

Article 23

William R. Forstchen

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Typeset by Windhaven Press, Auburn NH Printed in the United States of America For Jeff Ethell, military aviation historian, who, on the day this book was finished, was killed flying a P-38 Lightning. As of the time of this writing it is believed that the plane suffered a major mechanical failure and Jeff sacrificed his life trying to bring it in safely rather than let a historic plane be destroyed.

Jeff's love of history, his ability as a writer, his dedication to honoring the memory of those who served in World War II, his devotion to his faith and his family, and his remarkable skill as a pilot were an inspiration to those fortunate enough to call Jeff friend.

All who knew you shall miss you, Jeff and thanks for the ride in the P-51 Mustang. It was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, and I'll never forget it or you.

"For you have slipped the surly bonds of Earth and touched the face of God."

From "High Flight" by John Gillespie McGee

Chapter I

Justin Bell was heading back to the stars.

He settled back in his chair and felt a chill of excitement race down his back as the airlock door to the Skyhook turbolift slammed shut. He looked over at Matt Everett, his best friend from the Academy, and smiled.

"Well, buddy, good-bye Earth, but back home for you," Justin said with a smile.

"I finally got a chance to see a sunset and go canoeing. There's a lot about Earth I'll miss," Matt replied wistfully.

"But gravity sure ain't one of them," Justin laughed.

Matt gulped and shook his head ruefully. The ultimate moment of embarrassment for the solar sailor had been when he jumped up a bit too quickly at the dinner table, forgetting that he would not simply float away. Instead, he crashed down on the table in the Chinese restaurant, ruining his dress white uniform.

"How you Earthsiders live with gravity all the time is beyond me," Matt said. "It'll be good to be able to

float again."

"We'll be back at the Academy soon enough," Justin replied.

It was hard to believe he was actually heading back to the Academy. Only two weeks ago he had thought for sure that he'd wash out at the end of the summer session. Thanks to the help of a lot of friends he managed (somewhat to his own surprise) to squeak through the Astro-Navigation course and was now returning for his first full year as a cadet at Star Voyager Academy.

"Please fasten seatbelts for liftoff," a computerized voice announced.

Justin settled down into his seat by the window and strapped himself in.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard Skyhook Tower One, first tower to the stars. This is passenger car number 338, departing at 1303 Greenwich Space Time, arriving at Geosynch Orbit Base at 1919 Greenwich Space Time. Even if you have traveled with us before, please pay close attention to the safety briefing."

Justin watched the computer screen mounted into the back of the seat in front of him as the crew pointed out where space suits were stored in case air pressure inside the cabin was lost. Justin shook his head at that one. If they had a catastrophic depressurization there would be just enough time to look at the instructions for getting the shit out of its bag before it was all over.

"If you have any further questions, please feel free to ask your computer, the serving 'bots, or your flight attendant. We are second in line for boost so please remain in your seats until the seatbelt light is turned off."

A shudder ran through the cabin and Justin looked out the window to watch the show.

He half-wished that he lived back in the old days before 2050 when there was only one way to get into space aboard a shuttle plane. He remembered his grandfather's stories about riding an old United States second generation shuttle, soaring to the heavens atop a pillar of fire. But those days were just about finished because of the Skyhook Tower, which was far safer and a hundred times cheaper for boosting a passenger into space.

The tower was opening up space. Well over a hundred thousand passengers per day were going up or coming back down on the thirty-seven thousand kilometer-high tower, along with several hundred thousand tons of manufactured goods and supplies.

Outside his window he saw the vast domed pavilion of the Rio Skyhook Terminal, packed with thousands of passengers rushing to catch their rides into space or waiting for those coming back. It was obvious who the space travelers returning to Earth were. Many of them had been too long away from the home world's standard gravity and moved slowly, or rode on small float chairs until they got used to gravity again.

"Departure in ten seconds," the computer notified them.

The Skyhook car shuddered again as it rolled along its track and then locked itself on to the side of the tower. Justin pressed his face against the window and looked out across the terminal. Dozens of cars, which were nothing more than long thin tubes eighty feet long and twenty feet wide, were loading up with passengers. On one side of the cars were the heavy magnetic locks that hooked to the tracks located on the side of the tower. The rest of the car was ringed with small porthole windows so that the hundred and twenty passengers on board could watch the show. Once loaded, the car, standing upright, slid out of its

terminal gate onto a conveyor track that guided it to one of the vertical magnetic tracks strapped to the side of the tower.

The cars would then ride up the side of the tower into space. Directly in front of the car the track would carry a negative charge while directly behind the car the track was positively charged, the combination propelling the positively charged car in the desired direction. It was the same system used in the magnetic levitation trains that now hooked the world together, with the Express running from New York to Los Angeles in five hours.

The lights in the cabin flickered slightly and the car started up. Justin felt the seat pushing into his back as the terminal floor appeared to drop away. A couple of seconds later they were through the top of the building. It was a scorching hot morning in Brazil, heat shimmers rising off the parking lot and the magnetic levitation train station outside the terminal. To the south of the passenger terminal Justin could see the vast warehouses where cargo bound for space and manufactured goods returning down the tower were stored. Rio had replaced Gape Kennedy and Star City in Russia as the major port into space, though Brazil would soon have competition when the second tower was finished in Indonesia just outside of Jakarta.

He felt as if he were sinking into the seat as the car sped up to over eight hundred kilometers per hour, the fastest it would go while inside the Earth's atmosphere. Within seconds they were nearly six kilometers above the ground.

Justin turned to the computer screen mounted on the seat in front of him and switched it to show the forward view.

Overhead the Skyhook Tower rose like a white finger pointing straight up into space. Of course it was impossible to see the far end of it, which terminated at just over thirty-seven thousand kilometers above the surface of the Earth. It was, he realized once more, the engineering miracle of the 21st century. It had been constructed from the top down. In the same way that the cables of a suspension bridge are woven together, back and forth across a river, the cables that made up the heart of the tower were lowered thirty-seven thousand kilometers down from space and anchored to the ground. It in fact had to be made in space, since the cables were uniquely engineered metal-carbon fibers, with strength ten thousand times that of steel at only a fraction of the weight. They could only be made in the zero gravity and vacuum of space. What was fascinating as well was that the tower was actually held erect by centrifugal force. The rotation of the Earth and the angular momentum thus created held the tower aloft.

The tower was really an elevator to the stars, with nine tracks mounted on the side of the tower. Two were for passengers, one up and one down, with cars departing every minute, and six for cargo, while the final track was for the maintenance crews.

Justin found it to be fascinating that there was a staircase inside the tower that went all the way from the ground up to the first station, which was located five hundred kilometers up. A bizarre new sport had developed with athletes wearing specially designed lightweight pressure suits racing up the steps; the world record for the climb was now just under twenty-two days. A rung ladder inside the tower went up for the next thirty-six thousand and seven hundred kilometers. A few crazies had asked to go for it, though it would take years to finish the climb. The UN and Colonies Space Commission had come down with a definite "No!" on that idea.

The computer screen showed that they were clearing the thirty-five-thousand-meter mark and Justin, glad that he wasn't climbing, looked back out the window. The sky was a deep indigo and he could now begin to make out the curvature of the Earth. Down below the entire Amazon basin was visible. The replanted jungle, which had been saved and regrown throughout the 21st century, spread out before him,

its dark green glowing warmly beneath the midday sun.

"I'll miss the green of Earth," Matt said wistfully.

"If we get home for Christmas I'll take you to a pine forest. After it snows it's wonderful, the pine boughs covered with white, everything so silent and smelling just wonderful."

Matt pressed his nose against the window for another look.

"Good-bye, Earth," he said almost sadly.

"Hey, we're heading back to the Academy, don't be so glum," Justin said.

"Yeah, I know. But it was my first time down there. I've been living out in space all my life going down to Earth was about as exciting for me as going into space is for you."

"No frontiers down there," Justin replied. "Space is where it's happening now, and we're part of it."

"If you survive the Academy," a threatening voice behind them commented.

Justin froze as he slowly looked over his shoulder.

It was Brian Seay, their senior cadet instructor from the summer session. Seay towered over them, looking like a shark contemplating his prey.

"How you doing, scrubs?" he asked.

"Glad to be going back, sir," Justin replied, trying to keep a knot from forming in his stomach at the sight of the dreaded senior cadet.

Brian grinned slightly.

"Relax, you two, scrub summer is past. Glad the two of you made it. As of tomorrow you're plebes. Plebes third class but still plebes, and that's a start at least. Congratulations!"

He leaned forward and extended his hand. The threatening look was gone and there was almost an air of comradeship to his gesture. Hesitating a bit, Justin shook it.

"Look, there aren't any other cadets aboard this shuttle car so lets just relax for awhile, OK?"

Seay settled down into an empty chair across from Justin and Matt and strapped in.

"We'll be playing the saluting game again once we get back out there. And besides, the word is you two guys are hot shots, regular heroes for risking your lives to save those two girls. I was proud to have you in my company this summer. You even made me look good!"

Matt blushed at the mention of saving Tanya and Sue. It had even made the news nets back on Earth and resulted in the two of them being interviewed by the local holo station in Lafayette, Indiana while they were there on leave. Matt, who was normally good for a long yarn, simply went tongue-tied when the camera was turned on him, so Justin wound up doing ninety-nine percent of the talking.

He looked down shyly at the red and gold stripe above his left pocket, the life-saving award given to any member of the United Space Military Command who risked his life to save another. He noticed for the first time that Brian was wearing one as well. Brian saw him looking at the decoration and smiled.

"It was nothing much, just a little depressurization accident down on the Moon. I breathed vacuum for a couple seconds when I went out to pull my roommate back in, and they made a big fuss about it later. Hell, the guy owed me twenty bucks on a falcon flying game I didn't want to lose the money!"

Brian laughed quietly and Justin looked at him with renewed respect.

"You joined the Vacuum Breathers' club?"

Brian nodded, a bit embarrassed.

The Vacuum Breathers' club was a mythical club open to anyone who had ever been exposed, without benefit of pressurized suit, to the vacuum of space. Quite a few were qualified to join it, the only problem was that the vast majority of people eligible for membership received their qualification by dying.

"What happened?" Justin asked.

"I really didn't have time to think," Brian said. "I heard the depressurizing alarm go off in my room right after I stepped out and closed the door. They figured out later that an old gasket seal on the window had let go. I looked through the door porthole and saw my roommate Abdul flopping around inside."

He hesitated for an instant as if the memory were alive and floating before him. "You know that once the pressure goes you can't open the door from the inside."

Justin nodded. It was a grim part of standard procedure better to lose the people inside rather than a whole station.

"There were no emergency suits in there and I figured that by the time I got one on he'd be finished. So I secured the door down the corridor behind me, called Base Central Control to release the safety on the door into the room, and went in after him.

"When I popped the door, we didn't have time to drop the pressure in the corridor. Luckily the door opened in rather than out. The moment I

opened the door it just exploded inward; I went in and dragged Abdul out. I got a mild case of the bends from it and my eyes hurt for a couple of days, but that was it."

"But what did it feel like?" Justin pressed.

"Sort of strange. I did like they told you to do in training, exhaled and kept my mouth open. If you try and hold the air in you might burst your lungs or eardrums. I couldn't close my eyes because I had to see what I was doing. I guess what got me the most was just how silent it was. The moment the door blew in and I went through, all sound just disappeared, I could see my breath rushing out and turning into a frozen fog, and I could feel the moisture on my eyes and in my nose and mouth just vaporizing. It sort of felt like stepping out into a subzero day. Just real cold."

"That's from the skin moisture boiling off when the atmospheric pressure drops to zero," Matt interjected. "Felt it myself a couple of times."

"Yeah," Brian said with a chuckle. "It was all over with so fast, though. They told me later I got in and out of there, carrying Abdul, in just under ten seconds and once I closed the door the corridor was repressurized in another ten seconds."

Justin wondered how he would have reacted. Brian made his decision sound so matter-of-fact. In reality, no one would have blamed him for following standard rescue procedure getting a suit on and calling for

backup before going in. But that would have taken several minutes and Abdul would have been dead. Brian had not hesitated to make a split-second decision that was a wager with death.

Justin was silent. He looked over at Matt, who appeared ready to start into a story of his own, but his friend simply smiled, knowing it was best not to play one-upmanship with a senior.

"It was no big deal," Brian said quietly. "It kills me how they still have those stupid holo movies where somebody gets caught in a vacuum and their eyeballs or sometimes their whole body just explode. Actually, I think dying in a vacuum isn't too bad a way to go. You just pass out after thirty seconds or so and it's all over."

Justin said nothing in reply. His father had been killed in space; so had Matt's parents he pushed the thought away.

Brian fell silent for a moment and looked out the window.

"Space has a lot of ways of getting you if you aren't on your toes."

Justin turned and looked back out the window, In the short time they had been talking the car had climbed through the four hundred thousand-meter level. The sky was shifting into black, and stars were visible. He could see clear across the Amazon Basin all the way to the snowcapped peaks of the Andes, the surface of the Earth curving away beneath him.

The seatbelt light clicked off.

"Let's go to the top observation deck," Brian said. "It's the best view in the house."

Surprised at how friendly their old nemesis was, Justin and Matt followed along. They crowded into the small elevator that connected the three floors of the car. As they stepped out onto the top floor Justin looked up with a gasp.

High-stress plexishield domed the top of the car, giving a full view in all directions and straight up. You could see the gleaming white pillar of the Skyhook tower rising into space above them.

"Here comes a car heading down," Matt said, and pointed.

It took Justin several seconds to pick it out, a small white cylinder which quickly started to grow in size. For a brief instant Justin felt a moment of panic since it looked like the car was on their track and coming straight in for a head on collision. The car snapped past them on a parallel track and disappeared.

The three settled into lounge chairs in the middle of the room to watch the show as every minute a downward-bound car shot past on the passenger track to their right. Every few minutes a heavy cargo pod whisked by on their left, loaded with several hundred tons of manufactured goods from space. Justin watched the pods go by, realizing just how those manufactured items from space were now so important back on Earth. The cars were loaded with high-grade plastisteel, a hundred times stronger than the old fashioned steel made on Earth, as well as drugs, ball bearings, computer chips, quartz holo cubes, and even the latest rages in the art world, sand cast sculptures from Mars and paintings from the Aquarius Three orbital colony, which was made up almost entirely of artists.

Some of the stuff those artists were putting out was beyond Justin's comprehension, but the galleries in New York, London, Moscow and Paris were all paying top dollar for it. Small communal colonies were setting up in space every month as groups of people, united by a wide variety of special interests, banded together, had a small orbital home built, and moved from Earth. There were art colonies, religious communities and monasteries, some rather weird cults and even one strange group who pretended they

were characters from a popular old television and movie series from the late 20th century.

A lot of older people were retiring to space as well, especially those with disabilities that would have slowed them down on Earth. At some of the colonies many people, born all the way back in the middle of the 20th century, were still going strong and having the time of their lives freed from the bonds of Earth's gravity, aided by the new longevity drugs manufactured in space.

"Here comes the five hundred kilometer station," Brian said. "We'd better get our seatbelts back on." Even as he spoke, the computer requested that all passengers return to their seats and buckle up.

The station looked like a huge donut, over one-third of a kilometer across and set like a ring around the tower. Justin gulped hard as the car started a rapid deceleration down to just thirty kilometers per hour.

As the speed dropped off Justin found that it was far easier to pick out details of the tower. The sides were coated with heavy plastisteel shielding. When the tower was built, tens of thousands of objects were still in low Earth orbit, most of it junk going back to the early days of space exploration. A lot of it had been swept up, but there were still occasional stray bits of material, bolts, parts of booster rockets, and supposedly even a camera and glove lost by an early American astronaut drifting around. Without the shielding, an impact could do some serious damage.

Those satellites still in low Earth orbit were carefully routed around the tower, but it was better to be safe than lose a trillion-dollar investment. A battery of laser cannons had recently been installed at the station with the explanation that they could destroy any junk or small meteors that might threaten the tower. Another reason that no one talked about was fear that Trac raiders might show up again as they had seven years ago. Rather than destroy a colony or two, they might go for the tower and cripple the entire space program of Earth.

The five hundred-kilometer station was the offloading point for crews working in low Earth orbit, and it was also a major tourist attraction. As they shifted over to the express track that cut straight through the station Justin caught a glimpse of dozens of tourists out in the vacuum of open space, standing along the railing and leaning over for a look straight back down to Earth.

"Better not slip," Brian observed with a chuckle. "It's a long way down."

"Hey, I heard that somebody jumped off right after the station was completed," Matt said.

"Yeah, the dummy thought that since he was out in space, it was zero gravity. He didn't understand that you needed to be in orbit moving at twenty-seven thousand five hundred kilometers per hour around the Earth to fall free, so he stepped off. They said he screamed all the way down until he hit the atmosphere and burned up."

"What the devil is that?" Matt exclaimed as he leaned forward and pointed.

Four white figures leapt from the side of the station and started to fall, shooting past the car and heading straight down towards Earth.

"Newest sport around," Brian said eagerly. "That guy taking the fall sort of invented it, I guess. Space diving. You leap from the five hundred-kilometer station and free fall for almost four hundred clicks. You have a small reentry shield on your back and retro-rockets to slow you down when you hit the atmosphere. When you get to ten thousand feet, your main chute opens. Best damn thirty minutes of your life!"

"You've done it?" Justin asked.

"Yup," Brian said with a grin. "The Academy opened it up as a competition sport last year. There's talk that it'll be part of the next space Olympics and I plan to be on the team. We see who can land closest to a target back down on the Earth's surface. We're scheduled to do some jumps later this month. Hey, we need a couple more members on the team why don't you two try out?"

"Sure, I'd love it!" Matt said enthusiastically. "It'd be a kick to fall from the sky like that."

Justin nodded as if in full agreement, but in his heart he wished that Brian would forget about it. The idea of falling hundreds of kilometers and thundering through the Earth's atmosphere was not necessarily his idea of a good time.

"I'll put you guys down on the list then," Brian announced.

"Yeah, thanks," Justin replied, wanting to kick Matt for agreeing.

Another jumper leapt off and Justin found it strange that the tourists were applauding, their gloved hands striking together soundlessly.

They shot through the middle of the station past a docked car on a side track, and several seconds later they emerged topside. To his right Justin saw an old-style low orbit transfer ship departing from the station. He had heard that it was a heck of a ride. The moment the ship undocked from the side of the tower it'd start to fall straight down towards Earth, all rockets firing until it accelerated to orbital speed; then it would climb back up and insert into orbit. It was definitely not for the weak of stomach. He was glad that for this trip up he had made sure that he had put on an anti-space-sickness patch, unlike the last time.

"All passengers please remain seated," the computer requested. "We will now accelerate up to our maximum speed of seven thousand two hundred kilometers per hour. Our arrival time at Geosynch Orbit Base is scheduled for 1919 Greenwich Space Time."

"Here we go!" Brian said. "This is my favorite part."

Justin felt as if he had been kicked in the pants. He raised his arm and it felt decidedly heavy. Looking over at a computer terminal display, he saw that they had just hit 2.1 gees acceleration and were holding. Their speed quickly climbed through a thousand kilometers an hour. The side of the tower became a blur. They crossed through two thousand and then three thousand kilometers per hour, the car riding smoothly. Downbound cars on other tracks snapped by and were soon almost impossible to see except for a flash of light that shot past in the blink of an eye.

He turned his head to one side and saw the curvature of the Earth sweeping away. All of Central

America and southern Mexico were clearly visible along with the turquoise blue of the Caribbean Sea. Feeling slightly dizzy, he turned to look straight back up and closed his eyes for a minute.

"Acceleration is complete. Please feel free to get up out of your seats," the computer announced. "If you should feel hungry, refreshments are being served on the bottom deck."

Justin gulped hard and waited for a moment but his stomach didn't give any signs that it wanted to rebel. He looked over at the gravity meter on the computer screen. As the car climbed farther away from Earth, gravity would slowly drop away to only a fraction of surface gravity at the top of the tower. But the car would slowly continue to accelerate, holding at a steady 2 gee until final deceleration.

"Let's get some grub and watch the show down below," Brian said.

Matt, feeling a bit shaky, followed them over to the small spiral staircase rather than wait for the elevator. They went down the three levels to the bottom floor of the car, and as they stepped out Matt gasped in surprise. The floor was covered in plexishield, and the bottom cover had been retracted. Earth, now nearly three thousand kilometers away, was visible directly below his feet.

He stood there for a moment, absolutely amazed by the view. The entire sphere of the Earth was now visible, filling up most of space below, as was the long thin needle of the tower going straight down until it simply disappeared from view.

Matt shook his head and moved to join Brian at a table in the corner of the room but Justin found that he wasn't hungry at the moment. He was far more interested in watching Earth as it slowly dropped away.

The first-timers stood around like him, looking down, some of them nervous, others excited, while the old hands at space travel picked up the snack which was being served out by a 'bot and headed back up to their more comfortable seats on the main decks. Justin finally wandered over to join his friends and settled down into a reclining chair beside the table, ignoring the sardonic grins of Matt and Brian over his concession to the gee pull.

"A cadet has to look like an old hand whether he is or not," Brian said dryly. "Even if the sun should go supernova, don't get excited and don't stand there gaping like a tourist."

"Can't help it," Justin answered quietly. "It's just that the view is so incredible."

"You've seen it from the Academy all summer long."

"Yeah, I know. But just think, this tower is anchored on the ground and goes up thirty-seven thousand kilometers. It's incredible that we're riding on it. Sort of like we're still attached somehow to back down there. And besides, it's beautiful to look at."

Brian laughed softly and shook his head.

"You'll get over it."

"I hope I never do," Justin replied, looking Brian straight in the eyes.

A thin smile creased Brian's face.

"After it's scared you a couple of times it might not be so beautiful anymore," he said.

"Even then, I hope I don't forget how to look at it the way I am right now," Justin insisted.

"Ah, a poet here," Matt interjected with a laugh.

Brian shook his head.

"Plebes. Thank heavens I've grown beyond it."

Relaxing in the chair Justin half-listened to the stories Brian and Matt swapped back and forth, with Matt holding the upper hand when it came to yarns about his life as a solar sailor. The gee-load gradually lulled him into a stupor, and through half-closed eyes he wondered how Matt, who had grown up in a zero-gee environment, was handling it. His friend was obviously putting on a show of bravado in front of Seay, straining to remain upright. Over a cup of coffee Brian launched into another story, and Justin felt himself drifting away.

"All passengers please return to your seats for deceleration and docking with sky tower station."

Justin looked up, amazed that the hours had passed so quickly.

Matt and Brian gulped down their drinks and started back up to the main deck area with Justin tagging along. As they settled back in their chairs Brian and Matt were already into a boasting war as to which of the two had experienced the narrowest and most hair raising incident and Justin found himself feeling very much like an outsider. He strapped into his chair and leaned back.

"All passengers are now secured," the computer announced, and Justin's chair pivoted in a half-circle so that he was now hanging upside down, the back of the chair pointing straight up. The reverse-magnetic motors kicked on, pushing Justin up as the car started to slow down. From his window he could see

Earth far below, small enough now that if he held his hand out he could completely block it from view. Beyond it was the endless ocean of stars.

The long minutes of two-gee deceleration dragged out and he found himself drifting to the edge of sleep. Then the warning bell sounded to indicate that deceleration was complete.

"Prepare for docking at Geosynch Orbital Base Station, gateway to the solar system and beyond," the computer announced. "Have a nice day."

His chair rotated back to its upright position. When deceleration stopped, he felt his stomach leap. They were at near-zero gravity. He took a deep breath and waited, expecting his old enemy space sickness to kick in but nothing happened. He opened his eyes and saw Matt grinning at him.

"You're a veteran now," Matt said, "not Wee the first time."

"Don't remind me."

"Yeah, don't remind him," Brian growled behind them. Embarrassed, Justin looked back, remembering how he had thrown up all over Brian's dress white uniform. Brian looked at him coldly for a moment, then smiled.

"It's all right, kid, but some day I'll pay you back I promise!"

He reached out again and shook their hands.

"All right, plebes. Outside this ship there'll be hundreds of cadets waiting for the shuttle to the Academy. Out there I'm Senior Cadet Seay and don't forget it. And if you cross me, so help me I'll kick your butts from here to Phobos and back again. Got it?"

"Yes, sir!" Matt replied with mock seriousness.

A faint shudder ran through the car, and Justin spared a quick look out the window. The huge circle of the main docking station was straight overhead. It was nearly one and a half kilometers in diameter, and it appeared to float like a huge halo at the very top of the tower to which it was hooked by half a hundred support spokes. Hundreds of ships of nearly every description were anchored into the docking ports, everything from small express-courier ships and two-seater Strike Eagle defense craft to hundred thousand-ton bulk cargo-carriers. Hovering in holding patterns beyond the ring were more ships waiting for an open docking bay, and beyond them was a long necklace of solar power stations with panels ten kilometers across and zero-gravity manufacturing centers.

Space suddenly disappeared as the car entered a docking tube. The car slowed down, switched through several side tracks, and then came to a stop.

"Thank you for riding United Nations Skyhook Tower Number One, Earth's tower to the stars. Please exit by the nearest door. Please follow the flashing blue arrows to the baggage area to reclaim your luggage. To locate the docking bay of your connecting flight, please consult your computer monitor before leaving."

"It's Docking Bay B-47," Brian announced. "You guys have any luggage?"

"Just our tote bags," Justin replied.

"Come on then, I know the way."

Justin undipped his seatbelt and clutched his chair while Matt reached up to the overhead compartment and pulled down their bags. Brian was already out in the corridor and Justin struggled to keep up with his friends as they cleared the airlock and stepped out into the main arrival terminal. With a new ship coming in every minute, there were hundreds of passengers milling about. Justin threaded past a group of Benedictine monks wearing the plain brown robes of their order, who were drifting down the corridor alongside him.

"Heading to our new monastery orbiting Jupiter," one of them said excitedly when he saw Justin looking at him. "Can't let the Franciscans and Trappists do all the work out here."

At the end of the open corridor, which stretched for several hundred yards and was lined with duty free shops, they reached a shuttle tunnel that would take them to the B docking area. It seemed like a flood of white uniforms was converging on the spot, and Justin looked around in surprise. During the summer session the only cadets aboard the ship were the scrub class, their cadet instructors, and a few hundred others who were engaged in special projects. Everyone else had been out at hundreds of different research and work sites all the way from Mercury to Jupiter. He felt decidedly uncomfortable at the sight of all the additional stripes on cadet uniforms, and he looked down self-consciously at his own empty sleeve.

There were no seats aboard the open shuttle tram so he just floated into the long compartment, grabbed hold of a strap, and locked his feet under the safety straps set in the floor. Brian was already lost to view although Justin could hear his voice laughing and describing what a miserable bunch of scrubs he had been forced to work with for the summer. Justin and Matt looked at each other a bit nervously, especially when they noticed the disdainful glances of the upperclassmen as if the presence of two mere third-class plebes were not even worthy of comment.

The tram started up and drifted into one of the tunnels leading to the outer rim of the station. As the car emerged from the tunnel, Justin was overwhelmed at the sea of white uniforms floating in the B docking area.

Leaving the tramcar, they looked around in confusion.

"Justin, Matt!"

"Hey, it's Madison Smith," Matt cried, and he pushed off to float over to their old classmate. Her dark features were crinkled up into a bright cheery grin and, using her sticky bottom gravity shoes, she clumsily walked over to them to give her two friends a hug. Justin looked around and saw his other friends coming over; in the back of the group he noticed Tanya talking with Sue. She broke away from her friend at the sight of Justin, came up a bit shyly, and extended her hand.

"Good to see you, Justin," she said quietly.

He had been nervously wondering about this moment ever since he left Earth. There had been that hug and kiss on the day that he rescued her and a second kiss just before leaving for Earth. He noticed that Sue was already up to Matt, giving him a hug. Hugs were acceptable according to Academy regulations but anything beyond that was definitely frowned upon, in public and in private. The rules were tough on that point, but everyone knew that when a bit of romance took hold it was kind of hard to clamp down on it completely. But he wasn't sure if he really wanted a romance with Tanya or not. They had, after all, been bitter enemies right up until the moment he pulled her back from the edge of the cliff on the Moon. Now he wasn't sure, and he instantly picked up that she was nervous as well.

She pulled back a bit.

"Ready to head back?" he finally asked.

"Sure. I think it's going to be an interesting year."

"All right, plebes. First Battalion Company A, fall in, let's get a hustle on! Transport Twenty-Three leaves in seven minutes and I'll be damned if one of my pukes gets left behind."

Justin looked over his shoulder to see Brian approaching, and there was a low moan from Madison and several others gathered around Justin and Matt.

"Come on, move it! I'm sick at the sight of you pukes! And speaking of pukes" Seay came up to Justin and fixed him with a steely gaze.

Justin came to attention, amazed at Seay's sudden transformation from friendly comrade to company commander.

"It's gonna be a long year with you bums and with any kind of luck we'll get rid of most of you, one way or the other."

He could see that Brian was again all business. It was going to be an interesting year.

CHAPTER II

"Ship's company, attention!"

Justin sneaked a quick look at the assembled crowd. The last time he had attended a meeting of cadets in the great assembly hall of Star Voyager Academy it was both to receive his award for life saving and to hear Thor Thorsson, commander of the Academy, discuss the declaration of non-compliance by the Mars Assembly.

The room seemed as if it had been empty then in comparison to the thousands who now stood in orderly ranks, arranged by class and company. The senior cadet commandant stood at the podium, her steely gaze sweeping the room for the slightest irregularity or disturbance.

There was a stir up towards the podium and

Justin fixed his gaze forward, snapping off a salute as the bosun's pipe echoed in the vast room. Thor Thorsson ascended to the podium, saluted the colors of the United Space Military Command, and then, facing his audience he returned their salute.

"Ship's company at ease! Be seated!"

Thorsson stood silent for a long moment, scanning his audience, and Justin felt that calm penetrating gaze

sweep over him for a brief second. He sat a little more rigidly, as if he were alone in the room and Thorsson had singled him out for attention.

"I trust that all of you had a stimulating and exciting summer," Thorsson began in his deep rumbling voice, tinged with the faintest touch of a Norwegian accent. A stir greeted his words, a few of the cadets shaking their heads and chuckling.

"On behalf of the USMC, the faculty, and the staff of this ship, Star Voyager Academy, I extend greetings to all of you. Now, you've heard this before but you're going to hear it again call it my yearly ritual speech."

He paused for a moment, his features set in a serious expression.

"You are the best of the best. Gathered here today are seven thousand young men and women from Earth, the Moon, the orbital colonies, and outward to the farthest reaches of the solar system" he paused again for a brief instant, "and yes, even from Mars."

No one spoke at his mention of the breakaway colony.

Justin quickly scanned the room. Only two weeks ago word of Mars' Declaration of Secession from the UN and Colonies Space Commission had come, and over a dozen cadets from his scrub summer class had withdrawn to return home. The holo news had dwelt on little else while he was at home on Earth, and speculation was high that the crisis could very well spread and perhaps even erupt into a civil war.

"All of you have a tough year ahead. You upper-classmen have heard me say that every year, and you've thought nothing could be tougher than what you just went through; and you've learned that I was right. Those of you who recently survived scrub summer know that you started out with over two thousand classmates back in June, you're returning now in September with a class of thirteen hundred twenty-two. This year's senior class started out just like you and this morning we have two hundred and three sitting in the front rows, with another sixty-seven still out on assignments. I expect that around two hundred and fifty will finally graduate. You can figure out the math on your own.

"Remember the most basic rule 'In space there are no second chances.' You first-year plebes, if you screw it up at this stage of the game, at worst you'll wind up just killing yourself, but by the time you reach your senior year you'll be taking on the full responsibilities of an officer with the USMC and a mistake could cost the lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands."

He again stood silent. Justin knew what was coming.

"Yesterday's incident with the Daedalus illustrates that well enough."

A low murmur swept the room. Six senior cadets and one hundred eighty colonists were killed when a section of an orbital unit suffered a massive decompression. Indications were that one of the six might have been responsible, from a failure to thoroughly check an internal airlock system just moments before a meteor impact punched through three decks. Once the bodies were recovered the six would receive full military honors, but if the fault was ever pinned on any one individual the name would be made public and the mistake openly reviewed. No one ever wanted to be another Cadet Hansen, who was single-handedly responsible for the accidental destruction of the Oak Forest colony and the nearly three thousand residents on board. His name was now synonymous with being a major screw up; "to pull a Hansen" was one of the worst insults an instructor could hand a cadet.

"You are the best and I expect the best from you at all times," Thorsson continued. "This is a dangerous life you've signed on for, but as they used to say, 'it goes with the territory.' Our territory is space, die

endless frontier, the beginning of an adventure that will take us outward into the eternal sea of stars. No frontier has ever been settled without a price and you are the ones who will, more often than not, have to pay that price. We lost eighty-seven cadets last year, and a hundred and twenty-nine were seriously injured. Now, there are some on Earth who whine that the price we expect of our next generation is too high and you know what I have say about that."

He smiled and many in the room chuckled, remembering the famous and rather scatological statement made before a hearing committee which had been convened to investigate the so-called "unacceptable risks and casualties" associated with the Academy.

"No society in the history of the human race has ever advanced without taking risks. In your history classes you learned about the great Chinese explorers of the 14th and early 15th centuries who sailed as far as Zanzibar aboard three-masted ships. They were on the very edge of leaping outward, of sweeping the world, but then their new emperor lost his nerve and declared that the risk, the lives, and the money involved were too great. And so it was that less than a hundred years later the Portuguese came to them instead, with disastrous results for that ancient empire.

"My own ancestors sailed the open seas in then-longboats and perished by the thousands in the doing of it. All of you have learned that most basic of principles taught by history, that they who do not explore, expand, and achieve will be replaced by others who do. I remember one of my favorite quotes, from Scott of Antarctica, the great British explorer who perished on his quest to reach the South Pole. One of his last diary entries made when he knew he was dying stands, in its simple eloquence, as a guiding beacon for the spirit of what we are, in both triumph and defeat. He wrote, "We took risks, we knew we took them, and things have come out against us, therefore we have no need for complaint."

Thorsson stepped from behind his podium and began to pace the stage.

"That is what we are! Stoic both in defeat and in triumph. That is the spirit which must shape us, and, in the shaping, lead us onward to the stars."

He smiled softly.

"For the stars await us. You all know what I have done, where I have been. I first went into space over forty years ago, aboard the last flight of the old United States Shuttle Two. I even witnessed a flight of the original shuttle when I was a boy back in 1997. I was on the first team to go to Mars and the second team to orbit Jupiter. And yet I would trade all of that, all of it, to be where you now are. And that's not just an old man wishing to be young again. Not at all. For I believe that before much longer you young men and women will lead the way on the journey to the stars.

"If Earth is our nursery, then the solar system is our playground, our backyard realm of adventures. But pretty soon, far sooner than anyone dares imagine, we will be setting sail for Alpha Centauri, Wolfs Star, Betelgeuse and Sirius. I'm not giving away any great secrets here. Maybe we'll crack the secret of that alien ship we are reassembling and master light speed, or maybe we'll go the long slow way at a fraction of light speed aboard Ark ships, but one way or the other we will go!"

Justin found himself nodding excitedly. Thorsson had just alluded to the greatest non-secret of everyone involved in space. Nine years back the mysterious raiders, known simply as the Tracs, had staged an attack and destroyed several colonies. Thorsson himself had managed to bag one of the Trac ships, and even now it was reported that recovery teams were scouring a billion cubic kilometers of space looking for wreckage and parts in a painstaking effort to put the ship back together, piece by piece.

Mankind had known that someone or something else was out there for forty-five years, ever since the SETI project, the "Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence," had confirmed a clear signal being detected

from Proximus Gemini. Ten years later the first of three Trac raids had occurred. Who they were, where they came from, what they even looked like was a complete mystery. No one even knew if the SETI programs decision to beam a signal back had been the trigger for the attacks.

All humanity had to go on was the scattered wreckage of a ship the task of reassembling it equivalent to putting together a million-piece three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle without even knowing what it would look like once it was done. If the machine was ever put back together, and someone could then figure out how to activate it, mankind was on its way to the stars. But even if that failed there was still the Ark ship program of building habitats to accommodate twenty thousand people for journeys of thirty years or more until the nearest star was reached.

It was one of Thorsson's favorite programs; during scrub summer he had lectured about it to Justin's class. He compared the journey to that of 19th-century colonists and whalers braving the Horn on trips lasting up to a year or more into the South Pacific.

Thorsson slowly scanned his audience as if he were already searching for volunteer crews who would leave Earth forever, and in spite of the fears and anxieties he had yet to completely ditch about space flight, Justin knew he would go if Thorsson asked him.

"There is one thing, though, one thing that can stop us from fulfilling our destinies," Thorsson said at length, interrupting Justin's thoughts. "And it is not the Tracs. Oh, they're out there that's one of the reasons we must go forward, to meet them in their backyard, and not ours. Perhaps we can make an arrangement with them, but history shows that more often than not when two cultures collide, the weaker one will suffer. For that reason alone we must forge ahead. But that is not my fear, not now. Rather it is the events sweeping our system the separatist movements."

Justin looked over at Matt and saw his friend shift in his chair. Matt was in quiet support of the movement, and he feared that maybe the UN had issued some sort of decree or was about to require an oath of some sort. If they did, he knew Matt would refuse, if only as a matter of principle, being a very pig-headed solar sailor.

"As you all know, two weeks ago the Mars Assembly issued a decree of noncompliance with the United Nations and Colonies Space Commission, and also with the USMC. The Assembly has called for and I quote, 'A First Continental Congress of Space to decide whether these colonies shall declare themselves free and independent states.'

Matt smiled and nodded his head, and Justin saw more than one of his classmates doing the same.

"I want to emphasize right now that this is not a declaration of rebellion, no matter what the holo newscasters might be shrieking about, either from Earth or anywhere else. When you've been around awhile, you learn that if you've heard it on the news, chances are you better not believe it especially when it's one of those blow-dried fools doing the pronouncing rather than the people who are actually involved in the story.

"Those of you who were here for scrub summer know we lost a dozen cadets from Mars and two instructors who decided to return home. Now I want to make something damn clear to all of you."

The mere fact that Thorsson had just used the mildest of profanities caused a stir in the audience and the entire hall became as silent as a tomb.

"We are all brothers and sisters aboard this ship and in the service, united by the common

dream of leading humanity to the stars. That is why I fought for twenty years to have this Academy created, it is why I refused postings far more senior than my current rank simply so I could be here with you, our future. We will not, and I repeat, we will not let the politicians and hotheads of either side destroy that bond. It will not be. destroyed never!"

His words echoed in the assembly hall like the crack of a rifle.

