

## Action Station

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# Foreword

In the eight years since the ending of the Kilrathi War much has been written about the conflict, but there is one topic that few have felt comfortable about approaching. To even attempt to discuss him in a

balanced manner is now all but impossible, for of all the men, women and alien allies who served in the fleet, none was more controversial than Admiral Geoffrey Tolwyn, VC, MOH, DSC, KCB.

No one, not even his most partisan of foes, can deny that Tolwyn's brilliant defense of Earth against Lord Thrakhath's great offensive will stand for centuries as a classic example of military prowess in the face of overwhelming odds. If he had died in that battle, his name would be forever enshrined in history. Unfortunately, his subsequent political actions will forever place his name in the ranks of the dishonored. One must go far back in history, to Alcibiades during the Peloponnesian Wars, Benedict Arnold in the War of American Independence, or Sun Wan Lu in the Faraday Rebellion, to find a military leader so gifted, and yet so controversial and doomed by his own brilliance to a final, irrevocable downfall.

This author briefly served on Admiral Tolwyn's staff during the Earth Defense Campaign, and I can attest to the fanatical devotion of nearly everyone who served under him. Neither can I deny that, at the same time, I was troubled by a sense that, after more than thirty years of conflict, Admiral Tolwyn had become an entity that lived solely for war.

For those reasons, and others, I felt it to be essential to set the record straight regarding one little-studied aspect of Tolwyn's life, his first military operation at the start of the war, now more than forty years past. Perhaps in studying the beginning of his story we might better understand the tragic ending.

Recently declassified documents from the Kiltrathi Imperial Archives and the kind assistance of Baron Vakka nar Jukaga, the son of the highly controversial Baron Jukaga, have been instrumental in helping us to see, perhaps for the first time, some of the motivations for the Kiltrathi decision to seek war. Vakka nar Jukaga's monumental work, *Kilrah Tugaga Jak-Ta Haganaska duka McAuliffe*, has provided us on the other side with a remarkable case study of the intrigues within the Imperial Court, the planning for their opening campaign and the first five years of the struggle. This book is worthy of serious consideration in spite of its detractors in the realm of academia and postwar Kiltrathi apologists.

Granted, mysteries about the Kiltrathi side of the conflict still abound, especially regarding their infamous "lost war orders," an incident which Tolwyn played a part in. I hope that in the near future the truth about the lost orders will finally be revealed, for it is a mystery that has fascinated historians on both sides of the conflict.

I'd like to think that Vakka nar Jukaga's study, and this humble work, will at least be a start towards finding out the truth regarding the origins of a war that claimed more than thirty billion lives on both sides. It will be at least a generation or more before all records from the Kiltrathi and Confederation archives are fully declassified, so I am willing to admit that there are many aspects of this study of the early days of the war which are open to debate.

This novel is a companion piece to my yet to be completed study of the beginning of the war. I have decided to take this format for a variety of reasons, the main one being the flexibility that it offers. I hope that the readers will forgive me this straying from standard historical form, but it is perhaps the only way we might be able to gain insight into the stresses, assumptions, and misassumptions on both sides that led our two societies into the greatest conflict in our histories.

I would like to thank Admiral Vance Richards, MOH, DSC, FC (ret.) for invaluable access to declassified records from his thirty-nine years with the fleet, along with his own, as yet unpublished memoirs, *Point and Counterpoint — Intelligence and Counterintelligence in the War Against the Kiltrathi*; Commodore Kevin Tolwyn for his frank conversations regarding his uncle; Rear Admiral Jason "Bear" Bonderevsky for memories Admiral Tolwyn had shared with him regarding his early days with the fleet; Pilot of the Imperial Claw Haga Kaligara for his personal diary and flight logs of the opening strike of the

war; Barbara Banbridge, daughter of the famous admiral, for her personal recollections of her father; and Margaret Kruger, former wife of President Hans Kruger of the Landreich for her frank, though at times troubling discussions regarding that famous renegade leader. Without their help this study would not have been possible.

I believe that I can finally admit here, for the first time, that, during the court martial of Admiral Tolwyn, I was granted access to him in my capacity as Historian of the Fleet and was able to interview him on three separate occasions prior to his suicide. For one who had seen him at his moment of greatest triumph, it was a trying experience. On the night of his suicide I arrived at the military prison only minutes after the discovery of his death and was admitted to his cell after his body had been removed. Neatly arranged on his bunk there were three items—a photograph of his wife and children, lost in the war, and beside the photograph were the wings and ensign's bars issued to him on the day he graduated from the Academy... troubled soul, may you rest in peace.

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Department of Military History  
Confederation Fleet Academy

# Chapter One

CONFEDERATION STANDARD DATE 2634.89

TO: CICCONFEDFLT

FROM: CONFEDFLTINT

SUBJECT: INTEL UPDATE KILRATHI MILITARY\POLITICAL INTENTIONS

COPY NUMBER ONE OF ONE.

FOR EYES OF CICCONFEDFLT ONLY

Admiral, as per your orders 2634-98, I have provided a full update on the current internal political and military situation within the Kilrathi Empire. The report, as requested, is attached along with full evaluations of all known Kilrathi military assets, ships, bases, and industrial capability. You will notice that the report, to say the least, is slim. As I have already reported to you in our last conversation, we are looking at a mystery wrapped inside an enigma. No official of the Confederation has ever been allowed access into the Empire, and those border worlds where individuals living outside the law might come into contact with Kilrathi personnel are beyond our ability to adequately infiltrate. What resources ConFedFlt does have are, as you know, barely adequate to patrol the rapidly expanding frontiers, of which our sector bordering on the Kilrathi Empire is but one small part. Though this is outside my realm, I only wish the powers that be to whom we answer would devote more resources to this one sector which, I believe, poses the most serious threat to the Confederation since its creation. What little data my division has been able to obtain has been through remote sensing, extensive interviews with border world merchants who trade outside the realm of legal intercourse, and one covert op team, which filed a report of less than a thousand words and half a dozen holo images, of what we believe were Kilrathi capital ships, before disappearing.

In the five years since we've first had contact with the Kilrathi Empire, our base of knowledge is, in reality, no greater than what we had already heard from the Varni refugees who fled into our space after their disastrous war with the Empire. The numerous skirmishes on the frontier have yet to result in our acquiring any real, hard information as to their political intentions or their true military assets. In short, sir, I must frankly confess that we are in the dark. Those few vessels we've been able to get data on, I suspect are antiquated models that were already in service during their war with the Varni and are now assigned to patrol their side of the border so that we will not know their current capability. Sir, my attached report will go into greater detail regarding all these aspects, but there is something the report can not present as hard fact. Just call it the gut feeling of an old Intel officer who's been watching the "Cats" ever since we first bumped into them. . . There will be War. They are a predatory society; their definition of existence, both individually and societally, is predicated upon conquest, upon the clear establishment of superior and inferior. The stasis of peace, without the clear resolution of who is superior, is anathema to them. Those who believe otherwise live in a dream world, but this report is not the place to discuss that point.

I believe, as well, that there is a fear that drives them. We have seen the one intel report from Remote Deep Probe Twelve, which was launched in towards the galactic core over thirty years ago. The one report back before its mysterious disappearance five years ago indicates that there is a warlike empire of almost unimagined strength ten thousand light-years inward and heading in our direction. If this report is indeed true, the Kilrathi must make a choice; to confront that greater enemy and leave their flank towards us open, or create a buffer zone in our direction before facing this other enemy. We must realize a fundamental point here, sir. We must learn to stop thinking as humans, and learn to think as "Cats." Our instinct would be to form an alliance, but the question is, do they think that way? I believe not. Sir, I hope that the enclosed report is of some help. On a very personal level, sir, I must state here as well that current thinking in both political and military circles, that the Kilrathi are technologically inferior to us and lack the societal flexibility for a sustained fight, is madness. A "merchant," who deals in the gray area of commerce beyond the Landreich, recently told me about an ancient Kilrathi word, that dates to the time when they were predatory hunters. Jak-tu , which roughly means to spring from concealment upon a larger but unsuspecting prey, killing them with one blow. If they come after us, as I am certain they will, it will be aJak-tu . Respectfully submitted, Rear Admiral Joshua Speedwell Confederation Fleet Intelligence

REPORT ENCLOSED—HARD COPY IS TO BE FILED ACCORDING TO CONFEDFLT SECURITY REGULATION 34448A OR DESTROYED IMMEDIATELY AFTER READING .

IMPERIALPALACE—KILRAH

"I have spoken and thus I have decided!"

A rumbling growl of approval erupted from most of the eight clan leaders of the Empire and from behind his translucent curtain the Emperor carefully studied the reaction of each of the eight, and those who sat arrayed behind them.

"Vakka, you do not approve." The Emperor made the comment as a question, carefully using the soft tonal inflection for speaking to a blood member of one's own clan, rather than as a direct statement of fact, which would have been an issue of blood challenge between an inferior and superior.

Vakka looked around the room, saw the subtle blinks of approval from at least two other clan leaders who were leery of the Emperor's proposal for war, and the cool unfocused stares of the others, who

disagreed and now waited to see how far he would push the issue. He knew more than one of them would relish the chance for a blood challenge, for when the Baron of a clan did so and died, there were always rewards, titles, and worlds stripped away from the fallen for those who stood by the throne.

Vakka came to his feet and with a ceremonial flourish unsheathed his dagger, made from the tooth of a nagga. Bowing low, he laid it on the floor, hilt pointed towards the dais and screen behind which the Emperor sat, a clear indication of submission even as he dared to speak against the Imperial will.

"My Emperor, I follow thy call for the hunt. Point out the prey to us and we shall spring upon it, but I beg of thee the right to point to other herds which thou might not have gazed upon."

Vakka delivered his opening in the ceremonial dialect of the court, speaking the words with a sharp, clear enunciation, which was an indicator of his good breeding. Some might have taken his tone as a subtle insult against the Emperor himself, whose lineage was not as ancient.

The Emperor remained silent and Vakka waited, still bowed low.

"Go on then, but the hour is already late," the reply came at last.

"My Emperor, my brothers of the other clans, I urge you to consider one point yet again. Now is not the time to wage war upon the Confederation."

"Vakka, we have gone through this for three days," came the bored reply of the Crown Prince, who sat to the right of the dais. "Make an end to this protest."

Vakka coolly surveyed Gilkarg, the only son of the Emperor. As the Crown Prince it would be he who led the fleet into action, and all knew that he was the force, more than the Emperor, who urged war. The Emperor had won his glory in the campaign against the Varni, now the son wanted an even greater glory.

"Could there be the scent of fear in this room?"

The startling challenge came from behind Gilkarg, and there was an indrawing of breath from many in the assembly as Prince Ratha, the eldest son of the Crown Prince stood up, talons extended.

The Crown Prince extended his hand in a gesture of restraint, but Vakka could see that there was approval for his hot-tempered son's words.

"The dagger is upon the floor, Ratha, challenge can not be made."

Ratha, a flicker of a smile creasing his features so that his fangs were revealed, nodded and sat back down. An amused chortle and the whispered comment, "You would have killed him," came from Prince Thrakhath, the younger cub sibling of Ratha.

Vakka bristled slightly when the Crown Prince, in a display of crass disregard for decorum, did not discipline the cub. He looked around the room, in anticipation of other challenges, but none were offered.

"The Confederation must be dealt with," Vakka began, as if offering agreement, "but is this the proper time? Since gaining spaceflight we have expanded, taking all in our path, for this is proper. Yet remember, as we expand, it is like a balloon stretching outward. The surface grows larger and yet larger, our borders forever becoming wider. Now we find this Confederation on our flank, but there are other borders as well."

"Va ka garga ka naru ha garga." The Crown Prince intoned, matching Gilkarg's mastery of the ceremonial dialect of court, "Those not of the blood must have their blood spilt."

Vakka nodded. "Yes, such it has always been, if they are not of the blood they are prey to be hunted. Yet do you not see what I am saying here? As we hunt down and destroy a prey, two more spring up behind them."

"So there is more to hunt," the Crown Prince replied with a growling laugh. "More honor, more glory, more blood for our talons."

Vakka shook his head sadly.

"And what of the other direction? The darkness we know is coming up out of the galactic core? It is a force that even we must admit might very well overwhelm us. You have seen the reports from our deep remote probes, which have spanned the vast reaches in towards the heart of the galaxy. There is a power there that is overwhelming all in its path. A power that is coming this way."

"Precisely why we must fight the Confederation now—or are you afraid of them?" Ratha snarled, coming back to his feet.

"I fear nothing," Vakka replied coolly, gaze fixed upon Ratha.

There was a moment of tense silence, finally broken when the Crown Prince clicked his talons together, a signal for his son to back away. Reluctantly Ratha stepped back, gaze still fixed on Vakka.

"Precisely why we must fight the Confederation now," the Crown Prince said, staring at Vakka and speaking as if explaining the simplest of things to a cub. "Each war sharpens our talons. Each war requires us to improve our weapons and take as well the secrets of our enemies. Remember, it was the foolish Shata who came to us peacefully, and revealed to us the secret of the jump points and how to use them. And once we took that secret, we slaughtered the fools who bore it to us as we would slaughter any prey."

A rumble of laughter echoed in the audience chamber. The Shata wererugalgas, the equivalent of the herds of semi-intelligent beasts which had once wandered the home world, unable to defend themselves, the hunting of which was considered an exercise merely to fill the stomach, since there was no glory or challenge. How any beings could be so stupid as to come to Kilrah making loud pleas of peace, offering their secrets of interstellar travel and then be totally unable to defend themselves was a source of wonderment and amusement even now, several hundred years later.

"My father, in his war against the Varni, went into the fight knowing their technology was superior. That is exactly why we fought them then, to take their secrets. His father before him against the Wu, his father's father against the Eyoka, and now we shall take this Confederation as is our right and destiny."

"What I caution is our lack of knowledge," Vakka replied. "It is as if we hear something on the far side of the hill, and the hunting pride charges towards it with roars of blood lust, but know not what is upon the far side of that hill."

"We know enough," the Crown Prince sneered. "This colony your clan captured. It was they who first made us aware of this Confederation. You yourself said they were powerful and the issue of their existence should be addressed."

Vakka sighed. That point was indeed true and he cursed the luck of it all. Five years back all the clans had been expanding outward, encountering systems devoid of any foe, and then he had stumbled upon a world that aliens, humans of this Confederation, had arrived at only weeks before. Taken by surprise, they had been captured, their ship torn apart and looted of information, thus revealing much about who this new neighbor was. Within half a year after that, contacts started all along the sectors bordering towards this Confederation, and something of an unofficial war was even now under way.

There seemed to be a tacit agreement, established through one official communique from the Emperor, barring all humans from crossing into sectors claimed by the Empire and ships of neither side entered these realms, at least not officially.

But it was the world they had taken with the colonists that troubled Vakka. Normally he would have killed them out of hand, but there was something different about these aliens, and curiosity compelled him to keep them alive. From them he had learned much, not in the manner of the Emperor's official "questioners," who had tortured human captives for information, but rather by simply talking. He found that in many ways he liked these aliens, but even more, he feared them; a fact he could never admit before this gathering.

"We have learned this, at least," Vakka finally replied. "If they have an advantage it is in their depth, their web of alliances with half a dozen races, the sheer number of worlds they have colonized. Such a depth of organization could be of infinite help if the challenge from within the core is to one day be met. We lack that depth. We annihilate or enslave everyone on the worlds we take."

"So?" the Crown Prince replied, his tone obviously conveying total confusion over the intent of Vakka's statement.

"Yes, we have a fleet, the best in the galaxy, but we don't have the infrastructure, the web of commerce. We conquer, destroy, populate a new world like a fiefdom, placing a few tens of thousands of our own blood where billions once existed. Those whom we suffer to live, labor in our factories as slaves, not allies. Then we expand yet again. We are like a hollow shell, the Confederation is a solid mass."

"That is why we must attack now," the Crown Prince snarled. "We are the superior. One fierce blow will smash that solid mass, a blow from which they will never recover. Even if, as in your worst projections as presented earlier, they somehow survive the first blow, they will be so weakened that we shall hold what we have taken, then finally push the blade into their heart."

"Better to take it and use it in our own way," the Crown Prince cried, turning to face the other clan leaders. "We can see this truth. If our places were reversed, we would laugh at such an alliance, and simply use the Confederation as a buffer to absorb the first blow of the enemy, as they would do to us. And besides, the point is meaningless. It will be at least eight times eight years before the darkness even begins to approach our outer borders."

Vakka looked about the room for support and saw only blank stares. He knew those clan leaders whose realms bordered in towards the galactic core might see his side, but the promise of war, immediate war, rather than long boring years of preparation for a threat that might never actually come, superseded all other concerns.

"The war will train a new generation such as my son," the Crown Prince pressed. "For all our sons this fight will be their blooding and their chance to rise in honor and gain glory for their clan names. And this war, I predict that it will be finished before it has even started. After the first hammer blows, we will

pluck the flesh off the bones of the Confederation at our leisure."

"As for the rumor that they are preparing to declare war upon us—" and he chuckled softly, "—let them. We shall use the classic maneuver of the Haggin."

Laughter erupted at the reference to an old hunting trick, of sending a lone warrior out and letting him feign injury to draw the prey in. The prey would then be so focused on the Haggin that they would not notice that they in turn were being encircled.

"We will show weakness and confusion in the opening days, even pull back. Then will come the killing blow."

Vakka turned and looked back at his own son, Jukaga, the same age as the ignorant whelp, Ratha. Jukaga was eager for the fight, that was obvious by the pained, embarrassed expression in his eyes at his father's display. Would Jukaga survive this war? He scanned the rest of the assembly. All visible support was gone. Some were already looking towards the door into the feasting hall, the immediate needs of their stomachs far more important than this last hope for turning the decision back.

As he gazed upon them he did see one clear truth. They needed war, perpetual war, for if they did not have it the Empire would turn upon itself in bloody civil conflict, to satiate the need for combat, for glory, for blood. If for no other reason than that, the Emperor, in his cunning, would demand an attack upon the Confederation in order to insure his own place upon the throne.

So it would be the Jak-tu, the war of surprise. It was, of course, the way, for only a fool would warn his prey of intent. Picking up his dagger, he walked to the ceremonial circle in the center of the room. Raising the blade high he closed his eyes, hesitating, a dark warning of fear rippling in his heart. But there was now no other way, short of provoking a civil war, a breaking of the clans... he flung the blade so that it stood quivering beside the knives of the other clan leaders and the golden blade of the Emperor. A roar of approval erupted and Vakka looked back towards the dais. There was a rustling behind the curtains, the Emperor was standing... a howling roar erupted from behind the screen, the first cry of the hunt, joined an instant later by those assembled in the room, a mad ululation of abandon and joy, for the scent of blood was in the air. Vakka could feel it overcoming him as well, the primal instinct of the pride, the vast steppes filled with game, the hot sun overhead, the air thick with the smell of blood... and now it was the vastness of space, the cold silence, the swooping dive and the shudder of guns... it was still the same, the hunt. The spirit finally seized his soul even in its torment and, tilting his head back, the scream erupted from him, mingling with those who were of the blood of Empire.

## CONFEDERATION SERVICE ACADEMY—HOUSTON

"Admiral, hell of a good speech, the kids ate it up."

Admiral "Skip" Banbridge turned to see his old comrade, Commander Winston Turner, coming towards him, hand extended and holding a drink. Banbridge smiled sarcastically as he accepted the heavy crystal glass and took a long, grateful sip of well-aged single malt Scotch.

"Bullshit, Turner, same damn speech as last year, same damn speech as the year before..."

"And the same damn speech old Horatio gave us when we graduated thirty years ago," Turner interjected with a smile.

Banbridge looked around the reception room, filled to overflowing with Academy personnel, the hundreds of freshly-minted ensigns and their gushing parents, along with a sprinkling of politicians, hangers-on, lobbyists, and the ever-present news services, which were still salivating over the cheating scandal of the previous semester and the fact that this might very well be the last graduating class if the Senate Appropriations Committee voted next week to close the school down.

Mingled in with the background chatter he could hear Senator Jamison More, head of that committee, being interviewed by one of the vultures of the press.

"Yes, very impressive ceremony, always is, a nice tradition. But there are other traditions far more important and I must ask, is the money we spend on this place really worth it? We have several hundred million homeless after the nova on Yorin, millions more addicted to Happy Death who need treatment, the need for expanding our Confederation cabinet level position on cultural sensitivity and of course the terraforming of a dozen planets which I'm deeply concerned about. This navy is a mighty expensive toy for some of the boys around here and I have to ask, what are we getting back in return?"

He chuckled softly and shook his head. "After all, there hasn't been a war in over a century. Isn't it time we realized those days are over?"

Banbridge started to turn, ready to wade in. The fact that he had shown up for the ceremony was a boorish display that had soured Banbridge's mood. At least he could have given the kids this one day to enjoy the honor of graduation without standing like the undertaker in the wings, ready to drive the final stake into a tradition that dated back hundreds of years.

Through the crowd he caught a momentary glimpse of More, holding forth, surrounded by reporters... and the bastard was looking straight at him and smiling.

"Not now, Skip," and he felt a restraining hand on his shoulder. He looked back over at Turner.

"Bastard, think he'd at least let the kids have their day without all this crap about another cutback."

"He's baiting you, Skip, and you know he can outtalk you in front of the vids."

Damn it all, Skip thought coldly. Never did have that polish and never will. I'm a born gutter fighter from a godforsaken gutter world outpost who came up the hard way. Still an enlisted man at heart, and still speak that way. Funny, how did I ever get to be what I now am ?

He looked over at his old roommate from the days when they were fleggies in this same Academy. Turner was the proper first son of an American East Coast family that felt it necessary for their lads to do a bit of service to the Confed. While he had been six years Turner's senior, an enlisted man of whom the fleet believed that spending money on an education would pay off as a sound investment... a friendship formed that first day that had held through thirty long years of service.

"So why the hell don't you go over there and say something, Turner?" Skip snapped. "You're the damn professor around here, you got the culture, let's go take the bastard."

"Not now, Skip. Anyhow, someone else already is in there."

Banbridge looked back and saw a newly-minted ensign stepping in front of the vids. He was a good looking lad, tall, slender, calm, gray-eyed, already wearing the wings of a basic fighter trainee over the

left breast pocket. The lad had a respectful look. He was, after all, going up against a senator, but Banbridge could sense that the kid was a scrapper if need be.

"Senator, may I respectfully point something out, sir?" the boy interrupted.

Senator More paused and looked over at the ensign, and Banbridge was reminded of an ancient video actor, hundreds of years dead, and his line, "Go away, kid, yer botherin' me."

But one of the vid cam operators turned on the young ensign and the others turned as well. More smiled benevolently, but Skip could see the dart of his eyes to the boys name tag. The kid had just committed career suicide.

"Sir, with all due respect, I believe you are one of the representatives from Primus Three?"

The senator nodded as if indulging a child who had asked the most foolish of questions, that any idiot would know the answer to.

"You are exactly two jump points from the border with the Kilrathi."

"The Cats?" More replied with a laugh. "Third rate power. If we have to fight them, it will be a minor affair, a minor affair which the fleet can handle with ease."

"But if they should attack," the ensign pressed, "an attack could be at your world in under four days standard, sir. That is how thin the margin is and, given current appropriation levels, the defense is very thin indeed. One mistake, sir, and you would lose all of your voters in a single explosive flash."

"Son, don't lecture me about my voters," More snapped. "They're tired of the taxes imposed by the Confederation and the overpriced toys you fly around in, and it will come to a stop. The Wildcat fighter costs fifty million a piece, son, fifty million. I guess, though, a boy like you doesn't realize just how much that is?"

The young ensign stood silent, as if ready to withdraw, but the cameras turned back on him. Banbridge leaned forward to listen.

"I am fully aware of what that money can buy, sir. It's the price of freedom."

More snorted derisively.

"It buys a machine to justify you and your admirals."

"Sir, I am in training so I can one day fly a Wildcat. The good Lord willing, I'll make the grade. And when I get my wings, sir, I want to point out one thing."

He paused as if willing to let More interject, but then forged ahead.

"There is a one in three chance, sir, that within five years I'll be dead. The reason, sir, is that the fleet board begged your committee for the additional ten million for a Wildcat upgrade. The engines are outdated, stress flaws are becoming increasingly common. In short they're already five years past their design limits. The Wildcat is thirty years old and its replacement, thanks to cutbacks, won't be fully on-line for at least five more years. Therefore we are in a bind, sir. Since neither the upgrade facility for the Wildcat nor the main factory for its replacement went to your district, you turned on the plan and

have locked it in committee for three and a half years, sir."

"Respectfully, sir, on behalf of my comrades who graduated today and will fly with me, we do hope that you get your political deal, sir, and that you force the Senate to build the facilities on your world, where I understand that several of your family members own the land the proposed facilities were to be built on. Your district will profit, and, sir, I will be able to look forward to living past the age of twenty-six."

Before the astonished senator could muster a reply the young ensign came to attention, nodded politely and walked off. The vid operators turned their cameras back on More, but his back was already turned, half a dozen aides closing in around the senator and hustling him off. In the past there had been several incidents where More had blown in front of the cameras, especially after having several drinks, and his staff knew when to get him out. The senator's press flak stepped in front of the cameras with a smile and started to make some banal comment.

Banbridge had to turn away to hide his smile. Of course he'd have to chew the boy's ass off, but he couldn't help but admire his spunk. He saw one of More's aides trailing the lad, moving to intercept. Red-faced, the aide started to shout something, but the boy refused to rise to the bait, stepped around the aide and kept on going.

"Think we better run to windward." Turner chuckled. "More's heading this way and he wants a fight in front of the cameras."

Skip stole a sidelong glance and saw the red-faced senator pushing his way through the crowd, loaded for a head-on brawl, in spite of his aides trying to block his approach. Every fighter instinct told Skip to take the bastard on, but Turner was right. The senator would tear him to shreds in front of the vids. And besides, damn it all, this was suppose to be a day for the ensigns, and here this damned politico wanted to turn it into a brawl over appropriations, and most likely about service discipline as well.

Banbridge turned and followed Turner's lead out of the room and down a side corridor to his office. As they ducked around the corner he saw that they had thrown the stern chase off. Closing the door behind them, Turner opened a desk drawer, pulled out a half-empty bottle and slid it over to the admiral.

Skip looked around the room. Even though everything was arranged according to regulation—one desk, one holo display and comm unit, one office chair, arms padded, two chairs, no arms—there was a feel to the room that was decidedly not military and more like that of a professor's at some small, private college. Turner actually had bookcases, with old-fashioned traditional books, and one wall was covered with two-dimensional prints, one of them a wet water navy sea battle, next to it a photograph of a group of Confed assault marines in camouflage and full battle gear.

Skip walked up to the faded picture and smiled.

"We had some good ones in that team back then."

Winston nodded and then lowered his eyes. "No one remembers them now except you and me."

Skip said nothing, watching Winston as he poured himself a refill. Of the thirty men and women in Marine Commando Six, only half a dozen had returned from the mission Winston had once led against a terrorist stronghold. The wound which had almost killed Skip still ached at times, but as he studied the faded image he knew he would never trade the moment for anything, in spite of what had happened.

The mission was classified, the deaths listed as training accidents, and after it was all over Winston asked

for reassignment. Both he and Winston had secretly been awarded the Fleet Cross. The reports had been glowing, but the loss of the team still haunted Winston. He had not led a combat unit since, asking instead for transfer out and an assignment to teach at the Academy.

Skip studied the photo.

"Hell, were we ever that young?"

Turner chuckled. "Don't think so."

"Just talked with Sergeant Ulandi few months back, when I was out at McAuliffe," Skip said, pointing at a rock-solid marine who towered over Winston in the photograph. "He asked me to pass along his regards."

"Old gunney. I'd have been dead if he hadn't pulled me out."

"We both would've been dead. Ulandi the Madman, remember?" And Skip laughed softly, raising his glass in a toast to the sergeant.

"How is he?"

"Retires in six months. Riding herd on Admiral Nagomo till then, making sure the admiral doesn't screw things up."

"Damn it all." Winston sighed. "How the hell do we have people like Nagomo running the most important base in the Confed?"

"Peacetime fleet, you know what it's like."

"Well, at least you're in the front seat."

Skip sighed. "I might be in the front seat, but the damn machine is programmed by others. Always thought when I got in the chair I could finally do something about the things you and I used to complain about back then," and he nodded towards the photo.

Skip's gaze shifted to the other print, of a naval battle, back when fleets still sailed on water.

"You had an ancestor in that one, didn't you?"

"Squadron Leader, Torpedo Eight," Turner said proudly, even though he was speaking of someone dead nearly three quarters of a millennium.

"And they all got shot down, but not one of them wavered from the attack on the Japanese carriers. Their heroic sacrifice pulled the fighters down to sea level, allowing the dive-bombers to slip through. Damn, what guts they had then," Skip said, looking back at Turner who arched an eyebrow in surprise that his friend remembered the story from the Battle of Midway.

"Remember when this used to be Schneid's office?" Skip said with a smile. "Lord knows how many times he had me in here, dressing me up and down, letting me know in no uncertain terms that if I didn't pass Naval History 101, my ass would be back on some lower deck of some damn orbital base out beyond the Landreich until the day I died."

Skip chuckled at the memory, looking across the desk at his old friend, who'd most likely made the same threats to the latest generation of officers and gentlemen in training.

"Schneid always liked you though," he continued.

"But you got the A in his class, remember? I got an A minus."

"Cause you were too busy tutoring me and not studying enough for yourself. I never would have gotten through this joint without you, Turner."

Winston smiled at the comment.

"Yeah, right. You the admiral, and me the commander, which we both know is what I'll retire as."

"Look, Winston, we both know that if there's one system that's unfair, it's Confed Fleet. How a bullhead like me got to be admiral is beyond me. You were always the brains and that's what I need now."

Turner chuckled and shook his head.

"For what?"

"Let's just say, a little exploratory work."

Again the arched eyebrow.

"I just got a little report from Speedwell I'd like you take a look at."

Turner sat up in his chair. "That's Intel stuff, Skip. I don't even know if I've got clearance for that kind of thing anymore."

"You did as of 0001 standard this morning. Grade three A."

For once he felt as if he had caught his friend off guard. Turner's remarkable ability to appear outwardly calm, even when surrounded by a dozen doped-out terrorists screaming that they were going to kill him, wavered for a second, his features paling.

"What the hell is going on here?" Turner finally asked. "Hell, you're talking inner circle stuff here. That's the type of space you might travel in, but I'm just an academic type, sitting out his last years at the Academy writing papers nobody reads."

"You were once the rising star in Special Ops," Skip said quietly, "and you will recall, my friend, you were damn good at it."

He nodded back towards the picture. Winston said nothing, it had all been gone over a hundred times before. He still blamed himself for the lose of Marine Six, even though an admiralty board had vindicated him and, beyond that, decorated him for saving an entire planet, which the terrorists were set to douse with Anthrax derivative C.

"So you became the academic type instead," Skip pressed. "But you've kept your ear to the wire, you know what's up and you have the mind to analyze it. I've read your papers, and there're a few others

over at Fleet who pay attention to them as well. By the way, you might not know this yet but I slapped a classified on that last little tirade of yours. Your comparisons of current conditions to those from before our scrap with the Yan back in the twenty-fourth century and the Americans in the Pacific back in the twentieth were a little too close for comfort."

"So what the hell is going on?"

"We're moving towards a declaration of war with the Kilrathi."

His friend nodded. "Knew that, everyone does."

"That's the point. The government will declare war to silence the complaining from the border worlds, but we're stuck with Plan Orange Five."

Startled, Turner looked over at his friend.

"That's insane. It calls for limited action only, push them back slowly through the Facin Sector and hold elsewhere. Punitive response only to force them to cease their border harassment. Damn it all, Skip, the plan is predicated on the Kilrathi behaving like humans and not the predators that they are. Measured limited response simply won't work with them."

"Well, that's what we're ordered to do. It's Orange Five."

"Shit," Turner sighed. "Either all out or nothing with the Cats, this halfway war measure is nuts."

"Remember, old friend, it's election year. No one wants to go into it with the responsibility for having launched a full-scale war. It'll be limited strikes only."

"As if the damn kitties will then roll over and beg us to stop."

"That's what they think will happen. CIS claims their evaluations indicate the Kilrathi are being pressured from other directions. We slap them back and they stop. Punch too hard and they fight all-out."

"Confederation Intelligence Services have had their heads up the wrong place for years."

"Well, it's the branch the government's listening to."

"Because it's what More and his crowd want to hear," Turner snapped. "What about Fleet Intel?"

"That's why I'm pulling you in. Even Fleet Intel is rusty. I want a new perspective on it and that means you. I want you to look over Speedwell's report. He'll tell you right up front we're in the dark and, damn it all, we are."

"Any idiot can see that," Winston replied. "There's a wall there and they ain't letting us look over it, under it, or around it."

"But we sure as hell are letting them look over ours," Skip snarled.

"That's what's got me really steamed at More. Between us, Winston, I just got out of a hearing before coming over here that More and a few like him were sitting in on. We're not getting the new appropriation request for those three carriers and six battleships I wanted. We're told to make do. If

there's a signal to the Cats that we're walking around with a 'kick me' sign strapped to our naked butts, that's it right there. More was actually so damn stupid as to say that building those ships would be a 'provocative signal.' "

"You know, and I know, that will be on the news links by this evening and across the Confed within a month. They've got listening posts. Why is it we broadcast in the clear, but from their side of the fence we don't hear a damn peep? Nothing but static. Hell, that must tell us something right there. I want you to look that report over and get back to me by tomorrow."

Skip watched Turner's reaction as he tossed a memory cube onto his friend's desk and motioned for him to upload it into his system. As the several hundred pages of the report started to race across the holo field, Turner remained silent, pausing for a moment to scan a few lines, then scrolling forward.

He finally looked back at Skip.

"I take it my summer research leave is canceled," Winston finally said, and Skip smiled.

"Let's just say you're gonna do a little field work for me."

"Such as?"

"You'll walk out of the door here wearing the blue suit for starters. There are a couple of bases and such where I want you to do a personal look-see to get a feel for things. But from there? My first suggestion would be to go out and buy some civvies. Hate to tell you this but, while you're out there, we're officially going to put you on the inactive list."

Startled, Turner again was unable to conceal his surprise.

"Come on, Winston, we both know they're gonna gut this Academy. It's going to be downgraded over the next year to strictly a one-year program. More was here today to gloat. They've decided they'll simply recruit kids out of college, send them here for one year, then pack them off to the fleet."

"Damn it all, Skip, they're killing hundreds of years of tradition! Five years here conveys the traditions, the esprit of the fleet. Sure, the kids we get from other colleges are good, but it's the Academy that creates the spirit of the fleet."

"Well, More wanted that terraforming project for one of the moons around his planet, and he got it by taking our blood. It was the old guns or butter argument, and the butter is getting lathered onto his district."

"Damn it all, Skip, I wish a hundred years ago we'd built our main base on his world rather than over at McAuliffe. He'd be kissing our butts now if it was."

Winston sighed and looked around his office. Even though he might complain about being sidetracked in his career so that the pennant of admiral, or even a command of capital ship as captain was forever out of his reach, still, in his heart this was what he really wanted. After what he felt was the fiasco of losing Marine Six, the thought of putting yet more men and women in harm's way was unbearable. If he was ever to accept a captain's rank, or worse yet a flag pennant, that responsibility would again be on his shoulders. He realized that now more than ever.

"Anyhow, we'll work up a cover for you, a little archaeological work perhaps, maybe a little trading in

rare artifacts."

"Like black market trading in out-of-the-way places?" Turner asked and Winston smiled.

"On occasion."

"Look, Skip, I think you're overrating me a bit here. I'm not the field intel type."

Skip looked at him with a jaundiced eye. "I thought you were the best. Remember, old friend, your prolific pen wrote more than one of the training manuals."

"Let's not talk about that yet again," Winston replied coldly. "Hell, I can't even remember the last time I held a modern gun and did my qualification shooting."

"You still fire antique powder weapons every weekend."

"That's a hobby."

"The skill's the same."

"You're thinking about sending me through the lines, aren't you?"

"Look, Winston. We're ramming our heads against a blank wall here and getting absolutely nowhere. They got tabs on most of our Fleet Intel personnel. It's so bad Speedwell's convinced we've got a leak, and a bad one. So I'm going outside the loop. I want someone with some brains out there, and when I think of brains I think of you."

"Bull. And besides, you're talking hero stuff. That may might be my stock and trade, pitching it to wide eyed fleggies, but actually wandering around out there?"

Again Skip smiled and looked over at the print of Torpedo Eight going in to the attack at Midway.

"I think you've got some good blood in your veins."

Turner looked down into his empty glass and, reaching for the bottle, he refilled it. He gazed at the picture of his old comrades and then at the print of Torpedo Eight. So now the cards get called in, he realized. I've been pitching the line about duty, honor, sacrifice for so long and then this old SOB calls me on it. He almost wanted to laugh at the irony of it.

Refusal was not even an alternative.

"If I get killed, this will be your damn fault."

Skip smiled. "And Janet will make my life hell for the rest of my days."

Winston lowered his gaze. That was something that, after thirty years, he still did not like to talk about with his oldest friend. After all, both of them knew Janet wanted him first, but then settled on Skip when he had refused. Skip worshiped her, but in his heart he must have known that if the game had played out the way she had wanted, Janet would be married to a professor at the Academy rather than the Admiral of the Fleet.

Poor Janet, the loss of their two sons in the Miaquez incident five years ago was something she never had recovered from. He looked back up at Skip and realized that his old friend's pain was barely concealed as well. A case of mistaken identity, the Kilrathi claimed, and the apology was accepted, and Janet stayed locked away in mourning.

"I'll assign a couple of youngsters to you," Skip finally said, breaking the painful silence.

"Who?"

"I was thinking, Vance Richards."

"Good lad there," Turner said, nodding in agreement. "Top of his class when he graduated from here. Even taught basic flight here a couple of summers back. Hell of a pilot, just like his old man," and the two smiled at the memory of Quentin Richards, another comrade, lost somewhere out in the darkness. Fleet tradition was to take care of its own, and having young Richards along would be a pleasure.

"For your second, I was thinking of Robert Singh, to be your admin assistant."

Turner scanned back through his memory. Singh graduated about the same time as Richards, the brain type, well organized. But there had been something troubling him even before the conversation over this new assignment started, and now he saw an answer.

"Can I pass on Singh?"

"Why?"

"Well, I was just thinking. I know this newly-minted ensign who just destroyed his career today. You know, and I know, that no matter how much we admire what that kid did, More won't rest till he's fixed him, and will nail you for encouraging insubordination if you don't."

Skip smiled. "Okay. He's yours. Who is he?"

"Strange kid. Very upper-crust English family. Couple generations back one of them was a rear admiral. Old tradition type, serve in the Fleet for six years, then go on into the family business. Sharp, driven edge to him that might worry me a bit, but gutsy as hell and dedicated to the Fleet with a loyalty that borders on fanaticism. Top of his class, would have graduated number one if he hadn't opened his yap a couple of times to tell off someone who was being a fool, but was wearing one stripe more than him."

"Sounds familiar," Skip said with a grin, looking at his friend, whose outspokenness and brain that worked a little too quickly and sharply had most certainly cost him a captain's stripe. "All right. Pull his record, get it over to me tomorrow. I'll have to do some sort of public reaming on this boy. Its a shame, because he spoke for every man and woman in the fleet today. I only wish I had said it."

"Then it'd be you getting canned rather than him," Turner replied.

"Yeah, I know. Damn it all, I figured once I got to the top, I could open my big yap on occasion and say what I really feel. Instead I'm chasing votes, kissing butts, and praying that when the time comes we're ready. Anyhow, the kid's yours, take care of him."

"You'll like him, Skip. Might even get as far as you someday. His name is Geoffrey Tolwyn."

# Chapter Two

CONFEDERATION BASE MCAULIFFE

DATE: 2634.120

"Lieutenant Richards?"

Ensign Geoffrey Tolwyn snapped off a sharp salute as the lieutenant climbed out of the pilot's seat of his Hurricane space-to-surface fighter escort, the ground crew scrambling past Geoff to chock the wheels and hook in the fuel vent lines.

Richards pulled his helmet off, his cool dark eyes scanning the young ensign's features.

Geoff had a recollection of meeting Richards once before, back in his second year, when Richards served as a summer flight instructor for basic subsonic atmospheric flight, though he had never gone through the reported torture of spending an afternoon with Richards in the right seat. Richards had a reputation for being a washout maker, an instructor eager to give the dreaded red check mark, in any of a hundred different areas, that would forever ground the dreams of another fleggie pilot. He seemed to have aged. Wrinkles already creased back from his eyes and his hair was going gray, even though he was only twenty-six. Geoff wondered if this was part of the price of flying and sensed that it was, especially when the planes were usually far older than the pilots, and prone to catastrophic failure.

Richards stared at Geoff for several seconds before returning the salute.

"I was ordered to report to you here, sir," Geoff announced.

Vance nodded, turning away for a second to look back at the ground crew.

"Make sure you're careful screwing on that fuel exhaust vent line, the threads on it are damn near stripped," he said, and turned to look back at Geoff. "Should have junked the whole damn thing years ago."

Geoff knew enough, at least in this case, to remain silent. He had a couple of dozen hours in the twin seat variant, and the registration plate on that craft had showed the old bucket was nearly twice his age. And yet, even being close to what still was considered to be a primary strike escort craft set his pulse beating. On the rung of fighter pilots, flying a Hurrie was considered more than a few steps down from a Wildcat pure space interceptor, or even a heavy Falcon fighter-bomber. The Hurrie was a hybrid design, and like most hybrids trying to combine two functions into one, it did neither of them very well. Its original intent was to serve as a space-to-surface escort for the old Gladiator bombers and Sheridan marine landing craft. If jumped by a Wildcat equivalent, it was dead meat, and, down in atmosphere, if it ran up against something like a Hawk it was dead as well. But as such things often developed in the realm of pilots, Hurrie jocks might be disdainful of the craft, but inwardly they took a fierce pride in the knowledge that they had to be the best if they were going to survive. No one wanted assignment to a Hurricane squadron, but once chosen, few of them asked for a transfer after mastering the craft and learning to squeeze the last bit of performance out of one.

Richards went up to the nose of the Hurricane and, opening up a cargo hatch, pulled out a duffel bag and slung it over his shoulder. Turning to the crew chief he handed over his helmet, signed off on the

craft, then after hesitating for a second he gave the plane an affectionate pat before turning back to Geoff and motioning for him to follow. "So you're the one who told Senator More off." Geoff looked over at Vance and nodded. "You're insane, kid, just screwed your career forever." Geoff had nothing to say. It had not even been planned. He was simply walking past the senator, heading to the refreshment table to get a drink for his parents when he overheard part of the interview. Before he had even realized it, he was talking. That had always been one of his strong suits. It seemed that when the pressure was on, he could talk his way out of damn near anything, but there were times when he talked himself straight into the hole as well, and this was one of them. And yet, if he had it all to do over again, he'd still strike the same blow. There were a lot of ways to serve the Fleet, and if need be get your ass blown off for doing it. It might not be how he had planned it, but his confrontation had hit all the major vid services and in the ensuing flap more than one of More's compatriots from the opposition party had used Geoff's accusations. Unfortunately none of those senators were around when he had been summoned to the august presence of CICCONFEDFLT himself, Admiral Spencer "Skip" Banbridge for one royal chewing out and banishment.

Chew outs from Banbridge were legendary, made even more frightening by his physical appearance. He was short, squat, built like a fireplug, with a mashed in nose picked up when he had once been the Fleet's middleweight boxing champion. His command of vocabulary from the lower decks was legendary as well, and Geoff was given the full ten minute treatment. The mere memory of being on the carpet was enough to make him wince. He could well imagine that the shouting could be heard in the next corridor, and the smirk on the face of one of More's aides, who was there to witness the reaming, was enraging.

"Anyhow, Tolwyn, do you know what the hell is going on?"

"Sir?"

Richards motioned for him to follow as the two headed across the tarmac. Overhead, the scorching red giant sun of McAuliffe seemed to fill half the sky. The light appeared to give everything a blood-drenched hue which Geoff found somehow disturbing. The second sun, a small yellow dwarf which orbited half a billion miles further out than the planet, was just beginning to rise in the east. Due to the orbital mechanics of it all, it'd be another forty years before anyone would actually see night again. Those assigned to the sprawling planet side bases of McAuliffe claimed that after six months on the planet you'd kill for the sight of a star.

"Why are we here, Tolwyn, do you have a clue?"

"I just touched down here on Johnson Island a couple of hours before you did, sir, on the transport out from Earth. I then received orders to report to you when you landed. That's all I know, other than that I'm to expect transport from here to wherever my final assignment is."

Richards shrugged. "Well, they said orders are waiting at the flight desk, so let's go."

Geoff fell in beside Richards as they took the long hike along the apron bordering the three-kilometer main landing strip. Hangars and work bays lined the strip, and parked out in front, in neat orderly lines, were hundreds of craft—Johnson Island being the main Confed Fleet surface and orbital base for the entire frontier sector bordering the inward galactic border with the Kilrathi Empire. It was, in fact, the Confederation's largest base other than Earth.

Geoff could not help but look in wide-eyed awe at the vast array of strike power lined up before him, entire squadrons of Hurricanes, Gladiators, Trident heavy bombers, and Hummer light recon and strike planes, arrayed wingtip to wingtip. And yet, on closer examination, even his unpracticed eye could see

that more than one of the planes was missing an engine, or access hatches were pulled open to reveal that the guts of the plane were gone, and in some cases the plane was up on jacks and its wheels were missing.

Further back in the rows of planes he could see craft that should exist only in museums, even a few old Minotaurs which must be well over a hundred years old.

"Yeah, it's a junkyard," Richards said, as if reading his thoughts. "They look real nice and neat out here, all lined up. Hell, the base commander, Admiral Nagomo, can doctor any report to claim that every one of them can make space and fight, though he might neglect to add that maybe only a quarter of them could do it at any one time, since all the others would be providing the spare parts. Yet in readiness reports waved around by your friend More and others, each and every one of these craft is listed as A-1 status for frontline service."

"How is it upstairs?" Geoff asked.

"Seventh Fleet is spending nearly half its time now downside, to conserve on fuel, parts, the usual wear and tear. In fact, right now, all six of the fleet carriers are docked upstairs," and as he spoke Richards pointed up towards space. "If the Cats did the big one on us right now, we'd be out of the war in the first twenty minutes. There ain't another carrier cruising between here and Earth at the moment."

"I thought there'd be more going on here with the war rumors."

Richards laughed. "War? Hell, son, we're talking police action. That means just nudge them a bit, don't get too provocative. After all, the Cats are just misunderstood, need a little counseling. Didn't you hear that news vid commentator claim that it was all but our fault, that we didn't understand the cultural differences and once we did everything would be settled?"

The bitterness in Richards' voice was sharp edged and weary. The carriers were not even being committed to the Facin Sector. Task Force Twenty-three had sortied with a mixed match of two old battleships and their escorts and one oldRanger class carrier.

Geoff paused to look to the southeast and then up. The skyhook tower linking the planet's surface to the orbital base twenty thousand miles up was one of the engineering wonders of the Confederation. He felt a bit like a tourist as he slowed down for a moment to gape, looking up, the line of the tower soaring straight into the sky until it finally disappeared from view. North of the surface base were six fusion reactors, providing over a thousand gigawatts of power. Nearly all this energy went to the massive shielding systems which protected the ground base, or was wired up to the orbital base via the skyhook. It was the largest energy complex in the Confed and supposedly made Alexandria and the ground base of McAuliffe impervious to attack. No known weapon, traveling at a speed much faster than a walk, could penetrate the shields when they were activated.

That had always been the underlying paradigm of balance between ship weight and offensive and defensive power. A heavier ship with larger reactors meant more energy for shielding and plasma weapons, the only limit being the total mass that could be contained within the jump containment fields. Physically wiring the massive reactors into the base at the top of the skyhook supposedly made the base impervious to attack... as long as the reactors held. From that fact had come the massive array of weaponry, defensive perimeters and antiterrorist security ringing the base. As Geoff took it all in he could not help but wonder if the designers of McAuliffe had become so obsessed with defense that the concept of mobility had been forgotten. He remembered old Winnie, back at the Academy, calling McAuliffe the Maginot Line of space, though as he looked at it all now he could not help but feel that this was, indeed,

a fortress base that would never fall.

Richards fell silent as they turned to head into the flight operations office, acknowledging the salute of the two marine guards posted by the entryway. Richards went up to the main desk, turned in his flight report, and took an envelope bearing the seal of the Confederation Fleet Personnel Office. A marine topkick stood in the corner of the room, silently observing them with hawklike eyes. There was something vaguely disturbing about the way the topkick casually examined him, and Geoff found it difficult to hold his gaze. The sergeant finally stiffened slightly as if forcing himself to acknowledge that this young Academy graduate was indeed a superior officer. There was the flicker of a smile, a slight shaking of his head and the topkick walked out of the room. Richards tore open the envelope, scanned it and sighed.

Geoff watched him closely. Wherever Richards was going, he was going as well, and the look of confusion on the lieutenant's face did not seem to be a very good portent of things to come. He wondered what Richards' sins were that the albatross of the most talked about ensign in the halls of Congress would be tied to him.

"Let's go get a drink," Richards snapped, motioning for Geoff to fall in with him.

Geoff wanted to ask, but knew that Richards would tell him in his own good time. Leaving his duffel bag at headquarters, they headed for the base officer's club. Richards took a table in a far corner of the room, ordering Geoff to get a couple of beers from the bar. Geoff brought the drinks over and sat down across from him, waiting for some sort of comment while Richards sat, wrapped in silence, sipping his beer and scanning the empty room.

"So do you want to know?" Vance finally asked.

"I figured you'd get around to it eventually."

Vance let the flicker of a smile crease his features. "It's here."

"Sir?"

"Look, it's Vance, okay? At least when we're drinking together."

Geoff smiled. The gulf between cadets and officers spanned light-years. He knew that, once into the club, the barriers were relaxed a bit between ranks, at least off duty. Since graduation, though, this was the first time he had been allowed the privilege of addressing an officer by first name.

"You said it's here. What do you mean?"

"Just that," and Vance tossed the letter across the table.

Geoff took a look. After the usual cryptic acronyms, whereases, and therefores of fleet speak, the letter simply said to report to the base officer's club where they would be approached with further orders.

"Damned strange," Vance mumbled. "Damned strange. A week ago I'm a squadron leader, rumor kicking around that I'm about to move up to Lieutenant Commander and have a shot at a training wing, not a single red chit on any report, then boom, I'm told to report planetside as soon as my carrier docks. No explanation, no nothing. Typical fleet. You, when I heard I was to pick you up, I figured that since you royally pissed somebody off, I guess I did, too. But who?"

"Say, isn't that old Winston Turner over there?" Geoff said, looking past Vance to the entry door.

Vance looked over his shoulder. "Sure as hell is. Damn, he scared the crap out of me my plebe year. Found out later he was all right, but he sure was tough."

Turner scanned the room, picked up a drink from the bar and made straight for their table. The two stood up as he approached.

"Relax, gentlemen, sit down."

Geoff saw Turner glancing at Vance's orders, which were lying on the table.

"Sir, I suspect you're tied in with these orders," Geoff ventured.

"Why's that, Mr. Tolwyn?"

"Well, sir. They're rather cryptic and out of the ordinary. We come here, as ordered, and less than five minutes later you wander in."

"And the connection is?"

