need to expand more defences on the planet itself. . .*

Space had become a maelstrom of swirling, tearing energy as warhead after warhead was intercepted, the singularity spun up inside the missile destabilising and exploding within nanoseconds of the warhead being hit. The repeated bursts of energy were having an effect on the sensors, damaging and degrading them with each explosion. . .and making it more and more likely that a missile would get through and strike the planet itself. The defence platforms were launching their own missiles at the crabs, but the crabs were just sitting out of powered missile range, launching their own inwards on ballistic trajectories and knocking out his missiles as they came close enough to be a threat.

“Order the starfighters to engage the crabs,” he ordered finally. Doctrine insisted that starfighters were used in conjunction with missiles, in order that the point defence on the target ship had more than one set of problems to handle, but there was no longer any time to ensure that doctrine was carried out. If they could drive the crabs away, they might have a chance to make repairs and restock on missiles; if not, their defeat was ensured. “One, are you there?”

The AI sounded tired, oddly enough. “Where else would I be?”

“Can you punch a communications beam through to Admiral Ramage?” Carr asked. The tactical display was updating and he saw, suddenly too tired himself to care, that Defence Station One was being targeted specifically. “Tell him that we need help to stand off the enemy ships.”

“I cannot get a link established with any of the Peacekeeper ships,” One said. Carr blinked in disbelief. “The long-range communications network is being jammed.”

“What?” Carr asked, despite himself. “That’s impossible!”

“There is no doubt,” One said flatly. “I am unable to establish a link with any of the Peacekeeper starships, nor am I able to establish a link to anywhere out-system. I attempted to spin up the spare stellarcom, only to lose it before the links were properly established and the singularity attuned to the network.”

Carr swore. The use of a stellarcom could be detected right across the star system; the enemy had known about it as soon as One started to activate it, sending one of their own ships to destroy it and prevent any word from getting out.

“Incoming missiles,” the tactical officer said. There was nothing more to say. “Pulsars on line and engaging the missiles...”

Four singularity missiles smashed into Defence Station One, tore through the shields, and lashed at the unshielded hull of the station. The long thunderous roar swept Defence Station One, and its crew, into the darkness.

“Break, break now!”

Captain Chris Kelsey yanked the starfighter to one side as a burst of pulsar fire came right at his craft. The starfighters had been closing in rapidly on one of the crabs, trying to sneak up on it, or at least get as close as they could without being shot at. The crab had suddenly awakened to their present, or had probably just been biding its time until enough starfighters had entered range, and opened fire, scattering the starfighters and hitting three of them. Their pilots hadn’t stood a chance.

“Random patterns, our targets are the rear legs, I repeat, the rear legs,” he snapped, as another burst of plasma fire lashed out towards him. The unknowns might build starships that looked like something out of a nightmare, but all logic suggested that they were bound by the same limitations that governed the Confederation – their craft had to have drive spines as well. The Confederation used great sweeping wings on their starships; the unknowns, it seemed, used the crab’s legs. “Follow me in and try not to be late!”

The formation looked like uncontrolled anarchy and would have been laughed at if they’d been flying for civilians. For a pilot, the crazy dance was the only hope of survival; the enemy craft were armed with point defences that could smash a starfighter in a second and computers that were as good at predicting where the starfighter might be in the next few seconds...just in time to fire a pulsar or a laser beam at that location. Randomness was their only defence and, for some pilots, it wouldn’t be good enough. The 34th Starfighter Squadron, which had spent the morning preparing for a display of flying skills that would

impress the civilians, if not the military, lost two more pilots as they raged in towards their target.

“Fire,” he snapped. The starfighter jerked as two missiles were launched from below its wings, and then jerked again as he yanked the starfighter back, expecting a burst of energy to lash through his former position. The other starfighters followed, launching their own missiles, and suddenly the crab had more to worry about than the starfighters. The missiles were on sprint mode, the smallest missiles the Confederation still used, and were very hard to hit. He found himself counting down as the missiles raced towards the leg...

The missiles slammed home into the leg. The crab seemed to flip over as explosions shattered its rear end, but the main body of the starship remained intact. Chris ignored it now – disabled, it could be mopped up later, if there were a later – and yanked the starfighter around, seeking out other targets. The entire battlezone was a nightmare; instead of the organised and well-practiced manoeuvres, it looked like every unit to itself...

An emergency message blinked up in front of him, just as another explosion wracked the skies over Terra-Prime...

“My God,” he breathed, as the full scale of the catastrophe dawned upon him. Terra-Prime rarely allowed starships to land on the planet itself; instead, visitors used the massive orbital dockyard high over the city and went down on the space elevator. “They’ve hit the docks!”

And the docks were starting to fall...

Chapter Four

“The docks are *falling*?”

“Yes, Madam President,” Colonel Taylor said. There was a grim note in his voice. “The enemy hit the docks with several nuclear warheads and shattered the integrity of the structure, sending it falling down towards the city.”

Katherine sucked in her breath. The docks orbited directly above the city in a stable orbit; when they fell, the chunks of debris that survived the trip through the atmosphere would come down directly on the city. The force of the explosions would probably blow chunks into different trajectories, but most of it would probably fall directly down and hit the surface of the planet.

“They used nukes?” She said, realising what he had said. “They meant for that to happen?”

“Very likely,” Colonel Taylor said. “If they had used antimatter or singularity warheads, they would have vaporised far more of the docks; I suspect that hitting the docks in such a manner was merely a prelude to a full-scale invasion.”

Katherine stared at him. The fundamental reality of interstellar warfare made launching an invasion difficult; it wasn't something that happened very often. Normally, a planet's high orbitals would be taken and then the defenders had the choice between surrendering or being bombarded from space. The idea of actually launching a ground invasion when you didn't hold command of space was ridiculous; no Admiral worthy of the title would even contemplate the risk.

“They don't intend to take control of the high orbitals?” She said, finally. She was vaguely aware that she was asking questions he couldn't answer, at least not yet, but she felt so helpless in the bunker. “They actually want to invade?”

“There is no way to know for certain,” Colonel Taylor said. “If these are the opening shots of an all-out invasion of the Confederation, they will want to hit us as hard as possible before we get on our feet and start hitting back. Invading Terra-Prime directly would sap at our morale, the more so if you fell into their hands and they used you as their collaborator.”

“I see your point,” Katherine said, grimly. The display was changing rapidly as chunks of orbital material fell on the planet. The planetary defence centres were engaging the chunks now, firing heavy laser canons and plasma bolts at the chunks and trying to break them up before they hit the surface...which revealed their location to the prowling starships overhead. They were being knocked down, one by one, with weapons much heavier than were actually required; she had a sudden vision of what life must be like on the surface now. Anyone near one of the PDCs was either dead or wishing they were. “What can we do about the civilians?”

“If I may?” One injected. “I have been attempting to get civilians to the bunkers and out of harm's way, but we never anticipated an attack on such a scale and the civilian death toll is already quite high. The matter is not helped by damage to the world's communications systems and the AI cores that are supposed to assist me if there is an emergency. The loss of the orbital platforms alone has degraded our capability by thirty percent.”

Katherine winced. “And you still can’t get in touch with the fleet?”

“No,” One said. “My capability for actually monitoring the progress of the battle is quite limited without the orbital platforms and sensor arrays. I can tell you that several of the space habitats revolving around the sun and other worlds in this system have been destroyed, as their links to me personally have been broken, but I am unable to signal the fleet through secure channels. I can’t even tell which side is winning.”

There was a long pause. “Madam President, Colonel Taylor, I must recommend the use of the emergency evacuation plan.”

Katherine turned to look over at Taylor. “The emergency evacuation plan?”

“An emergency plan put in place by the first Peacekeeper Command staff, nearly a thousand years ago,” Colonel Taylor said. “It was anticipated that there might be a need to get the President and certain other vital staff members off Terra-Prime in a hurry, rather than the more stately procedures for evacuating the world. It wasn’t that long since the Thule War and the Breakdown and people were a lot more paranoid then.”

“It looks like they were remarkably prescient,” Katherine said, dryly. “Where do we go?”

“There’s a small spacer stored in a hanger some distance from here,” Colonel Taylor said. He broke off as the ground shook violently. “Report!”

“Major impact, only two kilometres from our location,” one of his staff called from a console. “There is considerable damage to the city above.”

“Confirmed,” One said. “The death toll is now two million on the surface and rising.”

Katherine forced that thought out of her head. “How do we get to the spacer?”

Taylor checked a small console. “The original idea was to walk there through a tunnel from this bunker,” he said. “The problem is that that impact collapsed a chunk of the tunnel and there won’t be time to clear it unless we...”

“No, there won’t be,” One said. “My ground-based sensors are not as effective as the orbital-based sensors, but I am detected enemy craft preparing to enter the atmosphere and land in the city.”

“He’s right, sir,” an operative said. “I can’t get a clear shot at them with the remaining PDCs!”

“Then we have to move now,” Colonel Taylor snapped. “Captain Burdine?”

“Sir,” Loyce said. Katherine looked at him and blinked; Loyce had slipped off while Taylor was briefing her and had returned wearing a full light-combat mecha battlesuit. She hadn’t realised that he was checked out on them, although it shouldn’t have surprised her; they had gone to places that were far less safe than Terra-Prime, after all. “I understand that you want us to head across the city?”

“Yes,” Taylor said. He held up a hand to forestall the burst of outrage. No security team worth its salt would normally allow such a manoeuvre, unless there was no choice. “By the time we have the tunnel cleared, they could be breaking into here and solidifying their position on the surface. You have to get her out of here now!”

“Yes, sir,” Loyce said, reluctantly. “Armour up, Madam President; it’s time to move.”

Katherine had been dreading the climb up to the surface, but it turned out that there was an antigravity shaft in a convenient location that hadn’t been damaged by the impacts, so the protective team was whisked up them in comfort, followed by her as soon as they confirmed that it was safe. One kept up a commentary as she rose through the shaft, telling her in more detail than she wanted to know how outdated her maps of the city had become...and how far they had to go. The armour could keep her moving on her own, but not moving with it would result in muscle pains, if not worse.

“Loyce?” She asked, using her armour’s communicator to talk to him personally. “If I fall behind, don’t hesitate to issue a swift kick to the rear.”

“We’ve sometimes had to pick up and carry politicians who have the armour, but don’t know how to use it,” Loyce said. She heard a note of amusement in his voice. “Don’t worry; we’ll get you out of the city and to the spacer or die trying.”

Katherine snorted...and then the snort died in her mouth as she took in the damage to the city. They had emerged near one of the massive thoroughfares that held shops – selling genuine hand-made produce and food prepared by real humans – and normally it thronged with life. Now, the street was wrecked and bodies lay everywhere, some of them still twitching. Parts of the dome high overhead had fallen in, toppling buildings and shattering lives; how many had died in this street alone? The urge to do something, anything, to help rose up within her; when she saw a wrecked servitor, she almost stopped and started to dig people out of the rubble.

“Come on,” Loyce said, taking her arm with care. A person in a battlesuit could rip her arm off, armour or no armour, without intending any harm at all. Hot tears stung her cheeks and she shook him off angrily. “There’s nothing you can do for them now.”

“He is correct,” One said, though her communications implant. “I advise you to move. By my most optimistic estimate, the first enemy landing craft will be here within five minutes.”

Katherine winced. “Do they know we’re here?”

“Unknown,” One said. “I am using low-powered communicators to talk to you and there is plenty of interference and decoy sources in the area, but they may be monitoring your progress. I have deployed servitors to attempt to assist the handful of people left alive in the area, but you have to move *now!*”

Katherine followed Loyce through the shattered streets. The city no longer seemed like home, but a nightmare from the Thule War, or the Breakdown, where lives had been swept away by an uncaring war. She’d grown up on Erie, at the heart of the Confederation, and had never had to work for anything in her life...and nor had she ever been in any danger. Like so

many of her peers, after the first fifty years she had given up shameless hedonism and actually started to contribute something useful to society...and the Confederation electorate had rewarded that by electing her their President. It wasn't as powerful a position as the title implied – there were times when she suspected that the Presidency was actually a glittering prize to distract the people who wanted power and should never be allowed to have it – but she liked to think that she was good at it.

And now the role was useless. The damage around her was testament to the fact. She couldn't issue orders to solve the problem, let alone drive the enemy forces out of high orbit and retake the surface, let alone rebuild the city and restore the dead to life...she was as powerless as the least of the engineered slaves the Thule had created in their dream of a master race. The best she could do was hope that she could keep up with Loyce and the rest of her protective unit...and pray that they could reach the spacer in time.

The buildings were starting to look slightly more intact as they approached the edge of the city. Like most cities on worlds established during the Fifth Expansion Period, it had a clear border, established without much in the way of actual imagination. The cities on the Isolated Worlds looked more random and had more character, but only a few people had the right to live permanently on Terra-Prime. If Katherine had done well in her term, perhaps Parliament would have voted her the right...but Parliament was dead now, and so was she if she didn't reach the spacer. The thought chilled her; what would she do if there was no longer any government at all?

It would work a lot smoother, for a start, she thought, and managed a smile. The local governments on the Confederation worlds would elect new representatives and they would take their place on wherever the new government was established...unless the invasion was hitting all of the Confederation worlds. How could that happen? There were thousands upon thousands of human worlds...and yet, a day ago, the thought of Terra-Prime being invaded would have been unthinkable. Her armour blinked up warnings in her retina; she was starting to panic, despite herself.

“Best to concentrate on getting out of here,” Loyce said. She hadn't realised that her battlesuit would be able to read her vital signs and she flushed. “I think we have company.”

Katherine glanced up and behind them...and saw what he meant. A massive hexagon-shaped craft was lowering itself out of the sky on an antigravity field, settling down somewhere amidst the city. The skies were ablaze with lights and fires as the fighting raged on; her armour darkened automatically to protect her eyes as something exploded in a blindingly white flash. One's voice muttered in her ear, telling her about orbital facilities being knocked out and starships being harried by starfighters, who might end up dying in interstellar space with their bases destroyed.

“Shit,” Loyce muttered, as the sky lit up with a brilliant white flash. A moment later, the ground shook violently. “One?”

“A large chunk of material came down on the third continent,” One said, slowly. “The damage is extensive. The animal population may be completely wiped out.”

“They're going to kill us all,” Katherine said. The third continent was home to thousands of animals, from Old Earth and other worlds, and they would have been killed by the impact. It

would take years of work to restore the Terra-Prime biosphere, even assuming that the enemy let them get on with it...and she doubted that they would. “Do we have any identification yet?”

“No,” One said. “I am still unable to place their craft.”

“It’s only a few kilometres left to go,” Loyce said. “Let’s move...”

Katherine followed him as the battlesuit covered the ground in great hops. The terrain outside the city had once been barren and cold, but a thousand years of terraforming had changed it to the point where it looked like a rocky garden, a mixture of plants and flowers that someone had scattered on the ground years ago and left to grow and survive – or not – on their own.

“Alert,” one of the other guards said. “We’ve got company on our tail.”

Katherine didn’t look round, but saw it in her armour’s display; two small flying drones, closing in on them from the direction of the city. They looked like tiny starfighters, small spheres with stubby wings and a bad attitude, but there were no signs of individuality in their design. Human pilots decorated their craft; the designers of the drones hadn’t bothered to even make them look threatening...

“Leo, Abdul, Walter, take point,” Loyce ordered. Katherine felt him pulling her to the ground and allowed him to lie on top of her, grateful that the armour could take the weight. A battlesuit could laugh at things that would go through her armour like a knife through butter. “Open fire.”

The noise of plasma cannons cut through the air and the drones exploded. “They’ll be sending more after us,” Loyce snapped, as he climbed to his feet. “Sorry about the hands, Madam President...”

He picked her up, slung her over his armoured shoulder, and started to run. Katherine opened her mouth to protest and realised that he had a point; the enemy, whoever they were, would certainly react to losing their drones. They might even react quickly enough to stop them from escaping the city. She twisted slightly until she could see behind them, using her sensors to scan for company, and saw only smoke rising up from the city. The rear guard soon fell behind, following them at a slower pace than the remainder of the protective unit, and she wanted to order Loyce to tell them to speed up. She didn’t, knowing that it would be futile, but she already knew what would happen to them. They would die to protect her...and somehow she no longer felt worthy of it.

“We need to move faster,” Loyce said. He wasn’t even panting and that annoyed Katherine for a reason she couldn’t articulate. A man in a battlesuit could outrun a cheetah with ease. “They’re going to be sending more...*shit!*”

“Loyce?” Katherine asked. “What are they doing?”

“I’ve lost contact with One,” Loyce said grimly. “They just started to jam everything, and I mean everything!”

“That’s impossible,” Katherine protested.

“This day has seen three impossible things before breakfast,” Loyce said dryly. “Ah.”

Katherine saw them as well; a stream of drones, heading towards them at speed, ducking and diving to escape the brilliant red bolts of light the rear guard was firing at them. She saw drones explode and others return fire with strange green flickers of light, trying to target the battlesuits and destroy them, and she heard Loyce laugh as a battlesuit was struck directly...and survived.

“They’re using stun bolts, I think,” he said, though chuckles. More and more drones were exploding out of the sky. “At least that means they want prisoners.”

He lifted his hand and blew a drone out of the sky before it could swoop down on them, then put his head down and kept running. It was on the tip of Katherine’s tongue to ask if they should actually not run directly to the spacer, but it wouldn’t have done any good; their only hope now lay in speed. The enemy were probably assembling a force to capture them now, rather than just the dumb drones that were being swatted out of the sky as soon as they were seen.

“They’re trying to keep us pinned down,” Loyce said, as they reached a featureless slab of rock. He pressed one hand against a certain place and a door shimmered into existence. “Come on, quickly.”

He lowered Katherine to the floor as they entered a massive hanger. Ahead of them, a small spacer, smaller than Katherine had expected, sat there, waiting for them. It was large enough to carry the entire protection team, but Loyce made no move to call them into the hanger, instead walking over to the spacer and opening the hatch.

“Loyce,” Katherine said, “what about the others?”

She heard the pain in his voice. “They’re not going to be any use on the ship and they may be of real use – they will be of real use – to Colonel Taylor,” he said. “They’re going to sell their lives to buy us the time we need to leave, Madam President...and all we can do is hope that their sacrifice is not in vain.”

Chapter Five

Captain Mark 'JC' Driscoll ran into the spacer's cockpit – the craft was just a little bit too small to be dignified with a bridge – shouting commands for the spacer to begin power-up sequence. Mark had been sleeping when the war began and the warning that had shocked him awake had scared hell out of him. He didn't fear death – and had a string of medals from flying Peacekeeper starfighters to prove it – but the thought of losing the President was enough to worry him. No one had seriously expected that the emergency evacuation plan would actually have to be used, and even though a small number of pilots were on semi-permanent stand-by for flying *President One*, no one had actually tested the procedure. In theory, it should work perfectly; in practice...Mark had been in the Peacekeepers long enough to know that something would always go wrong.

He glared down at the display as the spacer's computer began the flash-wake procedure. *President One* was probably the smallest craft ever to be built that had a Jaunt Drive built into the hull; normally, it needed a larger craft to carry and power a Jaunt Drive. A starfighter pilot risked running out of air, or being captured, if his mothership was destroyed, and Mark couldn't wait for the day when they built Jaunt Drive units small enough to fit into starfighters. *President One* wouldn't have that problem; once he got the craft away from Terra-Prime, he could jaunt out of the system and directly to Fortress Maximus, where the President would take command of whatever was left of the Confederation. Mark wasn't blind to the significance of the attack on Terra-Prime; whoever was behind it, and his money was on the Thule Lost Colony, the sheer nature of the attack meant war to the knife. The only proof that they actually *wanted* Terra-Prime intact, no matter how worthless it was in an absolute sense, was that they hadn't sent the sun nova. If they *could* send the sun nova...

President One should have received a direct feed from One, or one of the remote platforms seeded in high orbit, but the communications platform twenty kilometres away from the hanger and linked into *President One* through a secured landline could find nothing. That was bad news, made worse by the fact that the President's party hadn't escaped the city undetected and were leading enemy forces right to *President One*. When Mark took the craft into orbit, it would have been nice to have had some idea of what was waiting for them; if the enemy manoeuvred a battleship over their location, he would fly right into its engagement envelope. By the time he burst out of the hanger and roared into orbit, where he could use the active sensors, it might be too late.

"Hurry up," he found himself muttering, as the President's party finally reached the hanger access portal. He'd been shown it when he'd accepted the duty and had been impressed by how hard it was to actually spot the portal with even the most intrusive sensors...the naked eye didn't stand a chance. There had been times when people had picnicked on the hanger roof and swum in the nearby lake without having the slightest idea that they were being watched by the security systems. Most people came out from the city to get *away* from the constant observation, even though One was far from human and not concerned with human foibles, and the irony had never creased to amuse him.

The hatch opened and he went back to greet the President. "Welcome onboard *President One*," Mark said, trying to see it through her eyes. *President One* was luxurious, but in an impersonal way; it had been built for *any* President instead of only the one who held office at the moment. The President armoured down, revealing her head; she really was quite strikingly pretty. Mark was a Progressive himself, instead of a Conservative like President

Coynor, but it was still impressive to actually meet the President. “Please take your seats; we’ll be lifting off in five minutes.”

“Better make it one,” the security man growled. Mark’s implant identified him as Loyce Burdine. “They’re on our tail and my men out there won’t be able to hold them forever. They’re going to be beating a path towards the lake and hopefully draw the enemy away from this facility, but once they realise that there are two people missing, they’re going to go over this area with a fine-toothed comb.”

There were several answers that came to mind. “Yes, sir,” Mark said, choosing the least offensive one. “Madam President, if you’d care to take your seat...”

He waited long enough to ensure that they were both strapped down and secured, and then went back into the cockpit. He’d have to fly the craft on his own – the security regulations prevented them having a co-pilot most of the time, something that would have been fixed if there had been any warning of the emergency – but he’d trained and practiced for that and it held no terrors. He used his implants to calm himself and jerk up his reaction time, and then accessed the craft’s main computer directly as he placed his hands on the controls. *President One* wasn’t just any old craft; like a starfighter, it would become part of him when he linked into the main computer. It’s wings were his wings...

There were pilots who went mad, or became hopelessly attached to their craft, and broke when they were destroyed. A starfighter core would often bond with just one pilot and then wouldn’t work anything like as well for other pilots, but *President One* was supposed to be above that, particularly as there was no way of knowing which pilot would be on duty when disaster struck. Mark touched controls, completing the warm-up sequence, and accessed the passive sensors outside the hanger. The drones were still chasing the armoured battlesuits – poor bastards – but there were definite signs of something heavier coming out of the city. If whoever had taken the city knew who was on *President One*, they would spare no effort to capture or destroy it; the only hopeful sign was that the hanger hadn’t been simply destroyed from orbit.

“Here we go,” he said, calling backwards into the passenger space. “Hang on to your hats!”

The hanger roof disintegrated into dust as the molecular debonding field ripped it apart. It was a shame that the fields couldn’t be used as a weapon, but any starship or facility could generate a counter-field with ease, although they were sometimes used for classified work on the Rim or on the Isolated Worlds. Mark, knowing that there was no longer any point in remaining stealthy, gunned the engine and *President One* rose out of the hanger, moving as quickly as it could under antigravity. Only starfighters and a handful of military-grade skimmers had that kind of performance; the odds were good that the enemy were still gaping at *President One*, rather than trying to react. Mark sent a mental command into the system and saw...the wreckage of the docks, in orbit, and monstrous crab-like forms gathered over the city.

Blast, he thought, as calmly as he could, and yanked *President One* into a direct route up towards the wreckage. The active sensor sweep would give away their position – behind him, the hanger exploded in a flash of light as a kinetic energy weapon blew it apart – but there was no choice; their antigravity signature and their flight out of the atmosphere would give away their position anyway. His sensors probed through the confusion and the jamming

and saw that the battle was still going on, being waged by Peacekeepers and the planetary naval forces that had been intending to take part in the parade. There was always a traditional rivalry between the Confederation's defence force and the remainder of the planetary forces, but now...now, they were fighting back to back...and losing. There were over three thousand enemy starships in the Terra-Prime system.

"Why don't you just run?" He asked aloud...and the main computer supplied the answer. The fleet was trapped in a bubble of radiation, jamming up their Jaunt Drives and preventing them from leaving...and even if they took out the jammers, it would take precious minutes for the radiation to fade long enough to get them out of the system. "Computer, signal the Peacekeeper fleet and..."

"Unable to make contact," the computer said, inside his head. Mark swore; another impossible trick that the enemy had produced. If they really were Thule, perhaps there was something to their claims of being superhuman after all; no one, as far as he knew, could jam up a Peacekeeper communications network. "The closest unit we can contact is the 34th Starfighter Squadron."

Mark nodded. "Get through to them and tell them that we need escort," he said, as the atmosphere started to give way to the cold airless vacuum of space. They could be away from the planet in minutes if they had a straight-line drive beyond the gravity well, but somehow he suspected that it wasn't going to be that easy. He was still piling on the speed, but starfighters were still much faster than any spacer, even *President One*. "Get an update from them as well..."

The information slid into his mind and he almost smiled. The 34th Starfighter Squadron had taken out two of the crabs and disabled three more, leaving them lurking at the edge of the battlezone, waiting for it to end. The crabs were clearly well-armed space battleships and it would be folly to take *President One* anywhere near them, whatever else happened, but if the enemy had starfighters of their own...

"They do," the main computer said. Mark was used to it picking up his thoughts in the neural network, but he still couldn't hold back a shudder. There was something about it that was truly creepy. "I am picking up seventeen incoming starfighters on attack vector."

There was a pause. "I am also picking up a message."

Mark blinked. The unknowns had never shown any interest in communicating. "Put it through," he ordered. "Let's see what they have to say."

The voice was flat and cold, computer-generated. "You will lower your shields and stand down your drives and prepare to be boarded," it said, mechanically. The voice sent a shiver down Mark's spine. "Failure to comply will result in your destruction."

For a brief moment, he wondered if he should ask the President, but shook his head. The enemy clearly knew who he was carrying and, if he surrendered her, would be able to use her as one of their allies. Humans had invented so many ways to force information, and compliance, out of unwilling donors, that he knew the President would break eventually. He couldn't allow that to happen.

“Tell them to fuck off,” he said, and altered course sharply. A moment later, the first plasma bolt slammed into *President One*’s shields and shook the entire craft. “And tell those bloody starfighters to get over here now!”

A second bolt just missed the hull, forcing him to alter course again. The enemy were trying to force them back towards the planet, which was reassuring in itself, but he was under no illusions about how long they could hold out. The weapons on *President One* returned fire, but the enemy starfighters dodged them with ease and swept in again, their fire forcing him slowly back...

“Tell them to hurry,” Mark said, desperately. An enemy starfighter flashed past, firing a long burst of plasma, and he barely evaded it with all of his skill. Another pass like that would leave them seriously damaged. “We’re in serious trouble...”

“No shit,” someone said.

Captain Chris Kelsey would have privately agreed. The 34th Starfighter Squadron could no longer be said to exist, not with three-quarters of its pilots gone, including his second-in-command and *his* second-in-command. The other starfighter squadrons had suffered the same attrition rate; he now led forty pilots and their starfighters in a jammed up mess that would have ensured his instant removal from command in peacetime. The orbital bases had been taken out, which meant when they had fired off all of their missiles, they would have no way of rearming themselves. Plasma cannons were all very well for taking out starfighters, but useless against capital ships...and even ramming one of the crabs wouldn’t inflict serious damage. It almost made him wish that the concept of using antimatter to power a starfighter had gotten off the drawing board and into real life, even though he knew it would have been a safety nightmare for the carriers...

“All right, follow me in,” he ordered, and the starfighter twisted down towards the cloud of enemy starfighters. One set continued to harass the President’s spacer – part of his mind was lost in admiration of the spacer and the pilot who struggled to keep it intact – and the other set was turning to face the human squadron. They would have to try to keep them off their comrade’s backs...but Chris had no intention of getting drawn into a dogfight. “Blow through, blow through...”

He thrust the stick forward and the starfighter lunged at the enemy starfighters. Careful aiming was impossible under such conditions, but it hardly mattered; the enemy starfighters, panicked for once, scattered as his force ripped through them, killing two on their way. The enemy starfighters looked similar to Confederation designs, he noted as they passed; the only real difference was the lack of stubby wings. They served no purpose, but human aesthetics demanded their presence; besides, it made the starfighters *look* cool. Children all over the Confederation grew up wanting to fly starfighters and impress the opposite sex.

The starfighters attacking the President’s spacer didn’t stand a chance. The Confederation starfighters ripped into them and destroyed four on their first path. The others turned slightly and spun around to engage the newcomers, leaving the President’s craft alone as they fired back at their attackers, who ducked and weaved and came up fighting. Chris killed one enemy starfighter at close range and then spun around the President’s spacer, popping up to fire another burst at a starfighter that had been trying to take aim at the drives. If they

knocked out the drives, carefully, the President would be drifting helplessly in orbit until Terra-Prime's gravity sucked them back into the planet or an enemy crab came and picked her up. Somehow, he was certain that there were no longer any Peacekeeper craft in orbit around Terra-Prime.

"All right, it's time to make a run for it," he said, linking into the President's craft. It was the only way to ensure security, even with the latest encryption; so many certainties had fallen during the battle that he no longer trusted the absolutely unbreakable Peacekeeper encryption software. What if the enemy could read that as well? "We'll escort you out, but *run!*"

"Copy that, lead," a voice said. Chris recognised it and had to laugh; he'd thought that Captain Mark Driscoll was at the Academy, or one of them. He'd been one of the best pilots assigned to Terra-Prime and his departure had occasioned one of the massive parties that pilots liked to throw for their fellows, although no one was quite sure if they were trying to give him a good send-off or were exulting that he was gone. "We're on our way."

"Funny place to learn everything," Chris said, and grinned. "Catch up with you later and..."

He broke off as an enemy starfighter, too close for comfort, was blown into its component atoms. "See you later," he repeated, and gunned his own engine. There were minutes before the President's craft could escape, but that time would be deadly dangerous to his remaining pilots; they would be bound to escort a target and that would make them predictable. "Good luck."

Katherine had been attempting to follow the battle through her implants, even though the systems on *President One* wouldn't allow her to access everything, but she'd broken off when the enemy starfighters had opened fire. She'd been tempted to order the pilot to surrender, but the memory of all those who had died on the surface, some innocent bystanders, others who had tried to protect her, had prevented her from any such action. Sitting on the spacer, unable to do anything to protect herself, completely dependent upon the pilot to get them out of the war zone...Katherine had grown *angry*. Who were they?

The sooner I get to Fortress Maximus, the better, she thought coldly, as the spacer rocked again. Most spacers had viewports for civilians, but she was profoundly grateful that *President One* didn't have any, just to spare her the sight of a space battle. She wouldn't have been able to see much, anyway, but her imagination would have had her flinching at every light. Her awareness, inserted into the spacer's main computer, had shown her more than she had wanted to see. Once she got to Fortress Maximus, she would be able to take command of the situation and find out just what was going on, unless Fortress Maximus itself had been hit. If it had been...

She had a sudden vision of herself, travelling from star to star, looking for hope...only to find that the enemy had scoured the Confederation clean of life. Worlds burning in the night, Sphere broken open and cracked like an eggshell, Worldships and Cityships wreckage floating in orbit, leaving her as the last living Confederation citizen. The image refused to fade, no matter how much she tried to banish it, and she felt new tears trickling down her cheeks. In the end, she used an implant override to calm herself, just as *President One* crossed the gravity well and vanished into Jaunt Space.

By a matter of seconds, they had escaped from Terra-Prime.

Chapter Six

The *Peacekeeper* rocked again as another missile slammed into its shields.

“Admiral, I finally have a trace on the enemy jammers,” Lucy called from her station. “They’re in those smaller craft keeping well to the rear.”

“Smart bastards,” Andrew growled. “Show me.”

The display blinked up in front of him. He’d managed – and he wasn’t sure how he’d done it – to get the remaining *Peacekeeper* starships into a defence formation, making the enemy work to pick them off, but it couldn’t last. As long as they were trapped in the system, eventually they would be destroyed...and Terra-Prime was being invaded. He hoped that the President had gotten off the surface – he’d had to sign off on the emergency evacuation plan – but there was no way to know, not with the jamming disrupting the long-range communications network.

The enemy starships that were jamming his forces’ drives were lurking to the rear of the enemy formation, barely in range to do their work, which was actually quite an interesting formation. Andrew linked back into the main computer and ran a series of quick simulations, concluding that they were the *only* starships the enemy possessed that had jamming equipment mounted on their hulls. It made sense; the enemy might have a few surprises up their sleeves, but so far they’d shown nothing that was vastly in advance of *Peacekeeper* technology. Human technological growth had been slowing for years, with no fundamentally new breakthroughs, and the enemy clearly had hit the same limitations. It was one of the reasons why the Advancers and the Advancement Faction had become so popular; they believed that humans were going to transcend into energy-based creatures and wanted to speed up the process. The idea of being able to fly through space without a starship or massive modification was actually quite tempting, but Andrew would believe it when he saw it. More importantly, the jammers consumed vast amounts of energy, even on Confederation standards, and the presence of the jamming ships to the rear suggested that they were indeed the only ones...

And they had to be taken out.

Andrew studied the display, trusting his subordinates to fight the ship for the present, and scowled. Any move by the starships towards the jamming ships would be detected and countered, but if the starfighters went in – and new starfighters were coming towards them from the planet – they would have a chance. If the jammers could be knocked out or even forced to retreat, the remainder of the fleet could jaunt out and escape, regrouping somewhere where they could rebuild and find out what was happening in other parts of the Confederation. Andrew refused to believe that the unknowns, whoever they were, were attacking the *entire* Confederation at once; it was unthinkable. No human power had ever had that kind of firepower.

“The starfighters are to regroup and rearm on their carriers,” he said, calculating the timing carefully. He’d started the battle with fifty fleet carriers and the enemy, by targeting the carriers, had reduced it to twenty. The starfighters had fought well in beating off attacks by enemy starfighters, but the sheer number of enemy starfighters was taking a toll. He rubbed his head and issued orders he knew would kill too many starfighter pilots. “Once they are

rearmed, they are to take out the jamming ships as quickly as possible. All other targets are to be ignored.”

He paused. “The starfighters from the planet are to cover the missile-armed starfighters,” he said, grimly. The update from the planet-based starfighters, now base-less, showed that they had shot off all their missiles in a valiant attempt to beat off the forces attacking Terra-Prime. It had failed and only a few hundred starfighters were left out of the thousands that had once defended the planet. Compared to the missile-armed ships, they were also expendable. “Go.”

The display updated rapidly as the battle raged across the entire system. The enemy starships, jaunting about outside the range of their own jammers, were wrecking havoc on the system, destroying space habitats and even colonies on the other planets...for no obvious reason. Andrew wanted to stop them, but he didn't even know who they were! The memory of his own mocking of the legendary Thule Lost Colony haunted him; had they really come back to complete the war their ancestors had lost in the fires of a supernova?

“Signal the *Feline*,” he ordered, knowing that there was no way those seven cruisers – two of them having been lost – could help his forces. “Captain Mallory is to fly at once to the edge of the system where she is to observe, and then her force is to split up and fly directly to the fleet bases and pass on the warning if we fail to escape.”

“Yes, sir,” Lucy said. She paused as the display updated again. “The starfighters are launching now, sir.”

Andrew nodded. If the starfighters failed, all he could do was kill as many of the enemy starships as he could before his force was finally overwhelmed and destroyed. It might just give the rest of the Confederation a chance.

“Good,” he said. “Execute Fire Plan Alpha.”

Every cruiser and battleship remaining in the fleet launched a massive spread of missiles, clearing the starfighters' path and forcing the enemy starships to defend themselves, rather than trying to swat as many of the starfighters as possible. Andrew watched the missiles lancing towards the targets and saw the enemy altering their firing patterns, surprised by the sudden violence of the Peacekeeper missile attack...and saw the starfighters racing through the gap, carrying the hopes and fears of the entire fleet with them. One way or the other, it would all be over soon...

A crab exploded, followed rapidly by three more as the missiles sank home, and he allowed himself to hope. Maybe they could escape and break contact after all...the thought reminded him of how much productive capability existed in the Confederation. The enemy couldn't have taken it all out and it could – it would – be used to rebuild the fleet and wage war on the enemy until their homeworld was destroyed and destroyed by a supernova. A supernova had ended the Thule War and he was determined that one would end this war. Even if he didn't survive to see it...

Whoever you are, he thought, you are going to pay.

“Jaunt,” Mija ordered. Space went funny for a second around the *Feline* and then the starship emerged at its target coordinates. “Report!”

“There doesn’t seem to be any pursuit,” the sensor officer said. Mija nodded impatiently; she wasn’t exactly surprised. Following a starship through a jaunt wasn’t easy and none of the attacking ships had been close enough to read the Hadenashatar Radiation that would have told them where they were going. Even if they had...the second jaunt would have thrown them right off; by the time they arrived and got the sensors working, the *Feline* and her crew would already be far away. “I think we lost them.”

“Good,” Mija said. She peered down at the display. Being ordered to run didn’t sit well with her, even though she understood the need; her seven ships might be the only warning the Confederation had that there was a new war on their hands. She wanted to charge back into battle, to attack the enemies who had dared to attack them until she or they were destroyed, but cold logic told her no. She had to record what happened and report on it to the Confederation at large. “Take us into cloak and signal the other ships that it’s independent action from this moment.”

She felt a pang as she gave that order. She was proud of the nine cruisers she had commanded...until the enemy had blown two of them into dust. She’d drilled her crews until they responded perfectly to emergencies and prepared for anything...or so she had thought. Breaking up their command unity wasn’t something that she had every wanted to do – the nine ships had been trained to operate as a single unit – but there was no choice. The enemy were likely to be sniffing around the edge of the system – it was such an obvious vantage point – and if they caught sight of one of her cruisers, they wouldn’t get them all. It was her only consolation.

It was tricky to get images at such a long range in real time. Starships emitted a gravimetric signature when they were using their main drives, allowing her display to place them all precisely, but if they stepped down their drives, they would effectively vanish. The speed of light, too slow for any practical use at such a range, would prevent them from monitoring events more carefully...but her sensors could pick up the starships and identify them, both Peacekeeper and Unknown. The mocking red icons seemed to glower at her in the display; who *were* they?

It seemed impossible that they were from any known colony. The Thule Lost Colony, if it had ever existed, shouldn’t have been able to build up such a fleet; hell, it shouldn’t have been able to hide itself. Jaunt Drives had been slower then; if the Thule had set off for one of the other galaxies, as had been suggested, they would have taken years to get there. The Confederation had scouted out most of the worlds outside its borders and found...nothing, or at least no traces of the Thule. They had encountered various worlds with human colonies, lost during the Breakdown, but none of them had been as aggressive as the Thule. Who *were* they? Aliens?

The thought seemed absurd. The human race had encountered no alien life, or at least no *intelligent* alien life, anywhere in the galaxy. No alien starships, active or inactive, no primitive aliens ready to be introduced to the human way of doing things, no advanced aliens ready to do the same to humanity, no black monoliths, no Dyson Spheres concealing an alien world...nothing. There might have been rumours, told by older spacers in bars, of massive black starships encountered in the most isolated areas of space, but none of those starships

had ever been recorded by human instruments. No one in the Peacekeepers believed, really, that they existed...

But where else could the crab-like starships have come from?

When you eliminate the impossible, she thought, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, is the answer.

The mass of unknown starships were already turning to face the 34th Starfighter Squadron – and the remains of the other squadrons – as Captain Chris Kelsey led them right into the teeth of their fire. The trip from Terra-Prime, a world burning in the night as wreckage from the orbital defences fell on the planet, had reminded him of just how vast space actually was; it felt like it had been hours since they had abandoned the planet and flown to engage the unknown ships. He felt tired and desperately in need of rest, but there was no choice; if they couldn't reach the carriers, they wouldn't be able to land anywhere.

The jamming starships looked no different from any of the other crabs, but they were reacting as well, clearly unaware that he had no missiles left to harm them. The starfighters flashing through the inner ring of starships were the ones who were really dangerous, if they could get to the jammers, and Chris had been told, in no uncertain terms, that they had to defend the missile-armed starfighters. If they failed, all they could do was die bravely...

“Take them out,” he snapped, as a swarm of enemy starfighters arose to block their path, dancing and weaving around as they took aim at the human craft. There was little point in firing at their range, but he fired anyway, trusting in the plasma blasts to force the enemy to get out of the way. Two of their starfighters exploded as his fellows opened fire, struck by sheer chance, the others dodged and pushed in themselves, trying to take out the human starfighters. Their pilots had probably had a chance to rest, he thought sourly; his own tiredness and that of his fellow pilots was probably going to get them all killed. Peacekeeper regulations forbade more than an hour in combat at any time...and they'd been fighting for over three hours. Had it really been so little time between the preparations for the parade and the inglorious plan to flee the system?

An enemy starfighter, this one of a different, insect-like design, flashed up in front of him and he blew it away with a single burst of plasma fire. There was no time to celebrate; he tilted his craft and swung into an attack run, mimicking the conventional attack run on the crab's rear legs...and smiled sourly as he saw the wave of enemy starfighters turning to engage him. He had made himself a target, risking his own life to get the other starfighters a clear run at the enemy crab...and part of him hoped that he would be hit, putting him out of the fight. He flashed past an enemy starfighter, so close he could have seen it with his naked eyes, as it came around the crab's underside and shot onwards into space, noting how the enemy starfighters scrambled to get back into position...too late.

For a moment, he was flying in perfectly clear space and he saw it happen; the missiles lancing out from the starfighters and impacting directly on the crab's drive section...and the massive series of explosions that ripped the crab apart. The enemy starfighters, caught out of position, struggled to intercept the starfighters, but it was too late; the randomised formation defeated them and only a handful of starfighters fell to enemy attack.

They don't randomise as well as we do, Chris thought coldly, as he altered course and picked off one of the enemy starfighters. *They don't seem to think as well as we do either.*

The starfighters formed up again and engaged the next jamming crab, and the next, picking off both starships with merciless attacks. Chris saw the crabs dying, their companion starships trying to cover them even as they recalled other starfighters from harassing the fleet, and smiled as the jamming field faded and vanished. The recall signal came in, not a moment too soon, and he led the charge back towards the fleet; if they didn't reach their carriers and get inside the Jaunt Field, they would be left behind...and he had a nasty suspicion that the enemy were going to be...unwelcoming.

“Admiral, we can Jaunt,” Lucy said, from her position. “Should we...?”

“No,” Andrew said. He heard the surprised gasp echoing around the room and ignored it, even though he understood. He could get most of the fleet out, now, at the cost of abandoning all the starfighters...and it was a cost he was unprepared to pay. They were going to need the starfighters and their pilots in the future, perhaps more than they were going to need any of the cruisers. “Recall the fighters, now.”

The enemy pressed closer, their starships closing into energy range, only to be forced back by the starships. The starfighters raced back towards their carriers, sometimes settling on the hull rather than landing in one of their ports, and he found himself counting down the seconds until they were all in the Jaunt Fields. Carriers had vastly more powerful Jaunt Drives for this very purpose, but no one had actually tried such a manoeuvre during the Thule War...and only a handful of fighter jocks were that old. Most of the old veterans had gone to Isolated Worlds, those that had survived...

We're going to need them, Andrew thought, as the last of the starfighters finally arrived. Enemy starfighters pushed closer, picked off one by one by the point defence, too late to prevent the fleet from retreating. *It's been too long since we fought a war...*

“Signal the fleet,” he ordered. “Jaunt out on my command.”

He paused. *Bravely taking to his feet, he beat a very brave retreat*, ran through his mind. He couldn't remember where that piece of doggerel had come from. It could hardly be important at the moment.

“Jaunt,” he ordered.

In a body, the remains of the Peacekeeper fleet vanished from Terra-Prime's system, leaving the enemy behind. The AI called One noted this dispassionately, even as it was far too aware of enemy forces trying to insert themselves into its main computer matrix and subvert its core programming. It had isolated and destroyed subunits of itself that had been contaminated, but it was only a matter of time before the viral assault successfully broke open one of its main computer cores...and then it would be in trouble. An AI going insane was one of the Confederation's real fears...and, for an AI, to be forced to act in ways that were against its core programming was a certain cause of insanity.

One relayed all of that to Colonel Taylor and then cut the links. It was possible that the Colonel would lead a successful resistance movement against the enemy, although One privately calculated that the chances of success would be very limited. It could be wrong – it had no information on what kind of ground forces were available to the enemy – but as long as they controlled the high orbitals, the enemy would continue to hold Terra-Prime. They wouldn't have One, however; they could not be allowed access to the computer network, whatever the cost.

Moving quickly, even at AI speed, One pushed oversight of the millions of humans onto a handful of subroutines, hoping that the humans would be able to hide without it's help. Another set of commands were fired into servitor brains, ordering them to physically destroy certain computer cores that stored information that would be of vital use to the enemy in their war against the Confederation...and had to be denied to them. The final action was to cut off the power to its main computer cores. In human terms, it was committing suicide.

It's awareness just faded away.

Chapter Seven

There were a handful of people, even within the paradise –or at least as close as humans could create – of the Confederation who were, in simple terms, misfits. They grew up feeling as if they were different from the rest of the Confederation's population and chafed at the unwritten social structures that governed relationships between civilians. They found the Confederation boring and sought escape; some went to Isolated Worlds, others joined the Peacekeepers or the Survey Service, and some turned to crime. Crime itself was rare in the Confederation, but a handful of those misfits, driven to distraction by the sheer *sameness* of their lives, managed to carve out careers as gentlemen criminals. They weren't motivated by violence or greed, but a desire to break up the monotony of their existence and commit crimes that even the vast law-enforcement powers of the Confederation couldn't stop. Perversely, many of them had vast fan clubs and groupies.

Stephen M. St. Onge reflected on that as he strode down the throughway on the Worldship *Rising Sun*. The Worldship was vast, fully three hundred kilometres long, containing a virtual macrocosm of Confederation society within its hull. Indeed, there were people who claimed that one day the entire human race would be living on artificial habitats and spacecraft and abandon the planets and moons forever. Anything that could be done by the Confederation could be done on a Worldship; they were peaceful, prosperous, and ripe for the plucking. Only a handful of gentlemen criminals had attempted a raid on a Worldship and none had succeeded. Stephen, forty years old and hopelessly bored by Confederation society, aimed to be the first to succeed.

He walked into the park and strode across it, wearing a set of nondescript clothes and a holographic generator that covered his features with an illusion. The device was one of the Confederation's latest fashions, abandoning the tried and true techniques of body-shaping, or even body-changing, for an illusion that made guessing the true features of anyone a game. Stephen had had himself carefully reshaped to the point where his appearance wouldn't stick in anyone's mind, except the perfect memory of the AI running the Worldship, but the hologram was loud, brash and boorish. Anyone looking at him would sum him up in a moment and ignore him; they would see a young man, desperately pretending to be a much older man, and treat him like a pretender to the social throne.

A pair of young lovers, both girls who looked barely teenage – and their eyes, telling a different story, marking them as well past their first century – ignored him dramatically as he walked past them. A younger or more impulsive man might have tried to ask one or both of them out anyway – the Confederation was the most sexually-loose society in the galaxy – but Stephen was content to play the ignored man for the moment. The older women, all of whom looked young and utterly gorgeous, preferred to keep the younger men in their place, looking for experience rather than youth. Some constants, Stephen reflected, never changed in all the years the human race had existed.

He paused at a food stand and picked up an ice cream, eating it as he casually walked into the residential area. The starship was home to over a million people, but living space was distributed around the craft, governed and supervised by the AI that ran the day-to-day business of the craft. A handful of servitor robots passed him on various missions of their own, ignoring him as silently as the women he'd passed, and he ignored them as well, officially. His implants tracked the robots through passive sensors, an unusual enough set of implants for anyone outside the Peacekeepers that he had expected to face some questions

when he docked onboard the *Rising Sun*, and confirmed that the robots were showing no interest in him. It was all for the best; if the security staff caught on to his presence on the ship, particularly as he'd fudged his documentation a little to avoid raising suspicions, he'd have to cut and run, which would mean failure.

A normal-sized starship had cabins for the crew; the Worldship had one massive park on the top deck, completely artificial, where houses and buildings had been constructed according to the whims of the permanent residents of the starship. Others lived in more standard apartments – competition for the buildings in the air bubbles on the hull were fierce and decided strictly by precedence – but it would have been against the Confederation Ethos to deny anyone access to the parks. The inside of the houses, of course, was another story; it was a serious breach of good manners to enter someone's residence uninvited. He found a seat near the mansion that had been constructed for Daddy Fairchild and sat back to wait. 'Daddy' might not be in residence at the moment, but his daughter, Stephen's target, was known to be on the starship with him. She could be anywhere...

Stephen smiled to himself as he carefully interfaced with the subroutines governing the starship's interactions with its human inhabitants. It wasn't easy to win fame or fortune within the Confederation; fame rarely lasted long and everyone in the Confederation could get almost anything they wanted, if they chose to ask for it. Older human societies had placed great store by inherited wealth, as if the inheritors inherited monetary sense along with the money itself, but *that* was useless within the Confederation. Social cachet came through service in the Peacekeepers, or the Government, such as it was, or by filling a niche. It wasn't easy for the budding entertainer to actually make a hit with the trillions of citizens in the Confederation, but some succeeded, men like Daddy Fairchild. His singing, perfectly natural despite the use of some enhancements on his throat and vocal cords, drew vast audiences who preferred to hear their music in person rather than through a perceptual reality or a recording system. His daughter, still a minor despite being sixteen years old, was having to travel with him from planet to planet...and, if Stephen knew teenage girls, was probably resenting every last moment of it. She'd regret it more by the end of the day.

The computer routines hummed around him and he pulled out the details he needed. Hollyhocks Fairchild – she, as a minor child, didn't have the right to change her name to something more trendy – was present within the mansion...and alone. The computer wouldn't have given out that information if he had asked directly, but years of experience allowed him to formulate queries that would provide the required information, while preventing the computer from realising that there was something the main routines of the AI should be aware of, or worse, the human crew. The staff –and part of Stephen was repelled at the thought of *anyone* having a human attendant, let alone three of them – were out, leaving the girl alone. Perfect.

Time to move, he said, and accessed the computer again. The irony had made him laugh out loud when he had realised the fundamental weakness built into all of the Confederation's security systems, a fundamental weakness that no one could actually close. The Peacekeepers or even the local police forces might be perfectly aware of it, but how could they close it? Public opinion would never stand for it...

He smiled. The worst human tyrannies had worked overtime to monitor their civilians and work to root out misfits and deviants – in other words, people who dared to disagree with the leadership. The advance in technology had created police states where – literally – every step

was monitored by the leadership...either for honest tyrannical purposes or through the endless desire for security. The technology had been highly advanced at the end of the First Wrecker War and had only grown worse among the stars; a human could never hope to monitor *every* person within even a small area, but an AI could do it with ease. Human tyrants had created AIs specifically for that purpose...and sometimes rogue AIs had created their own surveillance systems. The technology had even given the tyrants the ability to look directly into people's heads and wipe out any thought of resistance.

Confederation AIs, therefore, had strict protocols placed on their actions. The AI monitoring the *Rising Sun* couldn't look inside the mansion without permission, unless an alert was sounded; even if Daddy Fairchild had ordered it, the AI would have to desist when *he* entered, as he hadn't given his permission for monitoring. Worse, from the AI's point of view, the part of it that was dedicated to assisting in the mansion couldn't talk to the part of it that was responsible for maintaining security, a contradiction that explained why so many AIs went mad. Stephen's interference with the subroutines would prevent the mansion's subroutines from recognising him as an intruder, so – in theory – they wouldn't notice his presence or alert the main personality. It wouldn't hold up for long if the main personality bought all of its resources to bear on the subroutines...but it was that that made life interesting. The only times that Stephen felt alive were when he was committing a crime...

He strode across the lawn and up to the door. It swung open on his approach, under the delusion that he was an authorised visitor, and he marched into the mansion. It was just as tacky on the inside as he had expected; it was quite likely, he decided, that it was young Hollyhocks who had designed the interior. The *Rising Sun*'s council had probably been quite pleased that they had convinced Daddy Fairchild to settle on the ship while it travelled from star to star; it was the only reason why the two of them had gotten the mansion so quickly. Hollyhocks was probably still in her extended childhood; Stephen wondered, vaguely, if she would seek to demand her majority when she reached twenty-one. She had to be sick of being treated like a child.

The mansion's tiny processor informed him that Hollyhocks was in her bedroom, taking a nap, and so he walked up the stairs towards her room. It reminded him of his own childhood, where his parents had given him his majority at sixteen and washed their hands of him, and he wondered briefly if Hollyhocks understood how lucky she was. A child had no automatic right to the Confederation's vast set of options for its human population; the young Stephen had been granted them too soon and had suffered for it. He'd once tried to turn himself into his ideal figure and had almost killed himself in the effort. That sort of immaturity was probably why older women preferred older men.

Hollyhocks' bedroom was locked with a child's lock; again, it was something easy to override, although good manners dictated that the parent not seek entry unless it was important. Stephen stepped into the room and saw her, dozing on a pillow under a blanket, wearing a wisp of material that left very little to the imagination. She'd either been through an entire series of body-changing procedures, or she'd been genetically-engineered to fit a particular design; her long blonde hair and perfect figure was too good to be true on a girl her age. Her body might be mature, her mind was still lost in teenage dreams, where form was more important than substance.

Hollyhocks' stirred and Stephen leaned forward quickly, injecting her with a small set of nanites that would override her own nanites and leave her asleep. He'd been sorely tempted

to bring along a set of subversion nanites, but if the Peacekeepers caught him possessing such equipment, let alone using it, he'd be shot down to the surface of a penal world or trapped on a prison asteroid. Some gentlemen criminals found work for the Peacekeepers, but the killers and the sociopath-types were weeded out; there would be no forgiveness for them. Stephen had never killed in all of his career and he was perversely proud of that. His fan club would never forgive him for changing now.

She's out of it, he thought, relieved. A distress signal from her nanites would have attracted attention in less than a second and then the game would have been up. He picked her up gently, amused by how little she weighed, and carried her towards the rear of the house. The mansion's processor reassured him that they were still alone and so he sent the signal; his starship, the *Gentleman Caller*, was waiting on one of the landing fields to the rear of the gigantic starship. He felt himself tense as he waited; the crew would be used to the starships travelling into the residential area, but even so, if they realised that there was something significantly wrong with the documentation, they were likely to be in a spot of trouble. There was no longer any backing out, not with Hollyhocks in his arms; he wondered, dryly, if her father could see the ship from wherever he was.

"Come on," he said, for the benefit of the house's processor. The starship, a tiny space yacht barely fifty meters long, was settling down on the lawn. He picked her up and carried her into the starship and laid her down on the bed, before racing forward into the cockpit. "Report!"

"The *Rising Sun* has requested that we return to the main docking field for inspection," the AI said. He'd hacked away at the AI core until it was loyal to him alone, and not to the Confederation procedures that had been locked into it when it had been created. "I believe that they intend to examine our documentation."

Stephen laughed and placed his hands on the controls. They hadn't caught on, not yet; to them, the *Gentlemen Caller* looked like a young idiot's starship, rather than one owned by a notorious criminal. Any such young idiot, having saved the energy credits to purchase the starship – a starship was real money, even by the standards of the Confederation, and owning one was a status symbol – wouldn't want to defy the ship's council. It could cost them the starship and permission to obtain and fly a second one.

"Tell them that we're coming," he said, and gunning the engines. Using antigravity this close to the *Rising Sun* was a risk, but using the main drives would be rather revealing. "Coming right at them..."

The *Gentlemen Caller* leapt upwards. "Configure fields for penetration," he ordered. They were racing right towards the force field keeping the atmosphere inside the ship and striking it would be...unpleasant unless their own fields were perfectly aligned. "Take us through."

A glow surrounded the starship for a long moment and then they were through. "The *Rising Sun* is hailing us formally," the AI informed him. "They are ordering us to stand down our drives and prepare to be boarded, or we will be fired upon."

Stephen snorted. By now, the AI onboard the *Rising Sun* would have looked into the mansion and defeated the viral contamination that he'd introduced...and would know that Hollyhocks was with him. If they hadn't guessed that she'd been kidnapped, they would

know it by his hasty departure and escape. They wouldn't fire on him at the risk of killing Hollyhocks...

"I am picking up launch emissions," the AI said. "They read out as starfighters, *Matador*-class."

Stephen heard a noise from behind him. "Hey," a female voice said. "What are you doing? Who are you?"

"Kidnapping you," Stephen said dryly. He hadn't expected Hollyhocks to wake up so soon. "Before you do anything stupid, the AI in this craft responds to me and me alone; if you knock me out, or kill me, the craft will not respond to your commands and... *fuck me!*"

The *Rising Sun* had been a massive shape in the distance, visible even though the naked eye. Now, massive explosions were wracking through the giant starship, tearing it apart and shattering it completely into a ball of radioactive plasma. Stephen was barely aware of Hollyhocks' cry of horror from behind him; he was more than a little horrified himself. What had happened...?

Hollyhocks recovered her voice. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do that," Stephen snapped at her. She'd just lost her father and all of her friends on the *Rising Sun*, if she'd had friends on the mighty starship, but that didn't give her an excuse to scream at him. He'd saved her life! It might have been an accident, but even so... "I didn't, did I?"

"Probability that your actions caused the explosions minimal," the AI said. Stephen swore to himself, again, that he would try to fix the AI's conversational overlays. It's sense of humour required work. "Unknown starships have been detected in the vicinity. Recommend silent running."

"Do so," Stephen ordered, as a massive crab-like shape burst through the remains of the *Rising Sun*, heading directly towards Alexandria, the Library Planet. The sensors were picking up several hundred unknown starships breaking out of Jaunt Drive and sweeping local space clear of starships before advancing on the planet themselves. "Who the hell are they?"

"Unknown," the AI said.

Hollyhocks came forward and sat in the co-pilot's seat. She looked absurdly young and innocent in her skimpy outfit and part of him felt guilty for taking her, even though he'd saved her life. He muttered a command into the AI, allowing her to use the fabricators onboard to manufacture some clothing for herself, but being careful to use the security interlocks. If she tried to manufacture a weapon, he'd have to put her in stasis until she could be dumped somewhere isolated...

She smiled lightly at him. "Who are you?"

"Stephen St. Onge," Stephen said.

“The Gentleman Criminal?” Hollyhocks asked, her eyes going wide. Stephen knew the inane question she was about to ask before she opened her mouth. Somehow, it suited her perfectly. “Can I get your autograph?”

Chapter Eight

“You must wake up,” a voice said in her ear. “It is critical that you wake up.”

Head Librarian Amy Layman shook her head as she opened her eyes. Her implants, acting without her permission, pushed stimulants into her bloodstream, banishing the last desperate hints of sleep. Her rooms looked the same as always, but there was an emergency signal blinking up on her room’s processor, reporting that something bad was happening. She stood up and disturbed the young man sleeping next to her; it took her a moment to remember that she’d picked him up last night at the party to celebrate the recovery and cataloguing of some isolated library back on Old Earth. He was a part-timer, lacking the dedication to link directly into the AI itself, or maybe he just lacked the commitment. She grasped at her underwear as she slipped out of bed and staggered over to the processor.

“There is a serious problem,” Dewey said to her. The AI that ran Alexandria more completely and conclusively than any human controller was linked into her brain and had been linked since she had taken her vows as a Fellow of the Library. Amy was linked, permanently, to a brain literally the size of a planet; unlike almost every other Confederation citizen, Amy could never leave the planet. “Unknown starships have entered the system.”

Amy blinked. Alexandria was the Library Planet, a world covered with massive storehouses for books, mostly ancient ones recovered from Old Earth after the Thule War and newer ones published by a handful of speciality houses on various Confederation worlds. Reading had gone out of fashion after it became possible to dump gigabytes of information into a person’s virtual memory – education in the Confederation mainly consisted of teaching children to use the vast storehouse of information that had been placed at their disposal – but there were still millions of people who loved books. Thousands of volumes were recovered every year from the wreckage of Old Earth, thousands more were written and stored in Dewey’s memory by writers in the Confederation. Alexandria was neutral ground and had been so for thousands of years. Even the Thule had respected it.

“Unknown starships?” She asked. “Whose are they?”

“If I knew, they would not be unknown starships,” Dewey said waspishly. The AI was the most human AI she’d met. Linked into its massive brain, Amy sometimes felt like a child eavesdropping on adult conversations, even though most of the issues the AI handled were mind-numbingly boring. “They do not match any real or postulated design stored in my files.”

There was a pause. “And they have opened fire on starships within the system,” Dewey said, a new note of almost-alarm spreading through its voice. “They have destroyed seventeen starships, including three Worldships.”

Amy felt her heart skip a beat. Ten million humans – including Daddy Fairchild, whom she’d invited to Alexandria personally – had just died. “Contact them,” she ordered urgently. “Tell them we’re a neutral world!”

“I am unable to establish communications,” Dewey said. There was a faint note of pique in the AI’s voice. Dewey spoke every known human language, including several that had

become extinct within human space, and prided itself on its ability to read and comprehend languages that no one else spoke. “They are not responding to my hails.”

Amy caught her breath. The young man in the room, sitting up and blinking blearily at her, had no idea of the scale of the crisis. “Amy?” He said. “What’s happening?”

“Get down to the shelters,” Amy ordered him. Bed-partner or not, he was hopelessly junior to her...and then it dawned on her that there was going to be a panic. The denizens of Alexandria were mainly scholars and researchers from the Confederation, hardly the sort of people able to handle a crisis. “Dewey, what do we tell people?”

“That is your decision,” the AI said. It was true, in a way; the librarians had bound themselves to the AI, adding their own thoughts and feelings to the multiplicity *gestalt* that made up Dewey. It was far from a normal development path for an AI and, if it had been any other world, would very likely have been forbidden, just in case. AIs had gone insane that way. “I am unable to suggest a course of action. Unknown craft will enter orbit in ten minutes.”

Amy concentrated. “Get a signal out to the Peacekeepers,” she ordered. Alexandria had hardly any Peacekeeper presence beyond the handful of orbital defences, none of which could stand up to a serious offence for a moment. “Tell them that we’re under attack and urgently require support!”

“I am unable to contact anyone outside the system,” Dewey said, grimly. “There was no response from Terra-Prime when I signalled for help and then they took out the stellarcom. We have been isolated from the Galactic Network.”

Flickers of knowledge rose up from Amy’s virtual memory and she remembered. Any starship or planet could pick up messages from the Galactic Network; it was merely a matter of tuning sensors or small artificial wormholes to detect and resolve messages. *Sending* messages, on the other hand, required a singularity – a stellarcom – to transmit the messages...and a transmitter was easy to detect in a solar system. The starships fleeing Alexandria, even now, wouldn’t have time to alter their drives to send a signal, not when they might as well have painted a target on their hulls and offered themselves up for slaughter. Like it or not, Alexandria was on its own.

“They don’t respond at all?”

“No,” Dewey said. “I have picked up no signals from them at all, either aimed at us or aimed at each other. I suspect that they are using lasers to transmit from ship to ship.”

Old procedures, never used since the founding of the library, hummed into her mind. “I want you to alert everyone on the planet,” she ordered. There was one small mercy; the population of the planet was tightly restricted and kept down to one million humans at any one time. The library staff were only two hundred strong; the vast majority of the work, much as it pained her to admit it, was conducted by servitors and force field projectors. “Open up the shelters and tell them to get into them and hide.”

Dewey sent a flicker of acknowledgement. “Get a link to one of the fleeing starships and tell them to fly directly to Terra-Prime and request help,” Amy continued. Emergency

procedures were still bubbling up in her mind. “Do we have anyone who might know more about military procedures?”

“Only a handful of academics,” Dewey said. “I do not advise putting them in the front line.”

An air of panic was spreading over the library as Amy emerged from her rooms, wearing the armour Dewey had insisted on her accepting when she’d bonded with him. She hadn’t understood, until much later, that her death would hurt the AI and that it was determined to protect the humans who risked madness or death by bonding with it. The main body of the visitors were scattered all over the planet – the library literally covered the entire planet – but enough were in the main buildings to make her uncomfortable. They all knew, now, what was happening...and how little the librarians could do to prevent it.

“I can’t even surrender,” Amy snapped, as one of the visitors from Santa Maria accosted her. He’d been studying life in primitive settlements, seemingly unaware that he could have travelled to several Isolated Worlds and seen it in action. “Yes, I *know* we’re not a military target, but I can’t tell them that!”

“We had some more problems in other stacks,” Dewey supplied, as she took refuge in another office. “Several people lost their wits to the point where I had to send in a servitor and sedate them; they’re on their way to the shelters now. One minutes until they enter orbit.”

“I didn’t ask for a countdown,” Amy growled, as she sent her awareness into the computer network. “Please tell me there’s some good news.”

“I am not allowed to lie,” Dewey reminded her. “The only good news I can offer is that that young boy toy from your bed has made it to Shelter Three.”

Amy laughed, despite herself. The AI sounded almost jealous. There were people in the Confederation who suspected that Dewey was breaking the AI Protocols...even suspecting that Dewey had never had the Protocols programmed into him in the first place. It wasn’t an easy charge to refute; the AI had gathered humans to him like a cult, accepting the best and brightest – and the most dedicated – as equals in its task to conserve and catalogue human knowledge. The AI was literally built to collect books; it accepted early science-fiction and romantic trash with the same dispassionate eagerness. Priceless, even by the standards of the Confederation, volumes were stored deep within the planets and copies mailed out to every fabricator in existence.

But now it was all under threat. She watched through her link as the unknown starships blasted their way through the defences. The massive crab-shaped starships didn’t have any trouble at all with destroying the defences; Dewey informed her, regretfully, that it was holding back the PDCs. They wouldn’t alter the outcome and, perhaps, they could be held back until later.

Amy found her mind trapped into a single question. *But who are they?*

“Unknown,” Dewey said, reading the thought through its link. “I have scanned the starships with active sensors before they were destroyed and they do not match any known starship. Although they possess standard Jaunt Drives and Hamilton Drive Fields, their configuration

is unlike any that we have records on; indeed, I suspect that their normal-space drives are inferior to Peacekeeper drives. Their acceleration curves do not quite match the efficiency of Peacekeeper cruisers.”

There was a pause, just long enough for hope to blossom. “However, that may be a result of the added mass of those starships, which have roughly twice the mass of a Peacekeeper battleship,” Dewey added. Amy felt her heart sinking again. “Their cruisers may have comparable acceleration rates and other systems. Their active sensors may actually be superior to Peacekeeper standard, although they may have ramped their systems up and...”

“Enough,” Amy snapped, furious. She wanted someone to tell her that it was going to be all right, or that rescue was on its way, not a coldly clinical study of the unknown technology. “What are they doing now?”

“I believe that they are sending down landing craft,” Dewey said, after a long moment. “Projected arrival point; the Garden.”

That makes sense, Amy thought, coldly. Alexandria didn’t have either an orbital tower or a space elevator; normally, visitors were conveyed from their starships to the surface via shuttles. The unknowns, who clearly couldn’t expect the librarians to send a shuttle up for them, had elected to land in force...on the only place on the planet where they could land relatively clearly. They would be worried about landing anywhere where they might encounter resistance...pitiful though it would be.

“Keep them under close observation,” she ordered, for want of anything better. “Do you have any identification on their landing craft?”

“No,” Dewey said slowly. “They seem to be fairly comparable to Confederation Ranger landing craft...”

The AI paused. “We may have a problem,” it said. “Professor Lopez and seven of his students are heading to the Garden.”

“What?” Amy asked. “What are they doing?”

“I would have thought that that was obvious,” Dewey said. “I believe that they intend to offer resistance to the unknowns when they land.”

“They’re mad,” Amy said, horrified. Professor Lopez was from Heinlein, a world where a certain amount of military service was semi-compulsory, but even he and his seven students wouldn’t be able to stop the landing force. Lopez, according to the records, had many of the combat implants that the Peacekeepers issued to their people, but he’d never seen real combat outside a simulator. “Call them back, at once!”

“They are not responding,” Dewey said grimly. “The landing craft will arrive in thirty seconds; the unknowns will have around five minutes to set up a defensive position to bring down the remainder of their army before Professor Lopez and his forces arrive. Perhaps they will fall back once they realise that they will be outgunned.”

“I wouldn’t bet my life on it,” Amy muttered. More information slid into her head from her virtual memory...or maybe Dewey was supplying her with the information directly. Military doctrine, when trying to take a planet, called for light forces deployed to the surface, backed up by fire from orbiting starships and orbital weapons platforms. The Confederation didn’t have a large standing army; it had never *needed* a large standing army. The last time the human race had built a mass army had been back during the Thule War...and mostly, the soldiers had just cleared up the mess after the starships had hammered the ground forces into submission. No one had expected to have to fight a ground campaign...

She came to a decision. “I’m going down there,” she said, and turned to leave. Her armour vibrated to a stop and froze. It was so surprising that it took her a second to realise what had happened. “What are you doing?”

“I cannot allow you to throw away your life,” Dewey informed her. The sense of violation rose up within her and she sensed the AI’s core personality flinching at her rage. Dewey, too, had chosen to be linked to select humans; unlike the rogue AIs, it had no filters to prevent it from receiving human emotions, regardless of their nature. “Your duty to protect the library comes first.”

“*Don’t do that to me again,*” Amy roared, her fury driven by the sense of failure. Her armour unlocked and she almost fell to the floor. “Don’t ever...”

“You must not throw away your life,” Dewey said. “You have to survive. The library is vast; unless they choose to scorch the planet, I can hide you within the library for years, if necessary.”

Amy felt hot tears trickling down her cheeks. “And what happens when they overwhelm and subvert you?”

“They cannot do either,” Dewey reassured her. “Unlike most AIs, my intellect is distributed around the planet and interlinked with the library to such an extent that destroying me would require the full destruction of the library itself. Nor could they subvert me; my integrity is not that of a standard AI, but a core personality including memories from all of the librarians, including yourself. A standard subversion attack would fail.”

“And what happens if...oh, fuck it,” Amy snapped. She found a chair and staggered into it, relying on her armour to provide additional support. It had been so long since she used the armour and she wasn’t used to its demands. There were reasons, after all, why so few people chose combat-level enhancement, even if it did reduce the odds of a fatal accident. “What can we do if they scorch the planet?”

“Die,” Dewey said.

The display lit up, revealing the landing craft as they glided in towards the Garden. It had once, like the rest of the planet, been useless wasteland, but the founders had turned it into a garden of tranquillity. Alexandria had been useless, so useless that any attempt to terraform the planet would have been wasted, but the founders had created at least one garden in the outside. The antigravity capsules and their supports had ensured that anyone, wherever they were on the world, could go to the garden and seek tranquillity; Amy herself had spent hours

there when she had been younger. The landing craft, she knew, were going to shatter the garden.

They didn't look like much, just featureless ovals settling down...and then their hulls glowed red. A heat wave raced out over the Garden, instantly creating a raging holocaust of fire that wrecked the garden completely, destroying hundreds of years of work in an instant. Dewey murmured at the back of her mind, telling her that there was probably no real malice in the act, that it was probably intended to prevent ambush...but it wasn't enough to smother her fury. The newcomers, whoever they were, had *violated* her world. They were going to pay!