"If I hear of any cadet, staff, or faculty member who uses the word 'traitor' or otherwise attacks a shipmate for supporting either side, I can promise you that you will have a very swift passage home. Do I make myself clear on this?"

No one in the audience even dared to move. In his brief exposure to Thorsson over the summer Justin had come to regard the man as a stern but kindly grandfather. Now he was seeing another side, one that was as hard as steel, and, if needs be, capable of bringing down a career without batting an eye.

"I want to make something clear here and now. I pray to God every day that this crisis shall pass us by; that together we can go forward and explore space." He paused, and he leaned forward as if speaking personally to each cadet.

"But if that should not be, if in the weeks, months and years ahead this crisis should spin out of control and we find ourselves arrayed against each other, I want you to remember what I have said today more clearly than anything else you ever learn here at the Academy."

His voice dropped to a near-whisper and all present strained forward so as not to miss a single word.

"We were comrades, we are comrades, and we shall always remain comrades. Never forget that never!" said Thorsson, and his voice echoed in the assembly hall. "If on some terrible distant field of conflict you should find yourself facing those with whom you once served if you look across that open stretch of space and on the other side are comrades with whom you once bunked, shared a meal, and knew without hesitation that you'd share your last sip of water, your last gasp of air if that day should ever come, remember what we were here this morning. That we few were once shipmates, united in common cause. You will have to do your duty, as your training commands, and as your moral obligation requires, but do it with honor.

"And know that all conflicts end none can go on forever. There will come a day when you will have to bind up the wounds, care for the injured, orphaned, and widowed among your own comrades-in-arms. And then, together, continue the quest to the stars.

"If you live by that pledge, if you temper yourselves to honor, to charity and yes, to love, no conflict will ever divide you. Such things will pass, and I suspect that it will be you who shall make them pass if you remember. For there is a higher calling for all of you and that calling is simple it is a single word, and that is Destiny.

"You, the generations of the 21st century, are destined to save humankind from its follies on Earth, and the follies it contemplates on its path to the stars."

His words drifted away into silence. Justin felt a curious stinging in his eyes, and was embarrassed until he looked around and saw more than one of his classmates on the edge of tears as well. Thorsson surveyed his audience, his eyes shining.

"Good luck to all of you, and God bless you."

"Ship's company, attenshun!"

Justin came to his feet with the others and stood at rigid attention as Thorsson stepped down from the podium to stand with the faculty. Minutes later, to the barked commands of the upperclassmen, Justin filed out of the assembly hall and double-timed down the long corridors towards the first-year plebe barracks. He thought he knew the ship but was soon completely lost as they were led to a distant section that had been off limits during the summer session. Sector F-7, Deck Nine, with .41 gravity. For Justin the gravity felt decidedly pleasant, but he could see more than one of the offworlders, especially those who had lived on the Moon or in zero-gravity environments, huffing a bit under the strain.

At last he started to recognize some of the side corridors, having passed through them briefly earlier in the day to drop off his gear. Turning into Corridor T, he and Matt came to the door of their room and, stopping on either side, the two snapped to attention.

Several minutes passed before Brian Seay appeared and stopped at the end of the corridor. The last of the cadets came racing past, looking nervously over at Brian as they stumbled into place by their rooms. Justin brightened as he saw Pradeep, their third roommate from the summer, fall into place beside them. Finally a cadet he vaguely recognized as having been with another company during scrub summer came and joined them. Justin gave him a sidelong glance. The cadet was tall and thin, with pale blue eyes and a look he found disquieting. It was a vague, undefinable something, a certain way of walking, an air of superior disdain, as if he were already a senior cadet forced to associate with mere plebes. The cadet gave Justin a sidelong glance, not friendly, but not hostile, either.

"All right, plebes, listen up and listen good."

Brian now started to walk slowly down the corridor.

"You are now Company A, Second Battalion, first-year plebes. Heaven knows how you made it this far just looking at you makes me want to get sick, turn in my stripes and jump ship with the first ore carrier heading out."

Brian started into his harangue about how disgusting, miserable, nauseating, and generally unpleasant they all were. In the distance Justin could hear echoes from other corridors, as company commanders from other units launched into similar tirades. At the beginning of the summer it had left him shaking and darn near in tears more than once; as Brian stopped in front of him, he felt a bit of the gut churn, and braced himself.

Brian fixed him with an icy gaze of disdain, as if he were looking at a loathsome insect. "Ah, the brains of the outfit," Brian snapped. "Passed Intro to Astro-Navigation by one point. Good heavens, Bell, if that stretched your pea brain, I can promise you that first-year Astro-Nav will make sure I don't have to look at your ugly face again come next semester. Boy, you are nothing but a hick from the cornfields of Indiana and when I'm done with you, you'll wish you had stayed there."

He continued on, harassing Matt over his accent, and then moved on, attempting to make life miserable for everyone. Half an hour later, after chewing everyone out, he went through the ritual of reading the ship's General Orders "Article Twenty-Three, If any member of the Service while aboard an active-duty ship conspires to commit mutiny, and such offense occurs in a time of war or emergency mobilization, the commanding officer shall have, within his powers, the right and privilege to summarily execute the offender, by agreement of those staff

officers on board who are in good standing, if the actions of the offender do jeopardize the safety of the ship or mission of that ship. If a member of the Service under those above listed conditions should strike an officer, the punishment shall be summary execution with the agreement of those staff officers on board who are in good standing.' "

"Article Twenty-four"

Justin had heard the Articles, all twenty-five of them read off at every Sunday service, and he was expected to know all of them by heart. But there was something chilling about the ritual, which he knew dated back hundreds of years to the old sailing days of the British Royal Navy.

The reading completed, Brian waited for several minutes as if hoping that someone had to sneeze, twitch, or move. He was looking for a victim to make an example of. Justin knew that for some of the offworlders standing at attention in half-gravity must be agony, and someone finally buckled, leaning forward with a low moan. Justin shot a quick glance down the corridor as Brian closed in on the offender. It was Alice McKay, a cadet from one of the orbital colonies, and Seay launched into her so that she was in tears. Justin looked past her and finally saw the girl who had caused him so much troubled thought, Tanya Leonov. She was standing next to Alice, her eyes straight ahead.

"And if you can't take it, plebe, ship out now!" Seay shouted, and Alice finally straightened back up. "That'll be double watch tonight, four hours straight, midnight to four, do you read me?"

"Yes, sir!" and Justin felt a wave of pity. She'd get less than two hours sleep tonight before having to fall out for the first day of classes. A bad first day could set her up for the whole semester.

"All right, you ship's rats. One hour till chow.

Make sure your rooms are shipshape or Weak Knees here will have company on watch. Fall out!"

Brian swept down the corridor; everyone was silent until he finally turned the corner and disappeared.

"Boy, he's even worse than this summer," Matt groaned, leaning forward and letting his knees bend. "And I thought he was gonna be OK."

"Never trust an upper."

Justin turned and looked at his new roommate and nodded in half-agreement.

"Well, lets get squared away," Matt suggested as he opened the door and led the way into their room. Justin stepped in and looked around. It was slightly bigger than the room he had shared with Matt and Pradeep during the summer, with two double bunks lining one wall, four desks and the holo field on a second, and the closets occupying the third. Justin and Matt had already flipped for who got top or lower Matt won, a decided plus for him since lower bunks tended to get sat upon by visitors.

"Hey, Uncle, what's been happening?" Matt asked as he headed for his bunk and started to unfold his linens to make his bed. The holo computer field on the opposite wall lit up.

"Cadet Everett, good to see you back," Uncle replied. "And I see Cadets Singh, Bell, and

Colson as well."

Justin looked over at his new roommate as the computer announced who he was. Colson nodded. There was something familiar about the name but he couldn't quite place it.

"Now as to your question, Matt, about what is happening? If you are referring to the overall state of the universe, there have been two supernovas sighted in Andromeda. Within our own Milky Way, a most curious change of pulse rate in a quasar was reported yesterday. Within our solar system"

"Relax, Uncle," Matt chortled, "I mean, just with you. You know, the old human greeting, 'what's new'?"

"Ah, with me. It's been decidedly boring with nearly everyone gone until this morning. My human support team installed ten thousand tril new holo cubes into my deep-core memory while you were away. Wonderful feeling, sort of like stretching and finding more room. I also received an upload of 19th-century photographs, several hundred thousand of them. Fascinating, you humans back in your primitive days. I even uploaded a new archive of early movies from your 1930s and 40s I love Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. That's about all. I take it you enjoyed your trip to Earth?"

Matt launched into a description of his experiences and Justin, smiling, half-listened to the embellishments surrounding their canoe trip down Sugar Creek, the visit to the Purdue Campus, and walks through Indiana cornfields.

"Sounds like you really liked Earth," Colson suddenly interrupted.

"Yeah, never been there before," Matt replied. "Kind of strange to have a steady gravity, and a bit of a closed-in feeling. But I loved the smells in the air, especially when we had a barbecue, and the sound of the birds singing the hour before dawn. And dawn I never imagined such colors, the oranges and reds streaking the sky. The thunderstorms and the rainbow afterwards, it was great."

Colson nodded tolerantly. "So the colonial boy finally gets back to the center of things."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked cautiously.

"Just that. It's good for offworlders to come back to Earth and realize where the center and power of things truly are."

"Say, Colson," Pradeep interrupted. "It's Wendell Colson III, isn't it?"

Colson nodded.

"Your father's on the Space Security Council."

"The same."

Matt looked at him closely, his face darkening.

"And your family owns Colson Construction, don't they?"

"What of it?"

Justin looked over at Matt and sensed something building.

"Just that they make the worst damn habitat units and ship pods in the system."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Colson replied coolly.

"Just that," Matt snapped back. "Substandard construction. Gasket seals prematurely aging and blowing. You people knew about it, should have issued recalls, but didn't."

"That was all cleared up." Colson answered as if Matt were barely worth talking to. "I don't see why you're getting all upset."

"Upset?" Matt snapped back. "Me upset? Wouldn't you be upset if your pod blew and your parents shoved you into an airlock, then stayed on the other side because the three of you couldn't survive in that tiny room, and you were there for weeks watching them float in vacuum?"

Matt's voice went up sharply and he drew closer to Colson. Justin stepped between them.

"Investigations cleared my family of any wrong doing," Colson replied sharply.

Justin could see the rage in Matt's eyes and understand it. Yet he knew it was unfair to blame someone his own age for an incident that happened years ago.

"Cool it down, Matt," Justin said, pushing him back. He looked at Matt, and to his surprise he could see tears forming. "Cool it," Justin whispered, "it's not his fault."

Matt nodded and started to lower his head.

"And besides," Colson offered, "it was most likely their own damn fault anyhow that they got killed."

Matt surged back up again. Justin turned to face Colson, struggling with the desire to simply let Matt go.

"That was uncalled-for," Pradeep now interjected. "So both of you, calm down."

"Calm? Of course I'm calm," Colson replied smoothly. "Just keep that sailor boy away from me. Offworlders, they're all alike, always ready to blame their woes on those who do the real work."

"Just what is that crack supposed to mean?" Justin asked,

"Why, it's obviously the truth, Bell," Colson snapped back.

"Elaborate on this?" Pradeep asked softly. "I'm curious."

Justin looked back at Matt, who was staring with cold rage at Colson.

"He isn't worth it," Justin whispered. "Hit him and you're out of here. Now go to the head, cool off and then come back" Justin pushed Matt to the door. Matt started to turn, but to his own surprise Justin actually managed to shove him out into the corridor.

Matt started back for the door, but Justin stopped him.

"Look, you can't blame Mr. Stuck-up, in there for what happened to your parents."

"Yeah, I know. I was off the handle, but what he said about them killing themselves. That's what got me."

"I understand. But we've got to live with each other."

"Well, there's more. His old man is one of the guys really stoking this crisis."

"How so?"

"He's on the Security Council Board for Space. He's the guy calling everyone out here ungrateful traitors and pushing for the Service to preemptively intervene at any colony where known separatist leaders might be located."

Surprised, Justin looked back to the room. The door was half-open and Pradeep and Colson were obviously in a hot debate.

"That would be war," Justin said.

"Darn straight, and Justin between us, it'd throw me over to their side once and for all."

Justin looked back into the room and thought he saw a flicker of interest from Colson. The cadet half-turned away from Pradeep, and then turned back.

"Well, the Service would never buy it," Justin whispered. "That's a straight-out violation of freedom of speech. You can't arrest someone for saying a change of government or in the status of the colonies is needed. Only if they move to overthrow the government, only then."

"Tell that to Colson the third in there," Matt snapped. "He's a chip off the old block, it seems. Beyond that, his family did kill many a good sailor. The investigation showed that they knew the seals were degrading quicker than the specs said, but they never issued a recall since it would have cost them millions. So the seals blew, dozens died, and they managed to cover it up."

"Matt, you can't blame him for that one."

"Yeah, I know, I was out of line."

Justin forced a smile.

"Hit the head, cool off and let's see if we can settle this when you come back."

"Yeah, sure, Justin. Thanks, buddy. I might of slugged the guy if it hadn't been for you."

Justin smiled and went back into the room.

"You can't lump them all together like that," Pradeep was saying.

"They allow it to be said in their midst. Without our support on Earth the colonies would all die within the year. It's about time they realized that and got off their high horses. I know what I've heard and I think that when you look at an offworlder, you're looking at an ungrateful traitor."

"Wait a minute, Wendell," Justin said. "Didn't you hear Thorsson? He won't tolerate that kind of talk around here. If we reported this conversation to his office your butt would be in the wringer."

"Are you going to go squealing?" Colson asked, a mocking tone in his voice.

"No, of course not."

"And what about you, Uncle?" Colson asked, looking at the computer.

"You know that would be a violation of the law," Uncle replied, his voice sounding cool and distant. "Computers may not report conversations without a specific court order, which is issued only when a felony is under investigation."

"Well, right there you have it," Colson said. "Everyone's too soft. Those people out there are plotting rebellion. One of my family's construction sites was threatened with seizure by some damn radicals, and we can't even use a stupid computer to help get the evidence!"

Justin looked over at Uncle as if to apologize. Even though Uncle was a machine, somehow Justin felt that he did indeed have feelings, and to call him stupid was an insult to something that could not fight back.

"So is that the real reason here?" Pradeep asked. "It's not policy, but rather it's your family's construction sites on Mars? Sites they control from Earth and which are little better than factory towns right out of the 19th century, where they even charge double the going rate for air rations?"

"We have a right to make money and they don't have a right to try and stop us. All this rubbish about 'local control' is nothing but double-talk for theft by traitors. I've yet to meet an offworlder you could trust."

"Then, if so," Justin asked, "why are you here?"

Colson sniffed. "Family tradition. Do my bit with the Service, then move up to take over the business, if there's still a business around in ten years."

Matt came into the room and Wendell stiffened.

"It's finished right here," Pradeep announced before Matt could say a word. "Thorsson was right, we have to treat each other like comrades. There are too many other strikes against us plebes as it is without you two going for each other's throats."

Matt nodded, and ever so slowly extended his hand.

"Look, I'm sorry about accusing you of being responsible for my parent's deaths. OK?"

Golson smiled, but it wasn't a friendly look. To Justin it seemed as if Wendell fully expected Matt to simply bow down and submit. Colson limply took Matt's hand and then quickly dropped it. Turning his back, he went to work on arranging his bunk.

An icy silence descended on the room. Justin could sense that the basic good-natured aspect within Matt wanted to somehow patch things up, but the way Colson had taken his hand without comment and then turned away had left him confused as to what to do next. The silence was strange to Justin, for usually Matt was a non-stop talker, ready to fill any conversational gap with a funny story or tall tale about solar sailing.

"Gentlemen, ten minutes to chow," Uncle finally interrupted.

Grateful for the opportunity to break off the silent confrontation, Justin looked over at the holo screen and nodded an acknowledgment. During the summer session he had come to regard Uncle as a friend, and once more he wondered about the machine. Uncle had heard every word of the conversation the machine heard and knew everything that happened aboard ship. Yet he was programmed with a very selective memory as prescribed by law. No conversation or action observed by him could ever be repeated except in the case of a class-one felony, and even then the programming block could only be lifted by the unanimous decision of a three-judge panel.

Justin wondered again if Uncle had personal likes and dislikes. He felt as if the machine actually did like him and looked out for him whenever possible. He knew that was illogical, for Uncle, after all, was a machine, yet the way he had so casually interrupted them, thus breaking off the confrontation, was interesting.

"Company A, fall out for chow!" Seay's voice echoed down the hall. Justin double-checked his bed and locker to make sure they were ready for room inspection after dinner.

"One final thing," Colson suddenly announced.

Justin looked over at Colson, who had finished stowing his gear in his locker. Colson stepped around Justin and stopped in front of Matt.

"I don't want to hear you spreading stories about my family. I'll try to ignore your less-than-desirable political beliefs and," he hesitated for a moment then smiled, "the support of them that I just heard you announce out in the hallway. But I'll remember what you said, and if you cross me on anything I'll turn you in."

"What kind of threat is that?" Justin snapped.

"A promise. There are other cadets who still have the guts to stand up to traitors, and when the time comes we'll be ready."

Without another word he stalked out of the room.

Justin looked over at Matt, expecting an explosion. But the old Matt was back. Shaking his head, Matt broke into a grin.

"A jerk, buddy, a class-A jerk, and that's no mistake!"

"A dangerous jerk," Pradeep added quietly.

CHAPTER III

"Come on now, son, you can do better than that!"

Rubbing his backside, Matt struggled back up to his feet, breathing hard under the stress of nearly one-and-a-half gees. Chief Petty Officer Kevin Malady, their close-in combat instructor, stood balanced on the balls of his feet looking as if he were poised to jump straight up and turn a quick somersault. Malady took the knife he had snatched from Matt's hand and tossed it to the side of the practice circle, motioning for Matt to rejoin the group. .

Malady scanned the group and nodded towards Justin.

"All right, son, you're next."

Justin tried to ignore the snickers of some of his fellow cadets as he stepped up to the edge of the fighting circle.

"So, son, what weapon will it be?"

Justin looked down at the assortment of deadly instruments laid out on the floor. There were several wicked looking knives, a plain old baseball bat with the charming touch of a few spikes driven through it, a fire ax, and a strange-looking device made up of a section of steel pipe topped by a two-foot section of wire with a lead ball tied to the end.

"Care to try the mace, Mr. Bell?" Malady asked.

Justin looked down at the weapon. Maybe in low, even standard gravity, but out here on the exercise pylon, which extended a hundred and fifty meters out from the main hull of the ship, he wasn't sure how well he could handle it.

He shook his head.

"Good decision, Bell. The mace seems to be popular with certain punks who prowl the tougher sections of the Moon's mining camps. Can be deadly in low gravity, but here you just might wind up wrapping it around your head."

Justin finally settled on the baseball bat. He hefted it up as he stepped into the circle. At least at home he had had a little experience with a bat, though usually when it came to a pickup game the other players tended to relegate him to right field and pray nothing would come his way.

Justin clenched the bat and raised it as if facing a pitcher.

Malady wearily shook his head.

"No, no," he sighed. "I'm not a hard ball, Mr. Bell. Give me that."

Malady bounded forward, moving with the ease of a ballet dancer in spite of his massive bulk. He took the bat and held it up, clenching the weapon a third of the way up from the handle.

"A lot of fools try the way you did, son. They'll only get one good swing in. If your opponent can dodge it, they'll be on you before you can recover. In low gravity you'll just spin around like a top and then catch a knife in the kidneys. Use both ends of it, just like old Robin Hood and his merry men used the quarterstaff like this."

Malady feigned a blow to Justin's head with the spiked end, recovered, and then drove in with the butt of the handle, stopping the blow at the last instant so it was just a light tap under the chin. Justin realized that if it had been for real he'd be ordering a new set of teeth.

"OK, try it again."

Malady tossed the bat back and returned to the middle of the circle. Nervously Justin gripped the bat the way Malady had shown him. He edged into the circle, trying to focus on Malady's eyes as the instructor had told them to, while watching the movement of his hands and feet with peripheral vision.

He tried a blow to his opponent's shoulder with the spiked end, but Malady easily danced out of the way. For Justin the whole ritual was very disconcerting. He liked and admired Malady; during the summer the instructor had taken him aside to share a few stories about Justin's

father. Malady's creased features had crinkled with delight when he had talked about "the skipper," and how Justin's dad had once saved his life in a barroom brawl on Mars. Yet now he was supposed to try and beat the life out of him. Of course he knew the attempt was futile, no plebe had ever bested Malady with any weapon let alone with bare hands. He wondered if Malady ever boasted about how he had most likely thrashed every officer in the service at some time during his or her career.

Justin tried again, this time jabbing for Malady's face. Malady stepped past the blow and moved to close in. Justin danced backwards, moving clumsily in the heavy gravity. He reversed his hold on the bat with his left hand and now used it to jab straight at the instructor. He almost connected, but Malady dodged so that the handle of the bat just scraped across his arm.

Malady grabbed the bat just below the spikes and jerked it back, dragging Justin along with it. His foot lashed out, tripping Justin so that he went down hard. Malady then jerked the bat up, trying to wrench it out of Justin's hands, but he refused to let go.

Justin felt the light tap of a knee go into his solar plexus, just enough to let him know that if it had been for real his spleen would most likely be wrapped around his backbone.

Justin let go and backed away, holding his stomach.

"All right, son?"

Justin nodded, not willing to admit that the blow hurt.

"Good move there, cadet, coming in with the butt of the handle. Don't go for an arm though unless you hit it square it'll skid off the way it did with me. Go for the ribs, face or stomach."

Justin nodded, wondering how he'd react if this situation were ever for real. These exercise periods with Malady always made him feel clumsy; he wondered if the legendary Marine looked at him and felt he would never match up to the legend of Captain Jason Bell.

Malady casually tossed the bat to the side of the circle.

"All right, kiddies, let's get down to some basics here. Now, the Old Man talks about the lofty vision of the Corps and all that, but when you cut out all the fancy talk and gold braid it comes down to guts. It might be nothing more than dealing with a couple of drunk miners in a bar who don't like a uniform and decide to express their antisocial behavior on your face. Or it might be a riot on a habitat like we had last year when a rumor spread about Kelson's Disease and everyone was trying to break quarantine and get out. Or it might be a nest of Thugees and you gotta clean 'em out. Your fancy book-learning down below in the classrooms or whether you're the best pilot in the universe won't mean squat.

"And you people make me wanna puke. All of you huffing and puffing just because there's a little pull on. Hell, you think this is bad wait until we thin the air outta here, put you in pressure suits and have you fight!"

He blew out noisily.

"All of you, extra exercise detail up here in the one-and-a-halfer, an hour each day for the next two weeks you're all as flabby as my big Aunt Sally."

Everyone knew better than to groan or express the slightest dismay. The regulations were clear on personnel hitting each other, but Malady wasn't above a bit of a rough "demo" if he

took a dislike to someone.

"We're going back to straight old FT, then to open hand combat; these little toys will hafta wait till you've grown up a bit.

"Now give me twenty, then dismissed!"

Justin felt like his arms were turning to jelly as he struggled through the last push up, made worse by Malady kneeling beside him and barking out his dismay over Justin's performance.

Staggering with fatigue, he hurried to shower and change, glad to see that Matt was waiting for him in the corridor.

"Man, was he tough!" Justin groaned.

"Yeah, I got a bruise on my butt to match the bump on my head for the last session. Jeez, you'd think we were trying out for the Shore Patrol units."

"Heard it gets worse," Justin sighed. The dreaded full contact training would start later this year. Even though everyone wore padded protection, it still sent some cadets to the infirmary or worse yet, right out of the program if they backed out of a fight no matter how bad a mismatch Malady might have set up. Justin knew that some of the mismatches were deliberate, to see if a smaller or weaker cadet had the guts to go into a fight he knew he would lose. Backing out was not an option if you wanted to stay in the Academy.

"Hey, cheer up, we're getting off ship today. Come on, we got to hustle to be on the other end of the ship in ten minutes."

Justin followed Matt's lead as his friend ducked into a down tube. Staying on the steps since they were still in the one-and-a-half-gravity zone, the two followed a rush of cadets heading towards the low and zero-gravity areas in the center of the ship. Matt handled the descent like an old hand, but Justin still found the gravity shift to be slightly disconcerting. As they reached the quarter gravity level Matt was bounding and floating down three and four steps at a time, while Justin hung on to the hand rail. When they finally reached the one-tenth-gravity floor, a number of cadets around them split off down side corridors to head to their next class. Justin recognized some friends from his own platoon, all of them going in his direction.

Matt, still leading the way, stepped into one of the tubes that ran the length of the ship. He touched down on the moving walkway heading to the stern of the ship and called for Justin to follow.

Justin eyed the moving walkways. They were nearly identical to those found in any large airport or shopping district, the only difference being that here hand straps, suspended from the ceiling, traveled at the same speed and gave nervous cadets something secure to hang on to. Stepping onto one was as easy as walking when done on Earth, but here in the one-tenth gravity near the center of the ship it was an entirely different matter.

"Come on, Bell, you're holding up the line," someone shouted behind him.

Justin saw an opening between two groups of cadets and took a shuffling step out onto the moving path. He started to lose his footing, and reaching up, he grabbed a handle, which jerked him along. Other cadets piled in around him, the more experienced setting off with leaping bounds down the track.

"Heard Major Davis got you on your Astro-Navigation problem this morning."

Startled, Justin saw Tanya standing beside him, holding on to a strap. Ever since their return she had been coolly formal. Perhaps the kiss she had planted on him during the summer was now a cause of embarrassment.

He tried to think of something witty to say. Having become a fan of old Bogart movies during the summer leave he tried a "Bogey" shrug and uttered a non-committal "Yeah, it happens."

The nervous squeak in his voice ruined the Bogart effect and he felt himself reddening.

"Study together tonight?" she asked. "Maybe we can figure out what Davis has up his sleeve."

"Yeah, sure."

"Great. Come on, we're losing the group."

Tanya bounded ahead on the walkway, taking twenty-foot strides. Justin tried to follow, noticing once again how gracefully she moved. She was, after all, part of the Academy's low-and zero-gravity ballet troupe, and her lithe, easy moves kept diverting Justin's attention as he struggled to keep up. There were times when looking at her made his heart skip a beat, and then there were other times when he wished she'd simply disappear. The way she was moving now definitely did not make Justin wish she would disappear. Watching her, he missed his strap and awkwardly tumbled into a group of upperclassmen. They soundly dressed him down until they jumped off the track into a side corridor.

His own group was now more than a hundred meters away and Justin struggled ahead, breathing a sigh of relief when he reached the end of the track and stepped off into the EVA prep area.

Their instructor, Senior Cadet Barker, was already calling the group to attention as Justin came through the doorway. Barker spared Justin a cold look but said nothing as he fell into line.

"All right you plebes, you got lucky today. Standard EVA has been scrubbed for the afternoon."

Some of the group looked disappointed, wondering if they were going to get stuck with another indoor suit drill, though Justin hoped Barker might opt for a game of falcon flying instead.

"We're in a near-orbital intersect with a Habitat Unit," Barker continued, "and the powers that be, in their infinite wisdom, have scheduled you pukers to go over for a look-see. We'd be making the run anyhow since we got some spare parts they need, so there's no sense wasting the tug space. We're taking a standard K-class open rig tug, so suit up."

Justin teamed up with Matt. Drawing two standard EVA suits from the lockers Justin helped Matt step into his suit, zip it up and connect his back pack. Matt then helped Justin into his suit. He clipped on his helmet, then finally his gloves. Justin checked the LCD readout inside his helmet and with a touch on the arm pad activated the system and ran a diagnostic. Everything checked out positive. The two then double-checked each other's suits, signaled a thumbs-up to Barker, and lined up by the door.

Following the senior cadet, the plebes filed into the airlock. The door slid shut behind them and

Justin felt a momentary tightening in his gut. Since returning to the Academy his platoon had gone on half a dozen EVAs, all of them review-and-checkouts of what they had learned during the summer, but it still made him nervous.

The sound of the alarm bell, the warning of depressurization, grew fainter as the air thinned, and then there was silence except for the low hum from his suit pump and a whisper of static in his headset.

"By the numbers, check off."

Justin scanned the LCD all functions were nominal, and he waited until the roll call was complete.

Barker opened the inner airlock door and led the way into the docking bay. He pointed out a tug and ordered the group to scramble aboard and strap in.

Justin eyed the craft cautiously. It was designed for short range ship to ship operations; the tug was really nothing more than a titanium girder a dozen meters long, with five-hundred-pound thrust engines mounted on either end, and smaller hundred-pounder thrusters mounted to fire along the Y- and Z-axes. A fuel tank was located amidships, and a chair for the pilot was at one end. Bucket seats lined either side of the girder down its length, and the seats could be snapped off to be replaced by hold-downs for cargo containers. There was no hull; everything was fully exposed to the vacuum of space.

For this run two canisters packed with spare parts for their destination were mounted above the fuel tank. Barker walked down the length of his ship, giving it a thorough pre-flight and double-checking that each cadet was strapped in. Justin settled into the chair directly behind Barker, and turned to watch as he powered the system up.

The outer airlock door opened. Barker gave a short burst of power to the stern engine and the tug lurched forward. While the tug was nosing out of the bay, Justin looked up relative to the rotational axis of the ship, becoming momentarily disoriented as he saw the center of the ship above him. The angular momentum imparted by the ship's rotation caused the tug to fall outward or upward relative to the central axis of the ship as it cleared the dock, the one-tenth gravity instantly replaced by the stomach lurch of free fall.

Barker expertly coned the tug, rolling it over and lining up on his target, Habitat Franciscan Three, which hovered like a white pencil just above Orion's belt. Justin gulped hard, trying to ignore the momentary flutter in his stomach.

"Everyone all right?" Barker asked.

There were no replies and Justin silently wondered if any of his comrades were worried about getting sick, what would happen if the fuel tank ruptured, or any of a hundred other prospects that could certainly ruin someone's day.

"It's a straight-out run," Barker announced. "Forty-two minutes, so hang on while I power up."

Now clear of the Academy, Barker gave the tug full throttle and Justin felt the slight kick of the engine straining against the several tons of mass it was pushing. Looking back he saw the Academy, silhouetted by the Moon. Forty-five degrees off was Earth, with North America shimmering under the noonday sun. He clicked on his faceplate magnifier; as he powered it up to maximum,

Earth appeared to leap towards him. A front of clouds was drifting across the Midwest. Most likely by sunset, he thought, there'll be a line of thunderstorms rolling through Indiana. A touch of homesickness hit him. He loved that time of day, when the air became still, hushed, the sky overhead darkening and then the first faint cool breeze swirling in from the west to break the humid heat. The slanting rays of the evening sun would disappear behind the towering thunderheads and then the storm would come lashing in, chilling the evening air.

He clicked the magnifier off and looked back at the Academy. They were starting to pick up speed; the Academy ship was already smaller.

Everything was silent, stark, highlighted by the brilliant glare of the sun. Yet all he had to do was put his hand up to block the streaming light and the stars appeared on either side of his hand.

Again it started to catch him; he remembered the lyrical stories of his father and grandfather. They talked about the early days of space exploration at the beginning of the 21st century, when humanity finally set itself the goal of reaching for the stars.

And I'm part of this now, he thought. Fearful as I am of it all, still I am part of it. He wondered if his father, too, had been afraid of the simplest things at first; whether he would get sick in zero gravity, if he was nagged by the anxiety that something would go wrong and bring him to a terrible end. And pulling a Hansen that was a dread as well. I might someday screw up, and then the honored name of my father would be eclipsed by the foolishness of his son.

The engine finally cut off and he felt himself floating in his chair although he was strapped in, arms and legs lifting up. It felt peculiarly pleasant out there with the vastness of the universe encircling him.

His grandfather and he would sit on the back porch and gaze up at the night sky while they listened to Hoist's Planets. He imagined his favorite piece, "Neptune," playing softly as he gazed out upon the pearly glow of the Milky Way. Out here, at least for the moment, all of the clinical study, the number crunching, classes, late hours of study, the hazing and harsh discipline were forgotten. The music played in his head; there was a quiet soothing rapture to it all, a timeless sense of floating through eternity. He found it strangely hypnotic, and his thoughts drifted and floated out across space.

"Hard dock!"

Startled, Justin jerked upright in his chair; had it not been for the seatbelt he would have vaulted right off the side of the ship.

He looked ahead, surprised by the massive bulk of the habitat now blocking the view. The tug was anchored to a beam projecting from an airlock door and Barker cautiously stood up, reaching for a guideline.

"All right, people. Listen sharply now. Unbuckle, stand up slowly, and be sure to grab the guideline I don't want to have to undock and go chasing around after you. If you do float free don't use your unit thrusters; we're too close in and you fools would most likely wind up banging into something. Bell, Leonov, wait for the others to pass then give me a hand with the canisters.

"The rest of you, go through decontamination, leave your suits, and you've got two hours liberty. I want you suited up and ready to go at 1530 standard."

Justin clicked an acknowledgment and waited while the rest of his platoon reached out for the walkway, then carefully descended to the open, waiting airlock.

Justin saw Matt turn back and wave. Darn, his buddy obviously was not going to wait.

Barker came aft, motioning for Justin to follow him. Bracing his feet on the walkway Barker leaned over, undipped the tie downs and handed a canister to Justin. It had several hundred pounds of mass to it and Justin handled it gingerly. He knew that if he jerked it too hard it would be very difficult to stop and might cause him to lose his own foothold.

He waited for Barker to hand the second canister to Tanya, then they followed the senior cadet's lead as they slowly moved along the walkway. They made sure each sticky-bottom boot was firmly locked onto the surface before lifting the other one.

Justin breathed a sigh of relief as they passed through the airlock door and it swung shut. Seconds later he heard the ringing of the alarm bell signaling pressurization. The light over the door to the ship flashed green to indicate equalization of pressure, and they followed Barker into the suit-up room.

After double-checking to make sure pressure inside his suit was equalized with internal ship pressure, Justin unsnapped his helmet and took it off.

"Good work, you two," Barker announced. "Don't like chasing plebes or supply canisters when we're visiting neighbors it's embarrassing!"

"Sir, why didn't we just dock inside? It would have been a lot easier."

"Practice, cadet do it the hard way. Had to make this little trip worth something besides a romp aboard a passing habitat."

Barker peeled out of his suit and hung it up in a locker. Justin could not help but give a surreptitious look over at Tanya as she wiggled out of her suit and brushed an errant wisp of hair back from her face.

"Ah, the supplies!"

Justin looked up and started at the appearance of the elderly rotund man, dressed in the brown habit of the ancient order of Franciscans, who came into the room. The monk was filled with good cheer, delighted by the sight of the canisters. He patted them affectionately.

Barker drew himself to attention. Justin and Tanya followed suit.

"I'm Brother Bartholomew. Now, no need for formality. You children over at the Academy, always so formal. Glad to have some youngsters drop by for a visit. One of the boys told me you can only stay a couple of hours."

"Yes, sir," Barker replied stiffly. "Have to be back for chow and evening classes, sir."

"Well, enjoy the sights wish you could stay longer."

The monk started to hoist the canisters up.

"Bell, Leonov, give the brother a hand."

"No, quite all right, zero gravity here. No problem at all."

"Where are you lugging them to, sir?"

"Ah, just to quarter gravity, but fine, you two can tote them if you want."

Justin obediently took one canister from the brother's hand and Tanya took the other. Barker motioned for them to follow the monk who led the way through the decontamination room, where they and the canisters were quickly scanned by the ship's computer for any threatening microbes. Once cleared, the monk led the way out of the zero-gee area, ascending the flight of steps that led to the gravitized region of the rotating sphere. Justin saw Barker turn and head off in the opposite direction. Justin wondered what delights he and Tanya might be missing but continued to follow the monk without complaint.

"How long have you youngsters been with the service?"

"We're first-year plebes, sir," Tanya replied.

" 'Brother Bartholomew,' please. Or just 'Brother Bart.' "

Justin looked over at the rotund monk. Such a sight was rather out of the ordinary in Indiana, and his own Presbyterian upbringing had rarely brought him into contact with genuine monks.

"I have a great-aunt aboard an Orthodox nunnery," Tanya volunteered.

"Ah, Russian then?"

"Yes, sir, I mean, 'Brother.'"

"Tour name?"

"Leonov."

Bartholomew broke into a grin. "Illustrious name. Any relation?"

"Yes, Brother. My great-grandfather was the first man to walk in space."

"An honor, then," Bartholomew announced. "We must celebrate."

He continued to lead the way upstairs, and the burden in Justin's hands grew heavier. He could only hope that they would arrive soon. Fortunately, they stopped just then and turned into a side corridor.

Justin had to suppress a gasp of astonishment.

The corridor was like the interior of an ancient gothic cathedral. Soaring arches joined overhead; the spaces where stained glass windows would have been on Earth were covered instead with high-stress plastishielding so that the wonders of space lit the chamber. Justin looked at a small chapel set into a niche. Earthlight shone through the window, revealing a row of monks who were softly chanting a service. As Brother Bartholomew passed he genuflected and made the sign of the cross. Tanya followed suit, making the Orthodox cross, and Justin awkwardly nodded. He stood paused in silent awe, listening to the medieval plain chant echoing in the corridor. He was stunned by the timelessness of it, as if a chapel hovering in high orbit was as it always had been.

Bartholomew motioned for them to follow and he stepped back into the stairwell.

"Always like to show that off to our visitors," Bartholomew offered by way of explanation as he bounded up to the next level and motioned for his two bearers to follow.

The next corridor had a uniquely different charm. This one was open as the first, with a soaring arched ceiling, but here the long chamber was planted with trees. Overarching branches heavy with apples, peaches and pears canopied the lengthy curving hallway. Monks wearing plain brown tunics tended the crop; Justin stepped to one side as a small electric crate rolled past pulling a wagon piled high with fruit. Bartholomew pulled out a couple of apples from the crate and tossed them to his companions.

Justin was delighted. On the farm back home they had several acres of apple trees and at any time of year it was fun to walk through the orchard, but he especially enjoyed it at harvest time when the air was heavy with the scent of ripening fruit.

He rubbed the apple on his tunic as he walked, admiring the shine before biting into it.

"Yellow Delicious," Justin announced, "my favorite."

"We grow half a dozen varieties here. There's another deck for subtropical fruit and one for tropical. Some wonderful blends come out of them."

"Blends?"

"You'll see."

"Ah, Brother, our shipment has it arrived?"

Justin saw an elderly monk rolling towards them on a power chair through a narrow pathway in the orchard.

"Yes, Brother Abbot, all safe and sound."

"Good, very good."

Bartholomew introduced them. Tanya was awed when the abbot, discovering her lineage, announced that he had been introduced to her great-grandfather when he had visited the old Soviet Union as a boy.