"Well, sir. Last I saw you was Earthside on graduation day. While I was dealing with my—" he hesitated for an instant, "—problem, I hear this report that you'd taken an early retirement along with a lot of the other professors. That struck me as strange."

"Why so?"

"Well, sir. I know you're good friends with Admiral Banbridge. I know you love the Fleet. I figured you to be one to stay on no matter what. Now you suddenly come walking in here, fifteen jump points away from Earth. So I guess our orders have something to do with you, sir."

Turner smiled. "Mr. Tolwyn, you always were an observant student, and yes, my being here has to do with your orders."

"How so, sir?" Vance asked.

"The two of you have been assigned to me."

Turner watched their reactions. He could almost sense relief from Geoff, who had undoubtedly been stewing in his own juices during the long transit out from Earth, wondering what godforsaken outpost he'd finally wind up in. As for Richards, the reaction was different. The announcement of a transfer meant that he was most likely grounded and the young lieutenant was obviously not very happy about the prospect.

Vance stirred uncomfortably. "Sir, in last week's issue of Fleet Proceedings I saw the notice about the shutting down of the Academy and your name was on the list of early retirements. How can we be assigned to you if you're officially on the way out?"

"I'm not quite out of the picture yet." Winston chuckled. "You'll notice my early retirement notice didn't specify a date. There's still one last assignment to be done and you two gentlemen have been nominated to give me a hand."

Geoff didn't know whether this was a compliment or not. After all, on the day before his encounter with Senator More he had already received his official orders posting him to Lunar orbital base five to start orientation training for the Wildcat fighter. He truly admired Turner, and would be the first to admit that the commander had done much to shape his own thinking about the fleet, its mission, and the inner sense that a crisis unlike any ever faced by the Confederation was about to unfold. Though he would never admit it to anyone, he sensed as well that there was a destiny to his life that meant that, when the time came, he would have a major part to play.

That belief, however, had been sorely tested by what happened after he had crossed the bow of Senator More's political machine and fired his pathetic shot. So now I'm attached to someone on the way out. He knew that he should feel uncomfortable with that thought. After all, Turner was one of the most respected intellectuals in all of the Fleet. . . but he was not a fighting commander and, by heavens, fighting was what he had trained for.

"You seem troubled, Mr. Tolwyn," Turner said softly, interrupting Geoff's musings.

"Well, sir, just curious, that's all," Geoff quickly replied and he motioned towards the orders which were still sitting on the table. "I mean, this is rather unusual."

"All in due time, Geoff, but first a couple of questions if you don't mind."

Turner looked over at Vance.

"How were things in your squadron, Mr. Richards?"

"Sir?"

"Just that. Not the type of crap you boys have to pump into your efficiency and readiness reports. I mean underneath it all. Your gut sense, what are you seeing, how do you feel about it all?"

Vance chuckled softly. "You got a couple of weeks, sir?"

"We might have more than that to get into the details, but give me the short form right now."

"Well, sir, regarding the men and women who fly the crates, they're top notch. The Academy, and even the outer world flight schools, are turning out some damn good pilots. They're dedicated as all hell, you'd have to be dedicated just to put up with all the crap. I'd stack them against anything out there."

"And the nonflight personnel?"

"The same." You know the old saying, "You have to be half mad to join the Fleet, and fully mad to stay with it"? Well, it's true. You've got to be mad about the Fleet to stick with it. If there's a problem, it's the fact that we lose too many good people to the merchant fleets and commercial lines. They get through their six-year enlistment, some of them have families, they have damn good training, and you can't blame them for jumping. Sure, we have a lot of the old guzzler types, who could never find a job outside of the fleet, but even they know their jobs. So on that score I think we're in good shape."

"What about readiness, though?"

Vance sighed, exhaling noisily.

"If things should ever blow, we're going to be in the barrel."

"What do you mean blow?" Turner asked quietly.

"Come on, sir. The Cats, we all know what you're talking about. The damn Cats are just waiting for the chance to jump."

"What makes you think that?"

"The Varni should have taught us that," Geoff interjected. "The Cats come up to their border, there's a period of peace as the Cats figure them out, then a jump that ended the war in the first thirty days."

"That was forty years ago," Turner replied. "You'd think they might have done something before this. Hell, we didn't even have any kind of direct contact until just five years ago, and not a peep since."

"Just because they haven't doesn't mean they won't," Geoff continued. "Remember that rumor a couple of years back about their taking some settlement beyond the frontier before the demilitarized zone was established? Hell, if that's true, they can deduce a lot even from the standard equipment a group of colonists might have."

Richards shook his head. "Hell there's at least a thousand or more uncharted systems between our border and the Cats, thousands more out in the other directions. There's rumors of incidents like that all the time."

"Well, true or not, I think the Cats are gearing up for us," Geoff replied.

"Your friend Senator More might say you're paranoid," Turner said, a thin smile creasing his wrinkled features.

"Just because he's paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get us," Vance interjected, changing tack and coming about to Geoff's support. "And if they do, we're going to get our butts kicked."

"Why?"

"Sir, I saw some of your articles in Proceedings, why are you asking us?" Vance asked.

"Indulge me. I've been locked away in the Academy for years. I send you young men and women out, but I rarely hear what's going on afterwards, other than what I see in reports."

"Sir, it's the same old story. There's only six carriers for this entire sector, nine in the entire fleet. The appropriation of five years back under the old administration, right after we first ran into the Cats, called for a building program of eight more carriers. We only got two, one of them the new Concordia. The others were shut down and abandoned in Lunar orbit."

"The carriers we do have, other than Concordia, were launched before I was even born. They're antiques, held together with spit and duct tape. Even though Soryu is listed as being on-line, the truth is she's nothing more than a floating stockpile for spare parts, which get stripped out to keep the other five like her going. The fleet spends nearly sixty percent of its time docked right upstairs to save on engine time," and as he spoke he pointed up to where the fleet was now docked at Alexandria.

"That's only the carriers," Turner said. "We've still got the battlewagons and heavy cruisers."

Vance snorted with disdain. "And that's another thing, sir. When are they going to realize the next war will be a carrier war? Those brass-hatted jerks at the top just don't seem to get it."

As if realizing he had warmed perhaps a bit too much to his subject, Vance fell silent.

"Well, at least one brass hat I know might object to being called a jerk, but go on," Winston said with a wry smile.

"It's those battleship admirals, sir. They keep thumping their chests and saying that in a fleet to fleet action it's the big boys who will decide it."

"No carrier-launched craft has ever downed a battlewagon," Turner interjected, "you have to admit that. And remember, even Banbridge flew his flag on a battlewagon, not a carrier."

"What about those reports we got from the Varni?" Richards interjected.

"Which reports, Mr. Richards?"

Richards stumbled for a second and anxiously looked away. The official evaluation reports of the brief war between the Cats and the Varni were still classified. Some of the stuff was still triple A. Vance now found himself in a bind. How could he admit that he had cracked a couple of the fleet access codes and actually managed to get into some single A secured files?

"Don't worry, Mr. Richards," Turner finally said. "You might not have realized it, but more than one eager fighter jock has fooled around with security codes to try to find out information they shouldn't have. I remember you as always having an interest in that area. In fact, when you graduated, Speedwell over in Confed Intel was interested in getting you. He even talked to me about it."

Richards seemed to shudder at the mere mention of the idea.

"I'm a pilot, sir, not cypher. Sure it's a hobby of mine, and I still fool around with it, but flyings my game."

"What best serves the fleet, Mr. Richards?"

"The best thing I can do for the fleet is fly Hurricanes. Are you telling me this new job with you is intel?"

Turner smiled. "Later, son. Don't worry, you'll still get some flying in, but the details can wait. You were complaining about fleet doctrine and the Varni reports."

"It's just that—" and he hesitated. "It's just that there's a rumor that the Varni claim to have darn near destroyed a Kilrathi heavy cruiser with an all-out fighter attack. They said they should have nailed it, but the strike commander was killed and the coordinated attack to break down the phase shielding fell apart."

Turner nodded while reaching into his pocket and pulling out his pipe. Filling it up, he set it alight.

"The bigger the ship the more energy generating systems it contains," Turner said, as if delivering a well-worn lecture in class, "and from the energy systems they get more power for phase shielding. The only thing that limits the size of the ship is the area that the jump engine generators can encompass. That argues against this whole notion that fighter-size craft will ever be able to take out a battlewagon. They

just don't carry enough punch, while a fifty-thousand-ton battlewagon can generate enough energy to power its shields and have enough left over so that its guns could annihilate a thousand fighters without getting a scratch. Sure, a couple of hundred of them hitting one single point might do that, but the heavy antispacecraft guns of a capital ship would rip them to shreds."

"Sir, you were part of the Panama system war games twelve years back, weren't you?" Geoff interjected.

"So?"

"Well, sir. That's where they did a simulation of a new type of weapon, small enough to be carried on a carrier-launched bomber, that can break through phase shielding. The three carriers wiped out all ten battlewagons on the Red team."

"I was there merely as an observer from the Academy," Turner replied while looking at the ceiling and blowing a smoke ring, "and I'm surprised, Mr. Tolwyn, to hear that you, like your companion, Mr. Richards, have also indulged in a little code breaking since that report is classified. And yes, the carriers did nail the battlewagons, at least until the umpires declared the strike null and void. According to official records, Red Fleet won that war game since the Blue admiral threw away his scouting capacity by wasting his carriers."

"And according to you?"

"I was just there as a fleet historian, I just recorded the results."

"But you were converted, weren't you, sir?" Geoff pressed.

"Let's just say I sat up and took notice. But that was speculation on a weapon that as far as we know doesn't exist. I think it's safe to say that our tech people have been fooling around with the idea of a weapon that can punch through phased shielding to nail a capital ship. I think it's safe to say they might have even developed some primitive models, but the counter is to simply increase the frequency of polarity shift to trick the warhead into thinking it's penetrated the shield, so that it blows before it's all the way through. That type of info isn't even really classified. The only way to break a shield is to hammer it so damn hard that it soaks off all the energy from the generators. And hammering means big ships with damn big guns which means battlewagons, not popgun fighters."

"And do you believe that?" Vance asked.

"Let's just say it's still doctrine at the Academy." He lowered his head and sighed. "Well, what was the Academy. Now, if some evidence came up to the contrary, we might see things differently."

"I just wonder if it's doctrine in the Kilrathi training schools," Richards said with a sigh.

"Well, Mr. Richards, maybe that's what you signed on for."

"Sir?"

"Let's just say I think you're going to find the next couple of months to be rather interesting."

"In what way sir?"

"Can you pilot a Wasp?"

Richards chuckled. "I bet even young Mr. Tolwyn, here, can do that."

Geoff bristled. "I was first in my class in subsonic, sonic, and transatmosphere training," he snapped. "I think I can handle an antique jump-capable craft like a Wasp."

"Well, the two of you can argue about who sits in the pilot's seat, because that's what we're using for starters."

"Sir, you've given us precious little," Richards said. "A Wasp is nothing but an old beat-up personnel transport. It's got one gun in case you run into some pirates, but that's just to give you something to hang on to while they rip you up. Just where are we going?"

"Oh, I did forget one technical point for you two," Turner announced.

"And that is, sir?" Vance replied warily.

"This little job is strictly voluntary. Voluntary and very, very classified."

"And our alternatives?" Richards asked.

"Well, son, the two of you have mouths too damn big for your own good. Mr. Tolwyn's affliction in this area is obvious and now rather infamous. Mr. Richards, you seem to have made one complaint too many to your ship's exec regarding lack of spare parts. That last one about him suffering from—what was it now?—cranial-fundamental insertion syndrome was just priceless, but also unwise. So if you turn this slot down, I think you've got a desk to ride here on McAuliffe, while Mr. Tolwyn, your assignment is so far out into the frontier at some one-man outpost that they haven't even named the damn place yet."

"Some choice," Richards replied. "Count me in."

Geoff nodded and said nothing.

"One minor detail that I'm required to explain to you. The classification level to this little job is rather high. Don't worry, you've both been cleared already by a rather, how shall I say, powerful friend up at the top. But you both better learn to keep your mouths shut."

Turner's easygoing professorial manner suddenly disappeared as he spoke, to be replaced with an ice-cold edge that Geoff found so out of character as to almost be frightening.

"That means forever, gentlemen. You keep your ideas and thoughts inside this little circle of ours and that is it. If you ever get back, no one will ever know, not for the rest of your careers. Do I make myself clear on that, gentlemen?"

"Yes, sir," both of them chorused.

"Because if you screw up while on this mission, if there's one loose word from either of you—" he paused, almost embarrassed at the melodramatic words he was about to use but which he knew were absolutely necessary, "—you will be terminated."

The two were silent.

"Do we understand each other and what I've just said?"

"Yes, sir."

Turner smiled and, motioning for the two to follow, he tossed a tip on the table and headed for the door.

# Chapter Three

HALLIN SYSTEM

INSIDE THE KILRATHI EMPIRE

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.121

"A second ship's just come through the jump point!"

Hans Kruger, copilot of the smuggler ship *Phantom*, felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle. Looking nervously over at the plot board, to where the pilot and owner of the ship, Kevin Milady, was pointing, he saw the second red blip wink to life. Seconds later a third blip appeared.

"Get me a readout on it!" Milady snapped.

Hans punched in a data inquiry and on a side screen the silhouette of a Kilrathi Targu class frigate appeared.

"All right, people, there's some big boys waiting up ahead," Milady cried.

"Got 'em on my board," came the reply from overhead.

Hans looked up at their topside gunner and navigator, Igor. Igor, grinning, took a small cup and spit a stream of tobacco juice into it; several of the drops splattered down to land in Hans' lap.

Again he felt the rage boiling over at the humiliations Igor had been heaping on him ever since he had signed on board ship back on Gainers World. He knew it was part of the hazing a new scrub had to endure until he had proven himself. The problem was that, on a ship like the *Phantom*, the hazing had a deadly edge to it. In a one on one against Igor, chances were he'd lose and the result would not just be a sound thrashing. Igor wouldn't be satisfied unless the thrashing included a clipped ear, a jagged scar across the face, a missing eye, or perhaps even a cut throat. Hans knew that playing around with a smuggler crew from the Landreich had its tougher side, but then again, there were no other alternatives.

Back in Confed territory he was wanted for murder. Granted, it was self-defense, but no court would ever bother to see that side of it, if he was even fortunate enough to make it to court. A lot had happened to him in his twenty-one years, none of it all that good. To escape a drunken father and life in a dreary icebound mining settlement on a godforsaken world, he had dreamed of the Academy as a way out. But at seventeen the acceptance had not come. Rather than endure another day he signed on to the next merchant ship leaving port, and for four years worked his way up through the ranks of the Sarn shipping firm, earning his copilot's license at twenty.

Things had been looking bright. Old man Haffa Sarn had even started to consider him to be one of his

extended family, that is, until he killed one of Haffa's sons in a fight over a girl. Some might have said Hans had a streak of the chivalrous in him for protecting a bar girl from a lout like Venela Sarn, but old man Sarn would never see it that way. The finer distinction of Venela pulling a blaster first to blow the girl away for her impertinent refusal would most certainly be forgotten by Haffa, who, for form's sake, had promised that Hans would be "sleeping with the asteroids."

So, for reasons of health, he had hopped the first ship pulling out of Gainer's World and Phantom was in need of a copilot. They hadn't told him where they were going, and it took some time to get used to the smell. The cleanup job for the remains of the last copilot had failed to locate the random bits of tissue, brains and blood scattered around the interior of the ship, splattered there after the unfortunate soul took a direct hit from a mass driver round which penetrated the shields and forward viewport.

"Say, Marilyn, what's going on with those bastards behind us?" Kevin shouted, breaking Hans out of his contemplation of just how wretched he felt at the moment.

Hans looked back over his shoulder and down the access passage to where Marilyn Langer, the ship's chief engineer and tail gunner squatted, hunched over her twin mass drivers. He could not help but admire the view, though if Marilyn knew he was checking her out, his fate might very well be the same as that of the last copilot.

"Four of the bastards and still closing up. Damn, they must have upgraded the engines on those Cat fighters."

Hans continued to stare at the forward plot board.

"The two frigates are accelerating," Hans announced. "Time to closing one minute and thirty-seven seconds."

He looked over at Kevin, who turned to gaze at him with his one good eye. Kevin grinned sardonically.

"Think we're dead?"

"It doesn't look good," Hans choked out.

"When you run the frontier of the Cats, ya gotta pay," Milady announced with a smile. "Now hang on!"

Before Hans could even reply Milady slammed his stick forward while cutting off the hydrogen scoop fields which served the dual role of pulling in the stray hydrogen atoms to be found in deep space for fuel and at the same time providing the drag which enabled a ship to turn and maneuver as if it was inside a planet's atmosphere. With the scoops shut down the ship didn't go into a dive but simply tumbled over on its x-axis so that in an instant it was facing "backwards" to its trajectory towards the jump point. Milady slapped in full throttle, popped the scoops back open and Hans wanted to scream a protest, they were bleeding off their speed and rapidly slowing down so that they'd be a sitting duck for the fighters closing in from one direction and the frigates sealing off their escape in the other.

The inertia-dampening system was barely adequate on the battered ship and Hans grunted, gasping for breath as he was slammed into his seat, the ship creaking and groaning in protest from the ten g stress load. Igor opened up with the topside guns, his photon blasts lighting up space. Hans had no idea what Igor was firing at, no target was visible as stitches of fire slashed back and forth in the darkness, dazzling his vision. Four points of light now erupted in front of him, bolts of light snapping back.

Hans wanted to duck as one of the streaks of light appeared to slash past the cockpit and laced into the starboard wing, a shower of sparks erupting as Phantom's shielding dissipated the energy.

"Lock on with the lasers!" Kevin shouted, and Hans nervously leaned forward to peer at the heads up display. Four blips danced across the glass in front of him. Igor was pouring fire in on the one stitching their starboard wing, but Hans still couldn't see anything, just the flashing red lights and a target circle that weaved back and forth, waiting for his command to lock and fire.

Suddenly, as if materializing out of nothingness, the four fighters popped into view. One second they were nothing but a blinking light on the heads up, and an instant later they seemed to fill space in front of him and then peeled off, two turning to starboard, the other two screaming by so close that the shielding of one of them brushed against the ship, so that it bucked and rocked. He could hear Marilyn's high-pitched yell erupt from the tail gunner's position as she opened up, her cries drowned out by Kevin's wild curses.

"Kruger, you damn idiot! You could've dropped one, damn it! Now shoot!"

But nothing was in front of them. Looking down at the plot board he saw that the frigates were still closing and were now less than two thousand clicks astern. Kevin kept his hands on the throttles, pressing them up to the firewall, their momentum towards the jump point all but gone as Phantom shuddered to a stop relative to the point and then slowly started to crawl away.

"They'll be on us in ten seconds!" Hans shouted, wondering just what the hell the pilot was doing.

"Got one!"

Hans looked up to see Igor roaring with delight, tobacco juice dribbling down his chin to splash Hans with a fine, pungent spray. Hans saw a flash off the port side and, leaning over, he witnessed an erupting cloud of debris.

"Hang on!" Kevin roared and a split second later he once more flipped the ship over on its x-axis so that it was again lined up on the jump point. He dodged the ship straight down and away from their original trajectory. The two frigates swept past to either side, both ships spraying the area with lasers, mass driver rounds, and plasma energy bolts, almost all the shots intersecting where Phantom would have been if they had continued on their previous course.

Several of the shots still found their mark, however, and Hans felt the ship heave under the hammer blows. In an instant shielding dropped down almost to zero from the heavy impacts. Several mass driver bolts slammed clean through the starboard wing in a shower of sparks. Hans realized that if they had been a couple of more meters inboard, the rounds would have driven right through the top of the ship, puncturing the cabin and thus triggering a rapid decompression. It most likely would not have mattered to him though, he thought, since the rounds would have nailed right through his seat, thus providing him with the same death as the last copilot. He looked to his right, to where his helmet and gloves were resting. Reaching over, he grabbed the helmet and put it on, ignoring Kevin's disdainful snort.

"Damn, kid, we get punctured, better to go quick, rather than float around and wait for the Cats to play games with you," Kevin snarled.

Hans had heard enough tales about what the Cats did to smugglers who dared to cross the line that he was tempted to take the helmet back off.

"One coming up front!" Marilyn shouted, her warning followed by a staccato burst from her guns. "Winged him, get the bastard!" A Kilrathi Vak fighter shot past them, tumbling end over end. Hans leaned forward to line up on the heads up display, his helmet banging against the forward viewport so that he lost acquisition for a second. He saw the lock on and hit the forward lasers. Intersecting blasts of light arced out, slashing into the crippled fighter, which detonated.

Hans let out a triumphal whoop—it was so damned easy!

Another shudder snapped through the ship, a shower of sparks erupting from the control panel to his right. A fighter swept past them, Igor cursing wildly as he tried to track the target.

"Those frigates are coming about!" Marilyn shouted.

Hans looked back at the plot board. Damn, how did they do that? Turning a ship that big using your scoop field usually took a couple of minutes, but they were already halfway through the turn and boring in. He looked over at Kevin, and for the first time saw that the boss was decidedly nervous, if not outright scared.

"They must have pulled some new upgrade," Kevin mumbled. "Don't worry, we'll hit jump before they close, then we'll lose the bastards."

Hans looked back at the board.

"At current rate of closing they'll be alongside us in forty seconds."

"Just shut up," Kevin snarled and then looked back over his shoulder.

"All right, Marilyn, dump the surprise!"

"They're away!" came the almost simultaneous reply.

Hans looked back over at Kevin, wondering what the hell they were doing.

"We just dropped a nuke mine," Kevin said quietly. "Damn, that thing cost almost as much as our entire haul."

"A mine! Damn it, a civilian ship carrying one is a capital offense. Why the hell didn't you tell me?" Hans cried.

"Why, you wanna quit? If so, then just get the hell off now!"

Hans, wide-eyed, shook his head.

"It'll save your ass, boy. Now shut up and get a lock on that light frigate."

The jump point was closing in, its telltale distortion waves rippling across the plot board, but smack in the middle was the Kilrathi light frigate which must have just come through. The two fighters swept in again from either side, a stitch of mass driver rounds slashing across the top of their ship, another one puncturing the starboard wing. A flash suddenly erupted on the plot screen, and at the same instant a hellish white-blue light bathed the cockpit.

"Got one!" Marilyn screamed. "He's shearing off. The other one's turning aside, the idiot fell for the dummy mine!"

Hans watched the plot screen and punched in a visual magnification. The eruption of the mine was dissipating, and the Kilrathi frigate which had been their target was tumbling out of control, its entire forward section a twisted, molten wreck. Unless the Cats had good internal bulkhead design and shielding, the bastards in the stern half were most likely cooked as well. The second ship had veered wildly off course, falling for the trick of the second mine, which was nothing more than an empty casing with a trace of radioactive material inside.

Three flashing red blips emerged from the second frigate and started to bore in.

"They've launched seekers," Hans announced, trying to contain the terror in his voice as a low-pitched tone started to squeal in his headset, the combat information board flashing with a profile of the weapon.

"Must've really pissed them off if they're blowing two hundred and fifty thousand credits a pop to kill us," Milady replied, almost as if pleased that the Cats were expending one of the most expensive launch weapons in a ship's arsenal.

"Marilyn, three seekers, can you nail them?"

"On it!"

"Damn, they really want us," Kevin said, his voice suddenly filled with weariness. "Those damn things cost a bundle. Kruger, blow chaff, two-second intervals!"

Hans looked at the weapons board, fumbling till he found the chaff launch button, and punched it five times. All the time Kevin kept weaving the ship toward the jump point. Hans watched as Kevin activated the jump engine, which drained their power still further. Once inside the nexus, the engine would interlock with the displacement of the jump point and they'd be catapulted across a dozen light-years, hopefully to emerge on the other side of the frontier, though if the angle of acquisition wasn't quite right, or the engine wasn't fully engaged, there was no telling where they might wind up.

"It's either shields or engines," Hans announced. "We won't make it running both."

Without comment, Kevin reached over and slapped the toggle shutting the shields down. Now there was only bare metal between them and whatever the Kilrathi could throw in their direction.

"First two seekers plowing straight through the chaff!" Marilyn announced, her voice drowned out by the reverberation of the tail guns as they kicked in, sending out a spray of mass driver rounds in the desperate hope that one of the bolts might impact on a seeker and detonate it.

Topside, Igor was still at work, trading shots with the fighters as they swept back in, while up ahead the light frigate, still holding position by the jump point, began to fire as well. Space seemed to be an insane intersection of flashing lights, all of them crisscrossing around Phantom.

I'm a dead man, Hans realized, and to his utter amazement, rather than renew the fear, he suddenly felt a strange, distant detachment from all that was happening. The sensation was remarkable, as if time was distorting, each second dragging out to an eternity. For an instant he wondered if he was already dead, so calming was the sensation.

He looked over at Kevin and saw the pilot, staring wide-eyed as they approached the light frigate, which was barely visible beyond the explosion of light emanating from its forward batteries. The man's scared to death, Hans realized, and the recognition of the fact was fascinating. He had been in tight binds before, while working for the Sarn consortium, and funny, again when he killed Sara's eldest son, and that same feeling had been there. Draw your weapon, step to one side to dodge the first blast, then calmly nail him between the eyes, turning everything from the neck up into a spray of pulp.

There was an intense awareness of all that was going on around him: Kevin, white-knuckled, driving relentlessly for the jump point; Igor cursing wildly, swinging his turret back and forth in a desperate bid to fend off the fighters; Marilyn cursing as well as she fired wildly at the incoming seekers. He looked down at the plot board, all the data now standing out so remarkably clearly. The seekers were still accelerating and would close a good ten seconds before they hit the jump. The light frigate was sending out a curtain of fire, but somehow he could sense that whoever was in charge of gunnery on board was doing one hell of a rotten job. The concentrated fire was causing the two fighters to hold back when all it would take was one more close sweep, and the first mass driver bolt to hit the pressurized cabin would cause a clean breach.

A shot from the frigate sheared through the portside wing, tearing off a couple of meters. Kevin dodged the next volley and then lined back up on the jump point. Without even asking for permission Hans leaned over and slammed the hydrogen scoops off. Though it immediately cut drag, it would be impossible to maneuver now.

"What the hell?" Kevin roared.

"Their shooting sucks and it'll give us a few more clicks of speed," Hans replied calmly.

He looked back down at the plot board. The first seeker was leaping forward, and then simply disappeared as Marilyn's shooting detonated the missile.

That bought us a few seconds, Hans thought, but the second and third rounds were still boring in. The second round skidded to maneuver around the expanding cloud of debris from the first seeker. To his amazement the third seeker appeared to go straight into the shower of debris, and it detonated as well. Interesting, he thought, the cats should have programmed their missile to avoid such a stupid mistake.

"Ten seconds to jump point," Hans announced, eyes still focused on the board.

The detachment and distortion of time that he was experiencing seemed to stretch out even further. He found it curious that, in a perverse sort of way, he was actually enjoying himself, a complete reversal from the terror that had all but overwhelmed him when the action first started. It was something worth remembering, he thought. Once into it, there's almost a cold joy to it all. Strange that dancing at death's door appeared to be the only thing that could elicit such a feeling.

He spared a quick glance up. The Kilrathi light frigate was turning to fire broadside, but he knew it was far too late. They shot past the frigate. They were inside the edge of the jump field, the jump engine telemetry showing that it was engaging with the distortion of the field.

Yet, even with his sense of total awareness, what now unfolded seemed to be nothing but a blur. The seeker seemed to leap forward and he realized that there must be some form of afterburner on the missile's engine to boost it through any point defense systems. The missile bored in and he heard Marilyn's cry of alarm.

He could see Kevin's features shifting to a brief instant of elation with the thought that they'd hit jump. That was washed out by a flash of light astern.

There was a final cry from Marilyn, "Got the bas..." and then the blast enveloped her. Though she had nailed the seeker, a remarkable display of shooting given its final acceleration, it had detonated far too close to them, the explosion washing into the back of the ship. If full shields had been up, they might have gotten away with it, but now there was nothing but a thin layer of durasteel, and the fragments of the missile, driven forward by the detonation of its warhead, slammed into the stern of the ship, tearing it open as if it was made of nothing but paper. He started to turn to look... and then wished he hadn't as what was left of Marilyn sprayed up into the cockpit. The air inside the ship whooshed out through the ruptured stern, the back draft sucking the fragments of the woman through the jagged opening.

He looked back at Kevin but there wasn't that much to look at there. A jagged hunk of durasteel, still imbedded in the back of his seat, had decapitated him. Igor, up in the top turret, was struggling to kick himself free of the debris, the bottom half of his flight suit was frayed by the wash of fragments, shards of white bone sticking out through the orange jumpsuit, pulses of blood spraying out and freezing in the vacuum.

Hans realized that his hands felt cold and, looking down, he saw that he had not put his gloves on. They were still in the rack to his right and, reaching over, he fumbled to put the first glove on. It felt strange. The pressurized cuffs around his wrists had sealed his suit shut. His hands were now in pure vacuum, sensation in them rapidly fading away as the moisture on his skin boiled off. It was becoming difficult to move them and he knew if he didn't act quickly they'd freeze solid.

Before he had even clipped the first glove on he struggled with the second, forcing it over his hand. He slapped his hands down on his thighs, snapping the locks closed, and sighed with relief as the pressurized cuffs released, flooding warm air around his fingers.

Something bumped into him. He looked over his shoulder and saw Igor, without a helmet, his flight pants from the knees down a tangled fringe of fabric, blood and bone. At the same instant the jump engines kicked in and there was the gut-wrenching sense of falling through jump. He had always hated this part, but for once jump came as a blessed relief. Everything seemed to freeze for an instant, Igor hovering above him, floating up for a brief moment as the jump engines overrode the artificial gravity. Behind him he could see open space where Marilyn's position used to be, the star fields coalescing into a shimmering, deep red glow as the ship instantly leaped through the folded space of the jump field. An instant later they were through to the other side, star fields returning.

Igor slammed back down on the deck and then, as if he was the walking dead, came back up, his mouth open in a soundless scream, hands clawing at Hans' helmet, as if trying to pull it off. Hans did not even bother to ward off the blows, there was an almost perverse satisfaction in not even bothering to resist his old tormentor.

Igor's eyes changed color as the moisture in them boiled off, the eyeballs then freezing. Igor continued to claw, mouth open, the thin wisp of a cloud of moisture, changing instantly to floating crystals of ice, cascading out of him. The tobacco he had been chewing fell out of his mouth, a frozen mass of dirty brown. His blows weakened, his arms slowly falling to his side, hands curling up into tight balls.

The blood in his lungs must be boiling, Hans realized, the bubbles filling his heart chambers. He knew that the stories about people exploding in vacuum were nothing but old wives' tales. Death was far more subtle, with surface moisture, the eyes, and the lining of the lungs giving up their moisture and then freezing. In a way, the victim simply suffocated, long before all the liquid inside their body was sucked out

by the vacuum, leaving the corpse a shriveled mummy. Igor clutched at his throat, even as he slowly crumpled to his knees. Hans still watched him, not sure if, in a final malevolent act, he might not draw his blaster to insure company on the other side.

And then he did something that startled Hans. Igor seemed to smile and gave Hans a thumbs up gesture. He wavered for several seconds, then fell to the deck. Hans looked at him in amazement. It was almost as if, at the very end, his foe had indicated that Hans was accepted, that he was part of the club.

Hans looked back at the plot board. There was no pursuit and space around where he had emerged was empty. He keyed up the nav screen and sighed with relief to see that they had successfully made their jump back into the demilitarized zone dividing the Kilrathi Empire and the outer reaches of the frontier. He popped the hydrogen scoops open. Fuel was at absolute zero. It'd be a couple of days at the speed Phantom was running at to pull in enough stray hydrogen atoms to fire the engines up. It was the frustrating equation of space flight. There was fuel aplenty in deep space. Have a big enough scoop field and you could not only maneuver but could always pull in more and yet more fuel. The faster you were going the more you got. But when you needed it the most, when you were down to bone dry, you might drift for days, weeks, even months before you had pulled in enough to pulse the engines up to a speed where you could gather in energy quickly. He knew that if the Cats pulled a hot pursuit it'd be over in another minute... but they never came through.

He chuckled softly. They must have seen the seeker blow, the blast engulfing the ship, and assumed that it had been a direct hit. Since you only got so many hops out of a jump engine before a very expensive overhaul, the frigate captain must have assumed it was a writeoff and not worth the effort of going through to check. Heaven help that Cat, Hans realized, when someone finally checked the high-speed film and saw that Phantom had hit the jump point still intact. Well, more or less intact. He could only hope that they didn't get around to that for awhile.

Hans stood up and realized that his knees felt slightly weak. The moment of hyperawareness was drifting away and he wanted to reach out, to embrace it and wrap it into his soul. Never had he felt so alive, so clear in his thoughts, as he had in those final seconds. He knew now that, like a lotus addict, he'd willingly seek the moment out, again and again, no matter what the risk. He knew as well that something inside of himself had changed forever. He had glimpsed it when he killed the Sarn, a calm detachment, but that moment had been so brief, and the fear of what the Sarn family would do to him so strong, that he had never really taken the time to fully embrace and analyze what had happened. A line of challenge had been crossed, and the crossing had been remarkably easy. Hans realized that Kevin, whom he had secretly admired even as he feared him, never had that sense of control. He could see that in the pilots eyes in those last seconds. He looked back over at the corpse. The blood that had been pulsing out of his severed jugular had stopped, the sticky liquid evaporating in the vacuum.

He looked around the ship and weaved his way through the flame-scorched rubble to the stern access hatch. An inflatable collar might be able to seal that off, he thought. He'd have to go outside, look for punctures and fill them with plasti-seal. Fortunately the blow had taken them directly astern. There was no way Phantom could go into an atmosphere, but at least the forward cockpit, with its precious control systems, had escaped damage.

He looked back around the cabin. Burial would be easy enough, just drag them to the ruptured stern and out they go. They wouldn't be the first consigned to the eternity of darkness. And besides, he was no longer considering a one fiftieth share of the profit from the illegal shipment of Kilrathi durasteel down in the hull. This was, after all, a salvage job he reasoned, and by the rules of admiralty courts half the salvage was his, the other half divided between the government and the original owners. He chuckled. Hell no, this wasn't a salvage job. The captain and owner was dead—long live the new owner of the

Phantom .

# Chapter Four

IN ORBIT ABOVE KILRAH

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.155

"We are now at X day minus eighty," the Crown Prince announced, grinning with delight as he looked around the room at the eight clan leaders, and behind them the commanders of the Second, Fifth, and Sixth Claw Fleets.

There was a stir in the room as the Crown Prince gestured towards the holo display field and stepped away from it as the simulation started.

"This is the main Confederation base at McAuliffe, the primary strike target of the Second Fleet of the Claw, which I shall personally lead."

A scorched orange ball of a planet floated in the middle of the field, first appearing as a small dot and then quickly magnifying in size so it appeared to fill half the room.

"Their main orbital docking facility has the capacity to handle nearly half of their Seventh Fleet in hard dock around the skyhook tower that connects down to the planets surface."

The image focused in on the vast orbital yards of enclosed docks, each capable of holding a heavy battlewagon inside a pressurized container so that repair crews could work in an atmosphere, storage facilities for the supplies, open dock stations and a terminal hub for handling half a hundred smaller transport ships. There was a vast interlacing of pressurized access tunnels spreading out from the central hub of the skyhook tower. It gave the base the appearance of an elaborate spiderweb hanging in space, with each of the ships docked into the system looking like a silver-and-black cocoon.

"Remarkable that you have this," Admiral Nargth, who was in direct command of Second Fleet under the Crown Prince, stated.

The heir shook his head. "Intercepted from one of their news links, broadcast on an open carrier," he said, and the assembly laughed along with him over the stupidity of their foe.

"And the latest defensive reports?" Nargth asked. "After all, these images might be a trick, a fabrication meant to deceive us."

"No, it's not a trick. These humans who dominate the Confederation are prey who believe that there are no hunters and thus gather in the open. We've seen these images countless times in the months we've been preparing. They are supported as well by a download from a computer on that world we seized. As for what we believe their current defense to be, it is fairly substantial."

As he spoke the vid image changed to standard battle schematics, positions of threat highlighted in orange.

"There're more than forty batteries arrayed in a defensive perimeter around the orbital base. Standard

weapons—mass drivers, laser and plasma. At least a dozen batteries are hard-linked to the ground through the skyhook tower and thus are connected to secured heavy fusion reactors so they have limitless energy to draw on. There're at least fifteen missile launch batteries as well, half of them multiple mounts that can launch at least sixty missiles in as many heartbeats. Add to that the weapons on board the ships and it's a formidable system to puncture. On the ground, at what they call Johnson Island, there are six fusion reactors supplying energy for the batteries in space and, more importantly, the shielding which completely encompasses the base, both in orbit and on the ground. The ground facilities, as well, are covered by an interlocking field of heavy batteries."

Holding a laser pointer, the Crown Prince outlined the six reactors while photo images of each appeared in the field.

"It still sounds impossible," Nargth replied.

The Crown Prince chuckled, looking around at the clan leaders, and especially at Vakka, who sat in silence.

"But easy enough now to break," Gilkarg continued.

"Sire, would you please explain?" Nargth interjected nervously. "We jump through and, by the time we close from the jump point to the base, they'll be fully aroused, shields up, and ships preparing to undock and engage. If they stay within range of those defenses we'll be slaughtered."

"Our new weapon will solve that simply enough," Gilkarg announced.

"Sire, it hasn't even completed its tests," Vakka replied, "let alone gone into production."

"We have eighty days to complete that," the Crown Prince said dismissively. "Have you made it clear to those who are involved in the testing and making of this weapon that it is their heads and those of their families at stake?"

Vakka nodded. Such methods might be approved of by the Emperor and the other clan leaders, but he could not help but find it somewhat distasteful. Granted, most of those engaged in doing the research and building of the latest weapons were not of the blood of Kilrah, but rather were slaves of other races whom they had had subjugated in their great leap outward across the universe. For those of the blood, there was but one calling, and that was to fight and win honor to their name. And yet, it was upon the toil of those not of the blood upon which the Empire rested. If such individuals, even if they were soulless, were not offered some hope, some semblance of life without fear, he knew that they would not work well.

He had often argued with himself that it was for just such a pragmatic reason that he wanted to end the constant series of death threats, punishments, and brutally arbitrary executions. And yet there was another side that of late he was forced to admit too... there was something inside of him that pitied the conquered. Some of the races had fought honorably and well, some were obviously more intelligent but had lacked the military prowess to stand against Kilrah. Now they were slaves, and in his heart he wondered if this course was necessarily the right one for long-term survival across the eons.

He had spent over a year on the place called Fawcetts World. The captured colony of humans had been his assignment to evaluate in preparation for this war. Though the Confederation was weak politically, wracked by incessant internal debate, it nevertheless had a certain vibrancy to it, and he sensed a depth as well. If they did not completely shatter these humans and the other races which had allied with them,

they might very well show a tenacity of spirit far beyond anything encountered before.

"Let us say they do not complete this weapon in eighty days. Do we then execute the only ones capable of someday producing it?" Vakka asked, the sarcasm in his voice evident.

"Just that it must be done. Is the test ready?" asked the Crown Prince.

Vakka nodded and pointed towards the holo field.

"Whenever you command, sire."

"Then let us see."

Vakka held up a remote, whispered a command and then pointed back to the holo field. The display of McAuliffe disappeared, to be replaced by the hulk of an aging Butha class cruiser. A flicker appeared to shimmer around the ship, indication that at least the ship's shielding was still operational.

The view in the holo field split between the ship and the cockpit interior of an Asjaka class three-seater bomber. The view was over the shoulder of the bomber's pilot and then shifted to focus in on the screen of the weapons officer. There was a quiet background of chatter between the crew, and Vakka could well imagine their nervousness at the realization that they were under the scrutiny of the high command of the Empire.

Through the forward port of the bomber the cruiser was in view, first as nothing more than a pinpoint of light, which started to elongate into a cylinder.

"Starting acquisition and locking procedure," the weapons officer announced.

The weapons display screen showed the cruiser and the pulse of its shielding.

"Have acquired shield phasing," the weapons officer continued. "The weapon is locking in."

The pilot reached over to slam back on the throttles so that the bomber slowed until it was almost at a dead stop relative to the target.

"Counting down to launch," the weapons officer announced and he began to count backwards, reading off the display. Vakka shook his head, knowing that the weapons officer was doing the countdown for dramatic effect.

"Torpedo launched!" the weapons officer roared.

The pilot slammed in full throttle and pulled a sharp, banking turn away from the ship. The view in the holo field shifted back to a close-up of the cruiser, while the voice of the weapon's officer counted down the seconds to penetration and impact.

The weapon closed in and Vakka held his breath. It had been tested repeatedly against shield generators, but never against a full-size ship. Even though the vessel was not maneuvering or fighting back, so much could still go wrong and he knew he would be blamed.

The torpedo hit the edge of the shielding... and then sliced clean through without detonating. It impacted against the side of the ship and then exploded in an incandescent flash.

A growl of approval erupted in the room at the sight of the cruiser splitting open, its entire bow section shearing off from the blow. Vakka looked around the room and saw the nods of approval from most of those assembled, but Nargth was shaking his head.

"Impressive, yes, but having to stop to launch? They will be blasted apart."

"Yes, some will be lost," the Crown Prince replied. "It will be the duty of the escorts to aggressively attack the target, thereby diverting the gunners from the bombers which are lingering further off, while other escorts will keep the enemy fighters at bay. Some will be lost, but enough will get through to shatter their fleet."

"And these weapons will be ready for me to fight with?" Nargth asked.

Vakka could only nod his head. He would have preferred to see more time spent on development and testing. He did not feel that now was the time to add that at least one out of three weapons malfunctioned in one way or another.

"It is this method of delivery that I find so troublesome," Nargth continued. "Now if we were launching them from our heavy ships, which could withstand the pounding that the enemy is sure to put up, then I could see it. But to launch this attack from carriers? That still strikes me as nothing short of madness."

The Crown Prince stepped back towards the center of the room and pointed towards the holo field, where the image of the shattered and burning cruiser disappeared to be replaced by what at first glance appeared to be nothing more than a star field.

"There are two reasons," the Crown Prince announced in reply. "First, the heavy shielding required aboard our own ships interferes with the acquisition and lock on an enemy target. The only alternative is to power down a larger ship's field, thus leaving it vulnerable. I do not think you would be willing to do that in a full-scale engagement."

Nargth growled and shook his head.

"Second, it is two jumps to McAuliffe from our frontier; one jump through the demilitarized zone, and then the next jump into their base. If we proceed in normal fashion the Confederation will have at least six hours warning of attack. I have devised a plan to destroy the monitors they have placed inside the demilitarized zone. The crucial moment will come when we jump into their system. Our attack must strike in well under two hours, not six, in order to catch their capital ships before they can warm their engines up and make way. That is why we must use the carriers."

As the Crown Prince launched into his talk the holo displayed the tactical plan.

"The attack will be preceded by two light smuggler-type craft. The Confederation keeps a frigate on picket duty in front of the jump point into McAuliffe. We will simulate a hot pursuit of the smuggler craft as they jump into the demilitarized zone and then break off the chase. The smugglers will then approach the frigate and allow themselves to be overhauled and boarded for inspection."

The Crown Prince paused for effect.

"The crews will then detonate a warhead aboard their ship. They will committaguar and destroy the frigate."

There was a growl of approval from the assembly. To committaguar in order to destroy an enemy and, by so doing, enhance the strength of the clans was the highest honor a warrior could seek. Having thus volunteered they were treated as beings who were semidivine until they left upon their mission. Any female that sired a cub from them was held in honor and the offspring granted the honorificKa-tagu .

"The six carriers assigned to the Second Claw Fleet will lead the attack, approaching the jump point into the demilitarized zone at the highest speed possible, the timing of their transit to coincide with the destruction of the enemy frigate. They will race across the demilitarized zone and jump into McAuliffe. If all goes to plan, they will arrive in the McAuliffe system without any warning."

"As soon as they emerge, all carriers will launch their full complement of fighters and bombers."

On the holo field display the view now focused in on the jump point inside McAuliffe, the simulation showing the six carriers, with a swarm of tiny dots emerging from them and then racing down towards the planet.

"Here is where the carrier strike is the key to success," the Crown Prince continued. "Their defenses are based on the assumption that it will be the heavy battleships which lead the attack. Such ships can only achieve, at best, three quarters the speed of our new carriers."

"Their hitting power makes up for that," Nargth replied defensively.

"You are talking about going against the strongest base in the Confederation, outside of their inner-world systems."

"If our battleships go in first, they will have sufficient warning time to sortie the docked ships. And remember, Nargth, their combined strength in ships, especially heavy vessels; is half again as great as ours. If we are to win this war, we must destroy their main fleet in the first strike or we are doomed."

The Crown Prince looked around the room.

"And how will the carriers manage to achieve victory?" Qazkar, one of the clan leaders, asked. "This is a complete reversal of all fighting doctrine. Sire, we are wagering all on an untested theory."

"Not completely untested," the Crown Prince replied. "The Confederation did the testing for us. You have seen the report on their war game of some years back, extracted from a prisoner on Fawcett's World. Their carrier commander succeeded because he jumped through into the system at top speed. The fighters and bombers then launched and accelerated as well. The key point here is that the initial velocity of the carriers was already imparted to the fighters and bombers. With their faster acceleration they were able to boost to yet higher speed, thus penetrating through to the target before it could scramble a defense.

"Our strike will hit the enemy base less than an hour after jump through, and their defenses will be down. The first wave will penetrate to the surface of the planet. Using our new torpedoes, they will launch a strike against the power reactors. The Confederation bases its entire defense of McAuliffe around those reactors. The reactors will be destroyed, which will knock down their shields. Once the shields are gone we can wade into our foes and slaughter them."

"Our strike craft will be going so fast, how will they slow down sufficiently to achieve an accurate approach on the target?" Qazkar pressed and there were curious nods of agreement.

"All strike craft will have booster engines strapped on. As they begin deceleration these engines will fire, slowing the craft, and then be jettisoned. It will cut down on the weight of munitions, but the sacrifice in strike power is worth it. It is surprise, surprise, thejak-tu that is everything!"

"In that hour, much can be achieved to get their defenses up," Nargth replied.

The Crown Prince smiled and looked over at Vakka.

"You are such an expert on these humans and their allies, explain the other reason why I moved the date up."

Vakka sat in silence for a moment and then the realization dawned on him. He could not help but admire the cunning of the Crown Prince. Yet, on the other side, the significance of it to the humans was troubling.

"The humans call the day Confederation Day," Vakka said, "the annual celebration commemorating the establishment of their government. It is observed throughout their systems and also signals a time when many government officials take what they call a vacation for several days."

"The evening before this day is one of drinking and celebration," the Crown Prince announced. "Our strike will bore in early the following morning. Most of the ships' crews will be asleep or drunk. It will be chaos."

"Might not the timing of this strike arouse them to an even greater fury?" Vakka interjected. "If they struck us on Tuhaga our rage would know no bounds."

"The war will be over before it starts," the Crown Prince replied. "With the destruction of their task force and the base at McAuliffe, the entire outer frontier is open to us. Later that day the Fifth and Sixth Fleets will penetrate on the flanks of the Confederation, the zones they call Etruria and this other one, the Landreich."

"Their reserve fleet near Earth will be forced to sortie. We shall then combine our fleets, forge straight into the heart of their space, meet what is left of their reserves and annihilate it. At that point the war will be over."

The Crown Prince surveyed the room. He could see that even old Nargth was beginning to believe in what could be done.

"The entire fleet will go on a series of continuous maneuvers, simulating their attack plans until it is time to depart for the jump-off points. Full detail battle plans for your individual missions will be loaded into your ships' computers, with an analysis of targets. Once our fleets depart from here, strict communications silence is to be maintained. If there are no further questions, I suggest you return to your ships."

The Crown Prince gave a curt nod of dismissal and, turning, he left the room, followed by his son and their entourage of staff officers, aides, and hangers-on.

An excited buzz of talk filled the room as those left stood up and started to gather into small groups to discuss what had just been revealed. Vakka looked over at his son, Jukaga.

"It will be glorious," Jukaga said excitedly. "I've been asked to fly in the lead strike."

Vakka nodded. "We shall see."

He could overhear some of the talk and most of it sounded favorable to the plan. Those Barons whose clan holdings bordered on the Confederation were, of course, the most excited, since it would be their realms which expanded outward to encompass the conquered territory. Even those Barons on the side of the Empire facing inward towards the galactic core seemed pleased. Certain worlds would be granted to them, titles and honors heaped upon them once victory was achieved... and was that not what war was for... the winning of glory as their sires and sire's sires had done before them?

"Do you think it will work?"

Vakka stirred from his musings to see old Admiral Nargth standing beside him. Vakka stood up and gave a ceremonial raising of the head to bare his throat as acknowledgment of respect. Though Nargth was not of the royal blood, he was nevertheless one upon whom many honors had been heaped. He had distinguished himself in the war against the Varni, when still not much more than cub, and in his long career had risen through the ranks, a phenomenon rare for those not of the line.

Vakka led the admiral over to a corner of the room and gazed out the viewport. The Second Claw Fleet was arrayed before them, eight heavy battleships, a dozen heavy and medium cruisers, a host of escort vessels and the six carriers, which seemed minuscule when compared to the heavy hitting power of the capital ships.

"The plan is unorthodox," Vakka began.

Even though he trusted Nargth, his own contempt for the Crown Prince and the Imperial line could never be revealed. And that was the frustrating part of all this. He felt slighted. For after all, it was he who had first called attention to the Confederation war game. It was he who had first taken Fawcett's World, studying the captive colony, and thus he who was the expert. And no one cared to hear his advice.

His thoughts drifted for a moment. Before Fawcett's World there had been no indication of the existence of this force on their flank. All their attention after the Varni had been focusing in towards the galactic core. It was felt that there was nothing worth exploiting out towards the galactic rim, where the density of worlds declined, and finding uncharted jump points became more difficult.

And then by random chance his own ship found a jump point, went through it, and ran straight into the humans of the Confederation. Well, it was inevitable, he tried to reason, and as such it meant this war was inevitable.

At first he thought the humans almost as stupid as the Shata. They had, after all, allowed their ship to be taken intact. Within its computers were all the navigation charts for several hundred million cubic parsecs of space, a coup of unprecedented proportions. There also was data on ships, cities, bases, orbital stations, and so much more... files on art, literature, music, history, politics; in short, all that they were.

It was startling to realize that such information was not unique, but in fact common on most of their larger vessels... how could they have been so insane as to allow it to fall into enemy hands?

He had left his oldest friend, Harga, in charge. It was the type of task to Harga's liking. A strange one, war had lost its appeal for him. Perhaps he had seen too much at the Battle of Karing, with the death of all his own cubs; it was after Karing that the questioning had begun. And it was through Harga that the warnings had come. Bizarre how the old warrior now claimed friendship with one of the captives, but Vakka had to admit he could not help but admire the human as well.

So it is from this that we now go to war. Strange how the universe works, he thought. I who found them, I who profit the most of all the clans by fighting them, now wish it the least. He felt he had a better sense of the humans than nearly anyone in the Empire. Some of his musings regarding them, their strengths and vulnerabilities, were now clearly reflected in the Prince's battle plan.

He looked back over at Nargth.

"The change in battle doctrine to the use of carriers as the first strike force has been discussed for years."