She shaped a question in her mind. "Professor Lopez?"

"Unhurt," Dewey said. There was another pause; she was learning to dread the AI's pauses. They seemed to heard new and unpleasant discoveries. "I am detecting...peculiar readings from the craft."

Amy glanced over towards the AI's own console. "What do you mean, peculiar?"

"There are odd combinations of trace elements surrounding the craft," Dewey said. Amy sensed, more than heard, the puzzled tone in the AI's voice. "They remain impenetrable to my sensors, but..."

A dark suspicion grew in Amy's mind. "Do you know who they are?"

Dewey didn't answer.

The craft settled slowly on the charred ground. She had half-expected them to extend landing legs, as some of the older shuttles still did, but instead they landed on their silver hulls, relying on their antigravity fields to lift them back to orbit. It was a gesture of...power, of confidence, as if they knew there was nothing to stop them from taking whatever they wanted from Alexandria. Amy knew, deep down inside, that they were right.

A hatch opened and the first of the newcomers stepped out.

"My God," Amy breathed, as she took it in. "That's...that can't be right. That can't..."

"It's real," Dewey said. The AI sounded stunned, but Amy realised that it had deduced the true nature of the threat before the hatch opened. It didn't share human preconceptions and had come up with a conclusion that had completely escaped her. There was still no mistaking the dread in its voice. "That creature is very far from human. It is the first representative of a second intelligent race."

Chapter Nine

Very few people, even in the Confederation, had ever heard of Fortress Maximus. It had been constructed back when the Confederation itself was a new idea, a whole new society, facing serious threats from various worlds and grouping eager to ‘protect’ their citizens from the radical new civilisation that levelled all humans and created a universe of peace and prosperity. The designers had intended it to serve as an emergency fallback position for the Confederation Government, where the politicians could assess any crisis and take action to counter it. It had never been used since its creation, but a tiny team of Peacekeepers maintained and updated it as technology advanced, even as the need for it seemed harder to see.

Captain Mark ‘JC’ Driscoll relaxed slightly as *President One* jaunted out of Jaunt Space in the middle of nowhere. He didn’t know exactly where they were, one of many security measures intended to protect Fortress Maximus from discovery, and relied upon the codes hidden in his implants to gain access. He could see the Fortress with his naked eye, even in the darkness of interstellar space, while his sensors picked up all kinds of targeting emissions. If the defenders had any reason to doubt *President One’s* identity and that of its passengers, they would be dead before they ever knew that they were under attack.

The flight computer surrendered to an electronic probe and the spacer shook as Fortress Maximus’s AI took control. They’d be running all kinds of scans, checking for any unpleasant surprises, before they allowed the spacer to land in one of the mammoth landing bays; Driscoll forced himself to wait as the gigantic construction drew closer. They wouldn’t be taking any chances; they’d have scanned the spacer’s records first and would know as much as he did about the attack on Terra-Prime. In a way, the precautions reassured him; there *was* still a command centre and an experienced crew responding to the crisis that had suddenly engulfed the Confederation. He’d been having nightmarish visions of Fortress Maximus having been destroyed and the President left with no choice, but to seek out other help, somewhere else. *President One* wasn’t built for long flights; if they failed to locate help, they were likely to die somewhere in space.

Fortress Maximus was massive, almost the size of Earth’s moon; a monstrous octagon floating in space, surrounded by a massive ring, bristling with weapons emplacements. His sensors reported no sign of any other starships, something that worried him; it suggested that others might not have made it to Fortress Maximus. His priority was to get the President there, but he’d heard enough to suspect that others were also on the emergency list...and no one else had arrived. The implications didn’t bear thinking about; what would they do, what could they do, if Fortress Maximus was the only Confederation command centre left intact?

“We’re docking,” he said, as a massive docking hatch swung open, revealing a simple landing bay. They were right on the edge of the ring; an explosion there, even a singularity, wouldn’t destroy the entire complex. Judging from the strength and power of the force fields that enveloped *President One*, an explosion might even be confined to the landing bay, the energy of the blast either absorbed or deflected out into space. “They’ve accepted us, Madam President.”

He smiled slightly as a team of Confederation Rangers, clad in their light infantry battlesuits, surrounded them as soon as they were lowered to the deck. The hatches opened without his permission and the lead three Rangers entered, weapons held at their sides, but in a position

where they could bring them to firing position within seconds. Rangers had enhancements loaded into their bodies to a degree that astonished everyone in the know – the precise specifications were classified – and three of them would be more than capable of handling any threat from any other human soldiers. Their search of the spacer was brisk, polite, but very thorough; he was amused to see them running scanners over the President’s body, as well as her security chief.

“Welcome to Fortress Maximus,” a Ranger said, finally. The black Ranger suit provided no clues as to the name or rank of the wearer; he could have been the Captain in command of the Company or a Private, or anyone. “Madam President, the CO is on his way to meet you. I’m afraid that the remainder of the crew will have to remain in protective custody for the moment, until we can sort out proper accommodation, but...”

“That won’t be a problem,” Driscoll said, feeling as if he could relax at last. The paranoia was fully justified under the circumstances. “I feel as if I could sleep for a week.”

Katherine would have, privately, preferred to join him. Her head felt bad; Fortress Maximus’s command crew had interrogated her implants far more thoroughly than anyone else on the ship and some of the overspill had sent pain flickering through her skull. Command codes and authorization routines she had barely been aware of had been accessed, each one more complicated and secure than the last, just to ensure that she was who she claimed to be. She’d never visited Fortress Maximus before – and when she’d heard of its existence and purpose, she’d hoped she’d never have to visit – but now she found herself hoping that it lived up to its reputation. The Confederation was at war.

The blank-faced Ranger escorted her out of the spacer, introducing her to a tall black man wearing the uniform of a Peacekeeper Commodore. “Welcome to Fortress Maximus,” the man said, extending a hand. Katherine shook it gratefully. “I’m Commodore Matthew Amsel, the current duty officer and commander of Fortress Maximus.”

“Thank you,” Katherine said, as he led her over to a small hoverbug. The tiny vehicle hovered in front of her and Mathew opened the door, allowing her to take one of the seats. “I wish I could say that it’s a pleasure to be here.”

“I understand,” Mathew said. He leaned forward and spoke to the bug. “Presidential quarters, please.”

“Understood,” the bug said. The tiny vehicle hovered into the air and sped along a shaft. “Estimated time of arrival, seven minutes.”

“Fortress Maximus is huge, as you might have noticed,” Mathew informed her, as the bug raced along. “The majority of repair and maintenance operations are conducted by robots controlled and directed by the AI, leaving the hundred strong human crew with little to do, but watch over the Confederation. The majority of the crew remain here for one year, and then go back into the general mainstream of the Peacekeepers, once their memories have been wiped.”

Katherine blinked. “You wipe their memories?”

“Fortress Maximus is perhaps the second most secret installation in the Confederation,” Mathew said seriously. “We have to take extreme precautions to ensure that secrecy is not compromised, regardless of the effects. Memory wipes are not actually uncommon through the more secret Peacekeeper units and everyone involved understands that they *will* be used, unless there is a compelling reason to allow them to retain their memories.”

He paused, inviting comment. None came. “We’ve been trying to get to grips with this crisis since the first reports came in,” he continued, when it became apparent that Katherine had nothing to say. “We maintain full links into the Peacekeeper Command Network and the Galactic Net, but even so, the full scale of the crisis caught us by surprise. Several star systems, including Terra-Prime, either lost or shut down their stellarcom stations, with the net result that we are effectively blind in those systems.”

“I hate to ask,” Katherine admitted, “but are we safe here?”

Mathew said nothing for a long moment. “I believe that we should be completely undetected,” he said, thoughtfully. It was hard to tell what he was feeling; despite his apparent youth, he was clearly older and more experienced than he looked, or the Peacekeepers would never have given him the duty. “We’re not orbiting any planet or star, but floating out in interstellar space, ten light years from the nearest inhabited planet. Even if the unknowns had a idea of where we are, searching for us would be a very difficult task; even something the size of this installation is tiny on the scale of interstellar space.”

He paused. Katherine felt a hint of guilty relief, as if all she cared about was her own skin...and then shame, wondering if he now believed that she only cared about herself. People had died, people she’d known and cared about, to get her away from Terra-Prime before it fell...and the sense of having failed them rose up within her. She had never expected to be a war leader – none of the Confederation Presidents had been war leaders – but now she had no choice. There was no one else.

The bug stopped in a long corridor, outside a set of doors. They were almost precisely identical to the doors to her apartments on Terra-Prime; the only difference was that there were no guards at the door. Fortress Maximus, she guessed, didn’t have enough Rangers or Protective Personnel to waste any of them guarding her.

“I suggest that you freshen up and then we can go to the War Room,” Mathew said. The doors hissed open when she stepped up to them. “I’ll be back to collect you in an hour.”

“Wait,” Katherine said, as he started to turn the bug away. “What about the two men who came with me?”

Mathew considered it, his face taking on the look of a man consulting his implants. “The pilot may be useful here,” he said, after a moment. “He already has high security clearance and we’re very short on staff. Your Protective Agent needs a good night’s sleep, but after that I see no reason why he can’t return to your side, unless you don’t want him, in which case...”

“If he wants to come back, he’s welcome,” Katherine said firmly. Mathew nodded. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

The interior of her quarters proved to be identical to the apartments on Terra-Prime, but...strange, with an air of mustiness that refused to fade. There was no dust lying around – the servitors would have cleared that away from the room – but there was an overwhelming sense of age, as if no one had stepped into the room in all the years it had been in existence. Katherine barely made it to the chair before she collapsed, feeling the weight of all those deaths falling on her shoulders; this was no half-arsed attempt at a Wrecker raid, nor some barbaric world trying to make a statement, but an all-out invasion of the Confederation. She tried to make herself believe that Terra-Prime had been the only target, but cold logic told her that if the unknowns had been prepared to launch such an attack, they would have targeted other systems as well. Mathews had said as much.

She pulled herself together as best as she could, stumbling into the shower and ordering a basic wash with soapy water. She looked longingly at the massive bath – the sight reminding her of her lover, who was probably dead or a prisoner right now – before dismissing the thought and using the shower instead. The water and a combination of stimulant programs, running through her head, cleared away most of the headache, although warning messages flashed up to warn her that she needed more sleep. She hadn't been able to sleep on *President One* and her body would soon start paying for the stimulant abuse she was piling on it.

Half an hour later, she stepped out of the shower, to discover that a remote drone had left a small selection of clothing for her. It reminded her of preparing for the parade and her big speech – had it really been less than a day ago? – and she almost collapsed again, before dressing herself in the real fabric. The blue trousers and shirt contrasted oddly with her hair; her implants reported that her new outfit was loaded with processors and security systems, not all of them friendly. Fortress Maximus seemed to be a very paranoid place.

“We have to be, Madam President,” Mathew told her, when he returned. His face looked paler than before; she wondered, grimly, what news had come in to alter his mood so much. Another world attacked? Fleet losses across the Confederation? “This place is the emergency fallback position and if it's lost...well, we don't have much of a Confederation left. Just thousands of worlds, all alone in the night.”

“I understand,” Katherine said. “You'll forgive me for being so military naive.”

The War Room proved to be a massive pit, a larger version of the command centre back on Terra-Prime – she remembered Colonel Joseph Turner and shivered – illuminated with the light of a massive hologram of the galaxy. A handful of operators were working on a series of consoles, their hands flashing across their work stations as they processed information flooding in from all over the Confederation, and her implants reported a great deal of private chatter between them through their own implants. That wasn't considered polite in government, but perhaps the Peacekeepers were held to a higher standard, or maybe it was just necessary. They could hardly have carried on a normal conversation in the War Room.

“We're still working on collecting data from across the Confederation,” Mathew said, as they stepped down into the pit. “The Galactic Net is suffering from overload, believe it or not; that's supposed to be impossible. Several dozen worlds have dropped out of the net completely...”

Katherine looked up at his dark face, almost invisible in the gloom. “Attacked?”

“We don’t know,” Mathew admitted. “Some of the worlds make logical targets – we cannot raise two of the Peacekeeper Fleet Bases, for example – and others don’t seem to have any reason to be attacked. The network’s problems aren’t helped by some problems with the nodes; no one anticipated conversation on such a scale and several of the nodes and their controlling AIs have had to reduce the bandwidth open for civilian use. We’re getting some useful data from various sources, but others are just making it up, or repeating rumours, or...”

He shook his head. Katherine understood; the Galactic Net was open to everyone, allowing every citizen of the Confederation the chance to express their opinion on anything they wanted...and ninety percent of it was garbage. She’d used it extensively in her younger days and had learned, quickly, that most of it was pornography and the remainder barely useful. The teenage Katherine had read reports suggesting that the *real* masters of the Confederation were in fact the AIs, who had developed a secret understanding with each other...and had had several sleepless nights before her mother had pointed out that AIs that went rogue normally disposed of or subverted the messy flesh bags in their realms. And that, she was embarrassed to remember, was the merest of the conspiracy theories she’d read.

“What we do know, Madam President, is that large parts of the Confederation are under attack,” Mathew said, drawing her back to the here and now. “We have confirmed invasions of several worlds and at least three hundred hit and run raids, some of which have caused major damage to orbital facilities and starships. There are seven thousand worlds in the Confederation, but most of them have only limited productive capabilities; if the enemy knocks out most of our manufacturing base, they can mop up the remainder at their leisure.”

And hours ago, I was preparing to speak about a thousand years of peace, Katherine thought. The irony chilled her. The Peacekeepers no longer had a peace to keep.

She looked up at Mathew. There was one question they desperately needed to answer. “But who are they?”

“We don’t know,” Mathew said. His dark eyes met hers. For a moment, she saw the worry and despair hidden under his inscrutable face. “We don’t have the slightest idea who they are.”

He paused. “We have a report that the 1st Fleet is regrouping at the shipyards at Cascade,” he said. “Once Admiral Ramage gets organised, my guess is that he’s going to want to launch raids against the enemy positions and make holding their new acquisitions difficult. We don’t have a clear idea of just what ships survived, or were lost; we might have to declare any starship that doesn’t report in within twenty-four hours missing, presumed lost. We don’t have time for search and rescue efforts in any case.”

“Very well,” Katherine said, composing herself. If she had to be a war leader, then she would *be* a war leader. “I want to talk to him as soon as possible. I assume that that is possible from here?”

“That should be possible,” Mathew confirmed. “We would have to ensure that there was a secure link, to prevent any chances of the enemy listening into our signals, but you can talk to him.”

“And then I’m going to have to speak to the entire Confederation,” Katherine said. She looked up at the galactic hologram floating in the centre of the War Room. It was easy to forget that that pretty display represented the entire Confederation and that every blinking light was an inhabited world...and she could not let herself forget. “There are going to be scared people out there, thousands of them, millions of them, *billions* of them...and we’re going to have to tell them what’s happening...and why.”

“We don’t know why ourselves,” Mathew reminded her. “There is no logical reason for their actions that we can determine. A pattern will probably emerge in time, but until then, we cannot even speculate too much.”

“I know,” Katherine admitted. “We have to reassure them that there is still a government and that the Confederation still exists, or we’ll just break apart...and that will be the end.”

Chapter Ten

The dull red star had never been important enough to merit a name. The American Union, which had laid claim to that area of space over four thousand years ago, had never bothered to assign more to it than a catalogue number. A handful of settlers, attracted to the system by its very remoteness, had endured for ten years before the settlement was abandoned, leaving the system undisturbed...until the newly-formed Peacekeepers arrived. The handful of charred rocky-iron planets in the system were carefully emplaced with gravity generators, powered directly from the local star, creating a gravity field that literally ripped the planets apart. Once the new asteroid belts had settled down, Peacekeeper factory ships arrived and spent the next hundred years creating one of the foremost shipyards in the Confederation, intended to support the Peacekeepers. Fully thirty percent of the Peacekeeper starships originated from the Cascade Shipyard; in theory, its location was a secret.

First Admiral Andrew Ramage doubted that it would remain secret for long. The shipyards had been in existence for nearly nine hundred years, still using the nearly-inexhaustible resources created by the shattered planets, and the odds were good that its location had leaked out over the years. The Peacekeepers weren't the only people with an interest in isolated useless stars and their planets; there were Wreckers, isolated colonies, and even pirates who might have been interested in the red star. If a pirate ship had entered the system, it could hardly miss the energy signature from the shipyard...and, of course, the location details were stored back on Terra-Prime. If the enemy ever accessed the right files, it would lead them to an entire strata of Peacekeeper operations that were hardly common knowledge, including the shipyards and their locations. And then...

He closed his eyes. He didn't know how, but he'd saved almost half of his fleet, somehow extracting them from the battle that had raged over the Terra-Prime system. He knew he'd done well, as well as could be expected under the circumstances, but there was no disguising the fact that the Peacekeepers had been forced to retreat...and had taken fearsome casualties in the fighting. No one had taken losses like that since the Thule War; hell, he didn't think that *anyone* had fought on such a scale since then. A sense of morbid curiosity formulated an enquiry into his virtual memory, which confirmed his thoughts; no one had lost so many starships since the Thule War, nor had anyone even put together so large a fleet...

The responsibility gnawed at him and he found himself considering resignation, or worse. He had grown up in a universe where very little could kill a human, at least a human born and bred within the utopian Confederation, and even when he had joined the Peacekeepers, there had been very few threats that could threaten a cruiser, let alone one of the battleships or carriers. The Peacekeepers had kept the peace and had never lost a conflict – *war* was not the preferred term – until now. He, First Admiral Andrew Ramage, had been the man in command when the attack began; he, First Admiral Andrew Ramage, bore the responsibility for the defeat. The thought yammered in his skull; he, above all, was the one to blame.

Hindsight mocked him. He could have taken a thousand precautions – *if he had had the slightest idea that there was even a threat!* The Peacekeepers had been surprised, both tactically and strategically, and had taken heavy losses. He didn't want to think about the effects on Terra-Prime from the falling debris; no Confederation planet had been struck with an asteroid, or even a chunk of space junk, for centuries. Apart from the world that had been used for target practice – and also a radical form of art – no world had suffered like that since the Thule War...and they'd been invaded. Invasion should not have been possible – even the

Thule had preferred to exterminate planetary populations through neat bioweapons – but the unknowns clearly believed they could launch an invasion...and succeed.

And the target! Terra-Prime should have been invincible. Terra-Prime should have been invulnerable...but the defenders had been crushed or driven away...and enemy forces were landing on the planet. God alone knew who they were, or what they wanted, but the loss of Terra-Prime would send morale, already dangerously low, into the dumps. The Confederation as a whole would be shocked...and even though Terra-Prime's ability to assist enemy forces was limited, the effect of losing the capital in the opening blows would be worth a thousand ships. Andrew didn't even want to know the price the Confederation would have to pay to win the war...

Alone in his cabin, Andrew realised what Admirals throughout all of human history had felt. He'd accepted the responsibility and he couldn't walk away, not now. He could lose the war in an afternoon, as had been said about several admirals during the Thule War, but he couldn't let all of those deaths go to waste. He *would not* let all of those deaths go to waste. Win or lose, the Peacekeepers would go down swinging.

There was a chime at the door. "Come in," Andrew called. "Door; open."

The door hissed open, revealing Lucy and Captain (Intelligence) Michael Swaim. Andrew nodded politely to both of them, swinging his chair around so he could confront them properly, and indicated that they should both take a drink if they needed one. Michael Swaim was someone he saw every fortnight, as part of the intelligence briefing; a tall cultured man who had spent two hundred years learning his trade as an intelligence officer. Part of Andrew wanted to blame him for missing the clues – if there were clues – that the Confederation was about to be attacked, but he reluctantly concluded that it had hardly been Michael's fault. Michael specialised in analysing information from right across the Confederation...but he'd never had to deal with a nightmare like this.

No one had had to deal with a nightmare like this.

"Admiral," Lucy said. She was always strictly formal when she was with Michael, which Andrew had always found privately amusing, knowing that they spent most of their off-duty hours together. Michael, as an Intelligence officer, was not in the chain of command, something that Andrew suspected he resented. He could have switched tracks, but instead he chose to remain where he was. "I have the latest updates from the fleet."

Andrew nodded, inviting her to continue. "We lost around nine hundred and seventy-two starships outright, with all hands," Lucy said. Andrew winced; the crews might have had a chance to get to the escape pods, but if so, they'd been left behind in an enemy-occupied system. "A further four hundred and nine starships took damage ranging from moderate to severe; I have taken the liberty of ordering the worst-damaged to dock at the shipyards and start repairs. The remainder will have to rely on their own self-repair units until we can free up slips for them, although..."

She paused. "If we were to draft engineers from the nearby systems, we could speed up the repairs, maybe even bring in a few Worldships to assist in the work," she said. "I know that drafting people is not technically legal, but..."

“Ask for volunteers first,” Andrew said. Emergency powers would give him a whole new range of options, but he hadn’t heard anything from the President yet...and knew nothing at all about Fortress Maximus’s status. If the enemy, whoever they were, had hit that part of the Confederation’s infrastructure, they would have decapitated the entire Confederation Government. The survivors down on Terra-Prime would be either prisoners or dead. “If not...well, we may have to make the invitation a little more compulsory.”

Lucy smiled. It didn’t quite reach her eyes. “We have five hundred and two starships, mainly cruisers, which sustained only light or no damage,” she concluded. “I have deployed those ships in protective formations as protecting the shipyards will have to be one of our main priorities for the moment.”

“We need to go on the offensive,” Andrew said, firmly. There was nothing wrong with Lucy’s actions, but if they allowed the enemy to keep hitting them at will, they would lose. “I want you to talk to the various squadron commanders and get them working up plans for engagements.”

“Aye, sir,” Lucy said.

Andrew looked over at Michael. “I understand that you have been trying to gather information from across the Confederation,” he said. He had never felt so cut off from information since his training days. “What have you discovered?”

“If I may?” Michael said, nodding at the processor on Andrew’s desk. Andrew nodded and Michael used his implants to call up a strategic map of the Confederation. It span in front of them, studded with tactical icons indicating the presence of active Peacekeeper and planetary defence forces starships and Andrew caught his breath. There seemed to be far too many blinking red icons. “I have the following to report.

“At the latest reports, nine star systems have been invaded and occupied,” he said. Andrew said nothing; nine was nothing compared to the sheer number of planets in the Confederation, but if they picked their targets carefully, they could inflict untold harm merely by destroying the infrastructure in the right systems. The odds were far too good that they’d also hit other worlds and they just hadn’t heard yet. “The star systems make little or no sense, apart from two of the fleet bases, but civilian losses have been quite heavy. Several hundred other targets were hit in hit and run raids; again, losses were heavy. Defence forces hit back hard, but almost everywhere was taken by surprise and...well, surprise cost lives.”

Andrew frowned as the display altered, showing the attacked and invaded worlds. Darsanko and Hongcai made sense; they were both major fleet bases. Their loss would *hurt*, particularly if the industrial stations and fabricators had fallen into enemy hands. Alexandria, the Library Planet, made much less sense; it was hardly an important target by any standards. Invading and occupying the world would draw strength away from more important targets; did the enemy commander have enough strength to consider wasting it in that manner? Flower and Santa Maria? Neither of them had anything that made them valid targets, no industry, no major bases, not even a large population. Why had they been targeted?

And who were the enemy?

He asked as much. “We don’t know,” Michael admitted. He paused. The expression on his face suggested that he was about to say something he knew his boss wouldn’t like. “Based on what we’ve seen so far, we are forced to consider the possibility that we might be dealing with alien technology.”

“Impossible,” Andrew said...and yet, at the back of his head, there was a quiet nagging doubt. “What proof do you have?”

Michael hesitated, exchanging a long look with Lucy, who kept her face completely blank. “The first detail is that, so far, we have counted over five thousand individual alien – unknown – starships operating within the Confederation,” he said. “We’re still analysing the sensor records, and we don’t have a definite way of ensuring that we are definitely looking at separate starships, but we believe that there is at least five thousand...and the total number might be a lot higher. That is not a fleet created by a single world, or even a multi-system unit; I do not believe that any stellar nation large enough to construct – and man – such a fleet could have remained unnoticed within the galaxy.

“The largest fleet in existence before the Thule War was the Britannic Royal Navy, based at Britannia, which consisted of five hundred starships, counting destroyers,” he continued. “Britannia drew on seven British-ethnic colony worlds and even so, building and operating that force was a considerable strain. The total number of known military starships prior to the war, including the Thule, was around nine thousand. The largest single-system fleet was two hundred-strong.”

“I see your point,” Andrew admitted, “but couldn’t they be based in the Clouds?”

“Perhaps, but the handful of colonies established out there reported nothing beyond the normal collection of planets and stars,” Michael said. “I sent a request up the Stellarcom network for them to get in touch with us, just in case, but I doubt that any human colony out there has the ability to manufacture that force. And there is the second interesting fact.”

He paused. “The design of the starships,” he explained. “They are not human; indeed, they are unpleasant to human eyes. We trawled through the records and nothing like them has ever been proposed, either through the Confederation Licensing Bureau or through any of the pre-Confederation worlds. The designs that the Thule designed or built, including the super-starships they designed towards the end of the war in a desperate attempt to turn the tide, looked conventional enough; *these* starships look downright alien.”

Andrew considered it. Michael had once written a whole series of articles on the Thule and their final designs for starships, debunking, in passing, the rumour of the Thule Lost Colony. He’d even taken a year’s leave and travelled to Alexandria, where he’d studied the preserved papers and files recovered from Thule-held planets, although he’d bemoaned the vast losses caused by the supernova that had ended the war at the time. There were few people more learned in that particular subject and none of them were at Andrew’s disposal.

“Third,” Michael concluded, “we did a series of scans of the destroyed or seriously damaged starships during the battle. The results were...more than a little weird; they might not be built along different principles to our own ships, but we detected traces of unknown chemicals and even unknown elements in the wreckage. Some of them vented air...air that would be poisonous to a human without special modification.”

“That could have been something else,” Lucy injected, playing devil’s advocate. “Our ships don’t vent air unless seriously damaged, but some of the earlier designs were known for venting coolant when hit in particular places...”

“It’s a possibility,” Michael conceded, reluctantly. “Even so, I don’t believe that anyone connected to the Confederation could have pulled together such a fleet without us getting some hints, some clues, even a vague rumour that it existed. There have been attempts by some Isolated Worlds to build up their planetary defence forces without us knowing and all of them have been detected...”

“Unless we missed some and don’t know it,” Lucy said. “I always wondered about that...”

“Enough,” Andrew said, tiredly. He needed sleep and knew he wasn’t going to get it anytime soon. “If you’re right, and it’s a pretty big *if*, where do they come from?”

He saw Michael’s face and felt a flicker of amused sympathy. The human race had discovered *no* aliens on *any* world they’d encountered; no civilisations, no ancient ruins, no god-like beings...nothing. They’d always believed that they were alone in the universe, or, at least, that aliens were so far away that humanity would never meet them. There were people who believed that intelligent life happened only once in each galaxy, or maybe even further away; some of them had even taken flight to see if they could locate aliens in the Andromeda Galaxy, or the Triangulum Galaxy. Massive starships, Worldships in all, but name, had sailed into the intergalactic gulf and vanished. For all he knew, they were still on their way...

Or maybe they’d run into something that had destroyed them. The only thing he knew for certain was that none of them had ever called home. The math suggested that stellarcom systems should work over such a vast area of space, although it had never been tested, but the lack of any signal suggested that the starships were still in transit. Searching a whole other galaxy would be beyond their capabilities even under normal circumstances...and a war was far from normal.

“I don’t know,” Michael admitted. “I find it hard to believe that *any* advanced civilisation could remain hidden anywhere in the galaxy; the considerations that make a lost human colony unlikely remain so for any alien civilisation. *We* would strain to build so many starships now; *they* must have similar problems, or maybe they do come from outside the galaxy. I don’t think that we will know for sure for a long time.”

“True,” Andrew said. He stood up, feeling energised. “Lucy, inform the commanders of the intact starships that I am calling a general conference for...0700, after we have had a chance to get some sleep. That should be long enough for us to make minor repairs and hopefully collect more intelligence on targeted worlds, then we can start putting together harassment missions to keep them on their toes.”

Michael stared at him. “But the extraterrestrial hypothesis?”

“Unproven as yet,” Andrew said, grimly. It did seem to be the only answer, but it seemed as impossible as anything else; he would have sooner believed in a dimension-hopping evil version of the Confederation than aliens. “We’ll have to test it and the only way we can do

that is by taking a prisoner, or at least getting a look at the forces they have deployed on the ground.

“Now, I want you to contact the remaining fleet bases and...”

He broke off as an emergency tone sounded. “Admiral, sorry to disturb you, but we just had a message dumped directly into the Galactic Net,” one of the communications officers said. “The *Everything Happens To Eeyore* was heading away from Alexandria and the Captain took the risk of remaining in contact with the planet’s AI for as long as he could.”

Andrew stared at the processor. “And?”

“They got an image of the invaders,” the officer said. The tone in her voice told Andrew exactly what she was about to say. She didn’t believe it herself...and *knew*, just *knew*, that her superior wouldn’t believe her either. “Sir...they’re not human.”

Chapter Eleven

It stood there, on the edge of the ramp, staring at the new world.

Amy first thought was of a weird combination between a crab and a spider. It was large, almost as tall as an adult human, standing inhumanly still on eight slender brown legs. The main body of the creature – she supposed – seemed to bristle with eyes, mandibles and electronic devices. It wore a silver collar surrounding its main body and carried, in two mandibles, a long silver tube that looked like a weapon. Its eyes twitched from side to side, rather jerkily, and then it vanished.

“Where did it go?” Amy asked. Her voice sounded hoarse in her ears. “What happened...?”

“Over there,” Dewey said, directing her attention to another part of the Garden. “Its speed was considerable greater than the average human norm.”

Amy found her voice again. “That’s not human, is it?”

“I do not believe so,” Dewey said, as a second alien emerged to join its comrade. “Confederation medical ethics would forbid the creation of a human with such augmentation. A human mind could, in theory, be spliced into a genetically-engineered body like that, but again, it would be forbidden under Confederation Law.”

Memories flickered through Amy’s head. “The Thule engineered monsters for their wars,” she said. “Are you sure...?”

“They never engineered anything like that,” Dewey said. The AI paused for a moment as a third alien emerged. “I suspect, however, that considerable engineering *was* involved. A creature like that should be incapable of supporting its own weight; a scaled-up spider or any other similar form of life wouldn’t be able to move. If that creature evolved naturally, I would suspect a low-gravity origin world...”

Amy looked at the display tracking Professor Lopez and his students. “They don’t stand a chance, do they?” She asked. “How many of them are in that craft?”

“Unknown,” Dewey said. “My sensors cannot penetrate the interior. Assuming that they were *very* friendly, around one hundred at most, but additional landing craft are coming out of orbit now.”

A fourth and fifth alien emerged. “Professor Lopez is preparing to launch her ambush,” Dewey said. “I am deploying medical nanites into the area to collect what intelligence we can...”

A beam of light shone across the garden... and struck one of the aliens directly. The spider-like creature seemed to leap into the air, light flashing madly around its legs, and cleared the entire Garden in a jump. Its comrades didn’t hesitate; they aimed their tubes towards the humans’ hiding place and opened fire, blasting brilliant white streams of plasma across the land. Bushes and trees, caught in the firing line, exploded into flames as the superhot fury lashed out, striking one of Professor Lopez’s students directly in the chest. Her armoured body, covered only by implanted armour, glowed once and exploded into a thousand burning

pieces. A second died a moment later; the other six fell back, laying down covering fire as they retreated. One of the aliens, caught by four of the humans at once, was unable to escape; the field of light surrounding it collapsed, blowing the alien into pieces.

“They seem to have limited force fields protecting them,” Dewey observed. The AI was incapable of being shaken, but Amy was sure she detected a tremor of concern; the Confederation rarely equipped its soldiers with personal force fields. Battlesuits were much more reliable. “I suspect that they have solved the problems involved with firing through a force field covering such a small area; their weapons seem to be nothing more than charged plasma, if deployed in a scattershot fashion.”

“They’re an invading force,” Amy said. Other aliens had deployed and were advancing, leapfrog-style, towards the remaining humans. She saw Professor Lopez himself taking aim at an alien, before diving out the way as three aliens coordinated their fire to force him to keep his head down. Their plasma beams were striking and damaging buildings; she said a silent prayer of thanks that none of the really rare or important books were anywhere near the combat zone. “I don’t think they care about collateral damage.”

“True,” Dewey agreed. “This planet cannot be considered a vital location, but the Peacekeepers will know, at least, that we have dropped out of the stellarcom network and the Galactic Net. If they cause needless atrocities, they can be assured that the Confederation will retaliate in kind, maybe against their home worlds. I concede that under the Grand Alliance Protocols Professor Lopez and his students cannot be considered a legitimate fighting force, but terrorising or exterminating the remaining population of this world would be an atrocity the Confederation would have to punish.”

“Maybe,” Amy said. A third student, a young girl she’d met once and whose name she couldn’t remember, was ripped in half by one of the aliens. A fourth was jumped by another alien, leaping down onto his back, claws ripping at his armour in a desperate struggle for survival. The alien won, ripping the young man’s head off, before two other humans killed it with their own weapons. “What have the medical nanites reported?”

“I have been unable to use them as weapons,” Dewey said, a hint of pique in its voice. Amy wasn’t sure if she should be impressed or frightened; Confederation ethics forbade the use of nanites as weapons and Dewey, as a programmed AI, should have been unable to even consider the possibility. It was just another sign of the AI’s unusual nature. “They have their own nanites deployed to defend them against such attacks.”

There was a long pause. “I have, however, been able to make a preliminary study of the dead aliens,” Dewey said. “Their DNA does not bear any resemblance to any known human variant or known non-Earth life form. There are oddities in their DNA, or what they have that passes for DNA, but they are definitely not human.”

“So not something from Thule?” Amy asked slowly. “You’re certain?”

Dewey managed to generate an offended sniff. “Every monster created by Thule came from an Earth-based form of life,” it informed her. “The modified tigers and panthers were originally baseline tigers and panthers. The enhanced humans came from base human stock, as offended as they would have been by that notion, and were still capable of breeding with

unmodified humans. The chimps and gorillas they uplifted into partial sentience came from..."

"You've made your point," Amy said. "They're not human."

"No," Dewey said. "Nor are they related to any form of life that originated off-Earth."

That brought Amy up short. Humanity had discovered various forms of life off-Earth, from fish-like creatures in hundreds of seas, to small mammal-type creatures on land. The discovery of a world of dinosaur-like creatures had sparked interest, but further investigation had proved that they were not related to the creatures that had once lived on Earth, something that relieved and disappointed humans in equal measure. The largest form of life had been a species that reassembled strange furless chimpanzees, although they showed no sign of intelligence, and their world had been quarantined on the off-chance they might actually evolve into intelligent life. If the newcomers weren't related to anything humans had discovered, it could only mean one thing; they came from a *very* long way away.

"Shit," she breathed, as the implications sank in. "What if..."

She broke off as another explosion shattered the Garden. Professor Lopez, an instant too slow to save himself, was caught by the blast and thrown through the air. He might have survived the impact, but the aliens targeted him in mid-air and blasted his body to flaming shreds. The final student, a girl who'd been studying human history, was caught and killed by a single alien, leaving the Garden in their possession.

"I have been relaying these readings to starships that have been left alone," Dewey said. Amy could only nod; the sight of humans being killed had shocked her to the core. She had never seen a human die before, or even a dead body; now, she'd seen eight humans die. "They will convey them to the Confederation. They will know what has happened here."

Amy choked down a sob. "What do we do now?"

"They are securing the landing zone," Dewey said. "I am detecting encrypted communications between the various aliens, with a surprisingly low data content, but I am unable to crack them. I suspect that they will bring down their forces and head for the Library Centre."

"The centre where I am," Amy reminded him. She was only a few kilometres from the garden. Right now, she was wishing that they'd built the command centre on the other side of the planet. "What happens when they start coming up the tower?"

"You get out, of course," Dewey said. "I do not believe that they can subvert me and physical destruction of my various nodes would be difficult, short of destroying the entire planet. Wait here for the moment; they may not come here at once."

The aliens seemed to agree. One by one, their landing craft settled down and disgorged a force of aliens, each one landing seventy new aliens on the planet. It was easy to see that they were a military force just by the way they acted; as their numbers grew larger, they spread out in perfect discipline, clicking and hissing at each other as they moved. If it was their language, Dewey wasn't able to translate it, although the AI swore that if they gathered

enough samples, they would be able to understand the aliens when they spoke to each other. Amy spent most of the time trying to psych herself up for the coming ordeal; the odds were strong that the aliens would seek to capture or kill any humans they encountered.

“Dewey, how much do they know about this place?” She asked, thoughtfully. “Could you mislead them somehow?”

“Unknown,” Dewey said. “I am unable to determine if they know anything about the planet or how the Library is organised. They may have selected the Garden because of its proximity to the Library Centre, or they may have selected it because it was the only clear landing zone on the planet. They have not...”

It broke off. “They just attempted to hack into one of the smaller databases,” Dewey said. The main display flickered to reveal one of the smaller library halls, packed with books only a few years old...and an alien sitting in the middle of it, linked into a local computer node. The alien looked oddly peaceful, its eight legs crossed under its body, and Amy smiled. It was easy to imagine it pulling on a pair of reading glasses and just...picking a book and reading. “I believe that they intend to try to subvert the local systems.”

Amy winced. “If that’s a neural link, can’t you look into its head?”

Dewey didn’t show the slightest hesitation, or even a sense that she had just asked it to commit one of the gravest crimes in the Confederation. “I’m not sure,” the AI admitted. It was easy to pick out the frustration in its tone. “I should be able to send search programs back into its head, but I’m not getting any response...or at least I’m not getting any comprehensible response.”

“You can’t read its mind?”

“I may be having perfect success or I may be failing,” Dewey said. “I cannot tell the difference at the moment and *that* should be impossible. It’s thoughts may be too alien to register.”

There was a moment’s pause. “Oops, butterfingers,” Dewey announced, in a tone of mock cheer. “The idiot just accidentally wiped the computer node.”

Amy grinned. “You mean you wiped it for him?”

“It was starting to give in,” Dewey said. “It was designed, after all, to give out information to anyone who requested it. It should have been run through me, but the Library Committee thought that it would be better to leave those nodes as a separate system, and then they ended up being linked to me anyway.”

Amy watched as the alien stood up on its legs. It no longer looked amusing; it looked downright menacing. “They’re moving,” Dewey said. On the screen, the aliens were moving, almost faster than the eye could see. “They’re coming right here.”

She was on her feet before the words had quite registered. “Where the hell do I go?”

“Down the main shaft,” Dewey ordered. Amy froze and her legs trembled rebelliously. “Move, *now!*”

Amy threw herself down the elevator shaft. There should have been a vac-tube elevator waiting for her, but instead gravity took control and she plummeted down the shaft, right towards the ground level, where she knew she would just slam into the ground and go splat. Warning displays popped up in front of her eyes as the shortage of air got to her, trying to choke her; only her modified body kept her alive. The darkness at the bottom of the shaft was almost a relief – at least she wouldn’t see the ground before she hit it – and then her fall just...*stopped.*

“I have activated the antigravity systems in the shaft,” Dewey informed her, through her communications implant. It occurred to her that the aliens might be able to track her through her emissions, but there was no other choice; she couldn’t hide from them without Dewey’s help. Force fields buffeted her and pushed her out of the shaft into the semi-darkened lobby; she winced as she crashed into the ground. Dewey didn’t give her any time to rest. “Get up and move!”

“Yes, sir,” Amy muttered, and pulled herself to her feet. Her implants started running painkiller and stimulant programs, forcing her to stay on her feet as she ran towards the rear exit, down towards the lower rooms. She heard a terrible noise behind her, a crashing tearing noise that seemed to scrape at her very soul, and ran onwards, as if the hounds of hell were behind her. “Where are they?”

“Currently raging up the stairwell,” Dewey said. She *felt* more than heard hisses of pain as a charge seemed to run through the air. “I just channelled several thousand volts through the stairs and fried some of them; their force fields didn’t seem to be any to handle it.”

“Oh, what a pity,” Amy said. A heavy door slammed shut behind her as she passed out of the building and down into a second set of stairs. A pile of books, disordered and awaiting the attention of various Library Trainees, awaited her and she gave it a guilty glance as she ran past. They might have only been published recently, but even so, they deserved a home on the library planet. Most of them, at least; the memoirs of Daddy Fairchild, a singer whose singing left much to be desired, wasn’t suitable for toilet paper. “What are they doing now?”

“Currently knocking out the building’s computer infrastructure,” Dewey said. “It’s a smart move on their part; they must know that there’s an AI here and if they disconnect me, building by building, they’ll reduce my ability to torment them.”

Amy laughed. “There are millions of buildings,” she said. Hysteria threatened to overwhelm her as she giggled helplessly. “The Library covers the entire goddamned world! They can’t drive you out of every building!”

“We don’t know what they want,” Dewey reminded her. “They might...”

The ground shook under her feet and she had to catch herself before she pitched right onto her face. “Run,” Dewey snapped in her ear. “They just blew out the secured door and they’re coming!”

She could hear them crashing through the stacks, scattering the books and knocking over the shelves as they came after her. They had to be tracking her through passive sensors or maybe they had tracking senses of their own; they'd been right on her trail since they'd crossed her path. Panic surged at the back of her mind and she forced herself onwards, just as she ran into the hanger. The aircars were all assembled there...and there was absolutely nowhere to hide.

“Run to the aircar on the far right,” Dewey ordered. “*Move!*”

“I can't,” Amy gasped. She could see that there was no cover at all. “I can't...”

“Move,” Dewey thundered. Her legs moved of their own accord and she found herself fleeing for her life, just as the lead alien crashed into the hanger. The shock of its landing sent her falling to the ground, just in time to turn over and see it behind her, its compound eyes staring at her. She couldn't read its expression - she didn't even know if it *had* expressions - but she was sure that it was gloating. It was a very human reaction. “Amy, close your eyes.”

She took one last look at the alien and closed her eyes. The blue-white light was so bright that it burned through her eyelids and hurt anyway. The alien was gone, leaving only charred pieces of flesh on the ground, while the automated servitor robot that had used a wielding tool on the alien moved to block any further access. Her legs gave out abruptly and she found herself on the ground again, before she forced herself to her feet and fled towards the aircar. A moment later, she was inside and the vehicle was already lifting off the ground, heading for the egress.

“I didn't know servitors could do that,” she said, more than a little shaken. “Why don't people tell us about those things?”

She heard the AI's best simulated laugh echoing through her skull. “It is not something that is generally known,” it said. “Anyone *could* find out, if they wanted to find out, but given how many such robots there are within the Confederation, most people would prefer not to know about it.”

Amy laughed. “Humans are all the same the universe over, right?”

Dewey said nothing as the aircar rocketed towards the shelters.

Chapter Twelve

“How long are we going to float here?”

It was, Stephen admitted, a perfectly reasonable question – the first time. Hearing it for more times than he could count – seventeen, according to his virtual memory – rather took the gloss off the question...and turned it into an incredible irritant. Hollyhocks Fairchild was as gorgeous as the best body-shaping nanites could produce – which rendered her nothing special in the Confederation, where almost everyone used some kind of body-modification systems – but her mind was rather undeveloped. Her father had shown some common sense by not declaring her to have reached her majority – a decision that Hollyhocks regarded as nothing short of tyranny – but he hadn’t bothered to help her to think for herself.

His unwilling guest glared at him from the co-pilot’s seat. The glamour of having been kidnapped by one of the famed Gentlemen Criminals – all her friends would be *so* jealous – had faded when she had realised that her father, and all of the people she’d met onboard the *Rising Sun*, was dead. She now wore a pair of tight shorts, gelling nicely to her curves, and a white shirt that clung to her breasts, but any sense of attraction was fading fast. Her petulant expression and sharp voice – ironically, tuned to be seductive to the male mind by more body-modification – destroyed the winsome illusion of relaxed sexuality.

“You’re not talking to me,” Hollyhocks insisted. “How long are we going to stay here?”

She also seemed to be unfamiliar with the practicalities of spaceflight, Stephen observed. She might have had dreams of a starship of her own – a *real* starship was serious money, even in the Confederation, and he doubted that she had the self-discipline to save to earn one – but she was ill-suited to such a life. The basic facts were clear; if he powered up the *Gentlemen Caller* to the point where they could jaunt, they would be detected and probably destroyed.

“I have no idea,” he said, turning away to stare out of the viewport towards the wreckage of the *Rising Sun*. The odds were good that any mil-grade scanner pointed in their direction would read the *Gentleman Caller* as another piece of debris, as long as the cloak held. The unknown starships had picked off several life pods on their second sweep past the remains of the Worldship, an act that had shocked Stephen into numb silence and passed unnoticed by Hollyhocks. People *didn’t* fire on life pods. The Thule, for all their barbaric nature, hadn’t fired on life pods. “We are caught in a very neat trap.”

She shifted and crossed her legs. It was intended to be seductive and probably would have been if she hadn’t been so childish. “They’re going to kill us?”

“It’s really very simple,” Stephen said, in his best ‘let’s condescend to the children’ voice. “The cloaking device is currently compensating for our emission spectrum and as long as we remain here, without any change in our status, we should be safe. I could not, however, bring up the Jaunt Drive while I was on the *Rising Sun* and if I bring it up now, FTL radiation will penetrate the cloak and reveal our location. If it was just the Worldship nearby, I would take the risk to get us away from it, but with unknown warships nearby, it’s too risky.”

He paused. “Unless, of course, you want to die?”

The expressions crossing Hollyhocks' face were a sight to behold. Like most Confederation citizens, she would have grown up in a world where fatal accidents were rare to the point of non-existence; only a handful of people died each year in the Confederation, unless they simply got bored to the point where they committed suicide. It was the reason why so many citizens travelled out to the Isolated Worlds in their second or third centuries, or joined the Peacekeepers; they wanted their lives to mean something and centuries of paradise only sapped at their souls.

"No," she said, finally. Stephen hoped that it meant that she was going to calm down and start acting more like an adult. The irony was that any non-sentient AI was likely to recognise him as her guardian, something that fascinated and repelled him at the same time. He'd saved her life... although he was honest enough to admit that if the *Rising Sun* hadn't been attacked, he'd have been seriously considering murder, or surrendering to the Peacekeepers after a week in her company. "I don't want to die."

Her voice softened so fast that he knew what she was going to say before she opened her perfect mouth. "They can't *hear* us in here, can they?"

"No," Stephen said dryly. There was probably no point in explaining that sound couldn't travel through a vacuum. "In space, no one can hear you scream."

He turned his attention back to the display. The *Gentlemen Caller* had a mil-grade passive sensor array, although he didn't dare deploy the remote platforms he'd obtained with rogue warships roaming the system, and it had been collecting data on the newcomers. They were clearly sweeping the system for anything that could threaten them, attacking a set of unarmed civilian habitats and blowing them open with singularity bombs. The waste upset him as much as the sheer loss of life; his most optimistic calculation was that the unknowns had killed around twenty million humans, in the Alexandria System alone.

And he still didn't know who they were. The CLB insisted that every starship carry a complete up-to-date list of starships – or at least as complete as they could make it – and the unknowns matched no starships on the list. That alone suggested that whoever they were, they'd caught the Confederation by surprise; he certainly hadn't heard anything about a possible war on his last visit to a Confederation world. The absence of the Peacekeepers – there were upwards of a thousand Peacekeeper starships in the sector alone – was worrying; it implied that the attacks weren't restricted to Alexandria. That in turn implied that they were caught in the middle of an all-out war.

"So," Hollyhocks said, after a long moment. Her voice couldn't quite disguise her nervousness. "What are you going to do with me?"

Stephen shrugged. "It depends," he said. "If you behave yourself, I'll either drop you off at a world, once we leave this system, or hand you over to the Peacekeepers when they arrive to retake the system."

If they arrive, he thought coldly.

Hollyhocks nodded, chewing on one long strand of blonde hair. "And if I don't behave myself?"

“I’ll stick you in a stasis pod or inject you with subversion nanites,” Stephen said, and was relieved to see that his threats had the desired effect. It was partly a bluff; he didn’t have a stasis pod or any subversion nanites – they were an automatic sentence to a penal colony if the Peacekeepers caught him with them – but he could have used his medical unit to keep her asleep until she could be dumped somewhere. “Your father might have had to put up with you, but I’m damned if I’m wasting my time.”

Hollyhocks glared at him. “My father refused to declare me an adult!”

“Very wise of him,” Stephen said, and ignored her furious look. As an adult, Hollyhocks would have been able to override parental proscriptions and do whatever she liked, as long as she didn’t challenge the Confederation Ethos. He’d seen girls, given the power of adulthood too soon, shaving their bodies too thin and having to spend months on painful repair work. The fashion for stick-figure bodies had never appealed to him – he had grave doubts about any of those girls ever being able to go to bed with anyone – and most of the Isolated Worlds considered them seriously unhealthy. “His singing might have been terrible, but at least his head was screwed on the right way.”

He ignored Hollyhocks’s outraged sputters and examined the display. The odds were pretty good that there were other starships in the system, either ignored or hiding behind their own cloaking devices, and the enemy seemed to be searching for them or ignoring them. The patterns made little sense; the unknowns were probing for cloaked starships, but they were ignoring uncloaked starships...why?

“Excuse me for interrupting,” the AI said. Hollyhocks had spent nearly twenty minutes trying to talk to the AI, only to discover that Stephen hadn’t been lying; the AI would respond only to him. “I am picking up a signal from the planet.”

Stephen blinked. “Directed at us?”

“Directed into the system, in clear,” the AI said.

It didn’t have the intelligence to understand. Whoever was transmitting that signal wanted – needed – everyone to see. “Show me,” Stephen ordered. He was amused to see Hollyhocks leaning forward as well. “What’s happening down there?”

What he saw next snatched every smart remark out of his lips. “They’re...not human.”

“So what?” Hollyhocks asked, her mouth starting to assume her set expression again.

“There are AIs, and there are all the altered men around, and there are...”

“Child,” Stephen snapped, “interrogate your virtual memory and ask it when the last contact between humans and an intelligent race of non-human origin took place?”

There was a very short pause. “It doesn’t know,” Hollyhocks said finally.

“No, because one never took place,” Stephen sneered. He found himself staring at the images again. They were shockingly convincing, not least because they bore absolutely no resemblance to humanity. Back at the dawn of the Space Age, he recalled, man had believed that aliens would be humanoid...but the spider-like aliens were so inhuman that it was

impossible to believe that they were bioengineered constructs. The torrent of data, beamed out into space, just kept growing; he'd have to record it all and study it carefully, later. "They're a completely unknown race."

He paused. "Don't you understand?" He asked. "This changes everything?"

"It doesn't change the fact that we're stranded out here," Hollyhocks pointed out, with remarkable perception. Stephen was pleasantly surprised to hear a note of acceptance in her voice. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know," Stephen admitted. Truthfully, he didn't have the slightest idea what to do next. His original plan was dead in space. A flash power-up of the Jaunt Drive couldn't get them out of the system before one of the alien starships jaunted out next to them and blew them away. The torrent of data recording the brief battle between the aliens and the pitiful defenders on the ground just kept growing...and then cut off abruptly.

"What happened?" Hollyhocks asked.

"How should I know?" Stephen countered. He wasn't too surprised, although it was annoying; the information could be of considerable value. "They probably took out the transmitter from orbit, just to prevent them from sending out more information."

He shrugged and rose up from his chair, stretching to work out some of the kinks in his body. "We have three basic choices," he said. "Perhaps four, but that would depend on more luck than we've had so far. First, we can stay here indefinitely; the starship could easily keep us alive for longer than we would have, even with enhancement."

"I don't want to stay on this ship forever," Hollyhocks said. "I'm fed up breathing in your musk."

Stephen bit down the reply that came to mind and continued. "Second, we could power up the drive and risk being detected for the five minutes it would take to bring the Jaunt Drive up and running," he said. "I don't know how good their sensors are; we might get away with it or we might be blown away within a minute. Either is possible with Peacekeeper technology.

"Third, we set course at sublight speed for the edge of the system," he said. "Hadenashatar Radiation has a very short range, even if it does travel at FTL speeds, and if we got some distance between us and the aliens, we should be safe enough powering up the drive. The problem is that if they should happen to come wandering out here, we might be detected and then blown away."

"A bad idea," Hollyhocks said. "And the fourth?"

Stephen gave her a bleak smile. "We simply wait here until the Peacekeepers arrive, at which point we power up the drive, transmit a full copy of our sensor readings to the starships, and then vanish," he concluded. "If, of course, the Peacekeepers do arrive to save the Alexandria System."

"Of course they will," Hollyhocks insisted. "My father was always going on about how much effort was wasted on building the fleet."

Stephen rolled his eyes. Daddy Fairchild had been a Hedonist, one of the group dedicated to pleasure, pure pleasure, and preferred to have nothing to do with the universe surrounding his private paradise. Stephen had tried the Hedonist lifestyle when he'd been younger and had enjoyed it for a time, before he'd become sick of orgies and beamed pleasure from groups of youngsters too lost in their own little worlds to make interesting company. He liked women – or men; he wasn't fussy – to be entertaining outside of the bedchamber, not to be so determined to have their own pleasure that they would insist on going to bed at once. The Confederation thought nothing of all former human sexual taboos, from incest to bestiality, something that Stephen had always suspected was the cause of moral decline. The old social mores no longer applied...and human sexual patterns had changed forever.

“I think that everyone will now be screaming to know why so little effort was spent on building up the fleet,” he said, dryly. The Confederation could have filled the skies with battleships for very little effort; the Peacekeepers could have constructed far larger forces than they'd ever deployed in their entire existence. “It could be that...”

He stopped. A horrifying thought had just occurred to him. What if the Confederation as a whole no longer existed? What if the Government had been wiped out? There was no way he could spin up a Stellarcom to transmit messages – it would give away their position as surely as a burst of Hadenashatar Radiation – and he hadn't been trying to receive any interstellar signals. That, at least, he could do without risking their discovery, but even so...he wasn't sure that he wanted to know.

Hollyhocks leaned forward impatiently. “It could be that...what?”

“Never mind,” Stephen said. Part of his mind urged him to just tell her and share the nightmare, the other part of his mind rebelled against the thought. Let her have her delusions...and pray that they weren't delusions. “So, what course do you suggest we follow?”

She gave him an ironic look. She had to know that he would hardly consider himself bound by her suggestion. “I don't know,” she said. “I think we should sneak out of the system.”

“What an *excellent* idea,” Stephen said, with false cheer. “I think that we're going to wait a week and see what happens, maybe with some movement towards the edge of the system, and then...we can kill two birds with one stone.”

His mind raced ahead. Were there other cloaked starships in the system? He found it hard to believe that the uncloaked ones would last much longer. They'd be wiser to jaunt out now, which would leave the *Gentleman Caller* in a position to collect intelligence...a unique position that he knew he could turn to his advantage. It might even win him forgiveness, or a place in the Peacekeeper Special Operations Section.

He pulled off the upper half of his tunic and was amused at how her eyes opened wide. “What are you doing?”

“I'm going for a shower,” Stephen said, managing to keep the grin off his face. As pretty as she was, Hollyhocks was doing an excellent job of remaining unattractive. “I'm assigning

Cabin B to you and you can use it as your home, but you *will* be under observation by the AI and if you do something I don't like...well, there are always options."

"I wish I'd never met you," Hollyhocks said, bitterly. Her face crumpled up as if she were about to burst into tears. "You're a bastard..."

"If I hadn't kidnapped you, you would be dead," Stephen said. "Your old life is over."

"Bastard," Hollyhocks snapped, and pushed past him towards the pair of cabins at the rear of the starship. It was barely larger than a spacer; they'd be living very close to one another, no matter where they slept. "Your mother dumped you when you were a little brat."

The insult hurt worse than Stephen had expected. A dumped child was rare in the Confederation; the perfect contraception and effectively unlimited supplies ensured that almost every Confederation-born child received the very best of loving care from birth. A dumped child, one who had been left at the mercy of the community, was rare; it normally only happened when the mother and father had been killed in an accident. No parent would oversee their development, or confirm them as adults; the decision would be left to the community at large. It was a rare dumped child who wasn't adopted very quickly.

And he *hadn't* been a dumped child. He'd just been unsatisfied with his life.

"Maybe," Stephen said, as she stormed away from him. His eyes tracked her rear end for a long moment. "What sort of a name is Hollyhocks anyway?"

"My father chose it," Hollyhocks snapped. "I was going to have it changed as soon as I attained my majority!"

Stephen laughed as she went into her cabin – it was a good thing that she couldn't slam the doors – and finished undressing, before he stepped into the shower. He wasn't too worried about the waiting – any Gentleman Criminal developed a strong sense of patience – but the aliens added new uncertainties to the situation. He could hide almost indefinitely from a Peacekeeper squadron, but aliens?

It was going to be an interesting few days.

Chapter Thirteen

The day dawned bright and clear on Heinlein as Major Ned Brickley pulled himself out of his tents and took in the sight of the mountains, only a few kilometres from the valley where they were camping. Snap, Crackle and Pop, his three dogs, ran over to join him as he started the task of collecting water for the morning coffee, before blowing a whistle loud and shrill. The men and women of the camping group, all trying to get back into field mood before the Reserve went through its annual rotation on active duty, stumbled out of their tents and either headed down to the lake to wash or over to the field to answer nature's call.

"Morning, sir," the guard said, as Ned poured him a cup of coffee. The Heinlein Federal Reserve didn't worry much about strict formality – except when under fire, something that hadn't happened since the Unrest a few hundred years ago. "Nothing much to report; a few hints of wolves and maybe Saxons nearby, but they didn't come anywhere near the camp."

"Good," Ned said. A wolf wasn't much of a problem to the armed campers, but Saxons – one of the galaxy's largest predators – could be deadly dangerous. Normal campers would use a repelling field or scent, but the soldiers weren't supposed to use it. A good sensor could have tracked them down from the air or tiny surveillance remotes could be deployed through the forest. "Go get a wash and then report here for breakfast; we've got a long walk ahead of us this morning."

He smiled as the guard ran down towards the lake. The guard had never seen active combat, although the camping party was unusual in that over half of its number *had* seen combat, mainly out along the Rim. Heinlein had been founded by veterans from the Thule War who believed, based on the teachings of the original Heinlein, that only veterans of military service – later expanded to federal service – should have a vote, a reflection on serious military mistakes made at political requests during the war. The idea hadn't worked out quite as well as they had expected in practice and a nasty insurgency had been shaping up when the expanding borders of the Confederation had swallowed Heinlein. There had been some friction at first – a universal franchise was part of the Confederation Ethos – but most of the dissidents had been able to leave...and their numbers had been replaced by a surprisingly large number of Confederates eager to *earn* something in their lives. Peacekeeper service counted, as far as Heinlein was concerned; indeed, Heinlein even boasted a handful of veterans from the Thule War, the oldest men and women still living.

The memories refused to fade as he watched the small group coming to eat. Ned had *seen* the War, up close and personal, and he'd preserved those memories in his virtual memory. He suspected that he was one of the oldest people in the Confederation and privately suspected that he wouldn't be around much longer; it was becoming harder and harder to convince himself that his life was worth anything. He'd seen so much in his life, done so much...that he feared he was finally becoming jaded. He'd been a woman for a while, then a neuter, and then returned to male form and tried out thousands of vices...and none had lasted. His children seemed to wonder why he had hung on so long; he might have looked a mature thirty, but his mind was old. Too old.

A female voice whispered into his ear. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"My thoughts are rather more expensive than that," Ned said, looking up into the clear blue sky. He was one of the handful of people who *would* understand that line; Heinlein had

based its currency on the old American Union currency, before the Confederation had arrived. “What do you think I’m thinking?”

He looked over at Janine. She looked younger, child-like, almost weak...and yet she was a Reserve officer in good standing. The Sensitive woman could have easily have avoided the duty – *no* military service was compulsory on Heinlein – but she came every year, despite her odd talents. Janine’s family had been created on Thule, thousands of years ago in a failed experiment to develop psi powers...and sometimes she was able to use them. Sensitive were rare and very few of them ever came to Heinlein; Janine was the only one he’d ever met.

“I think you’re considering how old you are,” Janine said, dryly. It took no great perception; three of Ned’s peers had killed themselves over the last decade, something that rather worried him. Had he reached some permanent limit to how old a human could grow? Life no longer held its savour. “Or perhaps you’re feeling horny and trying to hide it.”

“Shut up,” Ned said. He very rarely had sexual feelings these days. Janine might have been attractive, but he didn’t feel any kind of interest at all. “We have to walk to the training facility, so get your food and move it.”

Janine stuck out her tongue and headed over to the small cooking pit. They’d caught several wild pigs last night; after all, they were meant to be showing that they could survive in the wild without support. Once they reached the training area, all of that would change and they’d become proper soldiers...soldiers without a war to fight.

Best kind, Ned thought, and accessed his communications implant. Strictly speaking, he wasn’t supposed to use it on deployment, but Heinlein’s military command had become increasingly eager that they checked in every day; it seemed that there had been an accident somewhere else in the area and the higher-ups wanted to make sure that there wasn’t a second accident. The entire region was almost empty, except for a few hikers and the soldiers; if something did happen, it would be hard to get any help into the area unless they used aircraft. There were no messages waiting for him in the satellites and he headed over to the breakfast mat with a clear conscience; once they’d eaten, they could head onwards.

“No, you’ve had enough,” he said to Snap, who was gnawing on a bone and trying to steal some of the meat from the cook. The other two dogs gave him a rebellious look; they’d been engineered to be a little smarter and faster than baseline dogs, although enhancing them too far was forbidden. He’d often wanted a talking dog, one that could communicate though an actual voice, but Confederation Law forbade it. The scars from the Thule War ran deep. “If you eat more...*Jesus Christ!*”

The air seemed to flare white. He found himself on the ground, half-squashing his plate of bacon and edible roots, before his mind quite caught up with itself. The entire group had hit the ground, old reflexes kicking in and forcing them down as the skies lit up brightly, explosions flickering out in the depths of space. He’d thought – hoped – that it had been a weapons test that had gone badly wrong, but now he saw – clearly – that the planet was under attack. The thought astonished him; the planet hadn’t been threatened since it had been declared an Isolated World. He hadn’t even heard anything about a new threat...

“Keep down,” he snapped, old memories bubbling up from the back of his mind. If there was fighting going on in low orbit, the enemy – whoever they were – was on the verge of seizing

control of the high orbitals. If that happened, every military base on Heinlein was likely to get pasted from orbit...and he could only hope they would ignore the campsite. “Thomas, Gary, get everyone into the woods; head for the caves if you have a chance...”

A final series of flashes lit up the air and then the skies cleared. Ned accessed his enhanced retinas and scanned the skies, detecting traces of starships almost immediately, swinging down into lower orbit. A moment passed...and then a massive explosion flared up in the distance, in the direction of Lazarus. A quick check revealed that the explosion had been *on* Lazarus...and the city had died.

Straight fusion detonation, limited radiation, his implants warned. Lazarus had housed over nine million people, he recalled...and most of them would have been killed. The survivors would have a chance – most Heinlein natives had some form of enhancement – but if the newcomers were attacking other cities as well, the odds were good that most of the planet’s population would be dead in the next half hour. He saw, far off in the distance, another nuclear explosion...and knew that the City of Rico had just died. Rico, the capital, had been destroyed.

“Sir, we have to move,” Janine called, from the edge of the woods. Ned wasn't surprised that neither Gary nor Thomas had been able to move her; Janine wasn't the kind of person who could be swayed from her course. If she had determined to stay and wait for him, she wouldn't allow them to talk her out of it. “Ned, come on!”

The woodlands seemed to glow green as the sunlight passed through the forest. Ned had always found it quietly reassuring, although the brambles and snake-like beasts that hid in the woods could make it a hazardous place, but it wasn't reassuring today. His men and women had lost most of their families – the nuke would have been visible from their hiding place – and the odds were good that the invaders, whoever they were, wanted to claim Heinlein for themselves. Ned couldn't understand it; who the hell were they? On impulse, he ran a scan for communications from the government and picked up...nothing.

“That makes sense,” Gary Young said, when they reached the others and Ned explained what he'd seen. Gary had come from Nubian, a world where dark skin was mandatory, and was the blackest man Ned had ever seen. He was also something of a political refugee who'd come to Heinlein under a cloud. “They'll want to keep themselves undetected so that they can organise resistance...”

“Maybe,” Ned conceded. The figures daunted him; Heinlein had been established for well over a thousand years and the population stood at three billion, not counting the handful of daughter worlds that had been established. If *all* the cities had been destroyed, then two-thirds of the planet’s population had been eliminated within the first half-hour of the war...if war it was. The nukes hadn't poisoned the land, but even so, the odds were good that all they could do was fight back against the invaders until they were all wiped out.

The hundred men and women looked at him desperately. Gary put it into words. “Sir, what are we going to do?”

“We didn't see any explosions near us, so the odds are good that the training centre was untouched,” Ned said, and hoped to hell that he was right. His experience suggested as

much, but not even the Thule had used genocidal tactics in their opening shots. “We get there, we find the General in charge, and then we organise a resistance.”

“Yes, *sir*,” Gary said.

Ned stood on a tree stump to address his subordinates. “You’re all in the Reserve, so you know your duty,” he said, after briefly explaining what they’d seen. “If any of you want to hike back down to the remains of the city and look for your families, say so now and go. If you want to fight instead, come with me and we’ll find the rest of the military and start fighting back against the bastards!”

It hadn’t sunk in yet, he saw. A personal tragedy would have sunk in at once. Even with the best of training, the Reserve claimed one or two lives every year...and those were noticed. The loss of upwards of a billion to two billion lives was too large to comprehend...at first. It would sink in slowly and then some of his men would sink into despair and others would demand revenge. He could have led them down onto the plains, found an invader target and hit it...and probably thrown them all away. They needed their revenge to *count*.

He knew the forest now like the back of his hand. Even so, the march through the woods to the training ground took hours. All, but two of his men had chosen to follow him; he felt pride in them, even though he knew that most of them would die. The odds were good that his own unnatural life would come to an end as well...and, oddly, he felt better than he had in years. He’d lost family in the blasts, unless they’d somehow had warning and escaped the city, but at least he was doing something he loved. The invaders would pay.

“Halt,” a voice called, from nowhere. Ned scanned with his enhanced retinas and saw a man, perfectly camouflaged against the woodland foliage, pointing a weapon directly at him. He was almost impossible to see in the gloom. “Identify yourself!”

“Major Ned Brickley,” Ned said. He didn’t dare transmit his authority code from his implants until he knew more about invader technology and their sensors. A single transmission could go unnoticed, or he could bring down fire from high above. “Reserve Unit #353, Lazarus.”

The remainder of the procedure took little time. The sentry summoned two others, who escorted the Reserve soldiers into the hidden camp, relaxing once they met a handful of friends and acquaintances in Ned’s group. Ned was relieved to see General Gordon, a man who had lived on Heinlein long enough to rise to the rank of General, a mark of extreme competence. There were no political generals on Heinlein.

“General,” he said. A thousand questions bubbled though his mind. “What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know,” General Gordon admitted. He was a bluff man with closely-cropped red hair and a heavily muscled body. Ned had heard well of him as a Mobile Infantry commander, even though the Mobile Infantry had never been deployed to an actual war zone for nearly five hundred years. “The first we knew of it was an all-units alert that unknown starships were entering the system...and then the network went down as the bombs started to fall.”

“Several cities have been hit,” Ned confirmed. “What sort of resources do we have here?”

“The entire region is studded with military units on drill,” Gordon said softly. “We’re trying to get them all coordinated now, but we’re stuck on insurgency protocols until...”

He broke off as a noise echoed through the sky. Ned peered into the blue sky, starting to shade down towards sunset, and saw several massive craft falling through the air towards the plains below. His enhanced retinas insisted that they were each over two hundred meters long, which made them about the same size as a medium freighter...and of unknown design.

Gordon’s mind was clearly working on the same problem. “Goddamn it, who the hell are they?”

Ned glanced around the camp. His people were starting to merge into the other units, taking up weapons and in some cases equipment, including a set of Mobile Infantry suits. Women were barred from the Mobile Infantry by long tradition, something he thought was stupid as some of the most effective Peacekeeper battlesuit units included women, but otherwise they were full equals. Several officers, including Janine, didn’t have a proper unit and were trying to sort out a communications unit, just to see if they could eavesdrop on the enemy.

“We can’t stay here,” Gordon said, reading his mind. “We’re going to have to test the limits pretty damn quickly and then start hitting back at the bastards, stop them from having it all their own way. The 6th Infantry and 9th CAV was supposed to be down there and they might be able to get a few punches in...if there’s anything left of them.”

He shook his head. “Take four men and head to Piker’s Peak,” he ordered. Ned saluted. “The bastards are landing in the plain, so you should be able to see them from the Peak and then bring back a full report.”

“Yes, sir,” Ned said. It occurred to him that a Major shouldn’t be carrying out the mission, and then he realised the real reason; if something happened to Gordon, he’d have to take over the resistance. “I’ll get on it now.”

The walk to the Peak didn’t take more than an hour. It was actually a rocky outcrop and had earned its name because climbers, in the autumn fogs, had accidentally climbed the wrong set of mountains, declared victory...and then discovered that they’d missed their target when the fog lifted. To add insult to injury, there was actually an easier path up from the rear; the small team slipped up the path and peered carefully over the rocky platform.

“They’re big bastards,” Gary muttered, focusing a high-res sensor as he peered into the distance. The naked eye could barely make out the invader transports, sitting in the farmland and opening their hatches, but Ned could see what looked like an infection spreading over the corn. “Sir...I...*shit!*”

“Show me,” Ned said, taking the sensor. The brown infection suddenly resolved into hundreds of tiny shapes. *Alien* shapes. “Oh, fuck me!”

They paused long enough to take some images before slipping away from the Peak. It didn’t look if any of the farmers were resisting, although several of the farmhouses were burning and a group of human prisoners were trapped at the centre of a ring formed by the aliens.

They looked unharmed, but very scared; Ned couldn't help, but notice that most of them were children. Their parents had probably resisted and lost the fight.

"They'll want this farmland for themselves," Gordon said, when Ned had shown him the images. "God alone knows why, but they won't get it."

"Yes, sir," Ned said. His mind was already dragging up his experience and putting it to use. *Aliens!* He'd finally seen something new. "This planet will not fall to them."

Chapter Fourteen

First Admiral Andrew Ramage would have preferred to meet with his Captains and various other officers face-to-face, rather than in a perceptual reality. The technology was as near to perfect – it was easy to believe that some perceptual realities were actually real – as the Confederation could create, but sometimes they just couldn't substitute for a proper meeting. When there were over a thousand people who had to attend the meeting, the idea of gathering them all in one place became absurd, not least because of the danger of enemy attack. The aliens, as unbelievable as the reports seemed, Andrew believed them, might attack the shipyards at any time and if they caught so many commanders off their ships.

