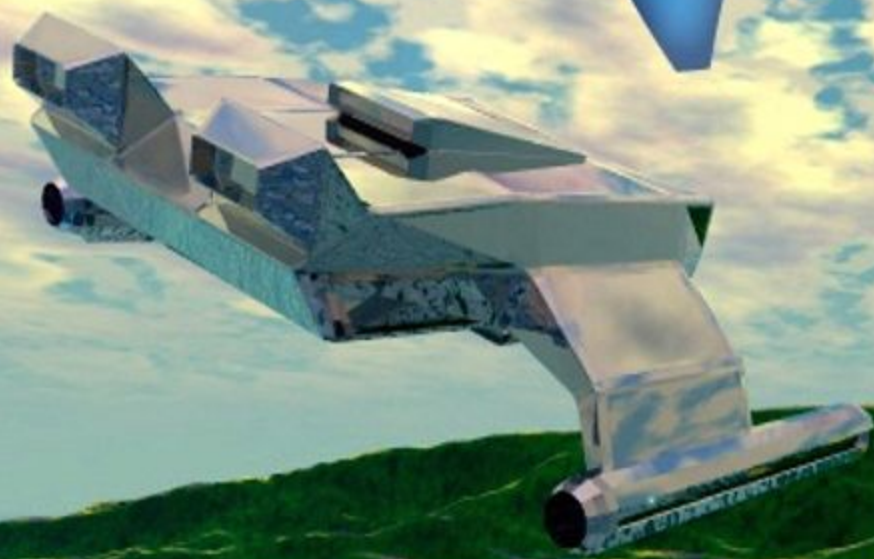


EMPIRE

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CITIZENS OF THE EMPIRE

Richard Allen Stotts
with
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Empire – Book Five

Citizens of the Empire

by

Richard Allen Stotts

With

Susan Ator

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Authors note: It is assumed by the author that the reader has at least some passing acquaintance with the previous Empire books.

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Part One New Beginnings

Chapter One Common Sense

“Maybe we really ought to show this to your father before...”
John had at least a hazy idea about all of the nasty things that could go wrong with this latest ‘enterprise’.

“You know he ignores anything that doesn’t have proper data to back it up,” Michael patiently explained again. “All we need to do now is to record some actual input power-to-thrust figures.”

“But...”

“There’s no risk. It’s all perfectly safe. I have the data recorder connected, there’s nothing left to do but test it under operating conditions. Besides, you’ll be the pilot and you have your ticket. That will make it all very proper and legal.”

“You know what my father said about tinkering with this flyer.”
John certainly remembered. The very modest and well-used craft had once been his mother’s first flyer. She had earned her basic flight ticket in the pokey old thing. The secret tinkering had been going on now for six weeks.

“Now who’s being the old lady? This modification will increase the efficiency of a standard drive coil by at least four hundred percent.

It will be a very big deal for the Empire and it will also make us both very rich.”

“I suppose. Sort of like the Murphy Shield?”

“Perhaps not that important, but very useful. Anyway, that was a defense system father developed while in the Navy. He never earned any money for it. Besides, I don’t know about you but I for one do not want to sponge off of my father for the rest of my life and this will make us both sacks full of money. We’ve already filed the initial Imperial Patent form but they will require a working model to be demonstrated to finalize the claim.”

“Then let’s do it before people start to ask a lot of questions. Shit!” John’s life-long friend and companion had all but called him a chicken and that would not ever do.

It is one thing to disobey your father’s instructions; it is just a bit more intimidating when your father is the Emperor. Even so, both boys were like most boys and tended to act before sufficient thought had been applied to the situation at hand.

John Grayson had inherited his father’s legendary abilities to fly and perhaps his talent for leading others. Michael Murphy was as hopeless at flying as his father was but had a mind that, if anything, exceeded his father’s. Both boys were almost carbon copies of their fathers in looks and intellect. However, common sense tends to be uncommon in the young, no matter what their intelligence and inherited abilities might be.

Port Ayers Imperial Marine Induction Center, Australian Continent

It was just before the sun would put in its appearance and a light rain was falling, unusual for this dusty and arid place. A naval personnel transport had arrived in the last hour and was in the process of disgorging its cargo of over three thousand raw recruits. The recruits were all volunteers and knew at least a little about what to expect. All the same it was a great jolt to their minds and bodies to be signed over to the tender mercies of the Marine Gunnery Sergeants who seemed able to bend titanium with only their bellowed commands and bad breath.

“Shut your garbage holes and stand at attention on your marks!” Gunnery Sergeant Hanes had done this all before many times. Still, he took some secret pleasure in making these green pukers shake and sweat in fear. The good sergeant also knew that he had a small audience this cool and wet morning, an audience that he had met on more than one morning like this. All the same it made the good sergeant do a little sweating himself. Standing back in the shadows and unnoticed by the rattled recruits was a modest figure clad in a simple black rain cloak and hood.

If they had the wits and time, the recruits might have taken note of some very armed and very intense looking Marines scattered around the lone figure that seemed to be just quietly observing this age-old process. The Marines wore the black uniforms of the Imperial Guard and were known for a certain lack of patience with those who might even appear to pose a threat to the person they were sworn to

protect. During the time of the Empire of Rome these guards were called Praetorians.

While the recruits were frozen in place waiting for their local transport to arrive the hooded figure quietly moved over to where Hanes was holding forth.

“Good morning, Sergeant. How do they look to you?”

Hanes snapped to attention and saluted before replying. A few of the dazed recruits wondered who the mysterious figure might be. Perhaps he was a senior officer or something?

“Above average, Your Majesty. Better physical condition than most.”

“They’re from Germania, aren’t they?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. A lot of good farm muscles from honest and hard work.”

“Is there time to inspect a few of them?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. Transport is still a good half hour away.”

“Then let’s have a quick look.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty.”

Daniel knew all too well how these young men felt at this pivotal point in their lives. Be it naval midshipman, naval or marine enlisted recruit, or any of the young men entering service to the Empire, they all went through a crucible intended to make them warriors or weed them out and send them home to more mundane lives.

“Name?” Hanes barked at the scared, wet and bewildered teenager in front of him.

“D...Dammons, John. Sir!”

“And was your father in the Empire’s service?” That last soft question was from the mysterious cloaked figure standing next to the burly Marine.

“My Father is Corporal Albert Dammons, sir! He was a Squad Leader in the Inchon, sir!”

“Against the Snakes?”

“Yes, sir! At Britannica and then later at Pampas, sir!”

“Alive now?”

“Yes, sir! Discharged with honors after the war, sir!”

“Good. Do not disappoint him. Further honor his name and do well here.”

“Yes sir!”

Recruit Dammons had no idea who he had been asking him gentle questions in the wet, dark morning. As the confused young man was trudging along with the rest to the smaller troop transport his ‘Gunny’ had a few close-held words with him.

“Do you have any idea at all who that person was who asked about your good father?”

“No, Gunnery Sergeant!”

“You blithering idiot! That was your Emperor, the chap whose face is on your pay chit, if you ever earn one!”

“God...sir.”

“When you put on the uniform he is God! Remember this day!”

Daniel often came to this place, it helped him to keep some sort of perspective on life. No sane person can fully accept that he is the one person who is mankind’s leader and guardian.

Daniel was halfway home and trying to take a short nap when one of the shuttle’s ratings spoke softly and handed him the message form. It only took a second for mankind’s absolute ruler to come fully awake. As he scanned the message his eyes narrowed a little and the faint scar across his face reddened.

“One day I’m going to strangle that child!”

“Sire?” Rating Benson asked.

“Tell the pilot to divert to Malta.”

“Malta, Sire?”

“Yes. Tell him to land at the traffic control facility there.”

“Yes, Sire.”

Air Traffic Control Holding Unit, Malta

“We are so very dead and buried.” John moaned with his head in his hands. He now fully realized they had both finally soared completely over the edge of the cliff this time.

“If you hadn’t got carried away with...” began Michael who could also see nothing but pain and grief in their futures.

“The air speed indicator only showed five hundred knots!” interrupted John.

“It only registers up to five hundred knots, you knew that!”

“I thought we...”

“Oh, do shut up!” said Michael wearily. He knew he was as much to blame as John. They both knew they were to blame.

The elderly flyer was pushing more than eight hundred knots when the Imperial traffic cruiser had nailed them fair and square. One simply does not exceed the speed of sound in the lower atmosphere without incurring a great deal of official wrath. The sonic shock wave upsets livestock and poultry and disturbs the general populace. John had been briefly tempted to use all of the newly available power to outrun the law but the old flyer had already been protesting the stress on its lightly built airframe, any faster and it might have come apart. And even John knew that you could never really outrun the law.

Now they were cooling their heels in a holding cell that rarely held such young miscreants and indeed rarely held any miscreants at all. At least they had been allowed the one message to relatives, however that was at best a mixed blessing.

The watch officer at Malta now had visions of a long tour of duty on the far side of Mercury, or worse. One of his men had just arrested the Emperor’s son and to put the icing on the proverbial cake, Sir Ian Murphy’s son as well.

The polished black Imperial shuttle landed close in to the building, completely ignoring the marked off parking slots. Overhead, six of the new Viper class fighters orbited the facility, also in violation of traffic procedures.

At least the weather was nice.

“Where are they now?” Daniel was doing his very best to be correct and civil in tone to these people who had only done their job.

“In the holding cell, Your Majesty. Procedures required that...we didn’t know who they were at the time...”

“Be at ease, Captain. Your people have only done their duty and what is expected of them. Now if you would lead Us to Our son so that We may properly strangle him.”

“Your Majesty...?”

“Perhaps We shall delay the strangling for now.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Captain Haynes could see the slightest smile on the other man’s face.

The door hissed aside then all of the power in the Empire was glaring down at them. A Marine firing squad would have been less intimidating.

“Stand up!”

John and Michael sat frozen stupidly on the rock hard bunk. It took a moment for them to react properly.

“Father...Sire!” John stood and moved forward a step, attempting a feeble sort of smile.

“Shut up.”

Not a good beginning.

“Explain!”

“We were testing Michael’s new drive coil design, it worked even better than we...”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, Sire.” John could see that mere facts would be of little use in this situation. Daniel had the quick impulse to slap his son for the stupid mess he had brought down upon himself and Michael. Instead, he remembered another Emperor who had once slapped a young boy and that painful memory stayed his hand. Finally, Daniel just turned and left the cell in disgust, leaving the two boys to stew and sweat over their dire predicament.

“Captain Haynes?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Is the arresting officer about?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. If you might accompany me, there is also something you may want to look at.”

“Of course. And what is it We should see?”

“The flyer, Your Majesty. The drive unit has all of us here scratching our heads.”

“Modified?”

“Very much so, Your Majesty.”

One more nail in John and Michael’s collective coffin.

Captain Haynes introduced the Emperor to Constable Wadsworth who was standing with several other officers in the impound hanger. They had indeed been scratching their heads over the odd drive coil in the old flyer. Wadsworth and the others snapped to attention with visions of ruined careers in their minds. Few humans ever catch sight of the Emperor and now these men had to answer to him for their actions.

“Constable Wadsworth was the officer responsible for the arrest, Your Majesty.”

The Emperor stopped in front of the tall, pale looking young man for a moment before speaking, as if to size up the nervous fellow.

“Could you please explain the ‘incident’ as it occurred?”

“Ye...yes, Your Majesty.” Wadsworth felt like his mouth was full of cotton. “It was a fairly straightforward violation, exceeded sonic speed below allowable altitudes and in controlled traffic sectors.”

“Did they then follow your directions and cooperate with you?”

“They did, Your Majesty. There were no problems, the boy...excuse me Your Majesty...your son seems to be a very competent pilot.”

“He is a damned good pilot. He’s also is a bit deficient in proper judgment.”

“If I might be so bold, Your Majesty, he is also very young. My own son is known to occasionally stray from the path of proper behavior.”

For the second time a slight smile from the Emperor lightened the mood a bit.

“Rest easy, Constable. It would appear that you did a fine job today.” Daniel further astounded the man by extended his hand to him.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Wadsworth took the offered hand, something that was rarely offered by any Emperor to anyone.

“Now what about this flyer?” Daniel could now see Michael’s brains behind this entire debacle.

“If you would step over here, Your Majesty. Perhaps you might be able to tell all of us here what we have been looking at?”

It looked like a drive coil, after a fashion. Except that it had been split into two sections and had some very insane looking windings. It was the work of a genius and Daniel already knew that Ian’s boy was very much his father’s son.

“Amazing,” was all the Emperor could think to say. Daniel never did pretend to understand what Ian could blather about endlessly.

“It is that, Your Majesty,” Wadsworth finally replied. “We also found these papers and data printouts during the required search of the craft.”

Daniel examined the documents then smiled once again.

“A receipt copy of an Imperial Patent application.” Apparently the two boys were not entirely without some small measure of practical sense.

“So what is the normal course of events in a situation like this?”

“Your Majesty, a hearing would be held and with the very obvious facts here there would be a heavy fine and a revocation of permit.” Haynes just wished for this day to be over and very soon.

“And your advice?”

“There was no real malice or intent to do harm, just some poor judgment by two young lads. They were well clear of other traffic. If I would dare to presume to be in your position, Your Majesty, I would take the legal matters into my own hands and deal with them as might be deemed proper.”

“That might also make your life a bit less...complicated?” Daniel decided that he liked this man.

“It would indeed, Your Majesty.”

“Then We shall do so. Life will not be easy for them.”

“I do believe that, Your Majesty.”

“Please extend Our thanks to your people for their good judgment and professional behavior.”

“Go talk to him, he’s your father!” Michael’s whisper held some real desperation in it. Both boys had been hustled aboard the shuttle at the last moment before departure. They had then been told rather curtly by the shuttle’s rating to sit in the rear-most seats and to be very quiet. The Emperor was in the forward passenger seat and had not even turned to acknowledge their presence. It was all very unnerving, as intended.

The Imperial shuttle was a study in subdued elegance. Soft leather, gold fittings and a general atmosphere of unlimited power and wealth. This was all completely lost on John and Michael, it was the only sort of surroundings they had ever known. Growing up in the shadow of the one person who ruled all of the Empire can rather distort one’s attitude about life in general. Still, the boys knew that they were in more trouble than they had ever managed before and they had managed quite a lot in the past.

The Sun Palace, Iberian Peninsula

“Escort these two to their rooms and lock them in!” Daniel’s sharp words to the Marine security officer were certainly heard by the “two” as the Emperor strode quickly by them on the tarmac.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Lieutenant Eichorn could only guess what sort of mischief the two boys had been caught at this time.

Now the Emperor had to go and impart the good news to his wife, the Lady Ellen, as well as to Sir Ian and his short-tempered spouse, Helen.

Alexandra Grayson had grown to be a greatly respected and equally feared Talent. Alex's presence at court and during critical meetings with the Emperor caused all concerned to speak with more truth and honesty than might normally be expected. She already knew her nephews were in very hot water.

It was no surprise to Daniel when he entered the royal apartments that all three of the women were waiting for him. Sir Ian appeared seconds later having been hastily summoned from the bowels of his laboratory and workshop.

"I see events proceed me." Daniel thrust the patent form into Ian's hands and made for the brandy decanter. The Emperor wasn't very much given to strong drink but now and then he did seek out the calming effect it had on him.

"They intended no harm," Alex began.

Daniel whirled around. "They never do intend any harm!" He paused a moment to collect himself and continued in a calmer tone. "They both disobeyed me. They both disobeyed Ian."

The Emperor almost never used the Imperial 'We' with his family and now was no exception.

Ian was staring wide-eyed at the simple schematics and drawings on the patent form and at the data on the readout paper. His own son had done this brilliant thing which was now so clear to him in its elegant simplicity.

Finally Ellen spoke.

“They both intend to try for Academy in two months. We all know that they will pass the entry exam...”

“And then what? Both of them are so spoiled and catered to that I wonder if they will last one week or even two at the most!”

“Dear brother,” Alex replied, “you do them both a disservice. Although they are pampered and catered to they are still named Grayson and Murphy. They will succeed at academy.”

“Truly?” Daniel had learned long ago to trust in his sister’s ‘judgment.’ He trusted in what only she could see.

“Yes. They only need the one chance.”

“They will have the chance, even I cannot deny them that.”

No male child citizen could be denied the opportunity to take the tests. It was one of the pillars the Empire was built upon.

“And what do we do with them in the meantime?” Daniel had passing visions of dank dungeons and awful devices of torture. Not that he could ever do such a thing to his beloved son. In truth he thought of both of them as his sons, as did Ian.

“Bust their skinny butts with some hard and honest work for a change!” Helen Murphy had never been one to use flowery and polite terms, especially with family.

For the third time this day the Emperor smiled, perhaps more broadly this time. He was sipping the brandy and gazing out the window at the restoration work on the perimeter path around the Sun

Palace. It was all handwork so as to be properly done and to spare the ancient and carefully tended plant life.

“Then they shall experience the blisters and all of the aches and pains that we common folk have known.”

There was no one in the room who didn't still regard themselves as 'common folk'. At one time or another they had all known hard work and humility.

And much worse.

Arthur Jackson kept asking himself why he had been so abruptly summoned to the Emperor's private study. As the senior groundskeeper he had often spoken informally with His Majesty but only at odd moments and always outside on the palace grounds. Arthur wished his soiled work clothes were more presentable but there was no helping that now.

A sharp-eyed Marine guard opened the massive door and motioned Arthur to enter this most inner of sanctums in the vast palace. The lighting was dim and soft and it took a moment for the man to focus on the figure seated behind the enormous and ancient desk.

“Arthur. Come in and be at ease, no ceremony.”

Arthur bowed anyway as he stopped at what he hoped was the correct distance from the desk. Daniel got up and moved around the desk, extending his hand to the nervous visitor. “We have a favor to ask of you.”

“Your...Sire?”

“The palace grapevine being what it is you probably already know about John and Michael’s latest...escapade?”

“I do, Sire.”

“They need some serious adjustments to their outlook on life in general.”

“They are good lads, Sire - if I may say as much?”

“Yes, they are good in heart. And they are also very much in need of some sense of discipline, some sense about actions and consequences. You have two sons and a daughter, you know what I...We mean.”

“I do, Sire.”

“Then you have two able bodies to put to work on the perimeter project. You will have them for one month.”

“Yes, Sire.” Arthur smiled at this, his nervousness passing as he spoke to this most sensible person who was also humanity’s ruler.

“If they return each evening without new blisters and wanting only food and bed We shall know you have failed in your duties.” Daniel looked hard into the other man’s eyes but could not suppress the grin that came to his lips.

Arthur hoped he wasn’t overstating things when he replied.

“If I might quote a certain Marine who attempted at one time to teach me the ways of combat Sire, they will ‘curse their mothers for giving birth to them’.”

“Then we have an understanding.” Once more the Emperor shook the amazed man’s hand. They did indeed have an understanding.

“You go in first,” Michael whispered as they approached the doors that now appeared to be about fifty feet tall.

“We go in together or I tell him about the recent ‘problems’ with the palace waste disposal system,” John replied.

“I only wanted to make the filtration sensor system program run more efficiently---” was Michael’s lame attempt at a defense.

“Together?” John insisted.

Michael knew when he was licked. “Okay. Shit!”

They didn’t have to knock. The ever-present Marine sentries opened the doors for them. Both John and Michael thought that they could detect a definite smirk on the Marine’s usually impassive faces.

“Good evening, father...” John began with some hesitation.

“Shut up.”

“Yes, father.”

It was going to be like that.

“Do either of you have any recollections at all about my instructions in regards to tampering with a certain household flyer?”

Michael’s father was also in the historic room, standing off to one side near the fireplace. So far Sir Ian had said nothing.

“Yes, Sire.” John could sense that awful events were descending upon them. It didn’t take much sensing.

“And yet you ignored my instructions?”

“We...we did, but...”

“But?”

“Michael needed a test craft for his drive...”

“And that justified your disobedience and then violating civil flight rules?”

“No, Father.”

“No, indeed!”

“We...”

“Shut up. You will spend the next month considering the errors of your ways. For this one time in your lives you will learn about hard work and honest effort.”

“Yes, father.”

“You will report to the head groundskeeper tomorrow morning and every morning for the next thirty working days. You will be there waiting for him as he begins his day. You will say good day to him as he leaves at the end of his day. You will follow his every instruction to the letter and if not I shall know of it. Questions?”

“But...” John started to protest but a sharp jab in the ribs from Michael’s elbow stopped him.

“But?” Daniel glared at both of them.

“No, Sire. No questions.”

“After your month working here you will both be packed off to the farm to help with the harvest. You will work hard there as well, or I shall know about that too.”

“Yes Sire,” both replied in quiet voices.

“Good. Now get out of here and count yourselves lucky!”

Daniel and Ian managed to keep a stern countenance during the short meeting with their sons. After the boys left they both had trouble keeping a straight face.

“They will be in good shape to face the month after their sentence here is up. Another month busting their ass on your father’s farm will also have a taming effect.”

“And then Academy?” Ian wondered if his boy could adapt and cope with such a life. He wondered if either boy could.

“They will sink or swim, as the saying goes,” Daniel replied.

“As I remember, you sank like a stone.” Ian grinned.

“True, but then I learned how to swim in a hurry.”

“Barely.”

“I truly hated that instructor.”

“Do you now?”

“No. He sent me a letter shortly after my coronation and actually apologized for tossing me into the pool like that. I suspect he was worried I had a long memory and would get even.”

“He got an actual letter through to you?”

“He did, how I don’t know. I wrote a note and thanked him for the swimming lesson. I didn’t want the man to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder.”

“At least our two know how to swim.”

“Yes, but they can still sink.”

“I take it you don’t approve of our son’s punishment?” Daniel could sense a distinct chill in the air as he attempted to curl up next to Ellen on the enormous bed.

“They aren’t criminals!”

“Only because of who the father of one of them is. They were facing large fines and John would have had his ticket pulled. They committed a major traffic offense, a crime if you will.”

“They only intended to...”

“The road to hell is paved with all sorts of intentions. They both need some idea that...”

“And after they have served their time at hard labor you just intend to let them waltz off to the Navy!”

“They have that right...”

“You could stop them! Need I remind you that you are the Emperor!”

Daniel could see that this night would be a rather unsettled one.

“Yes, I could stop them. Michael would survive that but it would destroy John. He would spend the rest of his life hating the both of us and with good reason. You know that.”

Ellen didn't reply, she knew the truth in what her mate had said. Finally she did answer him.

“I suppose you're right but I don't want my child dying on some God-forsaken planet or fighting some God-awful war. I'm a mother, mothers think like that!”

“The Empire is at peace.”

“Yes, now!”

“I will not deny my son his chance to make his own way doing what he is best at. Now give me a kiss or get out of this bed!”

Ellen did kiss him, quite well. Their love would survive this conflict; it could survive anything.

“What time is it?” John mumbled as he wobbled to his feet beside his bed.

“Just four-thirty, time enough for some breakfast before work.” John's manservant would have to get up very early himself for this month but it was worth it and he was already enjoying it.

“Wh...what time does “work” begin?”

“The groundskeeper commonly starts his day at dawn, he prefers the cool mornings for his work.”

“Shit!”

“Indeed, John. Now if I might suggest that you dress and eat. It will not do to be late for your first day, or any other day for that matter.”

“But...”

“Time grows shorter.”

John finally stirred himself to action, it would truly not do to be late and then have to face his father explaining why.

John and Michael had a light and hurried breakfast together while standing at a table in the main kitchen of the palace. This was another rude shock; no carefully prepared meal served to them on gold or fine china with white linen. It did not even occur to them to wonder about lunch.

One of the early shift kitchen staff handed the boys a folded note and left without a word.

“What is it?” John asked as Michael read the note.

“We are to report to the groundskeeper at the perimeter path by the olive grove.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“Shit! Let’s go!”

There was no transportation waiting for them as they dashed out the service entrance in the enormous kitchen. A very bored sentry took only seemingly short notice of them.

“How do we get there?” John asked the Marine. There should have been at least a ground vehicle to take them!

“Get where?”

“We have to work at the olive grove...on the path there.”

“Yes, I know about that. Better get moving, it’s about three miles and you only have a half hour.”

“But how?”

“Run.”

John and Michael could only stare at each other for a moment, and then they did run.

Some little thought might have told them to ask the Marine if he possibly had a light of some sort for them to carry. John fell down once as they tore along in the dark, Michael twice. No bones were broken as they both managed to arrive gasping and out of breath and minus a small amount of skin. A little more thought might have told them to bring along a light jacket or something appropriate for the cool morning air.

Of course they had been under constant remote observation by the palace security forces. A little lost skin on their flight across the

palace grounds was no reason for security to interfere in what they had all been so carefully briefed about.

When Arthur Jackson and his small crew finally arrived - a little late - the two boys looked as if they had already put in a full day.

“Good morning lads. Ready for work?”

“Ye...yes sir.” John managed to get past his chattering teeth.

“Bit chilly this morning. Bring something warmer to wear tomorrow and some heavier shoes. Where’s your lunch?” Arthur was, like the others in his crew, barely managing to keep a straight face.

“But we thought that...” Michael hadn’t thought at all about such mundane things. Food was always just there for them, taken for granted.

“Best bring a lunch along tomorrow too. You’ll work better if you eat something during the day.”

“Yes sir.”

Both boys decided that they would probably be dead of starvation with nothing to eat all day.

Arthur gave each boy a very conventional looking shovel and pointed at a huge pile of fine gravel. Then he pointed at two wheelbarrows that seemed to have been rolled out of a history museum devoted to artifacts of hard labor.

“You two will keep us supplied with paving gravel as we progress. Where are your gloves?”

“Gloves, sir?” John asked, appalled at the prospect of hauling the small mountain of crushed rock anywhere.

“You’ll get blisters without ‘em.”

“Don’t you have any power loaders, or something?”

“Handwork is better on this job.”

“But...”

“We’re running a little late. Best get to work.”

“Yes sir.”

The morning chill was soon forgotten as hard work warmed the flesh, and it was very hard work. An adult male could have managed the wheelbarrows with some serious effort but the two young boys tended to careen about and spill as much as they delivered.

“Clean that up and mind you don’t dig into the new surface!” Arthur was mostly just supervising as befitted his senior position. In truth he felt sorry for the boys who did seem to be doing their best. However the Emperor had given Arthur his orders and those orders would be obeyed.

“Yes, sir.” Michael carefully scooped up the spillage and wobbled away towards the work crew.

At least there was water to drink.

After years had passed it was time for the lunch break. John and Michael could only sit together and watch the men dig into packed lunches that seemed capable of feeding entire families. The

boys already had blisters on their hands and that too was a new experience for them.

“Shit!” John had made the mistake of picking at one of the nasty looking nodules on his palm.

“Don’t do that. It’ll get infected and your arm will fall off.” Michael advised, also observing the sorry state of his own hands.

“Maybe they’ll drop something?” John was now gazing intently at the thick beef sandwich that one of the men was devouring.

“Maybe we could offer to buy...?”

“With what?” John asked in disgust.

“Don’t you have any...?”

“No.”

“Shit!”

Eons had passed, entire civilizations must have vanished, but then the workday was finally over.

“Good day, sir.” Both boys wearily recited what was expected of them as the work sled started to lift off and turned to depart into the late afternoon sun.

“Tend to those hands. Mind what I said about proper shoes and gloves. Bring a lunch!” Arthur wanted to give the two bedraggled boys a ride but that was not in the instructions. It was a hard thing for the man to treat these boys like this.

“Yes, sir.” John felt like just lying down and curling up into a ball but his stomach had other priorities.

“Come on,” Michael said wearily as the sled vanished, “there is food to be had but not here.”

They were directed to the kitchen once again. The hike back had been endless but the thought of actual food was incentive to keep going. There was no fine china or linen waiting for them and the two boys could not have cared less. There was all they could eat and that was a great deal. Eventually they had to stop or risk an explosion.

The Royal Physician intercepted them as they lurched off towards their adjoining rooms in the royal apartments.

“Bathe and then use this on your hands.”

“Wha...?” John took the ointment container as the man turned and left without further comment. How rude!

They did sort of bathe and then did use the ointment on their stinging hands. Bed was all that had any appeal after that. Both boys also managed to lay out a warm jacket and their hiking boots for the new day tomorrow. Also a knapsack for whatever they could wheedle the cooks out of to take for lunch. Their man servants were nowhere to be found. It was all a very cold dip into the pool that was life without the royal cushions.

Perhaps the hardest parts of the day had been the way people treated them. They were no longer persons of privilege to be deferred

to and spoken to politely. Even their own parents hadn't so much as said goodnight to them. It was the attitude adjusting experience that it had been intended to be.

Being the Emperor's son conferred no title on John, he was no prince. All the same he had always been treated as a person of royalty and now he was just a faceless dirt hauler. It was much the same for Michael.

Relations between the Emperor and the Lady Ellen were still rather strained that evening, especially after the brief report from the Royal Physician.

"Their hands were worked bloody!" Ellen was ready to bite something or someone.

"They'll toughen up." Daniel countered, out of biting range.

"If they don't wind up in hospital!"

"They did well today. Arthur said that they did what they were told to do and worked hard, if not very skillfully. You grew up on a farm," Daniel continued, "blisters didn't seem to harm you beyond mending."

"But he's our only child...for now." Ellen said softly.

"Yes, and..." Daniel halted in mid-sentence. "For now?"

"I am completely knocked up, as the saying goes."

"What?"

"Pregnant."

“But...” Daniel needed to sit down but he already was.

“Twins. One of each sort, I’m told.”

“Oh my God...”

“Perhaps they’ll both be just like John.” Ellen had the most perfectly wicked smile when she said that.

Eventually Daniel closed his mouth and stood to embrace his wife. He needed something to hold onto lest he faint dead away.

He would have words with the Royal Physician, this was not supposed to be happening and was even not supposed to be possible.

Each day seemed to flow into the next. Stagger out of the comfort of a soft warm bed and face the cold dawn with all that the day held. However, after the first week things settled into a more bearable routine for John and Michael. They now knew how to pace themselves and work more efficiently as all people who labor with their hands must learn to do. Hands and bodies began to toughen, especially the hands. Muscles that in the first few days had ached and stiffened now were more pliant and better able to do what was asked of them.

The boy’s minds had also made an adjustment. They were coming to terms with actions and consequences.

“They waved at us,” John said as they devoured the lunch they had learned to pack while still half asleep. “They could have at least said something.”

As was their routine every morning, the Emperor and his wife went jogging on varied routes through the palace grounds.

“Yes,” Michael nodded, “perhaps one day they might even stop and say hello to us.”

“Maybe.” John finished off the crude sandwich and then made another observation. “We’re rich, you know.”

“Very. The final patent papers were posted yesterday.” In the New Empire such matters tended to occur rapidly.

“You did the brain stuff, you know. It’s really your...thing.”

“Yes, I did the theory work. But you made it all happen. We’re even.”

“Fair enough.”

“Off your butts! Time to earn your salt!” Arthur had grown to truly like these two pint-sized troublemakers. They were good boys from fine stock and they had adjusted to this hard work with little protest. Perhaps they might amount to something after all.

Someday.

HMS Pathfinder, Orbiting N7638, Sector Ten outer limits

It was supposed to be just another boring survey mission. None of the six airless planets in the system were suitable for human settlement. Remote analysis however, had revealed high enough

concentrations of valuable metals and rare earth deposits on the second planet to warrant further investigation. Pathfinder was preparing to send down sampling parties when the small exploration vessel's alarm klaxon sounded.

Ensign Barrows' voice was about two octaves above normal as he hit the alarm and alerted the rest of the bridge.

"Unidentified vessel closing rapidly from back-orbit!"

"Do you have a hull class?" Captain Gentry demanded.

"No sir. It appears to be non-human!"

"Activate shield! Inform Fleet, flash priority!"

Activating the invincible Murphy Shield was a waste of time. The dull gray triangle which was the Jaan raider sliced through the invisible force field as if it did not even exist. In moments all of Pathfinder's crew were lying unconscious on the deck plates. In a short while the vessel was drifting and abandoned with not a soul left aboard.

Why was Pathfinder left adrift when it could have been so easily destroyed?

More to the point, where was the crew?

Chapter Two Rumors of War

Imperial Fleet Headquarters, Earth

“Is this all?” Demanded an angry Admiral of The Fleet.

“Yes sir. The message appears to have been disrupted before completion.” Commander Bryce was also at a loss to understand what the message might truly mean.

“Pathfinder under attack...?”

“Yes, sir. That is the entire message. It was preceded with the proper identification coding.”

“What vessels do we have close enough to them to investigate in a timely fashion?”

“Raptor, a fast cruiser, is closest. Kinjo and Spear are also within range, but barely.”

“Have them all divert to Pathfinder’s last reported location. And have them exercise extreme caution!”

“Yes, sir. Is there anything else?”

“Not for you. I must now immediately go and report this all to His Majesty. God help me.”

Bryce raised his eyebrows but said nothing more. To take operational matters to the Emperor was a course seldom taken unless truly dire events were unfolding.

The Sun Palace, Iberia

“Have you two progressed in your attitudes and thinking by now?” Daniel had finally yielded to his emotions and went to his son’s room. Michael was also there for this evening encounter. The Emperor was violating his own family edict of no contact for this short visit.

“Yes, Sire.” John was for the first time in his life truly unsure about his relationship with his father.

“Good. Are you both well?”

“Yes, Sire,” they both replied, both nervous, both bone tired.

“Good again. Now drop the ‘Sire’ shit and both of you come here!”

They did. The embrace was crushing and warm and perhaps a bit damp.

“Do not think you are not loved, ever. But do think that you must learn some responsibility.”

“Yes Sire...father,” John managed to reply.

“Then good for the third time. Now you must both still finish the punishment you have earned. Actions have consequences.”

“Yes, father. I understand.”

“And you, Michael?”

“I have learned already that more time should be allotted to the possible outcomes of ‘good ideas’. Also, I apologize for what we both did.”

Daniel, to his credit, held his emotions in check.

“Apology accepted. Now both of you get to bed. Arthur has never missed a day of work and neither will you two!”

Like most people, the Emperor was not amused when roused out of bed in the middle of the night. And like most people, the Admiral of The Fleet was ill at ease with being the cause of the rousing. It was rumored that people still sometimes found themselves staring down the barrel of a very famous pistol when abruptly awakening this particular Emperor. Precautions had been taken.

“And the signal dropped out after this?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. There has since been no response to any of our inquiries, nothing.”

“And your actions?”

“I have dispatched vessels to search and investigate, Your Majesty. With caution.”

“This has a bad feel to it. Until further notice have all naval vessels maintain active shields at all times. Observe wartime surveillance protocols.”

“In all sectors, Your Majesty?”

“Yes. And keep Us informed of any unusual...reports.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Daniel was silent for a time as he drew his thick night robe closer around him. A chill not felt for many years had passed over him.

“What are your thoughts on this, Admiral? Honestly and with no protocol.”

“Pathfinder was of course shield equipped and would have had time to activate that shield. It takes far less time than sending a dispatch. Something must have breached their shield.”

“This cannot be the Snakes?”

“No, Your Majesty. Our picket vessels haven’t observed any sign that they can even manage to get off-planet after...what they have undergone.”

“Then we all have a very big problem.”

“We do, Your Majesty.”

Chapter Three Port Rat

Bakerstown Spaceport, New Albion

“You little shit! I’ll slice your nuts off when I catch you!” Bernie the Toad was very overweight and entirely too slow. He would never catch him, not in this tangled place. The junkyard was an endless maze that the fat boy did not want to get lost in. People had been known to enter this place and then simply vanish forever and not just because they were lost.

Sammy stopped long enough to shout a taunt back at his pursuer. “I copped it fair and square, you fat fart! Go jack someone else!” The small box of sweet bars he clutched had been a fair find, apparently spilled by one of the robotic loaders over at the United Merchant’s receiving dock. Bernie had wanted half of the small loot, having seen it fall but too late to grab it for himself.

Sammy slowed to a trot, something that was far safer than running in this vast pile of scrap metal and abandoned junk of every description. The boy knew every inch of the place but one misstep could still get you impaled on some nasty shard of metal.

It was his home but, as the old saying went, most accidents happen at home.

The New Empire did not take it upon itself to raise the less fortunate children of society. Private charities could do a better job with such matters anyway, assuming those they could help actually

wanted any help. Sammy Winslow didn't want any help, thank you. He had been on his own since his father had gotten himself squashed flat under a falling cargo pod. That was three years ago. He had never seen his mother or even knew her name. The few times he had asked his father about her had been answered with a sharp knock to the side of his head. Apparently she was not very well thought of.

Almost without exception every new colony's spaceport in the Empire had its port rats. In the rough society of the port rats at Bakerstown, Sammy was the runt. Youngest and smallest at ten years old but perhaps in many ways the toughest. He wasn't too much to look at what with his mouse brown hair roughly trimmed by Auntie Jean (everyone called her that) over at the Pig's Garter, fair skin that was occasionally bathed, gray eyes and a nose of average configuration. His clothing was best described as 'assorted' and was always in need of laundering or perhaps burning.

"Home again, home," Sammy mumbled as he punched in the combination to unlock the old and battered cargo container that was his 'house.' The container had been places in the universe that the boy could only dream of and he did dream of them. Surprisingly, inside it was fairly neat and tidy. There was a small bed fashioned from foam packing material with some actual - if very worn - blankets spread upon it. A cast off chair and table - equally worn - which held the boy's precious book card reader that was the main source of his education and entertainment and perhaps even his ticket out of this place. He had a small vid receiver but his books occupied the most of his evenings. Power came from a cobbled up solar panel system that

mostly worked except when it rained hard and shorted out the thing. Water had to be hauled a half mile from the spigot next to the pile's main entrance. There was no bathroom and there was all that the lack of one implied. All of his small possessions had been hard won over the years. Years of odd jobs, scavenging, and the more than occasional outright theft had furnished his miniscule home and kept him clothed, fed, and surprisingly well educated.

A light scratching at one of the small plastic covered windows cut into the aluminum pod told him that Miss Puss was also home, for the time being at least.

"Do come in, madam. Rain is about to commence." Sammy bowed elaborately as the amazingly disheveled looking feline deigned to enter and hop down to the floor.

"Reeower!" It's dinnertime, you stupid human!

"The menu is a bit thin this evening, I'm afraid. You can have a bit of my stew or go catch yourself a nice rat."

"Mrrr." The stew would have to suffice. The weather was indeed getting tuned up to rain and no self-respecting cat went out in such weather. A dog might, but not a sensible cat.

The stew was pilfered military issue in a self-heating pouch. Nourishing but lacking in a certain degree of elegance. A clean plate and an almost clean fork made for a more acceptable meal, with a sweet bar for dessert. There was no milk left in the tiny and dented Evercooler so a can of beer sufficed. Miss Puss turned up her nose at the offer of some of the beer. In truth Sammy wasn't too fond of the

bitter brew himself but it had been sitting there on that cargo sled for the taking so he took it.

Sammy had long ago set himself the lofty goal of getting into the Imperial Navy, preferably as an officer. He did have his Citizen's Card and that meant that he was entitled to take the test. This also meant actually passing the rigorous entrance exam and you would have no chance of doing that if you were an ignorant dope. Most did not pass and there was no shame in failing, but passing could open up a whole new existence. Every evening and every spare moment had been spent wading through textbooks on every imaginable subject.

It had been and still was a very hard thing to do with no adult teacher or even a parent to help him understand the lessons the book cards offered. His best smile and some serious wheedling had put him on the good side of the librarian over at the port navdata and information center. Questions usually got answered and book cards were loaned off the record and for free. A lot of people knew how the port rats lived and did what they could to make that hard life a bit easier.

Attending an actual school had been out of the question for Sammy. They expected to be paid and like most of Imperial society they were privately run. The homes that the well-intentioned charities ran for adrift children had at times been a temptation for the boy but he valued his freedom more than security, and like his father, preferred to provide for himself. Of course there were limits to his

ethics. Hunger will usually triumph over high-minded ideas about right and wrong.

“Let’s see...Lyman’s History Of The New Empire. Gads!”
Sammy didn’t care too much for history but he knew that the Navy test *would* care about it. He managed to keep at it for two hours before sleep claimed him for the night.

The boy was still awake enough to check his bed for any assbites that may have crawled in during the day. The nasty spider-like parasites were native to New Albion and were well named for their propensity to dine on one’s posterior in the middle of the night. You never felt them bite and suck but you certainly felt the after effects later on when they left the scene of the crime.

Especially the next day when you sat down and then for the rest of the week.

Bernie The Toad wasn’t one to forgive and forget and was waiting on the eastern edge of the ‘pile’ when Sammy emerged to begin the new business day. The junk pile had been growing since New Albion began as a colony and only lately had any commercial reclamation efforts began to use it as a source of potential profit.

“Where you goin’ you little shit?” Bernie wasn’t known for his tact. He had Sammy cornered and he knew it.

“I got places to be,” answered Sammy with a glare at Bernie.

“You’re gonna be in a lot of places after I’m done with you!” Bernie was three times the size of his quarry or he wouldn’t have even contemplated this one-sided confrontation.

“Then come on, lard balls. Show me what ya got!” Sammy wasn’t bluffing. He was quite able to take care of himself.

Bernie hesitated just a second, the runt seemed all too sure of himself. Still mad and bearing a grudge the fat teenager drew a large ‘one-at’ fighting knife. The weapon gets its odd name from the one atom-wide carbon crystal edge that it constantly self-hones in its powered sheath. It will cut through flesh and bone with almost no resistance and can be as dangerous to the wielder as the enemy. It is also a very expensive weapon and of course Bernie hadn’t paid anything for it.

Sammy had long ago learned not to run from bullies and wannabe thugs. He had also learned that a small person needs a special ‘friend’ sometimes.

As Bernie made his move forward he suddenly found himself staring into the spout end of a Hammond Mark IV, a small but particularly unpleasant sort of chemically powered projectile handgun known for the spectacular wounds it could produce. Sammy had inherited the weapon from his father. It was about all that he had inherited. Anyone who has ever stared into the muzzle of such a weapon held by another will tell you how very enormous and black that tunnel appears to be.

“Stay cool...” Bernie was trying to back up and was close to wetting himself.

“This part of the pile is my ground, you know that.” Sammy calmly explained.

“No problem. No beef.” Bernie’s eyes were darting about as if seeking some sort of way out of this sudden nightmare.

“Not anymore,” Sammy said softly. He knew that given the chance the Toad would do for him in some sort of future ambush. There was no safe choice but this one.

So he shot Bernie the Toad squarely in the fat boy’s forehead, splattering his dim brains for a good twenty feet behind him. It was the last of the most despised ‘rat’ in the whole pile and no one would care to do much investigating. If anyone ever did come across what would be left of the body after the rats and the nocturnal scabble crabs finished with it there would be no finger to point at his slayer.

Sammy didn’t start to shake right away and when he did it didn’t last very long. No sleep would be lost this night.

The one-at knife had a new owner.

“Any pods to clean?”

“Yeah kid, six of ‘em. Got fish stink all over ‘em.” Martin Harwood was a sometime employer of port rats and Sammy was well known to him. Sammy was small but he worked hard and had the

nerve and smarts to make him useful in some of Harwood's occasional 'transactions' that the port authorities took a dim view of.

"Fish...again?"

"That's life."

"You owe me money," Sammy said with no trace of a smile.

"Maybe tomorrow, I'm short today."

"I get paid today or I'll post your name."

Martin almost smiled at the nervy little rat. Getting your name posted on the rat's bulletin board meant that none of them would work for you until the debt was paid or the wrong put right. Also, bad things tended to happen to your property while your bad name was up there for all to read.

"Asshole! I'll square with you when you finish the pods today."

"Fair enough. Fish pods?"

"All the work I got for you today." Martin was lying and Sammy knew it. Even so it didn't pay to piss off one's employer too much. Work was work and money was always hard to come by. The boy still needed some decent clothes to wear to the Navy exam that was only a month or so away. A month until a new life. Failure was not an option.

"Shit! Is the steamer working again?"

"Mostly. Go easy on the pressure. Keep it under one-twenty."

"Okay. Shit!" Sammy resigned himself to another endless day of bad smells, awful gunk and sweat.

“Nine dollars!” Sammy hadn’t paid nine dollars for anything in his entire life. He didn’t even have nine Imperial dollars. He had never possessed such a princely sum.

“Son, what is it you really need fancy clothes for?” The tiny shop catered mostly to ship’s crewmen and the wrinkled old woman behind the worn counter was no fool. She sensed that this small and odiferous customer needed more than a little help.

“I...I need something that’s okay to wear to the Navy exam. Not what I have on.” Sammy’s ragged garb was better suited for life on the junk pile. He still smelled of fish. Most days he smelled of one thing or another.

“Son, they couldn’t care less what you wear, you could show up bare-naked.”

“But...”

“My boy took the test, all they cared about was his scores.”

“Did he...”

“No. Eyes not up to standards. Not correctable without a lot more money than we had.”

“Oh.” Something else to worry endlessly about.

“I can make you very presentable for three-fifty. Shoes not included.”

“Deal!” Sammy knew an honest merchant when he met one. Shoes could wait. He could clean up his boots if need be.

“Not too bad. What do you think?”

“Mrrrow.” Miss Puss seemed noncommittal as the boy modeled his new garb in front of the scavenged and heat warped plastic wall mirror.

He cast a critical eye at his reflection and then looked at the cat. “Needs shoes. I know.”

Simple gray pants and a plain white shirt with cheap white underwear. It was all indeed very cheap and mass produced and it was still the very best wardrobe the boy had ever possessed.

“You know that if I actually pass the test you’ll need another meal chit.”

“Mrrr.” So what?

“Yeah, I know. You got other places you can go to. Don’t sweat it, with my luck you’ll probably have a home right here for life.”

Like Sammy, Miss Puss was no fool and would never put all of her small chips on just the one wager.

Iberia, Earth

Centuries had elapsed. Eons.

“HMS Provider?” John was still puzzling over the curt message form that he and Michael were both looking at in turn. They now knew how they would get to New Albion.

“Hold on.” Michael punched in some data on the communications link that was in almost every residence room in the palace.

“Crap!” Michael seemed to wilt as he looked at the screen.

“What?” John knew in his gut that their punishment was not even close to ending.

“Naval heavy cargo vessel, Hercules class. Minimum crew.”

“Well sure, why not?” John said in disgust. He had been half expecting one of the Imperial yachts to transport them to the family farm on New Albion.

Silly boy.

“Oh shit!” Sammy could only stare at all of the activity around the new smelter site. It was finally starting up and that meant that his small home was eventually doomed. All of the ‘pile’ would now be fodder for the furnace, metal ingots to turn a good profit. Port rats and unkempt felines would in time need to seek housing elsewhere and there was no elsewhere except an orphanage or the street.

“Better do good!” Sammy steeled himself to take the plunge. He would submit his name to the Navy this day and hope for the best.

“Name?” The bored rating behind the desk took the grubby looking boy’s card and absently shoved it into a reader as he started to fill out the form. New Albion now rated a small but permanent naval

facility. Any male child of age had to apply here and in person if they wanted to take the test.

“Samuel M. Winslow.”

“Full name, genius!”

“Uh...Samuel Marion Winslow.”

“Marion?” The rating grinned.

“Yes, sir.” Sammy felt like a complete ass and was starting to get mad. Always a bad sign.

This all seemed to amuse the rating to no end. Marion!

“September eighth, nine in the morning, Bakerstown Civic Hall. Be there or fail.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m enlisted, not a sir!”

“Obviously.” Sammy could not fail to rise to the occasion.

“Beat it!”

Sammy snatched his precious card back and then did ‘beat it’. Maybe he still had a chance at another life, if only a slim one.

HMS Provider, Armstrong Naval Base, Luna

Captain Jamison did not need this complication at all. Maybe the dispatch had been misrouted or something?

“No sir, I verified the message twice.” Lieutenant Wayne replied, knowing that he would have been ordered to do so anyway.

“Wonderful. We get to baby sit the royal brats!”

“Sir?”

“Forget I said that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When does this great honor befall us?”

“They are due aboard just before we up ship, sir. Apparently, from what I can deduce, they are under some sort of punishment. They are to be put to work for the entire crossing.”

“Inquire if any of the Royal Family will be on hand to see them off. We don’t want to be caught gaping if the God-almighty Emperor himself shows up to say bye-bye.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One can only wonder about what they did to so displease His Majesty.”

“That was on my mind also, sir.”

“Whaddaya think?” Addie Weams was one of Sammy’s sometime partners in ‘enterprise.’ The black girl was thirteen and had the very irritating tendency to treat the boy as a younger and not very bright brother. New Albion was a mostly white planet and her presence here was another story altogether. No one living in or around the pile had the proper references which would get them through doors that most took for granted.

At the moment Addie and her 'little brother' were hunched down in the darkness near the port's largest transfer warehouse. Inside was...everything imaginable.

"There's no vidcams or sensors on the back side of the place."

"Good reason too, you can't get in that way!" Addie countered. "It's just a solid wall!"

"Wanna bet? Follow me." Sammy knew better because he had been inside twice before and from the back of the building.

"This way!" Sammy whispered as the girl followed him to a small square structure attached to the rear of the enormous warehouse. "Be quiet and listen for a while."

"Listen for what?"

"Anything."

After a few minutes of total silence the boy motioned the girl to help him slide back the loose metal siding on the box-like enclosure. There was just enough room to slip inside where Sammy switched on a tiny Everlite.

"Now what?" Addie hissed.

"Stay away from those power couplings and follow me."

The square enclosure housed all of the superconducting power lead-ins for the entire building. Getting too close to them could solve all of one's problems, forever.

"Follow you where?" There seemed to be no place to follow anyone anywhere.

“We gotta crawl for a ways.”

“How did you find this?” Addie whispered as her small guide disappeared into a low opening that was mostly occupied with the insulated power cables. It was a tighter fit for her but she did manage the passage through the thick ferrocrete wall.

“I have a lot of spare time.”

“I guess. Shit!”

Then they were inside the vast warehouse.

Addie’s eyes grew wide. “God! We’re rich!”

There were endless stacks of everything as far as the eye could see. The robotic inventory movers would not see them because they had no brains to speak of and were not programmed for such distractions.

“Not quite,” Sammy corrected, “anything we cop has to fit through that hole in the wall we came through.”

“Oh, yeah. Shit!” That was a problem.

“Yes. Follow me, I know where the medical stuff is.”

“What?”

“Viral cures. DNA modifiers. Stuff that costs a lot but is small enough to get back through that hole.”

“Oh.” Addie suddenly had more respect for the mangy little male that she had always given a bad time.

They were out of the place in less than ten minutes and never saw another human being.

“You’ve been taking this stuff to Banks?” Addie was incredulous as they made their way in the darkness back to the pile. All of their pockets were crammed with vials and packets of great value.

“Yeah, why?”

She looked at him in amazement. With a more than a hint of disdain in her voice she told him, “He’s a total cheat! He’s rat shit!”

“So who do you know?” Sammy was getting a little steamed by now. He now suspected that he had indeed been selling his valuable loot way under the going price. He had always been better at pinching stuff than at fencing stuff.

“At least five people who will give us an honest price!”

“Honest?” Sammy grinned.

“It’s all relative. A lot better than what that asshole Banks will give us!”

“Then do lead on, my dear lady.”

Sammy had been half expecting the whack on the head and it hadn’t been nearly as hard as the girl was capable of. She had even grinned when she did it.

One never calls Addie a lady and Sammy knew it.

HMS Provider

Farewells had been said at the palace; after all it would only be a few weeks until they were all together on New Albion for the yearly end of harvest traditions. Just the same it was a good thing that Captain Jamison had taken certain precautions as to who might possibly be on hand to see off the two boys.

“We thought to cause you no disruption, Captain. How did you...?”

“Your Majesty, it only seemed prudent to anticipate that you and Sir Ian might arrive as well.” Jamison replied. Perspiration.

“Understood. We appreciate your efforts.”

Except for those at vital duty stations Provider’s entire crew was at full dress, inspection ready formation.

“It is Provider’s honor, Your Majesty.”

Daniel hadn’t wanted to endure a review of the assembled crew but they had put forth a great deal of effort to spit shine themselves and the entire vessel. The Emperor did a proper job of it, even stopping on occasion to speak with a few of the crew. Sir Ian also performed his tasks as well, speaking with the engineering officers that were part of the origins of his fame and title. John and Michael silently trailed along feeling like so much extra baggage. Finally, Daniel had a quiet moment alone with Captain Jamison.

“They are at heart good boys, perhaps better than any parent might expect. But...”

“I have a son and daughter Your Majesty,” Jamison replied, “I know some of what you say. Even the best child at times might require a touch of the rod.”

“Well said. See that they earn their dinner. Work them as you would any cadet-candidate.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

“This is getting to be a real bore.” Michael voiced the feeling they both had. Mucking out a greenhouse unit was about the equivalent of cleaning a sewer. Especially if the nutrient drain system had clogged up and allowed the whole thing to go to rot.

“The farm at least has fresh air,” John answered, trying to make the best of the awful situation they were in. They were clad only in disposable coveralls that would go into the mass converters at the end of this day. Washing the smell off of their skin would be another matter.

“True. If we manage to get there without dying of olfactory poisoning first.”

“Huh?” John often wished that his dear and brainy friend would just speak simple English.

“This stink will probably kill us first.”

“Oh. True.”

Sammy now had more money than he had ever possessed in his entire life. Adie's advice had steered them to Morris Beezun's small and discrete shop just off of the main road to the spaceport.

"See! I told you!" Addie was also counting her half of the payoff.

"Yes, you did. I owe you." Sammy felt like hugging the girl but he resisted the urge knowing what the response would be.

"No. We're even. Same time tomorrow?" They could become truly wealthy at this rate. They had each collected just under one-hundred Imperial dollars for their very short work day, or rather, night.

"No."

"Why not?" Addie asked, totally confused.

"Inventory."

"What?"

"What we took will show up as a shortage. People will be looking to find out where it went." Sammy's father had worked around the port a long time and his knowledge had rubbed off on his son.

Addie could see now what he was saying. "Then they'll be watching the place."

"Yes. Watching it really good."

"Shit!"

"Yes. We leave it alone for now."

Any good thief knows when to let things cool off and return to complacency.

Even with their very reduced social status, John and Michael found themselves the center of interest on Provider, especially with the four young midshipmen in the vessel's crew.

"What... what's he really like, your...er...father?" Midshipman Garmond wasn't even sure that he should be asking such a thing. Michael and John were allowed to take their meals with Provider's midshipmen and that led to many questions. At least they were being allowed actual contact with other humans close to their age.

"He doesn't like horses," John said between bites of very passable roast beef and potatoes.

"What?"

"He hates the great beasts, entirely."

"Why?" Garmond had never heard of such a thing. The Emperor was supposed to be, well... The Emperor! Emperors were always depicted on coins seated on a great steed of some sort.

"I dunno. They are very large and smelly. Can't say that I care for them too much either. One of them stepped on my left foot once and broke my big toe. Hurt like hell."

"Yeah, well... But what is he *really* like?"

John chewed and looked at the midshipman for a moment before replying with his own question.

"What's your own father like?"

This caught Garmond off guard for a second before he answered.

“He’s a regular sort of person. You don’t want to really piss him off, though.”

“Then we both have fathers who are a lot alike.”

Garmond nodded in agreement but added a final comment.

“But your father is...the Emperor.”

“There is that,” John agreed. “At least he didn’t have our heads put on pikes.”

“Just what did you two do to...?”

The story took some telling and most of it wasn’t believed. But then...this was the Emperor’s son. Sir Ian’s son, too. Some of it must be true!

The evening before landfall at New Albion found John and Michael discussing this latest and most unlikely turn of events; they were being invited to dine with the officers.

“Put on your best stuff,” Michael advised as they hurriedly showered and dressed; it wouldn’t do to be late. At least their small bags had contained one ‘dress up’ outfit.

“I know the drill. I wonder why they want us to eat with...?” Then he stopped mid-sentence, of course he knew why. The officers were as curious about them as the middie’s had been. All of their lives people had been curious about them. The entire Empire had followed their lives since they were born.

Fame.