Vakka continued after a short pause. "Ever since the war with the Varni we've considered it. Development of a shield-penetrating torpedo now makes it logical."

"It will still be the heavy ships, though, that will carry the day," Nargth replied defensively. "I've given my life to the fleet. Only ships with staying power will finally decide it. As to the overall plan, there is a flaw to it."

"And that is?"

"It lacks aggressive punch to finish the war. Why split us into three fleets? We should concentrate. Yes, strike McAuliffe, but have the other two fleets drive straight to Earth and their inner worlds."

"In the nearly three times eight days such a journey would take, they will concentrate. Besides, there are heavy defenses around the inner worlds."

Nargth shook his head. "The Imperial family looks too much towards the taking of worlds and their wealth to define victory. We must meet and destroy all the enemy, not just take worlds. For that matter, the First Fleet of the Claw should be committed as well."

Vakka looked at Nargth in surprise.

"That is the Emperor's own fleet, permanently stationed here at Kilrah. It is the Imperial guard."

"Gold-plated toys," Nargth snapped. "There, with the First Fleet, is the additional strength to aid in a drive on Earth."

Vakka could see the logic, at least in a military sense, to what Nargth wanted. Holding back the First Fleet in that sense was unwise. If the blow was to beajak-tu, it had to be swift, remorseless, unstoppable. The First Fleet could provide the additional power. But in a political sense it was impossible. The Emperor would never dare to unmask the home world. Ever since the leap outward into space, the other clans, and their royal lines, had been dispersed to occupy the new worlds, thus leaving Kilrah solely to the Emperor. If he committed his personal fleet, there was always the chance of an attempt at overthrow, even though such a move was completely contrary to the blood oaths of the race. Vakka smiled at the thought. There was even something inside of him that found the thought distasteful, but he knew, if given the chance, he would try for it. There was, as well, the argument that if this unorthodox attack failed, the First Fleet would be needed as a reserve to fend off the Confederation counterstrike.

"If the torpedoes do work and we catch them by surprise, Admiral, is this war winnable?"

"There are many ifs," Nargth replied, his gaze distant as if he was staring off into some unknown and

uncharted realm.

"We must rip out their throats the first day. The Confederation is larger than us, its manufacturing more developed. We must rip out their throats before they are even aware. Given that, I believe we shall win."

Vakka watched the admiral closely. He could sense the hesitation, but also the resolve to succeed, now that the orders had been issued. Not being of the royal blood, it was inconceivable that Nargth should ever openly question or attempt to circumvent a direct order. He was ordered to prepare for war and now he would lend all his strength and will to that task.

"May I ask a favor, Admiral?"

"Anything, Baron."

"My son. For his, how shall I say it, education, I am sending him on a courier ship to Fawcett's World. I want him exposed to these humans."

Nargth wrinkled his nose with disdain.

"I've seen some of them in the Emperors questioning rooms in the basement of the palace. Disgusting creatures. Why do you want your son to see them?"

The questioning rooms... the fact that several eights of eights of the humans he had taken at Faweetts World were shipped to Kilrah for direct questioning had been troubling. Every ounce of knowledge of military worth had been extracted from them till they were nothing but dried husks, fit only for the final death blow. What might still be alive in the Emperors chambers were nothing but terrified animals.

"I want him to understand what he will face."

"Why?"

"He will one day rule my clan. I want him educated in all things."

Nargth shook his head over the eccentricities of a royal baron who thought such things important, but said nothing.

"He believes that he will be in the strike force, he has the wings of a pilot and the Crown Prince offered the assignment."

The offer had, in fact, been a direct suggestion of the Crown Prince and the inner plan was obvious. Jukaga was his only direct heir and, if he should die, it could cause a splintering within the clan as various cousins vied for the honor, thus making the Crown Prince a factor in internal clan politics.

"You want him on my staff?" Nargth asked, and Vakka could sense the slight ripple of distaste from the straight-laced admiral. Cubs, even those of royalty, were expected to do their duty, to draw blood and win their own honors. Granted, once blooded they could easily step aside and let others take the more dangerous risks, but this rite of passage was expected.

"He will return as a valuable resource, Admiral. He has been studying their language. If war was not coming so quickly I'd leave him on Fawcett's World for a year. Even with his limited contact he would be of use to you in this battle as something of an expert on our foes. Afterwards, there will be time enough

for him to wet his claws, but for this first action I think he would best serve the Empire by your side."

And out of harm's way, Vakka silently thought.

"All right," Nargth finally replied, the reluctance and slight measure of disdain in his voice all too evident.

A servant approached them, a captive Vami, its eardrums punctured so that it could not hear any conversations. At its approach Vakka felt slightly uncomfortable. He knew that xenophobia was a deeply bred instinct in the Kilrathi. Any creature not of their own blood was eitherukta , prey-food, orbak , another predator that was a threat. The Varni, with their reptilian features, immediately aroused a sense that here was another predator, even though the Varni had once been a highly developed civilization that only saw combat as a distasteful action of last resort. The Varni slave held up a tray, offering goblets of steaming hotxark , the fresh blood drawn from what had once been the main species they hunted, eons ago. The mere scent of the blood caused Vakka's mane to bristle. Many a warrior would carry a piece of cloth soaked inxark so as to heighten his killing instincts as he went into battle.

Now,xark helped Vakka to bury all the misgivings he held regarding the forthcoming campaign. Many in the room started to burst into their clans' battle chants, pounding clenched fists against tables, chair backs, and the walls so that a deep resonating rhythm thundered, setting Vakkas heart pounding. There would be time enough later on to worry about them, he told himself, but for now the taste of the blood was on his lips, the hunt was about to begin, and he allowed himself the pleasure of plunging into the lust for the kill.

# Chapter Five

THE HELL HOLE

CAPITAL OF THE LANDREICH

CONFEDERATION DATE 2436.170

Hans Kruger cautiously entered the room, surveying the patrons carefully. It had taken over a week to limp back to Landreich space and dock at the orbital base above the Hell Hole. The appropriate bribes had immediately been placed, registration numbers and titles altered andPhantom , rechristenedLazarus , was now officially his... officially, that is, as far as the local government went. It was an entirely different issue with some of Kevins old friends. Buying the first couple of them off seemed easy enough, but with each buy off, someone else showed up. There was now another death on his hands, again self-defense, and though he had never considered himself to be a killer, he felt deeply troubled by the last encounter, for there had been that strange sense of detachment as well. He was coming to realize that he was able to face death and walk away not only successful but unshaken.

If there was a fear still lingering in him it was not of going back against the Kilrathi, but rather of the Sara clan, who would track him down sooner or later.

He examined the clientele of the bar. The appointment seemed legitimate enough; some dam fool wanting to charter a smuggling run into Kilrathi space, but it could always be a setup. Funny, he realized that he wasn't even all that sure about what he should be looking for.

After all, just what did a hired assassin look like? All he really had to go on was the vids. An assassin

could always be told by the way he narrowed his eyes, wore a hat pulled down too low over the brow, and of course, by the sinister music and slightly burnt smell.

Unfortunately there were no sound and smell tracks to help him out and, beneath his outward calm, he still knew just how green he really was. There was actually some genuine regret that Kevin had not lived. Granted, he wouldn't be rich now, the owner of a ship, but Kevin at least had experience and could have shown him the ins and outs of the business.

He finally saw what he figured were his contacts, sitting in the corner of the bar and looking quite out of place. He slowly walked over and stopped by their table.

"Mr. Jackson?"

Winston Turner looked up, startled by just how young the owner of the ship looked. He could sense that the boy was nervous. He had seen that type of nervousness often enough when a young fleggie was facing the dreaded senior oral exams. That was clearly evident, and yet there was another quality as well that Turner found interesting—the boy seemed to almost be functioning on two levels at once. He was engaged in business with them, and yet there also seemed to be a strange detachment from it all. Some of the best fighter jocks he had ever met had that quality, the ability to stay detached in a crisis, to analyze the flood of information dispassionately, and then almost inevitably make the right decision. He knew Vance Richards had the quality, Tolwyn would most likely acquire it as well... and this boy seemed to have earned it the hard way.

Winston motioned for Hans to sit down and noticed that Kruger turned his chair so that he was facing the rest of the bar rather than the wall.

"Wanted by somebody," Turner ventured. "Let's see, your name was Meyer?"

Hans smiled. "I think we're all lying here about names, but let's just say I'm being cautious."

"We understand your ship has had quite an upgrade."

"The best money can buy," Hans replied proudly. "Engines are Reverberator Three Thousand C series, I've had an extra half inch of durasteel laminated onto the pressurized hull, a quad auto-tracking laser in a retractable belly turret added on and a complete overhaul of the jump engine."

"You've lost a lot of cargo-carrying ability with all that additional weight," Vance interjected, "even with the upgraded engines. And besides, the Reverberator is in the E series now."

"Listen, buddy, it's getting in and getting back that counts. Better ten runs without a scratch and just a couple tons of cargo, versus twenty tons down in your hull and a Cat frigate on your tail."

"Which is what happened to you last time," Turner said smoothly.

Hans looked around the room and again there was the flicker of a scared youth.

"Yeah, that's what happened."

"I already know the story. I looked over your ship earlier today," Turner replied, "saw a vid one of the repair crew shot of it when you brought it in. Lucky to still be breathing air. Too bad about your friends."

Hans took in what Turner had just said. If someone had shot a vid of the ship, there might be evidence floating around and perhaps getting into the wrong hands.

"I think, Mr. Kruger, that we can strike a deal here. For your own health I think you should get out of the Hell Hole for awhile. You've got a rep now, a lot of folks respect you for being crazy enough to do a run into Kilrathi space and bring your ship back alone. But that information might get into wrong hands, such as certain shipping firms that have been inquiring about you."

Hans again felt the sense of calm. These three weren't a threat, or they'd have already tried to waste him.

"And you three," Hans replied smoothly. "You sure don't belong in the Landreich. Good God, your haircuts alone have Confed Fleet written all over them. So, what's the game? A little trip into Cat space for a look-see?"

Turner's features hardened.

"Son, you've got reasons not to answer questions, so do I. Let's just keep it that way. We got a shipment of Gotherian glasswork that the cats are wild about. We want to get to one of the trade points inside their territory, the deeper in the better. Standard consignment contract is that the ship owner gets half the profits."

"Seventy-five percent," Hans replied calmly. "Since that report about their losing a frigate, it's gotten rather hot over there."

Turner smiled. "And of course you had nothing to do with that frigate."

Now it was Hans' turn to smile. Granted, he had nothing to do with the destruction of the Cat frigate, but he was, after all, the only survivor and the glory had to go someplace. Though it was doubtful that the Cats would fall for a second run-in with a nuke mine, the fifty thousand he had spent to acquire one was, to his thinking, a very wise investment. After all, he was already a dead man in some peoples books. Confed wanted him, with all the fuss the Cats had kicked up about the loss of a ship, so what was another capital charge more or less?

"All right, seventy-five percent," Turner replied.

Hans nodded and leaning over the table he extended his hand.

"No contracts out here in the Landreich," Hans said confidently. "Your word's good or you're dead. It's that simple."

Turner smiled and took the young man's hand.

"I'll be ready to ship in twelve hours. Get your cargo on board, I'm still at dock station thirty-three."

Hans stood up, surveyed the room one more time and stalked out.

Turner watched him go, carefully watching the other patrons at the bar and in the dark, recessed niches that lined the walls of the establishment.

"Well, Mr. Tolwyn, your impression?"

"Cocky character, but, sir, he strikes me as awful green."

Richards snorted derisively. "You are obviously a judge of such qualities."

Tolwyn bristled.

"He's got an interesting story," Turner said, not wanting to endure another go around between the two. In their respective roles as pilot and administrative assistant he was well pleased with his choices. But the two boys were like oil and water. Both wanted to be top dog and the whole display was striking Winston as rather boring.

"You know he should have been accepted at the Academy," Turner continued. "In fact, Geoff, he would have graduated with your class."

"So why didn't he go?"

Turner shook his head. "Had the brains and then some. Good aptitude, problem was he wasn't officially a citizen of the Confederation."

"So what? We've taken candidates from outside the Confederation."

Turner chuckled. "Son, you sure are naive when it comes to politics. Every senator is entitled to two slots for patronage. There's a certain number reserved for sons and daughters of those who died while in service, the usual number who get in just through sheer ability. That leaves precious few slots for those outside the Confed. We take a handful for window dressing, and so we can thump our chests and say how democratic we are. But Mr. Kruger there fell through the cracks. Too bad. I have some memory of his application from when I was on the selection committee. He would have made a good officer. But you're right, Mr. Tolwyn, he is rather green as you put it."

"So why hire him?" Richards asked.

"The upgrades on his ship are rather impressive for this far out into the frontier. Plus, I'd rather a green one like him than some of the old hands around here."

"Why?"

"Because, gentlemen, there isn't that much love for the Confed in these quarters. Remember, the fleet's responsible for controlling smuggling and I'm willing to bet that at least one of the fellas in this room has lost a cargo to our patrol ships. Beyond that, they think we're nuts for not going after the Cats first. So, all things considered, we might hire ourselves a ship, get halfway out there, and then get spaced."

Tolwyn looked around the room again.

"Come on, let's get our cargo transferred," Turner said, standing up and heading for the door.

Geoff fell in behind him, noticing that he was walking slower than usual. Just as they reached the door, Winston turned with a quick, almost catlike movement, drawing a small blaster from his pocket. The report from the gun was muffled, the round impacting the chest of one of the patrons. The man sagged up against the bar and then slowly collapsed, a blaster dropping from his hand. Tolwyn looked at Turner and back to the dead man with wide-eyed surprise. It wasn't just the killing, it was the smooth, graceful ease Turner had displayed, as if he had been training for years for just such a moment.

Turner, his gaze fixed on the other patrons stood silent, weapon pointed straight up at the ceiling.

"Anyone else from the Sarns?"

Everyone was silent.

"Keeper, do you see the weapon in the man's hand?"

The owner of the bar slowly leaned over the counter-top to look at the body and then back at Turner. "I see it."

"And you saw him drawing it?"

The barkeeper nodded.

"Two other witnesses?"

"We seen it," a couple who had been standing next to the dead man announced.

"Then according to the laws of the Landreich the issue is settled," Turner replied. The other patrons nodded in agreement.

With his free hand Turner reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet and tossed it to Geoff.

"Take out two hundred, that should cover damages and burial, and put it on the bar."

Tolwyn did as ordered. He looked down nervously at the dead man. There was a hole big enough to put his fist into dead center over the man's heart. He caught a sharp, almost metallic, smell and realized it was blood and felt a slight giddiness. It was, in fact, the first violent death he had ever witnessed. He had seen fellow cadets killed in training accidents, but in those situations it was simply a machine disintegrating, or bursting into flames, or slamming into the ground. It had always been distant, remote, followed a couple of days later by a polished coffin in the chapel. There was no smell of charred flesh and blood, or that shocked, wide-eyed look of a corpse gazing up at him.

He could sense the fear in the bar. Someone whom they had most likely assumed was nothing but a walking target had proved to have fangs. He stepped back from the bar and was surprised as Turner just turned his back and walked out into the main corridor. It hadn't been like the vids at all, where after the shoot-out the winner slowly backed out the door.

Turner did not even bother to look back.

Tolwyn came up by Vance's side.

"Damn, did you see that?" he whispered.

Richards simply nodded.

"That was old Winnie Turner in there," Geoff said. "Hell, I thought he was about as dangerous as a first year fleggie."

"You idiot," Richards whispered. "You never heard the rumors?"

"You mean about some sort of commando stuff? Come on, not Winnie," but even as he spoke he realized just how dead wrong they had all been. "I thought he was nothing but an old prof." Tolwyn looked at the hunched back of Turner as he continued down the corridor.

"Amazing."

Turner was glad that his back was turned to the two young cadets so they couldn't see his bemused smile. Spotting the Sarn hit man was easy enough; he was surprised Kruger hadn't picked up on him as well. The boy certainly was green. The only reason the hit man had not dropped Kruger right in the bar was that he probably wanted to keep it private and was simply waiting for them to leave. It had been a foolish act on the hit man's part to decide to take out Kruger's business associates. Something had triggered him and the damn fool had gone for his gun. Most likely it was that brief instant of eye contact when the Sarn hit man realized that Turner had recognized him.

Turner cursed inwardly; now the damn Sarn clan would be on his case as well.

## FAWCETT'S WORLD

Walking through the open-air compound, Jukaga nar Vakka looked around warily. It was, first off, the scent which was so damned disturbing. Since it was a new smell, and one not yet placed as that of prey or rival, his reaction was mixed. The humans, standing listlessly beyond the double strand of electrified wire stood silent, watched him pass. He could hear their whispers, high pitched, disconcerting. He had studied the holo tapes his father had forced him to watch and he tried to distinguish what they were saying.

One word caught his attention, illegitimate offspring . He stopped and whirled about.

None of the humans on the far side of the wire were looking at him.

A soft chuckled rumbled next to him.

"Ah, so you do know a few words of their standard speech."

Jukaga looked over at Harga, his father's oldest friend and most loyal retainer, who was responsible for running this outpost world, granted to the Vakka clan.

"Aren't we going to do something?" Jukaga hissed.

"What?" Harga replied. "Find who said it and kill him? Young Jukaga, if we did that, there wouldn't be a single human left on this world."

"I don't see why my father suffers a single one of them to live."

"Call it an indulgence," Harga said, motioning for Jukaga to step under the shade of a wide spreading ulanna tree, imported all the way from the home world in a small attempt to provide something familiar in this alien landscape.

Jukaga sat down on the silken blanket spread beneath the tree and accepted the ceremonial cup of greeting from Harga. Though Harga was not of the royal blood Jukaga knew enough to defer to him, first since he was a renowned warrior for the Vakka clan, and also because he was his father's closest friend.

Jukaga looked back at the human compound. Most had drifted away from the wire, returning to the fields to till the crops. As Jukaga took in the scene there was a certain pleasantness to it all; soaring blue-gray mountains on the horizon, a cooling breeze coming down from the hills, the only disconcerting note the alien scents.

"I rather like this place," Harga announced. "Never thought I'd one day be master of a world. Much preferred standing by your fathers side. How is he?"

Jukaga relayed the latest gossip from court and the final preparations for the forthcoming campaign, Harga slowly shaking his head as he refilled the young lord's cup.

"Strange to be here rather than going out on campaign again, but your father is right, I serve better here."

Jukaga looked back at the humans. How could anyone declare that standing home, watching slaves work, was better than going forth on campaign? Harga, as if sensing Jukaga's thoughts, chuckled.

"Do you know why your father sent you here?"

"He said he wanted me to see you. After all, this world is now part of our family holdings."

Harga smiled indulgently. "This world is far more. You know, this was the first place of contact between us and the humans of the Confederation?"

"Yes."

"Rather interesting. Apparently the Confederation is not even aware of it. The vastness of space, the multiplicity of worlds, the strange connections of jump points that can, at times, spring you past eight times eight systems before ending. The Confederation does not even fully know just where all its people are. The people that settled here, a mistake actually. Their ship was most likely reported as missing when, in fact, it had accidentally jumped to the edge of our forward outposts and shortly afterwards a ship of your fathers clan arrived here and conquered them. They would have been slaughtered out of hand if your father had not intervened to save them."

Jukaga looked over at Harga. There was something about his fathers friend that had always been strange. He was renowned as a fierce fighter, but he also liked books. Jukaga had to admit to a certain fondness for old Harga, the warrior had even served for a while as his tutor.

"Your father knew war was inevitable but he sensed something about this prey," and Harga motioned towards the fields.

"They work like slaves," Jukaga said.

"They work to feed themselves."

"Nevertheless, that is slave work."

Jukaga sensed something approaching from behind them and whirled about. A human stood behind him,

and Jukaga's mane bristled. The human had approached silently, upwind and he instinctively coiled, ready to pounce if the human made the slightest indication of attack. The human looked straight at him, then shifted his gaze away, lowering his eyes.

"My lord Harga. You sent for me?" the human said, surprising Jukaga because he spoke the tongue of Kilrah, the words sounding strange, lisping and high-pitched.

"Abram, I wanted you to join us forjirak ."

"I am honored," the human replied, and walking over to the simmering pot boiling on a charcoal brazier, the human poured himself a drink and, acting as if he was an equal, sat down on the edge of the silken blanket.

Jukaga bristled, ready to snarl out an angry comment at a slave who would be so impudent as to drink of the ceremonial herbal brew and beyond that sit in the presence of a royal member of the clan.

Harga chuckled at Jukagas surprise.

"How dare he?" Jukaga snarled.

"Because I was invited," Abram replied calmly, looking straight at Jukaga.

Harga roared with delight, slapping his hands on his knees.

"The Baron Jukaga thinks I have taken leave of my senses," Harga announced, looking over at the human.

"Well, from what I know of you, I dare say relative to others of Kilrah you have," Abram replied calmly.

"What do you know of us?" Jukaga snapped, forgetting himself for a moment and speaking directly to one who was not even of the blood.

"Oh, much, very much. I've read yourIkgara Kutgaga , I know the lineage of the clans and the Story of the Eight, I can even tell you that I suspect that there's a war coming."

Jukaga looked at the human in wide eyed surprise. TheIkgara was the sacred history of the clans, tracing the lineage to the mists of creation.

"A bit like our own Bhagavad Gita, and sections of Genesis," Abram said. "Comparative cultures can be rather interesting."

"Abram here is what the humans call a doctor, a teacher actually. He was one of the leaders of the colony ship which wound up here."

Abram nodded and sighed.

"A bit off course it seems. If you hadn't caught us by surprise I would have made sure everything was destroyed. For that matter, I would have most likely autodestructed our ship and everybody with it."

His tone suddenly took on a cold, hard edge and Jukaga sensed a dark, lingering anger.

"Lucky for you it was Vakka and me rather than someone from any of the other clans, or even other retainers from the clan of Vakka who found you first," Harga replied calmly.

"Lucky for me?" Abram replied shaking his head. "You found out far too much about us from our ship's library. You took as prisoner anyone with our group who had served with the Fleet. Tell me, where are they now?"

Harga looked at Abram, saying nothing.

"Dead most likely, after your Emperor extracted all that could be learned from them," Abram replied.

"Why do you allow this?" Jukaga asked, looking over at Harga and shifting to the dialect of the Imperial Court.

"He even knows some of that," Harga replied and there was a moment of hesitation. "I guess you could say because I consider him to be something of a friend."

"A friend?" Jukaga replied, stunned by the admission.

"Yes, you could call us that," Abram interjected. "Though I dare say my days are numbered. Once the war begins, our usefulness will be at an end. Your little lab here for studying the rats you've captured will be finished."

"I already told you the Baron Vakka has placed you under my protection," Harga replied.

Abram laughed. "You know, Harga, I actually do like you. You remind me of the stories of our old Earth, the samurai of the Tokagawa Shogunate. Trained killers, but killers educated in the arts, music, poetry. I only wish all you Cats were that way. Hell, we might even have found a way to get along."

"Cats?" Jukaga asked.

"Slang term they have for us," Harga interjected. "Seems they have a breed of pets that are a bit like us."

"Pets?" Jukaga bristled and his response drew a laugh from both the human and Harga.

"I do not see the purpose of this," Jukaga announced coldly.

"Simply this," Harga replied and his tone was now serious, as if he was once again the elder tutor speaking to a young noble. Though the student might be superior in blood, there was still no question of who was superior in wisdom and would administer a sound thrashing if he was provoked.

"In a short time we and the Confederation will be at war." As he spoke Jukaga was stunned by the fact that Harga openly discussed this point in front of an enemy. The human said nothing, casually watching Jukaga while sipping his tea.

"The Crown Prince is a fool if he thinks this will end in eight or eight eights of days. A few weeks here with these humans would teach him that, as your father learned. This war will go on for generations and you, young Jukaga, will one day rule our clan. Your father wants you to know what you are fighting."

He motioned towards Abram, who put his cup of tea down.

"Given who you are, patriotic duty suggests that I should try to kill you," Abram announced calmly.

"Go ahead and try," Jukaga retorted.

Abram laughed softly.

"For my race I am old and you could snap my neck with ease. I doubt if one human in a hundred could hope to stand up to one of you in a physical fight. So my gesture would be futile."

"Human, if you are so aware, then why do you continue to cling to life?"

"Ah, suicide? Actually against my personal religious principles, but also I do rather like living, even if I am a captive."

"Why?" The thought of a captive wanting to stay alive without honor was beyond comprehension.

"Let's just say I want to see how things turn out. Harga and I have reached an understanding of sorts. You already got most of our secrets when you took my ship. Amazing how much stuff gets loaded into a ship's computers through the years and you forget to clean it out of the core memory. Once you got that you had eighty, maybe ninety percent of the picture of who we were, what we could do, our strengths and weaknesses. So, after that, we just agreed to chat. Aquid pro quo as we say in one of our ancient tongues, I believe in yours it'shuma ta humas ."

Again there was a moment of surprise for Jukaga, the human had intoned an ancient saying in the royal tongue.

"Just how much have you shared with him?" Jukaga asked, looking at Harga.

Harga laughed. "Well, when you're alone out here, when you live in a society where learning is viewed with suspicion, of not being warriorlike, conversations with a learned alien can be rather stimulating. It helps to pass the years."

Abram smiled and nodded in agreement.

"We avoid things military," Abram said, "though given what's coming I dare say all things are military. I know Harga, here, is trying to figure us out, but for my friend I think it's just more of an intellectual exercise to pass the years. As for me, well, maybe, just maybe, I'll somehow survive and can report what I have figured out."

"And that is?"

"You'll lose."

"How?" Jukaga asked, incredulous at the audacity of the statement and also the matter of fact way in which it was delivered.

"You really don't know us," Abram replied. "Oh, you have the data, the numbers, the coordinates of jump points, the schematics of ships, the analysis of weapons. In that respect you have us, we're an open society, you a closed one. In a strictly military sense you should win."

Again there was the smile. "But you don't know what's in here," and he pointed towards his heart.

The gesture struck Jukaga as curious. The human was pointing to the place where the Kilrathi believed the soul resided and he wondered if it was a human gesture or simply one mimicked by a slave.

"You are most likely planningajak-tu , the springing from surprise. Wise move for any hunter tackling a prey, make it clean and quick, no chance of getting hurt. But the wrong move with us."

How the human even knew that was troubling. He looked over at Harga and saw the bemused look. No, this human had reasoned it out on his own.

"Go on."

Abram hesitated for a second.

"Funny, I start to relax and chat with you Cats and can almost forget that we're blood enemies, that we're destined for a fight and that whatever I say might hurt my race. But what the hell, you're all so fixed in your ways—" he smiled and looked over at Harga and nodded, "—present company excepted, that it really doesn't matter."

"Continue."

"We've got a strange sort of code. Two people meet, have a fight, maybe one gets killed, but there's a code, you shot him in the front, not in the back. Now I know throughout our own history that's usually not been the case, but nevertheless it gets us upset. You see thejak-tu as proper, we see it as cowardly, a springing from the dark."

Jukaga began to stand up. To tolerate the accusation of cowardice from an alien was beyond all acceptance.

"Remain seated," Harga snarled. "Let him speak."

Abram looked straight at Jukaga, as if half wanting him to strike, to end it. Struggling for control, Jukaga settled back down.

"Maybe it's racial memory for both of us," Abram continued. "You were carnivorous hunters, while we most likely evolved from creatures who, before we discovered tools, were the hunted."

Jukaga looked at the human in surprise. To so casually admit being descended from prey beasts was beyond comprehension. There was no shame in the human's voice, no humiliation. Surprised, he looked over at Harga, who again smiled.

"I told you there was something to learn here," Harga said.

"Did I say something interesting?" Abram asked and Jukaga realized the human actually had no comprehension of the humiliation he had just admitted to. Curious, an alien thought process. If this point was alien, beyond comprehension, than what else was beyond understanding?

Something stirred within Jukaga, a dim glimmering of realization, as if a weighty thought, barely perceived, was starting to open up. He leaned forward, looking straight at Abram.

"Continue."

"Well, as I was saying. You'll trigger a primal reaction in us. For you, the hunter, the mere sight of us, the fact that we exist, triggers the desire to hunt us to death."

He fell silent staring straight at Jukaga, who wondered if the human was even now coming to new realizations.

"As for us, the springing from the dark will trigger certain reactions as well. There will be terror, yes, I'll admit to that. Damn, I struggle with that even now, sitting across from you, your talons half bared."

Jukaga looked down at his hands and realize that the razor-sharp talons were indeed exposed, and to his own surprise he retracted them.

"You see, there are fears worse than death for us humans. Fear that loved ones, especially our children, might be harmed."

"We share that," Jukaga interrupted, a bit annoyed that what he thought was an interesting insight had become banal. Any creature of intelligence, even the dumbest of prey, protect their young.

"No, there's something more though. We fear almost beyond all other things being devoured," Abram said quietly. "To not just be killed but to be eaten alive, to have talons, fangs, tearing into us. Ask a human to sit quietly and contemplate such a death and they are filled with dread. Now let me ask you, do you devour those whom you defeat?"

Jukaga did not answer.

Abram forced a smile.

"Even if you didn't do all that your form implies, your thinking, your manners, your rituals, the way you fight speaks of the carnivore, the devourer of flesh. Now, why do you practiceJak-tu ?"

"What?"

"In the hunt, why do you practiceJak-tu ?"

"To overpower a prey with a single blow."

Abram shook his head.

"No. It is more. For if you do not overpower your prey with the first strike, if you don't break its neck or back to render it defenseless, it will thrash about. Even as it dies it will flay at you out of sheer terror. It then becomes dangerous, perhaps even killing you."

"There is the core of what I'm speaking of," Abram said softly. "You think us weak. Yes, we as individuals are weak when compared to you. Perhaps even militarily we're weak, but we will fight with the terror of despair. I don't think the Varni had that in them. From what I've heard they had maybe ten or twenty million more years of evolution behind them and it was gone. You see, it wasn't that long ago when all we held in our hands was a club or rock against cats that were a damn sight bigger than you. You haven't run into prey like us before and I tell you, when it's done your Empire will be dead."

The casual way in which the human spoke sent a chill down Jukaga's spine.

"Your father learned this," Harga interjected. "He wanted you to learn it too before you go to fight."

"Your father, his blood flows well?" Abram asked.

"His blood is thick," Jukaga automatically replied and then was startled that the human knew the standard ceremonial question regarding the health of a friend.

Abram chuckled. "I rather liked him. Hell, I guess we'd all be dead here if it wasn't for him. Unusual character for your race, thinks with this—" and he pointed towards his head, and then back to his heart, "—rather than with this."

Abram finished off his drink and, taking the pot off the brazier, he motioned towards Jukaga's cup and Harga's, refilling both of them and then his own.

"So it will be war then," Abram asked quietly.

"Yes."

"I heard something about the Confederation moving to declare war as well."

Jukaga looked at him in surprise.

"No reason not to talk," Harga replied. "Your father's kept me apprised of the intelligence reports coming in from our listening stations."

Jukaga stirred uncomfortably and looked back over at the human.

"There were bound to be incidents," Abram said. "Your Emperor's decision to not establish any formal connection with the Confederation after the first accidental contacts might be logical to you but would be confusing to our side. It was an indicator of belligerence."

"Beyond that, our nonmilitary communications are wide open and you're listening to them all the time. You cracked our language code by taking my ship and all its computer files, listening in is no problem for you now."

"There are reports of their launching a limited attack," Jukaga said.

Abram laughed. "Just like us. Again, a major difference between us. They figure if we bloody your nose a bit, let you know we aren't to be pushed around too much, that will settle it. Damn stupid bastards." Abram never raised his head as he delivered his conclusion.

Jukaga was surprised by the casual utterance of the foulest of oaths in regards to the leaders of the Confederation. Such blasphemy towards the Imperial line was cause for immediate execution.

"They think that what they call a limited action will dissuade you and that peace can then be made if too much damage has been avoided. Bizarre."

Jukaga nodded.

Harga sighed and there was a moment of eye contact between him and Abram. The human stood up.

"I'd like you and Jukaga to talk some more. He only has a few days here before returning."

"As you wish," Abram replied.

"You might find him interesting. I think he'd enjoy reading your Sun Tzu, or Machiavelli."

"Ah, two masters. Though discussing them with someone who might one day be a leader in your war effort may be a compromise I'd prefer not to make."

Harga smiled. "We've been over that before, my friend. It was all in your ship's computers anyhow, though I dare say no one in the Imperial family gives a good damn about it. But Jukaga, here, might make a difference someday."

"A difference in defeating us?" Abram asked. "Know your friends, but know your enemies better."

"Maybe knowing your enemy might one day result in saving him and you."

"I'll think about that," Abram replied, and without any ceremonial bow the human turned and walked away.

"He troubles me," Jukaga said.

"He should. Your father is rather fond of him. No, that's the wrong word. Rather, he admires him."

"A slave?"

"No," Harga said forcefully. "A foe worthy of respect, an intellect as good as our own. That's always been the problem for us. We don't admire intellect, only brute strength and courage. We let our slaves do the thinking when it comes to the making and running of our machines. Abram told me there's been more than one clan in the history of humans who were like that. Do you know what happened to them?"

"They were destroyed?" Jukaga asked nervously.

Harga nodded and, reaching over to the young heir's cup, he poured another drink then settled back, fixing Jukaga with his gaze.

"Your father and I are friends of blood. He saved my life at the Battle of Turing in the Varni War. I remember the day you were born, the joy and triumph he felt. I once taught you and saw in you an intelligence even beyond your father's. I never had young of my own, so, young Jukaga, in some ways I pin my dreams on you."

Jukaga lowered his gaze, unable to reply.

"Thus I ask that you listen to me. I pray that the Gods will that I am wrong, and that the day after our own attack begins you will simply remember my words as the ramblings of a foolish old one."

"You do not believe we will win?" Jukaga asked.

"I believe this war will be a disaster. I know your father told the Emperor and the Crown Prince this but they will not listen."

"The Varni were but ten worlds and the fight they put up was a dangerous and surprising one, even though we had total surprise. This Confederation is hundreds, thousands of systems. The simple mathematics make it evident that we can not strike all places at once."

"The plan of the Crown Prince is brilliant," Jukaga replied.

Harga chuckled. "Come now, remember the fourth maxim of Xag?"

"No attack plan ever survives first contact with the enemy," Jukaga replied, reciting from rote the fourth of the eight maxims of the legendary warrior who had established the First Empire.

"There is one most important element the Crown Prince has ignored and I beg you, Jukaga, to remember this."

The use of the word beg was startling to the young warrior since it implied a desperate plea from an inferior to a superior.

"The humans havekaga , the warrior spirit. Their history and tradition is replete with it."

"Someday, Jukaga, it might fall upon you to shape the events of this war. I beg you, study these humans well. Learn their literature, hear their music, examine their history. It might shape how you feel. Do so at first with the intent of thus deciphering who they are in order to gain victory. Perhaps then you shall learn something more. Perhaps you might even grow to like them, frightening though that concept must now seem to one like you who is eager for blood."

Harga looked back towards the fields where the humans labored. Abram had rejoined them, several of the humans gathering around him looking curiously back towards the pavilion under the tree.

"You know I have orders from the Imperial Court to kill all of them," Harga said quietly.

Jukaga felt a sudden mix of emotions. An hour ago it would not have troubled him in the slightest, but now? He had spoken with one of them, shared drink, been challenged to think.

"This is our fiefdom," Jukaga replied. "The Imperial edicts do not directly apply here."

"This world is to be converted into a military base once the war begins. The jump points here might be of strategic value, therefore the Emperor has laid claim to this planet in exchange for another world in another sector."

"And will you?"

Harga smiled sadly.

"The Emperor speaks..." and his voice trailed off.

"A curious human. A good friend. We shall see. I guess he suspects it as well. After all, he tells me he has been on borrowed time since the day we discovered them here. As he puts it, he lives now mainly out of intellectual curiosity to see what happens. Many a night we've sat up till dawn, telling each other our histories, sharing thoughts. Funny, how similar we are, but how different. He's why your father sent you here. Spend what time you have with him. He might be the only human you'll ever really know, especially after the war begins; for when it does we will slaughter each other on sight."

Harga closed his eyes and Jukaga realized just how old his father's friend really was. His mane had gone nearly to white, the ripples of muscle on his limbs were melting away into nothingness.

Harga opened his eyes and looked back at Jukaga and his voice suddenly sounded distant and old, as if already whispering from the beyond.

"I fear that all that the Crown Prince shall succeed in doing is awakening the sleeping giant."

# Chapter Six

EARTH

HEADQUARTERS CICCONFEDFLT

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.181

"Senator More, a pleasure to see you."

Skip Banbridge forced a smile as the senator, with an imperial air, strolled into the admirals office as if it was More's personal domain.

Skip sat down and took a sip from his mug of coffee, making it a point not to offer More a cup.

"Your comment to the press yesterday about my political motivations for blocking the upgrade facilities for the Wildcat fighters was way out of line," More began, without even the pretense of exchanging a few pleasantries before launching straight into the attack.

"All I said was that it is time to put political considerations aside. We are heading for a crisis and we need the upgrades now."

"My district or nothing, Admiral. Do you read me?"

"Senator. Your district is two jump points from what could be the front line."

"Front line with what?"

"The Kilrathi, sir," Skip replied coldly. "We are moving towards a declaration of war, sir."

"A move which you, rather surprisingly, are against," More snapped back.

"Sir. We are taking a swing into the dark. All we know is that they are out there and that they're xenophobic as all hell. Beyond that we know nothing."

"Are you afraid, is that it?" More asked tauntingly. "I thought you fleet boys would love a chance for a little shoot-up."

Skip struggled to control his anger.

"Sir, the good Lord willing, this limited war will get the message across, but we are dealing with an unknown here. We know nothing concrete about them. We don't even know where the hell the jump points are once we're into their territory. It'll take survey teams months, years to track them down. All I'm saying is I don't like the gamble."

"So you want to run off? Just what the hell are we spending trillions on? Toys for you to fly around in and nothing else?"

Slap leaned forward, coming half out of his chair.

"Good kids will die even in this limited operation. A hell of a lot more might die if the message is read the wrong way, either as a sign of weakness or of belligerence."

"So we do nothing about their raids?"

Skip wearily shook his head and collapsed back into his chair. The same man who was doing so much to hamstring the fleet was now pushing it out into aggressive actions it had no real business making. He knew it was an irrational prejudice but he had never really liked a political leader who had not put some time into the service, or at the very least had spent some time studying the history of it. The worst kind were the ones who cried about funding, wrung their hands over inane causes, and then were more than willing to send kids out to die for their pet cause of the moment.

The Kilrathi had to be addressed. Everything in his gut was telling him that a war, not just a limited declaration but an all-out, total war unlike anything the Confederation had ever faced was looming on the horizon. And if it came he knew More would maneuver himself into the appropriate political stance.

"The appropriations, Admiral," More said quietly, focusing the topic back on the reason for his visit. "I want the facility in my district or nothing."

"We need depth to protect our manufacturing. That means the inner worlds, not out on the edge. For heavens sake, man, can't you see that? We are talking survival here!"

More stood up and leaned over the desk, hands slamming down on Banbridge's desk.

"Always the inner worlds. You are in their pockets and I'll be damned if I buckle to that. And another thing, Admiral. Your ass is on the line and I want it. I've had it with your sniping. I'll tag so many damn investigations on you that you won't be able to breathe. You are finished unless you start playing ball with me right now."

Banbridge bristled and stood up, ready to explode.

"Damn it, just for once, just for once, Senator, can you stop thinking like a damnable ward politician and start thinking like a representative of all the Confederation? Tomorrow the Senate will declare war and I'm locked into Orange Five. If we're going to fight them, then, damn it, fight them and stop these half-assed measures."

"That's exactly what you people want," More snapped back. "Full-scale war. Well, times have changed, Banbridge. Our actions will be surgical and balanced, appropriate to the level of threat. We don't need a sledgehammer, we need a surgeon's scalpel to solve this problem with the Cats. Take some of their ships, push them back and that will be the end of it. You military types only see as far as the end of a gun. You should listen more to the people over at the State Department, they have a handle on this. Once the

Cats see we'll fight, we've won their respect and they'll back off. Do it your way and it will lead us into a full-scale conflict that means disaster."

"The Cats are ready and we are not, and when it hits they'll roll right over us, thanks to all that you've done."

"You are insubordinate, Mr. Banbridge, and I'll have your stars for this!"

Skip struggled with his rage, wishing that Winston was by his side. The old prof always had a way of smoothing a situation out. He knew he should play kiss ass with More, but it was beyond that now.

"Senator. When they start shipping home the body bags, I pray to God you're forced to look into the eyes of every mother whose son or daughter you've killed, because the good Lord knows I'll most certainly have to face some of them."

"You're finished, Banbridge. I expect support for the building of the facilities on my world. It's all or nothing now."

More stepped back from the desk as Skip bristled with rage. For the first time in years the admiral found himself filled with a desire to physically choke the life out of someone. He knew that if the crisis did come, More would be a survivor. Ones like him always were.

They'd dance and shift the blame and come out clean. And what was even more enraging was the clear knowledge that the bastard would not even think twice about the thousands of youngsters who would die because of his arrogance. In fact, any concept of personal guilt for the tragedies he created was beyond him. All that mattered was power.

"Get out of my office," Skip snarled. "Get the hell out of my office right now, damn you."

More smiled malevolently. "I was hoping you'd respond like this. I don't need your brown-nosing me to survive. In fact, I want your hide pinned to my wall."

Without another word More stalked out of the office. On the other side of the door Banbridge saw the ever-hovering staff of lackeys waiting, circling in around him like drones circling a queen bee. The door slid shut and, cursing a stream of his best lower-deck invectives, Skip stalked around his office. The coffee cup wound up smashed against the wall and he felt a moment of embarrassment as one of his staffers popped the door open and peeked in to make sure he was all right.

"Just get the hell out," Skip yelled and then felt guilty at the wide-eyed look he got from the young lieutenant.

"Sir, want me to clean that up?" he asked, and nodded towards the coffee slowly dribbling down the wall.

Skip took a deep breath. "No, son, just leave me alone."

Going into his private washroom Skip took a couple of towels, got down on his knees and started to wipe the mess up. He had always loathed officers who would leave a mess and then disdainfully walk away with the knowledge that some enlisted man or woman would be there to straighten things out. Picking up the fragments of the cup he tossed them in the trash and dumped the towels in the bathroom hamper.

His temper under control he settled back behind his desk. More was going to make his life hell and he could only pray that things would drag out long enough so that, if the crisis did come, he'd still be in the command seat. Kolensky was obviously the choice More wanted for the next CIC, a good enough officer but in the opposition's pocket. He lacked imagination and definitely did not have the feel of the fleet. Hell, it was Kolensky who had drawn up Orange Five and even believed in it.

He pushed the thought aside as he tapped into his system to scan the latest intel reports from Speedwell. There were a hell of a lot of signs coming together, but it was all information that actually was a lack of information. The Kilrathi had sealed things up tighter than a drum. The border which, for the gray world of the frontier, had been somewhat porous, was now shut. Rumors were floating about an incident with a nuke mine which had put a twist into the Cats' tails. But beyond that, nothing. Silence, an empty zone dividing two systems that were apparently heading straight into a collision. Couldn't people like More see that when overtures were made to the Cats to establish diplomatic contacts, overtures which were firmly rebuffed, that there was signal enough right there? Instead, State Department cranked out some crap about understanding peoples from different cultures and then let it drop.

Well, the few surviving Varni who had wandered in had info enough... the Cats were killers, period.

It was this total lack of information that he found troubling. Just what the hell were they up to? Equally disturbing was the disappearance of Winston without a trace. He knew that was part of the procedure they had agreed upon. But with the recent flap, he feared that he might have unnecessarily put his old friend into an impossible situation.

## BLACK HOLE SYSTEM 299—INSIDE THE KILRATHI EMPIRE

The nausea which had seized Geoff Tolwyn finally eased off.

"We've cleared it. Now keep your eyes sharp!"

Using the hydraulic foot pedals Geoff slowly spun the turret around, carefully watching the target acquisition board. Close in there was nothing, a scattering of reflections off some debris which target analysis informed him was wreckage from a shattered light transport. More wreckage began to pop up as the translight radar sweep picked up data from millions of clicks out and relayed it back.

"Must be half a hundred wrecks floating out here," Geoff announced.

"So I heard," Hans replied.

Geoff looked down between his legs to where Hans sat in the left side pilot seat, Richards occupying the copilot's seat to the right. He felt a flicker of envy for Richards. Lazarus was certainly one hot ship; Hans had not been idly boasting about its capability. Still, the inertia-dampening system was still not fully in synch so that, when the engines were slapped on, they'd pull upwards of ten g's before it flattened back out.

He continued to scan the darkness around them. The jump point Hans had taken them through was supposedly a trade secret of smugglers coming out of the Landreich system. The point opened just on the outer edge of the event horizon of a black hole two jumps inside the Empire. There were no planets in the system and it was a favorite rendezvous spot for a wide variety of merchants, smugglers, and those

simply in need of a serious change of location. As he spun the turret around yet again he looked inward towards the hole. It was, of course, invisible. Anything crossing the event horizon simply disappeared, but just short of the horizon there was a shimmering band of light as stray particles accelerating up to light speed glowed with a fiery, incandescent brilliance. He felt slightly nervous about being within a black hole system. The gravitational fields were highly unpredictable. Orbiting one, even at five billion clicks from the event horizon, was a dangerous proposition. In fact, Fleet regulations strictly forbade any of their craft to jump into such a system unless in hot pursuit of an enemy. The exits of the jump points had the unpleasant characteristic of shifting randomly, and supposedly on occasion would shift over the event horizon line... in which case you came through the jump, and in a millionth of second you were sucked in and disappeared forever.

"Now's the fun part," Hans announced. Geoff leaned over in the turret to watch what was up next as Hans punched up a coded recognition signal which he claimed had cost him a thousand credits to obtain back on the Hell Hole.

He sent out the burst signal, then settled back to wait.

"Either we get a positive return or we turn and get the hell out of here, so everyone stay on station."

Several anxious minutes passed until a bright blue blip appeared on Hans' control screen.

"Tolwyn, get a lock on that and nav us in."

Geoff looked back at his own screen and saw that the signal had come nearly a sixth of the way around the outer hub of the black hole and dangerously close in towards the event horizon. He punched in the lock and waited for the nav solution to come back. The computer took far longer than he had expected, making him realize just how difficult it must be to factor in all the variables of flying so close to the hole. The solution finally came up on the screen, and as he had been taught at the Academy he took the time to do it a second time, while running a quick manual diagnostic on the solution, just to make sure there wasn't some glitch which might result in all of them having a very bad day.

"Solution locked in," he finally announced and then, setting the threat-detection system on automatic, he unbuckled his harness and slipped down from the turret. Turner was already back up from the tail gun position and smiled.

"Good nav plot, Geoff." Tolwyn smiled at the compliment, realizing that actually it should have been Turner up there doing a job that important. Hans unbuckled as well and stood up.

"We'll be there in four hours. I'm going to get some sleep. Turner, you and Tolwyn can stand watch. Richards, you can sleep or not, that's your business."

Popping open the hatch down into the lower galley and bunk area, he disappeared from view. Geoff looked over at Turner, surprised that the old prof so willingly took orders from someone like Kruger.

Turner smiled. "It's his ship, he gives the orders."

"He's an arrogant pup," Vance replied.

"But a damn good pilot, I dare say as good as you, Richards."

Vance bristled but said nothing.

"I think he's right though, Vance. Grab some sleep. Once we get in there, we'll be doing watch on watch, two of us awake at all times. This could be a wild and woolly place we're heading into and I want you on your toes, so take a biorhythm alter pill, get below and sleep."

"Okay, sir." After unstrapping, Richards followed Hans down into the lower bay.

"Sir?"

"Geoff, once we get in there, let's just drop the sir line."

Geoff felt rather uncomfortable with the suggestion but could clearly see the logic to it.

"All right, Winston. It's just that all the way out here, I've been wondering. What the hell is it we're suppose to be looking for? I know we're going in there to do a little trading, but I'm still not quite on the mark."

Winston chuckled. "Ever put a puzzle together without the picture on the box to go by?"

Geoff shook his head. It was a strange pastime which he had never indulged in.

"That's what we're doing out here. We don't even know what shape the puzzle might be. It's getting information, stray bits of data that in and of themselves don't add up to much, but when you start trying to match them up, suddenly you get two pieces together, then a third, then a tenth, then a hundredth. I'm cutting you loose down there, son. It'll be dangerous. What you saw in the bar back at the Hell Hole was child's play. At least there you'll find the code."

"The code?"

"Strange, but its a rather ethical set of rules that binds folk in the Landreich together. No one asks questions, no one noses into anyone else's business, but on the other side one's word is his bond. You don't take someone else's ship, and you don't help an outsider against one who belongs."

"So that's why you turned your back when you walked out?"

Turner smiled. "The fight was fair. No one was going to interfere if I got shot in the back since I was an obvious outsider, but if that assassin had tried to shoot Hans in the back, he'd have been blown apart. Funny, they'll rip each other apart in a stand-up fight, but heaven help anyone, Confed or Cat, who tries to come in and tell them how to live or what taxes to pay. But where we're going, it's every man, Cat, or whatever for themselves. Now we're looking for information on anything of interest and I tell you, if you want the inside line on what's really going on, the hell with the signal intel, Confed Security, and especially those wool heads with the State Department. You go to the underworld, the folks living outside the edge who have to know everything if they're going to stay ahead and survive. So just blend in, buy some drinks, keep your mouth shut, your ears open, and the safety off on your blaster."

Geoff rubbed the stubble of whiskers on his face, feeling decidedly uncomfortable with the new growth which had sprouted in the four weeks it had taken them to skirt far out beyond even the loosely-knit union of the Landreich, and then circle back in on the flank of the Empire. He looked down at his dirty tunic and coveralls, noticing above all else the bulk of the blaster tucked into its harness under his left armpit and the smaller weapon fitting snugly into the top of his right boot.

"Don't worry, you're starting to look the part already. That's part of the reason I took you and Richards. I could have had standard Fleet Intel operatives, but the damn thing of it is, they're so good at it that they stand out, they look the part, they're simply too smooth. You and Richards will be ignored. They'll figure you're fresh fish not worth the effort of killing and let it go at that. Granted, you'll have some who might try and rough you up, even kill you for sport, but suspect that you're doing intel work? Never."

"Thanks for the confidence, sir... excuse me, I mean Winston," Geoff replied, not sure how to take what he supposed was intended as a compliment.

Turner's gaze hardened.

"Schools over, Tolwyn. We've got a mission. We either come out with what we need, or we simply don't come out. I'm convinced there's a massive Kilrathi attack coming and we've got to get the evidence. You do your job right, son, a lot's riding on it. You'll either come out of this a man worthy of respect, or dead, there's no in-between. Do you read me?"

Geoff looked at Turner with wide-eyed surprise. Yet again the genial professor was being stripped away to reveal something hard as steel underneath. He knew Turner liked him and in many ways had always shown an almost fatherly concern for him during his years in the Academy. But that was gone now. He knew that, if need be, Turner would see him as disposable if the mission was ever threatened by a mistake. The realization startled him, yet at the same time gave him an inner sense of confidence he had never really known before. Down deep he had always known that, while at the Academy, its reality wasn't quite real. Granted, quite a few died in the training, but it was still training... and this was different, this was the real game at last.