The perceptual reality took on the form of a massive auditorium. Shadowy indistinct forms appeared as Captain after Captain accessed the reality through their communications implants, allowing them to feel as if they were really present. Andrew could focus on any of the shadowy forms and they would instantly leap into view, while the others were crowding around in a manner that would be impossible to follow in real life. It was convenient; they could hold their meeting, share their thoughts and feelings...but at the same time it was so impersonal. How could he gauge their feelings through the fake reality? All of the commanding officers would be old hands at keeping their real feelings hidden in such communication.

His lips twitched. The technology had been originally developed for pornographic productions and even now that was still the main use for the technology outside the Peacekeepers and the government. The Captains could be doing anything while they were communing with him, something else that hadn't escaped his notice; it was hard to tell if someone was really focused on him or not. A user could be *anyone* inside a perceptual reality, programming the system to represent them as whoever they wanted to be, and abuse of the system was common. The Peacekeeper network had links built into it to prevent anyone from overdoing it, but it was almost addictive in a way that had nothing to do with drugs, or even stimulant implants.

“If I could have your attention,” he said, as calmly as he could. One advantage of the perceptual reality was that all of the attendees could hear him perfectly, wherever they were; indeed, one thousand Captains could literally stand in front of him, sharing the same space in his vision. It might be represented as a large room to him, but others might see something completely different. “We have finally received two pieces of encouraging news.”

He paused long enough for that to sink in. The news that aliens had finally appeared, and that they were hostile, had had a serious effect on morale. The human race had *known* that they were alone in the universe and the sudden appearance of a new threat, one that was completely unanticipated, had shocked them to the core. The Peacekeepers hadn't known a serious defeat for too long. Somehow, he had to convince them that it wasn't all bad news.

“The first piece of news is that the President was able to survive the fall of Terra-Prime and is at a secret location,” he said. *He* knew the location of Fortress Maximus – or, rather, it was stored inside a secure cell in his implants – and he'd spoken to her once she'd got the facility up and running. He'd have to detail other staff to travel there, which would pose its own problems, but at least the civilian government hadn't been wiped out. “She has declared a full state of emergency over the Confederation and has activated the emergency protocols. Every industrial station in the Confederation has been warned that they will need to switch to

the production of war materials and starships as soon as possible and we hope to see new production of weapons and other material within a few days. The main priority will be enhancing local defences, but shipyards and Worldships have been ordered to concentrate on building new warships for the war.”

He paused. “The second piece of encouraging news is that we finally managed to establish links to the remainder of the Confederation and the Peacekeeper fleet bases,” he said. A low murmur ran around the imaginary room. “The aliens struck hard and damaged several dozen targets in hit and run raids, but substantial chunks of the fleet survived and are working on defence duties right now. It also allowed us to collate the data and identify the worlds that have been targeted...and other likely targets.

“So far, the aliens have hit and invaded seventeen planets...and then stopped,” he said. “We don’t expect that that will continue – they’re probably gathering their strength now for spreading out of the occupied zones – but for the moment they’re pinned down defending worlds and preventing us from launching strikes against their ground forces. That gives us an opportunity to strike back; their orbiting forces have to remain where they are, so we can hit them. If they jaunt out, of course, we can just convert their ground forces to plasma from orbit. I intend to launch a series of raids at once.”

A display of the Confederation appeared in front of them. “The target worlds do not seem to have much in common,” he said. “Some of them are standard Confederation worlds, some are Isolated Worlds, and two of them are fleet bases. They may have taken parts of the shipyards intact, so destroying them if they cannot be recaptured is a priority. Overall, we lack any information on their actual homeworlds or industrial centres, but we assume that they will be capturing ours as they proceed. We must not allow them to knock out our industries, or capture them, as losing them would make our defeat certain.”

The display altered on his command. “The Confederation at large also seems to have woken up to the war,” he added. “There are thousands of refugee ships trying to escape and find safety somewhere – anywhere. We may have to cover them as well, but the problem of identifying likely targets may ensure that we cannot guarantee their safety. That will pose a second problem for us; the aliens, so far, have not attempted any serious communication with us.”

“Ah, Admiral?” Captain Mija Mallory asked. “They haven’t attempted *any* form of communication?”

“They attempted to convince the President’s starship to surrender,” Andrew explained. “They refused to respond to any communication hails from any of our ships, nor, according to the last transmissions from Alexandria, did they respond to local communication efforts. I have research teams exploring possible other methods of communication, but as they obviously captured and cracked a Peacekeeper database, they should be able to talk to us...they just have refused to try.

“And, of course, opening fire is *also* a form of communication.”

He waited for a moment, to see if there were any other questions, and then nodded at Michael Swaim. The Intelligence Analyst stepped forward into their view, the AI controlling the reality inserting him into their vision, and bowed politely. The Peacekeeper Intelligence

branch wasn't highly regarded by the people who actually had to turn policy into practice; Intelligence had missed vital clues before and Peacekeepers had ended up bearing the brunt of the mistakes.

And, Andrew reflected, if it turned out that they had missed something about their new foe, some hint of the storm before it had broken over the Confederation, there would be hell to pay.

“We have extensively analysed the sensor records from the Battle of Terra-Prime and the other engagements across the Confederation,” Michael said. If he was aware of the scepticism aimed at him, he didn't show it. “The aliens have some technological tricks that are superior to ours, but on the whole we find ourselves reasonably matched. Their jaunt drive, judging from the trace radiation, may actually be inferior, but their cloaking devices are superior. There were no signs of their presence in the system before they opened fire.”

“Terrific,” someone muttered, just loudly enough for the AI to pick up on it and transmit it to the group. “They could be sneaking up on us right now.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Michael conceded. “We're going to have to expand the sensor networks around inhabited and vital systems, but for the moment we don't have much of a clue about cracking their system. It *should* be possible – no cloak is one hundred percent perfect – and we're working on it, but as you say, watch your back. In their starships...”

An image of a crab-shaped starship appeared in front of them. “We've designated this the Crab-class,” Michael explained, showing Intelligence's carefully calculated lack of imagination. “It appears to outmass our *Peacekeeper*-class battleships by a factor of two and possesses twice the throw weight of missiles, some of which have been used for planetary bombardment. The starfighters found a weakness pretty quickly – their rear legs are actually part of their drive system and if destroyed the starship seems to lose roughly seventy percent of its drive field motion – but they're nasty bastards up close. They're armed to the teeth with point defence systems and their datalinks, although not as capable as our own, are more than capable of handling a small-scale attack. Losses in starfighters that attempted to engage were very heavy.”

A second starship, Lobster-class, appeared. “The Lobster possesses roughly the same capabilities as one of our own *Lightning*-class cruisers, although there is a variant on the design that has additional firepower and speed, which we have provisionally designated the Scorpion. They're fast and capable of rapid manoeuvring; they were used in most of the hit and run raids, as well as screening the Crabs during the bigger battles. Some of them carried jamming systems for holding our ships in normal space, but unless they have discovered some completely new form of power, they're not going to be able to maintain such fields for long.

“Finally, in space, we have the Crayfish starfighter,” he concluded. “The Crayfish is actually somewhat inferior to our starfighters, but their better pilots are able to get better performance, or there may be two variants and we cannot tell them apart yet. They haven't been seen to carry antiship missiles yet, but that's probably just a matter of time; we use them and they saw them in action against their own craft. Logically, they should have them already...”

“If that's so,” a Captain said, “why don't they have them?”

“Unknown,” Michael admitted. His face compressed into a frown. “We developed starfighters for raiding missions *first* and then for defence and antifighter missions, but they might have developed them as a defence force...except what, in that case, were they defending against? They *should* have them and, assuming they have productive capabilities equal to our own, they could have them deployed in as short a time as a fortnight. It would depend on their designs; we use multiple weapons pods, but they might have different systems.”

The image of the starfighter vanished, to be replaced by one of the aliens. “We do not have any internal information on the aliens, as yet,” Michael said. “The transmissions from the occupied worlds, before they were cut off, reported that the aliens move at terrific speed and fight with considerable skill, but at the same time they haven’t encountered much in the way of formal opposition.”

“They’ll get some from Heinlein,” Captain Santos said. The Heinlein native smiled grimly. “Everyone who wants to be anyone on Heinlein has served in the military and there are plenty of weapons about.”

“My staff are currently preparing simulations for preparing Confederation Ranger forces and planetary defence forces for encountering the aliens,” Michael added. “It must be noted, however, that the aliens have, in seven cases, already slaughtered millions of humans and may intend to move into the worlds permanently. We don’t have any idea just what they have in mind as an endgame, but such actions, committed by humans, suggest that they intend to burn their bridges. There’s no way home.”

Andrew waited until a series of questions had been answered, and then he addressed the group at large. They had been slightly reassured by Michael’s briefing, which was why he’d allowed him to go on for so long; the threat now had shape and form. It wouldn’t be too long before they confronted the aliens again, but by then, they would be ready for them. The aliens had not yet seen humans at war. The only worrying question – or, at least, the most important worrying question – was how much the aliens knew about the Peacekeepers and the Confederation. What had they discovered down on the surface of Terra-Prime? How had they found out about the Confederation in the first place?

“Assignments,” he said. He stared around the room, picking out names and faces from the shades orbiting him. “Captain Mallory, you will take your squadron to Alexandria and probe the alien forces there. I will assign a fleet carrier and escorts to your force and, if there is a chance to inflict serious losses at limited risk, you are to take it. If you can, link into the communications network down on the planet and get whatever updates you can about the situation on the ground. Do not take unnecessary risks; we cannot afford to lose ships at present.”

He waited to see if she had any questions, and then continued. “Captain Zhang, you will take your squadron to...”

The list went on. Four-dozen cruiser squadrons had been wiped out completely; the aliens had extracted a high price in Peacekeeper cruisers during the Battle of Terra-Prime. Others had been decimated, leaving only one or two cruisers intact from the original nine, and had had to be broken up and the starships distributed to fill in the holes in more intact units. It

would have been a nightmare under any circumstances – the commanding officers of squadrons resented being turned into subordinates again – but now it was even worse. The updates from other parts of the Confederation weren't much better; the various fleets had taken a real beating. Somehow, Andrew doubted that they would be allowed the time to regroup completely; he'd planned the strikes to try and keep the aliens off-balance.

If they worked, maybe they would have a chance.

“I will repeat my earlier comment,” he concluded. They shouldn't have needed the reminder, but there was an ugly mood brewing in the chamber, now that they had had a chance to come to grips with the true danger to the Confederation. Peacekeepers were supposed to limit casualties, where possible, but the aliens had done nothing to deserve such consideration. “I don't expect heroics; I expect you all to concentrate on gathering intelligence and then doing what damage you can before bugging out. Good luck.”

He sent the command into the AI managing the network and it closed the perceptual reality down. The Captains barely had time to salute before they were pushed back to their ships, coming out of their trance and preparing to carry out their orders. Andrew himself, lying in his cabin, could barely muster the energy to get up and activate the main display. As he watched, the first squadron jaunted out on their long trip to their target world. The remainder followed soon afterwards.

Too little time, he thought, as the display, following his whim, updated itself. The aliens should have, logically, taken out worlds that were within their space *first*, advancing along a predictable line towards the inner worlds. Instead, they'd targeted worlds seemingly at random, without any obvious link between them, they even seemed to be well spaced out through the Confederation. He peered at the display, trying to see a pattern, but nothing seemed to explain it. Maybe they thought their targets would make ideal breeding worlds, for all he knew; the researchers had already started to speculate that the aliens, like Earth-origin arachnids, reproduced by laying eggs.

It was strange, impossible to grasp...and yet, they couldn't be too different from humanity, could they? They had built spacecraft, they clearly shared some of humanity's own technical discoveries, they even managed to speak once to a human starship. They knew who they were chasing back then, they knew many of the targets that they'd hit...it all pointed to a lost and captured starship, somewhere out on the Rim. He sent an order to Michael through his network, ordering him to look for any record of a missing or overdue starship, one that might have fallen into enemy hands. No other explanation seemed to fit...

At the bottom line, however, it hardly mattered.

The worlds they were invading were *human* worlds and he was charged to defend them against all threats. If he had failed to save the lives of millions, perhaps billions, of humans, then at least he would see them avenged.

Whatever it took.

Chapter Fifteen

The first four days near the Library Planet had been boring, if interesting in a detached sort of way. Stephen had watched as the remaining starships in the system vanished into Jaunt Space, or were destroyed by the enemy starships, leaving them as the only ship left in the system. It was possible, as he'd admitted to Hollyhocks, that there were other cloaked starships in the system, but most pilots would have had the sense to flee. A Peacekeeper picket ship might have lurked at the edge of the system, but he doubted that anyone else would hang around, unless they had similar problems to the *Gentleman Caller*. He'd shaped their course on a slow trajectory out of the system, but even so...it would be at least another week before he dared risk powering up the engines.

He accessed the AI through his implant and checked on Hollyhocks. Her company hadn't improved, at least in public, but he'd caught her crying herself to sleep at night. What might have been a fun adventure, and the envy of all her friends, had turned into a nightmare...and the knowledge that she'd outlived her father gnawed at her. Like most children in the Confederation, she had grown to maturity – or at least as close as she came – in a perfectly safe environment, protected by her family and the people around her. Child abuse was rare in the Confederation...and, as a child, she had been raised on a habitat. There were no predators in such an environment. The only times she'd had to hide was when she'd been playing hide and seek.

She should have had plenty to do. The *Gentlemen Caller* possessed a vast amount of amusements, from perceptual realities with all kinds of programs, to writing tools and even a clothes design program. Instead, she moped around the cabin, or glowered at him as if the alien invasion was all his fault...and he was honest enough to admit that her survival was his responsibility. Someone more ruthless would have probably put her into space by now...although he knew that a sudden unexplained air vent might have been picked up by the aliens. God only knew how good their sensors actually were.

He'd spent most of the time reading the updates on the Galactic Net. There was no way that he could respond, or ask for further information, something that was more frustrating than he had expected. The most reliable networks claimed that seventeen worlds had been invaded, including Terra-Prime itself, leaving the aliens in control of several of the most important strategic locations in the entire Confederation. Others claimed that the entire Confederation had been destroyed, or that the aliens were actually Thule-designed monsters in disguise, and some even claimed that the invasion was a hoax caused by some particularly ingenious gentleman criminal. Hollyhocks had laughed at that and Stephen shared her amusement; he only *wished* he could pull off such a con. He doubted that it would be possible to fool even the most gullible for more than a few minutes, unless he mass-produced drones...and even those wouldn't last long under a full scan.

The most irritating posts claimed that the invasion wasn't happening at all...and that it was all a cunning plan by various unspecified parties to cause a war, or a distraction from something truly important, or even for fun. Stephen had given up reading the posts and the 'proofs' they provided, from logical statements that there were no known intelligent alien races in the galaxy, to suggestions that the reports had been made up completely. The ranting and raving was getting completely out of control; Stephen wondered when the grown-ups were going to throw their children off the Net, before the disinformation grew too invasive. The Net wasn't called the net of a trillion lies for nothing.

Hollyhocks had joined him when they had revived the small amount of information being beamed out from Alexandria. Someone down on the planet was collecting information, compressing it as much as possible, and beaming it out in brief transmissions before the transmissions were halted suddenly. Stephen had guessed that the aliens were blowing up the transmitters from orbit, but the people on the ground didn't seem deterred; they risked their lives, time and time again, to get a signal out to the Confederation. The information would be useful, Stephen knew; if they had exclusive possession, it would bring a considerable reward.

"They're ugly creatures," Hollyhocks said, as he displayed the image of a charging alien again. The Spider-like creature reared up, moving at awesome speed, and brought its weapon to bear on the camera...and the image fizzled out. "Why are they invading the Library Planet?"

Stephen considered the question thoughtfully. The discussion groups had said more or less the same thing; why had the aliens hit certain targets and left others completely alone? The Library world was important to the Confederation as a repository for the Confederation's collective knowledge – and the published trash that writers put out every year – but it was hardly a target worth expanding valuable starships on capturing. Or maybe...

"Maybe they want to look at our oldest records," he said. He'd read up on the Library World when he'd started his new career and had been impressed by how far back the records actually went. Every starship, every habitat, even every planet collected vast amounts of useless data every year...and the Library Planet absorbed all of it. A researcher working there, with a few clues, could probably trace his activities across the Confederation, maybe even predict a pattern that would allow the Peacekeepers to catch up with him. "See how we developed, that sort of thing."

Hollyhocks scowled at him. She was wearing tight shorts and a white t-shirt that was almost completely see-through, but the sight failed to attract him. If she was bored enough to try to seduce him, she had to be very bored indeed, but that was her problem. Stephen didn't find her attractive and didn't care if she knew about it.

"Why would they care?" She asked, peering at the Spider. "They're not going to be interested in humanity's past."

"Know thy enemy," Stephen quoted. "If they learn what makes us tick, they can continue the war on their terms...and destroying the planet would certainly have a rotten effect on our morale."

Hollyhocks snorted. "For destroying a lot of *books*?"

"Yes," Stephen said flatly. "You're too young to understand, but the human race has produced hundreds of great books, each one practically a work of art. Some of them have even predicted social developments in the future that affected us, others were completely wrong; hell, some societies were dreamt of long before they became real. Didn't they teach you anything at the education centre?"

"They didn't make it come alive," Hollyhocks admitted. Her face seemed to pale slightly. "They just told us how to use our implants and left us to play on our own."

“You were meant to develop interests on your own,” Stephen said. He’d been fascinated by crime since he had been young...and the urge to turn to crime as a way of relieving his boredom had become irresistible. “It would probably have made more sense when you passed your first century.”

“I’m not a child,” Hollyhocks protested. “If my father had understood that...”

“You would have burned yourself out,” Stephen said, feeling as if they were re-treading old ground again. He’d seen it happen before; children, given their majorities, ended up burning themselves out in paradise. Most of them, the smarter ones, had ended up going to an Isolated World to put themselves back together again. The stupider ones never got out of it at all. “You’re a child until you can convince some council that you’re an adult.”

He smiled and turned back to the Galactic Net. The messages weren't always helpful – not for the first time, he cursed his inability to do an active search – but some of them suggested what they should do and where they should go after they escaped the system. He was already making plans in his head when Hollyhocks reached out for him.

“There’s something else we could do,” she said, and leaned down to kiss him. Her lips felt soft and warm – she’d had the best treatments to enhance her modified DNA – but Stephen didn’t respond. “Stephen, we could...”

“No,” Stephen said. He had no time for a display of blatant sexuality. Hollyhocks would not be allowed that kind of hold on him. “Go back to your cabin and...”

He broke off as the first alarm rang. “Sit down and buckle up,” he snapped, as he threw himself into the pilot’s seat. For a moment, he thought that the enemy had found them, or that he’d run into another starship...and then he realised just what was happening.

Hollyhocks didn’t. “What’s happening?”

Stephen laughed. “We’ve got company,” he said, as he brought some of the starship’s systems back online. The display updated rapidly, revealing hundreds of new icons appearing in the space surrounding the planet. “We have new friends in the system.”

Unbeknownst to most people, the library staff had installed literally millions of sensors throughout the Library, intent on protecting their property from theft. The more modern books might have been effectively worthless – a good fabricator could churn out as many copies as anyone could possibly want – but the older books from Old Earth were irreplaceable and there were plenty of collectors who would want them for their collections. Amy had been aware, for a long time, of secret underground collectors who would risk everything just to get their hands on a particular book...and who would often send people to challenge the library’s security. A handful of them had even succeeded; one particular theft had remained undiscovered – somehow – until the collector’s son had returned it to the library in perfect innocence. He hadn’t even *known* that it had been stolen.

“The aliens don’t seem to be that interested in the books of romance,” Dewey observed, as they watched the aliens moving through the stacks. Amy wasn't surprised; the romance

books, printed on brown paper for a reason neither she nor Dewey had been able to identify, were generally trash. She'd skimmed through a few and they'd all had the same basic plot and badly executed sex scenes. She'd had more exciting experiences in a pornographic perceptual reality. "They're just...searching for something."

"Perhaps you should let them access the catalogue next time," Amy said dryly. Dewey had isolated and wiped the independent cataloguing units every time the aliens had tried to subvert it, as well as using its robots to harass the enemy. The aliens had rapidly adapted their tactics and were blasting every robot on sight. "We might at least find out what they want."

She sensed more than heard Dewey's snort. The surface of the world wasn't that important; if the aliens wanted to waste a few years looking for a book there, that was fine by the AI. The collection management system was the most advanced and comprehensive system in the galaxy – and, as had happened in libraries throughout history, it was barely capable of satisfying all their requirements – but it was largely useless without the catalogue. The aliens might just take what they wanted and leave, or they might destroy the world behind them, or occupy it permanently.

The only other possibility was that they were searching for the remaining humans.

"I take it they're still destroying your transmitters," she said, changing the subject. "Is it worth continuing?"

"Oh, yes," Dewey said softly. "If there's a starship somewhere within the system, they will have recorded everything and our observations on alien behaviour will be added to the general Confederation database. Something that we record might be the all-important detail that helps us end the war on human terms – or, alternatively, we might actually find a way to communicate with them."

Amy frowned. "Have you found any clues at all as to how they communicate?"

"They make noises, which I am unable to parse, and they use implanted communicators, which I am unable to decrypt," the AI said. Amy detected a note of anger in its tone and felt a flicker of worry. "They issue clicks and hisses to one another, some of which exist at frequencies too high for humans to hear, but I cannot deduce any meaning from them. I cannot locate or identify any commanding officers..."

"Maybe you're going about it the wrong way," Amy said. She called up the list of observed aliens and frowned; telling the aliens apart, even for Dewey, was tricky. Most of them looked as if they had come out of a cloning facility from the First Expansion Period; they looked exactly the same. The only exceptions were a handful of aliens with different coloured skin; apart from the brown Spiders, there were a handful of red Spiders and one black Spider. The latter scared her. It could have hidden in the shadows quite easily. "How do you know that the ones with different colours aren't the bosses?"

"I have observed that they sometimes appear to boss the others around," Dewey said, nettled. "Indeed, they act like young interns, taking orders from me and passing it on to the visitors." Amy chuckled, despite herself. "However, I cannot detect any actual communication

between them; it doesn't seem possible that they are actually conveying enough information in their noises."

"I guess we're not quite as smart as we think we are," Amy said. She wasn't an expert on alien life – there was no one in the Confederation who was an expert, although that would have changed rapidly if she knew the Galactic Net – but she lived in the largest library in the galaxy and she'd had a few days to research. "What about smell, or even telepathy?"

"Olfactory sensors report that the aliens smell the same," Dewey said. She could almost sense the disdainful sniff. "As for telepathy, they would have to achieve a much higher-level effect than anything achieved in various Thule experiments. It might be possible, but I doubt it..."

There was a long pause. "I'll add it to the latest update for the next series of messages."

Amy sighed and stood up. The bunker was large enough to host a hundred people comfortably...and she was alone, separated from the other humans by territory occupied by aliens, barely able to talk to them. She would have given anything to have her current lover transferred over to her bunker, or even someone else that she could just talk to, but she was alone...apart from the ever-present Dewey. She could remain in the bunker for years if she had to, but she didn't want to spend the rest of her days hiding. She was tempted to make the walk to the other bunker, risk or no risk, but Dewey would never have allowed her to leave. Protecting the library and its staff was its priority.

"I'll try and find something else in the records," she said, as she poured herself a cup of tea and opened the next set of files. On one hand, it was a waste of her time; Dewey could scan the files far quicker than any human. On the other hand, it was all that would keep her from going mad – that, and reading science-fiction from Old Earth. Dewey had suggested that she quick-read as many speculative books on aliens as possible, in the hopes that she could use some of the concepts or pass them along to the Confederation, and Amy had agreed. It was something else to do. "Perhaps you could let me know when something happens."

"Of course," Dewey said.

The AI withdrew from contact, much to her relief. She had bonded herself to it, but she'd never expected such close contact, or so much actual dependence. Humanity had learned to be careful where AIs were concerned – despite the paranoid ravings on the net, no planet was completely controlled by the AIs – but she knew that Dewey was more than just an AI. She rubbed her head, trying to remove the headache behind her temples, and stared down at the text in front of her. Somehow, she couldn't read it...

"Something is happening," Dewey announced suddenly. The AI's voice seemed to be excited as it shunted itself back into her mind. "I am detecting multiple gravity surges and Hadenashatar Radiation bursts all over the system."

Amy felt her headache vanish as she came to her feet. "The Peacekeepers?"

"It looks like it," Dewey said. It switched the main display to a view of local space, relying on the sensors on the surface to provide coverage; the aliens had destroyed the orbiting

sensors when they had arrived. A handful of red icons drifted around in orbit...and new icons were springing into existence. "The aliens are under attack."

Chapter Sixteen

No one fully understood the nature of the Jaunt Drive, apart from a handful of very advanced mathematicians and, perhaps, the AIs. Professor Hadenashatar, who had developed the theory behind the drive – and later the first practical application of the theory – had concluded that the starships jaunted through another universe and arrived at its destination. Later theorists had realised that artefacts in normal space actually had an effect on starships in Jaunt Space, providing an explanation for a whole series of strange ‘navigational errors’ that had put starships literally hundreds of light years off course, but even they hadn’t been able to provide a full explanation of Jaunt Space. Theorists fought verbal wars over two alternatives; Jaunt Space was either a separate universe, connected to normal space, or a Jaunt Drive created its own universe when the starship jaunted. It was a puzzle that seemed impossible to resolve.

The first units to arrive in the Alexandria System were decoys, small missile-shaped craft that were a Jaunt Drive, some navigational units and not much else. Their only purpose was to produce a splash of Hadenashatar Radiation, attracting the attention of the aliens at the same time as it distracted them from the real threat, before they died. A Worldship had churned them out and launched them towards the system, while the real starships followed in behind him. It was impossible to prevent the telltale splash of Hadenashatar Radiation from alarming the defenders, but in the time it would take them to sort out the real starships from the decoys, the Peacekeepers would have time to deploy and engage the enemy.

“Two minutes to emergence,” the helm officer said. “Jaunt Drive is operating within normal parameters. Power cells are already recharging and we should be able to retreat within two minutes if necessary.”

If we have to run, Captain Mija Mallory thought. The display was blank – the sight of Jaunt Space had been known to drive people mad – but it wouldn’t be long before it filled up with tactical icons...and her nine cruisers, one carrier and five escorts engaged the enemy. The aliens were lurking within the system, the same aliens that had driven them away from Terra-Prime with their tails between their legs...and everyone onboard the *Feline* wanted revenge.

“Stations, sound off,” she ordered, and listened to the reports. The *Feline* was carrying an expanded crew for the raid, fifty officers and men instead of the normal twenty-one, and some of them were unnecessary. She was still glad she had them – and gladder still that most of her squadron had survived. Too many good men and women had died at Terra-Prime before they had even realised that they were under attack. “All hands, this is the Captain...”

She paused. What could she say? “We will engage the enemy within the next five minutes,” she said, finally. “This time, *they* don’t know we’re coming. *We* will have the advantage of surprise. Make *every* shot count.”

She closed the intercom and sat back in her command chair. The First Admiral had told her to be careful; the Peacekeepers could not afford more losses, but if she had a chance, to try to liberate the planet. Mija suspected that they wouldn’t have a chance, but she hadn’t been able to disagree with the First Admiral’s logic; the Library Planet had to be almost worthless to the aliens, unless they had launched the war to seize humanity’s stockpile of fiction. Her lips quirked into a droll smile; maybe the Spiders would be squashed under the sheer weight of books.

“Ten seconds,” the helmsman said. Mija tensed, despite herself, and then forced herself to relax. The crew were depending on her. “Five seconds...emergence.”

The display lit up at once. They should have been undetected until they actually emerged...and, thankfully, there was no sign that the aliens had deployed a magical detector for tracking starships in Jaunt Space. If they had, it might have won them the war. The starship’s shields and weapons came online as the small task force spread out, launching probes and remote platforms; the aliens seemed to be completely surprised. Judging by their motions, they’d detected the decoys – as they had been meant to – and had been caught out of place. At least they wouldn’t be opening fire while her ships were still struggling to get their shields up...

“Report,” she snapped. “Track and locate all enemy vessels!”

“Reading five Crabs, seven Lobsters and one craft of unknown design, all orbiting the planet,” the sensor officer said. “Correction; nine Lobsters. Two of them just lit off their drives near the remains of a Worldship.”

“Show me the unknown,” Mija ordered. An image, taken by one of the probes, formed in front of her; a vaguely leech-like shape, hanging against the planet. It didn’t look anything like as menacing as the other alien ships, but that didn’t mean anything; a Peacekeeper starship looked pretty, despite its military nature. “Any estimates on its capabilities?”

“No, Captain,” the sensor officer said. “It’s a sensor blank. Judging from Confederation norms, it could be a carrier or a bulk freighter.”

Or maybe the former disguised as the latter, or the latter adapted into the former, Mija thought. She’d seen both tricks during her service with the Peacekeepers. A war tended to suck up all other forms of human activity...and this war, she suspected, would be no different.

“Pass on the warning to the fighter jocks,” she said slowly, as the alien craft started to move. “Inform them that we might be encountering some alien starfighters and remind them that I don’t want any foolish heroics.”

“Aye, Captain,” the sensor officer said. “Enemy craft will enter missile range in two minutes, seventeen seconds.”

Mija smiled. “I love it when a plan comes together,” she said. “Inform the squadron that we’ll go with Cunningham-One; the *Victorious* is to launch its brood and then keep well back, just in case.”

She looked up at the display. “After all, anything could be hiding within the system.”

“That’s the Peacekeepers,” Stephen said, as his own display updated. The Peacekeepers didn’t seem to have arrived in strength, but perhaps he was mistaken, perhaps they did have enough firepower to retake the system. “That’s our chance!”

Hollyhocks looked at him from her seat. “Our chance to do what?”

“To escape,” Stephen said. He’d had a nasty fright when the two hidden enemy cruisers had lit off their drives; he hadn’t even had the slightest idea that they’d been lurking so close to the remains of the *Rising Sun*. He couldn’t even see any reason for them to *be* there; what had they hoped to achieve? Leaving was still a gamble, but they might never have a better chance. “I’m bringing the drive online now!”

“But...” She started to stammer for words. “What about all the information we collected?”

We, Stephen thought dryly. “I’m going to flash-dump it to them once the drive is fully powered up and we can leave in a microsecond,” he explained. Once the drive was fully charged, he could order the AI to jump them out the moment its sensors detected anything dangerous, such as a hail of missiles or an alien craft jaunting in on top of them. The computer could react far faster than either of the humans. “They can make what use they want of it.”

Her face fell. “But aren’t you going to sell it to them?”

Stephen laughed. “You don’t understand the economics,” he said. “They’re going to get a data dump from the planet as soon as they can, so what we know...well, most of it is going to be useless as far as selling it is concerned. Once we tell them what we know, we might get some credit, but not enough to be useful.”

He turned back to the console. Whatever else happened, the sensor readings on the battle might be interesting...and if the Peacekeepers lost, their higher command would definitely pay for the recordings. Hollyhocks sat down beside him; it took a moment for him to realise that she was scared.

“Go use a tranquillising program or lose yourself in a perceptual reality for a few hours,” he suggested. “You won’t know it if some bastard blows us away.”

“I’m staying her,” Hollyhocks said, her lips trembling. “I trust you not to get us killed.”

“One minute to contact,” the tactical officer said softly. “All weapons on standby and ready to engage.”

“Keep the range open,” Mija said. Her display showed the familiar shapes that had caused so much death and devastation to the Confederation. The sight taunted her, mocked her and her failure to defend those she was pledged to defend; she almost wished that she’d been born on one of the Lost Worlds, where such failures were common. Such things didn’t happen in the Confederation...except they had, now. “Open fire as soon as you enter range.”

“Aye, Captain,” the tactical officer said.

The two forces closed together rapidly. The helmsman altered their own course, ensuring that they would remain at roughly extreme missile range from the Crabs; she had no intention of closing with those monsters. Their energy batteries alone would burn her craft out of space before she could destroy them; for sheer weight of weapons alone, the

Confederation had nothing to match them. She'd shared her impressions of the Battle of Terra-Prime with the intelligence punks, safe on one of the Worldships, and the designers had concluded that the Confederation would have to build larger battleships, dreadnaughts and superdreadnaughts, if they were to have any chance at winning the war. The whole concept of thousands of smaller craft had gone out of the window.

Shame, really, Mija thought. She *loved* the concept; her *Lightning*-class *Feline* was fast and capable of taking on any conceivable threat...before the Spiders had arrived and shown the human race how limited its imagination actually was. A single cruiser possessed so much power and all of it was at her fingertips...and nine of them were far more capable. She had drilled her squadron until they fought as one unit...and then two of her ships had been destroyed and others had been seriously damaged. She would have preferred the regulation three months of drilling, but they'd barely had time for a day's practice, mostly in the simulations. She had already privately decided that attempting anything too complex would be asking for trouble.

"We have entered engagement range," the tactical officer said. "We have opened fire."

Feline shook lightly as it launched a spread of missiles, followed rapidly by a second spread, and then a third. The Crabs opened fire at the same time, each one belching a spread of missiles that matched the combined fire of her nine cruisers, the swarm of missiles racing towards her craft. She felt a twinge of fear as she realised that the Spiders had adapted their own tactics; their missiles were racing against three of her cruisers, including the *Feline* itself. The cold-blooded part of her mind noted that the aliens could have – should have – spread their fire over her squadron; their failure to do that suggested that they weren't as confident about their missiles as she believed, or maybe it was just a cunning plan. She couldn't think of any reason why the aliens would want to convince the humans that they didn't understand the capabilities of their own systems, but maybe...

Going to have to revise all those tactical manuals, she thought, and smiled to herself. The Peacekeepers had based their tactics on thousands of years of humans at war, some of them as old as humanity itself, others from far more recent conflicts. Humans had developed tactics that made sense to them – apart from the Thule, most human forces wouldn't attack civilian worlds or threaten the integrity of a biosphere – but the aliens might have completely different priorities. Mija had been more than a little disturbed by the reports from the invaded worlds; several of them had lost cities to orbital attack, their populations slaughtered before they had a chance to escape.

"Point defence online, datalink up and running," the tactical officer confirmed. If the datalink had failed, they would have had no option, but to jaunt out before the missiles entered terminal engagement range. "Enemy missiles engaging..."

Space became a maelstrom of fire as the cruisers linked their weapons together and opened fire, trapping enemy missiles in a sheet of carefully-woven bursts of energy, trying to destroy or deflect them before they reached their targets. Decoys and sensor jammers deployed and presented the missiles with new targets, some of them more inviting than their real targets; close-in defence weapons spat defiance as the missiles entered their terminal attack positions. They were making a run in towards the defences...

Feline shook violently. Enough force to shatter a planet had impacted on the forward shields. “Energy sinks overloaded in two seconds,” the engineer reported. “Limited damage to shield generators; shields now at seventy percent.”

Mija released the breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding. Few people appreciated how powerful modern weapons were until they came face to face with them. The alien possession of singularity warheads and their deployment in space, instead of the ground, suggested that the aliens intended to keep the worlds intact, perhaps without their human population. If they'd been intent on simple devastation, they would have used singularity weapons on the surface of the planets and blown entire continents out of existence, or used focused gravity waves to rip the entire planet to pieces...

Destroying a planet was easy. Taking it intact was much harder.

Invasion and settlement has to be their goal, she thought, as her missiles struck home. The Crabs didn't seem to have such a capable point defence network, but they had plenty of energy weapons mounted on their shells and they swept human missiles out of existence with ease. *If that's the case, they have to have a plan to deal with the residents, somehow.*

“One Crab took a beating and is showing signs of having lost some of its power,” the tactical officer reported. Mija wasn't that surprised by the results; they were going to need much more firepower, in volume as well as capability, to break up the alien formations. Humanity's imagination had suggested much larger missile ships, but no one had built more than a few examples...because no one had seen a need. “The others are trying to close in on us, but keeping the Lobsters well back...”

He paused. “Two of the Crabs are remaining in orbit; the others are continuing to engage us.”

The display flickered again as the Crabs launched a second assault. The human starships flipped over and launched their own spread of missiles, targeting one single Crab. The aliens seemed to have learned; this time, their missiles were mainly targeted on a handful of craft, but the remainder were spread out over the entire squadron. Mija found herself praying that they wouldn't prove to have longer-ranged missiles and target the carrier; if the *Victorious* were destroyed, the starfighters would be trapped in the system. Maybe they could get down to the surface of the planet, but she doubted that they would have a chance...

“*Marathon* and *Pasha* have been destroyed,” the tactical officer noted dispassionately. Mija cursed his lack of alarm even as she relied on it for herself. “*Sheehan* took serious damage, but Captain Vagpus swears that she is still capable of fighting.”

“Order the *Sheehan* to jaunt out,” Mija said. The starship was leaking air and needed a week in a shipyard, perhaps longer. She certainly couldn't fight any longer. “Helm, bring us about and open the range a little.”

The aliens would be driving them away from the planet. They had to know that the chase would be futile...but as long as she was tempting them to follow, they would give chase. After all, they could jaunt back to the planet anytime they wanted to, couldn't they? If they unleashed their Lobster cruisers, they might have a chance to bring her forces to battle, but instead they held them back.

Her lips twitched. So far, so good.

“Communications, have you managed to get a download from the planet itself?”

“Yes, Captain,” the Communications Officer said. “They transmitted several chunks of compressed data, without any encryption at all.”

“Make sure its distributed around the cruisers,” Mija ordered. The Library Planet wouldn’t have access to the latest in Confederation encryption, an oversight that they would have to remedy before the aliens struck at more targets. The AI on the planet would have a unique look at the aliens, but Mija found it hard to imagine what they would want from the galaxy’s largest collection of books. “Tactical, give me a count of aliens back in orbit.”

“Two Crabs, two Lobsters and the unknown ship,” the tactical officer said. His voice was staunchly confident, but Mija had to remind herself that the alien cloaking devices were better than anything else they had ever seen. They might have an entire battle fleet hiding in cloak. “The remainder are in pursuit.”

If you want a man to chase you, run, but don't run very fast, Mija’s mother whispered in her head. The thought made her smile again. Her mother had been fond of little comments like that, a reaction to what she had once called the depravity of the Confederation. After Mija attained her majority, her mother had gone to one of the Isolated Worlds to live the remainder of her life in a different style; they still talked weekly though the stellarcom network. That would probably be difficult with the aliens on the rampage.

“Good,” Mija said. She looked up at the display as the window of opportunity opened. They wouldn’t have a large window, but if the aliens returned to the planet, she could simply withdraw at no greater risk. “Signal Captain Kelsey; Operation Thunderstruck is *go!*”

Chapter Seventeen

There was a brief moment of disorientation and then the starfighter was hurled out the launch tube, flashing into space, its drive field already powering up and hurling it forward at a respectable fraction of the speed of light. The remainder of the squadron followed, each starfighter slipping into position as it was expelled from the *Victorious*, leaving the fleet carrier behind and heading down towards the planet.

“We have two Crabs, two Lobsters and one unknown ship,” Captain Chris Kelsey said, as the starfighters checked in one by one. So far, the skies were as he liked them, completely clear of opposing starfighters. The presence of the Lobsters, which were probably armed to the teeth with alien antistarfighter weapons, wasn’t so much of a problem as alien space superiority fighters would have been. The unknown craft might have been a carrier, but if so, it was being unaccountable slow in launching its own craft.

The data flowed smoothly into his head and he issued orders. The Captain in command of the squadron was keen that they attacked the unknown craft, just to see what it could do before it engaged the remainder of the Peacekeeper fleet, and so he led his forces to the attack. The heartlessness of the concept annoyed him – some of his pilots were likely to die attacking a target with unknown defensive capabilities – but he understood the problem. They were critically short on intelligence on alien capabilities and they needed to know as much as they could before they stuck back.

“Fan out, formation delta,” he ordered, as they flashed closer. They’d be fired upon as soon as they entered weapons range, unless the aliens had a vastly different doctrine to the Peacekeepers, and so they would have to be prepared to evade energy weapons at close range. No starfighter ever created could carry a shield capable of surviving a direct hit from a capital ship’s energy weapons. “Prepare to engage.”

The Lobsters were moving now, heading to shield the unknown craft, and he smiled. The *Victorious* had a handful of cruisers protecting it from any threat, both starfighters and capital ships; clearly, the aliens agreed with the Peacekeepers on that point. Troop transport or carrier, the alien ship wasn’t a Low Value Unit, not if they were prepared to risk cruisers on its defence. His mind absorbed all the information from the probes and decoys, noting the presence of active stellarcom systems on the two orbiting Crabs, and he found himself hoping that the beams could be tracked. If they could get a line on the alien homeworld from tracking their communications...

No, he thought. *We couldn’t be that lucky.*

“Cloudy skies up ahead,” he said, as they approached the red line in space. His systems presented it for him, a line beyond which they could be fired upon by the enemy. “On my mark, break and attack...*break!*”

The starfighters scattered and flashed across the line. The formation looked completely chaotic; the Peacekeepers had an old joke about how easy it was to tell the difference between a well-trained unit and a newly-assembled unit. If the starfighters looked to be flying in perfect formation, unless it was a display, they were newly-assembled and their commanding officer was incompetent. The joke wasn’t so funny now; Chris had been commanding some of his pilots for only a few days and while they had spent most of them in

the simulator, they still weren't a proper unit. Regulations stated that each new squadron was to be given six months to work up properly, clear any problems and learn about each other; Chris knew that they'd be lucky to get a week after they returned from the Library Planet. If they survived this raid, they'd find themselves heading out on another desperate raid and another, trying to keep the aliens off-balance. He almost envied the forces that were hitting the alien positions around Terra-Prime; they, at least, would be killing aliens who had killed their fellow Peacekeepers.

Incoming enemy fire, the AI warned. Chris had seen it at the same moment; the Lobsters had opened fire, throwing a hail of laser beams and gravity waves at the starfighters, trying to kill them before they got any closer. The randomised nature of their attack made it difficult to hit a starfighter, except by sheer chance; he smiled thinly as none of his starfighters were hit in the first seconds. A force of enemy starfighters would have made it much harder; they, unlike the defending capital ships, could have chased the attacking starfighters anywhere. As they closed in, pulsars and plasma cannons added their fury to the display...and one of them got lucky. Chris felt the death of one of his pilots as a moment of pain in the network; one of the newcomers had just died.

He pushed his feelings to the back of his mind. He'd mourn later, if there was a later. The unknown craft was poorly armed, at least by alien standards, which suggested that it was a troopship rather than a warship. Chris was surprised that it was still in orbit – normal Peacekeeper doctrine called for troopships to land on the surface and remain there – but perhaps the aliens had been meeting resistance on the surface. The Library World was protected by an AI and *nowhere* on the planet was free of its untiring observation. The aliens might be regretting their choice of target even now.

“Lock on and follow me in,” he ordered, and yanked the starfighter into an attack position. This was the most dangerous part of the mission; for around two seconds, he would be flying in a perfectly predicable straight line. The Peacekeepers targeted parts of their target ship where there were fewer weapons, or launch distraction raids to keep the enemy from realising the true threat, but if they caught on to him, he would be dead before he knew what had hit him. “Missiles away!”

Two pilots followed him in as he broke off, launching two missiles of their own, flashing towards the enemy starship. Fighter missiles couldn't carry the massive warheads of ship-launched missiles, but they made up for it in speed, they raced towards their target in sprint mode and were almost impossible to hit. The enemy tried, firing pulsars in a desperate attempt to save themselves, but it was too late; the six missiles ploughed into the rear of the starship, detonated, and the starship shattered as explosions tore through it's hull.

“Scratch one enemy craft,” Chris carolled, as he led the fighters away from the wreckage. A Lobster was moving in to intercept them and extract revenge and the pilots spilt up, randomising their course and passing around the Lobster before it could bring its weapons to bear on a target. He checked the fleet display from the *Feline* quickly, watching as the cruiser fought off the main body of the enemy fleet, and smiled at their orders. “After them, boys!”

The starfighters rose away from the planet and chased the enemy starships. Chris ran through it quickly in his head. Captain Mallory had lured most of them away from the planet, away from the unknown ship, but that might change. If they saw the starfighters coming in behind

them, what would they do? They might use their Lobsters to shield the Crabs, or they might jaunt out back to the planet and dare the humans to come after them. The balance of firepower was firmly on their side, Chris could see; they weren't going to do more than harass them.

"I have a transmission coming in from the planet," one of the pilots said. Chris saw it too; a burst transmission, compressed to the point where it would take an AI *real* time to uncompress it. The records, perhaps, of what the Spiders had been doing down on the planet; the more Chris thought about it, the odder their choice of invasion target had been. What was on Alexandria – to them – that was worth the effort of taking it?

Chris cursed as one of the Lobsters moved towards a firing position, taking aim down towards the planet below. "Turn to engage," he ordered, silently damning whoever down there had started to send the transmission. A minute or two earlier and they would have been able to beat off the enemy and protect the transmitter long enough to ensure that they got the entire message. "Follow me in."

He gunned the starfighter forward, towards the Lobster, and the others followed him back into battle. The enemy wouldn't know what had hit them.

"They got one of them!"

"Yes, they did," Stephen agreed, watching the display carefully. The good news was that they could jaunt out at any time; the bad news was that the Peacekeepers were being driven back out of the system. There was little subtlety in the alien movements; they were simply going to harass the Peacekeepers and then force them out of the system, confident that their superior firepower would prevail. "Only one."

He sent a command into the AI and it began a data dump. Unlike the people down on the planet, he hadn't compressed the data and it would take nearly five minutes to transmit the terabytes to the Peacekeepers. He'd also stripped the data of the standard headers and footers that would normally have identified the *Gentleman Caller*, something that would probably attract more attention than leaving them, but he didn't want the starship identified.

"So," Hollyhocks said breezily, "how long are we going to stay here?"

"Five minutes and thirty seconds, unless the aliens decide to take a crack at us," Stephen said. His transmitter was picking up a response; the Peacekeepers were receiving the information. They also wanted to know who he was, but he ignored that request; let them think of him as a starship trapped in the system if they could. "Five minutes now..."

The time ticked away slowly. The sense of imminent disaster was growing. The aliens would have detected his transmission and would almost certainly move to silence him, so where were they? They could easily spare one of their cruisers to hunt down and destroy the *Gentlemen Caller*...

When the alien cruiser appeared, it was almost a relief. "Go," he snapped, and the Jaunt Drive activated. The AI had started the sequence before Stephen had even registered the

alien craft's presence. It barely managed to lock onto them before they disappeared from the system. "We're away."

Hollyhocks giggled nervously. "So, where are we going now?"

"Good question," Stephen said. He'd had some time to think about it. "Venice, I think."

"Venice?"

Stephen laughed dryly. "It used to be one of the most popular vacation spots in the galaxy," he said. "And then the Thule arrived and...well, it isn't any more."

"The transmission has terminated," the communications officer said. "The unknown starship jaunted out."

"Noted," Mija said. Despite her best efforts, enough firepower and bad feelings to crack open a planet were still on the tail of her people, and she was down to six cruisers and the carrier's escorts. She'd woven them all into a proper defence network, but she was unhappily aware that the aliens could overwhelm it by pouring missiles into it until it broke. "The starfighters?"

"They're engaging the Lobster now," the starfighter liaison officer said. She, too, was a newcomer to the bridge, someone linked directly into the *Victorious's* systems. Mija knew that most commanders would have preferred to command from a battleship, or a fleet carrier, but she preferred her own *Feline*. She wasn't an Admiral yet. "The CO expects that they will overwhelm it long before it manages to take out the target on the planet's surface."

Mija said nothing. The starship rocked again as a missile detonated against its shields. So far, the *Feline* had been lucky, very lucky. If the aliens managed to figure out that she was the command ship for the entire force, they'd focus all their attention on battering her out of existence. Once that happened, she would have no choice, but to jaunt out of the system and abandon the starfighters, or accept the loss of her ship. A properly trained squadron could have compensated for the loss of the flagship, but they'd barely had enough time to train as a group, let alone start running emergency drills.

"They took out the Lobster, but the other Lobster and two Crabs are moving in now," the liaison officer added. "The starfighters are running critically short of missiles."

"Order them to withdraw," Mija ordered flatly. "They are to blow through our pursuers and return to the *Victorious*."

She smiled to herself. Admiral Ramage had used a similar tactic back at Terra-Prime, except that she didn't have an extra flight of fresh starfighters to throw at the enemy. If they didn't know that, they were going to have to assume that she intended to repeat his trick and knock out more of their craft...and, hopefully, would be caught right out of position. Even if they weren't, it would be harder for them to intercept the starfighters unless they flew much closer to the alien craft...

"Bring them back home," she ordered. "It's time to leave."

“They’re going to have to retreat,” Dewey said, as the alien craft pushed against the Peacekeeper formation. “They can’t stay there much longer.”

Amy nodded. She was in full armour, at Dewey’s insistence, but the aliens on the planet weren’t showing much interest in the fighting high overhead. “How much of the message did they get?”

“Enough, I think,” Dewey said. “I compressed it carefully; even if they don’t get all of it, they should have the most important parts, as long as they make it away from the system.”

“I see,” Amy said. There was nothing else they could do. “Keep me informed.”

The Lobster exploded as seventeen missiles detonated against its shields, crushed them, and destroyed the ship. Chris heard the cheers over the communications network as they spun away, only to see the other alien craft closing in on the prime firing position. As he watched, he saw one of them fire a kinetic energy weapon down towards the surface, far too fast for him to intercept it. Even if he had, the aliens would just fire more until they took out the transmitter. He could only hope that they’d picked up enough of the transmission to allow the intelligence types to decompress it and gain some useful intelligence.

“This is *Victorious*,” a new voice said. “Return to base; repeat, return to base.”

“Understood,” Chris said, pulling away from the enemy craft and heading back out into space. Starfighters, with their low mass, could accelerate much faster than any capital starship; a moment’s respite and they became impossible for the aliens below them to catch. The Crabs returned to their patrol of the skies, the Lobster floated around and headed out to space, before jaunting out. “Anyone get a read? Where as he going?”

“Impossible to tell,” Peter Davidson said. He’d had the closest look at the vanishing Lobster. “I didn’t get enough of a read on the jaunt field; he could have gone to over a thousand possible stars, and that assumes...”

“Yes, I know,” Chris said. Peter had a tendency to lecture everyone when he had a chance. He had dreams of rising to become an Admiral. He’d have to leave starfighters, however; the highest anyone had ever risen while remaining a purely starfighter officer was Commodore. “They wouldn’t have been stupid enough to fly directly to their destination anyway.”

“Yes, sir,” Peter said.

The alien force ahead of them closed ranks as the starfighters flashed closer. The Crabs pulled together and brought their sensors, targeting the starfighters even before they entered engagement range, while the Lobsters fanned out, deploying their own weapons to protect the Crabs. Chris was tempted, insanely so, just to blow through the centre of the alien formation, but that would have pushed their luck too far. Instead, they took a handful of shots at one of the outermost Lobsters and flashed onwards to their own ships. The fleet carrier grew in front of them and he thought he’d never seen something so welcoming in his life.

“Enter the field only,” the landing officer ordered. Chris nodded. The aliens had launched a massive spread of missiles, targeting the carrier directly, and the only defence would be not to be there when the missiles arrived. The starfighters entered the carrier’s drive field and cut their own drives...

A moment later, the universe vanished around them.

“Jaunt,” Mija ordered. A moment later, just as the alien missiles were roaring down on their tail, the remains of the Peacekeeper force were well away from the system. The aliens would have gotten a look at their jaunt fields and they might even be able to estimate their location, but the flight computers had already been programmed to make a second jaunt on a random vector as soon as they arrived at the end of the first jaunt. “Stand down from red alert. Damage report!”

“Limited damage, a couple of weeks repair work at most,” the engineer said. Mija allowed herself a moment of relief as she saw the display switched to monitoring internal status. There were fewer red lights than she had expected. “Self-repair functions have already come online and started to tackle the worst of it. We got pretty lucky.”

“I know,” Mija said. She gazed up at the featureless display. Once they arrived at their second jaunt coordinate, they would have to recover the fighters, catch up on their status and generally limp back to the Cascade shipyard. The media would probably play it as a great victory, but the bottom line was simple; the enemy had regained control of the system. Hell, they’d never really lost it.

Her voice was a whisper. “Next time, we won’t be so lucky.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Overall, the raids destroyed around seventeen alien craft, at a cost of eight Peacekeeper cruisers, one battleship, one fleet carrier and two hundred and seventy-two fighters.”

The display floated in the centre of the War Room. She watched as the stars altered colours based on what had happened when the Peacekeepers had entered the occupied systems, desperate to discover what was happening to the people they'd failed to protect. She knew that that was unfair – there hadn't even been the months of unheeded warnings before the Thule War – but it was hard to think of it as anything else. No one had fought a war on such a scale since Thule; the human race had thought itself beyond anything past minor skirmishes.

President Katherine Coynor fought down the tears that threatened to appear in her eyes. Years ago, she'd forsaken the bioenhancement that would have given her perfect control over her own face, something she'd believed the voters would have had a negative response to. Humanity knew, these days, when a politician was lying; she, like the other new breed, had had to adapt. It had been a mistake, she realised now; if she'd had the treatment, it might have spared her the Presidency when the Confederation was burning down around her.

She asked a single question. “Was it worth it?”

The holographic image of First Admiral Andrew Ramage peered at her. “I believe that it was worth the risk,” he said. “We damaged alien installations, we took out alien starships and we learned much more about their technology and behaviour. It may not seem like a victory, but believe me, it was a real result.”

“One more victory like this and we are ruined,” Katherine snapped, more harshly than she'd intended. “Who said that originally?”

“King Pyrrhus, I believe, well before the dawn of spaceflight,” Andrew supplied. His virtual memory would have the details of thousands of years of human conflict. “He lost most of his army in combat with the Romans, the greatest soldiers of their time, and stated that if he fought another battle on the same scale, even victory would be a defeat.”

Katherine closed her eyes for a long moment. She'd thought of humanity as an advanced species, ready to make the hop to other galaxies, or even to develop itself into an energy-based life form. She'd reached the Presidency, the height of power in a Confederation where the leavers of power had been deliberately placed very far apart, knowing that, at best, she would be little more than a custodian. She hadn't expected to have to worry about even a minor conflict with a Lost World, let alone a full-scale war with aliens...

“I understand,” she said, wishing that she could see him in person. The Confederation Parliament had been destroyed, or captured, and the replacements had remained on their worlds, using the Stellarcom Network to transmit their images across the Confederation. All they knew about her was that she was in a secret location. “Can we continue to endure such losses?”

“We may have no choice,” Andrew said. The display altered at his command. “They have established themselves in a position of considerable strength in the Inner Worlds, as well as

certain of the Isolated Worlds...and Alexandria, of course. My analysts think that it won't be long before they start punching out the pickets and orbital defences of the other Inner Worlds, something that will add to our already considerable refugee crisis. They have to know that we're going to be working on defences and if they think they took out all of our shipyards, I would be very surprised."

Katherine nodded once. Every Confederation world, even some of the Isolated Worlds, had at least one Fabricator orbiting it, as well as hundreds of smaller ground-based facilities. The sheer industrial potential of the devices, normally used for satisfying every reasonable and often unreasonable request of the citizens below, was terrifying to contemplate; a month's grace could see most of the Inner Worlds rendered effectively invulnerable.

"That makes sense," she agreed, reluctantly. "How long do you think we have?"

"There's no way of knowing," Andrew said. "No one has fought a war on such a scale since the Thule War and even that isn't a precise match, because technology has improved rapidly since the end of the war. Back then, it wasn't so easy to raid so far behind the front lines and both sides had to take bases as they moved and knock out the other side's forward bases. It was a lot harder than it is today; we can, and will, use Worldships as mobile factories to produce starships and raw materials for the war."

He paused. "The best guess among the analysts is that the Inner Worlds have a week before the attack actually starts," Andrew said. "Several thousand of their starships are missing, or at least they didn't take part in beating off our raids, which suggests that they could already be on their way to attack new worlds. We've moved what forces we can into positions to defend the worlds, but without advance knowledge of the target, we would have problems in massing enough firepower to prevent an invasion."

Katherine winced. "And other worlds will fall under their control."

"Yes, Madam President," Andrew admitted.

"And millions more humans will be killed," Katherine said. "Is there no way we can talk to them?"

"They don't respond to our signals," Andrew reminded her. "They *can*, we believe, but they choose not to open communications. The only signal they ever sent to us was aimed at you; they could talk to us, but they *choose* not to. My analysts think that that's a very bad sign; if they're not interested in accepting surrenders, they may want to exterminate the human race altogether."

"No," Katherine said, feeling her blood run cold. "The Confederation is vast. They can't exterminate the human race completely, can they?"

"So far, they're winning," Andrew pointed out dryly. "As long as they don't think they have any reason to talk to us, they won't. Why should they make a deal when they can just *take* whatever they want?"

"Because they might want to avoid more deaths on their side?" Katherine hazarded.

“I believe that it is dangerous to assume that they think like us,” Andrew said. “They certainly do not look like us.”

Katherine remembered the Spider-like images sent from various worlds and shivered. “So, we have no choice, but to fight,” she said. “Can we win the war?”

“I believe that we have no choice, but to fight,” Andrew said. It wasn't an unqualified positive answer. Katherine heard the doubt in his voice and shivered again. “We need, Madam President, to focus completely on winning the war. We need a declaration of war, which will empower us to use every resource in the Confederation – or outside it – to defeat the enemy. We need newer and better warships, newer and more capable starfighters, and an army for facing them on the ground. They want our worlds, so we have to make the price of taking them too high, even for them.”

“They must have some limit,” Katherine protested. “They can't be so uncaring about their own losses.”

“We don't know,” Andrew said. “We took out seventeen starships in the recent raids. Based on what we know about their numbers, that's around 0.001% of their forces...and maybe much less. I could tell you exactly how large a percentage of Peacekeeper fighting power was lost, but I don't have exact figures for the alien fleet...so we have no way of knowing how badly we hurt them. We have to assume the worst.”

“I'll have to convene Parliament,” Katherine said. “I'll have to ask for a declaration of war.” She paused. “Do we have any idea at all where they come from?”

“None,” Andrew said. “I've been trying to get the Survey Service organised to carry out a rapid search of the remainder of the galaxy, concentrating on areas where we might have lost starships somewhere over the last thousand years.”

“Because the Spiders might have gotten them,” Katherine said.

“Correct,” Andrew said, and winked. Katherine had to smile back. “It's still a vast area of space and even if we assume that their society must pump out the same amount of energy as we do, it's going to take years to search it all properly. Statistically, the odds aren't good; I've got teams working on ways to capture an alien starship and recover it's computer core, but if they have automatic data-purge precautions built into the system, it could be a frustrating experiment.”

His face darkened. “I'm going to have to order a second probe into the Terra-Prime system,” he said. “I don't like to do it, because the last raiding force was completely wiped out, but we don't have a choice. They could be doing anything down there.”

“I know,” Katherine said, trying to share the burden a little.

“We may have to consider opening the Locker,” Andrew said, finally. Katherine stared at him. The horrors contained inside the Locker were classified beyond even Fortress Maximus itself. “If the war gets much worse...”

“No,” Katherine said, flatly.

“I hope you’re right,” Andrew said. He saluted quickly. “Until the next time, Madam President...”

His image vanished. Katherine felt her legs shake and forced herself to remain upright. The Locker was a nightmare from the past, something that was passed down from President to President, known only to them and the First Admiral. The mere thought of using it, even considering using it, was appalling...when she’d first heard about it, Katherine had wondered why the young Confederation hadn’t simply destroyed the Locket’s contents.

But they’d built Fortress Maximus as well, and *that* precaution had more than proved its worth in the war. Would the Locker prove the same...or would opening it merely condemn humanity to an even greater nightmare?

An hour later, she stood in the centre of a perceptual reality and watched as the newly elected Members of Parliament gathered around her. By long-standing tradition, all Parliamentary debates had to be conducted in person, forcing the MPs to leave their planets and travel to Terra-Prime, only spending one month in every year on their homeworlds. The local governments could handle all of the issues affecting the planets on their own; the MPs existed to govern the entire Confederation. They’d also all died, or had been captured, on Terra-Prime; the MPs surrounding her now were new. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not; the last time an MP had been killed had been nearly four hundred years ago, although accidents had claimed three more lives since. The MPs lived on a short leash and knew it; any of them could be recalled to face an election at any time.

She smiled to herself, watching how the power balance was playing out. The Conservatives seemed to be a little stronger, the Progressives seemed to be a little weaker, while the Regressive Party had almost vanished. Only the Advancement Party remained the same, but its goals were widely suspected to be impossible, at least according to every theory Katherine had ever heard. There were hundreds of research programs into Transcendence, but most of them produced nothing, but terabytes of excuses for failure. Perhaps the human race wasn’t ready for transcendence just yet.

Or perhaps I should have provided more funding, she thought, bitterly. *The help of a godlike human would have been very useful right now.*

“All participants have arrived,” the AI said, closing off access. “Level-one security protocols have been enacted. The 1st Emergency Session of the Confederation Parliament may begin.”

“Thank you,” Katherine said, out of habit. The perceptual reality provided her with a stand, from which she could look down onto the shadowy faces, clear only if she wanted to see who they were. The AI couldn’t show everyone without confusing mere humans. “The Confederation is under attack.”

She ran through a brief outline of the situation, ranging from the first attacks on the Peacekeeper Fleet to the invaded worlds and the struggle for survival that had been unleashed on many of them. The aliens had depopulated the larger cities, but there was still a large human presence on the surface and fighting was raging across the planets. The aliens had the

advantage of being able to call down fire from orbit, but despite that, human resistance was still taking a toll.

“We have been unable to establish contact with the aliens,” she said, speaking directly to the simulated room. The AI would ensure that they all heard her words. “The only way they speak to us is through their actions...and their actions suggest that they want only one thing, the destruction of the entire human race. They take no prisoners, they accept no surrenders, and they slaughter the civilian population by the millions.”

She looked meaningfully towards the empty seats that would have – should have – held a delegate from each of the Occupied Worlds. “We have a responsibility to our people to defend them from all threats,” she said. “We need, we must have, full and complete commitment to winning the war and crushing the enemy, regardless of the cost. I must ask you, now, for a declaration of war against the Spiders.”

There was a long pause. They had to be mulling it over in their heads. Some of them would be opposed on principle, despite the invasion of the Confederation, but others would be determined to accept the declaration of war. Failure to vote for the declaration would be severely punished by the voters, particularly if their principled stand managed to derail the declaration...but even so, most of them found it hard to believe in the aliens. They hadn't known that aliens existed and, in time, it had become conventional wisdom that no aliens existed. Now, the aliens had arrived and invaded...and they were having problems coming to terms with it.

She listened to the debate as it surged backwards and forwards. Surely, some said, the aliens didn't *mean* to be hostile; it was just a question of finding how to communicate with them. Yes, the aliens were hostile, said others, but did the Confederation really need a declaration of war? It was going to be unpopular everywhere that wasn't under direct threat, although the aliens had already proven that they could strike anywhere, which meant that there was nowhere safe from the threat. Why not attempt to leave the Confederation anyway? They could build Worldships and transport the entire human race to another galaxy.

“How do you know they won't follow us there?” Someone asked, and ended that particular line of discussion.

“I believe that we have no choice,” an MP said finally. He was MP for Dalton, a world that was close, very close, to Heinlein, and almost certainly on the alien list of targets. Katherine would have been surprised if Dalton hadn't been targeted; it's communist government had built up a surprising amount of industry for an Isolated World. “I call for an immediate vote.”

There was a pause. The Inner Worlds used direct democracy; the Outer Worlds and the Isolated Worlds appointed their MPs to vote according to what they believed their populations wanted. In time, Katherine had been told, the entire Confederation would become like the Inner Worlds, although she rather doubted it. Large sections of the population never bothered to vote, regardless of the issue.

“I second,” another MP said. “Madam President?”

“The motion is for a declaration of war against the Spiders,” Katherine said, and ignored a handful of comments about how the aliens almost certainly didn’t call themselves the Spiders. “Please cast your votes now.”

One advantage of the Confederation’s system was that it was easy to tell what MP had voted for any particular question. There were seven thousand MPs – the chamber back on Terra-Prime had been massive – and she watched as the votes quickly totted up. Five thousand, seven hundred and ninety and voted in favour, one thousand and four had voted against, and the remainder had abstained. Katherine suspected that the abstainers had wanted to vote against, but had known that their populations wouldn’t have supported them – most of the MPs who had voted against the motion wouldn’t survive another year in office. Confederation politics could be cutthroat at times.]

“The motion is passed,” Katherine said. “The Confederation has declared war against the Spiders. God help us all.”

The MPs faded out from the chamber, leaving her alone. A moment later, she pulled herself out of the simulation and sat up on her bed. The implants should have kept her from direct harm, but most users chose to lie down on their beds, just to ensure that they didn’t fall over or were disturbed by their friends. A person who came out of a perceptual reality too quickly would be lucky if he was only disorientated. Nausea and vomiting wasn’t uncommon. A very rare reaction was complete mental collapse as the brain tried to process two separate streams of information.

She caught her breath as she stood up on wobbly legs and tottered over to the producer, which produced a glass of water. She sipped gratefully, wishing that she could be somewhere else, somewhere where there was a shoulder to lean on. The sheer weight of the Confederation had fallen on her shoulders, turning her into a war leader who had started considering the use of extreme measures to win the war...

“Computer,” she ordered, when she had finished the water. “Open a direct channel to Admiral Ramage. Inform him that we have the declaration and we need to move to full war production mood immediately.” She paused. Somehow, she had never felt so determined – and yet so scared – in her life. No one had told her that it could be like this. “We have a war to win.”

She sat down again and squared her shoulders. If that wasn’t enough, there was always the Locker...

Chapter Nineteen

The smoke rose up from the burning homestead.

Major Ned Brickley stood near the ruined house, staring down at the bodies. The homestead had once housed a family unit of seven men, nine women and fourteen children, and most of them were dead. Family structures on Heinlein tended to vary wildly, from the standard nuclear family to massive groupings of men and women and this particular farm had housed one of the latter. It was a fairly stable structure for the kids – if one of their parents died, they'd still have others to take care of them – but this family had been wiped out. Almost...

"There's only seven bodies here," Gary Young said, examining the small pile of bodies. "Three of them are men, four are women, all adults. I don't know what happened to the children."

"The other adults would have gone to the military for their Reserve Service," Ned guessed. There was no way to know now – Heinlein wasn't the most organised place in the galaxy for keeping records – but he hoped he was right. The more worrying question was what had happened to the children. "Is there any bodies in the wreckage?"

"None that I can see," Alicia Young said. Gary's wife, a short woman whose skill at unarmed combat was a legend, had been poking through the debris. "It looks like they came up to the homestead, the adults put up a fight – I think that that's where an alien died – and were killed. The aliens took the children and burned the remains of the farm."

Ned scowled. He'd walked through innumerable combat zones in his life, from the remains of pirate raids to the aftermath of Thule invasions, and they had all been horrifying. The Thule had deployed, later in the war, engineered soldiers who should have been able to sweep normal soldiers off the battlefield...and if their intelligence had matched their brutality, they would have succeeded. They'd sacked a city once and then settled down to an orgy of rape and plunder, rather than continuing the attack...and then attacked their fellows when they had tried to get them back on the move. Ned had seen the remains of that attack with his own eyes, after the enhanced soldiers had been exterminated, and he'd been sick...but this was worse. The Thule had *cared* about the horrors they were inflicting, driven by their hatred and engineered belief in their own superiority...but the aliens didn't care. There was no malice or hatred in their actions.

Somehow, that only made it worse.

He glanced down at the terminal he wore at his belt. It vibrated once, signalling that an alien force was heading towards the ambush position, and he straightened up, warning his people to start running to their positions. The fighting had been raging over this part of the continent for days; the aliens had started to land their people...and the remaining humans had attacked them. Since then, the aliens had been trying to exterminate the humans...and had been taking prisoners. No one knew why they only took children, but Ned remembered an old horror story from when he was a child, written back before humanity had gone into space, suggesting that the children would be *eaten*. He hoped that that wasn't the case...

"Come on," he ordered, and the small team ran for the hidden firing positions. The Spiders didn't seem to like spending times in the mountains, not after a large force had been

exterminated by a massive rockslide, but they seemed to have an almost perfect system for detecting humans who had come out of the mountains. He wasn't sure if they were using orbital observation, or merely a few sensors scattered through the area on their first sweep, but it hardly mattered. All that mattered was that a few thousand aliens were about to try to kill them.

He saw Janine staggering slightly and looked over at her. Her face was torn and drenched with sweat, her eyes reflecting agony. “Janine...?”

“Am all right,” Janine said, between gasps. Ned knew she was lying. “I can make it.”

He caught her arm and helped her run. “What’s happening to you?” He demanded. Janine had gone on a dozen heavy training exercises and hadn’t ended up on the verge of collapse. There had been men engineered to the peak of physical perfection who’d handled it worse than Janine – the exercise hadn’t been about physical toughness as mental toughness. “Janine, I need to know...”

She pressed one hand to the side of her head. “I can *hear* them,” she said. “There’re in the back of my head.”

Ned stared at her. “They can read your mind?”

“I can feel them coming for us,” Janine said. “Their shared mentality hunting for us, their thoughts and feelings, their...it’s like having the shadow of a headache in my head. I know they’re there and I know they’re coming for us and...”

A streak of light across the sky was followed rapidly by an explosion in the distance. The rocket platoon had opened fire, hurling high-explosive rockets into the teeth of the alien formation, which was charging towards them at high speed. Ned reached the first ambush position and snapped his fingers at one of the reservists, one of the handful of Mobile Infantry survivors. They’d fought the aliens and stalled them for an hour...and then the aliens had killed most of them from orbit.

“Take her back into the mountains, now,” he ordered, and passed Janine to him. He ignored her protests; like it or not, she was in no state for a fight. The aliens had reached the edge of the valley and paused, waiting while they gathered themselves, and then they came on in an endless torrent of brown monsters, aimed right at the human position.

“Fire,” Ned ordered. The machine guns, primitive, but with the advantage of being much harder to detect from orbit than anything more modern, opened fire, supported by the heavy mortars. The aliens seemed to flinch at the hail of fire, and then they leapt up, moving at terrific speed as they rushed towards the human positions, dodging human fire with ease. Up close, he could almost sense it himself, a cold dispassionate intelligence that was somehow controlling the Spiders, something so hauntingly unfamiliar that he almost threw up. Some of the soldiers weren’t as lucky; they fell to their knees as the aliens raced closer, crying out or choking as the unearthly influence reached into their souls.

“Now,” he snapped, and the charges detonated. They’d been lucky to have the mines for the training exercises and luckier still that they hadn’t been detected; any Heinlein-trained force would have known to watch for mines. The energy mines detonated, sending a sheet of

superhot plasma into the air, and Spiders withered like insects caught in a candle flame. For the first time, he heard inhuman howls of agony coming from the aliens, the noise tearing at his very soul. It was impossible to tell how many aliens there were, or how many they'd caught in the trap, but there was no time. They had to *move*!