"A school group from Maine, oh, back let's see now back in 1986 it was. We went over there and met him at a conference. I'll never forget him. Funny, hope you don't take offense but he looked just like a comedy actor from long ago though the name of the three in that group escapes me."

The abbot laughed. "When you reach my age such things do tend to drift. We were all honored to meet your great-grandfather, just as I'm honored to meet you carrying on the family tradition."

Justin was surprised when Tanya bowed and asked for the monk's blessing. Justin shook his hand and the monk rolled on.

"Well over a hundred and still going strong," Bartholomew announced. "Space is good for folks like him." Justin looked back at a group working in the orchard and noticed that a number of the monks seemed quite old.

"A lot of men, when they reach their later years, they look for lives of contemplation," Bartholomew said, as if reading Justin's thoughts.

The monk smiled and looked over at Tanya, who was walking several paces ahead, and then back at the young cadet. "Once you hit eighty some of the distractions of youth are at last behind you."

Justin felt himself blushing, wondering if Bartholomew knew about the inner turmoil she was creating.

"So that's why our orbital monasteries are flourishing. More than a thousand monks on this one alone. We have several thousand others living here, too, lay brothers and sisters we call them. They are mostly part of our geriatric care center, which is our service to humanity since we are, after all, a serving brotherhood. Some of our residents were born as far back as 1950 and are still spry and fit. Low gravity is indeed a blessing.

"We lead a simple life prayer, tending our gardens, helping our patients. Our food is plain but there are a few indulgences we do allow."

He stopped and pointed towards a door that was nearly concealed under a rose-covered trellis. As he opened the door a rich heady aroma wafted out.

"Our distillery," Bartholomew announced. "Finest apple brandy in Earth orbit comes out of here. That's what you're carrying, spare parts; we were on our last backup for a few things and getting worried. Old Thorsson came through for us though, with this little emergency shipment."

A knot of monks gathered around the group as they came through the door. Eager hands grabbed the canisters carried by Justin and Tanya and the men scurried off, weaving through a line of vats and into a back room.

"Apple brandy, peach brandy, a few new concoctions we've cooked up from our tropical blends." Bartholomew led them over to a wooden table and motioned for them to be seated. A monk came up to them, bearing three small glasses and half a dozen flasks.

Bartholomew took one of the metal containers. He uncorked it, sniffed the contents, smiled and poured out three minute samplings.

"Ah, sir, we're on duty and, well, sir," Tanya announced, "I don't think we should."

"Old Thorsson said it was all right as long as I didn't get any of you soused before dinner. Thorny and I go back a ways. I was his commander once."

The two looked at him, incredulous.

"Certainly was. Back aboard the Celestial Beagle on the run to Jupiter. Not all of us monks are as boring as you might think. Brother Abbot there was an out-and-out United States Marine, fought in three wars. Flew in the First and Second Gulf Wars. Old tradition in the church, warriors taking to the cloister late in life. We're seeing a lot more of that, with so many folks living to be ninety, a hundred or more and still fit and active. Taking vows and coming out here to space has a certain appeal. Like I said, it's an old tradition, not just with us but with the Buddhists as well. I went to visit one of their Zen colonies last year; beautiful place their zero-gravity gardens are a wonder.

"You see, long ago monasteries both East and West were places of retreat, but that's hard to find in the modern world. Out here in space though, well, we have the whole universe to find the solitude and peace we desire as we search for the eternal. As you young cadets finally embark for the stars, the monasteries will not be far behind."

Bartholomew nodded towards the glasses.

"So, anyhow, a cadet's expected to hold his own when the occasion arises."

Having tasted brandy before, Justin accepted the glass. He swirled the contents around, sniffing them, then allowed a tiny sample to dance on his tongue.

"Delightful," he exclaimed, "better than grandpa's own stuff that we make on the farm." .

Tanya looked at the two hesitantly. Then, not to be outmatched, she downed hers as well, coughing hard after trying to take it all in one gulp.

Bartholomew laughed.

"Just like a Russian," he chortled. "One shot down the hatch."

An hour later the three stepped back out into the hallway.

"Now, you two children know your way back, don't you?"

"Sure, Brother," Justin replied.

"Take care, my friends. It was an honor to entertain you. And be sure to personally deliver that package."

Justin patted the box under his arm and nodded.

"The pleasure was all ours," Justin announced.

Justin waved cheerfully and motioned for Tanya to follow. She shook her head ruefully as she fell in by his side.

"I think you're slightly potzed," she said disdainfully.

"Nonsense. Blood alcohol of point zero two you saw him check us."

"Well, you're certainly no Russian, Justin. Point zero two wouldn't have one of us weaving like you are."

"Hey, us Hoosiers invented applejack. Why, Johnny Appleseed himself planted our orchard."

"Johnny who?"

"Oh, never mind. Wish I knew what was in this box." Justin held the box up and shook it, then tucked it back under his arm while letting his other arm drift around Tanya's waist.

"That's for Commander Thorsson, so don't go playing around with it. And Mr. Bell watch that other hand of yours as well."

She reached around and removed Justin's hand from her waist, and with a snort of displeasure motioned for him to speed up his pace.

Justin sighed, not sure if the drinks had indeed gone to his head or if he was simply using them as an excuse to try and put his arm around Tanya. Dutifully he fell in behind her, troubled again by her presence. The situation was made worse by the fact that the monks had opened up the shutters overhead, letting the sunlight stream in on the orchard. It created a strange effect the rotation of the ship caused the sun to rise and set every two minutes so that shadows raced across the ground. Sprinklers set both in the ground and overhead had been turned on and a gentle mist floated in the air, catching the shifting light so that the air seemed to sparkle. The moisture enhanced the ability of the air to carry scent, and every breath was rich with the fragrance of apples and an elusive trace of something that Justin knew was Tanya's perfume.

Without waiting for him she stepped into the corridor leading back to the zero-gravity core, but as she passed the doorway into the cathedral she paused and then stepped in. Justin followed her and was surprised to see her kneeling in the corridor, head bowed in prayer. Ashamed of what he had been thinking, he looked away in confusion. He saw a monk looking over at him, smiling gently, and realized the monk had seen him watching Tanya. The monk shrugged his shoulders, as if in sympathy and understanding. Justin smiled in return at the simple gesture which so eloquently summed up his own confusion.

He soaked in the beauty of the cathedral in space and the peace it offered, and he found himself wishing that he could somehow stay. At least there wouldn't be the fear, the loneliness and confusion, he thought. But some inner voice told him that maybe later far later this would be a place to seek, but for now there were other things to face.

Tanya made the sign of the cross, then stood up and walked to the door. .

"Now, can we behave ourselves?" she asked with a teasing smile.

"Sure, the Bells are always gentlemen," Justin replied with an amicable laugh.

She looked at him curiously and gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder. Her hand lingered for a second, then dropped.

"Come on, or we'll be late for the ride back. Remember, we've got a study date tonight." Smiling, the two bounded down the stairs.

CHAPTER IV

"Commander Thorsson, sir?" The commander of the Academy looked up from his holo screen. At the sight of Justin, he nodded and smiled.

"Come in, cadet, and please, stand at ease." Justin moved stiffly into the room in spite of the order. Though he knew the effects of Brother Bartholomew's concoctions had worn off, he was still nervous that Thorsson might know. Before making his way up to officer's country he had taken a quick shower, brushed his teeth twice, then changed into his class C jumpsuit.

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Bell?"

"Sir, Brother Bartholomew aboard Franciscan Three insisted that I personally deliver this package."

Justin placed the box on Thorsson's desk and stepped back, hoping to be dismissed.

Thorsson smiled with delight as he opened the box; Justin saw four metal flasks inside the container.

"Ah, Franciscan brandy best in the Universe if old Barry had a hand in the making of it." Thorsson looked at him. "Tastes good, doesn't it?"

"Ah, yes, sir."

Thorsson smiled. "It's OK, I told him it was all right to let some of you cadets have a taste. Guess the old slug told you we served together."

"Ah, yes, sir, he did."

"Tell you anything about me?"

"No, sir."

Thorsson smiled as if glad that some sort of secret had been kept.

"Well, Barty could rig up a still in the most unlikely places; heaven alone knows where he'd get the juice to play with. Going to the Franciscans was a natural for him," and then he fell silent, his voice trailing off.

"Lost his entire family wife, three children. Those early days on Mars were tough lose a couple of supply ships or an air distillery breaks down, and people die." Thorsson shook his head sadly.

"I don't know if you know this, but his oldest girl, Margaret she was the first child born on Mars."

Thorsson looked off, silent for a moment. "The price there's always a price with the settling of a frontier."

Justin said nothing, wondering if he should withdraw.

"Sit down for a minute, Bell." Thorsson motioned to a chair next to his desk and Justin sat down on its edge.

"How are your studies going? Keeping up on Astro-Nav and nuclear physics?"

"Well, sir, I'm hanging on."

Thorsson nodded, smiling.

"Heard you're going out for the Skyhook Diving team."

Justin gulped and nodded.

"Crazy sport, never catch me doing it," Thorsson replied.

"Sir?"

"Flinging yourself off the Skyhook Tower, falling five hundred clicks. No thank you reentry on the old rockets was tough enough on the nerves. Used to scare me to death."

Justin looked at Thorsson, not sure how to reply to the Commanders admission of fear. It was impossible to believe such a thing in Thor Thorsson.

"Back in the old days, before the Skyhook, the only way down to Earth was standard reentry."

Looks exciting enough in the old vids, but believe me, son, it used to scare the pants off me. Outside temps would soar up a couple of thousand degrees When we were flying those old government shuttles, you know what I used to think?"

"What, sir?"

"That this machine was built by the lowest contract bidder. I think I told you how when I was a boy I saw one of the old first-generation shuttles lift off."

Justin nodded, slightly awed that the man before him had memories of the 20th century space program.

"Well, I remember when one of the original shuttles peeled a heat tile on reentry. The thing opened up like a zipper once that first hole was punched. They never released it but years later, while I was in training, I heard the cockpit recording of the crew. It wasn't pleasant."

Thorsson looked off for a moment.

"Anyhow, I used to dwell on that. Funny how each of us has our own special fear that we rarely admit. For some, it's getting spaced; for others it's a micro-meteor punch while out in a suit, even though the odds against that are next to nil. Others just fear being alone, meeting the Tracs, or simply 'pulling a Hansen.' For me it was burning on reentry. Liftoff was fine I loved it but once we were up I sweated out reentry even though it might be months away. Used to keep me up late at nights."

Thorsson laughed softly.

"Remember, I was one of the biggest proponents of the Skyhook. Sure, I gave all the arguments before committees about the ultimate payback on the trillion-plus investment. In just ten years we're seeing that already. But down deep, son, well down deep I wanted the darn thing so we could get rid of reentry."

Thorsson smiled and leaned back in his chair.

"So now you know my little secret. Hope you don't think less of me."

Justin was startled. "No, of course not, sir."

"When do you go for your first dive, Bell?"

"We're supposed to go this weekend, sir."

"Fine, that fits the schedule."

"Schedule, sir?"

"You and forty other plebes are getting a posting, son."

"A posting?' Justin was startled. Usually a cadet spent a year at the Academy before going out on his first assignment.

"Little change in policy. It's just a standard run out to an orbital base near Mars. Most of the ship's space was empty it's an old design run now by a skeleton crew, so I managed to convince Fleet Assignment to let me throw some plebes aboard. There won't be much shipboard duty, and thus plenty of time to keep up on your studies. You'll be gone a month. I thought it'd be a

good incentive for some of our top plebes to get a shot at it, and might provide some good training as well."

"A top plebe, sir?" Justin hesitated. "You sure of that, sir?"

Thorsson laughed and shook his head. "Just like your father. Never really sure just how well you're doing. Sure, Astro-Navigation needs some polishing, but there was that lifesaving award showed quick thinking and guts, more guts than you know you have. By the way, Cadets Everett, Smith and Leonov will be going along, so you'll have some friends to keep you company."

"That's great, sir. May I tell them?"

"Sure. Mention it to Cadet Colson as well. He's your roommate, isn't he?"

Justin hesitated.

"Yes, sir."

Thorsson smiled knowingly.

"Is there a problem?"

"Oh, no, sir," Justin said quickly.

Thorsson chuckled. "Ah, yes, the Code. Never squeal to an officer or upperclassman about another cadet. Well, I think having Mr. Colson going with you and especially with Mr. Everett might be the right touch."

"Sir?"

Justin was confused. The tension in their room since the start of the semester had been as thick as an arctic freeze. Justin had noticed that Colson tended to hang with several other cadets who had stated their disdain of offworlders and especially of the freewheeling style of solar sailors. Matt had tried to remain aloof, though there had been several sharp exchanges.

"Bell, there's a lot of tension on this ship, and not just among the plebes. I just cashiered two junior-level cadets today for a fistfight over the separatist issue. Though I know it's against tradition to talk about it I think it's safe to say that even up here in officer country there are some sharp disagreements."

Justin said nothing, feeling it best not to comment.

"If this system, this dream, is to work, then we have to bridge the differences within our own community. I remember once reading about an old hero of mine, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain ever hear of him?"

"Yes, sir, I have. He was a Civil War general. My grandpa had an interest in the subject and even has his autograph."

"A good choice of heroes, Joshua Chamberlain. Chamberlain once wrote about how he had hosted a visitor shortly before the war. This man was from the South, Chamberlain from the North. Both were well educated and, given the climate of the times, the subject turned to the crisis that was about to divide your country. Chamberlain later wrote that their conversation

simply broke down, with the Southerner finally announcing that Chamberlain could never understand how the South felt. Chamberlain realized at that moment that if two intelligent men could not bridge the gap, reach some sort of understanding or at least acceptance of the opposing view, then they were all doomed."

"And are we doomed, sir?"

Thorsson shook his head. "Not yet. At least I hope not. The separatists have to realize that the countries and businesses on Earth that financed this great expansion have invested trillions of dollars, and they expect a return and a certain amount of control. On the other side, those on Earth have to realize that we now have a new generation, like your friend Matt, who were not born on Earth they see their ship, or colony, or planet, as their place of allegiance. Offworlders like those have a hard time understanding how corporate administrators and political leaders millions of kilometers away can or should decide their destiny.

"If the separatists continue to move towards a radical position, people like Mr. Colson's father could lose hundreds of millions, even billions. But if Earth doesn't back off, grant more autonomy and ease taxes and restrictive trade regulations, the radicals will gain even more converts."

"So then it comes down to Matt and Wendell being ready to tear into each other," Justin said, a comment he instantly regretted, fearing that he had revealed something.

"I sort of assumed that," Thorsson replied, waving his hand to still Justin's uneasiness. "A pity. Neither Chamberlain nor his acquaintance from the old South created the divisions that divided them. That situation had taken generations to develop, but they certainly paid for it with their blood. I fear a reprise."

Justin was silent, not knowing how to respond.

"There are some in this Service who are all but ready to drum anyone out of our brotherhood if they weren't born on Earth, or willing to take an unconditional oath of allegiance. They fear that offworlders might seize a ship or some such madness and give it to the radicals on the other side. Let's just hope that calmer heads prevail."

Thorsson stirred uncomfortably, as if he had said too much.

"I think your friend Mr. Everett will continue to show restraint. He's a good cadet and a worthy friend. I'd like to think that you could help him and Mr. Colson come to an understanding. That, in some small way, would most definitely prove something to us oldsters."

Justin felt as if he had just been given an order.

"I'll try, sir."

"Good. Going to Mars, especially this close to conjunction, might seem like short-haul stuff but I think all of you will find it interesting. Captain MacKenzie, who commands the ship you'll be on, is a tough man of the old school. Not to be crossed. He's not like the officers you know here on the Academy and that's part of the reason I

want some of my best students to go out with him. Let's call it a dose of reality, Mr. Bell, one I hope you all learn from."

Thorsson's voice trailed off.

"Make me proud of you out there, Bell. Have fun on your jump this weekend, and see you in a month."

"We're going to Mars," Matt chortled. "I still can't believe it. Out of the classroom and away from Davis and his bloody Astro-Nav course, what a treat!"

Justin nodded, unable to speak as he double-checked his suit.

"All right, you guys, ready for a little fun?"

Brian stepped in front of Justin, checking the straps that secured the reentry shield and retro-pack to his back. Even at five hundred clicks out, gravity aboard the Skyhook Tower was just slightly less than on the surface of Earth, so that his suit and jump gear weighed over four hundred pounds. He wasn't even going to try and stand up from his sitting position in the support frame.

"Now, this is gonna be a cinch," Brian continued. "Remember, it's all a drogue line-run everything is on auto. No fancy high-low stuff or group maneuvers on this drop. You know the routine from the briefing, so just hang on and enjoy the ride."

"Yeah, sure," Justin replied softly.

Seay didn't bother to prompt him with a "sir." Once off the Academy ship he had slipped back into a slightly less formal routine.

"Now remember, you guys are A Company, so no screaming or hollering on the way down. If anything should malfunction, just tap into my channel. I'll be right above you all the way down."

"OK."

"Ready?"

Justin gulped hard and nodded. All the way out on the weekend shuttle from the Academy to the Skyhook he had been trying to figure out some way to get out of this mess. He half-suspected that Seay knew he wanted out, and in response was leaning on him more to go through with it. Justin felt cornered, once again cursing himself for going along with this insane suggestion to "join the team."

Until this very second he had been hoping for some convenient excuse or, better yet, the divinely inspired intervention of some real ailment. Brian had insisted upon eating before the jump and Justin had been tempted to get some sushi in the Skyhook tourist section--with luck it might have had bacteria in it. But then he realized that even if by a rare chance some bacteria did show up it'd be a while before it made him sick, whereas the taste of raw fish in his mouth just before a jump might have a more immediate consequence. He had settled for a chocolate milk shake, figuring that would not pose a problem even though it could not save him from his fate.

Brian walked over to Matt and checked him over, then sat down in a support chair and strapped his own gear on.

"Ready to depressurize," he finally announced and Justin tensed as the alarm bell sounded and then faded away into the silence of vacuum. The door into space slid open, sunlight streaming in.

"All right, who's gonna be first?"

There was a moment of silence until Matt chimed in on the headset. "Sure, I'll be the hero."

"Then let's go for it! Everett first. Bell, you follow. We're not doing any formation stuff, but I want a tight pattern, ten-second intervals."

Justin waited for Matt to stand up and hobble towards the door. Justin stood up, straining against the weight of the suit, feeling the power servos kick in. Clumsily he took a step; the servos sensed his move and activated the suit's leg, and he lurched forward like Frankenstein.

He shambled out on to the platform and looked around. Matt was already out on the gangplank extending from the walkway that encircled the tower. Justin gazed up, awed by the tower that soared straight towards the heavens. A car shot upward on the track behind him, disappearing from view within seconds. Another car streaked down, snapping silently past them.

He looked around the walkway at the tourists moving clumsily in their space suits, closing in around them to watch the show. None of them were tuned into his circuit but he could see their faces, mouths moving silently, several waving encouragement, a few shaking their heads as if he were crazy. Many of them were already crowding up to the side of the walkway, hands clinging to the wire fencing which prevented the overly eager from tumbling into space. Unfortunately, the platform he was on had no such safety devices.

"Hey, buddy, come on out!" Matt cried. "The view is great." Matt made a show of jumping up and down on the gangplank as if it were a diving board.

Justin carefully stepped up to the edge of the gangplank, which looked like a diving board with handrails on the side, and then made the mistake of looking over the side.

Instinctively he clutched the handrails for dear life, his knees turning to jelly. Earth was five hundred clicks straight down. The city of Rio was directly below, and the Atlantic Ocean sparkled to the east. To the south the coastline curved away and he could clearly see the line of glittering white beaches that separated the blue of the ocean from the dark green of tropical growth. Early morning clouds were just beginning to appear over the jungle, soon to grow into towering thunderheads. Far to the west he thought he could see the peaks of the Andes catching the first light of dawn.

He knew it was beautiful he tried to focus on that but the end of the diving board was only a couple meters ahead.

"Hey, Bell, look out for this next step, it's a killer!" Matt chortled.

"All right, you two," Brian announced. "Times awasting. No fancy chute work, just let it float you down. If you can get into the target zone, great. If not, no sweat. Winds are calm, visibility unlimited, a good morning for a jump."

"Ten seconds, Everett."

Justin listened as Brian received a final jump clearance from the control room.

"Three, two, one! Jump, Everett, jump!"

Matt bent his knees, extended his hands over his head as if he were simply going to fall a few meters into a swimming pool, and vaulted off.

"Look out below!" Matt shouted.

"Ten seconds, Bell. Move it up to the edge!"

As if pulled by a force beyond his control, Justin took the final step up to the edge of the board and then looked down again. Without the support of the suit servos he knew he would have collapsed into a mound of quivering protoplasm, all resemblance to human form lost forever. He wondered as well if sixteen-year-olds could die of heart attacks, because if so, he knew he was dying his heart was out of its usual slot and was currently banging away some where up behind his mouth.

Brian's words echoed, dragging out with maddening slowness as if he were talking like some demented spirit trapped in a nightmare, "Threeee twoooo"

There was still time to protest, to stop this ridiculous stunt, Justin thought All I gotta do is say no. Hell, discretion is the better part of; "One! Jump, Bell, jump!"

He tried to move, but his knees were gone flesh, muscles, tendons, bones had melted into a puddle somewhere down in the toes of his suit.

He tried to say something, anything.

A sharp nudge tapped him from behind.

The universe tipped over. First he saw the horizon of the Earth, then the morning sun, spinning up and out of view again the Earth, directly below. Weightlessness, no real sense of speed, just weightlessness. He slowly tumbled over, plummeting head down. The tower was racing past him. A car was slowing down for entry into the five-hundred-klick station; it whisked past and for an instant he saw astonished faces peering out at him. He continued his roll; now he was looking back up. Funny, the platform was far above, or was it below and he was falling up? It was a couple hundred meters away, in any case. He saw a dot separating from the platform.

It was Seay, damn him! He pushed me!

"Yeee Haaa! How we doing boys?" Seay cried.

"On my way!" Matt shouted. "What a rush!"

"Bell?"

A stream of obscenities escaped from Justin, directed at Brian, Matt, and the universe. This was simply too damn much!

His slow somersault continued. After several rotations it was clear that velocity was increasing. The side of the tower was becoming an indistinct blur. As he fell the circular ring around the tower was growing smaller, details disappearing. Directly below he could see the Earth rushing up. The rotations continued; each upward turn showed the docking station receding until it was only a barely visible bulge on the side of the tower. The horizon was contracting: the peaks of the Andes were no longer visible, and the bay of Rio was standing out sharp and clear; he could even see different shadings in the colors of the ocean.

"Everett ten seconds to stabilization, thirty to shield deployment, retros kick in at forty. Hang on and check in. Bell, ten seconds after Everett."

Justin held his breath, counting down, barely hearing Matt's shout that he had stabilized.

Justin was still somersaulting; as he looked down he caught a brief glimpse of Matt. Suddenly a stabilizer jet on his backpack fired as the suit's inertial guidance system activated. The jet neutralized the slow

head-over-heels tumble. Another jet fired, this one strong, positioning Justin on his back, instantly augmented by a third jet, which held him in a flat back-down position looking up. The tower seemed to have drifted farther away. A dim thought registered that this was because of the Coriolis effect. The angular momentum of jumping from a tower five hundred clicks above the Earth's surface deflected him away from the tower relative to a straight line back to the center of Earth's gravity.

"Bell! Hey, Bell, you all right?"

"Stabilized," Justin announced grimly.

He counted off the seconds. If the shield failed to deploy, he was going to be a blazing light flashing across the morning sky. "Damn all, never again," he mumbled. "Never, ever again."

He felt a sharp jolt from behind. An instant later he felt as if he were lying face up inside an umbrella. The reentry shield packed into his suit had deployed; a dozen meters across, it would protect him from the fiery heat of reentry.

"Wow! Hey, these retros are a kick!" Matt shouted.

Justin waited, breathing hard, and suddenly it felt as if someone had punched him squarely in the back. Weightlessness was replaced by a two-gee counter-blow that caused him to grunt from the shock.

"Retro," Justin shouted.

Looking up, he could see Brian's ant-like figure disappear behind the disk shaped shielding. Seconds later there was a flare of light as the senior cadets retro-pack kicked on.

"All right, kiddies, get ready for the ride of a lifetime!" Seay declared.

The retro continued to fire. Looking to one side, Justin noticed a glow rimming the edge of his shield. Even as he watched, it shifted from a deep bluish-red, to scarlet, and then to a brilliant orange. When he glanced up he saw a cone of light pulsing around his shield. He'd reached the atmosphere, and the friction of reentry was ionizing the thin air a hundred and twenty clicks up.

A blinking red light projecting on to his faceplate startled him for a second and then he saw that it was the retro shutting down. The gees were increasing as the friction of the air became sufficient to blunt his speed. The cone of light pulsed higher, turning bright yellow and then nearly white. He heard a distant sound. It was Matt, laughing with maniacal glee.

Buffeting blurred his vision and deceleration pushed the load up to nearly four gees. He grunted hard as he fought to take in short gasps of air. Beyond his own fireball he could see the back of Seay's shield glowing white-hot.

Strangely, it was silent. In the old movies a roar like a tornado always accompanied reentry. He was silent fire streaking through the morning sky. I'm the fire, the pillar of light coursing down from the heavens. In ancient times, he thought, I'd be seen as a god, coming on my fiery chariot. A sense of power coursed through him: he was in the center of the inferno, untouched, unscathed.

He started to laugh, not even aware of the shouts of his two companions as they streaked down from the sky. A thought danced in the back of his mind the realization that if there should be the slightest imperfection in the shield, a flaw the size of a pinhole, it'd burn through. A two thousand-degree needle of fire would slice through his suit, gulping energy from his oxygen, blow-torching him apart so fast he'd barely have time to realize he was dead before he was already on the other side of that final mystery.

But in spite of that thought he continued to laugh for here, in the fire of the heavens for at least an instant, he wondered if this was what it felt like to be totally alive, and then knew that it was.

The fire died away, and then to his surprise there was indeed sound, a distant rumbling thunder. Straight overhead, just at the center of his vision, a few stars were still visible, but all around the edge of his shield the sky was a deep, dark blue. The gee-load began to bleed off. A mild buffeting rocked him. Another jolt startled him; it was the shield retracting into its backpack. He started to fall freely once again.

Justin felt the tug of the thin atmosphere against his body. Drawing in one arm, he rolled over and faced down. As he recalled the practice session in the Academy wind tunnel he extended the arm back out, arched his back, and raised his hands up to either side of his head. He lurched back and forth, then finally stabilized. Falling through twenty-seven thousand meters, he saw Matt a thousand meters below and a bit to one side.

"Nothing fancy, you two," Brian reminded them. "Just stay steady and let the computer handle the show."

Rio was now far off to one side, the massive bulk of the Skyhook tower soaring up from the edge of the city. It was surrounded by airstrips, maglev stations and warehouses in every direction for half a dozen kilometers.

"How you doing, Bell?"

"Fine."

"To your right."

Justin looked over and saw Brian falling, head first, thirty meters away. Brian arched his back and broke his dive, coming up to float by Justin.

"Get ready for drogue," Brian announced and then drifted back and away.

Justin focused on his heads-up display and saw that he was passing through sixteen thousand meters. He was surprised to see that the curvature of the Earth was barely visible to both sides of him. Just minutes before he could see almost completely across the continent; now the universe was reduced to this limited view of the planet.

A thin layer of high cirrus clouds came rushing up, looking almost solid. He saw Matt plunge through like a drop of water falling into the sea, a rippling wake spreading out from the hole he punched. Justin snapped through the clouds; rocked by mild turbulence, he lost control for a second so that he was almost on his back. Before he could begin to compensate a thruster jet rolled him back into place.

He saw a bright orange plume eject from Matt's back, the drogue chute popping open. Seconds later a blow hit him in the back. Justin was jerked upright as his own drogue deployed, killing off his nearly five-hundred-kilometer-per-hour fall. Momentarily stunned, he dangled in the harness. He looked around and saw Seay floating a hundred meters away.

They fell together for nearly a minute, dropping through seven thousand meters, then five, and finally to four.

"Bell, Everett. See the X in the field to the south? That's our target. No fancy steering this time, but see if you can at least bring yourself in without embarrassment. Remember not to flare too soon. Your suit servos can handle a hard landing but you look like crap when you drop that badly. Remember, you're cadets, not amateurs."

"Aye, aye, sir," Matt chimed back.

"If your main chute fails to deploy or tangles, you're on manual, no computers for this part. Hit your release button and make sure you're clear, then pull the backup on your chest."

"Wowww!"

Matt's shout startled Justin. Looking down he saw that the drogue chute had snapped loose, crumpling up and twisting like a piece of gauze in the wind. Seconds later Matt's main chute blossomed.

With a stomach-lurching snap Justin's drogue chute broke free and he started to fall. He counted to three, waiting. Then his left hand reached around to his backup.

A reassuring thump slapped him in the shoulders. Looking up he saw the bright orange canopy deploy, the arc of the airfoil opening over his head. He grabbed hold of the toggle handles and tentatively pulled his left hand down. The left side of the chute dropped and he went into a slow, spi-raling circle. He eased up on the left and tried fte right, reversing his spiral.

He started to laugh again. He felt like an eagle soaring through the heavens. A bubble of warm air swirled up around him; the first thermals of the day were rising off the open field below, and he surged up on the column so that Seay dropped below him.

"Hey, nothing fancy, Bell, just follow me in," Seay said.

He ignored the senior cadet for a moment, trying to stay within the thermal, but it was already gone, climbing skyward to where, at twenty-five hundred meters, it would cool, condense, and form a bright, puffy cumulus. It would be joined by others, until by midday it would be a towering nimbus, ten thousand meters high, marching across the sky and lashing the ground below with lightning and rain.

"Light breeze stirring out of the northwest," Brian told them, "five knots. Come in downwind and turn on to your target."

A warm rich scent flooded Justin's suit and he realized that the computer had opened a vent to the outside atmosphere. The air was rich with a riot of tropical smells that were a delight after the weeks of filtered antiseptic ship oxygen.

Breaking out of his spiral, he watched as Brian swooped down to dart past Matt, who uttered a sharp protest at not being first.

"Just follow my lead, you guys, circle when I do. In competition we all touch down at the same time. Today, just try and get down on your feet."

Brian went into a circling turn, hovering slightly downwind from the target. Justin tried to swing in above and behind him, but circled out too wide. He came back around to see Brian pulling down hard on both toggles, spilling his air, dropping and picking up speed. Matt floated up beside Justin, then dropped back down as well. Justin followed suit, surprised at how fast his speed picked up when he spilled air. The ground was racing up fast. Seay let his toggles up, rising back up slightly. Matt pulled a tight circle, staying just behind Seay. Justin tried to follow, then lost sight of the two as he pulled down hard on his right toggle and eased up on his left. As he swung out into a sharp rum the ground spiraled beneath him.

Coming back out of the circle he saw that he had drifted to the northeast of the target. A pennant set up near the "X" marker fluttered and shifted to the north, then to the northeast. Now upwind of the target, Justin tried to turn. Seay shot underneath Justin's feet fifteen meters below. Seay flared up at the last second and touched down, slapping a foot directly on the center of the X.

Damn all, Justin thought. I can do it! Racing past the target he tried to judge the moment. He pulled down hard on his left toggle and went into a turn as the ground spun by beneath him. He saw the target from the corner of his eye but was momentarily distracted by Matt, swooping down and screaming like a banshee as he soared over the target by a dozen feet, flared and then came down hard fifty feet away.

Justin tightened his turn and tried to line up. He swung out like a doll on the end of a toy parachute, and then saw the target rising up in his field of vision.

"Bell! Flare!"

He realized what was happening too late. He released his deathlike grip on his left toggle and felt his chute billowing back out. An instant later he slammed into the ground on his left side. He rolled over fast, a blizzard of shroud lines wrapping over his faceplate. He tumbled like a broken toy across the field, lines ensnaring his arms and legs.

He bounced to a stop, feeling as if he had rolled down a hill inside a barrel. The thought came to him that if it had not been for his suit and the power servo units he would most likely have broken a leg with his botched landing. For that matter, he wasn't sure he hadn't broken a leg; his entire body felt numb.

He lay still for several seconds, collecting his thoughts.

"Bell? Hey, Bell, you alive in there?"

"Huh?"

He tried to roll over onto his back, feeling like a turtle. Hands grabbed him by the shoulder; looking up through his dirt-smudged helmet he saw Seay eyeing him and shaking his head.

"You idiot, here let me help you up."

Seay grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him upright.

"Damn, looks like he got sprayed by a spider," Matt commented.

Hands drifted past his faceplate, struggling with the lines, unwrapping him from his cocoon. He heard laughter, strange voices Brazilians speaking Portuguese. He caught a glimpse of a girl with a gorgeous darkly tanned face; a wisp of her perfume drifted into his suit.

"Poor boy, he's all right?" she asked.

The lilt of her voice made his heart melt, especially when he caught a better glimpse of her as the bundle of chute lines was finally pulled free from his helmet.

Someone unclasped his helmet and pulled it off. Seconds later he felt the backpack containing his retrorocket, reentry shield and chute slide off.

"All right, Bell, let's see if you can still walk."

Gingerly he stood up, flexing his legs. Seay was standing in front of him, shaking his head. The ground crew was standing behind him, shaking their heads as well and laughing.

"You all right, Bell?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Nothing broken?"

Justin moved his arms and legs.

"No, the suit took it."

"Idiot, don't do that next time. OK?"

"Sure. Hey, did I make the target?"

Brian grinned and pointed down. Justin looked down and saw the center of the X directly under his feet.

"Two-point landings, Bell, are the only ones that count. Butts and heads don't."

Seay slapped him on the shoulder, grinning.

Matt came up to Justin and gave him a good-natured punch on the shoulder.

"Hey, buddy, outrageous ain't it?"

Matt pointed at the tower which soared heavenward on the far side of Rio, sixteen kilometers away.

"We got time to do it again?" Matt asked Brian.

Seay shook his head.

"We'll do a couple atmosphere jumps the old-fashioned way from a plane, then it's back up to school. You guys got a flight to catch tomorrow."

Justin didn't know whether to feel relieved or not at Seay's announcement. Staring at the tower, he found it all but impossible to believe that less than a half-hour ago he had been five hundred kilometers up, in the vacuum of space. His memory of the jump was now a jumbled blur of impressions highlighted by the cone of fire that had engulfed him as he bit atmosphere.

"Well, fire rider, welcome to the club," the young Brazilian girl proclaimed, and she extended her hand. He went to take it and then saw that she was holding a piece of burnt toast.

"Tradition," Seay declared. "First-time fire riders have to eat a piece of burnt toast if they make it down."

Justin grinned as he took the toast and bit into it. It was more charcoal than bread; there was chilling recognition that only a few millimeters of plastishielding were all that prevented him from finishing his ride as a shower of ash, drifting on the winds of the upper atmosphere.

But at the moment he didn't care, and when he and Matt finished the toast they were delighted by the reward of a kiss on the cheek from the girl.

She laughed at their foolish grins as she turned and sauntered away.

"Hey, being a fire-riding cadet has its rewards, don't it," Matt said. "I'm in love, buddy and we got the whole day down here for me to convince her that the feeling is mutual."

"Come on, you two, let's get out of these suits," Seay suggested, motioning towards the pickup truck that was coming out to ferry them and their equipment back to the hangar.

Brian started to walk away and then turned, looking back at Justin.

"By the way, Bell, I didn't know folks from Indiana had such a command of old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon."

Justin blushed, suddenly remembering what he had called Seay after the senior cadet pushed him off the gangplank.

"Remarkable," Matt chimed in, "have to remember that last one. What was it now? You son of a drunken no-good"

Justin tried to swing at Matt but did it a little too hard so that the suit servos kicked in. He spun around and landed on his backside; Brian and Matt, laughing even harder, had to pull him back to his feet and lead him off the field.

CHAPTER V

"A beauty of a ship," Justin announced admiringly as he examined the sleek lines of the USMC's Somers. Since the Somers was one of the older Timoshenko-class cruisers, it displayed the classic swept-back lines of a ship designed for a multitude of tasks: planet-to-planet transfer and reentry, patrol, and high-speed pursuit. Given the ever-increasing specialization of ships in the inventory of the USMC, the Somers was a bit of a throwback to an earlier and more exciting period of space flight.

Gently hoisting his duffel so as not to disconnect his sticky-bottom boots from the airlock's deck, Justin walked down the length of the ship. He could see on closer examination that it had been through many long years of service. Its underside was scorched and blackened from hundreds of reentries, micro-meteor and debris nicks marred the forward edge of its swept-back wings, and the paint was peeling in places from the thousands of long hours of exposure to the searing heat and freezing cold of the vacuum of space.

Justin scanned the line of cadets queued up behind him. Some of the faces were familiar: Leonov was behind Matt, and farther back in the line was Madison Smith, who had been in his squad during scrub summer. Chatting with Madison was her roommate Marissa Livollen. He saw his roommate, Wendell Colson, bringing up the end of the line.

As he reached the entry door he turned as sharply as he could in zero gravity and snapped off a salute, first to the colors of the USMC emblazoned on the side of the entry hatch and then to the First Officer.

"Plebe Cadet Bell, Justin, 144-99-1848, reporting as ordered, sir. Permission to come aboard."

Justin recognized the acting first officer as Senior Cadet Frank Petronovich, a friend of Brian Seay's. The senior cadet returned the salute.

"Aft, cabin three. Stow your gear and report forward in fifteen minutes."

Justin saluted both the flag and Petronovich once more, shuffled aboard and headed aft. It was his first time aboard an actual light cruiser. Somehow the vids made it seem far more expansive and romantic than the reality that now confronted him. The corridor was barely wide enough for one person, let alone someone carrying a duffel. The floor, walls and ceiling were marred with scuffmarks and dents, and had a tired, worn out look to them. The bonding material that kept the universe together, duct tape, held several light panels in place.

He squeezed past an open airlock door and saw the narrow mess hall to his right, a low-ceilinged room with a single row of tables down the middle. An unusual smell he couldn't decide if it was disagreeable or not wafted out, and he caught a glimpse of a cook back in the galley, wearing a stained T-shirt that showed his hairy, beefy arms. The cook was shaking a container and whistling a tune that Justin

recognized as a rather obscene ballad favored by Matt. He caught Justin's stare and winked, his grin revealing a row of stained yellow teeth.

Justin waved back before pushing on down the corridor.

He reached cabin three just aft of the galley and pushed the door open. Glad to be the first one in, he stowed his bag in a storage bin. The room had four webbed sleeping nets rather than beds. During the summer he had spent a couple of nights in the zero-gravity section learning how to rig up a sleeping net, but slumber had been almost impossible just as he'd nod off, a dream about falling would hit and he'd wake up with a start. At least he was not alone; several cadets actually woke up yelling and thrashing and one had washed out when he swore he'd never try to sleep in zero-gee again.

