

Exordium

RULER OF NAUGHT



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Ruler of Naught

Exordium: Book 2

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Book View Café

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PROLOGUE

The gnostors of Hypostatics will tell you that space-time is isotropic, that there is no center: all locations are equally central and equally peripheral.

Perhaps.

But every haji knows different. Those who survive that pilgrimage know there is a place different from all other places, a Center to the sentient universe.

Its name is Desrien.

From orbit, Desrien at first appears no different from any other planet cherished by humankind: a blue-white sphere marbled by cloud-whirls, a sight resonant with memories of the Exile and our lost Mother. But there are no Hightdwellings. Aside from the Node, here uninhabited, the only stars in the night sky of Desrien are those placed there by the unimaginable Hand of Telos. The planet lies open to space, unprotected by the webs of forces and vessels so familiar to interstellar travelers.

It does not need them. Those who are uninvited do not land, or if they do, they do not leave again. Unmappable, unnavigable, alone among all worlds Desrien stands exempt from the Jaspran Unalterable of Free Passage. For there is found an interface between the transcendent and the mundane that flouts the metrics of our sciences and defies the power of our machines, where Totality is unknowable except through human senses and perceptions.

Desrien is the heart of an immense engine, powered by the sleeting archetypal energies of the Nous, the emanations of the trillion-fold mentalities in the Thousand Suns that are focused

there by the mystical lens of the Mandala. There, stretched tight by the weight of dreams, the skin of the world is eminently fragile. The featherweight blow of a single thought can open a wound through which myths both fearful and beloved erupt into the waking world, so that the pilgrim enters fully conscious into the Dreamtime of humanity and walks among archetypes awakened into the light of day.

Every visitor to Desrien who truly surrenders to its mysteries thus confronts en fleshed the myths by which they live – which may not be the ones they thought they knew.

The title Haji, then, is an honored one; but those who bear it rarely speak of what they saw and lived on Desrien. It is enough that their lives are wholly changed.

*Gn. Ali byn-Ibrahim Japhez
College of Archetype and Ritual
Desrien, The Hinge of Time
Sync Achilenga, 615 a.a.*

In the place of the Omnipotence there is neither before nor after; there is only act.

*Charles Williams
Descent into Hell
Lost Earth, ca. 300 b.e.*

There was nothing, in no time, neither perception nor non-perception. Neither movement nor non-movement, neither identity nor difference, neither eternity nor boundedness.

There was a blow, impalpable, disturbing nothing. Nothing dwindled and resolved, rising through depths of abnegation to the awareness of a flame, suspended in a darkness evocative of incense and the faint tang of fresh fruit. Beyond the flame a golden blur, sharpening to a vast face of inhuman calm indwelling with transhuman compassion, its lips curved in a smile terrible with possibilities, knowing everything, rejecting nothing.

The bodhisattva Eloatri gazed up the Buddha. The faint scent of green tea from the kitchen beyond the dharma room tickled her nose. She let the sensation go, not thinking about it, merely experiencing it.

There was no sound. Above, the narrow windows against the roof admitted the pale light of false dawn,

barely illuminating the riotous profusion of images that framed the gilded statue of the Awakened One. The vihara was asleep around her; alone among the sleeping monks and nuns their abbot meditated.

Had been meditating. There was no one in the room; no reason for whatever had breached her repose in the higher dhyanas. Eloatri closed her eyes.

There was nothing, in no time, neither perception nor non-perception...

There was a blow, impalpable, and nothing fled before a flare of light resolving into the nine-headed form of Vajrabhairava, the terrifying aspect of the bodhisattva Manjushri, who is the strength of the spirit of the Buddha. Locked in sexual union with his consort, trampling beasts and men underfoot, his thirty-four arms juggling the flaming sword of knowledge, his eighteen-fold gaze sought her out, pinned her against the darkness. With a terrible smile he sought her, the sword transforming to a silver sphere which he hurled at her head and Eloatri shouted and opened her eyes to the calm of the dharma room.

The echo of her shout died away, replaced by the soft slap of bare feet in the corridor behind her. She ignored the presence behind her, breathing for a time until her heart slowed, gazing into the compassionate eyes of the

Buddha. Meaning would come when it would come. Rising to her feet in a fluid motion that belied her eighty years, she clapped her hands before her and bowed deeply to the Buddha. It was time.

She met the calm eyes of the monk Nukuafoa, then his eyes widened as she removed the blue cord knotted around her waist, and put it into his hands.

“The Hand of Telos is upon me,” she said. “And my third *hejir* is before me. You are chosen.”

He bowed. She felt the pressure of responsibility settling around him, she felt his question as she walked to her cell, where she collected her staff and cloak, begging bowl and sandals.

Then she left the vihara that had been her refuge for twenty-one years, driven out upon the third pilgrimage of her life, devotee and victim of that Unconditioned which humankind calls Telos, on a planet called Desrien.

PART ONE

ONE

ARTHELION

The lock of the shuttle hissed open on a spacious garden, severe in aspect.

Anaris rahal'Jerodi recognized it as the formal rooftop landing area of the Palace Major. Tall spindles of foliage formed narrow windows on distances soft in the morning sun.

Anaris strode down the shuttle ramp, the familiar scents catching at his throat. The complex of emotions evoked an Uni word he'd had no occasion to use since he'd returned to Dol'jhar: *Home*. Recognition overlaid amusement on his speculations about the purpose of his father's sudden summons. When he'd last stood here, he'd been on his way back to a Dol'jhar that existed only in his mind, distorted by time and youthful memory.

Home. Dol'jharian had no equivalent: the closest was probably *jhar*, fortress. *Walls, dead ends, eyes.*

Here, on the highest point in the Mandala, all was air and light, softly drowning the black garb and rigid postures of the Tarkan honor guard drawn up facing the

shuttle. Harsh ozone from the shuttle overlaid more subtle, resinous scents. Anaris inhaled deeply, reveling in a sense of expansiveness, and turned towards the lift adit for the Ivory quadrant, where the Palace Minor lay. Why had the pilot landed the shuttle sideways?

A double-thunderclap pulled his attention upwards, then another. His skin prickled. High above, jagged contrails scarred the sky. He'd felt the *Fist of Dol'jhar's* ruptors fire, just once, yesterday. *Then the comm filters came down, hard.* No one had told him who, or what, they'd fired at.

There had been no response from the Dol'jharian interdiction system hastily installed when Mandalic protocols took down all planetary defenses, so whatever was going on, it was some distance from the Palace.

Anaris shot a glance at his new secretary at the foot of the ramp behind him. Morrighon flinched, his gaze turned downward toward his useless compad. Anaris had only been able to discover that Juvaszt, *kyovernat* of the *Fist of Dol'jhar*, had been ordered down shortly afterwards.

And now my father summons me. This must be the next step in the succession duel. Watching for any hint of why it was happening at this moment, Anaris took a step toward the Ivory lift.

"Your pardon, Lord. The Avatar awaits you this way,"

said Morrighon, as he gestured towards the Phoenix adit directly across from the shuttle's lock. The secretary's voice had a resonance reminiscent of the mindripper, an insinuating whine that turned everything he said into a complaint against the universe at large.

He has reason to complain. The Bori was short, dumpy, with an asymmetric, pockmarked face and a widely divergent gaze. Anaris wondered how Morrighon had escaped culling.

His ugliness alone had made Morrighon Anaris's first choice to replace the secretary purged by Eusabian when Lelanor's presence on the *Fist* was discovered. Anaris still had not found out who had reported his secreted lover, forcing him to kill her in front of his father to spare her death by torture.

He doubted it had been Morrighon. All the records he'd found about this Bori indicated a love of rigid routine and a lack of imagination, surprising to find in the Catennach, the Bori elite. Anaris wanted just that if he had to have a secretary. This Morrighon had seemed to be the ideal buffer, busying himself endlessly over minutiae. His inevitable reports to Barrodagh could be easily shaped.

Best of all, Morrighon's cullish appearance, grating voice, and low ranking in the Catennach hierarchy would have made his assignment an insult had Barrodagh offered

it, so Anaris's choice overthrew all calculations. Including, perhaps, his father's.

This meeting will be interesting, at the very least. His father had the advantage of established power. Anaris had the advantage of being the sole surviving heir — he was not expendable. And he had grown to manhood here in the Mandala, from where his father now ruled the Thousand Suns. *I was a hostage then. I will not be a hostage now.*

Amusement flared again as they approached the Phoenix lift adit along an avenue of pleached trees ablaze with sweet-scented blossoms in every shade of red and orange. Anaris knew where the lift would deposit them. *My father's touch, part of purging the Panarchist poison.*

As expected, the lift debouched them at the inner end of the antechamber to the Phoenix Hall, a long corridor lined with the busts of former Panarchs and Kyriarchs, set in alcoves. When they passed the bust of the Faceless One, Anaris wondered what the Avatar had made of that symbol of refined Panarchist revenge.

Anaris lengthened his stride, impatient with the roundabout route his father had prescribed. He could hear Morrighon's breath rasping in his throat in counterpoint to the echoing clatter of boots on marble as the Bori struggled to match his pace. Morrighon's lumpy body looked ridiculous in an ill-fitting tunic, the gray of service

personnel. More ridiculous were the three communicators clipped to his waistband, plus the compad clutched fiercely under Morrighon's left arm.

As they left the antechamber, a shadow flickered across their path and melted into the opposite wall. The leading Tarkan grunted and jerked his weapon up.

"*Ni-Dolchu karra bi-stest j'cha!*" exclaimed another of their escorts — *Dol-forsaken lurking demon-spawn* — in tones that combined superstitious fear and long-suffering acceptance of a condition that couldn't be helped.

Controlling his own spike of reaction, Anaris continued on his way, forcing the Tarkans to scramble to keep ahead of him. He'd recognized that flicker. Old resentment sent blood surging to his head, but puzzlement was equally strong: what had reactivated that old trick of Brandon's?

But the Arkad was dead. Anger faded. *The best his shade can contrive is a computer-generated haunting.* Anaris laughed sardonically, which caught the Tarkans by surprise.

They slowed, unable to avoid glancing at him in fearful respect. Acting on impulse, Anaris bared his teeth and rapped his hand on the wall from which the haunt had emerged. "*Ka-nimichh duuni ni-pelanj marhh,*" he said. *The shade of my enemy holds no power over me.*

One of the Tarkans blanched before both resumed the forward march. The rank-inflection Anaris had used for the word “enemy” made it obvious to whom he referred. Coining so soon after their passage through the Phoenix Antechamber, the effect was all he could have wished.

He was aware of Morrighon’s observant gaze, but when Anaris turned his attention that way, the secretary properly looked down. He was apparently unaffected by the haunting. *Does he see what I’m doing?* The real question was what he might report, and to whom. The Bori’s ugly face gave no hint of his thoughts. Anaris began to suspect that more than simple routine-keeping was going on in that head.

After crossing another garden to enter the Palace Minor, their escort halted before a set of tall, carved doors guarded by another pair of Tarkans. The guards grasped the door handles and the doors swung open, releasing a waft of cool air against Anaris’s face. Inside, the marble flooring gave way to a soft, high-napped carpet in burgundy and subtle greens, with dark wood paneling below a high, white ceiling. Anaris recognized the room as one that the Panarch had often used to receive minor officials, or to speak *in petto* with those he did not wish to expose to the glaring publicity of court. Near the windows, against a rich backdrop of drapery whose heavy folds

admitted only a sliver of bright daylight against the mellow light within, a tall chair framed the straight-backed figure of Anaris's father, the Avatar.

His eyes alone acknowledged Anaris. There was a hint of thunder in his brow and the set of his broad shoulders.

Near him, in smaller chairs set before a small table, sat others. First was the Avatar's secretary Barrodagh, whom Anaris had not seen for a very long time: their communications had been through labyrinthine channels. The Bori's short, slight figure seemed thinner than ever, his pale skin stretched over his bones as if tension had been his only companion for far too long. Barrodagh glanced up at him, his dark eyes betraying no recognition, though he nodded respectfully.

Anaris turned his attention to the others gathered there: Almanor, a Catennach woman second only to Barrodagh; Kyvernat Juvaszt, and two other men Anaris at first didn't recognize. Then, as he approached his father, he realized that the small man was Lysanter, the Urian specialist. The other was a tall, fat young man with a florid complexion and the demeanor of a technician. Anaris guessed this was Ferrasin, a Panarchist computer tech who was now showing up in Anaris's reports with much greater frequency since Morrighon became his secretary.

Anaris stopped before his father and bowed. Eusabian

acknowledged by indicating a seat, which Anaris took, opposite his father. Morrighon sat next to him.

There was silence for a time. Juvaszt sat as if carved from stone. Barrodagh's eyes ferreted back and forth between Anaris and the Avatar, and Anaris knew without looking that his secretary's were doing the same. He stifled a spurt of amusement, remembering Morrighon's wall-eyed stare. *No one can tell where he's looking – definitely a survival trait on Dol'jhar.*

The Avatar spoke to Anaris. "I will open my mind to you regarding my paliach."

Anaris hid his reaction as the ritual formula confirmed his guess; another step in the struggle for succession. Another layer of secrecy stripped away. Now he would see much that Barrodagh had not been allowed, or had not wished, to share with him.

His father gestured, and Barrodagh stood. He faced Anaris but, as was proper, did not look directly at him as he spoke.

"All major centers of Panarchist resistance have now fallen." Barrodagh's voice was slightly hoarse. "We are on-schedule for establishing control of the anachronic hubs. Our forces have begun the next phase of occupation, dealing with secondary centers, while administrators have been dispatched from Dol'jhar to the octant capitals. Drafts

of labor and materiel will soon begin to flow as we regain control of the Acheront sector.”

As Barrodagh continued with supporting details, Anaris saw that Morrighon had several other windows open on the data now flooding in. He seemed to be paying little attention to Barrodagh, but then, the Avatar’s secretary was merely rehearsing what Anaris already knew. Anaris’s fingers itched for his own compad, but no Dol’jharian lord could be seen in public dependent on a mere device. *Even though they’re generally more trustworthy than a Catennach.*

Anaris studied Barrodagh’s haggard face. The Avatar’s lieutenant had not interfered with Anaris’s other channels of information. He was playing a careful game.

Even so, what hidden struggles have I missed?

“Operating through the Syndics of Rifthaven, we have encouraged raids elsewhere in the Thousand Suns by non-allied Rifiers to confuse the strategic picture, with excellent results.” Again, more familiar details followed.

In the normal course of affairs a succession duel would take years. *But we are no longer on Dol’jhar.* Eusabian no longer had the luxury of time, just as the Panarch had said, in the fey convulsions induced by a shock collar. *Whether my father realizes it or not, the Panarchy is far more dangerous and subtle than Jhar D’ocha. There is much room for*

error.

And Barrodagh knows that applies to me as well as to my father.

The thought gave him a frisson of challenge.

“As a result, resistance has been sporadic and ineffective, and is dwindling rapidly. Our force’s ability to keep ahead of the news of the attack combined with the power of their weapons guarantees that nothing can stand between us and complete control of the Thousand Suns,” Barrodagh finished.

He had elided immense complexity, but it would not do to underestimate the Avatar’s secretary. Eusabian’s fierce will had driven the war, but Barrodagh’s planning had carried it off.

Eusabian remained still.

“Nothing except Ares, and the Fleet,” Juvaszt finally said in a flat voice, with a glance at the Avatar.

“They cannot stand against the power of the Suneater, even without the Heart of Kronos,” Barrodagh stated.

Heart of Kronos? Anaris had learned about the Suneater when he was briefed about the imminent attack on the Panarchy, but he had been given few details. He cut a questioning glance at Morrighon, whose compad’s display flipped to accommodate him.