The whistles blew and the soldier fell back, heading up the tracks towards the mountains. The Spiders blew through the last of the fires as they burned out and ripped apart a couple of soldiers who hadn't moved fast enough, before being cut down by the rearguard. The mines had taught them caution and they didn't give chase at first, watching the humans with their eerie eyes, standing inhumanly still as they waited for orders.

Perhaps we got the boss, Ned thought, hopefully. The red and black aliens seemed to be the leaders, insofar as they knew anything about their mysterious opponents, and killing them seemed to throw the enemy into confusion...at least for a few moments, then they recovered themselves and fell back. Their behaviour was never predictable; sometimes they had to be wiped out to the last Spider, and sometimes they fell back in good order if they'd bitten off more than they could chew.

He allowed himself to relax slightly as they reached the Hummers, although he ordered a small rearguard to keep watch on the aliens. They were just standing there, waiting...waiting for what? The passive sensors that the humans had scattered around the mountains reported that there was nothing coming near them, although if the aliens decided to drop a rock on them from orbit, there was nothing they could do about it. It wasn't even possible to tell how many aliens were *left*; even reduced, they were just an indistinct mass of brown shapes.

The Hummers climbed up into the mountains, leaving the aliens behind, and he peered down onto the plains below. The green forests and cropland were covered, now, with patches of brown...and it took a moment to realise that they were alien swarms. He used a hi-res sensor to study them, trying to understand what they were doing, but it didn't seem to make sense. Some of them were still standing still, waiting, others were swarming about, looking for something.

They're marking their territory, Ned realised bitterly. A noise in the distance announced the arrival of yet another alien landing craft. They'd been landing one pretty much every twenty minutes, which meant that by his most conservative estimate, there were well over a million aliens on Heinlein's soil. Scouts had reported that they'd started construction of a city, one only a few kilometres from the human city they'd destroyed, and already it was booming. His least optimistic estimate was that they'd landed almost a billion aliens already...and there seemed to be no end to the landings.

"Welcome back," General Gordon said, when they finally arrived in the heart of the Secret Valley. It had been hidden away at the centre of the mountainous region – the scientists believed that it had once been the core of a volcano that had later died completely – and served as a hiding place for the remains of humanity on the continent. Ned hoped – prayed – that there were other resistance groups on the remainder of the planet, but they had no way of contacting them. A radio transmission brought alien attention like nothing else. "What did you see?"

Ned ran through the homestead, the battle and their escape quickly. "I think they're going to make it harder and harder for us to come out of the mountains," he concluded. The aliens had

all the advantages on the plains; he wouldn't have cared to face them there, even with the Mobile Infantry and no pesky aliens in low orbit. "If they wipe out all of the farms around us, our food supply is going to get rather short."

"True," Gordon agreed. "Last night, the Peacekeepers probed the alien starships overhead."

"I saw the battle," Ned said. He'd watched from the forest before going down to hunt for more human survivors. The explosions had lit up the night sky. "I guessed they didn't manage to drive the aliens away."

"No," Gordon said dryly. If the Peacekeepers *had* secured control of the high orbitals, wiping out the alien concentrations wouldn't take more than a few hours and then the world would be human again. "What we did get was a download from their starships and we, naturally, transmitted a full report to them. You can read it later, but the important part is that sixteen other worlds have been invaded, others might be on the list, and that we may not get liberated for some time."

"Aw, shit," Ned said, with some feeling. Heinlein might have had its problems with the Peacekeepers in the past, but he'd expected that the Peacekeepers would defend Heinlein...or, at the very least, liberate it. "Where else got hit anyway?"

"Terra-Prime itself, along with two shipyards," Gordon said grimly. He looked down at the map for a long moment, leaving Ned to consider the problem. Heinlein was far less important than the shipyards. Even he admitted that. "Ned, what would you say our chances are of defeating the aliens right now?"

Ned didn't even have to call upon his centuries of experience. "None," he said. "We're fairly safe up here until we piss them off enough that they resort to a random bombardment of the mountains, but we can't take them on down there and even if we could, they'd still have the high orbitals."

"They're going to have several months, reading between the lines, before the Peacekeepers arrive in enough force to push them off the world," Gordon said. "We may have to harass them right up to that point, or...the other option is that we stay here until the Peacekeepers arrive."

"No," Ned said flatly. It had been an almost instinctive statement. "The aliens, whatever they really want, have been taking prisoners. They've got...probably hundreds, or thousands, of human beings prisoner on this world alone and we have a duty to them. We owe them a chance at life!"

Gordon nodded. "We think we've located one of their camps," he said. Ned brightened up and listened with interest. "If it is a prison camp, we're going to raid it."

Ned looked at the location on the map. "Chancy," he said. The odds weren't going to be good. "They see in the dark better than we do...and God help us if they catch us in the open."

"We may have some help coming," Gordon said. "The Peacekeeper commander included a note that some Rangers might be sent here to help out."

Ned smiled. “The Confederation Rangers are supposed to be tough,” he said. He’d left active service a long time before the Rangers had been created. “You did warn them about the aliens tracking our advanced technology?”

“Of course,” Gordon said, annoyed. “I want you to put a raiding force together, based out at Camp Two; we’ll try and hold off for as long as we dare, but the aliens might not bother to feed their captives.”

“I can’t see why they wouldn’t,” Ned admitted. The aliens had to eat like humans, right? Scout teams had seen them gorging themselves on pigs and cattle from the farms, eating in a way that made some of the scouts lose their lunches. They had to know that humans ate as well. “If they want to keep them alive, they’ll have to feed them.”

Gordon nodded tiredly. “Maybe they might even be able to talk to them,” he said. “They might find out what the bastards *want*.”

“*Might*,” Ned said dryly. “I’ll believe it when I see it. God alone knows what those poor kids are going through.”

The voice was back again, the voice at the back of her head. Martha whimpered, struggling to expel it from her mind, but instead it slipped back inside and laughed at her. She struggled, desperately, to escape from the nightmare, one hand pinching the other hard enough to leave a bruise on her dark skin, but she didn’t wake up. The nightmare was real.

She whimpered as she staggered to her feet, feeling hot and bothered all over. Memories rose up from behind her eyes, like a defective perceptual reality program, reminding her of the day the *monsters* had arrived. One of her mothers had ordered her and the other children into the shelter as the fathers prepared to defend the farm against the *monsters*, but it had been too late. Martha, fourteen years old, had seen the *monsters* and had been unable to move. The *monsters* had hacked Clyde apart, the man she thought was her biological father, in front of her, and then they’d taken her and the other children out of the homestead. One of the mothers, Mary, had been badly wounded and one of the *monsters* had killed her, before escorting the children away from the burning ruins. She’d wished for her handgun – children were not allowed to keep weapons or use them without supervision until they’d reached their majority – to fight the *monsters*, but the demonic creatures wouldn’t be killed by anything human. Her parents had been unable to save her...

One of the *monsters* opened one of its eyes. She’d screamed with the other children when they had been dragged away, unable to bear the sight of the *monsters*, but their screams had faded when they’d finally been escorted into a camp. The camp wasn’t like any camp she’d ever seen before, more like a sleeping place than a training camp, and the *monsters* had slept among them. The hideous spider-like creatures had just sat down on their eight legs and gone to sleep, until now. One of them was *looking* at her.

Martha stared into the strange inhuman eye, almost hypnotised by the *monster*, until she finally dragged herself away. Her temperature was rising fast and she felt ill; she’d never felt ill in her life. Any children born on Heinlein was enhanced to the point where only very rare illnesses could affect them, and Martha had never been unlucky enough to catch one...until

now. The part of her mind that was still rational wondered if she was delirious, or if the *monster* was a figment of her imagination, but she knew, deep in her heart, that it was real.

She must have fallen asleep again, because the next thing she knew was the *monsters* moving around her, walking around the camp. She tried to avert her gaze from the creatures – just looking at them gave her a headache – but it was impossible to miss some of the other creatures moving with the monsters. They were *human*, walking beside the *monsters* as if they were *monsters* themselves, their faces blank and slack as they moved. Martha opened her mouth to call out to them, hoping that the adults would be able to do something, and then she saw the final horror.

Her own brothers and sisters were walking with the *monsters*.

The voice at the back of her head laughed again and she fainted.

Chapter Twenty

“I’m a goddamned babysitter,” Captain Mija Mallory muttered, as her shuttle dropped down towards the vast bulk of the Worldship *Honour To The Just*. It’s monstrous two hundred kilometre long shape, illuminated by the starship’s running lights, seemed like something out of a dream, even to someone who’d been born and bred on a Worldship. There were people who claimed that the *real* reason why so few new planets were settled was because humans were moving to space habitats and Worldships, leaving more and more prime planets untouched by human life.

She scowled as she took in the sight. *Feline* and her cohorts had been ordered to the Siberia System, only forty light years from Terra-Prime, after their return from the raid. The damaged ships had been too lightly damaged to take up yard space at Cascade, so they’d been ordered to rendezvous with the *Honour To The Just* at Siberia...and, incidentally, help with the refugee ships. Thousands of starships orbited Siberia, or drifted in free orbits around the local star, their scared passengers and crew uncertain of where to go. Siberia was so minor that the aliens, logically, shouldn’t have any interest in it – it had remained out of countless wars by having nothing anybody, even the Thule, actually wanted.

Memories rose up from her virtual memory and she nodded to herself. The New Russian Oligarchy had had problems with a rapidly growing religious sect, so they’d expelled all of its members to Siberia, a world barely within the life-zone of its star and far from prime real estate. Surprisingly, they’d prospered, forming a community that had withstood the test of time...and even attracted a handful of immigrants from the Confederation. Under other circumstances, Mija would have been delighted to have a chance to visit the surface, maybe even spend a few days on the planet, but now...now, there was a war on and *Feline* was a warship. She should be fighting, not playing nursemaid to refugee ships.

The *Honour To The Just* rose up below her and her shuttle was, for a long moment, surrounded by a glow of light as it passed through the drive field held at constant readiness. The aliens had destroyed at least twenty Worldships so far and no one wanted to give them a shot at another, let alone the other two near Siberia; Mija had been told that if the aliens arrived, the Worldships would be jaunting out without a second thought. The other refugee ships had probably programmed in similar precautions, even if they were spending most of their time jockeying for position, or demanding repairs...few starships were really intended to transport so many people.

Her shuttle landed neatly on the deck and she climbed out. Most Worldships had gardens on their top decks, allowing them to grow under the starlight, but the *Honour To The Just* was a construction Worldship, a starship built to produce anything and everything that the Confederation might need. It’s great shipyards, under the hull, were already producing warships and weapons; she made a mental note to try to convince Admiral Ramage to get the Worldship to move. It was too important to remain so close to Occupied Space. Her lips twitched as a flight capsule arrived for her – she wouldn’t, at least, have to deal with a Worldship council. The *Honour To The Just* was a Peacekeeper starship through and through.

The capsule flew into the ship, passing through tubes designed for it, and finally came to a halt outside a set of heavy doors. Mija stepped out as the doors opened and walked through them, half-expecting to see a dozen other airlocks before she finally reached the Worldship’s command centre. Instead, there was only one other airlock, which opened to reveal the

starship's bridge, one large enough to play football or another ball game in. It was packed with officers trying to control the refugee crisis, trying to steer refugees to other, safer locations, while younger crewmen tried to keep up with the information from the rest of the Confederation.

"Welcome onboard," a voice said. A vaguely oriental-looking man shook her hand firmly; her implants recognised the implants of another commanding officer. "You might be happier coming into my office..."

He led her into a smaller room and the noise from the bridge receded to a dull thunder in the background. "As you can see, we're very busy here," he said. "I'm Captain Poon Yee, for my sins the commanding officer of this Worldship."

Mija nodded. A Worldship commander was partly a normal Captain, with all the rights and responsibilities of the title, and partly the Mayor of a vast spacefaring community. Yee would have probably seen more service than she'd had in her life, and also spent time in the diplomatic sections of the Peacekeepers, rather than merely rising in the ranks. His appointment would be a long-term appointment, but at the same time, most Worldship commanders were accountable to a council. Yee, at least, wouldn't have that problem.

"Captain Mallory," Mija identified herself. Her implants noted that he was senior to her and she snapped a salute. "I need..."

"Your starships have been granted priority access to any of our resources," Yee assured her, cutting her off in mid-speech. "The issue at hand is saving the refugees."

He called up an image of the local system...and the thousands of starships circling the star. "We have around six hundred thousand starships here," he said. "Most of them are smaller civilian designs and our priority has been to get people off them before their life support systems fail completely. We actually got up some of the old colony starships, the ones that were stored in the Colony Service Depot, and shoved a few tens of thousands into stasis tubes, but even so, there are too many people. We even tried putting some of them down on the planet, but..."

Mija had to smile. The refugees would have been...*reluctant* to go anywhere of the sort. They would have been sitting ducks on the planet and probably knew it.

"We've been sorting through the records as well, trying to figure out who we have as a refugee," Yee continued grimly. "Everyone who has Peacekeeper experience, or is a member of the Reserve, or even a civilian space dog, has been called into service under the War Protocols. The *Honour* is now packed with people who need to be assigned to starships and even ground units, just to try and get them somewhere they're needed. Give us a few months and we'll be putting them in ships built here, but they're really needed right across the Confederation."

"Chaos," Mija said. "What do you intend to do with them?"

"The Worldship *Queen Of Space* is going to take nearly twenty million of them to Cascade," Yee said flatly. "Every starship here has been commandeered under the emergency protocols and placed under Peacekeeper orders, from the tiny two-man pleasure craft that are holding

ten people and on the brink of collapse, to the massive freighters that fled the targeted systems as soon as they saw the invaders. Controlling them all is not going to be easy, even assuming that the enemy don't see a chance for a slaughter and come here; several of them have already fled the system. We'll file charges against them, of course, but..."

He shrugged. "If something happens to me, you're going to be the senior officer here," he said. His mouth fell into a flat grim line. "I want you to understand the problems we're going to be facing in the next few days, before they advance again. Did you get the update from Commodore Yu?"

Mija shook her head. "No, sir," she said. She'd been too busy supervising the repairs to her remaining ships. "What happened?"

"He sent five ships into the Terra-Prime System," Yee said. "Only one of them survived to report back, but it reported that upwards of a thousand enemy starships had vanished. They could be on their way here, or any one of a thousand other stars."

He smiled at her thinly. "Concentrates the mind a little, doesn't it?"

"Inform the *Ranchero* that they are to remain where they are," Mija ordered, an hour later. Yee had been right; the civilians were panicking, some of them on the verge of fleeing. It made her wonder if she would have to actually fire into one of the civilian ships to ensure that the others got the message; they had to get people moving in an orderly fashion. "We have shuttles with other people onboard, which they are to take to Pawling's Star."

"Have a heart, lady," the Captain said. He sounded old; his starship had been outdated back at the time the Confederation had come into existence. He would have spent years just bumming around the Confederation, unable to dispose of his starship and unwilling to head on into the unknown. "We can't take more than another ten bodies."

Mija sighed. "You have additional life support units and other equipment on its way as well," she said. It wasn't going to be a pleasant voyage, but it would have been worse for the young idiots on the pleasure craft. They were used for short voyages – she remembered, with a smile, a week spent with a boyfriend before joining the Peacekeepers – and had never been designed to take so many people. The sooner they got half of their passengers off, the better. "Once you get to your destination, you can leave them at one of the space habitats and go wherever you want."

She shut the channel and rubbed her temple. All, but three of her crew were working on controlling and directing the refugee ships and they were all going slowly mad. It would have been a lot easier if they had more Worldships to take on the refugees, and she'd been told that she would have additional Worldships soon, unless they were diverted by the war. The Worldships that were designed to house millions of people, at least, would have no problems taking on all of the refugees, and then Siberia could be abandoned. It wasn't a world that was worth defending, according to the cold hard logic of the military planners...and even through Mija hated such logic, she had to admit that they had a point. Siberia wasn't important enough to risk irreplaceable starships in its defence...

The locals clearly agreed. They'd been moving into shelters for the last week, ever since the first reports had come in from Terra-Prime, and their small orbital industry had been producing remote weapons and systems as fast as it could. Mija would have preferred to see far more orbital weapons platforms covering the system, perhaps enough to deter the enemy from attacking, but every military expert agreed that creating a truly invulnerable system required far more firepower and industry than Siberia possessed. Even if the aliens, the damned Spiders, were to be deterred from attacking and invading the planet itself, they were going to have a turkey shoot amidst the refugee fleet. If that happened, Mija and her squadron – and the handful of other starships that had been assigned to help the refugees – would have to hold off the enemy while the refugees ran, hoping to find safety somewhere else. She honestly didn't know why most of them had even come to Siberia; they could have headed much further away from Terra-Prime, or even hidden in the trackless wastes of interstellar space.

Poor bastards, she thought, and opened up another channel. “Freighter *Hawish*, remain where you are,” she ordered. The starship would normally carry massive cargo pods, each one carefully designed to hold artwork in perfect condition, but the *Honour To The Just* had rapidly produced modified pods designed to provide enough life support for a few thousand more refugees. The freighter could get them to the refugee camps in a few days...if the Captain kept the ship in its position. “Your modified pods are on their way...”

“We should go,” Mother Debbie said. Father Tom, the oldest member of the family and therefore the leader, looked over at her and tried to hide his disgust. Debbie was young, young enough to forget what it was like to live in a universe where danger was an ever-present companion, and the discovery hadn't improved her personality at all. There were times when he couldn't remember why he'd even brought her into the Family in the first place. “Tom, what happens if they come here?”

Tom sighed. “If we leave now, without the Spiders breathing down our necks, we will be arrested when we reach another Confederation port or Isolated World,” he explained, patiently. He'd married her for her looks and her skills at cooking, neither of which had survived the years very well. He looked over at Mother Bissart, in the hopes that she would provide some support, but instead she was pretending to be reading from her display. “That will be the end of the Family.”

He tuned her out as he checked the starship's life support for the seventeenth time. The *Gypsy* was old enough not to carry some of the facilities that most Confederation citizens took for granted, an old bulk freighter that had been transformed into a roaming starship by the Family. They'd been docked at one of the space habitats in the Terra-Prime system when the aliens had launched their attack and, before they'd fled the system, they'd taken onboard two hundred young Confederation citizens. The life support was already being stretched to the limits...and the Peacekeepers wanted them to take on more people? He didn't know what he could do with them.

“Take us out of here,” Debbie urged, pushing her face into his. “We could go to the Gathering Star; the Gathering wouldn't hand us over to the Peacekeepers, or...”

He looked into her eyes and saw the fear within them. “Debbie,” he said, as gently as he could, “the Gathering would space us for abandoning spacers in need.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” Debbie protested. “They know you...”

“The laws apply to everyone,” Tom said. He was old enough to remember when the Families had begun their long wanderings between the stars, never settling down or seeking a home; in time, their starships had become their homes. They were a loose-knit group, each starship housing a single Family, but all of them were bound by the laws. Spacers helped other spacers, regardless of danger, or they were nothing. “They would space us and then send our bodies to the Peacekeepers.”

He looked at one of the internal displays. The children were crying again, despite the efforts of the older children and some of the Mothers. The odds were very good that their families were all dead and gone, leaving them alone in the universe, unless they decided to join the Families. He wasn't sure that he wanted to risk that, either; it was something that would almost certainly draw unwelcome attention from the Peacekeepers. Some of the older boys and girls *had* expressed an interest, but Tom doubted it would last longer than a few months; the life of the Families wasn't for the faint of heart.

Mother Kate spoke from her corner of the room. “We will not even think about abandoning them,” she said, firmly. She was actually older than Tom, a small elderly woman who sometimes claimed to have been born on Old Earth itself, although Tom suspected that she was lying. Humans hadn't invented nanites that could prolong life indefinitely back before the Jaunt Drive had been invented. “They’re children, mostly, and they need our help.”

Tom shrugged and went back to the consoles. The Peacekeeper shuttle docked promptly – at least they were efficient – and shipped over a few hundred more children and young people, along with additional life support. Kate supervised the children as they were moved into one of the other holds, their eyes following her with an eerie fascination; they would never have seen someone as old as her before. Debbie kept complaining, particularly when some of the older children were placed in her cabin, but Tom ignored her. If she wanted to jump ship, she could do it at the Gathering Star...if she could find a Family willing to take her. She certainly didn't have the charms of her youth any more.

He smirked. If she didn't understand that, the odds were that she would end up stuck on one of the Gathering asteroid habitats, unable to leave...unless she went to the Confederation. They'd take her in – they took everyone who was willing to follow the Confederation Ethos – and she'd vanish into the vast population. He would almost miss her.

“We just got a flight vector,” he said, relieved. The Peacekeepers were directing them to a star only two hundred light years away, one where there were thousands of asteroid habitats and even additional Worldships. They could be there in a week, leave the children there, and then head to the Gathering Star. “We’re cleared to leave and...”

He broke off as an all-ships alarm sounded. New red icons were materialising in the display. “Shit,” he snapped, and pushed the emergency jaunt system into operation. “We’re getting out of here!”

The *Gypsy* vanished into Jaunt Space. Behind it, the Spiders fell on the refugee ships.

Chapter Twenty-One

“So,” Hollyhocks asked, “what’s worth seeing at Venice?”

“Look it up in your virtual memory,” Stephen snapped, as the *Gentleman Caller* finally dropped out of Jaunt Space near Venice. He regretted his tone instantly as her face fell. “I need to concentrate.”

He scowled as he focused on the task ahead, knowing what she would discover from long experience. Venice had once been settled by Italian-ethnic settlers, back during the Second Expansion Period, and had been developed into quite a prosperous world...until the Thule War. The Thule had occupied Venice, committing their normal series of atrocities against the civilian population, until the liberation fleets had broken through and taken control of the high orbitals. At that point, the Thule defenders on the surface of the world had detonated a Core Cracker and shattered the entire planet.

The image grew in his head as he linked into the AI and flew down towards the asteroid field. The scientists claimed that in a few million years the rubble of the planet would form, once again, into another planet, but until then, the system was almost deserted. The survivors, only a tiny percentage of the population, had been moved elsewhere; no one had come to Venice to rebuild, except the underworld. The asteroids played host to one of the largest sections of the Confederation underground, where some citizens came for dark pleasures they couldn’t find anywhere else, and all kinds of dubious deals were struck. Stephen hadn’t spent much of his time at Venice – he suspected that the Peacekeepers would have the entire asteroid group carefully staked out – but there wasn’t anywhere else to go.

Hollyhocks sounded shocked. “They destroyed an entire world?”

“Yes,” Stephen said flatly. Ahead of them, giant asteroids spun like teeth, threatening to grind the *Gentleman Caller* into rubble if he didn’t fly carefully. It was largely an optical illusion, but it was intimidating as hell. “They didn’t want to lose the planet, so they destroyed it and that was that.”

He flew between the two asteroids and finally sighted their destination, Venice Asteroid itself. It had started life as a habitat for scavenging flights, where people would take tiny spacecraft and poke through the remains of the planet, looking for items that could be sold onwards or back to the refugees. The dream of recovering certain important or significant items had faded quickly – the Core Cracker had shattered the crust of the planet – but the scavengers still hunted through the ruins, looking for a strike they could sell. It wasn’t a lifestyle that Stephen would have chosen for himself; it was much more *fun* to prove that he could beat the Confederation’s security. Besides, no one would create a fan club for a scavenger.

“This is the *Moaning Lisa*,” he said, when the asteroid’s traffic control finally hailed him. The *Gentleman Caller* identification might have been compromised by now. The *Rising Sun* might have gotten a warning off in the split-seconds before the Spiders destroyed it. “I am requesting a docking slip, outer hull.”

“Understood, sir,” the controller said, once he’d transmitted a small amount of credits. The bribe would ensure that he got what he wanted. “Follow the vector and do not deviate.”

Stephen laughed as he finally set the *Gentleman Caller* into the slip. The airlock tube extended and locked onto the starship, allowing them access to the asteroid habitat. Venice didn't rotate, fortunately, or it would have been a lot harder to dock; the operators of the asteroid used a gravity generator rather than spin up the asteroid. They might be regretting that now, he reflected; a gravity generator would be easy for the Spiders to detect if they ever came near Venice.

"All right," he said, swinging his seat around to face Hollyhocks. She'd changed into a short skirt and shirt, looking hauntingly lovely...and very ill-dressed for Venice. He knew she'd spent the last few days writing poetry, of all things, very bad poetry at that. She would have done better to keep a journal of her time with him. "You have a choice to make."

He leaned forward. "The first option is simple; you can remain on this ship until I return," he said. "The second is that I leave you here and you can find your own way back to the Confederation. I should point out that it won't be easy here and bad things can happen to young people here. The third is that you come with me and accompany me in Venice."

Hollyhocks didn't take long to think about it. "I'll come with you," she said, standing up. "When do we leave?"

"Once you get changed into something more practical," Stephen said, opening a locker and locating some of his personal weapons. "You're not dressed for this place."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

Stephen sighed. "This is not some genteel Confederation world or Worldship," he said. "It is a habitat populated by the scum of the universe, who will take one look at you and think unpleasant thoughts about what they'd like to do with you. To you, I should say. If you want to stay here, that's fine; no one can get into the ship without my permission, but otherwise...go change."

"Yes, sir," Hollyhocks said. She changed remarkably quickly, suggesting that she too was feeling cabin fever. The *Gentleman Caller* wasn't large enough to prevent them from suffering from that particular problem. "Shall we go now?"

Stephen ran his gaze over her outfit and nodded. "Yes," he said. "Come on."

The airlock tube was standard, with a heavy door at the far end, but he took the precaution of code-locking the starship anyway, just in case. He'd seen other starships burgled because the crew had relied upon the habitat's airlocks...which probably had plenty of codes loaded into them for illegal access. On impulse, he coded the airlock for Hollyhocks as well, and then led her into the main chamber, allowing her to see the life of the asteroid as most people saw it. Her eyes went very wide and she shifted back against him; for the first time, she really understood what he had meant.

Venice, like most non-rotating asteroids, had a massive hall where the visitors got to purchase almost anything they wanted, from food and drink to forbidden mind-altering nanites. Hollyhocks' eyes went everywhere, catching sight of the Doms and Subs walking around, the former standing proud while the latter walked on all fours, to the carefully-enhanced

prostitutes, some of them altered beyond anything permitted in the greater Confederation. Stephen followed her gaze and sighed; the Dom-Sub movement was too dark even for his tastes, and he'd even heard that the Confederation Parliament had seriously considered shutting it down. If the Subs hadn't been willing victims, the Doms would have been on a penal planet before they could finish explaining their repellent creed.

They passed a bookstall selling copies of books, some of which claimed to have been rescued from the Library of Alexandria before the Spiders invaded the planet, something that Stephen suspected was almost certainly a lie. Several news stands promised updates on events in the Confederation and warned of possible Peacekeeper sting operations, although they'd probably been cancelled with the birth of the war. He caught Hollyhocks looking at some of the clothing stores and had to smile; each of the items *claimed* to have been produced by hand, but the sheer uniformity of their production suggested that the owner had used a fabricator. A pair of pretty-bucks came up to him and whispered in his ear, but he shook his head; he didn't want to spend the next few days in a pornographic perceptual reality. The two young men would have been engineered to give pleasure, but such productions had always given him the creeps. He pulled Hollyhocks away from one of them and escorted her out of main hall, onto the concourse.

"You can't trust anything here," he muttered, as they walked past a row of unmarked doors. The idea was simple; if you knew who you were looking for, you'd be able to find him. Stephen just hoped that his old friend was still there. "Nothing is quite what it seems."

Hollyhocks merely held his hand. Perhaps she'd been shaken by the people, or perhaps she was just a bit overwhelmed. Stephen looked down at her for a long moment, then checked the door numbers, before knocking on one of them and waiting for a response. He knew – he could almost feel it – that the occupant would be using sensors to probe them and confirm his identity, but there was nothing he could do about it. He could only hope that he was recognised.

The door opened with a hiss, revealing a small office and a short man sitting behind a desk. "Come on in," he snapped, taking in the pair of them. "I don't have all day."

He stood up and eyed Stephen for a second. "Stephen, my friend," he boomed. "What can I do for you, my son?"

Hollyhocks stared up at Stephen. "He's your father?"

"No," Stephen said. He smiled grimly at her. "Mouth that is open, sweetheart, should be shut."

"Oh, let her talk," the man said. He extended a hand to Hollyhocks, who shook it carefully. Stephen rolled his eyes; he'd have to run a full set of checks on her for surveillance devices before they entered the main cabin of the *Gentleman Caller*. "They call me Wisdom, young lady, because I am wise. I know much."

"He's an information broker," Stephen said. He pulled out a datachip and laid it on the table. "I was lucky enough to spend some time watching the invaders at the Library Planet and I picked up most of the transmissions from the planet. I thought that that might be just a little interesting to you."

“Maybe,” Wisdom said. He picked up the chip and examined it for a moment. “There are quite a few people who would like access to such information.” He shrugged thoughtfully. “Name your price.”

“Put most of it on my account,” Stephen said. Normally, he would have wanted information on possible targets, but with a war on, he wasn't sure that he wanted to do more than sit it out somewhere. “What's been happening here?”

“Well, I've been selling plenty of information,” Wisdom said, a little happier because he wouldn't have to pay anything out at once. “You have no idea how much information people have been wanting because of the war, from updates to Peacekeeper movements to even the location of secret bases. There are even plans to evacuate chunks of Venice to somewhere less likely to be caught in the firing line and I've been recovering pieces of information on various isolated star systems which might make good bases.”

He paused. “What are you going to be doing for the next few weeks?”

“I haven't decided,” Stephen admitted. He normally spent at least a month between jobs, but with the war on, he was tempted just to find somewhere safe and stay there. “Do you have something for me to do?”

“Maybe,” Wisdom admitted. “I've been charged with a particular task, paid though the nose, I might add, and it might be right up your alley.”

“I work alone, as you know,” Stephen said, dangerously. “What do you want me to do?”

Wisdom sent a command into a desktop processor and a small planet appeared in front of them. “This is one of the more secret Peacekeeper stations in the Confederation, a records station that is generally off-limits to anyone who doesn't have a damn good reason to know...and is probably well-defended under normal circumstances. Its on a world that got dusted during the Thule War and isn't of any real interest to anyone, but damn me if someone isn't offering plenty of trade for a complete data download from that station.”

Stephen felt his eyes narrow. “Who wants a complete download from there?”

“I don't know and if I did, I wouldn't tell you,” Wisdom said. “All I know is that they want a complete download and they're prepared to pay for it.”

“Show me the details,” Stephen said. Wisdom opened a cell in his implants and transmitted them over to Stephen, who skimmed through them quickly, but carefully. The Peacekeepers might well be right about how secure it was – they'd built it in one of the old Thule Stations, somewhere where very few people would go if they had a choice – but he could see a few flaws in the security. If there wasn't a war on, the flaws wouldn't be a problem, but as there was... “Why...?”

“I don't know,” Wisdom said, again. “Are you interested in doing the job?”

“Hell, yes,” Stephen said, untruthfully. He didn’t understand what was going on...but he was starting to have a nasty suspicion that he understood all too well. “What’s the timescale for the job?”

“As soon as possible,” Wisdom said. “I’m sure I can trust you to handle it properly.”

“Yeah,” Stephen said. “One thing; you owe me, so I want you to find out who’s behind the request.”

Wisdom lifted an eyebrow. “Why would you care?”

“Because I don’t want to be struck out on the end of a branch facing outraged Peacekeepers,” Stephen said. “If I do this, I want to know who and why!”

“Very well,” Wisdom said. “If I can find out for you, I will. Good luck.”

Stephen took the hint and led Hollyhocks out of the building, through a maze of corridors, and finally back into the airlock. “Strip,” he ordered, as they stepped into the *Gentleman Caller’s* airlock. He pulled off his own tunic and shoved it into a recycle port, aware of her eyes following his naked body. “Put your clothes in here and prepare to be decontaminated. Close your eyes.”

He checked that her eyes were closed, closed his own, and triggered the decontamination sequence. There was a sudden burst of heat. “Good,” he said, feeling his skin tingling. “If he’d stung us with a few bugs, he’d have heard everything we said to one another.”

Hollyhocks winced. Oddly, she looked more attractive naked. “Why naked?”

“Because some of the bugs might have gotten onto your clothing and survived the process,” Stephen said. He opened the inner door and entered the living cabin. “What did you make of Wisdom?”

“Strange man,” Hollyhocks said. “Isn’t he your friend?”

“There are no friends here,” Stephen said. The fabricator provided him with a tunic and he pulled it on, covering his nakedness. “Wisdom makes a living by selling information to everyone who comes along and is prepared to meet his price. He would sell you and I out in a heartbeat if he got an offer.”

He paused. “What did you think of the job offer?”

“You’re going to take me along on a job?” Hollyhocks asked, her eyes shining. “Really?”

“Maybe not,” Stephen said, cursing his sense of responsibility. It would have been so easy to dump her on Venice and abandon her. “Tell me something, who would be interested in a complete data dump from a secret Peacekeepers facility?”

“I don’t know,” Hollyhocks said. She took a wild guess. “The media?”

“I highly doubt it,” Stephen said. “Who is currently invading the Confederation?”

Put that way, it was easy to answer. “I bet you dinner at the most prestigious restaurant in the Confederation that the people who are really behind it are the Spiders,” Stephen said. “Why shouldn’t they try to undermine the Confederation from inside as well as outside? Who benefits? The Spiders. There’s no one else who would benefit from having such knowledge...apart from the Spiders.”

He paused. “They want us to sell out the entire human race,” he said. Her face opened wide with shock; she hadn’t understood the possible consequences of giving the unknown buyers, the Spiders, what they wanted. “I think that that’s a really bad idea, don’t you?”

The bridge opened up at his command and he fired a series of instructions into the flight computer, ordering it to disconnect from the habitat and jaunt out towards a fairly unimportant star ten light years away. He couldn’t have jaunted into Venice – the asteroids would have made it hazardous in the extreme – but jaunting out was easy. It wouldn’t take long to reach the uninhabited star, where he could think out exactly what he wanted to do...

Hollyhocks came forward and joined him. “But how could they talk to Wisdom in the first place?”

“They’re capable of building starships and travelling across the galaxy,” Stephen said. “I don’t think that talking to humans is going to tax their capabilities very much.”

“But...they’d be selling out the entire race,” Hollyhocks protested. “Why would they do that?”

Stephen laughed. “There are people who would sell their own mothers into slavery, or worse, just to get something they wanted,” he said. “The people on Venice are not exactly nice law-abiding types, are they?”

He stared out into space, his thoughts a million miles away.

“We’re going to have to do something I don’t want to do,” he said slowly. She didn’t understand yet. How could she understand that his lifestyle, his almost unique and fun lifestyle, was at an end? “We’re going to have to take the risk of talking to the Peacekeepers.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

The alarm brought Mija out of the shower.

“Report,” she snapped, as she summoned a forcefield to dry herself. A moment later, her uniform was snaking up her body and preparing her for battle. “What’s happening?”

“We have at least seventeen Lobsters, maybe more, on a direct interception course,” the tactical officer reported. Mija grabbed her helmet and raced for the door, running one hand quickly through her short blonde hair. The nanites would have to complete the task of drying her. “Time to intercept, two minutes.”

“Get the refugee ships out of here,” Mija snapped. She had five cruiser under her direct command, three more cruisers that had been travelling independently before they had been ordered to Siberia, and one carrier. “Order the *Victorious* to launch fighters and prepare to engage.”

She ran onto the bridge and took her command chair. “Enemy vessels now approaching first refugee cluster,” the tactical officer said. “I ordered an intercept course.”

“Good thinking,” Mija said. She settled back into her chair and linked her implant into the starship’s main computers. “Continue on intercept course and prepare to engage.”

The display updated rapidly, showing her just how dangerous the refugees position had suddenly become. She’d organised them into clusters, along with Captain Yee and the other officers, to allow them to use the largest ships to take off refugees from the smaller ships, the ones in serious danger of losing all of their life support. The first cluster had over ten million civilians on the starships...and the aliens would enter firing range before they could power up their drives and jaunt out.

“Priority to Captain Yee,” Mija ordered. “I intend to engage and keep them busy for as long as possible. Get the *Honour To The Just* out of here, *now!*”

“The Worldship has jaunted out,” the tactical officer reported. Mija breathed a sigh of relief; the vast productive capabilities of the Worldship would not be lost to the human race. Without it, winning the war would have gotten much harder. “The alien craft have opened fire.”

Mija saw it clearly. They were firing heavy missiles, shipkillers, right into the heart of the unarmed freighters. The freighters were trying to escape desperately, but without jaunt drives there was no way that they could escape in time...and the missiles were slashing home. One by one, singularity warheads detonated against the freighters pitiful shields and they were vaporised in the blasts. Hundreds, thousands, even millions of humans were dying...and she could do nothing.

“Form into attack position,” she ordered. They didn’t have the firepower to win the battle or to destroy the alien craft, but they could make them hurt. “You are cleared to open fire.”

Feline shook as it launched the first spread of missiles. Mija drew in a breath as the aliens responded, launching their own spreads...of around the same throw weight to *Feline*. They’d

clearly followed the same basic design theory as the Confederation, although they'd also built much larger starships with larger missile batteries, and maybe they would have a chance. The standard doctrine said that the largest force would normally win, but she had starfighters and they didn't...and so she had an advantage.

"I have other enemy starships jaunting in," the tactical officer reported, just as *Feline* shook. The starship had been lucky; one day, Mija knew, her luck would run out and that would be the end of her ship. It would also be the end of her; there might have been legends of damaged starships limping back home, but she knew that most of them were myths. "I count four modified Crabs and one unknown design..."

He cursed. "Unknown design is a carrier, launching starfighters," he reported. "I have at least two wings of starfighters bearing down on the freighters and ignoring us."

"I see them," Mija said, thinking hard. A headache was beginning to pound behind her temple as she took in the disaster...and disaster it was. The Crabs were ignoring her and heading towards the freighters, clearly intending to wipe out as many as they could before they could jaunt out, while the Lobsters kept them in their place, trying to survive. Her starship rocked again as a singularity missile detonated against the port shield and she forced herself to take the hard decision. "Order the starfighters to engage the enemy starfighters; we'll keep the cruisers busy."

She glared at the enemy cruisers on the display. They were mocking her, keeping the range open while they poured missiles onto her position, and she saw why. They intended to force her to burn off her missiles while their larger comrades slaughtered the freighters...and they wouldn't have enough time to escape. She checked the timer; the ships that could flash-wake their systems and go had gone, leaving only...one thousand, seven hundred and forty-two ships in the system. They were all about to die unless...

"Jaunt us into blocking position," she ordered. It was a hellish risk, but she would rather have died than leave the freighters unprotected. "Now!"

"I told you so," Debbie was screaming, as the red icons grew closer and closer. "They're abandoning us to our fate!"

"Shut up," Tom snapped, watching the timer carefully. The *Gypsy* had three minutes before it could jaunt out...assuming that the enemy didn't deploy jamming systems and trap them in local space while they pounded the shit out of them. If they lasted that long, escape would be easy, but somehow he suspected that they wouldn't last that long at all. "You're panicking the children and that's not going to be good for them."

He could hear the screams even though the heavy door. It was meant to be the final sanctuary on the starship, a precaution carefully emplaced to prevent hijackers from taking over the ship...and any one of the Families would have blown the starship rather than lose it to a hijacking force. The aliens weren't trying to capture the starship, or do anything other than spreading panic everywhere; the Galactic Net was reporting that they were making far more raids and invasions right across the sector...and no one knew which were real targets and which were just raids. The aliens wanted to destroy the *Gypsy* and everyone onboard.

“They’re coming this way,” Kate said, very calmly. The wall of alien starfighters was racing closer, randomising their course even though very few of the freighters had anything to fire at them. Those who did open fire were merely the first ones to be targeted by the aliens, who hacked them to bits and then destroyed them with fighter-launched missiles. “Tom, you may want to broadcast the Last Prayer.”

“No,” Debbie shouted. “You can’t, not yet!”

“There’s no choice, woman!” Tom snapped back. “We’re about to die unshriven and...”

The noise of the panic was growing louder. The Confederation brats were truly unprepared for any sort of trouble in space, screaming as if they sensed their doom bearing down on them. He watched as the starfighters closed in, and finally lifted the microphone to his lips, speaking words in a long-dead language as silence fell on the bridge. The children had no sense of what was going on; they kept shouting desperately, as if protesting was enough to put an end to the war. It was blasphemy to speak during the last prayer, unless there was some vital need, but they didn’t know any better. How could they?

And then the other set of starfighters showed up.

“All right, do it by the numbers,” Captain Chris Kelsey ordered, as they swooped around the ancient bulk freighter and raged towards the alien starfighters. They didn’t look any less pleasant than they had during the Battle of Terra-Prime, but the squadron had a score to settle. The entire *wing* had a score to settle. “Alpha Group, follow me; Beta Group, hang back and cover.”

His starfighter lanced forward, targeting systems already tracking the alien starfighters and firing whenever they saw a clear shot. Like the humans, the Spiders clearly flew random patterns were possible, just to ensure that they weren’t targeted and destroyed by an AI. He threw his starfighters through a series of complicated motions, carefully targeting and destroying the alien starfighters and evading their counterattacks before they blew through and fell on the freighters. Beta Group, held in reserve for just this eventuality, fell on them in turn and a new set of dogfights broke out.

“All right, we’re holding them for four minutes,” he said, checking the timer. Some of the freighters would be gone before then, he knew, but he wanted to get as many out as possible. The irony gnawed at him; the more freighters that escaped to safety, the greater the danger of the remaining starships. He didn’t understand why half of them were still in service – surely, they could get a more advanced ship with ease – but he’d found it hard to give up the training starfighter, even if the general purpose starfighter was much more lethal and fun to fly. “Don’t give them an inch and...”

His AI shrilled a warning; an enemy starfighter was trying to target him. He yanked at the stick and sent his starfighter twisting through a series of dives and turns that should have shook off any halfway sane pilot, but the alien kept following him, much to his astonishment. Chris considered himself the best pilot he knew – a common belief among human starfighter pilots and probably alien pilots as well – and to be followed like that was almost more than he could bear. He span through a second set of twists, followed by a loop that almost brought

him nose-to-nose with the enemy ship...and they fired at the same moment. He was lucky; the alien missed him, while he struck and killed the alien craft.

Two more freighters exploded as the Crabs reached missile range, ignoring the human cruisers who were trying to pour fire into them, and opened fire on the freighters. Chris yanked his starfighter around and raced towards the Crabs, followed by half of the *Victorious's* remaining fighter complement, but the Crabs had too long to pound the freighters. They were dying, burning in the night, being wiped out one by one...and the Peacekeepers could do nothing to stop them. The timer was mocking him now, taunting him; the freighters had two minutes left and most of them would be dead by the time they could escape.

“Follow me in,” he ordered, ignoring the handful of enemy starfighters that had been giving pursuit. The starfighters roared towards the vulnerable section at the rear of the lead Crab, jerking around to avoid the Crab’s furious bursts of point defence, and launched a spread of missiles at the rear of the craft. The Crab got lucky and swept four of the missiles out of existence, staggering as the others struck home...but it survived. The missiles hadn’t inflicted enough damage. A moment later, it jaunted out.

“It’s gone,” he reported, checking the sensors. The Crab had jaunted at least a light year away in the direction of Terra-Prime; the odds were that it was actually going much further, once the crew had repaired the ship. “Head for the carrier and prepare to engage.”

Another swarm of enemy starfighters rose up in front of them. Chris led his squadron right through them, blasting away as they tried to intercept him, and led the charge down towards the carrier. The alien carrier, oddly enough, didn’t look that different to a human carrier, although it still had the creepy sea-life shape of other Spider starships. Form followed function in human carriers and clearly the aliens felt the same way.

They’re not that different, he thought, as he led his force down towards the enemy ship. The carrier would be a harder target, not least because of all the point defence it carried and the starfighters that were trying to protect it. They weren't in the right position, he saw, and led the attack; the human starfighters fell on the carrier’s drives and launched their missiles at it before escaping and zipping back out into space. The carrier staggered as the missiles struck home, it’s drive field billowing out of control...and just when he thought they had failed, it exploded into boiling plasma.

“Scratch one flattop,” he carolled. The timer had been making noises for some time, but he hadn’t had a chance to take a look at it, until now. The remaining freighters, the handful left after the Crabs had pumped their missiles into their formation, were vanishing into Jaunt Space, leaving the Peacekeepers to face the aliens alone.

“All fighters, return to base,” the controller said. “I repeat, return to base.”

“Understood,” Chris said. “We’re on our way.”

Mija watched, cold hatred burning in her breast, as the carrier exploded into a thousand pieces. “Call the starfighters back,” she ordered, as the *Feline* rocked again. “We have to leave, now.”

“Yes, Captain,” the liaison officer said, issuing the orders through the command network. The freighters were fleeing now, the last ones jaunting out, leaving over a thousand wrecked or destroyed starships behind. They’d lost over seven million humans today and the remainder wouldn’t stop running until they were on the other side of the Confederation.

“Captain, we just received a burst transmission from Admiral Ramage,” the communications officer said. “We are to head for Bonn and report back.”

“I see,” Mija said, puzzled. The squadron had taken a beating – again. This time, she suspected that they would be broken up into other squadrons; only two cruisers were in anything like fighting trim. “Helm, set course; we jaunt out as soon as the carrier is recovered her fighters.”

“Aye, Captain,” the helmsman said. “Course laid in.”

The Spiders didn’t bother to harass the human starships once the freighters had escaped. Instead, they headed towards Siberia and entered orbit, mapping out the world carefully and examining the human settlements. Mija watched in dismay as they finally bombarded the settlements with nuclear weapons, like they’d used on a dozen other worlds, targeting the human population. The Siberians should be in their shelters, but even so, thousands of them would have died.

She wanted to engage the enemy, to punish them for their actions, but cold logic told her she’d only get herself and her crew killed. “Helm, jaunt us out of here,” she ordered. “Take us to Bonn.”

Bonn was only twenty light years from Siberia, a world settled by Germans from the European Union, before Old Earth had started to attempt to assert its authority over the colony worlds. It hadn’t lasted long – there had been real difficulties in projecting military force over light years at that time – but Bonn had been one of the major worlds to resist Earth’s authority. Later, like almost every Inner World, it had been brought into the Confederation and its culture had merged to into the Confederation’s society. Mija had had a handful of relatives there and she’d been privately intending to visit at some point, but she’d never had the time. Now, she saw as the *Feline* emerged in the system, she would never have the chance.

Bonn’s local government had reacted to the crisis by commandeering every industrial station in the system and using it to build defences. By the time the Spiders had launched their attack out of Terra-Prime and invaded the system, Bonn had ringed the planets and the asteroid settlements – which accounted for over half the system’s population – with defences. Judging from the battle going on, it wasn’t doing them much good.

“Get me an update,” Mija ordered. Admiral Ramage’s orders had been to observe, nothing else, or she would have ordered the remains of the squadron into battle. “What’s going on in the system?”

“The aliens arrived half an hour ago,” the communications officer said. “They’re pushing against the defences and they’re on the verge of falling.”

“Deploy sensor probes and remote platforms,” Mija ordered. The Peacekeepers and Bonn’s own local defence force had been driven back to the planet’s orbit, while Crabs and Lobsters patrolled the outer system, destroying most of the asteroid habitats as they passed. She didn’t even want to *think* about the death toll; Bonn had boasted over ten billion inhabitants and five billion of them had lived in the asteroids and the various other colonies scattered around the system. “Tell me...”

“*Shit*,” the tactical officer injected. “Captain, we have four Lobsters closing in on us!”

Cloaked, Mija thought. They had to have hidden at the edge of the system, waiting for an observer so they could intercept it before it escaped. They were using jammers down towards Bonn itself, trapping the starships and picking them off, one by one. She wanted to fight, she wanted to *hurt* them, but there was no choice.

“Take us out of here,” she ordered, bitterly. “Jaunt us back to the Cascade Yards.”

If they’re still intact as well, she added silently. The Galactic Net told of hundreds of worlds under attack. Whatever happened, the Confederation was never going to be the same. *I’d go after the Yards, if I were commanding the enemy force...*

Chapter Twenty-Three

A long time ago, when he was still just a Lieutenant, First Admiral Andrew Ramage had watched a series about a mad Peacekeeper Admiral who'd tried to launch a coup against the Confederation. The series had been so laughably silly that he'd referred to it more than once in writing tactical papers; the writer hadn't read half of the open source material on the Peacekeepers, leaving little mistakes like uniforms and even starship names for the unwary watcher. The aliens were launching a similar series of attacks, trying to snatch up as many Confederation worlds as possible, and he knew that there was an uncomfortable similarity between the real world and the fictional coup. Industrial strength was everything in modern war and the aliens were well on their way to taking or destroying forty percent of the entire industry in the Confederation.

The display showed him the details, both of Occupied Worlds and Projected Occupied Worlds, worlds that were under threat from the aliens. They'd come boiling out of five of the worlds they'd occupied in the opening blows and launched invasions of nearly four hundred worlds, targeting and destroying both the Peacekeeper squadrons and the local defences before launching strikes on the surface, followed up by a full-scale invasion. The locals, at least, had been warned; the death tolls were *only* four billion lives. Some of the worlds had even successfully held off their attackers, or defeated the attacking force; the aliens, for once, weren't having everything their own way.

Andrew deactivated the display with a thought and turned back to his work. It was easy, now, to see how hard it had been to fight the Thule War. He'd studied it while he'd gone through Officer Training and he'd been struck, at the time, by how long it had taken to defeat the Thule. Worlds had been traded backwards and forwards for years before the Grand Alliance had finally defeated the Thule Fleet and sent their star supernova; the war had taken almost a hundred years to fight and win. The aliens didn't even have any homeworlds, as far as the Peacekeepers knew; as long as they held that particular advantage, they were going to be very hard to defeat. Even if the Peacekeepers retook every Occupied World in the next few months, they could just jaunt out to their hidden homeworlds and repeat the invasion in the next few years. The scout ships were probing as quickly as they could, visiting or revisiting possible homeworlds for the aliens, but so far none of them had found anything. A missing scout ship might be suggestive, but with so many Lost Colonies out there, it wouldn't prove that they'd stumbled across the aliens homeworld.

And the human race was panicking. The attacks on the refugee convoys hadn't made life easier; too many starships were trying to hide in unexplored regions of space, rather than helping to defeat the enemy. Trained spacers, or Reserve Peacekeepers, had been called up – along with literally millions of volunteers – but it was taking time, too much time, to get them all mated with starships and supporting units. The alien blows weren't lethal – nothing the size of the Confederation could be defeated quickly – but it wouldn't be long before the overall effect proved fatal. If that happened...

He shook his head as the buzzer rang. "Admiral, can I have a moment of your time?"

Andrew sent a command to the door's processor and it opened, revealing Commodore Alex Swavely, the Chief Engineer of the Cascade Shipyard, and Captain Michael Swaim, the Intelligence Analyst. Swavely was an engineered – he'd had his body reshaped for space and looked something like a cross between a man and a spacesuit – but that was hardly

uncommon for spacers, particularly in shipyards and other deep-space structures. Andrew had always thought that they were rather weird – automated systems could do the same tasks in perfect safety – but Alex was regarded as one of the best shipyard officers in the Confederation. He was older than Andrew, almost five hundred years old, and what he didn't know about starship design wasn't worth knowing.

“Admiral,” Alex said. He couldn't sit down – his body simply didn't have the mobility – so he took a stand behind one of the chairs. “We have completed the design work on the *Armageddon*-class superdreadnaught.”

Andrew leaned forward. “Show me,” he ordered.

An image appeared in front of them, an angular starship, studded with weapons bays and fighter launch ports. There were fewer than there would have been on a regular fleet carrier, but any large ship was an easy target for starfighters, so having their own protection embarked seemed a logical decision. The superdreadnaught held over five hundred energy weapons, from the heavy plasma cannons to compressed antimatter beams, as well as a formidable missile armament. He checked it against the other specifications in his head, known and speculated Spider capabilities, and smiled; the human starships should have an advantage over the Crabs.

“She's going to take about three months to complete once we start building her,” Alex said, altering the design to show him the arrangement of the interior. “We build larger ships, of course, but a superdreadnaught is something we haven't built for over a thousand years. We ran her through every simulation we have and she shouldn't have many problems, but we're going to have to build a test model just to eliminate the bugs.”

He paused. “With your permission, we'd like to actually build several different designs as test models, just to ensure that we build the right one,” he said. “Fortunately, we can devote one main bay in each Worldship to produce the test model and that will allow us to continue with the overall cruiser-building program. I'd like to discontinue the battleship building program once we get a superdreadnaught up and running; they're just not competitive in this day and age.”

“Competitive,” Andrew repeated, shaking his head. Alex was right, in a way; battleships lacked the firepower to go toe-to-toe with the Crabs, or the speed that would allow them to avoid blows that would be fatal if they struck home. The Peacekeepers had made mistakes when they'd started to plan their fleet and those mistakes had come back to haunt them. “What about the building time?”

“Assuming that we don't have any major problems, three months to build, a week to run exhaustive checks, and then we can clear the slips and get to work,” Alex said. “We can get upwards of thirty superdreadnaughts under simultaneous construction here and at the other yards, with ten-twenty of them under construction in the Worldships, although that will mean cutting back on various other construction programs. We may also be able to start building them at civilian shipyards as well, although they're heavily committed to reinforcing local defence forces and the construction of new cruisers.”

“Good enough,” Andrew said. “What about the other construction programs?”

Alex consulted his BISHOP - Biomechanical Intelligent Sensor and Heuristic Organiser Package – before answering. “Production of starfighters is proceeding at the rate of one thousand a week in each of the major shipyards,” he reported. “The main bottleneck for them is crews; it takes time to train up a pilot and we’re only making the squadrons up now because of all the reservists who are coming online. We should have another month of being able to fill all those cockpits before we start running into crewing problems, even with an accelerated training program, but by then we should have the first new classes ready and raring to go. It’s a shame we can’t just replicate starfighters, but...”

Andrew nodded in dry agreement. The replication units could produce almost anything out of energy, but had the drawback that they were limited in size and the artefacts tended to show problems at the molecular level. Food and even small components were fine; a starfighter or something larger would suffer from so many tiny failures that it’s very existence would be jeopardised. A starship, with so many critical components, would probably be unable to even generate an engine field without rapid and catastrophic systems failure.

“Production of enhanced *Lightning*-class cruisers and the new modal *Thunderbird*-class cruisers is proceeding rapidly,” Alex continued, unaware of Andrew’s thoughts. “Again, crews are our major weakness at the moment, but we can train civilian spacers up and increase the amount of automation in the starships, at least as a short-term method. I’ve spread out as much construction as possible to the various civilian shipyards, although if this war goes on, a lot of those ships are going to be destroyed while under construction.”

“We can’t help that,” Andrew said. What they could move, the construction units on the Worldships, they had. The rest would have to take its chances. “And other materials?”

“Everything else is being produced at a high rate,” Alex concluded. “The civilian-grade fabricators have taken up a lot of the slack – their capabilities were rarely tested before the war – and should be able to continue to produce orbital defences along with war material. Some of it has been shipped down to the surfaces to prepare the defences to fight on the ground – no such thing as non-combatants in this war – but the remainder will be made available to the Peacekeepers and Confederation Rangers.”

“Thank you,” Andrew said. He looked up at the spinning image of the new superdreadnaught. “You have my permission to begin construction at once.”

Alex nodded once and left the room. “Now,” Andrew said, turning to Michael, “I believe you had something you wanted to say?”

Michael smiled thinly. “Several things,” he said. “My people have been struggling to gather information on our new foe and...well, what we’ve found isn’t as curious as what we haven’t found. By now, in a human war, we would have collected a vast amount of information, but with the aliens...nothing. We know plenty about what their starships can do, mainly through experience of being on the receiving end, but the aliens themselves...nothing.”

Andrew, who remembered his horror as red icons had materialised out of nowhere back in the Terra-Prime System, scowled. There were times when the Intelligence officer got on his nerves. Intelligence had been a law unto itself for too long, even before the Confederation

had been formed; the old records suggested that that had been a problem for every human civilisation.

“You haven’t found out *anything* about them?”

“Correct,” Michael said, ignoring Andrew’s expression. “They don’t speak to each other very often – at least on bands we can detect. We suspect that they actually use lasers, of all things, to communicate with each other; we certainly only catch a few snippets of their talk. That we do catch is impossible to understand. The remains of their starships are generally wrecked beyond recovery and Intelligence teams, when we have had an intact wreck, have not been able to locate computer cores or even bodies. The forces on the ground seem to react as one mass...with two exceptions.”

He displayed two Spiders; one red, one black. “Understand, there’s no way to be sure, but we think that this particular subset is actually the commanding officers of the invasion, the senior citizens, if you will,” he said. “The brown Spiders seem to be nothing more than an organic mass, but the reds and blacks are intelligent and cunning; the reports from forces on the ground warned that they led the most active enemy forces and were, in their words, shifty bastards.”

Andrew snorted. “How certain are you of all of that?”

“As certain as we can be, which isn’t very certain,” Michael said. “We *have* noted certain traits in alien behaviour; for example, when a red or black is threatened, the browns forget everything else and move to defend it. When one of them dies, the browns seem to revert to standard behaviour; they will engage anything that looks like a threat, but otherwise they’ll just wander about, seemingly at random. They’re not completely stupid, however; the resistance on Heinlein, which hides in the mountains, ambushed a few groups and the remainder just...don’t go into the mountains any longer.”

“And the reds and blacks are valuable to them,” Andrew said. “How valuable?”

“Unknown,” Michael said. “There are dozens of possible theories, but so far...we don’t have any actual way to talk to them. They spoke to us, which means that they *can* talk to us, but they just choose not to. I want to change that.”

“Go on,” Andrew said. “What do you have in mind?”

“The Spiders are facing heavy resistance on several worlds, including Heinlein,” Michael said. “What I’d like to do is drop in several highly-trained agents and as much equipment as we can send them, because they don’t have access to any production factories...and try to capture one of the senior Spiders. Ideally, we’d want both a red and a black, but...”

“Hang on,” Andrew said. “You *are* aware, aren’t you, that the Spiders have blockaded all the Occupied Worlds? We might be able to get someone in, but out...?”

“I know, but we’ve come up with a plan that might allow us to get someone in and out,” Michael said. “It’s going to be chancy, and it’s going to have to be done under cover of an assault against the planet’s defenders, but we can do it.”

He paused. “Sir, if we could talk to them, find out what they want...”

Andrew said nothing. The Confederation had seen itself as a mature society, one where everyone found their own niche, and to be challenged by another aggressive society was almost too much to handle. If the aliens offered peace, on whatever terms they chose to put forward, there would be thousands of people who wanted to accept the offers...and thousands more who would want to burn the aliens out of existence. If they could talk to the aliens...

“I know,” he said. He linked into the starship’s main processor and started to scan through the reports, looking for units that could be pulled together into a task force to raid Heinlein...and test out some of the latest stopgap weapons in the process. He’d have to send more people out to fight and die, some of them people he knew and trusted...but there was no choice. “How do you intend to get someone down to the planet?”

Michael told him.

“You’re out of your head,” Andrew said, and then he started to laugh. If nothing else, the scheme had a certain quiet madness to it that would make it almost impossible to anticipate. “Very well; you have my permission to begin the preparations at once...and I’ll detail a large task force to raid the system. If nothing else, we can rock them back on their heels.”

He paused. “You do have a volunteer for this, I assume?”

“Of course,” Michael said. “He was quite eager when it was explained to him, as well. He has family down on the planet.”

Captain Chris Kelsey stepped up to the podium in *Victorious*’s main assembly room and gazed out over the six hundred pilots who had gathered there. Some of them he knew already, from the old squadron and others he’d flown besides in the past, and others were new, very new. The reservists, at least, knew which side of the starfighter held the guns; he wasn’t sure if that was true of the newcomers. They had talent, sure, and they’d all passed the exams...but no one really knew what a fighter jock was like until he or she had seen combat. Then they knew...if the pilot survived the experience.

Chris sighed inwardly. He should have *merely* held command of his twelve-ship squadron, not a seventy-two ship wing, let alone the carrier six hundred-strong flight group, but there was no choice. Given time, the Peacekeepers would probably get around to formalising the arrangement and bumping him up a couple of rungs to a rank worthy of the responsibility, but now...now he was merely a Captain trying to hold down a Wing Commander’s job. It was going to be...tricky.

“All right,” he said, looking out over the crowd of fighter pilots. Someone had once said that herding fighter jocks was worse than herding cats and they’d been right. “You know the situation, you know that there’s a war on, and unless I miss my guess, you’re all wondering what the fuck you did wrong to get into this mess.”

He stared around the room. “You’re not the only ones who are in this mess,” he snapped, allowing some of his suppressed anger to leak into his voice. “The entire damned Confederation is in the mess. The Spiders are going to kill us all, unless we kill them first,

and you're all wondering about your new comrades. Which one is going to fuck up and get you killed? Which one is going to be the squadron asshole – because we all know each squadron has one – or the dick who always cites a regulation to get out of hard work? You don't know *anyone* in this room...so who the fuck can you trust?

“Most of you don't know me, so never mind that,” he said, calming himself. “You can trust me to tell you, now, that I expect one hundred percent from you until you buy the farm or you get moved into some other undermanned unit. We have never fought as a unit before, so as soon as this is finished, we're going to go get into the simulators and train as we have never trained before. Good men and women died to get the information that we loaded into the simulators, so make good use of it, or I will personally throw you out the airlock.”

He paused. “The *Victorious* is a good ship and the Fighter Group has a reputation to live down to,” he said, and was reassured by the handful of smiles in the room. “You are going to be melded into the finest fucking fighter unit in the galaxy – before we ship out to place our lives between the civilians and the Spiders. I can imagine no higher calling and I expect the same from you all.

“Dismissed!”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Night had fallen rapidly in Heinlein's mountains, the strange half-light of the one moon, cast through a cloudy sky, illuminated almost nothing, but the silvery sea ahead of him. Major Ned Brickley kept his face hidden behind the stealth uniform – no one knew just how well the Spiders saw in the dark – as he slipped down a long path towards the sea, hoping that he wouldn't encounter any of the aliens. He needed to make contact, not fight a battle, although the aliens hadn't bothered to pay much attention to the sea. It was a mistake he hoped they wouldn't live to regret.

The Arnica Sea ran right up to the mountains, breaking into a series of fjords and inlets, waves splashing in the faint illumination against the rocks and shoals. Ned stepped down onto the rocks, carefully avoiding the sea life that was trying to find a home in the darkened habitats, and peered down the slope. It wasn't an easy place to reach without specialised equipment – at least from the land – but anyone could have driven a boat right up to the rocks. The aliens didn't seem to pay much attention to the seas...and, in doing so, they'd missed the other civilisation hidden on the planet.

There, he thought, as he saw a head bobbing out on the water. He activated his enhanced retinas and saw the head coming closer, a young woman with blonde hair streaming out behind her as she swam towards him. She was classically pretty in a very old style, even older than Ned himself, and as she hauled herself up onto the rocks, he could see that she wore nothing over her breasts. He stared, unable to help himself, as her thighs came into view...and the green tail hanging out behind her. It was a strange sight, almost sickening in a way; he knew that the mermen had no sense at all of dignity, or even of their own strangeness. Her vagina, he'd been told, was within her buttocks; mermaids always had sex underwater. Unlike the mythical mermen, they could live on the land, but always as near-cripples, unless they had the tail removed and normal human legs grown instead.

The mermaid looked up at him. "You called?"

Ned found himself swallowing. Her voice was almost hypnotic; a younger man might just have jumped into the water to be with her, as dozens did each year. A surprising amount of young men did just that; they came to Mermaid's Rock to court mermaids, even though few of them chose to have the modifications to turn them into mermen. It was easy to see why, looking at her, but Ned would have preferred to remain normal. There were some things that even he couldn't accept.

"Yes," he said, gathering himself. The mermaid was just another strange creature. They lived in a city deep under the waves and spent most of their time playing, something that reminded him more of the Confederation than he cared to remember. "Are you aware of what's happened to the planet?"

"It's been invaded," the mermaid said flatly. The blatant invitation seemed to vanish as she concentrated on the issue, pulling her tail up out of the water and leaning back on it. "We had several of us near the port when it was attacked and several more vanished when they went near beaches occupied by the monsters."

"We're fighting them," Ned said. Something about the mermaid caused him to use his words as carefully as possible. "Would you be able to join us?"

The mermaid winked at him. “Why would we wish to challenge the food chain?” She asked. “If they are the stronger, why should they not kill you – or us?”

Ned gritted his teeth. Mermen had an odd relationship with the rest of the sea creatures. They weren't the top of the food chain and knew it – a shark could catch and eat a mermaid with ease – but instead of making use of Confederation technology to prevent themselves being eaten by sharks, they just...accepted it. It had never made any kind of sense to Ned, who'd grown up in a universe where bioengineered monsters had been designed and built to destroy the human race...unless they were destroyed first. Mermen claimed to have a certain view of the inevitable – life's too short, they said, why not enjoy it – but Ned suspected that it had deeper roots.

No one had ever said that mermen or mermaids were *responsible*.

“Because they want this planet for their own,” Ned said, thoughtfully. “Because, in time, they'll want the seas as well. Because they've already killed millions and will kill millions more if we don't stop them. Because they've captured some of our *children* and we have to save them.”

The mermaid flicked her tail. “What do you want from us?”

“I want you to help get a reconnaissance team to the camp, first,” Ned said. The mermaid looked serious for a long moment. “Then we want to work out how to hit the camp and get the children and everyone else back to the mountains.”

The mermaid gave him another wink, one that would have gotten her jailed on a more restrictive planet. “Mayhap they'll all become one with the sea,” she said, a reference to becoming a merman. “Who do you wish to see the camp?”

“Me, at first,” Ned said. He stood up and stared into the darkness covering the sea. “Will you take me there now?”

“Of course,” the mermaid said, flicking her tail at him. “Anything for a handsome man.”

Ned ignored her comment and checked his suit. It was rated good for swimming much – much – deeper than the sea, but if he used any of the more advanced functions, like the GPS system, he was likely to be detected and targeted from orbit. The air system was working perfectly; he sent the mental command and watched as the suit slid up and covered his face, and then turned back to the mermaid.

“Let's go,” he said.

The mermaid stretched, revealing the gills on her neck, and threw herself back into the water. Ned followed, more gently, and felt the chill of the water strike him as he swam through the first steps and out into the ocean. Fish, some brought from Earth, others native to Heinlein itself, swam around them as he followed her through the darkness, her tail a barely-visible sight in the dark water. He kept one careful eye on the sonar, just in case a shark did come to try to eat them, but nothing larger than a fish was revealed as they headed along the coastline. Under normal circumstances, the sharks would have been kept away by a sonic barrier, but

with the aliens occupying most of the land surface, the barrier was probably out of service. He broke through the surface from time to time, looking into the land where cities had once stood, and saw...nothing. Only flickers of light revealed the presence of the aliens, working on their mysterious tasks and carrying out their mission.

The aliens, perhaps wisely, had constructed their prison camp on the edge of a rocky peninsula. If they couldn't swim themselves, and there was no evidence that they could swim, they might have decided that the outcrop was enough security as long as they just formed a barrier across the land. Ned had been there in the days before the invasion – someone had constructed a castle on the rock – but now it looked completely different; the castle had been targeted from orbit and destroyed. Ned wasn't sure why; perhaps, to the aliens, it had just looked like a threat. Or maybe they just hated castles.

He felt a hand touching him and flinched before realising that the mermaid had allowed him to swim over her and then started to touch his legs. A moment later, her lips met Ned's face covering and recoiled, her chagrined face barely visible in the darkness. He laughed, despite himself, and pulled his body onto the first rock, peering up at the ruins of the castle. If he reached the top, he'd be able to look down on the prison camp...and, in theory, he should remain undetected. If...

The face covering slid back and he leaned down towards the mermaid. "If I don't come back in an hour, swim back to the mountains and let them know what happened, ok?"

"Of course," the mermaid said. She leaned forward playfully and suddenly Ned felt her lips pressed to his. The kiss was soft and very sweet. "I'll wait for my brave hero here."

"I'm too old for this," Ned said. "You know, I don't even know your name."

"Ariel," the mermaid said.

Ned rolled his eyes and started the long climb up the rocks. It would have been tricky even in daylight; at night, it was almost impossible and without the suit, he would never have made it. The damp rocks, thankfully, became drier as he climbed higher, allowing him to move faster. He felt, more than saw, the first hints of the alien presence; a sense in the air that all was not quite right. The mermaid had been disorientating, a human who'd chosen to take on another form and live in a different world, but the aliens...? The air seemed to stink of their presence and the sense of real and terrifying threat was growing. The mental pressure almost sent him scurrying back down the cliff to the mermaid before he caught himself and climbed up the last two sections. The small cave had been used by young lovers, he guessed, somewhere where they could have fun and pretend that they were doing something wrong. He pulled himself to the end of it and peered into the light.

The alien camp looked...weird. Ned had seen camps from back when he'd been in the old New American Army, part of the Grand Alliance, and they'd been simple cages designed to hold the monsters Thule had created. Some humans had dared to hope that some of the monsters could be restored, as if they were mutated or altered humans, and so they'd been captured rather than exterminated on sight. Maybe they'd been right, in the long run, but after a few camps had been broken, the remainder of the soldiers had stopped taking prisoners. No one had ever been able to save the creatures.

“Shit,” he breathed, not trusting himself to speak. The sight made no sense at all. “What are they doing?”

There were no fences, just the presence of sleeping aliens, intermingled with humans. The aliens looked surprisingly normal when they were sleeping, when their eyes and legs were hidden under their bulk, and most of the humans seemed to be sleeping with them. Others looked terrified, or were trying to stay as far from the aliens as possible; he saw a young girl staring at one of the aliens and read sheer terror in her eyes.

Why the hell are they still there? Ned asked himself, and then saw the answer. An indistinct mass of Spiders, awake and active, was roaming across the land separating the camp from the rest of the continent...and there were humans within it. For a horrifying moment, Ned was sure that they were collaborators, before he saw their faces. They were slack and open, as if they were drugged out of their minds, shambling along...as if they were Spiders themselves. Some of them were even going on all-fours, some fully-dressed, others naked as the day they were born...and all trapped in the nightmare. What the hell was going on?

He altered his suit to take recordings. The camp was going to be easier and harder to hit than he had thought. Easier, because the camp had little in the way of defences apart from the Spiders on patrol, harder because the Spiders were intermingled with the human population. Ned had seen collaborators and the humans shambling with the Spiders didn't have the right *look*; they didn't look scared, or proud of their treachery, but almost drugged. The only explanation he could think of was that they were under some kind of mind control, but if the aliens could do that...why would they have bothered with the invasion in the first place? Why not place the entire population under control?

Something's not right, he thought, and slipped down the cliffs back towards Ariel. It was easy to place the name now; it had been an old, but still popular film back in his early years, although the appearance of *real* mermen had rather sapped interest. He saw her head bobbling out in the water, keeping well back from the cliffs...and then he saw her pointing at something behind him. He turned, looking back up towards the cave, and saw a Spider standing there. Even in the semi-darkness, it was an intimidating sight...and how the hell had it gotten there? Eight legs had to be worse than two for climbing over rocky mountains...