"Well, old man, roomies again," Matt announced, easily coming through the door and pushing his bag into the storage bin. "Ah, a net! Darn good to be sleeping the way normal people do. Chow smells good, better than Uncle Dan's hash, that's for certain."

"This three aft?"

Justin saw Tanya floating in the doorway.

"You got it," Matt confirmed. "Now don't tell me you're our roomie?"

Tanya rolled her eyes. "Yeah, co-ed arrangements on this flight." Sighing, she came into the room and stowed her gear. Matt looked over at Justin and smirked.

Tanya turned her head and caught his expression.

"Now listen, you two. Just because we're rooming, no funny business. First of all, it's against the regs and second well, second I'm not interested in either of you."

"Oh, I am crushed," Matt wailed. "You have shattered my heart, Leonov dear. I think I'll go space myself."

Matt doubled over with laughter as Tanya shoved him; he tumbled off his feet and bounced off the wall. Rebounding and still laughing he grabbed hold of a sleeping net, braked his flight and settled back down onto the floor.

"Hey, guess I'm with you guys."

Justin forgot the hurt he didn't want to show, and grinned as Madison Smith came into the room, her bright cheery smile lighting her dark features.

"Good, now it's two to two," Leonov announced, and the girls slapped each other's hands.

"Madison, how are things in Company B?" Matt asked. "Kind of missed your not being with the old crew from summer."

"Our senior, Arika Yagamaru what a terror! Just twitch on evening parade and it's down on the deck and give her fifty. In low gravity she'll sit on your back while you do them. Jeez, wish I was back with Seay."

"No, you don't," Matt interjected. "Justin and I here thought we had it made, doing the jump with him. All buddy-buddy on the way down, even on the ride home. Back aboard the Academy though, look out! Justin here called him Brian just once, no one around but the three of us, and look out Aunt Thelma Seay had him pull double watch."

The four fell into an argument about whose senior was worse until the shrill cry of the bosun's pipe sounded in the room's loudspeaker. An old-style flat computer screen winked to life on the far wall, showing Petronovich.

"All hands forward for reading of orders and departure."

Justin followed the crush out into the corridor. Some officers would mete out an onerous task to the last one to report and no one wanted to be last on the first day of a cruise.

Swept along by the jostling crowd, he floated forward past the galley, supplies storage rooms, and finally into the rec room just aft of the forward control center. The room quickly filled up, cadets jockeying for position. Justin looked around and was intrigued by the ship's design. All the floor arrangements were laid out on the long axis of the ship. He suddenly realized that when the main engines fired the artificial gravity would make the aft bulkhead walls the "floor" while the floor, when the ship was in zero gravity, would be a "wall." A moment's thought told him that it was done this way to maximize space inside a long narrow swept-back ship, permitting larger rooms rather than a number of small circular decks stacked one on top of another for the two hundred foot length of the ship.

"Ship's company attenshun"

Justin snapped to attention, making sure to keep both feet on the floor. The room was silent, expectant. The door forward, which led up to the flight controls, combat information center, and the distant stratosphere of officers quarters opened. First out was an elderly officer, face florid, hair nearly white, wearing the green tabs of a flight surgeon. Two more officers followed, one of them male, short, rotund, and dark-faced, the other a tall young woman who appeared to be barely out of the Academy. Both of them wore the coveted gold wings above their left breast pockets that designated them as fully qualified pilots. They cleared the door, stepped to the right of the entry and came to attention.

Last through was a stone-faced man, black hair going gray at the temples. His eyes, which were nearly as dark as his hair, darted from side to side as if taking in every detail of the forty plebes, one upperclassman and half a dozen enlisted personnel lined up before him. He moved with the casual ease of someone who had spent years in zero gravity. His walk was rigid, erect, as if by some miracle full gravity held him in place. Justin watched him with a slight sense of awe. This was, after all, Captain Ian MacKenzie. He remembered his father speaking of him with deep respect.

On the way back up from their Skyhook jump Brian had filled them in on "Old Mack." He was a notorious taskmaster, a stickler for regulations; an old line officer dating back to the beginnings of the

USMC, having come into the service from the old British Royal Aerospace Command.

MacKenzie stood silent for a moment surveying the cadets, his eyes sweeping back and forth, his head moving in a jerky manner like an eagle looking down on its prey. Justin sensed that here was something different. Aboard the Academy the officers might be tough, unforgiving, but down deep there was always a certain nurturing. In spite of their toughness he could always sense the hand of Thorsson guiding things. The personnel on the Academy were teachers in addition to being regular officers. MacKenzie was a different breed of cat, a straight line officer of the fleet, and for an instant Justin wondered why Thorsson had thrown forty plebes into his care. Reality lesson, he thought, as Thorsson had warned him.

"Ship's company, attention to orders," MacKenzie announced. His voice was deceptively quiet, a high tenor, seeming not to match his towering frame.

"Articles of the Fleet," he began and for the next ten minutes, reciting from memory, he ticked off all twenty-five articles, as any Captain would go through the ritual aboard any ship about to embark. Once

done he paused for a moment, scanning his crew.

"By order of United Space Military Command, I, Ian MacKenzie, Captain, do hereby assert command of this ship Somers, registry number 112A. By order of United Space Military Command I shall pilot this ship to rendezvous with Mars orbital base Delta for transfer of supplies and personnel. While on voyage I will assert the authority of the United Space Military Command and all aboard will, by the articles of the Fleet, comply with all lawful orders issued by me or my designated officers."

He fell silent. The first pilot stepped forward and saluted MacKenzie. She turned and faced the company.

"Ships company, stand at ease."

Justin relaxed, spreading his feet apart. He gave a sidelong glance over at Matt, who rolled his eyes slightly.

MacKenzie, still standing rigidly, cleared his throat.

"I will tell you now that until last week this flight was not slated to carry cadets."

He paused for a moment, looking slightly awkward as if speaking spontaneously was a troublesome chore that he'd rather avoid.

"Be that as it may, you are Fleet personnel. I have been requested to oversee your training. The ship's computer will be linked at all times back to the Academy. For the first day or two you should be able to interact directly with your classes until the time lag for signal makes that impossible. All of you will stand duty shifts in the cockpit, galley, engine room, and hydroponics room, and perform general ship's maintenance. I will provide daily Astro-Navigation problems along with running a class on fleet law."

He paused for a moment as he organized his thoughts.

"You will indeed serve as the crew of this vessel and be treated as such. Senior Cadet Petronovich will act as your platoon commander. All queries to me must first be directed through him."

He fell silent again and started to turn as if in dismissal, then stopped and looked back.

"I want to make this clear. You are duly sworn personnel of this fleet. This is not the Academy, where officers more fit for a classroom than for command are in control. Given the fact that this ship was designed for patrol and is fully combat-capable, I shall expect instant obedience without question. As you know, this ship carries a full compliment of weapons, including twenty Valkyrie space-to-space and space-to-surface nuclear warheads. The power to use them is in my hands if the situation warrants it."

Justin stared at the Captain. It was a curious statement. The USMC did indeed have control over humanity's stockpile of nuclear weapons. Part of its reason for existing was to serve as a deterrent to any nation on Earth that might secretly attempt to develop nuclear weapons and then threaten a neighbor with them. He wondered why MacKenzie felt it necessary to mention this power and the fact that he controlled it.

"Those of you from Mars or the outer colonies, raise your hand."

Justin looked over at Matt, who put his hand up along with half a dozen other cadets.

MacKenzie's gaze slowly swept the room. Justin watched the Captain while he stared intently at Matt for several seconds, as if memorizing every detail about his friend.

"If we should be called upon to react to certain elements in this solar system, I will expect instant obedience to my orders or you shall face the consequences."

The room was silent, Justin wondering if a threat had just been issued.

"You will find this ship to be very different."

MacKenzie said with a smile. He then turned away and disappeared through the door.

"Prepare for departure in ten minutes," the senior pilot announced. "Acceleration chairs will be found in your rooms fold them down from the wall and strap in. Once clear of the Academy, burn time at four gees will be twenty-two minutes, then one gee for three hours and eighteen minutes, so if you need to hit the head better do so now. Ship's company dismissed."

Justin looked over at Matt.

"What do you think that was all about?"

"Shoot, I thought he'd burn a hole in me with his eyeballs," Matt replied, shaking his head. "Darned if I know but I don't feel good about it, old buddy, not one bit good."

Matt moved easily about the tiny galley, accompanying Ship's Cook Kelly O'Brian in the last stanza of "Gerty of Ganymede" while slipping a container full of chopped beef into the rehydrator.

Justin looked at the two in surprise as they finished the words, glad that Tanya and Madison had not pulled kitchen detail this first night out. On such matters he was still decidedly old-fashioned and wondered if Matt would have joined so lustily in the song about an overly friendly tavern owner if females had been present. Somehow he suspected that O'Brian would have kept on with his unending stream of invective and songs no matter who was present, including Thor Thorsson himself.

"You know a zero-gee galley like the back of your hand," O'Brian announced in his strange lilting lisp. "Serve aboard ship before?"

"My Uncle Dan owns a solar sailing ship, grew up on it."

"Which one?"

"Corona Wind, six-master, twenty-nine hundred square klicks of sail and out of Ceres."

"Not Dan Everett?"

"The same."

"So that's how you know the songs. We tangled lines a few times. Beat the tar out of me once and that's somethin' I don't normally admit, but being his kin and such I tell you he's a friend to have in a scrape. So you're a sailor then."

"That I am and proud of it," Matt announced. "Why, I'd been to near every asteroid mining camp in the system before I was twelve. Even did a Mars to Jupiter run once in eleven months twenty-three days, and not many been that far and that fast. Ol' Dan navigated among them moons by dead reckoning, and not a single burst of thruster."

O'Brian whistled good-naturedly at Matt's boasting.

"And you're an Earthsider," he said, looking over at Justin.

"Indiana."

"Never been there. Hey, watch them potatoes."

Kelly shouldered past Justin and snatched several hot potatoes that had drifted out of their container. Cursing soundly, he pushed them back in and snapped the lid shut.

"You ain't no galley rat yet, that's for certain. Quick way to get burned if you don't pay attention in here."

"All hands, all hands, starboard watch prepare for chow in fifteen minutes."

The loudspeaker momentarily interrupted Kelly's tirade about clumsy midshipmen and, worst of all, first-year plebes. Justin just listened; he was fascinated by the man's command of vocabulary.

"Sergeant O'Brian."

O'Brian shot a quick glance at the loudspeaker.

"Here, sir."

"I'll have my dinner now."

"Aye, sir."

O'Brian looked over at Justin and Matt. His gaze shifted from Matt and then focused on Justin.

"Bell, you'll have to take His Worship's dinner forward."

"His Worship?"

Kelly casually reached over to the wall and turned up the music coming from the computer so that the sound all but drowned out their conversation.

"Ice' MacKenzie, the 'Ice Man.' "

Justin, a bit startled by O'Brian's disdainful tone, said nothing.

"Now listen here, you young idiot. Just mind your P's and Q's in front of the Old Cuss. Don't speak unless spoken to. Lay his dinner out and for heaven's sake don't spill anything or let anything get loose. If you're lucky he'll just dismiss you, then scurry back here and help me set the spread."

Brian hesitated.

"And another thing, young sir. If he starts asking you questions just tread careful-like. Don't just go giving the first answer that comes to your mind, think it all through."

"Why?"

"Just do as I tell you. He's a strange bird. Something about youngsters sets him off at times. For the life of me I can't understand why Thorsson sent you kiddies on this trip. MacKenzie had a fit when the orders came in."

"Thought he'd like the extra hands to command," Matt interjected. "This ship seems empty without us."

"Designed a long time back, thirty years ago," Kelly replied. "Needed a lot more hands to run her then than we do now. She's an old one, she is, but a beaut. At least empty there wasn't much to stir

MacKenzie up. So just be careful something seemed to be troubling him right after we shipped out from the Academy."

O'Brian snapped a container of soup into a carry tray, followed by a container of beef hash and a cup of hot black coffee.

"Don't spill anything."

With an almost fatherly gesture O'Brian straightened the collar on Justin's jump suit, buttoned a breast pocket and finally nodded his approval.

"Now get."

O'Brian opened the door and ushered Justin out into the corridor.

Justin wove his way down the corridor, stepping cautiously. Cadets of the starboard watch were starting to drift out into the main corridor, some walking with sticky-bottom boots, others floating along.

"Gangway," Justin cried, using the ancient term that announced he was on official business aboard ship and thus others had to clear the way. He crossed the small assembly room and stopped before the cadet guarding the doorway leading forward.

"Captain's dinner," Justin announced.

The cadet opened the door and Justin stepped through. For a moment he looked around, confused. Steps led upward towards the flight control center and cockpit. A narrow corridor turned to his left and at the end of it he saw a handrail leading down. That must be the stairway leading to the lower deck where weapons storage, combat control and the hydroponics tanks were located, he thought.

He tried straight ahead, passing small doorways on either side. At the end of the narrow corridor a door confronted him, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Captain Ian MacKenzie" was emblazoned on a gold plaque set at eye level. Holding the tray with one hand, he knocked.

"Enter."

Justin unlatched the door and stepped in.

"Sir, die Captain's dinner," Justin announced, not quite sure what the procedure for this all was.

MacKenzie, hunched over a computer screen, looked up.

"Set it on the table."

Justin went over to the table in the middle of the room and set the tray down, clipping hold-down snaps to the four corners. He stepped back and decided that it was best to come to attention.

MacKenzie's attention went back to the screen as he read a report bearing the letterhead of USMC Headquarters. The image flickered and rolled for a moment, as if a glitch were running through the system. He sat for several minutes, attention fixed. Justin wondered if the man simply read slowly or if he was thinking about the contents of the message. An image flashed on the screen of a USMC ship, one similar to the Somers, with a smaller ship docked to its entry port. A strike frigate drifted in front of the camera, its forward turret guns aimed straight at the two ships.

It was a curious image and Justin stared at it intently. The audio was turned down and the screen was too far away for him to read the text scrolling across the bottom. The image again flickered and rolled, turning wavy as if a magnet were being held to the side of the monitor.

Finally MacKenzie looked back at the table.

"You still here?"

"Ah, yes, sir. I wasn't dismissed."

MacKenzie flicked the screen off.

"Don't tell me what I should and shouldn't do, Mister" he hesitated, leaning forward to read Justin's name tag, "Mister Bell. Do you understand me? Whether I dismiss you or not is not yours to question."

"Sir, yes, sir."

Mackenzie's cold gaze studied Justin's face.

"You were standing next to that red-haired cadet, the one who raised his hand."

"Yes, sir."

"What is his name?"

"Cadet Matt Everett, sir."

"He a friend of yours?"

"Yes, sir, he is."

"I could see that by the way you looked over at him. At least you are honest, Bell. Tell me, are you honest?"

"Yes, sir."

"In all things?"

"I try to be."

"Most boys aren't. Most are deceitful, given to vile practices, vile thoughts. Don't you agree, Mr. Bell?"

Justin hesitated for a second. How should he answer? Kelly had warned him about this. As he looked at MacKenzie he knew there was only one answer.

"Yes, sir," he said quietly.

"And therefore, Mr. Bell, haven't you contradicted yourself? You say you are honest, therefore implying goodness, yet you agree with me that most boys are deceitful."

"Most boys, sir, as you said."

"And your friend, this Mr. Everett?"

"He is honest, sir."

"Somehow I doubt that," MacKenzie declared. "I could see it in his eyes. The eyes, Mr. Bell, they are the windows of the soul as the philosophers once said. Yes, but a momentary glance can reveal much. For example, Mr. Bell, your eyes speak much."

He fell silent staring at Justin. Though the strain was terrible Justin realized that even a momentary glance away might be construed as an attempt to hide something. He stared straight back at MacKenzie. If what MacKenzie said was true, Justin thought, then the man before him was dead. His eyes revealed nothing; they were emptiness as deep as space itself.

He remembered his grandfather talking about the long years in space, especially in the early years. The endless boring watches, the silence, the months upon months trapped within a tiny speck crawling across the endless sea could drain life itself, leaving a man or woman an empty shell.

MacKenzie finally broke contact, looking down. Justin wondered if some sort of power game had just been played out, in which he should have broken eye contact first to acknowledge MacKenzie's superior power.

"You pass, Mr. Bell."

"Sir?"

"Just that you pass. You are guileless. Perhaps even a naive fool. I think you can be trusted."

"Yes, sir."

"Ever read Moby Dick?"

Surprised by the sudden shift in conversation, Justin shook his head.

"No, sir."

" 'And this drama between thee and me was planned a million years before the sea ever rolled', " MacKenzie said, his voice distant.

"Read the book by this time next week," MacKenzie ordered. "It's in the ship's computer library."

"Yes, sir."

"Fine. You are dismissed, Mr. Bell."

"Yes, sir." Justin braced himself and started to turn.

"And Mr. Bell avoid disreputable company. It is the cause of moral decline."

"Yes, sir, I will."

"This Everett, he is rooming with you."

"Yes, sir."

"That is bad," MacKenzie sighed and then his gaze locked on Justin. "But then again, if there is anything inappropriate I expect an instant report. Instant, do you understand me, Bell?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

"Fine, now get out."

Justin backed to the door, sensing that if he turned his back it might be taken as skulking away. He closed the door and exhaled noisily.

Now what the hell was that all about? he wondered. Suddenly feeling as if he were being watched, he straightened up and headed aft. He reached the galley and ducked inside. O'Brian looked up at him.

"Well?"

Justin hesitated. Though O'Brian was nearly old enough to be his grandfather, Justin realized that in the most technical of senses he himself was defined as an officer, even if he was only a first-year plebe, while O'Brian was an enlisted man. The Code said that one should never reveal what happened between two officers to enlisted personnel or civilians.

"It was OK."

O'Brian smiled grimly and nodded.

"Good for you, lad. Now grab a tray and help your friend."

Justin took up a tray-load of meal containers and stepped out into the mess hall. He saw Matt leaning against a table, talking with a blond female cadet; the others around the table were grinning while Matt obviously spun a yarn to impress her. Justin saw the second flight officer, the younger pilot, come into the galley and take a seat. Going over to her table, he set a tray down. She looked up, smiled and thanked him,

"You enjoy the kick-out ride?" she asked.

"Sure was a long haul, sir."

"Maria Hemenez," she said, extending her hand.

Surprised by her openness, Justin took it.

"We're cruising along at nearly a hundred and ninety thousand clicks per hour now, though it will bleed off as we coast up and away from the sun," she told him. "Anytime I'm on watch and you want to come forward, feel free."

"Thank you, sir."

"No problem."

A gale of laughter erupted, and looking over his shoulder he saw Matt had a band of admirers enjoying his story.

"Better tell your friend there to get back to work," Maria said quietly.

"Yes, sir, I will."

Justin walked over to Matt's side.

"And then, well, then she said"

"Hey, Matt, can I see you a second?"

"In a minute, buddy."

"Now," Justin hissed.

Matt looked at Justin and shrugged his shoulders.

"Old roomie here's gotta problem. I'll be right back."

Justin looked around and realized that there was no hope of privacy in the mess hall. He motioned Justin back into the galley.

O'Brian was in the far corner, banging on some pots and swearing away.

"Look, Matt, the Old Man, MacKenzie, he's got it in for you," Justin whispered.

Music again flooded the room and Justin looked over to see O'Brian looking back at them, his hand dropping from the computer console.

"Why?" Justin asked.

O'Brian pointed to the screen and then at the loudspeaker. What it implied was deeply troubling to Justin. He had never heard of an officer eavesdropping on his crew; first of all, it was against the law, and secondly it implied a lack of trust that was extremely disturbing.

"Hey, what did I do?" Matt asked.

"You exist, that's reason enough. So keep a low profile and knock off making a spectacle of yourself."

"Me, make a spectacle of myself? You gotta be kidding."

"I'm not."

"Yeah, right. You're just jealous because Tanya shot you down and I was hitting it off with that girl from Company B, Marissa Livollen."

"Come on, Matt, you know me better than that."

"OK, but you're askin' me to be what I'm not. I can't help but cut it up a bit at times."

"Well, if you want to stay out of trouble, believe me, don't draw attention to yourself. All right?"

"Yeah, sure, buddy, no problem at all."

Justin and Matt grabbed a quick meal back in the galley after they finished their work. Before cutting them free O'Brian sent the two below to **the** hydroponics tanks to bring up some fresh tomatoes and cucumbers for a salad. Heading aft, they passed through part of the engine room. A lone enlisted man was in the back, and Justin paused for a moment to study the layout. The shielding to the reactor core covered the entire aft bulkhead. They passed through the heavy lead-lined door and stopped again to look at the reactor and engine pods, which jutted into the bowels of the ship. It was an older design, a Beta-class nuclear pulse engine. The energy of the reaction superheated the reactor mass, which could be almost anything but was usually just liquid hydrogen. The high-stream jet it expelled produced far more energy and thrust than any of the old-style chemical-reaction rockets.

Going down a narrow circular staircase they reached the hydroponics deck. The deck was added on in a retrofit when the ship was reconfigured for extremely long distance hauls. Matt wrinkled his nose at the smell even though the filters had removed the most unpleasant aspects of the recycled waste water and ship's sewage.

"Come on," Justin laughed, "you have a hydroponics unit on your sailing pods."

"Yeah, but that stuff is your own, not somebody else's," Matt replied.

"I should have taken you to a pig farm down in Indiana," Justin laughed. "Boy, what a smell this is OK."

Justin opened a bag and plucked several dozen tomatoes from a vine along with a dozen cucumbers.

He was surprised to see the wide variety of plants O'Brian was cultivating in the hydroponics farm. There were fast-growth space-hybrid lettuce, cucumbers, several varieties of tomatoes, some broccoli, and a wide variety of herbs. On higher racks sorghum was laid out in orderly rows, specially cloned to produce the maximum turn around of CO2 to oxygen and thus act as a natural filter system.

The room ended in another barrier of heavy shielding, marking the forward sector leading into the lower storage areas, weapons lockers and missile room.

It seemed like it'd be easier to return back up to the galley that way but O'Brian had strictly forbidden it, saying that MacKenzie had a problem with enlisted personnel treading anywhere into officer's country without permission.

Returning back through the hydroponics farm, Justin and Matt floated up the ladder, cleared the shield airlock and went back to the galley.

"Ah, the happy peasants, dressed in colorful folk costumes, returning with the harvest," O'Brian chuckled. "Stay with me and you two will be ready to ship aboard one of them granola organic habitats by the time you're done. You'd fit in right well with them aging old hippies gone back to the simple life, eating their stone-ground barley while orbiting Venus."

"Hippies?" Matt asked.

"20th century Earth word. I think you solar sailors would fit right in."

Matt, not sure if he had been insulted or not, handed over his bag of tomatoes. O'Brian tossed both of them a couple of cherry tomatoes as a reward. Delighted, Justin popped them into his mouth. Matt looked at them curiously, tried one, smiled, and then downed the rest.

"All right, you two youngsters, supposed to be study time, so get to work now and stay out of trouble."

Back in their room Justin saw Tanya and Madison hunched over the computer screen, which was flickering and wavering.

"Something's up," Madison announced as they came in.

"What's wrong with the computer?" Justin asked.

"We were trying to link into Uncle to get the upload on our Astro-Nav assignments, and the signal kept wavering. Uncle said that solar flare activity is way up and interfering with all signal traffic."

"But there's more," Tanya interjected. "I tapped into the news net, just curious, wanted to see how my cousin did in the ballet competition in Saint Petersburg. There's been an incident."

"A what?"

"Some damn traitors, that's what."

Justin turned and saw Colson, with several other cadets, standing in the doorway.

"So what do you think now, Everett?" Colson asked, his voice cold and threatening.

"Think about what?" Matt asked.

"Some of your buddies seized a Fleet ship today, that's what."

Matt was silent.

"It was carrying some personnel working for my family. They're holding them hostage. It's piracy and kidnapping!"

"Maybe they have a legitimate complaint," Matt replied coolly.

"Legitimate complaint! I'll tell you what a legitimate complaint is," Colson shot back. "If they don't space everyone involved, that will be the crime."

"Ever see someone die in vacuum?" Matt asked through clenched teeth.

Colson was silent.

"No, figured you haven't. I have, and I sure as hell have a complaint against those responsible."

"Maybe they deserved it for their own stupidity."

Matt started to move towards the door. Madison sprang up and got between them.

"So you're in agreement with these traitors then, aren't you?" Colson shouted.

"You're damn straight I am if they are doing anything against you and those like you."

"Bet you wished you could join them," Colson said.

"Don't answer that, Matt," Madison shouted. "He's just trying to set you up."

"I think you know the answer to that," Matt finally replied, struggling for control.

"Colson, get out of here now," Tanya shouted. "Just get out of here."

Colson looked over at his companions. "See, I told you so," he announced and then with a nod of his head he motioned for his group to leave.

Matt looked back at Justin. "I'm gonna wind up killing that guy some day," Matt said.

Justin looked over nervously at the computer, unable to reply.

CHAPTER VI

"All hands, you are aware of the report of increased solar flare activity. We've just received advance warning from our Mercury Solar Observation Station that an eruption of unprecedented proportions has ignited on the surface of the sun. Background radiation levels are expected to soar nearly eight hundred percent in the next twenty-four hours, with spikes reaching two thousand percent."

Justin looked over at Matt as Doctor Zhing showed the last image broadcast from the Mercury observatory before the storm disrupted all transmissions. It was hard to judge the size of the solar flare

by the picture, but Justin guessed it was at least several hundred thousand kilometers across and millions of kilometers long. He hefted the anti-radiation suit that he had just been issued. In spite of zero gravity he judged the suit had several hundred pounds of mass. The only difference between the suit and full EVA gear was that there was no backpack, gloves or faceplate. The extra mass, he guessed was most likely made up of a synthalead lining.

"No sweat," Matt whispered. "I've seen worse; as long as we got the suits on we'll be OK. Heck, this should kick up the solar wind I bet Uncle Dan will have all sails out for this storm."

"As soon as this meeting is over you are all to don your anti-radiation suits," Doctor Zhing continued. "No personnel are to go aft of Bulkhead Four. All personnel housed aft of that position are to double up with personnel forward; room assignments will be posted. The hydroponics deck, which is completely unshielded, is strictly off-limits. The air circulation system that runs aft through the hydroponics deck already has extra baffle shielding inside the air ducts, so we don't have to worry about any contaminated dust particles. The filters are not to be touched, though, until this ship docks and properly shielded and trained personnel remove them. The rest of the lower deck is off-limits as well except for short visits to gather necessary supplies.

"We're going to position the ship so that its long axis is pointed directly back at the sun. The reactor engines and their shields should absorb most of the blow, but radiation inside the ship is expected to rise to a potentially dangerous level. Any questions?"

"How long is this expected to last, sir?" Tanya asked.

"Not sure, maybe for the duration of the run out to Mars. At least we're outbound rather than running in, so that will help somewhat. The interference level is significant, though. We've already lost all communications except on our primary dish, and even that signal's rapidly degrading. The forward edge of the storm is expected to wash over Earth orbit later today, and all communication will most likely be lost except for a few high-powered stations with strong directional focus. That means we're cut off. We're heading into a dead zone anyhow between Mars and Earth, no relay stations, no colonies out here, so skipping signals from high-gain systems aboard large ships is out. I guess we'll be out of touch for a while once the storm hits."

"No Academy assignments," Matt whispered with a smile. "Can't give us homework now."

"Anything else?"

Justin watched as Zhing scanned the group. He had heard a rumor the night before that Zhing had a reputation for getting into the "medicinal alcohol." Because there was so much money to be made aboard an orbital colony or even in the mining camps it was hard to find enough doctors for a flight; sometimes less than the best were recruited and given the rank of Lt. Commander. Either they were straight out of school and looking for a few adventures before settling into a practice, or they were at the tail end of a downwardly spiraling career. I haven't seen any indication of a problem, though, and he does seem kindly enough, Justin thought.

"If there are no further questions, you are dismissed. I'll be around within the hour to check that all of you are in your protective gear. You should know the drill. Avoid exterior walls, keep a sharp eye on your rad-dose meters, and suits should only be removed four times a day, ten minutes at most for going to the bathroom and sorry, that doesn't include time for showers."

Zhing nodded as if in dismissal, but the forward door opened and the assembly snapped to attention as Captain MacKenzie came into the room.

He stood silent for a moment, dark eyes darting back and forth.

"If Doctor Zhing has done his job correctly you've all been informed of our situation," MacKenzie began. "All ship's routines will continue as normal, except where there are safety considerations. The aft engine room has been sealed, the door bolted and secured and engine watch will be run forward in the secondary control center. There is, however, one further announcement.

"An incident occurred on the day of our departure. I felt it best not to discuss it with you for obvious reasons, but circumstances have changed."

Justin shifted uncomfortably. Everybody already knew what had happened from their contacts with Uncle aboard the Academy. Now they were going to hear it officially.

"Yesterday a group of terrorists claiming allegiance to the Mars separatist movement seized a USMC ship in orbit above that planet. A number of civilians are being held hostage with the claim that they had violated certain laws on Mars and as such were to be detained for a local judge and jury to decide their fate.

"Those individuals were engaged in a legitimate business operation chartered by the United Nations, and as such they do not fall under any so-called 'local control.' Besides, such claims are totally without merit. No violation of generally accepted law had occurred. Thus these raiders are no better than pirates and should be treated accordingly and without mercy for that fact alone.

"It is reported as well that an officer aboard the ship allowed these pirates to gain access. There was a report of casualties on both sides. It is disgusting to realize that someone wearing the uniform of the Fleet has turned traitor. This should not come as a surprise, though, to those of us who are loyal and who are at times forced to associate with such scum hiding behind our uniform."

He fell silent for a moment. "Yes, there are traitors in our service, and it is time they were rooted out and smashed like the vermin they are."

He slammed a clenched fist into an open palm as if he were actually performing the act of annihilation, and Justin winced at the sound of the blow.

"This, gentlemen, was an act of mutiny and piracy and as such the regulations are well known execution."

He spat out the last word as if the sound had a certain pleasant ring to it.

"This is not the Academy, it is a ship of the line. There are no kid gloves here like your Thorsson wears. I expect all of you to do your duty.

"The last communication I received from USMC headquarters before communications failed indicates that a full and formal Declaration of Emergency is about to be announced."

Justin took that information in, not sure how to react. It had been nearly ten years since the last Declaration of Emergency had been enacted. The situation had been far worse then, a group of religious extremists in South Central Asia, the Thugees, managed to secretly manufacture and deploy a dozen thermonuclear devices with the intent of destroying the newly created Skyhook tower, claiming that it was an offense against God. It was the last time a nuclear device had been used when a USMC strike force had gone in to destroy the stockpile, the extremists had set a weapon off in an act of self-destruction that had also killed over two hundred strike marines.

"Since we are now out of contact with all higher authority, the rules and regulations regarding the behavior of ship's personnel in time of emergency are now in force."

For the first time Justin suddenly realized that there was something different about MacKenzie. It wasn't just that he was wearing a full anti-radiation suit it was that he had a sidearm strapped to his waist.

"Ship's company dismissed."

Without another word MacKenzie retreated back into the forward section. Zhing, eyes wide, watched the Captain depart and then turned back to the cadets.

"Go on, now," he said quietly. "Run along and get yourselves suited up. Go on!"

With a very unmilitary gesture he waved the cadets off as if they were so many children on a playground. Heading into their room, Justin slid the door shut after his three other roommates came in.

"Hey, a full blown storm," Madison said excitedly. She unstuck one foot and started to slide into her suit.

Going over to the wall Justin turned the ship's computer on, punched in for some music and turned the volume up.

"Come on, Bell, Wagner's a little heavy-handed for all this," Tanya said. "At least put a good Russian composer on."

"Listen up, all of you," he whispered.

Justin turned the volume up even louder and motioned for his three friends to draw in closer. Leonov smiled warily as if he were planning some sort of trick.

"Now listen, I turned the music up so no one can hear us. I don't have a good feeling about this announcement."

"What, the storm?" Matt laughed. "Hey, I've been in one of these suits for weeks at a time, it's a snap. Except that you stink to high heaven after a couple of days the damn things are like a sauna bath gone amok."

"No, stupid," Leonov retorted, "he means that separatist movement incident."

"MacKenzie seemed pissed," Madison added.

"Exactly," Justin replied. "Listen Matt, no joking around. Something's wrong with that guy. Last night when I served him dinner he was talking kind of strange. Something about 'they're all in it together.' And did you see the gun?"

"Yeah, a genuine Walker 8 Laser. Burn a hole through an elephant."

"Never heard of an officer wearing a sidearm aboard a ship," Tanya said.

"Well, the regs say that in an emergency situation, if the Captain feels his ship is threatened, he is authorized to wear a weapon."

"Threatened by whom?" Tanya snapped. "Us?"

"Maybe so, at least in his mind," Justin replied and he looked over at Matt.

"Who, me? What the heck are you talking about? I'm with the USMC. Sure, I might talk about the separatists, but I took the oath of loyalty to the USMC and until they do something that goes against the principles the service claims to stand for, I'm with you guys."

"Well, I wish you had a chance to go out into the lounge and make that pronouncement," Justin replied.

"What for?"

"Do you know that Colson is now the Captains steward for breakfast?"

"No?"

"O'Brian told me this morning. Said Colson came in and told him the Captain had requested his service. I wonder if Colson's been running forward, telling tales and now he's been given an official-looking assignment so he can go forward without people asking questions."

"Yeah, I just remembered," Madison interjected. "Marissa told me that she heard the shouting night before last when Matt here and Colson got into that argument. She said that about a half-hour later she was up in the lounge area and she saw Colson come out of the door leading to officer's country."

"That's not good," Justin said softly.

"So why the music, you want a sound track for your storytelling?" Matt laughed.

"So MacKenzie can't listen in on us, fiat's why," Tanya said.

"Come on, that's against the regs," Madison announced. "Aren't we getting a little paranoid around here?"

"Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get me," Justin replied.

A knock on the door interrupted them and surprised Justin looked up as the door started to slide open, wondering if MacKeuzie was going to come barging in. He groaned inwardly when he saw Wendell Colson coming in, already suited up and carrying his sleeping net and duffel bag.

"I drew this room," Wendell announced.

"Oh great," Matt said, "just like home."

Either not catching or ignoring the sarcasm, Wendell looked around for someplace to hook his net.

"Looks like we share hooks," Wendell said and reaching up he clipped the top of his net to where Tanya's was secured and stretched the bottom over to Justin's clip. Justin wondered if it was deliberate, but let it pass.

"The Doc said get your suits on," Wendell said, "and instead you're in here listening to music. Get moving."

"Oh, yes, sir," Matt replied, putting on a high-pitched wheedling voice, "anything you say, sir."

Matt made a big show of disconnecting from the floor, then, while floating up, he slid his feet into the suit and after slowly bouncing off the ceiling he slid his arms in and zipped it shut. Turning end over end he came back to his feet and extended his hands like a circus acrobat.

"Cut the child's play, Everett, this is serious," Wendell snapped.

"Oh but it is serious, though nothing to be afraid of."

"Are you implying I'm afraid?"

"Why, no such thing, old man, not at all."

Wendell stepped closer to Matt.

"If you're calling me a coward, wise-ass, then have die guts to do it straight out. Typical off-worlder, a coward just like your buddies who took that ship."

Matt stopped grinning.

"First of all, stupid, they're not cowards."

Justin groaned, half-tempted to simply clobber his friend.

"Sneaking up and stealing a Fleet ship. MacKenzie was right, they're no better than pirates and deserve execution."

"We don't know the whole story," Matt shot back. "There might have been a justifiable reason for taking that ship."

"Remember what Thorsson said," Justin tried to interject, "no accusing or arguing about"

Matt put a hand out and pushed Justin aside.

"And another thing. If you wanna talk about executing you better be ready to do something about it. There might be friends of mine in that group and no one talks about killing a friend of mine and gets away with it. Death comes too easy out in space as is," Matt hesitated for an instant and then forged ahead, "especially when folks are given cheap equipment and then sent out to die. That's damn close to murder as far as I'm concerned."

"Hey, what the hell is going on in here?"

The group looked up to see Senior Cadet Petronovich in the doorway, hands resting on hips.

"Turn that damn music down!"

Leonov, who was closest to the computer, leaned back and hit the switch to shut it down.

"Now I want a straight answer what gives in here? You could hear shouting half-way down the corridor."

"Oh, nothing, sir," Madison quickly interjected. "Everett here was just telling one of his jokes."

Petronovich eyed her suspiciously. His gaze fell on Colson.

"Mr. Colson, is that true?"

Wendell hesitated for a moment. There was the code, of course, but the mere fact that he hesitated almost seemed to Justin to be a violation in and of itself. "Just a joke, sir," he finally replied coldly.

"All of you are on report, double watch tonight for skylarking around when you should be checking out your safety gear. I want everyone in here suited up in five minutes flat and ready for inspection."

He turned and walked away.

"Thanks a lot," Wendell hissed, "my first punishment detail ever thanks to you."

"No problem at all," Matt replied with a smile.

"Enter."

Justin slipped the door open, moving a bit clumsily due to his anti-radiation suit. MacKenzie was at his computer, the screen displaying a mass of static. Without waiting for orders Justin snapped the dinner on the table and stepped back.

MacKenzie finally stirred and looked up.

"We are cut off, Mr. Bell."

"Sir?"

MacKenzie pointed at the computer. "Totally cut off. Ever read Coleridge, cadet?"

"My grandfather read some to me."

'Alone, alone, all alone, alone on a windswept sea,' " MacKenzie intoned somberly. "Like the ancient days at sea. From the moment you weighed anchor till the chain rattled back down a captain was alone, the deck of his ship the entire span of the universe he controlled. Not like today, with some fat-buttred bureaucrat of an admiral barking orders at you from seventy-five million kilometers away. He, safe in his office on Earth, most likely never stood a watch alone a hundred million kilometers from home. Never stood alone"

His voice trailed off.

Justin waited, knowing better than to stir or offer a comment in return.

"This is as it was, as it should be," MacKenzie said softly. "Forty years I've served, only as captain of a light cruiser, but still I served loyally while others far more glib and far better connected maneuvered behind me, gaining the rights and power that should be mine. But here here I am the power as it was and as it should be."

Sighing, he stood up and slowly moved to the table, walking as if his anti-radiation suit was the burden of a martyr. He sat down, leaning over to noisily sip his soup through a straw.

"This crisis, this separatist movement, never would have started if they had listened to me and other line officers. We were out there, patrolling the edges, watching the riffraff move in and take over. We protested and we tried to enforce the laws, but the bleeding-heart do-gooders at headquarters always blocked us. Men like your Thorsson."

