

Genellan : Earth siege

By

Scott G. Gier

ISBN 1-932657 - 45-2
434 pages

© 2005 by Scott G. Gier
Cover Illustration by Jeremy Ellis

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States of America by Third Millennium Publishing, located on the INTERNET at <http://3mpub.com>. Any similarity of the characters to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Third Millennium Publishing
1931 East Libra Drive
Tempe, AZ 85283
mccollum@3mpub.com

Dedication

To Jerry and Lenore McCollom

Acknowledgements

My editor, Dan Perkins, for all his wonderful advice, worldly and otherwise.

Jeremy Ellis for his artful interpretations of my universe.

Section One: Pitcairn System

"Where there are goats, there are eaters of goats."

Preface to History

Under the sepia glow of a star long since gone dark, the mating instincts of the species became ritual. In that dim, forever distant past the ur-male foraged over grassy savannah, tasting the wind, always frightened. Short and thick of limb, these brutes sought protection in vast herds, for stalking them were huntresses, fierce creatures, lithe and quick.

Wary of the male's ability to wield stone and stick, the long-striding ur-female came to hunt in teams, peculiarly in teams of three. Yodeling like the furies of hell, the huntresses worried the herds, winnowing out the aged and the lame. Once clear of their protective masses the hapless creatures were run down by fecund females

and clasped with powerful coupling organs. The tortured victims, never slain outright, were ripped apart, their loins implanted with the female's eggsack, her kar. The huntress, trembling in the rapture of procreation, screamed with terrible ecstasy, serving notice of renewed life.

The act complete, the depleted female staggered away without backward glance, leaving the sundered male in the throes of death, his seed and mortal-blood flowing across the steaming kar. Corrupt with new life, the eggsack in time split, loosing a horde of maggots within the paternal host. Subsisting on the putrefying flesh of their sire, the surviving larvae were almost always male. Infrequently one egg among the multitude became female; on those rare occasions only one maggot would mature to term. Only she.

Impeded by lust so destructive and by selection so perverse, Ulaggi evolution was glacial, the genetic instinct to kill well founded. Yet the tide of time and the mutability of life can never be checked. Inevitably civilization arrived. Benign methods to extract seed were discovered, and ravenous kar maggots were sustained without males perishing upon reproduction's altar. Predatory breeding became proscribed, made taboo in culture and religion. Ulaggi males, though incorrigibly brutish, formed a workforce. Time passed; evolution accelerated. Millennia upon millennia flowed inexorably into history. Civilization blossomed, and the female elite, exploiting their burgeoning knowledge, delved ever deeper into science and politics, relentlessly tightening its grip on power.

All the while the Ulaggi womb planet grew old.

Chapter One

Planet Pitcairn Two

The sandblasted atmosphere grew brighter as they climbed, swirling from murky rust to brooding gold. Lieutenant Commander Nestor Godonov was relieved that the frenzied pall obscured their height; his every fiber was devoted to securing his footing on the perilously steep mountain. Pulse pounding, Godonov halted to check his visor display. A flashing diode warned of low power; the patrol had been submerged in sandstorms for too long. Employing his retinal cursor, Godonov brought up a terrain display. Contour lines indicated a crowning ridge three hundred meters higher.

A muffled shout came from above. The science officer glanced up. Major James Buck's gear-encumbered silhouette burned a black hole in the sun-fired haze. The Tellurian Legion Marine had removed his mask and was bellowing through cupped gloves—in vain. Their sophisticated systems were worthless. Godonov touched the side of his helmet and signaled thumbs down. Pumping his forearm, Buck signaled to increase pace. Godonov nodded and peered back into the buffeting gloom. Sand rasped against his visor with the sound of distant surf, the battering gale more like ocean waves than arid wind.

Chastain's bulk emerged wraithlike from the maelstrom, his reactive armor blending with the sand. In front of the wide-shouldered Marine and less than half the giant's size hiked a sandaled woman wearing sweat-stained hides. Her head was wrapped in a rag revealing naught but black eyes; these were cast down when she noticed Godonov observing her. The rail-thin female was agile yet her movements were hesitant; she was frightened, uncertain whether she had been rescued or kidnapped. She had been snatched from an Ulaggi mining compound—a labor camp; but she had also been taken from the only home she had ever known, and from her daughters. Her name was Pake, and she was a second-generation prisoner-of-war,

born thirty years earlier to an enslaved survivor of the Shaula massacre. Until that morning, Pake had never seen a human male.

"She's strong, Commander," Chastain boomed, the big man's voice defeated the gale. Sergeant Major Jacques Chastain, a living legend and a demigod to the cliff dwellers, was one of Sharl Buccari's Survivors.

"Thanks, Jocko. I saw you carrying her," Godonov said, teeth crunching grit. "We're almost on top. The major wants some hustle."

The giant nodded and surged upward, nudging the female forward. Sergeant Wu and Corporal Zhou, wheezing behind their masks, came next, scrambling upward through the blowing crud. Godonov climbed after them, wondering what had happened to the cliff dwellers. Fifty meters higher the dust-swirled ether brightened, and suddenly, as if surfacing from an ocean, the sandstorm was below them. Major Buck, breather mask dangling, stood at the cloud's lapping verge, counting noses.

"About time we cleared the crap," Zhou muttered over low-power laserlink, his battle armor shedding wisps of dust. "I've eaten dirt—"

"Stow it!" Buck roared into the howling wind. "Voice and hand signals until I clear you otherwise. You know the damn drill. What chatter you getting, Corporal?"

"Sorry, Major," Zhou shouted back. "Normal stuff. Bugs are quiet."

They were still undetected. Standing at last under a naked sun, Godonov looked back at the ocean of gold and dun, ebbing and flowing against a granite massif. Held at bay by a shearing wind, the Aeolian tide surged with nervous agitation, as if angry the humans had escaped.

The science officer pulled off his breathing mask and spit grit. Scratching his grizzled chin, he sucked nutrient from his fluids tube and squinted into a cloudless sky. He badly needed to shave. They had departed orbit with the sleekly glabrous bodies of Legion spacers; after twelve days on the planet, body hair had become an irritating fact of life. Two quartering moons adorned the planet's dome of intense blue, but Godonov barely noticed; overhead, at differing altitudes, four predatory shapes suspended on leathery wings hovered against buffeting breezes. Although a relief to have sentries, unlimited visibility worked both ways; the hunters could see, but they could also be seen.

"Helluva view," Buck shouted, raising his visor and revealing sharp features haggard with fatigue. "Where're the bugs, Nes? Why aren't they after us?"

"They don't know we're here, Jimbo," Godonov shouted back. "Sandstorm covered our tracks."

"They gotta' know she's missing," Buck replied, yanking his assault rifle from its fitting. He blew out the gas ports and banged the heavy weapon against his palm.

"They probably don't care," Godonov said. "Plan's working."

"Plan, my sweet butt," Buck grumbled, raising his fist. "Close up and push it," he shouted, turning into the gale. "Weapons ready."

Their hands no longer required for climbing, the Marines unrigged rifles. Chastain unlimbered a ponderous laser blaster. Satisfied, Buck stepped out, leading the patrol across bare rock. Their color-shifting garb blended against the unrelieved surface, but shadows moving over bleached stone could not be camouflaged; they needed cover. The humans hustled upward as the mountain's shoulder rounded before them, giving purchase to meager groves of wind-warped cactus. Breasting the ridge, another mountain range hove into view, snow-capped and taller. A rift valley stretched northward between the ranges, its forest canopy broken with a necklace of island-studded lakes.

The patrol pushed through increasing thickets of leather-leaved scrub, following a rivulet, its stony banks gaudy with wildflowers. Lower, they encountered stunted

junipers. Still lower, as the wind-sculpted trees grew taller, their captive balked at Chastain's efforts to prod her onward.

"What wrong?" Godonov asked, struggling with his feeble Neo-Mandarin. The female's scarf-muffled, singsong spilled out too fast. Godonov activated his communications unit, its depleted solar cells finally recharged.

"—dangerous," the translation came through his helmet receiver, an emotionless alto, "—evil things. We will die here."

Sergeant Wu, catching up, gave a low whistle. "Damn, Commander," he said. "She's says it's nasty up here."

"What things?" Godonov asked as a swift-moving object blotted out the sun. The female shrieked and collapsed behind Chastain, clenching the Marine's massive thigh. Tonto and Bottlenose swooped by, wind hissing across two-meter wingspans. The hunters twisted into the wind, luffing and stowing membranes as they neatly touched. The mattock-headed creatures wore goggles and conformal skull-caps; knife scabbards and lightweight automatics hung from small-arms bandoleers over carbon armor. They stalked forward on stubby talons, blinking rapidly and tasting the air; their gaping maws revealed rows of sharp teeth. Godonov flashed hand sign commanding the cliff dwellers to stand back. The gruesome duo halted, chittering to each other in registers at the limits of human hearing, apparently amused.

"What things?" Godonov repeated. "Humans? Ulaggi? What things?"

The female emerged from behind Chastain's thigh. She loosened her face-rag, revealing eminent cheekbones covered with taut flesh. She eyed the hunters, her features dark. Her fear of the cliff dwellers had lessened, but not her loathing. Pushing a lank fall of hair from her face she turned to Godonov, her begging tone near panic, belying the passionless translation.

"Not go into the wood. Not go. Not go. There are evil things. Creatures of the night. Beasts that scream."

"We will protect you," Godonov replied, scanning the skies. Notch descended toward the rendezvous. Pop-eye held station overhead.

"Friggin' all we need!" Corporal Zhou whined as he joined them. "Got bugs behind us and night-screaming monsters in front of us."

"Shaddup!" Buck snapped, falling back on his bunched squad. "Keep moving! Or you'll get a boot up your butt. Zhou, take the point. You get to flush any screamers. Sergeant Wu, you're number two, in case Zhou loads his skivvies next time a birdie chirps. Move it!"

The Marines jumped. Tonto flashed hand sign indicating the hunters would scout the flanks. Buck acknowledged with a curt nod and gestured with a jerk of his thumb for Chastain to get the female moving.

"Come on, ma'am," Chastain said softly, putting an arm around the female. Stumbling, she spat on her fingers and rubbed her forehead, her expression melting to tears. The big Marine embraced the small woman, lifting her into motion. Pake responded with a wan smile and staggered forward, eyes wide. As she passed a wind-twisted tree her fingers lingered, trembling on its gnarled trunk.

"She's scared out of her gourd," Buck said, head swiveling, eyes darting. "Why is that, Nes?"

"Psychological barbwire," Godonov replied. "The Ulaggi probably fed them horror stories to keep them from wandering. They don't want their slave labor to know how much nicer it is up here."

"Hope you're right," Buck muttered, glancing over his shoulder.

The terrain flattened as they descended, the foliage grew taller, with wispy needles that moaned in the thrashing wind. In sheltered hollows the trees grew to

greater proportions, never taller than five or six meters, but attaining immense girth and under whose fragrant boughs foraged squirrel-like rodents and chesty birds. The valley was alive. Pushing through another ring of thicket, the humans came to a boggy lea resplendent with flowers. Scattered across the meadow, placidly grazing, was a flock of shaggy animals. Big-horned males and triangle-faced females, many with young, lifted rusty-fleeced heads as the humans passed; a few bounded aside, more wary than frightened.

"More goats," Godonov said, thinking it strange that feral beasts would be so tame. They had seen other ovine herds, smaller white creatures on the higher elevations.

"Now that's scary," Buck muttered sarcastically, watching Pake gape at the animals, unbelieving. Chastain swept her into motion.

"At least we'll have plenty of meat," Godonov said.

"We'll need it," Buck replied, grumbling obscenities.

Godonov could not blame the Marine; their prospects were dim. Even if Admiral Runacres immediately turned the fleet around, it would take four months to complete the hyperlight cycle, and Runacres had not abandoned them on Pitcairn Two just to make a quick round trip. Something ominous was afoot, likely a fleet engagement. Godonov swallowed hard. In a space battle anything could happen, mostly bad things.

A screech came from above, a shrill call at the limits of human perception. Suddenly, soundlessly, Tonto was at Godonov's side. Tonto was the reason they would be rescued. Over a decade earlier, Sharl Buccari's fateful meeting with the young cliff dweller had marked humanity's first friendly encounter with an alien life form. The Genellan cliff dweller had saved Buccari's life and the lives of her ship-wrecked crew; Sharl Buccari would move mountains and drain oceans before she would abandon the hunter. And Godonov, like most humans, had a religious faith in Sharl Buccari's determination.

The hunter signed, "Sentries within bowshot."

"Almost home," Buck muttered. The Marine signed to Tonto: "Deploy to flanks. Watch our backs."

The chirruping cliff dweller hop-waddled with astounding velocity into the brush. Bottlenose's answering call came from the opposite flank.

"Like I said, Jimbo, the plan's working," Godonov said.

"Yeah, right," Buck replied, but this time with a crooked smile. "Okay, Nes, I'll admit it—now that we're back on top. It was a good idea. Lucky, but good."

"Lucky, my sweet rump," Godonov replied, striding in the Marine's footsteps.

"About like finding a cold bottle of beer in my boot when we get back to camp," Buck laughed.

"Grunts don't know brains from beans. Now we have intelligence to process. I'll explain that to you in one-syllable words when we get back to camp. Move out, Major."

"Don't press it, shippie," Buck laughed, breaking into a trot.

Godonov also laughed but in relief; there was little humor in their situation. Human prisoners held on Pitcairn Two had been discovered during Admiral Runacres's initial foray into the Red Zone. Runacres had been routed; but as the human fleet retreated into hyperlight, they had intercepted a signal, a few plaintive words of Neo-Mandarin. That the prisoners spoke Chinese was not surprising; a half century earlier, at Shaula System, in humanity's first contact with sentient beings, the Akita Fleet of the Asian Cooperation had been annihilated. No survivors emerged from the devastated hulks, but a suspicious number of bodies were never recovered.

Godonov checked his HUD, reset the terrain bug, and stepped out. As they approached a tumbling confluence of streams a hunter screeched. Startled, Godonov

looked up to see Notch perched on a snag. The cliff dweller, black eyes narrowed, shifted the bloodied carcass of a small animal to one of his talons and employed his bony, four-fingered hand in polite greeting. Godonov displayed both palms.

Admiral Runacres had returned to the Red Zone to rescue the mysterious prisoners. Twelve days earlier, Godonov's reconnaissance team had been inserted onto Pitcairn Two's highlands. The mission had gone quickly awry. No sooner had Godonov's advance team been committed to the planet than did fleet sensors detect an Ulaggi battle fleet in transit to the konish system—to Genellan. Admiral Runacres, with no recourse but to pursue, had ordered an emergency recall, marooning Godonov's team.

"Are we glad to see you, Major," a hushed voiced announced. Two face-painted Marines garbed in matte-black skullcaps and raiding gear materialized from the brush. Godonov recognized Technician Private First Class Slovak, the only female on the recon team, and burly Laser Corporal O'Hara. They moved nervously, brandishing their weapons. Up ahead, another skull-capped Marine escorted Chastain and Pake away at quick march.

"It's mutual, Corporal," Buck replied. "Where's Gunny Turley?"

"We lost him, Major!" O'Hara blurted.

"You what!" Buck growled, rounding on the Marine.

"He just...disappeared, Major," O'Hara cried. "Three nights ago. We frigging ain't alone up here, Major. We got—"

"Stow the bullshit, Corporal!" Buck snapped. "Give me facts."

"Aye, sir!" O'Hara said, trying to skulk through the woods and maintain a posture of rigid attention at the same time.

"Gunny Turley moved base camp to a dry cave about a kilometer north," Slovak jumped in. "Good cover, high ground, close to water."

"It looked perfect, Major," O'Hara said. "Dry shelter. Observable approaches. We posted perimeter guard, four on, four off. Gunny wasn't even on duty. He went down to the beach just after midwatch to take a leak. Never came back. We searched all night and the next day. Couldn't find any sign of him."

"We think there's some kind of predatory life form, Major," Slovak added. "We think—"

"Let Commander Godonov do the thinking," Buck exhaled, turning to the science officer.

"Did you deploy sensors?" Godonov demanded. "What did they show? What data did you get?"

"Yes, sir, we deployed full-spectrum and motion. Got nothing, Commander. Nothing," O'Hara replied, glancing at Slovak. Slovak looked at her boots. Both Marines were exhausted; even camo-paint could not hide their bruised and sunken eyes, and something else.

"What is it?" Buck demanded.

"Last three nights," O'Hara said, swallowing hard. "There's been something screaming...all around us, all night long. We ain't had much sleep, Major."

Chapter Two

Cliff Dwellers

Brappa, son-of-Braan, clan of Soong, studied the clumsy five-fingered signs.

"Great danger. Be vigilant," Big-ears gestured emphatically, but neither Big-ears nor Sharp-face knew of the danger's nature. They described only a peril that yelled in

the night. Sharp-face then commanded the cliff dwellers to scout ahead and to seek the unknown.

Brappa, son-of-Braan, relished the hunt. Screaming his clan clarion, the hunter unfolded his membranes and leapt from a boulder, twisting into the wind. Sinews warming with the sunstar's heat and honest exertion, the cliff dweller spiraled upwards, well pleased to be under an open sky and surrounded by mountains, even if not the glacier-draped giants of his home. The wind-blown crags were welcome change from the sterile interior of long-leg star-ships, and much preferred to marching through sandstorms. With a gusting down-rush of their appendages, the other hunters followed their leader into the sky. Gaining altitude, they veered against the wind until they were joined; on Brappa's sword wing soared stalwart Sherrip, son-of-Vixxo, grandson-to-Kuudor; on his shield wing flew Croot'a, son-of-Karro; and in shield echelon soared Kraal, son-of-Craag-the-leader. Far below, the long-leg warriors and their female prize resumed their plodding advance.

Croot'a, wind whistling across his nobly scarred wing, screeched with joy. Brappa forgave his cohort; they were on the hunt, their appetites whetted. It was strange terrain, dust-blown lowlands hemmed by snow-capped mountains; but the cliff dweller's eyes were focused on the high valley and on the immense lakes snaking through its sinuous rift. Hunters ate meat, vegetation, insects; hunters ate almost anything, but above all hunters craved fish. Lakes of this size gave much promise.

Brappa's membranes buckled and warped against the gusts. A flying creature started from the rocks, sword-tipped wings flailing. Brappa had seen birds and falcons on the windy planet, but no large raptors, no soaring scavengers. This surprised the hunter, for buffeting thermals were ideal for winged predators. The cliff dwellers billowed ever higher, searching tumbled rock and tangled forest.

Sherrip screeched. Brappa heard the pulsing warble and saw the hard object moving with unnatural steadiness above the distant sandstorm. The stark mote banked toward them, growing larger, climbing. The lakes would have to wait. Brappa screamed. The hunters dropped from the sky.

It had been thirty hours since Godonov last slept. With each leaden step his eyelids drooped lower. The cliff dweller's screech yanked him alert. Godonov saw the creatures diving at him. Adrenaline coursed through his weary system yet again.

"Cover!" Chastain boomed. Hoisting the wide-eyed female above his shoulders, he bulled his way into a thicket.

"Move!" Buck shouted, diving into the bushes.

Godonov followed the Marines down a stony bank overhung with pine. They rock-hopped across the gushing stream and scrambled up the opposite slope, crawling under branches. Swirling winds wheezed through the fragrant needles, rivaling their own gasps. The science officer monitored sensors for search probes. He turned up acoustic sensitivity and was startled by the rustling of hunter wings. Tonto and Bottlenose, flight membranes trailing, scurried under the boughs. Bottlenose, furling his wings, brushed Godonov's ungloved hand with the softly furred appendage.

"What comes?" Godonov flashed hunter sign.

"Singing machine," Tonto replied. The hunter pointed a bony digit upwards, rudely, in the human manner. And then Godonov heard it.

Yu-yuuuu ... yu-yuuuu ... yu-yuuu.

The pulsing warble lifted above the wind, its pitch rising. Godonov took a deep breath as the blurred shape yodeled overhead and held it as the dissipating ululations were replaced by the *thumpity-thump* of running animals. A dusty pack of thick-shouldered goats, bleating in fear, scampered past. The noise of panicked animals

receded, leaving only wind sound and rushing water.

"About time they came looking," Buck said. "Still think they don't know we're here, Nes? Our sweaty bodies had to stand out like flares."

"If they'd seen us, they would've made another pass," Godonov replied. "They thought we were goats."

Buck grunted an obscenity and scrambled across the stream, risking a low-power laser signal to marshal. Godonov and the cliff dwellers followed.

"Get'em back in the air, Sergeant Major," Buck commanded.

"Aye, sir," Chastain replied. Lifting his blaster, the giant whistled sharply. Tonto leaped, talons extended. Chastain bent low, his blaster parallel to the ground. As the creature made contact with the lowered stock, the Marine boosted the weapon, propelling the hunter into the sky.

Brappa dove upward, extending his membranes to catch the wind; its force pushed the warrior upward and backward. The singing machine had disappeared. Brappa signaled all clear, and Giant-One catapulted the others in turn. The hunter cohort once again spiraled into the gusty skies. The sun was fallen from the zenith, and the updrafts were less impetuous, but good lift remained. Gaining sufficient altitude, the hunters accelerated in a shallow descent toward the lakes, relishing the increasing moistness. The stream along which the long-legs marched gathered momentum below, frothing over smooth stones toward deeper waters. The hunter swooped over a last line of trees, and the lake was before him. Brappa gloried in the wash of water against rock. The hunter's stomach growled, but a reconnaissance remained to be conducted. The warriors glided above the shoaling shore, their acute vision resolving fish moving languorously in the shallows.

Nothing threatened. Brappa signaled Croot'a and Kraal to remain overhead, while he and Sherrip scouted lower. Brappa descended into ground effect, refreshed by the surface temperature. Sherrip, also flying low, screeched his pleasure. For hunters, being above a large lake was a very safe place. Hunters could not truly fly; they were soaring creatures, relying on thermals and ground effect for lift. The chill waters provided no updraft, and Brappa knew that he must soon set down. Sherrip elected sooner rather than later. Wheeling into the wind, the stalwart collapsed his membranes and knifed downward, his streamlined form darting through crystalline waters with a comet-tail of bubbles. The hunter surfaced, a glittering fish in his jaws. Overhead Kraal and Croot'a screeched approval. Soon they would all eat, and well.

Losing momentum, Brappa worked his membranes with labored beats as a clutter of white objects on a beach crescent caught his attention. Alabaster rocks were tumbled about, some stacked in irregular cairns. The hunter leader curved smoothly toward the formations, his membrane tip slicing the wind-faceted surface. The rocks nagged at Brappa's instincts; as he drew near, the clutter took alarming form.

Flexing weary muscles, Brappa grounded his talons in course sand. A fetid odor lifted from the disturbed surface, the smell of carrion, the breath of death. The hunter stowed his membranes and unholstered his deathstick. Sherrip, fish in his teeth, swam powerfully shoreward. Brappa flicked hand signs to Croot'a and Kraal, ordering them to maintain altitude. Remaining clear of overhanging foliage, the hunter stalked the narrow strand. Behind him Sherrip crept from the water, fish in one hand, deathstick in the other.

"Bones," Sherrip chirruped, sniffing the foul air.

Countless bones littered the beach, shivered shank bones, crushed ribs and skulls, large triangular skulls with curved rack of horn.

"The bones of goats," Brappa said.

Pake

"Enough," Godonov said, shutting down to conserve power. They were gathered before the cave, sheltered by a rampart of boulders and leatherleaf. The wind had abated. The sun was down, yet the snow-capped mountains in the east remained awash in bloody alpenglow, their muted beauty reflected from the lake. Two moons, red crescents, dropped toward the western ridges. Godonov stared at the splendor, unseeing.

Free at last from interrogation, Pake clutched at Chastain, her fatigued countenance tear-stained and confused. The curious captive, growing more secure with her captors, had asked as many questions as she had answered. Revelations were still registering on her stunned brain, not the least being the very presence of living adult human males.

"Get her cleaned up and fed," Buck ordered. "Private Slovak, you got any clothes she could use?"

"Sergeant Wu's closer to her size, Major," Slovak replied. Slovak carried her solid mass on a large-boned frame and had to stoop to enter the cave. The wiry Wu did not.

"We all wear green skivvies," Buck muttered. "Sergeant Wu, give a hand with Pake's kit. Keep her comm-unit charged in case you or Corporal Zhou ain't around to translate."

"Aye, sir," Wu answered, grimacing at Slovak's grin as he pulled Pake loose from Chastain's arm.

"Talk about a miserable existence," Buck muttered, tossing a pebble into the bushes.

"Breeding farms!" Godonov snarled, scratching his grizzled chin. "She's not even thirty standard, Jim, and she's had eight kids. Look at her; she looks fifty."

Pake's story was unsettling. In addition to forced labor in the ore mines, the imprisoned females were artificially inseminated every other year until they were too old to bear. Any female that missed consecutive childbearing cycles was taken from the village, never to be seen again. And Pake's time was up; almost three years had lapsed since her last delivery, a large child that had passed but reluctantly from her womb. Pake's pride at having borne a robust male was obvious, as was her immense sorrow at having lost her sons to the Ulaggi. She had borne six males and two females in her brief life; and she was three times a grandmother, all boys. But on Pitcairn Two, mothers were permitted only their female issue. Pake's male children and her male grandchildren had all been taken at birth, without so much as an embrace, without so much as a final touch. Pake had lived her short life in a community consisting solely of girls and women, the only distinction being the ability to bear children.

"We saved her life," Buck said.

Godonov muttered an obscenity. The details uncovered had been bizarre, but for Pake it was the only life she knew. She spoke matter-of-factly of unending toil, but she also spoke of old songs and stories of other times, of legends told by the old mothers when she was young, tales of heroes, of families with fathers, and myths of ships that traveled the stars, of great civilizations and greater dreams. But the old mothers had long ago been taken away, and with them had departed their fervor, their conviction. The myths and the songs remained but without the memory to give them texture, without passion. There was only reality, the muscle-aching reality of the mines, the body-rending reality of childbirth, and the heartbreaking reality of losing her

baby boys. And now Pake had also lost her daughters, and her home.

"What happens to the males?" Godonov mumbled as he dropped his head to his forearms. "Maybe they work separate mines. Intel shows more mining settlements on the planet."

"I'll ask an Ulaggi guard next time I see one," Buck replied.

"They get sperm from somewhere," Godonov said, yawning.

"Right now we have to figure out what to do about the screamers," Buck snarled. "I'm not going to lose any more Marines."

They had asked Pake about the night screamers. She had never seen one, but on foraging trips to glean cactus spines and hardwood, she had heard horrible cries in the night. The Ulaggi knew of the danger; the birthing technicians would order the women to stay out of the high country; but the dull-witted guards would taunt their prisoners, knowing they desperately needed wood and cactus for fuel and building material. Several days each lunar cycle, the oldest women were given leave from the mines to scavenge the highlands. Some never returned.

"We're a zillion light-years from humanity," Buck muttered, "on an Ulaggi-held planet, and we got a body-snatching carnivore that builds bone cairns on the beach for a neighbor. What's going to happen to us?"

"Truth is we don't matter..." Godonov sighed.

Buck moaned. "At least let me hope, Nes."

"Yeah, keep hoping, Jim," Godonov replied, slapping the Marine on his back. "The alternative isn't pleasant to contemplate."

The last glow lifted from the mountains. Ranks of stars twinkled into existence. Chastain, with Tonto stalking silently at his heels, appeared from the gloaming. A soft chittering broke the calm. Tonto exchanged hand sign, declaring all in readiness. Chastain had changed to raiding rig, a light torso shell of reactive camouflage and a matte-black skullcap; a tactical data unit with stowed night-vision lenses covered Chastain's left cheek and temple, and a throat mike clasped the Marine's bull neck like an opera choker.

"Heard any screamers, Sergeant Major?" Buck asked.

"All quiet, sir," Chastain reported. "Sentries posted. IR scanners fully charged and trip wires set. Ready for inspection, sir."

"Time for my evening stroll," Buck muttered, pulling his sidearm and checking the magazine.

"Nothing like a summer vacation lakeside," Godonov sighed, looking up at the achingly beautiful heavens. Like their rescue, the stars were infinitely far away. His stomach growled, bringing him back to reality.

"Get some sleep, shippie," Buck ordered. "You're relieving me in four hours."

"Not to worry, boss grunt," Godonov replied, yawning. He pushed aside the parafoil over the cave entrance and let his eyes adapt to the meager red glow. The team's heavy gear was positioned to block light emanating from interior galleries. In a niche just off the entrance, Corporal Zhou monitored sensors, their dimmed consoles adding amber highlights to the sanguinary ambience. Wary of leaving his scalp on the uneven overhead, Godonov passed deeper into the lowering interior where a single red-shaded lantern provided illumination. Below the lantern something was warming on a mini-stove; the aroma of coffee competed with human sweat and cave dankness. Pop-eye perched in the shadows, apparently asleep; reflected light from a line of moisture on the hunter's eyelids suggested a slit-eyed malevolence.

"You had chow, Commander?" Private Slovak asked. "Cruzie's a sweet cook." Slovak sat near a barrel-chested Marine whose jet hair and eyebrows were already reestablished on his chiseled face. Private Cruz looked up from the steaming stew and

grinned.

"We're conserving packaged rations, sir," he said, "so you got a choice of boiled goat-like critter or boiled fish-thing, all tested positive as genuine human-digestible protein. Ain't bad, neither."

"Why boiled?" Godonov asked, stomach juices welling; the odor of stewing meat reached his olfactory. His throat filled with saliva.

"Less smoke," Cruz responded. "Keeps the stink down."

"I'll get my silverware," Godonov said, motivated by the gamey aroma. He moved deeper into the shadows, dropping to a crawl as the ceiling rounded to the floor. The surface was hard-packed clay; parafoils had been spread, making for a serviceable bunking area just high enough for a person to sit. Corporal O'Hara was already turned in, sleeping the petrified sleep of the exhausted. Sergeant Wu and Pake were also there, communicating softly. Pake, unabashedly naked, was on her back, delightedly pulling on a pair of government-issue skivvies. Her face, forearms, and lower legs were darkly weathered, but her rosy shanks and bare torso radiated paleness. For having borne eight children, she was in remarkable condition, but then she was also a slave laborer in an ore mine. She hummed a tune as she pulled on her new clothes; to her delight, Sergeant Wu started singing along. Pake beamed with joy and rolled over to give the Marine a hug.

"It's an old nursery rhyme," Wu explained, pushing Pake about her business. "About new clothes for the baby..."

Godonov's pack was next to Buck's in a recess apart from the troops. As he extracted his mess kit he noticed that the cave continued past the bunking area. It climbed into a niche with enough headroom to stand before narrowing into a tight channel that twisted downward into shadow. More gear was stored in the niche.

"Sergeant Wu, how far back does that go?" Godonov asked.

"Can't say, Commander," Wu replied. "The passage chokes down to where even I can't get through. Slovak deployed a microbot but wedged it about thirty meters in. We can't retrieve it. It's still imaging. She also set IR sensors in as far as she could. We moved some rocks in the way, just in case. Slovak keeps her gear in the alcove, and that's where she sleeps. We'll put Pake in there, too. Lady's room, if you know what I mean."

Godonov grunted and peered down the rubble-filled hole. The air was musty and unmoving. Satisfied, he grabbed his mess kit and retreated toward the lantern, his stomach demanding its due. Slovak and Cruz sat shoulder to shoulder, sharing a joke—or possibly something more tender.

"I'll have some of that goat facsimile," Godonov said, joining them. "You two look like you're enjoying this."

"Sorry, sir," Cruz replied as he ladled a helping into Godonov's cup. "Just mighty glad you guys are back. It's been tough, losing Gunny Turley and all. Now we can run a proper watch."

"The screamers only come at night?" Godonov asked.

"Mostly after midnight until just before dawn," Slovak replied, grimacing. She had removed her skullcap and washed off her camo-paint, revealing pleasant features, a strong chin, clear eyes, and a wide mouth. Her head stubble barely caught the red glow of the battle lantern, making her a blonde or a redhead.

"Never thought I'd say it, but having hunters around sure makes me feel better," Cruz added, nodding toward the shadows. The roosting cliff dweller's red-glistening eyes appeared deeply sinister. "If anyone can track the screamers, the hunters can. And, even better, Pop-eye caught us these fish. I was past tired of goat."

"Mighty good goat," Godonov said, relishing the taste and texture of natural

food. He had been subsisting on caloric loaders and field stims since arriving on planet. "What else is in this?" he asked, stirring the chewy dregs and sniffing the pungent steam. "It's good."

"Thanks," Cruz replied. "Some roots and nuts that passed bio-screen. There's lots of local stuff to eat. We should be okay until winter..." Private Cruz's words trailed away. Winter was a long way off.

Sergeant Wu and Pake joined them, breaking the wistful silence. Pake floated in a set of Wu's rolled up fatigues. She chatted with the sergeant while her hands moved over her garment, investigating collars and pockets, relishing the faultless synthetic fabric. Cruz offered her a cup of stew. The female stared, licking her lips; her eyes darted inquisitively into Cruz's smiling face. The Marine thrust the cup forward. Pake smiled like a child and took it in her small hands, eyes closed, nose wiggling. She bowed graciously and lifted the cup above her eyes before putting it hungrily to her lips. She finished the hot stew with alarming speed and let go a solid belch.

"Doesn't seem so frightened now," Godonov said.

"No, sir," Wu replied. "But I think she's horny—Excuse me, Commander, I meant she's in love with Sergeant Major Chastain."

They all laughed, especially Pake, after Wu whispered to her.

"Joko!" she said, laughing. "Joko!"

"Is she still worried about the screamers?" Godonov asked.

Sergeant Wu translated. Pake, wide-eyed, answered quickly.

"She says we are very big men and there are many of us, and we have big knives. We will please protect her," Wu replied.

"Damn right, we're big men," Slovak said, giving Cruz an elbow. "And now that we're all together, and now that we know something's out there, whatever they are, they won't get past us."

"Then I won't worry either," Godonov said, stooping to his feet. And he wasn't worried, at least not about the screamers; they were just an indigenous predator, a creature of the night that technology and discipline would surely detect and defeat. But Godonov was immensely worried about the Ulaggi, and ultimately about the prospects for rescue. He yawned and considered his own advice: the rescue mission and all the prisoners on Pitcairn did not matter in the grand scheme. They would try to survive the night and then take it one day at a time. That was all they could do.

His belly full, Godonov removed his boots and crawled into his sleeping bag. He punched up a stuff-sack with spare clothing and was asleep before the weight of his head settled onto the makeshift pillow.

Chapter Four

Screamers

Something was there. Brappa slowed his heartbeat and shifted his senses, straining to penetrate the shroud of night. Nothing resolved from the darkness, nothing moved, yet the hunter was certain. Something was there.

Night was hard fallen, the two large moons long set. A feeble third moon, no more than a dull ember, was on the rise, faint and futile to the hunter's purpose. The air was still; a dusty pall had crept into the rift valley, dimming the stars and smothering sound.

Daylight had waned before they could finish scouting even the nearest lake. The sinuous body of water meandered, broken with myriad coves and islets, with endless lakes beyond, all with their own beaches, coves, and islets. More bones had been

found, cairns of skulls and pyramids of long bones, some still reeking of death, many splintered and sucked clean of marrow, the thick crowns and heavy horns crushed, clear indication of a powerful predator, one not to be underestimated, indeed, a foe to be respected. The mysteries had multiplied with each new discovery, but dusk had fallen too soon. The sunstar became a red sphere, its filtered surface mottled with sunspots, until it had faded into a monochromatic gloaming the color of drying blood. Abject darkness, unrelieved by moon or star, had come precipitously. With no answers at hand, hunters and long-legs had repaired to their cave, to ready themselves for the night. Hunters were creatures of caves; they had thought it a good shelter, perhaps too good.

Brappa shifted his senses to a new arc, sifting the dusty blackness. It was not his watch; he had paused to stare out over the black water. Something had stirred in his gut. His talons tightened on gritty rock. Dust irritated his eyes, but Brappa did not blink. A spoor drifted on the thick air, a musky essence, the same taint discerned from the sand beneath the cairns. Something was there.

The lake lapped against the cliff a dozen spans below. Here the terrain was precipitous, with only sparse thickets clinging to the rock. To the left and right the approaches were less steep, with overgrown ledges that served as terraced paths to the beaches below. These narrow approaches were monitored with sensors and guarded; Croot'a and long-leg warriors posted sentry to his left; Sherrip and long-legs posted to the right. Kraal was in the cave, resting, where Brappa should have been.

A long-leg sentry adjusted position. Brappa filtered out the distraction, keeping his attention on the dusty void. Something was there—a heartbeat in the darkness. A feckless zephyr off the lake refreshed the foul spoor; Brappa opened his mouth to taste the musty night. It was closer, drifting to Brappa's left. The hunter's talons took firmer purchase. He loosened his membranes, making ready. Slowly, very slowly, he unholstered his deathstick. In his other hand he gripped a knife.

A long-leg sentry hocked and spat. The raucous warrior muttered in his guttural tongue, loud to Brappa's ears. A different long-leg answered, too soft to hear; Brappa recognized Giant-one's sound pattern. A moment later the long-leg warrior approached, heavy boots crunching. Soundlessly, Sherrip was at Brappa's side. Giant-one loomed from blackness. Brappa held up his knife, signaling halt. Giant-one, employing night-vision optics, froze. Brappa swept his blade through a narrow arc. Sherrip, deathstick in hand, skulked to a flanking position.

From far off came a keening, a penetrating mid-range shriek, at first above the hearing range of long-legs but descending into their ken. Giant-one inhaled sharply. The hunter strained to detect nuances. Was it a signal, or merely the cry of a dumb beast?

Croot'a chirped, reflexively transmitting a sonic pulse. Brappa sensed the hunter's primary pulse and the echo. And something else—a whispering sound packet—of low frequency—came groping from below, searching. Another pulse, stronger, came from his left. And another. Perplexed, Brappa blinked to moisten his eyes. Whatever was there, it was searching, hunting. Another keening cry flew through the night, louder, closer. The long-legs stirred, grumbling, giving away their positions.

Brappa detected a soft shower of pulses, lower-pitched than hunter sonics. *Focused on him!* A ridge of fur bristled on Brappa's spine; hunters little relished being hunted. Something was about to transpire. Brappa chirped a warning and crouched. Croot'a and Sherrip acknowledged.

A long-leg yelped. A weapon fired on full automatic, its thumping muzzle blasts illuminating the night with angry bursts. The attack was come! A portion of Brappa's night moved. It moved rapidly, emitting a focused stream of pulses. Brappa's nervous

system reacted autonomously; the hunter's cortex reflexively bombarded the formless specter with sonic darts, and the moving night took form in the hunter's brain. A target, large and quick! Brappa depressed the trigger of his deathstick. Its muzzle blast illuminated a hurtling shadow brandishing raised claws, with immense reptilian eyes and a gaping maw of jagged teeth. Sherrip and Giant-one joined fire. The horrible phantasm was blasted backward, shrieking into the night. A heavy splash recorded its impact with the lake below.

The night came alive. Brappa processed inputs; goat-eaters, like cliff dwellers, used echo-ranging to navigate the dark. Ultra-sonic pulses fired from all directions, high-pitched hunter probes and lower-pitched enigmas from the darkness. Sonic bedlam. Amorphous shapes darted over rocks and crashed through thickets, chased from the cliffs by the thundering reports and flashing muzzles of long-leg weapons. Some long-legs shouted angrily as they fired, but from the cave Brappa heard a long-leg screaming. Giant-one bellowed orders above the fusillade, and the firing sputtered to a halt. In the sudden lull, hollow splashes, like flat rocks knifing water, lifted from the black lake below.

Goat-eaters came from the lake. And there were many of them.

Screams, shrill female screams, jerked Godonov into consciousness. The science officer struggled to remember what planet he was on, while from somewhere near heavy weapons thundered on full automatic. The unyielding rock beneath his shoulder was not a dream. Motion detection alarms beeped, bringing awareness and terror. Adrenaline coursed through his blood, jolting Godonov from his coma. He came awake into the surreal glow of the battle lantern, his body jerking in panicked spasms, nerves and battered muscles not in concert. He rolled from his bag and lunged to his feet, luckily slamming the adamant ceiling with the back of his neck instead of his skull. He dropped to his knees, seeing stars.

"Target! Mark your targets!" Chastain's deep voice thundered from far away.

"Sensors! Give us data!" Buck shouted.

Shaking away cobwebs, Godonov grabbed his weapon and crawled toward the bedlam inside the cave. The desperate pleas were not in Legion Standard; his dimmed senses recognized Chinese words and inflections. It was Pake. But hers was not the only voice in the din. Godonov recognized Sergeant Wu trying to calm Pake and Corporal Cruz's deep voice shouting Slovak's name. Godonov moved deeper into the cave. He ran into Wu and Pake clutching each other as they crawled toward the entrance, both staring over their shoulders. Pake muffled her face with her fists, turning screams into sobs.

"Wha' happened?" Godonov demanded.

"Intruder sir," Wu gasped. "Musta' come in through the back. I heard screaming, but it was gone by the time I got there. The hunter scared it away. I saw him dive into the hole, chasing after it. And Slovak's gone, too. They're both gone. Pake says the intruder took Slovak."

"Took Slovak?" Godonov mumbled stupidly as he crawled to the deepest part of the cave. Private Cruz and other Marines not on watch were already there, some slapping on their gear, the others staring down the narrow opening, weapons trained. The dismal hole was still tight, but now it was less constricted. Obstructing boulders had been pushed aside, and a current of air gushed upward. The orifice's rim glistened with spongy matter and a dark fluid. The science officer bent down and scraped some onto a knife.

"What is it?" Cruz asked.

"Flesh and blood, I think," Godonov replied, sniffing.

"I'm going in!" Cruz cried, moving forward. Like Godonov, he was in his socks.

"Negative!" Godonov growled, pushing the heavy Marine. "You won't fit down that hole, Private. Get your gear together and post guard here. Sergeant Wu can back you up. Be careful you don't shoot Pop-eye when he comes back. The rest of you, outside and see if Major Buck needs your help."

"Aye..." Cruz moaned, blinking tears.

The automatic fire outside the cave stuttered to a halt. Godonov crawled back to his gear, clamped on his boots, and yanked on his helmet. On his way out he ran into Sergeant Wu returning with a weapon. Pake lay huddled in the sensor alcove, trembling with fear. Leaving her with Corporal Zhou, Godonov emerged into the night. The dust-obscured expanse of humid blackness was welcome relief after the fear-congested cave. The chatter on laserlink was terse and controlled; Chastain mustered the troops; Corporal O'Hara, with poorly muted excitement, was claiming a kill. Godonov reduced sensitivity on his night-vision optics, focusing the blurry images dancing in the glow of infrared. He located Buck's IR transponder and groped his way toward the Marine.

"Corporal Zhou, how'd they get so damn close?" Buck demanded. "You awake in there?"

"Sensors didn't show any motion until the firefight, Major," Zhou replied from the cave. "You can check the replay, sir. They move slow, under threshold. Once they started moving we could track them. I figure there were at least thirty, maybe as many as fifty. Plus at least one in the cave."

"What do you mean—one in the cave?" Buck snapped.

"It came in through the snake hole," Godonov said. "Somehow they opened it enough to get in, but it's still too small for a man to pass. Pop-eye followed the intruder down the hole. He's still missing. Slovak's missing, too. Pake says the intruder took her."

"If the hole's too small for a man," Buck replied, "then it's too small for Slovak. She ain't no frigging lightweight. Hell, she's one of my best men. She's got to be there somewhere. Check the cave again."

"Sergeant Wu just did, sir," Zhou replied over the link. "Me, Cruz, Sergeant Wu, and Pake are the only ones in here. Slovak's gone, sir."

"Concur, Major," Chastain reported, materializing from the dark. Tonto was at his side, gesturing rapidly. "Perimeter checks clear. All hands accounted for except Slovak and Pop-eye."

"Crap!" Buck growled. "What are we dealing with? Ghosts?"

"No, sir. They can be killed," Chastain replied. "Me and the hunters took one out at mid-perimeter. It came out of nowhere. No IR, no nothing. But I know we tagged it."

"Show me," Buck demanded.

"Can't, sir. Blew it into the lake," Chastain replied. "But O'Hara says he tagged one in sector two."

"Let's see what we're dealing with," Buck muttered, leading them into the bushes. Chastain and the cliff dwellers formed a picket while Corporal O'Hara pointed Godonov and Buck toward the kill.

"Nothing on IR," Godonov reported as they spread out.

"You sure you hit one, O'Hara?" Buck demanded.

"It's there," O'Hara protested. "It went down like a load of crap. I friggin' tripped over its slimy ass."

"Cruz you up?" Buck barked. "What's your status?"

"Cave is secure," Cruz reported. He was angry. "Private Slovak and Pop-eye are still missing, sir."

"Damn," Buck muttered, just as Godonov's boot contacted a yielding surface.

The science officer turned his IR sensors full up. Beneath the hot glow of his foot, a shaded outline the same temperature as the rocks resolved from the mottled background.

"Got it," Godonov said. "No IR. It's cold as dirt!"

"Put a light on it," Buck ordered, shouldering through the brush. Godonov fired off his helmet lamp. An intense red column dancing with dust motes and nervous insects knifed into the darkness. Godonov opened the beam, revealing rocks covered with slimy residue—and a dead screamer. The creature was green-black and slick with moisture, a full two meters in length.

"Friggin' frogburger," O'Hara said, leaning over Godonov's shoulder.

"Back to your post, O'Hara," Chastain grunted as he peered over the science officer's other shoulder.

Heavy caliber bullets had ripped the beast's torso, revealing a musculature promising brutish strength. There was no neck; the shoulders narrowed and extended upward into a hairless, blunt protrusion. Where one expected ears, there were flaps of a lighter hue. A pronounced cranial brow shielded widespread protruding eyes, lidless and thrice the size of corresponding human organs. One black orb was partially covered with a diaphanous membrane. The gruesome creature had muscular legs and arms, with large extremities; thick webbing connected toes and fingers, and icy white claws protruded from all digits.

"Bugger's huge," Buck gasped. "How could one of those get through that rat hole in the back of the cave?"

Godonov, preparing to extract a tissue sample, was thinking the same thing. He lifted the creature's arm; the sinews were firm, but the bones were remarkably flexible.

Tonto appeared at the science officer's side, sniffing the air. The hunter pointed at the creature's head and flashed signs.

"Tonto says it speaks with brain sound like cliff dwellers," Chastain said. "And that it comes from the lake."

"A predatory amphibian with sonar ranging," Godonov said. "That's one for the exobiologists."

"I guess vacationing on the lakeshore wasn't such a grand idea after all," Buck said.

"But ain't the mountain air dandy?" Godonov muttered.

Private Cruz came up on tactical. "Pop-eye just came back up through the hole, Major," Cruz reported, his voice breaking. "He brought back one of Slovak's boots, and..."

"Yeah?" Buck snapped. "What else?"

"Slovak's f-foot, Major!" the Marine sobbed.

"What? Spit it out, Cruz!"

"Her foot's still in it, sir!"

Section Two: Decisions

Exodus

Ancient were the Ulaggi before the ancestors of man walked upright. Ancient were the Ulaggi millennia before konish warlords declared themselves noble. And ancient were the Ulaggi when their womb-planet died, blasted by nova.

Yet the virulent race did not perish. Anticipating their sunstar's demise, the indomitable species had for centuries prior sortied probes into the infinite void, each self-sustaining hull propelled upon a desperate voyage of survival. Scattering

outward into the galaxy, century upon century, these thin threads of existence began to rupture. The racial spark grew dim.

Mutating as it probed, mutating to survive, the Ulaggi germ sought beneficent planetfall; but only the female evolved, for the wandering ships were crewed solely by that gender. The male, numbering uncounted billions, also traveled the stars but in seminal stasis, cryogenically preserved, employed clinically only as needed to propagate the race.

Centuries of uninterrupted space travel rendered primitive emotions genetically counterproductive. The most aggressive Ulaggi became the most adaptive, redirecting their truculence inward. The race did not lose its belligerence; rather it was insulated. The already complex female brain bifurcated into dual lobes, each with unique persona. The primary cerebellum developed heightened emotional control and an inchoate telepathic ability. For a select few, this mutated sense was elaborated; these exceptional specimens progressively gained the ability to manipulate emotions, even to perceive the thoughts of their fellow creatures. This was to have telling effect; but the universal mutation that allowed these creatures to survive for century upon century in space was even more complex: Ulaggi females developed a secondary lobe, a repository for suppressed emotion, a libidinous prison of atavistic personality, dominated by fear and sensuality. In this lobe resided the g'ort—the animal within.

All female Ulaggi shared the biological check valve of dual personality. All alternatively embraced and suppressed their g'ort, for it was the animal within that defined the depth of their passion and the intensity of their pleasure. But it was their ability to control the animal within that defined their social station. Only one strain came to possess full-blown telepathic powers and the concomitant emotional preeminence. These were the lakk-Ulag. Those females not endowed, or favored to a lesser degree, were known as hajil-Ulag.

Through centuries of space travel hajil came to serve lakk.

Chapter Five

Fear

A white-hot nova exploded on Cassiopeia Quinn's optic nerve; consciousness arrived in a spasm of pain. Head throbbing, the science officer swam upward through a flood of adrenalin, fear dominating agony. Quinn struggled to cover her eyes, to avert her face from the febrile glow beyond her clenched eyelids, but her wrists were bound and her head clamped fast. Rigid bands ran over her chest, thighs, and ankles, their sweat-slippery contact confirming her nakedness. Her breasts were cruelly flattened, her ribs bruised, but it was the pain behind her eyes that ruled, overwhelming even her abject vulnerability. Fighting panic, Quinn blew air from her constricted lungs and willed her stupefied brain to function. Her throat was dry, her tongue thick and cleaving. She sifted the clues; the air reeked of sweat and urine, but it hinted of something else. Her nostrils filtered air redolent of machinery; she sensed the rhythm of pumps and recirculators. Realization brought suffocating panic—she had no weight. She was no longer on Genellan. She was in space—on an Ulaggi ship.

"Help me," Quinn whimpered.

"Quiet," croaked a human voice. "They'll hurt you."

"W-who—" she asked, cracking an eye against the impenetrable incandescence. *Whoosh*—a hatch seal let go. Quinn bit off her plea as pressure attacked her eardrums. Rushing air chilled the sweat trickling over her ribs. A pungent odor suggestive of

cinnamon and clove joined the oleo of baser scents as a dark presence eclipsed the glow. Strangely, the pain in Quinn's head blew away like dry dust in a hot wind. And was replaced by something else, something vague, an awareness—no, an intrusion—foul and menacing. Terror rising, Quinn squinted through her lashes. In the overwhelming glare floated a shadow, tall and lithe, its willowy form swathed in translucent robes billowing in null-gee like oil sheening on pure water. The occluding specter floated away, flooding Quinn with the full force of the infernal illumination. The headache returned with renewed fury.

An Ulaggi! *But different!* Quinn's battered brain replayed its last conscious moments, of sea gulls screeching and waves crashing, of Nash Hudson plummeting from the cliffs. God, no! She desperately tried to suppress the recollection of her husband falling into the rocky ocean, but merciless memory replayed the entire nightmare: the failed defense of New Edmonton's spaceport degenerating into a rout, of enemy robots swarming the scorched land, and of black-helmeted Ulaggi dragging her from the cliff face. But those aliens had been thick beasts with wide backs, nothing like the apparition just witnessed. The hatch cycled again, sealing with pneumatic finality. The air flow ceased. What had she seen? Why was she alive? She wished she were dead. No! No, she had to survive; Emerald was still alive.

"Please, God," Quinn prayed, the broken words unable to escape her sand-dry throat. "Please let my daughter live."

Someone sneezed. A sour odor lifted from the stink; a metallic essence filled her throat. Another sneeze.

"Gassing us again," a different voice groaned.

An itch festered within Quinn's sinuses and blossomed into pure torture. Others sneezed. She envied them beyond reason. Involuntarily, Quinn blinked open her eyes. Brightness tipped the measure; three glorious times she sneezed, liquid and loud, a catharsis, but a mixed blessing, for her head throbbed with each discharge and her ribcage flamed with pain. She tried in vain to sniffle her draining sinuses under control, but that discomfort was suddenly and overwhelmingly subordinated by her bladder. Quinn did not care; nausea over swept her. The unmistakable ripples of time warping and space compressing blended with oblivion. Wetting herself, Quinn gratefully surrendered. She recognized the punishing sensations: her prison ship was jumping, jumping into hyperlight, jumping into the timeless distances of space.

She was lost. Genellan was lost. All was lost.

Chapter Six

Hope

Fleet Admiral Robert Runacres, his immaculate pate reflecting the harsh glare of the lander's exterior floods, stepped onto the planet's surface, his boots crunching blackened debris that only days before had been the colonial city of New Edmonton. The Tellurian Legion admiral's thick neck was bowed; gravity and remorse tugged at every fiber of his frame. Runacres had just lost six motherships and three transports, most with all hands. His burly shoulders slumped under the weight of so many spacers gone to their deaths. The old man was tired, his grief profound, but he was not defeated. It was the Ulaggi that had abandoned the field. *His crews had not died in vain.* The cost was dear, but at the end of the day it had been a victory, their first victory.

Runacres stared up at the PDF defense station, a twilight star, its brilliance filtered by pink streaks of cirrus. The Planetary Defense Force satellite had tipped the

balance, saving the planet. It was at last nearing stationary orbit, if not soon enough to protect New Edmonton. The defense station was not the only star penetrating the rich indigo. Rising in the east was an eye-aching orb of mustard hue. Massive with a thick and noxious atmosphere, Kon was the second planet from the sunstar and home to the system's dominant civilization. Runacres was standing on the surface of Genellan, the system's pristine third planet.

The old spacer moved outward from the cone of light and stared at the devastation. He lifted his face to the breeze sweeping up from the distant sea, inhaling a salty tang with bitter draughts of smoldering ruin. A misty scud rolled across the sky, harbinger to an approaching front. Weather was wondrous to a spacer. Cool air hitting the stressed skin of his lander generated a soft percussion of clicks and pings, forlorn accompaniment to the frantic symphony of Legion-yellow graders and backhoes grinding across the darkening horizon. All around the azimuth, banks of arc lights and headlamps were popping on in preparation for a long night. New Edmonton would be rebuilt.

"Copy that," drawled a senior officer stepping to Runacres's side. "The admiral will return to orbit in two-zero hours. All ships, excepting *Terra del Fuego*, will be linked and ready for departure on the next grav-max." But for a pale stubble, Captain Sarah Merriwether's scalp and brow were also devoid of hair. On her breast flashed a mothership command star, although her command was no more. Hours earlier *T.L.S. Eire* had plunged into Genellan's atmosphere, a fiery meteor.

"Death toll is now over five thousand, Admiral," Merriwether grimly announced. "Five hundred are still missing. That's humans. Ocean Station was annihilated with six thousand kones massacred. It's worse than Shaula."

Runacres, jaw clenched, said nothing, his pale eyes flaring amidst webs of broken veins. The butcher's bill run up by contact with the Ulaggi continued to grow, with Genellan's horrible losses joining the massacres at Shaula and Old Father and Hornblower. At Pitcairn, Runacres had saved his task force by running. At Genellan there had been no choice. At Genellan, Runacres had stood his ground.

"So many dead," he muttered. The loss of flight crews churned Runacres's gut. Earth's teeming billions would replace the dead settlers soon enough. It would take years to train a mothership crew, a decade to make a corvette skipper.

"We beat them, Admiral," Merriwether said.

Runacres turned to his flagship captain, her rubicund features aglow in the landing lights. "It's only just begun, Sarah," he sighed.

"They'll get the same next go," Merriwether drawled, eyes flashing. "And the next. And the next."

Daring to smile, Runacres patted his old friend's shoulder. "We must get you a new ship, Captain. The Ulaggi do not yet comprehend their peril."

"Here's the reception committee," Merriwether replied, nodding towards a trio of all-terrains lumbering over a ridge of rubble, headlamps jerking and twisting. The vehicles shuddered to a stop, issuing a knot of grave-faced men.

All but one wore military environmentals. Runacres recognized the tall civilian and took his hand. Reginald St. Pierre, formerly of the Legion Security Service, had come to Genellan with the first load of colonists, planted to spy on settlers and to shape their attitudes. Now he was one of Charl Buccari's most ardent disciples.

"Good to see you, Reggie," Runacres said, breathing heavily. Gravity was taking its toll.

"Even better to see you, Admiral," St. Pierre replied. The man's handsome face was haggard with strain and stubble, his raven hair disheveled. "We owe you our lives, sir."

"Too many were not saved," Runacres replied.

"Have they found Captain Quinn?" Merriwether demanded.

"Negative," St. Pierre replied, tight-jawed. "We've found no DNA matches among the dead. I'm praying for her, Admiral. We need her now more than ever. NED was Cassy's city. She was our decision maker—"

"New Edmonton is yours to govern now, Reggie," Runacres said. "Do not let her down."

"I won't, Admiral," St. Pierre replied.

"How's her renegade husband?" Merriwether asked.

"Hudson's in awful shape, but he's recoverable. They pulled him from the ocean with a crushed spine and two broken legs. He was placed in remediation stasis and uploaded. He and their daughter, Emerald, will be joining you for the return to Earth."

"Poor Nash," Merriwether said. "It will be his third rebuild."

"All he has left is his character," St. Pierre said.

"'Tis what matters most," Runacres replied. "We shall need thousands more like Hudson before this is through. But I doubt we shall find many more like Captain Quinn. Tell me, how is your city, Governor?"

"Bad, but it could be worse," St. Pierre said. "Two trunks remain operational, and refugees are flowing back from the camps. We are diverting as many as possible to the farms. We must bring in the harvest before the monsoon."

"How soon before PHM reentry?" Merriwether asked. Twenty planetary habitation modules, emergency-jettisoned before battle with the Ulaggi, were falling toward the planet, bringing another two thousand settlers to Genellan. Runacres had saved their lives, too.

"Two hours before the first one hits atmosphere," St. Pierre replied, dark eyes glinting. "The landing pads will be ready," he said, nodding at the bustling graders in the distance. "We'll convert two modules into power stations, two into hospitals, and we'll use the others for shelters. New Edmonton will rise around them like a Phoenix from the ashes."

"Quite poetic," Runacres grumbled.

"Tar Fell arriving," Merriwether announced, pointing to a new star flaring overhead. A low rumble reached the ground, rising rapidly to a gut-felt growl; too soon the reentry growl blossomed into a corrosive, atmosphere-rending explosion. St. Pierre ushered Runacres and Merriwether into his all-terrain, slamming the heavy doors against the teeth-vibrating bedlam.

Konish civilization was far older than human. Kones had learned of the Ulaggi menace a millennium earlier when the marauders had suddenly appeared deep within their system. The alien terror had descended into low orbit around Kon and for day after endless day pounded the massive yellow planet. Millions of kones perished, their ancient cities laid waste; all apparently for sport, for when it was over, the aliens disappeared into the immensity of space, without having made contact in any manner except to kill.

In the intervening centuries Kon's civilization recovered and, with obsessive discipline, prepared for the next invasion. As those centuries passed, kones became more frightened, more suspicious, and more belligerent, all in the name of self-defense. Fleets were built; constellations of defense satellites orbited the planet, ready for the next attack, their fear of the unknown the only glue binding the powerful northern hegemony with the contentious nations of the south. Such was their fear of alien attack that an independent Planetary Defense Force was formed to protect the entire planet. Even when the nations of Kon went violently to war, the PDF remained aloof, dedicated to the planet's defense.

Tar Fell's massive reentry vessel plummeted planetward atop a white-hot column of fire. As the lander neared the surface, its howling retro intensified into a scream. St. Pierre maneuvered the all-terrain toward the touchdown point as the immense black cylinder settled to contact, its thrusters pounding the carbonized ground. Articulating legs deployed, buttressing the ungainly vessel. The shrieking ceased, leaving a ringing in Runacres's ears.

Despite their powerful impulse technologies and their consuming motivation, the kones had been unable to break the bonds of their own solar system. Until humans arrived, the secrets of the hyperlight anomaly had eluded their scientists. Trapped in their own solar system, konish engineers used the lessons and necessities of escaping Kon's massive gravity well to create battleships with immense impulse engines and orbiting defense stations equipped with energy weapons of great power. They would be ready if the murderers ever returned.

But it was not the Ulaggi that next came; it was Admiral Runacres and the Tellurian Legion Fleet; and it was the humans, despite desperate overtures of peace, who received the brunt of frustration pent up by centuries of fear. Konish forces were too aggressive, too powerful for the outgunned humans. Runacres fought valiantly in self-defense, but after taking losses he retreated to hyperlight, abandoning a single corvette and its crew. Lieutenant Charl Buccari, the skipper of that corvette, and Ensign Nash Hudson, her copilot, did more than just survive. Buccari and Hudson changed the destinies of both civilizations and forged a bond between kone and human. Twelve standard years had lapsed since. Kones had received the gift of hyperlight, and humans had gained a blood-ally in their struggle against the Ulaggi.

BA-BOOM! BA-BOOM! A sonic boom thundered out of the gloaming. *BA-BOOM!* Another sonic thunderclap followed.

"That would be Commander Buccari," Runacres grumbled, hanging on as the all-terrain jolted over the ruins. The PDF lander, its red strobes penetrating the night, loomed ever larger in the ATV's windshield.

"Her EPL's in the pipe, Admiral. Twenty minutes to touchdown," Merriwether reported. "Carmichael's on her tail."

"We are in a struggle for our very existence, and they're still playing grab ass," Runacres muttered. "We need to get this over with. We have a war to—"

"Relax, old man," Merriwether whispered in his ear. "You're going to enjoy giving away the bride. Forget the bloody battles for a few minutes. Be happy for them. Be happy for yourself. You deserve it."

"I am relaxed, damn it!" Runacres snapped as the konish lander's main hatch opened.

"Cheery aye, aye," Merriwether muttered.

The ship's floodlights illuminated a lowering ramp. A gigantic, black-uniformed PDF soldier bounded onto the planet, landing on all fours. Pivoting like a cat, the monster towered onto thick hind legs, blaster ready. Their ATV halted and the helmeted alien leapt to the admiral's door. Shaking off a morbid stiffness, Runacres acknowledged Merriwether's advice with a wry smile and helped his former flagship captain from the vehicle, his fingers lingering in his old friend's firm grasp.

"Admiral Runacres!" boomed the voice of another old friend.

He looked up to see Tios Teos Kateos, King Ollant's envoy, hurtling down the ramp. Kateos engulfed the admiral, pulling him from the ground in an overwhelming embrace. Her emotion bladders fired audibly as she pressed her great pebbly cheek to his. She was not wearing a helmet, and the bittersweet odor of konish joy surrounded Runacres like a rank cloud.

"I am sorry—ugh," he managed, gagging from the cloying aroma.

"Gravity, give-ah him air, my mate," an impossibly deep voice rumbled in heavily accented Legion Standard. Scientist Dowornobb and Armada Master Tar Fell hulked at Kateos's side, their spiked eyebrow tufts frantically erect.

"It is I that am sorry, Admiral," Kateos said, her bovine countenance riven with a huge grin, her command of Legion Standard impeccable. "We have so much for which to thank you. You were already a legend of peace, Admiral, now you are forever a warrior god of mythology!" The ambassador set the human down and stepped back, allowing the damp breeze to clear away the miasma of konish emotion.

"It is the armada master's bravery that saved Admiral Chou and it is konish cannon that took first blood," Runacres protested, gasping. "And it was Scientist Dowornobb's hyperlight discoveries that evened the playing field. They are the heroes."

Approaching three meters in height, the konish males were a full meter taller and much broader than the giant female. Neither wore a helmet to contain their discharges, and both giants exuded their own roiling clouds of emotion. In addition to the bittersweet scent of joy, Runacres recognized the acrid spoor of excitement, or fear; it was difficult for the human olfactory to discriminate. Tar Fell and Dowornobb embraced, slapping each other and laughing in thunderous camaraderie, their splayed features distorted with joy.

"Ad-ah-miral Runacres is-ah too humble," Tar Fell boomed, demonstrating a modest command of the human tongue. Kateos beamed proudly at her student.

"It is indeed my humble honor," Runacres gasped and fell back, as much in search of clean air as in awe of the giants. Runacres was accustomed to working with Dowornobb and his konish scientists floating in null-gee. Standing erect with their feet on solid ground, the aliens gained incredible stature.

"Ah, Captain Merriwether! I shake-ah hand!" Tar Fell announced, his mass surging forward. Towering at near twice the human female's height, the Titan grabbed Merriwether's hand in his immense fingers, covering her arm to the elbow. Merriwether hooted with surprise.

"It's...my pleasure," she cried. Suffering from the kone's discharges, she collapsed into Runacres's arms.

"You berry small, like-ah Citizen Sharl," Tar Fell rumbled, grinning ferociously. "You also great-ah fighter like Citizen Sharl. Human females fight berry angry, berry death making. Good fighters."

"Good fighters, indeed!" Runacres replied, enjoying Merriwether's distress. Infected with their joy, the fleet admiral started laughing, deep and uncontrollably. Merriwether, gasping for air, giggled like a schoolgirl. The kones, brow tufts quivering, also began to laugh, their mutual great humor increasing to seismic proportions.

"We defeat-ah them!" Tar Fell bellowed.

"Damn straight, we beat them!" Merriwether gasped, raising her fists into the air. Runacres momentarily felt a weight lift from his shoulders. Together they had beaten the unbeatable. Indeed, there was hope. And then, beyond his ability to comprehend or control, Runacres felt his joy melt into sorrow. The weight returned. His laughter rolled into sobs. Covering his face, Runacres jerked away. The laughter subsided and the giants stood, great maws agape. Merriwether put a hand on his quaking shoulders. The konish discharges transformed palpably from bittersweet joy to the flowery sweetness of sorrow.

"Forgive us, Ad-ah-miral, but our big stink-ah has made you sad," Tar Fell growled. "I put-ah on my helmet. It too cold-ah for my blood. I not-ah understand why your race want-ah this frozen rock."

"Yes, yes," Kateos said, pushing the males back and pulling on her own helmet.

"We have been immensely rude."

"Forgive me," Runacres said, standing stiffly erect. "I am old and tired. Scientist Dowornobb, I must ask you again. Are you sure? Are you sure about the Ulaggi knowing the location—?"

"There can-ah be no doubt, Admiral," Dowornobb replied. "The Ulaggi monitored Tar Fell's and Admiral Chou's in-bound trace. That-ah many HLA cells generated a persistent gravitronic vector. The Ulaggi must certainly know the direction and-ah the hyperlight throw to your home system."

"Then surely, Earth's turn is come."

Chapter Seven

Beauty

Commander Sharl Buccari rolled the endoatmospheric planetary lander onto its stubby wing and eased the craft into a continent-sweeping turn. The EPL, its engines quiescent, was a plummeting hypersonic glider. The planet's limb, an ebony arc silhouetted against curving slivers of turquoise and orange, swept across her canopy. With the fading light glinting from her green eyes, Buccari looked down from her Olympian height; the terminator flowed across the Corlian Steppes, the sunstar's slanted rays lingering on immense peaks, snow-capped and ragged, many aglow with pillars of magma and spewing columns of billowing ash into the last light of day. Genellan was a rare planet. An exquisite gem when approached from deep space, it was beautiful from any altitude; but unlike most planets, it was especially beautiful when standing on its surface. Too frequently cruel and unforgiving, Genellan was always beautiful.

"Checking good, Commander," Chief Boatswain's Mate Winfried Fenstermacher reported from the systems station aft of the cockpit. "All temps good. Fuel pressures in the green. Ready for dirt."

"Roger dirt," Buccari replied, smoothly rolling into a knife-edge reversal. As she hauled the sunset back across the horizon she looked through the top of her canopy. Jake Carmichael's apple sliced behind her, a glint of reflected sunlight against an inky stratosphere.

"*Eagle*, this is *Condor*. With your permission, group leader, I'll take the lead," she broadcast. She was in position; tactical doctrine made it her call.

"Roger, *Condor*, you have the lead," the corvette wing commander came back. "On your tail, babes."

"Behave," she snarled, reversing her turn. Fenstermacher snickered lecherously. "You, too, Boats, or I'll kick you off my crew."

"Promises, promises," Fenstermacher muttered.

Buccari laughed, but with little joy. Fenstermacher always whined about staying ashore; now he was serious. That would leave only Jocko Chastain and her still on active duty. The survivors of her old crew were all home with their families—or else dead. Chastain was as good as dead, if she couldn't convince Runacres to return to Pitcairn—and quickly.

"Will we have time to go home, Skipper?" Fenstermacher asked, as if reading her mind. Home for Fenstermacher and Buccari was MacArthur's Valley, 400 kilometers north of New Edmonton. MacArthur's Valley had also been attacked, but her old shipmates had evacuated into the mountains. Her neck warming with relief, she gave thanks for her son's survival.

"Don't know, Boats," she replied, working her jaws to equalize pressure. Buccari

struggled with her own motivation. She was supposed to marry Jake Carmichael tomorrow, the man she loved; and she desperately wanted to spend time with her son. Yet her biggest concern was trying to convince Admiral Runacres to turn the fleet around and go back to Pitcairn.

"I want to see my girls," Fenstermacher muttered. "They—"

"Keep your head in the game, Winnie," she said, but not harshly. She understood Fenstermacher's longing. She missed her son with a depth beyond words, but someone had to fight the Ulaggi. She shivered away her fears and checked over her shoulder. Carmichael's EPL joined smoothly. She accepted his signal link.

"Locked in, *Condor*," the wing commander broadcast. "I'm all yours."

"Confirming positive control," Buccari replied, grimacing at Carmichael's uncharacteristic banter. They were getting married, at long last, but she wondered if they had a right to be happy. So many had died.

Realizing how little control she actually had, Buccari pulled both EPLs through a series of sweeping reversals, killing energy and altitude as the penetrators fell into the planet's deepening twilight. Overhead, amidst a growing riot of stars, the PDF defense station sparkled gloriously. The planet Kon, spherical and brilliantly yellow, elevated in the east. She breathed deeply, appreciating each living breath, and stared out at the planet darkening beneath her. The awareness was always breathtaking—King Ollant IV had given Genellan to her. Not to the Tellurian Legion, not to humanity, King Ollant had given Genellan to Sharl Buccari.

A nav alert broke her revelry. She nudged the lander's nose; the tracking bug on the course indicator drifted into the acquisition funnel. NEd's beacon was strong and steady. Tar Fell's and Admiral Runacres's transponder signals came from the middle of what once had been a crowded city. She programmed landing coordinates and downlinked, simultaneously announcing on NEd's terminal control frequency: "*Condor*, flight of two for vertical landing. Flag precedence. Squawking."

"Roger, *Condor*," a controller replied. "Positive ident. *Condor* flight is cleared into the restricted area."

Buccari switched to autopilot as the linked section of EPLs passed over NEd's beacon and steadied up outbound, each endoatmospheric planetary lander dragging a set of sonic explosions across the new world.

"Mach two point five, altitude loss on schedule," Fenstermacher said. "In the funnel, engines hot and feathering, fuel pressure in the green. Checking good, Skipper. 'Got weather rolling in.'"

A curling cold front obscured topography except for the soaring peaks of Corlia's continental range, an ebony archipelago above a sea of starlit clouds. Her flight arced outbound over the Southern Sea, dropped transonic, and commenced a sweeping inbound turn away from the sunset, hurrying the night. Terminal data indicated a quartering tailwind; the ceiling was already on the deck. Her craft turned final; the curving approach path straightened as she settled into the groove. Nightfall was complete. The autopilot held altitude; airspeed decayed as the glideslope indicator eased resolutely to center-scale. Established on speed, the overcast rose to meet them; tumbling pillars of cotton rippled past and then embraced them in darkness. She shifted her attention to the softly glowing instruments.

"Landing checks complete, Skipper," Fenstermacher yawned.

"Roger landing checks," Buccari acknowledged, reclining her seat and cinching her harness. *Condor* went feet dry over NEd's spaceport, its shattered fuel bunkers showing as fiery hotspots on the forward-looking IR. Instruments beeped, announcing an abort point; Buccari accepted the profile. Airspeed decayed. The unaided view remained solid clag, but full-spectrum imaging revealed familiar terrain. Five kilometers

from touchdown her ship autoconfigured for landing; vortex fences snapped erect; flaps growled down. The EPL commenced its flare as the black cotton shredded away. Bright flares streaked past on both sides, along with blurred glimpses of scurrying work parties under banks of amber lights. All else was blackness.

Touchdown imminent, Buccari kept her attention on the instruments and her hands on the controls. Airspeed fell away; approaching stall, the nose of the craft rotated to vertical—and past. Looking over her shoulder she saw Carmichael's EPL in full retro as her own mains thundered alive. Pressed into her seat, she felt the engine gimbals grinding through their pivots. The ship's landing skids made probing contact. Pulsing hover-blasters joined the cacophony as the ship's nose fell forward to forty-five degrees and held. As abruptly as they had ignited, the mains wound down to a plaintive whine and then to silence. Hover-blasters screamed for a half second longer. The lander shivered with a final jolt.

Her EPL was on the ground. She glanced over her shoulder. Carmichael's EPL, strobes flashing, sat solidly on the surface in precise formation. But New Edmonton was no more. Like taking a punch to the stomach, Buccari gasped at what she could no longer see. Where once there had been blocks of settlements and broad avenues lined with golden globes, there was nothing but smoldering debris and night-shadowed gloom. Around the azimuth, arc lights and headlights illuminated the flurry of landing pad construction. Closer she saw the strobes and glaring floodlights of Tar Fell's lander and even closer the subdued exterior lighting of Admiral Runacres's barge. Three ATVs trundled violently toward her ship. In the distance she saw dozens more vehicles approaching and helicopters hovering. Bounding ahead of the vehicles and sporadically illuminated in their headlights she observed three helmeted kones. This made Buccari smile.

"Dump cargo and secure the apple, Boats," she ordered, releasing her harness. "We have a welcoming party."

Chapter Eight

Reunions

Galloping on all fours, Dowornobb and Kateos arrived at Citizen Sharl's lander well before the gear-shifting ATVs. Tar Fell, still unaccustomed to Genellan's reduced gravity, lagged behind. Dowornobb bravely removed his helmet and sucked in the thin air. Kateos did the same, gracing her mate with a smile.

"Pah, but it is morbidly cold on this forsaken rock!" Tar Fell roared, bounding up with a spray of debris.

"But you can see forever," Dowornobb replied. Visibility was unbounded in Genellan's pellucid atmosphere, unlike the steamy smog of Kon; but the crystalline air was frigid. Dowornobb and Kateos moved downwind, dangerously close to the lander, relishing the heat flowing from its groaning skin. The scientist leaned over and rubbed foreheads with his mate, their joy rising in bittersweet waves.

"Gravity, let us get this over with," Tar Fell grunted. The armada master retained his helmet against the bitter chill and watched the humans approach in their bouncing little vehicles. Coming up behind, as if herding the lesser machines, lumbered a konish land cruiser, its immense headlamps spearing columns of dust-mottled light. Seeing the cruiser improved Tar Fell's disposition; at least they would have somewhere to get out of the cold.

"I am anxious to get off this benighted planet," he growled. "We must pursue the enemy."

"Why must we chase after trouble?" Kateos asked wistfully.

"To defeat an enemy one must attack," Tar Fell replied with grudging patience. His respect and affection for King Ollant's envoy had grown to immense proportions but his racial hatred transcended all protocol. "Else the foe will return, with ever larger weapons and improved tactics."

"Then we must quickly pursue," Dowornobb said, "or their gravitronic trace will dissipate." The scientist was in no hurry to leave his mate again, yet he was anxious to return to space, to continue his experiments, for he was on the threshold of greater discoveries, and contact with the enemy provided the best possible laboratory. As if illuminating the scientist's thoughts the EPL's exterior lights flooded on; the loading ramp clam-shelled opened. A tiny crewman appeared driving a cargo pallet.

"It is Citizen Fenstermacher. Greetings, Winfried!" Kateos exclaimed, switching easily to the human tongue.

"Ho, good-ah friend Winnie!" Dowornobb hailed.

"Arrggh! Door Knocker, put on your frigging head can," the little human snarled. "I can smell your stink through a meter of metal."

"Citizen Fenstermacher is in a fine temper," Kateos laughed.

"Hey, Katie," Fenstermacher replied. "I'm always glad to see you. It's Door Stop's fat ugly butt that makes me puke."

"It-ah is true," Dowornobb boomed, bounding up to the human and holding out his massive arms. "My fat-ah ugly butt-ah and your big-ah ugly mouth make a perfect match. No wonder we are famous friends." Fenstermacher chortled and stepped into the kone's embrace just as a freight mover came in low and turned into the wind, hovering to land.

"Boats, pick on someone your own size!" Citizen Sharl shouted, trotting down the ramp. "And get that freight offloaded." She acknowledged Tar Fell with a sharp fist salute and then leapt into Kateos's open arms. Dowornobb embraced them both.

The leading ATVs pulled up, doors flying open. Admiral Runacres and Captain Merriwether trudged into the floodlit perimeter. Reggie St. Pierre, dark eyes shining, followed. Behind them more vehicles approached, jolting over the twisted terrain, sounding sirens and blasting horns. Bareheaded humans leaned from windows shouting and cheering. Through the mist-filled headlamp beams sprang a lithe human youth. Leaping over the debris, the gangling boy ran straight for Citizen Sharl.

"Mom! Mom!" he cried, pewter eyes flashing in the brilliant lights. Astounding to the kones, the young human was wearing only sandals, short pants, and but the thinnest of shirts.

"Charlie!" Citizen Sharl shouted, pulling off her helmet to reveal a perfectly hairless skull. She embraced the lad almost violently, her green eyes lifting to the stars. Tears glistening on her face highlighted a noble scar running from temple to cheek, a souvenir from a Genellan field dragon.

"Who is this? What is happening?" Tar Fell thundered as a crowd of shouting humans leapt from their vehicles.

"That is Citizen Sharl's offspring," Kateos replied. "She has not seen the child for many moon-cycles. Citizen Sharl is being welcomed back to the planet. She is their great hero."

"Ah, of course, I am aware of that," the armada master replied, not comprehending at all. "Why is the...little one here?"

"Humans raise their own children, Armada Master," Dowornobb said. "They do not trust this function to their governments."

"Oh, but..." the southerner replied, obviously perplexed. "Gravity, the child is practically naked. Is he being punished?"

"They do not feel the cold," Dowornobb replied, shivering.

"Their attachment to their young is a beautiful thing," Kateos sighed, squeezing Dowornobb's hand, her bladders discharging.

The konish scientist sensed his mate's pungent joy and marveled at humanity's primitive bonding to their progeny. On Kon all children were removed from their families at birth and raised by the government, to be trained and tested for aptitudes and future occupations. Even children of the nobility were institutionalized, if by rigorous royalist schools. It was an efficient system, and population levels were effectively controlled. And yet there was something lacking. Dowornobb and his mate had discussed the exotic human customs. His mate wished to raise their children in the human style—a daunting prospect. An adventure, Kateos described it. If they were not permitted so on Kon, then they would raise their children on Genellan.

Sometimes Dowornobb wondered at his mate's sanity.

"Ah, you got big on me, Dirty Face!" Citizen Sharl said, tears pouring down her face. She held her son at arm's length and wiped an unruly, sun-streaked thatch of hair from his eyes. Charlie MacArthur was tanned nut-brown, in stark contrast to his bald, space-pale mother. "You're as tall as I am."

"All due respect, Skip, that ain't saying much," Fenstermacher muttered, tousling the boy's hair. "When he gets as mean as his old lady, then I'll be impressed. Gee, Commander, I wish Leslie—"

"Not to worry, Boats," St. Pierre said, stepping forward. "When I heard Sharl was getting married, I took the liberty of having a few friends flown down. Charlie came down early with the supply flight. The others have just arrived, including your family, Winnie. They're waiting at the command center. Why don't you take the vertical back with the cargo."

"Going to see my babies!" Fenstermacher shouted, doing a jig.

Kateos danced her own ponderous and precariously lively version of Fenstermacher's jig as she translated for Tar Fell, shaking the ground and generating laughter from the humans. Tar Fell stared aghast at King Ollant's undignified envoy, the official representative of the konish race.

"They are so happy. I envy them beyond words," Kateos added, giving Dowornobb a lingering embrace. Grumbling, Tar Fell turned to covet the towering konish land cruiser as it pulled up.

"Secure the apple, and get out of here, Boats," Buccari ordered, wiping her eyes. She offered her hand to St. Pierre while possessively keeping an arm around her son's waist. "Thanks, Reggie. It's damn good to see you here. Cassy's gone. It's up to you to get tough with these bastards."

"Commander Buccari," Admiral Runacres growled. "I hope you are not referring to the Legion negotiating team. They have a job to do, too. Thousands of settlers and spacers have been killed, for goodness sakes. Let's concentrate on fighting the Ulaggi and not amongst ourselves."

Citizen Sharl gave St. Pierre a hard look and offered no apology.

"I'll do my best, Sharl," St. Pierre replied, taking and holding her hand. "It's mighty good to see you, too. I wish—"

"Look's like a homecoming," a deep voice interrupted. Jake Carmichael stepped through the cordon of by-standers and held out his hand. "Hello, Reggie."

St. Pierre relinquished Citizen Sharl's hand and accepted Carmichael's. They were both tall men, nearly the height of a konish female, Carmichael thick and fair, St. Pierre slim and dark. They stood, eye-to-eye, each with a wry smile, although Carmichael's space-ravaged features seemed triumphant; St. Pierre's finely sculpted countenance appeared tired, resigned.

"There is mating rivalry here, yes?" Tar Fell whispered to Dowornobb. Kateos signaled silence, but nodded in agreement.

"Reggie, besides Commander Buccari's wedding, what's the agenda?" Admiral Runacres grumbled. "The fleet leaves for Sol-Sys on the next maximum, and I'm sure Armada Master Tar Fell is anxious to return to his ship."

Tar Fell, struggling to understand, grunted fiercely in assent.

"King Ollant has requested—" St. Pierre began.

"Admiral, we must return to Pitcairn!" Buccari interrupted.

Admiral Runacres turned on his heel and glared at the corvette commander. An awkward silence ensued.

"Citizen Sharl also wishes to return to Pitcairn System," Dowornobb whispered, translating for Tar Fell; but the armada master had comprehended Citizen Sharl's impudent demand.

"Brash as ever," he rumbled, brow tufts quivering. Such behavior from an underling, much less from a female, was unthinkable in konish hierarchy.

"Sharl, enough," Carmichael pleaded. "It's been—"

"Later will be too late," Citizen Sharl cried. Admiral Runacres turned away, his granite expression growing impossibly harder.

"Ah...I have several communiqués from King Ollant," St. Pierre resumed. "If necessary we—"

"We must return, now!" Citizen Sharl persisted, jumping in front of the fleet admiral. Citizen Sharl's fiery nature was well known to the kones, yet Dowornobb flinched at the confrontation, and Tar Fell, needing no translation, gasped at the tiny human's hubris.