Most midshipmen, or would-be midshipmen, would be intimidated at being asked to dine with the senior officers. For John and Michael it was a perfectly ordinary thing; they had grown up around all manner of senior officers and admirals. The Admiral of The Fleet was just 'Uncle' Morris to them, even though he wasn't actually related. Still, one had to be properly respectful and they always were; that was one lesson they had learned very early on.

The two had put on their best smiles as they shook hands and said polite hellos to the gathered officers who stood waiting for the Captain to enter the mess. If anyone was nervous it was the officers, unsure about how they should treat these two very famous sons of the Empire. Finally Captain Jamison appeared and the mess came to attention; so did John and Michael, it was only proper courtesy after all.

"Thank you for having us here, sir." John said as he shook the man's hand. Michael did likewise.

Captain Jamison smiled at the boys. He said, "I have instructions to work you two hard, nothing was said about not feeding you. Now let's all be seated and have a nice meal."

As they took their seats, waiting for the Captain to sit first, John and Michael were aware that all eyes were on them. This was nothing new to them; it was always this way when they were with strangers. They were seated mid-table and across from one another, right in the

midst of it all. Provider's Engineering Officer broke the momentary silence with a question that would be the first of many.

"Mister Murphy, about this new drive coil design? Was that truly just your...I mean did you really come up with it on your own?"

"The theoretical part, sir. John helped me with getting it all assembled and flight-tested. He's better with tools than I am."

"Which is why we are under a sentence of hard labor," John added.

"Why is that?" Captain Jamison asked. The Emperor had not gone into the nature of their transgressions and the naval officer certainly hadn't been inclined to ask him.

"Well...we sort of disobeyed my father's orders against modifying my mother's old flyer. I guess it was sort of special to my mother."

"Which wouldn't have been so awful if John, the hot-shot pilot here, hadn't gone supersonic in restricted airspace," Michael continued as he looked pointedly across the table at said pilot.

"Ah. I see." Jamison and the other officers had to chuckle a bit at this. These boys really were getting what they deserved.

"You did have your flight ticket at the time?" Jamison asked, looking directly at John.

"Yes, sir. For a couple of years now."

"Then you must have some of your father's abilities. Both of you, in fact."

“Yes, sir. It’s just about the only thing that I’m actually good at. Michael is just entirely too smart for any five humans put together.”

“A dangerous pair, you two!” Jamison laughed.

“Apparently, sir.” John replied with a slight blush.

Conversation was interrupted for a few moments as the stewards began serving the first course, a rather well executed barley soup. No one mentioned it but several of the officers noted the practiced ease with which their two young guests managed very proper table etiquette. State dinners in the Imperial Palace tend to hone one’s table manners to a fine edge. That and mothers who had their own methods to impress upon them the finer points of civilized life.

“Did His Majesty teach you to fly, Mister Grayson?” This was asked by Lieutenant Chan, who commanded the vessel’s main shuttle.

“Yes, sir. And please sir, just call me John. Mostly I get called a lot of other things.”

“Thank you, John. What sort of craft have you flown?”

“In simulators just about everything, sir. I have managed some real-time in the new Viper, that is until recently.”

“You’ve flown the Viper?” Chan could not accept such a thing; it was something he had only dreamed of doing and certainly no child had...or had he?

“Yes, sir. The controls are the best yet, light as a feather.” John could see that the man didn’t believe him, nor did most of the others at the table. Michael intervened, also aware of the doubt around the table.

“His father has a certain amount of influence with Fleet when it comes to access to naval craft, sir. It will swell his head to say so but I have overheard His Majesty saying that the nitwit sitting across from me will be a better pilot than he ever was. Honest, sir.”

“But...” Chan was shaking his head, still in disbelief.

“Is there a flight simulator on Provider?” Michael asked with a smile. John barely managed to keep his tongue still, amazed at Michael’s strong defense of him.

“There is.” Captain Jamison said, entering the conversation.

“Perhaps after dinner...?”

“Done!”

John was indeed his father’s son. The session with the flight simulator ended all doubts and left all of those onboard Provider who were flight-qualified feeling like complete incompetents.

Chapter Three Paths That Cross

New Albion, The Murphy Farm

John and Michael had lost a lot of the softness that a young boy has when living a protected and cared for life. They were showing traces of new muscles and a lack of body fat that comes from hard work and then a lot more hard work. They were also coming to grips with the fact that they were not at the center of the universe around them. This is a realization that some people never arrive at, at any age.

“We get to go to the harvest dance?” John asked, not sure if he had heard Michael right.

“I guess. Your mother said so, anyway.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She left some nice clothes for us and everything.”

“So where was I when all of this happened?”

“Feeding the stupid chickens.”

“Oh. Do we maybe get to sleep in the house now?” Their dusty space above the equipment bay in the main barn was just a bit...bare.”

“No. Maybe later if she can talk your father into it.”

“And the test?”

“We take it. That’s one thing they can’t stop. Grandfather said that he would loan us his flyer to go into Bakerstown to register tomorrow, but not to tell mother or father.”

“Outstanding!”

It was the same bored and put upon rating that Mister Samuel ‘Marion’ Winslow had encountered. John and Michael had, of course, been tracked and escorted by a very competent and equally discrete Imperial security team, from a distance.

“Name?”

“Grayson, John.” His card was snatched impatiently away and shoved into the reader.

In due time the rating became a good deal less bored.

“Good God!” The rating stood to attention, not even sure if he should or not. It couldn’t hurt. Then Michael offered his card, which was shakily accepted.

“Shit!” Rating Burkes looked nervously around as if expecting the Emperor himself to next step up and offer his card for submission. It was well known by all that His Majesty was on-planet for his yearly family get-together. It was a few seconds before the rating managed his stuttered response.

“Sep...September eighth, nine in the morning. Civic hall.”

“Thank you, Rating...?”

“Burkes.”

“Thank you, Rating Burkes.” Michael replied.

Both boys smiled politely and left. It wasn't until they reached the flyer that they started to shout and pound one another on the back. It was done! They would take the test come what may!

"Oh no." It was only whispered, there was no emotion left for a scream. Sammy's small home had been swept up and into the maw of the smelter while he had cleaned pods all day. His total possessions were now what he wore on his back. His precious book cards and reader were no more. The new clothes were gone along with almost all of his money. And where was Miss Puss?

"Bastards!" Finally he was able to get mad. He had thought that it would be months before the smelter workers made their way out to his location. "Now what do I do?"

Maybe he could talk Addie into letting him stay with her for a few days; the test was only three days away.

A quiet tapping brought Addie to her door and then her eye to the small view screen. Now what in hell was Sammy doing here? Sammy had never been here, nor had anyone else who valued a whole skin. The girl liked her privacy and safety and guarded it fiercely; no one ever got invited to Addie's place.

"Watcha want, runt?" Addie said as her head poked around the door, now ajar, with a small pistol held out of sight.

"I need a place to stay. My place got...smeltered."

“What?”

“I think they’re clearing out all of the rat holes in the pile. My place got cleared.”

“Then get a new place!”

“I’ve got nothing! Just for three days, until I take the test. Please!”

This must really be bad, Addie thought. Sammy had never said ‘please’ to her for anything! “What test?”

“The Naval Academy Test! I’m registered to take it!”

“You?” The girl was unable to stifle her laughter.

“Yes, me!”

“Oh please!” Addie could not imagine such a silly notion. Pigs would perform Aida in the Royal Opera first!

“Addie... You don’t have to believe me but can you do this one thing for me... just for three days?”

The girl could see the boy was beyond desperate and she did owe him something for the very good haul they had made last week. The girl’s place wasn’t in the junk pile but was nearby in a small loft over a long abandoned flyer repair shop. There was just enough spare room for one short and grubby houseguest.

“Okay runt, but just till you fail the test and then you get out and find your own place!”

“I don’t plan on failing... I can’t.”

She could see in his eyes that failing would be the end of his world.

“Then come on in. Wipe your damn feet!”

“Thanks Addie...a lot.”

“Don’t go all weepy on me. This is against my better judgment!”

Sammy didn’t remark on the small handgun the girl put back on its shelf. Didn’t everyone around here do as much when answering the door?

Addie’s small home was a revelation to Sammy. This was obviously a place that had a female running things. Running things better than he had ever managed.

“God, you reek!” Addie wasn’t widely known for her tact.

“Sorry. I was cleaning pods all day.”

“For that creep Harwood again?”

“Yes.”

“Jerk! He’d sell you for fertilizer if he could get a fair price!”

“Yeah, well...” Sammy could only gaze around at the small but very civilized abode he found himself in. He had never been inside here before and no one he knew had ever been here. Addie was something of a mystery to everyone.

“Take a bath while I finish dinner! You’re smelling up the place!”

“A bath?”

“Yes! You know, apply water and soap to your skin.”

“Uh...where?”

“In there.” Addie pointed at a doorway closed off with a faded curtain of some sort.

“But...” Sammy had taken a bath on occasion, but never in a place like this. His baths had mostly been just a sort of hosing off affair.

“Toss all of those rags into the cleaner in there and then use the shower. Do I have to give you bathing lessons too?”

“No!” Sammy was getting steamed, even if he was the unwanted guest here.

Addie was a very resourceful person. The small ‘bathroom’ did indeed include a small laundry unit. There was also an actual indoor toilet and a shower with hot water. There were also soap, towels, and the sorts of things that no boy would think to acquire or even need. It was a small bit of heaven to Sammy.

“Better!” Addie sniffed the air as her damp guest emerged wrapped in one of her largest and best towels. His clothes were still being processed in the laundry unit; apparently the device’s simple brain decided that another complete washing cycle was needed. His pistol and knife were left on the shelf above the toilet; there seemed to be no threats in this place except for the one very crabby young female.

“Thank you,” Sammy said in a quiet voice.

“What?”

“For doing this for me. Most people wouldn’t.”

“Oh. Well...call me stupid, but I sort of like you. In a stupid sort of way.” Addie looked uncomfortable saying such a thing, especially to such a scruffy little male rat as Sammy.

“How did you do all of this? I mean, this place?” Her small home was light years beyond his ex-hovel in the junk pile.

“Maybe it’s because I’m smarter than you and I’m a girl. Females are always better at making a home!”

“Apparently.” There were even some wildflowers in a small vase on the table. Looking around there seemed to be flowers and potted plants most everywhere. “You like flowers, huh?”

Addie didn’t answer that question but instead asked if the boy was hungry.

“Now I can call you stupid.” Sammy managed his first smile and so did Addie. Dinner was chicken in some sort of vegetable stew that must have been simmering long before he had showed up. It was ambrosia to Sammy, food of the gods!

“You really think you can pass that navy test?” Addie asked as she cleared the table. There wasn’t that much left to clear on her guest’s side.

“I’ve been studying my brains out for years now. I think I have a chance at it.”

“I hear that most flunk it.”

“Most don’t even try. I’m going to try.”

Addie only nodded in response. She could finally see that there might be more to Sammy than first meets the eye.

The Murphy Farm

The royal household was revolting. His Most Imperial Majesty found himself facing a sitting room that held everyone but the locally hired farmhands. They all had a grim look about them. The Lady Ellen fired the first salvo.

“John and Michael are eating at our table for dinner and they are sleeping in this house tonight!”

Daniel just blinked and said nothing.

“They’ve paid their debt. Enough is enough,” Ian added in a calmer tone.

“And they are going to the Harvest Dance with the rest of us!” Ellen added. “If they pass that damned Navy test we won’t see them for an entire year!”

Even an Emperor can concede when greater forces than his own are in control of matters.

“They will pass the test and we will not see them for a year,” Daniel conceded. “Someone should go and tell them that punishment is ended or they will be late for dinner.” In all truth the period of punishment had been in some ways harder on Daniel than John and Michael. It is often so when a parent has to harshly discipline a child. It was a great relief that it was finally over.

“This is humiliating!” Sammy said as he pulled on the pale green ‘girl’ nightshirt. The modest laundry unit’s dryer phase hadn’t been working for about three months now and so his clothes would have to air dry during the night.

“What?” Addie shouted from the small bathroom. She had finished preparing a thin pallet for her guest to sleep on and was now preparing herself for bed. There was no way that rat-boy would be sharing her very clean and comfortable bed, even if he was only a young runt and recently bathed!

“Nothing. Thanks for the, uh...night shirt...thing.”

“You owe me for this!” Addie appeared once more and was holding the sheathed one-at knife. “Isn’t this Bernie The Toad’s sticker?”

“It was.”

“How did you...?” Addie knew that the Toad wasn’t one to give away valuable property.

“He tried to use it on me,” Sammy calmly explained.

“And?” Addie knew what was next.

“So I shot him.”

“Dead?”

“Completely. Very messy.”

“Shit!” Once more the girl was reworking her assessment of the boy.

“It was him or me, I chose me,” said Sammy matter-of-factly.

Addie nodded her head, impressed despite herself. “Yeah. I don’t blame you. The fat asshole has tried to corner me for some fun more than once but I was always too fast.”

Freehold Community Hall, New Albion

The annual harvest dance had very humble beginnings. The first year it was held there had been only a handful of farming families getting together in a crude barn to celebrate just surviving for another year. In time a town had grown and prospered and the dance became a more formal occasion, but it was still a very small-town sort of affair.

Then one year a very young and highly decorated midshipman had come to the dance. Now that same midshipman was the Emperor and he still came to the dance.

Adjustments had to be made. Attendance had to be limited to the actual inhabitants of the town of Freehold and the surrounding farms. Uninvited social climbers from the rest of New Albion would face hard-eyed Imperial security agents and then have to explain their presence to them.

It was still the most coveted of social events on the planet.

“You will do this thing.” The Emperor bent slightly to speak to his son; few could see the distress the boy was undergoing.

“But father...!” John had thought that his time of punishment was over.

“It is a tradition. Now go and ask that pretty young girl in the blue dress for the first dance!” His quiet but icy tone had been such that there were no more arguments to be made.

“Bite the bullet, John! God knows that you have had enough damned dance lessons!” These unspoken thoughts gave the boy the courage to forge ahead.

“Yes, father.” Into the Valley of Death.

Alice Witherspoon barely managed to remain upright and conscious as the boy whose official portrait held a central place on her bedroom wall walked over and asked her father if he might speak to her. Permission was granted with a handshake and a grin. Then John politely asked her for the first dance. The entire hall had their eyes on them.

“Please?” John wondered if the girl was deaf or something. She seemed to be without a voice.

“Yes...My pleasure.” Finally! She did have a voice and indeed could hear him!

It was the very same ancient music that began every harvest dance, ‘The Blue Danube’. Musical grace and elegance distilled to accent the simple movements of two young humans. Everyone survived the evening.

The Emperor had some late reading to do before retiring after the long evening. It was the Admiralty report on HMS Pathfinder.

“... no evidence of battle damage, hostile activity or forced boarding. All of the vessel’s systems were fully operational, including all weapons and the shield device. A thorough search of Pathfinder found no officer or crewmember to be left aboard, nor were there any indications of how they might have departed the vessel. All emergency capsules and auxiliary craft were still in place.”

There was much more in the report but it was all still an unsolved and ominous mystery.

Daniel was a long time getting to sleep that night.

The Test

“Eat!” In the last three days Addie had come to care more about Sammy than she would ever admit to. It was now the morning of the test and she was as tied in knots as he was.

“I don’t think it will stay down.”

“I paid good money for those eggs, eat em’ or you’ll be wearing the damned things!”

Sammy reconsidered and took a bite of the scrambled eggs and then some of the toast and jam. Maybe he wasn’t so nervous after all; it all tasted pretty good.

“Better,” Addie said as she sat down to her own breakfast.

Sammy’s clothes were as clean and presentable as he was able to make them... well, at least they were clean. He would have been pushing things entirely too far by asking the girl for a loan to buy new things. Cleaning the mud and gunk off of his boots had helped

some, but only some. Now it was time to go; it was a long hike to the hall and if you show up late you have failed. There are no retests, there is only the one time for every applicant.

“I’m coming too,” Addie said as the boy prepared to leave.

“Really?” This really surprised Sammy.

“Yeah. You might get lost or something.”

“Thanks, Addie.” He knew that she was coming along for whatever moral support she could provide.

“Shuddup. If they mess up and actually pass you, you’ll need someone there to wave bye-bye to.”

Passing applicants were by tradition and regulation only given one hour after the test to decide if they really wanted to go through with this momentous step in their lives and board the naval shuttle. The very short hour was actually easier on the applicant and his family; no long and painful farewells to endure.

Of course everyone in the Imperial household wanted to accompany John and Michael to the test. It was simply going to happen. At the breakfast table His Majesty laid down some ground rules.

“We will remain in the unmarked shuttle at some distance after arrival and during the test.”

“But...” Ellen tried to object.

“We are not going to disrupt things by adding our presence until the test is complete,” Daniel continued. “It would not be fair to the other applicants or to our own two boys. That is simply the way it will be.”

And that is the way it would be. The Emperor had spoken.

John and Michael were very relieved and even managed to down some of the hearty farm fare heaped on the table by their grandmother.

“We’re way too early!” Addie complained with a smack to the back of Sammy’s head. They had left her place a little after dawn and now had almost two hours to kill in the chill of the morning.

“I didn’t want to be late or anything.” Sammy had visions of being delayed along the way by a thousand imagined and real problems, but none had occurred. “Besides, there are some other people here too.”

There were indeed other people standing in small clots around the large square in front of the new civic hall. Sons surrounded by anxious families. No one wanted to be late.

“Keep your heads, do your best. Remember that I cannot help you in this. Expect anything.” Daniel’s final words to the boys were quietly spoken as everyone crowded around them in the shuttle.

“Yes father,” John replied. “We should go now, people are starting to...”

“Then go and succeed or fail and know that no matter what, you are loved by your family.”

Eventually they were free of the arms which did not want them to go but which could never stop them.

Two armed naval ratings stood at the traditional white line on the paving stones; so far no one was being allowed across that line. Then it was nine o'clock and an officer with a loud talker appeared.

“All cadet candidates will now enter and go to their assigned place marked on the floor! Give your name as you enter and go to the number assigned to you!”

The officer knew very well that the Emperor's son and Sir Ian's boy were in this group. To show any favoritism or bias was not even to be considered. Still, it was a daunting thing to pass or fail anyone so close to all of the power that there was. Lieutenant Swenson was in truth as nervous as the boys standing before him; not that he could let it show.

Sammy started to move forward but was halted as Addie grabbed him and kissed him squarely on his forehead.

“If you fail I'm gonna beat your butt!”

“No way. Thanks, Addie!” He surprised even himself by giving the older girl a tight hug. Then he turned and moved with the crowd towards the door.

John and Michael turned briefly to wave toward the small group of people standing at the far edge of the square. Then they too moved along with the small crowd of sweaty-palmed and dry-mouthed young boys.

If the reader of this tale has even a very modest intelligence then it is obvious where certain applicants would find themselves standing. Paths had finally converged.

“I’m going to throw up,” Michael whispered as he and everyone else waited for... what?

“No you’re not! Stay loose!” John didn’t feel too wonderful himself but at least they were still together for this ordeal. For a long time nothing seemed to be happening; maybe this was all part of the test? After a while John managed to take more notice of the others around him. The boy on his right looked like he could really use a better wardrobe and shoes but a whispered hello would be polite and couldn’t hurt.

“Hi. I’m John.” An extended hand to the ragged looking boy was returned with a sort of suspicious look attached to it.

“I’m Sammy.”

“Nice to meet you. The dopey looking guy next to me is Michael. We’re sort of a team.”

Sammy appraised both of them and smelled serious money from the looks of their conservative but obviously expensive and

hand-tailored clothes. A rat notices things like that. Still, they seemed like okay guys.

“I’m not with anyone,” Sammy finally replied, a bit unsure of this new situation.

“So now you are.” John had inherited more than his ability to pilot from his father. He knew by instinct how to gain the trust of others and to lead them.

“Thanks. This is sure taking a long time.”

“I think they’re just trying to rattle us. My father said they do that a lot.”

“Did he take the test?”

“Yeah. He even passed.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah. So did Michael’s father. Imagine how we will look if we mess up and fail.”

“Did they... did they make it through academy and everything?” Sammy was trying hard to place the faces belonging to these two regular sort of guys, they looked vaguely familiar.

“They did, with flying colors. Something else we have to live up to.”

“Are they still in the Navy?”

“No. Well, sort of but not on active duty.”

‘Did...?’

Sammy's question was interrupted by the reappearance of the officer with the loud talker. Other ratings and officers were moving to man the equipment set up on the far side of the hall.

"When your number is called you will move quickly to the medical examination unit. You will strip and place your clothing in the basket and stand upon the marks on the floor until you are told to dress and return to your places. These instructions will not be repeated!"

It was a ritual that was centuries old.

"One!" It had begun. The count continued.

"Forty-seven!"

"Shit!" Sammy, like the others, knew he was next. It was still a pulse raising moment as he dashed across the hall to the medical unit. His new acquaintances had already been called; Michael was still pulling on his pricey clothes as he arrived at the medical exam unit. No comment was made as he shed his own loose fitting and frayed jacket and worn clothes; an applicant's social and financial status had no bearing on what occurred this day. A compact handgun and a one-at knife went unnoticed and into the basket. Sammy was, if nothing else, very good at doing things best not seen.

"Remain still till I tell you to move." Commander Li was HMS Boone's Medical Officer and rather enjoyed this break from his boring routine aboard ship.

"Yes, sir."

"And be quiet unless I ask you to speak."

Sammy had the quick wits not to say anything further to the officer as the scan ring slowly passed down around his body to the floor and then returned to halt above his head.

“Hold out your arm.”

Sammy instantly complied and was rewarded with a sharp sting as the officer pressed some sort of device against his arm. The boy suppressed his flinch and stood as still as he could manage.

A quick visual inspection of the boy caused one question.

“That scar on your leg? How did you get it?”

“A dog, sir.” Not a lie either, just no mention that it was from a very competent guard dog only doing it’s job.

“Did you get any medical attention for it?” The scar had the look that it hadn’t been properly seen to and had taken a long time to heal.

“I cleaned it up myself, sir. I had some antiseptic stuff (stolen) that I put on it.”

“You did it? Not your parents?”

“Haven’t any parents, sir.”

“Where do you live?” Li was now very much intrigued with this gritty boy; his clothing had the look of extreme poverty and hard work and he had a certain air of contained defiance about him. The boy didn’t seem to be insolent but he gave the impression that he wasn’t one to take any crap from anyone.

“I get by sir, on my own.”

“I see,” Li nodded. “Get dressed, return to your place.”

The officer knew that life was often hard and he had just talked to an example of that fact. Still, poverty and a lack of parents were no grounds for disqualification. The readouts on the scanner and sampler said that the boy was healthy and that all of his parts were present and met officer specifications.

A full third of the boys had their names called out and were told that they had not passed the physical exam. Thank you so very much, the door is over there. Actually the officer had been polite about it and had said the proper words, but that was the gist of it.

“So far so good,” Sammy whispered.

“Yeah. Now comes the hard part,” John replied.

And of course he was right.

John and Michael had entered this competition with great advantages. Michael had an I.Q. that was so high it was difficult to measure. For their entire lives both of them had been privately tutored by the very best educators the Empire could offer. Sammy, on the other hand, had no one to teach him, but he was a quick study and he was very determined.

“Oh God,” Sammy whispered to himself as he waded into the mathematics exam. He had never made it past simple calculus in his studies and these questions seemed to start with that. What in the hell were wave theories? At least most of the questions had several answer boxes to check; guessing was better than no answer at all.

Midway through the mathematics section the 'reaction to emergency situations' test was sprung upon the applicants. The 'reaction' test was something that was always left up to the personnel of the vessel who were conducting the entrance exam. HMS Boone's people had outdone themselves devising a fiendish way to totally rattle a hall full of already jumpy boys. The vessel's engineering section had spent months of off duty time putting together what they considered to be a masterpiece; perhaps they had gotten a bit carried away with the project.

A blood-curdling scream caused every stylus in the hall to freeze. Something out of hell itself was attacking the medical rating that had assisted with the physical exam equipment.

This part of the test was the one thing that John and Michael's fathers had purposely not told them about. As far as Sammy... no one had told him about anything.

"What the...?" John had jumped up at the scream, quickly followed by just about everyone else in the room. The few who sat frozen with fear had just failed the test. Many other eyes were also remotely observing and noting just who did what and especially those who did nothing at all.

"What is it?" Michael yelled over the shouts of panic and confusion in the hall. The thing that had sunk its fangs into the hapless rating looked like a cross between a spider and a tiger. It was about the size of a large dog and had six legs; the green scales that covered it did nothing at all to calm the nerves.

“Come on, let’s get out of here!” Michael’s words were reasoned and prudent, they had nothing to defend themselves with, nothing to fight such a ... thing.

Of course everyone else had the same idea. And of course none of the doors would open, contrary to sensible safety regulations.

Now the thing launched itself at Commander Li, who then died in a most dramatic fashion. Boys were backed up against the walls on all sides, some were still pounding on the impassive and unyielding doors. Those boys in a blind panic to escape also failed the test.

“We gotta do something!” John and his two ‘team mates’ were in a small bunch against the wall like the others.

“What?” Michael demanded, his voice even higher than it’s normal church choir soprano. So far Sammy had said nothing and was just taking it all in with very wide eyes. Then the ‘thing’ started coming in their direction.

“Grab a chair! Try to keep it away until some help gets here!” John took the lead and picked up the nearest overturned chair. At least it put something between them and ‘it’.

And it was action with some purpose and reason; this too was taken note of by the observers.

“Crap!” Test or no test Sammy decided that surviving was better than not surviving. A small part of him wondered why the rest of these idiots didn’t just shoot the damned thing. He was thinking this while he was pulling out his Hammond and taking careful aim. It did not occur to him that most ten-year-olds do not normally go about

armed to the teeth. Not that it was unheard of, especially among the Free Traders.

“Get out of the way!” Sammy yelled. The creature was now just a few feet away from them. John turned to find himself looking into the spout end of a pistol and literally jumped out of the way.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The ‘thing’ seemed to explode in a shower of metal, plastic, fake scales and shattered electronics. There was also an impressive burst of sparks as the robotic creature’s power supply shorted out.

Commander Li and the rating staged truly biblical resurrections and scrambled upright in genuine alarm.

“Jesus, Sammy.” John said quietly, his ears still numb from the deafening reports.

“We’ve been had!” Michael added. It didn’t take any genius to understand that real ‘things’ didn’t spit sparks and shed fragments of metal and electronics when shot.

“It’s just a fucking robot!” Sammy seemed very put out that he had been fooled also.

They had all been fooled and only the port rat had been able to take any truly decisive action.

It was all so very irregular. Cadet applicants were simply not expected to show up for the test armed. Still, even after a careful review of the regulations there was nothing found saying that

applicants could not be armed. Apparently the issue had never come up before, ever.

“Your firearm is your personal property and will be returned to you if you fail, or it will be kept in safe storage for you if you pass.” Lieutenant Swenson felt a little uneasy asking this short but hard-eyed applicant to turn over his very nasty weapon. John nudged his new friend with his elbow and whispered in his ear.

“They don’t lie, you gotta do it if you want to pass.”

Sammy had already decided to hand over the pistol; his new acquaintance just confirmed what he already knew.

“I apologize for wrecking the... robot thing, sir. I thought it was real.” Sammy handed the pistol butt-first to the officer as if parting with a dearly beloved relative.

Lieutenant Swenson tried to refrain from smiling but failed entirely.

“Nothing to apologize for, candidate. Good shooting actually.” All three shots had connected dead center on the moving target’s body.

Sammy kept the one-at knife. After all they hadn’t asked for it. They hadn’t thought to ask for any other weapons he might be carrying.

Chapter Four Enemy

Sammy had lost all hope of passing the test. The last segment on language skills had been mostly guesswork on his part... maybe all of it was guesswork. Now he would have to wait until he was sixteen and try to enlist as a rating. Six more crappy years of trying to survive on his own. Shit!

Only seven of the original ninety-three applicants would be passing onto the next level of testing, fewer than was the norm.

“The following applicants will report in one hour to HMS Boone’s shuttle. Failure to report will be taken as a withdrawal from the application process without record or prejudice.”

Every boy left in the hall simply stopped breathing as they all waited for the passing roll to be called.

“Edmond Blythe.”

“Richard Cavot.”

“John Grayson.”

Sammy’s eye’s snapped around to the boy on his left. Now he knew why he was so familiar looking! How could he have been so dense not to see it? He knew very well that the Emperor was on-planet with his family!

“James Kilgore”

“Dylan Langsford.”

“Michael Murphy.”

Again Sammy knew instantly who the other person in his small ‘team’ was.

And then.

“Samuel Winslow.”

Oh my God!

All three boys stumbled out of the hall and into the afternoon sun and just stood there blinking, trying to come back into focus. Addie quickly found her ‘houseguest’ as he stood with two other somewhat dazed looking candidates.

“Well?” Addie demanded, about to bust from the tension of waiting around so long.

“I passed,” Sammy said quietly.

“You’re shitting me?”

“No. I passed. Just barely I think, but I passed.”

Addie’s hug and kiss lifted a surprised Sammy clear of the ground, much to the amusement of the two boys standing beside him. Finally John spoke.

“Come on with us, Sammy. Our folks are over there,” John motioned to a large group of people standing next to a very impressive looking but unmarked shuttle on the far side of the square.

“And who’s your friend?” Michael asked Sammy as they started to walk.

“Oh, this is Addie. She’s been giving me a place to stay the last few days. I think I can call her my friend.”

“Nitwit! Finish the introductions!” Addie said in exasperation.

“Uh, the blonde guy is Michael Murphy and the other one is John Grayson.”

Addie just stopped walking and everyone paused for a moment, she did continue to do a lot of eye blinking. Finally she started walking again along with the others and took notice of the people they were headed towards.

“And those people are...?”

“That would be our folks,” John explained with a grin.

“Oh shit,” Addie whispered, “what do I do?”

“They don’t bite...much!” Michael laughed.

“And those guys?” Addie was also taking careful note of the plainclothes Imperial Guards that were now moving in to escort them on both sides.

“Be sort of polite to them. They do bite,” John explained with a perfectly straight face.

John and Michael could remain dignified no longer and dashed ahead to collide into the open arms of their families.

“We passed!” John shouted.

“We know,” Daniel said as he swept up his son, “our spies told us so.” The Emperor and Sir Ian seemed composed but all of the females had tears and even tighter hugs to administer.

For a time the general emotional melee left Sammy and Addie somewhat forgotten and ignored. But not for too long and not by the person who mattered the most.

“Maybe we should just sort of edge away from here?” Addie whispered to Sammy, stunned that she was even this close to the for-real Emperor and the whole damned royal family. In so vast of an empire it was a most singular and unlikely event.

“No, look.” Sammy nodded towards the group of people.

John and Michael had been reminded of their manners and were beckoning them to come over. The Emperor and everyone else were looking directly at the two port rats.

“Oh God!” Addie squeaked.

“Come on, remember to bow.” Sammy was amazed at how calm he felt. Maybe it was just sensory overload or something. All around the square were crowds of the curious and entire squads of media types. Word had gotten around about which boys were taking the test this day and about who was waiting around for the results. All of bystanders had the good sense to stay put and not to draw any undo attention from the Imperial Guards.

John made the introductions as the two rats attempted very awkward and unpracticed bows before their Emperor and The Lady Ellen.

“Father, Mother, this is Sammy...Samuel Winslow and his friend Addie. They don't have any families here...I mean...”

“We are very pleased to meet the both of you,” Daniel began.
“Is it Adelle, by the way?”

Addie found herself taking the hand of the Emperor. Ladies first of course.

“Yes...Your Majesty. Adelle Weems.”

The Emperor then turned to the poorly dressed boy at her side.

“And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Samuel.” Another handshake.
“My spies tell me that you are an excellent shot.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I’m afraid we were all fooled by the ‘thing’ that they...let go in there.”

“As you were supposed to be. We would suspect that your actions added some points to your score, even though it is somewhat... odd for candidates to show up armed for the test.”

So that was why he had passed! At least it must have helped.

“All that Michael and I could think to do was pick up some stupid chairs,” John added in disgust.

“It was all that you could do, son. The important thing is to do something practical rather than just panic.”

“We have so little time,” Ellen interrupted, “we have arranged a place nearby to be together for a while. Adelle and Samuel will of course join us.”

Join them they did, treated as family.

The small hotel that faced the square had whipped itself into a total froth when suddenly faced with hosting the Emperor and his family, if for only a very short time. The modest reception room was as well prepared as the panicked manager could make it, a large table was piled with every sort of edibles that would be mostly ignored. The royal family just wanted to say goodbye in private to their sons, food was not on their minds.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once while Addie and Sammy sort of withdrew and sidled over to the food table. They both felt like they had just been dropped uninvited into a wealthy stranger's home. Still, any decent rat will gravitate towards free food. Besides, Sammy was starving.

"God! Look at all of this stuff!" Addie whispered, wondering if she could pocket some of it before they left.

Sammy was also gazing at all of the food in the world when a strong hand came to rest gently on his shoulder. The boy turned to find himself facing his Emperor.

"Adelle, may We borrow Samuel for a few minutes?"

"Of...of course, Your Majesty." Addie watched in alarm as her seedy young friend was gently ushered into a side room. What was happening?

Sammy was more than alarmed when he saw two very large and very uniformed Imperial Marine officers were standing at attention, waiting for...what?

"Oh crap! They're gonna arrest me!" Sammy thought.

“Don’t be alarmed, Samuel. You aren’t in any trouble.”

“Your Majesty?” Sammy certainly felt like he was.

“Every applicant who was to take the test today were subjected to a sort of background check by Our security people. It is a routine sort of thing when people are going to be in close contact with any of Our family.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Maybe they found out about his many ‘business’ deals or worse, maybe even about the Toad?

“We do not wish to insult you son, but you are an orphan living alone and only by your wits. You need a family and you need some decent clothing before you board that shuttle. Human nature being what it is, you will make a better impression in the navy if you will accept some better clothes from Us and take a home address to enter on all of the forms you will soon be filling out.”

“But...”

“No buts. You are to going do this thing for Us.”

No arguing seemed to be permitted, go with the flow.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Very much.”

“Good. Now go with Lieutenant Dawes and get changed, there isn’t much time left.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

It is beyond belief how quickly things can be arranged when the Emperor says to get it done, now.

The Emperor reappeared without Sammy and that sent Addie into another panic. A quiet word from Daniel calmed her.

“He’s getting some better clothes, he’ll just be a few minutes.”

“Oh...gosh! Thank you...I was worried that...”

Daniel smiled at the nervous girl. “Not to worry. Come and sit with the family for a while.”

When Sammy did return as promised he was dressed very much like John and Michael. The soft and perfectly fitting garments had performed a transformation from port rat to young gentlemen. Even so, the boy had still managed to keep his knife, undetected.

“Sammy!” Addie stood in amazement, “You look...really nice!”

“I do, don’t I?” said Sammy as he inspected himself.

John walked over and handed Sammy an envelope with the royal seal embossed upon it.

“Father says to use the address and the other stuff in here for all of the paperwork we’ll have to fill out. Just stick it in your pocket for now.”

“Okay.” Sammy turned to where Daniel was sitting and bowed to thank him once again with the Emperor nodding in return.

There was of course more than just a mailing address in the envelope. By one stroke of the pen the Emperor had made himself the legal guardian of one Samuel Marion Winslow. The boy’s legal residence was now the Sun Palace. For all of his hard edges and

sharp places Daniel had a soft heart and this was a very easy thing to do for a young person who needed a few good breaks this one time.

Then it was time to line up shoulder to shoulder in front of the naval shuttle. The goodbyes had finally wept to a close, much to the relief of just about everyone.

“Have you ever been off-planet?” John asked Sammy as they waited for the officer to appear.

“No further than I can jump straight up.”

“Then chew on this. Father told me to give it to you.”

“What is it?”

“Motion sickness candy. Keeps you from spewing chunks in zero-g.”

“Oh. Thanks!” Sammy did as suggested and popped the fruit flavored candy into his mouth. He still couldn’t believe that he would soon be in actual outer space. In the navy! It was a daunting thought.

“Don’t you need one?” Sammy asked.

“No. Michael and I have spent half our lives in one sort of a spacecraft or another. It doesn’t bother us anymore.”

In fact it had never bothered John, not ever; Michael had been another story altogether but had finally developed his own sort of immunity to gut wrenching pilots.

“Boarding this craft will place you under naval regulations and justice! Any violations of those regulations or disobedience of orders will be dealt with under the naval code of justice! HMS Boone will rendezvous in two days with HMS Gladius. You will transfer to Gladius for the remaining voyage to your next testing phase on Wilderness. Any candidate failing on Wilderness or suffering disabling injury or death there will be returned to this place at the convenience of the Imperial Navy!”

That last part always gets everyone’s complete attention.

There was just time for a quick wave goodbye as they all filed aboard. Sammy turned and spotted Addie; she was waving and grinning but there were tears on her face. The Emperor was waving also.

“Bye! Thanks!” Sammy felt a pang himself as he bolted inside the shuttle. He liked Addie a lot, even if she did tend to be crabby and whack him on the head from time to time. He had also decided that he liked the Emperor, also a lot.

“Take a seat, belt in, shut up!” The rating shouting at them seemed to be enjoying this all just a bit too much in John’s opinion. Seating was in two rows of two abreast; the personnel shuttle was almost empty save for the candidates. John found himself next to Sammy who seemed at a loss about the standard belt restraints. Michael and one of the boys that John hadn’t met yet were in the seats just ahead of them.

“Over both shoulders and into the crotch link,” John whispered as he demonstrated how the manually operated belts fastened. Plusher transports had automatic restraints but this was the navy.

“Oh. Yeah, I see. Thanks.”

“Navy pilots...well, they sometimes sort of push things more than they need to. Just try to relax and take deep breaths, don't tense up and get all antsy.”

“I'll try. You've done this before, I haven't.”

“True. A zillion times. Try to relax and enjoy the ride. You won't get sick, the chewy will stop that.”

“Easy for you to say. But thanks anyway.”

In another shuttle the atmosphere was, to say the least, subdued. Two mothers had just handed over their firstborn beloved flesh and blood to the tender mercies of the Imperial Navy. Two fathers who had once undergone the experience themselves were trying to keep a low profile away from their spouses and at the same time cope with the coming year-long loss of their dear sons.

“Did we do the right thing?” Ian finally asked.

“I don't know, maybe no one ever does know. In any event it really wasn't up to us.”

Daniel could only turn to stare out at the planet below them as their trajectory took them to the farm where so many happy times had

occurred in the past. On the sunrise they would be leaving for Earth and a return to the Imperial life.

“What a hot dog!” John said in a very cool and collected voice. The shuttle’s pilot was obviously doing this just to torment the candidates.

“Ummmphff!” An adult hippopotamus seemed to be sitting on Sammy’s chest and all of the rest of him.

“You know, he’s pushing it way past regulations for a personnel shuttle in peacetime conditions. It’s just to give us a bad time. Are you okay?”

“Ummmff.” No, Sammy was not okay and judging from the groans of the other candidates, neither were they.

“He’ll have to ease off pretty soon or overshoot his orbit match.”

“Oohhhhh...” Sammy vowed to punch his new friend in the nose just for being so damned unconcerned about what had to be an out of control shuttle. If he lived long enough.

Fast Attack Cruiser H.M.S Boone

“Stand to attention!” The marine seemed to have some sort of artificial voice amplifier, but in fact he did not. John and Michael were perfectly fine but Sammy was a little woozy as he stood unsteadily next to them on the hanger deck, but at least he hadn’t been sick. The rest of the sorry looking candidates had faired somewhat worse.

The cursing ratings assigned to the shuttle were still cleaning up the mess.

H.M.S. Boone's captain was putting in the traditional appearance. He had a few time-honored words to say to the (mostly) miserable candidates.

"You have no rank status on this vessel at all! You are only cadet-candidates, nothing else. Any disobedience to orders will result in an immediate failure. Any officer on this vessel can fail you for any reason and with no appeal! You will perform all duties assigned to you without question or you will be failed. There will be no preference or prejudice towards any of you. Questions?"

No candidate ever had any questions at this point. All of the idiots had already been eliminated on New Albion. The idiots were always eliminated before making it this far and that too was a tradition.

The Imperial Yacht, four hours out from New Albion

"Is this confirmed?" The worst of news always had to be checked and double checked.

"It is, Your Majesty. Lancer is overdue with no communications whatsoever."

The only named heir to the Imperial Throne was aboard HMS Lancer and had been on his way to a state visit on Forest. His wife and children were also with him.

"Jacob...and his wife and daughters..."

“Sire?” Rear Admiral Han asked in a soft voice. Then the Emperor seemed to gather himself.

“Contact Fleet. Issue the War Conditions Alert in Our name. Something is targeting our naval vessels, something is taking our people.”

Something or someone had now taken the one Prince of the Empire, he was so far the only named heir to the throne.

Two months ago John and Michael would have balked at the task before them but now it only seemed an unavoidable part of life. For Sammy this first job on board Boone was just another workday and a pretty easy one at that.

“Missed one,” Michael pointed at the seed cup that John had failed to fill with synth soil.

Apparently they were both destined to be gardeners, farmers, or greenhouse tenders for the rest of their natural lives if recent events were any indication.

“This is getting to be a real pain!” John said as he rammed the smelly growth accelerant into the holder.

“Poor babies!” Sammy laughed as he ran the clean-up hose’s suck-nozzle along the deck beneath the seedling racks. This was far easier than cleaning cargo pods.

“Oh do shut up!” As much as he liked Sammy, John really galled at the boy’s ability to apparently adjust to just about anything

and without much protest. By now the port rat was someone who could be treated and talked to as family, and at best that was a mixed blessing for Sammy.

In a half hour it would be time for the noon meal, their first meal aboard this vessel. For Sammy navy food would be cuisine far beyond what he was accustomed to. And it was all free!

Bed and rest was a space in an empty dry stores locker; at least they had a clean sheet and a blanket to put on top of some cargo pads. Only the port rat and the Emperor's son were still awake as the long day took its toll on the rest.

"What does "ward" mean?" Sammy finally had the time to open and read the papers that had been crammed into his pants pocket all day long. The light was dim but the words still jumped out at him.

"I think it means that you have been sort of adopted, or at least you're officially part of the family now, I think." John wasn't too sure but if father had gone to the trouble to do this 'ward' thing then Sammy probably didn't have any more worries about where his next meal would be coming from, ever.

"But why... why would he do this for me? I'm nobody."

"Everyone is somebody. Father likes you or you wouldn't be holding that letter. Michael and I like you."

"But..."

"Go to sleep. Tomorrow will be another pain in the ass."

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Huh? For what?”

“For...everything today.”

“Oh, well...you’re welcome. Thanks for shooting that stupid robot. I was about to piss my pants.”

No preference or prejudice was permitted in dealing with cadet-candidates but human nature has it’s own priorities and curiosity is right up there at the top of the list. The Emperor’s son was aboard Boone, not to mention the son of Sir Ian Murphy; wild tales and rumors about both of the boys had circulated around the Empire since they were born.

“Word is that you have some experience with fighters.” Lieutenant Banks was trying to decide if the rather short individual in front of him was a rumor or the real thing. John had been assigned for this new day to clean and polish everything in sight in the flight-training classroom, but perhaps he was not assigned there by chance.

“Yes, sir.”

“And?”

“Sir?”

“What are you qualified to fly?”

“Sir, I only have official tickets for general civilian craft and some reserve military trainers. Unofficially I... have some other

experience.” John had not even begun to relate all of the craft he was qualified in.

“In what?” Banks could see that the boy was holding back.

“If it can fly I can pilot it, sir. It’s my only real talent.”

“Indeed?” Banks had the fleeting impression that perhaps this child of the Emperor was telling the truth. His Majesty’s legendary abilities as a pilot were in no doubt at all and this *was* his son.

John didn’t reply and the officer just gazed down at him for a moment, trying to decide what was next. The boy didn’t seem at all cowed by the officer, something that was unusual in candidates. But then look who his father was.

“Then come along with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Being a combat vessel Boone had four flight proficiency simulators, one of which was programmed for the new Viper. So far the vessel had not received any of the new birds but the combat pilots were training and hoping for that day anyway.

This whole thing had been pre-arranged, judging by the group of pilots who were standing around the simulator. At least that was what John decided as he walked into the training area with Banks.

“Gentlemen, may I present candidate Grayson.” Banks’ introduction managed to produce the first blush that the boy had managed in a very long time. The assembled pilots looked at him and then at each other as if trying to decide how to react to this odd

situation. This was after all, the Emperor's son and all that that entailed.

"Show us." Banks said simply.

"Sir?" John knew but asked anyway.

"Take the Viper for a run. If you can?"

"Yes, sir. I can."

"You are familiar with the protocols for combat?"

"Yes sir, we have a simulator down in the basement."

"In the basement...where?"

"Er...at home sir, in the palace sir."

"Oh. Proceed then."

The palace. That palace. The one you saw in the history books and on the reverse side of the Imperial dollars in your pocket, if you had any.

"Permission to power up?" John knew the drill by heart.

"Permission granted. Launch in sixty seconds." Banks also knew the drill, so did the rest of the pilots.

"Roger." John had the simulated fighter powered up and on line faster than it seemed humanly possible. The watching group of pilots huddled around the simulator's programming console had no real time to take it all in before the 'candidate' requested a wartime launch safety override.

“Granted.” Banks had barely said the words when the view screen showed the ‘viper’ flashing forward and out through the atmosphere shield.

“Gawd! Look at the G-meter!” Ensign Lawrence blurted.

The meter only read as far as eight gravities and was blinking red to indicate that even that was being exceeded.

John was indeed his father’s son. The simulated Snake attacking elements were scattered and hunted down with a cold and efficient use of acceleration and braking, tight turns no normal human might endure and a precise aim that wasted no shots.

“Permission to land aboard?”

“Granted. Take slot three.” Banks’ numbed response was automatic.

“Roger.”

The simulator had produced readings that were outside of its programmed parameters and it was displaying red ‘error’ icons on its readouts. But there were no errors and the stunned pilots watching it all finally realized that they were in the presence of abilities that they did not possess and never would.

“Thank you, candidate Grayson. You may return to your assigned duties.” Banks couldn’t think of anything else to say. No one could.

“Yes, sir.” More cleaning and polishing to do, but at least he had had this one brief respite from all of that.

There would be a noticeable lack of the usual ego driven 'pilot talk' about combat tactics and one's own abilities for a very long time after John would leave Boone.

In the time of wind powered warships the Gladius would have been rated as a main ship of the line and a few centuries later it would have been an armored vessel classed as a battleship. Rendezvous with HMS Gladius occurred as scheduled at system H3847, an uninhabited and barren star system that was handy for both vessels to meet at and useless for much of anything else. The crossing from Boone in the personnel shuttle was a matter of only two minutes with no radical maneuvers, much to the relief of most of the candidates. There would be no greeting or words from Gladius' Captain, just a rather jumpy midshipman to guide them to their assigned sleep area in the giant dreadnaught.

"Oh Dear Lord!" Michael looked absolutely ashen as he turned to John and Sammy.

"What?" John asked with some alarm as they crossed the hanger deck.

"Over there, by that bulkhead."

"Oh no! Maybe he won't see us!" Almost a whisper.

"What's the matter with you two?" Sammy didn't see anything but some goofy looking candidate in civilian clothes cleaning an air vent.

"What are the odds?" John asked in disbelief."

“Too high to factor.”

“Dammit! What are you two talking about?” Sammy hissed.

“Starling.” John finally replied as they entered a companionway.

“Who’s...?”

“Heywood Langston Starling, Junior.”

“And?” Sammy was beyond exasperation by now.

“His father was of some service to my father and mother, badly wounded in the whole mess. Ever since then the miserable weasel has shown up for ‘visits’ and he always has his wretched family in tow. Junior is even worse than his father.”

“Oh. Bad news then?”

“Sammy, you have no idea. He’s probably already told everyone on this tub what a close family friend he is with us and what a personal chum the Emperor is. Father despises the lot of them but seems to feel that he is in Starling’s debt, so he tries to tolerate them. Honor and all of that sort of rot.”

“I’ll try to avoid him.”

“You can try Sammy, but you won’t succeed.”

“What?” Jason Quinn, Gladius’ commanding officer asked in disbelief. On top of a war alert there was now this unlikely complication to deal with!

“John Grayson and Michael Murphy, sir. They were in the group of candidates we took aboard.” Ensign Anson was used to being barked at and now was no exception.

“Then that arrogant little twit Starling wasn’t just dropping names and farting in the wind?”

“No sir, apparently he truly did know that His Majesty’s son would be in the group from New Albion.”

“And he said that his father commands...?”

“The Bren, sir. A fast reconnaissance corvette.”

“I would suspect that some very long strings have been tugged on but probably not by His Majesty.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Johnny! Mikey! It’s so good to see you!” Heywood was beaming his most convincing smile as he approached his two ‘friends.’ The end of another long day had finally put them all together in one corner of the dreadnought’s rating’s gymnasium. Bed was to be the padded floor and a blanket. John hated being called “Johnny” and Michael likewise abhorred “Mikey.”

“Hi, Woody,” John replied. They both knew that Heywood also despised that particular moniker.

Sammy just stood quietly to one side and began to see why his new friends/new family disliked this person so much.

“This is so amazing seeing you both here! Father mentioned that it was just barely possible we would meet up and now we have!”

“It is amazing,” Michael replied dryly, wishing to be in some other part of the known universe. In so vast of an empire they were now face to face with the one person that they least wanted to be with. This was no coincidence at all.

“And this is...?” Heywood was regarding Sammy as one might examine a deceased vole.

“Samuel Winslow.” Sammy rather formally introduced himself and extended a hand to the jerk. You were supposed to do that sort of thing in polite society and his two friends certainly could be classified as being a cut above port rats. He wanted to at least behave properly and not make a fool of himself in front of John and Michael.

“Pleased.” Heywood extended a limp hand that was quickly withdrawn, as if touching something dirty and diseased.

“Sammy is family!” John added with a flash of anger in his eyes.

“How is that?”

“Father made him his ward.”

“Whatever for?” Heywood’s mind was racing in full weasel-mode by now, trying to decide which way to dart.

“Do you know what a port rat is?” Sammy asked in a cool voice as he stared directly into Starling’s eyes. It was a term that he had

never used with John and Michael, who both actually did know what the term entailed, at least in theory.

“Well, yes. As a matter of fact I do know what a port rat is.” Starling almost sniffed the air for some sort of foul body odor, but as always, just not quite.

“Then you know what I am. Do you have any problems with what I am?”

Something in Sammy’s eyes told Heywood that there should be no problems with this low-born person, not now or ever.

“Well, no. Of course not.” Like his father, the boy could insult you while apologizing to you. It was always just short of the need to further confront him, but always just barely.

“Good. Pleased to meet you.” And it was good for Starling. Sammy might have sliced Heywood into neat and bloody sections if things had progressed beyond mere words. The port rat was perhaps two separate people; part of him could be as humane and as considerate as the situation merited, he would put his life at risk for you if he cared about you and thought that you cared for him. The other part of him you had best always be wary of if you were someone he did not care for. If you were his true enemy then you have used very bad judgment at some point and you should strive to correct your mistakes, while you still can.

Heywood quickly turned away from the distasteful and unsettling boy and just as quickly changed the subject.

“Johnny, have you heard about the war alert?”

“Of course we have. Do you know where our action stations are supposed to be?”

“Enter any escape pod we happen to be close to and stand by. It’s all rather useless and tiresome, but there it is all the same.”

“Good night, Woody. See you in the morning.”

“This is just not right! We should...” Starling was like his father, not one to indulge in avoidable manual labor that lesser persons are better suited for. Actual work was for those with no other redeeming social qualities.

“Do what,” John asked wearily as he scooped up a blob of spilled nutrient gel. Gladius’ greenhouses (six of them, actually) were by now like a second home to Michael and John, not so to Heywood.

“We should protest this! You are His Majesty’s son, we...”

“Are only cadet-candidates,” Michael countered, “and if you want to go and whine about it to the Captain, then by all means do so.”

Eventually even Starling Junior could see the lack of wisdom in that course of action and went back to at least appearing to be working as assigned.

The squadron had moved into orbit around Wilderness and was preparing to ferry its consignment of candidates to the planet’s surface when the Jaan vessels appeared in force. The six Imperial

vessels seemed to have been expected by the alien vessels, there were six of the Jaan craft and each one moved to their separate targets as if by prior knowledge. There was simply no time to do more than sound the call to action stations and initiate messages to Fleet.

“What do we do?” Heywood looked like he was about to bolt from the shuttle they had all just boarded. He would have if there had been a place to bolt to.

“We stay here like we were told...” John’s words were cut short as some sort of high-pitched whine seemed to bore into his skull and drown out the entire universe.

Blackness.

“Oh shit!” John felt like he had been tossed into a vat of thick glue and had now only just managed to push his head above the sticky surface, even breathing was a real effort. Images of what was around him were hard to pull into focus, blurred and indistinct. But in time John managed to come into focus and take a mostly rational assessment of where he was.

“Oh God...” He was in a cage. There were others with him in that cage. It had to be a cage; there were actual bars across the one open side of the small enclosure. Peering out through the dull blue bars John could see that there were other cages lining each side of the passageway; it was almost like a cellblock out of a history vid. The lighting was very dim but he could make out in the other cages what might be a few of the boys who had been with him in the shuttle,

along with some of Gladius' crew. It didn't take much deduction to understand that this place had never had a human hand in its design.

Michael and Sammy seemed to be on the edge of stirring to consciousness, Woody was still dead to the world. Where the hell were they? The four of them had wound up in the same cell; perhaps they were always destined to be in the same boat, so to speak.

"Ahh...my head!" Sammy managed to sit upright at about the same time that Michael also made his first attempt and then failed. On the second try Michael managed to prop himself up against John and take some notice of where they were.

"This is not Gladius." Michael finally managed to croak.

"No shit. Are you okay?" John asked.

"I feel like I should be at least dead, or something."

"Me too," Sammy agreed.

So far Heywood hadn't seen fit to join them in their misery and remained blissfully unconscious.

"Look at this place!" Michael was more aware by now and his large brain was taking inventory.

"What?" Sammy asked, also more in possession of his wits.

"Look at the walls and floor, where the bars join."

"Huh...? Oh yeah. How...?" Sammy could see it all too well by now. The floor, the walls and ceiling, and the bars were all one molded piece. There was no hinge or any way of opening the bars; it all just flowed together. How had they even been put into this place?

“I really have to piss.” John brought them all back into focus. One’s physical body has its own priorities.

“Maybe that hole?” Sammy pointed at a simple round opening in the floor towards the rear of their dim ‘accommodations.’

John wobbled over to inspect the opening, still not too steady on his feet.

“There’s water running down there, I think.” He wished that the light was better, it was hard to make out very much of anything in this awful place.

“Then add to it,” Michael suggested.

And so he did. They all did.

“Ooohhh...” Heywood was finally coming around. John and Michael had sort of hoped that he wouldn’t, but of course he did.

“Just when things couldn’t get any worse,” John mumbled as he turned again to peer out into the dim ‘cellblock.’ He could hear and make out other people beginning to stir and talk quietly among themselves.

“I need a doctor!” Heywood almost always began with ‘I’ when feeling put upon. “My head hurts!”

“Shut up. Everyone’s head hurts.” Sammy was in no mood to offer any sympathy to the total pain in the ass.

“My father will have you...”

With those words Heywood had stepped over Sammy's tolerance line by several yards.

Thunk!

Now Heywood had a bloody nose to add to his list of complaints. Even though he was taller than his attacker and probably stronger he just sort of scuttled back against the wall and glared at Sammy. It was the beginning of very bad blood between the two boys.

"Thanks, Sammy." John managed a slight grin at this turn of events, so did Michael.

"My pleasure. Now what do we do?"

"I dunno. All we can do is wait."

Chapter Five Beasts of Burden

“Hello?” John finally decided to just call out and see what might happen. Almost immediately there was an answer.

“Chief Denkins here! Say your name!”

“John! John Grayson! There are four of us in this cage thing. We’re all just some candidates!”