Justin shifted uncomfortably. He wanted to voice a protest in defense of a man whom he considered to be his friend as well as his commanding officer. But, sensing that now was not the time, he dutifully remained silent.

"Even with my back turned I know you don't like what I said, Mr. Bell. A good Captain can sense such things. The way you drew your breath in. Do you have something to say to me, Bell?"

"No, sir."

MacKenzie chuckled softly. "Now I remember the name. Your father served under me. Not much older than you, then. Rare, an honest lad. Died well from what I heard. You must have inherited his traits. Blood will tell, Mr. Bell, it always does."

"Thank you, sir."

"Your Thorsson. Norwegian. Not British, not American like you or me. The United Nations allowed

such to gain power. How we ever agreed to the creation of the United Space Military Command, even if it was chartered and designed by us; well, it's madness. They're the ones who allow these separatists to flourish. Out on the edge it's lawlessness, anarchy. I know, Mr. Bell, I know And his voice drifted off into silence.

So much was being said that Justin barely had time to sort out all the implications of MacKenzie's onesided conversation before the Captain started again.

"I think, Mr. Bell, that this separatist crisis is deeper, more insidious than any are willing to admit. I know I've heard the traitorous utterances, even in the halls of the highest command. I tell you, Bell, there is only one thing holding humanity together and that is the Service."

"Yes, sir," Justin replied, feeling that at least there was one thing he could agree with.

"We, the line officers, must take a stand. If not, those lily-livers back on Earth, in league with the traitors with whom they make believe they are negotiating but are really secretly helping they will destroy us all. A firm hand, Bell, a very firm hand, that's what's needed. Don't you agree?"

Justin hesitated for a second.

"A captain commands his ship," Justin replied, hoping that his noncommittal answer would be viewed as support.

MacKenzie turned and looked Justin in the eyes.

"Have you read the book I assigned?"

"The first few hundred pages, sir," Justin replied, stretching the truth slightly. There were parts of the story he enjoyed, especially the details about how the old sailing ships and whalers operated, but the deeper stuff was throwing him off and he had skimmed entire chapters.

"Ahab saw the evil behind the mask," MacKenzie said. "Others could not, but he did."

He smiled. "It is the thing behind the mask I chiefly hate.

"There's much to be learned there, much indeed. I'll need you to finish reading that, Mr. Bell, by tomorrow night if you please."

Justin inwardly groaned. "Yes, sir."

"Have you heard anything, **Mr. Bell?**"

"Heard anything, sir?"

MacKenzie leaned forward.

"Inappropriate things. Dirty secrets, the little glimmers that evil can not conceal and which reveal what is hidden behind the mask. I know, Mr. Bell, I know about such things, oh indeed I do."

"No, sir, nothing, sir."

"You're a fool then, Bell," MacKenzie snapped.

He remained silent again for a moment and then ever so gradually a smile crossed his face.

"Any stray talk. A slip of the tongue, or a dark and dirty secret shared with someone you think is a friend, Mr. Bell?"

"No, sir, nothing, sir." Justin replied, trying to not let his voice betray just how nervous he was. Somehow he was convinced that Golson had been spreading stories about Matt and the Captain was now looking for confirmation.

"Perhaps you need a lesson, Bell, perhaps everyone does. You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir."

Justin backed out of the room and started down the corridor.

"Mr. Bell?"

Surprised, Justin looked up and saw Doctor Zhing standing in the doorway of his cabin.

"Come in here, son," Zhing announced loudly, "I want to check your dose meter."

Justin stepped into the room, a bit confused because a quick glance to the tag on his chest would have shown that so far his exposure had been less than half a rad.

Zhing peeked out into the corridor then slid the door shut. He made a display of leaning over to check the meter, then motioned for Justin to stand at ease.

"How are you, son?"

"Fine, sir. No problem. The suit's a bit clumsy but we'll get used to it."

"What did you and the Captain talk about? I see you going in there every evening."

"I've been assigned as his steward for dinner," Justin said.

"Why?"

"I don't know, sir. Guess it was just the luck of the draw. O'Brian sent me down with dinner the first night and the Captain asked that I serve him for the remainder of the voyage."

"Good, that means he trusts you, at least for now." Zhing hesitated. "The same way he seems to trust young Mr. Colson."

"Sir?"

"Oh, the Captain knows the family and its connections. Your Mr. Colson has a powerful family, he does. When the Captain first saw the roster he recognized the name immediately."

"Sir, we're all cadets on this trip," Justin replied, curious about Zhing's comment. "Of course we can be trusted."

To his surprise Zhing leaned over, switched on the computer and dialed in some music.

"Did he talk to you at all about secrets? Or about the separatists?"

Justin wasn't sure how to respond.

"Son, as medical officer on this voyage I have the right to any information that might impact on my duty to

monitor the health of this crew," he hesitated for a moment then dropped his voice to a whisper, "and that includes the Captain."

Taken aback Justin didn't know how to reply. He suddenly wished that Thorsson or his grandfather were here. This entire situation was not shaping up to what he had expected the service to be. Somehow, whenever he was done talking to MacKenzie he left feeling unclean, as if there were something wrong that he should feel guilty about but wasn't quite sure what.

"Sir, I'm not sure, sir," Justin replied.

"I'm concerned, Bell. I've served four cruises on this ship with that man. I retire in less than a year. Just a few more runs," he said dreamily, "just as long as I don't run afoul of that man."

The way he said "that man" surprised Justin; there was a note of disdain, but his eyes betrayed a look of fear.

"Sir. He talked about the separatists and how he doesn't like them."

Zhing laughed coldly. "Has reason not to. You know about his wife, don't you?"

Justin shook his head.

"She left him some years ago. Messy situation. What with him gone for months, years at a time. It happens a lot in the service."

Justin thought of his own mother, the memories of when he was a boy and his father was shipping out. The long months of waiting, the anxiety and fears. But she was always there for him when he returned. He wondered how such a blow would affect a man and how he would learn to live with it afterwards.

"She's one of the leaders now," Zhing continued. "She's said some embarrassing things about fleet officers in general and him in particular through the years. They think she might've been one of the participants in the seizure of the Gustavus."

Justin didn't know how to reply, wondering why the doctor was even sharing this information.

"Did he say anything about her?"

"No, sir, he didn't."

Zhing nodded and leaned closer. "Now listen, son. If anything troubles you, you come to me with it. I've been around a bit. You young pups from the Academy, they feed you a lot of sweetness and sunshine. There might be ships like that, but this universe is a damn big place. Frontiers draw all types, some good like Thorsson, some not."

He stopped as if cutting off something that he wanted to add.

"Anyhow, it's only eleven more days out maybe this will all blow over. But then again, this has been building for some time. Not just here but on board a lot of ships where men like MacKenzie, passed over for promotion and forgotten on long and distant patrols, are left in the backwaters but have to handle all the dirty situations with little thanks. So keep your ears open."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Zhing?"

The voice cut through the noise of the music. Zhing, startled, straightened up.

"Yes, Captain."

"To my cabin if you please. And Zhing, why the loud music? I can hear it all the way down the corridor."

Zhing, fear in his eyes, opened the door and peeked out. Silently he motioned for Justin to leave.

"Sorry, Captain. On my way, sir."

Justin slipped out into the hallway, afraid but not sure why. Zhing again motioned for Justin to hurry up.

"Gangway."

He turned, startled, as Petronovich came past moving quickly. Not bothering to hang around to see what was up, Justin went through the door into the lounge, leaving officer country behind.

The room was half-full. The portside watch had just stood down and dinner was over. The instant he came into the room he could sense the tension. Something was wrong it was the way the cadets were clustered into groups, talking in low whispers, some raising their heads to look about.

He saw Tanya and Madison sitting in a corner with a chessboard between them, but neither one was looking at the board. He drifted over to where Leonov and Smith were playing. Even though sitting in a chair didn't serve any real function in zero gravity, he settled into one anyhow. Sitting in space still survived, at least as a social custom.

Leonov looked up.

"So how did it go up there with the Ice Man?"

Justin looked around nervously. "I wish you wouldn't call him that."

Tanya laughed softly. "That's what everyone on board calls him."

"Don't ask. It's just getting weird. That's all." He figured it was best not to mention the conversation with Doctor Zhing.

Off in the far corner he saw Matt and several other cadets sitting, leaning forward and talking.

"Matt OK?"

"Oh, you missed it," Madison said.

"Missed what?"

"He and Wendell had another argument."

Justin groaned.

"Petronovich had to break it up."

"Let me guess, the separatists."

"Exactly. Those three Matt's sitting with. All are off worlders. Marissa Iivollen, Collin Bugniazet you remember he was captain of the team we beat at falcon flying during the summer and Abdul Amin. It got a little heated with Wendell and a couple of the others, those guys around him all shouting at each other."

Justin looking around the room and found that he could sort out everything. Matt and his followers in one corner, Wendell and his in the other corner, both sides whispering, pausing to shoot dark looks at each other while other groups of cadets, trying to stay neutral, gathered on the opposite side of the room. Justin thought the setting looked like a scene from a bad vid, a barroom in the old West, two rival groups sitting in opposite corners waiting for the showdown to begin.

"They're all on report," Madison announced. "I tell you, this one's gonna hit the fan when we get back to the Academy. Colson called Matt a cheap sailor. I have to give Matt credit he tried to laugh it off at first, but then Colson called him a damn liar. That set Matt off and the show started. There are gonna be a lotta black marks in files, and double duty."

"So that's why I passed Petronovich going forward in an all-fired hurry," Justin whispered.

"Yeah, off to squeal to the Captain, I bet," Madison said. "Uh-oh, looks like something brewing again."

Madison stood up and pushed off, floating across the room towards Mart's group. Marissa Livollen was starting to get up as if ready to go over to the opposite table.

"Maybe I should help," Justin remarked uneasily.

"Maybe you should stay out of it for the moment," Leonov said quietly, eyes fixed on the chessboard.

"Tanya, what the hell is going on with this ship?" Justin sighed. "This is nothing like I expected the service to be."

"Maybe that's why Thorsson sent us out. Give us a harsh taste of things. Hell, this could all be a hoax for all we know."

She leaned back and looked at Justin.

"Tough in there with the Captain, isn't it?"

"I think the guys a bit nuts," Justin whispered.

"No fooling, Sherlock."

Justin laughed softly. But her comment about Thorsson was troubling. Was this yet another elaborate test? An intricately designed simulation? There was no way of knowing if a solar storm was really on. That could be faked easily enough. Zhing could have just shown a few pictures taken from a storm that happened years ago, then had the transmit connection shut down from up front. That alone was test enough two weeks in an anti-radiation suit with the constant threat of getting fried would be a good examination of nerves. The dose meters could be doctored as well. Most of the cadets were already quietly complaining about how hot and sweaty the suits were. Justin shifted uncomfortably. The inner lining was supposed to wick off sweat, but after a day the system was all but swamped. Justin felt sticky all over, and as he shifted he could sense the unpleasant smells wafting up through his collar. Give us a week and some of them will be going nuts in these darn things, he thought.

And then there was the Captain. Did the Fleet really tolerate officers like him? He couldn't understand how any such man could pass his fitness reports. Maybe MacKenzie was in on the game. Act weird, put some pressure on and see how the cadets reacted to his eccentricities.

The thought was both calming and disquieting. In one sense it meant that none of this was truly real. It was just another test. Yet if that was so, then when would he know if things were real? And beyond that, what did it say about the Fleet, throwing plebe cadets into such a crazy game?

The thoughts started to get even more confusing. But then again, he thought, if it was real, then something was seriously wrong on this ship and with a service that allowed it to happen. Looking around the room, the tensions that were building were frightening when compared to the stressed but orderly calm aboard the Academy.

"Kind of an amusing thought, isn't it," Leonov said, her gaze still fixed on the chess pieces. "If this is a test, then our dear friend Mr. Colson isn't long for this service the way he picked that fight with Matt. Matt might be in a bit of hot water too, but at least he can say he was defending himself and not looking for a quarrel. Most people here, at least the ones not blinded by Colson's whispering, will defend Matt if a hearing is called."

"A hearing?"

"Sure. Do you think Thorsson's going to let one cadet call another one a traitor?"

"He said that? In public?"

"Sure did."

Justin looked over at Matt. Madison, with her usual laughing charm was busy defusing the situation. Justin realized that in many ways she was like Matt, easygoing, always ready for a good joke, someone who had that indefinable something that just naturally made most people like her. But there were certain types who took offense, or were secretly jealous of how easy it was for someone like Matt or Madison to make friends and be the center of attention.

The door back out to the lounge opened and everyone looked up. Petronovich stood glaring at the group.

"All right, show's over, everyone back to quarters. You all got studying to do."

"Guess the Tsar isn't going to make an appearance," Tanya whispered. "Come on, let's get our good Mr. Everett back to the room."

"Remember, Colson is bunking with us," Justin whispered.

"Damn all."

Justin nodded, stood up and drifted over to where Petronovich was standing by the doorway to the forward section.

"Sir, can I have a word?"

"What is it, Bell?" Petronovich snapped, obviously distracted by all that had been happening, and none to pleased.

"Sir. Mr. Colson was assigned to room with us."

"So?"

"Well, sir, Mr. Everett is in our room too."

"Listen, Bell, in the service your personal likes and dislikes don't count. The Captain drew up the reassignments and there's no way I'm going to go back up there and whine that someone doesn't like his roommate. You're dismissed, now get to your room."

Justin wanted to press the issue. Petronovich was obviously not doing his job to head off trouble before it started. Even though Seay could be a royal pain and an exacting taskmaster, he was always on the lookout for tension within his unit and found ways to ease it. That realization of command style suddenly hit Justin simply through the contrast. Seay seemed to have a sixth sense for when to drop into a room to put on a little heat, just shoot the breeze for a moment, or offer an impromptu game of falcon flying to the platoon to let off a little steam.

Justin turned and followed the last of the cadets down the corridor.

"Mr. Bell?"

Justin looked over at the galley door and saw O'Brian.

O'Brian motioned for him to come in. O'Brian held out a container and there was the faint whiff of hot chocolate.

"Always take care of my kitchen crew. Hot chocolate's just the thing to settle the nerves."

"Thanks," Justin said. He gladly took the container and sipped the brew through the straw.

"How'd it go with the Captain?"

Justin found himself wondering if he was going to be interrogated by the entire crew before he could finally get to his room and get some work done.

"OK, I guess."

"Ah, already the officer in training." O'Brian laughed. "All right, I won't pump you. But if you need someone to spill some beans to, know I've got a tight lip."

Justin smiled.

"Thanks, O'Brian. I appreciate it. I better get into my room and try to get some studying in."

As he slid open the door to his room Justin instantly knew that something had gone horribly wrong. Wendell was hunched over in the far corner, features bright red, hands clenched over his face. A trickle of blood was floating out between his fingers; a tiny globule broke free and floated before him. For a second the scene almost looked comical to Justin, the way Wendell's eyes seemed to cross, focusing on the drop of blood as it floated away.

Matt was in the opposite corner, Madison on top of him, trying to hold his arms.

"He hit me," Wendell cried, "damn it, he hit me."

"like hell I did," Matt snarled. "You shoved me through the door and my foot caught you in the mouth as I tumbled so stop whining."

Justin could see a look of panic in Matt's eyes. If Wendell's accusation was true, then Matt's career at the Academy was finished.

"Madison, what happened?" Justin snapped.

"It's like Matt said. We were coming into the room. Matt suddenly tumbled into me and then hit the locker. I turned and saw Wendell going up against the wall. It looked like Matt kicked him by accident after Wendell pushed him."

"Where's Tanya?"

"She went to the head, she didn't see it."

"They're both lying," Wendell cried. "He turned and hit me as I came through the door."

"You're a bloody liar," Matt shouted. "If I'd really hit you, you'd be out like a light."

"Both of you, shut up," Justin snarled, surprised by the anger in his voice. Startled, both looked at him.

"Wendell, you lost your footing, broke free from the floor and banged into Matt. Matt, you accidentally connected with him. Now that's it. Do you understand me?"

The three were silent for a moment. Justin was surprised at himself for attempting to seize control of the situation before it got out of hand.

"I'm not going to ask you two to shake I think things are a bit too hot right now. But this is my room too and I want peace in it or I'll knock both your heads together and then all three of us can get kicked out of the Academy together."

"What's going on here?"

Tanya tried to slip into the room and stopped when she saw the blood.

"An accident," Justin quickly said, "just an accident."

Justin fixed his gaze on Wendell.

"Maybe you better go up to Doctor Zhing and get that bump taken care of."

Wendell opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He pushed off from the wall and went for the door. Grabbing the doorsill, he stopped and looked back.

"You'll see," he snarled, "you'll see."

Releasing his hold on the door, he disappeared.

Tanya shook her head and sighed. "He's dangerous."

"He's a coward," Matt snapped.

"I don't want to hear any talk like that, Matt. It'll just make it worse."

"Well, he tried to sucker punch me from behind, then make it look like an accident."

"Maybe he did lose his footing. Not everyone's as good at bouncing around in zero-gee as you are. Besides, hauling these suits around only makes it more difficult."

"I think it was deliberate," Madison announced. "He's still sore about the argument in the lounge."

"Look, guys. We're on a real ship here, not safe in the Academy. We're expected to act like officers, not a bunch of quarreling kids. Matt, you've got to cool it."

"Yeah, sure," Matt said morosely. "Look, I wasn't asking for an argument. He started it."

"He did," Madison interjected. "Matt and the others were minding their own business."

"Well, for the sake of everyone aboard, but especially you, I hope you end it when he comes back. Maybe the guy will cool down a bit by the time he gets back. Either way, just let him know you want to back off."

"That's a tall order, buddy."

"Matt, it's for your own good," Tanya said.

"OK, I'll try, but I think I'd rather be mining rocks on Ceres."

Justin slapped his friend on the shoulder and offered him the rest of his chocolate.

He went over to the computer terminal, settled down and punched up Moby Dick. The other three settled into their sleeping nets, Tanya and Madison studying on hand-held units while Matt simply stared off into space.

The loudspeaker, turned down for the nighttime watch, chimed ten o'clock, the signal for quiet hours. Justin looked at his watch. He was supposed to get up at four to help O'Brian prepare the morning meal. At least he didn't have to serve the Captain breakfast; that was Wendell's job. Browsing through the book, he got to the first sighting of Moby Dick and the pace picked up. He was surprised to find that he was actually getting into the story. The writing was a bit strange at times, but there was something about Ahab that was weirdly compelling. Finishing another chapter, he looked down at the clock at the corner of his screen. He suddenly realized that Wendell had been gone for over two hours.

Justin looked over his shoulder. All three of his roommates were asleep. Madison was scrunched up, curled almost into a ball, floating inside her sleeping net. There was something about the way she looked that aroused a childlike desire to pull a prank, to disconnect her netting, roll her up and then send her floating down the hall.

Matt, arms splayed wide, slowly tossed back and forth, rolling the netting in tight around himself so that he looked like an ungainly fly caught in a spider web. He mumbled something in his sleep and started to thrash around, then settled back down again.

What a trying friend you are, Justin thought. Half the time lately I'm ready to kill you, but there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. He remembered how, when they had returned to Earth after scrub summer, Matt had stood by his side when he had to confront some of the bullies who had made life a torment in school. It was good to know, at a moment like that, that your best friend was by your side. He thought as well about how they had rescued Tanya and Sue from falling off the cliff on the Moon. He'd have gone over the edge rather than give up.

Strange how behavior in one place seemed innocent but here, aboard this sad ship, Matt's slightest utterances made him wince. Couldn't he sense that even the most idle comment about the separatists might be dangerous?

Tanya, floating in her net, sighed and interrupted Justin's musings. A stray wisp of hair had come out from under the protective cap Tanya was wearing. He watched as the black strands gently undulated back and forth on the currents of air wafting through the room. There was a faint scent of her soap and he smiled watching her. At least now he could look at her without worry that she might notice and take offense.

She stirred in her sleep; her eyes half-opened. She sighed, whispering something in Russian. For a moment he thought she was looking at him; her smile lingered, then her eyes gently closed.

Justin enjoyed the moment of watching her and his friends, glad for the quiet.

The door into the room slid open. Wendell returning, Justin thought. Maybe with the others asleep I can talk some sense into him.

Justin looked up and was so surprised that he completely forgot to stand as Captain Ian MacKenzie came into the room. He was wearing a sidearm, hand resting on the grip of the blaster. Behind him stood Frank Petronovich, similarly armed and looking decidedly uncomfortable with the weapon nervously poised in his hand.

"Matthew Everett!" MacKenzie barked.

"Huh? It ain't four o'clock yet," Matt groaned, "let me sleep."

MacKenzie stepped up to Matt's sleeping net and ripped it open. He reached in, grabbed Matt by the shoulder and tore him out of the net. Matt started to flail around, eyes half-open.

"Get your hands off of me, you creep," Matt yelled, still not fully awake.

"Hey, what's going on?" Madison cried as Matt bumped into her.

Justin was on his feet, trying to reach for Matt to calm him.

"He doesn't wake up easy," Justin shouted, "just give him a second!"

MacKenzie slammed Matt up against the wall.

"Colson, you creep!" Matt cried, and, flailing about, his left arm slammed against the side of MacKenzie's head.

A roar of outrage greeted the blow. Pushing Matt away with such violence that he bounced against the wall, the Captain drew his pistol and aimed it at Matt.

"Sir, don't!"

Justin moved to get between MacKenzie and Matt.

"Stay out of this, Cadet Bell," MacKenzie shouted.

"Sir, it was an accident!" MacKenzie shifted his weapon, pointing it straight at Justin. There was a

frightening moment when Justin saw the Captain's finger curled around the trigger as if ready to shoot. Justin held his hands up and backed away.

Matt, now fully awake, looked around in obvious terror.

"Sir, I'm sorry, sir," Matt blurted out, "I thought Colson was hitting me. I was dreaming it, sir."

MacKenzie shifted his weapon back to Matt and looked at him coldly; then the slightest of

smiles creased his face.

"Mr. Everett. I am placing you under arrest. You too, Cadet Smith."

"Sir?" Surprised she looked at MacKenzie, her mouth open.

"Sir, I didn't mean to hit you," Matt cried, and Justin could see that his friend was almost at the point of tears.

"That only adds to it," MacKenzie announced. "Cadets Everett and Smith, you are under arrest for violation of Article Twenty-Three of the Fleet Code.

"As for the other charge of striking an officer Mr. Petronovich, Cadet Bell, and Cadet Colson, you were witnesses to that as well."

For the first time Justin saw Colson standing in the doorway, holding a pistol and grinning. Justin struggled with the urge to leap forward and smash the smirking grin off the cadet's face.

"Cadet Everett, you are also under arrest for striking a superior officer while he is executing his duty. Mr. Petronovich, take them away."

CHAPTER VII

Justin came into the lounge and looked around. All were silent, staring at him. Saying nothing, he headed for the door to the forward section where Petronovich was standing again. There was one difference, though, and Justin found it disconcerting Petronovich was fully armed, laser assault gun by his side, a heavy blast jacket and helmet layered on top of his anti-radiation gear. The combination of equipment made Petronovich look sinister.

Justin stopped before Petronovich and formally saluted.

"Reporting as ordered by the Captain," Justin announced.

Petronovich pressed a communications tab on his collar and whispered into it. Several seconds later the door behind him unlatched and Justin stepped through. One of the enlisted men, armed and dressed like Petronovich, was on the other side of the door. He motioned Justin down the corridor to the Captain's cabin where yet another guard stood waiting.

The guard opened the door into that sanctum and Justin stepped through, snapping to attention at the sight of MacKenzie, who was standing and looking through the forward view port. Justin saw Doctor Zhing and the other two officers on board, the pilot and co-pilot, sitting at a table.

MacKenzie turned and looked at Justin.

"Stand at ease, Cadet Bell."

Justin did as ordered and waited nervously. He had gone without sleep for the entire night, trying to stay removed from the chaos that had reigned in the ship after the arrests of Matt, Madison, and all the other offworlders from the cadet unit. Wild talk had echoed through the corridors all night. Some of the cadets were stunned, claiming that MacKenzie was insane. Others, the circle who had followed Colson, argued back fiercely enough so that Petronovich, fully armed and under orders from the Captain, finally threatened to shoot anyone who set foot in the corridor for the rest of the night.

This incident had shown Justin yet again just how out of control the ship was. The thought of a senior cadet having to threaten violence in order to maintain control would have been almost beyond comprehension before shipping aboard the Somers,

"Mr. Bell, this is an informal inquiry to gather certain facts before proceeding," MacKenzie announced, his back still turned. "You are expected to answer truthfully. I hope they still teach honesty at your Academy."

"Yes, sir, that is part of the code of honor," Justin replied, trying to keep any hint of sarcasm out of his voice.

"Funny, it didn't seem to take with Everett and his fellow conspirators."

Justin looked around the room and noticed Colson sitting in the far corner. If he was being asked to give evidence, even for an informal inquiry, why was Colson allowed to be present?

Something was terribly wrong and then he realized that no vid was hooked up to record the testimony. Also, he had not been asked to swear an oath, nor had the actual purpose of the inquiry been formally stated. He remembered these requirements from his Procedures and Customs of the Fleet class; their instructor had been very specific about how such things worked.

MacKenzie turned and looked at Justin.

"You know your friend is a traitor, don't you?"

"Sir, he made nothing of the kind known to me."

"I doubt that," Colson announced.

MacKenzie turned and stared at Colson, who visibly wilted.

"Mr. Colson, I am a good judge of character and Mr. Bell here has been truthful with me in the past. I saw that in his eyes. His father served well and blood will tell Mr. Colson, blood will tell"

Justin wondered if there was some sort of veiled rebuke in MacKenzies comment, for Colson lowered his eyes.

"Now, let us continue."

Justin wanted to voice a protest but the look in MacKenzie's eyes stilled him. There was a grim purpose and he suddenly wondered if he protested would he wind up getting arrested as well? Already two of the cadets who had been so vocal with their opinion after Mart's arrest had not returned after being called forward to meet with the Captain. He was on relatively safe ground because of MacKenzie's strange internal reasoning, and he didn't want to damage MacKenzie's trust. There was no chance of helping Matt and the others if he was locked up along with them.

Justin stood silent. He looked at Zhing, who was staring straight ahead, as was the first pilot. For a brief instant he caught the gaze of Maria Hemenez. There was a look of warning in her eyes.

"Mr. Bell, I have so far found you to be a reasonably trustworthy cadet, so don't disappoint"

me," MacKenzie began. Justin looked up at MacKenzie, who had drawn closer.

Justin remained silent. As he looked at MacKenzie his heart started to beat faster. The room seemed uncomfortably warm, and he felt a cold sweat breaking out, the clammy feeling made worse by the clinging bulk of the anti-rad suit. It was becoming increasingly intolerable and he wondered if everyone else was feeling the same way. Could the darn suits be one of the factors helping to drive this along he wondered.

Though he wished he could blame his reaction on the suit he knew that it was fear that was hitting him and he was glad that the only visible part of his body was his face, otherwise the fact that his knees were shaking might be noticeable.

"Mr. Bell, nine cadets are now under arrest. I do hope that the list stops there. Do you understand me, Mr. Bell?"

Justin nodded, unable to speak.

"Captain, can I ask something?"

MacKenzie barely turned to look at Hemenez, who had spoken.

"Sir, are we holding an inquiry regarding the allegations surrounding last night's incident or are we interrogating this cadet as a possible suspect?"

MacKenzie's gaze shifted from Justin and he breathed an inner sigh of relief.

"lieutenant Hemenez, are you a pilot or a ship's lawyer?"

"Sir, it's just that Fleet Proceedings makes it very clear how inquiries aboard an active duty ship are to be held. If Mr. Bell faces arrest he should be informed of that before being questioned and he is entitled to representation by an officer serving as his advisor."

"Your opinion is noted," MacKenzie said coldly, "and will be remembered."

He looked at the other two officers.

"Any other objections? Lieutenant Lewis? Doctor Zhing?"

Zhing looked as if he were about to speak, but then lowered his head. Lewis said nothing.

"This is an informal discussion," MacKenzie announced smoothly. "I have learned to have confidence in Mr. Bell here. I just wish to ask him some questions or is that no longer the right of a Captain, Lieutenant Hemenez? Have the bureaucrats at headquarters taken even that away from me?"

He spat out the last words with a cold anger that surprised Justin.

Hemenez struggled to hold his gaze.

"Sir. Is the presence of another cadet," and she nodded towards Colson, "appropriate?"

"He is here as a representative of the cadet unit by my invitation or am I not allowed to even do that?"

Hemenez said nothing.

"Fine, then, let's continue, Mr. Bell."

Attention focused back on Justin and he struggled to calm his nerves, realizing that whatever he said, he'd have to do it truthfully but carefully as well.

"Mr. Bell, you are a friend of Everett and Smith?"

"Yes, sir."

"For how long?"

"We met the first day at the Academy. We were in the same platoon during scrub summer. Cadet Everett and I have been roommates since joining."

"I see. I understand that Everett is given to, how I shall I say this, to telling tales."

"Sir. Matt is a solar sailor. As I understand it, tall-tale-telling is a tradition with them."

"Just yes or no, Mr. Bell, is sufficient. We in the Fleet are quite familiar with some of the more questionable traditions of these sailors."

Lewis smiled and nodded his head when Mac-Kenzie turned back to look at him.

"Have you ever heard Everett utter traitorous comments?"

"No, sir," Justin replied forcefully. He knew that was going to be a question MacKenzie would throw at him. Looking back on the months they had been together, their discussions had ranged over nearly every topic imaginable. A large part of it had been about girls, but there had also been school, classes, comparing their lives in Indiana and in the far reaches of the asteroid belt, and how to lasso and catch a comet so it could be mined for water. And a fair amount of time as well about the separatists. As a freewheeling solar sailor Matt had grown up in a tradition that emphasized individualism, stoicism and mistrust of any large center of civilization. Anyone living "down sun," towards the inner worlds, was viewed with suspicion, especially when it came to laws, taxes, and the myriad of regulations. Of course, he had expressed an understanding of the separatists, but if Justin ever admitted that to MacKenzie, it would only be twisted and distorted.

"That's not true."

Surprised, Justin looked over at Colson, who had interrupted him.

"Sir, this is highly irregular," Hemenez interjected. "Mr. Bell at least has the right to discuss this situation without another cadet present."

MacKenzie started to make an angry retort, then stopped. "All right, Wendell, why don't you go aft."

Colson smiled, then stood and left the room.

Wendell the Captain had addressed him by his first name. The realization was disturbing. So Wendell was now the good boy the Captain had said was so rare. Justin wondered if he himself was about to fall from grace and be arrested.

"Cadet Colson accuses you of lying, Mr. Bell. Do you have a response?"

Justin could see a look of warning in Hemenez's eyes. To counter that Colson was a lying toady wasn't going to help either his situation or Mart's.

"Sir. I can not speak for any encounters between Cadets Everett and Colson when I was not present. The Matthew Everett I know is loyal, courageous and forthright. We won the lifesaving award together just before the end of scrub summer. In actuality it should have been Cadet Everett alone who won it, sir."

"We're not questioning Everett's courage here," MacKenzie replied. "Only his loyalty and integrity."

"Sir, Cadet Matthew Everett has never uttered a traitorous comment to me."

"And Cadet Madison Smith?"

"No, sir."

MacKenzie nodded.

"Cadets tend to be loyal to each other," MacKenzie said quietly. "Your Academy works to instill that, even if it is carried to an extreme. There is this ill-founded tradition of not telling on a comrade, no matter how terrible their fault. I'll ascribe your response to a naive purity in you, Bell. Either that or a foolishness that renders you immune to the darker nature that lurks in most souls."

Justin said nothing.

"You were present when I placed Everett and Smith under arrest."

"Yes, sir."

"You were wide awake."

"Yes, sir, I was studying when you came into the room, reading the book you assigned to me."

"You saw Everett hit me?" MacKenzie asked slowly.

"Sir. It was an accident."

"Did you, or did you not see Everett hit me?"

Justin could feel the sweat breaking out on his brow.

"Sir. Cadet Everett was having a bad dream just before you came in. He wasn't awake, sir, when he banged into you."

Justin wanted to add that MacKenzie had grabbed Matt first, violently dragging him out of his sleeping net.

" 'Banged into me'? With what?"

"His arm, sir."

"You mean a clenched fist."

"His arm, sir."

"I know what a fist feels like when it hits me, Bell. Are you contradicting me?"

"No, sir," Justin said quietly. "It was confusing; the room is very small, sir and the lights were turned down."

"And your view was partially blocked by Everett. I know what I saw and felt, Bell."

Hemenez, sitting behind MacKenzie shook her head.

Justin was silent.

"You are dismissed, Bell."

"Sir, may I ask a question, sir?"

Annoyed, MacKenzie merely nodded.

"Sir. Exactly what is going on here, sir? Is this a trial?"

"That is not your concern, Bell. You are dismissed."

"It is a legitimate question, sir," Hemenez added.

"We are under emergency conditions as outlined by Fleet Regulations," MacKenzie snarled.

"One of the last transmissions before we were cut off announced that all ships of the Fleet were about to be placed on formal alert. As captain of this ship in such status I have declared a full military alert for this vessel and shall act accordingly. Do I make myself clear, Bell?"

"Yes, sir." Justin wasn't quite sure of the implications of what MacKenzie said but sensed it was best not to push any further.

He saluted, then turned and left the room and headed aft.

He ignored the inquiring stares as he went through the lounge and made it a point to avoid the knot of cadets gathered around Colson.

"Hey, Bell, I need you in here."

Sighing, Justin looked up and saw O'Brian in the doorway of the galley. Tanya was at one of the counters unpacking a carton of freeze-dried meals.

O'Brian slid the door shut and Tanya came over.

"What happened in there?" she asked. "He only grilled me for a couple of minutes and I was out. You were in there more than half an hour."

Justin sighed and shook his head. "I'm not sure what the hell is going on here any more. This whole thing is like a bad dream."

He stopped and looked over at O'Brian.

"Hey, O'Brian a straight answer?"

"Yeah, sure. Go ahead."

"Is this some sort of test? You know, a game of some kind. A simulation to see how we'd act."

"Yeah," Tanya interjected, "because if so, it's gone far enough."

"I only wish," O'Brian replied. "Look, I've been on this bucket for four years now, all of it with Mad MacKenzie. And let me tell you, he's been slipping a gasket the whole time I've been aboard."

"He wasn't too far gone at first. Long runs, though, resupply all the way out to Saturn, one trip of fourteen months. He'd sit up there, reading them old books, talking to himself. But whenever we'd get near Mars, he'd start climbing the wall."

"How come?" Tanya asked.

"His wife. She's a big leader with the separatists. Apparently she said some things about him that weren't too nice. Heard how just before I came on board he went over to the base at Deimos. Got in a terrible row with some prospectors who laughed at him. Well, it put a black mark in his folder, picking a fight with a civilian. That was the kiss of death for his career; that's why he's never gotten off this bucket and been kicked upstairs to a commodore's slot before retiring. Been a captain now for twenty years."

"You'd think they would have transferred him down to a desk job on Earth or the Moon," Justin said.

"Yeah, none of us could figure it. Well, he has old Doc Zhing under his thumb. Zhing is scared to death of him, so scared he'd never file a bad Fit-Rep for fear that MacKenzie would find out. His pilots, they just stay for the usual one or two tours then move up. Remember that piloting an old ship like this is a beginner's slot. People like young Hemenez, they do their stint and move on to heavier stuff. A negative report from a co-pilot on her first tour usually doesn't carry much weight. If they dare to say he's crazier than a March Hare, well, someone higher up might think it was the pilot who's nuts and not the captain, and bango no more flying. As for those like Lewis, well they've gone as far as they will go and don't want to make waves."

"But what about the Independent Board of Review?"

O'Brian laughed. "Come on, Bell. People like MacKenzie are too shrewd to fall afoul of that. How do you think crazy captains like him act? Do you think they walk around ranting and raving before a board, squinting, juggling steel balls in their pockets, and doing imitations of Captain Bligh? No, they're smart enough to play it straight. Besides, nearly everyone is slightly nuts after fourteen-month runs on an old bucket like this, and the Board takes that into account. No, lad, men like MacKenzie, they're out there cruising the back lanes, just ticking away, and on occasion they explode."

"The meals are ready," Tanya announced as she carefully took a stack of trays out of the microwave.

"Good. Those kids haven't eaten since they were arrested. Bell, why don't you take this grub forward? Give you a chance to see your friend."

O'Brian double-checked the straps on Justin's anti-radiation suit.

"A bit hot down below, so don't take too long."

"Hot?" Justin asked, and then he remembered that the lower deck was not as well shielded.

"What about them?" he asked nervously.

O'Brian shook his head. "I doubt if Zhing protested too much. They'll just have to sweat it out."

Justin nodded sadly and took the trays.

"See me when you get back. OK?"

"Sure, O'Brian, and thanks."

O'Brian escorted Justin down the hall and stopped before Petronovich.

"Bell here is bringing grub forward to the prisoners."

"Ah, I have no orders regarding that."

"Well, listen here, youngster, according to Regulation Sixteen Twenty-seven of the Code regarding the treatment of prisoners, it is stated that they are entitled to three square meals a day, or the officer in charge will be held responsible. Now open that door!"

Petronovich spoke into his commlink and then finally opened the door.

Justin, awed, looked over at O'Brian.

"Regulation Sixteen Twenty-seven?" he whispered, surprised at the cook's knowledge of regulations.

O'Brian simply shrugged his shoulders and grinned, then turned and headed back to the galley.

Justin followed the guard, who led him down a narrow flight of stairs to the lower deck and then headed aft. Another guard, who was standing by a padlocked door, unlocked the room and stepped aside. Justin stepped in, surprised at how cramped the tiny room was. The air was thick and stank of unwashed bodies. If not for zero gravity, it would have been impossible to fit everyone in.

"Hey, Justin, how goes it?" Matt asked, trying to sound cheery.

"O'Brian sent some food down for you guys."

Justin passed the containers out to eager hands.

"Any word on what's going on up there?" Madison asked.

"Nothing."

"Why are we even in here?" It was Marissa Iivollen, her face pale. "It'd be nice to get out of here and stretch a bit."

Justin figured it was best not to share what he had experienced in the Captain's cabin.

"Any of you go up to see the Captain yet?" Justin asked.

"Nope, we've been down here in the lockup since he grabbed us," Madison replied, "except for the two that got sent down after questioning this morning."

From what little he knew of Fleet Regulations he realized this was yet another violation. No one could be held for an extended period without at least being told of their offenses before a

hearing board and given the opportunity to offer an explanation.

"I think the whole thing will get straightened out soon," Justin replied softly

"Not on this ship," Madison replied. "Any contact to the outside yet?"