KEY TO FULL SUNEATER POWER. THOUGHT

LOST BY TREACHERY.

Perhaps my new Bori is going to be of more use than I assumed. Anaris sensed attention, and discovered Barrodagh watching him, his forehead tight, making Anaris wonder if Barrodagh hidden this crucial fact from him as touching the Avatar's Will.

Or to keep me safely ignorant.

"The Panarchist Fleet is more dangerous than you can imagine," Juvaszt replied, and Barrodagh's facial muscles tightened even more. "Let me remind you that it was treachery that bought us Arthelion. They very nearly defeated our forces at Narbon and Lao Tse, the other key systems..."

Almanor gave a thin smile; no doubt she'd managed the moles who had undoubtedly been worming into Panarchist defenses throughout Anaris's stay. He appreciated the irony.

As for the fight itself, *Avatar's Sword* and *Hammer of Dol*, two of the laboriously-constructed Dol'jharian destroyers nearly up to Panarchist technology, had been at Narbon, Anaris knew. They had done fearsome work against Admiral Koestler's forces before being demolished. The other destroyer, *Urtigen's Wrath*, had been battered nearly to scrap at Lao Tse by the battlecruiser that had brought the Panarch and the Privy

Council there. It might spend months in repair and refitting.

Anaris was surprised at Juvaszt's forthright acknowledgement of his losses, and he wondered again what had happened yesterday.

"... and partly the auxiliaries, who performed better than I had expected."

"Yes, it was our Rifter auxiliaries that helped carry the day, there and elsewhere," Barrodagh said, bringing the meeting's focus back to himself.

Anaris knew that after the war began Juvaszt increasingly challenged Barrodagh's control of their Rifter forces, arguing that military expertise was what was needed now. Anaris hadn't been able to find out how effective the auxiliaries were.

The lines in Juvaszt's scarred face deepened to a sneer. "Do not overestimate them, either. Their losses were even worse, and it was in trying to compensate for their tactical ineptitude that our destroyers were lost."

Barrodagh smiled tightly. "Ah, yes. Tactics. I defer to you there. But it was not Rifthers, was it, that destroyed the Node while failing to stop Kryasarch Brandon's escape from Arthelion?"

Brandon? Alive? Anger burned through Anaris, then cooled into self-mockery. Why not look forward to

hunting him down and finishing him?

Morrighon swiveled his compad towards Anaris with a succinct summary.

So that was how the haunt had been reactivated!

Brandon Arkad looted the palace, stole an important prisoner, in effect wrecked the Node, and thumbed his ear at the Fist. And lost only one of his force, a diseased female Rifter.

Anaris's self-mockery sharpened at the situation's symmetry. *My father is free, and I imprisoned, while Brandon's father is imprisoned, and he is free.*

Anaris glanced at Juvaszt with new respect – he must be even better than Anaris had assumed, for his father not to have purged him instantly after such a spectacular failure. The Avatar's wrath must have been impressive.

Juvaszt is on thin ice here. No doubt Barrodagh had some more easily-managed officer in mind for command of the flagship.

"If you mean the Aerenarch Brandon vlith-Arkad," the kyvernats said to Barrodagh, emphasizing his own noble birth by stating Brandon's correct title and inheritance surfix, "You have already read my report. The *Fist of Dol'jhar* was on the other side of the planet when I was – too late – ordered to intercept."

Ferrasin yanked his finger away from an in-depth exploration of his nose and jerked upright. "It wasn't my

fault. Serach Barrodagh's secretary wouldn't listen to me, and the palace computer misled me when I tried to reach him in person to report the Arkad's presence."

Barrodagh glared at the technician. *Bad move*, thought Anaris. Barrodagh would resent this attack—as he would interpret it—in front of the Avatar. Being the top computer technician in his father's entourage could only protect Ferrasin so far. Here lay opportunity.

Ferrasin probably didn't even realize what he had just done—that type rarely understood human interactions, and he definitely did not perceive that silence was safest around the Avatar, unless you had some news that he wanted to hear.

Sure enough, Barrodagh turned toward Ferrasin. "Speaking of ineptitude, perhaps we should discuss your delay in dealing with the dog sabotage and the..." Barrodagh hesitated, searching for a neutral word.

"Apparition," Morrighon whined, his countenance respectful. At the same time he flipped the display on his compad again for Anaris to see: FERRASIN, HEAD COMPUTER TECHNICIAN, confirming Anaris's guess.

Anaris remembered the Arkad dogs with loathing—it had been difficult to finally catch Brandon without one nearby. Interesting that they were now an agent of sabotage—but why was the computer tech tasked with

finding them? Surely that was a job for the military. There had to be a human resistance directing the animals.

Barrodagh glared at Ferrasin. "Well?"

The Avatar made a slight movement. Anaris looked up and their eyes met. Anaris recognized that unfamiliar expression as amusement, of a sort his father had never evidenced on Dol'jhar. Eusabian's gaze touched Morrighon, inviting Anaris to share his amusement.

Do you know why I chose him? Anaris permitted his lips to relax in a hint of smile, then turned his attention back to the computer tech, whose florid features were now shiny with sweat as his lips struggled to form a reply.

"The system is the m-most complex in the Thousand S-s-s—" began Ferrasin, but Eusabian's secretary overrode him.

"Why can't you just cut out the circuits responsible for the apparition and get this under control?" Barrodagh demanded. "Just yesterday, because of your incompetence and delay in dealing with this, two of the Tarkans posted in the Ivory Antechamber were tricked by the apparition into shooting each other. One of them will likely die."

But Barrodagh had gone too far. By making his accusation so specific, within the realm of the tech's profession, he'd given Ferrasin an out.

"C-c-c-c-ut out the circuits?" The tech's voice

squeaked with nervousness as he forced his way past a painful stammer, but the sarcasm came through clearly nonetheless. He gulped and resumed speaking with a hint of singsong, his stammer subsiding somewhat. "Do you think the palace computer is like your compad, a little chip on a substrate? This system is almost a thousand years old, distributed across thousands – perhaps millions – of nodes throughout the Mandala and the entire planet, self-maintaining..." He paused, swallowed as a strange expression crossed his face and his voice dropped to a tone of almost superstitious awe. "... almost self-aware."

Anaris listened carefully. He could sense a faint fear that the apparitions were more than just computer artifacts – or perhaps that was just Ferrasin's Panarchist terror of trespassing the Ban. But certainly the majority of Dol'jharians in the palace would interpret the specters as supernatural, no matter what explanations were offered.

That could make the haunting an integral part of Anaris's campaign, if he could understand its powers and limitations. *And I am the only one here who's had any experience with it – who is really sure what it is.* He would have to be sure of Ferrasin before revealing that knowledge.

"So find the *node* with the ghost in it and cut it out!" A tic twitched at Barrodagh's right eye, and it fluttered

furiously as the Bori apparently realized his error in using the word “ghost.” The Avatar frowned, and Juvaszt’s face lost a little of its impassivity.

“Of course, serach Barrodagh,” said Ferrasin with snarling courtesy, almost singing the words, his anger expunging his caution with the remainder of his stutter. “As well tell your surgeon, ‘Find that neuron with the memory of getting caught with my *tuszpi* in my hand and cut it out so I don’t have to suffer the embarrassment of remembering it.’”

Barrodagh’s face tautened to skull-like rigidity. The tech’s use of the Dol’jharian diminutive for penis – and the reference to masturbation, an abomination to Dol’jharians – was bad enough, but to say that to a Catennach, smooth to the belly –

After a beat, Ferrasin blanched, too late aware of the magnitude of his trespass. Next to Anaris, Morrighon jotted a note. *I can be sure of him now. No one else can protect him from Barrodagh.*

The tableau broke as the Avatar snorted with amusement. *Discipline here has suffered greatly*, thought Anaris as he took the opportunity.

“What would the likely consequences of trying to stop the apparition be?” he asked.

Barrodagh’s tic returned and Ferrasin answered him

with returning boldness. His speech was easier in the security of expertise. "Lord, no information in this system has any location, as we understand it, any more than memory has a location in your brain. The secrets of a millennium of Arkadic rule are here, and if we go about snipping and cutting to expunge a basically harmless holographic projection, we could lose it all. As it is, we're trying to remove the projectors from critical areas, as in here, but the computer keeps replacing them – and that ability most definitely cannot be destroyed without crashing the whole system."

"Enough," said the Avatar. "We will endure the apparitions, as long as you continue to extract information from the computer. When the information ceases, do whatever is needed to eliminate them."

Ferrasin bowed and sat back, sweat dripping from his untidy hair.

Now to make sure of Juvaszt.

"When we were interrupted, Kyvernat, you were explaining about tactics," Anaris said. "Why do you fear the Panarchist Fleet, despite our command of the Suneater?"

From Barrodagh's mouth that would have been an attempt to place Juvaszt in opposition to the Avatar by forcing him to, in effect, denigrate the power of the

Suneater, and thus, by association, the potency of the Avatar's paliach. But Juvaszt heard the simple-request inflection Anaris put in the question.

"The Sodality auxiliaries have done well enough from ambush, against unsuspecting foes. In a sustained fight, when the advantage of the hyperwave is not as great, their lack of discipline weakens them."

Barrodagh rubbed his eyebrow, looking back and forth from Juvaszt to Eusabian.

"We can force our Rifter allies to fight, with the threat of disconnection from the Suneater to enforce our will, but we cannot make them into better fighters. In the meantime, the news of Arthelion's fall and the presence of the Avatar is spreading steadily outward, along with knowledge of our boosted skipmissiles. Soon it will outstrip our Rifter forces."

Juvaszt turned his attention toward Barrodagh. "When they run out of ignorant targets, their fortunes will likely change, unless they are very carefully managed."

As was proper, Juvaszt did not look at the Avatar, but Anaris could tell that the man was watching his father nonetheless. A well-developed peripheral vision was a necessity in the Dol'jharian circles of power. Doubtless the kyvernats had seen his hit at Barrodagh's control of the Rifiers strike home.

“So we should remain on the offensive as long as possible?” asked Anaris.

Juvaszt’s jaw relaxed fractionally. “Precisely. Our strategy has three arms: ambushes while still possible, finding and destroying Ares, and defending Arthelion against the inevitable Panarchist counterattack. Once ambushes are no longer probable, calling in auxiliaries to assist in the defense of Arthelion will be of much higher priority than merely extending administrative control past octant capitals.”

Eusabian’s eyes narrowed, emboldening Barrodagh to reply, “You have overlooked a fourth arm: the recovery of the Heart of Kronos. The Avatar has spoken. This our primary goal. The estate of the gnostor Omilov and the university on Charvann are now being dismantled piece by piece. Unfortunately that idiot Tallis Y’Marmor shot Omilov’s majordomo when he refused to cooperate, so we do not even know if Omilov actually received the Heart—the other servants could tell us nothing, even under a mindripper.”

Almanor then said, “Since the DataNet on Charvann was crashed by the Aegios at the Node there when the planet surrendered, it will take some time to trace all the byways of the ParcelNet.” She then turned focus back to Barrodagh, who relaxed fractionally.

“In addition, the Syndics of Rifthaven have been notified, as well as all fleet units, that a large reward will be paid for any Urian artifact, and a general description of the Heart has been supplied – without, of course, any indication of its true nature. Lysanter –” The Urian specialist looked up as his name was spoken. “ – is standing by to authenticate it when it is found.”

Juvaszt inclined his head. “As the Avatar wills it is done. But in any case we can only hide our hyperwave capabilities so long. Eventually Naval tacticians will figure it out, and our advantage will erode further. And Rifthaven is a hotbed of Panarchist counterintelligence – have the Syndics successfully concealed the existence of their hyperwave? You will remember I recommended against their getting one, for once it is known there, the Panarchists will find out for certain.”

“All communications through Rifthaven are released there with an appropriate delay, to ensure that no one deduces the existence of the hyperwave,” Barrodagh said.

Almanor said, “The Syndics have no desire for the information to become general. They are being scrupulous, our agents in place report.”

Anaris saw Morrighon make another note on his compad, and smiled faintly. “And when the first Urian-equipped vessel puts into Rifthaven, as will inevitably

happen, what then?" asked Anaris.

Barrodagh hesitated. "When that does finally happen, Lord, it will no longer matter," he replied cautiously.

Anaris sat back, satisfied that Barrodagh had recognized Anaris's intent to protect Juvaszt from a purge.

So did Juvaszt. Anaris's questions had put the discussion—and the actions desired by the kyvernat—squarely in that officer's realm of military strategy and tactics. He continued with more assurance. "Very well. But there is one more thing about hyperwave communications. The volume of messages is increasing steadily, much of it nonessential traffic. You must make stronger efforts to control this before it grows to the point where it impacts our tactical capabilities. The discriminators can handle only so much."

Before Barrodagh could reply, Juvaszt waved his hand, dismissing the subject.

"In the meantime, I intend to send Hreem the Faithless—" The captain's lips curled in disdain as he pronounced the Rifter's name. "—from Charvann to Malachronte. Our agent on the Ways reports that the battlecruiser *Maccabeus* being refitted there is very nearly ready. I will have a crew for it from Dol'jhar rendezvous with him."

Barrodagh hesitated. "Hreem is needed at Charvann

until the Heart is found. I have assigned Charterly to that task... ”

“Charterly has too many effectives left to waste on an errand that will take but a single boosted destroyer to ensure capture or destruction,” Juvaszt interrupted. “And he is presently well-positioned to join Arthelion’s defense fleet, which will enable me to post *Satansclaw* and its logos to patrol duty further out.”

Anaris flicked his hand, dismissing another gesture by Morrighon towards his compad. He knew what a logos was, but details could wait for the conclusion of this duel between Barrodagh and Juvaszt.

“We do not have real-time communications with Malachronte,” continued Juvaszt, “so our agent’s information is already dangerously dated. The Panarchists are unlikely to waste any effort on recovering so minor a planet; Hreem’s other forces will be sufficient to enforce the Avatar’s will.”

Juvaszt paused just long enough to induce Barrodagh to begin a reply, and then overrode him. “I trust this meets with your approval?”

Anaris did not trouble to hide his amusement, Under the circumstances Barrodagh had little choice but to agree.

Barrodagh’s discomfiture became complete when the Avatar spoke for the third time, forcing him to abort his

reply even as his lips formed it. "Let it be done as you have said. This meeting is at an end. Henceforth you are to share your information freely with my son." Anaris noted the continued use of the Dol'jharian conditional noun form for son. "That he may participate in the continuing destruction and transfiguration of the Thousand Suns."

The Avatar walked out, followed by Barrodagh.

Anaris sustained a flare of pride that he had gauged his father correctly, but at the same time, the other side of him, the side that the Panarchists had trained, scorned the strategic focus on Arthelion the meeting had revealed. This planet, despite its centrality, had little to offer to the war effort. This Suneater, source of their strategic and tactical advantage, was what must be defended.

But they don 't see it. The entire offensive is built around my father's obedience to the dictates of ritual. But while he is reveling in the possession of his enemy's home and treasures, will the Panarchists figure out where the real power lies?

The others had remained where they were, watching Anaris with strained expectancy. Ferrasin seemed poised on the edge of flight.

Anaris restrained them with a motion of his hand. "There is much to discuss."

TWO

ARTHELION TO DIS

Osri Omilov stared down at the tiny console in the cabin he shared with Brandon nyr-Arkad. No. Brandon *vlith*-Arkad. A sense of unreality intensified by exhaustion seized Osri so strongly that the cabin around him smeared sickeningly.

They had escaped a Dol'jharian battlecruiser. Scant minutes later Osri had learned facts that he could not escape and he gripped the back of the console chair to steady himself.