"At ease!" Captain Merriwether snapped. "Commander Godonov's team may already be dead, or worse. Returning to Sol-Sys and preparing the fleet for battle must be our priority."

"The Ulaggi think we're hurt," Citizen Sharl persisted. "They won't expect us to follow. Now is the time."

"Throttle back, Sharl!" Carmichael ordered, grabbing her arm. She yanked away, chin up, color rising, accentuating her scar.

"Indeed, the Ulaggi would be correct," Admiral Runacres at last replied, leaning down to place his nose in Citizen Sharl's face. "You may have control of this planet, Commander, but the fleet belongs to me. I am returning to Sol-Sys, and if you wish to remain part of my fleet then I suggest you follow orders. This conversation is over."

Citizen Sharl started to reply, but discretion overcame obstinacy. "Aye...aye," she exhaled, stepping backward.

"Shall we adjourn to a more suitable location?" Merriwether asked.

"With your permission, Admiral," Citizen Sharl said, chin jutting. "I will excuse myself and accompany Chief Fenstermacher to the command center. *Governor* St. Pierre will speak for me on matters of the planet. He has my complete confidence." She glared at the former colonial administrator. St. Pierre groaned at his promotion.

"You are dismissed," Admiral Runacres growled.

The kones exhaled as one, relieved that the challenge to authority had run its course. Kateos squeezed Dowornobb's arm as Citizen Sharl, hand-in-hand with her son, headed for the freight hauler.

"Now, Ambassador," Admiral Runacres said, offering Kateos his arm. "Let us get started. We have much to discuss and precious little time. You are certain you cannot return with me to Earth?"

"Perhaps on the next cycle, Admiral," Kateos replied, taking the human's arm. "I must spend time with King Ollant and work with Planetary Defense to arrange

Genellan's defenses. There is much to do."

Scientist Dowornobb breathed another sigh of relief, delighted that his mate was not leaving again. Not certain what to do, the scientist put out an arm for the tiny Captain Merriwether. She graciously accepted it. Tar Fell, watching carefully, offered his huge arm to St. Pierre. The human, bowing gallantly, hooked the armada master's immense arm with his own. In unlikely pairs, they followed the admiral and the king's ambassador toward the konish land cruiser.

"Allow me to apologize for Sharl, Admiral," Carmichael said, falling in step with Runacres and Kateos.

"I will ignore Commander Buccari's insubordination, Jake," Admiral Runacres replied. "She is overwrought. After all, tomorrow is her wedding day."

Captain Merriwether, eyes slit fiercely, whispered to the admiral. Dowornobb was certain that he must have misinterpreted the impossibly impolite remark.

Kateos refused to translate, even for Tar Fell.

Chapter Nine

Old Friends

"*Condor*, fleet ops." The nagging transmission came over her multiplexor. "Say when ready for download."

"Negative," Buccari replied. "I have a malfunction. I'll download when I return to ship. Buccari out." She reached into her ear and pried the implant loose, a serious breach of regulations and a moderately painful experience. "I'm tired of this crap," she muttered, stuffing the mangled comm-bug into her pocket.

Legion soldiers had established a perimeter, keeping back the growing crowd and making room for the cargo transfer. Buccari and her son moved outside the illumination cone of the floodlights; for the moment they were isolated by darkness, even if surrounded by blaring horns and cheering colonists. Her anger dampened, Buccari took a breath of misty air and turned to face her son. She was troubled on several counts, not the least of which was how she was going to explain her marriage. She was a decision-maker, never in doubt about how to fly a mission or to fight a battle; but at the moment she was swimming in a torrent of uncertainty. Too many months had lapsed since she had last seen her son; she was afraid she no longer knew him. Charlie stared back, reflecting a wistful image of his dead father, a father the boy had never known. Buccari's memories of the gray-eyed Marine made her task more difficult. She touched the scar on her cheek, running a finger along the past.

"Charlie, I'm getting married tomorrow," she blurted, the damp breeze cooling her heated brow. There it was done.

"Ah, mom," Charlie said. His smile brightened, erasing Buccari's fears. "Everyone knows you're getting married to Jake the Ace. He's famous, mom. Almost as famous as you."

"Surely more," Buccari replied, suddenly relieved.

"Ah, no way," her son snorted. "Will...he be my father now?"

"If you want him to be," she replied.

Charlie, growing taller with every heartbeat, pointed over her shoulder and waved. Buccari turned to see the admiral's party climbing aboard the land cruiser, larger than a bus and articulated into two cabins supported by tires twice the height of a human. Brevet Captain Joyman K. Carmichael, mist swirling about his broad shoulders, stood in the powerful headlights, his hand lifted, hesitantly. She waved back, suddenly reassured. She loved Jake Carmichael, and she knew that he loved her. They

both knew the dangers of fighting the enemy, and their love was greater for the peril. They had saved each other's lives too many times to count, and now they both lived in fear the other would die first.

"Let's go see our friends, Dirty Face," she said, stepping out toward the helicopter, bitterly resigned that Jocko Chastain and Tonto and the rest of Nestor Godonov's reconnaissance team were likely never to be rescued.

"When are you coming home, mom?" her son asked, trotting at her side.

"Real soon, Charlie," she replied. Even though the fleet was departing, she was remaining in system; her corvette had been reassigned to *Tierra del Fuego*, to assist in technical exchanges with the kones. Once *TDF* was stabilized in orbit, she would be able to spend time with her son and friends. There would never be enough time, but at least she could watch her son grow up for a few months. She waved to the cheering colonists as she reentered the cone of lights thrown off by the freighter; the helo's turbines were winding up.

"Escaped, eh, Skipper?" Fenstermacher shouted.

"Let's go see our family, Winnie," she replied as the rotors engaged. The big vertical lifted and carried them over blackness relieved only by smoldering embers and acrid smoke. Within minutes they touched down at a dimly illuminated landing grid. Red lights flooded the zone, cargo doors flew open, and a squad of black-suited freight handlers swarmed the loading bay.

"Easy, buttheads," Fenstermacher shouted, jumping out with the cargo pallets. "I didn't bring these supplies all this way to be trashed by amateurs."

Buccari pushed the boatswain away from the scowling civilians and watched her son bolt ahead, running on colt's legs. Genellan's gravity was just over nine tenths standard, but Buccari had been in space for many months; her mass bore down on her legs and spine as she jumped onto the smoothly finished concrete. Heavily armed guards lurked in the darkness.

"Come this way," a voice barked. They hustled across the darkened mat and passed through a light baffle; they entered an elevator and descended deeply into the ground. The door opened. Her son burst through into a pale-green corridor filled with shouting friends.

A young girl shouted, "Charlie's back!"

Sandy Tatum and Nancy Dawson towered over the group, their carrot-red hair gathering and softening the harsh light.

"Here comes the bride!" Dawson shouted. The first humans borne on Genellan stood between the tall redheads: Honey Goldberg, Tatum's daughter, and Adam Shannon, Dawson's son, both much taller than Buccari remembered them. Each teenager held by the hand an identical hefty redhead. Tatum and Dawson were breeding machines, and Nancy Dawson was profoundly pregnant again. The other Survivors were there: portly Gunner Wilson and Beppo Schmidt, flaxen-haired and broad-shouldered, and Toby Mendoza and Terry O'Toole. Memories of the struggle flooded back; Buccari looked desperately among the happy faces for those not present; Tookmanian was absent, no doubt tending his growing flock, but too many of Sharl's Survivors were dead, or injured like Nash Hudson, or like Jocko Chastain, still fighting the Ulaggi. Chastain's absence was especially bitter. She fought back tears.

Leslie and Hope Lee were foremost of the welcoming party. Sobbing with joy, Fenstermacher swept his wife and daughter into his arms. Lee's long black tresses wrapped around the reunited family like a protective shroud. The other Survivors closed in, pounding Fenstermacher on the back.

"Got something for you, Fensterprick!" Nancy Dawson shouted, planting a wet kiss on Fenstermacher's shiny bald head.

"Gee, Nancy," Sandy Tatum growled. "Not with the kids around."

"Heck, that's what the kids call him," Gunner Wilson chortled, sticking his finger in the boatswain's ear. Leslie Lee slapped it away. The incorrigible Fenstermacher, for once in his life, was overcome with emotion. He ignored the baiting and kept his face buried against his wife's neck. The welcoming crowd enveloped Fenstermacher and Buccari in a happy swarm.

"About time you got married," Nancy Dawson shouted, pulling Buccari against her tall and swollen body. Sandy Tatum, kissing Buccari on her cheek, joined the group hug with his single massive arm, his freckled face wet with tears.

Buccari pulled away to greet the others, settlers from MacArthur's Valley, the first wave of emigrants from Earth, all fiercely loyal to Buccari's leadership and to the independence of their northern colony; but there were non-humans present as well. Two Genellan cliff dwellers, an ancient huntress and a remarkably ugly guilder, waited with differing degrees of patience. Cliff dwellers were native to the planet. On Genellan, humans were the aliens.

The white-furred female stood patiently, her fierce, saw-toothed maw set with sullen resolve. The old female grasped Charlie's wrist with her boney hand and protectively drew him to her. Buccari's son had grown head and shoulders above his childhood nurse, but the grotesque cliff dweller was clearly dominant. Known to humans as Great Mother, in many ways the huntress was more mother to Buccari's son than was Buccari.

Struggling to control her emotions, the grateful human bowed low, palms open. Great Mother's presence was another reminder of the tragedy of Pitcairn; for the old female was dam to the warrior Tonto. In sad irony, Buccari's son was safe, protected by the ancient huntress, while the cliff dweller's last surviving male child remained in peril on a far distant planet, deserted there by Buccari.

Great Mother returned the bow, but her quiet dignity was eclipsed by a rude screech-whistle. The other cliff dweller, a bandy-legged steam-user garbed in a Legion yellow jumpsuit, could no longer contain himself; he erupted in a stream of shrieks and whistles, reaching beyond the range of human hearing. Buccari was accustomed to cliff dweller screeching; what startled her was the synthesized voice that followed the incomprehensible noises. It emanated from a device clipped to the guilder's belt. Buccari was ecstatic; Legion scientists had at last succeeded in converting the cliff dweller's shrill speech patterns to human phonetics.

"Toon-the-speaker begs attention, Short-one-who-leads," the monotonic voice announced.

This cliff dweller, a remarkably homely individual among a race of ugly creatures, had long ago been christened Lizard Lips because of distinctive and unflattering features. But it was this same acutely intelligent being, using pictographic glyphs, who had initiated communications between humans and cliff dwellers.

"It is my great honor to hear your spoken name, Toon-the-speaker," Buccari replied, out of habit using sign language as well. "I am ashamed of what we have called you. I beg forgiveness."

"It is but a name. I take no offense, Short-one-who-leads," the cliff dweller replied. "We have also given insult by invoking a slightness of stature in your title. It will be difficult to change, for my race holds your name thus spoken in great reverence."

Toon-the-speaker, formerly known as Lizard Lips, was a guilder, a differentiated species within the race of cliff dwellers. Guilders were taller and heavier than hunters; their flight members were atrophied in favor of more specialized talents, for guilders were technicians and gatherers. Guilders harnessed steam and fire and harvested fish and grain, while hunters killed meat and protected the cave homes from Genellan's

myriad dangers.

"I am surprised Toon-the-speaker is arrived here before me," Buccari said. Lizard Lips had also been a member of the Pitcairn mission but had not descended to the planet. After the battle for Genellan, Lizard Lips and the other cliff dwellers, serving no purpose aboard the battered motherships, had been returned directly to MacArthur's Valley.

"I have reported to the Elders," Toon replied, also using sign language from force of habit. "They are distressed by the plight of Brappa-son-of-Braan, of Kraal-son-of-Craag-the-leader, of Sherrip-son-of-Vixxo and of Croot'a-son-of-Karro. The Elders ask when will the hunters be returned to their cliffs? Will you require more warriors to affect a rescue?"

Though the translation was sterile and monotonic, Buccari discerned obvious emotion in the guilders' body language. Her overwhelming frustration returned, her anger at Runacres's decision rising to new heights. But Buccari understood the limits of her power; she would not make promises that she could not keep.

"What is the name of the one we call Tonto?" she asked.

"Brappa-son-of-Braan," Toon's device answered.

"Brappa-son-of-Braan," she repeated. Hearing her abandoned friend's actual name, the rightful name of humanity's first peaceful alien contact, was intensely painful.

"I will not be false with you, Toon-the-speaker," Buccari said, fighting to control her anger. She understood Runacres's decision; Earth was in jeopardy. The lives of a few stranded humans and cliff dwellers did not signify; yet if they did not act now, there would never be another chance. "Admiral Runacres and the fleet are returning to Sol-Sys. I am sorry, but there will be no rescue."

Toon concentrated on the translation, the dark tidings contorting his already distressed features. Great Mother chittered demandingly. The guilders softly answered, looking at his feet and wiggling his boney, four-fingered hands in helpless spasms. Great Mother, mother to Brappa-son-of-Braan, stared straight ahead, unblinking. Buccari dropped to her knees and took the old huntress in her arms.

"Commander Buccari!" a voice called.

Buccari turned to see a young officer stepping from the elevator.

"Commander Buccari," the officer said, nervous to be so near the legendary pilot. "We could not raise you on your multiplexor. Admiral Runacres is asking for you. Please follow me, sir."

Her friends groaned. They understood too well the nature and consequences of a preemptory summons from the Tellurian Fleet commander.

"A moment, please," Buccari replied. It could only be bad news. She embraced the huntress, stroking Great Mother's silky fur. Toon-the-speaker whistled softly to the ancient cliff dweller.

Great Mother proudly lifted her chin. She pushed Buccari away, signing, "Life is hard."

"Commander Buccari," protested the officer.

"Yes," she replied, standing erect and acknowledging the crowd. These were her true friends, but they were all in mortal danger. She would have to leave them, again. She looked at her son and repressed a tremble. Someone had to fight the Ulaggi.

"Charlie," she said, holding his hands. She was afraid to release him, not knowing if she would ever touch him again. "I have to go."

"Sure, mom," Charlie said with a brave smile.

She started to walk away, but felt her son tugging on her sleeve.

"Mom?" her son asked in a whisper.

"Yeah, Dirty Face?"

"Mom, will Jake Carmichael die, too?"

Chapter Ten

Negotiations

Jake Carmichael followed the admiral's party onto the konish land-cruiser, struggling with little success to repress thoughts of Sharl Buccari. Beyond the thermal baffle, the cruiser's interior became uncomfortably warm; the confused stench of konish emotional discharges grew overwhelming. A Legion State Department official handed out filtration systems with translation units. Carmichael could not don his quickly enough.

Negotiations were already underway in the central salon. Artemis Mather, Legion *chargés d'affaires*, was displaying data to Et Joncas, the senior surviving administrator of Genellan's devastated konish population. Et Joncas rose elegantly to his hinds. The young noblekone smiled, but his bereaved features were haggard, his normally golden complexion gone ashen. Kateos took Et Joncas's hands in her own. Tar Fell gruffly waved them all to their places. Runacres and St. Pierre took seats at the table next to Artemis Mather, the humans sized like children among adults. Scientist Dowornobb, Captain Merriwether, and Carmichael took seats against the wall, seats designed to accommodate the immense dimensions of a konish posterior.

"Good evening, Ambassador Kateos," Mather said. Mather, a rotund career diplomat, was attired in the harsh black and white formal garb of the Tellurian Legion State Department. Her curly raven hair was slick against her skull, and her ear lobes glittered with jeweled studs. "I was bringing Et Joncas up to date on immigration status. Reggie, I know you've seen Secretary Stark's numbers."

"I have," St. Pierre replied curtly. "What you propose accelerates the arrival rate over agreed limits and expands the projected colonization footprint. I can't endorse this."

Tar Fell nodded ponderously. Kateos listened impassively. Carmichael knew Sharl would have voiced the same objections, only with far less tact. Sharl had long ago lost patience with the Legion State Department, and particularly with Artemis Mather.

"Ah, but resources are needed more than ever," Mather answered with a disarming smile, perfect white teeth contrasting against her black-coffee skin. "We've lost over three thousand colonists. The infrastructure repairs alone will require double this acceleration. Reggie, this is a huge empty planet. We can make a difference for humanity—"

"Genellan is not empty, Art," St. Pierre replied. "Sharl—and I will not tolerate immigration above the established rate. We're firm."

Mather increased the intensity of her smile. Carmichael thought it more a grimace.

"What are we to tell the people of Earth, Reggie?" she pleaded. "They need to know that there is hope. They need to—"

"Find another planet," St. Pierre replied.

Mather's smile melted; her complexion purpling with rage. Tar Fell, obviously concerned with the tenor of the human exchange, whispered something to Kateos.

"I defer to Governor St. Pierre," Admiral Runacres interrupted. "Given the sad state of planetary defenses, I shall advise the President and Secretary Stark that it is imprudent to increase settlement rate, at least until security can be restored."

"But Admiral, the sooner we build sustaining colonies on Genellan," Mather

protested, "the sooner we develop the technical and manufacturing capabilities to foster its own defense."

"I have no argument," Runacres said, looking across the table to Tar Fell. "But for now we must ask the kones to secure this planet, as well as their own. As we have just witnessed, without more defense satellites anything we build on the surface is doomed. More importantly—for humanity—the Tellurian Legion Fleet needs to reconstitute and consolidate for the protection of Earth. Our home planet is perilously vulnerable."

"But, Admiral," Mather persisted, "we have no—"

"That is all!" Runacres rumbled. "You will adhere to Governor St. Pierre's instructions." Mather clenched her jaw and looked down.

"Good-ah," Tar Fell thundered. "We-ah discuss other subjects now?"

"Indeed," Runacres replied. "I have many questions for Scientist Dowornobb. What does Armada Master Tar Fell wish to discuss?"

"A jump-ah to Pitcairn," the kone replied. "On next-ah grav-max."

"Negative!" Runacres snapped. "The Tellurian Legion Fleet is—"

"Not-ah you fleet...me, konish ships," Tar Fell blurted.

"What?" Runacres replied. Even Kateos started in her chair.

"I must be clear," Tar Fell replied, switching to his own tongue. Carmichael adjusted his translation unit. "Admiral Runacres is correctly concerned. The Ulaggi know the location of Earth, but the enemy has long known the location of my planet. They have already attacked Kon. To destroy the Ulaggi, we must know about them what they know about us. We must track them to their lair. Scientist Dowornobb believes that if we jump quickly enough, we may arrive in time to trace their next jump."

"But how will—" Runacres protested.

"I traced Ulaggi back-ah to Pitcairn system," Dowornobb's booming voice interrupted. The konish scientist lunged from his seat and stood next to Ambassador Kateos. "From Pitcairn they will jump-ah closer to their home. We must jump-ah to Pitcairn in time to measure their hyperlight path. The trace will fade fast."

"But, Tar Fell, *Mountain Flyer* was lost in battle," Runacres protested. "You have only three ships. Not have enough to—"

"Yes," Tar Fell replied. "And new-construction konish hyperlight ships will not be in position for another lunar cycle. That will be too late. Admiral Runacres, I am requesting that Captain Ito and another Tellurian mothership be assigned to my command—also Citizen Sharl's corvette squadron. I propose to follow the Ulaggi to Pitcairn, to monitor their movement, to allow Scientist Dowornobb to learn more about hyperlight tracking. And while I am there, I will attempt to contact Commander Godonov and affect his rescue."

Carmichael sat upright and studied the admiral. Runacres stared at his hands, his fingers clasped, white-knuckled against the dark table.

"Admiral Runacres," Dowornobb said. "If I know-ah where the enemy comes from, I can detect—no, I can predict-ah their next arrival. We are very close to tracking hyperlight movement itself. If I can—"

"I am convinced," Runacres interrupted. "Scientist Dowornobb's discoveries are auguries to the future of warfare. If we are to defeat the Ulaggi, we must prevail in hyperlight, for that is where future battles will be fought. Scientist Dowornobb, I will send my best technicians with you. Together, we must not fail."

"Then you will assign a ship to this mission?" Kateos asked, obviously saddened. She stood and embraced Dowornobb.

"Yes," Runacres said. "I wish to God I were going with you."

Tar Fell nodded heavily. "It-ah is understood," the kone replied in Legion

Standard.

"We must-ah leave on the next grav-max," Dowornobb replied, but he was staring at Kateos. Large tears formed on his pebbly cheeks.

"Enough talk. So must we," Runacres growled, turning around to glare at Carmichael. "Jake, get Franklin Wells on link. Tell him to immediately chop *Novaya Zemlya* under Sam Ito's command to Tar Fell. With *Condor* deployed. And get Commander Buccari back here, now! I'm giving her what she wants...what we all want, damn it."

"Aye, aye, Admiral," Carmichael replied. He exchanged a wistful glance with Sarah Merriwether and engaged his multiplexor. He understood the priority, but to his wrenching disappointment he realized that he was not getting married to Charl Buccari.

At least not tomorrow.

Chapter Eleven

Return to Space

Tomorrow came. Genellan's sunstar lifted, amber and sullen. Tar Fell's orbital lifter and Admiral Runacres's barge were departed. Two EPLs remained, casting long shadows over the devastated ground. Between the gold-glinting ships stood their pilots, a man and a woman.

"We'll get married, Jake," Buccari said, her ear to his pounding heart. She felt safe in Carmichael's strong arms. She wanted this man forever. "We'll do it...next time."

"I love you, Charl," Carmichael said. "I will always love you."

"Don't say it like that," she said. "It sounds like I'm not coming back. I'll be back. You aren't getting away." Her words were upbeat, but doubt tore at her. There was a bewildering exhilaration, for she had gotten what she wanted; she was returning to Pitcairn, to rescue Chastain, Tonto, Godonov, and all the others. But good-byes were pure torment. Sending her son and friends away in the frenetic darkness before dawn had been misery enough, but saying farewell to Carmichael was torture.

"We'll miss our slot times," she said, trying to push away. "Runacres will hang you for missing movement, and Sam Ito would probably jump without me."

"God, Charl, I love you," Carmichael said, not letting go. His hand moved to the back of her neck. He kissed her.

"Oh, God, I love you, too, Jake," she said, her tears wetting both their cheeks. She wanted so badly to be possessed, to be forever protected. She pushed away and picked her way over the broken terrain, wiping her eyes.

"We're going to get married, Booch," he yelled. "I'll see you in six months. We'll get married on the moon, under a full Earth."

"Deal! Now get your tall tail clear of my ship!" she shouted. Carmichael, stumbling backwards, waved as she ran up the ramp. Fenstermacher, in pressure suit and helmet, secured the hatch. She double-checked the locking sequence, finding escape in the details of her profession.

"No rest for the horny, eh, Skip?" Fenstermacher said.

"Get your thick head back in the game, Winnie," she ordered as she moved through the cargo compartment. Toon was belted in; the cliff dweller wiggled a salute. She slapped the guildler's helmet.

"My butt's in the friggin' saddle," Fenstermacher replied dryly, following her up the companionway.

"That's not what I said," she snarled, arriving at the crew locker.

"What's the difference?" Fenstermacher muttered as pushed past her and tethered into the system operator's station.

"Damn it, Boats!" she snapped.

"Yeah, yeah, my head's in the game...sir," he said.

"Better," she said as she slammed shut the couplings on her pressure suit. She twisted on her helmet and engaged pressure seals. Oxygen flowed from her suit reservoir. Status outputs stuttered across her headup.

"Tertiaries spinning," Fenstermacher reported. "Pressures are up. Gun barrels hot. Cabin secure."

"Rog," Buccari replied, pulling herself into the cockpit. She peered out from her elevated position. Around the azimuth at varying distances she could see the newly arrived planetary habitation modules, huge silver cylinders atop stubby landing pads. Each PHM was swarming with support vehicles. Two thousand new settlers had arrived during the night, two thousand new souls to protect.

Far to the south, a flare caught her eye. From the ruins of NEd's spaceport, a freighter elevated atop a pillar of white heat. The heavy-lifter's primaries engaged, and the monster leapt heavenward on a blade of fire, pulling after it another column of blossoming alabaster. A flock of exhaust contrails in various stages of dissipation floated to the east, marching before the prevailing wind, wispy markers for the last frenetic uploads to the departing fleet.

Buccari engaged the ship's nav-computer. "Pilot Buccari," she barked, punching in the ascent profile.

"Pilot Buccari," the computer's synthesized voice responded. "Control authorizations check. Pilot has command."

It was a light load; she would make good time to orbit. She blinked in her go-request. NEd's launch controllers were busy, but Buccari's sequencing number had priority; her launch panel went immediately green. She waited for a transmission break and then broadcast.

"New Edmonton Control, *Condor One-Alpha* with clearance. Departing."

"Roger, *Condor*. Good hunting, sir."

"Commencing," she announced, settling her forearms into the restraints. The button-festooned controls welcomed her fingers as she shoved the heavy throttle to the detent. She engaged autopilot. Caution lights winked. "Throttle set. Autopilot engaged. On my mark."

"Ready to rock," Fenstermacher announced.

"Three ... two ... one ... ignition."

Igniters fired. Fuel pressures surged. The EPL trembled like a wet dog. At ignition-plus-two the secondaries fired; the lander surged upward. Stabilizer skids stowed. The nose rotated, searching for vertical; the main engines pivoted to line up with the lander's arcing center of gravity, balancing the craft on a column of fire. At ignition-plus-four, the main engines slammed Buccari into her seat. Her vision tunneled; her eyeballs rattled in her skull as the EPL knifed into the deepening blue. Buccari reveled in the thrust, every muscle in her body tensed, every fiber resonating with the engine's imperative. Punching through the stratosphere, the acceleration schedule slackened. With the planet's horizon bending off in both directions and the heavens turning purple, Buccari disengaged autopilot. She picked up the orbiting corvette on radar and switched to tactical.

"Good morning, *Condor*," she radioed. "One-Alpha is up."

"Reset your watch, Skip. It's six bells on the evening watch," replied the cheerful voice of her copilot, Lieutenant Commander Sean Flaherty. "And we're time critical. Air Boss is asking for an ETA every two minutes. We'll have to hump it."

"Roger that, Flack," Buccari answered, checking her position. "On board in ten." She adjusted vector with a squirt of maneuvering thruster and applied a punishing blast of primaries. She had fuel to burn.

"Ugh," Fenstermacher groaned over the intercom. "Now my frigging ass is really in the saddle."

"Ass...head, what's...the difference," Buccari replied, grunting against the gee-load. She was in black space now; all the stars of the universe twinkled in their places. She throttled back as a silver glint on her windscreen expanded with alarming speed. Alarms sounded.

"Collision alert! Collision alert! Alter course now!" the nav-computer announced. Buccari silenced the alarm and disengaged the system before it could override her commands.

"Geezus, Skipper!" Flaherty blurted over tactical. "Slow down!"

"You said we're time critical," she replied. With the *Raptor*-class corvette overflowing her forward canopy, Buccari pivoted the EPL against its vector and slammed in a blast of retrograde primary. Deftly tweaking the maneuvering thrusters, she spun the skidding lander into docking formation just below the ungainly, slab-sided 'vette.

"You have permission to board, sir," Flaherty said. "I'll be changing my skivvies."

Buccari drove the EPL to gantry acquisition and shut down. She unstrapped and pulled herself down to the crew locker, exchanging her full-pressure gear for underway suit and flight helmet.

"Stimulating," Toon said. The cliff dweller had already unstrapped and was floating next to the systems station, peering over Fenstermacher's shoulder.

"Sorry, my friend," she replied. "I hope you were not frightened."

"No," Toon replied, his gruesome countenance breaking into a grin.

"Lizard Lips handled it better than me," Fenstermacher said. "Heck, now that Lizzy can talk, he's asking more questions than ever. He'll be taking over my job before we get to Pitcairn."

Fenstermacher's flippant comment registered within Buccari's professional consciousness. She pondered the cliff dweller's skills; the guilder was a steam-user, an expert in practical mechanics and applied physics. On Toon's previous flights, the creature had shown an aptitude for computer systems and flight controls; the only difficulty had been his inability to communicate in real time. That problem had been solved. Buccari's thoughts were disrupted by docking clamps engaging. Pressurization alarms sounded. The top hatch hissed open.

"Time to go," she said, arrowing upward. Toon, surprisingly agile in null-gee, followed on her heels. Buccari pushed through the EPL bay and into the crew rest area. With all hands at their watch stations and no Marines on board, the galley and sleep cells were deserted. Buccari floated through the top-forward hatch and into the fore-aft passageway connecting the flight deck with engineering. Chief Warrant Officer Silva, *Condor One's* engineering officer, was just departing the flightdeck.

"Ready aft, Skipper," the engineer said, saluting as he floated upward into the lab bubble, giving Buccari room to pass.

"Let's light this puppy's butt, Chief," she replied, pulling herself onto the cramped flight deck. The sunstar glared off the port bow, forcing her to squint. She activated her helmet visor. Lieutenant (jg) Ted Thompson, head down in the pre-ignition checklists, occupied the third-pilot position. She floated over the console and pulled herself into the command station. Flaherty looked up from the right seat.

"Skipper on deck!" her copilot announced. "Lizard Lips, too."

The cliff dweller tethered into the observer's seat in the narrow space between

the pilots. Buccari decided to let him ride it out; sustained acceleration in the jump seat would teach the cliff dweller a lesson.

"Hemorrhoid vector set," Flaherty announced as Buccari strapped in. "Six gees, three minutes. Ready to blow orbit."

"My ship," Buccari ordered, scanning instruments and setting her fingers on the familiar controls. She hit the maneuvering alarm. "Ready, Mr. Thompson?"

"All stations reporting, sir," the third-pilot reported.

"Buster!" Buccari announced, triggering the burn.

"Hooty-hoot hoot," her copilot shouted.

The corvette's main engines engaged, attaining a sustained six gees within a fluttering heartbeat. Although every muscle in Buccari's body was pressed to her acceleration chair, her brain still struggled with the myriad problems facing her. With departure from the planet, one set of problems fell away, problems that she could do nothing about. Another set of challenges, more desperate and more deadly, took their place. The new problems worried her less; she had been trained for these challenges, and trained well.

Sharl Buccari was once again a corvette pilot.

Chapter Twelve

T.L.S. Novaya Zemlya

"*Condor One* is coming in hot, sir," reported the officer-of-the-deck.

"Very well," grumbled Captain Isamu Ito, commanding officer of *T.L.S. Novaya Zemlya*. With the silvery limb of Genellan providing stark backdrop, the flight ops monitor displayed Buccari's pug-nosed corvette centered on the starboard glide slope alignment reticule, setting off over-speed alarms as she poured down the chute. Sam Ito made a mental note to chew out his squadron commander for flagrant abuse of closure limits. And then immediately disregarded it; he had just red-lined *Novaya Zemlya's* thrust cores to make rendezvous with Tar Fell's flotilla.

"NZ's on station, Captain," the officer-of-the-deck reported. "Zero relative. Link capture commencing."

"Send respects. Report on station," Ito ordered. "Engineering, status on impulse drives."

"Cooling down, sir," the harried ship's engineer reported. "Number four super-conductor surge reserve is depleted. We'll need to go cold-iron to inspect the by-pass seals. With two months of transit we'll have plenty of time. Engineering's checking good, Skipper."

"Very well," Ito replied. *Novaya Zemlya* had just joined company with konish HLA battleships *Star Nappo*, *Thullolia*, and Tar Fell's flagship, *House Ollant*. Sam Ito was no stranger to his flotilla mates; *Novaya Zemlya* and her crew had spent more time on Genellan station than had any other ship in the Tellurian Legion fleet. As officer-in-charge of technology transfer, Ito had supervised the construction of konish hyperlight anomaly drives; the kones built engineering and weapons systems on a scale at which he could only marvel. Ito's task had not been easy, but it had been a peerless experience. Not only had Ito born witness to awe-inspiring konish weapons and impulse technologies, he had walked on Kreta, the immense konish moon. It was on orbit around Kreta where konish defense satellites and new HLA battleships were being constructed.

A flag-precedence alert sounded. Tar Fell's splayed nosed and grainy complexion filled the primary holo-vid on Ito's command console; the giant's cow-eyes were dark

and dolorous, but his brow tufts were as rigid as steel.

"Captain Ito, I am gratified to have you back under my command," the Armada Master boomed in his own tongue. "And once again, we wait for Citizen Sharl."

Sam Ito spoke konish passably well, both the guttural southern dialect native to Thullolia, Tar Fell's nation, as well as the northern hemispheric dialect of King Ollant's Hegemony. Ito was also one of the few humans to have trudged the surface of Kon, the system's noxious and gravity-wracked primary planet. Ito had accompanied Admiral Runacres and Sharl Buccari to Imperial City, the Northern Hegemony's methane-smothered capital. The kones had treated them like heroes, and Ito had met King Ollant II, humanity's benefactor. Ito had witnessed the power that Sharl Buccari wielded over the northern ruler; indeed, it was this display of raw charisma that first planted the seeds of Sam Ito's vision.

"Commander Buccari is worth waiting for, my commander. It is a miracle that she is still alive," Ito replied, pondering an uncertain future. "And it is a miracle that we have at last defeated the Ulaggi."

"Gravity!" Tar Fell snorted. "It was a battle, not a miracle. The Ulaggi are mortal. Admiral Runacres merely demonstrated his willingness to die."

"As did you, my commander," Ito said.

"Pah!" Tar Fell replied, his eye tufts rigid.

"As did Citizen Sharl," Ito continued.

"It is a most curious thing," Tar Fell said. His immense eyes widened, while his brow tufts wilted with puzzlement.

"What is that, Armada-Master?" Ito replied.

"What of this ceremony—this marriage? Citizen Sharl was to be mated with Captain Carmichael, yes?" Tar Fell said. "To what purpose? And why did it not occur? Ambassador Kateos was vastly disappointed, so much so that she would not speak with me before she left for Kon."

Buccari's shattered wedding was the last concern Sam Ito would have expected from the konish fleet commander. Konish ships were about to jump into hyperlight—for only the third time in their history.

"They are in, ah...they have deep affection for one another," Ito mumbled, his command of the alien's language severely challenged. "They wish to express this affection by making a permanent bond, but there was insufficient...ah, time, for the ceremony."

"Affection...bond?" Tar Fell boomed, eye-tufts lifting with impatience. "You mean they wish to breed?"

"Not necessarily—er, probably," Ito stuttered, his own concentration now disrupted by vagrant thoughts of the green-eyed corvette pilot. He, too, was surprised that Buccari and Carmichael had not gone through with the marriage; Governor St. Pierre could have wedded them in a fifteen minute civil ceremony. Ito suspected that Buccari had other reasons, maybe even second thoughts, and the distraction of the rescue mission was a convenient excuse. Ito was not disappointed; marriage was inconsistent with his vision.

"A human wedding is a vow, Armada-Master, a commitment to share the rest of one's life. It may imply intent to breed—but for humans that is not always the purpose."

"A vow," Tar Fell mused.

"A public vow, my commander," Ito amplified. "A ceremony."

"Why must it be public?" Tar Fell boomed.

"It is our tradition...to share the moment with family and friends. Have you no such ceremony? When you become mated with a female?"

"Gravity, one merely enters the petitions," Tar Fell replied. "Of course the compatibility of parental aptitudes and genetics always dictate, but if the government approves, then the forms are binding. It is our law. It is efficient."

"Ambassador Kateos is of a different opinion," Ito offered cautiously.

"Ah, Ambassador Kateos is special, of course," Tar Fell continued. "She has Ollant's ear, and his heart. Mistress Kateos has accomplished much, but she cannot change this. Some lessons kones have learned the hard way. Throughout history my planet has suffered from population excesses, with great cycles of famine and warfare. Ambassador Kateos maintains that is currently the state of your own planet."

"Tragically true," Ito replied.

"Konish culture has adapted," Tar Fell said. "It did not happen quickly, but now there are far fewer famines, and the workforce is well-trained and adequate to the requirements of society."

"But you still have wars," Ito said.

Tar Fell grunted. "The beast is within us; we blindly fight, if only to survive. Thankfully, our wars are rare, for it is a punishing cost to build an army, much less to lose one. I pray as a Thullolian that with the Ulaggi returned as common foe, kones will stop fighting among themselves. I know King Ollant has the same dream. But we have not vanquished the beast; we have but broken its fangs."

"Your grid-link signals are strong and coherent, Armada Master," Ito said, changing the subject. "Your task force is in excellent order. My respects to Colonel Magoon and the rest of your crews."

"You have drilled us well, my friend. It is a pleasure to once again have your little ship with us."

Ito laughed at the gibe. Known simply as "NZ," or less affectionately as "*Nil Zed*," *Novaya Zemlya* was a heavy displacement Legion mothership. Larger and heavier than her sister ships, NZ had been modified to accommodate environmental reinforcements for Scientist Dowornobb's HLA laboratory and living space for his cadre of konish scientists. Like other *Island*-class HLA ships, *Novaya Zemlya* carried a main-battery of four directed-energy weapons and twelve secondary batteries as well as kinetics magazines and nuclear torpedoes. Her tactical complement included a squadron of six *Raptor*-class corvettes, two *Atlas*-class fuelers, and a detachment of orbital maneuvering tugs. By human standards she was a big ship, yet when compared to the dark and massive hulls of konish HLA battleships, NZ's fine lines were delicate, even fragile.

"It is my honor to be in your company," Ito replied. "Your battleships are formidable, and your crews are brave and well led."

"Pah! Now you are sounding like Ambassador Kateos," Tar Fell snorted. "However, I commend your obvious wisdom—ah, I must beg your pardon." The armada master's attention was diverted off screen, the reason quickly apparent.

"Admiral Runacres is maneuvering," NZ's officer-of-the-deck announced. "The admiral sends to all hands: God speed, good fortune, and smooth sailing. Find our people and bring them home."

"Pass the word," Ito ordered his deck officer. Admiral Runacres's communiqué would be the last fleet message they would receive for at least four standard months, perhaps much longer.

"Ah, Admiral Runacres beats us to the jump," Tar Fell said, returning to Ito. "Can you not make Citizen Sharl move faster?"

"She moves at her own pace, but a reliably rapid one. She will be on board momentarily, my commander."

"I understand-ah," Tar Fell replied, switching to Legion Standard. "Stand-ah by

for orders, my friend." His image dissolved.

"Prepare to jump," Ito announced to his bridge team. He monitored the displays on the mothership's bridge. Ship status and engineering data dominated the port bulkhead; tri-dimensional astro-navigation holos and tactical maneuver grids filled forward; weapons status and corvette deployment displays took up the starboard bulkhead. At stations arrayed in an arc before the commanding officer were the officer-of-the-deck, the conning officer, and the tactical officer. The quartermaster and boatswain-of-the-watch occupied stations on the captain's flanks, and a Marine sentry held ceremonial post at the main battle hatch to the rear. A smaller chromed hatch led to his underway cabin. Arrayed along the base of the forward displays were image feeds from the weapons, science, and engineering watch officers, as well as the images of the ship's executive officer and navigator from their battle stations on the secondary bridge, twenty decks below.

"Stable on all axes," reported the officer-of-the-deck. "Grid link is a hard link. Ship is Alpha Alpha."

"Captain, *Condor* is on board. Hangerbays secure," the tactical officer announced.

"Signal to flag: *Novaya Zemlya* stands ready," Ito commanded, snugging his tethers and pulling on his battle helmet. Sam Ito's log registered over two hundred hyperlight jumps, a mission total exceeded in the human fleet by but a handful of living spacers; yet Ito's pulse still raced with anticipation.

"Signal's in the air," the officer-of-the-deck reported.

The watch boatswain piped attention. In a calm voice she announced, "Now jump stations. All hands battle dress. Jump Stations."

The response from *House Ollant* was immediate.

"Maneuvering orders," the conning officer announced. "Stand by for acceleration."

"Ready to answer," the engineering watch officer responded.

"Proceed," Ito commanded. Maneuvering alarms brayed. Ito's tethers snugged and his seat pressed into his back. The acceleration schedule was gentle; at this altitude only modest acceleration was required to null out angular momentum associated with the local gravity field.

"Sir, Admiral of the Tellurian Fleet has departed the system," the officer-of-the-deck reported. "For the log, Commanding Officer *T.L.S. Novaya Zemlya* is now Senior-officer-present-in-orbit."

"Very well," Ito replied dryly. It would be a brief distinction; in mere minutes Ito and his ship would also be flung into the gravitronic vortex, on a grav-radial inbound toward the galactic core. Admiral Runacres's was heading outbound, returning to Sol-Sys to defend Earth. More ships were needed. All nations of Earth needed to contribute their treasure and their people to the planet's defense. Ito shook his head; it took time to build a fleet, but it would take more than time to mobilize humanity.

"Transition in two minutes," the conning officer reported.

The watch team moved with coordinated grace. Once again the boatswain piped 'attention' over the ship's general information circuit. "Two minutes to jump. Now jump stations," she broadcast.

"Our turn," Tar Fell announced, his helmeted image reappearing on Ito's command console. Behind his visor his grainy features twisted into a grimace, his brows rigid with anticipation. "I relish this power of star-travel, but I dread the sickness of passing through its portal. I cannot fathom how you tiny humans tolerate the immense nausea."

"Experience will harden your stomachs," Ito exhorted. "You must learn to jump

with the Ulaggi, my commander. We must jump faster and tighter. You must—”

“Yes, yes, my little tyrant,” Tar Fell sighed. “With you as my goad, I will chase the Ulaggi through my own anal passages. For now, I must prepare myself to be disgustingly ill within my own helmet.” The kone’s image dissolved.

The countdown continued. Ito scanned his status boards, each detail imprinting on his brain. A jump, like a sentence of execution, did wonders to focus one’s mind. Adrenaline pulsed in his veins. Great masses of metal carrying living cargoes were about to alter their energy states, reorganizing within a gravitronic string and shifting to another energy quantum. And yet Sam Ito found his thoughts drifting. Life was uncertain. Sharl Buccari had once again flown at the maw of the dragon; and once again the dragon had fled. Buccari had defeated both konish and Ulaggi pilots in battle; she had fought Genellan dinosaurs and bears; she had saved a king and won a planet. Ito stared up at Genellan’s full crescent image hanging above the bridge arena on the primary holo-vid.

“Jump execute,” the officer-of-the-deck announced. Genellan’s holo-image dissolved, left behind in time. Ito lost focus as the ripples of timelessness veiled his senses; his stomach wobbled, his consciousness grayed out, but only for a few heartbeats. Ito had leaped into the void too many times to lose control. He looked about. His veteran bridge crew was shedding their jump-induced ennui, moving professionally, growing aware of the ship and her condition. He checked the other ships. Tar Fell’s modest armada was safely in hyperlight, with a good gravitronic flow and only a moderate tack vector. The flag precedence alarm sounded; a beleaguered Tar Fell reappeared on Ito’s console. Colonel Magoon, Tar Fell’s flagship commander and tactical adjutant appeared at his side.

“Gravity, such torture,” Tar Fell gasped, tearing off his great helmet. The kone’s eye tufts lay plastered to soggy temples. Magoon appeared in worse shape.

“My congratulations, Armada Master,” Ito said, removing his own helmet and suddenly feeling the accumulated fatigue. Hyperlight, though dangerous to attain, was also a forced sanctuary; once committed, there was little choice but to ride the insertion vector to its destination. Any disruption to the grid matrix, intentional or otherwise, could sunder the task group’s gravitronic integrity, strewing the component ships over light-years of space. “Your ships have transitioned nicely. We’ll raise Pitcairn System in forty-eight point three two standard days.”

“Then I...will have time to clean up. Please join Colonel Magoon and me for dinner...ugh, tomorrow evening,” Tar Fell mumbled, his bedraggled vid-image fading to darkness. Colonel Magoon’s image faded at the same time, the konish flotilla commander still incapacitated by transition. Sam Ito worried yet again about the kone’s ability to fight coming out of hyperlight.

“Set the cruising watch,” he said, slipping his tethers. He fought back a yawn. “Engineering, you have permission to engage the habitation ring. I’ll be in my cabin.”

Eyes scratchy with fatigue, Ito pushed from his station and floated past the saluting sentry. Security sensors detected Ito’s biometrics; the chromed hatch slid open and Ito passed into his compact suite. He removed his armor and floated into his null-gee hammock. The transit to Pitcairn would take seven weeks; he would spend the first hours gaining critically needed rest. But even in his fatigued stupor, sleep did not come easily. Ito’s mind roiled with his great hope. He chided himself for the sin of hubris, but at the same time steeled himself for the journey ahead. Sam Ito may have trod on konish moons and labored mightily over the surface of Kon; and he may have marched on Genellan and hiked upon a dozen barren planets, but Sam Ito had also walked upon Earth. He had witnessed her intractable politics, her tragic turmoil. Earth was self-destructing. Yet on Earth, Sam Ito had also observed another phenomenon.

He had seen adoring crowds shouting a name, enraptured with salvation. New churches were being erected in that very name, a female's name. The name shouted by the crowds had been that of Sharl Buccari. In Ito's punishingly analytical mind, Buccari was the leader that would save Earth from itself. He knew within the depths of his heart and with the clearest essence of his intellect that Sharl Buccari was the savior of humanity.

How would he convince Buccari to accept that burden?

Chapter Thirteen

Nash Hudson

"Cassy," Nashua Hudson moaned as he surfaced from his hyperlight stupor. He was in remediation stasis, his body suspended in an organic soup, with only his face exposed to the external world, his brain clinically disassociated from his spinal cord, his body tissues and fluids chemically maintained. He was conscious, but his mind and his mouth were about the only functions he still commanded, and Nash Hudson was never sure of his own mind. He was lucky to be alive, a miracle that he had not bashed out his brains. The brain was the one organ that science could not replace or rebuild. Hudson wanted to tear his out, to expunge his memories.

"Cassy," he moaned again, unable to help himself.

"Good evening."

There was movement at the limits of his peripheral vision.

"Who's that?" he muttered, scarcely caring. A surgeon floated into Hudson's sight field. The senior medical officer peered into the invalid's eyes. Hudson had expected sterile service by lab robotics or the good-natured abuse of med-techs. He wondered if there was something seriously wrong, and then he cackled at his miserable condition; just about everything was seriously wrong.

"Am I going to make it, doc?" he asked.

"You've had practice at this, haven't you?" the surgeon replied. "Assuming that you want to make it, ultimately you'll be better than new, although with this level of central nervous damage, rehab will be a ball buster. You're getting expedited priority. Admiral's orders. I'm prepping you for on-ship regeneration. You'll spend the transit, and then some, in dreamland."

"Where's my daughter?" he demanded, suddenly desperate. Hudson had not expected to go under until they had returned to Sol-Sys. In the netherworld of regeneration, dreams were as real as dirt. Memories caused pain, or worse. He desperately needed something to take his mind from the living nightmare of losing his wife. He needed his daughter to be the last thing he saw, to sustain him. Emerald would feed his subconscious, free him from torment; she would give him reason for staying alive. "I'm not going under until I see her."

"Relax. Ship's just standing down. She'll be here as soon as the hab-ring gets up to speed."

Despite being insulated from most of his nerve endings, Hudson sensed the press of induced gravity in his inner ear. By nature optimistic and uncomplaining, Hudson struggled to control his crumbling emotions, made fragile by helplessness. He forced his brain to work, stifling his fears. He realized, with no little guilt, that a precious benefit was being bestowed upon him. Mothership sickbays could handle dozens of medical remediations, suspending mortally wounded or terminally ill spacers into triage stasis until regeneration facilities or qualified surgeons or appropriate medicines were

available. They could even restore extremities and patch skin, but there were precious few regeneration facilities in space. Hundreds of maimed and critically injured spacers were on board, returning to Earth for life-saving treatment. Hudson was being given a head start, literally three months of meaningful life. Others would have to wait.

"Why am I being expedited?" Hudson asked.

"Because I need you," a familiar voice replied. Jake Carmichael moved into Hudson's field of view, reaching out to touch his cheek by way of greeting. He held Hudson's daughter in his other arm. Like everyone else on an HLA ship, both Carmichael and Emerald were perfectly bald. Hudson was accustomed to seeing spacers without eyebrows and hair but not his daughter. Where before there had been flaxen tresses there was now a luminescent paleness made all the more pallid by the tanned mask of her face.

"Daddy!" Emerald cried. His own eyes shone radiantly from his daughter's features, but it was her mother's face in miniature that stared back at him.

"Emmy!" he blubbered. Carmichael held his daughter close enough so that the girl could kiss him. Hudson's entire being focused on that exquisite contact.

"Careful!" admonished the smiling flight surgeon. "You'll kill him with love. On the other hand, that's probably what he needs most."

"Jake! Gosh, it's good to see you. I'm sorry I missed the wedding. I was, uh...detained."

"Uh, thanks, Nash," Carmichael replied. A wry smile creased his handsome but acceleration-battered face. The lines defining his strong features were deeper than Hudson remembered. "We didn't get married. We decided to wait until we got back to Earth."

"I'm sorry," Hudson said.

"Don't be sorry, old boy," Carmichael replied, laughing. "Sharl's off rescuing people again. She's returning to Pitcairn, with Tar Fell. They're going after Godonov. You know Sharl, if she has to choose between marriage and a mission..."

"No kidding! How did—Wait a minute!" Hudson said. "What do you mean, you need me?"

"Yes," Carmichael replied, smiling a different smile. Hudson remembered that dog-smile from the old days, when the corvette commander had tough duty to hand out.

"Uh-oh," Hudson muttered.

"We lost a lot of pilots, Nash," Carmichael said. "I've been talking with the flight surgeons. They're confident they can bring you back to flight status. I'm putting you on the active list. Lieutenant Commander Hudson, as soon as able, you will report for duty."

It was like getting hit with a sledgehammer. Flying corvettes was the last thing Hudson thought he would ever do again.

"I've got to...take care of my daughter, Jake," Hudson mumbled, pondering the group-leader's words. Something in him stirred, an excitement, a hope. Intellectually, he knew he would never see his wife again. Cassy was dead, he kept telling himself; but he refused to believe his own intellect. Maybe, just maybe, he could do something to find her. If not, then he could avenge her.

"I know, Nash," Carmichael said. "That's why I came to tell you personally."

"Okay, gentlemen," the flight surgeon interjected. "It's time to transition the patient. Captain, if you will hold the young lady over here, please."

"Daddy, they're going to make you better," his daughter said bravely, her eyes wide with youthful certainty. "I'll be here, Daddy."

"Emerald, I love you!" Hudson cried, wanting desperately to take his daughter in

his arms, to hold her close, to feel her beating heart.

"The fleet will take care of Emerald, Nash," Carmichael said. "I need you, Nash. She'll be safe on Earth."

"Sure," he mumbled, as he slipped away, staring at his beautiful daughter. But his failing consciousness filled immediately and unmercifully with images of his lost wife. There would be nightmares.

"Cassy," he moaned.

Section Three

Rescue

A New Planet

All probes but one perished.

Genetically transformed by centuries in space and callused by unending frustration, one strain of the tormented race made orbit around the fourth planet of an impossibly distant star-system. How those time-hardened voyagers must have rejoiced to glide on orbit over the exquisite, white-spiraled atmosphere of a vibrant world. A treasure in time and space lay beneath them, a new home for the taking.

And take they did. Descending into the verdant biosphere, the first hajil explorers perceived no untoward danger; the atmosphere was full-bodied, the waters sweet. Their lakk masters hungrily followed. The conquering telepaths discerned in their surroundings a mechanism for repopulating their withered ranks—the first priority of conquest. Eminent among the fauna of this temperate sphere walked a tool-using omnivore, a primitive denizen, without language or fire; its pristine environs and its freedoms were soon to become forfeit, for in the male of the indigenous species Ulaggi scientists discovered a surrogate host for their unspeakable get.

Unwary natives were captured and arrayed in confining shelters called tiwak—the Ulaggi word for nursery. In tiwaks, these bewildered creatures were surgically eviscerated but carefully kept alive, and in pain—for the victim's agony enhanced the flow of blood and hormone. In each was implanted an Ulaggi eggsack—a kar—carefully bathed in precious, long-traveled sperm. The sanguinary warmth nurtured the eggs, swelling them; and when the sack ruptured, the debouching larvae were fed by the host's rotting tissue.

Slowly at first, for their means to sow exceeded their means to harvest, the first generations of Ulaggi were born to their new planet. After eons of genetically suppressed existence, the male of the species, squat and broad-shouldered, once again labored under a bright sun. Of necessity, the process accelerated; gender determination occurred only after fertilization, and female larvae morphed naturally from an eggsack but one time in ten thousand. Ulaggi science could perceive the appearance of the female germ but could do little to accelerate an occurrence. Of the male Ulaggi there were soon millions; of the female there remained a dearth. And of the lakk there remained a profound scarcity; for if it took ten thousand larvae to produce a single female, it required a thousand females grown to pubescence to reveal a single natural telepath.

Battalions of males were produced, and cadres of hajil were created to supervise them. The process became industrial in output. Husbandry teams monitored the natives; collection crews brought in victims and placed them in ever

more automated tiwaks; and in these sprawling factories of life the docile creatures died horribly, by the uncountable millions. The benighted indigenous beings came to be called kar, the Ulaggi word for eggsack, and the munificent planet was named Kar-Ulag.

Chapter Fourteen

Roll Call

Cassy Quinn opened her eyes, and then closed them. It made little difference. Utter darkness held her senses in thrall. Her immobilized forearms throbbed; she assumed from intravenous probes. She was alone. There were no human voices to answer her pleas, no voices at all, except her own mad whimpers. How many days or weeks—or even months—had passed, she knew not. She was cold. She hurt. A steady, thrumming vibration defined her reality. Yet there was no weight, no gravity to give her substance. She stank, therefore she was alive.

Quinn's abysmal misery plummeted to even greater depths as her prison ship entered hyperlight transition. Her brain lost focus. Waves of nausea swept her. Her senses argued with her instincts; her skull wanted to collapse within itself. And then it was over. Whatever ship she was in, that ship had just exited hyperlight into a solar system far removed from Genellan. All hope extinguished, Quinn wished fervently for death; she was granted only unconsciousness.

How much later Quinn awoke she did not know. Her lips were cracked, her mouth dry. Though befogged, she knew something was wrong; a Klaxon, softened by intervening bulkheads, wailed incessantly. The oppressive darkness throbbed with a troubling dissonance; heavy vibration transmitted into her bones. From somewhere within the ship came an explosion, its noise muffled but not its violence. The ship accelerated unevenly; her bindings pressed. Alarms sounded. Another explosion racked the vessel's innards, louder, more jolting. Something was terribly wrong.

"Help," she moaned. There was no response.

New noises, hydraulics being charged, sounded very near. A hatch heaved open, letting in the full blare of a wailing alarm. A flash speared the darkness. Quinn gasped. Adrenaline sputtered through her as a helmet light lunged near, blinding her. A lever was pulled; Quinn came unmoored, bouncing painfully off the open claw of her restraints. A gloved hand yanked her upward, IV clamps tearing from both arms. Screaming in pain, she was dragged into a passageway, her naked knees scraping the hatch combings. A scattering of beams slashed the corridor, their action frenetic, frightened. Quinn's drug-induced lethargy was gone, eradicated by pain and fear. The spearing beams illuminated the obscenely wide shoulders and stocky forms that had laid waste to Genellan; to be captive of the aliens was terror enough, but if these same monsters were themselves panicked, then her own peril was doubled.

Guided by manic yellow strobes, her captor floated through the ship. A dull gleam shone from a hatch, from which she heard shouts and screams—human screams. She was flung into the iron embrace of another guard. For a horrible moment she was nose-to-visor with the alien. She recoiled at the squat creature's repugnant countenance, weak-chinned with a wide gash for a mouth, its skin like rancid hamburger.

The guard twisted Quinn with brutal force and shoved her into an airlock. A heavy hatch slammed to; air pressure played havoc on her ears. The airlock opened; she tumbled into a dimly lighted cabin where another alien smashed her into an oversized acceleration station and locked the tethers. The gruesome creature stepped

back, revealing a scene from Dante's nightmares. Bleeding and haggard humans, some crying in pain, others wide-eyed with fear, were arrayed along both sides of the narrow cabin. But for bandages and a few rags, all were nude and roughly shaven, head and body. Most slumped in their stations as if unconscious. Quinn was the only female.

"Captain? Captain Quinn!" a voice lifted from the din.

Heads turned, focused on her with frightened eyes, feral with fear. A burly prisoner two seats down strained forward, stretching his neck tendons grotesquely; his head was wrapped with green bandages, but his face, livid with lacerations and burns, was familiar.

"Major Becker?" she rasped, forcing her throat to function. She had last seen the Marine during the rout at NEd's space station, leading the rear guard to certain death against Ulaggi robots. She was incredulous that Becker was still alive and aghast at his condition.

"I thought you were dead, sir," Becker gasped, collapsing back.

"What's happening?" she asked. "We've dropped out of hyperlight."

"Not sure, sir," Becker replied. "Something broke when the ship engaged impulse engines. We're in a lifeboat—"

Done securing the hatch, the Ulaggi crewman pounced into the center of the cabin, bellowing with insane anger. The alien yanked a black prod from his belt and approached Becker with menacing intent. The prisoners fell mute and recoiled in their stations. Quinn worked moisture into her throat, her thoughts fighting for rational form. Another alarm sounded. The alien brandished the gleaming prod in Becker's face before pulling back and hastily strapping into an acceleration station, a few meters aft of Quinn.

"Have you made a muster, Major?" Quinn asked.

The alien roared with obscene volume, but remained strapped in. Quinn closed her eyes, fighting fear. Their ship was preparing to maneuver; now might be the only time to communicate. At that moment their lifeboat disengaged from its parent ship with emphatic acceleration, its propulsion system winding up.

"Major Becker, do you have a muster?" she persisted, her lungs pressing against the gee-force. The Ulaggi, sitting just out of arms reach, pointed his prod, his threat obvious beyond the precision of any language.

"A partial list, sir," Becker replied, grunting against the acceleration. "They don't take kindly to us talking. Once big ugly hits you with that prod, you'll wish you didn't have a tongue."

"Listen to me," Quinn croaked, her voice painfully returning. "I want everyone to sound off in order. I want everyone to take a number and sing out your last name and rank. I'll start. Try to remember. Everyone has to remember, got it? After we go around once, we'll start over again, and everyone sings out."

"We're mustering," Becker shouted. "Listen up."

"One," she shouted, her voice breaking. "Quinn, Captain."

"T-two," her frightened neighbor mumbled. "Bald—"

"Louder, damn it!" Quinn shouted. "Everyone has to hear."

"Two," the man repeated, cringing at the Ulaggi guard's bellowing remonstrations. "Baldwin, Laser Corporal."

"Three. Becker, Major."

Around the cabin they went. Thirty-six names were called out. Quinn made them go around again, this time with everyone shouting the names together. And again, louder. As the third round was completing an alarm sounded. The Ulaggi guard stirred.

"Remember the names!" Quinn shouted as a white-hot shock hit the back of her neck. "Arrggh...remember the names!" she shouted in agony. "One...Quinn,

Captain!"

The Ulaggi pounced on the prisoner across the narrow aisle—Quinn knew him only as number thirty-six, Dooley, Private First Class—and swept a huge arm around the poor soul's neck. Throttling his captive, the alien held the prod against the victim's temple. Private Dooley convulsed hideously, eyes rolling. After a few seconds the guard released his grip. The Marine sagged in his tethers, his pallor a grayish blue. Number thirty-six, Dooley, Private First Class, was dead.

Quinn wrenched her gaze from the death mask and leaned forward, screaming in fury, "Remember the—"

The probe touched her, a brain-piercing caress against the soft skin behind her ear.

"—the names!" she shouted, her teeth rattling like shattering porcelain. Again it touched, holding contact. Quinn screamed in agony and passed out.

Chapter Fifteen

Ore Loads

"The ship is lost, mother," cell controller Jakkuk announced. "Ship-mistress Radia has jettisoned lifeboats and ordered away her destroyers. Her link is tenuous and fading."

"Blood," Fleet Dominant Dar growled, translucent coppery skin darkening to bronze. "Disperse Radia-hajil's triads among the remaining ships and have her brought to me. I will have her black eyes."

Jakkuk moved to obey, but her dendritics were seized. The scalding oil of an intruding mind flowed through the neural-fusion interface, obstructing the cell controller's synaptic contact. There was only one who would dare to interfere with the fleet dominant's commands.

"Blood and blood," Karyai cursed.

The fleet political's acrid telepathic presence was made doubly bitter by her physical arrival on the star-cruiser's bridge. Alabaster robes and tresses swirling in null-gee, the lantern-jawed lakk anchored herself at Jakkuk's shoulder, physically touching.

"Recover the destroyers, but Radia-hajil will have the honor of remaining with her ship. Her officers, if they are wise, will do likewise. Our exalted empress has no further employ for them."

Jakkuk struggled mightily to suppress her thoughts, focusing on cell dispositions and the flow of orders, not easy with Karyai-lakk's essence delving into her brain. Now was not the time to ponder a suggestion or, blood forbid, an opinion. The political was furious. The empress might well deem them all incompetent; three star-cruisers and their crews lost in battle, and now a fourth ship succumbing because damage to its impulse engines had not been repaired during transit. Death in battle was glorious; death from incompetence was unblemished ignominy.

"Among the prisoners," Karyai snarled. The political's essence flowed from the interface, leaving Jakkuk's brain throbbing. "There is a female of authority, yes?"

"Yes, mother," Dar replied. "The governor-mother of the planet."

"She has been evacuated," Jakkuk said. An alien female of such stature had surprised the Ulaggi. Previous encounters had indicated the puny humans to be dominated by *kar*-like males. How could one respect a race governed by *kar*?

"Where is the human-mother now?" Karyai demanded.

"Her lifeboat approaches transfer orbit," Jakkuk replied, interrogating the

neural network. Her mind melded with the interface; as senior cell-controller her dendritics shunted aside all competing transmissions. "The prisoners are being taken to the planet."

"Bring her to me," Karyai ordered.

"So ordered, mother," Jakkuk replied, puzzled.

"What of the ore loads?" the political demanded.

"The tractors are only now departing staging orbit, mother," Jakkuk replied. "It will be four watch-cycles before the barges are in range, and another two before transfer is complete." Dominant Dar's primary mission was to ensure the flow of base metals to the mother planet. They could not return to Kar-Ulag without an ore load.

"They take too long. We must warn the empress."

"Lakk-mother, my mission," Dar protested.

"Gast!" Karyai snorted. "We shall attend to both. Retrieve the human-mother at best speed. She will be a gift, a compensation for our losses."

"Make it so, Jakkuk-hajil," Dar seconded.

"Fist a'Yerg attends," Jakkuk replied, transmitting neural commands. The roon's response was immediate and powerful, resonating in Jakkuk's mind like a scream. A triad of destroyers under Fist a'Yerg's command departed the defensive screen at maximum acceleration.

"What are your intentions, mother?" Dar asked.

"As soon as the human-mother is on board we jump," the sexless lakk announced. "We return to Kar-Ulag, to declare our great shame. Dar-hajil, you will remand four cruisers to recover the ore loads. When loading is completed, they will follow."

"Do you not fear pursuit?" Dar asked.

"Gast!" Karyai spat. "Our enemies must first lick their wounds."

Jakkuk sensed Dar's stifled protest and clenched her own brain shut, forcing her thoughts to grayness.

"Jakkuk-hajil, authorize Ship-Mistress Tonda to assume control of the ore-load," Dar pronounced. "We jump separately—in cells of four."

"As ordered, mother," Jakkuk replied, submerging into the dendritic links.

"Blood, I do not accept this shame," Dar growled. "We shredded their fleet; we destroyed twice the number of interstellars as we lost. We annihilated their cities. There is no shame in victory."

"Such pride is unbecoming, Dar-hajil," Karyai muttered. "We will be fortunate if the Most Glorious Mother spares our miserable lives."

Chapter Sixteen

Fist a'Yerg

Quinn regained consciousness. Head throbbing, she focused her eyes. The corpse of number thirty-six, Dooley, Private First Class, no longer floated in the acceleration station opposite. In its stead hulked the Ulaggi guard. Quinn noted warily that the prod was returned to its holster. Shorter than a human male, but half again as wide, the watery-eyed creature glared at her. Where there had been anger, there was now something approaching concern.

"What's your problem, yogurt-face?" Quinn muttered. "I'm the one with the headache."

Relief flowed through the monster's gelatinous features. Quinn could not be sure, but she thought she detected another emotion in the creature's eyes—fear.

"Major Becker, how's the muster going?" she asked, turning her head very slowly. It hurt so.

"Are you okay, Captain?" Becker replied. "You've been out for hours."

The alien's furious demeanor returned. Bellowing, the monster ejected from his tethers, prod in hand. Becker shrank back, shielding himself with his forearms.

"Not going so good, eh?" Quinn muttered hoarsely, trying to draw the alien from Becker. The alien rounded on her, squinting as if concerned.

"I feel as crappy as you look, pus-face," she said. The guard grumbled but pulled himself into his seat. Somehow she had earned a free pass; something in the equation had changed.

"One...Quinn, Captain," she muttered, testing her leash. The alien growled half-heartedly. "Two...Baldwin, Laser Corporal," she continued, louder. "Three...Becker, Major."

The alien just shook his head. Quinn continued, slowly, announcing the names while the others remained quiet. Occasionally she stumbled. Only then would someone sing out, risking the wrath of their keeper; but their guard remained in place, his shoulders slumping further with each passing moment. Quinn repeated the muster, and again.

An alarm sounded. Quinn suspended her recitation as their guard whirled into position aft of the entry lock, eyeing the hatch. Sounds of docking vibrated the lifeboat's framework. The guard, rheumy eyes surrounded with white, floated to the hatch controls, his gloved hands trembling. Pressures equalized. The hatch hissed open. The guard pressed against the after bulkhead, staring upward. Long minutes dragged by in explosive silence.

An alien descended into the cabin, its downward translation completed in the blink of an eye; its arrival so sudden and graceful it was as if it had always been there, a wraith that had decided to become visible. Garbed in matte-black flashed with scarlet, it was taller than the vertical dimension of the cabin; it stooped as it flowed down the aisle, its oily-black helmet and opaque visor pivoting slowly. Its limbs were extraordinarily lithe; yet it exuded strength, a definition of muscle and deftness akin to a big cat. The alien's shoulders seemed narrow, but only because the monster was so tall; those shoulders framed a thick chest out of proportion to the creature's sleek anatomy.

Its inspection complete, the monster floated back to Quinn's station, towering above her. The human's neck crawled, but a flood of emotion washed over her, anger most prominently and a bizarre sense of triumph. At the same time a peculiar clarity swept Quinn's mind; the throbbing in her skull washed away. The monster lowered its head and moved its opaque visor closer to her face. Anxiety overwhelmed Quinn; she felt as if she were losing control.

"W-who the hell are you?" Quinn stuttered, laboring to think. It was as if her synapses were firing randomly. The creature made a throaty sound. To Quinn's tortured senses it sounded like laughter.

"Screw you," she snarled, letting her anger rise.

The alien crouched, all elbows and knees, staying in Quinn's face. Gruff noises emanated from behind the black visor; Quinn was certain the beast was laughing. A warmth suffused her skull along with a sense of intercourse, a feeling that this creature was communicating. The monster moved closer, too close, until Quinn, confined in her tethers, could recoil no further.

"And the frigging horse you rode in on," she snarled.

The creature gently inserted a device into Quinn's ear. And then it spoke; sounds emitted from behind the dark visor, from a voice pitched mid-range and raspy. Quinn's ear tuned to the patterns, and she realized the alien's utterances were being translated

into Legion Standard.

"Human-mother, what is your name?" the voice in her ear asked. Quinn felt as if the translation arrived after the literal meaning, as if she could understand the alien tongue.

"Quinn," she replied. "My name is Quinn."

"Queen-n-n," it repeated.

"What's yours—" Quinn started to ask, but the alien pulled off its helmet, stealing Quinn's breath away. A fall of ebony tresses uncoiled, swirling and spreading like silk in the null gee. With practiced hands the alien swept the flowing locks into a mesh and draped the rich tresses over its shoulder. Deep-set eyes regarded Quinn, almond-shaped like the guard's but spectacularly larger, with immense silver irises, vertically biased. They glared from under lush, arched brows, hypnotic eyes, piercing. The creature's nose was prominent and aquiline, tightly fleshed. Except for bruised pockets under the glorious eyes, the skin was translucent, only golden and smooth, not the mottled, rotten-meat coloring of the ox-shouldered guards. The mouth was wide like the guard's, but the pale lips were full, even sensual. Quinn perceived a sinister beauty in the monster before her.

"You're female," Quinn gasped. A sweet-rancid odor penetrated the science officer's sensory overload, much the same as human pilots smelled after being too long in their flight suits, only with a strong clout of cinnamon.

"Of course. I am a'Yerg, roonish warrior," the alien pronounced, the translated words droning through Quinn's ear-plug. Quinn started, her memory triggered. Ahyerg! It was the name from the combat recordings. Sharl Buccari had encountered this pilot in corvette engagements, first at Scorpio Minor and again at Hornblower.

"Your name is well known to humans," Quinn said.

"Honor is mine. Many have I killed," a'Yerg replied. The alien smiled cruelly, her gaze intensifying.

Quinn struggled to think, or rather to process the myriad thoughts tumbling uncontrollably within her mind. Alternating sensations of alertness and confusion struggled for dominance.

"Boocharry," a'Yerg abruptly snarled, peering fiercely into Quinn's eyes. "You know this warrior."

It was a statement not a question.

"Y-yes," Quinn stammered, her mind racing but going nowhere. Had she uttered Sharl Buccari's name aloud without realizing? Or was it just coincidence? A frightening awareness elbowed its way through Quinn's mental morass: this creature was reading her mind. A satisfied smile formed on the Ulaggi's lips.

"Boocharry is female, too. A worthy adversary," the alien said, her demeanor mellowing.

Quinn swallowed hard, trying desperately not to form specific thoughts and not knowing how to prevent it. "How do you know Buccari is female?" she sputtered.

"You inform me," a'Yerg said, her silver-eyed gaze lifting to take in the other humans. Her countenance transformed abruptly from serenity to an unspeakable malevolence. At the same time Quinn felt her brain clear of the alien's presence, as if escaping from a fog.

"What will happen to us?" Quinn shouted, her anger welling, her headache recurring.

"You..." the alien replied, reluctantly returning her attention to Quinn, her demeanor softening only slightly. "You will come with me."

"The others?" Quinn demanded. "What will happen to them?"

"I have little time," a'Yerg replied, her expression morphing again, to the

unblinking leer of a predator stalking prey.

"What're you doing?" Quinn shouted. The alien growled in her own tongue, affording no translation, yet Quinn was certain the female had ordered the guard to release her. The male approached Quinn warily, moving closer only as the female drifted into the center of the cabin. The female began unfastening her pressure suit. Quinn's foreboding blossomed into panic. She perceived the female's bloodthirsty lust.

"What're you doing?" Quinn screamed as the panicky guard hauled her toward the airlock. The eyes of her fellow captives dilated in terror. Quinn tried to push away, but the bugged-eyed guard shouldered her through the docking collar. As Quinn lifted out of sight there came a full-throated roar from the prisoners. Out of that furious unison there lifted a wrenching scream, a man's last mortal cry. And then above the increasing bedlam there spiraled an even more horrific sound, an inhuman yodeling—an ululation from hell.

Quinn peered over the monster's shoulder and beheld a red mist suffusing the lifeboat cabin.

Chapter Seventeen

Hyperlight Exit

Sharl Buccari verified throttle settings. The hyperlight transit to Pitcairn System had taken three standard months, three tension-building months frantic with emergency drills and combat exercises. Sam Ito had driven Tar Fell relentlessly, and Tar Fell had driven his ship commanders and crews even harder. Now there was little to do but wait. Buccari looked up from her instruments and stared out at the interior of *Novaya Zemlya's* massive black and yellow hangerbay doors, only meters in front of her ship's nose.

"Thirty seconds to exit," Thompson called out. Her third-pilot's deep voice was strained with impatience. "Hangerbay pressure dump has initiated. Catapults are charged."

"Roger," she replied. Buccari hated waiting, too. They would be coming out disconcertingly close to Pitcairn Two, and they would be coming out hot, with all weapons systems armed and all sensors radiating. Scientist Dowornobb promised unprecedented navigation accuracy; having been visited twice before, Pitcairn System's planetary periods and mass distributions were precisely mapped.

"...At all costs maintain grid link." Tar Fell was broadcasting to his commanders, his glowering image overflowing the command holo-vid. "If we are attacked, be prepared to execute an emergency return to hyperlight with all overrides disabled. Captain Ito will assume command if I am unable to function."

"Your pardon, Armada Master," Scientist Dowornobb's thunderous basso broke in. "We have indications of impending gravitronic activity, directly ahead. Signatures identify four of the same ships we fought at Genellan. Estimate the source to be Pitcairn System."

"Gravity!" Tar Fell roared.

"Amazing!" the usually dour Sam Ito exclaimed.

Buccari was astounded; it was the first time external hyperlight activity had been detected from within hyperlight space.

"What is its nature?" Colonel Magoon asked.

"Indeterminate," Dowornobb replied. "Signal parameters indicate a grid alignment, but I cannot tell whether it is for a jump entrance or an exit."

"Pray they jump away," Sam Ito interrupted, his spoken konish precise but heavily

accented. "We are out-ah of time for new plans. We must stand-ah to our stations and-ah prepare for battle."

"Battle does not frighten me, my little friend," Tar Fell laughed. "It is the jump exit that worries me. All hands to battle stations."

Buccari returned to her instruments, checking unit status. All screening units were linked, all corvettes and interceptors full-systems capable. Colonel Et Lorlyn, call sign *Khytan*, and his wing of interceptors would spread across the task force's forward hemisphere. *Condor* squadron would range in front of *Khytan's* screen, directing the point of the spear.

"Fifteen seconds," Thompson called.

"Flack, you have the ship," she said. Her hands would be full commanding the screen deployment.

"Rog', got it," Flaherty replied. "Hey, Lizzy, give me a final systems check. Wake up those slackers in engineering, and tell Bosun Fenstermacher to put down his teddy bear."

Buccari chuckled. Tar Fell's task force could be heading for its doom, but her crew was loose and easy. She ignored the crew intercom, a prudent tactic; no doubt the corvette's engineering officer was at this moment giving Flaherty return fire. She was loath to imagine the invective that Fenstermacher was serving out. But then Flaherty always seemed to ration out more than he received, and was well respected for his talent. It also helped that he was an excellent pilot.

"Pre-launch checks complete," reported the synthesized voice of Toon-the-speaker. "Engineering reports mains and thrusters ready and all reservoirs topped. Weapons fully charged."

The cliff-dweller occupied the third-pilot's station. During the transit, in both simulated missions and actual flight maneuvers within the grid, the cliff dweller had become part of her crew, taking over an increasing share of the cockpit load. Without Buccari's knowledge—and on a bet—Flaherty and Thompson had consumed precious simulator time during the work-ups to give the guilder a third-pilot checkout. To Flaherty's profit and to Thompson's chagrin, Toon had qualified, excelling in piloting and navigation.

"Ten seconds," Thompson called.

Buccari twisted to observe the cliff dweller. Toon flashed hand sign for long life. She saluted in kind and turned back to her instruments, confident the alien would perform.

"Launch checks complete, Skipper," Flaherty reported. "All go."

"Very well," she replied, using her eye-cursor to clear units to launch in sequence. The screen status board sparkled with acknowledgements.

"Five seconds," Thompson called. "Hangerbay dump complete. Three seconds...two...one."

The familiar wave of nausea swept over Buccari. She accepted her helplessness; training and self-discipline paid dividends, but then she had also logged over a hundred transitions.

"Welcome back to Pitcairn System," she muttered, shaking off the malaise. Horns sounded and crash beacons pulsed. Ponderous hangerbay doors slid back with stunning speed revealing an explosion of stars. Pitcairn Two, gibbous and brilliant, stood fine off the corvette's bow. Buccari exhaled and blinked away the lingering cobwebs. Warning lights illuminated. She used her eye-cursor to sound the maneuvering alarm. Launch lights sequenced to green.

"Initiate screen operations," the konish launch boss ordered, his thunderous voice still trembling from jump shock.

"Launching," Buccari broadcast. Docking grapples fell away. "Go cat," she commanded. *Condor One* jolted into motion, its considerable mass propelled down the launch rails by an accelerating hydraulic piston.

"Corvette away," Thompson grunted. "Hoot...hoot!"

Clear of *Novaya Zemlya's* hanger bay, all sense of motion abruptly ceased. Billions of stars, pinpoints of brilliance, hung motionless in fathomless velvet. Pitcairn's limb was so very close, but Buccari's attention was on the tactical display. *Condors Two, Three, and Four* debouched from *Novaya Zemlya* in precise order. *Condor Five* and *Six* remained on board as ready alert. After an uncomfortable delay, similar contact streams emanated from *House Ollant, Thullolia, and Star Nappo*, each interceptor squadron taking assigned interval.

"*Condor* is clear," Thompson reported. "Hard link."

"Go," Buccari commanded.

Flaherty applied a power coupling, twisting the corvette to the screen vector. Command-linked, all *Condor* corvettes danced in perfect unison.

"Clear angle," Thompson announced.

"Two gees," Flaherty broadcast as he hit the igniters. *Condor* flight leaped forward, spreading into staging sectors. It would be a short haul with no fuelers. They would remain within the grid, under the big guns.

"Hoot...h-hoot," Thompson grunted.

"Hoot. Hoot," echoed Toon's mechanical voice.

"Atta way, Lizzy!" Flaherty howled.

"Et Lorlyn's birds are deploying," Thompson reported. "*Khytan* flight is clear."

"About time," Buccari muttered. She was satisfied with the konish sortie; previous exits had been far less impressive. The kones were superb pilots and their huge interceptors more powerful and better armed than human corvettes, but their jump-tolerance sucked. Buccari blinked open the scale on her tactical display, searching Pitcairn's proximity for potential targets. Several bogies had already been designated. Swarms of small ships filled the lower orbits, streaming upward and clustering around intermediate-sized satellites, typical of orbiting upload stations. Her attention focused on ominous icons rising over the planet's limb. Their formation and mass revealed them to be large interstellars.

"Battleships," Sam Ito announced over Tar Fell's command frequency. "I count five."

"They were at Genellan," Dowornobb reported.

"Nine bug ships departed Genellan," Ito said. "Scientist Dowornobb, where are the four signatures that you recorded before exit?"

"No longer present," Dowornobb replied. "They are confirmed to have jumped. But there is something amiss."

"Gravity, I am ill," Tar Fell grumbled, breaking in, his voice tremulous. "The ones that jumped...did you trace their vector?"

"Yes," Dowornobb responded. "Their gravitronic vector is persistently defined. I know the direction and location of their home planet—or at least of their next exit point."

"Then our mission is accomplished," another deep but ragged voice joined in. Buccari recognized Colonel Magoon. "We may retreat without further risk to our task force."

Gravid silence held sway. Buccari's neck grew warm. Tar Fell's flotilla commander was correct; with Ulaggi main force units still in the system, it was foolish to risk Tar Fell's precious battleships and trained crews; but she would not abandon Godonov again.

"There are humans on the planet," she broadcast.

Sam Ito broke the distressed pause. "Attend to your screen duties, Commander. This is not your call."

"Aye...sir," she responded, fighting the fire in her belly.

"We remain outnumbered, five to four," Tar Fell said.

"Armada Master," Dowornobb broke back in. "Thermal sensors suggest one battleship to be critically damaged, possibly afire. Its shields are quiescent, and, other than random radiation, there are no indications of an active power plant. There seems to be some disarray, as if a rescue were in progress."

"The odds grow slightly less unfavorable," Tar Fell rumbled.

"Armada Master, whatever we do, we must execute quickly," Magoon thundered. "Their orbital trajectory brings them within weapons range by the end of the watch-cycle. Unless we retreat, we cannot avoid combat."

"I-ah concur," Ito said. "Either we retreat and-ah go home, or we attack. We cannot deploy a rescue mission with Ulaggi battleships hanging over our heads."

"An in-system jump daunts me," Tar Fell muttered. "I have read Captain Merriwether's account at Genellan. There is great risk."

"Admiral Runacres won the day," Ito exclaimed.

"And lost his flagship," Magoon countered. "We are but four ships."

"Timing is everything, Colonel," Ito replied.

Buccari was amazed at Ito's persistence. The officer was advocating for an attack, possibly a suicidal attack. She wanted to cheer.

"Scientist Dowornobb," Tar Fell muttered. "What say you? You were with Admiral Runacres. Can konish ships execute an in-system jump?"

"With certainty. The physics are absolute," Dowornobb thundered. "And the jump vector is tangential to the gravity field, so the risk is greatly lessened. Give me but a moment to compute quantum transfer rates. We leave only our sanity and our digestion in doubt."

"There is nothing wrong with my digestion," Tar Fell growled.

"Requesting orders," Buccari interjected. "Should I recover?"

"Insufficient time," Ito replied. "The Ulaggi will pounce, if we do not first jump them. The screen will remain deployed. Pull your corvettes back to grid-center. You have ten minutes to maneuver."

Buccari acknowledged electronically as her hands flew to her command console. "All screening units!" she broadcast. "Fall back on grid center at max acceleration. Prepare for hyperlight. I say again: Fall back on grid center and prepare for in-system jump."

An in-system jump would be brutal, doubly so for the interceptor crews deployed within the grid. Would the konish pilots recover? Buccari concentrated; she needed to collapse her screen as far into the grid as possible, and at the same time be able to kill all relative motion at the moment of HLA transition. She punched in screen reference coordinates and prayed.

"I will have revenge," Tar Fell rumbled, his voice returned to its full majestic timbre. "Captain Ito will take command until I am once again able to function. *Novaya Zemlya* is now battle guide. Scientist Dowornobb, make your preparations. Captain Ito will provide navigation orders."

Sharl Buccari swallowed hard. *Condor* squadron would take the lead once ejected from hyperlight. She prayed the kones would recover quickly enough to support her attack, else she was committing suicide. She laughed without humor.

She was getting exactly for what she had asked.

Morning

Nestor Godonov, his clammy brow chilled by a faint breeze, slid closer to the cave mouth; it was his turn to go first. Private Cruz, breathing hard, followed. A day earlier Cruz had led the morning foray; but for Major Buck's accurate aim he would have been decapitated by a lake monster. That had been reason enough to push back the morning sortie, surrendering yet another half-hour of daylight to the screamers. They would lose more time as winter approached.

Major Buck and Sergeant Major Chastain crept along the opposite side of the gallery. The sun was just rising; a determined dawn filtered under the uneven lintel, bottom-lighting their worn features. They no longer slept at night; rather they worried away the hours hunkering in their alcoves, bathed in red light, weapons ready. At first light they too often cleared the cave mouth of bullet-riddled lake monsters, but not this morning; no shots had been fired this night. A good thing; ammunition was running low.