Justin shook his head. The morning report from Doctor Zhing was that the storm was intensifying and radiation levels inside the ship were climbing steadily despite the fact that they were pulling away from the sun at over a hundred and fifty thousand clicks per hour. All communication was down and expected to remain that way until they were within close proximity of Mars.

"The guy's a nut case," Matt whispered, "a total nut case."

"Listen, all of you," Justin whispered. "All of you just keep your mouths shut. Sing, dance, do anything, but absolutely not a word about anything going on here," and as he spoke he motioned towards the speaker grill and blank computer screen.

Matt nodded.

Justin drew closer to Matt.

"Are you really OK?" he whispered.

"Scared crapless," Matt sighed, his voice near to breaking. "I didn't hit him. It was just that he scared me half to death, grabbing me like that in my sleep. I was dreaming that Colson was after me with that baseball bat with a spike in it like you and Malady played around with."

"I know."

"I think he's going to execute me, maybe the others too," Matt said.

Startled, Justin shook his head. "He can't. He's gotta go through a court-martial board first and that means going to a base. And then there'll be automatic appeals and believe me, when Thorsson hears about this it's gonna be fat in the fire. You'll be OK."

"Thorsson is nearly ten million clicks away," Matt sighed. "Communications are down so he might as well be sitting somewhere out past Betelgeuse. And besides, remember, Article Twenty-Three?"

Matt lowered his head and began to whisper, "in a time of war or emergency mobilization, the commanding officer shall have, within his powers, the right and privilege to summarily execute the offender, by agreement of those staff officers on board who are in good standing, if the actions of the offender do jeopardize the safety of the ship or mission of that ship. If a member of the Service under those above listed conditions should strike an officer, the punishment shall be summary execution with the agreement of those staff officers on board who are in good standing."

"Remember, that gets read to us before every chapel or assembly. He read it to us before we embarked."

"There's no official emergency," Justin whispered and his voice trailed off. MacKenzie was claiming that just such a message had been partially received before communications were lost. Beyond that, they were heading into a sector where a military action might very well be under

way at this very moment.

"That's nuts. Hey, he might be crazy, but he isn't completely off his rocker. He harms one hair on your head and his career is zero, finished, and he knows that. You don't just go around hanging cadets from the yardarm in this day and age."

"They don't hang them, they space them," Matt replied and tried to force a smile. "Hey, I'm a member of the Vacuum Breathers' club, remember, so it won't be anything new to me."

"Just relax," Justin said. "And try to keep the others cheered up. They look up to you."

"Yeah, right, I think I landed most of them in hot water as it is."

"Look, buddy, they see you as the leader, and so do I. If you lose heart we're all sunk."

Matt smiled.

"You still my friend after this?"

Justin punched him lightly on the shoulder.

Matt grabbed Justin's hand and looked him straight in the eyes.

"Thanks, buddy, it's good to know I still have at least one friend in this crazy universe."

Justin squeezed Matt's hand, embarrassed and not sure what to say.

"I'll be back later with more food. You just hang in there."

"Ain't going no place else." Matt tried to laugh, but it came out hollow.

Returning to the main deck, he was surprised to see that the lounge area was cleared, the ship as silent as a tomb. On his way down the corridor he saw doorways open, cadets inside, some studying, most just whispering among themselves. He wasn't surprised when O'Brian reached out from the galley and grabbed him, saying loudly, "Bell, I need help in here."

As Justin slid the door shut he saw Tanya, her face wan, and even more to his surprise, Flight Lieutenant Hemenez was there.

"Hemenez here is down to pick up some food," O'Brian announced loudly, "now move lively and heat those containers up. We can't keep the Captain waiting."

Justin drew closer.

"How are they?" Hemenez asked.

"Pretty scared."

"They should be," she hissed.

O'Brian made a show of noisily pulling out containers of food and stacking them up while humming loudly to the music blaring from the computer.

"What's going on?" Justin asked.

"Article Twenty-Three," Tanya interjected.

"I know, that's the one he cited when he arrested Matt and Madison."

"No, the last part," Hemenez stated. "He needs to force agreement from the other officers according to the regulations."

"For what?" Justin asked nervously.

"The Captain wants to execute Matt and the other eight cadets!"

CHAPTER yill

Try as he might, Justin couldn't get to sleep; the net felt like a trap, closing him in.

"Tanya, you awake?" he finally whispered.

"Yeah, can't sleep either."

In the darkness he could barely see her as she unzipped from her net. Soft music filled the room Justin recognized it as Prince Igor. He unzipped, then floated over by her side and settled down.

"What are we going to do, Tanya?" he sighed.

"I don't know any more, I'm scared, Justin, really scared."

"Still think this is a simulation?"

"Well, if it is, I wish to hell Thorsson would pop the hatch and come in. This is going too damn far."

"Too damn far," Justin agreed.

"MacKenzie is off his rocker. We both know Matt and the others are innocent."

"We know, but he sure doesn't. I think he was just waiting for a chance to do something like this. Getting cut off, then Colson running and squealing like a stuck pig. MacKenzie wants vengeance, wants to prove something. Colson gave him the excuse to act."

"But vengeance on who, Justin? Matt Everett? He wouldn't harm a fly."

"O'Brian told me a lot about his wife. Maybe it's that. I don't know there's something really weird about him when it comes to cadets our age. Maybe something happened when he was a kid and now it's playing back out.

"I've been reading that book he assigned to me. I can understand what he sees in it, Ahab believing that he sees an evil no one else can comprehend. Enlisting his crew, even the virtuous Starbuck to destroy what he hates. I think what's left of his rational thinking is convinced that executing Matt and the others will show firmness to the rest of the Fleet. It will force the crisis out into the open, and then let the cards fall where they may. He has no patience for the slow approach like Thorsson. He wants it settled now."

"But he must know Matt is innocent."

"No, he doesn't. He's got this sick obsession with people our age. Convinced nearly all of us are deceitful, untrustworthy. Every school always seems to have a teacher like that, always

lurking, trying to catch somebody and thereby prove themselves correct. So Matt and the others fit the bill for the crimes MacKenzie imagines."

"And he takes in the one sniveling rat who really is untrustworthy. Has anyone tried to talk to Colson?"

Justin shook his head. "He can't be reached. He lives up in officer country now. Guess MacKenzie, or Colson figures that if he wandered around back here with us low-lives he'd get torn apart."

"I think I'd kill him myself if I could," Tanya hissed.

Justin was startled by the hatred in her voice. This whole thing was going completely out of control on both sides. It was strange how only days ago they were all straight and proper cadets, at least on the surface. It only took several days aboard this ship, with its fear and mistrust and a little discomfort thrown in due to the anti-radiation suits, and everyone was supping over the edge.

Their classes always emphasized honor, self-sacrifice, and the unspoken acceptance of the concept that one would willingly lay down his life for a comrade or for anyone in peril. Yet it didn't take long to change all that around. Those not arrested were cowed, divided into whispering groups.

He wondered if senior cadets would have behaved the same way. Petronovich seemed to have sided with the Captain. Did that therefore mean that in some perverted way the Captain was right after all? He wrestled with that thought. Petronovich had gone all the way through the Academy, and had done so with honor. He was a friend of Brian Seay's, and though everyone might grumble about Brian, Justin knew that he himself would not hesitate to follow the senior cadet's lead.

He wondered if Brian would have sided with MacKenzie or offered some resistance. Some inner voice told him that if Brian had been aboard this ship, chances were he'd be down below locked up with the others. Everything MacKenzie had done so far was a violation of Fleet Procedures singling out offworld cadets, the strange questioning, acting after listening only to Colson and no one else, the manner of Matt's arrest and the interviews afterwards, and above all else the decision to execute the nine cadets without benefit of a formal hearing. No, Brian would be down in the brig.

So how did it get to this? Was most of humanity made up of sheep that cower and turn their heads the moment a wolf emerges? History seemed to show that was the case; in fact, many preferred the wolf especially when he singled out a target that was unpopular with some.

Yet we are the generation of space, at least that's what Thorsson keeps preaching. The disdain MacKenzie showed for Thorsson Justin wondered if in fact the Academy was in a dream, and the attitude of MacKenzie was more the norm. If so, what then of honor and comradeship? He remembered Thorsson's story of Confederate Sergeant Kirkland who, during the Battle of Fredericksburg, dropped his rifle, took the canteens from his friends, and crawled out into the open to give water to wounded Union soldiers. Thorsson had dwelt on that, asking if they could reach the same level, to risk their lives to give comfort to a fallen enemy.

And Matt is my friend, my closest friend and what have I done? Justin thought guiltily.

"You're awfully quiet," Tanya said.

"Just thinking, that's all."

"Something about you is different now," Tanya whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Just different, not as nervous, like something's building and changing inside you."

Justin didn't know how to reply.

"Do you really think he's going to execute them?"

"Hard to believe, but I think he will. We're cut off, he claims there's an emergency, and in a technical sense, he might be able to get away with Article Twenty-Three."

"But why, damn it? He can keep them locked up down there till we hit Deimos, turn them over for court-martial. There's no reason not to wait."

"Oh, yes, there is."

"Why?"

Justin shook his head sadly. "Why not? It's that simple why not? Kill some traitors, arrive at port and some will acclaim him to be a courageous hero for having the guts to take a stand."

"You think someone would protest, though. What about the media, someone will scream about a Captain murdering a bunch of sixteen- and seventeen-year-old kids."

"The media?" Justin sniffed. They'll tell lies as they always do. Come on, Tanya, think. Think of some of the leaders in the past who were nothing but damn lying scoundrels, cheating, stealing, breaking the laws left and right, yet the media kissed their butts while other leaders trying to bring about honest reform were pilloried. Right now the press are calling the separatists a bunch of terrorists. If some people were killed on the Gustavus, that clinches the deal.

"Remember that there are a lot of people who don't like the Academy. They've never liked the military to start with; they're afraid of our discipline, our adherence to an older code of values, and would love to see us torn down. Matt, Madison and the others will be instantly denounced and then through them they'll get at Thorsson and the Academy. We'll be seen as a nest of sedition to be rooted out. It won't be the first time that cadets or soldiers who were innocent were sacrificed to get at someone farther up the ladder."

"I wonder if MacKenzie is using Matt to get at Thorsson then," Tanya said, her voice bitter.

"You know," she continued, "I don't think I've ever heard you talk so much before."

"Well, I guess there wasn't anything this important to talk about," Justin replied, suddenly feeling somewhat shy.

"So what do we do?"

Justin fell silent for a moment. "MacKenzie still trusts me somewhat."

"So?"

Justin got up and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To see the Captain."

"Are you crazy?' Tanya hissed. "Go in there and you might be victim number ten."

"Maybe so. But I'd rather that than sitting here doing nothing."

"I'm going with you, Justin."

"No, you aren't."

"Look, Justin, you can't order me out of this."

"Tanya. He does trust me to a certain extent. You, I'm not sure. I think the fact you're a woman might set him off as well. Just stay here."

She hesitated.

"Please, just listen to me just this once? If I get caught up I'd like to think there was still someone on the outside on my side."

"All right. But I'll never forgive you if you get yourself locked up."

Stepping out of his room he looked up and down the corridor. At the end of the hallway he saw an enlisted man standing guard. Justin motioned that he wanted to approach, and the guard waved him forward.

"I'd like to go see the Captain," Justin said.

"Listen, son, just go back to your room."

"I'd like to see him," Justin pressed.

"Kid, it ain't pleasant up there right now. You can hear them hollering and yelling all the way out in the lounge. I heard O'Brian say it was getting kind of nasty, something about Hemenez being relieved."

"What?"

"Just that, and believe me, kid, I'd rather have her flying than Lewis any day of the week. So play it cool and get back to your room."

"I'd still like to see him."

"All right, kid," the guard sighed, "it's your funeral. I'll take you forward."

The guard escorted Justin through the lounge and talked to the guard by the forward door. The second man shook his head, then tabbed his commlink. After several minutes' wait the door opened. Petronovich was on the other side. The senior cadet was obviously shaken, and suffering from lack of sleep.

Petronovich offered the same arguments but Justin refused, repeating his demand to speak to the Captain. Petronovich finally led him forward. As the door opened Hemenez came out, her

face flushed.

"I've been relieved of duty," she announced, and then stared at Justin. "What are you doing here?"

"I felt I should talk to the Captain."

"You've got guts, kid, I'll say that for you," she said. "Just be careful."

Justin stepped into the room. Doctor Zhing and Lieutenant Lewis were still in the room, both of them looking exhausted. MacKenzie seemed surprisingly refreshed; a thin smile lighted his face as Justin entered.

Justin came to attention. "Sir, permission to speak, sir."

"Ah, the idealist. Have you finished reading the book yet?"

"Sir? Oh, yes, sir."

"So you've come to report. Good, very good. Did you like it?"

Justin was surprised, and then realized that in spite of all that was going on the Captain thought that Justin was simply here to report the completion of a reading assignment. Well, if so, it was best to play along and look for an opening.

"It was troubling, sir."

"Interesting. Tell me, cadet, did Ahab warrant death?"

How to cast this? Justin wondered.

"His sacrifice, sir, did not change the course of events. The rope snagged him and he disappeared over the side. I remember seeing a movie where they did it differently, but in the book, sir, I think it was a senseless death."

"Yet it changed Ishmael, did it not? Was not such sacrifice therefore worth it?"

Justin looked around the room. Lewis was staring off blankly. Zhing, however, was watching intently. Justin knew that everything here was a metaphor, but he was out of his league when it came to this type of interaction.

"Sir, Moby Dick triumphed. He killed his nemesis, he destroyed the Pequod and all aboard save one. Would it not have been better for Ahab to wait until there was a more suitable time to act?"

MacKenzie walked up to Justin and smiled.

"You're playing a game with me, Mr. Bell. You are trying to be Starbuck, counseling caution. Don't play a game you do not understand."

"No, sir."

"Now what do you want?"

Justin suddenly realized that coming into this room was an act of pure impulse. He had not

prepared in his mind exactly what he would say.

"Sir, concerning the executions."

"Execution," Zhing interrupted, holding up his hand.

"Sir?"

"The Captain has agreed to execute only the ringleader of the conspiracy. The others will be held for trial upon arrival at a base."

"You mean Matt alone will be executed."

Zhing nodded, eyes darting back and forth. "It's a fair compromise," he said hurriedly, as if to convince himself he had done the right thing. "Besides, Cadet Everett did strike the Captain, a capital offense in a time of emergency or military action."

"Oh, the good doctor argued long and hard for sparing all of them," MacKenzie interjected.

"The humanitarianism of the physician, that was it, wasn't it, Doctor?"

Zhing, obviously beaten, lowered his head and looked back over his shoulder at MacKenzie.

"I still think we should wait for this boy as well, sir," he said quietly.

"No!" MacKenzie snapped, slamming a balled fist into the palm of his hand. "When this ship arrives at the base with a conspirator executed it will send a clear message across the system that the days of tolerance for traitors is over. The gesture of sparing the others for later trial is a weakness I regret, but I'll agree to it for your vote, Doctor, to have this traitor receive his immediate reward."

Zhing looked back at Justin in resignation. He could sense what Zhing would say, that in order to spare the other eight he was forced to agree to the death of one.

"Sir, I was informed that Flight Lieutenant Hemenez has been relieved?" Justin asked.

"She has been relieved," MacKenzie replied, "and that is no further concern of yours. Our brave Lieutenant Lewis can handle the ship well enough on his own. I've promoted Senior Cadet Petronovich to fill Hemenez's place."

As Justin looked at MacKenzie he knew that any appeal, any attempt at logic was beyond hope.

"So why are you here, Cadet?"

"Sir. May I have permission to say good-bye to Cadet Everett?"

"He is no longer a cadet," MacKenzie snapped, "I have stripped him of his rank in the service. But yes, you may see the prisoner. You can tell him of the sentence which will be carried out at morning muster, 0700 ship time."

"They don't know? There hasn't been a formal sentencing?" Justin asked in surprise.

"No need for that," MacKenzie replied. "So you can tell him."

Justin looked at the chronometer on MacKenzie's computer screen. Just over seven hours to

go.

"Thank you, sir."

"Bell."

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't do or say anything foolish. So far you have been spared in spite of some indications casting doubt upon your loyalty."

Again Justin could see the warning in Zhing's eyes. So Colson had tried to drag him into the net. It was to be expected, because he had witnessed most of the encounters.

"Sir, my loyalty to the service has always been foremost in my mind," Justin replied.

"And to me?"

"I am always loyal to the captain of the ship," Justin announced, not adding his own inner question that wondered who indeed should be captain of this ship.

"You're dismissed, Bell. You have ten minutes with the condemned."

Justin backed out of the room, trying to keep from breaking down into a bitter denouncement.

He went down the corridor and turned right by the door leading into the lounge. The stairs up to the flight deck were now on his right, and to his surprise he saw Colson coming down. Colson froze, his eyes darting back and forth nervously.

"I guess you heard," Colson finally said when Justin refused to move aside.

Justin nodded, wondering if a computer link in the corridor might be on.

"Look, Bell," Colson began, and then his eyes lowered.

Justin studied his face. It was pale, drawn, eyes sunken from lack of sleep, streaks of sweat bathing his forehead. Some of it was obviously the strain of being in the suit, and Justin realized that the days of lugging the bulky anti-radiation gear around must be taking a toll. He could feel it himself the increasing sense of claustrophobia, the screaming desire to tear the damn thing off and just run naked, to have a cool, soothing shower and then clean sheets to crawl between. He knew it was setting the entire crew on edge. But the stress in Colson was far more than that.

"Having second thoughts now?" Justin whispered.

Colson looked back up, trying to hold Justin with his gaze. "Everett went too far."

"So far that he deserves to die?"

"That's out of my hands now."

"No, it's not," Justin hissed. "It started with you. You can go back to the Captain, tell the truth, and save Matt's life. Whatever happened between you and him doesn't deserve death."

"He's a traitor," Colson declared, but the old sharp edge to his voice was gone.

Justin drew closer and dropped his voice to a barely heard whisper. "If there's a traitor here, a traitor to the traditions of the Academy, it's you, Wendell."

He wanted to leave it at that, but for Matt's sake he knew he couldn't.

"You can still change that, retrieve your honor and your good standing with your shipmates. Tell the truth, save Matt, and you would deserve this far more than I ever did," and as he spoke Justin pointed to the life-saving stripe above his left breast pocket. "Just tell the truth, Wendell, that would be an act of heroism and bravery reflecting the highest traditions of the Academy."

Colson looked down at the coveted award and for a brief instant there was a look of sadness and longing on his face. Justin actually felt a moment of pity, wondering what inner turmoil must be tearing Colson apart. Surely there had to be a sense of guilt and fear screaming inside of him.

"Mr. Colson?"

The voice on Colson's commlink tab startled him.

Colson pressed the tab.

"Sir?"

"Where are you, Colson?"

"Coming off the flight deck, sir."

"Report to me in five minutes, Wendell."

"Yes, sir," and Colson punched the tab, shutting it off.

"I have to go."

"You can go in there and straighten this problem out," Justin begged as he reached out and grabbed Wendell by the arm.

Wendell looked down at Justin's hand and shook it free. He hesitated for an instant then shook his head.

"It's beyond that now," Colson said. "The Captain has made up his mind and it's final."

"And you gave him the ammunition to do it with."

"I did my duty."

"A line so many have hidden behind," Justin hissed, and instantly regretted his words. He had to use persuasion, an appeal to a higher sense of honor, not condemnation.

Colson drew himself up and started to shoulder his way forward.

"You're in my way, the Captain wants me."

"Wendell, please."

The smile returned and Justin knew he had lost.

"I did do my duty. Thorsson would never see it that way, but I wonder if he'll be in any position to object after all of this is over. MacKenzies right and I know there are others out there who will agree. And don't forget, Bell, my family will back me up, so if I were you I'd find a safe place to hide."

A spasm of rage swelled in Justin and Colson quickly slipped past. For an instant Justin wanted to reach out and grab him, to somehow beat the truth out of him, but he knew it would be useless.

He let Colson go and then stood alone for several minutes struggling for self-control. He had to be calm when he saw Matt; being angry or upset in front of his friend wasn't going to help the situation.

Continuing down the short corridor he turned right and went down the stairs to the lower deck. He approached the guard and announced the purpose of the visit. The guard called up to the Captain and after several more minutes of waiting MacKenzie gave permission for Justin to go in. Justin watched as the guard undipped a key from his belt and unlocked die padlock. Looking farther down the corridor Justin saw what he assumed was the barrier door leading aft to the hydroponics room. Just before the door was the weapons storage area, padlocked as well.

He entered the room and saw that all of the prisoners were asleep, floating. Reaching over to Matt, he touched him lightly on the shoulder. Matt stirred and woke up, this time without thrashing about.

He rubbed his eyes and smiled. "How you doin't buddy?" Matt whispered.

Justin struggled for control.

"What is it?"

Madison, floating behind Justin, awoke. She pushed off the ceiling, let her sticky boots make contact with the floor, and settled down beside Matt and Justin.

"Come on, Justin, spill it," Matt said.

"It isn't good."

"No fooling," Madison interjected. "We've been locked up in here till we're ready to go bonkers. Two chances to hit the head and that's it. And we're slowly getting cooked."

She pointed to her dose meter, which indicated she had picked up half a dozen rad.

"Several years worth, makes me wonder what my lads will look like."

"You'll be all right. Zhing give you iodine doses to flush your thyroid?"

"Yeah, big help. But that's not my worry now," Madison whispered.

"No one's talked to us, questioned us, read us our rights, even told us formally what we've been charged with. So when are we getting outta here?"

Justin struggled to form the words. "Madison, you'll be going before a court-martial board once we arrive at Deimos."

"A court-martial?" Madison hissed. "I haven't even been questioned yet or charged. How can

he do that? Besides, I haven't done anything but try and keep Matt here from getting into a brawl with that idiot Colson, and you're telling me I'm facing a court-martial? This is nuts!"

"What about me?" Matt asked, "You said Madison, but what about the others and me?"

"The others will face court-martial as well."

Matt reached out and touched Justin on the shoulder, hand shaking. He gulped, face pale.

"I think you're trying to say something and you can't get it out," Matt whispered.

Justin nodded, and in spite of himself tears came to his eyes. In zero gravity they simply pooled, dulling his vision so Matt looked distant and hazy.

"Justin?" Madison whispered. "What is it?"

"He's going to space me, isn't he?" Matt asked, his voice strangely calm.

Justin nodded. "Seven in the morning."

"Walk the plank and breathe vacuum," Matt tried to chuckle but it came out strangled, his voice choking.

"As a sailor I always figured I'd drown in vacuum some day a lot of us go that way," Matt rambled.

"But I never figured I'd know the time and date beforehand."

Madison started to cry, her sobs waking the other cadets. Word of what was to happen flashed through the room and for a moment Justin lost Matt as the others swarmed around him, some crying, others swearing, shouting their protests so loudly that the guard flung the door back open.

"All right, pipe down in there!" she roared.

A storm of angry shouts greeted her. Frightened, the enlisted woman waved her laser pistol, but Justin could see that her heart wasn't in it.

"Please, just be quiet or the Captain will be down here to kick my butt."

"He's getting spaced and you're worried about your butt?" Marissa Livollen cried. "Give me that damn gun and I'll take care of MacKenzie for you."

"Don't talk like that!" Justin shouted, "Just everyone pipe down."

Startled by his vehemence, the cadets looked over at Justin.

"Please," he said softly, looking at the guard. "I'll be right out, but just forget what you heard here. OK?"

She nodded her head. "Sure, OK, but you gotta keep it quiet," and she half-closed the door.

Justin stood up and grabbed hold of Matt.

"Look, buddy, this isn't going to happen."

"Yeah, sure, Justin."

"I mean it."

"Look, Justin. You're the first real friend I've ever had. I wanted you to know that. It means a lot to me."

Justin grabbed Matt by the shoulders and hugged him.

"My stuff. Whatever you want, it's yours."

"I don't want anything of yours except you."

"Look. At least hang on to that picture your mom took of us canoeing on Sugar Creek. Make sure the rest gets back to my Uncle Dan." Matt smiled sadly. "Old Dan will take it hard. Down deep I know he didn't want me to go. Funny. My 'bot, my robot friend I think he'll miss me too. He was a great chess player. When you get a chance, would you visit them? Tell Dan I took it like a real sailor, no whining or pleading. Walked the plank and spat in their eye, I did, before they popped the door."

With that, Matt started to break down.

The chaos around them swelled again with Madison shouting that they should rush the guard.

"Get out of here before you get locked in with us," Matt shouted. "Go on, Justin, do me the favor. I don't want you getting hurt too."

Matt pushed Justin away. Justin started to move back, wanting to spend the last hours with Matt, but his friend drew back into the group.

"See you in the morning," Matt said and he smiled through his tears.

Time seemed to drag out. Justin stared at Matt as if really seeing him for the first time. He remembered as well so much of what Thorsson had said about loyalty, loyalty to the Service and, by extension, loyalty to those who served in it.

Matt had exemplified all those virtues to anyone who extended a friendly hand to him. He remembered how in the first days at the Academy it was Matt who had befriended him, and then helped to pull him into the circle of their platoon. He realized so clearly now that without Matt he would have undoubtedly washed out of the Service. If there was anyone aboard who truly showed what the Service was about it was Cadet Matthew Everett and not the man who claimed to be Captain and was now about to kill him. In that instant Justin fully realized what he had to do.

Without another word Justin stepped out of the room, watching without comment as the guard slammed the door shut and snapped the padlock closed. She looked over at him.

"You OK, kid?"

Justin nodded.

"I heard about your buddy," she whispered. "Tough break. Real tough break. I'm sorry."

"Do you think it's right?"

"It's the law," she replied slowly.

"What law?"

"Listen kid. There are two kinds of law out here. Fleet law and the Captain's law. And what the Captain says is the higher law, at least aboard this ship."

"So you're only following orders," Justin said in a voice edged with sarcasm.

She hesitated. "Go on, get outta here, or I'll place you on report."

"Would you?"

"Just get out of here."

Justin stepped back and looked down the corridor heading aft. He studied it for several seconds, then turned and went forward and upstairs. Stepping into the corridor topside he passed the flight deck and reached the doorway to the lounge. He heard loud arguing coming from the Captain's cabin, and stepping past the door he went and looked down the corridor leading forward. The guard by the doorway into the Captain's cabin was leaning against the bulkhead and obviously eavesdropping. At the sight of Justin looking at him he shook his head.

Justin hesitated, realizing he was standing next to Lieutenant Hemenez's door. He knocked on the door, ignoring the guard who stirred but then did nothing to stop him. ;

"Enter."

Justin stepped into the tiny room. Hemenez was sitting at her terminal, studying the screen. She looked up as Justin came in.

"How are you, Bell?"

"Not good, sir. And you?"

"Oh, just checking the transmit systems," she said, nodding at the screen. "Kind of hoping the storm was dying down. No such luck, we're cut off. Occasional bursts of traffic from high-gain transmitters, but nothing coming our way and most definitely nothing going out."

She turned around to face Justin.

"Guess you heard the verdict?"

Justin nodded. "Also heard about you. I'm sorry."

"Don't feel sorry for me, Bell. Maybe I'll get cleared. If not, there are always the commercial transports."

"Is that what you want?"

She shook her head sadly. "Never thought I'd see something like this. I just graduated last year and nothing like this ever happened at the Academy or aboard my off base postings."

"Care for some coffee? We have to talk about things."

She started to shake her head.

"Galley in ten minutes," Justin whispered.

She hesitated. "OK."

Justin left the room and headed aft, hoping that Hemenez could bluff her way past the guards.

He slowed as he approached the galley and was grateful to hear O'Brian banging some pots inside. Looking through the door he saw the cook loading food containers into the cleaner. Justin turned to go in.

"Hey, you. Bell."

Justin looked back and saw Petronovich approaching.

"Sir?"

"Into your room."

"O'Brian just called for me and Leonov," Justin said loudly. "Said he wanted us to help."

"Into your room."

"But, sir."

"Don't 'but, sir' me!"

While Justin hesitated a beefy hand reached out, grabbing him by the shoulder.

"That's what I said, sonny," O'Brian announced while dragging Justin into the galley. "I need a couple of rats to help me scrub things. You wanna join us?"

Petronovich hesitated. "Even though I'm a cadet, I am a senior cadet holding the rank of ensign and should be addressed as 'sir.'"

"Yeah, sure, sir. Now either he helps me or you help me, what's it gonna be?"

"I've heard nothing from the Captain granting approval for cadets to leave their rooms tonight."

"Well, sonny why don't you just call him on that commlink of yours. And by heavens he'll tell you that at this end of the ship it's O'Brian who runs things and if I want a couple of rats to help me, by God I have them. Now are you coming in to help or are you going back to pacing your beat?"

"I'll remember this," Petronovich snapped. "When things calm down here you'll be on report too."

O'Brian snickered. "Sure, sure. Lose my stripes again. Won't be the first time. Now let us get to work."

Petronovich backed away, trying to maintain his dignity.

"Bell, once things are over with this morning, report to me. We're going to see the Captain about this, and you, too, O'Brian."

"Yes, sir, I'm sorry, sir," O'Brian replied in a wheedling tone.

The cook reached across the corridor and slid the door open into Tanya's room. "Hey, you lazy Russian, get your butt outta the net and in here. I need you."

O'Brian pushed Justin into the galley. Justin went over to the coffee dispenser, filled a container and took a gulp of the scalding brew. The caffeine, lack of sleep and nerves started him shaking. O'Brian went back to work. A minute later Leonov, obviously in a bad mood, came in.

"Close the door," O'Brian snapped, "and get to work."

"Look, O'Brian," Leonov began. "No one calls me a lazy Russian and Her voice trailed off as she looked at Justin.

"You look like hell, Justin, what happened?"

Justin told them the news and the two looked at him, stunned.

"I knew he'd flip some day," O'Brian snarled. "Damn all. It's going to be straight into the fan once we dock."

"What do you think will happen then?" Leonov asked.

"What if this separatist thing on Gustavus goes bad? What if personnel from the Service got killed? I think there might be some who will back MacKenzie up. At least in public. Say that it was an emergency, Everett was talking sedition and mutiny. MacKenzie is shrewd. None of the personal stuff will come out he'll act remorseful, claim that he was reluctantly forced to act to save his ship and he'll be exonerated. Besides, notice how he claims to have compromised by sparing the other eight. That'll make it look like he tried to be fair. And there's one thing that separates Everett from the others. "

"What's that?" Leonov asked."

"That Matt supposedly hit MacKenzie," Justin said.

"So there's two counts against him and your friend gets spaced."

"Thorsson would never sit for that," Leonov replied. "He'd bust his own career to get MacKenzie for killing one of his cadets."

"Would he? Look young lady. There are some who think Thorsson's off his nut with all this talk about the brotherhood of the service and our destiny to go for the stars; the emergence of the new generation of humanity. Chances are Thorsson will fall too because of this."

"Thorsson fall?" Justin cried. "That's impossible."

"There are some folks who think your Academy is nothing but a billion-dollar toy. They'd turn around and say that Thorsson was soft and Everett was the result. The truth of it all will get buried in a lot of mudslinging. And I tell you this, even if MacKenzie never goes a step farther in the Service, he'll have won what he wanted. He showed everyone that he was tough."

"By killing a sixteen-year-old cadet?" Leonov cried.

That will be forgotten. He'll be branded a traitor. What will be worse, though, this will drive a wedge between the two sides. In the Fleet the small core of hard-liners will rally around

MacKenzie. But on the broader side of things the separatists will have a martyr and proof for their argument that the Service is an iron fist ready to smash them if they resist. This could take the simmering pot and make it boil over. And that, as well, is exactly what MacKenzie wants."

Justin listened to O'Brian, fascinated by how clear his logic suddenly was. The act of the simple, rough cook was, Justin realized, a facade. There was a depth of understanding to the man he'd never quite seen before. O'Brian looked at Justin and winked as if he knew what the cadet was thinking.

The door slid open and Hemenez stepped into the room.

"Lieutenant, sorry, I just heard the news," O'Brian said.

"Don't worry about me now, that's the least of my concerns."

O'Brian drew a cup of coffee and pressed it into her hand.

"All right, Bell, what gives?" Hemenez asked.

And as Justin began to talk the three looked at him with wide-eyed astonishment.

Alone in his room, Captain Ian MacKenzie stared out the forward view port. Mars was to one side, shining with a brilliant intensity in the center of Gemini.

It was quiet at last, the arguing finished, the task all but accomplished. Finally it will be clear, out in the open, he thought. He could sense what would happen when they finally docked. But it would be beyond recall. They she would portray Everett as a hero. Just like them to take such deceit, such arrogance and turn it about, wrapping it in a shimmering mantle of glory. Let them, he mused. It will drive them further in their madness and then it will be out in the open.

Then it will be revealed, all the poison, the lies and the corruption, and in the end I will be seen for the strength I alone had, to stand against the darkness. There will be a war and when it comes there will be need for such as me. Gone will be the men and women like Thorsson, unmasked as the builders of traitors. It will be a time of action, and command will be in the hands of men like me who will remember my courage.

He leaned over and turned on his computer, punching in the bypass codes. Scanning room by room he listened to all that was being said. In some rooms he heard whispers, yet more talk. He let the recorder run. Here will be more proof, for there will be a time when such things will be allowed to be heard. He switched through the lounge, which was empty, and then the galley.

Again that damnable music. He listened for a moment, then continued on.

He looked at the clock in the lower corner of his screen. Two hours to go. At least it would be over with quickly. He had seen enough good men die in vacuum to know it would be fast. For a brief instant the face of Everett was in his mind. Mouth open, gasping in the nothingness, then the freezing eyes rolling back, features going slack, arms and legs relaxing, limp, slowly curling up into a fetal position.

He hoped the boy wouldn't cry or struggle. At least take it like a man. Not a boy. But then they were deceitful, liars, and he remembered the boarding school so long ago, the taunting because he wasn't of their class, a boy from the east end of London among all that snobbery and wealth. Never good on the playing fields, called a drone for finding solace in study. The bully,

Thrackworth red hair just like this one. The late night beatings with the others watching, saying nothing, afraid, or, worse yet, laughing. No one to stand by my side. Well, it was good training for the long watches alone, always alone.

Sighing, he turned the computer off and waited for the beginning of the morning watch.

CHAPTER IX

"All hands, all hands, report forward to witness punishment."

Justin froze, looking over at O'Brian.

"Go, go! Remember, you got fifteen minutes, maybe twenty. It'll take time for them to line up, go through the reading of the Articles. I'll cover for you when roll is called, say I've confined you and Leonov to the galley and Hemenez is watching you."

Justin grabbed O'Brian's hand, then looked over at Leonov and Hemenez.

"Let's go," Justin announced.

Crouching, he looked down the narrow ventilation tube set in the aft wall, its cover panel and filter unbolted and removed.

He took a deep breath and pushed his way in. Glad to be out of his anti-radiation gear and wearing just a light jumpsuit again, he squirmed into the narrow opening and pushed himself along. Stopping after five meters, he looked back in the darkness and felt a hand touch his bare foot.

"All right?" Justin whispered.

"Fine, keep moving," Tanya replied, "Hemenez is right behind me."

Justin squirmed along, counting the ventilation grills passing beneath him the first one leading to a storage room, the second, then the third. Reaching a barrier, he stopped. He put on a respirator filter, then pulled out the screwdriver and popped the mount off the filter blocking the way. As he pushed the filter aside a light plume of dust swirled up from the baffle and lead shielding. He wondered just how much of a dose he was picking up, glad that the emergency respirator he was wearing, which had been stored in the galley survival gear, would keep the worst of it out of his lungs.

Once clear of the filter shielding he knew they were in the back end of the ship, crawling under the reactor and engine mounts. The only barrier to the raging inferno of the sun was the outer hull surrounding the hydroponics unit, and within minutes he'd pick up a year's worth of radiation. The anti-radiation suits were far too bulky for the narrow ventilation shaft, but if they had simply gone aft through the doorway into the engine room it would have triggered an alarm up in the cockpit.

Finally he hit the fifth ventilation opening, as O'Brian had explained, and stopped. He looked down on the racks of tomato plants four meters below. He went to work on the screening beneath him with a bolt cutter, lopping off the tops of the screws that projected up through the ceiling and held the panel in place. The last of the bolts sheared off; he pushed down and felt the screen detach and float away. He doubled over and went through the opening, turning a somersault before landing on his feet.

Cautiously he looked around. No one was here, and he breathed a sigh of relief. When he had first proposed taking the ship to stop MacKenzie he had expected that maybe Leonov would go along he wasn't sure about Hemenez and O'Brian. But he needed them if there was any hope, for they knew the ins and outs of the ship and what had to be done beyond a vaguely formed plan to "do something to stop MacKenzie."

It was O'Brian who suggested timing it so closely, pointing out that everyone would be heading to the lounge area just prior to the seven o'clock muster and in those precious minutes there would be the chance to maybe pull it off. Between Hemenez and O'Brian the two had cooked up the plan of going aft through the ventilation shaft down into the hydroponics room and then forward again to the room where the prisoners were being held.

Justin realized with a cold certainty that the next ten minutes would decide it. Either he'd succeed, and then there would be a whole new crisis to deal with or, most likely, he would be dead, for a genuine mutiny would fully justify MacKenzie's actions and the Captain would simply add Justin and his friends to the trip through the airlock.

Leonov came through the opening, followed seconds later by Hemenez.

Hemenez looked around.

"Good, we're well aft, no one's here."

Justin wondered just how heavy a dose they were receiving dressed only in their light jumpsuits. The thought almost seemed absurd there was a good chance that in fifteen minutes the consequences of absorbing a rad or two of radiation would be moot.

Hemenez motioned them to go forward. Justin pushed off, floating down the length of the hydroponics chamber, weaving his way through the racks of sorghum which helped scrub the CO₂ out of the air and the trays containing the spices, tomatoes and lettuce that O'Brian was cultivating.

Reaching the bulkhead door leading forward Hemenez stopped, putting her ear to the door, motioning for Justin and Tanya to be quiet.

"There are people in the corridor," she whispered. "Sounds like they're leading Matt out."

Justin struggled with the urge to simply burst through, waiting patiently as the seconds dragged out. The high temperature in the room made him break into a sweat although he felt cold and clammy with fear.

He looked over at Tanya, who was breathing in short, rapid gasps.

"Remember, we move quick," Hemenez announced.

With a flourish she pulled the kitchen knife out of her belt and cupped it in the palm of her hand, concealing the blade with the back of her arm. The gesture made Justin think of pirates about to storm the quarterdeck. He followed her actions, wondering if he could indeed use the blade on the guard who was surely waiting on the other side of the door.

Justin looked over at Tanya, who was holding a knife as well.

"Ready?"

She offered a nervous smile and gulped hard.