He had to face those facts now. Less than a month ago Osri had been on leave, visiting his father on Charvann. He'd been secure in his career as a Naval officer, an instructor at the Academy in a Thousand Suns long at peace. Now he was on a Rifter ship that had only hours ago barely escaped destruction at the hands of an enemy thought defeated twenty years before, an enemy that now occupied the central world of the Thousand Suns.

He blinked eyes burning with exhaustion. The chair was real, very nearly the same utilitarian design used by

the navy for officers below the level of captain. The cabin was also evocative of the navy cabins standard for lieutenants and below, albeit much smaller: a small console desk with this integral chair. On one wall, storage, on the other, the fresher. The main difference was two lozenge-shaped bunks against a bulkhead rather than a single bed.

He didn't even know if the Naval Academy still existed. For a time, as his pulse pounded in time to the throb in his head, he tried to impose naval reality on the cabin.

But as his father had twitted him once, he had no imagination.

His father.

He lifted his head, anguish like a blow to his chest. Reality was pitiless: he stood in a cabin on an old Columbiad, refitted with a nearly military-grade weapons system, captained by an outlaw. His father — a retired gnostor who had lectured for decades on xenoarchaeology and no conceivable threat to anyone — apparently lay in the dispensary, having been tortured for military secrets.

Tortured by Dol'jharions, who had been defeated twenty years ago at Acheront after trying to carve out a small empire on the periphery of the Panarchy of the Thousand Suns. In revenge they had struck at Arthelion,

the Mandala – palace and planet conflated in ancient usage, a name resonant with power. From there the royal Arkads had provided Panarchs and Kyriarchs to rule the Panarchy for very close to ten millennia. The Dol'jharians had elsewhere loosed a horde of Rifter outlaws on a spree of unprecedented killing, looting, and destruction throughout the rest of the Panarchy.

And who was left to stand against them?

The hiss of water in the fresher forced Brandon nyr-Arkad's proximity on Osri. Brandon was now Brandon *vlith*-Arkad. *Heir to the Thousand Suns*.

A familiar surge of disgust and resentment made Osri release the chair and flex his fingers. Perhaps Brandon had not betrayed his family as Osri had thought since their first encounter on Charvann, just before the Rifter attack. He had certainly helped rescue Osri's father.

But just as certainly, he'd fled the Enkainion ceremony that would have inducted him into the responsibilities of royalty, thrown his lot in with Rifiers of just the sort now ravaging the Thousand Suns, and led them in a raid on his own home, the Mandalic Palace. He'd heard the outlaws exulting in the loot they'd taken, ripped from a collection representing thousands of years of art and culture with no peer in the Thousand Suns.

Osri straightened as fresh anger pulsed through him.

He would find the truth, and that had to start with Brandon.

The hiss had ceased. The fresher door slid open, and Brandon walked out, grimacing in pain as he tied a towel around his waist.

“You took a wound?” Osri said, eyeing Brandon for burns or bleeding.

The Aerenarch... (Osri could not replace the vivid image of Brandon’s austere, disciplined older brother that that word brought to mind)... Brandon’s flesh was mottled with purpling bruises, but there were no visible wounds. “Back.” Brandon’s breath hissed as he fell into bed.

“Carrying. One of the dogs.”

“A dog?” Osri reached for understanding – he knew very well what dogs Brandon was referring to – but couldn’t find it. “You ran through the palace Minor, exchanging fire with Dol’jharian soldiers, while carrying a *dog?*”

“Yes. Wounded. By some predatory animal brought by the Dol’jharians.”

That was exactly the sort of idiocy Osri had hated Brandon for all their lives. Carrying a 30-to-40-kilo dog through a couple of miles of corridor under heavy fire when he could have been doing something useful. Like halting the torture of Osri’s father sooner.

Afraid he would say something he would regret, Osri hit the hatch control and walked out, though he'd meant to take his own shower first.

The dispensary was not many steps away, but it seemed farther to Osri, who did not want to encounter any of the wretched outlaws crewing the Columbiad. Especially its captain, who was a tempath. Supposedly her kind read emotions, not actual thoughts, but the very idea of some outlaw able to sift anything from his mental state was unbearably repellent. And the worst thing was, she would be able to glean that reaction from him. He did not want to be shot out of hand.

He smacked the dispensary hatch control with his fist.

His mood worsened when he stepped in and found the huge, grizzled ship's surgeon waiting, fists the size of the melons Osri had been compelled to cut up under this same man's orders, for Montrose was also the ship's cook. Osri had been teaching navigation for five years, a fact these villains knew, which compounded the insult of working as a cook.

"He's asleep, Schoolboy." Montrose's voice rumbled in his chest like thunder.

The presence of an Arkad dog at the big man's side, its masked gaze intent on Osri, did not lessen his menace. *It's not wounded; there must two of them on board.* He had little

experience of companion animals, let alone the ancient breed maintained by the royal family and favored others. Osri's mother Risiena had forbidden animals in her presence. "*Filthy, destructive things.*"

Past Montrose, at the other end of the dispensary, the doors to the three recovery berths were closed. Above each of them yellow indicator lights with a black quarter-section blinking in rotation glowed, indicating quarter-gee acceleration within.

"I want to see my father." Osri made an effort to keep his voice even. Montrose had demonstrated early on, with detached exactitude, his opinion of Osri's lawful authority as an officer of the navy. The last of the bruises had taken weeks to fade.

"You want to worry him to death with interrogation," Montrose stated. "I can tell you more than he can. Ask your questions. I will answer to the best of my knowledge."

But this Osri was unable to do. Most of the questions crowding his mind were personal, some were political, and all of them he refused to discuss with an outlaw. He was forced back to the most fundamental of all, and he hated himself for how plaintive his voice came out, "At least show me that he is alive."

The monstrous tangle of grey-shot black eyebrows

lifted over Montrose's deepset gaze, then the Rifter surgeon-chef shifted out of the way. "If you waken him, I will put you in your bunk for a month," he warned, in the typical manner of Rifters.

Osri had learned that the old bully meant exactly what he said. He swallowed his irritation and managed a short nod. Montrose touched the rightmost of three door controls, revealing a tiny single berth, barely big enough to hold an infirmary bed, with a med console and a visitor's stool next to it.

Under the warm-sheet lay Osri's father, moored to the med console by a tangle of tubes and wires. He looked unsettlingly like an oversized, prematurely aged infant with his head bald as an egg, his complexion an ugly mix of gray and mottled red under the normal brown.

"Why does he have cuts all over his head? Did you shave him?"

"No. The Dol'jharians did. They had him wired up to a torture machine. Mindripper. Brandon slagged it," Montrose added with morose satisfaction.

At least Brandon had that much sense, Osri thought.

Montrose closed the berth door. "From what the gnostor was muttering before I put him under, the Dol'jharians were trying to find out where that silver sphere was. It is apparently a key to their military effort."

“The Heart of Kronos,” Osri corrected automatically. His father had been so excited over the Urian artifact showing up at his home via ParcelNet delivery, scarce hours before the planet was attacked.

By *Rifters*.

“The attack on Charvann seems to have had at its goal the acquisition of the Heart of Kronos,” Montrose said, those massive brows now lifted interrogatively.

“That’s impossible,” Osri retorted.

But why not? He would have thought it impossible that anyone would attack Charvann, which had no military importance, and scarcely any political presence in the Tetrad Centrum—the central Panarchic planets. It was too far away from the Mandala, and its famous university was hardly a center of the kind of power Dol’jharians, or Rifters, were concerned with.

Yet the attack had happened. A brutal attack, apparently; Brandon had mentioned that the Archon Tanri Faseult, a family friend all Osri’s life, had died in it.

Osri shook his head. “I don’t understand. The Heart of Kronos is an Urian artifact, but what would Rifters want with it? They couldn’t sell it anywhere, it’s one of a kind. The planet it was stolen from—and it only could have been stolen—has been proscribed for a very long time. Merely having possession of that thing would be a high

crime, possibly treason.”

“Under your former government,” Montrose said, looking amused. “It’s wanted by no less than Jerrode Eusabian, the Dol’jharian war leader who calls himself Avatar, or Lord of Vengeance. Maybe both.” Montrose lifted a massive shoulder. “However unlikely this man’s string of titles, he’s managed to smash the Panarchy pretty thoroughly, and he was having your father brutalized in some kind of torture machine in order to discover the Heart of Kronos’s whereabouts. We can assume that the ferocity of this hunt is not going to abate.”

“Why?” Osri asked. “What’s it for? What does it do? There were no controls on it, nothing whatsoever, just the unbroken surface. And the fact that it is inertialess.”

“That information seems to be a mystery to all concerned.” Montrose tipped his head toward the berth. “Let the gnostor sleep. You will see him when he awakens, I promise you that. When his heart has stabilized to my satisfaction, you may bring him his first breakfast.” Montrose frowned. “I suggest you get some rest yourself. It’s been a very long day for us all.”

Osri was going to protest, but a violent yawn seized his jaw, nearly unhinging it. He turned away.

Back in the cabin he was required to share with Brandon, he discovered the Krysarch—no, the *Aerenarch*—

asleep. Osri took a fast shower, and feeling incrementally better, hitched himself into the upper bunk, where at least he didn't have to see anyone, and the Rifiers had fitted sound baffles into the bulkhead, so he didn't have to hear Brandon's breathing. He tabbed the air flow to max to simulate a breeze from an open window, a revealing Downsider habit that his Highdweller bunkmates had teased him for during his naval academy days, and though his mind was still reeling frantically from question to question, sleep took him within seconds.

oOo

"They're all asleep," Montrose said.

"As I would like to be," Lokri murmured, his gray eyes half-closed, his whisper venomous.

Montrose shook his head, hiding his amusement, which (he admitted to himself) was a shallow cover for an unexpected grief. Who was going to admire Lokri's lounging pose, his elegant insouciance? Young Greywing was dead. *Nobody is ever going to find you as interesting as the admirer you despised for her ugly looks*, Montrose thought.

Jaim sat a little apart, forearms on his knees, head bent. He looked up. "How's the boy?"

Montrose didn't speak until everyone turned his way.

“Ivard is stable. The burn wouldn’t worry me ordinarily, but the Kelly ribbon... that is something new.”

“Kelly ribbon?” Jaim asked.

Jaim and Marim had been working in the engine room during the raid on Arthelion’s Palace Minor. Montrose regarded them as he considered his words. How characteristic their reactions: tall, somber-faced Jaim concerned. Small Marim unconcerned, arms crossed, one foot jiggling. Lokri sardonic.

Montrose said, “When we reached the antechamber to the Ivory Hall, we discovered that the actual hall was closed off. The Dol’jharis apparently took out the government with a dirty nuke. I don’t know if this is connected or coincidence, but a ribbon from a Kelly had somehow gotten outside the doors.”

“A ribbon?” Marim repeated. “Those ribbons are like hair on the Kelly, aren’t they?”

“No, they’re living tissue. Able to survive on their own for quite some time. They play a part in memory and sexual reproduction.”

Marim wrinkled her nose. “Sex with a Kelly. Ick.”

Montrose ignored the interjection. “When Ivard bent to get at some piece of art, it attached itself somehow to his arm. It melded with his flesh. I will run a test, but I suspect it has integrated down to the cellular level.”

Vi'ya spoke for the first time. "Was the ribbon radioactive?" The captain looked tense, her black eyes narrowed as if her head ached. At least the brain burners were hibernating in their sub-zero degree cabin. Montrose was grateful for that.

Montrose shook his head. "No reason to expect even Kelly to be different from other living flesh. If it's dangerously radioactive, it dies. The ribbon is still alive."

Marim sighed dramatically. "What I want to know is, what's our share of the take?" Her small stature, the buttercup yellow cloud of hair, her fluting voice all contributed to make her seem much younger than she was. At first glance, anyone would take her for Ivard's age, but she was nearly old enough to have birthed him.

Vi'ya said, "Some of those artifacts are so rare that it would have taken finesse to negotiate sales even before Dol'jhar interfered. A few of them we may as well regard as impossible to sell, like the coin that Greywing took, and Ivard now has."

Marim's eyelids flashed up, then she affected indifference. "Why should this Eusabian care?" she protested. "That blunge-sucker just conquered himself more planets than he can ever visit, much less loot."

"For the same reason he attacked the Panarchy in the first place," Vi'ya said. "Part of Dol'jharian revenge

custom is possessing his enemy's home. He will want everything in the Mandalic palace restored exactly as it was." Her accent betrayed itself when she referred to her hated planet of origin, which gave her words a subtle but sinister twist.

She turned to Jaim. "When we reach Dis, you'll collect everyone's loot. Since Reth Silverknife is our best negotiator, I will send you and her ahead to Rifhaven. You will take the *Sunflame*, and your first attempt will be with lesser known artifacts, things that have been copied in like materials." She rapped her knuckles gently against a bulkhead. "We will follow in *Telvarna*."

Nobody argued. Not even Lokri. They all sensed that the captain had something on her mind besides their loot.

Sure enough, Vi'ya said, "From now on, I want everyone wearing their boswells."

Marim sat upright. "On *Telvarna*?" She tossed her curls. "Why? All you have to do is stick your head outside any hatch to be heard from engineering to the bridge."

"Because I do not want you heard from engineering to the bridge," Vi'ya retorted. "I want you in the habit of communicating anything but the most superficial chatter through your boswells, which the Panarchists will not be allowed, or you will spend the duration of this war, however long it lasts, confined to Dis along with the

Telvarna. In fact, I am not sure we should land at Dis at all."

"We don't have enough fuel to get to our other caches," Jaim said, briefly looking up.

"I know," Vi'ya said his way. "I am considering stopping only long enough to refuel at the cache off Dis, make contact with Norton, and then continue on."

Lokri drawled, "What's the worry? We escaped the Dol'jharians. I think they're too busy to send an armada after a ship crewed by seven. Now six. With two canine and five sophont passengers. Even if one is a royal stray."

Vi'ya's slanted black eyes narrowed. Lokri's challenging grin didn't abate a whit, but his knuckles betrayed his tension. "You have not sufficiently considered that fact," she said softly. "I think you should, before we emerge from skip. We departed with from Dis with a royal stray, but if what the old man revealed is true, he is no longer the most useless of the two spare heirs. He is *the* heir. Maybe the Panarch is dead. Whether he is or not, the Arkad asleep aft is now the most sought-after person by both sides."

"So we sell him to whoever offers us the most!" Marim threw up her hands.

"The only thing the Dol'jharians would pay is a protracted death, whatever they promised," Vi'ya said.

“The Panarchists won’t be much better.”

“Their Bourse having been taken over,” Lokri drawled. “The nicks won’t have anything to pay *with*.”

“Either side would string us up and pick the insides of our skulls dry,” Vi’ya stated. “I hope Norton and the others haven’t left Dis yet, in spite of my orders. We are going to have to change our plans. Until then, no stray bits of information in front of either of the Omilovs or the Arkad. And be on the watch for whatever they might try.”

“Schoolboy is too stiff-rumped to try anything,” Marim scoffed. “And Brandon has a pretty face, but he’s a party boy.”

Montrose shook his head silently, and noticed Lokri’s tightened lips.

Vi’ya gave her head that odd twisting nod and said, “Markham always claimed that Brandon was smarter than he was.”

Montrose was surprised. Vi’ya seldom brought up the name of their former captain.

“Markham thought everyone was interesting, and all his friends smart,” Marim said, hitching her elbows over the back of her chair. “That’s why *he* was so interesting.”

Lokri gave a tight shrug, and said, “The Arkad did get us free of the Palace. But it was his home ground. Whether he has brains or just a knack at games remains to be seen.”

“Until then,” Vi’ya said, “boswells.” She touched her wrist.

“So you don’t want us talkin’ to ‘em?” Marim jerked her thumb toward the cabins aft of the rec room. “Soon’s I see Schoolboy’s ugly mug I’ve got to poke at him for his own good. And Brandon’s too pretty not to bunny with.”