“Good God,” Denkins muttered to himself! Here he was in some sort of ghastly alien prison and now he was talking to the Emperor’s son! “Are you all okay?”

“Mostly. Just headaches and one bloody nose.” It was reassuring to John to be talking to an adult even if he couldn’t quite make him out in the dim light.

“Our heads hurt too, son. There are three of us in this cell.” Denkins paused a moment and then called out himself. “Is there anyone else hearing me?”

There was. In moments dozens of voices from up and down the corridor checked in creating a babble of confusion and unanswered questions. If only it were not so dark, if they could just better see where they were!

Gladius had a crew of more than two thousand and they were all being kept in this nightmarish place.

Iberian Peninsula , The Sun Palace

His Majesty was not to be disturbed at breakfast, a time that he and the Lady Ellen set aside for private talk of the coming day's events. Nevertheless this morning he would be disturbed.

"What is this?" Daniel halted his toast buttering as the Marine officer in charge of communications violated all of the normal procedures by entering the shaded veranda during this time.

"Something's wrong," Ellen said as the officer approached. They both knew that.

"Captain?" Daniel could see from the man's face that something indeed was very wrong.

"Your Majesty, Lady Ellen, forgive my intrusion. There has been another loss of vessels." Captain Han was braced at attention, trying to find a way to say what had to be said.

"Vessels?" More than one?

"The entire Gladius Squadron, Your Majesty. It was in orbit over Wilderness and ceased all contact after sending an initial attack alert message."

"The entire squadron?"

The boys!

"Yes, Your Majesty. The testing unit on Wilderness reports that the squadron orbited for a time without responding to signals, then it departed and shifted into sub-space. The garrison's limited

surveillance system also indicated the presence of several craft of unknown origin.”

All that humanity’s Emperor could do was look into the eyes of his wife and see the desolation that they both felt.

Hours seemed to last for days in this dark and frightening place, but at last something was happening.

“Look, the ceiling’s getting brighter!” John was stating the obvious; it was indeed slowly become lighter in their cell and in the corridor and the other cells also. After about ten minutes the light level was almost daytime-bright.

“Now what?” Sammy was peering through the bars like the others, trying to see what might be happening outside. But then nothing at all was happening; it was just brighter.

“What is this stuff?” John asked as he closely looked at and felt of the bars. The material wasn’t metal and it could be just slightly dented with a hard push with your fingernail. His hardest tug also caused the bars to bend a tiny bit. The entire cell was composed of the same material; even the now glowing ceiling looked like it was the same material. And it was all just one continuous piece.

“I wonder if we could cut it or saw it with something?” Michael wondered out loud. “It almost looks like some sort of organic growth.” It was just an academic observation, not that they had any sort of tools with them to actually try anything.

But of course Sammy still had the one tool that no one else had ever suspected that he even possessed.

“Let’s try this,” Sammy suggested as the sheathed one-at seemed to just materialize in his hand. John had seen such a knife before in his weapons instructor’s hands but had never been allowed to actually try one of the very dangerous things himself. Lopped off body parts of the Emperor’s son would be a difficult thing for the instructor to explain to His Majesty.

“Damn! Where did you get that thing?” John asked in total amazement.

“The Toad tried to use it on me.”

“The Toad?”

“Yeah. Bernie The Toad, another port rat. He was after me with it.”

“What happened?” Michael asked, equally astonished.

“I shot him.”

“Oh.” Michael then just looked at John for a moment as they both tried to digest this and think of what to ask next. Heywood was still just sitting against the wall looking for a chance to improve his standings here.

“Did you...I mean, did he...?” ‘Die’ was left unspoken by John.

“Yes, he did. So?” Now there was no doubt about what became of the Toad.

“Er...nothing. Let’s just try the knife on the bars.” There were a thousand more questions that John wanted to ask but did not, at least for now.

Sammy just nodded and unsheathed the blade; its cutting edge had a ghostly and deadly bright glint to it. A hair dropped on that cutting edge would part almost without slowing in its descent.

“Be careful,” John said quietly. He had seen what one of these fiendish weapons could do to a thick slab of oak.

“No shit.” Sammy said with poorly concealed contempt. Everyone knew what these knives could do. Didn’t they?

The material that the bars and cells were fashioned from did indeed seem to be almost alive; perhaps it was alive. Sammy pushed the blade completely through the bar with only slight resistance.

“Look at that!” Heywood exclaimed, standing close with the rest of them. The severed bar had closed smoothly behind the blade’s passage and was now unmarked and one solid piece again. Now what could they do?

“Try holding the blade in the middle of the bar while I pull on it,” Michael suggested.

“Okay. Mind your fingers.” It seemed the logical thing to attempt next.

Once more the impossibly sharp blade entered the bar and Sammy firmly held it in place there. Michael gingerly grabbed the bar above the knife and to his surprise it was as pliable as if made of rubber, easily bending up at a full ninety-degree angle and beyond.

When he released the pliant rod it immediately rejoined with the bottom section, once more stiff and unyielding. There was no sign that the bar had ever been apart.

“So now we can get out!” Heywood crowed. His nose had stopped oozing by now and his ego was again moving to the front.

“Yes, but do we want to get out just yet?” John asked with some very good sense (for a change).

“Of course we do! We can release the others and...”

“And do what? We don’t even know who or what is running this shitty place.”

“But I’m thirsty! I need something to eat!”

“Okay, Woody. We’ll let you out and you go look for something to eat and drink. Bring something back for us too.”

“I’m not going out there alone!”

“Then shut up or I’ll shut you up,” Sammy said in a very icy voice.

Heywood glared at Sammy but he did shut up. Like all of the Starlings, Heywood had a fine sense of self-preservation. That and a still throbbing nose.

“Maybe we should at least tell the others that we can get out if we want to?” John asked.

Sammy and Michael nodded in agreement; Heywood was in a silent snit by now and was ignoring them all. John got up from the sitting huddle they had been in and went over to the bars.

“Hello! Chief Denkins?” John could see the man plainly now, across the corridor and down two cells.

“I hear you, son.”

“We have a knife, a one-at. It cuts through these bars easy.”

Denkins could not believe what he was hearing and neither could any of the other crewmen listening to this exchange. “You have a what?”

“A one-at knife, Chief. Sammy has one.”

“Sammy?”

“Samuel Winslow, Chief. He’s from New Albion.”

“Then you need to get that knife to us. No offense, but one of the officers needs to be in charge of that thing and then decide how best to use it.”

“Are there any officers there with you?”

“No, but we can find one if we relay the word along.”

John turned to confer with the others and could see from Sammy’s expression that he was not going to be parted from his knife. The boy had already handed over his pistol and he was still regretting that decision.

“No way!” Sammy said before being asked.

“But we have to do what they want,” John reasoned, “we’re just candidates and all and anyway the regs say that we’re under naval...”

“No. I keep the knife.” Sammy was cool and calm about it and John certainly wasn’t going to try and take the knife by force.

“But...”

“I’m sorry John, you and your family have been really good to me, more than good, but the knife stays with me. At least for now, until we see how things are going to go.”

“Okay. I’m not dumb enough to try and take it away from you.”

“I know. And you need to know that I would never use this knife to stop you.”

“But you would stop me?” John had to grin a little as he asked that.

“Totally.” Sammy also smiled.

“Then I guess I better tell Chief Denkins to go and piss off.”

“Perhaps not in those exact words,” Michael suggested.

Iberia

“Bring the fleet to a fire-on-contact status. Any craft not immediately identified is to be destroyed. Weapon systems are to be powered up and on-line at all times. Gun commanders are free to fire without a release from the bridge. Issue a warning to all civilian shipping to avoid naval craft without prior arrangements to approach.”

“Your Majesty, there will be errors, friendly craft...” The Admiral of The Fleet could envision innocent civilians dying by the thousands.

“Then so be it! This is escalating too fast, We cannot allow normal Fleet procedures to leave the Empire at risk!”

“Chief Denkins?” John wasn’t sure about how to go about saying this. They were pretty much committing mutiny even if they were still only candidates.

“Yes?”

“Ah...uh, Sammy has sort of decided to keep his knife.”

Denkins was silent for a moment, he was in no real position to do more than make threats and demands.

“Sammy, talk to me!” Maybe going to the source was a better tactic?

“Yes, sir?” Sammy was as always outwardly calm and in charge of himself as he moved to the bars.

“We need that knife son, this isn’t about what belongs to you, this is about what we all need from you to help us get out of this mess. Now I’m ordering you to hand over that knife!”

Sammy didn’t have a chance to answer the man; something large was lumbering down the corridor to his left. Some *thing*.

“What the fuck is that?” Sammy hissed as the others joined him at the bars. Even Heywood had his injured nose pressed between them.

“A six-legged hippopotamus?” John whispered.

“Four legs and two arms,” Michael corrected, “it’s only walking on the back four. The front two have some sort of finger-things.” Sometimes Michael could be a little too analytical. The ‘thing’ was as

big as the Earth creature it resembled but it had obviously never been within light-years of Earth.

Heywood prudently retreated to the rear of the cell, behind the others.

Iberia

Ellen had moved passed the stage where she wept and alternately threw priceless art objects at the walls. Her firstborn child had been taken or killed by forces unknown, the happy little child who had sat at her feet with his best friend as she read them tales from an ancient and priceless story book. She remembered that he didn't like the parts where bad things happened in the stories, not even when the bad things happened to the ogres or to the wolf that huffed and puffed.

"What's it doing?" John asked quietly as they watched the ponderous 'thing' pause for a moment in front of each cell. It was like watching a rather bright hippopotamus taking some sort of inventory in a warehouse.

"I think it's just counting heads," Michael replied.

"It doesn't look very smart," Sammy observed.

It truly didn't look very smart and it wasn't. The 'thing' was a Chuf, a gentle being from a race that had just barely managed to work its long way up to basic agriculture. Then the Jaan had chanced upon them and decided that they could be of some use for their great physical strength and easy to control brains.

“Move back!” John’s caution was a bit wasted; everyone else had already joined Heywood as the lumbering creature paused in front of the cell bars. But caution seemed rather unneeded as the almost comical alien only peered at them carefully and then seemed to be visibly counting on its stubby fingers, finally pressing four times on the small flat device it held and then briefly pointing the thing at them. John had the fleeting impression that the creature was someone being compelled to act against its will. The small eyes in the massive face looked haunted and sad, as it truly was.

A half-sphere of polished metal was attached to what passed for a leathery forehead on the Chuf; it was about an inch in diameter.

The device was what was planned for all of the Jaan’s captives and then for all of humanity.

“Hel...hello?” John ventured to speak to the alien before it moved on to the next cell. The only reaction from the Chuf was a soft snort and some ear twitches as it briefly regarded John, then it turned and moved on to proceed with its slow and methodical task.

“I don’t think that thing is in charge here.” Sammy’s said as the ‘hippo’ lumbered down the cellblock at a glacial pace.

“No,” Michael agreed, “and did you notice the metal thing attached to its head?”

“Yeah, what was that?”

“Maybe some sort of communicator or...”

“Or what?” John asked

“A control unit.”

“Shit!”

“Yes, shit.” Michael agreed.

Heywood had been whining again about his need for food and water and was getting close to having his nose re-injured when another stir from down the cellblock brought them all to the bars once again. Food and water was arriving.

“Look!” John had to say something if only the obvious. A small floating platform heaped with naval emergency rations and water pouches was moving past the cells. Two boys who could only be naval midshipmen were walking along with the platform and tossing the rations into the cells.

Look at them,” Michael gasped!

The midshipmen’s uniforms were filthy and unkempt, almost not recognizable as uniforms. Their hair looked dirty and matted and long overdue for trimming.

Both middies had a small metal half-orb square in the center of their foreheads.

Crewmen in all of the cells were shouting at the midshipmen as they passed, trying to get them to speak or respond in some way. But it was as if they could not hear or did not want to hear as they mechanically tossed the packets into each cell with blank expressions and then moved on in a tired shuffle.

Both of the midshipman been assigned to HMS Pathfinder.

Only Woody seemed to have a good appetite as the four boys sat on the floor of the cell. But they all did eat and drink; the body goes on even when the mind is off somewhere else for a time. They had also taken note of the fact that the markings on the emergency rations said they were a consignment belonging to HMS Gladius.

“If we just sit here we’re all going to be wearing one of those things on our heads. We have to get out of here and at least try...something!” John wasn’t one to just sit around and wait for eternal damnation to come knocking on the door.

“Agreed,” Michael said. “I say let’s cut the bars and then open as many of the other cells that we can as fast as we can.”

Sammy nodded in agreement and as if on cue the ceiling began to slowly dim. Perhaps the coming dark might help them.

“Chief Denkins!” John softly called across the darkening space between them.

“Yes, lad?”

“Unless you say no we’re going to cut these bars and then the bars on all of the other cells that we can.”

“Now you’re talking! We’re all of a mind that we’d rather buy the farm fighting like men than being turned into stinking zombies!”

“Okay then! Any ideas about what we do after we get out?”

“That we don’t know, son. I think moving fast, quiet, and together is our best bet. Then we get organized with some officers and see what we can do.”

It wasn’t much of a plan but it was pretty much the only thing that they could do.

Sammy cut two of the bars with John on one side and Michael on the other and in seconds they had a way out.

“Wait a minute, let’s try something!” Michael demanded.

“What?” John was in a hurry and was getting a little exasperated by this delay.

“This.” Michael had John hold the two upper bars up and out of the way as he grabbed the two lower ones and touched their ends together. The two lower sections fused together and seemed to shrink a ways toward the floor, forming an upside-down ‘u’ shape. John took the cue and did the same with the upper sections and they too fused together. Now the ‘door’ would stay open on its own.

“Any time you have another idea just go ahead and speak up.” Sammy said to Michael as they all stepped gingerly out into the dark corridor.

“I will.” Michael wasn’t very much given to gloating.

By the time they had made it to Denkins’ cell there were twelve free men with them and the door opening process was down to a fast routine. John would grab two bars down low as Sammy cut one and then the other leaving John to join them together. The men inside the cell would get the idea and join the upper halves together. In between

cells Sammy would sheath the dangerous blade for safety and to allow the sheath's laser honing system to do its impossibly delicate work.

There were so many cells and so many men to free. It was all taking too long but so far whoever or whatever was in charge of this alien place had not taken any notice of them.

Why was that?

All of Gladius' officers were being kept apart in one section of the maze of cells and finally they too were released. Commodore Quinn soon found himself free and face to face with the Emperor's son and most of the enlisted ratings he now once more commanded. Chief Denkins made the hurried introductions.

"Sir, these lads are the reason we're all on the loose now. One of them had a one-at knife, as you have just seen."

Quinn looked over the four boys in front of him and then clapped his right hand on John's shoulder.

"This will not go without mention, assuming we all live to tell about it. Good work!"

"Sammy had the knife, sir. He's sort of a hard case but he's a very good person to have on your side." John pushed Sammy forward a bit as he said this.

“Again, good work Sammy!” Quinn embraced the boy and then looked around at the massed officers and ratings before speaking again. “Now we need to take some organized action!”

The Jaan had evolved into beings that subsisted off of the labor and indeed the very lives of other forms of life deemed inferior and disposable. Physically they were as alien as it is possible to imagine. The nearest physical comparison to a terrestrial life form might be a clawless hermit crab weighing perhaps ten pounds. They had powerful intellects and a total lack of anything resembling compassion.

The Jaan needed a daily period of prolonged rest. A deep sleep akin to a coma. The creatures would literally retreat into their shells and in effect simply shut down for two-thirds of their day-cycle. It was their Achilles heel in a way; they did not fully appreciate that other beings might not have such an absolute need for total rest.

And they had never before had humans as subjects.

“We split into four groups, work that out between you!” Quinn began. “Do what reconnaissance you can and then report back here in one hour. Make that five groups, the lads here will continue opening what cells they can find in that hour!”

John and his small band almost sighed as one, they were already worn down by opening countless cells. But this was no time

for complaining and even Heywood knew that they were all probably as good as dead anyway.

“Well come on, you heard the man.” John pointed down a corridor that was so far unexplored. It was like looking down some sort of burrow a large spider might create, there were no angles or edges anywhere. There was just the same dull blue ‘organic’ looking material that appeared to have been grown rather than built.

“I need a break!” Heywood immediately complained.

“Where would you like it?” This time it was Michael who made the threat, very much out of his gentle character.

“Oh, and I suppose you think that you can...”

Heywood didn’t finish his challenge; suddenly there was a very, very sharp knife very, very close to his throat.

“Urk!” It was all that Heywood could manage in the way of a protest. Any sudden movement could find his head on the deck, totally apart from his body.

“Last time, asshole. Get with the plan. No more warnings.” Sammy’s ice-cold words finally appeared to sink into Heywood’s ego and the obnoxious young male seemed to undergo some sort of instant conversion.

“Lead the way.” Heywood said with outward calm while desperately trying to control his bladder.

“No, you lead the way,” Sammy countered as the knife gently flicked off one of the expensive fasteners on Heywood’s shirt. It made a slight ‘plink’ as it hit the floor, further stirring it’s owner to action.

“My pleasure. Follow me.”

“Oh God!” Heywood had said it but they all felt the same thing. They were looking across a large open, domed area at the end of the corridor. It was the place where the Jaan’s ‘subjects’ took their rest. It was a scene that seemed to be out of the proverbial hell.

Chuf and humans alike seemed to have just stopped where they were and then curled up into some sort of tortured sleep. There was the reek of uncared for bodies, excrement, and things best left unseen. All of them were as unconscious as their captors.

“Wake up!” John was shaking and almost pounding on the man who was wearing what was left of a lieutenant’s naval uniform. However he would not wake up and could not, at least not until the Jaan resumed their waking day.

“Will that thing on his head come off?” Sammy whispered, as if afraid of disturbing someone’s sleep in this awful place.

The half-sphere could not be budged or even wiggled, it was as if it had been fused to the man’s skull and indeed it was.

“Cut it off,” Michael said to Sammy as if talking about an ear of corn or perhaps a toenail in need of trimming.

“What?” John was horrified at his lifelong friend’s ghastly suggestion.

“Do it carefully. Don’t penetrate the cranium.”

“But...” Even Sammy had some qualms about this. He had lot of qualms!

“We haven’t time to mess about. These people are all dead if they stay under...the control of whatever it is that’s doing this. Cut it off!”

John knew that Michael was capable of detached and clinical thinking when the situation required it but this was a new level altogether. But then this was a place that called for such cold reasoning.

“Go on, Sammy. Cut it off.” John finally could see that it had to be tried.

“Maybe Michael should do it?”

“No, you know how to use the knife, we’ve never even held one.”

It was one of the hardest things that Sammy had ever had to do but he did it. As carefully as he could manage; this was not some enemy intent on killing him, it was a helpless human being with his life in the boy’s hands.

Lieutenant Morris Sharon jerked as if touched with high voltage as a hot and searing light flashed through his head.

Then he sat up, fell back in a heap, and then managed to sit up again.

“Who...?” Morris was looking around as if he had awakened in a room full of strangers, and in a way he had. Blood was streaming unheeded down his face from the awful gash on his forehead, a patch of bare bone was showing. Any wound to the head always produces the most alarming amount of blood but this wound had restored his soul to him. It was obvious that the man was at last free from what had possessed him.

“Do the others! Hurry!” John’s words stirred the frozen Sammy into action. In the space of a half hour every human and Chuf in the dome-shaped space was free of any control the Jaan had over them. Sammy ended the awful task with bloody hands and perhaps with nightmares reserved for many nights ahead.

But how much more time did they all have until the Jaan finally emerged from their daily hibernation? How long was their day?

The Chuf were by nature a gentle bunch and were as confused and dazed as the newly released humans, perhaps much more confused. The Chuf had up until now not even invented the wheel and perhaps they never would. All the same they were allies with the small and odd looking two-legged creatures in this rebellion and were at least smart enough to cope with that fact.

“Come on, follow me! We all have to get back to the Commodore!” John was the catalyst that stirred the newly freed

people of both races into action. Both human and Chuf alike moved together while regarding one another somewhat uneasily as they all meekly followed after the boys who had released them. There were senior officers among the humans who should have taken charge but they can be forgiven for being human and unable to yet truly cope with all that had occurred. The time under the control of the Jaan was a blank space in the minds of both the humans and the Chuf.

“My Dear God!” Commodore Quinn could only gape in disbelief as the Emperor’s son led the bizarre procession into sight. The humans looked like the dead brought to life and the Chuf looked like, well...? They all had perfectly awful looking wounds on their foreheads.

“Sir! We found our people!” John began as he approached the officer.

“I can see that. And those...others?”

“We don’t know who they are or what they are, only that they’ve been captives too, sir. They seem to be on our side.”

“The metal spheres?”

“We cut them off. Or rather Sammy did. Michael suggested it and it worked. It was pretty awful but Sammy got it done.”

“Then once again I will say well done to all of you.”

Quinn and the others had also been busy. Very busy.

Two of the four recon groups had met only dead ends and places that were too alien to begin to understand; they had to return with nothing useful to report. Of the other two groups the results were far beyond what could be hoped for. An open passage leading into Gladius had been found; apparently the Jaan vessel was docked hard against the Imperial warship. Just where in the universe they were docked at was as of yet not at the top of the list of priorities. A part of the recon group had split off and proceeded on into Gladius to determine if the vessel was still operational and to, if possible, dispatch some sort of message to Fleet.

The smallest of the recon groups had found the Jaan and killed all of them. It had almost not taken place. The Marine captain leading the group had at first thought that the rows of 'shellfish' being bathed in a soft salt water spray were some sort of aquaculture intended to feed whatever was running this waking nightmare. Except that there were passages leading away from the communal shower bath and those passages led to what could only be command and control positions designed for oversize crab-things.

They had been very easy to kill. Their shell was very thin from millions of years of evolution in which brains mattered more than a tough outer covering. A hard kick shattered the shell and smashed its disgusting contents. The Jaan had been too long without a worthy foe and had grown lax in their personal security.

But there were five other warships in the squadron and the odds were that no human in those vessels had the right tool to free themselves.

“But sir, we can...” John started to protest and was cut very short.

“Do as you are ordered, do what your father would do!” Quinn was eternally grateful to this unlikely bunch of candidates but now was no time to have to worry about their safety and especially about the safety of the Emperor’s son. He ordered all candidates into the nearest escape pods.

“Yes, sir.” John knew when to shut up and do as he was told. He turned to his small band and motioned them to follow him. “Come on, there’s an escape pod next to that...”

John didn’t get to finish his words as the hanger deck jolted upwards and a blinding flash of light and heat from the aft end of the hanger gave them all an instant sunburn. A roar of escaping atmosphere signaled that Gladius was in the process of dying.

The Jaan were now very awake.

There was no time and the escape pod was too far away.

“That shuttle!” John screamed over the roar of thinning air and the shaking deck. “Come on!”

It was only thirty yards away and no one had to be urged to do less than run like hell itself was right behind them. Heywood was an excellent runner and was the first to tumble into the empty craft; in seconds all of the others had piled in after him.

John paused just a second at the hatch to see if anyone else was seeking this dubious haven but there was no one in sight and the fogged air around him was fast disappearing. The boy then turned and slammed his palm against the emergency close plate next to the hatch. In a split second the awful noise dropped to a muffled rumble as the hatch rammed shut. Normal air pressure began to reestablish itself just in time for all of them to avoid passing out.

“Strap in! Michael, take the right seat!” John didn’t wait to see if his orders were being obeyed, there was no time for anything but instinct to take over as the gravity field on Gladius’ hanger deck failed completely. Michael barely managed to do as he was told just before the shuttle accelerated at its maximum thrust, mashing him into semi-consciousness. Sammy was mashed completely unconscious, Heywood being a close second. John had never understood why mere mortals were so prone to pass out during hard maneuvers.

“Oh no...” John was watching the entire squadron perishing in violent blasts of light and scattering debris. The Jaan vessels had separated from their prey and were now destroying all of the helpless Imperial craft. The shuttle had flashed out of the hanger deck just ahead of the massive detonation that had finally ended Gladius and the lives of all who were aboard. The Jaan vessel that was still attached to the dreadnaught also disintegrated in the titanic blast.

The personnel shuttle was only lightly armed, turning to fight would kill all of them. There is a time to stay and fight and a time to run like hell and live to fight again. John held the maximum acceleration for as long as he dared subject the others to the high

gee forces, putting distance between the shuttle and the death that was now behind them all.

The Jaan did not pursue; perhaps they did not even care if a few of the beasts fled. As far as they were concerned there was no place for the beasts to flee to in this desolate point in space; they would surely die anyway.

The Jaan decided to forget them, they were proving to be too much of a risk anyway.

Chapter Six Castaways

The Sun Palace, Iberia

“How is this possible?”

“Your Majesty, you have had some dealings with superior technologies, most notably the A’chon.”

“Yes.”

“If these beings took the squadron that far and that fast then it is possible.”

“How long to get a vessel to that area?”

“Perhaps six months, sire.”

“God!”

“This part is... confusing.” Daniel had studied the hurried messages from Gladius as carefully as the rest of Fleet Command. “...prolonged period of rest?”

“We think that whatever these ‘things’ are, they do not function without some sort of extended rest period. This is something that we might exploit.” At least Admiral Morris Harmon hoped they could exploit it.

“And this last part about issuing one-at blades to all officers?” This last and very cryptic part of the message had been cut off abruptly when the Jaan attacked.

“There are mixed opinions about that, Sire. Some feel that one of the weapons may have played some role in the escape of the Gladius captives.”

“Issue the knives to all officers. It may be important and we cannot afford to pass up any advantage we can manage.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. But...”

“But?”

“The weapons are a scarce item, hazardous even to the person using...”

“Then order emergency production of them and see to it that proper training is given to those receiving them.”

“At once, Your Majesty.” The admiral also knew when to just do as he was told; this Emperor could be argued with only up to a very dangerous point.

“Where the hell are we?” John was gazing out at the lifeless gray cinder lump that the shuttle had briefly circled and then landed on, one asteroid in a field of millions. The asteroid’s almost non-existent gravity did at least keep things from floating about, including the contents of Sammy’s stomach. They had been sitting here for most of two hours while Michael did his best to locate just where ‘here’ was. A passive sensor scan had already told him that the Jaan were nowhere to be found or if they were around they weren’t emitting any sort of detectable energy.

“It’s not in the data base,” Michael said with a sigh of resignation. His spectral sampling of the system’s sun said it was pretty average for a G class but the exact numbers had not been recorded in detail by any survey vessel. Simply peering out at the visible stars did little more than tell them that they at least appeared to be in the right galaxy. The personnel shuttle simply wasn’t equipped for any sort of detailed deep space survey.

“How far from Earth are we?” Sammy asked.

“Probably further than anyone has ever been, but that’s just a guess.”

“But how...in such a short time?”

“It’s all just technology. Just because we can’t do it yet doesn’t mean that it can’t be done.”

“Planets?” John asked as he turned away from the forward view screen. Like the others his face and exposed skin were coated with the greenish burn cream they had found in the medical locker.

“Can’t tell yet. If there are any that might keep us alive they’ll probably be sunward from this debris belt, that’s the usual pattern for a G class.” Michael explained.

“Is there anything you don’t know?” Sammy asked, somewhat recovered from his terminal motion sickness.

“Maybe,” Michael smiled, but the smile wasn’t too genuine; they were all trying to keep what had occurred to the Gladius squadron out of their minds.

They appeared to be safe where they were for now and without any spoken decision some badly needed sleep seemed to be in order. On an intellectual level perhaps only Michael realized just how hopeless their situation probably was but he also had the intelligence to keep his opinion to himself, at least for now. They had to find a planet which could support human life in an uncharted solar system. On average there were planets in one system out of three hundred and ten which could support human life.

“Is this all there is to eat?” Heywood’s breakfast was simply not up to his standards and he was letting one and all know about it. Perhaps he had already forgot his recent lessons.

“Shut up.” Sammy only had to say it once. The emergency ration bars were a very balanced and nutritious meal; even needed fiber was included. Perhaps that was why the bars tasted like fruit flavored sawdust. The instructions on the wrappers said to drink plenty of water with the bars.

“We can’t just sit here,” John began, “this shuttle will keep us alive for maybe three weeks if we stretch things.” John did know about craft that flew and moved through space; like he always told people, it was his only talent. At least it was the only talent apparent to him. Not to others.

“Then we should be moving sunward while we try to find the planets in this system,” Michael replied between bites of sawdust.

“How fast?” John asked.

“A steady one gravity acceleration will add up very fast and keep us fit for if and when we find a place to land.”

“Okay. Can you find a...?”

“Maybe. If I can’t you can have my rock collection.”

“Really?” John had always admired Michael’s collection of minerals and odd looking rocks. The best that he had ever found was a rather ordinary looking bit of petrified wood from that field trip to the desert when they were both only six years old.

The shuttle was configured to seat twenty people; two seats abreast on each side of a narrow aisle, five rows. It was not laid out to consider a continuous forward thrust of one gravity. Under continuous thrust, progressing from the rear of the vessel to the pilot’s command seat meant climbing up a ‘ladder of seats and what handholds there were.

The tiny toilet was not designed for these conditions but could function properly under zero-gravity or normal planetary gravity. John would bring the thrust down to zero twice a day. In the meantime there was an empty water container for one and all to fill. Emptying the container was Heywood’s only assignment.

There was no fuel consumption to calculate or worry over. The Shuttle’s small mass converter supplied almost unlimited power to the drive coils. Water could be reclaimed and purified from the atmosphere scrubber and the toilet. Breathable air was the Reaper that was waiting in the darkness; there was a limit as to how many

times the atmosphere could be recycled and enhanced with stored liquid oxygen. They would all suffocate before they starved or froze to death.

“Yes!” It was just a whisper from Michael but Sammy was still awake and close enough to hear it.

“What?”

“Oxygen, nitrogen, CO2. Water vapor.” Only the dim light from the sensor readouts illuminated the command area but it was enough for Sammy to make out Michael’s wide grin. John and Heywood were already fast asleep in this rest period, this forth day in the shuttle. Michael had slept very little these last few days knowing that every moment spent searching was a point in their favor to survive.

“Huh?”

“Planet. With a breathable atmosphere, I think.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“How far?”

“Almost too far. Other side of the system.”

“But...?”

“If we haul ass we can probably make it.”

“I’ll wake up John.”

“Two moons?” John observed as the planet grew close enough to form a visible disk.

“One shows a very small mass, probably a captured asteroid,” Michael added as he studied the readouts.

They were all very weary of being penned up together in the shuttle and they had just finished the last of the emergency rations. If this planet could keep them alive they had arrived just in time; they had about thirty hours of breathable air left.

“Oceans and stuff!” Sammy exclaimed as they all peered down at the world beneath them. It could have been Earth save that the continents were all the wrong shape. The icecaps seemed a bit larger also. There were no indications on the sensors of any radio wave transmissions, electrical or atomic activity. But the first night-side orbital pass gave them all pause to wonder just who or what was down there.

“Oh crap!” John increased the magnification on the forward screen to its maximum setting.

“Cities.” Michael added unnecessarily.

“Small ones anyway, and not very bright. Switch to infra red.”

The heat sensing vision better revealed what could only be intelligent life organized into at least some sort of scattered towns and modest cities.

“Now what do we do?”

“Land someplace remote for now.” Michael said.

“Why not just land next to a town or something?”

“They might have us for dinner, literally. We have to go slow till we can find out more about this place.”

It was a sensible sort of logic that they all could see. No one wanted to end up in the stew pot or as the star attraction in a zoo.

“Strap in. I’m going to put this thing on the ground.” John, like the others, was very tired of being cooped up in this smelly tin can.

“Where?” Sammy asked.

“Pick someplace...remote looking.”

Sammy spent a minute longer looking down at the world they were orbiting. By now they were back over the planet’s day-side.

“That small continent in the middle, maybe by the coast somewhere?”

“No problem.”

John opted for a relatively new re-entry procedure and turned on the shuttle’s defensive shield. Atmospheric pressure provided a smooth braking force while the shield kept the glowing hot gases clear of the hull. The alternative was a more time consuming braking maneuver while still above the atmosphere.

“Jee-zuss!” Sammy just wasn’t cut out for more than three g’s and they were pulling almost five right now.

After about six minutes of being squashed Sammy felt the weight coming off of his chest as John leveled out the shuttle. For the

first time in too long the craft was in level flight with up and down being where they were supposed to be.

“Point nine-six g’s,” Michael reported. The gravity on this world was just a bit less than Earth-normal.

“Coming up on the coast.” John said as the shuttle continued to slow to subsonic speeds at about one mile above a very blue and Earth-like ocean. Heywood and Sammy unbelted and moved forward to stand behind the command seats. Wherever they were they were the first humans to visit this world and there was a lot to look at.

“What’s wrong?” Sammy asked as the shuttle came to a hover. They were just short of the line of breakers crashing against the beach at the foot of the massive coastal cliffs.

“Birds. Look!” John was pointing at what could at this distance pass for ordinary seagulls.

“Move in closer,” Michael urged.

John did so, pausing to hold the shuttle directly over the narrow beach at the base of the cliffs.

“Not any birds I ever saw!” John was no ornithologist and it didn’t take one to see that your average seagull didn’t have besides two wings, a pair of small ‘arms’ tipped with claws. Never mind the nasty looking jaws and teeth where a sensible bird’s beak might be expected to be.

“Come on. We know this isn’t Earth and I’m hungry! We smell! I need a damned bath!” For this one time Heywood was making perfect sense even if it was entirely self-centered.

“That was a farm.” John said it as if describing an ordinary landmark on Earth or New Albion. They had just passed over the line of coastal cliffs and now they were over cultivated land sectioned off in perfectly ordinary looking, rectangular plots. They had even spotted a rather oddly shaped ‘house’ of some sort.

“Holy shit!” For once Michael had no intelligent comment.

“Head for those hills!” Sammy snapped them out of their open-mouthed amazement and John did as suggested, almost throwing Heywood and Sammy all the way to the rear of the shuttle.

Grinso, first child of Myso and Brogs, was by any estimation the proverbial Village Idiot. When he managed to close his gaping mouth the gleaming thing in the sky had already vanished in a rush towards the Big Hills. He dutifully ran to tell his father about what he had seen and was as usual rewarded with a sharp rap to his thick skull and was then told to get his voode back to weeding the seedlings. Grinso did so without complaint or protest, as is befitting a proper Village Idiot.

“There’s a good spot!” Michael pointed at the small clearing next to the stream they had been following. There didn’t seem to be anyone or anything within miles of this place. All of the boys were almost desperate to get outside and into fresh air again. The water in

the stream also looked very cool and clean. The ‘trees’ and plant life looked green and normal, even if they couldn’t identify anything as being an oak or elm.

“Okay. But let’s keep our wits here! What are the readouts on the atmosphere saying?”

“That it’s a nice day,” Michael replied, “just a bit more oxygen than Earth, nitrogen is about right, lower on the rare gases.”

“Microbes?”

“Nothing bad showing on the basic air sampler we have.”

“But, what if...?”

“John, we have no real options here. We can either live here or we can’t. There’s no point in putting things off.”

Michael as always made perfect sense. They would either thrive on this planet or curl up and die horribly. Or possible something in between those two fates.

“Alright. But everyone carries a weapon. We stay close to the shuttle!”

H.M.S. Lincoln, orbiting Nova Bersheeva

“Target acquired! Firing main batteries!” Ensign Drummond was certain that he was kissing off his modest career but orders were orders.

Fire upon detection with fast closing and unknown contacts.

The Jaan vessel never had a chance to activate its brain-numbing capture field as the entire forward one-third of the delta shaped alien craft simply ceased to exist.

So much for superior technology.

Ensign Drummond would shortly be Lieutenant Drummond and he would be wearing a much coveted medal that His Majesty would personally pin to his chest.

The Empire would have at least part of a Jaan craft to study along with three living aliens who had survived their ill fated attack on the Lincoln.

Iberia

“They are all still alive.”

“You feel this?” Daniel gently asked his younger sister.

The sister who was an acknowledged Talent without peer.

The sister who was once the household ‘pet’ of alien monsters.

“No. I know this. Save them, dear brother.”

“Stay alert. Watch out for one another.” John stood by the hatch trying to at least sound serious and like he knew what he was doing. Like the others he was wearing a pistol from the arms locker and was carrying a compact beam rifle.

“Yes, mother.” Sammy said it with perfectly a straight face.

“Jerk!” John shoved the ‘Open’ plate as he had to grin at how he must have sounded to the rest of them.

Then a new world was open and in front of them.

It smelled like it looked. Fresh and clean and very green.

“Look at that...those trees!” Michael was as ever the one to notice the small details. The trees looked like pine trees but their bark was a lot smoother and the ‘needles’ were too long.

“Nice.” Sammy was more interested in the fast flowing stream. Even a port rat feels the occasional need to bathe or at least hose off the outer layers of crud.

They all just wandered around for a short while trying to come to grips with a totally new world. Everything looked familiar until you looked at it really close. Even the small ‘insects’ that darted about in a normal sort of way had wide wings that seemed to ripple rather than simply beat up and down.

“Shit!” It was John and Michael’s turn to get clean in the rushing water. It was very cold and refreshing and if there were any nasty life forms with teeth in the stream they didn’t seem interested in human flesh. It was wonderful after the endless days in the shuttle trying to keep semi-tidy using only the moist body-wipes supplied with the emergency rations.

Sammy and Heywood had been the first to shed their rank clothing and take the dip; now they stood their turn at guard duty against...what?

Clean clothes were the silver-gray survival suits packed next to the medical stores. They were literally ‘one size fits all’ and were designed to keep you cool in hot climates and to insulate you in frigid zones. They were also so elastic as to appear comical when first unpacked; a tiny child would seem to have been the model for them. A puny midshipman or a beefy rating could don the same incredibly elastic garment for a perfect fit. There were no buttons or slide zips; the fabric was so elastic that you simply entered through the neck opening.

“Very stylish,” Michael commented as John finished pulling on his survival suit. The fit was so close that the suits appeared to be just a very thick coat of paint.

“Thank you. It is a sort of fashion statement, isn’t it?”

“Of some sort.”

Now they were all clean, clothed, and refreshed. They were also starving. Fresh air and cold water had greatly sharpened the ache for just about anything at all they could find to eat.

“Food.” It was a basic thought that Sammy voiced as they all gathered together at the base of the shuttle’s personnel ramp.

“What about that farm we saw?” Heywood asked and for once wasn’t told to shut up.

“We can’t just walk up and knock on the door. We’re the aliens here,” Michael reasoned. “Assuming we can even digest the food here.”

“Let’s check out the place from a distance,” John suggested, “we can use the surveillance scopes to at least see what the locals look like.”

“We could just shoot them and take their food,” Sammy offered, again with a perfectly straight face.

Everyone was pretty sure he was kidding. Mostly.

The shuttle was parked and buttoned up behind a small rise about a quarter mile from the farmhouse. John and the others were on their stomachs behind a sort of unorganized hedgerow studying the ‘man’ who was, at the moment, chopping some wood.

“They have five fingers,” John whispered as he gazed through the image-stabilized scope.

“Yes, but two of them are thumbs. Jack up your magnification.” Michael always saw the small details in things.

“I’ll be darned. Two thumbs. One where it ought to be and the other where our pinkie finger is.”

“Metal tools, also.” Sammy added. The ax/machete thing the guy was using looked very heavy and very sharp.

“His ears can twitch, like a horse. There’s hair on his head.” John observed.

“He looks about as smart as a horse, too.” Heywood sneered.

“So now what do we do?” John finally asked. Lying there in the bushes was doing nothing at all to fill their empty stomachs.

“One of us should try and make contact.” Michael decided.

“Why not all of us?” Sammy asked.

“How would you feel if four weird looking aliens just walked up to you? One is bad enough.”

“Point taken. Let’s send Heywood.”

“I’ll go,” John offered before Woody could bolt for the shuttle. “Keep a rifle on that guy in case he decides to use that axe-thing on me. But don’t shoot him unless I can’t outrun him.”

“At least wear your pistol!” Michael insisted.

“Of course. I’m not nearly as stupid as I look.”

The ‘man’ had his back to John so he decided to angle off to one side until the guy could catch sight of him at some distance. Better than tapping the woodchopper on the shoulder and getting an axe in your forehead. Eventually Myso took some serious note of the short demon who was just standing there waving at him.

“Hello!” John shouted as the man just seemed to freeze in mid-hack. More waving didn’t seem to be having any effect so he started to edge a bit closer to the guy.

“Crap! He’s a lot bigger up close!” John said under his breath. The guy had to be close to seven feet tall with a massive body that appeared to be mostly muscles. His face was almost human in appearance, save for the lack of eyebrows and the oddly shaped eyes. That and the extra pointy front teeth. His clothing was some sort of hand spun looking fabric with boots that looked like they might

have been fashioned from something that had been mooing recently, or whatever noise the cows made on this planet.

“Keep away from this place, demon!” It was what Myso shouted in a voice like distant thunder. To John it mostly sounded like a lion gargling with gravel. Maybe sign language would work?

“Hungry!” John said as he patted his stomach and pointed to his mouth.

“Keep back!” Myso raised his axe in a most unfriendly manner.

Sammy’s finger came off the guard and rested lightly against his beam rifle’s trigger. Myso was going to literally lose his head if he didn’t back off a little with that axe-thing.

“Stay calm, big guy!” Obviously it didn’t matter what John actually said to the guy but perhaps a calm tone would help. Maybe more sign language?

“I surrender!” John raised both of his arms with his hands open and slowly turned around once to show that he was unarmed. Hopefully the big lump didn’t know what a holstered pistol was.

Demons weren’t supposed to act like this and they were supposed to have long tails and claws; at least that was what the village faith-keeper had told him when he was a child. Myso lowered the axe to his left side and just studied the odd looking creature for a moment. Sammy’s finger slowly returned to its resting place on the trigger guard.

“Come closer.” Myso’s words were gibberish to John but his beckoning hand was a sort of universal signal.

“I must be nuts!” John thought as he edged to within ten feet of the now gigantic appearing ‘man.’ “Maybe they shake hands like we do?”

John extended his right hand in what he hoped was a friendly gesture. “I hope I’m not giving him the local version of the middle finger,” he thought.

This all seemed to have the right effect on the man as he too stepped forward a bit to also extend his hand. John took a prudent step backwards and pointed at the axe still in the man’s left hand.

“Think I’m going to chop you up, do you?” Myso gently tossed the axe aside and stepped away from it.

“Thank you.” This time John moved close enough for a handshake to occur and it did. The man’s large hand was very hard and calloused and by now John did regard him as a man.

Michael, Heywood and Sammy resumed breathing. So did John.

“Where do you come from?” Obviously John wasn’t from around these parts. Myso was fascinated with the ‘demon’s’ small and very odd hands and most of all with its round eyes which he peered intently into for a long moment.

“Pleased to meet you.” Neither of them had any idea what the other was saying but John knew that talking was better than fighting, his mother had taught him that.

“What are you?” Myso was feeling more at ease with this small and very odd looking boy. It was surely a boy of some sort, the

incredibly smooth and closely tailored garment he wore left no doubt about that.

“Mister, we’re very hungry.” Once more John patted his stomach and touched his lips.

Myso was no genius but he finally understood that this odd visitor was in need of food.

“Come. Brogs will feed you!” Myso gestured toward the strangely curved ‘farmhouse’ and started to walk in its direction.

“Wait!” John called after the man. There was no way he was going in there alone!

“What is wrong?” Myso turned to see the small ‘boy’ holding his place.

John’s mind was racing to try and work this out. Pictures!

“Look!” John beckoned the man over as he hunkered down to quickly draw something in the dusty earth. Three stick figures that were obviously people even to Myso.

“There are more! This many!” John held up his left hand and then carefully counted off three of his fingers. “Over there!”

“Over there” was where the rest of the interstellar refugees were hiding. Myso looked down at the crude drawings and then over towards the windbreaks he had been meaning to repair for about three years now.

“More of you?”

“Please help us!”

Myso didn't understand the words but could see some desperation in this strange boy's eyes.

"Come. Show me."

"Holy shit!" Perhaps the translation is lacking but it is close to what Myso was thinking as three more of the short visitors emerged from the windbreak. They were all about the same size but had different features. Two of them had hair that seemed to almost glow in the afternoon light; Michael and Heywood were both hopelessly blond. They all wore the same closely tailored garments that indicated high birth and great wealth. They also carried strange looking devices of some sort that made Myso feel a little uneasy.

It took a while but Myso did manage to greet and shake hands with all of the boys. Then a rather long and awkward silence followed. Sammy finally unlocked things when he took the man's rough hand and tugged him towards the farm house.

"Let's go eat for Chrissakes!"

Eventually Brogs ceased her screaming as she ran out of pots and crockery to throw at the small devils now cowering behind Myso. Little Carmy was hiding behind the root bin and was only occasionally poking her head into view. It was all very noisy for a while.

"Calm yourself, woman!"

"What have you brought into our house?" Brogs was in no mental state to be calmed down.

“These...boys need our help. Our faith tells us that it must be given to them!”

“Boys?”

“Yes!”

“They do not look like any boys I have ever seen! They are devils! Demons!”

Instinct told John that he should do something so he stepped out from behind his large pot-blocker and moved carefully towards the woman.

“Hello.” So what would you say?

“Keep back!”

John didn't keep back but instead started to extend his open palm towards this very agitated alien 'person'.

There was an interruption.

“You look funny!” Carmy was by now again peering around the corner of the root bin. A smile on this world was a smile on Earth also. This cute little person caught John totally off guard with her interruption, likewise her mother.

“Well, hi!” John sort of squatted down to be at eye level with the tiny child. Carmy's eyes grew even wider with delight as the silly looking boy held out his hand to her. Brogs still held her last and best fry pan in her hand and looked about ready to totally brain John. Then something stayed her hand as her daughter timidly reached out to touch the demon's hand.

Demon's didn't make little children smile. Demon's didn't smile.

"They only want some food." Myso explained.

"But what are they? Where did they come from?"

"I don't know and I don't know. They were hiding in the windbreak."

"Why would they hide?"

"Perhaps to avoid getting pots and pans bounced off their skulls."

Brogs seemed to be calming down so John stood to face the woman and once more offered his hand. For the first time the woman took a very close look at the skinny boy's strange face. After a time she reached out and touched the fine black hair on his head, so much finer than the coarse hair a 'normal' person had. His misshapen ears were far too small and seemed incapable of any proper movement. With some real curiosity now Brogs motioned for the boy to open his mouth.

"His teeth are so small! And so white!" They looked fragile and unhealthy, not a proper yellow color at all.

Perhaps John's clothing fascinated the woman the most as she ran her hand over the smooth gray fabric that almost seemed to shine.

"It is not sewn! There are no stitches to be seen!"

"It is very odd." Myso agreed. *"Now can we feed them?"*

“Yes. It is not good sense to do so but I will feed them. Go and fetch Grinso or the poor soul will keep weeding all night!”

“Yes, dear.” There was no doubting about who was in charge of this household, even the small demons had figured that out.

With at least an uneasy truce declared there was time for Brogs’ odd houseguests to take better stock of their surroundings. The home they found themselves in did indeed feel like a proper home even if the furnishings did look rather crude and misshapen. Brogs had pointed at the massive wooden table next to the kitchen area and the four demons obediently took a seat on the hard benches, beam rifles tucked under the table. The table, like most everything else in the house, seemed to be hand-hewn and capable of supporting several thousand pounds of food.

There were also new odors to try and sort out, most of them were coming from the cooking area and they were not at all unpleasant.

“I don’t care what she puts on this table, I’m going to eat it!” Sammy whispered to the others. It seemed to be the consensus opinion.

“Look at that,” Michael was pointing to the side of the stone fireplace in the living area.

“Bow and arrows,” John had even used them once, “big too.” It was as tall as the ancient English longbow but it appeared thicker towards the middle.

“Sword too,” Sammy added. The curved scabbard hid the blade but it looked big enough to dice up a medium size dragon.

“Let’s all be really polite around here.” John said, perhaps unnecessarily.

“The shiny sky thing is behind the hill!” Grinso was almost too dense to lie and his father had already seen four very strange things this day.

“Show me.” Myso followed his excited son and wondered what he should do if his oversize offspring was actually telling the truth. And of course he was telling the truth.

“Gods in the heavens!” There was simply no reference point in Myso’s life to help him understand what he was looking at. *“What magic is this?”*

It took some real courage or perhaps some foolhardiness for the man to edge close enough to the large shuttle to actually touch the thing.

“How can metal be crafted like this?” Myso ran his rough hand over the shuttle’s polished titanium, it seemed to curve and flow like water. Good iron was hard to come by even if you had the price for it. All of the silver in the land would not buy this thing!

“Are you certain it flew through the air?”

“Yes, Father! Faster than a bird!”

It had to be true. It had no wheels and it certainly hadn't been carried here by four little demons. It was almost as big as his house!

"Come. Your mother is preparing dinner."

"It is early yet." Grinso was used to certain routines.

"We have guests."

"Who, father?"

"The owners of this...thing. You will treat them with respect when you meet them. They are not like us at all."

"Yes, father."

"This is delicious!" John said between mouthfuls of what could pass for a thick beef stew.

"Umm," Michael agreed

"This bread stuff is rather tough," Heywood complained.

"Shut up," Sammy replied automatically.

"Drink some milk, you are all too thin!" Brogs pointed at the pottery mugs full of slightly blue 'milk'. Apparently mothers of all species share some common traits.

"Yes, ma'am," John dutifully replied. Even if he didn't understand her words he understood their meaning. His nose should have tipped him off about the 'milk'. It just didn't smell quite like milk ought to.

“Awww.. God!” The small sip was enough to almost cause the boy to lose his stew. “Don’t drink this shit!” Manners or not John was unable to hide his shuddering disgust.

“What is wrong with him?” Brogs asked.

“I think he does not like his milk,” Myso replied.

“It is perfectly good! It has been aging for five days now!”

“Perhaps they have...different foods where they come from?”

“Hmmpf!”

Myso had held off discussing, or trying to discuss, the large metal thing behind the hill. A quiet sit-down around the fireplace seemed the time to bring up the subject. The four boys were completely stuffed and were in danger of nodding off until their host drew a crude picture on a piece of valuable message paper.

“That’s the shuttle,” John whispered as the man held up his labored-over artwork.

“No shit,” Sammy replied a bit sarcastically.

Myso pointed at the picture and then at his guests. *“Is this what brought you to this place?”*

“That’s our shuttle.” John nodded his head yes and apparently that too was a gesture common to both of their cultures. “Shuttle.” John said the word slowly as he pointed at the drawing.

“Shuzzle?” Myso repeated.

“Shut – tull.” John corrected.

“Shut..tull.” Myso had just learned his first human word.

“Right!” John’s grin told the man he had said it correctly.

“Reet!”

“Close enough.”

In the spirit of the moment their large host patted his chest and said “Myso!”

“My – so,” John answered while pointing at the man. Then he patted his own chest. “John.”

“Joon!”

“Right!” John nodded at the others and they in turn told the man their name. It all went very well until it was Woody’s turn.

“Heywood.”

Total pandemonium erupted as the host and his family started hooting at the top of their lungs and slapping the sides of their faces. In truth it sounded remarkably like a troop of hysterical baboons. John and the other demons were about ready to make a break for the door when things calmed down to just some light face slapping and the occasional low hoot.

“They were laughing!” Michael finally realized.

“At what?” Heywood was starting to get a bit red in the face when he realized they were probably ‘hooting’ at him. They had all been pointing at him during the loudest part of the outburst.

“I think it was your name.”

In time they would learn that Heywood was in fact two words. Hae being the name of the large draft animals used to plow and pull carts or wagons, and Voode, referring to one's butt or ass.

Heywood would eventually learn to introduce himself as Starling but the other demons would always think of him as a horse's ass anyway.

"It's getting dark, we should go." John had no wish to be wandering around at night on an alien planet, nice hosts or not.

"We should give them some sort of present or something first, for feeding us and all." Michael said.

"What?"

Sammy supplied the answer as he popped the small everlite out of the butt of his rifle. The rifle had been designed for survival usage and had several handy attachments.

"Here." Sammy handed the finger-sized light to John who then stood and held out the device to Myso on his open palm.

"*What is this?*" It was obviously a gift and appeared to be as finely crafted as a nobleman's timepiece. Myso turned the light over and over, trying to fathom what it was.

"Like this." John gently retrieved the small light and then pushed the button on the end of it.

"*Magic!*" Myso and his family all seemed to cringe backwards from the brilliant circle of light on the stone wall.

“It’s just a light, see!” John moved the beam slowly around and then pointed it at his hand to show them that it was harmless. After clicking it off he handed it back to Myso who accepted it as if being offered a lit bomb. It took a while but John finally seemed to convince the man that it was a very useful gift. However, to Myso it was a gift that would always be magic.

Myso and his son had walked along with the four boys until the shuttle was in sight. It was almost dark and there were always the night-beasts to worry about. At one time Myso had also tried raising what might be called sheep, but it had been impossible to keep them safe from the predators that prowled this area during the night. Only the massive and sharp horned ‘cattle’ that supplied them with milk and meat to sell and for their own use were able to fend off the packs of wolf-like predators. Grain crops were also of no interest to meat eaters and grain could also be traded for needed things in the village.

“Father! It is opening!”

“Yes! Be quiet!”

Myso watched in amazement as the shuttle’s hatch opened and it’s ramp then extended to almost touch the ground. An unearthly white light flooded from the open portal as it opened, obscuring what might lie inside. The small boy/demon named John paused and waved to them before disappearing inside. In seconds the portal was closed again and the shuttle seemed as dark and forbidding as the night was becoming.

“Come. This is no place to be this night!”

The shuttle’s seats could be adjusted to form passable beds and that was where the four demons were to be found. The large amount of alien stew they had consumed had so far not produced any ill effects save for significantly more audible ‘emissions’ than might be expected from a terrestrial meal.

“I like them,” John said between yawns as he dimmed the lighting and pulled the light blanket up to his chin.

“Medieval.” Michael said.

“Huh?”

“Middle ages. They seem to be at about that stage of development. At least around here.”

“And?”

“We need to be careful. They might think we’re some sort of wizards or goblins.”

“Burned at the stake?” John did remember that small and unpleasant item from his tedious history lessons.

“Maybe. These aren’t humans even if they sort of look like us. We just need to be really careful.”

John didn’t say anything else before sleep claimed him. He did wonder if they would ever see home again.

“Maybe they’ll give us some breakfast?” Sammy’s stomach alarm had gone off again, as it was prone to do on a regular basis.

“We can’t sponge off of these people forever!” Michael argued.

“We can hang around until we learn more about this place. We can try to make ourselves useful to them, pay for our keep.” John’s words seemed to make sense to everyone.

Hiking back and forth between the farmhouse and the shuttle was a rather tiresome prospect so John decided to just relocate the shuttle.

“It does fly!” Myso was feeding the carefully protected ‘chickens’ when the gleaming shuttle appeared overhead and circled slowly around the farmhouse. As the floating apparition settled to the ground in front of the house Myso felt a slight vibration that seemed to permeate the very air around him.

“This cannot be!”

But it was. It was right there in front of him. The friendly little boy named John was now poking his odd looking head out of the great metal thing and he was waving at him!

Brog dashed out of the house followed by Carmy, then she shrieked once and disappeared back inside. Little Carmy just stood there looking at the pretty metal thing in wide-eyed astonishment. Grinso was away at his lifelong weeding chores and missed the whole thing.

“Good morning!” John put on his best smile as he came down the ramp and once more extended his hand to the man. The other three were close behind, even the one called Hae Voode.

“Best day to you,” Myso finally managed to say. It was one thing to see the great metal beast sitting on the ground, it was another experience altogether to see it floating through the air. It should not be a possible thing.

There was an awkward silence as the boys stood around hoping for another meal invitation but Myso couldn't keep his eyes off of the shuttle. Finally Brogs stuck her head out of the door and sort of broke the spell.

“I am not feeding them now! Firstmeal was two parts ago!”

“There is bread and fruit paste, give them some for now!” Myso sternly ordered.