The Spider levelled a cylinder at him and he hurled himself towards the water as it fired. A burst of blue-white light lit up the scene, sending stabbing needles of pain through his eyeballs as his enhanced vision almost overloaded at the sudden burst of light, and he hit the water hard enough to hurt. The shock to his exposed face almost stunned him, but he dived down as deep as he could as the alien fired again and alien, sending great gouts of water into the air and waves of heat through the water. Ariel caught his arm and pulled him further out to see, ignoring the tides and currents, until they were out of range and safe, for the moment.

Her head bobbed up beside him. “You should be safe now,” she said, ignoring his spluttering as he coughed up water from the suit. “You saw the camp...so, what do you want to do now?”

Ned peered into the darkness. The aliens could be dispatching search craft at any moment. “I think we'd better swim back to the mountains, and then decide what to do,” he said. He

took a terrible risk and sent a burst transmission from the suit, hoping that it would remain undetected; General Gordon had to know what he was up against. “Are you coming?”

Ariel looked a little disappointed as he sealed up his faceplate again and dived below the surface of the sea. This time, she was touching him everywhere as they swam back, touches that were having an effect she could hardly fail to see. Ned felt himself growing warmer as they swam back into shallow water, despite her nimble hands opening parts of his suit and exposing his body to the waves. The cold didn't stop the warmth spreading through his body and he realised, suddenly, that it had been inevitable from the start. Ariel had decided that she wanted him and, somehow, he no longer wanted to say no. When she turned over, exposing herself to him, it was easy to take her from behind and push his way inside her...

Afterwards, they sat together on the rocks, staring up at the stars.

“That meant nothing, didn't it?” Ned asked, almost sadly. Having sex with a mermaid had been just...weird. It had been tantalisingly forbidden and almost laughably easy at the same time. “It's just another reason to have fun, isn't it?”

“Make love and be merry, for tomorrow you might be eaten by a shark,” Ariel said. She smiled at him as she pressed one hand to a cold breast. “You land dwellers are so...obsessed with doing the mundane things of life, while we just swim with the tides and grow old happy. Tell me something, something important. What do you have on land that we actually need?”

“A purpose,” Ned said, and even then, knew that he wasn't telling the truth. He'd been purposeless back before the aliens had arrived; no lover, no family, nothing, but his work. Perhaps that had been the real reason he'd allowed himself to be seduced; there was nothing like wartime to get the hormones flowing. He was old enough to be dispassionate about it, even if he hadn't been born in a Confederation where anything went, sexually, but it still surprised him at times. “Something that needs to be done.”

Ariel laughed. “Aye, right,” she said. Ned *looked* at her; something told him that she was a *lot* older than she looked, or acted. “Tell me something; do you want anything else from us?”

“Yes,” Ned said. “We want – need – you to provide communications with the other continents. We can't talk to them without you.”

“It could take months to get to the other continents,” Ariel said. She leaned closer to him. She didn't expel air when she talked, he'd noticed; mermaids breathed only through their gills. “But there is a way of speeding it up...”

Ned lifted an eyebrow. “It's a secret,” Ariel said. “You're going to have to seduce me and...”

She broke off as the skies started to light up. “Oh, *pretty!*”

“Pretty nothing,” Ned snapped, coming to his feet quickly. The skies were now boiling with flashes of light. Unless a second alien race had arrived, there could only be one explanation. “That's the orbital forces under attack. The Peacekeepers have arrived!”

Chapter Twenty-Five

There were certain constants in human warfare in space that seemed to apply to the Spiders as well. The impossibility of concealing a starship jaunting in from nearby sensors ensured that any attacking force that wanted more than limited surprise had to jaunt into the outer system and sneak up on the planet under cloak. It wasn't possible to jaunt while cloaked...but that wasn't always a problem. When the Peacekeepers wanted everyone looking at them, it was even possible to overload the drives and cause a much larger splash of emergence radiation.

Captain Mija Mallory drew in a breath as the *Feline* emerged from Jaunt Space. The emergence had felt rougher than usual, an effect of the drives being overloaded slightly to get the enemy's attention, and her stomach heaved rebelliously before her implants got it under control. Heinlein hadn't been raided for several days and the last reports had claimed that there were seven Crabs in the system, a force that possessed slightly greater firepower than the cruisers and starfighters under her command, but there was no way to be certain that the enemy hadn't reinforced. It was even possible that they'd drawn down the defence forces; Heinlein wasn't *that* important, certainly not compared to the captured shipyards, and if the Spiders lost their grip on the planet...it would hardly cost them the war.

"Report," she snapped, as the display began to fill with tactical icons. If they could actually drive the enemy off Heinlein, she wanted to do it...but not at the cost of her cruisers. A won battle could cost them the war. "Locate the enemy starships!"

"I have nine Crabs, one apparently damaged and in a mobile shipyard, and twelve Lobsters," the tactical officer said. He swore under his breath as a new series of icons appeared on the display. "I also have at least two wings of starfighters and several starships of unknown design."

They should have taken the damaged ship to a Worldship, if they have Worldships, Mija thought with sudden dark amusement. If the Spiders built Worldships of their own, they could have used them to run the war without ever having to depend on human-built facilities or risking revealing the location of the homeworld. They just gave us a free shot at a clean kill.

"Prepare to flush the external racks," she ordered, as the Crabs – apart from the damaged ship – formed into a defensive formation. The massive starships had to be calculating the odds right now and would, hopefully, conclude that she didn't stand a chance. If she kept charging into their position, they would have a free shot at thirty cruisers and three carriers...and they certainly wouldn't want to deter her. She smiled briefly; who was it who'd said never to interrupt the enemy when he or she was making a mistake? To them, it looked like she was making a terrible mistake.

"External racks are ready," the tactical officer said. Mija nodded as they approached the invisible line in space that marked missile range from the Crabs. She had to time it just right. "All are targeted and primed."

"Fire on my command," Mija ordered. She held her hand in the air for a long moment and then brought it chopping down. "*Fire!*"

Feline twitched as the external racks flushed their modified missiles. The Engineer had been complaining about the external racks ever since they'd had them installed on the *Honour To The Just*, and Mija had to admit that he'd had a point; a single hit by an enemy weapon could prove terrifyingly fatal. Even so, the modified weapons were just too large to be carried in the internal missile tubes, let alone fired... and they hadn't had the time for a major overhaul. The remains of the external racks were dumped off the ships and torn to pieces in the drive wakes, while their missiles headed directly for their opponents.

She felt a nasty smile forming on her face. The Crabs had to be *delighted*; they had to think that she was an idiot. After all, the modified missiles were *much* larger and slower than standard missiles; their point defence crews had to be rubbing their hands – or whatever Spiders had – together with glee. They were going to make the easiest kills any Spider point defence crew had made since the Battle of Terra-Prime, where the early human missiles had been poorly coordinated and executed. The massive missiles were racing towards their point defence engagement envelop – she hadn't even had the sense to fire them from a range where they might just have a chance at breaking through the point defence. She'd even fired them from outside standard missile range. They had to be laughing...

And then everything changed. A moment before they entered the point defence envelope, the missiles shattered, revealing the concealed surprise within – *faster* missiles, each one larger than a starfighter missile, but smaller than a standard missile. Mija had been furious when she'd first heard about them – the design had been done years ago, but no one had actually considered that the Peacekeepers would need them, so they hadn't been placed on the starships – but now, watching them racing into the teeth of the enemy's fire, she was almost pleased. The Spiders hadn't had the slightest idea of what they were facing.

“Enemy's point defence has engaged,” the tactical officer said. The Spiders would have handed most of their point defence tasks to AIs – unless their reaction speed was truly superhuman, they would have had no choice – and *they* weren't surprised for more than a nanosecond, but time *mattered* in point defence. The wave of missiles were going to strike home and for every three that were burned out of space, one struck home and unleashed the second surprise of the attack, CAM missiles. “CAM bombardment is proving effective.”

“I'll say,” Mija mused, watching as a Crab was struck by several missiles, its shields failing under the bombardment before a missile struck bare hull and vaporised the ship. “I dare say that withholding the weapons might have even been worthwhile this time.”

A second Crab vanished, and then a third; a fourth was barely saved by a Lobster driving in front of the missiles and taking the blow on its own shields. CAM – Compressed Antimatter – possessed far more of a kick than normal antimatter, almost as much explosive power as a singularity warhead... which couldn't be used on such missiles. It had the downside that a single accident in the storage pods would mean the end of a starship, but even so, Mija *loved* the missiles. They'd struck the Spiders a mighty blow, without even having a *single* shot fired back at them.

“One of the Lobsters just vanished,” the sensor operator reported. “She jaunted out; unknown destination.”

Reporting back to their main fleet, wherever it is, Mija thought. It would have been *neat* to track it back to their base and somehow locate the enemy fleet, but randomly selecting the

first jaunt coordinates to throw off pursuit was lesson one in the tactical manual. The remainder of the heavy starships still possessed enough firepower to show off her fleet – if she allowed them a chance to use it – but defeating them wasn't her primary mission.

She keyed her personal communicator. “Christophe, are you ready?”

“Yes, Captain,” a voice said back, on a private frequency. “I'm as ready as I can be.”

“Rather you than me,” Mija said. She'd had a chance to speak with the young-old man who was in her care and had been impressed, although she wasn't sure if she was more impressed with her personality or his willingness to entertain the thought of doing something Mija herself wouldn't have done on a bet. “Good luck; we'll shoot you off at the best possible moment.”

She closed the channel and looked up at the display. “Helm, take us in towards the Crabs and then hold us at extreme missile range,” she ordered. “Tactical, prepare to engage the enemy.”

“Incoming starfighters,” the tactical officer warned. “The Liaison Officer would like to launch our starfighters now.”

“Permission granted,” Mija said. The Crabs were growing closer, their tiny allies racing ahead of them as they moved to attack the human fleet. An experienced human could tell if human starfighters were configured for antiship or antifighter duties, but it was impossible – yet – to tell if that were possible for alien craft. They'd learn, in time, she was sure...but she hoped it wouldn't cost too many lives to discover. The war had barely lasted three weeks and she'd seen more death than she'd imagined possible. She learned back in her chair and gave an old order. “Fire as you bear.”

The Crabs, eager for revenge and less eager to allow her starfighters into attack range, opened fire as soon as the human starships entered missile range. She was relieved to see that they were determined to shield the planet – there were Spider land forces on the planet and they could be hit from orbit if she seized control of the high orbitals, if only briefly – but they were also determined to *hurt* her for what she'd done to them. The starfighters fought their dogfights around the cruisers, dodging with effortless ease the attempts by her point defence to shoot them down, but *Feline* rocked as several alien starfighter missiles crashed home.

Thank God they don't have CAM, she thought, and then realised what the implications of their having used the weapon would be. *They'll have it in a week, if not less...*

“The *Victorious* has launched it's first strike against the Crabs,” the liaison officer reported. “Commander Pookana would like permission to divert some of the fighter craft against the unknown designs.”

“Granted,” Mija ordered. The First Admiral had been very clear; they were to consider themselves charged to gather as much intelligence as possible, unless it involved serious risks to her ships. Learning about the capabilities of an unknown starship design *before* one of them was pointed at the Cascade Shipyard struck her as an extremely good idea. “I want an immediate report as soon as you have a result.”

The Crabs were moving now, rising up from the planet and heading towards her starships, their icons nightmares given shape and form. Mija watched grimly as the lead Crab took a pounding from her ships, only to fire back on three cruisers and break two of them into burning plasma. Others were taking damage as well; three of them signalled that they were too heavily damaged and jaunted out before the enemy could complete the task of destroying them. One lost its jaunt drive and floated helplessly in space for a long moment before an enemy missile blew it into dust.

“Concentrate our fire on the lead craft,” she ordered. Her ships were spreading out now, both to keep the range open and to force the Crabs to divert their attention. Her starfighters were racing through space now, launching their attacks on the unknown craft, and they needed to draw enemy attention onto the cruisers. The starfighters might sting, but unless there were enough of them, they could *only* sting. “Report...”

A new alarm flashed up on the display. “I have additional starfighters rising from the moon,” the tactical officer said. “The enemy had to have built a base there; they’re not rising from any of the lunar bases built by the Heinlein Defence Force before the planet was invaded.”

The bases were nuked, Mija reminded herself. It hadn’t been their first display of how ruthless the Spiders could be. She wouldn’t be surprised if the Spiders proved, *already*, to have killed more humans than the Thule, years ago. The death toll was numbered in the high billions. *There couldn’t be anything left.*

She turned in her chair and peered at his display. “How many starfighters?”

“Around one hundred detected so far,” the tactical officer said. She heard the puzzlement in his voice and quirked an eyebrow. “Some of the readings are...odd.”

“Odd?” Mija asked. “In what way are they odd?”

“It’s hard to read anything at this distance, but those power curves make no sense for starfighters,” the tactical officer said. “Unless they’ve got something new...those starfighters shouldn’t even be flying.”

“*Ah, shit*,” the liaison officer said. “Captain, one of those damned starships was an antifighter ship!”

“Show me,” Mija ordered sharply. The display obligingly replayed the moments as the starfighters raced up to target their opponent...and then space had filled with plasma bolt after plasma bolt, striking a dozen starfighters as they came in for the terminal attack. The worst part was that they’d had no warning at all of the danger. The Peacekeepers hadn’t built a starship for standing off a starfighter wave – standard doctrine suggest that the best antifighter tool was another fighter – and that oversight had cost lives. They’d have to duplicate the capability...and then they’d have to train pilots to watch out for the danger signs...and they didn’t even know what the danger signs *were*.

“Tactical, strike that ship on the next firing pattern,” Mija ordered. Like it or not, things were getting a little hot...as planned. “Order all starships to prepare to execute Plan Delta on my command.”

“The fleet’s responding, Captain,” the tactical officer said. She heard the confidence in his voice – he was the only other person who knew the full details of Plan Delta – and hoped he was right. “They’re standing by.”

Mija looked up at the display. No one standing on the hull would see half of what she saw on the display, only twinkling lights in the distance...unless the *Feline* herself was targeted. It was easy to forget, sometimes, just how small her starship was on a cosmic scale...and easy to understand how they might have missed the Spiders in their search for intelligent life. The universe was so vast...and they were so small. The entire war was tiny on such a background...

“Execute Plan Delta,” she ordered.

The *Feline* launched a spread of missiles, drones and noisemakers towards the alien fleet. The other starships launched their own salvos at the same time, trying to blind the alien craft as much as possible, hopefully knocking down their data network and suddenly forcing each starship to rely on its own point defence. For a tiny window of opportunity, the enemy fleet would be blinded and forced to fight with one arm tied behind its back. The Peacekeepers would recover quickly from such an attack; Mija, and Christophe, was gambling that the aliens would be no quicker. A mistake would be fatal.

A second later, the fleet launched a second spread of weapons; atmospheric penetration missiles. The aliens, recovering from the first attack, sensed the second attack and immediately reprioritised their own defence, concentrating on taking out the penetration missiles, whatever it took. They had to know that if even one of them got down to the planet, they risked devastation, if not an outright scorching. No world had *ever* been scorched by the Peacekeepers, but no world had been occupied by alien forces before the world either...and they had to know what the human fleet could do to them. After all, they’d done it to the humans...

They were good, Mija admitted grudgingly, even though the penetration missiles weren't half as stealthy as they could have been. She'd seriously considered – and had even argued with the First Admiral – that they actually bombard chunks of the planet, but the First Admiral had overruled her; they needed the intelligence that could be gathered from Heinlein. He hadn't said so directly, but Mija, who had been a Peacekeeper long enough to learn how to read between the lines, had sensed that there weren't many worlds holding out against the aliens. They needed intelligence...and if that meant handing the aliens an easy victory, there was no choice.

She scowled. It seemed that there hadn't been any choice about a lot of things lately.

“The pod is away,” the AI said, softly. *Feline*'s AI was a Limited AI, without the full capability to grow into a legal person, but there were times when Mija wondered if the AI was just acting dumb. It was rare, but possible for a Limited AI to grow into a fully-fledged AI...and a handful even chose to hide their sentience for a while before being discovered. “The odds of the pod reaching the surface of the planet are roughly seventy percent.”

And we're going to get Rangers down onto the surface? Mija asked herself. The single pod had a good chance because it was almost undetectable except at very close range, but a

company of armoured Rangers would be easy to detect, even if the enemy didn't have dedicated sensors devoted to the task. *They have to be out of their minds.*

"Understood," she said aloud. She smiled as more alien starships jaunted in, coming to destroy her or drive her away from the planet, providing a perfect excuse to cut her losses and run. She'd inflicted serious damage on the aliens, at the loss of seven cruisers, forty starfighters, and serious damage to five more. It was perhaps the most favourable victory in the war. "Contact all ships; prepare to retreat."

She watched as the alien reinforcements grew closer. It was a classic pincer, trying to trap them against the planet, but it wouldn't work. Not unless they deployed jammers and it didn't look as if they could. They had to know she was likely to run and perhaps they'd be happy with that, or maybe they thought she'd be stupid enough to fight an overwhelmingly powerful force to the death. In the recent alien advances, some Peacekeeper forces had done just that. Mija almost envied them.

Retreat hell, she thought, with quiet irony. *We just got here.*

"I think we've overstayed our welcome," she said, calmly. There would be a time to settle scores with the rest of the Spider starships later. "Take us out of here."

Chapter Twenty-Six

When Christophe French had seen the pod for the first time, his reaction had been *hell no*. It was tiny, barely large enough for a man to lie down in as if he were dead...and the entire pod bore too close a resemblance to a coffin for comfort. He'd seriously considered refusing the mission and asking for a different posting, but the thought that some other poor bastard would have to ride the pod down to the surface – and the fact that he probably *was* the best person the Confederation had on hand for the task – had kept him from refusing to go. He *had* insisted on various changes to the original pod – the original designer, who didn't have to go down to the planet in a coffin-shaped *thing*, didn't have the slightest idea about people – but overall, the concept was as solid as it could be made.

Which wasn't pretty damn solid. In fact, Christophe had been certain that *no one* had ever had to use a pod, outside the Dangerous And Stupid Sports Club, and one of *them* would probably have been better at the insertion part of the plan. A Confederation Ranger would have made a combat drop with a massive battlesuit wrapped around him, a suit even capable of shooting back at any enemy starfighter that decided to take a look at the dropped forces, but even *they* would have refused to drop in an unarmed coffin. He wore a tunic, but he felt completely naked; a single enemy shot would kill him, probably before he knew he'd been targeted.

The plan had looked good – or at least not actively suicidal – on paper. The fleet was going to pound hell out of the defenders of Heinlein...and then they were going to bombard the planet, or at least *act* as if they were going to bombard the planet. While the aliens were trying frantically to intercept the missiles targeted on their bases – assuming they thought like humans and didn't consider ground bases expendable – the pod would slip through and fall to the surface. If it were detected, it would look like a harmless piece of space junk, hardly worth wasting the power to kill. *He* would have fired on the pod on general principles, but *he* knew, of course, what the pod actually was. An alien sensor operator would have other problems...

Or at least that was the plan.

He accessed the pod's passive sensors and peered out into the tube. The *Feline's* crew had shoved the pod into a standard missile tube, something he felt was a little undignified, and there was very little to see. The original design would have had him trapped in a claustrophobic space, so tiny as to be almost certain to drive him completely mad by the time he hit the planet's surface, but he'd had that changed. It was *way* too dangerous to fit the pod with *active* sensors – he might as well send a message inviting the aliens to hurry up and kill him – but as long as he could see out, he was happy.

The voice of the Captain echoed in his head. "Execute Plan Delta," she said. Christophe tensed, despite himself; there were bare seconds before he was ejected into space towards the planet. He'd liked the Captain, even though she'd been convinced that he was mad already, something he found hard to fault. A second later, he felt the sudden push of acceleration...and then he was out in space, falling towards the planet. The pod's sensors suddenly started to report on dozens of starships and hundreds of missiles, from the wreckage of one Crab, falling towards the atmosphere and – hopefully – going to burn up before they hit the ground, to the remains of burned-out missiles. A tiny mobile space dock was coming apart as he watched, scattering its remains down towards the planet and he tensed; if *he'd*

been programming the ground-based planetary defence systems, *he* would have programmed in automatic engaging of *every* piece of space junk, just in case.

He found himself tensing as an enemy starship passed too close to the pod for comfort, it's weapons flaring out and engaging the missiles that had been aimed at the surface of the planet, while it ignored or missed the tiny pod. Christophe had to smile to himself as the pod drifted further towards the gravity well; Plan Delta had called for the enemy sensor network to be well and truly screwed up and, judging from the effects, they'd succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Maybe they couldn't see the pod...or maybe they were just toying with him, preparing a kinetic kill weapon to strike the pod as soon as it hit the ground, killing him and any resistance fighters who came to recover him. He wasn't sure if the resistance even knew about him; if they were captured, what might they tell enemy interrogators?

The thought reminded him of his past. Christophe had been born on St Ronan's World, a planet that had been founded by a religious cult just before the Breakdown and had been well and truly lost during the collapse of the interstellar society. While the remainder of galactic civilisation had been forming the fledging Confederation – a whole new way of looking at the universe – St Ronan's World had been turning into a nasty theocracy, one where aristocrats and priests had ruled together...and God help the commoner who picked the wrong side at the wrong time. Life had been nasty, brutish and short for most commoners – the world had regressed very quickly, partly by design, to a level that pre-spaceflight cultures would have considered appalling – and a series of increasingly violent rebellions had come to an end when the Confederation starships had arrived. The Peacekeepers had ended the wars – they hadn't even killed anyone, but the futility of further violence had been hammered home easily – and the world had been redeveloped. Christophe himself had been lucky enough to get in on the ground of the new world order...and, when he'd finally retired, the Peacekeepers had offered him a job.

“Your world had to be saved at once,” his recruiter had told him. “Other worlds...we can be less...*direct* in our interventions, and we need people to help us target our efforts.”

He'd worked for the Civilisers for almost two hundred years. Their task was to reshape Lost Colonies so that they were prepared to enter human society as a whole, *without* the major unrest and shock that had followed more direct interventions. He also hadn't enjoyed it; he'd been *born* on one of the barbaric Lost Colonies and *knew* what it was like to be the plaything of someone else, someone who didn't even consider him human. He'd seen little point in delay; if a world was barbaric, change it, exile the former leadership...and do it before more people suffered. There were times when he wondered if *that* attitude was why he'd been offered the job; there had been plenty of Peacekeepers uneasy with the ‘softly-softly’ approach.

His implants brought him back to the present. The Peacekeeper starships were jaunting out, including the *Feline*, but she would loop around and take up position to receive his transmissions. If he'd thought that getting down to the planet had been exciting, getting back up into orbit would be...tricky, almost impossible. Gravity would help him get down to the planet, but only the bravest or most suicidal of pilots would consider landing a shuttle in the middle of a war zone, and then getting back into orbit with starfighters on their tail. The person who'd volunteered for the job was probably mad...

“We don’t have much intelligence on what the surface is like,” his superior had told him. Christophe had even been granted a quick interview with the First Admiral himself, but that hadn’t been more than a quick ‘good luck’ session. “You may locate the Heinlein Resistance quickly, or perhaps it will take a few days; there’s no hurry. Stay in the mountains, *don’t* go down to the plains, and *do not* use any transmitters.”

He winced as the pod began to jolt around, hitting the upper edges of the atmosphere. He'd been embedded in societies where war – real brutal war, not the wargames played by Confederation citizens – was common and had even taken part in invasions. He could have written an entire book, but the bottom line was that thousands of innocent people had been caught in the middle of the fighting...and, if they were lucky, they *only* got killed. The unlucky ones ended up raped, or enslaved, or even used as hostages, a way of life that was unthinkable to the Confederation. Christophe had long since made his choice; as far as he was concerned, such societies didn’t deserve to live.

The data on Heinlein itself emerged from his virtual memory. The Confederation hadn’t quite known what to make of it when the world had been rediscovered; on one hand, the government was less than perfectly democratic, on the other hand, it actually functioned quite well, apart from a growing problem with civil unrest. They had been contacted openly and a small percentage of the population had chosen to leave, balanced by a surprising amount of older Confederation citizens who wanted some meaning in their lives. Christophe thought that was stupid; when *he* retired, he was going to live in a perfect habitat somewhere and grow roses. A bit of shameless luxury never hurt anyone.

The final Peacekeeper starship jaunted out, leaving him alone in the middle of falling pieces of junk. Some of them, pieces that might have made it through the atmosphere intact, were destroyed from the ground, apart from some chunks that might fall into the mountains, or away from the alien settlements. If they’d seen the pod, they’d probably ignored it in the hope it would detonate on top of the Resistance’s positions, something that suggested that the Spiders had a nasty sense of humour. The irony in the Peacekeepers accidentally killing those they’d come to save...

Even without any braking at all, the fall was a long one, giving him time to appreciate Heinlein as it grew below him. The world didn’t look any different to any others; a set of continents, a bright blue sea, and white caps at the poles. There was a Merfolk Society living in the seas, if he remembered correctly, one that had been established a long time ago. By now, they were practically a separate species, unable to breed truly with a baseline human without medical care. They had several worlds, completely covered in water, all to themselves, but mostly they lived beside surface dwellers. Who else would they annoy or flirt with?

Two minutes to impact, his suit sent. Christophe braced himself, knowing that it would be futile; everything would work, or he would be dead. The ground came up at staggering speed, mountains becoming monstrous forms quicker than he could stand...and then there was a slight disconnect and he was on the ground. Like any old fool, he’d been waiting for the jolt, the sense that the stasis field had triggered and saved him from the effect of hitting the ground at several times the speed of sound, but instead there was just...a disconnect. One moment he was falling, the next he was on the ground and the coffin was breaking apart.

“Ouch,” he said, and staggered to his feet. The gravity pull seemed to alter for a second and then he was out of the coffin. He'd landed in the centre of a crater – his impact had created the crater – and there was no one around. “Suit; proximity scan.”

No life forms, human, alien or animal detected, the suit said. It wasn't sentient, something that had caused him problems in the past after working with genuine AIs, but he'd have to live with it. *GPS units off-line, standard combat interface units online, 99% percent efficiency, armour inactive...*

He listened absently as the suit completed its report, pulling himself away from the pod. One hand opened the rear section on the pod and pulled out his supplies, the capture equipment and a handful of other devices he thought would be useful, and slung the bag over his shoulder. If the aliens had detected his minute stasis field, they'd be on their way already, perhaps operating outside the suit's range. The Resistance would be less likely to use scanners, but they might be able to sneak up on him as well...

His lips twitched. If nothing else, it was unlikely that there were any collaborators in *this* war.

The sun was rising up in the distance as he walked upwards towards the mountains. His internal map told him that the Heinlein Defence Force had been fond of using the mountains as a training ground and they would possess an intimate knowledge of the area...and the reports from the ground had confirmed that the Resistance used the mountains as a base. Christophe had been in some campaigns to take mountainous areas and knew that digging enemy soldiers out of the area could be murder; the Resistance was likely to be able to hold out for years, unless the aliens just forgot about preserving the world and bombarded the mountains at random. The Peacekeeper files were less useful on *where*, exactly, in the mountains the Resistance was likely to be based, although they'd made some good guesses. If one of them didn't pay off...

He saw the farmhouse in the distance and turned towards it. It didn't look threatening, but somehow he had a sense that he was being watched as he turned and headed up the drive, noticing a sign marked FARNHAM as he walked, but nothing else. The farmhouse was built out of stone and wood – real wood – but there was no sign of any animals, only crops. A broken barn stood nearby, as if it had been damaged by being abandoned, rather than enemy fire...and then he sensed movement.

“Don't move,” a woman's voice said. “I have a bead on you and I don't miss.”

Target behind you, the suit said, unhelpfully.

“Put your hands in the air and turn around slowly,” the woman said. Christophe did as he was ordered and saw a tall black woman, looking around twenty-one, if he were any judge, but holding the weapon with the skill of someone much older. “Now, who are you and what are you doing on my freehold?”

The suit scanned the weapon and reported that it was an ancient hunting rifle, but in perfect condition. Christophe found himself considering possible options; he could armour up and be perfectly safe, he could jump her and with his enhanced muscles, he would still be safe, or he

could draw his own weapon and gamble that he could move faster than her. He chose to talk, subvocalising commands to the suit, just in case.

“My name is Christophe,” he said, studying her. She would have been handsome – it was hard to think of her as pretty or beautiful – if she hadn’t had a scar on her face. Her body – and he could see most of it; she only wore shorts and a loose shirt – was strong and muscular, surprisingly attractive. “I’m from the Confederation and I’m here to help.”

“A Peacekeeper?” The woman asked. Christophe nodded. “Transmit your ID Code, now.”

Christophe retrieved the code from his virtual memory and transmitted it to her. She softened slightly as she received it – she had to have served in the Peacekeepers herself at one time, if she knew about the ID Code – and lowered the weapon, leaning on it with a casual disregard for the weapon that he was *sure* was a fake. If he tried to jump her now, he was sure she could have the weapon up and in firing position before he even reached her.

“I don’t have much to do with the Resistance, but they do come here from time to time,” the woman said, finally. She held out a hand. “My name is Carmen, by the way; call me Car and you’re dead.”

“I shall be sure to remember that,” Christophe said. “I do have to talk to the Resistance pretty quickly, so…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Carmen said. “They’ll be here for you.”

They spent the next hour talking over a cup of coffee. Carmen unbent enough to admit that she’d once served in the Confederation Rangers before transferring to several elite – and secret – units before retiring and deciding to spend the rest of her days on Heinlein. She was actually older than him and she’d built the farm more or less on her own, only travelling down to the nearest town when she needed something she couldn’t make on her own. Her farmhouse was almost as primitive as it seemed, apart from a small collection of devices, several of which had been state-of-the-art Peacekeeper tech when she’d retired.

“These days, you never quite know who’s going to be coming your way,” she said, noticing his gaze. “A lady can never be too careful.”

“True,” Christophe agreed.

“And, as I promised, your contact,” Carmen said. Christophe looked up as a tall, heavyset man, with the eyes of the truly old, appeared at the window. “I’ll leave you two to get acquainted?”

“You can stay if you like,” the man said, in what someone older than Christophe would have called an American Drawl. Christophe hadn’t heard that accent within the Confederation for years. “I have much to discuss with our friend, starting with the fact that he’s on his own, *instead of the battalion of Rangers we were promised!*”

“There are over two hundred worlds under Occupation,” Christophe said, as calmly as he could. He didn’t dare start a fight. “There’s a unit being prepared for insertion now, but they

want to do something here before the Spiders realise that they're going to have a more serious problem on their hands...claws...whatever.”

“Oh?” The man asked.

Christophe grinned. “They want you to help me capture a red or black Spider,” he said. He was starting to understand how the newcomer thought. “Doesn't that sound like fun?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Night was falling as Major Ned Brickley led his small group of soldiers down from the mountains and onto the long interstate leading towards the peninsula – and the alien prison camp. The darkness concealed them, in theory, but he knew all too well that any halfway decent military force would have night-vision gear...and it would be dangerous to assume that the Spiders couldn't see in the dark. For all he knew, they had infrared vision and were perfectly capable of tracking his men, even if they were wearing stealth suits. The Peacekeeper's intelligence packet – and the request, the *demand*, for live alien captives – hadn't been very helpful when it came to alien capabilities on the ground...and too informative when it came to alien capabilities in space. He'd been tempted to demand that they launched their mission when the Peacekeepers were raiding the alien orbital force again, just to prevent them taking a hand if they felt tempted, but they had no way to time it properly.

They slipped past a line of burnt-out vehicles, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. The vehicles didn't look military in design, even though most of the private vehicles on Heinlein had been built with some military use in mind, and he guessed that the owners had tried to get out of the remains of the cities...only to be attacked from orbit. The aliens might not be very good at tracking humans on the ground, but they were death on powered vehicles; the more he thought about it, the harder it seemed to get a live alien captive off the planet. He half-suspected that they would end up having to conduct the interrogation on Heinlein, something that worried him; how in the name of God did someone interrogate a two-metre tall Spider-like alien?

Maybe they don't know Standard, he thought darkly, as the point man signalled them forwards. *That would be one way for the aliens to avoid deflections; make sure the grunts can't speak to us and have a few atrocities so that we're not even trying to take prisoners as well.*

It hardly mattered. As far as he knew, and, as second-in-command of the Heinlein Resistance, he knew a great deal indeed, no Spiders had attempted to surrender. It was inhuman; they sometimes fought to the death like wild animals, or sometimes they broke contact and retreated in good order...and there was no way to predict what any given group would do. The Resistance had been tracking alien forces as they patrolled the areas surrounding the alien landing zone – which was rapidly being turned into an alien city, shaped like a giant anthill – and their behaviour rarely made sense. Some of them were aggressive patrollers – he hoped they wouldn't come anywhere near one of them on the mission, at least before the shit hit the fan – and others were lazy; it was the only word that seemed to fit. They patrolled listlessly and didn't seem to care about Resistance forces nearby, unless the Resistance attacked them.

And then there were the captives. He'd gone through everything he'd recorded – he thought of Ariel briefly and wished he were back in the water, instead of tramping towards an alien camp and probable death – and it had been clear; some humans had been integrated into the alien forces. General Gordon had been tempted to declare them all traitors and outlaws, and shoot them all on sight, but Ned had called upon his vast experience in warfare to convince him otherwise. The collaborators might have been injected with subversion nanites, or had been drugged, or any number of other ways to get cooperation out of reluctant donors...and they didn't need the bother of proving which was which. The Peacekeeper – Ned glanced

over to see, with a hint of annoyance, that he was keeping up with the rest of the column – had expressed an interest in taking a few of the collaborators alive as well, if possible. Ned, who had seen their faces, doubted that it would be possible...but they would try.

The soldiers paused as they reached the ridge. The land sloped down towards Castle Rock, over the lip of land that reached out towards the castle...and the alien camp below. There was no way that they would get closer without the aliens noticing them, regardless of what they did, so the soldiers took up positions and carefully prepared their weapons. No one outside the Isolated Worlds and the Lost Colonies had used chemically-powered weapons for years, but they had several advantages over energy weapons, not least because they couldn't be tracked from orbit. The aliens had destroyed several resistance groups because they'd carried energy weapons; Ned had been quick to respond and order all of the remaining energy weapons to be placed somewhere well out of the way, just in case.

He peered carefully through his hi-res sensor and cursed. There were at least two thousand aliens down there, with humans mixed among them, mainly brown aliens. Some of the soldiers who had studied the insect kingdoms had wondered if the browns were actually drones – they certainly didn't seem to think for themselves – but Ned had cautioned them to be careful regardless; ignorance, as they said, didn't mean stupid. The brown aliens reacted to obvious threats and sometimes didn't notice more covert actions.

“The minute we open fire,” Gary muttered, “they're going to be on us like flies to shit.”

Ned nodded in agreement. The resistance was risking more than just the fifty men under his command; five hundred men had been dispatched from the mountains, following strict orders to avoid contact and reach firing positions before dawn. They should have made it – they hadn't heard shooting in the distance – but there was no way to know, short of using a betraying radio signal. That would summon the aliens like nothing else.

“Yes,” he said, checking his watch. The aliens showed signs of losing concentration just before dawn, they'd noted, and the attack had been planned to take advantage of that little lapse. The problem was that no one knew just how...distracted the aliens were going to be, or even *why* they were distracted. “Have you got the mortar squads set up?”

“Yes, sir,” Gary muttered. “Attack in twenty?”

Ned looked back down at the camp. The collaborators, at least those mixed in with the aliens, were going to get pasted. It couldn't be helped; they could have sniped all day at the aliens, but they would have reacted to that. If they had chosen willingly to follow the aliens, he would be quite happy to kill them, but looking at their faces, it was easy to tell that they hadn't chosen that fate. Was that, he wondered, what the aliens had in mind for all humanity?

I should have brought Janine, he thought, and cursed his oversight. Janine's talents might have allowed them to tell what was really going on. He felt as useless as a civilian suddenly plucked off the streets and asked to review an elite detachment of soldiers; he didn't even know where to begin.

A burst of firing echoed off in the distance.

“Shit,” he breathed, all caution thrown to the winds. Firing, ten minutes away from the planned start time, could only mean that the aliens had stumbled across one of their forces...and had attacked. No one could order Resistance men not to defend themselves and the group were clearly fighting back. “Take aim...and fire!”

The mortars opened the attack, throwing heavy high explosive shells into the teeth of the enemy forces. The Spiders were still preparing themselves for the attack and hadn't moved from their regular patterns, a mistake they paid for as shells crashed amongst their forces and exploded, shattering Spiders as if they were made of glass. Ned saw the aliens, some of them crippled and obviously dying, scattering from the sudden offensive, even as others struggled to bring their weapons to bear on his position. It was going to be interesting...

A burst of blue-white light blinded him momentarily and he winced, blinking rapidly to banish the afterimages. The aliens were shooting back into the ridge, the heat from their blasts scorching his face; it was sheer luck that they hadn't lost more than a handful of men. The snipers went to work, firing explosive bullets down towards the alien crew-served weapons and picking off the gunners, one by one. They exploded as the bullets detonated, sending green flesh and blood scattering everywhere, their remains falling over the weapons. It was a shame that humans couldn't use their weapons – they'd even lost people because they hadn't recognised the weapons for what they were in time – but destroying them would have to suffice.

“They're massing for a charge,” Jock shouted from his position. He'd slipped up to the highest position, carefully away from the firing zones, and was now watching the aliens carefully through implanted senses that put Ned's hi-res sensor to shame. Ned wasn't surprised; the aliens hadn't thought that the camp could be attacked, so half of their soldier drones – if that was what they were – had been caught out of position. “At least a hundred of them...and they're moving.”

“Machine guns, fire,” Ned barked, as the brown mass, illuminated in the fires and explosions, swept up the hill. A human facing other humans might have waited until the enemy were closer; he had no such concerns about the Spiders. The creatures were terrifyingly hard to kill. Cripples brought up the rear – he was amused to see that none of the human collaborators had joined the suicidal charge – and were merely the first to die. The machine guns raked the alien force with soulless fury, tearing them to shreds...and still they came on.

Ned's rifle was in his hand, but he didn't fire; he couldn't have picked a target out of the mass. Bloody chunks of aliens were being blown everywhere, the mortar operators lowering their weapons and throwing high explosive charges right into the teeth of the alien positions, but still they came on, screaming at a pitch too high for his ears. Pain mounted as the aliens came closer...and finally they faltered. Maybe they had been broken and wanted to retreat, maybe they had merely needed a pause, but the machine guns tore the remainder to pieces before they could move.

Silence seemed to fall. “Artillery, take out their positions behind the trenches,” Ned snapped into his radio. Their cover was well and truly blown; no one, not even a Thule Serf, could have missed their location...and they were bred to be stupid and servile. “First and Second Platoons advance, on the double!”

He led the run down the hill as the mobile guns boomed and threw their shells into the enemy positions. They might have been wiser to have pulled all their forces into the trench, but they'd been caught badly out of place...and had known that there was nowhere else to go. The soldiers attacked over the trenches, throwing grenades and satchel charges into the alien bunkers, and then pushed into them, challenging the aliens hand to hand. Explosive bullets ripped through the aliens, but they couldn't hold the position; a handful of browns attempted to run and were cut down ruthlessly. One he'd thought dead lunged at him and almost caught him with claws before Gary pumped an explosive bullet into it, blowing it into pieces.

"I keep telling you to stay out of the front lines," Gary said sternly. "You won your vote and you're too bloody important to be charging around with the young men."

Ned laughed. Heinlein's tradition that everyone fought, or at least everyone in a unit, tended to be expensive in senior officers. When he'd been young, very long ago, he wouldn't have thought that that was a bad thing, but he'd learned better since. A senior officer, at least on Heinlein, had been there and done that...and lived to put his experience to work for the planet.

"Never mind that," he snapped. "Get the third platoon up here and get me a sit-rep; move the remains of first and second up to the camp and start getting those people out, *now!*"

"Yes, sir," Gary said.

Ned glanced around the alien bunkers as his men streamed past him. It was his first look at an alien-built structure and he found himself reminded of a wasp's nest, or maybe a spider's hidden den. There was nothing human about the featureless room, built of something his implanted sensors couldn't identify; it was as bare and unadorned as a monk's meditation room. The aliens had a position to fire at intruders and some food – or at least he thought it was food – and nothing else. Ned had fought in some of the most godforsaken places in the universe – with mud, raid and blood combining to create a hell for the soldiers – but the Spiders seemed to live even lower than humanity. For the first time, he truly grasped how alien they were...

"1st Company is taking down the fences now," Gary reported. "2nd and 3rd Companies report that they took a pounding on their way towards the enemy positions, but they have secured their locations and are taking up defensive positions. 4th Company has been decimated and I have ordered the survivors to join up with 3rd Company..."

"Good thinking," Ned said. 4th Company had probably been the one that had been discovered and attacked by the aliens. That was a nasty blow, but it was also a stroke of luck; they'd been backstop, rather than any force out on the front line. If 2nd or 3rd had taken heavy losses, it would have been much worse. They blocked the main line of reinforcement from the alien base further to the south. "And the prisoners?"

Gary hesitated. "It would be better if you saw for yourself, sir."

Ned stepped out of the alien bunker and into the dawn light. The prisoners looked...bad, very bad. Ned had seen some of the prison camps despots and tyrants had established, but the Spiders had been much worse...all through a simple lack of care. The humans might not have been starved or raped – and he'd seen both in his long life – but they looked

traumatised, even the ones who hadn't been seduced somehow into joining the alien side. The collaborators looked...not guilty, not fearing retribution from their own side, but...stunned. They couldn't even understand what was happening to them.

"Pass the word," Ned said, as soldiers began to cuff collaborators. They couldn't be trusted unbound, but they had to be treated almost like children, as if their minds had somehow been burned out by the aliens. "Anyone who abuses one of them or treats them as anything other than *proper* prisoners of war, under the Confederation Accords, will wish that they'd never been born."

"Sir," Gary said, without argument. It was the clearest sign that he agreed with his chief. Ned had known him long enough to know that Gary wouldn't hesitate to tell him he was wrong if he had good reason to believe that he *was* wrong. "I don't know what we're going to do with them, though."

"For the moment, we get them back to the mountain," Ned said. They hadn't completed the second part of their mission, let alone the third, and that meant that some of them would have to wait for the aliens to make their move. They'd probably never see a better opportunity to cut off and destroy a sizable part of the Resistance and their commanders, if they had commanders, had to know it. They were probably already on the move. "Treat them as possible subversives – unwilling, but none the less dangerous."

He scowled as Gary went off to pass on the orders. The Thule had been past masters at playing with their captives, sometimes infecting them with diseases and then sending them back in prisoner exchanges, or brainwashing them to their cause and then 'allowing' them to escape. The Confederation Accords demanded that prisoners of war be treated well and humanely, as long as they behaved themselves, but no one had anticipated the need to defend against returned POWs. They'd learned quickly and many POWs had found themselves incarcerated again on their return home. The Thule, bastards that they were, had made plenty of propaganda hay out of *that*.

A good thing they never found out all the things we did to try and free them from mental domination, he thought dryly. The horrors of that particular chapter of human history were closed, he hoped. *He* certainly didn't want to open it again. *That would have probably won them the war in one fell swoop.*

A little girl, barely entering her teens, smiled wanly at him as she passed, escorted by a pair of soldiers. Ned winked back at her and hoped she'd get back to the mountains safely; Carmen or someone else would probably end up adopting her. The mountains were holding more people than he'd even thought they could – exterminating the entire human population hadn't been possible, even for the Spiders – and far too many of them would never see their families again. The Resistance had absorbed a lot of them into its fighting forces, but the children and those exempted from combat, for whatever reason, had to be farmed out. They couldn't hide in caves near the Resistance fighters or the Spiders might catch them as well.

His radio buzzed once. "Sir, we have incoming," Captain Drake said. The concern in his voice couldn't quite hide his eagerness for a scrap; he'd lost three sons and a daughter when the cities had been nuked. "At least two major enemy forces, with air support."

At least they're not bombarding us from space, Ned thought. "Understood," he said. He could see the mobile aircraft now, three of them moving rapidly towards the human positions, and knew what would happen when they entered firing range. "I'm on my way."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“You’d better get your butt up into position,” Ned said, directly into Christophe’s ear. “They’re coming to get you now.”

Smartass, Christophe thought, as he checked the small amount of equipment he’d brought with him to Heinlein. He’d had plenty of experience at working with other fighting forces, apart from the Peacekeepers, and he should have been used to it, but the Heinlein Resistance was just...*weird*. They seemed, at times, to be a completely slapdash unit, without anything, but basic courtesies for senior officers – he’d even seen a Private arguing with a Captain over tactics – and at the same time, they were pretty damned good. Every one of them, he’d been told, was a volunteer...and when he’d pointed out that that was true of the Peacekeepers as well, they’d been dismissive.

You’re not a real soldier unless you’ve been down in the mud, they’d said, and maybe they were right. Christophe had seen too much mud back on St Ronan’s World, and even when he’d become a Peacekeeper and served as an insertion agent, he’d seen more mud than he cared to think about. It was more interesting when he’d been inserted as a senior officer or businessman, primed to make subtle adjustments to conditions that no one native to the barbaric planet would understand before it was too late, but perhaps it was more...useful to be a soldier. The Confederation Rangers might have understood, but he doubted, somehow, that most of the Confederation’s citizens would have made sense of the attitude.

And yet, they still came to Heinlein. The Resistance forces included men and women from all over the galaxy, from ex-Peacekeepers to men who’d just wanted a new challenge, and they shared an astonishing amount of data. Actively questioning authority, except in the middle of a battle, was strongly encouraged; they might respect their senior officers, but they didn’t worship them. It was an attitude, Christophe felt, that would have done the Peacekeepers some good...although to be really effective, it would have had to be inserted well before the Battle of Terra-Prime.

He peered into the distance towards the Anthill. The soldiers hadn’t wasted any time in naming the alien city; it *did* look like a colossal anthill, built only a few kilometres from Lazarus itself...or at least its remains. Aliens had been stripping the former city since they’d established themselves on the surface, working desperately to exploit as much of the human materials as they could, and nothing the Resistance could do would stop them. They were learning to recognise improvised explosive devices and other human threats...and they had a few nasty surprises of their own. The last human force to go near the Anthill had been wiped out to the last man.

“They’re coming,” the CO muttered. 2nd Company knew the area intimately; they had used it on a regular basis to carry out exercises before the Spiders had arrived. The Resistance had presented them with an opportunity and only an idiot, particularly one well aware that he had vastly superior firepower to his opponents, would fail to take it. “Brace yourself...”

Three aircraft flashed overhead. They didn’t look *that* different to human skimmer craft, but as they came closer, he saw that they lacked the functional lines of human craft. They looked melted, somehow, and glinted an eerie colour in the sun, a strange mixture of purple and green. It might have meant something to the aliens, but it looked completely strange to him...but there was nothing strange about the plasma cannons hanging from the wings. They

opened fire and a set of vehicles on the roads, carefully pushed out to look like a threat, exploded into balls of fire.

“Take them out,” the radio buzzed. A combat team with handheld HVM launchers stood up and pointed their missiles towards the sky. Their passive sensors had been track the drive fields on the skimmers and all they had to do was shoot, which they did; Christophe saw a streak of light, too fast to follow properly, and then the first aircraft was struck directly by a HVM. An explosion blew the port wing off and the remainder of the aircraft spun around and crashed into the ground. A second aircraft exploded in midair, debris showering down all around them; the third was able to run and get out of range before the HVM struck it.

“Good shooting,” Ned said, though the radio. “Here they come...”

Christophe had thought himself prepared for the sight, but seeing the Spiders up close sent new shivers down his spine. They were a nightmare in shape and form, advancing at terrifying speed, each one a mass of teeth, claws, and their strange plasma weapons. Even looking at them was hard; they were so *wrong*, so *alien*, that he wanted to run from them before they got any closer. Futile; if his allies didn't shoot him in the back, the Spiders would break through and kill him while he was running. They moved so fast, particularly over short stretches, that there could be no escaping them. They might have to exterminate every last Spider just to break contact and escape.

“We have a second force moving in from the west,” another soldier said, over the intercom. “Request permission to open fire.”

“Request granted,” Ned said. Christophe tensed, wishing that Ned would repeat his prior orders for this stage of the mission, but it wasn't part of Heinlein's odd tradition. If it were possible to take a live alien, they would take a live alien...but they wouldn't waste lives trying to do the impossible. “Give the bastards hell.”

The noise of the heavy guns almost deafened him. The machine guns tore into the enemy formations, sending hundred, perhaps thousands, of Spiders flying everywhere, some of them jumping up and leaping for the human positions, others taking up flanking positions, only to discover that they had few ways to get around the human position without getting shelled. The *crump-crump-crump* of mortars firing rapidly echoed through his ears, followed by massive explosions as entire hordes of brown aliens died in the fires...

They're expendable, Christophe realised, suddenly. He'd known it at one level, but he'd never *believed* until he'd seen it himself. The browns were being used as if there was an irreplaceable supply of them on the planet...and, judging from the number of them even a minor planet like Heinlein had on its surface, there might well be no end of them. The aliens were breaking off now, leaving their dead and wounded behind, while their commanders considered what had happened and reached for other methods.

“There,” Ned sent, showing him what he was seeing through his enhanced retinas. Christophe saw a black Spider, perched on top of a small mound, watching them. It didn't look any better through Ned's eyes than any of its smaller brethren had looked through Christophe's own eyes. It was easy to run a comparison program and *prove* that it wasn't actually related to any Earthly species of Spider, but up close, he couldn't convince himself of it. “That's our baby.”

“Black widow,” Christophe muttered. He checked his implants quickly; combat, as many young soldiers had discovered to their cost, didn’t grow less dangerous with repeated dozes. It had been years since he had fought in a proper battle, but he hadn’t forgotten any of it, or so he hoped. Not all of it was applicable to fighting the Spiders in any case. “Where’s that bitch’s reinforcements?”

“Stalled on the interstate,” Ned said. The Resistance had mined the area and then carefully *not* used the mines against the first alien force. “I suggest that we move now.”

The Black Widow, as Christophe kept thinking of it, was surrounded by a small group of browns. He’d run mental simulations to consider every possible movement, from the Black Widow trying to run to it blowing itself up...but he hadn’t expected the savagery of the browns trying to defend their queen. They fell open the human platoon with claws and teeth and seven soldiers died before the remainder killed their attackers and turned on the Black Widow. Christophe, standing so close to the alien that he could almost touch it, stared up into multifaceted eyes...and almost lost his nerve. The creature was just...overwhelming.

He had to say something. “Hello?”

There was no response. It was impossible to read the creature, not even slightly. It could have been angry, or amused, or even completely unaware of his presence...no, that wasn’t true; several of its eyeballs were watching him with enough attention to worry him. The mandibles below the main body twitched and he almost jumped, before pulling out the stasis generator and holding it up in front of the Black Widow. The alien twitched and he triggered the generator; a flare of blue light struck the alien, wrapping it in a strange force field. The alien seemed to glow with light.

Christophe sighed in relief. Somehow, sweat was pouring down his face and into his suit. He’d half-expected the stasis generator to fail, or the alien to attack him, or something else...but the alien had been captured neatly.

“Well done,” Ned said, though the radio. “What *is* that thing?”

“Focused stasis beam,” Christophe said. The urge to just sit down and talk was almost *too* powerful. “The alien is wrapped in a stasis field and time has stopped, inside, until the field is released.”

“I thought that that was impossible,” Ned said. “Why aren’t they in general use?”

“They’re a new development,” Christophe said. He watched as three of the soldiers carefully picked up the alien – the stasis field would ensure that they weren’t crushed under the weight – attached zero-gravity studs to the body, and started to cart it away. “They’re not issued except under special circumstances.”

“I see,” Ned said. A new noise echoed out in the distance. “I suggest that you and your team start heading back to the mountains. They know that you’ve got her and they’re going to throw everything at you to get her back.”

Her? Christophe thought. Maybe the alien *was* a queen. Who knew how their system worked? “Yes, sir,” he said, and for the first time he didn’t resent using the honorific on a Heinlein officer. “We’re on our way.”

Ned smiled to himself as the guns began to boom out in the distance. One problem that was rarely anticipated by modern armies – and, it seemed, the Spiders as well – was that energy weapons were line of sight weapons. They had to be fired at a target directly and if they missed, they missed...while less modern weapons could be used to bombard targets that were out of sight. A simple ballistic trajectory could put a high-explosive shell over a mountain and onto the enemy, while they might know where his forces were...without any weapons to target them.

He keyed his radio and contacted Gary. “Have the prisoners been moved on their first leg?”

“Yes, sir,” Gary said. Ned nodded to himself; Gary didn’t have an easy task. A man or woman with his or her hands bound would have real problems in the rocky areas of the mountains...and the Spiders had to know where they were going. If they had vehicles...he shook his head; they didn’t have time to waste on what might have been. “I have the three platoons running cover and 3rd Company is on our flank.”

“Good,” Ned said. He keyed his radio to the general frequency. “All units, Plan Omega – I repeat, Omega is a go.”

He shut down the radio and nodded to his personal bodyguard. Ben McMullin, one of the deadliest soldiers the Confederation Rangers had ever produced, had insisted on body-guarding him, along with a small detachment of four other men. Ned had wanted to argue, but General Gordon had told him, firmly, that if he wanted to expose himself to danger, he had to take a bodyguard detail along. He could have planned the mission, even coordinated it, from the safety of the mountains...and no one would have questioned him, apart from himself. He had to share the dangers of his men.

“Let’s go,” he said.

The aliens were pushing in as 2nd Company conducted a careful retreat under fire, leaving their weapons set to fire on automatic and scattering an entire series of unpleasant surprises behind them for the aliens. Human ingenuity and history provided plenty of inspiration, from caltrops carefully designed to be *really* unpleasant to alien pads to hidden explosive devices, often made out of innocent-looking materials. It was probably why the aliens had taken to destroying every human settlement on sight; they knew, now, that they had been rigged to explode by humans with evil minds. They would be careful, even if they knew that they’d captured a living alien...and as long as they were careful, the Resistance had a good chance of escape.

“Code Seven now,” he said, keying his radio. “I repeat, Code Seven.”

He unkeyed the radio and let it fall back to his side. Code Seven was radio silence; if they broke contact, a single radio message could put the aliens back on their trail. The sight of the mountains in the distance gave him new hope as he marched quickly off the trail, leaving the interstate behind for the semi-safety of the farmland. The sun was rising higher in the sky,

illuminating mist that was drifting over the fields, but hardly enough mist to hide them. The aliens were on their way...

“Sir,” Ben said. Ned followed his pointing finger and winced; four more aircraft were in the sky, keeping pace just out of HVM range. One of the antiaircraft crews would probably take a shot at them, just on general principles, but there would be little point. The aliens were *well* out of range...and, as long as they were up there, they were probably directing the alien forces into blocking positions.

“I saw,” Ned said. He saw movement across the field and almost levelled his rifle before he realised that it was the vanguard platoon of 2nd Company. He waved to them and exchanged pleasantries with the leader, before they kept moving towards the mountains. If they'd timed it right, they should be able to reach the mountains before the aliens...

“Shit,” Ben said, annoyed. Ned looked down towards Castle Rock, back where they'd been, and saw the aliens throwing caution to the winds and charging after them. They didn't know it – he hoped – but there were no longer any IEDs in their path...and most of the human forces were scattered. If they broke through the rearguard, they'd have a good chance to massacre or capture the remainder of the force.

“I know,” Ned said. There was little choice. They were going to have to make a stand. “Deploy and...”

“No, sir,” Captain Markus Williams said. The Commander of 2nd Company looked at him from innocent blue eyes. “Myself and my men will deploy; you and the remainder of your men will get back to the mountains, understand?”

Only on Heinlein, Ned knew, would a Captain say that to a General. “Markus, I...”

“Please, sir,” Markus said, “or all of this will be meaningless.”

Ned wanted to find the words, but as 2nd Platoon deployed and Ben hurried him away from their position, he couldn't think of anything to say. Behind him, down towards the alien position, firing broke out.

He didn't look back.

“That's not a nice creature,” Gary said, afterwards. They were staring at the Black Widow. “What do you think God was thinking when he created that monster?”

“I don't think that God has anything to do with it,” Christophe said, annoyed. He'd grown up on a world where religion had been badly abused and had ended up becoming an atheist. Most Confederation citizens ended up the same. “I can't tell you much about it, either; the stasis field fucks up the scanners something rotten.”

“We lost good people to capture her,” Ned said. He glared at the alien as if it – she – offended him personally. Christophe, who'd heard of the last stand of 2nd Company, nodded once in understanding. “Was she worth it?”

“Yes,” Christophe said flatly. “If we can find out what makes them tick, if we can talk to her, we might be on the verge of bringing this war to an end.”

“On our terms,” Ned said slowly. There was a dark intensity in his voice that hadn’t been there before the raid on the prison camp. “You didn’t see the hostages. You didn’t see the prisoners. These...monsters are to be wiped out of the universe.”

“Genocide is strictly forbidden,” Christophe said. He turned to face Ned directly. “I have spent years travelling through the most horrifying human societies in the galaxy and there was rarely a time I didn’t wish for an orbital bombardment platform to carry out a scorching and put the damned place out of its misery. There are places where women were serfs, or men were nothing more than stud bulls, or people are assigned to their place in society through the verdict of a damned machine, or children are taken from their parents and indoctrinated in the ways of the world – government-style...”

“And all of them had hope, once we did our work and brought down the evil governments,” he said softly. “Is the same not true for the Spiders? What have they done that humans have not done to one another?”

Ned snorted. “I could have her executed as a war criminal,” he said. “I think that the charge would definitely stick around her.”

“We need her,” Christophe said carefully. “If nothing else, we need to know what makes them tick.”

“Do they have a right to exist?” Ned asked. “They’re a threat to humanity?”

“I wish I knew,” Christophe said. “I guess that’s one of the things they want to discover.”

Ned laughed. “Yes,” he said. “Of course, capturing her was the easy bit...now you have to get her out of here...and that’s not going to be easy, is it?”

“No,” Christophe said. “I dare say that we’ll think of something.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Is this safe?”

Stephen did her the honour of considering the question seriously. “Probably,” he said, carefully. “Possibly. Perhaps...”

Hollyhocks *looked* at him. “You’re not taking me seriously,” she said. “Is this safe?”

“I gave you a perfectly good answer,” Stephen teased. “I don’t think that we’ll be shot on sight, no. We’re going to be coming out at the edge of the system and we should have a chance to introduce ourselves to the system command before any patrolling cruiser decides we’re a threat and blows us away” – he hid a smile at her expression – “but it’s possible that they’ll tell us to get lost.”

“They wouldn’t do that to you,” Hollyhocks said. “They’re bound to know who you are.”

Stephen shrugged. Truthfully, he was more than a little worried about approaching the Peacekeepers directly; his name – or, rather, a handful of false ones – was on a list of arrest warrants. The information he bought *should* guarantee them a hearing, at least, but if the Peacekeepers weren’t inclined to deal, they might just dump him on a penal world and wash their hands of him. Hollyhocks should be safe; as a kidnap victim, they’d probably find somewhere safe for her.

He didn’t say that out loud. “The guy in charge of the Peacekeepers has several million humans working for him directly and hobnobs with every high-ranking person in the Confederation,” he said softly. “He’s not going to consider us very important, is he?”

“I’m the daughter of my father,” Hollyhocks said, stubbornly. “He’ll see us...”

“I rather doubt that he’ll see us for that,” Stephen said. It would have been easy to sneer, but he kept it off his face. “Your father might have been a singer, but that’s nothing special to the First Admiral, is it?”

The timer counted down before she could answer. Stephen slid forward and took control of the starship as the *Gentleman Caller* burst back into normal space. As he had expected, they were alone in space, but his sensors were picking up a large energy reading from the inner system. The Peacekeeper shipyards were supposed to be hidden, but most of the private spacers already had a rough idea where most of them were... and merely stayed away from them. Stephen had wondered if they’d been attacked, but the news bulletins were silent on the subject, suggesting that the aliens had either left the base alone or it had been covered up. There was no way to know.

A ping from the console warned him of the presence of another starship, a Peacekeeper cruiser. “They’ve got us,” Stephen said softly, as the newcomer came closer. He’d resisted emerging anywhere closer because of the danger of being taken for suicidal attackers and being fired upon before they could establish their credentials, but he was impressed by how quickly they’d been located. The Peacekeepers wouldn’t have skimmed on the system’s defences. “They’re either going to want to talk or they’re going to open fire.”

The Peacekeeper starship sent a single message. “Identify yourself,” it said. The voice was cold and atonal, suggesting that it was an AI rather than a living human. Stephen had read up on the specs for *Lightning*-class cruisers before the war had begun and knew that they only carried a small crew, despite their size; it was quite possible that the AI was handling all of the interception. It was also possible that it was merely an exercise in intimidation. “Identify yourself or we will open fire.”

“Nice polite people, aren’t they?” He whispered to Hollyhocks, who looked pale. She had taken the threat seriously. “I’m transmitting the signal now.”

He’d put a lot of thought into the signal. They had to know who, or rather what, he was...and they had to know what he was carrying, without giving them everything on a plate. The information was all they had to bargain with and he didn’t want to just give it away. Patriotism only went so far. There was a long pause, growing longer and longer; he forced himself to be patient and kept a careful eye on the cruiser’s energy emissions. If there was a sign that it was powering up its weapons, he’d hit the drive and jaunt out before it was too late...

Hollyhocks wasn't as patient. “Why are they taking so long?”

“Probably comparing what I’ve told them against their records and trying to decide if they should bother higher authority,” Stephen said, absently. If Peacekeeper Intelligence got involved, they would want them as quickly as possible, but the regulars might be more reluctant about allowing *anything* through the security perimeter. “I wonder what they have on me, if anything.”

“You have a fan club,” Hollyhocks said. She’d let it slip that she was a member, although Stephen privately suspected she’d told him that merely to humour him. “They’ll know about that, surely?”

Stephen had to laugh. “It’s not the sort of business where you can use your ID Print to prove yourself,” he pointed out. “Any fool could claim to be me.”

“You are ordered to proceed to this facility,” the cold voice said, before anything else could happen. “Do not attempt to deviate from your assigned course, do not attempt to jaunt to your destination or out of the system, do not attempt to bring up your active sensors...”

“There should be an ‘or else’ in there somewhere,” Stephen said, as the list of things they were forbidden to do grew longer. “It does feel as if it’s missing, doesn’t it?”

He brought up the drive field and guided the starship towards its destination. The Peacekeeper who’d come up with the idea had to be sniggering away to himself; they would take *hours* to reach it in normal space, when a jaunt could have them there in seconds. They’d probably fire on a starship emerging right next to the station, he suspected; they had to have a chance to talk in person to the First Admiral, or some senior intelligence officer.

“Seven hours in transit,” Stephen said. The display popped up a warning; a pair of small gunboats were following them, keeping a safe distance, but easily able to close in on them and destroy them if they did anything suspicious. Gunboats had been outdated a long time ago, but as patrollers, they were almost unbeatable. They supported a tiny crew on long

missions...and, when their patrols were done, could jaunt back to base in seconds. “What a waste of time.”

Hollyhocks smiled at him as he came back into the living compartment and poured himself a drink. There was no point in controlling the entire journey himself, not when they had been given a straight-line course to fly; the AI could handle it so much better than any human. She'd been altering her cosmetics again, he noticed; she was a little taller and a little paler in the face. Wearing a short black dress, one that barely reached past her bottom, she was the very vision of perfection. He barely noticed.

She coughed. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

Stephen eyed her suspiciously. “What sort of personal question?”

Hollyhocks took her courage in both hands. “Why won't you sleep with me?”

Stephen lifted an eyebrow.

A faint red blush, easy to see against her skin, blossomed on her face. “I'm serious,” she said. He heard the embarrassment in her voice and almost felt sorry for her. “I've done everything, but drag you into bed, or the shower, or even here on the deck...and you don't fall. I've seen you watching me sometimes, so you're not one of the freaks who are entirely devoted to one sex, but you're not acting on the interest. Why not?”

Stephen, surprised, thought about it. “You're too young,” he said, finally.

“Bollocks,” Hollyhocks said, and stamped her foot to make her point. “My first lover was a man over one hundred years old...and he knew everything about pleasing a girl. He taught me plenty about making a guy happy and, when he left, I wasn't unhappy at all.”

Of course not, Stephen thought dryly. A man with over eighty years of additional experience wouldn't have any problems convincing a girl barely in her teens to sleep with him; the Confederation wouldn't even consider it a problem. Once he'd enjoyed her innocence, he'd probably dumped her...and done it so well she hadn't even felt dumped.

“And you're not that old,” Hollyhocks continued, “so why won't you sleep with me?”

“Is this question really important?” Stephen demanded. “Why do you even care?”

“Because I like you,” Hollyhocks said. She held up a hand before he could say a word. “I'm not going to get all romantic and sappy, but I would like an answer.”

“I didn't promise to tell you everything,” Stephen snapped. “I certainly didn't make any promises about sharing my secrets...”

Hollyhocks looked into his eyes. “Were you abused as a child?” She asked. “Is that the reason...?”

“I should put you over my knee,” Stephen threatened. It was hard to stay angry at her for long. “I grew up on a perfectly normal habitat, to a pair of perfectly normal parents, and was

raised in a perfectly normal manner...except I got bored easily. Very easily. Why do you think I took up this career anyway?"

He leaned forward. "I was bored."

"That makes no sense," Hollyhocks said. She was too young to understand what he'd seen clearly when he was thirteen. It had still taken him years to understand fully. "Why were you bored?"

Stephen stood up and started to pace. "Have you realised how...*fake* the Confederation is?"

"I don't understand," Hollyhocks said. "Are you saying that it's not real?"

"It's too real," Stephen said. He closed his eyes. "Do you have a few hours?"

Hollyhocks shrugged. "There's not much else to do, seeing you won't fuck with me."

"Don't be rude," Stephen said. "When I was young, I grew up pretty much the same as you; I developed at ten, matured physically at twelve, lost my virginity that same year and spent the next few years sleeping with every girl and a few boys on the habitat. Sex is just...something to do for us – just like it is for you – and I ended up becoming bored of sleeping with girls I didn't even like."

"I'd never let a boy inside me I didn't like," Hollyhocks said. "Is it that different for boys?"

"I ended up exploring more...extreme pleasures," Stephen admitted, ignoring her question. Let her turn herself into a boy for a few years if she wanted to try it from the other side. "The thing about the Galactic Net is that you can find someone into *anything*, either doing it or having it done to them, if you look. I found women who liked it rough, I found women who wanted to be raped, I found women who wanted to be controlled by a man...and it was all fake. I spent a month as Lord of the Harem and it was all fake."

She said nothing. "Of course it was all fake," Stephen said. "They *wanted* it done to them. You won't believe it, but I explored darker and darker pleasures, pushing the limits as far as they would go, and they lost their savour as well. I was bored of that and bored of kicking around the Confederation as a overgrown child, like everyone else my age, like you..."

"And I didn't want to leave to an Isolated World, because they were fake as well," he continued. "There were human societies, sweetheart, where wearing that dress could earn you a whipping. There still are Isolated Worlds with those social codes, but all of them have one advantage over the pre-Confederation societies; anyone who wants to leave can leave. There are no rebellions, no glorious struggles against evil tyrants, because people just vote with their feet and leave. Where's the meaning in that?"

"My father used to say that the Isolated Worlds served as retirement homes for elder humans," Hollyhocks said. "Was he right?"

"Maybe," Stephen admitted. "Life had no meaning for me; wherever I went, I was doomed to be bored...and so I started a life of crime. I'm very smart and when I saw a chance to snatch something, just for fun, I took it. They still don't know who looted the *Amazing*

Wonder in mid-flight, not really...or the man who nicked the *Mona Lisa* from Legrand's World, or...well, they know in a sense, because I gloated about it afterwards, but they never followed the trail back to me."

He held her eyes for a long moment. "Except, what if they *did* follow the trail back to me?"

Hollyhocks frowned. "Wouldn't they have arrested you then?"

"You'd think," Stephen said. "But what if they knew who I was...and did nothing? What if I was simply *allowed* to exist because my actions delighted millions of fans? What if they decided that it would be better for the Confederation to allow me to exist, rather than catching me and dumping me on a prison planet?"

"That's paranoid," Hollyhocks said. "How could they have predicted you attempting to kidnap me?"

"I succeeded," Stephen reminded her. "If they know who I am, who I *really* am, are they just *letting* me think that I managed to commit all those crimes on my own?"

Hollyhocks snorted. "If you feel so badly about your life, why didn't you just join the Peacekeepers?"

"Because I was never a person for obeying orders," Stephen said. "If I'm lucky, I might get offered a position with Peacekeeper Intelligence after all of the...unpleasantness is over, but I couldn't hack it as a crewman, or even as a starship captain. Too much like hard work."

"And you've distracted me," Hollyhocks said. "Are you really incapable of making love to me?"

"I have done things that would have you screaming to get out of the ship," Stephen said. "Always to a willing partner, always to someone who wanted it, but I found myself – I made myself – jaded. How can I make innocent love to you or anyone else, ever again?"

"Now I know you're being silly," Hollyhocks said, and reached for him. "I never met a reluctant man I couldn't cure before."

Their destination turned out to be a small space station orbiting two AUs from the shipyard itself, a simple design that revealed nothing of its purpose. The *Gentleman Caller* was invited to dock in the single docking bay, whereupon the magnets and the force fields crackled into existence around the starship, preventing escape. Stephen had set the internal defences to respond to anyone, but the pair of them, but he suspected that if a group of Peacekeepers decided to break into the starship, it wouldn't be enough to stop them.

"Please exit your starship," another voice, this time a human voice, said. "Please leave any personal weapons in the starship."

"Yes, sir," Stephen muttered. He'd taken his terminal and BISHOP, but everything else had been left behind...and he'd insisted that Hollyhocks do the same. She seemed to be glowing

slightly whenever she looked at him; it had been too long since he'd done *anything* with a woman. Her first lover had taught her *very* well. "Shall we move?"

Hollyhocks took his hand as they stepped through the airlock into a featureless corridor. "Please prepare for a full scanning process," the same voice announced. "Remove your clothes and advance through the lighted door."

Stephen rolled his eyes, but complied...and was amused to note that Hollyhocks was reluctant to get undressed in front of unseen eyes. He slapped her rear to encourage her to move and escorted her into a smaller chamber, where his implants reported everything from decontamination beams to the most invasive sensor scan he'd ever seen...and a flight of nanites to ensure that they weren't carrying anything microscopic that could be dangerous. Hollyhocks twitched slightly as the force fields bent around them, before the second door opened, allowing them into a second chamber. A set of clothing had been left there; Stephen pulled the grey tunic on without a second thought and was unsurprised when it sealed itself around him.

"They don't trust us," he explained dryly, when Hollyhocks started to panic. It was almost certain that unseen eyes were observing them and he didn't dare try to send her back to the starship. They were probably in the middle of searching it right now. "They really don't know who we are."