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CONFEDERATION NEWS NETWORK DATELINE: OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE CONFEDERATION DATE: 2634.186

This evening at 6:00 p.m., GMT Earth, the President announced that a state of war now exists between the Confederation and the Kilrathi Empire. Elements of Task Force Twenty-three have crossed into Kilrathi territory in the Facin Sector on a punitive expedition against supposed centers from which Kilrathi raids had been launched into Confederation territory. When asked about the scope of the war the President declared that the war is limited in scope and that it is not the intention of the Confederation to seek what he called "a battle of annihilation which can only serve to destroy both sides." When asked to clarify this point, the President stated that it is believed that the attacks along our border were not necessarily actions directed by the Emperor but rather might very well be the activities of rival clan or family leaders seeking to provoke a general war. Our actions, therefore, will be directed solely against those sectors from which verified attacks have previously been launched. Due to the limited nature of this conflict the President made it clear that he does not wish to bring about a general war and has conveyed such sentiments to the Emperor in an open message on a frequency known to be monitored by the Kilrathi. He closed by declaring that the war can be ended at any time when the Kilrathi make a clear effort to bring these provocative factions under control.

In other news, Aju Akbar won the Confederation heavyweight championship in three rounds...

GAR'S EMPORIUM

"So this is it?" Geoff asked. "Hell, it looks like a floating junkyard."

"Just keep your weapons ready," Hans snapped back. Geoff wanted to shoot a reply but knew now was not the time. He carefully scanned the dozens of ships that were gathered around what looked like an abandoned bulk ore cylinder. Some of the ships looked familiar. According to the limited fleet intelligence Turner had shared with him, a couple of the ships were Kilrathi Tugar class light transports, but the engines were modified beyond anything he had seen in the holo profiles. There was even an ancient Confed Valiant class destroyer, its entire aft end sheared off to be replaced by an engine that looked as though it belonged on a heavy cruiser or battleship. As for the other ships, he couldn't even figure out their origins. Some individual pieces might have been recognizable, but when assembled as a whole, it looked as though nearly every design of the last hundred years had been packed together in one place, torn apart, and then reassembled by a group of demented, blind welders.

He could see two quad mount particle guns on the cylinder aimed straight at them. He watched the guns intently. The moment there was the first flicker of light, he'd open up. Down below he could hear Hans trading off coded signals and hoped that whomever sold the signals had provided them with the straight line.

Hans maneuvered Lazarus in to less than a hundred meters off the side of the cylinder, adroitly weaving his way past one of the Kilrathi transports and an old Wu ship painted over with a cracked and peeling emblem of the Imperial Claw.

"Used to be part of the Kilrathi fleet," Turner announced through Geoff's headset. "You can still see the registration numbers. They must have sold it off. Interesting..."

Geoff realized it was what Turner had said, a piece of a ten-thousand-piece puzzle. Geoff picked up a holo vid camera and shot some footage, doing a close-up on what he assumed were the numbers Winston had referred to.

"There's our port," Hans announced, and Geoff looked off to the starboard side and saw a circular port, adjacent to where a jet-black ship of unknown design was docked. Hans gave a short burst of reverse, then lateral thrusters, and Lazarus drifted up against the side of the cylinder. There was barely a shudder as the ship docked.

"Everybody armed?" Hans asked as Geoff slipped down out of the turret. "Just remember, any high-velocity weapons with jacketed rounds will result in your getting torn apart. Hull punctures are frowned on by the management."

Geoff again felt for the weapon under his armpit. The blaster put out a nasty, slow moving shot that traveled at only eight hundred f.p.s., the round splintering when it hit something solid. It was identical to the one Winston had used on the Sam assassin, and he shuddered inwardly at the memory of just how big the hole in the man's chest had been.

Hans popped the access hatch open and, with heavy caliber scattergun secured with a shoulder strap and at the ready, he led the way out. The first breath of air from within the cylinder made Geoff gag. The recycling system was obviously barely functional, and if they had any filters they had long since overloaded. The air was heavy and fetid, reeking of human sweat, vomit, other things even less pleasant, and added in was a melange of other scents including a heavy clinging musklike odor which he assumed was the distinctive smell of Cats. Even as the thought formed he saw one, up close, for the first time in his life. The Cat towered above him by nearly two feet, its broad shoulders almost filling the narrow access corridor. It was wearing durasteel-plated body armor, its face concealed behind a bright red helmet, the

only feature visible its orange glowing eyes.

"I represent Gar," the Cat growled, in barely understandable common English, "owner of this barge. Your cargo?"

Hans carefully eyed him up and down, lingering intently for a second on the scattergun pointed straight at his chest.

"Crystaland glasswork."

"Tax is ten percent of cargo on arrival. In return you have full trading access inside the barge, protection will be provided for your ship and cargo while it is in your hull. If you don't agree, undock now."

Hans slowly nodded.

The Cat looked over his shoulder, and several humans and a Varni, all of them wearing silver slave collars, slipped past, carrying null gravity units.

"Geoff, show them to the cargo hold. I've already set aside the first two containers for tax."

Geoff wanted to protest at how he was being ordered, but knew now was not the time to disagree. He stepped back into the ship, cautiously watching the slaves. He popped open the access hatch and pointed for them to go down first. The realization that he was looking at slaves, especially human slaves, was deeply disturbing. Humans along the frontier were disappearing all the time, and it was even rumored that the Mancusian pirates had found a lucrative trade in taking prisoners and selling them across the border.

A human and the Varni came back up, hauling the first container and Geoff stepped back to let them pass. Neither raised their eyes to look at him. A minute later the next two came up.

"Just a minute," Geoff whispered.

The human in the lead stopped and looked up.

"Where are you from?"

The man looked at him, wide-eyed.

"Your name, where are you from?"

The man shook his head and started to edge away.

"Come on, don't be afraid. Maybe I can get word back to your family. Where you from?"

The man sighed, shook his head and then opened his mouth wide. Revolted by the sight, Geoff looked away—the man's tongue had been cut out. He followed the two out, a cold, simmering rage building up inside. The Cat guarding the access checked the readout on the null gravity hand held units.

"We'll check the weight on the rest later. It better be right, Gar doesn't appreciate being cheated."

"We're on the mark," Hans replied coolly. "Now, where can we get a drink?"

"Rules of the establishment," the Cat growled, motioning for Hans to stand still.

Hans nodded wearily as if he had heard it all before.

"We are not responsible for injury or death, or loss of property inside the barge. Any hull punctures results in death for you and all your crew. If an Empire patrol comes through, we will sound the alarm but you are on your own."

The Cat, finished with his short speech, stepped aside.

Hans nodded and, slowly reaching into his tunic breast pocket, he pulled out a heavy platinum five-hundred-credit coin. He tossed it to the Cat, who caught it in midair. Geoff watched the transfer, seeing the glint of the coin, a bit startled that he was watching nearly two months pay for a newly-minted Academy graduate flicker through the air.

Money had never been a personal concern of his. After all, the Tolwyn family, with its connections into Earth government and industry, along with the family estates in England and up in the Shetlands, had never wanted for money. But four years of discipline in the Academy, cut off from the comforts of his ten-thousand-a-year allowance, had taught him much about the value of cash. He could see the flicker in Vance's eyes as the Cat pocketed the bribe.

"I assume my ship will be protected now," Hans said quietly. "If so, there'll be another one when I leave."

A throaty growl of assertion rumbled from the Cat, who stepped aside as Hans moved into the main corridor, followed by his crew. Geoff took a sidelong glance up at the Cat. The malevolent orange eyes gazed back at him. Bribe or no bribe, he sensed the contempt and hatred that lingered just below the surface and instinctively he felt the same back. It was a startling revelation to him. He had met Firekka, Varni, Hagarin, Wu, and others at the Academy. Granted, the Varni did make him feel slightly nervous. The old instinctive fear of reptiles, especially ones with poisonous fangs, was a hard one to overcome, in spite of their peaceful ways. The Cat, however, seemed to strike something just as primal but far more intense. As he turned his back he could feel the hair at the nape of his neck bristle, as if in anticipation of the powerful jaws clamping down in a crushing blow, the talons ready to spring out to rip his stomach open even before he was dead. He wondered if that same instinct for the kill lingered in the Cat as well, and something in his heart told him that it did—the Cats were still hunters and we are the prey.

As he entered the main corridor the stench of the place again overpowered him.

Winston looked around with the touch of a sardonic grin on his face.

"Rather interesting, isn't it, Geoff," Turner whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Interesting arrangement. Drag an old bulk ore container out here, pressurize it, and open for business. Good location, way the hell off the beaten track, flirting with a black hole. If the Imperial Cats show up, get the hell out and boost the damn thing over the event horizon so there's no evidence. Nice arrangement."

Geoff looked around, appalled by the squalor. Booths were set up down the interior length of the ship,

housing the permanent establishments. Lotus dens, brothels for every species he had ever imagined, and some that he never knew existed, bars with passed-out patrons lying in the swill that covered the floors, illegal weapons dealers and some booths that simply left him mystified as to what they were selling—it was simply incomprehensible.

"Its disgusting," Geoff whispered.

Turner laughed. "We've known about the existence of the Cats for a little over five years and had no official contact. But out here, beyond the edge, it seems like there's been a hell of a lot of contact. Sometimes I think we should let those out beyond the frontiers do the foreign policy, and have the inner world bureaucrats just stay the hell out of the way."

"How come we haven't infiltrated this earlier?" Geoff asked, stepping to one side as a towering Wu, obviously very drunk and in danger of regurgitating several dozen kilos worth of lunch, lurched past them, bellowing out a raucous song.

Turner chuckled. "Not proper and, hell, it most likely didn't even exist six months ago. Besides, beyond this point, no one's gone and come back. These Cats are outlaws in the old sense of the word, outside of their clan laws, dishonored, most likely facing death if they ever tried to return, for some offense or other. Same for a lot of our human compatriots, like our friend Hans. Most likely the Empire tolerates this place as a conduit for their own information gathering as well, but beyond here, its steel door is slammed shut."

"This is the gray region between Empires, Geoff, enjoy it."

He slowed for a moment by a weapons booth as Hans paused to look in. "So that's where he got the nuke mine," Hans muttered and then pressed on.

"I want you to stick with me for a while," Winston said, "till you get your feet wet."

Geoff felt a sense of relief. Unless he was directly ordered to, he planned to stick to Winston's side like glue. The old prof had shown a very different side back at the Hell Hole, and in this place he knew those talents were definitely worth staying close to.

"But after that, Geoff, I'm cutting you loose. Fill your pocket with some change, buy some drinks, hell, you can even go in one of those houses if you want. No telling what some of the girls in there might have heard."

Geoff shuddered at the thought. What would he ever say to Rebecca if she found out about that? She was, after all, from a very proper British family, with all the right pedigrees. In a certain sense it was an arranged situation between their families, but he could not help but admit that there was a growing attachment there as well. And besides, there was no telling what strange things one might pick up out here, and the Black Rot was definitely an unpleasant way to go.

A wild howling of cheers erupted further down the corridor. The crowd they were wading through started to surge towards the noise and Geoff was dragged along with them. A small amphitheater opened up before him, filled to overflowing with a hysterical, cheering mob. Down in the center of the theater was a fighting pit. Two humans and a Kilrathi were warily circling each other, with a dead Kilrathi lying in the corner in a pool of blood.

Confused, Geoff watched the fight, a Varni beside him booming a thunderous roar of delight as the Kilrathi flung his blade, catching one of the men in the throat. Before the surviving human could close in,

the Kilrathi ducked past his blow, scooped up the fallen man's blade and turned to parry.

"You cheering for the Cat?" Geoff asked, looking over in surprise at the Varni.

"Fifty credits on him."

"What the hell is this?"

"Grudge pit! Cats claimed the humans had robbed them. So Gar arranged a public fight rather than them settling in private. Gar cleans up on bets, winner gets losers ship. Everybody's happy."

Geoff could only shake his head in disbelief that a Varni would cheer for a Cat. He looked back over at Turner, surprised to see the professor buying a bet ticket. Winston caught his eye.

"When in Rome ..." he said, and shrugged his shoulders.

Geoff caught Vance's eye and could see the confusion in the lieutenant's gaze. He moved up to Vance's side.

"This place is bedlam," Geoff shouted, trying to be heard above the hysterical roar of the crowd as the human darted in and sliced open the Cat's arm just below his right elbow. The Cat quickly shifted his blade to his other hand, snarling with pain and anger.

"Did you ever think that this whole mission is nuts?" Geoff asked.

"From the very beginning, Geoff, from the very damn beginning."

Geoff looked back around at the howling crowd. Of all the places in the universe, this was the last place he figured to find a clue about the intentions of the Empire.

# Chapter Seven

KILRAH

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.195

"My father, all is in readiness."

The Crown Prince waited with bent knee as the Emperor slowly came into the room. Even though they were alone, certain ceremonies had to be observed. The Emperor, noisily exhaling from the effort his battered body made, settled down on the dais in the middle of the room and motioned for Gilkarg to come forward and sit by his side.

"I saw the reports of the latest maneuvers," the Emperor stated, pressing right to the point. "It is not adequate according to your plan."

He held up an old style printed report, and tossed the pages at Gilkarg's feet.

"The torpedoes are failing at an alarming rate. Both the simulations and the maneuvers indicate that you

will lose close to half of your best pilots in the first strike. Such losses can not be quickly replaced."

Gilkarg wanted to counter that it was by the Emperors own design that the training of Kiltrathi pilots as carrier pilots was far too exacting. Less than a hundred new pilots qualified each year, out of entry classes of five hundred or more. Half died in training, and of the survivors, most were disqualified, often for the most mundane of reasons. The Emperor argued that this created a spirit and also an elite force that the Confederation could never match. Though he could see his father's point, he still believed that to have more pilots in reserve would have been the wiser course. Now the potential losses were being presented as an argument against the strike.

"You've been talking with Nargth, haven't you, my father?"

"He still believes the capital ships should jump first. You can have your bomber strike, the carriers can jump right after the battleships. It will mean a delay of only twenty minutes."

"Each minute is crucial. It must go according to plan."

The Emperor stared straight at him and Gilkarg could sense that an order, which could not be disobeyed, was about to be issued.

"Half then." He sighed. "Two carriers, then three battleships, followed by the remaining carriers. Is that acceptable?"

The Emperor contemplated the offer for a moment, then nodded.

"The torpedoes. What about them?"

"We should have enough, even with the malfunctions."

"Should not an autodestruct mechanism be put on them, so that if they fail to detonate they will be destroyed anyhow? Suppose the enemy manages to capture one?"

"No for two reasons, my father. First, the modification would delay construction. We depart in three days; to change plans now might mean we would not have enough. Also, such a modification has not been tested. The other concern is that the enemy might be able to trigger the self-destruct mechanism. If they could figure that out in the opening moves of the battle, the result would be a disaster. I assure you, by the time we are done with McAuliffe, not a single Confed ship will be left, therefore there is no reason to worry."

"Let us hope so. And our target, will it be there when you arrive?"

"My father, that is precisely why we are offering almost no resistance to their declaration of war. We've lost half a dozen bases and four systems, but they've only seen our most antiquated systems. Their main fleet at McAuliffe has not sortied. The fools are now overconfident. This declaration of war by them has, if anything, played straight into our hands by lulling them into a belief that we are weak."

"Are you still confident of victory, my son?"

"As certain as you were when you led the attack against the Varni."

The Emperor snorted with disdain. Leaning over, he slowly rubbed his right knee. Most of the leg was

artificial, the leg having been shattered by a suicidal Varni attack on the flagship of the fleet.

"We underestimated them," he said softly. "Oh, we knew we could win, but they fought better than expected, almost worthy of being considered chakta." Chakta were those rare warriors of equal rank who deserved honorable execution upon capture rather than slavery.

The Emperor hesitated. "I think your plan to drive straight in to Earth after taking McAuliffe is dangerous."

"We must close and win."

"Better to sweep up the outer worlds first, to push the border back. The resources are rich, there are billions of slaves to take. Garner those things in and Earth will die on the vine. If you should press the attack though, and if the combined fleet is lost, we lose everything. Granted, the First Fleet will protect us, but they will push us back."

Gilkarg dared to utter a growl of disagreement.

"Plunge the dagger into their heart," he snapped. "The taking of all the outer worlds is meaningless. Cut out the heart, then we can turn back and take the rest at leisure."

"There is still time to decide this," the Emperor replied. "After you destroy McAuliffe we can consider the next step."

"My father. I have worked on this plan ever since our discovery of the Confederation. Every consideration has been evaluated. They are bigger than us, perhaps stronger. We must stun them to their knees by the Jak-tu, then move to cut their throats before they can recover."

"Taking the outer worlds of their system will do the same thing."

"But the inner worlds will survive and will fight on."

"You want all of it at once, and thereby risk all."

The Crown Prince looked at his father in surprise. He was getting too old, too cautious. Granted, the age brought cunning, but it also brought slowness, the unwillingness to risk all with a single strike.

"But as I said," the Emperor continued, "that can be considered after McAuliffe."

Knowing that it was useless to press the issue now, Gilkarg lowered his head in agreement.

"There is a final concern."

"And that is?"

"It's possible they might discover our intentions."

"How?" The Crown Prince stirred nervously. Everything was based upon surprise, everything.

"Some of the spies that we've placed beyond our frontier have reported a rumor that their Confederation has successfully infiltrated into one of our systems."

"Absurd. They've tried repeatedly and failed."

"The report says that this one might be different. He once commanded a secret combat team that reported strictly to the military commander and no other. He is supposedly the closest friend of their military commander, a trusted confidant. This man, along with a young pilot who had insulted the senator disappeared out of the Landreich, and are believed to be inside our space. This was stated directly by one of the senator's aides to a paid informant we have managed to slip into their space with the Varni refugees. It is reported that this man is the closest friend of the Admiral of their Fleet. That information leads me to believe the report might be accurate."

Gilkarg stood silent. Interesting. The Varni spy was reliable. He knew: one false report and his entire family, held captive in the lower reaches of the Imperial Palace, was dead.

He had seen the reports on the human who could be considered his counterpart. The man was without a single drop of what humans would define as noble blood. And still they had made him their commander... such a move was yet another sign of their decadence. Yet he was reported to have remarkable intelligence, which was well hidden beneath his ill-bred exterior.

Could he have sent his friend into the border region to look for information? Granted, there would be nothing direct. The fleets were being held well back of the line, though the Sixth Fleet of the Claw was departing even now, since it had the furthest to go, in order to line up on the flank of the region the humans called the Landreich. Was there a chance this human could stumble on that? And even if he didn't, rumors were beginning to sweep the Empire. Every member of the fleet had been placed on active status, reserves who were retired out of active service in their fortieth year were being recalled. Commercial shipping was nearly at a standstill as every available craft was pressed into service to provide support and supplies for the attack. That, in and of itself, was the one weak point of his plan. Though he had pressed for the construction of a thousand transports whose sole purpose was military support, none had ever been constructed. Already there was signs of economic disruption as certain crucial goods were no longer being moved between worlds. The cover regarding the war being fought in the Facin Sector would only hold up for so long before it was realized just how little was actually being committed to it.

He knew, as well, that rumors would circulate. Only this morning he had ordered the execution of the commander of a frigate. The fool had bedded a courtesan the night before and boasted to her of the blood he would draw when the attack on McAuliffe started. The courtesan worked for his own security team and had been placed into service to uncover loose tongues. Notice of the dishonor and execution had been posted to the fleet as a warning about such stupidity. This commander was now the fourth to die for such foolishness, and he wondered how many boasted and were never caught.

He felt a cool ripple of warning.

"We will track these humans down and tear the flesh from their bones. After the first battle I shall make sure their skulls are sent back to their commander," Gilkarg hissed. Like all Kilrathi, he had a deep loathing for spies and those who lurked and fought from the shadows. Even those who worked for his side were beings barely worthy of his notice and were treated accordingly.

The Emperor sighed and slowly stood up.

"I will not see you again, my son. Bring us victory. This shall be the greatest war yet fought by us. If victorious, your name will shine brighter than mine. But if you fail..."

The Crown Prince stood and bowed low as his father started for the door.

"I know your son, Prince Ratha, needs blood. But do not place him at too great a risk. For after all, if something should happen to you, he will be needed and your youngest cub, Thrakhath, has yet to reach his majority..."

Without another word the Emperor disappeared through the door, leaving Gilkarg to wonder just what was meant by his father's closing words.

EARTH—CON FED FLEET HQ

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.203

"Glad to see you, Joshua. Grab some coffee and take a seat."

Admiral Banbridge stepped around from behind his desk and refilled his own mug of coffee before settling down in a comfortable leather chair across from Joshua Speedwell, head of Fleet Intel.

"Anything new to report today?"

"Gamma Three in Facin fell this morning."

"And?"

"Not much of a fight. One frigate moderately damaged, six fighters and bombers lost. About one hundred marines killed or wounded. We got a destroyer and two transports. As usual, no prisoners, and the base was destroyed by autodestruct. That's where we lost most of our marines, the whole place was mined."

"When are they going to turn and fight?" Banbridge asked.

Speedwell shook his head. "Goes entirely against the grain of what little we know. Maybe it's because they don't define Facin as home territory. Maybe some of the stuff about internal rivalries within the Empire are true and they're leaving the clan that owns Facin to hold the bag."

"And your gut feeling?"

"We're getting sucked in."

Banbridge took another sip of his coffee. The meeting with the president and the Senate Committee on the Conduct of the War had been frustrating. They only heard what they wanted, and to them it was all good news. Nearly bloodless victories, the Kilrathi proving to be a paper dragon, and no need to mobilize the fleet and the reserves before the holidays and, more importantly, just before an election.

"Nothing to sink our teeth into," Joshua replied. "You saw my report on what happened to the Beta team?"

Skip nodded and sighed. Of course their deaths would be listed as a training accident, bodies

unrecoverable. They'd been nailed trying to slip into Kilrathi space near the Ingraya system in order to set up a listening post.

"That's the third team in as many months," Joshua said bitterly, looking into his mug of coffee. "One of them is Akiko Kurosawa's daughter, captain of Gibraltar. We've lost thirty good men and women for nothing."

"Why? Why are we getting hammered on covert intel?"

"Like I said in my report several months ago, the Cats have sealed the border up as tight as a drum. They used to turn a bit of a blind eye to illegal trade. Hell, it profited both sides, and it gave them a chance to slip their intel people across as well. What I shudder to think about is just how many listening posts they've most likely got stashed inside our territory. We just nailed another one yesterday, near the Nanking Sector."

"Any prisoners?"

Joshua shook his head. "No, the usual. One of my counter intel teams acquired its burst signal, traced it in, and as they closed the Cats self-destructed."

"We've been fighting an unknown war for weeks now," Skip said quietly, while getting out of his chair to get something a little stronger to put in his coffee. He looked over at Joshua, who shook his head at the offer of some Scotch.

"Are you going to break this to the Armed Services and Intelligence Committees?"

Skip shook his head. "I've told the president as required by law and that's it."

"And his response?"

Skip snorted disdainfully. "He's a politician facing re-election. The Peace and Prosperity Coalition is closing in on winning a majority. If they do, he's out and More takes over. If he goes public with what you and I suspect, the other side will accuse us of saber rattling to panic the voters because we're afraid of more appropriations cuts. More's got us over a barrel. And damn it, there's no good clear evidence. Just what the hell are we supposed to do, stand up and announce we've lost close to a hundred marines and special ops personnel in operations that we were running before war was officially declared? Damn, I'm surprised the Cats haven't gone public with our attempts, that'd really put you and me in the wringer."

"That's something right there," Joshua replied, "the fact that they haven't gone public. It means they want to keep this whole shadow war a secret as well. Look at it the other way. If we were innocent and kept nailing infiltration teams, don't you think we'd be screaming our heads off? So what do we do, Skip?"

"You keep on it. I want three more teams sent out immediately and a step-up in searching for their recon units."

"I can tell you right now it'll mean more good kids getting killed. Trying to slip over is nothing short of a suicide order."

Skip nodded sadly. "It's what they signed on for," he finally said, as if trying to convince himself. "We're just going to have to play our cards very closely for right now. I can't give an increased readiness alert, that'd set the damn press off into a real howl. But I have passed the word privately to some key people

to start juggling the books a bit, horde some of the training ammunition, speed up overhauls, cut back on leaves. What about more listening posts?"

"Got six more going on-line, but remember we're talking a cool hundred million apiece for all that listening gear."

"Spend it. Damn it all, we've got to get a better read on their signal traffic. I just wish we could sneak some units half a dozen jump points in, try and pick up stuff from closer to their home world."

Speedwell shook his head.

"And lose them like the others? The damn arrays are simply too big."

Skip sighed. That had been one of his pet projects, to get the R and D money needed so that listening posts, capable of grabbing translight burst signals, could be reduced in size. Right now the antenna arrays were the size of a battlewagon and the best units available could probe only a few dozen light-years in.

"What about this damn forward deployment of the fleet at McAuliffe?" Speedwell asked. "It gives us absolutely no reaction time."

Skip mumbled a bitter curse. "That order still stands. It's part of Plan Orange Five, forward deployment to protect the outer worlds while punitive operations go on in Facin. If we pull the fleet out of McAuliffe and drop them back to the inner worlds, More would have another arrow in his quiver. Even if I tried to give the order the president would immediately block it, because it'd throw the election for sure. More would take that ball and run with it right into control of the government."

"So when do you think they'll hit, Skip?"

"If I was the Cats, I'd wait to right after the election. If the Peace Party wins, they could really lean on us, get us slashed even further to the bone, then simply close in and mop up. Wait a couple of years with those jerks in control and, hell, it wouldn't even be a fight."

"Remember what I've said before, Skip. We've got to learn to think like Cats. The whole concept of an election is totally alien to them. The simple fact that we run the show that way is seen by them as weakness."

Skip looked back at the calendar on his desk.

"Right after the election, I'd make it."

Joshua sat in silence for a moment.

"Why not Confederation Day?" Joshua said slowly. "It'd be the logical time to really nail us. Half the crews will have the weekend off."

"Maybe, but I wonder if the Cats would be that crazy. Do that and it'd really get our blood up. It'd be an act sure to arouse our rage. That's the biggest holiday of the year outside of Christmas."

"Washington did it at the Battle of Trenton and turned the tide of the American Revolution. Sure, the British and Hessians screamed foul, but it brought victory. The Arab states did nearly the same thing in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and the Mongols did it in their Chinese New Year strike of 2082."

Skip let the thought settle in. Suppose Joshua was right? But were the Cats that subtle?

"Could we cancel Confederation Day leaves, Skip?"

"I can tell you right now the president will balk. You're talking seven days before elections. Again, More would scream war scare to panic voters."

"For heaven's sake, at least try to keep readiness up on that day. All right?"

Skip sighed. Ever since he had seen the report on the loss of the latest infiltration team he found himself wondering if he had sent his closest friend out on a suicide mission. A gut feeling was starting to take hold that he would most likely never see him again.

"Joshua, I fear we might have to take the first blow on the chin."

"If so, let's just hope we still have a head left the day after."

## KILRAH

As his son strode into the room he sensed a subtle but significant change in the young cub. Perhaps it was simply that he was indeed maturing, but there also seemed to be a wariness on his part.

"My blood warms at the sight of thee and I thank the Gods for your safe return," Vakka said as Jukaga came to stand before him.

Jukaga remained silent.

"Out with it then," Vakka said.

"With what?"

"If you are to learn to survive my son, learn to hide your feelings before both friend and foe. You are troubled by something, yet you hesitate to voice it."

"Harga said something about you."

"How is he?"

"Troubled by the prospect of war. It is clear he does not believe in it."

"And you think that it is traitorous not to fully submit to the will of the Emperor."

Jukaga lowered his head. "He spoke against the war and then finished by saying 'go and ask your father. You will find his response to be interesting.' I heard your arguments before the Pledging of Knives in support of the war. You threw your dagger into the circle as well. But are you now against what is to come?"

"Sit down, Jukaga."

Jukaga seemed reluctant but finally settled down on the floor next to his father.

"What did you learn on your journey to Fawcett's World?"

"These humans and their allies, it is hard to judge."

Jukaga began. "When I stand close to them, I do not like them. They are weak. Their bare flesh looks repulsive, their scent is foul."

Vakka chuckled. "But what else?"

"Abram is, I'm not sure how to say it..." and his voice trailed off.

"A friend?"

Surprised, Jukaga shook his head. "I couldn't call him that. He is, after all, alien. But there was something there."

"Intelligence, wisdom, honor," Vakka said quietly, and Jukaga nodded.

"Then the time spent sending you there was well spent," Vakka announced. "You've learned something no one else seems to accept about our foes. The knowledge of it will come as a shock that will shake the Empire."

"Before I departed, Harga gave me translations of some of their books to read on my return journey."

"Did you read the human, Sun-Tzu?"

"Yes. Strange, many of his maxims of war are nearly the same as the writings of Xag. Yet there is much of their writings I find odd. The poets of their first global war are filled with disdain for war and seem like the ravings of old widows. But so much of their effort has in one way or another been war, either real or symbolic." He paused for a moment. "And yet they seem so weak, barely worth our notice except as prey."

Vakka chuckled. "'Judge not thy enemy by the strength of his arm, but rather by the cunning of his brain'" so Xag once said. I think my old friend has opened a door for you and what you have seen on the other side troubles you deeply."

"You mean Harga?"

"No, Abram. I found, at times, when we sat in the darkness and he was downwind so that I could not detect his scent, that I felt as if I was talking with a clan elder."

Vakka looked away, "... and so I saw him first, and killed him in his place."

"What was that?"

"Oh, one of the ravings of old human widows, as you called it."

"Harga said they are to be killed."

"And you are concerned? I thought you hated them, that they were prey."

"Still, he might be useful," Jukaga said, as if searching for an excuse.

"Things might be arranged."

"Do you think we will win?"

Vakka laughed bitterly. "I glory in war, my son, all of the blood do. Remember the honors heaped upon me when we fought the Varni. I expect the same of you. It is in our blood to fight. For if we do not fight others, in the end we will turn back to fighting ourselves. If we should do that, when the darkness comes from the heart of galaxy we will have drained our own blood off and that darkness will drink what is left."

"But this war? No, I do not want it. It is the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. I wanted you to visit the human world we held so you might get your first taste of what this Confederation is because I believe that, when you are my age, you will still be fighting them. That is, if you survive... if our race survives."

Jukaga started to open his mouth to say something, but then looked away.

"I know you are ashamed of me. But remember this as well. This war is a clever plot of the Emperor's as well. Notice how the First Fleet will not engage, and that nearly all the personnel in this fight are from the other clans, except for the landing assault troops. It will be Imperial blood which shall place our banners upon other worlds, but only after the fleets have shed their blood. It will be our blood that is drained while the Emperor's clan takes the final glory."

"But the Crown Prince and his own son lead the attack."

"Do you think the Emperor truly cares if they live or die? There are other grandsons of other concubines. If there is victory he will embrace them, if they die he will immortalize them, if they lose he will denounce them and blame those who fought under them as well. This war will burn off our strength and yet leave his clan even stronger."

"I cannot believe this," Jukaga gasped. "You speak of the Emperor."

"It is time to grow up!" Vakka snarled. "It is time to put away your childish dreams of how the universe should be, and accept the truth behind it all. Everything is power, that is the goal. Glory is but a tool to trick others to give power to those who rule."

"Once there was the glory of the hunt and those who returned with red talons were acknowledged and glorified for feeding the clans. But now? If you should fight in this attack and destroy a Confederation ship, what does it bring you?"

Jukaga looked at him, unable to reply.

"What is glory then? You destroy a ship, but it will be the Emperor's power which grows, not yours. Oh, you will be praised, you will wear new baubles, concubines will come to you willingly. But as for power? We, the heads of the clans, will receive new worlds as our bribes and new wealth as payment. But when one owns entire worlds already, what is one more? Only the Emperor will grow stronger and chances are you will die for nothing in this fight."

Vakka sighed and settled back on his pillow.

"Judge later, my son. Not now, go to your fight, and if it should actually come to pass that there is a great victory, then see who has actually won."

Vakka waved his hand in dismissal.

Jukaga stood up and bowed. Vakka finally stirred.

"May your talons be wet and, if fated not to return, may praise be sung of thy name."

The ritual farewell having been said, Jukaga straightened up.

"I am angered, father, that you had me removed from the fighter force. What good am I—" and he hesitated for a moment, "—what glory is there to stand behind Admiral Nargth and to run his errands?"

"Continue to read the writings of these humans," Vakka replied. "A word of advice at the right moment has often turned the tide of battle. Do that, and you accomplish far more than simply charging to your death."

"As you will it, father," Jukaga said bitterly and, turning on his heels, he stalked angrily out of the room.

Vakka smiled as the door slammed shut. At least the cub would most likely survive now. He didn't give a damn about the shame to his own name for asking to have his son removed. It was evident that the Emperor wanted a good killing off of those who were the best of the young heirs to the control of the clans. Well, this one he would not get.

He let his thoughts drift to the other thing he had been contemplating. It was a plan within a plan that both drew him and yet caused him to rebel against his most basic instincts. And yet, if it worked, perhaps this insanity could still be avoided. War might be inevitable with the Confederation but, if so, the enemy must be better known, his weakness in politics exploited, his will softened yet further. The Crown Prince only saw the humans as an opponent to charge when, with patience, they could be weakened from within. It was one thing the race had never truly learned, that war could be fought on many different levels.

His plan took form and all that it implied both frightened and drew him closer to unleashing it.

"Sire, we think we have located another Confederation spy team."

Gilkarg looked at his aide with annoyance.

"So why bother to worry me with this? If they've been found, take them out."

"My lord, there're some interesting details to this. One of our agents just reported into the station at Jigada with the information."

The Crown Prince stood up and was now most definitely interested. The Jigada system was the forward resupply point for the Sixth Fleet just before it went in to attack.

"Apparently there is an unstable jump point into the next system over that we were not aware of. It was

declared off limits since it leads into a black hole system."

"Let me see the system on the holo, then we will decide how to handle it."

There were considerations within considerations here. This one would have to be handled carefully.

# Chapter Eight

GAR'S EMPORIUM

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.218

"We've been in this damn place for over a month," Vance growled. "Just how much longer is this crap gonna take?"

Geoff stared blearily into his mug. He wasn't even sure what he was consuming any more. What was really troubling to him was that there was something about The Pit, as the locals called it, that was starting to grow on him. Maybe, after all the years of harsh discipline, there was something inside stirring to life in a place where he didn't have to take any orders. Turner had cut them loose after the first couple of days, and Geoff now found it amusing that Vance had actually clung to his side, though perhaps Vance might have seen it the other way around.

"It's almost like the learning curve on a fighter," Vance had explained, as if he was a seasoned veteran of places like Gar's. "Get through your first three missions and your chances of survival skyrocket. The trick is, just getting through those first three."

Their second day out on their own, the first bar fight had occurred, a Cat and a Jarma lizard deciding that Vance's wallet was worth lifting. The Cat was now minus a hand, thanks to Geoff's shooting. As for the lizard, well, there were rumors that Haggans found the Jarma to be a particular delicacy and neither Vance nor Geoff objected when a Haggan slithered up and offered them fifty credits for the body.

Blowing the hand off the Cat just before it nailed Vance had secured a grudging friendship, though Vance kept claiming that once a reciprocal save had been pulled off things would get back to normal.

Geoff continued to act as though he was staring into his drink as a Cat settled down on the stool next to him. He watched cautiously from the corner of his eye for, after all, Stumpie, as they now called him, might have friends willing to do a vengeance job. This one looked new, however. There was a slight bristling to the Cat's mane; the thing was nervous and hyperalert.

The thing that was strange was that he and the Cat were, in the legal sense, enemies. Word of the declaration of war had reached The Pit and, for the first few hours, it had seemed as if fighting would break out. But then the master of The Pit had made a rare public announcement, pointing out that there was no sense in tearing each other apart when profit could be made. Now the war was viewed almost as a joke.

Geoff eyed the Cat cautiously, then decided to venture an opening.

"First time here?" Geoff asked casually, hoping the Cat understood the pidgin dialect of space, a mix of English standard and Imperial standard which was the language of trade on the frontier.

The Cat snarled, a standard response when a human first spoke to them. Geoff already knew to give a toothy grin in response to show he was not afraid, but not to open his jaw, which was a signal for a fight.

"Many times here," the Cat responded.

Geoff could tell he was lying. The thing kept looking back and forth as if soaking it all in the for the first time.

Geoff motioned for the barkeep to set up a drink for his new neighbor and the Cat looked over at him in surprise.

"To the spilled blood of our enemies," Geoff announced, raising his mug in salute.

"We might be speaking of your blood," the Cat replied as he took a tentative sip of the drink, grimaced, and then forced the rest of it down. Geoff motioned for a second.

He didn't even want to think about how much money he had spent buying drinks. In fact, word seemed to have gotten around The Pit so that, whenever he walked in, there was always at least one pathetic drunk whining at him for 'a taste of juice.'

Turner's level of action was something he didn't even want to try. The old prof was often in the Lotus Holes and had even wandered into some of the brothels. He claimed to be playing it straight, but what he was doing in the name of the service was something Vance speculated on in loving detail.

The question was, had they accomplished anything useful while spending thousands of what he assumed was Confed Intel money? There were individual pieces enough of something that didn't seem right. The number of ships slipping through from Cat territory had slowed to a trickle, creating a hell of a lot of tension in The Pit. With few Cats coming in, the price of their goods had skyrocketed, while there was now a glut on goods coming from within Confederation and frontier worlds. Turner pointed out that this information alone might have some significance, but the news that all commerce between the worlds of the Empire was almost at a standstill for lack of shipping was something that set off alarms for Turner. The problem, though, was that in and of itself there was still no direct documented evidence that they could take back to Banbridge.

He continued to watch the Cat he was buying for. The bristling of the mane was down slightly.

"Anything interesting to trade?" Geoff asked.

"Don't know, just crew," the Cat replied.

"We have some Gotherian crystal."

The Cat looked over at him.

"Access port seventy-one if you'd like to see. Tell my friend Hans I sent you and he'll give you a break."

"You with Phantom?"

Geoff did not let his gaze flicker. How did the Cat know the original name of the ship?

"No, the Lazarus ."

The Cat growled with amusement.

"I saw your ship as we docked. Seen it before. Changing wing design and armor, it is still the same."

"Sorry friend, I think you've got the wrong ship."

Geoff quietly nudged Vance with his knee to alert him that there might be trouble.

"Phantomship that destroy frigate."

"I heard about that," Vance interrupted, moving his chair away from the bar and dragging it to Geoff's side while motioning for the keeper to set up yet another drink. "Some fight, I heard. Anyhow, the one guy that got away wound up getting ventilated back at the Hell Hole. Some folks didn't like him back there."

The Cat looked at him with a mocking gaze.

"You say you have Gotherian glass and crystals?"

"The best," Vance interjected.

"Lets see."

The Cat quickly downed his third drink and stepped away from the bar. Geoff set out to lead the way, letting Vance fall in behind the Cat to cover his back. They stepped out into the swirling confusion of the main corridor, swerving around a body sprawled on the grating. After weeks in this place, Geoff found that he was getting used to it all. As he walked down the corridor, right hand in his pocket, lightly wrapped around the grip of his blaster, he carefully surveyed those walking past. Hans had tipped them off that he was convinced that a Sarn clan headhunter had recently come in on a huge three-engine smuggler out of the Jab system. At least, that was the tip-off offered by another trader from the Landreich who was docked near them.

Weaving his way around the stinking, heaving crowd, he at last reached the side corridor leading into their docking bay. Hans was leaning against the door, Turner by his side, a sample of their ornate glasswork spread out on a small table.

The Cat walked up and quickly scanned the table, picking up one of the heavy ornaments, which for some strange reason the Cats found fascinating, and casually held it up so it could catch and reflect the dim light.

Geoff could see he was not really looking at the glass, but instead was gazing intently at Turner. Turner calmly returned the look.

"Price?"

"Fifty credits for what you're holding," Turner replied.

The Cat nodded and, putting down the glass, he fished in his left pocket for a twenty-five-credit piece, pulled it out and slapped it on the table. Hans was about to raise an objection but then the Cat reached

into his right trouser pocket and produced another twenty-five-credit coin, but this time he handed it straight to Turner.

Curious, Turner accepted the coin. The Cat picked up the glass and continued to stare at Turner.

"You will find the payment fair, Commander," the Cat said softly. He quickly turned and, shouldering his way through the crowd, disappeared.

"Geoff, Vance follow him!" Turner hissed.

The two started off after the Cat but their quarry was moving fast, dodging down a lateral corridor that crossed through the middle of the barge. The two squeezed into the passageway, struggling to get around a Wu whose half-ton bulk all but blocked their way. In that same instant the sharp crackle of an automatic blaster erupted further down the corridor. Vance pulled Geoff down to the floor. The Wu suddenly let out a deafening, trumpeting shriek and staggered backwards so that the two had to scramble out of its way as it crumpled down, blood cascading out of half a dozen wounds stitching across its chest.

Lying behind the body, Geoff pulled his weapon out and peeked up over the still-heaving chest of the screaming Wu. He caught a glimpse of the Cat they had been trailing, identifiable now only by the blood-covered piece of Gotherian glasswork clutched in his left hand.

"He's dead," Geoff cried. "Let's get the hell out of here."

More shots erupted from the far end of the corridor, now obscured by a smoke grenade that someone had popped off beside the dead Cat. The spray of rounds was nearly continuous as the two crawled away. Geoff could hear the repeated smack of bullets impacting the Wu, realizing that if it had not been for the giant, lumbering creature, they'd be dead.

Gaining the main corridor, which was now as empty as the one church mission inside The Pit, the two sprinted for safety. Turner stood alone in the middle of the corridor, weapon raised, Hans at his back covering the other way. Geoff could see the look of relief in Turner's eyes.

"Thought you boys were dead," Turner shouted as they scrambled past him and turned into their access corridor.

"Whoever it was got him," Geoff cried as they ducked into the side corridor. Turner backed in behind them and started to shout a curse at the Cat who worked for Gar, who was pressed into a niche in the wall on the other side of the corridor.

"What the hell is going on here?" Turner roared.

"Gar not responsible, that's in agreement!"

Before Turner could say another word a booming siren echoed through the barge, its wavering tone setting Geoff's hair on edge.

"Imperials!" their Cat guard screamed.

The corridor, which only seconds before had been completely empty, erupted into a seething, shrieking mob.

Hans grabbed hold of Turner.

"We better get the hell out of here right now!"

Turner nodded, motioning for Vance and Geoff to head into the ship. The four backed up the access corridor. Their Cat guard shoved his way through the panic stricken mob.

"My five hundred!" he roared.

Turner stopped, reached into his pocket, pulled out a heavy platinum coin and tossed it while still keeping his weapon aimed straight at the Cat with his other hand.

The Cat caught the coin and grinned. "Hope you live human, your smell does not turn stomach," he shouted and, turning, he ducked into the swirling mob.

Turner backed through the hatch. Just as it slammed shut a spatter of high-velocity rounds slammed against the durasteel coating, made evident by dimpling and flecks of paint spraying off.

"Punch us out of here!" Turner shouted.

Hans was already in the pilot's seat, powering the engines up.

More rounds splashed against the door. There was a moment of silence, and then a deep, thumping boom.

"Damn, they're trying to blast their way through," Turner shouted. "Heat those engines and let's get moving!"

Geoff, standing behind Hans, watched as the main screen showed engine warm-up and purge. He realized that Kruger had, in fact, screwed up. The engines had sat cold for more than a day, when they should have been switched over at least every eight hours for a quick pop off.

The ship in the next docking bay had already disconnected, the wash of its engines rocking Lazarus. The pilot slammed his throttles up to full, flame cascading over the forward view ports, setting Hans to cursing wildly.

"My new paint job, you bastard!"

Hans slapped on lateral thrusters and at the same instant a second explosion rocked the door. Hans pivoted the ship around and Geoff saw three Cats struggling in the now-open port to get back through the inner airlock door, but it had already slammed shut.

Ships were disconnecting from all sides of the barge, like hundreds of lampreys dropping off a dying fish. An explosion detonated directly above them. Startled, Geoff watched as two ships careened off each other, the side of one ripped open, its fuel tanks rupturing in a blue-white flash. On the far side of the barge, three more ships collided and were ripped apart.

"Get topside, Tolwyn. Turner, take the stern. Shoot any bastard that gets too close!"

Flashes of light started to wink back and forth as evidence that other ships' captains had already adopted the same strategy.

Geoff climbed up into his turret and powered up his target-acquisition computer. The screen was a mad jumble of blips as ships started to dart off in every direction.

"Where's the Imperials?" Hans shouted.

Geoff started to switch through frequencies on the screen and finally locked in on The Pit's translight search pulse, while sliding back the scale so that the confusion of ships in the immediate vicinity congealed into a single ball of light at the center of the screen. Eight blips appeared at the far edge of the screen and he then switched it to a holo projection so that all three directions were shown.

"They came right through the jump point we used," Geoff announced.

"Watch that bastard on the right!" Hans shouted.

Geoff pivoted his guns and fired, suppressing the instinct to duck as a light transport with two heavy external engines strapped on came boring in on a collision course. The ship was so close he could see the Wu pilot inside, its mouth open in what he knew was a wild curse. Geoff aimed his guns straight at the Wu, deciding to give him another second to react. The Wu pulled back on the stick, the ship rearing straight up. Geoff looked up and saw another ship crossing above them, even as Hans nosed forward, spinning Lazarus ninety degrees so that their wings would not slam into the bow of the Wu vessel, which plowed into the underbelly of the ship above them.

"How many Imperials?" Turner shouted on the intercom.

Geoff looked back at the screen.

"I'm counting eight reflected off The Pit's scanner. They're already picking up speed. Wait... looks like one's a cruiser with four fighters attached."

Turner grunted.

"Front door's closed, Hans. Where to?"

"Let's just get clear of here first," Hans snapped. "Watch your tail, looks like a Cat smuggler is swinging in behind us."

Geoff swung his guns to the stern and saw a sleek smuggler craft. Behind it the last of the ships were detaching from The Pit, one of them a medium-sized transport bristling with engines. The Pit's translight scanner suddenly shut down as the cylinders single stern-mounted engine pulsed to life, driving it towards the edge of the black hole's event horizon. With the thousands who had been on board, Geoff wondered how many were still trapped and would soon discover what happened once the event horizon was crossed.

A flash of light detached from the belly of the craft in pursuit, a low, pulsing tone erupting in Geoff's headset. An instant later Hans slammed off his engines, pivoted Lazarus so that it was facing in the direction it had just come from, then fired the engines back up.

"What the hell are you doing?" Geoff cried.

The missile came roaring in. Lazarus' shields popped on and an instant later the missile struck the shield

and then ricocheted off, breaking apart into half a dozen pieces, the engine still firing.

"Understand now, Tolwyn?" Vance asked, the slightest edge of mocking disdain in his voice.

Geoff was too embarrassed to reply. Their opponent had fired a seeker too close in, so that the warhead did not arm.

Geoff, who was still facing astern, spun his turret around and found himself staring straight at their pursuer, who had opened up with all its forward guns. The shielding around Geoff shimmered and glowed. He squeezed off a long, sustained burst, amazed by the sparkling display as his rounds slammed into the forward shield of his opponents ship, directly in front of the cockpit.

He realized that this was no longer a simulation back at the Academy. This was the real thing and, even if he did everything right, his own death might be the final result. Their pursuer was bigger, and apparently more heavily armed. He wondered how their own shields were holding up as a maelstrom of shot and laser bolts slammed into them.

"Geoff, hold on his cockpit. Break to port in five, four, Vance, jam the signal he's putting out, two..."

Geoff held the trigger down, manually adjusting the twin guns as his stream of shots snapped across the narrowing distance. He had a sudden cold feeling that this opponent was not about to turn aside, and if need be was willing to ram. "One, break!"

Geoff started to pivot his gun even as Hans initiated a full burning turn without use of the maneuvering scoops. Geoff was startled to catch the flash of a dumb fire missile snaking out from under Lazarus, boring straight in on the Cat ship. An instant later the missile impacted right into the cockpit, where Geoff had weakened the forward shield. He was surprised to actually catch a glimpse of the cockpit interior exploding, flames leaping down into the bowels of the ship.

They shot past in a skidding turn that seemed to take them halfway back towards The Pit, which was ponderously accelerating in towards the black hole.

"Look for others," Hans announced, his voice dead calm.

Geoff turned his turret, but the other ships were now racing off in every direction. A few had been coming in their general direction, but the sight of the battle caused them to steer off. As they continued through their turn Geoff caught a glimpse of a spreading shower of debris.

"Geoff, pull down a nav solution for alternate jump points and do it quick."

Geoff did one more rotation of the gun turret to double check if any ships were turning in towards them and then looked down at his screen. There were more than a dozen jump points surrounding the black hole. The one they had come through was obviously out, as were the two that flanked it. He started to scan the others, pulling up nav charts to see where they led. Four came up as unknowns, meaning they most likely headed into Cat territory.

The fleeing ships were all starting to line up for their jumps, picking their points of escape and running for them.

"Geoff?"

He looked down between his legs and saw Turner looking up at him, motioning for him to come onto the main deck. Geoff slipped out from behind his guns and plot screen and dropped down to the deck.

"What's the solution, Tolwyn?" Hans asked.

"Three closest are out. Five lead out beyond both our frontiers, four back into Cat territory, but we don't know where."

"Head for Cat territory," Turner said quietly. "I'm willing to bet they flanked this system, and there's a reception committee waiting at most of the ways out."

Hans turned in his chair and looked at Turner.

"Lot of effort to break up a smugglers nest."

"That's not what they're after."

Hans smiled softly. "They want your ass, don't they?"

Turner nodded.

"Like I said before. You had Confed Intel written all over you."

"Fleet Intel. Confed's civilian intel is thought to be compromised."

"You know, we didn't even turn a profit from our trip out here. I'm at least six thousand down."

Turner chuckled. "Just do what I tell you and it's fifty thousand when we get back."

Hans said nothing for a moment.

"What are you out here for?"

"We think there's a war coming."

Hans snorted disdainfully. "Hell, there is a war on."

"A war?" Turner replied disdainfully. "I'm talking about the real damn thing, not some dumb ass phony show of force. The Cats are gearing up and we've got to find out where, and damn soon. We were sent out here to get the hard facts."

"Well, damn it, Turner, I could have told you that back at the Hell Hole. The rumors have been flying for months now. Everybody in the Landreich knows it."

"It's one thing for you to know it, it's another thing for the president and the Senate to know it. That's what I was sent out here to try and pin down."

Hans snorted disdainfully. "Put their fat asses up on the border. Make their hides the trip wire and you'd see how fast they'd be putting the fleet on alert. Hell, it was the same thing when Xerxes invaded and the governments of Athens and Sparta could only argue with each other. It's the same today, the politicians who aren't doing the dying are always the last to get it."

Geoff looked at Hans in surprise, never expecting an allusion to the Second Persian War of ancient Earth history to be cited by the smuggler pilot.

Hans looked at him and grinned. "Just because I ain't highbred Academy doesn't mean I haven't read."

Turner laughed out loud and then leaned over and pointed at Hans' plot board.

"Look, that ship we just took apart was an Imperial counter intel team."

"How do you know that?"

Turner reached into his pocket and withdrew a twenty-five-credit coin. He held it up. Taped to one side was a small memory wafer.

"They have a leak somewhere. They were tracking him, waiting for the handoff so they could nab us all. If the confusion hadn't broken out, with their regular fleet jumping in so quickly, they most likely would have had us. Or maybe they were just looking for us and this courier, whoever he was, stumbled in at the wrong time. Either way, we're what they're looking for now."