Apparently when Myso was outside of the house he was the one in charge. This is true in many cultures. Brogs' ears seemed to twitch in anger but she did as she was told and curtly beckoned the alien panhandlers inside.

“There's just more of this awful bread stuff!” Heywood complained.

“This purple gunk is pretty good. Spread some of it on the bread and shut up!” Sammy was getting to a very thin spot where Heywood was concerned and the feeling was mutual.

“I'm really getting fed up with the way you talk to me! Who do you think you are anyway?” Heywood was finally working up a

semblance of a spine where Sammy was concerned. It was almost without precedent.

“Will you two knock it off!” John hissed, trying not to attract the attention of the excitable Brogs. “We are guests here and we want to stay on the good side of these people!”

Sammy’s eyes were very cold when he again spoke to Heywood.

“Later, asshole!”

“My pleasure, port rat!”

This was going to eventually get very nasty. John and Michael just looked at one another, silently agreeing that this was one more complication that really wasn’t needed right now.

Myso was trying to peer inside the shuttle’s hatch from his place next to the ramp, one hand was resting on the ramp’s rubbery non-skid surface.

“Should we let him go inside?” John whispered to Michael as they approached the shuttle.

“Sure. If he was going to hurt any of us he’s had plenty of chances by now.”

Myso turned to see the four visitors standing quietly behind him.

“I was only looking...I meant no harm.”

Whatever he said it was apparent that he was a little embarrassed by being caught at his snooping and perhaps more than a little awed by what he had managed to glimpse inside the shuttle.

“Come inside,” John beckoned with his hand as he climbed partway up the ramp, “be our guest now.”

Myso also didn't have a clue about what the strange boy had actually said but the invitation was obvious. But did he have the courage to enter this frightful thing?

“*Gods protect me!*” Myso muttered as he finally placed one foot on the ramp.

“Come on, we don't bite!” John could see that the huge man was almost shaking with fright. An extended hand was taken and that seemed to calm Myso a little.

Then he was inside.

Everywhere was polished metal and odd looking ‘wood’ so finely crafted it defied description. How was it possible to smooth and shape such perfect surfaces and such intricate devices? There was light but there were no candles or lamps!

“Have a seat!” John gently guided the mind-numbed Myso into the right-hand command seat as Michael and the others stood behind them. In front of the rough-hewn farmer was an array of the most tiny and exquisite points of twinkling lights surrounding what might be timepieces or even perhaps the compasses a mariner might use. But it was all from a place other than Home. This thing was not from his world!

“Gods!” Myso jerked backwards as John activated the wide view screen that wrapped around the forward part of the shuttle. The craft had no windows as such but the view screens were as sharp and clear as if they were an open area cut out of the titanium hull.

“Wanna take a ride?” John asked with a grin.

“John-ee.” Michael only said that when total disaster was descending upon them.

“Huh?”

“No rides. Not now. Myso is about to go nuts as it is. Maybe later.”

“Oh. Maybe so.” John could finally see that Myso was in total sensory overload and flicked off the view screen.

John took the man’s iron hard hand and held it between both of his own and in a moment Myso managed to look into the eyes of this small person from someplace so very far away.

“It’s sort of a lot to take in I guess,” John said quietly.

Myso understood. Not the words but the two hands that were holding his own and trying to comfort him.

“I need to go outside now.” Myso looked back at the open hatch and then again at John. He needed to feel the sun on his face and see if his world was still the same.

Hard work always cleared Myso’s head when he was troubled. Perhaps some time spent removing the boulders from the new

planting area would be a good idea. It was an endless task but the land could not be cultivated if it was not done.

“You are too puny for this work!” Myso was a bit touched that the four spindly looking boys wanted to help him. The four of them together didn’t add up to one good farmhand.

“Why don’t we just blast them to bits with the shuttle’s main gun?” John asked. Better than getting terminal hernias and mashed fingers.

“It’ll scare the crap out of Myso,” Michael replied.

“We can draw some pictures or something to explain what we’re going to do and have him stay well clear of everything.”

“Well...” Michael wasn’t too sure about this latest brainstorm but it would indeed make short work of all of the boulders.

It took a great many dirt sketches to explain what they had in mind in the way of boulder disposal. The best that Myso could understand was that lightning bolts from the great metal flying thing would destroy the rocks. Also that it would be very loud. It was all very ridiculous but then so was a metal house that flew.

With everyone watching from the farmhouse, including Brogs, John lifted off in the shuttle and moved out over the new field. It was perhaps a quarter-mile from the farmhouse.

“Just center the pip and hit the lock-on tab.” John had decided that with a little coaching Sammy would be a fine gunner. In addition it would keep him away from Heywood for a while.

“Got it. Now what?”

“The red button on top.”

The only sound the beam cannon actually makes is a rather muffled thump as the accumulator dumps its power into the exciter coils. What happens when a large rock is impacted with that energy is a great deal noisier.

Any rock exposed to the elements, no matter how dry it may appear, has some moisture trapped in it. Heated too fast the rock will crack and may even explode into dangerous fragments. Taken to extremes a rock that is instantly heated to near-molten temperatures will pretty much vaporize with a deafening blast.

“I like this!” Sammy grinned wickedly as he zeroed in on his next target.

Myso and family did not like it at all and had run wailing into their modest abode after the first blast, certain that death itself was running amok on their farm. They simply had no knowledge of explosions other than the booms in the sky produced by the occasional thunderstorm. All civilizations evolve at their own pace and needs. Technology tends to also progress in uneven fits and starts. The ability to work with iron does not necessarily mean that gunpowder will be devised at that same point in a people’s progress.

“They won’t come out,” Michael explained as the two boulder blasters came down the shuttle’s ramp.

“What?” John had expected at least a decent ‘thank you’ from Myso for clearing away the rocks in the field.

“The noise scared the living shit out of them! They’ve been holed up in the house ever since it got really loud around here. Those big cow-things took off too.”

This was not at all what had been intended.

“Myso?” The little demon named John was rapping on the door again. They must truly be demons to command such terrible power!

“Please leave us alone!”

“We didn’t mean to scare you. We’re sorry!”

They were at least talking to one another but they were not communicating.

“The rocks are all gone!” John was at his wits ends trying to figure out how to fix this awful screw up.

“Why not just cut the door off its hinges?” Sammy meant well but that simply would not do. Myso had a very big sword.

Michael could see nothing good to be gained from further imposing themselves on these poor souls. “We need to go away and leave them alone. At least for now.”

And in the end they did just go away.

Hungry again.

“Any ideas?” John asked as the shuttle drifted slowly inland from the coastal farm.

“Maybe we should try a town or something?” Sammy suggested.

“I have visions of torches and pitchforks if we try that,” Michael said.

“What about finding a big city, or whatever passes for one here? Maybe their leaders will be more educated and won’t be so...easy to scare?”

“And if they decide to just grab all of us?” Heywood asked.

“We take it really slow. Some of us stay with the shuttle at all times with the shield up. Anyone going out carries a locator beacon and a comlink.”

“And a pistol,” Sammy added.

Unsaid between them was the soul-chilling prospect of spending the rest of their lives on this remote and backward planet. They were all thinking it but they did not really want to confront it, not yet.

Eventually Myso ventured back outside with stern admonishments to his family to remain inside. The battle sword he had been awarded in The Long War went along with him.

“Gods!” There were only giant splashes of rock powder where the boulders once were. In places the ground seemed to almost have been plowed or turned over with a giant spade.

The small demons were nowhere to be seen.

But were they demons? Myso could see that all they had done was what they had explained they were going to do and except for his scattered cattle no harm had been done. Ridding the field of rocks would have taken Myso many years, or even longer.

“Perhaps I have been foolish?” Myso finally asked himself.

“Look at that!” Michael was pointing at what was in any estimation a castle. All of their noses were almost touching the view screen as this vision out of a warped fairy tale emerged from the morning mist. A city composed of mostly one story stone and wood buildings surrounding the walled castle and was almost hidden by the haze from a multitude of wood and coal stoked fires.

The previous night had been spent at the clearing where they had first landed, a night without anything to eat but two shared rations scrounged from the leg pouch of the shuttle’s only emergency pressure suit. Heywood and Sammy had pointedly ignored one another, perhaps realizing that the shuttle was no place to get into an all-out fist fight.

Two hours of slow cruising over a quilt-work of farmlands connected with winding dirt paths and narrow gravel roads had finally brought them to this place. It had to be the seat of power for this area and perhaps for this entire small continent.

“Do we land or what?” John asked as he circled the shuttle in a wide arc around the sprawling ‘castle’.

“Let’s just do ‘what’ for a while,” Michael suggested. “Let them have some time to get organized and maybe calm down a little.”

That seemed like a good plan; most of what Michael ever proposed made sense. People were running in all directions on the ramparts of the castle and on the grounds both inside the wall and on the open areas outside. There appeared to be a fairly robust panic underway.

“My Lord! You must come out to the overlook!” First Advisor Deeso seemed even more agitated than when the protesting merchant guild had dared to try and force their way through the gates of the palace. That was nine winters ago.

“Calm yourself, you old cow! What is it?” Klaso The Just did not care at all to be intruded upon during his breakfast. It is a common trait among those who hold absolute power.

“You must come and see, my Lord! It is most frightful!”

The toasted fruit-bread had cooled by now and the obscenely expensive imported tea seemed rather bitter this morning. And now this!

“Oh very well!”

“How about that flat place inside?” Sammy asked.

“High walls all around, not too good if they want to shoot down at us,” Michael was analyzing everything, as always.

“We’ll be shielded. So what can they do to us?” John asked.

“Nothing. Not until we let them.”

Michael’s words made them all think for a while. Eventually they would have to move beyond the shield. There was no food to be had inside the shield.

“What in the stinking hell is that thing?” Klaso The Just was never known for his verbal restraint. “Get that fat assed excuse for a Scholar up here! Now!”

“At once, my Lord!” Deeso scuttled off as fast as his thin legs could manage. It was not prudent to be in close proximity to Klaso at times like this for he was anything but just.

But there had never been a time like this and that made it all the more dangerous.

“I’ll just hover here for a while and then slowly set it down in the middle of that big courtyard.”

“They’re turning those overgrown crossbows around that they have mounted on the walls,” Sammy reported. The devices could launch massive bolts that appeared to be about six feet long and were tipped with nasty looking iron points. Now they were all pointing inward at the shining apparition hovering over the ceremonial courtyard.

“Our shield is up.” John double checked it anyway. The shuttle’s tough titanium hull would probably stop one of the bolts but caution is always the better course. There were no shuttle repair facilities on this planet.

Well? Have you lost your tongue altogether?” Klaso was about ready to boot the very obese Scholar over the edge of the balcony.

“My...My Lord. This...th...thing cannot be!” Hanso The Learned stuttered.

“Well it seems to very much be! It is right there in front of all of us, you fat slug!”

“Per...perhaps it is a war machine the Drans have devised. They have very clever metal workers.”

“So clever that they can make a metal carriage float through the air?”

“No, My Lord. There is no explaining such a thing.”

“Get out of my sight while you still have your worthless head!”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Commander Druso!” Klaso bellowed, even though the man was standing just behind him.

“My Lord?”

“Order all weapons loosed at that thing!”

“At once, My Lord!” Druso didn’t think it was the best course of action but to disobey would cost him his head.

“Shit!” John, like the others, ducked instinctively as the hail of giant arrows smashed into the shield and shattered as if hitting the proverbial stone wall.

“How very rude of them!” Sammy said in a voice mimicking Heywood’s snottiest tone.

“This is not getting off to a good start,” Michael added, stating the obvious as usual.

“We may as well land and let them cool their heels for a while. Maybe they’ll run out of those overgrown arrows and try to make nice with us.”

With that John eased the shuttle slowly to the stone-paved courtyard and powered down the drive coils. All around them lay the shattered bits and pieces of the futile crossbow attack.

Klaso The Just was in one of his legendary rages and anyone in his sight was in mortal peril.

“Order your men to attack with their battle pikes! It’s just squatting there for them like a great metal chamber pot!”

“But My Lord...” Druso started to protest.

“And you can lead the attack!”

“Yes, My Lord.” Skewering Klaso was what Druso had briefly considered but instead he turned and went off to obey orders and assemble his already terrified men.

“They’re up to something,” John said as small groups of soldiers started to edge into the courtyard on all sides of them.

“I think the morons are going to charge us with those big pig-pokers,” Sammy added, almost with some real pity.

“Maybe if we went outside with a white flag or something?” John offered.

“Let’s wait till they get it into their heads that they can’t hurt us, then we show ourselves...inside the shield.” Michael’s plan was put on hold as a great roar went up that didn’t need the external sound pickups to detect it.

“Here they come!”

The massed charge of screaming soldiers ended in an almost slapstick comedy of bent and broken pikes and jumbled bodies. Repeated thrusts with the remaining usable pikes either glanced off or jarred to a stop in mid-air against the invisible and unyielding shield. The entire attack finally dribbled off into a confused milling about as the braver of the terrified soldiers dared to test the invisible wall with just their bare hands.

“This is magic!” Druso said to himself before ordering his men to withdraw. There was no way to even get close to this great metal thing that just sat there and seemed to silently laugh at them all!

“Surrounded by a spell?” Klaso had no belief in such stupidity. Tales of spells and wizardry were just stories to frighten fools and small children.

“It is something you must see and touch for yourself, My Lord. It is like nothing I have ever encountered in my life!”

Klaso was on the spot here. His military commander had as much as dared him to leave this place of safety and to confront this strange invader himself.

“Then I shall do just that!” Klaso didn’t feel as confident as he sounded as he gathered his extravagant robes around him and strode purposely from the balcony.

There was after all, a certain image to maintain.

“Look at this guy!” Sammy said as he pointed to whom could only be the one in charge of things around here. Klaso The Just was now standing near the arched entryway of the main building.

“What the hell does he have on?” John asked.

Klaso’s everyday robes were to say the least, elaborate and colorful.

“I think we need to go out and say hello now,” Michael decided.

“Yes,” John agreed, “but how do we do that?”

“Good question. Let’s take a slate to draw pictures on. We should have thought to do that with Myso.”

The “slate” that Michael was referring to was a very simple clipboard-size viewing device used for everything from writing simple reminder notes on to downloading complex data from remote information sources.

“What is that?” Klaso demanded as a small section of the metal ‘carriage’ moved smoothly inward and then a metal walkway slid silently out and down to the ground.

“A door, My Lord,” Druso explained as if speaking to a small child.

Michael was the first to step out into the late morning sun, his fine blonde hair seeming to almost glow in the light of the court yard. No ‘person’ on this entire planet had ever in its recorded history been born with anything but thick, jet black hair.

“Gods in the heavens!” Klaso had finally let down his guard. He was as frightened as everyone else who was witnessing this strange occurrence.

“Remember the shield’s polarity,” Michael said as they all gathered at the foot of the ramp.

“What’s that?” Sammy asked.

“You can move through it from this side but you can’t get back in unless the shield is turned off or re-sized. Same for any weapons we fire.”

“Oh.” This was a good thing to know. “Glad you told me.”

“Also it’s tuned to allow sound transmission, up to a certain cutoff point.”

“Then we can talk with them?”

“Yes. Or at least talk ‘at’ them. We really need to learn some of the language here.”

“No shit. We don’t even know what they call themselves.”

Klaso finally moved forward as regally as his shaky legs would allow toward the ring of guards that marked the limits of the shield. Druso was at his side with his sword at the ready, not that there was anything to use it on.

“It is like touching glass!” Klaso said after lightly running his hand over the invisible barrier.

“But so much smoother, My Lord. It is difficult to hold one’s hand in place when you press upon it.”

It was infinitely smoother than glass; the shield offered a friction coefficient that was effectively zero.

“Well, come on guys,” John began, “let’s try to act harmless and cute...or something.”

“Personally, I would just go with scaring the crap out of them and taking what we need,” Sammy muttered as he fell in beside John.

“Maybe later. Let’s try being nice first. We only want some food.”

“Fart food at that.”

“It does have that effect, doesn’t it?”

“You’re telling me!”

“What are they?” Klaso demanded of the timid Scholar who was once more reluctantly at his side, or more precisely several steps in front of him at the edge of the shield. Klaso had prudently retreated as the visitors approached.

“They are thin and misshapen...look at their hands, their eyes and ears...!”

“I do have eyes myself! Tell me what they are!”

“There is nothing in any of my scientific manuscripts relating to these... creatures.”

“They appear to be young males of some sort.”

“Indeed My Lord, their odd garments are very immodest.”

“Talk to them.”

“My Lord?”

“Talk to them or count your last moments in this life!”

“Yes, My Lord!”

“Hello.” John tried to look friendly and non-threatening as he gently waved at the extremely fat ‘man’ on the other side of the shield.

“*Hello, small person.*” Hanso replied, having no clue at all about what the small creature might have said. Perhaps it was a greeting?

“I am John.” John placed a hand on his chest and repeated his name. “John!”

“*We are Masso.*” The Scholar repeated the visitor’s gesture as he spoke.

John smiled and pointed at the man while repeating “Masso,” then pointing at himself as he repeated his own name.

“They are called “Joon” My Lord.” Hanso confidently reported to his liege.

“All of them or just that one?”

“Err...I believe Joon is their collective name, as we are called Masso.”

“Get the others to speak.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Hanso pointed to the other creatures who then repeated their own names in turn.

“I was mistaken, My Lord. They are named Joon, Mikall, Sam Ee and...ah...Hae Voode.”

“Hae Voode!?”

“It would seem so, My Lord.”

“Idiot! They are jesting with us!”

“I think not, My...”

“Ask them again!”

This was all going to take a very long time.

“Extraordinary!” The incredible device the one with the silvery gold hair was holding could seemingly display anything one wished for. Hanso was now looking at an amazingly detailed ‘painting’ of a strange looking table with all sorts of exotic appearing food piled on it. Between the photos on the slate and all of the gesturing, the Scholar finally got the point.

“Gods! They only want to be fed!”

“Food?” Klaso asked in astonishment.

“It would seem so, My Lord. If I may say so we should indeed give them food and work to establish their trust. Imagine the knowledge that they must have of...so many things!”

Klaso was silent for a moment. Whatever this great metal thing was that flew through the air it represented power, and power was always to be sought after.

“Very well. But how do we give it to them with that...spell barring the way?”

“They must surely have some method for controlling it, My Lord.”

“How do we do this?” Sammy asked.

“We can pull in the shield a few yards to start with, then have them leave the food next to it. Then they move back and we re-

establish the shield beyond the food.” Michael’s explanation seemed simple enough, if you were Michael.

“You know how to do all of that stuff?” Sammy asked dumbfounded.

“My father did invent the shield.”

“Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting things like that, you seem like such an almost normal person.”

“Almost?” Michael grinned.

“Yeah, like John. He can’t be completely normal the way he can fly that tub we arrived in.”

“You’re right, he isn’t normal.”

“What do we do after we get the food?” Woody asked.

“Eat it,” John answered. Wasn’t that obvious?

“And then?”

“I say we leave and maybe come back tomorrow, maybe leave them a gift.” Michael suggested. “We need to see if these people can be trusted to not slit our throats or something. They didn’t exactly greet us with flowers and open arms.”

“They were scared,” John reasoned.

“Yeah, well, better safe than sorry. Myso was scared too but he didn’t try to kill us,” Michael pointed out.

“Point taken,” said John and the others agreed.

Chapter Seven Staying Alive

Iberia

“There is some conjecture that these beings have never encountered a serious challenge to their expansion or to their technology, Your Majesty.” Sir Malcolm Bains wasn’t much given to conjecture but for now it was all that existed.

“Then we might defeat them? Find a weak point?”

“Only if we can understand what we presently have to work with.”

“The three specimens and the wreckage?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It is so far just a giant puzzle.”

“And the interrogation of the...specimens?”

“They are totally non-cooperative unless confronted with an actual threat to their physical well being.”

“Cowards?”

“In respect to their individual selves, yes Sire. They have almost no tolerance for physical discomfort.”

“Then make them very uncomfortable. Hurt them!”

“With pleasure, Your Majesty.”

Sir Ian was on his way to the wreckage site. If anyone could sort out the puzzle it was him and he also had a son missing.

“Are we stuck here forever?” John finally voiced what they had all been thinking. Even the peace and safety of the small clearing that they had first landed at was no longer of much comfort. But at least for now they now had something to eat, with some exceptions. Any of the food items that were classified in the ‘dairy’ category were simply too nauseating to even consider tasting. They had been more than lucky that the foodstuffs of this planet were for the most part digestible by humans, albeit with some considerable audible side effects.

“Unless someone comes looking for us,” Michael answered between bites of what might pass for a slice of apricot cake/pie/pastry.

“Emergency beacon?” Heywood asked.

“We turn it on if we want to be found by anyone close. But do we want to be found? And by who?” The shuttle’s beacon was not capable of long range non-space transmissions and was in effect little more than an electronic signal flare.

There was another small detail to worry about. What had become of the aliens that had brought them to this system? Why had they disappeared? And perhaps the most perplexing question: Why was this planet untouched by those who seemed to have designs upon the entire galaxy?

Morning found the simmering feud between Sammy and Heywood finally ending in what amounted to a set duel.

“No weapons, just fists!” John wasn’t about to allow this stupidity to get completely out of hand as he stood between the two foes. “Give me the one-at, Sammy!”

“Michael already has it. I don’t need it for this.”

“Oh. Well...shit! Do you two really have to thump on each other? This isn’t going to change things!”

“Ask Lord Heywoody over there.”

Heywood was standing about twenty feet away and was just glaring at the port rat.

“Okay. But remember that he is one of the only four humans on this entire planet. We need everyone, even Woody.”

“I’m not gonna kill him, just pound some sense into him.”

“Fair enough but don’t get too cocky. Woody’s had pretty much the same fighting lessons that Michael and I had. This is the first time I’ve ever seen him worked up enough to do anything more than just act more insulting than he usually is.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.”

Sammy also had fighting lessons and none of them had ever occurred in a palace or gymnasium. His instructor had been blood and pain with no one to make it all better if he got hurt during the lesson.

“One question?” Sammy asked.

“What?”

“Haven’t you or Michael ever...had enough of him?”

“Michael can keep himself cool enough not to let Woody totally get to him.”

“And you?”

“Twice. The first time I must have been around four or so and I wasn’t really strong enough to do any serious damage. Mother pulled me off of him before I could find something to use on him other than my fists.”

“Okay, that’s once. What was number two?”

“Two years ago I almost bashed his skull in with a squareball post.”

“Almost?”

“Father was there and sort of took me aside for a talk.”

Father. Absolute ruler of all of humanity. Sammy still couldn’t come to grips with who this likable boy’s father was.

“What did he say?”

“That the Woody’s of the world are put here to test us and I was about to fail the test.”

“Your father...His Majesty is a wise person. I’m still going to pound on Woodhead, test or not.”

“Sure. Just remember that our medical department here is a bit limited and that he can’t really help who he is.”

Heywood got in the first good lick when he managed to kick Sammy's feet out from under him. It was his best move, according to the only martial arts instructor who had managed to put up with him long enough to actually teach him something.

"Come on, port rat! Get up!" Woody was of course grinning like a lunatic, sensing a quick victory over this low-life.

Then Sammy did stand up and that was the last event that Woody or the two spectators could clearly sort out after it was all over.

"Stop blubbering, it's only a split lip!" Michael's bedside manner was a bit lacking as he tried to mop up the mess that was Heywood's face.

"Mah nosth isth bleedin ahgan!" Heywood looked like he sounded. One eye was also already starting to darken and swell shut.

Sammy had a skinned knuckle.

Woody was already making other plans.

"You know that he will always be the way that he is, that this won't make him...a better person." John said as he sat with Sammy on the shuttle's ramp.

"I suppose so, but maybe he can learn to fake it or at least shut up."

“Maybe, but I doubt it. In a way it’s not really his fault that he’s the way he is.”

“Why?”

“You need to meet his father. And his mother. In fact you should meet his whole damn family. God, what a bunch they are!”

“I’ll pass.”

“Not to worry. We’ll probably be stuck here in the dark ages for the rest of our short and stupid lives!”

“They are not coming back!” Klaso The Just was edging dangerously close to one of his blind rages,

“I believe they will, My Lord. If I interoperated their words and gestures correctly then they will be here this mid-day.”

“If?”

“There is no certainty, but they seemed very grateful for the food we gave them. They seemed to look upon us with good will. There is that wondrous lantern that they presented you with.”

A second Everlite was now Klaso’s most prized possession.

“If they do come back we must learn how to talk to them!”

“Indeed My Lord, but this must all be approached with some considerable patience and tact. If we gain their trust the rewards might be enormous.”

Klaso said nothing more and turned to again gaze down at the place where the flying 'device' had once sat. If the odd visitors failed to return he could always amuse himself with a red-hot iron and the scholar's fat body. Such diversions could take up most of an entire day if properly paced.

"There aren't any guards in the courtyard this time," John observed as the shuttle circled the castle.

"Those crossbow-things are facing outwards again too," Sammy added.

"Just the same, we still need to be careful." Michael cautioned.

Heywood didn't say anything. He had been completely silent since his thrashing by Sammy. It was sort of worrisome to all of the others. What was he thinking or planning?

"My Lord! They have returned!" Hanso was as relieved as anyone might be who has ever been given a new lease on life. The sight of the metal flying thing meant that perhaps there were more days to be numbered in his wretched life.

Being named as the Scholar of The Royal Keep was at best a very dubious honor under this particular ruler and was one that offered no provision at all for resigning the post.

"Let's bring that fat guy inside the shield with us. We can sit down with him and maybe loosen things up." John suggested.

“He doesn’t seem very threatening,” Michael agreed, “more like a scientist or maybe a professor sort of person.”

“Gods be with me!” Hanso knew immediately that he was now inside the ‘spell’ that could not be broached. There was now nothing between himself and the unsettling visitors. Hanso suddenly had a longing for the predictable life of an obscure scholar studying soil types and the crops that they might be best suited to.

“Hello. Nice to see you again.” John extended his hand to the obviously terrified man. Hanso had no idea about the words but could now sense that his fears might be unjustified.

“Hello small visitor, welcome you are.” Hanso was amazed and relieved that the small, malformed hand holding his own seemed so very warm and alive, not at all cold and threatening.

“Come on inside, we need to talk,” John said as he motioned towards the shuttle with his free hand.

Hanso almost lost control of his more elemental bodily functions at the thought of entering such an alien thing, at least initially. However, he was at his soul a student and a scholar and curiosity is a powerful thing.

“I am in your care and at your mercy.”

This surely wouldn’t be any worse than living in the dark shadow of Klaso The Just.

“My Dear Gods!” It was something that Hanso would repeat many times this day. He was surrounded with a level of technology that made the most intricate Masso timepiece seem like a stone axe. But even in the midst of all of this his eyes finally came to rest on the badly abused face of Heywood.

“What has happened to you, young one?”

Woody’s one open eye could see that he might have an ally at last, someone who wasn’t intent on making his life a bleak misery, a life of being assailed and insulted by one’s social inferiors.

Iberia

“Captain Starling is here, Your Majesty.” The Chief of Staff disliked the man as much as Daniel did but all the same he managed to keep a professional bearing as he announced the appointment.

“Lord, give me strength!” Daniel muttered.

“Sire?”

“Send him in and then we need to be left in private for a while.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty,” Starling bowed deeply and with perhaps a bit more of a flourish than might be deemed entirely proper.

“Heywood. Welcome. No ceremony.”

“Thank you, sire. I only wish that our meeting was under better circumstances. Is there any more news of...?”

“None. Our vessels are still missing and so are our sons and that is why you are here.”

“Sire?” Heywood Senior had the most awful sinking sensation in his middle that he was about to be placed squarely in harm’s way. The last time he had undertaken a mission for this Emperor his career had been greatly advanced and he had very nearly been killed.

“We require you to take the Bren at its best speed to the last known position of Gladius and then assess the situation there.”

“Sire...that is far beyond the explored limits of...”

“So?” Daniel snapped. He had expected all of the excuses that Starling was capable of and Starling was capable of very many excuses.

“This will take some considerable preparations and...”

“You have two days to get underway. You will have Our letter of authority giving you priority for all repairs and supplies. The Empire needs to know what has become of the Gladius Squadron.”

“But...”

“We know that your son is alive out there, so is mine. You have one of the fastest vessels in the fleet under your command and now is the time to put it to its intended use. Do not dare to disappoint Us in this undertaking.” Daniel’s voice was noticeably colder by this time, leaving no room for any more excuses.

Starling had the distinct feeling that if he didn’t come back with all of the damned brats in tow then he may as well not come back at all.

He was right.

“They are leaving with that fat shit!” Klaso bellowed as the shuttle gently drifted up and away from the castle.

“Perhaps they will return, My Lord?” Druso ventured.

“They had better!” Klaso emphasized his words by grabbing one of the ever-present messenger page’s and heaving him off the high balcony.

Druso peered down at the young life ended too soon and finally decided that it was probably the best thing for the poor boy. Klaso’s many and varied pastimes were a matter of common knowledge and all of them involved inflicting massive pain. Druso also made a silent pledge to himself to one day rid this realm of the beast that held reign over them all.

“It is so beautiful!” Hanso had finally left his fear behind as he gazed down upon a scene that only the Gods had seen until this day. All of the world lay below him, they were so high that even the curve of the planet was apparent and that too was a confirmation of all he knew as a scholar.

“It is pretty,” John agreed. You didn’t need a translator to understand what the man had said. He was also keeping the shuttle on a mostly one-g course to avoid subjecting their guest to the consequences of free fall.

That was all just fine with Sammy.

“It was beyond describing, My Lord. The world that we live upon was below me...all of creation was to be seen from above!”

“Truly?” Klaso could see that this fat scholar was telling the truth but it was also a great deal to accept.

“Yes! You have seen that the...device can move through the air. It can also move very high and at a speed that is beyond understanding!”

“And these...creatures?”

“They are only boys, Sire. They are extraordinary in their knowledge but they are in fact only children of a people we can only wonder about.”

“And these ‘children’ might be persuaded to be our allies?”

“I believe so, My Lord. If we move carefully and with some consideration for them. I have the impression that they are stranded here, apart from their own people.”

“Then we will move carefully,” Klaso agreed.

“There is one more point to consider, My Lord.”

“What?”

“One of the two with the silvery hair was injured, as if in a punch-around. I believe that there is some dissension among them and that too might work to our advantage.”

“Indeed? Well done, Scholar.”

Hanso did not feel pleased with this praise which was the first he had ever received from this tyrant. He had never wed or had a family but he felt as if he were selling his own children into bondage just to gain a few more days of his own safety.

“Some hot water would be nice, shit!” John was taking his very short ‘bath’ in the very cold stream.

“Maybe they have hot water in that castle,” Michael said as he also carefully eased into the rushing water.

“Or boiling oil. That guy in charge gives me the creeps and I’ve never even talked to him.”

“Why not try looking at a different part of this mud ball?” Sammy asked as he sat shivering on a flat rock, warming and drying in the sun. “We have enough food for a week if we stretch things some. If Woody doesn’t eat it all today, that is.”

Sammy gestured towards the shuttle into which his worst friend had disappeared after mumbling something about getting a snack. As the others smiled and glanced toward the shuttle they all froze in horror; the hatch was just now sealing shut.

“He’s taking the shuttle!” Michael yelled.

John was already making a naked dash for the external ramp’s control plate as the low moan of the drive coils powering up began. He managed to slap his hand onto the identification sensor but

nothing happened; the device had been overridden and he was locked out.

Then their only real safe haven on the entire planet lifted off and disappeared in the direction of the castle city. Heywood did know very well how to fly the craft, he had just never been given a chance to do so until now.

“You shitty bastard!” John’s shouted words at the departing shuttle did not begin to describe his rage, or the rage of the others. Heywood hadn’t even left them any food.

“Maybe he’s just trying to scare us?” Michael knew better in his heart but it was just barely possible.

“No,” Sammy replied quietly, “he’s going to go suck up to that Hand-so guy and his boss. He’s not coming back.”

“Then we are so very screwed,” Michael concluded.

“We still have our weapons,” John said, “maybe My-so will take us in for a while until we figure out what to do?”

“That dopey farm is a good fifty miles from here!” Sammy said in disgust. They were very far from anything at all.

“Then we’d better get moving, unless you have a better plan? Lord knows we need a better plan!”

Sammy didn’t have a better plan, neither did Michael. For now there was nothing else they could do.

“We can follow this stream most of the way, that way we’ll at least have water to drink. Maybe we can shoot something to eat along the way.” John said as they started off.

“Shoot something?” Michael asked with a grimace.

“Well...yes. Cows and chickens don’t commit suicide just in the hopes of becoming a sandwich.”

“So what do we shoot?” Sammy asked.

“Haven’t a clue. Whatever looks edible, I suppose.”

As they started off the going was easy for the most part and the weather was warm and sunny, at least for the first couple of hours. Nothing that appeared worth shooting ran or flapped within range of their beam rifles. Then the scattered clouds became less scattered and the air began to cool.

“Its gonna rain,” Sammy observed. The weather on this planet was as Earth-like as everything else here was except that changes seemed to take a lot less time to occur.

“No shit. We better find some shelter or make some,” John agreed.

“How about those rock cliffs over there?” Michael pointed at an outcropping of what looked like sandstone off to their left.

“A cave maybe?” John asked.

“Or maybe some sort of overhang.”

Shelter turned out to be a deep recess in the cliff wall that water and erosion had once carved out; it wasn’t an actual cave but it would

do in a pinch. A line of rain showers in the direction of the stream was moving steadily closer to them.

“Firewood,” Michael said. “We should try and gather some while everything is still dry!”

It would indeed be nice to stay warm through what promised to be a cold and wet night.

“This will last the night if we keep the fire small,” Michael explained as he piled the last of the loose stones in a circle while Sammy picked out some of the smaller sticks to start the fire with. The wood gathering had been fast and furious as they had all raced to beat the weather and it had produced a large supply for the night. The rain was now beginning in earnest and gusts of cold air swirled in and out of the ‘shelter’. At least it was dry where they were and their survival suits were keeping them as warm as the info sheets packed with them had advertised.

“What’s for dinner?” John asked as he moved the power selector on his rifle to its lowest setting and adjusted the beam spread to maximum, ideal for igniting campfires.

“Dirt and sticks.” Michael answered with some resignation as he stood back from his handiwork.

“I wonder what Woody is doing right now?” John asked as he ignited the pile of sticks.

Heywood was doing very well for himself at the moment. Being the most honored guest of Klaso The Just could be a very fine thing indeed, as long as Klaso wanted it to be a fine thing.

The earlier arrival of the shuttle at the castle had been a good beginning for Heywood.

Advisor Deeso had rushed into the royal chambers in a great flap. "My Lord, it is here once again! It has alit in the courtyard!"

"And about time!" Klaso was not a person with any particular patience for anything or anyone.

"My Lord, the spell does not surround it!" Deeso added.

"Better still!" Klaso was now up and moving as fast as regal appearances allowed.

"Welcome, young Hae Voode!" Hanso said as he moved forward to greet the short visitor. At the same time he was wondering why the others were remaining inside the shuttle.

"Hello you great pile of shit!" Woody knew that the man had no idea what he was saying. Only a few words had been learned during his last visit with them.

"Your eye is better today!" Hanso pointed at Woody's still puffy but now mostly open eye.

"Yes, I can see better. Pity I have to look at you." It felt good to be insulting someone again even if they didn't understand you.

"Klaso approaches, you must show him proper respect."

“He’s the boss, huh? He could also use a tailor who isn’t entirely color blind.”

“My Lord, may I present the visitor who is called Hae Voode.” Hanso bowed as he spoke and Woody followed his cue. Woody had been taught to bow by his father who was a master of the art.

“Is that truly your name?” Klaso asked as he leaned close to look at this odd and somewhat injured ‘person’.

“Nice to meet you, ass breath!” Woody replied with his very best smile.

There was no thought in Heywood’s mind about the three he had deserted for a better life on this disgusting planet. His father had taught him well that you must look to your own best interests before all else. If he was to be marooned here for all of eternity then he would just make the best of his sorry lot.

“There’s something moving around out there,” Sammy whispered while John was adding another small piece of wood to the fire.

“Huh?” John strained to see beyond the small flames but couldn’t spot anything.

“Use your rifle, night setting.”

John glanced down and to his right to see that Sammy was peering through his beam rifle’s small targeting scope. The port rat seemed to have a natural affinity for all things that could be pointed

and fired; there seemed to be no need to instruct him as to how they worked.

In a moment all three of them were using the light-amplification settings on their rifles. There was indeed “something moving out there.”

“What are they?” John asked, very quietly.

“Overgrown wolves with crooked teeth,” Michael replied.

“They’re sort of edging this way,” John observed.

“No. Not anymore.” Sammy squeezed off a full power shot at the closest animal which then seemed to come apart in a most satisfying sort of wet and disgusting explosion. Other shots followed in quick succession as John and Michael picked their targets and let fly. Michael missed but it didn’t really matter.

If there were any surviving ‘wolves’ left they had the good sense to have disappeared far into the black night.

“Let’s take turns keeping watch,” John said.

“They won’t be back,” Sammy decided.

“Just the same, two hours for each of us. Something else with big teeth might decide to visit us tonight. I’ll take the first turn while you two get some sleep.”

“Maybe those wolf-things are good to eat?” Sammy asked as he curled up next to the fire. If you’re tired enough even dirt makes a good bed and if you’re hungry enough even wolves might be edible.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be that hungry!” Michael added as he too gave into the need for sleep and moved closer to the warmth of the fire.

One hour later John prodded the others awake. Something else was moving about in the shadows beyond the fire.

“What are those things?” Michael asked as his eyes finally focused on what was in John’s Everlite beam.

“Scrabble crabs, or the local version of them,” Sammy said as he too came fully awake and peered through his rifle’s scope.

A horde of large, ash-gray insect-like ‘things’ was swarming over the remains of the wolf creatures. They seemed about the size and shape of large rats but had too many legs and a hard exoskeleton instead of fur. There must have been a hundred of the disgusting looking scavengers.

“Scrabble what’s?” John asked, having never heard of such things.

“Scrabble crabs. The ‘yard was full of them. Someone told me that they were originally from off-planet...off of New Albion. They only came out at night and mostly left you alone unless you were dead or smelled really bad. They look more like Earth crabs than those things out there do.”

Whatever the scavengers were they had no interest in approaching the small campfire and when dawn finally arrived they had vanished altogether. All that remained of the wolf-things were their picked-to-a-polish bones.

Surprisingly it was Michael who bagged their first meal since Woody deserted them. Michael was the first to say that it had been a very lucky shot on his part and at a running target to boot. Like his father, he just wasn't a very good shot. It was midday by now and everyone's stomach alarms had gone off some time ago.

"What is it...or what was it?" John asked as they all stood looking down at their next meal.

"That was a really stupid question," Sammy replied. What was anything called on this planet?

"Well...I guess I mean...can we eat it?"

The badly mangled thing looked sort of like a large and obese brown rabbit but without the big ears and large rear feet. A beam rifle is not the best choice for taking small game as you often have to search for what is left of the target.

"You two make a fire and we'll find out." Sammy said as he sat about carving away the furry pieces with his one-at knife. This division of labor was fine with John and Michael who had no real interest in watching this grisly chore.

"Tastes sort of like chicken," John observed.

"It does, doesn't it. Not too bad actually," Michael agreed.

"I dunno, maybe more like rat," Sammy countered.

Sammy did know what a rat tasted like but the others thought he was just kidding so he didn't press the point.

Armstrong Naval Base, Luna

The Admiral of The Blue Fleet was having some private words with Lieutenant Commander Starling prior to HMS Bren's departure.

"Your vessel has set a new record for requests for transfers, can you offer any explanation for that?"

"I have been extremely unlucky in the personnel that I have been assigned, sir. The number of slackers and malcontents has been perfectly appalling!" Starling was beginning to perspire, even in the cool air of the admirals private office.

"You have repeatedly asked for extensive repairs, repairs that were later deemed entirely unnecessary. You seem to go to great lengths to extend your vessel's down-time. Can you explain that, sir?" Admiral Lemus' voice had a distinct edge to it by now. In fact his tone could easily leave scars on a diamond.

"Bren is a very fast and highly tuned vessel, sir. She requires a much higher level of maintenance than most vessels."

"I will move right to the point, Starling. The only thing that has kept your ass off of the beach this long is your personal relationship with His Majesty! That relationship will no longer suffice to shield your record from review."

"Sir, I do object...!"

"Shut up! You have this one last chance to steer a correct course. Do not disappoint me yet again. Do not disappoint His Majesty!"

Starling left the Admiral's office with seeming calm but inside he was seething with rage at his treatment by Lemus. He had half a mind to go directly to the Emperor, but...perhaps not. In his devious heart he knew that the time for excuses and whining had long since passed.

But did he have it in himself to face the daunting mission ahead of him? Did he have any choice?

"Are you sure this is the right way?" Michael asked as they all flopped down on the finally level ground. The last five miles seemed to have been more vertical than horizontal.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. Those hills ahead border on the farm."

"I think we're heading too far west!" Sammy complained. They called it the west because that was where the sun set in the evening; it was the same on all planets that humans set foot on, at least on the planets that rotated properly.

"I was flying the shuttle when we flew over this area. I may not be too good at a lot of stuff but I do pay attention to the ground I fly over!"

Everyone was thirsty and exhausted and tempers were far shorter than would be normal.

"Sorry. You are a hell of good pilot," Sammy said in a calmer voice, "it's just been a very long day."

“Same here,” Michael agreed. “Why don’t we all save our spit and teeth for Woody.”

“Thank you,” John replied. “Let’s rest here a while and then I think that those low hills ahead of us are the last ones until Myso’s place.”

This was the second day of their march and there had been no food today and no water for the last several hours; the stream had to be left behind as they moved to the east and they had nothing to carry water in.

It did tend to wear on a person.

HMS Bren

“The Marine assault squad is settling in well sir, despite their improvised quarters. Propulsion is nominal except for the slight imbalance in the power feeds and that is being adjusted. The ship is in fine shape.” Lieutenant Commander Rivera, Bren’s Executive Officer, was also one of those who had requested a transfer. But Rivera also did his best for his vessel, if not for its captain.

“What is your assessment of the crew’s morale?” Starling asked.

“Adequate, for now. The visit by His Majesty before we departed Armstrong was a big boost.”

“Adequate for now?”

“It will be a very long and very tedious voyage sir, and then a dangerous venture into unknown space.”

“You have submitted yet another request for a transfer?”
Starling held the form in his hands as they spoke, acid dripped from his voice.

“Yes, sir.”

“Why is that?”

“May I speak openly, sir?”

“Yes.”

“I truly loathe you, so does the entire crew. This vessel will do well on this mission to avoid being the first Imperial craft to mutiny in nine hundred years.”

Starling already knew what Rivera and the crew thought of him but it was at last out and into the open air.

“Stop it!” John was holding his left arm to his chest as if it were made of glass. His fall had been very quick and unexpected, as most accidents tend to be. This last steep part of their journey had been his undoing. A patch of loose gravel atop a stretch of hard rock had been like marbles under his feet.

“You’ve got to let me look at it!” Michael demanded.

“Shit!” John had already said that several times by now, that and a lot of other pointed comments.

“Hold my hand,” Sammy said as he gazed into John’s eyes.

“What!”

“Look at me!” Sammy dug his fingernails hard into his friend’s free hand as he spoke. This new pain diverted John’s attention just enough to let Michael get a closer look and feel of his injured arm. Sammy knew about this sort of thing, or at least about the pain part.

“It’s broken about three inches above your wrist. Just the one bone, the ulna...or is it the radius?” Michael couldn’t remember which bone was which; he was mostly a math and physics sort of person and his mind had tended to wander during the dull anatomy lessons.

“It really hurts!” John said in a really loud voice.

“I can see that. We need to get the bone back in place and then keep it there with some sort of splint or something.”

It was all finally done. John was not one to complain or to make a big deal about the ordinary physical discomforts that life supplies to us all, but agony was agony and it had been a very hard thing to endure. The shuttle’s medical supplies would have been a great help in the pain department, and that was just one more reason to further despise Woody.

“Sorry,” John finally said as he sat being actually hugged close by Michael.

“No problem,” Michael answered, feeling a bit awkward holding his friend/brother so tight like this. Even the most battle tested Marine will tell you that having someone hold you when you hurt like hell is the next best thing to actual painkillers. The whole thing had been almost as hard for Michael as it was for John. But now the worst was over and the makeshift wooden splint was in place. Some fine work

by Sammy and his one-at blade had produced thin strips of pliable tree bark to bind it all together.

“Knock it off you two,” Sammy interrupted, “people will think you’re in love! We need to get moving, that’s Myso’s stupid weed farm down there and it’s starting to get cold and dark!”

They did get moving. It was getting dark and they very much needed a familiar face to greet and take them in, if they could find such a face.

“Who can that be?” Brogs whispered as they all froze in mid-bite at the evening meal. Visitors with good intentions simply did not arrive after dark and then bang on the door, at least not this far out from the village.

“Take Carmy to the sleeping room.” Myso moved with seeming calm to retrieve his great battle sword and it was a weapon that he knew well how to use.

“Myso?” Brogs was frightened and that was picked up by Carmy who had started to whimper.

“Do as I say, woman! Grinso! Stand behind me!”

It took a moment for the very large but very simple boy to close his mouth and then to do as he was told.

Then the rapping on the door came again.

“*Who is it?*” Myso demanded.

“Myso! It’s us!” John’s answer wasn’t very original but then again he wasn’t at his very best right now.

“The little demons are back!” Myso wasn’t too sure about whether to be glad or dismayed. In the end he finally decided on glad. Life had been very dull in the strange visitors absence, even if they had scared him and his family witless.

The heavy door slowly creaked open on its wooden hinges and there before him were three very worn down looking small demons. One of them had an injured arm.

“Joon?”

“Hello, sir. Can you help us...again?”

And then exhaustion, pain, lack of water, and a broken arm finally took its toll on the boy as John fainted dead away in an untidy heap at the large man’s feet.

“Gods in the heaven!” Myso set his sword aside and knelt down, gently scooped up the small demon who seemed to weigh almost nothing in his massive arms. *“Woman! Fix a place by the fire for this boy!”*

Brogs was sensible enough to tolerate this breach of marital traditions for now and her maternal instincts extended even to small and injured demons.

John came quickly to life when Brogs applied a cold and wet cloth to his face. Some remedies are universal, at least on Earth-like planets.

“What...?” John blinked as he finally focused in on the homely but not unkindly face peering down at him.

“What have you been doing?” The woman’s words were gibberish but John recognized the tone that his own mother had used when he had presented himself before her in less than optimal physical condition.

“I fell down...on some rocks.”

“Where is the other demon, the one with the silly name?” Brogs asked this as she gently examined the crude splint and then began to undo the wrappings that Michael and Sammy had labored over.

“Can I have some water? Please?”

Food and water were forthcoming, and rest. Brogs would even let them sleep in her house this night.

Chapter Eight Back On The Farm

The three demons had been at Myso's farm for two months now and had settled into a dull and tiring routine. The heavy weight on all of them was the knowledge that this might be their home for the rest of their days. They had defied the odds by even being alive at all but reality is a hard thing to ignore, especially without the shuttle to provide some link with all they had ever known.

Myso had provided for them as best he was able to and had denied them nothing he was capable of giving, which was mostly just food and shelter. In return the three boys worked with Myso and Grinso in the fields pulling weeds and doing whatever they could to repay their host's kindness. John did what he could with only the one good arm.

"There's still a hard lump there," John said as

Michael once more examined his 'patient.'

"Calcium buildup."

"Huh?"

"When a bone breaks more bone will build up around the break in a large mass. Then later on that extra bone gets reabsorbed by the body."

"Is there just one thing in the universe that you don't know?"

“Yes. I still can’t remember if it’s the radius or the ulna that you broke.”

“Good!”

Clothing was getting to be a problem. The elastic survival suits were incredibly tough and durable but they still got dirty, especially dirty when working in the fields. The light, adjustable boots that were part of the survival kits were better suited to hiking than plodding about in a muddy field. Both items could be ‘laundered’ and made clean again if you didn’t mind standing around naked and shivering while that happened. That and being hooted at by Myso’s entire family. Apparently the boys’ perfectly normal male parts were a source of wild amusement to Brogs and everyone else who laid eyes upon them. John and the others better understood why when they happened to see Myso and Grinso taking their weekly baths.

After that visual shock all three of the young human males felt very...inadequate.

Brogs invested a great deal of her hand woven cloth that she had produced this past year to provide the very odd but likable demons with a second set of clothing. The woman had gradually undergone a change in attitude about the strange visitors and now felt very protective towards them.

“She worked really hard on these, now give her a proper hug like we did!” John whispered as he pushed Sammy forward.

“I look like a total...masso!” Sammy hissed back.

“Yeah, well, don’t we all. Now do the right thing!”

Sammy did hug the big woman because he knew that what John had said was true. Kindness must always be repaid in the same currency if you dare to call yourself a decent human being.

Communications between the two wildly diverse cultures slowly began to improve. A few words learned every day and soon there arrived a point at which simple conversations could be held.

“Weapon.” John pointed at his beam rifle leaning against the wall next to Myso’s sword. Then he pointed at the sword and repeated the word. “Weapon.”

“Weepoon.” Myso replied.

“Yes. Kill.”

“Yess.” Myso nodded, already understanding what the odd devices actually were and why the small demons always kept them within sight. He also knew what the word “kill” meant. The night predators now seemed to be avoiding the farm altogether after the demons had spent a few evenings out where the ‘cows’ sheltered for the night.

“I don’t know how to fix it!” Woody did know by now that Kласo was not one to listen to excuses and he was already regretting his rash decision to throw in his lot with these ugly barbarians. And now this disaster! Without the beam cannon the shuttle’s role in the planned attack on the Heens Keep would be very limited. The whole campaign would have to be cancelled.

“Is this...nooladge...with the oothers like you?” Hanso asked, also not wanting to take this news to Klaso.

“Michael probably knows how to fix it,” Woody answered in a low voice.

“Then we muss tell Klaso and goo and bring My-call here.”

“I’m not sure where they are, maybe they’re back at that shitty farm by now.”

“Do not tell Klaso you are noot sure! He vill end your days and mine!”

Woody had been treated as a valued and honored guest these past weeks but he had also seen what happened to people who were suddenly out of favor with Klaso.

There were no simple executions in this Keep, the most merciful endings took at least an hour. Woody was considering ways to escape this place but the shuttle was under constant guard now; there were even two guards stationed inside the craft, always.

“This really bites!” Sammy grumbled as all three of them again hid in the small ‘barn’.

“Sooner or later one of Myso’s neighbors are going to catch sight of us. Then what do we do?” Michael asked.

None of them had an answer to that question but they all had visions of an angry mob armed with torches and sharpened farm implements.

“I sometimes wonder what the hell is the point in anything anymore,” John said, “we’re going to be freaks here for as long as we live on this mud ball.”

“There is the tiny possibility that someone will come looking for us,” Michael countered.

“Very tiny. Especially with Sir Fartsalot in control of the shuttle. The emergency beacon was still turned off when he took it.”

“Woody always looks out for number one. I’m betting that he’s turned it back on,” Michael replied.

“Probably a waste of time, we’re so far outside of the Empire...”

“Messages had to be sent before Gladius blew up, those messages will have been triangulated.”

“We’ve been over this a zillion times!”

“Your father knows approximately where we might be, assuming he thought we were even alive.”

“Aunt Alex would know we were alive...” John’s voice trailed off as he looked directly at Michael.

Father would be looking for them. He would send someone.

But without the shuttle whoever came looking would never find the three of them, only Woody.

“*What?*” Klaso had bolted upright and drawn the ornate dagger at his belt, his face distorted with rage. The keen tip of the blade was almost touching Woody’s trembling nose.

“It...it can...b..be repaired!” Woody stammered, as terrified as it is possible for a person to ever be.

“What is this little turd saying?” Klaso roared at the equally frightened Hanso.

“The weapon can be mended, My Lord. One of the other...visitors has the knowledge.”

“Where are they?” Klaso once more focused on the short figure in front of him. Woody understood enough of the language by now to know what had been asked.

“I...I think they are on a farm. To the west of here!”

Hanso translated the words as best he could.

“You think?” Now the knife was at Woody’s crotch and Klaso’s horrid breath was very close.

“Yes...yes! Please, we can just go get them!”

Woody survived the encounter with his anatomy intact, but only just barely. He would be providing Klaso with endless hours of amusement if the shuttle’s main weapon wasn’t repaired very soon.

The weather seemed to be entering a warmer phase. When asked, Myso explained what might be translated as ‘first summer’ was commencing, sort of. Apparently the weather on this planet was rather complicated what with the seven short and distinct seasons.

“We’re all getting a little thinner,” Michael said as the three of them sat together in the evening on what served as a back porch for

the oddly shaped house. They didn't have a lot of energy left at the end of the day either.

"We've all been working pretty hard," John replied.

"Not that hard. And Lord knows we've been eating enough."

"Fart food!" Sammy said automatically.

"That may have something to do with our gradual loss of weight. And for being so tired at night."

"What?" John asked, now completely focused in on the conversation.

"Our bodies probably aren't digesting the local foods properly or what we do digest lacks certain nutrients we need. We may not be getting all we require to stay healthy, or in the long run even all that we need to stay alive."

Sometimes Michael was just too damned smart and too damned observant.

"Wonderful." Sammy's comment was the last that was made for a while. Barring rescue they didn't have much of a future on this planet. If the natives didn't burn them at the stake they would probably all slowly starve to death.

"At least the local microbes don't seem to bother us," Michael finally added on a positive note.

"I wish the local fleas felt the same way!" John picked another of the tiny biting things off of his left arm. They had asked Myso what could be done to get rid of the vermin but apparently it involved

burning your clothes along with the house and barn. It was of little consolation that the parasites died soon after feeding on a human, something else that Michael had determined from close observation.

HMS Bren

“Can you explain this?” Starling asked.

“It appears to be a white feather of some sort, sir.” Rivera was as neutral and properly respectful as he could manage, despite his true feelings.

“It was in the daily readiness folder, submitted by you just an hour ago.”

“Indeed sir? I certainly did not place it there.”

“Then who did place it there?”

“I have no idea, sir. I shall inquire about it.”

“Do so. Now.”

“Yes, sir.”

The white feather was an age-old symbol accusing an officer of cowardice. Starling had accumulated nine of these feathers by now from this crew and he had not even seen combat with them. At this rate Bren’s commanding officer would be able to stuff a pillow with the white feathers if he survived this odyssey.

“You will take what men you can get into the flying device and go and fetch the other visitors!” Klaso curtly ordered Commander Druso.

Druso had been aloft in the shuttle several times and it no longer terrified him but the same could not be said for his men.

“The other visitors still have those fearsome beam reefles, My Lord.”

“Then take them at night and by surprise!”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Move over!” John complained to the already asleep Sammy. Their communal pallet in the living area lacked softness and room, but at least they felt safe and welcome here and were out of the changeable weather.

“Ungh.” Sammy didn’t awake but he did shift over a little, by now it was an automatic response for all of them.

“Shit!” John quietly cursed to himself. Cursing at life in general.

“I wonder what Woody is up to?” Michael quietly asked in the darkness.

“You still awake too?” John asked.

“Obviously.”

“I dunno. Maybe he’s wound up in some cook pot by now?”

“One can hope. Good night.”

“night.”

It was two hours before the dawn when the massive front door crashed in and the soldiers from Lord Klaso’s keep poured in and fell

upon them all. Myso actually managed to grab his battle sword and take out two of the intruders before he was killed with a lance thrust into his massive chest and good heart. Grinso died as he attempted to stop the bad men hurting his father, his simple brain almost split in two by a massive curved sword. Brogs was clubbed unconscious as she attempted to shield Carmy from the hell that had invaded their small home. Had Myso not moved on instinct to confront the intruders he would have been spared, along with his son.

None of the demons managed to reach their weapons stacked against the wall as events seemed to move in an awful sort of slow motion. Wearing only rough, hand-me-down nightshirts, they were bound and trussed before they really understood what was happening to them. It was apparent that no harm was to come to the small demons, they had skills and knowledge that Lord Klaso desired. Only little Carmy's wailing followed after them as they were slung over broad shoulders and then after a long hike dumped roughly onto the shuttle's deck.