Tonto and Notch, warily crouching, were silhouetted in the cave mouth. Tonto signaled. Notch eased forward and sailed a recce drone into the light of day. Buck gave a thumbs-up. Sergeant Wu, from his station in the near alcove, activated the device's sensors. Its muted whirring quickly submerged into the wind's moan.

"Good launch," Wu muttered. They had precious few drones left. Pop-eye stood at the technician's shoulder, black eyes reflecting screen images. In a dark corner behind them Pake huddled with Bottle-nose. The hunter's arm was splinted and bandaged. With his good arm and a large rock, the warrior steadied an assault rifle, covering the rear of the gallery. The screamers had come in through the back twice since Slovak's death, slithering through openings denied beings with rigid skeletons. These interstices, stained with blood, had been wedged with heavy rock.

There was no one else in the cave. The others were all dead.

"Anything?" Buck hissed.

"Panning," Wu answered grimly. "Wind's are strong."

"Check topside," Buck whispered. Ominous noises punctuated their nights; heavy noises, audible through the surrounding rock. Small boulders thudded with increasing frequency onto the terrace in front of the cave entrance.

"Rolled some more rocks, Captain," Wu replied. "Good coverage. No visible threats."

"Anything?" Buck demanded.

"Nothing, sir," Wu replied. "Area's clear."

"Go!" Buck commanded.

Unfurling their membranes, Tonto and Notch disappeared through the mouth. Godonov heard the *crack* of hunters grabbing wind. With Private Cruz at his side, Godonov dove under the overhang and whirled, his sights sweeping the near horizon above the cave. Buck and Chastain followed on Cruz's heels, spreading out to cover the lower approaches.

"Clear above," Godonov shouted. He darted a glance skyward; Tonto and Notch, both struggling for altitude, had been thrown out over the lake. It was a cool morning; there would be no thermals. The warriors would quickly fatigue. One hunter covered the drone; the other hunter would reconnoiter. The humans covered the hunters.

"Clear left," Chastain rumbled, flexing his shoulder.

"Clear right," Buck shouted.

"Clear front," Cruz reported, kicking a new litter of boulders over the terrace's granite rampart. The rocks tumbled through the scrub and splashed into the lake.

A month earlier Bottlenose had failed to gain enough air before a lake monster had leapt from the same leatherleaf and clawed the cliff dweller from the sky. Though overpowered and badly injured, the lightning-quick hunter had prevailed, thrusting a knife through the beast's eye. That misty morning had been a near thing. For weeks prior the monsters had lain low, possibly to lull them. On that morning they came in waves. The humans would have all died had not the cliff dwellers comprehended the weight of the attack. Rather than turn to help their beleaguered comrade, the hunters screeched a general alert and directed fire on the main thrust, preventing a melee. Fifty lake monsters were killed, but the besieged hunters and humans also sustained critical losses; not only was Bottlenose mauled, but Chastain, in hand-to-hand struggle, suffered a gash to his shoulder. Worse yet, Corporal O'Hara was dragged away, howling horribly until pulled under the waters of the lake.

Tonto, automatic in hand, turned into the wind and landed above the cave. He screamed an all-clear. Notch recovered the drone in mid-flight and glided back onto the terrace where Sergeant Wu and Pop-eye were already dragging out solar panels and recharging units. Pake, blinking in the soft light, peeked from the cave entrance with an assault rifle cradled like a baby, too heavy for her to hold with one arm. The female, though haggard from fear and lack of sleep, was fleshed out from a steady diet of fish and goat. Though frightened and frequently heartsick for her daughters, she had displayed good humor and a willingness to work hard. She was a survivor, and intelligent; she had improvised a pidgin-Legion and with every passing day was able to communicate more effectively. Her fear of the cliff dwellers had been vanquished; she nursed the injured Bottlenose with a tenderness approaching devotion.

Tonto screeched, causing Pake to flinch.

Godonov acknowledged. "Going up," he shouted, growing more nervous as he clambered away from the sanctuary of the cave mouth. The science officer lifted his face to the rising breeze. He was weary of the wind; it was always blowing on this hell-hole of planet, except at night, when the monsters crawled from the lake.

After Slovak's death the monsters had come every night, probing the terrified sentries and screaming their bloodcurdling cries. The giant-eyed amphibians became adept at destroying sensors, and any attempts by humans or hunters to create traps or pitfalls were uniformly frustrated. Occasionally the monsters came in headlong waves, throwing their bodies into frontal assaults, content to die by the dozens. But Marines died, too, ripped to shreds one at a time. Major Buck had had little choice but to accept a siege; the humans and hunters no longer had sufficient firepower to hold a perimeter. The lake monsters owned the night.

The snow level was creeping down the peaks. The days grew rapidly shorter. Godonov pulled himself upward; he felt like a wounded animal crawling from a hole. He scrambled onto the ledge above the cave entrance and discovered new rubble. Godonov shook off his defeatism and focused on survival, anger overwhelming fear.

"They're stacking rocks again," he called down.

The others turned and watched as Godonov bombed the hefty stones to the cave front. Cruz and Chastain collected the boulders and rolled them into the lake. As the Marines cleared the terrace, the sun climbed over the mountains, mixing radiant heat with the swirling chill; but even with the light of day warming their tired bones, they maintained a vigilant watch. The lake monsters avoided sunlight, but its presence did not prevent them from attacking; Corporal Zhou had died foraging along the beach at mid-day under a cloudless sky. A gray-green horror had exploded from the

shallows like a breaching whale, ripping Zhou's head from his shoulders before the first return shot. Only cliff dwellers went near the lake, to fish in the clear shallows, and only when another hunter was steady on a thermal, able to peer into the surrounding depths. The hunters brought them fish, and the hunters brought them goats; but most of all, the hunters gave them a security and an awareness of their enemy not afforded by technology. Had it not been for the cliff dwellers, the humans would not have survived.

Godonov tried to learn about the screamers. He dissected a half-dozen gelid corpses, discovering an impressive brain mass and highly specialized sensory and musculature systems. The lake monsters were thermal chameleons, able to blend perfectly with ambient temperatures and to move exquisitely smoothly, nearly undetectable by heat and motion sensors. But what worried Godonov the most was their raw intelligence. The gruesome amphibians used tools and tactics; they worked in teams. The recurring rock piles indicated a planning capability, the highest level of intelligence.

Godonov clambered over the outcropping above the cave. Tonto, sniffing the wind, waited amidst a stand of whispery pines. One tree had come down, its bole giving every appearance of having been gnawed through. The hunter hop-waddled across the rocks, pointing to a fresh crevice. A stout limb protruded from the cleft, and boulders were wedged next to it, pounded solidly home. A wrack of broken stone filled much of the void. Webbed footprints tipped with claws patterned the rock powder.

"Schemes," Godonov muttered. In time, the immense slab would fall in front of the cave, closing it. Perhaps a standard month, or six, but sooner or later, the lake monsters would evict them from their shelter, or trap them inside.

"Must leave cave," Tonto signed.

"Not today," Godonov signed back, forcing his tired brain to work. The rescue window had opened twenty days earlier; they had been on the planet for over six standard months, time enough for Admiral Runacres to have made the round trip. Each day had been an eternity, each passing hour a wrenching disappointment. But hope—and despair—know little of reason.

Godonov worked his way back down. The science officer joined the others before the cave and described what he had seen. Sergeant Wu translated for Pake. While the humans talked, the cliff dwellers held their own discussion, occasionally throwing hand sign to Chastain. The hunters, even the injured Bottle-nose, seemed in weird good humor. They enjoyed danger.

"Damn frogs'll trap us in the cave," Cruz moaned.

Godonov leaned back in the warm sun and let his eyelids droop. He needed sleep; they all did. He had been first out of the cave this morning; it was his turn to sack out first.

"Where we gonna' go?" Wu replied. "You wanna' be outside when the sun goes down? Here we got plenty of food. And besides, this is where they're gonna' look for us, if they ever come back."

"Not if—*when* they come back," Buck growled. "*When*, damn it!"

"They'll be here any day," Chastain rumbled.

Chastain and Buck had repeated the same litany for twenty days. Godonov admired their stubborn optimism. But Godonov also realized that the more hopeful they got, the more crushing would be the passing of each unanswered day.

"Major, what we gonna do when we run out of ammo?" Cruz asked.

"We'll use blasters as long as they'll charge," Buck replied. "Then we'll use knives and throw rocks."

"We could carve some spears," Chastain said.

"Good thinking, Sergeant. You and Cruz get on it."

"Where're all the frog bastards coming from?" Wu asked. "You'd think they'd get tired of dying."

"We must taste damn good," Cruz replied.

"Shut up, Cruz," Wu snapped.

"He's not wrong," Godonov said. "They're smart. A dumb beast would have learned fear a long time ago. They either really hate us...or they really like us."

Buck laughed grimly.

"We killed a couple hundred, maybe as many as three hundred," Wu said. "How many more can there be?"

"A lot more than a few hundred," Godonov said. "These rift lakes run like a chain between these two ranges for five hundred kilometers. My guess is they're getting reinforcements."

"I'd like to set off some depth charges," Cruz snarled. "Friggin' blow their miserable slimy asses to the moon."

"It's their planet," Chastain muttered. "You'd do the same if bugs landed on Earth like they owned it. We just need to leave 'em alone."

"What'd we do to them?" Cruz replied. "They started it. They snatched Gunny Turley. And then they grabbed Slovak. We didn't do nothing. Damn straight, if we ever come back to this rock we should exterminate their slimy asses."

"You ate their goats," Godonov said. "I'm with Sergeant Chastain. Some day we'll return and establish proper contact."

"It'll take a lot of selling," Buck said. "I imagine--"

"Go down mountain," Pake said loudly.

Everyone turned at the outburst. Pake dropped her eyes and mumbled in Chinese. Wu answered her softly.

"What did she say, Sergeant?" Buck asked.

"She says we should go down the mountain and hide. She would steal food for us. We would be safe from the screamers."

"I'd rather live with the devil I know," Buck grunted.

Godonov stared out at the lake. Their sensors were useless. In time their blaster batteries would no longer charge. Long before that they would run out of ammunition. Spears and knives notwithstanding, all the food and water in the universe would not matter then. They would have to do something before the lake monsters blocked the cave entrance. He felt his resolve slipping.

Sergeant Wu whooped, startling everyone to silence.

"Major!" he shouted. "Sir, ya gotta' see this!"

"Say again what I gotta' do, Sergeant," Buck snapped.

"Sir, we're being pinged!" Wu shouted. "Fleet signal!"

Chapter Nineteen

Battle

Buccari, blind and stupid with transition vertigo, fought to regain control. Targeting alarms were going off; her brain struggled to process the signals. Adrenaline pulsed with gut-wrenching urgency.

"Flack!" she shouted, shaking her head, willing her instruments to steady out. Targets were designated. Her corvette was accelerating, apparently under command. She grunted against the gee-load. "Are you functioning? D-do you have control?"

"I...no," Flaherty stuttered. "Yeah...wait, I'm coming out. This sucks...I got the

ship, Skipper. I got it. We're on course and, damn, we're on speed, too."

"All units... *Condor*... data-locked," Thompson gasped. "Ugh... formation is solid."

"You guys are good," Buccari shouted, her bleary eyes clearing. *Condor* flight was accelerating, rock-steady on the threat-axis. Targeting computers flashed, but Buccari ignored the impending threat and struggled to determine the status of Et Lorlyn's interceptors.

"We're not this good, Skipper," Flaherty shouted.

"Huh?" Buccari growled. The konish pilots were still in jump shock; their formation was ragged and falling behind.

"Lizzy's been flying us!" Flaherty replied, jerking a glance over his shoulder at the cliff dweller. "Check the logs. Lizzy acknowledged disposition orders and synched us to the attack plan. Heck, he's been command flying all *Condor* birds for the last two minutes."

"Established on vector," Toon's toneless voice reported. "All systems checking good. Engineering and Weapons are now checking good."

"Throttle back, Flack," Buccari commanded as brutal reality displaced her astonishment. "We can't fight by ourselves. We need Et Lorlyn's interceptors."

The furious distress of the jump was history. Buccari exhaled and sharpened her senses. It was time to perform. Captain Ito could be heard exhorting the stunned konish commanders on the command frequency, but Buccari was busy with her own issues. *Condor One* jolted from a shield bounce. The big dogs were barking—the battleships were engaged, exchanging fire with their massive directed-energy batteries. Buccari filtered the electronic chaos from her display, more difficult with each passing second as Ulaggi jammers screamed toward her.

"Et Lorlyn's interceptors are moving," Thompson reported.

Buccari's screen display updated furiously; the kones were finally maneuvering. Except for stragglers, Et Lorlyn's ships were sorting into order and accelerating along the threat-axis.

"Time to fight," Buccari snarled, assessing the battlefield. Captain Ito had jumped brilliantly. Tar Fell's task force had emerged from hyperlight above the Ulaggi orbit, seizing gravity advantage; but more importantly, the formation plane gave Tar Fell's heavy weapons clear firing angles. The batteries of the trailing enemy interstellars were masked; the kones and humans had tactical advantage, at least for the initial exchange.

Another shield bounce shook *Condor One* like a rat in a dog's jaws. The Ulaggi battleship was not firing at them, or they would have been incinerated; *Condor* flight was too close to a firing lane. Buccari vectored the screen through an energy gauntlet, scanning for fast-movers.

"Here they come!" Thompson reported.

A horrible yodeling saturated the tactical channels. Targeting computers resolved strings of contacts boiling from the Ulaggi ships. Buccari analyzed the threat density and accepted the computer's assault model. Et Lorlyn acknowledged; his squadrons spread to their assignments. Buccari listened to the cries. She listened for her own name echoing in the ether as it had in previous battles—and did not hear it. She was almost disappointed.

"All pilots, listen up," Buccari broadcast. "Hold your formation and attack in pairs. The harder you fight, damn it, the longer you'll live."

As if on cue, the nearest Ulaggi interstellar went critical, exploding in a massive fireball. Colonel Magoon, still reviving from jump shock, came up on the operations frequency, and then Tar Fell; together they bullied the other ship commanders, pressing the attack with ruthless fury. Almost immediately a second enemy ship, far

across the formation, exploded. Cheering erupted over the tactical frequencies.

"Hoothoothoot!" Flaherty shouted.

"Tar fell can't take credit for that one," Thompson gasped. "She blew up on her own."

A high-precedence alert sounded. Dowornobb—eye tufts rigid—appeared on Buccari's holo-vid.

"Citizen Sharl, this is most exciting," he blurted. "With these last jumps we have learned much. I believe we can now navigate to within—"

"Forgive me, old friend. I'm busy," Buccari interrupted.

"Of course," Dowornobb rumbled. "But I thought you would like to know. We have made contact with Commander Godonov."

"Thank you!" Buccari cried, the back of her neck glowing. As she spoke, a third Ulaggi interstellar went critical, exploding majestically under the combined weight of konish and human energy batteries.

Godonov was exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. Lying on his back, unable to sleep, he stared into the morning sky and softly uttered a prayer. A battle raged far overhead, a precarious battle that would determine their future. Much closer, Tonto hovered on a rising thermal, mattock head swiveling. There was still a battle to be fought on the planet's surface.

"Anything new?" Buck asked, striding onto the terrace. The orbital engagement had moved to the other side of the planet. Fleet transmissions had ceased. Instead of sitting on their thumbs, the Marines and hunters had just returned from an armed reconnaissance. Chastain and Cruz remained on the perimeter. Notch and Bug-eye perched like gargoyles above the cave.

"We're kicking ass," Wu almost giggled, shielding his earpiece from the gusts. "It's old NZ and three big konish ships. They've taken out most of the bugs. It's four to two now, our favor."

"They came with only four ships?" Godonov gasped, more fully appreciating how meager their chances for survival had been. The odds were still slim; there was no margin for error, or for misfortune; their lives hung by a transparently thin thread.

"Any news on an extraction?" Buck asked.

"No, sir. Flag requested a muster," Wu replied. "But that's it, Major. I sent up Commander Godonov's status reports."

"They have their hands full," Godonov said, looking out over the wind-whipped lake.

"What's the plan, Nes?" Buck growled.

The equation had changed; rescue was becoming a possibility, if not a likelihood. Quelling his sputtering elation, Godonov forced himself to concentrate on survival, and on the suddenly fickle commodity of time. He suddenly knew what they had to do.

"We have a mission, don't we?" Godonov said.

"Now you're talking like a Marine," Buck replied. "I'm plumb wore out with vacation."

"Gear up. We're going down mountain."

Chapter Twenty

Fast-movers

"Thirty seconds to weapons range," Thompson called out.

Buccari opened the display scale, scanning the battle model. Et Lorlyn's

squadrons had gained solid order, driving three prongs against the enemy flank and center. *Condor Squadron* was the fourth attack prong. Ulaggi destroyer triads streaked upward, committed to disrupting the energy onslaught streaming from Tar Fell's battleships. Maneuvering in the van, *Novaya Zemlya* had taken the brunt of Ulaggi return fire. Her shields shredded and her impulse engines overboosting, *NZ* had been forced to seek cover under *House Ollant's* massive batteries. Tar Fell drove his flagship into the breach, pounding the Ulaggi center. It had been a near thing, and the battle was not over; two unscathed Ulaggi interstellars remained in the game, along with a frenzied swarm of destroyers whose pilots had nowhere to run.

"Laser cannon armed. Reservoirs topped. Forward and aft kinetics fully loaded," Toon reported, his computer-generated voice devoid of emotion. Buccari wondered if cliff dwellers even comprehended fear.

"I have the ship," she said, locking her forearms into their restraints. She exhaled and concentrated, forcing her pulse to slow.

"Roger," Flaherty replied. "Lizzy, I have weapons control. Hoot hoot, do we ever have targets. Primary locked in. Secondary and tertiary designations are solid."

Buccari scanned the designated icons. Her screen was outnumbered by the Ulaggi interceptors, but she had overwhelming heavy weapons support. The battle was not over, but the outcome was decided; for the first time in human experience, an entire enemy fleet was about to be annihilated. Revenge—bitter revenge—was at hand. The Ulaggi captains and destroyer pilots would never surrender. On this day they would all die.

But more kones and humans were also going to die.

"Decoys now," Buccari ordered.

"Roger," Flaherty replied, triggering jammers. ECM tubes forward ejected a pattern of silver cylinders into space, their exhausts flaring. The tactical display blossomed as signal-breeders filled the contracting no-man's land. The enemy destroyers did not deviate. Their situation was dire; the Ulaggi captains were fighting valiantly, but the konish ships were merely being wounded; the Ulaggi ships were dying.

"Ten seconds to cannon range," Flaherty reported. "Hard lock."

An alert *whooped*—*Condor One* had been locked on by an enemy acquisition radar. And then another. They were on the bull's eye.

"Weapons free," Buccari barked.

"Kinetics away," Flaherty replied. The corvette trembled; a clutch of depleted uranium ingots atop pillars of incandescence hurtled outward, bending gracefully on their deadly arc.

"Five seconds," Flaherty announced, positioning his helmet against the targeting boot. "Dinks away. Dinks away." High-pitched bursts of vibration resonated through the corvette as a discharge of mini-kinetics leapt into the void.

"Three seconds..."

With every nerve in her body focused on the approaching destroyers, Buccari's peripheral vision registered the distant explosion of another Ulaggi interstellar going critical.

"Hot damn!" Thompson shouted.

"Hoot," Toon squeaked.

One enemy interstellar remained, but there were still dozens of destroyers in the fight. Buccari was locked on. She tracked the alien, smoothly accelerating to hold her victim steady. *Condor Two*, on her port wing, struggled for position.

"En-gaging," Flaherty gasped, grunting against the gee-load. *Condor One's* energy reservoirs dumped with a brain-rattling *whooomp* as the copilot fired the

main weapon. *Condor Two* fired a split-second later, but the target had already disappeared.

"Scratch one!" Flaherty snarled.

Buccari checked for her next target just as a blizzard of kinetics hit the enemy front; the Ulaggi fast-mover constellation evaporated like snowflakes in fire. But the enemy pilots had also fired; Buccari's corvette trembled with a shield surge from a high angle-off hit. The opposing formations streaked through each other with time-distorting closure rates. Fully a third of the Ulaggi fast-movers were gone to eternity. The survivors streaked doggedly onward.

Buccari slammed in a course change and accelerated at max gee to a new attack vector. Et Lorlyn's interceptors turned with her. The ranks of human and konish interceptors had also been reduced.

"*Condor Three* is gone," Thompson reported. "Et Lorlyn reports two interceptors destroyed and four adrift. He has assigned two ships to pick up survivors."

"Roger," Buccari replied, concentrating on the still abundant targets. The Ulaggi tactics were changing; a dozen enemy destroyers peeled from the column, intent on counter-attacking. Et Lorlyn's squadron was closest to the engagement point. Buccari altered course to provide support.

"We are on them," the konish commander bellowed.

Buccari slammed in full power, sacrificing weapons energy for acceleration. *Condor Two* and *Condor Four* struggled for position.

"F-furball," Flaherty grunted mightily, fighting the gee-load. "They're all...all over the frigging p-place."

"Target!" Buccari demanded, retarding her throttle to let her weapons reservoir build.

"Tracking!" Flaherty replied. "Designated!"

The lead destroyer of a tight three-ship formation illuminated with a targeting halo. Buccari tweaked her heading with a jolt of thruster and hammered the throttles past the military detent to emergency power. Her brain pressed against the back of her skull; her eyeballs rattled in their sockets. Oxygen, driven by positive pressure, surged into her lungs; her muscles were nearly paralyzed by gee-loading.

"Nine Ulaggi units penetrated the screen," Toon's mechanical voice penetrated her acceleration-induced catatonia, the guildler's ability to speak seemingly unaffected. Buccari cataloged that fact with the other surprises presented by the cliff dweller's combat capabilities. But there was nothing she could do about the penetrating enemy; it would be up to Tar Fell's in-close defenses to stop them. Buccari eased throttle to recompute her pursuit vector, and to allow her weapons reservoir to top out. Emergency power was no longer an option if she wanted a charged cannon.

Et Lorlyn's squadron was taking losses, but the wily pilot was driving the melee closer to his support. Two more konish interceptors joined the fray as she watched; one was annihilated by the hard turning trio of Ulaggi destroyers led by *Condor One's* primary target.

"Kill range five seconds," Flaherty reported. "Hard lock."

Buccari slewed her corvette's nose, aiming at the point in space to where the Ulaggi would track. The target halo was firm, weapons lock solid.

"We're lit up!" Thompson yelled. The radar alert *whoop-whooped* again and again. Buccari checked tactical; another trio of destroyers was deflecting in her direction. Pressing her attack would pull *Condor Squadron* into a kill zone.

"Shift target," Buccari growled, using her eye-cursor to bracket new threats.

"Rog!" Flaherty replied. "Give me some angle."

Buccari pulled power and slammed in a hard thrust-couple, pivoting the corvette,

changing her adversary's targeting solution and uncovering her own weapons. The pilots of *Condor Two* and *Condor Four* stayed with her, their formation loosening.

"Good vector!" Flaherty reported. "Optical lock. Oh, man, would you look at that!" Far beyond the approaching destroyers, the last Ulaggi interstellar gave up the ghost, erupting in a glorious plume of silver and gold. Tar Fell had won.

"On target, damn it!" Buccari shouted. The Ulaggi fast-movers had nowhere to retreat. They would only fight more furiously. Better to kill them quickly.

"Hard lock!" Flaherty growled. "Get 'em, Skipper."

Condor squared up and streaked straight at the on-coming destroyers, three on three. Buccari assigned targets. *Condor Two* and *Condor Four* acknowledged electronically.

"*Condor Two* has a shield casualty," Toon reported. "Her reservoir is at forty percent and falling."

Buccari grimly processed the input. *Condor Two* would not survive. "Very well," she replied. There was no choice; she needed *Condor Two's* cannon in the fight.

"Six seconds," Flaherty reported. "Decoys away."

Condor One trembled with counter-measure discharges. Jamming signals blossomed. Buccari pulsed her maneuvering thrusters, slewing her formation behind the burgeoning false images.

"Heavies," Flaherty called as he triggered a command barrage. A pattern of kinetics ripple-fired from each ship, spears of flame blasting into the void. Buccari, violently jinking, tracked the approaching destroyers. It was time to fight. It was time to die.

"Three seconds...two...engaging!"

Whooooomp!

Condor One's cannon discharged. Buccari's visor went opaque as answering fire splashed incandescent across her view screens. *Condor One* was smacked hard. Buccari, unable to see through her visors, relied on her headup. The energy impact had stripped away her shields and fried control paths. Depending on the severity of damage, it would take precious seconds or fatal minutes for self-generating circuitry to repattern.

"Battle damage!" Buccari demanded, her visors clearing. Pitcairn Two, backdropped by a riot of uncaring stars, filled her windscreen.

"Shields are down. Reservoirs depleted," Toon reported. "Engineering reports loss of fusion pressure. Estimate at least five minutes to restore capacitance."

Buccari scanned her panel. Five minutes was an eternity. Her corvette was coasting, with no shields and only maneuvering thrusters. Helpless to defend herself, Buccari stared at the tactical display, searching for threats.

"Got all three bugs!" Thompson shouted.

Two of the Ulaggi ships were exploded into nothingness; the third destroyer was tumbling outbound, with no power or radiant emissions. *Condor Two* was also missing, her transponder signal silent. *Condor Four* was transmitting an emergency signal and was no longer able to maintain formation.

"*Condor Two* is destroyed," Toon reported. "*Condor Four* has declared an emergency and requests permission to return to ship."

"Granted," Buccari growled. *Condor One* was all alone. Buccari pulled up engineering diagnostics, trying to monitor the extent of damage and the progress of repair. Warrant Officer Silva and Toon were heavily engaged. Buccari was stunned at the cliff dweller's level of technical comprehension.

"Partial power coming on line," Toon reported calmly. "Full power to engines and laser cannon in two minutes."

"Give me a target," Buccari demanded, scanning the tactical display for the

nearest enemy. A pair of destroyers maneuvered into her sector. Flaherty was already tracking them.

"Designated," her copilot replied. "Partial lock. Need to get closer."

"Let's go," Buccari replied, using thrusters to point the corvette's nose. "Four gees!" She eased in throttle.

"Hoot. Hoot," Toon called out in his own screeching whistle.

Buccari gave a grim laugh and warily gauged closure rate. *Condor One's* cannon was a long way from charged. She pulled power, and a pair of overtaking *House Ollant* interceptors joined the pursuit. Buccari handed off the target and adjusted trajectory to provide cover. The Ulaggi fought valiantly, but they were outmatched. The remaining fast-movers were caught in a maelstrom, and with each engagement their numbers were reduced. The equation had changed. With no line-of-battle opposition, Tar Fell's dreadnaughts trained their batteries on the Ulaggi fast-movers, burning them out of existence one at a time. It did not happen quickly, for Buccari's and Et Lorlyn's crews were locked in a dozen death matches; the maniacally screaming Ulaggi pilots refused to break off.

"Et Lorlyn just got the last one!" Thompson finally cried.

"Setting course for low orbit," Buccari ordered, swinging the corvette's nose. "Direct a fueler and a heavy-lifter to follow at best speed. *Condor Five* and *Six* to provide escort."

"Aye, Skipper," Thompson replied.

"Flack, you have the ship," Buccari muttered, trying to relax; a suffocating awareness filled her breast, a hot pressure—a hurt. *Condor* squadron had lost two more corvettes and their crews. Buccari had ordered them to their deaths. Could she have led them better? She was bereft, heartbroken, but her eyes remained dry. The luxury of tears would come later.

She still had a job to do.

Chapter Twenty-one

Lowlands

Topping the ridge, Godonov looked back. A hard northerly tumbled across the mountain rift, whipping the lakes. The valley was a place of plenty, a place of beauty, but mostly it was a place of fear—a place of death. A morbid weight lifted from the science officer's shoulders as he turned and followed the ragged remains of his patrol over the ridge. A different sensation, a dark excitement, took its place, not fear, but the anticipation of fear. Danger lay ahead, though still distant enough as to be seductive.

"Move out!" Buck shouted, his verbal command sharpened by his helmet amplifier. The Marine officer, under a heavy pack and garbed in reactive battle armor, led the column. Bottlenose limp-waddled at the his side; the doughty hunter refused to be carried. The other cliff dwellers soared overhead, hovering against shearing westerlies. Sergeant Wu and Pake went next, the female decked out in Wu's camouflage rig and shouldering a hefty pack. Chastain and Private Cruz, each burdened like mules, waited for Godonov. The science officer shrugged under his own leaden straps and stepped out. What they could not carry on their backs they had left behind for the lake monsters.

Godonov rechecked his systems; his power cells were fully charged and his reactive camouflage operational. He blinked up a navigation display and verified mission track and rendezvous coordinates. He overlaid the nav-track from their previous foray;

they knew where they were going, and this time they had a guide.

"Getting steep!" Buck shouted.

The terrain rounded over flinty talus, through scraggly cactus stands, and onto bare granite. But Godonov gave scant notice to the flora. An unending sea of dust stretched westward to the horizon, broken only by distant mountain archipelagoes. Gritty waves of dun and yellow tumbled at their feet, dissipating in swirling tendrils of brown.

A thunderous reverberation jerked everyone's attention skyward. And then another, and another. Sonic booms, countless jumbles of sound, rumbled down from the cloudless dome.

"Reentries!" Godonov shouted, scanning the sky.

"There!" Chastain bellowed, pointing.

Godonov saw it, and then two more! Silvery glints darting overhead. "Ulaggi lifeboats," he snarled.

"Just what we needed—more bugs," Cruz shouted.

"I bet they're pissed," Wu added. "They're talking, too. I got Ulaggi transmissions saturating all frequencies, Major."

"Move out!" Buck growled. He waved signals; the soaring cliff dwellers pulled in their membranes and plummeted into the grit. Godonov envied them their effortless descent. The hikers scrambled downward with far less grace, seeking footholds, crawling ever closer to the swirling cloud. All the while sonic booms thundered above them.

"Major, I got a burst packet from fleet," Wu bellowed.

Godonov, with Chastain and Cruz scrambling on his heels, closed in time to hear Wu declare, "Battle's over, sir. Tar Fell kicked ass. All Ulaggi motherships have been destroyed."

Cruz roared with joy. Even Chastain thrust a gloved fist skyward. Godonov could not predict how much resistance they would meet in the lowlands, but now at least he knew they would get unhindered support from orbit. Given enough time, and reinforcements, they could rescue some of the prisoners; but they had to act before the Ulaggi on the ground realized what was happening.

"What about recovery?" Buck demanded.

The others crowded closer.

"*Condor One's* on the way," Wu replied. "Estimate low orbit in ten hours. An escorted heavy-lifter with a company of Marines is following."

"How long before the fleet jumps?" Godonov asked. It would take time to isolate, overrun, and evacuate even a single labor camp.

"No word, sir, but I was able to zag 'em our position and mission track. They know where we are and where we're going."

"Let's get there then," Buck shouted, leading the way downward into the shifting pall of dust. His reactive armor disrupted his outline, blending it into the grainy backdrop, leaving only the belay line wiggling against rock. Sergeant Wu and Pake followed, disappearing into the golden haze. Godonov, rejuvenated with the news, scuttled downward on all fours.

After four hours of wind-buffed, white-knuckled climbing, the terrain moderated and visibility increased. Escarpments loomed from the gritty murk. A hunter, invisible to the eye but revealed by IR optics as a hotspot against cooler rock, perched patiently on a ghostly ledge. It was Notch, loitering at a designated waypoint. The cliff dweller hand-signed all clear and leapt into the scouring wind, gliding downslope and veering from sight. The humans followed, descending deeper into the wind-blasted lowlands, the muted thunder of reentry booms giving frequent reminder of the

enemy's increasing presence.

Although the reddening gloom darkened with their descent, the visibility drifted out, lifting grudgingly at times to fifty meters, even farther with IR optics. Buck engaged laserlink. Godonov blinked up the disposition display on his visor. Transponder returns winked unsteadily on, marking positions. Satisfied, Buck waved them on. An hour later they topped a wind-riffled ridge and came to a beaten path. Tonto, Notch, and Pop-eye were waiting, sidearms drawn. It was the same path from which they had kidnapped Pake six months earlier. One direction climbed into the rusty haze, leading to the mines; the other twisted downward along the face of a cliff, to the village and to the smelter beyond. Its dull pounding lifted to their sensors, and from the dim depths came a throbbing glow.

Pake and Wu exchanged words.

"The guards stay at the mines," Wu translated, pointing uphill.

Godonov nodded; according to Pake, the guards relieved every third day. On shift-change day there were twelve guards present, otherwise only six. The guards stayed near the mines, except when the breeding technicians came to the village, every ten days. The plan was to scout the village. Once the area was cleared, Pake, Wu, and Godonov would go into the village to prepare the prisoners for evacuation. Buck, Cruz, Chastain, and the hunters would remain on the approaches, hoping to lure the guards into ambush.

Tonto took point. After a hundred meters, the path veered from the cliff; the hunters slipped out to cover the flanks. Wind-blasted outcroppings gave way to hardpan, devoid of shelter. They marched hard and fast, thankful for the obscuring grit and for the falling dusk. The dust-dimmed sunstar, a blood-red smear, decayed into the thickening haze; but night was already hard fallen in the valley's nether regions. The smelter glow pulsed in the distance, the relentless pounding of its ore-crushers joining the wind in bleak symphony.

Hardpan gave over to sparse carpets of brittle grass. Tumbleweed bounced by, activating motion sensors and dulling reactions. Tonto thrust up an arm. Large shadows loomed in the gloaming. The nearest objects were wind-formed boulders, cold and inanimate; but IR returns glowed beyond the jutting rocks. Buck, flashing hand signals, fell behind a boulder while Godonov and the Marines rolled for cover. To their great surprise and consternation Pake kept marching.

"Pake, no!" Buck ordered.

Wu yelled in Chinese, but the female did not slow. The cliff dwellers scampered to the flanks, while Chastain leapt from cover and raced after the female. Godonov and the others pursued.

"Not danger," Pake said. "Follow me."

They were in a herd of stumpy-legged, camel-like animals. The creatures, heavy-haunched and disinterested, were sheltering in a cove of rock, their backs to the wind. Godonov eased forward, but the rheumy-eyed brutes refused to move. Pake, muttering loudly, pushed past Chastain and elbowed her way through the beasts, fearlessly punching at their haunches.

"She calls them packers," Wu translated. "She says they are stupid and smell bad. And that they taste of dung. She says the village is just ahead."

Pake came to an erosion gully and dropped into the inky defile. The hunters, with sharper eyes and sonic senses, crowded after her, while Godonov and the Marines followed on their butts. The descent ended in soft sand at the murky bottom of a deep wash, between eroded walls an arm-span apart. All was black except for a crust of red-glowing clouds far overhead. Pake, visible only with IR optics, signaled them onward. They marched another kilometer as the wash widened and its walls lowered,

the sandy bottom yielding beneath their boots. Godonov was relieved when Pake stopped.

"Village near," she said, pulling off her helmet.

"Prepare for action," Buck ordered.

Godonov gladly shed his pack. As the Marines checked their weapons, Pake stripped off her gear in favor of her old scarf and rags. The wind had died. The obscuration had lifted; though still pitch dark, the surface air was clearing. The pounding of ore-crushers was sharp, not just louder but unmuffled by dust. The red glow off the clouds was brighter.

"Major, some kinda' vehicle coming this way," Chastain reported. The towering Marine was able to peer over the sides of the wash.

"Up, Joko," Pake commanded.

Chastain hiked Pake onto his hip so that she could see. The hunters also clambered up, using the Marine's body armor for handholds.

"Major, I'm getting intense chatter," Wu reported.

"Down, Joko," Pake demanded, wriggling in Chastain's arms. She barked at Wu, tugging frantically on his arm.

"She says a breeding technician is coming, some sort of mobile laboratory," Wu translated. "The guards are probably already in the village, likely at least two. She says we gotta' move fast or we'll be cut off."

"Go!" Buck commanded, signaling for Pake to lead the way.

Pake, jabbering softly, moved down the wash with Wu and Buck at her heels. Tonto, Notch, and Pop-eye set their wings and glided ahead, skimming through the shadows. Chastain, with Bottlenose clinging to his back, pounded after them. Godonov and Cruz brought up the rear as light from the vehicle danced downward against the top of the opposite wall. They could hear low-pitched rumbling. The wash continued to lower; Pake stooped to remain in shadow, finally dropping to a crawl. Just as the dirt walls merged with the ground, the erosion gully dropped steeply into a channel, a meandering alluvial bed bottomed with sand and smooth stone. Pake, with the humans and hunters right behind, sprinted directly across the path of the approaching vehicle, masked by the shadow of the near bank. The diffuse scattering of headlights and sweeping floodlights intensified as the vehicle drew nearer.

"Down!" Pake hissed, grabbing Wu's wrist.

The vehicle topped a rise. Godonov and the Marines flattened into the sand as the harsh glare of floodlights suddenly illuminated the wide dry bottom spreading into the distance beyond them. The hunters, gliding ahead in ground effect, gained the shadows. The humans, crawling on their bellies, took longer to reach the darkened lee of a boulder-tumbled escarpment. No sooner were they in shadow than did the engine noises drop to a chugging idle, and then to silence, leaving only the pounding of the smelter—along with the throbbing of Godonov's heart; the science officer rolled onto his back, sucking for oxygen.

"Come on, shippie," Buck gasped. "Let's check it out."

The hunters, high in the boulders, were signaling. Godonov pushed onto his knees and climbed until he was able to see. Silhouetted in the backlight of its own spotlights and supported by six immense tires, the mobile laboratory was a large vehicle bristling with antennae. No on-board weapons were apparent. A boarding ladder on the boxy superstructure provided access to a landing just aft of the control cupola.

"My village is beyond," Pake whispered, joining them. Godonov, still regaining his breath, followed her finger. On rising terrain far beyond the mobile laboratory, Godonov observed three guttering torches in a line.

"Commander Godonov," Wu whispered. "I'm getting real time from *Condor*

One. She's asking for you, sir."

Godonov squeezed into a cleft and blinked up his comm screen; he authenticated; the encryption indicator went green.

"*Condor*, Godonov here," the science officer broadcast, just loudly enough to drive his microphone.

"I'm back, Nes," a familiar voice said. "I told you I'd be back."

"Never doubted it, Sharl," Godonov replied, his scalp crawling. The transmission lag was delightfully abrupt; rescue was near. "I've got four Marines, four hunters, and approximately one hundred female prisoners to evacuate. How long will it take to get a lifter down here?"

"Two hours, Nes. I've got fuel, a heavy, and a pair of apples an hour behind me. Tar Fell is only giving us one shot. His ships have taken battle damage, and he can't wait around. Estimate no more than—"

Buccari's transmission was obliterated by an explosion that vibrated sand from rock ledges and rattled gravel and pebbles from their resting places. A thermal flare blossomed under the overcast, illuminating dragon-backed ridges beyond the valley and spiking feverish shadows across the intervening terrain.

"Landing retro!" Buck shouted.

The narrowing realm of their senses was brilliantly fired by retro-exhausts coming to ground in the ancient river bed from which they had just departed. A shock wave blasted Godonov with sand and stones, knocking him backwards. The white-hot fury splayed outward like splashing acid as a lifeboat slammed into the ground with seismic force. A paroxysm of flame was snuffed by impact. Godonov's IR and flash filters kicked in, but his night vision was annihilated. Godonov groped his way into the rocks, trying to put something between him and the sensors of the newly arrived enemy. Bad news had arrived in a double dose—their escape route was cut off, and there were more aliens to fight.

"Here, sir!"

Chastain's meaty fist clamped his arm and hauled him unceremoniously across the boulders. A hunter climbed on his back, covering him with silky membranes.

"Speak to me, Nes."

Sharl Buccari's voice came from his earphones, calming Godonov's shocked nerves. He wished she were there. Sharl would know what to do.

"Say again, *Condor*," Godonov gasped, blinking frantically to restore his vision. His brain churned desperately.

"What's happening, Nes?" Buccari asked.

"It's getting hot down here, Sharl. Don't take too long."

"I'm on the way, Nes."

Chapter Twenty-two

Pake's Village

Wary to stay in the umbra cast by the vehicle's shifting spotlights, the hunters and humans eased from hiding. Godonov's night vision slowly returned. To the unaided eye the area around the downed lifeboat remained dark; there were no fires, no beacons, no ramp lights, nothing. IR optics, however, revealed a lump of thermal intensity four hundred meters distant.

Engines erupting into gear shifted Godonov's attention. From his vantage point among the rocks, he watched the mobile structure trundle into the river bed, its fixed headlights and a shifting array of searchlights reaching for the grounded ship.

Godonov wondered what other sensors might be probing the night.

Tonto chirped. Into the vehicle's headlights trotted four helmeted beings in black uniforms, stocky and wide-shouldered.

"Big suckers," Cruz grumbled.

"Don't see any weapons," Chastain muttered. Godonov clicked up visor magnification; each alien wore a broad belt with attachments including a short baton, but their gloved hands were empty.

"What's the plan, Nes?" Buck asked.

"We have two hours to secure a landing site," Godonov replied. He could not let Buccari drop into a trap, but his dread of that prospect was increasing. The mine guards had just been reinforced by the pissed-off crewmembers of a destroyed interstellar.

"No way we're going to get these ladies ready to dance in a couple of hours," Buck said.

"So you got three hours. That's when the heavy-lifter hits dirt. I'm going to drop it and its Marines in that river bed," Godonov said, marking the coordinates for uplink.

"Much better," Buck grunted.

"That's the plan," Godonov replied.

"I knew you'd say that," Buck grumbled. "We should take the village while the guards are busy. I counted four; I wonder where the other two are."

"Let's go find them," Godonov said. They scrambled from the rock tumble, keeping its lumpy profile between them and the moving lights. One by one, they skulked across the tracks left by the Ulaggi vehicle and into dark boulders below the village. A path meandered upwards. Buck posted Private Cruz as rearguard and led the way, cautiously rounding the switchbacks. The hunters scrambled up over the boulders, but Tonto immediately dropped in front of them.

"Danger!" he signed. A shifting light beam painted the rocks.

"We're in luck," Buck growled, crouching to one side. Tonto took cover between his legs. Godonov and Chastain pressed against the opposite side, trying to squeeze into the same crevice, a meager cleft too small for either of them. Wu and Pake retraced their steps down the path. Bottlenose retreated with them, remaining at the apex of the last switchback, his weapon ready.

A guard treaded heavily into view; a sharp beam of light jounced from his helmet. Another guard followed. Between the aliens marched two human females. The Ulaggi were brutes. By comparison the ragged humans, their bodies wrapped in rags, appeared as stick-figures, with scrawny necks and wiry extremities—except that they were both very pregnant.

"First bug's mine," Buck whispered, pulling his knife. "Jocko, take the second. We'll leave the ladies for Commander Godonov."

Chastain grunted. Godonov felt the big Marine shift, powerful muscles tensing; a matte-black blade appeared in his left hand. Godonov's view of the approaching danger was much too adequate. The heavy-footed guard rounded the switchback, oblivious to his peril. He shuffled past. The first female, a mere child, was more alert; she lifted her eyes. And then she screamed. Buck shouldered into the guard and drove his knife under the alien's faceguard. They wrestled heavily to the ground. Tonto leapt on top, black blade flashing.

Chastain had farther to go, and his trajectory was obstructed. The big Marine, moving like a cat, elbowed the second woman to the ground and lunged. The Ulaggi squared, a black baton rising. Plummeting from the rocks, Notch struck first, slamming the guard's helmet. A split-second later, Chastain, knife thrusting, collided with the startled alien. His thrust went home, but Chastain recoiled violently. The Marine fell on his back, twitching convulsively. The guard, with Notch clinging to his helmet, staggered

forward, one hand holding his gut, the other flailing the baton. Notch was too quick; the hunter's furious dirk went home again and again as he dodged the sinister wand. His life ebbing, the alien crumpled to the ground.

Godonov, alarmed over Chastain, hesitated before attending the females. The taller one, knocked to the ground, lay frozen with fear, curled in the static beam of an Ulaggi helmet light; but the smaller one, wide-eyed with panic, sidled into shadow. Godonov moved. Even though heavy with child, she darted away like a deer.

"Catch her!" Buck shouted, flipping open his visor.

Notch and Tonto scrambled upward, swirling dust. Godonov jumped after the barefoot female, but she was gone into the night by the time he rounded the first switchback. A shrill scream lifted the hair on Godonov's neck. He jogged uneasily around the next turn, groping. His IR optics prevented him from stumbling over the panicked female struggling face down in the sand. Pop-eye, chirping for help, labored precariously to stay on top. Gasping for breath, Godonov slipped between the beleaguered hunter and the bucking human. Except for her gravid abdomen, she was alarmingly thin, and yet she was extraordinarily strong, all elbows and knees.

"Sorry, baby," Godonov said as he jammed his gloved hand into her shrieking mouth. He carried the squirming burden back into the grounded helmet beams. Buck had propped Chastain against the rocks. The big Marine, his helmet removed, sat slack-jawed and dull-eyed, his legs awkwardly twisted and his arms limp. Tonto paced at Chastain's side, the hunter's ugly face twisted with fierce concern. In battle, cliff dwellers killed their wounded.

"What happened?" Cruz asked over the link.

"Shaddup," Buck snarled, glancing up at Godonov and his hostage. The other female sat, trembling against a boulder, under Bottle-nose's intense supervision. "Sergeant Wu, get Pake back up here. On the double."

"How is he?" Godonov asked. Chastain was the backbone of their team, its very keel.

"Don't know," Buck replied. "He's alive, but—"

In his concern Godonov relaxed his grip. His captive jerked away, screeching like a banshee. Chastain's eyes open wide at the explosive sound; his hands spasmed upward as if warding off an attack. Godonov lunged after the female, but the terrified child halted, screaming hysterically. Tonto, maw agape, eyes red-rimmed and slit with ferocity, stood blocking her escape. Pake, tears streaming over her great cheekbones, jumped between the hunter and the girl. The pregnant child's screech chopped short as she was snatched into Pake's grasp. They hugged with seismic exuberance. Sobbing and shrieking, they staggered to the other hostage, collecting the astonished female in their embrace.

"The little one is Pake's daughter," Wu said. "That's her name, Little One." The child, though delirious with joy, stole glances at the men and at Tonto, her countenance flooded with revulsion.

"I don't care if she's Admiral Runacres's mother. Shut her up," Buck snarled, slapping Chastain's cheeks. The Marine's eyes rolled. To Godonov's unalloyed delight, Chastain lifted a heavy hand to his head.

"Some...shock," the big man muttered, flexing his fingers. "Where's...my weapon?"

"Joko!" Pake cried, dragging her unenthusiastic daughter to the downed Marine's side. She lavished concern on the dazed Marine. Chastain reciprocated with a weak smile as he rolled unsteadily onto his knees. Pake released her dumbstruck daughter, incongruously struggling to support the huge human. She shouted imperiously to the others; they reluctantly obeyed, but fell back in terror as Chastain

unsteadily resumed his full height.

"Sergeant Wu, get Pake into the village," Godonov said, pulling Pake away. "They had to have heard the screaming. We'll have a panic if we don't do something. Keep them in their homes until we're ready to leave. Explain to them, we need their help."

Wu relayed his instructions. Pake reluctantly left Chastain's side and pushed the others dumbly before her.

"No let hunters be seen," she begged. "Will frighten my people."

Godonov looked to Buck, but the officer was busy dusting off the injured man's helmet.

"I'm heading up," Godonov said.

"Yeah...move!" Buck growled, recovering his fierce demeanor. "I'll stay with Jocko until he gets it together. We'll use the hunters to cover the approaches while you get the prisoners ready for evacuation."

Buck hand-signed orders to the goggling cliff dwellers. Chastain nodded with increased alertness and added more signals. Tonto, Pop-eye, and Notch scrambled into the night-shrouded rock; Bottle-nose, gun in hand, hop-waddled into darkness. Chastain, pulling on his helmet, stumbled after the hunter.

"What if we run into more guards?" Godonov asked.

"Kill them!" Buck snarled, delicately lifting the guard's baton and examining it.

"Sound's like a plan," Godonov said, jogging after the females. The dark trail flattened. Lights appeared, flickering and inconstant. A steady keening, cries of alarm, cries of fear, arose from the night. A cry of recognition pierced the darkness. Godonov guessed that Pake had been discovered. Sergeant Wu was waiting where the path debouched onto a dusty clearing.

"Check it out, Commander," Wu said.

The widening path continued upslope, narrowing again between rows of mud huts. Dozens of ragged women and girls filled the alley, overflowing into the clearing. Illumination came from flickering candles and a few sputtering torches. Frightened faces floated above the flames, their shadowed countenances staring wide-eyed down the path. The muted keening took an uncertain, desperate tone. Pake's shrill voice rose above the din, a commanding voice. Objections were raised, but Pake shouted all the louder. She pointed; the crowd moaned.

"Come now!" Pake shouted.

"You first, Sergeant," Godonov whispered. "Take off your bucket."

"Aye, Commander," Wu replied, removing his helmet as he walked toward the flickering lights. The crowd recoiled at their first sight of a human male, their keening rising, despite Pake's efforts to calm them. With exquisite inspiration, Wu started singing, his voice deep and sweet; it was the nursery rhyme he had shared with Pake back at the cave so long ago. Those nearest hissed for the others to be quiet, and the frightened murmur fell away, replaced with a collective gasp. A nervous giggling broke out as the crowd opened to accept the singing male. One little girl reached out with trembling fingers.

Pake, darting to Wu's side, broke the stillness with a string of commands. Wu also started giving orders, but they saw Godonov coming, helmet in hand. A murmur welled up with increased fervor, for Godonov was much taller than Wu, taller than their Ulaggi captors; and as he drew near, the flickering light revealed his pale complexion and hazel eyes. Godonov stopped short, offering his hands in the cliff dweller fashion.

"I am friend," he said slowly, in his best Neo-Mandarin. The frightened women fell quiet, wide-eyed with wonder. He held his ground.

"What now, Commander?" Wu asked.

"Just like we briefed it, Sergeant," Godonov replied, looking at his chronometer. "Get them inside. Get them settled. Have them eat their dinners, if they haven't already done so."

Wu translated, relaying the orders in a firm tone. Pake joined in, even more commanding; with uncommon roughness the female herded her fellow villagers up the gentle slope and into their huts. Godonov followed, inspecting the terrain. Doors fluttered ajar as he passed and window covers shifted, their openings filled with frightened faces.

"Friend," he repeated softly. "I am friend."

There were no more than fifteen hovels to each side of the alley, most with narrow paddocks containing domesticated packers. The village rested on a gentle slope nestled against rapidly rising cliffs. Between the last hut and the cliffs spread a larger paddock containing a dozen packers; beyond the paddock the terrain rapidly stepped upward in irrigation terraces. Godonov replaced his helmet and employed his nav computer to survey the terrain. There was room for a landing zone, if only just. The retro would demolish the large paddock and possibly some of the huts. It would be a devilish approach, with vertical cliffs eliminating any possibility of a wave-off; once the apple was committed to final it would have to land.

Godonov engaged terrain mapping, scanning in the surrounding contours and marking all obstructions within line of sight. He yanked a device from his belt, armed it, and placed the instrument on the ground near the center of the packer corral. He processed his inputs into an encrypted burst and transmitted it to the stars. The receipt beeped almost immediately. With a tight smile on his face, he chased the balking animals from the paddock, kicking down the flimsy railings when the dull beasts would not take the open gate.

"What are you doing, Nes?" Buck's incredulous voice came up on laserlink. "You're leaking active like snot."

"Sorry, Jimbo. I should have checked in," Godonov replied as he retraced his steps down the hill. "I've set up a beacon to mark the landing zone. *Condor* will be coming in above the village. Everything's under control."

"Glad to hear it," Buck replied. "It's not so pleasant down here. Got lights moving this way. The bugs are coming back."

Chapter Twenty-three

Return to Pitcairn

"Hoot, Skipper, we're point two above aerobraking limits," Flaherty reported from *Condor One's* flightdeck. "And we're approaching fuel critical."

"Tanker's right behind us," Buccari replied as she snuggled herself into the cockpit of the corvette's endoatmospheric planetary lander. Cockpit lights reflected off the tight dome of her canopy, bathing her silver pressure suit. She blinked down intensity and checked the corvette's trajectory. Any deeper into Pitcairn Two's gravity well and they would be going too fast to make a direct descent; she would have to circle the planet to burn energy.

"Make your orbit, Flack," Buccari ordered.

"Orbit, aye," Flaherty replied. He fired a retro-burn on the mains and a sustained pulse of thrusters to adjust for inclination.

"Any word from Commander Godonov?" Buccari grunted, bracing herself against the maneuvers. She had no idea what she was dropping into. There was no time for surveys; she was going straight in.

"He's armed a beacon," Thompson reported. "He says it's tight, with no abort on final."

"What else is new?" she replied.

She blinked up the target fix on the terrain model. She pulled up Godonov's imagery of the landing zone and whistled. It was damned tight.

"Orbit set, Skipper," Flaherty reported, throttling back.

"Systems," Buccari demanded, floating in null gee.

"Checking good, Skipper. All systems hot," Fenstermacher replied.

"Cabin secure," responded Toon from the cargo bay.

"Ready to launch," she reported.

"Cleared," Flaherty responded.

The EPL bay yawned open; an overwhelming blackness crept through the widening aperture, a fathomless backdrop for countless stars. The lander moved outboard. Pitcairn Two emerged from behind the bulk of the corvette, filling Buccari's canopy with swirls of gold and brown. Her visor darkened.

"Apple away," Buccari announced, firing a lateral pulse.

"You owe me, Skipper," Flaherty transmitted.

"Shut up or I'll promote you," she replied. Buccari should have delegated the extraction mission to her copilot, but this was her job; she had left Godonov's team behind, and she was going to retrieve them. She rolled the lander and commenced retrofire, falling straight up into Pitcairn Two's golden glare.

Godonov left Pake and Sergeant Wu to evacuate the upper huts. Running down the dark path, he stumbled over the dead guards; their helmets and jumpsuits had been removed. Puzzled, Godonov hurried downward, discovering Buck and Bottlenose at the foot of the path. Chastain and Cruz knelt behind boulders in the broad open area beyond. The Marines had donned the Ulaggi helmets, yellow headlamps blazing. Pacing fretfully about in the jerking beams, even more exposed, were two diminutive, mattock-headed creatures wrapped in rags.

"What's the plan?" Buck asked.

"Looks like you already have one," Godonov said, peering into the darkness. The rumbling Ulaggi mobile unit was masked by terrain, but the luminescence from its searchlights formed a white aurora that waned and waxed as the vehicle trundled nearer.

"The hunters report four guards," Buck replied. "We should be able to give 'em a surprise. I want you up behind those rocks. Set up another firing lane. Once we take out the guards, we'll figure out how to take the vehicle."

"What came out of the lifeboat?" Godonov huffed, scrambling to his assigned position. "Did they get reinforcements?"

"Don't know," Buck replied. "I sent Tonto to check it out. Hasn't reported back. Not much we can do about it, so let's take 'em as they come. We'll fall back to the village if we have to. Where's *Condor*?"

In answer, another sonic boom echoed across the valley, joining the ceaseless hammering of the smelter; but this was the distinctive double thunder of an EPL. Godonov looked up and saw a few fuzzy stars peeking through a grainy overcast.

"She'll be down in eight minutes," he said, praying Buccari was not dropping into a trap. Unable to do more, he settled into his ambush position.

"Here they come," Buck whispered.

The rumbling *chug-chug* of the mobile laboratory lifted above the wind, its transmission pitching higher as it climbed. Three hundred meters away the obscene silhouette of an Ulaggi guard breasted the rise, and then another one. The bloom of a

searchlight jittered over the near horizon like a sun gone insane, pulling behind it the glare-masked superstructure; and then came the powerful beams of the headlamps, great blinding orbs. Squinting into their illumination, Godonov made out the other guards, one stalking to each side of the rolling building.

"Jocko, wave to them—easy, like you do it everyday," Buck ordered. "Cruz, you nail the one on the far right. Jocko, you have the next one. I'll take the close one. Nes, the one on the left. On my command."

Chastain lifted an arm with studied nonchalance. Godonov raised his sights with far less calm. The vehicle, its searchlights roving, trundled closer. One searchlight held fast on Chastain and Cruz. The lead guard tapped the side of his helmet and held up three thick fingers. Chastain held up three fingers in response.

"Atta' way, Jocko," Buck warned. "Steady now. Steady."

The aliens kept coming, their body language alert. A hundred meters out the lead guard held up a hand. The vehicle nearly overran the wary guard before it shuddered to a stop, its engine revving as clutches disengaged. With an impatient snap of the wrist, the guard held up three fingers again.

"*Condor's* on final," Sergeant Wu broadcast. "Retro in fifteen seconds."

"Stand by," Buck ordered.

An eternity passed before the fiery starburst exploded from the dusty overcast. Night flashed into garish noon; Godonov's visors darkened. The guards pivoted and recoiled, lifting their hands, as the miniature nova flared overhead. Godonov forced his wavering sights squarely on his target's chest.

"Fire!" Buck commanded.

A bolt of cyan from Chastain's blaster impaled the lead alien. Godonov took a short breath and exhaled; his assault rifle bucked hard. The alien in his sights jerked. Godonov pulled the trigger again. Sparks jumped from the vehicle, but his target was already down.

"Go! Go!" Buck bellowed as *Condor One* thundered overhead, a screaming spear of flame.

A furnace-hot turbulence buffeted Godonov as Buck charged past. Chastain and Cruz sprinted free of their meager shelter. The hunters, casting off their rags and drawing their automatics, glided along the uneven ground, quickly outpacing the humans.

"Frigging insane!" Godonov screamed as he lunged to his feet and joined the assault. The Marines blew out the goggling headlights, leaving only crazily sluing searchlights. The vehicle began to spin in place, attempting to turn from its attackers. Godonov had only wounded his target. The Ulaggi guard, writhing in the shadows, was ground screaming into the sandy wrack beneath the massive vehicle's twisting tire.

"Cruz, finish the bugs! Nes, Jocko, go for the left front tire," Buck commanded.

Godonov brought his weapon to bear, joining the others. Their assault rifles belched on full automatic, but the tires were of a solid substance that absorbed punishment. Chastain's blaster proved more effective; a sustained, energy-draining burst melted a canyon in one tire, causing the ponderous vehicle to wobble. Buck redirected Chastain's aim to the center tire; the machine's hull bottomed out. The right-side tires spun in vain, grinding metal. The engine wound down, leaving only the humming of a generator.

"Jocko, put some heat on the control cabin," Buck shouted. "Everyone else take out the lights!"

Chastain focused a burst of energy on the cupola's windscreens. Armored glass resisted momentarily and then exploded. The remaining running lights and spots were shot out, leaving a faint glow coming from the shattered cab.

"Major, my unit's dry," Chastain reported, stowing his blaster.

Notch signaled frantically. Chastain bent close to see the signals. Whistling an acknowledgment, the big Marine stood erect and peered into the darkness.

"Major," he whispered, pointing. "Notch says there's a hatch just aft of the turret. It's opening. He's not sure but he thinks the bugs are trying to surrender."

"Hold fire," Buck commanded.

Chapter Twenty-four

Introductions

Buccari's apple was on the ground. Her pulse pounded in her ears.

"Exterior lights, Skip?" Fenstermacher asked.

"Negative," Buccari replied. "No need to advertise any more than we already have." The scudding sky provided a dim red cast, but it was still too dark to see the ground. Terrain imaging revealed cliffs close aboard on the starboard side; her approach trajectory could not have missed terminal granite by more than a wingspan. More vertical terrain loomed dead ahead.

"Pitcairn, *Condor* here," she broadcast on mission tactical. "You weren't kidding, Nes. Damn cozy spot. Where are you?"

"Still mopping up," Godonov replied. "We're clear for the moment, but I need you to shut down all active transmissions. Secure link only. The bugs know we're here. Pitcairn out."

"No shit," muttered Fenstermacher over tactical.

"That will do, Boats," Buccari ordered as she scrolled through takeoff checks, preparing for immediate departure.

"I hold you on planet, Skipper," Flaherty's voice came down from orbit.

"Roger," she replied, accepting the encrypted link. "Where's our support?"

"*Condor Five* and *Six* are thirty minutes out," Flaherty replied. "The gas truck and the heavy are right behind."

She acknowledged and rolled from her station. Full planetary gravity tugged her down the canted deck.

"Hold the fort, Boats. All transmitters into standby," she said as she climbed past the systems station, shadowed in red light. "Keep the tertiaries burning. We may have to blow this mudball in a hurry."

"We ever do it any other way?" Fenstermacher replied, his fingers flying as he made the EPL ready. "What's that in front of us—a friggin' wall? Good-for-nothing landed us in a friggin' hole."

"That's *Commander* Good-for-nothing," Buccari shouted as she dropped into the cargo hold. Toon, in pressure suit and helmet, stood at the hatch controls.

"Caution, skin temperatures equalizing," Toon warned.

"Override," Buccari ordered, pulling a blaster from the weapons rack. "We'll buy new seals when we get home."

Toon complied. The aft cargo hatch clam-shelled open, letting in a blast of friction-heated air and the distressed sounds of cooling metal. From somewhere in the distance came an ominous pounding, rivaling the throbbing of her heart. Her silver suit bathed in red, Buccari trotted down the ramp and onto Pitcairn Two's gritty surface. Toon, struggling to sling a laser blaster onto his drooping shoulder, hop-waddled in her wake. A helmeted Marine waited. A rail-thin female dressed in rags stood at his side.

"I'm Sergeant Wu, Commander. Are we ever glad to see you, sir," he said, giddy with relief. "I'll take you to Commander Godonov. This is Pake. She's our liaison. Follow

me."

"What's that pounding?" Buccari replied, nodding to the female.

"A smelter, sir," Wu replied. "You can see the furnace blast reflecting off the clouds."

Buccari noted the red-bruised overcast, but it was the flickering candles dancing in the near distance that captured her attention. More flames appeared from mud huts on either side of a narrow alley. Each flame illuminated the face of a frightened female, all with high cheekbones and almond eyes. Raggedly garbed women—and girls—fell back before Sergeant Wu's rapid stride, their dark eyes wide with fear. Many were pregnant.

Pake asked something; Wu replied. An excited murmur rippled through the crowd, and the women crowded closer, peering into Buccari's visor. Wu had to push them clear.

"What did she ask?" Buccari asked.

"She asked if you were a female," Wu replied.

Buccari pulled off her helmet. They gasped and fell back. Space travel had made Buccari's complexion as pale as any breathing human could ever be; her alabaster skin, smoothly devoid of all hair, appeared luminous, accentuating the scar running from temple to cheek. Suddenly a woman screamed and dropped her candle; others recoiled. Buccari turned to see Toon without his helmet. To his mother the cliff dweller was undoubtedly a handsome son, but to these females he was a monster. While perhaps not as gruesome as the mattock-headed hunters, the snake-faced guilder was ugly by any terrestrial measure. Buccari hurriedly assisted Toon in replacing his helmet, inadvertently keying his radio mike as Pake was shouting down the hysterics and herding the women back into their huts.

"What the hell's going on?" Godonov demanded, violating his own radio stricture.

"Sorry, sir," Wu replied. "Just had some introductions."

"My guess is the ladies met Fenstermacher," Godonov ventured.

"All due respect, sir," the boatswain replied. "I hope your gerbil dies."

"Shut up, Boats," Buccari snapped. "Lead the way, Sergeant."

Buccari and Toon, guided by Wu and Pake, threaded their way down the path. Pake clung to Wu's elbow, bombarding him with questions. Wu answered with exasperation, trying without success to shut her up. Buccari was perspiring and her joints were protesting by the time the crazily canted wreckage loomed out of the darkness. A Marine and a hunter, darker shadows in the dusty murk, posted guard fifty meters away, but underfoot and impossible to miss was the crushed body of an Ulaggi soldier. Three more lifeless aliens lay nearby.

"About time, Booch! Who's that with you?"

Buccari looked up to see Nestor Godonov drop from a boarding ladder on the side of the wreck. Toon bowed and spread his hands in greeting.

"Is that Lizard Lips?" Godonov blurted, returning the cliff dweller's bow in good form.

Bottle-nose, heavily bandaged and carrying an assault rifle, waddled out of the darkness chirping excitedly. Toon and the injured hunter chattered into ranges beyond human hearing. Another hunter standing sentry in the darkness joined the squeaking conversation; Buccari recognized Notch's shrill tones and excited mannerisms. She could hear a third hunter somewhere in the dark distance, likely Pop-eye; she was certain it was not Tonto. She wondered where that warrior was. And Chastain.

"Sorry it took so long, Nes. We had our hands full," she said, searching Pitcairn's gloom for signs of her friends. "The Ulaggi attacked Genellan. NEd was destroyed.

Admiral Runacres beat them back, but we lost a lot of ships and people."

"I'm sorry, Sharl. How...bad was it?"

"Let's talk when we have more time," she replied, slapping the science officer's helmet. "It's good to see you, Nes. Looks like you've had a tough go, too. What's happening?"

There was a scraping movement on the catwalk. Buccari looked up into the gritty night. Her heart soared to see the unmistakably broad back and tall form of Jocko Chastain descending the ladder.

"We've taken out the local muscle," Godonov reported, looking up. "And we captured this specimen."

Descending after her old cohort came the equally broad but squat form of an Ulaggi soldier. Buccari felt immense measures of hate and revulsion welling up. The murdering aliens had devastated her planet and killed her friends.

"Gee, Sharl...I mean Commander," Chastain gushed. "I knew you'd come. I knew it. We caught one, sir."

She wanted to leap into the big man's arms, but the alien's presence withered her joy. Chastain dropped to the ground, holding the stocky alien by the scruff; not an easy task, the Ulaggi was thickly muscled and heavy-chested. He wore a light-colored jumpsuit and no helmet. The red light of Buccari's helmet lamp revealed a closely shorn head too small for its massive body, with mottled, nacreous skin; the features were broad and flat, melting into a chinless-jaw; the eyes were wide-set, small and runny. Buccari's hatred expanded with each beat of her heart; monsters like this had killed thousands of humans and millions of kones without reason or remorse.

"Commander Buccari, as usual it's a pleasure," said another tall Marine as he pounced to the ground. Buck flipped opened his visor to reveal hard eyes and a grim smile.

"Glad you're still with us, Major—"

"No hurt him," the female called Pake interrupted, clutching Chastain's arm. "He no hurt us. He no guard." Frustrated, she redirected her pleas toward Sergeant Wu, in her own language.

"Son of a gun!" Godonov said. "She's protecting him."

"She says he's a breeding technician," Wu said. "From what I can tell, this guy impregnates them and delivers their babies."

"And then steals their male children, damn it," Godonov growled. "There are six new-born humans in incubators in this machine, all males. And room for a dozen more."

"Sergeant Wu, take Pake back to the village and bring all the women here, on the double," Buck ordered. "We need wet nurses for the babies. I don't know how long the vehicle's generators will keep running. This will be our marshalling point for the uplift."

"What is function of this vehicle?" Toon asked.

"Lizard Lips can talk!" Godonov blurted.

"They solved their speech pattern discontinuity," Buccari said, sharing Godonov's joy. "Lizzy's real name is Toon—Master Toon. The labs finally broke down their sonic patterns. It's not perfect, but wait a second; I'm curious, too. What is this—this vehicle? You said *babies*?"

"Master Toon, eh? We need to get the hunters fitted out—but yeah, it's a breeding station, Sharl. Wait until you read my report," Godonov snarled, menacing the alien. "This planet is an obscenity. It's a damn breeding farm."

Pake, sensing Godonov's fury, redoubled her remonstrations, pleading with Sergeant Wu.

"Pake says the bug is, ah..." Wu translated. "She called him a good, ah...a good man."

The alien spoke, his voice deep and warbling; Pake and Wu turned to listen, Wu straining to comprehend.

"He's speaking some kind of Chinese-pidgin. He's thanking Pake for trying to save him," Wu translated. "Man, he has one strange accent."

"Get moving, Sergeant" Buck ordered. "We don't have much time before the lifter hits dirt. We gotta' get the whole lot on board as quickly as possible."

Wu pulled Pake away, both of them jabbering as they disappeared into darkness. Chastain secured the alien to one of the mangled axles.

"I guess they can't all be killers," Buccari remarked, attempting to check her hatred. She had blood on her own hands, but that was from kill-or-be-killed combat. She had never killed wantonly. She had never murdered unarmed civilians. She had never stolen the babies of her enemies.

"We can't let him go," Buck said.

"The exobiologists will want him," Buccari growled, her fury rising. "We'll take him with us."

"How long before the heavy-lifter arrives?" Buck asked.

"Hits atmosphere in ten minutes," Buccari replied, checking telemetry on her headup. The lifter was approaching from the opposite side of the planet. *Condor One*, still far enough above the horizon, was acting as relay. "Where's your landing zone?"

"An alluvial bed four hundred meters west," Godonov said. "I uploaded the position offset and got a hard link. There's plenty of room. Trouble is, an Ulaggi lifeboat crash-landed in the area about an hour ago. We don't know what it was carrying, if anything."

"Where's Tonto?" Buccari asked, almost too frightened to ask.

"I sent him to scout the lifeboat, Commander," Buck said. "He hasn't come back. We—"

A hunter whistled an alarm, and again, more urgently. A gust of wind lifted a pall of dust. A herd of tumbleweed bounced past.

"Ulaggi flying craft come," Toon announced.

"Listen!" Chastain hissed.

Buccari heard it. The pulsing warble lifted above the moaning wind, its horrible pitch rising higher and higher.

Yu-yuuuu ... yu-yuuuu ... yu-yuuu.

Chapter Twenty-five

Rescue

The spine-crawling noise clipped off in mid-warble. Buccari knew the flyer was still gliding toward them, but her thoughts remained on Tonto. The cliff dweller was too much a part of her.

"There!" Chastain pointed.

Visibility was closing down, but a solid black object sliced below the bruised overcast. It banked into a turn, descending. When it was almost on the deck, the yodeling resumed.

"Cover!" Buck bellowed.

Buccari scrambled under the wreckage as the hard shadow warbled overhead, its lift vortices mixing with the kicking gusts, swirling whirlwinds of grit.

"Sergeant Major, your blaster got any power at all?" Buck demanded. Laserlink

transmissions were growing increasingly scratchy.

"Negative, sir," Chastain replied.

"Maybe if we ignore them, they'll go away," Godonov ventured.

"Famous last words from Commander Crap-magnet," Buck growled.

"I'm the crap-magnet," Buccari muttered, checking power on her blaster. Toon mimicked her actions. The flying craft, melding into darkness, wheeled back, decelerating into the rising gale. A searchlight, a column of incandescence tumbling with driving dust, marched across the ground.

"It's landing!" Buccari shouted. She was cut off from her EPL, and the prisoners were cut off from rescue.

"Cruz left, into the rocks," Buck ordered.

"Garbled, say again," Cruz responded. Laserlink was succumbing to the swirling dust.

Buck switched to radio and repeated his command. Cruz sprinted into the darkness. "Jocko," Buck continued, "take Commander Godonov's weapon. I want you and the hunters in the high ground on the right."

Whistling commands, Chastain unrigged his blaster pack, accepted Godonov's assault rifle, and pounded into the night. Notch and Pop-eye scuttled after the big Marine. The injured Bottlenose hesitated and then took off in pursuit, arguing hypersonically with Toon long after he had disappeared into the gloom. Godonov, lugging the useless blaster, dropped to the ground next to Buccari.

"Welcome to Pitcairn, Sharl," he muttered. "I'm sorry about Tonto."

"Yeah," she replied, her mind whirling with old memories, unbidden and bittersweet. Toon hopped in front of her, still screeching after the vanished hunters. The guildler's manic intensity brought Buccari back to the moment. She pulled the cliff dweller under the wreckage and took shelter behind a knee-high bulge of rock.

"Nes, put your knife next to that bug's nose," Buck ordered. "Just so he understands the situation."

Godonov complied as the Ulaggi patrol craft, awash in the backscatter of its own lights, settled to the ground. Hatches opened on both sides, spewing magenta light into the dust-shrouded night. Six wide-shouldered aliens pounced from elevated hatches. The brutes were garbed in bulky armor and brandished thick-barreled weapons. No prison guards, these were soldiers.

"Fire on my command," Buck ordered.

"More are come," Toon reported.

A second flying machine yodeled overhead, sweeping in behind the first, its landing light tunneling into the swirling dust. Through the thickening veil, a third landing light lined up beyond the others.

"Not good," Buck muttered.

"I've lost the heavy-lifter's signal," Godonov reported.

"She's penetrating," Fenstermacher joined in over tactical. "What the hell's happening down there...sir?"

"Stand by, Boats," Buccari replied. She prayed Fenstermacher was correct. The lander could just as easily have been shot down. Her mind raced with options. "Sergeant Wu, have you made the village yet?"

"Yes, sir," Wu replied. "We see the bugs. What should we do, sir?"

"Get the women in their huts," Buccari ordered. "Fenstermacher, leave the apple and assist Sergeant Wu. Get them inside."

"Liberty call!" Fenstermacher shouted.

Buccari barely heard. The second ship touched down behind the first, but it did not land soldiers; instead it disgorged machines, a half-dozen or more of sinister shape.

The soldiers, clearly defined in Buccari's IR optics, held their ground, waiting for the automatons to pass.

"*Condor*, this is Alpha," Buccari transmitted. "Flack, I need cannon now! Tight beam. I have three fast-movers dropping troops and berserkers on top of us. Do you have a fix? I need you to walk the beam out, closest one first."

"Roger that, Skip," Flaherty came back. "I have your position, and I have heat signatures. Cannon is charged. Got a nasty oblique firing solution. Keep your heads down. I'll only get one shot. The good news is *Condor Five* and *Six* are coming over the horizon."

"Now, Flack!" Buccari pleaded.

Buck gave the order to fire; Marine assault rifles thumped angrily into the night, accompanied by the snapping of hunter automatics. They had the Ulaggi in enfilade, but there were six, armored and well dispersed. Two went down hard; the others, returning fierce fire, dropped on their own. Streams of angry tracers streaked over the no-man's land. Chunks of molten armor fell from the wreckage above Buccari's head. Adding to the bedlam, the prisoner started yanking violently on his restraint.

"The babies!" Godonov shouted, leaping toward the ladder. The Ulaggi grabbed his arm, wrenching him down like a toy. Buccari whirled, putting her blaster to the alien's head, her finger tensed.

"No, Sharl!" Godonov shouted. "He's talking Chinese. He's begging me to help get the babies out—or at least I think he is."

"Can you trust—"

Her words and thoughts were obliterated by a golden column of directed energy. A punishing shock wave thrashed her with a swirling coil of gravel. Her flash visors kicked in. She frantically blinked them down, trying to peer into the troubled night. The air in her lungs vibrated, and every movement she made drew a blue arc of static electricity. At least she could still see.

"Crap—I'm flash blind," Buck transmitted. "Switch to active sensing and report!"

"Same here," Chastain reported. "IR's flared out. Hunters are okay. Notch sees something; I can hear him."

"The hunter known to you as Notch reports two enemy soldiers still moving," Toon's calm mechanical voice reported as the guildler hopped up and down, waving his blaster excitedly. "Also battle machines still function."

"Damn," Buck replied. "I still can't see. Lizard Lips, er—Master Toon, come here. I need you."

The cliff dweller waddled across the open ground, a blur in the blackness.

"The nearest ship is vaporized," Toon reported.

Buccari stared into the night; IR optics remained useless, washed out with residual thermals. The ionized atmosphere sparkled with dust ignition, like a swarms of fairies; but she saw the very satisfying glow of destruction where the first flyer had been.

And then the second flyer erupted in flame.

"Damn, I saw that," Buck shouted as the ball of burning gases was whipped by the lifting gale.

They cheered, but their jubilation was cut short as the third craft jumped into the air, its engine yodeling maniacally. Its trajectory was erratic, and it was trailing flame. The burning flyer abruptly veered into the cliffs above the village, inspiring Fenstermacher to let loose a stream of passionate invective.

"Great shooting, Flack," Buccari transmitted. "All three fast-movers are history."

"So are my skivvies," Fenstermacher added.

"Good, 'cuz I'm out of range, Skip," Flaherty replied. "*Condor Five* will acquire in

six minutes.”

“Roger,” she replied, praying they would not be needed. She knew better; the enemy was still there. She worried about the berserkers; combat robots on Genellan had been unstoppable.

Buck was shouting over the radio, trying to muster his small force. “Cruz, damn it, nothing heard. Are you up?”

Nothing came back, except enemy bullets in a staccato scream; a burst of hyper-velocity charges thudded against their shelter like a jackhammer gone berserk. Buccari detected noises. She turned to see Godonov and the Ulaggi helping each other up the trembling boarding ladder. Another deep-throated weapon blasting away on full automatic thudded against the mangled wreckage. The powerful thumping of Marine assault rifles answered. One enemy weapon fell silent; the other kept hammering. Incoming fire erupted from a new source; a spray-laser fanned their position, igniting dust and buckling metal.

“Berserker!” Buccari shouted as she pressed herself into the ground. A hunter’s screeching lifted above the din, a battle cry. The others replied.

“The hunters have located the laser,” Toon reported. “They are circling behind it. There are more machines.”

“Affirmative,” Chastain added, his voice lowered to a whisper. “I’ve got emission signatures on three robots. At least one’s moving your way. A couple are moving towards me.”

“Jocko, fall back to the village—”

Buck’s command was annihilated by the Legion heavy-lifter arriving. Its monstrous retro turned night into day, a nightmarish noon shrouded in sideways blowing sand. Buccari looked up, her heart swelling with hope. But hope—and logic—struggled with welling panic; it was as if the sun, enveloped in a giant paper lantern, was falling on her head. Sanity prevailed. The hazy inferno descended until it was masked by intervening terrain; and then its retros were extinguished. Blackness returned, and with the blackness came the pounding of the smelter and the howling of the wind.

The noise of combat, stunned into silence by the greater din, resumed; the vicious reports of projectile weapons and the reptilian hissing of robotic fire joined the symphony of destruction. In the bedlam Buccari detected another noise, clarion to a mother’s instincts. Buccari rolled from her shelter and stumbled to the lee of the wreckage. In the unfaithful light she saw two beings, a human and an Ulaggi, clambering from an open hatch. They moved awkwardly, for the twisted wreckage shuddered under the impact of fire. In their arms they carried swaddled bundles, very frightened bundles, judging by their screams.

Godonov slid to the ground, an infant crooked in each elbow. The alien came to the edge holding four babies stacked like squirming logs in his broader grasp. Buccari ran up to the odious creature and relieved him of two. The little creatures were insubstantial, yet strong with life. She looked at the alien; it was too dark to see clearly, but she thought she detected a crooked smile.

“Pitcairn, *Jolly Green’s* on the ground,” the lander’s beachmaster announced. “Deploying security perimeter. All aboard, please—and smartly. The enemy has reinforcements en route.”

“*Jolly*, Pitcairn here,” Buck responded. “You’re a sight for sore eyes. I hear you got some Marines on board. I got a couple of iddy-biddy berserkers pinning me down. Request assistance.”

“At your service,” the beachmaster replied.

“Jimbo,” Godonov broke in, staring at the newborns. “Sharl and I are heading

for the lifter with six babies. The Ulaggi prisoner is with us. Can you hold out?"

"Got you covered," Buck replied. "Good luck, shippies. *Jolly Green*, you copy babies on the way?"

"Roger that. We'll open the nursery."

Godonov prodded the prisoner into a trot. Buccari followed, staying low, trying to keep the wreckage between her and the enemy weapons. They had gone but a few hundred meters when scouts, invisible in battle armor, materialized out of darkness. The baby carriers froze and were identified. The officer-in-charge ordered a squad to assume their cargo and to take the Ulaggi back under guard. Relieved of their precious burdens and accompanied by a phalanx of heavily armed Marines, Buccari and Godonov sprinted back toward the glowing hulk. Missiles and razor-sharp laser beams streaked overhead. Behind them and before came brilliant detonations, some ground-shakingly near.

"Okay, Pitcairn," the beachmaster came up. "It's too hot. My defense systems are saturating. We need to load up and leave."

"It's pretty hot up here, too, Commander," Chastain reported. "I'm retreating into the village."

"Stand by, *Jolly*," Buccari advised. "*Condor Five*, *Condor* here. Do you have targeting data?"

"*Five* is tally-ho, Skipper," came back the gruff voice of Sheila McGirk, *Condor Five's* commander.

"*Jolly*, *Condor* is waiting for targets," Buccari broadcast. "Break! Jocko, is there any other way to get the women past the robots?"

"Commander, this is Wu. Sergeant Chastain's got his hands full, sir, but Pake says there is another path out of the village. We're pulling everyone out now. We're on our way."

"Roger that," she replied. "Jocko, Boats, stay with the women. Cover their six."

"What about the apple?" Fenstermacher almost shrieked.

"I'll buy us a new one, Boats," she replied.

"Aw, Skipper, it's—"

"Shut up and get your skinny ass down here."

Fenstermacher's oath was drowned out by *Condor Five* and *Six* firing cannons. Their directed energy weapons penetrated the stormy night like golden spokes of a slowly spinning wheel. Buccari ordered them to put a beam into her EPL. It happened quickly; the explosion, even smothered by blowing dust, displayed the utter whiteness of booster fuel going critical.

Condor's barrage gave them breathing room. Buccari and Godonov found Buck and Toon retreating from the burning wreckage. Private Cruz, unconscious from wounds, had been recovered. Toon was in confused contact with the hunters; they were having a difficult time. It seemed an eternity, but small groups of wailing women emerged at last from the furious haze with Pake and Sergeant Wu pushing and pulling them along. Shouting in Chinese, Godonov exhorted the ragged column, leading them toward the lifter's ramp. Notch and Pop-eye followed, herding the hysterical stragglers like sheepdogs, nipping at buttocks and haunches. Another eternity passed before Chastain appeared. Bottlenose clung to the Marine's neck, the hunter firing his automatic in counter-tenor to Chastain's thumping assault rifle. Fenstermacher brought up the rear, enthusiastically employing his own blaster. The Marines closed ranks around them, pouring lead and laser energy into the sand-blown void. Buccari ran up to Chastain and almost tackled the giant.

"Commander Buccari, are you okay?" the big Marine gasped. His helmet was seared with laser burns, his battle armor charred and smoking. Bottlenose dropped

from Chastain's back and screeched at Toon. Toon gave full measure in return. Pop-eye and Notch, exhausted, waddled up, adding their own disharmonies. Buccari reached out and pulled them all to her.

"Hey, what about me?" Fenstermacher whined.

"Just like old times, heh, guys?" Buccari laughed, pulling the scrawny boatswain into their scrum, but tears streamed down her cheeks; Tonto was still missing. She buried her head in Chastain's chest. Marines, pulling back from the collapsing defensive perimeter, sprinted past them, converging on the ramp. The beachmaster team directed traffic, shouting lustily, pushing bodies. Overhead a screeching pattern of projectiles was intercepted by the heavy-lifter's counter-fire.