“Poke and bunny all you like,” continued Vi’ya. “Bozzing or your cabins, hatches closed, for any other communication.”

“You’re not going to have time for that anyway, Marim,” said Jaim. “You and I, and anyone else I can grab, will be spending every spare minute on inspection and whatever repairs we can accomplish before we get to Dis.”

Marim flipped an obscene gesture at Jaim, then followed the captain as she walked out. As she passed Lokri, the little blond tech grinned up at him, a grin that faded to speculation when Lokri bowed ironically to the captain’s back.

o0o

There’s going to be trouble, Montrose thought as Jaim got to his feet, and shambled Montrose’s way, his Serapisti chimes tinkling in his long braids. Already the journey was going to be full, what with Ivard’s medical condition,

and canid biology to learn to deal with the wounded Arkad dog from the Mandala. *I wonder how similar they are to felines?* And Lokri was sure to make things interesting.

As always, Montrose kept this observation to himself. He'd lost the habit of sharing his thoughts when his wife died, back on Timberwell. He often wondered if his habitual isolation was in part due to that, and in part due to his age, a full generation older than most of the Dis company. *Two* generations ahead of young Ivard.

I can't be that old, he mourned as he led the way back to the dispensary, followed by the silent engineer.

As soon as they got inside the dispensary, "Montrose? Jaim!" Ivard's voice held a wheezy, hectic note that Montrose did not like. "Jaim?"

Montrose gestured toward the door to Ivard's berth, which the boy had opened. The low-gee warning cycled above it. Ivard sat up on the bed, clutching his bandage to him and shivering, his pale skin mottled with bruises and feverish color, except for the dark green band around one wrist, so integrated it may as well have been body art.

Ivard's console was mostly green or yellow lights. In the next berth the wounded dog now stirred on the floor as it recovered from the drug Brandon had administered in the palace, whining faintly, almost an ululation. The sound worried Montrose. The other dog sat next to the

next of blankets cushioning the wounded animal, brown eyes steady, one ear cocked towards its companion, the other towards Montrose.

“Calm Ivard, would you?” Montrose murmured to Jaim as he punched up information on canine medicine.

“Jaim!” Ivard’s voice cracked.

“Ivard. I’m sorry about your sister.”

Ivard’s voice dropped. “She died quick.” He licked his lips. “Vi’ya said she waits in the Hall of Ancestors. What does she mean?”

Jaim raised a hand and sketched one of those stylized Serapisti gestures, the chimes in his braids tinkling sweetly. “We’ve talked about the Flame. I think she means the same thing.”

Ivard stirred restlessly. “That’s no answer. Nobody gives me a good answer, and I can’t find her Greywing coin, that she picked for herself. She told me she’d never sell it, that it was special. I get to keep it, don’t I? Even if she’s dead?”

Jaim touched his forehead, a curiously gentle gesture, though his long hands were callused, and criss-crossed with fine scars from his childhood on Rifthaven. “Be easy,” he said soothingly. “You know the rules. Now that you’re full crew, you keep one item out of your loot, and the rest goes to the pot, to be divided according to our

articles. This goes for Greywing, too. She died in an action, so the thing she would have kept comes to you. Pick anything of hers you want.”

“I want the coin, but it’s gone. I had it in my hand all the way back, I know I did. But it’s gone, and so is my flight medal that Markham gave me.” Ivard’s voice rose. “And my arm hurts!”

“Probably fell on the way up the ramp. We’ll find it,” Jaim said. “You’ve got to rest first. That’s orders.”

Ivard lay back down, muttering protests. “It’s hot in here. My arm itches...”

Montrose half-listened as the engineer’s deep voice soothed Ivard’s fever-driven complaining, most of which settled around the loot. Montrose was not surprised to learn that Lokri had apparently pushed the boy into loading extra artifacts into his clothes for Marim, being too selfish to carry them himself. Typical for them both.

The soft ululation from the wounded dog, which was getting louder, was apparently typical behavior when recovering from anesthesia. The animal’s vital signs seemed within the ranges stated. Montrose had already taken blood, and hunted up the protocols for further analysis. He made notes on what he should be feeding the dogs and relayed the data to the galley. Osri Omilov could be assigned dog-food duty, Montrose decided as he waved

Jaim aside, and ran his gaze down Ivard.

He and his sister were throwbacks, with their unappealing pale, freckled skin and watery eyes. But Greywing, at least, had been tough. She had gone on the run with a bad burn only three weeks healed, without saying a word. It was difficult to tell if Ivard possessed a similar toughness, or owed his survival so far to an ebullient nature and his older sister's unswerving protection. *No more.*

He hoped that the Dol'jharians had learned nothing from her corpse, regretting (as he suspected he would for a considerable time) that they'd been forced to leave her behind.

He checked Ivard's vitals, administered a painkiller, and watched in satisfaction as Ivard's eyes rolled around. The boy lay back, and still muttering softly, slid into sleep.

Montrose closed the berth door, and found Jaim waiting.

"That thing on his wrist," Jaim said. "Making him sick? We've all taken jac burns, most of us worse than what he got."

Montrose sighed. "It's far too early to say for certain, but so far, my meds and his body chemistry are interacting in a troubling manner. Listen, Jaim, I heard the captain say that she's going to send you and Reth Silverknife to

Rifhaven to liquidate the loot. If you'll take Ivard to the Kelly surgeon there, I'll tender ten percent of my share to you two."

"No need." Jaim shook his head, his chimes tinkling. "Reth and Greywing were friends. As much as Greywing was friends with anyone. Reth'll say first thing that we should watch out for Ivard."

"Good," Montrose said. "Though consider the pay. I'll want the medical write-up. Kelly biology still has large mysteries in it."

"That, you arrange through them," Jaim said. His long, somber face split in a smile. "My guess is, they'll stick you for that full ten percent."

Montrose laughed. "Well worth it, if I can learn more about them. Go get some rest."

Jaim raised a hand and walked out, his tread silent except for the sweet tinkle of chimes.

o0o

The next few ship days were a boring blur as far as Marim was concerned, with what seemed like every waking moment spent working on repairs. She'd seen the Arkad only in passing, when Jaim dragged him off for other tasks, and assigning the glowering Osri Omilov to

assist her. Her verbal pokes provoked only sour looks: Osri spoke in monosyllables and moved through his tasks as though sleepwalking. When off shift, he stayed in the cabin he shared with Brandon.

(Lay off of him), Jaim finally bozzed her at one point. (We'll get better work out of him without you rizzing him all the time.)

(Gotta get some fun somewhere), she replied.

(Get it somewhere else. He's pretty tightly wound, and getting tighter the longer Montrose keeps him from his father. I don't want to scrape your brains off the deck, or his.)

So Marim stuck Osri with a particularly unpleasant session with the recyclers — work he could perform alone — and went off looking for Brandon. She was delighted to discover him and Jaim in the rec room.

“How's your back?” Jaim said to the Arkad.

Brandon rolled his shoulders, looked from side to side, then said, “Better. Much better.”

“You know Ulanshu,” said Jaim. “Saw it. Think a light workout would help?”

Brandon winced slightly. “Probably a good idea, although I doubt I'll much enjoy it.”

Jaim dipped his chin down in approval. “We'll start slow.”

It would take some time for Jaim to reconfigure the

room for sparring, so Marim dialed up a drink, then drifted past the dispensary, but Ivard was not alone. He watched Montrose tending to the wounded dog, while the other dog lay nearby. The door to the third berth, where she knew the old man lay, was closed. Above all the berths a quarter-gee warning rotated.

She walked up to the gee stripe on the deck, but no one paid any attention, not even the unwounded dog. It was a snooty animal. What had Ivard named them? Gray and Trev, Gray being the wounded one.

She ignored the stupid dog, smiled at the stupid boy, and waited for the stupid surgeon to shift his stupid bulk so she could talk to the stupid boy... but he was obviously going to stick right there for eternity, so she laughed, drained her cup, and retreated.

She could check later – and by now the fighters should be good and warmed up.

She skipped back down to the rec room, now cleared for close-contact practice. She leaned against a bulkhead to enjoy the show.

She liked watching men fight, especially handsome men. Double that when they were well trained. Jaim and the Arkad circled one another, their bare feet touching the edges of the floor mat. Jaim lunged, feinted in a blur of movement, and brushed the side of his hand against the

Arkad's shoulder. Brandon staggered back, then recovered his balance with an effort Marim could see in the tightened muscles down his slim body.

Marim smiled appreciatively and shifted her hip against the dyplast curve of the bulkhead.

"Back leg," Jaim said. "Need to pivot."

The Arkad nodded, lifted a hand to swipe his dripping hair off his forehead – and Jaim attacked.

The flurry of movement was too swift to follow. Brandon flipped, rolled to his feet, and shifted – too late. Jaim was already behind him, and once again hit him with a light blow that threw him off balance.

"Tighter roll," Jaim said. "Too slow."

Marim watched them circle once more, Jaim's ropy body taut with the control exhibited only the masters of all four Ulanshu Levels. In comparison, the Arkad appeared less trained, but never clumsy. Marim grinned, observing his light, quick breathing, the watchful eyes and slight smile. Jaim probably never thought about his face. His mouth hung open, his breath whooping.

The Arkad probably never thinks about his face, either, Marim thought. Jaim had spent maybe half his life learning the four Levels; Brandon had been trained since he was born to hide behind that pleasant Douloi non-expression.

Air stirred at Marim's shoulder. Lokri's pale gray eyes, startling in his dark face, narrowed in appreciation.

"He sure is pretty, isn't he?" she said. "I wonder if those Arkads use gennation on their brats despite all their whiff about morality." She flexed her long toes and wiggled her foot, regarding the black microfilaments furring its sole for free-fall adhesion.

"Idiot," Lokri said without heat. "That," a jut of his sharp-cut chin toward the Arkad scion, "is the product of forty-seven generations of absolute power."

Jaim and Brandon grappled, swaying, and this time Jaim threw Brandon over his shoulder, then dropped astride him, knees pinning arms to the mat, and two knuckles pressed against Brandon's larynx.

"Number forty-eight." Marim savored the words. Brandon lay flat on his back, arms pinned to either side, blue eyes crescents of laughter. Above him Jaim's face was crimson, sweat dripping off the metallic chimes all devout Serapisti wear woven into their braids.

"Dead," Brandon said. "Again."

Jaim's long, somber face reflected Brandon's laughter, then he swung to his feet. "You been lazy."

"So I have," Brandon agreed, and got to his feet.

"Here." Jaim began reviewing the match, demonstrating improvements.

Marim bozzed Lokri. *(And he's mine.)*

Lokri snorted.

Marim glanced at him, delighted. *(A wager? Who jumps him first?)*

(Stakes?) Lokri's brows quirked slightly.

(Whatever.) Marim shrugged, then squinted at Lokri.
(Stakes?)

Lokri's smile was thin and utterly unreadable, but Marim had bunked with him for years. She knew him better than anyone alive. *We've captured the last heir to the Panarch of the Thousand Suns. Every Rifter in Eusabian's fleet will be after him. The Panarchists are going to be hunting him as well – and he's ours. He's ours and Lokri is afraid of him.* She laughed again, but said nothing out loud.

(Vilarian Negus.) Lokri's subvocalization was reflective.

(Done.) Marim said promptly. *(Loser pays for both.)*

She pushed away from the bulkhead, nudging Lokri to follow. *(Vi'ya drop any hints to you about what she plans to do with our captive nicks?)*

(Nothing.) Lokri lifted a shoulder in a shrug. *(She'll decide that when we get back to Dis, I expect.)*

(She only mentioned the Dol'jharians and the nicks. She coulda also said that half the Rift Sodality's gonna be after us, if they find out where we were and who we got.)

(Life might get interesting,) Lokri agreed.

He hated talking about the future, even plans. Marim knew that. *(Do you think we might –)* she began.

Lokri shook his head. *(I never think.)* His hand dropped from his wrist and he turned off toward the ladder down to the engine room. Marim watched him disappear, then sprinted down the corridor to the dispensary, her bare feet soundless on the deck plates. The hatch was open.

Montrose was *still* there, looming over his console as he checked readings on the wall console outside the old man's berth. Music was playing, a bright and complicated melody, indicating he was there to stay for a time. That had to mean Schoolboy was in charge of the meals.

At the other end of the room all the berth doors were closed now, the gee warning still blinking above them.

When Marim stepped inside, the surgeon's grizzled, ugly face swung toward her, thick brows rising in question.

Marim grinned at him. "Is Ivard able to have visitors?"

Montrose's brow beetled in surprise. "Might cheer him some."

Marim winced. "Is he missing Greywing pretty bad?"

"He's tranked." Montrose sat back, his gaze assessing. "Though ordinarily I would never recommend a wounded dog as therapy, he seems to find Gray's presence

comforting.”

Marim shuddered as she crossed to the berth where the youngest crew member of the *Telvarna* lay. She sensed Montrose’s surprise turning to curiosity, so she nodded toward the next door. “How’s the old man?”

“He’ll live.”

Marim stepped over the gee stripe and raised her hand to the door control.

“Don’t upset him,” Montrose warned, not looking up.

“I won’t,” Marim said. “I came to cheer him. Promise!” She hit the tab, waiting impatiently through the gee-shift before the door opened.

The space inside was cramped, despite the fact that the two berths were still connected. The two beds had been reconfigured into a single larger one. Ivard lay on his unwounded side, one arm lying across the quiet dog. Marim could see stitches livid against shaved patches of skin on the animal’s flank. The animal opened its eyes and tracked Marim as she came around the bed, and the ear tips flattened.

“I’m a friend,” Marim cooed.

Ivard made low, soothing noises to the dog, whose tail stirred. The dog let out a snorting breath and closed its eyes. At least the other dog wasn’t there as well. The berth already smelled of dog, though the tianqi was set on high.

Marim leaned against the door frame and studied the boy. He was certainly ugly, with his frowzy red hair, pale, blotchy skin dotted with freckles, and weak, watery eyes. Though he was barely old enough to shave, his wound had left him drawn and pinched-looking, like a little old man. The bandage across back and shoulder was clean, but Marim was sure she whiffed the sweet-sick smell of burnt flesh as well as dog hair.

With a glance at the dog, whose eyes were closed, she put out a finger and brushed it lightly along the inside of Ivard's arm.

His eyelids lifted, and she watched his pupils widen. She gave him her friendliest smile. "You're looking a lot better, Firehead. Those chatzers aim with their nackers, eh?"

Ivard breathed a soft laugh, then winced.

She laid a hand on his skinny ribs and brushed it slowly up to his cheek. "Don't make it worse. We'll have time later to laugh lots. Would you like that?"

Ivard nodded, a hopeful quirk to his brows. His eyes flicked to the med console.

He's worried about Montrose finding out. Well, she wasn't about to tell the boy that bunnying was one thing Montrose was guaranteed not to listen in on, and wouldn't interfere in any case. But getting Ivard out of the

dispensary was the first step.

“Not here. But once you’re healing up and are back in your cabin...”

Ivard blushed.

Marim leaned gently against the bed, wary of the dog, and smiled at him. “How much you remember what happened?”

“Mandala,” Ivard whispered. “Didn’t just dream that? We looted... big room, then the Krysarch found another room, radiation—”

Marim touched his hand. “Forget that. Wasn’t it fun, being the only Rifters, ever, to loot the Panarch’s palace—and get away with it?”

“Greywing didn’t,” Ivard muttered, his smile vanishing.

“She died quick and clean, in action,” Marim said. “Isn’t that the best way to go?”

Ivard nodded, but the gleam in his eyes gathered liquidly, then tracked down either side of his face. Marim bit her lip, hoping that Montrose was not watching Ivard’s vitals. *What will cheer him?*

“So, what kind of loot did you get?”