Chapter Nine No Choices

“Look at that asshole!” Sammy hissed as all three of them lay face down on the small, flat cargo area of the shuttle that was behind the rows of seats that were packed with nervous soldiers. Woody had briefly glanced back at them from the command seat, an unreadable blankness on his face.

“Why would they come after us?” John asked as he tried once again to loosen the rope around his by now numb hands.

“Maybe they need us for something?” Michael offered.

“Be quiet!” One of the soldiers close to Michael cuffed him hard against his right ear. From then on the flight was a silent one. All three of them just silently continued to glare at Woody as he piloted them to whatever fate that lay before them.

The sun was now providing just enough light for John to catch a glimpse of the castle in the view screen as they landed with a distinct thump.

“He’s a shitty pilot, too,” John mumbled. Anything less than a perfectly greased in smooth landing was something that John, like his father, seemed incapable of performing.

Woody left the command seat and lowered the personnel ramp, then he turned to face the three boys he had deserted and now betrayed.

“The beam cannon is busted. If I hadn’t helped to bring you back Klaso would have killed me. He’ll kill us all if the cannon isn’t fixed!”

No one could find any words to answer Woody and there was no real time to say anything as he turned and left. Then once more, rough hands picked them up and carried them to stand before the lord of this flea infested castle.

“Are you guys okay?” John asked in a whisper as they all finally stood huddled together. A guard with a sharp knife had made quick work of the ropes that had bound their wrists and feet. So far there was no sign of Klaso but there were plenty of guards around them with swords at the ready.

“I’m starting to feel my hands again,” Michael replied.

“Me too,” Sammy added.

“Do you have your one-at?” John asked.

“No. One of the baboons grabbed it.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah, but look around. This is no place to get into a knife fight.”

John did look around and Sammy was right. One incredibly sharp knife was no match for a room full of big swords.

“Let’s all try and stay cool here. Whatever they want, we do it with a smile,” Michael whispered.

“Can you actually fix the beam cannon?” Sammy asked.

“Dunno. There isn’t a lot to break or go wrong on one of them. It’ll probably be simple to fix or impossible to fix.”

“Sorry I asked.”

“Heads up, here comes that Klaso asshole!” John urgently whispered.

Woody and the scholar Hanso were trailing along behind the extravagantly robed Lord of The Keep and they both looked to be in a near panic.

“Which one has the knowledge?” Klaso’s tone was almost friendly and that was something that Hanso knew was a bad sign.

“Th...that one.” Woody pointed at Michael with a shaky finger.

Klaso nodded and barked at the guards. “Hold them all! Bring the iron!”

In an instant all three boys were being held in rock hard grips as the guards pounced on them; Michael was pulled off to one side. What appeared to be a sort of small blacksmith’s forge on squeaky wheels was pushed into the large tapestry hung room.

“Pick one.” Klaso told Woody, still in a calm voice.

“No! I won’t do...” Even Woody had some vestiges of humanity and he knew what was coming.

“Pick one or you will take his place!” Klaso roared.

Pick the port rat.

“That one.” Woody instantly pointed at Sammy.

Klaso narrowed his eyes at Sammy and then ordered the guards holding him to strip off the boy’s nightshirt. Of course much hooting then ensued.

“Stop it! If you hurt him I won’t fix a fucking thing for you!” Michael screamed.

Klaso beckoned Hanso over to him. *“What did that one say?”*

“He...he said that if th...that one is hurt he will not mend the weapon.”

“Tell him that he surely will mend the weapon. Tell him that this little lesson is for no reason at all. Tell him never to give me an actual reason to be displeased.”

Hanso translated as best he could. For all of their struggles none of the boys had the faintest chance to escape the vise-like grips that held them.

Klaso rather absently withdrew a simple iron rod from the white hot coals; it had a wooden grip to protect the person holding it. The end of the rod was glowing a bright red for perhaps ten inches from its tip.

“Let me think now, where to begin?” Klaso slowly waved the iron up and down Sammy’s body, it’s awful heat so very close to his skin. *“Perhaps just the one light touch, here.”*

The iron settled briefly on Sammy’s stomach, just above his navel.

All of the boys screamed as one, even Woody.

The Summer Palace, North America

In the small hours of the morning Alexandra had also screamed. “They are so frightened! They’re being hurt!”

Daniel had come running into Alexandra’s rooms, awakened by her screams. “By who? Who is hurting them?” Daniel asked as he tightly held his sister.

“A monster! A scaly has them!” Alex was almost hysterical drawn back briefly into that dark time in her life when she was so very young.

The Emperor knew the monsters that once held his sister were the snakes, monsters that were now no threat to anyone. His sister had called them “scaly’s” when she was a small child and in her mind all monsters were still “scaly’s”.

“How’s that?” Michael asked after applying the last of the remaining burn cream to the seared place on Sammy’s stomach. Klaso had shown great restraint and only made the one ghastly contact with the iron.

“Better. Thanks.” In fact it was a lot better, the healing cream also had a very effective pain killer in it.

Michael had hoped that the medical kit in the shuttle was still intact so he had insisted that Sammy be included in the repair party. Klaso couldn't have cared less, all that he required was a fully functional shuttle.

“Can we...can you fix this thing?” John finally asked Michael.

“Let's have a look. Pop the access cover and kill all power to the cannon.”

John went to the command deck and punched the correct buttons. Below the shuttle and between the two drive pods a long fairing did indeed make a popping sound as it detached and swung down and clear of the main cannon. This all suitably alarmed the guards who retreated several yards from the infernal machine.

“Well, shit!” Michael said in disgust as he lay on his back peering up into the innards of the cannon's power supply.

“What is it?” Sammy asked, certain that they were all now doomed to a painful death that he had just had a small taste of.

“I don't know what it was, but it's really fried now.” Michael gingerly pulled out what was once a small, mouse-sized creature that was now a cinder and held it up for the others to see.

“What is...?” John started to ask.

“Dunno. It caused a power short and tripped out the fault isolators.

“Do you mean that a stupid...rat thing was the only problem?”

“Yeah. All I have to do is clean up the mess some and reset the isolators.”

“How did it get in there?” Sammy asked.

“Probably through the muzzle fairing, there’s a gap around the barrel that’s big enough.”

“But...”

“Animals are the same everywhere. They see a hole and feel some stupid need to crawl into it.”

“So we get to live a while longer then?” John asked.

“Yes. For whatever that’s worth.”

“My Lord, the visitors say that the weapon is mended!” Hanso was for one time not a nervous wreck, he had good news to report for a change.

“Excellent! Bring the creatures before me, I would speak with them.”

“At once, My Lord!”

“Be veery polite,” Hanso urged as he hustled all of the boys along the stone hallway followed by two large and unpleasant smelling guards. Woody was with them and it was taking a great deal of self-control for Sammy and the others to not jump on him and pound him to a pulp. “Bow when we are before him.”

“Kiss my ass.” Sammy said under his breath.

“Stay cool, Sammy,” John whispered, “if Klaso gets pissed off at us we’re all dead meat. Don’t get us killed here!”

“I’ll behave, but one day I’m going to shove that hot iron up his fat ass.”

John had no reason at all to doubt anything about what Sammy had just said.

“What was the matter with the weapon?” Klaso was seated on a massive and ornately carved wooden ‘throne’ in the great hall of the castle.

“A small animal made it’s way into the power circuits and caused some damage, My Lord.” Michael carefully recited with Hanso providing the translations. All of the boys had properly bowed at the start of this meeting, even Sammy.

“Then the weapon is once more working as it should?” Klaso had no idea in hell what a “power circuit” might be.

“It should be, My Lord. A proper test must be...”

“Should be?” Klaso snapped, his eyes narrowing to a squint.

“Yes, My Lord. As I started to say, the weapon could not be tested safely with the shuttle sitting where it is at the moment, it would badly damage the castle wall.” Michael seemed calm and collected to the others but it only seemed that way.

“I see. Then go and test it, now!” Klaso seemed somewhat mollified but that wouldn’t last if the cannon failed to work. A wave of

his hand dismissed them all and more bows were made as they all backed away from the monster.

“Too of yoo must reemain heer at all teemes.” Hanso explained as they approached the courtyard where the shuttle was parked. Hostages would ensure cooperation.

“Me and Michael will take the shuttle up for the test.” John explained before Woody could say anything.

“Veery weell. Commander Druso weell bee going weeth you.”

“Now wait just a damned minute! I fly the shuttle!” Woody demanded.

Pow!

John had put all he had behind his right fist. Woody landed flat on his back, his nose once more suffering grievous injuries.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a real long time!”

Hanso seemed rather nonplussed at this turn of events, not that he had any fondness for the rude and offensive visitor lying on the ground. Druso had seen the whole incident as he too approached the shuttle from the direction of the guard quarters.

“What is this?” Druso demanded.

“They...have had a disagreement, Commander.” Hanso finally replied.

“Apparently. Can the offensive one on the ground still operate the machine?”

“These others also have that knowledge, Commander.”

“Good. I do not care for that small turd anyway. Let us proceed.”

Sammy would have to remain behind with Woody and because of that John had some quick words with him before he entered the shuttle.

“Keep your head! Just stay the hell away from Woody. If we ever do get off of this shit ball of a planet it’s better that you don’t have to stand in front of my father explaining why you killed the sorry bastard.”

“Sure. I can wait.”

John looked Sammy hard in the eye and was a little frightened by what he saw looking back at him. Sooner or later Woody would pay the price for what he had done to them all and Sammy was determined to be the one to collect on that debt.

Commander Druso was seated directly behind the shuttle’s control deck carefully watching what John and Michael were doing. Behind him were six guards wishing to be anywhere but in this demonic machine that assailed the senses and the stomach. John turned and spoke as simply as he could manage in his limited native vocabulary.

“Where?” John motioned to the view screen before them. They were cruising slowly over farmland to the east of the castle. A low rock cliff beside a small stream would do nicely for a target.

“Loose the weapon at that.” Druso got up from his seat and pointed down at the rock formation.

“No problem. Michael?” John motioned to the fire control handgrip built into the right-hand seat that Michael occupied.

“Okay. Let’s hope my repairs did the trick.”

Michael was as a poor of a shot as his father was but at this range and in a steady, hovering craft it was impossible to miss. The rock formation disintegrated in a flash of light and with a thundering boom that could be felt even through the shuttle’s hull.

“Gods!” Druso had seen the cannon in action before but it still frightened him with its power. John and Michael just breathed a sigh of relief that the weapon had worked at all.

John had an idea. If they were to survive the mess they were in it might do to curry some favor with the people running things.

“Let Druso try it,” John said.

“Huh?”

“Get up and let him try the fire control.”

“Are you nuts?”

“No. Play along with this.”

Michael gave John a look that spoke volumes about his doubts as he unbuckled and stood up and moved out of the way.

“Sit. You do it.” John hoped he hadn’t told the man to have marital relations with a cow; languages were not one of his talents at all.

Druso's eyes widened at the very idea of trying to control such power but he was a soldier at heart and was drawn like the proverbial moth to the flame.

"I can do this thing?"

"Yes. Sit."

Druso gingerly slid into the seat and then looked at John for directions.

"Show him, Michael."

With Michael guiding his large hand Druso quickly grasped the idea of using the control grip to center the holo-projected crosshairs on the target.

Press the red button.

Hooting ensued. It was great fun! John finally had to kill the power to the cannon; Druso seemed intent on exploding the entire countryside. This idea of John's had made Druso a friend in a sea of enemies.

"Thanks be to you!" Druso said as he reluctantly returned to his former seat. He even patted Michael on his head.

"Most welcome, sir." Michael replied with a small bow of his head. Michael was better at languages than John, of course.

"The weapon is fully functional, My Lord." Druso dutifully reported to his hated master.

"Truly?"

“Indeed. The visitors even instructed me in the method of its use. I myself let loose the weapon at a target that I aimed it at!”

“They taught you to do that?”

“They did, My Lord. They are much more agreeable to deal with than the one who has been with us until now.”

“Excellent! Issue the orders to move on the Heen’s Keep as soon as your forces can be assembled!”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“This isn’t too bad,” John observed as he wandered around the large room they were all in. There were ornate wall hangings and what passed for plush furnishings on this planet. There was a bed large enough to play a proper game of squareball on. They were locked in but as prisons go it was truly not so bad. There were ‘fleas’ of course, but that was to be expected by now. Their original clothing that they had all worn to the naval test was laid neatly folded on the bed, clean.

“Except for him,” Sammy nodded towards Woody who sat huddled on the floor in one corner of the room. The sulking boy had a very broken nose and a very damaged ego.

“He looks sort of pathetic,” Michael said in a quiet voice. Of the three of them Michael had the softest heart and the gentlest spirit.

“He is pathetic. Just like that bucket of shit he has for a father!” John was by now pretty well on Sammy’s side when it came to Woody.

“It’s genetic. A spider can’t help being a spider,” Michael explained, “and Woody can’t help being...a Woody.”

“Yeah, well. If a spider bites you what do you do to it?” Sammy asked.

“Mash it,” Michael agreed. “But Woody isn’t a spider and we aren’t God. If we ever get out of this mess he’ll have a lot to answer for. If we ‘mash’ him here and now then we will have a lot to answer for and I don’t want to ever have to answer those kind of questions.”

“Sometimes I wish you didn’t make so damned much sense,” John finally said.

Even Sammy had to think very hard about what Michael had just said.

Excerpt of a previous written report from Sir Ian Murphy to His Imperial Majesty

...who we have learned call themselves the Jaan seem devoid of any sense of loyalty to their kind. They have been answering our every question as fully as the gap between our languages and cultures permit; they have no tolerance for pain of any sort.

As I told you in my last message there exists a way to shield a vessel from the effects of their paralysis beam. A working prototype is

close to the testing phase and if successful I recommend you deploy it on every vessel in the fleet as quickly as is practical.

Perhaps the most significant development is in the area of the Jaan propulsion system. At first examination it appeared beyond our ability to cope with, but as always the Jaan were easily persuaded to explain things. At the core of the drive it is in principle the same that we use but they have perfected a way to loop and join the linkage points in space/time. I have sketched out some modifications to this vessel's drive that can be accomplished here. This will, or should, very soon enable us to...

“It is a foor dee march to thee Heen’s Keep.” Hanso explained. “Thee macheene must stay close to thee soldeers dureeeng thee march.”

“Okay,” John agreed. He had no options in any case. “Then what do we do when we get there?”

“Commandeer Druso will requeeer you to launch the weepoon at thee Heen’s Keep.”

John looked at Michael and Sammy with a sick expression.

“We’re going to be killing people, a lot of people.”

“Maybe we can just knock some big holes in the walls there and avoid trying to hurt people?” Michael suggested.

“If we have to kill people then we kill people. End of discussion.” Sammy added, always the realist.

“I’m not gonna kill a bunch of poor...” John started to protest.

Sammy just pulled up his shirt to display the nasty red welt on his stomach. “This really hurt and Klaso barely touched me. If we don’t do a good job of it with the shuttle then we’ll all be doing a whole lot of screaming.”

“But...”

“If you two can’t do it then Woody can pilot and I’ll man the cannon.”

John thought for a moment and finally nodded his head. No choices.

“I’ll pilot, you shoot. Michael can’t hit a barn even if he’s inside of it and I don’t want Woody touching the controls of the shuttle ever again.”

Michael wasn’t offended by John’s statement, his awful marksmanship was a long standing source of amusement to the both of them.

Hanso was translating again. The shuttle was sitting hidden in some trees two miles from their objective. As was always the case, Klaso had the good judgment to be very far away from any actual combat and was back at the Keep.

“The four main gates must be breached first,” Druso explained as he pointed at the castle that was almost a twin of the one Klaso

resided in. “Then the upper walls must be swept clean of bowmen and catapults.”

It was this last part that made John shudder. He could see in the greatly magnified image on the view screen that there were hundreds of men all along the upper walls of the castle. Dead men if the cannon was used on them.

“Can’t we just knock down the walls in several places rather than kill all of those people?” John asked.

Druso peered intently down at John for a moment before replying.

“This causes you some...distress?”

“Yes sir, it does. We can win this just by scaring the crap out of them and getting them to surrender. We don’t have to kill them all!”

This seemed to stir some lost fragment of ‘humanity’ in the hardened military commander. It had been a very long time since anyone around him had voiced such thoughts, far too long.

“Perhaps so. We shall try your methods first, but if it is not successful then you must do as I first said.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Will you truly do as I first said if the need occurs?” Druso put a massive hand on John’s shoulder as he asked this and stared directly into the boy’s eyes.

“Yes...sir. If we must we will...to survive.”

“Yes. We all do what we must do to survive, but perhaps that will not always be so.”

John was puzzled about Druso’s last words. The man seemed to be torn between two forces. Good and evil?

Perhaps.

Jaan Home World

High Session of the Reef

“The risks are too high for the gains to be made in that area. This One proposes to expand our Influence in other directions.”

There is little point in trying to translate the name of the Jaan voicing that opinion, suffice it to say that it was a ‘person’ of very high rank. It was also the opinion of all of the Jaan in the Reef; risk was almost an obscenity to them, almost as bad as pain. They had encountered humans and they had not cared for the experience at all.

Humanity’s Empire would be a very long time trying to find any trace of the Jaan. But the Jaan would one day be found and that too would be an experience that they would not care for.

“Awake! Thee sun is weel up and thee battle weel soon commence!” Hanso shook John and Sammy awake from their reclined seats in the shuttle. The poor scholar seemed even more agitated than his normal state; he simply was not made for a life such as this and especially he was not made for war.

“Shit!”

“Shit!”

John and Sammy had the same comments on the new day as they stirred to life. Sammy was the first to get up and start to pull on his clothes. John almost fainted when he stood and had to quickly sit back down.

“What’s wrong?” Sammy asked with very real concern.

“I dunno. I just felt all dizzy and weak.”

“Are you sick?”

“I don’t think so. I feel better now. Maybe I just got up too quick.”

And maybe his body needed more of what this planet could not provide it.

“You sure?” Sammy hadn’t been feeling all that grand himself lately but hadn’t said anything to the others. In fact all of the boys were beginning to deteriorate physically, it was a slow process that had begun with their first meal on this world. Ribs were starting to become more pronounced.

“Yeah. I’m okay now.”

Hanso had said nothing as he watched and listened to the exchange between the two visitors, he had also been observing that they were getting thinner and less energetic as the days had passed. The small visitors were not prospering, like young plants rooted in the wrong type of soil or denied enough water.

“First the main gates, as we have discussed.” Druso explained as pointed to the hand drawn map on the field table. As always Hanso was translating to better facilitate things.

“Yes sir, after the smoke signal. And then we make holes in the walls at these points.” John indicated the red circles on the map.

“That is correct. Our forces will move when the walls are breached, if...”

“They haven’t already surrendered,” John continued, “and then we fire on the forces on the walls.”

“Correct again.”

“I hope they do surrender,” John said in a quiet voice.

“As do I, small one.”

John hesitated for a time before asking a question.

“Why...why do you obey Klaso?”

Hanso blanched as he translated this awful question.

Druso looked sharply at Hanso and then at John and Sammy.

“That is a very dangerous thing to ask any person!”

“Yes sir, but you don’t seem at all like him...like Klaso.”

“I am not like him.”

“Then...?”

“I have a family. A good mate. Two male children and a female child. A fine home for them all.”

“And you want to keep them safe?”

“Yes! And now you must do what you must do to keep your companions safe!”

“Yes, sir.”

No choices for anyone.

The sight of the shuttle swiftly orbiting the Heen’s Keep was almost in itself enough to win the battle. People could be seen running to and fro on the castle walls and in the inner courtyard areas. The small city surrounding the keep seemed to have been deserted in a large hurry. Hanso and the two guards sitting behind John and Sammy could only moan in distress as the mild g-forces pushed them back into their seats.

“There’s the smoke!” Sammy said as the black, oily smoke erupted from the signal pot near Druso’s command position.

“I see it. Take out the first gate.”

“Then slow this damned thing down!”

“Sorry.”

In fact John brought the shuttle to a steady hover three hundred yards from the main gate. A few of the catapults in the walls fired wildly at them but were no real threat. Sammy simply could not miss as he took aim and fired.

“It just made a stupid hole!” Sammy said in disgust. Apparently wood didn’t respond as well to the beam weapon as stone did.

“Aim for the stone, where those big metal hinge things are attached.”

“Got it.”

Two thunderous explosions later the main gate lay flat on the ground and even more panic spread through the castle. Five minutes later the castle had no gates at all.

“The small visitors are doing well!” Druso exclaimed to Anto, his second in command. “Prepare for the attack at my signal!”

“At once, sir!”

“And remind all of the group commanders about mercy for those who properly surrender! I will have no butchery here!”

“Understood, sir!”

“Hit that small watch tower thing first, maybe that’ll scatter those idiots away from that part of the wall before we blow it!” John once more brought the shuttle to a hover as Sammy took good aim and fired.

“Fuck!” Sammy cursed as two of the men on the wall were caught by flying shards of stone and went down hard, but all of the rest of the keep’s defenders did scatter out of the way as planned.

“What do I do now?”

“Blow the wall, Sammy,” John answered. “Maybe we’ll save more people in the long run if they just give up.”

Sammy nodded and commenced a long series of full power blasts at the immensely thick wall. The resulting skull shaking thunder finally ended and after a moment the stone dust thinned enough to reveal a huge gap in the castle wall.

And it was enough.

“Look! The flag!” John shouted as he pointed to the highest tower on the central building. The elaborate multicolored banner was being hauled down and in another moment a large black sheet of cloth had replaced it.

“Druso said that would mean that they give up!” Sammy added with great relief. He had been prepared to reduce the castle to a dust pile if need be but now that wasn’t needed, they had surrendered. They didn’t have to kill any more of these poor dopes.

Druso was relieved too.

“Stay the advance! They have darkened their colors!”

“Praise the Gods!” Anto had no stomach for combat, he was much better at organizing things than at actual fighting.

“And remind our people that I will have the head of any soldier who violates the covenants of surrender!”

“That I will, sir!”

A week had passed since the ‘battle’ of the Heen’s Keep had occurred before John and Sammy were reunited with Michael and

Woody. While Druso was giving a full report to Klaso there was time to catch up on events.

“You two look sort of like crap,” Michael observed after hugs and back slapping were exchanged between the three. Woody just sat on the edge of the great bed in their room and said nothing.

“We’re just sort of beat,” John began, “they had us out for days blowing up the small forts that hadn’t got the word about the change in management.” Both John and Sammy had dark circles under their eyes and seemed to have lost even more weight. Gaunt.

“Were...were there a lot of, you know...casualties?” Michael asked.

“Some. We did our best not to kill people, but...”

“Then you did your best. You did what you had to do.”

“Yeah,” John said with some resignation, “but we have to get out of here. We just have to.”

The tear running down John’s cheek said all that was there was left to say. There was nothing on this planet for them but a slow and lonely death.

Chapter Ten A Cold Winter

Summer Palace, North America

“Ian?” Daniel stood as if confronted with a ghost.

“Guilty.” Ian looked very tired as he advanced and embraced the one person who had always stood with him through all of this life’s trials.

“But how?” Daniel drew back and tried to understand how his lifelong friend could even be here.

“It was time to test the revised drive, the Jaan modification. It worked as expected and here I am.”

“Shit almighty! You took that risk?”

“Along with forty-three others on Arrow, all volunteers.”

“But...”

“My son is out there too. Now we have the means to go get him, and to go get your son...our sons. The Jaan are also out there.”

“How long to modify an assault squadron?”

“Three, maybe four weeks if all of the regs are thrown out.”

“Then get some sleep for now, I just threw away the book.”

“There’s no more coal,” Woody said with disgust as he went to add more of the black lumps to the ebbing glow in the huge fireplace.

The coal bin was empty and the drafty stone castle was like a giant Evercool unit during this First Winter.

“We’ll have to go down to the cellar and get some more.” John replied mechanically. “The stupid servants won’t show up till morning and by then we’ll all be frozen to death.”

They were huddled close on a makeshift bed next to the fire, flea infested blankets wrapped around them. It was something of a mystery to them how the blankets could be so bug-ridden considering that the parasites died soon after feeding on a human. Perhaps there was a waiting list for flea-space on the blankets.

Even with new survival suits from the shuttle to serve as long underwear they always felt cold. They tended to sleep a lot these days.

“Then let’s go, all of us.” Michael added with resignation. It would take all of them to carry the full coal sack. They were no longer locked in or even watched closely. Their weapons were safely locked away and the shuttle was too well guarded. All of them together didn’t add up to one healthy masso child. By now they were just stick figures, lacking any real strength.

They were living out their last days and they all knew it.

Perhaps the most ominous development was that Woody had become almost tolerable to be around.

“I can see that they are going to die soon! Will we still be able to operate the shuzzle without them?” Klaso was spending this late

winter evening with Druso and Hanso and as always it was not a tranquil gathering.

“They have been cooperative in the effort to teach us, My Lord,” Druso began, “but the device is devilishly constructed and it is so very complicated.”

“I know that!”

“Nyso, my youngest apprentice, has shown a good aptitude for learning the device, My Lord.” Hanso offered, telling the truth and hoping it would suffice.

“And...?”

“He has almost mastered the rudiments of guiding it through the sky and Commander Druso here is already familiar with the weapon it carries.”

“Almost! And if the device needs mending, as it did before?”

“Then I must be honest with you, My Lord.”

“Yes, yes!”

“I truly believe that it will always be a mystery to all of us. The people that constructed that device must be as far removed above us as we are from a beast in the field.”

It was not what Klaso wanted hear but even he could see the hard and sharp writing upon the wall.

“Then we must make our final move on the Spree while we still have the device in our service.”

“A winter campaign, My Lord?” Druso asked with dread.

“Yes. They will never expect such a thing and that will also be in our favor.”

“It is simply not to be considered!” Daniel was trying to assume his full Emperor Mode and as always it never worked with Ellen.

“I am coming. Helen is coming. Alex is coming!” There was no way in Ellen’s mind that she could ever just sit patiently at home while her mate went off searching for her lost son.

“You are entirely pregnant. You look about ready to explode as it is!”

“Then I can explode aboard that damned dreadnaught that Ian is tinkering with! I hear they have excellent medics in the Navy!”

“You have...you are responsible for two unborn lives right now. You must think of them.” Daniel tried to lower his tone, after all one simply does not shout at one’s very expectant wife.

“You are responsible for all of humanity and that isn’t stopping you from going!”

His Most Imperial Majesty started to say something more but then decided not to. He could already see that this one small battle was over and he had lost. This battle had been fought before and he had lost all of those encounters too.

Tomorrow they would all embark HMS Orion and Ian would ‘flip the switch’.

“Lord Klaso inteends to move on thee Spree within theese week,” Hanso began. “Victoree will assure Lord Klaso as thee one ruler of thee realm. Thee shuzzle weel be needed once more.”

“Hanso?” John asked softly.

“Yeess, Joon?”

“Look at us. What do you see?”

Hanso nodded sadly, he did truly care about these odd young visitors and it pained him to see them in this poor condition.

“I see that you are not weel, that all of you are not weel.”

“We’re cold and tired all of the time. We’re really weak. Hanso, we’re pretty much dying here and you want us to go and blast another castle to crap.”

“Noo, Joon. I do not want you to, Klaso wants you to.”

“Then we all go together or not at all. The shuttle will be warm inside and we all need to get warm. I’m not leaving Michael and Woody here to freeze to death.”

“Lord Klaso will not allow such a thing.”

“Then tell Lord Klaso to fly the fucking shuttle himself!”

“I do not know theese word, “fooking?”

“Mating. Sex with one’s self.” Michael patiently explained.

“Ah. I cannot say such a theeng to him.”

“Then use your own words. The worst thing that will happen is that we all die a little sooner.” John replied.

“Dear Joon, that is not thee worst thing at all.”

HMS Orion, Armstrong Naval Base, Luna

“Empire arriving!” Six thousand naval personnel and Marines snapped to attention as the royal shuttle grounded on the spotless central hanger deck. Sir Ian stood waiting with Rear Admiral Kimmel and Marine Colonel H’osa. Behind them was a good percentage of the Imperial Guards, the Praetorians.

Even after all of these years and all of these sorts of arrivals Daniel still felt a twinge of stage fright as he stepped from the polished black craft and onto the deck of Orion. So many eyes were always fixed exactly on him.

But as always the feeling passed.

“Hello Ian,” Daniel bent protocol entirely out of shape and embraced his life long friend and companion and whispered a question. “Is this great scow going to take us all where it’s supposed to?”

“Probably. Unless I dropped a decimal place or two.”

“Good enough.”

Ian remembered his manners and introduced the squadron commander and Colonel H’osa to the Emperor, the Lady Ellen, and the royal entourage.

In time all ceremony was completed and all introductions were made. There was only one thing left to do.

“Admiral Kimmel?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“At your convenience, up all ships and make for the transition point at your best speed. Time is not on our side.”

“At once, Your Majesty.”

Orion was a new class of warship with a radically different hull shape. Instead of the conventional tubular shape the vessel was shaped somewhat like a flattened sphere. This allowed for multiple hanger ports and a fast launch for all craft. Orion was also a departure in size, it was nearly a mile in diameter and was by far the most powerful war vessel ever commanded by men.

Hanso had the very good sense to go first to Druso with the demand made by the visitors. He made a very good case for them as he spoke with the military commander.

“They pose no physical threat to us, they have become so very weak and frail. They have also been the one reason that this Keep will soon rule all of the realm.”

“Agreed. Were they not so small and ugly I would be proud to have them as sons.” Druso was almost to that place where most arrive at sooner or later. Stand up and act like you have a spine or...not. But he would indeed stand up and had long been planning for this day.

“Will you...?”

“I will speak with Lord Klaso.”

Orion Squadron, orbiting Pluto

“Ian?”

The Emperor and Sir Ian were standing off to one side on the great warship’s bridge.

“It all looks sort of like it should...the readings.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, exactly like it should, to be precise.”

“Then...?”

“Time to go, I suppose.”

“Then flip the switch.”

“One question first?”

“What?”

“Who’s in that letter of succession you wrote last week? You know, in case this all goes really dry.” This was asked softly so none of the others could hear.

“Two people. Lieutenant Drummond, from the Lincoln. He has some considerable grit and a large measure of common sense. He doesn’t know yet.”

Ian nodded in agreement at Daniel’s first choice.

“And the second?”

“Samuel, if he survives all of this.”

Ian looked truly shocked and surprised but managed to keep his voice down.

“He’s far too young! And we still know so very little about him!”

“All true, Daniel agreed. “Which is why I will not tell him for a good long while. And I haven’t told anyone else either, not even Ellen. But there is something at the core of that boy that is diamond hard and that is what this God-awful job requires.”

This seemed to mollify Ian a little, but only a little.

“He’s still too damned young and unprepared!”

“So was I. So is anyone at any age.”

“How long until you tell him?”

“At least two years and maybe never if events should change my mind about him.”

“Then you are not entirely sure about him?”

“I’m not entirely sure about anyone, especially about you and this new drive system.”

“Good. Because we may wind up inside out and back somewhere in the Jurassic Age.”

Then without further comment Ian flipped the switch.

Chapter Eleven Sons and Fathers

“Where the hell are we?” Daniel actually voiced what everyone on Orion’s bridge was thinking. In an eye blink the star pattern on the view screen had changed radically, it was not even recognizable save that they were now within another solar system. Orion had not so much as shuddered during the abrupt transition.

“It would appear...” Ian began.

“Communications here!” The urgent voice of the Com Officer interrupted all conversations.

“Report!” Admiral Kimmel demanded.

“Distress beacon detected sunward! I.D. code reads as HMS Gladius, Shuttle Number Three!”

“Bring them before me!” Klaso was very close to one of his blind furies.

“My Lord, they are no threat to us and we do still need them to...” Druso tried to explain.

“Are you siding with them?” Kalso roared.

“They very much need the warmth to survive, my...”

“Bring them here!”

“Yes, My Lord. But tread very lightly for this one time.”

Klaso was for once speechless as Druso turned and left the big room. Anger had been replaced with a real sense of peril; it was the way his military commander had looked at him for just an instant. Klaso had been threatened!

Onboard Orion a 'family' conference was being held.

"There isn't time to move with caution," Alex explained. "They are in peril and very ill. Much more so than before!" She was explaining what only she could see and feel.

"Can you...do you have any sense about where they are?" Daniel asked gently.

"It's like an old castle. A cold place made of stone."

"We will move quickly. We are moving quickly."

And God help the monsters holding their boys.

It was mid-afternoon and the sun had finally appeared to reveal a snow covered landscape. John and the other boys stood at the small glass paned window in their room staring out at the clean beauty that fresh snow always has. They stood huddled close together, wrapped in blankets. The fireplace seemed to do little to heat this great pile of rocks.

"Remember when we learned to ski?" John asked.

"You learned to ski. I mostly just crashed into people," Michael replied with a faint smile."

“Yeah, but you finally did pretty good.”

“Is it hard to learn?” Sammy asked. Snow was almost unknown where he had grown up.

“It’s sort of like learning to do anything,’ John answered, “at first you mess up bad and then you get better at it.”

“I never cared much for it myself,” Woody added, “too damned cold.”

Nobody rebuked him for his sensible opinion, they were all very tired of being cold. They were all tired of being tired.

“Something’s going to happen,” John said as if he was off somewhere else talking to himself.

“Huh?” Sammy looked at John and then at Michael.

“This is either good or not good.” Michael said to Sammy because he knew all too well about what being a Grayson meant. Sometimes they were more than they appeared to be and sometimes they could be a little frightening.

The squeaking of the door turned them all around. It seemed like every door in this place squeaked; apparently these people were not too well acquainted with the principles of lubricants.

It was Commander Druso and he looked even grimmer than was the average for him. He was also carrying something bundled in a blue cloth of some sort.

Druso's words were not as easily understood as this is written, but all of the boys got the most of what he said. By now Druso could converse in a simple fashion with the visitors.

"Lord Klaso ees most displeesed with your request to bee together een thee shuzzle," Druso began as he sat the bundle down on the bed. "Hee has summoned you to appeer before heem."

"We...we're staying together!" John answered with some anger that surprised even himself.

"Hee weel hurt one of you to make yoo obey heem."

"We're all as good as dead anyway, fuck Klaso!"

Druso slowly smiled at this, Hanso had related to him what the obscene word meant. He did admire the courage that these small and weak visitors possessed even now.

"Theen eet ees time for...theengs to begeen."

Druso turned to the bundle on the bed and unfolded the cloth. All four of the boy's survival pistols were then lying gleaming before them. There were also the small belt pouches of extra ammunition.

"Yoo weel hide these weepoons in yoor garmeents. Use them to save you...to save yoo from Klaso."

"But...what does this...?" Michael started to ask and then suddenly saw it all clearly. Druso then explained what the boy had already deduced.

"Lord Klaso's eveel time ees to eend. Others weel bee acting these day alsoo."

“Initial readings indicate approximately a sixteen on the Drummond scale of twenty, Your Majesty. Very close to Earth in all respects, although there are some lower percentages in the light metals and rare gases. No readings in the radio spectrum and no detectable atomic reactions. There are numerous inhabited areas, small cities and villages mostly.” Orion’s reconnaissance officer had more to say but the Emperor held up his hand for the man to pause in his report.

Daniel studied the giant view screen on Orion’s bridge for a moment. It did look a lot like Earth.

“And the position of the shuttle?”

“The small continent off to our port, Your Majesty. The one that is shaped a bit like a half circle.”

“Admiral Kimmel?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?” Kimmel was standing just to the rear of the Emperor.

“Move the squadron into a position low over that shuttle’s location and ready the assault forces. Now.”

“At once, Your Majesty.”

Druso felt a sense of calm as he followed close behind the visitors along the drafty hallway. This day was long overdue and the plans for it had been carefully laid down. If he had any regrets it was

that these frail visitors might not survive the coming events, since they would be the catalyst for it all.

“What do we do?” Michael whispered as they all plodded along the endless hall.

“The second he tries to grab one of us we just open up and start blasting away at whoever’s closest.” Sammy replied, also in a very low voice.

“And at Klaso, if we can.” John added.

“Sounds good to me!” Woody agreed. He had his own reasons to want to see Klaso cold and dead, reasons he had never talked to anyone about and that he never would talk about.

The small group of stick-boys paused a moment before approaching the guarded door with Druso halting just behind them.

“Can I still have your rock collection?” John turned and asked Michael.

“Sure.”

Neither Sammy nor Woody said anything about this exchange, they both knew a final goodbye when they heard it.

Ellen was in no condition to go charging into a possible combat situation, she was in no condition to charge into very much of anything.

“Watch out for your butt!” Ellen did her best to give Daniel a quick hug on the hanger deck but her shape and his powered combat

armor made it a rather distant and impersonal embrace. The fighting suits were a rather late development not widely available to the Marines yet. But if nasty appearances were a combat asset then the suits would probably frighten any sensible foe into quick submission.

“Not to worry fatty, now go along with the medics and rest while I fetch our boys.”

Druso gently squeezed John’s shoulder in assurance before roughly shoving him and the others forward and into Klaso’s presence.

Whatever was to occur the boys knew that they were not facing Klaso without at least one ally.

“Stay loose,” Sammy whispered, “there’s only four of the guard goons in here.”

Hanso was standing close to Klaso looking like he was about to pass out. He would have to again translate for this despot who hadn’t the intellect or inclination to learn a new language.

“Choose one among you to die!”

Hanso managed a good translation but the boys could already understand what had been said. Four concealed hands put four fingers on four triggers.

“Kiss my ass!” Woody surprised himself most of all after yelling that.

Hanso got backhanded onto his obese behind after he translated what the boy had shouted.

“Seize that one!” Klaso stood pointing at Woody as the nearest of the guard-goons moved forward to obey.

As is often remembered about events of instant violence and peril, it all seemed to move as if mired in some sort of thick fluid.

Boom-boom-boom-boom!

All four boys had fired as one at the approaching guard-goon who was mostly dead as he was collapsing to the stone floor. And then for a frozen moment there was no movement at all in the large room.

But then of course all of hell quickly erupted.

Druso drew his sword and actually decapitated the guard-goon closest to him, the resulting fountain of blood was spectacular and made a disgusting splattering sound as it hit the floor. The two guards that remained fell after absorbing a combined total of nine slugs from the boy’s pistols. Klaso had managed to shove Hanso forward into the deafening melee and in the confusion managed to grab Woody and then hold him close with a jeweled dagger pressed to the boy’s pale throat.

“I will end his days!” Klaso’s eyes were darting back and forth for a way out of this nightmare when the castle started to gently vibrate with a low rumble. Ancient dust started drifting down from the wooden ceiling beams.

“Your Majesty, please allow us to...” Lieutenant Colonel Wolfe was wasting his breath as he attempted to put himself between his Emperor and harm’s way.

“Harry, my son is down there. Now get the hell out of my way!”

Of course Harry did. One does not rise to second in command of the Imperial Guard if one lacks any common sense at all.

Even with Klaso holding a knife to Woody’s throat John and Michael’s eyes connected and a true grin appeared on both of their faces

“What is it?” Sammy demanded, still ready to end Klaso’s days with the three remaining rounds in his pistol. Woody’s spindly body wasn’t very good cover to hide behind.

“Navy! Ours!” John and Michael had been raised with the background rumble of large warships coming and going. The sensation was not to be mistaken.

“Joon? What ees these?” Druso asked as one of the ancient wall tapestries fell to the floor.

“My father’s here!” John knew in his heart that it was so, it just had to be!

“Whoot should wee...I doo?”

Before John could answer the bright sunlight streaming in through the small glass paned windows dimmed as if suddenly shaded.

HMS Orion was now holding position a mile above Klaso's keep.

A gleaming mountain of metal was hovering above the keep. If a small personnel shuttle could create panic then a vast Imperial ship of the line could create absolute terror. Those who could command their legs at all simply ran in any direction away from the keep and indeed away from the entire surrounding city. If you fell down in the process then you were promptly trampled.

Alex was close to her brother's side as the swarming assault craft landed all around the keep and in the inner courtyards. Everyone was in powered combat armor and any one of them by themselves could probably defeat all of Klaso's forces.

"Which way?" Daniel asked his sister as they both joined the squad moving down the assault craft's ramp.

"Ahead, that archway!"

Daniel then keyed in the squad's common data link. "On me!"

There are times when the Imperial "We" is just a bit silly.

Hanso had managed to wobble over to a window and peer up at what was shading the keep.

"Oh my blessed Gods in the heavens!"

"What do you see?" Druso demanded as an ornate sword clattered to the floor from its place of display on the vibrating wall.

“Gods...the God’s Heavenly Ark itself is above us!”

Even during all of this Sammy was slowly edging his way off to one side while keeping his pistol carefully trained on Klaso’s skull.

“Joon! What ees theese?” Druso once more demanded. Too much was happening that was not planned for this moment.

“My...our people are here to get us! They will kill you if you...try to fight them!”

“Then I weel not fight theem!” Druso knew very well the power that these small visitors held and now their “people” were here collect them. Only the Gods themselves knew what power the adults or the parents of these boys had at their command!

At this point Klaso seemed irrelevant with his demands but his shaking knife was now very close to drawing blood from Woody’s neck.

“*Move away!*” Klaso screamed, his eyes looking for any way to escape from this place.

“Over here, shit for brains!” Sammy knew the man didn’t understand what he was saying but his shouted words distracted Klaso just enough. And it was just enough.

Samuel Marion Winslow got even, he always did.

Boom!

For a moment Klaso failed to react at all as a fair portion of his dim brains sailed across the room to ruin a painting of his equally

perverted father. Then, slowly at first, he just seemed to sag and collapse on top of Woody who was still held tight to his chest.

In the process Woody's throat got cut.

"Aauugg! My throat! Get this giant turd off of me!" Woody suddenly sounded very much like his old self. It was almost reassuring in a way.

Motion resumed in the room as Druso moved to help the pitifully weak boys shove Klaso's dead bulk off of Woody. Outside, things were starting to get very loud when an explosion preceded what had to be one of the serving maids running shrieking and wailing down the hallway. Hanso just sat down in a heap on the floor, his nerves a jittering wreck. Woody sat up not at all dead but with a nasty cut that threatened nothing more than a slight scar for his future, if he even had one.

"Druso! Lay down your sword!" John shouted as the ruckus outside the door seemed to be moving rapidly closer.

Druso was no coward nor was he a dullard. His curved battle sword landed with a clatter on the stone floor.

The massive wooden door to the room splintered and fell inward behind the impetus of six Imperial Guards in full, powered battle armor. Druso thought he was looking at the worst devils from the lowest hells and all of them were pointing massive weapons at his chest.

“Hi guys,” John said as he moved unsteadily to stand between Druso and the shining black ‘devils’. Weapons were lowered. Even in his skin and bones condition all of the Guards knew it was John.

And Ian.

And Woodrow.

And Samuel.

Mirror bright helmet visors snapped up almost as one as the Guards moved to take better positions in the room.

“You! Stand away!” Captain Jefferson motioned Druso to move away from the boys.

“Captain Jefferson!” John grinned as he recognized the man who had once helped him to learn the secret to the dropper pitch in squareball.

“John? What have they done to you?”

“I guess we look pretty awful, don’t we? It’s the food here, they feed us the best they have but we can’t get what we need out of...”

The boy’s confused words were cut short by another commotion in the hallway as more people were arriving.

Empire was arriving.

Druso could only stand in frozen awe as he watched the exchange between John and what had to be the warriors of these people. They were like a melding of men and metal, even the ‘gloves’ that they wore seemed to be complex mechanism’s of great strength.

And then all of these metal ‘warriors’ seemed to brace to attention as who must surely be their leader strode into the room.

“Father?” John and Michael were standing close together as if to prop one another up. Woody was still sitting on the floor trying to decide if he was bleeding to death. Sammy had two bullets left and appeared to be looking around for another target.

“John?” Daniel’s visor clicked upward as he looked in horror at what had happened to his son and to all of his sons. Alex moved to her brother’s side and then her shocked face was also revealed.

“Aunt Alex!”

Druso eyes grew even larger as he saw that even these people’s females were warriors!

Daniel can be forgiven for only being able to see his own son for this moment. An embrace followed and it had to be done carefully as the powered suit could easily crush the frail boy. The reunion was a quiet one with no great show of outward emotions, but the emotions were there.

“Are you all right?” Daniel didn’t know what else to say.

“I am now.”

“Have they been starving you?” There was a hard edge in the Emperor’s voice as he asked this.

“No. They gave us plenty to eat. Ian figured out early on that the life-system on this planet lacks some stuff that we need.” John

was in control of himself as he held on to the steel-hard figure that was his father, but there were still tears on his cheeks.

“Were any of you ill, from the local microbes?” This was a very important question for everyone now exposed to this place.

“No, nothing at all like that. Even the local fleas die when they bite us. We just don’t handle the local food very well.”

In a few moments all of the boys were gathered in for a careful embrace and for once in a very long time Sammy felt like he belonged to a real family. After a few more moment mankind’s ruler took note of the large alien standing off in the corner of the room, and of the very dead aliens on the floor.

Hanso had also looked dead, but he had only fainted flat on his back and was just now starting to rouse himself.

“What has been happening here, John?”

“It’s sort of a long story, father.”

It surely must be a long story.

“And that one standing over there?” Daniel nodded toward Druso.

“Please don’t hurt him, or the fat guy over there. Not all of these people are bad.”

“And the dead ones?”

“They were really bad. Sammy just now took out the worst one.”

“Then good that they are dead and good for you Sammy!

Sammy seemed happy that he had pleased someone, especially the Emperor.

“Father?”

“Yes, son?”

“We really need to go now. I’m so cold and tired. I guess we messed up really bad, I’m sorry.”

And with that John sagged into his father’s armored arms.

They were all so very cold and tired.

Daniel stood back for a moment as Alex and the medical team did a quick once-over of the boys and then whisked them away in powered medical pods. The floating pods had almost caused Hanso to faint again. There were endless questions to be answered about this world and about the people who inhabited it. Empire’s eyes settled on Druso and then upon the terrified Hanso who was still sitting in an untidy heap on the floor, both were under heavy guard. Hanso was closer so Daniel moved to speak with him first.

“Can you understand Our words?” Daniel asked.

“Yee...yeess! Thee small ones taught mee” Hanso was certain that his days were now most assuredly over.

“Then stand up and speak with Us.”

Hanso found himself taking the offered metal hand to assist him in rising. Perhaps he might live a few moments longer after all?

“Thanks bee to yooo,” Hanso managed to say as he finally gained his feet. Looking into the eyes of this adult male visitor almost caused him to faint yet again. This was no small and weak boy and indeed seemed to be a person of considerable importance if the attitude of the other demon-warriors was any indication.

“What is your name?” Daniel asked gently, seeing that the ‘man’ was terrified of him.

“I am Hanso, appointed Scholar of thesee keep.”

“Who...rules this place?”

“Klaso thee Joost, that one.” Hanso pointed to the garishly clad and entirely dead figure on the floor.

“Not any longer.” Daniel dryly observed.

“Noo. Praises bee upon thee Gods.”

“Yet you served him?”

“One has noo choice een thesee matters.”

Daniel just nodded and then turned to regard the much more formidable looking Druso. A small hand gesture to the guards brought the military commander to stand before the ruler of all of the ‘visitors’.

“Can you also understand Our words?” Daniel once more asked.

“Poorly, eef you speek slow.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Druso, Coommander oof thee foorces heer.”

“John said not to hurt you. Why?”

“Wee weer...freends...of a keend. Ageenst Loord Klaso.”

“I see. We will speak later. No harm will come to you and...Hanso.”

Druso started to thank the leader of these visitors but had no chance as his questioner abruptly turned and left the room.

“Bring those two along to Orion. Treat them properly but watch them closely.” Daniel instructed with a quick motion towards the only two living natives left in the room. His Majesty had other matters on his mind at the present, he had found his boys and now he must be with them.

“What is the matter with them?” Daniel asked both Orion’s Chief Medical Officer and the Royal Physician as they stood conferring with him in the small ward set aside for the Imperial Family.

“It seems to be a sort of selective malnutrition, Sire. They have been fed well but it seems that what they ate lacked some of the amino acids needed.” Commander Haig had never seen anything exactly like it, nor had the Royal Physician who then replied to the questions that followed. “They apparently digested the local foods without serious side effects but there were elements they needed that simply were not there.”

“And?” Daniel asked with real impatience.

“As best that we can determine there is nothing that cannot be reversed with proper nutrition and a selective course of supplements that they have been without, Sire. Woodrow’s injury to his neck was only superficial. John’s arm had been broken some months ago and healed with the bones slightly misaligned. Samuel related that the burn on his stomach was inflicted purposely by one of those ‘people’ who held them, Klazo I think was the name.”

“Apparently Samuel shot the ugly bastard just before we arrived.”

“Indeed, Sire? Excellent!”

“Then they will all be...well again?”

“That is the consensus opinion here, Sire. But it will take some time and some patience.”

Daniel had to close his eyes for a moment and give silent thanks before speaking again.

“And Lady Ellen?”

“Her labor has commenced, Sire. These recent events hastened the onset.”

“My God!”

“Yes, Sire. If I may suggest Sire, perhaps a good measure of Navy brandy might be in order right now?”

“Just bring Us the whole damned bottle.”

Chapter Thirteen Explanations

“Collect your wits, man!” Druso snapped at the Scholar who seemed on the verge of physically dissolving. Both of them were deep into sensory overload but at least Druso had some measure of self-control left. Perhaps the worst moment had been when they had exited the assault craft onto Orion’s main deck, a sight and experience that they had no reference points for. For now they were alone in a cabin reserved for visiting officers, and this too was a great deal to handle. There was nothing within sight in the room that did not pose so very many question of how and why.

“We will never see our homes again!” Hanso whimpered. “We are doomed to...”

“Be quite! Gods! Of all people to be confined with I have the poor luck to be here with you! Wherever the flaming hells this might be!”

“Ohhh...”

Hanso finally managed to shut up after Druso nearly knocked him unconscious with a flat hand to the side of his skull.

The Lady Ellen was between contractions as her rattled husband sat next to her on the edge of the bed.

“John is...they are all so horribly thin!”

“The doctors have said, as you know, that they will regain their former selves with proper food and time.”

“And that awful burn on Samuel’s stomach? And John had his arm broken!” Ellen was in full mother-mode, in more ways than one. She and Helen had been right in the midst of things as the doctors had made their careful examinations, beginning contractions or not. Both mothers and fathers finally had to be tactfully ‘ushered’ out of the area for any real medical progress to be made.

Woody’s parents were not aboard Orion despite having been invited along on this rescue mission, to no one’s surprise.

HMS Bren was due to arrive in the area in four days from a voyage of six wasted months.

“That all remains to be explained for now,” Daniel replied. “they all need some real rest and some time to gather their wits. Maybe we all do.”

“And what about those two ugly gorillas that you grabbed?” Ellen asked.

“They will help us piece together what has happened to our boys. Now stop fussing and keep in mind the task before you.”

As in so many occasions in the past, mankind’s absolute monarch got a sharp whack on the head for his ill-considered remarks. No male should ever lecture any female about her “task at hand” when giving birth is that task.

“What are we going to tell them about Woody?” John asked as he lay in the soft and delicious warmth of the infirmary bed; Michael was in the bed just across from him. In the other beds across the aisle from them Sammy and Woody were still very much asleep.

“It won’t be up to us.” Michael replied, as logical as ever.

“Huh?”

“Event recorder.”

“Huh?”

“You keep repeating yourself. The event recorder in the shuttle,” Michael explained, “the thing has a one-year cycle time.”

“Speak as if you were talking to a normal person.”

“Every second of the past year’s activity for the shuttle is recorded in real-time in the control system’s memory cube stacks. Outside views, internal views, audio, all control inputs and system readouts. Everything. Every burp and fart.”

“Oh.” It finally had sunk in; John had a hazy memory of reading about such things as event recorders in one of the dry navy procedures manuals. Woody in all of his glory would have been recorded abandoning them and then betraying them on an alien world. All of the words spoken in the shuttle would be an open book.

“Woody’s totally screwed.” John decided.

“Maybe we all are,” Michael added. He could think of a hundred things that they should have done better.

“Would Woody have thought to erase...?”

“Can’t be done without removing the central control processor and that would disable the shuttle. I doubt if he even thought about the recorder.”

“I didn’t either.”

This quiet conversation was interrupted by Medical Rating Thurmond who entered the ward bearing more food.

“Care for some more pudding?”

Oh yes! It was some sort of sweet, vanilla flavored goo that had been formulated to contain all of what their bodies had been denied for too long. Rating Thurmond was again dispatched to fetch even more of the pudding and then more sleep was soon in order. It was so very warm and comfortable here.

Tomorrow they would all be feeling a little stronger, as they would with each passing day.

And then all of the questions would begin.

Daniel had the very good sense to leave the birthing process to Ellen and the medical personnel. A birth on a Navy warship was something of an event in itself, let alone the birth of the Emperor’s children. Ian was helping with the pacing and dithering that was occurring in the adjoining area.

“John didn’t take this long to appear!” Daniel protested.

“Actually, he did. Longer in fact, being a first born and all. I was there if you remember and I timed it.” Ian was and would always be the type of person to do just such a thing.

“You actually timed it?” Daniel stopped his pacing and just gaped at Ian.

“There was little else to do, you weren’t making much sense at the time.”

“And when Michael was born did you time that also?”

“No. I was doing the pacing then.”

These small revelations were interrupted as the sterile-clad Royal Physician entered the impromptu waiting room and bowed before his Emperor.

“Your Majesty, it is my great honor to inform you that your son and daughter are born and that the Lady Ellen is doing well. They are all doing well.”

“Oh. Shit.” Daniel croaked and then he had to quickly sit down.

“They are rather red and wrinkled appearing,” Ian observed as he peered over Daniel’s shoulder with Helen at his side. Ellen had both of the new arrivals in her arms and appeared rather...drained.

“John looked like that too,” Daniel replied. “It seems to be the normal sort of thing.”

“Well I think they are just beautiful!” Ellen pretended offense at the remarks of the two males. In truth newborns lack anything resembling physical beauty.

“Are you still intent on naming them Sean and Victoria?” Daniel asked Ellen with a smile. They had gone over this before many times.

“Yes, after my grandfather and your grandmother.”

“Personally I would go with the names of War and Pestilence,” Ian offered with a perfectly straight face.

“Dear, would you please take Ian outside and break his nose for me?” Ellen requested, also with a straight face.

“I don’t know, War is a pretty good name for a boy, very heroic and manly, if a bit unconventional.”

“Actually, I had thought to name the girl that,” Ian corrected.

“Ah. I see. Probably a better fit anyway, females being what they are.”

Helen took care of the whacking.

Admiral Kimmel was speaking at the staff meeting called by The Emperor.

“We have located what is believed to be the debris field of the Gladius Squadron, Javelin is under way at the moment to investigate further.”

“And the Jaan?”

“There are no active signs of them, Your Majesty. Some of the long distant spectrograph readings indicate that parts of the debris field may also contain Jaan wreckage.”

“What is intel’s opinion of the people that held my...Our people?”

“The level of civilization appears to be fairly uniform on the six continents we have preliminarily surveyed remotely, Your Majesty. They have attained iron working and some beginnings of technology. It isn’t a precise assessment but they appear to be at about where we were in the early Middle Ages.”

“No central planetary authority?”

“No, Your Majesty. Apparently just scattered fiefdoms and warlord societies.”

“Anything of use from the two we are holding?”

“The one referred to as a ‘Scholar’ could give us years worth of information, probably none of it of any real value except to the academic community. The other is a military sort of person and also has a limited amount of useful information.”

“Then it is Our decision that this planet will be cataloged as excluded from further contact and allowed to develop on its own. Future contact can be left to our descendants.”

This place was of no real value to the Empire as a trade partner, at least not without totally disrupting and exploiting its entire civilization, such as it was. Food exports were right off the list and that left little else to bother with. The Empire was at its core

commerce driven and had no interest in conquest or domination of other races, such endeavors simply didn't pay in the long run.