Turner looked over at Vance.

"Do you think you jammed their burst transmission in time?"

"Part of it got out, sir, before I could nail it. Two seconds later they were all dead."

"So, what do you think?"

"They transmitted an identification of us, we have to assume that."

Hans looked back at the plot board, pulling down Geoff's calculations. The screen was lit up with streams of ships breaking towards their escape points. Suddenly, one of the streams started to break apart and turn. An open radio frequency crackled to life.

"All ships. All ships. Imperials blocking jump point Delta. All ships... all ships—" The signal disappeared as a jamming wave washed over it.

Hans looked back at Turner. "You really put my butt in the wringer on this one."

"You already had that figured when you signed on."

"Guess I owed you one for dumping that Sarn goon. Not that I wouldn't have nailed him. I already had the bastard cased out."

Turner simply smiled and then, without asking, he leaned over Hans' shoulder and turned back the scale on the plot board so that the entire system was shown, the known jump points highlighted in blue. He studied it intently for a minute and then, tapping the screen's joystick, he placed a crosshair over the jump point resting right on the edge of the event horizon and clicked once. Nav lines appeared, tracing their best trajectory in.

"We'll skim the event horizon, use the gravity to slingshot us around and in through the point."

"That'll be a hairy run," Vance said. "Hell sir, off by even the slightest and we go over the edge. Remember, there're fluctuations in the gravity waves that close in. We can't be sure on this."

"And it takes us into unknown Cat territory. I was told the Imperials might not even know about that point," Hans interjected quietly.

"That's what they're not expecting. I can't see them coordinating a block on a dozen jump points simultaneously. They'll most likely cover the obvious ones and that's it."

"Too bad we couldn't have gotten ten or fifteen of our ships together," Hans said wistfully.

"Why?" Geoff asked.

"Cause if we could've, I'd lead them back and kick the asses of those Imperials closing in."

"One of them's a cruiser," Vance replied.

"So? They fight by the book. We don't. We'd kick their asses right into vacuum."

Vance shook his head and laughed, but Geoff could see that Turner was looking intently at Hans.

"You handled yourself well against that ship back there."

Hans ignored the compliment.

"All right, we take that point out. We're gonna skim close to the horizon so you better strap yourselves in. OldLazarus' inertial dampening ain't the best and it's going to get rocky."

Geoff started to climb back to his position and noticed Turner looking at him.

"You did some good shooting back there. Perfect deflection as we turned."

"Who do you think the courier was?"

"Damned if I know. Too bad they ventilated him before we could find out. Could be anything, maybe even one of our intel teams that we wrote off but is still out there. Could even be a false lead. Once we get out of here, I'll run a check on the wafer, see what it says."

Geoff climbed back up into his turret and pulled his harness straps tight. Looking straight ahead he could see the whispers of light streaking in towards the black hole before they disappeared into the unfathomable void. He knew that slingshotting into the precise location of a jump point was going to be a tricky bit of navigation, and it suddenly dawned on him that the responsibility for that was actually his. None of the other three had commented on it, and the acceptance that implied gave him a newfound sense of confidence. Leaning over his board he started to check and recheck their run, which would take them yet deeper into Cat territory.

## Chapter Nine

KILRAH

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.220

The alarm for jump transit sounded. Jukaga sat and strapped himself into his chair. The excitement on the bridge was electric as the admiral's staff and helm officers secured themselves and then started to break into their battle chants.

Jukaga looked up at the view screen. To port he could just barely make out the pinpoint of reddish light that was Kilrah. It disappeared from view as a heavy battleship, the Kitagki, swung in behind them. A swarm of nearly a hundred ships was gathered at the jump point; light frigates, destroyers, transports, courier vessels, intelligence surveillance ships, supply vessels, fuel tankers, mine layers, and heavy landing assault craft. It would take the better part of a day for the ships to complete transit through the jump point. It was one of the advantages, though, of being on the admiral's flagship that there was no waiting for access to a jump point. As soon as his vessel arrived, a way was cleared for him and the other battleships traveling in line astern.

The only ones who had gone ahead were the forward picket ships and the Crown Prince's six carriers.

Jukaga still felt a ripple of resentment over what his father had done. He should be on the carrier Ukshika rather than a hanger-on to Nargth's staff. The glory was to be found in a fighter, and in his feverish dreams he had imagined himself leading the first strike in to destroy an enemy carrier. Instead, he had to endure the quiet stares of contempt from the admiral's staff, for they undoubtedly knew that he had been given the position because of influence and some undoubtedly suspected that he was a coward who did not want to fight.

There was a small part of him now that wondered if indeed there might not be some validity to the accusation. Yes, he did want to fight, but he could not help but wonder against whom he should fight.

The jump alert rose to a high quavering tone and snapped off. An instant later the image in the view screens wavered, distorted, and then snapped off. Jukaga felt his stomach heave as artificial gravity was lost. There was a sickening sense that somehow he was being ripped apart as their ship slipped through a fold in space. What was strange was the feeling that it was impossible to judge the actual time. Ships' chronometers registered that the jump was instantaneous, yet one's own senses argued differently, that there was a frightful sensation that the jump, if it had gone slightly awry, might have stretched into an eternity of endless falling. On rare occasions something would indeed go wrong. Usually a spray of debris would eject out the other side, or the ship would simply disappear forever. It was often a source of macabre speculation just prior to a jump.

The sensation of falling dropped away with a sickening lurch. For a brief moment it was impossible to focus as Jukaga looked up at the screen. He could see the jump nav specialist already leaning forward in his chair, checking the coordinates. The view screens winked back to life, showing new star fields... and directly ahead the carriers hovered in space.

"Jump successful," the nav officer announced and, with a sigh, Jukaga unbuckled his harness as a cheer erupted from the deck. They had left Kilrah and were on their way to victory.

The Crown Prince carefully examined the dispatch which had just arrived by burst transmission.

"Flagship jump successful."

He looked up at the view screen and saw the heavy battleship burst out of the jump point and turn aside to clear the way for the next vessel. He cursed inwardly. Part of him had hoped that the ship would miss its approach and cross jump to another system, and thus disappear from the campaign.

"I want the heart of the commander of this botched operation. Order that his second take immediate control. They are to hunt this ship down and destroy it," Gilkarg snarled, flinging the hard copy of the dispatch back at an adjutant. The aide, eyes averted in fear, backed away.

Gilkarg looked around angrily at the staff assembled on the deck and motioned for them to clear the room. Their elation at the start of the campaign evaporated as they fled his presence.

Jukaga paced back and forth, ignoring the view screen displaying the arrival of the line of battleships.

He turned and saw that his son, Ratha, had remained.

"Somewhere there's a leak," Gilkarg snapped.

"Who?"

"We don't know. The report came back from our ambassador that a special operative had been dispatched to cross into the Empire. I detached a squadron of the Sixth Fleet to seal off the approaches to where they were located and to send an assassin team in to take them prisoner if possible, or kill them if there was no alternative. They arrived moments after a message was apparently transferred."

"From whom?"

"The messenger was killed by accident," Gilkarg roared. "We know nothing about him, his contact, or what was transferred."

"And the human spies?"

"Incredible. Darg, commander of the squadron, sprung the trap too soon. Our team was to flush out the human spies, take them prisoner if possible, then destroy the smuggler camp before the fleet jumped through."

Gilkarg continued to pace angrily and then slammed his fist against a bulkhead.

"They jumped too early! Triggered a panic. The humans escaped, killing our team. And the jump point they're heading to—" he shook his head in disbelief, "—they're jumping straight in to where Sixth Fleet is marshaling for the strike on the Landreich!"

## JUMP POINT TO BLACK HOLE SYSTEM

"I think you better get us the hell out of here," Turner said, trying to keep his voice calm.

When they realized they had been spotted by a picket ship, seconds after their jump through, he had ordered a high-intensity translight burst scan of the system. Having been sighted by the picket running silent was no longer required so they might as well see what was lurking further in. As the echoes of the burst came back, the plot screen began to sparkle with dozens of red blips clustered above the one

habitable planet in the system. Some of the ships were already under way, heading up on an obvious intercept.

"Give me another burst," Turner announced. "Focus the beam down on that cluster of blips. I want a good data read on them."

Geoff punched the data into the computer and hit the transmit button. Power in the ship dimmed from the massive energy required to transmit a translight radar sweep.

"We better react, and quick," Hans announced. "That picket ship is gaining."

"Hold her steady and shields off for another minute," Turner replied, "I want a clean read on this signal."

Geoff kept an eye on the board, sparing an occasional glance over to the other screen, which showed that the picket ship was almost within range. A blip detached from their pursuers, followed an instant later by the insistent tone that warned of a seeker locking on.

"Damn, seeker on the way in," Vance announced.

"Hold her steady, hold her steady," Turner chanted, all the time looking up at Geoff.

"Seeker closing down fast, she's running true on."

The tone in Geoff's headphones started to slide up. He pushed them back off his head, and kept his eyes focused on the main radar screen. A strong blip erupted across the monitor the bottom, of the screen lighting up with a flood of data.

"Got a good lock!" Geoff cried.

"I'm in control now," Hans announced, "hang on."

Before Turner could even get back to his position Hans slammed Lazarus hard over, blowing chaff and infrared distracters. The seeker started to turn with them, then swerved as an infrared decoy mimicked the shifting silhouette of a ship turning about. The missile turned and dove for the distraction, detonating as it slammed into the white-hot flare.

Geoff braced himself for the head-on run back at the picket ship.

"Where we going?" Turner asked, patching into the intercom as he settled into the rear gunners position.

"Right the hell back from where we came."

Geoff was startled to hear that they were heading straight back into the system they had just jumped out of and even more surprised when Turner started to laugh.

"Hell, they'll never expect it. Besides, we sure as hell can't run this place with an entire fleet in the way."

Without waiting to be told, Geoff started to fire short bursts at the picket ship which was moving obliquely to intercept. Their coming about and running straight back towards the system they had just emerged from had obviously thrown the enemy commander off.

As the two ships closed in, Geoff was the only one who could bring his weapon directly to bear and he slammed out a continual stream of fire. The picket ship's twin turrets fired back, so that Lazarus' shield glowed hot red, a few of the mass driver rounds breaking through, tearing furrows in the durasteel shielding, the strikes setting up a reverberating shriek of metal tearing into metal, echoing through the interior of the ship.

Lazarus shifted slightly in its course as Vance, working the copilot's controls, adjusted for the angle of acquisition into the jump point. A final strike of mass driver rounds tore into the armor sheath around the stern, the incandescent explosions momentarily blinding Geoff.

They went into the jump, and Geoff braced himself. Though it only seemed like an instant, he still had time for a reflexive surge of panic as the ship lurched and buffeted violently. They came out of the jump point, tumbling end over end, flame trailing off the starboard wing.

The star field spun violently as they continued to tumble. Geoff caught a quick glimpse of a cruiser streaking past them. Startled, he realized it was the first time he had actually seen a Cat heavy ship up close. Rolling on all three axes, he caught sight of it again for a brief instant, then lost it to view.

A topside thruster, just forward of his gun position, winked on and held for several seconds. The tumble started to straighten out on at least one axis. In spite of the inertial dampening Geoff continued to get slammed back and forth in the turret and, to his embarrassment and disgust, he suddenly vomited.

The tumble straightened out on a second axis so that Geoff tried to train his guns on it, but his disorientation was now complete, and attempting to focus on the target reticule only made him want to vomit again.

The spin flattened. Rotating his turret aft he saw half a dozen Kilrathi ships moving in line, one of them disappearing with the telltale flash of a vessel going into jump.

The Kilrathi ships were already out of visual range. He punched out a standard sublight radar sweep which showed that they were barely moving, and that three of them were starting to come about. Two had launched missiles, but Lazarus was far outstripping the pursuit, at least for the moment.

"Damn it, Geoff, you puked in my lap," Vance cried.

Geoff looked down at Richards, who was angrily trying to wipe the splattered liquid off his legs. Hans chuckled softly and looked up.

"You remind me of somebody," he said with a distant smile, then motioned for Geoff to come down.

"What the hell was that?" Geoff asked.

"We hit something going the other way," Turner announced. "Thought we'd bought it. As it was we damn near ripped apart. We must have been pulling twenty g's or more in that spin."

Turner looked over at Hans and nodded. "Good piloting, son."

Hans did not even bother to acknowledge the compliment.

"It'll be a half hour or more before those boys start to close," Hans announced. "We ain't out of this yet."

"I suggest we skim the event horizon again, and get the hell into the next system."

"What I was thinking. The trick is, which jump point?"

"Whichever one they haven't sealed. We've got to get back home now."

Turner looked back over at Geoff.

"Pull that sweep up on the system down here. I want backup copies made of it as well, in case our main computer gets fried." As Turner spoke he stepped into the head, came back out, and tossed Geoff a towel.

Embarrassed, Geoff wiped himself off, ignoring the disgusted look on Vance's face.

"Must have been the dinner we had back on The Pit," he said defensively.

The other three said nothing and Geoff felt a flash of anger, wondering if they thought he had vomited out of fear rather than simple motion sickness.

Throwing the towel down a disposal hatch he leaned over a plot data screen and quickly plugged the sweep into a memory cube. Pulling out the cube he handed it to Turner, then pulled the data up on the screen. Turner sat down and slowly started to scan through it. The images were fuzzy, details blurring into wavery smudges of light and shadow.

"Wish I had an A-23 system for this," Turner mumbled.

After several minutes of examining the screen he looked back at Geoff.

"Two battleships, I think Yar class, older design but still good. A full squadron of cruisers, a hell of a lot of lighter ships, and at least ten heavy assault landing ships."

He paused for a moment.

"It's an invasion fleet. I'm willing to bet the Landreich and the bordering frontier is the target. They don't have any of their main fleet carriers here though, looks like just one cruiser conversion."

Geoff stood silent, looking down at the screen.

"I think we got what we came for," Turner announced. "The trick now is to live long enough to tell somebody. Hans, how close can you squeeze us to the event horizon?"

"How close do you want to go?"

"Close enough that they think we went in. Start mimicking control failure, keep us spinning. As we loop around, we'll be lost to view. There's most likely a hell of a lot of debris floating around, they were shooting up a lot of ships as we were getting out. Let's see if we can throw them off and dodge for the nearest jump out of here."

Even before he finished talking Hans had already hit the thrusters, which set Lazarus to spinning. Geoff looked around and swallowed hard.

Turner smiled. "You picked a good time to graduate, Tolwyn."

"Hows that, sir?" he asked, trying to stay focused.

"'To a long war or a bloody plague,' used to be the old drinking toast in your ancestors' army. It means quick promotion. Hell, son, you might be captain in six months when this show blows up."

Unfortunately for ensign Geoffrey Tolwyn, promotion was the last thing on his mind at the moment.

CONFEDERATION FLEET HEADQUARTERS

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY COPY ONE OF ONE

TO: COM7FLT MCAULIFFE—BASE

ALEXANDRIA

FROM: CICCONFEDFLT

This communication is strictly off the record and should be destroyed after reading. I shall retain a copy in my personal files in case, at some future date, questions are raised as to your actions.

Consider this letter to be an official warning of attack directed, and I repeat, directed only from my office. I discussed my concerns this morning with the president, and for reasons of state he refused to make an official statement from the Confederation Government to this effect. I am therefore taking it upon myself to do so personally. Unfortunately, this memo cannot be sent by burst transmission due to security concerns, therefore it must take the slow route of arriving by official courier. Upon receipt of this memo I am directing you to disperse Seventh Fleet from McAuliffe into the next system inward without delay. Ships will rotate back to McAuliffe and orbital base Alexandria only for essential repairs. This is to be done under the guise of maneuvers and this procedure shall be maintained until you receive orders to the contrary.

All leaves are to be canceled, all ships are to depart from port with full load of armaments and to maintain a class two level of readiness. If any ship of the fleet is approached by an unidentified vessel, they are to shoot first and ask questions later. That order is to apply especially to our picket ships guarding the approach from the old demilitarized zone.

I am not operating on any hard evidence. Call it instinct, that I smell a storm on the horizon. More than anything else, I wish we could send a forward picket line deeper into Kilrathi territory, but to even suggest such a provocative action against the Kilrathi, other than in the Facin sector would mean my dismissal from the service along with the cashiering of any officer who complied with such an order.

I also request that if Commander Winston Turner should appear within your area of control, any messages he might have for me should be given the highest priority. This message should arrive the day before Confederation Day leaves begin. I am sorry to ruin the holiday for you and your personnel, but for the good of the Confederation I deem it to be essential.

Skip examined a hardcopy of the letter one more time and cursed under his breath while taking a sip of Scotch.

Hell of a way to run the fleet, he thought coldly as he folded the letter and sealed it inside a secured, scanproof envelope. The envelope, in turn, went into a red—Class A Priority—Fleet Dispatch Pouch. A ship was departing from Houston within the hour to rendezvous with a priority shipment of spare parts heading straight to McAuliffe. McAuliffe's translight burst signal station was again on the blink, probably due to the damned solar storms rippling between its two suns. Even if the line was open, he still preferred to send a message of this nature by hardcopy. There was no telling if the Cats had broken their latest coding.

Word had only come in the night before that yet another infiltration team had disappeared attempting to cross into Kilrathi space. Unfortunately, this one had been made public. The poor bastards had not blown their ship in time, and the Cats had a vid of one of the prisoners confessing.

The flood of reporters eager to greet him as he appeared at the president's office had turned his stomach. Didn't any of the slime realize that they were playing straight into the hands of the Cats?

He sipped again at his drink, looking at the second letter on his desk. He knew it was a melodramatic gesture, but perhaps his resignation in protest over current policy was just the gesture that was needed. That was the rub of it now. Resign, and More and the opposition will turn it around as the president attempting to shift blame from himself for the current flap. Stay, and it's the president protecting a CIC who never should have authorized the mission, which threatened to expand the war far beyond its current scope. More had adroitly ducked a stand on the issue with the statement that the "President should know how to handle his military, especially in this time of delicate negotiations to reduce tension."

Skip poured another drink, realizing that he was on his third of the afternoon and it was best to nurse this one for a while. Damn, I was meant to fight a ship, not this vicious web of backstabbing and deceit called politics. And the timing of the flap could not have been worse. Speedwell had turned in yet another report, which he had been planning to share with the president this morning. Remote intel, which was monitoring Kilrathi private and commercial signals, was picking up a ripple in their economy. Shipping to half a dozen worlds along the border had fallen over ninety percent in the last forty-five days. There was report of famine on one world due to a major flare of the star in that system, which had caused a radical climate shift.

Normally, even the Cats would have been sending emergency relief since it was one of their colonial outposts, but only one ship had come in to evacuate some key personnel, leaving over a million to starve to death. A message had been intercepted openly stating that no shipping was available. A counterresponse was sent back, demanding that the military provide some form of relief. The following day the transmitter was suddenly knocked off the air, the strange part of it being that a destroyer was reported to have gone into orbit above the planet.

Could it be that the Cats had fired on and destroyed one of their own transmitters because it was saying too much and could not be controlled? That was Speedwell's read on it, that their shipping was completely tied up in preparation for a military move of unprecedented magnitude, and that every civilian ship had been pressed into service. There was also the report of a Cat smuggler in a trade rendezvous in the demilitarized zone claiming that half a dozen of their own smuggler ships accompanying him on a run had been destroyed without warning by an Imperial Fleet frigate. The captain of the frigate had thus thrown away tens of thousands of credits in prize money. The system of prize money was the way the

Imperials convinced their own personnel to aggressively pursue smugglers. So why wouldn't they board and capture unless the orders were to move quickly, eradicate and then move on rather than waste time with long chases and prize crews.

In and of themselves, each piece of evidence, if taken in isolation, could mean nothing, but put together the picture was starting to come into focus. But it was still not enough, especially in light of the media hysteria that More, and the crowd in the news offices who thought like him, were now saying.

"We have to wait to the day after the election," the president had told him. "If the signs are still as strong, I'll give you authorization then to come to Defense Level two and start mobilizing the active reserves, and release the Ninth Fleet from its position at Sirius, but not until then, or we lose the election and you'll be taking orders from More."

Skip looked back again at his letter of resignation, and with the foulest of oaths he crumpled it up and threw it into the shredder.

Twelve days to Confederation Day, he thought. Dear God, at least let that day be a peaceful one.

Traffic out to the airstrip outside of Houston was lighter than usual for this time of day and Lieutenant Anderson looked at his watch. The Old Man had promised him the afternoon off and Nancy was waiting. He had never expected the Old Man to turn around and keep him waiting for three hours, just to run a courier pouch out to the airstrip. Nancy was so ticked she had turned off her personnel pager after his third call begging for her to wait.

Nancy's place was only a block off the main run, and on a last minute impulse he pulled over, ran up to her flat and knocked on the door. There was no answer. Cursing the Fleet, and the Old Man in particular, Lieutenant Anderson pulled back out and headed for the main run, only to find that the entry ramp was jammed due to an accident. Weaving his way through back streets he lost seventeen valuable minutes before getting back on the main road and flooring it... he missed the departure of the courier ship by one minute and twenty seconds.

Looking at the pouch resting on the passenger seat he felt a cold knot in his stomach. To go back and face the Old Man was impossible... and besides, Nancy had blown him off for the evening. Still cursing, he settled down and decided to wait for next ship, which wouldn't leave for another six hours. He did not know until long afterwards that the second ship missed its connection with the McAuliffe courier ship by fifteen minutes, and thus the pouch would be delayed by a precious twenty-four hours. And as the pouch sat in its priority shipment container, waiting to be loaded, the fleets of the Kilrathi Empire continued their journey towards the frontier.

# Chapter Ten

THE HELL HOLE

CAPITAL OF THE LANDREICH

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.226

Shaking with exhaustion, Geoff nervously looked down at his stained coveralls, wondering if they were the ones he had thrown up on, or if it was the other pair he had packed along for their trip. It was hard to

tell now, after weeks of standing watch. He rubbed his chin, surprised at how the stubble had turned into a full beard. Most amazing of all, though, was the simple fact that they were still alive.

He looked up at the blazing sun of the Hell Hole and did a slow walk around Lazarus. When Hans had said that they were going for an atmosphere landing he was half tempted to simply kill the damned pilot, fearing that after all that they had been through the icy bravado of Kruger would still wind up killing them. Part of their starboard wing was gone, there was no telling what other structural damage they had endured going through the stresses of skirting the very edge of a black hole, let alone the half dozen skirmishes fought on the way back to the Landreich. He had expected Turner to object, but the only comment was that it'd save precious time by going straight down to the surface.

He slowly walked around the ship while waiting for Turner to climb down out of the hatch. Lazarus was fire scorched from one end to the other. In places the durasteel had been shot away right down to the inner titanium hull. Going to the starboard wing, he examined where part of it had been sheared off in their near collision going through the jump point. The damage was fascinating to examine. It looked as though a surgeon had neatly cut the end off with a high-intensity laser.

"You know, you look like hell, Geoff."

Tolwyn turned around to see Vance Richards coming up to join him.

"Look, I just wanted to say you did a hell of a job back there," Vance said, a bit self-consciously. "Smashing up that light frigate guarding the last jump point was masterful."

He smiled slightly, as if surprised at what he had just said. "Almost as good as what I could have done with those guns."

Geoff laughed and slapped Vance on the shoulder.

"You boys ready?"

Turner, with Hans by his side approached. Hans paused to look up at the damaged wing.

"Even getting paid fifty thousand ain't gonna cover this damage," he said grimly.

"If we still have a Confederation in a month, send me the bill. I'll see it gets paid. Come on, we can't keep Blucher waiting."

Geoff fell in two paces behind Turner, again trying to assume the role of a Confed officer working as an adjutant. He found it surprising that the president of the Landreich, Johann Blucher was willing to meet with them, based on nothing more than a call from Turner that had taken only thirty seconds. Even though Blucher was head of a state that the Confederation did not even recognize as a legitimate government, and some claimed was an outright haven for rogues, thieves, and murderers, Geoff was nervous about his appearance, and furtively tried to pick the dirt and grime out from under his fingernails as they strode across the scorching-hot tarmac.

A couple of ancient Gotha surface-to-space interceptors lifted off from the runway behind them, engines roaring at full afterburner as they nosed up to vertical and punched into supersonic speeds, the double boom slamming into Geoff so that he winced. Vance watched them disappear and grinned.

"Hell, if I tried that stunt on Johnson Island I'd be grounded for a month."

"Asinine rules, that's the Confed," Hans said casually as he lead the way into small concrete bunker. A lone guard, with a lightweight gatling assault gun stopped them at the entry, took a quick look at their IDs and tossed them back.

"All the way down first office on the right, he's expecting you."

Geoff bristled slightly at the guard's tone, but knew better than to say anything as he followed Turner down a winding staircase that took them through a dozen meters of reinforced concrete. A durasteel door blocked the bottom, where another guard waved them through, slamming the door shut behind them.

"Turner, you old son of a bitch."

A towering, cadaverous-looking man stood in the semidarkened corridor as if waiting for them. Winston took the man's hand and the two, laughing, slapped each other on the shoulders, both of them swearing affectionately at each other.

"Haven't seen you since you went back to hide behind a desk at your damned Academy."

"Well, I got tired of putting my ass on the line for idiots like you," Turner replied and the two laughed, slapping each other yet again and launching into another round of crude invective that left Geoff startled. He had never imagined that old Winnie had such a command of Anglo-Saxon derived words.

Turner finally looked back at the other three and introduced them. Geoff didn't know what the protocol was for saluting an unrecognized head of state of what was officially considered to be a renegade government, and decided in the end to err on the side of safety.

Blucher merely nodded at the salute and then looked over at Hans.

"So you're the new owner of Phantom ."

"Lazarus, you mean."

Blucher laughed. "It was the Bouncing Belch before that and before that it was Snafu . Kelly wasn't all that bad, sorry he bought it."

"Bad luck."

"By the way, there's a ten-thousand-credit price on your head."

"Sara?"

"Yeah. Dumb bastards offered me five more if I'd turn my back. Can you believe the bastards? Anyhow, thought you should know. Look out for the boys on that Ugati docked upstairs."

"Thanks."

The two continued to talk for a couple of minutes about the Sam clan, before Blucher finally pointed to his office door and ushered them in. Geoff looked around in surprise. He'd seen flats owned by newly minted second lieutenants that were more lavishly furnished. A battered sofa and three worn leather

chairs were the only places to sit. Blucher opened the door of a gasping, rattling fridge and looked at his guests.

"Cold ones?"

"Thank God, yes," Turner gasped, and without asking the others Blucher pulled out five bottles of beer and passed them around. Popping the cap onto the floor, he sat down on top of his desk.

"Johann, take a look at this," Winston said, and reaching into the breast pocket of his coveralls, he pulled out a memory cube and tossed it over. Blucher got behind his desk, loaded the cube, and for several minutes he silently examined the data.

"Where did you run into these bastards?"

"Actually not sure. It was designated as jump point Epsilon out of The Pit. A Cat squadron came out of jump point Alpha, the one we used to go in. We took off and headed into Epsilon, saw these bastards and got the hell out."

"Know the place, traded there myself. Did they get old Gar? Damn, he was one crafty devil. He'd sell the teeth out of his dead grandmother's skull if he thought he could turn a credit. Funny though, he actually ran a pretty honest business in that old cylinder of his."

"Well, the cylinders inside the hole," Hans replied. "They must have smashed up at least twenty ships trying to get away, don't know if your friend made it."

"He'll survive, always has. By the way, you went into sector 42-33 Beta if you want to look on the nav charts we got of that region."

Hans looked at Blucher.

"I didn't know anyone had charts of out there."

"You never asked," Blucher replied. "Trade secret, boy, be glad to sell you one for a hundred thousand if you should ever go back out that way. But that's for private venture stuff only, not Confed business. If they want a chart it'll be a flat million or nothing."

Turner chuckled. "Hell, I didn't even know you had one."

"Well, you dumb bastard, you should have come and seen me first rather than go sneaking through here the way you did, hooking up with a green kid and then disappearing. Heard all about it after you left and was downright insulted."

"I was on something of an unofficial trip. Sorry. Too many people around you I don't know."

"Your problem, not mine. Anyhow, those Cats are at a good system. Eleven known jump points, half connecting back into the Empire, one angling into the demilitarized zone between here and the Confed, the others heading out beyond our systems and theirs. Logical place to marshal a fleet for an attack."

Turner briefly related the main points of their trip while Blucher continued to study the scan, punching in some enhancements to clarify the image. Geoff came around to the side of the desk and watched as the computer scrubbed the image. Though Blucher's office seemed like something straight out of a bad vid

about frontier life, the hardware on his desk was of the latest design. From their long distance scan the computer created images of startling quality, providing analysis of external weapons systems, engines, estimated gross weight and last reported locations of many of the ships.

"Mostly their older stuff, some of it from the war against the Varni. So where the hell is the new equipment?"

"Poised somewhere else," Turner replied.

"It's those damn heavy assault ships that have me worried," Blucher said. "Look closely there—" and he pointed at the screen, "—those are armored space-to-surface landing craft. Each of those ships can handle a brigade of Imperial marines. This isn't a maneuver. The marines stay close to Kilrah, they're part of the Imperial line. If they're deploying their Imperial assault legions, this is an attack to take possession."

He pointed at another ship. "Look at this one, it's got one hell of a radiation signature. I bet the damn thing's packed to the gills with thermo nukes. Blast down the ground defenses, then send in the assault troops to mop up."

Geoff could not contain himself any longer.

"Sir, if you know all this, how come Fleet Intelligence doesn't?"

Both Blucher and Turner looked at Geoff in surprise. Blucher shook his head and laughed.

"Where did you pick up this babe in the woods?"

Geoff bristled slightly at the insult, but a sharp look from Turner stilled him from making a retort.

"Look, son," Blucher said, as if lecturing a child, "we don't exist out here as far as Confed goes. We're outside the law, settling where we want and the hell with Confed surveys, permission, taxes, and what have you. We knew about the Cats a full year before any of your official histories will ever acknowledge it. Over on their side there's some Cats like us, outside their laws as well. Fallen warriors, dishonored and clanless, living on the edge. We trade with them, they trade back, on occasion we kill each other for profit, or just because we have to and the hell with what our supposed legitimate governments say. Now, does that answer your question?"

Geoff wanted to press the point. Humanity was looking at the potential for one hell of a war. The intel that the Landreich and other frontier smuggling posts had was invaluable, but again there was the look from Turner and he stepped back.

Blucher continued to study the ships intently for several more minutes and then finally looked back at Turner.

"Anything else?"

Turner hesitated for a moment and finally reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, lead case. Opening it up he produced a thin wafer.

"Cat, memory wafer," Blucher said.

"I know. You got a system that can handle it?"

"Let me see."

Turner held the wafer as if not willing to give it up.

"Don't worry, we've played with these before."

Turner handed it over. Blucher touched the pager on his unit and a moment later the door into the room opened.

"Fetch me a Cat model five unit and be quick about it."

The young officer returned less than a minute later with a small handheld unit of obvious Kilrathi make, placed it on Blucher's desk and departed without a word. Blucher popped the unit open, a small holo field appearing. He then slipped the wafer in, punched several keys, and waited. A single document appeared on the screen an instant later. Blucher cursed softly, punched several more keys while watching the holo display.

"Only one thing on that wafer and this is it," and he motioned for Turner to come around to the other side of his desk. Geoff craned forward to look. The document looked ancient, as if written by hand on aging parchment. A red claw was emblazoned at the top of the document, the symbol appearing again at the bottom next to what he assumed was a signature.

"It's an Imperial communique from the Emperor," Turner whispered in awe. "I've seen a couple, the usual diplomatic bull. But this looks like something for internal use."

Frustrated, he looked back at Blucher.

"Got anyone here who can read Cat?"

"Give me a minute."

Blucher produced a camera from a desk drawer, snapped a photo of the image in the holo field, pulled out a memory cube from the camera and slipped it into his own unit. Seconds later a copy of the document appeared on his screen, this time in translation.

Blucher started to read it, Turner leaning over his shoulder and following. Frustrated, Geoff could only watch their expressions. Both of them seemed to react at almost the same instant, a look of shock that quickly changed to a bitter expression of rage.

Turner finally looked over at Geoff.

"It's the Imperial authorization for full-scale offensive operations against the Confederation and any other territories occupied by humans or their allies."

"So now we've got it," Geoff replied.

"Damn it all," Turner snapped, "but it doesn't say when or where. This is nothing but some formalized piece of ritual crap."

"What else do you want?" Blucher replied. "Their timetable, attack plans, and schedule for when their

commander goes to the head?"

"It would have been nice, damn it. Why even go through the bother of getting this to us?"

"Who was it that sent it?" Blucher asked.

Turner looked straight at him, then shook his head.

"All right, I understand."

"No," Turner replied. "It's not that. I don't know who the hell passed it off to us, or why. That's what has me confused."

"Don't you see? It's a little game within a game for some Cat on the other side. This document must have gone out to all the head honchos, clan leaders, maybe even their admirals and key military administrators. It's a ritual for them. Someone wanted to tip us off, but not necessarily betray their side either, so there's no plans. Maybe they want to derail the attack for their own purposes, or even feel that now is not the time. Maybe they're hoping to drag a stink onto one of their rivals. Sooner or later someone will leak that we've got this thing, and they'll point their claw at a foe and have him eliminated. It's untraceable, that's for certain. It doesn't give us a damn thing other than clear knowledge they're coming, and any damn idiot could figure that out."

"Not the Confed government," Hans interjected.

"They don't even qualify for the status of idiot," Blucher said casually.

Geoff felt that he should take insult at the exchange but in his heart, at this moment, he could not help but agree.

"We need to get this back to Confed Fleet Headquarters now," Turner said.

Blucher sighed and pushed himself back from his desk.

"You'll have to fly it."

"What the hell are you talking about? You've got a burst signal facility here."

"It's down."

"What the hell do you mean, it's down?"

"Just that, Winston. Down, kaput. Remember, there's an embargo on us terrible sinners out here. We lost it three weeks ago. We can receive, but we can't send. We're trying to smuggle the replacement parts in right now, but it might be a month or more before we get them."

"Welcome to the Landreich," Hans said with a smile.

"So it's McAuliffe then," Vance interjected. "That's the nearest burst signal station that can relay back to Earth on a secured line."

Blucher laughed. "Theirs is down too."

"What the hell is going on?" Turner snapped. "We're talking about McAuliffe, damn it."

Blucher shrugged his shoulders. "It went off-line, that's all I know. Most likely solar storm activity in their system."

"That's a week by transport," Turner said angrily.

"Take Krugers ship. I think we can spare that. Hell, it's shot to ribbons again, not much use in the fight coming up."

"I think I should be consulted on this one," Hans announced.

Blucher smiled. "You son, have officially been drafted into the Landreich militia."

"The hell you say."

"The hell I do say," Blucher announced. "Considering your service, would the rank of first lieutenant suit you?"

"Hell no," Hans snapped. "I'm independent, the last damn thing I need is to get tangled up in this."

Blucher leaned forward, his features set.

"Listen Kruger. You go back to McAuliffe with Turner and the Sarn boys will be all over your hide. Out here, you're safe, well let's just say safer. And besides, you didn't quite hear me straight. I'm declaring an official state of emergency and, by the rules of the Charter of the Landreich, any personnel and their ships residing in this territory when an emergency is declared must place themselves at the disposal of the Militia. We don't have any standing military out here, we take care of it ourselves. In short, son, you've been drafted. Now, do you understand me?"

Kruger glared coldly at Blucher.

"Will lieutenant commander suit you then?"

Vance gaped in surprise.

"I'll be damned if I ever salute you."

Hans looked over at Vance and then back at Blucher.

"I want my own ship. You've taken mine, I want something I can fight in. Hell, I'm pissed off now, and if I can't take it out on the Cats, I'm going to take it out on you unless I have something hot under me and a damn sight better than my old ship."

"All right, agreed."

Hans looked over glumly at Turner.

"The keys are in the ignition," he said bitterly.

"We'll take good care of it and try and get it back to you. If not, I'll make sure you get a check from the government."

"Yeah, right," Hans replied, his voice sounding hollow with defeat.

"We better get going," Turner said.

Taking the wafer and memory cube back he started for the door, Blucher following him. Geoff looked over at Hans and extended his hand.

"Sorry."

"Win some, you lose some, I guess. You're a good shooter, Geoff. Take care of yourself."

The two shook hands. Vance bid his farewell after Geoff and the two sprinted to catch up with Turner.

"He's a damn good kid," Geoff heard Turner say, as they fell in behind him on the stairs leading up. "Nerves of ice, instinctive pilot. I think he'd make a damn good leader. Even though he was green I had no trouble with him in the left-hand seat."

"Did you really trust him when you hired his ship?" Blucher asked.

"Hell, no. I was looking for a green kid. For what I wanted, if I'd hired an experienced crew they would have been more trouble than they were worth, might have had to kill them before I was done. If the kid hadn't worked out, I'd have dumped him someplace or tied him up and taken over. But I didn't need to."

Geoff was shocked to hear Turner discussing the coldblooded elimination of a crew.

"Give him a good ship, some people who will listen to him, and cut him loose out on the flank some place, and he'll raise holy hell with the Cats."

"All right, I'll take care of it."

As they stepped out onto the blazing hot tarmac the two fell to reminiscing about "the old days," talking about some raid on a pirate base.

Geoff, however, let the conversation drift out of focus. "Nerves of ice... a damn good leader," Turner had said of Hans. It was an interesting point to consider. He had respected Hans but had let his own prejudice about Hans not being Academy trained get the better of his judgment. Turner had seen the quality and he had not. What was even more troubling was that he now wondered about what Turner would say if and when a fitness report was ever filed on Ensign Geoffrey Tolwyn. Hans showed the nerves of ice, but did I?

He looked over at Vance, who was walking along with a nonchalant air, listening in as the two old warriors continued to trade stories. Vance was a good pilot, had a razor-sharp mind, but did not necessarily work too well with others. More the loner type, the typical pilot, or intel spook. But what is it that I now want? Geoff wondered.

Prior to this mission all his focus had been on getting wings and flying a Wildcat. But what will that ultimately accomplish? Hans would have his own ship and independent command. The mere thought of that held a certain thrill. The time across the frontier had whetted his appetite for something far different

from life on a hangar deck. It was to run the show, to be independent and to make one's own decisions. He knew, as well, that the path to it meant nerves of ice, and above all else, to be ready to take charge when a crisis came, in the same way that Hans did when they jumped out of The Pit and then turned to go straight back in again. Kruger now had command as a result, and Geoff knew that when the time came, he would reach for it as well.

They finally reached Lazarus and Geoff was surprised to see more than a score of ground personnel swarming over the ship. An epoxy spray had been layered onto the damaged starboard wing, holes were patched, and two men were hauling a crate of fresh food up the ladder.

A hunched over man chewing on an unlit cigar, his features like aged leather, came up to Blucher.

"She took a hell of a beating. This is Kelly's old ship isn't it?"

"That's it."

"Good ship. Like the add-ons. Anyhow, I've topped off their hydrogen tanks, and run a check on internals. They've got a cracked main spar on that starboard wing, but it should hold together as long as they don't pull too many g's in atmosphere. She's ready to fly."

Turner and Blucher traded a final round of obscenities, the ground crew laughing and throwing in a few comments of their own. Turner scrambled up the ladder, followed by Geoff and Vance.

"Vance, left seat, Geoff you take right. Two-g max till we're clear of the atmosphere."

"Got it," Vance said with a grin.

Geoff settled into his new position and quickly scanned the controls. They were a pretty standard layout. He plugged his headset in, and since there wasn't any checklist he simply applied the routine he'd learned for a typical atmosphere-to-space transit.

The crew chief stepped out in front of them and raised his right hand, swinging his fist in a tight circle to indicate they had the all clear to power up. Vance fired the engine to life, did a quick throttle up with the brakes on, then eased back. The crew chief was now waving his right arm, then pointing straight towards the taxiway.

Geoff saluted the chief as they started to turn and the old man grinned, giving a universal gesture back while laughing. Geoff could only shake his head and grin.

Ground control clicked on, giving them priority clearance, and as soon as they reached the end of the strip Vance slammed the throttle to the wall. Geoff kept a light hold on the stick and could feel the vibration caused by the uneven lift due to the damaged wing. He called off the speed and when they hit two hundred Vance pulled the nose up while Geoff pulled up the landing gear. They started to climb, adding on speed but holding off going sonic until nearly clear of the atmosphere.

As the sky overhead shifted into an indigo hue, Turner unstrapped and came forward to stand between them.

"Set fastest possible course to McAuliffe. Do you think we can squeeze it down to seven days?"

"Think so, sir," Geoff replied. "We'll really have to shoot our transits into the jump points right on the

wire though. There'll be no slowing down."

"I think you can manage that," Turner replied. "I just want to get us back there before Confederation Day."

"Why, sir?" Geoff asked.

"Just a gut feeling. I want the message back before everyone goes running off for the holiday."

"I'll work up the calculations once we're out of orbit sir."

"Fine, Geoff."

"Sir, why don't you get some sleep?" Geoff said calmly. "We'll take first watch."

Turner nodded his thanks and disappeared aft.

"Why Confed Day?" Vance asked.

"Why not?" Geoff replied quietly, and then the realization hit... the Cats are going to hit us on Confed Day, the one holiday observed throughout the entire Confederation. He felt a flash of annoyance with himself for not having caught on to that before Turner did. It was yet another lesson learned; analyze everything, pull the pieces together, expect the unexpected and plan for it.

## CONFEDERATION FLEET HEADQUARTERS

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.228

"Skip, glad I caught you!"

Banbridge motioned for Speedwell to come in and have a seat, but his chief of intel went straight to Skip's computer, pulled a memory cube out of his pocket and slipped it in,

"We just got this in from Listening Post Epsilon twenty minutes ago," Speedwell announced excitedly. "Damn it, they're coming."

Banbridge leaned forward in his chair as the holo field lit up with the usual classified-info screen. Skip waited for the laser scanner to sweep him, matching cornea patten and various chemical traces to confirm who he was before unlocking the report.

"It's from Lieutenant Ches Penney," Speedwell announced, "one of our better cryptologists out on the frontier. Here's the original burst signal."

First there was a sharp, high-pitched squeal, lasting barely a second, then it was replayed after decompression, a quavering tone nearly a dozen seconds in length.

"Long signal," Skip announced.

"Penney had damn little to go on. The Cats have been shifting codes at increasingly shorter intervals.

Something in the initial part of the tone caught his attention. That's the signature message, which tells the receiver which coding system to use. Seems that they recycled an older code that we had partially cracked, and Penney remembered it. Anyhow, here it is in Kilrathi."

Speedwell pointed to the screen as page after page of text scrolled past in the strange, blocked pictographs of what Skip knew was Kilrathi.

"Even here, most of the message is filler, so he started to run random pattern searches and finally hit on it."

The translation in English now appeared. Skip read the text once and hit the stop button. Turning in his chair he refreshed his mug of coffee, then turned back to the screen, features pale, reading slowly.

"Target Vikyah?" he whispered, already sensing what the answer was.

"McAuliffe," Speedwell replied.

"How do we know that?"

"Because it reports our translight burst transmitter is down due to intense solar flares as reported from the Carlin system. There's only one Confed base offline at the moment, and that's McAuliffe, where we've been having problems with flares of late. This message reporting the signal problems was sent by one of their listening posts inward to Kilrah yesterday. Twelve hours later it was repeated back outwards, Skip, back outwards to an Admiral Nargth."

"McAuliffe," Skip whispered. "Damn it all, they're going for McAuliffe."

"Looks that way. There's a lot of holes in the message, Skip. Penney pulled this one out right from the very edge. It looks like we caught, at best, maybe a quarter of the message, but we know the code name for this Admiral Nargth's command, and their target is McAuliffe."

"How big would you say their fleet is?"

Speedwell exhaled noisily. "Damn, Skip, that's a tough one. We know their big one, the first, is the Home Fleet. They've got at least four others, but the names shift, even the numbers."

"And Nargth?"

Skip punched in a couple of keys to pull up the profile.

"Precious little on him, like most of their commanders. Only what we've been able to decipher from signal traffic. Doesn't bear the honorific title of the Imperial line, or of a Baron of a clan."

Speedwell smiled. "Hell, guess he's a mustang like you, Skip. Came up through the ranks, very rare for the Cats."

"So, what do you think?"

Speedwell stood silent for a moment. "Like I told you months ago, they're a mystery hidden inside an enigma. We've seen precious little in Facin, though we do know their commander there is of the Imperial bloodline. There's no Imperial commander with this fleet, as far as we know."

"Could there be and we didn't get all the message? Maybe they even have two fleets traveling together, and all we intercepted was the message to one of them."

Speedwell nodded. "Or this could be a diversionary action to pin our assets at McAuliffe while the main body, led by a member of the Imperial family, is doing a straight drive in and will blow through the Firekka sector. Remember, we war-gamed that one out and figured it might be a possibility."

Damn it all, Skip thought angrily. When the hell would the translight system go back on-line at McAuliffe? If we had that, we could scramble a forward screen. It could be up today, then again it could be weeks. But we do know something is coming.

"Typical Kilrathi Fleet sizes at last report?"

"Two battlewagons, half a dozen heavy cruisers, a carrier, usual escorts."

Skip remained silent for a moment, calling up the latest readiness reports.

"I'll order Rear Admiral Dayan with Task Force Twenty-one to deploy from Tangier. She's got two battlewagons, the carrier Ark Royal, and some damned good cruiser and frigate commanders. That'll push our assets out there. Hell, if it's a typical Cat fleet, we'll have more than double their strength in battlewagons. If they come in, we'll put a real twist in their tails. At least we still have direct contact with Dayan. If it turns out they're moving towards the Firekka sector instead, we can still turn her back around."

Speedwell said nothing.

"You approve?"

"Best move available, given the data we have. What troubles me is that we only got part of the transmission. Suppose there was more? They might be throwing everything they have into McAuliffe, and if so, we're going to lose big-time."

"Once Dayan links up with Seventh Fleet, that's one hell of a force. If it's too big to handle, they can pull a fighting withdrawal, if not, close for the kill."

"But, McAuliffe," Speedwell said softly. "Hell, they could throw a dozen battlewagons in and still not have enough to batter down the base shielding on McAuliffe and orbital station Alexandria. It doesn't quite add up."

"Try a landing outside of the shielding and storm in by ground attack?" Skip ventured. "It's the only scenario we know of to take the place."

"Hell of a lot casualties. Third Marine Division is on the ground, and they'd still have to gain superiority in space and in the atmosphere first. The Cats would lose half their assault troops on landing and then have to storm the base. They'd need ten of their legions to do it."

Skip took the information in. It'd be one hell of a vicious ground fight. Or did they have some way of busting the shielding? Too many variables here, too damn many variables.

"What's the transit time from Tangier to McAuliffe?" Speedwell asked.

"Six days, including time for our signal to get out there and for her to get moving."

"Confederation Day," Speedwell said quietly.

Skip nodded. "I'll tell Dayan to make transit at top speed. I'm calling the president right now. I want you to go with me on this one, and let's pray to God our good Lieutenant Penney got all the message right."

# Chapter Eleven

MCAULIFFE

CONFEDERATION DAY EVE

CONFEDERATION DATE 2634.234

"Have a good holiday Janice."

Stepping out of the space-to-surface transport, Admiral Frederick Long, commander of the Seventh Fleet docked at Alexandria Station above McAuliffe, nodded thanks to his pilot. As he walked across the tarmac he took a deep breath of hot, dry air. It was hard to imagine Confederation Day in such a setting, he thought sadly. Back on Earth he used to spend it up in Maine, catching the last of summer, sailing on the coast. He was heading to the coolest spot on the planet, Highcroft, which at fifteen thousand feet and a hundred miles from McAuliffe was about the only bearable place on the surface. Most of his staff would be up there as well.

Highcroft was officer's country, the resort area an attempt at mimicking a mountain resort back on Earth. They had even imported trees from home, though the darn things took almost constant attention from an entire company of ground personnel, and a fair part of the base's precious water ration. At least there'd be a log on the fireplace as a result, though they'd have to turn on the air-conditioning while the fire burned.

He looked up at the blazing primary sun, shading his eyes against the glare. Thirty-nine more years to a real sunset, he thought.

A lieutenant, one of Nagomo's staff, stood waiting patiently, and then approached the admiral and saluted.

"What is it, lieutenant?"

"Sir, Admiral Nagomo wanted me to inform you he'll be along in an hour or so and suggested that you go ahead."

"Fine, lieutenant."

"He also wanted me to inform you that communications with Point X-ray have been cut off."

Long hesitated for a second. Point X-ray was the listening post positioned just inside the demilitarized zone, near the jump point into McAuliffe and orbital base Alexandria. The lieutenant handed him a sealed

envelope, which Long opened.

The post reported that a smuggler craft had emerged from the Kilrathi side at high speed. A Kilrathi destroyer had popped through in pursuit, then turned and went back through into its own system. Shortly after this report, the post failed to check in with its twice-daily all clear signal. Damn it all, with the translight burst system still down, the picket ship was reduced to hovering near the jump point and sending a transponder back through the jump point to indicate everything was all right.

Long stood silent for a moment. Damn equipment. Chances were the transponder had failed, but still.

"How long before we're back on the air again?"

"The techs say the storm's abating up there. Maybe six hours, sir, and we'll be back up, on-line," and the lieutenant pointed up towards the fiery red ball that filled half the sky, a streamer of glowing fire arcing from the red giant to the smaller yellow dwarf.

Long nodded. Concordia had translight burst capability, he really should run it out of the system to get a clear signal. It had been almost two weeks now since they'd heard anything from outside the system. For that matter, maybe a frigate should run out to Point X-ray to check on the listening post. Too much was going wrong with communications, maybe it would be best to hold off on leaving right now.

"Fred, you know you're late."

Sighing he saw his wife, Linda, step out of their helo lift, gesturing towards him as though he was a child who was late for school.

"Sorry, dear. Last minute paperwork."

A transport which had settled down next to the admiral's lift craft popped its access hatch, and a storm of laughing, shouting enlisted men piled out. At the sight of their commander, they nervously fell silent, snapping off salutes as they passed.

"Enjoy your leave, boys, and stay out of trouble," Long said in a fatherly way while acknowledging their salutes.

Linda came up to her husband's side and looked disdainfully at the disembarking crews, who as soon as they thought they were out of earshot started to again discuss where they were heading.

"Frederick, is that wretched place, Four Dollar Suzie's still open? I distinctly heard one of those boys say that's where he was heading. I thought I told you I wanted that filthy den shut down."

"Yes, dear," the admiral said wearily, "I'll have one of my people look into it immediately. But do remember, groundside is not under my control, dear, that's Nagomo's territory."

She shot an angry glance at Nagomo's lieutenant, as if the den of iniquity was his fault.

Long sighed and nodded to the lieutenant. "Tell the admiral the transponder most likely malfunctioned. If they don't report in on the next check, I'll run a frigate out to look around."

"Fred, our guests are waiting," Linda announced impatiently.

"That's all, lieutenant."

The lieutenant saluted and headed back towards headquarters. Long folded the envelope up and put it in his pocket as Linda took him by the arm and steered him toward the waiting helo.

"And another thing. I saw your guest list for tonight. I thought I told you that I will not tolerate Captain Hunter stepping into our house. After what he did with that other woman, it'd be an insult to Nancy if we have him in. I sent a note to her yesterday about that, and I'd die if she found out we had him over. Frederick, I want him transferred off your staff at once."