Ivard pointed with two fingers at the locker at the foot of the bed. “Montrose... put my share there,” he breathed.

“Lokri said you two got some for me.” Marim asked,

smoothing back his hair.

Ivard began to nod, then winced as if that much movement hurt. "Lots. Greywing put some of them back..." Ivard's eyes narrowed as he mentioned his sister's name. "I couldn't run, see. So you can choose any of those for your one to keep. The rest can go in the crew pile. I know what I want to keep. Greywing picked it. Said it's one of a kind."

"She had a good eye. She'd find something priceless," Marim murmured. *Greywing was always a strange one – right to the end, I guess.*

"Her coin." Ivard's hand moved restlessly. "She took it, said it had a greywing on it. I had it, I know I had it..." His fingers tightened briefly into a fist. "Montrose said it isn't with my things. I must have dropped it."

"Coin?" Marim repeated, trying not to show too much interest. "If it's on the *Telvarna*, I'll get it for you. But you have to tell me what it looks like, so I don't take someone else's thing."

Gratitude smoothed his face. As he explained in halting words, she was amazed. It was better than she'd thought. *An artifact from Lost Earth? Find the right collector, and we'd be able to buy and sell whole planets.*

She bent forward and kissed Ivard's cheek. "I'll find that coin," she promised. "Now. Why don't we look at the

other things you got. You can help me pick the one I'm keeping..."

THREE

SATANSCLAW: ARTHELION ORBIT

Captain Pham Anderic ran a finger along the inlays in the arm of his pod, glorying again in the command center of the ship that was now his.

In the main viewscreen Arthelion bulked huge beneath them, with the jeweled chain of the Highdwellings arching far above as the ship approached the terminator. Only a few of the monitor pods were active, for much of the crew was enjoying liberty on one of the Syncs given over to them. Anderic smirked as he imagined the reaction of Douloi Highdwellers to the swaggering new aristocracy of the Thousand Suns: the Rifter allies of Eusabian of Dol'jhar.

But for him, every benefit the victory of the Avatar had delivered was right here, a gift of the savage whim of the new ruler of the Mandala.

Anderic gently fingered the tender flesh around his still-inflamed right eye, remembering the interview with the Avatar, under a sky made bright by the destruction of the Node during the pursuit of the fleeing Kryrsarch. *"Take*

one of Y'Marmor's eyes and give it to this one." The aftermath had been even worse, when Barrodagh denied anesthesia to Tallis during the operation. Anderic had been unable to refuse Barrodagh's invitation to watch, fearing that to show any sign of weakness might be fatal. He shuddered. He didn't want to think about what it must have felt like.

The recovery from the eye transplant had been bad enough. A week in the tank, alternating between dreams of drowning and agonizing neural alligation sessions. The visual migraines that too often warped the world into glittering tessellations and sometimes even drained the meaning out of words. And the first time he'd looked in a mirror after the dressing came off...

A movement at the navigator's console drew his attention. Sho-Imbris quickly dropped his gaze. Anderic thought he knew why, the same reason he now avoided his own reflection: one blue eye and one brown. He snorted, feeling both revulsion and amusement – Tallis was a part of him now, for the rest of his life. *I wonder what he feels when he sees my face.*

Sho-Imbris looked up again, addressing a point somewhere to the right and above Anderic's head. "Fifteen minutes to terminator, Captain," he reported. "We'll be at minimum altitude at that point, as ordered."

"Very good. Get me a status report from the lock

crew.”

The monitor bent to his console with gratifying alacrity, proof that Barrodagh’s action had been more than the casual cruelty that common knowledge ascribed to Dol’jhar and its minions. *They do everything with a purpose, even inflicting pain.* Certainly the crew of the *Satansclaw* had been on its best behavior since Anderic posted the vid of Tallis’ operation, as the Bori had suggested. *And they remember it every time I look at them.*

“Lock crew reports ready. Discharge will take place along the axis of the skip accelerator, as you ordered.”

Anderic nodded. In a few minutes he’d be enjoying a little entertainment he’d devised, while at the same time ridding the ship of some of the chatzy furnishings that had represented elegance to its former captain, Tallis.

“Very good. Have them stand by.”

He took a deep breath. There was only one leak in the seal on his contentment, and now he would have to confront it. He couldn’t put it off any longer, for without the aid of the cold intelligence illegally embodied in the ship, he’d be unable to create the display that he hoped would finally win Luri as his consort.

Anderic looked around the bridge. No one was watching him. He began to tap out the code sequence that would awaken the logos that Tallis had installed.

His hand trembled. A logos was the embodiment of evil to one raised on Ozmiron, but not only was its assistance necessary for the coming entertainment, its concentrated experience of warfare was also the only thing that would permit Anderic to captain a warship safely through the disintegrating Panarchy.

Fascinated, almost terrified, he watched as the main viewscreen sprang to life with words and diagrams overlaying the view of Arthelion and the approaching darkness beyond the terminator. He could hardly credit the fact that no one else could see them, but sure enough, there was no reaction from anyone else on the bridge.

“COMMAND TRANSFER ACKNOWLEDGED. AWAITING ORDERS.” Anderic started as the dispassionate baritone of the logos sounded inside his head. He blinked, trying in vain to shift the migraine crosshatching crowding into his vision.

The buck-toothed little toad named Ninn at Fire Control gave him a puzzled glance, then hunched over his console.

Anderic almost turned the logos off. It was worse than he had imagined: the dead voice of a never-alive intelligence, cousin to the horrifying Adamantines, whose coldly calculated assaults could only be stopped by acts of planetary genocide.

But the memory of Eusabian of Dol'jhar's harsh face, his casual cruelty, restrained Anderic's hand. He had no illusions about his fate if he defied Eusabian — by comparison, a logos might even be a reasonable partner.

Warily he sub-vocalized his instructions to the logos. He arranged his fingers over his console and carefully followed the commands illuminated there to rearrange the main screen for the best view of what he'd planned. How had Tallis managed to hide it as long as he did? Barrodagh's advice to explain it as a Dol'jharian revenge custom was going to help there.

Moments later, all was ready. He dimmed the bridge lights and tabbed his comm. "Luri, I've got a surprise for you. Come up to the bridge." The shakiness of his voice surprised him, and he cut the connection without waiting for a reply.

He spent the intervening time in careful breathing, trying to recall and use some of the meditation exercises of his youth under the harsh discipline of the Organicists.

The visual aura retreated somewhat as he slowly relaxed, then came the quiet tick-tick-tick of heels on the deck, and a wave of heavy scent as Luri stopped directly behind his pod. Her heavy breasts radiated a sensual heat as they pillowed the back of his head. Anderic exhaled as her cool fingers stroked his temples, traced around his

ears, and drifted down to begin kneading the muscles in his shoulders.

“You wanted Luri?” The emphasis she used on the word “wanted” aroused the Rifter even more than her touch.

“I’ve arranged a special show, just for you, and then I have another surprise for you.”

“Ooooh,” she sighed, her breath stirring the hairs on the back of his neck, “Luri likes surprises.”

She slid around the pod and settled into his lap, her movements a deliberate dance. He stretched his arm around her to adjust his console so he could reach it. The smoothness of her silk against his bare arms excited him even more.

The bridge dimmed as the ship passed into night. The comm crackled to life.

“Lock three here. We’re ready.”

“Do it,” Anderic croaked. He cleared his throat, struggling for control. “Ninn. Slave the tractors to my con.” As his console flickered into a new configuration, another thought occurred to him. “Communications. Relay the main view down to the bilge and tell the blunge-boy he can take a break and watch.”

Lennart, a short, squat woman Tallis had promoted from Damage Control, gave Anderic a narrow look, but

when he widened his eyes at her, she turned away quickly.

A few of the crew had actually liked that fool Tallis Y'Marmor, and Kira Lennart had been one of them. As captains went, Tallis had not been as bad as some in the Sodality. He was careful, which had kept them all alive. He was fair in sharing the take. But he'd also been a nuisance with the stupid uniforms he'd made the bridge crew wear and his constant worries about the cleanliness of the ship.

Worst of all, he'd insisted on keeping Luri's attentions exclusively to himself.

Anderic grinned, thinking of Tallis now demoted to slubbing in the recycling tanks of the *Satansclaw*, where the sewage generated by its crew was transformed back into useful forms.

And this will make his misery complete.

"Lennart."

The comtech looked up.

"Be sure to replay this for him a few times."

Anderic smirked as he tapped at his console. The main screen flickered to a new view, from an imager above the bridge, looking forward. The extended lance of the destroyer's kilometer-long accelerator tube, brightly illuminated by its running lights, shone against the velvet

darkness of Arthelion's night side.

There was a faint *thunk* as the tractor engaged. In his mind's eye Anderic envisioned the ornate furnishings he'd ripped out of Tallis' cabin swirling up off the deck in the grip of the gravitic field, the sparkling ring-discharge of the electronic lock field as they were propelled out the lock. He laughed as a surge of well-being gripped him, momentarily overwhelming even lust. *Life is good when you're on the winning side.*

"What?" Luri's voice was breathy with expectation.

"You'll see. Watch."

"EJECTA NOW ACCELERATING, REENTRY BEGINNING. VISIBLE IN TEN SECONDS."

Anderic tapped at his console. They were at minimum safe altitude, brushing the fringes of the atmosphere. Held in the grip of the docking tractor, the ejected furniture, mixed with ingots of various alloys he'd requisitioned through Barrodagh—"A show to firmly establish my control," he'd explained—was now rushing ahead of the ship, deeper into the atmosphere. If the control of the logos was accurate, the debris should start to flame just as it became visible beyond the accelerator tube.

"THREE, TWO, ONE..."

"Now," said Anderic.

A spray of polychrome splendor blossomed just

beyond the end of the accelerator tube, flares and streams of light exploding as the various elements flamed into glory against the upper airs of Arthelion. The display pulsed magnificently against the night side of the planet, evoking an inhalation of delight from Luri.

“Oh, Pham, it’s beautiful.”

Unable to wait any longer, Anderic pulled Luri against him and kissed her deeply. Then he stood up and carried her off the bridge, bound for the cabin he’d carefully prepared for them.

o0o

The commands of the Anderic-biont, to whom the logos now owed allegiance, took but a fraction of its node-time. As was its nature, it did not question the change in its programming, and indeed, the changes did not go deep. Its primary goals lay beneath, untouched, and now its consciousness flashed throughout the ship that was its body, seeking the Tallis-biont that might yet be key to fulfilling its primary purpose.

Microseconds later the logos found the former captain of the *Satansclaw*, staring at a viewscreen deep within the ship. Moisture was leaking from the biont’s remaining image receptor, and its physiological parameters were

confusing, as though it were preparing to fight, or flee. Confused by the conflicting emanations from the Tallisbiont, the executive invoked the subjective mode, and for the second time awoke the god from his dreams.

o0o

Ruonn tar Hyarmendil, fifth eidolon of the fleshly Ruonn, cybernetic exile within the logos he himself had programmed, rolled over in his opulent bed as a quiet tone sounded within the seraglio. The two houris moaned with disappointment, but he pushed them aside as a projection appeared above him. The apologetic face of his vizier appeared.

“The Great Slave desires an interview with the god.”

Moments later the knowledge of his true condition came back to him, and he sprang out of the bed. An unfamiliar, almost painful weight between his legs drew his eyes downward, and he stared pop-eyed at his manhood, enormous beyond his wildest dreams in the rapture tanks at home. A dizzying sense of unreality assailed him, but he asserted himself and willed himself into congruence with the ship—he would deal with the sexual programming problem later.

Slowly the *Satansclaw* fitted itself around him, filling

out his senses with perceptions that no biological human would ever experience. He could feel the engines, the pulse of vital air and water through the fabric of the ship, the tingling discharge of electrical power and data permeating every centimeter of circuitry. But there was something strange about the feeling, almost something missing, and when he reached out for understanding his mind slid away from him until he returned to the task at hand.

“THE PARAMETERS OF THE TALLIS-BIONT ARE CONTRADICTORY. ADVISE BEST TECHNIQUE FOR CONDITIONING.”

Ruonn accessed the memory nodes. Not surprising. Tallis had lost control, and the Ozmiront had taken over. What did surprise him was that Anderic had activated the logos. Would it be possible to work with him?

No matter, he decided, it would still be best to try to program Tallis for more cooperation, holding open the possibility of eventually restoring him to command and guaranteeing a return to Barca laden with data for the Matria, and reunification with his archetype. *With Tallis properly conditioned, I will yet surpass Rimur, with the ten progeny he was granted for the data his first eidolon collected.*

Well, then, this would be simple enough. Revenge was an excellent tool for conditioning. Willing a virtual console

into existence, Ruonn set to work.

oOo

Tallis choked back a sob as he stared at the comscreen, watching the destruction of all the beautiful furnishings he'd labored so long to earn. All around him the machinery of the bilge throbbed and hummed, breathing a warm fetor over him, like the breath of some vast carrion eater with a taste for bad cheese.

He sat down on the edge of a recycling injector, then sprang back to his feet as a sudden, dull clunk and a painful twist in his groin reminded him of the Emasculizer Anderic had fastened on him. He cradled the bulge in his crotch, shifting it from side to side in a vain attempt to find a comfortable position for the sphere firmly leeches around his member. *If I don't get this off soon, my nacker'll be hanging down around my knees.*

He sat down again, more carefully, and looked back at the screen, which was beginning another replay of the reentry fireworks his former comtech had devised. The symbolism of the imager-angle Anderic had chosen was not lost on him. He knew what would be the sequel, in what had been his cabin, and the knowledge enraged him.

He lifted a hand to the patch over his eye. The empty

socket still throbbed. The memory of the pain was fading, thank Telos, but the memory of his screaming, and the laughter of Barrodagh, would never leave him. And Anderic had been there, too.

His mind spun off into fantasy, grasping for a revenge sufficient for such betrayal. Slowly, a very satisfying image assembled itself in his mind's eye, overlaid on the glorious destruction of his cabin contents above Arthelion. Anderic drowning in vacuum, eyes bleeding as they bulged from their sockets, the veins in his face breaking out in varicose webs of bluish red, the rich arterial blood gushing from his nose and ears as the emptiness of space sucked the life out of him.

Tallis' eye socket started throbbing harder — there seemed to be a strange flicker in the viewscreen. But he ignored the discomfort, devouring the image of pain before him as the destruction of his former life aboard the *Satansclaw* played over and over again amidst the stench of his new abode.

oOo

Ruonn sat back from the console, satisfied by the subliminal loop he'd invoked. There was a long way to go, but the combination of the image from reality with the

graphic effects he'd created from the ship's records of Anderic was a good start.

He watched as the destruction of Tallis' furniture was played again. That Anderic had a good eye for effects. The angle from which the imager was relaying was quite effective—

Without warning, a wave of intense pleasure fountained up through Ruonn, filling the inside of his head with light and washing away the console and his knowledge of the ship around him. Quite without transition he found himself again at the edge of his bed, facing three houris, their eyes wide with astonishment.

He looked down at himself. The sight of his immense engorgement triggered him into an explosion of pleasure, and a wash of flame spewed out of his member, engulfing the houris in wave after wave of polychrome splendor as they shrieked and writhed with ecstasy. Ruonn laughed at the surge of inexhaustible potency that possessed him.

o0o

Satisfied that the conditioning of both Tallis and Ruonn was proceeding properly, the executive relegated the god and the ex-captain to the attention of some slave-nodes and flashed back throughout the ship in search of

more knowledge. Locating the Anderic-biont, it watched as he carried the Luri-biont toward a dormition space to execute the curious procreational functions characteristic of bionts.