Hemenez grasped the door latch and slowly opened it, peeking out.

She motioned for the two to follow as she pulled the door wide open and started down the corridor. The hallway was darkened. Peeking over her shoulder, Justin saw a lone guard standing by the door into the prison cell, looking squat and distorted with the heavy battle gear donned over the anti-radiation suit. When they were less than three meters away, the guard turned.

"Halt, who goes there?"

Justin, startled by the voice, saw Colson in the shadows. In an instant he understood why the Captain would want his regular enlisted personnel in the lounge in case there was trouble. Also, he wanted Colson out of the way, and down below guarding jailed prisoners was one place he could safeguard him.

"I want to talk to you, Cadet," Hemenez said in a calm yet commanding voice. She drew closer.

"Halt! Halt or I'll shoot!"

"Cadet, I need to talk to you."

Hemenez pushed forward, arms extended in a friendly gesture. The knife blade was still concealed by the back of her arm. Horrified, Justin wondered if she was simply going to spring forward and slice Wendell's throat. Somehow when he had dreamed up this plan he had envisioned it as being bloodless. They'd take a guard, break into the weapons locker and arm the other prisoners, then confront the Captain who would be led away in chains while everyone cheered. Now he realized that the mutiny of fantasy was vastly different than reality chances were that people were going to die in the next few minutes, die because of his actions.

"You're a traitor, too. I'll shoot!" Colson cried, his voice breaking.

"Come on, cadet, all I want"

Her words were cut short by the crackling burst of a laser pistol. Wordlessly Hemenez spun around, clutching her shoulder, smoke and the pungent stench of burnt flesh billowing around Justin.

Justin vaulted from the floor, diving over Hemenez. Colson, eyes wide, tried to back up and lost his hold on the floor, feet disconnecting. The gun went off again, the glare blinding Justin for an instant. He felt a stinging burn crease his side. Crashing into Colson, the two tumbled over. Colson tried to knee him in the groin, but the blow simply pushed Justin up towards the ceiling. Turning end-over-end he kicked off the ceiling and came down hard, feet first, slamming back into Colson.

Reaching out with his left hand he grabbed Colson by his helmet strap. He swung the knife around and brought the blade up to Colson's throat, then pressed it down far enough so the skin was taut. It was a strange sensation, the knowledge that with just the slightest flick of the wrist Colson's life would spill out. He thought of all that Colson had done, the madness he had helped to create, and the temptation was all but overpowering. And yet, then what? He eased back slightly.

"Move and I'll kill you," Justin hissed.

Colson looked up at him, goggle-eyed.

"Tanya, get his gun."

Tanya reached past Justin and tore the gun from Colson's hand.

"Mr. Colson?"

It was the Captain on Colson's commlink!

"Mr. Colson, I heard something, what is going on down there?"

"Tell him the prisoners are acting up," Justin whispered. "If you screw up I'll cut your throat from ear to ear."

Colson reached up to the commlink attached to his jacket and fumblingly toggled it on.

Justin pressed the knife down harder so that the skin under the blade was taut once more.

"Sir?"

"What is going on down there?"

"Nothing, sir. The prisoners are yelling, sir."

The terror in his voice was evident and Justin wondered if the Captain would notice.

"Tell them to shut up, Mr. Colson, or I might change my mind about the number to be executed."

The commlink snapped off from the other end.

Justin leaned forward, his mouth brushing against Colson's ear.

"Off the link," he whispered.

Colson removed his hand.

"Bell, he'll kill you for this."

"Maybe so. Just don't screw up or you'll go before me."

Behind him he heard Tanya unlocking the door and whispering for everyone to be quiet.

"Hemenez?" Justin called.

"I'll make it. You'll have to go on without me."

Marissa and Madison came out first.

"Get him out of that battle gear," Justin demanded, and he passed the knife to Madison.

Going over to Tanya he motioned for the pistol, and to his surprise she passed it over without comment. Quickly he went up to the door to the arms room, leveled the pistol, and squeezed. A brilliant glare exploded in the corridor. He pressed the trigger half a dozen times, then looked down at the padlock.

"Damn, it's not melting."

"Plastitungsten composite," Hemenez groaned, coming up to look at the lock, which was glowing faintly from the heat of the blast. "The pistol doesn't have the energy to cut it. I was afraid of this."

Justin looked at the eight cadets he had just released. Part of his plan had been to seize the weapons locker and arm everyone before going topside in one quick rush. Now all he had was the one pistol, most of its energy drained, and the knives carried by Hemenez, Leonov and himself. Things were starting to unravel. He looked at his wristwatch. Less than five minutes at most.

"Come on," Justin said, and going up to Madison he grabbed the helmet and heavy protective battle jacket. "Help me get this on."

"Bell, what are you doing?" Livollen asked.

"The Captain accused you of mutiny now let's give him one. We're taking over this ship and stopping the execution. If you're not with me then you better get the hell back in that cell right now and stay low."

A grin broke out on Madison's face.

"Now you're talking I can't wait to space that bastard."

"No killing' Justin snapped. "Unless we're forced to, I want no killing."

"You're taking on the Captain and the guards?" one of the cadets asked.

"That's the plan."

"He'll space all of you," came the reply and the cadet backed into the cell. "Count me out, I'll take my chances with the court-martial."

Two more cadets followed the first one back into the cell. Justin looked around at his group while strapping on the helmet and pulling on the heavy battle jacket. He had six now, counting Leonov, and just one damned gun. It wasn't looking good. He knew he couldn't hesitate or he might lose more.

"Someone gag Colson," he snapped, "and throw him in the cell."

He hoisted the pistol and grabbed hold of Madison. "You first, Madison, I'll have the gun right at your back. Keep your hands behind your back. Leonov, bring up the rest of the group. Stay out of sight, but move quick if I holler for you."

"Right, General."

He looked back and saw her smile and motion for him to get going.

Livollen, finished with gagging Colson and tying his hands using the collar torn off his uniform, shoved him into the open cell.

"We're not asking you to help," she announced to the three who had backed out, "but at least don't let this scum start screaming for five minutes."

"If we do that, we're part of the mutiny," came the reply.

"I'll cut his throat if you don't," Tanya interjected. "You're protecting him from this terrible band of buccaneers."

Tanya closed the door and slipped the padlock back into place.

Moving quickly down the corridor, Justin stopped at the next bulkhead door leading upstairs and listened, then opened it up. No one was there.

He went up the stairs and came out on the small landing that branched off to the flight control center and the corridor that led to the officers quarters. Looking up into the flight area, he saw Lewis sitting in the pilot's chair staring straight ahead.

A plan instantly formed. He pointed towards Lewis and whispered into Madison's ear, the thought of barging into the lounge with a single weapon forgotten. She nodded and slipped up the steps. Justin looked down the corridor and then back up. Madison had the blade to the side of Lewis' throat and was already sliding into the copilot's chair.

"Tanya," he hissed softly. She poked her head around the side of the landing and he motioned for her to come up. He leaned over and whispered into her ear. Surprised, she nodded and went back down to the waiting group.

Justin then drifted down the corridor, stopping just at the edge of the turnoff to the doorway leading into the lounge. He could sense the guard standing by the door. Taking a deep breath he stepped forward, turned and jammed the barrel of the pistol between her eyes.

"I'm sorry, but move, make a sound, and you're history."

The guard looked at him, her eyes wide with astonishment. It was the same guard he had talked to earlier when he had gone to visit Matt.

"Cadet, are you nuts?" she whispered. "This really is a mutiny."

"You're damn right," Justin replied.

Tanya came up behind Justin. Reaching around, she pulled the guard's gun from her holster.

"Away from the door," Justin announced.

There was a flicker of a smile.

"It's OK, kid, just don't get jumpy."

"I won't if you don't."

"There are five enlisted personnel in there with MacKenzie, all of them armed," she continued. "Barge in and you'll get fried."

"Thanks, but that's not the plan."

He motioned her up against the bulkhead away from the door. Looking back down the corridor he saw the others come up and brace themselves against the wall to the lounge.

Taking a deep breath, Justin put his hand on the door and slowly unlatched it. He cracked the

door open and looked out into the lounge. All backs were to him, except for MacKenzie who was standing by the airlock door. Behind him were the enlisted men, all of them armed with weapons drawn, like MacKenzie. He could see O'Brian, armed as well and standing to one side. He wished he could somehow signal him, but knew he couldn't. Justin knew that just barging in would result in a slaughter. And in that instant, he heard MacKenzie speak.

"Open the airlock, and may the Lord have mercy on his soul."

There was a stirring among the cadets lined up to witness punishment. Some were crying, most stood with heads lowered.

Through the airlock window, Justin saw his friend standing with his arms bound behind his back, head held high.

"Madison, do it now!" Justin screamed and in the same instant he slammed the lounge door shut.

Several long seconds passed and a mad panic seized Justin. Had Lewis overpowered her? If so, now what?

And then the main engines kicked on with over three million pounds of thrust. Acceleration alarms sounded in the corridors, a massive shudder running through the ship. In an instant zero gravity was gone as Somers leapt forward. Apparent gravity was now directly astern, and the floor of the lounge was a wall.

Justin could hear the screams of fear and confusion in the room as everyone was swept off their feet and dropped down the length of the room to the far wall. He counted to three; the seconds seemed like an eternity, the screams in the lounge echoing.

The engines shut down, and Justin felt a surge in his stomach as zero gravity returned. He tore the door open and stepped into the lounge. Everyone was piled up on the far wall in a confused jumble.

"Everyone freeze!" Justin screamed. "Tanya, guard them!"

Justin bounded for the airlock door. To his horror the outer door was open and he could see the hunched over body of his friend floating in the chamber, drifting towards the opening. He reached the inner door and grabbed the handle, but it wouldn't budge; all the safety locks were on and the internal air pressure was just another safeguard keeping it closed.

Seeing the pressurization button, he slapped it hard. Through the window he saw the outer port closing, Matt still on the inside.

"Bell!"

Justin turned and saw MacKenzie coming to his feet, raising his pistol.

"Bell, drop that weapon!"

"Sir," Justin cried. "I am relieving you of command of this ship as per Article Twenty-five regarding a Captain who has violated the Articles, sir. Drop your gun or I'll shoot!"

There was a frozen instant. In the background Justin could hear the air rushing into the outer chamber, the alarm ringing. The cries of the cadets piled up against the wall echoed, yet all his

attention was now focused on MacKenzie. He could see the Captain sighting down the barrel of his pistol, finger curled around the trigger. Justin had his weapon up as well, aimed straight at MacKenzie's head. It would only take the slightest amount of pressure and it would be over. Malady had said never draw a weapon unless you fully intend to use it, that bluffing with a gun was the surest way to get yourself killed.

Yet he couldn't do it. Something stopped him in that instant and he wasn't sure what. Even as he saw MacKenzie's finger curling backward he held his fire.

MacKenzie's laser blast struck Justin's helmet just above his brow. The ablative coating of the helmet vaporized, carrying away the intense heat, but the recoil from the exploding vapors jerked Justin's head back.

Justin saw several of the enlisted men bringing their weapons up as well, some pointing at him, others aiming back towards the door while cadets scattered in every direction.

MacKenzie fired again, and the recoil from the vaporized coating staggered Justin as if a blow had hit him squarely in the chest, the battle armor absorbing the blow.

If I don't drop him, Justin realized, others will die. Justin's finger brushed against the trigger and then he saw MacKenzie go down, dropped by a roundhouse punch delivered by O'Brian, who grabbed the gun that fell from MacKenzie's hand. Another gun fired and he heard Tanya scream. The enlisted guard who fired started to draw a bead on Justin.

"Vincennes, I'll kill you where you stand," O'Brian growled. "Now drop it."

O'Brian was already up, MacKenzie's pistol and his own both aimed at the guard. The guard released his gun and pushed it away. Justin turned his weapon towards the other guards, several of them still trying to crawl their way out of the pile-up.

"Grab their guns," someone shouted and in an instant half a dozen cadets were on the enlisted personnel, relieving them of their weapons. The only one still armed was Petronovich, who stood in the corner with his gun half-raised.

"Come on, Petronovich," Justin said. "It's over. Now drop it."

"It's not over, Bell," Petronovich replied coldly. "It's only just started."

He let go of his gun and Iivollen, crossing the room, scooped it from the air.

Justin turned back and saw Tanya curled up in the corner, hands wrapped around her leg. She looked at him and gave a thumbs-up sign.

Grabbing hold of the airlock door, Justin tore it open. Matt was curled up in the corner, and with a cry Justin went to his friend.

There was no movement as he grabbed Matt and pushed him through the airlock door and up against a bulkhead wall. Pulling Matt's head up, Justin clamped his mouth over Matt's and breathed hard into his friend's lungs while fumbling to feel his throat for a pulse.

"Get the doc!" Tanya screamed.

Justin started to clamp his mouth on Matt again to give him another breath.

"I don't kiss guys," Matt groaned, "but thanks for the thought."

"Matt! You're alive!" Justin cried, clutching his friend.

"Cold, space is so cold," Matt whispered.

"Move aside, Bell."

Justin looked up and saw Zhing.

"Was this fair?" Justin screamed, reaching over to grab Zhing. Suddenly all his frustration and fear were exploding out.

"Let me be the doc right now," Zhing said quietly. "You can shoot me later if you want. God knows I deserve it."

Justin backed away from Zhing and Matt and saw all his comrades staring at him. A few were crying, some were standing in awe, others were angry, turning towards MacKenzie who was firmly held by O'Brian.

"Mutiny! You're all mutinous scum now, and all of you will be spaced for this," MacKenzie cried.

Justin walked over towards MacKenzie, who was still being held by O'Brian.

"Yes, we did take this ship," Justin announced, "but we're not mutineers. This is an action taken under Article Twenty-five to resist any unlawful order given by a superior officer. And you, sir, are hereby relieved of command according to that Article."

"We should space the bastard," someone cried. "Do it right now the way he wanted to do to Matt."

Justin looked at MacKenzie and the rage he had felt for Zhing redoubled. At that instant he would have gladly pulled the lever to the airlock with MacKenzie on the outside for what he had done to Matt.

"Well, Mr. Bell, is that what you want?" O'Brian asked and he made a gesture as if to shove MacKenzie forward. Several of the cadets cheered at the suggestion.

MacKenzie looked at him, and Justin saw a flicker of fear in the man's eyes. There was a strange, intoxicating power to it. With a simple nod of his head MacKenzie would be dead in a matter of minutes. No begging, no appeals would stop it. He could see the bloodlust in the eyes of several of his comrades; one of them, a cadet whom everyone knew had an interest in Livollen, was moving up as if to help O'Brian.

And he could suddenly understand, as well, what MacKenzie was. The power was absolute out here, all contact gone, your voice the one authority that all must answer to. And then he remembered something he had read in the book MacKenzie had ordered him to read, "Who is the judge when the judge himself is dragged before the bar?"

Justin turned away and saw Hemenez standing in the doorway, silently watching.

Justin slowly went up to her, feeling infinitely tired. Drawing himself up formally, he saluted.

"Lieutenant Hemenez, sir, I ask that you take command of this vessel as per regulations upon

the removal of the Captain and First Officer and that you guide us to the nearest base at which time I will turn myself over to Fleet authorities for judgment. I surrender my weapon to you and place myself under your full authority."

A flicker of a smile crossed Hemenez's face and then she grimaced as she took the pistol offered by Justin and without ceremony stuck it into her belt.

"I take command of this ship USMCS Somers, by the authority of the Service as stated in Article Twenty-five, that a member of the Service is honor-bound to resist any unlawful order issued by a superior officer."

She slowly looked around the room.

"Please take Captain MacKenzie and Flight Officer Lewis and confine them below with Cadet Colson," and she nodded towards Livollen and several of the cadets. "And remember," she snapped, "all three are to be treated with respect."

"Hemenez, you're dead for this," MacKenzie shouted.

"Maybe we all are, sir," Hemenez replied, "but if so it will be done by a lawful court-martial and not an act of murder, as you attempted."

Next she turned to Zhing.

"Doctor, I am asking for your oath of honor as a physician that you will not attempt to intervene any further in the command of this ship. If you agree, sir, I will not be forced to confine you, and you may go about your duties."

Zhing looked up from Matt and nodded. A cadet came back from sickbay and handed him an oxygen bottle; Zhing clamped it on Matt.

"You and Leonov, you'll have to wait, as will the others," Zhing announced.

Justin looked back and saw that there were a number of injured in the room. Some were nursing simple bumps and bruises, but one looked like she had a broken leg and another appeared to be unconscious.

"Enlisted personnel, turn in your weapons," Hemenez said. "I will ask each of you to report to me in ten minutes. If you give your personal oath not to aid the former Captain you will have the freedom of the ship. O'Brian, you are Acting First Officer, see that the weapons are collected if you please."

She now turned her attention to the cadets.

"Well, you've received a hell of an education on this flight," she said, her voice cold and bitter. "I just pray that all of you learn from it. My first order is that you are forbidden to discuss anything regarding the separatists for the duration of this flight. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a chorus of agreements.

"Nor are there to be any recriminations. Debate as to who was on which side in this incident is finished for the duration of this flight."

Justin could see Colson's followers looking about nervously, having already backed into a

corner away from the rest of the cadets.

"I remember Thorsson telling us we were comrades no matter where we came from or how we might one day be separated by choices made by our superiors, and I still believe that. Mars, Venus, Earth, sailors and habitat dwellers, you are first and foremost of the Service. What you saw here," and she nodded back towards the forward part of the ship, "that's not us.

"Now to the business we must face. All of you are to write a fair and honest report of all things that you saw transpire from the moment you boarded this ship. You can write it any way you want, but it must be honest, with no hearsay. All of you are forbidden to utter another word to each other about what happened here until every last report is filed. You will deposit them with me, and you have my pledge that I will take your reports, seal them and not examine them in any way. I will turn these reports over to the appropriate authorities upon our arrival at Deimos. I shall offer the same opportunity to the former Captain, Flight Lieutenant Lewis, and Mr. Colson.

"Finally," she said, and looked toward Justin and Tanya, "I regret to inform you two, along with Cadet Smith, that you are hereby under arrest on the charge of leading a mutiny."

Justin looked at her, startled.

"I'm sorry, but in this case we're bound by tradition and law, and we will automatically face charges upon our arrival at the base on Deimos. If I have your pledge of honor you may have access to the galley, but for the duration you are confined to your quarters and no other cadet may speak to you. Upon arrival we will turn ourselves over to the commander of the Base, and that includes you, too, O'Brian. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Justin replied.

"Fine, all hands dismissed."

The cadets started to leave the room, a sharp glance from Hemenez stilling all comments. She came up to Justin, hesitated, then finally extended her hand.

"You have guts, Bell, more guts than I've ever seen before. Especially that last moment. I would have tried to stop you, I think O'Brian would have as well, but you could have killed the Captain a lot of them were ready to follow you."

"I know, and it frightened me," Justin said.

"I could see that too. I'm sorry to have to place you under arrest, but we have to follow procedure here, unlike that man we arrested."

"I know that, sir."

"Come on, let's get to the infirmary."

"Me?"

"You're wounded, too," and she pointed to his side. Under the battle jacket he felt a sharp pain for the first time, and he remembered that Colson had hit him.

They went over to Tanya, who was sitting against the wall with weapon still in hand, helped her up and went through the door to the forward section. Madison greeted them.

"I left it on auto-pilot at least I hope I did it right. Lewis is down below."

"Fine, Madison," Hemenez said. "I'll be up in a moment to check."

"What a kick to that engine," Madison announced. "I told Lewis to give us full power and he did I darn near cut his throat by accident when the engine came on. So everything's OK?"

"Yeah, OK," Justin sighed.

When he reached sickbay he saw Matt sitting up, an oxygen mask still strapped to his face. Zhing was putting drops into Mart's eyes. His hands and feet were wrapped in warming cuffs, and an IV was stuck into his arm.

Justin could sense the smile under the mask, and in spite of Zhing's protest Matt pushed the mask aside.

"Well, I figure it was forty seconds in the vacuum club this time," Matt gasped weakly.

"Is he going to be all right?" Justin asked.

"Possible frostbite to his extremities. Eyes were starting to freeze up, I think the drops will stabilize them, some freeze damage to his throat so he'll talk funny for awhile. No symptoms of nitrogen bubbling, though with forty seconds of vacuum we'll just have to keep our fingers crossed. I think, with luck, his lungs will heal up and be all right. Hearing might be off for awhile, looks like one eardrum ruptured, but he's anesthetized now and not feeling much pain."

"Hell, pain," Matt mumbled, "this is nothing. Why, I remember the time" and his voice trailed off as he looked around at the group with a lopsided grin.

"I'll be with you three in a minute," Zhing announced. "But for heaven's sake don't stand around there gawking, get your anti-radiation suits on right now."

Justin suddenly realized that he had been getting a heavy exposure for nearly an hour.

He stepped closer to Matt and clumsily took his friend's hand.

"Thanks again, old buddy, I owe you one," Matt whispered.

"No matter what, it was worth it, Matt, it was worth it."

"Hard dock!"

"All hands, all hands, proceed to the main airlock."

Justin unstrapped from his seat and looked over at Tanya. The storm had finally abated the day before, allowing them to at least get out of the anti-radiation suits. Zhing estimated that their little one-hour jaunt free of protection had exposed them to over a year's acceptable level of radiation, which would mean either grounding or limited duty aboard a well-shielded habitat. The end of the storm had meant that communications had been reestablished as well, and when the USMC heard the news they had been ordered straight to the moon of Mars as Hemenez had assumed they would be. The base commander was undoubtedly waiting just on the other side of the airlock.

The one great irony to the entire crisis was that the incident aboard Gustavus had been resolved without casualties; in fact, the first report of injuries was exaggerated, only one crew

member of the ship had been injured, a tooth loosened in a scuffle, and one separatist slightly wounded. After holding the ship for only a day they had disembarked without incident and fled upon the approach of a Service heavy cruiser, which had not engaged in pursuit.

He could well imagine, though, that with the Gustavus incident fading into the background what had happened aboard the Sotners would now be the center of attention.

"Ready for this?" Justin asked, extending a hand to Tanya to help her up.

"Got butterflies in my stomach. More scared now than when we stormed into the lounge."

"You were one cool piece of work on that," Justin said.

Tanya laughed. "You should've seen yourself wish I had a vid of it. My God, you looked ferocious."

"Who, me?" and he suddenly felt even more nervous.

"Yeah, you, Justin Wood Bell. I think you would have drilled MacKenzie without a second thought if it came to it."

Justin wondered about that. He had, indeed, hesitated, letting MacKenzie get off two shots, and he wondered why. Yet for an instant there he really did want to kill him, especially after seeing Matt in the airlock, fully exposed to the vacuum of space. The whole thing was far too confusing to sort out right now.

Madison gave Tanya a hand as well and the two pulled her up; together they headed out into the corridor. Those around them fell silent as they passed, a few whispering "good lucks" before hurrying on.

"Well, children, are we ready to face the music?"

Justin smiled at the sight of O'Brian. For the first time since he joined the Somers Justin saw the cook not in an old T-shirt but dressed in full class-A blues, a tangle of ribbons on his left breast. Justin was surprised to see a Medal of Honor with Oak Leaf Cluster and a Purple Heart among the "spaghetti." O'Brian caught him staring.

"Yeah, saw a little fun now and again but I tell you, this ride took the cake. Now let's get forward, can't be late for what might be our funerals."

Justin stepped into the lounge and, seeing Matt coming slowly through the door to the forward section, went over to join him.

"How we doing today?" Justin asked.

"Feeling coming back in my fingers and toes gosh, I thought old Zhing was gonna have to lop them off."

"Your ear?"

"Healing. He did a little laser surgery on it yesterday, said I should be back up to Service standard in a month. Darn, can't wash out just because of a bad ear."

Justin smiled. Washing out over a busted eardrum was the least of his worries for Matt at the moment.

"Captain on deck," someone announced, and all came to attention as Hemenez, her arm still in a sling, came into the room. She went up to the airlock door, stopped, and slowly surveyed the group.

"You're a good crew and I hope you don't think it strange for me to say that it was an honor to serve with you. As I promised, I have not looked at your reports. I know you filled them out honestly and that's all that I ask that if questioned about the events which transpired on this ship you speak truthfully and with courage no matter how you feel about what happened here. Open the airlock."

As the door unhinged a bosun's pipe twittered. Justin drew in his breath and he saw a quick sidelong glance of reassurance from Hemenez.

The first man through the door was a fully armed marine in battle gear. The marine cleared the airlock, sharply scanned the group, and then stepped to one side. A short portly man wearing the uniform of a base commander came through the door, and Hemenez snapped to attention and saluted.

"Acting Ship's Captain Hemenez, sir. Welcome aboard."

The commander returned the salute and then slowly examined the group, his gazing lingering on Justin and Matt as if he had been studying their pictures long before actually meeting them face to face.

"Captain, you are relieved. My Exec will take command. Where are Captain MacKenzie, Lieutenant Lewis and Cadet Colson?"

"Down below, sir."

The commander motioned with his hand; half a dozen marines came aboard and immediately headed for the lower deck.

"Lieutenant Hemenez, Sergeant O'Brian, Cadets Everett, Leonov, Smith and Bell, come with me."

Justin spared one final glance for his comrades, and he could see that all eyes were fixed on him. He was tempted to say something but knew it would be inappropriate, and as he left the ship he wondered if he would ever see any of them again.

CHAPTER X

"Hebe Cadet Bell, Justin, 144-99-1842 reporting as ordered."

Justin stood before the Court-Martial Review Board, eyes straight ahead. Behind the five men sitting at the long table he could see Mons Olympus framed by the airlock window. The highest mountain on Mars soaring upward, its summit lost beneath a thin line of clouds wreathing the slopes. It felt good to have one-third gravity under his feet again; it made him feel steady.

Outside the window he saw a few protesters standing outside the base perimeter; one sign caught his eye, Space Mackenzie! Justin flushed at the sight of it.

The hearings and trial had been moved down to Lowell City, the main base of the USMC on the planets surface. The general explanation was that a matter of such grave significance had to be heard by the office of the rear admiral in command of Mars, Omar Singh. Justin could

understand the unstated political reasons as well. The separatists had seized upon the "Somers Incident," as it was now called, to demonstrate that the USMC was a service out of control. Holding the trial in the heart of the separatist region would be seen, hopefully, as an act of fairness. He also knew that the media back on Earth saw the holding of the review board on Mars as caving in. More than one commentator was openly stating that MacKenzie had in fact shown restraint and should be decorated for heroism rather than face a court-martial. Justin and his followers were already being branded as a group of reckless, spoiled children.

"Mr. Bell, you may be seated."

Justin sat down in the plain armless chair in the middle of the room. Admiral Singh was sitting less than a four meters away, a semicircle of glittering brass flanking him on either side. Singh nodded to the Judge Advocate, who stood up.

"Mr. Bell, I am Captain Tracey Houston. I want to explain something to you before we proceed. This is not a general court-martial but rather a review board hearing to decide if the events that you were involved in aboard the Somers warrant the need for a general court-martial, and if so what charges the USMC will bring against you and others. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir, it was explained to me by my legal advisor."

Justin nodded to the woman sitting to the side of the room.

"You understand, therefore, that there is no one here in this room who is seeking to prosecute you or who will defend you, though your advisor may intervene if she believes your rights as a member of this service are being violated. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"The reason for this method is as follows. The captain of the Somers, Ian MacKenzie, has preferred a charge of mutiny against you and ten other cadets. Normally that would automatically lead to a general court-martial. However, the service has brought charges against the captain based upon Article Twenty-Five, and his trial goes before the court-martial board starting tomorrow. This hearing is to serve as a general review of that charge against him, but also possibly against you and others. I think it is evident that if Captain MacKenzie is exonerated you and your compatriots will undoubtedly face charges."

"Yes, sir, I understand that."

"Mr. Bell, we are seeking to gather background information regarding what happened aboard that ship from the moment of embarking from Star Voyager Academy until docking at Deimos. I must warn you that you are under oath, and whatever you say before this board may indeed be used against you if you are brought up on charges."

"I understand that, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Bell. Admiral, you may proceed."

Singh smiled and leaned forward.

"Well, Mr. Bell, I dare say you realize that you have created one hell of a mess for this service."

Startled, Justin did not know how to answer.

Singh then launched into his attack, and for the next hour Justin felt as if he were being pummeled by Malady, the one difference being that a beating from Malady was administered with a certain amount of mercy. Singh began with Justin's decision to mutiny against MacKenzie and the bringing of Leonov, O'Brian, and Hemenez into his plan. By the tone of his questioning he displayed obvious displeasure over the fact that a regular serving officer and an enlisted man with years of experience had thrown in with a mere plebe cadet.

He then reviewed the attack and seizure of the ship and Hemenez's subsequent behavior. Singh then turned the subject to Matthew Everett and grilled him about Matt and their friendship. He focused on whether Matt had made any statements that might be construed as favorable to the separatists, and Justin was forced to admit that what his friend had said might be misunderstood.

"Now, as to the incident of striking an officer. Remember, Mr. Bell, Captain MacKenzie placed the sentence of execution upon Mr. Everett not for any alleged traitorous intent, actions or statements but rather for striking an officer in what was believed to be a state of emergency while administering his lawful office as captain of the ship. Did Mr. Everett strike Captain MacKenzie?"

"Sir, it was accidental, a glancing blow while Matt was still asleep."

"Did he, or did he not, strike him?"

"Sir, Captain MacKenzie laid hands on Matt, dragging him violently out of his sleeping net without warning. Matt flailed about; he has a hard time waking up from a deep sleep."

"Did he or did he not?"

"Sir, that would be like someone saying that you hit their fist with your nose. Matt banged into him, yes, but Captain MacKenzie had grabbed hold of Matt and was dragging him around."

"Then he did strike him."

"I didn't say that, sir," Justin replied and a touch of anger was in his voice. He could sense where Singh wanted this to go; that no matter how erratic and crazy MacKenzie's earlier actions might have been, the bottom line was that a cadet hit a captain of a ship. If that was the case, then everything else would be brushed under the carpet. Matt would be guilty and therefore his own actions and those of his friends would have been illegal, or at best in a very gray area of the law.

Singh- looked down at his computer screen, then back at Justin.

"According to a statement made this morning by Captain MacKenzie, and I quote, 'based upon the information given to [me] by Mr. Colson,' Cadet Matthew Everett had uttered treasonous statements, and had declared that he planned to take the ship and turn it over to the separatist movement. Everett had boasted that he would do the Gustavus one better."

"That is a lie, sir," Justin snapped angrily. "Either I or Cadet Smith was with Matt the entire time, and we never heard him make a statement like that."

"Cadet Colson is not facing charges at this moment," Singh replied sharply. "You and Smith are, and so help me, son, if you interrupt me again you'll have a charge of insubordination"

thrown at you before you leave this room, do you understand that?"

Justin looked over at his legal advisor, who shook her head sharply.

"Yes, sir."

"So you are claiming that Cadet Colson is lying in regards to his allegations against Cadet Everett?"

"Yes, sir," Justin said emphatically.

"That is all I have to ask," Singh said calmly and as he leaned back in his chair again he gave a disarming smile as if he and Justin were in a friendly game and not involved in an issue of life or death.

"Are there any other questions?"

There was a moment of silence, as if all that Justin had said was somehow beyond belief, and then an officer at the end of the table stirred.

"I have some, sir."

"Go ahead then."

"Cadet Bell, I am Captain Roberto Marcioni. I wish to tell you now that I served with your father when I was a cadet, and found him to be an honorable man."

"Thank you, sir."

"As I look at your file I see that you gained admittance to the Academy not through the standard review process but rather by special decree as the son of the winner of a posthumous Medal of Honor. I therefore have to ask you are you worthy of the honorable name of Bell, or is your presence in this service nothing more than a way for the service to honor your father?"

Startled, Justin did not reply for a second. The thought had indeed troubled him during the long days of the cruise after the mutiny. What would his father have done, he had wondered while lying awake at night. During the time from Marts arrest to his seizure of the ship he had not had time to contemplate that question and he realized now that in fact he should have cast the question more in that light before going ahead, rather than simply acting on the impulsive decision that he was right and MacKenzie was wrong.

"Sir, I believe I am worthy of my father's name."

"Tell this board why, Mr. Bell."

"Sir, my father, as you know, gave his life to save over five hundred civilians aboard a transport that was threatened with catastrophic decompression. I believe my father did not hesitate to make that decision, even though in those few seconds before his death he knew that he would certainly die by going through that airlock and closing it behind him."

Justin paused for a moment. Again the image formed and he wondered if in those last seconds his father might have indeed hesitated, if he was afraid, and if his last thoughts were of his wife and son. Justin drew a deep breath, afraid that there might be a shudder in his voice, worried that the others in the room would then believe that he was trying to play on their emotions.

"I made my decision to take the Somers based upon Article Twenty-five, that the Captain was engaged in an immoral and illegal act and as such I was honor-bound to stop him. Also, I did it to save a life.

"To ask if I can compare myself to my father is unfair," he said, his voice steady but low. "I am proud to be his son and only hope that someday I might measure up to half his stature."

He fell silent.

"If the cadet facing execution had been Mr. Colson rather than Mr. Everett, would you have acted?"

Justin, surprised by the question, said nothing for a moment. Would he? He loathed Colson, and Matt was his best friend. Would he risk his life, his career for a worm like Colson? He realized that if he would not be willing to do that, then he was indeed a hypocrite, only willing to selectively apply the high ideals of Article Twenty-five.

"I believe, sir, that I would have," Justin finally replied, "though I must confess it would have been far more difficult to reach that decision."

The captain questioning him said nothing for a moment.

"One final question, cadet."

"Sir?"

"Did you want to kill Captain MacKenzie?"

Justin closed his eyes for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "I wasn't sure when I made my way upstairs and prepared to attack. I had considered the chance that people might get shot. I had hoped originally to arm everyone I had released, burst into the room, and by a show of force convince the guards to lay down their weapons. The idea of firing the engines was a lucky break."

"Not for the two cadets who were seriously injured," Singh interrupted.

"I regret that, sir, I honestly do, but I saw no other way."

"I think you realized though that MacKenzie would fight," the captain continued. "I know the man, and you did, too."

"Yes, sir, perhaps I wasn't thinking that far ahead at that moment. But when I came through the door after firing the engine and saw my friend in the airlock, breathing vacuum and dying, yes, sir, I did want to kill him."

"Why didn't you? He fired two shots at you but you did not reply."

"Perhaps I was afraid, sir," Justin whispered.

"I don't think so, Bell," Marcioni replied, and he looked over at Singh. "No further questions."

Justin looked out the window, watching as the shadows of twilight deepened on the side of the mountain. It was such a strange light, the sky directly overhead a dark indigo blue, the horizon

showing a faint orange glow of reflected light from the surface. On the south-facing side of a nearby hill he saw a team of farmers wearing light pressure suits checking the protective plastic covers that automatically wrapped around the rows of Yarinba cactus when the temperature dropped below zero. The plant had been created from genetically altered barrel cactus to withstand the thin air and harsh climate extremes of the planet. The Yarinba were part of the first step in terraforming the planet, the plant locking moisture beneath its tough outer hide and ever so slowly pumping the hundreds of billions of cubic meters of oxygen into the atmosphere that would finally make the surface habitable.

"How are you, Justin?"

Justin stood up as his legal advisor, Janet Kowalski, came into the room and sat down beside him.

"How are things?" Justin asked. "I don't know. I feel like I was dragged through a meat grinder over the last week."

"I told you that they were going to be tough. This is not some simulation, although you raised that question. This is for real. Careers, and not just MacKenzie's, are on the line. There are major political considerations as well. A kid like you often gets caught in the grinder for far less, even when they're right."

"Are you telling me it's looking bad?"

"MacKenzie is basing his whole defense on the fact that at the time he acted he had every reason to believe that Matt was planning a mutiny and was about to strike. He then claims a show of mercy for not executing the other eight even though that was within his power. Matt had to be executed, according to MacKenzie, to prevent a general uprising of his comrades. In a perverse way, your mutiny now actually serves as proof of MacKenzie's claim, rather than the justified provocation you claim."

"That Colson is such a damn little weasel."

"He is also the son of a member of the United Nations cabinet, and you can believe that his old man is screaming bloody murder. I'm willing to bet Wendell's father has called every flag officer in the service who in any way whatsoever can bring pressure to bear on Singh. That's a lot of heat to take. Colson can threaten to squeeze appropriations, question promotions and in general make life a pain for the top echelon if they don't back his son up."

"And the hell with the truth," Justin sighed.

"If Colson's story is accepted, then MacKenzie has a peg to hang his defense on; that he had probable cause to at least seek the arrest or temporary detainment of Cadet Everett. If that fact is accepted, then it follows that Cadet Everett struck the Captain."

"Even if he did," Justin replied hotly, "is that any reason to space a sixteen-year-old cadet?"

"Hell, no," Janet replied, "that was something straight out of the old navy, as if he were playing Captain Bligh or Billy Budd."

"Melville wrote that too, didn't he?" Justin asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Just that MacKenzie had me reading Moby Dick. It was creepy."

"He is a deeply disturbed man. But unlike the vids, someone can be crazy without walking around frothing. Ninety-nine percent of the time they appear to be perfectly normal. And there are some people who want to see MacKenzie continue to appear normal. Because if he's proven not to be, then there are going to be a whole lot of questions asked as to how such a man rose to the authority of command of a ship. And not just any ship, but a ship that is considered to be a weapon and is, in fact, carrying nuclear weapons on board which could be released on any country on Earth."

"So we're damned in nearly every direction," Justin said, "and truth becomes secondary."

Kowalski laughed and shook her head. "My young Mr. Bell, when did you ever hear that truth had anything to do with politics? Take a look at some of the presidents your country has had, and some of its other leaders as well. Truth is relative to the moment."

"There was the Declaration of Independence I believed in that. My father and grandfather believed in the Charter of Organization of the USMC. I figured that was something to believe in, at least that's what Thorsson said."

Kowalski reached out and patted Justin on the arm.

"I wish it was, but it's not looking quite like that at the moment."

"And if he wins?"

"Oh, they'll call him back Earthside, and when the fuss dies down he'll be quietly retired. There'll be discreet internal reviews, things will be changed, but he'll walk."

"As for you, Matt, Leonov, Smith, Hemenez and O'Brian, you'll get time. A year, maybe two. After serving six months, you'll all be dishonorably discharged. The other cadets who helped you will simply be discharged. There'll be some in the service who will quietly say you did the right thing; in fact, your actions will be studied and analyzed. Maybe a dozen years from now you might even be recognized for having done the right thing. But execution, I don't think anyone wants that."

"So what you're telling me is that at MacKenzie's court-martial tomorrow we'll get slammed and MacKenzie will go free."

"You have to face that possibility."

"I can't believe that."