"Yes, dear," the admiral replied, looking back to see his shuttle powering up and starting to taxi back out to the runway. There was a slight gnawing sense, a gut instinct that was troubling. Communications back to CONFEDFLT had been down way too long. There were no indications of outright trouble. Hell, the offensive against the Cats was hundreds of light-years away, entirely outside his operational sector, but still, a lot could have happened. Now this glitch with the picket station. Maybe he should go back up, keep station on board tonight, at least until they found out what was going on at X-ray.

Thirty years of service, a good record, never a mistake, that was worth guarding. But then again, how many hundreds of false alarms, how many sleepless nights that turned out to be for nothing?

"Frederick, I'm waiting."

He watched as the shuttle was cleared and pulled out onto the runway.

"Frederick!"

"Yes, dear," the admiral mumbled as he ducked into his helo, which lifted off and turned northward, headed for Highcroft.

Minutes later the twice-monthly transport from Earth arrived. Over a hundred replacements stepped out and looked around forlornly at their new home, while eighty men and women, their tours completed, piled on board. A pallet of replacement parts was offloaded and quickly sorted, the equipment destined for the fleet above was set to one side and covered with a tarp. The pilot of the ship finally stepped off, carrying a silver pouch, and went up to the ground crew chief.

"When's the next ship going upstairs?"

"Too bad, sir, just missed it. Headed up not five minutes ago."

"Got priority dispatches here for Admiral Long. Lot of stuff here, you guys have been off-line for over two weeks now."

The crew chief looked at the silver pouch.

"He just took off too, sir. Headed up to the officer's retreat for the holidays."

"Damn."

"Try Admiral Nagomos office. He's heading out to join Admiral Long, maybe they can relay the stuff along."

The pilot stalked off, heading for the base HQ, falling in behind the replacements. Breathing a sigh of relief as he stepped into the blessed air-conditioning of the building, he looked around for the signs which finally led him to the office of the base commander.

"Priority dispatches here for Admiral Long," he announced to the bleary-eyed clerk behind the desk, who had obviously started his holiday celebration early.

"Can't be reached now, sir. He's headed up to the retreat. We could transmit them up."

"I can't, they're Priority Triple A from Banbridge. I'm not allowed to have them transmitted. I heard Admiral Nagomo is still here, maybe he can forward this along," the pilot replied, feeling annoyed that, with ten years in the fleet, he was still running around like an errand boy.

The clerk stood up and, coming around from behind his desk, looked at the silver envelope. Without saying a word he went back to his desk and picked up his phone. A minute later a middle-aged lieutenant came up to the pilot.

"Can I help you, sir?"

The pilot repeated yet again the need to get the dispatches to the admiral, and mentioned the requirement that he sign the pouch off before being permitted to leave.

"Admiral Nagomo, my boss, is heading up there in a couple of minutes. How about if I pass them on to him, and he can deliver them to Long?"

It wasn't quite according to regulations, the pilot thought. He was required to hand them off to Long or to one of his staff. But then again, he reasoned, one could say that Nagomo was part of the staff since he was in direct command of all ground facilities at McAuliffe, which answered to Long as commander of this fleet, which included McAuliffe and the orbital base Alexandria .

"All right."

The lieutenant signed the receipt. The pilot, glad to be rid of his burden, wished the lieutenant a happy holiday and left the building. The lieutenant watched the pilot enviously. The damn kids getting out of this lousy place, while I've got six more years to wait out till retirement.

The lieutenant started down the corridor to Nagomo's office, but stopped when one of the women in personnel gave him a cheerful greeting, and then, without much discretion, held up a bottle. The lieutenant hesitated, then stepped into the office which was already starting to cut loose with its celebration. Tucking the pouch into his belt, the lieutenant waded through the crowd... and never saw Nagomo heading down the corridor on his way to Highcroft.

## KILRATHI SECOND FLEET OF THE CLAW

"Remember, all pilots are in their attack craft and will start immediate launch once the jump point is cleared. No matter what is encountered on the other side, the launch will proceed without delay."

The Crown Prince carefully examined the expressions on the faces of his six carrier commanders. They were all personally picked, all were eager.

"Return to your ships."

The commanders saluted and hurried down to the launch bay for the return flights to their vessels. Gilkarg looked over at his son.

"I expect you to return with blood on your claws, but do not take any unnecessary risks like a fresh cub looking for notice from his elders."

"I will do my duty, father."

Gilkarg drew closer. "Your duty is to stay alive."

Ratha looked at him, unable to reply. Was he being asked to shirk?

"I will not be like Jukaga, if that is what you mean."

Gilkarg snarled with disdain. "He is an embarrassment to his family. The shame will follow him for lingering behind when there is glory to be won. But as for you, I expect survival. You are the heir after me, remember that."

Ratha smiled. That, of course was a fact he would never forget.

Gilkarg watched his expression carefully, then waved a dismissal. Three of the best pilots in the fleet had been assigned to his unit with orders to keep him alive, something Ratha would never know. He would win his glory, but he also must learn when to let others do the killing.

The Crown Prince turned to look back at the navigation plot boards. They were continuing to accelerate towards the jump point into McAuliffe. They would hit it in less than six hours, attempting a jump at a velocity never before tried by carrier- and battleship-size vessels. The tests with old cargo hulks indicated that the risk factor of a misalignment had increased, but not enough to be of concern.

He settled into his command chair and motioned for the latest reports to be handed over. Most of the news was troubling. The Confederation picket ship did get off a partial burst signal before being destroyed. Could McAuliffe's station be back on-line, and had they been warned? There would be no way of knowing until the first carrier cleared the jump. Sixth Fleet had just completed its final burst transmission before jumping towards the Landreich, but resistance had already been encountered short of the jump point, when a picket ship opened fire first, then fled. Obviously, the Landreich was waiting for the attack.

Finally, there was the report on the transfer of information to the spies on the smuggler ship. All leads had turned up cold. The courier was completely untraceable. He wore no identification or clan markings. His record of teeth imprints and laser scan of his eyes revealed no records, as well. It was as if he had never existed. Gilkarg smiled and shook his head as he contemplated just how masterful the betrayal truly was.

MCAULIFFE

Commander Winston Turner stormed out of the McAuliffe communications center and headed for the

base headquarters.

"The stations still down. They said another couple of hours at least!" he cried bitterly. "Now, let's go find this damn admiral."

Geoff, still self-conscious about his filthy clothes and lack of uniform, raced to keep up.

"Some damn Confed Day Eve we got here," Turner snapped as half a dozen enlisted personnel, several of them more than a little tipsy, came out of headquarters, laughing and talking loudly. They looked at Geoff, Vance and Winston in surprise. An officer, following the boisterous crowd, stopped at the door and stared at them coldly.

"Now, just where do you three think you're heading?"

"I'm Commander Turner, on special duty for Banbridge. I need to see Admiral Long or Admiral Nagomo now."

The officer grinned, as if he was a majordomo confronted by a peasant begging for audience with the king.

"You are not in uniform, Commander," the lieutenant started. "Second, you have no authorization here to see either admiral. The weekend holidays started. Come back on Monday and follow the proper channels."

Winston sprang on the officer, slamming him up against the open door. With his free hand he whipped out his identification card, which was trimmed with red and gold, a color coding indicating that he worked for the office of the Chief of Staff.

"Son, I'm giving you just thirty seconds to get into your damn office and find me one of the admirals, or find me someone who can, or I'll rip your damned head off, then jam it down your gaping throat."

"You could be court-martialed for this," the officer stuttered. His gaze shifted from Turner to Geoff and Vance, as if hoping they would restrain the lunatic, but the two simply closed, in on either side of him.

"Better listen to him, lieutenant," Geoff said calmly, "I've seen him do it."

The lieutenant sagged against the door and nodded weakly. Turner loosened his grip and shoved him through the door so that the lieutenant almost fell on the waxed linoleum surface. He looked back at Turner, as if ready to try an escape, but Winston was standing straight over him.

"Move it, lieutenant."

They followed the frightened officer down the corridor. As they passed the main desk he looked over at the young woman behind the counter. "Get security, now," the lieutenant hissed.

Turner ignored him and pushed the lieutenant forward.

"Where are the admirals?" Turner asked.

"At Highcroft, the officers retreat. Everyone's standing down for the holiday."

"What about their execs?"

"The same."

"Their heads of security?"

"The same."

"Damn it all to hell, is anybody here?"

"I am, sir, I'm on Nagomos staff."

"You the highest ranking officer in here right now?"

"I guess so, sir."

The lieutenant stopped by a small cubicle.

"That's my office."

"Well, let's get in there," Turner snarled. "Get on the horn to your boss, right now."

"I can't do that, sir. Standing orders are that the Admiral is only to be disturbed this weekend if there is a serious emergency."

"Would you call a damn war an emergency? Because, son, there's one coming straight at us. Now get on that comm unit, and I want to see Nagomos face on that screen in one minute, or it'll be your face that's jammed right through it."

"Is there a problem here, sir?"

Geoff turned to see two military police standing in the doorway.

"This man attacked me, he's a lunatic, sergeant, arrest him!"

The marine sergeant started to step into the room with a bit of a bemused look on his face. He had already dealt with half a dozen fights so far this evening, fueled by the rivers of cheap booze flowing in town. The sergeant stopped cold when he found himself staring down the bore of a blaster held by Geoff.

"Vance, take their weapons. Good move, Tolwyn, don't hesitate to shoot either of them if they make a move."

Geoff stared calmly at the sergeant. Though he doubted if he could actually blow the man's head off in cold blood, he knew that he had to convey the impression that he would if forced to do so. Vance pulled their pistols and nightsticks, then tossed them towards the far corner of the room.

"Come inside, gentlemen," Turner said calmly, motioning for them to sit down.

"Look, fella," the marine sergeant said. "I don't know who you guys are, but you're quickly moving from thirty days in the brig to a lifetime of bustin' rocks out on Devil's Planet. So, why don't we be friendly about this and I'll forget about the gun?"

"Tolwyn," the other marine said, looking over at Geoff. "Hey, you're the guy who told that senator to kiss your ass."

"The same," Geoff said calmly.

"Lieutenant, these guys are officers."

"Like hell they are," the lieutenant cried, trying to reassert some control now that there were witnesses from the base in the room who would undoubtedly discuss how he behaved.

Turner looked at the marine sergeant.

"Is Nagomos topkick still in the building?"

"Master Sergeant Ulandi? Yeah, he's down the corridor, he never leaves this place."

"Geoff, take the sergeant, get the topkick, and bring him back."

Geoff motioned for the sergeant to step out in the corridor and pocketed his own pistol, but kept it trained on the marine.

The marine led him down the corridor and stopped at a door just one down from an ornate plaque that announced the domain of the base commander.

Without bothering to knock the marine opened the door.

"Sergeant, we have a little problem here."

The sergeant major looked up from his comm unit.

"What the hell is this?" he barked.

"Sergeant, Commander Turner needs to see you," Geoff interrupted, while still keeping his eye on the M.P.

"Turner? Here?" The sergeant major stood up. Geoff could not help but admire the precise neatness of the old sergeant's uniform, which seemed ready to crack when he moved, so thick was the starch. As he stepped out into the corridor he casually looked over at Geoff and noticed the bulge of the blaster in the ensign's pocket.

"I hope your finger isn't on the trigger of that, Mr. Tolwyn."

Geoff was surprised to be recognized yet again.

"I'm sorry, sergeant, but it is. Commander Turner is having a problem with one of the admiral's lieutenants. If you would be so kind as to help straighten it out, I'll be glad to take my finger off the trigger and turn the weapon over to you."

Geoff sensed that this was not the type of man to push with threats. The tradition of an old top hand commanding, in many ways, far more respect than most officers was an ancient one, and Geoff knew that

to cross it would most likely provoke the sergeant into going after him, and probably beating the hell out of him as well.

"All right, damn it. Let's see what the hell is going on."

The sergeant strode down the corridor with a precise, measured thirty-inch stride, as if he was walking on the parade ground behind his admiral. Reaching the door into the lieutenant's office, he stopped and Geoff could see the slightest flicker of surprise in his eyes.

"Commander Turner, sir. Now just what the hell are you doing?"

Geoff stepped up behind the topkick and saw a look of genuine pleasure in Turner's eyes.

"Gunny, been a long time."

"Yeah, Tabul, and I still owe you a drink for that one, sir."

"Forget the drink," Turner replied, and he quickly launched into a brief explanation of what was going on. Before he was halfway through, the sergeant cut him off and fixed his gaze on the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, sir. I strongly urge you to let me get hold of the admiral right now."

"Sergeant, my orders are..."

"Pardon me, sir, but damn your orders, sir," the sergeant snapped, and, barging his way into the office, he got behind the lieutenant's desk and punched in a secured access code which connected him straight to Nagomo. Turner sighed with relief and seemed to sag against the wall.

"I flashed Iron Butt an Alpha priority," the sergeant announced. "That ought to get him stirred."

A minute later the screen flickered to life.

"Sergeant Ulandi, this better be damn important."

Geoff could hear the sound of a party going on in the background, Still keeping his eye on the two marine guards, who now seemed relaxed as if they were enjoying a show, he nevertheless edged his way to the other corner of the room so he could see the screen. Nagomo did not look pleased at all.

"Sir. We have a major crisis here. I think you better get Admiral Long with you."

Nagomo hesitated, then looked over his shoulder.

"Sergeant, if you make me look foolish you can kiss that topkick retirement money good-bye."

"Sir, I just hope I live to see it. Please, sir, could you get the admiral, sir."

The screen flickered off for a moment. The sergeant leaned back in his chair, fished out a cigar and lit it. "Against regs to smoke it inside, but what the hell," he said with a smile.

The screen flickered back on. The two admirals were standing side by side and Geoff could hear the shrill, angry protests of a woman in the background. Admiral Long looked over his shoulder, made a

hushing noise, then looked back. The sergeant motioned for Turner to step in front of the screen and drew aside.

"Sirs, I am Commander Winston Turner," and as he spoke he held his ID card up to the screen.

"I remember you, Turner," Nagomo said. "Good articles, but what the hell are you doing? You look like crap."

"This better be good, Turner," Long interjected angrily.

"Sirs, just bear with me for five minutes," and yet again he launched into a recap of his mission, starting with Banbridge's orders.

The two admirals grew increasingly somber as he talked.

"You'll have a hard copy of the scan and the document in a moment, sirs," he continued, motioning for the sergeant to do an upload. The sergeant ran out of the office carrying a memory cube. Seconds later Nagomo stepped away from the screen, and then came back holding a sheaf of papers which he started to quickly scan through, then handing them over to Long.

"We'll get back to you in a couple of minutes, Turner," Nagomo said, and the screen went dark.

Frustrated, Turner stalked over to the lieutenant's coffee pot, poured a cup, and then downed it.

The lieutenant, wide-eyed, looked around the room nervously.

"Sergeant, I saw over three hundred planes out there on the tarmac, lined up wingtip to wingtip. Where are the pilots?"

"Most of them are undoubtedly down at Four Dollar Suzie's puking their guts out by now."

"How many hardened positions we got here?"

"Enough for a hundred."

"Can you call an alert?"

The sergeant sighed and shook his head. "Sorry, sir, I can't do that, especially tonight."

The screen flickered back to life. Another officer was now visible, while in the background the angry denouncements of a woman were clearly audible.

"The admirals are coming back to the base right now, sir. They should be there within an hour and a half."

Turner's features reddened.

"Captain, have they authorized a full alert?"

"No, sir."

"Damn it all, why not?"

"There is no clear indication from your information to necessitate that."

Turner looked over at the topkick, who came around to stand in front of the screen.

"Sir, things are getting a little out of hand downtown," Ulandi said. "Can I at least authorize the military police to start rounding the crews up?"

The captain hesitated for a second, then nodded. "Go ahead, sergeant."

"Thank you, sir."

The screen flickered off.

Ulandi quickly switched screens.

"Andre, the stuffs going into the fan, the Cats might be heading this way. I want every one of your men out on the streets in five minutes. They're to shut down every joint in town. Try and find as many ship's officers as possible to help you round the crews up, and start getting them back here now!"

The sergeant flicked the screen off and stood up.

"I better get to work, sir."

Turner extended his hand and the sergeant warmly took it. The sergeant kicked the two marines out of their chairs and stormed out into the corridor. In less than a minute it seemed like the place was coming to life as orders were shouted, and personnel began to run.

"You got the officer's manifests for any of the ships docked at Alexandria, and who's standing watch tonight?" Turner asked the lieutenant.

He stood silent for a moment, and then disdainfully punched up the lists. Turner started to scan them and stopped on one of the carriers.

"I at least know her," he said, and, without bothering to ask, Turner reclaimed the comm unit and punched in the access code listed next to the officer's name.

A young red-headed woman, who had obviously been awakened, looked blearily at the screen.

"Lieutenant Commander Valeri Olson, watch officer Concordia, here."

"Valeri, it's Commander Turner here."

She looked at him in confusion for an instant, then a smile formed. "Winston, long time, sir. Heard about the Academy, too damn bad."

"Listen, Val, I don't have time to explain. Something bad is about to come down, maybe right here. Do you catch my meaning?"

She seemed to instantly come awake.

"I think so."

"Could you pull a battle alert drill on your ship right now?"

"Turner, two thirds of our crew are down on the planet."

"Can you get a drill going? You'll have to trust me on this. At least start getting those engines warmed up."

"Yeah, sure, I'll get them cooking."

"Okay, Val, thanks. I'll touch back later with more."

Turner shut the screen down, then looked over at the clock, which showed local time and Confed standard.

"Well, it's going to be one hell of a holiday today," he said quietly.

Geoff looked up to see that it was one minute after midnight.

Ulandi came back into the room.

"Sir, just got a message from communications, burst signal station thinks they're able to transmit, but nothing coming in yet. They asked me about your signal. There's several hundred dispatches piled up waiting to go out."

"Tell 'em to send it first and get it the hell out now!"

## CONFEDERATION FLEET HEADQUARTERS

"Sir, we've just had a priority flash come in from McAuliffe directed to you."

Skip looked up at his adjutant.

"All right, Anderson, hook it in to me."

In spite of the years of training, Skip felt his pulse rate surge. Was this it? Chances were it was just a confirmation of his orders to Long and Nagomo. They should have arrived there yesterday.

He looked up at his clock. It was eight in the morning, local time, and in spite of the increased alert, but on the orders from the president, business was to be carried on as usual. There had been one logical point to his argument, to blow out a full alert across the entire Confed might very well tip the Cats off that a code had been broken. So, except for Dayan running at high speed for McAuliffe in hopes of ambushing their attack, the rest of the Confederation knew nothing.

His screen flashed red, encoding signals scrolling across the scarlet background, followed an instant later by the message header.

COMMANDER WINSTON TURNER TO CICCONFEDFLT

MESSAGE PRIORITY THREE A ENCODED

ATTACHED FILES ENCODED

MCAULIFFE, 0011 STANDARD TIME 2634.235

A wavery image appeared on the screen, typical of a burst signal on its first read, before the encrypting computers had made a second run-through to clean the picture up.

"Skip, this is Turner. I'm at McAuliffe, having just arrived at twenty-one ten hours standard. My mission was successful. Skip, I'm going to say this in the clear. The Kilrathi Empire might very well be launching its counteroffensive at this very moment. The phony war is over. I've attached a scan we picked up of one of their fleets, which I believe is moving to flank the Landreich. I also have something else, Skip, but it has to be sent by courier. Concerning that second item, Skip, it is clear and conclusive proof of their intentions to launch a preemptive strike. Blucher is already mobilizing the Landreich, and it is safe to assume that hostilities have already started on that front. A deduction here, Skip. What they're throwing at the Landreich is mostly their older stuff. Just a gut feeling, but I think they're going to coordinate it with one hell of a major strike, concentrating everything at one point. My first thought on it—the damn blow is coming right here, at McAuliffe, with everything they have."

"Skip, this entire base is sitting with its bare ass hanging out, waiting to get kicked. For heaven's sake, issue a full mobilization alert now, damn it!"

"If you should not hear from me again, I want to commend Tolwyn and Richards for an excellent job. Take good care of them if they get out of this. I've already written up the details of our entire mission, along with the attached scan. Take care, Skip, and may God protect the Confederation."

The grainy image snapped off, followed by a signal indicating attached files. He quickly scanned the report and the profiles on their attack fleet. One light carrier, a couple of old battlewagons, potent enough, the same profile he'd figured they'd throw at McAuliffe.

Damn, if the Cats were throwing a diversionary against the Landreich, they certainly wouldn't split their forces even more for a second diversion. That could only mean one thing. Turner was right and the damn Cats were going to hit McAuliffe with everything they had left. If that was the case, we won't outnumber them, it's going to be the other way around!

"Anderson, get in here now!" Skip roared, as he waited for the computer to load the files and unscramble them.

The adjutant stuck his head through the door.

"My message to McAuliffe. The one two weeks ago. Did that get out?"

The color drained from Anderson's features.

"Ah, yes, sir, it most certainly did, sir."

"As I ordered it to? Apparently McAuliffe's yet to get word."

"Ah, sir, I'll track that down right now. It should have gotten there on time."

"Well, damn it, find out. Now, call down to the security at all exits to this building and out in the garage. This building is to be sealed right now. I want everyone we can lay our hands on back in their offices. I'm calling the president now and asking for authorization for a full alert. Now, move it."

For the next twenty-eight minutes the Admiral of the Fleet sat in an ever-increasing rage, waiting as he was shunted from one office to another while scurrying staff tracked down the head of the Confederation.

The argument went for another twelve minutes as Skip waited for the copy of Turner's report to be relayed over to the party that the president was attending.

He finally fell silent as the president sat down and started to thumb through the papers.

"You know that More and half of the senate is out in the next room at this very moment?" the president said.

"Screw More," Skip snarled. "Sir, if they come through right now, I tell you we will have no fleet by this time tomorrow. It looks like McAuliffe as we suspected, but, sir, there's indications they might be throwing a hell of a lot more into the attack than we thought."

"Do you know the flap this will cause if I call an alert on Confederation Day and it turns out to be false? We can kiss the election good-bye."

"Sir, if this is the real thing and we don't alert, there won't be any damn election."

Skip hesitated for a second, trying to think of an argument a politician would respond to, then pressed on. "Sir, I'll take the heat on this. You can have my resignation if I'm wrong. It'll make you look vigilant and you can say I overreacted."

"And besides, sir, we are talking about the lives of nearly two hundred thousand young men and women out on McAuliffe alone. I'd rather see them pissed off that their holiday was ruined than dead. For God's sake, sir, authorize me to mobilize."

"What about this thing that Turner referred to but wouldn't send?"

"Sir, Turner has a damn good head on his shoulders. Whatever it is he has, it must be so damn important he can't trust it even to encoded burst. It must be a document, a report, an intercepted transmit, something from the other side that we can't let the Cats know we have. That alone tells me this information is solid."

The president finally nodded reluctantly.

"Authorize Defense Level Two."

"Sir, can I go to One? I want forward recon all along the frontier and shoot-to-kill orders on all fronts."

"It's Two, Admiral," and the screen went dark.

Admiral Banbridge switched stations on his screen and activated the emergency burst signal transmit and quickly dictated the order. Dayan's last report indicated she was approaching final jump into McAuliffe. At least she could be alerted that she was most likely jumping into a hot situation, but would McAuliffe's station be able to receive? He routed the signal through to the orbital transmit station, and prayed that there was still time.

JUMP POINT X-RAY

"Prepare for jump transit!"

Jukaga cinched in his harness and waited for the shift. He felt a flutter of apprehension. They were hitting the point faster than any battleship had ever attempted to do so before.

He looked over at Nargth, who sat unperturbed, as if this was simply another exercise.

"For the glory of the Emperor!" someone shouted, and the cry was picked up on the deck and then throughout the ship.

"For the glory of the Emperor!" ... and the battleship hit transit into Confederation space.

# Chapter Twelve

MCAULIFFE

CONFEDERATION DAY 2634.235

"All right, Turner, you have most certainly kicked up one hell of a storm," Admiral Long snapped as he stormed into his office, Admiral Nagomo in tow. "I don't recall authorizing that this whole damn base gets turned upside down."

Geoff spared a quick glance out the window behind Long. The view out the window as one of utter chaos—the tarmac in front of headquarters swarmed with hundreds of service personnel, many of them drunk and wandering around. Ground crews were cursing and yelling as they started to move some of the planes off of the apron towards hardened underground revetments, dozens of ship-to-shore landing craft were surrounded by shouting crowds, angry because the pilots could not be found. Sergeant Major Ulandi had apparently gone beyond his authorization, and Geoff was amazed at just how powerful an admirals topkick could be. Though he might have to salute first and call new shavetails sir, there was many a captain, and perhaps even an rear admiral or two, who might think twice before disagreeing with him. Geoff was amazed, as well, that a marine corporal had shown up, only minutes before the arrival of the admirals, with fresh uniforms for all three of them, along with razors and shaving soap. Though he still wished passionately for a shower, he knew he was somewhat respectable looking, as long as no one got too close.

"Sir, would you be willing to go to a full alert and scramble the fleet?" Turner asked.

"Look, Winston, there isn't a ship up there with much more than thirty percent of their crews. We scramble now, we'll have to turn right back around and pick up our personnel hours later. That's a lot of engine time loitering around, only to come back and dock again."

"Don't worry, we've got plenty of time, even if your report is true, and besides, I've only had your word so far. I've heard nothing from the CIC. So, let's just take it easy here."

"At least start powering up the engines, sir."

"Mr. Turner, I will not be told by you what to do and what not to do. Even if the Kilrathi popped through the jump point right now, it'd be hours before they reached here, and then what? Our shields are the strongest in the universe."

Sergeant Ulandi appeared in the doorway, the lieutenant who had first encountered Turner beside him. The lieutenant appeared to hesitate, but a look from the sergeant seemed to propel him into the room.

"Ah sir, this dispatch arrived after you left."

The lieutenant approached the desk and handed a silver pouch to the admiral. At the same instant the admiral's pager chimed. Long punched his coded access into the lock on the pouch, which popped open. The pager chimed again and, as he pulled the envelope out of the pouch, he switched his screen on.

Ulandi, who had stepped up to Turner's side nodded towards the lieutenant.

"Damn priority dispatch arrived more than eight hours ago," he whispered. "The lieutenant forget to get it to Nagomo. I just saw it sticking out of a desk drawer."

"Long here," the Admiral said while unfolding the letter.

"Sir, this is Sergeant Williams, over at Signals. Sir, you better see this!"

Before Long could even reply the sergeant switched the screen. A very young and obviously frightened lieutenant appeared.

"This is picketship Java . Repeat, picketship Java . A Kilrathi battleship has just come through jump point Alpha. Christ! It's opening up on us. It's..."

The image died, to be replaced by Sergeant Williams, who was obviously scared.

"We got that just under five minutes ago, sir. I just had a high-density burst scan shot out, and getting it back now. Image is rough due to solar activity, but there is definitely a KilrathiZulu class battleship at jump point Alpha. Wait a minute, sir, a second ship is coming through now, looks like a carrier, sir."

"Keep me posted!" Long cried.

The admiral stood up and Geoff felt a cold ripple of fear. There was a look of near panic in Long's eyes. He gazed back down at the dispatch from Banbridge, then back over at the lieutenant.

"Damn you, Carter. You've killed us all, you son of a bitch. This was an order to cancel all leaves and prepare to move the fleet. Why the hell didn't you get it to me?"

Carter gaped at him like a fish gasping for water as it flopped around on dry land.

Long started into a bitter stream of invective against the terrified lieutenant.

"Admiral!"

Long, his features flushed, looked over at Turner who had stepped in front of him. Turner was holding Banbridge's orders.

"Sir! Order a full scramble now! Get the fleet out of here, now!"

"It's only a single battleship so far," Nagomo interjected. "It'll be a minimum of four hours before it gets in range. Plenty of time to get a fair part of our crews up. Besides, Orange Five says the fleet stays within the shielding around the base upstairs."

"Its orders, sir," Turner shouted.

"Sir, we've a burst signal coming in from the CIC," the sergeant at the communications center announced, coming back on-line.

"Play it, damn it!" Long shouted.

"To all units, this is a Level Two alert issued by CIC. McAuliffe base, expect a full-scale attack, repeat full-scale attack..."

Geoff stood, horrified, as chaos engulfed the office. He had always imagined that in a moment of crisis a true officer would radiate calm control. Instead, with the voice of Banbridge in the background, Nagomo and Long were shouting at each other. He could see Turner edging forward to jump into the fray in an attempt to bring some order to it. The only one who seemed removed from it all was the sergeant major, who stood calmly by the door, his cigar glowing, arms folded across his chest. The sergeant major saw him looking, nodded slightly, then nodded towards Turner.

Geoff took a deep breath, held it for several seconds, then exhaled. Somebody has to stay calm in all of this. If the sergeant major can, Geoff reasoned, so can I, damn it!

He walked up to Turner and touched him on the shoulder. Turner whirled about, as if ready to attack.

"Sir, that sergeant over at the comm center said a carrier had come through," Geoff said, forcing his voice to sound even and under control. "That's against standard doctrine, but it was a scenario you presented to us in class. They're most likely launching fighters and bombers now. They could be here in less than an hour and a half. This could be the Panama war game scenario, sir."

In the background the admirals continued to argue whether the fleet should abandon McAuliffe, Nagomo raging that Long would lose the war if he followed Banbridge's orders, which were issued without knowledge of the tactical situation.

"Sirs," Turner snapped, loud enough to cut through the yelling. "They may be launching fighters and bombers first. If so, you don't have four hours, you've got less than two."

"That's absurd, Turner," Nagomo said dismissively. "We'll tear them to shreds."

The executive officers and several additional staff were now in the room, some of them turning on each other. Geoff found himself wrestling with the fantasy of retrieving the blaster he had left in Ulandi's office coming back in, and shooting the whole lot of them. What had to be done was so simple and obvious... scramble all ships, withdraw from McAuliffe, let the base take the blow if need be, but above all else... save the fleet so it could fight again. On the comm screen the latest sweep showed four ships having emerged, and what looked like a spread of small dots streaming out ahead of them.

Geoff grabbed hold of Turner's arm again and pointed at the screen. "It's the Panama scenario. There's nothing more you can do here, sir. Now, let's go!"

Turner looked at Geoff in surprise, as if, after all their months together, he had really noticed him now for the first time. With an angry curse, Turner headed for the door, motioning for Richards to fall in with him. As soon as they were out of the office, Turner stopped and looked over at Ulandi.

"Come with us, sergeant," Turner snapped, "I need your help."

"Sorry, sir. I'm with the admiral, sir. He'll need me before this is done—" his tone was distant and sad, "—and besides, sir, it's what I signed on for."

"You might have saved something anyhow, Ulandi," Turner said sadly and extended his hand. "God watch over you, sergeant. Next time the drink's on me."

Ulandi took Turner's hand and smiled. "Stay alive, Winston."

Turner broke away and started into a run down the hall. Geoff caught the eye of the sergeant, who snapped to attention and saluted.

"Now Senator More can kiss your ass, son," the sergeant said with a grin, and then nodded towards the door. "You did good in there, woke old Winnie up. Take care of him, son. Stay alive, you might make a good officer someday."

The sergeant saluted, a gesture that startled Geoff. He snapped off a salute in reply and then broke into a run. As he sprinted down the corridor he looked back and saw the old topkick leaning against the doorjamb, his features obscured in a cloud of cigar smoke.

Bursting out of the main entry, Geoff caught up to Turner.

"We're going up. Maybe Concordia can get under way in time."

Geoff broke into a flat out run, heading for Lazarus, dodging and weaving his way through the swirling confusion of fleet personnel, ground crews, pilots looking for ships, and even some civilians who had tagged along as the military police emptied the town's emporiums. Apparently word that an attack was coming had already hit the crowd, which was quickly degenerating into a mob. As he ducked around a line of Thor bombers, most of them propped up on jacks, their wheel bays empty, he saw half a dozen men gathered around Lazarus, one of them hammering on the access key to the hatch.

"Get away from my ship, damn it!" Geoff roared.

The men turned. One of them, a lieutenant commander who was more than a little drunk, stepped forward.

"If you're going up, boy, I'm ordering you to take me to my ship."

Geoff ignored him as he punched in the code which unlocked the door. He scrambled up the ladder, and looking over his shoulder he saw that a crowd was starting to form, the drunken commander leading them up the ladder. Without hesitating Geoff leaped into the crew compartment, opened a storage hatch and pulled out a light assault gun. He turned and faced the commander.

"Sir, I am ordering you off this ship, right now."

"Like hell you are, ensign."

Geoff chambered a round and snapped the safety off.

"If you don't get the hell off this ship right now, sir, they'll be digging your brains off the wall behind you."

The commander looked at him, wide-eyed, then started to back out of the hatch, cursing at the men behind him to make way. With the hatch cleared, Geoff waved Vance and Winston through the gathering crowd, which was hurling imprecations at him. The two scrambled in and he stepped aside, but kept his weapon trained on the crowd.

Geoff looked at the mob. Some were drunk beyond any hope of recall, some were angry, shouting that they should rush the ship, others were obviously just plain frightened out of their wits. He knew that if he tried to sort them out as to who was best to take along, it would get very ugly, very quickly. He heard the ignitors kicking over on Lazarus' engine.

He pointed first at the lieutenant commander, then at the ten men and women closest to the ladder, making sure he pointed out two that had flight wings on their uniforms.

"You people, in now!"

They eagerly scrambled up the ladder, and as the tenth one cleared the hatch Geoff struggled to block the entry. A burly, overweight petty officer tried to shove his way in.

"Get back, damn it!"

"I'm coming too, damn you," and the crowd behind the petty officer started to roar and surge forward. The ignitor caught and Lazarus' engine flared to life. Several of the mob who were too close to the stern of the ship were knocked over and rolled end over end by the blast.

"You son of a bitch, I'm coming too!"

The petty officer reached out to grab Geoff's weapon. Geoff shifted it slightly and squeezed the trigger, catching the petty officer in the shoulder and knocking him down the ladder. Sickened by what he had just done, he looked at the man squirming on the tarmac below. There was a stunned moment of silence from the mob and, taking advantage of the hesitation on their part, he yanked the ladder in before someone else could grab hold, then slammed the door shut.

The ten whom he had chosen were sprawled out along the narrow access corridor leading from the forward cockpit back down to the stern gun position. Several of them had seen the shooting and looked at Geoff in shock.

The lieutenant commander stepped towards Tolwyn, as if to block his way forward.

"I'm off the Antilles and I'm ordering you to head there first."

"Listen, commander," Geoff said coolly, "Commander Turner is in charge of this vessel and we go where he orders. Do you understand that?"

"I need to get back to my ship right now," the commander started and then fell silent as he found himself staring down the bore of Geoff's gun. The argument settled, Geoff stepped past the lieutenant commander and went forward. Vance was in the left seat, and Turner in the right. As Geoff approached Turner scrambled out of the seat and took the gun.

"I can't fly worth a damn," Turner said. "You take over."

Again there was the faintest of smiles.

"You had to shoot him, there was no other way around it," Turner added, making sure his comment carried to the crowd in the access corridor. He then turned and looked back at them, as if noticing their presence for the first time.

"We're heading to the Concordia. If any of you have a problem with that, get the hell off now."

No one spoke up.

"This is going to be a rough one, people, so lie down and hang on."

Turner settled into the jump seat behind Geoff and strapped in. Vance tapped into the ground control channel, listened to the chaos for several seconds, then switched it off and looked over at Geoff.

"The hell with clearance, Geoff, keep your eyes peeled. I'm going to lift it straight off the taxiway."

Geoff grinned as Vance gunned the ship out of the parking area, weaving adroitly past half a dozen surface-to-space transports that were lumbering towards the strip. Reaching the taxiway, he clicked on the radio, announced his intentions, then pivoted and started to throttle up. Geoff saw a transport, which had just touched down on the main strip, hurriedly turning to clear the strip as a second transport touched down just behind it.

"We'll clear him," Vance announced as he slammed the throttles to the wall. Lazarus kicked to life. Geoff checked their speed, ignoring all the other instruments. If they had a malfunction, that was it. The transport continued on an intersect line.

"Speed?"

"Fifty, sixty, seventy..."

"Wish you'd left those bastards back there behind," Vance snapped. "Too much weight."

Geoff didn't reply. They were fleet personnel and he would be damned if he left somebody behind who could be saved, and could fight.

Vance pulled back early, the nose lifting. Lazarus rose several feet, lumbered in a stall, munched back

down, then lifted again.

"Gears up!"

Geoff slapped the landing gear lever back and spared a quick glance at the gauges. They were hovering at stall speed. If they mushed back down now, it was over and they'd plow straight into the transport that was crossing the taxiway a hundred yards ahead. He didn't look away, and continued to stare at the transport. He felt Vance nudge the stick back further for an instant. They gained a dozen feet, then he pushed the stick forward, dropping the nose as Lazarus shuddered on the edge of a stall. They just cleared the transport... for an instant Geoff could see the wide-eyed copilot looking up at them, his mouth opened as if shouting an obscenity. Lazarus dropped down so that Geoff felt for certain that they'd pancake, but they didn't fall the final few feet to disaster.

"We got ground effect," Vance said casually, "we're okay."

Airspeed started to build and, seconds later, Vance eased the nose back up and they started to climb.

"Boys, that was the hairiest damn takeoff I've ever seen," Turner sighed. Vance looked back over his shoulder.

"Piece of cake, sir."

Vance put them into a forty-five-degree climb, afterburners roaring, devouring the liquid hydrogen in the ship's tanks.

"Remember that crew chief on the Hell Hole said to keep the g's down," Geoff said casually.

"I know, thanks. But I think we're in a bit of a rush here." Seconds later Geoff could see the stars overhead.

"Sir, we've lost a carrier," Jukaga announced, coming up to stand by Admiral Nargth's side.

Nargth, surprised, looked at Vakkas son.

"I just received the report from our radar operator. The fifth carrier, Kathuga, was scheduled to come through several minutes ago. A spray of debris streamed out of the jump point instead. Part of it was identified as the bow of Kathuga. It must have misaligned on jump, or the jump engine failed to encompass the entire ship in its field due to the high velocity."

"My brother's second son was on that ship," Nargth said quietly. Without another comment he turned away from Jukaga.

Prince Ratha, roaring with a wild, passionate glee, was slammed back in his seat as the ship's catapult slammed him through the magnetic airlock field and out into space. Giving a touch of thruster he surged ahead of the carrier and, once well clear, slammed on full engines, including the extra strap-on units. The unleashed power set his pulse to pounding as he streaked forward, ignoring the calls of his wing support and the other three pilots of his section. The target area was still nothing but a blip on the center of his screen. He didn't even really need to watch that, all he had to do was follow the dozens of winking lights of those who had been launched before him. It still enraged him that his father had ordered him to go with the second squadron, rather than have the honor of being the first fighter to be launched from the first carrier. Yet still, it would be sung that he was part of the first attack on the Confederation, the attack that

in one blow shattered their power.

"Concordia, we are coming aboard!"

"Sir, you are not cleared for landing yet."

Winston grabbed a comm mike and snapped it on. "Is Lieutenant Commander Valeri Olson there?"

"I am not authorized, sir, to discuss that."

There was a moment's pause and a different voice came on the air.

"Winston, this is Valeri, you are cleared to land. Now get your ass in here, and I'll meet you on the deck."

Turner looked over at Vance. "Can you squeeze this thing in through the airlock?"

"Tight, sir, but I think we can manage her."

For Geoff it was his first look at Concordia as they came up several kilometers off the starboard beam and lined up to swing in for a head-on approach into the landing bay. He felt his pulse quicken. The ship was beautiful, far more beautiful than he could have ever imagined. Her lines were sleek, white paint fresh and glimmering in the harsh sunlight. As they turned into final approach, he felt a tightening in his throat at the sight of the insignia of the Fleet, painted across the ship's bow. He had always felt an affinity for the emblem as far back as he could remember. But now it was different. They were at war, the first attack was boring in and this beautiful ship was the point of the javelin that must be hurled back to stop them.

"Hands off the stick, Geoff," Vance said quietly. Geoff released his hand from the stick and sat back to watch as Vance jockeyed Lazarus into alignment with the launch bay airlock. He gave a tap of vertical thrust to ease Lazarus down another meter and slipped through the airlock with less than half a meter clearance for the tail. Geoff could sense the tension on Vance's part. If he should screw up the approach and crack it up, they might very well block the launch port, which would most assuredly be a death sentence for the carrier.

Vance pivoted Lazarus forty-five degrees, clearing the launch bay, and nudged Lazarus in between two personnel transports. It was Geoff's first view inside a fleet carrier. His only previous experience had been aboard the old training ship Schweinfurt, where he did his qualification landings for surface-to-space flight. The launch and deck area looked absolutely cavernous and swarmed with what appeared to be a madhouse of confusion. Flight crews were scrambling around a line of Wildcat fighters, loading them with fuel and armaments. He sensed that, though it might look like insanity, the crews were actually performing a well-choreographed drill.

Turner was already out of his seat, climbing over their passengers. Going aft he popped open the access hatch, while Geoff and Vance shut Lazarus down. Stepping down onto the deck of Concordia, Geoff saw Turner talking with the launch officer, clearly identifiable by his bright red baseball hat.

A young enlisted woman was summoned over and with her leading the way Turner took off again at a run.

Geoff looked over at Vance. "We'd better stick with him, we still might be useful."

The two took off after Turner, abandoning the thoroughly confused passengers who stood in a silent knot. Going through a double row of damage control doors, which a marine locked shut behind them, they sprinted to catch up to Turner as he raced up several flights of stairs, was cleared through another set of double doors by a marine guard, and finally reached the Combat Information Center in the center of the ship.

"Valeri, what's the latest?" Turner asked, coming up to the side of the lieutenant commander who was staring intently at a holo display field which filled the center of the room.

Lieutenant Commander Valeri Olson stepped up close to the field, held up a hand control unit, and clicked it. Several hundred flashing red dots appeared on the screen with solid lines projecting from them, all the lines tracing in to a single intersect point.

"We have, at this moment over three hundred inbound strike craft, Commander, a mix of Kola class fighters and Gomora class heavy strike bombers. The first wave will hit our outer defense perimeter in twenty-seven minutes."

"They're moving damn fast," Vance interjected.

"Four of them slowed down in less than a minute to nail a light corvette that was halfway up to the jump point on a routine patrol. Just before we lost the ship they reported that all the strike craft had strap-on boosters."

"And the capital ships?" Turner asked.

She hit the hand control unit again and the holo field displayed an overhead projection of the system, showing McAuliffe and jump point Alpha. A tight red bundle of blips appeared near the jump point, with half a dozen blips strung out in line and moving down into the system.

"Five carriers, two battleships forward. They've got a stream of craft still coming through. Four more battleships, eight cruisers so far, and two heavy-assault transports."

"That's not the fleet we spotted," Turner said, looking back at Geoff and Vance. "This is the main strike right here. The other fleet must be hitting the Landreich like we figured."

Turner walked around the holo field and then turned to face Valeri.

"Are you the senior officer on board?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where's Captain Mifune?"

"Still down on McAuliffe, sir. Last report was that he commandeered a Hurricane, but traffic on Johnson Island is shot to hell. There was a bad crash on the primary runway. It'll be at least forty-five minutes before he gets up."

"Are the engines on-line?"

"We'll be up and running—" she hesitated and looked over at the engineering display, "—in thirty-two minutes sir."

"Your orders from Captain Mifune?"

"Wait for his arrival. Admiral Long has ordered all ships to undock, but to stay inside the area of the orbital base shielding."

"Any other signal traffic?"

"We intercepted the translight burst from the CIC, sir. Also an encrypt from Rear Admiral Dayan's task force. They are approaching jump point Delta but are still nearly ten hours out."

"Dayan's coming? Thank God, what does she have?"

"Two wagons, and carrier Ark Royal , plus escorts."

"Damn," Turner whispered, "not enough by a long sight." He drew a deep breath. "Valeri, you were a damn good student of mine twelve years ago. You remember the Panama war game?"

She smiled and looked over at the holo field. "We've got it right here. They've got a shield-busting weapon, there's no mistake. Otherwise they wouldn't be attacking like this."

"I'll take the heat for this," Turner said quietly and then he drew himself up so that he was standing at attention. "Lieutenant Commander Valeri Olson, by the power of Fleet Regulation Seventeen I am hereby taking command of this ship as the senior officer on board in a time of crisis."

A flicker of a smile creased Olson's features. She looked over at a chief petty officer who was standing by the main console.

"Chief, you have heard Commander Turner's orders. I acknowledge Commander Turner's authority and hereby relinquish command of Concordia . Note the time, Chief."

Geoff watched the formalized ritual as it was played out amidst the confusion of the bridge. There was but a momentary pause as the several dozen enlisted and commissioned personnel observed what was happening, then went back to their desperate effort to bring Concordia on-line.

Olson saluted, then handed over the holo field controller. Turner acknowledged the salute.

"How many personnel are not on board?"

"We have just over forty percent on board at this moment, sir."

"Pilots?"

"Twenty-nine out of eighty-three, sir."

Turner went over to the main board and looked around for a mike. The chief petty officer, as if sensing what the new captain wanted, unclipped one from the console and handed it to him.

"Switch me onto the main ship system," Turner asked, and the petty officer hit a button.

"This is Commander Turner speaking. I was on McAuliffe on special assignment from Admiral

Banbridge. Those of you from the Academy might remember me." He hesitated, knowing the image he had for many as the woolly professor. To hell with classified information, and besides, it was twenty years ago. "I should add that, prior to that, I was commander of Marine Commando Six, so I do have combat experience."

He waited for several seconds, then pressed on. "As senior officer aboard I have formally taken command of this ship until such time as the executive officer or captain return on board. As you know, the Kilrathi have launched a sneak attack. In less than thirty minutes their fighters and bombers will hit the outer shield area. We have reason to believe they might have weapons capable of penetrating our shields."

He waited for what he had said to sink in.

"If we stay here, Concordia will be destroyed. We are therefore going to power this ship up, get out into open space, and fight this ship the way it was meant to be fought. I will be honest with you. We might not live through this day, but if we are fated to die, Concordia will go down fighting and we will take some of the bastards with us!"

Geoff could hear a defiant, angry cheer erupt in the ship, to be picked up by the personnel in the combat center.

"All pilots, man your planes, prepare for launch the moment we clear base shielding."

Turner clicked the mike off. There was a moment of silence and then the crew set back to their work.

"Richards, Tolwyn."

Turner motioned for them to come over. "Vance, head down to the flight deck. Grab a free plane."

Richards grinned, saluted and left the room.

Turner looked at Geoff as if weighing a decision.

"Have you ever handled a Wildcat?"

"Only in the simulator, sir."

Turner nodded. "I could use you here, son, but what do you want?"

Geoff took the information in. He knew that, even in the full simulator, his time was limited. The Fleet usually expected a minimum of five hundred hours of flight time on a Wildcat before they'd assign a new pilot to a combat wing. And yet, if he did stay here, a decision that no one would really question, he knew that he would question it for the rest of his life.

"I'd like to take a crack at the bastards, sir."

What looked like infinite sadness clouded Turner's features, and Geoff realized that the commander felt as if he was allowing yet another young man to go to certain death.

"A hell of a lot of good people are going to die today, sir," Geoff said. "I'll be in good company."

Turner could not reply. Rather than salute he extended his hand.

Geoff shook it, stepped back, saluted, then sprinted from the bridge.

# Chapter Thirteen

MCAULIFFE

"My Lord, the leading edge of the strike should be closing now!"

The Crown Prince said nothing in reply. Speculative talk was a waste of breath at this moment. He realized that in the next hour he would either emerge as the greatest hunter in the history of the Empire, or would be dead by his own hand. He had felt such supreme confidence in his plan, and especially in this particular aspect, the strike to destroy the main base of the Confederation and the carrier fleet stationed there. Yet so much could go wrong, in fact had gone wrong. The loss of the carrier in the jump had deprived him of nearly a fifth of all his strike craft. Targets were being reassigned even as the attack went in, which was adding to the confusion. It was a crucial reserve that might affect plans after the attack.

Nargth was dragging his heels as well. The battleships were lagging behind, the admiral claiming that he wanted proper tactical formation. None of the strike wave craft were equipped with burst signal capability.

The two craft that were to go in without weapons to serve in that capacity were out, one lost on the destroyed carrier, the second one losing both engines right after launch. The time lag using sublight radio was now stretched out to nearly eight minutes and would not decrease until the battle was engaged and the carriers finally caught up. The delay could be crucial for redirecting attacks.

And yet... he watched as the latest translight scan appeared on the screen. All the ships were either docked or still inside the heavy shielding. Half a dozen were showing heat signatures from their engines but most of the rest were still cold. Intercepts of radio signals were coming in without any scrambling, revealing widespread panic.

The Crown Prince returned to his command chair and sat down to wait out the first and most crucial part of the attack.

Prince Ratha felt as if he was going to black out and closed his eyes, grunting for breath. His fighter shuddered and groaned with the strain as all engines fired in order to brake his high speed for the run down to the target. He opened his eyes again to scan his instruments and then up. His back was to the target area as the braking maneuver continued and he saw a flare of light as a fighter disintegrated from overstress, debris spraying out in a widening plume.

The first wave started to penetrate the planet's atmosphere and met no resistance. The next few seconds would decide...

Sergeant Major Manuel Ulandi stepped out of the headquarters building and, lighting another cigar, he looked up to the hills north of the city. Thirty years of discipline would not allow him to feel disgusted with an admiral who was his boss, but the feeling was pretty damn close to the surface. Command had totally broken down, with orders being shouted only to be countermanded a minute later, and then changed yet again. He heard the thunder of a flight of Hurricanes taking off and, looking over his

shoulder, he saw them lifting up, banking and then streaking off westward, afterburners glowing. Sirens echoed from the town while, out on the flightline, a hysterical mob of personnel, cut off from their ships, swarmed around the transports. Thousands of others streamed towards the base of the skyhook tower and he shook his head.

"Poor bastards." He sighed. "They'll get caught when the Cats blow it."

A file of marines barged out of the headquarters, surrounding a Hurricane that had been pulled up to the door of the building. Ulandi watched as Admiral Long emerged, squeezing himself into the back seat of the Hurricane trainer. The pilot, already in his seat, pulled the canopy down and locked it. The Hurricane fired up and headed for the taxiway, weaving its way around the wreckage of several ships which had slammed into each other in the confusion. Without even waiting to gain the runway, the Hurricane went to afterburners, rumbling across a concrete apron then onto what passed for grass on this world and finally lifted off, going into a vertical climb.

A rolling peal of sonic booms rumbled across the sky and, shading his eyes, Ulandi saw a score of contrails tracing in from the west. The Hurricanes were now just glowing dots of light which disappeared from view as they punched through the shimmering waver of the shields. He could feel a crackling in the air as the shielding went up to maximum, the view on the other side distorting so that what lay beyond the base looked like a shimmering mirage. Any ship that hit the shield at high speed would be ripped to shreds. If it slowed subsonic speeds to make the transit, the defensive batteries would tear the target apart... at least, that's what the book said.

Through the shimmer he could see the mushroomlike spread of heavy shields activating over the reactors, which were buried deep in the mountains, one of them under Highcroft.

I bet the officers still stuck out there are crapping themselves, Ulandi thought with a grin.

Flashes of light ignited off to the west, one of them detonating with a brilliant white-hot intensity that caused Ulandi to turn away.