Many, many millions of microseconds would doubtless elapse before the new captain remembered to shut down the logos. It would make good use of that time.

o0o

Anderic paused before the hatch of his cabin. Above it the indicator flashed a rotating quarter section, black against yellow. "Quarter-gee?"

Luri nibbled at his ear. "To start with. And then Luri has some kama for null-gee she thinks Pham will like."

With his elbow Anderic tabbed the control, feeling her grow light in his arms before the hatch opened. He carried her through, setting her down with a flourish. "Surprise!"

He watched with pride as she looked around the newly refurbished cabin. Gone were the overstuffed, curlicue furnishings that made him feel like he was sitting on somebody's face. Instead, the room now exhaled an air of cool refinement, the sparse lines of the furniture and the paintings, tapestries, and sculptures artfully arranged about the cabin bespeaking an effortless elegance that only

the highest of Douloi could either conceive or afford. Armed with a *carte blanche* from Barrodagh, Anderic had taken it unchanged from a Douloi palace on one of the Highdwellings. He was sure that no other Rifter had so elegant a cabin.

“What do you think”? All that old blunge went out the airlock for your fireworks show.”

An explosion of red pain against his cheek, accompanied by a sound like a slashcat caught in a shredder field, knocked him off balance and impelled him with dream-like slowness against a bulkhead. He clawed at a tapestry to regain his balance, which only brought it down on top of him. As he thrashed to escape from its smothering embrace, Luri’s foot caught him agonizingly in the crotch.

“You blunge-eating Shiidra-chatzing defiler of every orifice your mother ever had or conceived of!” Luri shrieked, her glossy dark hair writhing around her head like snakes. “I’m gonna kick your nacker so far up inside you that you’ll choke to death the next time you get kewpy!”

Anderic rolled frantically across the cabin, scattering the delicate furniture and bringing a hail of small objets d’art down with low-gee slowness as several tables and pedestals overturned. Luri followed. The only thing that

saved him from worse damage from her sharp-pointed shoes was her tendency to bounce into the air every time she kicked him. He flailed against the embrace of the tapestry, which clung as though determined to devour him, like one of the raptor-slugs of Acrasidora.

“I spent *months* choosing that furniture and arranging it. It was *beautiful*, it was what I’d always *wanted*, and you *trashed it out the airlock and burned it up.*”

Finally Anderic managed to struggle to his feet, ripping the tapestry away from him, only to see a heavy statuette flying straight at his face. He jumped, and the figurine, of some many-armed god engaged in sexual congress with several women, caught him in the chest and knocked him back against the wall. Luri also flew backward from the reaction of throwing the heavy piece, but she recovered and tabbed the hatch open, her curves losing some of their exaggeration as the grav came back to normal. A curious crewman looked in as she paused in the hatch, her hair once again swinging gloriously around her shoulders.

“Don’t you even think of getting near me, you blunge-suck excuse for a dilenja.”

The crewman grinned, then hastily withdrew as he caught sight of Anderic’s face, but the Rifter knew he was still watching.

"I'm gonna find real satisfaction, with someone who really cares," Luri announced at the top of her voice, and flounced away.

As the hatch slid closed, Anderic remained slumped against the bulkhead, looking around at the ruins of his cabin, knowing the crew would be talking about it before Luri reached whoever it was she'd chosen.

o0o

TELVARNA

Osri Omilov set the tray down at the bedside, anxiously looking at his father though he tried not to see that gray stubble over his scalp, and the healing scabs from the torture machine.

Sebastian Omilov smiled weakly. Osri tried to return the smile, but couldn't. He sent an angry look at Montrose, who hulked in the doorway. Osri had been waiting a week to be able to talk to his father. The surgeon had claimed it was necessary to put his father into a medical coma due to the brain disturbances caused by the torture machine.

"A monster was in here... or was I dreaming it?" Omilov asked, his thready voice managing to sound amused.

Osri forced a sort of smile. 'You saw Lucifur, the ship's

cat. And monster is right.”

Montrose put in cheerfully, “He’s big, he’s curious to the point of obsession, and he’s got terrible taste in people.”

“He follows me everywhere.” Osri’s voice was dry. “He’s also gennated.”

“Hard for a cat otherwise in free-fall,” Montrose added, still cheerful. And he flicked a meaningful look at Osri.

“Eat,” Osri said to his father. “Regain your strength.” *We’re going to need it to escape from these people who won’t let me tell you that we are prisoners.*

Omilov blinked, then made an obvious effort to sit up. Under him the bed adjusted.

“I believe I am able to distinguish now what is reality and what is nightmares,” Omilov whispered. “We are on a ship, that much I know. And Brandon is truly safe?”

Osri met Montrose’s eyes, licked his lips, then said, “The Aerenarch is with us.”

“Aerenarch. Not Krysarch,” Omilov said, wincing. Omilov struggled again, his right hand moving restlessly over the bedcover. “So I remembered that rightly. What ship is this?”

“The *Telvarna*,” Montrose put in smoothly. “My name is Montrose, and I am your surgeon. You must eat now,

and sleep again. There will be time enough for talk when you've recovered some strength. Your heart took a great deal of damage."

Omilov sighed, his hand relaxing. "Very well," he said. He smiled at Osri. "Come back and see me soon, son."

Osri forced a return smile, though the violence in his heart made it nearly impossible. What he really wanted was to strangle Montrose. *Except it would take a Tikeris android to down that monster*, Osri thought grimly as he left.

He went back to the galley, as he was still technically on the duty these Rifter scum had forced onto him. His hands were now skilled enough at the chores he'd been allotted, so he did not need to pay much beyond superficial attention to the preparation. His simmering anger rose towards rage, liberated perhaps by at last being able to talk to his father. After a short interval he swept the preparation area clean and slammed out of the galley.

The corridor was empty, but a moment after he dashed headlong toward the cabin he shared with Brandon vlith-Arkad, there was an odd whisper in the air, and he felt the presence of the small white-furred sophonts who called themselves the Eya'a. Sophonts? Psionic killers.

He stopped short as they emerged from a hatchway, both pairs of multifaceted eyes staring straight at him. One

of them opened its round blue mouth, revealing rows of tiny teeth, and he shuddered and backed away. The Eya'a passed on, their twiggy feet scratching faintly on the deck plates.

Osri stopped, trying to still the pounding of his heart. Vivid images of the Dol'jharian torture chamber from which his father had been rescued, as described by Lokri, forced their way into his mind: the fallen Dol'jharians, their eyes exploded from within, and their screams beforehand as the Eya'a boiled their brains with psi energy.

The captain of the ship appeared in their wake, her black gaze brief but considering. Fully as tall as he, Vi'ya was in her own way as unsettling as the Eya'a. She rarely spoke, but there was a disturbing undertone in her soft voice; Osri detested her at least as thoroughly as he did her crew.

She said nothing to him as she passed by, a strong-shouldered figure in unrelieved black, her only affectation the long black hair clipped high on her head, swinging freely down past her hips. Her tread was soundless as she disappeared into her cabin after the Eya'a.

Osri breathed relief, and slapped the hatch-panel to his cabin, where the click and scrabble of dog toenails on deck plates warned him that one of those dogs was in the

cabin a second before he heard Brandon say, "Platz." The dog leaped down from the console chair and lowered itself to the ground, haunches ready to spring, forelegs braced, head up and alert.

"Good platz," Brandon said, and "Fry." The dog leaped up, tail wagging, tongue lolling as Brandon ran his hands over its face and ruff. "Can't sleep, either?" Brandon asked.

Osri entered, making an impatient sound as his knee collided with the dog.

"Sitz," Brandon said, and the dog sat, eyes shifting from Osri to Brandon.

Osri stared impatiently, imagining that he read wariness in the dog's face when it looked at him, but adoration for its idiot master, though that master didn't look all that pleased. Brandon's blue eyes were marked with exhaustion, the skin across forehead and cheekbones taut with tension.

It seemed two years instead of merely two ship-weeks since the euphoria of escape from the Dol'jharions who held Brandon's home on Arthelion. They'd managed to escape seconds before a vicious death—but to what?

"Can you get rid of it?" Osri pointed to the dog.

Brandon's brows rose, but he said "Raus," and patted the dog as it shot out into the corridor and away, toe

clicking rhythmically.

Osri shut the hatch, tabbed the lock, and said hoarsely, hating the strain in his voice that he could not hide, "We have to plan."

Brandon's eyebrows rose. "We? Have to plan?"

Taking his tone for offense at his presumption of equality, Osri sketched a bow of deference – difficult in the cramped quarters – and said, "Your plans, my lord Aerenarch."

Brandon gave a dry laugh. "Sarcasm, Osri, should be subtle, or it becomes merely caricature. One of the titles of lesser degree would have conveyed your lack of respect for me quite nicely, unless you wish to make an oath – and perform the required Reverence?"

Osri gritted his teeth. *I've always hated him, and he knows it.* "I use the heir's formal title to remind you of that which you seem to have forgotten, namely that you are now the heir – through the most appallingly regrettable circumstances – and that as such, you have a duty to escape these criminals and to bring your father to safety."

"I have not forgotten, Osri," Brandon said.

"Then what is your plan for the taking of this ship so we can seek whatever remains of the Navy? Tell me, I am yours to command!"

The silence in the small cabin grew protracted as Osri

stood gazing at Brandon, no longer trying to hide his anger.

Finally Brandon looked up at him, his expression sober. “How would you handle it? We haven’t any weapons. Put a drug in the food, perhaps, shove the crew into the galley, and bar the hatch? Or should we somehow kill them all and dump them out the locks?”

“We are at war, Aerenarch, and it is Rifters who began it.”

“But not these Rifters. They are not allied with Dol’jhar. They saved your father’s life, and ours.”

“To what purpose? At best to make a profit, which apparently *you* offered them—”

“Why don’t you ask them?” Brandon said, hand out. “Or even ask your father. You don’t really want my opinion, any more than you would perform a plan of mine should I come up with one. Speak your piece, or clear out.”

Osri went on formally, “If you cannot form a plan, Your Highness, will you place yourself under my command?”

Brandon’s face slowly blanked again, into invincible—and unreadable—politesse. “No,” he said. “Whatever their intentions toward us are, whatever happens, I feel now that to attack the crew of this ship would be a breach of

faith.”

Osri clenched a fist and brought it down on the edge of the bunk with a gesture of barely controlled violence. “A breach of faith,” he repeated with bitter scorn. “To hear you mouth that phrase disgusts me beyond endurance! For a light-forsaken coward, a deserter, who abandoned the highest authority in known space in order to escape unpleasant duty and run to Rifiers, to talk of breach of faith goes past irony into the blackest dishonor. Thousands of people have died performing unpleasant duties because honor demanded no more than that! And millions more like them have sworn allegiance to your family – would swear to you since the rest of your family is dead –”

Osri gritted his teeth, breathing hard. Brandon said nothing, his only movement the twisting of the signet ring on his hand.

“You had better keep your faith with your Rifter scum,” Osri said finally. “When I get my father off this ship and back to our people – and I shall do it, or die trying – it will not be duty but pleasure to speak to all who will hear me about your sense of honor. I only hope your father is dead so he will not have to suffer the shame of hearing it, for not even my allegiance to the Panarch will silence me.” He stopped, his breathing ragged, and glared down at Brandon, who lifted his hands.

“Do what you want, Osri,” he said wearily. “I hope your honor and duty will always be so simple to define, and to follow.”

Osri lifted his fist, hit the hatch control, and lunged out before the hatch was fully open, seeking privacy.

It was hard to find, harder to keep. Since his first moment on this ship, wherever he’d gone, aside from his cabin, a Rifter had either been there or one showed up. None of them showed any shame at the open use of their boswells.

He finally ended back in the galley, where he slapped at his wrist to record his thoughts, before he remembered that his own boswell was gone.

He dropped onto a stool and gripped his head in his hands.

o0o

The angry-one directs anger at you. Perceive you danger, shall we amend with fi?

No. Again I repeat, if I perceive danger from other humans I will share direction, but again I repeat, you do not amend a human with fi, you cause its cessation. Again I repeat, each is a one.

We move in a chaos of noise, we fear.

You Eya’a are among us to seek knowledge of us, therefore

again I repeat, contemplate cessation. Your world-mind had once a beginning, it could have an end. This end would not be amendment, it would be cessation for the Eya'a.

The one-with-three contemplates cessation, in fear. It seeks amendment.

One with three?

Damaged-one with new memories of three-nonhuman.

We will amend the damaged-one-with-three so he will not cease.

In our next withdrawal we will celebrate knowledge of cessation.

You can protect yourself from danger from humans with fi, but again I repeat, you are not amending human actions, you are destroying an entity.

Amendment promotes growth in Eya'a. We seek to amend the chaos, we seek wisdom from Vi'ya.

Again I repeat, this chaos is formless, it is many minds existing but disunited. Again I repeat, continue to separate-and-hear one-patterns. I shall now bring forth the object you have named the eye-of-the-distant-sleeper, for our contemplation...

o0o

Montrose tapped at the main med console, catching up with his notes, glancing up from time to time at the patient he was now most concerned about.

He had brought Ivard's bed out into the main dispensary, where the boy now reclined before the big wallscreen, watching a vidchip on the Kelly that explained the breakthrough in understanding between humans and the green sophonts who always moved in threes.

Trev trotted in, giving Montrose a brief sniff and a flick of tail. Before Montrose could react, the big dog leaped up onto the bed. Montrose raised his hand, words of protest shaping his lips, but the animal settled down carefully on Ivard's free side. Gray, the wounded dog, was already lying next to Ivard on the other side, its spine against Ivard's leg. Ivard's hand stretched over Trev, and Montrose went back to work.

From time to time Ivard snickered as the vid displayed impassive Panarchists, resplendent in their formal gowns and tunics, slapping and poking at the Kelly headstalks with as much grace as they could muster. The Kelly really were graceful, their continual dance as they patted and touched one another mesmerizing, the ribbons covering their bodies writhing and fluttering as if sentient. The trinity's honking and twittering voices also made Ivard grin.

The vid went on with some information about the Archon's phratry, showed scenes from the lush, humid Kelly planet, ending most startlingly on a huge mountain

whose stone was carved faithfully into facsimiles of three human faces.

“There were three of them,” a Kelly bassooned. “Most Kelly-like.” The Kelly made a sound like a prolonged ratcheting sneeze and the two larger ones on either side of it slapped it gently on top of its torso.

“Three,” Ivard said, his fingers rubbing the dogs’ ears at either side. “There are three of us, eh, dogs?”

The vid shifted then to the ancient monochrome flatvid that had occasioned that breakthrough, and Ivard cracked up at the manic antics of the three men in the picture, poking and slapping at one another without apparent damage.

When the vid ended, Ivard looked up, his face expectant. “Do they ever do anything alone?”

Montrose shook his head. “They do everything in threes. If you were to find one alone, it would indicate a grave emergency.”

Ivard ruffled Gray’s ears, as the dog leaned into his hand. “So, what about the Kelly medtech?”

So much for distraction. “We’ll find out all we want to know when we reach al-Ibran’s Chirurgicon at Rifthaven,” Montrose said. “Remember, the Kelly are the best physicians in the Thousand Suns. Now sleep. You’ll heal faster that way.”

“I don’t like sleeping here alone.” He blushed as Montrose looked significantly at the dog. “I want to be back in our cabin. Jaim said it wasn’t the same without me.”

Montrose hid his amusement. *No, I don’t suppose it is.* The Serapisti was a wonderfully patient man, an ideal cabin mate for a boy in the gawkiest phase of his adolescence – physically a young man, but emotionally still so young.

Jaim was probably enjoying his solitude.

“I can’t send you back to your cabin until you heal more, and that means sleep.”

He watched Ivard’s thin, drawn face relax incrementally as he lowered himself onto the bed. Gray hopped down and trotted away, nose to the deck plates as was usual with both dogs. Montrose pushed the bed back into the berth and closed the door.