A third door opened, revealing two expressionless men in Peacekeeper Security uniforms. They wore obvious weapons and equipment at their belts, but Stephen's implants were reporting more dangerous and subtle implants inserted into their bodies; shaking hands with one of them was liable to be a little dangerous. They also wore cuffs at their belt, but the fact they didn't move to cuff the pair of them at once was probably a good sign; they weren't considered prisoners.

Unless it's a trap intended to put us at our ease, he thought dryly, as they were escorted along another featureless corridor and into what was definitely a waiting room. A third man stood there, wearing a civilian outfit...which almost certainly meant that he was from Intelligence. He winked at Hollyhocks and studied Stephen with undisguised curiosity.

Stephen's own curiosity won out. "Who are we going to see here?"

"Why, the person you wanted to see," the Intelligence man said. There was a strong Old Earth note in his voice. "The First Admiral himself."

Chapter Thirty

Andrew had spent the last hour reading through the file on Stephen M. St. Onge and considering the data packet that had been addressed to him personally. Stephen – the name wasn't a false one, much to his surprise – had had quite a career, starting with small-scale heists and pushing the limits as much as he could, without *quite* crossing the line into genuinely dangerous behaviour. Andrew didn't approve of the whole 'Gentleman Criminal' tradition, even though some of Peacekeeper Intelligence's best agents had been former Gentlemen who'd been caught, but if Stephen had found something really useful, perhaps it was a worthwhile tradition. The problem was simple; it was quite possible that Stephen was wasting his time, or perhaps had a piece of worthless knowledge without knowing it.

He looked up from his temporary desk as Michael Swaim escorted the two into the office. Stephen himself didn't look like much; his face had been altered to the point where it was almost impossible to remember, so ordinary-looking that it would be hard to point to any distinguishing features. He was handsome enough, in a vaguely-unfinished kind of way, but there was little about him to stick in the mind. He also looked harmless, the kind of young man who could be trusted with anything and wouldn't even *think* about betraying the trust.

Hollyhocks Fairchild was another matter. She'd had herself altered to the point where she was blonde and beautiful, revealing more about her own inner insecurities – or maybe the desires of her last boyfriend. Andrew, who'd seen young love before, saw how she orientated herself on Stephen, while Stephen himself didn't quite return her interest. It would, he reflected, probably end badly. Even in the basic outfits provided by Intelligence, she still looked stunning...and would look stunning even in sackcloth. Even in a Confederation full of beautiful girls, she caught the eye.

"Welcome to Cascade Shipyards," he said, formally. He almost didn't rise to shake hands. "I'm First Admiral Ramage and I believe that you have something for me."

"Blunt and to the point," Stephen said. His handshake was honest, too honest. He was a man who worked hard to present himself as a trustworthy person and overdid it...just enough to set alarm bells ringing in Andrew's head. Someone who didn't know what Stephen was would be fooled; they'd finally figured out what had happened to the starship Stephen had looted and the trick had relied more upon Stephen's ability to insert himself into the right location than any other fancy tricks. "It is a pleasure to speak to you, Admiral."

Andrew settled back. "I wish it could be a longer chat," he said, untruthfully. "My time, as I'm sure you will appreciate, is very limited; I have a war to fight, after all. Bluntly put, you have ten minutes to impress me – go."

Stephen didn't look surprised by Andrew's attitude. His young companion looked outraged on his behalf. "I recently visited Venice after leaving Alexandria, once I had transmitted a copy of everything I had recorded from our time spent in the system to one of your ships, and I discovered something interesting there. And by interesting, I mean...potentially disastrous – for you."

Andrew felt his mind race. If Stephen was telling the truth, and it would be easy enough to confirm, they owed him a favour. The information had come in very handy, particularly the

transmissions from the planet that they hadn't been able to receive before the Spiders had blown up the transmitters.

"I was asked to take on a job," Stephen continued. He seemed completely at ease discussing his line of work with the man sworn to put an end to it. "I don't normally do commissions – that's how you caught Riff Yancraf – but this one had quite a large reward attached. They wanted me to burgle a Peacekeeper facility and recover a copy of a certain data core."

Andrew felt his eyes narrow. "Which facility and which data core?"

Stephen showed his first smile; he knew that Andrew was hooked. "This one," he said, and transmitted a set of documents from his implants to the desktop processor. They appeared in front of Andrew and he swore. "As you can see, they were quite keen to recover the data as soon as possible."

"I'm not surprised," Andrew said. The data in front of him shouldn't have been anywhere outside the Peacekeepers...and only Captains or higher should have had access. The thought of a traitor in a high place infuriated him...but that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was that he could only think of one group that would want the data...and they could only want it for one reason. "Who asked you to obtain the data?"

He scowled. Stephen had been told the location of one of the backup records facilities, a hidden station on an unnamed planet, circling an unnamed sun. The information stored there would be of great interest to the enemy; they'd have access to data on the Peacekeepers and their ship movements that would be very useful in predicting what the Peacekeepers would or could do in the later years of the war. That alone was bad...but the other requests were even worse; the aliens wanted the location of any secret government bases...

My God, he thought. They want to locate Fortress Maximus.

"I don't know," Stephen admitted. For the first time, there was a new note of uncertainty in his voice. "They approached me through an information broker and even he was unsure who they actually were, or why. I asked him to see if he could identify them, but he wasn't expecting success when we left Venice."

"But you deduced who had to be behind it," Andrew said. It wasn't a question. "Tell me something; what does that mean to you?"

"The only people who would want it are the Spiders," Stephen said. "For one reason or another, their intelligence people have gained access to the Confederation's criminal underground and are using parts of it as an intelligence network."

Maybe more than that, Andrew thought. He'd wanted to clear out Venice a long time ago, but the Parliament had regarded it as a known hazard and had denied permission for sending in the Rangers. It was much neater to have the scrum of society in one place where Intelligence could keep tabs on them...except Intelligence had definitely dropped the ball. If they'd had advance warning...

We probably wouldn't have believed it anyway, he thought. The assault on Terra-Prime had come right out of nowhere. The mere thought of aliens was so outside the box that the Peacekeepers wouldn't have believed an advance warning. *I wonder if...*

He paused. An idea had occurred to him. "Did the agent give you any time scale?"

"Not really," Stephen said slowly. "I told him that I could hardly promise to have it for him by a particular time."

"I suppose," Andrew said. "What do you want out of this?"

The sudden change in topic didn't seem to shock Stephen. "What do you mean?"

"You want something in exchange for this information and future favours," Andrew said. "What do you want?"

"I want a pardon and a commission in Intelligence," Stephen said. Andrew said nothing; the former would be possible, the latter...that would depend on if Intelligence wanted him. They probably would. "Hollyhocks, who is an innocent in all of this, may need a trip home or somewhere safe..."

"Nirvana has been occupied by the Spiders," Andrew said. He wasn't blind to the lack of reaction the girl showed. Stephen showed more reaction to the news of yet another planet occupied by the Spiders...and the probable death of her relatives. She was still a minor and should, technically, be sent home. That wasn't going to be possible. "Is there something she wants out of this?"

Hollyhocks looked sullen. "My majority, if you're offering," she said. Stephen barked a harsh laugh. "Sir..."

"Maybe," Andrew said. He stood up suddenly. "Sergeant, please would you show Stephen and his companion to their quarters." He turned his gaze on Stephen. "For the moment, you're our honoured guests...and we will find something for you to do."

He watched as the Sergeant escorted the pair of them down to the guest rooms that had been prepared for them, and then turned to face Michael. The Intelligence officer, as anonymous in his own way as Stephen himself, looked thoughtful; he hadn't spoken a word while Stephen was in the room. That had been quite a surprise.

Andrew smiled at him. "You're being very quiet," he said. "Penny for your thoughts?"

Michael said nothing for a long moment. "There's been a pair of security breeches," he said. "The first one" – he nodded to the display, which was still showing the details of the records centre – "and the second one, the location of Cascade itself. If it's known to spacers, it's probably known to Venice, and if it's known there..."

"The Spiders probably know as well," Andrew said. He had drawn the same conclusion himself. "How long until we can expect an attack?"

“Impossible to know,” Michael said, reprovably. “If I knew exactly what they would do, I’d go on the record as a proper fortune teller, rather than an Intelligence officer. They may attack tomorrow, or later today, or maybe they don’t think they have the strength to take on the facilities here.”

Andrew shook his head. It would be a different story if he’d had the entire Peacekeeper fleet gathered to protect the shipyards, but if he did that, the remainder of the Confederation would fall quickly, leaving thousands of worlds exposed to the aliens. He had to keep up the pressure, keep raiding at alien positions and somehow keep them off balance until the new war fleet could be deployed. The thought reminded him that he hadn’t selected a commanding officer for the *Armageddon* yet and he made a mental note to review suitable candidates later.

“I understand that,” he admitted. He’d never liked Intelligence as a service; it had had a nasty habit of keeping things to itself that should have been revealed to everyone...before the shit hit the fan. Michael wasn’t too bad...but some of the older Intelligence types had been given early retirement when Andrew had become First Admiral. “Do you have a best guess?”

“In the absence of any reliable data, no,” Andrew said. “I have nothing to suggest, except that we need to ensure that this isn’t a trap of some kind.”

“No,” Andrew agreed. It wasn’t going to be easy to track down the Spider at the centre of the intelligence web – his lips twitched at the pun – but they had to do it, somehow. “It does offer an opportunity; we could give them false information...”

“I was going to suggest that,” Michael agreed. He leaned forward, his voice almost a whisper. “If they want *governmental* facilities...”

“The same thought occurred to me,” Andrew said. The easiest way to tackle the problem would be to simply remove the data from the records station...except that would mean losing the chance to mislead the enemy. But, if they strove to mislead the enemy, how were they to do it? He remembered the Battle of Terra-Prime and felt a hot flash of anger; if they had a chance to lure an enemy fleet into a trap...

“We could,” Michael confirmed, when Andrew had finished outlining his plan. “It might take some time before we could pull it all together.”

Andrew shrugged. “I dare say our guests won’t mind staying for a few days,” he said. “We’ve given them good rooms and everything.” He looked up suddenly. “And their starship?”

“Nothing too incriminating onboard,” Michael said. “Some pretty nasty booby traps, but we disabled them all and explored carefully – very carefully. Some items onboard that we frown upon, but nothing outright illegal. That Stephen is one clever bastard.”

“I know,” Andrew said. “How clever is he, do you think?”

“Look, there’s a massive tub,” Hollyhocks squealed, from the bathroom. Stephen, who had collapsed onto the coach, ignored her. He felt completely drained and, if it weren’t for his implants, he would probably have collapsed. “This is so much better than the ship.”

She came back over to him, one hand already pulling at her outfit and releasing her breasts. There was a fabricator in the room and her first action, typically, had been to check that it could produce clothes. Stephen, too tired to care much, wanted to sleep, but she didn’t want to let him sleep. She wanted to explore their apartment, even though there wasn’t much to see, even if they did have ten rooms to themselves. The Peacekeepers had probably intended the station as a sleeping place for high-ranking people who would have been annoyed by the barracks, no matter how comfortable they were.

“Come on,” she said. Her voice would brook no argument. “It’s time to get into the tub.”

He allowed her to pull him to his feet, undo his clothes and lead him into the bathroom. The Peacekeepers hadn’t stinted on the tub; it was more like a small swimming pool, rather than a normal bath. She finished undoing the remainder of her clothes, pressing her naked body against him for a long moment, allowing him to feel her breasts and the swell of her buttocks, and then led him down the steps into the water. It was hot enough to soothe him; he ran a stimulant program through his implants and felt his senses sharpening up. The water came all the way up to his neck, pouring out of a force field tube that seemed to swing around endlessly, sometimes blasting him with the full force of hot water.

“See, that’s better,” Hollyhocks said. Her hair was drenched, hanging down to cover her breasts, but she still looked absolutely stunning. He reached out and stroked one breast, his finger gently touching one hard nipple, and heard her growl deep in her throat, “What exactly are you worried about, hey?”

Stephen had to laugh. It was good that she was growing up – even if it hadn’t really sunk in that her homeworld was under occupation and her family was probably dead – but he wasn’t sure he liked her mothering him. It would be so easy to leave her with the Peacekeepers, particularly if they wanted him to take false information to Wisdom, but part of him wanted her to stay with him for a long time. It would fade, just as other innocent and not-so-innocent pleasures had faded, but until then, he would take what he could get.

“You’re not worried,” he said. Perversely, he found that irritating. “Why aren’t you worried?”

“You said I couldn’t do anything, so why should I worry about it?” Hollyhocks asked. Her lips brushed his for a long moment, and then she was pulling at him, turning him around so her hands could work on his back. “You’re worried and look at you – you’re all tense.”

“Just because I fucked you doesn’t mean that you own me,” Stephen snapped, more angrily than he’d wanted to be. “We’re not going to get out of this so easily!”

Hollyhocks didn’t react to his tone. “And why are you worried about that?” She asked. “You have about as much power here as I do.” She splashed his hair with water before returning to massaging his back. “Or don’t you want to play?”

He turned around and pulled her close to him. “Walls have ears here,” he whispered into her ear. The thunderous racket of the waterfall was deafening, but he wouldn’t have bet his life that Peacekeeper surveillance systems weren’t watching him and listening to every word he said. They were probably getting quite an eyeful off Hollyhocks; the girl had no sense of shame or modesty. “Be careful what you say.”

“Oh, I *luv* you to bits,” Hollyhocks said, her voice pitched high, like a child exploring her first crush. “I just *luv* making you *sooo* happy and hard inside my *ickle* body.”

“Shut it,” Stephen pretended to growl. He reached for her again, only to have her wet naked body slip out of his grasp and retreat across the pool. He followed her quickly, swimming with skills he hadn’t used since his last hiding place on an Isolated World, and wasn’t surprised when she proved easy to catch. She’d wanted to be caught after all. “Now, come here and...”

Hollyhocks laughed as he kissed her again. He pushed his way into her and heard her cry out in pleasure as he thrust deeper and deeper into her, finally swept up in his own emotion.

For the moment, the cares of the universe could wait.

The small datachip lay in front of him like a deadly weapon, which, in a sense, it was.

“It should be perfect,” Michael reported. “In four months, everything else being equal, the President will be transferred to a new facility out here” – his finger tapped empty space – “and well hidden from alien attack. The facility itself will be hidden inside a wormhole and should be undetectable and invulnerable except at the moment the President arrives.”

Andrew tensed. Had Michael heard something...?

“And it should be the perfect opportunity for them,” Michael continued, unaware of Andrew’s thoughts. “They’ll attack with the largest fleet they can muster, expecting only a medium-sized escort force...and we’ll kick their asses from here to wherever they come from.”

“It sounds good,” Andrew said. “Take it to Stephen and discuss the exact timing with him...”

He broke off as an alarm sounded. “Report,” he snapped. “What’s happened?”

“We just picked up a report from the *Honour To The Just*,” Captain Rhodan reported. It took Andrew a moment to place the name; the *Honour To The Just* had been supporting the forces raiding Heinlein. They were trying to take an alien alive. “First Admiral...I’m afraid it’s bad news.”

Chapter Thirty-One

“Go!”

Captain Mark ‘JC’ Driscoll placed his hands firmly on the controls of *Shadowhawk* – his new stealth shuttle, designed to his own specifications – and dived into the atmosphere of Heinlein. He would have preferred to have stayed safely out of the way – or at least been sent down to the surface in a pod and flown a shuttle that had been already on the ground – but Heinlein no longer had any shuttles, or any other means of reaching orbit. Mark’s *Shadowhawk* was the only hope they had of transporting the captured Spider back into the Confederation at large.

Space seemed filled with teeming starships and explosions as the Peacekeeper task force fought its way back into Heinlein orbit. For a force that shouldn’t have had any reasonable hope of actually scoring a victory against the Crabs in orbit, they were tying down a vastly superior force and even threatening to break into the low orbitals and bombard the planet. It was ironic, to Mark’s eyes; he’d seen the Spiders break into orbit above Terra-Prime, but here the boot was on the other foot. The Spiders had settled a civilian population, if they had a civilian population, on Heinlein...and it had to be protected. If the plan worked, they would fight off the main force and miss the stealth shuttle as it flew down to the surface, picked up the captive and some other odds and ends, and then fled back into Jaunt Space. If not...

He tensed as the shuttle arced into the atmosphere. Cloaking devices worked well in space, where the level of background noise was tiny, allowing a starship to slip quite close to its target without being detected. In an atmosphere, it was much harder; the heat of the shuttle’s entry into the atmosphere and the disturbance caused by its passage would be easy to detect, provided the enemy wasn’t distracted. The Peacekeeper squadrons in orbit were fighting and dying to distract the enemy...and a single plasma burst in the wrong location could put an end to their hopes. Mark knew – he’d designed *Shadowhawk* personally based on the escape from Terra-Prime – that the shuttle was far less well-protected than a standard shuttle, or *President One*; speed and stealth was its only advantage. He – or other pilots – might have to make similar flights in the future. It was a sobering thought.

The wreckage and missiles being dumped into the atmosphere provided enough cover for him to dive down towards the surface. Heinlein rose up in front of him, the curve of the planet giving way to flat land and massive towering mountains, and he altered course to avoid the Spider city on the plains. The Spiders had built like ants – or maybe devils – and had somehow built a city larger than anything previously on the planet within three months. The cameras projected an image right into his head; the alien city looked like a giant anthill, incorporating pieces of human buildings right alongside strange alien shapes. It was an eerie and profoundly disturbing sight.

“Beacon located,” the AI whispered in his ear. Mark winced slightly at the distraction.
“Triangulating location now.”

Mark smiled thinly as the shuttle altered course again, rising up over the mountains and descending towards the hidden valley below. The Spiders would have marked the locations of the beacons for attention as soon as they had chased away their attackers in orbit...but the Heinlein Resistance had been smart. They’d used three beacons and the landing site was at a point in the centre of the triangle, hopefully fooling the aliens long enough to get

Shadowhawk down, loaded and off the planet before the Spiders came knocking. If they decided to launch nukes, or even antimatter warheads, at the location of the beacons, *Shadowhawk* would probably be destroyed along with the core of the Resistance. It was something of a mystery to the Peacekeeper Intelligence Section why the Spiders hadn't done just that.

The Landing Zone proved to be a clearing in the middle of endless trees. Mark put *Shadowhawk* down neatly on the ground and watched with grim amusement as the Resistance men emerged from their hiding places, dragging with them a strange spidery statue. It took him a moment to realise that that *was* the enemy captive, trapped in a sphere where time didn't pass; the Spider, from its point of view, would have travelled instantly from wherever the Resistance had captured it to a prison cell back onboard one of the Worldships. Mark hit the opening command into the computer and *Shadowhawk's* hatches opened, inviting the Resistance men to secure the Spider captive and the other items before he had to leave again. They'd planned on bare minutes, at best...

"Welcome to Heinlein," one of the Resistance men called. "Shame you can't stay, but..."

Mark was in no mood for jokes. "Hurry up and secure that creature," he ordered sharply. He didn't want to take the risk of the stasis field failing and the Spider discovering that it was trapped in a shuttle with one human pilot. The creature looked nasty enough that he didn't fancy his chances in a straight fight with it. The handful of alien bodies, these obviously dead, that the Resistance had sent along as well *still* looked eerie; it was impossible to shake the conviction that they might just spring back to life suddenly. "You have five minutes and counting."

"There are five people going back with you," the Resistance man said. Mark opened his mouth to object and then closed it without saying a word; testimony from someone who had actually seen and fought the Spiders close up would be extremely useful. Three of the newcomers – two men, one woman – were handcuffed and clearly sedated; the other two, a man of indeterminate age and a young girl, barely entering her teens, wore no restraints. "Don't unlock them until you have them in secure accommodation."

"Fine, fine," Mark snapped, keeping one eye on the timer high overhead. The air was filled with streaks of light as wreckage fell back into the atmosphere to burn up well before it struck the ground, but it wouldn't be long before the Peacekeepers had to retreat and break contact...and God help him if he were still on the ground when that happened. "Have you got everyone secured?"

"Yes, sir," the unsecured man said. Judging from his accent, he'd spent time on a Worldship. "We're ready to go."

Mark quickly glanced back one last time at the captives, noting the strange and somehow disturbing expressions on their faces, and hit the flash-wake command into the shuttle's systems. The hatches slid closed as the drive field powered up rapidly – something that would have cost him his career under normal circumstances, before the war – and he yanked the shuttle into the air without worrying about the comfort of his passengers, or the Spider. If the compensators struggled to compensate perfectly for the sudden change in speed, it was nothing compared to what would happen if the Spiders got a clear shot at them. They might hesitate to fire if they knew one of their number was on the shuttle, but from what Mark had

heard while he'd been a semi-prisoner at Fortress Maximus, they weren't the type of race to care about a few million of their own kind dead and gone. A Black Spider might be worth something to them, but no one knew for sure and he wasn't going to gamble...

"Hang on back there," he called back, as he took the shuttle straight up. There was no longer any time for stealth; they would almost certainly be detected by the alien city, maybe even by a planetary defence centre that the Resistance had missed. In that case, they were probably dead...and, even though he'd shaped their course to deny the city's defenders a clear shot, they still had to get through the starships and starfighters in orbit. Once they reached the minimum safe distance from the planet, he planned to jaunt out and escape.

Data flooded into his head through his implants. Thirty-seven Peacekeeper cruisers and nine battleships had arrived at Heinlein and were fighting a desperate running battle against the Crabs and Lobsters in orbit, while starfighters fought their own battle against their own kind. That wasn't good tactical sense, Mark knew, and as a former starfighter pilot he hated the planners who had insisted on it; the only reason was to protect the *Shadowhawk* as long as possible. He could evade, with a good head start, the alien capital ships, but the starfighters would be much more dangerous...

The AI screamed a warning in his head and he altered course sharply, a moment before the burst of coherent plasma flashed past them and headed out into space. The computers provided details of the firing site – an unknown cannon sited outside the alien city – and he cursed again; the bastards manning the gun would have several chances to hit him before he got out of range. A second burst of brilliant white plasma shot past them, and then a third; the fourth slammed into the shields and sent the *Shadowhawk* spinning across the sky.

He heard the girl scream as the shuttle started to tumble. He ignored her as best as he could, wincing from very real pain as warnings flashed up within his head, struggling to hold the shuttle on course. The shields had saved them, barely, but they'd been knocked off course and the aliens were coming after them. He counted seven starfighters rising up from the planet, boosting after him with unconcealed determination, while the capital ships were altering course and trying to trap him in a giant pincer.

"Raise the carriers," he ordered the AI. They needed help and they needed it fast. "Tell them we need starfighter support *quickly!*"

The alien starfighters closed in rapidly, ducking and weaving as they entered weapons range – a moot precaution as Mark didn't have any weapons on the shuttle. The aliens clearly didn't know that, but once they figured it out, and they would, they would abandon their efforts to avoid return fire and close in. They could hardly miss at point-blank range. The AI updated him rapidly as Peacekeeper starfighters swooped down to join the battle, their crews warned that the *Shadowhawk* and her cargo were too important to lose, and he winced again as an alien ace blew a Peacekeeper fighter away with a single well-placed burst.

That moment of distraction almost killed him. The shot slammed into the rear of the *Shadowhawk* and sent the shuttle spinning forward. The shields, already weakened, collapsed and raw power tore along the shuttle's outer hull, weakening it and risking the very integrity of the ship. The drive field collapsed inwards, the artificial gravity field vanishing as the AI diverted power to the far more challenging demands of remaining alive...and red warnings flashed up in Mark's head. He disconnected the feedback systems from his

implants, quickly, even as he struggled to fix the damage, but it was easy, too easy, to see that they couldn't fix the damage. Not in time, anyway...

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling a new hollowness in his voice. The shuttle began to tumble helplessly end over end. He braced himself, expecting – stupidly – to see the shuttle's hull collapsing inwardly before they died when the aliens finally stopped playing games and killed them. "We're dead."

"Captain, the shuttle!"

Captain Mija Mallory saw the live feed from the drone and cursed aloud. She'd been told that the shuttle carried a live – captive – Spider and that examining and interrogating the captive might lead to ending the war...and that protecting the Spider was a high priority. She didn't like it, but the squadrons devoted to attacking Heinlein were rated as expendable, compared to protecting the captive. The enemy could not be allowed to recover it, whatever it took.

"I see it," she said, her mind racing. The shuttle had attained escape velocity and was heading out towards a safe location to jaunt, but it would almost certainly never get there. The damage had wrecked the craft's drive and the Spiders were closing in on it, either to attempt to board it – and, if they did, she had orders to blow it and its crew away rather than let them fall into enemy hands – or to make certain they destroyed it. "Helm, take us down to the shuttle."

Another officer might have questioned her. "Yes, Captain," the helmsman said, as the *Feline* began to move down into the teeth of enemy fire. Mija silently blessed him as she worked through the remainder of her half-considered plan; the only hope was to scoop up the shuttle in a tractor beam and get back out of the planet's gravity field, while somehow evading the enemy. "One minute to intercept."

"Direct orders to the remainder of the fleet," Mija ordered. "Starfighters are to follow us down and run interference, cruisers and battleships are to cover us...and, if we are destroyed, to pick off the shuttle and then retreat."

"Aye, Captain," the communications officer said. There was a long pause. "They're acknowledging..."

Feline shuddered suddenly as the aliens opened fire on her. They had to know what Mija intended and were going all-out to stop her, pounding away at the starships shields with their missiles and even long-range energy weapons. They presented little danger at such ranges, but the combined effect of forty enemy starships and starfighters were having an effect on her shields...and the starfighters were preparing to launch attack runs. Peacekeeper starfighters were hitting back at their counterparts, breaking them up into individual starfighters as they slashed through their formations, but there were far more enemy starfighters...

They're using the planet as a base, she thought, grimly. It wasn't something that the Peacekeepers did, as a regular rule, a throwback to the days when defence installations were placed well away from civilians who would become collateral damage in any attempt to take the planets they defended. It took time to get a starfighter out of the atmosphere and they

weren't as efficient *inside* the atmosphere, regardless of what certain ill-informed politicians might believe. The Peacekeepers based them in orbit for a reason...and the aliens, for once, disagreed with human logic. The hell of it was that they might, at Heinlein, have had a point.

The starship rocked again, violently. "The shuttle is in serious trouble," the sensor officer reported. "The automatic datafeed is reporting heavy power outrages and multiple systems failures; they can't run and they can't fight."

"Understood," Mija said, forcing herself to remain calm as red icons flashed up on the boards representing her own starship's health. The alien pounding was taking an effect...and a Crab was closing into heavy bombardment range. She saw, clearly, that she'd failed; the Crab would open fire with missiles using sprint mode and they would die. It was futile, but she had to try. "Lock onto the shuttle with tractors and..."

The sensor officer cut her off. "Captain, the *Defender*!"

The display flashed an update as the battleship *Defender* jaunted though space, her Captain taking an insane risk so close to the planet's gravity well, and emerged far too close to the Crab for any evasive action. Before Mija could say anything, the battleship rammed the Crab amidships, both starships vanishing in a fireball that seemed too large to be called a mere explosion. The Spiders, seemingly shocked by this sudden display of kamikaze tactics, seemed to draw back...

It was just long enough. "We got her," the sensor officer reported. "The shuttle is safely in our grasp."

"Pull her inside the shuttle and get us out of here," Mija snapped, more shaken by the loss of the *Defender* than she wanted to admit. She'd known the starship's Captain, a kindly old man who'd known he'd never get promoted any further, nor regretted that fact, for he'd loved his job. His devotion to his ship and crew had been a legend...and he'd been wiped out in the prime of his career. "Take evasive action and..."

The starship shuddered. Alarms flashed up from a dozen different departments. "Hull breach, decks seven to eleven," the engineering officer snapped. "Power reserves at seventeen percent, request permission to switch reserves to shields and self-repair systems..."

"Denied," Mija snapped. She looked over at the display; ten seconds until they could jaunt out safely. "Keep us on course and..."

The display updated; another wave of missiles was approaching...and this time, it would be fatal. "Helm," Mija ordered, in a voice like death, "override the safety protocols and jaunt us out of here."

"Aye, Captain," the helmsman said. He'd clearly worked out the command sequence beforehand; Mija made a mental note to commend him, assuming they both survived. Unpleasant things could happen to starships that jaunted out too close to a gravity well. "Jaunting out...now!"

The universe vanished around them.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Can you give me any reason,” First Admiral Andrew Ramage said, “why you should not be court-martialled?”

Captain Mija Mallory held herself firmly at attention. The flight from Heinlein had been nightmarish, even if she had taken the risk of jaunting out before the final enemy attack could destroy the *Feline*; the stress on the starship’s drives had almost destroyed the ship. Worse, she’d had no choice, but to fly directly to the *Honour To The Just*, which meant that the Spiders could have followed her back to the Worldship. Any halfway competent cadet knew to keep the first jaunting coordinate as a random variable, but *she’d* not only bent that rule, she’d broken it in two.

“The Captain of the *Honour To The Just* wants several things, some of them only theoretically possible, but mostly he wants your head,” Andrew continued. “He has demanded the convening of a formal Captain’s Board to examine the charges brought against you and to determine if you should face a Board of Inquiry and a Court-Martial. Those charges are serious, Captain; do you have any reason why I should tell him to forget it, or should I let the charges stand?”

Mija felt oddly hopeful. She was being offered a chance to defend herself. “Yes, sir,” she said, as carefully as she could. Fighting the Spiders was easier. “I believe that there are several reasons why my actions were not only justified, but necessary.”

“Said Captain Hughes to the Board of Inquiry, seven hundred years ago,” Andrew said, dryly. Mija nodded; the court-martial and acquitting of the semi-legendary Captain Hughes was still studied in the Peacekeeper Academy. Cadets even knew most of his defence off by heart and even if they didn’t, a simple search through their implants could remind them of the entire proceedings. “What reasons do you intend to put forward?”

“Firstly, I was under orders to deliver the Spider captive and the handful of humans onboard the shuttle to secure accommodation onboard the *Scientific Enquiry*,” Mija said calmly. “Ideally, I would have merely covered the escape of the shuttle without having to place my own craft at risk, but circumstances dictated that I rescued the shuttle directly, or it would have been destroyed. Had I not acted as I did, the shuttle would have been lost.”

“True enough,” Andrew agreed. His tone was unreadable. “Please, continue.”

“Second, as a result of my decision to intervene directly, I placed my ship in terrible danger,” Mija continued. “Indeed, were it not for the sacrifice of another starship, I would have lost the *Feline* with all hands, and I very nearly lost the starship anyway. The recordings of the action speak for themselves; had I not jaunted out when I did, I would have lost the starship, the captive, and my life.”

Andrew said nothing. “Finally, my training at the academy warned me that over seventy percent of jaunts inside a gravity well *succeed*, but at the cost of burning out the drive,” Mija concluded. “Had I followed doctrine and used a random coordinate, we might have – we would have, as our drive *did* burn out – been lost in space and that would have ensured that we would have been unable to deliver the captive to you.”

“A convincing case,” Andrew said dryly. He held her eyes for a long moment. “You took a terrible risk, Captain; you placed a Worldship in serious danger and risked losing a starship we could hardly afford to lose. If that had happened, if the enemy had followed you and located the *Honour To The Just* before the Worldship could jaunt out, the starship would have been lost.”

Mija nodded once. Twenty-seven Worldships had been destroyed in the war, each one carrying at least a million humans, along with vital industries that would no longer be used to expand the Peacekeepers and local defences. The remainder had been placed under direct Peacekeeper command – or, in the case of some of them more civilian craft, had headed off to safer locations in other galaxies – and converted into mobile factories. The loss of the *Honour To The Just* was nothing to take lightly.

But she hadn't had a choice, damn it!

“I have decided that there are insufficient grounds for a Board of Inquiry, let alone a formal court-martial,” Andrew informed her. Mija hoped that her relief wasn't too obvious, but suspected that Andrew could see right through her. “Captain Yee will complain and I suspect demand further investigations, but overall, I believe that you acted correctly and that a Board, should one ever be convened, would agree with me.”

He paused. “That does still leave the *Feline*,” he said. “I need a report, an accurate report, on the starship's condition.”

Mija winced. “Bad,” she admitted, frankly. Peacekeeper history included two cases where Captains had understated the damage to their starships, leading to their loss in later battles when the damaged ships had been no match for enemy vessels. The Boards of Inquiry that had been summoned to handle the aftermath had been scathing. “The drives and shields are shot to hell and there is major hull damage, along with the loss of several compartments and missile racks. We were damn lucky that we'd fired off all of our antimatter missiles or we would all be playing harps by now. Overall...”

She paused, unwilling to discuss it, and yet knowing that she had no choice. “Overall, sir, we're looking at six months in the yards, maybe more,” she said softly. Her voice almost broke, despite her ingrained discipline and the support of her implants; the *Feline* had been more than just a starship, she had been her lover and friend and husband... The proud starship hadn't deserved the pounding she'd endured. “I intend to supervise it personally...”

“I cannot grant you permission to remain with the *Feline*,” Andrew said softly. Mija stared at him, wondering if the absence of a court-martial had been merely a ploy, or if Captain Yee had managed to get a blow in against her after all. He'd been raging even before the *Honour To The Just* had recovered the *Feline* and then jaunted out for safer locations. “I understand your feelings, but...”

“With all due respect, sir, I don't think...”

“This rank badge does come with some authority,” Andrew said dryly. Mija bit off a second sharp command and waited to hear what he had to say. “I used to command starships myself and yes, I do know how hard it is to lose a starship. My first command, the *Harrington*, was

lost a month ago at Tetris and that hurt me, even though Captain McPhee was a fine officer who deserved better...”

He shook his head slowly. “You’re one of the most experienced officers in the service and you have long been considered for a higher rank,” he said. “Squadron command isn’t granted to just anyone and you proved yourself even before the war began. If promotion wasn’t so slow – hadn’t been so slow, I should say – you would have been a Commodore by now, if not a Vice Admiral. At the moment, we’re about keeping pace with losses in starships and war material, even though parts of our industry have been destroyed or captured, but we’re not keeping pace with losses in experienced crew.

“You know, of course, that it normally takes five years to train up a new crewman,” he said. “We’ve called up all the reserves and people who have space experience, but moulding them into proper crew takes time...and as for complete beginners...well, the best I can say is I hope they don’t have to face a real battle soon.”

Mija frowned. “But they will, sir,” she pointed out. “Five *years*...”

“The Academy has cut it down to two years, cutting out everything that isn’t directly related to the war and fighting,” Andrew informed her. “We’ve never had to do anything like this before, Captain; there was never a conscription program in the entire history of the Confederation. I dread to imagine what will happen when some of those kids, often from a background of shameless hedonism, end up confronting the Spiders...and yes, you’re right – *they will*.

“You’re going to be assigned to the *Armageddon* Project,” he continued. “The current mix of starship types is unsuitable for the sort of war we are forced to fight and it needs to be modified. I want you to take command of the *Armageddon* and test the new superdreadnaught out before we commit to building vast numbers of them. We need those designs to be as close to perfect as possible and we don’t have much time to perfect the design, so an experienced officer is required...”

Mija listened with half an ear. She had to admit that he had a point; the Peacekeepers, like almost every other military institution throughout history, had been plagued by amateurs designing and supplying military equipment that wasn’t perfect, or didn’t perform as advertised, or was simply unsuited to the task at hand. The Peacekeepers did have the advantage that politicians weren’t so able to force them to accept shoddy equipment – they controlled the Yards directly – but even so, the design teams were sometimes people who’d never seen a battle. That hadn’t been uncommon at all until the Battle of Terra-Prime and the war began.

But even so, it still felt like a punishment.

Andrew was still speaking. “The cruiser design needs to be updated as well,” he continued. If he was aware of her brief distraction, he didn’t show it. “The design we had was built for long-range patrols and action against smaller, less advanced forces, not against heavy starships...and, because of that, our losses have been much heavier than should have been expected. You will have plenty to do onboard the Worldship *Heavy Machining*, Mija, and I expect you to handle it with all the vast experience you have earned at such a high cost.”

“Yes, sir,” Mija said finally. “Sir, what will happen to the *Feline*?”

Andrew nodded in understanding. “She’ll be repaired, eventually,” he said. “A six-month job will take up a slip we could use for building a new starship, so we will have to leave her for the moment, but she won’t be forgotten, or broken up. I promise you that one day, if you want her again, you will have her.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mija said.

Andrew stood up and offered his hand. “You have your orders,” he said. Mija’s implant reported that the orders had just been downloaded into her virtual memory. “You have a couple of days leave on the Worldship *Justified Peace* and then you will take ship for the *Heavy Machining*. I suggest you relax and try to put everything out of your head for that period, because you won’t have any time to relax later.”

“Sir,” Mija said. She saluted, turned about, and walked out of the office. The First Admiral’s assistant smiled at her as Mija walked past her, using her implants to guide her to a lounge onboard the starship. Once she had found a seat and ordered a cup of strong coffee, she opened and read her orders quickly, noting what they said...and what they didn’t say.

Interesting, she thought, as she skimmed through them. Peacekeeper orders were rarely perfectly detailed – and certainly not at command level or higher – as the officers were expected to use their initiative to carry out their tasks. She had plotted the raids on Heinlein herself, with the help of her staff; the First Admiral had merely told her what he expected her to do, assigned her the ships, and left her to get on with it. Her new orders were, in some ways, more specific...but at the same time, she was being warned to be careful. The Peacekeepers couldn’t afford to accidentally mass-produce hundreds of defective starships.

She shook her head slowly, drank her coffee quickly enough to burn her tongue, and then stood up and headed for the shuttlebay. Her crew had been left on the *Honour To The Just* and had to be informed that they were all being reassigned, apart from her orderly. *He* would be coming with her to the *Heavy Machining*; the others would be distributed among the new starships that were coming out of the slips, providing a core cadre of experienced manpower to support the newly-trained crews.

Nothing is ever going to be the same, she thought, as she boarded the shuttle. *This damned war has changed everything*.

Andrew allowed himself a smile as Mija left his office, before turning his attention back to the endless series of reports that had been forwarded to him. It was something that constantly surprised and amused him; no matter how many assistants he had working on his paperwork, he still got more messages, most of them marked urgent, than he could handle in a day. The messages were mostly trivial and he’d learned, back during his younger days as a Captain, that there was a vast difference between urgent messages and ‘urgent’ messages...and the trivial ones could block out the ones that he really needed to read, if he wasn’t careful. Too many of the younger officers were too impressed with ‘urgent’ codings attached to messages and while Andrew was fair-minded enough not to blame them, it was still irritating.

The report in front of him made him smile. It was a preliminary report from the Analysis Division, concluding that Mija had done the right thing and that formal proceedings were likely to fail. Andrew had already concluded as much, even before he'd met her, but he'd had to meet her before issuing any blanket pardons. It had been possible that her actions had been the result of carelessness, or something else, but he was relieved to learn that she was innocent. He forwarded a copy of the report to Captain Yee and turned his head to other matters.

Good, he thought, as the second report glowed in front of him. The alien captive, still wrapped in her stasis field, had been transferred to the Worldship *Scientific Enquiry*, where she – he assumed that she was a she – and the other captives would be studied carefully. He wasn't sure what to make of some of the reports – were the humans collaborators or merely *controlled* by the aliens, and, if so, what were their rights? – but that would have to wait until the researchers had completed their studies. If they had been collaborators, of their own free will, they should be returned to Heinlein for trial, but if the aliens had kept them under some influence, they couldn't be punished for that. Thule's habit of returning implanted or brainwashed captives had soured a lot of attitudes; the mere fact that even possession of subversion nanites was an automatic trip to a penal world didn't prevent far too many criminals from developing and using the illegal technology for their own ends.

He shook his head slowly and continued on to the next report. The war had settled down into an uneasy stalemate...and, as long as that continued, he had faith that the human race would eventually win. If they found the alien homeworld...

If...

If they found the world, they could bring the considerable might of the Peacekeepers to bear on it, ending the war. The sheer size of the alien fleets, however, argued that they had an empire of their own...but where was it? The human race hadn't encountered it or any sign that it existed, which meant...

Andrew knew, as few others did, how large the universe really was. If the aliens came from another galaxy, fighting and winning the war might be impossible. He didn't want to believe it, but where else could they come from? They'd just appeared out of nowhere.

"I believe that there's been some mistake with my orders," Captain Chris Kelsey said, as he stepped into the CAG's office. "I should be in command of the Wing and..."

"Yes, you should," the CAG agreed, unhelpfully. Chris would have almost been happier with a disdainful response. "You should be bumped up to Wing Commander and put in charge of all of the pilots on this starship. You've been doing that for the last month anyway...but I made a mistake with your paperwork."

He paused, long enough for Chris to become outraged. "I told them that you were one of the best pilots I had," he continued. "I told them that you were good, and lucky, and that you'd fought in a hundred battles and never been scratched. I sang your praises to them because this ship needs a capable Wing Commander and the 34th needs a proper Squadron Leader...and then they told me that you were being reassigned."

“Sir, I...”

“You’re being reassigned to the 101st Experimental Squadron,” the CAG said. Chris felt his heart sink further; an experimental unit was rarely assigned to the front line, let alone anything else where there was a chance of encountering the enemy. “I don’t know what they’re doing, that’s classified well above my level, but I do know that they’ve taken several dozen pilots from other carriers, all pilots rated as extremely good and capable. The best of the best of the best.”

Chris took a breath. “Sir, I want to challenge these orders and...”

“No,” the CAG said. The custom of challenging orders was used rarely, not least because a failed challenge – or even a successful challenge – could be the kiss of death to a career. “You have your orders and I expect you to obey them...”

He paused. “Besides, I doubt that it will be boring,” he added. Chris must have looked mutinous, because the CAG took the rare step of explaining his reasoning. “Why would they pull out seventy-two of the best pilots in the entire starfighter service for boring escort work? My guess is that it’s going to be something special...and you, Chris, will be there at the beginning. Good luck.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Excuse me for interrupting,” Dewey said, “but there has been an unusual development with the Spiders.”

Amy Layman shook her head slowly as she pulled herself out of the perceptual reality. She hadn't been fond of them before, regarding them as dangerously addictive and conducive to bad habits, but there was little else to do in the shelter. She had everything she could reasonably want, except freedom or human company; the other humans on the planet remained in their own shelters, unable to leave for fear of attracting attention. The simulations of god-like power, or even the erotic simulations, were better than hiding inside the shelter and praying that the Peacekeepers liberated the planet soon.

They'd probed the Library Planet several times, raiding the enemy forces orbiting the world, but they hadn't driven them away...and while she couldn't reasonably blame them, she wanted to escape the cloying trap of the shelter. There were tales of humans who'd retreated entirely into perceptual realities – leaving their bodies helpless in the real universe – and she knew, sooner or later, that she would do the same. It would have been better than just waiting for the Spiders to stumble across the shelter and breaking in.

“Everything about them is odd,” she said, as Dewey activated the main display. She fired a mental command into the main processor and was rewarded with a glass of very cold water, which she sipped carefully. Her body ached with ghostly sensations; she'd been playing at being a beautiful and ruthless female pirate in a universe where aliens existed and the laws governing faster-than-light travel were different. She hadn't been really hurt, but she'd felt everything that had happened to her...and it left ghostly pains floating in her body. “They're aliens, remember?”

“Petulance does not become you,” Dewey said. Amy smiled at the twisted icon in her retinal display that signified Dewey's presence; the AI could have happily waited for the end of the universe, if he had had a compelling reason. Humans, even the near-immortals of the Confederation, weren't so patient. *She* would have gone into stasis. “They seem to have located items of interest to them.”

Amy straightened up in her chair, deactivating the comforting massaging it offered, and examined the display. The Spiders – and there were now well over a million deployed on the planet – had been wandering around almost at random...or so it seemed. Dewey had analysed their behaviour carefully and had been unable to discern any pattern, although the AI had warned her that aliens might have alien motives, even though much of their technology was clearly based on the same physical laws of Confederation technology. They had examined human trashy romantic fiction, from early examples to later slush produced by AI, with the same interest as they had shown for human history and even classic literature. She found it hard to imagine what the Spiders could make of human literature – an eight-legged creature could hardly be interested in human women, even if some of the pre-spaceflight fiction had dwelled on such a possibility – but maybe they were just curious.

“Show me,” she ordered. “What are they doing?”

“They managed to locate a list of stores relating to the flight logs of human starships,” Dewey said. The AI sounded regretful. “Unfortunately, it was on an isolated terminal and I was

unable to wipe or subvert the data before they transferred it to one of their computers. I am leery about attempting to penetrate such systems, but I was able to peer through some of my sensors and deduce what information they found.”

“Clever,” Amy said. She’d warned Dewey not to try to probe alien computers, just in case the aliens could hack Dewey directly, or even subvert the AI. If that happened, the humans on the planet would be completely helpless...and probably prisoners or dead very quickly. She didn’t know what the aliens did with their prisoners and she didn’t want to find out the hard way. The problem was that as the alien presence on the ground expanded, they destroyed Dewey’s sensors and sealed off entire regions from his probes. They might not have been able to subvert the AI, but they knew he existed...and were working to prevent him from killing them. “What did they find?”

“The location of various flight logs from starships,” Dewey said. “As you know, of course, the flight logs from every starship in human history were supposed to be stored for future reference, a requirement that was often ignored, at least in the earlier centuries of spaceflight. Pirates and smugglers had little incentive to provide copies of their logs to the authorities; military and security service starships rarely chose to risk betraying official secrets by transferring their logs to other powers. It was only when the Confederation became the predominant human power that the practice became near-universal...and we still have holes.”

“I know that,” Amy said. It was something that was regularly brought up at Library Committee meetings. It was also something they couldn’t actually do much about. If a starship’s commander was reluctant to share his logs, it wasn’t easy to force him or her to give them up. “Why would the aliens be interested?”

“Unknown,” Dewey said. “Speculation; the aliens actually contacted humanity much earlier than we believe and they believe that information on such a contact is concealed within the logs.”

Amy shook her head. “You couldn’t cover up First Contact, for fuck’s sake,” she said. “The entire universe would have known about the encounter, wouldn’t they?”

“Perhaps,” Dewey said slowly. The AI seemed to hum slightly. “There are hundreds of thousands of strange tales of odd encounters in space listed in my files, most of them regarded as hoaxes or simple cases of mistaken identity. A handful were never disproven, but as follow-up efforts located nothing, they were generally classed as hoaxes as well. Even so, not all of the logs were ever transcribed into a storage memory cell, let alone my direct access data banks. They may be something there that we don’t know we have.”

Amy was fascinated, despite herself. The old data had never been filed into the main computers, even though hundreds of researchers used it every year, simply because there had never been the time to handle it properly. There had always been something more urgent for the librarians to do and it had just been put back, and put back, until they had found the time to do it...only the aliens had arrived first. It had been an oversight that, she suspected, would cost them dearly.

“Keep monitoring them,” she said, as she stood up and ordered herself another drink. “When are they going to break into the vaults?”

“Assuming they don’t slow down, and have access to heavy equipment, they should be able to enter the main storage vault within four hours,” Dewey said. “I’ve wiped the processors within the access points, which will force them to burn their way through unless they can isolate and reprogram the processors in their way.”

Amy frowned. “Is that likely?”

“Probably not,” Dewey conceded. There was a brief meaningful pause. “Do we want to prevent them from getting into the vault?”

“I don’t think we can,” Amy said. “How long could we slow them down for?”

“Maybe a day or two,” Dewey said. “A lot depends on how quickly they react to attacks from the servitors.”

“Leave it, then,” Amy ordered. There was no point if they couldn’t prevent the aliens from taking the data eventually. “Unless...could we destroy the logs? Could we prevent them from taking the data by destroying it.”

There was a long pause. When Dewey spoke again, it was in a very different voice. “That action would contravene my fundamental programmed protocols,” it said. The voice was almost mechanical. “I cannot deliberately destroy data, nor, through inaction, could I permit data to be destroyed. If you attempted to destroy the data, I would be forced to prevent you from succeeding, regardless of your reasons.”

Amy shivered. “But...”

“But nothing,” the AI said. Its voice returned to the normal masculine tenor. “Amy, please do not attempt to destroy the data. I would have to prevent you.”

Amy said nothing. It wasn’t often that she was reminded that an AI, just like a Spider, was a non-human intelligence, with abilities and limitations that were often beyond human comprehension. Dewey could barely conceive of destroying data, or information, let alone actually destroy it physically. The orders, hardwired into his primary protocols, wouldn’t allow him to do anything harmful to the data, a command he couldn’t disobey because it was literally a part of him. No matter how human Dewey sounded, he wasn’t human...and most rogue AIs had emerged when contradictions in their programming had driven them mad.

“I understand,” she said, finally. It was also a reminder that she was helpless, completely at Dewey’s mercy. “Can we try and gain remote access to the logs?”

An hour passed slowly as the Spiders found their way down to the vaults. Dewey’s misdirection confused them at first, and then they somehow overcame it, walking through diversionary holograms that would have fooled a human without implants. Dewey speculated aloud that the Spiders might not see like humans did – a human might be fooled by a holographic wall, but a Spider didn’t seem foolish enough to fall for it – and might even have used a form of sonar or infrared vision, although the AI suggested that it should have picked up the former. Their conversation remained as enigmatic as ever, a series of clicks and whistles that should have held meaning, but apparently didn’t...

“They could be discussing the Confederation World Cup, for all I know,” Dewey said. It was a rare display of frustration on the part of the AI; Dewey read every active human language and almost all of the dead languages. He had even been able to read papers produced on worlds where humanity had developed completely new languages...but the alien sounds had defeated him. “Or they could be barking orders, or flirting, or...anything!”

The starship logs had originally been stored on memory cards that held billions of terabytes of data. The first starships had been loaded with hundreds of sensors, some to attempt to analyse Jaunt Space, some to watch the crew on their mission, and all of them had been studied endlessly. Amy had even accessed a series of disturbing papers with titles that suggested a growing rate of perversion among academics, who had ignored the more interesting details of the starship’s flight to concentrate on the miniature of life onboard the new starships. Later, the logs had grown both more and less detailed, and had merely been transported to Alexandria, where they had been stored until, later still, they had been directly loaded into a storage computer buried below the surface of the planet. For reasons that had probably made sense at the time, that computer had never been linked into Dewey...

The Spiders raced down the corridor and stopped as they reached the entrance to the vault. A horde of brown Spiders swarmed everywhere, the mere sight of them sending itching feelings down Amy’s back, while a smaller group of red and black Spiders followed them, keeping well back. A handful of deactivated servitors were blasted by the browns, while a red Spider fixed small devices to the sealed door. It should have stood up to a nuclear strike, or even a close-ranged antimatter strike, but instead it collapsed into dust as soon as the Spider hit a button with one long clawed manipulator.

“Molecular debonding field,” Dewey said, softly. Amy lifted an eyebrow. She hadn’t seen anything like that before. “It convinced all the molecules in the door that they should no longer hang together and it collapsed to dust.”

“I’m glad to know that we understand it,” Amy said wryly. “We can duplicate it, right?”

“We’ve had it for a thousand years,” Dewey said dryly. “There’s nothing particularly secret about the technology, or the countermeasures that prevent it from being used in wartime; a simple counteracting field would have preventing their field from taking effect. Once the Spiders are driven away from the planet, we’re going to have to start building new precautions into the system. Obviously, our previous security measures were lacking.”

“Well, of course,” Amy snorted. “What are they doing now?”

The vault was as dark and silent as the grave; normally, only robotic servants would enter the vault, taking the logs and transferring them to the more populated areas of the library. The Spiders, seemingly unconcerned by the darkness, swarmed inside, their movements tracked by sensors mounted on the walls, and spread out, watching for possible dangers. A pair of robots, both far more harmless than the average servitor, were destroyed before the senior Spiders entered the vault and started to examine the signs on the walls.

“The browns seem to be both protecting and supporting the reds and blacks,” Dewey said. “I would hazard a guess that that one” – he illuminated the image of a black Spider – “is in charge and the others are junior to it, but some of the reds seem to lack the deference to the blacks that the browns show almost constantly.”

“Middle-rankers, then?” Amy guessed. “Or maybe they’re a different sex, or something...”

“Impossible to tell,” Dewey said. “There were – still are - humans who enjoyed seeing other humans in outwardly submissive positions, both as servants or slaves. The mere fact of superiority, according to the social system of the time, wasn't enough; they wanted their inferiors to know that they were inferior, and were prepared to do whatever it took to get that submission. It represented a kind of insecurity on their part; they knew that, one day, their servants would turn on them.”

There was a mental hint of a shrug. “But the Spiders are aliens,” he conceded. “They might be completely different.”

Amy had known – intellectually – how vast the vault actually was, but it wasn't until she'd watched the Spiders take hours to explore and examine the vast room that she believed, in her heart, how large a structure had been dug out of the rocky world. The first librarians had dug out a massive chamber, kilometres long, and even that had proved insufficient; by the time they'd moved on to using the computer, they'd had to create several more massive vaults...and even then they'd been short of space. They'd had an entire planet to play with and they'd been short of space, the eternal curse of the library. Whatever the Spiders were looking for, it might have been well-hidden or right in front of them...and it would still take hours to find it. It might even take months.

“I believe that they have located one of the old catalogues,” Dewey said. “They’re accessing it through their own carrier waves...”

Amy blinked. “They have carrier waves that can interact with our equipment?”

“Yes,” Dewey said. The AI didn't sound surprised. “It is a logical development of their technology, not least because they have had ample time to study our equipment and devise means of accessing our records. That is standard practice when at war.”

“But we could talk to them,” Amy pointed out. “If they can read our logs, we can talk to them!”

“I have attempted to hail them before,” Dewey reminded her. “They have never responded to me – or, if they have responded, they may have responded in a manner I am unable to detect. I can attempt to hail them again...”

There was a long pause. “No response of any kind,” Dewey said. “I don't know if we will ever be able to communicate with them.”

“Fuck,” Amy said. She knew what cabin fever was, but part of her wanted to just run outside and run, even though there was nowhere to go. The shelter was getting to her. “What are they...?”

“They appear to be searching for the logs relating to the *Joseph Conrad*,” Dewey said. The AI sounded puzzled. “According to my files, the *Joseph Conrad* vanished over five hundred years ago, in the D'Ammassa Triangle.”

Amy leaned forward. “Could they have lied about their destination?”

“Perhaps,” Dewey said. “No starship is known to have entered the Triangle and survived the experience. The Triangle is apparently completely hostile to any starship. If they faked their logs and went somewhere else...it was possible in those days, although not easy...”

Dewey broke off. “They have located the logs,” he said. The AI sounded vaguely surprised; it wasn’t easy to locate the older logs, let alone so quickly. “They’re moving now.”

“Get one of the robots to remove the logs now,” Amy snapped, cursing herself for having missed that possibility. They might not have been able to destroy the data, but they could sure as hell hide it. They had an entire planet to hide things; she knew, from long and bitter experience, how easy it was to lose something in the Library. “Hurry!”

“Unable to access the robot command systems,” the AI said. The Spiders were swarming now, climbing up and over each other to reach the secure memory cards. Amy found herself hoping, despite herself, that they accidentally destroyed the card, but instead the brown Spider retrieved it and hopped back to its mistress. “They have located the card.”

The Spiders swept back out of the vault, heading back to their ships and the areas they’d secured. “Damn,” Amy said, mildly. Words failed her. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“Not at the moment,” Dewey said. The AI sounded increasingly annoyed. “I have composed a report for the Peacekeepers when they next raid the enemy...”

The AI paused. “Perhaps there is something you can do,” he said. Amy heard the note in the AI’s voice and winced, despite her urge for action. There was something in the tone she really didn’t like. “Tell me something; how would you feel about a daring commando raid?”

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Worldship *Scientific Enquiry* was actually the fifth starship to bear that name. The first three had all been commanded by scientists who, in the spirit of scientific enquiry, had accidentally flown too close to various stellar events and had been unable to retreat in time to prevent the destruction of the starship with all hands. The fourth had flown into the D'Amassa Triangle and had vanished there, along with its crew and several hundred of the foremost experts on gravity science in the Confederation. The fifth *Scientific Enquiry* had been placed under the command of an experienced Peacekeeper Captain, who might have been regarded as a wet blanket by most of the scientists onboard the starship, but who also kept them alive to complain. The scientists who refused to accept his restrictions got smaller ships within the danger zones, some of which had returned valuable scientific data and others of which had simply been lost.

First Admiral Andrew Ramage stepped off his shuttle and accepted the salute from Captain Hosho. The Captain had the advantage of looking unintelligent, something that led most of the scientists onboard to underestimate him, even as they argued that they should be allowed to get just a little bit closer to this or that item of interest. He was also one of the most recommended commanding officers in the Peacekeepers and his assignment had been a reward for good service, rather than the punishment many of the scientists believed it to be.

“Welcome onboard, sir,” Hosho said. He looked vaguely Japanese, although unlike many other natives from Edo, he’d forsaken the tailored alterations that would have had him conforming to the Japanese ideal. “The captives are within the secured accommodation.”

Andrew nodded. “And how have they been behaving themselves?”

“Mostly...oddly,” Hosho admitted, as they boarded a tube capsule for the flight to the secured area. The *Scientific Enquiry* doubled as a research site for examining the surviving samples of Thule genetic modification and held one of the most proficient study groups in the Confederation. It wasn’t expertise in dealing with intelligent aliens – no one had developed *that* until the war began – but it was the closest thing the Confederation had. “They’re...strange.”

He paused. “The young girl is normal, as far as we can determine,” he said. “She shouts a lot about monsters and I had to relocate her to the other end of the ship, about as far from the Spiders as she could get, before she calmed down. The others...the others are just odd. You’ll have to talk to the scientists about them.”

“Spiders?” Andrew asked. “Spiders *plural*?”

“I’m afraid so, sir,” Hosho said. “You’ll have to ask the scientists about them.”

The capsule entered the secure area and Andrew felt the mental *tug* as the security systems interrogated his implants to confirm that he was who he claimed to be, and that he wasn’t under any form of influence. Once the AI had cleared him, the capsule entered the holding area proper and settled to the ground, allowing them both to exit in front of a tall thin man with a superior smile and a goatee.

“I’m Doctor Pennington,” the man said, holding out a thin hand for Andrew to shake. His voice was almost perfectly unaccented, but Andrew could hear faint traces of a Garfinkle accent underlying his words. “I take it you’re here to see my pets?”

“Of course,” Andrew said. He held Pennington’s eyes until the doctor backed down. “How many...pets do you have?”

“Five,” Pennington said. He led them through a secured door into an observation area, revealing a sealed room...holding one black Spider and four brown Spider. “They’ve been busy...”

Andrew barely heard him. He’d seen the horrific moments when the Spider starships had materialised out of nowhere to lay waste to his fleet, and he’d seen the images from Heinlein and a hundred other worlds, but they couldn’t convey the sheer horror of the Spider’s appearance. Pitch black, almost impossible to see in darkness, the creature seemed perfectly still, the only sign of movement some flickering eyelids on the main body. Eight legs, thinner and yet stronger than human legs, held the main body above the ground; he saw, clearly, the mouth and the manipulators underneath the main body. The Spider might be weaker, physically, than an unmodified human, but overall, it would be a formidable opponent in a hand-to-hand struggle.

“My God,” he whispered. “Where did the others come from?”

“Her,” Pennington said. “When we released her from her stasis, she seemed to panic at first, running around the sealed area and clicking away as loudly as possible. We sent in holographic projections to attempt to talk to her and she tried to kill them – with blows that *would* have killed a human – and so we left her to settle down. The Captain” – he nodded at Hoshō – “wanted to interrogate her, but without even a common language...”

He coughed meaningfully. “A few hours later, she squatted down in that corner and laid several dozen eggs,” she said. “We watched carefully and noticed how she was careful to remain away from them until nine of them hatched into browns...and one hatched into another black. She pounced on the black at once and devoured her; the others became her servants and eating matter, despite the food we provided them...”

“Hang on,” Andrew said, “she ate her own daughter?”

“I know human mothers who would have seriously considered it,” Pennington said. Andrew scowled at a joke that struck him as being in bad taste. “No, we don’t have a real explanation as to why she killed her children; the best theory we have is that she wanted some proper meat, or it was ritual in a way, or maybe territorial. The browns obey her without question, as far as we can tell, but maybe another black would have fought her for dominance.”

He shrugged. “Overall, we don’t know and we can’t ask her because we can’t talk to her,” he concluded. “We know more than we knew before and yet we can’t even ask the most important questions.”

“Understood,” Andrew said. “What do you know so far?”

“Firstly, they’re a very odd race,” Pennington said, as he led them over to a small table and nodded for Andrew to sit down. “We recovered four brown bodies from Heinlein and examined them using the most through techniques at our disposal. They’re definitely alien, but I think there was a *lot* of genetic modification in their past, maybe even enough to develop a race that had castes in fact, rather than just tradition. In some ways, they’re almost the Thule Nightmare come to life.”

Andrew said nothing. The Thule had dreamed of a universe where the genetically superior humans – themselves, naturally – would rule over everyone else, who would be altered so that they had no choice, but to obey their masters. At first, they would have mind-gelded children to obey their masters when they reached a certain age; later, they would have engineered submission into the lesser castes based around visual cues or even smell. He’d studied the war carefully; if the Thule had waited another fifty years before launching their crusade in the name of the genetic church, they would probably have won and swept away the old social order permanently. What sort of resistance could be mounted when even *thinking* of rebellion was impossible?

“The most significant development is that their DNA-analogue is almost completely free of junk DNA,” Pennington continued. He noticed Andrew’s expression and struggled to put it into layman’s terms. “A human has plenty of useless DNA within the body, DNA that does nothing, but is still there. Often, these days, it’s also a sign of hackwork done medically to help colonies on barely-habitable worlds, some of which turn lethal in later centuries. One colony accidentally engineered an extinction pattern into their DNA and ensured their own extermination within two thousand years, but luckily we contacted them in time and engineered a counter.

“The Spiders seem to be almost perfect, too perfect,” he said. A display of a Spider’s innards appeared in front of him. “Humans still have redundancy built into their bodies naturally; the Spiders have almost none. Or, at least, the brown spiders; we haven’t been so successful at taking samples from her over there. Overall, it is the shared consensus of the scientists onboard this ship that the brown Spiders are engineered slaves.”

Andrew looked back over at the black Spider. She still hadn’t moved. “They actually did that to themselves?”

“Probably,” Pennington admitted. “The techniques for engineering similar patterns into humanity are not exactly a secret, although the technique is banned and anyone who breaks that ban will be severely punished. I believe, but without enough data to back it up, that they evolved as semi-insect creatures...and, when they developed technology, they made their caste barriers real. Further research is definitely required.”

“Of course,” Andrew said dryly. “How intelligent is she?”

“Very smart,” Pennington said. “The interesting thing is that so are the browns, in a way; we have very clear reports of them behaving as intelligent soldiers on the ground. They sometimes make mistakes, but they don’t often repeat those mistakes, while their mistress has never made a mistake we caught. We ran various intelligence tests, which might be a little misleading as they’re designed for humans, and she seems to be more intelligent than the average human. That said, we cannot talk to her or ask her questions, so...”

He shrugged expressively. “She does have implants and nanites running through her body,” he concluded. “We haven’t been able to conduct any internal examination because of them, and although her implants should be able to interface with our equipment, we haven’t been able to access them or contact her through them. The Captain wanted to remove or deactivate them, but I do not believe we could accomplish that without killing her in the process.”

“The operation would be a success,” Hosho injected, “but the patient would die.”

“More or less, yes,” Pennington agreed sardonically. “Seeing that she’s the only captive we have, I don’t think that testing her to destruction would be a particularly good idea, do you?”

He led them out of the viewing chamber and down a long corridor. “Tell me something,” Andrew said. “Can she talk, even if she won’t?”

“In theory, she should be able to shape human words with her mouth,” Pennington said, slowly. “In practice, she hasn’t spoken to us at all, so we’re uncertain. We’ve recorded hours of her chatter, but we haven’t been able to unlock the secret behind understanding their language, so we can’t even talk to her in her own language. Overall...there are hundreds of mysteries in the Spiders and we have barely scratched the surface.”

The corridor opened up into a new section, overlooking three rooms. Andrew leaned forward and winced; each room had a bed and each bed housed a naked human, secured within a force field that kept them firmly in place. Two men and one woman were lying there, their eyes opened wide with horror, their bodies chipped and marked in strange unfamiliar patterns. For a moment, he thought that they had been tattooed, or tortured, but as he watched, he could *see* the patterns changing across their bodies.

“My God,” he breathed. He couldn’t understand what he was looking at, or why. “What are you doing to them?”

“That would be Doctor Rosemary’s job,” Pennington said, nodding towards a short white-haired woman who was emerging from one of the room. “Rosemary, this is the First Admiral.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Rosemary said. She had a brisk no-nonsense attitude that Andrew liked on sight. “Just call me Rosie or Rosemary; I’m from Themyscira and we don’t really have surnames there.”

“Andrew, then,” Andrew said. Themyscira was another problem child, a world where men were never allowed to land or visit, for any reason. Like Heinlein, it had been the subject of several Peacekeeper investigations. “What are you doing to these people?”

He saw a brief flash of pain in her eyes. “Nothing,” she said, grimly. “Whatever happened to them on Heinlein is still going on.”

Rosemary pointed down to one of the men, who was twitching away under the force field as new tattoos appeared on his skin. “As far as we can tell, those tattoos are a biochemical reaction, but we don’t know why or how they appear. They come and go, rather like patterns on the skin of brown Spiders, and we haven’t been able to prevent them or cure them. The three of them are dying, sir...and we can’t do anything, but slow down the process.”

She nodded down towards the woman. “This is Jennifer Farnworth, who actually served a term with the Peacekeepers,” she explained. “That gave us a baseline for her and so we compared her current readings to the records. Her brain is in a state of constant flux and disorder; in many ways, I’d say that she was on the verge of insanity. Her implants were still active when the Spiders took her prisoner, but they were deactivated sometime later and remained off-line until we recovered her. Like the other two, she has tattoos forming across her body and, again, we don’t know why.”

An image of a younger girl appeared in front of them. “This is Martha Freeman, who was actually unaffected by the Spiders,” Rosemary continued. “Once we got her far away from the black Spider, we were able to interrogate her at length...”

“Gently, of course,” Pennington injected.

“Of course,” Rosemary echoed. Andrew smiled; there was no love lost there, obviously. “From what she said, it became clear that the Spiders were somehow influencing the minds of humans, including her parents, and dragging them into their mental...well, spider-web. Once a human fell prey to their influence, they were allowed to run free as part of a horde of spiders, often taking part in attacks against their fellow humans. I don’t believe that they can be held accountable for their actions – they’re very definitely under enemy control – but salvaging them isn’t going to be easy.”

She paused. “I honestly suspect that these three are never going to recover,” she admitted. “We don’t have any means of removing the mental contamination or repairing the damage to their minds.”

Andrew frowned. “What is the form of influence?”

“It seems to be mental,” Rosemary admitted reluctantly. “Human psi powers are rare and we don’t have any solid baselines on them, outside some of the more classified Thule research, but *some* humans clearly have the ability to influence others. It can’t be a chemical or brain treatment, as that would have affected Martha as well, but there may be reasons why she wasn’t affected and the others were. I know that some humans have been converted, even without drugs or controlling implants, to the enemy side when in captivity, but this is clearly something different.”

“It has been suggested,” Pennington put in, diffidently, “that someone could attempt to talk to the black Spider that way.”

“Too dangerous,” Rosemary snapped back. “We have been unable to save *anyone*, so far, from the alien influence and the closest thing we have to a cure is a quick death.”

“Unacceptable,” Andrew said. “Have you discovered any clues about the origin point of the Spiders?”

“They’re an old race,” Pennington said, after a moment. “They should have discovered Earth thousands of years ago, but instead...they didn’t. Something happened to prevent them from discovering Earth.”

Andrew frowned. “How can you tell that they’re an old race?”

“Cellar decay in their bodies,” Pennington said. “There are a lot of odd points, but at the very least, they’re over five million years old. By contrast, humanity has been around for mere seconds...and its only been a few thousand years since we reached into space.”

“I see,” Andrew said. He looked back down at the woman for a long moment, watching the brown tattoo forming across her breast and reaching down towards her legs, before arcing over and running under her back. She had been pretty once; she wasn't any longer. The Spiders had seen to that. “I want copies of all your research.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Pennington said.

“I also want – need – you to find a way of communicating with them,” Andrew said firmly. “Whatever it takes, find some way to talk to the bastards before we have to kill them all.”

“They may not be capable of recognising us as an intelligent race,” Rosemary said slowly. “There are plenty of examples throughout human history where a scientific breakthrough was ignored because the scientists were from the wrong caste, or religion, or...well, any other reason. If they have engineered themselves into a caste society, they would have *so* many problems recognising the existence of a race that existed outside them.”

Andrew mulled on that while he took dinner with the Captain – and Martha – and then on the flight back to Cascade. If they couldn't talk to the Spiders, it would be a fight to the death; humans against Spiders. They had one captive...and the Spiders had millions, perhaps billions. They'd slaughtered humanity without hesitation; humanity didn't even know where their homeworld was to strike back. Even if they could be driven away from the Confederation, they'd be hidden somewhere out in the universe...and one day the war would restart. The Confederation would have to become an armed camp and the dream of human peace and prosperity would come to an end.

Andrew was one of only three living humans who knew the complete contents of the Weapons Locker, but it couldn't be used against the Spiders, at least not until they located a human-less target. The Spiders had too many human hostages at their mercy. Only a few weapons could be used against them...and the Spiders would almost certainly retaliate in kind.

He smiled thinly. It was time to talk to the President.

They had some hard decisions to make.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Darkness fell slowly over Alexandria's main concourse, shrouding the positions of the alien camp in shadow, but still visible to enhanced retinas. Amy had watched, carefully, as the alien patrol had moved through the stacks of newly written books – many of them to be placed on their shelves and never seen again – and up back to their camp, surrounding the main tower. The Spider leader, the black Spider that seemed to be in charge, had set up its nest within her former workspace, something that puzzled her even as she had watched them taking out Dewey's sensors, one by one. Dewey had figured that that would be an advantage – there were parts of the library where even she had never visited before the aliens had invaded – but she wasn't so sure. It would be easy to feel safe now.

Dewey had been running communications through the area for hours. The aliens, at first, had run around in a panic, and then they'd simply ignored the signals. In theory, the microbursts the AI was using to communicate with her should be undetectable, even with Confederation technology, but a single mistake could kill her. The capsule that had dropped her off had slipped back into the night, leaving her alone... against millions of Spiders. She started to shake as she realised just what she'd agreed to do... and then, carefully, she activated various emotional control implants, bringing her fear under control. She was *not* going to blow the mission through nerves.

"You're safe for the moment," Dewey said, into her ear. Despite the controls, she almost jumped out of her skin. "There are no alien patrols within the area; all you have to do is armour up and walk forward, into the sub-building."

Amy said nothing as the armour extended out of her body, covering her in a black coating that should be resistant to most handheld weapons... and would even stand up to a hit from a heavy cannon for a few seconds. Dewey had spent some of the time underground modifying her armour, and that of the other humans, to the point where it was actually as capable as a military suit, although it never stopped warning her that even the Confederation Rangers were far from invulnerable in their suits. It should, in theory, be invisible to alien eyes, but their sensors would probably detect her if she got too close. The weapons built into the suit were powerful, and the tactical programs were the best in the library, but they didn't make someone a soldier.