Nuke airburst he realized. Reaching up to his helmet, he snapped down his protective goggles and then turned back. Everything was dark for a moment except for the glowing point of light, which spread out and dissipated. The goggles gradually shifted so that, after several seconds, background light started to come back in, and then snapped back down as half a dozen more nukes lit up the sky.

Ulandi stepped back under the protective shelter of the doorway. Ground defense was kicking up and he could feel the rumbling in the soles of his feet as the batteries on the other side of the shield fired off a barrage.

"Sergeant?"

A corporal, one of the headquarters MPs, was beside him, crouched down low.

"Just watching the show."

"Everyone's heading down into the shelters, sergeant."

Ulandi smiled and took another puff on his cigar.

"Better get down there yourself—" he looked at her name tag,—"Corporal Danner. I'll be along in a

minute."

Another flare of light spread across the sky.

"Damn, what the hell was that?"

"Guess the Cats are using nukes to make sure they knock down our fighters and ground defenses."

"Sergeant, we'll get cooked out here!"

"Shields will block most of the pulse, but you better go on inside, corporal."

The young woman looked at him nervously and then shrugged.

"Guess we're dead then anyhow," she whispered and didn't move.

The girl unclipped a handheld comm unit, clicked it on, and punched in a channel. Static hissed and crackled on the unit...

"Got ten, got ten bombers bearing two nine six, angels seventy-three, eight clicks outside shield... he's on my tail, get him off me..."

Ulandi half listened as the girl, trying to control the shaking of her hands, held the radio up. Another nuke popped off. Standing inside the shadow of the doorway, Ulandi saw the harsh white glare illuminate the city, which was outside the base shielding. A shockwave from one of the blasts swept across the town, shattering windows, collapsing some of the flimsier buildings. He wondered sadly if Four Dollar Suzie's was still up. Most likely old Suzie was pouring free drinks at the moment.

"The bombers are slowing down... get them, get them!"

One of the Javelin batteries on the far side of town kicked in, lancelike bolts tearing straight up into the sky, the rockets trailing fiery plumes of smoke as they sprinted towards the heavens. Other lines of fire erupted from nearly straight overhead, streaking down. Ulandi turned his back and pushed the girl up against the wall. There was another flash of light, this one far brighter.

"Javelin's down, nuke pulse..." the radio crackled, the words drowned out, then came clear again.

"What the hell... bombers have dropped ordnance, moving Mach 10..." There was a momentary pause. "The damn missiles, they're penetrating the shielding to the reactors! What the hell is going on, missiles have penetra..."

Ulandi felt the ground beneath his feet buckle and roll as half a dozen torpedoes, tipped with ground-penetrating nuclear warheads slammed into the reactors north of the base. The crackle in the air snapped off. Crouching down, he covered the girl's head and pulled her in tight. She started to sob and he felt as if, at that moment, he was holding his own little girl again, comforting her when the summer thunder rumbled in the night sky.

The ground shock died away, the glare dimmed, and he finally looked back up. Six pillars of fire and smoke filled the northern sky.

"More bombers coming down... count thirty plus, bearings three one nine, angels one five eight..." An

explosion ignited on the west side of the base and the radio snapped off.

"They'll go for the skyhook now," Ulandi said and, stepping away from the building, with the young corporal clinging to his side, he watched as a Kilrathi bomber came thundering in, so close to the ground that swirls of dust eddied up behind it. The bomber shrieked down the length of the runway and pressed on eastwards, banking slightly to the south. Twin flashes of light ignited under its belly and two missiles streaked away.

"These might be small nukes," Ulandi said.

"Why not on top of us?" the corporal asked, struggling to control her voice.

"They want the base, but they'll knock out the tower and maybe drag down the ships still hooked to it."

The bomber banked up sharply, followed suddenly by half a dozen Javelins. Flares streaked out behind the ship, one of the Javelins swerving and detonating, but the other missiles closed in and Ulandi felt a grim satisfaction as the bomber disintegrated, the girl beside him letting out an emotion-releasing scream of triumph. But the attacker had already accomplished his mission. One of the missiles was dropped by the point defense around the base of the tower, but the second round slammed into the durasteel frame of the skyhook and detonated with a force of sixty kilotons. The heat of the fission bomb tore out half of the tower's armor. If that alone had been the effect of the weapon, it might have survived, but the shock wave now set up a fatal oscillation, the way a wave of movement travels down a taut string which has been plucked. The tower began to waver, the shock wave from the blast rushing down to the ground, hitting, then reverberating back up. Thrusters mounted along the length of the tower, which were designed to dampen any motion created by earthquakes, were now firing at full power to try to counter the blow. The reflected shockwave now hit and the thrusters were firing in the wrong direction, adding their power to the blow. The tower sheared off several kilometers above where the warhead had detonated.

The skyhook tower of McAuliffe, connecting to base Alexandria over twenty thousand miles above, started to collapse. Due to its size, it'd be several minutes before those at the top of the tower would even feel anything, but when they did and the tower started to fall, it would drag down with it any ship that was in hard dock.

Ulandi could not help but feel a sense of admiration for the Cats and the masterful skill and coordination demonstrated in their attack. They had struck with surgical precision, knocking out the reactors which provided the thousands of gigawatts of energy for the shields, which for a hundred years had been proclaimed to be the ultimate defense. With the shields gone, all of the defensive doctrine and infrastructure built up around them was nothing more than broken toys waiting to be kicked apart.

From out of the south he saw several dozen flashes of reflected light. They quickly took form, a sweep of Kilrathi fighters coming in to strafe the base and nail anything that might still offer resistance.

Thirty years, he thought, thirty years getting ready for this moment, and now...

He took a long drag on his cigar and exhaled slowly. Funny, he thought, don't have to worry about inhaling the stuff now and he took another deep drag so that the cigar tip glowed bright red.

"I'm scared."

He looked down and saw her terrified eyes. Sergeant Major Manual Ulandi made a hushing sound, as if

stilling the fears of a frightened child, and drew her in close, burying her face into his chest.

Best for her to get it here rather than trapped down in the basement, he thought. Holding the soldier, who was really still a child, he watched as the fighters closed in, guns flashing.

\* \* \*

"Jak-ta Gal Jak-ta Ga! Jak-ta Gal"

The triumphal cry, announcing the destruction of the reactors and the lowering of the main base shields, erupted from the speakers on the bridge, greeted an instant later by wild shrieks and roars of unspeakable joy as those around the Crown Prince broke into a mad demonstration. Fists were raised to the heavens, talons extended, some of the warriors turning the talons on themselves, slicing open their own veins so that they might smell blood and then drink it.

Even the Crown Prince allowed the moment to seize him, and he ritualistically cut his arm open, holding it up so that all might see the blood flow. His staff clamored around him, offering their blood to him so that they could someday tell their cubs how they had shared blood with the Emperor at the moment of his greatest triumph.

Gilkarg finally stepped free of the turmoil and approached the flat, two dimensional screen as a wavery vid image appeared, shot by a tail gunner on a bomber and beamed back. Fighters were crisscrossing the ground base, hundreds of fires igniting beneath their hammer blows. As the bomber turned it showed the skyhook tower. The structure was so massive that it appeared to be moving in slow motion as sections of the tower, dozens of kilometers long, snapped off, the tower disintegrating from the bottom up.

"We've won!"

He whirled about to look at the fool who now taunted the gods to steal back their victory. The communications officer, realizing the supreme folly of proclaiming victory before it was accomplished, lowered his head.

"Its only started," Gilkarg roared.

\* \* \*

"Helm, give me full throttle, now!"

"We're barely out of cold start," came a nervous reply. "We need another five minutes, or we might rupture the pumps."

"In five minutes we're dead. Full power now!" Turner clicked over to the shield control center.

"Defensive shielding?"

"Defensive shields here, sir."

"As soon as the engines power up, take shields up to fifty percent. I'll give you word when you can draw more."

"Aye, sir."

Commander Turner snapped the line shut and looked back up at the starboard view screen. The full weight of the Kilrathi attack was sweeping in across the far side of the base. He had expected their attack to go straight for the ground reactors, but the speed with which they had been knocked out was startling. The additional ten to fifteen minutes he was praying for simply wasn't there any more.

"Sir?"

One of the combat analysis team looked back from her station and motioned for him to come over.

He stepped up to her side and she pushed her earphones back.

"Sir. I just heard a report relayed from one of the batteries near shield generating station number three. They claim they clearly saw a missile penetrate the shield at very high speed. They caught it on vid and are uploading."

"Good work, yeoman. Let's see it."

A flickering image appeared on her screen, with a scale line appearing beneath the missile, showing it to be nearly fifteen meters in length and two meters thick.

It was, by far, the largest weapon he had ever seen launched from a carrier plane. He watched the grainy image as the missile cut right through the shielding and, seconds later, disappear as it impacted in a thermonuclear flash.

"It was making Mach 10 when it penetrated." She hesitated for an instant and then a grin broke out.

"Sir, it's ArkRoyal! On translight burst. The signal's close by."

"Where?"

"I'll switch them in now."

Turner looked up at the screen.

"McAuliffe, McAuliffe, this is Ark Royal ."

The image of the ArkRoyal's captain appeared on the screen and Turner could not help but smile.

"Admiral Dayan, thank God," he cried. "This is Turner, acting commander Concordia . Where the hell are you?"

"Winston? How did you get here?"

"No time now, Naomi. All hell is breaking loose. We're losing the base."

He looked up at the plot screen and saw a blue blip appear, coming in from jump point Delta. Dayan's task force was starting to come into the system but was still hours away.

"You're the one on the scene, what the hell do you want us to do?"

Naomi had served as a visiting professor at the Academy for a year, teaching carrier tactics, and was definitely one of the young Turks of the fleet. He was grateful, as well, that she wasn't pulling rank and was deferring to his on-the-scene view.

"Let me work up a plot, hang on."

Stepping back he scanned the view screens.

"Navigation, work best possible solution for rendezvous with Ark Royal . Communications, upload all data we have so far on this strike to Ark Royal's exec."

"Coral Sea's gone!" he heard someone cry. The screen focused in on the fleet's heaviest carrier. They had managed to break clear of the tower on maneuvering thrusters but the Cats were already on her, several dozen bombers and fighters weaving around the ship, which was bursting apart amidships, explosions racing through the interior, bursting out of the old carrier's single launch ramp.

He turned away and looked back to the forward view, which showed the skyhook tower. It was finally beginning to move, a flickering waver as the blow from twenty thousand miles down finally arrived. Dozens of ships were still hard docked to the spiderweb array of ports. Many of them went into emergency disconnect, blowing the explosive bolts that held them to the dying tower. Smaller vessels, which had been able to start their engines up quicker, were darting away, but the heavy ships, which had been drawing power from the tower were helpless, whoever was in command on board frantically trying to maneuver and pull away using only low-energy docking thrusters.

The battleship Belarus , though disconnected, hovered motionless. The tower started to lean over and appeared to slowly brush against the side of the ship. Due to the sheer size of the vessel and tower, it appeared like nothing more than an inconsequential bump, but Turner knew it was a fatal blow with thousands of tons of mass behind it. The battleship started to move under the impact, as if it would simply be brushed aside... then the outer hull ruptured. Seconds later the ship detonated as stored munitions let go. The explosion blossomed out, taking a frigate that was moored higher up on the tower, the frigate detonating in turn. Explosions laced across the skyhook, momentarily blocking out the view of the incoming waves of Kilrathi fighters approaching from the other side.

Turner felt a slight swaying movement and for a second thought that it was a shock wave from the explosions, until he realized that Concordia was under way and starting to accelerate. He held his breath. If they were going to lose a pump from not warming it up properly, it'd be now. The seconds passed and they continued to accelerate.

"Have the solution, sir," the navigation officer cried.

"Upload it to Ark Royal ."

"Naomi."

"Here, Winston."

"You're the rally point. Put out a signal to all ships making way."

"What's left down there?"

"Scratch four carriers and most of the fleet, Naomi."

"Got it, Winston."

"Hail to captain of Concordia from Admiral Long," the comm officer interrupted.

"We didn't get that signal," he said calmly.

"Sir?"

"You heard me. We didn't receive that hail."

The radio operator grinned and flicked the channel off.

"If they find out later, you're cooked."

Turner saw Valeri coming up to join him on the bridge.

"Good work on the engines, Val."

"What about Long?"

"You know damn well what he wants, and that's for us to wait until he can come aboard. Val, if we wait, we're dead."

She laughed softly.

"Naomi, I'm having problems receiving Admiral Long's signal," he said, staring back at her screen. "How about you?"

She smiled. "The same problem here, Winston. I'll call you as soon as we get our birds out."

"Just hurry." And then he shut the signal down.

"Val, send a signal in the clear. 'Concordia is under way. All ships to rendezvous on us and proceed to Ark Royal at best possible speed.' After that, get the data from weapons analysis and transfer the info on these new missiles to all ships. Maybe we can point defense against them after they're launched. I then want a burst signal out to Banbridge. Update on the battle, all ships' video records, transmissions sent and received. The hell with encoding, send it in the clear."

"In the clear?"

"If the news vids pick it up, that's fine with me," Turner said grimly. "No one's going to cover this shit up any longer. I want the truth out there for a change."

His new exec grinned and went over to the communications desk.

Turner looked back up at the chaos around the skyhook tower. The explosions were rippling away and around the edges of the fireballs he could see that another battleship, Malta, was gone as well.

Two of the battleships, however, were indeed under way, fire erupting from every gun position.

"We've got thirty, at least thirty bogies are veering in on us for an intercept!"

Winston held up the display controller and shifted the holo field in the middle of the room to ship's tactical display. In the center of the field was the image of Concordia. At the far edge of the field was a mass of blue and red lights, showing the spreading battle around the shattered skyhook base. A stream of blinking red lights was veering around the fight and setting up for a head-on attack.

Turner nodded and clicked the mike which he had attached to his collar.

"This is Turner. Launch all fighters, repeat launch all fighters. We have thirty plus incoming."

Prince Ratha let out a triumphal cry as the fleeing carrier came into view on the far side of the explosions tearing through the orbital base. For a moment he had feared that everything would be destroyed, leaving nothing for him to sink his talons into.

"This is Ratha!" he announced, ignoring code names. If the enemy should find out who would soon destroy them, so much the better so they could curse his name when they went to their underworld.

"I will lead the attack, form on me!"

Geoff watched, wide-eyed, as a fighter roared down the launch ramp and kicked through the airlock. Peacetime procedures were gone, and afterburners ignited as soon as it was on the far side of the shield.

He was startled by the jerk of the tractor hooked to his nosewheel, which pulled him out onto the ramp, putting him second in line, directly behind Vance. The tractor disconnected and darted to one side. The deck launch officer in front of Vance's fighter jumped aside, going down on one knee with left arm pointed towards the airlock.

The backwash from Vance's fighter rattled Geoff's ship as it raced down the ramp and slammed through the airlock.

"Tolwyn, you're next," a voice whispered in his headset.

"Tolwyn ready."

The confidence he had tried to instill in himself while waiting to launch was on the point of evaporating. It was truly his first time in a Wildcat. The simulator might provide a trainee with almost all the sensations, but no matter how realistic, there was always that realization that when the holo field blazed white, then snapped off, all one had to do was hit the reset button... but in real life there was no reset button.

He remembered to do a quick scan of his instruments, though at this point nothing short of a full engine shutdown would stop the launch. If there was a critical malfunction in any other system he was expected to launch anyhow, then get the hell out of the way and wait to die.

"Tolwyn... five, four..."

The launch officer in front of his plane darted to the left, dropped down on one knee and pointed forward.

"Launch!"

Geoff pushed the throttle up to fifty percent and, with inertial dampening cut off because he was still inside Concordia's field, he felt the surge slamming him back into his seat. The star fields outside the airlock began to shift rapidly, and he had a moment of disorientation until he realized that the carrier was making a rapid turn. He felt a slight resistance as the fighter went through the airlock.

"Tolwyn clear!"

He instantly slammed the throttles forward, hit the afterburner switch, and popped out the maneuvering scoops, while at the same time pulling the stick back and to the right. The inertial dampening kicked in, the pressure on his spine easing off. He heard a beep in his headset, signaling that he had a clean connection back to Concordia's Combat Information Center, and that the center was downloading the updated data regarding the fight. His terminal screen lit up, working off the CIC data so that he did not have to light himself up by using his own radar.

"Tolwyn, form on my right!" It was Vance.

Anxiously he looked around. Where the hell was he? He felt as if all his senses were overloading. McAuliffe was in the background, and he could distinctly see the glow of explosions and smoke down on the planet's surface. A broken, jagged line extended up from the planet's surface—the skyhook tower, which was continuing to collapse, the force of gravity inexorably ripping it apart. Where the orbital base had been was now an apocalyptic nightmare of explosions.

"Tolwyn, form on my right!" It was Vance, but where the hell was he?

"Tolwyn set IFF transponder to 1144 now!"

Geoff punched in the numbers and a flashing blue light appeared on his screen—bearing 275, negative 60. He banked over and looked to the left, catching sight of a Wildcat down below.

"Form, Tolwyn, form, we're going in!"

Geoff tried to jockey the fighter in on Vance's right wing, and just when he thought he had it, Vance pulled his nose up.

"Stick to me like glue, damn it, if you want to live!"

Geoff yanked back on his stick, overcompensated and nearly went into a loop. He slammed the stick forward, overcompensated yet again, then finally leveled back out.

"Green squadron," Vance announced, "Going for the bombers... full throttle, three, two, one, go!"

Vance's fighter leaped forward and Geoff remembered that he had to cover Vance. It required that he keep one on the leader, while at the same time doing a constant scan, both visually and from the instruments, for anyone trying to intercept.

"I will block their fighters. Bombers, prepare to attack!" Ratha cried.

His screen showed a thin screen of fighters moving forward to intercept. The hunting would be good. He picked the lead group and headed straight for them.

"Head-on attack coming in, go through them!" Vance said. The tone of his voice had changed, Geoff

noted. There had been an excited and angry edge to it a moment before, but now it took on a dead, flat calm. No matter how frightful the situation, Geoff realized, Vance's training had completely taken over, and he was functioning now as an efficient, emotionless, killing machine.

Geoff saw a formation of four Kilrathi fighters spread out into a line-abreast formation. Something in the back of his mind told him that this was, most likely, the first combat encounter ever between Confederation and Kilrathi carrier planes. Neither side quite knew the doctrine, the training, of the other. Everything was up for grabs now.

The lead fighter opened fire with lasers, the range a bit too far. They closed at what Geoff felt was a frightening speed that all but insured a head-on collision. Vance opened up with his lasers, and Geoff pressed the firing button on his stick... but the fighters were already past them! At what he felt was the same instant, something rocked his ship, forward and starboard shields flashing red. He hadn't even seen the shots that hit him. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the four Kilrathi fighters break into a climbing turn, one of them trailing a streak of fire.

"Keep on the bombers," Vance announced. Geoff looked over again and saw that the number two slot in their section of four was empty. What was his name? Andrews, Anders? He had simply disappeared. Looking back again, he thought he saw an expanding fireball. A shadow swept over Geoff's cockpit and, startled, he looked back to see that Vance's starboard wing was directly over his cockpit. He pushed his nose down and banked to the right, yo-yoing out of position before finally slipping back into his slot. In the brief instant he was out of formation, the bombers loomed up before him. Vance opened up, but before Geoff could even fire a shot they were past and then banking into a hard turn to the right.

A stream of bolts slammed into Geoff's stern and, as they banked around, he saw that two of the tail gunners were zeroed in on him. He jinked slightly, trying to throw them off as his stern shield indicator began to glow from yellow to red. A mass driver round popped through, durasteel peeling back. He jinked again, the stream of shots going wide.

"Three of the fighters are bearing in 090, positive 40," Vance announced. "Keep on the bombers."

They came out of their turn, lined up, and charged in on the bombers, which were now lined up in a row. Vance opened up, aiming for the middle of the group. Geoff tried to line up the bomber in his sights, his opening shots going wide. He could see flashes of fire coming back but he ignored them, focusing on the target. Vance's shots continued to hammer across the top of the bomber, shards of armor flashing off as the rounds punched through the shield. Geoff tried to focus his own rounds in on the same spot, but went wide of the mark. The bomber loomed up, filling his screen, and he sensed more than saw Vance pull out in a tight, spinning turn. Geoff tried to hang onto Vance's wing. There was a flash of another bomber appearing. He fired, shots finally hitting something at last, then the target disappeared.

Everything was happening far faster than he could fully comprehend. He knew he should check shield levels, energy levels for weapons, damage control, position on Vance's wing, position of the bombers, position of the closing fighters, position of the carrier. He tried to stay focused simply on Vance, knowing that if he was to survive it would be by following the lead of someone far more experienced than himself.

They swept up into what was once called an Immelmann back on Earth, and again lined up on the bombers. A stream of light erupted from behind and Geoff caught a flashing red light on his screen, showing that an enemy fighter was hanging on his six o'clock position.

The bombers were straight ahead. Again Vance lined up on the one they had hammered before. At the same instant another section of fighters from Concordia swept in for a head-on attack and their target

disappeared in a shower of debris. Geoff focused on the next one in line and squeezed the trigger, his fire intersecting the stream of rounds from Vance.

The starboard wing of the bomber sheared off and the target spun out of control. At the same instant a hammer blow struck Geoff from behind.

\* \* \*

Prince Ratha lined up on his target, furious that the three fighters had managed to turn inside of him and position themselves for a second attack. His target kept bobbing and weaving erratically and he wondered, was it remarkable skill, or was it, rather, the flying of someone who did not know yet how to fly?

He closed to near point-blank range and finally opened up, his very first shot slamming into his opponents shield. He held the trigger down, switching to mass driver rounds, fearing that if he used lasers their instantaneous speed might hit the bombers straight ahead, while the slower rounds would miss the bombers completely by the time they arrived where the planes had been.

He could see the flashes of his enemy's shields, surprised that the tiny fighter could take so much punishment; an equal number of hits on his own ship would have destroyed it.

The middle bomber in the group disappeared as a second enemy section raced through the line, while his own target raised his sights and started to tear into the next bomber in line.

Ratha continued to fire, swearing vehemently, expecting the target to disintegrate, yet still the shields held.

Finally bright flashes erupted, showing that the shields had folded and he was now tearing into armor. Directly ahead he saw another bomber die. Momentarily diverted by the sight of the explosion, he did not see his target jerk abruptly into a vertical climb.

Pulling back on his stick, Geoff broke out of formation. "On my tail, Vance, breaking up!"

"Try and reform, I'm staying on the bombers." Geoff looked back over his shoulder, surprised to see that his tormentor was not behind him. The warning chime of shield overload beeped in his headset and he suddenly realized it had, in fact, been sounding for several seconds.

Still climbing away from the fight he continued to scan for the Cat fighter on his tail. His six position cleared, he pushed the stick forward and caught a flash of Vance finishing his run and banking over to his left, two fighters on his tail. Vance's number three was trailing a stream of fire as one of the fighters closed in to point-blank range.

Geoff continued to nose over, realizing that his inertial dampening had blinked off, power diverting to restore shields. Pulling four negative g's, he felt as though his stomach was about to explode out his mouth. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He lined up on the two enemy fighters just as number three exploded. Both of the Cats flew through the debris and started to line up on Vance, who was continuing to turn for another sweep on the bombers.

Geoff lined his sights up on the fighter to his left, and opened fire. The first shots were just astern and he pulled up slightly, then bore straight in. The stream of fire from his guns intersected just aft of the cockpit. Shields sparkled, flashed and, to his amazement, the ship disintegrated. He suddenly realized that he was

going straight in and tried to turn. There was another jolting blow as his fighter slammed through the debris, forward shields shorting out.

"One still on your tail, Vance!" Geoff cried as he hurtled down and out of the fight.

"Thanks, Tolwyn. Now, form up."

Geoff, feeling a flicker of resentment, yanked back hard on his stick, the sensation of his stomach coming out of his mouth replaced in an instant by the feeling that it was now buried in the soles of his feet.

"All fighters, all fighters, this is Concordia CIC. Enemy bombers are slowing. Believe this is in preparation for launch of torpedoes which can penetrate shields. Acquire torpedoes after launch and destroy them."

As Geoff continued into his climb he saw the bellies of four bombers straight ahead, and for the first time noticed the massive missiles that ran their entire length. An instinct told him to switch his gun cameras and surveillance gear on to continuous run. He spared a quick glance away, searched for the switches and slapped them on.

He clicked his radio.

"Tolwyn to Concordia, link on my vid and data sensor feed. Have missiles sighted."

"Copy, Tolwyn."

The missile under the bomber to his right flared to life, followed seconds later by the other three. Geoff focused on the first one while nosing over, trying to imagine an intersect point. For the first time since he had engaged the bombers he was aware that Concordia was nearby, the carrier filling his forward view. Guns on the carrier were concentrating fire forward, directly engaging the bombers. Geoff forced himself to concentrate on the missile. He opened fire, but the target was so damned small he found it impossible to lock on. The missile accelerated with incredible speed so that it snapped past his imagined intersect point seconds before he had closed. He nosed over, trying to follow, firing, his missed shots spraying against Concordia's shields. Fire from the Concordia blazed around him and another shudder ran through his fighter. Smoke billowed up into the cockpit.

He wasn't sure just where his target was now. He saw a glowing point of light, aimed at it, and held on. The missile detonated in a blue-white fireball of light and, for a gut-wrenching instant, Geoff feared that it had broken through Concordia's shields. He saw the blast wave flatten out on the outside of the carrier's shields, which glowed red hot.

He banked up hard, a violent shudder rattling his stick so that it felt as though his hands would be ripped off. Turning, he saw a second torpedo boring in. A fighter flashed past Geoff. Not truly believing what he saw, the fighter dove straight into the torpedo, and disappeared in the ensuing explosion.

The third torpedo continued on in, hitting the shield. Cursing madly, he tried to edge over to intercept... but the torpedo penetrated the shields and exploded amidships on the port side.

Concordia rolled up and over from the hammer blow, flame washing down the length of the carrier. He could see armor peeling back, and caught a momentary flash of an open deck area, exposed to the vacuum of space.

The port shield overloaded and winked off. The fourth torpedo closed in and, cursing helplessly, he

waited for it to deliver the death blow. The torpedo slammed into the side of the ship, punching straight through the open wound left by the previous missile... and nothing happened.

Geoff held his breath, waiting for the explosion which never came. With the port midships shields gone, Kilrathi fighters closed in, firing off dumb fire missiles, blasting off sections of armor and gun mounts. Concordia could still die, he realized, and, struggling for control, he tried to press back in to the attack.

\* \* \*

Prince Ratha watched, unbelieving, as the fourth torpedo failed to detonate.

"All fighters, close and destroy her!" he cried.

His lust for blood was all-consuming. He had already damaged one enemy, killed a second, and almost destroyed the third, but the enemy's plane refused to die and the wily pilot had dived straight at his carrier, pulling off at the last second, leaving Ratha exposed to the defensive batteries.

He turned to do another run on the carrier, racing down its length, firing his guns until all his energy bled off and they shut down. Furious, he pulled back, contemplating the performance of the ultimate act, a dive straight into the ship.

"My lord, we are being recalled."

A fighter darted directly in front of Ratha and then throttled back, forcing him to turn away from his suicidal intent. Ratha was tempted to fire on his wingman, but, mastering control over himself, he turned aside.

"My lord, we are being recalled."

"Damn you, clear the way! The carrier is defenseless. One more blow and it's destroyed!"

"Its shields are coming back up my lord."

Ratha looked back at Concordia and saw that his wingman was right, the unmistakable shimmer of shielding was coming back on-line.

"We can strike at it. We can bring it back down!"

"My lord, we must escort the remaining bombers back. There'll be another strike, but now we must protect our bombers."

"Damnation to the bombers, they failed!"

"Half our fighters are destroyed or damaged. We are ordered back by your father, my lord."

Breathing deeply, he realized that the recall tone had been sounding in his headset, most likely for the last several minutes.

Silently cursing his father, he turned away from the damaged carrier and locked on to the signal beam back to his ship.

It seemed that in an instant the enemy fighters were gone. Where they had gone, he wasn't sure. He scanned back and forth. It looked like a fight was still going on astern of Concordia. Checking his screen, he saw a dozen red blips, followed by three blue flashes. The smoke in his cockpit thickened, and he realized it was time to turn back as the warning alarm sounded. His damage control screen showed critical damage in half a dozen areas. The eject warning alarm sounded. Concordia was only a click off his port side, but accelerating fast. He realized that, if he ejected, chances were there would never be a pick up.

"Tolwyn to Concordia, request immediate clearance for emergency landing."

"Concordia to Tolwyn. Your display shows critical."

"Eject and get left behind Concordia? I don't think so. Request clearance."

Even as he talked, he struggled to line up on the landing bay. There was no reply and he knew the landing officer was consulting the Combat Information Center. If his landing was viewed as a threat to the carrier, he'd be ordered to eject. He held his breath, waiting for the verdict.

"Tolwyn, cleared to land, make it quick, son."

"Copy, Concordia."

He punched his landing gear down and sighed with relief when he saw three green lights.

"Tolwyn, this is landing control. No need to acknowledge. You're doing fine, a little high, bring it down, down... fine, now back off your speed, a little too fast... hold steady, hold steady... cut engines!"

Geoff felt the faint shudder of passing the airlock. A second later he touched down, hitting his brakes, which immediately failed. A small crash truck was waiting and, even as he skidded past it, a spray of white foam erupted, hosing down his fighter. He skidded down the deck, slamming into the safety nets, and then everything was still.

Stunned, he looked around as the foam sprayed over his canopy, obscuring the view. The canopy popped back, released from the outside. A crash and rescue team member was above him, concealed under a white fire-resistant hood, holding an extinguisher. He hosed down the cockpit, threw the extinguisher aside and grabbed hold of Geoff under the armpits, hoisting him up.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Geoff gasped as he was bodily pulled from the plane and then dropped down to two ground crew personnel, dressed in fire resistant gear as well. One of them threw a fire blanket over Geoff and, half carrying him, they ran across the bay, getting down behind a blast shield. A medic was waiting for them as they unclipped Geoff's helmet.

"Damn it, I'm okay."

"I don't think so, sir," the medic said, pointing down to his legs. The lower half of Geoff's pressure suit was lacerated, flame scorched, and for the first time he realized that he was hurt, the pain from the burns slicing into his brain.

He looked back at his ship and was stunned. Most of the upper aft section was gone, scorched wires hanging out, durasteel armor peeled back like crumpled tinfoil. Smoke was cascading out of the plane. A tractor with an extended boom arm latched onto the back of the fighter and pulled it clear of the safety

net. A warning light flashed on the far bulkhead. The crash crew, still spraying the fighter with fire retardant, scrambled back as an airlock field formed around the bulkhead, which then slid back to reveal open space on the other side. The tractor pushed the fighter through the airlock, gave it a sharp blow and disconnected from the fighter, which tumbled out into space and disappeared from view.

"Well, Tolwyn, you just blew off an even fifty million," one of the rescue personnel announced calmly as he stood back up and prepared to greet the next fighter coming in.

"How's the pain, ensign?" the medic asked.

"I can handle it. I want another fighter, so don't give me anything now."

"Guess someone upstairs likes you, ensign. I heard the communications. Didn't you know you couldn't eject?" and he pointed again to the torn space suit.

Geoff numbly shook his head.

"The data board showed your fighter was set to cook off. If it had let go once you landed it could have wiped this whole deck. I'll tell you sir, everyone here was crapping when you came through the airlock. Anyhow, the word came down from the top to bring you in."

"I want to get back into the fight," Geoff announced, trying to block out the surge of pain.

"Thanks for nailing that torpedo. There's an inferno down on decks ten through thirteen, port side. If we'd taken another hit, that would have been it."

Geoff was surprised that word of his lucky shot was already known by the crew.

Geoff looked away from the burns blistering his legs while the medic gingerly peeled the burned and tattered fragments of his flight suit off. The landing bay area had obviously taken damage. The paint on the inner bulkhead wall had peeled off, the metal underneath discolored from a fire that he sensed was still raging on the other side as wisps of smoke curled off the wall. The air was thick with acrid smoke. Half a dozen forms were stretched out on the deck, covered in blankets, blood oozing from several of them. A chaplain was kneeling by a bloodied crew chief, holding her hands and, with a shock of horror, Geoff realized that the crew chief's legs were missing. Even as he watched, the chaplain leaned over and gently closed the chief's eyes, then stood up and went to the next wounded man.

Another fighter came in. As it touched down the nose gear collapsed, a shower of sparks spraying out. The fighter lurched to a stop as the crash crew closed in. The canopy popped open and Geoff smiled at the sight of Vance climbing out. Geoff was momentarily diverted by a stab of pain as the medic, using a pair of tweezers, plucked a piece of durasteel out of his calf. Vance tossed his helmet to the crew chief and came up to Tolwyn, kneeling down by his side, sparing a quick glance at his legs and grimacing.

"Thought you'd bought it, Geoff. Are you all right?"

"Think so."

"Listen, ensign, next time, stay on my wing."

Geoff looked straight into Vance's eyes and then saw the faintest of smiles.

"Thanks for saving my ass. You did good for a rookie," Vance finally said, patting Geoff's shoulder. "Damn, the good Lord most certainly protects fools. Andrews and Foch each had nearly a thousand hours and bought it, yet here you are."

The medic stood back up and motioned for one of the ship's doctors to come over. The doctor stopped for a moment, listened while the medic whispered something, nodded, then walked away.

Geoff looked up anxiously as the medic knelt back down by his side, reached into his kit, pulled out a high pressure injector and dialed in a mixture.

"Say, what the hell are you doing?" Geoff asked. "I'm okay."

"No you're not, ensign. You're not just burned. Hell, you've got some durasteel frags in you. You're heading up to surgery."

Before Geoff could say another word the medic slapped the injector against Geoff's thigh and hit the button. Within seconds the world around Tolwyn started to go soft and fuzzy.

"You son of a bitch," Geoff moaned, "I can still fly."

"Not today, Geoff," Vance said reassuringly.

Geoff looked up and saw a deck officer standing to one side and motioning to Vance.

"Sir, we're forming up a covering unit. You're needed."

Vance nodded.

"Take care, kid. I'll come up and see you later."

Geoff laid his head back on the hard durasteel deck. Strange, he could hear the vibrations, the distant thump of an internal explosion rumbling through the ship, and then it seemed to dissolve into a soft memory of England and home.

# Chapter Fourteen

## CONFEDERATION FLEET HEADQUARTERS

Mumbling a stream of obscenities that even his staff was amazed to hear, Skip Banbridge watched the vid display.

"This is no longer the time for partisan politics," Senator More announced. "Some might say that we see now the harvest sown by the current administration for its years of neglect of the fleet. Our fleet was caught by surprise and those responsible will be held accountable, but now is not the time for that. But I can assure you that the appropriations bill which I have labored so long, and so hard for, will be placed upon the floor of the Senate this very afternoon."

The senator struck a pained expression. He pushed back his mop of wavy gray hair from his eyes and looked straight at the camera, as if struggling for control.

"I pray for all our brave men and women who are sacrificing themselves at this very moment. In spirit, I stand there with them. In spirit, I will make any sacrifice necessary to turn back this dastardly aggression. Though it is obvious our fleet was caught totally by surprise, I can assure you that new blood and new muscle will be infused and we shall go on, together, for victory."

He dramatically lowered his head.

"Let us pray together..."

Disgusted, Skip switched the vid off.

"He'll be coming after you tomorrow," one of the staff said.

"Let the bastard try. I want one of you to find the vid from last summer, the one where that Tolwyn boy laid into him. Get it over to the president. Find a vid newscaster we know still believes in the truth."

He shook his head. "That'll be a challenge but find one, have it shown."

"New burst signal updates coming in, sir, from comm central."

Banbridge activated the large holo field in the middle of the planning room.

A three dimensional map of the Confederation appeared, showing the frontier and demilitarized zone. Three large red arrows showed where identified attack groups had penetrated, the primary axis of the attack striking at McAuliffe. A task force, with a battleship and a cruiser squadron, was striking into the Yarin system, opposite where the old Varni Republic used to be. A third arrow was directed out on the flank, indicating an attack into the Landreich. A dozen other arrows showed where smaller raiding forces were, or where unconfirmed reports indicated incursions. One of the arrows was already two jump points in, with a data indicator that three frigates and a cruiser had devastated a forward base world with nuclear weapons and then pushed on. The one area that was quiet was the Facin Sector. The phony war had been just that.

The Kilrathi didn't even care about where the war had started, and were not even bothering to counterattack. Orders had already been issued for the task force to pull back out to cover the Yarin sector.

It looked as though the entire frontier was collapsing. More than thirty billion citizens of the Confederation were, at this moment, facing annihilation or captivity... and there was nothing he could do about it.

Along the entire jump line from McAuliffe back to Earth, there was only one squadron of destroyers besides Dayan's task force. If the fleet at McAuliffe was totally destroyed, nothing could stop the Kilrathi from storming straight on, into the inner worlds. If there was anything left out there, he could only pray that whoever was in charge knew how to save the ships and get out.

It had been nearly twenty-four hours since the action had opened. Burst signal back to McAuliffe was down again, and all he could do was wait and pray.

## MCAULIFFE SYSTEM

Coughing and spitting, Valeri Olson crossed through the damage control doors and stepped back into the Combat Information Center. A damage control ensign handed her a bottle of oxygen and she gratefully took a couple of breaths. Wiping the soot from her face, she looked around the deck. The ventilation system filters had already overloaded, so the room had a surreal sense to it; smoke-filled, red lights from battle displays illuminating the center in a Dantesque light. Turner was standing in the middle of the room, waiting for her.

"How is it?" he asked, not even bothering to look at her, his gaze fixed on the holo field.

"There's at least a hundred dead or missing. Fire is still raging on deck twelve, sectors B through K. It's a hell of a mess back there, but we can still fight."

"The warhead?"

She smiled. "The armorer said she's a dud. He said it was the damnedest thing, a key link in the firing mechanism was installed backwards. A test scan would show it in place, but an actual firing, and nothing."

Surprised, Turner looked at her.

"All I can think is that we heard reports about how the Kilrathi use slave labor. Maybe somebody decided to do a little sabotage."

The irony of it all caught Turner's attention. Whoever installed the card backwards had saved his carrier, yet he would never know who it was, nor would the saboteur know just how much they had accomplished.

"And here?"

Turner nodded towards the holo display. He had been on his feet for over twenty-four hours as they made the long retreat out of the system, maneuvering around the primary star to finally rendezvous with Dayan, coming down from jump point Delta.

"Their carriers are starting to move away from McAuliffe, heading towards us. Two battleships are bombarding the surface, wiping out any pockets of resistance. It looks like ten assault transports are moving in to disembark a landing force."

He held up a pointer and started to trace out particular points of the battle.

"Did anyone else get out?"

Turner shook his head. "Three frigates, a couple of destroyers, one light cruiser, all the rest are gone."

"My God," she whispered, "that's it?"

"That's it. We've lost over eighty ships, the base—" he paused, "—and at least two hundred thousand personnel."

"Where's Dayan now?"

He pointed back to the holo field and a blue flash appeared.

"She is coming in to rendezvous with us now."

"And you're still going to do this?"

Turner nodded.

"Val, we've got to do something. The Third Marine Division down on McAuliffe is putting up a hell of a fight. We can't write them off. Tactically, the Cats should have taken off in hot pursuit of us before we could link up with Dayan. But, for God knows what reason, they stayed in orbit around McAuliffe, providing space-to-ground support. The Marines and surface-to-space interdiction systems tore things up, and they lost a lot of birds."

He fell silent, remembering the pullback with Commando Six, two of his men left behind. I should have died with them, I should have stayed. I'll be damned if I let them down now. Ulandi's down there.

He looked over at Val.

"If you think I'm out of line, Val, tell me. We're talking about going back in."

She shook her head. "That's a good division down there, Turner, thirty thousand men and women. We're not going to abandon them."

"More like ten or fifteen by now," Turner replied sadly. "The damn Cats just nuked the hell out of the place. The only thing relatively intact is the airstrips. But Val, if we go back it might very well mean this ship."

"If the situation was reversed, what would they do?" she said with a smile.

"Come back and try to get our asses out, or die doing it," he replied softly. "But we've got to think of this carrier and Dayan's task force. We're the only assets left between here and the inner worlds. Even if we do fight our way in, there's no way in hell we'll be able to stay. All we can hope to do is cut them up enough so that the old Third has a fighting chance, then get the hell out."

"Sir, if we turn about and run, everyone will know we've abandoned our comrades. We're going to have to come about anyhow, and face off against the bastards, and we might as well do it here. Maybe, if we twist their tails enough, it'll stop them from pushing on, even if we do go down in the process."

Turner nodded wearily. It was the same argument he had used for himself. It had to be more than sentiment, more than guilt for a dead team lost twenty years ago. Yes, it was those things, but he could not allow himself the luxury of letting the personal side interfere with a decision that could very well affect the outcome of the war. Dayan was in favor of the suggestion as well. There was part of him that wished the comm link with Banbridge was back up, so he could push the decision to Skip, but he knew that was dodging the shot. And besides, he knew what Skip would do.

"Hell of a day," Valeri said, looking over at Turner.

"Thanks again for not putting up an argument when I came on board."

"Hell, sir, if I had you might have flunked me if I ever came back to the Academy for some graduate work."

The Academy... a long way from that now. He thought of his office, the photo of Marine Six, the other of Midway and the suicidal gesture of the Torpedo Squadrons.

"Well, Val," he said quietly, "maybe they won't cut the budget after all."

"Commander Turner?"

The comm screen lit up to show Rear Admiral Naomi Dayan, her pale blue eyes blazing with an intense emotion. "I've reviewed your suggested tactical plan and am in agreement."

Turner nodded grimly.

"I'm ordering the fleet to come about now and close at top speed."

Gilkarg paced back and forth angrily, looking at the plot board. Everything was confusion. The first assault wave, which was supposed to drop six hours after the initial attack and secure the landing sites, had failed abysmally. An entire legion had been annihilated before they had even touched down, slaughtered by hidden surface-to-air batteries which had held their fire until the transports were in the atmosphere. Nargth had ordered the direct attack, rather than transferring the troops over to landing craft, claiming that all resistance had been neutralized and that it would be a waste of time to go through the transfer.

As a result the other transports had been pulled back out of orbit and the Imperial shock troops were just now completing the transfer to assault landing craft, while his bombers and fighters continued to pound the planet's surface.

This was not what he wanted his carriers to engage in. The old doctrines were gone, it was the surviving enemy carrier and the new one that had come into the system which should be his targets. Damn Nargth for sending the dispatch to the Emperor about the opening stage of the attack. The orders had come for his own group to stay near McAuliffe until the base had been seized, and only then for the fleet to push on in pursuit.

"My Lord."

Gilkarg looked over at his tactical command officer.

"My Lord, the enemy carriers and their accompanying ships are reported to be moving at high speed."

Gilkarg walked over to the tactical display and examined the red blips.

"They're not fleeing, they're coming back," Gilkarg whispered.

"Yes, my Lord."

Interesting. Suicidal, two carriers against his five, two battleships against eight, and even greater odds with the smaller ships. Suicidal. Excellent, there would be no lengthy stern chase across half a dozen systems. They could not stand by and watch their base fall. And yet, disturbing in a vague way. It was a gesture he himself would make, rather than retreat and admit defeat. The humans and their allies were

degenerate, why would they come back when fleeing was the only logical choice? It violated, as well, the Ninth Maxim, "always reinforce triumph, learn to back away from defeat."

"Our strike forces?"

"My lord, nearly two thirds are currently engaged down on the planet, or refitting for another strike."

"Closing time for their fleet?"

"They'll have to clear the force of destroyers shadowing them. Four hours, my lord, if they close with scoops closed."

Gilkarg looked at the plot board. Damn it all, should I send the next strike in to insure that the landing sites are neutralized, or start to refit?

"Hail from Admiral Nargth."

Gilkarg looked up at the screen.

"My Prince. I assume you've seen that they're coming back."

"Yes, Admiral. Nothing to worry about. We'll meet them far forward."

"I need my landing forces protected. The arrival of their additional forces is disturbing."

"We outnumber them in total firepower by better than six to one now."

"So why are they coming back?"

"Madness."

"I ask that you continue the bombardment with your next strike wave. There'll be time enough to refit and meet them."

Gilkarg hesitated. It would be better to start moving his carriers now, rather than delay the additional two hours or more it would take to send the next strike down and recover it.

"You said we outnumber them six to one in fire power. My attack must go in now, and the Emperor will not be pleased if yet another legion is lost to their ground fire."

Though that mistake was Nargth's, Gilkarg nodded in agreement.

"We'll launch the next attack, then move to destroy the rest of their fleet. We should be able to recover all strike craft in two hours, and have time to move out against them."

The pilots for the next strike were filing in and, spotting Tolwyn, Turner went up to the ensign.

"You don't have to do this, Geoff. You're listed as down."

"If you were in my boots, sir, what would you do? Hell, it was only a couple of frags."

"Second-degree burns, a dozen durasteel fragments and part of a rudder pedal dug out of your legs, Tolwyn. Now, get the hell back to sick bay."

"I've been out of the fight for over a day, sir. There's a hell of a lot of people out on damage control or at their battle stations in worse shape than I am, sir. I'm going."

Turner looked at him closely, trying to judge whether he should ground the boy. He'd done his part. Sheer dumb luck he was still alive. Again sentiment. My heart telling me to order the boy off-line, save his life, but we need every pilot we can get for this counterstrike.

"How's the pain?"

"Hurt's like hell, but I tossed the pills they brought me so I'm clear. Don't worry." He forced a smile. "I can handle it."

"All right, then," Turner said wearily and patted him on the shoulder.

Vance Richards, eyes rimmed with exhaustion, came in last and Turner broke away from Geoff, motioning for him to sit down.

"How is it out there?"

"Well, sir, their destroyers didn't expect us to come blowing straight through with scoops closed. We lost two more fighters, but the road's wide open to McAuliffe."

"How many missions have you flown since yesterday?"

"Six, sir."

"You should be off the board on this one, Richards."

Vance smiled and shook his head. "This is the big one, sir. I hate to tell you this to your face, but I'll simply disobey. We've got more fighters than pilots, and you'll need every one you've got for this crazy stunt."

Turner nodded sadly.

"Just do me a favor," he said, lowering his voice. "Keep an eye on Geoff. The kid barely survived it yesterday. I should ground him, but I can't."

"I'll try, sir."

Turner walked up to the front of the room and scanned the assembled pilots. Twenty-three were left, half a dozen of them obviously wounded.

"This will be short and sweet. You start launch in seven minutes. For once we have more planes than pilots so, those of you with damaged craft, your crew chiefs will take you to your new ones. This is an all-fighter strike from Concordia, bomber pilots, you'll be in Wildcats. ArkRoyal's bombers will provide the strike power. Their mission will be to strike against the closest carrier. Combat Information is currently showing all their carriers are moving away from McAuliffe to intercept."

"Now, here's the tough part. Just before hitting the carrier you will break off, head for McAuliffe, loop the planet and nail the transports and landing craft. Once the bombers strike their carrier, ArkRoyal's fighters will form the second wave and loop in after you. Remember, that is the real main target in this attack. The only hope Third Marine has of holding the planet is our dumping their assault landing craft before they hit the surface. You'll only have time for one sweep. You can't slow down, you'll need all the velocity you have to loop back out and make it to the rendezvous point, so it's a straight in and then out strike. Toggle all your missiles into your computer and let it do the acquisition and firing. You just handle your guns.

"Continue your loop and get back for the hookup with this ship. It's going to be tight, but you can do it. Your nav computers will be loaded with the trajectory down. Let your autopilots handle the final approach on the planet and then the run back out."

"Sir, that's one hell of a mission," one of the pilots said, and there was an obvious question in his voice about the orders coming from a commander they had never fought under.

"I know it's a tall one, lieutenant. Here's why. The Lord willing, we'll take down one, maybe two carriers. But we want to strike a psychological blow as well. The assault troops are the pampered elite of the royal family. Remember that as you go in and start frying their hairy asses. You will be killing Cats who the damn Emperor considers to be kin. Bluntly speaking, this strike is to give him the middle finger. It will make him think twice and it will show him we plan to fight as hard and as dirty as he does. That strike will kick him even harder than dumping a carrier."

Turner lowered his head.

"Prudence dictates that we just get the hell outta here and save the carriers. But that means leaving a lot of damn good marines to die. If we can smash the transports and landing craft, it just might make them stop dead in their tracks. We've got a few surprises in store on this one, but the main thing I need to count on, lieutenant, is you pilots. There's no sense in handing you a bunch of crap. Some of you, maybe most of you, won't make it back. Hell, there might not even be a carrier to come back to. But it will send one hell of a clear message to the other side that we are not going to take their shit, then turn tail and run. What we do here might very well stop them cold and give everyone back home the time needed to marshal our forces and prepare for the struggle to come."

There was a harsh bitterness to his voice. The lieutenant stood silent for a moment, many of the other pilots looking at him, as if expecting a decision. He finally nodded.

"Fine, let's go kill the bastards."

"Sir, what the hell good will fighters be against what's out there?" a pilot asked from the back of the crowd.

"We've got to hit back. We've got to show that there's still some fight in us, to make them think twice before pushing further in." He hesitated. "The bridge crews on the frigates Masada and Hermes have volunteered to ram their targets."

Geoff stood silent, letting the thought sink in. He had made a similar decision in the desperate seconds when it looked as though the torpedo attack would destroy Concordia. But that was a moment of rage, this was different. Undoubtedly Dayan had asked them to do it, and that alone was a command he wondered if he could ever give. He realized that, if he wished to command, he might very well someday have to order men and women to certain death in order to save the Confederation. He made a silent

prayer that it would never have to be the way Dayan just had.

What of the bridge crews, though? It was not a snap decision and then it was over. There were the long final minutes, the realization of all that would be forever lost.

"Oh, God," Valeri whispered, interrupting Geoff's thoughts, "Dayan's son is the exec on Masada ."

The group gathered around Turner looked over at Valeri, stunned by the news.

"Escort the frigates and bombers in, but break for McAuliffe the moment the signal is given. The timing on this has to be precise," Turner continued, his voice hard. "The battleships Yorkshire and North Carolina and the cruiser squadrons will be providing support as well. The three other frigates from Dayan's group will follow Ark Royal's fighters in on the loop around as well, but it will be you people who hit first. Make sure those Cats never forget the name Concordia" .

Turner surveyed the pilots one last time.

"Good luck, and may God protect all of you. Pilots, man your planes."

"All fighters to be armed with ship-to-ship missiles, as many as they can carry," Gilkarg announced. "If we had had a half dozen more out there, Concordia would have been destroyed."

He looked back at the data board. The last of the fighters were down and he felt a vague uneasiness. With the sixth carrier gone, and the casualties taken in the strikes on the ground, he had no reserves as originally planned. There should be a forward screen out even now. With the sixth carrier, he could have had a second wave held back in reserve to blunt their attack, then leap forward to finish Concordia and Ark Royal . He paced the deck, waiting as his fighters launched and moved forward to intercept the incoming attack.

"My Lord! I think you should look at this."

He looked up at the screen.

"Here come the Ark Royals! "

Geoff saw the spread of blue blips deployed off to his left, clustered around the frigates. North Carolina and Yorkshire were a hundred clicks above the formation. In spite of the pain in his legs, he felt a momentary surge of elation. Kicking in afterburners he moved up on Vance's right. This time they'd have to fight as a two-plane formation, and in the first couple of minutes Vance slowly weaved back and forth, Geoff sensing that his friend was trying to at least give him a couple of minutes' worth of practice.

