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The Insectoid Invasion

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First Forward

From the log of War Admiral Norman North, Commander, 7th fleet:

I always blamed myself for letting it happen.

But in reality, it was society's fault. Society, our society, which had rotted to the very core.

I had roused them once before, to face the menace which now threatened to utterly wipe us out as a free society. But when a chance came for peace, any chance, no matter how unrealistic, no matter how risky, they grasped it in an unbreakable bear hug, and there was nothing I or anyone could do to separate them from it. For our society not only had lost the will to fight, but even worse, had lost even the will to enable us, the warrior class, to defend it. Our advancements in technology had regrettably eliminated the need for workers. Rohelpers took over what little that still needed to be done manually, and most citizens became a passive bunch of consumers, interested only in consumption, focused on their next vid, their next meal, their next bit of entertainment. And war was inconvenient for them, not because they had to fight it (most of them didn't), but the prospect of conflict threatened to distract them from their all-important pursuit of pleasure. So when the enemy proposed their deceitful peace, they didn't have to make much of an effort to deceive us.

And now we've lost everything, and almost everyone. I keep thinking there was something I could have done, something I should have done. Maybe I could have saved us all by staging a coup and taking over, before the armistice was signed and the ambush had taken place. Maybe. And if I had, maybe I and my sailors would be sitting in some brig, waiting for the enemy to come and take over from our current jailors.... Or maybe we would have saved the day.

Now, we'll never know. All we can be concerned with is saving the tiny group of humanity that's left, keeping our task force together long enough to regroup and one day reclaim what's ours. But the memory of what "might have been" continues to and always will be with me, wherever I go.

Second Forward

Finally, there would be peace.

Humanity had been in conflict with the Insectoids for nearly 20 years. They had appeared out of nowhere--giant, seven feet tall intelligent insects bent on conquering the human race. And, for a time, with their flood of destroyers, cruisers, and battleships, it appeared they would win. It was only at the decisive battle of Trajinar, three years earlier,

that the Alliance fleet under the command of War Admiral Norman North had turned the tide and decisively crushed the Insectoid fleet.

After that, battles became skirmishes, skirmishes became hit and run raids, and then the Insectoids ceased their attacks altogether. They had contacted one of the Alliance's most respected ministers, Lawrence Mitterand, and sued for peace.

And peace there would be. After a year of slow but steady negotiation, Mitterand had worked out a peace agreement that both sides could agree to.

League President Hov Marshall looked out from the bridge of his mighty flagship the Augustus at the rest of the fleet. He shielded his eyes from the powerful glare of Vitalics' brilliant sun as he started at the assembled ships. Nearly the entire League fleet was here for the armistice with the Insectoids. The League was the dominant partner in the Alliance; the junior partner, the June Directorate, had chosen not to participate in the armistice, but had agreed to abide by the terms of the ceasefire.

Well, Marshall wasn't going to let the Directorate spoil things.

"Ze Insectoid fleet is here," said Mitterand, standing by his side. "Finally, ve will have ze peace," he said in his old westeuro accent.

"Admiral Peterson, order the fleet to a halt," Marshall said as he eyed the approaching Insectoid Fleet.

"Fleet command: hold here," said the Admiral over the central comm.

The Insectoid fleet maintained a healthy distance from the League fleet. Only four of their larger ships slowly moved towards the League Fleet, each moving towards a different part of the fleet.

"Admiral, I'm getting some weird readings from those ships," said a bridge crewer. "The scanners seem to say that they have some kind of unstable cargo."

"Cargo? What kind of cargo?"

At that moment external ports opened on the giant ships, which rapidly spat out a series of oval objects which speeded towards the densely packed League fleet. As they closed on the fleet these spheres started to detonate, casting a fine mist over the League fleet.

"Power drain!" cried a crewer. "All systems are down!" cried another.

"What's going on?" said Marshall.

"Ve must continue ze peace process," said Mitterand, almost mechanically. "Ve need ze peace like ve need ze air."

And it was at that moment that the Insectoids attacked.

Still staying well clear of the League fleet and the mist that enveloped, the Insectoid ship launched a massive wave of missiles. The tail section of the missile exhausts cut out as they entered the misty area, but inertia caused them to continue moving forward.

Peterson eyed the missiles streaking towards them.

"Raise shields! Activate anti missile lasers!"

"We can't sir, we've lost all power except emergency batteries!" said one of the crewers, frantically turning switches on and off again.

The Augustus was rocked as a missile hit it amidships, causing everyone on the bridge to stumble momentarily. Other

missiles slammed into other ships of the fleet, all of which were helpless and dead in space. Several of the destroyers, not large enough to survive a direct impact, burst into pieces.

"What's going on here?" said Marshall. "This was supposed to be an armistice!"

"All ships to battlestations, repel attackers!" Admiral Peterson shouted into the hectic fleetcom channel. But with so many voices over the comm he couldn't make himself heard. Not that it mattered; most of the fleet was disabled, as dead as museum pieces.

The Insectoids launched a second wave.

"Ve must continue ze peace process," said Mitterand mechanically.

Marshall, almost out of his mind, grabbed Mitterand by the shirt. "What are you talking about? They're blowing us to pieces!"

Another set of missiles slammed into the fleet. This time a number of cruisers were seriously damaged, several of them critically. One blew up just starboard of the Augustia, creating a white flash which shook the flagship.

"Ve must continue ze peace process," said Mitterand.

"Stop saying that!" Marshall shrieked, shaking Mitterand and slapping him hard in the face. What happened next surprised him even more.

Mitterand's face came off, revealing wiring and circuitry underneath, with sparkling orbs for eyes.

Marshall reflexively let go, just as another missile slammed into the Augustus, causing him to stumble. "What... are you?"

Moving very quickly, Mitterand grabbed Marshall and started to throttle him. "Peace begets peace begets peace" he said, squeezing Marshall's neck in a crushing grip. There was a crack of broken bones and Marshall was tossed across the bridge. General Peterson reached for his sidearm...

Just as another missile slammed into the bridge. The Augustus was one of the most heavily armored ships in the fleet, but it wasn't intended to operate without shields, and without shields it couldn't survive more than a few direct hits.

The missile blew up much of the forward decks, incinerating the bridge crew instantly. The survivors in the interior sections didn't last much longer either. Missiles from a succeeding wave crashed into the engine section, detonating the fuel supply and creating a miniature sun in the space where the Augustus stood.

This scene was repeated throughout the entire fleet. One after another League ships turned into fireballs, their crews helpless to do anything to defend themselves or even fleet. Within a few minutes, the rest of the fleet was destroyed. So complete was the destruction that there were almost no survivors. Of the 362 ships in the League fleet, only 8 managed to escape the immediate battle. Three of those were quickly hunted down and destroyed; one light cruiser managed to go to ground and her crew joined the planetbound resistance on Whenfor; one destroyer managed to link up with members of the surviving fleet, a battle cruiser and a fast attack destroyer became blockade runners until they were hunted down and destroyed, and one battleship, whose story is told elsewhere, escaped into deep space.

But for all intents and purposes the bulk of the League fleet ceased to exist in a matter of minutes, leaving all the League worlds open to domination by the Insectoids.

There would be peace all right, but the peace of the subjugated, the peace of the master and the slave; peace, but on the Insectoids' terms, and humanity, what elements that survived, would fare very, very poorly.

Chapter 1: Attack at Hunt's World

Two weeks earlier...

"It's utter foolishness!" said War Admiral Norman North.

"Watch your tongue, Admiral!" countered Admiral Gubar Peterson, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the League of United Worlds. He was addressing a fellow admiral, the legendary Norman North. There were precious few War (four star) Admirals in the League, and although North's permanent rank was Victory Admiral (five star), he had given up that rank to return to active duty in the field. Regardless of his rank, Peterson was technically the top Navy man, and expected proper behavior from all his sailors--even the great Norman North, the hero of Trajinar.

"I still think it's foolish," said North stubbornly, as if he didn't fear anything Peterson could do to him.

"This is a decision of the civilian hierarchy, and we report to them, not the other way around," said Peterson. "Are you saying you are going to go against the orders of our civilian authorities?"

North avoided this obvious trap. "No, of course not, sir." He was already aware of the number of resignations, a number of them forced, over the issue. Some of the best fleet captains and admirals of the line had already resigned in protest; but North was not ready to take that route. That wasn't his way.

Peterson relaxed slightly. "Very well then. You're entitled to have your own personal opinion about peace with the Insectoids, but keep that opinion to yourself. Now, let's talk about your next assignment." Having taken North down a notch, he felt inclined to be a bit more generous. "I'm prepared to give you some latitude. Where would you like your fleet to be located?"

North felt his mouth drop open. "I had assumed that I would go to Vitalics with the rest of the fleet for the signing of the armistice."

"That's not wise, War Admiral. You yourself pointed out the folly of putting the entire fleet all in one place, leaving our planets undefended. The League President has agreed with your line of thought in this matter. That's why he's permitting you and your fleet to stay behind."

"Meaning he doesn't want me anywhere near Vitalics during the signing."

"That's another way of putting it," said Peterson, allowing himself a grin. "But I'm prepared to give you some latitude in your positioning."

"Latitude?"

"You can base your fleet anywhere you like... as long as it's not within 10 lightyears of Vitalics."

"I see," said North. He turned to a star map, as if thinking, then pointed to a star, "Hunt."

"The Hunt system?" Peterson looked surprised, both at the speed of North's response and his selection. "I would've thought you would've chosen a system 10.1 lightyears from Vitalics, or stationed yourself here on August."

"Hunt will do fine, sir. What forces are under my command?"

"Here's a readout," said Peterson, handing him a datapad. North took a look at it, and bit his lip. 42 ships. About 10% of the fleet. It was almost an insult for a War Admiral to be commanding such a small force. Well, at least he still had the Glory, his flagship, and a fair mix of top of the line and current ships. It would have to do. Peterson was looking at his face to see his reaction, but North forced himself to give a blank expression. "Very well, sir. If you'll excuse me?"

The Glory was an old Command Carrier, one of only four such ships still in existence. But old shouldn't be confused with feeble; although over 300 years old, every part of the Glory except her armor and her bulkheads had been stripped out and replaced several times with upgrades and new components. The Glory was one of those very rare and expensive combinations of a battleship and a fleet carrier. On the bottom the ship was pure carrier: it had two launching and landing bays capable of holding six squadrons of fighters plus a wide variety of support and transport craft. The Glory currently carried a complement of five squadrons of old but proven assault Wildcats and one squadron of even older Defender heavy bombers. Although both classes of fighters had been in service for over 100 years, the Glory carried a mixture of type 145-D and 150-B Wildcats and type 78-J Defenders, among the most modern versions of these fighters in the fleet.

The top of the Glory was pure battleship, featuring three sets of massive 34 inch laser cannon turrets, side mounted missile launchers, a 22 inch turret in the rear, and a number of small caliber anti-fighter armament. While no longer state of the art compared with the most modern battleships, the Glory could go toe to toe against nearly any ship in the fleet except the most modern superbattleships and dreadnaughts.

In short, the Glory had the teeth of a battleship and the carrying capacity of a carrier. That combination, however, made the Command Carrier line tremendously expensive, which explains why they were discontinued after only eight models, in favor of regular carriers and battleships.

North's shuttle, accompanied by his standard fighter escort, landed in the forward landing bay. His executive officers, Captain Roger Dulin, skipper of the Glory, and Commander Stacy Wren, his first officer, were waiting for him in his ready room.

"Ridiculous!" were Dulin's first words.

"Obviously a trap," said Wren. "Why else would they want to meet at Vitalics?"

"Admiral Peterson said that they considered that neutral territory," said North.

"And it's just a coincidence they chose a meeting place where electromagnetic interference would prevent any

communication outside of the system?" said Wren.

"Mitterand said with the entire fleet there we'd have nothing to fear," said North hollowly. Even he didn't pretend to believe what he was saying.

"Mitterand is a traitor!" said Wren savagely.

"Commander—"

"Or at least a dupe," said Dulin. "It doesn't matter which. What are we going to do?"

"Do, Captain?" North raised his eyebrows. "Our orders are to go to Hunt's world and stay put."

"We've got to stop them," said Dulin. "They'll ambush the fleet."

North frowned. "Assuming you're right, how do you propose we stop them? Admiral Peterson is leaving even as we speak, and the bulk of the fleet is already on its way to Vitalics."

"We could catch up to them at top speed before they get there," said Wren.

"And then what?" said North. "Tell them they're going into an ambush, of which I have no proof of? And when the admirals and civilian leaders who are traveling with them tell them to disregard my orders, what then?"

"Tell them not to obey their admirals, if necessary," said Wren. "War Admiral, you've saved us countless times. We all owe you for Trajinar. The fleet will follow you."

North self consciously fingered the silver eagles on the collar of his light blue uniform. "So you're telling me to stage a coup, to overthrow the elected leaders of the League and their military leadership. Do you realize what you're saying?"

"If it has to be done to save us, yes!" cried Wren.

North turned to Dulin. "And you, Captain? What are your views on this?"

"I... I think the fleet will listen to you, sir," said Dulin.

"You realize you're talking about mutiny," said North. "The penalty for which is still capital punishment." He paused, as if he were also fighting a battle with himself. "All right. Let's take your thought experiment a step further. What if we make our big announcement and some ships don't go along? Do we fire on them?"

Dulin was silent.

"Do we shoot at our own sailors? For that matter, what if the majority of the fleet doesn't go along? We'll be vastly outnumbered and outgunned. Are you prepared to be vaporized for mutiny, along with all the other ship captains and senior officers in this fleet?" North asked.

Dulin, choked up, tried to make a sound but nothing came out.

North slowly paced back and forth on the carpeting. "I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about doing something like this too. But it's too risky. Even if we're right, without proof we might not be able to persuade the fleet. And just remember, we may not be right; it's been almost a year since the last skirmish; the Insectoids may really be suing for peace.

"You don't believe that!" said Wren.

North shook his head. "You're right, I don't. But I'm not certain. And as long as I'm not certain, and an 'intervention' on our part is risky at best, I'm not going to

act. Remember that most of the fleet is going there; if there is an ambush being planned, the Insectoids will have to be strong enough to take out our entire fleet at once. Maybe they won't be foolish enough to try; maybe if they try, they'll fail."

"At the very least we should go to Vitalics too."

North shook his head. "We'd be risking court martial when we got into sensor range. And with only 40 odd ships under my direct command, I'm not sure we could make a difference."

He sighed. "This isn't an easy decision. But I'm not going to overthrow an elected government unless I'm certain they're wrong, and I'm not.... And even if I were, I'm not nearly sure we'd be successful."

"So what do we do now?"

"We go to Hunt's world... and we wait," said North.

The Glory and its accompanying fleet came into orbit around the moon orbiting Hunt's World. Formerly a pioneering world, Hunt had over the centuries gradually evolved into a center of industry and capital and was now the main "money world" in the League. Because of its importance to the financial industry, Hunt's World had a series of battlestations in high orbit around the planet, brimming with weaponry and a full assortment of starfighters.

But, oddly enough, North hadn't stationed his fleet in proximity of the battlestations; instead, much of the fleet were in orbit around Hunt's moon, too far to get support from the weaponry on the battlestations, if needed.

"It's been eight hours," Commander Wren fumed. "Eight hours since the armistice convened.

"Patience, Commander," said North, sitting in his command chair which was set just behind Captain Dulin's. "I'm sure we'll be hearing something soon." He touched the silver eagles on his collar below his four stars, his only sign of restlessness.

"How long does it take them to sign a piece of paper?" Wren fumed.

North gave her a mild look but said nothing.

"Sir, we're getting an incoming communication," said the comm officer, working the receiver. "It's faint, but I think it's from the fleet. We can only get audio."

A few seconds later there was a hissing sound and then, "--under attack. This is Captain Tirako of the Cruiser Impulse. We are under attack by a fleet of Insectoid ships--"

North's voice was immediate, but it was also calm. "Captain Tirako, this is War Admiral Norman North of the Glory. What happened to the fleet?"

"...fleet... destroyed. All destroyed. Glory, they're firing again!" There was an explosion, then a crackle, and the line went dead.

"Captain, I'm picking up a fleet of Insectoid ships at extreme range, closing rapidly," said the scanner officer.

For a moment, the bridge was incredibly silent.

"I think we have our answer," said North, very slowly, in a very soft voice, as if he had difficulty speaking. He looked grimmer than Wren had ever seen him.

"Battle Stations."

The attacking fleet was not, of course, the same one that had conducted the ambush at Vitalics; Vitalics, still days away, was too far away. Instead, this smaller Insectoid fleet had started out several days before the Vitalics ambush occurred, timing their arrival to come just after the Vitalics rendezvous had taken place.

"I'm reading 78 combat ships," said the scanner officer. "12 battleships, 14 battlecruisers, 27 cruisers, the rest an assortment of smaller ships."

"They knew exactly where we were," North muttered, his heart sinking as he stared at the line of massive battleships on the screen. The Insectoids had a two to one advantage in ships, but probably a three to one advantage in weapons; while the Insectoids had 12 battleships and 14 battlecruisers, North's fleet had only the Glory, and a pocket battleship, the Blue Luna, and four battlecruisers. The rest were standard cruisers and other combat vessels. It would be a tough fight, and everyone knew it. Normally, North's cruisers wouldn't stand a chance against Insectoid battleships. But North had a few surprises planned that would help even the odds, if everything worked as planned. North raised his voice, "Only 78 ships? They must be feeling overconfident." He touched a button on his console to open a channel to interfleet. "This is the War Admiral. By now you have heard of the destruction of the main part of our fleet. I won't deceive you with some public relations doubletalk and say that everything will be fine."

"But I will say that whatever has happened to the main fleet, we are still alive and the Insectoids haven't won until they've beaten us. We've defeated the Insectoids before and we will again, as long as we continue to be a coherent combat force. That's why it's vital we win this encounter with a minimum of losses. There will be time for grieving later. For now I expect you all to give your best. Prepare to conform to the attack plan Hunt 1 exactly as we rehearsed it. Good luck. North out."

The previous silence was replaced by a babble of voices as bridge officers readied their stations for combat.

The Insectoid Admiral, a junior Queen, was puzzled. She had expected North's forces to be stationed in high orbit around Hunt, to take advantage of the defenses afforded by the battlestations. She had been prepared to conduct a standoff attack with missiles to destroy the battlestations first. Instead North had his forces strung out around Hunt's moon, where the battlestation weapons wouldn't be effective and where even the battlestation's fighters would take several minutes to engage. The Insectoids had fought Norman North too long to underestimate him, and yet the Insectoids still couldn't see what North was trying to achieve or why he would take such an obviously inferior defensive stance.

The Admiral studied the scanner interface. It was a pity they didn't have the same suppression equipment they used at Vitalics; but there had been barely enough there to get the job done there. Well, they'd have to conduct this battle more conventionally. Either way, the result would be the same.

"Order the attack," the Admiral ordered.

The Insectoid attack fleet closed in a narrow formation. During their first attack they intended to punch

through the human fleet, currently in low orbit. Then, while their formation was disrupted, the Insectoids would engage the enemy one-on-one until they were all destroyed. The Insectoid Admiral had competed with others to have the honor of destroying the great Norman North. She wondered what kind of honor the Queen would bestow upon her when she brought the Queen his head.

Her attention snapped back to the present as her fleet plowed through the human fleet, firing madly at their ships. The human shields were holding up, but so were those of the Insectoid ships. The Insectoids, having gone past the human fleet and between it and Hunt's moon, started to brake, and turn, and...

Brilliant beams of light shot up from the surface of Hunt's moon, impacting on several of the Insectoid ships. The Insectoid Admiral turned her scanners to the moon and saw, for the first time, that portable laser batteries had been set up on the surface. Where had they come from?

She had no time to wonder, because even as those laser batteries opened fire, dozens if not hundreds of fighters were streaming out of hidden caves beneath the moon's surface. Where were all those fighters coming from? North's fleet didn't have nearly that many fighters, according to the intelligence reports. Then the Admiral immediately figured it out: they must have been moved from their births in the battlestation to the moon. When had this been done?

And then explosions started to come on a new front; as the Insectoid fleet braked and turned, heading away from the moon, some of them slammed into mines! The Insectoid Admiral checked her short range scanner. There were a thick layer of mines between the human fleet and the moon. How had the humans known that they would arrive at this exact spot?

North's fleet closed on the Insectoid ships, which continued to be pounded by surface fire and, a few moments later, by squadrons of 145-B and even more nimble 150-D Wildcats streaming out of the surface. The Insectoid Admiral, realizing that being sandwiched by North's fleet on one side and the moon's laser emplacements and fighters on the other was a recipe for disaster, ordered her fleet to break off and cut through the line of North's ships to get to the relative safety of open space.

But in doing so the fleeing Insectoid ships lost their carefully planned formation and bearings and became open targets for North's fleet. North's cruiser groups raked them with fire as they passed. A number of Insectoid ships also slammed into mines on their way out, causing heavy damage.

When the Insectoid ships cleared the mine field and steered out of range of the moon's guns they moved to reform into their original squadrons, but War Admiral North's fleet gave them no quarter.

By the time the Insectoid fleet had moved off and reformed, while still under constant attack from North's fleet, 37 ships had either been destroyed or heavily damaged, including five of the battleships and seven of the battlecruisers, and North's fleet hadn't lost a single ship. But if the two fleets were now roughly even in size the Insectoid fleet was still more powerful, its battleships and battlecruisers capable of outgunning any ship in North's fleet in a one-on-one battle, except perhaps for the Glory.

But it wasn't simply to be a ship to ship battle.

Fighters, nearly 300 of them, swarmed up from the moons surface, attacking key Insectoid battle groups.

One fighter attacking a capital ship can almost be ignored. Three or four fighters attacking a capital ship is an irritant. But 20 fighters armed with heavy rockets can make short work of a cruiser or even a larger capital ship. A number of them were converted Defender heavy bombers with several payloads of ordinance.

North's fleet was careful to only engage the Insectoid battlegroups already under heavy attack from the fighters. Whenever one of the Insectoid battlegroups not under fighter attack tried to engage North's fleet, his ships carefully maneuvered out of the way to try to keep the besieged Insectoid fleet groups between them and the ones not under fighter attack. In fact, at any given moment half of North's fleet refused to engage, simply playing cat and mouse with battleships and battlecruisers not under fighter attack.

The fighters did quick work, not waiting to destroy Insectoid ships but rather halting attacks when they had achieved heavy damage, and moved in groups of 20 and 30 to attack the next ship.

"Engage them!" cried the Insectoid Admiral. In their rush to get here they hadn't brought any fighters of their own, but the Insectoid Admiral thought that their overwhelming number of capital ships would even out that advantage. Then again, the Insectoid Admiral hadn't expected to face 300 heavily armed fighters, more than triple the number normally assigned to the Glory.

"We can't," said an Insectoid officer. "They keep running from us!"

But as the number of undamaged Insectoid ships dwindled down to 25, the bulk of North's fleet did turn and engage the Insectoids, even those not currently under fighter attack. A cruiser couldn't take on a battlecruiser, one to one, but three of them could. The Glory directly engaged one of the two remaining Insectoid battleships, while the pocket battleship Blue Luna, in the company of a destroyer squadron, engaged the other. The Insectoid fleet struck out at the human ships, damaging a number of them, but the momentum was on North's side.

When the number of Insectoid ships remaining dropped to less than 20, the Insectoid Admiral gave the order to retreat.

"Pursue and destroy!" cried North from the bridge of the Glory. The fleet pounded the Insectoids as they retreated, following them to the edge of the system and disabling or destroying four more of their ships. At the system's edge North called the fleet back to deal with the surviving damaged Insectoid ships who were trying to limp from the field.

The fleet opened fire on the damaged Insectoid ships on orders from the Glory. Captain Dulin didn't ask War Admiral North if he wanted them to rescue any Insectoid survivors, and War Admiral North, grim faced, said nothing. After the slaughter at Vitalics, no one was in the mood to take prisoners.

When it was all over Admiral North assessed the damage. Seven ships, three cruisers and four destroyers had been destroyed or heavily damaged. The rest of the fleet had suffered light damage, except for one cruiser whose engines

had been knocked out.

"Transfer the survivors from these seven ships aboard our battlecruiser group," commanded North. "The cruiser with the damaged drive section, the Larata, how long before it can be made spaceworthy?"

"Our techs think two hours," said Captain Dulin.

North calculated how long it would take them to get the fighters back onboard. "We leave in one hour," said North. "If they can make it spaceworthy by then, they can accompany us; if not, they can play catchup."

"Where are we going in such a hurry, sir?" Dulin asked.

"June," said North. June was the Capital of the June Directorate, the junior coalition partner in the Alliance with the League. Now that the League fleet, except for North's battlegroup, was largely destroyed, the Directorate's fleet was the only other allied fleet left. It was smaller than the League fleet, but their ships were technologically advanced and their navy had a solid reputation as capable fighters.

"Get me Admiral Zarat of the June Directorate fleet," North said.

There was a pause and the holographic display crackled but remained otherwise silent. "We can't, sir, there's some interference."

"Jamming," said North. "They could already be under attack." He resisted the urge to order their immediate departure. If they left now, they'd have to leave most of the fighters behind.

The Glory was officially rated to carry six squadrons of fighters but to help carry the additional fighters from the Hunt battlestations would now be carrying eight. In addition, each surviving ship would also be carrying a handful of fighters in their hanger bays. All said and done the fleet could now carry 200 fighters. The local Hunt military authority wasn't thrilled to lose half of its fighter support, but North pulled rank and gave them no choice.

"Get those fighters aboard as quickly as possible," said North, looking at his chronometer and privately fuming. Time was so precious!

Well, there was still one thing he could do. "Get me Command General Tenor Markov, commander, ground forces on August, Sarney Sarittenden Central Command HQ." A Command General was a three star general, the highest practical rank in the ground forces. Although there was theoretically one higher rank, that of War General, that rank was generally unfilled and reserved for great war heroes. Currently, only the head of the joint chiefs held that rank, and that was currently an Admiral, Ruber Peterson. Who was almost certainly dead.

The comm officer opened a line to August.

August. The capital of the Alliance.

North's hands flitted as he wondered if communications had been jammed there too. Which could only mean the attack had already begun there as well.

But after a few tense moments the screen crackled and Markov's face filled his holocommunicator.

"War Admiral," he said curtly. A loud babble of voices could be heard in the background on Markov's end.

"You've heard the news," said North, referring to the

transmission from the ship that briefly escaped the ambush at Vitalics.

"We did. Was the entire fleet really destroyed?"

"We have no way of knowing without going and taking a look," said North. "But if we haven't heard from anyone else by now, it's a safe bet that there aren't entire battlegroups in silent running."

"The entire fleet," said Markov, trying to wrap his mind around it. "And the President, and the Vice President, and the joint chiefs... all gone..." He paused a moment, as if lost in thought, then snapped back into reality. "And your battlegroup?"

North checked the scrambler controls. They flashed green. He looked up at Markov. "We had a little ambush of our own, but we're fine. We have only 34 ships left, so there's not much we can do."

"Understood. What do you recommend?"

"The Insectoids will be coming," said North. "Your orbital defenses will not be able to hold out long. My suggestion is that you abandon your military headquarters and disperse your troops and prepare for ground assault. Your best strategy, if there is any best strategy, is protracted guerrilla warfare to wear the enemy down."

Markov's face showed that the implications of this were slowly sinking in. "Protracted? How long is protracted?"

North lowered his voice, though he knew the entire bridge crew could still hear him. "We're about to go into battle again, General." Picking his words carefully, he said, "I don't know when, or if, we'll be able to communicate again. I suggest you wipe your command files and-"

"Just a moment!" a third voice intervened, splitting into their two-way communication. The face of Defense Minister Novacan appeared. "Admiral North, where are you going?"

"Into battle, sir," said North, picking his words carefully. Scrambler or no, this communication could be tapped and deciphered, with the right access codes. With the President, Vice President, JCS, and most of the cabinet at Vitalics, only Novacan had been left behind to mind affairs on August.

"Battle where? Admiral, I order you to return to August to secure the defense of our homeworld!"

"Minister, our small fleet will be no match for the overwhelming force the Insectoids will throw at us-"

"You're not paid to think, Admiral!" Novacan snapped. "I'm issuing a direct order for you to return immediately!"

North paused a moment. "No," he said. It was obvious to everyone on the bridge that he omitted the "sir".

"No? No what?"

"No, we're not returning."

"Admiral North, you are relieved of command! Captain Dulin!"

"Sir?" said Dulin, stepping forward promptly.

"You are to take command of the fleet and return to August immediately."

"No sir!" said Dulin, just as promptly.

"This is treason! You'll be vaporized for this!"

"No," said North slowly. "What you and your administration have done is treason. You have lowered our guard and cost the lives of thousands of loyal sailors whose

only fault was following your orders. We will no longer listen to yours." He turned as if to terminate connections.

"Where are you taking your fleet? Are you going to run away? Coward!" Novacan spat.

North turned back, murder in his eyes. "Yes, I'm a coward," he said slowly. "I've been giving the subject a lot of thought lately. I'm a coward for not arresting you, the President, and the Joint Chiefs when I had the chance. I'm a coward for not taking power when I should have. I was afraid of taking action. This is the result of my inaction. My inaction" He repeated it, for emphasis. "I don't know if we'll survive this, but if, by some miracle we do, I won't make the same mistake twice," he said, his voice deadly grim. "Goodbye, Minister, and try to take a kinder tone with your new Insectoid masters."

He terminated communications. The bridge crew was speechless. North turned to Wren. "Are the fighters aboard yet?" he said quietly.

"Another few minutes, sir."

"Is the League network still up?"

The comm officer checked, then nodded. "For the most part." The Insectoids hadn't yet gotten the chance to disrupt the League-wide communication network.

"Activate the League wide network. Use our priority military code."

"Online."

North took a deep breath. He would now be addressing the senior military, political and administrative leaders and staff throughout the League. "This is War Admiral Norman North. A few hours ago, it appears that most if not all of the League fleet sent to the Vitalics armistice was destroyed in an ambush. As President Marshall unwisely sent nearly the entire fleet to Vitalics, we are now left open and defenseless to an Insectoid invasion."

He paused for a moment to let this sink in.

"The Insectoids will be coming, in some worlds in a matter of hours, and others in a few days. Worlds on the outskirts of the League may be lucky enough to have a few weeks, but they will come, sooner or later. This is a terrible time for the League; we have been led to defeat by the naivete and incompetence of our leaders."

"But ultimately we are the ones at fault, we, through our complacency and nearsightedness and preoccupation with consumption and pleasure, who elected the Marshall and his cronies on their unrealistic "peace now" plank. President Marshall is no longer around to pay for his mistakes, but we are. I have spent most of my adult life fighting to defend what we hold so dear, and now we are about to lose it."

"To those of you who still value freedom, who are still willing to fight for it, I call on you to rise up and resist. Form small, mobile tactical groups. Harass the Insectoids and make them pay for their occupation. Sabotage Insectoid installations and kill as many Insectoids as you can. It will be a long and difficult fight, but eventually we can make the price of occupation too expensive for them to pay."

"As for myself, as long as I am alive the Insectoids have not fully conquered the fleet. Never forget that as you fight on the ground I will be here, in space, fighting for you as well. Mark my words: someday we will meet again, and the next time we do, we will regain our hard-won freedom

once again."

"This is War Admiral Norman North, signing off. Good luck to all of you."

If the bridge had been merely stunned by North's communication with Defense Minister Novacan, they were overwhelmed by North's message to the League. It was one thing to know that they had been defeated; to hear it from North's lips, however, gave it a new weight and reality that was only now sinking in.

Dulin moved closer to North's command chair. "Ah, sir, do you think it was really wise to blame the people for this?" he said, in a low voice.

"Wise?" said North, raising an eyebrow. "I don't care. They're responsible. I've fought my entire life for these people, and look at them! Most of them are parasites simply living off their rohelpers and holopics, and haven't worked a day in their lives. They voted for Marshall because war was "inconvenient" and peace was the easy thing. Our rise in technology and productivity was supposed to make life easier, but when it reached the point when technology enabled the population to stop working and simply seek out pleasure, it set a moral decay in place. Quite frankly I'm tired of people who have no interest in defending themselves. I signed on to defend people, not spineless jellyfish, and that's what our society has become. When the Insectoids arrive, many of them will learn what hardship is like for the first time. Many of the survivors, that is," said North, his tone so angry and bitter that Dulin almost didn't recognize it. But then he addressed Dulin directly, and that legendary calm was back. "Are the fighters aboard yet?"

Dulin distracted, quickly turned to check his board. "Uh, Yes sir. And I'm showing temporary repairs to the cruiser have been completed as well."

"Compliment the repair crew on their fine work," said North unemotionally. "Let's get under way. Set course for June, maximum speed."

Chapter 2: The Brief Battle for June

Admiral Whyold Zarat was the soldier in charge of the Directorate's fleet defenses.

North's opinion of the League's civilian leadership was only slightly lower than Admiral Zarat's opinion of the Directorate's civilian leadership. Until one year ago the Directorate, the junior partner in the Alliance with the League, was under the brilliant leadership of Steven Quick. Quick, who was technically brilliant, had founded the Directorate and ran it as an enlightened dictatorship for as long as Zarat could remember. Quick took over from the previous corrupt and inefficient bureaucrats and created a model of government that even the League, which had a traditional disdain for dictatorships, found so admirable that they sent their people over to study how their bureaucracy worked. Quick also built up and modernized the Directorate fleet and made it a vibrant partner in its coalition with the League, especially during the early years of the war against the Insectoids. But all that changed a year ago when Quick's ship blew up under what could only be termed suspicious circumstances.

Quick's handpicked successor, Administrator (now Director) Tel Kalin immediately took over, and quickly made a mess of things.

First there was the explosion of the reactor at the enormous military base on Tentus IV. Somehow a chain reaction started which vaporized the base. The result: 20,000 sailors and their families dead, 20 ships lost. It was a tremendous blow to fleet morale. Kalin made things worse by pinning the blame on several of the Directorate's most distinguished Admirals, forcing a number of them into retirement before their time, even though most of them had nothing to do with the accident on Tentus.

Then as part of a "modernization" program Kalin retired fifteen perfectly capable ships of the line before their replacements were made ready. In fact, since Kalin had taken over, Zarat hadn't seen a single replacement ship come off the assembly lines. There were "problems in production" he was told.

Then the final straw came two months ago when a drive explosion on one of the newest class of battlecruisers forced all ten of those battlecruisers out of service for "inspection". Despite repeated inquiries, Zarat had had no word on when he was going to get those ships back either. So there he was commander of a once mighty fleet of a little more than 100 ships, now down to a demoralized group of 55 ships, all because of the incompetence of their leadership. There was already talk in the ranks about getting rid of Kalin and putting a new leadership in place, a military leadership, and if the situation didn't improve soon, Zarat might be forced to take sides. Kalin's predecessor, Quick, had been a civilian, but he had shown by example that he knew how to run the military. Kalin didn't have that touch. Currently the fleet was stationed in orbit around June, the capital of the Directorate. Well, at least Kalin had had the good sense not to agree to send the fleet to this ridiculous armistice the League had agreed to with the Insectoids. Zarat knew it would be a trap; the only question in his mind is how many League ships would survive the trap. There had been no word from the League fleet since the meeting at Vitalics had begun, several hours earlier.

"Admiral, I'm getting a communication from Director Kalin, for your eyes only," said a crewer.

Kalin entered his ready room, and keyed in a code. A hologram of the Director appeared in front of his desk.

"Admiral, you're there. Good. Prepare the fleet for attack."

"Attack, sir?" From the Insectoids? How could they attack this far into their territory without being detected?

"The Insectoids are about to attack June," said Kalin. How did Kalin know this? "Sir?"

"We haven't much time. The Insectoid fleet will outnumber and outgun your fleet by at least two to one. Your orders are to engage them in one pass only."

"One pass only?" This was only getting more confusing. "And then what?"

"Disengage and make for open space. Head out and stay alive as long as possible."

"You would ask us to abandon June after a show of no more than a token resistance!" Despite his dislike for Kalin, Zarat was prepared to obey reasonable orders. But this wasn't

a reasonable order, not by a long shot. He should leave the Directorate open to invasion? For a moment Zarat started to think that maybe Kalin wasn't merely incompetent; perhaps he was actually a traitor. That would explain the weakening of the fleet.

"I realize these orders are hard for you to accept. And I also realize that circumstances have forced us to have a rocky relationship."

"Nothing you can say will make me abandon the Directorate. Sir." said Zarat stonily.

Kalin paused, checking something. "This conversation is scrambled. If you stay and fight your fleet will eventually be destroyed. And it's important for your fleet to survive." "What is the sense of surviving if we're not going to be able to defend our planets?"

Kalin lowered his voice. "I was told, if you resisted this order... I was told to tell you to trust me, I know what I'm doing."

Told? Who tells the First Director to do anything? And then the words struck home. "Trust me, I know what I'm doing." There was only one person in the galaxy who had used that line frequently, when talking to Zarat.

Suddenly, an incredible thought burst into Zarat's mind. Kalin, watching the transformation of his face, nodded. "I see you understand. But you are to tell NO ONE about this conversation, not even your most senior officers." He then proceeded to give Zarat a series of secret instructions that he needed to commit to memory, and also provided him with three names.

"Understood," said Zarat, when he was done. "Director? Will this really work out?"

Kalin sighed. "In the short run... no. But at least this way we'll have a chance of restoring what we're about to lose."

Zarat swallowed. Well, at least he knew the truth. "What about you, sir, will you need evacuation?"

"Don't worry about me, Admiral, just take your fleet to safety. Kalin out."

Zarat sat alone for a moment. Then he activated ship-to-ship.

"I need to speak to the following three officers, alone.

Secured channel." He called for the names of three communications officers on three different ships.

When Zarat returned to the bridge he said, "Prepare for battle."

"Battle? Against whom?" said an aide.

"Admiral! A large number of enemy ships are showing on our scopes!" cried the scanner officer. Suddenly, the ship was on alert.

Zarat didn't even ask a single question about the size or composition of the enemy. Instead, he simply said, "Prepare to conduct a single pass. Then set course out of the system."

"We're just leaving?" said an aide, stunned.

"Follow my orders!" Zarat barked.

"Where will we set course?" the aide asked.

Zarat considered for a moment. Kalin had told him to set course for deep space. And yet... War Admiral North's League fleet was at Hunt's World. That was only a stone's throw from June. Suddenly, it all made sense. Zarat had wondered why North had stationed the fleet at Hunt;

strategically, it made no sense. But now he realized why; Hunt was the League world nearest to June! North had intended to join forces all along. If he survived whatever the Insectoids had planned for him, Zarat was sure he would send his ships to June. In fact, he might even be on the way there now.

Zarat checked the long range comm. The Insectoids were jamming all frequencies. But it all made sense.

"Once we get clear we'll set a course for Hunt." Once they linked up with North's forces, then they would head out into deep space.

The Insectoid fleet, 70 ships strong, came blazing into the June system. The June orbital defense stations opened fire, and the Directorate Fleet raced out to engage the Insectoid fleet. But after a few brief seconds of laser fire, the Directorate fleet whipped right past them! The Insectoids braked and turned in a leisurely fashion, confident that the Directorate Fleet would turn back and meet them.

But the Directorate fleet kept going... all was going according to plan, until they reached the edge of the June system, where they ran into the rearguard, 22 Insectoid heavy cruisers.

The command chamber on the Insectoid flagship was filled with holographic displays showing the movements of the Insectoid fleet across League and Directorate space. Hive Queen Zsst watched the screens with satisfaction, flexing her many arms and tendrils as she chattered softly to herself. She was so distracted that she almost didn't notice the hooded creature enter her chambers. Almost. It was impossible not to notice the curtain of fear that descended everywhere she went.

"All goes well," says Zsst. "The human fleet at Vitalics was completely wiped out."

"I know," said the hooded creature. "But what of Norman North's fleet, or the Directorate fleet?"

"Mere mopping up operations," said Zsst dismissively, waving one of her arms. "Their fleets are small and inconsequential."

"Then how did Norman North's 'small and inconsequential' fleet defeat the much larger one you sent against it?"

"What? How do you know this? I have yet to hear reports-"

"Norman North is alive, and his fleet is intact," said the hooded creature. A hint of green peeked out from under the hood. "And as you know from personal experience, while Norman North is alive, he is a threat. Dispatch three more fleets to find and intercept him."

"I will," said Zsst. "But we will have to try and project where he will go."

"I have already provided this information to the Admirals of your fleet. I launched them on their mission ten minutes ago."

"You gave orders to my fleet!" thundered Zsst.

"To be fair, they thought the orders came from you," said the creature, undisturbed.

"Watch your step, Baracki," said Zsst. "One day you may go too far."

Baracki stepped closer to Zsst, saying nothing. Zsst

became noticeably uncomfortable, and suddenly flinched as if struck, and pulled back.

"We shall see," said Baracki.

"Any word from June?" said North, pacing back and forth in the command area on the bridge.

"There's still jamming in place," said Commander Wren. "We're about halfway there; there's only about four more hours to go. Almost there."

"It's very fortuitous that we happened to be so near June in the first place," Captain Dulin remarked.

North made no response.

"Sir, picking up ships, on the scanner!"

"Battle stations!" said North. Then, over the klaxons, "Identify!"

".... 51 ships... They're Directorate ships, sir, all of them. Looks like they've been in a fight...."

"We should be able to punch through the interference locally. Get me Admiral Zarat."

The holographic field shimmered and a Directorate naval officer dressed in white appeared. "This is Captain Alada of the Directorate Flagship June Defender."

"Where is Admiral Zarat?"

"Admiral Zarat is dead, War Admiral," said Captain Alada. "I count only 34 ships on your end. Where is the rest of your fleet?"

"All destroyed." said North.

"All destroyed?" Alada looked stunned. "At Vitalics?"

"At Vitalics," North confirmed. "I commanded only a small portion of the fleet, and we took some losses when we were ambushed at Hunt's Moon. We came here to help as soon as we could."

"Appreciated, Admiral, but we're quite all right. We only lost four ships in the attack on June."

"How did you escape with such light losses?" said North, frowning.

"We didn't engage the first wave and immediately headed out system. It was only when we ran into the backup group that we took losses; that's when a missile struck the bridge and killed Admiral Zarat--"

"Didn't engage the first wave? Why not?"

"Admiral's orders. Or rather, orders he received from June."