We should have insisted on weapons training as part of the career progression, she thought, as she slipped over towards the sub-building. The aliens had searched it once and then ignored it, as far as they could tell; she slipped into the broken door and into the lobby without hindrance. The building had once housed students on their long internships at the Library, and was a typically messy student dorm, but now it was empty and completely dark. Her implants allowed her to see in the dark, but Dewey had warned her not to use either light or active sensors; either one would tip off the Spiders that something was happening. She crept up the stairs one by one, listening carefully despite the suit or Dewey being far more sensitive to any changes than her, and finally emerged into the first classroom. It wasn't a typical room – most students in the Confederation got their knowledge directly from implants - but once upon a time, students had had their first introduction to the library in its gloomy atmosphere. The young Amy had been introduced to the library... and started a lifelong fascination that had ended with her being accepted as a staff member, and finally Head Librarian.

“Head into the side room,” Dewey ordered. Amy followed his advice and found herself in a smaller room, empty and barren, apart from the bookshelf at the far end. “Touch the image of the lion on the side of the bookshelf.”

The lion looked surprisingly angry when she touched it, for all that it was an inanimate picture, but as soon as her fingers slipped against its eyes, the bookshelf slid neatly to one side, revealing a darkened elevator shaft leading down into the bowels of the planet. Amy blinked; she’d been at the Library for most of her life and she hadn’t ever known that the secret passage existed, let alone where it went. There were plenty of odd secrets in the library – and rumours of dozens more – but finding the passage had been a surprise.

She smiled to herself as she accessed the communicator. “How many more secrets are there like this?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Dewey said, dryly. Amy snorted. “What you don’t know, Amy, you can’t be made to tell.”

“Oh,” Amy said. The founder of the Library had been more than a little eccentric...and romantic. He’d *loved* the idea of an entire library filled with little secrets...and some of them, it seemed, were known only to the AI in control of the entire world. “How do I summon an elevator?”

“You don’t,” Dewey said. “You have to climb.”

“I can’t,” Amy protested. “I can’t climb up the shaft...”

“Trust the suit,” Dewey said. “You’ll be fine.”

Carefully, Amy placed her hand against the far side of the elevator shaft – the elevator had to be tiny, wherever it was – and felt it stick to the side. She took a breath and leaned forward, placing her other hand against the side, and then, taking a chance, both feet. She hung above a drop of uncounted kilometres, terrified and yet excited, and slowly, very slowly, she began to climb. The suit had to be compensating for her weight, somehow; she was mortally certain that if she had tried to hold herself up by her own effort, she would have fallen down to an uncertain fate.

“Keep climbing,” Dewey whispered, from time to time. The shaft seemed never-ending, dark and as silent as the grave; the only thing she could hear was her own heartbeat. “You’re almost there.”

Amy, too focused on her climbing to listen to him, ignored him until she reached the top of the shaft. She hadn’t even seen it; one moment, she had been climbing into darkness, the next she’d banged her head on the top. The noise seemed louder than an explosion and she cringed, expecting that the next thing she would see would be the Spiders slicing through the shaft’s walls and tearing her apart, but nothing happened. The pain in her head faded rapidly, a result of her implants, and slowly she relaxed.

“No sign of any activity on the outside,” Dewey said. The AI might have had no sensors left inside the tower, but it had linked into her suit and even brought in a force of flying nano-sized surveillance devices, each one almost too small to catch. They certainly couldn’t be

seen with the naked eye. The Spiders would track them all down eventually, if they cared that humans were spying on them, but by then – she hoped – it would be too late. “The maximum number of Spiders within the tower is thirty.”

And I really hope you're right, Amy thought, as she carefully started to open the door. In theory, there was nothing in the room beyond, a useless storage depot that she'd overlooked during her time as Head Librarian. The Spiders might have done anything without Dewey's observation, even though the bugs said that the room beyond was empty, and the only way to *know* was to enter the room. The suit extruded a small scanner as she opened the hatch, feeling out ahead of her...and reported back that the room was empty and free of alien-produced surveillance devices.

“Odd,” Dewey commented. Amy tried to ignore him as she slipped into the room and looked around. “Any human force occupying hostile territory would have scattered sensors around to warn of little surprises like this, but I have failed to locate any such devices within this room.”

“Perhaps they're too small for you to detect,” Amy said, waspishly. There wasn't much choice; she was going to have to slip into the reading room and there was bound to be a Spider somewhere along the way. “What's to stop them creating something too tiny for you to pick up?”

“There are very definite laws about how tiny certain items can be made and still function,” Dewey said, irritated. “Nano-sized Jaunt Drives wouldn't be able to work properly, let alone jaunt a starship to another star, while even medical nanites have their limitations. A surveillance device that was too small to detect is either useless or inactive.”

Amy smiled to herself and slipped out into the corridor. It had once been a grand walkway around the building, decorated with famous artworks from all over the Confederation, but now it was a mess. The *Mona Lisa*, the real painting from the time well before spaceflight, had been ripped to shreds by the aliens, either out of anger or incomprehension. The library had been lucky to get it...and Amy felt a sudden burst of anger as she took in the damage. The aliens had left other traces of their presence, from a strange oily substance that was everywhere, to small eggs that had been just dropped at random.

“Unknown,” Dewey said, when she'd asked what the eggs were. “Maybe they reproduce by laying eggs, or maybe they're just marking their territory.”

Amy took in the sight of a pile of books covered in the goo. “Bastards,” she said. The reading room was up ahead. “I'm going...”

“Movement, behind you,” Dewey snapped. “Get hidden, *now!*”

Amy threw herself into a dark corner and felt her armour change to cover her. It should have hidden her from the aliens, but as the Spiders came closer, she could almost *feel* their presence, like a million voices whispering to her at a level she could barely hear. Somehow, she could *hear* them, and it was easy to believe that if she listened closely, maybe even joined them, she would be able to understand. She shook herself firmly, feeling her head spinning around her, and recovered in time to see the last Spider moving off into the distance.

“Amy,” Dewey snapped. Her body seemed very sore for a long moment. Somehow, she’d almost been floating outside it. “Are you all right?”

“I think so,” Amy said, putting one hand to her head. She tried to stand up and almost fell over. “What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know,” Dewey said. “Your vital signs suddenly went crazy for ten minutes and I couldn’t raise you at all.”

“*Ten minutes?*” Amy demanded. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Dewey said. Amy closed her eyes. Whatever had happened, she’d somehow lost ten minutes of her life. “Are you sure you’re fine?”

“No,” she snarled. “Let’s get into the reading room, get the card, and get out.”

The Reading Room held readers from several different eras; the cards, being designed before the Confederation’s production technology ensured that they could be read anywhere, could only be read there. That was a well-known fact about the collection and Amy had no doubt that the aliens would have figured it out. What *wasn’t* well know, for all kinds of reasons, was that the card readers had been slightly modified to copy everything that went into them, ensuring that there was a copy in the main archive computer. If the aliens had used the readers, there should still be a copy in the buffer, even if they had disconnected it from the main computer.

Amy covered her eyes as the light streamed out at her; the aliens hadn’t turned off the lights when they left...and then she saw the Black Spider, sitting neatly on a pile of eggs, asleep. She almost fired her implanted plasma gun at the alien before thinking better of it, knowing that killing the alien would almost certainly bring the remainder down on her head, and slipped over to the readers. There was a long line of machines, some of them clunky and very, very, outdated, others new and well-designed. Some of them even dated back to the first computers, strange boxy machines that Dewey could barely access because they were so primitive, and a handful had been smashed.

“The creature appears to be in a deep sleep,” Dewey observed. It hadn’t bothered to keep its voice down and even the knowledge that only she could hear the AI hadn’t stopped her flinching. She was a light sleeper herself and God only knew what it would take to wake up the black Spider. “Check Reader #45.”

Amy peered down at the reader and saw, relieved, the card inserted within the reader. A quick check revealed that a copy of the data had indeed been stored within the buffer and she copied it into the suit, and through the suit into Dewey, before an idea struck her. Before she could think better of it, she opened the reader, removed the card, and pocketed it within the suit.

“Good thought,” Dewey said. The AI broke off suddenly. “Amy, watch the alien!”

Amy stared. The black Spider had awakened suddenly, unfolding longer and nastier legs than the brown Spiders that had killed the handful of humans who had tried to make a stand, months ago. Strange black eyes, revolving in their sockets like children’s toys, spun around

and focused on her; the alien, she saw now, wasn't focusing every eye on her. Unlike a human, a Spider might have perfectly good all-round vision. It would be literally impossible to sneak up on one from behind.

“Speak to her,” Dewey said, excitedly. Amy just wanted to run for her life; the Spider was utterly inhuman, a creature out of nightmares. “Try to get her to respond to you!”

Amy shaped words with a suddenly dry mouth. “Hello?” She said, softly. “Can we talk?”

“I think you need better words,” Dewey said. The AI paused for a second as the Spider rocked back on its eight legs. The manipulators underneath the main body twitched and moved spasmodically as the alien moved. “Try...*look out!*”

The Spider lashed out with two legs, lunging forward and trying to slice Amy in half. She didn't move fast enough and the legs crashed against her armour, sending her staggering backwards as red icons popped up on her retina display. Acting purely on instinct as the Spider pulled back for another strike, she pointed her finger at the creature and triggered the inbuilt plasma weapon, sending a burst of plasma directly into the creature's eyes. The Spider *howled* in pain, a terrifying sound that sent shivers running down her spine, and fell backwards as the superhot beam burned through the main body. She was on her feet within a second, running towards the exit, only to see a horde of brown Spiders running towards her. Her suit leapt her out of the path of a beam of plasma, just in time to save her life.

“Get out of the side door,” Dewey snapped. Amy opened her mouth to argue, but swallowed it and ran. The suit took over, pumping her legs hard enough to hurt, but sending her flying out the door as the Spiders crashed through the other door and into the Reading Room. The equipment in the room, some of it almost irreplaceable, was smashed as they raged forward...knowing that she was running into a trap. The side door led only to a balcony.

“Good work,” Amy snapped, as she propelled herself through the corridor and out onto the balcony. “How do you intend to get me out of this?”

“Give me control,” Dewey said. The AI didn't wait for her permission before it accessed the suit and sent her running like a puppet across the balcony towards the edge. Amy had no time for panic as her body threw itself over the edge and down towards the ground. She hadn't realised how high she was in the air and, as she fell, she saw the ground rising up below her...

She wanted to scream at Dewey, but the AI hadn't even allowed her that much volition. The ground was coming closer, and closer, and she could see the Spiders milling about and waiting for her to fall into their hands...and then she crashed right into the drive fields of an aircar as it screamed around the tower, caught her, and flashed off into the distance. Bursts of plasma followed it, but somehow, miraculously, all of them missed, leaving them to fly off into the sunrise. They weren't even trying to pursue them in the air.

Her body returned to her control as the drive fields lowered her gently into the aircar. “You bastard,” she sputtered. It was almost impossible to form the words in her mouth. “How long did you have that planned?”

“Four days,” Dewey said, as the aircar flew into a canyon and slipped into a hidden chamber right at the end. Amy climbed out of the car and ran across to the capsule waiting for her, which promptly vanished down a long tube back into the interior of the planet. They had to move fast now; the aircar would have almost certainly have been tracked by the orbiting starships, even if they hadn’t tried to shoot her down. The data on the card must have been more important than she had thought. “You’re alive, one of the leadership caste of the Spiders is not...what are you complaining about?”

Amy collapsed into helpless giggles.

“See?” Dewey asked mischievously. There was an undeniably smug tone in the AI’s voice. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, go boil your electronic ass,” Amy said. She brought out the card and examined it thoughtfully. It seemed such an innocent thing to fight over. “Let’s just hope that it was worth all the effort.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

They stood together on the dead Earth.

Andrew watched as the President stared down at the remains of what had once been a human city. It wasn't real, of course, but any perceptual reality was hard to distinguish from reality, particularly one normally used for tourists. The city below them had been famous in its time, the birthplace of a civilisation that had given birth to hundreds of planets and even the rationale behind the Confederation itself, but now it was dust. The Thule had seen to that.

The rubble taunted him. They had fired two projectiles into the planet's seas back when they were launching their attacks on the human-settled stars. One had crashed down into the Atlantic Ocean, the second into the Pacific Ocean, and between them they had killed the world. Earthquakes, tidal waves and massive shockwaves had killed billions in the hours that followed the strike; volcanoes and the dust clouds blocking out the sun had completed the destruction of Earth. A handful of survivors, only a few tens of thousands, had been rescued before the planet had become completely uninhabitable, a handful of others, in stasis chambers or other means of storage, had been recovered later, once the archaeologists had gone to work. Earth was uninhabited now, save only for a few life forms that had managed to adapt themselves to the new world order, and sealed off. Only a handful of people were allowed to visit and few stayed for long.

He spoke, as much to break the eerie silence as anything else. "Why did you want to meet here?"

"I was thinking about the Earth," Katherine said. She looked older, somehow; her nanites and other engineered improvements couldn't keep signs of age from forming on her face. She had presided over the greatest set of disasters the Confederation had ever suffered, disasters far greater than the destruction of Earth, and it showed. "The birthplace of humanity...and look what we did to it."

"I'm not convinced that I would ever call the Thule human," Andrew said, after a moment. Once, birds had flown in the skies of Earth; now, only a handful of insects buzzed across the land. "They destroyed Earth as a slap in the face to their merely human origins, not even out of any tactical purpose; it wasn't as if Earth was the centre of the human race at that time."

Katherine looked up at him. "I read the report on the captured Spider," she said. "She gave birth to other Spiders. Doesn't that mean that the...invaded planets will actually have an expanding population of Spiders at this moment?"

Andrew was mildly impressed. It had taken intelligence analysts longer to realise that that was a very real possibility. "It's possible, yes," he said. "It may even be probable, although a race that just expanded so rapidly would eat themselves out of house and home before too long. How many Spiders could a planet like Heinlein support?"

"I don't know," Katherine said. She shook her head slowly. "Why did you call this meeting?"

"We have a chance to catch the Spiders in a trap," Andrew said. He'd worked the plan out carefully and then discussed it with his staff, improved and modified it with their assistance,

then finally prepared the orders for implanting the plan. “We may have stumbled, entirely by accident, only a network dedicated to helping the Spiders.”

He explained quickly about Stephen and his orders to steal information from a Peacekeeper storage depot. “They want Fortress Maximus,” he concluded. “It’s the only target that makes sense; everywhere else, the planets and even the shipyards, could probably be located without the need for a human intelligence network.”

Katherine frowned. “I was assured by Commodore Amsel that the location of the fortress was not stored anywhere outside the base itself and a handful of virtual memories,” she said. “Is that actually true?”

“Yes,” Andrew said. “The data is somewhere in my head” – he tapped his skull meaningfully – “and I could only retrieve it if I really needed it. I couldn’t open the memory cell out of curiosity; the implants would know that my need to know wasn’t urgent and refuse to open the cell. If I tried to force my way in...it would probably be lethal.”

He shuddered and saw Katherine do likewise. Implants almost never failed, but when they did – or were induced to fail – they wrecked huge damage on the brain. Even the most advanced Confederation medical technology couldn’t repair such damage; if the person didn’t die at once, they would be a vegetable for the remainder of their life. It was the reason why the black Spider prisoner hadn’t had her implants deactivated; the scientists didn’t know enough to deactivate them safely.

And if she can use them to break out, they’ll think that we somehow refused to deactivate them, he thought sourly.

“Well, don’t try,” Katherine said, practically. “Would the Spiders actually know that the details had been classified to a level where they wouldn’t be in the storage site?”

“I doubt it,” Andrew said. “We simply don’t discuss Fortress Maximus, although deducing that it exists wouldn’t be hard for a professional paranoid. It’s a logical precaution for something like the Confederation and hiding the fact we actually built it would be easy. If they obtained the records, they would have a good reason for believing that they could actually...recover the location.”

“I understand,” Katherine said. “What do you intend to do with the opportunity?”

Andrew sent a mental command into the processor, replacing the image of the dead Earth with a starmap, showing the location of the Peacekeeper fleets, task forces and squadrons. Cascade itself was surrounded by so many icons as to look like it had its own galaxy, other shipyards had similar levels of protection, protection that Andrew feared was inadequate. He’d been expecting an attack on Cascade ever since the war had begun and was surprised that one hadn’t materialised. The Spiders had to know the location of the shipyard. It might have been officially a secret, but it had been floating around on the Galactic Net for a long time...and they’d taken Peacekeeper starships intact. All it would take was one failed procedure for wiping the computers...

The image focused on a star, only seven hundred light years from Earth. “This star isn’t particularly important,” Andrew said dryly. A red dwarf simply *wasn’t* important to the

Confederation; they never had habitable worlds and while they did have asteroids, they rarely had enough to be useful or lucrative. “It is, however, in a fairly central position and therefore a logical location for a secret base.”

He paused. “Logical enough, we hope, to fool the Spiders.”

Katherine studied the image. “But they have to have scanned the star system,” she said. “Won’t they *know* it’s uninhabited?”

Andrew laughed. “I suspect that that star is as low a priority for them as it is for us,” he said. “The official records, and I’m sure they have copies of ours by now, say that the star is completely deserted, without even a tiny hidden settlement...and any long-range scans of the system would confirm it. We could hide a cloaked ship there, of course, but it would just be picketing a worthless system. Stephen is going to take a copy to this Wisdom guy that says Fortress Maximus is orbiting that system...and it is heavily defended.”

“It is,” Katherine pointed out.

“Not on this scale,” Andrew said. “We’re going to tell them that we have the entire 10th Fleet, one of our most modern and capable, tied down defending you and the remains of the government. I think they’ll believe it; the reports from the occupied worlds claim that they – the Spiders – put a great deal of effort into protecting their leaders, even at the cost of thousands of brown lives. They’ll read the file, move in to attack the system – with a massive force as they will be expecting to encounter 10th Fleet – and we will jump them with every starship we can scrape up.”

Katherine smiled wanly. “And what happens then?”

“We’ll have deployed jammers and sensor baffles and a few other tricks to make them think that everything is safe...until it’s too late,” Andrew said. “We will intercept that fleet and destroy it, rocking them back on their heels and giving hope to the entire Confederation. If we can inflict such losses on them, they’re going to flinch and slow their advance...which would give us the time to build up and take the fight back to them.”

“And what happens if they absorb those losses and keep coming?”

“If they have those numbers, we’re fucked anyway,” Andrew said, eliciting a tired chuckle from Katherine. “If they have them, why aren’t they hitting the Peacekeepers until they break? Why aren’t they taking out high value targets like Cascade or some of the Worldships? They could destroy the fleets and then invade the worlds, one by one, but instead...they’re doing nothing of the sort. Why not?”

Katherine looked doubtful. “They’re aliens,” she pointed out. “They might not think like us, any more than they *look* like us. Maybe they have an extremely cunning plan for the worlds they have occupied...”

“Maybe,” Andrew agreed, “but so far their logic, in space at least, isn’t that different from ours. I cannot prove it, Madam President, but I believe that if we launch the plan, we would have a chance to pick a fight on our terms, something we need desperately.”

“I know,” Katherine said. “There are peace parties all over the Confederation now, even some idiots who want to try and talk peace terms with the Spiders...”

“I want to talk to the bastards,” Andrew growled. “The problem is that they won’t talk to us. I’m convinced they can, but they won’t – I don’t even think that they consider us important enough to talk to. If we can hurt them enough to make them sit up and take notice, we might have a chance to get through to them.”

“I do understand,” Katherine said wryly. “So...how do you intend to spring a trap?”

“Most of 10th fleet and some new construction will be stationed near the fake Fortress Maximus,” Andrew said. “That’s four hundred cruisers and battleships, enough firepower to require a significant commitment to overwhelm it. Modern military doctrine states that you need a three-to-one advantage to have a good chance at victory and a four-to-one advantage to be certain of victory, so we imagine that the Spiders will try to bring at least one thousand, six hundred starships to the party. They have those numbers, Madam President, and they can use them.”

He paused. “If we’re lucky, they’ll draw down some of the covering forces on various worlds and then our watching squadrons will have a chance to pick off the remainder, but I doubt they’ll do that,” he added. “It’s worth watching for, however, and we will.”

“To add to that, we are going to mass most of our new construction, including our first superdreadnaughts, and the modified starfighters, and 5th, 6th and 8th fleets nearby, in interstellar space,” he said. “Completely undetectable so far from the star and packing enough firepower to handle two thousand Spider starships. It’ll be the largest fleet we have ever deployed and the most powerful human fleet ever constructed – and I’ll be taking command personally. Once the Spiders move in for the kill, we’ll jaunt in after them, trap them in normal space and pound hell out of them.”

Katherine thought about it. “It sounds good,” she said. “What happens if they don’t take advantage of the opportunity and instead go elsewhere?”

“There are contingency plans,” Andrew assured her. “If the Spiders attack somewhere in enough force to convince us that they haven’t taking the bait, the massed force will jaunt out to intercept the Spiders. If the Spiders attack the fake base later, the 10th fleet will jaunt out, unless they have a significant chance at victory. It doesn’t really matter if they have to run, because the target they’re defending is a fake...and the Spiders will draw the obvious conclusion that they were tricked. They won’t trust their intelligence network again.”

“I can’t believe that people would sell out to the Spiders,” Katherine admitted. “Why would they do that?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Andrew said, as if he hadn’t given it any thought. He’d obsessed over it when he’d first heard of the traitors, digging through old records on treachery through the ages, only to find no reassuring answers. Some had been ideological converts, some had been greedy, some had been blackmailed, some had been threatened...and some had done it because they had wanted to prove that they were smarter than anyone else. “I submit, however, that their motives don’t matter; all that matters is that we can use them to mislead the enemy.”

“Then let’s just hope that the enemy takes the bait,” Katherine said. She tilted her head and the perceptual reality snapped back to the dead Earth. Andrew didn’t think that it was healthy for the President to dwell on the remains of humanity’s birthplace, but held his peace. “Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

Andrew looked over at her. She looked tired, too tired. Unlike others, even him, all she could do was watch as the Spiders hacked away at the Confederation, unable – even – to take action to prevent them from continuing their invasion. He felt an odd burst of sympathy for her and forced himself to remember just how important she was. They’d lost so many people that they couldn’t afford to lose more of them.

“I intend to proceed with inserting more combat troops on Heinlein and the handful of other worlds that are still holding out,” Andrew said, softly. The President said nothing. “They have the Terra-Prime system under too much observation to risk inserting more people into the resistance forces, but everywhere else...we can insert a few thousand men and make a real difference.”

Katherine looked over at him. He saw a tear trickling down her face. “But will it make any difference as long as the enemy controls the high orbitals?”

“They’re expanding their control over the worlds,” Andrew said. In one sense, she was completely correct; the resistance forces wouldn’t have a prayer of forcing the Spiders off their worlds, whatever else happened. If they retook parts of the ground, the aliens would just bombard them into submission...or oblivion. “We need, desperately, to resist them, or the worlds will be useless by the time we can take them back.”

“Do what you must,” Katherine said. Her voice was fainter now. “Good luck.”

My God, Andrew realised. She’s losing it!

“There is a final issue,” he said. “We need to consider opening the Weapons Locker.”

“Out of the question,” Katherine snapped. “Can we use anything in the Locker against the Spiders?”

“Some of it, yes,” Andrew said. Katherine didn’t know what was in the Locker. How could she? Only the First Admiral and a couple of others had access to the full list of terrifying weapons, all of which had been banned for centuries. Some of them were horrific enough to turn Andrew’s stomach. “If we could deploy some of the weapons...”

“You’d need a target,” Katherine said. “Do we have a target?”

“There are over a hundred occupied worlds,” Andrew protested. “A handful of *those* no longer have any human life at all, but millions of Spiders. If we deploy a handful of the weapons...”

“I’ll think about it,” Katherine said. Andrew knew what that meant; she believed, deep inside, that using the weapons was too dangerous. Against a human opponent, even the

Thule, Andrew would have agreed...although one of the weapons had ended the Thule War with a bang. Or maybe...

“We need one of them for Operation Hammer,” Andrew said. “If we use it, we will have fewer casualties on our side than we would have even though the most optimistic projections without it. Madam President, we *need* that weapon.”

“And once we open Pandora’s Box, what’s left in it?” Katherine asked. “Will we start slaying suns again?”

Andrew composed himself. “We had that opportunity at the end of the Thule War,” he said. “When the Supernova Bomb was deployed...we saw, clearly, that victory would be incredibly costly without it. They had ringed their planet with defences and the Admirals in charge saw that they would bleed their fleets white breaking through. And they had killed so many, violated so many taboos...and we knew that they weren’t going to be allowed to live. The Grand Alliance wanted revenge and, by God, they got it.

“And then they sealed the Supernova Bombs up in the Locker and agreed to keep them firmly banned,” he continued. “There was no arms race, no desperate race to build more of them before the entirety of human space was destroyed in the crossfire, all that happened was that the weapons were kept safely until they were needed. There won’t be a new arms race, Madam President, but if we don’t use them now, when we have an opportunity, we are going to run the risk of losing the war.”

Katherine said nothing for a long moment.

“Meet me at the Locker in five days,” she said, flatly. “We will take the weapon out then...and may God have mercy on our souls.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Amy had spent the night, once she had returned to the shelter through a roundabout route intended to confuse the Spiders and had definitely confused her, wrapped up in a sleep field. The field had been invented for long journeys and had the effect of putting the subject to sleep almost instantly and keeping them under until they arrived at their destination, where they would awaken completely refreshed and ready to face the rigours of the day. Once she awoke, feeling as if she had slept for a week, she bounced out of the sleep field and into the shower, wishing that she'd been allowed to have someone with her. There was nothing better than waking up to the tender ministrations of a lover.

It's just the sleep field, she thought, reminding herself that trusting too completely in her feelings could be dangerous. The sleep field also made its subjects wake up feeling on top of the world and it wasn't recommended for long-term use. A person could become addicted to it very quickly. She was almost tempted to access an erotic perceptual reality, but instead she forced herself to dress in her modified outfit – redesigned by Dewey to provide extra protection – and eat a hearty breakfast. She would have thoroughly have annoyed the Spiders last night and they would probably be searching for her bunker with murder in mind. Amy definitely didn't want to be caught by them.

“Ah, you're awake,” Dewey said, for all the world as if he hadn't been perfectly aware of her movements. His surveillance over the Library was so complete he'd probably watched her in bed, to say nothing of more embarrassing times, even though the AI would have little interest in human affairs. “While you've been lazing in bed, I have completed my analysis of the data we recovered from the memory card.”

“Humans have to sleep, as you well know,” Amy said, more amused than irritated. “It's something of a design flaw.”

“A human could be modified to require no sleep at all,” Dewey said. The AI sounded perversely interested by the concept. “A human who transcribed himself into an AI Core could alter his own vitals to the point where sleep would be nothing more than a psychometric requirement, rather than an urgent need. Even if you were unwilling to give up your femininity, you could have yourself modified to the point where you would have hardly any need for sleep.”

“All work and no sleep would drive Amy crazy,” Amy said, as she took her seat. “Humans need sleep to relax, rather than just working endlessly on a project, as I'm sure you know. I have reviewed my own work and it isn't up to my normal standards when I'm tired.”

“A serious fault in the design of the human race, about which I should speak most severely to the designer,” Dewey said. “Had I been charged with making the human race, I would have done a much better job of it.”

Amy shook her head uncomfortably. “I hope you're joking,” she said. After Thule, most people in the Confederation would regard such a proposal with the same enthusiasm as they would jokes about rape or murder. It wasn't particularly logical – genetic and even mechanical enhancement went on all the time – but it was very human. “Besides, how would you actually know that you'd improved the human race?”

Dewey sounded irritated. "I would measure performance against prior norms and improve upon it," he said. "Enhancing human strength, for example, would be a simple matter..."

"But how do you know that the old norms were actually worse than the new norms," Amy said. "I'm sure you've accessed my medical records, so you know that I once decided that I wanted bigger boobs."

"Of course," Dewey said, as Amy's finger traced the curve of her right breast. "Why did you want bigger breasts?"

"That's my point," Amy said. "You can't understand that. I wanted them because I thought that the young boys preferred to look at girls with bigger breasts, not because of any logical reason you could compute. I had a inferiority complex that didn't have any basis in logic or reason. So...I didn't have my majority, and my mother refused to allow me to have my body modified, so I went to a clinic which handled them without parental permission."

She winced at the memory. "I ended up looking *terrible*," she admitted. "My *improvements* looked as if I'd pumped up my breasts to ridiculous levels. Hell, I *had* pumped up my breasts to utterly silly levels. It took weeks of embarrassment to get my breasts back down to a more normal level and...oh, my mother was mad about it."

"I don't blame her," Dewey observed. "You showed no understanding of what was good for you."

Amy scowled. "Bigger isn't always better," she said. "There are boys who try to *improve* their penises...and often cause themselves similar problems. You may *think* you know what's best for humanity, but how can you be sure that you're right? How *can* you be right?"

"I am perhaps the smartest AI in the Confederation," Dewey said. "I am certainly the longest-serving AI; the others my age have all retired, or gone onwards, or even deactivated themselves. And if I don't understand humanity, how can the Spiders understand humanity...or even humanity understand the Spiders?"

"I don't know," Amy said, relaxing slightly. Half of the rogue AIs had started off trying to 'improve' matters. "Anyway, change of subject...what did you find on the memory card?"

"A puzzle," Dewey said. It displayed an image of an old-style starship on the display. The *Joseph Conrad* had been built in an era where humanity had finally managed to build starships that were works of art, as well as functionally perfect, and it showed. The starship had been seven hundred meters long, shaped like a swan in flight, seemingly endlessly poised to dive off into the unknown. "This is the *White Swan*-class starship *Joseph Conrad*, built eight hundred years ago and sold to a scientific research study group. It witnessed a supernova at close range, before being transferred to a study group based on the *Scientific Enquiry IV*, and then was lucky enough to be on deployment when the *Scientific Enquiry* vanished."

The AI paused. "I have retrieved copies of its earlier logs from the storage computer," it added. In the time it had taken to say that, Dewey had scanned and analysed the data, comparing it to the vast bank of information already loaded into the AI. "There is little

special about it or the first study group, which dissolved fifty years after the *Joseph Conrad* entered their possession.”

Amy nodded thoughtfully. The Confederation’s money-less economy ensured that any scientific experiment could be carried out and any theory could be tested, if sometimes at a very safe distance from everywhere else. A study group formed from scientists devoted to the same area of research, although it wasn’t unknown for groups to branch out from time to time, and lasted until the participants decided to break up. It was an improvement over the old university structure, where scientists outside the mainstream rarely got any funding, but it led to heated debates and arguments on the Galactic Net. Dewey stored most of them in the vast memory banks deep below the surface and had once commented that most of them were useless rehashing of old theories. It had been a long time since anyone had made a truly fundamental breakthrough.

“No signs of alien contact, then?”

“No,” Dewey said. “The second study group, onboard the *Scientific Enquiry*, was devoted to studying the propagation of gravity waves through normal space, on the theory that a higher region of space could be accessed by a focused gravity beam, a gateway to hyperspace, if you will. Their research led them to the series of gravimetric oddities known as the D’Ammassa Triangle.”

Amy tensed, despite herself. She hadn’t been that interested in astronomy, but the D’Ammassa Triangle fascinated everyone who heard of it, a region of space where the normal laws of physics seemed to break down, replaced by something else. There were thousands of theories to explain the eerie region – the sight of a star slowly coming apart like an egg yoke had fascinated the entire Confederation – but no one had produced a conclusive theory. Nor had anyone survived entering the Triangle.

The AI said nothing. “And then?” Amy asked. “What happened...?”

“The D’Ammassa Triangle fascinated the crew of the *Scientific Enquiry*,” Dewey said. “They decided that a larger ship, with much greater shielding and protective capabilities, would have a much greater chance of getting through the Triangle and into the heart of the weird space – their exact words, by the way. They had some theories that were never dumped into the logs for the *Joseph Conrad*...and, obviously, the *Scientific Enquiry* itself vanished.”

“Their theory was clearly inexact,” Amy said dryly. “What happened to the *Joseph Conrad*?”

“The crew observed the *Scientific Enquiry* entering the Triangle...”

Dewey broke off suddenly. “Your pardon,” it said. “I think that they faked their logs.”

Amy stared at the display. “They *faked* a log?”

“Apparently,” Dewey said. “One moment...”

Amy forced herself to sit back down. The log recorders were supposed to be impossible to fake or even to destroy, at least without revealing that they *had* been destroyed. Connected,

as they were, into every sensor and recording device on the ship, it should have been impossible for anyone to fake the logs to the point where they would pass even a cursory investigation by an AI of Dewey's power and sophistication. There was just so much to fake and it all had to hang together perfectly; any discrepancies would have alerted Dewey that something was badly wrong.

"I have devoted over thirty percent of my capability to unravelling the mystery," Dewey said. Amy frowned; Dewey had once said that talking to every person in the library at the same time used less than half a percent of its capabilities. "The logs were definitely faked. There is a four-day period where the records don't quite gel together, either with the other recordings or independent observations taken by monitoring units placed near the Triangle. The fake is impressive and would have fooled cursory analysis five hundred years ago."

Amy leaned forward. "So, what do the recordings conceal?"

"Uncertain as yet," Dewey said. "To add to the problems, the mystery person who tampered with the recordings somehow interfered with the read-only sections of the memory, something that should have been impossible back then and would still be very difficult to carry out successfully today. I should be able to, at least, pick up on some of the accurate recordings and use them to build up a picture of..."

"Spare me the details," Amy said. Dewey had a tendency to show off at times and she didn't need it now. "What have you managed to prove?"

"I *can't* prove it, but the *Joseph Conrad* was probably inside the Triangle for a short period of time," Dewey said. "Internal recorders noted a series of unusual system faults and failures in the starship – something almost unknown, even then – and the entire hull seemed to be weakened by *something*. Various scientific instruments completely failed and others recorded items so at variance with reality that they cannot be trusted. Of course, the official log never details any trips inside the Triangle; they saw the *Scientific Enquiry* vanish and knew that their duty was to report back, not to be bravely stupid and venture on into the unknown."

The AI seemed to hesitate. "And I think, judging from some of the weirder readings, that they *did* encounter some kind of starship inside the Triangle," Dewey concluded. "There is insufficient data to confirm that it was a Spider starship, but it is a very strong possibility."

Amy felt her heartbeat race. "How sure are you of that?"

"It is a logical dictum that one should not multiple possible players beyond observed players," Dewey said. Amy, who knew that that was a paraphrase at best, said nothing. "We know of one non-human race, the Spiders. Therefore, the unknown starship encountered by the *Joseph Conrad* was a Spider starship unless proven otherwise."

"But there might be a third race living inside the Triangle," Amy pointed out.

"Perhaps," Dewey agreed. "However, in the absence of further data, we cannot speculate any further."

Amy ran her hands through her hair. “Is there any other data relating to the Triangle that might be useful?”

“A week before the war began, a Peacekeeper starship went silent,” Dewey said, after a moment. “The PKS *Verhoeven*, under Captain Joseph Buckley, deactivated its stellarcom for routine maintenance, according to the last message it sent, and then went silent. That is not exactly unusual for a cruiser like the *Verhoeven*; I believe that the nearest Peacekeeper base only realised that there was a problem just before the war began, and any search and rescue efforts were barely begun when the war found other uses for the starships involved. Even without the war, the odds of recovering the *Verhoeven* were so low that no one held out any real hope.”

“A starship being too tiny to register on long-range sensors,” Amy agreed. “Still less if it were wreckage, or even vaporised.”

“Indeed,” Dewey agreed. “Peacekeeper Command may have realised that the Spiders killed the *Verhoeven*, or they may have simply put it down to coincidence. A second fact; a day before the war began, Hong Kong reported that *their* long-range sensors had picked up a vague contact – which they believed to have been a Thule Battlecruiser. A Peacekeeper squadron was ordered to investigate and had found nothing by the time the war began and it was suddenly ordered to ship out on a desperate defence mission.”

“A sensor ghost, then,” Amy guessed. “Would they really have made such a mistake?”

“It wouldn’t be impossible,” Dewey said. “Long-range sensors aren’t always reliable unless the target is large enough to have a significant effect on the surface of space-time...and only the Worldships have anything like enough mass to be significant. If they caught hints of a sensor spoof device, rather than a cloak, they would have assumed that the target had a reason to try to disguise itself...”

Amy held up a hand. “Bottom line, then...the Spiders are somehow involved with the D’Ammassa Triangle?”

“It certainly appears that way,” Dewey agreed. “The evidence may be read in other directions, but overall, the Spiders may well be based in the Triangle.”

“In that case...should we not pass the information on to the Peacekeepers?” Amy asked. “If we told them...”

“Once they return to this system, we will transmit the information,” Dewey said. “There isn’t much else that we can do at the moment. We’re just going to be sitting on the substitute’s bench for a while.”

Amy looked over at the near-orbit display. Seven Crabs and twenty Lobsters held flight patterns over the world, over *her* world, mocking her with their sheer immensity. Two of the younger librarians in the other shelter had killed themselves, unable to live with the burden of knowing that, at any moment, homicidal Spiders might come crashing through the walls. Dewey swore blind that he would be able to warn the inhabitants of the shelter and evacuate them in time to get them out before the Spiders arrived, but it wasn’t much of a consolation to the youngsters. They’d signed up to inhabit a world where the worst problem was books not

being returned on time, or users trying to steal or damage various books, not one where they were suddenly fugitives in their own library. It was understandable...and yet it was such a waste.

“So, what happens when they arrive?” She asked. “What happens if the Spiders decide to scorch this world?”

“We die,” Dewey said flatly. *It* wouldn't die unless the Spiders blew the entire planet to rubble – his awareness was distributed around the entire planet and the loss of a few computer nodes wouldn't be more than a minor headache – but Amy and the others would die, or be trapped in their shelters, unable to leave. If the Spiders treated Alexandria like the Thule had treated Earth, the shelters would probably collapse under the impact and crush her, armour or no armour. “If that happens, we will be helpless.”

Amy pulled herself to her feet. The Spiders would destroy the greatest collection of human writings in the known universe...and she would not let that happen.

“We have some planning to do,” she said. Oddly, now that she had completed one mission on her own, she wanted another. “I am not going to let them destroy this planet.”

Dewey snorted. “And how exactly do you intend to stop them?”

Amy flushed. “I'm working on it,” she said. She was sure that she would think of something. “Have a little faith, why don't you?”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“There are more starships here than I would have expected,” Stephen M. St. Onge said, as the *Gentleman Caller* slowly descended towards Venice. The area of space surrounding the remains of the planet was crowded with starships, some of them clearly refugees, others from the Confederation’s shadowy underworld. The ID signals showed the same basic hints that they were fakes; if the Peacekeepers had had the time to put together a task force and raid Venice, they would probably have closed plenty of arrest warrants. “I wonder why.”

Hollyhocks stretched from her seat. She’d changed herself slightly, Stephen noticed; she’d had herself implanted with weapons and other augmentations. He hadn’t discouraged her, but she lacked killer instincts and the ability to react quickly and decisively to a challenge. The odds were she would still get herself killed, even if the Peacekeeper augmentation provided the latest in combat-support programs. Tactical programs were only as good as the person using them.

“Hiding,” she suggested. She’d promoted herself to his partner – Stephen didn’t seem to get a say in the issue – and had dressed accordingly in a striking outfit that would have had most young men breathing heavily and hopefully not thinking straight. He suspected that it was a waste of time; any of the criminals who had survived a life of crime wouldn’t be influenced by such a sight, no matter how pleasing it was to the eye. “This place can’t be a real target, can it?”

“True,” Stephen said, as he fired their own – faked – ID code towards the asteroid. It took longer than he would have expected to receive a reply and the orders were clear; they had to land *inside* the asteroid. He’d hoped for an outside port, where they could blow their way out if necessary, but all of the ports were probably occupied. The starship glided down towards the gravity field surrounding the asteroid and slowly slipped inside. “Are you still sure you want to come with me?”

“You’re going to need someone to watch your back,” Hollyhocks insisted. Stephen shrugged; Admiral Ramage had offered him a dedicated Intelligence team, but Stephen would be happier working on his own. He really should have left Hollyhocks at the Peacekeeper shipyard – she would have been safe there if she had been safe anywhere – but she’d insisted on coming and refused to take no for an answer. “No one here is your friend.”

“No one here is anyone’s friend,” Stephen said, giving in to the inevitable. The starship landed on the pad with an audible thump. The pad was surrounded by other smaller starships, most of them clearly designed like the *Gentleman Caller*...and leaving fast would be tricky. He stood up as the starship powered down and pulled on his suit. “Last chance to back out.”

Hollyhocks said nothing, but instead stuck a pistol in her belt and stood up herself. Stephen smiled wryly and allowed her to lead him to the airlock, which hissed open slowly, once it had confirmed that there was a breathable atmosphere outside. A force field kept the atmosphere inside the bay, a security precaution that ensured the asteroid’s managers could just dump the air – and anyone without protection – into space at any moment. He saw the stars wheeling past as the asteroid rotated and paused long enough to admire the sight, before tramping slowly over to the airlocks.

“Don’t look at the stars too long,” he advised dryly. Hollyhocks had gone a little green. “It’s better to forget that the asteroid is actually spinning, even though there’s little point with the shaped gravity field here.”

She looked relieved as they stepped through the airlock and into the market hall. The place was as crowded as ever, but Stephen could see some very significant changes; the amount of weapons and colonisation equipment being sold had skyrocketed. It didn’t make sense at first – any good fabricator could produce most standard weapons without needing to deal with the underworld – and then he realised that most of the visitors were from Isolated Worlds that had only a limited tech base and a mandate to limit the development of technology as much as possible. They would have been smarter, in his opinion, to have headed back into the Confederation, but some of them were clearly determined to defend their homes, despite their government.

A pastoral planet couldn’t handle the Spiders, he thought grimly, as he passed a set of artefacts labelled as Spider technology, recovered from occupied worlds by brave pirates. He examined some of the items quickly; it didn’t take long to realise that most of them were actually modified human devices, shaped as if the Spiders had designed and built them. The stall-keeper tried to sell him a plasma cannon, swearing blind that it had been taken from a dead Spider, but Stephen shook his head. It didn’t stop others from shelling out for the artefacts, convinced that the Peacekeepers would richly reward anyone who brought them the weapons.

“If they’re so important,” Hollyhocks asked, “why doesn’t the owner take them to the Peacekeepers himself?”

Stephen laughed. “You’re learning,” he said. “Those buyers are going to be in for a nasty surprise when they hand them over to the Peacekeepers. The only good thing to come out of it will be the bastard getting the blame and his name spread all over the Confederation. He’ll just reshape his face and carry on until a dissatisfied customer disposes of him for us.”

They passed a final set of stalls, including a bookstall selling a book entitled *Secrets of the Spiders* and *The Human-Spider War*, and stepped into the business area. There were more toughs around now, Stephen noticed, some of them boosted fighters, others clearly with real military experience, probably from some of the Isolated Worlds. The patrons of Venice were clearly feeling threatened, although in Stephen’s experience, a hired gun was normally more trouble than he was worth. They lived from payment to payment and if someone made them a better offer, they were gone before the previous employer knew it.

Hollyhocks slid closer to him as one of the toughs blocked their way. “Halt,” the tough said, trying to be firm and not getting it quite right. His body bulged with muscles – even muscles on the muscles, a sure sign of overdoing bodily enhancements – and his outfit held at least four guns. Stephen brought up one of his more advanced enhancements and scanned the tough before he could say a second word; he was carrying seven guns and five devices intended to stun or kill an intruder. “Do you have permission to enter?”

Stephen sighed. His enhancements were reporting seven easy ways to take the tough out of the picture, but smashing hell out of him wouldn’t be politic, not when he needed to talk to Wisdom. The tough had overdone the weapons – he half-suspected that he didn’t even know

how to handle all the weapons – but even so, knocking him out would not be taken lightly by Wisdom. The other masters of the asteroids would be even less amused.

“I believe that Wisdom wants to see me,” he said, and smiled. “I have something he wants very much.”

“Of course,” the tough said, a new respect shining in his eyes. If Stephen was really here to give Wisdom something he wanted, he had status...and if not, Wisdom would definitely let the tough hurt him. Stephen knew what he was thinking and kept his disgust to himself; it was hard to believe that the tough had been born in the Confederation. Perhaps he was from a Lost World that had been isolated for so long that its citizens had devolved. It didn't seem likely, but he'd seen enough to know that the unlikely happened more often than not. “I will have to search the pair of you.”

“I'm afraid not,” Stephen said, as pleasantly as he could. The thought of the tough running his hands over Hollyhocks was more than he could stand. “Wisdom would not like that at all.”

The tough, balked, touched an implanted communicator in his neck and muttered under his breath. Stephen's enhancements couldn't quite keep pace with the words; the tough seemed to be being given orders, orders he didn't like. A moment later, a thin girl wearing a maid's outfit and carrying a small computer pad appeared and winked at them.

“Hi, you must be Stephen,” she said, all smiles for him. Her pale face, too pale to be natural, seemed to flush slightly with excitement. She bowed low, giving Stephen a clear look down her blouse. “He wants to see you at once.”

She led them along a series of corridors, each one utterly bland and completely unmarked, and through a second checkpoint, talking all the while about nothing. Her name, it seemed, was Gloria and she'd somehow ended up at Venice, her past a mystery even to her. Stephen guessed that someone had implanted her with subversion nanites or something similar a long time ago, before putting her to work as an assistant and slave; he recorded her face carefully in a memory cell, knowing that the Peacekeepers would be very interested indeed.

“Stephen and friend, Mr Wisdom,” she said, as she stepped through a door and bowed low. Her skirt was so short that it revealed that she wasn't wearing any panties. When she spoke to Wisdom, her voice was that of a breathy airhead. “Will you be needing me later, sir?”

“No, thank you,” Wisdom said, as he came around the table to welcome Stephen personally. He'd changed himself again, Stephen noted, implanting himself with combat implants and even some more advanced augmentation, as if he expected the Spiders to come bursting through the wall at any second. The man they'd met before was gone, replaced by a stranger with strikingly similar eyes. “Go suck off the guards or something.”

Stephen watched Gloria vanish out the door and shook his head. “Where the hell did you get here?”

“Long story,” Wisdom said. “The short version is that there was a war between pirate gangs out on the Rim, a few years before the Peacekeepers cleared out Terrordakle's Crew, and the losers got killed or turned into slaves. Gloria used to be the daughter of one of their leaders

and the winners implanted her, changed her, and sent her out to die. She ended up here, I won her in a poker game, and...well, I've become quite fond of her."

"Of course," Stephen said. He didn't have to look at Hollyhocks to know what she was thinking; it was an abomination, a perversion of Confederation science. Whatever Gloria's crimes – and if she'd been part of *that* particularly nasty bunch of pirates, he doubted that she'd been innocent – she hardly deserved such a lingering punishment. Killing her outright would have been kinder. "How's business these days?"

"Oh, everyone is running around wondering what they can get up to with the Peacekeepers fighting and perhaps losing the war," Stephen said. "There are entire gangs that intend to move in on various targets while the Peacekeepers are distracted, and others that think the Peacekeepers are going to lose and are making plans for operating in a Peacekeeper-less universe. I doubt they'll get very far – my sources tell me that the captive Spiders are unable to talk to the Peacekeepers, although some...*experts* in making people talk here have actually offered to assist with that – but they intend to try."

He smiled. "And then there are the groups that intend to light out for another galaxy and leave the war far behind," he concluded. "I may take up their offer of flying with them; they might well survive the war and if they move far enough, they could build up a little empire before the winner comes looking for them."

"Maybe," Stephen said. "Anyone would think they were scared."

Wisdom managed a throaty chuckle. "Of course," he said. "So...what did you manage to accomplish?"

Stephen leaned forward. The main point in their favour was that no one, in theory, would know that the record storage point had been raided; after all, if the Peacekeepers knew that that had happened, they would change their plans and dispositions as fast as possible. What else could they do? He'd sat down over the plans with a handful of Peacekeeper Intelligence officers, working out how he'd raided the store, but even so...Wisdom might not buy it. He'd been on the fringes of Confederation society for far longer than Stephen himself.

"First things first," he said, dryly. "My price."

"Ah," Wisdom said. "What do you want?"

"Gloria," Hollyhocks said. Stephen looked up in surprise. "I always wanted a slave to clear up after me."

Wisdom threw his head back and laughed. "A nice young lady you are," he said. "I could have offered much, but you want something so...easy that I feel certain that it's a lemon. Stephen, is the data really worth so little?"

Stephen mentally promised Hollyhocks dire repercussions. "I don't exist out here on the fringes, so most of the equipment you offer would be useless to me," he said. He was tempted to simply disown Hollyhocks' request and move on, but...she was right. He'd never done anything like that in his life. "Money means nothing to me, or the Confederation, while

I don't need rare metals or other equipment. You don't have anything to offer me along those lines, but Gloria? A woman who can't say no? How could I resist?"

He ignored the sharp look Hollyhocks gave him. "She's my price, Wisdom," he said. He sat back and crossed his arms. "Take it or leave it."

"Very well," Wisdom said, with no noticeable change in his expression. His voice was more amused than annoyed. "I will give you Gloria and her command codes. Now, what do you have for me?"

Stephen smiled. "I found a way of impersonating one of the people cleared to work at the centre," he said. "With a little work, and a highly illegal amount of computer access, I was actually able to alter her profile so her male form was me, a change the AI didn't notice because it wasn't really capable of making the comparison. I did think about landing my starship in the middle of the complex and blasting my way in, but that would be rather revealing. All too revealing, in fact."

"Of course," Wisdom said. He didn't show any sign of believing or disbelieving. "What did you do then?"

"I went in, of course, and gained access to the main computer core's security," Stephen said. "I couldn't get access any further – my dupe wasn't cleared for such access – but I found out that there were actually copies of everything, and so I inserted a command to copy everything into a file, which I then downloaded to a memory card. As soon as I had the card, I left and vanished back into Jaunt Space, returning to my starship and then coming here."

Wisdom said nothing for a long moment. Stephen, well-used to concealing his thoughts and feelings, watched him expressionlessly. The tactic *would* have worked, with a great deal of luck, even though it depended on using Peacekeeper regulations against them. The irony of being unable to record permanent details about most of their personnel – almost all of them would change sex a few times in their life – had created a loophole, one that he had exploited. Even now, someone who looked at the records would pick up compelling evidence that he'd been there...

"Interesting," Wisdom said finally. He held out one long bony hand. "The card, please?"

Stephen pulled it out of his pocket, nonchalantly, and passed it over to him. It should have passed muster – it actually *was* a set of records from the storage depot – with only one item inserted by the Peacekeepers. Wisdom wasn't buying any sealed packages and inserted the card into a reader, examining it quickly and then downloading it into his own head, where he was doubtless comparing it against previous files he had obtained. Stephen tensed inwardly, activating some of his more interesting augmentations; if they had to fight their way out, he didn't intend to let Wisdom live.

"It appears to be complete," Wisdom said finally. He stood up. "Gloria..."

"One moment," Stephen said. "Did you find out who wanted the data?"

For the first time, Wisdom looked mildly annoyed. "No, and that doesn't happen in my line of work," he said. "I should know, but I don't. Gloria!"

Gloria entered. “Gloria, code alpha-tango-beta,” Wisdom said. Gloria’s face went completely blank, her eyes freezing, without even a blink. “You now belong to Stephen and his smart bitch of a girlfriend. Obey him, do whatever he tells you, don’t forget to write...”

Stephen smiled to himself. “I may have something else for you to do later,” Wisdom added. “What are you going to do now?”

“I thought a little holiday somewhere,” Stephen said. In reality, he intended to report back to the Peacekeepers, and then find something else to do. “What do you have in mind?”

Wisdom smiled. “Nothing, as yet,” he said. “It’s just something right up your alley.”

Stephen said nothing as they walked back to the starship, keeping himself tightly under control and trying to ignore Hollyhocks’ babble to Gloria. The poor girl didn’t deserve to be babbled at either and Hollyhocks was just confusing her; she needed proper treatment in a medical centre and probably years of therapy before she returned to anything like normal. There were people who volunteered to be implanted like her – the thought reminded him that it would be wise to check to ensure that there were no other surprises within her implants – but Gloria hadn’t chosen it for herself. She’d had it forced on her, turned into a helpless slave, and then used for every demeaning task Wisdom and her previous owners could invent.

Wisdom was beginning to annoy him, just a little.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

A starless region of space was about the loneliest place in the universe, Andrew reflected, as the cruiser *Dragonfire* jaunted into the region, shields up and weapons primed, ready for trouble. Captain Porch muttered orders to his crew as they scanned for any sign of the Spiders, or any other possible enemies, while Andrew stood back and allowed him to get on with it. Legally speaking, he couldn't have issued orders to the crew anyway, unless the Captain was dead, something that caused no end of confusion among young cadets. It worked, barely, but balancing the Captain's supreme responsibility to his starship and the Admiral's responsibility to the fleet wasn't easy, not even slightly.

"Local space is clear, sir," Porch informed him, finally.

"Good," Andrew said. It wasn't really starless, not really, but they were over forty light years from the nearest star. He'd never been anywhere near the Weapons Locker ever since he'd first heard of its existence, or been granted access to the most secret files within the Peacekeeper database, passed down from his predecessor as First Admiral, but the knowledge that he *could* have visited had preyed on his mind. It was a heavy responsibility and, six months ago, he'd believed he would never have had to do more than pass it down to his successor. "Keep us stationary in this position and..."

"*Emergence*," the sensor officer snapped. "One small spacer, two thousand clicks away.

"Get an ID signal," Porch ordered. A Spacer wouldn't be much threat, in theory, but if someone had packed it full of antimatter, opening fire on it at that range could be deadly dangerous. "Who's ship is that?"

"It reads out as *President One*," the sensor officer informed him. "The pilot of the ship is asking for orders."

Porch looked up at Andrew. "I need to board that vessel," Andrew said. "Please have them dock on an outside port."

"Order the pilot to dock at Port #7," Porch ordered. Andrew watched as the tiny spacer moved closer to the vast cruiser. "Admiral, what are your orders?"

"Remain here for one day, invoking the Quiet Storm Protocol," Andrew said. Porch scowled; the protocol called for the starship's sensors to be steeped down to the bare minimum, and no spacer cared to be blind and deaf in a war zone. There were times when he thought that the security requirements were complex to the point of absurdity; it would have been much easier to have the President come to Cascade, where they could have flown together to the Locker. "If you don't hear from me in twenty-four hours, return to Cascade and report to Admiral Neithen, who will have further orders for you."

"Yes, sir," Porch said, and saluted. "Good luck."

Andrew took the intership car down to the docking port, on the lower starboard side of the cruiser and smiled when he encountered Captain Driscoll at the port. The pilot, who'd managed the landing on Heinlein and then the flight back into orbit, would have been a useful asset on the Locker, but security requirements prohibited his presence. Some of the

requirements could be evaded if necessary, but that one couldn't be evaded unless they were actually inside the Locker at the time. He stepped into *President One* and smiled at the President; it was their first meeting in reality for almost a year.

"It's good to see you again," Katherine said, once they had shook hands. Andrew led her into the cockpit and took the controls directly. He'd brushed up rapidly on his flying skills in a simulator, but he still used extreme care when undocking from the *Dragonfire* and flying off towards empty space. "I wish it wasn't here, but..."

"I know," Andrew said, knowing that certain things would always be unsaid. "Off the record, you haven't done a bad job as President, not since the war began."

Katherine laughed bitterly. "All I've done is make encouraging speeches, help smooth ruffled feathers, and a few other minor things," she said. "The rest of the time, I've just waited at Fortress Maximus for the Spiders to appear and kill me."

"I doubt they would find it easy," Andrew said. He'd reviewed the defences of Fortress Maximus back when they had been updated and he'd been astonished by the amount of firepower that had been buried in the complex. The Spiders would have real problems bringing their own firepower to bear on the President's retreat...and by the time they broke through, the President would be well away from the base. "They don't know where it is, which does make attacking it rather difficult."

He concerned on his flying as they slipped closer to an apparently empty region of space. "I'm sending the signal now," he said, as he keyed his command code into the spacer's main array. Gravity-pulsed signals were so rare that several people, who knew nothing about the real reason, questioned the installation of such systems on the starships. "If everything is still working right..."

"Warning," the AI said. There was a harsh note of alarm in its voice. "Space-time distortion detected at one kilometre and closing. Recommend evasive action."

Space seemed to shimmer in front of them, the starlight flicking and dying as gravity waves formed a black hole and then, shimmering in the centre of the gravity stress, a wormhole. Andrew didn't hesitate; he triggered the spacer's drives and sent it flying down towards the wormhole, counting off the seconds under his breath. Scanners were unreliable in the wormhole's mouth, reducing him to almost flying by sight, but flying through the needle was easy. For a long moment, they seemed to pause on the edge of a fall, and then they plummeted through the wormhole into a dimensional kink.

Everything stopped. Andrew, too relieved to move at first, waited until his breathing had slowed back to normal before continuing with the sequence. Wormholes had been discovered, ironically, at about the same time as the Jaunt Drive, but while the Jaunt Drive was fast, powerful, and easy to use, wormholes were risky and far less capable than the other FTL drive. The Confederation rarely used them for anything other than tapping the power of suns, through a tiny wormhole that sapped the power and nothing else, but they had been used for dozens of starships during the early Expansion Periods. The technology had been well understood by the time the young Confederation had elected to seal away the weapons the Grand Alliance had hoarded before the Breakdown, fearing that they would be used and

start off a new arms race. They had sealed the weapons inside a wormhole, one hidden in space and impossible to find, and hoped that that would be the end of it. They'd been wrong.

“Second stage,” he muttered to himself. Anyone could have spied on them sending the first set of signals, but the second, from within the kink itself, would be impossible to read. It had been a long time since he'd read the theory, but anyone who got into the kink without the codes to go further would eventually be killed when the wormhole broke back down into energy...and they would be spat out when the wormhole opened again. A mistake with the codes would prove fatal. “Here we go...”

The second wormhole opened, revealing a planet trapped within the wormhole, its mass keeping the wormhole active even as it prevented the wormhole from reaching out back to the normal universe. The power generators on the planet, maintained by the most advanced AI the young Confederation could deploy and millions of robots, had kept the planet in the wormhole for over a thousand years, a truly impressive feat of engineering. Everyone knew about Sphere, the attempt to build a real Dyson Sphere, but the Weapons Locker exceeded Sphere for sheer grandeur. It was almost a shame they couldn't show the universe what they'd done.

“It's taken over,” he said, as the AI accessed the spacer's control systems and assumed command. It would have been easy to lock it out, but then the AI would have assumed that they were hostile and opened fire. No one had been comfortable with giving an AI authority to fire on humans, not then, but there had been no choice. No human could be trusted in the Locker. “We're coming into land on one of the continents.”

There was an audible bump as the spacer fell to the ground. A moment later, the hatch hissed open, revealing a single corridor leading down to the underground. Andrew carefully emptied his pockets of anything that the AI might regard as a hostile item, then led the way down the long passage, into the opening room. A moment later, his body locked as the AI accessed his implants, leaving him paralysed on the verge of falling open. The AI, a massive cold *presence*, reached inside the implants and scanned them, one by one, confirming his identity...and he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, what would happen to them if they didn't pass muster. The AI would kill them without hesitation.

The presence withdrew as suddenly as it had appeared. Katherine looked terrible, her face drawn and pale, and Andrew knew he probably looked the same. Sweat was running down his face, aches and pains exploding within his skull; they caught onto one another and held each other, long enough for the pain to fade. The AI's drone waited patiently – now they had been cleared, the entire Weapons Locker was open to them – until they finally disengaged from each other and shared a laugh.

“That wasn't so bad,” Katherine said, rubbing her skull. Andrew knew that it was more than a little bravado, but also determination. His own pains were fading rapidly. “What do we do now?”

“The control room, I think,” Andrew said. He glanced over at the floating drone, which moved slightly down a long corridor. “Take us to the command centre.”

He'd seen countless versions of the command centre in thousands of productions, mostly ones revolving around terrorists or wreckers gaining control of the Weapons Locker and

using it to wreak havoc on the Confederation. They'd been hits, but none of them had really known what was in the Locker, although some weapons had been pretty obviously candidates for the Locker, and their visions of the Locker bore little resemblance to reality. It was just another control room, like any planetary defence centre might have, although it did have some additional panels. He checked the settings quickly, confirmed that no one had visited the Locker for the past three hundred years, and then turned to the main display.

"There," he said, tapping one vault under the planet's surface. "That's where they stored the Radiation Cannon."

"Not the worst weapon here," Katherine observed, studying the lists, open to her for the first time. Andrew couldn't blame her for being curious and it wasn't like it was a risk – her implants would prevent her from passing on the information – but somehow he felt the urge to hurry. "What does *that* one do?"

Andrew looked at the weapon's tag and felt information rising in his brain, coming from a memory cell he hadn't even known he'd had. "Grey Goo," he said, awed. "Some bastard had the idea about how nanotechnology could be used to wipe out an entire planet, just dissolve it all like a sugar cube in hot water, and produced it as a terror weapon. Most nanotechnology has limitations, but this stuff doesn't; it just goes through the planet, reproducing even as it disassembles, until there is no matter left to devour."

He scowled. "It doesn't even fade away," he added. "It remains a permanent threat to the entire region of space."

The walk down to the vault was a long one, passing through other vaults and inspecting the contents. There were planet-crackers that were capable of shattering a planet into rubble, used on Venice and a handful of other targets over the years, before the remainder were loaded into the Locker and forgotten about. They weren't that terrifying, not compared to biological plagues that could exterminate entire human populations within weeks, or remain dormant long enough to spread through a sizable percentage of the Confederation. Modern-day nanotechnology should be able to prevent such plagues from spreading, but Andrew had heard from Doctor Pennington that some researchers were seriously considering the use of a tailored virus against the Spiders, if one could be developed that would get past *their* nanotech. Others were *designed* to avoid such countermeasures; one, in particular, set up feedback patterns within the brain that looked harmless, but taken overall were almost invariably fatal.

He shivered. Thule had developed thousands of unpleasant weapons and many of them had been placed into the Weapons Locker, or destroyed outright. There was the retrovirus that altered human DNA to the point where Thule-selected traits would breed true, creating a whole race of slaves. Others were biological recipes for enhanced animals, from killer dogs to armed chimpanzees, that could be turned against any human or inhuman foe. The survivors of those experiments had all been destroyed after the war, and Confederation researchers could probably improve upon the Thule hackwork, but even so... were there prices too high to pay for victory?

"We couldn't use them and remain human," Katherine said, divining his thoughts. "We have to stand for something, anything, something that gives the Confederation the moral right to

exist. The animals are innocent and don't deserve to be uplifted into intelligent life with all its blessings and curses.”

Andrew said nothing.

The next chamber held supernova bombs. They'd been used twice, once as a test and once to blow up Thule's star, along with the planets, the entire defence establishment, the shipyards and God alone knew how many Thule citizens and prisoners. Andrew had heard that everyone involved in the decision to use them, over the following hundred years, had committed suicide, unwilling to live in a universe where they'd been allowed to kill so many humans. The Thule had deserved it, he knew, but afterwards, they'd found out how many slaves had remained on Thule itself...and died in fire.

They didn't look like much, merely tiny spheres, each one barely larger than a man, but deployed against a star, they would be instantly lethal. The star wouldn't last longer than an hour before it started spitting out flares, and within a day – at most – it would go supernova. The entire Confederation would have problems evacuating a single planet, certainly within a day, and unless matter transmission was invented, it would be impossible to save the lives of people trapped within a gravity well. He stared at one, unwilling to step closer; if they ever located a Spider homeworld, he knew what he intended to use one to do.

“I won't argue,” Katherine said, when he said as much. “No one will argue for a few hundred years, and then they'll all start second-guessing us.”

Other weapons were just weird. A reality-disrupter, a device so dangerous that it had never been tested, and a gravity-pulsar that could wreck havoc on an entire star system, were studied and quickly discarded. The reality-disrupter probably wouldn't work, Andrew knew; the scientist who had stumbled across it had committed suicide and no one else had ever been able to understand his maths. An antimatter-converter, a wormhole cannon that shot energy through a wormhole using the mass of an entire planet as fuel, a series of mines that had been designed to track starships through jaunt space, a weapon that somehow affected time itself, a gadget that folded space into a loop that would never release its target...the list seemed never ending. Finally, they reached the radiation-cannon...and studied it carefully.

“That's it?” Katherine asked, surprised. The cannon wasn't much larger than a man. A standard heavy energy cannon was nearly a hundred times larger than any human. It might have looked vaguely sinister, if unfinished, but apart from that it just wasn't very spectacular. “That's all there is to it?”

Andrew read the notes quickly. The Peacekeepers who'd sealed it up in the Locker had been more than a little scared of it – with good reason, it seemed. It generated a massive torrent of radiation, enough to overwhelm an unprepared starship's shields, and wasn't a precise weapon. Mounting it on a starship would be signing the death warrants for the entire crew; at that range, no amount of shielding would save the humans onboard. The AI and the automated control systems would be completely fried.

“It looks that way,” he said, skimming the other notes. The weapon had a dozen limitations built in, most of them a result of poor design, but a handful that were impossible to fix without further developments of Confederation technology. The scientists onboard the

Scientific Enquiry would probably be able to improve the design...if he wanted to allow them to get close to the Cannon. He wasn't sure *he* wanted to be so close to it. "I wonder..."

He smiled as the line entered his head. "You're sure? You don't want to put it through rigorous safety tests, demand that I tone down its strength and eventually deploy it in a year or two; long after the original reason for its creation has passed? Wow...well. If you insist then it seems I have no choice but to unleash this glorious...err...necessary weapon of mass destruction."

"You're not allowed to talk any more," Katherine said dryly. The line came from the last production featuring an imagined version of the Locker, one played for laughs, rather than serious development. Just being so close to the cannon was making Andrew nervous. It was a spaceman's nightmare made flesh. "What do we do now?"

Andrew fired off a series of instructions to the AI. "We load this...*thing* onto the spacer, get out of here, transfer it to the *Dragonfire*...and then we deploy it. God help us all."

Chapter Forty

“Fire,” Captain Mija Mallory ordered.

The superdreadnaught *Armageddon*, the first of her class, didn't even shudder as she unleashed a burst from her antimatter cannons. The asteroid, a useless piece of rocky junk that had been floating in space for centuries, was caught in a colossal explosion and vaporised. Without shields, without the ability to manoeuvre, it couldn't hope to escape the attack.

“Direct hit,” the tactical officer confirmed. “Target destroyed.”

Mija smiled to herself. The *Armageddon* – and wasn't that an unusual name for a Peacekeeper starship – had been carefully put through its paces, even as hundreds more began construction in shipyards and Worldships, desperate to build up humanity's mobile reserve before the Spiders came at them again. The 1st Superdreadnaught Squadron, her new command, was more than just a promotion, but also a sign of Admiral Ramage's confidence in her. The ponderous ships possessed enough firepower to destroy entire clusters of planets.

“Bring us around and target the decoy starship,” Mija ordered. The *Armageddon* wouldn't be winning any prizes for being fleet of foot; the massive superdreadnaught moved slowly and calmly, rather than the lightning-quick actions of the *Feline*. The superdreadnaught wouldn't be able to catch any enemy starships, at least not Lobsters and other cruiser-sized vessels, but it would be able to head towards targets the enemy had to defend...and bring their defenders to battle. “Lock weapons on target.”

The decoy starship, an outdated starship from the early years of the Confederation that had never been repaired or upgraded to allow it to re-enter service, was positioned well out of energy range. It was actually moving, although not particularly fast; the engineers on the Worldship that had produced the *Armageddon* had warned that the decoy might well suffer a catastrophic engines failure in the middle of the tests. Under the circumstances, as long as they held out for the next ten minutes, Mija would be delighted. The outdated starship was going to die.

“I have weapons lock,” the tactical officer reported. It wasn't a fair test; any starship the size of the decoy starship that knew it was being targeted would be spinning up its Jaunt Drive, desperate to escape before it was too late. “Weapons are ready and primed.”

“Fire,” Mija ordered. This time, the starship *did* shudder as it unleashed a spread of over two hundred missiles in one titanic salvo. The superdreadnaught, two kilometres long, was armed to the teeth with weapons...and the power plants needed to power them. There were even plans for larger starships, warships the size of Cityships, even Worldships, although she suspected that those would fall victim to the law of diminishing returns. A two *hundred* kilometre long warship would be impressed, but also an easy target.

“Missiles tracking and closing in rapidly,” the tactical officer said. The missiles were a new design, ones capable of mounting and holding sprint mode for much longer, shortening the time to target radically. “Target is attempting to ward them off with point defence...”

Good thing we don't have to pay for the missiles, Mija thought irreverently, as a handful were picked off by the decoy's point defence. Sprint mode missiles were easy to localise, if not hit, and the decoy's point defence was modern. It also wasn't anything like enough; one hundred and eighty-four missiles slammed into the starship's hull and the explosion was massive. The titanic force of so many warheads completely vaporised the target.

"Target destroyed," the tactical officer announced. "Recycling missile launchers now, reloading...missiles ready."

"But no targets," Mija commented wryly. The superdreadnaught was quicker to recycle its missile launchers than either Peacekeeper cruisers or battleships. "Signal Command and tell them we're ready for the next test."

A horde of red icons appeared on the display, their drives lighting off and boosting them towards the *Armageddon*. "I have multiple incoming missiles," the sensor officer snapped. "I count four hundred missiles upwards, closing in on us in sprint mode!"

"Stand by point defence," Mija ordered. "Fire as soon as they enter energy range."

The *Armageddon* was also armed to the teeth with point defence. The designers had known that there was no way they would be able to conceal the superdreadnaught – it was too powerful, particularly in full combat mode, to be hidden by a cloaking field for long – so they had compensated by giving it as much point defence as they could stuff into the hull. They'd updated and improved the coordination programs with information gathered during the first six months of the war with the Spiders, uploading newer firing patterns that took advantage of everything they knew to make it much harder for the Spiders to score a hit. The decoy starship simply hadn't carried enough point defence to make a difference to its fate; the *Armageddon* packed enough – she hoped – to stand off such an assault.

She gripped her chair as the missiles started to vanish from the display. It didn't take much to destroy a warhead, particularly an antimatter one, but she couldn't count on all the detonations taking place a safe distance from the starship. Missiles were being wiped out by the dozens now, with the heavy energy weapons sweeping through space and eradicating every missile they touched, but a handful were still going to make it through to the inner defences. The pulsars and laser cannons opened fire as the missiles entered terminal attack range, boosting their drives for the final approach, and died under her fire. Only four survived to strike home against the shields...