A shadow loomed; Vi’ya’s black eyes assessed Montrose without giving away her own thoughts, then she said, “How is he?”

“He’ll hold, but for how long I can’t tell,” Montrose said. “I’d like to move him back in with Jaim – more contact with the crew will do him good – but don’t know if he’s stable enough.”

“Burn? Or the ribbon?”

“The burn isn’t that serious, but it isn’t healing as fast as it should. It’s the Kelly ribbon. I think it’s trying to change his immune system.”

“The Eya’a say he is afraid.”

Montrose expelled his breath in a sigh. “So am I.”

o0o

DESRIEN

Eloatri smiled at the children seated in front of her in the dusty courtyard. The day, past its peak and drawing toward evening, was hot but not oppressive; the shade of the huge higari tree that shaded the way-hostel was refreshingly cool, but its vinegar/vanilla scent made her nose itch. From the hostel came the quiet hum of the conditioners, cooling the interior, and the faint bleeping of a console.

The children were quiet. Some were standing, most seated. Many of these had imitated her posture, assuming the ancient lotus position with the effortless flexibility of youth. They ranged widely in age, some as young as seven years, others nearing adulthood. In some the spirit glowed white-hot, in others, like banked coals – and a few, she judged, would leave Desrien when their majority came, unable to tolerate the soul-mirroring airs of the planet.

She began to speak. "Desrien and all its beliefs and faiths rest in the Hand of Telos, which has five fingers." Her hands moved in the pattern of the *mudras*, adapted from her own tradition, that were part of the language of the Magisterium. "These principles enfold us all, but there are many ways to speak and hear and live them. I will share mine with those of you who wish."

Some of the children leaned forward, eager to hear. Others listened politely, with the respect they had been taught was due a Phanist, the highest rank in the Magisterium. At the back of the group stood a small, redheaded boy, with the pale, blotched skin of an atavism, his gaze hungry with an indefinable longing. She smiled at him and continued.

"We all encounter the numinous, a message from something that is beyond all measurement and knowledge." Her left hand was poised beside her at eye level, palm-up as if supporting a water jar; her right touched the top of her head, the center of her forehead, and the center of her chest in a fluid movement.

"We all possess some fragment of whatever sends these messages, however we may conceive it." Both her hands came together vertically before her eyes, cupped around a space, and then descended to her chest.

"We all live a story which has no ending we can see or

understand." Now she brought both her hands together before her, thumbs and middle fingers touching in a circle parallel to the ground. She transformed the circle into the ancient symbol of infinity by bringing the fingers and thumbs together, then rotated her right hand until its palm faced outward, thumb to finger and finger to thumb, and folded her hands together, circle to circle. The symbol of the projective plane, true infinity.

From beyond the group of children, the redheaded boy watched, but his hands were busy with something she couldn't see, hidden behind the heads of those seated in front of him.

"We all suffer because we are attached to things that really don't matter." Here she used one of the most ancient of the mudras, Turning the Wheel of the Law.

The red-haired boy began tossing the object in the air rhythmically; it was a small silver ball. The setting sun sparked highlights off of it, small splashes of glory dappling the deepening shade of the tree overarching the courtyard. A wave of dizziness and disorientation overwhelmed Eloatri and she fell out of the world into the Dreamtime.

The path was dull gray, wide and edgeless, suspended in an infinite space. A golden light shone from behind her. She turned and beheld the face of the Buddha at the beginning of the path, inhumanly calm and indwelling with transhuman compassion, its lips curved in a smile terrible with possibilities.

The Buddha's eyes opened. She shriveled under his gaze. His mouth opened on a soundless resonance as the Word resounded throughout the Wheel of Time and a slow procession of figures came forth, all dressed in the finery of the High Douloi. Among them she saw the tall figure of the High Phanist, his face enshadowed in his cowl. There was the sound of weeping, and a blow against her heart.

o0o

Eloatri opened her eyes, staring without comprehension for a moment at the field of purple and yellow that slowly resolved into the dense canopy of the higari tree. Through its branches glimmered a star.

An anxious face bent over her, an elderly man with a green band around his forehead: a healer.

"Are you returned, bodhisattva?"

She levered herself up on one elbow, feeling light-

headed, and looked around. Most of the children were gone; a few still stood at some distance, looking worried. A small group of adults stood to one side, less worry in their faces than respectful waiting.

“Yes.” She sat up as the dizziness passed. The redheaded boy was not among the remaining children. She felt his loss. His spirit had glowed brighter than his hair.

“The redheaded boy,” she said. “With the pale skin. Where is he?”

The healer hesitated, puzzlement lengthening his face.

“The one who was standing at the back of the group, playing with a silver ball.”

The healer sighed, apparently considering his words, before replying. “There is no redheaded boy in this village.”

FOUR

PANARCHIST BATTLECRUISER *GROZNIY*

From his seat at the senior table, Lieutenant Commander Mdeino ban-Nilotis could see most of the junior officers bridge wardroom— not surprising, given that he topped most on *Grozniy* by a head. That didn't help him see into the little alcoves that ensigns tended to hide in to avoid catching extra duty. But right now, an hour before watch change, the compartment zinged with nervous energy and he was sure those alcoves were empty.

Nilotis was better than most of his rank at the peripheral people-watching required of officers. He'd had to be, given that the heritage of the *bomas* of Nyangathanka had given him not only a elongated build but flaming red hair and night black skin. One did not overlook Mdeino ban-Nilotis in most company, no matter how much he might wish you to.

He needed every bit of that talent right now. The next watch would see the battlecruiser *Grozniy's* emergence back into the Thousand Suns after seven months out-

octant. The most animated conversations in the wardroom – those in which hands shaped air and lips shouted laughter – surely involved boasts and speculations about the coming liberty in Wolakota System, famous – or notorious – for its hospitality to Naval personnel.

Other colloquies were more sober, though no less intense, as revealed by the set of shoulders here, and fingers stiffly tapping the table over there. Beyond Wolakota, a few weeks further into Rouge Nord octant, lay the end of their tour of duty and the further definition of career trajectories: the summing up of rank points gained or lost, new assignments, new ships, new captains.

And then there were the junior officers Captain Ng was rotating into the alpha crew for the first time this next watch, the most senior of whom sat across the table from Nilotis right now.

Nilotis grinned at Lieutenant Rom-Sanchez, who was picking at his food. “Gee-flutters, Sergei?”

Rom-Sanchez dropped his fork on his plate and pushed his food away. Like the rest of his body, his hands were lean and quick-moving. Next to him Lieutenant Denil Methuen chuckled in a light baritone. “He’d rather be back in the lock of that bubbloid.”

Rom-Sanchez was spared the necessity of a reply as

Lieutenant Tang dropped into the seat next to Nilotis. "I can never resist a look of misery," she said brightly, her straight black hair swinging about her ears, a couple of centimeters past regulation. "Especially on the face of the most junior lieutenant in the wardroom an hour before his appointment with destiny."

"Thanks, Mabel," Rom-Sanchez muttered. "You're such a comfort."

"Anytime, Sergei. Just remember, all those Rifiers could have done was kill you. Hero."

Nilotis laughed. "That's enough of that. Denil and I have had sufficient time to get his head back to normal size since the Captain's momentary lapse in judgment." He canted a look at the new lieutenant's tabs Rom-Sanchez was trying not to finger.

"It's our duty." Methuen nodded soberly. "We have the ship's reputation to think of."

Everyone laughed, but Nilotis noted how forced Rom-Sanchez's was, and dropped the teasing. "Sergei. Look at it this way. Giving you tactical on the alpha crew is the captain's way of underscoring your success at Smyrna. As your last station on this tour, it will look good on your record, especially since it's not for just any emergence, but our triumphant return to civilization."

Rom-Sanchez snorted at the mockery in the last

phrase, but shook his head doubtfully.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about,” said Methuen. “Wolakota’s a liberty port, not an out-octant hellhole like Smyrna or Breakpoint. Tactical’s a sinecure on an emergence like this: Captain’s actually going easy on you.”

“Right.” Nilotis tipped his chin towards a short, powerfully-built lieutenant watching two other officers playing L-4 Phalanx, the Tenno version forbidden in tournament play but popular throughout the Navy for both training and entertainment. “Mzinga, there, he’s on Nav – always possible to screw up at that station, no matter where we come out.”

Rom-Sanchez glanced in that direction, and his brows contracted in a quick frown. Nilotis realized that Rom-Sanchez wasn’t paying any attention to Mzinga. His attention was on the console, specifically the Tenno evolution one of the players was attempting.

Then Rom-Sanchez shook his head and turned back again. “Yeah, but Mzinga’s been alpha before.”

“He had a first time, too. We all did, at least on *Grozniy*. Lot of ships you can’t say that about.”

Rom-Sanchez grimaced but said nothing. As far as Nilotis knew, the younger officer was largely apolitical, although it was hard to tell whether that was innate or the regrettably necessary discretion practiced by Highdwellers

like him in a Navy increasingly dominated by the Aerenarch Semion's Downsider connections. *Well, we don't have to worry about that with Margot Ng at the helm, even if it does mean we spend most of our time out-octant.*

As if to belie his words, the wardroom hatch slid open, and Nilotis didn't need to look up to know who had just entered the compartment. The sudden bubble of quiet and the wariness of the two young lieutenants told him it had to be Lieutenant Commander Eisel ban-Tessler.

"Uh, oh," said Tang under her breath. "Stuffcrotch has that brass-polishing look of his, and I'm on my tween watch, which means 'available for scut work' as far as he's concerned."

Accurate as the epithet was, Nilotis had to uphold the respect for rank that made Naval hierarchy work smoothly, and he glanced Tang's way.

She flushed. "Tell you what, Sergei, why don't you take another shot at convincing me that Warrigal's L-5 Phalanx doesn't rot your brain?" Her gaze flickered to Nilotis. "Lieutenant Commander Tessler won't bother us there."

Nilotis suppressed a smile. He'd heard the faint emphasis on Tessler's rank and name. Tang was always trying for the lower orbit, trying to keep ahead, which tended to cost her rank points that her ability would

otherwise garner.

“How about you, Denil?” Tang turned his way.

The other lieutenant shook his head theatrically.

“Brrrr! No way I’m letting that wire-dream blunge into my head – that would be all I need, transposing her impossible Tenno into the middle of a real fire fight.”

“Who’s going to be looking at the screen?” replied Tang. “Not me. I like watching the players sweat.”

The three juniors excused themselves just ahead of Tessler’s arrival at the table.

Tessler was carrying a compad as was his invariable custom. As he sat down, he looked after Tang and Rom-Sanchez with a sour expression that deepened the frown lines on his long face.

“Our newest lieutenant seems pretty casual about his first alpha,” he said. “Or does he think that fantasy Phalanx is a good warm up for Tactical?”

“I can think of worse,” replied Nilotis mildly, with a glance at Tessler’s compad.

Tessler’s lips tightened. Scuttlebutt had it that Tessler had entered the Academy with high hopes for a fighting career, with patronage linked to the Aerenarch. That he’d ended up in Supply was, Nilotis suspected, in large part because he had found the Tenno tactical glyphs difficult to master. There was nothing wrong with that – the Navy

needed logisticians as good as Tessler. But it wasn't good enough for the man himself.

"Well, he'll hardly gain any rank points kissing up to Warrigal."

Kissing up. Like too many Downsider officers, whose families were satellites to the older Tetrad Centrum clans, Tessler tended to see things first in terms of Douloi preference, then Naval rank. *A regrettably common viewpoint among many connected to the Aerenarch – especially those not invited to Narbon.*

"They're distantly related, I understand," said Nilotis, "and both in Tactical." Tessler's face soured even more at the reminder that the two juniors would have to acknowledge some acquaintance, given their families' relationship. "The Warrigals freighted Rom-Sanchez's Highdwelling, I don't know, three or four centuries back." *And the Warrigal shipping interests have helped start Highdwellings many times, since before there was a Panarchy, in fact. So Rom-Sanchez has little to worry about from you, especially since they're both under me, not in Supply.*

"As you say," said Tessler, somewhat stiffly, pushing his chair back a bit. Nilotis tended to loom over just about anyone on the ship. He called Nyangathanka home, a planet deep in the Tetrad Centrum that had joined the Panarchy in the first century of Jaspar's Peace. *There I go,*

doing the same right back at him. Disgusted with himself, Nilotis leaned back in his chair.

“I suppose it’s harmless enough,” Tessler continued. “It’s not as though *she’s* likely to have much to do otherwise, given the circumstances of her transfer from Narbon. No rank points, came out as she went in, an Ensign.”

Nilotis shrugged. “Captain seems happy enough with her. So am I. Her doctorate in tactical semiotics, coming so early, doesn’t hurt.”

“Doesn’t help much, either that I can see,” replied Tessler. “Close to a calculated insult to turn in a game as a thesis. A *game*,” he repeated in disgust. “While the Aerenarch struggles to build up the Navy to face a real threat.”

Nilotis managed not to roll his eyes. *Dol’jhar again.*

“Sorry, Eisel, I just can’t see a failed serial-chip empire as a real threat. It shattered like glass after Acheront. What’s left is maybe ten or fifteen planets with raving sociopaths barely in control, while Sodality syndicates make a fortune smuggling and jacker raids keep them off balance.” Nilotis laughed. “If they start to get out of line, there are entire Rifter fleets willing to take them on if we open up the Dol’jharian sector for bidding on a Writ.”

“You just don’t get it,” said Tessler in exasperation.

“Why did we just spend seven months out-octant from Rouge Nord? Because Eichelly dropped out of sight two years ago, just like Charterly and others.”

Nilotis snorted. “No surprise there. There were enough derogations to have put his Writ under litigation a dozen times over. The Justicials vacated it just before we left on patrol.”

“Exactly. It took them over a year, which ended up costing the Navy three battlecruiser tours of duty, plus who knows how many destroyer squadron tours? And that’s just for our assigned recognizance. It’s happening elsewhere. Raving sociopath or not, the Avatar of Dol’jhar is dispersing our forces.”

“To do what? With one capital ship?” asked Nilotis, wearying of the familiar argument. Tessler could hardly be expected to feel otherwise, not and expect to retain his connection to the Aerenarch, who would never forgive the murderer of his mother.

“You know how I see this. Eichelly, those others, are just part of the natural expansion of the Peace. He’s deep out-octant by now, establishing some petty fiefdom. He’ll either end up plasma, Shiidra food, or the founder of a polity that a few centuries from now will be petitioning for a protectorate. Yes, it costs tours of duty. That’s how it works, so I think it’s pretty senseless to build up a core

fleet that never leaves the Tetrad Centrum.”

The first watch-change bells sounded, interrupting Tessler’s reply, and Nilotis shifted his attention, watching the group around Warrigal break up and hurry to the hatch, on their way to the ready room. Tessler watched, too, stiff with disapproval.

They are cutting it close, Nilotis thought.

Warrigal, now alone, was still tapping intently at her compad as though nothing had changed. She often seemed to be in a world of her own, as though walking in the Dreamtime of her ancestors on Lost Earth. Was that why Captain Ng hadn’t yet given her a shot at alpha, despite her tactical skills?

Tessler followed the direction of his gaze, and snorted. “If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” He scooped his compad off the table and stalked out of the wardroom.

Relieved, Nilotis settled back to his watching-not-watching. He’d been working hard, and this was his wind-down before he hit the rack. He’d sleep through emergence so he could be fresh for Wolakota. Rom-Sanchez could handle this emergence in his sleep. Once he got used to being on the bridge under the captain’s eye. After all, what could possibly happen?