"Really," said North. His frown only grew deeper. "What else were your orders?"

"I'm not sure. Admiral Zarat received them orally in private during a conversation with Director Kalin. All he told me was that we were to link up with you at Hunt's Moon. Beyond that, I don't know what his plans were."

"I see." North was silent for a moment, hands clasped tightly behind his back, as he paced back and forth a moment.

"War Admiral? We have to act," said Alada.

"What? Yes," said North, snapping out of it. "I suggest we travel to Orotis, where we can get resupplied--"

"Orotis is on the far end of the League."

"Precisely. It's probable that the Insectoids won't have gotten that far yet."

"We have imminent reports of an invasion of Jarja," said Alada. "Twenty two transports, with only ten escort ships. We could take them easily."

"What about the fleet following you?" North said.

"We have no indications we've been followed; they're probably just as happy that they've chased us away from June."

"Assuming you're correct, how do you know there's not a secondary escort fleet following a safe distance behind the Jarja attack force?"

"War Admiral, you're being too cautious--"

"I tend to get that way when 90% of my fleet gets destroyed. We are the only effective fighting force left in the Alliance."

"And what would you have us do with this fighting force? Run away?"

North drummed his fingers on his console. "We don't know the disposition and location of the enemy force. We don't know exactly how they destroyed the fleet at Vitalics. They may have some new weapon or kind of ship we have yet to see. I don't favor rushing in when we're the only attack force left."

"Well, I have a different interpretation."

"What about your orders?"

"I don't know what my orders were beyond this point, and transmissions in and out of June are being jammed." Alada's holoimage faced North directly. "We're going in. Are you coming with us?"

North shook his head.

"Then we'll just have to do it on our own. I hope you decide to take a stand somewhere, Admiral," said Alada. He made a motion, and his image faded.

"What are we going to do?" Captain Dulin asked. "Are we going to assist them?"

North stared off into space.

He shook his head, mostly to himself. "The fools," said North. "The poor, bloody fools."

The Insectoid fleet burst into the Jarja system unopposed. Jarja II was a medium sized colony world that didn't have any ground or orbital defenses. The other planets in the system were uninhabited. The Insectoid fleet had just reached Jarja IV when the Directorate fleet under Captain Alada caught up to it. The Insectoid escort ships immediately peeled off and engaged Alada's forces, but they were outnumbered.

The Directorate fleet blasted through the escorts, and in a few short minutes wiped them out. The fleet turned to chase the Insectoid transports, when all of a sudden, a massive Insectoid attack fleet pounced on them--twenty battleships, twelve battlecruisers, thirty four cruisers, and thirty destroyers.

Suddenly, the hunters became the hunted. A number of Directorate ships were instantly vaporized by the superior firepower.

"Evade, evade!" cried Alada into the intrafleet comlink. The fleet started to turn and desperately speed away, but the Insectoids were in hot pursuit. Alada's battlecruiser tried to turn about, but was hit by simultaneous multiple torpedo attacks, and was blown to bits.

On a nearby battlecruiser, an officer reported to the fleet's next ranking officer, Captain Bennett. "Captain Alada's ship has just been destroyed!"

Suddenly, a hologram appeared on Bennett's bridge, and the bridge of every other Directorate ship. "Attention, Directorate forces. Proceed immediately to these coordinates," said the very familiar figure in a light blue uniform with four stars and silver eagles on his collar, pointing to a set of figures on a holographic display.

It was War Admiral Norman North!

"Admiral!" said Bennett, shocked. "My name is War Captain Michael Bennett, I'm in command-"

"No time. Follow my instructions. It's your only chance," said North. He appeared to check an indicator on a console out of holoview. "If you want to live, you'd better hurry."

"Instruct all ships to hone in on those coordinates," said Bennett. "Scanners, do you pick up North's fleet?"

"Negative," said the scanner officer. Then, "Captain, these coordinates will have us going through the far side of the Jarja asteroid belt!"

Of course! North's fleet must be waiting in the belt to ambush the Insectoids. The Directorate fleet followed the main path through the asteroid belt set out by the coordinates provided by North. But when they reached the belt and were inside it, Bennett still couldn't pick up any sign of North's fleet hiding in the belt. Where were they?

On the other side of the Asteroid belt, the Command Carrier Glory and the rest of the League fleet was at rest, waiting.

"They've just safely past the second group, sir," Commander Wren reported.

"Very well," said North. "Activate the mines."

The Insectoid fleet sped across the narrow channel as mines exploded around them. Because the path through the asteroid field was so narrow, there was no way for them to avoid the explosions. After several ships in the lead were hit by explosions and destroyed, the Insectoid fleet skidded to a halt and tried to reverse course. Several of them couldn't stop in time, and rammed into each other.

"They're going to take the long way around, but it won't take them too long" said North, speaking holographically on Bennett's bridge. "Are all your ships capable of top speed?"

Bennett checked a damage report. "No. Four of them have drive damage."

"Scuttle them and take the crews aboard."

Bennett opened his mouth to protest.

"And quickly," said North. "That is, if you want to live. We'll be here for another 20 minutes to provide you with covering fire. Then we're leaving; any ships that want to come with us, can come; the rest stay behind," he said, bluntly. Once again, he was giving the orders.

Chapter 3: The Fall of August

"Our occupation forces have made landings on several League and Directorate worlds. So far, we have faced little resistance," said an aide.

"Excellent," said Queen Zsst, smacking her mandibles.

"Don't be so proud of yourself yet," said Baracki. "You haven't landed on June. You haven't landed on August. And

Grafton will be especially difficult to take."

"Once we get past their orbital defenses, June and August will be easy pickings," said Zsst dismissively, referring to the capitals of the Directorate and the Alliance respectively. "Their civilian population, by all reports, are weak and sheeplike."

"But they have military ground forces as well," said Baracki. "And what of Grafton?"

"I have dispatched my best insect troopers to take all three worlds. Not to worry, my friend," said Queen Zsst. "In a few hours our troops will land. And in a few hours after that we will begin to process every human pest on those planets."

August.

The capital of the League of United Worlds, and the united Alliance between the League and the June Directorate. It was a brilliant gem so perfect, so habitable, that it actually required little or no terraforming when it had been first settled, over 1000 years earlier. Unfortunately, once August became the capital of the League, the bureaucrats settled in, and began covering the western continent with layers upon layers of metasteel and plastics and synthetic materials and tunnels and buildings and travel strips. It wasn't until nearly half the western continent, including once pristine forests and rugged mountains, was covered with offices for bureaucrats and accompanying lobbyists and other parasites, that the League actually did a smart thing; they declared the eastern continent off-limits to development. And to this day the eastern continent is largely uninhabited, one of the largest national parks in the galaxy, visited by millions of tourists a year but rigorously kept undeveloped. Bureaucrats and politicians who felt trapped by the metal walls of the western continent became regular visitors to the natural valleys and mountain ranges of the eastern continent. Meanwhile, back on the western continent, development continued unchecked for centuries, and nearly three quarters of the continent was now encased in steel towers and tunnels. Only on the periphery of the western continent did farmland and less developed areas still exist.

The capital of August, and from which all power derived, was Sarney Sarittenden. Sarney Sarittenden was a collection of ornately designed towers and buildings, all made of an odd, glittering metal that defied precise description. Sometime one could look at the metal, and it would be a silver color; at other times, the metal would take on the colors of the rainbow. Although most of Sarney Sarittenden was enclosed, in the heart of the grand plaza was the outdoor throne plaza, where important ceremonies of state were held.

High above Sarney Sarittenden in orbit around August were a series of advanced battlestations, as well as a civilian transit station and a military shipyard.

The military shipyard was almost totally abandoned. Almost. All the external berths on the shipyard were empty. But that doesn't mean the shipyard was entirely empty. Captain Robert Hollister tapped the stationwide intercom in the now abandoned admiral's office. "Nautilus crew, report to the ship! Prepare for immediate launch!" He signed off and turned to the Admiral's computer screen, typing in a few keys....

A few minutes later Hollister entered the crowded bridge of the Nautilus. "We thought you weren't going to make it, sir," said the XO.

"I had to purge the memory banks of all information relating to the Nautilus. We can't let it fall into the hands of the Insectoids," said Hollister. "What's our status?" he asked, settling into his command chair.

"Navigation, shields, and ship systems operational."

"And the cloak?"

The cloak.

The Nautilus was an experimental ship, the League's very first ship that could travel cloaked, totally undetected by other ships. The Nautilus was modeled after the old water navy submarines, with a long, slender, oval shaped hull that had only a small projection at the top. It was a "dual torpedo" ship, meaning it could fire energy torpedoes from the single launcher at its forward tip, or a metal homing torpedo from its limited stored supply. As a prototype, the ship had a limited capacity and operating range; most of its cramped interior was taken up with machinery used to maintain the cloak.

In its first field test the cloak had operated for nearly twenty minutes without fading, after which it became visible. The technicians thought they had figured out what went wrong; now was the time to put it to the test.

"Open the external bay doors," Hollister commanded.

The external doors to the internal bay slowly opened.

The view of the outside was not encouraging. An entire Insectoid fleet was approaching.

"Is the cloak ready?" Hollister said.

"A few more minutes," said the XO.

The Insectoid fleet entered the range of the orbiting battlestations. They launched a wave of missiles and opened fire with lasers. The battlestations responded.

Hollister watched the battle quietly from his vantage point, powerless to intervene. So far the Insectoids were ignoring the spacedock, but that couldn't be expected to last very long.

"We're not even sure that it will work," said the XO.

"The latest repairs to the cloak haven't been tested."

The sounds of explosions around them grew louder as the nearby battlestations absorbed the punishment the battleships were lashing out at them. Several of the Insectoid battleships seemed to orient on them, their enormous turrets pointed, it seemed, directly at their ship.

"We'll find out very quickly if it works," said Hollister. The Insectoid battleships loomed closer, getting so close that Hollister could almost see inside the turrets of their gunports. "We need that cloak!"

"Ready!" cried the XO, checking a display. "But if this doesn't work..."

"Attention all hands," said Hollister. "Prepare to dive. Dive dive dive!" This nomenclature had been imposed by Hollister. Technically the cloak made the Nautilus disappear or "submerge" from the visible spectrum, and Hollister, with his historical romanticism of the ancient waterborne counterparts, had insisted on using this terminology for cloaking. Fortunately, the admiral hadn't found out.

"Diving!" said the XO. There was a hum and the lights subtly changed color.

"Are we cloaked?" Hollister asked.

"I think so," said the XO.

"You think so?"

"At least, that's what the instruments are saying," said the XO.

Hollister gulped. "Thrusters: all head."

The Nautilus slowly worked its way out of its internal bay. There, ahead of them less than a mile away, was the looming image of an Insectoid battleship. They were in direct line of its enormous turrets. They were so close that they could see the black insides of those deadly weapons. If they were going to attack, it would be over almost instantly...

The Nautilus exited the bay, slowly moving into space. As it flew directly in line of the Insectoid battleship Hollister was suddenly conscious of the fact that he was holding his breath. When cloaked the ship wasn't even shielded; all it would take would be one volley....

The ship passed the front line of Insectoid battleships. A ragged cheer went up from the crew of the sub.

"Rear view image," Hollister said. The image shifted to the orbiting stations behind them.

Most of them were in pieces or convulsed with explosions. The cheering immediately died down. The stations had fallen; August was defenseless.

"What... what do we do now?" the XO asked.

If they decloaked and joined the battle, they might get a shot or two off; but the Insectoids would quickly destroy them. The Nautilus had been designed for surveillance, and quick strikes at isolated targets; not general fleet engagements.

"I really don't know," said Hollister.

"Levi! Levi!"

Levi Esherkol, former chief technology specialist for the supersecret spy organization known as "The Agency", and now the owner of a concessionaire restaurant in Entry National Park on the eastern continent of August, hummed a simple tune to himself as he stirred some meat in a pan.

Levi had spent much of his adult life working for the Agency, designing miniaturized devices for use by its agents. He had branched out from electronics into computers, biology, chemistry, and other fields. Levi had no formal education; but he could just pick up a subject, and, if he were interested, learn it quickly. After a number of years of service, he retired to do the one thing he really wanted to do: run a restaurant. The Agency occasionally persuaded him to come out of retirement to do discrete jobs for them, when the need was vital; after one particular important assignment, the Agency, very much in his debt, gave him the one thing he always wanted: a concession to operate the only restaurant in Entry National Park. The rest of the continent, except for the guesting area on the western tip, was totally, totally undeveloped forests and mountains. Levi stabbed a sizzling piece of meat with a fork as if to sample it when his wife, Mindy, entered the basement where he had been working.

"Levi, it's happened, turn on the holonews," she said, turning on an ancient dusty device in the corner of the room.

"Eh?" said Levi, sampling a bit of the meat. An excellent cattle mutation, very flavorful, he realized. But

it needed a bit more pepper.

The holographic announcer appeared in their basement. "-even as we speak our orbital battlestations are under attack. General Markov has declared martial law and ordered all civilians to stay in their homes-"

"Levi, the Insects are coming, what are we going to do?"

Levi motioned for her to come over. "Keep stirring for about five minutes more under low flame"

"That's it! You want me to cook your food! Levi, what else can we do?"

"Add another pinch of pepper, about two minutes in." He said, reaching for his jacket.

Even as she grabbed the stirring fork she said, "Levi, where are you going?"

"I have to take quick trip to Western continent," said Levi, in his trademark old easteuro accent.

"Levi, it's too dangerous! What are you going for?"

"I need go shopping for some meat," explained Esherkol.

Clifford Croft was not having a good day. He was one of the top spies in the Agency (one of the Eight to have the highest Level-One designation), and he couldn't even get paid on time! He had just spent the morning arguing with the paymaster that no, in fact his account wasn't credited with his monthly payment. The paymaster insisted that his department had transferred the credit. Finally, when Croft gave him the access codes to look up his private account, and the paymaster saw that he hadn't been paid, what did he do? He said he'd "look into it!"

"Look into it!" Croft muttered, mostly to himself. He had saved the Alliance from destruction countless times; he had been the first agent to infiltrate the Happy Worlds and return to tell about it; he had prevented assassinations, toppled governments, and kept countless billions safe and secure; and they wouldn't even pay him his measly salary for it.

"How can this day get any worse?" Croft grumbled.

He was about to find out. There was a hooting alarm sound, and a speaker blared. "Condition 44! All agents, report to the nearest conference room immediately! On the double."

Condition 44? What was that? Probably someone's laundry caught fire in the saniray. Croft thumbed his datapad as he idly walked to the conference room down the hall. He ignored the other people rushing around him as he thumbed through his seldom-used Agency handbook database.

"Condition 42... listening devices on premises... Condition 43... intruder on agency ground... Condition 44...' Croft almost dropped the pad. "Invasion."

The particular conference room Croft entered was packed; on the video monitor the current Director, old Stanton himself, was already speaking. "-tracking has picked up a large Insectoid fleet on the outskirts of the August system. Nearly the entire fleet has been ambushed and destroyed at Vitalics-"

The murmuring in the room grew to a nervous buzz, making it difficult to hear Stanton.

"-August is about to be imminently invaded. We must assume that our headquarters here is either insecure or won't

be secure for much longer. We are purging our databases as we speak; you are all to go to ground and operate in small combat cells. Each cell will have one contact with an adjacent or higher cell. Although you may receive orders from above, you are to act semi-autonomously in small groups to harass the enemy, as well as gathering intelligence and commit acts of espionage and sabotage when you can."

Stanton took a deep breath. "It's not an easy thing to say that we're about to be conquered. In all our years of defending the Alliance August has never been conquered. That bastard pacifist President Marshall led us into this trap. If by chance he or that traitor Mitterand survived the rendezvous at Vitalics and they return to August, your to drop everything and code 9 them on sight." Code 9--that was one code Croft was quite familiar with.

"I wish you luck. I won't say this occupation will be easy, but many of you have been in more difficult situations before. Make them pay for this occupation. Each time you blow up one of their installations or kill one of those insects brings us one day closer to the time they'll decide it's too costly to occupy us and decide to pack up and leave. Remember they can only win if we let them."

"Your cell partners are listed on the boards, which will be wiped in 30 minutes. Good luck." His image faded.

Stunned would be an understatement. "How are we to survive?" "I'm an analyst, not a secret agent!" "They'll pick us off one by one." "We're spies, not a fighting force."

A blaster shot rang out. The babble of voices quieted. Croft lowered his smoking blaster as plaster dropped from the ceiling. "That's better," said Croft, now that the crowd was paying attention to him.

"Now, before you start writing your epitaphs, remember it's not over yet. Granted, things don't look good. But we haven't heard from War Admiral North's fleet. If anyone was following the military ops report, they'd know that they weren't at Vitalics. And we haven't heard from the Directorate fleet. They weren't at Vitalics either. If they've survived, it's not over."

"And what if they were destroyed as well?" said a voice from the back of the room.

"Then we fight to regain our freedom ourselves. That's what we've been doing all our lives, haven't we?" said Croft. "The only difference is that we've been carrying the fight to the enemy on other worlds. Now they're carrying the fight to us. If we show courage, resolve, and less stupidity than they do, we can get through this. Now go to the supply rooms and strip them of every last bit of field gear. Don't even think of using any established frequency, any network, any safehouse after today; the Insectoids may already have spies here who know about them. The only communication will be through the cell network. Stanton's a dumb political appointee who doesn't know a comlink from a comtag, but he was right about one thing: they can only win if we let them. Good luck," he said, hefting his blaster as he left the room, and trying to be braver than he sounded.

With the orbiting battlestations nothing more exploding pieces scattered across the skyscape, the Insectoid battle transports moved in, flanked by their powerful battleships and other capital ships.

Because every square inch of the central part of the western continent was studded with buildings and infrastructure, there were relatively few places that the Insectoids could safely land.

Therefore, it was not entirely unexpected when the first wave touched down on the tarmac at Sarney Sarittenden Spaceport ("Triple S" to the locals). The huge landing craft opened up their bellies to disgorge their large troop transports and landing vehicles while Insectoid fighters flying overhead provided cover. Individual columns of Insectoid troopers emerged, giant seven feet tall creatures brandishing wicked looking laser rifles.

Command General Tenor Markov, commander of League forces on Sarney, and, by extension, on August, stared out at the landing craft through electrobinoculars from his vantage point inside one of the spaceport's lounges. There weren't many ground troops stationed on August--after all, in the heart of the League, with its mighty fleet and orbiting battlestations to protect it, invasion was never thought of as a realistic possibility.

But the impossible had suddenly become reality, and Markov had used the time afforded him by War Admiral North's warning to best advantage.

"Ground troops, attack.... now!" he said, speaking into his comlink.

Troops sprang out of hiding and opened fire, cutting down some of the Insectoid troopers. Their laser fire merely bounced off the troop transports, and the Insectoids on foot took cover behind them as they slowly rolled forward.

"Gravitators, move in!" Markov had only a single platoon of gravitator troops under his command, soldiers with anti-grav packs who could bounce in and over the scene. 45 troops zoomed into battle from the air, picking off Insectoid troopers hiding behind the ground transports.

"Battle tanks, engage!"

The snouts of concealed battle tanks emerged from hangers all around the field. One of them let go with a burst of laser fire that turned an Insectoid troop transport into scrap metal.

High in orbit Admiral Bzt watched the landings on the holoscope.

"We have strong resistance at the Sarney Sarittenden field and the two military fields here and here," said an aide, indicating a point on the holograph.

"Resistance? These humans were supposed to be as passive as sheep!" Bzt spat. "Order our fighters to engage the ground forces. And unleash the beasts."

The circling fighters started to make dive attacks, scoring direct hits on the hangers the battletanks were hidden in. The battletanks weren't in direct line of sight of the fighters, but the hangers were easy targets. The Insectoids destroyed one hanger with a series of cluster bombs; several others were lasered and exploded under the combined attacks, forcing the surviving battletanks out into the open, where they were easier targets.

General Markov had several anti aircraft units set up, and they downed several Insectoid fighters, until the Insectoids focused their fire on them, knocking them out.

Markov gritted his teeth as he saw battletank after battletank knocked out; without air support, the situation was grim.

But at least the troops were dug in; the fighters tried to make strafing runs, but the troops were too well dispersed in deep, protected trenches around the spaceport.

But then another Insectoid transport landed, and when its doors opened, a series of nightmares from a zoo emerged. Giant insects--bees, wasps, mosquitos, and others Markov couldn't identify, each one as large as a ground car. They were all on leashes held by their Insectoid masters. In the distance Markov heard them bark a command, then the Insectoids dropped their leashes; he heard another barked command, and the giant insects flew forward.

The troops saw them coming, but they came so rapidly, there wasn't much they could do about it. Several of the bees and wasps were shot down, in flight, dripping green fluid as they hit the ground; but many more reached the trenches where the troopers were, and the next thing Markov heard were the screams of his men over the radio.

"Aaaaah!" one screamed as a giant stinger was implanted his chest, killing him. Another tried to resist a giant mosquito with his hands, but was pinned down as the monster stuck a giant tube in his neck and rapidly drained his blood. A giant warrior ant snapped the neck of another trooper.

Markov saw his troops couldn't last long going hand to hand. "Recall! This is the recall order. Retreat, full retreat! Gravitator platoon, cover the troops in the trenches!"

A few of the gravitator troop, who had taken the fewest casualties, swooped down from above and raked the giant insects with blaster fire, buying the surviving ground troops time to disengage. Some of the giant insects took flight to chase the gravitator troops, forcing a number of them to pull back.

The image of the fleeing troops could be clearly seen on the Insectoid holoscope. "The landing area has been secured," said the aide.

"Excellent," said Admiral Bzt. "Commence the landing of the assimilators. Begin the processing of the human animals immediately."

Large, oval shaped vehicles rumbled down the streets and causeways of August, flanked by Insectoid troopers. Screaming civilians ran in opposite directions, but were met on other streets by more of the oval shaped vehicles. The shadows of Insectoid fighters and attack ships buzzed overhead.

Sandra Layata, an unemployed pleasure seeker, like most of the population of August, screamed as she saw an Insectoid vehicle approaching. She tried to duck down a sidestreet, only to be stopped by a large, looming shadow above her. She heard a loud, buzzing sound and saw giant flapping wings supporting a yellow and gold body. Giant multiplexed eyes stared down at her as the monster descended.

Running back out of the alley, Sandra ran right into the laser rifles of the Insectoid troopers.

"This way, this way," they said through their

translation devices. In reality they were making "buzz buzz" sounds, but the glowing device around their necks spoke in a dull female tone.

Layata and a line of frightened civilians were herded up a ramp into the belly of one of the oval shaped vehicles. Then the processing began.

They were herded into narrow corridors on the vehicle. The humans were warned to close their eyes just seconds before a spray of an unidentified liquid that smelled like pungent lemon came out from walls on their left and right. When the spray stopped Layata opened her eyes to see how drenched her clothes had gotten and was surprised to find her clothes in pieces. A water hose sprayed down on her from the ceiling and the remaining bits of her clothes fell into a vent or drain on the floor.

Then the examination began. She was grabbed by the throat and strapped to a semi-horizontal table while she was poked and prodded with alien instruments. Something stabbed her arm and she felt blood being withdrawn. She tried to scream but a living hose snaked into her mouth and she felt something slimy feeling around her throat. She felt small, snakey things entering other parts of her body and tried to scream again, but it was cut off before it began, as the hose in her mouth stiffened. Even her eyes weren't left alone as a small screen descended to her bound head, showing different twinkling images. A monitor watched her eye movements as the images on the screen moved around. A sensor attached to her head monitored brainwaves while pictures of familiar objects--ground cars, buildings, ships, shoes--flashed across the screen.

Then all the hoses withdrew and the screen cleared away from Layata's face, and the living machines around her clicked as they evaluated her. She had this opportunity to turn her head left and right to see two other people bound to tables just like she was. The one on her left was an old man, and the one on her right was a young, strapping youth, both as nude as she was. Layata didn't have time to feel modest about her nudity because she was still in shock.

Suddenly she heard a voice from the table on her right. "Designation: harvester labor." A device came out of a wall and sealed a green collar around the young man's throat. He screamed in pain as it was sealed. But Layata's attention was distracted by the man on the table to her right.

"Designation: Useless. Recycle." The arms descended from the ceiling, and swish! swish! Swish! the old man was instantly dismembered, the table tilted so his parts rolled into a bin.

Layata screamed, so she almost didn't hear the voice when it spoke from her table. "Designation: Genetic experimentation."

A collar was wrapped around her neck; it burned as it was sealed, but Layata was already screaming at that point.

When the processed humans emerged from the other end of the vehicle they were clad in tight green leafy clothing. Most bore the green collars of agricultural workers or the blue collars of factory workers. Sandra Layata, however, was wearing a purple collar, and was hustled off the vehicle by two Insectoid guards, who took her to a waiting shuttle.

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North,
Commander, Combined Alliance Fleet:

We're nearly four days out of Jarja and the shock still hasn't worn off. We had a combined fleet service yesterday, for everyone lost at Vitalics, for the League sailors who died at Hunt's moon, and for the Directorate sailors who were lost at June and Jarja. But it hasn't quite sunk in emotionally that all our friends who we've served with for years are gone. We know it, intellectually, but since we didn't see most of them die at Vitalics, I think everyone is holding out hope that somehow, some of them survived. To think that men I served with for decades, even centuries, are just gone, dead, is too difficult to deal with.

The bridge goes silent whenever we receive a transmission. We keep hoping we'll hear from other surviving warships. But of course we never do; even if one or two warships did survive, they would be much wiser to maintain radio silence; that would prolong, at least for a time, their survival in now-occupied League and Directorate space.

We are getting transmissions, but they are disturbing ones. We're getting images of planets being conquered, of giant ships setting down in our cities, chasing civilians down, herding others to whatever the Insectoids have in store for them.

At that point the transmission from a planet under attack is usually shut down as the Insectoids take control of the transmission facilities. But then the Insectoids start transmitting again, and they show disturbing pictures.

Humans in collars, whipped and beaten by the Insectoids, forced to provide slave labor. One particular scene burned into my memory.

A young woman, digging with a metal instrument in the ground. Something she did upset the Insectoid overseer. Maybe she wasn't working fast enough. Or maybe she was doing nothing wrong at all.

The Insectoid stood over her, its arms twitching, and it gargled for a second, as if bringing up something through its throat. Then it vomited, spitting a pink liquid onto the woman. She shrieked, fell to the ground, and started to tremble with fear. Obviously, the liquid was having some kind of effect on her neurological system. A man, seeing what was done to her, rushed up to the Insectoid, yelling, "What are you doing to her?"

The Insectoid just cackled, and lifted the man in its many arms, and then the arms moved swiftly, and the man was decapitated--his arms, legs, and head.

Hardened bridge officers wept when they saw this broadcast; and from then on I ordered the comm officer to screen what was being relayed over the general comm.

Why are they broadcasting such atrocities? Don't they realize that they will just make us fight harder? Perhaps they intend for it to be demoralizing. Which brings us to another problem.

Many of us, in fact nearly all of us still have relatives on our home worlds. Thank goodness we haven't seen any of them in these broadcasts. But we know that they have almost certainly been drafted into forced labor, or worse. What of our families? Will we ever hear from them again? Are

they still alive? And do they even know that we are still alive? Probably not.

It was with these black thoughts that I listened to Commander Wren give our status report. Seventeen Directorate ships were lost in a matter of minutes at Jarja. That means 34 of their ships, and 35 of ours. 69 ships left to face the massive onslaught of the Insectoid fleet.

We have enough fuel, ammunition, and supplies to reach Orotis, our outermost shipyard on the far edge of League space. I expect that the Insectoids may anticipate our move and send forces to meet us there; but I'm gambling we can get there first and resupply as best we can.

What we can do from there is unclear. One option is to start hit and run raids, splitting into small groups of ships and launching guerrilla warfare attacks against the Insectoids. But guerrilla warfare only works when you have a lot of guerrillas, and a lot of places to hide. There are only so many habitable worlds in the Alliance, and we only have 69 ships. It's my feeling that sooner or later massive Insectoid fleets would hunt us down and destroy us. We might do some damage in the short run, but eventually they would destroy us.

If hit and run isn't an option, then what is? I'm a soldier, trained in conventional naval combat. I was trained to fight fleets against fleets. But a fleet of 69 ships can't defeat a fleet of hundreds of Insectoid ships... unless we have an advantage. That's part of the reason we're heading for Orotis; that may be the first step in finding ourselves an advantage we can use against the Insectoids.

Just a little under three more weeks to Orotis.

"Admiral Bzt reports the landings on August are proceeding apace," said Queen Zsst. "And we have reports of only scattered resistance to our landings on other planets. We are beginning to set up reproduction farms and hive factories on all of them."

"You are on schedule," said Baracki approvingly from under his hood. "But what about Grafton?"

"Our assault on Grafton II is to start within the hour," said Zsst. "I have assigned our very best battle troops there. I know how important that planet is, and how difficult the resistance will be."

But if the Queen really knew how difficult the resistance would be on Grafton II, she would have at least quadrupled the size of her invasion force, and even that would've been no guarantee of success.

Grafton II occupied no strategic location in space; it had no important military bases; it had no vital minerals; it wasn't even a formal member of the Directorate or the League. What it did have was very, very good gunfighters.

After hundreds of years scientists still hadn't quite analyzed what it was, but SOMETHING on Grafton speeded up the reflexes, making its inhabitants extraordinarily quick. This made manual tasks and skills requiring dexterity much easier to accomplish; foremost among those, however, was gunfighting.

Grafton produced the most sought after soldiers,

bodyguards, and killers in the galaxy. They simply could operate much more quickly than anyone else.

For hundreds of years scientists tried to determine just what it was that speeded up the reflexes. It seems that anyone who spent a few years on Grafton gained increased dexterity. But once a Graftonite left the planet, his reflexes started to dull; if he had only been on Grafton for a few years, he would lose his abilities in months; if he had been there for decades, he would lose his abilities gradually over several years.

That's why Graftonites were so reluctant to leave home and when they did so it was for short periods, when they were highly compensated for it. Scientists tried to figure out what speeded up their resources--they tried eating large amounts of Grafton food off-planet, but that didn't work; they tried drinking large amounts of Grafton rainwater, but that didn't work; they tried breathing large amounts of Grafton air, but that didn't work. If it was something in the food, or the water, or the air, somehow taking it off-planet nullified its effects.

The effects of Grafton on its population didn't go unnoticed to the Insectoids. They were confident that in time they could isolate whatever was speeding up reflexes and instill this ability into all their Insectoid troopers; but for now they wanted to conquer the planet and set up breeding farms so at least new generations of Insectoid troopers bred locally would have this ability.

That meant that Grafton had to be conquered, not destroyed. Without a space force of its own it would be easy enough to bombard the planet from orbit, but because the population was dispersed (besides the capital and two other smaller cities, most of the population was spread out over the countryside), this would have to be done the hard way, by ground assault.

That's why Queen Zsst had allocated 4 brigades of her most fearsome Insectoid troopers, complete with two companies of giant insect beasts, to take the major population areas. Zsst expected some resistance at first, but once they had driven the humans out of the major population areas, she suspected the humans would be content to be left alone in the countryside. For now, Zsst didn't need the whole planet; hunting every human down over the sparsely populated surface area of the planet would be impractical; for now all she needed was just a large enough area for the breeding farms. Later, when they had enough of the new enhanced warriors, they could be sent on training missions to hunt and destroy the remaining humans.

Zsst gave the orders for the landings to begin....

"For the last time, I'm not interested," said the man in blue in a dull tone.

He had a name, once; actually, he had several names. But the one that stuck with him over time was related to his profession.

He was one of the best gunfighters, even on Grafton II. And his name was the Silencer.

"But the Insectoids are attacking the League!" said his chief of staff.

"Are they attacking this house?"

"Not yet..."

"Are they on the grounds?"

"Well, no..."

"Has anyone offered to pay me to fight the buggers?"

"No..."

"Then let'm eat cake."

After several hundred years of fighting, and killing, the Silencer was weary of it all. He turned his chair around to face the window. They had just finished decorating the house, and Annie had finally gotten the landscaping done exactly the way she liked it--with short, green bushes, alternating line by line with exotic, multi-colored flowers.

"But they're attacking Grafton!"

"As long as they don't enter my estate, they're welcome to the rest of the planet," said the Silencer generously.

"But how will your wife get thru the blockade--"

"Annie's not back for three days. I expect things will be sorted out by then, one way or another," said the Silencer. If he had to, he'd go up in his ship and meet her transport himself.

Annie was his wife. For several hundred years he thought he'd never find a woman who'd make him feel anything other than the utter calmness he always carried with him. But then he met Annie, Annie Oakley. Not the name she was born with, of course, any more than his was the Silencer. But that's who she was now, one of the fastest female gunfighters in the Alliance.

"Sir!" said a servant. "I'm getting a faint transmission from your wife over the central comm unit. Please hurry!"

The Silencer suddenly came alive, leaping over his desk and pressing the enable button on the comm unit.

"John?" came her voice in a very staticy picture.

"We're under attack. I don't know how long we have--"

"Annie!" The Silencer yelled, raising his voice.

The transmission broke up.

"Annie!" The Silencer screamed again, smashing his hand against the wall near the console, creating a fist sized dent.

His chief of staff bent down to pick up some plaster from the rug. When he stood up he started to say, "Sir, will you be needing your ship-", but he was speaking to empty air.

The Silencer didn't think anything of the naval blockade the Insectoids had established around Grafton--a bunch of capital ships and four squadrons of fighters. He didn't even bother to fire back when his fighter came under attack. But he was a Graftonite, and he adjusted his course and speed almost before the laser bolts hit; and not one of them came within 200 feet of his tiny, darting ship.

Within moments he had passed the command ship on the perimeter and was gone.

Two and a half days of steady flying got him to the point where he calculated the convoy, four cargo ships and the passenger transport, were flying. He had no trouble finding the coordinates.

But when he got there all he saw was a field of debris.

Admiral Tstss stood on the bridge of her command ship. "Opposition?" she inquired.

"No ships, no orbiting stations. Only one fighter

eluded our blockade."

That sounded like a fine record of interdiction. "How many tried to breach the blockade?"

"...only one, sir."

Admiral Tstss's alien features looked surprised. Normally, the human animals tried to flee when they could. Perhaps the Graftonites had no ships to evacuate with.

"Very well. Land the first brigade."

Troop transports peeled off from the Insectoid fleet and orbit and slowly entered Grafton's atmosphere, escorted by a ring of Insectoid fighters.

What they didn't count on was the Graftonite middle guard.

Most planets that had defenses usually had orbiting battlestations, orbital fighters, ground to orbit artillery, or a combination of the three. The Graftonites, knowing that on their own with their limited resources they could never build defenses strong enough to prevent their planet from being attacked, didn't bother with any of these.

Instead, what they did was build cheap, atmospheric fighters by the hundreds. Since these fighters didn't have to be spaceworthy, they were much more inexpensive to construct than conventional fighters. But in armament and maneuverability they were just as impressive as regular spacefaring fighters--in fact, more so, since their pilots were all Graftonites, with superior reflexes.

The first attack force lost three ships before they realized what hit them. Two hundred fighters lifted off from the surface in unison and swamped the descending transports and Insectoid fighters. The Insectoid escorts tried to fire back, but they were quickly destroyed.

"What? Totally destroyed! How?" Admiral Tstss demanded to know.

"Fighters, from the surface."

"Target the airfields they launched from!"

There was a moment while the scanners were in play. "Sir, as far as we can tell, there were no fields they were launched from. These are vertical lift fighters that are scattered all over the countryside. They could lift from anywhere--a field, a barn, a road--anywhere. And when they're grounded they probably keep them under camouflage!"

Admiral Tstss twitched. "Signal the entire fleet. We're going in again."

"Admiral, we only have two squadrons of fighters left to defend the remaining transports. Are you sure?"

"All capital ships are going in-atmosphere to cover the remaining transports on the way down," Tstss ordered. "What can 100 of those little fighters do to us?"

All 27 ships in Admiral Tstss's task force started to descend into the planet's atmosphere. There were ten heavy transports filled with several brigades of troops, and 17 capital ships, ranging from three destroyers to two battleships, one of the Tstss's flagship.

The ships slowly entered the atmosphere. As they entered the middle layers, the sensor being called out, "Attackers, on their way!"

"How many?"

There was a pause. "1000... 1,500... 1,800... over 2,000!"

"Activate anti-fighter lasers!" Tstss ordered.

The Graftonite fighters swarmed over the descending fleet.

The battleships and heavy cruisers tried to use their bulk to defend the transports, but the fighters darted through the smallest spaces between ships to hit the troop transports, using not just lasers but missiles and heavy rockets. Tstss's laser batteries scored several hits, but most of the fighters were too fast and too elusive to be hit by capital ship laser fire.

One by one the transports were hit and caught fire. Damage to the capital ships was minimal; Tstss's battleship was too heavily armored and shielded to be damaged by laser fire, or even small missile impacts; but some of the smaller ships didn't fare as well--one of the frigates blew up, scattering pieces that hit the other ship. A destroyer lost its drive and went crashing into the planet.

When they had gotten halfway to the surface Tstss realized it was hopeless. They had already lost seven transports and there was no way the remaining three would survive.

"Retreat to orbit!" she ordered.

The remaining three transports were destroyed long before they reached orbit, and then the fighters turned on Tstss's battleship, scoring hits and minor breaches. By the time they reached orbit all the smaller ships--destroyers, frigates, and troop transports--were gone. 25,000 fighting beings had been destroyed, and the enemy had taken almost no casualties.

"Inform the fleet of our situation and signal for reinforcements," said Tstss. At a minimum, of course, he would be relieved of command; probably her wings would be plucked and her would be beheaded in disgrace as well. Tstss sat back limply in her command chair to await her fate.

Admiral Tstss's fate was decided a lot more quickly than she thought. She had expected reinforcements, and her replacement, to arrive in a week; but it was only a little over two days before her command ended.

"Human fighter approaching, from outside our perimeter." What did it matter? Tstss's command was over. Let the fighter go where it wanted. Tstss didn't have any fighters left to intercept it anyway.

"Admiral?"

"Let it go," she said wearily.

"But Admiral, it's headed straight for us!"

"What?" Tstss sat up in her chair for the first time in two days. The fighter was indeed heading straight for her command ship. Was it attempting a suicide run? A fighter that small?

"Activate laser guns," said Tstss.

Shots from the lasers never came near the bobbing and weaving ship, even as it got closer to his command ship. It looked like it was about to ram, and then... it disappeared off the screens altogether.

"Where did it go?" Tstss asked. Even if a ship that small had rammed them, they should have felt something.

"Sir... It's in our landing bay!"

What? "It crashed in the landing bay?" Was it a suicide attacker? If so, why hadn't they felt the impact?

"Sir, it landed in the landing bay!"

They were being boarded? By a one-man ship? "Security to the landing bay!"

Tstss waited impatiently while several minutes went by.

"Well?"

"Security isn't reporting in from the landing bay," said her aide. "In fact, I can't get anybody to report from the landing bay."

"Get me a vid of the landing bay."

Tstss stared at the image of the single seat fighters. The cockpit was open, and the fighter was empty. What about his security beings? He panned down, and saw the bodies. More than 10 of them.

"Security alert! We have intruders aboard!" said Tstss. "How many humans can that ship hold?"

"I think... only one, sir." Then, "Sir, we have reports of gunfire in Section 4!"

"Send more security!"

"Now we're getting reports of gunfire on Section 3!"

Tstss turned on that section's monitor. He saw one man in blue, calmly blasting away. His troopers fired at the man, but he always seemed to dodge out of the way. His shots, by contrast, never missed. Who was this man? What did he want? Then Tstss realized where he was going. To the bridge. Here.

Tstss turned to the two burly bridge guards. "Burn anything that comes through that door!" The guards turned their rifles on the doors.

They didn't have to wait long. The door opened, a blaster hand darted in, the doorway was raked with fire, and just as suddenly the blaster hand was gone.

Then, in a move almost too quick to see, someone rolled into the room as quick as a flash. The figure flashed its gun once, twice, and both guards fell; then the gun flashed several more times, and everything in the room was still.

Tstss looked around. Everyone in the room was dead now except her, and the intruder in blue.

"You the guy in charge?" the man asked casually.

"Who are you?" Tstss asked, the translator around his neck interpreting for her.

"You the bug in charge?" the man asked.

"I am Admiral Tstss," Tstss said. No reason not to admit it anymore.

"Who is your immediate superior, and where can I find him?"

Tstss remained silent.

The Silencer burned a hole through one of Tstss's walking legs. She hollered in pain.

"Who is your immediate superior, and where can I find it?"

Admiral Tstss's leg started to leak green fluid. She started to feel faint, but, fearing even more pain, she said, "Admiral Bzt..."

"Where can I find her?"

"August..." Tstss looked up at the Silencer. "Why are you doing this...?"

"You killed my wife," said the Silencer. And in the second it took for him to raise his laser and pull the trigger, Tstss wondered, since her force had inflicted virtually no casualties on Grafton, what this human was talking about....

Chapter 5: An Interrupted Lunch on August

Despite the enormity of the League's defeat at Vitalics, a

very small number of ships had managed to escape, and of those few, one or two actually managed to make their way back into the heart of League space (which quickly was becoming occupied territory). One of those few was the battlecruiser Argon, under the command of Captain Hu. For several days they had been evading Insectoid patrols, making their way deeper and deeper into League space. But wherever they went it seemed that the Insectoids weren't far behind.

Hu was looking for an even match, where his ship could take on one or perhaps two smaller Insectoid ships. But most of the Insectoid ships they had encountered on extreme scanner range were large groups that the Argon would have no chance against. But then, after a few days of abortive engagements, a single blip showed up on the scanners; it seemed the Argon was finally going to get its chance.

"Contact!" said the scanner officer. "One ship, small contact, destroyer sized."

"Close for battle, maximum speed!" At this point Hu, throwing caution to the wind, almost didn't care if it were a trap. They had been running for several days now and the weight of their disgrace at Vitalics hung heavy on his shoulders.

"Scanning...." Then, almost incredulously. "It's one of ours, sir. A fast attack destroyer!"

"Hail them!"

In seconds a friendly face appeared on the screen.

"Captain Presta, of the Swordflash," said their captain. It turned out that the Swordflash had been one of the handful of ships assigned to barrier patrol along the rim of League space. When they had heard the news of what happened at Vitalics they rushed back to August to find it already occupied by a large Insectoid fleet. The Swordflash had barely escaped unscathed. Now they were roaming around, looking for smaller opportunities for attack much like the Argon was.