"We are now brought to the events recorded by shuttle number three's event recorder, Your Majesty."

"Continue, Admiral." Daniel was very focused on what the man was going to say. How had his boys even managed to survive what had happened?

"It is an extraordinary record, Sire."

Kimmel went on to give a condensed but concise account of the boy's boarding the shuttle during the Jaan attack, John waiting to the last second to close the hatch, and all that followed till they made a safe landfall. No father was ever more proud of his son than when the Admiral concluded his remarks on the odyssey of Gladius's shuttle number three.

"I hope that you do not think myself or any officer at this table is trying to curry favor when I say that the actions of John Grayson and Michael Murphy were remarkable in the extreme, no experienced flight officer could have done better than they managed to do. When the time permits Sire, you must watch for yourself what they accomplished."

"We will, Admiral. And thank you for your words."

Kimmel didn't seem all that pleased with the Emperor's thanks for there were other events that had occurred and had been recorded.

“There is one other very troubling item I am bound by duty to bring up, Your Majesty.” Kimmel looked as if he now wanted to be anywhere but at this table.

“Go ahead.” Daniel could feel trouble approaching at a dead run towards him.

“The Gladius shuttle again, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t dance around the edges, Admiral. What are you trying to say that you don’t want to say?”

“Sire, we have been continuing a quick review of the shuttle’s event recorder after landfall. Woodrow Starling’s actions would seem to indicate that he committed a general court martial offense, probably more than one. Being that he and the others were certified cadet candidates and were all subject to Naval regulations and punishments.”

Daniel knew that Woody was very much his father’s son but this was a nasty thing to have to approach, whatever it was.

“Explain, sir.” Daniel had a very flinty look in his eyes that did nothing to help Kimmel in what he had to report.

“Sire, you will of course have to observe the pertinent events for yourself, and then judge for yourself.”

“And...?”

“It would very much appear that at one point Woodrow Starling abandoned the others and then took the shuttle to further his own ends.”

“Abandoned?” Daniel asked in a neutral voice.

“Perhaps marooned would be the correct term, Your Majesty. It is all very disgusting to have to watch.”

Daniel nodded silently and said nothing further for a time.

“Then We shall do as you suggest and look at the record of events.”

“There is at least one other serious offense, Sire.”

“Proceed.” Daniel wondered what else could be as bad.

“It would seem that Woodrow Starling was also instrumental in the capture of the other three lads by the locals. He piloted the shuttle to a rural dwelling where the others had taken shelter with a farming family, a place where all four had been together at an earlier point in time.”

“Are you certain of this?” Daniel’s asked sharply.

“It is all there to see and hear, Sire. The lads were carried into the shuttle bound hand and foot while Mister Starling was at the controls of that shuttle.”

“Tell me the truth about Woody.”

The Woody in question was at the moment away enjoying a hot froth-bath and soak.

“Father?” John knew what this was about but couldn’t quite bring himself to say the words. All three of the spindly boys sat on the

same bed in the medical ward, there were no other ears around to hear what was to be said.

Sammy had none of John's qualms about laying it all out bare and unvarnished.

"He...excuse me...Your Majesty. Woody took the shuttle and left us all to suck mud and die! Then he ratted us out to Klaso!"

Daniel blinked twice and was about to ask another question when Sammy had more to say.

"It was my fault, Your Majesty."

"Why?"

"I beat the shi...we had a fight, I pounded on him pretty bad."

"Was it a fair called meet?"

"It was, father," John interrupted. "We all felt like pounding on Woody but Sammy was first in line!"

"I have seen the recordings of some of what happened and now I have to decide what to do with Woodrow."

Daniel looked into each of the boy's eyes as he said that and then asked one more question.

"So what should I do?"

Michael supplied the ever-logical answer.

"Woody doesn't belong in the Navy Sire, maybe none of us do considering the mess we made of things. But Woody is just Woody

and he can't help being what he is." It was something that Michael had said before on several occasions but it was still true.

"None of us can help what we are, Michael. And by the way, none of you three messed up at all. Everyone who has seen the recordings are very proud of your conduct and actions, save for Woody's. I for one am damned proud of all of you!"

The precise regulations said that Woodrow Starling could be stood before a Marine firing squad. Fortunately for Woody and other very young naval miscreants, regulations can be 'interpreted' to take into account age and lack of experience. No parent worthy of the name will hold up their child to live or die by the same standards that they as adults have to live by. The Empire was the ultimate parent and acted accordingly, as did the Emperor.

Not to say that serious transgressions do not have serious consequences.

The next morning Admiral Kimmel's day cabin served as the setting for Woody's day of judgment. The Emperor was sitting at the desk as the bone-thin boy was ushered in clad in the pale blue pajama-suit and slippers of a naval medical patient. Lady Alexandra was sitting silently on the navy issue couch opposite the desk. True to form Woody overdid the bow after approaching the plain navy desk.

"How are you feeling, Woodrow?" Daniel began simply and in a neutral voice. He could not bring himself to raise his voice to this emaciated boy, at least not yet. He was torn in two directions,

between compassion for a boy who had been through hell and the need for some sort of accounting to be made for actions that were at the very least, criminal.

“I feel a bit stronger now, Your Majesty. Thank you.”

“Good. Sit down now, no ceremony.” Daniel motioned to the chair to one side of the desk.

“Thank you, Sire.”

After a moment of silence Daniel spoke just a single word.

“Explain.”

“Sire?” Woody seemed to deflate just a little at this one-word and very ominous question. The presence of Alexandra at this meeting further unnerved the boy, the entire Empire knew of her abilities to see the truth and to see any lie.

“Observe, Woodrow. And then explain.” Daniel touched the portion of the desktop that controlled the large vid screen off to his right.

It was all edited down to the crucial events and left nothing to be imagined or wrongly interpreted. The ‘evidence’ ran for only about ten minutes but lasted for years in Woody’s mind.

“Woodrow?” Daniel asked in a deadly calm tone as the screen darkened to dull gray.

“They all hated me.” Woody said in a soft voice, there was no glossing over what had just been displayed.

“With some good cause, apparently.” For the first time there was some real bite in Daniel’s voice.

“I didn’t mean to...things went so very wrong...” Woody’s voice trailed off to almost nothing.

“First you left them abandoned in the wilderness and then you betrayed them to that...Klazo person!” Daniel snapped.

Alex caught his eye just then and silently held up her right palm in a signal to go softly, there was more here than might be evident.

“I...Klazo made me...” Woody could not say all of the words.

“How?” Daniel asked, more gently this time.

“He had a little girl there, I guess from the town or someplace”, he said dully. “He...did things to her every time he didn’t like what I said! He made me do things to her!” Woody was holding both hands to his head by now and fairly screamed his last few words. “He did things to me! He made me...!”

Alex stood and put an end to the agony. “Enough!”

Daniel closed his eyes for a moment and nodded in agreement. Woody was as close to being totally destroyed as any person can ever get, or at least as close as a Starling can get.

“He had no options but to obey this Klazo...thing,” Alex explained. “For that he cannot be held to account.”

“Agreed.” Daniel also stood and came around the desk to where Woody was sitting. Woody seemed oblivious of anything happening in the cabin by now.

“Woodrow?” Daniel put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“What?” Woody wasn’t crying but he had a blank expression as he looked up at his Emperor, it didn’t even occur to him that he too should stand.

“Was it your wish to enter the Navy or was it your father’s wish?”

“Father wanted me to so I could be with John and Michael, and near to you.”

Daniel looked at Alex after that was said, both of them knew all too well about the boy’s father always worming his way into their lives.

“What do *you* want to do with your life?” Alex asked, even though she felt she knew.

“Grandfather said I was better suited to business than the Navy and I think he was right. I’m very good at...figures and that sort of thing.”

“But not in the Navy?” Daniel asked.

“No. There’s no money to be made in the Navy and it’s all just too tiresome and silly.”

Daniel had to grin just a little, for once the obnoxious boy had been completely truthful.

“Then you are now free to pursue your own path. You are dismissed from the Naval Candidate process for failing to...meet the

needed criteria. There will be no court of inquiry into your past behavior and for that you should be eternally thankful.”

Woody blinked and seemed to come back into focus, then he remembered where he was and who he was talking to. He stood up.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Father will be...displeased with me.”

“Let Us take care of your father, Lord knows it is about time someone did.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Perhaps it is time.”

“You may go now. What has been said here today remains here between us, always. Do you understand that?”

“I do, Your Majesty.”

“Then good luck to you and remember this day.”

After Woody had left the cabin Alex had an intriguing smile on her lips.

“What is it?” Daniel asked.

“Despite his ancestry he is a remarkable young man.”

“He’s a damned pain in the ass, just like his father! And why are you grinning?”

“He came in here and moved from being torn apart by the truth and then managed to leave being perhaps the happiest person on this vessel.”

“Happy?”

“Yes. You got him off the proverbial hook with both the Navy and his father. I can see that now he can and will go to live with his grandparents and will probably wind up owning half the Empire.”

“Maybe I should just have had the little bastard shot?”

“Too late for that now.” Alex then kissed her big brother on his cheek and quietly left the cabin.

HMS Bren

“Sir, you must come at once, to the aft fighter pad!”

Rivera looked up from his desk in annoyance at the junior rating who was out of breath and appeared to have just seen a ghost. Bren’s second in command had been trying to draft a direct appeal to Fleet Command for a transfer off of this misery-barge, a chancy move as Fleet did not like it’s vessel commanders being bypassed.

“What is it, Connor?”

“It’s Barlow sir, he’s gone at the Captain with a locking bolt!”

“What?” Rivera had feared something like this and now it had finally happened, and just one day out from normal space.

“You have to come now, sir!”

HMS Orion

“They cannot tolerate our food, Sire. In time we could formulate something for them but for now the best we can offer them is sterile water.” Orion’s Executive Officer explained as Druso and Hanso were being detained just outside of the Captain’s day cabin. Both of the aliens were starting to show signs of physical distress by now. They

could drink the water here but the food had disastrous effects on their digestive processes. The aliens didn't care much for the taste of it, either.

"There seems no point in holding them here any longer. Bring them in."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

By now both of the masso had come to understand that they were not the 'guests' of any small lord of some petty keep but were in the kind graces of the one ruler of all of these visitors. It was a great leap to even begin to imagine the vast power that such a person must hold. And now they were standing again before that person.

Daniel spoke slowly and as clearly as he could manage. "You are to be returned to your people, within this day.

There will be no...harm to you or your people."

Druso managed the sort of bow that he had observed the visitors performing before this ruler, Hanso tried to follow his example.

"Wee are thanking yoo for theese."

"We are also thanking you for what help you gave to our sons."

Druso paused for a moment before responding. This particular ruler didn't seem a bad sort, nor did he seem like a person you should lie to at all.

"Eet was to speek all truth, a good theeng for both to work as one, tooo help eech other ageenst Klaso."

“Understood. Now go and try to do a better job of things than that Klazo bastard did.”

Druso and Hanso weren't familiar with the term “bastard” but they understood the tone that the word had conveyed.

And within three hours they were standing again in the great courtyard of Klaso Keep, soon to be renamed. Three of the four young visitors had been on hand to see them off, except for the one with the silly name. The small visitors had given Hanso a small flat parcel, explaining simply that it was in gratitude for what kindness they had managed to show them.

“May I have one request of you, Lord Druso?” Hanso was so very tired of just about everything.

“Of course. And don't call me that! I am sick unto death of lords of all sort!”

“Then blessings be upon you. May I now return to my school and my studies?”

“Yes, of course. You have more than earned that much.”

Hanso seemed to gather himself into a stronger person as he took this all in. The gentle scholar could go home now and not have to dread the sun's next rising.

Druso had no great interest in the gift that the visitors had given himself and the scholar, it being just dry and dusty books, although in a fascinating sort of 'binding'. Let the long-suffering scholar take the things and enjoy whatever knowledge he could glean from the gifts. It would be almost a month after the visitors had departed before

Hanso could finally sit in peace and commit some serious time to trying to understand the device.

“Insert book card.” The ‘window’ on the thing had actually spoken and demanded something. Hanso was some time sorting it all out before managing to do as the contraption had asked.

“A Child’s First Book of Words.”

In good time it would teach the scholar to read and write and mostly understand the strange language of the visitors. But there were nine other books to consider. The Encyclopedia of The Empire, Edition Nine-Hundred and Forty-Seven, held the most fascination for Hanso.

“Now whoot in thee heavens is goonpowder?” Hanso had even started mumbling to himself in the odd language.

There was a simple formula displayed for the alarming substance if the scholar could puzzle out the Masso names for the ingredients.

The book reader had a power supply rated at fifty years so he probably would figure it out, that and a great deal more.

HMS Bren

Rivera was watching a mad man prancing back and forth along the top of hull of the only assault craft that the small Bren carried. Rating Connor seemed very pleased with himself and was shouting his glee to one and all as he was waving the bloody locking pin about.

“I did for him! We’re all free of the bastard! Hahahaaha!”

Rivera approached the scene dreading what might be there, and also secretly hoping for what might possibly be there.

“Good Christ.” Rivera said under his breath as he got near enough to see what all of them men standing in a circle were looking at.

Captain Heywood Langston Starling, Commanding His Majesty’s Ship Bren, had been beaten entirely dead by the lunatic still ranting atop the assault craft. There was blood and brains everywhere, the Captain’s entire head was not recognizable as belonging to anyone at all.

“You!” Rivera pointed at the nearest rating.

“Sir?”

“Find Lieutenant Forest and tell him that his Marines are needed here at once, have them bring along a sticky-net!”

“Yes, sir!” Rating Lee departed at a good rate to obey his orders. To obey his new Captain.

“Who saw this?” Rivera demanded in a loud voice.

No one responded. Most of them had seen all of it and had done nothing but stand back and watch the ghastly attack.

Orion

There was no point in remaining here any longer, except to reunite the two Starlings and inform the senior of them that he faced another pointless six month voyage home. There was no way to modify Bren’s drive here, that would take a naval shipyard. In a

relatively short time Ian's adaptation of the Jaan propulsion system would fundamentally change the way that humans moved about the stars, but for now there was just these few vessels with such radical capabilities.

"Your Majesty?" Ensign Tran spoke tentatively, feeling like a burglar intruding into this private place. The entire royal family was sitting together listening to John trying to demonstrate what the masso laughter sounded like, complete with face slaps.

"Yes?" Daniel looked up at the nervous appearing ensign.

"Admiral Kimmel's respects Your Majesty, and could you please come to the bridge at your earliest convenience?"

This was the properly tactful language to get his royal ass to the bridge, now!

"Tell the admiral We shall be right along."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Ian accompanied Daniel to Orion's bridge and even as all of the officers there came to attention they could both see that something was very wrong.

"Admiral?"

"Your Majesty, Bren has arrived on schedule but there has been a...most..." Kimmel couldn't seem to find the words.

"Just say it man, what is it?" Daniel asked, a little peeved by now.

“Your Majesty, I have the sad duty to inform you of the death of Captain Starling. Apparently he has been murdered by one of Bren’s crew.”

Daniel and Ian could only look at one another in disbelief. It was utter surprise tempered by a lot of other feelings.

“What details do you have?” Daniel finally managed to ask.

“None at the present, Your Majesty, except that it occurred just a day ago while they were still in non space. Bren is due to be alongside in three hours. Lieutenant Commander Rivera will be coming aboard with a full report, he is now acting Captain.”

“Keep Us informed as matters occur.” Daniel said in a neutral voice.

“Yes, Your Majesty. And if I may offer all of our condolences for the loss of...your friend?”

“Friend?” Daniel asked with raised eyebrows. “He was a long time acquaintance, but he was never a friend.”

And with that Daniel and Ian departed the bridge and left them all to speculate just what that last statement was all about.

“We must go and tell Woody,” Ian said as they walked along the companionway.

“Agreed.” Daniel was trying to cope with an overwhelming sense of relief and absolutely no sense of grief. He felt rather guilty about his own lack of feeling any loss.

“They never seemed very close, as a father and son,” Ian observed.

“No, but we must still be as easy with Woodrow as we can about this, he’s just like his father but he has still been through a great deal.”

“You know,” Ian said as they approached Woody’s cabin, “it’s a wonder that this hasn’t happened a lot sooner.” It was an honest thought, perhaps out of place at this moment.

When they had arrived at Woody’s cabin Daniel paused and looked at Ian. Then he spoke again. “The thing about Starling...I wonder if he even wanted the navy as a career, just like his son?”

“Probably not, but he did enter service and now here we are at this sorry place.”

“It’s still a bad way to end.” Daniel felt some sense of a loss. There was no logic about it but it was there all the same. He had despised Starling and now he would actually miss him, sort of.

Woody finally answered the rapping on his cabin door after an interminable wait. Daniel and Ian had expected as much, it was sort of a Starling tradition.

“Your Majesty!” Woody performed his best bow.

“May We come in and talk, Woodrow?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Woody motioned the both of them to enter and then hurried to position the one chair in the tiny cabin for the Emperor to use. Ian was grandly directed to sit on the bunk.

“How are you doing, Woody?” Daniel asked simply.

“Well, Sire.” Even close acquaintances of the Emperor would not drop the ceremonial address of “Your Majesty” without permission, at least those outside of the family. But of course Woody had.

“Then I must come to the point and it is a hard thing to tell you.” Daniel had shifted into the family “I” mode. The Starlings had a talent for causing that to occur without even a thought.

“Yes, Sire.” Woody even sat on the bunk beside Ian, something else no one outside of family would even consider doing without being asked to do.

“Woodrow, it would appear that your father has been killed, aboard Bren.”

Woody just blinked a few times and said nothing.

“Did you understand what I just said?” Daniel asked after an awkward length of time had passed.

“Yes, Sire. Father is dead. Thank you for telling me.”

Neither Ian nor Daniel were very surprised by the boy’s reaction or, rather the lack of reaction.

“Will you come along with us and be with family, until things have been sorted out for you?”

“Thank you, Sire. That would be nice.” Woody even managed to convey some sense of loss.

It was of course another poor decision that His Majesty made where any person named Starling was concerned. Fate had rid the Empire of one nuisance only to replace it with another.

Chapter Twelve Paths

Iberia, The Sun Palace

For John and Michael it was merely coming home again and happy they were to be here. For Sammy it was his first true encounter with all of the power and wealth of an Empire and it was as large of a jump as waking up as a guest of the Jaan. Not to say it was unpleasant, just very hard to adjust to after living in a shipping container for a good part of his life.

“I know how to dress!” Sammy protested as his assigned man servant attempted to perform his proper duties. The underwear the man had laid out for him probably cost more than the boy had ever earned or stole in his entire life.

“Of course, Samuel. But my place is to assist you.” Howard Timms had been in service to this household for twelve years, working his way up the ranks to this first assignment as a personal valet for one of the royals. And Sammy was considered as one of the royals, albeit a ‘ward’ sort of royal.

“I know. Sorry. It’s just that I’m not used to...this way of living.” Sammy could not bring any anger to his words, the fussy guy was only trying to do his job and earn his wages. Sammy knew very well about working for your dinner.

Timms nodded and stood silent for a time before replying to the scrappy kid. Timms had been very well briefed on the boy's harsh background.

"I lost both of my parents also, in the war with the Snakes. I wound up in a charity home for a time and never had two pennies to rub together until I left that place. Not that they were unkind, mind you. There just wasn't too much money left over at the end of the day."

Now it was Sammy's turn to stand silent and then nod. This guy wasn't really just some poof of a snob after all.

"So what did you think about this place the first time you made it through the front door?" Sammy asked.

"I've never been through the front door actually, just the service entries. But yes, I just mostly stood around with my mouth open, until I was told to get to work. We are both not so very different, Samuel."

"Fair enough." Sammy extended a hand to the man and they both shook on their common heritage. "Just one thing...err Howard?"

"Yes, Samuel?"

"Call me Sammy or I find me a new guy to help me get dressed."

"Very well, Sammy. Away from others though, one must follow certain protocols in this great museum. And call me Howie, also away from others."

"Okay, Howie."

Sammy had made a friend but this whole transition was still more than he had ever faced. The boy had the feeling that sooner or later people would find out what sort of person he had been, and still was.

But of course they did already know.

“I’m a bit worried about Samuel,” Ellen said as she polished off the last of her breakfast melon.”

“How so? He’s gaining weight like the others. The doctors are pleased with his progress.” Daniel looked up from the morning’s required reading as he too worked his way through their always private breakfast.

“He’s like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs.”

“Trot that by me again?”

“My father’s expression, and maybe his father’s father. Samuel is out of his element here, afraid to make any moves lest he gets his tail mashed under a rocking chair.”

“And?”

“Addie.”

“Do I have to drag it all out of you?” Daniel could see his mate’s gears whirring away and had to smile at her.

“I think it would help Samuel to have her here as a sort of connection with his past, someone to confide in.”

“But Samuel and our boys are very fast friends!” Daniel countered. “They have been through...so much together.”

“Yes, of course they are good friends and I suspect that they always will be. But Addie should be here, at least for a time. Besides, that poor girl is on her own on New Albion!”

“Now the real truth comes to the surface,” Daniel decided, silently. And then aloud, “We did try to get her to come along with us to live here and attend a good school, she declined.”

“She was frightened to death of us!”

“And now?”

“So we send the Marines this time.” Ellen could already see that she was winning this debate. “One of the modified drive ships could be there and back in no time.” Literally no time.

“I suppose it could be worked into one of the training jumps that Ian is conducting,” Daniel conceded.

“Well?” Ellen had long ago learned the right facial expression that always melted the Emperor and she used it now.

“Very well. But I don’t think the marines will be needed.”

New Albion

“Adelle Weems?” The voice on the other side of the door sounded like the law. A quick look at the view screen said that it was even worse. Imperial Navy! What had she possibly done to piss these guys off?

“What is it?” Her voice was a little muffled through the door, the audio link had never worked.

“If we may, ma’am? We have a sealed letter from the Lady Ellen for you.”

What? Addie’s brain was racing. How could the wife of the Emperor even have remembered a stupid port rat like her?

“Read it to me!”

“I cannot do that, ma’am. It is under the Imperial seal and is for your eyes alone, only the letter’s intended person may open it. I could have my head detached if I read it to you.”

In time Addie opened the door just a crack. These guys hadn’t then charged in and grabbed her, they had just stood there looking sort of dopey.

“Come in. Sorry about the welcome.” Addie motioned the four men inside her small fortress. Three of them were extremely armed and the one with the letter was an officer of some sort, she never had sorted out all of the insignia they wore. They all peered about as if in some sort of alien trap.

“We are under orders to wait for your reply, ma’am.” The officer said as he handed over the letter.

“Okay,” Addie replied in a thin voice. She had never been called “ma’am” in her entire life. Finally she sat down at her small ‘dining’ table and broke the gold and wax seal on the letter. The paper itself looked like someone had handmade it out of Lord knew what.

“My Dear Adelle,” the letter began. Addie read and reread the hand written letter at least six times, all the while ignoring the navy types who were standing around looking very awkward and out of place.

The stupid little runt needed her! Sammy needed her!

It didn't take too long to make up her mind. Her pantry was nearly empty and they were really starting to crack down on the whole rat community. It was the progress a new colony always seemed to make. When there were finally enough resources available a colony got around to cleaning up its messy places and that was where Addie lived.

“I'll need to pack some things.”

But not all that much, and none of it something you might wear to meet with His Majesty.

“We are at your service, ma'am. May I inquire about anything that is required of us?”

“Call me Addie. My name is Addie!”

“Yes...Miss Addie.”

“Do you have a name too?”

“Lieutenant Greene, Miss Addie.”

“It says here I'm to come along with you to Earth.”

“We were briefed on that much...Addie.”

“Then you guys take a load off for a little while, I need to get sort of organized here. And where's that damned cat of his?”

“Cat, ma’am. Addie?”

“Never mind!”

Daniel looked up from the petition from Harmony to withdraw from the Empire, the lot of them had always been a pain and a nuisance and he was half tempted to grant them their idiotic wish. The colony seemed to be governed by ‘feelings’ and very little by common sense and logic. The place never had been much except a place a few tourists visited to observe the odd lifestyles of the locals.

As was his nightly routine his son then appeared to bid him a days end and in the process interrupted his fuming.

“Father?”

Daniel motioned the boy in, and as always wished that his son wasn’t so tentative about this sort of thing. Perhaps he had been too harsh in the past with his boy? And his son was still so very frail appearing, too easy to pick up and hug and with too many bony places.

“Sammy can’t swim.” John said simply as he sat in the side chair next to his father.

“Neither could I at his age.”

“Really?”

“I made it into academy and couldn’t swim a damned stroke. Bricks could do a better job of it than me.”

“But...?”

“The instructor just threw me in and then I learned, very fast.”

John managed a wide grin at this revelation. “We can’t just throw Sammy in the pool!”

“Then we teach him how to swim, properly.”

“Water really scares him.”

“Scared me too. It scared me a whole lot.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Now it seems just sort of natural to get wet and paddle about. All things are possible.”

Almost every problem has a very direct solution, if not always an easy solution.

“I’ve never done this!” Addie was standing in front of the abandoned repair shop that was her home. She was looking with some real dread at the shiny naval shuttle parked square in the middle of the dusty ground traffic street. She also looked about ready to bolt.

“The pilot has some considerable experience,” Greene replied with a straight face. “We have motion sickness candies aboard and I will instruct the pilot to refrain from his usual lack of restraint.”

“Shit!” Addie made a supreme effort to control her panic. “Then let’s go before I come to my senses!”

“My thoughts precisely, Addie.”

Greene decided that he liked this young girl but also decided that she was probably better to have as a friend than as an enemy. The same might be said for the unkempt and hostile feline that they had all finally managed to corner and shove into a makeshift carrier.

Miss Puss was coming along, but not of her own free will and not without some bites and scratches suffered by the Imperial Navy.

“Welcome aboard Dolphin, Miss Weems.” Captain Hobbs even kissed the wide-eyed girl’s hand, as one should do to an honored guest of the female gender.

“Th...Thank you,” Addie stammered. “This is sort of a lot for me to get used to.”

“Understood. The worst of your journey is already behind you.”

Behind and off to one side was a figure that caught the girl’s eye. She had seen him before. She had even spoken to him before on New Albion!

“Sir Ian?”

“Hello, Addie.” Ian moved to gently embrace the rattled girl. “Sammy’s been through a great deal and we thought that your being with him might help things. Lady Ellen was actually the one prodding all of us off our numb behinds.”

“I got all of the messages about things...as they happened. How is he really? And the others?”

“They are not as you remember them in appearance, but they are still the same in their hearts. They are getting better with each day.”

“How long will it take us to get there?” Addie was very much aware of all of the navy types standing around trying not to look like they were staring at her.

“No time at all.”

Probably a good thing too, considering the alarming noises that were coming from Miss Puss’ portable jail.

“Sammy?” Timms knew that they were out of earshot of anyone and did not call him Samuel.

“Huh?” The warm bubbling water was almost like being in the womb, especially after the tiring exercise program. Modest exercise was part of the medic’s course of treatment, that and a lot of very good food!

“A visitor will be arriving shortly.”

“Who for?”

“For you, I am informed.”

“Me?”

“Yes. The person running this great circus says that you should now dress and get your bony butt out to the south landing pad.”

Everyone was there. The Emperor was there and that meant that no one else could be off soaking in a tub.

“Your Maj...Sire. What is going on?” Sammy had been prodded up front to stand beside the man in the plain black uniform who was starting to seem like a real father to him.

“Observe.” Daniel pointed at a bright speck in the blue sky that was rapidly descending.

“Sire?”

“Adelle is arriving. Put on your best smile.”

Sammy didn't have to make a special effort, he was now grinning from ear to ear.

“Runt! Shit, don't they feed you here?” Addie lifted her skinny partner in crime completely off the ground as they connected. The Emperor and the entire flock of royals were for this moment not in her eyes at all.

“All I do is eat here! And I am getting fatter!” Or at least he was gaining some weight on a daily basis.

Addie had never really analyzed her feelings about Sammy until now. There was certainly nothing sexual between them, perhaps it was more the grudging love of a sister for her pest of a little brother. The love for someone who had never asked to be loved.

“She’s sort of pretty,” John whispered to Michael as they stood together watching this sappy spectacle unfold. Maybe he had forgotten what she looked like, back on New Albion.

“Idiot! She’s beautiful.” Michael had not forgotten at all.

Sammy and Addie were lost in this place but together they would be a very small and mutual support group for one another, and they would both attempt to cope with it.

It had been almost three months since they had returned to Earth and the boys were well on their way to looking like tan and healthy young human males again, if still slightly on the thin side. One warm afternoon Michael managed to drag his father out of his lab and onto the path that the boy had once labored so hard on with John to repair.

“Why are we going on this trek?” Ian asked, a little put out at having his work interrupted and at the same time curious about what was obviously troubling his son.

“I need your advice, father.” Michael replied.

“You do?” This was something new, asking advice from a parent? Asking advice from his father?

“Yes, father. I have decided not to enter the Navy. How do I tell that to John and Sammy?” Michael had mentally rehearsed this statement many times and when the time came he had just blurted it out without any of the pillows and cushions.

Ian stopped in his tracks and just stared down at his son in amazement.

“But...you were so set upon entry.”

“I thought I was, now I’m not. I would like to accept the invitation from the Hawkings Institute for my studies and then later on I would like to work with you. If you agree.”

Ian started to walk again, much more slowly this time. Finally he said, “I ultimately decided that I wasn’t cut out to be an officer. Is that the case with you?”

“Partially. Maybe mostly.” Michael halted this time before speaking again. “I’ve always done everything together with John. I feel like I would be betraying him somehow if I didn’t enter service with him.”

“Fleet has waived academy for the three of you. Your performance after the Jaan attack proved your worth to the navy, all three of you more than proved your worth. All that remains is your formal appointments as midshipmen.”

“For John and Sammy, not for me.”

“I see.” Ian did see. He had been at this place once himself, although not nearly as soon as this.

“Now what do I tell John...and Sammy?”

“The truth and without varnish. You do John a discredit if you think he will not understand, and perhaps to Samuel as well. However, your mother will be extremely pleased.”

The four of them were sitting on the side of the great pool after a swim when Michael decided to bite the proverbial bullet. Somehow John and Michael always managed to be sitting on either side of Addie who had no thin and bony spots at all but did have several slightly soft and round places. Sammy was still the swim-student but he had so far managed a sort of peace with the water and could, if pressed to it, save himself from drowning.

“I won’t be accepting my appointment as a midshipman.”

“Huh?” John almost lost his perch on the pool edge. Sammy’s mouth was slightly ajar, so was Addie’s. This was truly a bolt from the blue.

“Not to seem like a swelled head, but I think I can do better for the Empire and for myself as a civilian, working with father.”

“But...” John looked like he had just been slapped.

“We’ve always done it all as a team,” Michael continued, “and I will always think of us as one. But I just don’t think I want to be a naval officer, maybe I never really did.”

Sammy was the one to move them out of the silence that followed Michael’s stunning words.

“Then I say good for you! You’ve got more brains than all of the people I’ve ever met put together! Any dumb ass like me can shoot things and any dumb ass like John can fly things! Your brains are what really kept us all alive!” For Sammy it was almost like a formal speech.

Michael then looked at the silent John to see his reaction and for a time there was none.

“Okay, then. Just one condition.” John finally said. This was a lot to accept in such a short space of time.

“Sure.” Michael responded, hoping that he hadn’t just destroyed the one friendship that he had always known.

“You have to give me your rock collection, now. Between you and your father there are bound to be a lot of miscalculations and nasty explosions.”

Michael grinned. “Done.”

The two of them would have hugged each other but they were getting too old for that sort of thing by now. And besides, Addie would have doubled over in laughter. Sammy too.

“He is your little brother. You must learn to care for him and your little sister and to watch over them if the need ever arises.” Ellen was trying to introduce her eldest son to the fine art of infant care. Unlike many things, changing a diaper had not advanced very much over the centuries.

“But...the nurses always do this sort of...”

“Normally. On occasion I even do it myself. Assume that this is an emergency.”

“But...!”

“Remove his diaper and put on a clean one, as you have been shown before. It is a simple process.”

John approached the task as if disarming a malfunctioning and smoldering anti-vessel missile.

“Oh Gawd! His nose had given him a faint warning, but only a warning.

“Proceed.” Ellen suppressed her grin as she urged her first born onward. “Use the moist wipes to clean him.”

“What have you been feeding this poor child?” John’s eyes were almost watering as he tried to cope with this most onerous of all parental tasks. His little brother seemed to be enjoying the whole process all too much and then decided to add to the fun.

“Ohh shit!” John was too slow to dodge the small fountain that suddenly erupted and John had amazing reflexes.

“Language, John.”

“He peed all over my arm!”

“Not fatal in most recorded cases. Finish now and then change your sister.”

“Nooo!”

“Yes, or you get this duty for an entire week.”

“You can be very hard, mother!” Even while saying that John managed a sort of crooked grin.

“You have no idea, dear.” Ellen replied as she kissed her boy’s cheek.

John finally managed a sort of uneven completion to the odious chores, then he went off and took a long hot shower, silently swearing never to be a father to any sort of offspring of either sex.

“Church, Sire?” Sammy had never been to church in his entire life.

“Yes. Day after tomorrow. Its time that the lot of you appear in public. The people need to see that you are all well again, at least physically.”

John nudged Sammy in the ribs as he replied to his father. “We shall be happy to go, Father.”

“Good, because three days later we will all be attending the opening season.” Daniel had the most wickedly thin smile as he said that.

“Opening season...of what, Father?”

Dread.

“The Royal Opera, in Milan.”

Adelle, like any female worthy of the title would be, was in a type of wardrobe heaven. But she too had never been to any sort of church.

“Oh God! What do I wear?”

Ian’s wife Helen was there with her to point her in the general directions needed.

“Conservative lines, subdued colors. No jewelry big enough to really see.

“But...?”

“Perhaps that dark blue dress with the thin lace around the collar?” Helen was standing in the wardrobe ‘closet’ with the girl she had taken under her wing.

“It is nice,” Addie agreed, “sort of subdued, like you said.”

“Then that’s settled.” Helen breathed a sigh of relief, this had been simpler than anticipated.

“Shoes!” Addie exclaimed.

Perhaps not so simple after all.

The Great Cathedral of Lisbon

“Just act dignified and no waving at the crowd, that isn’t done at church.” John’s whispered advice to Sammy as they all stood to depart the shuttle was very welcome.

“Dignified?” Except for that part.

“Don’t belch or scratch your butt.”

“I can handle that much.”

“Then here we go. Always stay at least three steps behind mother and father.”

Mother and father. John had said it like Sammy was his brother, that he now had a mother and father.

All of the Empire was watching from the discretely placed vid links. Countless commentators offered countless opinions about how the boys appeared, and about the somewhat mysterious girl who was with them. Just who was she?

Sammy made it through it all without belching or scratching and very much enjoyed the choir's efforts. Even the Archbishop had kept his usual droning to a tolerable length.

Before it had been obliterated in the Dark Times the place had been called La Scala. A great theater devoted to great music and magnificent voices, now rebuilt on a far grander scale. Those with lesser tastes equated it with the sounds generated by a cat tossed into the midst of a circus band.

The Emperor had been in this latter group until he had actually attended a live performance. And now Puccini was his favorite composer.

Madama Butterfly. It could touch the soul of a marble statue.

Un Bel Di. The aria had touched Sammy in a way that he would never have even thought possible. Opera was supposed to be music for sissies and poofs.

"Look at Sammy," Michael whispered in Addie's ear.

The girl turned from the beautiful music and looked to her left.

There were tears on the port rat's cheeks and the boy didn't even seem aware of it.

“I’ll be damned,” Addie said in a whisper that only she could hear.

Samuel’s tears were noticed by a great many that night, when the Emperor is seated in the royal box the eyes of the audience often flick away from the stage to see what the mighty are doing.

Port Bremen, Imperial Naval section

Goodbyes had been as wet and drawn out as can be imagined but the time had finally arrived and then passed. Now John and Sammy were wearing the dark blue uniforms with the gold pips of midshipmen. It was as if all that had gone before had never happened, they were on their own now to again sink or swim.

“This is hopeless!” John wiped the rain off his face while trying to make some sense out of the darkness of the huge naval yard. It was a dark and stormy night, truly and once again.

“We’re heading the right way. The yard map said it’s right ahead.” Sammy wasn’t as sure as he sounded but straight ahead was all they had to go on in the way of directions.

“There it is!” John finally made out the white hull number as the two of them plodded along towing their hovering sea chests behind them. It seemed as if they had been walking for weeks, and in a monsoon .

“4056, that’s it!” Sammy agreed. HMS Drake, a combined fighter carrier and Marine transport. A main ship of the line by any measure.

Of course their journey was being monitored and observed from a hidden distance by security, no son of the Emperor is ever very far out of sight and protection. All the same, this was their journey to make, or fail to make. Once the boys were aboard the naval vessel the security teams would be done with their work.

“Come on, there’s the personnel ramp!” John urged as they moved closer to the massive hull of the vessel. Even in this rain-drenched darkness the size of the craft was daunting, it was like approaching a titanium cliff.

Rating Hemsworth was as close to being asleep as he ever permitted himself to be while on duty. The two small and rain-cloaked middies making their way up the ramp and into the entry port were an almost welcome diversion.

“ID’s into the reader then a palm scan, if you please.” Hemsworth added the “if you please” only because these boys were at least in theory officers-to-be. But no rating worthy of his rank ever looked at a middie as being any sort of real officer.

Sammy and John complied as directed and Hemsworth never even bothered to do more than observe the green light that said they were both cleared to come aboard. Had the rating read the data on his screen the night would have been a great deal more exciting for him.

“Take your kit along to middie quarters and get squared away. Report at 0800 to the Personnel Officer,” Hemsworth recited from memory.

“Will do. Thank you.” John replied with a smile. Sammy was all wide eyes and open ears, trying to at least look as if he should be here. For John it was like a second home.

Part Two A Reconnaissance in Force

Chapter One Apprentices

“Looks like we get the rat hole.” John peered into the tiny cabin with disgust. It was actually rated for two people, in theory. History always repeats.

“Rat hole?” Sammy asked with no clue.

Only one sleepy middie had been up and awake enough to steer them to the one empty cabin that was left. HMS Drake now had its full compliment of midshipmen.

“That’s what the smallest middie cabin is always called. I think they design these things that way on purpose just to make things hard. It would be just as easy to make them all the same size.”

“My cargo container was bigger than this,” Sammy said as the both of them edged into the small space.

“Your what?” John asked. Sammy never spoke much about exactly where he had lived on New Albion and John had never really pressed him for the details that he seemed reluctant to talk about at the time.

“I lived in a old cargo container, in the dump. Sort of homey, though. Nice and quiet at night.”

John just looked at Sammy with a kind of blank expression on his face.

“It had a little more room than this,” Sammy continued, “but no plumbing.”

“Oh.” John couldn’t think of anything else to say so he finally just changed the subject. “Come on, we have to get this place all squared away and then try to get a little sleep.”

The ‘cabin’ had two fold away bunks, two storage lockers for uniforms and personal items plus a fold down desk. The head consisted of a tiny commode/sink with a shower nozzle above the whole thing; there was a drain in its floor. The entire sanitary facility seemed to have been stamped out of one piece of metal that had better be kept spotless at all times.

‘Fold away’ seemed to be the main theme of their tiny living accommodations. When empty, even the sea chests they had towed behind them could be folded flat for storage in the shallow compartment in the floor. If you folded up both bunks to get at it.

“Well, good night.” John said wearily as he turned off his small overhead light. They had been hours getting their belongings stowed in inspection order and then running down some bed linen and towels.

“You mean good morning, don’t you?” Sammy was right, if they were lucky they might get two hours of sleep before the day watch began.

“God’s holy trousers! Why wasn’t I informed when they came aboard? Why didn’t we get any advance notification that they had even been assigned to us?” Commodore Klaus’ protests could be heard for a considerable distance down the companionway outside his day cabin.

“The uh, rating on duty failed to read the names as he entered them into the records system, sir.” Lieutenant Pope was Drake’s Personnel Officer and it was why he was standing before his Captain so early in the morning. It was still only 07:15 and the two new midshipmen in question were not yet due to report to Personnel for another forty-five minutes.

“They are after all, only green midshipmen, sir.” Pope offered a little weakly.

“Yes and one of them...hell both of them are the sons of His Majesty! And yes, I know very well about not showing any favor or deference to them! Now go track them down and bring them straight along to me!”

“Yes, sir.” Pope turned and left with some haste, very glad to be leaving this particular target zone.

“Breakfast was sort of lame,” John opined as they sat on their bunks. They had a little time to pass before reporting to the Personnel Officer and John knew very well that midshipmen idling about had better be doing it in their quarters, lest they be put to some onerous task just to keep them busy.

“I dunno, I thought it was pretty good.” Sammy’s palette was not as refined as John’s was. Food was food and there was no shortage of it here.

“Franks and Watkins seemed like okay sorts.” John was referring to the two older middies who had shared their mess table with them.

“They both sort of froze up some when they figured out who you were,” Sammy replied. The word was already spreading rapidly throughout the vessel about the two latest midshipmen to report aboard.

“When they figured out who we *both* were,” John corrected. “You’ll have to get used to that sort of thing when you meet new people. After they know you a while things will get better.”

“It sort of bites, though. Some of the ratings working in the mess seemed almost scared of us. Shit, everyone did!”

“They were, sort of. I’ve always had to put up with it and you will have to learn how too. But like I said, it will get better after a while and you’ll probably get yelled at just like any other dumb middie. Me too.”

“Dumb is right. I never even went through academy!”

“Neither did I.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been around the Navy enough to have learned most of the routines by now. I had no idea even how to stow all of my stuff in the locker.”

Conversation halted when the figure of an officer filled the open door to the 'rat hole.' John and Sammy quickly stood to attention.

"Mister Grayson, Mister Winslow?" Pope knew very well it was them but he had to open with something.

"Yes, sir." John replied for the both of them.

"I'm Lieutenant Pope, Personnel Officer. Welcome aboard Drake." Pope extended a hand to John and then to Sammy. A handshake and a civil welcome were not part of the usual first encounters that a green midshipman might expect from an officer. Being a member of the royal household did have a few good points at times.

"Thank you, sir. We were told to report to you at 08:00..." John started to explain.

"Yes, understood. The Captain got wind of your arrival and would now like to see the both of you, at once. We've had no prior notification about your being posted to this vessel."

"Yes, sir."

"Bring along your record packets and follow me."

"Yes, sir."

John seemed cool and collected as they followed the officer up through the huge vessel. Heads turned to watch them as they passed, some of the crew just stopped and stared openly. For Sammy it was very unnerving but he at least managed to look as if it didn't bother him, mostly.

“Wait just here,” Pope said as they arrived outside the Captain’s day cabin, then he entered and spoke to Commodore Klaus.

“Sir, Mister Grayson and Mister Winslow are waiting outside.”

“Very well, send them in.” Klaus had been pondering how to deal with these two ‘complications’ but finally decided to just play it as events occurred.

“Midshipmen Grayson and Winslow reporting aboard, sir!” John recited the required formality for the both of them as they saluted the officer seated at the desk. Sammy was quite content to let John handle this sort of thing. To Klaus’ credit he suppressed the urge to stand as he returned their salutes. In his entire career the officer had only once glimpsed His Majesty in the flesh, and then only from afar. Now the Emperor’s son and his legal ward were standing before him and they were both now under his command.

“Stand at rest.” Klaus said after a brief moment.

Both boys assumed the proper stance with Sammy taking most of his cues from John.

“Packets.” Klaus asked and was instantly obeyed as both boys handed over their folders and then stood back again. The folder that belonged to John was fairly thick with records of flight qualifications training and several basic naval courses completed prior to actual entry into service. Sammy’s folder was very, very, thin and was mostly devoted to his entry exam scores and the events aboard Gladius. His actions after the Jaan attack and the time spent with the

aliens ended his short but impressive list of actions and accomplishments.

Klaus' eyebrows raised at numerous points while leafing through John's folder and only twice while looking at Sammy's.

"Mister Grayson?"

"Sir?" John replied with no trace of nervousness. Senior officers had always been a part of his life.

"If I might say so you do seem to have some of your honored father's talent for piloting."

"Thank you, sir. It is the one thing that I actually seem to do fairly well."

Klaus smiled briefly at this response and decided that this particular son of the Emperor would probably do very well aboard Drake. Calm and collected but no evidence of a swelled ego.

Then he turned to Sammy.

"Mister Winslow?"

"Yes, sir." Sammy wasn't very cowed either, but for many other reasons.

"What useful talents do you bring aboard Drake?"

Sammy hesitated just a second before answering.

"Very few, sir. I am pretty good with a knife or with small arms."

There was something in the boy's eyes that told the man he was telling the truth; that and the accounts of what had happened

after the attack on the Gladius squadron. The entire fleet had read and reread the accounts published in Naval Proceedings and in the civilian media. Without this ordinary looking boy's gritty actions there would have been no trace of Gladius and all that that might now entail.

"Fair enough. I have little tolerance for bullshit and the both of you haven't tossed any of it about so far. Keep that up and you might do well on this vessel."

"Yes, sir." Sammy replied for both of them this time.

"Mister Grayson, you are assigned to flight operations under Commander Jordan. Not to say that you will be doing much flying, if any. Report to him after you leave here."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!" It was pretty much what John had expected but it had never been a sure thing, given the uncertainties of naval duty. He could have just as well wound up in Hull Maintenance if the Captain had taken a real dislike to him.

Mister Winslow. I am putting you under Lieutenant Chu in the Special Weapons Section. It is a new department operating in cooperation with the Marines and good marksmanship might be of some possible use there. It's a small section mostly devoted to field testing new combat technology."

"Thank you, sir. I will do my best." Sammy was fairly beaming.

"You will both do your best or the two of you will soon find yourselves on the beach. There can be no favoritism shown to either of you on this vessel despite your past accomplishments or who you

are related to. Good efforts and good results here and now are all that matter on this vessel.”

After they had saluted and departed Klaus was left wondering if he had overcooked his last words just a little.

In any event it had all gone better than expected for all sides.

“Here’s my place,” John announced as they looked out on the forward hanger deck. There was nothing but naval fighters and Marine assault craft in sight, and there was an awful lot in sight. “Two decks down and then to port for you.”

“I wonder what the hell Special Weapons really is?” Sammy wondered out loud as he gaped in awe at where John had been assigned.

“I dunno,” John confessed, “but if it involves blasting shit to pieces then you’re probably heading for the right place.”

“Maybe. Anyway, good luck to you today.”

“You too. Make tracks.”

And for the day they parted on separate paths once again, but on paths that at least for now ran parallel.

“Gawdamsunofabimotherf...” Lieutenant Chu was apparently being eaten alive by a dark, dull green metallic spider as big as a rhinoceros. In fact he was just trying to sort out the malfunctioning systems display inside the hideous thing’s cramped control pod.

“Uh sir, excuse me?” Sammy had been directed to the irate officer by one of the amused technical ratings who were standing around watching the fun. Sammy felt really silly as he finally decided to tug on the officers boot just to get his attention.

“What is it now?” Chu complained as he wriggled back out of the tight space and then turned to face this latest interruption.

“Uh, Midshipman Winslow reporting for duty, sir.” Sammy then saluted as is required on such a first meeting.

“Crap!” Chu returned the salute, remembering now that the two royal brats had been assigned to Drake. Now one of them was apparently assigned to him! “Well...welcome to Special Weapons!” Chu seemed like a reasonable sort of person assigned to an unreasonable task. In fact Chu was a genius of an engineer and a naval officer only as an after thought.

“Thank you, sir.” Sammy replied as he darted his eyes around looking at all of the ‘odd’ equipment in this place. And it all looked very lethal, whatever the hell it was.

Chu looked somewhat askance at the nondescript sort of boy standing in front of him. What to do with this short person?

“Are you any good with tools?” Chu finally asked.

“I can take anything apart, sir.”

“And can you then reassemble the pieces?”

“Occasionally, sir.”

“Fair enough,” Chu seemed on the verge of smiling. “Can you also walk and think at the same time?”

“If I concentrate, sir.”

Then Chu did smile. “Good. Get your buttocks into that Creeper and call out to me what shows up on the main view screen.”

“Yes sir. Creeper, sir?” Sammy looked at the giant ‘spider’ with some misgivings. The thing had two swiveling gun ports where you might expect some sort of mouth or fangs to be.

“Yes. Mostly my design, actually. Built for silent ground reconnaissance and close combat. No hydraulics elements in the leg systems at all. It’s all pseudo-muscle activated and driven by a central processor. Too complex to manually control otherwise.”

Lieutenant Chu had Sammy totally hooked by now. “Pseudo-muscles, Sir?”

“Parallel bundles of polarized poly-elastomers. Apply voltage with a positive polarity and they contract like a muscle. Negative and they expand. Very handy for walking and creeping about. Running also. They never get tired either.”

“Yes, sir.” Sammy had no clue what the officer was babbling about but he was now sure that he had been assigned to the best duty on Drake, at least for him. The vast and noisy hanger deck where John was assigned had seemed very intimidating to Sammy; this place was just right.

“What the hell do you want?” Jordan bellowed as he turned from chewing out his fourth pilot this morning. The man glaring at John seemed on the verge of actual, physical, detonation.

“Midshipman Grayson reporting for duty, sir.” John had been on occasion yelled at by all of humanity’s commanding officer and he had learned to deal with that early on. This guy wasn’t in the same league, no one was.

“Wonderful!” Jordan at least had lowered his voice to a shout. John simply stood silent and without expression, it had always been the best tactic for him when confronting irate male superiors.

“Reporting for duty?” Jordan snapped as if trying to cow the boy.

Keep it simple, no frills. Never give an officer an opening to use against you.

“Yes, sir. Captain Klaus instructed me to report to you.”

“Why?”

“Captain Klaus was not specific sir, he merely ordered me to report to you for duty.” John had once peed on the Admiral of The Fleet when very, very young and he knew all of the correct responses by now.

Jordan could finally see that he was not dealing with the average snot-face just out of academy. And on top of that this kid was the Almighty Emperor’s son!

“I read that you have...some flight experience?” Jordan asked in an almost conversational tone.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well? Such as?”

“I hold the basic civilian flyer license, a Class A civilian ticket for private passenger vessels carrying up to one-hundred passengers. A civilian ticket for cargo shuttle craft up to one-thousand tons. An Imperial Naval ticket for general small craft. I hold a Marine ticket for standard transport shuttles and assault craft. Also an Imperial Naval ticket for fighter-trainers up to Viper Class and I have had time in the...

“Grayson!” Jordan interrupted.

“Yes, sir?”

“Do please be quiet. I get the drift.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are your records for this endless litany of flight tickets?”

“Captain Klaus still has them to the best of my knowledge, sir. If you like I will go and try to fetch them for you.”

“Later. Come along with me for now!”

“Yes, sir.”

Jordan had clearly lost round one but he was not one to take defeat gracefully and certainly not from any green midshipman, no matter who his father might be.

“Leg delta now shows green, sir.” Sammy was using the headset by this time and no longer had to shout out of the Spider’s open side hatch.

“Excellent! Initiate full power up.”

“Sir?” Sammy had just been asked to turn the damned thing on!

“Power up the Spider. It’s right there on the touch panel. Big yellow thing.”

“I see it, sir. Here goes.”

Several things seemed to happen at once. The access hatch thumped shut, internal lighting dimmed while all of the controls seemed to glow brighter. Then the Spider stood up. Sort of. As spiders seem to do when aroused to bite something.

“Now use the control grip to move around in a tight circle.” Chu seemed to think that it should all be so very obvious.

“Sir, I have never done this before!” Sammy was about ready to turn the contraption off and bolt out the hatch.

“Remain calm. Follow my instructions.”

“Yes, sir.” Easy for him to say.

“Now fiddle with the control grip, use very small inputs. Get the feel of it.” Perhaps Chu wasn’t as loony as he sounded but all of the ratings in the section had now gathered to watch the mayhem that was sure to follow. Sammy was reclining almost on his back in a seat that had moved automatically to adjust to his small frame and then

hold him secure. The control grip in his right hand felt very good, sort of the way his father's long lost pistol had always filled his hand.

"Here goes." Sammy whispered to himself as he gently nudged the grip forward.

And then very soon it was as if he had found his true calling in life.

The assembled ratings had been expecting Chu's 'bug' to once more careen into a bulkhead or attempt to even climb one, as it was prone to do when one of them was trying to pilot the thing. Instead, the new middie was soon guiding the 'bug' around the deck as if it was indeed a real spider with a mind of its own.

"Excellent, Mister...uh?" Chu already had forgotten the boy's name.

"Winslow, sir."

"Yes. Good job. Now return it to the support pad and power down."

"Yes, sir." Sammy had wanted to take the thing out for a real workout but orders were orders.

"This vessel has the good fortune to have a full squadron of the new Vipers," Jordan explained tersely as John followed him into one of Drake's flight simulator areas.

"The 'F' variant, sir?" John asked.

Jordon turned and sort of glared at the boy for a moment before replying. "No, Drake has the 'C' models."

"Yes, sir. Have your people worked out the feedback problem on the 'C' model's coil controls?" John thought it was a sensible sort of question one pilot might ask another, and it was.

"Yes, dammit! We have the latest upgrades installed!" Apparently Jordon had been only further irritated by the modest inquiry. John refrained from further questions for the moment.

"Get in and stand by for a combat launch," Jordon motioned to the nearest simulator. "If you can manage that?"

"Yes, sir. Standard protocols or are tactical situation overrides permitted?"

"Use your best judgment!"

"Yes, sir."

As was the usual case all of this was attracting a few spectators and all of them wanted to see if the rumors about this boy and the legends about his father were true, or even humanly possible.

"Port-side deck clamp has failed to disengage," John reported calmly as he began to quickly power up the fighter-simulator.

"Shit!" Jordon muttered to himself, he had thought that old trick would have caught the boy and ended this nonsense. "Deck crew is manually releasing it." Jordon answered curtly.

"Roger." John waited for the third green light to appear before bringing the drive coils fully to power. And there it was.

“Viper One, launch release.” The flat voice of the simulator was still speaking as John did a full power departure. Some simulated atmosphere was lost from Drake’s simulated hanger deck as the fighter flashed outwards and into deep space.

Then all of the rumors and legends were proved to be very true.

The endless first day had finally ended and both new middies were back in their rat hole starting to recount their experiences.

“He sort of reminds me of your uncle, Sir Ian.” Sammy said of Chu as he toweled off after a hot shower. The tiny head had no such luxuries like a full body air dryer. “Very smart but sort of unorganized. Decent person, though.”

“So is your new title ‘Spider Pilot’ or what?” John asked as he prepared for his turn in the tiny shower/head.

“Hell if I know. How was your new boss?”

John had to pause for a minute as he tried to compose a reply.

“He’s very loud,” John finally answered.

“Total asshole, then?”

“Not totally. He finally gave up on trying to shake me.”

“And?”

“I am now officially the Standby Utility Pilot for the day watch.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Sammy asked as he finished pulling on his under shorts and then sat down to sort through the pile of book cards that John had returned with.

“It means that I get to run errands in a utility flyer if no one else is handy. The rest of the time I stand by, observe, and keep out of the way.”

“I see. What are all of these cards for?”

“Course studies. Didn’t Lieutenant Chu give you any book cards?”

“No. He probably didn’t even think about it. He’s sort of wrapped up in his work.”

“I’ll bet someone senior to him reminds him about it real fast. All middies get stuck with tons of the shit.”

“Wonderful.” Sammy had thought that his first day aboard Drake had been too easy and he was right.

The Summer Palace

“For the short term there will certainly be a large disruption in the passenger transport lines.” Ian was only repeating what the Emperor’s financial advisors had already told them both.

“I can’t see where delaying this will make any difference.” Daniel knew that the existence of the new drive technology was becoming common knowledge in the shipping and transport community. “The major passenger liners will be a thing of the past, replaced with simple and short duration transfer vessels.”

“Yes,” Ian agreed, “but the cargo vessels’ functions will remain much the same, except for their transit times.”