"We gotta' go, sir," Chastain said, pushing Buccari toward the lifter's ramp, almost carrying her. At the ramp they found Pake and Godonov. Pake had tears in her eyes, too. The wind was blowing hard; sand and dust filled the air.

"Come," Godonov shouted, taking her arm.

"My home," the female replied, her scarf whipping.

"You will have a better home," Godonov shouted, pushing her into the ship's belly.

The lifter's crew was in official panic mode, shoving the uncomprehending and painfully thin females into acceleration tethers; there would be bruised limbs if not broken bones before they were returned to the mothership. Buccari looked at the females' grimy, horror-struck faces. Many were just little girls, but fear and dust had aged features and whitened hair. Sounds of battle grew louder. A different Klaxon sounded, harsher, with more imperative.

"Get your frigging butt in a bucket, now!" a burly chief shouted while crewmembers secured the main ramp. Elements of the afterguard, their armor battle-scarred, poured aboard through the last open man-hatch. Suddenly the hunters started screeching.

"Stop! Stop!" Toon shouted.

The cliff dwellers bolted. The boatswain moved to intercept them, but the hunters were too quick, ducking through the legs of the Marines trying to clamber aboard. And then Buccari heard it, too, rising above the wind's moan.

"That's Tonto!" Chastain exclaimed, darting from his station.

Another alarm sounded. The lifter crew shouted and swore, but Buccari, Buck, and Godonov followed Chastain's interference, pushing aside the beachmaster and the cursing Marines. Outside, the last of the afterguard formed a tight perimeter at the bottom of the ladder, their weapons pointing outward.

"Everyone back, dammit!" shouted the officer-in-charge. "Sorry, Major," he amended, perceiving Buck's rank. "Sensors picked up stragglers. 'Come outta' nowheres. 'Look like humans, but ya' ne'er know. My pickets 'most blew 'em away, weren't for the hunter screeching. Cudda' been a ruse."

A *hunter*! Buccari ran beyond the perimeter. Three humans, two staggering and one being dragged, limped out of the sandstorm, pushed by nervous Marines. What little clothing they still possessed was shredded. Their leader was naked and barefoot, his emaciated, large-boned body caked with dirt and blood. In his arms he carried a hunter, its head and arm bound with bloody rags, its shredded flying appendages limp and trailing to the ground.

"Identify yourselves," the officer shouted.

"Becker, Major...Tellurian Legion Marines," the leader mumbled.

"Becker?" Buck gasped. "Tom Becker! What the hell?"

"Jim Buck, is that you?" the man replied, stumbling forward. "Never thought your butt-ugly puss could make me so happy."

"Give me the hunter," Buccari said, taking Tonto into her arms. The cliff dwellers surrounded her, chirping anxiously, at least until Toon silenced them. Tonto's fur was matted with blood, his pulse weak and ropy. So light and seemingly so fragile, the hunter twisted his head and looked at her, his gruesome maw opened with a smile.

"Careful, sir," Becker gasped. "Little bugger saved our lives."

"Join the club," Buccari replied, moving toward the lifter.

"Get your sorry tails on board!" bellowed the beachmaster, pushing them up the boarding ladder. A crew member tried to take Tonto, but Buccari pushed past and clambered aboard. She took a station with the hunter cushioned against her breast, gathering in his flight membranes as best she could. Cliff dwellers scrambled into stations on both sides. Godonov, Buck, and Major Becker took seats across the narrow aisle. Becker was thrown a crew suit and Buck helped him pull it on. Sirens sounded. Repeater panels on the bulkheads announced immediate lift-off. The heavy-lifter's engines ignited with a seismic trembling, and the ship lifted even as the last crew members struggled into their tethers. The women screamed against the massively building gee-forces but their hapless cries were overwhelmed by a lusty cheer from the Marines. The cliff dwellers joined in, their battle songs soaring into the ultrasonic. Tonto stirred, but Buccari, her heart swelling with joy, embraced the intrepid hunter and held him still.

Chapter Twenty-six

Still Alive

Twenty minutes later the orbital burn terminated, leaving them in null-gee. Repeater panels advised of an eleven-minute orbital leg before the trajectory burn would sling them outbound. While the Marines sang ribald songs, Buccari held the hunter close, trying to keep him warm against the creeping chill. A loadmaster and a team of medics clumped by, inspecting their damaged cargo. Tonto was removed to a medical pod where he was sedated and prepped for remediation; the hunter's injuries were grievous but not mortal. Becker's lacerations were treated and sealed; he was given a fluid load and a field-stim.

"Major Becker, were you in the Ulaggi lifeboat?" Godonov asked.

"Yeah," the Marine replied, his color returning. "We were captured fighting for NEd's spaceport. We got crushed, just frigging crushed. The transit was hell. They ran tests on us, but mostly they drugged us into a brain-busting stasis. Everyone had headaches. Not sure what happened. Our interstellar went critical just as she came out of hyperlight, battle damage, maybe."

"Likely Runacres's work," Buccari said. "The admiral punished the Ulaggi as they lifted from low orbit. He took out two bugs on the rise and damaged two others. Tar Fell and Admiral Chou took out another one." She gave them a rundown on the battle for Genellan. Wondrous news to Buck, Becker, and Godonov, they shouted their joy. Even Chastain bellowed.

"Don't cheer," Buccari protested. "Runacres lost *Eire*, and Second Fleet was annihilated; we lost eight motherships to their three; twenty-three corvettes destroyed along with most of their crews; NEd and Ocean Station leveled; six thousand cones killed and over five thousand humans. It was worse than Shaula."

"Damn them," Godonov responded for all of them.

"But we drove them from the system," Buccari continued. "They were in worse shape than we thought. Still, we were lucky they split up before Tar Fell dropped into Pitcairn. Damn it, but we almost evened the score."

"Evened the score?" Becker asked.

"Revenge is sweet," Godonov said and explained to Becker what had transpired above Pitcairn's atmosphere in the last twenty-four hours.

"How did you escape, Tom?" Buck asked.

"The lifeboat landed hard," Becker said. "Knocked me out, but I was lucky; they killed some of us before we hit the atmosphere, and most everyone else was injured by the crash, some so bad you couldn't move them. A few of us came to before the guard did. We killed him and managed to pull ourselves into an airlock before the flight crew broke into the cabin. When they got the hatch open and saw the dead guard, they just started blasting away." The Marine looked down at his bloody feet, composing himself.

"A rescue party or something arrived," Becker continued. "A vehicle of some sort, with lots of lights. And then everything went dark and quiet. We waited until we thought it was clear and then dropped into the cabin. It was...slippery."

Becker coughed, his throat thick. Buck cursed.

"But they were waiting," he continued. "None of us would have made it if it hadn't been for the hunter. He came in behind them. Took out two before he was hit, then even after he was wounded, he about ripped the head off the last one. We had to pull him off. He lost a lot of blood. After we bandaged him up, he staggered away in your direction, screeching like a banshee, until he ran out of gas."

"How many of you were there?" Buccari asked.

"Started with thirty-six," Becker replied, anger giving him strength. "I have a muster. The captain made us memorize the names. Dooley was killed by the cabin guard. And then Byrd, Chasra, and Heinz were murdered. No, disemboweled! Oh, Lord, I still can't believe my eyes. I think they were killed by a...female."

"A female?" Buccari asked.

"Yeah," Becker replied, his face once again draining of all color. He described the horror of the creature dropping through the airlock, how she opened her uniform and pulled the helpless humans into an embrace of death, her eviscerating organs rendering the human stomach cavities into bloody pulp; and how she yodeled in ecstasy with each murderous spasm.

"Yodeled?" Buccari asked, taken aback. Her adrenaline surged; Ulaggi pilots screamed during combat, a yodeling, scalp-seizing scream.

"Don't know how else to describe it, sir," Becker replied. "She just ripped them apart. Left them gutted on the floor. I think she was coming for me next, but she was too tired. She pulled herself up the airlock and returned to her ship. She took Captain Quinn with her."

"Quinn?" Buccari blurted. "Governor Quinn?"

"Yes, sir," Becker replied. "She was captured with us. That's one brave lady. I would follow her to hell and back."

The heavy-lifter's powerful engines ignited. The hold once again filled with panicky screams and singing Marines; at least until acceleration forces pressed the air from their lungs. Buccari let the ship's impulse press her back. Her tethers snugged, compelling her exhausted muscles to surrender. Tonto and the hunters, though battered, were safe; Chastain and Godonov had been rescued; and a hundred wretched humans had gained their freedom. Her mission was accomplished. It would have been bliss to fall into a fatigued stupor, to surrender to the pressures on her eyelids and her mind, to fall asleep.

Instead her mind raced. Cassy Quinn was still alive.

Section Four

Kar-Ulag

Atavism

In the timeless annals of Ulaggi history the watershed epoch known as the Settlement Millennium is much studied. It informs us that society is but a translucent veneer, a fragile encapsulation of primal urges, and that while organisms evolve instincts do not. During the Settlement Millennium, Ulaggi civilization once again became vigorous. Yet despite its reestablishment on a young and fecund world—or perhaps because of it—the trajectory of Ulaggi civilization was much troubled.

The evolutionary delta between male and female had so widened that, even before the Exodus, it could be argued that the female had evolved apart from the male into a distinct, if sexually symbiotic, species. And yet the female's need for sensual stimulation, that most primitive trait, had not disappeared; it had also mutated, residing as an adjunct to the animal within—the g'ort. Throughout their interminable wandering, these hyper-sentient females had been bathed in risk. Their very mortality had been wagered, and like gamblers throughout all time, they were intoxicated by ceaseless peril. Danger had become their erotic accelerant; fear, especially fear of death, had become their aphrodisiac.

Established on their new world, with a resurrected caste to do their labor, the females found themselves devoid of sensual stimulation—without danger—trapped within a sterile heaven. In many ways, their serene new arena was more prison than was the spaceship that had transported them across the galaxy; but a race that had for centuries penetrated the infinite void could not long be denied that milieu. Space beckoned—a siren's song; yet however well their technologies were laid, decades—nay, centuries—were required to reconstitute a star-faring civilization; roads and bridges had to be constructed before veins of ore could be exploited into production; factories had to be built before launch pads could be erected. Exploration resumed, haltingly at first, for hyperlight drive was as yet undiscovered. Mission cycles were frustratingly prolonged; only a fortunate few could explore.

Those left behind could not ignore their obsession. The lakk elite found vicarious peril in research. All areas of science gained their attention, from mind-altering drugs to quantum mechanics, from vivisection to pulse-reactors; Ulaggi science never stopped advancing. The priesthood of the lakk revered the intellect, ritualistically practicing disciplines that furthered their mastery. They developed almost preternatural powers, including the power to maim, even to kill, using only their thoughts. Triumph over the mind came at a cost; lakk still produced eggsack, but it was an atrophied organism, desiccated and increasingly sterile. The lakk had not only learned to control their g'ort, their animal within, they had all but destroyed it.

Not so the hajil. The vibrant inner animal of the hajil craved physical peril. Early on, Ulaggi populations were focused onto but a few of Kar-Ulag's many island continents. This design left much of the planet in natural state. Opportunity breeds inevitability; into these nether reaches penetrated bands of adventurers. The first atavism is not documented, but imagine a solitary hajil, deep in a pristine wild, coming upon the spoor of kar. She has recently matured, her young body strong and sensate. Curious, she tracks the creatures. Alone, far removed from social inhibitions, the female becomes aroused by an ineffable lusting. She stalks, instinctively lurking

downwind. Stealing closer, she becomes intoxicated. Her g'ort—her animal within—stirs. It awakens, and it dominates, as pent waters from a broken dam would flood a valley.

Insane with passion, the wilding hajil falls upon the herd, pulling down a straggler in her iron-strong grasp. Her helpless prey, a warm and vital creature, struggles. The huntress's nascent mating organs, tender with pubescence, swell painfully. She releases her clothing. Twisting organs spring free; horny tentacles plunge with irresistible force into her victim's bowels. Screaming in ecstasy, her lust building spasm upon spasm, the female's eggsack is ejected into the eviscerated body—a natural act not witnessed in countless millennia. Stunned from depletion, the shuddering hajil pushes her gore-soaked body from the writhing victim and staggers away.

This unspeakable coupling bears no fruit, yet there are lasting effects; the hajil has tasted primal ecstasy. She feels shame, but she revels in the triumph of her g'ort, the passion of procreation. A terrible lust is ignited. She is helpless before it; she strikes again, soon—and often. Others succumb. There is too much wilderness and boundless opportunity; a blood sport is born. As night follows day, these wilding females stalk males of their own race. The primal cycle is restarted; once again maggot-infested offal litter the land, the rapacious larvae and the crawling young tending themselves, for egg-bearing Ulaggi are merely female, never mother.

Lakk leadership, though repelled, allows the atavistic tide to flow; female population is needed, and their own addiction to knowledge compels them to study. Wilding newborn are brought into the tiwaks; many more range free. Among the natural offspring the incidence of female larvae is no higher than of the civilized strain, but peculiarly the occurrence of telepaths is accelerated. Entire continents come to support natural populations. The most proficient hunters spread their genes and form the most effective killing teams. These most rapacious—these most telepathic—killers are able to experience levels of pleasure and fury that a lakk can scarcely comprehend and of which a hajil can but dream.

They are called roon.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Imperial Summons

Jakkuk's cell dropped from hyperlight. Her navigation was satisfactory; the four-ship cluster was stable and within the Kar-Ulag security corridor. Jakkuk monitored her controllers and their ship-mistresses as mission reports rippled outbound in rapid bursts. Jakkuk could sense their collective distress—their shame. And the fleet dominant's distress was the greatest of all. Dar-hajil had sortied from the mother system with twelve star-cruisers; she was returning with but four. Such mathematics would garner the attention of the Imperial Tribune—or worse. Distracted by wayward thoughts, Jakkuk initiated a reflexive positioning axon for Kwanna-hajil's cell.

"Blood, mind your signals," Dar snarled.

"Gast," was all Karyai deigned to utter, but the political's verbal excoriation was amplified with a mental lash, no mere words but a tide of neural bile flooding Jakkuk's mind.

"Forgive me, mother," the cell controller replied, aghast at her own incompetence. Kwanna-hajil was dead; her cell no longer existed. Stifling unprofitable shame, Jakkuk reported, "Formation is in order, mother. Mission reports have been transmitted."

"Make standard arrival," Dar huffed.

Jakkuk acknowledged and deployed her cell into line ahead, driving the formation through delousing. Sensor scans and interrogation links bathed them at the outer gate. Informal links commenced soon after, salutations from distant controllers, neural greetings from old comrades and rivals. Jakkuk's replies were perfunctory; there were no victories of which to sing. Outbound ships rendered honors, for Fleet Dominant Dar was a senior battle commander, much respected for her exploits. Jakkuk sensed Dar-hajil's mortification, but the cell controller's attention was distracted by a surge of untidy telepathics. The rogue signatures rising above the lustrous limb of the blue-green mother planet were unmistakable.

"I'rdish ships, mother!" Jakkuk blurted, her *g'ort* flushing.

"Impossible!" Karyai shouted, flinging herself into contact with the interface, her gnarled hand clenching Jakkuk's shoulder. The lakk's mind stabbed Jakkuk's brain, her breath hot and foul on Jakkuk's neck.

"I count...no fewer than t-thirty," the cell controller stammered, laboring under the political's overwhelming presence.

"A full battle fleet," Karyai muttered. "A pod of heavy cruisers and at least three mainline battleships."

"Battle stations!" Dar sang out.

"No!" Karyai countermanded.

The lakk detached from the interface. The political's retreat was akin to cool water flowing across the cell controller's temples.

"Blood and blood!" Dar snarled. "An I'rdish battle fleet."

"Dominant y'Tant's weapons are cold," Karyai replied.

"Y'Tant!" Dar screamed. "Y'Tant is here?"

"Yes," Karyai hissed. "And under Imperial warrant."

"How can that be?" Dar shouted.

Jakkuk strained to read the I'rdish signals. The situation was staggering—the leader of the roonish insurrection on diplomatic orbit around Kar-Ulag. Much history had transpired in their absence.

"Jakkuk-hajil, status of Imperial defenses?" Dar demanded.

"In place, mother," Jakkuk replied, scanning the ether. "I detect marshalling beacons radiating above and below diplomatic orbit. Control signals would indicate at least six battle pods on full alert."

"Honor the roon. She is audacious," Dar growled.

Jakkuk felt the uneven return of Dar-hajil's composure. Following her commander's example, the cell-controller stifled her own *g'ort* and returned to her duties. She permitted a portion of her brain to monitor the rebel fleet, analyzing the raffish emanations. With a souring stomach she recognized signatures from previous encounters, reminders of how often the outnumbered I'rdish commander had devastated her Imperial rivals. Jakkuk's concentration was broken by a synaptic override, not a fleet signal but an encrypted command direct from the Imperial net.

"Dar-hajil, we are summoned," Karyai-lakk growled, pivoting down the companionway. "Fist a'Yerg's presence is also demanded. Jakkuk-hajil, surrender control of the cell. You will also attend. Make haste. Have the human-mother brought to my lander."

Kar-Ulag Arrival

Cassy Quinn looked up through her drifting tangle of greasy hair as the guard jammed a device in her ear.

"Ba'at," he shouted again, louder.

"Come," translated a sterile echo in her ear.

Her prison ship had dropped from hyperlight; they had arrived somewhere—but where?

"Ba'at!"

The black prod caressed Quinn's naked shoulder—enough to make her eyes water.

"I'm coming," she whimpered, unable to fathom leaving her cold cell. All sense of time and place had been crushed; there had been no day or night during the HLA transit, only consciousness and unconsciousness. She was a lab rat, always hungry, naked and powerless, enduring behavioral tests that were frequently painful, and physical examinations, which if not painful were grossly indelicate. Worst of all, they had assaulted her mind.

The wall-eyed male thrust a shift at her.

"Wear this," commanded her implant. The bareheaded bug was familiar to her, one of a mottle-faced team of guards and medical technicians allowed to enter her cell, to clean her, or to motivate her. The males were indifferent to her nudity. Quinn's once firm muscles and tanned skin had succumbed to the ravages of null-gee. Her pale, flaccid body was her clock; its spring had run down.

Quinn cursed the alien with her thoughts. The males could not read her mind. Apparently only females had that power. Without machines the males could not read a rock; but they had ways to hurt her.

"Ba'at!"

The guard's bellow stirred the air; a piquant odor akin to cinnamon wafted through her inured olfactory. The not unpleasant scent was always there, cutting the fetor of her cell. She pulled the filmy material over her goose-fleshed shoulders, relishing the texture of clothing against her skin. The hulking being drove her weightless body through the hatch and down the passageway. She was handed off to a pair of brutes in crimson helmets. Airlock doors sucked open, revealing a lofty hangerbay filled with black, fine-lined ships. Her new keepers, stamping over the dull-yellow deck in mag-boots, dragged her forward as squads of males bustled about under the supervision of hajil. Robotic devices dangling from carriages moved overhead with startling velocity. A reluctant spark of curiosity flared up; the big-engined vessels appeared to be tactical craft, half the size of Legion corvettes. Two larger vessels occupied the rest of the hangerbay.

"Human-mother, attend," the implant in Quinn's ear announced. The guards released her as if she were afire. Quinn turned. A black-suited female soaring across the vast space adroitly snagged a deck ring at the human's feet, sinews rippling against the fabric of her pressure suit. It was the same monster that had taken her from the lifeboat—Quinn could sense it—even though the looming alien wore a helmet with an opaque visor.

"Ahyerg," Quinn said, struggling through the chaos within her brain. The nagging befuddlement grew more intense, more roiling. She could sense the female invading her thoughts.

"Queen-n-n-human," the alien replied, this time with actual speech. The lithe specter extended her crouching body to its imposing length. Spidery fingers closed above Quinn's elbow, a gentle touch, yet undeniable. "We go...*garble*...Kar-Ulag. My planet."

Kar-Ulag!

The question was foremost in Quinn's mind. The alien had answered it unasked. That the Ulaggi female could read her mind was no longer surprising, yet each insidious reminder gave the human an emotional jolt. Anxiety, verging on panic, surged through the science officer's thoughts, injecting a feeble spurt of adrenaline into her battered system.

"Calm yourself," a'Yerg said, gracefully pulling Quinn across the vast deck. "However haste is appropriate."

The words in Quinn's ear had been without emotion, but some essence emanating from the alien seemed fueled by fury. And the pitch of that ire heightened as the willowy creature flew up the ramp of a large vessel. Was she reading the Ulaggi's mind?

They passed through a cargo hold. Arriving at an elaborate hatch, her escort pulled off her helmet and organized her tresses, all the while fixing Quinn with haunting silver eyes. The alien's fury was hot and vibrant, but there was also exhilaration. The female was angry or excited, or both. Quinn struggled to isolate these sensations, but the hatch swung open.

"No!" Quinn blurted, grabbing her head. A raging torrent boiled into her brain. To her ears the cabin was silent, yet a cacophony raged within her mind, not aural but neural. Quinn was shoved over the threshold. Fighting nausea, the science officer struggled with spurious signals, her brain growing feverish. Cinnamon welled afresh into her nostrils, sharp and tangy; Quinn focused on the scent, clinging to it like sensory bedrock. She opened her eyes.

The immaculate cabin gleamed with gold trim against ebony bulkheads. Form and function were wed with sublime effect; austere, with high ceilings, the cabin interior was partitioned into distinct areas, richly upholstered and subtly instrumented. Two females, one garbed in dazzling white, the other in slate gray, sat in the forward carrel. Though seated, their eyes commanded an elevation superior to that of the human's. A third female, also in gray but apparently of lower rank, sat apart.

Her steely fingers on Quinn's neck, a'Yerg positioned the human before the pair. The one in gray leaned forward. Though the less aged, she was not young. Her thick raven tresses, netted in black mesh, were streaked with gray. Her immense fawn-colored eyes, heavy-lidded yet piercing, were red-rimmed and bruised with responsibility. She was hatchet-faced, and her sallow, acceleration-blasted complexion—a shade darker than her sleek uniform—was blotchy with shattered veins. Canyon-like creases separated a beaked nose from slab-flat cheeks, while the corners of her thin-lipped mouth plunged downward as if to run the length of her immense jaw. A long neck amplified the overwhelming vertical nature of the creature, and her choke-collar, embroidered with overlapping triangles, climbed her neck like a pewter cylinder.

The other alien was much older. Belying that great age, a pair of anthracite eyes, bright and penetrating, shined out from the hag's liverish countenance. Her netted hair was uniformly alabaster, the same shade as the gossamer robes that floated about her person like a monochromatic jelly-fish. She wore no insignia. She needed none. The ancient one languidly lifted a spidery finger to her hooked nose and, rubbing it, made it wiggle like a turkey wattle. If anything, the older one's lantern jaw was longer, her lips, twisted in a perpetual sneer, were tighter and crueler. Even to the science officer's

objective intellect, the aged apparition was by any galactic measure a profoundly ugly creature.

"You are no beauty, child," a voice in Quinn's mind replied.

No words were uttered. It was not a translation from her implant, yet a voice sounded in her mind with distinct timbre and volume. Quinn had no doubt that it came from the white-robed witch. She bowed her neck, trying to think without forming thoughts, but her concentration was shattered by an emanation from the ancient one's mouth, an oily flow.

"It smells of its own offal," the unctuous voice said. "Jakkuk-hajil, sanitize this creature."

The other gray uniform glided over and brusquely grabbed a fistful of Quinn's hair. A'Yerg slapped the offending hand. The young female crouched, warily glaring into the silver-eyed female's fierce countenance. A'Yerg, a half-head taller, stood erect, her golden complexion darkening. Quinn sensed a spike of fury emanate from a'Yerg's mind. The gray-uniformed female recoiled at precisely that instant. The younger alien was frightened, her glowing amber eyes flashing hatred. Yet she exuded a remarkable grace; her loosely netted hair was silken obsidian, and high cheekbones enhanced her creamy complexion with enchanting shadows. Although her features were long and sharp, bordering on the grotesque, Quinn thought her exotic, even beautiful.

A'Yerg screeched insanely. Her face contorted into a rictus—a vile grin.

"The *kar-sow* considers you beautiful, Jakkuk-hajil," a'Yerg said.

"Cease your taunts, roon," the white witch snarled. "Attend me."

Quinn sensed a'Yerg's defiance. The tall alien straightened to even greater heights, but the fierce creature's emotions were bludgeoned by an overwhelming discharge of white fury that burst from the ancient one's forehead. Quinn almost fainted from the neural shock.

"As...ordered, mother," a'Yerg stammered, pulling herself into the commander's carrel.

The young female, with a sulking backward glance pulled the human aft. A curved bulkhead slid aside, revealing a cylindrical chamber; its mirrored interior sparkled with reflected light. The gray-uniformed alien growled.

"Remove your shift, human-mother," her implant translated.

Naked and cold, Quinn pulled herself into the chamber. The door slid silently to. Sleek handholds protruded, and the pressure of her grip triggered a jet of water, warm and wet, a sensation her body had not enjoyed since being captured. Recessed into the wall was a dispenser; Quinn put out a hand hoping for soap and was rewarded. Excited as a child, she lathered up, starting with her tangled hair. Mounted into the wall was an apparatus with comb-like teeth. Quinn ran the tool over her scalp. It exuded a slippery fluid; her tangles fell apart. Scrubbed clean, she rinsed. Too soon the water stopped, and jets of dry air played over her body. The door slid open.

"Dress quickly, human-mother," the alien said, thrusting Quinn's shift in her face.

As Quinn slipped on the silky material, the alien pushed her into an acceleration station. The active-contouring chair sucked her down; padded restraints hugged her head, and clamps fell across her waist and lower legs. The ship stirred. A soft gong sounded; the young female threw herself into a station next to Quinn. The ship dropped, accelerating smoothly. Imperceptibly, the downward translation was replaced by a ramping acceleration. One gee, and then two. Quinn sucked in a lungful of air. Three gees, four. Quinn closed her eyes.

The acceleration moderated, dropping smoothly to the low side of one-gee. Their compartment reoriented to the acceleration axis, providing its occupants with near normal gravity. Seats pivoted upright, their restraints relaxed. Quinn noticed the

young female studying her. Quinn returned the stare, trying to understand her enemy. This one was different. Unlike her contact with a'Yerg, Quinn detected no overt intrusion, only an aura of emotion. The undercurrent of mental chaos in the cabin was still there, but it was distant, attenuated. Yet in that roiling background of emotion Quinn detected manic spikes of anger with a'Yerg's characteristics. Less often she detected subtle impressions, like a fading scent, that bespoke the white witch.

Quinn turned to the young female.

"May I know your name?" she asked.

"I am called Jakkuk," the implant recited tonelessly. Jakkuk's actual voice was low-pitched and gargling. The alien's lithe arm snaked out and stroked the human's hair, curling a lock and fingering it.

"It is my honor, Jakkuk," Quinn replied, growing nervous.

"Address me as Jakkuk-hajil," the female replied, lifting her prodigious chin. "I am hajil."

"Of course, Jakkuk-hajil," Quinn replied, her brain on overdrive. "What is hajil?"

"You are human. I am hajil."

Quinn pondered this, her confusion growing; but then her stomach growled.

"You are hungry," Jakkuk said, stepping over to a cabinet. She lifted out an Ulaggi space-sausage, familiar fare to the human after months of captivity. Ravenous, Quinn ripped back the wrapping and took a lusty bite. The wrapping decomposed in her hand.

Jakkuk peeled one for her own consumption and said as offering, "The weak must die."

Quinn choked on the alien's words and wondered, not for the first time, what she was eating; but her stomach was not to be denied.

"So you think me beautiful, human-mother?" Jakkuk asked, glancing over her shoulder. "I am aware that I am attractive, but this affirmation, especially from one of another race, is gratifying. In truth, I am much envied for my beauty. However, I cannot say the same for you. Such wide hips and pendulous mammaries, and yet your meager hair is as yellow as the sun and as soft as silk. And your eyes, ah, your blue eyes. I had not seen the like."

Once again Quinn almost choked. Pain and intimidation she could understand; vanity and petty chatter were almost unbearable. The young female kept talking, chewing loudly. Quinn's roiling brain struggled to align the puzzle pieces. Incredibly, she was about to land on the Ulaggi home planet. She needed to understand the enemy.

"Jakkuk-hajil, who are they?" Quinn asked, nodding toward the officers at the front of the cabin. The young female, glancing over her shoulder, just smirked.

"Yes, Jakkuk-hajil, you are beautiful," Quinn said, trying another gambit. "What is your function? You must be very important."

The Ulaggi leaned closer, her amber eyes growing larger. She spoke softly, nodding toward the conference.

"I doubt your sincerity, Quinn-human. But I am Dominant Dar's cell controller. Dar-hajil is the officer sitting in the middle. She is the fleet dominant, the commanding officer of my fleet, and I am responsible for dendritic communications between her ships. I am an extension of Dar-hajil's mind. All ship-mistresses and cell controllers and even destroyer commanders like a'Yerg-roon—that is the other officer—must respond to my neural commands. It is high privilege."

Quinn labored to digest the outburst; questions tumbled to her lips one atop the other.

"Being cell controller must be challenging," Quinn ventured. "So a'Yerg is a destroyer commander, but you called her a'Yerg-roon. A'Yerg is not hajil?"

Jakkuk's features bunched with disdain. "Gast! She is a silver-eye," the alien snorted. "She is roon, human-mother. She is roon. Be warned."

"But...what is roon?" Quinn felt a flush of anger, not from Jakkuk, but from across the compartment. From the white witch.

"I have said too much," Jakkuk replied.

"Who—what is the officer in white?" Quinn gasped, pushing through the exploding muddle in her mind. The flush of anger flared, flashing through the human's forehead like a gale of flame.

"Silence!" Jakkuk snarled, her expression transformed with fury.

Her brain boiling with someone else's anger, Quinn fell back on her acceleration chair and closed her eyes, struggling to think. That a'Yerg was different from Jakkuk and the other gray-uniformed female seemed obvious now, from eye color and complexion to uniform and speech patterns. And the white witch was different yet. If a'Yerg was frightening, the white witch was pure horror.

These were the females of the race.

Quinn pulled her thin wrap closer and settled into her chair, her fatigue crashing down. She fell asleep, a deep sleep, and dreamed of being on a beach with her daughter. Nash was there, too, alive and so very healthy. They were all immensely happy.

An alarm sounded. Quinn reawakened to nightmare. Her seat flattened and restraints reactivated. The cabin remained dimmed, but there was enough light to see a'Yerg's silver eyes glinting from across the aisle. Jakkuk had moved forward, in mid-cabin next to the officer called Dominant Dar. The white witch slumped alone in the forward carrel. Quinn felt the chop of atmospheric reentry. The muted scream of stratospheric plasma racing past their hull increased in pitch and volume.

Turbulence faded. With the ship gliding smoothly into the thickening atmosphere, panels slid back, flooding the interior with the richness of a livid blue atmosphere. Down they plummeted, their lander banked in a sweeping turn. Towering sun-tipped cumulous rose above them, and lightning flashed about them as they sank into murky cotton. And then they were through the clouds and falling into stormy night. Rivulets of water streaming past her window distorted the scintillating fabric of surface lights, stretching to the horizon. The bottomless pitch of a desert—no, an ocean—rolled into view, spreading like an inky stain. Descending, she saw ships and islands aglow with gold and silver. The islands grew more numerous until they were over land again, with radiating boulevards and grids of commerce, sweeping arteries dimming in the rain-swept distance. As they descended the texture of the alien world grew ever clearer, ever more tangible; immense structures swept past, grand architecture reaching into the clouds and spreading laterally, temples of habitation and commerce interlaced with ebony rivers and canals that were themselves spanned by gossamer bridges.

Quinn wondered if she was the first human to land on this planet.

"You are certainly not the first," a'Yerg muttered. "Our scientists have brought many others here, to...study. Your skills are strong, Queen-n-n-human, but they are not unique."

Quinn shook off her fear. There was work to be done. She had to learn. Here were an immense numbers of sentient beings. Here was technology—and art. Here was a hyper-advanced civilization. Here was the heart of the enemy.

Smoothly, the lander touched down.

Alliances

Jakkuk felt naked; she was powerless to counter a'Yerg's mischief without an interface. Her best defense was proximity to the political. Clinging close to Karyai, Jakkuk pulled the soft-limbed human down the floodlit ramp. Dominant Dar and a'Yerg followed. Wavering weather shields shielded them from the wind-chilled precipitation.

Their lander had come to ground at Port Uwon, spacegate to Punna, capital of the Ulaggi Empire. Port Uwon was situated on a plateau above Punna. The megalopolis sprawled below, radiant, sparkling beneath sweeping veils of rain. The city's tentacles spread into the utter blackness of the Last Ocean in a network of curling peninsula and bridge-beaded archipelagoes doubly ablaze with reflected glory. Its distant landward perimeter climbed into the ragged valleys of the Manic Mountains, their snowy peaks obscured by darkness and lightning-laden clouds.

Jakkuk had often visited Punna, but it was Bloody Hills that stirred fond memories. The remembrance of her first breeding kill warmed her. Bloody Hills, the richest of the Imperial hunting grounds, lay beyond the northern curve of the forbidding mountains. There were other hunting grounds on Kar-Ulag, but Bloody Hills was legendary. Indigenous *kar* roamed its lowlands, and in the higher reaches, packs of Ulaggi male struggled to serve out their penal terms. But what set Bloody Hills apart from other hunting grounds—and what made Jakkuk's neck warm—were the humans. Male of that species roamed the nether reaches of the glacial valleys, surviving at heights where no *kar* or Ulaggi male could survive, fighting like no *kar* or Ulaggi could ever fight. Jakkuk's *g'ort* flickered, sending a shot of delectable heat down her spine.

"Jakkuk-hajil, what is wrong?" the human-mother asked, frightened. "You are on fire. I feel your...your excitement. Are you ill?"

Jakkuk stifled her *g'ort*, but it was too late. The roon moved close, putting a powerful arm over the hajil's shoulders.

"Jakkuk-hajil is but come into heat," a'Yerg laughed.

"Unlike roons, who are always so," Jakkuk snapped.

"Ignore her!" Dar commanded. "Fist a'Yerg, cease your taunts. Mindless roon, do you not realize your peril?"

Jakkuk struggled to bring her *g'ort* under control, only now it was rising in anger. Her fury was eclipsing her will to survive; many hajil had committed glorious suicide attempting to murder a roon, although few attained satisfaction.

"As ordered," a'Yerg replied.

"Jakkuk-hajil, are you ill?" the human-mother repeated, frightened. "You are feverish. And you are angry. I...I can feel it."

"Jakkuk-hajil merely dreams of the hunt," a'Yerg replied, laughing. "She has become stimulated—"

"You obscenity!" Jakkuk snarled. Blood rushing, her *g'ort* in command, Jakkuk pivoted and bunched to spring.

"Enough!" barked the sexless political. Karyai's boiling fury knocked the roon back a step and blasted Jakkuk to her knees. The human-mother dropped unconscious like a sack of sand.

"Fools!" Dar snarled, gesturing disgustedly as she strode away. Dazed from the political's rage, a'Yerg bundled the limp alien into her arms. Jakkuk, her *g'ort* extinguished, staggered to her feet and stumbled down the ramp, shaking acid from

her brain.

A delegation awaited them. Garbed in silky alabaster chased with Imperial crimson, a young, monumentally tall lakk stood at its head. A diamond and onyx tiara, signifying royal bloodline, graced her tall forehead. Jakkuk, nulling her thoughts, sensed the royal's uninvited presence, if gentle and brief. Karyai bowed arthritically, not low but generously held. The ancient political's prestige was not to be denied; the young royal nodded well, showing handsome respect. No words were exchanged. The royal turned to escort the political and the fleet commander into the foremost ground car.

"Attend," commanded another lakk. Ancient and watery-eyed—a Tir-lakk by her deathly pale complexion, the lakk-mother was garbed in Imperial livery of mid-rank, yellow robes flashed with gold and crimson. A snowy shawl covered the bureaucrat's shoulders. Without verbal instruction, they were directed toward a second groundcar. A squad of soldiers wearing the yellow armor of the Imperial Guard stepped forward.

"I am to take custody of the alien," said their burly hajil captain, her armor flashed with crimson.

Jakkuk's self-control was long overwrought. Fermenting with rage, she stared at the dull-eyed Guards officer.

"Blood and obscenity, your impertinence is grand," she shouted. "Do you not know who I am? I am Pokkuk Merde der Jakkuk, fleet controller to Dominant Dar, victorious commander of the fleet at Tarno and Ventata." Full of her own fury, Jakkuk still felt the old lakk's iron tentacles wrapping around her mind. Reinforcement arrived from an unlikely source.

"I am Destroyer Fist a'Yerg," the roon snarled, pouncing forward. She thrust the human into Jakkuk's arms and whirled upon the officer, extending to full height. "I believe you shall not take another breath."

The roon's rising bile caused the old lakk's neural hold on Jakkuk to waver. Jakkuk felt the fullness of a'Yerg's temper; and yet somehow the roon seem amused.

"R-roonish warrior, your fame precedes you. I beg pardon," the Guards captain sputtered, looking to the lakk-mother. Jakkuk glanced at the old bureaucrat, who could, if she desired, turn their brains to steaming mush. Outwardly serene, the old lakk stepped forward.

"An impressive display, a'Yerg-roon," she uttered. "I had disbelieved rumors of your power. My pride has been impeached. However, you will attend. This officer follows orders."

"I attend, mother," a'Yerg replied, rudely remaining at her full height. "Karyai-lakk ordered us to stay with the worthless *kar*-mother. This officer will not gainsay my political's authority nor, with infinite respect, mother, shall you."

Without words and with all serenity vanquished, the Tir-lakk waved the hapless officer and her troops away. Bowing deeply, a'Yerg ushered Jakkuk and her human burden, now regaining consciousness, into a groundcar. The old bureaucrat and her entourage retreated to another. Jakkuk moved to the forward compartment, placing the wide-eyed alien onto the seat next to her. There was ample room aft, but a'Yerg-roon also chose the forward section, promiscuously invading Jakkuk's mind.

"Desist, you obscenity!" Jakkuk snarled as their car squirted onto the ground loop servicing the spaceport. The human clutched at her seat, startled by the sudden motion.

"Be at ease, Jakkuk-hajil," the roon replied. "I would not harm you. The consequences are too painful, and besides, I confess to your excellence as a cell controller. We fight well together, yes?"

The human gave a yelp as the groundcar hurtled off the plateau's edge, merging with mag-traffic on the arterial. They passed through a veil of rain, once again

revealing the splendor of Punna, but Jakkuk barely noticed. She stared at a'Yerg as if the roon had two heads. Had her ears deceived? Had she just received a compliment—from a roon?

"You two fight all the time," the human-mother said.

Jakkuk glanced at the intrepid alien. She could not help but respect her.

"Ah, Queen-n-n-human," a'Yerg said. "We do not fight. Though we are hajil and roon, we are as one. Jakkuk-hajil is my sister. Together we kill the weak."

Jakkuk only grew more confused. Deeply suspicious, she slumped in her seat and locked glares with a'Yerg. The roon's murderous eyes stared back, her lips parted with a cruel smile. Jakkuk turned away and studied the alien. The human-mother sat with her nose pressed to the window, her astounding eyes sparkling in the flashes of lightning.

Chapter Thirty

Imperial Tribunal

Quinn's fascination overwhelmed her fatigue. Their vehicle raced above the city, plunging through driving squalls without hint of turbulence. Though windowless fore and aft, the car's sides and top formed a transparent arch affording a stunning panorama; disconcerting at first, for flicking past in the opposite direction, too fast and too close to resolve, streamed other flows of transport. But it was the glittering landscape that dominated Quinn's attention. A parade of unworldly edifices marched into the mist-shrouded distance, rising in great leaps, their aerie superstructures spearing into the ragged overcast, defiantly buttressed with gossamer and footed on crystal.

"You will soon see the Imperial Palace, the most exquisite structure in the galaxy," a'Yerg boasted, filtering Quinn's thoughts.

The roon's invasions had grown less jolting. Quinn's fascination had distracted her from her own discomfort, but now her head ached, and a chill had reached her bones. Shivering, she tucked her bare feet under the thin shift and hugged her arms close.

"The *kar-sow* is cold," a'Yerg muttered.

"Soon she will be very warm," Jakkuk said, throwing a wrap over the human's shoulders.

Quinn pulled the thin material tight. The aliens' sudden deference was disconcerting; they were competing for her attention. A'Yerg responded with a smirk. Quinn filed her suspicions away and strained to catch a glimpse of their destination. Suddenly their car plunged; the nearest structures—now at eye level—churned past in a vertiginous blur. Quinn glimpsed a celestial structure of minarets and arches heaving into the clouds, and then the car was bathed in golden light, swallowed by a tunnel. A soft tone sounded. They decelerated smoothly. The door opened, and a flood of dissonant thought washed over her—a gathering tide of insanity.

"Fetch the human-mother," a voice stimulated her implant. "Make haste all. The Imperial Tribunal awaits. Make haste all."

"Already I grow weary," a'Yerg muttered, pushing Quinn through the door.

The human stepped barefoot onto the frigid tiles of an immense concourse. Vehicles large and small came and went, depositing or gaining passengers at a frenetic pace. The familiar acrid-cinnamon scent, first among many odors, assaulted Quinn's nostrils. She lifted her eyes. Vaulted arches spanned a distant ceiling, and gaudy murals of massive scale and of unremitting violence covered the great walls. Quinn was

permitted no time to gawk; Jakkuk grabbed one arm, a'Yerg the other. The human was dragged like a child, trotting as fast as ever she could, between two hurrying adults—although the gait of the Ulaggi was more akin to a stalking giraffe. An escort of crimson-robed Ulaggi led the way, and a phalanx of orange-uniformed troops followed. No males here, all were long-legged females.

The entourage entered a paneled chamber whose doors sealed off the outside but did little to diminish the din in Quinn's mind. Surrounded by breathtakingly tall females, the human examined her surroundings. Glimmering handholds hung from an impossibly distant ceiling. The bus-sized elevator accelerated upward and sideways. Her keepers, employing the ceiling grips, held their places and restrained Quinn from falling. How far the car moved Quinn could not guess, but deceleration was prolonged and vigorous.

Quinn and her entourage debarked onto a columned portico. They were escorted at an awkward jog up a stone staircase with mirror-black risers and treads ill-suited to the stride of a human. Quinn stubbed her toes when her attention strayed to the spiral-fluted columns and ornate balustrades lining their way. Everything was shaded yellow or saffron or gold with sharp accents of crimson or black. Brocades hung with ponderous richness, and immense vases supported floral arrangements suited to Titans.

The broad stairs curved upward to a hall, where the soldiers peeled off to their stations. Quinn was marched over the threshold, the turmoil in her mind intensifying with each step; although the chamber was hauntingly quiet. At the focus of the chamber squatted a grand onyx bench, upon which were enthroned six females. Quinn deduced these to be Imperial Tribunes. They reposed on crimson chairs, in clusters: three sat in the center and three on the right; a trio of sleek thrones on Quinn's left stood vacant. The immense wall behind the bench was of the same liquid black. Decorating its ebony surface in livid gold, yellow, and a profusion of crimson was a rendering of a spiral galaxy. Three amber starbursts anchored one of its sweeping arms.

Dominant Dar and the white witch sat in a dock before one side of the bench. A'Yerg and Jakkuk were escorted into a dock on the opposite side. An orange-robed official with a vice-like grip seized Quinn by the arm and frog-marched the human into the well of the court, across a circle of polished onyx, and onto a raised circular dais, its mirrored surface the color of fresh blood and sorely cold to bare feet.

The orange-robed hajil yanked Quinn's shift over her head, leaving the human chicken-skinned naked. The bedlam in Quinn's brain, and now in her ears, rose to a crescendo; fleeting impressions, including colors and odors, echoed behind her eyes like dry leaves before the winds of autumn. Resisting the urge to curl into a ball, she winnowed out the mental chaff, struggling to discern that which could be understood from that which could not. Squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin; and then—as if compelled by a thousand commanding voices—she defiantly pivoted her pallid body, slowly surveying her hell.

A gallery arced above the court, a wide balcony descending to wings on either side. The ranks of plush yellow seats were filled. The audience wore either pure white or crimson flashed to varying degrees with yellow and gold. Quinn recognized the tall lakk from the spaceport sitting among the white-robed personages. Others in her vicinity wore similar diamond and onyx tiaras, the heft of the stones and the decay of old age increasing as their seats neared the onyx bench.

"Attend! Return to order," Quinn's implant intoned. A growl brought her attention forward. All audible noise fell away; the mental din dampened, becoming more coherent.

"Karyai-lakk brings us a specimen," A voice in Quinn's mind announced. There was no accompanying sound.

"What are you called, human-mother?"

Quinn scanned the ebony bench, trying to discern her interlocutor. None stirred. The six tribunes were all old, yet none so ancient as the ugly witch from her prison ship. Four wore immaculately white robes; two wore robes of burnished gold. All wore crimson mantles.

"My name is Quinn," she replied, finding her voice. "Captain Cassiopeia Quinn. I am a science officer of the Tellurian Legion Fleet."

"Karyai-lakk reports that you are the ruler of the planet called Genellan."

The statement came as Quinn was still speaking; again with no verbal communication, but she was certain of its source; like a wavering mirage discernable only to Quinn's brain, word-thoughts radiated from the forehead of the white-robed harridan sitting in the center of the center throne group.

"That is not correct. I was the appointed governor of Genellan, not its ruler. But please, who is Karyai-lakk?"

"The ugly one, child," a familiar tenor in Quinn's head snarled, almost before the question was out of her mouth. The acid essence of the white witch flashed through her mind leaving a slowly ebbing welt. Irresistibly compelled, Quinn turned and beheld a pair of black angry eyes peering from a tunnel of white. Now she knew the witch's name. And that she was a lakk. Jakkuk and Dar were hajil, a'Yerg a roon. The ones wearing white were lakk. Lakks held the power.

"Karyai-lakk reports that you are intelligent," said a mental voice from the center of the right-hand group, another lakk. "That your mind is exceptional, both in mass and cellular activity."

"Karyai-lakk flatters me," Quinn replied, desperate to focus her thoughts; no, to stifle them.

"And that you have a capacity for telepathic communication."

"No," Quinn replied, shaking her head. She had to ignore her fear; she had to think through it. "My race is not telepathic." Her scientific training welled upward. She forced her mind to work linearly, fighting the scattered stimuli racing through her thoughts.

"You are wrong," a different voice replied, this time with audible words. These words came from one of two tribunes wearing golden robes. Shorter and stockier, Quinn guessed them to be hajil. "We have tested many human brains. Our science has detected active emissions, to a lesser degree, in all humans tested. Unlike the ones you call kones. But Quinn-human's thoughts are open—"

There was a disturbance to the left. Like puppets on the same string, the enthroned tribunes cast angry eyes in that direction. The mental gale in Quinn's brain and the audible commotion in her ears elevated to a storm and then to a cacophonous cyclone as a side entrance dilated open. The gallery leaped to their feet as a delegation of six prodigiously tall females sauntered through. Quinn judged them roons by their height and complexions. The shock of their appearance was amplified by the hue of their uniforms; in this court of yellows, golds, and crimsons, these willowy interlopers wore shades of blue: azure tunics and tight, midnight-blue trousers.

"Karyai-lakk believes your nascent telepathy makes you dangerous," an intense new presence in Quinn's mind announced, but this time a verbal translation came through her implant, sterile and toneless.

The tallest of the blue-uniformed roons moved apart from her fierce comrades and continued with graceful strides into the well. Quinn felt the intense focus of the collective minds around her, their waxing anger barely eclipsed by their sensual fear as

the stalking monster circled like a predator. The alien stopped and squatted, all elbows and knees, dropping to put her eyes at Quinn's level, her thick, plaited braids of raven coiling snakelike on the ground. Like a Yerg, this lantern-jawed monster had immense, viciously slanted silver irises. The roon snarled, ejecting spittle. Quinn fell backward.

"No doubt the worthy lakk-mother is correct," Quinn's implant translated. "Venerable Karyai-lakk, notorious for her power, is even more infamous for her wisdom. But worthy mother, this *kar-sow* seems too much like the rest of her kind, puny and cowardly. There is no threat here. What would you have me do? Weep in fear?"

All eyes focused on the white witch. Karyai rose imperiously to her feet. Her mouth never moved, but her thoughts penetrated the mental bedlam with biting clarity.

"The I'rdish commander honors this humble political, but it is to the pleasure of the empress and to the wisdom of the Imperial Tribune that I defer."

Karyai's bitterly familiar presence suffused Quinn's brain, colliding with that of the roon. Quinn thought the lakk's tone far from humble. The silver-eye laughed.

"Even the *kar-sow* doubts your humility, most worthy mother," the roon replied, still staring into Quinn's eyes, nostrils twisting as if scenting carrion. Quinn, her body catatonic, was unable to look away. The roon and the lakk were inside her skull, locking minds, not gently.

The contest was brief. The roon's eyes glazed; she dropped to a knee, though her cruel smile remained grimly fixed.

"Release her!" the first tribune shouted. "She is protected."

"Certainly, mother," Karyai snarled.

The one called y'Tant staggered erect. Struggling for composure, the roon bowed unsteadily to the black bench and turned to the gallery.

"Tribunes, mothers, and sisters," she shouted, her voice growing firmer with each uttered word. "Honor is mine. We stand here at the behest of the empress. However, we of I'rd-Ulag, remain unvanquished in battle. We seek neither favor nor counsel. Our rebellion is in full flower. I'rdish battle forces are everywhere positioned with strategic advantage, and they grow in number and power with each passing day."

Discordant murmurs lifted from the audience, and then a single screech lifted above the rising din. Quinn turned to see Dominant Dar standing in her dock, shaking a fist, her great jaw jutting. "Blood, I will drive your reeking carcass back into the foul swamps of Mathern," Quinn's implant intoned.

"Ah, Dar-hajil! Again and again, honor is mine," y'Tant snarled. "My hearts warm at your presence, my most worthy opponent. But how will you fight, sister? Your ships were destroyed. By humans!"

"Attend!" rumbled a vibrant contralto both inside and outside of Quinn's mind. "Behold our mother, Enod the Strong, Empress Enod III, Fourteenth daughter of the Wawn Succession, Lord of all Planets, Light of all Stars, Mother to All. Behold the Empress of Ulag!"

Chapter Thirty-one

Empress Enod

The clamor in Quinn's mind fell away to stone silence. Behind the bench, where there had been a galaxy-emblazoned wall, there was now an alcove of golden stone. In the center of that austere chamber upon a bejeweled throne sat a white-robed ancient. She was wizened yet erect, hatchet-faced with a gray complexion and deep

creases dividing a prodigiously beaked nose from slab-flat cheeks. Her eyes were like pools of tar, heavy-lidded yet piercing, her mouth wide and cruel, the lower lip sagging in perpetual scowl. A thin fall of snowy wisps, held back by a lustrous crown, hung loose over her shoulders. Languorously, she dipped her scepter. Bowing, the audience resumed their seats.

Quinn studied the image; it was a holograph, a projection. The ancient lakk was twice natural size, and yet her corporeal image was eminently lifelike, solid and breathing, with no distortion or littoral anomaly. The white witch's burning presence in Quinn's mind was gone, displaced by another, equally acidic. Her confusion escalating, the human focused on the empress's image. The specter stared back with the dead glare of a snake.

"Gast, such eyes," Enod murmured, her lifeless gaze at last lifting, taking with it the hot coal from Quinn's mind. "Karyai-lakk, you have brought me an interesting...gift. Welcome you home, sister. It is good that you are arrived. I have long desired your counsel."

"Mother of All, honor is mine," Karyai replied.

"And Dominant Dar, you have completed another campaign, yes?" Enod purred viciously. "But can it be true, daughter? You lost three cruisers?"

Three Ulaggi ships destroyed! Quinn's elation was crushed by merging tides of Ulaggi anxiety and anger, and something else—something sensual.

Dar lifted her lantern chin. Her voice piercing, the dominant spoke, "A fourth ship was lost, Most Exquisite Mother."

A fourth destroyed! Quinn rejoiced, but again the human's joy was overwhelmed with febrile emotion—a lusting.

"There can be no excuse, My Worship," Dar continued. "Let it be known that in Her Glorious Name, I engaged two human fleets, and that these fleets were reinforced by the first konish hyperlights we have encountered—immense ships and powerful. Seven human and one konish interstellar were destroyed, along with three armed transports. Their planetary outposts were razed. Yet it is fact, Mother to All. I lost four ships. But in Her Glorious Mercy, I shall seek revenge until my dying day."

Eleven Legion and konish ships destroyed! Quinn almost fainted. But her shock did not outlast the awkward silence; the Ulaggi empress, baleful eyes burning, glared out at her fleet commander. Quinn sickly realized that Dar's dying day may have already arrived.

"Blood!" y'Tant snorted, furiously stacking wood onto Dar's funeral pyre. "Chased into hyperlight by *kar*! Had you fought to the death, you would feel less shame."

"Silence, I'rd-roon!" Karyai snarled, her powers overwhelming the shocked reaction from the chamber. "Our war has changed. The humans fight well, and they have become allied with the kones. And this specimen before you reveals their intelligence. We fight not just *kar*."

"Blood! This is no warrior," y'Tant replied, whirling on the human.

"Blood and blood!" another voice shouted. Quinn recognized a'Yerg's powerful presence, rising like a sunstar. "They are indomitable warriors. There is one among them called Boocharry. I have more than once met her in fair combat. And yet she still breathes. None of y'Tant's pilots make that claim. Many destroyers have been lost at Boocharry's hands and at the hands of her pilots. They are not *kar*."

"Ah, Fist a'Yerg!" y'Tant roared, smiling wolfishly. "I revel in your fear—"

"Challenge me, *jik*!" a'Yerg screamed, leaping to her full magnificence. Blue-uniforms spilled onto the floor.

"Be still," the first tribune shouted peevishly. A bolt of mental energy—an

unseen bludgeon—stood the blue-uniformed cadre erect and pounded them back against the wall. A'Yerg was thrown into her chair.

"Kar and gravity-slug allied," the golden-robed tribune growled.

Quinn stared past the hajil-tribune to the empress, defiantly holding the Imperial orbs of coal with her own.

"The kones, after all these centuries, have built hyperlight ships. It is imperative," the hajil tribune continued, "that we cease this obscene rebellion. Why should roon murder lakk when there are billions of kones and humans—"

"Cappa-hajil, hold," the empress commanded. The white-robed ancient glared down at the human, her black eyes tightening.

"I am unaccustomed to such scrutiny, child," a murmur in Quinn's mind announced. "If you must gawk, stare at the ground."

Quinn's neck arched downward. Her eyes lost focus. She tried to lift her chin, but was deterred by pain. Flushed with fear, she pitched forward. With agonizing effort she twisted, taking much of the impact on her shoulder. But not all; her nose cartilage fractured, and the skin over her cheekbone split as her face bounced off the blood-red marble.

"Cappa-hajil is correct," Enod growled. "This rebellion must cease. Dominant y'Tant, I command you to the tribune's chair for I'rd-Ulag. I desire your counsel."

Pain kept Quinn conscious. Blood pooled in her mouth and ran onto the floor. Her eyes focused on the reflected image of the blue-uniformed roon striding through her blurred vision to ascend the bench.

"Honor is mine, Mother of All," the I'rd-roon replied as ceremonial attendants draped a crimson mantle over the roon's shoulders.

Quinn sensed a rising vehemence from the assembled aliens, a protest that was quelled by a stronger, higher tide of admonition from the empress and from the collective wills of those supporting the imperial decision.

"Dominant y'Tant is here, because I asked her to come," Enod snarled. "I have declared a truce, but despite I'rdish claims, their rebellion has stagnated. They are stalemated. Certainly in time, that equilibrium will break. The Empire will prevail."

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," y'Tant interjected, taking the center throne of the empty three, "if I entertain a different vision. Dominant Dar has sustained unanticipated losses, yes? The Imperial Fleet has been sorely weakened"

Enod's leaden presence disappeared from Quinn's mind; the human discovered that she could move again. Desperately averting her eyes, she pushed onto hands and knees. Blood drained from her nostrils. Head throbbing, Quinn lifted a hand to staunch the flow, wincing with pain as she pinched her shattered nose.

"Dar-hajil's losses are...inconvenient," Enod purred. "Imperial defenses remain unimpaired; you could not penetrate them in a thousand years. This you know. Yet the humans, despite great punishment, persist in their adventures. Something must be done. Dominant y'Tant, what say you? Will you turn your siege away from Tir-Ulag and join us against blood foe? Upon my honor there will be no attacks on I'rd-Ulag."

"Gast, Her Majesty's forces are too occupied with defending Kar-Ulag to ever attack," y'Tant replied. "If you adventure against the humans, the balance will tip even further in my favor. You must trust that I will not attack your vacated defenses, yes?"

"Just so," the empress replied, her anger rising. "But trust must be mutual or it cannot exist. That is why I ask you now to join us."

"Hmmm...I would hear Karyai-lakk," the roon proclaimed, spreading her hands upon the ebony bench. "Karyai-lakk, as your tribune, I command you to speak."

A surge of anger flooded the room. Karyai's ugly face grew impossibly uglier.

"Human motherships have only the firepower of small cruisers," the white witch

snarled, "but the kones have batteries to challenge the shields of a battleship. The kones have also developed obdurate defensive platforms. Though battered by Dar-hajil's weapons, one such machine orbits Genellan. It was against the anvil of this satellite that the insane, short-jumping *kar* admiral hammered our rising cruisers."

"Gast, they have mastered the short jump," y'Tant muttered.

The collective mind within the chamber reverberated with alarm. Quinn was confused; the tactical terms were incomprehensible, but the lakk's concern gave hope.

"Mother-of-All speaks true," Karyai continued. "In the past we annihilated the human fleets using but modest force. We grew complacent and now have lost tactical advantage. We can no longer depend on victory if we commit but a battle cell or two. Let us carry the war to their home planet, and let us attack in overwhelming force. I suggest at least a full battle fleet."

Quinn's stomach leapt into her throat. Panic overwhelmed pain. She staggered to her feet, her eyes lifting desperately to meet the sour gaze of the empress.

"No!" she shouted. "Not war. Please! The galaxy is big enough for—" Quinn's windpipe constricted. She was knocked to her knees; the white witch's mind was on her throat like the talons of a dragon.

"Silence, *kar*-sow!" Karyai commanded. "Above all, do not beg."

Quinn's throat relaxed, allowing a painful breath to pass. The collective disgust of the audience, layered with arrogance, pummeled the human's mind. Quinn kept her gaze grounded.

"Karyai-lakk declares we must carry the battle to our enemy," Enod growled. "Dominant y'Tant, what say you?"

Quinn dared to look up. The blue-coated tribune was staring into the human's mind. All audible noise fell away, but she could feel the sensual pulse of the audience, demanding war, demanding battle, demanding blood. Helplessness overwhelmed her.

"I say...no," y'Tant said.

The chamber went silent, audibly and telepathically. Quinn's relief climbed upwards. Earth was to be spared.

"You reject me!" Enod screamed. The collective anger exploded into fury. The l'rd-rooms moved toward their leader as the audience surged to their feet. The empress waved her subjects to their seats. "Speak, roon! Speak, you!"

"Your Majesty," the roon replied, standing. "Dar-hajil has ravaged the enemy. Your own intelligence suggests they are in no position to threaten the Empire. I shall crush them...in good time."

"I demand your ships!" Enod demanded, also standing erect.

"l'rdish victory is too near. l'rd-Ulag will be liberated. l'rdish roons will soon control their own destiny and take their rightful place in this society."

Quinn's emotions soared. Humanity—self-absorbed and ignorant—might yet be saved, if only by the selfish instincts of the enemy.

"You will not prevail," Enod screeched. "l'rd-Ulag will be crushed, and I will see your bowels twisting over the gates of this palace. This tribunal is ended. Escort the rebels—"

"Your Majesty! I beg forgiveness!" the other hajil tribune declared. "There is news!"

Scowling, the empress tilted her head. Her eyes widened and her scowl deepened as she digested the incoming information. She closed her eyes and exhaled deeply before returning her attention to the assembly.

"Is it appropriate to discuss this now, Mother-of-All?" the first tribune asked.

"Ill news travels rapidly," Enod said. "Dominant y'Tant will know soon enough."

"Yes, Mother-of-All," y'Tant replied. "I am receiving word of a...uh, further

misfortune.”

The empress nodded.

“A survey mission,” the hajil tribune announced, “has within the hour dropped from hyperlight with dark news from Ore-source Two Ten. Human and konish ships were observed in low orbit. The cruisers left by Dominant Dar to retrieve the ore loads have been destroyed—to the last ship.”

Quinn’s spirits soared, and then plummeted with the realization that she had just missed being there for the victory, perhaps even rescue—or more likely death in battle. Steeled with new resolve, she leapt to her feet and stared defiantly at the empress. But the empress’s attention was focused on the blue-uniformed tribune.

“What say you now, Dominant y’Tant?” Enod asked. “Will this encourage your treason? My losses are more than *inconvenient*. What say you now, roon? The Empire will still battle you to the death, and the Empire will still win. Do not fight me, roon. Fight for me.”

“You know me well, Mother-of-All,” the l’rdish commander replied. “The roons of l’rd-Ulag have long suffered under the heel of your dynasty, but the Empire has been invaded. The invaders were not repulsed. This cannot stand. It is written: the weak must die! I am not weak!”

The chamber exploded with rage. And the sensuality again, but Quinn barely noticed. Her fleeting elation collapsed into despair; victory at Pitcairn only signaled a greater doom.

“Hail the roon!” Enod proclaimed, sending the bedlam to another level. “All hail the l’rdish roon.”

“Karyai-lakk’s recommendations are sound,” y’Tant shouted, quelling the din. “But I would exceed them. I will join two full battle fleets with one of Her Majesty’s. We will smash the *kar*, not with one battle fleet but with three. Dominant Dar, your battle cells have been destroyed; but I seek to spare you from the Glorious Mother’s ire. Despite your losses, you remain her foremost commander. You shall be my second-in-command, yes? Does Her Majesty concur? Will the Mother-of-All provide Dominant Dar with a fleet?”

“I stay Dar-hajil’s execution,” Enod replied, “for a death more glorious. What says Dar-hajil? Will she command an Imperial fleet?”

“By the hearts and mercy of Our Glorious Mother,” Dar shouted, “In Her name, I serve the roon. Honor is mine. I am not weak. The weak must die.”

“Blood and blood,” y’Tant snarled. “And valiant a’Yerg-roon will command her destroyers. Yes! If such commanders cannot crush the *kar* under the weight of three full battle fleets, then it is the Ulaggi that are weak, and it is the Ulaggi that deserve to die. Fist a’Yerg, what say you?”

“Blood of my hearts! I am not weak. The weak must die,” a’Yerg echoed in a snarling voice, and then she yodeled—a piercing howl lifting into unbearable registers. Y’Tant and her blue-suited cadre joined in, a murderous screeching howl of death. The collective sensuality flew higher.

“The weak must die!” echoed over and over, reverberating in Quinn’s mind. Amidst the bedlam y’Tant jumped to her feet and shouted. Quinn’s implant picked up the words:

“And Karyai-lakk will serve as my political!”

The bedlam, audible and mental, clipped to silence. The empress fell back. Quinn could not decipher the undercurrents of telepathy raging within the hall, but she sensed blinding rage, foremost among them that of the old witch.

“It is written,” y’Tant proclaimed, “that pride is weakness. I am strong—and courageous—enough to ask for the worthy lakk-mother’s wisdom and power. I would

pray she is not too proud to—”

“Be silent, roon! Arrogance serves no purpose,” Enod snarled. “What say you, Karyai-lakk?”

The empress stared out, black eyes ablaze, bony fingers kneading her scepter. The mental ambience grew even more subdued, and yet Quinn was certain the empress and the political were belaboring each other. The empress at last closed her eyes and sat back. There was a pall of silence within the chamber.

“I make this day an oath,” Karyai broke the spell, “to obey the roon. We go to Earth. I will listen for the frightened pulse of our foe. And I shall hear the dripping of the enemy’s blood and the rasp of its last breath. The weak must die.”

“No,” Quinn whimpered. She sank to her knees, tears mixing with blood. She prayed for her daughter and for all those that were about to die.

“Yes!” the blue-jacketed roon hissed. “Our expeditionary force will rendezvous under Tir-Ulag’s moon in three cycles. Will you be ready, Dar-hajil?”

“Blood, yes!” Dar snarled.

“Do not fail me, my daughters,” Enod said. Her image faded, leaving behind only the ebony wall and the crimson galaxy.

Section Five

Earth

Triad

Embedded within a prolific star cluster, the Ulaggi night sky is wondrous to behold. The galactic plane writhes across Kar-Ulag’s night, a diaphanous scarf aglitter with jewels. It was into this dazzling cluster that Ulaggi spaceships returned. Progress was slow, for their forays were without hyperlight; but even as robotic probes and intrepid explorers pushed outward on generation-spanning missions, meticulous lakk scientists peeled away the mysteries of gravitronic translation.

Still more centuries passed. The Era of Expansion commenced. A restored civilization burgeoned across the planet. Continents were tamed and settled in full. Feral females were captured. Except for managed herds maintained on reservations, the incorrigibly dull males were exterminated.

The mutated female became cause célèbre ; roonish eggsacks were enthusiastically accepted into the insemination process. Socialized into the culture, these strains were manifestly brighter and physically more imposing than hajil; and the roon’s latent telepathic command, while inferior to that of the lakk, greatly exceeded that of the hajil. Roons took their place in society, with heavy representation in the military and space exploration. Athletics and the arts received notable contribution as well, but as time passed and populations grew, roons gravitated naturally to leadership. In Ulaggi society, telepathic prowess is political power. Lakk, with vast psychological advantages, were dominant—they could kill with their minds. But roons were exceptional telepaths, and roonish numbers increased at far faster rates than did that of the lakk. Inexorably roons gained power.

The inertia of the founding civilization was tectonic; during the Settlement, the lakk had created a predictable and efficient society, a society without laws, controlled by mores, custom, and protocol—a religion of order. The roonish conquest of the bureaucracy enabled the lakk to direct their full attention to science and technology. The lakk still ruled, but from ever more rarified heights.

Roons chaffed under this priesthood. Although bright and capable, the willful

roon too frequently gave over to her animal within. Often this produced positive effect—invention or inspiration; but too frequently a roon would become breathing chaos, endangering the ancient framework with rebellious thought, or worse, exceeding the limits of accepted behavior. Criminality was defined where none previously existed. It was not enough that the roon challenged the ancient ways, on occasion the roon lost all inhibition and became hurtling, screaming death, savaging kar and Ulaggi male alike, eroding the very bedrock of Ulaggi society.

Lakk leadership eventually contemplated elimination of the strain; but a mortal race once established is not easily excised, and a spirit of existence, regardless of inherent flaw or perfection, once passed to another generation is hallowed by bloodline. Simmering conflict erupted into civil war. In what became known as the First Roonish Rebellion—there would be many—ranks of hajil and male were conscripted into conflict, terrified shield-carriers and foot-soldiers serving vicious roon and manipulative lakk.

Telepathy's advantage was blunted by distance; once territory was gained and defensive positions established, roonish armies, largely through audacious maneuver and numbers were able to conquer. Kar-Ulag's blasted continents became racial redoubts, with roons advancing against shrinking lakk positions. But it was in the mind, not on bloody fields, that the ultimate battle was fought. The beleaguered lakk understood the roon's whirling sword to be its soft underbelly. The roon's liberated g'ort, that which gave the monster its ferocity, also represented its greatest weakness—the animal within was insane. Eliminating the roon's control was to create a frenzied killing machine, a berserker. A general gone raving, blood-drinking insane makes for a poor general.

Invention of the dendritic interface allowed the lakk to project their telepathic will over great distances. For roons a continental battlefield suddenly became too small. The tide of war was reversed; roonish armies lost their generals. The lakk won back their planet. Millions of roon were murdered by enraged hajil abetted by hordes of rabidly angry male. Civil war ceased; surviving roons had little choice but to acknowledge subservience to their masters.

It is irony that the very technologies that defeated the roon preserved them from genocide. In penetrating the mysteries of the dendritic interface, lakk scientists unraveled the secrets of gravitronic resonance. The Ulaggi at last attained the intoxicating mastery of hyperlight. This technology transcended racial victory; competition for power vanished. The Ulaggi were born of the stars. The ferocious energy of the roon had new outlet—there were planets to conquer. And the lakk, secure in their power, well understood the need for warriors.

Galactic distances are immense and the density of life sparse. Without hyperlight the ancient race had for thousands of years wandered helplessly. Other than Kar-Ulag, the only planets discovered during those unending centuries had been balls of gas or barren rock. Within a mere decade of their gravitronics breakthrough, Ulaggi colonists took possession of two more planetary jewels: Tir-Ulag, named after the Ulaggi word for conquest; and I'rd-Ulag, after the Ulaggi word for dominion.

The Triad was founded. The Ulaggi Empire was born. Lakk, roon, and hajil looked outward. There were worlds—uncountable worlds—to conquer. And there was an exquisite urgency, a compelling urge to spread Ulaggi seed.

A fertile galaxy lay at their feet.

New Construction

"I'll miss you, Daddy."

Lieutenant Commander Nash Hudson buried his face in his daughter's cornsilk thatch. Blinking back tears, he set her on the ground.

"I'll miss you more, sweetie," he replied. "Emmy, you do what your auntie says. And study hard, so you can be as smart as your mother." He pushed the child into his sister's arms and turned away. Wiping his nose with his gold beret, Hudson jogged out the door and jumped into the armored maglev. He had taken too long to say good bye. He was in danger of missing his insertion hop.

Hudson checked his chronometer; it was the anniversary of the Battle for Genellan, one year since he had last seen his wife, one year since Admiral Runacres and Tar Fell and Charl Buccari had beaten back the Ulaggi. He wondered if Buccari was still alive, and if she had rescued the Pitcairn mission. Each passing day worked against his hopes. They could all be dead now, killed by the Ulaggi, just like Cassy. Hudson shoved the black thought back, letting it dissolve with anger. He had never hated before, but now he hated the Ulaggi with unbounded passion.

Only two months out of the tanks, Hudson's frame was thin and angular, but he was fit and growing stronger. It would take effort to regain his old mass, especially now that he was returning to space. Hudson was lucky that he could walk, lucky that he was even alive. Few people were given three tank sessions. Hudson had paid for his with immense amounts of pain, but now he had the cellular structure of an adolescent. He was grateful for his new body; his old ones had died; and now, even after a few months with new nerves, every touch, every sensation was sublime. Yet his memories remained as old as his battle worn soul. There were sensations he would never feel again; foremost among them, he missed his wife with an ache deeper than the darkest abyss.

Hudson shook off his foul mood. His maglev was joined by a security escort. The fleet of armored cars accelerated onto the high-speed bypass; a sleek vert-drone held formation on each side, scudding beneath a shroud of rain. From the artery's elevation, Hudson stared out at Edmonton's distant profile; the Tellurian Legion capital building lifted like a gray iceberg from the subterranean megalopolis. Beneath the bypass lay the weary fringes of Edmonton's old town, sprawling weather-beaten tenements, pocked streets limned with grime-crusting snow, its crumbling skyline pricked with an admixture of nodding oil derricks and clapboard steeples. Rain had eroded winter's veneer from the Alberta plains, uncovering the enduring blight of humanity, unmistakable even in the capital of the most powerful nation on Earth.

Hudson's anguish soared to a different planet; he desperately missed the unspoiled vastness of Genellan. He missed trekking her unexplored wilderness; he missed hunting dragon in the Corlian vales, or nightmare and snow lion on the wind-swept ridges above MacArthur's Valley; he missed the untamed vistas and the unspoiled newness, but he quashed those thoughts, too, for Genellan would forever remind him of his wife. And he would not be returning anytime soon. Admiral Runacres was refusing to send colonists to Genellan, insisting that every ship be made available for the defense of Earth. Hudson was but a pawn on Runacres's galactic game board.

His attention returned to Earth's sordid scenery. White banners whipped in the north wind. Every steeple seemed to have at least one and many were festooned. From this distance he could not read them, but he knew what they said:

SHARL WILL SAVE US

The cult-like movement had exploded since his first medical visit to Earth. Then it had been merely uncomfortable; now it was global and overwhelming.

A counter-cult was on the rise. Not as numerous as the white flags, red banners and signs could be seen fluttering from walls and buildings. This new cult, steeped in hate and political intrigue, deemed Buccari and Hudson to be evil incarnate for restricting immigration to Genellan. Hudson's instincts told him that President Stark and the government's security apparatus were fomenting the unrest; its operations were too slick, its scruffy leaders too well financed.

The previous administration had been incompetent, but at least President Duffy had given the fleet a budget for exploration. Genellan's discovery had been a dividend of that policy. But the best surgeons and all the regeneration tanks in the world could not excise Duffy's brain tumor. In the ensuing election Hayward Stark, the darling of the Legion Army and the former Secretary of State, had been elevated to the Presidency. Under Stark's administration, the Tellurian Legion armies had been busy. Their stirring victories on the southern front had given Stark immense political capital. Stark's cabinet was packed with beribboned generals. Their personal portfolios—and Stark's—had swollen obscenely with the profits of war. Sharl Buccari's popularity was a threat to the Legion's powerful elite.

Nash Hudson despised the Ulaggi for what they had done to his friends and family, but Hudson hated only one human being. Stark's mindless ambition as Secretary of State had nearly proven fatal to human-konish relationships. Hudson pondered how Ambassador Kateos would deal with this backward step in planetary relationships. The image of the huge, irrepressible konish female brought a smile to Hudson's face; Katie would manage Stark quite well.

Hudson stifled a yawn, his brain foggy from hours spent in simulators. He dozed off, dreaming about corvette emergency procedures. When he awoke Edmonton's desultory sprawl was replaced by featureless plains streaked with old snow. Hudson's car dropped out of the high-speed onto a spur. Maglev lift terminated as the vehicle descended to the roadbed, its wheels contacting the macadam. Shanty towns lined the road; shouting crowds pointed at his little convoy. The ramshackle detritus of curiosity seekers and protestors had grown into a slum spilling over with ersatz-preachers and their white-flagged flocks gloriously anticipating the return of Sharl Buccari. Red banners were there, too, fluttering from jury-rigged standards.

His car passed through a checkpoint and onto the vast open spaces of the launch facility. Converging lines of roll-out runways disappeared over the horizon. Immense servicing hangers lined one side and ranks of fuel bunkers stretched to infinity on the other. Clear of the lander area, his car accelerated for the low-orbit insertion terminal. All four rail-guns were in operation, their loads firing with rhythmic thunder. He showed his orders at the operations desk and, despite his considerable fame, was chewed out by a young officer for arriving late. He was lucky. He was assigned a shuttle that would get collected on the current orbit; he would still make the next lunar insertion. Relieved, Hudson jogged up the loading ramp and presented his orders.

Tellurian Legion Ship Avenger, HAB-1, glimmered in the brilliance of an unfiltered sun, one of eight hyperlight anomaly battleships stacked in lunar construction berths like Behemoth bullets in an orbiting magazine. Earth, a delicate crescent, floated in the greater distance, adding sublime hues to the reflections from their silvered hulls. But it was the monochromatic lunar landscape that dominated. Viewed through the intricate tracery of girders and gantries, the pallid moon rotated overhead, an argent overcast, ominously close, her ebony-rimmed craters, marching in endless review over

the lunar horizon.

T.L.S. Avenger, first of her class, slipped clear of her bollards. Attached to the battleship like lampreys from the blue-green oceans of the mother planet, four pug-nosed orbital maneuvering tugs, anti-collision beacons rotating nervously, waited in readiness. Two more OMTs hung in the brilliant darkness, their massive, gimbaled boosters standing ready. The HLA battleship pivoted sedately about her maneuvering axes. Aligned for trajectory, her mains gently pulsed, boosting *Avenger* away from the lacy spider web of the orbiting facility.

"For the log: Terminated maneuvering burn at T plus 34," the facility master pilot dictated with quiet authority. The evolution duly logged, the port pilot saluted the new commanding officer.

"Captain Carmichael," she said. "*Avenger* answers her helm. The ship is stabilized on trajectory for assigned orbit. Control is transferred from the Lunar Docking Authority to the ship's captain at this time. Request permission to disembark and to dismiss the tugs?"

"Granted," replied the new commanding officer. Returning the salute, Jake Carmichael allowed a smile to crease his chiseled features. Underway at last, his dark brown eyes sparkled. Euphoric, he inspected the bustling bridge, experiencing a sense of gratification and pride enjoyed by few mortal men—the pride of command. He wished Charl Buccari were here to share it. With grim determination he cast aside his joy.

"Officer-of-the-deck, where are my fuel lighters?" he thundered. "I want plugs and I want them fast!" Although her cores were topped and tuned, Carmichael's powerful new command was worthless without the vast tons of reaction fuel and supplies necessary to cruise the galaxy and to fight her enemies. Watch standers leapt to their tasks. Status boards sparkled with constantly updating information.

"Scheduled tanker rendezvous in five minutes, Skipper. Starboard forward, than port forward, working aft in standard intervals," the officer-of-the-deck responded. "Air Boss reports *Eagle* Squadron lining up to come aboard. Group leader sends her respects, sir."

"It's about time," Carmichael snarled, floating behind the watch team's console. "Air Boss, direct Commander Green to have all corvettes armed by the second dog watch with ten-minute alerts on the rails."

The flight operations officer acknowledged. Carmichael pulled himself into his command station and took a deep breath. He had to stow bulk supplies before he could drill his damage-control teams. Once he got the transfer hatches secured he would exercise his weapons. There was too much to do, and his crew was pathetically green; but the enemy could arrive any day, at any moment.

Avenger would be ready, damn it.

"Welcome to big iron, Jake," Sarah Merriwether said, her rubicund image grinning out from the holo-vid on Carmichael's command console.

"Thank you for giving her to me, Commodore," Carmichael replied.

"Say it like you mean it," Merriwether retorted. "And *Avenger's* no gift, space sailor. You paid for her with blood and sweat...well, you made a down payment."

Carmichael looked up and tossed a salute. Though she had not yet formally hoisted her flag, Merriwether sat ensconced on *Avenger's* flag bridge. Only a few months earlier *Avenger* had been Merriwether's, and Carmichael had been shaking down a wing of new corvettes. Much had happened in the year since the battle. Vice Admiral Chou, broken by his losses and despite Runacres's entreaties, had folded his flag. Franklin Wells was promoted to Second Fleet. Sarah Merriwether fleeted up to commodore, taking command of First Fleet under Runacres's senior flag. Jake

Carmichael stepped up from corvette group commander to replace Merriwether as skipper of *Avenger*. Similar changes rippled across the Tellurian Legion Fleet.

"*Avenger* needs a hard shake down," Carmichael said. "She'll have a few gripes if she's like any woman I've ever known."

"But unlike most men, she'll get the job done," Merriwether snorted.

"Er, correct, sir," Carmichael said.

"Relax, Jake," Merriwether replied. "And it's not just your ship under the gun. We have an entire fleet to harden, Captain."

Seven more battleships were coming off the ways; grizzled Bobby Knox was bringing *Intrepid* out within the watch cycle, and Alice Sato had *Nemesis* ready to go in turn. The battle-tested captains of *Vigilant*, *Vindicator*, *Valiant*, *Courageous*, and *Retribution* were all lighting off their reactors and singling up. And keels for twelve more hyperlight battleships were being laid, ships that had been planned and designed after the konish engagements—powerful ships, taking advantage of advances in energy optics and power. Humans had given the kones hyperlight; the kones had reciprocated, giving humans more powerful engines and bigger cannon.

"Skipper, *Sun-Tzu* task group passing overhead," the officer-of-the-deck announced. "Admiral Zhang extends congratulations and wishes to exchange honors."

"Initiate passing honors," Carmichael ordered. The Asian Cooperation was monitoring the Tellurian Legion's order of battle changes, for all the wrong mettlesome reasons. "Reply to Admiral Zhang: *T.L.S. Avenger* looks forward to operating with your fleet in the future."

The Asian Cooperation and the Turko-Gallic fleets were expanding, although less effectively than desired and with far less coordination. Carmichael doubted their ability to fight the Ulaggi; and there was always the morbid danger they would start fighting each other. Growth of the Asian fleet had been stimulated by the rumor of Shaula survivors. Billions of humans awaited Charl Buccari's return, but none more anxiously than the populations of the Asian Cooperation. There—as everywhere else in the world—her name had become synonymous with miracles. The cult of Buccari had grown in the East like a virulent virus.

Ships were desperately needed, but crews were even more precious. Earth teemed with people, but numbers alone did not answer. Spacers were a special breed; they had to accept discipline; they had to be intelligent, adaptable to the vast technologies surrounding them; they had to be physically whole and fit, and perhaps most importantly, they had to be emotionally resolute. Courage and confidence were mandatory. Despite the danger, hosts of humans clamored to become spacers, if only to escape the deprivations of life on Earth, but so very few were capable of the demands.

An alarm sounded; not just any alarm—the impending hyperlight activity alarm. Something was approaching from deep space.

"Invasion alert, Captain!" his officer-of-the-deck shouted.

"Where away? How much time?" Carmichael demanded, his soul shriveling. He stared at his new HLA panels, praying for a miracle. He yearned that it might be the kones bringing Charl Buccari back to him, but he knew better. She had been gone too long. She was dead. Miracles did not happen.

Damn it to hell! His ship was not ready.

Jump Exit

An array of gravitronic deep-field analyzers streaked into distant orbits around Sol. Spaced at vast intervals to increase parallax, these sensors scanned outward, seeking infinitesimally small aberrations in the vast fabric of the galactic gravity field. Disruptions in field lines signaled movement within the field, and certain types of movement signaled danger. HLA alarms on every ship in the Tellurian Fleet had been triggered by such telemetry.

"Impending hyperlight activity. Sector Six, Admiral."

Runacres looked up, his concentration replaced by an all too-familiar gut wrench. In a lesser man it might be termed fear; for Runacres it was the precursor to iron resolve. The fleet admiral bounded into the operations command center. The watch team stirred nervously.

"Execute Op-Plan Three," Runacres ordered, glacier-blue eyes peering out from beneath snowy eyebrows. The sly old warrior had been dirt-bound for months, championing the construction of new ships. His savagely barbered hair had grown in thick and white, but his acceleration-battered face remained livid pink and spectacularly veined; Runacres had had no time for tank treatments.

"Aye, sir," the watch officer replied. "Executing Op-Plan Three."

"How soon?" Runacres demanded.

"Lower limit two hours, sir. Confirmed Genellan vector," the watch officer reported, his voice rising with hope.

Runacres suppressed any optimism. A Genellan vector was falsely encouraging; the Ulaggi would likely transit via Genellan. And two hours were miserably inadequate—insufficient time to fully maneuver the fleet yet an eternity for terror to take its toll.

"Transponders?" Runacres demanded, assuming his command station.

"Negative, sir."