"We're happy to see a friendly face," said Presta. "We didn't know anyone survived Vitalics. Were there any other ships...?"

Hu shook his head. "A few managed to escape, but most were hunted down. I think we should use this opportunity to join forces," he said, quickly changing the subject.

Hu agreed, and they quickly conferenced to settle on their first target.

While they were planning on their first target, the subship Nautilus was making its first strike.

"Steady... steady..." said Captain Hollister. "Range?"

"Five miles, and closing," said navigation.

The Nautilus was closing on two Insectoid transport ships escorted by a destroyer. The Nautilus was bearing down on the destroyer first, since it would be the main threat.

"Two miles, and closing."

"Cut velocity by 50%."

"One mile, and closing... One half mile... one quarter mile..."

"Prepare to surface... now!"

"Surface, surface!" cried the XO, as a klaxon sounded. An outside observer would've seen a shimmering effect as the ship slowly surfaced into the visible spectrum, a few hundred feet behind the destroyer.

Alarms yammered on the Insectoid ship as the Nautilus was picked up on their scanners. Insectoids scrambled to their battle stations-

"Fire!"

Two energy torpedoes hit the destroyer amid ships at point blank range. The Insectoids hadn't even had the chance to raise their shields. The well placed shots detonated the ship's energy core, and in seconds the ship exploded into a fireball.

"Emergency power! Hard astern!" cried Hollister, gripping a railing as the ship desperately turned about to avoid the miniature supernova in front of them. The screens flared bright, white light for a moment, and there was a shudder as the shockwave hit, and then all was quiet.

"Damage report!"

"... small hull rupture on deck 2, must be a piece of debris," said the XO. "The cloak is temporarily offline. Now that the warship was destroyed, that wasn't so crucial. Probably some of the exterior lining used by the cloak had been damaged. Well, that could be replaced. Hollister, blinking away the rapidly diminishing white circles in front of his eyes from the explosion, stared at the two unarmed merchant ships slowly trying to get away. The rest would be a mopping up operation.

The corporal eyed the target in the rangefinder. It was an administrative building on the edge of the August spaceport. The Insectoids had converted it into a barracks for one of their warrior platoons. The corporal, lying on his belly in a now deserted building across the street, grumbled, "I don't get it."

The sergeant, lying next to him, said, "Don't ask me."

"We're invaded and there are swarms of these things coming down all over the place," said the corporal. "And what does the general tell us to do. Attack an arsenal? Commit acts of sabotage? Ambush a convoy?"

"No," the corporal continued. "We're to attack a barracks unit. Around lunchtime. Their lunchtime. We're to get the body of an Insectoid who's just started to eat lunch. And we're also to capture the rest of his uneaten lunch. I mean, what sort of crazyness is that? No wonder we got invaded."

"If you think that's crazy, what did you think of that weird looking guy standing next to the General during the briefing?" said the Sergeant.

"You mean, the guy wearing the hood, mask, and long cape? Very inconspicuous," said the corporal. "Must be some sort of higher-up in the resistance who needs to keep his identity a secret."

"Either that, or a nut," opined the Sergeant. He saw a flash to his right. "That's the signal. Let's do it."

General Markov's troops assaulted the edge of the spaceport from three sides. Most of the Insectoid troops had dispersed throughout the city, leaving only a company on defensive duty. And half of those were eating lunch now.

Two of Markov's companies pinned down the defenders while the third moving, penetrating the barracks and shooting their way in. The corporal reached the entrance to the barracks and ducked his head through the door. A split second after he pulled his head back, a barrage of laser fire blasted where

his head had been.

"Lunchtime, eh?" said the corporal. "I hope they like their eggs scrambled," he added, as he tossed a grenade in and hit the ground.

After the resulting explosion, and a moment of silence, the corporal and his squad darted into the barracks, one by one. Insect bodies oozing green blood could be found everywhere. "Let's take that one, it's bound to be lighter," said the corporal, pointing to an Insectoid corpse on the ground that was missing its lower half.

"They want an intact corpse, one that was clearly eating," said the sergeant. He pointed to another that lay sprawled over its food. "Take that one, lads!"

It took four of them just to carry it out of the barracks. The Insectoids were really heavy. As his men carried the body out, the sergeant scooped up the contents of a meal tray and put it in a plastic bag he had brought with him. Then he followed his men out, all the while ducking the fierce laser crossfire.

A few minutes later the attackers faded away. The Insectoid officer was a little surprised that they hadn't tried to penetrate more deeply into the spaceport--none of their ships or cargos were harmed. It concluded, incorrectly, that the attack had been repulsed successfully.

They were met at the rendezvous point by a strange looking fellow whose features were hidden by a mask, a cape, and a hood. He supervised the body being loaded onto a gravlifter and took the lunch bag from the sergeant. "Good, is very good," he said. Then, before he left, he handed a bag to the sergeant. "For your men." And then he was gone.

The sergeant slowly opened up the bag, not knowing what to expect. Inside the irresistible aroma of soft, crispy rolls struck him like a brick. The taste, if possible, was even more delicious; each soldier got half a roll, wishing for more; when the lieutenant heard about it, he pulled rank to get some too.

As they were eating, they noticed a shuttle taking off from an adjacent building. It hugged the building tops as it sped off, trying to stay below enemy sensors. "I don't know who that guy was," said the sergeant. "But he sure was one good cook!"

The Insectoids roamed the cities in brigades, and as they covered more ground the brigades broke up into battalions, the battalions into companies, the companies into platoons, and finally the platoons into squads.

One element of one such squad happened to wander into the quarters of one of August's few extraterrestrials, Professor Capybara.

He wasn't a professor, and he wasn't a capybara, but that's what everyone called him, partially because he looked almost exactly like a capybara--beige, strawlike fur, four legs with webbed toes, and the flat, wide snout of a real capybara--and partially because he wore what looked like spectacles (but weren't) on the end of his snout.

Whatever the reality of it, he didn't mind being called that, and no one really seemed to know what his or his race's

real name was, so everyone called him Professor Capybara. He was one of the very first non-humanoid lifeforms encountered in the galaxy, and, fortunately, he had turned out to be a friendly one. Vague on his origins and the location of his race, it was unclear if he was one of a kind, or part of a race of billions.

But to most high officials he granted an audience to, he was simply Professor Capybara, speaking in a low, reassuring voice, making little "tweatle tweatle" sounds as he talked.

An Insectoid trooper entered the passageway into Professor Capybara's study, where the good Professor was curled up with a good data pad on his couch. A small pile of peanuts lay by him. As the Insectoid watched the Professor absentmindedly put one in his mouth, making loud munch-much sounds as his jaws moved horizontally.

The Insectoid paused for a moment, as if trying to digest what it saw there. Then it made a loud buzzing noise, the equivalent of, "Hey, come here!" to its mates.

Two other Insectoid troopers, rifles on guard, quickly joined in. The Professor, as if not hearing, didn't even bother to look up, but continued chewing. He liked peanuts that had been exposed to open air for a number of days; they were softer, chewier, tastier too.

"You!" barked the first Insectoid, speaking through its translator now.

Professor Capybara looked up, looking mild-mannered through his spectacles that weren't really spectacles.

"What are one of you doing here?" said the Insectoid, as if a capybara wearing spectacles was the last thing it expected to find in a living room on August.

"Reading [tweatle]," said the Professor.

The Insectoids their rifles. "I will get a great reward for your capture," said the first Insectoid. Reward indeed! It might even get an award from the governor-general herself, or, perhaps, even permission to breed.

Professor Capybara sighed, putting down his datapad, as the troopers approached.

A series of inhuman screams could be heard coming from the room. Then, just as suddenly, they cut off. The rest of the Insectoid squad, patrolling nearby, rushed into the study.

Three Insectoid bodies were splattered against the walls of the study, crushed so severely that gallons of green blood oozed out from them, dripping on the finely tailored carpet.

Of the Capybara, there was no sign.

Chapter 6: The Log of the Subship Nautilus

Captain's Log, 57 days after I-Day

LWS Nautilus

Captain Robert Hollister, Commanding.

We've been on our own for nearly two months now. After hulling those two Insectoid cargo vessels, we EVA'ed a team to look over the damage we took from the explosion of the Insectoid warship. We repaired the sensor webbing over the hull and quickly made repairs. The cloaked seemed to work

fine after that--we say "seemed to" because we no way of knowing for sure whether and how well its working. But our hull is very sensitive to damage--any damage to the hull necessarily damages the cloak, since the cloak requires an intact sensor web around the ship in order to operate effectively.

The first engagement taught us a number of tricks and tactics, foremost of which was not to get closer than a half mile to our target--too close, and the sub gets damaged by the resulting explosion. We don't much have shielding to protect us like a regular warship. Since then we've made two more attacks that have been very successful. First we took out a lone supply ship enroute to the Whenfor system; then, several days later, we took out another escort ship and two medium sized transports.

Crew morale is good, under the circumstances, but no one can forget that we're locked in this metal alloy crypt for the indefinite future. By its very nature the Nautilus is crowded; most of the space on the ship is taken up by the prototype generator. Our shields are practically non-existent, and our sole weaponry consists of a "dual" torpedo launcher; capable of launching both guided missiles, and energy torpedoes. We have only eight of the former, and they're invaluable; unlike energy torpedoes, which have to be fired in direct line to an unmoving target, guided missiles can follow and track.

The crew is holding up well, but there is simply no personal space on board this ship; we have to rotate and share bunks, and in fact we had to lay out some air mattresses on the floor of the torpedo room. The prototype is rated for a crew of 72; we left spacedock with a crew of 64, but it's still crowded. Even eating must be done in shifts, as our tiny mess hall can only hold 15 (crowded) or 20 (very crowded) at a time.

And that gets to one of our problems: food. The Nautilus is certainly not large enough to have hydroponic farms, though we do have a standard oxygen regenerator; that means that we must put down periodically for food, and, eventually, fuel. As nearly the entire Alliance has been occupied, getting resupply is hazardous, at best. With our food stores already down 25%, I've set a course for one of our remote resupply stations on Karis; perhaps the Insectoids haven't reached there yet.

* * * * *

"There it is, sir," said the scanner officer, magnifying the image on the viewscreen.

"Lifesigns?"

"None."

As it should be. The satellite was fully automated, in orbit around a lifeless rock. But it had defense systems of its own, defense systems that could only be deactivated if the proper code was transmitted. As of yet, however, Hollister wasn't quite ready to transmit the code. Not yet.

"The planet?"

"No signs of life."

Hollister nodded.

"We're in effective weapons range of the station,"

announced the XO.

"Status?"

"No change."

Good. That meant the cloak was functioning normally.

"Transmit the signal," said Hollister.

The Nautilus transmitted the proper IFF code. The station sent an immediate response, and powered down its defensive systems.

"Shall we surface, sir?"

Hollister paused. When they surfaced, they would become vulnerable. But if there were a trap here, he couldn't see what it was. He nodded fractionally.

"All hands, surface! Surface, surface, surface!" A klaxon sounded, the lighting brightened and there was a small shudder as the cloaking field disengaged and the Nautilus reemerged into the visible spectrum.

"Maneuver us into docking-"

At that moment there was motion on the viewscreen. A ship, coming up from the planet's surface.

"An Insectoid ship!" cried the con officer, checking the readings.

"Class?"

Con checked the readings. "Heavy cruiser... no, a battlecruiser!"

"Dive!" cried Hollister immediately.

"Dive, dive dive dive!" cried the XO. There was a pause that seemed to last for an eternity. And then, the lights dimmed, and the proper indicators glowed green.

"Course reset, 114 mark two, full power!" Hollister snapped. He didn't want to be anywhere near their last visible position when that heavy cruiser reached orbit. Indeed, the cruiser was streaking directly towards their former position, but as it got closer it slowed, then stopped.

"Probably not sure what to do," the XO chuckled.

The heavy cruiser released a barrage of sudden weapon's fire, surging first in one direction, then another.

"They're firing blind," said the XO. An energy bolt streaked not far from them, parallel to the stern. "Sir, shall we set course?"

"No," said Hollister.

"No?" said the XO. "Sir, if you're thinking of taking that on..."

"We can't let it go. If we do, we won't have the advantage of surprise anymore," said Hollister. "Right now they don't even know that we, this ship, this technology, even exists. But that ship saw us submerge out of the visible spectrum. Once they report back to their home base, they'll start an intensive search for us."

"But they're bound to find out about us sooner or later," said the XO.

"Better later, than sooner," said Hollister. "Con, do a passive scan of that ship. Look for weak spots."

"Aye sir."

"Sir, we've taken out destroyers and light escorts only," said the XO. "Ships that can be taken out in one shot. If we strike that battlecruiser and don't take it out in the first shot, we've had it."

"Perhaps," said Hollister, eyeing the battlecruiser. It had stopped firing now, and was moving in slowly expanding

circles relative to its present position--a standard search pattern. But they would undoubtedly get weary of that soon, and leave to report their findings. Time was running out. He turned to Con. "Any luck?"

Con activated a three dimensional representation of the Insectoid battlecruiser. Using a remote pointer he said, "If we hit them here, in their engine section, that should cause an explosion."

"Surely it can't be that easy," said the XO.

"Like everything else, it's armored," said Con. "But two or three torpedoes, at close range, should be able to do it."

"We can only generate two energy torpedoes at a time," said the XO. "What if they aren't enough?"

"We can instantly switch over to the hard missile torpedoes," said Hollister. "Weapons, how long does it take to switch the dual use launcher mode?"

"Five seconds."

"That should be sufficient," said Hollister. "Con! Maneuver us under the enemy ship and into firing position. I want to be exactly a half mile, no more, no less, when we fire. Weapons! Lock onto the vulnerable part of their ship. If we hit the wrong area, this whole exercise will be worse than useless."

The Nautilus maneuvered into position. The Insectoid ship was much faster than the subship, but was moving slowly in its own search pattern.

"In position," said the Con officer.

"Weapons: lock on target, and prepare to switchover to metal torpedoes."

"Aye."

"Drop cloak... .now!"

"Surface, surface, surface!" cried the XO, over the yammering of the klaxon.

The Nautilus surfaced out of subspace, behind and under the Insectoid battlecruiser. A few seconds past as energy from the cloaking field was transferred to the torpedo generator. During this time the subship showed up on the Insectoid scanners; information was conveyed to the senior Insectoid officers, controls were activated, the ship started to turn..."

"Fire!" cried Hollister.

First one and then two energy torpedoes spat out of the Nautilus, striking the Insectoid ship precisely in its engineering section. There was a miniature explosion which flung the battlecruiser backwards... but still leaving its engineering section in direct view.

"Switch over to metal torpedoes," said Hollister. One... two... three... four... five.... "What's happening?"

"It's not working, sir!" said the weapons officer. He rapidly depressed a button. "It's jammed! It won't convert over!"

"Prepare to dive," said Hollister promptly.

The Insectoid ship had regained attitude control and was now turning to face the Nautilus. Hollister could see miniature explosions and debris trailing from the bottom of the ship, but it still seemed functional.

"Dive dive dive!" said the XO.

The klaxon sounded again, but the lights didn't dim. "Are we cloaked?" Hollister asked.

The cloak officer checked a panel. "No!"

"What's wrong?" said Hollister. The Insectoid ship had almost completed its turn. In seconds its primary weapons would be in direct line of site of the Nautilus.

"I... don't know," said the cloak officer. He slammed his console in frustration. "It should be working, but it isn't!"

"Helm! Keep us out of position of the topside of their ship!" said Hollister. Most of the battlecruisers weaponry was on the topside.

"Too late!" cried an officer, as several beams lashed out of one of the Insectoid's laser cannons. Three of them just barely missed the ship, but a fourth struck the Nautilus squarely amidships, cutting through the hull and blasting its way out the other side.

Hollister and the rest of the bridge crew were thrown to the deck as the ship heaved and started spinning. Painfully, he worked his way over to navigation. He held on to the console for dear life as the ship spun about, tossing the crew across the chamber like rag dolls. Gripping the console with one firm arm, he rapidly tapped on the controls.

The Nautilus stopped spinning. But the Insectoid battlecruiser was right on top of them, all its guns trained on them. A voice came through the communicator, punctuated by the squeaks of the Insectoid language as it came through their translator.

"Human ship. Surrender," it rasped.

Hollister looked at the looming ship on the screen. Of course they would want to take the Nautilus intact, if only to learn about its cloaking technology. Well, that wasn't going to happen. Not as long as he was captain. He checked engines, weapons, navigation... it was all down now, except for thrusters. A power line must've been hit.

There was only one thing left to do. Hollister opened access to the main computer under emergency power. He prepared to key in the self-destruct mechanism. The battlecruiser loomed closer. Good. Maybe they could take the Insectoids with them.

As he prepared to key in the sequence, there was a brilliant flash on the viewscreen, and Hollister was thrown back, and hit his head against the railing, and that was all he remembered for a while.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, 61 days after I-Day

LWS Nautilus

Captain Robert Hollister, Commanding.

We're alive, so I suppose that counts for something. Taking on that battlecruiser was a miscalculation on my part, for which I take full responsibility. The Nautilus was a prototype, its systems untested in battle, its crew untrained in its capabilities and foibles. It was certainly never meant to operate alone, on its own, as we are doing.

Let me try as best I can to reconstruct what happened during our encounter with the battlecruiser. We had hit its engine section, twice, but that only seemed to slow it down. It hit us with a laser cannon that impaled the ship in sections 9 and 10 between decks 6 and 7. The ship was

spinning, helpless. I managed to restore attitude control, but we had no power for most of the ship's systems.

The battlecruiser closed with us, demanding our surrender. I moved to activate the self-destruct, but then there was a flash, and I was knocked out. What actually happened, we think, was that the Insectoid ship blew up. We damaged but didn't destroy their engine section; while their ship was still operational, our attack seems to have caused a buildup in their engines that caused an overload.

And just in time, too. The explosion threw our ship clear without much additional damage; but the hulling of our ship was another matter. Eight crewmen dead at their stations. They were all in the depressurized areas. Nearly all of us have scrapes and bruises and concussions, but we're ok. The funerals were a solemn, and only a brief respite from our frantic attempts to repair the ship.

The chief said we were lucky that no "critical areas" were hulled; we patched up the hull plating using supplies from the space station. We replaced the exterior sensor webbing from stores, but used up nearly all our remaining supply in the process. The only good news, if there is any good news, is that we were able to take on all the food supplies we'll need for the next few months and some key spare parts.

But it was a tense time; we hung here for three days, waiting for the Insectoids to show up. I had repair crews working 24 hours a day to get us going again; if we had been caught here, without the cloak, we would've been an easy target.

Now the cloak is functioning again, as is navigation and weapons. We figured out what malfunctioned; when we tried to turn the torpedo assembly "off" so rapidly after firing, it jammed in place. Not only could we not switch to metal torpedoes, but energy was still being drawn into the assembly, making it impossible to get the critical mass we needed to cloak. A bitter lesson for us all.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, 158 days after I-Day
LWS Nautilus
Captain Robert Hollister, Commanding.

We've had some better luck lately, having successfully conducted four ambushes. But we're starting to get the Insectoids' attention, and they're making things tougher for us.

We plugged another unescorted cargo ship a few weeks ago. Then we attacked two small convoys, each guarded by a small escort ship. After that we started noticing the first of the changes. Suddenly, convoys have gotten larger, and aren't traveling without escorts anymore; and the escorts consist of at least two or even three ships. We spied around for a while, trying to find convoys with only one escort, but after a week of furtively spying around, we couldn't find any.

So we had to make a decision whether to stop operations entirely, or take on a convoy which had two escort ships. Although the decision was mine, I held a meeting of the

senior officers in the wardroom. At first opinion ran against continuing. After all, it's one thing to take one warship by surprise, but two at the same time would be difficult, if not impossible. If we went to ground, we'd have to destroy or hide the ship somewhere.

But then we started thinking exactly what that would mean. We couldn't go to an inhabited human colony, because all of them would undoubtedly be under the iron heel of the Insectoids. We'd have to settle on an uninhabited world and become homesteaders, trying to grow crops and simply survive.

That settled it for my crew; we're soldiers and spacemen, not farmers. We decided to take the risk.

And, the first time, it paid off. We found a convoy of eight ships--four cargo ships, two troop transports, and two destroyers. We surfaced under one, blew it up, and immediately cloaked again before the second could turn its guns to bear on us. Then the second started searching for us, and we waited, biding our time, until we could get a clear shot at its unprotected areas. We surfaced, blasted it... and then started our leisurely hunt for the others.

But we can't always count on it working. If we fail to immediately destroy the first warship we attack and we're forced to cloak again, one destroyer could hug in close to protect the other, making further attack impossible. In fact, if the two destroyers had been close to each other when we attacked, we wouldn't have been able to carry this tactic out. Sooner or later, they're either going to use this defensive tactic or increase the number of escorts in a way that will make it impossible for us to continue. We're doing the best we can with one prototype that wasn't meant to be in combat, certainly not acting on its own without support.

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Captain's Log, 250 days after I-Day
LWS Nautilus
Captain Robert Hollister, Commanding.

Despite a run of successful attacks, our morale has been flagging and we are starting to run low on some critical parts; most crucially, we only have two metal torpedoes left, which will force us to rely nearly exclusively on energy torpedoes, which consume ship's power and take time to generate. Being "on" all the time has taken a toll on the crew too. Oh, we could see that we were causing damage to the enemy, but being trapped in this very confining ship day in and day out was difficult for the crew. Unlike a regular warship, most of the interior of the Nautilus is taken up with equipment for the cloak; we were just fortunate that none of that irreplaceable equipment was hulled when we took on that battlecruiser several months ago.

But all that changed last week. We were getting in position to attack another convoy, four cargo vessels escorted by two destroyers. We had maneuvered under one of them, and I was just about to give the order to fire, when all of a sudden, the destroyer accelerated away from us. For a panicky moment we thought we had been detected, but we could quickly see that both destroyers were heading away from

us, and at top speed.

At that point we had to decide what to do. We could surface into the visible spectrum and take out the four cargo ships; there were no other warships in the area, and they would be easy pickings.

Or... we could follow the destroyers. What had caused them to take off so suddenly? If they had detected us, they would've turned to attack. Therefore, there must've been something else calling their attention. Something important.

I felt we needed to find out what that was. So, with the greatest reluctance, I ordered navigation to follow the destroyers at top speed. We could've stopped and hunted the other four ships, but in addition to taking valuable time, it would've alerted the destroyers to our presence in the area. The destroyers were faster than us, but they traveled on a straight line, and their destination wasn't far away, merely two solar systems away. When we caught up with them we found an amazing sight: a battle with Alliance warships.

An Alliance deep space cruiser was mixing it up with a damaged Insectoid light cruiser. An Alliance fast attack destroyer was chasing down survivors of a convoy. Fragments of another Insectoid destroyer were spread across space.

The Alliance ships had just about finished off the Insectoid light cruiser when the two destroyers arrived. The two destroyers immediately lined up on the fast attack destroyer and started engaging it two on one. The deep space cruiser turned to assist but it had suffered some damage in battle, slowing it up.

We were still too far away to get an effective shot with energy torpedoes; at this range, the Insectoids would easily be able to dodge them before they arrived. But our metal torpedoes had a homing capability.

"Ready metal torpedo," I said.

"Metal? At this range? They'll shoot it down before it gets there," said the XO.

"Not if they don't notice it," I said. "I'm gambling they're too busy with that Alliance fast attack destroyer. Also, since we don't need power to generate a metal torpedo, we don't even have to surface to do it. Weapons: target one torpedo for each destroyer."

"Targeted."

"Fire!"

Away went our last metal torpedoes. It would be a long, long time before we were ever resupplied with those again. But how often could we come to the assistance of an Alliance warship? We hadn't even known that there were other surviving Alliance warships, besides us.

As it turned out the destroyers were so intent on attacking the fast attack destroyer that they didn't notice, not until it was too late. One of the destroyers tried to fire a beam from its aft section at the incoming torpedo at the last minute, but it missed. Each ship was hit in their aft sections, disabling one and seriously damaging another. This gave the fast attack destroyer and the arriving deep space cruiser the advantage it needed to quickly wipe out the new attackers.

"Open a channel," I ordered. "This is Captain Robert Hollister of the Nautilus. Identify yourselves."

Their responses came in. Captain Hu of the Alliance deep space cruiser Argon, Captain Irwi Presta of the fast

attack destroyer Swordflash.

"But where are you? We can't get a fix on your ship," said Captain Presta.

"We'll show you," I said, giving the command to surface.

From their open commlines we heard the gasps of surprise from both ships.

We set a rendezvous a few hundred thousand miles away and prepared to dock with each others' ships so we could meet and plan strategy. Well, not just meet and plan strategy; our crew hadn't seen another human being in more than eight months, and their crews were in the same position. Once we had retreated to a safer location we conducted a docking operation. The Argon, by far the largest of the three ships, set up an open galley amidships, and all non-essential crew were granted leave; except for those on bridge watch or conducting tours of the ship.

The first question that we all had for each other was the same: had we seen any other surviving ships? The answer was no.

"They were all wiped out at Vitalics," said Captain Hu. "We escaped, but we didn't see any other ship get away; not that we were in a good position to track survivors; we were fleeing with a large Insectoid fleet at our rear for days."

"We were one of the few ships on barrier patrol on the rim of Alliance space," said Presta. "There were maybe 9 or 10 other ships in a similar position, but we haven't heard back from them."

"So the fleet is destroyed," I said. I pretty much knew this, of course, but getting confirmation of it was another matter.

"Not necessarily," said Hu. "We've been hearing persistent rumors that the Glory is still out and about."

"War Admiral North's personal ship? Wasn't he at Vitalics?" I asked.

"No. We're not sure what happened to whatever forces he's commanded; at least, we haven't run into them. Likewise for the Directorate fleet; no word on them either."

"But Directorate space is occupied by the Insectoids as well, so we can't presume that many of their ships survived either," said Presta.

"So we're in a tight bind," I muttered.

"Not the way I look at it," said Presta. "You're the best news that's happened to us in months. We've been raiding convoys just as you have for the past few months. But unlike you we couldn't sniff out a situation first to see how well armed a convoy was. There have been several times we've simply gone in to take a look, and been chased out by battlecruisers and battleships."

"Our problem has been the opposite," I said. "We can go anywhere, but once we surface, we're very vulnerable to attack."

"Then it's obvious that we should join forces."

And that's just what we decided to do. The Nautilus was tasked with scouting out potential targets for attack; if we found a suitable target, we would send a tightbeam signal back to the Argon and the Swordflash; and once they had engaged the enemy and kept them busy, we would surface and take them from behind. So we hoped.

But first we took a break, a pause from the combat. After retreating for so long it was good to see other humans free and alive, fighting the Insectoids, especially members of the fleet, whom we had thought had all been lost at Vitalics.

We took on some additional supplies from the Argon; as a Deep Space Cruiser, they had the most developed hydroponics labs, and they helped augment our stores of food. We also took what spare parts we could, but the Argon didn't have much to give, and most of our needs were incompatible. The Nautilus, as a custom prototype, wasn't very compatible with standard fleet stores. But we did what we could.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, 521 days after I-Day
LWS Nautilus
Captain Robert Hollister, Commanding

We've had a number of successes operating as a combined force, and it's got me worried. For the past year we've been successfully ambushing small Insectoid convoys, groups of ships with not more than two or three small fighting escort vessels.

Here's how it would typically work: first the Nautilus would locate a convoy of ships on our passive scanners. Then we would go in for a closer look. If we found too many warships in escort, we would slink away. But if the convoy was only lightly guarded, we would send a single tightbeam signal back to the fleet--the fleet being the Argon and the Swordflash. They would come streaking in and take on one or two of the heavies. Once they were engaged, we would surface from behind and blast away in an unprotected area.

In that fashion we've attacked and completely destroyed twelve convoys in the past eleven months. Our sensors reported that some of those convoy ships we blew up were clearly carrying munitions; and others were carrying troops and material for their occupation forces. While we're certainly not stunting their overall war effort, we must at least be hampering them in a number of areas--preventing reinforcements from arriving, preventing troops from being resupplied, and the like.

But still we can't see the effect of our offensive on the front lines, on our occupied worlds. It's one thing to know intellectually that we're having an effect; it's another to actually see it happening.

One thing that we have noticed happening is that convoys are growing larger and are more and more likely to be escorted by larger number of escorts. Evidently the Insectoids don't have enough warships to provide adequate protection to all their supply ships. But surely they must know what's happening. We've spotted increased patrols in the area, presumably on the prowl for our raiders. But with the Nautilus on the job, we always see them before they see us.

At least, as long as we can keep the Nautilus operational.

"What's your status?" asked Hu.

"Our cloak is currently operating within accepted

parameters," I said. "But that's only at the moment. That system drain we happened off of Grafton nearly forced us to drop cloak. And that's the third time it's happened this month."

"Any idea what's wrong?"

I shook my head. "My crew was trained, or at least partially trained, to maintain the equipment. We're not the designers. Perhaps, if we had one of them with us, they could find out the root cause of the problem." But the designers of the Nautilus were almost certainly under Insectoid occupation on August. "My best guess? That juryrigging we've been doing isn't holding up. As individual parts fail we've been trying to replace them as best we can with spare parts from the Argon, but our technologies aren't fully compatible. It's amazing, I think, that we've been able to keep things going as long as we have."

"How much risk are we facing?" This was from Captain Presta of the fast attack destroyer Swordflash.

"Impossible to say. Theoretically, our cloak could drop at any time," I said.

"Do you want to withdraw from the field?" Hu said, voicing what we had all been thinking. "You could stay in the rear, acting as logistical support...."

I shook my head. "My men and I are determined not to spend the rest of the war as a cloaked vacation ship. Morale isn't great now, but imagine what it would be if we were simply sitting around and doing nothing, day after day?"

"There's another alternative," said Presta. "You could go to ground."

I nodded. "And spend the rest of our life as pastoral farmers on some uncharted world, hoping the Insectoids won't arrive one day and put control collars on all of us. Captain, we're not farmers, we're naval officers. As long as our ship has the power to move, we're going to stay active."

"Very well," said Presta. "For what it's worth, I would have felt the same way as you."

"On to present business," said Hu. "I suggest we lay another strike at Whenfor. We haven't launched an attack there in a while...."

The actions of the raiders hadn't gone unnoticed by the Insectoids. On her command ship in orbit around August, Queen Zsst said to one of her aide things, "Report on the status of the Grafton campaign."

"Our forces are holding on to a two mile by two mile enclosure in the western coast of the central continent," reported the aide thing.

"Still only that beachhead?"

Actually, it was quite an achievement. After several more disastrous attempts to land on Grafton, the Insectoids had established a mighty battlefleet, and send many of their ships down towards the eastern coast of the continent; when the Graftonite fighters rose up to meet them, the real invasion force landed in the sparsely inhabited western coast of the continent. The real invasion force still encountered resistance, but less than before, as many of their fighters had been drawn eastwards; and 40% of the first wave of troop transports actually landed and managed to disembark. They

hurriedly set up their anti-aircraft units, and set up a defense for the second and third wave to land with additional anti-aircraft units, for the Graftonite pilots attacked furiously once they discovered the landing. But after five waves of anti-aircraft units had been set up, the Graftonite planes, with strong support from Insectoid spaceships, had been driven back.

That only changed the nature of the combat; the Graftonites weren't content to let the Insectoids establish a beachhead, however small, anywhere on their planet; and infiltrators came by the night, sometimes in one's and two's, and sometimes in overwhelming force; and the Insectoid compound had to be reinforced against constant attacks, and they learned to fear the night. The Graftonites were so quick that one of them could shoot four sentries before they could raise their rifles; so there had to be eight dedicated guards at every post, and even that wasn't enough. Still, despite tremendous losses, the Insectoids were holding what they had.

But the Queen wasn't satisfied. "What of the effect of the shipment of warrior beasts we sent?"

"Destroyed enroute in a raider attack last week."

"Destroyed before they even got there?" Zsst thundered. "Those were 200 of our best fighting things. Do you realize how hard it is to breed those effectively!" She emitted a faint buzzing sound and started to flap her wings in place menacingly. "I want a full report on these raiders."

It was presented almost instantly by the aide thing, who started to fear for its wings.

Zsst bizzed angrily. "Look at all these ship losses! I was told these raiders were nothing but a minor annoyance! Why wasn't I told about the extend of their actions! Get me my intelligence officer!"

The intelligence officer, another Insectoid like the others, but with larger eyes and bigger antenna than most other Insectoids, appeared before the Queen.

"What is the meaning of this?" said Zsst, waving the report with one of her arms.

It was a credit to the intelligence officer that it didn't need to ask what the Queen was referring to. "We thought it was a minor matter, not worthy of your attention, my Queen-

"When we lose 47 cargo ships and troop transports and 27 warships, that makes it worthy of my attention. Who are these raiders? What is your intelligence on them?"

"We're not certain; so far, there have been no surviving eyewitnesses; the enemy makes certain to thoroughly destroy whatever they choose to attack. However, we've analyzed debris from the destroyed vessels and found the weaponry used on them consistent with those used by Alliance cruisers and their destroyers. From the looks of the numbers and kinds of hits on our ships, I'd expect we're dealing with a single cruiser, and two or possibly three Alliance destroyers."

"If the attack force is so small, why have there never been any survivors?"

"We're not sure. Another odd thing; many of the torpedo hits seem to have been fired at point blank range."

"Point blank? How could they get that close to make such an attack?"

"Insufficient data. A further odd item to report: many

of those torpedo hits came from behind, or in vulnerable sections of the ship. It's as if our ships stood very still and waited for the enemy to come in and take the first shot."

Queen Zsst twizzled one of her antenna. "How do you account for this?"

"We're not sure," said the intelligence officer. "There were rumors that the Alliance was at work on a jitter drive-

"Jitter drive?"

"A drive that lets a ship travel a relatively short distance in a very quick period of time, and then come to a near or complete dead stop. In essence, the ship would make a great leap at one moment, and at the next be in a completely different location."

"So they could be leaping in from several solar systems away?"

"No, our intelligence speculates that this drive would only work over very short distances; but it could've been enough to let the humans get a first strike in."

"How come our intelligence never reported that the human ships were outfitted with this drive?"

"The humans have had prototypes of this technology for some time, but never seem to have employed it, for whatever reason," said the intelligence officer.

"And what are you doing now to locate these errant ships?"

"We've laid traps along the major shipping lanes, waiting for the enemy to attack."

"And have they?"

"No," said the officer. "They seem to have some ability to detect where we're laying our traps. We're not sure how."

"Having some trouble?" came a whispering voice.

A shudder went through the intelligence officer as the robed and hooded figure entered the room. Only the tip of a dark greenish nose and the occasional flash of a rectangular pink tongue could be seen as it talked.

"We are dealing with raiders, Baracki," said the Queen.

"Not very well, so it seems," said Baracki. "You have lost over 50 ships so far, have you not?"

Zsst turned to her intelligence officer. "Have you-"

"Do not waste your time, Zsst," said Baracki. "I do not need your underlings to tell me how the war is going. You seem incapable of dealing with this minor irritant. Perhaps we had chosen wrongly in selecting you."

Zsst gave a quick glance at her intelligence officer, to see if he had any reaction. It was one thing for Baracki to speak to her like this, but in front of one of her subjects! "We can handle it," Zsst said, through gritted mandibles.

"And we will help," said Baracki.

We? Thought Zsst. This was the first time Baracki had ever made mention of more than one of his kind.

Baracki waved a hand forward and another robed and hooded figure stepped forward. "Meet one of my assistants, Rugani. He will help you deal with this small problem."

Zsst opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it. "What will you require?"

"One modest fleet should be sufficient."

"Where should they be deployed?" Zsst asked. According to her reports, they had elements of five fleets spread out looking for these ships. What could one more fleet do?

"Leave it to Rugani." Both figures quickly left the Queen's chamber.

The Queen glared at her intelligence officer. "Speak of this to no one."

And then she got really worried.

Admiral Eze, another Junior Queen, stared with trepidation at the hooded figure on its bridge. Eze had never seen one of THEM before... although she had heard rumors. All Eze knew was that it was ordered to give its full cooperation.

"What are your instructions," said Eze in a neutral voice, trying to hide the feeling of terror building within her.

"Take us to these coordinates," said Rugani, rasping out a set of numerical coordinates.

Admiral Eze's fleet launched immediately.

When they arrived, a few hundred million miles outside the Capertown system, Eze checked the scanners. Nothing. Perhaps they had arrived early. But it was all so preposterous because how could this creature know where the raiders were?

"We have arrived," said Eze pointedly, to the silent figure standing on the bridge.

"All stop."

Eze waved an arm. "All stop" said a subordinate. The fleet stopped.

"And now?" Eze said, after another moment.

The figure in the hood seemed to be looking about for something. But Eze got the feeling that it wasn't looking on the bridge.

There was another moment of silence. Then... "No," said Rugani. "Not here."

If they weren't here, why had they come here? Eze wondered. But Eze wisely kept silent.

Rugani issued another set of coordinates. "Inform me when we arrive," the creature said simply, as it left the bridge.

They kept this up for nearly two weeks, stopping at four different locations. Always, the result was the same. Rugani would concentrate, or enter some sort of trance for a moment, and then shake his head.

Eze's crew was openly scornful of Rugani by now. After the most recent attempt, it proved too much for the navigator to keep silent. He buzzed jeerfully and said, clearly sarcastically, "And where shall we set course for next?"

Rugani looked up at the navigator, who gasped as it saw Rugani's face for the first time. Rugani made the slightest of gestures with his right hand, and the navigator's head jerked back, making a loud snapping sound and then a different sound altogether as the navigator's lifeless body slumped to the deck.

Rugani turned towards Eze, but his face was obscured.

Eze, waiting in silence, could only hold his breath. In a calm, cultured voice, Rugani said, "Have your next navigator set course for..."

And then they hit on it. They were just inside the Whenfor system. Eze called the fleet to a stop. Rugani was silent for a moment. And then... "This is it," he said softly.

"What?" said Eze, sitting up. She hadn't expected this.

"The raiders will be here... in 25 of your hours," said Rugani, speaking slowly as if he were concentrating. "There will be a deep space cruiser, a fast attack destroyer, and.... and...." he seemed to pause.

"And?" said Eze, not, for the moment, questioning the source of this information.

"Something else," said Rugani simply. "I suggest you make ready, and move the special ship I ordered you to prepare into position. Is it ready?" he asked, the dark edge of threat in its voice.

"As you instructed," said Eze, with only the faintest of tremors in her voice. "The battlecruiser's outer hull has been modified, and the sensor ghost generators have been installed."

"Then let us send the rest of the fleet into the cover of the nearby gas giant, and let us wait," said Rugani.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, 543 days after I-Day
LWS Nautilus
Captain Robert Hollister, Commanding

We've arrived at the Whenfor system. We had hit them several months ago on the outskirts of the system as they were ferrying in more troops and supplies, and we felt it was time to hit them again here. When we entered the system, however, we noticed only a single ship, a large transport of some kind, slowly plying its way past one of Whenfor's gas giants towards the only inhabitable planet in the Whenfor system. Rumor had it that there was a lot of fighting going on down there; our people were giving the occupation forces a hard time. We must stop that transport!

And yet... it was odd of the Insectoids to send one ship, alone, without any escort. Could it be that this one ship was dispatched in such a hurry that no escort had been available? Or could it be another trap?

We had detected several of those, lone merchantmen plying the starways, while a fleet of attack ships hung back. But we could detect no attack ships here. And yet it still bothered me that one ship should be travelling alone.

I should've listened to my instincts and called off the attack. But to resist the opportunity to attack an unguarded troopship, if that's what it really was, was too strong to resist.

So, to be cautious, I took us closer, nearing the target as it course tangented off of the gas giant. The Nautilus, never very speedy, especially under cloak, was still faster than the slow troop transport. As we closed on it our passive scanner provided more information.

It really was a troop transport, a large one, jammed packed with several thousand troopers. The Insectoids would never use such a juicy target as bait. I launched the tightbeam signal back to the rest of the fleet. The Argon and

the Swordflash raced in at top speed and were on our passive scanners within a few moments.

Funny, though, the transport hadn't changed direction or speed, or tried to call for help. And yet our ships must surely be on its scanners by now... I felt a sudden stab in my stomach. Something was very, very wrong.

But we couldn't call off the attack now. To do so we'd have to send a general transmission; even if we didn't surface, the Insectoid ship would know there was a cloaked ship around, and report this to their headquarters. The best we could do was to be in position to fire on the transport in case it showed any hidden surprises. I had the ship maneuver around to its underside as we got closer.

I frowned as I saw its hull up close. There was something odd about that hull...several pieces of the hull seemed very modern, very new, compared to the material that composed the rest of the hull.

At that moment the Argon and the Swordflash streaked into range, and several things happened at once.

Pieces of metal dropped off the troopship's hull, revealing gaping gun turrets. In a matter of seconds our stodgy troop transport had turned into a sleek battlecruiser. And on our scopes an entire fleet of Insectoid ships emerged from the cover of the nearby gas giant and were streaking towards us at top speed. In seconds they would be on us.

"It's a trap!" I said, just as the battlecruiser opened fire. Its opening volley caught the Argon amidships, sending the ship tumbling. The Swordflash soared into the battle, firing several torpedoes.

"Lock onto their engine section! Prepare to surface!" I yelled.

"But sir, that fleet will be on us in seconds-" said my XO.

"Surface!" I said, hitting the button myself.

The Nautilus surfaced into the visible spectrum.

"Fire!" I yelled.

Three energy torpedoes streaked out of the ship, two of them hitting squarely into the battlecruiser's engineering section. One of them was absorbed by the ship's shields, but the second went through, and there was an explosion as the battlecruiser's engines flickered and it slowly started to tumble.

I quickly checked a nav reading, then activated the ship to ship comm. "Argon! Swordflash! Set course, 114 by 129 by 224."

I turned to the XO. "Prepare to dive."

"Sir, it will take 60 seconds for our cloak to recharge."

I watched the Insectoid fleet that was almost upon us. "Helm; get us out of here!"

The Nautilus was slowly turning about when we saw the Argon and the Swordflash streak above us. The Argon was hit but its mobility didn't seem impaired. They both seemed agreeable to heading to another of Whenfor's nearby gas giants where we might be able to hide in safety.

But the Insectoid fleet was launching missiles, several of them at each of us, and they would be in laser range in seconds.