Daniel stood for a moment looking out at the new spring growth on the lower slopes surrounding this ancient place. Then he arrived at a final decision.

“Then an announcement must be prepared and released, and then the technology will be made available to the public.”

The Empire now had the means to greatly accelerate its expansion and that meant that exploration must also be greatly accelerated. A task best suited for the Navy.

“I think the practice of sending small and lightly armed exploration craft is too risky, considering the Jaan and Lord knows who or what else is out there. I’m going to propose to Fleet that exploration now be conducted by armed vessels in squadron force.” Daniel knew that his ‘proposal’ would be adopted, as all such ‘suggestions’ are that come from The Emperor.

John and Sammy had been about to give up on the day and get some needed sleep when a light tapping drew their attention to the slightly ajar door of their rat hole. Like almost all personnel doors in a warship it was on simple hinges and was manually opened and closed. Powered doors could fail in combat emergencies and simple is always safer. Cheaper too.

“What?” John asked as he turned towards the sound.

“May I come in?” It sounded like one of the other middies.

“Sure, door’s open.”

A head with jet black hair and very brown skin poked through the door and grinned at them.

“I am Juan. Actually I am Juan Carlos Perez, Junior.”

John stood and beckoned the short middle inside and then shook his hand. Sammy also stood and shook hands with the newly minted midshipman.

“Nice to meet you,” John smiled back, “take a load off.”

“Thanks.” Juan sat in the only chair there was while his hosts sat on their bunks. The boy seemed a little tense.

“I’m John, that’s Sammy,” John said to sort of start things off.

“Yes, I know. Everyone knows who you are but they aren’t too sure how to...meet and talk with you. So I decided to just find out.”

“Gosh, I don’t know,” John began in a serious tone. “You didn’t make an appointment through our social secretary or anything.”

For a moment Juan’s face went sort of blank until he saw that he was just being kidded, then his face lit up with a wide smile.

“Ah, what was I thinking?” Juan asked in mock shame.

“We’ll let it slide this time,” Sammy added. “Where do they have you working on this large barge?”

“I’m in the life support section at the moment. Mostly I’ve been working with the ratings who operate the greenhouses. I’m hoping to get assigned to communications later.”

“Me and Sammy have a lot of experience with greenhouses, mostly with just cleaning them.”

“Is it true...that you are a pilot? There have been rumors going around all day that you have been assigned to flight duties already!”

“Standby Utility Pilot. I get to run errands and stuff like that, but only in a utility flyer and only if no one else is available.”

“Oh. But still, you are a pilot!”

“Sort of. More like an errand boy.” Just like his father had been.

“Will they give you the wings to wear?”

“No, not yet. You have to command at least a shuttle for that.”

“I think that you will soon be wearing the wings,” Juan said with some assurance.

“So tell us about yourself,” Sammy said. “Where are you from?”

“El Dorado. My father makes hand crafted furniture from the native woods. A lot of it he makes for commissions from off-planet, even for customers here on Earth.”

“Sounds like it’s really pricey stuff.” Sammy replied. At this time in mankind’s progress almost anything truly hand made was a luxury item.

“Yes, very. Father wanted me to continue in the business with him but I cannot cut a straight line or pound a nail without bending it. I have none of his talents for such things. Eventually he agreed with me and I managed to get into the Navy.”

“Any brothers or sisters?” John asked.

“A sister who’s fourteen, and brothers who are six and four.”

Then Juan had to ask the questions that most people eventually got around to.

“May I... I mean what is your father, His Majesty, really like?” Juan seemed uncomfortable, as if he might be stepping over some sort of invisible protocol line.

“He’s just a person, like your father is.”

“Except...?” Juan asked.

“Except he’s the guy in charge of everything.”

Everything.

“Truly. It is a hard job he has.”

“You’re telling me. I sure wouldn’t want to do it. He didn’t want to do it either but things just sort of happened.”

The three of them could have talked through the night but it was already late and all of them really needed some sleep. After Juan had left John and Sammy agreed that they had made a new friend.

“See, it gets better after a while,” John said as he turned off his light.

“Yeah, maybe so.”

Chapter Two The Deep Black

“Mister Grayson!” Jordon seemed to have no other volume level other than full on.

“Yes, sir. I’m here, sir.” John was sitting five feet away trying to cope with what his book reader was telling him about naval procedures that pertained to boarding civilian vessels.

Jordon turned to see that the boy was indeed just where he had last been told to sit and be quiet. The officer was finding it very hard to find much fault with anything Midshipman Grayson did and that galled the man to no end. Not to say that he didn’t respect the boy and what he was capable of. Mister Grayson had ‘flown’ many circles around what the best pilots on Drake were able to do, if only in a simulator. Then there were all of those damned qualification tickets he held!

“Our sailing orders are now waiting for pickup at Fleet. Take a flyer and go pick them up.” It was a naval tradition for vessels that were grounded on the home planet. Orders for sailing could just as easily be impersonally transmitted but were instead hand written and hand delivered, at least on Earth and when the situation allowed the time for it.

“Yes, sir!” At last, something to do!

“Regulations require an armed escort of at least two Marines. Stop by Colonel Brock’s office and ask them to assign two of their men to you. They know the drill.”

“Yes, sir.” John gathered up his book cards to leave.

“And Grayson!”

“Sir?”

“Look sharp and keep your wits about you when you get to Fleet, don’t do anything to make us all look silly. And when you return aboard take the orders straight away to Captain Klaus, no detours.”

“I will, sir.”

“Then why are you still standing here?”

John came to attention and then left, quickly.

John had to venture into ‘Marine Country’ or the ‘Jungle’ as it was sometimes called to follow his orders and pick up an escort. Any naval rating or midshipman entering into these areas of the ship could always expect to have a bad time. Except of course John was not just any midshipman and the Imperial Marines had a very special relationship with his father.

Praetorians.

“Excuse me?” John was looking down at a Marine corporal trying to find his dropped writing stylus. Or rather he was looking at the man’s butt which was all that was in sight at the moment.

“Wait a minute!” Corporal Black could tell by the young voice that it was only another annoying middie who could just wait until he

was good and ready to talk to him. Eventually Black was ready and rose to face his visitor.

“It’s you! Err...Mister Grayson.” Black lost all of his ‘attitude’ at this moment.

“It is I,” John agreed with a grin. “I am ordered to pick up our sailing orders at Fleet. Regulations require a Marine escort.”

“Yes. They do! Wait right here!”

Black was gone for a few moments and John looked around at the other administrative types in the area. They all looked right back at him, at this son of the man who commanded them all.

Black returned in a very short time.

“Major Bartlett has detailed two Marines to draw side arms and to proceed to the forward hanger deck, they’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you, Corporal...?”

“Black, sir.” The ‘sir’ just sort of slipped out, Black had never called a middie ‘sir’ and would later be given a hard time for doing it now. At best a midshipman was addressed as ‘Mister’, if that.

“Then thank you again, Corporal Black.” With that John smiled nicely and departed for the hanger deck.

Privates Reed and Niccolini were almost as newly minted as John was. Both of them were still picking bits of invisible lint off of their sharply creased duty greens as they dashed to the flyer pad.

“Crap! He’s already there!” Reed exclaimed as the both of them came into view of the flyer and its pilot. The two Marines had been hurriedly told in very plain language about just who their flyer pilot would be and how they should conduct themselves. Now they had kept him waiting!

But not very long.

“Hi guys,” John smiled as the two Marines came to a quick halt in front of him and then stood at attention. “I’m John Grayson.”

“Yes Sir...Mister Grayson. We are assigned as your escort!” Reed explained.

“Then we had better get going. Captain Klaus might be a bit put out if we don’t deliver his sailing orders and soon.” John had wanted to greet them with a handshake but that was contrary to proper naval protocol and other eyes were probably watching them. An officer, or would be officer, was supposed to keep some emotional and physical distance from the enlisted men. It was the time tested way that the Navy and Marines functioned, the way they always had. An officer should be seen as a person to be obeyed and not as a friend, a system that was often harder on the officer than those under his command.

“Drake Operations, Flyer One ready for departure to Fleet Command.” John was a little nervous but he knew this routine by heart. A lot of people who wouldn’t ordinarily be paying any attention were watching and listening out of curiosity. Others were watching

and waiting for the Emperor's son to mess up or to succeed in this very routine duty.

Reed and Niccolini just made very sure that their seat restraints were fastened and tight.

"Flyer One, released for departure. Report on arrival at destination."

"Roger Operations. Departing now."

The small utility flyer lifted and moved off as if on rails, there was no minor bobble or hesitation as there would be with a pilot of only mortal abilities.

Jordon was watching this all and was unaware of the person who had silently moved to stand just behind him.

"Waste of good talent," Klaus said quietly.

Jordon turned in surprise to see his Captain looking past him at the departing flyer.

"Sir?"

"We both know he's the best damned pilot in the fleet, just like his father was. It's in his blood."

"There is that, sir." Jordon conceded. The boy was indeed his father's son.

"Then why is he toddling about in a utility flyer?"

"He's still very young, sir."

“So was his father when he laid it all on the deck against the Snakes.”

“What are you saying, sir?”

“Put him in something worth his time and ours. And put some wings on him for Chrissakes!”

Jordon had seen it all coming and had no good argument to counter with. Perhaps it had all been preordained. Both officers had viewed over and over the edited Gladius shuttle records and neither one of them could understand how the boy had ever managed to get his craft clear of that carnage. There were also his simulator runs for which there were no explanations at all.

And there again was the father who had taught him to fly.

“Yes, sir. I’ll give him a shuttle.”

“Another waste of our time and his.”

“A Viper? Surely not, sir?”

“Of course. What else?”

“He is the Emperor’s son, sir! All of hell will fall on us if any harm comes to him!”

“No, it will not. I have known good men who have served in close company to His Majesty. He is a hard rock to come up against if you are his true enemy, but we are not his enemy and he will know that.”

“Sir...”

“We still have three unfilled combat slots. Give him a Viper. On my authority if you would prefer it that way.”

Jordon could finally see what was behind Klaus’ words.

“No sir, on our authority. The both of us.”

“We need to test the high speed mode and we can’t do that in here.” Chu looked around at the small work shop area they had to work in as Sammy stood at his side. They needed more room to properly test the Spider.

“How about the aft hanger deck, sir?” Sammy had learned from John that the aft deck was the least busy while Drake was grounded. Maybe they might arrange for some time there for testing?

“Why not?” Chu asked himself out loud. “Hop in and power up. We can take it up in the cargo lift.”

“Yes sir, but shouldn’t we notify someone there or maybe get an okay...?”

“Whatever for?” Chu had no idea what the boy was worried about. A giant spider on the aft flight deck. What could possibly be the problem with that?

“Yes, sir. I’ll follow you with the Spider, if that’s all right?”

“Of course. Let’s get moving.”

And of course it was all right until the cargo lift’s doors opened onto the aft hanger deck. Four ratings were pushing an assault craft’s

drive unit forward in anticipation of taking it down in the lift to the rewind section.

“Hold up, cargo coming up!” Chief Rooney had seen the red light above the lift doors and called a halt. They could all use a breather anyway.

What came out of the lift caused some considerable excitement. Special Weapons was not a section well known to the rest of the vessel, it was small and obscure and sort of tight lipped. A bunch of brainy engineering types.

“Holy shit!” Seemed to be the favored expression as all of the ratings moved back and out of the way. Fast.

“Good morning, men.” Chu said cheerily as he walked past them, followed silently by something out of a nightmare. The spider was indeed eerily silent with no whir, hum or clank evident as it glided by on pad tipped legs. Six legs actually, as opposed to a proper spider’s eight walking legs. The padded ‘feet’ could also be used to grip and climb.

“This is not good!” Sammy thought as he carefully kept pace behind his officer. The 360 degree view screen was displaying a barely controlled pandemonium in progress on the hanger deck. The spider had more of an organic appearance than it did a mechanical one, and most people tend to avoid large spiders, improper leg counts or not.

“This is fine here,” Chu said into the small comm link he carried. “Take it up and down the hanger at best speed. Keep an eye on the power loads, don’t push it past the muscle red limits.”

“Yes, sir.” Sammy hesitated a moment before speaking again. “Uh, sir?”

“Yes...Winslow?” Chu was finally remembering the middle’s name.

“People here are pretty agitated by this thing, sir. Should we maybe not be doing this right here and now?”

Chu glanced around as if unaware of the large number of very spooked ratings who were trying to decide between fight and flight.

“Well...try not to step on any of them.” Chu was an amazing engineer but his lack of situational judgment would assure that he had no shining naval career ahead of him. Not that he really cared about such things, the Navy was just the best place to build and experiment with the things that had always fascinated him.

“What the hell is that?” Captain Klaus was on the bridge at the moment and on the view screen that displayed the aft hanger deck was an image not soon to be forgotten.

“That would be Lieutenant Chu and his spider, sir.” Drake’s Engineering Officer had to suppress a grin as he answered the Captain.

“His what?” Klaus demanded. Drake’s commanding officer was not even close to being amused.

“It’s one of the Special Weapons projects, sir. For recon and close combat. It’s very new, one of a kind so far.”

“Come with me!” Klaus was already moving as fast as appearances permitted. Lieutenant Chu was not going to have a very good morning this day.

John was directing the flyer’s data link to inquire as to where exactly at Fleet Headquarters one picked up sailing orders. He had not been given any specific directions from Jordon, midshipmen are expected to sort those things out for themselves. Reed and Niccolini were sitting just behind their pilot, finally at ease with the idea that a middie, a mere boy, was at the helm of this small craft and apparently doing an amazingly good job of it.

The tinny voice of the link finally supplied the needed information. “Main personnel entrance. Office of Fleet Routing. Visiting Officer parking on pad four, blue section. No ground transport available.”

Some more button tapping brought up a ground map of the area.

“Great! We’ll have to hike about a half mile, guys.” John said over his shoulder to the two Marines.

At least the weather was supposed to be nice and the Marines certainly knew how to hike.

“Explain this!” Klaus was standing very close in front of Lieutenant Chu, in his face as it were.

“Sir?” As usual Chu seemed sort of detached from it all.

“Bring that...thing over here and turn it off, now!”

“Yes, sir.” Chu could finally see that he was in some difficulties here and quickly spoke into the link to the Spider.

“Winslow?”

“Yes, sir?” Sammy was at the far end of the hanger but he had already spotted who was standing beside Chu.

“Move down to where I am here and then shut down.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s a person in that God awful thing?” Klaus had never been briefed at all on this obscure project.

“Yes sir, of course. Mister Winslow in fact. He’s very good with the controls, quite the best person I have for...”

“Silence!”

“Yes, sir.”

Even Kluas took a few steps back as the Spider silently glided up and powered down, its ‘abdomen’ lowering to rest on the deck. The thing just looked evil, its small beam guns seemed like fangs protruding outwards.

“You may open up and come on out,” Chu said without being prompted from Klaus.

“Yes, sir.” Sammy would rather have stayed right where he was. He could see that his earlier reservations had been right on the mark and now Captain Klaus was truly pissed off at them!

Fleet Headquarters was one of the largest buildings on the entire planet, and it never really seemed to be having a slow day, or night. It was said that if you could make it up the endless front steps of the centuries old structure then you could easily pass your yearly physical tests.

“Good God!” Reed exclaimed without realizing he was even speaking aloud. The central ‘lobby’ of the place was a wide sea of marble, polished brass, an ornate ceiling high enough for clouds to form, and worst of all, high ranking officers. Luckily John had been there many times and mostly knew what he was doing and where he was going.

“Come on, we have time to say hello to Sergeant Connery on the way.”

“Sergeant Connery, Mister Grayson?” Niccolini asked as they trailed after the boy who was their only life raft in this sea filled with sharks.

“Command Sergeant Major of The Imperial Marines. He’s the guy who really runs this place.”

Reed and Niccolini would have rather been told that they were all going to now strip and dash naked through molten lava. Connery’s awful visage was posted in every Marine training barracks in the

Empire. Right next to the Commandant and directly under the Emperor's portrait.

"Here we are," John said as they arrived at a wide office entrance set right in the middle of the far wall of the vast 'lobby'.

Sergeant Connery happened to just be standing there, as if expecting them, and he was. The man never seemed to be taken by surprise and had his own network of 'eyes' to keep him informed. The weathered marine snapped to strict attention and saluted the green midshipman who was now daring to enter his domain. John managed to resist the urge to run and hug the rough hewn man while also managing a proper salute of his own. Connery had once taught a much younger John how to properly salute, that and a lot of other things.

Connery had also taught the Emperor the art of fly fishing, and again, a lot of other things.

"Just look at you, Mister Grayson!" Connery finally said with a broad smile on his face.

"They let most anyone wear this uniform these days," John was also ginning like an idiot.

And then the both of them violated several regulations and all naval decorum when they did properly hug.

Reed and Niccolini were just very happy to be ignored for the moment.

Sierra Academy, North America

It had all seemed like a very good idea at the time to send Addie to a good boarding school so that she might get off to a better start in life, and Addie had reluctantly agreed. It is a hard thing to tell the Emperor “thanks, but no thanks.” Especially when he had been so very kind and generous towards her and Sammy.

“Miss Weems, can you possibly offer any explanation for your conduct?” Headmaster Chung had never been faced with such a situation as this. It was unheard of in such a staid and prestigious institute of learning as this!

Addie was in a lot of trouble and this was only her second day in this tight-assed place. The first day her assigned female roommate had demanded other quarters immediately, as if a leper had been put in with her. And now this.

“He called me “mud skinned trash”, and in public, in front of other people! So I kicked him in the balls!”

Chung’s hands seemed to flutter in distress at this rather blunt account of events, even if it did seem to agree with the witnesses.

“The boy is in hospital, Miss Weems. His...injuries required surgical intervention. His parents are threatening actions!”

“Good! I hope he’s a permanent soprano!”

“Miss Weems, it is very true that Master Hopkins’ words were ignorant, crude and unwarranted, but we simply cannot allow such conduct as yours to occur here at Sierra.”

“No problem, lard butt! I’m out of here!” With that Addie turned and stalked from the gasping man’s overstuffed office.

Sierra was one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the entire Empire but Addie was not spending another night under its hallowed roof. She just wanted to go home. To her home. New Albion. Anyplace but this snob factory!

Klaus had calmed himself enough to realize that chewing out an officer in front of ratings and midshipmen was very bad form and was also detrimental to morale.

“Mister Winslow!”

“Yes, sir.” Sammy had only been following orders but that wasn’t helping his heart rate any at this point.

“Can you steer that infernal device back to where it belongs?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Then do so right now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chu was instructed to come along with the Captain to his day cabin where words would be used that others could not hear. Sammy would have the cargo lift all to himself and the Spider, and to his thoughts.

“I’ll probably be cleaning greenhouses again!”

With the Command Sergeant Major of The Imperial Marines acting as a guide and escort there was absolutely no delay in locating and handing over HMS Drake's sailing orders.

"Just sign this form, please." The Ensign in charge of such transfers seemed very eager not to cause any sort of delay that Connery might later remember. No officer worthy of his rank ever pisses off a very senior rating or enlisted marine without very good cause, it can make life very complicated if they do.

"Thank you." John did sign and then accept the thick and ribbon tied envelope.

"You'd best hustle your butt back to Drake now, Mister Grayson." Connery advised.

"Yes, sergeant. Will you be laying the usual bet with father again this year?"

"Of course. But I always win."

"Father has a new fly rod this year. Mother had it made for him for his birthday. It's a Hemmings. Father even let me hold it once, carefully."

"A Hemmings, huh? An overpriced rod won't help any, I still know some tricks that I never taught him."

"I sort of thought that was the case, so does father."

John had introduced Reed and Niccolini to the sergeant when they first met, and then the sergeant promptly ignored them. The both

of them felt like they were eavesdropping on private family matters and in a way they were.

Sergeant Connery had been one of the marines who took part in the raid on a planet called Bones. It was there that he had met the future Emperor and witnessed what had been done to him and what he was capable of.

“Proceed to coordinates specified and reconnoiter for any possible inhabitable systems and any indications of intelligent life. Observe all war time precautions and procedures.”

There was a great deal more in the orders but that was the meat of it.

“This is a full combat squadron, not some sort of wandering mapping corvette!” Klaus was not too well pleased with this new sort of assignment.

“Reconnaissance in force, sir. That seems to be the new tactic since the Jaan came onto the scene.” Lieutenant Commander Pettigras was Drake’s Executive Officer.

“Yes I know, but a fully armed squadron out poking about for anything of use to the Empire?”

“Well sir, if we find something and it pokes at us we can surely poke back. And with the new drive system we can search enormous areas in very little time.”

“All true.” Klaus sighed and leaned back from his desk. “Well we have our orders, let’s try to do a proper job with them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Initialize final preparations for departure. Up ship in six days.”

Summer Palace

“Sire, Miss Weems has just now arrived and seems intent on packing her belongings.” The Palace’s Chief of Staff seemed rather ill at ease relaying this untidy bit of news.

“What? She’s supposed to be at Sierra!”

“Yes, Sire. But she is indeed here now and if I might add, she seems very...distraught.”

“Notify the Lady Ellen and have her meet Us at the girl’s rooms.” Daniel was already up and moving from his desk and wondering what this latest family calamity was all about.

John had been curtly told to report to Flight Operations after delivering the sailing orders to Captain Klaus. When he arrived on the hanger deck every Viper pilot assigned to Drake was lined up in two columns facing one another, with Jordon at the far end from John.

“Looks like someone is getting winged,” John thought as he started to move off toward his assigned place in Jordon’s office. He would have liked to stop and observe the whole thing but orders are orders and Klaus had been pretty snappy about it. The boy had seen

this sort of ritual before and both envied and pitied the guy who would be 'walking the line.'

"Mister Grayson!" Jordon bellowed.

John froze for a second and then turned to see that they were all looking at him. In fact every person on the hanger deck was moving to watch what was occurring. "Stand to the line!"

"Oh crap! It's me!" John should have seen it coming and now he did.

"Any time today will do, Mister Grayson!" Jordon barked.

"Yes, sir!" John dashed to obey and came to a quick halt at the end of the two rows of pilots.

Jordon held up a shiny pair of gold wings. "Come and get them, if you want them bad enough!"

Walking The Line was an ages long tradition that navy pilots often had to endure when getting 'winged'. Every one of the pilots in the line was allowed one solid punch at the honored person of the moment. But of course there was no way that any of the men were going to give one of their best shots to a puny little middie, so something else had been decided upon.

WHAP!

John had been expecting total annihilation but the painful slap on his behind caught him by surprise.

"Best keep moving or I'll give you another," the first slapper advised.

There were thirty-seven slappers in the line and John did keep moving. You were supposed to walk at steady pace if you could and the boy did so, at a *quick* and steady pace.

In good time the end of the line was reached.

“Stand to attention!” Jordon commanded.

John wobbled a little but managed to do so despite the sensation that his backside must be in actual flames.

Then Jordon ‘winged’ him and as he pinned on the gold emblem he held, and for once he had some quiet words to say.

“Against all common sense you are being assigned a Viper. Do not ever dare to give me cause to regret that decision.”

John thought that the pain was causing him to hallucinate.

“A...A Viper, sir?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, it was hard enough to say the first time.” Jordon was actually smiling, a little.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t be too grateful, you have a hell of a lot of work ahead of you.”

“Yes, sir. Sir, I have to ask this. Did my...did His Majesty have any hand in...?”

“He did not!” Jordon replied sharply. “And if he had ordered such a thing I would have resigned my commission on the spot!”

“Thank you sir, I apologize for asking.”

“Accepted. Now get back through the line!”

The trip back through the line was not to be feared, handshakes and some much less painful slaps on the back were all that had to be endured. That and the three cheers from the entire flight deck.

The Summer Palace

“I’m just a port rat and I always will be!” Addie had tears on her cheeks as she sat trying to explain the day’s events to the Emperor and Lady Ellen. “Everyone at that place could see it too!”

Ellen sat down and put her arm around the tearful girl. “I grew up feeding chickens and harvesting wheat, this husband of mine grew up pushing cargo around,” she explained.

“And both of you...and God bless both of you, had parents and homes and didn’t steal and do other...things like that!”

“We were lucky, you weren’t.” Daniel added. “That can all be put right if you will give it a chance to be.”

Addie sat in silence for a time before finally responding.

“Sammy made it into the Navy and now he’s where he has always wanted to be.” She hesitated. It seemed like she wanted to say a lot more.

“And where do you want to be?” Ellen prompted gently.

“Home. New Albion. I was trying to save enough to open a small shop in a nicer part of town.”

“What sort of shop?” Daniel asked.

“Flowers. I wanted to have a flower shop. That sounds sort of silly and small time but it’s what my mother did.”

“Then you do remember her?” Ellen asked.

“Yes, some. I remember the good smells from the shop, the fresh flowers.” Addie seemed to finally be able to talk freely, as a child might to a parent.

“Where was her place?” Daniel gently asked.

“I’m not too sure, not on New Albion. I was very small and it was before things happened. I’m not even sure it was her place, she may have just worked there.”

“What ‘things’ happened?”

“It’s all still a mess in my head but I was put with some people migrating...from wherever I was at to New Albion.”

“What happened to those people?” Daniel asked.

“I was with them for what seemed a long time, and then I just left, I ran.”

“Why?”

Addie didn’t respond to the question but instead just looked hard into her Emperor’s eyes. What Daniel saw there answered many questions.

Ellen held her close and looked at Daniel. Her eyes seemed to say, “Give her a chance at what she dreams of, not at what might seem the very best for her.”

Daniel nodded. "We will see to it that you have what you need on New Albion. I know a man there with some good business sense you can count on for advice." He grinned. "He even managed to be the father of my wife, not that I hold that against him."

Ellen didn't even whack him.

Sammy was lying flat on his bunk with his eyes closed, he was feeling very relieved to have just survived another day. Then John quietly entered the rat hole and *very* carefully sat down.

"How'd it go with you?" Sammy asked without even opening his eyes.

"Okay. I ran an errand to Fleet and then did some other stuff. And you?"

"Chu got chewed."

"Huh?"

"We tested the Spider on the aft hanger deck without getting an okay from anyone, Captain Klaus was extremely pissed off about it." Sammy roused himself enough to sit up and look at John. Something looked different about his friend. "Shit! Wings!"

"Yeah. And a sore butt!"

"Did they give you a shuttle?" Sammy was very awake and wide-eyed by now. The glittering gold wings on John's chest seemed to glow in the low illumination of just the two bunk lights.

"No."

“Oh. Sorry. What did you get?”

“A Viper.”

Sammy knew by now that John was piss-poor at lying. It just wasn't a talent his friend had ever possessed or ever would.

“No shit?” Sammy's mouth seemed unable to close all the way. Viper pilots were the minor gods of the Navy.

“No shit. It's really sort of scary.”

Sammy sat for a while longer before he could manage to ask another question.

“So then why is your butt sore?”

John explained the process for getting 'winged' as he stood and undressed in anticipation of a shower. Now Sammy could see what was being described.

Sammy then laughed too loud and for entirely too long in John's estimation. “Your ass is all red and blotchy looking!”

“Well, mother was always fretting when we first got home that we all looked pale and didn't have good color in our cheeks. So now I do.” John was trying to peer around at his abused backside to inspect the damage.

“We should send a vid to her!”

“Perhaps not,” John decided. Knowing his mother she would quickly arrive bearing ointments and admonitions for one and all.

Hawkings Institute

“Mister Murphy!” Professor Danforth had little patience with students who were not paying attention, no matter who they were or who their fathers were.

“Yes, sir?” Michael had been gazing out the window of the lecture hall wondering what John and Sammy might be doing at the moment. He was also wondering if he had made the right decision by opting out of the Navy. There now seemed to be a great void in his life, something missing.

“Do you find my lecture boring?”

In fact Michael knew more about non-space theory than the professor did, but the course was required and so here he was getting a flat butt on the ancient wooden seats. Moreover, yes, he was indeed bored.

“No sir, I apologize.”

“Then perhaps you can step up here and recap for everyone what I have been talking about for the last half hour?”

“Yes, sir.”

Of course Michael did, at times wandering off into related areas that no one at all in the hall understood, including Professor Danforth. It was the last time that Danforth paid any notice of Michael’s lack of attention.

“It seems perfect, Chief.” John was testing the full range of motion that the new pressure suit had. Nothing was getting pinched or squeezed in the process.

“And under the arms?” Chief Hoyt was like most suit fitters and tended to fuss too much over his finished product.

“Feels fine, not too tight at all.” John had worn pressure suits many times before and knew what a good fit should feel like.

“All right then, Mister Grayson. You have a new pressure suit. Mind you don’t grow too fast, I don’t want to be repeating this every few months!”

“I’ll try to restrain myself, Chief. Thank you.”

Then John signed the same sort of form that his father once had. If he broke any part of the suit or lost anything through neglect he had to pay for it. The Navy was very tiresome about that sort of thing. This was of little concern to John but it had been of great concern to his father who had only a paltry midshipman’s pay to exist on. Tucked away in John’s locker in the rat hole was a drawing ‘card’ issued by the Imperial Bank, a ‘card’ with no limit on it. Sammy had one too, but the entire concept had all seemed very abstract and unreal to the port rat. Money was something you had to work for, or at the very least, steal.

“In the future you will please be a bit more forceful about your misgivings, Mister Winslow.” Chu seemed to be actually embarrassed

saying this. "I will give more consideration to your opinions of the situation at hand."

"Yes, sir. Are we still...in operation here?"

"Yes, if we get approval from the higher-ups before we do anything alarming. But in the Captain's words I am standing on thin ice that has a lot of hot water beneath it."

"Yes, sir."

"Also, it has come to my attention, rather forcefully I might add, that I have neglected to start you on your required course work."

"Uh oh!" Sammy thought. It had all seemed too good to be true anyway.

"Behold!" Chu turned and pointed at an appallingly high pile of book cards sitting on an equipment table.

"Oh God!" Sammy said out loud.

"Agreed. Keep us both out of the hot water beneath the thin ice and get started on them. They're numbered in the sequence to be completed."

"Yes, sir."

"And Winslow?"

"Sir?"

"If you need help with them I will be available for you at anytime, anyplace."

"Yes, sir. Thank you for that."

Sammy decided then and there that Chu was a person to be counted as a friend, at least as far as superior officers could ever be counted as being anyone's friend.

VD-CS10. That was the number on the Viper's aft fuselage. Viper Drake C Squadron, number ten. The 'VD' part seemed to be a running joke with just about everyone, even John had eventually figured that one out. Now John had to meet with the three ratings in his maintenance crew and attempt not to make a fool of himself in the process.

"Gawd, he's just a damned tyke!" Rating Tarkington whispered as John approached from the direction of the ops office.

"He's also the Emperor's damned tyke, and keep that in mind!" Senior Rating Jenkins hissed.

They would all be keeping that in mind. How could they not?

The three ratings were in spotless work suits for this first meeting, the Viper was gleaming. Jenkins called his crew to attention and saluted, as all first meetings required. John stopped and came to attention as well, returning the salute.

"Viper ten is ready for your inspection, Mister Grayson. Crew Chief Jenkins at your service."

"Thank you, Jenkins. Please stand easy, all of you." John suddenly felt like a total imposter. He was now in at least theoretical command of these men and that was something he had never been faced with. It was quite the most intimidating thing he could imagine.

A handshake for all seemed like the place to start, and it was.

“I can see that you have all put in a lot of work here, thank you for that.” The entire slot looked as if it had been hand polished. So did the Viper.

“I have the bird’s log ready for you to inspect, Mister Grayson.” Jenkins seemed a bit stiff and ill at ease to John.

“Okay, but let’s all go and take a load off first. We need to talk some.”

It was the same sort of thing that John’s father had done, on more than one occasion.

By the end of the duty day the crew of VD-CS10 was breathing much easier. After John had left there were a few moments to compare notes.

“He’s not the sort I was expecting,” Tarkington began. “No airs about him, just a regular sort of...lad. He talks to us like we were...people.”

“They say his father’s like that, or was before he took up his present trade.” Rating Spaatz offered. Not that he really knew, it was just a common tale told over a strong brew.

“Well, the lad knows his flying business and that’s more than can be said for half of the pilots on this tub. That’s good enough for me!” Jenkins concluded.

Sammy was again lying on his bunk at the end of the day, holding his head. John then finally arrived and collapsed face down on his own bunk.

“We could always just jump ship,” John mumbled, wanting only rest and sleep and no one at all to command.

“Sounds good to me,” Sammy agreed. “I’m gonna wash out anyway.”

“No you’re not.”

“I can’t understand half of the crap in my course studies!”

“So? Get some help. I’ll help where I can.”

By now both of them were upright and facing each other.

“Chu did say to come to him if I needed to,” Sammy conceded.

“There you go. Consider the alternative.”

“What’s that?” Sammy asked.

“Having to explain to father why you blew it all.”

“Shit!” That was not something to be considered at all.

John had the shower first this night and as he emerged Sammy had at least one welcome thing to pass on.

“We get a twelve hour leave, day after tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Then it’s off to the deep black for maybe six months or forever.”

“Well, at least our naval careers will last for that long.”

Being The Emperor of The New Empire and all of the rest of the lengthy title, Daniel had the means to keep discrete tabs on just about anyone. The progress of two midshipmen was no challenge at all for his intelligence people. It was information that The Lady Ellen also shared, if Daniel wanted any peace.

“How did their day go?” Ellen asked as they both of them took turns trying soothe two cranky infants. Most evenings the multiple nurses and nannies departed for a few hours, leaving the royals some time alone with their little ones.

Daniel hesitated for a moment before answering, it was always something that heightened Ellen’s senses

“Well?”

“They both did well today,” Daniel finally replied. “Samuel started on his course work.”

“And John?” Ellen could see something coming here.

“Got winged.”

“Really? That’s wonderful! All of that time in simulators and shuttles paid off, and now he’s going to be in command of one!”

“Err...no.” Daniel wished he were anyplace but right here and now.

“What? He’s a very good shuttle pilot!”

“Very true. But they didn’t give him a shuttle.”

“But you said he got his wings!”

“He did. They gave him a Viper.” There, he had said it.

It was very silent for a time in the royal nursery. Even the twins had shut up and decided to just listen for now.

“I forbid it! After all he has been through I forbid it!” Ellen’s eyes were close to spitting actual sparks.

“Not up to you,” Daniel replied calmly.

“Then it can be up to you!”

This was all going just about as Daniel had thought it might.

“Not up to me either.”

“You’re the Emperor! Everything is up to you!”

Things were getting noisy again, even the twins were tuning up for another duet.

“He can already best me in one-on-one combat, and no one else can come close.”

“He’s still just a boy! You can’t let him...!”

“He’s no longer ‘just a boy’. He now wears the uniform that he has more than earned.”

“Then I will forbid him!” Ellen was very much beside herself at this point and she was not one to easily reach such a state.

“You can forbid him all you like,” Daniel replied calmly, “but in the end you will only have built a wall between yourself and your son. He will not obey you in this!”

“I’m his mother, he has always obeyed me!”

“As a child and as a good son, yes. He has moved past all of that now and you must come to accept that fact.”

But Ellen could not accept it, at least not right here and now.

Daniel slept in one of the guest suites that night, where it was all very, very quiet.

All newly assigned pilots are expected to take their craft out for a shake down flight, operational conditions permitting. The choice of test flight profiles is up to the pilot, within reason of course.

“An approach to the Summer Palace and then a hover and go at the main pad?” Jordon could see nothing wrong with the overall flight plan, it was very conservative except for the highly restricted turn around point.

“I cleared it with security, sir.”

“Security?”

“Uh, Palace Security, sir. They sort of know me there.”

“No doubt. Going to show off a little for the family, are you?”

“Well, yes sir. Just a bit. If I may?”

“You may, keeping in mind the purpose of your flight. But if you do anything outside of the lines you’ll be standing here again handing over your wings.”

“Understood, sir. I can change the profile if you would prefer, sir.”

“The profile is fine. Just avoid any temptations along the way.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please remain still!” Chu had been messing with the suit’s programming for what seemed like hours to Sammy. Just getting the uncomfortable thing tailored to his short frame had been an ordeal in itself.

“Sir, I need a break. Please!”

“Can’t it wait? I almost have the color compensations zeroed out!”

“If I don’t take a piss things are going to get shorted out, sir!”

“Damn! Well, go then. Leave it powered up, though. I don’t want to have to restart everything.”

“Yes sir, thank you!”

Sammy was only a faint blur as he left the test bay. Not that he was moving that fast, the metal mesh ‘garment’ that he was wearing rendered him almost completely invisible in daylight and totally invisible at night. It was a low power variant of the shield technology that allowed light to be bent around an object and then sent along on its original path. You could probably spot it in the daylight if you knew exactly where to look and what to look for.

The nearest head was down a long companionway and along the way Sammy had to dodge people who had no idea he was there. The one officer who was using the head had an unfortunate accident

when Sammy was finally able to open the front of the suit and get some relief.

It was sort of a startling sight.

“Empire control, Viper Drake Charlie Ten holding at outer zone limits, delta area.” One simply didn’t fly right on into the most restricted airspace in the Empire, even with a clearance. You had best follow all of the rules because heavy weapons were always watching your every move.

“Viper Drake, you have full clearance on His Majesty’s personal authority. And welcome home, Mister Grayson.”

“Empire control, roger. Is this Captain Bell, sir?”

“Roger. Steer clear of the corral if you can, they have two new foals just now out and about.”

“Will do, and thank you sir.”

His Majesty now kept horses for guests to ride the mountain trails on, although he always avoided the great smelly beasts himself. For a time the horse barn had housed only a naval fighter, the Emperor’s own craft. Eventually Daniel had been persuaded to restore the equine population, for tradition’s sake.

A full clearance meant that John could do a close fly-around of the ancient palace and he was pretty sure that his family would be someplace outside to watch. They were all there, save one.

“I wonder where mother is?” John thought as he waved from the beneath the raised canopy and hovered for a moment just off of the main terrace. Everyone else was there save for Michael who was off getting over-educated. “She’s probably changing diapers or something equally disgusting.”

A final circle of the palace was all that time and his flight profile allowed, then John shot off to the east, a fast diminishing speck in the pale blue morning sky.

“Full circle,” Ian said quietly as he stood with the man he had been beside for so long.

“What’s that?” Daniel had been lost in his own thoughts and turned to look at his friend.

“He has started it all again, where his father left off.”

Daniel did not answer but just nodded. He would have given all that he possessed to be in that fighter himself, but in a way he really was in that Viper.

“How do I look?” Sammy had been fussing with his uniform for a good twenty minutes by now. All midshipmen going on any sort of shore leave had to pass inspection first.

“Ugly, but I guess we can’t do anything about that.” John said as he gave his friend a careful once-over. “Let’s get going, we don’t want to keep the shuttle waiting and we still have to get a sign-out from our officers.”

“Its not due for another forty minutes!”

“Father is sending it and it’ll be crewed by some of the Imperial Guard.”

“Then I guess we had better be going.”

Sammy didn’t want to keep those guys waiting at all. They never seemed to smile much, especially when they looked hard at him. What he didn’t realize was it was pretty much the only way they looked at anyone.

The two split up and made for their respective duty sections, presenting themselves there for the required inspections.

“Shore leave?” Chu hadn’t been paying close attention when Sammy had told him about it two days ago. “Where to?”

“It’s here sir, on the leave form.” Sammy handed over the paper that Chu had to sign. The officer’s eyes finally scanned down to the leave destination.

“I see. Of course!” Chu quickly scribbled his name and returned the form to Sammy. “Have a nice time, Mister Winslow. Give my regards to your family.”

“Thank you sir, I will.”

His family.

“How did it go with you?” Sammy asked John as they stood waiting on the forward hanger deck.

“Lint on my sleeve, but he signed off anyway.”

“You didn’t have any lint anywhere!”

“Probably not but Jordon likes to give middies a hard time.”

“I think Chu would have signed off if I had showed up naked and painted green.”

“Count your blessings.”

“I do.”

“Heads up, our ride’s here.”

A gleaming, polished black shuttle bearing the Imperial crest was gliding smoothly in through the hanger portal. This arrival pretty well halted all activity in the hanger.

Captain Klaus was watching all of this from the bridge and for a moment was panicked by the thought that His Majesty might actually be in that shuttle. But then the arriving shuttle hadn’t given the traditional “Empire arriving” notification.

“Damned impressive sight, sir!” Drake’s Executive Officer commented as he stood next to Klaus. Four of the black-clad Imperial Guards were already out of the shuttle and lined up on either side of the boarding ramp, and they were armed.

“It is that,” Klaus agreed. It was also damned intimidating. “I want some preparations made for when that thing returns, His Majesty might just decide to see his boys off in person.”

“Yes sir, I’ll see to it. Best to be ready just in case.”

The Summer Palace

“Father will be standing out in front of everybody, we stop at ten paces and salute, holding it till he returns it or maybe starts shooting at us.” John’s whispered coaching was very welcome by Sammy as the shuttle gently touched down on the pad.

“I remember, but thanks. Then what?”

“It’ll come natural, just your family welcoming you home.”

Family.

“Oh yeah, one more thing. Always thank the pilot if you have time.” John added as they stood to leave the shuttle. It was something that his father always tried to do, as a courtesy from one pilot to another.

And they did thank the pilot, both of them shaking the man’s hand.

“Welcome home,” Daniel said simply as he properly returned the two sharply executed salutes, then he beckoned the two boys forward for an embrace. “Things are not good with your mother and your Viper assignment on Drake,” Daniel said quietly as he bent forward some to hold his boys. “Go very easy in that direction.”

“Yes, father.” John had sensed that perhaps all was not well when he stepped off the shuttle. His mother had seemed to be standing just a little further from his father than was normal. She was not smiling, either.

“And Samuel?” Daniel turned to look at the boy.

“Sire?”

“Adelle wants to talk to you in private later, she has decided to return to New Albion.”

“Yes Sire, thank you.” Sammy wondered what that was all about?

Both of them wished that Michael had been here.

“A flower shop?” Sammy hadn’t been too tactful in his tone and a sharp whack on the head brought him more into line.

“And what’s the matter with that?” Addie snapped.

“Well, nothing. Not really. Sorry!” Sammy did remember all of the flowers and plants the girl had, or did have in her small home.

“It’s something I can handle. I can’t handle living here no matter how good everyone has been to me, and they have all been very good to me!”

“Okay. I don’t blame you. But...?”

“But what?”

“Can you swing this, I mean the money and all?”

“His Majesty practically offered to buy Bakerstown for me if I wanted it. I settled for a loan that I can and will pay back!”

“So can I maybe buy in as a partner?” Sammy’s business offer and smile were all that the girl really needed right then. Sammy got properly kissed, on the lips and everything!

It was very nice.

“It’s what I’m good at,” John finally managed to say. His mother had had all of the words up until now. “It was what father was and still is very good at.”

“You don’t have to be flying a Viper! A shuttle, or perhaps a...”

“Utility flyer? Cargo sled?”

“Don’t mock me, please!”

“I’m not, mother. Nevertheless, I am where I have always wanted to be, doing what I have always wanted to do. It’s what I can do and do well.”

Ellen seemed almost to visibly sag inward as she realized her words were of no more use. Her son was no longer her child to protect as best she could, he was a man now in spirit and actions, if not fully in body.

“Then at least try to be careful.” It was what all mothers sooner or later said to their sons as they held them close and perhaps for the last time.

Michael did just barely manage to get to the Summer Palace before his two companions in life had to leave.

“I had to finish the quarter term exams, even though I entered mid-quarter.” Michael explained.

“How’d you do?” Sammy asked, as if he had to.

“Aced them. The whole thing is a waste of time.”

“I wish I could say that about the crap I have to learn!”

“Maybe we could trade places?” Michael replied, only half in jest.

“Second thoughts?” John asked. He could plainly see that Michael was not a happy person.

“I thought I was doing the right thing, but now it all seems sort of silly on my part.”

“Maybe you could still...”

“Fleet takes a dim view of ex-middies changing their minds every few weeks. I’ll stick it out at Hawkings for now. Father has some interesting work that I can help with later on.”

Michael was left standing on the landing pad. He looked very small and alone even though he was surrounded by all of his extended royal family.

Chapter Three Scattered Seeds

HMS Drake, Port Bremen

“All hands will stand by for up ship in sixty seconds!”

The words echoed through all compartments in the enormous vessel, but the words were more of a ritual than anything else. John and Sammy were in the rat hole stashing away the choice edibles they had brought back with them from their very brief shore leave.

“So what do we do?” Sammy asked with some concern after the announcement.

“Nothing. Only Engineering, Navigation, and the bridge really have much to do right now.”

“Oh. So what do we do with this booze?”

Each boy had been given a bottle of wine to present to the captain’s mess in the event that they were ever invited to dine there. Another tradition.

“We take it to the captain’s steward as soon as we have time.”

“Why the rush?”

“Because us children aren’t allowed to have such liquids down here.”

“It looks sort of old anyway,” Sammy said as he peered at the dusty bottle he held. Sort of old and sort of priceless.

Up ship was accompanied with only a slight shudder and a few muffled creaks and groans as the great hull adjusted to the changing stresses. There was no sense of any motion since the drive systems of large vessels can compensate for such trivial matters as mass and inertia.

“Initiate the squadron move to the Jupiter orbit assembly point.” Klaus’ words were expected and were acted on instantly. Once at the assembly point all seven of the vessels would “flip the switch” and appear...elsewhere. During the next ten hours it would take to get to the assembly point there would be little to do but wait, and worry. Worry if you were the person in command of this expedition, wait if you were everyone else.

John opted (it was suggested to him) to spend the waiting time with his Viper crew. The shield generator in his fighter wasn’t showing quite the proper readouts while in test mode.

“See there, that little fluctuation in the power drain.” Jenkins pointed at the readout as John peered over his shoulder.

“Bad power tap maybe?” John offered. John had looked over a lot of flight crew shoulders and he had paid a lot of attention while doing so.

“We checked that, Mister Grayson. That was my first idea too. The shield still shows full strength with no weak points. Everything looks fine.”

“Do we have to down-check the bird for this?” John asked.

“I can’t come up with a good reason to do that, Mister Grayson. But maybe you might want to include this on your readiness form as an unidentified anomaly.”

“Okay. Probably just a test glitch anyway.”

Jenkins nodded in agreement but some small part of the crew chief felt a little uneasy with it all. The man was never happy unless everything was perfect, as any good crewman feels about ‘his’ bird.

“All vessels will now slave propulsion and navigation controls to Drake.”

When Klaus initiated the drive system all of the squadron would move as one unit.

“Ten seconds.”

Then Klaus “flipped the switch.” It was a phrase that would in time become yet another tradition.

The universe seemed to blink twice as the view screens suddenly displayed entirely new star fields.

“I’ll never get used to this,” Klaus muttered. “I want initial readouts, now!” Which he did not mutter at all.

The squadron was now officially further away from Earth than any vessel had ever been, by ten-fold.

“No close objects, background radiation is ten points lower than galaxy standard, relative motion is near zero. Deploying long range

sensors and antennas.” The Executive Officer recited what Klaus could plainly see on the data screens.

“Concentrate your search efforts on the closest G types for now. Notify Fleet of our status. I’ll be in my day cabin.” Klaus felt the need for a few moments alone. This instant flitting about the galaxy was very hard on his nerves.

“Conditions permitting on first landfall, we will be conducting routine formation exercises and live fire combat runs. That is if there are no natives around to get pissed off at us in the process.” Lieutenant Bear was John’s squadron leader and the man had everyone’s attention. The briefing was one of four that were occurring right now and John knew to keep his mouth shut, being the junior member of the flight squadron.

“Will any landings be in the mix?” This from Ensign Haig.

“No way to tell right now. If the first system we visit is barren then anything goes. If there is life there then flight practice takes a back seat for recon missions.”

But they all knew that there usually wasn’t any life.

Most of the time.

“Flight operations will now stand down! Power down all craft!” This announcement on the hanger deck was at first met with total silence, then with a lot of rather florid language.

“Well, horse shit!” John’s remark was about average. The squadron had been within minutes of launching their first live-fire training mission on the barren world that Drake now orbited. “What’s going on?” John shouted down at Jenkins as the fighter’s canopy slid back and up. Jenkins could only shake his head and raise his hands in confusion. No one seemed to know what was happening.

Commodore Klaus did know what was going on. The quick briefing by the communications officer had changed a lot of plans.

“Amplitude modulated low frequency radio?”

It was something out of ancient history studies.

“Yes, sir. The signals are of course very weak and dispersed at this distance but they positively triangulate at a single point eleven point six light years roughly towards galaxy center.”

“And?”

“The signals are a hash of pulsed tone transmissions and voice. There also appears to be some sort of music in the mess, but that may be some sort of noise effect. We need to get much closer to separate it all out.”

“What sort of ‘voice’ transmissions are you talking about?” That was the one thing that Klaus had focused on.

“Well sir, not to sound too theatrical here but the tonal qualities put it right in the middle of the range for human speech, although the multiple languages are a total mystery as of now.”

“Human, huh?” Klaus’ skepticism was all too apparent to the other officer.

“Perhaps a poor choice of words, sir. But the sound frequency range is right on the mark.”

“Very well. Get with Navigation and narrow down a target destination. We’ll just go and have a look see.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Ruiz?”

“Sir?”

“Good work. Tell that to your people.”

“I will, sir. Thank you.”

Whatever Ruiz and his people had picked up had happened almost twelve years ago. Light and radio waves travel very slowly. Crossing a million miles takes almost six seconds.

“Mister Grayson, Mister Winslow?” The small vidcom on the wall in the rat hole had blinked on and had an officer’s face attached to the voice.

“Yes, sir.” Sammy stood from his endless studying to face the man.

“Both of you are to report to the command briefing room in thirty minutes.”

“Yes, sir. What...?”

Then the device went blank again and the officer was gone before Sammy could ask anything.

“What was that all about?” John wondered. Neither one of them was any trouble that they knew about. The whole ship was abuzz about the signals they had intercepted. Maybe that had something to do with it.

“Why would they want us there?” Sammy asked.

“Who knows, but we better get changed and look sharp when we get there.”

“You two sit at the corner of the table over there and remain quiet unless spoken to.” Lieutenant Powers pointed to where the middies had to sit and that is exactly where they went, quietly. Most of the senior officers were already entering and taking their own places, and all of them gave the two boys a curious look. Everyone stood to attention as Captain Klaus entered.

“Be seated gentlemen.”

John and Sammy gave one another questioning looks as they sat down, not daring to even whisper aloud what they were wondering about.

“As you all know by now we will very shortly be in the vicinity of the source of the signals that has everyone playing guessing games,” Klaus began. “So far all indications are that this may be a society just entering into a true technological phase. Still fairly primitive but perhaps not so far removed from where we now find ourselves. The

question now is, just how do we properly go about assessing and contacting these beings, and if we even should contact them? Comments, gentlemen?"

For a moment there were only questioning looks exchanged around the table. No one at the table had any experience with this sort of thing. Well, almost no one.

"I have asked Mister Grayson and Mister Winslow to sit in on this meeting since it appears that they are the only people within light years with any experience at all in dealing with alien races with primitive technology."

John and Sammy both wished that they could just sort of slink under the table at this point but both managed to appear calm. Klaus was looking directly at them and it was obvious he expected them to say something.

"Sir," John began after clearing his throat, "the Masso were *very* primitive. They had no electronics of any sort, not even steam power. But if I may be so bold as to offer one piece of advice...about what we learned, sir?"

"Of course. Anything is welcome." Klaus replied. He even smiled a little.

"If we just show up all at once we'll probably scare the sh...the heck out of them, sir. The family that we first met thought we were some kind of devils. It was a very iffy thing at first."

"But this new planet seems to be further along than they were," countered the Executive Officer.

“Yes sir, of course. We can still scare them if we aren’t careful and they’ll probably have more than just bows and arrows to shoot at us.”

“And that is your learned opinion, Mister Grayson?” The Exec asked with raised eyebrows.

“I apologize if I was too forward sir, but yes sir, that is my opinion.”

“You weren’t being too forward, Mister Grayson,” Klaus interrupted. “Both of you speak up if you have any other useful words.”

“Yes sir, thank you.”

In fact they didn’t really have any more useful words and just sat quietly through the rest of the meeting. But perhaps John’s initial words had had some effect on things; first contact would be very discrete and cautious.

Klaus had once more flipped the switch and now the squadron was in the target star system. It was a system with a total of twelve major planets, three gas giants, eight barren and rocky worlds either too close to the sun or too far away for life to exist. There was, however, one blue-green planet and it did support life, a lot of life.

“It’s a Drummond scale twenty, sir!” Ruiz seemed prepared to actually jump up and down.

“Truly?” Klaus asked in disbelief. No one had ever found a real ‘twenty’ in all of man’s wanderings among the stars. Even the most Earth-like planets held marked differences in composition.

“Yes sir! And their radio transmissions have progressed somewhat over the past relative twelve years, there is now what looks like a form of primitive video!”

“Showing what?”

“We’re still trying to get that organized into something viewable, sir. Give us another hour and we’ll have it.”

“Excellent work! Keep at it!”

Like most of the other off duty middies, John and Sammy had congregated in the small common room that they all shared to watch the large vid screen. There was no real reason to keep the information being gleaned from the radio transmissions away from the crew, and it was very fascinating to watch.

“Look at that!” Sammy was as stunned as the rest of the middies were.

“People!” John managed to croak.

Two comically disheveled men were attempting to push a large crate of some sort up an impossibly long and steep stairway. The image was all shades of gray and white and was not very sharp, the sound was flat and one-dimensional. And it was very, very funny, even if the fuzzy sounding words made no sense to anyone.

“Those are humans.” John finally said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Damn right.” Sammy agreed. Everyone in the room agreed.

They just had to be humans!

The Summer Palace

“Can this be?” Daniel asked as he waved the printout of the dispatch from the Drake squadron.

It would appear to be so,” Ian replied.

“What do we do now?”

“Proceed slowly. DNA samples are for now our first priority. If these are indeed humans and not some sort of cosmic coincidence then the Harmon Seed Theory will not seem to be just some sort of crackpot ranting.”

“Back up. What is the Harmon...?”

“Seed Theory. It has been proposed that mankind’s evolution has not been a smooth and progressive transition dictated purely by natural forces.”

“Keep talking.” Daniel was nearing one of his ‘Ian’ headaches listening to the man’s explanations.

“The theory postulates that there has been outside manipulation of our DNA at certain points in our evolution.”

“Outside?”

“As in an alien intelligence of a higher order. It would account for a lot of the abrupt changes in our development but most in the scientific community give it little credence.”

“Seeds sown upon the land?”

“It’s just a theory.”

“And what do you think?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

That told Daniel that Ian probably agreed with the theory.

“Fleet says to obtain a DNA specimen,” Klaus said as yet another meeting was taking place. For reasons that they could not fathom both Sammy and John were once again attending.

“Easy, sir. We just insert a combat team and grab one of them.” Colonel Brock mostly saw things in terms of what is needed and what is readily available to do the job.

“We don’t want to alarm them, Colonel!” Klaus said in exasperation.

And at this point Sammy raised his hand, to everyone’s utter surprise, even his own.

“Sir?”

Klaus’ focus seemed to waver and then shift to the far end of the table. “What is it, Mister Winslow?”

“We can use the stealth suit, sir. In and out and no one will know we’ve even been there.”

“Stealth suit?” Another of Chu’s odd projects the Captain had never been appraised of.

“Yes, sir. If you can give me a few minutes I can demonstrate it for you.”

“Of course. Go!”

Sammy got up and left at a good rate of speed, John was left gaping at what his friend had just said. What stealth suit?

Klaus had just about decided on a small force landing at some isolated rural dwelling and then simply taking a blood and tissue sample with quick and brute force. Then Sammy reappeared, or rather he returned.

“Not necessary, sir.” Sammy said as he picked up the writing stylus in front of Klaus and touched it gently to the man’s left arm.

“What the...?”

The stylus had seemed to lift on it’s own power and float through the air. Then Sammy shut down the suit’s power supply, instantly visible again to one and all.

A DNA sample would probably be the easiest task that was facing them.