"We need an arrival to calibrate the array, Admiral," a tall female replied as she strode into the command center. "We'll do better next time." Vice Admiral Klein was Chief Science Officer for the Tellurian Legion Fleet. Gaunt, fatigued, yet erect as a post, Klein had been working night and day to make the HLA warning system operational. "Assuming, of course, there is a next time," she added.

"Welcome back," Runacres said. "You're early."

"Thank you, sir," Klein replied, her features pinched with disappointment. "I secured funding for the next satellite constellation but only half what we needed. President Stark is digging in his heels. I'm sorry, Admiral."

"I read your report," Runacres replied, holding his temper. The treasury was in distress. Battleships were expensive, and the new detection arrays required exorbitant funds; but if the governments of Earth did not stop fighting each other and prepare for the Ulaggi, there would surely be no Earth to protect. The damn fools would not acknowledge their peril until it was at their very doorstep. Perhaps that terrible day of reckoning had finally come.

"Reorient Sectors Five to overlap," Klein ordered. "Null out and resync, just like the tuning drills. You know the frequencies. We need transponders."

"All fleet commanders acknowledge Op-Plan Three," the watch officer reported. "Admiral Wells is short-jumping Second Fleet into primary attack position. First Fleet is covering lunar orbit. *Avenger* is en route rendezvous. Commodore Merriwether

has hoisted her flag.”

Sarah Merriwether’s calm demeanor appeared on the staff holo-vid, joining the other fleet commanders. Runacres pounded his fist, debating his proper station. Prudence dictated that he should stay in his headquarters bunker. But damn it! His place was on a ship, not hiding in some lunar hole.

Runacres stared up at the main plot, seeking inspiration. Franklin Wells completed his jump; his Second Fleet would be first into the meat grinder. First Fleet was establishing a blocking formation between the exit point and the moon. *Avenger*, dragging a convoy of fuelers and freighters, was lagging the battle line. *Intrepid* and *Nemesis*, still days from being battle ready, were hauling out, desperately seeking maneuvering room.

“We are not ready,” Runacres muttered as he planted his stern firmly in his command chair. It would take ten hours for his barge to rendezvous with *Avenger*. The battle, if there was to be a battle, would be long decided. Choosing discretion as the better part of valor, he decided to remain in his bunker.

“It’s President Stark, Admiral,” a flag aide announced.

Runacres ignored him. The aide wisely retreated.

“Refining exit point,” Klein reported. “It’s in close, real close. “If Scientist Dowornobb’s theories are correct, we’ll have emission signatures momentarily. We’re getting flux aura. Not sure what to make of it, but we have a tremendous mass coming our way, Admiral, far more than two or even three hyperlight cells.”

Runacres made somber eye contact with his science officer; a large mass bespoke certain calamity. Even with a year of new construction, Tar Fell’s entire HLA fleet could number no more than three cells. A cold shiver ran up Runacres’s spine. He must assume the worst: an armada of Ulaggi battleships was about to plunge into real time just outside lunar orbit, heralding the end of human civilization.

“Jump exit countdown,” the tactical officer reported. “Two hours and eight minutes.”

“Interdiction plan Beta-One,” Runacres growled. “Weapons free.” There was no choice, and little hope. An overwhelming mass of weaponry was descending upon them. Surprise was the only way to fight superior numbers. He had to attack the exit point.

“Designated units are releasing warheads, Admiral,” the watch officer reported somberly. “Weapons are away.”

Runacres’s heart surged. He had just authorized a saturation barrage of seeker nukes to be fired at a point in space where an as yet unidentified force would soon appear. He glanced up at the situation plot and noted the ominous tracks of hyper-acceleration missiles converging toward the HLA exit point.

“President Stark is waiting, sir,” the aide persisted.

“Yes, Mr. President,” Runacres replied, opening the circuit.

Stark’s dolorous countenance appeared. The Legion president wore a high-collared ebony sharkskin; his shimmering silk cravat, the darkest of hues, contrasted severely against a brilliantly white shirt. Stark was not a young man, but his skin was as pale as milk and ghastly smooth. *De rigueur* in his professional society, Stark wore his carbon-dark hair slicked back, exposing generous ear lobes resplendent with diamonds and sapphires.

“Good evening, Admiral. I wish you good health,” Stark said without the least hint of sincerity. He deigned not to look into the vid-lens.

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

“You have already commenced hostilities. Is that wise?”

“Missiles can be recalled or destroyed, sir.”

"Somewhat expensive," Stark purred, at last looking up. "And risky. What if the Ulaggi wish to make peace? Will it not then be too late?"

Runacres swallowed his anger. He had lost too many ships and crews to the unrelenting hostility of the Ulaggi, and to the foolish demands of politics. The old warrior knew too well the futility of suing for peace against a malignant and incorrigible adversary.

"A peace mission would require but a single cell, sir, not an armada. Our sensors indicate an extraordinarily large mass is approaching, a far larger mass than the entire konish HLA fleet, but I am sure you have already been briefed."

"Quite so. Quite so. And please see that I remained informed, Admiral," Stark threatened, signing off. To his credit, Stark's oily demeanor revealed not the slightest hint of fear, and the President of the Tellurian Legion, more so than all Earth's benighted citizens, was aware of the planet's peril. President Stark exhibited a great many unsavory qualities, but the man was not a coward. But then reptiles knew no fear.

"Where are those infernal transponders?" Runacres demanded, checking his own trepidation. The missiles tracked toward the exit point, each warhead carrying enough power to destroy a small planet.

"Soon, sir," Klein replied, her long fingers white-knuckling the railing. Hardly were the words out of her mouth when a technician proclaimed, "Konish signatures. We have six, no eight konish battleships."

Runacres exchanged skeptical glances with his science officer. Eight battleships—even konish battleships—did not nearly account for the incoming mass.

"Abort the attack, sir?" the watch officer asked.

"Stand by," Runacres growled. Runacres could only marvel at Tar Fell's audacity. Eight konish battleships were practically the entire konish HLA inventory. Or was it a Trojan horse?

"It's the *Novaya Zemlya*, sir! She's pinging true."

"Abort the attack!" Runacres ordered, the scales tipped; Sam Ito would never give up the authentication codes. "Destroy any missile that does not immediately respond. All ships to maintain maximum alert status."

"All missiles are answering, Admiral. Attack aborted."

"Very well," Runacres replied, still profoundly confused by the overwhelming mass disturbing the gravitronic flux. Eight konish battleships, far larger than Tellurian ships, could not signal this much mass. *Novaya Zemlya's* presence, half the mass of a konish battleship, certainly did not answer the mystery.

"What the hell?" an indiscrete watch stander muttered.

Runacres, thoughts racing, leaned forward. *NZ's* presence also meant the Pitcairn mission was returning, bringing Charl Buccari back to Sol-Sys—assuming she was still alive.

"Status of civil defense alerts?" he demanded.

"No alerts were issued, Admiral," the watch officer replied. "The Army did not want to start a general panic."

Runacres sighed. An impotent decision, but the correct one; in panic, the masses were uncontrollable. The civil population, even within the Tellurian Legion, was a powder keg. Riots sprang up and lasted for weeks with no tangible cause, ignited by events as mundane as sporting matches.

"Notify the Asian Cooperation and TGSR command centers of impending exit activity," Runacres ordered, studying the ops plot. "I see Admiral Zhang has moved his task group into lunar support orbit. How did the AC get word of the arrival?"

"I pressed his fleet into service, Admiral," a warmly familiar voice replied. "He

graciously accepted a subordinated position as maneuvering reserve." Merriwether's holo-vid image looked out at him, her wry smile lighting up his console.

"Well done," Runacres replied. "Please send the admiral my heartfelt appreciation." It was an encouraging development; all these many months he had been begging the Asian commanders to subordinate at least a portion of their growing fleet to Tellurian Legion authority for integration training. This was the precedent he had been praying for, and he knew with certainty that it was because of Charl Buccari and the Pitcairn mission.

"May she still be alive," Runacres muttered under his breath, forcing himself to sit back. Precious time spilled away as word of the approaching fleet flew to the political centers of the world. Runacres's command center was besieged with priority messages and summary inquests from all levels of the Tellurian Legion as well as from foreign governments. He delegated these to his harried staff.

"Ten minutes to jump exit," Admiral Klein reported. "I've got every sensor focused on the anomaly, but we still have no indication of its nature, sir."

"Very well," Runacres growled. Something huge was about to fall into the solar system.

"President Stark again, sir," the flag aide announced.

"Yes, Mr. President," Runacres sighed.

"Has Buccari returned?" Stark demanded. This time the politician made unrelenting, almost desperate eye contact. It was an inane question, but it revealed Stark's obsession, and his dread. The Tellurian Legion president feared a small human female more than he feared the Ulaggi.

"Mr. President, we won't know until they drop out."

"Blast," Stark muttered. "Of course you will now relent and dispatch the next phase of colonists to Genellan. Perhaps the kones can provide escort, if your forces are still...indisposed."

Runacres refused the bait. "Sir, it is premature—"

Runacres's words were drowned by a raucous cheer. He glanced up at the main plot; the konish fleet had dropped into normal space. Good news, but certainly no justification for such ill-discipline. Annoyed, the admiral forced his attention back to the president.

"Ah! It is Tar Fell," Stark muttered. "I will have General Tomas schedule uploads. I demand that transports be made ready immediately."

"Mr. President, we must wait," Runacres pleaded with the already fading holo-vid. "Governor St. Pierre will—"

Contact was terminated. Runacres clamped his jaw, ready to chew nails, his fury at such usage by a politician compounded by the continuing ruckus in his watch center. He looked up to see a science officer standing at attention, her expression radiant.

"What is it, Commander?" Runacres snapped, his gorge high.

"Admiral Klein begs your pardon, Admiral, but—sir, the kones...they brought a defense station!"

Runacres jumped to his feet and stared at the data arrays; accumulating telemetry revealed the gravid return of an immense spherical object dead in the middle of the widespread konish formation.

"The hell you say!" Runacres gasped, his scalp crawling.

"It's not possible," Klein laughed. "Scientist Dowornobb created a grid large enough to accommodate the mass of a defense satellite. I see it with my own eyes, but I don't believe it."

"Admiral Runacres!" the communication watch officer barked. "We have a laser burst—diplomatic protocol. Two second delay. Ambassador Kateos sends her regards."

"Display!" Runacres commanded, his own joy welling.

Kateos's magnificent image blossomed on the holo-vid, her lashes rigid with emotion, her pebbly skin flushed, her immense features splayed wide. She was beautiful.

"Admiral Runacres, my dear friend," Kateos began, her voice deep and unaccented. "I hope this finds you well. I request permission to download a permanent delegation from the governments of Kon. Also, you may have noticed our gift by now. If you have a suitable location, Armada Master Tar Fell wishes to install a defense satellite, compliments of my sovereign and my inspiration, King Ollant II."

"Prepare parking parameters for lunar orbit," Runacres ordered. "We must protect the shipyards. Assign a full squadron of tugs. Smartly."

"Aye, aye, sir," his operations officer replied.

"But, Admiral," Klein whispered, "the politicians will howl. They'll all want geo-stationary coverage."

"There is but one satellite," Runacres snapped, his concerns lifting. "We'll deal with the infernal politicians later."

He stared, almost in rapture, at the konish ambassador's bovine countenance; but before he could dictate a response, his attention was usurped by muffled cheers from the comm center. A ripple of jubilation spread across the operation center gaining decibels as it traveled.

"Watch commander, what is the meaning of this infernal din?" Runacres roared, angered that vital intelligence was spreading so rapidly. Flashing message lights illuminated his console.

"Silence on deck!" the watch officer sternly shouted, but his face was splitting with joy.

"Admiral!" an aide reported. "Zinger from Captain Ito!"

"Out with it, man!" Runacres snapped, awestruck at real-time images of the defense satellite.

"Commander Buccari has returned, sir," the aide stammered. "Her rescue mission recovered over a hundred human prisoners, descendents of the Shaula massacre."

Any irritation that Runacres harbored was swept away. But then the entire headquarters exploded in another thundering outburst, reigniting Runacres's rancor. The admiral stepped in front of the senior watch officer and delivered a glare to turn mere mortals to stone.

"Silence on deck! Silence!" shouted the watch commander.

Runacres directed the same baleful gaze onto the watch team noting that the watch officers, messengers, and quartermasters were still passing furtive glances, their faces splitting with foolish grins. A façade of decorum settled upon the command center.

"Well?" Runacres demanded.

"Jupiter's balls, Admiral!" the watch commander blurted. "Tar Fell destroyed five more Ulaggi battleships at Pitcairn."

Chapter Thirty-four

Handoff

"*Condor*, flight of two, high key," Sharl Buccari reported, disengaging the EPL's autopilot. It was unusually clear for the dissipated planet. To the east a quartering moon

lifted above Edmonton's sulphurous haze; to the west ranged the sparsely snowcapped Canadian Rockies, pale imitation of Genellan's Corlian Range.

"Roger, *Condor* is-ah number two for landing," the konish controller replied in heavily accented but serviceable Legion Standard. "The ambassador's downloader is rolling out. Stand-uh by for clearance."

Buccari acknowledged, gently testing control response; the heavy-lifter on her wing remained in rock-solid formation. Beyond her left wing sprawled the roll-out runways of the Calgary Extraterritorial Facility. Situated in a remote corner of the Alberta Military Test Grounds, CEF was a heavily guarded enclave ceded as ambassadorial holdings to the planet Kon. Tar Fell's lander had already touched down, delivering Ambassador Kateos and the konish delegation to their fortified facility. Buccari's EPL was next to land, escorting a Legion heavy-lifter and its precious cargo—the descendents of the Shaula Massacre, their number increased by childbirth to one hundred and twenty-four, including fourteen males, likely the most indulged infants in the history of the species.

Buccari thought of her own gray-eyed boy and how much of his life she had missed. In the frantic interval before the jump to Earth, she had stolen precious moments from her duties to drop into MacArthur's Valley, to touch her son, to live with him for even a few hours. She laughed at bittersweet memories; her son had kissed her and hugged her, but the lad had grown so tall and so somber, so adult. She would bring him to Earth next time. He would enter the Academy. And she would make time to marry Jake Carmichael. They would become a family.

Her mood plummeted. She and Carmichael had just exchanged holo-vids, awkward with transmission delay. Carmichael was distracted, although his words were passionate and tender. She loved the big man, and she knew that he loved her, but life was not helping. They were finally in the same star system, not separated by light years, but still they were not close enough to touch. They had agreed to postpone the wedding, again. Time was too short; she had to train the cliff dwellers, and Carmichael had to bring *Avenger* on line. She rejoiced in his great triumph, swelling with vicarious pride; Jake Carmichael, commanding officer of the newest and most powerful battleship in the Legion Space Fleet, had reached the zenith of his profession. With a nagging pang—perhaps of jealousy—Buccari realized that Carmichael may have already wed.

"*Condor* flight is-ah cleared to land, runway two-eight left," the konish controller announced.

Buccari acknowledged. Her spirits lifted; she was piloting an aircraft through clear skies, and she was bringing to the peoples of Earth an extraordinary gift.

All the world's citizens awaited the hostages' return, certainly none more so than the xenophobic states of the Asian Cooperation. These were their grandchildren, missing all these decades. Word of their rescue had circled the globe with furious joy and lifted the leaden spirits of all humanity. Accompanying that heartwarming news and spicing it with vindictive passion was the report of Tar Fell's smashing victory. Vid announcers around the world arrogantly proclaimed the Ulaggi defeated; the vanquished aliens would not dare attack Earth now. Buccari knew better; they had but pricked a giant's finger. The giant was angry.

"Temperatures are in range. All systems are green," Toon reported.

His synthesized voice dispelled Buccari's returning gloom. For both their sanity, Buccari had left Winfried Fenstermacher on the beach, the feisty boatswain delirious with joy to remain with his family. Buccari had replaced the human with Toon-the-speaker.

"Very well," Buccari replied. Toon had qualified as EPL systems operator on the

outbound leg to Pitcairn. The inquisitive and competent guildier had since qualified as corvette copilot, and Buccari was ready to recommend him as command pilot. Toon was no anomaly; a cadre of twenty guildiers served aboard *Novaya Zemlya*. Not surprisingly, all were of the same cliff dweller guild; every corvette in *Condor Squadron* had a steam-user assigned to its crew, serving either on the flightdeck or in the engineering or weapons spaces. There were thousands more back on Genellan waiting to volunteer, too many for the available instructors and simulation time. Buccari had submitted a request for resources up the chain of command, but she would not wait; she would present her case directly to Admiral Runacres. She would ask for another mothership and another squadron of corvettes to be deployed to Genellan. The fleet desperately needed crews. Two questions remained: would fleet commanders accept the intense aliens among their flight crews? More importantly, how would the guildiers perform in combat?

"Hold's secure," Petty Officer Nakimura, the loading boatswain, reported. "Passengers locked down."

"How's the weather, Commander?" Captain Ito's deep voice asked over the intercom.

"Nice day for the handoff, Captain," she replied, her dark mood returning. Sam Ito, Nestor Godonov, Jim Buck, and Jocko Chastain were her passengers. They were, all of them, descending to Earth, to be decorated by President Stark himself. Buccari had grown to love and respect Sam Ito as a father; but the diminutive man had begun to frighten her. Ever since returning from Pitcairn, *Novaya Zemlya's* skipper had demanded precious hours of her time, counseling her, warning her, the usually taciturn officer's intensity approaching wide-eyed fervor. She had attempted to humor him, but Ito's persistent, unsmiling zeal unnerved her. His grandiose intentions were nothing short of mutiny. She worried for the man's sanity.

Buccari worried for her own sanity. Information feeds from Earth had provided incredulous scenes, frighteningly so. A jubilant world awaited the return of the Pitcairn hostages, but that joy was just an undercurrent of the roiling emotions sweeping the globe; more dominant was the tumultuous—no, virulent—anticipation of her own return. The vids from Earth were saturated with images of millions of people screaming her name, multitudes lifting their arms to the heavens, waving white flags, their prayers rising in neck-crawling chants; and the vids never ceased, playing constantly in wardrooms and ready rooms, their throbbing soundtracks drifting from every compartment and workspace.

Sharl Buccari had always enjoyed the attentions of her fellow spacers, but now the expressions of respect and admiration were replaced with dumbstruck awe, or worse, furtive glances. Even squadron mates seemed uncomfortable, and not a few avoided her. Sharl Buccari, the discoverer and lord of Genellan, present at all victories, and now the rescuer of the Pitcairn hostages, had become the avatar of human hope. Buccari's reputation had exceeded the heroic, even the legendary; she had become mythic. She was frightened, more frightened than she had ever been in her life. To her horror, Sam Ito's pleas had even begun to make sense; she was beginning to understand his vision. But still, what Sam Ito wanted was mutiny.

She pulled the EPL through a wide arc and steadied on final. The heavy-lifter, slaved to her inputs, held perfect formation down the glideslope. On final she looked out over the Alberta plains; in the distance she could see the guard towers and perimeter fences of the CEF. Something was not right; the land on the near side of the fence was dappled green and dun, but beyond the demarcation was a shifting mass of unnatural tones. She increased magnification on her helmet visor; all along the fence swarmed a tide of humanity, the host of some misbegotten crusade, red and white

banners flying.

Buccari tore her gaze from the distant mob and focused on the approach. The EPL and the linked heavy-lifter kissed the runway in perfect unison, departing the runway onto a high-speed taxi way. The ships were towed into a cordoned area between massive hangers. Suborbital cruisers from at least two dozen Earth nations were parked on the mat behind a row of grandstands. Buccari was relieved to see only a modest crowd, perhaps five hundred humans and a hundred kones. Red carpet was strewn with military precision, and sunlight glistened gold and silver from musical instruments.

"Five minutes for temperatures to equalize," Toon reported.

"Show time," Buccari muttered, her heart once again beating against the tug of full planetary gravity. She untethered and crawled into the suit locker. While they waited for the hatch seals to unbond, Buccari and Toon changed into full dress. Her passengers were already in their regalia; Sergeant Chastain, bending beneath the low overhead, and Major Buck stood out in their crimson tunics. Master Toon, in midnight-blue and brilliant white, his watch cap rakishly tipped, resembled a mattock-headed penguin, an exceedingly homely one. Buccari, medals jangling, straightened the guilders cap. Rows of decorations adorned her swelling breast. The Legion Medal of Honor hung from a sky-blue ribbon about her neck, the gold medallion embellished with a second cluster. The high, choking collar of her navy-blue tunic accentuated her sculpted jaw, perfect match to her fine nose, high cheeks, and passionate mouth. Her countenance was not immune from the travails of interstellar acceleration or from the stress of command; wrinkles radiated from Buccari's eyes, and a lacework of broken veins covered her face and head; and there was the scar, the pearly white line from temple to cheek, a badge of courage bestowed by the hooking claw of a Genellan field dragon.

"Are you ready, Commander?" Ito asked, his thin chest crowded with an array of decorations rivaling Buccari's.

"Not for this," Buccari replied, stepping to Ito's side and signaling Petty Officer Nakajima to open the hatch. Martial music penetrated the seals and grew louder as the ramp lowered. Above the music she heard a distinct buzz, like far distant surf. A trio of vid-cams hovered overhead, their micro-engines whining. A saluting noblekone with a squad of gigantic Royal Hegemonic soldiers stood ready. Even standing at attention on all fours the escort formed a breathing mountain range; and even though they wore full Genellan suits, the acrid aroma of their anxiety was discernable.

"What is that noise?" Ito asked.

Buccari knew. She wanted to crawl back into the EPL.

"There-ah is a great-ah mob outside the facility," the noblekone officer replied. "They broke-ah through outer security, but we are holding them at the internal perimeter. It-ah has been ugly. Many thousands have been injured and some hundreds have died. Vid-screens were erected and it-ah seems to have appeased them. We go now?"

"Be strong, Sharl," Ito whispered, his hand propelling her.

Medals clinking, she fell into step, marching to the pounding rhythm. Tall and brilliantly red, Chastain and Major Buck followed. Godonov and Toon came last with the cliff dweller shambling at his own short-legged gait. Two vid-cams swooped in and out of Buccari's field of vision, while a third maintained station directly in her face.

The heavy-lifter's precious cargo was already disgorged. Garbed in Legion-yellow jumpsuits, the mass of ex-hostages huddled together like a many-legged animal, clutching their precious offspring. Pake, standing as their leader, gaped about at the immense hangers and massive konish landers; but then Chastain's resplendent form

caught her attention.

"Joko!" she shouted, running towards the Marine.

The others followed, screaming with glee. Chastain, Buck, and Godonov stepped out to meet them, leaning into the happy tide. The konish officer harrumphed as his troops marked time. Grinning stupidly, Godonov and the Marines herded the refugees into line, although Pake refused to release Chastain's arm. With Captain Ito and Buccari leading the way, they wandered in happy confusion past ranks of hulking konish troops in brown and red, past Legion Marines resplendent in crimson and gold, past an Alberta Brigade unit under chromed helmets, and finally approached a company of Asian Cooperation Commandos in forest green.

As Buccari passed before the Asian troops, stern and rigid though they were, she anticipated some reaction to the giggling females; but as Buccari came abreast, a soldier in the first rank dropped to his knees and placed his forehead on the tarmac. Two or three at a time, others followed. Within seconds almost all were kowtowing, including petty officers and even some officers. Outraged commanders waded through the broken ranks, kicking prostrate men and beating them with swords. The vid-cams darted away, retrieved by the censors.

"No!" Buccari pleaded, breaking step and advancing on the kneeling soldiers. "Get up! Listen to your officers! Please!"

"Keep moving, Sharl," Ito hissed, pulling her back. "They won't stand until you're away."

"Damn it, Sam," she gasped, staggering forward. But Ito was right; once she was clear, the bloodied and disheveled soldiers resumed ranks behind fuming officers. Buccari lifted her chin and marched toward the honor guard standing before the VIP pavilion.

There were five standard bearers: a human on each flank, one holding the Tellurian Legion flag, the other that of the Asian Cooperation; and three Gargantuan kones, one under the flag of the Konish Planetary Defense Force at center, another bearing the national standard of Thullolia, Tar Fell's homeland, and a third with the Royal Hegemonic banner. Buccari prayed the flags standing together represented a new unity of purpose, but she was not optimistic. The nations of Kon had learned the hard way. She hoped the lesson was not repeated on Earth.

Kateos waited beneath the flags; she wore a Genellan suit but held her helmet under her massive arm, her bittersweet joy wafting on the breeze. At her side were Admiral Runacres in Glengarry and Nightwatch kilt, President Stark in his usual morbid, bediamonded attire, and Premier Kim of the Asian Cooperation, a short, blocky man in a brown suit. Arrayed behind them were a dozen kones in Genellan suits and, dwarfed by the kones, an equal number of humans. Buccari recognized Dowornobb and Tar Fell.

Buccari and company halted in front of the flags, forming a rank in order of seniority with Captain Ito at one end and Master Toon at the other. The ex-hostages shuffled behind them in a whispering mob. The band beat to a halt. Ambassador Kateos stepped forward.

"Today marks the beginning of permanent diplomatic contact between all nations of Earth and all nations of Kon," she thundered in Legion Standard. The ambassador's words echoed over the distribution system and were retransmitted around the globe and into all the languages of Earth. "But more importantly, today we bear witness to a miraculous homecoming, and we give thanks and praise to those responsible for making it possible."

With few words—no doubt but Kateos was cold without her helmet—King Ollant's envoy presented the new konish delegation, ambassadors from the sovereign

nations of Kon, and invited all governments of Earth to submit emissaries to the Konish Embassy. Enthusiastic applause thundered from the galleries.

"Now it is my pleasure to acknowledge the bravery of my friends," Kateos boomed. "President Stark and Admiral Runacres will do the honors?"

Stark and Runacres, followed by aides carrying lacquered boxes, stepped forward and proceeded to present a wealth of medals, starting with Master Toon. Mercifully the citations and the accompanying speeches were short. As they were about to award Godonov his medals, Admiral Runacres, the leading member of the presentation party, stepped in front of Buccari and pivoted to face her.

"Please behave," Runacres whispered, saluting and then shaking her hand. Godonov's presentation complete, Runacres left-faced and moved in front of Captain Ito. President Stark, his cologne preceding him, stepped in front of Buccari.

"Ah, Commander," the tall, unctuous leader of the Tellurian Legion said. "It has been a long time, has it not?"

He stood too close. Buccari craned her neck to look into the man's miserable artificial countenance. The urge to kick him where it hurt was overwhelming.

"Seems like just yesterday, Mr. President," she replied. "May I extend my congratulations on your election to office?"

"Thank you," he replied, stepping even closer as the citations were read. He draped a Legion Star, her third, about her neck and pinned two other medals onto her breast. Buccari shivered at his touch.

"President Stark," she said. "Please ask Premier Kim not to punish those soldiers."

"Not now, Commander," Captain Ito growled out of the side of his mouth. Admiral Runacres turned a darker shade of pink.

"Quite all right," Stark replied, shaking Buccari's hand. He turned and stepped in front of Captain Ito. "Commander Buccari will be able to ask Premier Kim herself. He wishes to meet our great heroine, and he seems quite accommodating. Only moments ago he subordinated the entire Asian Cooperation HLA Fleet to Admiral Runacres, specifically in appreciation of Commander Buccari's latest exploits."

"Fourteen line-of-battle," Runacres muttered as Stark pinned a medal on Ito's chest. "I'm giving you your flag, Sam. I want you and Commander Buccari to bring Admiral Zhang onboard, just like you did Tar Fell."

Buccari was stunned.

"Will NZ not return to Genellan, Admiral?" she demanded.

"Shall we discuss this later?" Stark said curtly, shaking Ito's hand. "This is hardly the time."

Admiral Runacres and President Stark returned to Kateos's side. Tar Fell and Premier Kim stepped forward, the human comically tiny in the armada-master's solar-eclipsing shadow. An Asian Cooperation band struck up an anthem. Buccari, her mind racing with the implications of Runacres's statement, barely noticed. She would not be returning to Genellan. But she must; she had cliff dweller crews to train, or was that just a conceit? Others could train them; but the program needed hardware and instructors. Surely Admiral Runacres would understand.

Not returning to Genellan changed everything; she would immediately send for her son; and she could marry Carmichael. But then Buccari came to a realization—she was being manipulated. Sam Ito had already talked with Runacres. They were playing their great chess game, conspiring to take over the governments of the world, and she was their queen. The Konish defense satellite gave them immense power over the capitals of the globe, and soon they would control the world's space fleets. Buccari laughed, recoiling at own her paranoia. Admiral Runacres was only trying to protect the

planet. He would never accept Ito's crazy scheme.

A commotion brought Buccari alert. An Asian Cooperation sub-orbital was parked opposite the grandstands, there to receive the ex-hostages and hence to fly them to the land of their ancestors. A company of red-uniforms waving banners had formed a gauntlet leading to the loading stairs. Several of their number, with Premier Kim at their side, attempted to herd the ex-hostages. A few started to obey but drew up short, balking at a change in guardianship. The little herd of yellow jumpsuits collapsed inward with a surprising number clinging to parts of Chastain's anatomy. An international incident was in the making; the Asians had already been embarrassed by their troops, and now their long-lost survivors were refusing transportation. Premier Kim's fuming rage was poorly masked.

"We must get them on board," Buccari shouted, turning to intercede, but Chastain and Godonov were already tangled in the melee. Godonov, shouting in their language, attained some order but little cooperation. He continued to plead.

"Let me try, Commander," Chastain said, moving into the middle of the scrum. He took Pake by the shoulders and spoke to her, softly but with evident passion, his deathly serious countenance blushing radiantly. Pake, jaw agape, stared at the Marine. The others, especially Pake's daughters, crowded close, whispering and giggling. Suddenly Pake, smiling beatifically, bowed sharply. She whirled and, barking orders, pushed the others before her, herding them through the gauntlet and up the boarding ladder. Chastain remained at the ladder's foot, waving sheepishly. Godonov, grinning hugely, retreated from the mob. Buccari caught Premier Kim's eye, his beleaguered countenance actually entertaining a smile. Kim nodded sharply, almost a bow. Buccari returned the gesture and lifted an easy salute. Godonov, mistaking the salute for him, returned it with élan.

"Nes, what did you say to get them moving?" Buccari asked.

"Wasn't me. It was Jocko."

"What did he say?" Buck asked

"He asked Pake to marry him," Godonov replied. "Jocko said he would come and get her if she didn't come back to him. That they believed."

Chapter Thirty-five

Reunion

Bands playing, the sub-orbital taxied onto the runway and blasted into the hazy Alberta sky. As the roar of its engines faded, the husky hum of the distant mob reentered Buccari's awareness. Weariness came over her. She knew she could not stay on Earth or remain anywhere near Earth. She was no Messiah; she was a throttle-jockey, a spacer. The yearning to return to Genellan welled mightily within, an ache in her heart.

"The newly installed konish ambassadors request the honor of your presence," Kateos commanded over the speaker system. "All will adjourn to the embassy grounds."

Buccari surveyed the migrating crowd. Captain Ito joined Admiral Runacres and Tar Fell in discussions with President Stark and Premier Kim. Buccari—with Toon tailing her like a second shadow—elected to avoid the brass and instead followed her friends, reveling in Godonov's and Buck's unmerciful treatment of Chastain's marriage prospects. They came to the transportation terminus. Groundcars for humans lined up on one side; on the other, Kones boarded massive, environmentally contained vehicles the size of buses.

"A word with you, Commander?" a deep voice requested, a delightfully familiar voice. Buccari whirled to confront a saluting lieutenant commander in EPL flightsuit, tall and gorgeous. She closed her eyes, not believing, and reopened them.

"Hello, Sharl," Nash Hudson said, smiling sweetly.

Toon, waving spindly arms and jumping in circles, whistled with joy, his translation unit garbling with ultrasonic laughter.

"Lizard Lips!" Hudson shouted. His hands flashed a more intimate greeting.

"Look at you!" Buccari gasped. "You're beautiful!"

"Damn, it's good to see you, Sharl...ugh, Commander," he laughed as Buccari made contact.

"Mr. Hudson!" Chastain roared. The huge Marine ran up, waving his arms, undecided whether to salute or shake hands. Hudson and Buccari pulled him into their embrace. Godonov and Buck joined them, slapping Hudson on the back and shouting insults.

"It's great to see—"

"Citizen Hudsawn is here!" Scientist Dowornobb's interplanetary bellow drowned out Hudson's words. "My mate, it-ah is Citizen Hudsawn! Come! Come!" The ground trembled as the kone swept Hudson and several others up in his massive arms.

"Put me down, you big, ugly, cow-faced bastard!" Hudson shouted.

"Bastard, am I?" Dowornobb boomed. "You puny pellet of *goda dung*." But then Kateos—still without helmet—collided with all of them, her emotion bladders firing, the cloying, bittersweet aroma of her joy surrounding them in palpable waves. To the amusement and consternation of officers and dignitaries nearby, the kones, the cliff dweller, and the humans shouted and danced in a most undignified, if supremely happy, mob.

"Citizen Hudson, you will come to the reception," Kateos insisted, at last pushing apart. "Now I must play the good host and attend to my duties, and with some haste. Come, my mate. You have responsibilities." She grabbed Dowornobb and pulled him away. Waving happily, the giants departed in a thundering gallop.

"Uh, excuse me...Commander Buccari." An aide was at her elbow. "Admiral Runacres requests your immediate presence. We have a staff car waiting."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she replied, unable to take her eyes off Hudson's perfect face. "Give us a minute." She sent Toon ahead with Godonov and Buck. She would meet them at the reception.

"I'm back in the saddle, Sharl," Hudson blurted. "Corvette command pilot, no less. *Predator*-class. Call-sign *Eagle Three*, off *Avenger*. Jake's ship, and what a beautiful ship she is. Wait until you see her. Max Sakamoto's got the *Eagles* now. Old Brickshitter's got the group. She sent me down to pick up Admiral Runacres. He's shifting his flag when the party's over."

Buccari reveled in Hudson's gusto. The last time she had seen him the man had wanted to die; and his poor soul would easily have let go if had not been for his daughter. Her old friend's spirit was reborn but his eyes still registered the full measure of his loss.

"Oh, Nash," she whispered, suddenly serious. "Listen to me."

"What, Sharl?" he asked, his beautiful features transformed instantly into a grim mask. They knew each other too well.

Buccari felt someone at her shoulder.

"Excuse me, Commander Buccari," the flag aide persisted. "Admiral Runacres and President Stark have gone ahead with the premier. Captain Ito is waiting. He said there is not much time—"

"Please ask Captain Ito to go on without me," Sharl said. "Tell him I'm talking

with Nash Hudson. He'll understand."

"He said he would wait, sir," the aide replied, standing at attention. Buccari glared. The aide turned on his heel and opened some distance.

"What is it, Sharl?" Hudson asked. "Is it about Cassy?"

"She was taken from Genellan alive."

"What?" Hudson shouted, his features twitching between disbelief and astonished hope. "Where is she, Sharl? Is she still alive?"

"All we know is that she was alive. We recovered three Legion Marines, survivors from NEd's spaceport—you remember Major Becker? Their lifeboat crashed on Pitcairn Two. Cassy was removed from that same lifeboat before it entered the atmosphere, before we arrived in system. Major Becker thinks she was taken to another ship, Nash. He is certain that it was her."

Hudson's shoulders slumped. "I read the battle damage reports, Sharl. Tar Fell destroyed all enemy ships at Pitcairn."

"Four jumped before we arrived, Nash," Buccari replied, not certain if she credited her own words. She grabbed Hudson's hands. "We think Cassy was taken back to the Ulaggi home system."

Hudson clasped her hands and lifted his watering eyes. "That's a long way from here," he said, a tragic smile softening his features. "I knew she was alive, Sharl. I knew it."

"Come on," Buccari said, turning toward the VIP cars. "I need a drink."

"Me, too," he exhaled. "Damn, I missed you, Sharl."

"We're together now, Brown Bar," she replied, stopping and giving him an enduring hug, rank differences and public displays of affection be damned. "We're going to keep it that way. How would you like to go back to Genellan? I've got a job for you. We'll take Emerald home."

"You mean it?"

"Who-ah going to stop us, Citizen Hudsawn?" she replied, mimicking Dowornobb's thundering accents. "Let's go. Captain Ito is waiting."

The staff limousine was parked off to the side. Ito saw Hudson and Buccari coming. His face split with a grin, he threw open the door and jumped out to greet them.

The car exploded.

Chapter Thirty-six

Change of Plans

The blast hit like molten steel.

Buccari came to being carried at a rapid pace, cradled by an immensely strong arm. She felt cool air and the rasping texture of a Genellan suit against bare skin; her own uniform was in shreds. Her ears rang and her head throbbed, but her appendages were intact and answering; although there was searing pain in her left thigh. She lifted up to see konish troops, weapons drawn, pacing her rescuer. A stabbing in her shoulder made her groan.

"Hold-ah still," the kone carrying her admonished; it was the same officer that had earlier provided escort. Her dazed memory stirred, filling in gaps.

"Where's Hudson?" she cried, a rush of fear clearing her head. It hurt to talk; her lips were cracked and tasted of blood.

"I'm here, Sharl," Hudson gasped, running up beside her, his head bandaged with a bloody rag, his face blistered and streaked with gore—his poor beautiful new

face.

"Where's Captain Ito?" she demanded, her battered brain replaying the gut-twisting instant that Sam Ito's flickering silhouette was consumed by a horrific white-orange flash.

"Take it easy, Sharl," Hudson replied. "You need to relax."

Sam Ito was dead. Her head spun; her stomach roiled. The kone galloped up a ramp past Marines brandishing assault rifles and into the belly of *Novaya Zemlya's* heavy-lifter. She was deposited on a med-station and restrained. Hudson, shouting encouragement, was pulled from her sight. Technicians stripped away her shredded rags and initiated scanning probes, punching IVs into her limbs. A medical officer still in dress uniform, his features falling in and out of focus, leaned over her, prodding and thumping, intently scanning the scope dumps.

"Admiral on deck!" someone barked.

"How is she?" Runacres's winded voice came through the daze. Suddenly the fleet admiral's glacier-blue eyes were staring down, his livid, acceleration battered features framed with an unruly thatch of white hair.

"...concussion but no apparent edema," the doctor replied. "...need more tests. Besides burns...a dislocated shoulder...left thigh has a deep puncture...artery nicked. She lost a bucket of blood..."

"Iron lady," Runacres muttered, his features distorted.

"She'll be okay, sir," the doctor assured. "I'll clear her for orbital insertion."

"Upload Commander Buccari to NZ's medical facility. Immediately!" Runacres shouted as he disappeared from Buccari's view. The drugs were working; the throbbing in her head and leg were much diminished. She felt sleepy.

"All due respect, Admiral," she mumbled. "You need a haircut."

Runacres was at her side, his hand resting on hers.

"Allowing that you have been rendered daft," the admiral snorted, "I will ignore your insubordination. Must you make a habit of it?"

"Captain Ito's dead, isn't he?" she persisted.

"Technically he remains alive," Runacres replied, his voice catching. "His odds are short. We shall know more soon."

"An assassination?" she asked. Runacres nodded.

"Why Captain Ito? What is—"

"It was meant for you, Commander. I'm informed that your infernal dawdling saved your life, and possibly Captain Ito's. So now I am sending you back to Genellan, at least until you are returned to fighting form."

It took several heartbeats for the information to sink in—she was going back to Genellan. Of course she was. But then she remembered Runacres's assignment.

"What about Admiral Zhang? The Asian Fleet?" she asked.

"Others will be tasked," Runacres replied. "I have reviewed your recommendations on training guilders as corvette crew. I confess to some skepticism, but Tar Fell's and Captain Ito's endorsements are persuasive."

Her brain spun with so many reversals. The wedding was off—again; but then it was never on, was it? An inspired thought sifted up through her befuddlement.

"I want Nash Hudson," she said. "I need more instructors. He speaks the language."

"Done," Runacres replied, signaling an aide.

"Admiral, there's something else..." she mumbled, the drugs weighing upon her eyelids and fuzzing her tongue. She struggled with informing on Sam Ito, but this might be her last chance for many months to confront Runacres. She respected both men too much to let circumstances get further out of control.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Captain Ito had some crazy plans—"

"Step away," Runacres snapped in a tone brooking no argument. The doctor and the med-techs reluctantly pulled from their tasks and left the treatment alcove.

"Sir, I don't want to—" she started to say.

"I am aware of Captain Ito's...plans, Commander," Runacres replied, leaning close. "They have been developing for years, at my behest. You were to receive a formal mission briefing—this very day in fact; however, in light of events, political action is premature. The strategic environment is foul, and you are simply not ready."

"Wha...if I'm never ready, Admiral?" she slurred, her brain deadening. "Wha...if doan wanna' be...Messiah?"

"Commander Buccari," Runacres said, but not sternly. "I insist that you refrain from employing inappropriate labels, and that you reserve further comment until you have been fully briefed. I have every confidence in your ability to perceive your duty and to fulfill your responsibilities."

Buccari desperately wished to argue the point. Instead she fell unconscious.

Chapter Thirty-seven

New Hope

Runacres, fighting anger and despair, strode down the lifter ramp, leaving the frenzy of launch preparation behind. Legion Marines and konish embassy guards snapped to attention as he passed. The admiral's foul temper was checked as Commander Godonov, Sergeant Major Chastain, Major Buck, and Buccari's cliff dweller protégée, ran up the ramp, colliding like Keystone Kops as they came to attention, their expressions twisted with tragic concern.

"Commander Buccari is out of danger," Runacres reported, returning their salute flurry. He continued down the ramp, his dark mood and the oppressive tug of gravity lightened by the broadside of their relief and their ensuing stampede to see their leader. A squad of aides and a convoy of security vehicles waited at the bottom of the ramp.

"Admiral Runacres," a voice shouted.

Runacres wearily turned to see a tall spacer limping in pursuit, his bandaged face burned raw, his charred flightsuit shredded; an IV hung from his arm and a team of med-techs closed on him from behind.

"Ah, Mr. Hudson!" Runacres replied, his mood brightening another shade. He ignored the salute and firmly turned the young officer toward the pursuing med-techs. "I have followed your frequent rehabilitations. I confess you seem devoted to your own ruin. I am also informed that your injuries are not life-threatening; however they do require attention. You will return to the care of the medical staff. That is an order."

"Aye, sir, but I'm supposed to ferry you up to *Avenger*," Hudson replied. "I don't—"

"I shall find another pilot, son," Runacres replied. He had to shout; sub-orbital cruisers transporting international delegations were lining up for departure; Ambassador Kateos had ordered all humans removed from the CEF. "Your assignment has changed. You will be returning to Genellan with Commander Buccari. She requires your particular assistance. My aides will see that your kit is transferred."

"Thank you, sir," Hudson replied. "Sir, my daughter—"

"Of course, Emerald—a lovely child, the image of her mother," Runacres replied, his memory triggering. "Jupiter's balls, man! You were informed that Captain Quinn

was seen alive at Pitcairn, were you not?"

"Yes, sir, I was," Hudson replied, choking back emotion.

"I will do everything in my power to recover your wife, Hudson," Runacres shouted, giving rare vent to his own emotions. "I will send orders for your daughter's immediate upload. You must send word to her guardian." He directed an aide to facilitate the communications. "Now I must depart. Best of luck, son, and...do take better care of yourself."

Runacres dropped wearily into the staff car's upholstery and endeavored to relax, a difficult state to attain on Earth's besotted surface. He ignored message alerts and ordered his aides into another car. The attack had deeply unsettled his nerve. There had been other assassination attempts; more than once he had been their target. Runacres suspected Stark, or at least elements of Stark's political faction. That the agents of death were able to execute their murderous handiwork so deep within the boundaries of the konish enclave gave Runacres new doubts; had kones become corrupted? Certainly King Ollant and Tar Fell were under Buccari's spell, but there were lesser leaders on Kon that might succumb to Stark's machinations. Runacres steeled his resolve. Someday—and he hoped soon—he would destroy Stark, but first he needed to save Earth from the Ulaggi. If only Stark would give him time.

Runacres's car, escorted by konish security, proceeded at immoderate speed toward the central compound. Constructed largely underground, the visible portion of the embassy was squat and ponderous yet grandly delicate by konish standards; its central edifice reached into the sky for fifteen stories with overly engineered buttresses, breathlessly precarious architecture for kones, rivaling the tallest and most intricate structures on their home planet.

Konish interior dimensions were predictably generous, but the chambers of the Minister Plenipotentiary, with heavy columns and cathedral windows were well suited to a magisterial court. The ambience was oppressive, with heady densities of methane and carbon monoxide. Runacres grabbed a breather unit from his aide. Kateos, garbed in ambassadorial robes, greeted him at the grand entrance. Tar Fell and Dowornobb, also shed of their Genellan suits, were at her side, their immense mass overshadowed by their greater concern, palpably discernable.

"How is she, Admiral?" Kateos demanded, her emotion bladders firing promiscuously. Dowornobb's and Tar Fell's profligate emotions played copious harmony; the cloying odors were overwhelming. Runacres snugged the breather unit to his face.

"Her injuries are not mortal," he replied. "She is whole."

"Joy!" Kateos thundered. Dowornobb and Tar Fell leapt into the air, pounding each other on the back. The marble floor trembled.

"She is sedated. I have ordered her evacuated to *Novaya Zemlya* for remediation and hence to Genellan in company with Tar Fell's task force."

"Good...she will be safer there," President Stark said, parading into the chamber, his stentorian voice muffled by a breather unit. A cadre of bediamonded assistants and not a few broad-shouldered Legion Security Service agents, uniformly dressed in black, flanked the president. They nervously measured the attending Imperial guards, also garbed in black, as the konish security established positions around the humans.

Stark's unrelenting arrogance was infuriating. The politician may not have claimed Buccari's life, but he had accomplished his sinister purpose; driven back to Genellan, Buccari was no threat to his power base.

"President Stark," Runacres growled. "Captain Ito's car was under Legion protection. How could this have happened?"

"I have apologized to the ambassador," Stark replied in sterile tones. "Those responsible will be punished. You have my promise."

Punished for failure, Runacres wanted to shout. He thrust balled fists behind his back in effort to avoid throttling the President of the Tellurian Legion.

"President Stark has salutary news," Kateos said, perceiving the admiral's will to do violence. "He wishes to impart these tidings before returning to Edmonton."

"You will be gratified, Admiral," Stark declared, "that the Caliphate has responded to the Asian Cooperation's gesture of largesse. They have also declared for detente. Their ambassador informs me that ten Turko-Gallic ships capable of hyperlight operations will be pledged to Legion control."

One of Stark's diamond-studded ghouls produced a listing. Runacres scanned the order of battle. He was familiar with the TGSR vessels; six were nearing obsolescence, the others only marginally more effective. And yet he was pleased; he would employ them for set-piece work, relieving Legion ships for offensive duties. He nodded pensively.

"Beyond doubt, we are prepared for the Ulaggi," Stark crowed, "should they even dare attack! Of course, you will resume settlement convoys to Genellan."

"It is not enough," Runacres said.

"What more do you possibly need?" Stark blurted.

"Five times, nay, ten times more weight of weaponry. When the reckoning comes, Mr. President, it will be a full tide of despair."

"Rubbish, we have this...this defense station over our heads," Stark snarled, contemptuously. "And the konish fleet stands between us and the Ulaggi."

"The satellite is Godsend," Runacres replied. "But it only closes a small arc of our vulnerability. And nothing prevents the Ulaggi from jumping directly for Earth. We must be prepared to confront the demon on our own. We must continue to defensively marshal our ships—in this system."

"Utter nonsense!" Stark snarled. "I order you to immediately resume a full schedule of settlement transfers—no, an accelerated schedule. We must make up for lost time."

"Lost time?" Runacres muttered. "Sir, can you not comprehend? New Edmonton was melted to the ground. Have you not seen the images? No more colonists will go to that planet until Governor St. Pierre is ready to receive them, and I will not send line-of-battle ships to Genellan until the defense of Earth is assured."

"But you have defeated the Ulaggi, man!" Stark screamed.

"All respect, Mr. President, but you are a fool."

Tar Fell and Dowornobb exchanged horrified glances. Stark swelled erect, towering over Runacres, but wavering unsteadily, as if tossed by a gale. Runacres, chin jutting, seem to grow taller and broader.

"You, sir, are relieved," Stark snarled.

"Stop!" Kateos thundered as she stepped between the humans, separating them with her inarguable girth. Kateos dropped to all fours and pressed her immense countenance nose-to-nose with the Tellurian president. Speechless, Stark fell backward. His security agents did likewise.

"President Stark," Kateos said, her deep voice vibrating human skulls. "If Admiral Runacres should be relieved, I would be disappointed. I have the power to terminate all Genellan settlement...forever? Do you understand?"

Stark, lifting his patrician nose, swallowed and nodded. "Perhaps I spoke unwisely," he replied.

"I have a compromise—that you will *both* accept," Kateos continued, fetching Runacres a hard glance. "Admiral Runacres will immediately prepare transports for the

standard load of two thousand settlers. Armada Master Tar Fell will provide escort for these transports. Mr. President, I will persuade Commander Buccari—I beg your pardon—Governor St. Pierre, to accept these colonists. Listen to me, my friends. Our focus...our only focus must be the Ulaggi menace."

"Of course," Stark muttered, composing himself, his measured panache returned, excepting the furious glow of his ears and neck.

"It-ah is settled then," Tar Fell boomed. "Let-ah us go about our tasks, quickly please, quickly. I would-ah jump in four of your days."

"Transports will be ready," Runacres growled.

"Thank you, Ambassador," President Stark puffed. Ignoring Runacres, the Legion President turned on his heel, dragging away the shreds of his dignity and the phalanx of security personnel.

"I must also beg my leave," Runacres said, signaling an aide. "Ambassador Kateos, Armada Master Tar Fell, I extend my unbounded gratitude. The people of Earth can never thank you enough."

"I am confused, dear friend," Dowornobb asked. The scientist had been silent, studying the interactions. "Why-ah do your leaders so fear to cooperate?"

"Our own history is no different, my mate," Kateos replied.

"But-ah why would-ah they attempt to assassinate the greatest of human heroes?" Tar Fell asked.

"Above all else they fear losing power," Runacres replied. "Commander Buccari threatens them more than any alien fleet. They fear her even more than they fear you."

"Fear us?" Kateos asked. "But why? Kones and humans are—"

"No leader on this planet has seen a live Ulaggi," Runacres replied. "The massacres have occurred far out in space. To them, the battle vids are curiosities—perhaps even entertainment; but they have seen you, and you frighten them very much. Your satellite, the kindest, most benevolent sacrifice in the history of this galaxy, intimidates them. They do not see a gift; instead they see a massive weapons platform, hanging over their heads like some great sword of Damocles...for they are all liars."

"Sword of Damocles?" Dowornobb muttered to Tar Fell. The armada master shrugged his mountainous shoulders.

"Surely you are being dramatic," Kateos said.

"Sadly no," Runacres replied. "The leaders of Earth are cooperating only because you control Genellan emigration and because of Buccari's influence on their frightened populations. They feign cooperation while they conspire to change the equation. Dear Kateos, I would presume to give you some advice: never trust a human. Ever."

"But-ah you are human," Tar Fell replied. "And Citizen Sharl."

"Perhaps there are exceptions," Runacres laughed grimly, "but damned few. Humans are not like kones; humans conceal their emotions and their devious natures exceedingly well. I fear now that Stark has corrupted some of your own race. Else how could this assassination plot have advanced so far?"

Kateos slumped onto her haunches, unable to respond.

"The advantage remains ours," Runacres continued. "Sharl Buccari is alive. She does not seek it, nor does she yet appreciate it, but she holds more power than all of Earth's leaders combined. The vast populations of this planet have accepted her as a god."

"Gravity, but she has my pity," Kateos said.

"More importantly, she has your protection," Runacres replied. "But I must return

to my ships.”

Kateos took Runacres in her ponderous arms, lifting the human in an encompassing embrace, irresistible yet exquisitely tender. Dowornobb wrapped his even greater embrace around both of them, and Runacres returned the pressure to the limits of his ability.

“Until we touch again, my friend,” Kateos replied, setting the human on his feet. “Farewell.”

Runacres regained his composure and turned for the exit, his entourage of aides and staff officers falling in step. Konish guards snapped to attention and saluted as they passed. At the final security checkpoint an aide trotted abreast.

“Good news, sir,” she said. “Captain Ito’s central nervous system is answering and his brain signals are holding. The prognosis is good.”

Fighting his emotions, Runacres stepped into bright sunshine, removed his breather unit, and inhaled deeply.

“Perhaps there is a God,” he muttered, staring heavenward. Sam Ito would rejoin the fight.

“Get me off this planet,” he commanded. His step was lighter; he had two new fleets to deploy and a konish defense satellite to integrate into Earth’s defenses. A staff limo raced him to the insertion pads. As Runacres stepped from the car a thundering made him look up. Like all spacers Runacres could not resist following the flight of a heavy-lifter violently shedding the bounds of gravity, its blossoming contrail pulling heavenward in the afternoon sun. An EPL blasted off in the lifter’s wake, its trajectory curling gracefully around the heavier ship’s column of exhaust gas like the coils of a spring.

“That’s Buccari’s apple,” Runacres said. “Who is the pilot?”

“Master Toon, the cliff dweller, Admiral,” the aide replied.

Toon-the-speaker, sensing the atmosphere’s decreasing resistance, terminated roll pressure and tweaked the EPL’s nose onto the rendezvous vector. He blinked his eye-cursor and captured the pipper, locking the ship on course. This was his first EPL orbital insertion from a full gravity well, not counting simulator flights. Though pleasantly stimulated, Toon’s need for aerobatics came less from unbridled joy than from empirical curiosity; the guilder desired to physically test control degradation through the nether reaches of the atmosphere. He suspected the tactile algorithm used in EPL simulators gave control surfaces more authority than warranted. His suspicions were confirmed.

Toon drove the EPL unerringly to an orbital intercept with *Condor One* and slid into position alongside the looming, slab-sided corvette. He requested permission to come aboard.

“Looking good, Lizzie,” Lieutenant Thompson replied. “Cleared.”

Toon acknowledged and deftly piloted the lander into its bay. As docking clamps captured his craft a cheer lifted from its hold. The guilder fastidiously completed the secure checklist while his long-leg passengers floated noisily through the top hatch. Toon was last out, joining the corvette’s crew as they flocked together in the crew rest compartment. Confusing to Toon, the entire crew was there, including the bridge and engineering watches, all crowding about Commander Godonov, Major Buck, and Sergeant Chastain, furiously disparaging the attack on their leader. Toon also harbored anger for the foul deed, but the cliff dweller failed to comprehend the wasteful moaning, or the abandonment of watch stations. Short-one-who-leads was in the care of her gardeners. She would fully recover. This gave Toon joy, but above all the guilder realized that there was work to be done.

Toon's brain-rattling screech silenced all conversation. The long-legs stared, wide-eyed. Commander Godonov and Major Buck were senior, but they were not pilots. They were passengers. Toon was crew-manifested as corvette third officer. Lieutenant Thompson as copilot was now pilot-in-command; but the human was not acting appropriately. Toon was now copilot. It was up to him to reassert command authority.

"Why are you idle?" Toon asked, his machine voice flat and soft, belying the shrill intensity of his actual speech. "Report to your stations. We proceed to the mothership."

Lieutenant Thompson recovered quickly and slapped the guildler on his thin back. "Lizzie's right," the tall officer replied, taking command. "Everyone back to their jobs. Light 'em up."

"Mr. Thompson," the cliff dweller intoned. "I would be addressed as Master Toon. I am your copilot. It would be more dignified."

Chapter Thirty-eight

Qualifications

Sharl Buccari floated above her bridge station, studying the kaleidoscope of data. The watch team moved purposefully, reacting to the shifting battle model with professional detachment.

"Exercise objectives have been met, Skipper," *Novaya Zemlya's* executive officer reported from secondary conn. "All divisions reporting drill complete. Sir, Weapons and Engineering are begging for mercy."

"Life is hard," Buccari replied, struggling to control her exasperation, and her fatigue. Three months earlier she had arrived on board, drugged unconscious and incapable of protest. She had been in a remediation coma when *Novaya Zemlya* jumped into hyperlight, joining Tar Fell's task force for the return to the konish system. She awoke one month into the three-month transit and was informed that Admiral Runacres had promoted her to brevet captain and given her command of the aging *Island-class* mothership. Runacres's explanation, provided in an officious crypto-vid, was succinct: there were more ships coming off the ways than there were qualified captains; she would take Sam Ito's place. And besides—Runacres had smugly lectured—Buccari's injuries needed time to mend; what better way to recuperate than occupying the sedentary command seat of mothership.

Buccari grew furious—command of a fleet mothership was anything but sedentary. Buccari had been kicked upstairs because it was less dangerous than flying corvettes; but in protecting her, Runacres had promoted Buccari over the heads of the mothership's senior officers, all competent, hand-picked volunteers for the konish liaison mission. Buccari was no stranger to *NZ's* wardroom, having served thousands of transit hours on bridge and engineering watch teams. She deeply respected those officers. To Buccari's delight and gratification, the feeling was mutual; the department heads and the entire wardroom had welcomed the living legend as their new commander.

But if it was her ship, she was going to command it. The crew of five hundred souls and the daunting array of detection, propulsion, and weapons systems would not stay battle-ready without training and exercise. Two months of HLA transit had been a blur of exercise, drilling not only the ship's systems and its crew but also, and perhaps most importantly, Buccari's ability to command them. They were three days out of Genellan. The crew had worked hard. Buccari, abusing battle stims and relentlessly driving herself, had worked herself even harder. *NZ* and her skipper were in fighting form.

"Stand down from battle stations," Buccari ordered, pushing off from her command station. "Set normal cruise. Engage the H-ring. I'll be in Ready One."

Floating in null-gee, she pulled off her helmet and shed her battle armor. She should have headed for her underway cabin and much needed rest, but she was wired. She needed to let her brain cool. And besides she wanted to review the progress of the cliff dweller corvette crews. Hudson had made outrageous claims. She could only hope they were half true.

"Captain leaving the bridge," the watch quartermaster shouted. The Marine sentry snapped to.

"Carry on," she replied, the back of her neck still warming at the honors of command. Hatches opened and closed as she floated from the bridge; passageway security sensors winked and beeped at her passing. She kicked off a bounce plate and arrowed downward to the transit bore. She grabbed a tractor lug and pushed off, accelerating downward. Drifting free in null-gee relaxed her, liberating her thoughts. She greedily anticipated seeing her son and spending precious time in MacArthur's Valley. It was early spring; it would be cold, the Great River likely still frozen. Her thoughts shifted easily to Reggie St. Pierre and to the resurrection of New Edmonton.

She checked her momentum; the large muscles of her left leg, though well healed, remained stiff, and her weight was up. Thirty days in the remediation tank had healed her burns and repaired her shoulder. The regenerative process had also cleared up the spider webs of damaged veins and smoothed out the scar. Buccari was disconsolate at the repair; the horrid scar had been an emotional badge, a life-marker—a memory; but she could still feel a ridge of gristle beneath the perfect skin; strangely, the disfigurement gave her comfort. She fingered the vestige, recalling a simpler time—and, with its touch, she mourned a lion-hearted, gray-eyed Marine.

Exiting the transit bore at Level Ten, she floated down the midnight blue corridors of corvette operations. Pilots in flightsuits, human and cliff dweller, pressed against the wall as she glided past. The guilders' pelts were filling in. Early in the transit Master Toon had decided that if human spacers were to be hairless aboard their motherships, then cliff dwellers would also have full depilatories. Guilders, like all cliff dwellers, had pelts of exquisite fur, fine and dense. With fur, guilders were as ugly as mud. Without their coats their horrid homeliness defied description. With piebald pink and black skin rippling over ropy sinews, the NZ's wags called them PTCs, short for 'plucked thunder-chickens.' When Buccari awoke from her tank session and saw Master Toon, she immediately and expressly forbade cliff dwellers from taking depilatories, but it was too late; all guilders aboard NZ had forsaken their fur in the line of perceived duty.

Buccari entered Ready One, home to *Condor* Squadron, and smelled the musty funk common to all ready rooms. Lounging pilots bounced off the overhead, springing to rigid attention. Many were old squadron mates; they smiled hugely, but their greetings were formal. Things were different; gone was the off-color banter and camaraderie. They had not changed; she had.

"Where's Mr. Hudson?" she asked, inspecting the schedule. Her own name, under call sign *Condor One*, remained in the squadron roster's dominant position, a courtesy.

"Simulators, sir!" a dozen voices shouted as the duty officer, a guilder, struggled to engage his translation unit.

"Hoothoot," she muttered and turned for the training area. As compensation for kicking Buccari upstairs, Admiral Runacres had given her Nash Hudson; but the admiral had also augmented NZ's complement of six aging *Raptor*-class corvettes with four new-construction *Predator* corvettes, and a full crew of instructors. Hudson and his

demanding cadre had taken full advantage of the transit. Rumors of the guilders' amazing prowess flew about the wardroom, but Buccari had been too busy with the affairs of command to validate sea-stories.

She floated into the training area; classrooms and debriefing carrels lined one side; simulators filled the rest of the space. Beacons over three simulators indicated operations in progress. The area around the control consoles, where the instructors programmed their insidious tortures, was crowded. Nash Hudson, daughter in his lap, lorded over the technicians running the scenarios. Surrounding them were the other skippers of *Condor* Squadron, including Johnny DeChamps, the squadron commander.

"Hoot! Captain on deck," Sean Flaherty, announced, a huge smile on his face. Her old copilot was now *Condor Five*. The battle worn pilots, combat aces all, assumed a relaxed attention. Buccari waved them down.

"Timing's great, Booch...er, Captain," Hudson said, his color high. He shoved Emerald behind his back, as if to hide her. "We're just wrapping up."

Hudson's once perfect face was stretched taut with burn scars. He had been too busy for tank treatments. Buccari pushed him aside and grabbed the giggling girl.

"You got a crowd here, Johnny," she said.

"Hudson wanted every *Condor* skipper to sign off on this check ride," DeChamps said. "I agree. It's a big deal. We gotta' sell this to the fleet."

"What's the bottom line?" Buccari demanded.

"Fully qualified," DeChamps replied, punching keys; a standard qualification score scrolled across the screen, the results outstanding by any measure.

"Not just one crew, skipper!" Hudson added, bursting with pride. "We qualified three full cliff dweller crews."

"I thought we were seeding them into the rosters," Buccari said.

"We should rethink that," Hudson replied. "When they operate in their own language, their performance scores go way up. All three crews just qualified for combat operations, but Crew One, under Lizzie...er, Master Toon, qualified well above fleet median. I would not want to fight them. They're hot. Watch."

Buccari studied the monitors, observing the guilders in the final stages of drill. It was an inane tradition, she thought, but tradition was tradition. *Condor* crews, once successfully through their qualifications, were overwhelmed with a final combination of emergencies, inevitably resulting in an unrecoverable situation—crash, burn, and die, in pilot parlance. The cliff dwellers were in the midst of this ceremonial hazing, but it was hard to tell. Garbed in full battle armor, they looked like humans, albeit uniformly short ones. Their decisions were quickly executed, their movements economical.

"They're good! They're handling three criticals," the lead instructor said. "Here goes the *coup de grâce*. The end is near."

Except for periodic tweets and shrieks, the simulator intercom was silent. The end came, but from the cliff dweller reactions it was difficult to discern. They remained at their stations, their body language exuding dejection. The simulator technician punched open the hatches, but the cliff dwellers remained in place. Toon started shrieking in and out of human ranges, his tone unmistakable.

"Whoa!" Hudson said. "Lizzie's chewing them out."

"Master Toon," Buccari shouted into the controller microphone. She had to repeat herself several times before the cliff dweller's tirade abated. "Please come out."

Toon was first out. He yanked off his helmet, revealing his unfathomably ugly countenance—made impossibly uglier by the absence of fur—twisted with frustration. The rest of his crew followed, clinging together in the null-gee, their eyes uniformly downcast.

"Congratulations, Master Toon," DeChamps said, holding out his hand. "All

three crews satisfied requirements. Crews Two and Three are rated proficient and designated supernumerary. Your crew passed with exceptional scores. Master Toon, you are hereby designated a qualified primary commander. I am assigning you and your crew callsign *Condor Eight*."

The cliff dweller's snout jerked upwards, his gaze, still avoiding Buccari, darted from DeChamps to Hudson. His eyes narrowed to slits.

"My ship burned," Toon replied. The guildler's synthetic voice was sterile, but his defeated body language was eloquent.

"You and your crew did extremely well," Hudson laughed, flashing hand signs. "You will have command of a real ship."

Toon twisted to face Buccari, his doubt lingering. Humans frequently played jokes on the humorless cliff dwellers.

"Congratulations, Corvette Commander Toon," Buccari said.

The cliff dweller looked at her proffered hand. His snout peeled back, revealing sharp teeth—a rare smile from the guildler. Toon grabbed the human's hand with his spindly digits and laughed—an even rarer event—a shrill, head-splitting discordance. Toon's crew, at last comprehending, joined in, raising a din across sound spectrums unknown to human ears.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Passing Ships

Buccari left the celebration. For the first time in many months she felt optimistic, almost happy; but fatigue was winning. A flash summons beeped in her ear. A surge of adrenaline pulsed through her veins; a multiplexor summons meant trouble.

"Go," she replied, yawning.

"Citizen Sharl, come immediately to the lab!" Scientist Dowornobb blurted. "Make haste! We have little time."

"On my way," she replied. She dove for the transit bore and pushed upward, arrowing past gaping crew. A ship's commanding officer rushing about her own ship was poor form, but if Dowornobb wanted her to see something quickly, it must be important. She pushed out at Level Five, onto the pink and gray passageways of the Intelligence decks. Tweedling security robots, alarmed by her breakneck pace, painted her with sighting lasers but beeped her through. The oversized hatch to the HLA lab swung open; Buccari floated into the morbidly warm space.

"Ah, Citizen Sharl, er...Captain Buccari is here," Kateos announced, moving aside. The compartment was capacious enough to accommodate a team of konish and human HLA technicians, but Buccari's arrival coupled with the ambassador's presence overwhelmed the space. The atmosphere was set to konish standards; human technicians wore environmental suits against the heat and noxious gases. Instrumentation labeled in konish dominated the bulkheads. Scientist Dowornobb studied a particular display while images of Armada Master Tar Fell and Colonel Magoon, eyebrows protruding like piano wire, glared down from the holo-vid. Buccari raised a fist in salute.

"See this! See this," Dowornobb thundered in Legion standard, his emotion bladders popping softly.

"What, my friend?" she replied in konish. Perspiring, she moved beneath the excited scientist's great bulk, breathing through her mouth.

"Gravity, Scientist Dowornobb believes he has detected an approaching HLA fleet," Tar Fell boomed.

"There is no conjecture," Dowornobb responded. "I am tracking at least six—perhaps eight—gravitronic anomalies. Discrete hyperlight cells, I am certain of it."

"How is that possible?" Buccari asked. They were in the impenetrable murk of a hyperlight transit, warping along gravitronic radials, their material essence no longer defined in Newtonian space.

"Admiral Klein's excellent research has verified my hypothesis," Dowornobb replied. "Hyperlight cells transmit a bow wave, packets of energy pulses. Before we departed Sol-Sys I equipped our ships with sensors designed by Admiral Klein's technicians. These sensors have detected hyperlight cells tracking toward us in the opposite direction. They will pass close aboard. And soon. Very soon."

"They cannot be konish ships," Tar Fell growled.

"Or human," Buccari said. "But how is this possible? These must be very strong energy signals, or else—"

"They are on a grav-radial coincident to our own," Dowornobb replied. "Trajectory vector has near identical endpoints, different direction."

"An Ulaggi battle fleet!" Buccari said. "Backtracking to Earth." There could be no other explanation for this improbable intersection in the immensity of space. Buccari's brain raced, cycling and recycling meager alternatives.

"I pray that Genellan was not attacked again," Kateos said.

"Or Kon," Colonel Magoon thundered.

"Scientist Dowornobb, you said eight cells," Buccari said, feeling as if she had been punched in the gut. "The Ulaggi deploy in six-ship cells. That means at least forty-eight ships." The Ulaggi, in overwhelming numbers, were on their way to Sol-Sys. Admiral Runacres would be faced with impossible odds.

"My estimate is conservative," Dowornobb said.

A general quarters Klaxon sounded.

"I have ordered battle stations," Colonel Magoon snarled.

"There is no danger of contact," Dowornobb said. "We will simply pass as would beams of light."

"But if we detect them, then they must detect us," Kateos said.

"Perhaps not," Dowornobb replied. "Our sensors are passive. Our detection of the Ulaggi task force may be a spectacular coincidence. I was testing signal strength on a secure HLA resonance beacon positioned in Genellan orbit. That beacon provides a reference point that makes detection possible. They would not have that reference."

"Is there anything we can do?" Buccari pleaded, knowing the answer as she spoke. They could not randomly eject from hyperlight and reverse course. They were committed to their gravitronic trajectory.

"We return to Genellan," Tar Fell said. "And then we may assess our options. I must confer with PDF headquarters and with King Ollant. This may be a diversion."

Buccari pounded a fist in frustration. Time was not on their side. They would have to discharge the settlement downloads. *Novaya Zemlya* could not return to Sol-Sys by herself. Tar Fell's ships would have to reconstitute and then turn around if they were to relieve any siege of Earth. It would take weeks, assuming that King Ollant and Tar Fell would even agree to send the konish fleet back. A vast Ulaggi strike force was cruising the galaxy. It could return and strike Genellan or even Kon.

"Perhaps it is possible to intercept the Ulaggi," Dowornobb suddenly spoke.

"Intercept?" Tar Fell, Magoon, and Buccari shouted in unison.

"With weapons," Dowornobb said. "It may be possible to insert a destructive object into their gravitronic space. It would require tremendous precision, but aligning the vector and synchronizing the resonance—"

"Mines!" Buccari blurted. "You are proposing to drop seeker mines into

hyperlight space—into a moving Ulaggi HLA cell. The mine goes active, acquires a target, and homes in. Their guard will be down. They will never expect an attack in hyperlight.”

“The probability of success is low,” Dowornobb replied, his sausage-like fingers blurring over his terminal. “We must move rapidly. Soon they will be too close to intercept.”

“Can we attack every cell?” Colonel Magoon asked.

“No! We must focus on only one or two,” Tar Fell boomed. “Unless every ship in the cell is destroyed and every Ulaggi killed, they will realize that we can track them in hyperlight. We will have revealed a great secret.”

“It is possible that all missiles will be errant,” Dowornobb added, working feverishly, “leaving no indication of attack.”

“It’s a shot in the dark,” Buccari exhaled. Low odds, indeed, but Tar Fell was correct—the ability to detect and attack the enemy in hyperlight was a weapon of incalculable worth. A first attack would forever change tactics; Ulaggi ships would henceforth travel with shields up, with damage control and battle watches at high alert. Saving the secret, and perfecting methods for some future assault, could yield dividends many times higher.

“Is the risk worth the outcome?” Magoon asked.

“There is no choice,” Kateos finally spoke up. “The cradle of human civilization is about to be destroyed. We must do what we can.”

“Pah! I say no,” Magoon replied. “We cannot stop them. If we cannot prevent the inevitable, why divulge this secret?”

“Because we must,” Buccari pleaded.

“Decide quickly,” Dowornobb said, his fingers flying. “The envelope is shrinking.”

“Punish them,” Tar Fell commanded. “Colonel Magoon, we have many seeker mines on board. You have my permission to deploy them all, but waste not another moment. Scientist Dowornobb, you will determine the targets and brief the weaponeers on deployment.”

Scientist and flotilla commander turned to their tasks. Buccari studied the displays. A persistent datum tic moved amidst the swirl of noise, converging with their position, seeming to accelerate as it neared. Precious seconds crawled with tortuous indifference into history.

“All weapons are ready,” Magoon finally reported.

“Targets are programmed,” Dowornobb said.

“Release weapons,” Tar Fell ordered.

“Weapons are away,” Tar Fell’s flotilla commander reported.

No one spoke. Kateos wrapped an arm around Buccari’s shoulder.

“Status!” Tar Fell obliterated the silence.

“Contact with warheads has been lost.”

“Can you still see the Ulaggi ships?” Buccari asked, staring desperately at the display.

“No,” Dowornobb announced. “Their bow waves have passed.”

“Could they have been destroyed?” Kateos asked.

“Certainly not yet,” Dowornobb replied. “It will take four of your weeks before the gravitational space of the mines converges with the gravitational space of the Ulaggi targets. Probability of success is very low.”

Home Again

"A union not entered into lightly..."

The Tellurian Legion chaplain spoke with bright-eyed fervor. Buccari, mind racing, listened to the heady words. Why was she getting married? What future could there be? She looked past the shattered obelisk commemorating peace between kones and humans, to the smoldering ruins of New Edmonton. There had to be hope; why else love?

When the question came, it startled her.

"Sharl Firenze Buccari, do you take this man to be your husband?"

Buccari looked into Jake Carmichael's soft brown eyes, windows into his soul, mirrors of her own joy, his space-paled cheeks rosy with autumn chill and excitement. Her delay raised a hint of concern in the man's eyes.

"I do," Buccari replied. Carmichael's worry dissolved, his smile widened. Buccari's heart pounded in her throat; her lungs constricted. Gravity had no power over her.

"Captain," a distant voice shouted as Carmichael's grip tightened on her hand. She squeezed harder in return.

"Captain! Ouch! Wake up!"

"Joyman Knight Carmichael, do you take this woman to be your wife?" The big spacer's chiseled features colored. He stared intently into her eyes. His mouth opened—

"Captain! Jump watch is called. You requested a wake-up."

Buccari swam up from the depths, struggling to focus. In the darkness she discovered a young watch rouser floating beside her. She was clutching his hand, squeezed bloodless.

"Carry on," she muttered, letting go of the spacer's mangled paw and releasing her null-gee tether. As the wide-eyed spacer darted from his legendary captain's underway cabin, Buccari, still stunned, rolled out and commanded low illumination. Yawning, she studied the displays blinking alive along the bulkhead of her battle cabin. Her dream had faded, but not her sadness. Leavening that melancholy was the helpless frustration fueled by an Ulaggi fleet bearing down on Earth. Buccari pulled on her underway suit and pushed through the hatch. As she floated out onto the bridge her lethargy departed and her sorrow dissolved, replaced by resolve. Adrenaline pulsed through her veins; Buccari needed no better stimulant than her first jump exit as mothership commanding officer, especially a jump exit into possible battle. The Marine sentry barked her presence. The bridge watch snapped to.

"Carry on," she said, inspecting the boards. She demanded and received operational status from all department heads: the crew had been fed; all corvettes were manned and ready; impulse engines were standing by, core temps up; weapons batteries were charged; and the ship's habitation ring was locked down. Everything was in order.

"Signal the armada master," Buccari commanded, checking the chronometer. Since they were part of a konish task force, the countdown was being conducted in konish *todans*; each time increment, not quite two seconds in duration, ticked slowly away. "*Novaya Zemlya* is ready."

She brushed her hand over her console sensors; Scientist Dowornobb's image materialized followed rapidly by Tar Fell's and then Colonel Magoon's, all in battle armor, their stolid bovine countenances belied by their rigid brows.

"Trajectory is stable," Dowornobb reported. "Genellan exit coordinates are

confirmed.”

“Gravity, do not miss the mark,” Tar Fell growled.

Intending to surprise any potential adversary, Dowornobb had programmed an exit point soberingly close to Genellan. *Novaya Zemlya*, with its human crew and more rapid HLA recovery times, would be battle guide. Buccari updated her conflict model, preparing herself for an ambush. If the situation proved untenable, they would execute an in-system jump to Kon—an unprecedented maneuver for konish ships.

“All ships, battle stations,” Colonel Magoon ordered.

Klaxons sounded, shrill, imperative. Buccari’s ship turned to. Pulling on her helmet, the sickly familiar sensations of going into battle welled up, but this time she felt peculiarly helpless. Sitting on the command station of an ungainly mothership was very different from sitting on the snug flightdeck of a corvette; there were no flight controls at hand, no triggers to depress. Now she had to fight vicariously, employing the skills and courage of her crew. She could no longer freelance; her ponderous ship was a critical element of a battle line, charged with maintaining station within a static array of capital ships, each providing mutual support to the others.

Battle hatches sealed shut throughout the ship; damage control stations reported. As the exit countdown marched relentlessly downward, Buccari’s hopes blended with the dread of battle; dispelling thoughts of the Ulaggi armada heading for Earth, she anticipated with desperate pleasure reuniting with her son, and with her friends—to touching once again the soil of her planet. Genellan was as much a child to her as was her own offspring. Her thoughts dwelled on Reggie St. Pierre, her bosom friend and steward of the planet. Her face grew warm.

“Jump exit in ten *todans*,” *NZ*’s watch boatswain announced over the ship’s general broadcast system, reciting the litany of impending battle. “All hands tether down. Stand by for heavy maneuvers. Now battle stations.”

Countdown chronometers throughout the ship flipped to zero. Familiar sensations swept over Buccari, a wambling tide of nausea. She fought through the miasma, reciting meaningless ditties to keep under control, and focused on her command console. The enduring *todans* ticked slowly by. Arrival alarms signaled acquisition of the broadcast signal from Genellan’s primary navigation beacon, centering her consciousness. And then they were through, spot on Dowornobb’s wildly ambitious coordinates. Buccari rechecked the fix. There was no deviation—a navigation miracle.

“Jump exit...complete, Captain,” the officer-of-the-deck reported, her voice slurring. “Ship status alpha-alpha. Impulse engines are answering. Maneuvering to attack vector.”

“Full active search,” Buccari commanded, shaking off the fog. Her acceleration tethers snugged as *Novaya Zemlya* wheeled to assigned course and speed. Flotsam robots jettied overhead, gathering up the inevitable debris dislodged by the ship’s first linear acceleration after months of transit.

“Initiating active search,” the officer-of-the-deck replied.

Acquisition radars exploded into activity, sending out expanding bubbles of energy, seeking objects from which to rebound. *NZ* steadied on course while the remaining ships of Tar Fell’s flotilla accelerated outward, forming line of battle on the threat axis. Scanning her console, Buccari observed Tar Fell and the other konish commanders struggling to shed transition affects while their ships responded automatically to the battle program. Targeting computers synched up, displaying green lights across the attack front. Colonel Et Lorlyn, the konish screen commander, signaled readiness.

“Stand by to launch the screen,” she ordered, scrutinizing the targeting displays.

Genellan's hulking mass materialized, dominating the tactical display. Both moons appeared.

Jupiter's balls, but they were in tight.

"Battle line is synched. All batteries reporting hot and armed," her weapons officer reported. "Negative targets."

"I...am at last returned to my senses," Tar Fell boomed. One by one, the rest of the konish commanders reported ready for action. The Behemoths were recovering, but would have happened had they jumped into a furball?

"Contact!" the weapons officer reported. "Bogies bearing—"

"Friendlies!" the tactical officer shouted. Like fairy dust spreading across the planet's dark limb, a constellation of active returns sparkled into being, all revealing PDF signatures.

"Painting six konish HLA battleships and one Legion mothership," the tactical officer reported. "And we've got what appears to be *three* konish defense satellites on Genellan orbit. And a *fourth* one rising, Captain!"

Tar Fell growled with sour satisfaction.

Buccari stared with fascination—*four konish defense satellites on Genellan orbit!* The pregnant returns of the immense orbiting fortresses pulsated like small novae. The more modest signatures of six konish battleships were clustered on mid-support orbit in company with *T.L.S. Terra del Fuego*. The Legion mothership, its impulse engines severely overboosted during the Battle of Genellan, would be operational by now, though with only a skeleton crew. Buccari coveted the battered mothership's corvettes. She would fill them with cliff dweller crews.

Ambassador Kateos's vid-image joined the others. She wore an expression of delighted amazement.

"King Ollant, Hegemon of the Northern Hemisphere, is with us," she gasped.

Buccari also gasped. Signals of their arrival could not yet have reached Kon; King Ollant must have traveled to Genellan.

"His Majesty sends his congratulations on our successful transit," Kateos continued. "King Ollant presents to Armada Master Tar Fell, for service in the Planetary Defense Force, a squadron of Hegemonic hyperlight battleships, well founded vessels, newly built."

The holo-image of the charismatic ruler appeared, his golden complexion marred with scars from the claws of a Genellan bear, but even more so with the sagging ravages of age and responsibility. Buccari sensed her own mortality reflected in her friend's dissolution.

"I welcome Citizen Sharl home," Ollant said, studying Buccari's remediated image with obvious pleasure. "I see that she has returned in excellent health."

Buccari lifted her fist in salute but waited for the armada master to speak.

"Hail, good king," Tar Fell announced, delighted at the augmentation of his modest force. The Thullolian was also surprised to see his old rival this far from the home planet, yet at the same time threatened; there could only be one armada master. "Your ships are welcome, but—"

"He has already jumped!" Dowornobb blurted rudely. "King Ollant short-jumped from Kon! I have mapped his trace. How very excellent! I knew you could do it...er, Your Majesty."

Tar Fell and the other konish commanders were taken aback at Dowornobb's glaring breach of protocol, but not Ollant, or Kateos.

"He will never change," Kateos said.

"Nor should he," Ollant laughed. "Scientist Dowornobb has trained my scientists well. Gravity, they insisted upon the maneuver, if only to reach Genellan orbit before

Scientist Dowornobb's return. They said he would expect nothing less. Pah, I must confess, it was profoundly unsettling, and not one I would care to repeat as overture to battle."

"Be assured it will become our standard battle entry," Buccari inserted herself into the conversation. "Greetings, my Lord."

"Then we must practice until we are proficient," Tar Fell remarked, his awe and his apprehension apparent.

"I have more good news," Ollant reported. "There are eight more Hegemonic ships shaking down off Kreta, and six PDF ships coming off the ways within the moon cycle. They will deploy to Genellan, bringing with them another defense satellite."

"Are we not sacrificing the defenses of the mother planet?" Magoon growled. Tar Fell nodded with vociferous agreement.

"We bolster them," Ollant replied, his expression sobering. "Should Genellan fall, it would become a formidable base for the Ulaggi. General Talsali agrees. To defend Kon we must preserve Genellan. I am charged with setting up those defenses."

Buccari settled into her tethers. For the first time in memory she felt safe. Kon had for centuries been protected by constellations of PDF and Hegemonic defensive satellites, augmented by fleets of powerfully armed conventional battleships. And now, thanks to hyperlight anomaly technology provided by humans, the powerful konish defensive capabilities were spreading. Genellan was girded with four satellites, and even Earth had one of its own. If only humanity knew how much they owed these immense aliens.

Buccari's peace of mind was ephemeral.

"All news is not good," Ollant rumbled, his feature suddenly dark.

"We know," Dowornobb said. "A fleet of Ulaggi ships, a very large fleet, passed through here, en route Sol-Sys."

"How can you know this?" Ollant demanded, brows springing rigid.