I watched three missiles closing on us. "Range?"

"700 miles and closing."

"Cloak?"

"40 more seconds!"

And we didn't even have any anti-missile capabilities.

"Navigation?"

"We're heading away at top speed. But we'll only gain a few seconds, those missiles are much faster than we are!"

"400 miles and closing."

"Cloak?"

"20 seconds."

"Push it to the limit," I said. I licked my lips. It was going to be very, very close. The cloaking process took a few seconds; how "cloaked" would we have to be to throw off the missiles? The enemy fleet would know what they were dealing with after this encounter, but at that moment if we could merely survive I'd call it a victory.

I could see the missiles on the viewscreen as they streaked towards us.

"100 miles."

"Cloak?"

"....two... one... Cloaking!"

"Dive dive dive!" cried the XO as the klaxon sounded.

The Nautilus started to fade from the visible spectrum. The lead missile closed on us, 30 miles, 20 miles, 10 miles...

"Hard to starboard!" I ordered. I grabbed the railing as the ship lurched to the side... and the missiles passed by the space we had just been occupying.

"Status!" I cried as I climbed back into my command chair.

"The cloak is operating within normal parameters," said the cloak officer.

"Head us towards the other gas giant, top speed. What kind of lead do the Swordflash and the Argon have on us?"

"The Swordflash is nearly one million miles ahead of us, and is under pursuit."

"And the Argon?"

The sensor officer adjusted the viewscreen, and the picture held it all. The Argon was dead in space; one of those missiles that had been launched at it had scored a lucky hit on its engines. The lead ships of the Insectoid fleet were coming into range. The Argon turned and opened fire with its forward batteries, carving into the hull of a light cruiser.

But then the other frontline ships opened fire, seven in all, one after another, and in seconds there was a brilliant explosion, and the Argon was gone. I shielded my eyes momentarily from the glare, and one of the crew cried out involuntarily.

I paused, stunned for a minute, then said, "Continue course to rendezvous with the Swordflash. Report on movements of the Insectoid fleet."

The sensor officer brought me up to speed. Most of the Insectoid ships were in hot pursuit of the Swordflash. Sensors showed the Swordflash had taken a hit amidships. Interestingly, a number of other Insectoid ships were engaged in a classic search pattern around the scene of their wounded battlecruiser. Evidently, they were looking for the Nautilus.

Well, we were a secret no longer, but the Insectoids would still have to find us.

Suddenly, a broadcast appeared on our screen. It was

Captain Presta. "Hollister; if you're receiving this, please don't respond. There's no reason to give away your location. We've taken some serious damage here; our reactor is going to go critical at any time. We don't have a lot of options. We suggest you take your ship to safety. I want to thank you for the hospitality of your ship; I especially enjoyed the food and mess hall entertainment you provided. Good luck to you, Presta out."

I sat in the stillness of silence for some time, as our ship continued to head towards the gas giant.

"Course, sir?" asked navigation.

"Maintain present heading," I said.

"The Swordflash has just made it to the giant and is entering the upper atmosphere, but the Insectoids are pursuing," said the sensor officer.

"Did your sensors record any reactor damage to the Swordflash?" I asked.

"Not specifically; but that missile hit was near their reactor, so it's very possible," said the sensor officer.

"So that part of the message was true," I murmured.

"What do you mean, sir?" asked the XO.

"Didn't it strike you as odd that in the man's parting message he took the time to thank us for our food and hospitality?"

"It did seem kind of odd, but I thought that, under stress, he was just trying to send a graceful last message," said the XO.

"Or maybe he's trying to send a message of another kind," I said. "Punch up the files on this gas giant; Whenfor IV, isn't it? I want to see everything there is to know about it."

Data filled my screens. "Eleven moons, atmosphere mostly helium, nitrogen... wait a minute. What are the names of those moons?" I scrolled down the list, and then smiled. "Viola."

"What?"

I raised my voice. "Ensign Lane, what instrument did you use to entertain our guests five weeks ago in the mess hall?"

Lane looked as if he were being tested. "My... violin, sir..."

"Thank you." I turned. "Navigation: set course for Viola."

"Sir, Viola's course is currently skimming the outer edge of that gas cloud. It will be difficult to navigate and obscure our sensors."

"Let's hope so," I said.

As we approached the edge of the gas cloud we could see that the Insectoid ships were furiously searching for the Swordflash. We slowly approached Viola, which was partially obscured by the upper atmosphere of the gas giant, and reached it without incident.

But there was nothing there. Had the Swordflash been destroyed? We made one orbit around the moon, then two, then three, then four... and then the Swordflash showed up.

We surfaced, on the side of the moon that was obscured by the atmosphere, close to the Swordflash. They saw us, and we saw them, but we still made no signal. Silently we aligned so that we could dock. It was only then, as we were arranging to get our ships parallel to each other, that I could see how

bad the damage was.

Presta hadn't been lying; he had extensive damage in his reactor section.

The sensor officer caught my eye. "Sir, our passive scanners are showing that his reactor is increasingly unstable. If it blows..."

"Noted. Get everyone on board as quickly as possible as soon as the hatch opens."

It took a small eternity for the ships to dock, another small eternity before the connecting hatch opened, and then the crew of the Swordflash stormed through. They knew the clock was ticking, and many of them had been waiting at their airlock to get through as quickly as possible. Some of them were carrying wounded, and one of those I recognized, First Officer Jones.

"Jones, where's Presta?" I said, only glancing briefly at his arm in a sling.

"He's looking for survivors with a search team in the damaged areas. We estimate we have about 3 minutes left on the reactor. He says that if he's not there in two...."

I wanted to go through the corridor to join the search on the Swordflash but the corridor was still packed with crewmembers trying to rush into the Nautilus. For a moment I wondered if we could even fit everyone inside the Nautilus. Did we have enough passageway for people to fit, even if everyone was standing? Would we have to turn people away? Should I close the hatches in less than two minutes and disengage?

The two minutes came and went as the remaining crewmembers who had been clustered at the airlock passed through. Then there was silence. We were running out of time!

I called the bridge on the con. "Let me know the instant the cruiser's reactor goes critical."

"Sir, it's critical right now!"

I bit my lip. "Prepare to close-"

At that moment Presta and several crewmembers came running down the airlock corridor, saving me from making a difficult position. They were half carrying, half dragging several of the wounded.

I helped pull them through, and sealed the hatch. "Navigation! Get us away from here!"

The Nautilus disengaged and slowly pulled away. A moment later, just as I was reaching the bridge, we were rocked off our feet by a tremendous explosion that shook us. We didn't know it at the time, but a piece of metal from the Swordflash's hull streaked across ours, scratching the delicate sensor webbing in place.

"Take us out of here! Prepare to cloak!" I cried.

The Nautilus emerged from the upper atmosphere of Whenfor IV. Immediately, five Insectoid ships zeroed in on our position.

"Dive!" I cried.

"Dive dive dive!"

The Nautilus dived out of the visible spectrum. But as soon as we had done that, the lights changed color again. We were surfacing!

"What's going on?" I cried.

"It looks like one of the sensor inhibitor relays have burned out under the stress-"

"Fix it, quickly!" I said. I checked the sensors. The

first ship would be in weapons range in just under two minutes. "Navigation; orient us away from the lead ship! Top speed!"

As always, the Nautilus was much slower than the pursuing ships. But our velocity away from our pursuers should buy us a few extra seconds.

"Cloak?" I said.

"Working on it," said the cloak officer. "I'm trying to bypass the burned out sections-"

I watched the approaching ship on the screens. "Can't you replace them?"

"No time," said the officer.

"They're almost in lockon range!" said the sensor officer.

"Now!" said the cloak officer.

"Dive dive dive!" said the XO.

The Nautilus dived into subspace again. I immediately changed course, just as a laser beam lanced out in the area where we just were.

"That was too close," said the XO.

All was silent for a moment, and then I noticed that the pursuing ships, instead of starting a circular search pattern, were continuing on. In fact, they were going in the same general direction as we were-

One of them lanced out with a laser burst. It struck several meters off our bow.

"Evasive!" I cried, grabbing the railing as I turned to the Cloak officer. "What's going on?"

"The cloak is operating-"

"-Within normal parameters. I know, but then why did they shoot?"

"Maybe they're guessing," said the Cloak officer, who seemed to be guessing himself.

"There's one way to find out." I changed course again, this time in a new direction. The Insectoids continued along their old course for nearly a minute. But then they turned, and headed directly towards us.

"Are we cloaked or aren't we?" I asked, my perspiration soaked uniform getting another rinse cycle.

"The cloak... wait! There's a leak in the sensor web... no it's fine... wait, there is it again," said the Cloak officer. "There's an intermittent leak in the sensor web. This isn't related to our previous problem. We must have been hit by a chunk of debris from the Swordflash explosion. It must have scrapped against some of our sensor webbing, not enough to deactivate it entirely, but enough to give an intermittent reading."

"Meaning?"

"Every 10 to 15 seconds we seem to be generating a 8 foot by two foot radar signature. It's small, and it winks out, but it's enough for them to follow."

In other words, a small piece of us was blinking in and out of the visible spectrum. I immediately set course to return to the gas giant, and for the next 10 minutes we played the most dangerous game of cat and mouse I've been involved in.

The Nautilus showed up on their scanners every 10 or 15 seconds; every 20 seconds we changed course, tacking this way and that, but always heading closer and closer to the gas giant. Once we got inside there, if we got inside there, we'd

be safe.

The Insectoids pursued us closely, firing lasers at our last reported positions, and then, speculating, firing at our next suspected position. Every time I ordered a course change I had to outguess our opponents; they had only to guess my course change once, and the game would be over.

Lasers streaked by us but never touched us. We weren't coherent long enough for a missile to lock onto us. But then one of the biggies, a battlecruiser, I think, launched a missile in our direction.

"It's a multiyield warhead!" cried the sensor officer.

"Full speed ahead!" I cried. We were at the outer edges of the atmosphere now. It would be a race against time.

We plunged into the atmosphere, the warhead following us less than a minute behind our position. But since they couldn't know which direction we would go in the atmosphere, they were forced to detonate.

The explosion tossed me from my chair, and I looked at a bulkhead in horror as I heard it creak under pressure....

"It's been nearly an hour," Admiral Eze remarked.

Rugani said nothing.

"The warhead probably got them."

Rugani didn't comment.

"We haven't found any debris, but that's understandable, in the proximity of such a gravity well."

Rugani put a hand to an ear inside his hood, as if listening to something for a moment. Then he straightened up. "I'm being called away. But your raider problem has been largely solved. Station ships at a discrete distance to watch for the ship if it emerges."

Eze looked at the viewscreen. "For how long?" it asked, turning back to Rugani

But Rugani was already gone.

"Status report," I said, staring at the colors of Whenfor IV's atmosphere on the viewscreen. It looked like pink fog, almost.

"Repair teams are EVA-ing to repair the sensor webbing. and crews are working on the inside to shore up bulkheads two and fourteen. Repairs on the Cloaks and other affected systems continue."

I nodded, and turned to Captain Presta. "Once we get the cloak fixed, we'll be able to escape."

"Escape to where? With only one, overcrowded ship, what kind of opposition can we mount?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "And I don't think the ship can take much more of this. We may have to set down somewhere after all.... for now, however, we're out of action."

Chapter 7: A Cook Takes Action

"We are encountering minor, scattered resistance, but all essential facilities are firmly in our hands" said an aide.

"Good," said Queen Zsst, studying the latest reports. Good; as ordered, her units were taking root everywhere but the grounds of the capital itself, Sarney Sarittenden. Now was the time to do something she had waited years for.

"Gunner! Lock weapons on Sarney Sarittenden. Lock all missiles and energy torpedoes!"

"Weapons... locked...."

Her intelligence being spoke up. "Queen, don't you think we should wait until we examine-"

"I have waited for this moment for over 20 years. Destroy the human capital now. FIRE!"

Missiles spat out of the Queen's flagship, missiles big enough to destroy a cruiser with one hit. They sped down into the atmosphere, on an ark that would prevent them from burning up before impact. They sped down, and hit... precisely on the Throne Plaza itself, ground zero. There was a tremendous explosion, and a fireball filled their screens; and that fireball was amplified by other fireballs, and more missiles struck.

Queen Zsst watched with satisfaction. Finally, after all these years, the symbol of the Alliance had been destroyed. Her satisfaction, however, was short lived, as the explosions cleared, and she saw... the towers and spires of Sarney Sarittenden... without a scratch on them!

How could this be? "Fire energy torpedoes!" the Queen cried.

They fired, slamming into the planet more quickly than the missiles. More fireballs filled the screen; some of it washed over onto the immediate area around Sarney Sarittenden; but when the explosions died down, she saw the impossible; the buildings weren't even scratched. Some of the civilian buildings on the border of Sarney had been leveled by the attack; but all the structures in Sarney itself were untouched. How was this possible?

"You fool!"

The Queen jerked her head up to see Baraki entering. Her mandibles chattered a bit.

"What are you doing?" said Baraki.

"We are destroying the symbol of the human resistance," said Queen Zsst.

"You are meddling in things you DO NOT understand," said Baraki. "Cease this immediately!"

The Queen really had no choice; she couldn't have destroyed the place even if she had wanted to. But how had it survived such a devastating attack?

"What do you know about this place?"

"That is not for you to ask," Baraki snapped. The Queen recoiled; she hadn't seem him this angry before. He stomped out without saying a word.

All was quiet in the chamber for a moment, except the hum of electrical control panels. But then, there came an announcement from an underling.

"Queen, we are picking up a beacon from the surface!" stated a comm insect.

"A beacon?" said Zsst. "I thought all communications facilities were in our hands."

"We thought so; this must be a small portable generator."

"Who can they possibly be hailing? Track their transmission!"

"The beacon is hailing... us!" said the comm insect.

"Us! From a human? What's it saying?"

"Indeterminate, but it's definitely directed at us"

said the comm insect, listening to the pulsing sound. "That's it, the same thing, over and over."

"Sounds like a trap," said an aide.

"Probably," said the Queen. "Where is it coming from?"

"The eastern continent."

"I thought the eastern continent was unpopulated?"

"That's what we were told. There are certainly no large scale dwelling or industrial structures there."

The Queen considered. "Send a full combat team to investigate."

"Levi! Levi!"

Levi Esherkol, finicking with meat on the grill, at first didn't hear her. But then he did hear the engines of the attack transport touching down near his home. In the quarry, probably.

"Levi! The monsters are here!" shrieked Mindy. She ran inside, a look of fright on her features.

"Oh, all right," said Levi, putting down his apron.

"Levi, what do we do?" she said, trembling.

Levi pointed to the range. "Keep flipping them every five minutes. When they start to turn black on the outsides, turn down the temperature." He scooped up a bowl of something and headed out the door.

A squad of seven foot tall warrior units were already disembarked from their ship. Their weapons were scanning, bobbing all about, but several of them turned to face Levi as he approached, openly carrying the bowl, but no other weapons, in his hands.

The human was unarmed. Civilian. Therefore capture, not annihilation, was in order. For now.

"Human. You will service us," one of them said through its flashing translator device, It pointed its gun barrel at Levi with one arm and lifted him painfully by his throat with another. A third arm reached up and secured a control collar around Levi's throat, which sealed with a click.

"Oh, uh, yes," croaked Levi, rasping through his sore throat as he dangled painfully in the air. Then he was cruelly dropped to the ground. As he dropped he barely managed to avoid dropping the bowl he carried.

"Report to the transport for reassignment-" said the Insectoid, stopping in midsentence. For it had started sniffing. The aroma coming from the bowl was strong, very strong...for an Insectoid, that is. A human wouldn't have noticed the smell, but the concoction in the bowl was designed to give off a very appealing smell. Appealing for Insectoids, that is.

"What... is that?" came the harsh but flat voice through the translator.

"This?" said Levi, looking at the bowl of brown goo as if noticing it for the first time. "Just some insect food. I entomologist, I study insects and I just going to feed... say, you descended from insects, no? I suppose you might to give it a try...?"

Normally, there was no way the Insectoid was going to accept food from a human; it could, after all, be poisoned. But the smell was so overpowering... for a human, it was the equivalent to the smell of steaks, frying over a charcoal grill, with a smattering of hickory chips to give it that

special smell... but the scent was even more overpowering for the Insectoids, who were even more sensitive to smells than humans.

The Insectoid called over one of its junior hatchlings. "Try this," it ordered.

The junior hatching did, without needing to be prompted again; it liked the irresistible smell too. When the hatchling took a tentative taste, and then another, and then another, it wasn't long before the entire squad was digging out of the bowl and licking the sides of it.

"I have some more of it in house" said Levi. He paused, as if considering something. "You know, it's shame I going to be common slave. I make very good food for insects, no?"

Queen Zsst, in her ship in orbit around August, dipped one of her claws into the bowl again. "It is good," she hissed. "Very good, in fact. Very well, bring it in."

Levi Esherkol, wearing a collar and manacles around his hand, was brought into her command chamber, looking mighty small and alone as he was flanked by seven foot tall Insectoid guards. He was actually only the second human to get this far; the first, Mitterand, hadn't fared very well.

"I am told, human, that you made this food that is pleasing to us," rasped the Queen.

"That? Oh, that was nothing," said Levi, with a shrug. "A quick snack. With the proper tools and equipment, I could do much better."

"What do you mean?" the Queen asked.

"Well, it's a science, see? At least, for humans it is," said Levi. "Tell you what; you give me access to a lab, and I can cook up some food you'll really like!"

The Queen buzzed for a moment. She didn't think humans had any other uses besides manual labor, but she had never met the likes of Levi Esherkol before. If the human could produce pleasing food, why not? She could always terminate him if she grew bored or displeased. "Very well," said the Queen, raising an arm to dismiss him.

"Ah, just one minute," said Levi. "You haven't heard my conditions."

"Conditions?" said the Queen, standing up in her high chair, towering over the poor Levi.

"Requests, then," said Levi, taking a step back, and trembling.

The Queen sat down, hiding her amusement. "State them."

"One: that you leave my wife out of this. You will need her on our farm, on August, to produce much of the food I will need to prepare for you."

The Queen nodded. That seemed reasonable enough.

"Continue."

"Two: That I have a fully stocked lab, and one or two of your... associates to experiment on."

The human would of course be closely watched. But experiment, on an Insectoid?

"To test new recipes, I mean," said Levi hastily. "I wouldn't want you to try a new recipe until I had tested it on your underlings, right? If I didn't, I might come up with something you might not like, and what would happen to me then?"

"You would be executed," said the Queen. She shifted about, appearing to grow bored.

"Final condition!" said Levi, sensing her restlessness.
"Leave the Eastern continent free from development."
"Development?"
"You know, mining, manufacturing-"
"Unacceptable," said the Queen flatly.
"Well," said Levi, swallowing hard, "How about just protecting two or three locations from development?"
"Name them."

Levi gave her the name and spacial locations of a certain rock formation, a certain forest, a certain waterfalls, and two other locations.

"I will consider your requests," said the Queen. Levi opened his mouth to say something more, but she cut him off, "Take him away." And he was dragged off.

"Shall I have the human executed?" said an underling.

"No," said the Queen. "It amuses me. But first scan the locations the human seeks to have off-limit for development. Look in particular for any signs of hidden human installations. Then report back to me."

The report came back a few hours later. Orbital scans, arial overflights, and even landings by ground troops had found nothing suspicious in any of those locations--simply varied arrangements of trees, rocks, and water.

"These humans are strange," said the Queen. "Tell the human his terms are accepted. We will see how long it proves amusing...."

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North,
Commander, Combined Alliance Fleet:
Two weeks after Vitalics.

We stopped to catch our breath, and found it to almost be our undoing.

My original plan was to head directly for Orotis. But then three of our ships started to develop engine trouble, and Danmark II was almost directly in our flight path. Captain Bennett, speaking for the Directorate fleet (replacing the late Captain Alada, whose ship perished at Jarja), suggested we stop there to make emergency repairs--two of the limping ships were his.

Actually, "suggested" may not be the right word. Even from the very beginning of the Alliance between the League and the Directorate, there's always been some tension when a Directorate commander had to take orders from a League officer, or vice-versa. There have even been rare occasions where each have gone their own way due to "creative differences" over battle strategy.

But we can't afford to have creative differences now. There are too few of us left. Bennett obviously respects me, and he didn't state his suggestion as a demand, but I still sense he's not fully ready to buckle down and take orders from the senior Alliance commander. Unfortunately, that could be our undoing.

A week ago I would've let him go his own way and do as he would. But there are too few of us left now. No longer will I passively sit by and let things unravel. I've already

seen the terrible price we've paid for our inaction. My inaction.

Bennet's suggestion does have some merit. I don't want to leave any ships behind, and those three ships have valuable sailors on it. We could evacuate the damaged ships, but with our shipyards out of commission each ship is priceless, irreplaceable. Nevertheless a rest stop does give the enemy more of an opportunity to catch up with us, even though we have no indication that we've been pursued. Logic suggests that the Insectoids are too caught up swallowing the sheer size of their latest acquisition to go after us, but we can't afford to take chances. Despite my concerns, however, I have authorized a quick stop, and even my own officers concur with Bennett's suggestion to drop out at Danmark II.

Nevertheless, if there comes a point where I have to relieve Bennett of command to save them all, even if I have to arrest him, even if I have to court martial him, even if I have to execute him, I'd do it, in an instant. Never again will I sit passively. Never again.

The fleet was still decelerating into orbit when they received a transmission from Governor Delapan of Danmark II. "Admiral! I knew the fleet would save us! We heard the worst-

"The worst is true," said North. "What you see before you is all that's left of the fleet."

"All?" Delapan frowned. "You mean, all that's left of the sector fleet?"

"All that's left of all the fleets. All of them," said North. "And I'm sure our would-be conquerers aren't far behind us."

"The entire fleet," said Delapan, stunned. He took a few moments to digest this. "Well, it's good you've arrived. Please take up defensive positions around-

"You misunderstand, Governor," said North. "We're on our way out of this region of space entirely."

"But... you can't just leave us defenseless!"

"I'm afraid we have no choice," said North.

"I order you to assume defensive positions around our planet," said Delapan. "You are military, and are bound to obey the orders of civilian authorities-

"-no longer," said North bluntly. He knew that even under normal circumstances that the Fleet wasn't answerable to planetary governors. But he wanted to drive the point home. "I'm declaring this entire sector under martial law. Our crews are coming down to take on supplies; we also want all available merchant spacers to be made ready to join our convoy-

"You can't just give orders!"

"I can," said North. "My troops are coming down armed. If anyone resists or hinders us, they will be shot."

"What! I won't permit-

"We have your transmission zone pinpointed," said North. "If you incite rebellion or attempt to issue orders contrary to ours, we will flatten your administrative area with a proximity missile."

"What... why..."

"Politician. Dissembler. Traitor," North spat. "You're

all the same. Because of your kind, we've lost everything. If you want to make yourself useful, start working on your surrender speech for your new masters, who should be along soon. End transmission!"

The silence on the bridge was deafening. The crew had never heard North be this... visceral before, even when dealing with the enemy. His anger with the civilian authorities was intense, but it was only magnified and exacerbated by his anger with himself.

Commander Dulin looked worried but said nothing. Lieutenant Commander Wren cleared her throat, and said, "Sir, don't you think-"

North glared at her, and she fell silent. Wren turned away.

And then, in a voice almost too low for anyone to hear, he muttered, "Not again. I won't let it happen again."

Transports and shuttles from the fleet touched down at the main spaceport. And it was a madhouse. Word had gotten out about the fleet's landing, and the approach of the Insectoid forces, and mobs rushed the spaceport, hoping to escape. Everyone wanted to get aboard the few merchant ships left that were being conscripted to join the fleet.

Major Fortran, commander of the Glory's marine battalion, bit his lip. The word going around was that North had given him strict "shoot to kill" orders; Fortran, who had received the orders face to face, knew that this was only a slight exaggeration. North had authorized him to use restraint if possible, but to "take all measures necessary" to ensure the cargo was obtained. Fortran's men were on guard at the spaceport perimeter, holding back the crowds, while the regular navy people took on supplies and made the remaining civilian spacers ready.

The screaming crowd surged, and one of the perimeter security fences buckled, and fell. The crowd pushed forward towards the thin line of League Marines. Fortran could hear over his command monitor the corporal in charge of that section of the cordon frantically calling his platoon leader for instructions.

"Sir, sir, what do we do?" said the Corporal, as the crowd surged forward. He was waiting, almost fearfully, for that dreaded instruction, "WFC", weapons-free clearance, a fancy way of giving permission to fire into the crowd.

But before the platoon leader could respond Fortran broke into the command circuit. "Warning shots first! Fire rounds, over their heads!"

His men fired a series of laser volleys over the crowd's head. The crowd screamed, pulling back. Fortran barely had time to exhale before the next hot spot demanded his attention. When had they ever gotten so desperate as to be at the point of firing on their own people?

"The reports are coming in; there isn't very much available in the way of supplies at the spaceport, except for fuel, and seven civilian and merchant spacers" said Commander Dulin. "Perhaps if we went farther inland...."

"Too dangerous. Not enough time," said North, looking into the air.

"Sir, three of those ships are passenger ships, and even the merchant ships can take on some passengers," said

Dulin meaningfully.

North continued to stare into oblivion. "Millions of people, and we get to choose the handful that get saved. But are we really saving them? We're going on a journey that none may return from. Maybe they'd be better off where they are."

"Sir?"

North waved a hand dismissively. "Tell ground control that once everything is loaded to take some passengers aboard. But that should be the final task, and only after all the cargo is loaded aboard. There will be a stampede once the word gets out. What progress is there on the repairs?"

Suddenly, the alert klaxons blared.

"Report!" said North.

"An Insectoid fleet is entering the system."

"Composition!"

"...14 ships, four scouts, five destroyers, five cruisers, four light, one standard class."

"Battle stations!" said North. "Jam their frequencies! I don't want any message getting through!"

The battle was brief but fatal--for the Insectoids. Even North's small fleet outgunned the small attack probe. The Insectoids lost three destroyers and two light cruisers in the first engagement. Deciding they had had enough, they turned tail and ran... right into the arms of the vanguard force North had purposely positioned behind them.

When all was said and done the Insectoid battle group was destroyed, but two of North's cruisers were damaged, one beyond immediate repair.

"Evacuate the heavily damaged one," said North. "And the other ship?"

"Damaged, but spaceworthy," said Wren.

"What about the three ships that were undergoing repairs to their drive units?"

"One has been repaired. Repairs are pending on the other two."

"Tell them they have one hour to make repairs. If they can't make their ships reach at least 90% of fleet flank speed, evacuate their ships and scuttle them."

"An hour?" said Dulin.

North swiveled his command chair to face Dulin. "We can't be certain they didn't get a message off before we engaged them. Also, this combat probe is bound to be missed. Those are my orders."

From the Log of War Admiral Norman North,
Commander, Combined Alliance Fleet:
Three weeks After Vitalics

We're just a few hours out from Orotis. I suppose I should feel a small sense of victory that we've made it this far without further losses. I say "should" because I don't; there's no joy in making a hasty retreat. Basically, we're retreating out of Alliance space at top speed, and so far no Insectoid ships have come so far so quickly to catch us running with our tails between our legs.

Which brings me to the subject of what we do next. Some of my officers have begun floating the idea of hanging out here, at the rim, and conducting hit and run raids on the

Insectoids, when they come out this far. But if guerrilla warfare won't work in the core of our homeworlds, it will hardly work much better here. We'd have some successes in the beginning, but sooner or later the Insectoids, with an overwhelming number of ships, would hunt us down and destroy us. Guerrilla warfare only works when you have a secure base of operations to retreat to and get resupply from; very shortly we will have neither.

I've been giving the matter of what to do next a lot of thought. There are really only two ways to have any realistic chance of destroy the Insectoids. First, we could build more ships. But that could take years, and the first thing the Insectoids will do is to destroy or occupy all our shipyards.

That just leaves one other possibility. If we can't get the numbers we need to take back our homeworlds, the only other way a fleet this size could defeat the enemy is if we had superior technology. And that, I'm afraid, will require us to leave Alliance space altogether. It's risky; for one thing, we won't have any established means of resupply when we're gone. And it will mean leaving everything that we know. Outside of our fleet, we may never see another human face again, if ever. But we need to go into the uncharted regions if we're to find what we're looking for.

For it isn't by chance that I selected Orotis as our final destination inside of Alliance space. The University of Orotis is known Alliance-wide for a certain field of study that will be vital to us in our search. The study of historical xenology. The study of the Chent.

The remnants of the Alliance Fleet successfully made it into orbit around Orotis without further incident. North split up his fleet, sending portions of it out on barrier patrol around the outskirts of the system while his main force took up position above the planet.

The governor of Orotis, though hardly pleased by the turn of events, was more willing to be cooperative than the governor of Danmark II, and offered his assistance in the resupply effort. Orotis, while hardly a major hub by the standards of the core worlds, was one of the largest trading areas on the fringe. Eighteen merchant ships were in orbit or on the ground when the fleet arrived, and all agreed to form a convoy along with the ships that joined their fleet at Danmark II. The merchant skippers figured, correctly that they'd get better protection if they joined with North's fleet, though if they knew that they were to undergo a journey that might last years or even decades, they might've had second thoughts.

While the resupply efforts were underway, North took a military shuttle down to the University of Orotis. Dulin and Wren had tried to veto his decision, but he was adamant; but he did agree to take a platoon of Major Fortran's men, most of whom touched down on an accompanying assault transport. As Orotis didn't have its own landing facilities, North made a splash as he landed on the front lawn of the sprawling campus. North slowly plodded across the campus, flanked by the security platoon, oblivious to the curious onlookers. He knew exactly where he was going; he had downloaded this

information before leaving the Glory: the Department of Historical Xenoscience.

North found the faculty members and research scholars waiting for him. "Good, gentlemen, I see you received my message," he said calmly. "As many of you may know, my name is War Admiral Norman North. I command what's left of the Alliance fleet."

There was a small murmur in the room.

"The Insectoids will be coming here soon, perhaps in several days, or even several hours."

"What are you going to do?" said the head of the department, Professor Stevenson.

"There's not much we can do," said North. "Nearly all the fleet was destroyed. That's why I've come to you gentlemen. You're going to help me defeat the Insectoids."

Shocked glances.

"That's right. We're preparing accommodations for you and your senior researchers on the Glory. We're taking you all on a little trip."

"Trip? Where?" They asked.

"To find the Chent."

The Chent. An extremely technological advanced older race that had existed hundreds of thousands if not millions of years before mankind. Thought to be long extinct, some of their works had survived--a few artifacts here and there, a few scattered monuments on distant worlds.

"The Chent are gone," said Stevenson

"True, Professor," said North. "But not their works." He lowered his voice, but still spoke loudly enough to be heard. "The situation is grim. We no longer have the numbers to defeat the Insectoids. Our chance, our only chance, is to find some piece of Chent technology we can use to destroy the Insectoids. That's why I need you people. You've made some good progress in deciphering the Chent monuments. You can help us locate other Chent sites, and maybe even point us in the right direction of where to go."

"Researchers have been searching for Chent artifacts for centuries, and most have turned up little or nothing," said Stevenson. "What makes you think we'll fare any better?"

"We have no choice," said North. "If we stay here, we'll be destroyed; if we dance around the sector, we'll only be postponing the inevitable. This is our only chance. If it will take time, spent it with me. I'll see it through with you, if you come with us."

A researcher said, "This could take decades, or longer."

"Yes."

"Our colleagues on August or June are really more knowledgeable in this area and maybe they--"

"Your colleagues on August and June are already being fitted with Insectoid control collars and are now slaves of the Insectoids. Do you really want to be in their company right now?"

Stevenson said, "Let me have some time to talk it over with my people."

North shook his head. "I'm sorry, but we have no time. The Insectoids could be here at any time. We'll only have a few minutes warning before they reach in-system, which won't be enough time to evacuate you and your staff."

"Admiral, I think we need to vote--"

North shook his head again. "You don't understand; I'm

not asking you to accompany me; I'm telling you. I offered an explanation out of courtesy. Lieutenant!"

"Sir." The platoon leader stepped forward.

"Allow these men to gather any papers or files they need. But they're not to leave the building, and I want them boarded on your assault transport within the hour. If they resist, carry them. If they run, stun them and carry them."

"An hour!" said Stevenson. "But what about our families? Our-"

North's face softened ever so slightly. "Call them. If they want to come, we'll make room for them. Just be honest with them--we're going away for a long, long time, and there's no telling when we'll be coming back." Turning on his heel, he marched backed to the shuttle in the company of two marines. Much as he wanted to supervise the evacuation of the scientists, events were moving too quickly, and he didn't want to be caught on the ground when the Insectoids arrived.

"Glory," he simply told the shuttle pilot, as he strapped himself in.

His concerns seemed justified when the shuttle, on final approach to the Glory, was relayed a proximity alert from the bridge.

"How many of them are there," North asked, stiffening immediately. His mind was racing; could they evacuate the scientists in time? How had they gotten here so quickly? If the attackers were only another small combat probe, maybe they could repel them....

"Just a moment," said Wren, studying the data being relayed from their out-system pickets. "Just one... it's one of ours, Admiral! A fast attack destroyer, the Suny Blue! Wait... I'm getting a relayed message...."

"What is it?" North asked, straining to listen over the sounds of the shuttle landing in the bay. With a scrape and a small bump the shuttle touched down securely in the hanger.

"The Suny Blue was assigned to Armistice duty at Vitalics," said Wren, her voice filled with awe.

One hour later the Captain of the Suny Blue, Tens Zender, was standing at attention in North's command office, just off the main bridge.

"At ease, Captain," said North. He gestured for Zender to sit down. "We didn't know that anyone survived the ambush at Vitalics. Did any other ships get away?"

Zender swallowed. "No sir, not that we saw. But it was quite a hectic situation."

"I imagine," said North. He gazed coolly at Zender. "I'm very interested to hear how you got away. I'm even more interested to know how you found us."

"Found you, sir? We didn't even know any elements of the fleet had survived," said Zender. "Once we escaped we realized that most of the fleet was probably destroyed. We were pursued by Insectoids ships in the area around the core worlds, and barely managed to escape. Finally we decided that our only chance for survival was to make for the fringe worlds. I guess you came to the same conclusion."

North nodded. "But how did you survive Vitalics? What happened at Vitalics?"

"Well, sir, I'm not really sure." Zender swallowed again, and got a pained look on his face as he tried to

recall unpleasant events. "The Insectoids sent ships forward to meet us. They weren't military ships--actually, they looked more like cargo ships. The ships launched these round, spherical objects, a lot of them."

"What kind of objects?"

Zender shook his head. "We don't know. But when these objects got near us they exploded, spreading a fine mist. It took down the shields, weapons, and power systems for most of the fleet. Then they started launching wave after wave of rocket attacks at us. It was a slaughter."

North's hands grasped his chair more tightly, but otherwise betrayed no reaction. "And how did you escape?"

"We were on the very edge of the formation. One of the battleships got wise that something is wrong and opened fire on the ship heading closest to us. The Insectoid ship wasn't destroyed, but it was damaged enough so it stopped launching globes at us."

"Did any other ships fire back?"

"Not that I could see."

"What battleship was this? Did you see what happened to this battleship?"

"I don't know," said Zender. "Once we heard reports of power failures throughout the fleet, we knew we had to steer clear of the mist field, which we were mighty close to. When we saw what was happening to the fleet, we knew there wasn't much we could do... so we escaped. Or tried to escape. We were hunted for several days by several battle groups. They got a few potshots at my ship before we managed to get out of range, but they kept up the chase. We managed to evade them, hiding out in an asteroid field for several days. After we got out, we knew we'd have to escape, so we headed out here."

"And did you see or hear of any other ships escaping from Vitalics?" said North. "If you were clear of the field, perhaps others were as well."

"Perhaps one or two," said Zender. "But if there were, we didn't see them."

"Hm." North drummed his fingers on his desk. "And they were simply destroying the fleet, not taking any prisoners."

"Not that we saw," said Zender quietly.

North's face grew grave. "A lot of good men died that day, Captain. And I served with a lot of them for a long time."

"Yes sir," said Zender. "Sir? What do we do now?"

"Return to your ship," said North. "Naturally, you'll join our fleet. We're going on a little journey. You'll get details on that soon. Dismissed." As Zender turned to go, North hit a button on his command console. "Captain Dulin? Please report to my ready room."

Dulin entered a few seconds later. "Sir?"

"Have a tech team go over Captain Zender's ship from stem to stern."

"What should they be looking for?"

"Anything out of the ordinary. Tracking devices. Anything. Then have sickbay do a thorough medical scan on our Captain and his senior officers. Have them look specifically for any signs of medical tampering."

"You suspect a trap?"

"Unlikely, but possible," said North. "I believe the young man is telling the truth. But I still find it hard to believe that anyone got out of Vitalics alive." He told Dulin

what Zender had relayed to him. "I wonder who that battleship captain was and what happened to him."

"His ship would've been vastly outnumbered; he was probably destroyed, along with the rest."

"Probably," said North. "When you're done with my little errands, call all senior captains to a meeting in the briefing room in two hours. It's time we got moving."

The briefing room was packed when North arrived, several minutes late. Normally he insisted on punctuality for all under his command, including himself, but he had just been on the line with the medical staff, and received a preliminary report from his tech team. Zender, it appears, was in the clear.

"Gentlemen," said North, gazing at the assembled Captains. Every senior captain was there, mostly Command Captains but a sprinkling of War Captains as well. Most senior captains were in charge of the larger ships, the heavy cruisers and the battlecruisers, but several captains in charge of destroyer battle groups were present as well. Also present were North's senior staff--Dulin, Wren, and Colonel Robert Dey, commander of the Glory's starfighter squadrons. North noticed that all the white uniformed Directorate captains sat on one side of the room with Captain Bennett, who had been second in command to the late Captain Alada, while all of North's light-blue uniformed League sailors sat on the other side. That would have to change.

North quickly related Captain Zender's story. A hushed silence fell on the crowd.

"What kind of a weapon could render our fleet defenseless?"

"We don't know yet what kind of a weapon it is, but we know its effect," said North. "It makes ships defenseless. If we stick around here, we're just giving the Insectoids an invitation to try it out on us."

"No one is proposing that we stay here," said Bennett. "What do you propose, War Admiral?"

North slowly walked around the room, staring at different faces in the crowd, both Directorate and League officers, as he spoke. "We know now that this battle won't be won by sheer force of numbers. In the past we have won victories even when we've been outnumbered, but never by margins of five or ten to one, never when the enemy is as technologically advanced or more advanced than we are."

"Therefore if we cannot win by numbers, we must prevail by utilizing superior technology. We have to develop new weapons that will let our little pocket fleet destroy the Insectoids."

"How do we develop this new technology?" said one of the captains, Captain Harkness, of the second largest ship in North's fleet, the pocket battleship Blue Luna. He was a crusty old officer, but very reliable; and as Captain of the Blue Luna, he was technically third-in-command of the fleet, should anything happen to North and Dulin. North frowned inwardly; with the combination of the two fleets, he would have to give some serious rethinking to the chain of command. But not now.

"Perhaps 'develop' was a poor choice of words," said North. "We're not going to develop this technology, we're going to find it."

"Where do we find it?" Someone else asked.

"Out there," said North, pointing out the viewport.

"Out among the stars. Among the Chent." He paused to let this sink in. "All of us know from the bits and pieces of Chent technology we've discovered that they were vastly superior to what we've developed now. If we can uncover an abandoned Chent base, or even the remnants of one of their ancient cities, we may be able to harness enough of their technology to help us defeat the Insectoids."

"The galaxy is a big place," said Bennett. "We could search for centuries and not find anything."

"I've recruited a bit of help," said North. "Leading researchers on the Chent from the University of Orotis have patriotically decided to sign up and join our efforts to search for the Chent. I'm not saying it will be easy, and it will take time, but I think it's our only chance."

"But if we leave human space, how will we be resupplied?" one of the captains wanted to know.

"We won't be," said North. "Your ships already have the ability to grow a limited supply of your own food. We will be augmenting this ability with hydroponics equipment that we're bringing up from Orotis. We can plant gardens in our cargo bays and on the civilian ships which are joining us."

"And what of spare parts, and fuel?"

"We have an ample supply of spare parts at present, but we will have to improvise," said North. "As for fuel, we can adapt our collectors to run on plasma from any nearby sun."

"Plasma!" said one of the Captains. "Even if you get that to work, we won't be very fuel efficient; and we'll have to constantly be refueling."

"Not constantly," said North. "More frequently, yes."

"And what if it takes us a century of looking to find what we're looking for--that means another century just to get back to Alliance space!" said another. "The farther out we go, the longer it will take us to return."

"I never said it would be easy, and there's no guarantees. But it's our only choice," said North.

"What if we stay here, and start a hit and run operation? We can't destroy them, but we can sting them, wear them down," said another.

North shook his head. "Guerrilla tactics work where you have a network of friendlies who can resupply you and give you sanctuary for repairs and refueling; we don't, or won't, for very long. Sooner or later, they'd find us and destroy us."

Bennett said. "War Admiral, I hear what you're saying, but you're asking a lot. You're basically asking us to leave mankind behind, and perhaps never to see our people again for years, if ever again in our lifetimes.... It's a lot to ask." North looked at the assembled officers. "Most of you know me, if not personally, from fighting side by side in battle, then from the legends of what I've accomplished. For hundreds of years I've fought to keep the Alliance safe. You know what I've accomplished, what I've achieved, despite sometimes overwhelming odds. I'm asking you to trust me again, now; and to join me, not as League sailors, or Directorate sailors, but as one group. Alliance sailors. Only by sticking together can we survive. Otherwise, by this time next year we'll all either be wearing Insectoid slave collars, or we'll simply be

dead. I'm offering you an alternative to this certainty. Now who will stand with me?"

At that moment North's stern face looked as if it had been chiseled from stone. He stared at the assembled officers like a searchlight staring out at the darkness. Wherever he gazed confusion, and fear, was replaced by confidence, and resolution.

North's officers stood up, almost as one, and declared themselves for him. But he knew they would. The Directorate officers, however were seated, each looking at the other, as if waiting for an unspoken signal.

"I don't like your plan," said Captain Bennett slowly. "But you warned us against going to Jarja; and if we had listened to you, this room might be a good fuller than it is now. You saved us then, just as you saved us before and undoubtedly will do so again. I know your history, War Admiral, just as I know you, and while I say I have doubts about your plan, I have no doubts about you. Where you lead, I will follow."