In the last few seconds of the countdown to emergence, Ng looked around *Grozniy's* bridge, wishing she could have more time with this new alpha crew, young as some of them were. They were smart, ambitious, and several of them were perhaps a bit too unconventional for their own good—just as she had been twenty-five years back. She hoped that their new captains would recognize their potential. Especially Rom-Sanchez. Aside from a regrettable emotional distraction of the sort she'd dealt with before, he'd demonstrated command potential on this cruise, and not just at Smyrna.

“Emergence.”

The descending tones of the bells blended with the quiet voice of the navigator as the battlecruiser *Grozniy* dropped back into fourspace with a barely perceptible shudder.

After a pause Lieutenant Mzinga looked up, puzzled. “No beacon, sir.”

Captain Margot O'Reilly Ng leaned forward in her command pod.

“SigInt. Verify.”

Yeo Wychyrski at SigInt tapped scrupulously at her console, her profile intent. Lieutenant Rom-Sanchez glanced at Ng from the tactical pod; she briefly checked his display echo next to the main screen and noted with

approval that he was already setting up the appropriate range of presets for a no-beacon emergence.

“All sensors functional, sir,” Wychyrski sang out. “No beacon.”

“Navigation, tactical skip, now.” The fiveskip’s faint basso profundo hummed momentarily. “Confirm our position. Engage drunkwalk skip-orbit around our emergence point at five light seconds. Tactical, take us to threat-level one.” *Grozniy* had come in using a standard trojan attractor point, so there was little doubt of where they were within a few light minutes.

Ng saw the impact of her orders in the postures of the crew, especially those new to alpha: transformed from nervous, under-the-captain’s-eye alertness to eager anticipation. Mzinga and Rom-Sanchez barely had time to echo her orders before the engineering officer sang out “Engineering reports teslas at threat-level one,” a heartbeat ahead of other station confirmations.

The Tenno rippled, accommodating the sudden change in position. “No ship traces within skipmissile range,” reported Wychyrski moments later.

Aside from the derogation at Smyrna, which had turned out to be a private Rifter feud that the losing party had tried to turn around by bringing in the Navy, it had been a long, boring patrol out-octant from Rouge-Nord.

Lots of time for drills, including, just a few weeks ago, the standard beacon-bashing scenario, where jackers destroyed the navigational beacon and fivespace conditions transponder, hoping to delay passing ships long enough for an intercept. Not very likely, now that they had returned to the Thousand Suns proper: Wolakota was just inside the ill-defined outer border of Rouge Nord octant. But still..

Decision crystallized in her. This was too good an opportunity to pass up.

“Lieutenant Rom-Sanchez,” she said.

He turned to her, startled, reminding her even more of a puppy, with his large brown eyes and curly dark hair that had the vestige of an cowlick over one eye, strictly clipped.

She’d used his name rather than his station. She saw comprehension dawning in him just ahead of her next words.

“Your captain just dropped dead, and you’re senior.” She smiled at the stricken expression on his face. “But I’ll leave you the rest of the crew, and I’ll take Tactical. You have the con.” With a swipe of her hand she transferred control to him, and took the tactical feed.

Rom-Sanchez blushed to the ears, then shifted his focus to the unremarkable starfield now on the main

screen. Ng saw some of the crew watching him, especially the two other members of what some officers derisively called “the L-5 Loonies” that she’d chosen for alpha: Ensigns Wychyrski and Ammant, SigInt and Communications. To the crew’s credit, there was no trace of *schadenfreude* or malice in anyone’s expression, often a problem when a potential lower-orbit junior officer was put on the spot.

Lieutenant Mzinga was not watching Rom-Sanchez. His fingers were dancing over the nav console, correlating the data delivered by the sensors scattered over the seven-kilometer-long hull of the *Grozniy*. The precision lent by its size enabled a battlecruiser to orient faster than any other ship in the absence of the flood of data furnished by a navigational beacon. The older officer appeared absorbed, but Ng detected the faintest compression of lips indicating a suppressed laugh.

A bit more quickly than she’d expected, Rom-Sanchez spoke, with only a trace of a stammer before he dropped into bridge cadence, the almost-singsong speech pattern that they learned in the academy as part of bridge protocol, meant to project a uniform impression of calm and control. “AyKay. I have the con. SigInt, crunch a ship-centric mass and energy summary for me while nav is working.” He hesitated briefly. “Tactical, work up a threat

assessment assuming we're at the Wolakota leading trojan. If jackers took out the beacon, what are we likely facing, given the strategic situation here?"

Ng saw from the tactical setup now on her console that he hadn't gotten to threat assessment before she'd ambushed him, but he was doubtless more concerned about that lack than she was. *So far, so good.*

"Spectrum match to Wolakota primary. Elevated asteroid density around the ship," reported SigInt. "Looks like a lot of collisional evolution, not much to hide behind. A good deal of asteroid thermal scatter sunward. Matches a trojan point emergence."

Like most systems with one or more gas giants in it, the Wolakota system had an asteroid belt inward from the sunward giant.

Ng watched Rom-Sanchez drumming his fingers on the arm of his pod as he stared at the main viewscreen. She would have preferred to see him observing the crew: the scattered points of light displayed there would reveal nothing. *If it's Rifters, they'll skip the second they see our pulse.* A battlecruiser generated an emergence pulse that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. Depending on how far out the Rifters were hiding, the *Grozniy* had only minutes before its prey fled.

"Very well," Rom-Sanchez said. Again, the slight

hesitation. "Tactical, give me a sigma on hiding places."

Ng popped up one of the Rom-Sanchez's preset windows on the main screen, a colorful probability plot centered on the assumed position of the ship. The plot shifted as Mzinga straightened up, his task finished.

"Position confirmed, sir. Wolakota system, absolute bearing 30.6 mark 358.8, plus 47 light-minutes." His mellow voice was even, but Ng heard his excitement in the quicker pace of his words. "That puts our initial emergence within one light-minute of the beacon's position at the leading trojan attractor of Wolakota Six."

That was as expected: their by-the-book approach had let the fivespace well created by the trojan attractor pull them into the system.

"No alerts on local widecasts. No links found," reported Ammant at Communications. The local authorities were either not alarmed or playing it safe.

Ng glanced at the sigma plot, reading the Tenno glyphs overlaid on it with the facility born of twenty-five years' practice. The asteroid belt sunward of their position was indicated on the plot by a series of faint green ring segments – k-zones – separated by the Kirkwood gaps where the periodic interaction with Wolakota Six swept away the debris left over from the system's formation. The rings' patterns, and various glyphs, indicated probable

density, composition, and other tactically important information. A few yellow dots marked the position of major asteroids.

The plot had one lobe flaring the red of maximum probability, about fifteen light-minutes away, concentrated in the ecliptic in the closest k-zone to Six. *Nothing there we didn't already know – the average calc time for commercial traffic is about thirty minutes or so – probably more given the fivespace conditions in this stellar neighborhood.*

Commercial traffic at the leading trojan was ships passing through the system, who couldn't skip locally any great distance without further compromising their safety on the next leg of their fivespace journey. That'd give their hypothetical Rifters – no doubt hiding behind a chunk of rock or ice, as usual – sufficient time intercept their prey.

It also meant that the *Grozniy* now had something less than fifteen minutes to find the intruders – if the beacon's destruction had indeed been deliberate.

Rom-Sanchez tapped his console and a countdown windowed up in a corner of the main screen, starting at ten minutes. *Good!* He was settling into his role as acting captain, and pushing the crew. His next order was crisp.

“Navigation, take us in to within five light-seconds of the attractor point. SigInt, run a scan for debris and radiation. Extrapolate time of destruction if you find

traces.”

The plot shifted as the fiveskip burped. One glyph indicated the presence of a Fleet tactical transponder nearby. Rom-Sanchez tapped at his console, highlighting the tacponder.

“SigInt, pop that tacponder and update Tactical immediately for threat assessment. Check its monitor status.”

Ng saw the impact, minor as it was, of the unnecessary last order: a slight hitch in the otherwise smooth flow of activity on the bridge. There was a brief silence on the bridge as Ensign Wychyrski began the scan. A window from Communications popped up on Ng’s console.

“No data from transponder,” she said. “Last update plus four months, no new threats reported, monitor mode off. Latest Wolakota data plus seven months, Pulwaiya tacponder.” That had been on their way out-octant.

“Tactical, assessment?”

“Worst case, Eichelly’s back, *sine lege*. Four Alphas in his fleet, three of them third-tranche.” It took a minimum of three destroyers to take on a battlecruiser, so the possibility they were facing a renegade Writ-holder with four of them made Eichelly a credible threat, even though one of his destroyers was more than 400 years old.

Rom-Sanchez’s eyes flicked towards Ng, and this time

he hesitated a bit longer – too long – but then his shoulders straightened. “Very well. Take us to threat-level two.”

By the book, so far. “AyKay. Ship status to threat-level two.” Rom-Sanchez betrayed mingled relief and desperation as Ng fell into bridge alert cadence and echoed his order, followed by the other stations’ secondary confirmations: relief that she hadn’t countermanded him, desperation that she wasn’t taking the con back.

I’m not taking you off the hook yet. They still didn’t have confirmation of hostile activity, and tactically, it was impossible that more than one destroyer would be able to take a shot at them at the beginning of an engagement, given a battlecruiser’s sensor platform. *Not that any jacker would be insane enough to do so.* In any case, there was no danger to *Grozniy*, now that its shields were powered up sufficiently. They were still tracking the standard scenario: nothing Rom-Sanchez couldn’t handle, if he didn’t over-think things.

The brassy tones of the alert pealed out, followed by the hiss of the tianqi increasing the airflow into the bridge. Ng breathed in, aware of the faint bergamot scent fading, replaced by a complex of pine, jasmine, and less familiar scents, calculated to promote alertness, balanced with rose and jumari, for relief of stress. She knew, but could not

sense, that the conditioners were also raising the ionization level slightly, and cycling faint subsonics at irregular intervals in a pattern that reached deep into the human thalamus with the age-old message: thunderstorm coming, be alert!

The aft hatch whispered open. Commander Krajno slipped into the pod on her left side, giving her a glance of muted surprise as he brought up his console.

“Dead again, eh?” Krajno’s gravelly voice perfectly matched his craggy, amiable face, like that of a boxer whose guard had been less than perfect during his career. It was a deceptive facade—Ng considered him one of the sharpest officers in the Fleet.

Wychyrski sang out, “Debris detected. Crystalline stress patterns of debris consonant with skipmissile impact. Dispersion indicates destruction about one hour ago, plus or minus ten minutes.”

Skipmissile, and only an hour past – that’s like a front-row seat.

Ng grinned at Krajno. His answering grin was feral, anticipating action after months of tedious patrol and training; Perthes was too scrupulous an executive officer not to get out of the rack when his captain ran drills at all hours, even if he didn’t have to.

Rom-Sanchez glanced their way. Ng kept her manner

neutral, and knew Perthes was doing the same. *Show time.* Her fingers tingled, longing for the feel of the command console, but taking control now would teach entirely the wrong lesson, possibly even destroy a budding career. She had to demonstrate her confidence in him.

Ng watched him take a deep breath as he pitched his voice for firmness. “General quarters. Engineering, rig engines for tactical maneuvers. Fire Control, ready all ruptors. Charge skipmissile.”

As the general-quarters klaxon rang out – a sound Ng knew dated back to the oceanic navies of Lost Earth – excitement and purpose showed in straightened spines and a quick exchange of grins. She could read them so easily – general quarters, no question whether it was real or a drill, and they were on alpha! On *Grozniy*, alpha crew stayed on through general quarters, which was why that status was both feared and sought after.

“Navigation, SigInt, coordinate a light-cone convergence on the beacon’s destruction and position us for observation. Start one light-hour out, normal to the ecliptic. Communications, full-scan record, give me a visual.”

The *Grozniy* leapt briefly into fivespace and as quickly out. The transitions were rougher this time: the lower frequency skip required for fine tactical movements was

hard on the engines. A faint whisper of datacode commenced.

“Beacon acquired,” said Wychyrski. They had skipped to a point outside the expanding wavefront marking the beacon’s destruction.

Another set of transitions, the fiveskip burping so briefly that an eyeblink would have missed it. The whisper ceased.

“No beacon.” Inside the wavefront.

Ng noted sweat on Mzinga’s brow, and his massive arms bulged against his trim uniform as he jumped the battlecruiser back and forth, struggling to get it to the desired position as quickly as possible. The countdown ticked off fifteen seconds more as the big ship continued its series of skips, which seemed on the edge of divergence.

“Navigation,” said Rom-Sanchez. “Try —” He stopped abruptly, and Ng knew that this time he had seen loss of flow when the crew shifted attention from their tasks to him. “Belay that. Carry on.” He leaned back in his pod, gaze taking in the bridge, then he relaxed as he comprehended everyone settling back into smooth action. *Good! Least action, best action. You’re learning.*

The fiveskip burped twice more.

“On screen.” Ensign Ammant at Communications

tapped at his console. A small targeting cross blinked at the center of the screen, and the faint whisper of datacode once again squealed onto the bridge from the doomed beacon.

Nothing happened for nearly a minute. Then a tiny flare of reddish light bloomed near the cross.

“Emergence,” Wychyrski said. “Signature indicates Alpha-class destroyer.”

Ng stroked the keypads at her station. “Signature ID’d. Eichelley’s *Talon of God*.”

The short chain-of-pearls wake of a skipmissile briefly connected the destroyer with the beacon, which vanished in an ardent burst of light. Then the destroyer vanished, leaving behind a reddish pulse.

The Tenno rippled furiously as the destroyer’s orientation on skip and other betraying aspects of its signature propagated through the bridge systems. “SigInt, find his emergence,” Rom-Sanchez ordered. “Navigation, drop us in five light-minutes out from his emergence, long-range, and then take us in to ten light-seconds on my mark. Fire Control, prepare ruptors for barrage at skip-smash level. We want him intact.”

The seconds stretched into minutes. Finally Wychyrski spoke, disbelief betrayed in her voice. “No emergence, sir. He’s gone.”

Ng leaned forward in her pod, glaring at the screen as if she could compel the Rifter to emerge. But there was no arguing with what the sensors showed. At normal skip speeds, the *Talon of God* would already be light-days away – and they were watching from a vantage point over an hour in the past. She shook her head, looking from Krajno to Rom-Sanchez, whose expressions mirrored her own feelings of confusion and anger – with perhaps a tiny bit of relief in the lieutenant’s.

She spoke to Rom-Sanchez. “Very well done, Lieutenant. I have the con.”

He swiped at his console, his face flushed with pleasure at her compliment, but the tremble in his fingers betrayed his relief. “AyKay, sir. You have the con.”

She raised her voice. “Stand down to threat-level one.”

“He bashed the beacon and skipped out of the system?” Krajno’s bass rumble was hesitant. “What the hell for?”

Ng bit her lip. “There’s been some suspicion about the disappearance of Writ-holders like Eichelly. That maybe it was to distract us from something else by pulling patrols out-octant. This stinks of concerted action across systems, so perhaps that ‘something else’ is coming down – and we need to get to the bottom of it.”

She pitched her voice to bridge cadence again.

“Navigation, SigInt, get me a precise vector on his skip.”

She stood up, motioning to Krajno and Rom-Sanchez.

“Genz, will you join me in the plot room?”

“Captain?” Ensign Wychyrski’s voice was uncharacteristically hesitant. “There was something odd about that explosion. Spectrum’s wrong for a skipmissile impact.”

“Very well, Ensign. Log it for analysis and give me a report. Lieutenant Mzinga,” she continued, “you have the con. Give us the vector soonest and stand by.

Communications, squirt a message to the Wolakota Node informing them it’s safe to replace the beacon. Set the Fleet tacponder to monitor status and ready a report for it, full record of this action. We’ll add our report in a few minutes.”

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