"We detected their passage," Dowornobb replied. "I estimate eight hyperlight cells, perhaps as many as forty-eight Ulaggi battleships." Dowornobb explained what his instruments had seen, and how Tar Fell had attempted to intercept them with a barrage of seeker mines. The king listened, his expression hard as stone.

"In fact there were nine cells," Ollant at last replied. "They arrived and departed in task groups of three cells each. But you have sorely underestimated their number, my friends. There were twelve interstellars per cell, not six. Our sensors confirmed one hundred and eight enemy ships."

Chapter Forty-one

Return to Genellan

Buccari's insides twisted.

"What can be done?" Kateos took the words from Buccari's mouth.

"Nothing," Colonel Magoon growled.

Fighting a wave of shame, Buccari wondered whether saving Earth was even worth the loss of a single additional kone. But Buccari could not abandon Jake Carmichael, or Sarah Merriwether, or Admiral Runacres, or the thousands of shipmates and fellow spacers standing between the Ulaggi and her home planet.

"King Ollant," Buccari said. "I must ask—a very large favor."

"Indeed, an immense favor," Ollant replied, "if you ask us to chase down such a formidable force."

"I must," Buccari said.

"A day will come," Ollant said, "when, beholden to human technology, kones will seek out and attack the Ulaggi. But that day has not arrived. We cannot prosecute an attack against such numbers, not without stripping our defenses. That we cannot do."

"We must," Buccari pleaded.

"I do not have authority here," Ollant replied, brows drooping. "Tar Fell speaks for Planetary Defense."

Buccari turned her gaze onto the armada master. The immense kone straightened, resolve apparent in every muscle, intransigence oozing from every gaping pore of his grainy complexion. Buccari had gone nose-to-nose with the surly giant too many times to be intimidated, but she wondered if she was flying past the point of reason.

"Armada Master, the human fleets will have combined," Buccari pleaded. "Admiral Runacres will have over seventy HLA ships, including eight new *Avenger*-class heavy battleships armed with konish caliber weapons. And you have already provided one defensive satellite; if you could see your way to transporting another, we—"

"Pah, I would like nothing better than to attack the vermin!" Tar Fell growled. "But even if your wish were granted, your settlers must yet be downloaded. The weapons fired into the void must be replenished. It will take a moon-cycle to consolidate the fleet and yet another to prepare new crews for combat. By the time we return to Sol-Sys the battle will be over. Even if the human fleet survives, there is stupendous risk and precious little gain. I am sorry; for Earth it is too late."

Buccari closed her eyes. Earth was doomed. Carmichael would never retreat; he would die first, and Merriwether and Runacres, too, along with millions, if not billions, of her fellow humans.

"Do not reject Citizen Sharl's request in haste," Dowornobb said.

"Pah!" Magoon snorted.

"Do not offer false encouragement, my mate," Kateos counseled. "We cannot strip our defenses."

"Offense and defense are but different surfaces of the same mirror," Dowornobb persisted, his brows springing rigid. "Tar Fell, your voyage to Pitcairn was capricious, if not headstrong. And yet you not only defeated the enemy and rescued the human captives, you uncovered the hyperlight vector to the Ulaggi home planet. With each leap into hyperspace we learn much of the enemy—and of ourselves. Our last Earth transit verified the capability to transport defense satellites; it also revealed our ability to track the enemy in hyperlight. This is vital data. We must continue to gain knowledge. I am no expert in warfare, but I say we go to Earth, if only to study the Ulaggi."

Buccari wanted to crawl through the vid-cam to hug the kone. Tar Fell, eyebrows pulsing, thick lips bunching, stared straight ahead. Kateos, for once, was speechless.

"We cannot hide in our hole," Dowornobb continued, "or the enemy will come as they choose, fully enforced, unconcerned about defending their territory. If we do not attack, the Ulaggi will soon own the galaxy. But most importantly, my friends, we must save humanity, for it was humanity that aided us in ending our own civil war; and it was humanity that gave us hyperlight. Humans are the only allies we have in this utter vastness. Kateos, would you abandon Admiral Runacres? He would never abandon you. I say we jump. And I say we fight."

"Well spoken," King Ollant at last replied. "As Tar Fell has stated, we must offload the colonists and consolidate the fleet. This pause will give us time to consider. Armada Master Tar Fell, I beg your indulgence. Ambassador Kateos will convene a

plenary session of the Planetary Defense Council. This decision requires a larger review.”

“Colonel Magoon,” Tar Fell growled. “Signal all ships to rendezvous on my flag. Prepare for maneuvers. Regardless of any decision, we must prepare for action.”

Buccari signed off, her spirits soaring. Scientist Dowornobb was a powerful advocate, but King Ollant, far more powerful, had decided to fight; the kones would be returning to Sol-Sys. Her first priority would be to get *Tierra del Fuego’s* corvettes for her guilder crews. Her second priority would be to upload another training class of cliff dwellers. Her third priority—first in her heart—would be to go home. She was riven by her desires and her fears. There was tremendous urgency to fight the Ulaggi, to defend Earth, but she would go back to MacArthur’s Valley. She would make time to see her son.

Possibly for the last time.

Chapter Forty-two

Homecoming

Almost home. Nestor Godonov smiled.

On final for the Corlian Plains space port, the heavy-lifter’s tactical camera scanned forward; in the distance, illuminated by the morning sun, arose a pair of symmetrical volcanoes, belching smoke in wind-ripped tendrils, and beyond the twin cones lifted the mist-shrouded massif—Hudson’s Plateau—where humans first landed. And far beyond Hudson’s Plateau heaved the Central Spine, a phalanx of six-thousand-meter peaks marching northward until they were lost beyond the crisp curvature of the wild planet. The Spine’s southern march was obstructed by the Corlian Alps, but Godonov’s attention was closer; swirling mists from the middle cascades of the Great River threw rainbows into the air as if to celebrate their arrival. Beyond the rainbows lay MacArthur’s Valley.

The heavy-lifter touched down; its cargo of usually stolid cliff dwellers shrieked with joy. Godonov and the Marines joined the jubilation. Landing on Genellan was like returning to paradise. Or better, it was coming home.

Not everyone was delighted; Chastain sat morose, his placid countenance bunched with concern. As the heavy-lifter was being towed from the rollout runway, Godonov broke loose from his tethers and put an arm around the Marine’s massive shoulders.

“C’m on, Jocko,” Godonov said. “We’ve got work to do.”

“I’ll do my job, sir,” Chastain replied. “Just wish we knew.” The big Marine was sick with concern for Pake and her daughters.

“Worrying’s not going to change things, Sergeant Major,” Buck added. “Commander Buccari will get us back, if anyone can. Admiral Runacres will hold them off until we get there.”

It was a brave lie. Even if the konish Planetary Defense Council responded favorably to Buccari’s pleas, the odds of returning in time were impossibly low; but Godonov refused to descend into Chastain’s depression. Even if civilization on Earth was destroyed, the human race still had hope. That hope was Genellan. Godonov’s joy swelled as the heavy-lifter came to a halt. Every human and cliff dweller in the cargo hold shouldered their fleet bag and turned toward the opening hatch. A teeth-rattling shriek from without penetrated the yielding seals and was immediately answered by an equally shrill scream from within. As the ramp lowered, a shivering blast whistled through the hold, reminding Godonov just how cold paradise could be.

The science officer followed the shrieking guilders as they waddled onto the

tarmac. Stepping into delicious sunshine, Godonov paused to breathe pure air and to glory in cloudless skies; a stiff westerly cleared away any hint of musk-buffalo. Planets and low-magnitude stars sparkled against an indigo dome while Genellan's small moon hung like a blue rock in the west. Godonov brought his gaze down to the Corlian taiga, an immense vastness marred to the southeast by Legion-yellow derricks. Closer, a new cracking plant had come on line; burn-off flares flickered ghastly orange, and unnaturally straight pipelines disappeared into the infinite distance. Ugly scars on the virgin expanse, the industrial tracts drove the musk buffalo to the east, further diminishing the effects of their lethal fetor on MacArthur's Valley.

"Damn, it feels good," Buck rumbled. Even Chastain begrudged a smile. Godonov, hefting his fleet bag, backslapped the big Marine and followed the wobbling column of guilders across the tarmac. The tires of Toon's EPL kissed the runway; the screeching lifted to even higher levels. Behind *Condor Eight*, Buccari's EPL lined up on final.

A crowd of humans waited, but for every human there were thousands of screeching cliff dwellers. Godonov reveled in the keening of the hunters. There were guilders present, but their numbers were dwarfed by the hosts of vulture-necked, mattock-headed hunters perched like so many gargoyles on every elevation. In their midst, Godonov was startled to see white globes held aloft on carved totems, emblems reserved for elders. Elders never left Hudson's Plateau.

"Hey, Jocko, you friggin' gorilla!" an all too familiar voice lifted above the din. Chief Boatswain's Mate Winfried Fenstermacher jumped from the crowd, followed by a happy mob. Sandy Tatum was there and Nancy Dawson, pregnant again. Gunner Wilson, tanned like a nut and fatter than ever, pushed into the forefront, arguing with Fenstermacher; Leslie Lee, Fenstermacher's diminutive wife, played referee. Beppo Schmidt, Took Tookmanian, Terry O'Toole, and others followed, all with smiles on their faces. Fenstermacher and Wilson ripped the fleet bag from Chastain's shoulders while the other men pounded his back and the women savaged him with kisses and tendon-straining hugs. The huge man, blushing mightily, smiled as if to break his face, while tears streamed down his cherubic cheeks. Godonov and Buck were swept up in the welcome, perhaps not with the same delirious passion afforded Chastain, but still with affection in its purest form.

"Sharl's Survivors are together again!" Wilson shouted.

"Except for Booch...and Hudson...you fat, worthless, mud-sucking bonehead," Fenstermacher snorted.

"They're in the goddam apple right in front of you, butt-face," Wilson replied, using a pointing motion as precursor to an earnest backhand.

"Nitwits!" Leslie Lee shouted, grabbing Fenstermacher by his ear.

Also at Tatum's side was Sharl's son, sandy-thatched and wiry thin, yet square shouldered and sinewy. Godonov exchanged waves with the boy. He had grown taller, ganglier. Great Mother, the ancient huntress, stood protectively at his side.

A Marine band struck up a march as three companies of armored hunters wheeled onto the tarmac, black eyes locked ahead, their bandy-legged ranks perfectly in step. Their formation halted before the milling guilders. Screeching commands, the adjutant hop-waddled forward—it was Bottlenose, his Pitcairn injuries healed. Tonto, also whole again, stood proudly at the forefront, with Pop-eye as his executive. Notch commanded the first company.

"Sergeant Major Chastain, shall we fall in?" Buck shouted.

The humans double-timed toward their cliff dweller counterparts. Tonto moved as if to relinquish command. Buck, towering over the warriors, refused with emphatic hand sign, taking instead a subordinate position on the staff line next to Chastain.

Tonto snapped to attention at the head of the formation, chest thrust out magnificently.

Godonov, still buffeted by the rowdy mob, celebrated with the crowd as Buccari's EPL chirped onto the runway. Toon's lander, in tow by a robot tractor, neared their position.

"Welcome back, Nes," spoke a deep, pleasant voice. Godonov turned to see Reggie St. Pierre. At the planetary governor's side stood a short, powerfully built older man.

"Reggie, Colonel Pak, it's good to see you," Godonov replied, taking St. Pierre's and Pak's strong grip in turn.

"You've sure stirred things up, Nes," Pak said. "You even got the elders out of their caves." Colonel Han Pak had been St. Pierre's commander in the Legion Security Service. The old LSS agent and former mayor of MacArthur's Valley had retired to become a confirmed civilian, dedicated to raising a family and to fishing as permitted by his young wife. St. Pierre had pressed the old spy back into service.

"Things will never be the same with the cliff dwellers," St. Pierre said; the tall man was haggard, with shadows under his dark eyes; and yet his classically handsome features seemed somehow enhanced, even saintly. "That threshold was passed long ago."

"I'm surprised you're up north, Reggie," Godonov said. "When are the new settlers coming down?"

"First habitation module hits atmosphere in less than five hours," St. Pierre replied, checking his chronometer. "I have to leave. I just had to see her again, before..."

The swarthy man's words trailed off, his features softening. Godonov understood. Buccari had that effect on everyone. That was why they were all there—to see Charl Buccari return to MacArthur's Valley, to where it had all started.

Toon's EPL came to a halt, backdropped by the heavy-lifter and the endless taiga plain. The band ceased playing. A grizzled hunter in stained leather armor waddled into the open; it was Captain Two—Craag—leader of all hunters. Marching in slow-step after the scarred warrior came four apprentices hoisting globes on short staffs. Between the globe-bearers shuffled three ancients. Each elder wore a heavy necklace of sun-sparkled jewels; the first wore rubies and white jade, a steam-user; the second wore emeralds and garnets, a gardener; and the third wore diamonds and sapphires, a stone-carver. Only the green jade of the fishers was missing, all elders of that guild too weary to make the journey.

"How did you get them to leave the plateau?" Godonov asked.

"I flew up to Hudson's Plateau after Tar Fell arrived in system," Colonel Pak replied. "News of Master Toon's accomplishments beat me there. When it was announced that Toon and Buccari were coming down, the elders insisted at least some of their number attend. I transported—"

Whistling blasts interrupted Pak's explanation. The EPL's cargo hatch opened. The cliff dweller screams increased in range and volume. The band made an effort to resume playing, but bedlam rendered it inaudible. The shrieks of uncountable cliff dwellers lifted to an unbearable pitch as the ramp lowered, revealing the crew of *Condor Eight*. Led by Toon-the-Speaker, the cliff dweller crew waddled onto the tarmac and formed a ragged rank. With ponderous gravity, and absent any semblance of coordination, Toon and his crew exchanged bows with the elders. Craag, the hunter leader, raised his arms and pivoted sharply to face the runway. Except for the low moan of the wind, the sprawling spaceport on the Corlian Plains fell instantly silent.

Godonov sucked in another cool lungful of air and looked about. All hunters and

guilders faced precisely the same direction, their attention riveted on the EPL in tow, Sharl Buccari their lodestar. The humans were less restrained; Nancy Dawson's laughter lifted above the giggling of children; Fenstermacher and Gunner Wilson exchanged insults. The robotic tractor, anti-collision beacons flashing, positioned Buccari's EPL in its parking station. After a breathless interval the main hatch cracked open. The ramp lowered smoothly to the tarmac, but the cliff dweller host remained preternaturally silent, the babbling of humans and the soft howl of the wind the only noise. A lander boatswain, her skull shaved pearly white, appeared at the threshold. She gaped out at the stone-quiet crowd. Godonov recognized Petty Officer Nakajima.

"Hey, bubble-butt!" Fenstermacher shouted, seeing his old shipmate. "Some reception, eh? It's the least we could do for you."

Nakajima shook her head and disappeared into the EPL as Sharl Buccari and Nash Hudson trotted onto the tarmac. Both had changed into khaki coveralls, and both wore gold berets tilted jauntily on hairless pates. The rowdy humans broke the silence, whistling and shouting, but their lusty cheers barely beat down the wind. The cliff dwellers remained silent. As Buccari and Hudson approached, Craag issued a scream that went ultrasonic. The ancients bowed, paying homage with surprising fullness, four-finger hands open at their sides. At precisely the same instant a uniform wave rippled across the sprawling horde, silent except for the susurrant rustle of fur; acting as one organism, the cliff dweller host bowed. Even the boisterous cheers of the humans died away, allowing the wind's moaning to return. In the lull Godonov heard a whisper not intended for his ears.

"She's beautiful."

The mumbled paean issued from Reggie St. Pierre's lips.

"Down, boy," Colonel Pak hissed.

Godonov laughed and stared at Buccari, embracing St. Pierre's sentiment. The science officer had grown accustomed to Buccari's power and perhaps was inured to her charisma; above all, she was his friend. Now, as if seeing her repaired face for the first time, Godonov beheld a different being; the female's emerald eyes sparkled; her wan, space-induced pallor glowed; and though of modest height, her ample physique exuded power, grace—and an undeniable sensuality. She was the sun around which all others orbited. Godonov laughed once again, but less easily. He glanced at the planetary governor, and was taken aback. St. Pierre's countenance bespoke rapture, even adoration—not of a spiritual nature. The smitten man closed his eyes as if shutting out some torture. Opening them, he detected Godonov's attention. The governor gave a meek grin. Embarrassed, Godonov returned his attention forward, too easily comprehending the other man's passion.

Buccari and Hudson bowed gracefully. The elders straightened. Craag screeched, and the great mass of cliff dwellers stood erect as one. Buccari and Hudson did likewise. The elders wore translation units, and words were exchanged, too soft to discern. Master Toon and Major Buck were commanded forward; handsign replaced verbal communications. Craag and Hudson engaged in blurring intercourse, with both warriors laughing after their own fashion. The tall human embraced the diminutive warrior leader, and the masses of hunters erupted in whistles of camaraderie. From out of the shrieking bedlam came a chant, from the humans repeating Hudson's name over and over. Smiling, Buccari's gaze lifted from the elders. Her attention fell like a laser on St. Pierre, and her radiant countenance brightened. Godonov felt a twinge of jealousy.

"Governor St. Pierre, Colonel Pak!" Buccari shouted, waving for them to join her. "Nes, you, too!"

The men strode from the protection of the crowd. Godonov had been in the

presence of elders many times, but the gardener and the stone-carver were not familiar. Though ancient creatures, they were the youngest of their exalted cadre, having replaced those who had passed on in the human's absence from the planet.

"A momentous occasion for dwellers of the cliffs," the steam-user announced. The translation unit emitted a firm tone, belying the ancient's labored chirping. An apprentice stepped close, giving the old guildier his arm.

"As it is for long-legs," Buccari replied. "But grave danger is abroad, wise one. This world is in danger."

The ancient remained silent, his drooping eyes glazed with age. Craag, the hunter leader, chirped impatiently. It was the nature of hunters to be impatient, always ready to fight, to hunt, to kill. Guilders were rarely hasty, elders never.

"Your help is needed, wise one," Buccari said. "We fight for our lives. We fight for this planet."

As she spoke her beauty morphed into sadness beyond words. Godonov basked in her passion. The guildier was also affected; he remained silent, but his eyes cleared, awed by the human's intensity.

"Colonel Pak has spoken of star battles," the ancient said at last, "of enemies far greater than even the bear people."

"The bear people are not your enemy, wise one," Buccari replied.

Godonov sensed her frustration. At one time kones had ravaged Genellan for metal and fur. Buccari had labored to bring the two species together. Some wounds were timeless.

"Change comes too rapidly," the elder replied. "We are as twigs in the flood. What would Short-one-who-leads have us do?"

"More warriors are needed," Buccari replied.

Craag chirped again, asserting his authority. Buccari flashed respectful hand sign at her old comrade, calming him. The elder's unbelievably ugly face screwed up in a horrid smile, exposing the few jagged teeth left to him.

"Craag, leader-of-hunters, exhibits unseemly enthusiasm, enthusiasm born of good fortune," the elder said. "Our young hunters no longer die on the plains and in the mountains. We have more salt than we need and more game than we can eat. Our warrens are crowded with careless sentries and indolent warriors with nothing of which to boast. They clamor for danger. Thou favor us by giving them employment. Their usage is by Craag's authority."

"Guilders are also warriors," Buccari said.

Snorting with disdain, Craag hand-signed, "Hunters protect guilders. Always!"

Buccari hand-signed sharply. The hunter leader bowed and was silent.

"Steam-users are now warriors," Buccari said. "The numbers requested are small, for we can train but few. Beware, the numbers will grow. Master Toon and Commander Godonov will communicate our requirements."

"Toon-the-speaker has caused a great disturbance," the old one replied. "From ages past, guilders have worked fire, rock, and water, their feet firmly on the ground. Only hunters left their families. Now young guilders also beg to leave, to be like Toon—to fly to the stars. Even wisdom cannot stand before a flood. Our sons await thy beckon."

"My gratitude, wise one," Buccari replied. "The future will be difficult. Many will die."

"Cliff dwellers have always known death," the elder replied. "Now we will know the stars."

"I swear by those stars that I shall protect your sons," Buccari said, her jaw set like steel, "as if they were my own."

The wizened one struggled with his response.

"Many cliff dwellers look to Short-one-who-leads as a god," the old one at last replied. "The council knows thou art not a god, but we have faith thou doth speak with good will. Colonel Pak, we grow tired. May we repair to the cliffs? Speaker Toon comes with us."

Buccari bowed. Colonel Pak led the unsteady entourage—with Toon waddling proudly in its train—across the tarmac to a waiting helo. Turbines whined into life. Rotors engaged. As the helo lifted, Craag screeched. A spreading wave of brain-rattling concussions rippled across the spaceport as the keening hunters cracked open their flight appendages. With membranes snatching the wind, tens, and then hundreds, and then thousands of hunters lifted, blown violently sideways. Fighting for stability, sonics firing to avoid their struggling comrades, the warriors pounded ever higher, following the helicopter into the air. Their sonics resonating, the screeching mass of hunters climbed in a billowing swirl, tacking against the stiff westerly. Godonov, fighting to maintain his equilibrium, lifted his own arms, glorying in the explosion of flight. The amorphous whirlwind lifted from the ground and heeled northward, tacking across the face of the gale, following the helo toward Hudson's Plateau.

The humans, their awe overcome by impatience, tumbled upon Buccari and Hudson, swamping them. Hudson was mobbed even more violently than was Chastain. Buccari, her son held tight, waded amongst her friends. St. Pierre held out his hand. Buccari brushed it aside and embraced the tall governor.

"It's great to see you, Reggie," she shouted over the chanting crowd. "How long can you stay?"

"I can't, Sharl. I have to get back. I just wanted to see if you had any face-to-face instructions. I haven't built very many civilizations before."

Buccari laughed, a fluid sound, making everyone around her smile. There must have been something in the Genellan air; Godonov grew dizzy with his own joy.

"Aw, give Booch a break," Fenstermacher wheedled.

"I'm glad you came, Reggie," Buccari said, her gaze sweeping the taiga. "We have so many challenges. We can't always get what we want, but we'll lose everything if we don't fight. I won't tell you what to do, Reggie; you're in charge. I trust you."

"Now that's pressure," St. Pierre replied with a wistful smile. "I better get back to work. The habitation modules will be landing in less than four hours, and my boss will fire me if I'm not there to manage the download."

"I hear she's a real prick," Fenstermacher shouted.

Laughing, St. Pierre trotted toward a shuttle waiting on the tarmac, its turbines winding. At the hatch, he waved. Buccari reciprocated, and he then he disappeared inside. The shuttle commenced taxiing as the hatches were sliding shut.

"Let's go home!" Buccari shouted, turning back to her friends. Charlie whistled and two snub-nosed Genellan horses thundered up, each heavy-chested steed with a young hunter on its golden back.

"We thought you and Charlie might like to ride home," Tatum said. "You have the trail to yourself all the way to the ferry landing. We'll truck your gear back to the cabin."

"Thanks, Sandy," Buccari replied, swinging up on her thick-legged mount. Her son was already in the saddle; Great Mother, her flight membranes partially deployed, perched on the big mare's rump. The old huntress shrieked and grabbed the boy's collar as he wheeled the big horse in place, its long mane whipping.

"Nes," she shouted, reining in. "Double the size of the guilder cadres. I want at least four raw crews in simulators within the week and at least eight more queued up before we leave. Take a helo and rescue Lizzy from the elders as soon as you can. And

round up his crew.”

“They just got home, Charl,” Godonov protested.

“I want Lizzy back on board in a week, or I’ll take his corvette away. I want you there, too. There’s no time to waste.”

Godonov acknowledged and watched Buccari as she rode off. A small woman, yet powerful, she seemed bathed in light, not just a reflection of sunlight, but an internal luminescence. Once clear of the cheering crowd, she wheeled her horse and waved at the crowds. Godonov could only agree with St. Pierre’s dreamy assessment. Certainly she had grown powerful beyond any mere station and charismatic beyond any explanation; but above all, Charl Buccari was a beautiful woman.

Chapter Forty-three

MacArthur’s Valley

In many ways it was the best week of Buccari’s life; she could see, smell, and hear the treasures of existence; she could touch them; she could taste them, her experiences made all the more sublime by the knowledge of their vulnerability.

The golden stallion, an old favorite, required little spur; they climbed the old trail above the settlement, beyond the resplendent hardwood and into the pine glades, their sure-footed steeds making easy work of the traverses. From old habit, Buccari kept her holster unfastened; though infrequent, nightmare packs still prowled the region and the occasional bear. Neither field nor mountain dragon had been seen in the valley for a decade, eagles only rarely.

She pulled up on a craggy overlook below the church and stared down on MacArthur’s Valley, hazy with chimney smoke; Lake Shannon, mirror calm, was a radiant in the early sun. Autumn had arrived with hard frosts and shortened days; the alpine lake’s periphery and its feeder valleys were aflame with turning foliage. Hanging glaciers high on the far side of the valley were freshly dusted, creating an even starker contrast with the surreal blueness of crevice ice.

Charlie’s horse moved alongside hers. She grabbed her son’s hand. He returned the pressure; he was strong, in every way the image of the man whose grave they were about to visit. She fought back tears.

“What’s wrong, mom?” her son asked.

“I’m just happy, dirty-face,” she replied, running her hand through his sun-streaked hair. With her son at her side and astride a strong horse, Buccari felt more alive than she had in many days; and not with the adrenaline-pumping, nerve-jangling awareness of mortal combat, but alive in a far more exquisite way. Perhaps it was the absence of fear.

“Aw, ma,” Charlie replied. “No one calls me that anymore.”

“I’ll always call you that,” she said, pulling her horse back to the trail. They continued upward, watching cliff dwellers soaring in the first thermals of the day. It had been chilly when they started, now it was warm and still; the smell of dust and tree-sap lifted above the sweaty tang of their horses. Other than the measured breathing of their mounts, the only sounds came from birds chirping and the nervous chatter of rock marmots. Even that fell away as they climbed above the tree line. Immense vistas opened, and a scattering of day-stars penetrated the indigo sky.

“When are you leaving, mom?” her son asked, damaging her peace.

“Any day,” Buccari replied. If they were to save Earth, Tar Fell’s departure for Sol-Sys could not be soon enough.

“Can I go with you? I’m ready for the Academy. Honey’s going next year.”

"Next time, Charlie," she answered, wondering if human civilization would even exist. She fought to regain her joy. Millions, if not billions, of people were going to die. She had no right to be this happy.

The trail switched steeply past the clapboard church. The settlers called it St. Maggie's, to honor St. Pierre's wife; Margaret St. Pierre had died on its doorstep. Buccari's fragile joy dissolved under the weight of old tragedies, but her gloom was tempered by thoughts of St. Pierre—warm thoughts; Reggie St. Pierre in the north and Cassy Quinn in the south had been the true architects of human settlement on Genellan. Between them, they had established the colony's character—incorruptible and far-sighted. With Quinn gone, it was up to St. Pierre to govern. She felt sorry for the man; but she also knew there was no one better for the job. She would fly down to New Edmonton in the next few days, to spend time with the new settlers. St. Pierre had asked her to come.

"People still call you queen of the planet, Mom," Charlie said. "Heck, some people even believe you're a god."

Buccari grunted her displeasure and dropped from her horse. Her son leapt from his. A pair of hunters fell screeching from the sky to land in the vacated saddles; they took the reins and, standing erect, rode the massive horses to pasturage.

"I guess that makes you a prince," she replied, grabbing his neck. "Prince Dirty-face. Has a nice ring to it. You'll have to go to school for a long time to be a prince. You can't be a prince until you understand...oh, quantum mechanics and the First Law of Thermodynamics."

"Aw, ma," the boy replied, his brow furrowed.

"I'm your mother," Buccari said, taking his dirty hand. The boy's strong fingers intertwined with hers. "You're my son. That's all that matters."

Smiling, the boy remained silent.

Twin pinnacles loomed hard and bone-white against the perfect sky. Buccari and her son made the ridge and climbed along the hogback. Countless hunters in leather armor, carrying pikes and bows, wheeled low overhead, their great wing-spans hissing. Buccari's trek to the mountain was a sacred event; thousands of cliff dwellers had died here, blasted from the sky by konish lasers.

Her son sprinted ahead. Buccari's pace slowed while her pulse quickened. Tears welled. She brushed them away as she reached the meandering rock wall surrounding the battlefield. The wall, built one mourning stone at a time, was head-high now and solidly mortared; its once unbroken perimeter had been cleaved at the ridgeline, where stone-users had fashioned an arch of polished marble. Both wall and arch were tangled with withered vines; in spring and summer the stones came alive with heliotropes.

Buccari passed under the arch and halted, removing her floppy-brimmed cap. Burial mounds spread unevenly across the field; immense cairns marked the konish graves; far more numerous were the hunters' cairns, scattered in their tragic plentitude. Buccari walked through the field, the density of cairns thinning as she moved past the main battleground.

Hunters rained from the sky to roost on the wall, crowding its length with a battlement of gargoyles. The veterans of battle descended around Buccari, forming a waddling column of fur and leather armor. Craag, the leader of all hunters, joined Buccari at the column's head. Together, they marched down the steepening descent of the eastern slope. The isolated cairn at the cliff's brink—so near the tumbling shelter of boulders, so near safety, yet so far away—lifted into view. Charlie stood on one side of the monument, Tonto—Brappa-son-of-Braan—on the other.

Buccari forced her herself forward. She resolved not to cry. Suddenly the cairn

was before her. She stopped and inhaled. A single forlorn blossom, radiantly white, clung to a sere vine. Closing her eyes, she reached out and placed both hands on sun-warmed rock. Memories flooded; the tears came. As she wiped them away, her fingers lingered on her cheek, seeking the scar.

The hunters commenced a haunting chant; too familiar, the warrior's death-song rose with overwhelming intensity, lifting dust and rolling pebbles from the cairn. Charlie, his youthful features distorted with effort, chanted with Brappa, both young beings whistling and screeching to the limits of their abilities—sons singing for their fathers, embraced in death. The mournful anthem drifted on the rising breeze and in time came to an end.

"Mom, you all right?" Charlie asked, touching her shoulder.

Her son stood before her, taller than she was, his sweet face twisted with concern.

"I'm okay, Dirty-face. Come on," she said. "Let's go home."

Without looking back, mother and son, turned from the cairn by the cliffs and walked arm-in-arm from the battlefield. She had so much to do, and so little time.

Craag chirped a warning. Buccari stopped and listened. The beating of rotors lifted from the valley. It grew louder. The urgency to return to space, to fight the vicious foe, welled within her, a heart-pounding pressure. She exhaled mightily, forcing herself to be serene; but serenity would not come. The sleek scouting vertical appeared above the trees and skimmed up slope. Before it touched down, a crewmember jumped to the ground and ran toward them.

"Captain Buccari!" he shouted, saluting.

She returned the salute. Her time at home was run out.

"Sir, Armada Master Tar Fell sends his respects, sir," the Marine gasped. "He is preparing to sortie."

"How soon?" she asked.

"Begging the Captain's pardon, sir, but Tar Fell's orders are for you to report immediately. We have your space-bag. There's an apple coming down to pick you up."

She took a long last look.

"It's time," she said.

"I'll miss you, mom," Charlie replied.

She pulled the boy to her. Craag, standing at her side, sounded another alert and pointed with both hands into the sky.

"There!" Charlie said.

Buccari followed her son's pointing finger; far up in the deep blue flew a pair of Genellan eagles, immense wings outstretched.

Craag chirped. She pulled her gaze from the giant predators.

"A good omen," the hunter leader signed.

Chapter Forty-four

Interdiction

"Sit," the wall-eyed male ordered.

Cassy Quinn listlessly obeyed, pulling her shift close. Her pallid body, once firm and tanned, had suffered too many months in low-gee. Yet the human refused to surrender her health; Quinn exercised at every opportunity in her null-gee cell, pressing on hatch combings or against the opposing force of her own muscles. Like some demented animal she jumped against the overhead and pushed back to the deck for hours on end, elevating her heart rate. Her captors manipulated this behavior to their

advantage.

"Continue pattern matching," commanded the male. "You will be permitted to exercise, if you are successful."

The interrogation area sustained a low gravity, maybe two tenths gee. Quinn did not comprehend the mechanics of the induced acceleration, but the slight tug was welcome; it gave her body order and balance. The puffiness of micro-gravity diminished as pooling blood and contracting tissue gave heft to her head, breasts, and limbs. The drab compartment reeked of alien.

Quinn adjusted her temple probes. She had ceased resisting; rebellion served little purpose—they could read her mind. During transit she had endured hours of interrogation, much of it in silence, responding to myriad stimuli, eerily exchanging thoughts with her captors. The interrogators were males supervised by hajil officers. On rare occasions the white witch would appear; the others would disappear, leaving Quinn and the spidery lakk, face to face in the gray cell.

Quinn understood that she was being manipulated, even brainwashed; but to her astonishment, and fascination, the process worked both ways—she was able to read their minds. Not perfectly; without their interrogation machines the stolid males were dead to her. The hajil were, by varying degrees, open to the human, but their minds were cluttered with spurious signals and emotion. Quinn required great concentration to sift through the noise generated by their strident egos. But with the white witch, unaided telepathic signals came through with crystalline sharpness. Quinn could feel the lakk's presence, like a tumor behind her eyes, even when the alien was not physically present. The exchanges were grossly uneven. The lakk visited the human's thoughts at will. Quinn was permitted to read only those portions of the white witch's mind open to her; all else was a like peering at a steel door.

She had no overt contact with roons, but Quinn suspected that a'Yerg visited her telepathically. Quinn recalled the roon's fluid insinuations, very much like the lakk's but somehow different, more vibrant, ineffably of higher energy—hotter.

At first Quinn's telepathic sensations were vague—impressions or emotions; but her acuity increased as she learned the alien language. As a scientist, she was an eager student. With a currency of common words, what were once ill-formed thoughts began to suggest abstracts, concepts, even objects, and then imperatives—commands. Words were like tools, and armed with sharper implements her interrogators delved deeper and deeper into Quinn's ego, into her libido—into her very soul. All the while the human sensed, with a perverse pride, the development of her own extrasensory *muscle*. This awareness was narcotic.

"Human-mother, are you ready?" the technician commanded. Even plugged into the interrogation machine, the male's thoughts tumbled disjointedly.

"Yes," she muttered, brushing aside fatigue and hungrily focusing her mind. She detected her interrogator's wheedling mind probe. She also recognized the unseen hajil supervisor—perpetually angry. Quinn settled into her seat, summoning the neurotic female's piquant thoughts.

"Concentrate on *this* signal," the technician snarled.

Quinn abandoned the supervisor's self-indulged preening and shifted attention to the sterile patterns emanating from the interrogator's machine. At that moment the deck heaved upward, and the cell's gravity failed. Quinn and her interrogator slammed against the overhead in a tangle of legs and arms. Dazed, Quinn sought a handhold, anything to anchor herself against another jolt, and felt harsh vibration. *Something was wrong*. An alarm sounded.

"Battle stations!" the supervisor shouted.

Verbal command was unnecessary; the female's thoughts were focused,

brilliantly clear—and passionate. The male was near panic. Another alarm rang! The ship lurched. *What was happening?* Quinn's mind flooded with an avalanche of emotion not her own, a feeling of general panic, and something more intense—something overwhelmingly sensual. Quinn looked at the female supervisor. The lakk's eyes were closed to cruel slits, her mind ecstatic with fear.

"Take the prisoner to her cell!" the female screamed, brutally slapping the male.

"You come! Now!" the goggle-eyed male shouted, blinking violently.

Quinn's equilibrium was destroyed by the riot rampaging in her mind. She hesitated, flailing for a handhold. The interrogator punched her with the heel of his hand, sending her reeling. He pushed her through the hatch, barking her bare shins on the combing. She fended off a bulkhead with her skull. The alien shoved her down the passageway where a uniformed guard mauled her into her cell. Bruised, bleeding, and helpless, Quinn pulled herself onto her acceleration pallet and tethered down.

Frightened and in pain, all she could do was pray.

Chapter Forty-five

Damage Control

"Screens up!" Dar commanded, her *g'ort* soaring. "I have lost Ship-mistress Rantrav. Jakkuk-hajil, say cell status?"

"Ship-mistresses Rantrav, Janijop, and Rebmac have dropped," Jakkuk reported, desperately seeking links with surviving controllers. The tedium of hyperlight had vanished in a heartbeat, replaced with pandemonium. Jakkuk shook away cobwebs. Ignoring blood dripping from her chin, the cell controller forced her mind clear. Her own *g'ort* pulsing, Jakkuk remeshed and scanned the ether; only four of twelve controllers were answering, their telepathic links tenuous at best, holding the hyperlight grid together by the slimmest of margins. A fifth and sixth responded to Jakkuk's active sweep, just clinging to the matrix. Jakkuk warped their links around the flagship, restoring critical redundancies. Immediate danger was past, but six controllers were missing, their minds evaporated from the neural ether.

Something horrible had happened. Jakkuk reveled in fear. Her cell remained established in hyper-space, on vector. With glorious determination, Jakkuk resynched the synaptic signals from the surviving ship controllers and ship mistresses, reestablishing Dominant Dar's command links. Her cell was ready to fight.

"Say the damage, Jakkuk-hajil," Dar demanded.

"Cell integrity is fixed with six nodes," she reported. "Six ships are missing, presumed destroyed or ejected from hyperlight. Three ships have suffered damage, including severe damage to this ship. We are the weakest link in the matrix. Systems are stabilizing."

"Gast, where is the enemy?" Dar demanded, her *g'ort* throbbing the ether like a pipe organ.

"I sense only our own controllers," Jakkuk replied, her mind probing outward to the ill-defined thresholds of hyperlight. Where once there had been two l'rdish battleships and ten Imperial star-cruisers there were only six Imperial star-cruisers.

"I sense no enemy," the cell controller reported.

The political approached, a searing wind in Jakkuk's skull.

"What has happened?" Karyai snarled as she floated onto the bridge, her mental presence eclipsing all communications. Even the lakk's feeble *g'ort* was manifest, though more in analytical intensity than in fear.

"Blood and blood!" Dar shouted. "We were attacked. Six ships do not

simultaneously disappear."

"Seek self-control, Dar-hajil," Karyai muttered, her anger rising to a magnificent resonance, all the more evident as the lakk floated atop the interface, pressing against Jakkuk's spine. The lakk elbowed into Jakkuk's synaptic sphere with the delicacy of a thug. Helpless to prevent it, the cell controller's telepathic focus was thrust outward by the lakk's compelling power, scanning, searching, smelling, ripping the fabric of space apart. To no avail; there was naught but six Ulaggi star-cruisers remaining in the grid, their crews frightened, angry—belligerently aroused.

"Only six remain," Karyai growled as she disengaged. Jakkuk felt momentarily blinded, as if an intense light had been extinguished. "Mind your cell, child," Karyai muttered.

"Yes, mother," Jakkuk replied, regaining command.

"How can this be?" Dar screamed.

"As you have declared," Karyai replied. "We were attacked."

"How?" Dar demanded.

The facile minds of the officers shared irrefutable facts, debating without words. Their collective scrutiny and analysis provided but a single logical outcome: the enemy had planted warheads in their hyperlight space. Either they knew in advance where their fleet would be—impossible, for no track had been laid prior to their jump—or worse, the enemy was able to detect and track their movement in hyperlight.

"They track us," Dar snarled.

"Debris analysis indicates konish weapons," a bridge-talker reported.

"Gravity slugs," Dar growled. "Perhaps we chase the wrong enemy."

"One foe at a time, daughter," Karyai replied.

"Gast! They will all suffer for this," Dar growled.

The fleet dominant linked to her remaining ship mistresses, issuing battle commands. Jakkuk monitored the order stream, directing and redirecting thought impulses across the void. She admonished the surviving ship controllers to be vigilant. Her own ship could ill afford further injury. But repairing battle damage was not Jakkuk's responsibility. The cell controller focused her attention on the strength and redundancy of the cell's dendritic integrity. If they dropped grid link, they would be lost in space.

"I wonder how fared the other cells," Dar remarked.

"We shall not know until we depart hyperlight," Karyai replied.

Section Six

Siege

Live to Kill

The reach of the Ulaggi Empire is not fully comprehended. For untold centuries Triad raiders inflicted their murderous will on an unsuspecting galaxy. Collisions with advanced civilizations were rare, but pity them all, advanced or primitive. That the blight did not spread more widely is attributable to Ulaggi racial dissension and civil war, not always of roonish spark.

The planets of the Triad melded into a star-ranging empire, but each colony retained unique qualities. On Kar-Ulag the roonish aberration occurred early in the population cycle, but the mutation's effect on genetic dispositions was not dominant; the mother planet was to a far greater extent populated through controlled insemination, using kar-tiwaks and later employing traditional incubation. On Kar-Ulag lakkish power was supreme. The roon retained a place in society but

because of its rebellious past was untrusted. In time lakk science would muzzle the native roon even more.

There were no kar-like life forms on Tir-Ulag or I'rd-Ulag, no hosts for the Ulaggi tiwaks. Lakk scientists colonizing I'rd-Ulag ignored the lessons of Kar-Ulag. Though repugnant, primal urges afforded an efficient means of perpetuating a population. Desiring to study the dynamics, and confident that dendritic technologies would contain the bloody atavism once ignited, the politicals of I'rd-Ulag authorized primitive methods.

The lakk-mothers of Tir-Ulag, in concert with strong hajil counsel, were more circumspect; the scars of roonish chaos were still livid. Although requiring centuries longer to build a population, Tir-Ulag's leadership rejected natural breeding, opting instead for traditional incubation. Genetic sourcing was restricted, offspring were meticulously screened, and roonish genes were aggressively suppressed. On Tir-Ulag the roon was never permitted a role, and it was on Tir-Ulag that lakkish researchers developed neurological imprinting techniques that increased the roon's sensitivity—nay, her mortal vulnerability—to lakk telepathy; with these methods Roons birthed on Tir-Ulag were ruthlessly socialized. These same precautions were implemented on Kar-Ulag.

Similar measures were ordered for the roons of I'rd-Ulag but were not compelled. The breeding experiment on I'rd-Ulag was a catastrophe. Here lakk leadership failed; such was their apprehension of the roonish peril, the first generations of priestesses and politicals abided in enclaves on island fortresses. Many deigned not even to descend to the planet, choosing instead to remain in orbiting command posts, secure behind dendritic interfaces. All the while far-seeing roons and complicit hajil, graced with abundant offspring, enforced a militantly orderly society within the areas they controlled. Generations passed, and then centuries. I'rdish settlement expanded; a continent was civilized, and then two.

Curiously, the number of lakk conceived by natural methods was far reduced from expectation. Perhaps reproductive pressures vital to survive in the wild displaced neurological capacity, but this is conjecture. Without a critical mass of native lakk, it was left to the roon to govern. Motivated by a fierce pride of planet, a partnership was forged; native-born hajil tempered roonish excesses and exploited the vast labor force. Of necessity, I'rdish roon and even hajil became engineer and scientist, applying impatient creativity to the ancient crafts. I'rd-Ulag civilization blossomed into an economic power, obsessive of space exploration. I'rdish hyperlight ships soon probed the galaxy, searching for planets, some to colonize, all to terrorize.

A concomitant command of gravitronic resonance gave I'rdish roons access to dendritic technologies—and the ability to counter lakkish neural weapons. While roons of Tir-Ulag and Kar-Ulag remained congenitally vulnerable to lakk telepathy, I'rdish roons could hold the lakk at arm's length, and punish them. The roons of I'rd-Ulag became emboldened. The Second Roonish Rebellion resolved possession of I'rd-Ulag; all lakk were cast from the planet, their command posts blown from orbit. An I'rdish fleet engaged an Imperial fleet—and was victorious. A second Imperial fleet was dispatched to quash the rebellion, and a third. These fleets, too, were vanquished. I'rd-Ulag was liberated.

This transpired over thousands of years, a tidal flow of conquest and rebellion. But I'rd-Ulag was also for centuries on end at peace with her sister planets. It was during these periods of cooperation when the galaxy was most in jeopardy. Dynasties rose and fell; cultures ebbed and flowed. Power shifted on rare occasion to Tir-Ulag, but ultimate control was always wielded by lakk, most often from the onyx edifices of Kar-Ulag. Two facts were constant: the power of the lakk and roon, when

wielded in concert, was irresistible; but the glue that bonded their power was as fragile as an emotion.

As disparate as the Ulaggi races and civilizations were, one to the other, they had far more in common. All Ulaggi were neurotically compelled to conquer—to enslave. If they could not enslave, they killed. Hajil, roon, and lakk all shared an abiding instinct—kill to survive.

Chapter Forty-six

Faint Heart

"Welcome back to Lunar, sir."

Runacres looked up as Vice Admiral Klein entered his office. The chief science officer's bounding stride belied her haggard appearance; even in lunar gravity, the willowy female stooped with fatigue, her eyes sunken and deeply shadowed.

"It is certainly not good to be back," Runacres muttered. Surgeons had ordered him down. Personal telemetry had revealed a mild heart attack during the AC Fleet readiness inspection. He had prayed it was indigestion. The ensuing fatigue had not gone away, so he relented and brought his flag down to the beach. Now they wanted him in a tank. He would have nothing to do with remediation, no matter how long overdue. Not now.

"You appear a bit mangled," Runacres commented.

"All due respect, sir," she replied, "but have you stood before a mirror?"

"Gods forbid," Runacres muttered, rubbing his stubble; he would have to start shaving again. "How is your detection network progressing?"

"We have midrange coverage on the Genellan vector. If they come at us from another sector we won't see them until it's too late."

"I remain sadly confident they will come from Genellan," Runacres said. "How soon can you extend detection range?"

"We require launchers," she replied. "We need to position a full constellation—"

"How soon?" Runacres demanded. He needed every possible advantage.

"Two weeks to launch and at least another month to make station. I'm sorry, Admiral."

Runacres leaned back, feeling the weight of the universe on his chest. *Time!* Time was precious beyond measure. First and Second Fleets were at full strength. Between them he had a dozen *Avenger*-class battleships on line, but the ships and their crews remained untested; few were even at full complement. Third Fleet was a fleet in name only; with only two *Avengers* in its order-of-battle. Runacres was keeping the newest ships and their inexperienced crews under the umbrella of the defense station. His long-term priority was to build out and crew up another fleet.

A more pressing need was integration of the AC and the TGSR fleets with the Tellurian Legion. Six months had lapsed since the Asian Cooperation and the Turko-Gallic Socialist Republic had subordinated assets to his command. Admiral Zhang's cooperation was driven by his nation's gratitude for the rescue of her citizens. The ex-prisoner Pake had achieved celebrity status, appearing on news-vids exhorting her compatriots against the Ulaggi. Thanks in no small degree to Pake's politicking, the AC's contribution had grown to a dozen HLA ships, including three first-rates. AC fleet discipline was good, but execution was rigid, the chain of command fragile. AC skippers were accustomed to being told what to do and when; during battle drills, when Runacres had simulated loss of the AC flagship, the entire command structure fell into chaos.

TGSR participation could best be described as desultory. Sheik Cerise, the Turko-Gallic fleet admiral, had a disturbing tendency to avoid commitments. TGSR ships were well-maintained, their commanders alert and competent, and their crews disciplined; but Runacres doubted Sheik Cerise's resolve. The man's primary motivation seemed political rather than survival of the race.

With international contribution, Runacres had over fifty line-of-battle HLA ships. In six months he would add eight more *Avengers* to his order of battle, twelve more in a year, if they survived so long.

"You could use the time to—" Klein started to say.

"I will not go into the tank," Runacres growled.

"Admiral, we cannot afford to lose you," Klein persisted. "If you would spend even a month in the tank your health would improve. Three months would—"

"We may all be dead in three months."

"But, sir, we don't know if they're coming. It may be years. Perhaps never. Your heart could give out at any moment. You're killing yourself."

Runacres nodded; he had received the same lecture from Merriwether. No doubt his ego was in the way; the next heart attack or stroke could mean brain damage, making remediation more difficult, perhaps impossible. He looked up at the disposition boards; the stakes were impossibly high. He wished Sam Ito were here. He might consider dropping into a tank were Ito here to shoulder the load; but it would be another month before the man could even be talked to, at least three months before he was on his feet, assuming they yanked him out of the tanks prematurely, which Runacres had every intention of doing.

An alarm sounded from the operations area.

"No!" Admiral Klein whispered, her exhaustion replaced with bloodless horror.

"What is it?" Runacres demanded.

"The HLA grid is showing activity," Klein replied. "It's too soon for a konish task force."

The staff operations officer and the science watch officer appeared on the command screen, their faces ashen.

"Sir, we are showing hyperlight traffic on the Genellan vector," the ops officer reported. "Inbound. Estimated arrival in just over eight hours. Second Fleet action zone."

Eight hours was more warning than he had expected.

"You and your technicians are to be commended, Admiral," Runacres said.

"Thank you, sir," Klein replied without joy.

"Science, how many inbound units?" Runacres demanded. The remediation tank would have to wait.

"Unable to resolve discrete units, Admiral," the watch officer replied. "Telemetry indicates no fewer than seven hyperlight cells."

Seven cells! The Ulaggi traveled in six-ship cells; at least forty-two battleships were heading his way. Runacres stared at the screens. The enemy would never be more vulnerable; dropping out of hyperlight, they would be blind, their formations not optimized for combat.

"Say the spread," Runacres demanded. "Time and distance between arrivals?"

"A half hour from first cell to last, plus or minus five minutes, Admiral," the science officer replied.

Franklin Wells's Second Fleet, with twelve ships deployed, including nine *Avenger*-class, was closest to the exit point. Wells could be in position to attack within five hours; but twelve Legion ships—even with nine *Avengers*—would be no match for an Ulaggi armada. Runacres could not afford to trade losses; he had to inflict disproportionate

damage. Sarah Merriwether's First Fleet, also with twelve ships on the line, but only three *Avenger-class*, was at least six days at flank impulse from the battle zone. Admiral Zhang's AC Fleet was nine days out. Runacres would maintain the TGSF Fleet in reserve; he could not yet trust them.

"Orders, Admiral?" the operations officer asked.

"Signal Sheik Cerise to dispatch a cell to Genellan. Have the task group commander inform Tar Fell and King Ollant of the situation and request all possible assistance."

Runacres stared at the battle plot. It was now or never.

"Signal to Admiral Wells," he growled. "Maneuver for battle."

Chapter Forty-seven

Battle Begins

"Second Fleet has been ordered to attack!"

Jake Carmichael pulled himself into his command station and scanned the updating status boards. Twelve against forty-two made no sense. He checked the exit fix and did the math. He swallowed hard; he knew what was coming. For once he was glad that Charl Buccari was light years distant, for the moment safe. He prayed he would see her again.

"Weapons, warm up the plasma generators. Clear for action," he commanded. "Engineering, stand by for combat maneuvers. All departments make ready for battle."

The executive officer and departmental duty officers acknowledged. On the flag bridge above him, Commodore Merriwether and her senior staff appeared at their action stations. The flag summons buzzed in Carmichael's ear; somber vid-images of the fleet's unit commanders appeared on his console, as well as Wanda Green, the corvette group commander. Two skippers were absent: Maria Bolo of *T.L.S. Baffin*, and Marty Tanaka of *T.L.S. Iceland*, both en route lunar orbit for maintenance and crew rotations. Merriwether's cherubic image dominated the matrix, her placid countenance belying the intensity of the situation.

"Prepare for action," she announced, her drawl even sweeter than usual. "Battle plan is updating. Stand by for in-system jump. Battle staff will reconvene upon exit. Now jump stations."

An in-system jump!

Boatswain whistles trilled. Maneuvering alarms sounded throughout the fleet. *Avenger*, as flagship and formation guide, held impulse vector while *Intrepid* and *Nemesis*, also *Avenger-class* battleships, and nine *Island-class* motherships maneuvered to optimize linking. Count-down annunciators on all ships reset and commenced decrementing the precious seconds before gravitronic dislocation.

Carmichael pulled on his battle armor and tethered in. Except for injecting encouragement and acknowledging reports, the battleship skipper sat back and observed his watch team. He fought his concerns; an in-system jump was necessary to get to the party on time, but First Fleet had only recently gained its full complement, and fewer than half the crews had been through a jump evolution, much less a short jump. Stifling doubt, Carmichael brought up simulation models; there was precious little time to game the enemy. Battle parameters were still loading as he played out high-level scenarios. As the minutes passed, he grew increasingly uncomfortable; with twenty-four ships against forty-two, the outcomes were not easy to stomach.

"Five minutes to jump," the watch boatswain announced.

Glancing up at the flag bridge, Carmichael noted that Commodore Merriwether seemed animated; the board pieces were not yet set. He punched his console, calling an ally on flag staff. Commander Wanda Green appeared on vid-console, her broad brown forehead shiny with perspiration.

"What's happening, Brick?" he asked.

"Hey, Jake," Green responded, pulling on her own helmet. "Friggin' comm delay with Lunar Command. Admiral Runacres is trying to gin up more firepower, although about half the TGSR fleet just jumped for Genellan."

"More firepower would be good," Carmichael replied, but he understood Runacres's plight. All that was left in reserve were the AC and TGSR fleets, and neither their jump proficiencies nor their readiness ratings were much to brag about. Fighting short-handed was better than chaos.

"How're you doing?" he asked his old wingmate.

"Feel about as useful as nipples on a chicken," Green growled. "So this is what it's like to be strapped to a bull's-eye?"

Green was suffering through the transition from squadron commander to group leader. Carmichael knew how she felt. He also longed for the days when he could fly a corvette into battle, rather than waiting for the fight to come to him.

"See you on the other side," Carmichael replied, inspecting the updating status boards. Time was short. Klaxons sounded.

"One minute to jump," the watch boatswain announced. "All hands tether down. Now jump stations."

"Sorry, Jake. *Avenger's* a beautiful ship. She'll kick ass," Green said.

Carmichael smiled and terminated the connection. He studied the boards, looking for indications of trouble. Everything was in order, all departments reporting. His ship was ready.

"Ten seconds," the watch boatswain announced.

Carmichael settled in. His thoughts returned, as they always did prior to jumping, to Sharl Buccari.

"Four...three...two...now jumping."

Carmichael gripped his arm rests. Equilibrium vanished into vertigo—the jump entrance and exit mangled in time and space. Always far worse than any memory, it was as if Carmichael's brain was in two places at once. The pain was real; the panic unnerving. Desperately, he held onto Buccari's image, but wrenching forces ripped her away. Measured in linear time, only a few seconds passed, yet to Carmichael's tortured senses it was an unending nightmare; Buccari's loss felt unspeakably genuine. The swirling ceased, the nausea lessened; his eyes focused, blurred, and focused again. His respiration loud in his helmet, his equilibrium returned and then his sense of mission—and then his fear.

"Ship...is alpha-alpha, Captain," the officer-of-the-deck mumbled; and then louder as his senses gathered, "All d-departments reporting. All systems ready."

"Very well," Carmichael acknowledged. Reflexively, he glanced at the externals vid, his dulled brain expecting new stars; but the vid revealed familiar constellations. Alertness returning, he shifted his attention to the battle plot. First Fleet, jumping through hyperlight, was first to the point of attack. Second Fleet was still maneuvering at flank speed. The battle plan updated. Alarms sounded.

"Rudder signals," the officer-of-the-deck reported. "New vector."

"Make it so," Carmichael ordered. Maneuvering alarms sounded. Tethers snugged as the battleship accelerated to its assigned vector, taking position directly in the throat of the enemy's approach vector. Second Fleet pressed onward to the down-orbit flank, spreading its big battleships into enfilade. Carmichael wondered

when Merriwether was going to reconvene her battle council. Another alarm sounded; the battle plan was resetting, updating critical parameters.

"Sir, new input!" the tactical officer shouted. "AC Fleet has joined."

Icons for ten more ships on First Fleet's high flank appeared. Runacres had thrown all his chips on the table; he had not wanted to announce the movement until he was certain of Admiral Zhang's arrival. With all pieces set, Merriwether reconvened her command council. The arrayed countenances of the skippers were uniformly less drawn, more optimistic. There were thirty-four human ships against an estimated forty-two Ulaggi, still long odds, but they had the immense advantage of surprise.

"Enemy exit fixes have stabilized," the commodore reported. "We will adjust the line as necessary to overwhelm their van. All ships will launch ordnance to assigned exit points in staggered waves. Our objective is to saturate the defenses of the first cells to emerge."

With battle plans fully loaded, Carmichael replayed the simulation; the outcomes, although still predicting losses, were significantly improved.

"Show no quarter," Merriwether announced. "Give them pure hell. Now carry on. Give comfort to your crews. History is made today. That is all."

Carmichael hit *Avenger's* general circuit button. Throughout the fleet similar actions were being taken by all skippers, the timeless ceremony of commanders addressing those who are about to die.

"All hands, this is the captain."

Carmichael paused, giving his crew time to settle. His mind roiled with nervous energy. He forced himself to be calm.

"Avengers!" he continued. "In less than an hour this ship will be engaged...in the greatest battle in human history. We are well named, for today we avenge our shipmates at Shaula, at Old Father, at Pitcairn, and at Genellan. Never forget.

"But this battle is not just about revenge or about glory, or even victory. This battle is about survival. Not for this ship but for every ship in the fleet, for every human on the planet beneath you. There will be no tomorrow, if we do not on this day defeat the enemy.

"*Avenger* is the most formidable ship ever built, its crew the best trained. We will engage the enemy. We will destroy them. Stand to your posts all. Give aid to your shipmates as you are able, but at all cost, do your duty.

"I say again, we will prevail. And..." He paused again, longer this time, "...I'll see all of you on the beach. That is all."

A muted cheer rolled through the ship. Everyone on the bridge held a thumb in the air.

"Kick ass, Jake," Wanda Green said.

"Kick ass, Brickshitter," he replied. "You ready?"

"Screen is green," she replied. "Launching now."

"Corvettes are deploying," his tactical officer echoed. Swarms of contacts flowed from each ship, spreading into formations above and below the firing planes.

The last tortured hour of suspense melted into history. At five minutes to jump exit all ships engaged shields. At two minutes the call came to launch the first wave of interception ordnance—heavy nukes. A second, third, and fourth wave launched at thirty-second intervals. On the operations plot, the waves converged on an empty point in distant space.

"Ten seconds to jump exit."

Jaw tight, Carmichael stared at the battle display.

"Five seconds...four...three...two...one—"

"Multiple contacts dropping from hyperlight," the weapons officer reported.

"Eight bogeys, designated unfriendly: Alpha One through Alpha eight. Now nine. Now ten. Ordnance is active and tracking. Twelve bogeys. Thirteen."

Delicate dots of red and gold bloomed. Acquisition radars locked on. Targeting computers allocated targets. Green lights flashed.

"Weapons free!" the tactical officer announced.

"Fire as they bear!" Carmichael barked.

Avenger's batteries discharged a deep salvo, joining an anvil chorus of thundering emissions from the other ships. All along the line of battle, main batteries sparkled with scintillating detonations, projecting unerring barbs of energy at the arriving enemy.

"Bogeys are taking hits," the tactical officer reported. "Confirmed unfriendly. At least four enemy no longer emitting shield signals. Alpha Six confirmed destroyed. Also Alpha Two. Now three kills. Four."

A muted cheer lifted from the bridge decks. Carmichael prayed the *Ulaggi* would turn and run.

"Seven enemy destroyed, many damaged. Counting eight confirmed kills. Now nine."

The cheer kept building, but something was wrong. Carmichael watched the icons popping up. His gut began to twist.

"Silence on the bridge," he ordered, but even as he spoke all noise had ceased. Except for the sonorous ringing of the batteries and muted operational chatter, silence reigned. All celebration had vanished, not in response to Carmichael's order, but rather to the relentless kaleidoscope of icons blossoming across a broadening front.

"Counting twenty contacts still active, now thirty. Ten, now eleven enemy ships confirmed destroyed. Now counting forty active contacts. Total of twelve destroyed."

Forty enemy ships still active! And a dozen destroyed.

"Now fifty contacts," the weapons officer reported. "Another cell arriving. Now sixty, sir, and rising."

Avenger jolted with the stuttering impact of multiple energy beams crashing against her shields. Alarms sounded.

"Sir, the enemy has opened fire."

Chapter Forty-eight

Ambush

"Kill them!" Dar screamed.

Jakkuk's crippled cell had erupted from hyperlight into an inferno. The cell controller desperately scanned the ether, her own *g'ort* flushing superbly. Two I'rdish controllers, their cells fully engaged, embraced Jakkuk's link. Jakkuk had expected four cells to be in place, but there were only two. *Two entire cells were missing!* And more ships were being destroyed; she sensed an I'rdish controller's death knell, ringing out from the van, and then another.

"Launch destroyers!" Dar snarled, her *g'ort* swelling into the ether. *Fist a'Yerg* and her destroyer triads erupted from the bays, their pilots screaming at the indifferent stars. Shifting constellations of fast-movers poured from the *Ulaggi* ships, clusters of death seeking opportunity.

Jakkuk detected *kar* ships arrayed across the exit vector. She relayed positions to her weapons controllers. Controllers already in action furiously sought Jakkuk's link, assigning targets. Dar commanded her ships into battle, maneuvering to bear on the enemy. The dominant's flagship, still suffering damage sustained in the hyperlight

ambush, fell back from the advance; but Dar's cell surged into the battle zone, taking terrible hits and delivering smashing blows. An enemy ship blossomed with destruction. Roonish destroyer commanders screamed with ecstasy. But then one of Dar's ships, also weakened in transit, succumbed to enemy fire. And then another.

Jakkuk, feeling the life force of controllers snuffing out, barely sensed the overtaking cells, their energy weapons blazing, their destroyer triads hurtling past.

"Why does your cell plod so into battle, Jakkuk-hajil? Where are your ships?" a powerful dendritic probe queried; Jakkuk recognized the jolting abrasiveness of Dominant y'Tant's fleet controller. The political's presence overwhelmed the link before Jakkuk could respond.

"Honor is mine, roon-child," Karyai screeched. "This cell was attacked in transit. Six ships were lost and Dominant Dar's flagship suffered near mortal damage. How fared the rest of the fleet?"

The fleet controller's spike of alarm heightened magnificently.

"Yours is the only cell to report such an attack, lakk-mother," the roon replied. "But two cells remain overdue. Blood and bowels, I fear the worst."

Jakkuk's ship took a devastating blow, burning away the last layer of her crippled shields. They were naked before the enemy.

"All possible speed," Dar commanded, her *g'ort* swelling, her fury sublime. "Maintain fire." The ship shuddered again and again. "Kill them!"

"Die well, daughters!" Karyai screamed, and every lakk, hajil, and roon aboard joined in the death chant.

"Hold and attend, daughter," an immensely powerful mind commanded, the unmistakable mental rasp of Fleet Dominant y'Tant. "Remain in position, Dar-hajil. Collect all damaged ships still capable of fighting. Your cell controller will release operational ships into my train."

Dar acknowledged with a scream of shame.

Death would have to wait. Jakkuk dispatched three ships still capable of battle as y'Tant's expanding armada passed close aboard, maneuvering to shield Dar's crippled force from the enemy's withering fire.

"Bear off," Dar commanded, her *g'ort* sputtering into submission. Jakkuk embraced the ignominy. There was no choice; their ship was severely damaged. Dominant Dar rallied her crews, ordering rescue and repair parties. Diverting energy from weapons systems to the power plant, her engineers restored impulse propulsion as well as partial shields. Collecting other wounded ships in its train, Dar's cell followed in the battle's wake.

Jakkuk assessed the battlefield; the human ships, fighting fiercely, were clustered in three maneuvering fleets.

"Are there konish ships?" Karyai asked, intruding on Jakkuk's neural matrix.

The cell controller had wondered the same; many of the human ships exhibited weapons parameters of higher frequency and greater power than previously displayed, signatures of konish weaponry.

"No, mother," Jakkuk replied. "I sense no konish emissions. I suspect a new class of human ship."

"Gast, it matters not," Karyai replied, slipping from Jakkuk's mind. "They will all die."

Though the humans had done hard damage, the weight of the Ulaggi attack was telling; the enemy line was about to be center-breached and outflanked. Three of their ships had been destroyed, and several more were in grave peril. It was but a matter of time before the puny *kar* were swept away.

Even so, the Ulaggi expeditionary force had been savagely blunted; nine cells

had been reduced to seven. One hundred and eight ships had been reduced to sixty-four, many of those gravely damaged. Of the twenty roonish battleships, only twelve remained. Jakkuk submerged deeper into the dendritic link, searching for clues.

"Hold!" she shouted, scanning the planet's single large moon, just lifting above the planet. The signals were unmistakable. "Mother, there are kones here. I detect a defense satellite orbiting the moon."

A konish defense satellite! Had they fallen into a trap?

Chapter Forty-nine

Retreat

Runacres was helpless. The grandest battle of all time, and he was absent from the field. It was not ego or self-aggrandizement that stirred his soul; Runacres belonged on the pitch, amidst the carnage and the violence—it was his destiny. He pounded his fists on the console.

"*Hainan* and *Corsica* have been destroyed," the tactical officer reported. "*Avenger* and *Nemesis* are holding the line, but they are getting hammered."

The enemy, an enraged beast disdainful of death, forged ahead as it stumbled out of hyperlight, clawing furiously into Merriwether's batteries. Runacres's frustration welled magnificently. Transmission delays prevented him from controlling the battle. Runacres stared at the status boards, berating himself for underestimating the enemy force; there were over eighty Ulaggi units in the attacking formations, and they included a previously unseen ship of formidable power.

"You had no choice, sir," Admiral Klein said softly.

"Did I cry aloud?" Runacres growled.

"You did not, sir, but your expression was eloquent. Attacking was the correct tactic."

"History shall judge me cruelly," he replied. He was losing ships, but he had inflicted far greater damage than he had suffered. *Damn it, they had smashed the leading edge of the Ulaggi attack.* If only there had not been so many of them.

"Admiral Wells has ordered all corvettes into the grid," the tactical officer reported. "He is preparing to fall back."

"Which option?" Runacres demanded. The battle plan provided three retreat options: if holding the advantage, Admiral Wells would fall back to low-Earth orbit; if enemy strength made defense of low-Earth tenuous, he would fall back to lunar martial; and if all hope was lost, the fleet would retreat to Genellan.

"Lunar martial, Admiral. Seven minutes to jump."

All hope was not lost; but seven minutes was an eternity. Runacres stared up at the battle plots.

"*Kyushu* destroyed," the tactical officer reported. "*Britannia* is in extremis."

"Get out of there, Franklin," Runacres growled.

"We are picking up transmissions across all tactical frequencies," the tactical officer reported. "From the fast-movers. On speakers."

"Belay that!" Runacres commanded. He knew what was coming; he had heard the wailing battle-cries before, inhuman, cruel. But it was too late; the tactical officer's order was already obeyed.

"*Boocharry. B-o-o-o-charry!*"

"Secure that bloody noise," Runacres commanded, wishing, not for the first time, that Charl Buccari were here to help. *Damn it,* even he was starting to believe in her invincibility; but it would be at least two months before Buccari and the kones could

possibly return, assuming they came back at all. Runacres's only hope was to fall back, to create a small enough perimeter around the moon to defend his remaining ships and repair facilities. He needed time, but time was also working against him.

"*Britannia* is no longer reporting."

"One minute to jump."

"Admiral Zhang is closing the gap. He is taking losses. *Morning Star* is gone and *Fire Fountain* has lost shield power. *Avenger* and *Nemesis* moving to cover."

Fire Fountain was Zhang's flagship. Runacres professional estimation of the Asian admiral soared majestically.

"Ten seconds...nine..."

Seconds floated in the air

"Get them out of there!" Runacres pleaded.

"Four...three...two...one...jumping," the tactical officer reported. The watch center fell silent, all eyes on the position locators.

"Sir, Admiral Wells has retreated into hyperlight," the operations officer said. In the next breath he continued, "We have them positioned at lunar fallback. Six ships did not make it."

"Six?" Runacres asked, desperately scanning the updating plot, seeking out transponders. His heart soared when he saw *Avenger's* icon. "Did we lose *Fire Fountain*?"

"No, sir," the ops officer replied. "*Fire Fountain* is reporting, but *Nemesis* is gone, sir."

"What is the enemy doing?" Runacres demanded.

"They're consolidating on a high standoff orbit, Admiral," the tactical officer reported. "Jump threat considered low."

Runacres digested the bitter news. Battle-damage updated: the combined human fleet had taken out fourteen Ulaggi ships; at a cost of six, including one *Avenger*-class. By any military standard it was a clear victory, and yet Runacres could only swallow a bitter gorge. In less than an hour, he had lost over two thousand spacers; and he was still outnumbered, sixty-four enemy mainline ships to forty-four, including the questionable TGSR reserve. No, there were only thirty-eight remaining; six TGSR ships had leapt into hyperlight.

"Admiral Wells is requesting orders, sir," the ops officer reported.

The combined fleet was returned within direct command range. Runacres stared out over the operations center. The watch teams hustled about their functions, but they were all watching him, gauging his resolve. The old spacer felt heartsick.

"Fleet commanders," Runacres demanded, standing erect. Now was not the time to falter. Holo images of Admiral Wells, Admiral Zhang, Sheik Cerise, and Commodore Merriwether appeared on the command board.

"Well and bravely fought," Runacres said. "You have punished the enemy, but our work has just begun. Admiral Wells, converge all ships on lunar defense orbit in standard precedence—Battle Plan Delta Six. Disperse AC and TGSR assets at your discretion. Integrate the konish satellite into primary coverage and adjust datum altitude accordingly. Our first priority will be to protect ships under construction."

"But Admiral Runacres, what of Earth?" Sheik Cerise blurted.

"Earth is untenable," Runacres snapped. "You have your orders, sir. That is all."

The TGSR commander, his swarthy complexion growing darker, bowed and signed off. Runacres had no time for diplomacy. He could not contest the Ulaggi's numerical advantage. Runacres would hide under the defense station and the lunar batteries. He would come out to fight only on favorable terms.

His secure comm buzzed. He checked ID and accepted the link; Sarah

Merriwether's space-ravaged features appeared on his screen. He smiled despite the butcher's bill in his pocket.

"How you doing, Admiral?" she drawled.

"Seeing you, much better, ma'am," he replied, staring up at the status plots; the Ulaggi were holding orbit, adding to his relief. "How fares your flagship? She has been well and truly baptized."

"*Avenger* is one hell of fighting machine," she replied. "And Jake Carmichael's got brass balls. 'Bout as big as mine."

"An engaging image," he replied.

"We got earnestly knocked about," she continued, growing grim. "The Ulaggi battleships are bad business. We're analyzing data and flushing out the specs, but it's clear we can't match 'em head-to-head, Admiral. I'm not sure a konish battleship could."

"That is why we are falling back, Sarah," Runacres replied. "Perchance they will go away."

"Wishful thinking as strategy?" she muttered, shaking her head. "By the way, you were a tad sharp with Monsieur Cerise."

A senior aide ran up to the admiral's station.

"I shall trust you to patch his pride," Runacres replied. "I must go now. Godspeed, Sarah." She smiled and signed off, leaving Runacres feeling very tired. The aide fidgeted.

"What is it?"

"Sir, President Stark demands an immediate conference."

"Extend my respects," Runacres said, "but beg Mr. Stark to hold for one moment." The fleet admiral had long ago ceased being surprised at the efficiency of the president's security network—less than two minutes had passed since the decision, and Stark was already aware of Runacres's plans to leave low Earth orbit unprotected. A more important priority had come to Runacres's mind.

"Captain Ito's regeneration tank," he commanded. "I want it evacuated from Earth to the Fleet Medical Facility on Lunar Base. Make it happen, now!"

Battle-hardened skippers would be perilously difficult to find; trusted friends even harder. He prayed there was enough time.

Chapter Fifty

Hope and Despair

Cassy Quinn cowered in her tethers. She was confused and frightened, but most of all she was morbidly hungry. Ever since the accident—or whatever it was that had happened in hyperlight—the aliens had abandoned her. Interrogation sessions had ceased. Her cell had become a deprivation chamber, the lighting never increased above an anemic glow and, worse, never extinguished. The guards made indifferent appearances, sometimes bothering to feed her. All track of time had been lost.

At long last her prison ship had dropped from hyperlight. Despite the sickening disorientation of transition, and overwhelming hunger, Quinn's battered spirits lifted—she was returned to Sol-Sys! But brutal logic perforated her joy; her euphoria flamed out—the Ulaggi had come to conquer, to kill—and her feelings plunged once again to miserable depths; but no sooner did the gut-wrenching transition dampen out than did her prison ship commence the frantic operations associated with full-pitched battle; abrupt maneuvers, accelerating on multiple axes, arrhythmic power surges, all accompanied by vibrations of sinister frequency and intensity—the ship was firing its

weapons. They were under attack.

The Ulaggi had been ambushed.

Admiral Runacres must have been waiting for them. Even in the absence of all hope, Quinn's joy rekindled. But as she tightened her tethers against the accelerations, her euphoria once again receded, displaced by confusion; how could Runacres have known the Ulaggi were coming? How could he have anticipated their exit point accurately enough to wage an immediate attack? She struggled to think, but then came the unmistakable shuddering and ozone-reeking jolts that drove away all emotion—except stark panic; her prison ship was being hit. She curled up, trying to cram her terrified consciousness into a dark corner of her brain; she clenched shut her eyes and willed away her thoughts, wanting desperately to fade into unconsciousness; sleep would drive away the hunger; sleep would drive away the fear. But in her panicked trance she sensed a welling emotion, a fervor—a *lusting*—permeating the ether. She had felt it before; it was familiar now—the Ulaggi battle fever. But added to the blend of soaring emotions, was the pipe-organ intensity of countless roons, a murderous, lurid fury—orgasmic in intensity.

Kill them! Kill them! The plaints echoed in Quinn's head. The alien words formed involuntarily on the human's lips. Out of control, her emotions once again climbed with passionate abandon, resonating with inhuman harmonies of death. Quaking with delirium, Quinn struggled to empty her mind of the rage, driving with it her last kernel of sanity; but as the Ulaggi buzzsaw retreated, other sensations welled—bright motes of energy, more disturbing—and at the same time comforting. And then came the shock of awareness—she was sensing other humans, sensing their fear and anger. She heard pleas for help. She heard dying cries. It had to be hallucination; she was going crazy. And then Quinn's exhausted brain surrendered. She fell unconscious.

How long she slept she did not know. She came groggily to, awakened by rough handling. The illumination in her cell had increased to an uncomfortable intensity. Blinking, she realized she had been cleansed of her filth and dressed in a fresh shift. There were intravenous clamps on her leg and arm. Her head ached, but she felt energy returning. A technician, seeing her awake, handed her a ration. Salivating, Quinn snatched the sausagelike substance from his hands and shoved it into her mouth, ripping the wrapper with her teeth.

"In moderation, *kar-mother*," the technician grumbled, yanking his own sausagelike fingers from the human's ravenous jaws.

With food in her system, Quinn's cognitive horizon moved grudgingly outward. Her environment was on an even keel, no longer accelerating, and except for a circ-fan with a bad bearing, the ship was quiet. At least of aural noise; the rushing background of mental activity was still there, although subdued. Somewhere in the back of Quinn's memory, she had teasing recall of humans, but that memory was dreamlike; and like a dream, the certainty of it quickly faded. An effect of delirium, she assumed.

Her paltry meal consumed, the technician released Quinn from her tethers and disconnected her IVs. Two guard-males roughed her into motion. Quinn cursed them in their own language, reaping a cuff to the ear. The brutes pushed her into the passageway, floating freely in null-gee. The telepathic ambience elevated to an indiscriminate din, akin to walking into a crowded room. They transitioned up a companionway and continued down the long axis of the ship, the background tenor growing stronger. Ulaggi females, mostly hajil, stood aside and watched her pass. Quinn sensed the hajils' preening hostility; with the roons she felt a hot malevolence, an almost sensate violation. Initially stunned with their unwanted probes, she tried digging back; her awkward and ill-focused darts were angrily rebuffed, but not without discomfiture on the part of the aliens.

They came to a halt, her guards trembling. After a moment a tall hatch sucked aside; the telepathic cacophony blared higher. Quinn discovered that she could force order to the mental roar, at least enough to clear her mind for her own thoughts. A hajil stood beyond the threshold. The guards jerked backwards, relinquishing their charge. Quinn sensed recognition even before seeing the alien's face.

"Come," Jakkuk commanded, pulling Quinn inward.

The cinnamon smell burgeoned; Quinn had grown inured to the odor, but the sudden intensity was overwhelming. The darkened room was crowded with hajil, all sullenly glaring. Garish status arrays and sectorized charts filled the bulkheads, casting a kaleidoscope of color and painting the pallid features of the grim females with carnival malevolence.

Another hatch sucked open, spilling stark brilliance into the command center and boosting the raucous din. Quinn was thrust into the intense light and into a telepathic maelstrom like a drowning person swimming against a flood. Immensely strong intrusions insinuated into Quinn's mind. She recognized the white witch's telepathics before she saw the harridan; but the tall, blue-jacketed female was also there, rummaging in Quinn's mind. The human tried pushing back on Dominant y'Tant, but she might as well have tried pushing her nose through a titanium plate.

Focusing her thoughts required Herculean effort. Quinn desperately sought order out of sensual insanity. Dominant Dar was in the room, along with a half-dozen blue-uniformed roons. Jakkuk pushed Quinn toward the white witch and the roonish commander. The stunning cacophony surged higher as the human approached a coffinlike module in the center of the compartment. Quinn came into contact with its brushed-metal surface, and the telepathic volume in her brain increased by an order of magnitude. No, not volume—but gain, or bandwidth. It was as if everyone in the entire galaxy were speaking at once.

"Behold!" the white witch snarled. "The *kar-sow's* etheric receptors have developed. She attunes naturally to the interface."

"Power but no discrimination," y'Tant remarked. "I sense only chaos."

"Be patient, roon-daughter," Karyai replied. "I have confidence in this one. Bring her to me."

Jakkuk pulled Quinn from the module, holding her before the lakk. Both the lakk and the roon wrestled within the human's skull. Quinn grabbed her head. Jakkuk yanked the human's hands to her sides.

"What do you know of the *Avenger*-class battleship, child?" the white witch demanded.

The mental query fell like a hammer blow. Quinn's battered intellect balked—how hard could she resist? After months of telepathic abuse, she was confident the aliens could not extract isolated data from her mind; they required a sequence of thoughts to be formulated. With a marker, the aliens could then wedge out deeper levels. Quinn labored to control her thoughts. There was no use lying; they always knew.

"*Avengers* were built to replace ships that your fleets destroyed," Quinn replied, looking defiantly into Karyai's eyes. "I know little of their specifications. I am a science officer, not a line officer."

The Ulaggi officers glared, their minds probing. Dominant Dar and the others conversed in the background, their chatter flowing in telepathic subtext. But within the encompassing din there were other signals, benign sparks of warmth, distracting the human from her hideous interrogators.

"*Avengers* employ konish weapons technology," y'Tant declared, brutally seizing Quinn's attention.

Konish weapons technologies! Quinn had not confessed as much; the fact must have escaped her thoughts.

"I am a science officer, not a line officer," she repeated. "I have heard references, but I know of no specifics."

It was the truth. Still, they glared. They probed.

"Tell us of this *kar* called Runacres," Karyai's telepathic demand reverberated between Quinn's ears. "He was your leader at Genellan? He is the obscenely insane commander who drove his ships into the atmosphere, yes?"

"Yes," Quinn replied, saying nothing more; but the science officer's mind was defenseless, it was futile; Admiral Runacres was like a father to her, and more—a hero.

"Blood, you revere this male—this *kar*," the roon hissed.

"He is a great man," Quinn cried. "He defeated you at Genellan. He will defeat you here."

Her interrogators glared with even greater hostility, their snake-eyes filled with a burning contempt. Dominant Dar grew furious. Jakkuk's anger eclipsed her petty ego. Others in the room commenced a screeching banter that Quinn's translation device could not follow; their emotions were baldly clear. The white witch silenced them with a furious spasm that almost made Quinn faint.

"How did Runacres-*kar* know of our arrival?" This from y'Tant, with words, but then telepathic questions rained down from both officers, verbal and mental, one atop another, digging, prying.

"How was Runacres-*kar* able to attack us in hyperlight?"

"What tracking technologies does Runacres-*kar* possess?"

She knew little, but Quinn feared her accumulated hyperlight knowledge might reveal some unsuspected clue; she desperately focused on her poor dead husband, replaying her last memories, but the image of his death was too painful. Quinn shifted her thoughts to her daughter, wondering where Emerald was and whether she was even alive. But her concentration failed, betrayed by her own curiosity. The Ulaggi ships *had* been attacked during transit. Her amazement was genuine, as was her consternation. How could the Ulaggi have been tracked in transit?

Her puzzlement seemed to satisfy the aliens.

"A *konish* defense satellite orbits your moon," the white witch said. "How did it get here? How many *kones* are here? How often do *kones* come to your system?"

Again, Quinn could not mask her astonishment—a *konish defense station!* Hope blossomed. Surely this was Dowornobb's work. And the fact that Runacres was waiting for them—that also had to Dowornobb's work. Too late, she tried to stifle her thoughts.

"Dowornobb. Tell us about Dowornobb-*kone*," Karyai demanded.

It was futile to conceal the *kone's* identity or his importance to human HLA research; Quinn desperately created a web of partial truths; but her excitement could not be suppressed—there was a *konish* defense station in orbit around the moon.

Incensed at the human's rising spirits, the Ulaggi officers pummeled her with renewed fury, wheedling her with questions about *konish* defenses and technologies. Obvious from their questions, they already knew a great deal. At last they relented, both Karyai and y'Tant withdrawing from her mind. Quinn collapsed like a free-floating sack of flour.

"Her brain has shut down," Karyai growled.

"She is but a *kar-sow* casting pellets of dung," y'Tant snarled.

Quinn clung to consciousness, fortified with anger. Employing her last ounce of will, she turned to her tormentors.

"Go back to your own system," she gasped, desperate to squeeze out her failing

thoughts. "Before our other fleet returns."

"There are no other human fleets, child," Karyai snarled.

"The konish fleet!" she shouted. "Before the konish fleet returns." Powerless to prevent it, the image of Charl Buccari came to her mind, a vision of irresistible power, crushing the Ulaggi before her. Both Karyai and y'Tant elbowed their way back into the human's brain.

"Gast, Boocharry, again," Karyai snarled.

"So, the warrior Boocharry is here?" Dar asked.

"She does not know," the white witch said.

Dominant Dar snarled an oath.

"Boocharry? Who is this...Boocharry?" y'Tant demanded, spitting out the tortured syllables.

"One of their leaders," the white witch said, using words. "But not *kar*. A female. She has made trouble before."

"I recall Fist a'Yerg's simpering praise," y'Tant remarked, casting about Quinn's mind. "I should like to meet this warrior."

Once again the aliens departed Quinn's mind, leaving the human's skull empty and bruised. She floated backward, brushing against the silvery module. A sensation of narcotic intensity surged through her; she melded with the surrounding ether, a modulated patchwork of emotion and logic. Much she could not understand, but there were threads of gold—motes of light—that attracted her attention. She touched the shimmering surface with her fingertips, increasing the intensity. The white witch glanced up; her acidic mind swirled through the human's mind and was gone, a foul scent.