And then Bennett's men stood up as one, and declared themselves for North. And after that day, though sailors knew if in the past they had belonged to the Directorate, or the League, they simply called themselves soldiers of the Alliance now, and War Admiral Norman North was their leader. That didn't mean there would never be factionalism or disagreements again, but at that moment, they were more united than they ever had been.

It was two days later before outlying warning beacons, dispatched far beyond the edges of the Orotis system, sounded the alarm; a fleet of Insectoids ships, some 104 ships strong, was on its way. Although information on the composition of the attack force was sketchy, it was composed of at least 60 capital ships. This was no small combat probe.

Immediately, transshipments from the planet ceased; the fleet formed the formations that North had worked out with Dulin and Bennett; and the fleet was made spaceworthy within an hour. There was a last minute crush of people trying to reach the civilian ships; but only a tiny number could be taken, and then only after they agreed to maintain the hydroponic farms on the spacers that were appropriated by the fleet. As the ships accelerated away from the planet, there was more than one teary eye as the image of Orotis, the last human outpost they would ever hope to see, shrunk from a round oval into a shiny dot in the sky... and then it was gone.

When the Insectoid fleet arrived in-system twelve hours later, there was nothing to greet them but Orotis itself and empty space, no trace of North, or the rest of the fleet, which were long gone, in search of a slender chance and a wild hope.

Chapter 8

The Silencer Comes to August

The Insectoids in patrol around August tracked the small fighter that streaked past their orbital blockade; but though they trained their lasers on it, it was too quick for them, streaking in-atmosphere even as their orbital fighters set course to engage it.

Landing was another matter; once it set down, they would quickly locate and destroy it. Then a decision was made not to destroy but to capture and interrogate the pilot. The Insectoids wanted more information about this individual who could slip through their net so easily.

The fighter settled in a clearing near a set of low hills on the outskirts of the Capital city, in a small (and very rare) public spot: a city park. But the ship's landing also attracted the attention of others.

"See that?" said Croft, squinting with his electrobinoculars.

"See what?" said Gantry, one of the Agency members he had teamed up with.

"A fighter. Looks like it landed a bit to the west."

"How do we know it wasn't an Insectoid ship?" asked another Agency team member named Jena.

Croft shook his head. "It looked like one of ours." Hoisting up his backpack, he said, "Let's go."

Gantry groaned. "But today is Sniper Monday!" Gantry was the "caddie"; he was in charge of lugging the special rifles in their protective carrying case.

"We can shoot some Insectoids later. Someone might need our help."

"The place will probably be crawling with Insectoids. Since when do we help people?" said another teammember, Corren.

Croft took a breath. "All right, we're not going to help whoever's there; we're going to find out what the pilot knows. Once we finish interrogating him we can turn him over to the Insectoids, satisfied?"

It was funny what a difference a few weeks of scavenging could make. Most of the population of August had been interned in forced labor camps. But a few scavengers and resistance fighters survived. Some of them were soldiers, and others were Agency teams, like the one Croft led. As he was widely known to be one of the Eight, his leadership of the group was never questioned, even if his decisions constantly were.

They tried as best they could to hurry, but they also had to evade Insectoid patrols. But when they arrived at the park it seemed the Insectoids had gotten there first. In the distance they saw the fighter, the exhaust still smoking, as it lay neatly parked by a lake, and the faint images of Insectoids in the distance. The Insectoids didn't seem to be moving.

"Neat landing," Gantry commented, peering at the ship in the dim light. "Whoever did that must've been one great pilot, even with repulsarlifts."

But then as they cautiously snuck closer they saw another detail... the Insectoids they had seen from the distance were all lying on the ground, unmoving. In fact the lawn around the ship was oozing with green, coming from their bodies. Dead bodies. All dead, at least 20 of them. What had happened here?

The ship was a one-seater, maybe a two seater at most. Could one or two people have gunned so many Insectoids down?

And then Croft saw the figure, leaning against the side of his ship, whistling a sad tune, his hand reflexively drawing, holstering, and redrawing his gun at a rapid pace.

"Is this a crazy man?" Gantry hissed, as Croft and the others peered at the guy through the bushes.

Croft, realizing the sound of his voice might carry, hit the ground, pushing Gantry down as Croft motioned him to be silent. But the warning almost came too late; right after they dropped, an energy bolt scored right where Gantry had been standing.

"I... see... you...." came the voice, as it stopped whistling and started humming. That voice sounded familiar, kind of.

Croft raised his electrobinoculars, as he lay prone on the ground. Then Croft caught the guy square in his visual sites... and caught the end of the man's pistol, pointing straight at his binoculars. "Wait!" Croft yelled at the top of his voice.

The man didn't fire, so it must have worked.

"We're human!" Croft yelled again.

The man seemed to know it from the start, but he wanted to give them a hard time. "Prove it," he said.

Croft slowly started to get up, but Gantry pulled on me. "Croft, he's obviously mad!"

"Oh, most definitely mad," Croft said. "But probably not at us." He realized that the man could have shot them dead several times by now, even at this distance.

Croft stood up, with my hands raised, and he saw the man that Croft now expected to see.

The Silencer.

The man had his gun drawn and pointed at Croft. "Croft?" he said, lowering it a few inches.

Croft nodded. "Can I lower my hands now?"

The Silencer nodded. "You can tell your guys in the bushes there, there, and there..." he pointed with his pistol, "To relax. They are with you, right?"

Croft nodded again.

They approached his ship. "How did you get here?" Gantry asked.

The Silencer made a deprecating expression on his face and pointed to his ship.

"I mean, who are you? What are you doing here?" Gantry asked.

"No time for that," said Croft. "We've got to get you out of here, it's not safe-"

The gun whirled out of the Silencer's holster and two bolts were fired. On the far side of the lake, two approaching Insectoids fell to the ground, one of them screeching as it was shot.

"I know, it's not safe," said the Silencer. Then, purely as an afterthought, "You'd better go."

"If you stay here more and more will come, and they'll kill you," said Croft.

"I know," said the Silencer, standing his ground. He slowly turned his head, looking for potential targets.

"What's this all about?" said Croft. "You don't usually kill unless you're paid for it." Then, looking at the Silencer's face, and thinking about his actions, he understood. "Where's Annie?" he asked.

The Silencer's face was granite. "They killed her, Clifford."

A squad of Insectoids burst into view. Croft's people

raised their weapons, but before they could fire, it was all over. The Silencer momentarily lowered his weapon.

"This isn't the answer, John," Croft said. "Sooner or later they'll come at you with armored vehicles, or shoot you from the air."

"Yes."

"Don't you want to live?"

"No," said the Silencer. Then, uncharacteristically, he added, "I just want to kill as many of these creatures as I can."

"That's not what Annie would've wanted," said Croft. That got him a glare, and for a moment, Croft felt a wave of fear. He licked his lips, and tried a different tact. "These Insectoids didn't kill Annie, John. It's their leaders, they're the ones who gave the orders."

"I know, I killed one of them," said the Silencer. "I'd like to get some of the others, but they're too well protected in orbit." The Silencer's gun shot out again, and two more Insectoids fell. In the distance the sound of a motorized vehicle could be heard. Time was running out.

"But some of them are on August! And working with us, we can help you get them!" said Croft.

For the first time, Croft felt that something that he was saying to the Silencer was finally having some effect.

Several mechanized vehicles broke into the clearing on the other side of the lake. They were brimming with troops.

"That will take time," said the Silencer.

"In the meantime, you can kill some Insectoids with us, have some fun, paint the town... you can kill more if you come with us and live, than if you simply stay here and get shot."

"I don't know," said the Silencer. "I think I can kill an awful lot more before the get me."

"Come with us, you'll kill even more in the long run!"

The Silencer considered, as the vehicles closed into effective range.

"Promise?"

"Promise!"

When the Insectoid groundtracks cleared the far side of the lake, all they found was an abandoned fighter. One of the Insectoid troopers, inspecting the cockpit, found a stick pressed against one of the controls. He removed the stick... and the ship exploded, taking two of the groundtracks and more than a dozen Insectoids with it.

When the sound of the explosion carried a quarter mile to the south, a small smile broke out on the Silencer's lips. But only for a moment.

From the personal log of Clifford Croft, one month after the invasion of August:

We brought the Silencer back to one of our hideouts in August. If you're an outsider reading this (how did you crack my code?) you may wonder what I mean by that. Where on August? Well, since August, the western continent, is basically one big city, we just refer to it all as August (except for Sarney, of course). Oh, there are still some

farms in the outlying provinces, and the entire eastern continent is undeveloped (mental note to self: whatever happened to Levi?). But, to put it simply, August is August.

I've kept a log in the past, but this time it has a special meaning to me. We're slowly getting picked off one by one, and chances are that we won't survive much longer. There's no air cavalry waiting to come over the horizon to save us. Our fleet has been destroyed and we're trapped here, on our own.

If you know anything about me or my past, you may think that this situation should be familiar to me. After all, I've spent most of my life as an infiltrator, hiding around in a society that would imprison or execute me (or worse) if they got their hands on me. While that's true, this is different. Whenever I went on a mission, I always knew there was a home, somewhere, where I could go in safety once the mission is over. Only now there is no safe home to return to, and there will be no end to the mission. This occupation could last dozens of years, or hundreds of years, or longer. Our only hope is to try to wear the Insectoids down, and it's a slim hope. We can hurt the Insectoids, but there are only a few Agency teams out there, and in the big scheme of things we can't stop an army; that's not what we were trained for.

The Silencer has been plenty quiet since we brought him in. Preston and the others think it's because of his grief over Annie. Only I, who have known the Silencer for a long time, know better--the Silencer ALWAYS keeps to himself. Even I, who counts himself as one of the Silencer's best friends (if he ever had any), could rarely get much of a conversation out of him. I wonder if Annie ever got him to talk?

Anyhow, we have to continue to stay active. But each time we go out on a mission there's a chance that one (or more) of us won't come back. We lost Fletch last week and Dorim the week before. We're down to seven agency operatives in this group... seven and the Silencer.

"Good moooooorning, August!" I boomed, entering the common room, giving a strategic toe to the forms lying on makeshift bedding of foam packing.

I was met with groans from the half-dead. I had appointed myself morale officer; I was keenly aware that without morale, or at least some agitation, this bunch would become little more useful than an unruly mob.

"Go away," said Jena, covering her head with a pillow.

"Good morning!" I boomed again. "The sun is shining, the birds are chirping--"

"We're on sublevel 17a, and we don't know or care whether there's sunlight on the surface," said Gantry.

"And there hasn't been a bird seen on the western continent in decades," Jena added, moaning slightly as she woke up some more.

Good. At least I was getting their attention. "It's time to start our day! While Preston here serves you a delicious breakfast of protein concentrate and distilled water, it's time to consult our favorite fortune telling device, the activity planner!"

I turned to indicate a giant black wheel behind me, part of a stabilizer from an Insectoid shuttle. We had liberated the stabilizer covertly from a shuttle parked at the Sarney Sarittenden spaceport, confident that our theft

wouldn't be discovered until the shuttle was used again. (Sure enough, the very next day when the shuttle was next used, there was a loud explosion at the spaceport and a smoking hole in the ground not far from where the shuttle had been).

The wheel was divided up into a number of sectors, each of which had a word painted along the edge, such as "SNIPER", "ASSASSINATION", and "ESPIONAGE", "SPYING", "SEARCH FOR PROFESSOR CAPYBARA" (where did he go?), and "SHOPPING" were written. A giant pointer (actually, the burned rifle barrel of an Insectoid gun) was in the middle of the wheel, where it could be conveniently spun.

After several weeks of going on the same missions, over and over, we had decided to introduce some variety by making a game out of it. Well, ok, actually it had been my idea. But things had gotten so boring through repetition.

"Who would like the honor of spinning the wheel today?"

I was met by groans in response.

"Very well," I said, taking that as permission to spin myself. I took a grip on the pointer, and gave a wild spin.

The pointer spun around and around, only slowing down a bit after three laps. It really started to run out of energy around the "Professor Capybara", leading me to believe that we were destined to spend another fruitless day searching for that spectacled rodent, but then the pointer landed on "INTELLIGENCE GATHERING".

"Well well well," I said. "And so our agenda is set."

More groans.

And so today became Intelligence Gathering Tuesday. Actually, we didn't end up gathering that much intelligence about the Insectoids; but we did learn a lot about the Silencer.

While doing a routine reconnaissance (last Thursday being Recon Thursday), we noticed some unusual activity coming in and out one of the tall skyscrapers just a few blocks away from our hideout (once we came out on the surface).

We entered an adjacent building across the street that was empty and took the elevator up a few floors. Then we looked across the way at the other building; and, seeing no activity, we went up a few floors more.

On the 44th floor we saw it, through the windows across the way. It looked like some sort of Insectoid command post, with consoles set up throughout the floor that were manned by Insectoid technicians. Crouching down on the floor, we caught the images through our electrobinoculars.

"If we can sneak in and climb up to the 43rd floor, we might be able to tap into an access cable on the 44th and get into their network," I said. "The only tricky part will be getting into the stairwell, but maybe if we try going underground...."

"Unacceptable."

I turned around to see the Silencer. It was always surprising just to hear him speak.

"But that's the safest way-"

"How many Insectoids will die this way?" the Silencer asked.

I considered. "Well, if we're lucky there might be one or two in the stairwell."

"Unacceptable," said the Silencer.

"Listen, Silencer, or whatever you call yourself," said Jena. "You may have a deathwish, but some of us here want to remain alive for a while longer. If you want to go in through the front, guns blazing, by all means. But otherwise keep quiet and follow our lead."

A muscle twitched in the Silencer's cheek. I held my breath. The Silencer was not one to bait. But he simply stared at Jena, with a cold, deadly stare. She matched his gaze for a moment, then she looked suddenly away, looking flustered.

"Right," I said. "To the stairwell."

We took the elevator down to the ground floor and then I turned to head to the stairwell leading down under the planet surface. But when I reached the entrance to the underground, I turned around and noticed something.

The Silencer was gone.

We ran to the entrance of the building, giving us an unobstructed view of the Silencer walking calmly to the building across the street. Four Insectoid troopers were on guard, all armed with laser rifles. They watched the Silencer as he walked up to them. Maybe they didn't shoot him on sight because his gun was holstered; or maybe they didn't shoot because the sight of this single, grim human slowly walking to them was not like anything they had ever seen. Humans cowering in fear? Yes. Humans running away from them? Yes? Even humans firing on them? Yes. But a single human walking up to them? No.

Either way, they all had the sense to at least point their rifles at him when he got close. "Halt!" one of them said through its glowing translator device, located on its chest. "What are you doing here, human?"

"I'm here to steal information from your command center upstairs," said the Silencer.

This took a second or two to penetrate. During that time the wind howled, a glint of sunlight glistened off the Silencer's eyes, and a note of alarm planted itself in the minds of the Insectoids. They raised their rifles ever slightly, fingers tightening about their triggers....

And in that split second there was a streak of motion and three, no, four discharges. All Croft saw, from across the street, was a blaze of motion, the light of blaster fire, and then, when he blinked again, the Silencer's gun was back in its holster, and four Insectoids were slumped on the ground.

Croft and his operatives cautiously ran up to the Silencer. There seemed to be no other immediate resistance.

"Why did you do that for?" he asked.

The Silencer shrugged microscopically. "She invited me to go in with guns blazing," he said, indicating Jena.

We went inside. There were two more guards at reception, but they barely had time to see us, much less react, before a blaster bolt aimed to each sent them crashing to the ground.

"Are you going to let us do any of the firing?" Croft inquired.

"If you're quick enough," said the Silencer.

"I saw you shoot three bolts," said Gantry. "What was the third for, did you miss?"

The Silencer nodded to the ceiling, where the blasted

remains of a vidmonitor hung. "If I got it quick enough, they may just think it's a malfunction."

"And if you didn't?"

"Then they'll be waiting for us."

We entered the elevator, after first checking to see that there were no monitors in there. The Silencer pressed a button, and up we went....

When the elevator doors opened, two Insectoids who were waiting at the entrance to the elevator sprayed the interior with laser fire the minute the doors opened. After a few seconds of spraying the elevator they stopped firing, realizing something.

The elevator was empty.

They turned to look at each other, and at that moment the Silencer and I dropped from the top hatch of the elevator. Before they could realize what was happening, they were dead.

The Silencer took five steps out of the elevator, which was sufficient to put most of the floor in his view. He fired nonstop, a blaster in each hand, while our operatives emerged from the stairwell and opened fire as well.

In a matter of seconds almost two dozen Insectoids were dead. The Silencer walked calmly down the rows of consoles, shooting occasionally; he didn't seem the slightest bit concerned about stray guards or technicians who might be hiding.

In moments it was over. I went over to what looked like a database interface terminal, but was dismayed when I saw a ragged blaster hole through the control circuits. "Now we'll never be able to log in!" I said. I turned to the Silencer, who had walked silently behind me. "Look what you've done!"

The Silencer looked past my shoulder, and inspected the jagged hole. "That's not from my shooting," he said, as if he could tell.

"This is what we get for the guns blazing strategy," said Jena, glaring at the Silencer. I sensed those two might have some trouble getting along.

The Silencer shrugged. "If you didn't want the equipment damaged, you should've left all the shooting to me."

"You?" said Preston. "Against two or three dozen Insectoids?"

"Yes," said the Silencer simply.

Intelligence Gathering Tuesday ended on a sour note.

The next morning we spun the wheel, and it turned out to be Sniper Wednesday. That was good. That's something we could all share and enjoy together, including the Silencer. But as we gathered for our mission I introduced the Silencer to another team tradition.

"Place your bets," I said, pointing to a board which bore all our names (and the Silencer's, newly added to the board).

"I'll bet one ration on the Silencer," said Gantry.

"I'll bet a ration on the Silencer too," said Preston.

"What is this?" said the Silencer.

I cleared my throat. "We have a competition, a gambling bet, to see who will come back from a dangerous mission. We each bet on the teammate we think is likeliest to survive

that particular day; if they win, they get an extra half-ration."

But then everyone made it clear they were voting for the same person--the Silencer. His tactics might have been only short of insane, but everyone had seen his Graftonite reflexes in action.

Since everyone was betting on the same guy, we couldn't really wager effectively, so we had to cancel this aspect of our gaming. Well, at least we still had the activity wheel to play with. And today the activity wheel said we were going sniping, and that cheered me up a bit.

I think sniping was everyone's favorite activity on the wheel. I know that everyone was already bored with searching for Professor Capybara (should we remove him from the wheel?), and most of the other sort of commando operations we performed were starting to get monotonous from repetition.

But sniping, that would be real fun. No one ever got bored of sniping. We were going to have a great time.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Preston fetched the rifles, and Jena brought the cammo tarp, all rolled up in a tight bundle. It was as if we were going on an outing, or on a picnic. Well we were going on an outing all right, but the outing we had in mind was a half mile off the surface of the planet!

We took the elevators up to the roof of one of the tallest buildings on August, the Regulation Building, and Preston unpacked the equipment while Jena spread out the cammo tarp and the rest of us started looking off the rooftop--north, south, east, west, to find the best view. The winds whipped by us and the hot morning sun shined down on us.

"A squad down the block to the west," said one operative.

"A command post backed up by heavy armor on the east," said another.

"A few stragglers on the south."

"A troop convoy on the north."

"A troop convoy, perfect!" I said. "Just what the sniper ordered! Preston?"

Preston finished unpacking and assembling three agency laser sniper rifles with special long range scopes. Only the scopes weren't the only thing special about these rifles. The laser projector inside produced a special kind of light not viewable in the visible spectrum. The problem with most sniper lasers is that after the first or second shot the path of the laser bolt would give away the sniper's location. But since the beam was invisible, the sniper's location could remain hidden for longer periods of time, especially if the sniper was shooting from long distances.

We had had merry times sniping all over August the past few weeks, picking off Insectoids troopers, watching the rest scurry away on their malformed legs. It was great fun, really, and this time shouldn't have been different.

We only had three rifles, and the customary fight broke out about who would get to snipe first.

"Hey!" I said. "We're running out of time. That troop convoy is on the move. The Silencer will take one, Preston will take another, and I'll take the third."

"Hey! You got to shoot first last time!"

"When you're one of the Eight, you'll get to decide who shoots first," I said. "Now get under cover. We all got down under the cammo tarp, so that only our heads stuck out. It was a little bit hot under it, but well worth it; the cammo tarp automatically assumed the color of the surrounding rooftop, protecting us from prying eyes, if any came up this high.

I located an Insectoid trooper on the scope, a driver of one of the vehicles. I started to squeeze the trigger. "Ready... Aim...."

And suddenly, in my sights, the trooper jerked backwards, and the vehicle skidded to the side and rammed a building. Someone must have fired first. And I didn't need to guess who.

After that it was a veritable shooting gallery, where we attempted to pick off all the targets who were now scurrying across the thoroughfares. Although they could see the approximate direction of attack, they had no way of spotting our exact location, nearly a half mile away.

Gantry mumbled something about wanting a turn and I knew that it was about time to switch. Before I could start dealing with the problem of how to persuade the Silencer to let someone else take a turn with his rifle, I heard a dull rumbling which pushed all other thoughts out of my mind.

I knew what that sound was. "Cease fire!" I hissed. "And get your heads and rifles under the tarp!" Everyone did, just before an ascending flying fortress appeared above the top of the building.

At least, it was the Insectoid equivalent of a flying fortress, a heavily armed gravitator platform, about 10 feet wide and 40 feet long, with heavy guns mounted on it every few feet, each manned by an Insectoid trooper. I peered out at the gravitator through a tiny hole at the end of the cammo tarp.

The gravitator hung in the air above us for a few seconds. Could it have located us so quickly? I thought not. And yet the gravitator hung there. I suddenly felt a shiver down our spine. The rooftop should appear empty to them, but if they detected us... we would be easy targets.

"Jena," I hissed. "Can this thing withstand heat scans and infrared?"

She paused a moment. "I think so," she said.

It was at that moment that she shifted an arm to scratch her nose, and the thought immediately flashed through my head: motion detectors. But the thought came almost too late.

Somehow the Silencer was already up and running even as the first laser bolt singed the tarp. Did an unknown hunter's instinct protect him? Or would that be a prey's instinct?

I didn't have much time to think philosophically about it, as I and everyone else was running for the stairs that would take us all the roof. Laser fire burst thick around us and we all ran for it without even trying to fire back; well, almost all of us; the Silencer, reaching the stairwell first, was on bent knee, rapidly firing several potshots, before a returning volley forced him inside.

We dashed down the single flight of stairs which took us to the elevator shaft. I noticed that some of us were missing but didn't have time to count faces because a deep, deep rumbling sound could be heard, a rumbling so deep that

it shook the stairwell. We couldn't see it at the time, but later hypothesized that a spaceship, a cruiser, maybe, had snuck up against the building. And a cruiser's lasers could demolish a civilian building in seconds.

"Jump!" I said unnecessarily, leaping into the open shaft, as I was followed by my companions. A few seconds into our fall the top levels of the building were turned into a fireball as turbolasers blasted the area. The concussion from the shock almost pushed Preston into a wall, but he steadied himself, straightening his descent. We continued to fall, trying to outrun the flames above us.

It was just a few moments later that we saw explosions again, but this time even closer; this time the Insectoids were blasting a giant hole in the middle of the building, just a few dozen feet above where we were falling seconds earlier. They were methodically destroying the building! Would we get to the bottom before they destroyed the entire structure?

I watched the ground below steadily approached. While we couldn't increase our speed of descent, it was time to start worrying about decreasing our speed. The buildings generators were located in the basement, but if feedback or the shockwave from the explosion knocked them out....

The bottom closed quickly and I eyed the rapidly approaching ground with horror. And then, just as I thought that it wasn't going to kick in, I felt myself suddenly braking rapidly. In seconds I landed gently on my feet.

All elevators on August were powered by gravitational fields and projected force beams; all we did was disable the elevator car and put the shaft in test mode. This was SOP whenever we needed a quick getaway from a rooftop.

We quickly slunk back to one of our hideaways, but I didn't have to wait until we got there to count the missing: Jena, and two of our other operatives. Three people dead on what should have been one of our least dangerous missions!

"They were expecting us," I said, gritting my teeth.

"Expecting us, how?" said Gantry. "Do you think one of us-

"Gantry, I picked the building at the last minute," I said. "No, they were expecting us because we always did the same thing. Sniping from a tall rooftop. Do the same thing enough times and they'll prepare for it. There are only a finite number of rooftops that have a commanding view over the city. It's probably taken them several tries to catch us like this," I fumed. I blamed myself, personally; this was supposed to be a fun distraction, from the normal life and death missions we went on. Instead, we had our worst casualties yet.

"Did anyone see any of the others?" I asked.

No one said anything. Then Gantry gulped.

"Gantry?"

Gantry shook his head.

"What?"

"As... as I got out of the cammo tarp, for a moment, I passed over Jena's body, just for an instant," he said. "She... had a burning hole in her forehead."

I didn't say anything else. There were only four of us left now, five if you counted the Silencer. I wondered what he was thinking. He didn't volunteer any thoughts.

Suddenly, the who-will-survive sweepstakes didn't seem

so funny anymore. The next morning, the board containing our names was gone.

Chapter 9 Fire & Applause

From the personal log of Clifford Croft, five months after the invasion:

We took it easy for a while after that. But taking it easy isn't easy; just sitting there, doing nothing, drives all of us stir crazy. Even the Silencer. I can see it in his eyes. He just sits there, quickdrawing, and reholstering, quickdrawing and reholstering, over and over again.

It must have irritated Jenkins, one of our surviving operatives, for he looked at the Silencer and opened his mouth, as if to ask him to stop. But the Silencer gave him a cold stare, and Jenkins simply closed his mouth and looked away.

After a few days we had to go out, if only to go shopping. Our food supplies were limited, and we had to periodically raid storage centers for more. The storage centers and the routes leading to them were often guarded by the Insectoids, of course.

We sneaked across one of the underground stripways. August had as many as 50 interior levels in some areas, and each level stretched for miles, much to our advantage. The Insectoids didn't have the trooper force to station soldiers on all levels. But they did have frequent patrols; it wasn't often we could sneak from one area to another without at least seeing a patrol. I tried to crack into the city's internal security system to see where the patrols were, but while I could break into the system, I couldn't figure out how to access and target the scanners. The system had been designed to be used by police bureaucrats, and so far I had been unable to crack the very unfriendly user interface. I thought I had the route to the nearest storage area memorized, but we must have turned a wrong corner, because suddenly we were in unfamiliar territory. Keep in mind that it was very easy to get lost in an underground this size; but at least, in earlier times, there would be people travelling through that one could get directions from, or electronic wall panels to consult. Now the underground was virtually empty, as most people had been rounded up and the few that hadn't been were in hiding. The only one to ask directions of were the patrols, and somehow I didn't think they'd be very forthcoming.

We heard a patrol coming our way and we quickly ducked into a side passage.

Wrong turn again. It was a dead end.

We heard the clop clop of the Insectoid feet coming our way. It sounded like a LOT of them. Some of their patrols had only two or three of them, but this sounded like at least a dozen. And in seconds they would turn the corner and see us.

We all had our weapons out, even the Silencer. I suppose with the Silencer with us we shouldn't worry, but we were boxed in a narrow corridor, and it would be difficult for the Insectoids to miss us. Unless the Silencer could get them all first. Could he?

We never found out because the Insectoids stopped, just

short of turning the corner. I heard them buzzing to each other in their own language, but had no idea what they were saying. Then, one of them made a loud buzzing sound, a warning sound, and I heard sudden movement, and then the corridor lit up. That's right, it lit up, as if there were a fire in it. But we heard no explosion, we just saw the lights of a fire, and the screams of the Insectoids. One of them, screaming rapidly, turned the corner and ran towards us. We could see it was on fire and desperately trying to rub against the wall to put the flames out. It came close to us and fell to the ground just feet from the Silencer, who still hadn't fired a shot. I think, for once, that he had been as surprised as we were.

Then there was silence and the fires died down.

"That's about all of them," I heard a high pitched, almost little-girl voice say.

And then I heard a clapping sound, also around the corner, as if someone had offered applause.

My people gripped their guns more tightly. But for me, fear evolved into cautious recognition. "Stay here," I hissed. I didn't want any misunderstandings.

I slowly edged my way around the corner, to see charred bodies under a low flame, and an expressionless young woman with reddish hair looking at me. Even as she stared I noticed her hair turning back to blonde.

"Sally?" I said.

"Who are you?" she said, peering in the gloom. "Come forward slowly, or I'll use you to create some light."

"No need," I said quickly, putting my hands where she could see them.

"Oh," said Sally, when I came closer. "It's you," she said, sounding disappointed.

"Croft!" Clap! "Croft!" Clap!

I turned around and knew who I would see before I saw him. The Clapper. Robert Clerk. A powerful telekenetic. But we just called him The Clapper.

"It's ok," I called, raising my voice slightly.

My people came around the corner, gripping their guns. Preston, I think, knew who they were, but Gentry and Jenkins probably didn't, and I'm sure the Silencer hadn't met their acquaintance.

"People, meet Sally Ravanal, aka Red Sally, and Robert Clerk, aka the Clapper."

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Gentry and Jenkins looked at me quizzically, as if more explanation was needed.

"They're high level operatives from Gamma Section," I said. "She's a top level pyrotechnic, and he's a middling range telekenetic."

"Telekenetic!" Clap! "Telekenetic!" Clap!

"Who has a tendency to clap," I said. "What are you two doing here? I thought the Agency shipped you people out before the invaders arrived?"

Gamma section contained all the Agency's mentalics; a hasty, but correct decision had been made to ship them out before the occupation took hold; they were too valuable to waste in street fighting. What were these two still doing here?

"I decided to stay and fight," said the Clapper nervously. He clapped twice.

Red Sally gave him a look.

"We decided to stay," said the Clapper.

Red Sally gave him another look, a more dangerous one.

The Clapper gulped. "She decided to stay," he said, in a small voice.

"Why?" I asked. "You were ordered-"

"I'm not going to let myself get kicked off my home planet because of a bunch of giant mosquitos," said Red Sally. "I decided to stay and fight."

"And you?" I said, turning to the Clapper.

"She... she told me to stay," he said, nodding his head.

"I see."

"I hate to interrupt this reunion, but we're asking for trouble if we stick around here," said Preston.

We beat a hasty retreat back to our base.

It was really good to have some of the Gammas on our side. But the flip side is that they were undisciplined, especially Red Sally. The first night they had problems falling asleep, due to the Clapper, and were rudely awoken early in the morning, due to Red Sally.

It all started after dinner, when we were getting ready for bed. The Clapper, eyeing the foam packaging we had laid out for him, started to clap nervously, slowly. It was a clap every ten seconds or so, but it was still frequent enough to get our attention.

"Doesn't he have any way of turning that off?" Preston asked.

Red Sally said, "Believe me, I've been resisting burning his hands off for ages."

I said, "He only claps when he's nervous, or upset, or fearful, or...."

"Or what?"

"Or if he's bored, or if the weather isn't right," I added. I went to the Clapper. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, vigorously nodding his head.

"C'mon, I see you're clapping... tell Clifford what's bothering you...."

"Bedding..." he said, nodding his head slowly as he studiously avoided eye contact.

"What about it? You have to realize we don't have real beds here-"

"Bedding!" he shrieked.

Everyone looked up for a moment.

"Lower your voice," I said. "Do you want to attract a patrol?" Our little hideaway, formerly a spacious utility closet, was fairly remote from the major passageway, but loud voices could still be heard from it.

"Bedding," he said, softly. "Bedding in the corner of the room, I'm used to my bedding in the corner of the room."

"Your bedding is in the corner of the room."

".... the corner of the room closest to the door, closet to the door, it has to be in the corner closest to the door..."

I looked around. The Silencer was lying on a pile of bedding in the corner closest to the door. I didn't think he'd appreciate doing a public service for the rest of us by moving.

"What difference does it make? A corner's a corner," I

said. Then I remembered how he didn't like the shape of our drinking glasses at dinner, and had spent most of the dinner slowly clapping about that. I shuddered; was he going to do this all night?

"Corner closest to door," he said dully, slowly clapping in pace.

I sighed and went over to the Silencer. His eyes were closed, but it seems unlikely he was asleep. When I crouched down by him, his eyes immediately flew open, and I saw the muscles in his right arm jump minutely. He looked at me with irritation, as if weighing whether I'd be worth a blaster bolt.

I cleared my throat. "Um, John, I was wondering if I could ask you a small favor."

The Silencer continued to look irritated. He wasn't going to make this easy for me.

"The Clapper... he's used to sleeping in this corner."

The Silencer glared at me.

"I mean no, obviously, he's never slept in this corner before, but in his previous hideout, he always slept in the corner closest to the door. It's a nervous habit, see? So I was wondering if you'd mind trading places with him."

The Silencer said nothing.

"John? Would you be willing to move? To help the group?"

The Silencer considered for a moment. Then he spoke a word, the only word he would say that night. "No," he said, closing his eyes.

"John? John?" I said. I decided against shaking him. Obviously, this discussion was over.

"Sorry, I tried," I said, seeing the disappointment in the Clapper's face.

We settled down for the night. I tried to ignore the periodic clapping sound. 1... 2... 3.. 4... 5... 6... 7.. 8... 9... 10... Clap. 1... 2... 3.. 4... 5... 6... 7.. 8... 9... 10... Clap.

This went on for several minutes. Then I heard a sudden rustling around me, and a startled squeal. Instantly I opened my eyes, instinctively grabbing my gun.

The Silencer was bent over the Clapper, but before I could move forward the Silencer moved away, and I could see the Clapper, hands outstretched, bound securely together in several loops with a sturdy piece of wire. The Clapper looked astonished, as if no one had ever done this to him before.

I turned back to the Silencer to say something, but he was already on his back, his eyes closed.

We were awakened early the next morning by a pungent smell; no, actually, it was a burning smell. My eyelids slowly fluttered open to find Red Sally, her blonde hair now a reddish brown, slowly burning one of the legs of our dining table. A stream of smoking was rising out of the foot of the table as it slowly burned under her constant attentions. A flame came out of one of her fingers, pointed at the leg, burning the wood but somehow not her fingers.

"Hey, what're you doing?" I asked getting up. "Stop that."

"Some hideout this is," said Red Sally. "You've got nothing to burn."

"We need that table," I said, stamping out the flames

with my boot.

"I was only going to burn a few inches. It's like a muscle; I need to keep practicing it, or I lose it," Sally said.

"Uh huh." By now everyone was up. We had a quick breakfast (after putting a bit of foam under the burned leg so it would line up with the other legs), but not before Gantry untied the Clapper.

"My hands hurt!" he said, looking accusingly at the Silencer as he massaged his hands, which had red lines on them from the cord. He clapped once, tentatively.

"I see they still work," said the Silencer dryly.

After breakfast we spun the wheel again, to see what we would do that way.

"It's a lousy idea, to let random chance decide what to do," the Silencer remarked.

"What do you care?" I countered, sensitive to criticism of the wheel. "Whatever option it settles on, it will almost certainly involve killing Insectoids."

Clap! "Let me do it! Can I turn the wheel? Can I? Can I?"

"All right," I said, glad that at least someone was getting into the spirit of things. I stepped aside so the Clapper could turn the pointer.

The Clapper didn't move forward, and he didn't touch the pointer. He concentrated, staring at it, and the pointer started turning on its own. It spun, around and around, around and around, every few revolutions getting another mental push to keep it going.

"Uh, the purpose of the pointer is defeated if it doesn't stop somewhere," I told the Clapper.

"Oh." Immediately, the pointer came to a dead stop, then moved two quadrants forward, and then stopped permanently.

"Somehow I don't think this was exactly a random selection," I said, looking at the pointer. It was pointing to "SABOTAGE".

"Sabotage!" Clap clap clap! "Sabotage!" Clap clap clap!

I used a pointer to indicate sections of a video schematic of the warehouse grounds. "This is one of the Insectoid's main ammo dumps in the city. We could go in shooting again, as I'm sure is popular in some circles, but that could set off the dump prematurely."

"Not if I do all the firing," said the Silencer.

"Even if you do all the firing," I said. "There are Insectoids barracks here, here, and.... here. If the alert is raised and they start firing, they may hit the ammo dump. No, this requires a bit of sneakiness. There's an underground service crawlway that leads into the warehouse here. We go in through there, plant a few of our homemade bombs, crawl out, and boom! We detonate. Any questions?"

The Silencer raised a hand.

"Do we get to kill anyone?"

"I presume all three barracks of troopers will be wiped out in the explosion," I said. "Any other questions?"

The Silencer raised a hand again. "Let me rephrase; do we get to shoot anyone?"

"There's always that chance," I said. "Other

questions?"

"Do I get to light anything on fire?" said Red Sally.

"Absolutely not! Not in the warehouse," I said. "If you do, that will be the last fire you ever light."

"What about this crawlway?" Preston asked. "Do they know about it? Isn't it sure to be guarded, or boobytrapped?"

"It most certainly is boobytrapped," I said, having done the preliminary survey myself. "That's where my hero comes in," I put an arm around the Clapper.

"Not to touch!" he squealed, moving away. Clap Clap.

We crawled through the access tunnel. It was a five man job--myself, the Silencer, Red Sally, the Clapper, and Gantry. We sent Preston and Jenkins out on a shopping trip, to get some more food.

We moved through the narrow space on our elbows and knees. I moved silently, as did Gantry and the Silencer. But Red Sally and the Clapper were as loud as a drumset as they banged their elbows and knees against the floor.

"Quiet!" I hissed. "We're coming up to a guard post ahead. There's a grill in the floor of the corridor above us that connects directly to this tunnel. If they hear us, these thin walls won't protect us from laser fire."

We moved at a slower pace to permit Red Sally and the Clapper to move more quietly. First I passed under the grate; looking up for a moment, I saw a shadow over it, and heard a buzz buzz sound. If they looked down...

Gantry followed next, followed by Red Sally, followed by the Clapper and then the Silencer.

When the Clapper was under the grate he froze, trembled, and stopped moving. I could see his two shaking hands moving closer together... if he clapped, we were dead. I maneuvered past Gantry and Red Sally to try to motion him forward, but he ignored me, staring at his shaking hands, moving closer... and closer....

The Silencer chose that moment to spin around silently in the tunnel, and he gave the Clapper a great kick in the buttocks, sliding him several feet down the passage. I barely had the sense of mind to put my hand over his mouth as he tumbled into me.

The buzzing sound stopped, and we could see the shadows above us shifting. We kept dead silent for a moment. Had we been discovered?

Another moment, still silent. Perhaps they were being silent because they thought they heard something, but were not sure and was trying to hear more.

Another moment. And then, the shadows shifted again, and the buzzing sound resumed.

I exhaled silently, unaware I had been holding my breath.

We proceeded without incident down another hundred yards of passageway, where a field of glowing blue bars blocked our way.

"An alarm," I whispered.

"Do you have equipment to neutralize it?" Gantry whispered.

"Yes," I said, pointing to the Clapper.

"Me?" said the Clapper.

"See that button in the wall, behind the blue bars?"

The Clapper squinted. "No."

"Look more closely."

"I don't see anything in front of the blue bars."

"Look behind the blue bars."

"Oh.." Pause. "I don't see anything, except for that button."

"Press it," I said.

The Clapper concentrated, and I saw the button push inwards. The blue bars barring our way disappeared. "Very good. Take two claps out of petty cash."

The Clapper moved to clap, but I was quicker, grabbing them first and holding them immobile. "Not until after the mission is over. This warehouse is teeming with Insectoids and is a clapping-free zone, understand?"

The Clapper nodded.

I opened the grate leading to the surface, my gun drawn as I pulled myself up and out of the tunnel. I looked around. We were surrounded by crates of munitions. Good.. I cautiously slunk around, noticing the guard positions. There were guards posted on the northern and eastern exits to the room, but they were in fixed posts. They shouldn't bother us. Of more serious concern were the warehouse workers, loading, unloading, and moving about. If one of them should come our way...

I set the Silencer to watch while Gantry planted the bombs. It would only take two or three to ignite the explosives here and blow the entire city block up. Meanwhile I was quietly opening up containers, taking out things that looked useful, and handing them to the Clapper, who held a sack that I quickly thrust into his hands. It turned out to be a strategic move, because it also inhibited his urge to clap.

Gantry, being the consummate professional he was, finished placing the explosives in under a minute, hiding them underneath things so they wouldn't be discovered until they were too late. I, however, was still picking out useful items from this demolitions supermarket.

"Croft," he hissed, hearing footsteps.

I stopped what I was doing and ducked down, but it was too late. An Insectoid worker, wearing a hardhat of some sort, came around the corner, staring at a datapad. It looked up, was about to buzz-

And a bolt from the Silencer's blaster caught it in the mouth; it dropped wordlessly.

I looked at the Silencer, stunned; the blaster bolt hadn't made but the tiniest of burping sounds. Then I saw the attachment on the end of his blaster.

The Silencer was using a silencer.

I nodded fractionally, scooped up a few more containers, put them in the Clapper's sack, and we started for the hole which led to the tunnel. The timers were set for 8 minutes, and we had already used up at least one of those...

The Clapper and Gantry popped into the tunnel. I was about to go next when we heard a klaxon. An alarm had sounded!

Above us on the catwalk we heard an angry buzz, and saw an Insectoid trooper standing next to an alarm button. Grabbing its weapon, it fired down on us.

Fortunately for us, and everyone in the warehouse, it struck a piece of empty floor, just inches from one of the

munitions boxes.

Red Sally was in action in an instant, using just a gaze to light the Insectoid on fire. Screaming, in an instant, it fell over the railing, right onto a heavy munitions crate! The minute it burned through the whole thing would explode!

"Into the hole! Quickly!" I yelled now, above the klaxon. We jumped in, me, the Silencer, and Red Sally.

We started crawling as rapidly as we could. There was no telling when that flaming Insectoid corpse would detonate the munitions. One thing was fore sure: we didn't have eight minutes to get to safety.

We crawled as rapidly as possible, and made good progress for a minute or two. I could see our exit from the tunnel up ahead, and I knew we just might possibly make it...

And then the explosion came, one which shook us against the walls of the tunnel, and I could suddenly feel a tremendous heat rising behind us...

Looking back, I saw a fireball rushing at us down the tunnel. It would reach us in seconds, before we could reach the exit. Instinctively I closed my eyes for a second, but quickly opened them again, which is a good thing, or else I might've missed what happened next.