"All units, all units," It was Ark Royal's CIC, which was coordinating the attack. "The Kilrathi carriers are launching fighters now."

A real-time scan, transmitted from Ark Royal , appeared on Geoff's screen. The five carriers were moving forward, away from McAuliffe. The shattered base was now lost to view on the far side of the planet.

The seconds dragged out, and finally, on his own screen, he picked up the forward edge of the Kilrathi defenses, scrambling into position.

"We must vector our bombers onto the frigates and battleships now!"

The Crown Prince was about to shout a defiant no back at his launch officer, but held his temper in check. Recovery of all the strike craft from McAuliffe had taken longer than expected. It was one thing to do it in practice drills, something far different when damaged craft were coming in, wounded pilots missing approach, and, worst yet, fighters crashing and blocking launch ramps on two carriers. His sortie to meet the suicidal attack was only now moving, an hour later than he had desired.

He struggled with the decision.

"They have eighty or more fighters accompanying two frigates in the first wave, my lord. Three frigates and the battleships are maneuvering behind them. Our own simulators and planning suggested that they might have torpedoes, but too big to carry on bombers. This could be their counterstrike. Repulse it, my lord, and we still might be able to recover and counterstrike yet again before they escape."

He closed his eyes, weighing the possibilities and then finally reached a decision.

"Is the launch deck on Tukgah cleared yet?"

"Just in the last five minutes, my lord. They're still recovering craft."

"Order the bombers and fighters on carrier Tukgah to hold. That should give their crews time to arm fully, our pilots a few moments of rest. Once the enemy attack is cleared we will immediately launch a counterattack from Tukgah and catch them while they are recovering their planes. All planes on the other four carriers are to launch."

"My lord, it takes time to load and calibrate the torpedoes. If we launch all bombers, some might go without proper loads."

"Get them out anyhow. They can at least draw fire to protect those which are ready to attack."

The launch officer seemed ready to raise another point. Then, bowing low, he withdrew.

The comm screen to Nargth winked to life, the admiral looking at him anxiously.

"What is happening out there?" Nargth asked, in his anxiety forgetting to address Gilkarg by the proper honorific.

"We are moving later than expected. If you had not insisted on one final strike I would have been in far better position."

"My assault landing craft are just starting to disembark. Should I wait till your action is completed?"

Gilkarg shook his head. The final pounding of the planet had battered down what was left of their ground-to-space resistance. If Nargth delayed it might allow them to bring some new surprises back on-line.

"Go in now!"

"I would prefer stronger fighter escort."

"You have fighters from your cruisers. That should be sufficient for what's left."

"That is your decision, then," Nargth replied coldly.

"I have four battleships here," the Crown Prince retorted coldly. "I would prefer your releasing the rest in your command."

"Against their two?" Nargth asked. "I thought you said your carriers could handle them. I need my battleships for close-in bombardment support. Our supply of space-to-surface missiles is nearly exhausted, I need their particle and laser batteries."

Gilkarg angrily snapped the channel off without bothering to reply.

Yet again the first sweep caught Geoff by surprise, so that he did not even fire a shot. It was a blow to his pride and confidence, making him realize that, even though he had by some miracle survived the last mission, he was still a very long way from being considered a veteran pilot.

The sweep of a dozen Kilrathi fighters striking line abreast shot past, with two Confederation and three Cat pilots dying instantly.

"Hold escort," Vance said calmly. "We stay with the frigates."

Geoff looked back over at the Ark Royal information display. A vast number of red dots seemed to be converging and he swallowed hard. Making a desperate defense was one thing, but to go into the jaws of the lion was something far different.

He was startled as a brilliant flash of light erupted overhead. The heavy forward batteries of North Carolina and Yorkshire were opening up. He had once seen a live fire demonstration by a battleship when he had spent the summer of his junior year as a midshipman with the Earth defense fleet, but this was far more intense and frightful because, a split second later, streaks of light slammed back in from a Kilrathi battle wagon.

The slugging match continued as three more Kilrathi battleships added their power to the exchange, so that it appeared as if all of space would be consumed by fire.

Jukaga braced himself as another blow rocked the ship. Nargth stood unperturbed, arms folded, watching the battle screen. Something about this battle did not seem right. The two carriers and two battleships of the Confederation could have made good their escape, yet now they had turned about to come back. This was not in character with how they thought. Taking a deep breath, he stepped up to Nargth.

"Something is not right about this attack, my admiral."

Nargth looked over at Jukaga as if his presence was an annoyance. The cub had served absolutely no useful purpose in this campaign, his presence an embarrassment.

"They will die, it is that simple."

"My admiral, I think they are going for the carriers. They have some stratagem, a surprise."

"With what?" Nargth sniffed. "Their commander does what I would do. Better to die than return

announcing such a defeat. We will bag their battleships and end this battle."

"My admiral, may I dare to suggest that you divert fire to the attack below us. Knock out their frigates and fighters, then take on their battleships."

"Our target is there," Nargth said disdainfully, pointing at the flashing targets which were now visible on the high-resolution view screen. "It is battleship against battleship, damnation to their carriers, and ours for that matter."

"I pray you are correct," Jukaga replied, "but I fear you are not."

Nargth fixed him with an icy stare and Jukaga withdrew.

"Launch!"

Ratha grunted as he was slammed back into his seat. Clearing his carrier, he banked over sharply and darted towards the spread of targets laid out before him. This fight would not afford him the same opportunity for glory that the attack on Concordia had offered. His pride still ached from not having destroyed the ship, but at least here was the chance to add more kills to his record.

Geoff looked straight overhead again. The four Kilrathi battleships were awash in fire and light as their batteries poured out a continual salvo. Only a few of the secondary, bottom mounted batteries were firing down on the attack wave of fighters. Streaks of light flashed past and Geoff saw one of the Ark Royals disintegrate, and then they were past. A massive dogfight was building up just behind him as yet more Cat fighters swept through their ranks, then turned to engage. A blow shook his fighter. He saw a Cat drop into his six position, and then bank off as another fighter came in behind his attacker. He looked to his right and saw the two frigates' shields glowing.

The forward edge of the carrier escorts now engaged, four frigates sweeping in on intersecting runs, dozens of lights crisscrossing back and forth, a spread of half a hundred missiles dropping. Geoff's headphones sounded with a high-pitched warble. He looked at his screen and saw a seeker blinking, closing. Firing off flares, he continued to watch it. The seeker turned away, went to reacquire, then locked on the heat of a frigates engines instead.

"There's some bombers," Vance announced, "let's break them up."

Geoff edged his throttle forward, keeping pace with Vance and the other Concordia fighters as they surged forward. Two of the sections broke left into a sweeping turn while the other sections bore straight in. The bombers had slowed to a stop and were reversing thrust in order to keep themselves in front of the frigates. For several precious seconds they were sitting targets. Geoff lined up on the nose of one and held his firing button down, shields taking the strike, shimmering hot. He was tempted to drop a dumb fire missile on it, but orders were to hold them for the second part of the mission. Suddenly the bomber disintegrated from the blows, its bow shearing off. He banked slightly to stay on with Vance, who was providing the same treatment for a second bomber, which detonated just as Geoff added his fire to the strike.

"Not giving you a partial on that one, Geoff," Vance announced.

Geoff grinned as they pushed on through the formation.

"Concordia, we break in ten seconds."

Geoff felt a flash of disappointment. He wanted to stay in this fight, but the other target was still waiting.

"We lost Hermes!" a voice crackled on the radio.

Geoff looked over his shoulder and saw the frigate breaking up, and then completely disappearing as three torpedoes slammed into the expanding wreckage. He could see that Masada had taken a hit as well, one of its engines was down, and flame was pouring back from the nose.

"Concordia strike, break in three, two, one... now!"

Geoff nosed over, lining up straight on the north pole of McAuliffe. The preprogrammed nav point for the diving attack flashed on and he let his autopilot lock it in.

"Close maneuvering scoops now, go to full afterburner acceleration, now!"

He slammed his scoops shut, cutting down on all drag and then punched in afterburners. It was going to be one hell of a fast ride in, he thought. The one big question, though, was whether they would be coming back.

"Masada to Ark Royal, we are going in!" The cry echoed in his headset. He looked up and over his shoulder but could no longer see what was happening. Another voice now came on the link. He recognized the words as Hebrew and he felt his throat tighten, knowing what the young executive officer was saying... "This is Masada... the Lord is God, the Lord is One."

The Crown Prince watched the attack come in. What were they doing? Neither frigate had fired. One was dead, the other dying. The few bombers with the strike had suddenly diverted and were now diving towards McAuliffe, while the battleships had just executed a cowardly turn and were breaking the action off. The single frigate, surrounded by fighters, continued to press forward, trailing fire, and then the realization hit.

"Signal Tukgah!" he roared. "Full evasive, full evasive now!"

Jukaga stood mesmerized, understanding exactly what they were doing. Two of the fighters ahead of the frigate continued straight in, not wavering a fraction. They impacted the shield of Tukgah amidships, the shield flaring to life, but easily handling the blow. A second later the frigate struck at the same spot. The forward edge of the frigate flared into molten titanium and durasteel, overloading the shield and driving a hole through it. The aft end of the ship, disintegrating as well, slammed forward through the hole plowing into the side of the carrier.

The carrier's thin durasteel armor resisted the blow for several milliseconds, until it, too, melted down. The remaining mass of the frigate now blew into the interior of the ship, sweeping the flight bay where sixty bombers and fighters, fully loaded, waited for launch. If the bay had been empty the carrier might have been crippled, but still could have survived. The spray of molten metal hit the bay like a hurricane, touching off the fuel inside the nearest bomber. An instant later the bomber's ordnance, including a torpedo that was indeed functional, detonated, setting off the next bomber in line. The chain reaction swept down the deck, faster than an eye could detect, while the remains of the frigate plowed crosswise into the heart of the ship, dragging along the exploding wreckage of half a dozen bombers and fighters.

Tukgah ruptured wide open in an expanding fireball of light, the explosion taking a dozen or more Kilrathi and Confederation fighters that were nearby along with it.

Admiral Nargth's arms dropped to his side as he watched the explosion wash across the screen. Jukaga stood behind him, not daring to speak. A moment later he finally turned and looked back at Jukaga.

"You were right," he whispered.

Jukaga knew it was best not to respond, and said nothing.

Nargth turned to face his staff.

"I fear we have underestimated our foes," he said, his voice shaking. "These humans have Zaga, the warrior spirit, as well."

"Scratch one flattop! Masada did it!"

Geoff squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, blinking back the tears.

"Concordia strike." It was Hawkins, their wing leader. "We'll only have one pass, so make it count. I've just been relayed a signal from Third Marine. The enemy landing force is going in."

The planet was racing up so that it looked as though they were going to slam into the atmosphere and burn up. Geoff hoped that the preprogramming was on the mark. He braced himself as the top of the planet filled half his forward view.

The autopilot flipped his fighter over and started to fire retros. Hanging upside down relative to the planet, the top of the world swept by underneath him. The scorched orange-red ball filled his view and he counted off the seconds, waiting, knowing that the force of gravity was looping them down and around towards the equator and McAuliffe.

A light flared beneath him, and he realized it was a fighter that must have skimmed into the atmosphere, been pulled down and disintegrated. On his forward screen he saw some Kilrathi fighters coming over the top of the world in pursuit.

"We've got a hot target," Hawkins cried. "The landing craft are out!"

After several minutes of transit, the autopilot flipped Geoff's fighter back over and his target acquisition light started to blink.

"We've hit the jackpot!" Hawkins cried. "Pick your targets and go for it! Look out for the damn escorts!"

Exuberant cries filled the comm link. Geoff spared a quick glance at his battle screen as his computer switched on its own radar and swept the area ahead. The entire forward edge of the screen glowed red with targets. Geoff toggled in to Hawkins' computer, which would take the data analysis from each of the strike fighters and then allocate targets so that no two attackers would go for the same target. Less than a second later, yellow circles appeared around half a dozen of the landing craft, indicating which targets his computer had been assigned.

Several hundred landing craft were strung out beneath the transports. Above them, however, were three battleships and at least a dozen cruisers, which had been providing fire support down on the surface of the planet. Far below, down on the surface, Geoff could see the smoke and flashes of fire from what had

once been the Confederation's most important base beyond Earth. Apparently some resistance was still being offered, as a side channel picked up a signal from two Hurricane fighters. There was even a flash of fire from a ground-based laser battery.

A firestorm of light erupted around Geoff as the heavy ships laid down a curtain of fire against the intruders, and within seconds Geoff saw three fighters wink off his screen.

"Geoff, I'm skimming the atmosphere," Vance announced. "There's four fat landing craft going down, they must be loaded!"

Geoff, his palms feeling clammy pushed his nose over to follow Vance in. He knew that going into the edge of the atmosphere would cause a tremendous bleed off in speed, but the prospect of nailing a fully laden landing craft, with a battalion of assault troops on board, was too much to resist.

Confused calls reverberated on the comm link and then were drowned out as the Cats laid down a jamming curtain. His screen showed the four blips of the landing craft, which were nose down, going into a powered dive, seeking the protection to be found in the heavier air below.

Vance, now several clicks ahead, opened up on the lead ship, pouring in a hail of mass driver rounds. Within seconds the landing craft was in flames and tumbling. He banked, dropped off a dumb fire missile and began to pull out. The missile struck a second landing craft, which lurched, but stayed together. Geoff lined up on the damaged vessel and opened fire with his mass driver guns, the rounds going incandescent as they tore through the thin atmosphere. The landing craft burst and he caught a frightening glimpse of Kilrathi warriors, dressed in battle camouflage, tumbling out into space to begin their long fifty-mile fall down to the surface. It was the first glimpse he'd had of who he was fighting against. He banked, lined up on the third craft, fired off his one dumb fire missile and pulled up.

Geoff rolled his fighter over and looked back. His missile had hit. Smoke trailed out of the landing craft, and then it was lost to view as he continued to accelerate up and away from the planet. The Cat jamming lifted for a moment. Again the radio was filled with a wild confusion of shouts of fierce joy, terror, and screams of rage as the fighters tore through the massed landing craft. Flashes on Geoff's screen indicated that three of his six remotely-fired missiles had scored hits.

New signals washed in. The second wave, the Ark Royals, were clearing the pole, more missiles streaking out. Then the jamming came back on again. Flashes of light crisscrossed the heavens, explosions marking where landing craft had been hit, or fighters of the Confederation were dying.

A warning beep sounded, a fighter on his six o'clock coming in. A second later a reverberating shudder slammed into him. Intersecting beams of fire laced around him as the heavy ships several hundred clicks above poured out a fusillade to knock down the attack.

Prince Ratha cursed soundly as the fire from the battleships threw off his aim. He had already pumped a half dozen rounds into his opponents shields, the pilot not even reacting as he closed for the kill. Something made him sense that this must be the same pilot who had eluded him earlier, and he would not be denied the kill.

A cry erupted on his headset, announcing that one of the assault transports was heavily damaged and going down, the news moving him to a wild, insane rage. The transport carried the Third and Seventh Brigades of the Imperial Claw. They were kin of lesser blood, but of his blood nevertheless.

Banking around the shots from his own ships, he tried to reacquire his target, but it was already darting

ahead, continuing to loop around the planet, accelerating with maneuvering scoops closed. The gravitational pull of the planet held the fighter on a curving trajectory which he attempted to follow. The fighter popped scoops open for a second, turned, then closed scoops yet again, now racing straight out and away. Ratha hung on grimly. The Confederation fighters apparently had a very slight edge on speed, he realized, but at some point it would have to slow for a landing, and there would still be time to kill it.

"This is Yorkshire, this is Yorkshire, we've lost our number three engine!"

Winston stood silent, watching the wavery image on the screen which was barely getting through the combination of shielding and Kilrathi jamming.

"It's been a good fight, chaps. We've crippled one of their battleships. We've also picked up a report from one of your fighters, now looping under McAuliffe, that they've dumped an assault transport and nailed a whole parcel of landing craft laden with troops. Marine Three just relayed up that the sky is on fire with landing craft burning up!"

A ripple of cheers swept through the CIC. Turner looked around the room and they fell silent.

"Concordia Yorkshire, any report how many planes coming back?"

"We've got ten fighters of yours on the scanners now, Concordia."

Winston let the information sink in. He had started the fight with forty, lost sixteen in the first encounter, and now another fourteen were gone. Half of Ark Royal's bombers assigned to the attack were gone as well, even before their fighters had broken off to join in the second wave of the counterattack on McAuliffe.

The young exec in command of Yorkshire looked haggard, blood pouring from a slice across her forehead, the rest of her features concealed under a respirator, but she was still game and Winston could not help but feel a surge of pride in her defiance.

"We're going to slow down a bit here. I think it'll draw the flies in. Give you folks some breathing room to get the hell out."

"We copy that, Yorkshire," Naomi Dayan replied, her image showing now on a side screen. Winston could see the hardness of her features. She had been on the open line as the attack on the Kilrathi carrier went in, and he could see her disintegrate as her son shouted his defiant cry. He had known Naomi for nearly twenty years and never had he seen her break before. She had been offscreen for ten minutes, and she looked now as if she had aged ten years in that span of time.

"Take as many of the bastards with you as you can, Yorkshire," she said, her voice harsh and cold.

"Most certainly will," Yorkshire replied. "Must get back to work here. This is Yorkshire. Long live the Confederation."

The image snapped off. Strange, "Long live the Confederation." Two days ago such a line would have seemed like a bad line from a vid, now the words nearly moved him to tears. Winston looked over at Naomi's image.

"How are repairs?"

In the confusion of the attack, three Cat bombers cut their way through and plowed two torpedoes into Ark Royal . Again, one had failed to detonate, but the second one almost took the ship out, shutting down its launch and recovery capability.

"It's bad, Winston. We've lost all launch capacity. We might lose control of the fires, and I've got fifty percent casualties on board."

"Your engines."

"Still at one hundred percent."

"Get the hell out, Naomi. I'll bring up the rear with North Carolina , we'll recover your remaining planes."

"All right, Concordia . Rendezvous on other side of jump point."

Her image snapped off. Winston went to his command chair and collapsed. An ensign came over, bearing a steaming cup of coffee and he gratefully accepted it.

He turned his chair to look at the holo field. The round ball hovering in the field, McAuliffe, was drifting to one side of the display as they accelerated up and away after the strike. It had never been his hope to actually cut a way in and stay, but simply to relieve the pressure long enough to give the marines down on the surface a fighting chance of holding on.

They had come back around and were now racing at full throttle back towards jump point Beta. It was not the direct way back in towards the inner worlds but, rather, curved back in at an oblique. Naomi had suggested it for two reasons, the first that it was the closest jump point available, less than three hours out at full throttle, but it would also present the Cats with a tactical dilemma. If they drove straight in towards the inner worlds, a viable striking force would be on their flank with the potential of cutting back in. If the Cats did decide to pursue, it would take them away from the main target and maybe buy a little more time for Banbridge to organize a defense.

He watched the screen as the minutes dragged by. Yorkshire was continuing to fall further behind, while the strike on McAuliffe continued to accelerate towards the pickup point, less than ten minutes short of the jump. It would be a tight squeeze.

"Yorkshire's in serious trouble, sir," a comm officer announced. Winston pivoted his chair back and saw the display pop up. Three Kilrathi battleships had slowed to engage and were running parallel at a range of less than fifty clicks. The projected damage control board and continual translight radar bursts showed a fusillade of fire and missiles tracing back and forth. Yorkshire's first and third main turrets were gone, and multiple hull breaches flashed red on the diagram of the ship. He put his cup of coffee down, feeling that it was somehow indecent to be drinking it while good men and women were dying. He came to his feet, jaw clenched tight as a red band of light swept into the middle of the ship's diagram. The display winked off.

"We've lost all data from Yorkshire" the comm officer whispered. She waited several seconds. "Translight radar shows debris plume expanding... she's gone, sir."

Winston lowered his head. "She was a good ship." He sighed.

"Sir, one of the Kilrathi battleships is in trouble, sir."

He looked back up at the screen, which now only displayed the translight radar.

The radar officer stood up excitedly, pointing at the image. "There, sir, there. Look at that debris, something's wrong. Massive heat signature... the bastard's breaking up! Yorkshire got her!"

Winston watched, unable to feel anything as a second plume of debris erupted on the screen.

He watched the screen as the slower visual image finally arrived, showing the breakup of Yorkshire, followed seconds later by a series of internal explosions tearing through the Kilrathi battleship. Yorkshire had not hit it that hard, something must have gone wrong with their internal damage control.

"Sir, second Kilrathi battleship is slowing, turning. Massive heat signature behind it, sir. They've been breached, fuel is blowing out and igniting!"

Turner watched the display, praying that the damned ship would blow, but the red plume started to abate. Still the Cat ship was crippled and out of the fight.

"What's our threat analysis, Valeri?" Winston asked, still watching the screen.

She went over to the tracking board, consulted the officer and two enlisted personnel tracking the enemy and then went over to the holo field display. Intersecting red and blue lines started to trace back and forth.

"If Ark Royal can keep up speed, she'll make jump just ahead of them. Our pick up of remaining fighters, both ours and Ark Royal's, will start in thirty-seven minutes. Sir, the incoming Cat fighters and bombers in pursuit will be on us in one hour and twenty-eight minutes at present closing speeds. We're going to have a very tough fifteen minutes from there to jump."

"Fine, Val, fine."

He settled back in to his chair to wait.

"I told you to ignore the battleship!" Gilkarg cried. "We could have taken care of it later."

"My lord, the battleships are the primary target of this strike, not the carriers. We saw the kill and went for it," Nargth replied.

The scene behind Nargth on the vid display was one of chaos. The control room was filled with smoke, flames licking up from shattered control boards. The image flickered for a second, Nargth swaying, grabbing hold of a bulkhead as an internal explosion rocked the ship.

"Will you hold together?" Gilkarg asked.

"Ruptured fuel tanks for engines three and four, they're venting now. We'll hold, but this ship is out of the fight."

"And you lost a battleship. How was that?"

"It is a mystery, my lord. But remember, I warned the Emperor years ago that the Gamorgin class battleships needed more armor instead of greater speed. I think that is the reason."

Gilkarg bristled at the implication of laying blame for the failure on his father.

"If you had not dropped your speed, you could have closed on their carriers and finished them."

"Your own fighters and bombers, which you place so much trust in, will be there before the second one jumps out, and you appear to have delivered a crippling blow to the other," Nargth replied calmly.

Snarling with rage, Gilkarg shut the comm link down.

"My lord. You have shattered their base and taken it," an aide said. "You have destroyed over eighty of their ships in return for the loss of but two carriers, a battleship, a cruiser, a transport and several small vessels. It is still the greatest victory in the history of the empire."

"Yet they made a counterblow while crippled, and that is when they inflicted most of our casualties," Gilkarg replied. "Do you not think that will affect what comes next? If we could still guarantee the death of Concordia, it will be seen as an even trade-off. Concordia must be killed before it can escape."

He did not even comment on the savaging of the landing transports. Reports were that close to fifty percent of the assault force had been lost. Though of minor blood they were still mostly of the Imperial line. This would not sit well with his father at all. The balance had to be regained, a price of vengeance exacted for the defiant blow. He knew what Nargth would counsel, and who he would blame. Blood had to be shown now in return.

"The one carrier will escape," the aide announced, studying the board. "He is abandoning his fighters and running for the jump point with scoops closed."

"That means the scum who launched the attack must land on the other carrier. There is the point of our vengeance now."

"We have thirty fighters and five bombers closing in, my lord."

Gilkarg nodded but did not reply. He watched the plot board as the minutes dragged out. Though he did not know who the commander of the other side was, he would have his vengeance.

Geoff checked and rechecked his screen as they closed in on the rendezvous. It was going to be tight. Already a pattern was building up around Concordia. A crippled fighter had crashed at the entry bay, shutting down recovery operations for seven crucial minutes. The screen of red blips behind him was coming ever closer. He looked at his chronometer. In fourteen minutes Concordia would hit jump. Ark Royal had already successfully made transit several minutes earlier.

As he closed in he finally could see a speck of light, the Concordia, trailed by North Carolina and a frigate, which were engaging several Cat destroyers in a long-range exchange of fire.

"This is recovery operations, all recovery on hold. Repeat, all recovery on hold, we've had another crash."

Geoff cursed silently. His palms felt clammy and the pain in his legs was intensifying after the long hours cramped inside the fighter, so that it was hard to concentrate. To have survived all this, he thought, only to miss a pickup in the last seconds.

"Green and blue sections, do you copy?"

It was Hawkins.

Five pilots answered in. Geoff clicked his mike. "Here, leader."

"All right, boys and girls. Guess you know what we've got to do. On my count, follow. We've got to break up that incoming strike and let the others land."

Geoff sighed and nervously clicked his mike again. He suddenly realized that, though he had been tested before, here indeed might be the final and ultimate test. Part of him wanted to scream out that he deserved a rest, that he had played the hero, had done his bit, and now it was time for someone else, that it had to be time for someone else.

"Hey, leader, why us?" someone called sarcastically.

Hawkins chuckled sadly. "Because we're here, lads, because we're here."

The cynical exchange somehow braced Geoff. For that, after all, was indeed the logic and reason behind it all, because he was here it would always be his turn, and would continue to be his turn as long as he decided to place himself in harm's way.

"All right, lads, ready to break, three, two, one... break!"

Geoff saw Hawkins' fighter pull upwards and he followed suit, banking slightly to tuck himself in behind Vance. Within seconds after doing an Immelmann, the Kilrathi fighters swept past them, Hawkins leading the flight up into a banking turn to sweep across the bombers. A head-on flight of Cat fighters broke straight into their attack, dropping Hawkins' wingman.

Geoff barely managed to get off a high-angle deflection on a Cat fighter. He saw the shields glow, and then it flashed from view. The fight turned into a swirling melee which drifted relentlessly towards Concordia. Landing operations resumed and they were down to four. Two of the fighters broke out of the pattern and turned back to help, one of them dying seconds later as three fighters jumped it. Two of the bombers turned away from Concordia, angling up instead for a belly shot on North Carolina. Geoff was tempted to follow until Hawkins cut in.

"Cover our ship, cover our ship!"

Geoff winged back over, following Hawkins as they dove on the three remaining bombers. Geoff lined up on his target, ignoring the incoming fire from the top turret gunner that slammed into his forward screen. He heard the shriek of durasteel peeling back, the impacts blinding him. He continued to bore in, draining off the last of his lasers and, almost by instinct, broke right, narrowly missing the bombers wing.

"Concordia blue and green. Data indicates remaining bomber about to launch weapons."

Geoff continued through his turn, a fighter dropping in on his six and opening up. He looked back up and saw only two bombers left, not sure if one was the one he had been attacking or another.

"Torpedo released and inbound!" The cry was from combat control.

Over his shoulder, Geoff saw the weapon boring in on Concordia. He held his breath as the torpedo struck amidships and detonated. The carrier shook like a rat in the mouth of a terrier, sections of hull

peeling back, explosions detonating inside the ship... but it held together.

"Second one about to launch!"

"I'm on the bomber, rest of you chaps head for the barn." It was Hawkins, and Geoff saw his fighter streaking in, trailing a stream of fire... and a second later slamming straight into the remaining bomber, slicing it in half.

"All sections, final recall, final recall. Jump in two minutes, fifteen seconds!"

Geoff dodged and weaved, trying to throw the fighter off, but it hung doggedly to his tail, lining up a few shots before Geoff dodged, reacquiring him and putting a few more in. Inexorably, his shield power continued to drain.

"Jump in two minutes and counting."

Geoff looked back over his shoulder, and the fighter was still there. Overhead he caught a flash of light and looked up to see a hammer blow slamming into the belly of North Carolina. Another shudder ran through his fighter, and at that instant he felt a cold sense that it was over, that he would continue to circle with the Cat on his tail.

The Cat closed in and he leveled out, holding steady... and then slammed his throttles off. The Cat skimmed over his canopy, the fighter inverted so that he caught a quick flash of the pilot wearing a purple helmet.

The Cat dropped into his sights even as it started to pivot, spinning on its axis to point backwards so it could fire straight into his destroyed forward shield. He fired a volley, several shots slammed out... and the guns shut down, energy drained.

As if watching in slow motion he saw the Cat turning, throwing on reverse thrust, lining up for the killing shot. Another fighter swept past Geoff, firing a concentrated salvo straight into the enemy fighter, shearing off a wing. The Kilrathi fighter broke up, the pilot ejecting.

"All right, Tolwyn, enough heroics. You first, we've got ninety seconds!"

Vance circled in around Geoff as he pointed his fighter towards Concordia's landing bay.

"You two are the last," the launch and recovery officer announced. "Now get the hell in, we've got seventy seconds!"

Geoff nudged in his power, suddenly remembering that this was only the second time he had ever attempted a landing in a Wildcat. As he angled in towards the carrier he saw his opponent, still strapped to his chair, tumbling slowly end over end. A darker instinct told him to divert just for a second and try to fire a shot in... it would be one less Cat pilot to worry about later.

Just not British though, Geoff thought, shaking his head. After all, he was a damned good opponent.

As he passed the Cat he raised his hand in a salute, slightly disappointed the Cat had not saluted in return.

"Sixty seconds, hurry it up!"

He lined up, remembering that Vance was behind him. If he screwed up his landing, Vance would be stuck as well.

"Tolwyn, this is recovery, no need to reply. You're coming in hot, reverse thrust, bring her down, bring your speed down, too high, too high... get your gear down."

Geoff struggled to keep up with the orders, popping his gear down, pushing stick forward, pulling thrust back.

"Too low now... bring her up... still too fast... bring her up... bring her..."

His landing gear clipped the edge of the ramp as he slammed through the airlock, his fighter slapped down onto the deck in a shower of sparks. He could feel the back of the fighter snapping, the controls in his hands going slack.

The safety net seemed to be racing up. He slammed into it, his vision blurring. A second later the canopy was yet again covered in foam, followed by someone pulling the outside release hatch. A hooded crash and rescue man towered above him, spraying the cockpit down with foam and then yanking him out. As they dragged him back from the plane he saw a ripple of flame venting around the wings as a ruptured hydrogen tank let go. A blizzard of foam engulfed the plane.

"Fifteen seconds," a voice boomed over the deck PA. "Prepare for jump."

"Vance!"

Geoff struggled to stand up, breaking free from the rescue personnel. A fighter came through the airlock, touching down gently, and turned to skid past the wreckage of Geoff's plane.

"Those not secured, lie down now! Five, four, three..."

Geoff sprawled himself out on the deck. The star field outside the airlock shifted in color. He caught a momentary glimpse of North Carolina, fire wreathing its belly and starboard forward section. The star field shifted into red, the stars turning into receding streaks of light.

Cursing, Prince Ratha watched as the Concordia seemed to stretch out into a long streak of light, then disappeared in a sparkle of light. He could not understand these humans. He was dead, he should be dead, and yet the fool had waved to him and left him. It was a humiliation beyond bearing, that a foe had bested him thus and then did not deliver the coup, and instead had mockingly waved.

A hatred for the humans he had never believed possible before filled his soul. Having killed three of their fighters, he should have been able to return as a hero, his talons painted red when he was presented to his grandfather, wearing the clasp of the red claw with honor... yet in his heart there would be no honor. He had been defeated and then left to live.

There was but one thing left to do. Grabbing hold of his helmet latch, he tore it open, the air venting out of his suit. Strange, how silent death was in space, he thought.

The deck seemed to fall away underneath him, there was the momentary disorientation and wave of nausea. It felt as though the deck then slammed back up, knocking the breath out of him. The star field outside the airlock came back into focus, but was different.

"Jump successful," the PA announced.

Geoff staggered back to his feet and stood, numb with shock and pain. He could feel explosions rippling through the ship. For a brief instant artificial grav winked off, came back on, and then seemed to hover at a reduced level so that Geoff felt as if he would float off the deck. Another explosion slammed through the carrier, lights winking off, emergency battle lamps turning on in the gloom.

The crash crew continued to hose down his fighter as he witnessed yet another plane he had flown being dragged to the side airlock and ejected out into space.

"Well, sir, that's another fifty million," one of his rescuers announced. Slapping him on the back, the three men who had dragged him out went over to help with the cleanup.

"Sir, you are to report to sick bay at once."

He looked over at the medic.

"You've had it, sir. Now get to sick bay."

"In a moment," Geoff whispered.

Vance slipped out of his plane and came up to Geoff, shaking his head.

"You know, they usually ground a guy who dings a fighter like that."

Geoff looked at him, unable to reply. It felt like the action was playing out in his mind again, strangely, at two different speeds. There were flash memories going by at high speed, and then frozen moments—the Kilrathi assault troops tumbling into vacuum, Hawkins going kamikaze, the exec of Masada and his defiant cry, McAuliffe burning.

He tried to speak, but couldn't. Vance was staring at him.

"I know, Geoff, I know," Vance whispered, resting his hand on Geoff's shoulder.

Behind Vance, Geoff saw a sparkle of light. It was the North Carolina coming through, still on fire, but intact. He knew it was probably dumping mines like mad, standard retreat doctrine. It'd be hours before the Cats could clear the entry point, and even then they'd have to send light ships through first to clear the mines on the opposite side.

"Thanks, Vance," Geoff whispered.

"Same here, buddy. Welcome to the club."

"Yeah, thanks."

Together they turned and started for debriefing.

\* \* \*

Commander Winston Turner slumped wearily in his chair and closed his eyes. Another explosion rocked

the ship and he hung on, watching the damage control board as yet another section flashed yellow, indicating a hull breach. The damage control officer looked back at Turner.

"Sir, we'll hold her for the moment, but primary engines are going to be lost. I think we'll lose jump engine control as well, sir. She's dying."

Turner nodded wearily.

"How much time do we have?"

"Six, maybe eight hours tops."

"If they come through in pursuit, can we still fight?"

The bridge crew looked over at Turner, defiance in their eyes as if he had insulted them by even implying the ship couldn't fight.

"We'll go down fighting, sir."

"Fine, get ready for another launch, then."

He looked back at the rear display screen as North Carolina, with one escort, came through the jump. A ripple of a cheer swept the CIC. Remarkable, he thought.

He looked over at Valeri.

"We lost, yet they cheer," he said softly.

"We lost, sir, but we sure as hell kicked them on the way out. They'll think twice about pursuit."

Pursuit. Pursuit, retreat, and when would it end? The worst defeat in the history of the fleet. And yet, he felt something else, a defiance. He could hear that in those around him. If they had simply run, what would the feeling be now? The fact that we had turned, even in defeat, and struck back, maybe that was something. Maybe it would be something for Dayan, for the families of all the others, that we still fought back.

Third Marine. Maybe we've brought them enough time to marshal a return strike. He doubted that. Dayan had sent a ship up to jump point Delta to go through, then reemerge later in the day, deploying signal simulators to try and bluff the Cats into thinking another attack was coming through. It was a hackneyed old trick, but he doubted if it would change anything now.

He looked up at the chronometer. It'd been fifteen minutes since North Carolina had jumped. No hot pursuit. If they were going to come on, they'd have to do it slowly, worry about mines. No, they'd hold back for the moment.

"Val, make sure the log notes time we broke off engagement."

"It's done, sir."

"We'll deploy out here, wait to see if they come in hot pursuit. If they don't come on, we'll send a frigate back through the jump point for a look around. Damage control, see if you can contain things. If not, give

us enough warning so we can abandon ship."

Sighing, he settled back in his chair. "Val, could you give me a couple of minutes?"

"Sure, sir, relax."

Commander Winston Turner settled back in the chair and closed his eyes. In less than a minute he was fast asleep.

Bitter with rage, Crown Prince Gilkarg stalked out of the briefing room, retired to his private chambers, and slammed the door.

A burst signal had just arrived from Kilrah. Furious, he wished he had followed through on his earlier wish to simply disconnect the communications system on his ship and then say it was battle damage. But it was too late now, the signal had been received and acknowledged. If only it had taken another hour, he would already be committed, crossing into the next system in pursuit of a beaten foe with three battleships and three carriers while the rest of the fleet mopped up resistance on McAuliffe.

The signal from their jump point leading towards the inner worlds was an obvious fake, a mere bluff to indicate that a phantom fleet was preparing to jump through on the flank while he attempted a direct pursuit.

But all that was finished. Nargth, the base-born scum, had sent a dispatch to the Emperor with casualty reports and details of the enemy counterstrike against the landing force, and now the reply had come.

His father had ordered a retreat, declaring that the fleet must be preserved and that the base at McAuliffe was no longer worth the expenditure of Imperial blood.

Damn it all, the senile old fool! Damn it all. He had just taken victory and thrown it away out of fear. Nargth's declaration that the warriors of the Confederation attacked withzaga , the warrior spirit, had been the wrong choice of words. Yes, indeed it might be true, but it had swayed his father. Six legions destroyed. To lose the other four now might very well place the balance of Imperial power in jeopardy. His proud plan that the Imperial clan lead the attack to take McAuliffe had never been calculated with an honest realization of just how many casualties they might take.

Though it was hard to admit, even Gilkarg found that he had to concede that the humans and their allies had fought with fanatical bravery. The few units which had actually made it to the planet's surface were taking horrific casualties from the Confederation Marines, and even now were being evacuated.

But to pull out of the system they had all but won? Though the Emperor promised that the fleet would return once repairs had been made and new troops brought in from the other clans, Gilkarg knew that the opportunity to bring the war to a swift and final conclusion had just been thrown away. The Confederation would have the time to take a breath, to rearm itself, to fortify its inner worlds. We will seize the outer edge, but the chance to delve straight in and deliver the final, crushing blow has been lost.

Vids from his fighters showed that a torpedo had slammed into Concordia , and another one into the other carrier which escaped, the torpedoes failing to detonate. The humans were undoubtedly tearing them apart right now, learning how they worked to disrupt shields. The surprise would be lost.

There was the report, as well, of the betrayal of information. A report had already been intercepted that the Confederation was in possession of the ceremonial decree announcing war. It was undoubtedly the

information transferred by the unknown agent to the intel team that had infiltrated in.

Unknown... he smiled. The blame would be laid at the proper doorstep soon enough.

We have won the most glorious victory in the history of the Empire, his father had said even as he threw the fruits of that victory away... and yet, in his heart, he feared that they had created a war that might last for a generation.

"My lord?"

He looked up at the screen, ready to roar out an angry command for his aide to leave him alone.

"My lord, I beg leave to interrupt and to offer my own blood in this moment of sorrow."

The ritual words caused Gilkarg to fall silent.

"Go on."

"Your son, my lord. He is dead. We've recovered his body."

Gilkarg nodded slowly, unable to speak.

"My lord, he died a warrior. He committed self death, my lord, after his fighter was destroyed and the enemy ship escaped. His honor is great, my lord, as is yours."

Gilkarg turned away from the screen.

Self death. Damn it all. There was no need for the foolish cub to kill himself. Glory enough in the fight. But there was no other way, there was only the way of the clan, of the hunt, and he had failed. Failed because of Nargth, because of his own grandfather.

There was still Thrakhath though. In the years to come, he will be the heir. But Ratha, Ratha was dead.

Drawing his dagger, Gilkarg drew the blade across his forehead so that the blood flowed in mourning, mourning for all that had been lost rather than won.

# Chapter Fifteen

## FAWCETT'S WORLD

Captain Hans Kruger of the Landreich militia climbed back out of the wreckage of what the Landreich called a frigate, but in actuality was nothing more than an aging transport with guns welded on. Hoisting a survival pack and two assault rifles, he slid down the side of the smoking wreckage.

The Cats had smashed all the outer worlds of the Landreich into rubble, but they had been held in front of the Hell Hole, with one of their battleships disabled and three cruisers destroyed. The price, that was something he didn't even want to think about now. It was hard to admit that he had actually grown fond of Blucher during the short time he had served under his command.

He shifted his gaze up as a flight of birds, crying shrilly, took wing. The triple canopy of jungle overhead had been torn wide open by his crash landing. That, and the plume of smoke, were most likely visible for miles. It was time to get a move on, because the Cats would most certainly be closing in to check it out.

"Well, Kruger, you sure as hell ruined this ship."

His exec, a girl who had claimed to be a former ship's engineer with, of all companies, the Sam consortium, appeared out of the jungle.

He laughed at the thought. If ever there was a place where those bastards would never get to him, it was here. He was two jump points inside the Empire, nailed raiding a Cat base at some place called Fawcett's World that was supposedly garrisoned by an entire division of Imperial marines. If the Sarns still wanted him, they'd have to get through the Cat marines first.

"You know, Kruger, that was pretty dumb, coming into the atmosphere of this place to try and shoot it up."

"Elaine, we trashed it, didn't we?"

"Yeah, and they got us too."

"Goes with the territory."

"Anyone else alive in there?" she asked.

"We're it."

"Could be interesting," she said with the slightest of smiles.

"Let's go raise some hell with the Cats first. The odds are only ten thousand to one."

MCAULIFFE

Popping open the back hatch of Lazarus, First Lieutenant Geoffrey Tolwyn nodded to Rear Admiral Winston Turner, who unstrapped from his seat.

"Good landing, Tolwyn."

Geoff said nothing. It had been his first run flying the left seat, and he had sweated every detail of the approach into the landing strip, touching down right on the numbers.

"Door's open, sir."

"Well, son, let's go take a look around."

Geoff followed Turner down the back hatch ramp, and there was a momentary memory of the struggle to get on board this same ship, the shooting of the panic-stricken petty officer, and the heart-stopping takeoff.

The air was hot, dry and laden with a sickly sweet smell. Stepping clear of his ship Geoff stopped short, stunned by the wreckage. The stump of the skyhook tower off to the south pointed like a jagged finger into the bloodred sky. Hundreds of wrecked planes littered the taxiway and parking area, coils of smoke rising up from some of the craft which were still smoldering. What had once been the town was now nothing but flame-scorched ruins, dark columns of smoke blanketing the sky.

A marine colonel was waiting for Turner and snapped off a salute, then extended a hand which Turner took warmly. The colonel stepped back and, behind him, Geoff saw Sergeant Major Ulandi, wearing full battle gear of camouflaged antiradiation battle armor, dented helmet, and a heavy assault gun slung over his shoulder.

Ulandi saluted, his hand dropping away as Turner stepped forward and flung his arms around the sergeant, the two men laughing, cursing softly, and hugging. Ulandi caught Geoff's eyes and nodded.

Turner finally broke away, and Geoff could see that he was struggling to hold his composure. In the distance came a rattle of small arms fire.

"Still mopping up some pockets," Ulandi said. "Got to admit, those bastards are tough. No surrender."

Turner nodded.

"So, what the hell is going on?" the colonel asked. "Hell, figured it was over for us. Then, yesterday morning they starting lifting out. Are they coming back in?"

Geoff was surprised that the marine didn't know.

Turner shook his head.

"Damnedest thing. They just beat feet out of here," Turner replied. "We waited beyond the jump point, expecting them to come on through, hoping to ambush at least a few of their ships before falling back. We finally sent a scout frigate back in and it reported their entire fleet was withdrawing. Colonel, they've bugged out. It's over."

"How are things with Concordia?"

Turner shook his head.

"We abandoned ship. She blew just before I jumped through to come back here."

"Sorry, sir."

Turner tried to force a smile.

"The trade-off was worth it, Colonel. It was worth it."

"So this is a victory then," Ulandi said.

Geoff looked closely at the sergeant and was surprised to see just how burned-out Ulandi really was. The look in the man's eyes told Geoff volumes about the reality of ground combat. It made him realize that his own few moments of terror were undoubtedly trivial by comparison.

"Yeah, I guess the historians will call it a victory."

Ulandi spat on the ground and said nothing for a moment.

"Sir, we better get you down below," Ulandi finally said. "It's still a bit hot up here."

Turner motioned for Ulandi to fall in by his side while the colonel led the way, Geoff coming up on the other side of the towering sergeant.

"Long, Nagomo?" Turner asked.

"Heard Long tried to get up, then nothing. Nagomo, well he died at his post, I'll give him that."

"How was it here, sergeant?"

Ulandi motioned towards the wreckage, the burning city, and then at the hundreds of bodies laid out in long rows on the tarmac. A group of marines was wearily loading the dead into trucks.

Geoff saw Ulandi slow for a moment and then stop to look over at a young corporal, a woman, who seemed almost to be asleep. Two marines stepped up to her and lifted her body into the truck. The sergeant seemed on the edge of breaking. He sighed and then looked back over at Turner.

"The colonel will fill you in, sir. We lost nearly seventy percent of the division. Ground personnel for the base even worse. It was a slaughter."

"Fifth Marine is being deployed. They'll be here in two weeks," Turner replied.

Ulandi nodded, saying nothing.

"I'm staying on here, sergeant. Ordered to take command of the base, get it ready, dig in if they come back. Looks like our retirements have been postponed. Want you as my topkick."

Ulandi smiled.

"Sure, Winnie. Glad to have you with me."

Ulandi fished in his battle tunic and pulled out a cigar. Breaking it in two, he gave half to Winston and lit it for him.

Reaching the shattered remains of the base command center, Winston stopped.

"You might as well head back up, Tolwyn. With all the planes and crew from Concordia on Ark Royal, there'll be a slot there for you now."

"Sir?"

"Well, I'm ordered to stay on here at the base for now. You're a flyer. I don't think you or Vance would want to be stuck down on the ground here with me."

"Sir, I'd be glad to serve with you."

Turner laughed.

"Maybe someplace else, another time."

Geoff looked back out at the ruins of McAuliffe.

"It never should have happened," Geoff said, an edge of bitterness in his voice.

"What do you mean?"

Geoff looked at him. How could he voice the rage in his heart? Again he thought of More. A bulletin had arrived just before they came down to the planet's surface that More's world was now behind enemy lines, but it was decided that all senators from the occupied territories would continue to hold office. More was now the most rabid war hawk of them all, calling for a war of total annihilation, no prisoners, no quarter expected or asked.

It was the government, Geoff thought, that had been the problem. If ever there came the chance, he would see that a similar mistake would never be made again.

He looked back at Winston.

"Just, it shouldn't have happened, sir."

"Tolwyn."

"Sir?"

"Let it go. In every war, mistakes are made. In every war that a democracy has fought, a hell of a lot of good kids die due to the asinine mistakes, stupidity and greed of their elders. They're not all bad, in fact most of them are pretty damn good, and try their best. And yet the system survives in spite of its mistakes, and goes on, and sometimes those kids who survive one day are the elders and make the same mistakes. I sense an incredible ability in you, son. I've noted that in my report. You've been recommended for the Medal of Honor."

Stunned, Geoff could not reply.

"I think we're in for a long haul. If you stay alive, Geoffrey Tolwyn, I suspect one day you might command a ship, maybe a new Concordia." He sighed. "She was a hell of a ship."

Winston smiled, and for a brief instant he again looked like the kindly professor.

"Just do me a favor and then the lecture's ended. Remember everything you've learned, everything, but never forget that you are fighting to save the Confederation and all that it stands for. Never forget that your sworn duty is not to the Fleet, it is to the Confederation which the fleet serves."

"Aye, sir."

"Fine. Now we've got two choices here. Richards has been booted up to wing commander for Ark Royal. While you're on station here until reinforcements arrive, you'll have a section of fighters under him, but you're going to have to get a hell of a lot of training in despite your accomplishments—" he then paused for a moment, "—or you can have an independent command."

"Sir?"

"Once we get some more assets in here, Ark Royal is heading back to Earth for refitting. She's a hell of a mess. I sent a message up to a friend of mine about your service. There'll be a lot of light frigates getting commissioned now. The fleet needs gutsy first lieutenants to run them. They'll most likely be sent out to do scouting, behind the lines type action. I think it's the next step in your career, son."

Stunned, Geoff said nothing.

"Go for it, kid," Ulandi interrupted. "You can always get back to the carriers later."

A smile creased his features. "I'll take it, sir, thank you."

"Gentlemen, I hate to interrupt," the marine colonel said, "but we're in a hot zone here. The rad level's still pretty high."

Turner extended his hand. "You're the best student I've ever had, Tolwyn. Continue to make me proud of you."

"Thank you, sir. I will."

Tolwyn drew himself up to attention and saluted.

Turning, he headed back to Lazarus. Turner, his features serious, watching as the boy disappeared up the ramp, closed it, and then fired up the engines.

"Tough kid," Ulandi said. "Got the stuff of a damn good commander."

Turner nodded. "As long as he just remembers what the hell it is he's fighting for."

TO: INTELCONFEDFLT

FROM: CICCONFEDFLT

Received your report of yesterday and will forward appropriate sections to commanders, Task Forces Three, Nineteen and Forty-Two. Jim, I agree fully with your analysis. We are lucky. The disaster at McAuliffe was indeed the worst known in the long history of the Fleet. One can look back to the China Sea, Pearl Harbor, Tsushima, Salamis, and not find a defeat so lopsided. Yet rarely in history has a combatant thrown away such a stunning victory and walked away from the spoils. I don't think we'll ever really know why they abandoned McAuliffe and let us hang onto it. My gut instinct is that Turner's insane counterattack scared the crap out of them. The casualties he inflicted on their landing force most likely struck a nerve with their Emperor that triggered the withdrawal. In spite of the disaster at McAuliffe, it has stirred us and united us in a way that the Kilrathi little dreamed of. To them the Jak-tu, the blow upon a superior and unsuspecting prey, is both attack and climax in the same instant, the blow that kills and then the feast thereafter. For us it was an outrage that demands revenge.

It has been thirty days since the beginning of the war. Yes, we have lost a hundred and fifty-three systems, thirty percent of our industrial capacity, nearly forty percent of key strategic resources and the

shocking number of twenty-eight billion citizens who are now behind enemy lines and condemned to slavery or death. And yet we have not given in.

The prognosis for the short term is terrifying. Seventy percent of the fleet is gone. The loss of Concordia in the closing minutes of the fight was a painful blow. She was a proud ship and I hope someday we'll pass her name on to a new ship. We are now down to three carriers in active service, with Ark Royal arriving back at Earth later today for what is expected to be a six-month overhaul. I must now urge you, Jim, to press forward. Our enemy is still an enigma to us, as we are to him. We must, therefore, learn who he is, and in the process learn his weaknesses and how to exploit them. We already have learned much in the technical sense. Within three months we shall be turning out copies of their torpedoes, and the crash program to bring the new Corsair fighter on-line is rapidly moving ahead. Above all else though, we must learn where they will strike next. There can never be another McAuliffe. For that matter, any form of defeat in the next campaign will spell our doom. In the next fight we must win an overwhelming victory or die. I am counting on you, Jim, to find out where the next blow will come so that we might be ready. A significant enough victory and we can yet turn the tide of war.

Banbridge CICCONFEDFLT

Banbridge hit the transmit button and sat back.

The tide of war, he thought. To everything a season... the tide will one day shift. And yet, in his heart, he feared that he would not live to see it, that the war to come would be a bitter twilight struggle that would reach across generations.

Admiral Skip Banbridge wearily rubbed his eyes and, with a sigh, he turned his comm unit off. Leaving his office, he went down the darkened corridors and stepped out under the midnight sky. Somewhere above, he knew that at this very moment the Cats were poising for their next strike. And even if we throw them back, he thought sadly, when will it ever end?

"Admiral?"

Warily he turned about. It was his new aide.

"Sir, another dispatch from Task Force Forty-Two came in. You're also being paged by the president."

"Fine, son. Put the coffee back on. I guess we've got another long night ahead of us."

Shaking his head, Admiral Spencer "Skip" Banbridge went back to work.