"My station," Jakkuk whispered, but words were unnecessary; the hajil's mind engaged Quinn's with far more clarity than ever before. The human could sense the alien's pride and much more—this was Jakkuk's reason for being, her professional calling—her art. Jakkuk was a cell controller, and this station was the fleet control nexus. A thousand questions leapt to Quinn's mind; but her attention was overwhelmed by visions of Admiral Runacres. She embraced the metal with both hands, and the visions became even clearer. Suddenly her thoughts were wrenched from the intoxicating ether. The white witch and the blue-uniformed roon glared at her.

"We will commence our attack," y'Tant fiercely proclaimed. "The *kar*-planet is mine."

The roon's emotions were elevating; Quinn detected that curious sensuality, not fear, but a love of fear—no, a lust for fear, a desire for danger, even death.

"What of Runacres-*kar* and his *Avenger* ships?" Dar growled. "Blood, but I would like to gut him. My counsel is to first destroy him and the human space fleet. Only then would I attend to the planet."

Runacres! Quinn gasped; she sensed Runacres's essence again, even stronger, as if he were in the same room. The *deja vu* was intense, unsettling, as if she could speak to him. At the same time Quinn felt the white witch's mind slipping into hers, but gently.

"Dar-hajil offers wise counsel," the lakk said with words, her black eyes fixed upon the human.

"Your ship was nearly destroyed, Dar-hajil," y'Tant snarled.

"With each passing moment my ship grows more capable," Dar replied defiantly. "Its shields are restored and all primary weapons are fully operational. Honor is mine. I have consolidated the Imperial cells. We are ready for battle. Permit us the glory of destroying Runacres-*kar*."

Quinn jerked her hand from the polished metal surface and looked up to see the white witch staring hungrily into her mind. She tried to force all thought from her mind. It was impossible. Runacres's essence would not leave, and the words from the

blue-uniformed roon little helped.

"As you are able," y'Tant replied. "Move your effectives into blocking orbit around the moon. I will add two of my battleships to your numbers. Hold Runacres-kar in place. Hurt him as you can, but let him cower under his defenses. I will sever his lifeblood. Desperation will bring him out. Then you may kill him."

Chapter Fifty-one

Metal Fatigue

"I have bad news, sir."

Runacres looked up from the gaming projections to see Vice Admiral Klein and a brace of senior science officers. His gaze jerked up to the ops plot, but nothing had changed; the Ulaggi ships remained on high standoff, consolidating and repairing. Forty-eight hours had lapsed since the human fleets had retreated to lunar orbit.

"There is a problem with in-system jumps, sir."

"Problem?" he replied, his stomach turning sour. "Enlighten me."

"As every midshipman knows, sir, an anomaly transition is an ionizing process. For a jump into stabilized hyperlight ionization is minimal, because the free-particle mass accompanies the molecular structure, enabling restabilization usually within nanoseconds. Of course there is always some loss, but—"

"Please, get to the point," Runacres growled.

"An in-system event exacts a much heavier toll, Admiral. By jumping in and out of hyperlight without sufficient time for stabilization, an increasingly critical portion of the ion-cloud is stripped away. The shorter the jump, the greater the loss."

Runacres's mind raced. None of this was surprising; he had conducted discussions with Sam Ito and Scientist Dowornobb on the mechanics of in-system jumps.

"Structural imaging has revealed crystallization, sir," Klein continued. "Beryllium alloys are more resistant than other metals, and organic compounds fare much better than metals."

"Crystallization?"

"Yes, sir. Trusses and load bearing members are becoming brittle, increasing susceptibility to metal fatigue."

"Of course," he muttered, the implications clear.

"We have detected—"

A Klaxon sounded. Threat alarms went off.

"Sir, the Ulaggi are preparing to jump!" the watch officer announced.

"Fleet to battle stations," Runacres ordered. He studied the operations plot. Many of the Ulaggi ships were annotated with incipient action symbols; grid-link emissions indicated they were preparing to enter hyperlight. As he watched, the position markers vanished.

"How many jumps?" Runacres demanded, grimly searching the detection grids.

"Beg your pardon, sir?" Klein asked, doing the same.

"How many jumps before structural failure?"

"Contact! We've got them," the tactical officer reported. "They've split up! Contact group Bravo, a force of twelve ships, has descended to low-Earth orbit. Contact group Charlie, also twelve ships, is on lunar orbit. Holding current parameters, group Charlie will close to lunar engagement range in thirty-six hours. Admiral Wells is adjusting defenses for a high-side attack."

"Very well," Runacres replied. The next phase of battle had commenced; the enemy intended to attack both Earth and moon, while maintaining a reserve on high

standoff. Runacres knew that if he attempted to intercept either of the attacking groups, most of that forty-ship reserve would out swarm any force he could throw. Runacres stared at the plot, focusing on the Ulaggi reserve. The reserve formation likely included damaged ships; that was their vulnerability.

"How many jumps do we have left?" he asked again.

"It will vary by ship age and jump-history, sir," Klein replied. "But for *Island*-class ships the damage may already be done. *Britannia*, *Corsica*, and *Kyushu* were all high-time keels with multiple in-system jumps."

Her point struck home. *Britannia*, *Corsica*, and *Kyushu*, three of the oldest ships in the fleet, had just been destroyed in battle after a short jump. *Nemesis*, one of his newest ships, had also been destroyed, but Runacres understood her captain's sacrifice.

"All commanders to inspect for structural fatigue," Runacres barked. "I want a baseline." Fighting the Ulaggi without in-system jumps was not an option, but he needed to understand the risk. Admiral Klein acknowledged and made her exit.

"Sir, Earth defenses are engaging."

Runacres turned his attention to distant maneuvers. Planetary defenses were springing into action. Earth's fixed-base redoubts were the most powerful energy batteries in the human inventory, but they were static emplacements; they could not maneuver.

A gasp went up. Broadcast satellite telemetry displayed the horrible glory of chained nuclear detonations. One after the other, perfectly spherical, crimson and gold bubbles rippled outward, lanced with razor-streaks of energy—terribly beautiful.

"One Ulaggi ship reported destroyed," the tactical officer reported.

A muted cheer lifted from the watch center, but Runacres found little comfort. *Only one.*

"Oh, God!" someone moaned. Horrified outrage filled the room. The holo-vid revealed another pattern of nuclear detonations and directed energy traces blossoming across the planet's terminator from day to night, but these malevolent flowers, distorted by atmospheric turbulence, sprouted upward from the planet's surface.

"Mind your duties," Runacres shouted. "Quartermaster, secure that vid."

"Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taipei have all been hit," the tactical officer reported. "Satellites are going down. We're losing coverage. Sir, a second Ulaggi ship has been confirmed destroyed."

Runacres studied the horrific data. The Ulaggi were saturating specific regions with decoys and spooks before nailing them with nukes and directed energy. Most sobering of all, they were willing to take punishment.

"Sir, twelve more enemy ships in high standoff are preparing for hyperlight."

Runacres looked up just as they disappeared. Twenty-eight remained.

"We have them, sir. They've jumped to low-Earth orbit, joining Contact group Charlie."

Reinforcements! The attack on Earth was deadly serious. Runacres glared at the status plots. Could he risk a gambit? Not yet. Contact group Bravo, a force of twelve ships would be rolling overhead in a matter of hours. He needed to protect his lunar base; he needed the ships under construction. But time was not on his side; lunar operations depended on supplies from Earth.

"Beijing, Tokyo, and Osaka are taking hits, sir. Capetown and Johannesburg, too."

Hell on Earth

In one blurring motion Pake grabbed the rat's tail and bashed its head against the stone wall. She added the rodent to her collection and followed the crumbling barrier over a small knoll. From the modest elevation, Pake stared across the hazy Yellow River basin and watched a stream of humanity flowing along the distant highway, plodding silhouettes reflected in blood-red rice paddies. To the east, dark skies glowed with the flames of burning cities.

Pake turned and dropped over the knoll, nodding to the sentries with their big rifles. A campfire burned in a swale next to the rubble of a barn, its heavy-beamed roof partially intact. A generator hummed, and torches shed soft light over a meeting of grim-faced men. Some nodded; one or two even smiled as she walked by.

Pake and her daughter had been lucky to find shelter. Li-Li was all she had now; Pake had waited through the interminable night of the first attacks, but Little One and her son had not come home. The great roaring fires had rolled too close, forcing Pake and Li-Li to join the panicked mobs streaming from the burning city. They drifted with the mindless tide, cringing under the manic drumbeat of energy beams and distant incandescence. Military convoys, loudspeakers blaring, sped past. At first they had been protected by patrolling militia, but the farther they traveled from the cities the more daring had grown the desperate. The violence from the sky ebbed only to be eclipsed by the unutterable viciousness of hungry humans. Corpses appeared along the highway, stripped naked and beaten. Armed ruffians pushed through the crowds, turning the shuffling march into a frantic melee. During one riot Pake and her daughter slipped from the highway, following a reed-covered path along a flooding river until they found a place shallow enough to ford the turbulent currents.

There were no roads on the opposite bank, only sodden paths through marshes and rice paddies. But there were fewer people. Holing up during the day and marching at night, Pake knew only to avoid the mobs. After mucking across paddies under a driving rain, she came to the knoll with its burnt out farmhouse and broken barn. She saw the campfire, and the pigs, and an ox and a milk-cow. Exhausted and tired of eating insects, Pake and her daughter crept past the sentinels and crawled into a nook beneath the barn's shattered eaves, desperately seeking warmth.

They were discovered the next morning, too weak to run. Serious men glared down at them, but to Pake's surprise, the women gave them milk and rice. The leader recognized Pake. Other clan members grew angry, saying it was her fault that aliens had come to their solar system. The clan elder loudly proclaimed them fools and demanded obeisance. Pake was determined to prove her usefulness. She was a child of Pitcairn Two, a far harder world than this. The next morning Pake, a master forager, slipped from camp, leaving her exhausted daughter still asleep. Within an hour Pake returned from the rice paddies, marching past laughing guards. In each hand she carried a muskrat.

The days went slowly by, the rains fell, and Pake foraged for food. Pake and her daughter were accepted. The countryside, though pillaged by refugees, teemed with life. Unlike Pitcairn, sustenance was everywhere: muskrats, insects, mushrooms and other fungus, wild onions and weeds, but especially rats. Carrying her string of carcasses, Pake walked into the warmth of the campfire and, bowing her respect, handed the meat to the women preparing food. After a few polite words, she returned to her daughter.

"I'm hungry," her daughter whimpered.

"The meal will be ready soon," Pake replied, listening to the dripping eaves. It was strangely quiet. Far to the northeast, angry beams still streaked from the skies, but less frequently now, their thunder muted by distance.

Pake held her daughter close, her anger billowing. A slave's life on Pitcairn had been hell, but in their ignorance, hell had been tolerable. Pake was now cursed with knowledge; she had seen Genellan with its crystalline skies, its tall forests, and its clear lakes. Even Earth, with its teeming multitudes, its towering skyscrapers, and its fantastic technologies had seemed the stuff of unworldly wonders. The rescued prisoners had been treated like royalty; they had been given exquisite clothing and spacious apartments in the garish cities of their ancestors. They had become celebrities, national treasures, appearing on the holo-vids and speaking before large crowds.

Pake reflected with abiding misery on how quickly and horribly things had changed, from the sere, windblown misery of Pitcairn to the starving, besieged rice paddies of Earth. Yet in the midst of her misery there had been Genellan. Her thoughts dwelled on that planet almost as much as they dwelled on the now fanciful image of her big Marine.

The hiss of static caught Pake's attention. In the evenings the clan turned on a radio, desperate for information. Before the attacks there had been much good news. They had celebrated the brave deeds of Admiral Zhang and the Asian Cooperation Fleet. It was said that a hundred enemy ships had been destroyed. Gongs and drums beat all over the city; there had been firecrackers in the streets. But the celebrations had been brief, replaced by a darker reality; it was rumored that two hundred enemy ships had survived, and that the humans had been driven back to the moon, where they yet cowered. And then the attacks on Earth had started. Horrible pounding torrents of energy had streamed from the skies, and ghastly explosions had erupted across all horizons. As the shock had worn off, everyone grew bitterly angry. Why had Admiral Zhang and Admiral Runacres not driven the aliens away? Why did they hide in lunar orbit and allow Earth to be ravaged? But anger had been overwhelmed by fear; reports had come of alien landings, and then in the middle of the night—as in a nightmare—Pake had heard the terrifying ululation of fast-movers overhead.

Now she slept uneasily, and in her fitful dreams Pake longed for Genellan. She dreamed of Chastain holding her like a child, but she would awaken in fear. In the middle of those endless nights she would hold her daughter close. Often she clasped the thin card hanging from a lanyard around her neck. She would hold it like an amulet—and she would pray. She pulled it from beneath her shift and looked at the device; on its face a single softly blinking diode pulsed like a heart.

"Joko," she whispered and touched it gently to her lips.

Chapter Fifty-three

Volunteers

"Secure from General Quarters," Buccari commanded, pulling off her helmet. "Set Condition Three cruising watch. Maintain relaxed battle dress. Spin up the habitation ring."

"Aye, sir," the officer-of-the-deck replied. The watch boatswain called the watch, her baleful piping going out over the ship's general circuit.

Buccari doggedly returned to her simulations, introducing ever increasing numbers of enemy. The only fixed quantity in the equation was the formidable defending force of which her mothership was a very small part. She wondered at the

kones; they had sacrificed from their own defenses to provide for the defense of Earth. But even more wondrous, she marveled at Scientist Dowornobb's unbounded confidence in pushing the physics of hyperlight, daring to employ compound grid nodes; Tar Fell's expeditionary armada was spread over a HLA matrix four times the volume permitted in Legion jump doctrine. In addition to Legion motherships *Novaya Zemlya* and *Tierra del Fuego*, there were six konish hyperlight ships, including three of the awesomely immense Planetary Defense Force battleships. But the PDF dreadnaughts were only the icing; in addition to the six HLA ships there were three conventional konish battleships, heavy-armored Hegemonic vessels with refitted weaponry, carried as freight within the grid; but the centerpiece of the task force was the moonlike defense satellite cruising at the distended formation's focal point. Buccari glanced at the station-holding display; the PDF fortress hung in the gray abyss like a dark star.

The kones were bringing immense power, if only they could reach the battlefield in time. Any optimism that Buccari may have harbored had long ago departed. She prayed that Jake Carmichael and Admiral Runacres and Sarah Merriwether were still alive. If the humans were already defeated, the kones would not engage; they would drop back into hyperlight, to reinforce their own defenses against the day the Ulaggi reappeared. Jake Carmichael's image haunted Buccari, sleeping or awake, with a sense of foreboding and an oppressive urgency.

"Captain," the watch quartermaster said. "Sergeant Major Chastain, Chief Fenstermacher, and Master Toon request permission to come on deck...to speak with you, sir."

Buccari glanced up, her grim mood softening. With only five days to go before reaching Sol-Sys, Buccari had persuaded Tar Fell to stand down. The human crews and been pushed too hard for too long; they needed recovery time before battle. Buccari suspected the same to be true of konish crews.

Chastain had wasted no time seeking her attention.

"Commander Godonov," she barked.

"Yes, sir." Nestor Godonov's image appeared on her console. The science officer's countenance was drawn and bruised-eyed.

"Jocko, Winnie, and Liz are waiting on the oh-two mezzanine. I want you to escort them to my H-ring cabin. It's time we had that discussion you've been requesting. The bridge is no place for debate. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Round up Hudson, too."

"Aye, sir!" Godonov replied, his expression energized. Fingers flying over his console, he handed off a task in process. "On my way, sir."

Completing her simulations, Buccari allowed her thoughts to change focus, to rescuing—again—the Pitcairn prisoners. She realized that recovering a hundred people scattered over an entire political region was not possible. Unless the Ulaggi were already gone from Sol-Sys, the odds of a freelance rescue were remote. Her duty was first to Tar Fell and then to Admiral Runacres.

"Commencing H-ring spin-up," the officer-of-the-deck reported.

Buccari acknowledged and pushed off from her command station, shedding battle armor. She looked forward to feeling her body weight, even if only the half-gravity of the habitation ring.

"Captain leaving the bridge," the officer-of-the-deck shouted. Both the on-coming and off-going watch teams braced at their stations.

"Carry on," Buccari muttered. Security monitors beeping, the Marine sentry snapped to as she arrowed through the after hatch, past damage-control teams stowing gear. She dove over the companionway railing, taking the direct route to the core terminus. Crew members stood aside as she plunged through the combing and

joined a growing throng. Both up and down-bores already flowed with human current.

Buccari pushed off at Level Six, floating past ponderous thrust joints and bearing housings. Levels Six and Seven housed a flat-gray cavern. Filling much of its core was Mass Center Control and Damage Control Central. Pierced by transport bores and trim sensors, the MCC hub surrounded the mothership's oscillating center of mass.

Positioned at cardinal points around the hub were transfer stations. Buccari dove into Station Two, joining an outbound stream. Staging airlocks sealed, metering the flow to the breach docks. Buccari floated into a car with a dozen suddenly silent crew members. Each person reoriented their body, placing their boots into quick-disconnects on the outboard bulkhead—standing on the wall. A tone sounded; the door curved shut and the airlock cycled. Pressurization complete, the car accelerated under pneumatic load, falling outward through one of the H-ring's radial spokes. The hub car decelerated with maglev silence. Airlocks cycled. The car door hissed open. The passengers held their positions, allowing their commanding officer to step from the car. Once again sensing pressure on her boot-soles, Buccari bounded through the environmental locks and into Quadrant Four transport station. Nash Hudson was waiting.

"Hear you might need some corvettes, skipper," he said.

"Got any kick-butt crews?"

"Does a kone kneel to piss?" he replied. Hudson and Master Toon had trained over twenty cliff dweller crews, most of them top-rated, able to compete with any human crew. Not satisfied, Buccari had demanded even more; she ordered Hudson to work with Colonel Magoon to cross-train these corvette crews as bridge liaison teams. Prior to every jump, cliff dweller crews would deploy aboard each konish ship, as safety observers. Their imperviousness to transition affects would make them invaluable.

"My biggest fear, Nash," she replied, looking up at her intelligence officer, "is we'll be too late." Crew members moved against the bulkheads as Buccari marched across the turnstiles. Overhead, the armor sheathing in the H-ring's ceiling ports was just sliding open, revealing a view of the operations core and the bridge exterior. The habitation ring was spinning, but it was the operations core, momentarily backdropped by the hulking mass of the defense satellite, that appeared to sedately pirouette above them. The running lights of Tar Fell's flagship, *PDF Victory*, floated past. All else was the slate-black fog of hyperlight.

"It will be a miracle, if the fleet's still in action," he snarled.

They turned clockwise—or forward in H-ring convention. Buccari grabbed a radial pole and slid down to Charlie Deck, the outermost of three decks in the habitation ring. Hudson followed. They stepped through an armored hatch into a thwart-deck damage control station, gaudy with risers and valves. Security robots beeped them through into officer's country.

"Then we need some miracles," she said, striding down the narrow passageway. At her cruising cabin, the security robot detected her approach and opened the hatch.

"Attention on deck," Fenstermacher shouted. Chastain and Toon jumped to their feet with Chastain's egg-smooth head brushing the overhead. Toon bowed. Buccari returned the courtesy.

"Let's hear it," she barked, waving them down.

"We know you have a lot on your plate, skipper," Godonov said.

"We didn't pull them women out of Pitcairn only to see them toasted on Earth," Fenstermacher whined.

"We gotta do something, Captain," Chastain said, his voice filling the small room.

"Your plan, Nes," she demanded.

"The op-plan has three phases: survey, contact, and recovery," Godonov said, bringing up a presentation on the holo-vid. "Each of the Pitcairn survivors was given a personnel transponder. Assuming they still have them on their possession, first we find them, and then we see if we can extract them. Everything depends on how scattered they have become. Odds are we can only rescue some of them." Godonov exchanged somber glances with Chastain as he finished his report. "...*Condor Eight*, Master Toon's corvette and EPL, will be the primary penetration asset. Obviously, if more than an EPL-load was to be extracted, then multiple corvettes or even a heavy-lifter would be tasked for the mission. That's the plan."

"Listen to me, all of you. Especially Jocko," she said, staring at the pink-cheeked sergeant. "We don't know what we are going to find. The odds are against us. We may not even get the opportunity to survey the planet, and if we do, the brass will in all probability have us search for President Stark, or some other cheese. We may not get clearance to go after Pake. Do you understand?"

Toon nodded vigorously. The humans looked at their feet.

"Jocko, do you understand?" Buccari persisted. "If it's within my power, I will get Pake back, but you need to understand, we may not get that chance. You may never see her again. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Chastain replied, his great brown eyes welling.

Suddenly Jake Carmichael's image filled Buccari's mind and heart. She needed to take her own advice. The odds of seeing Carmichael again were miserably low.

"I don't want to hear another word, until I give the go-ahead. Now get out of here," she said, quickly averting her own eyes.

She needed sleep.

Chapter Fifty-four

Under Siege

"Ten minutes to main battery range."

Jake Carmichael, his stomach souring, glared at the updating plot. *Avenger* was going to be in the thick of it yet again. Sometimes the Ulaggi swept by just out of range, content to scan the human ships and lunar installations, monitoring shield strengths and battle damage. Sometimes they made feints to jump, but too often they came in close, streaking just above the moon or below; and when they came close, it was to fight.

Like a hard-wound clock spring the tension mounted, to be explosively released every four days; that was how frequently the Ulaggi task force reached perilune, raging past every ninety-six hours, like clockwork. Months had passed in a blur of grinding repetition, week after week of brutal pounding, while the larger alien task force cruised low-Earth orbit, clearing massive swathes of territory for landings. North America and Europe had been hit hard, but the Ulaggi were focused on eastern Asia, India, and Africa. Satellite constellations had been long destroyed, but reports and images being returned from those areas revealed unspeakable devastation. The rumors were far worse.

Carmichael brought his attention back to the command screen from which stared the grim visages of Sarah Merriwether's First Fleet commanders.

"They're coming in low," the commodore drawled. She had not yet donned her helmet; her features were drawn with fatigue and bruised with stress. "Hold your interval. Expect saturation tactics."

Merriwether's First Fleet, with a smaller inventory of *Avengers*, had taken the

brunt of the attacks, although Wells's Second Fleet had not been spared, nor had lunar surface installations; nearly half of the static emplacements had been taken out. No more ships had been lost, but several had degraded shield systems and stressed batteries. *Baffin*, *Kodiak*, and *Tasmania* had been battered into space junk; the Old Man had moved the damaged ships under the shadow of the defense satellite, replacing them with AC and TGSR units. To their credit both Admiral Zhang's and Sheik Cerise's crews had fought with skill and courage. *Crusader*, the latest *Avenger*-class to come off the ways, also loitered under the defense satellite's batteries as her skipper pressed a new crew from the degraded hulks. *Ferocious*, only days from first launch, was also stripping the *Island*-class hulks of able-bodied spacers.

"Eight minutes to firing range. Engagement plan is fully loaded. All ships are synched. Give 'em hell," Merriwether exhorted, steely eyes flashing. "Contact Charlie-six is target focus. Make the sumbitches pay. That is all."

Carmichael acknowledged and returned his attention to the updating battle plot. The Ulaggi task force drew nearer with each passing second. His bridge team moved with professional detachment, their intensity apparent. Gone was the light-hearted chatter; all calls were curt.

"Engineering status," he barked, scanning the displays.

"Sir!" The engineering duty officer's helmeted image appeared on his holo-vid, inscrutable behind her visor. "All weapons and propulsion systems are green across the board. Shield repairs have been completed as best we can, Captain. Accumulators holding at ninety-six percent."

Avenger had suffered too many hard blows. Her accumulators were stressed, taking longer to recover; but worse, her shields, once charged, leaked like a sieve. Carmichael was delaying until the last second before channeling precious power into the defective capacitance cells.

"Shields to maximum strength," Carmichael commanded. It would be two more battle cycles before First Fleet rolled back under the konish defense station far enough to take his crippled systems down for a flying overhaul. The satellite was just now rising over the lunar limb. *Avenger* would get frustratingly little cover from its batteries on this pass, but the konish platform had made the difference; even when not in optimum position, its powerful batteries forced the Ulaggi ships to deflect their trajectories, enhancing human firing solutions. They had given as much as they had received; of the twelve Ulaggi ships harrying the human fleet, two had been destroyed and two others were showing persistently depressed shield readings. Unlike the larger alien task force attacking Earth, their losses had not been replaced. Carmichael wondered why Admiral Runacres did not sortie against them.

His contemplation of tactics was interrupted by a preemptive multiplexor summons. Sarah Merriwether's vid-image materialized.

"Commodore," Carmichael acknowledged. He tossed a salute to the flag bridge. Merriwether acknowledged with little enthusiasm.

"You planning on using shields any time soon, Jake?" she asked. "Or are you just going to waltz my flagship 'cross the dance floor, jaybird-naked like?"

"Coming up now, sir. Defenses will be adequate on this pass, but I'm afraid shields are degrading. I'll let you know what it looks like after the shooting stops."

"I'll be right here..." she said, starting to sign off; but she stopped and squared up. "Jake, you're going to think I'm loony as moonbat, but I've been meaning to ask—" Klaxons sounded.

"Incoming," the tactical officer announced.

Carmichael looked up at the large-scale holo-vid as probing fire from the Ulaggi rippled across the forward edge of their formation.

"Talk to you later, Jake," Merriwether said, signing off.

Carmichael returned his attention to the impending battle. All departments were reporting full readiness. Damage control stations were manned. All weapons were hot; shield strength was climbing. Carmichael checked the engagement zone; *Iceland* and *New Zealand* were in overlapping support positions on orbit forward; *ACS Inland Sea* and *ACS Southwind* the same aft; while Bobby Knox's *Intrepid* brought up First Fleet's rear guard. Admiral Well's Second Fleet flagship, *Vigilant*, and *Bastion* were accelerating below tactical orbit to increase firepower at the point of attack.

"Launching disruption pattern," the weapons officer reported. A barrage of argent slivers erupted from every ship in the exposed battle line, white-hot needles streaking outbound on converging trajectories, seeding the orbital path of the approaching enemy with a spread of seeker-mines and decoys. The density of their barrages had grown less dense; they were running out of ordnance.

"Enemy in main battery range in three minutes," the tactical officer reported.

"Shields at max available," the engineering duty officer reported, masking a grimace. "Stable at ninety-one percent."

"Very well," Carmichael replied, calm on the exterior but furious on the inside. *Avenger's* shield power was falling lower and lower with each engagement.

"Screen units commencing inbound run."

Carmichael looked at the plot. Wanda Green's corvettes, stacked above and below the orbital plane, would converge on the contact zone, timing their passes to hit the *Ulaggi* just after engagement, hoping to catch their heavies with their shields degraded and their weapons discharged. It was a dim hope. Green's corvettes had taken a beating. A full third of her ships had been knocked out of action and too many good pilots and crews lost—the cream of the fleet's future.

"Good luck," Carmichael whispered, wishing he could join them. He focused on the onrushing mayhem, listening to the controlled chaos of bridge patter.

"Launching secondary disruption pattern."

"Decoys away."

"Main battery range in one minute."

"All hands, this is the captain," he announced. He had given up on speeches. "Same drill. Give these bastards everything you got."

Carmichael pulled on his helmet and mated the seal. His breath sounded obscenely loud. He used his eye-cursor to lower suit temps and pushed back in his tethers, forcing himself to relax. Bridge patter continued.

"Thirty seconds."

"Targets acquired."

Carmichael stared at the cloud of contacts sweeping toward them. Masking the aliens was a swarm of warbling decoys, EMP torpedoes pulsing in random sequence, and tumbling junkyards of battle-debris from previous engagements. *Avenger's* acquisition computers sifted through the contacts, assigning threat codes. Fire-control shifted to green.

"Weapons free."

"Ten second...nine—"

An out-of-range beam slammed against *Avenger's* shields, and then another—ominous harbingers of the enemy's target focus. And then another. Once again, *Avenger* was on the bull's eye.

"Seven...six...five—"

Carmichael's concentration was overwhelmed with vivid thoughts of Cassy Quinn—no, not thoughts—feelings; it were as if the science officer had climbed inside his battle armor and was hugging his neck, like a drowning person.

"Three...two—"

"Release weapons," Carmichael ordered, shaking off his demons. It was not the first time he had felt Quinn's ghostly presence, but he had no time to ponder the phenomenon; *Avenger's* weapons systems erupted. The leading edge of the attack arrived—a barrage of decoys and missiles, some nuclear-tipped, others just massive pile-drivers of kinetic energy—and was met with a full symphony of response; spikes of laser cannon bristled outward, creating a rippling scintillation of destruction as the opposing ordnance fronts collided. Main batteries opened fire, a full-throated crescendo.

The enemy, streaking nearer with each heartbeat, responded with equal violence. Nuclear detonations rolled across the threat sector, perfect spheres of expanding energy marching closer and closer. Electromagnetic pulses blossomed invisibly, constantly, an electromagnetic fog; and through the fog raced the enemy. *Avenger's* shields rattled maniacally with a constant drumbeat.

"Fast-movers," the tactical officer reported.

"Boocharry! Boooocharrrry!" The same horrible screams flooded the frequencies as triads of Ulaggi destroyers materialized out of the radiation fog.

"Secure that!" Carmichael commanded, his blood freezing.

The transmission clipped to silence as a furious formation of fast-movers zipped passed close aboard, unleashing a squall of lasers against *Avenger's* wavering shields. Many vanished, their violently disassociated atoms rejoining the universe, but their weapons had struck home, further eroding *Avenger's* melting energy reserves.

On the primary holo-vid, a pair of nukes impacted the moon's dark limb, illuminating the timelessly pocked surface in stark black and shades of bone. The Ulaggi main force struck like sledgehammer on stone. Closure rates were high, the engagement window lasted mere seconds, but to Carmichael it endured. Energy beams smashed against *Avenger's* deteriorating defenses. *Avenger's* batteries fired back with manic intensity, but her shields resonated at high pitch, precursor to failure.

"Boost shields," Carmichael commanded, sacrificing power to his weapons; it was too late—the high-pitched vibration turned into a violent rattle. The immense ship heaved along its lateral axis.

"Shield breach!" the engineering duty officer gasped. Warning lights flickered and held steady.

"Stay on your targets!" Carmichael exhorted. His tethers snugged. *Avenger's* autostabilizers fired asymmetrically; the immense ship wallowed like a drunk, its portside thrusters disabled. The officer-of-the-deck, Carmichael's best maneuvering officer, shouted rudder and engine commands. All the while his crew fought the ship; damage-control parties threw themselves at the ship's wounds.

And then it was over. The Ulaggi were away, arcing off on their orbital trajectory, harried by Wanda Green's corvettes. Portside maneuvering power was restored. The battleship steadied up, but Carmichael's bridge team remained tense, scanning for trailing attacks.

"Clear!" the tactical officer at last shouted.

"Say the damage," Carmichael barked, studying the chaos of warning lights flashing across the status boards.

"Reporting charlie-charlie. Shields are hard down," the ship's damage control officer reported. "Energy impact forward melted through the outer hull. Inner hull is holding. We are containing a class-three electrical fire on the forward ballast holds. Number three battery is off-line, and environmental systems are down forward of frame eighty-seven."

Carmichael exhaled hugely. His ship was still functioning. He checked the ops plot

and was relieved to see all other ships still responding; *Iceland* reported heavy damage.

"Where're the *Eagles*?" he asked.

"Returning to base," the tactical officer replied. "No losses, sir. *Kite* lost two corvettes and *Viper* one."

Carmichael tightened his jaw. "What did we do to them?" he asked.

"Flamed four destroyers. Contact Charlie-six was hit hard, sir," the tactical officer reported. "She's still in one piece, but she's gone dark. We think she's adrift."

Charlie-six was one of the Ulaggi heavy battleships. The outcome was a toss-up; Admiral Runacres's desires to avoid a war of attrition—a war they could not win—had been frustrated. Carmichael pulled off his helmet and floated at his station, trying to order his exhausted thoughts. Merriwether's multiplexor summons did not surprise him.

"Jake, tell me straight. Do I need to shift my flag?"

"Commodore, I've got four days to put this lady back on her feet. I would never presume to stop you from shifting your flag, sir, but if I have anything to say about it, *Avenger* will be ready."

Merriwether stared for several long seconds and then smiled. "Very good, Captain. I'll be with you."

"Yes, sir—and Commodore, I believe I know what it is that you wanted to talk about. You feel her, too, don't you, sir? Cassy Quinn. During the engagements. She's here...she's with the Ulaggi."

"Lordy, I thought I was going crazy, Jake."

Chapter Fifty-five

Motes of Light

Vibrations rippled through the ship; Ulaggi weapons were discharging, but Quinn also felt the higher-pitched resonance of the ship's shields fending off incoming energy. She sensed the exploding fear-lust of the Ulaggi, unfailing indication that her prison ship was going into yet another battle. Time was almost meaningless in her dimly lit cell; weeks, even months, had gone by since they had arrived in Sol-Sys, but the battle cycles were fixed; she estimated every four days. Such regular engagements could only mean they were on orbit.

Quinn twisted in her tethers, bracing herself. She was helpless and frightened by her vulnerability, but mostly she was terrified that she was going insane; her mind seemed out of control, opened to a kaleidoscope of emotion she could not fathom. Whenever the battle was most fierce Quinn would lie on her pallet, tethered tightly, ignoring all senses—except her mind—as it ranged free, a disembodied bundle of synaptic receptors. Gradually the chaos took form; bright motes became entities, some brighter than others, like novae in a swirling starfield. The brightest were peculiar, familiar, like discerning an aroma from childhood or walking into a room and seeing an old friend. Suddenly Admiral Runacres was there; she could feel him and Sarah Merriwether, too, and Jake Carmichael, and so many more. They were still alive. Her friends were there, strong souls, indomitable spirits. They were fighting. And they were frightened.

The thundering of combat once again sputtered to an end. As the suddenly silent minutes slipped by, Quinn stared at the hatch. The white witch came to her after every battle. *There!* A horrible stink, an approaching fetor welled in Quinn's mind. The alien was close, a ghoul behind the door, lurking. The locking mechanism retracted, the hatch swept aside, and the lakk floated in. Her mind dominated the human's, eclipsing

it, smothering it. Quinn sagged in a boneless heap, her self-will reduced to a hypnotic stupor.

"Your Admiral Runacres fights well," Karyai growled, surprising Quinn with actual words. Rarely did she communicate openly; usually she just stared and battered the human's mind in bitter silence.

"How do you know...that it is Runacres?" Quinn asked.

"You tell us so," the lakk replied. "You sense him. We detect defining patterns in your thoughts."

"You can read Admiral Runacres's thoughts through my mind?" Quinn blurted, horrified that she might be a conduit for treachery, even if unintended.

"Your powers are not yet so strong," Karyai replied, almost smiling. "But we know when he engages us. Soon we will know which ship he is on. He seems to be in transition now."

"How can that help you?" Quinn cried, suddenly understanding her purpose—she was a window, a spy hole.

"It helps greatly," Karyai said. "Knowing which ship to attack."

"But that does not—"

"We can tell if he is still alive. His intentions may be dark to us...for now, but your powers are growing."

"No!" Quinn gasped, pondering ways to end her own life.

"You will be kept alive."

"Why?" Quinn cried, searching her bruised mind for some logic, some meaning for the Ulaggi's dedication to death.

"You would do the same to us. It is kill or be killed, yes?"

"No! Our ships had no weapons until you attacked us."

The lakk sneered. Quinn felt the alien pick-axing at her mind.

"We are peaceful," the human protested.

"You do not even believe your own words. We have studied your species. Your planet is rotten with war, with vastly dissonant cultures and disparate races, all filled with hate and envy. Your species has never known peace."

"That is our past," Quinn protested. "I speak for Admiral Runacres and for the future."

"Gast!" the lakk snorted, continuing her excursions into the human's mind.

"He is a man of honor," Quinn insisted. "He will—"

"What do you know of honor? Runacres is *kar*. *Kar* have no honor."

"He is a great leader—"

"Then he must know that it is better to strike first, yes?"

"No! I beg you to listen. I beg—"

"You are a race of beggars."

Quinn, her own anger welling, glared back. The alien looked away, and the human sensed a different emotion in the Ulaggi's veneer, a hint of frustration; but no sooner had that thought entered Quinn's mind than did the lakk's demeanor change. Something passing for a smile captured the creature's features, a ghastly expression.

"Your hope hangs by a thread, human-mother," the lakk purred. "Your civilization is dying by its own hand. We will crush what remains. But we will not destroy your race. We will preserve it—"

The lakk went rigid.

"What is it?" Quinn blurted.

"More are come," Karyai snarled and whirled through the hatch.

Quinn's mind was vacated of the white witch's bitter presence. Suddenly chilled, the human curled up for warmth. Floating listlessly in null-gee, destitute of hope, Quinn's

logical brain shut down; but her telepathic mind, unburdened by thought, reached out. Her ennui was short-lived; the swelling fear-lust of the Ulaggi, precursor to battle, stirred her perceptions, but she also sensed changes in the ethereal fabric; new motes of light were materializing—bright and sharp—an entire constellation. And something else—the tenor of human thought was changing; deadening fear was morphing to collective hope. Coming fully alert, Quinn’s mind sifted the telepathic winds. Her heart pounded as it had never pounded before. At first she would not credit her powers—miracles did not happen. But a particular essence stripped away all doubt; one unmistakable and brilliant mote of light informed Quinn that the performer of miracles—the hope of all mankind—had returned to Sol-Sys; Sharl Buccari’s throbbing aura, her majestic confidence, filled the ether with a command presence like no other. It could only be her. Though gloriously unexpected, Buccari was not the miracle; there was another mote of light, one that burned even brighter, a spark that touched the science officer’s heart and stoked passions long abandoned. Buccari’s presence merely affirmed Quinn’s faith in her own powers, enabling her to believe; the science officer’s monumental disbelief was overwhelmed by unbounded joy.

Nash Hudson was alive!

And, oh, he was so very near. She reached out with her mind, embracing her husband’s essence, intertwining with his thoughts. She rejoiced; the father of her daughter—the possessor of her heart—was alive. Nash Hudson was alive.

Her joy soared.

Chapter Fifty-six

Return to Sol-Sys

Buccari struggled to shake off transition effects. She stared at the plot, willing her bleary eyes into focus. Threat alarms sounded.

“All ships reporting,” spoke a mechanized voice, frustratingly calm. “Shields are up; weapons are tracking; all corvettes alpha-alpha.”

The machine translation emanated from Master Toon, reporting from *PDF Victory*. Buccari had installed her cliff dweller crews on every konish bridge. Unlike hunters, guilders begrudgingly tolerated the presence of kones; and while they could not master the Behemoth ships, they could control the conning systems and initiate emergency actions during transitions, long enough until konish crews regained their sea-legs.

“Ah...affirmative, sir, NZ is alpha-alpha,” her officer-of-the-deck reported, still recovering.

Buccari, her own equilibrium stabilized, exhaled and scrutinized the status boards. Shields were up, guns were hot. Her ship was ready to fight. It had been four standard months since they had passed the Ulaggi task force going the other way. The battle for Earth, if it was still being waged, would have lasted for over two months. Buccari stared at the threat plot, as the computers resolved a flood of data.

Threat warnings erupted. They were already localized by acquisition radars. A rash of icons appeared on the operations plot.

“Close-in targets! Threat axis four-zero-six-six,” the weapons officer gasped. The bogeys were inside weapons range.

“Establishing engagement vector,” the officer-of-the-deck announced.

“Very well,” Buccari replied. Maneuvering alarms sounded; the mothership surged with a steady imperative. Every ship in Tar Fell’s fleet pivoted in place, moving in perfect synchronization, a precedent-setting response for konish ships so soon out of

hyperlight.

Buccari scanned the updating displays. Dowornobb had navigated them in spectacularly close; an overflowing holo-image of the moon's gibbous profile hung suspended above the bridge amphitheater, casting a hoary glow. The massive structures of the fleet graving docks were rising into sunlight, argent sparks backdropped by infinite blackness. Unidentified ships glinted against the same backdrop.

"Prepare to engage," she commanded. *Novaya Zemlya* was battle guide; she would be first under fire. All alarms stuttered to silence; threat icons were redesignated.

"Close-in contacts are friendly," the weapons officer reported. "I make *Baffin*, *Tasmania*, *Kodiak* and a gaggle of OMTs."

The ships were alarmingly close. There was no reason for them being there other than to intercept; Admiral Runacres must have seen them coming.

"New contacts!" the tactical officer reported.

Farther afield, more icons flickered into life. Buccari stared anxiously at the growing contact list; too many were confirmed as enemy—but those were distant threats. The konish defense station was there, its comforting return glowing like a small moon. Other transponders glittered into life; she saw icons for *New Foundland* and *Sardegna*. And *Valiant*, *Courageous*, and *Malta*. She noted Asian Cooperation and Turko-Gallic identifiers. Where was *Avenger*?

"Authenticating fleet links," the weapons officer reported. The bridge's operations displays refreshed, remapping to integrated data; contacts—friend and foe—were labeled, command structures defined and mission sectors revealed.

"Confirmed enemy contacts," the tactical officer reported. "Fleet contact groups Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie, totaling fifty-eight combatants. All outside weapons range. No impending or actual hyperlight activity detected. Establishing primary threat axis on contact group Charlie: ten ships on lunar orbit, three-two-thousand clicks and opening."

"Very well," Buccari replied, trying to remain calm. *Fifty-eight enemy ships*. Her anxiety heightening, she surveyed the vast battlefield. Where the hell was *Avenger*? "Science, what do you have?"

"We just missed action." Godonov's image came up on her screen. "I have EMP echoes and radiation blooms. Lunar Sector Six just ate a couple of nukes."

"What are we seeing, Nes, some kind of standoff?" she demanded. Heart pounding, she desperately sought to focus her mind.

"Not even close," Godonov replied. "The Ulaggi outnumber Admiral Runacres two to one, and two dozen enemy ships on low-Earth orbit are operating with impunity, skipper. Earth has been hammered. Emergency freqs are squealing. All satellite comms are gone and we detect almost no surface defensive activity. There is some burst chatter on the opstaff freqs, but we don't have the codes yet. Earth is in big trouble. Serious hurt."

Buccari's attention was captured by new contacts rounding the moon. There she was! *Avenger's* identifier flashed into view. Buccari's heart pounded with joy, but her anxiety resurged. *Avenger* was damaged, her readiness rating down to charlie-bravo. She had no shields.

Buccari reached for her console to initiate a command-link with *Avenger's* skipper when a summons buzzed imperiously. Stifling her anxiety, Buccari prepared for conference. Vid-images of Tar Fell and his command staff appeared. Tar Fell and Colonel Magoon, eyeballs rolling, eye tufts limp across pebbly cheeks, still struggled with transition effects. Kateos and Scientist Dowornobb were little better. Sitting with Tar Fell—practically in the alien's lap—was Master Toon. The diminutive guilder appeared alert and very much in command.

"I will have...cliff dwellers on all my ships," Tar Fell sputtered, lifting an immense hand from the cliff dweller's back. The kone removed his helmet and wiped a gob of drool from his chin.

Toon, not daring to remove his helmet in the corrosive atmosphere, stared fixedly into the vid-lens. Another comm-alert sounded; Admiral Runacres joined, and then Vice Admiral Klein. Admiral Wells and Commodore Merriwether appeared seconds later. Runacres had aged. Though his pale eyes still sparkled like gemstones, his ruddy complexion had turned sallow. The Old Man was apparently dirt-bound, for his head was covered with a thick white thatch, badly in need of shearing. Admiral Klein's elegant features were melted with fatigue, her once-raven hair streaked with white. Admiral Wells stared back, sphinx-like, his broad features drooping, his ebony complexion gone gray. Sarah Merriwether's cheeks had caved in from weight loss, their faded glow replaced by a ragged lacework of broken veins.

"Armada Master Tar Fell, Ambassador Kateos, speaking for all of humanity, I thank you for returning so miraculously quickly," Runacres announced. "And, miracle of miracles, you bring another defense satellite."

"Ah, Admiral Runacres," Tar Fell replied, his thundering basso recovered. "We feared the worst. We knew you were under attack."

Runacres and Klein both started with amazement.

"How could you have known?" Runacres blurted. "Sheik Cerise's cell could not have arrived at Genellan before your departure. I had thought your arrival here a providential—no, a miraculous coincidence."

"On our last return from your system, three days out from Genellan, we detected the Ulaggi in transit," Dowornobb proudly asserted. "Admiral Klein, it is as we discussed. We are able to detect gravitronic translation from within hyperlight. And you have improved your sensor array, or your ships would not have been so well positioned for rendezvous."

"Yes!" Klein replied. "We detected you twenty hours out. At first we discounted the data as erroneous, but the very mass of the defense satellite was telling. It could only be what it is."

"What parameters are—" Dowornobb started to ask.

"Armada Master Tar Fell," Runacres interrupted. "I beg you to prepare for battle. I have been waiting to attack. The Ulaggi will see that you have arrived. Now, before they can react, I would have your forces combine in an in-system jump with nine *Avenger*-class ships under Admiral Wells, targeting the enemy forces on high standoff."

"An in-system jump?" Tar Fell thundered.

"Gravity!" Dowornobb roared.

"We have only just arrived," Kateos gasped, grasping her mate's arm. Dowornobb clutched her hand.

"Tar Fell will have full tactical command," Runacres declared. "It will be his decision whether to press the fight or to withdraw."

"Explain the mission," Tar Fell demanded.

Admiral Wells, fiercely grim, began a tactical briefing. Buccari studied the status plots: the two-dozen alien ships in low-Earth orbit were obviously the greatest threat; the ten ships on lunar orbit were the closest; but Runacres intended to attack the formation of twenty ships cruising on high standoff orbit.

As in a dream, Buccari's mind suddenly filled with sensations of Cassy Quinn, jumbled thoughts, both joyful and fearful.

"Armada Master, what say you, sir?" Runacres asked, wrenching Buccari from her troubling daydream.

"I do not doubt that your *Avenger* ships are formidable," Tar Fell answered, his

brows springing rigid, "but we are outnumbered. Why should we prevail?"

"We vigorously engaged the enemy when they first arrived," Wells explained. "Many of the ships in high standoff were damaged, some seriously. I believe not a few of them to be crippled."

Tar Fell remained quiet.

"What of the Hegemonic satellite?" a glowering Colonel Magoon asked. "It limits our maneuvering ability."

"A truly magnificent sight," Runacres replied. "I make the selfish presumption that you have brought it all this way for Earth's defense."

"That is correct," Kateos replied. "It is presented to you on behalf of King Ollant, in the name of all kones, in gratitude for the secret of hyperlight."

"Mere words are inadequate, my friends," Runacres replied. "As you have noticed, Commodore Merriwether has sent out a task group and a squadron of fleet tugs to retrieve your gift. *Novaya Zemlya* and *Tierra del Fuego* will join as escorts for the defense station. They cannot participate in the strike."

"But, Admiral!" Buccari blurted. "We have developed tactics—"

"A blessing to see you again, Captain Buccari," Runacres interrupted. "Forgive me, but you have a face to make men cry, my dear, and your time in the regeneration tank has made you impossibly more beautiful. That said, you will report immediately to Commodore Merriwether."

"Aye, sir," Buccari muttered, taken aback. "May I ask after Captain Ito?"

"He does well, as long as the lunar medical facility escapes further attack. I was able to communicate with him just yesterday. His cognitive functions are excellent. We may pull him out early. However, we have an engagement to conduct. What says the armada master?"

"What Captain Sharl says is true," Tar Fell boomed. "I would have her in my company, especially on a short-jump into combat. Her cliff dwellers have substantially enhanced my performance."

"I am sorry," Runacres replied. "*Terra del Fuego* and *Novaya Zemlya* must not be exposed to further jumps. We have discovered profound metal fatigue on all *Island*-class ships. It is probable that a short jump would have catastrophic consequences."

"Metal fatigue? Are only *Island*-class ships affected?" Magoon demanded.

"Every molecule of metal is affected, Colonel," Runacres replied. "But it is the shortness of the jump that matters. Admiral Klein estimates that an unstressed ship will have no more than ten to fifteen sub-parsec jumps before she becomes unsound. Standard jumps into hyperlight have minimal affect, but the shorter the jump, the more accelerated the damage. Her findings have been transmitted to you in the initial data packet, flash priority."

"The report is arrived," Magoon said, scanning his console.

"Decide what you must, but decide quickly," Runacres said. "I strongly recommend that Scientist Dowornobb and Ambassador Kateos remain with the defense station, for their own safety and for the good of all."

"Enough words," Tar Fell boomed. "Captain Sharl, it is necessary that I retain the cliff dweller bridge teams on board. You will understand."

"Of course," Buccari replied. Toon's jaw dropped.

"Admiral Wells," Tar Fell boomed, "how soon do we attack?"

"My ships will settle in grid within the hour. Will you be ready?"

Tar Fell gave Dowornobb an inquisitive glance. The scientist nodded vigorously, his brows springing erect.

"We are ready now," the armada master replied. "Ambassador Kateos and Scientist Dowornobb will depart immediately. Captain Buccari, *Novaya Zemlya* and

Tierra del Fuego are returned to the authority of the Tellurian Legion Fleet. Colonel Magoon, maneuver the formation clear of the defense station at best speed."

Buccari signed off, no longer a part of Tar Fell's task force. She felt discarded—she was going to miss the battle; but on the other hand her ship and her crew were, for the moment, safe.

"Officer-of-the-deck, order *TDF* into standard interval astern and send our numbers to Commodore Merriwether. Respectfully reporting for duty," she commanded. "Set rendezvous course for the defense station. Full speed."

Cassy Quinn's image still burned in Buccari's brain, but other emotions burned in her heart. Nerves jangling, Buccari sent out a captain-to-captain signal for Jake Carmichael of *T.L.S. Avenger*.

Chapter Fifty-seven

On the Attack

Jakkuk sensed the arrival, as did every Ulaggi controller. The enemy ships made no effort at masking emissions, and the mass of the defense station created a first-order perturbation in the synaptic fabric. Telepathic links between cell controllers and ship mistresses grew frenzied with competing packets. Jakkuk felt their collective *g'ort* rise as word of the intruders spread.

Fear-lust was a refreshing change from fruitless fury. Dominant Dar's incessant excoriations had grown wearisome. Jakkuk had endured endless watch cycles on orbit listening to her commander screaming bloody epithets at the stars, her fury increasing volcanically every time they engaged the enemy. The human defenses, with interior lines and heavy weapons, were resilient. Dominant Dar had tried everything, from focused attacks on their weakest points, to feints and misdirection, but the *kar* commander had been resourceful, maneuvering adroitly and fiercely holding ground. And all the while the unspeakable konish defense station had anchored the enemy line, an immense bloody thorn in their side.

And now there were two.

"In addition to the defense station I make nine heavy konish ships and two human interstellars," Jakkuk reported as she slipped into the interface, shoving aside a watch officer. "They include ships we have encountered previously. Fist a'Yerg will be pleased; the warrior Boocharry is likely with us again."

"Blood, but I grow weary of roons," Dar growled.

Karyai arrowed onto the bridge, a swirl of white robes and tresses. "Your burden is shared, daughter," the lakk snarled.

"A second defense station!" Dar screamed. "Why did y'Tant not first destroy the human fleet? Why? Why? *Why?*"

"A roon thinks first with her *g'ort*," Karyai snarled.

Dar's anger pulsed. Jakkuk sensed even the fuming ire of the lakk. They were all furious. Y'Tant had refused to reinforce Dominant Dar. It was as if the roon intended for the Imperial expeditionary fleet to be torn apart. Indeed, Dominant Dar's task force had suffered gravely, but the human lunar defenses were crumbling. Given time, Dominant Dar would have won the human moon, defeating even the defense station—but *now the enemy had been reinforced!*

"They maneuver the defense station into lunar orbit," Jakkuk said. "They sortied the old ships as escorts. The humans must be able to detect inbound hyperlight traffic."

"Well noted, Jakkuk-hajil," Karyai muttered, dancing through the cell controller's

mind. "The humans show remarkable command of technology. First they attack us in transit and now this. Blood, but we underestimate them again and again."

"Blood and blood! Two defense satellites and eleven more interstellars—large ones!" Dar screamed. "What does y'Tant want us to do? Jakkuk-hajil, demand instruction!"

"As ordered, mother," Jakkuk replied. The cell controller merged with the interface, linking with y'Tant's fleet controller, an I'rdish roon with razor-sharp thoughts and mind-control like a steel door. The fleet controller accepted Jakkuk's interrogative and fired back a dismissive response.

"The fleet dominant returns to her flagship," Jakkuk reported. "She is expected on board within the watch cycle. Two battle cells have been ordered to commence escape maneuvers."

"Perhaps now that she has put her helmet back on," Karyai sneered, "her brain will resume function."

"It will take three watch cycles for y'Tant to clear the gravity well," Dar said. "What is her intent?"

"Not yet specified, mother," Jakkuk replied.

"She waits to see how the enemy reacts," Karyai said.

"We cannot wait. Our orbit brings us in contact with the konish ships," Dar screeched, her *g'ort* and her survival instincts in fiery opposition. "Glory is ours, but we will be overwhelmed. Jakkuk-hajil, maneuver the cell. Make jump formation."

"As directed, mother," Jakkuk replied, feeling her commander's burning shame. It mattered not at all how hard they had fought, or how much damage they inflicted upon the enemy; being forced to evade the enemy was ignominious. Jakkuk reached into the ether for a link with the fleet controller.

Her probe was blocked, not gently.

"Hold!" Karyai announced. "The konish ships maneuver."

Jakkuk vectored her scan outward, sifting the nebula of konish mental emissions, as always unintelligible. But there were humans among the kones, tiny explosions of emotion, mostly excitement and fear. Jakkuk castigated herself for failing to notice; the newly arrived formation was collapsing into a smaller cell, but only the konish ships. The human ships were maneuvering to clear, joining with the three old ships—a curious development.

Jakkuk detected new signals; a mass of *Avengers* were accelerating out of lunar orbit, testing gridlinks.

"Human battleships are maneuvering," she reported, drawing the lakk's attention. Jakkuk simultaneously sent the information in tight packets to the fleet controller. The acknowledgement was instantaneous and—again—dismissive. No orders were given.

"The enemy prepares to attack," Karyai muttered. "Where?"

"Jakkuk-hajil," Dar ordered. "Wherever the *Avengers* go, we will follow."

"Caution, my daughter," Karyai admonished. "Let us observe y'Tant's actions. She seems anxious for the fight. Allow her to engage."

Dar snarled a begrudging assent, poorly concealing her lust. Jakkuk's shame was expunged; they were no longer fleeing a superior force—they were pursuing the enemy. The cell controller settled into her interface and monitored the flood of neural activity. She allowed her own *g'ort* to elevate.

There was about to be a great and beautiful battle.

Embattled

"You're beautiful, Booch," Carmichael said.

His rugged face, worn and haggard, appeared on the vid-screen. His sad brown eyes, flecked with gold, stared back adoringly, but the whites of his eyes were bloody swamps, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Ah, Jake, I love you," she replied, tears welling. She blinked them back; it would not do to cry on her own bridge.

"I love you, babes."

"You're pretty beat up," she gasped, unable to speak. Her heart pounded in her throat. She had so much she wanted to say, but it was neither the time nor the place; seeing Carmichael roiled her mind. More than anything she wanted to touch him, and to be touched.

"It's been rough, but now that you and Tar Fell are here, we'll make it. We'll beat them now."

Things were happening fast. Her tactical officer reported clear of the grid. Klaxons sounded. Tar Fell's jump countdown approached its final seconds. Her console blinked preemptively; the science duty officer was signaling, critical enough for flash override.

"I have to go, Jake," she said. "See you in a few days."

"Can't wait, babes," he replied and terminated.

Feeling empty and helpless, she cleared her channel.

"Bugs are maneuvering, Captain," Godonov reported. "Half the ships in low-Earth orbit are elevating. Estimate six hours before they clear the well. And the ships in lunar orbit have formed a grid. They could jump any time."

As Buccari studied the status plot, cruising orders arrived from fleet, official and sterile. Buccari was annoyed that Commodore Merriwether had not made vid-connection; the orders were puzzling: *TDF* and *NZ* were to maneuver clear of the defense station and make emergency grid rendezvous with *Baffin*, *Tasmania*, and *Kodiak*.

Grid rendezvous?

"Not much we can do about it, Nes," she replied, trying to make sense of the situation. "We have our rudder. Officer-of-the-deck, all ahead, flank. Make assigned station."

The officer-of-the-deck acknowledged and established vector. The ship surged to its new course. Buccari returned her attention to the impending force deployment. Admiral Wells and Tar Fell were both signaling alpha-alpha. Nine konish battleships and nine *Avengers* comprised a mighty force, but they were still outnumbered. Admiral Runacres was risking his entire offensive capability. Buccari's throat thickened with anticipation.

"By the way, sir," Godonov said. "Scientist Dowornobb and Ambassador Kateos have come aboard. Dowornobb prefers *NZ's* lab facilities to the defense station. We've been reviewing metal fatigue numbers, and I've run some scans on the keel and support trusses. It's grim. *NZ* has used up a bunch of her lives."

"We all have limits," Buccari replied. "Bring Kateos and Dowornobb to my mess for dinner. We can celebrate our glorious ferry mission."

"Aye, sir," Godonov replied. "By the way, Captain, did you notice Admiral Runacres was reporting from a mothership?"

"What's that, Nes?" she asked, staring anxiously at the jump chronometers. In fifteen seconds a fleet action would commence.

"Admiral Klein was transmitting from Lunar Command, but Admiral Runacres was reporting from the intel decks of an *Island*-class. Didn't you notice the pink bulkheads?"

Buccari had no time for recall; Tar Fell's jump countdown had run to zero. The konish task force disappeared from the ops plot. Admiral Wells's ships disappeared immediately after. Buccari stared up at the refreshing screens and prayed the two task forces would successfully converge. It seemed forever; the distances were immense and the transmission delay over four seconds. An eternity passed before Tar Fell's ships materialized, and then Admiral Wells's. All konish ships maneuvered smartly, their weapons discharging; Master Toon and company were doing their jobs and well—an Ulaggi ship near the konish center went critical, blossoming with a satisfying spectral display. A cheer lifted from the bridge.

"Belay that," Buccari growled, studying the battle plots. Enemy formations were maneuvering in nearly all quadrants; an attack could come from any direction. The defense station, surrounded by fleet tugs, was still near enough to provide comfort.

The action in high standoff was a morbid waltz; the engaged Ulaggi ships sagged from contact, while enemy ships in the rear accelerated forward. *Vigilant*, Admiral Wells's flagship, plowed into action, advancing on the retreating center. The combined allied fleet, with Wells's flagship as battle guide, deployed into a parabolic front focused on the enemy's solar flank. Buccari stared transfixed as both formations maneuvered for advantage. An excruciating hour of fierce exchange passed before another Ulaggi ship melded with the universe. And then another. Runacres's battle plan was working. The odds were evening up, but that could change as soon as either or both of the enemy dispositions elected to join battle. The twelve ships rising from low-Earth orbit were still clearing the gravity well, but the enemy ships in lunar orbit could leap at any moment. Buccari wondered what they were waiting for.

The conning officer barked commands. Buccari's ship accelerated smartly to formation vector.

"Captain, *Novaya Zemlya* and *TDF* have joined with *Baffin*, *Tasmania*, and *Kodiak* on assigned station," the officer-of-the-deck reported. "Grid nodes are verified; angular momentum within tolerances. Ready to jump on command."

She checked the station-keeping display and found everything in order. She noticed that *Baffin*, *Tasmania*, and *Kodiak* had corvettes deployed within the grid; and then it dawned on her: Admiral Runacres was using the *Island*-class ships as decoys.

"Send my respects to the group commander," she ordered, glancing up at the formation plot. If her memory was correct, Maria Bolo of *Baffin* was ranking officer.

"Sir, I interrogated seniorities," the officer-of-the-deck replied. "You are senior commander. We are now formation guide."

"Not possible," Buccari snapped. "Check your data!"

"All ships have received new commanding officers, sir," the deck officer protested. "All C.O.s send their respects, sir."

"Sir!" the junior officer-of-the-deck squeaked, a helpless look on her face. "Admiral Runacres's barge just departed *Baffin*. His intentions are to come aboard."

"Say again!" Buccari blurted.

"Admiral Runacres's barge is on final, sir," the junior officer-of-the-deck cried. "We've authenticated his call-sign. He has directed there be no ceremonies or fleet broadcasts when he shifts his flag."

"Shifts his flag? Geezus jumping Jupiter! You're serious," Buccari growled, leaping from her bridge station. Shouting orders to ready the flag spaces, she arrowed

from the bridge. Battle hatches unpressurized and slid aside as she plunged through the down-bore and emerged on level eleven where the ship's First Lieutenant and a deck gang were frenetically preparing the quarterdeck. She floated out onto the hangerbay in time to watch the admiral's barge settle into its docking collars. As she waited, more thoughts of Cassy Quinn came unbidden, so strong that she had to force them into suppression.

"Welcome aboard, Admiral," she said, saluting smartly. The admiral and his staff poured across the quarterdeck.

"Good day, Captain," Runacres replied, his bright eyes flashing behind his visor. He had recently taken a depilatory, and his bushy eyebrows and disheveled white hair were eradicated, taking with them any hint of fatigue. "Prepare to short-jump on my command. All interlocks will be disabled and all links masked until I clear the task group to go active."

"But, sir—" she replied.

"Battle conference in three minutes, Captain," Runacres snapped, heading for the upbore. "The op-plan is downloading. Kindly remove your "butts" to the bridge, and stand by for orders."

Chapter Fifty-nine

Spawn

Pake watched an Ulaggi lander blast into space. And then another. Curious, she pushed aside reeds and crawled up the muddy bank. A stench overpowered the land, a miasma of rot, but Pake's senses had been dulled by unspeakable death. Her survival instincts had been overwhelmed by the horrors of life. Almost overwhelmed—the hunger in her belly was real.

Pake came clear of the reeds and saw a forest of contrails arcing through the high overcast. Peering above the wide levee, she saw corpses, a field of bodies, eviscerated and corrupt. Waves of spawn bubbled forth from the carrion mounds, masses of vermin in uncountable number, scuttling across the land like tides of immense, ravenous ticks, devouring reed or grass, rat or cat—or any human too slow or too injured to escape.

She had lost track of the days—of the weeks—since the attacks began. The fast-movers had come first, ululating through the clouds, strafing refugees. All across the burning horizon, landers had come to ground, disgorging battalions of hulking troops and their killing machines. The men of Pake's clan had joined with remnants of a local militia to overwhelm an alien foray. Ulaggi troopers had been slaughtered and a small lander destroyed, but the victory had been short-lived, and bitter; energy beams had rained upon them, incinerating their triumph. The destruction widened, sweeping the countryside in wanton carnage. Pake escaped, but not her daughter. She barely had time to bury Li-Li's charred remains before the next onslaught of landers thundered from the skies. Brutish creatures swept across the countryside, crushing resistance and creating cordons to separate female from male, herding the mobs into wailing masses.

Then the huntresses appeared.

On Pitcairn Pake had seen only guards and technicians—all males. Her first sight of a female left her trembling in disbelief; she watched three naked assassins—terrible creatures, tall and grotesquely muscular—descend upon a wide plain concentrated with captured men, grasping and rending in a trance-like fury. The race of the victims seemed little to matter; Ulaggi guards and human prisoners alike broke and ran from

the murderous huntresses.

Pake fled into the rice paddies, but she could not escape the horror. Screams of dying men filled the interminable nights, and in the mornings there were fields of sundered dead. So many dead; her daughters were dead. She was alone. She wanted to surrender, even to die; but her accursed stomach, gnawing mercilessly, drove her from one day to the next.

A commotion wrested Pake's attention from her own self-pity. She quietly slid down the bank. The noise came nearer. Pake sank into the reeds. She felt safe submerged in the stagnant paddy; the vermin avoided water deeper than a puddle, at least the small ones did. Pake had seen a youngling huntress—a waist-high female—running through a shallow drainage ditch earlier that day. Soon even the swamps would not be safe.

Pake had witnessed the unspeakable metamorphous, the transformation of the vermin. Male maggots swelled overnight into thumb-sized pupa. Sprouting appendages, they crabbed about, swarms amassing as they flowed across the killing fields. Head and jaw specializing as they scavenged, the swollen puss-colored sacks became squat homunculi, with appendages transforming into nascent arms and hands. Once their natal carrion was stripped to the bones, the male pupa began migrating, eating insects and vegetation, growing taller and wide-shouldered.

The noise grew louder. Pake had seen only three huntresses and the one wild female, but other females—not huntresses—were increasingly evident. Pake submerged into shadow as a uniformed female strode across the levee. She led a company of jogging soldiers. Pake cringed deeper into the scummy water. The female screeched at the sullen males as they plodded by, beating them into a trot with a humming truncheon.

More troops appeared, similarly harangued by screeching females. And more landers blasted into space. Something had changed. Curiosity overcoming fear, Pake climbed to the top of the levee to peer across the land; all around the azimuth there were dissipating contrails pointing into the sky, with new ones lifting skyward, pulled upward by fiery stars.

The aliens were leaving.

Pake heard more noises, like crabs scuttling through weeds. She remained still; she knew what it was, for the sound was familiar now. The leading edge of a vermin horde appeared on the levee, the outliers being pushed down the bank by sheer force of numbers. These spawn were perhaps four weeks old, maybe five.

Pake carried a stout branch with a knurled end. She waited until the closest male was within striking distance. She swung, crushing its soft skull. The others scattered up the bank. Pake bent to pick up the broken creature, satisfied with its heft.

Food was food.

Chapter Sixty

One Last Mission

"Solid link, Captain," the officer-of-the-deck reported. "Overrides activated. Jump count holding."

"Very well," Buccari replied. Thoroughly baffled, she glowered down questioning looks from her bridge team. Admiral Runacres was proposing to short-jump five *Island*-class motherships, in direct defiance of his own dire warnings. She pulled up the op-plan, hoping to make sense of the mission, but her attention was drawn back to the fleet action. Admiral Wells and Tar Fell still dominated, but the

enemy was adjusting; sections of the alien line were matching up, slowing the advance, though not without cost; another Ulaggi ship went critical, and another. The odds were steadily accelerating in Tar Fell's favor. Again, not without cost; *PDF Penc*, consort to the konish flagship, showed shield failure. Seconds later it vanished. And then *Bastion* fell off the line. *Vigilant*, Admiral Wells's battered flagship, and *Retribution*, both ships giving and taking fierce fire, closed the gap. Another Ulaggi ship succumbed to their furious energies.

Buccari's multiplexor buzzed with Admiral Runacres's imperious summons. She glanced up at the flag bridge. The Old Man was ensconced at his command station, a grim god of war. She shifted her attention to Runacres's vid-image. He looked ill, his ruddy complexion gone gray and sallow; the rumor of a heart condition had arrived with him.

Vice Admiral Klein and Commodore Merriwether were attending, their vid-images arrayed along with those of the other skippers of Buccari's task group: John Bonden had *TDF*, Johnny Stanton had *Baffin*, Tonda Jones had *Tasmania*, and Max Sakamoto commanded *Kodiak*, all recent corvette squadron commanders, all old friends. Buccari grew more perplexed. Scientist Dowornobb, brow tufts rigid, was the last to join. He was industriously working a keyboard.

"Ah, there you are, Dowornobb," Runacres remarked.

"I am-ah reviewing your calculations," the kone replied. "Yes, it-ah will work as Admiral Klein supposes. It-ah is brilliant, but—"

"Then I shall get to the point," Runacres announced. "Admiral Wells and Tar Fell are prevailing. The longer the battle continues, the greater will be their advantage. Given time, they will destroy the enemy reserve force. However, the remaining Ulaggi dispositions are maneuvering to counterattack. When that occurs, Tar Fell and Admiral Wells will be forced to fall back to the moon. Our mission is to prevent, or at least to delay that from happening. Admiral Klein, please elaborate."

"We will use a grid matrix as a weapon," the fleet science officer proclaimed. She looked up from her console. "This is theory, but if an arriving hyperlight cell collides with a forming cell, the forming cell will inherit an ungovernable surge of gravitronic resonance and be violently scattered beyond mutual support, perhaps even destroyed."

"It-ah is good theory—" Dowornobb said,

"Time is of the essence," Runacres said. "Two Ulaggi cells—twelve ships—are climbing out of Earth's gravity well, consolidating for jump. That is our primary target. They will initiate a jump sequence at any moment. We must be ready to intercept."

"But, sir," Buccari protested, suddenly comprehending but not believing. "How can we jump in time to prevent the bugs from leaving real space. If any of our ships fail on jump, we would be the ones scattered—or worse."

"To your first question," Runacres replied, his jaw tight, "we have timed their jump-cycles. By eliminating interlocks and safety-cycles we shall outpace them."

"That just increases the odds of something going wrong."

"Time for talk is past, Captain," Commodore Merriwether broke in, her once-cherubic features hardened. "But as for your second question, *Tierra del Fuego*, *Novaya Zemlya*, *Baffin*, *Tasmania*, and *Kodiak* have seen the end of their days. We have the bitter choice of either abandoning them as hulks or committing them to expendable combat...we can make their loss meaningful."

"Meaningful?" Buccari asked, cringing with dark prospects.

"This is war," Runacres growled. "Some of your ships will not survive, but if we execute smartly, most of your crews will. Captain Buccari, you may retire from this mission as you choose. *Baffin*, *Tasmania*, and *Kodiak* have been picked clean; their skeleton crews have all volunteered. I will extend the same consideration to your crew,

but I will have one of your ships. Those of *TDF* or *NZ's* crews that do not wish to volunteer may evacuate to the ship of your choice, Captain, but it must be done immediately. Immediately, do you understand?"

"My ship and my crew are ready, Admiral," Buccari replied.

"And mine, Admiral," *Tierra del Fuego's* skipper joined in.

"Very well," Runacres replied, swelling with fierce pride.

"Admiral Runacres," Buccari persisted. "All due respect, sir, but why are you here? Allow me to lead the task group."

"As Commodore Merriwether so eloquently stated, the time for talking is past," Runacres replied.

Buccari noticed Sarah Merriwether's tight-lipped fury. Apparently, the gods had already clashed.

"What about the enemy ships orbiting the moon?" Buccari asked. "They could still ambush Tar Fell."

"They are also being monitored," Merriwether reported. "If they jump, my *Avengers* will follow them. We have hardware enough to give them a fight."

Buccari struggled to remain impassive. So much could go wrong; Merriwether's effectives were either badly beat up or just off the ways, their crews untrained. Her flagship—Jake Carmichael's ship, *T.L.S. Avenger*, the pride of the Tellurian Legion fleet—was one step above a deep-space derelict.

"Forgive me, Admiral," Dowornobb broke in, thundering. "But Admiral Klein, are you certain of your sidereal variables?"

"They are of concern," the science officer replied. "But I have modeled and remodeled local field densities. The readings are consistent with predicted values."

"I think it-ah is not so easy," Dowornobb replied. "Your hypotheses are correct, and your math is impeccable, but your variables are time-shifted. I would-ah give you no more than a twenty percent probability of success. Since I am on the *Novaya Zemlya*, I am able—"

"The hell you say!" Runacres roared. "Dowornobb is on board this ship?"

"Yes, sir," Buccari replied. "Ambassador Kateos as well."

"Damn it! I ordered them to the defense station."

"My apologies, Admiral," Dowornobb replied. "It-ah was taken as an order to remove ourselves from Tar Fell's flagship. Captain Charl did not know that-ah we were coming on board until after we arrived."

"Captain Buccari, you will immediately have Scientist Dowornobb and Ambassador Kateos transported to the defense station."

"I must-ah remain here," the kone rumbled. "The time parallax from lunar base to our current position has corrupted the triggers. The jump-ah trajectory needs recalibrating right up to resonance. I must continue to update the solution, if we are to make-ah the outcome a certainty."

"I shall remain with my mate," Kateos said, leaning over Dowornobb's shoulder.

"Admiral Runacres, we are getting grid signals," Admiral Klein announced. "Twelve Ulaggi ships in low orbit are preparing to jump."

"Time has expired," Runacres snarled. "Captain Buccari, Scientist Dowornobb, you know what to do. Make it so."

Chapter Sixty-one

Surprise Attack

"Why does y'Tant not order us to attack?" Dar screeched.

Jakkuk wondered the same thing. Although the attack on their reserve had at last been blunted, the enemy's battleships had done grievous damage. The opposing forces were lined up, trading fierce blows, but it was growing late; the enemy had gained advantage. More and more of the detail battles were going against the weakened reserves; and the weight-shift in favor of the enemy was accelerating. Reinforcements were required. An immediate flanking attack would still turn the battle in their favor.

"She deigns not to share glory," Karyai snarled. "For a roon, glory is sweeter than the sweetest wine."

"Blood and blood," Dar lamented bitterly, "She remains *g'ort*-stricken."

"Fleet Dominant y'Tant is preparing to jump," Jakkuk reported.

"At last," Dar snarled.

Jakkuk monitored the increasing link intensity. The I'rdish commander had maneuvered two six-ship cells into an overwhelming attack force. So much mass so deep within the planet's gravity well required precious time to neutralize angular momentum; but resonance signals were finally lifting into the ether.

"Hold!" Jakkuk snarled. There were more linking signals—much closer—from the humans! With astounding swiftness the emissions attained full resonance. Jakkuk watched in disbelief as the contacts blinked to nothingness; the human grid-matrix had dissolved into hyperlight.

"What is this?" Karyai demanded.

"Mother, the humans have jumped! The old ships!"

"Gast, they are cripples," Dar snarled.

"Dominant y'Tant finally jumps," Jakkuk reported, but with growing trepidation. The I'rdish task force had disappeared, but something was wrong; the human derelicts were materializing where y'Tant's formation had been. Without warning, one of the five human ships blossomed destructively. And then there were only four.

"Impossible!" Karyai gasped, a lesion on Jakkuk's mind, growing furiously hot. "No," the lakk screamed. "It is not possible. Those bloody *cripples* have disrupted y'Tant's hyperlight grid."

Jakkuk rechecked data. The political was correct; the human ships were occupying the space in which y'Tant's formation had last been located. But where were the I'rdish ships?

"Blood and bowels!" Dar demanded. "Jakkuk-hajil, where is y'Tant?"

"I cannot sense her, mother," Jakkuk reported, scanning the ether. Roonish cell controllers were never hard to detect. Never! But the only roonish controllers on the dendritic network were those still in low orbit, and they were frantically initiating their own probes. Dominant y'Tant's cell controllers—and their ships—were gone.

"Search, Jakkuk-hajil!" Karyai growled. "Search very wide!"

Where was the enemy?

Sharl Buccari struggled to regain her wits. Klaxons clanged. Target acquisition radars lit up. Threat warnings screamed. They were in range; she desperately needed to recover from transition. She forced her blurred eyes to focus on the tactical displays, trying to determine a threat axis. Her tethers tightened; *Novaya Zemlya* was robotically maneuvering to an attack vector, driven by gaming protocols, but gently; the enemy was not close, just as Runacres's op-plan had anticipated.

"Tracking targets," the weapons officer gasped.

"S-ship is alpha-alpha," the engineering duty officer reported.

"Very well," Buccari replied, relieved and proud that her ship was bearing up. Her vision clearing, she examined the plot and detected enemy returns: twelve ships in

two cells of six orbited twenty thousand clicks below her. They were almost beyond the planet's sun-fired limb. Her weapons would have to bite through too much atmosphere.

Where were the other twelve?

"Hold fire," Buccari replied, studying the battlefield.

"*B-Baffin* doesn't answer, sir," her tactical officer reported.

With a gut-wrenching jolt, Buccari realized that her own formation had been reduced from five ships to four. *Baffin's* signal was missing. In its place was an expanding debris pattern. *Baffin's* corvettes were still there, nestled within the grid along with those of *Tasmania* and *Kodiak*.

"Close up and restore grid integrity," Buccari ordered as the admiral's summons commanded her attention. Runacres's image appeared on her console, joined in turn by the other skippers—less Johnny Stanton and his bridge crew. One ship down, four to go.

"Make orbit. Same trace as the enemy," Admiral Runacres announced. "Recover all corvettes. Captain Buccari, you've got deck space. Bring *Baffin's* corvettes on board."

"Aye, sir," Buccari ordered. "Officer-of-the-deck, make your vector."

As her officer-of-the-deck barked conning orders, she frantically scanned the wide-scale plots for any sign of the missing enemy. They were nowhere to be seen. The ten Ulaggi ships orbiting the moon were still there, and the ferocious battle in high standoff still raged. Admiral Wells's and Tar Fell's ships were doing heavy work; another Ulaggi ship flamed out of existence. And another.

Her attention was brought back to her console as Commodore Merriwether, Vice Admiral Klein, and Scientist Dowornobb joined the conference. Merriwether was actually smiling, her cherubic demeanor pushing through her haggard countenance. Dowornobb's brow tufts quavered, but his equilibrium was surprisingly stable. Kateos floated at his side.

"Hoot-ah-hoot! Admiral Klein's theories were correct," Dowornobb thundered joyously, his brows stiffening. "Admiral Runacres's tactics have worked. The Ulaggi ships have been cast from the system. How far will not-ah be known for days, if not-ah weeks or even longer. Perhaps they have been destroyed."

A rousing cheer lifted from among the watch. Buccari's scalp crawled with elation—and wonder. The implication of what had occurred exploded like a starburst—they had thwarted a jump. They had removed twelve heavy enemy battleships from the field at the cost of a single *Island*-class relic. Hyperlight tactics were forever changed.

"Belay that. The day is far from won," Runacres pronounced, but Buccari could detect the Old Man's sternly repressed joy. He had accomplished the impossible, yet again. "The enemy still has the numbers. If they consolidate, we are defeated."

The watch team's cheering choked off, but the expressions on their faces were telling; fear had been replaced with grim confidence.

"I am content to let the enemy chase us," Runacres declared. "We have put fear into their vicious hearts, and they will be cautious on their climb out. If we maintain this orbit, they will haul us into firing range in eight hours. I pray that Admiral Wells and Tar Fell will be with us by then."

"Sir, why not jump back to lunar orbit?" Tonda Jones, *Tasmania's* skipper, asked.

"The enemy ships in lunar orbit will act soon," Runacres replied. "We shall wait for battle to come to us. I would rather avoid another jump. You have performed a sufficient number of suicide missions for one day."

Change of Command

Jakkuk executed another sweep of the trackless infinite, trying to detect even the faintest of dendritic pulses from y'Tant's cell controllers. She detected only random noise. The I'rdish commander and her ships could have been scattered millions of *turoks* distant; any plea for help might take many days, if not years to reach them.

"Mother, we must act soon," Dar screeched.

Jakkuk agreed vehemently. Their trajectory was curving inexorably toward the moon. They would soon be in range of the infernal defense stations; and now there were two.

Jakkuk sensed Fist a'Yerg's approach—a magnificent nimbus of fury, as did Dominant Dar, as did every member of the bridge watch.

"Blood, we must act now," Dar screeched.

"By your mother's loins then, for what do you wait?" a'Yerg screamed. The destroyer commander dove amongst them in a frothing rage, her *g'ort* precariously in check. The bridge watch, male and hajil alike, recoiled in terror from the silver-eyed destroyer commander.

Dar disdainfully lifted her chin, indicating the lakk. Karyai floated above the interface, her mind ranging wildly, an emotional maelstrom. Jakkuk had never seen the political so overcome with uncertainty, so frozen with doubt. With good reason; the humans had executed a stupefying tactic, erasing y'Tant's task force from the battlefield. And it was no accident; the timing was exquisite, and the employment of old and battered ships only made it more obviously a product of imagination and intent.

"Silence, you impudent *jik*," Karyai snapped, rounding on the intruder, her own anger blossoming terribly.

"Cowardly hag!" the roon retorted, showing no fear, her *g'ort* throbbing obscenely. "To wait is to die, old witch. We must attack! We must attack now!"

"I said *silence*," the political hissed, unleashing pent-up fury.

Jakkuk felt pain as the interface vibrated upward through five harmonics, overloading with the lakk's explosive rancor. The cell controller, fearful for her sanity, gracelessly extricated herself from the searing mind-machine; but overlaying her panicked discomfort was a frisson of perverse revenge, for it invoked no little pleasure to see a'Yerg clutching her head as the roon convulsed into a ball of cramped muscle.

"I have tolerated your arrogance too long," the lakk sneered, straddling the stricken roon. The destroyer commander's spasms of agony were immense, but the political's tantrum was magnificently greater.

"In the Empress's name, mother," Dar pleaded with passionate ferocity. "My roons will not fight without their commander."

Karyai relented with delicious deliberation. The interface cleared, but the lakk's outburst, magnified and transmitted over the ether, had served a greater design. I'rdish ship commanders and cell controllers, even those in the jaws of battle, sent interrogating probes. Yet at the same time they all knew; there was but one lakk with such powers in the fleet. That lakk had just sent clear signal that I'rdish roons were no longer in command.

"To your post, roon. We go to battle," Karyai snarled. "There soon will be *kar* blood enough."

To Jakkuk's morbid delight, the panting roon uncoiled from her seizure. The

warrior's silver-eyed gaze remained diverted as she swam unsteadily for the hatch, fending off collisions with hatch combings.

"Gast, the reserve force is lost," Dar screeched.

Indeed, they had waited too long; the battered formation collapsed under the onslaught, the battle line disintegrating into melee. Very soon it would be slaughter. Jakkuk sensed the rising ecstasy of the stricken crews, their fierce acceptance of death—a warrior's death, pure and noble. Jakkuk's envy soared.

"Then, by Enod, we jump to the aid of the landing force," Karyai snarled.

"Jakkuk-hajil," Dar screamed. "Maneuver the cell. Jump to engage. By the name of our Mother, Runacres-kar and his crippled ships will pay."

"But hold," Karyai snarled.

"Blood, blood, and blood, now what?" Dar demanded.

"First simulate the jump," Karyai replied.

"What!"

"Simulate the jump. Approach resonance with conviction, Jakkuk-hajil, only do not attain it. Yes, we will jump, only not on the first effort. Terminate sequence at the last possible moment. Let us see if they descend upon us, as they did upon y'Tant. Notify all ship-controllers and commanders to prepare for battle."

"A ruse!" Dar muttered cruelly.

Jakkuk played out the feint, praying that the enemy would come. The maneuver was accomplished; full resonance was approached and maintained mere *ingors* below threshold. It was like knuckling the iron-taut reins for a full team of Tirrish stalking cats.

"Now hold," the lakk whispered, and they waited.

"All ships are in full readiness, mother," Jakkuk replied, straining to keep her charges in check, sensing their collective passions.

"They do not come," Dar growled, her disappointment keen.