The fires were almost on us when Red Sally, who was last in our procession, send forth a powerful flameburst of her own. It smacked against the advancing firewave, slowing it, slowing it, holding it, and then, pushing it back slightly, then holding it.

Red Sally, gasping with perspiration and looking exhausted, whispered, "Hurry... can't... hold it long..."

We scampered out of the tunnel, me dragging Red Sally, who never left eye contact with the firewall behind us. As I dragged her into the light I noticed her normally blonde hair was now a bright, bright red; in fact, it was now even warm to the touch.

We stopped for a moment in the corridor, even though it was dangerous, merely because we needed Sally some time to get on her feet. The Silencer stood with a gun in each hand, each pointed in opposite directions down the corridor. After a moment she nodded and stood up, a little unsteady. But she was able to keep up with us as we made our way home.

We all congratulated Sally; after all, she had saved our lives. But she wasn't happy.

"I didn't get to burn any of THEM," she said.

"You burned one of them," I remarked.

She made a dismissive sound and turned away. Her hair, already blonde again, was still wet with perspiration as she laid down on her foam stuffing and dropped off.

"She must be really exhausted," Gantry remarked.

"Oh, all she needs is some rest," I said. "She'll be up and igniting flammables again in no time."

I looked around, and only then noticed something was wrong. Preston and Jenkins were missing.

They should have been back before we were. I had sent them shopping for some food.

"Preston and Jenkins are overdue," I said.

"Most of you non-Graftonites are slow," the Silencer shrugged.

"I think something's happened to them."

"Let's give it a little more time," said Gantry. "Let's give it another hour or two before we start looking for them."

I nodded, feeling a bit alone. If Preston and Jenkins had been caught or killed, that would leave Gantry as the last agency agent left, besides me.

It turned out that Gantry was right to insist we wait, because several minutes later, Preston, breathing heavily, stomped through the entrance to the large maintenance closet that was our home.

"Need help," he gasped, as if he had been running hard.

"Slow down," I said. "Take a few deep breaths. What's happened? Where's Jenkins?"

"An Insectoid patrol," said Preston. "After we got the food, we had to run, and we got separated. I got lost. I've spent the past few hours just trying to figure my way out. If Jenkins is still out there, he's lost too."

I knew what it meant to be lost. With fifty dark, underground levels with corridors that all looked alike stretching for hundreds of miles in every direction, it was very easy to get lost. Even before the occupation, of course, it was common for people to get lost in the underground, but back then there was always someone around to ask directions of, and the electronic wallmaps were functioning. Neither of which was the case now. The corridors were empty, operating on low, auxiliary lighting. The only people who came through those tunnels now were the occasional scavenger, or, more likely, Insectoid patrols.

I grabbed my blaster. "Then we'll have to go looking for him. Where was your last known position?"

"Level 32, Section 85, subsection 2," said Preston.

"Let's go." Red Sally would stay behind to rest, but the Clapper, Gantry, and Preston got up and headed towards our exit. But I noticed as I headed to the door that the Silencer was staying put. "You coming?"

"No," said the Silencer. "You could search for days down there and not find him. It's a fool's errand. He's probably already dead by now."

"All right," I said. "If you don't want to come to save Jenkins, then maybe you'll want to come with us to find some food." Preston hadn't come back with his pack; he must have dumped it to travel faster. "We have almost no food left: that's why we sent them out, remember?" I knew which buttons to push.

The Silencer nodded. That made sense. "But I'm not spending more than a minimum of time on this useless chase," he warned.

"Noted," I said, sighing.

The Clapper clapped nervously in anticipation as we trooped out.

It was some team we were building here.

Chapter 10:

Jenkins is Found,

But No One Is Grateful

From the personal log of Clifford Croft:

We went through the dark corridors slowly, alert to every sound--the drip drip of water, the scurrying of rats, the

distant sounds of footsteps. We were expert enough by now to be able to tell the sounds of Insectoid footfalls from human ones, but none of the ones we heard were human. They were all the creepy scurry-scurry scraping sounds of Insectoid patrols.

Whenever the sounds of one came close, we stopped and stood absolutely still, hoping it would pass us by. With so many corridors it was unlikely they would stumble onto us. That's why in most cases, standing absolutely still until the sound grew distant, was the smartest thing to do. Still, there was always the chance that they would come across our particular corridor...

We searched for an hour, and then two, and I couldn't help but notice that the Silencer was showing signs of impatience, drawing and holstering his blaster in rapid succession, as if he were playing with a toy he was eager to use. Perhaps on one of us...?

I turned to Preston, "We've searched the entire area in this section of level 32. Are you sure this is where you got lost?"

"Well, partially," said Preston. "But we were also on levels 30 and 31, and that was hours ago. Who knows where he may be now?"

I didn't turn around to see the inevitable look from the Silencer. Even I knew that there had to come a limit to this search. Jenkins was lost, or captured or dead, and there was nothing we could do about it. If he was merely lost, and he found his way out, then there was some hope-

"Who knows where he may be now," said a high-pitched voice, imitating what Preston had just said in a mocking way.

The Silencer's guns were out of their holsters so quickly that I hadn't see them drawn. But the blasters bobbed this way and that, unsure where to point. The Clapper clapped three times, despite the metal block I had given him to hold.

"Yes, much shoot everything that moves--is the Agency way," affirmed the high-pitched voice, obviously sarcastically.

I peered ahead in the darkness. There was a discarded piece of machinery in the corridor. Whoever or whatever was speaking seemed to be behind that device.

"Come out," I said, my own weapon drawn. "We won't shoot you."

"Promise not to hurt, yes, the ones gripping guns tightly always promise...."

Suddenly that voice sounded familiar. It should have sounded familiar earlier, but with all the tension, and the unfamiliarity of their surroundings, my mind had drawn a blank. But another one of the Gammas? What was this, mutant reunion week? I holstered my gun. "You can come out now, Mongo."

A head suddenly darted above the machinery. When it saw us, it paused a moment, and then slunk forward. This being, undoubtedly human, was like no human any of them had ever see before. He had dark, straight hair that went down over his forehead and wide dark eyes. Even in this poor light they could see he had incredibly pale skin, as if he had never been exposed to sunlight, and he was incredibly thin, as if he were only bits and pieces of muscle and bone. He cautiously skulked over to them, pacing slowly, moving his head this way and that, like some animal checking out his new

surroundings.

"You can relax," I told the Silencer, who didn't lower his gun. "This one's a friend."

"A friend, yes, we put friends in confinement, that's what friends do," said Mongo.

"So I heard," I said. "What did you steal this time?"

"Steal? Yes, they say Mongo steals. Mongo looks at bits, and pieces, and shiny things, and just touches them, small things that no one misses, and they say Mongo steals--"

"What did you steal?" I asked again, patiently.

"A landing bay power energy converter," said Mongo.

"That's not a small thing that no one misses," I commented, wondering how he had been able to make off with such a large object. Well, evidently he hadn't.

"So they put him in jail, Mongo they put in jail, with all hardened criminals. Do they take into account all Mongo has done for Alliance? Do they remember all times Mongo has saved Alliance, from very very bad enemies? No. Do they say, 'Thank you Mongo, thank you for saving dear sweet lives on August?'. No. Do they say, Do they say, 'Mongo, you have done a small bad thing, but you have saved Alliance, many, many times, we are grateful?' No! It is only, 'Mongo, you are bad, we do not need you right now, you go to confinement.'" "It was the ninth or tenth time you had been caught," I said. "You couldn't expect the Agency to intervene on your behalf forever." Another thought crossed my mind. "How did you get out?"

"Insect peoples stream out of the sky, invading. Do kindly guards say, 'Bad Insect people coming. They will make you slaves, or kill you. We should free you now before we run off'? No, guards think nothing of prisoners, they just run away. But Mongo knew that forcefields relied on military generators that were about to be hit--"

"About to be hit?" said Gantry. "How did you know they were about to be hit?"

"So polites, Agency peoples, always interrupting, very good reputation--"

"Get on with the story," I said.

"Force field go off, we escape. Alien peoples come everywhere, but they don't see Mongo, no, Mongo knows all the places to hide. Mongo knows; Mongo likes tunnels!"

Gantry got impatient. "Very good, but we're looking for--"

"Jenkins, must find Jenkins," said Mongo. "Mongo knows. You can find your Jenkins, must find Jenkins, two levels down and on section across--at least you will find him there. May not find him yet there."

"What does he mean, will find him there?" Gantry said. "Croft, you know this...."

"Agency operative," I said. "Gantry, I've had more contact with the Gammas than you have. Meet Mongo, an off-again and on-again Agency operative, whose specialty is precognition."

"Precognition! That means he can see--"

"Sometimes," I said. "But predictions are often vague, and open to several interpretations--"

"Complains, all they do is complains--"

"And in addition as you can see he's very high-maintenance with an attitude to match--"

"Attitude? Mongo just told you where to find your

Jenkins. What attitude would you call that, Clifford Croft?"

The Silencer growled, "We've spent enough time in this open hallway. I feel like stationary target. You, creature, take us to Jenkins!"

Mongo sat still for a moment, then started to buff his nails. "What if I choose not to-"

There was an explosion of chipped wall pieces and ferrrosteel as the wall around Mongo exploded with blaster fire. The Silencer had used one of his blasters with the silencer on it, but in the absolute stillness of the underground Croft was afraid that the sound would still carry. The Clapper cringed and clapped three times to add to the noise.

Mongo, his life threatened, immediately turned over a new leaf. "Mongo help! Mongo help!"

"Very good," said the Silencer.

"But you don't want to go to find your friend," said Mongo. He moved closer, coming out of the gloom. He looked at the Silencer and a look of recognition came to his eyes. "You shoot me with your right hand; how did you do that?" he said, looking at the Silencer's right hand and then his arm up to his shoulder.

"What did you mean?" asked the Silencer, showing one of his rare emotions, curiosity.

Mongo hastily turned away, muttering, "Sorry... not yet, not yet."

"What do you mean, we shouldn't go after Jenkins," said Croft, also curious but trying to steer things back to more pressing topics.

"Alien peoples around," said Mongo. "Or they might be, or will be, or could be."

"What do you mean, might, will, could?" said Gantry. "Which is it?"

Mongo looked at Gantry like he was an idiot. "Many futures, some happen, some not. And some futures that happen, may happen sooner, may happen later, often hard to tell. Many flashes, all undated, hard to sort through." He shuttered, then blinked, as if he had just received another one. "You too," he muttered, looking at Gantry.

I spoke one-on-one with Mongo briefly to pin him down on Jenkins' exact location--two levels down, subsection C, corridor 22, Room 15a, a deserted classroom. That's where he may be/have been/will be. Mongo told me that there are or would be patrols in the area looking for him. If we were lucky, we would get there before the patrols.

"You might get there before them," said Mongo, "But you will not get out before seeing them. And this one," he looked at Gantry with his big dark eyes, "will die."

Gantry didn't look pleased with the news of his impending death. "I'm not going down there," he said immediately.

"Are you sure?" I asked Mongo.

"Mongo never sure. Mongo unreliable, Mongo high maintenance-"

"Are you sure," I said again, putting more aggression in my tone.

Mongo took a step closer to Gantry. He peered closely at Gantry through half shut eyes for a moment.

"Well?" I said, after a moment.

"Mongo wrong," said Mongo. "He dies later, in another place. Mongo apologizes for the mistake."

Gantry looked extremely agitated.

"Relax," I said. "What Mongo sees doesn't necessarily occur. It's not a death warrant."

But Gantry had a question, "How far can you... see into the future?"

Mongo shrugged, as if he had never considered the question before. "Weeks... months... Mongo not sure. Mongo no longer under warranty."

"All right, if we've finished with that morale booster, I vote we go after Jenkins," I said.

"He said the level is swarming with them," said Preston, speaking for the first time.

"So much the better," said the Silencer.

Mongo took us down two levels to the appropriate section, offering us running commentary every step of the way describing how ungrateful we were and how underappreciated he was. I had dealt with this behavior many times before and over time had been able to unconsciously screen it out, but I could tell from the expressions of the others that they weren't handling it as well. As we got close to the location where Jenkins was reported to be, or would be, we heard the scrape-scraping of an Insectoid patrol. We flattened against a wall in shadow, and three junctions ahead of us heard the chattering sound of their troopers speaking in their hissing, clicking and buzzing language.

And then we actually saw them, three junctions ahead of us. A patrol passing by, crossing perpendicular to us.

We stood silently against the wall, our weapons drawn, pointing, aiming... could they see us, in the dark? They said their vision was better than hours...

The patrol passed. I heard Preston clear his throat as if to say something, but the clicking sounds hadn't declined; they had only increased.

A second patrol passed by, only two junctions ahead of us. We ducked behind some falling debris and peered out. The Insectoids seemed to turn their heads this way and that; they couldn't be more than 20 or 30 feet away. Click, click, buzz...

We watched, one by one, at the last of the patrol passed out of our line of sight, and indeed stood still for a minute later until the click click buzz receded.

"I thought you said we wouldn't encounter them until after we found Jenkins," Preston whispered.

I preemptively cut off Mongo's reply about ungratefulness. "He's not always as accurate as a weather stat, Preston. Come on."

Cautiously we slunk to the appointed corridor. Mongo's eyes turned this way and that in the gloom. Was he really navigating according to a memory, or rather a vision of the future?

Mongo stopped and pointed to a door ahead of us. Guns raised, we pried it open and cautiously peered in. It looked like a dark, empty classroom. Maybe Jenkins wasn't here yet (or maybe Mongo was wrong). But if he were here, in hiding, he might shoot us before he realized-I saw a flash of something being raised in a corner, behind a desk, and hissed, "Jenkins!"

The blaster, it was clearly a blaster, held but didn't fire. "Croft? Is that you?" he hissed back.

"Are you on a last name basis with any Insectoids?" I said, gesturing for the rest of the gang to follow me in.

"How did you find me?" said Jenkins, getting up from behind a desk.

I introduced Mongo. "But detailed explanations can wait later," I said. "I can't help but notice the heavy pack on your back; while rescuing you is reward enough, may I presume it's filled with food?"

Jenkins nodded.

"Good." I turned to Mongo. "You said we'd encounter them on the way out; would we be safer if we hunkered down here and waited?"

Mongo shrugged.

"What does that mean?" Gantry demanded.

"Mongo not know. Starting out now may be worse, or better, or no difference."

"You're useless," Gantry snorted.

"Mongo remember you say that."

I groaned. We'd be hearing about that remark for a while.

"Ok, I vote we get going," I said. I didn't relish hanging around in this gloomy abandoned place unless we have to. "Any other suggestions?"

There were none.

We prepared to get going. But before we left I took the Clapper aside. "You know what to do if we encounter an Insectoid patrol, right?"

The Clapper looked confused.

"That's what I thought. You may have thought I took you along just for comic relief, but you actually have an additional purpose," I said. "If we're attacked and forced to fight, I want you to use your power against the Insectoids."

"You want me to lift them in the air?" Nervously. Clap clap.

"Push them over! Knock them out! Anything to put a few out of commission."

"My power doesn't work that way." Clap clap.

"Make it work that way," I said, clapping my own hands twice. Clap clap. "Get it?"

The Clapper nodded.

We didn't find trouble when we left that classroom.

Trouble found us.

Almost immediately we were bracketed by two patrols, coming down opposite sides of the hallway. It was either the worst run of bad luck we had had in a while or somehow they had been expecting us. The Silencer's guns were out and firing, one pointed down the north end of the hallway and one pointed towards the south. Laser and blaster bolts were flying everywhere.

"Retreat!" I yelled, dashing back into the classroom. The others quickly followed, taking positions behind desks and pointing their guns straight at the door. No one had been shot, I think, and we all took deep breaths as we stared at the partially opened door.

The first Insectoid tried to rush in and was gunned down by three shots; so was the second, and the third, and then the fourth. And then they stopped, showing that even the Insectoids have a modicum of intelligence. We heard them clicking and buzzing outside.

"A standoff," said Preston, breathing heavily.

"Anyone hit?" I asked, glancing around to identify everyone visually, but not taking my eyes off the door for more than a second at a time. No one responded, which meant either no one was hit or whoever was hit wasn't in a condition to reply. If I had had my wits I would've had everyone sound off, but on second thought that would've informed the Insectoids exactly how many of us there were, so maybe that wouldn't have been such a good idea after all.

I saw that the Silencer, Preston, and Gantry had their guns drawn and pointed at the door; I couldn't see Preston from my current position. Confident that we were as well protected for the moment as we were going to be, I took the luxury of looking around again. As I remembered from our first stay, the room had only one exit, the door we came in. Or did it? I peered in the gloom....

"Humans," came an artificial sounding voice through an Insectoid translator. "Humans, we have no wish to harm you." Click click buzz.

"You have a funny way of showing it," said Preston.

"Surrender, we will not dismember, will not hurt," said the flat, insincere sounding voice.

I crawled my way to the opposite corner of the room. Yes, there was a vent there! Trying to act as quietly as possible I pulled on the metal grating...

"We have called for reinforcements, there is no escape...."

With a wrenching sound the grating came off. The Insectoids must have sensed that something was going on, for there was a scurry of activity outside the partially opened door. But no one came in.

I motioned with my hands to get everyone's attention. They saw what I was doing and one by one started to crawl to my position. The vent looked dark and uninviting but at that moment our options were pretty limited.

At that moment, however, the dimly lit room lit up with a flash, and an explosion blew the door in and a good piece of the wall around it.

The Insectoids came streaming in, and, momentarily stunned, we didn't respond.

Except for the Silencer, that is. He hesitated only a split second before opening fire with both blasters while in a crouched position; if he could've had weapons mounted on his feet I bet he would've fired with those as well.

The Insectoids opened fire but the ones in the front ranks fell immediately and the other ones were forced to search for cover, hiding behind desks in their end of the room. But some of those desks started to push against the Insectoids; one by one they were being crushed against the walls, emitting inhuman shrieks as green liquid squirted from their exoskeletons. The Clapper looked weary as he glared at the desks, one by one, causing them to smash into the Insectoids.

In seconds it was over. The remaining Insectoids fled out the large hole they had created, and we had restored the impasse, for the moment.

Then we heard that the buzz buzzing of the few outside being accompanied by the click clicking of farther off sounds, getting closer.

It must be those reinforcements.

"Quick! In here!" I hissed, climbing in. It was a

narrow squeeze, but that was a good thing; the Insectoids wouldn't be able to follow us in here. The only trick would be to get far enough down the vent to be out of direct weapon's fire range from the classroom. If an Insectoid should simply stick his weapon into the vent and fire....

That and other cheery thoughts sustained me as I wiggled on hands and knees down the vent as fast as I could. Thankfully it turned to the right after less than a minute of flight, indicating we'd be out of site of the classroom entry point. I could only hope that everyone followed me behind.

The vent was totally dark; I only felt my way by touch. If the vent should constrict and get too small to continue, I would be at the end of a small, narrow tunnel, with a half dozen or so of my companions jammed up behind me, trapping me completely....

Adrenalin kept me going, and thankfully none of these fears materialized before I saw a dimly lit exit to my right as the tunnel branched. I avoided that one, figuring it was too close to our entry point, and kept going. The great thing about our escape was that I was fairly sure the Insectoids had no idea where this vent was; maybe they could punch up the plans for this area, but by the time they did and figured out where this vent was on their map we'd be long gone. Even people who were experts in level management had trouble figuring out maps of the tunnels of August!

After twenty minutes of steady movement and turning down possibilities to leave the vent system, I finally turned right on a likely exit, figuring we had put enough distance between us and our pursuers. The others exited behind me, one by one, huffing and puffing, all except the Silencer, who I was beginning to suspect wasn't remotely human.

We caught our breaths, and I did a count and was relieved to see that everyone was still with us. As well as the foodpack that Jenkins had been carrying. Good man! It must have been tough for him to lug that through the narrow crawl spaces.

We cautiously peered out of the room we were in, some sort of abandoned living quarters, into the gloomy corridors around us. They were empty, though in the faint distance I thought I could hear a scraping sound.

Now we faced a different problem; we were lost.

It wasn't a laughing matter; conceivably, in the dark, we could be lost down here for days, in which time we could pick up another patrol.

We lucked out when we found a stairwell which had the level number on it. We were one level higher than when we started, but we still didn't know what section or block we were in. Well, at least we could return to our level; our current hideout was on level 15. Maybe once we returned to our level things would look familiar. Of course, level 15 extended for miles in every direction. Such was the subterranean sprawl of August.

We climbed in silence and without incident. When we once thought we heard some activity on the stairwell below us, as if someone had opened the door to the stairwell, we all froze instantly, at the same time, for a moment. Then, after a moment's silence, the door slammed shut, and we waited another moment. When there was no further noise we cautiously started our ascent again.

We came out on a junction on level 15 that looked vaguely

familiar to me. "That way, I think," I said, pointing one way.

"No, I think it's the other way," said Jenkins, pointing in the opposite direction.

Gantry offered a third opinion for another direction.

The Silencer didn't offer any opinion, and Mongo had no flashes of insight. So we compromised by going a few blocks in each of our directions and looking to see if anything was familiar. Nothing did.

Then I remembered my electrocompass. Like many planets, August had a strong magnetic pull from its north pole. The compass might not work this far down, but then again it might....

The compass didn't move for a moment, and then I shook it; then it moved slowly, lazily. Ok, we had been going north.

Which was right. Because I remember that Preston had taken us south to look for Jenkins.

We traveled along this route for another 10 minutes and then things started to clearly look familiar to all of us-- the burn marks on that wall, the faded sign on that door, etc. And in minutes we were home, safe and secure in our maintenance closet.

"That was simple enough," I said. "What's for dinner?"

Chapter 11: Liberating The Farm

From the personal log of Clifford Croft, nine months after the Invasion of August:

Of course, nothing was that simple, especially when it came to living with Mongo. While he was an invaluable asset when used against the enemy, he tended to create dissension among allies. And I'm not just talking about his tendencies to steal; no, he created worse problems than that. Immediately after dinner, he started up again with his predictions about the deaths of members of the team.

"It seems to me that if we had stayed put for a few minutes, we would've avoided both patrols," said Gantry, giving Mongo a purposeful glare.

"Yes, yes, blame Mongo, Mongo always at fault," said Mongo. "Always get angry at Mongo, yes. Mongo not the one to tell you to go there. You ask, you ask for help, 'Where find friend'? And Mongo, Mongo give you exact direction, even guide you there. But Mongo say, 'Danger. Danger if go there to get friend. Mongo risk life to guide you, but danger.' And this is thanks Mongo gets."

The Clapper clapped twice.

"Mongo thanks you," said Mongo, erroneously taking it as a sign of gratitude.

"What else can you tell us about the future?" Gantry asked.

"You mean your death?" said Mongo innocently. "Mongo see in future that you are very, very, concerned about your death. You blame Mongo unfairly for warning you--"

"That's enough!" I said. "Mongo gets occasional flashes about the future, but they're not always right, and they are always fragmented. He's good as a warning sign, and useful as an ally, but we shouldn't be setting our clocks, or our

lives, by his predictions."

"I want to know more," said Gantry. "What are the circumstances of my death? Do you see death for any of us?"

"Death, yes, see death, very unsafe business you are in, is no surprise," said Mongo sullenly. "See death for you," he said, pointing a bony finger at Gantry. "And you, and you and you, and maybe you," he said, pointing at Jenkins, Preston, the Silencer, and at me.

"Under what circumstances? When?" Gantry demanded.

Mongo was silent.

Gantry grabbed him by the shoulders, and started shaking him. "Talk!"

Mongo started to sob and weep as he pitied himself. I pried Gantry away. "He doesn't work that way."

"Well make him!"

"Mongo gets flashes, insights, concerning himself and people around him, but that's all," I said. "Imagine if you were constantly bombarded with flashes of insight, visions of future events, but each vision wasn't longer than a second or two long, and all were disconnected. Would you be able to piece together what they were all about? Would you be able to keep yourself from going mad?"

It was at that moment that they understood. In a stroke they understood why Mongo was what he was.

But my defense of Mongo had an unintended side effect.

"Mongo not mad." I heard grudgingly behind me.

"No, of course not," I said. "But experiencing what you're experiencing has to be stressful on you."

"Yes, stressful, very stressful," muttered Mongo. "Made worse when not appreciated."

Preston asked, "How do you..."

"Mongo not know. Agency not know. Top scientists of Gamma Section not know. Together, know very little. All that is known is that Mongo is not appreciated."

"I'm glad we had this little get-to-know-you session," I said. "And before any of you start planning for your funerals, remember that what Mongo sees is at best what might happen. Only your overworrying will cause it to happen. On no less than two previous occasions Mongo claimed to have "foreseen" my end, and I'm still here."

Mongo muttered something unintelligible and retreated to the corner with the bedding I had prepared for him. He wouldn't make friends easily.

I put him next to the Clapper and Red Sally; they had known each other previously from their time together in Gamma Section. But I made the mistake of moving the Clapper's bedding to make space for Mongo's, and that started a whole round of discussion and accusation. The Clapper was used to sleeping against that wall, the Clapper didn't want to complain but wasn't comfortable-

I cut it off almost before it began, moving the Clapper's bedding back where it was and switching Red Sally's bedding (she didn't care where she slept, as long as she slept in something flammable), with Mongo's. But that started a line of complaints from Mongo about how dispensible he felt and how his feelings weren't being considered.

I screened out the noise from that corner of the room and turned to Preston. "How're we doing?"

"We got enough supplies for a few days, but we won't last more than four or five days, especially not with this

new mouth to feed."

So Preston resented him too. "This new mouth led us directly to Jenkins, and will save our lives four or five more times before the month is out," I said. "He's irritating, but he's more valuable than a squad of Jump Troopers." Speaking of them, I wonder what had become of the Jump Troopers, the elite mechanized planetary paratroopers? Wiped out in the initial Insectoid attack, I supposed.

"We'll need more food soon," said Preston. "It seems they're stepping up patrols in this sector. We should probably search farther afield for other supplies."

"Good. You take Jenkins and Gantry and scout around to see what you can find tomorrow. I'll take the Silencer, the Clapper, Red Sally and Mongo to scout around on the surface."

"Splitting us up?"

"There are enough of us to form two teams," I said. "And yes, I'm conscious of the fact that I'm keeping the Agency people separate from the Gammas. You just need to build up some more tolerance for them."

"Where are you going?"

"I spotted a hive last week on the surface. They're starting to sprout up everywhere. I want to see what's going on inside one of them."

Buildings all over August were being selectively demolished and replaced by large, multi-level hive like structures. So far I had never seen the inside of one of them, a lapse in intelligence info that I intended to remedy the very next day. Usually it was safer to go around at night, especially on the surface, but I wanted to be able to see what I was looking at; most of my critical gear, including my infragoggles, had been left behind at the Agency in my haste to depart.

My team slunk around on the surface, moving from building to building. The Insectoids were starting to build up their forces on August, but the city, covering almost the entire Western continent, was just so big, that it would be some time before they could fill every nook and cranny of it. Certain areas like the capital, at Sarney Sarittenden, which the Insectoids had taken over as their command, was simply swarming with Insectoids, but most of the city only had sporadic patrols.

I had noticed a hive going up on the edge of this sector, and we went and checked it out from a building across the street. We noticed a steady stream of ground transports loading and unloading equipment and people. Lots of people, streaming in and out.

"Wonder what's going on?" I said. The Clapper clapped twice.

"Let's go in and burn something and find out," said Red Sally, starting to get out of the squatting position.

I pushed her down and said, "No. This requires a bit more finesse. The only ones who can get into that building are the Insectoids and their human slaves. Therefore, I'll have to dress for the part."

I took a control collar out of my backpack; several weeks ago I had retrieved it off a deceased prisoner who had been shot in the back; I had cut it off, made sure it was thoroughly deactivated, and then made superficial repairs to allow me to snap it on and off my neck. I put it on now and disgarded my

backpack and weapons, except for a small blaster I put in my ankle holster, under my trousers. While some of the slaves were wearing the green uniforms of the Insectoids, others were wearing their own tattered clothing. My clothes were almost as tattered and dirty as the human slaves; the only problem is that I probably looked a bit more well fed than they were. Well, nothing I could do about that.

"So you're going to play spy," said Sally disgustedly, curling her lip. "Why did you bother bringing us along?"

Clap clap.

"I may have a harder time getting out than I do getting in; I'll need you to create a diversion if I'm forced to run for it," I said. "Think you're up to it?"

The Silencer drew his guns; Sally's hair turned a slight pink; the Clapper put his hands together; and Mongo put his finger to the wind.

"Wish me luck," I sighed.

The trick about infiltrating a group is to make it look like you were always part of it. If I simply walked across the street and attempted to join the slave procession, the Insectoid guards would notice something funny. So I slunk from position to position, moving steadily closer into danger, until finally only one guard separated me from the prisoners streaming in and out. I held a rock in my hand, which I used to good effect, tossing it far in the opposite direction; it hit the ground with a clink!, causing the Insectoid to look at the noise; when he turned back, he didn't notice one more prisoner moving among the bunch. Mission accomplished.

I have to add parenthetically that this sort of thing isn't very difficult for me; as a Level One Agency Operative, one of the Eight, I'm a top-notch infiltrator, and have infiltrated far more controlled societies than this. But it was good to see that a few months of guerrilla combat hadn't made me lose my touch. I followed the line of prisoners shuffling into the hive.

My eyes had to adjust going inside because there was an eerie green light everywhere. We went up several levels, depositing boxes of equipment and supplies here and there, and I could see immediately what this was: a manufacturing facility. So at least some if not all of the hives were manufacturing plants. They were using our resources and our labor to help fuel their war machine.

Once we had delivered the supplies we were herded back outside to waiting vehicles. "Where are they taking us?" I hissed to a young woman ahead of me in line.

She looked surprised, as if I should already know. She said nothing.

We were getting close to the vehicles. Time was running out. "Where?" I whispered.

"Back to the labor camp," she whispered, glancing this way and that, as if talking was forbidden.

Indeed it must have been, because two Insectoid guards closed on us and struck us with the butts of their rifles, sending us to the ground.

"Get up," one of them grated through its translator matrix.

Winching through the pain I realized I was actually grateful for the chance to reach down so I could palm my hidden blaster. As I got up I showed my appreciation, first

by vaporizing the thorax of the Insectoid who had hit me, and then blasting the other one, and then in rapid succession two more behind him.

"Run!" I yelled, taking my own advice. Prisoners, at first unsure what was happening, started to run off.

There were other guards further ahead in line and they started to open fire, hitting some of the fleeing prisoners. But then they themselves were under attack; I didn't have time to observe it at close hand, but I think the Silencer shot several immediately, picking them out effortlessly though the crowd of screaming and fleeing humans. Red Sally caused one to spontaneously combust, and the Clapper hit one of them with its own rifle butt.

In all the confusion a good number of the prisoners escaped, though the guards were quickly reenforced, preventing the bulk of the prisoners from getting free.

"See how easy that was?" I said, when I had rejoined the group.

"We should destroy this factory," said Preston, over lunch back at the maintenance closet.

"A good idea, if we had some heavy ammo," I said.

"We still have some of the explosives left."

"The only problem being that we have to plant it inside the factory," I said. "No, I have a much more pressing target in mind." I paused. "The work camp. There are prisoners who need freeing"

"We don't even know where it is," said Preston.

"But those transports go there," I said. "It will be a simple matter to trace them."

"They're bound to be guarded."

"I hope so," said the Silencer, making this one of the rare times he chose to speak.

"This operation will proceed in several stages, or steps," I said. "Step one involves the Silencer." We stood a block away and around the corner from the factory we had visited the previous day. Security there had been doubled; but that didn't concern us.

"See that lone Insectoid guard there, younder, a few hundred feet away?" I said, pointing to a dot in the distance. "I need you to kill him neatly, in one shot, where it won't show."

The Silencer snorted, as if he were still waiting for a real challenge; and he took up his laser rifle (with a silencer fitted to the end of it), and, after a moment's hesitation, fired. The Insectoid dropped like a sack of potatoes.

We ran over to the Insectoid body and then the Silencer and I dragged it to the next intersection. It wasn't fun touching the thing, but I had thoughtfully prepared gloves. Once we arrived at the intersection I saw an Insectoid transport approaching. Right on schedule.

I motioned everyone back to the safety of the area just around the corner, then I gave the thumbs up to the Clapper.

He gave me a thumbs up back, with an idiotic expression on his face.

I looked at the Insectoid body. It wasn't moving.

I turned back to the Clapper. "Now!" I hissed.

The Clapper cringed.

The body suddenly stood upright, as if pulled by strings.

"Good," I said. "Now make it waver back and forth, back and forth a bit."

The body started to waver, then swing, back and forth, as if it were drunk.

"Good, good."

The approaching transport saw the Insectoid standing in the middle of the road, swaying back and forth; something was obviously wrong. The transport stopped short of the guard, and one of the Insectoids got out of the driver's section.

The guard fell to the ground, dead, the instant it's tendrils left the transport. The driver, seeing something was amiss, moved to reactivate the transport with its tendrils, but a sudden bolt eliminated the driver as well.

We raced around the back, saw it opening up to reveal two guards and a load of human prisoners. The Silencer got one and I got the other; the only thanks we received for our efforts were a series of shrieks from the prisoners.

"All off, last stop!" I yelled. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I apologize for this unscheduled stopover, but your guards are experiencing technical difficulties."

The prisoners stared at me with a mixture of shock and incredulity on their faces.

"You're free!" I yelled. "Get out NOW!"

The prisoners streamed out of the truck.

"Now we have a transport," I said. I spoke into my com. "Step two: Preston, go."

Preston, lying prone in a building just above and almost across from the factory, had one of the parked transports in the scopes of his weapon which was poking just outside of the hole in the glass he had cut. He depressed the firing stud, and a tiny transmitter lodged itself in the side of the transport.

The transport obliged us by giving us several minutes to collect Preston and Gantry before getting underway. Step three was the pursuit. We followed it at a cautious pace, but never letting it get too far ahead; the metal walls and canyons of August made it difficult to use a tracer effectively at any distance.

The transport went south for more than two hours, and we followed. It only slowed when it reached a less developed district, one of the few districts left open for farmland.

For although August imported most of its food, it still keep some of its land open for farming. Were the Insectoids still tilling the land, or were they using it for other purposes?

We parked a safe distance away and surveyed the perimeter. There was a wire fence around the edge, and sentries patrolling. It was obviously a civilian internment camp.

I looked at the Silencer, and he nodded. By unspoken agreement, we agreed that this was an operation that would best be carried out at nightfall. I spread the word to Preston and the others.

While we waited we counted guards and studied security measures through electrobinoculars. Not too bad--we counted only a dozen guards, though there could be more in a barracks structure along the edge of the perimeter. The barracks were outside the internment area, where it was safe from attack

from the prisoners, but that would give us easy access to it. It would be the first to be attacked.

But I was forced to bite my lip the rest of the day as I watched how the prisoners were treated. They were forced to work the land, growing oddly shaped green vegetables I had never seen before--presumably food for the Insectoids. But the Insectoids were cruel, using whips or their sharp tendrils to assault prisoners who they felt weren't working hard enough.

One prisoner even had the temerity to collapse with exhaustion for a moment when he felt a guard wasn't looking; but within seconds he was eclipsed by a seven foot tall shadow. The prisoner trembled with fright, and the Insectoid vomited some pink goo on him; and then the prisoner started laughing hysterically, so hard that it looked painful, and then the Insectoid vomited some identical looking pink goo, and the prisoner started crying. There must be something in whatever the Insectoid was vomiting that directly worked on the brain.

A few of the Insectoids gathered to watch the spectacle for a few moments, buzz buzzing to themselves as they obviously enjoyed it. Then an overseer called out, and one of the Insectoids ended their fun, by dismembering the prisoner! Swish swish and his arms were cut off; it was so quick that the prisoner couldn't even scream. Then swish swish his legs went off, and then he did scream, but only for a few seconds, for then his head went next.

The other prisoners nearby started to scream, but their screams were cut off as the Insectoids turned their attention on them; and then all was silent, as their horror was checked by their fear.

I raised my rifle in anger.

Preston saw what I was about to do and moved to stop me. "No Croft, we need to wait--"

But I aimed carefully and squeezed the trigger. There was a "swit!" and the Insectoid who had dismembered the prisoner scratched a slight sore on its body cavity.

I indicated the tracking sensor, and the blip this Insectoid now generated.

"Why did you do that?" Preston whispered.

"That one's mine," I said calmly.

When nightfall came we moved, first closing on the barracks. It never occurred to the Insectoids to guard from outside attacks, this far out of the center of the city. We showed them the error of their ways.

Gantry, Jenkins, and Red Sally burst into the barracks, the first two opening fire, the third sending forth a sheet of flame. The fire was so hot that it almost singed even her, as her face beaded with sweat and her hair turned a dull red. They shot and burned everything that moved in that barracks, and took them completely by surprise.

But the noise alerted the sentries on the outside, and that's where I and the Silencer moved into action. The Silencer picked off guards left and right in the darkness, and I shot purposefully, each of us using infrared scopes (something I had been fortunate enough to liberate from a military armory). When it came time to shoot the target who had dismembered the prisoner I shot carefully, aiming low.

The Insectoids must have seen the flashes from our

muzzles, but they were still confused and were dying more quickly than they could respond. In a matter of moments the area was clear. The five of us had slaughtered nearly three dozen of the enemy; chalk that up to careful planning and the advantage of surprise.

We moved cautiously into the camp, alert for any guards we might have missed. I walked calmly to what I knew I would find, a certain buzzing, clicking Insectoid who was down on the ground grabbing one of its lower limbs in pain. It tried to reach for its gun when it saw me, but I kicked it away. I looked around for a second and picked up a jagged piece of metal. That would do.

I started to hack off the monster's tendrils, one by one, pausing to listen to it shriek each time. Then I cut off its lower limbs, causing it to shriek louder. Finally, after a pause, I cut off its head.

There was sudden silence. Then I turned around, feeling rather than seeing the Silencer standing behind me. He looked at me expressionlessly, and then moved on.

We gathered up the prisoners and told them they were free. Most were too weak to start on an extended run, so first we gathered what food there was and distributed it among them.

"Break up and head in different directions," I said. "There are several ground transports here, at least half of you should be able to make your escape that way. Just avoid the transport parked over the ridge, that's our own ticket home"

"Thank you, oh thank you," said a man, who, like the rest, was thin and emaciated. "You don't know how beastly they were to us!"

"I have some idea," I said dryly, remembering what I had observed earlier that day.

"Is there any way we can thank you?" said the man. "I don't even know your names!"

Reflex, and my training, prevented me from divulging this otherwise useless fact. "Your thanks is enough," I said. I turned to Red Sally. "Red? You have enough juice left for another flame?"

Red Sally snorted. "I'm barely warmed up."

"It looks like the Insectoids were growing some food here; I think it would be nice if you torched the place," I said. "Just wait a few minutes for the prisoners to disperse. The flames might attract unwanted attention."

It was still early in the night; we actually gave the prisoners an hour to disperse and make their way away from the internment camp. Chances are that few of them would survive on their own, but at least we were giving them that chance. I had Gantry sitting in the front seat of our vehicle to make sure it wasn't appropriated.

When Sally was ready she took a deep breath, and sent a long spurt of flame into rows and rows of the greenish whatever the Insectoids were growing. In just a few minutes there were rows and rows of fires on the farm. The Insectoids wouldn't be harvesting any of their alien lettuce from this farm.

"Let's go," I said.

We piled into the back of the transport and headed on our way. I mentally started to wonder if we could park the

transport somewhere in the capitol, it could be useful. The transport also had some supplies, sacks and boxes in the corner, that would merit inspection later.

We returned to the capital without incident. I can only wonder at the reaction of the Insectoids when the next set of ground transports arrived at the farm to find all their soldiers dead and the place in flames.

We put the transport in an underground garage. I bit my lip; out in the open here, it would probably be stolen or vandalized quickly. Well, nothing we could do about that for now.

As we walked back to our hideaway the Silencer suddenly raised his hand and stopped for a moment.

"What is it?" I asked.

The Silencer shook his head and stood still for a moment. "Probably nothing. At least, not close by. Continue."

We made our way back to the maintenance closet; I strained to hear the sounds of an Insectoid patrol, but heard nothing.

We planned quite a celebratory dinner that night, though I don't know how we could manage it when the only supplies we had were liquid starch (hardens when cooked), canned meat strips, and a few other items. I was preparing to do the cooking myself, basking in the glow of happy conversation in the crowd--even the Silencer was letting himself be talked to, which was quite a good sign, for him. For once we had accomplished something positive and could see the effect of it, and that made us feel good. And what's more, we had done it without any casualties.

"Very (clap clap) good work, Mr. Silencer," said the Clapper.

The Silencer stiffened, looked away, and reached for his gun. The Clapper shrank back. The room was suddenly silent.

"Hear that?" said the Silencer, in a whisper.

I strained, I didn't hear anything. I started to speak, when I DID hear something.

Tap tap tap.

We waited, another moment, and then it grew louder.

Knock knock knock.

Someone was knocking on the door to our maintenance closet.

Chances are it wasn't the Insectoids; they usually didn't knock before coming in. Even scavengers wouldn't go around politely knocking on doors. But everyone who knew about their homebase was already inside; so this meant that we had been discovered by someone, or something.

Weapons drawn, we cautiously approached the exit to the maintenance closet. We had installed a locally powered cryptic lock and created passkeys for everyone inside, so the only way they could get through would be to burn or blast their way in.

The Silencer positioned himself on one side of the door, and I and Gantry and Preston and Jenkins took positions from other angles to give ourselves clear lines of sight to the door.

Knock knock knock. The knocking was louder, more insistent now. Who could it be? Could this be some Insectoid trap to lure us outside?

The Silencer looked to me, and I nodded. He palmed the door's control, and pulled back instantly as the door came unlatched. A tiny crack opened to the outside.

Something reached forward and slowly pulled the door open. In the dark corridor we could make out the shape; a thin, emaciated person in rags.

"Oooh!" said the man, seeing the outlines of our weapons. "Don't shoot!"

"Put your hands up!" I barked. "Come in! Slowly!"

As the man came into the light I saw he was unarmed. It was the same man who had effusively thanked me at the farm.

But the farm was hundreds of miles to the south; how did he get here?

Preston checked the corridor; it didn't seem like there was anyone else there.