"What you want to believe and reality are crashing together here, Bell."

"Thorsson taught us to believe in a higher ideal, and such an ideal is based upon truth."

"We're not in the Academy now, Bell, this is the real system, and out here on the frontier it can be rough and damned unfair at times."

"That man arrested nine cadets. He never formally charged them, they were never given the opportunity to make a statement, defend themselves or face their accuser, there was no formal board hearing or trial where Matt could have defended his life. MacKenzie just arbitrarily announces, 'I'm going to kill this cadet,' and now you're telling me the Service will back him"

up?"

"They're caught by Article Twenty-three, and it's a dilemma as old as navies, in space and on the sea," Janet replied. "In the old days, when ships were out of contact from the moment they cleared port, the authority of the captain had to be absolute. He had to be given broad powers to maintain control, and if needs be, to enforce his authority with the threat of swift and instant punishment. When our service was formed it was decided to follow the traditions of the surface navies. In modern times a lot of thought went into this power of the captain and it was felt that through careful screening only the best would be given such powers. MacKenzie is being protected by that tradition, because you, Mr. Bell, struck right at the heart of all such power. Remember the ease aboard the Goddard?"

Justin nodded. After nearly a year in space the Goddard's second officer had become unhinged upon receiving a message from his parents that his girlfriend had left him. Breaking into the weapons locker, he had taken a high-power gun, seized the bridge, and threatened to start shooting up the control panels. The captain had finally shot and killed him. The captain had been fully exonerated for taking action without trial.

"That's different," Justin snapped. "The guy had a gun."

"You wound up with a gun, aimed straight at the Captain some might not see any difference."

"We did. MacKenzie was out of control. He had overreacted."

"Sure they realize MacKenzie overreacted. But to what? He is claiming that at that moment he believed he was facing a mutiny and had to preserve the authority of the Service. His decision to spare eight cadets from a possible execution is being presented as an act of restraint. And you see, Justin, he does have one clear and positive argument in his favor."

"What's that?"

"The fact that there was a mutiny, and you led it."

Justin's shoulders sagged. Everything had seemed so clear and simple back on the Somers. He felt now as if he were sinking into a muddy swamp with nothing to hang on to.

"Now, I want to go over everything one last time before tomorrow's trial."

After hours of reviewing the events and Janet probing every point with questions, Justin felt as if his head would split apart.

"Look, like I told you a dozen times. O'Brian caught my signal that I needed to talk to him. I went into the galley, Leonov came in a minute or so later after O'Brian woke her up, and then Hemenez came in. O'Brian turned up the music from the computer player and I laid out my proposal to seize the ship."

Janet looked up from her computer pad.

"Turned up the music? Why?"

"We all did on that ship whenever we wanted to really talk."

"Why?"

"O'Brian tipped me off the first day I worked in the galley. On the Somers, if anyone wanted to talk they turned up the music."

"Talk? Talk about what?"

"You know, about the captain, about things aboard ship."

"You mean like mutiny?"

"No, sir. Look, sir, cadets talk, we gripe, we swap stories with friends that we wouldn't want our officers to hear," he blushed slightly, "and you know, guys will talk about girls and they don't want them to hear."

Janet smiled. "That's OK, we talk about guys too and we don't want you to hear. What do you think those trips to the rest room are all about?"

"Well, it was sort of like that. MacKenzie had asked that weird question about who were off-worlders. Matt and I were in the galley that evening and Matt made a comment about it. O'Brian immediately went over to the wall unit, punched in some music and then pointed to the loudspeaker as if someone were listening. We realized he meant the captain. From then on, whenever I talked with anyone I turned the music up."

Janet looked at him, her brows knitted.

"You never do this on the Academy, do you? At least, we didn't when I was a cadet."

"You know we don't, sir. Uncle told us right at the start that to use a computer or other device to listen to the conversations of others without a direct court order was a violation of" Justin's voice trailed off.

"Bell, I'll see you tomorrow morning, now get some sleep." Before he could say anything else she was out the door.

Justin sat in the back of the courtroom, slowly simmering. The testimony had dragged on for hours, starting with MacKenzie who had been on the stand for over two hours. His questioning had been circumspect, and MacKenzie had come across as calm and rational. Next had come Lieutenant Lewis, who had backed MacKenzie up on every one of his points. Zhing had proven to be a disappointment, dodging most of the questions and then, to Justin's dismay, coming out with a tacit agreement that given the emergency nature he could understand why MacKenzie pushed for execution as a means of insuring discipline. When the Judge Advocate had pressed Zhing regarding MacKenzie's mental competence Zhing had completely ducked out, claiming that he saw no serious problems with MacKenzie worthy of note or as justification for removing him from command.

Next had come Hemenez and O'Brian. If there had been a damning point for O'Brian, it was that he had fraternized with cadets and shared with them his displeasure with the captain. For both O'Brian and Hemenez, though, the court had focused on the fact they had allowed themselves to be drawn into a mutiny by a sixteen-year-old cadet. The fact that a commissioned officer had agreed to follow a cadet against her duly appointed captain triggered a visible and withering disdain from Singh.

Several times it was pointed out that her commission was only months old, and Singh made the deliberate mistake of referring to her once as "Cadet" before correcting himself and calling

her "Lieutenant." Justin could not help but admire her courage throughout the barrage. She held her head high, answered her questions in a straightforward manner, and affirmed that if given the choice she would not hesitate to do the same thing again.

Colson, though, set his blood to boiling. The cadet had further embellished his story, obviously realizing that the exoneration of MacKenzie was his own ticket to safety. Colson claimed that Matt had made statements to the effect that he wanted to seize the ship, and without provocation had hit him, and had said in front of Smith that once the ship was taken Colson would be "spaced along with the damned Captain."

Madison had not helped the situation when, in a voice loud enough for most of the court to hear, she had turned to Livollen and snarled, "That's a damned lie," resulting in a contempt citation from the Judge Advocate.

Senior Cadet Petronovich had come last in the morning lineup, and he set yet another nail into the coffin. He claimed that Matt, Madison and Justin had been unruly, and that he was planning to write negative fitness reports on all three once they returned to the Academy. He then added that he had suggested to MacKenzie that Justin be arrested as well. Justin, surprised, struggled not to say anything in response. Amazed, he listened as Petronovich claimed that MacKenzie had shown too much mercy and forbearance towards Justin, his opinion clouded out of loyalty to the son of an old comrade.

Justin could clearly see how brilliant Petronovich's statements were. MacKenzie was now cast as a loyal family friend betrayed by the son of an old comrade. Thus he had been blinded by the traditional code of comradeship while Justin had foully stabbed him in the back.

Breaking for lunch, Justin looked around nervously in the cafeteria for his legal advisor. She had not been present throughout the morning hearings. Though not formally under arrest, Justin felt the ever-present eyes of the marine guards posted in the cafeteria as he took a bowl of soup and nothing else and headed for the far corner table where Matt was already sitting.

"Well, buddy," Matt sighed his voice still raspy, "it ain't looking good."

"Yeah, I can't believe that Colson. And as for how they questioned MacKenzie talk about the kid-glove treatment."

Tanya, followed by Madison, came over and joined them, filling the table.

"You're up next," Tanya said, "give 'em hell."

"Yeah, sure."

"Hey, you're our ringleader," Madison told him. "Don't flag on us now. We're counting on you."

"Well, I wish the hell you wouldn't," Justin said morosely.

"Come on, we're all in this together," Madison announced, "and believe me, if I had it to do over again there isn't anything I would have done differently."

"Damn it all," Matt sighed, "it's me who got you guys into hot water. If it hadn't been for me, none of this would have happened."

"Oh, yes, it would have," Tanya said quietly, "so stop feeling sorry for yourself, Everett. He

was already over the edge. Someone else would have been dragged in by his paranoia. Maybe not this trip or the next one, but it would have happened. Hell, he could have unlocked the nukes on board and tossed them at a colony or habitat and then claimed they were attacking. At the very least, do you think they'll ever let him command a line ship again?"

"Yeah, so what, he'll still have gotten away with this one. What are we supposed to do then, take solace in the fact that we sacrificed ourselves for the greater good? All I want is to see justice done."

Justin listened as they continued to argue, saying nothing. His stomach was in a knot. I'm just sixteen, damn it, he thought, depressed. Six months ago I was out in afield in Indiana or fishing on Sugar Creek. How the hell did I ever get in to this mess, and what am I going to do now? He thought of the vid message he had received from his mother and grandfather the day after docking at Deimos. There had been the usual statements about loving him, and then his mother had said that if it didn't work out she'd be ecstatic to have him back home again.

Back home? Go back home after this? The thought of walking back into his old high school, of facing the taunts and jabs again was unbearable.

"I don't believe it," Madison whispered.

Justin looked up and followed her gaze to the entry of the cafeteria. Everyone in the room had fallen silent, and Justin felt his heart skip at the sight of the man standing in the doorway it was Thor Thorsson!

"My God, what is he doing here?" Tanya asked, and everyone else in the room echoed her question.

Thorsson went over to the table where Admiral Singh was eating. Thorsson extended his hand and the two chatted for a moment, everyone else silently watching them. Thorsson finally broke away and started across the room.

"He's coming here," Madison hissed.

As Thorsson approached their table the four began to stand up, but Thorsson extended a friendly hand waving for them to remain seated. Justin ignored the request and came to attention, the others following his lead.

"Well, you four, a bit of mess, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Justin replied, his voice choked, "I hope we didn't let you down."

"I'm proud of you," Thorsson announced, his voice loud enough so it carried across the silent room, "proud of all of you. Now let's have lunch."

Stunned, Justin sat back down, and to his embarrassment tears came to his eyes. It was as if his father had appeared and announced that he had indeed done the right thing after all.

Thorsson drew up a chair and leaned over to Justin.

"It's all right, Bell. I understand, but don't let them see that they're getting to you."

Justin braced himself and nodded.

Thorsson looked over at Matt.

"How are the wounds?"

"Healing, sir. Hands are a bit stiff and the ear still hurts."

"Forty seconds, I understand. You're a tough man to kill, Matt."

"Just worried about passing my next physical."

Thorsson smiled. "I'll make sure you pass, the Service owes you that."

"Well it sure doesn't seem like they feel that way now," Tanya replied coldly.

Thorsson nodded then looked back to Justin. "I hate to ask this, but would you mind grabbing a bowl of soup and some coffee for me, Justin? It was a long flight and I'm beat."

"How did you get here so quick?" Matt asked.

"Well, I'm a good hand with an Eagle fighter interceptor."

"You flew an Eagle all the way from the Academy to here? That's one cramped flight, sir."

"Oh, I needed the hours to keep my rating," Thorsson replied with a laugh.

Amazed, Justin stood up and went to get Thorsson's lunch. The Eagle was little more than an oversized engine with a cockpit and weapons bay. It was the hottest interceptor in the Service, but it meant that Thorsson had spent the last ten days in a cockpit barely the size of a closet.

"Senior Cadet Seay served as my co-pilot," Thorsson was explaining as Justin returned and set the lunch down. "I think I had him scared half to death the whole flight out."

The group laughed appreciatively at the thought of Seay living cheek-to-jowl with Thorsson for ten days.

"Sir, may I ask why you are here?" Tanya inquired.

"You're my students," Thorsson replied, "and I screwed up. I knew MacKenzie was a hard taskmaster. I thought that a short cruise with him would show all of you the tougher side of the service. I should have checked more thoroughly. It'd been years since I served alongside the man. I should have listened to O'Brian."

"O'Brian, sir?"

'Killer Kelly,' we used to call him. He came to see me as soon as the Somers docked with the Academy. Tried to talk me out of having you youngsters on board. He said MacKenzie was on the point of cracking up, but I didn't listen. I asked him to look out for all of you and by heavens, he did."

Thorsson paused and looked across the room to where O'Brian was eating lunch. The sergeant, catching Thorsson's gaze, snapped off a friendly salute which Thorsson made a show of returning.

Justin, looking around the room could see that everyone was still staring at them. He realized that Thorsson's simple act of coming in the way he did and sitting with the ringleaders was a clear and open statement of support.

"Thank you, sir," Justin said quietly.

"For what, Mr. Bell?"

Justin smiled and shook his head, unable to speak.

A bosun's pipe sounded in the distance.

"Well, once more into the breach," Thorsson announced. "That's the signal for the court to convene."

Chapter XI

As the Judge Advocate gaveled the court back into session, Thorsson came to his feet and walked towards the bench where the five officers in charge of the session were arrayed.

"Sirs, I know this is highly irregular, but may I approach the court to make a statement?"

Singh lowered his head.

"Admiral Thorsson, you are not listed as a witness in this case. I do not see why you should be allowed to speak."

"Sir, I know it is irregular, but I traveled over eighty-seven million kilometers to be here. I ask but a moments indulgence."

Singh started to shake his head, but Captain Marcioni intervened.

"Sir, I for one feel that it is acceptable to grant Admiral Thorsson this indulgence. This case is based in large part upon the veracity of the witnesses who are cadets in the care of Admiral Thorsson. He can verify the truthfulness of their testimony by his knowledge of their character."

Singh looked at the other three judges, who nodded agreement.

"Five minutes, sir."

"Thank you, sir."

Thorsson, his back to the audience, drew closer to the judges.

"I will not speak of the ideals of the Academy, or the influence I believe such ideals must have in the shaping of the United Space Military Command. All I will say is that our service is unlike any other in the history of humanity. We represent the next generation of civilization, the generation that, united together, will seek our final destiny among the stars.

"I believe that Cadet Everett was the victim of a brutal and disturbed sadist unworthy of our uniform."

"That is out of order," Singh snapped.

"It might be out of order, but it is the truth," Thorsson replied sharply. "Yes, we face a crisis; that crisis is an inevitable part of the historic process of expansion and frontiers. That crisis will not be resolved by the killing of sixteen-year-old cadets whose only crime is being high-spirited and sixteen."

Shaking his head angrily, Admiral Singh held up his hand.

"Then perhaps sixteen-year-olds do not have a place anywhere there is serious work to be done," he shot back angrily, "and your Academy is a nuisance and hindrance to the jobs we must perform."

"It is precisely their spirit that our new and evolving society needs," Thorsson replied. "We need to see the universe through their youthful eyes and not the tired eyes of old men like you and me. We need their exuberance, and yes, their playfulness as well. And most of all we need their idealism. For idealism is born and nurtured in the hearts of the young. I came eighty-seven million kilometers to tell all of you this one thing. I believe that Cadet Justin Wood Bell acted in the highest tradition of the United Space Military Command. Article Twenty-five is placed last on the list for a deliberate reason, to remind all of us that in the end, all rules must be subservient to truthfulness and idealism.

"Too many in our society believe that truth is relative, and I say they are mad. No higher society can function without certain absolute truths to which all must adhere; and defining our ethics based upon a given situation is the path of the damned. I believe that Cadet Bell's act was one of selfless sacrifice to save a friend who could not protect himself from evil. It is that simple, truth versus falsehood, right versus wrong, and if you let MacKenzie go free and then condemn Bell, our Service is damned. And I for one would rather see our entire Service go down fighting and all of our careers destroyed than see one guilty man go free and a group of innocent cadets be condemned in his place."

Singh stirred angrily.

"Are you implying, Admiral, that we would place careers ahead of truth?"

"Yes, I am," Thorsson fired back. "Too many are quietly whispering that for the good of the many we should turn a blind eye to the faults of MacKenzie. We rationalize to ourselves that collectively we do so much good, and that we jeopardize that good by examining this case too closely. Yes, I know about the pressure from the top, Admiral Singh; believe me, I heard it myself, and that is why I flew here with my radio turned off."

Marcioni chuckled at Thorsson's admission that he had ignored an order to return to his base and Justin wondered just how much flak was going up over Thorsson's actions. Most likely a lot, he realized.

"Is that all, Admiral?"

"Yes, it is. To condemn any of these cadets except for the one whose truthfulness I seriously doubt would be a crime unworthy of this service. I came here to state that I feel responsible, in part, for this incident as well. If they are found guilty then I am guilty as well of the crime of idealism. If they are found guilty I shall resign my commission in protest and retire from duty with a service that no longer represents the ideals which should and must be at the core of what we are."

Singh, face turning bright red, gazed angrily at Thorsson as he came to attention, saluted and then walked to the rear of the room to sit by Justin's side.

Justin looked over at Thorsson, unable to speak.

"Plebe Cadet Bell, Justin."

Thorsson winked at Justin as he came to his feet, nervously tugged at his uniform blouse to make sure it was tucked in, and then approached the bench. As he was sworn in Justin saw his legal advisor come into the room from the corner of his eye. Trying to appear unobtrusive, she slipped up to Captain Marcioni, leaned over, whispered to him, and passed on an envelope.

The questioning started, following much the same path that Justin had endured in the earlier hearing, starting with his relationship to Matt prior to shipping aboard the Somers, their conversations with O'Brian and others and through to Matt's confrontations with Colson and what Matt had said.

Justin tried to remain calm, but he could feel the sweat breaking out around his tight collar and on his brow. After two hours of questioning Justin felt as if the officer acting as MacKenzie's defense was boxing him into a corner, forcing him to admit that in the most technical sense Matt's statements could be construed as supportive of the separatists and therefore imply a mutinous action. Whenever Justin tried to add a "but" or make his own personal observation he was cut off; he would never get the chance to really explain what had happened in straightforward words other than "yes, sir," and "no, sir."

He was coldly furious when Matt's thrashing around in his sleeping net was turned into a physical attack on the Captain.

MacKenzie's defense finally rested and Justin could see the glint of cold satisfaction in the Captain's eyes. Justin struggled with the temptation to stand up and somehow voice his protest.

Singh looked around at the other four judges.

"Are there any other questions?"

Marcioni, who had spent most of the time hunched over his desk computer screen as if ignoring the testimony, stirred and looked up.

"I have a few questions, sir."

"Go ahead then."

Marcioni stood up and looked at Justin.

"Can I quickly review a few things, Mr. Bell?"

"Yes, sir." Justin said wearily.

"First. We have not yet heard from Cadets Leonov, Smith, Everett, Iivollen, and Amin, but it is your contention that all will claim Cadet Everett never made any statement that he planned to take the Somers."

"I can not speak for the others, sir, but yes, sir."

Justin took a deep breath and then saw that Marcioni was giving him an opening to say more.

"Matt and I have been roommates from our first day together at the Academy. We know everything about each other, things we'd never tell anyone else. Matt is given to big talk, sir. And he spills everything out when he does. He never, sir, never even hinted that he had any intention of doing anything illegal."

"Yet he did express sympathy for the separatists."

"Sir, he expressed understanding, and I think that's different. And, sir, as I understand it, having opinions is freedom of thought, which the Academy teaches us is our right. We're not out here to police thoughts, only actions."

There was a stirring in the room at his comment and Justin wondered if he had said too much.

"So Mr. Everett, in your opinion, is innocent of the charge leveled by Cadet Colson that he was planning a mutiny."

"Yes, sir. There was bad blood between Colson and Matt even before we shipped aboard Somers."

"Explain."

Justin reviewed the encounter on their first day of the plebe year and up to the final encounter with Colson's threat of getting even.

"So you think Colson's accusation was revenge?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Matt hitting him?"

"Colson is lying about that, sir. Though I did not see it, I think Colson pushed him from behind; Matt tumbled and accidentally kicked him. I know Matt, sir. If he was going to nail someone like Colson he'd do it face to face and not go skulking around sucker-punching someone from behind. Also, I think that if Matt had hit him, Mr. Colson would be minus some teeth."

"And Matt hitting the captain?"

"Sir, it happened as I tried to explain it to you yesterday, and not like Captain MacKenzie's advocate is painting it now. Matt was still half-asleep, the Captain grabbed him and dragged him out of the net and Matt, tossing about, banged into the Captain."

"Mr. Bell. If what you said is true then first of all Captain MacKenzie's belief that a mutiny threatened was an ill-formed and incorrect opinion, based solely upon the lies of one cadet who knowingly played to the fears of his commander."

"Yes, sir," Justin said emphatically.

"Second. Captain MacKenzie went off, as the old saying goes, half-cocked, not properly balancing **the** evidence before acting, and therefore **singled out** Cadet Everett based **upon his own prejudices and**

the falsehoods of one cadet. And finally, the incident of striking the Captain never happened as claimed by MacKenzie and was, in fact, an unwarranted attack by a commanding officer against one of his personnel."

"That is correct, sir."

Marcioni looked over at Singh. "If we accept those points then Captain MacKenzie was acting outside of the authority granted to him as captain and did demonstrate, as well, in the worst possible way, faulty and prejudicial judgment that amounted to a vendetta against Cadet Everett. If so, then the later actions of Cadet Bell and his compatriots were fully justified, proper, and in total accordance with Article Twenty-five."

"So far," Singh replied, "I believe the evidence leans to the contrary."

Marcioni nodded, then leaned forward, hands resting on the desk, his attention fixed on Admiral Singh.

"One final point, sir. After several unpleasant incidents during the early days of fleet operations, Regulation 1303 in regards to the use of remote sensing and the gathering of information about fleet personnel was passed."

Singh looked at him quizzically and then nodded.

Marcioni raised his voice, now addressing his remarks to the entire room. "It is strictly forbidden to use a ship's internal computer systems to observe in any way whatsoever the actions and speech of members

of a crew. Without that provision, all of us would live in constant fear of the sophisticated machines that are essential to our service."

"Your point, Captain Marcioni?"

"If such recordings are made without prior warning and full agreement by the crew or individuals being observed, it is considered a violation of their rights. The only exception is by prior court order in pursuit of a known felon. All other use is strictly forbidden and there are no exceptions to that rule. Sir, it turns out that Captain MacKenzie routinely recorded the conversations of his crew."

There was an uncomfortable stirring in the room. Justin looked over at his legal advisor who grinned at him and quietly gave a thumbs-up gesture.

"Sir, I ask the court to issue an order allowing us to now view the recordings Captain MacKenzie made that bear directly upon this case."

"Where did you get these?" Singh asked.

"Lieutenant Kowalski, sir, Cadet Bell's legal advisor. She went up to the Somers last night and entered the Captains computer."

"That is a violation right there," MacKenzie's defender cried.

"Yes, it was but necessary to protect evidence, sir. Kowalski feared that if she sought the necessary court order the delay might enable someone to purge the system. In fact, I think Lieutenant Kowalski was surprised to still find the records intact."

Justin looked over at MacKenzie for the first time since the start of the questioning and saw the Captains face pale.

"This is highly irregular," MacKenzie's advocate shouted, "and I question the admissibility of such evidence."

Singh looked over at the Judge Advocate.

"The bugger was doing it for months," a voice shouted from the back of the room.

Startled, Justin turned and saw O'Brian on his feet.

"O'Brian, sit down!" Singh shouted.

"You officers, quit playing your games covering one another's ass and stop trying to hang these kids!" O'Brian snarled.

Singh slammed his gavel down but O'Brian continued to shout.

"Ask any enlisted man on that ship. Ask Doc Zhing, ask the other cadets, we all knew he was taping us. Hell, he had every channel feeding into his computer. The crazy bugger couldn't watch one-one-hundredth of all he was taping!"

"O'Brian, you'll be stripped of rank for this!" Singh shouted.

"Fine, go ahead, it won't be the first time, damn it!"

As he sat down a ripple of applause broke from the cadets and the enlisted men sitting in the room.

"He's right," another voice chimed in and to Justin's astonishment Doctor Zhing came to his feet. "I can't take this anymore. I was wrong, I should have placed him on medical disability the moment this whole thing started."

Breaking into tears, Zhing turned and walked out of the room, ignoring Singh's shouted orders for him to remain.

After several minutes of angry debate at the front table Singh finally looked back at the audience.

"If there is one more outbreak I'll place every last one of you under arrest. Now, I reluctantly agree to the viewing of the recordings but given the nature of how they were obtained I shall hold my decision as to whether they are admissible or not."

Marcioni, grinning, switched his computer display to the screen behind Singh.

"Item one," Marcioni announced.

It was a recording of the lounge, the incident between Matt and Colson unfolding. With the general background noise it was hard to hear, but it was obvious the two were arguing, Matt almost lightheartedly, Colson increasingly angry.

Colson suddenly raised his voice.

"You're a traitor," Colson shouted.

"Come on, lighten up," Matt laughed. "You need to unbend a bit, Colson."

"You're a dirty offworlder, a cheap sailor."

Matt stiffened. "Listen, buddy," he said coldly, "your old man's company sold faulty seals to cheap sailors like me, a lot of guys I know died from it, including my parents when an airlock blew. I think if my buddies knew who your family was they wouldn't be happy."

"Are you threatening me?"

Matt stared at him angrily. "I wish I was, but I think they'd tear you apart out in the mining camps if they knew who you were. Just stay out of my life. Now get away from me."

Petronovich now stepped in, breaking them apart, and Colson started to shout that Matt had threatened him. Petronovich ordered them to separate areas of the room.

Colson drew back and several of his friends gathered around him, while Matt withdrew to the other side of the room. It was hard to hear the conversation for a minute, then Colson raised his voice. "That's what he said, he said he'd get us all. I think he's planning a mutiny."

Marcioni stopped the scene and the room was silent.

"Item two, though I think if we spent more time on this recording and did a digital cleaning we could zero in on all that was said."

The second clip was of the main corridor, cadets passing down the hallway, snatches of conversation showing they were upset. Madison passed under the camera, followed by Matt and then Colson. Colson suddenly looked back as if to check if anyone was behind him. Balling up his fist, he struck Matt on the back of the head. Matt fell into the room, his feet spinning up and catching Colson on the mouth, knocking him backwards. Yelling started, Colson shouting accusations. The recording showed Justin

coming into the room and then the image switched inside the room. The scene ended with Colson storming out.

Marcioni stopped the recording for a moment and looked over at Colson.

Justin turned in his chair and saw Colson, face ashen, jaw trembling. An icy silence seemed to be enveloping him.

"There were several hundred billion K of recorded images and sound in the Captain's computer. Apparently he had every single connection running all the time. I don't see how he could have kept track. It is evidence of an obsessive compulsion to spy but I think he even lost track of all that he was spying on, as manifested by the next clip."

It was the recording of MacKenzie coming into the room to arrest Matt. Everyone in the room was quiet, leaning forward to watch. Several in the audience gasped as Justin pleaded for Matt while the Captain grabbed him in his sleep and tore him out of the net. The camera clearly caught Mart's arm banging against the side of MacKenzie's head, his open palm waving back and forth and not balled up. Justin could feel all eyes on him as the recording showed the Captain leveling his pistol and threatened to shoot Justin if he moved.

The clip ended.

Marcioni looked about the room. "In some circles what the Captain did in that room would be defined as assault. There are more clips, of the Captain badgering Doctor Zhing in sickbay, threatening to destroy his career and retirement if he did not vote for execution. There is a disturbing scene with Lieutenant Hemenez up on the flight deck, the Captain threatening to ruin her career as well if she did not comply with his wishes. At least Hemenez had the courage to take that risk rather than compromise."

All eyes turned toward MacKenzie as Marcioni fell silent.

Slowly he stood up, his eyes cold and lifeless. "You will never understand," he said, his voice distant, almost mechanical. "I did this to show everyone, to show everyone" His voice trailed off.

Stepping away from his desk, MacKenzie stalked out of the room. Singh watched him leave, saying nothing as the door closed behind MacKenzie.

"We are adjourned until 0800 tomorrow," Singh said quietly.

Justin felt as if he would collapse in his chair and he barely had the strength to stand as Singh walked out of the room. Marcioni came up to Justin and extended his hand.

"I knew from the beginning, son, that you were right. You might not believe this but maybe even the Old Man felt that way as well."

"He sure didn't seem that way."

"Well, he was caught in a bind. A lot of powers beyond what you see here were playing the game out."

Marcioni fell silent as Colson, head lowered, hurriedly walked past them. Justin was tempted to say something but the hunted look in Colson's eyes stilled him. Kicking a beaten dog came to mind and he knew that as long as Colson lived the bitter revelations in this room would haunt him.

Marcioni looked up as Thorsson approached. Smiling, Marcioni extended his hand.

"You were a darn good cadet and an even better officer," Thorsson said, eyes beaming.

"Thank you, sir. Just trying to do what was right, as you taught us."

"Well now, I think this young cadet here needs a little rest, so how about if I walk him and his friends over to their quarters. I think it's safe to assume that all charges will be dropped against them and they will receive a full and honorable exoneration."

"Full and honorable at the least," Marcioni replied. "I think some decorations are in order once all of this gets sorted out."

Thorsson put his hand on Justin's shoulder and led him to the door. As they stepped out into the corridor Justin saw a flurry of activity down at the end of the hallway. A marine, his uniform disheveled, came running up the corridor. Grabbing another marine he darted back down the hall and around the corner.

"Something's wrong," Thorsson said quietly.

Justin started forward but Thorsson put out a hand, stopping him.

"It's not your responsibility now, let it go."

"I still can't believe he killed himself," Justin said.

"I can," Thorsson replied, leaning against the wall of the lounge and nursing a scalding cup of coffee. The burn out of Mars' orbit had finished half an hour ago and Thorsson had called the crew of Somers forward to the lounge to talk things out.

The ship was heading back to Earth, with a stop at the Academy to drop off the cadets and Thorsson. Hemenez had been placed in acting command of the ship until its return to Earth Base One, with Seay as acting second pilot. Rumors were already spreading that, given the "bad luck" name of the ship, and its age, chances were the old Somers would never sail again, at least under USMC colors, and would be sold off as a high-speed transport.

"What happened to the Captain, sir?" Livollen asked.

"He was already far over the edge of paranoia when you people came aboard and for that I must apologize. Let that be a warning to all of you young officers, when an old hand like O'Brian here brings you a warning, you darn well better sit up and take notice."

O'Brian nodded his thanks from the corner of the room. He, of everyone involved in the incident, had wound up taking the hardest punishment, the dark swatch on his shoulder indicating where his stripes had been pulled off for his outbreak in the courtroom.

"Not the first time," O'Brian announced cheerily when Justin tried to console him. "Hell, young sir, you might be pulling my stripes yourself someday."

The days after the end of the trial and the full exoneration announced for all cadets, enlisted personnel and officers who had resisted MacKenzie had gone by in a confusing whirl. As Thorsson had implied, heads had rolled over the incident, and were still rolling. Zhing had taken early retirement, Lewis had resigned, and Singh had suddenly been recalled to Earth for an "administrative review." It was rumored as well that there had been an overhaul in the Office of the Director Service Personnel, with sharp questions being asked about the review process that promoted captains and gave them command.

As for the press, Justin found he simply couldn't understand it. On the one hand he was being hailed as

something of a hero, especially by the Mars press and the pro-separatists leaders. That in turn had created something of a backlash in conservative quarters, with some wondering if the service had gone too soft and Justin was being overly praised for his actions. Before Singh had left he had called Justin in and suggested that in the long run his career with the service was now dead no matter what any court might say. He had led a mutiny, and regardless of the justifications that stigma would always surround his name. No officer would ever fully trust him in the future.

Thorsson in turn had laughed at Singh's comments, replying that Singh was a generation on the way out.

"Concerning Captain MacKenzie's suicide," Thorsson continued, "it was tragic, but in a more traditional sense it was, perhaps, the only avenue left to him. It was a shame that marine guard was wounded trying to disarm him; there was a time when a man went quietly to his office, wrote a letter of apology, and then ended it."

Justin looked at Thorsson in surprise for implying support for the idea of suicide.

"Just talking about an older time, which MacKenzie's mind functioned in," Thorsson said. "MacKenzie's world came apart long before you people ever set foot aboard his ship. I wonder if having so many of you young cadets around might have triggered something buried deep within. A memory, a fear from when he was young. Be that as it may, once the unraveling started it couldn't be stopped, sort of like when you crack open an intricate machine and all the little springs start leaping out. No matter how hard you try you can't get them back in and trying to fix it just means more leap out.

"He built a justification for what he did and I think he actually believed it. It is a rare person who will do evil, knowing they are doing evil. Such characters belong in bad fiction; they rarely appear in real life. Most such people somehow believe they are doing right no matter how twisted they are. Even Hitler. He did not look in a mirror, cackle and say he was evil. No, in his twisted mind he believed he was doing right. Even the men and women of the Black Cell who destroyed most of New York and Moscow early in the 21st century thought they were doing right, even though millions died.

"No, I'm not connecting MacKenzie to those nightmares of humanity, all I'm saying is that he was disastrously disturbed. In that courtroom I could see it in his eyes when the recordings started to play. Poor Mr. Colson was revealed as a liar, and MacKenzie as a failure of a captain who did not follow the most basic steps of trying to analyze Colson's lies before acting. I don't think he even saw that in many ways he had set Colson up to be the initiating spark of his desires for vengeance. Once that was revealed, the way he seized Matt no longer seemed like a captain heroically defending his ship, but rather the actions of a bully out of control. His treatment of Hemenez and Zhing was deplorable and again looked more like a bully trying to have his way rather than a captain attempting to reach the truth. I dare say that if those recordings were ever reviewed in more detail there might be some darker aspects of MacKenzie revealed. I hope they are just simply destroyed.

"So, in that moment I think MacKenzie realized what he was and the internal collision of those two sides was played out. When he left that room there was only one answer for him find a gun, which tragically happened to be in the holster of a marine, and end it."

"And Colson?" someone asked.

"He's on his way home on **the** same ship taking

Singh. I accepted his resignation just before we departed. Poor lad, I don't think he wanted to endure the ride back to the Academy. I think I should add that I reluctantly accepted the resignation of Senior Cadet Petronovich as well. Petronovich felt he should have resisted the captain as the rest of you did, and for that he apologizes to you all."

"Colson a poor lad?" Madison interjected. "He almost killed Matt, myself and a lot of others with his tales."

"He had the potential of a good officer in him, otherwise we never would have accepted him, family connections or no family connections."

Justin stirred uncomfortably at the mention of family connections, for after all, wasn't that how he had gotten in? Thorsson saw him start to lower his head.

"There are some exceptions to that rule," Thorsson added, "but they never survive scrub summer, Mr. Bell, or what happened aboard this ship."

Justin blushed but said nothing.

"But, as I was saying. It's not fair for me to discuss Mr. Colson with his fellow classmates. Let me just close the issue by saying he is now a young man with a terrible burden to atone for. I'd like to think there's enough mettle in him to see his mistakes, to make amends and get on with his life."

Justin could see that for Matt and Madison that idea would be a hard pill to swallow.

"I think we've all learned a terrible and valuable lesson aboard this ship, one that will be studied by the Service for years to come. All of you should look into your hearts and ask what you did right and what you did wrong. Concerning what you did wrong, learn to correct it; concerning what you did right, take pride in it, but not glory. This was a horrible tragedy in which, in an ultimate sense, there were no winners."

Justin nodded in agreement. He could perceive that in a way he was the center of attention in the room and all he truly wanted at the moment was to slip back and be an anonymous plebe-year cadet like the rest of his friends. He wondered if the Academy would ever be the same again.

"Now, lets just say the next watch is free time, but at 0700 hours tomorrow we are back on Academy schedule," Thorsson said with a grin.

"I just happened to bring along a complete update on all assignments and study guides. Malady is beside himself thinking you people have slouched off on your physical training, so we'll start with a two-hour workout. Heaven knows I need it after being cooped up on that Eagle for ten days. I'll then give a daily two-hour class on Fleet Procedures, followed by study for the rest of the day."

Muttered groans greeted his comments.

"You're dismissed until tomorrow morning."

The group came to attention as Thorsson went to the door to the forward section. As Thorsson came to Justin, he slowed.

"I heard that Captain Marcioni asked you a question that troubled you, Justin."

"What was that, sir? There were so many questions I really can't remember much of anything now."

"Whether or not you feel that you are entitled to bear the honorable name of your father."

Justin flushed and lowered his head.

"Well, son, do you?"

Justin finally nodded his head. "I think so, sir."

"I know so," Thorsson replied, placing a hand on Justin's shoulder. "I know so, and I'd be proud if I ever had a son like you, as I know your father is proud of you now."

Thorsson squeezed his shoulder and then departed. Justin, eyes full, smiled when he saw that Thorsson left the door to the forward section open after he had passed.

The group started to break up. Off in a corner he heard Matt going into another one of his tall tales, with Livollen and Smith drifting over to listen. Justin stopped at the edge of the group and for a moment the two caught each others eyes. Matt grinned and shrugged, but there was the slightest look of acknowledgment, an almost whispered thank you, and Justin, smiling, backed away.

"Care for some coffee?"

Justin saw O'Brian coming, and he gladly took the cup and sipped on the straw.

"I think I might stay on with you Academy folks," O'Brian announced. "This getting bounced around from ship to ship is growing old. So I asked old Thorsson and he said the transfer will be through by the time we dock if I want it. He said no one else would want me anyhow."

"Well, we'd sure want you," Justin said with a grin.

"That would be just fine, Bell, I'll make sure you pull extra kitchen duty so we can talk over old times. You should see the things I can whip up when there's gravity under my feet."

Grinning, Justin stepped away, not sure where to go next. His old cabin seemed too cramped, so he started forward. Seay was coming down from the flight deck, and with a smile extended his hand. Again there was the comment about a job well done and again Justin didn't know how to respond.

"Remember, we jump again the week after we get back. You up for it?"

"Sure, can't wait!"

Brian clapped him on the shoulder and continued aft.

Stopping at the door to the forward section he hesitated. There was a flash memory of standing at the doorway, bursting through and seeing Matt drifting in the airlock and then there was MacKenzie. For a brief instant he wondered if a ghost had come aboard the ship, he could so clearly see him, pistol raised, screaming at him and then firing.

He drifted up the stairs to the flight deck and saw that someone was in the command chair.

"Permission to come on deck and observe, sir," Justin announced.

Hemenez turned and smiled.

"Come aboard, cadet, but someone's already in the co-pilot's seat."

Justin was surprised to see Tanya and he started to back away as if to leave.

"Bell, maybe you can do me a favor. I need to take a break. I think you and Leonov here are capable of standing watch awhile. OK?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

Hemenez unstrapped from her chair and floated out, moving carefully as she maneuvered her arm that was still in a sling.

"I know I can trust you and Leonov with the ship, just page me if anything comes up."

"Yes, sir."

Still smiling, she drifted past him. Justin looked over nervously at Leonov; she motioned for him to take the seat and strap in.

For several minutes Justin said nothing, studying , the array of instruments and control screens. He wasn't quite sure of all of them, but he figured Hemenez wouldn't leave the bridge if things weren't under control with all automatic sensors working correctly.

Finally he looked up out the forward view screen. To his surprise he felt Tanya's hand slip into his. He looked over at her and she smiled.

"Beautiful night," Tanya said.

Justin nodded, unable to speak. It was, indeed, a beautiful night, and far off, a glowing dot in the sky marked their course to home and the Academy.