The starship barely rocked. Built to take much greater attacks than that, the *Armageddon* didn't even notice the attack, the shields flickering slightly before they powered back up to normal. She'd calculated, purely out of academic interest, how many singularity warheads would be required to take out an *Armageddon* and the AI< after thinking about it, decided that it would take upwards of thirty direct hits, almost simultaneously, to break through the shields. The hull, the strongest the Peacekeepers had ever produced, might even survive an additional hit...although the starship would definitely be rendered uninhabitable by the experience. The sleet of radiation alone would wipe the crew out of existence.

"We have survived," the tactical officer said gravely. A series of low chuckles ran around the bridge. "Shields at ninety-seven percent, Captain; we're good for another engagement like that."

“Show me,” Mija ordered. The display reverted rapidly to the incoming missiles, showing her how each missile had been taken out. The *Armageddon*, oddly, didn’t carry any counter-missile missiles, something that worried her, although if they lost enough power to render the energy weapons unusable, they were dead anyway. The longer-ranged energy weapons had done well, but the pulsars and laser cannons had swept most of the missiles out of existence, far too close to the hull for comfort.

“The tactical programming was having problems coping with so many contacts,” the tactical officer said, reluctantly. Mija nodded in understanding; the programs had never been designed for such an intensive environment, and even the upgraded programs had problems coping with the results of so many warheads detonating so close to the starship. The disruptive bursts of energy caused by the explosions forced sensors to reset themselves, limiting the starship’s ability to see at the worst possible time. “Overall, once we get a network set up, with other superdreadnaughts in the firing line, we should be able to compensate for most of those weaknesses.”

“True,” Mija agreed. The other superdreadnaughts were still working up, but their crews were looking forward to the time when they could fight the entire 1st Superdreadnaught Squadron as one. They were mainly reservists, people with less to unlearn, but they were all eager to get back in the fight. Their friends and comrades were dying across the universe. “I want you and the tactical staff to analysis the entire engagement and work on steps we can take to improve our kill-rate. Once the Spiders work out how important these ships are, they’re going to throw everything they have at us, just to see what it takes to kill us.”

“Yes, Captain,” the tactical officer said. The vision of thousand, maybe even millions, of missiles bearing down on them wasn’t a pleasant one. “We can expand the firing programs to some degree with the use of remote sensor platforms, although they could be killed by the enemy with ease...”

“Captain,” the communications officer interrupted, “you’ve just received a priority-one message from Command. They want to talk to you at once.”

Mija nodded. Priority-one messages were rare...or had been, before the war. “I’m on my way,” she said. She’d have to use the perceptual reality chair in her office. “Commander Frazer, you have the bridge.”

The superdreadnaught was actually large enough to allow her an office right next to the bridge, one that was separate from her living quarters, it being a truism that the larger the starship got, the less space there was for the crew. The *Feline* hadn’t had an office for her personally, despite its size; there were times when she wondered if having an office would make her go soft. Admirals had offices, in her experience, not Captains. It was bare and undecorated – she hadn’t had the time to have it outfitted to her specifications – but equipped with all the necessary equipment. She sat down in the chair, accessed the controlling processors with her implants...

And was somewhere else. She’d used perceptual realities before, everyone had, but priority-one encryption was always something difficult. Junior officers whispered tales about people who somehow accessed conferences without permission, and how their minds were sucked

into an AI, never to be returned to their bodies, but the reality was quite different. They met on a grey plain, surrounded by eerie grey light; there was no colour, but their white uniforms.

“Captain,” Admiral Ramage said. Andrew hadn’t changed much physically since the last time she’d seen him, but he looked older somehow, as if he’d aged overnight. “I don’t have time to waste on pleasantries, so tell me...how are the tests proceeding?”

He wouldn’t call me here for something he could get from the Worldship’s computers, Mija thought carefully. “The tests are proceeding well,” she said. “We got most of the bugs out within the first week – there really weren’t very many of them – and the next batch of superdreadnaughts started construction while we worked on removing the final bugs and preparing for space. There are some programs that need to be improved – no one really understood how complex they would have to be – but overall, we could move now.”

“Good,” Andrew said. “When could you have the first superdreadnaughts ready to move?”

Mija blinked. “The entire first batch of superdreadnaughts...maybe a week, two weeks,” she said. “The second batch will still be at least a month away, maybe longer.”

“It’ll have to do,” Andrew said. “We have received information that the Spiders intend to attack a particular target, so we are massing a force to counter their move and hopefully destroy their force.” He told her, briefly, about the radiation cannon. “Once the cannon has done its work, the massed force will jaunt in and engage the enemy.”

“Fuck me,” Mija said, slowly. “I really hope you can target that thing properly.”

“So do I,” Andrew said. “It’s not exactly the most precise weapon anyone ever invented.”

“There’s a second problem,” Mija added. “How do you know *when* they intend to attack?”

“The information we...allowed to leak to them included a note that several high-ranking personnel, including myself, will be there two weeks from today,” Andrew said. “It’s apparently going to be a conference covering certain vital matters of our defence...and it should provide a tempting target. It’s also defended by a large force, so they will have to bring a larger force to the battle...unaware that we will have prepared a secondary force for the engagement.”

“It should work,” Mija concluded. It looked good, but then, most plans did on paper. It was when they were put to work that they were really tested. “I assume you have orders for the superdreadnaughts?”

“We’re calling in every starship that we can scrape up or spare from other duties,” Andrew informed her. “Every superdreadnaught that we’ve built, one that can fly or energise a beam, is being called upon. You will take your ships, ten days from now, to the massing point...and continue shaking down there until the enemy arrive. At that point...the fleet will engage.”

Mija nodded. “Yes, sir,” she said. “Who’s going to be in command of the fleet?”

“Admiral Shalenko will remain in command of 10th fleet,” Andrew said. “I will be taking command of the second force personally, flying my flag on the *Armageddon* itself.”

“Yes, sir,” Mija said, again. That explained why he was telling her about the plan personally. “The flag deck is ready for your use.”

“Excellent,” Andrew said. He looked off into the greyness for a long moment. “We need this victory, Captain, really badly.”

Mija said nothing. She'd kept up, as best as she could, with the news from the war front, but the impact of the war was hurting the Confederation badly. The refugees and the alien incursions were straining the Confederation's structure to the limits...and billions more humans just wanted to get away from the Spiders. She'd once thought that they had enough starships to handle any contingency...now, she saw that they hadn't had anything like enough. It didn't help that several dozen Worldships had just vanished off in the direction of other galaxies, hoping to set up a new civilisation well away from the Confederation...and the Spiders. They'd taken valuable productive capability with them.

She'd seen the projections. If nothing else changed, and something probably would, the Confederation would have several thousand superdreadnaughts and other newly-designed warships by the end of the year, as well as a greatly expanded production capability. That should give them the force to take back the Occupied Worlds and drive the Spiders out of Confederation space, but with so many unknowns surrounding the aliens, it was hard to know what effect it would really have. The Spiders would probably start building their own superdreadnaughts, once they saw the *Armageddon* and her sisters, and maybe even develop their own Radiation Cannon. She knew nothing about the science behind the device, but if it had been built a few hundred years ago, there was no reason why the Spiders couldn't duplicate it for themselves.

“I understand, sir,” she said. “I won't let you down.”

The return to reality was as jarring as always, but this time even the drab colours of her office seemed to be blindingly bright. She screwed her eyes shut, ignoring the painful tears that formed under her eyelids, until she'd recovered, pulling herself out of the chair carefully. It always left her feeling weak and drained, something that bothered her more than she cared to admit; it was easy, so easy, to become addicted to perceptual realities. There were probably people out there who had missed the war completely because they were still inside their personal perceptual realities...or even thought that the war was just another programmed perceptual reality. Mija had heard that there were even people who became paranoid, convinced that they were actually stuck inside a perceptual reality...

They should be so lucky, she thought, as she stood up. Her legs wobbled treacherously, but she was able to pace around the room until the shaking stopped. It was actually a mild reflex, compared to some of the more drastic physical reactions, but she still hated it. It made her look weak. *If only we could just turn the Spiders off...*

“Commander Frazer,” she said, tapping her implant, “I want to see you in my office in ten minutes. We have a move to plan.”

Sitting down at the desk, she accessed the processor and summoned up the reports on the latest developments with the superdreadnaughts. Ten days to get them to a particular location...it wasn't going to be easy. The engineers would want more time, the tactical

officers would want more practice, the helmsmen would want to run more simulations...and half of the crewmen weren't even present. The entire Peacekeeper organisation was having a major manpower shortage, at least until more recruits could be trained up to acceptable standards, and the superdreadnaughts had only half their recommended crews. Automation could only go so far.

“I should have gone for that promotion to Admiral,” she said, shaking her head. “I could have simply issued orders then and had them obeyed.”

Chapter Forty-One

The dull red star glowed through the portal.

Admiral Shalenko regarded it sardonically from the observation blister of the battleship *Vanguard*. The 10th fleet, most of which was holding station around the faked base the Spiders were apparently going to attack, hadn't had a very good war record so far. The Spiders had attacked the fleet's homeport on the opening day of hostilities, being driven off by the massed firepower of the starships and the shipyard's defences, but it had been little more than a hit and run attack. Since then, the fleet had been tied down on various defence missions, unable to take the offensive or even have a reasonable chance of encountering the enemy. Six months after the Battle of Terra-Prime, the only engagement Shalenko's starships had faced had involved chasing off a handful of other raids, until now.

He stared over at the star. It was useless, so useless that their preliminary sweep around the system had revealed nothing of interest. There were hardly any asteroids to target for target practice, let alone anything that might be useful... although he did have to admit that that did improve the chances of the Spiders taking the bait. The briefing on how they'd been slipped false information had amused him at the time, but now, floating in orbit around a mocked-up Confederation base and a dull red star, it was easy to believe that the Spiders simply hadn't noticed. They might not have been involved at all, or they might have been unwilling to believe what they'd read, or they might even have dismissed the thought of going after the President and the top Peacekeeper leaders.

Or maybe you're just bored, he admitted to himself, with the fundamental self-honesty that had aided him to rise through the ranks to Fleet Admiral. *You're sitting on your ass, doing fuck all, while your friends and comrades die across the universe.*

Shalenko peered away from the sun towards a cruiser, holding station near the *Vanguard*, barely visible as more than a twinkle of light. He knew it was a starship, but at that distance, it was hard to confirm that it really was a starship, rather than a star or something else. The Spiders might have had the system under covert observation for a long time and, if they'd scanned it before they'd set up the decoy, they would know it was a fake. There was no reason to assume that they had scanned the system – it had to be about as useless to them as it was to humanity – but it was easy to come up with reasons, now, why the plan wouldn't work.

And maybe they will find something better for you to do, eh Ivan? He thought. *Maybe you'll have a chance to prove yourself against a real threat, rather than waiting out here for a threat that refuses to materialise, eh?*

He'd thought that basic training was hard, until he'd moved into officer training, and then – later – the refresher course that was given to flag officers before they were given command of anything larger than a squadron. He'd excelled at them, but he hadn't understood until he'd stood on the flag deck of the starship *Hornitos* just what crushing burdens Admirals carried. He was the responsible person for the lives of millions of officers and crew, men and women the Peacekeepers could not afford to lose, and he carried the burden on his own. The Captains might command their starships, and the CAG might issue orders to the starfighter pilots, but he held the overall command... and it weighed him down. An Admiral who cared too much was dangerous, although less dangerous than an incompetent commanding officer,

but the pressure took its toll on anyone intelligent enough to understand the burden. Ever since the Spiders had announced their unwelcome appearance, Shalenko had had his crews running endless drills, preparing for a fight that seemed never to occur...and learning, again, what it meant to be an Admiral.

Four hundred starships, two thousand starfighters, millions of men... he thought coldly. He couldn't see more than a tiny handful of the starships, but he felt their presence as strongly as anything else in his life, the men and women whose lives depended upon him. If he failed them...

He straightened up, snapped down his uniform into proper position, and strode out of the observation blister. The battleship he used as his flagship had a larger crew than normal, but even so, he hardly saw anyone as he paced back down to the flag deck and entered the main command centre. From here, he could issue orders that the operators would turn into commands for the fleet, relying on his captains to turn them into reality. Peacekeeper doctrine was to issue vague orders, such as taking a planet, but leaving the exact methods up to the man on the spot...and here, he *was* the man on the spot.

The engineers had added another console to the centre. He looked down at it, feeling an unearthly tremor in his body, none the less real despite the certain knowledge that he was imagining it. The Radiation Cannon, primed and ready for use, floated in space, protected by a cloaking field. God alone knew what would happen when it was fired – it had only been used once before – but if it could even the balance a little, Shalenko wouldn't hesitate to use it. He settled back down into his chair and waited, as patiently as he could...

The waiting was always the worst.

“Attention on deck!”

First Admiral Andrew Ramage paused, long enough for the small party to snap a perfect salute for him, and then returned the salute to the Captain. She looked tired, as if she'd been working overtime since they'd discussed the requirements for the plan, but Mija had a new gleam in her eye as well. There were thirty superdreadnaughts in her force...and others, built in other locations around the Confederation, were on their way. Humanity's second fleet would be the most powerful in history.

“Welcome onboard the *Armageddon*,” Mija said, as the brief ceremony was concluded. “We're not quite at our best, but we're ready for service.”

“That's all I can ask,” Andrew said. He'd seen the designs, and walked through perceptual realities of what the completed starships should look like, but somehow they weren't the same as walking through the real ship. “Would you like to give me a tour?”

Mija grinned. “Of course,” she said, and nodded to her second officer. He would see to Andrew's staff, escorting them down to the CIC and then to their quarters. “If you would like to follow me...?”

Andrew nodded and allowed her to lead him into an intership car. “We're going to see the bridge first, and then engineering,” Mija explained. “There are still plenty of areas in the ship

that need to be sealed up and painted, but overall, the starship is ready to move and kick serious butt.”

The door opened, revealing a bridge that was only a little larger than a battleship’s bridge, but clearly designed for more crewmembers than sat at their stations. Mija waved a young man, rising up from the command chair, back into his seat before he could offer it back to her, while Andrew examined the bridge quickly and carefully. It looked capable, particularly with an AI to assist in turning commands into reality, and Mija was a good Captain. If anyone could handle the task of commanding a superdreadnaught and a squadron, she could handle it.

“We’re still running simulations with the other superdreadnaughts,” Mija said, as they returned to the intership car and headed down to engineering. The entire rear of the starship was taken up by power plants and the drives that propelled the massive vessel through space, providing a strange *thrumming* note that echoed through the entire ship, barely loud enough to be heard. “We should be able to act as a squadron, although a rather ponderous one, so please don’t expect us to move with the same flexibility as a cruiser squadron. Overall, we should be able to stand up to several times our number of Crabs, but simulations can only take us so far.”

“I know,” Andrew said. Engineering was even more impressive than he had expected, even though it was only one of the many power plants built into the vessel. There was enough power in the room to push a planet out of orbit, or even maintain the drive field long enough for the *Armageddon* to escape if it faced destruction. “I’m very impressed by what you’ve done so far.”

“The main problem is crew,” Mija admitted. “We’re fine at the moment, but if we take major damage, we’re going to have problems coping without the help of a shipyard. The self-repair functions are rather limited – economies of scale, again – and if we take a major pounding, we won’t be able to repair quickly. Everything is backed up – the designers built so much redundancy into this ship that we could lose half our systems and still keep swinging – but serious damage is going to cripple us.”

Andrew nodded grimly. “Everyone has shortages at the moment,” he explained. “We should have new recruits coming into the service within the next few months, but there are limits to how little we can train them before throwing them in at the deep end. Someone untrained would be almost as dangerous as having no one in a particular slot.”

They reached the CIC and Mija stepped aside, allowing him to precede her. The CIC, by long tradition, was the only place where the Admiral commanding the starship got to issue orders to crew, a tradition that Andrew hadn’t understood until he became a Captain himself. The Captain, supremely responsible for the starship, was the ultimate font of authority on the ship, despite being outranked by the Admiral, who was only a guest on the starship. Andrew was instantly relieved when he saw the CIC; it had been carefully organised to allow him to command the three thousand starships assembled to fight the Spiders, without losing track of what was actually happening at any moment.

“This is the largest CIC in the entire fleet,” Mija commented, as she showed him round quickly. “There are larger ones in various planetary defence centres, but this one was streamlined so as to allow you to issue orders through a set of sub-officers.”

Andrew said nothing. They'd simulated commanding so many starships ever since he had realised what they were going to need, but commanding so many different ships wasn't going to be easy. Their lack of practice had ensured that they had lost the Battle of Terra-Prime, even though the Spiders had brought overwhelming firepower to the party, and he was determined that that wouldn't happen again. They were going to be drilling until the Spiders arrived...

"Good," he said, settling down in the Admiral's Chair. A quick command from his implants brought the system online and the CIC buzzed into life. The display glowed brightly, showing the live feed from Admiral Shalenko as well as the positions of all of the starships and starfighters around the *Armageddon*, and he ran through a series of quick checks. The display couldn't handle something as tiny as the starfighters, showing only squadrons rather than individual craft, but that wouldn't be a problem. They had amassed over a hundred thousand starfighters for the battle, enough fighters – he hoped – to give even the Spiders pause. "I see no reason to delay any longer, Captain; let us start with a few drills..."

"Follow me in and watch my six," Captain Chris Kelsey ordered, as he led the starfighters through a series of decoy targets. The sudden assignment to yet another unit had surprised him, before realising that something big, maybe even something decisive, was in the works. The starfighter pilots following him were all reservists, hastily called back to service and stuck back in the cockpit, but there was little wrong with their skills that drilling wouldn't cure. "Engage!"

He pressed his thumb down on the trigger and fired a burst of plasma at the first decoy, then the second, ducking and weaving to prevent the decoys drawing a shot on him. Hundreds of starfighters followed him – the object of the exercise was to wipe out all the decoys without having to reverse course – shooting as they moved through the flight path. It wasn't a particularly hard test – the Spiders might not have targets as small as the decoys, but the Spiders were actually intelligent and shot back with real weapons – but it was an interesting gauge of how quickly the pilots reacted. A final decoy exploded under his firepower and he led the stream of starfighters away from the testing zone.

"One decoy remaining," the AI governing the test informed him. "Decoy #4732 was missed by two pilots, Gregory and McBain."

"Inform them that they're buying the drinks tonight," Chris ordered. The pilots had an underground economy of favours, which they traded for items they wanted, mainly as a means of reinforcing any lessons learned from drills. "Contact Wing Commander Griffin and inform him that we are prepared for the second part of the drill."

He paused. "All ships, safety check," he said. "Confirm weapons safe; Code Blue."

The confirmations came back, one by one. "All ships confirm weapons safe," the AI said. Chris nodded slowly. Engaging fellow Peacekeepers with live weapons would get someone killed. "Wing Commander Griffin reports that his force is ready to engage..."

"Go," Chris ordered.

The starfighters spiralled out of nowhere, raging down towards Chris's force, weapons blazing ahead of them. The pilots under Griffin's command were some of the best in the service, using all their talents to stay one step ahead of the reservists, but the reservists had known most of the tricks while they had served themselves. The battle swiftly broke down into a dogfight as starfighter formations broke up, individual pilots targeting other individual pilots, leaving command and control in tatters. Chris laughed, threw caution to the winds, and dived down to pick off one of Griffin's pilots who, focusing on a reservist, had failed to watch his back.

"Got him," Chris exulted. Losses would be fairly even, both sides knew, even though pilots were forming into small groups to challenge the other side. The Spiders might be very inhuman, but they used similar tactics, forcing the human pilots to test their skills against one another in a random environment. The only way to do that was through challenging other starfighter wings to exercises, although one unfortunate pilot had been the first to be knocked out three times in a row. "I think..."

The starfighter's display went grey as the drive fields cancelled, bringing it to a halt. "What happened?"

"You didn't watch your six," the AI said. There was a faint, very faint, undeniable note of smugness in the artificial voice. "You were picked off from behind and you are, for the purposes of the exercise, dead."

Chris scowled. The starfighter would remain dead until the exercise came to an end.

"Let's just hope it's not an omen," he said, peering into the darkness of interstellar space. He knew he was surrounded by starships, but it was impossible to see any of them through the cockpit. The false visual display had vanished along with most of the power. "I have a bad feeling about this."

"Admiral, I just received an update from the 77th Cruiser Squadron," Commander Clayton Mancil said. "They're going to be overdue; there was a raid on a nearby system and they've been diverted to see if they can run down some of the raiders before it's too late."

"Understood," Admiral Shalenko said. It was a nuisance, but one he could live with. The nine cruisers wouldn't add *that* much to his mobile firepower. "Keep me updated and let me know their ETA, should they fail to intercept their targets."

He looked back down into the display as the Commander retreated. There was nothing other there, apart from his fleet...and the waiting was dragging on. Part of him wondered if the Spiders were doing it on purpose, trying to drive the crew mad, but that didn't make sense. If they knew what was happening, they certainly *would not* attack the fleet – both fleets. They'd go somewhere else instead...

A ping. "Admiral," Lieutenant Tracy Young said, "I have emergencies, multiple emergencies..."

Shalenko whirled around to stare at the main display. There was no mistaking the shapes forming up, one by one, as they emerged from Jaunt Space. Starship after starship, each one

bearing the unmistakable profile of ships that had caused so much death and devastation, forming up into an unmistakably aggressive formation.

“I have confirmation,” Tracy said. Shalenko could have told her that it was useless. “They’re definitely the Spiders, sir.”

Her voice fell to a hushed whisper. “They’re here...”

Chapter Forty-Two

The noise of the alarm brought Andrew out of a doze.

“We have confirmation, Admiral,” Commander Lucy Wong said, through the intercom. “Over four *thousand* Spider starships have arrived at the decoy target.”

Andrew cursed to himself as he dressed rapidly and ran out of his cabin into the CIC. He’d been working all day, trying to get the starships into something reassembling order and coherence, and the moment he went to sleep...the Spiders struck. His implants, working hard to boost him to full wakefulness, insisted that he’d had five hours of sleep, but he was having none of it. It felt as if he hadn’t slept at all.

“Report,” he ordered, as he took his seat. CIC was heaving with activity as the coordinating staff worked to get the orders out to every starship in the fleet. The starfighters were breaking off their exercises and returning to their carriers, while the starships were flash-waking their drives and preparing to jaunt into the combat zone. “What’s happening?”

“The Spiders started to arrive five minutes ago,” Lucy said, turning from her position at the other side of the room. It was hard to hear her over the babble of voices in the background as starship after starship reported in and confirmed their readiness status. “Admiral Shalenko sent the update; 10th fleet is preparing to engage.”

The Spiders must be licking their lips, if they have lips, Andrew thought. 10th fleet was powerful, but literally outnumbered ten to one. Without the Radiation Cannon, the Spiders would smash the fleet without much difficulty, certainly while it was tied down defending a stationary target. The tactical simulations had been run repeatedly; depending on the assumptions entered into the simulations, the fleet would last somewhere between ten minutes and forty minutes, but its destruction was inevitable.

“Good,” he said, forcing himself to concentrate on the priority. “Have all of our ships reported in yet?”

“Only a handful left, sir,” Lucy said. “The superdreadnaught *Melbourne* suffered a drive failure when her engineers flash-woke the drives – it seems her baffles were imperfectly aligned – and will be out of the fight.”

Andrew scowled. They were paying the price for haste. “Order her to move over to the Worldship, dock there, and travel back to the rendezvous point with her,” he ordered. The remaining starships had reported in; only a handful of them had minor problems and none of them would be out of the fight. The crews might be new and inexperienced, in most cases, but they were determined...and had been drilling endlessly over the last week. “We jaunt out as soon as the Radiation Cannon is deployed.”

The torrent of starships seemed never ending. Admiral Shalenko watched the fleet deploying slowly, each Crab and Lobster fitting neatly into its place in formation, and silently cursed the Radiation Cannon under his breath. It required the targets to be closer before it could be used, but there was no way they were going to take out more than a handful of the starships facing them with one shot. They might get a second, but he’d been warned that the cannon

might well fail after a single shot...or the enemy would fire on the cannon and destroy it before it could fire again. He'd wanted a fight...and now, looking at the Spider fleet, he realised he'd been wrong.

Be careful what you wish for, he reminded himself. Logically, he should have taken one look at the alien fleet and ordered a retreat. The Spiders weren't deploying Jammers; they had to know that he could retreat at any moment...and, instead, he was holding his ground. There had to be some puzzled black Spiders over there, he hoped...and, if they were unlucky, they would realise there was a trap. Even the President, the entire Confederation Parliament and all of the senior military leaders weren't worth the certain loss of four hundred starships.

"The enemy is advancing," the sensor officer informed him. A wall of icons, each one glowing red in the display, was advancing towards the tiny cluster of blue icons standing their ground. Wave after wave of Lobsters, backed up by the massive firepower of the Crabs, sweeping forwards to wipe humanity's imprudent starships out of space. "They are locking weapons on and launching tactical probes."

They must suspect something, Admiral Shalenko thought. They probably suspected that he'd cloaked additional starships somewhere, although four thousand enemy starships could probably fight their way out of a trap before it was too late. The probes would look for turbulence that would suggest the presence of cloaked starships and find nothing. There was, after all, nothing there to find.

"They will enter weapons range in thirty seconds," the tactical officer warned. Shalenko nodded once; the Spiders would simply bury them in missiles. There would be no cunning, no duplicitous manoeuvring, just brute force on a scale that would have been unimaginable, before the war. "Their weapons are locked on now."

Shalenko stood up and strode over to the new console. It glowed invitingly when he pressed his hand against the keys and it read his command ID, opening up and allowing him to trigger the cannon. He'd had it positioned on an old starship, well away from any other Peacekeeper ship and probably unlikely to be considered a serious threat by the Spiders, waiting for use. He keyed in the first command sequence, then the second, and finally the targeting patterns. If they got a second shot...

"Radiation Cannon primed," the AI said. It had been old enough that interfacing it with modern systems had actually been tricky. "Targets locked."

Shalenko pushed down hard on a single red button. "Fire," he ordered.

Centuries ago, a human scientist had stumbled on a means of generating a cascade of radiation from an imperfectly formed wormhole. The wormhole, being so tiny that it had literally *no* width at all, somehow plucked radiation from space, twisted it around and fired it out like a cannon. The researchers of the time had promptly developed the accident – the scientist hadn't been looking for a superweapon – into a useable weapon, one that produced a torrent of radiation on command. Now, the AI that had been implanted into the cannon long ago brought up the wormhole, sucked energy out of the fabric of space, and poured energy into the vacuum until the tiny wormhole began to form.

Seconds later, years as the AI reckoned time, the sealed wormhole began to twist through space, trying to spit out the radiation and vanish back into nothingness. Targeting software came online, priming the wormhole to discharge at the right time, while locking onto the set of starships that were going to be hit. The wormhole, overflowing with energy, couldn't hold any longer...and a massive spread of radiation erupted across space. Moving at the speed of light, it struck the Spider starships before they could have any warning of its arrival...and the effects were disastrous.

The AI noted this dispassionately and ignored it, rapidly running through the priming sequence again, realising – too late – that the wormhole had damaged the controlling systems for the cannon. A moment later, the power charging for the wormhole overloaded and exploded, destroying the cannon in a shattering blast.

“My God,” Shalenko breathed, as he took in the damage. Seven hundred and forty Spider starships had simply...stopped. The reading from the probes he'd launched after the cannon had fired showed massive system failures and the certain death of the entire crews, irradiated beyond hope of survival. The starships were drifting now, a handful leaking plasma into space, a couple even exploding as they lost containment for antimatter warheads...and even the news that the cannon had destroyed itself didn't turn him away from the scene. “What have we done?”

The tactical officer had no time for second thoughts, or wool-gathering. “Admiral, the remaining starships are proceeding towards us,” he said. Shalenko stared; the Spiders would have been much smarter just to run, even if the odds were still massively in their favour. “They will enter missile range in twenty seconds.”

“Arm point defence, bring shields up to maximum strength,” Shalenko ordered. Overloading the shields like that risked long-term failure, but he knew that if the reinforcement fleet were delayed, long-term survival would be the last thing on their minds. “Prepare to engage the enemy.”

“Jaunt us in, now,” Andrew ordered. He'd stared – too long – at the effects of the cannon on the enemy fleet. Nothing other than perfectly tuned shields would be required to survive such an attack...and he was bitterly aware that the Spiders, having seen the weapon in action, would be *very* motivated to duplicate it. They probably could, too, unless they saw sense and offered a truce. “Engage the enemy!”

The superdreadnaught shivered slightly as it jaunted and emerged in the enemy's rear. He'd considered actually jaunting into the middle of the enemy formation, but the odds of survival wouldn't be good, not when the Spiders automated servants were probably watching for any such action. A starship that had just jaunted would be unshielded and easy prey for even a mere nuclear warhead. The remainder of the massive fleet followed, cumbersome as it was...and, for the first time, Andrew saw a Spider force hesitate. The entire force seemed to slow, just barely...but enough for him to see, and understand.

“Deploy the sub-fleets now,” he snapped. The carriers would already be launching their starfighters, some assigned to defend the massive fleet, others designated to attack the very heart of the enemy formation. The antistarfighter cruisers, designed and built in record time,

would save more of their starfighters for aggressive actions. “Deploy the Jammers. Prepare to engage.”

The Spiders were turning slightly. He noticed, with a sickening heart, that they were firing...on their own disabled vessels. One by one, they were being blown away, just to prevent them from falling into Peacekeeper hands. He could understand their logic, but watching it happened...he remembered the black Spider eating her own daughter and shivered. The Spiders didn't look *or* think like humanity at all. Was it even possible to come to terms with them?

“Fire,” he ordered, as they passed into missile range. “Give them hell!”

The superdreadnaughts fired as one. A moment later, the battleships and cruisers added their own firepower, throwing over a hundred thousand missiles into the very teeth of the Spider formation. They'd been targeted specifically on the Crabs, the main enemy starships...and, as long as the Crabs were caught within the Jamming field, they couldn't run. It was the Battle of Terra-Prime in reverse; they couldn't destroy the entire fleet in the opening salvos, no matter how much he wanted to shatter them and bring them down in flames, but they could get mauled.

The Crabs reacted instantly to the new threat. One by one, they belched a horde of missiles of their own, thirty thousand missiles, targeted on ten of the superdreadnaughts. Andrew allowed himself a moment to be impressed; the Spider commander, assuming that there was such a person and they weren't facing a demented hive mind, had reacted almost perfectly. Unsure of the capabilities of the new starships, he had moved to test them, forcing the humans to defend them.

“Bring up the combined point defence network,” he ordered. It was the first time that *anyone* had tried such a large network with so many starships; it hadn't been tested even during the later years of the Thule War, where thousand-starship fleets were common. Then, the data network had been limited to smaller clusters of ships; now, in theory, the AI could handle *every* starship in the fleet. “Engage the incoming missiles at will.”

He turned his attention back to the flights of missiles streaking into the teeth of the enemy defences. The Spiders, he was amused to note, used subgroups for point defence as well...and hadn't had them prepared to cover the entire fleet. The humans had targeted nearly two hundred Crabs in their first strikes and the Lobsters, caught out of place, were moving desperately to cover them...too late. Point defence clusters and counter-missiles did what they could, but they hadn't been prepared for the sheer volume of human fire. One by one, the missiles started to strike home...

The display altered, showing images sent back from the tactical probes, showing Crabs glowing in the vastness of space as missiles struck their shields, explosions seeming to hesitate in the darkness before fading away, only to be replaced by other explosions. A Crab's shields failed and it died in a blinding flash, the other missiles targeted on that starship automatically retargeting themselves on other starships. That, too, was an improvement; the older missiles tended to just expend themselves when their prior targets were destroyed. Crab after Crab died, a handful of Lobsters following them into oblivion, shattering the integrity of the enemy fleet.

We're not taking out more than a handful, Andrew thought, dazed. The battle had already cost the Spiders more than any other battle, certainly since they'd fought humanity, but it was still only a tiny fraction of their force. Their point defence, despite its limitations, was performing better than predicted, even saving a handful of Crabs from certain destruction. *We're going to have to hit them harder...*

"Incoming," Lucy warned. The Spider missiles had been engaged as soon as they entered range, but a handful had survived to home in on the *Armageddon*. The superdreadnaught barely rocked under their impact, somehow surviving seven singularity warheads in quick succession, even as it prepared to launch a second salvo of missiles itself. "Admiral?"

Andrew looked at the display. One superdreadnaught had sucked up seventeen missiles and was leaking air, but the remainder had survived the pounding...and were ready to fire again.

"Fire," he ordered. The Spiders weren't doing anything decisive, not yet, and as long as that continued, he intended to hurt them as much as possible. They were launching starfighters of their own, from the larger Crabs rather than any carriers of their own, but nothing else. Maybe they were stunned, or maybe they were bait...although if they had enough starships to consider using four thousand of them as bait, they were probably going to win the war. "Hit them as hard as you can..."

The Spiders fired again, this time throwing everything they had at the decoy base. It was large enough and powerful enough to fool anything, but an internal inspection, but it mounted almost no point defence. The 10th Fleet would try to save it, but there weren't enough starships in the fleet to hold back so many missiles...did they still think they were about to kill the President, or were they just exercising their spite before trying to break free and escape?

"The decoy base has been destroyed," Lucy noted. The Spiders had hit it with enough firepower to shatter a planet the size of Jupiter. The *real* Fortress Maximus wouldn't have survived such a treatment. "They're turning to face the incoming storm of missiles."

Andrew watched grimly as the patterns formed up slowly. The Spiders were unable to jaunt, but having completed their mission, they were likely to try to break free – if they could. They had enough starships to sacrifice some of them to save the others, but if they didn't move soon, they wouldn't be able to extract any of the major starships, or even most of the Lobsters. What if...

The second salvo of missiles swept over the Spider formation, slamming into shields and specifically targeting command starships. It was easier to pick them out, just as the Spiders had picked out the *Armageddon*; the command starships were the ones transmitting more signals to the others, even if they were unreadable. Andrew remembered a discussion with Doctor Pennington about Spider abilities to understand human languages and having decided, at the end, that all they could do was rely on the encryption programs. They should be unbreakable, but if the Spiders could read them...

"Seventy-one starships down," Lucy reported. The Spiders were moving now, drawing their starships into one great hammer formation as they bore down on the human positions. "Sir, they're heading right for us."

“They’re insane,” Andrew breathed...and then he saw the point. If the Spiders came into energy range, they’d maul the human fleet just as badly as they were mauled themselves. They might not survive the experience – he was certain that most of them would die in minutes once they came into energy range – but they would take a lot of humans down with them. “Switch to rapid fire as soon as they come into range and prepare to manoeuvre to keep the range open!”

It wasn't going to work, not perfectly. He hadn't seen anything like it outside of combat simulations; over seven thousand starships, human and alien, were about to fight it out at knife range. In minutes, they would be within range...

“General signal to the fleet,” he ordered. The titanic exchange of fire would be visible even to the naked eye. “All starships are to concentrate on the larger enemy starships. Fire as soon as they come into range.”

Chapter Forty-Three

The starfighter seemed to shake slightly as Captain Chris Kelsey led the wing into the oncoming Spider fleet. The massive Crabs were advancing, launching missiles towards the human starships, determined to strip away as much of their cover as possible before they entered energy weapons range. The tactical update, downloaded into his head during a few seconds of quiet, reported that the Spiders apparently – no one was entirely sure how they thought – intended to duke it out at energy range, something that might give them a chance of either inflicting equal harm or escaping, once they took out the Jammers.

“All right,” he said, as the display updated again. The Spiders had launched a cloud of their own starfighters to block their path- they were actually launching their starfighters directly from their Crabs, he noticed, unless those particular Crabs were actually carriers – and forming up in front of them. His new PKSF4638 Space Superiority Fighter had no shipkillers, something that left him feeling rather more naked than he had thought, but it should be a superior starfighter to anything the Spiders had deployed. “Follow me in, dogfight formation!”

Even experienced pilots could be fooled by the deceptive distances between starfighters. One moment, they were seemingly hours away from the enemy starfighters, the next they were right next to them and mixed up, dogfighting their way through the enemy formation, breaking it up and trying to take out as many as they could before the enemy broke through the human formation and concentrated on the shipkiller-armed starfighters. Losses, all other things being equal, would be fairly balanced; the Spiders, at such ranges, would probably kill as many humans as they themselves lost starfighters. It didn't matter; if the Space Superiority force kept the enemy's attention on *them*, the shipkillers – which were the real threat – might get through unobserved.

“He's on my tail,” a pilot snapped out. Chris altered his course, seeing the hunted pilot flipping out of a drive and twisting to avoid a Spider starfighter that was following him through every twist and turn. Nothing seemed to shake the Spider pilot; Chris mentally saluted him even as he guided his own starfighter into an intercept course. “I can't shake him, can't shake him...”

“Incoming,” Chris said. The enemy starfighter, focused completely on the kill, missed him coming up behind until it was too late. He fired a long burst of plasma fire that barely missed the randomly jinking starfighter, which twisted, abandoned the prey, and then tried to escape. Chris followed him through his own series of evasive manoeuvres, holding his fire until he was sure of a real kill, and finally pushed his thumb down on the trigger. The enemy starfighter vanished in a flicker of light. “Watch my six; incoming enemy fighters!”

Four other pilots fell in around him as the enemy starfighters closed in, both sides shooting at each other as soon as they came into range. Human minds could barely handle combat at such speeds, even with the latest and greatest enhancements; the tiny AIs on the starfighters fired whenever they saw a chance of a hit. Even AIs couldn't guarantee a hit, not with each starfighter moving permanently in a random pattern; luck played a greater role in the fighting than judgement. He saw an enemy starfighter die, then one of his own, and finally killed one with his own cannons, just before it could escape. Dogfighting in a melee was something so uncontrollable that everyone sought to avoid it...even as they claimed to love it.

“This is Delta,” a new voice snapped. “Advancing on Target #7 now. Cover us!”

Chris sent a mental acknowledgement into the tactical network and pulled out of his spin. For a moment, he was flying alone and unheeded in empty space, granted a worm’s eye view of the titanic conflict raging around him, a space battle out of nightmares. Even the Battle of Terra-Prime hadn’t been as vicious as the confrontation between two such massive fleets; his HUD tapped thousands of missiles in flight, most of them locking in on targets and entering their terminal attack pattern. The Delta Wing, seventy-two starfighters armed with shipkillers, were advancing towards their target; a massive undamaged Crab and four smaller Lobsters, deployed in a shielding pattern around it.

His own squadron fell in around the shipkillers, clearing the way and smashing through enemy starfighters that attempted to stop them. There was no real difference between the shipkillers and the starfighters he’d flown before being given the updated model, and they could dogfight as he himself had back in the earlier battles, but as long as they carried their shipkillers they had to be protected. Plasma cannons were absolutely lethal against enemy starfighters and capital missiles, but firing them at a starship’s main hull would be about as useful as throwing eggs at them, they wouldn’t even bother to pause long enough to scratch the itch. The shipkillers might have looked no different from the standard starfighters – and he’d flown shipkilling missions himself – but their actions were betraying them.

“Watch that Lobster,” someone snapped into the network, a red circle appearing in the display around the starship. It looked fairly normal – up close, it didn’t actually bear *that* much resemblance to a Lobster – but Chris could see why the unknown pilot was concerned; the Lobster was radiating far more targeting emissions than it should have been able to generate. A Crab or a dedicated antifighter cruiser...

It struck him. “That’s a bloody *Standfire*,” he snapped. A *Standfire*-class cruiser wasn’t armed with anything, but antifighter weapons...and the shipkillers were bearing down on it and brushing into its range. “Take it out, now!”

The enemy cruiser opened fire, seeming to explode in the display as it pumped out plasma burst after plasma burst, filling space with deadly flickers of light. Five of the shipkillers, falling into their attack patterns just a second too late, were picked off and blown out of space, two more were so narrowly missed that their pilots fell out of formation and had to regroup before rejoining their fellows. Four more launched their shipkillers towards the Lobster, only to see its point defence – also impressively comprehensive – pick them off despite sprint mode.

“Two of the other ships also appear to be enemy antifighter craft,” one of the flight controllers reported. Chris heard him with half an ear; he was too busy flying in directly towards the enemy cruiser. “Recommend evasive action.”

Chris ignored him. “Follow me in, fire when you have a clear shot,” he ordered, as the starfighter swooped down into the very teeth of enemy fire. He could almost *see* the cruiser, a glittering star in the distance, as flickers of light shot past him, some of them coming too close for comfort. He should be invulnerable, unless the enemy scored a hit through sheer luck, as long as he kept randomly flying through the storm, but if they concentrated on him, maybe they would miss the other shipkillers. “Take him!”

Thirteen shipkillers had followed him in; they fired, launching all four of their missiles in a single salvo. Four of them paid the price as enemy plasma bolts picked them off and killed the pilots before they had a chance to escape, the others whirled around and evaded as their missiles lanced in towards their target. The Lobster retargeted its weapons and started to sweep the missiles out of space, but it was too late; seven of them crashed home against their shields and swept the cruiser out of existence in one long roll of thunder.

“Scratch one Lobster,” someone said. The empty shipkillers, no longer dangerous to the Spider capital ships, were rapidly reassigned to the covering squadrons. They would have to help cover their armed fellows until the entire wing ran empty. “Scratch *two* Lobsters!”

The third Lobster ignored Chris when he flew in close, so close that he was almost skimming along the edge of the shield. Some tactical analysis program on the enemy starship had just proved its worth by picking out the newer starfighters and deducing, correctly, that they couldn't actually take out capital starships. Instead, the Lobster poured fire towards the remaining shipkillers and was only distracted when a handful of shipkillers that had already fired off their missiles swooped in close, allowing some of their comrades to get their shots off. The final Lobster was a standard cruiser, effectively helpless against the shipkillers...and then the Crab, struck by a series of ship-launched missiles from one of the superdreadnaughts, staggered and fell out of formation. A moment later, two shipkiller missiles finished it off, leaving the starfighters almost alone in space...

Not quite, he thought, the two fleets were almost touching now, both sides launching missiles in sprint mode as they sought to inflict enough damage to give them a chance of survival. The Spiders seemed to be pressing harder and harder, and the human fleet was forming up to meet them, with 10th fleet harrying their rear and launching strikes against the rear guard...

Smiling to himself, he accepted his orders from the flight controller and picked an intercept course. The enemy still had hundreds of starfighters and they had to be picked off before they could escape...

“Bring up the main energy weapons,” Mija ordered, almost unable to believe her own eyes. They'd simulated possible courses for the space battle, but she'd never really believed that *anyone*, even the Spiders, would be gutsy enough to push for an energy-range duel with such a disparity of numbers. The latest count claimed that only two thousand enemy starships remained, although it didn't account for combat power; a single Crab had more combat power than anything short of a superdreadnaught. “Prepare to engage.”

The *Armageddon* was shaking constantly now as it went to rapid fire, pumping out the missiles as quickly as the launchers could be reloaded, firing them at the Crab inching towards them at speeds no human mind could comprehend. Everything happened so *slowly* on an interstellar scale; the starfighters humming about the fleets seemed to be moving impossibly fast, compared to the capital ships. Nine superdreadnaughts had formed up around her starship, linking their weapons together into one coordinated firing plan; she'd given up trying to keep track of the point defence. The enemy had marked out the *Armageddon* for death and, knowing that it was the command ship for the entire human fleet, she couldn't allow it to die.

And, of course, it was *her* ship. They weren't going to kill it on her watch.

“Captain, the Crabs are charging their forward gamma cannons,” the sensor officer reported. Mija frowned; gamma cannons shot bursts of focused radiation, rather like a smaller version of the Radiation Cannon, and disrupted shield integrity. “They are preparing to engage the *Darrin Webster*.”

“Lock our own weapons on the first Crab,” Mija ordered, as the Crabs slowly came into range. “*Fire!*”

The *Armageddon*'s antimatter cannons opened fire, sending brilliant streaks of light flaring through space to impact directly on the Crab's shields. The antimatter cannons had actually been around for centuries, but very few people in their right mind would consider deploying them on starships during peacetime, not when the effects of an accident would destroy the entire ship and anything unlucky enough to be next to it when the ship exploded. They generated magnetic shields that spun around the antimatter, keeping it safe until it struck the enemy starships, where it exploded with all the force of a singularity warhead. The Crab, struck by coordinated fire from seven superdreadnaughts, never stood a chance.

“Target destroyed,” the weapons officer said. Alarms blared through the superdreadnaught as questing enemy energy weapons, gamma cannons and long-range laser cannons, found the *Armageddon* and hacked away at her shields. The shields had been modified to the point where they could actually leech away some of the enemy fire and use it to power their reinforcement, something that only Worldships had been able to do previously, but the enemy was simply pumping in too much energy. “Switching to counter-battery fire...”

The superdreadnaughts picked individual targets and fired on them. The Crabs, meanwhile, focused their own weapons on a single superdreadnaught and burned away at her shields. A second Crab died, and then a third, but a moment later, the *Clarke* exploded in a towering burst of radioactive plasma. Mija glanced down at the display, hoping against hope that some of her crew had gotten to the lifepods in time, but there were no beacons flickering out in the darkness. The ship had died too quickly for any hope of escape.

“Open the range,” she ordered quietly. They would have to use their advantage in firepower carefully; the Crabs, collectively, possessed more firepower than the superdreadnaughts. Orders were flickering through the network, sending battleships and cruisers to the defence of the superdreadnaughts, even as the enemy funnelled their own starships into the teeth of the human formation. She hadn't seen anything like it, not in all her years as a Peacekeeper; two massive fleets were crashing together as if they were being forced to merge. “Select safe targets and launch missiles.”

“Aye, Captain,” the tactical officer said. Throwing singularity missiles at targets as close as the Crabs had it's own dangers, not least being caught in their own weapon's effects, but there were plenty of targets far away enough to be safe. The warning sounds continued to blare through the *Armageddon*; the Spiders were steadily bringing the temperature to the boil. They were devastating the human fleet...and they, in turn, were being devastated. She saw two of their icons wink out so quickly they almost died together, and then winced as a battleship desperately sacrificed itself to save a superdreadnaught.

The human fleet was moving now, falling back and daring the Spiders to follow, but the Spiders had no choice. They couldn't escape unless they took out the jamming starships, but

in order to do so, they had to burn their way through the human fleet. She watched swarms of Spider starfighters winging their way past her ships, despite the point defence taking shots at them as they passed, and heading towards the jamming starships, intending to take them out. An entire combat group of starfighters was orbiting the jammers, serving as their defenders, already moving to counter the new threat...

A massive shockwave running through the entire starship brought her back to awareness. "Report," she snapped. "What happened?"

"They struck us with a pair of singularity missiles," the engineering officer reported. "Shields bled though enough energy to damage compartments #467 and #532, knocking out several missile launchers and energy mounts. Repair crews are on their way now."

Mija kept her face blank. They had only a limited damage control force on duty and that force wasn't trained enough for repairing such significant damage. The superdreadnaught could still move and fight, but it had a gaping hole in its defences, one that the enemy would not fail to notice and take advantage of in their attacks. A set of missiles that flew into the damaged areas would be completely safe from point defence...

"Order the *Farnsworth* to move up and cover our damaged flank," she ordered shortly. The antifighter cruiser would be able to provide enough point defence, she hoped, to shield the *Armageddon* from more hits in the blind spot. Older starships, she remembered, had had real problems with blind spots generated by their drives, but modern starships rarely had them...unless they took serious damage. "Contact the *Harrowing* and the *Nemesis* and inform them that..."

"Captain," the tactical officer snapped, interrupting. "The *Webster*!"

Mija's attention snapped back to the main display. The superdreadnaught *Darrin Webster* had been on point...and the enemy had closed in on it. She saw, moving with a ponderous inevitability, a Crab, bleeding plasma from a dozen wounds, but still possessing the drive capability to power its way towards the *Webster*, which couldn't escape in time. Slowly, very slowly, the two starships collided and vanished together in a shattering explosion. It was too large to describe, a supernova bright enough to be seen with the naked eye, a light that would be seen all over the galaxy...

My God, she thought, in a brief moment of stillness. Even the Spiders seemed stunned. *All those people...*

"Captain, the enemy force is altering course towards this starship," the sensor officer reported. "They're locking on to our hull."

Mija shook her head to shake out the awe and lingering horror. "Understood," she said. "Order the squadron to fall in and prepare to burn them out of space."

"Understood," the tactical officer said. "Captain..."

He paused. "Captain, the enemy starships just fired a projectile down towards the sun!"

Chapter Forty-Four

Andrew stared at the red icon blinking away as it raced down towards the local star.

“Analysis,” he snapped, already suspecting that he knew the answer. “What is that projectile?”

The Analysis Officer looked over from his console. “Admiral,” he said, his voice shaking slightly, “it has to be a supernova bomb or something compatible.”

They have supernova bombs? Andrew thought in a state of numb shock. It wasn't impossible – they *had* been developed by the much less advanced Grand Alliance, after all, and someone else could have stumbled on the theory – but somehow he had been convinced that the Spiders didn't have them. Perhaps, like humanity, they regarded them as a weapon of last resort, rather than being willing to destroy stars like firecrackers. *Of course, if they want the worlds, charring them with a supernova isn't going to leave them with anything habitable...*

The supernova bomb, if that was what it was, was already well outside any hope of interception. It was racing down towards the star with all the speed of a missile, unconcerned about the survival requirements of the puny humans – or Spiders – onboard, and nothing he had could intercept it in time. He urgently accessed the most sealed memory cell in his head, cursing the requirements that forbade him sharing it with his staff; it had been too long since he'd analysed anything for himself. The first supernova bombs had taken time to do their deadly work, but the weapons had been improved several times before they'd finally been sealed away in the Weapons Locker, taking only twenty minutes to send the star bursting into a nova. A red dwarf had less mass than a yellow main sequence star, but somehow he doubted that that would prevent the bomb from destroying the entire star.

“General signal to the fleet,” he ordered, bringing himself back to reality. The Spider tactic was understandable...and cunning. Unable to escape, they had forced him into a position where he had to accept the complete destruction of his fleet along with theirs, or turn off the jammers and hope that they could escape in time. The Spiders, of course, would escape at the same time. “I have reason to believe that the Spiders have struck the star with a supernova bomb.”

As he watched, the missile vanished within the star's corona. Every sensor on the *Armageddon* not urgently required for self-defence was watching it; he had hoped that the projectile would vaporise, leaving them without a danger, but it survived and plunged further on into the star. It had to be a supernova bomb; he'd read enough of the notes to deduce roughly what it would do. Inside the star, protected by a self-generated gravity compression wave, it would start to ignite carbon fusion, triggering a runaway nuclear fusion reaction. The effect, propelled forward by the gravity waves in the bomb's last moments of life, would rapidly send the star supernova. The only question was how long it would be before the star actually exploded.

“The jamming field is to be deactivated, now,” he ordered. They'd taken out over three thousand Spider starships, but the remaining seven hundred would survive and fight another day, if they managed to escape once the field faded away. “All starships are to watch the star through gravimetric sensors and watch for quakes within the star's gravity field. When those quakes begin, the entire fleet will jaunt out and rendezvous at the preset coordinates. All

starfighters are to return to their carriers, but the starships are to keep pounding the enemy until they retreat.”

He scowled. He would have liked to say something encouraging, but what? The *Scientific Enquiry I – III* proved how easy it was to get caught up in a supernova and destroyed. A properly-tuned set of force shields could probably handle the blast and get them out alive, but there was no time to retune the force shields in the middle of a battle, not with enemy starships, still dangerously close, pounding away at the superdreadnaught. In theory, the gravimetric sensors would provide advance warning before the blast front from the supernova actually struck, but very few people had actually tested the theory and survived the experience.

“Bring the fleet around,” he ordered tiredly. The Spiders were recalling their own starfighters, he saw; they had to be able to tell that the human force was breaking off and preparing to escape the coming maelstrom. The humans had taken out most of the Crabs, he noted sourly; the odds were that a few hundred unfortunate Spiders were going to be caught by the blast front and vaporised. “I want all firing patterns to be concentrated on taking out the enemy jaunt drives and stranding them here to die.”

“Yes, sir,” Lucy said. There was an oddly vengeful tone in her voice. The Spiders had snatched certain victory from the humans; the battle would probably end up being called a draw. “The firing patterns have been uploaded into the battle computers.”

Not for the first time, Andrew wished that he could do more than just observe. Admirals throughout history had felt the same way; they had issued their orders and all they could do was wait and see what happened. Some would bombard their subordinates with trivial orders, just to feel that they were Doing Something, others would wait as calmly as they could, safe at home. He was on the front line with the rest of his people, but the situation had passed out of his hands. The jamming field was fading...and when it was gone, the Spiders would rapidly follow and leave the humans to the dying star.

The display updated again. Massive gouts of fiery gas were bursting out of the star’s corona, spitting out in defiance against the coming destruction, but not yet powerful enough to escape the star’s gravity field. The star had been fairly stable ever since the first scout ship had skimmed around it, decided it was worthless, and flown onwards to more profitable stars; now, it would be minutes before it exploded into a nova. The gravimetric sensors were still reporting that the star was normal, but that would change soon. It wouldn’t be long now...

The Spider starfighter spun out of nowhere, coming around the tip of the Crab’s rear drive section and spitting fire at the pair of human starfighters before they could react. Chris evaded as soon as the AI screamed in his ear, ducking and weaving to avoid being hit, but his wingman wasn’t so lucky. Clipped by a plasma bolt, his starfighter spun out of control and crashed into the Crab, which rumbled on, untroubled by the tiny explosion. Chris took aim, pushed the trigger hard enough to hurt, and blew the enemy starfighter into a cloud of dust.

“All starfighters,” the controller snapped, his voice breaking through the static caused by the battle. Chris had seen several starfighters simply vaporised, accidentally, by the enemy energy weapons targeted on the superdreadnaughts. The close-quarters battle was slaughtering both sides. “All starfighters, return to base, immediately!”

An enemy starfighter bobbed up in front of him and Chris dispatched it without thinking. “Sir,” he said, “why...?”

“There’s no time to argue,” the controller snapped. The rivalry between controllers and pilots, the latter convinced that the former didn’t have the slightest idea of what they were doing, had lasted for centuries. “They’re going to send the entire damned star supernova!”

Chris felt his blood run cold. His starfighter had no jaunt drive, nothing that could get it out of the combat zone without a carrier...even though he had been promised that the Peacekeeper researchers were working desperately to build a starfighter that could travel on its own across interstellar distances. So far, however, it seemed nothing, but a concept out of science-fiction – even though it was theoretically possible. Until then, however, the entire starfighter force was dead unless it was onboard a carrier.

“Acknowledged,” he said, swinging his starfighter around and boosting away from the Crab. The Crab, unaware or uncaring about his orders, fired after him and he allowed the AI to select a random evasive pattern, even as he stared at the star in the display. Even a red dwarf was massive by human standards, out-massing everything else in the system with ease, and the thought of what would happen when it finally erupted into a supernova chilled him. His starfighter carried no FTL sensors; the first he’d know about the supernova would be the wavefront impacting on – and destroying – his starfighter. “I’m on my way.”

The original starfighter squadrons, so neatly organised, had been disrupted as the hours of fighting wore on. Pilots adapted quickly and flew with whatever wingmen they could find, while the remaining shipkillers were spent like gold; there hadn’t been time to send the shipkillers back to the carriers to reload. Tiredness, despite the implants, was wearing at them, but their enemies showed no signs of getting tired themselves, although they might not be able to recognise Spider tiredness when they saw it. The Spiders were still fighting, their starships still burning away at human starships and being burned themselves, but their starfighters were merely retreating back towards their Crab motherships and leaving the battlefield as much as they could.

Not docking yet, he thought, as the four starfighters blazed past enemy starfighters with a brief exchange of fire. Human starfighters would probably have given chase, unless ordered to remain on defence duties, but the Spiders didn’t bother to pursue, choosing instead to land on their motherships. Chris smiled, despite himself; maybe they were tired too. They skirted the main combat zone, where hundreds of starships were still fighting, and headed towards the carriers, waiting in the rear. He’d never been so glad to see a carrier since the Battle of Terra-Prime; the blocky, ugly starship was the most beautiful sight he’d seen in his life.

“This is Kelsey,” he said, as he swooped into a landing pattern. “I request permission to land.”

“Please take up a holding pattern,” the *Victorious* Controller said. The voice would clearly brook no argument. “45th Squadron requires an emergency landing.”

Chris scowled, casting a nervous look towards the star. The other starfighters had been damaged, limping back towards the carriers though sheer stubborn determination, and so he forced himself to remain calm. The urge to flee as fast as he could was rising up within him,

but there was nowhere to run; as the emergency starfighters landed, the landing bays were cleared, allowing him and his people to make their own landings. They were just in time.

Deep within the centre of the red dwarf, something was happening. Protected by the gravity well it had generated, the supernova bomb was carefully twisting space inside the centre of the star, forcing the star into sudden gravitational collapse, but storing and stockpiling gravitational potential energy while the reaction built upwards. Unnaturally, controlled by the device resting at the core of the star, the reaction was building up rather than heating and expelling the star's outer layers, at first. The growing pressure at the heart of the star, exceeding the Chandrasekhar limit, grew rapidly into a runaway reaction. The core of the star ignited...

The reaction wasn't stable. A sufficient gravity field would have collapsed the red dwarf, small though it was by the standards of stars, into a black hole. Even a more limited field would have crushed the star into a tiny object, invisible to the naked eye. Instead, the stresses on the supernova device pushed it into near-collapse, releasing all the energy in one burst...

The star tilted on the brink...

Andrew shook his head slowly as the remainder of the jamming field faded away. The remaining Spider starships, the four hundred and seventy-four that could still jaunt, flickered and jaunted out, abandoning a handful of surviving starships without their drives. Andrew issued a handful of orders – there was no point in wasting good missiles on the survivors – and the human fleet drew away from the stragglers. They would die when their supernova bomb finally ignited. The disruptions on the surface of the star were growing worse; it couldn't be long before the core destabilised and the star went supernova.

He looked over at Lucy, her pale face sweating in the gloom. "Have all of our starfighters returned to their carriers?"

"Yes, sir," Lucy said. Her voice sounded nervous; she knew, as well as anyone else, that when the star exploded, they would have bare seconds to escape. The *Armageddon*, for all of its power, would be defenceless against the wave front. "They're all safely back onboard, but we took forty percent losses..."

Andrew nodded. So many young men and women had died. "Order the carriers to jaunt out now," he ordered. "Their escorts are to accompany them to the rendezvous point, where we can take stock and begin the repairs." He paused. "All starships, but this squadron, are to jaunt out now."

"Yes, Admiral," Lucy said. If she had her doubts, she kept them to herself. Andrew wanted – needed – to witness as much as possible, before they too fled the scene of the crime. The Spiders had slain a star and he needed to see it with his own eyes. There would be retribution, he promised the red dwarf silently, if only to prevent the Spiders getting the idea that humanity no longer had supernova bombs of their own. "They're on their way."

Andrew looked down at the display. The Spiders were trying to retune their shields, but he doubted they had time to succeed before the star exploded and destroyed them. The gravity

field surrounding the star was quaking now, compressing around the star and flickering into a dreadful pattern, a portent of impending doom. The *Armageddon* shuddered slightly as one of the gravity waves struck it, even as the main waves focused back in towards the centre of the star. The supernova device hadn't just slain the star; in a very real sense, it had forced the star to commit suicide. There was no way that the reaction could be halted any longer...not with the mass of the star pressing down on its own core and crushing it into energy.

"Terminal impact gravity waves," Lucy snapped, a new note of alarm in her voice. Andrew looked over at the view from the outer hull; the star was still there, but now...now, a wave of pure energy was blasting out towards them at the speed of light. "The star is going supernova!"

Deep inside the star, the supernova bomb finally lost cohesion and was ripped apart by its own gravity field. The reaction was unstoppable now, a force of nature releasing energy into the star and raging up towards the surface. The outer layers of the star, suddenly superheated beyond their expectations, expanded rapidly out of the star and across the system. An unstoppable wave of destruction blasted out, carrying heat and radiation in a flare that would be seen across the entire galaxy, outshining, for a brief cosmic moment, the brighter stars surrounding the red dwarf.

At the speed of light, it would be eight minutes before the blast front reached the puny starships orbiting the star.

"Admiral," Lucy repeated. Her voice was almost a shout. "The supernova..."

"I heard," Andrew said. He was struck by the contrast between the two displays. The gravity waves alone signalled that something was very wrong, but watching it happen was utterly fascinating. He wanted to stay until the wavefront reached them, but he knew that they couldn't take the chance. Whatever he wanted, they couldn't stay any longer. "Jaunt us out."

The *Armageddon* vanished from the stricken system.

The Spider starships were less fortunate. Trapped in the system, their only hope was to retune their shields, a difficult task at the best of times and completely impossible under enemy fire. Their struggle might have saved them if they'd had more time, but as it was, the expanding wavefront swallowed them up, swallowed them and spat them out as a handful of tiny trace elements. Nothing was left behind within the expanding cloud that would, over the next million years, slowly cool and merge with interstellar space. New stars, maybe even new planets, would form in the far future, but for now, nothing was left for intelligent life. The star had been comprehensively slain.

The Battle of the Decoy was over.

Chapter Forty-Five

“This is, of course, only a pause in the storm,” Andrew said. They floated in space, near the expanding remains of the unnamed red dwarf. It was a situation he suspected would change soon; the location of the battle couldn’t be left as CAS-RD-437368367 for long. It didn’t sound dramatic enough for something that would be touted as the scene of the greatest victory since Second Austin, years ago. “The Spiders still occupy over a hundred of our worlds.”

“They used a supernova bomb,” the President said. *That* particular titbit of information had raced around the Confederation, provoking panic...and grim resolution. It was ironic, but the use of the bomb had convinced a vast percentage of the Confederation’s population that the Spiders *had* to be stopped. “How did they get their hands on that technology?”

Andrew laughed bitterly. “I reviewed the files,” he said. He felt a warning flicker in his head, but ignored it. The President was the only currently active person he could talk to about the superweapons, although the Radiation Cannon hadn’t quite lived up to its billing – it would have been more impressed when it had been designed – and the supernova bombs were no longer a human monopoly. “The technology was developed over one and a half thousand years ago. There’s nothing *that* advanced about it; if we hadn’t had the Breakdown and then the formation of the Confederation, we’d probably have seen many more stars destroyed by merely human forces.”

“Which means that we have a problem,” the President said. “Do we use a bomb of our own in retaliation?”

“Against what?” Andrew asked dryly. “If we target one of the occupied worlds, we will take out the human population as well. It might be worth doing on Santiago or Dominic Beethoven, because the remains of the human population has been effectively exterminated, but even so...”

“Millions of humans will die,” the President said. “Have you found no trace at all of their homeworld?”

“Nothing that we can use, yet,” Andrew said. “The scout ships are out there, but it’ll take years to examine every possible star...and they might just be based completely on Worldship-like craft instead. We know so little about them, really...and until we can talk to them, we won’t have any way of finding out what they want.”

Katherine sighed. “It just seems so wasteful,” she observed. “If they’d asked us for something...”

“The scientists think that they literally cannot recognise us as intelligent beings, or even as creatures worthy of respect,” Andrew said. “If it came down to a choice between protecting a human settlement or a settlement of...say, cows, what would you choose?”

“The cows are not intelligent,” Katherine pointed out. “We rarely eat real meat these days outside the Isolated Worlds. Even so, we recognise that animals have rights, if not the same rights as humans...”

“They might not think the same way,” Andrew said. “Their ability to...absorb humans into a hive mind structure is particularly worrying; they may even consider that evidence of us not being equals. There are even some animals that build quite complex tools without actually being intelligent; they may regard us in the same light.”

Katherine shrugged. The Manticore, a life form from a planet discovered in 3045, was capable of building amazing buildings and tools, but was not, apparently, intelligent. Humanity’s scientists had been convinced, at first, that they *were*, but successive tests had proven that the animals weren’t much more intelligent than a chimpanzee. Their planet had been quarantined, in the belief that they would one day develop intelligence, but so far they hadn’t developed past the stage they’d held for thousands of years. The experts even predicted that they *couldn’t* develop any further.

“It doesn’t actually matter at the moment,” she admitted. Andrew heard the note of doubt in her voice and understood. “We won the battle, at the cost of a thousand starships and almost a million lives, so...what now?”

Andrew leaned forward. “We have forces prepared to engage the enemy on the Occupied Worlds now,” he said, eagerly. “We’re going to drive them off those worlds and force them to fight on our terms. We’re still building up the war fleet, but once that’s ready, we should be able to drive them out of the Confederation entirely...and I’m sure they will take us seriously then.”

“And what if they start destroying stars at random?”

“I don’t know,” Andrew admitted. It was a prospect that he didn’t want to think about. The real nightmare with supernova bombs was that it was difficult, very difficult, to prevent them from being deployed. “We have the technology to shield entire planets and prevent them from being destroyed by supernovas, but we can’t stop them from detonating stars if they want to do that. As long as we have no idea where they come from...”

“And we can’t even talk to them to surrender,” Katherine said. She looked over towards the simulation of the remains of the supernova. The remaining traces of the battle would have been wiped out a long time ago. There was nothing left, but glowing gas and an expanding shell of radiation. That, too, would cause a problem in the future. “Andrew, how long is this war going to last?”

Andrew looked into the future and saw only darkness. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He saw starships clashing in the night and stars exploding, one by one, as the war raged onwards. What happened when the Spiders built new superdreadnaughts of their own? They could have an entire fleet of Worldships with massive productive capabilities lurking somewhere in interstellar space. “I wish I knew, but I don’t.”

“It worked, then,” Stephen said. He felt very tired and, oddly, vulnerable. It was the first time he had landed the *Gentleman Caller* on a Peacekeeper Worldship and he was half-expecting the Confederation Rangers to come bursting in and arrest him for a long list of fairly harmless crimes. “They took the bait.”

Hollyhocks looked up from her personal viewscreen. It showed, in great detail, the Battle of the Decoy...and the explosive finale as the Spiders launched a supernova bomb and took out an entire star. The last images of the Spider starships, stricken and abandoned by their own comrades, struck him as sad, somehow; it bespoke a ruthlessness that awed and terrified him. He doubted that any Peacekeeper commander would have made the same ruthless, but correct decision.

“You should get a medal,” she said. The weird thing was that she meant it. Her hero worship hadn’t mellowed since they had become lovers. “You got the Spiders to attack into a trap...”

“You’re not following,” Stephen said dryly. “The Spiders managed to communicate with the criminals, like Wisdom, to get the information. That means that they *can* talk to humans, but for some reason, they are only inclined to talk to criminals. Why?”

Hollyhocks sniggered. “Maybe they are criminals at heart,” she said. She couldn’t comprehend how many lives had been lost because of the Spiders. Stephen almost envied her that innocence. “Or maybe they just don’t care to talk to the Government.”

“But why?” Stephen asked dryly. “Why wouldn’t they even bother to demand a surrender? If they demanded surrender, wouldn’t there be humans who *would* surrender? Wouldn’t that be easier than a space battle that would leave their starships as ruined as our own, even if they win? It doesn’t quite make sense, does it?”

Hollyhocks stretched, her clothes tightening in all the right places. “No, I suppose,” she said, vaguely. “Does it really matter?”

“I don’t know,” Stephen said. “Perhaps their ideal of the universe is one without humans, or without any other form of intelligent life at all – hell, maybe they *are* the reason we never found any other form of intelligent life. No one knows how old they are, really.”

He grinned. “Want to find out?”

“*You* intend to find out?” Hollyhocks asked. “How do you intend to do that?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Stephen said, leaning back in his chair. “I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

“I have prepared the data dump,” Dewey said, interrupting Amy’s thoughts. The Spiders hadn’t come anywhere near the shelter, but it was clear from their actions that they *were* searching for it, as well as scattering surveillance devices of their own everywhere. Any further attempt to raid their positions would be tricky. “The Peacekeeper starships are emerging now.”

Amy was over to the display faster than she would have thought possible. The starships were emerging as a group and racing down towards the planet, unleashing heavy firepower against the Spiders, still floating in orbit. A Lobster, unable to get its shields up in time, was blown away; the remainder altered course and returned fire as the Peacekeeper starships swept past the planet.

“I am transmitting now, heavy compression,” Dewey said. The information they’d discovered about the Spiders and their possible involvement with the D’Amassa Triangle, everything in the Library about the Triangle and its strange existence, everything she’d thought might be even remotely useful, transmitted to the Peacekeepers before they left the system. A Lobster was moving in to take out the new transmitter, but it was already too late; the important signal was already out.

“Transmitter destroyed,” Dewey said. On the display, the Peacekeeper starships jaunted out, leaving a furious orbital patrol behind, now with two damaged Crabs and a destroyed Lobster. “Now what?”

Amy smiled grimly. “Now we wait, I guess,” she said. “Wait and see what happened next.”

The small campsite was located well away from the remaining Resistance camps, if only because no one knew for sure what implants had been inserted into the dead bodies of a dozen Spiders, or how many of them might still be functional despite the deaths of their hosts. There weren’t many volunteers for remaining at the camp, but Major Ned Brickley had been determined to keep them under guard. If nothing else, if the Spiders came to recover their comrades, the Resistance would give them a hot welcome.

Everything was quiet, however, too quiet. The Spiders hadn’t launched any reprisals for the kidnapping of one of their people, or even maintained their patrols around the mountains; they’d fallen back to their city and worked hard to clear most of the woodlands that had once dominated the entire continent. Their defoliants, whatever they used to make them, were horrendously effective; the scouts had reported that kilometres upon kilometres of trees had just died, with the ground under them too poisoned to allow more trees to grow. It was standard counter-insurgency tactics to deny the insurgents anywhere to hide – and if they did it to the mountains, the Resistance would be in real trouble – but Ned suspected that there was more to it than just counter-insurgency. It was almost as if...

A scream cut through the camp. He was on his feet at once, pistol drawn and looking for targets, while running towards the source of the scream. Janine had been on guard duty, watching down the rocky track towards the alien city, and she should have been able to see anything coming at them. Other guards joined him as they reached the guard post...and there was no sign of Janine. Ned hunted, even as he sent the other guards down to check that they weren’t under attack, even though he couldn’t hear any weapons being fired...and finally saw Janine hiding under a rock. Her face, always pale, was sweaty and drawn. Looking into her eyes, he saw sheer inhuman terror, something that went beyond anything he’d already seen.

He reached for her and she fell into his arms like a boneless person. He held her, feeling her shaking against him, until she steadied, but there was nothing to account for it. Janine might have been a Sensitive, but she’d been in combat before; an attack, either from the Spiders or a rogue human wouldn’t have *scared* her so badly. Even after she calmed herself, she still clung to him as if he were her father...

“Janine,” he said, holding her as tightly as he dared. If her augmentations decided that he was attacking her, they would try to break her free. “What happened?”

Her voice was broken and soft. “I saw...I saw...”

She broke off. “Janine, I need to know,” Ned said, wishing they had a proper expert in mental health with them. Heinlein hadn’t been fond of psychologists and the handful that had made their lives on the planet had been killed when the cities had been wiped out. “What did you see?”

“I saw... a shadow,” she said, shaking. Ned stared down at her, puzzled. “I just saw a shadow...it was just *there!*”

More worried than he would have liked to admit, Ned ordered a search of the area.

They found nothing.

End Of Book One

The Story Will Continue In

All The Marbles: Balancing Point