We shut the door and started the interrogation.

His name was George Sashay and he had been a professional visual artist, before the invasion. The Insectoids evaluated him at one of their processing centers and found he was best suited for manual labor. He had been working at the farm for several months when we liberated him, earlier that day. When all the prisoners were escaping, he made his way to our vehicle and snuck in the back while Gantry wasn't watching; it was there that he hid in one of the boxes until we returned.

He quietly followed us back to our home.

"Wait a minute," I said. "How did you follow us? I didn't see or hear you."

"I did," said the Silencer.

"I followed a bit behind you," said Sashay.

"Then if you weren't in visual sight of us, how do you know where we turned off to go into the maintenance closet?" I asked.

"Oh, that was easy," said Sashay. "I simply looked at all the footprints in the dust. They all lead here."

I blinked, feeling like a fool. Could we have really left such an obvious trail for our pursuers to find? But the corridors were very dimly lit; one would have to really be looking for such a thing to find them. And this was no expert tracker. Could his story really be true?

"I tend to notice such things, dust I mean," said Sashay. "Remember, I'm an artist."

"That leaves one question: why?" I asked.

"Well, I didn't see much of a future following the others," said Sashay. "But look at you, you're well-fed paramilitaries, obviously survivor types. I figured I would join your group."

I frowned, but said nothing. I pointed to Jenkins and snapped my fingers; he watched the prisoner while we went to the other corner of the room to confer.

"It's far-fetched at best," said Gantry. "I don't believe an ordinary civilian could have tracked us like he did."

"Don't underestimate the survival instinct," said Preston. "I'm suspicious too, but what other explanation could there be? That he's a plant, from the Insectoids? In that case, they would've had to know that we were going to hit their farm, and no one knew that."

"Good point," I said. "What I think may be more likely

is that he was the camp spy, working for the Insectoids to spy on the other prisoners. When he saw us, he saw a chance to get a big bounty by turning us in."

"But if he wanted to turn us in, he had already located us," said Preston. "He didn't have to knock on the door to get our attention."

"He said he located us," I said. "Maybe he wasn't sure we were in here."

"So you think he's a spy?" the Silencer asked.

"Not necessarily," I said. "I'm just trying to think out all the possibilities." I looked at the emaciated figure sitting quietly in the corner under Gantry's watchful stare. Maybe, on the other hand, he just wanted to survive.

But maybe we didn't have to guess. I whistled for Mongo, and he came scampering over. "Mongo! What do you get on that fellow?"

Mongo stared at Sashay with crinkly eyes for a moment. "Cook," he said at last.

"What?"

"Cooks. If you keep him, will cook for you."

"We don't care about that," I said. "Will he betray us?"

Mongo concentrated again. "Don't see betrayal; but doesn't mean doesn't happen. In some future he cooks foods for you." He licked his lips. "If you going to kill him, have him cook dinner, first."

"Doesn't sound dangerous to me," said Preston.

"Are you thinking of keeping him?" the Silencer asked me, as if we were talking about a new pet.

"Why not?" I asked.

"What skills can he bring to the group?" the Silencer asked. "Can he shoot a gun, or start fires with his mind?"

"Probably not," I admitted, seeing where this was going.

"Then he goes," said the Silencer.

"Why?"

"He consumes food but contributes nothing," said the Silencer. "This isn't a ten star hotel. Every time we go out to hunt for food we risk our lives. We shouldn't have to do it for freeloaders."

"I see your point," I said, and I did. "How about we keep him here overnight, give him a meal, and send him on his way?"

"That raises another problem," said the Silencer, his voice grim. "He knows our location. Even if he's not a spy, if he gets caught and interrogated by the Insectoids, he can give our location away."

"Well, we had talked about establishing a new hideout," I said, not liking where this conversation was going.

"Which we haven't yet done, and once we do, we planned to use only when we were in imminent danger of discovery," said Preston, slowly seeing things the Silencer's way. He turned to the Silencer. "What are you suggesting?"

"I can make it quick and painless," said the Silencer calmly.

"I say we burn him!" said Red Sally, speaking for the first time.

"Burn me!" said Sashay, picking up on this. "But I can be of great use to you!"

"What can you do, paperweight?" said the Silencer.

"Have you ever fired a blaster before in your life?"

"Well, no," said Sashay, rapidly casting about. "What about them," he said, indicating Mongo and the Clapper. "They don't look like gunfighters!"

"They have other skills," said the Silencer.

Sashay looked about wildly as he rapidly tried to think of a way to save his life. "Well so do I!"

"You? What can you do, paperweight?"

"I can cook! Better than any of you, I'll bet!"

"That's hardly an essential skill," said the Silencer humorlessly.

Sashay was silent for a moment, thinking wildly. The Silencer let it go on for a few moments, then he took a step forward.

"Wait!" said Sashay. "I can paint!"

"Also hardly an essential skillset," said the Silencer, reaching for him.

"Wait!" said Sashay again, holding out his bony arm. "I can help you conceal yourself better!"

The Silencer lowered his arm. "What do you mean?"

Sashay licked his lips nervously. "Well, I already told you about the footprints, you can clear the dust there yourself. But what about your door?"

"What about it?"

"The absence of any dust may also attract unwanted visitors. I can make you safer by hiding your door."

"How?"

"Get me some plastiform and some metallic paint and I can put a fascade over your door that will make it look like ordinary wall," said Sashay. "It will peel back every time you open it, but look like regular wall to anyone passing by when it's closed."

The Silencer stood, considering. "That might be somewhat helpful, if we could get the materials, and if you could accomplish it. But that's only one task; what could you do to earn your keep after that?"

"The transport," I said, picking up on the idea. "He could help us disguise the transport, hide it behind an artificial wall of his, maybe." I turned to the Silencer. "You know, if he's as good as he says, we could really use a disguise and camouflage expert."

The Silencer considered for a moment. Then, to the relief of Sashay, he slowly nodded. "All right, Paperweight. You show us what you can do."

The Paperweight, as he was called, started with dinner. And by all accounts everyone was quite satisfied. Somehow the Paperweight took what few ordinary ingredients we had and used the cooking range to make a quite enjoyable meal. I think in retrospect everyone was glad that we didn't banish or kill him, at least not before dinner.

Chapter 12: Desperate Raid On Sarney Sarittenden

From the journal of Clifford Croft, ten months after the invasion of August:

Sashay, or the Paperweight, as the Silencer and the others took to calling him, was as good as his word. The next

day I led an expedition to locate the materials he needed; and he got to work immediately, creating a camouflaged version of the door that would look like the wall around it. But once the task was done, e.g. once the door looked like the wall, the Paperweight wasn't artistically satisfied; he kept wanting to dab little colors here or there to make it look more realistic. I managed to pull him away from that and get started on a bigger project, building an artificial but real looking wall around the ground transport we had stolen.

I didn't think it was possible, but when he was done, several days later, he had colored and molded plastiform around it so it looked like a real wall. The plastiform could be easily unwrapped from the very end where it met the real wall, if you knew where to look; and if you knocked on it, you'd get a hollow sound; but under any but the closest of inspections it would look real.

The Paperweight's cooking continued to earn our appreciation. I think his culinary talents, combined with the fine job he did on the door and the wall covering the transport, muted any sentiment to get rid of him. The only problem with the Paperweight was that he was, well, a bit irritating.

He always insisted on painting us; he would sit there with an easel, when we returned from a mission and were just trying to relax, and he would paint us. Preston or Gantry would get annoyed and turn away; Jenkins would just ignore him, as I did; but the Silencer got him to stop painting his portrait by shooting one of Sashay's creations in progress, when Sashay was right behind it. To this day I'm not sure how he managed to get an angle where he could shoot the painting without also shooting Sashay.

Similarly Sashay stopped painting Red Sally when one of his paintings burst into flames as he drew it. Only the Clapper and Mongo actively cooperated with his efforts, posing while making exaggerated facial expressions. In fact Mongo hung up the atrocious portraits of himself all over the place and complained that Sashay wasn't painting enough of him.

But Sashay wasn't the only one causing problems; Red Sally keeps lighting fires, sometimes burning things we needed. She keeps bugging us to go shopping for objects that were fire-resistant but not totally inflammable, saying she needed a "challenge". We tried once or twice to let her cook our dinners, under Sashay's direction, but she always went overboard and burned things. But the worst incident happened one night when she had a nightmare and started to burn her blanket. I, who was on watch, immediately ran over to her, shook her awake, and snuffed out the flames.

"Does this happen often?" I had asked.

"Occupational hazard," said Sally, glaring at me. She always glared. I think she was angry with me for not letting her start as many fires as she might like.

I know the Silencer was angry; he was always hopping mad that we weren't spending every minute of every day shooting Insectoids. He's still burning up inside about what they did to Annie; I'm not sure how he's going to work it out. Maybe he won't.

We're still trying to work things out with the Clapper, who claps for any reason or no reason at all. If his bed isn't in the right place, or his dinner dish is out of

alignment, he'll start clapping. We've tried tying his hands together, but that's not a practical solution; I found some soft gloves for him, but that only muffles the clapping sound slightly. The only thing we were able to do was to stop him from clapping at night--I say we, but it was the Silencer who did it, using something I euphemistically call "aversion therapy".

And then there's Mongo. He still complains how underappreciated he is, but actually I do appreciate him. We're outnumbered and outgunned and we need every advantage we can get. He's not always accurate in his visions but he's saved my life more than once in the past and I'm glad to have him with us. I just wish I could get him to shut up sometimes about how ungrateful we all are.

As for us, myself, Preston, Gantry, and Jenkins, the remainder of the agency cell that was set up several months ago, we don't say much, for what is there to say? I think our morale suffered because we didn't have a sense of progress. Sure, we were hitting the enemy here and there, but we didn't see results that were changing our situation. In our years with the agency we were used to short, discrete assignments with clear end goals measured in days or weeks. We had already been at this for months and there was no end in sight. No amount of sabotage we could do on our own would end the Insectoid occupation, and all we had to look forward to was uncounted years of further resistance and life of rats living in a maintenance closet.

I think we all felt that underlying unhappiness, and that was the setting for our feelings and actions on the days we lost both Gantry and Jenkins, the first on a recon patrol, and the second only a day later, on a hunt for food.

Gantry and Preston were scouting the area, looking for potential targets--an essential task because we had to locate targets before we could attack them. It was a dangerous task, because they could stumble into an enemy patrol or trap at any time. And that's exactly what happened. Preston escaped in a firefight, but he says he saw Gantry shot dead.

I initially blamed myself, as the senior agent, wondering if I should have sent teams larger than two; but even I, in my grief, knew better. Scouting teams by their very nature had to be small in number; their defense lay in their ability to avoid detection, not to fight, so the larger the team, the more likely they were to be discovered, which is why scouting teams always had to be as few in number as possible.

No, chalk it up to weariness on the part of Gantry and/or Preston, or just plain bad luck, but he was gone. And if that wasn't bad enough, the following next day, when we were foraging for food, we lost Jenkins.

Food was getting more and more scarce--August survived by having food imported from other worlds, and that was no longer happening. The Insectoids, maybe, were growing small amounts of food for their captives, though we never saw any evidence of this on our attack at the farm; more likely they were doing what we were doing, which is raiding warehouses of food. But those warehouses were running out of food, rapidly, forcing us to venture farther and farther a field to search for food.

The Insectoids, having a good idea that food storage areas were being raided by scavengers and resistance units,

put guards on the storage areas they were able to locate and identify, and stepped up patrols in the area. That made hunting for food a losing proposition. As time went on, we had to spend more and more time searching for food, and we were more and more likely to be caught.

That's what happened when we found ourselves in a firefight after we went looking for food one day in one of the underground storage areas. The entrance to the storage area, a giant one block by one block facility on level 37, was under guard by the Insectoids; but we tried to use a laser torch to cut our way into a back wall.

What we didn't anticipate was how quickly the Insectoids would come around the backside of the perimeter looking for us; they must have either implanted sensors in the wall or actively been scanning for energy signatures. Because before we had cut through one side of the wall we were attacked from both sides of the corridor in a crossfire.

We at least had some warning that they were coming, because we could hear their buzzing sounds as they approached; so we ducked into an alcove opposite the wall we had been cutting into before the first shot was fired.

But then the firing did begin, from both sides. The Silencer and I popped around the corner, firing sporadically for a second before pulling back, but with the unfriendly fire coming from two ways this was very dangerous at best. But then I felt something hot near me, and Red Sally brushed by me, sending a ball of fire down one end of the corridor for a split second before pulling back; then she was poking out in the other direction, sending a flaming ball in that direction as well. We heard harsh screams and for a moment the firing stopped.

"Now!" I cried, jumping into the corridor. The Silencer and the others followed, and we opened fire on the survivors. We started running forward down the corridor, the Silencer and I firing ahead of us, and Preston and the others firing behind us. If they had been at full strength they could easily have cut us down, but most of the ones still living were busy fanning down the flames.

I reached the corner first, firing all along, and it took me a few seconds to stop when I saw there were no longer any movement among the bodies; only smoking, charred remains. We turned the corner, taking us out of the line of fire, and it was then as I counted noses I noticed Jenkins was missing.

Meanwhile, we heard loud buzzing sounds coming from down the corridor. Reinforcements were arriving.

I looked at Preston for a split second, and we were in agreement; no Agency man gets left behind.

We turned back into the corridor we had just left, and could see a stirring mass at the far end as fresh reinforcements were making their way past the charred lines of the first wave. We didn't have to go far, just about 25 feet, before we found Jenkins, face down.

Preston laid down a covering fire while I reached down to check for a pulse. While I was doing so I saw the gaping hole in his chest; he had been hit from behind while we had been retreating. And there was no pulse. He was gone.

I was up and sprinting out of there in a second, and Preston was following; blaster bolts streaked around us, most of them coming from behind us, but some of them coming from ahead of us! The Silencer was giving us covering support,

carefully firing around our fleeing forms to attack our attackers. Only the Silencer could fire down a crowded, dark corridor in split second intervals to hit targets 70 or 80 feet away without hitting us.

We rounded the corner, breathing heavily; and I looked at the Silencer and Preston, to make sure they were ok. Preston was winded but was fine; the Silencer looked totally unfazed. I nodded fractionally to thank him, and we took off, quickly getting out of there.

We managed to evade our pursuers and get back to maintenance closet. We had lost two operatives in two days, Gentry and Jenkins, and we had lost the two of them on what should have been very routine missions. And what was worse was that we didn't get any food. In other words, we'd have to go out again and risk our lives again if we wanted to eat.

But no one wanted to eat right now. We were all upset, and no one more than me. I hadn't been close to Gantry or Jenkins, but I had seen a progressive pattern over the past nine months, as, one by one, Agency operatives were picked up. Only Preston and I were left. The others--the Silencer, Red Sally, the Clapper--all had special abilities that might enable them to survive. But Preston and I were just ordinary men, and, sooner or later, our number was bound to come up.

From his facial expression I could tell that Preston was thinking the same thing. We were stuck in a losing proposition, and top Agency operatives were smart enough not to just sit around and wait for the end to come.

"Maybe we should move on," said Preston, saying what we all were thinking.

"Where?" I asked.

"One of the outer provinces," said Preston. "The concentration of Insectoid troops may be lower there."

"Yes," I said, following this line of thought. "And let's just say we find some place in the outer provinces. What do we do then?"

"Establish a new hideout, find food...."

"And what do we do all day when we're not finding food?" I said. "There will be no targets to hit out there, will there?"

Preston shook his head.

I raised my voice. "We all have our own reasons for staying this close to the center of things, just a few miles out from Sarney Sarittenden. Because that's where all the targets of opportunity are. Because this is where we need to be to hurt the enemy. We can go to the fringes, and maybe have a peaceful life for a few years, until they expand out there.. but is that what we want? Preston, how do you plan to spend the next five, or ten years? What hobbies will you take up to pass the time? Modeling plastic? Painting?"

Preston averted his gaze.

"We stayed here to fight, because that's what we do," I said. "Sitting around and doing nothing but existing might be fine for most of the sheep that passes for civilians around here, but not us. If we could be happy sitting idly by we'd never have joined the Agency. You and I both know that."

"Then what do you suggest?" Preston said. "We stay here and get picked off while going shopping for liquid starch?"

"I don't know," I said.

"There's another option," said the Silencer, speaking

for the first time. "We can attack the governor-general's office in Sarney Sarittenden."

"Sarney Sarittenden?" said Preston. "That has to be the most tightly guarded place on August! We'd never get in."

"No," I said suddenly. "I know a way, at least, I think I do."

"We'll be killed before we get close to the governor general."

"It would be nice to get the governor general," said the Silencer. "But even if we don't, all the senior occupation officials are located there. We could wipe out a large number of them."

"This is madness," said Preston.

"We're not having an impact," said the Silencer, as if he were reading my thoughts. "Oh, we're an inconvenience; we can snipe at an outpost here, take out a small factory there, free a group of prisoners somewhere else. I'm sure our activities get mentioned on some report that some midlevel insect reviews. But we're not inconveniencing their leaders; indeed, we're probably not even a blip on their scopes. I say we make them aware of us."

I swallowed, thinking about this. I had a strong sense of self-preservation, which was telling me to run, to go to the outer provinces and hide. But I knew that once the fear wore off, the restlessness would set in, and I would come back. And if I was going to be killed for something, I wanted to die fighting for something more substantial than shopping for liquid starch.

Assassination had never been my favorite line of work, but I had done my share in my time. The nature of the assignment--going in quickly, getting the job done, and getting out--appealed to me, because it reminded me of past assignments I had done. Of course, in a real assassination job I would have spent days if not weeks researching the target; what we were talking about doing now was more of a semi-unplanned raid than an assassination, in the hopes of nabbing the top Insects.

Maybe it was my desperation, or maybe it was my anger over the loss of Jenkins and Gantry, but it made sense to me. I looked up; everyone was looking at me, and I wondered how much time had passed while I was caught up in self-thought. Slowly, I nodded.

The Silencer nodded back. Red Sally was next--and why shouldn't she? This was a chance to make her enemies burn. And then the Clapper, who nodded reluctantly after Red Sally glared at him. Good, he had some backbone. Or maybe he was just more afraid of Big Red than he was of the Insectoids.

I turned to Preston. He shook his head, paced back and forth for a moment in the far corner of the room, then came back and nodded.

We were united on this.

"I know of a secret way into Sarney Sarittenden," I said.

"How do you know it's still a secret to the Insectoids?" Preston asked.

"I don't," I said. "We'll have to find out, tomorrow evening."

"No," said a weak voice.

We all turned. It was Mongo. In all our discussions we

assumed that the Paperweight and Mongo, who were obvious noncombatants, wouldn't accompany us, and so had unconsciously screened them out of our deliberations.

"No, not to go at night," said Mongo.

"What do you mean?" Preston asked. "Why shouldn't we?"

"Go, go in morning," said Mongo. "Tomorrow morning, or maybe next morning after that."

"Why?" Preston asked again. "If we go tomorrow morning, it will be safe?"

"No, not safe!" said Mongo.

"Then what does it matter when we go?" he asked.

Mongo concentrated a moment, as if he were trying to get the images straight in his head, or trying to summon up the patience to deal with Preston, I'm not sure which. "Not safe at all! See images of bad, bad ends for all of you. Many possible bad ends! But many more bad ends if you go at night; if you go in two mornings from now, much better, is chance that some of you may survive, fewer bad ends, even a few good ones."

"Well, since we'll be indoors, I don't think it really matters if it's day or night outside," I said. "But would it be better if we go tomorrow morning, or two mornings from now? You aren't being clear."

"Not clear, not clear at all! Yes, they say to Mongo, 'be clear about future, tell exactly what will happen and when, and fetch me tea so I can read about it in daily newscast'. But Mongo not work that way; hard to say, see many possibilities. Not sure if morning better, or two mornings."

"Then we'll go tomorrow morning," I said. "We don't have enough food to last more than one more day, and I'd rather get shot on this mission than on a shopping trip." If we survived, a tall if, we would worry about food again afterwards.

Mongo looked uneasy but said nothing.

"What about me?" said Sashay.

"You want to come too?" Preston asked.

"No!" said Sashay. "As my dear departed wife once said, don't put your finger in a boiling pot! But what's going to happen to me if you're killed?"

"You'll have fewer people to cook for," said the Silencer, lying back and closing his eyes. Sleep was an easy thing for him, even before a mission like this. Or maybe the thought of what was to come made him sleep more easily?

I went over to the Paperweight. "Look, if we don't return in a few hours, go to the transport. You know where it is. Drive by night out of the city; if you're lucky, you'll come to a sparsely populated area out of the provinces."

"And if I'm not lucky?"

"Take Mongo with you," I said. "He'll help."

"O no! You will not get poor Mongo on some d-diiirty farm," he said. "If Agency spies foolishly get themselves killed, Mongo knows what to do."

"Really? What does Mongo do?"

"Mongo was taking care of himself for many, many months before being captured by Agency men," said Mongo. "Mongo knows places that are safe, yes, very safe. Before you took Mongo, Mongo was never seen or shot at by enemy. Mongo live a lot longer on his own."

"I don't seem to recall capturing you, or forcing you to stay against your will," I said. "You're free to leave at

any time."

"Ungrateful Agency peoples need Mongo's help." A bony finger pointed accusingly at me. "Croft himself says so."

"So I did," I sighed.

"Mongo gets no appreciation, but Mongo helps."

"You're a regular philanthropist," I sighed, lying back in my bedding. I nodded to Preston, who was taking the first watch. Tomorrow was going to be some day.

I didn't think I would sleep at all that night; I spent the first part of the night going over options in my mind, sepl how we would get into Sarney, and how we would get out. I resolved to think out as much of the plan of action as possible. I knew the layout of Sarney Sarittenden, but had no information on what had been done inside by the Insectoids or what parts of it they occupied. Chances are their highest officials would be located in the Chamber of Leaders or the central control room. We might not get the governor-general, but perhaps we could kill some of his senior aides before we were taken down.

My thoughts turned morose as I reflected on the larger issues. How had we come to this? I had spent several hundred years of my life defending the Alliance and its predecessors; governments had come and gone, but I had always been defending August, always been defending our people. And all of a sudden, because of the gullibility of our political leaders, we had allowed our defenses to drop, had allowed our forces to be ambushed, and humanity was now paying the price for that. The sickness went deeper than a handful of political leaders; it was the fault of the people who elected them. They had lost the will to fight, or to even let our warrior class fight for them; they were more consumed with the latest vids, the latest fashions, the latest tastes, they had no room or interest in their lives for an unattractive war; they considered even news of it to be an uncouth disruption of their aesthetic pursuits. It was that attitude that had elected the present administration, and that attitude that had caused the downfall of the Alliance.

Most of the citizenry who had been so concerned about their next vid were now more concerned about their next meal, if and when it was coming as they labored under the yoke of Insectoid oppression. If we ever survived this great disaster, I wonder if the populace will learn something of hardship from this and the need to have a strong self-defense, or if the lessons learned during this time will simply be forgotten after a few years of restorative self-indulgent pleasures....

I awoke in the morning, with the Silencer shaking me; he had relieved Preston, allowing me to sleep the entire night. I looked up questioningly at him and he said, "It might have been your last sleep. You might as well have enjoyed it."

I got up and prepared our gear. Mongo was still watching us with wide-eyes, as if something were really bothering him. "Not the right morning... not the right one..." he muttered, watching us make our preparations.

"What?" I asked Mongo. "So tomorrow morning is better, after all?" Inwardly I groaned; now that our decision had been made, I didn't want to delay this another day.

Mongo watched me holding my equipment, and looked at the others, as if he were trying to match this scene with images in his mind. "Not the right day," he muttered again.

And then Red Sally cracked open the door and peered out into the gloomy corridor. Mongo's head jerked around; immediately he said, "That's right, that's very correct."

I had been about to tell the others to scrub the mission, when I turned back to Mongo, and saw what he was looking at. "What? Now it's the right day, just because Big Red was the one to open the door?"

"This is the morning where she opens the door, opens the door, opens the door," Mongo repeated. "Probably is right morning. Must be right morning."

"Does that mean we come back alive?" Preston asked.

Mongo shook his head. "Chance you may come back; see many different images. Some you die, others you captured, a few you escape. But if you go another time, only see same kinds of images, all of you, dead, shot, killed."

"A few chances that we escape?" I said. "Well, that's the most encouraging news I've heard in a while. Are we ready?"

We turned to go. I made my goodbyes to Sashay as the others filed out. But before I left, Mongo grabbed my arm and rapidly whispered in my ear.

"What did he say?" Preston asked, as we trooped down the corridor.

"He said, our only chance to survive is if we cross paths with big nose." I frowned, as if part of me knew what that meant, but couldn't quite translate it into recognition.

I was pretty familiar with Sarney Sarittenden, the capital of August, and, by extension, the capital of the League and the Alliance, though in recent times that didn't count for much. When I say I was familiar with the place, I was not so familiar that I really understood what Sarney was about, but familiar enough that I knew that there was something unusual about the place. It was built of an odd, gently glowing metal that defied description, and unusual things were known to happen there. Even the exact origin of Sarney Sarittenden was a mystery, for we didn't have the materials to build such a structure. It seems likely that it had been built by aliens, though how or why and for what reason was unsure. I had had my own experiences with Sarney, and let's just say that there was more to the place than it seemed.

Sarney Sarittenden connected seamlessly to the rest of August, its polished, glowing metal extending several levels down below the surface; but all the entrances to Sarney were above ground, on the surface; there had never been one underground--at least, not one known to the public.

But I knew one.

We descended into the tunnels directly adjacent to Sarney. Insectoid patrols were more frequent here; after all, we were close to the seat of power. But even the Insectoids couldn't be everywhere, and we inched forward, moving slowly and carefully, stopping when we heard the patrols. It took two hours of slow but steady progress before we got there, but we arrived undetected (so I hoped).

"There" was actually an empty storeroom, right up against the side of Sarney itself, relatively high up in

level 4. Formerly the home of some sector of the bureaucracy, it was abandoned now. I looked over at the smooth wall along one side, feeling it with my hands.

"What are you doing?" Preston asked.

What was I doing? I wasn't really sure. I stopped, looking at the wall. I was in the right place, I think.

"Haven't you been here before?" Preston asked.

"Yes, but usually leaving, not coming in," I said, trying to remember.

"That makes a difference?" Preston asked, not understanding.

"Here it does," I said, finally remembering. I fished a hand scanner out of my backpack, and slowly passed it along the wall. Slowly... yes! Several contact points on the wall surface, invisible to the naked eye. I gauged their location on the scanner, and then tapped the appropriate code.

A section of the wall slid open, revealing a gently glowing passageway beyond.

"Gentlemen... Sarney Sarittenden."

In one bold stroke, we had gotten in without a battle, past companies and companies of Insectoid troopers. While I didn't claim to know much about Sarney Sarittenden, I certainly knew more than the Insectoids.

We entered the passageway cautiously but without incident; my scanner showed no detection devices or traps waiting for us. As we entered the entrance sealed behind us, leaving no sign on either end of an exit there.

I pointed to the door ahead of us. "We are on the 7th level of Sarney, I think. The Chamber of Leaders is on Level 1, and the control room is on level 4; both are in the central rotunda, one above the other. Normally, I would take one of the central access stairs, but they're sure to be guarded."

"What's the alternative?" said Preston.

"There another stairwell on the side, but that will require a longer walk through corridors, and a greater likelihood we'll encounter opposition."

I looked at their faces. They obviously had no idea what to do. If I were doing this mission right, I would've gone in with camo tarps, slunk around, explored the place, and planned and plotted for days. This mission was being done on the fly, with no intelligence gathering or planning beforehand.

I would have to decide for them. I resisted the urge to go the most direct route, guns blazing. We'd try the circuitous way.

Cautiously, we made our way out of the chamber. I saw the broad, gleaming hallways of Sarney around us, the gentle hum of its mighty power, but no Insectoids. I could hear a faint buzzing in the distance; they were around us, but not too close.

We started off, myself and the Silencer in the lead, Preston in the middle, the Clapper and Red Sally bringing up the rear. We encountered two Insectoids around a bend in the corridor, but got the drop on them, with silenced guns; they weren't even armed, which was a good sign. Chances are that this far in there were only posted guards, not ones roaming on patrol. We just had to make sure that none of the Insectoids we encountered survived long enough to raise an alarm.

We reached the side stairwell, started climbing. As we climbed we encountered an Insectoid coming down the stairs; we shot him before it had a chance to buzz. We reached level four without incident and started making our way to the central dome, the capital rotunda. Traffic was heavier here, and we shot several more along the way. One of them gave off a scream as it was shot, causing the Silencer to lightning quick fire off another shot to decapitate it.

We waited a tense moment to see if anyone or anything would come running. But nothing happened. So far this was very easy. Perhaps too easy? But if this was a trap, how could they have known that we were coming? No, it simply must be that we were too far inside to encounter much in the way of armed opposition. Ironically, this might be a safer mission than shopping for food!

We snuck into the outer section of the rotunda. On level four there was an outer circular area that circled the control room, with entrances at every major compass direction. We could see two guards posted at every entrance. Aiming around curved walls, we shot them, two at a time. Our guns were silenced, but even silenced guns create some noise; however, the combined buzz and sounds of electronic equipment from control dampened anything but a very sharp noise.

We picked off a second set of guards, then a third, then the fourth; skipping past an entryway each time to move to our next target. Now all that remained to do was to assault the control room itself.

I peered inside, just a for a moment. From my constricted viewpoint I saw a handful of Insectoids buzzing as they studied their consoles. Good. This was probably the governor-general's command center. I made a signal with my hand, and my team dispersed

I took the north entrance; the Silencer took the south; Preston took the east; and Red Sally and the Clapper took the West. When I had given them enough time to get into position I withdrew a demo charge from my pack, which was already set for 5 second detonation. I whispered into my com, "Ready... set... now!"

Pushing the activation switch, I lobbed it into the control room and then retreated into the outer area and flattened my back against the wall, while the others did the same from their entrances.

There was a loud explosion that shook the ground. And then we went running in, guns blazing. The room was, or had been packed with several dozen technicians, functionaries, and guards. There were only a dozen or so left who were uninjured, and they quickly recovered from their shock to reach for their weapons as we entered.

But we were quicker, blasting everything that moved and much that didn't; consoles, equipment, live Insectoids, dead Insectoids, spraying the bodies with blaster fire. Red Sally flamed a guard who was trying to sneak up on her from behind.

In moments it was all over, and the Insectoid's center of control on August was smashed. For a moment we stared around us at the destruction we had caused. I don't think anyone had believed that we would get this far, certainly not this easily. I let everyone enjoy a few moments of satisfaction. This was for Gantry and Jenkins, and all the other Agency operatives we had lost. This was something that wouldn't just be a blip in the governor-general's report.

The governor-general. It was probably on level one, in the Chamber of Leaders. Dare we press our luck and...?

It was at that moment that an alarm sounded, and I knew our attack had been discovered, and that we wouldn't stand a chance of getting to the governor-general.

It was only many, many years later that I discovered that (a) our attack didn't trigger the alarm, (b) that the governor-general wasn't waiting for us in the Chamber of Leaders, and (c) we had almost bagged ourselves a much, much bigger target than the governor-general.

Queen Zsst, leader of the Insectoid invasion fleet, sat in the Chamber of Leaders on level one, surrounded by carnage. The walls were splattered with green circulatory fluid; her guards were all mashed into crumpled, flattened forms on the ground, except those that were flattened against the wall; and her aides chattered nervously in the nest around her, afraid to show their mandibles.

And for good reason. The Queen had been pressing the alarm button for several minutes before the first wave of guards came in. She vented her rage on them in her harshest buzzing tone, a tone that signified pending disincorporation. "An alien simply walked in here, liquidated my guard, and could easily have liquidated me! What do you have to say about your security!"

The captain of the guard was terrified, but stammered something.

"Where is the governor-general? Where is the captain of my security?" The guard stammered something about a failure to communicate with central control, but the Queen cut him off.

"If you value your existence, find out where they are, and find and kill this alien before it escapes!"

The captain of the guard was so eager to get out of her presence that he never thought to ask the Queen what this alien looked like. But then, it didn't really matter; all humans tended to look alike.

We started to run down the stairwell, but heard heavy marching sounds below us. I could see several squads of Insectoid troopers marching up towards us. We ran as quickly as we could, but we were never going to make it back to the level seven stairwell before they reached us.

So we got out at level five, just one level down, and kept running. The Insectoids were only a few seconds behind us. They weren't quite as fast as we were, but I heard a loud buzzing sound, and saw something catching up with us--a large killer bee. It's buzzing was loud enough to blank out most other noise, and it cast a shadow as it closed on Red Sally and the Clapper, who were in the rear.

The Silencer fired a round of quick shots at it as we continued to run, but that only stung it slightly, causing it to flinch; then Red Sally let loose, and she burned it in mid-air, and the flaming beast hit a wall with a whoomph! and

it almost exploded with embers as it hit the ground.

We kept running, looking for a main stairwell, which we unfortunately found--complete with more Insectoids, just coming up out of it. We quickly reversed course, but couldn't do that for very long before running into our original pursuers, so we took the only alternative we could, down a side corridor... which led to a dead end.

Which could be that quite literally for us. We were trapped.

As the first wave of Insectoids came around the bend we blasted them, and the second wave, and the third; but there were too many of them, and blaster bolts were flying everywhere. We all crouched down or lay prone to try to present less of a target, but we had absolutely no cover in the corridor, and while the Silencer was blasting away with his two blasters, a bolt struck his right arm, and the pain must have been so intense because he cried out and involuntarily dropped the blaster in his right hand.

But more Insectoids were rounding the bend and the Silencer forced himself, through gritted teeth, to keep firing with his left hand; if we gave them even a second to target us as they came around the bend, we were dead.

The bodies kept piling up, but the Insectoids kept coming; they must have been throwing an entire company of Insectoids at us. Red Sally sent burst after burst of flame at them, but they kept coming; the Clapper kept pushing them back, or pushing them against each other, but they kept coming; Preston and the Silencer and I kept firing like madman, but they still kept coming.

And finally Red Sally sent out a giant sheet of flame, which engulfed the attackers and forced others out of sight around the bend to draw back, and she cried out, and fell to the ground, her bright red hair actually steaming.

And for a moment, there was silence. Then I heard the unmistakable buzz-buzz around the bend. They were still there. Massing for another attack. Without taking my eyes off the corridor for more than a second at a time I cast glances at everyone else. Preston and the Clapper seemed to be ok. The Silencer was in obvious pain, bleeding from his arm, but he said nothing. Red Sally lay unmoving on the ground. Had that last effort killed her?

Then I saw some slight movement in her arms and legs.
No.

The buzzing sound around the bend grew louder. Reinforcements must be massing for a quick rush to overwhelm us.

"This is it," said Preston, trying to keep a grip on his weapon despite his sweaty palms. I wanted to say something reassuring, but for once I was at a loss for words. I looked at the Silencer. This was the way he wanted it to end; now that Annie was dead he didn't care what happened to him, as long as he managed to kill some Insectoids as well. Red Sally, with her fierce hatred of the enemy, probably wouldn't have had it any other way. And the Clapper? Well, he was always scared, whatever the circumstances.

And me? Now, in my last few seconds, I regretted my foolishness, regretted letting my emotions run away with me, to lead me into making such a hasty and unplanned attack. If only I had listened to Mongo... I actually chuckled slightly, which I hastily turned into a cough, as the Silencer glared

at me.

The buzzing sound grew louder, and we could see shadows of Insectoids massing around the bend. They were getting ready to attack. And then, improbably, I found a second reason to laugh.

"What's so funny?" said Preston, in a loud whisper.

"Now I'll never know what Mongo meant about the guy with the big nose," I said, regretfully.

The buzzing sound was very loud now, and we prepared ourselves for the attack. Suddenly there were a group of inhuman screams, screeches, more like, and we could see the shadows, being tossed about like rag dolls, jumping this way and that. There were more screams, and several bodies were actually tossed around the bend--flattened, lifeless husks, we could see immediately; they had been pulverized by some very powerful force.

And then the screaming stopped. The shadows were gone, and so was the buzzing sound.

I looked at Preston and the Silencer. What was going on here?

And then, because it was absolutely silent, we heard a gentle pad-pad, tap-tap down the corridor, and we saw the shadow of a large, four legged creature, much like a big dog, with a large, flat, rectangular snout.

And then an extremely unlikely thing happened: Professor Capybara came around the bend.

Chapter 13: A Most Unexpected Capybara

I'm certain my jaw dropped; I think Professor Capybara was just about the last being I expected to see in an Insectoid stronghold. His brown, straw-like hair, webbed feet, box shaped nose, and dark black eyes were just as I remembered; he was even wearing his trademark spectacles (which weren't really spectacles, but another piece of technology entirely).

I started to tell everyone not to fire, but everyone had the good sense to lower their weapons slightly; they saw what had been done to the Insectoid attackers. Did Professor Capybara do that? How did he do that? To our knowledge the Professor was unarmed and an extremely peaceful being.

"Clifford, (tweatle tweatle) how unexpected to see you," said the Professor, in that sing-song voice of his.

"I could say the same," I said, still stunned. "What are you doing here?"

"I was on the way out and I sensed the commotion these beastly creatures were creating," said the Professor.

Sensed? Not heard, but sensed? But more immediately: "What do you mean, on the way out? What were you doing in the heart of Sarney Sarittenden in the first place?"

"Dropping by for a chat (tweatle tweatle). We must hurry, Clifford, they will be summoning reinforcements."

We got to our feet and made our way around the bend, with Professor Capybara in the lead. It was there we saw the pile of bodies, dead, crushed, and splattered against the wall and floors.

"Did you..."

"They were very rude," said the Professor, trotting along at a good pace. "I merely asked them to step aside. If they had showed proper manners (tweatle tweatle) they would

not be leaking as they are now."

I hoped I was always polite to the Professor; I gave this some thought as I automatically started to turn back towards the stairwell.

"No, not that one," said the Professor. "Just a little farther". He trotted to an apparently smooth portion of the glowing wall and tapped it twice with his snout. A panel slid open, revealing a room filled with humming machinery... and a hidden stairwell leading down!

The panel closed behind us as the last of us filed in. "I assume you made your way in through level 7," said the Professor conversationally, as if giving a tour of the hidden recesses of Sarney was an everyday occurrence.

This shook me out of my stunned silence. "Yes," I said. "But what are you doing here? I looked for you, after the invasion, but you were gone-"

"I just needed to gather a few more notes in the field," said the Professor.

Field notes? Field notes about what? I started to speak, but the Professor said, "Quietly now; we're on level 7, but you may encounter some resistance."

We emerged on level 7 out of a featureless wall panel, just a few dozen feet from our entry point. We made our way down to the corridor; I saw two Insectoids, who Preston and I shot. But buzzing sounds in the distance suddenly grew louder.

"Hurry," said the Professor, tapping the appropriate panel. We all ran into the room, and the Professor entered with us, shutting the door behind us.

Professor Capybara turned to me. "I believe you know how to get out from here."

I nodded. But then I caught the implication. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"No, Clifford," said the Professor. "I need to use the facilities here."

Facilities? What was the Professor talking about? Could he just walk around Sarney with ease? But, evidently, he could. As he pad-padded towards the doorway I said, "Wait! Why don't we meetup, later?"

The Professor shook his head sadly and looked at me as if I were a somewhat retarded pupil. "I'm going home, Clifford."

Home? As far we knew, the Professor was one of a kind; if there were a planet of the Capybaras, we sure didn't know about it.

"Wait!" I said, getting my wits about me. This was all happening too quickly, but I was starting to catch up. "If there are more of you, perhaps you can talk to your people, get them to help us in our war against the Insectoids."

"I'm sorry, Clifford, but we don't work that way," said the Professor. He tweeked almost apologetically.

"What I mean is, you don't have to fight yourselves; if you could even give us materials, supplies, weapons-"

The Professor looked at me through his spectacles. "I really regret what's happened to your people, Clifford. But much as I'm fond of your species, I cannot intervene; my only role is to study, and report." He turned away, for the last time.

"Will we ever meet again?" I asked, half chokingly. I had grown very fond of my four legged friend.

Professor Capybara paused, as if he were considering, and he flexed one of his webbed feet. A small cramp, maybe. "Perhaps," he said, opening the door, and he was gone. As the door slid shut behind him we heard insane screams in the corridor and a splat of green circulatory fluid streak across our view before the panel slid shut.

Preston and I exchanged glances. I think in that short exchange I learned more about Professor Capybara than all the xenobiologists had in several decades. But our conversation also raised more questions than answers.

I noticed the Silencer was bleeding rather profusely and he looked faint; I dug out some bandages from my backpack and set about binding the wound. It ran the length of his upper arm and shoulder, and looked to be about two inches deep in length. Nasty. The Silencer tried not to cry out in pain as I bandaged it, but he grit his teeth and looked very uncomfortable.

"We'll see what we can do for you when we get back," I said quietly.

We made our exit and reentered the tunnels around Sarney. The Insectoids didn't seem to realize that we had made our escape this way, and had not yet set up any special alerts. While we had to dodge a routine patrol or two, we made our way back to maintenance closet without further incident.

Sashay's eyes were round when he saw us bringing in the bleeding Silencer, who by now had lost so much blood that he was having trouble walking. But Mongo only looked at his right arm and muttered knowingly.

"I guess you don't have to ask us how it went," said Preston sardonically.

"You are alive," said Mongo. "Mongo tell you best time, and you come back alive. Why so unhappies?"

"You could have mentioned that the one with the long nose wasn't human."

"Did not ask. Many questions you do not ask Mongo, such as 'How are you today, Mongo? What is new with you, eh?'"

The Silencer groaned. "Somebody shut him up," said Preston, referring to Mongo.

I looked at the Silencer; he was bleeding through his bandages. He needed medical attention. Well, that was easy enough; all we would need was a doctor, a hospital, and medical equipment. All doctors were probably scattered among workfarms across August; locating one of them would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

But equipment and hospitals....? There was a chance they were simply deserted, abandoned. Surely scavengers would've picked through them, but there was a chance there could be some medical equipment left. As a field operative I had been given basic medical training; if I could get a cauterizer, I might be able to stop the bleeding.

"I'm going out to look for medical supplies," I said.

"It's bound to be risky," said Preston. "They're all stirred up now."

"The Silencer isn't going to make it if I don't," I said. I licked my lips. "You stay here and watch over him."

"Are you sure?" said Preston, offering to come.