"Let us seek them," Karyai commanded.

Chapter Sixty-three

New Orders

Nash Hudson and Nestor Godonov pulled themselves and their gear through the penumbra of shadows. Winfried Fenstermacher was waiting at the corvette's port-side lock.

"Man, oh man, why did I ever leave Genellan?" the boatswain moaned, sealing the exterior hatch behind the officers. "I must be one of the dumbest morons in the universe."

"Now you're just being modest, Boats," Godonov muttered.

Hudson ignored the banter; his concentration was dizzily overwhelmed with thoughts of Cassy Quinn, persistent and compelling.

"You okay, Nash?" the science officer asked as pressures equalized.

"Yeah," Hudson muttered, forcing the cloying images from his mind. It was time to perform. He could not afford distractions; there was too much at stake. Fenstermacher threw open the inner hatch. Hudson hustled from the lock with Godonov pushing on his heels. To their amazement, Admiral Runacres had green-lighted the mission. The admiral wanted intelligence, but time was of the essence; the penetration window was narrow.

"You friggin' believe the Ulaggi are going to let us get away with this?" Fenstermacher whined, following them into the EPL operations bay.

"Cool your jets, Boats," Godonov admonished, pushing his gear through the

lander's top-hatch. "Why would the bugs sweat a lousy corvette and a couple of auxiliaries? They're fighting for their lives. It'll be a walk in the park."

"A friggin' stroll in a minefield," Fenstermacher groaned.

Hudson and Godonov left the boatswain muttering at his post. In the crew rest compartment, Sergeant Chastain sat staring grimly at a sensor console, while four cliff dwellers in docking hoods played acey-deucey with their usual ferocity. Notch screeched an alert; Bottlenose, Tonto, and Pop-eye pushed away from their games, assuming a perfect vertical in the null-grav.

"Attention on deck!" Chastain belatedly roared, doing the same, if with less precision.

"Carry on," Godonov said, flashing hand sign.

The hunters frenetically signaled questions, while Godonov attempted to answer. Hudson floated to his locker and changed into a flightdeck suit, all the while struggling with bittersweet visions. It was like a waking dream; Cassy's essence pulsed vividly, a delirium of joy and concern, calling out to him.

"Any signals, Sergeant?" Godonov asked.

"No, sir," the big man forlornly replied.

"It's big planet, Jocko. It'll take a few orbits, but we'll find her," Godonov said. "Come up to the blister. We'll light off the primary sensors as soon as we clear."

The science officer and the sergeant leapt through the forward overhead hatch, darting through the access tube and into the corvette's laboratory. Hudson followed but pushed through the flightdeck hatch. Teddy Thompson, in the copilot station, gave a cavalier salute. A hotshot guilder named Coor was ensconced in the third-pilot's seat, his spidery hands flying across his instrument.

"All *Condor Two* systems are green," the cliff dweller's machine voice announced. "*Jolly Green* and *Atlas* ready to launch."

"The bugs just faked a jump," Thompson reported.

"They what?" Hudson gasped, pulling himself into his tethers.

"They faked a jump. We best get moving. If they jump, we're no go."

"Tell ops *Condor Two* is ready," Hudson ordered, running the checklists. Thompson obeyed. Caution lights strobed along the hangerbay bulkheads, and brutally loud alarms sounded. Hangerbay outer doors flew aside with gut-sucking speed. Finished with his checklists, Hudson glanced out at star-spangled blackness. His visor darkened, reacting to the brilliance of Earth's reflected light. The planet dominated the corvette's viewscreen, a silver-blue limb against the perfect blackness of space.

Hudson considered their good fortune. If the enemy had jumped, the mission would have been scrubbed; but it was a sobering reprieve—the false jump was a ruse. It meant the Ulaggi understood what had happened; if humans could destroy an Ulaggi cell by jumping into its forming grid, the Ulaggi could return the favor.

Launch alarms sounded. Flight ops cleared them for launch.

"Releasing locks," Coor reported.

Docking grapples let go. Launch sequencing lights flashed.

"Science, you ready?" Hudson demanded, employing his retinal cursor to activate the maneuvering alarm. He repressed tortured thoughts of Cassy Quinn as his fingers and eyes performed long-practiced functions.

"Affirmative," Godonov replied. "Mission vector set."

"Checklists complete," Coor reported.

"Roger," Hudson replied, laying his forearms in their acceleration rests. "On my count, three...two...one..."

He hit the kick-switch. A dull *thunk* vibrated his ship as the massive corvette catapulted through the yawning opening, pushed with increasing force from the

cavernous hangerbay into the infinitely greater cavern of space.

"Corvette away," Coor announced.

Clearance indicators flickered amber to green as the mass of the mothership fell astern. Hudson pulsed his quarter thrusters; the corvette's tail slued smartly to starboard.

"Clear angle," the copilot reported.

"Mains," Hudson barked, setting throttles. "Four gees...now."

The corvette leapt on course, gaining velocity at a lung-squeezing rate. Seconds behind them, a fleet fueler and a heavy-lifter punched from *Novaya Zemlya's* hangerbay.

"Un-derway," Godonov grunted over the gee-load. "G-good thing we got out when we did. The bugs are preparing to jump again. I bet this time it's for real. We got a furball in the making."

"Roger that," Hudson replied, scanning the tactical display. *Atlas* and *Jolly Green* followed in loose trail. His plan was to drop the auxiliaries on the same orbit as the *Ulaggi* task force. They would remain on the opposite side of the planet from the aliens while Hudson's corvette penetrated to insertion altitude.

"Any updates?" Hudson asked as the burn timed out.

"Bugs are recovering their landed forces in a hurry," the science officer replied. "I've scanned imagery. It's a mess. Every major urban area has been leveled."

A fire-warning alarm burped; they were being painted at long range by enemy acquisition radar. Suddenly, Hudson was overwhelmed with an unmistakable barrage of unbidden thought, far more intense than the emotions previously experienced. His mind reeled with a vicarious torment, an unspeakable anguish, and he knew, without a scintilla of doubt, that the thoughts he was sensing were his wife's.

"Cassy, where are you?" he whispered.

"The bugs in lunar orbit have jumped!" Godonov reported. "Ten new contacts, this sector. They're going after Admiral Runacres."

Struggling mightily to regain his composure, Hudson opened the scale on his tactical display. The enemy ships previously orbiting the moon were painting on his screen, only a few thousand clicks away. With a certainty as clear as his own heartbeat, he knew his wife was on one of those ships. And with an agony that sent shafts of pain into his chest, he knew that she was frightened.

"Power blooms on bug ships in low orbit!" Godonov reported. "They're coming up to join the party. It's going to get crowded."

"Skipper, you okay?" Thompson asked.

"Yeah, dammit," Hudson snapped, white-knuckling his controls as he forced his attention to the tactical display. Admiral Wells and Tar Fell were still grinding down the *Ulaggi* reserve, but low-Earth orbit was turning to worms. Cassy was close. She was in trouble, and he was heading in the wrong direction.

"I have a mission," Hudson growled to himself, over and over.

An hour of helplessness passed as the corvette plunged deeper into Earth's gravity well. Hudson welcomed the concentration required to evade the alien task force blasting upward toward them.

"Hot damn," Godonov suddenly shouted.

"What?" Hudson demanded.

"I'm getting signals! Transponder signals from our survivors. At least a dozen. Stand by for new orbit parameters."

"Do you have Pake?" Chastain asked.

"Won't know who's who until they acknowledge," Godonov replied. "I recommend we put the heavy-lifter down near the greatest concentration and start

rounding up the ones we can. We can hold the apple in low orbit until we get solid data."

"Okay, Teddy, get moving," Hudson barked, hitting the maneuvering alarm. "Nes, I want you and the Marines in the apple now. We'll punch you and the heavy-lifter down on a hard vector. The fueler will hold orbit and gas you up on the return. When you get back up, inject for lunar base without me."

"Where the hell are you going?" Godonov asked.

"Back to the furball," Hudson replied. "I've got new orders."

Chapter Sixty-four

Faith

Quinn's feelings were acute, as if she could hear her husband's pulse pounding in her own skull. They were communicating—not perfectly, but Nash seemed to understand. His thoughts were growing clearer; but then a mental stench wafted through the science officer's mind, obscuring the ether with a bitter pall. The white witch was approaching. With each heartbeat the lakk's acrid presence grew stronger. Quinn's command of her own powers drained away, like water through a sieve, eclipsed by the white witch's overwhelming stink. Unmoored from her husband's mind, Quinn's joy turned to panic; she began to breathe faster, her pulse accelerated; her mind retreated on itself, recoiling into a protective clench. What secrets was she divulging? What new treason was her mind committing?

"Calm yourself, daughter."

The hatch slid soundlessly open. The white witch, her mind already deep within the human's skull, floated into Quinn's cell.

"Runacres-*kar* is formidable," Karyai said, a voyeur on the human's wishes and fears. The hatch slid shut.

"He will defeat you," Quinn whimpered, struggling to empty her mind. The lakk, though still arrogant, was lacking her overweening confidence. The perception must have registered, for the lakk's uncertainty was suddenly erased, like a dark curtain yanked across a window.

"Indeed, your perceptions increase," the lakk muttered.

"Why? Why do they increase? I do not understand my powers," Quinn replied, trying desperately not to think.

"Nor we ours," Karyai said. "Each advance of knowledge only illuminates the depth of our ignorance. Your powers are a gift, Quinn-human. You have been blessed."

"Blessed?" Quinn asked, surprised by the alien's response; the white witch was not given to idle conversation. "Blessed by whom?"

"Your race professes many gods," the lakk replied, a sneer twisting her horrid features. "Choose one."

"Do you have gods?" Quinn asked, struggling to maintain control as the white witch assaulted her mind, probing, scraping.

"Science is our god," Karyai replied, not with words. The lakk's telepathic tone was different—hinting of passion.

"Many humans worship the same god."

"It is hardly the same," the lakk replied, this time with words, emphatic, almost strident. "You are a science officer, yes? But science is not your faith."

"No," the human replied.

"Science is our Oracle. Survival is our religion."

Quinn sensed a hesitation in the alien's probing, an irritation.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It is beyond you," the lakk replied, closing her eyes. "What is your faith? Have you a personal god? Your thoughts are muddled, human-mother."

"Life," the human replied, hesitantly. "Life seems to be a system. A system implies a purpose...if there's purpose, there must be a cause—a god. I don't know its name. Call it Science. One name works as well as any."

The alien remained haughtily silent. Quinn thought the alien to be fatigued.

"Indeed, I am weary," the alien at last replied. "But tell me more of this extraordinary *kar*. This Hudson. He dominates your thoughts like an idol...like a god."

"He's my husband, the father of my daughter."

"Husband..." the lakk muttered, her ghastly expression eloquent beyond words or thought. "You have coupled with this *kar*."

"He's my husband," Quinn repeated, but her thoughts provided much, much more. The alien delved into the human's mind, excavating her passion.

"Love," the alien snarled, an obscene smile contorting her wicked features. "In science there is no love. There is only species perpetuation. What you term love is merely nervous agitation—a motivation to procreate—an instinct."

"It's more than that," Quinn protested.

"Your instincts are fascinating to us—this instinct to give *kar* pleasure. Disgusting and humiliating, but fascinating—to be used in such a manner is abominable."

"It's not just sexual. We have affection for our children, for our brothers and sisters, and for our parents...for our fellow humans."

"Side-effects to the same end."

"We love other races as well. The *kones*—"

"You gain advantage. Your race finds protection in their shadow."

"But...I could even grow to love you. If I loved you, I would sacrifice my life for you, as if you were my child...or my mother."

The lakk just stared. Her intrusion into Quinn's mind softened, but it did not withdraw. At last the lakk spoke.

"You can have no affection for me."

"You're a murderer, damn it!" Quinn cried.

"It is our nature—as it is yours. Our species are both predatory; you would hunt us, were we not hunting you. In this regard your race shows great...promise."

"Why?"

"Because in the end, the most murderous survives."

"It doesn't have to be. I beg you to leave. To stop killing us. We can make—"

"Again you beg. To beg is to submit. Submission is not survival," Karyai snapped, growing agitated. "There is no honor in begging. Begging only stirs my blood to rage."

"Our races don't have to fight," Quinn protested.

"Certainly they must."

"I can be of use to you," Quinn persisted. An idea came to her—an inspiration—in full flower. Focusing her imagination as intensely as she could, she contemplated a future. Invoking memories of Kar-Ulag, of Punna—the capital, Quinn imagined *konish* battleships raging torrents of energy upon the planet, shattering the ethereal architecture of the Imperial Palace. She imagined the old empress screaming in flames."

The lakk glared fiercely. A cruel smile touched her lips as she pushed off for the opening hatch.

"Well done," Karyai snarled.

"I can help you," Quinn shouted.

The lakk stopped at the hatch.

"You already do."

"I don't mean as a spy."

"Ah, but we know now which ship Runacres-*kar* is in. Soon we will be able to anticipate his every move, until he is killed. And when Runacres-*kar* is destroyed there will be no stopping our conquest. It will only be a matter of time before humanity wears our leash."

"No," Quinn moaned.

It was too late. The lakk was gone.

Chapter Sixty-five

Dance of Death

"Weapons range in ten minutes," the tactical officer reported.

Buccari studied the gaming plot, ruthlessly suppressing the images of Cassy Quinn bubbling through her consciousness. The enemy's jump was tactically perfect; ten alien heavies had cut off their sling vector, forcing the humans to descend deeper into the gravity well—and to engage the rising task force within four orbits—or to hold orbit and fight now. There was no escape, except to jump. Admiral Runacres's signals gave no weight to that option.

"All ships, shift emergency power to forward shields," the admiral commanded. His image dominated the battle conference, his space-battered visage making his volunteer commanders appear as children. "Ready all weapons. Hit them as hard as ever you can. Reinforcements will arrive momentarily."

It better be damn soon. Buccari critically scanned her formation; *Novaya Zemlya* was in the van of an oblique battlefront, trailed at half-standard interval by *Tierra del Fuego*, *Tasmania*, and *Kodiak*—strongest to weakest. Hers was the only ship with a full crew. The others were little better than drones, but their batteries could still fire; Runacres had ordered all weapons slaved to *Novaya Zemlya*'s fire control. The crews of *Tasmania* and *Kodiak* were already at their abandon-ship stations.

"First Fleet jump signals," the tactical officer reported. As he spoke Commodore Merriwether's ships transitioned to hyperlight.

"Contacts!" the weapons officer barked. "In close!"

New returns blossomed—a flight of seven friendlies on a trajectory that would intercept the aliens, but not before Runacres's four *Island*-class ships were well engaged.

"We have *Avenger*'s number," the tactical officer reported.

Buccari's heart skipped a beat. A shudder galloped down her spine; Jake Carmichael's ship was about to enter battle. In company with Merriwether's flagship were *Avenger*-class battleships *Intrepid*, *Crusader*, and *Ferocious*, and *Island*-class motherships *Iceland*, *New Zealand*, and *Shikoku*. Merriwether had deployed everything in her inventory, leaving only the remnants of the Asian Cooperation and TGRS fleets to defend the moon.

"First Fleet reporting for duty," Merriwether announced. Her vid-image, along with those of seven more grim-faced commanders, joined the battle conference, Jake Carmichael among them. Buccari felt his eyes caressing her.

"Excellent to see you, Merriwether," Runacres replied.

"Got 'em surrounded," the commodore drawled. "Your orders, Admiral?"

"Show no quarter," Runacres replied.

"Aye, and I'll see you in hell, sir."

"Surely where we both belong, ma'am. But would it be too much to ask for a modicum more velocity. As it is, your ships shall be tardy."

Merriwether, her expression hardening, snapped orders to her bridge team. She turned back to the vid.

"My motherships have nothing left to give, but my *Avengers* will be there on time, sir," she said. "And the damn bugs will know it."

Runacres's brow furrowed; Merriwether was splitting her force. Until the Ulaggi task force elevated from low orbit, the humans had the numbers, eleven ships to ten; but at first contact there would only be Merriwether's four battered *Avengers* and Runacres's four used-up *Island*-class ships against a single concentration of ten Ulaggi heavies—a desperately uneven match up. Buccari stared at her console, unable to take her eyes from Carmichael's face. Not worried for her ship, or even for her own life, somehow watching Jake Carmichael come into harm's way frightened Buccari more than anything.

"Godspeed and good hunting," Runacres said as he terminated the battle conference.

Carmichael's vid-image dissolved, but his face remained glaringly sharp in Buccari's mind. It was as if she could feel him. She closed her eyes and forcing her roiling emotions into a dark corner; there was desperate work to be done. She opened a circuit to the HLA laboratory.

"Scientist Dowornobb," Buccari barked, "You and your staff will immediately depart this ship. Repair to the hangerbay within two minutes. Ambassador Kateos will accompany you."

"I would rather remain—" the kone started to reply.

"Weapons range in seven minutes," the tactical officer reported.

"Master-at-Arms," Buccari barked. "Offload Scientist Dowornobb and Ambassador Kateos in the admiral's barge immediately. I want them clear in three minutes, not a second longer. Impale Scientist Dowornobb with a tranquilizer if he does not cooperate. Smartly now."

"I-ah depart," Dowornobb replied as his image faded.

Buccari scanned gauges and status boards, looking for anything that might be tuned to advantage. All departments were reporting; all damage-control stations were manned; all weapons were fully-charged and operational. She pushed back; it was time to fight the ship.

Targeting alarms went off. Threat warnings sounded.

"Incoming," the tactical officer reported.

Alien missile tracks screamed into Buccari's formation, needling precursors to the main event. The motherships sparkled with barbs of energy as small and medium-caliber counter-fire reacted. Rippling detonations swept over the *Island*-class ships, climbing in violence with each passing second. *Novaya Zemlya*'s systems throbbed with a deep-throated bellowing as electromagnetic pulses crashed against her shields and great globes of thermal radiation expanded past her hull like cracking whips. Her shields were holding; radtox levels remained within remediation ranges, but Buccari worried for her consorts. *Kodiak*'s defenses were already crumbling, and *Tasmania* was reporting catastrophic overloads. Runacres ordered their skippers to jettison crews. Buccari prayed the ships remained intact; she needed their weapons.

"Enemy fast-movers," the tactical officer reported.

Another advantage to the enemy, Runacres's ships would have to rely on Merriwether's outnumbered corvettes now rising in thin blooms. Buccari envied their precarious freedom as each corvette deployed into attack spread. Buccari's course was set by formation; she could only drive her big-iron straight into the battle.

"Admiral's barge is away," the officer-of-the-deck reported.

"Very well," Buccari replied. The radar blip accelerated tangentially from the formation's trajectory. That her friends were leaving the line of battle gave some relief, but Buccari remained anxious about the barge's ability to evade Ulaggi fast-movers. As if the war gods desired to fuel her anxieties, the spine-crawling screams of Ulaggi destroyer pilots lifted onto all tactical frequencies.

"Boooharry! Booooooharry! Boo—"

The watch quartermaster squelched the transmission. More now than ever Buccari wished she were at the controls of a corvette with her cannon sights on the taunting enemy. She forced her attention back to the impending battle. They were outnumbered and outgunned, but they were confronting head on; the engagement would be brief, perhaps fifteen seconds. Merriwether's exposure would last significantly longer; but for the briefest of windows, the Ulaggi would be caught between the hammer and the anvil.

"Weapons range in one minute."

Watch team communications were sharp; it could have been just another work-up drill. A glow of satisfaction warmed her heart.

"This is the captain speaking," she broadcast. She paused, her throat thickening, allowing the operation chatter to subside.

"Once again *Novaya Zemlya* closes for battle. My pride in this ship is great, but my pride in her crew is boundless. No matter what happens, we will always remember this day, and we will always be shipmates. Godspeed. Fight for your families."

The cheers were muffled by battle armor, but everyone on the bridge raised a fist, thrust as high as their tethers would allow.

"Weapons range in thirty seconds," the tactical officer reported. Hands and arms dropped back to their tasks. Operational chatter resumed. Buccari fought her demons. She could feel Jake Carmichael in her arms, but Cassy Quinn dominated her thoughts. Once again, she forced her emotions aside and stared grimly at the approaching enemy.

"Weapons free," Buccari announced, snugging her tethers. "Make every shot count."

Chapter Sixty-six

Jake Carmichael

"Do ya' feel her, Jake?" Merriwether asked.

"Hell, yes," he replied, glancing up at the flag bridge. Merriwether glared down, pointing at her helmet. Carmichael nodded. His brain was roiling with emotions not his own; Quinn's resurgent presence haunted him again. Her spirit had noticeably diminished when the Ulaggi ships had jumped away, but now the science officer's essence was returned, stronger than ever.

"Fantastic!" Merriwether gasped. "My science staff thinks we're crazy, but I just talked with the admiral. He feels her, too. Cassy Quinn is on one of those Ulaggi ships, Jake."

"Concur," he replied, nervously returning his attention to the tactical display. The enemy ships were growing near; battle was at hand. "When this is over, we'll have to wring it out. But now we have some ugly business to sort out."

"Weapons range in ten seconds," *Avenger's* tactical officer reported. "Now eight...seven..."

"Roger that. Good luck, Jake," Merriwether said, releasing his circuit and coming

up on the flag network.

"Godspeed all," she announced to her commanders. "Give 'em hell."

Carmichael struggled to focus on the developing battlefield. *Avenger*, *Intrepid*, *Crusader*, and *Ferocious*, their powerplants overboosting, bore down on the converging formations. *New Zealand* and *Shikoku* lagged the advance by a full minute; *Iceland*, its engines faltering, had fallen back still farther. Battle was at hand, and his concentration was a mess. Cassy Quinn's presence would not leave his mind, but it was not the science officer that disturbed Carmichael's focus; Charl Buccari's image consumed him. She was in trouble; Runacres's *Island*-class ships were majestically outmatched, their tragic fate all but certain unless Merriwether's force arrived in time to pound the enemy from the opposite direction.

"...two...one..."

A salvo of energy crashed against *Avenger*'s shields. He was drawing fire; they had made it in time. Carmichael's elation burst as *Kodiak* went critical, blossoming with destruction. A heartbeat later Merriwether's battle line discharged a broadside. Carmichael watched with professional detachment as *Avenger*'s weapons tracked the nearest interstellar, pouring energy onto its disintegrating shields. As the enemy battleship moved abeam, it crumbled in upon itself, detonating with three stuttering starbursts, each more massive than the previous.

"Press your attack!" Merriwether exhorted.

Carmichael had little time to savor revenge; Runacres's task group was getting pounded; *Tasmania* died next, breaking into pieces. *Novaya Zemlya* and *Tierra del Fuego* fought doggedly on; an Ulaggi ship succumbed to their combined fire, disintegrating in a slash of yellow. But then, on his right flank, *Ferocious* went critical in a white-hot starburst.

"Maintain your firing front!" Merriwether commanded. "*Avenger*, close interval."

Carmichael acknowledged. His conning officer shouted rudder orders. *Avenger*'s bridge officers and weaponeers bent to their tasks, but the hammers of hell gave no respite; *Tierra del Fuego* blossomed with destruction just as another Ulaggi ship gave up the ghost, victim to *Novaya Zemlya*'s manic gunnery.

A kernel of hope swelled in Carmichael's chest. *Novaya Zemlya*'s high rate of closure had taken her beyond the critical engagement zone. Runacres's flagship had miraculously survived the gauntlet. Charl Buccari was almost out of danger.

Not so his own ship.

Merriwether's staggered task force slashed through the enemy formation, blasting nose-to-nose with their adversaries. With Runacres withdrawing, all Ulaggi weapons were brought to bear. *Avenger* and her surviving consorts received painful service as they battled past the closest point of approach, their track diverging from the enemy's with agonizing slowness. *Avenger* was hit again and again. The horrible sounds of shield overload vibrated Carmichael's ship. Collapse was imminent.

"Shields going down!" the engineering officer shouted.

Alarms joined the building cacophony of Klaxons and sirens. *Avenger* was hit again. She slewed drunkenly, two of her impulse turbines out of action. With eroding confidence, Carmichael glared at his damage control boards; the ship's port quarter was devastated.

"Battery Six not answering," the weapons officer reported.

"Maintain fire on remaining batteries," Carmichael commanded. "Officer-of-the-deck, get my ship back on station. Weapons, maintain your fire!"

Her bridge team struggled heroically, but *Avenger* was hit again. Without shields, each blow was punishing. Damage-control parties in the after sections were no

longer reporting. Carmichael's command wallowed drunkenly, her impulse engines firing asymmetrically. Coupling oscillations threatened to tear the ship apart.

Carmichael stared at the battle plot; he was under attack from three Ulaggi ships. Suddenly one of his attackers was annihilated, blasted by combined fire from *New Zealand* and *Shikoku* just arriving within battle radius. *Iceland*, still out of range and dangerously overboosting, was also firing. Pressure on *Avenger* lightened as the enemy shifted their aim. Undeterred, the three *Island*-class ships waded into the battle, their distinctive discharges blending into the forest of criss-crossing energy beams.

Daring the gods, Carmichael's spirits lifted. Buccari was safe; *Novaya Zemlya* was clearing. The mothership's shield emissions were weak and ragged, but she was still maneuvering, still blazing away with all weapons. Carmichael began to hope; his ship was still alive, staggering under the protective umbrella of the late-arriving motherships. But Fate, never to be mocked, called in her markers; *Shikoku*, atomizing into a star, paid the ultimate price. The enemy's full attention returned to the stricken *Avenger*.

"Fast-movers! In close!" the tactical officer shouted.

"On targets!" Carmichael ordered. Triads of Ulaggi fast-movers appeared on his flank, rocketing through debris fields.

"Boooharry! Boooharrrry!"

Their screams saturated the frequencies, a manic blend of hate and fury. Carmichael watched with morbid satisfaction as *Avenger's* defensive systems blasted one fast-mover after the other, but there were too many. It was over. Chaotic thoughts of Cassy Quinn intruded on Carmichael's frantic prayers, but those unbidden images were banished by an irresistible flood of welcomed ones; indelible and sublime, images of Charl Buccari came to Carmichael. In his mind's eye, he could see her; he could feel her, embracing him. And all the while she was furiously screaming orders, still beautiful—a glorious angel. An avenging angel.

Such was Carmichael's last mortal thought.

Chapter Sixty-seven

Miracles

Buccari's lungs emptied, as if taking a hammer blow to the heart. A bright light flickered out, leaving a throbbing darkness in her soul. Jake Carmichael was dead. A split-second later the wrenching jolt of technical confirmation arrived; *Avenger's* transponder signal disappeared from the tactical display. Struck dumb, Buccari floated against her tethers, scanning the battle plot but not seeing.

"*Novaya Zemlya*, make your reports."

She had survived. Carmichael had not.

"Sir, admiral's calling for status," a distant voice persisted. Buccari's conditioning struggled against the flood of emotion. Staunching tears, she focused on her comm panel; Carmichael's vid-image was extinguished; the images of the surviving commanders exhibited exhaustion and fear. Runacres's determined countenance dominated, but the fleet commander's blue eyes, red-rimmed and spectacularly bloodshot, were welling.

Commodore Merriwether's vid-image was missing. Sarah Merriwether was dead, too.

"All ships, stand by for orders," the admiral commanded, his voice faltering. Merriwether and Runacres had been a team for longer than most spacers had been alive. Buccari's loss was immense, but Runacres's loss was immeasurable. Buccari squared her shoulders; if the admiral could keep going, then so could she.

Buccari studied the flashing operational panels. Her ship was a mess; so was her mind. Was she going insane? Had she actually sensed Carmichael's death? Why were thoughts of Cassy Quinn intruding so persistently? Quinn's sorrow rivaled her own. Could Quinn understand what was happening?

"Sir! Weapons status, sir!"

"Go!" she snapped, shaking off her misery.

"Sir, batteries two, three, and six on line," the ship's weapons officer reported. "Batteries one and five will return to service within the hour. Battery four is hard down. We're working on it, but it's fried, sir."

"Bring one and five up before you invest any more time on four," she barked. "Damage Control?"

Buccari had expected her damage control officer or his second; instead a young watch officer appeared on the vid.

"Sir, after shields are holding. Forward shields have been restored and are rebuilding reserves. Hull penetration at frame forty-six has been isolated. Battle doors are holding; pressurization is good. Environmental are stabilized. Keel rigidity and structural integrity is uncertain."

"Where's my DCO?" Buccari demanded, marveling that her ship was holding together. That she still had any shields at all was a miracle. She wanted to commend her damage control officer.

"Sir, both the DCO and the assistant were lost securing the hull breach. Lieutenant Commander Hanson is senior surviving officer, but she has a concussion and a broken leg."

Her crew had sacrificed dearly.

"Say the casualties," she said.

"Eighteen dead, forty injured, twenty-six missing. Remediation tanks are maxed out; we can't save anyone else without triage."

Buccari swallowed another flood of tears. Her neck burning with sudden fury, she studied the tactical plots; *Novaya Zemlya* sailed alone. Debris patterns haunted near space; *Kodiak* and *Tierra del Fuego* were reduced to streaks of haze, *Tasmania's* wreckage tumbled in large chunks. Emergency beacons twinkled throughout the carnage.

"Get the tugs out!" she barked. "We don't have much time."

"Belay that!" Runacres countermanded on the flag circuit. "Bring in all corvettes and auxiliaries. Anyone left outside will have to make it on their own. We have a battle to fight. *Novaya Zemlya* will rendezvous on *Intrepid* group at best speed."

Buccari acknowledged through clenched teeth. Runacres was right; the surviving ships had to consolidate for any chance to survive, but that did not make the decision to abandon survivors any easier. The mangled remnants of Merriwether's task force were just now clearing the engagement zone. *Iceland*, her hull penetrated and her powerplant reduced to wreckage, was last to break contact. *New Zealand*, still fighting *Ulaggi* fast-movers, was maneuvering to assist. The surviving *Avenger*-class ships, *Intrepid* and *Crusader*, had slowed to allow the *Island*-class ships to join.

Maneuvering alarms sounded; signals from flag were in the air.

"New mission vector," the officer-of-the-deck reported. "*Novaya Zemlya* is ordered to rendezvous at flank speed. Engineering is answering all bells, sir."

"Make it so," Buccari barked, her pride swelling as *Novaya Zemlya* surged to maximum power. Gee-forces pressed Buccari into her station, but an undeniable rumble announced itself through the seat of her pants.

"Damage control, what's the story?" she demanded.

"Can't say for sure, Captain," the watch officer reported. "We're getting

structural noise but no destructive harmonics...yet."

Buccari warily monitored accelerometer readouts and gee-loadings; Runacres was demanding too much of *Novaya Zemlya's* deteriorating keel, but it was easier for a single ship to maneuver; *Intrepid*, *Crusader*, and *New Zealand* were limited by *Iceland's* engineering casualty.

"We aren't going to make it," she muttered only minutes into the burn. She checked the updating trajectories. Even at flank speed, without vector adjustments from the other ships, *Novaya Zemlya* could not affect rendezvous before the enemy came back into range.

The admiral came to the same conclusion.

"I am ordering *Iceland* to proceed independently to Lunar Base, to abandon ship, if necessary," Runacres announced, stone-faced. "*Intrepid* group will immediately make best possible speed to rendezvous."

It was wrenching to leave crews in their lifeboats, but there were no other options. The nav-computer reevaluated trajectories and updated with new vectors. Rendezvous was possible, the margin razor-thin. *Intrepid* and her cohorts accelerated to their new course.

"Captain Buccari," Runacres demanded, "If it is not too much trouble, sir, your readiness reports."

"My apologies, Admiral," she replied. "NZ is bravo-charlie. Expect alpha-bravo within the hour, sir. Number four battery is inop."

"Your attention is invited to the updated battle plan. We have punished them. Now is the time to press the attack."

"Aye, sir," Buccari replied, analyzing new parameters. The alien formation, now numbering six ships still radiating power, was slipping beyond Earth's horizon; the enemy had lost four interstellars. Runacres had effectively lost seven—and his best fleet commander. Runacres had gotten his ass kicked. But he was going back for more.

Buccari's primary concern was the twelve ships rising from the planet; they were untouched by battle, their crews and weapons systems fresh. The projected intercept would coincide with their trajectory just as the six orbiting Ulaggi ships rounded the planet. Without reinforcements, Runacres's battered task group would be crushed between the enemy's hammer and anvil.

"Any chance for reinforcements, sir?" Buccari blurted. She studied the battle in high standoff. The remaining Ulaggi ships were fighting demonically, retreating while doing their best to prevent Tar Fell and Admiral Wells from disengaging; both human and konish fleets were paying for their efforts.

"I labor on the matter, Captain," Runacres replied. "Admiral Wells still has business to conduct."

"New contacts! Friendlies!" the tactical officer reported.

Buccari's attention snapped back to the tactical display. Six ships had materialized. Transponder emissions revealed them to be Asian Cooperation ships under Admiral Zhang's flag. Buccari's elation quickly faded.

"Admiral Runacres," Buccari said. "Admiral Zhang's ships are too far out. His trajectory is all wrong. He cannot possibly get to the battle zone on time."

"He has not come to engage," Runacres replied. "I have ordered Admiral Zhang to escort Scientist Dowornobb and Ambassador Kateos back to Lunar Base. Stand by."

"Yes, sir," she said, chewing her teeth. The situation was officially a can of worms. Admiral Zhang's precious force was now committed. Legion lifeboats were strewn from here to the moon. And a massive Ulaggi strike force was rising from the planet.

"Tar Fell and Admiral Wells will soon join us," Runacres said. His voice was firm,

but it sounded like a prayer.

Chapter Sixty-eight

Powerless

"Jakkuk-hajil, how soon before we regain dendritics?" Karyai screeched.

"Uncertain, mother," the cell controller gasped. Blood in her eyes made it difficult to focus. "Core organics are functioning, but synaptic circuitry is degraded, and the neural regeneration rate is low. The system must be powered down to make repairs."

"Do so!" Dar ordered. "Transfer control to Ship-mistress Sajohi's controller."

"Dendritic control is transferred," Jakkuk reported, executing the hand off. "Powering down." Dazed and wiping gore from her nose, the cell controller pushed from the superheated interface. Technicians, exhorted by hajil supervisors, descended upon the smoldering machinery. A medical technician approached. Jakkuk granted permission to be touched; the trembling male ministered to her trauma.

"Blood, but we had them in our grasp!" Karyai snarled. "Both Runacres-kar and the warrior Buccari were aboard the same ship."

Jakkuk snarled in frustration. The telepathic links received through Quinn-human's troubled mind had been impeccable. The alien's mental images had provided exquisite intelligence, a window on the enemy's emotions—and on their locations; and still, they had been unable to kill the human leader.

"Blood, but they fight," Dar muttered, fanning away an acrid haze. Recirculation fans labored to vent the bridge.

Jakkuk's throbbing head prevented her from nodding. Indeed, the humans had demonstrated a fanatical determination. Of one hundred and eight first-line interstellars that had departed Kar-Ulag, less than twenty remained. They had been ambushed in transit. They had been attacked head-on in battle line engagements, and though reckless leadership had allowed the human admiral to arrange confrontations to his advantage, one fact was obvious: humans—no matter whether male or female—were fierce fighters.

"Blood and bowels!" Karyai screeched, her fury elevating magnificently, her crippled *g'ort* dangerously near eruption. "All because y'Tant-roon needed to spread her bloody seed."

Jakkuk cringed at the lakk's unfathomable temper. The political's self-discipline was tenuous. No one was safe if a lakk, especially one of Karyai's brilliance, lost control. Another battle was approaching. Without amplification of the ship's dendritics, even Karyai would be unable to control the willful l'rd-rooms.

"Blood, but we still have them," Dar exclaimed. "Our force is greater. We will prevail. By the end of the watch cycle we will possess this solar system."

Jakkuk analyzed the battle plot. Victory remained within their grasp. The twelve l'rdish ships in low orbit, including six main battleships, were rising fast. The combined Ulaggi force would first annihilate the crippled ships and then overwhelm the main body. The Ulaggi reserve forces had fought well. The enemy main force had been punished; they would be softened.

"How now?" Karyai snarled. "What is this?"

Jakkuk felt it, too. She brushed away the medical technician and concentrated on the peculiar thought-frequency of the human mind. The alien presence was suddenly grown strong—astoundingly strong. Quinn-human was very near. The alien had somehow escaped her cell.

"Security!" Jakkuk shouted.

It was too late. The human, followed by frightened guard males, floated onto the bridge, her gaze fixed upon the interface; the alien pushed hungrily forward, fingers outstretched. A brace of hajil security officers glided together to intercept the interloper.

"Do not harm her," Karyai commanded, her *g'ort* receding. "Bring the human-mother forward."

"Why?" the alien cried. "You must sense our fear. Why are you so intent on killing us?"

"Fear is but mask to your fury, Quinn-human?" Karyai snarled.

"You are wrong," Quinn pleaded. "There can be peace between us."

"Peace!" Dar screeched. "A race governed by *kar*! You are but cattle. You are weak. The weak must die."

The human inspected her surroundings, her eyes growing wide. Her hungry gaze rested on the interface.

"What has happened?" Quinn asked. The human's unboosted presence in the ether had grown immensely stronger. Jakkuk could sense the human gripping minds with the political.

"Your powers continue to increase, Quinn-human," Karyai remarked. "You have been too long among us. You become dangerous."

"Then kill me," the human pleaded. "Kill me."

"Again you beg," the lakk replied. "But no, you still have use."

"You will never defeat us," the human screamed. "We will kill you!"

"That is more like it," Karyai growled. "Now you are acting like a superior race. Remove the alien from the bridge!"

"As ordered, mother," the senior security officer replied. "This time we will shackle her to her acceleration station."

"No," Karyai commanded. "Confine her, but make her comfortable."

"As directed, mother."

The political floated silently at her bridge station, her furious thoughts perfectly masked. In contrast, Dominant Dar fumed mightily, her anger suffusing the ether.

"Our destroyers are recovering," Jakkuk reported. "Two were lost."

"The weak must die," Karyai announced, floating from the bridge. "I will be in my cabin. Have Fist a'Yerg report to me."

Chapter Sixty-nine

Lifeboats

"We approach critical fuel," Master Coor reported.

Hudson throttled back. There had been no voices, no sound in his ears, but Cassy had guided him to this point in space as clearly as if she had been on his command circuit.

"Where did you go, Cassy? I'm here," he muttered.

The cliff dweller glanced at the human as if he were mad.

"Yeah, I'm frigging crazy," Hudson muttered, doubting his own sanity; but the sensations were too real, the commands too fierce to ignore. Cassy was out there.

"On this trajectory," Coor said, "we will reengage."

"Roger," Hudson replied, studying the tactical display. Orbital debris from earlier battles was approaching overhead; Hudson's trajectory would yo-yo through the detritus. Given his fuel state, there was not much else he could do.

"Line-of-sight on NZ," Coor reported. "Also *Intrepid*, *Crusader*, and *New Zealand*."

"Where're the others?" Hudson moaned, widening the scale. Admiral Runacres's badly wounded task group, just coming over the hill, appeared on his tactical display. *Novaya Zemlya* was struggling to join.

"Enemy also in sight," Coor reported.

The six-ship enemy formation appeared over the opposite horizon. The twelve-ship task force rising from the planet was not yet visible, but the computer projected a battle-range convergence in less than three hours.

"We need to head for NZ if we're going to get there before the battle starts," he muttered, hitting the maneuvering alarm.

"Emergency signals," Coor reported. "Directly ahead. Lifeboat beacons."

"What?" Hudson replied, tightening scale. The low-power beacons of two Legion lifeboats resolved from the clutter.

"The lead boat is hailing, sir," the communication petty officer reported. "They're from *Avenger*. Total of twelve souls. Commodore Merriwether is reported on board. She's in critical condition."

Now he knew why Cassy had brought him here.

Chapter Seventy

Futility

"Patch in another fusion generator," Buccari ordered. Her throat dry, she sucked fluids from her stim-nipple, draining the catalytics reservoir. She ejected the empty canister and slammed home a new one. She had been living in battle armor for too long. Her entire body itched.

"Aye, sir," her harried engineer replied. "We'll lose five percent shield strength."

"Damn it, do it," she commanded, desperate for acceleration. The enemy was two hours from engagement range, but *Intrepid*, *Crusader*, and *New Zealand* were still not closing fast enough. The wily enemy commander had adjusted course to intercept *Novaya Zemlya*. Buccari needed to tighten her rendezvous vector or else she would enter battle without support. Not that it much mattered; unless Admiral Wells jumped soon, their struggling formation would be evaporated by the Ulaggi ships converging on the battle zone.

Buccari's command alert flashed. Admiral Runacres's helmeted image appeared above the equally grave demeanors of the other ship captains.

"The fleet action in high standoff is approaching finale," Runacres announced. "Tar Fell will remain engaged until the enemy is no longer able to answer. Admiral Wells has signaled his intentions to jump. Coordinates are set. Operation plan is updating. Stand by for target assignments."

About frigging time! Buccari scanned the displays, praying that Second Fleet would jump close enough to provide cover.

"Any indications of enemy jump activity?" she demanded.

"Negative, sir," her tactical watch officer reported.

She exhaled; the Ulaggi could easily replicate Admiral Runacres's tactic and destroy Admiral Wells's matrix by jumping into it. But that would further separate their battle groups. The enemy needed to consolidate as desperately as did the humans.

"Second Fleet has jumped," the tactical officer reported.

Operational chatter went silent. The bridge team, Buccari included, held their collective breath as the projections solidified into actual fixes.

"Friendly contacts!"

Icons representing seven *Avenger*-class ships materialized on the battle plot. Buccari's relief was tempered; Admiral Well's had lost two battleships. The humans were still badly outnumbered on the line, eighteen to eleven. Buccari swallowed hard; something else was wrong. Admiral Wells's ships had stumbled out short; they could not cover *Novaya Zemlya*. Buccari refreshed the nav-plots and recalculated time to rendezvous; even at full emergency, her ship was not going to make coverage.

"Override core governors," she ordered. "Give me all emergency rated power."

"Aye, aye," the engineering officer responded, his haggard face ashen; his powerplant was destroying itself. *Novaya Zemlya* was nearing catastrophic failure, but she was surely dead if she could not join the others.

"The game board is not propitious, Captain," Runacres said, coming up on vid. "You are sacrificing shield power, and still we lag rendezvous."

"Yes, sir," Buccari replied, clenching her arm rests, desperately trying to create something from nothing. *Novaya Zemlya's* updated trajectory remained forward of the advancing battle line. *Intrepid*, *Crusader*, and *New Zealand* would only just make it.

"Captain!" the engineer reported. "We have critical oscillations approaching harmonic resonance. The keel could go, sir."

Buccari flushed her mind and focused on ship systems: compartment pressures, vibration alarms, stability systems—dozens of reinforcing indicators were screaming at her. When the keel buckled, the hull would implode.

"Admiral Runacres," she reported. "We're not going to make it."

"What do you recommend, Captain?" he snapped.

"Immediately abandon ship," she replied.

"Damn it to hell," Runacres growled.

"There's no choice, sir."

As if to punctuate her words, a screeching vibration lifted into the ambiance, a manic overture.

"Critical resonance, Captain!" the damage control officer broke in. "Structural failures reported below frame one fifty-six. Visible faults in the primary truss. Sub-hull is losing pressure."

"Power down reactors!" she ordered, giving up the chase.

"Aye, sir," the engineering officer responded.

"Maintain maneuvering power from the bridge," she barked. "Depressurize the ship. Open hangerbay doors. Clear the engineering spaces." Her ship was doomed. Shutting down would quell the vibrations, and depressurizing would diminish the violence of an implosion. Her crew might have time to escape.

"Captain, when you have completed your duties," Runacres said, "would you join me in my barge?"

"I'm sorry, Admiral. I used the barge to get Scientist Dowornobb and Ambassador Kateos away. May I invite you and your staff to my gig?"

"Under the circumstances, I should be delighted," Runacres replied, signing off.

Buccari returned her attention to the deteriorating situation. She had no recourse; she punched open the ship's general circuit.

"Now hear this. This is the captain." Her neck crawled as she spoke. "Bridge and tactical teams stand fast. All hands to life-boat stations for muster. Stand by to abandon ship. I say again, all hands, stand by to abandon ship."

And then the dreadful Klaxon sounded. Buccari, stomach churning, settled into her tethers to monitor the evacuation. Her crew was well trained; station musters started arriving almost immediately.

"Sir, Tar Fell is preparing to jump," the tactical officer reported. "Countdown has commenced."

Buccari acknowledged, turning her helpless attention to the battle plots. The battle in high standoff was over, if too late for *Novaya Zemlya*. Tar Fell's dreadnaughts had reduced the Ulaggi reserve to its last two surviving ships. Knowing there could be no escape for the aliens, the armada master had pulled his battle line into jump formation. The Ulaggi commanders refused to disengage, battling to disrupt Tar Fell's maneuver. As Buccari watched, both ships were destroyed for their efforts.

"Very well," Buccari replied. "Tactical watch stand down. Report to your lifeboats."

"Aye, aye, sir," the officer replied. "Sir, you should know we just made contact with *Condor Two*. Commander Hudson is requesting permission to come aboard. He has survivors from *Avenger*, including Commodore Merriwether."

Hudson! Hudson was supposed to be in low-Earth orbit. *Survivors from Avenger!* Buccari's surprise was eclipsed by her joy and then by her fear. She punched up flight ops tactical.

"*Condor*, this is *Novaya Zemlya*," Buccari broadcast. "You are to immediately clear the battle zone."

"Cannot comply, NZ," Hudson replied. "Critical fuel. I need to come aboard for a plug and to offload survivors. Commodore Merriwether needs medical treatment."

Survivors! Buccari's fear heightened. Her discipline struggled with her emotions; if Merriwether was alive, then perhaps so was Carmichael.

"Nash," she begged. "Any news about Jake?"

"He's gone, Sharl. I'm sorry."

Suffering Carmichael's death was harder the second time. Too hard; they were all going to die. Why keep fighting?

"Muster stations are reporting, Captain," the officer-of-the deck reported. "All hands are accounted for. Ready to abandon ship, sir...sir, are you okay?"

"Yes, damn it," she barked. Her crew could still be saved. Shaking away self-pity, Buccari focused on the battle plot. Just over an hour remained before weapons range.

"Contacts!" the tactical officer reported.

Tar Fell's formation of eight immense ships materialized, joining in good order on Admiral Wells's flank. The armada master's vid-image along with those of Colonel Magoon and his ship commanders joined the battle council; the kones were still incapacitated by jump transition. Sitting at each konish skipper's side was an animated cliff dweller. Master Toon's sterile voice dominated the exchanges as he controlled the movements of the konish fleet.

Buccari's pride eclipsed her sorrow, but anxiety dominated. With *Novaya Zemlya* disintegrating, the numbers were even, eighteen to eighteen. Each side had a major force positioned on exterior lines, and each side had a minor force sandwiched in between—a double nutcracker. Humans and kones held the gravity gauge, but the Ulaggi had fresh ships and crews.

"More contacts!" the tactical officer yelled.

Five more friendly icons appeared in good order on the forming battle line, squawking TGSR codes; it was Sheik Cerise and the remaining elements of the Turko-Gallic Fleet. Admiral Runacres had thrown in the kitchen sink; the numbers were finally in their favor, twenty-three to eighteen, but the gaming computers still gave the undamaged Ulaggi ships an upper hand. Buccari's frustration mounted; she could not join battle; she could not help. Her ship was toothless, its trajectory driving aimlessly into the engagement zone. *Novaya Zemlya's* hulk and her constellation of lifeboats were condemned to drift through the tempest.

An idea forged in her mind.

"Bring *Condor Two* aboard," she ordered. "Get a fueling station manned. Have Commodore Merriwether and the other survivors transferred to my gig. All unnecessary personnel to their lifeboats. Away lifeboats."

The officer-of-the-deck set about his ordered tasks. Minutes dragged into history as dozens of lifeboats, in daisy-chains of two and three, ejected from the mothership, propelled on ballistic trajectories into the void. Darting among them like shepherd dogs, the ship's OMTs nudged the lifeboats into order, extending the daisy-chains and pointing them on course for the long haul to lunar orbit, assuming they survived the impending engagement.

Only the bridge watch and a skeleton hangerbay crew remained at their stations when *Condor Two* came aboard. Buccari's gig was brought alongside; a medical team transferred the injured survivors while fueling gangs frantically attended to the corvette.

"Captain, we have imminent enemy jump activity," the tactical officer reported, startling Buccari with both the puzzling information and her continued presence.

"You were ordered to secure," Buccari snapped.

"Yes, sir," the officer reported. "I thought we would hold on until the bridge team stood down."

"Get your butt to a lifeboat—"

"Sir! Sir! Sir!" the tactical officer interrupted, her eyes like saucers. "The rising task force has jumped!"

Impossible! Buccari's focus snapped back to the main battle plot. The twelve alien ships lifting from low orbit had disappeared. Unable to rub her eyes, Buccari slammed her gloved hands against the top of her helmet.

"They must be attacking Lunar Base," the tactical officer blurted.

But there were no contacts materializing in lunar orbit. Buccari searched for a blindside attack. She refreshed sensors covering the far side of Earth. There was nothing but six Ulaggi ships arrayed against twenty-three allied combatants. A glorious realization overwhelmed her like a clear sunrise after a stormy night. They had driven the enemy from the field.

They had won the battle.

But the fight was not over. *Novaya Zemlya* was drifting in no-man's land, her crew still in danger. And the six-ship cell remained on intercept course. *Novaya Zemlya's* hulk would be the first target in contact. Buccari had no time to celebrate.

"*Condor* is fueled and ready to go," the officer-of-the-deck reported. "First Lieutenant reports all lifeboats have been jettisoned except for bridge personnel. All hands accounted for."

"Secure the bridge," she ordered. "All hands to lifeboats."

Escorted by Marines, Buccari chased the stragglers from the command decks and plunged behind them into the transit bore. Tractor lugs were no longer moving. Operational lighting flickered and died as they pulled themselves down the bore, the red glow of battle lanterns illuminating their way. All hatches were sprung; pressurization warning lights flashed as they floated across the quarterdeck and into the yawning cavern of the hangerbay.

Condor Two, navigation lights aglow, was at the center of controlled chaos. Beacons rotated with manic intensity as emergency generators and pumps were manhandled into position. The ship's gig was being fended alongside the corvette. Buccari floated through the gig's open hatch and into the forward compartment. She found Admiral Runacres leaning over Sarah Merriwether's medical chrysalis.

"Captain Buccari," Runacres said, looking up. His eyes were moist, and tear

globules floated behind his visor. "I have just been informed that the great bulk of the enemy has departed the field. That we have won."

"Thanks to you, sir," she said.

"No," Runacres replied. "It is to the heroic dead and to the cruel gods of war that we must pay our gratitude...but I trust everything is in order. I am anxious to get Merriwether to a medical facility. Will you soon depart, Captain?"

"Yes, sir, but not in the gig," she replied. "I'll be joining Commander Hudson in the corvette. There are still six Ulaggi ships in our sights. Take care of Commodore Merriwether, Admiral."

Buccari held out her hand.

"Ah, yes," Runacres replied, clasping her hand with both of his. "I should have realized you would find a way to fight. Good luck and Godspeed, Captain."

"Thank you, sir," she said, pushing back through the hatch. Grabbing a railing, she watched as the last lifeboats were propelled through the gaping doors. Earth, a sublime opal, hung suspended in the pure blackness of space as Buccari floated across the empty hangerbay.

"Sir, all boats are clear. All hands accounted for," the First Lieutenant reported.

"Away the gig," she replied

"Aye, sir. Good luck, sir," the officer said as he dove for the craft. Admiral Runacres was standing at the hatch to pull the deck officer aboard. Anti-collision lights flashing, the gig accelerated into the star-splattered void.

Buccari stood on the flightdeck, alone—except that Cassy Quinn's vague presence was returned to her, growing stronger.

"Jupiter's balls, you about ready, Cap'n?"

Winfried Fenstermacher waited at the corvette's man-hatch.

"Yeah, Boats," she replied, turning to take one last look. "I'm just about ready." She pushed across the open space and latched onto Fenstermacher's outstretched arm.

"Good thing. Wouldn't want you getting all misty-eyed over this radiated pile of crap," Fenstermacher said, pulling her aboard.

"Aw, shut up, Winnie," she growled, slapping the boatswain's helmet as hard as she could.

"I'm on board, Nash," she announced. "You're cleared to depart."

Whistling the William Tell Overture over the intercom, Fenstermacher closed the lock hatch and cycled pressure.

"Roger, backing out," Hudson replied, sounding the maneuvering alarm. Docking clamps fall away. "Cassy's talking again, Skipper. She knows we're together."

"I feel her, too, Nash," Buccari said as she pulled herself through the crew rest area. Indeed, Quinn's presence was as loud as ever but still undecipherable—more emotion than communication. Buccari felt a sharp acceleration and heard the distinctive high-pitched ratcheting of the corvette's forward maneuvering jets. Bracing herself against the building gee-load, she pushed onto the flightdeck. *Novaya Zemlya's* gaping hangerbay, rapidly growing smaller, filled the forward view screen. Master Coor chirped a greeting, but the cliff dweller's attention remained on his copilot's duties.

"Cassy's out there, Sharl!" Hudson shouted.

"Move over, Nash. I've got the corvette," she growled. "Let's go kick some bug ass."

A Last Mission

"They have jumped," Jakkuk gasped, still unable to comprehend. No sooner had the cell controller restored dendritic control to Dominant Dar's flagship then did the I'rdish ships transition to hyperlight, deserting the field—a display of inconceivable cowardice.

"Blood!" Dar screamed, her *g'ort* soaring.

"They would suffer the rest of their ignoble lives as branded cowards," Karyai said, laughing cruelly, "rather than submit to the will of a lakk."

Jakkuk swallowed hard and monitored the encompassing signals from the enemy fleet, her own *g'ort* swelling. Steeling herself, she returned to her duties, relishing the seductive power of restored connection. The neural patterns of the remaining ship-mistresses and their controllers swirled into Jakkuk's mind; though uniformly aghast at the departure of the I'rdish task force, they were all resolved to fight. Jakkuk was flooded with their collective willingness to die, no—their collective *desire* to die.

"My sisters, honor is ours," Dar snarled, transmitting to all ships. "On this day legends will be made. Die well."

"Hold," Karyai growled, smothering the dominant's broadcast. "We also depart. Dar-hajil, you will jump for Kar-Ulag."

"How say you?" Dar demanded. "The *kar* admiral is isolated in the van, and the ships next in the advance are easy game. Their line is scattered in parts. I will maneuver away from the konish battleships and destroy the humans. It shall be a great triumph."

"You must die another day, Dar-hajil. On my orders, you will forego battle."

"Blood and bowels, but I am no coward," Dar protested.

"Your honor is not questioned," the lakk continued. "On my orders, you will bear tidings. Her Majesty will be pleased."

"I will not return in defeat," Dar screamed.

"Attend to me, Dar-hajil," Karyai said, the intensity of her message drilling through Jakkuk's skull. "The empress will be immensely gratified. The human fleet is in ruin. Earth's defenses have been crushed. Roons have planted seed upon human soil."

"We have lost ninety interstellars," Dar cried.

"Daughter, do you not comprehend?" Karyai hissed. "It is the I'rdish rebellion that has been mortally wounded. The rebel y'Tant has been removed, her main battle fleet reduced to a shadow of its former size. Ah, but the empress will be so very pleased. She will likely task you to break the siege at Tir-Ulag."

"Siege...Tir-Ulag," Dar growled, at last comprehending. "And then I'rd-Ulag will be ours for the taking. The empire will be whole again."

"And then may you return to this besotted planet, perchance to die. But for that glorious day you must wait."

"Honor is mine, mother," Dar growled, her *g'ort* reluctantly diminishing. "Jakkuk-hajil, maneuver into grid. We jump for Kar-Ulag."

"But hold," Karyai commanded. "A final mission must be performed. Jakkuk-hajil, inform Fist a'Yerg she is to sortie."

The cell controller did as ordered. To her amazement, the roon acknowledged without remark.

Quinn's skull pounded. The resumption of telepathy struck like an avalanche, as

though she had walked into a stadium filled with screaming people. Struggling mightily, she forced the mental cacophony into order, sifting it, trying to understand. Ulaggi fear-lust dominated; the alien death-passion climbed to incomprehensible heights. Threaded throughout the wanton call for battle, Quinn resolved the piercing clarity of the white witch and the amplified commands of Jakkuk-hajil.

But sublimating out of the telepathic blizzard Quinn also detected human thoughts. Nash was there! He was very close! And Sharl, too. More distant was Admiral Runacres and Sarah Merriwether, her essence diminished, but alive. Nash had saved her. Quinn reached out for her husband, but her efforts were dashed aside by a greater force. The roon's abrasive thought patterns lifted above the din. Like a thunderhead tumbling over the horizon, the presence approached, eclipsing all other neural signals.

The hatch slid open.

"Come, Quee-e-n-human," a'Yerg said, floating astride the combing.

"Where?" Quinn asked, releasing her tethers and lifting free. The roon's mind was as impenetrable as steel, and yet the human sensed her own strength in the very effort expended by the roon in keeping her out.

"You are to be set free."

Set free! Quinn struggled to sense the alien's intent. The words were spoken plainly, without cruel jest. Still, she could not believe what she was hearing.

"Why?" the human asked.

"Karyai-lakk has so ordered. Come now."

"Why does she not kill me?"

"Because you have done what I have been unable to do, what all roons have been unable to do," a'Yerg replied.

"What is that?"

"Blood!" a'Yerg gasped, clutching her head. "You...have frightened her."

The roon shuddered in paroxysms of agony. Quinn felt the white witch's taint, strong but strangely muted. The lakk's thoughts reverberated in the human's mind, displacing all other thought.

"Show yourself!" Quinn cried.

Karyai drifted into the hatch opening. The lakk booted the convulsing roon aside and entered, glaring into Quinn's eyes. The human retreated, but for once the science officer's mind did not feel as if it were overflowing with acid.

"I have come to say farewell, Quinn-human," Karyai said with words, oily with condescension. The lakk glanced at a'Yerg; the roon straightened, clutching for the bulkhead.

"Why are you letting me go?" Quinn demanded.

"When you are not begging, you are asking questions. I can kill you if you prefer."

"That is no answer."

Karyai did not respond. Instead the lakk and the roon glared into each other's eyes; the roon, struggling to recover, displayed a cavalier—perhaps suicidal—defiance.

"It is as you have requested, Quinn-human," Karyai replied at last, but this time with her mind; the roon and the lakk remained locked in a contest of wills. "You are to be an emissary."

"An emissary?" Quinn asked.

"Tell your leaders what you have seen, and what you have...sensed. Tell them to keep clear of Ulaggi space. Tell them that the galaxy belongs to the Ulaggi. One day our fleets shall return. On that day you shall come back to us."

"And if I don't?"

"You shall," Karyai replied, turning her full attention to the human. "Do not

forget, Quinn-human, I know your mind. You are not *kar*. You will answer."

Quinn's mind swam with confusion. The lakk's presence was suffocating.

"A'Yerg-roon says I have frightened you."

"She pays for her insolence," the lakk replied.

"Have I frightened you?"

"If you have frightened me, it is with your species' stupidity and unbounded arrogance. Now, take her, roon."

A'Yerg thrust Quinn along the featureless passageway, leaving the white witch behind; but Quinn felt the lakk clinging to her mind, probing. They came to a compartment with more roons dressed in sleek suits—a ready room. Two pilots descended upon the human, shoving her limbs into an ill-fitting pressure suit. Quinn sensed rapid-fire telepathics, but when she tried delving into their minds she was rebuffed with a glacial of hate and fury.

A helmet redolent of cinnamon was secured on Quinn's head.

"It is time," a'Yerg grunted and pushed off down a short passageway. Quinn was towed after, a seething roon on each arm. They cycled through pressure locks and entered the hangerbay housing the rakish interceptors. There were gaps in the ranks, and many appeared cannibalized or battle-damaged. Quinn's escorts hauled her to the nearest interceptor and pulled open an underbelly hatch. The human was stuffed into the cramped hole and strapped onto a station sized to the posterior of an Ulaggi male. Her escorts withdrew; a'Yerg poked her head inside.

"Touch nothing," the roon snarled. Satisfied with Quinn's fittings, she dropped from sight.

As Quinn's eyes adjusted, the ship squatted and surged forward. Her pressure suit bunched unmercifully as she was pressed into her seat; but even pain was not enough to distract Quinn from the abrupt diminishment of telepathic activity; the background noise in her brain blinked out; her mind was suddenly empty of all thoughts but her own. No, not all—a'Yerg was still there, and Jakkuk, distinct and officious; and the white witch was there, much subdued. And, perhaps more in her heart than in her mind, Quinn could still feel Hudson. And Buccari, faint but furious; Buccari's unyielding anger burned even hotter than Hudson's yearning.

Her excruciating discomfort ended; the ship's acceleration abruptly ceased, established on course. But to where?

"What is happening?" she said.

The roon did not respond, but directly in front of her a wide-aspect display illuminated, revealing star-shot heavens. In one corner of the screen was the moon. Quinn focused on the satellite; it moved to center screen. She moved her focus to a star on the left edge of the screen, and it also moved to center, pulling with it a limb of planet Earth. As she focused on the limb, the planet moved obediently to center screen. Sliding her focus, she was able to scan the entire azimuth, without obstruction, including the filtered flare of the sun. Other than heavenly bodies, the only objects in view, discernable as black holes in the fabric of stars, were two Ulaggi interceptors, one off to each side.

"Ahyerg, what is happening?" she asked, louder this time.

"Boocharry-human comes, yes?" a'Yerg replied, her words filling Quinn's brain and then her ears.

"I...I think so," Quinn replied, but there was no mistaking Buccari's approaching fury. "What are you going to do?"

Quinn realized that she was being used as bait.

"Do not worry, Queen-human. Boocharry-human is truly come to take you home. It was my intention to lure her into engagement, but Karyai-lakk...persuaded me

otherwise.”

The roon’s malicious tone gave the human small comfort.

“At our next meeting, Queen-human,” a’Yerg snarled. “You will bring Boocharry-human with you. I, ah...*beg*, that you do. Farewell.”

The roon’s words sounded only in Quinn’s brain; her station was ejected before the transmission reached her ears. Dazed by the violence, Quinn looked up in time to see the star-occluding planforms of three Ulaggi fast-movers pulse-firing their thrusters. In the blink of an eye they were gone.

She was alone, physically and mentally; a’Yerg was gone from her mind, and Jakkuk; and blessedly, the white witch was gone as well, all replaced with pulse-throbbing silence. Nash and Sharl were no longer there. There was nothing, only dreadful, corrosive emptiness. Quinn’s mind had been for so long besieged with telepathic noise, now it teetered on the edge of narcotic withdrawal. Quinn struggled to suppress her welling panic; the stunning silence in her mind now more frightening than any chaos.

Stabilization jets on her ejection seat gently fired; the pulsing vibrations focused Quinn’s thoughts. She relaxed and stared, transfixed at the surreal vista of humanity’s home planet rolling beneath her. Her mind cleared as thoughts of survival displaced inchoate fear; she estimated her orbital altitude somewhere around middle martial, perhaps a bit lower. She wondered how much oxygen remained in her suit; no matter, she would be long dead before she fell out of orbit. She stifled her rising panic and forced herself to think.

With sudden and frustrating clarity, Quinn realized that her telepathic abilities were not inherent; they were dependent on Ulaggi technical systems and her proximity to the dendritic interface. The Ulaggi had trained her and conditioned her; and then they had given her the power to peer into the minds of other humans. She had simply been a tool of war. She had no real value; if she could be used, than so could others.

Minutes passed in silence, her thoughts circling back, recurring to fear and panic. A’Yerg said that Sharl Buccari was coming to retrieve her. How could the roon know? Quinn grew despondent, fatalistic. What was the use? She was going to die. She stared at the planet; her mind emptied of thought. A mote of light floated up behind her eyes. Confused, Quinn let it grow; it was familiar. As it grew, she reached out and embraced it. Hudson! She could sense Hudson again. The mote of light became a star in the heavens. She focused on the bright speck. It was moving. It grew larger.

It was a corvette.

Chapter Seventy-two

Battle’s End

Dead ahead, a beacon flashed.

“How do you know it’s not a trap?” Buccari demanded.

“She’s calling, Sharl!”

“I don’t hear her,” Buccari snapped, wondering what the hell was going on. Hudson swore that Cassy Quinn had steered him to Merriwether’s lifeboat, and that now she was steering him again. But it wasn’t just Hudson that was going crazy; she had felt Quinn’s presence, too, and so had Admiral Runacres. And she had felt Jake Carmichael; so real she could almost touch him—oh, God, she had felt him die! Was it hysteria? No, something was happening. Quinn’s compelling presence had been with Buccari ever since she had arrived in Sol-Sys; but it had grown muted, even dreamier than before, in fact less like a dream and more like the memory of a dream. And now it

was gone.

Buccari glanced without hope at the tactical display. Et Lorlyn's interceptors and Wanda Green's corvettes would never join in time. Buccari had wanted to rendezvous, but Hudson had violently insisted on taking a course directly toward the enemy. Doubting her own sanity, Buccari had set an intercept vector—a single corvette facing down six Ulaggi warships.

"Enemy fast-movers are reversing course," Master Coor reported.

Buccari blinked up the scale. The destroyer triad had looped back ahead of the oncoming interstellars and was coming straight for her position.

"Boocharry!"

The eldritch yodeling came over the tactical frequency.

"Bo-o-o-charry!"

Buccari's scalp crawled, but her muscles warmed with anticipation. She was ready.

"Ahyerg," Buccari broadcast. "Buccari here."

"Ye-e-sss!" the alien responded. "We meet again."

"This time you will die."

"Ye-e-sss!" the Ulaggi hissed. "But I do not fight...not this time."

"Then what do you want, Ahyerg?"

"There is not time enough to speak of my desires, Boocharry-human. I am here to satisfy your desires."

"Then my desire..." Buccari grunted as she shoved the throttle to the stops. The corvette lunged forward at full military acceleration. "...is to kill you."

"Ah, Boocharry-human. A wish I can never grant."

The alien destroyers arced across the shrinking no-man's land. Buccari analyzed trajectories; if the bugs held course she could make an intercept before the heavies came into range.

"T-throttle back, Sharl!" Hudson cried, grunting against the gee-load. "Check...the beacon. She's there. You gotta...slow down."

"I don't feel her, Nash," she snarled, certain it was a trap. Her corvette would be on the beacon in mere seconds.

"I do, damn it!"

"The enemy destroyers are dropping back," Coor reported.

Buccari squeezed the throttle and checked trajectories. There was no way she could engage without being annihilated by the battleships.

"Sharl!" Hudson cried.

"Son of a bitch!" she shouted into the ether. Her hate blossoming to fill the universe, Buccari yanked the throttle to cut-off, killing acceleration, but not her vector. She wanted to murder the enemy pilot. She wanted to crush the entire Ulaggi race to a bloody pulp. She so dearly wanted revenge.

"Please, Sharl!"

Hate exceeded only by frustration, Buccari slammed in a thrust-couple to swing the corvette nose to tail. Aligned with her vector, she fired mains in full retro, applying four gees, then six—then eight.

"Sensors reveal a life form, but no active emissions or weapons," Coor reported. "It is estimated to be an operating emergency module with a single living being."

Buccari pulled power. Her momentum relative to the beacon glided to a halt. She switched to maneuvering thrusters and brought the corvette to within two hundred meters. Close-up imaging revealed only a wide-shouldered suit; its silvered sun-visor prevented identification, but the stranded being was waving.

"It's Cassy!" Hudson cried.

The only emotion that Buccari could sense was Hudson's frantic yearning.

"Shields down," Buccari said. "Go get her, Nash."

"Aye, aye," Hudson shouted. He untethered and vacated the flightdeck in a blur.

"But you got to hustle," she snarled. "The Ulaggi ships will be on us in five minutes. Hell, we're already in range."

Buccari was morbidly uncomfortable; they were a nonmaneuvering target, and she had to bring *Condor's* shields down for recovery. Not that corvette defenses would do much to deflect a main battery.

"*Novaya Zemlya's* hulk is approaching enemy contact radius," Coor reported as he moved into the copilot's station. "*Intrepid* group and Second Fleet are two minutes behind."

Buccari checked tactical. The derelict was hurtling for the battle zone and the combined human/konish fleet was right behind. Within minutes *Condor* was going to be in the middle of a line-of-battle engagement. They had to get out of there, and fast.

Diodes flashed indicating pressurization changes; external hatches were opening. Buccari watched over remote vids as Petty Officer Nakijima came out of the forward personnel lock, maneuvering jets sparkling. Hudson was right on her heels. Buccari used lateral verniers to edge the corvette closer, following Hudson and Nakijima as they approached their objective. The marooned creature grappled with seat fittings. Suddenly it was free and twisting slowly in the void; it reached out.

"It's her, Sharl," Hudson cried, grasping the extended hand. "God, I know it's her." The space-suited being clutched Hudson like a drowning person. Any doubt was fast dissipating.

"Okay, Nash," Buccari replied. "Now get your asses back on board."

"We're coming, Skipper. We're coming."

The recovery party regained the lock. Buccari pulsed a gentle vector for the *Intrepid* group. As soon as pressurization integrity was regained, she restored screens and eased in acceleration, holding back until loose crew were tethered down. All the while she warily watched the enemy coming up behind her.

"*Novaya Zemlya* is in range," Coor reported.

Battle was about to resume.

"I want everyone tethered in," Buccari announced, checking the vid-images from the crew rest area; Hudson and Nakajima were struggling with the alien pressure suit. Hudson figured it out and lifted the helmet; Cassy Quinn, her hair—dark with sweat—hung lank across her temples, more silver than blonde. Her nose had been broken. Bright blue eyes, bruised and drawn, stared with febrile intensity from a sallow skull; she had lost so much weight as to be nearly unrecognizable.

"Tether in, damn it!" Buccari shouted.

"They let her go," Hudson gasped, strapping in next to his wife. "They gave her back. Maybe they want peace."

The words were no sooner out of Hudson's mouth than did the main batteries of the Ulaggi battle front let go in frightful harmony; the plasma front made the corvette's shields and electrical systems squeal. Buccari scanned the heavens. Clearly visible against the utter blackness of space, an object at the focus of the alien energy beams exploded in a jagged star of blue and white.

Novaya Zemlya was no more.

"Damn their frigging souls!" Buccari cried, praying the ship's lifeboats had opened enough distance to escape the blast. She hit the maneuvering alarm and slammed in full power. "Range on the fast-movers?"

"One eight thousand," Coor replied. "But they are returned to their grid."

"We have a battle to fight," she snarled. She twisted the corvette's nose onto an intercept course and armed her cannon. The Ulaggi main force was coming straight for them. Threat alarms sounded continuously. They were well within range. They should have been dead.

"Pickle decoys!" she ordered. "Get some kinetics on target! Cleared to fire."

"Decoys, aye," Coor replied. "Target designated. Firing."

The corvette's energy weapon discharged, but its beam met no resistance. Buccari checked tactical, running the scale out; no targets were displayed. Threat alarms stuttered to silence.

"They jumped," Coor said.

Buccari stared out the corvette's viewscreen. The battle was over.

"We have defeated them," the cliff dweller said.

Buccari pulled power and brought her focus back to the tactical display. The enemy was gone.

"Securing cannon," Coor reported.

Stunned, Buccari stared into the immensity of space.

"Skipper," the corvette's communications petty officer reported. "Admiral Runacres has ordered all corvettes into grid. He directs you to immediately report aboard *Intrepid*. He sends job well done."

"Roger," Buccari replied. The battle was over. They had won. The enemy was gone. On the crew vid, Hudson and Quinn were both clear of their suits and engaged in reunion. Buccari was happy for her friends. She was especially happy for Admiral Runacres and Commodore Merriwether.

But her heart went suddenly leaden.

"Master Coor, take the ship."

"I have the corvette," the cliff dweller replied.

Buccari put her hands in her lap and stared out at the stars. Only then did she allow the tears to come.

Chapter Seventy-three

Dawn

Silhouetted against a bloody dawn, oily columns tumbled skyward from pyres of angry orange. The morning reeked damply of death and burning flesh. In the distance a bulldozer pushed dirt over a ditch filled with ashes. Her work party waited for the heavy equipment to dig another mass grave. But it was not enough to cover the bodies with dirt; soil would not kill the maggots. First they had to burn away the corruption.

A sodden scarf covered Pake's face against the stench. It did little good. Gagging, she and a workmate dragged another maggot-infested corpse by its ankles into the nearly full ditch. A wizened old man poured kerosene on the layered corpses. There were no young men collecting bodies; those still alive had been pressed into hunting parties.

Pake was exhausted. Existence no longer invoked sheer horror, just drudgery. They worked at night and slept during the day; it was safer during the day, even if the stench worsened with the heat.

Government patrols had returned, bringing officials to organize the clean-up. The bureaucrats exhorted the survivors; the Ulaggi ships were gone, but peril remained—something the survivors knew too well. There was yodeling in the night,

and human screams; and in the mornings they would discover eviscerated bodies.

The officials showed them civil defense videos. Cities had been destroyed. Hundreds of millions were dead. But so much was still unknown; there were immense regions into which no human could travel and from which no information was available. One fact was certain: the Ulaggi spawn were maturing. Packs were spreading, and the swarms were already being stalked by young huntresses. Soon they would be old enough to reproduce, and the breeding cycle would accelerate. Exterminating the spawn and eradicating the maggot-infested bodies had become humanity's only priority.

But there were so many. Pake wondered what was going to happen. Her back ached. Every joint in her body protested. And she was hungry. Always hungry.

Ba-boom!

The double sonic boom jerked Pake's attention skyward. She had heard such before, in the sky above Pitcairn Two. Heart pounding, Pake dropped the ankle she was dragging and reached into her blouse.

"What is it?" her workmate asked, irritated at being abandoned with the full weight of the corpse.

Pake, barely able to breathe, pulled out the metallic card attached to a lanyard around her neck. On its smooth surface a red diode was blinking. Fingers trembling, she entered a code. The red blinking stopped; an adjacent green diode illuminated. Pake held the transponder to her breast and stared into the obscured sky.

"They are coming," she whispered.

Muttering, her workmate picked up the dropped leg and lugged the corpse away, leaving Pake to search the skies.

The winged creatures were first to find her. Bottlenose, his Pitcairn injuries healed, and Notch were suddenly at her side, chirping happily. She grabbed the ugly animals and pulled them to her. The hunters squawked with delight and engulfed her with their silky membranes.

"She's over here somewhere," a familiar booming voice shouted. Chastain appeared in silhouette, broad-shouldered against the sunrise.

"Joko!" Pake screamed. She pulled clear of the hunters and started running. The big man turned in her direction. They met as the first light of day poured over the horizon. The Marine lifted her high in the air. Tears poured from her eyes.

"Where is Li-Li?" Chastain asked, looking around.

"She is dead," she replied, lifting her chin. She would be strong. "My daughters are dead."

"No, no," Chastain said. "We found Little One and her son."

Pake looked up, wide-eyed in disbelief.

"They're alive, Pake. They've aboard the heavy-lifter. So far we've recovered twenty-nine Pitcairn refugees. You make thirty."

"Joko, take me to them. Take me away from here."

"Pake, it might be safer...here on Earth," Chastain said. "We don't know what's happening upstairs. There's been a battle."

"There is nothing here but death," she replied, her grip tightening desperately on Chastain's arm. She would never again let him go. "Joko, take me to Genellan. Take me home."

Genellan—One Year Later

Cassy Quinn, wrapped in the silky down of winter nightmare pelts, came reluctantly awake. Summer and autumn had come and gone to MacArthur's Valley, and now winter had arrived. Even the passage of time was glorious on Genellan. A wan luminescence struggled in over the shutters of the attic window; she could make out the loft's heavy wooden beams meeting overhead. Outside it was far below freezing, yet Quinn was warm, deliciously warm. Nash Hudson, his respiration gentle with slumber, faced away from her, his wide shoulders creating a snowy mountain of fur in the pre-dawn darkness. She rolled over and shut her eyes, enjoying the quiescence of her mind. So still, she could feel her own pulse. It was exquisite to have her mind to herself.

But then, as if in one of her dreams, Quinn's mind filled with unbidden images; Sharl Buccari's presence was suddenly strong, frighteningly so. Cassy Quinn shook her head, clearing her thoughts. Poor Sharl. Cassy Quinn inhaled deeply, feeling doubly thankful; she was with her family, and at the moment she had sole possession of her being, and that was all she had to worry about. Her mind and her body were liberated. Giggling with joy, she slid close to Hudson and pressed against him, running a hand over his ribs.

"Wha—?" Hudson muttered.

"Time to get up," she replied, crawling across his body.

"Read my mind," her husband mumbled, reaching for her.

"We've got too much to do," she said, slapping his hands. "You're meeting with the elders today."

"Winter's here," he mumbled. "S'time to sleep..."

Quinn yanked the furs from his body. It was cold, but she didn't care. She had regained lost weight, and more; and six months of exploring Genellan's unforgiving terrain had hardened muscles and toughened flesh. She had become a planetary geologist again.

An airplane flying up the valley crept into her awareness, unusual this early. Judging from the engine sounds, the plane landed on the lake just below the cove. Again, sensations of Sharl Buccari nagged at Quinn, but she doggedly pushed them aside. Flipping on lights, she pulled a thermal robe over her goosefleshed body and scrambled down the rough-hewn stairs to the worn floor. Hudson followed, grumbling like a bear.

"Up and at 'em, sweetie," Quinn purred, nudging a fur-covered lump. Her disheveled daughter sat up and smiled hugely as Hudson tumbled into her bed, pushing her aside and stealing the covers.

"It's your turn to cook," Quinn admonished as she stirred the fireplace ashes. Checking the draught, she added kindling and then threw logs onto a crackling flame. The settlement cabins had long ago been upgraded with electric heat and running water, but she still preferred the radiated heat and aromas of natural fire.

"Okay, Em, let's show mom how to make pancakes," Hudson bellowed, throwing his giggling daughter over his shoulder and disappearing into the kitchen. Quinn headed for the shower.

A knocking came at the door.

"Who could that be?" Hudson said.

Quinn knew. Her chest tightening, she opened the door. Frigid air poured into

the cabin. Sharl Buccari stood in the mud-room. Reggie St. Pierre, swarthy and tall, stood behind her.

"Oh, my!" Quinn gasped, her voice failing.

Buccari pulled back her hood, revealing a perfectly bald head; her cheeks were livid pink, contrasting against the radiant paleness of her spacer complexion.

"Auntie Sharl!" Emerald squealed and burst through the door.

"I saw your smoke," Buccari said, hugging the child. "Can we come in?"

"Of course," Quinn replied, standing back, feeling dizzy. "Why didn't you tell us you were here? We would have met you when you came down. Everyone would have been there to meet you."

"Tired of crowds," Buccari replied. "This is better."

"Hey, boss!" Hudson bellowed, giving her a hug and shaking St. Pierre's hand. "How did you escape? What's it like back there? Are you going back? Say you're not going back."

"Still hell on Earth," she replied. "Admiral Runacres relieved me...temporarily. He came out of regen feisty as hell—he looks great. I left him and Sam Ito with the duty. They deserve each other. But no, I have to go back. The ground game is just beginning."

"Runacres promoted her to vice-admiral and put her in charge of the planet," St. Pierre said.

"Geezus," Hudson blurted.

"I'm sorry, Sharl," Quinn said.

"We're making progress," Buccari said, lifting her chin. "But we still have a long way to go."

"How long will you be home?" Quinn asked, staring into Buccari's eyes. There was pain and frustration there.

"Three months," Buccari replied, her eyes suddenly sparkling. "And then I'm taking Charlie back to Sol-Sys. I want him with me, and besides it's time for him to start academy prep. He'll be old enough for midshipman training next year, if he can pass the entrance exams."

"Shoot, Sharl," Hudson laughed, "you're queen of the planet. No one's going to keep you from getting what you want."

Buccari scowled. Hudson recoiled in genuine fear.

"But we get you for three months!" Quinn exclaimed, breaking the tension.

"Three months of heaven," Buccari replied, grinning. But the grin morphed into a grimace.

"What, Sharl?" Hudson asked. "What's wrong?"

"I have to ask Cass a favor. It's important."

"Anything, Sharl," Quinn replied. "You know that."

"Be careful, Cass," Hudson muttered.

"I need you to take over Genellan again—"

"Crap! I knew it," Hudson growled.

"But, Reggie's doing a great—" Quinn started to protest.

"Reggie's coming back to Earth," she said, looking up at St. Pierre. "I can't do it alone."

Quinn and Hudson exchanged glances.

"It was getting too easy, just having a few thousand colonists yelling at me," St. Pierre said, breaking the awkward silence. "I've always wanted billions of people hating me."

"Sure, Sharl," Quinn replied, looking deeply into Buccari's eyes. She sensed her torment. "Whatever you need me to do."

"Thanks, Cassy," Buccari said, pulling her hood up. "We'll talk later. I want to look around before anyone knows I'm here. In a couple of weeks we'll go down to NEd and start the serious work. Right now, I just want to spend time with my son."

"We'll be ready, Sharl," Quinn said, pulling on a coat. She stepped into her boots and followed the couple through the mud-room. Hudson and Emerald did the same. Motion-sensing lights in the snow-tunnel illuminated, but Buccari and St. Pierre climbed up icy steps cut into the packed snow. Quinn followed, climbing above the drifts. There was no wind. The sun was not yet above the Great River valley, but the sky was hard blue, and the Corlian Alps above them were bathed in full morning light. Only cabin roofs and smoking chimneys protruded from the snow. In the distance the snow pack had reduced the high-peaked lodge and barracks to single-level structures, and the remnants of the old palisade were nothing more than a ponderous picket fence. Beyond the palisade, the hardwoods were bare, and the evergreens were dwarfed. The only movement was a herd of elk marching single-file across the lake.

"Welcome home, Sharl," Quinn said.

"It's good to be back," Buccari said as she clipped on snowshoes. She stood and stared around at humanity's first permanent settlement. "It's damn good."

Buccari waved and, with St. Pierre at her side, plodded across the common, their tracks and their smoking breaths merging into one as they marched into the distance. In the iron-hard air Quinn heard Buccari laugh. The pureness of her laughter gave Quinn joy. But Quinn realized that her own peace of mind must come to an end; she was taking charge of Genellan again. Someday—any day—the Ulaggi would return. She pulled her husband and her daughter to her, desperately. Someday they would have to fight for their lives; but for now, they were all home; they were all together.

For now, life would go on.

The End

Author Biography

Scott G. Gier was born in Aiea, Hawaii in 1948. He received his undergraduate degree from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis and his MBA from Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California. He served in the United States Navy for six years and then worked for various Silicon Valley companies while living in the San Francisco Bay Area for almost thirty years. Married for thirty-seven years and a proud grandfather, his interests include backpacking (aircraft wreck-chasing), kayak-fishing, surfing, bird watching, and ocean-staring. He says of himself, "Still haven't grown up (just old)."