I could tell he had experienced enough shock for one day. I nodded.

Clap clap. "I'll go."

I turned to the Clapper. "No offense, but this operation requires stealth."

"I can help (clap clap)."

I was about to turn him down, gently, when I noticed Mongo looking at me, with those great big eyes, giving me one of his "you'll be sorry" expressions if I said what I was about to say. Or was I just imagining it?

"All right," I relented.

The first two hospitals we checked out had been thoroughly scavenged; in one of them, even the sheets on the beds were gone. The second had been destroyed by fire. Time was pressing when we arrived at our third prospect, and I was surprised to find that it was quite unabandoned.

And concerned; it was buzzing with activity, literally. We snuck in through an air vent, and saw Insectoids buzzing around... experimenting on humans. They were strapped to surgical tables, being injected by very alien looking machines, or having implants added to their body. Most of them appeared to be sedated but there were a few moans from those that weren't.

I grew sick to my stomach, and retreated back farther in the vent where the Clapper was waiting. He saw my expression, and reached up with his hands-

"No!" I hissed almost silently, grabbing them and holding them together. "One round of applause is all it will take to get us strapped down in the operating room too."

Mentally I started to calculate if I could take them, if I could burst out, gun blazing, and try to save some of these people. But I had no idea what kind of firepower there was in this hospital; the last time I had participated in an unplanned mission, I had almost been slaughtered in a deadend. Besides, every minute I delayed increased the likelihood that the Silencer would bleed to death.

I searched some of the other avenues offered by the vents, and found one leading into a storeroom, just off one of the surgical chambers. Supplies were scattered all over the floor, but it didn't look like the Insectoids had made a concerted effort to destroy or take the items here. Keeping one eye on the open door, I scrambled around, looking for what I could find, trying to be as silent as possible. I located some more bandages, and sedatives, and put them in my backpack. I kept searching, aware of the buzzing sound in the next room. I really needed a cauterizer. I rapidly glanced through the row of shelves, didn't see one. Then, on a small table just opposite the doorway, I saw what looked like a handheld model sitting on a bench. I couldn't tell for sure unless I got close... but it was right in view of the open doorway.

I peered ever so slightly into the doorway. There were a number of Insectoids performing their ghastly procedures, but several of them were faced in this general direction. They'd definitely notice me grabbing something from the bench.

I thought for a long, hard moment; the Silencer was running out of time! Then I went back to the vent, and silently gestured for the Clapper to come down into the room. Actually I lowered him gently on the ground, to prevent him from making any noise; he looked down on the ground with

anticipation as first his toes and then his feet touched down, as I lowered him by his belt. I motioned him forward, almost to the point of the doorway, and pointed to the object on the bench.

The Clapper raised his hands nervously to clap; I grabbed his hands, shook my head vigorously, and pointed to the object again.

The Clapper nodded. The object started to move, making a slight scraping sound on the table. I winced and the object lifted, and suddenly dashed into the Clappers hand. It was a cauterizer.

We heard an odd tenor change to the buzzing, and the sound of movement; I quickly motioned for the Clapper to hide behind the ends of one of the shelves; and so did I, tightly gripping my blaster.

An Insectoid entered the room. It stood there for a moment, buzzing. I stood with my blaster, peering though a tiny obscure angle to see it standing there. It looked this way and that. And then it left the room entirely.

We made our way back into the vent and out of the hospital without incident. I tried to sprint as much as possible but had to slow down to let the Clapper keep up. Finally, we had almost reached the turnoff to the corridor where the maintenance closet was located when I saw it; an Insectoid standing guard at that junction.

Had they discovered our hideout? Very possible. Or it could just be a general sweep to try and catch resistance members. But it seemed quite a coincidence that a guard would be stationed there.

But I had to find out if the hideout had been discovered. The Silencer could still be bleeding to death inside. I thought for a long moment. I could kill this Insectoid easily enough, but there could be an entire platoon around the corner. Even if there weren't, the death of an Insectoid right almost outside our hiding place would create unwanted attention in this area.

I thought for a moment. Time was running out for the Silencer; what could I do? And then, for some reason, I thought of Mongo. He had seemed to hint that the Clapper would be useful on this mission. He had already proven his value once. Maybe he could help again.

I pulled the Clapper forward, and whispered something to him. He nodded.

A piece of debris just past the Insectoid lifted itself up and clanged against the wall. The Insectoid, suddenly stirring from immobility, started marching down the corridor to investigate. When it was out of site we raced to the junction to try and reach the turnoff before it returned. I was conscious of the fact that we could be running right into the hands of a full platoon of Insectoids, but we needed to take the risk.

The corridor, our corridor, was empty; I raced down to the entrance, accessed the lock and peeled back the door. As the Clapper scampered in I cast a glance back to be sure the Insectoid hadn't returned and spotted us; then I ran in and shut the door as quietly and quickly as possible.... to find myself facing Preston's blaster.

"Sorry," he said, lowering it. "They've been milling about out there for hours. I think our little raid got them

really stirred up."

"How's the Silencer?" I said, suddenly spotting his inert body and fearing the worst.

"Not good," said Preston.

The Silencer moaned as I reached over for him, and I saw he was bleeding onto the ground. The first thing I did was give him a sedative to knock him out. Then I took out the cauterizer. In my haste I hadn't even tested to see if it worked, or still had power. But I flicked the activation switch and was rewarded with a small glow on the tip.

Surgery isn't one of my favorite tasks, and it was about as unpleasant for me as it was for the Silencer, but in a few minutes it was done. He jerked a bit from the obvious pain even when he was unconscious, and I had to give him another shot to keep him knocked out. When it was done I had stopped the bleeding; but the question is, had I stopped it in time? What the Silencer needed was a transfusion, but we had no way to get him one.

For the first time in what felt like years I slumped into a corner, and immediately sank into unconsciousness.

"There is no sign of the alien who invaded my sanctum; no sign of the humans who attacked the control center and killed the senior watchers, and no knowledge of how they got in our out; is this correct, commander?" Queen Zsst asked.

The commander, actually the deputy commander of the Sarney garrison, couldn't help but tremble. Both the governor-general and the commander of the garrison had been unlucky enough not to be in the control room at the time the humans had attacked; at least if they had, their endings could have been quick and relatively painless; instead, both their dismembered corpses were hanging just feet away from the Queen's thrown, a very poignant statement about her unhappiness with palace security.

"We do have some more information about the creature who attacked you," said the commander, sweating profusely. "It was a-"

"I know what it was! Don't you think I recognize one of those when I see it!" The Queen snapped. "And it shouldn't have been here! Is there anything else useful you have to say?" She stressed the word useful. If the commander had nothing useful to impart...

"We also have video on the human attackers," said the commander.

"Not enough to show how they got in or out," the Queen noted.

"They disappeared somewhere on level 7," said the commander. "My men are still searching, but the structure of this place prevents effective-" he broke off, seeing the expression on the Queen's face, seeing her tendrils start to lift, as if to motion her bodyguard to move forward and set another example. Ever since the last attack she had four heavily armed squads located inside her chambers, and several more platoons scattered throughout the whole of Sarney Sarittenden.

"We have the identities of the human attackers!" The commander blurted.

The Queen lowered her tendrils, for a moment. "Go on."

"One of them has been identified as the same Graftonite who stormed our ship orbiting Grafton and slaughtered the crew. He has been identified as "The Silencer" and is reputed to be one of their fiercest warriors."

A Graftonite. The Queen shuddered; wasn't there supposed to be a blockade in effect? Even their intense efforts to invade and pacify the populace had so far been stymied by strong resistance on the ground; so far all they had managed to do was occupy and fortify a small, four square mile area that was under almost constant attack.

"And the other?"

"His name is Clifford Croft, he's a level one operative with the Agency-"

"I thought we had located and killed all the top agency operatives!" the Queen roared.

"Apparently not. They may have formed an alliance with the creature that attacked you in an effort to destabilize our pacification program."

The Queen considered this possibility. If so, that would be very, very disturbing.

"Then we must prevent such an alliance from being cemented. Bring me the heads of this Graftonite and Agency man. Bring me their heads within two planetary revolutions, or I will have yours," said the Queen.

I got up and stretched my very sore muscles; the whole previous day seemed like a bad dream. Then, remembering, I rushed over to the Silencer. He was lying on the ground, but his eyes were open and he was conscious.

"How're you feeling?" I asked.

"Awful," said the Silencer. He didn't look very good. His face was very pale.

"You lost a lot of blood," I said. "Most people wouldn't have lasted as long as you did." I looked around. "You should eat something to replenish your strength."

"Preston gave me the last of the food before he left," the Silencer whispered.

"Left?" I looked around. Red Sally and Sashay were gone too, but Mongo and the Clapper were there.

"He goes several hours ago," said Mongo. "Asks Mongo if bugs still waiting outside, but Mongo not know everything, so finally he goes out."

"And were the bugs still outside?"

"Mongo not hear sounds of weapons fire, so Mongo thinks not," said Mongo. Then, as an afterthought, "But Mongo always criticized for being wrong, Mongo not want to try to make guesses."

Clap clap.

The door was opening and this was the Clapper's way of getting my attention. My weapon was already drawn and pointed but it was only Preston and Co., and they were carrying big packages of something.

"Food!" said Sashay. "We stopped off at the most lovely storehouse-"

"That's a lot of food you got there," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"We located a new supplyhouse on Level 48, just one sector over," said Preston.

"How did you get past the Insectoid guards?"

"No guards," said Preston. "Looks like they haven't discovered the place yet. We should go back there tonight and take what we can before they do."

"Um," I said absentmindedly. Somewhere inside alarm bells were going off, but I wasn't sure why. I looked at Mongo, our most reliable indicator, and he was frowning too, but he also looked puzzled. In other words, something was bothering him too, but he wasn't quite sure what it was either.

"Are you sure you weren't followed on your way back?" I said.

"Croft," said Preston, in a very disgusted tone. "I'm not an amateur."

I sat back against a wall while Sashay went through the food and began preparing dinner. While he worked he started taking out the food from their containers and transferring them to smaller bags.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"Many of these foods get stale when they're stored in opened containers for longer periods; I'm transferring them to smaller baggies to keep them fresh," said Sashay. "As my dearly departed wife used to say, don't put all your eggs in one stasis bin."

The Paperweight turned momentary to attend to the cooking food, then returned to his task. He emptied a large container of cereal into several smaller ones, but something caught his eye at the bottom of the box, and he tittered hysterically.

"What's so amusing?" I said, stepping forward. For some reason I was infused with a sense of urgency. Maybe I was just jumpy; but all my instincts said that something was wrong here.

The Paperweight held up a shiny piece of metal. "Look, it comes with a prize! I didn't realize they still did these kinds of promotions--"

"Let me see that," I said. I grabbed it from him, ignoring his hurt expression, but I only needed a few seconds to look at it... until I rapidly threw it to the ground and grinded it under my heel.

"Everyone up," I said, loudly clapping my hand.

"They've discovered us! We've got to move, now!"

"What?" said Preston.

I stood inches from Preston's face. "They bugged the food, you idiot!" I turned to everyone else. "Out, out! Now! No, don't wait to pack everything else, just take essential weapons; I want everyone out of here in the next 60 seconds, and DON'T TOUCH THE FOOD! Preston, help the Silencer up NOW!"

I quickly gathered our most essential equipment, and madly packed them into two bags, one of which I kept and the other I gave to the Clapper; I told Red Sally to check the door and to see if they were coming.

I had destroyed that transmitter, but there were bound to be others in those cartons they had brought back. This wasn't some random sweep by the Insectoids; they were expending a tremendous amount of labor and energy to find us.

Big Red opened the door a crack. "Clear," she said, as far as she could see. Which was about 20 feet.

We had made it to the first junction before we heard the buzzing sound, distant, but closing; we ran down another

corridor, and only I hung back, behind a corner, to see several long columns of Insectoids trotting down the corridor, the ones in the lead consulting a scanner of some sort.

I crept quietly around the corner and caught up with the others. We stopped to catch our breath in an abandoned room in the next sector. We had to proceed slowly because Preston and Sashay had to half-carry, half-pull the Silencer, who was in no condition to walk. But even this area wouldn't be safe for long, as the Insectoids widened their search.

What do we do now? was the unspoken question. We had talked many times about locating and equipping a second hideout, but that had always taken second priority to missions to gather food or raid Insectoid facilities. And now we were out in the cold with little more than the clothes on our backs, a wounded man among us and not a crumb of food.

I looked around at faces as grim as mine. Well, we'd just have to start from scratch, picking a place to settle in, at least temporarily, until we could find something full-time. "Maybe we can find something in Sector 5 of Level 40, at least temporarily," I said.

"No, not go there," said Mongo. "You go to naaasty level 40 on your own. Mongo goes his own way."

"Where will you go?" I asked.

"Clifford Croft forgets that Mongo survive a loooong time before they find Mongo. They think, they may think 'Mongo waiting in hallways for months, waiting for Agency peoples to come and save him'; but no, Mongo has his own hideaway, nice, safe place where bugs don't go."

"Is it far? Can you take us there?"

"Not too far, no, not too far at all, can take you," said Mongo. But then, considering, "If Mongo takes you, will you be grateful?"

"Yes," I said, barely containing my annoyance. "Yes, we'll be very, very grateful."

Mongo had a very different definition of "not far" than I did; we had marched about for almost an hour before we found ourselves in an industrial section of level 14, sector 22, a huge chamber filled with pipes. I could just barely make out the dim shapes of large vats across the room. Mongo went for a medium sized pipe and turned a hatch to open it.

I peered inside; it was dark, and it smelled of... something. "You can't be serious," I said, wondering how we could drag the Silencer inside. "Isn't there another way?"

"No, no other way. Not far! Not far!"

No longer relying on Mongo's prediction of distances, I told the others to wait there while I followed Mongo in. Who knows what we'd find on the other end, or how far the pipe would go?

It was dark, and the stench only grew in intensity as we crawled onwards. But the distance was relatively short; after just 50 feet, the pipe opened up into a large, enclosed, spherical area. Mongo groped around in the darkness and turned something on which I saw to be a haphazardly mounted light bar.

We were inside a sealed vat! The stench was almost overpowering, and I recognized it. Gauche. Dried up gauche, the flavored coffee favored by a large percentage of Augustans (and many off-worlders). Unfortunately, I was one

of the few who wasn't a fan, and the smell of it was awful.

But when I looked around I saw bedding, ripped up papers, and several cartons of something. I went over to them, and Mongo instinctively moved to intercept me, and then stopped himself when I gave him a warning glance. I saw why when I opened them up.

Food! But where had Mongo gotten all this food? One box contained chocolate bars. The second box contained chocolate bars. The third box... it was all chocolate bars. He must have raided convenience stands. Had he eaten nothing but chocolate bars for months on end?

Mongo must have seen the expression on his face, because he smacked his lips and said, "Good food, yes! Very tasty. Mongo not have much, but Mongo share, yes, Mongo share with good Agency friends."

I looked around doubtfully. It wasn't much, the place was as filthy as a rat's cage, and it smelled bad, but Mongo had used this place for months to avoid the Insectoid patrols, so it was probably secure.

"How do you get ventilation?"

"Ventilation?" Mongo asked, as if I had used an unfamiliar word. Then, frowning, he said, "Leave entrance to pipe open sometimes. But dangerous, very dangerous, can show bugs where Mongo is."

"Hm," I said, looking up. Well, we could always burn a few small and discrete holes in the sides to get some ventilation; at least we wouldn't asphyxiate ourselves. I nodded, making the decision.

The only problem was how to get the Silencer through the pipe. There was no way he could crawl on his own; he was so weak now that he had to be carried everywhere. We couldn't pull him by his arms, not without causing him tremendous pain.

It was Sashay of all people who figured it out. First Sashay entered the pipe backwards; then he had us put the Silencer in the pipe legs first, and then Sashay pulled on the Silencer's legs while crawling backwards. The Silencer, semi-conscious, moaned slightly in discomfort but endured it.

When we had all crawled through the pipe I immediately braced myself for the objections.

"You can't be serious," said Preston, pulling his shirt up to his nose to act as a filter against the stench.

"This place stinks!" said Red Sally, her blonde hair acquiring just the slightest tinge of violet in the poor light.

"Look how dirty it is! You can't expect us to live like animals," said Sashay.

"Like animals, yes, that's how they see us," said Mongo. Oh oh, we had hurt his feelings. "Nice Agency peoples want to live like civilized peoples; way out of pipe is that way."

"He's got a point," I said. "This isn't perfect, but we need a safe place to hide, at least for a while, and this may be the ticket. Does anyone else has a better hiding place to suggest, and is he or she willing to carry the Silencer there?"

I received the silence I expected.

"-We took DNA sampling which shows that the ones called Silencer and Clifford Croft were in the closet only minutes before we got there," said the deputy commander, trembling silently as he held up a sample tab. The deputy commander knew his two days were up.

"So you're saying that you missed them by minutes, and that's the success you have come to report," said Queen Zsst, as if she were summarizing.

"We were very close! I'm sure if we just had a little more time-"

"Return to your post," said the Queen, interrupting.

The deputy commander, surprised, saluted, and turned to go.

"Not that way," said the Queen, as two of her bodyguards came up behind and around the deputy commander. "That one," she said, pressing a button which lowered a hook near the bodies of the garrison commander and the governor general.

Queen Zsst watched dispassionately as her bodyguard started to ritually dismember her former deputy commander, who was screaming even before the first limb was removed. She summoned the newly appointed garrison commander, and it stepped forward, trying to ignore the now much louder screams coming just several feet to the right.

The Queen summoned a viewscreen image of Clifford Croft and the Silencer, taken from their internal records. "Find Croft. Now!" said the Queen.

The commander looked surprised but said nothing and saluted, turning away. A smart being; it might go far.

Baracki chose that moment to enter her chambers. He gazed for a moment at the partially dismembered deputy commander, and then turned away, as if bored him, as if he had long since become desensitized to such a thing. But who knew what really went on underneath that hood? Baracki approached the Queen. Gesturing to her dismembered officers, he commented, "Doing a little redecorating?"

"A minor matter," said the Queen. "Nothing we can't handle."

"I'm not so sure," said Baracki. "I got a good look at the 'redecorating' of the control area on level four. Perhaps..." His words were cut off by his gaze, which settled on the image of Clifford Croft. "This one is known to us! He has meddled in our affairs before." He gave a dark hiss.

"It is only one being, and we are hunting for him," said the Queen. "A minor irritant," she said, hiding her rage from Baracki.

"Let us hope you do not suffer any further 'minor irritants' in your command center," said Baracki. "I would hate to think that my confidence in you had been misplaced." And he strode out of the chamber, leaving a trail of fear in his wake.

Chapter 14: New Allies

From the personal log of Clifford Croft, 1 year and eight months

I never imagined (or simply wasn't at all sure) that I would survive long enough to write another entry almost one year

after our near-fatal attack on Sarney Sarittenden. But I have.

The first few days after the raid were touch and go, especially for the Silencer. He lay unmoving for two days, and we almost thought he was dead; but then he moaned, and sat up, and from then on got slowly stronger. Within a few days he could stand up unassisted; within a week he was walking around; and within a few weeks he was more or less back to his old strength.

But the injury to his arm was not so easily healed. He had a deep, black-reddish wound along his upper arm and part of his shoulder, and had no apparent control of his right arm. He tried to train it, forcing himself to lift first light and then heavier objects with his right arm, and soon regained some strength there. But he must have had some nerve damage, for his arm would jump or tremble at odd times, even if he wasn't using it. When he was asleep, it was not uncommon to see his arm jerk about as if he were having a nightmare. Maybe he was.

That effectively meant his ability to shoot with his right hand was gone; although the Silencer assured us that he was "almost as good" a shot with his left hand. Almost as good was still several times better and faster than the rest of us, so I think we're still grateful to have him with us.

Our first task was to find a new hideout. I didn't want to hurt Mongo's feelings, but we didn't want to live in a vat forever. After much searching, and consideration of different possibilities, we found one, in an abandoned factory. We found a large block of machinery that we could hollow out and fix up. We fixed it up and equipped it under my direction; it was to have a minimum of three entrances and exits, to give us several avenues of escape; and it was to be equipped with a security system that also had a self-destruct mechanism tied to a block of explosives. If we ever had to abandon our base again, next time we could leave the Insectoids something to remember us by.

The next step was to equip our new headquarters. I had had some time to think in Mongo's vat, and I realized that searching for food in warehouses was a losing proposition. The warehouses were running of supplies, and most of them were baited traps guarded by the Insectoids. If we couldn't get food, we'd have to make our own.

So we raided some garden supply depots (a rarity on August, but at least they were unguarded), as well as a few outlying farms for supplies. We got the seeds for some thirty day potatoes, and quick growing rice as well as a few other vegetables. We even got some meat seeds, the bioengineered group that grew what looked and tasted like meat. Well, they tasted somewhat like meat, with a kind of tangy corn flavor. It wasn't top-notch sirloin from a carefully bioengineered white steer, but it was better than nothing.

But before we could eat we had to set up the hydroponic garden and the hotlamps (run on a portable generator) in our new hideout. That meant we had to eat nothing but chocolate bars for a month; in fact, we ran out just after a week, and had to raid other convenience counters for more chocolate bars. By the end of a month we were quite, quite sick of chocolate; and when the first of our grubby little potatoes came out of the ground, we greedily devoured them. After that we laid out more space for our garden, and soon evened out

the supply and demand problem--though, with limited space, we always had to ration food.

We even made an attempt to live normal lives. When the Clapper told us that Red Sally's birthday was coming, Sashay somehow managed to put together a cake. I'll never forget the moment when she put her face close to the cake and blew on the candles. The minute she blew on them they all lit up. I wonder what kind of wish she made.

We even got her a present, of sort; I had located a military target dummy, used for testing explosive and high-caliber ammunition. It was flame resistant, and that gave Sally hours of pleasure as she slowly burned little pieces of it off in her spare time. It took her two days just to slowly burn the head off, and I think she really enjoyed this present; she would sit in a corner, a flame sprouting from her finger, grinning as she flamed pieces of the thing.

Sashay took up painting again, and tried to paint each of us; he would hang the results on the walls, along with other decorations he would find or make. The Silencer even let Sashay do a painting of him, when we told him how Sashay had dragged him through the pipe. But only one painting, the Silencer insisted; and sure enough, when the Paperweight attempted to test the Silencer on this point, starting a second painting, the Silencer shot the painting in progress with his good hand.

The Silencer practiced quickdraws and aiming with his left hand, to improve his proficiency (if that was at all possible), and he also worked with his right hand; sometimes he could draw his gun with it and hold it steady, but often his arm would jump when he drew the gun, or tremble when he tried to aim.

The Clapper didn't seem to do much on his own. He just stuck around Red Sally and watched her burn things.

And Preston and I? I think we were just glad to be alive. But having survived the initial invasion, there was more to do. The first task I put us to was preparing a secondary hideout, in case our new base of operations was discovered. I had the unenviable task of explaining to Mongo why we couldn't use his vat as a backup base, that we were "saving it" as an ultimate backup in case our secondary hideouts were discovered.

Then I issued unusual orders--I told the Silencer, Preston, Red Sally, and the Clapper, to find and equip a backup hideout of their own, while I, the Paperweight, and Mongo would prepare a backup base of operations on our own. Under no circumstances, I stressed, was one group to tell the other group where their hideout was. The Clapper, Sashay, Mongo, and Red Sally looked puzzled with these instructions, but complied. Those who were experienced enough to understand my instructions knew why I issued them; and those that weren't needn't be worried by... unpleasant contingencies.

A turning point of sorts came two months after our attack on Sarney, when we had finished building up our hideout. It was a bit hot inside from the light of the heat lamps in the gardening area, but otherwise reasonably comfortable. We were sitting around, not really doing very much, when Preston said what was on all our minds.

"So, what do we do now?"

I understood his question immediately. We had built up our base, and we had nothing to do--in fact, our little farm

was going so well, that we didn't even need to go out to hunt for food anymore. Aside from some trips for gardening supplies, we could stay inside our little hideout almost indefinitely.

If we were simple machines that could be turned on and off, that could be an acceptable solutions. But we were humans, restless humans; even the Clapper wanted to go out and cause trouble (it must have been Red Sally's influence). I tried to make excuses. I said, "What about the Silencer? Is he up to-"

Two guns came into being, mere inches from my face. The one on the right wavered a little, but both pointed at me. "I guess that answers that."

"We could start small," said Preston. "There's an Insectoid checkpoint two levels up-"

And that's how we started, small. But we planned our missions carefully. And in another difference, we traveled mostly through the ventilation system, to reduce the chances of getting caught. We painstakingly mapped all the vents in the area and used them for travel, to reduce the amount of time we'd have to wander around the corridors where we could run into an Insectoid patrol. The Silencer was well enough to permit him to crawl again using both arms.

We went on a few missions, always being careful to check out our targets first, always being careful not to strike too close to our home base of operations so we wouldn't draw attention to ourselves. And we did this for a few months, achieving some measure of success. By success I mean that we managed to inflict harm on the Insectoids; we weren't crippling their occupation, but we were hurting them, and, most importantly, we weren't taking any casualties in return. Better planning and coordination were paying off.

We had a string of minor successes over the next few months, and then, unexpectedly, we had a mission go wrong. Preston and Sashay were on a recon mission, to look for new targets of opportunity, when Sashay got caught.

I know, I know it sounds crazy that we would send the Paperweight out on military missions. But the alternative for him was to stay in our hideout 25 hours a day, seven days a week. He could, and did, get stir crazy. I couldn't afford to give him an armed escort just to take a walk outside; it was much too dangerous. So he volunteered to go on missions with us. I figured that recons were less dangerous, relatively speaking, than direct assaults; and as Sashay refused to touch a blaster, this was all he was really good for.

But he and Preston got separated on a recon mission, and Sashay stepped on something that gave away his position, and the Insectoids pounced on him quickly. In a way maybe it was good he was unarmed; if he had been armed, he might have been identified as a rebel and executed on the spot. I think the Insectoids thought he was probably an escaped laborer, and they merely took him away

"Who will take over his cooking duties?" the Silencer asked.

"I hated his food," spat Red Sally.

"Aren't we going to try and rescue him?" Preston asked. Perhaps he felt responsible for his abduction.

"We don't even know where he is," I said reasonably.

"But I know where he is," said Preston. "I saw them take him to their outpost on the surface, block 14-24 section

2."

"He may not be there anymore," I said. "And it's bound to be heavily defended."

"There are only about 15-20 of them," said Preston.

"And there are only 4 combatants among us," I said.

"If he talks, we'll have to abandon this hideout," said Preston.

"Ummm... you've got something there." While we had secondary hideouts, I wasn't too eager to uproot and abandon what we had. I turned to the Silencer. "What do you think?"

"Seems like a lot of work for a Paperweight," said the Silencer.

"He did pull you through the pipe," I said.

"I did let him draw a painting of me," said the Silencer. "That makes us even."

"He also spotted the bug the Insectoids planted in the food," I said. "If he hadn't noticed it, we all would've been caught or killed."

"He's a noncombatant, and contributes little outside of the dinner table," said the Silencer. "I also find his painting and decorating habits annoying."

"All right, then," I gave an exaggerated sigh. "I guess we'll just have to pick up and move to a new hideout. It's a pity, though... I guess you're not up to it anyway."

The Silencer gave me a cold, deadly look.

"I mean, you've been able to handle the minor skirmishes pretty well, but this would be considerably more of a challenge; after all, we haven't gone up against this many Insectoids since our raid on Sarney. And, with your injured arm, it's no shame..."

Two guns were out and pointed at my face. Neither of them wavered.

"Your crude attempt at manipulation isn't worth commenting on," said the Silencer. "If you want to go and kill more Insectoids, cut the psycho-crap and just say so."

I checked my blaster charge, and holstered my weapon. "Saddle up, gang."

We moved through the ruins on the surface cautiously, heading towards the Insectoid encampment. It was some sort of checkpoint or outpost, but given the darkness there could be more of them than Preston reported. When we got close enough, about a half block away, I peered at the location through electrobinoculars. There were guards standing outside a small, hastily constructed guard building that had been built on the sidewalk and over part of the street. There were only a handful of guards outside, but that building could easily contain two dozen more. And there, sitting on the sidewalk under guard, was the Paperweight, looking glum. He seemed to be sitting there awaiting transport.

As if on cue, a ground car zoomed to a halt near the encampment, containing four more Insectoids. As if on cue another group of Insectoids came out of the building, making for almost two dozen Insectoids on site. I could see where this was leading; once Sashay was in the ground car, we'd never be able to trace him.

But could we take on two dozen, or more, Insectoids?

I passed the electrobinoculars around, and the expression spread from face to face; there was nothing we could do for Sashay. I was preparing to herd our group home

and my back was to the outpost, and so I missed the very beginning of the battle.

But I certainly heard it, hearing the unmistakable cackle of blaster fire. Multiple blaster fire, which my trained ear said was coming from League weaponry. What was this?

Wresting the electrobinoculars away from the Clapper, who was tapping unconvincingly on it, I saw what was happening. The Insectoid outpost was under attack from several different sides! It was unclear who the attackers were, but if they were against the Insectoids, they were almost certainly on our side.

We joined the attackers, haphazardly running down the block to engage the Insectoids who were busy responding to blaster fire from all sides. The Paperweight had instinctively hit the ground when the shooting started, which may have saved his life, with all the blaster fire whizzing around. As we closed on the center of the firefight I saw the attackers, all undeniably human, many wearing the green uniforms of regular Alliance army units.

In seconds it was all over; every Insectoid was down, and green was running on the streets. Sashay, covered with a streak of green, sat up, looking a bit ill. The newcomers eyed us as cautiously as I did them, and their guns were now pointed at us. "Halt!" one of them cried. "Identify yourself."

"We're here to pick him up," I said, slowly lowering my weapon as I indicated Sashay. "Very fortunate you happened to be around. My name is Clifford Croft."

Their leader approached. He gave me a looking over, and then looked at Red Sally and the others more curiously. He must have thought we were scavengers, or escaped prisoners. He made a hand motion, and his men lowered their weapons.

"My name is Captain Sklam, of the armed forces of the Alliance," he said. "How long have you been on the run?"

"On the run?" snorted Red Sally. "We've been hitting the Insectoids for months!"

"Really?" said Captain Sklam. "The six of you?"

"We were the ones who raided Sarney Sarittenden, what have you done lately!" Red Sally countered.

"You?" said Captain Sklam. "I had heard rumors that Sarney had been attacked... but I think it's hardly possible that a bunch of stragglers..."

I could see that credibility was going to be an important stumbling block, so I decided to break cover and say, "I'm a level one Agency operative."

There was a murmur among his men. "One of the Eight," I heard more than one say. Maybe it wasn't wise to admit in public, but I needed to get through to them.

"And I'm a fire surprise," said Sally, sending a spectacular sheet of flame shooting out of her fingertips into the evening sky.

The soldiers took a few steps as they were stunned.

"And I'm a Clapper!" said the Clapper, clapping as Sklam's blaster was pulled from its holster by an invisible force and then holstered again.

"And Mongo not anything," said Mongo, with big eyes. And then, "You will have grape juice and liquid starch for dinner tonight."

"Ah, that's enough," I said hastily. I hadn't intended

to put everyone's skills on display.

"I can see there's more to you than it seems," said Sklam. "I think I should take you back to see the General."

General? Had a significant portion of our military survived, after all these months? I started to hope against hope.

"But we'll have to blindfold you, for security reasons, you understand," said Sklam.

I nodded, understanding the necessity of it. In fact, the only one who put up a fight was Mongo.

"No, no," said Mongo.

"Mongo, it's necessary," I said, rather anxious now to get off the street. The Insectoids would be coming to investigate, soon.

"They will let Mongo trip and fall down the last five steps."

"No, of course they won't," I said.

"Our men will guide you carefully," said Sklam. "You have my word."

Mongo looked unconvinced, but dutifully let himself be blindfolded. We started marching for some time, at least 30 or 40 minutes, during which time we went underground and down eight levels--at least I could count the number of stairwells we went down. We passed through several more corridors, and then, right before we reached our destination, we walked down a short flight of five steps. A few seconds later I heard a "eee...upppp!" behind me and the sounds of someone falling down the stairs, and then Mongo's voice screaming and cursing, and then, from one of Sklam's men, "Oh... sorry about that."

When our blindfolds were lifted, we found ourselves in a large office; a sandy haired man in a general's uniform was sitting behind a desk, and we were flanked by armed guards.

"So, you are our mysterious visitors," said the general. "The preliminary action report I received indicated that you have some rather unusual abilities."

"We demonstrated them to get your attention," I said. "I'd love to speak further about it... in private."

The general considered. We had been disarmed, but there were seven of us, and one of him. "Why don't my men and your men wait outside and we'll talk one-on-one?"

I nodded, instantly agreeing.

Once everyone left we immediately made introductions. His name was General Tenor Markov and he had been commander of security at Sarney Sarittenden when the Insectoids first attacked. His men had put up a show of resistance when the Insectoids first landed, but were forced to pull back and stage a guerrilla warfare operation over the past year and a half.

I explained who I and our people were, and Markov looked surprised. "I had only heard rumors of an existence of--what do you call it? The Gamma Section? But the things your people were seen to have done--telekenesis, pyrotechnics--were undeniable."

"It was not my intention to give a personal demonstration to a large audience," I said. "Our strength rests in secrecy. But yours lies in numbers. May I ask how large your resistance is?"

The General, now comfortable with my story, gave more details. He had gathered 350 troopers, almost a battalion

sized force, and they had been conducting raids as frequently as they could. Because of their size they could engage what we considered larger enemy groupings, like the checkpoint that was destroyed tonight, but they still couldn't stand up against the mass of the Insectoid occupation force.

"Are you working with other allied forces?"

Markov shook his head sadly. "We've had no other contact with other forces. At the time of the invasion there were at least 50,000 soldiers on August; I can only guess that they're either dead, or imprisoned, or scavenging just to survive. Of course, August is so big, there's always the chance that other resistance forces could be operating without our knowing about it. You're the first top-level Agency man we've seen come through here."

"You've seen other Agency people?" I said, hoping against hope.

"We came across two field agents last year; but haven't seen or heard from any others since," said Markov. Seeing my expression, he added, "Of course, not all of them would hasten to identify themselves to us. You people are survivor types, I'm sure there must be more of you still around."

"Hm," I said, my gears turning rapidly. "How do you avoid detection?"

"We have a large underground area here, but most exit points are sealed off and the rest are carefully hidden," said Markov. "We only go out in groups and we make sure to collect our dead and wounded."

"Still, in an organization as big as this, you're bound to be discovered sometime..."

"We have contingency plans," said Markov, "But it's difficult to constantly move around over 300 soldiers and support staff. Our numbers are actually around 500, as we've taken on civilians to support our efforts." He looked at me appraisingly. "We could certainly use people with your obvious skills. Would you like to join forces with us?"

I told him I'd have to take that subject to my people. He nodded, and then spoke into his comm, ordering us to be released and to have our weapons returned. We had established a certain level of trust.

We sat in a large, busy cafeteria, marveling at all the well-fed, relatively well dressed and high morale soldiers and civilians around us.

"I had no idea this kind of resistance was going on, less than two miles from us," Preston marveled.

"August is a big city," I said. "The General has asked us to join him. What do you think?"

"Is nice here!" said the Clapper, dropping his spoon to clap twice. "And food good!" We were, for the first time in months, eating something that wasn't potatoes, rice, carrots, or artificially grown meat.

"We can get more action and combat here," said Sally.

"I don't like it," said the Silencer, slowly spooning food into his mouth with his left hand.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Too big. Too many people," said the Silencer.

"I get that feeling too," said Preston. "How can a place this big avoid getting discovered by the Insectoids?"

"They've done it so far," I pointed out. Secretly, I was torn. It would be so much easier just to be part of the

group, to give up our hand-to-mouth existence, to be able to strike at larger targets with less individual risk to ourselves. At the same time I felt uneasy being in such a large group, as if that just made us a bigger and more prominent target to be stepped on. I turned to Mongo. "What do you think?"

"Yes, food good, very good," said Mongo, gobbling up his portion as if he hadn't eaten in a week. "But stay? No, cannot stay, no, not stay."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Big place may or may not be discovered," said Mongo.

"What do you mean, may or may not?"

"Depends on hooded man," said Mongo. "If big bugs send hooded man, place becomes discovered. But... big bugs may not send hooded man, in which case soldiers move on own before being discovered."

I considered warning Markov. But what could I say? That Mongo could see into the future, and in some future that may or may not happen at some unspecified time they would be discovered, and because of that risk he needed to pick up and move his operations....? No, I couldn't go to him with that, not unless I had something more concrete.

We agreed that we would go on some joint missions with the soldiers but not formally move in with them. The only catch is that the General would need to allow us to let us leave knowing the location of his hideout. I spoke with him again and he agreed, stating that he trusted me, and that only caused me greater alarm. He had never met me before an hour ago, and now he was trusting me, and my team, with the location of his secret base. Even if we didn't actively betray him, if we were caught and interrogated, the Insectoids would get the location from us easily.

And then everything became clear: the General was a military man. He wasn't skilled in conducting a cloak and dagger guerrilla war; he was accustomed to large scale attacks that didn't require secrecy like an Agency infiltration did. Sooner or later, I realized, he and his men would be discovered.

Chapter 15: Disaster

From the personal log of Clifford Croft, one year and eleven months after the Invasion of August.

We've gone on a number of raids with the General's men, each seemingly more successful than the last. We've raided supply depots that contained prized munitions, convoys where we were given the precise time, locations, and routes of, and even the location of one of their top secret breeding vat installations. The Insectoids have established breeding vats on August to grow troopers more rapidly. That meant that destroying those vats are our top priority, but naturally the location of these vats are the most closely guarded of their secrets.

So the question is, where is Markov getting his information from? And how is he so successful in staying hidden? More and more things weren't adding up. I tried to confront him.

"Have you managed to tap into the Insectoid information network?"

No, said the general.

"Do you have some form of electronic surveillance on the Insectoids?"

The general shook his head again.

"Do you have an Insectoid traitor who's giving you information?" I asked, thinking it most unlikely.

The general shook his head again.

"Then how are you getting precise information about their military assets?" I asked.

The General sighed. "You know, Clifford, if I were to tell anyone, it would be you. But this was a secret that I specifically was entrusted with. It's the biggest secret of our organization; even my senior aides don't know. Unfortunately, because of it's sensitive nature, I can't reveal it to you. It's bigger than all of us; our organization may fail, but my source of information is more important than all of us, and can't be allowed to be discovered. It's our most important asset in the war effort."

And that's all he would say on the subject. Meanwhile my wheels were spinning rapidly; if it wasn't electronic intel, and it wasn't an Insectoid traitor, what else could it be? That was what was bothering me the most.

The thing that bothered Queen Zsst the most was the attack on the breeding farm.

"5000 combat units destroyed!" she raged. "This is yet another large scale operation just miles from this building, and you still cannot locate the rebels!"

The commander of security for Sarney and it's immediate environs trembled; it had just been appointed to its post a few weeks ago after the liquidation of its predecessor.

"The rebels were an annoyance when they destroyed an occasional stockpile or industrial facility," said Queen Zsst. "But this is a new level of assault and cannot be tolerated. There were at least 200 of these vermin in the last attack; why can you not track them down?"

The commander said, "We have conducted level to level scans but cannot find any trace of them. If they are located nearby, it's almost as if they know how we scan and how to defeat our scanning devices."

The Queen considered. Liquidating this fool wouldn't yield any better results than the past few liquidations of recent months. Perhaps, now, it was time to ask for help.

She was about to press the button on her console to summon him when he came in. It was almost as if he had somehow anticipated her request; but that wasn't possible, was it?

A trail of fear blazed the way for Baracki, and the Insectoids consciously moved out of the way as he entered the Chamber of Leaders.

"I understand you have a problem," he said simply.

Several more days passed. I noticed we seemed to be having an easier time making our way from Markov's hideout to our own; it was as if the Insectoid patrols had been drawn back for a reason, as if they had been reassigned, or... were

massing for some operation we were not yet aware of.

I had sent Preston over to Markov to report my observations, and Sashay had accompanied him in order to pick up some supplies. In return for our help in the raids, Markov had supplied us with food to supplement our own supplies. We had enough for our own needs, but it was nice to have some variety in our diets. Markov's men had come not just to respect but to admire our abilities; after the first joint operation where Red Sally set a dozen Insectoids on fire, his soldiers could hardly fail to be awed. When the Clapper sent an Insectoid slamming into a bunch of his companions on guard, causing them all to fall helplessly to the ground, I think they were also impressed. And of course they had all heard of the Silencer--he was famous across the Alliance. Even when limited to shooting with his left hand, he was a faster and more accurate shot than any of the soldiers in on our raids.

I sat, quietly reflecting, when all of a sudden Mongo, who had been sleeping, started tossing and turning, going "no.... no.... no... no!" and then he bolted upright, dripping of sweat all over.

"What is it?" I cried.

Mongo started shaking all over, his thin frame trembling.

"What? What is it?" I had never before seen him like this.

"Death," he whispered. "Much death... and fear."

I didn't need him to say another word. I could figure out the rest. Markov's group was about to be discovered.

And I had sent Preston and the Paperweight over to Markov's encampment. I might just have signed their death warrant.

I got my weapons, and gestured to the others. "They only have a 20 minute head start. There may still be time to save them." It was about a thirty minute journey to their hideout.

"No!" said Mongo, grabbing at my ankles. "Do not go! Do not go!"

"Do you see my death?" I asked calmly.

Mongo looked around, at me, Red Sally, the Clapper, and the Silencer. "Death, much death," he whispered.

I considered. It was one thing not to undertake a mission, or take a risk, because of one of Mongo's warnings. But to simply give up on Preston and the Paperweight simply on Mongo's say-so didn't sit well with me. Mongo wasn't 100% accurate and couldn't fully predict and control the future.

"Are you coming?" I said, my face grim. The Silencer and Red Sally wordlessly made their way to the exit. The Clapper procrastinated for a moment, his hands clapping anxiously, then he nodded and followed.

Mongo followed us out, which surprised me. He was going into combat with us? But as soon as we came to the first junction he turned off, heading in another direction. I said nothing; he was under no obligation to follow us, and wasn't a combatant. But if he didn't want to come, why didn't he simply stay behind at our hideout?

Thank you for reading my book! You're almost finished! Now I'd like one thing

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