“Simply press the sampler against the skin, any fleshy part of the body, and then press the stud on the end. It won’t work properly

through clothing,” Drake’s chief medical officer, Doctor Wasabe, explained to Sammy. Klaus had wanted to send one of the Marines to collect a sample but that would have meant totally rebuilding the stealth suit and a delay of at least three days. The risk factor was deemed low enough to send the middie who already knew how the suit functioned and to whom it was already tailored.

“Yes, sir. Isn’t this the sort of thing they use during entrance testing?”

“That’s correct, only smaller and easier to hold.”

“It’ll fit nicely in the suit’s chest pouch, sir.”

“Fine, take along two of them in case something happens to one.”

“Yes, sir.”

Very much like Earth there was just one large and airless moon orbiting this new planet. The Drake squadron was now sitting squarely on that moon. If the people on the planet had powerful enough telescopes they might have spotted them, but only if they knew where to look in the shadows of the deepest crater.

“They do seem to have some sort of crude scanning detection system, sir. Operating in the low microwave range,” Ruiz explained.

“Then they might actually detect our landing?” Klaus asked.

“I think not if we land at one of the more remote islands we discussed earlier, well away from any such detection facilities.”

“And at night,” Klaus added.

“Yes, sir. That might make collecting the sample easier too, catch everyone asleep.”

John was of course very put out that he wouldn't be going along in any capacity on this first mission. There was simply no need for an escort of Vipers for the already shielded landing craft that would be making the trip. There would be just a small Marine combat team aboard the craft in case things came badly undone where Sammy was concerned.

“The recon probe shows a small village of some kind right here on the edge of this lagoon,” Colonel Brock was pointing at the mapping display as Sammy paid very close attention to this last briefing before departure.

“We think that if we land you in this small cultivated clearing about a half mile back in the forest, or jungle if you will, that you can simply walk right into the village, poke the handiest person you come to and then quickly depart.”

“Sounds simple enough, sir.” Sammy wasn't very concerned about it, after all he would be invisible. And he had some experience with sneaking about in the dark.

“Simple plans tend to work the best, but don't take any risks. Just quietly in and out. I don't want to have to be explaining awkward events to His Majesty.”

“No sir, neither would I.”

Lieutenant Chu would be along on this small expedition in case there were any problems with the suit. The engineer hadn't designed the suit himself but he had done work on its development.

"Motion chewy, sir?" Sammy offered one of his motion sickness candies to the slightly pale looking Chu.

"Don't mind if I do, thank you." Both of them were strapped into the landing craft waiting for the Marines to board. Sammy wouldn't don the uncomfortable suit and its weighty backpack power supply until they were close to their objective.

Eventually the ten Marines piled in and strapped down, all of them trying to figure out what sort of nutty mission this really was. Being what they were the Marines didn't very much like the idea of a boy taking all of the real risks, small risks that they were.

A half hour after the landing craft departed Drake, Chu quietly asked the midshipman some personal questions.

"Mister Winslow...Samuel?"

"Sir?"

"I really don't know very much about you. I tend to focus on my work too closely."

"I'm nothing special, sir."

"I understand that His Majesty didn't think that."

"Well, he can be a very generous person, sir."

Chu was silent for a moment then continued to prod the boy for more than the midshipman seemed to want to reveal.

“Parents?”

“I don’t remember my mother. My father was killed when I was six or seven. Then I was on my own.”

“Alone? Surely not!”

“Yes, sir. I was a port rat.”

Even Chu knew what that entailed, at least in theory. Like so many others.

“But how did you...?” Chu could see that he was invading private places here but this unusual boy seemed to be much more than just a clever and mechanically adept assistant.

“Get by, sir?”

“Yes. I apologize for pressing you like this, but...”

“Not a problem, sir. I worked at odd jobs and I was a thief.”

To his credit Chu managed to accept that without comment.

“Look at it this way sir, I’m used to night work.”

“Apparently. Thank you for putting up with my curiosity.”

“May I ask you about yourself, sir?” Sammy had his own questions about the officer.

“Of course.”

Lieutenant Chu’s background was much more conventional than Sammy’s.

“Thirty minutes out!” The landing craft’s pilot shouted back to the waiting Marines.

“Time to suit up,” Chu said as he unbuckled. Gravity had returned as the craft had entered atmosphere and slowed. The pilot knew that preparations needed to be made during this time and made an effort to keep the landing craft as stable as possible. Sammy stripped down to his under shorts and began to pull on the stiff wire mesh garment, helmet, and power backpack. The recon probe had sent back temperature and humidity readings that made such light dress mandatory. Air could circulate freely through the wire mesh and that air would be very warm and humid, even at night.

“Helmet display?” Chu asked as he monitored the suit’s data receiver.

“Looks good, sir. Everything seems to be working right.”

“Try the vid relay.” Chu asked.

“On now, sir.”

Chu and the Marines could now see on the small vid screen exactly what Sammy could see, which was the sight of Corporal Rance scratching his crotch.

“Sixty seconds!”

For the first time in the mission Sammy’s pulse started to rise some, but not as much as Chu’s.

“Stand to the ramp!”

The darkened landing craft eased out of the moonless night sky as silently as the pilot could manage, only a faint, low moan could be heard from the craft's powerful drive coils as it settled gently to the ground.

"Straight ahead, Mister Winslow." Marine Lieutenant Ito pointed in the direction straight out from the open ramp. "Mind the natives!"

"Yes, sir. Don't go away."

"We'll be here." Ito already liked the boy, more so now.

As Sammy set foot on the soggy soil the Marines fanned out in a large perimeter around the landing craft. If any of the natives were aware of them they gave no sign, it was as quiet as three hours before dawn always is, anywhere.

"Looks like we landed in someone's potato patch," Sammy thought as he became invisible and moved off at a quick walk. There were rows of some sort of low growing and wide leafed plants filling the entire clearing. Without the enhanced night vision that the suit's helmet supplied Sammy would have been almost blind.

It was a very dark night with starlight as the only illumination. The air held the scent of some kind of flower that was very pleasant and sweet smelling.

There was a well trod path that led through the thick 'jungle' from the clearing to the village. Sammy made good use of it and also made good speed. Ten minutes later he was looking at a collection of about twenty small, open-sided wood dwellings. Surprisingly the structures had some kind of sheet metal roofing and the wood

appeared to have been milled by machines; these people had at least some of the trappings of technological society.

Then the dogs started to bark.

“Dogs?” Sammy knew that sound all too well. But how could there be dogs here? Then he spotted one of them.

“Report!” Lieutenant Ito’s voice demanded in Sammy’s earpiece. He too had heard the unmistakable sound that the suit pickups had relayed.

“Dogs, sir.” Sammy whispered into the audio pickup. “Sort of runty looking, but they look like dogs.”

“Can they actually see you?”

“No sir, I think they may have heard me walking or caught my scent, like dogs can do.”

“Can you see any people?” Ito could hear and see most of what Sammy could but he asked anyway.

“Not yet, sir. I’m going to head for that closest house thing.”

“Go ahead. Watch your ass, kid.”

“Always, sir. It’s the only one I have.”

Apparently the dogs must have always barked a lot because no one showed up to investigate the racket.

Clothing seemed unwanted and unneeded by these people in this very warm night. Sammy was now peering carefully into the structure and it was a very target rich environment. The small bare butt of a little girl was the closest and easiest “fleshy part” to get to.

“Sorry kid, but you’re it.” Sammy said to himself as he silently pulled out the sampler and pressed it gently against the child’s exposed buttock.

Press the stud.

“Uhaaahhhh!”

Apparently it stung just like it had when Sammy had undergone his testing on New Albion and the small child had reacted instantly and in the vocal tradition of all small humans.

“I’m out of here!” Sammy whispered into the audio pickup as he quickly backed out of the dwelling. People were finally waking up and they were beginning to light lanterns of some kind. The dogs were raising complete hell by now.

One of the dogs seemed to have better sensory abilities than the rest and had placed itself squarely between the path out of this suddenly noisy place and Sammy’s fast retreat. The small yellow cur actually seemed about ready to charge the unseen intruder.

Sammy had no time for all of this and pulled out his small and silent beam pistol, putting a quick end to the noisy and toothy roadblock. Dog parts flew off in random directions in a sort of soft explosion. Sammy broke into a dead run.

“Damn!” Ito said to no one in particular as he witnessed this quick and decisive violence on the part of Mister Winslow. Now he really liked this kid!

Visible once again, Sammy tumbled into the landing craft to be quickly followed by the Marines. The inhabitants of this small and

isolated community heard only a dull rumbling in the distance but saw nothing as the darkened spacecraft departed. Whatever had occurred this night would remain an unsolved mystery, as would why little Manki had a slightly sore butt the next day. Probably just a banu bite or something, nothing a hug and a kiss couldn't fix. But then there were the dog parts discovered lying about the next morning and that was very unsettling. What could have done such a thing?

"Well done, Mister Winslow!" Klaus extended a hand to Sammy as the boy stepped off the landing craft's ramp. "Your part in this day's efforts will be mentioned in our daily dispatch to Fleet."

"Thank you, sir. It all went pretty much as planned." Sammy then handed over the sample tube to the medical officer standing beside the Captain.

"Excellent!" Wasabe exclaimed. "What can you tell me about the subject...the person you obtained this from?"

"A small girl, sir. Maybe four or five years old. Her butt was sort of the handiest to get to at the time. She yelled and woke up the whole place."

Wasabe smiled at this description. "And they truly look like us, they look human?"

"Totally, sir. At least as far as I could tell in the time I had. We recorded the vid that my helmet picked up, it'll show most of what I saw and heard."

“Excellent again! Now I have to get this sample to the analysis section, a lot of people are waiting for the results.”

Lieutenant Chu’s efforts didn’t go without notice either and the thin ice under the man thickened considerably on this day.

The Summer Palace

“Can this be a simple coincidence?” Daniel asked as he looked over the puzzling DNA sequence chart lying on his desk. In truth he had no idea how to actually interpolate the chart.

“The human shape can be a coincidence, as it was with the masso to a certain degree, but not all of those sequence pairs,” Ian explained as he pointed at the chart. “That chart is as human as you or me and no cosmic coincidence can explain it away. The odds for such a thing occurring are beyond all reason.”

“Then maybe this ‘seed theory’ isn’t as crackpot as it was thought to be?”

“Some intelligent force was behind this, something with a lot of time to get things done.”

“God?”

“Perhaps God-like in our eyes.”

“But why? To what end?”

Ian had no answer for that enormous question and for right now there were other more mundane matters to settle.

“Any thoughts on how to proceed with contacting our long lost relatives now that Drake has found them?”

“Small increments of contact. Simply showing up on their doorstep could totally disrupt their society. I’d love to be there to watch it all.”

“Then go.”

“Really?” Ian looked like a small child given complete freedom in a toy store.

“They can use your input. And take along that pesky son of yours too, he’s smarter than both of us put together.”

“I’ll need to assemble a research team, some people who can think beyond the expected.”

“Best get busy then.”

Chapter Four Humans

The entire Drake squadron simply wasn't needed for what was turning into a long-term research and contact mission. HMS Drake would remain on station stripped of all of its companion vessels and of all but ten of its best Viper pilots and their assigned fighters. Most of the Marine contingent also departed, the vacated space taken up by the scientific team that Sir Ian had put together. A bulky looking auxiliary craft now occupied a good deal of Drake's main hanger deck. Commonly referred to as a "hog", the craft had its own small internal hanger that could hold a crew of ten with two passenger shuttles or two Vipers and could be used for extended close orbit observations. This reorganization had taken the better part of two weeks and now they were finally ready to begin the delicate business of a first contact.

There were also a few small reunions in the process.

"Two pair, ladies and nines!" Michael grinned as he began to rake in the small pile of coins on the improvised poker table that was very much against regulations in middle country.

"Well gosh, does that beat three fours?" John asked with a perfectly open and innocent face.

Michael sagged and ceased his raking efforts. How could he have missed that? He was sure he had kept track of all of the cards!

John started to take over the coin reaping chores when Sammy finally spoke up.

“Full house, kings over sixes. Where did you old ladies learn to play poker anyway?”

Juan only had a pair of jacks and threw them down in disgust. He was obviously just treading water in the middle of a pool full of sharks.

“You’ve won almost every damned hand lately!” John protested. “How do you keep doing that?”

“I cheat,” Sammy replied very matter-of-factly. And in fact, he did cheat.

“What?” John was more curious than mad. It was only a small change game anyway, not that the money even mattered.

“Father taught me when I was very small. My pinkie fingernail is cut very sharp and these cards are just cheap plastiboard. Very soft stuff.”

“And?” Michael asked, totally intrigued by now.

“I nicked a simple code into the edge of every card I held and eventually most of the deck. Every time I dealt I could feel what you all were holding. It’s a very old trick, ancient even. It just takes some practice to read the nicks.”

“Grab him!” Juan shouted. Then they all pounced.

“We might arrange a small incident with one of their military aircraft. Something that the public may not learn about and be alarmed over.” Ian suggested to those at the assembled staff meeting.

“An ‘incident’?” Klaus asked with some skepticism. The man had been very touchy since most of his command had departed for other duties.

“Yes. Nothing drastic, just flying alongside one of their larger military craft for a time, that sort of thing. They will surely have the ability to record or somehow report the incident. This will set things in motion without causing a general panic.”

“Any suggestions as to what we use to create this ‘incident’ with?”

“Put your best pilot in a Viper. It’s a very impressive looking craft and it’s very fast.”

“Shielded too,” Klaus added.

“Of course. They might conceivably fire upon it, not that it matters. They only seem to have very simple projectile weapons and some crude missiles anyway.”

They were also engaged in what seemed to be a very large war.

“My best pilot is Midshipman John Grayson.” Klaus seemed to want to throw a loose bolt into the gears here.

People stopped taking notes at this point and looked up at the two men doing the talking.

“John is indeed an excellent pilot. There’s no danger for him or any of the other pilots in this.” Sir Ian hadn’t risen to the bait and asked for another pilot, he hadn’t asked for special treatment for the Emperor’s son. Nor would he ever.

“These large combat air machines...” Klaus began.

“Airplanes, they were called. Before the Dark Times.” Ian interrupted.

“Yes. As I was attempting to say these large ‘airplanes’ seem to depart the combat arena on a regular basis and return to the largest continent, we might assume for some type of maintenance cycle or whatever reason they have. They are isolated for long sections of the over water route. Easy to find and intercept.”

Countless missions by the small recon drones had already inundated them with such facts.

“Any problems with that, John?”

John was at the briefing session and as always wished that his uncle would be just a little more formal during meetings like this. Why couldn’t Uncle Ian properly call him Mister Grayson?

“No sir, it’s a very simple sort of rendezvous, like Captain Klaus just explained.”

“Risks?”

“None, sir.” The Viper was untouchable.

“Any thoughts on what you do when you find them?”

John glanced at Captain Klaus for a second, this was something a midshipman shouldn't be deciding on.

"Well, perhaps a fast flyby to get their attention, then circle around and pull up alongside them?"

"Then what?"

"See what they do, sir?"

It was as good of a plan as any and it would certainly get their attention. These other humans would certainly know that they had visitors.

Two hundred miles west of the Troban coast, late afternoon.

*Translated, roughly.

"Shut down number five!" Flight Commander Hanz ordered wearily. The damned thing had been running rough for the last four hundred miles and now it was starting to overheat and stream smoke. It was about average for such a tired bird returning home. However, it was only one of six engines and they could make it home on three if need be.

"Cutting five," Engineer Funtzle replied. It was almost a welcome diversion in the endless flight over nothing but a flat blue sea.

"Radio, notify Air Command, give our position." Hanz added over the headset link that all of the crew wore. Notifying command was required by regulations when you lost an engine.

“Will do,” Radioman Jansy responded automatically, having been just kicked fully awake by the forward top turret gunner.

John had launched from the orbiting ‘hog’ but the mission was being controlled from HMS Drake, still sitting on the large moon of this planet.

“Drake Control, target is nearer to the coastline than we planned on, shall I proceed?” John had the slow moving target on his acquisition display, it must be the size of a barn!

“Proceed, Viper Ten.” Commander Jordon was handling the communications for this mission, something that tended to give John sweaty palms.

“Roger, Drake.”

John accelerated the Viper from its dawdling idle to just below supersonic speed, no sense in scaring the crap out of those people in that flying contraption up ahead with a sonic shockwave impact.

The tail gunner had been asleep for the last nine hundred miles, likewise the aft belly gunner, the forward belly gunner and most of the rest of the crew. They were all going home and were well out of any combat zones. However, the aft top turret gunner never seemed to sleep, at least not since being jumped by three Sumi fighters over the Bunsal Islands.

He was wide awake and something very shiny and impossibly fast was closing from behind them.

“Outlaw closing from dead-ass!”

They were shouted words that jerked even the heaviest sleeper instantly awake.

The Consolidated Airframes Model Nine heavy bomber could roar through the skies at almost three hundred miles per hour on a good day and with a strong tail wind. Today it was doing about two-thirty. The “outlaw” flashed close by at close to three times that speed and then pulled up into an even faster climb, accelerating straight up.

“What the fuck was that?” Hanz screamed. For a few moments it seemed like everyone on the big bomber was screaming something. Most of them had seen something, but what had it been?

John then simply chopped power and let the atmosphere slow him as he descended out of his giant loop, dropping back in behind of the lumbering bomber.

“Here he comes again!” The tail gunner charged his guns but held his fire, his commander hadn’t released them to fire. “That ain’t no damned Sumi kite!”

John eased up next to the bomber’s left wing tip and just sat there totally exposed. After a moment he remembered to switch on the outside vid pickups so that Drake could see what he was seeing.

“Will you look at that thing!” Nose gunner Drams shouted what they were all thinking. Whatever it was it was no damned Sumi fighter! And this was not at all the proper behavior for an enemy fighter.

“Thumbs off!” Hanz gave the command that told the nine gunners to hold their fire. He needed some time to think!

“My God!” John could only stare open mouthed at the great ‘contraption’ that seemed to be barely hanging in the sky. Visible seams joined by thousands of tiny fasteners. Six vapor producing power plants attached to whirling fans. Except for one fan which seemed not to be functioning at all.

“Propellers!” John remembered from a visit to a musty museum; and a lot of what had to be weapon turrets were pointed directly at his Viper.

“Drake Control, are you seeing all of this?”

“Roger Viper Ten. Maintain position for now.”

“Nichas! Get some pictures of that thing!” Hanz yelled down to the Bombardier in the nose of the aircraft.

“I’m already on it!” The man was clicking off images as fast as he could wind the film.

“Jansy! Get Command on a Priority One! Then let me talk to the assholes!”

“Working on it!”

Hanz simply could not take his eyes off of the thing that appeared to be distilled speed and grace, and menace. He could not spot a single seam or joining point. What must be the canopy for its pilot was a shimmering golden mirror. There were certainly no propellers. There was no exhaust. No visible means of support,

certainly not those stubby fins along its sides. The protrusion under the nose was almost certainly some sort of weapon.

And it was just sitting there off of their left wing.

John had some time to carefully study the flying museum exhibit as he patiently idled along next to it. It occurred to him to also turn on the external sound pickups.

“Shit!” John said it out loud and winced when he realized that Klaus and Jordon were listening. The incredible racket that the six (five now) engines were making almost deafened him before he could dial back the volume.

“Agreed.” Klaus added with some humor in John’s earpiece.

“Sorry, sir. How do they put up with that racket?”

“Maybe they have earplugs.”

It took a lot of convincing but eventually Air Command took some special notice of events unfolding over the Western Ocean. The coastline was only moments away.

“Repeat!” Hanz could not believe what he was hearing.

“Destroy outlaw upon crossing the coast! Western Air Defenses are closing on your position!”

“Command! It has shown no hostile actions at all!”

“You have your orders. Flame the outlaw.”

John wasn't actually bored but this was getting a little tedious after almost a half hour spent pacing this flying museum display.

"Uh oh," John said under his breath. The shield status display was starting to wink at him with an amber light. Not a good sign. "Crap!" Nothing to do now but tell Jordon that his bird was sick and this mission was over. They were crossing the coastline anyway, which was supposed to be the end of this rendezvous.

"Take out the outlaw! That's not my order, it's Command's order! Just do it now!" Hanz had no stomach for cold blooded murder and that was just what this order amounted to.

"Drake Control, Viper Ten."

"Go ahead."

"Viper Ten. My shield is starting to go unstable on me. Request permission to break off and return."

"Granted. Get out of there!"

"Roger."

Too late.

None of the gunners aimed for the gold-mirrored 'cockpit'. By now the crew had grown to have some sort of odd attachment for their beautifully weird escort. All of them had also seen the results of combat and had no great wish to needlessly destroy another human being, or whatever was flying alongside of them.

John was about to pull up and away when hundreds of finger-size projectiles riddled the entire fuselage aft of the cockpit. The Viper was a tough craft but without it's shield it was far from invulnerable. The starboard drive coil shorted and ceased to function, then the mass converter went dead. The Viper was now just a descending projectile.

“Ohhhshhiiiiitt!” John had flown countless and totally impossible simulator missions that had resulted in his demise, but this was all too real. “Viper Ten, taking fire!”

“Viper Ten, Status?” Klaus could not believe what he was hearing and seeing, nor could those around him. Sir Ian and Michael could only watch in horror at the images that then abruptly ceased.

“Shield failed...they fired everything they had at me! No drive power! On backup storage!”

“Separate! Now!” Klaus yelled into the audio pickup.

John didn't have time to answer, the patchwork green earth of the coastline was rising toward him all too fast.

Separate!

The new Vipers had a better escape module than past models. Instead of a tried but true parachute the nose section on the Viper had its own separate drive system, albeit a very limited and short lived one. John had about five minutes of powered flight before exhausting the storage pack, and not a great deal of maneuverability.

“I can’t believe this!” It was something that kept going through his head as he aimed for a broad crop field of some sort. His first actual mission of any sort and he gets shot down by a flying collection of sheet metal straight out of a history book!

“Shit! This thing handles like a bathtub!” The separated nose section of the Viper did lack a certain amount of grace.

Jod Hardo knew beng farming through and through, and that was about the limit of his intellectual capacity. He wasn’t the village idiot but if pressed into service he would do in a pinch. Jod also knew a spaceship when he saw one, his pulp magazines and the nightly Space Rangers serial on the radio had taught him that much!

“That’s a God cursed Drushon!” It had to be, all silver and gold and with no wings to support it!

Jod revved up the ancient tractor and headed straight for the descending alien. Jod was going to be famous! He’d be in all of the news sheets as the man who shot an honest to God space alien!

Perhaps he really was the village idiot.

“Well just shit!” John had managed a sort of skidding touchdown and then promptly rolled on to his port side in the deeply furrowed field. For a long minute he just lay there belted in, trying to collect his wits. Then simulator practice took over and a sequence of actions was remembered.

“Locator beacon.” John pulled the small red knob out until it glowed red. At least now Drake could find him, eventually.

“Blow the canopy, keep your helmet visor shut.” John remembered that it was a very loud and possibly debris causing event, and it was.

Jod had just jumped down from the overheated and wheezing tractor, bird gun in hand, when the gold canopy blasted itself fifty feet out into the almost mature beng plants.

“Furk! It just blew up!” Jod shouted, to no one within sight. For the first time the farmer began to feel just a little uneasy about this whole adventure, this was all becoming very real, it was not a radio thriller.

“Crap! Maybe I’m in the wrong line of business!” John muttered to himself as he managed to unbuckle and crawl out of what was left of his beloved Viper.

“Don’t you move, you damned Drushon!” Jod was pointing his four-barreled bird gun straight at John, but not too steadily. At this point John was still on all fours trying to untangle himself from a badly mangled beng plant.

“Oh wonderful,” John thought as he looked up at the distant voice muffled by his helmet, “I’m going to die in a damned potato patch!”

Eventually John managed to stand up and then Jod promptly shot him.

“How long to mount an armed rescue mission?” Klaus demanded at the hastily assembled meeting?

The unarmed ‘hog’ had carried only the single Viper on this trip and any armed rescue force would have to cross from the planet’s moon.

“Thirty minutes here to assemble things, then about a five hour transit time. Then we have to find the module and Mister Grayson, assuming that the two will still be together.” Colonel Brock’s reply was not what everyone wanted to hear, but they knew it was the truth.

“If the local authorities or the military have John then we would have a fight on our hands, people could be killed, including John.” Ian said.

“We will not just leave one of our people down there!” Klaus snapped.

“No, of course not.” Ian agreed. “But it might work out all to the better if we delay an immediate and armed response.”

“Please explain, Sir Ian?”

“We know that the area where John went down is well developed for this planet, civilized if you will. It would stand to reason that these people will very much want to keep this ‘alien’ alive and well to question and study. Hopefully they will also very quickly understand that they are dealing with other humans from off of their world. Just charging in shooting may well get John killed and ruin any chances for a peaceful meeting with these people.”

“If they haven’t killed the lad already!”

“There is that possibility and if so a rescue mission would be pointless anyway. Not going in right now will be hard on the boy but at least he will remain alive and provide some link with these people.” Ian could be cold and calculating when it was required and right now it was.

“And how do we find him, eventually?”

“The module’s locator beacon is functioning. I would suspect that they will be taking both John and the module to some secure facility. That is where we go when some time has passed.”

Jod’s bird gun had three more shells left in it as he edged closer to the short space alien, who was now flat on his back making a faint hissing noise. The book-size emergency air pack on John’s chest had suffered grievous harm and was gasping its last. The lack of any more breathable air in the suit automatically caused John’s helmet’s mirrored faceplate to open and snap up into its recess.

“Owww! Shit!” John stirred and raised his head just enough to focus on the four gun barrels pointed at his nose. “You shot me, you stupid moron!”

Jod was somewhat taken aback. This was no hideous green-skinned alien, it was just a boy! A very pissed off boy, at that!

“What are you doin’ in a damned spaceship, boy?” To his minimal credit Jod did manage to lower his bird gun. You just don’t point guns at young boys.

“Asshole!” John managed to sit up despite the burning pain in his ribs. The air pack had taken most of the pellets but a few of them had penetrated his pressure suit on the right side. John was tempted to grab his survival pistol from its leg holster and return the favor to this bumpkin, but the guy didn’t really look nasty enough to warrant shooting, he just looked sort of simple-minded.

Two Defense Forces twin-engine interceptors interrupted this confrontation in the beng field as they roared overhead at what would be treetop level, had there been any trees.

“Wonderful!” John craned his head around to try and follow the God-awful noisy things. “What else can go wrong today?”

“What are you saying, boy?”

Neither of them had any idea what the other was saying. Just as well.

“Stop it!” John had taken off his helmet and opened the front of his pressure suit to inspect what he feared might be there. Jod seemed determined to be of some assistance at this point and had to be fended off.

The four small, slightly oozing punctures didn’t look as bad as they felt. A nasty looking bruise was forming where the air pack had once resided.

“Trauma cover.” John said to himself as he opened the small battle first aid pouch on his left thigh. The white spray-on goo seemed

to lessen the exquisite burning sensation as it rapidly dried and formed an untidy looking but sterile field dressing.

A clattering rumble in the distance signaled yet another complication. By now John was propped up against the escape module with Jod kneeling at his side trying to be of help.

“Now what?”

“*Hoverflies!*” Jod exclaimed. There were four of the dark gray and ungainly looking craft approaching.

“Helicopters!” John almost had it right, ancient history had never attracted much of his attention.

John was too amazed to laugh at the incredibly ungainly rotor craft that took up hovering positions in a wide circle around the escape module. Two large rotors on extended booms to either side with a smaller rotor on the tail, a fuselage that looked like a fat banana. The noise was deafening.

Jod stood up and waved his floppy hat at the hovering machines, as if to signal that all was safe. It was about the most intelligent thing the man had done all day. Then as one the four machines settled to the ground, throwing out a great blast of wind and beng plant leaves. Armed soldiers began piling out of the big “helicopters” and moved to encircle the gleaming escape module. All of the men seemed to have rifles of some sort and they were all pointed at John.

“It’s okay, fellows!” Jod shouted. “It’s just danged kid here!”

Field Lieutenant Chemsan carefully moved closer while still keeping his carbine trained on the small figure that was wearing what had to be a spacesuit. And what in the blazes was that gleaming metal thing he was propped up against?

“Son, what in the hell is going on here?” Chemsan asked as he finally stood looking down at a very human looking boy.

“He don’t understand Ormish,” Jod offered. *“He talks real funny.”*

“He looks like he’s hurt, what happened to him?”

“Well, I sort of shot him before I could see he wasn’t one of them space aliens.”

“You shot him?” Chemsan seemed about ready to shoot Jod.

“He looked really weird with that shiny helmet thing on his head!”

The officer knelt to inspect John’s wound. *“What is this white stuff?”*

“He sprayed that on there, there’s just four or five little birdshot holes.”

John thought it was time to stand up having decided that his small wounds weren’t going to kill him anytime soon. Maybe he should try a handshake? If these guys even did that here?

“My name is John.” He then repeated his name while pointing at himself. *“John.”*

And they did shake hands on this planet, it was a human thing.

“John?”

“Yes, John.”

“*Where is that...thing from?*” Chemsan pointed at the escape module, the craft didn’t have the look of anything built on this planet. John didn’t understand the words but the question was obvious.

“Out there.” John raised his arm and pointed straight up.

Chemsan just nodded slowly and moved to peer into the open cockpit of the eerie looking device.

“*Hoo-lee shit!*” It was all too real and there was nothing the man could point at and make any sense out of. Except for the one small blinking red light the whole thing seemed dead and inert. Walking once around the module the officer could see that the rear part had once been attached to something else, cleanly severed cables and connections protruded a few inches from the rear surface. But how had the thing landed in one piece with no wings or even a parachute?

More soldiers began arriving in large eight-wheeled trucks that were belching a great deal of smoke. Chemsan received radio orders to load the ‘space kid’ into one the helicopters and to load the module into one of the big trucks.

“*Come on kid, they can figure you out back at the base.*”

Chemsan pointed at the nearest of the helicopters but first put a hand on John’s shoulder before they moved in that direction.

“*I’ll need whatever is in that holster of yours.*” Chemsan indicated the obvious weapon grip protruding from the suit-holster.

“Oh. Sure, here.” John carefully handed the light and compact revolver over to the man, butt first. He certainly was in no position to

get into a gunfight with these people, even if he had wanted to. At first Chemsan thought the gun might just be a child's toy since it felt so light, that and the odd color of the metal. A closer look at the weapon revealed that it held eight nasty looking cartridges tipped with a heavy, whitish metal. The fit and finish of the survival pistol was exquisite and was unlike any revolver that the man had ever seen. It was no toy.

"I'm gonna die!" John mumbled to himself as he was being helped up and into the insane looking flying machine. Like the bomber that had shot him down this craft seemed to be held together by a million little screw-things. It just looked so damned fragile!

"Put these on." Chemsan handed John some bulky looking ear protectors and made motions about how to use them. When the helicopter started its engine John understood perfectly.

"I'm gonna die!" John was sure of it this time as the flying deathtrap finally wallowed into the air, seeming to be on the verge of shaking itself apart.

The flight would take less than an hour, but to John, it was an hour that seemed years long.

Founder's City – Office of The Minister of War

"They have the craft and its pilot, sir!" First Assistant Welshun excitedly reported.

"Alive?" Minister Wardling asked pointedly.

"Yes, sir. And..."

“An honest to God outer space alien?”

“Er, not exactly, sir. The craft appears alien but its pilot was a human boy, at least that’s the first report from the scene.”

“Get back to those people! Boys just don’t fly around in spaceships!”

John’s view out of one of the helicopter’s small square windows had changed rapidly from lush green coastal farmland to flat and dry semi-desert. What had to be a large air base was coming into sight now, seemingly built on the edge of a dry lake. It all reminded John that he was very thirsty and that reminded him of the small water flask in his suit. Chemsan carefully watched the boy as he pulled out the small flat water flask and took a long pull from it.

“Want some?” John yelled above the racket and politely held out the flask to the man.

“No thanks!” Chemsan yelled back. No telling what might be in it.

John was amazed that the “helicopter” had even held together for the endless flight. Whoever had been flying the thing must be either very skillful or very insane. Eventually the roaring and clattering machine settled to the ground with a solid thump, apparently all in one piece.

“How’s your side doing, kid?” Chemsan pointed at John’s injured ribs as they both unbuckled. John put his left hand over the area and made a grimace for the man. It hurt!

“We’ll get you some medical attention, they have a hospital here.”

Whatever the man had said had a reassuring tone to it and for now that was the best that could be hoped for.

The helicopter had landed at a remote spot on the hot and sprawling aircraft littered base, away from most of the curious eyes. A large dark blue ground car pulled up and that would be John’s ride. So far the small cooling unit in John’s suit had continued to function on its stored power, but that couldn’t last forever.

“Go on son, in the back seat.” Chemsan motioned toward the now open rear door.

“Yes, sir.” It was an automatic sort of response to what had been said, the man was obviously an officer.

Roobars Lake Air Base Medical Facility

“What in the hell is this all about?” Doctor Amund Rends demanded. One entire wing of his small facility had just been cordoned off by the base security people.

“Classified patient arriving, that’s all I know.” Major Zubins answered, as confused as everyone else was.

“What in blazes is a ‘classified patient’ for crap sakes?”

“I don’t know, doctor. Let’s just both of us wait and see.”

John was quickly escorted in through a rear entrance and then directly into one of the trauma treatment areas. Doctor Rends arrived just a moment later. A boy in a ‘spacesuit’ was standing there

surrounded by two medical corpsmen and one irate nurse. That along with several soldiers armed with carbines.

“Explain this!” Rends demanded as he moved towards the strange scene. Chemsan did the explaining.

“He has a bird gun wound to his ribcage on the right side that needs attention. For now that is all you need to know, doctor.”

“On who’s authority is...?”

“The Minister of War.” Chemsan interrupted..

“I see. Then let’s attend to him.” The doctor was no dullard and numerous careers had been ruined displeasing the current Minister.

Following a great deal of pointing and gesturing John started to take off his pressure suit. One of the soldiers now held a large camera that whirred softly, recording the whole process. After a time John had everything disconnected and removed. For reasons unknown to John the small medical team seemed most fascinated by the suit’s urine collection system.

Now down to his bare skin the boy was made to lie down on the padded and spotless white exam table. An equally white sheet was pulled up to cover his lower half.

“Owww! Stop that!”

Doctor Rends had just attempted to pull off the sprayed on dressing with no success at all. It seemed to be permanently bonded to the boys skin.

“Hand me the first aid pouch! Shit!” John pointed at the pressure suit and helmet lying on the adjacent table. Finally he had to get down from his own table and fetch it himself, ignoring whatever the medics were babbling about. The spray container had two ends clearly marked, one to apply the dressing and one to remove it. John sprayed on the ‘remove’ solution and the dressing quickly turned pink and then almost clear, dissolving into a thin mess that dribbled down his side.

“Okay,” John said as he got back on the table, “do your worst.”

They did.

“He needs to rest?” Minister Wardling snapped.

“Yes, sir. The doctors at Roobars had to perform some minor surgery on him.” Welshun explained.

“I want that boy...if he is a boy, interrogated at once!”

“It isn’t that simple, sir. He doesn’t speak any language known to man. Poking him with a sharp stick right now won’t change that fact or gain us any information, this will take some time. Perhaps a lot of time.”

Wardling snorted in disgust at this complication.

“They have begun to examine in detail the...device that he arrived in,” Welshun offered.

“What have they found out about it?”

“So far the initial assessment is that it was part of a larger craft we haven’t yet found. It’s also astoundingly advanced and it could not have been constructed on this planet. Even the ‘spacesuit’ garment the boy had on is so far beyond what we are capable of as to make us appear as ignorant savages.”

“Who said that?”

“The team leader from the Henzel Laboratory.”

“I see.” And the Minister finally did see. They were dealing with something here that was without any precedent. The Minister did have one final question.

“And if this boy’s...people come looking for him?”

“I think it might be best for us if they learn that he was well treated and properly cared for by us, sir. His people have the ability to travel the stars and that implies a vast amount of power. It was an enormous miscalculation to shoot him down in the first place.”

Wardling looked sharply at his aide, this was the first time the man had ever worked up the nerve to say such a critical thing to him. But the Minister had other problems at the moment, he had to go and further brief the President of The Assembly on what was fast becoming far more important than the endless war halfway around the globe.

And he would no doubt be asked why he had ordered the shoot down.

Morning found John awake and sore. And hungry. His memories of his 'repairs' had been of actual potion-filled needles painfully jabbed into his side to locally deaden the pain. It had seemed very silly, hurting you so they wouldn't hurt you. After that it all got a bit hazy, apparently involving some poking and prodding around in his flesh for the pellets that Farmer Jod had blasted him with. Not that the people here had been intentionally cruel to him, in fact they had done the very best they knew how and John realized that after he had some time alone to think about it rationally.

Except for a soldier who occasionally craned his head in the door to check on him John was alone in the small room. Most everything in sight seemed to be made out of painted wood of some kind.

"I really gotta piss," John said to himself as he carefully sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. A sharp twinge in his side caused him to stop and lift the thin robe-thing that he was wearing and inspect what had been done to him. The bulky white dressing taped firmly to his side revealed nothing and John wasn't inclined to try and peel it off.

"Probably scarred horribly for life," John muttered as he stood a bit unsteadily beside the high bed and then surveyed the quaint room. "Maybe in there," he guessed and then moved carefully across the room to what might be the open door to the 'head'.

It was the head, after a fashion.

“Now what?” John had emptied his bladder but then the commode-device did nothing at all to dispose of things. The contraption appeared to be without any sensors of any kind, entirely mechanical, or perhaps even hydraulic. “Maybe this lever operates it?”

A great rush of noisy water had John wondering if he had started a minor flood, but then it quickly subsided and then ceased gurgling altogether.

“Up and about, are we?”

John straightened up and spun around to face Nurse Grinkle, the most beautiful female he had ever encountered, or even imagined. Smitten.

A common occurrence in young males.

“Er, hello.” John managed a rather weak and silly grin.

“Err Elloo yourself. How are you feeling, young man?”

The Summer Palace

The Lady Ellen had ceased speaking to His Majesty altogether and had moved into rooms on the eastern side of the residence. She had been tempted to take the twins and return to New Albion with Addie but that would have only put her further out of touch with her first-born child.

His Majesty could only pour over the dispatches from Sir Ian and wonder if he should simply go there himself and use the entire brute power of the Empire to find and rescue his son.

Whatever was to be done would be done soon.

Nurse Grinkle had John's complete attention as she sat his breakfast tray in front of him. His empty stomach had been almost forgotten by now, his sore ribs not even a blip on his mental radar.

"Thank you," John said. He still had the look associated with a complete simpleton as he smiled at The Most Beautiful Female In The Known Universe.

"I'll be back in a while, dear. Eat up!"

In time John's eye's returned to the morning meal in front of him. There was nothing that looked really unusual but at the same time there was nothing that he could attach an actual name to. It all smelled pretty good, though. He ate all of it.

HMS Drake

Entirely on his own, Sammy had gone directly to Commodore Klaus with a proposition. It was all very irregular and contrary to proper channels. It was an extremely bad idea.

"Too risky!" Klaus snapped at the nervy boy's wild plan.

"But sir, we already know about where he is. With an implant sensor I could find him quick and then we could get him out of there!"

"Did Lieutenant Chu approve your coming here right now?" Klaus asked with narrowed eyes.

"No sir. He probably wouldn't have allowed me to come to you."

"Then why are you even standing there?"

“But, sir...”

“Silence!” Klaus seemed about to erupt. “Now I will tell you this only once Mister Winslow, and I will take into account that you have not had the benefit of any academy training! Midshipmen simply do not waltz in here without going through the proper channels, it is not done, ever! I do understand your concern for Mister Grayson, we are all concerned about him. If the stealth suit is needed again then it will be put to use. Now get out of here!”

“Yes, sir.”

Sammy left with red cheeks and feeling like a complete ass, which in fact he was at the moment.

“This will be the key!” Professor William Bonham was the team linguistics expert and he was almost dancing with glee.

“Their entire alphabet?” Ian asked in amazement.

“All thirty-eight letters, and the sounds associated with each letter! Or at least for this particular language.”

“From a children’s vid program?”

“It was a chance thing we even recorded it, but there it all was presented in a manner that even small children can understand!”

“How soon until we have a working translator unit?” Ian could see that the linguist was really onto something.

“With full access to Drake’s processors and increased monitoring of their radio and vid we should have something usable in perhaps two days.”

“Then I’ll speak with Klaus.” They had to be able to talk to these people if there was to be any hope for a meaningful contact.

John really didn’t need to be in a hospital any longer and under normal circumstances would have been sent home to mend on his own. But he had to be kept somewhere and the isolated ward in the small hospital was as good of a place as any for the moment, perhaps better than any.

Because Nurse Grinkle was there.

“Just let me change this dressing, dear.”

John would have let her saw off both of his legs above the knees. It was all totally appalling.

“Will you marry me?” John knew that she had absolutely no idea what he was saying.

“Hold up your arm a bit more.”

John closely observed, expecting a bloody and disgusting mess to appear under the bandage she was removing. Instead there were only a few small spots of dried blood. But there did appear to be small lengths of thread in his skin holding the larger holes together.

“These stitches will come out in a day or two.”

“My God, they sewed me up with kite string!”

John might have fainted if Nurse Grinkle hadn't been there to hold him close for a warm and wonderful moment.

"Z...zee." John was doing his best to explain his own alphabet to these people. Along the way a few words were being learned, on both sides.

"Water." John pointed at the glass he just took a sip from.

"Blinse." The person who was called Dorson replied while also pointing at the glass. Other people in the room were all the while furiously scribbling notes.

It was late afternoon and John was getting very tired of this, something that was noted by the half dozen civilians and military crowded in to his small hospital room.

"One final question for now." Dorson said as he pulled out a large rendering of what was obviously the Milky Way Galaxy. A white "X" marked the approximate location of the planet they all were upon at the moment. *"Where are you from?"*

John studied the illustration for a moment, he knew what they were asking without understanding many of the words.

"Here. More or less." John took the wooden writing stylus the man held and made another small x. It was fully a third of the way across the vast disc of stars.

"Our God!" Dorson said in a soft voice.

Perhaps for the first time that day the investigation team fully comprehended just who and what this likable boy really was, and of more importance, what he truly represented.

HMS Drake

“What is this?” Ian asked as the midshipman held out a sealed message printout.

“We don’t actually know, Sir Ian. It was marked and coded as Purple traffic and private for you. It was printed and sealed automatically, sir.”

Purple. Direct from His Majesty.

“I see. Thank you, Mister...?”

“Bains, sir.”

Ian nodded and moved off to a quiet spot in the makeshift contact control center. The message was very short and to the point, and that too spoke entire volumes.

“Ian-- Assume full command of the contact effort. Time to stop farting around. Initiate formal contact. Daniel.”

The message didn’t actually say “find my boy” but it may as well have. There are limits to any father’s ability to just let matters take their proper course when a first-born and truly loved son is involved.

The next morning found John in the hanger containing his escape module, and little else. Shoes and clothing suitable for a boy of his age had been provided for him. If John had understood her

correctly the clothes belonged to Nurse Grinkle's much younger brother and hopefully not to her son. In any case she had been lying.

"What...this?" Dorson pointed at the small red light in the Viper cockpit that kept blinking on and off. By now a few words between them were understood.

"Emergency beacon," John replied. No point in not telling the man, HMS Drake must surely know where he was by now anyway.

"What?" Those two words the boy had used were new.

John paused a moment and then pointed at the module, himself and then straight up.

"*Radio.*" John finally remembered their word for it. The beacon transmitted micro-burst data messages at frequencies almost beyond the radio spectrum.

Dorson felt a quick chill run over him at the word "radio". The damned thing was sending a homing signal!

John was rudely pushed aside by the man as Dorson reached into the cockpit and managed to finally shove in the protruding lighted button, which then ceased all blinking entirely. Then he turned to the other men standing around the alien craft.

"Contact Wardling! Tell him we're moving both items to the Hopsin Mesa facility!"

John was item one, the escape module being item number two.

“But Sir Ian, we only have a few hundred useful words programmed right now! Just give us another twelve hours!” Professor Bonham pleaded. The translator project was only just getting fully underway.

“That will have to do for now. His Majesty says to proceed now and I am not the one to tell him to cool his heels, are you?”

“No, of course not. But...”

“Get the device as ready as you are able to for use in the next few hours. This is all going to happen very fast.”

“But...”

“You are all out of ‘buts’ Professor. We all are. Now we have to do what we have been asked to do.”

Bonham seemed to wilt a little, but then he gathered himself and hurried off to accomplish what he could. A good man doing his best under impossible conditions, something that would not go without some recognition in his future.

“I’m gonna die!” John simply could not adapt to traveling above the planet in these scrap-tin assemblies held together with hope and small screw-things. His latest transport had four incredibly noisy fan motors and two rows of almost comfortable seats. His popping ears told him that it did not hold air very well at all.

Nurse Grinkle was along for the ride, but she was sitting somewhere behind him in the aircraft and as such was providing no eye relief at all for this nerve-rattling trip.

HMS Drake

“Could the power supply have exhausted itself?” Ian asked.

“No, Sir Ian. The beacon is a standard model and would have kept transmitting for at least three years.” Rating Sharp’s survival equipment specialty made him the resident expert on such devices.

“Then it has been shut off or disabled?”

“That’s my best opinion, sir. I’d bet my farm on it.”

“You have a farm?”

“Almost, sir. I’m still saving for it.”

Ian had to smile a little at this, having grown up on a farm. “It’s damned hard work, you know.”

“Yes sir, but I’ll be the one giving the orders.”

Roobars Lake Air Base, dusk

“Aircraft approaching from the west identify yourself!” Technical Captain Lipteer’s boring watch in the air traffic control tower at base was suddenly less boring. There was no response to his radioed inquiry and whatever was heading his way was lit up like one of Gelt Town’s gambling casinos. “Scramble interceptors and base security forces! Notify Command we have multiple inbound unknowns!”

The “unknowns” were HMS Drake’s ‘hog’ and an escort of four Vipers, all with their search and anti-collision lights full on. It was a

blindingly bright display that hid any details about just what was approaching in the near darkness.

“Over there, land where that wide paved area is in front of those buildings.” Ian was sitting just behind the hog’s pilot and was being somewhat of a back seat pilot.

“I have airborne craft approaching us from the east, sir!” Lieutenant Cameron reported as he slowed the hog and descended.

“Let them. Our shields are all up and show optimum strength.” Ian had made very certain that no more shield failures would be occurring during this second mission.

Air General Goudsle witnessed the arrival of the alien craft from his office window that looked out over the aircraft parking ramp. There was something the size of a hanger just now settling to the ground while four smaller craft seemed to be hovering motionless above it. None of the craft had any obvious means of support and the light from them was blinding.

A general panic seemed to be underway on the ground as airmen and officers bolted for cover, or just simply bolted.

“Is everyone all set?” Ian asked as the small group assembled near the hog’s still closed cargo ramp. Ian had donned his Naval Reserve uniform with the silver filigree of an Imperial Knight decorating the right shoulder. “I for one look damned impressive, don’t you think?” It was an effort to lighten the moment.

“Spectacular, Sir Ian.” Bonham agreed with a grin.

Perhaps more impressive would be the fifty combat armored Marines who would be proceeding them and forming ranks on the tarmac, mostly for psychological effect since they would all be safely behind a shield.

The Captain of the Marine unit stepped over to where Ian was. "Sir, the shield is now recording small arms hits. It all seems pretty unorganized at the moment."

"We expected as much. Let's just wait a little while until they decide it's a waste of time to keep shooting at us."

"Yes, sir."

"Order a cease fire," General Goudsle said to the aide standing beside him. Not even the air-to-ground rocket attack by the fighters had any effect on the impassive 'things' just sitting or hovering out there. "Maybe a little diplomacy might work?"

"Sir?" Captain Anglu glanced at Goudsle before picking up the command phone.

"I think that maybe they just want to talk to us."

"About the boy?"

"Yes. I also have the feeling that if they had wanted to do us any harm we wouldn't be having this conversation. Now order that cease fire, I'm going out there with my best smile on!"

Across the continent Minister Wardling wasn't smiling at all, like all political types he was looking for a way to cover his past actions. Such as ordering the shoot down of the alien craft in the first place.

"Are you hearing me?" Ian asked as he tested the small com link inserted in his right ear.

"Quite well, Sir Ian." Lieutenant Cameron replied from the hog's small bridge.

"Then go ahead and lower the ramp. They seem to have come to their senses out there."

"Yes, sir. I am also seeing a group of six people approaching our position. They seem unarmed, possibly officers of some type."

"Even better! Stand ready to re-size the shield on my command if things go well and we get to talk to them."

"Understood, sir. And good luck."

Ian started to reply but then the wide cargo ramp began to lower and the Marines prepared to move down it.

"Hold your places!" Goudsle shouted as his small delegation seemed about ready to flee for their lives. A large ramp had lowered from the giant grounded craft and now at least four dozen helmeted and black-armored 'nightmares' were charging down it.

Then the nightmares simply formed up two separate ranks on either side of the ramp and came to attention, as if only on parade.

“I for one am visibly impressed,” Goudsle finally managed to croak. “Let’s all move forward just a ways.”

Captain Anglu was slightly ahead of the others and was the first one to encounter the shield, nearly breaking his nose in the process.

“Lieutenant Cameron?” Ian was now at the top of the ramp looking down at the scene below him.

“Sir?”

“Extend the shield just past that small group out there.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Cameron,” Ian continued.

“Sir?”

“Keep your tactical ground weapons centered on them, just in case things go really sour.” Ian was at heart a gentle sort of person but he had never in his life been a fool. Well, except for the one time with that sexually precocious girl, when he was very young.

“Done, sir.”

“What’s happening?” Goudsle demanded as the ambient noise level seemed to drop to near zero.

“Thath wall ith gone, thir!” Anglu said in a muffled voice as he felt ahead of him with his right hand for what was no longer there. His left hand was now holding a handkerchief to his bloody nose.

“Oh crap!” Goudsle was beginning to feel like this small expedition had been a serious lapse in judgment.

Then Sir Ian was striding calmly down the ramp. It was obvious now that the person in charge was coming to greet them.

Hopsin Mesa Research Facility

“Well this is really nice!” John said to himself as he sat down on the narrow bed’s thin mattress in the small bare room. It was only one step above a jail cell, and a short step at that.

This business of contacting other humans in the universe was really starting to be a pain in the butt.

“My – name – is – Ian.” Ian further astounded the man by extending his hand to him. A small flat device clipped to Ian’s uniform was translating his gibberish for General Goudsle.

“My name is Goudsle.”

“Good – slay.” Ian repeated as the two men firmly shook hands.

“Close enough.”

“We – are – here – in – peace. No – harm – is – meant.”

“Then welcome to you all.” Goudsle thought that this was all starting really well. Maybe these were decent folks after all, just like the boy?

“One – of – our – people – is – here?”

“Oh crap!” Goudsle thought as he silently nodded his understanding. Then aloud, *“John is no longer here.”*

At the mention of the boy's name Ian and the other's exchanged looks of relief. He was indeed alive!

"Where – is – he? Is – he – well?"

"He is quite well. He had a small injury that we attended to, he's fine now." Goudsle's mind was racing to try and salvage this situation. The silent and ominous ranks of Marines were doing little to help his state of mind, they all seemed to be glaring directly at him, even though their faces were invisible behind their mirrored helmets. They were also all carrying the most God-awful looking rifles of some sort.

"We – thank – you – for – that. Where – is – he – now?"

"He's at another installation right now."

The translation device choked on the word "installation" and simply inserted a beep. All the same Ian could see that the officer was now very uneasy and trying to back and fill.

"Where?" Ian's sharp tone didn't need any translation, nor did his expression.

"He's safe and well. That's all I can tell you for now."

Ian said nothing further for the moment, he was a person slow to anger but right now he was getting angry.

"We – want – him – back. He – is – important – to – us."

"Of course. But I do not have the authority to release him or disclose his location right now. Others will make that decision."

The translator beeped three times but Ian still got the drift.

“We – will – return – for – him – in – one – day. Do – not – anger – us. Good – day – to – you.”

With that Ian turned and stalked back up the ramp, followed by the small team that was with him. The Marines moved as one from a position of attention to one of braced arms.

General Goudsle clearly understood that message and decided that it was past time to withdraw from this spot.

Fleet Command, Earth

“This will not stand,” Daniel muttered. His Majesty had arrived at Fleet’s communication center without notice in the small hours of the morning. Now he was holding Ian’s last dispatch in his hands. There was no real need for him to be here except for the feeling that he had to be somewhere else other than that damned lonely castle in the mountains.

“Sire?” The Admiral of The Fleet had arrived in a rush a full half hour after the Emperor had. Heads would roll for not giving the Admiral some sort of warning about this abrupt visit.

Daniel spun to face the most senior officer in the Imperial Navy.

“Prepare the flagship and it’s escorts for a departure this day!”

“But...Sire. There are many pre...”

“Is there a problem?” His Majesty didn’t seem in the mood for any delays of any sort.

“Of course not, sire. May I inquire as to the destination?”

“You know the destination as well as We do.”

“Indeed, Sire. Then if you will excuse me there are orders to issue.”

“Of course! Go! And pardon Our manner with you this night.”
That last was spoken more softly.

“Thank you for that, Sire. No pardon is needed.”

The Admiral also had a son, two in fact. And two grandsons and four granddaughters..

Nurse Grinkle was shaking John out of a very pleasant dream, a dream that was in fact focused entirely on Nurse Grinkle.

“Wake up!”

“Huh?”

“Get up now! We have to get you out of here!”

“What’s going on?” John quickly came into focus. Nurse Grinkle was picking up his clothes and shoving them at him as he managed to roll out of the small bed and wobble upright. “What’s wrong?”

The woman had about the same aptitude for languages as John did, which is to say that neither one ever had much of a clue about what the other was saying.

“You have to get away from this place, out into the desert and hide!”

“Huh?”

“Get dressed now!” The woman wasn’t wearing her usual white uniform but had on pants and other clothes more suitable for the outdoors. And boots.

In the society that John had been raised in and in the experiences that any nurse has, body modesty was not an issue. John was dressed and ready for whatever the hell the woman was talking about in less than a minute.

Nurse Grinkle had seemed like a different person as she brusquely hurried John through dressing and then pushed him out and down a darkened hall.

The two dead guards had been stuffed into a supply closet and John didn’t have the time to wonder about why they were missing.

Port Ayers, Earth

The pre-dawn announcement boomed out across the miles-wide tarmac and was entirely unneeded. Everyone on the giant base knew who was coming and why the HMS Orion, the largest and most powerful warship ever constructed by man, was preparing for a hurried departure.

“Empire Arriving!”

The Imperial shuttle seemed very small as it grounded close to Orion’s towering hull. It all seemed as a matter of course that the Lady Ellen was at His Majesty’s side as he stepped down from the polished ebony craft.

All of the royals would be on this voyage.

Office of The President of The Republic

“Get your flabby ass out to Roobars, tonight!” The President was very close to sacking his War Minister.

“But...” Wardling was perspiring despite the cold rain that was falling outside.

“And get that boy back with his people before this gets out to the press! Smooth out their damned hairs so I won’t have to! When this breaks I want go out there with nothing but smiles for the press on all sides!”

The President was expecting a very great deal. A place in history, re-election. Statues.

It was when Nurse Grinkle shot a lone sentry in the back near the eastern edge of the remote installation that John finally came to grips with matters. Namely, Nurse Grinkle was beautiful but she was not what she had first appeared to be. Nurses for the most part do not normally carry silenced firearms and then kill people from ambush with them.

“Why did you do that?” John demanded, in total shock. The guard had been walking away from their hidden position, in a few minutes more they could have made it onto the hills with no one at all knowing. And he still didn’t know exactly why they were on the run.

“*Shut up, you stupid little freak!*” Nurse Grinkle grabbed her prize by his left arm and pulled him along through the moonless night.

In the great war with the East, Nurse Grinkle was playing for the opposing team.

HMS Drake

“Were there any...details as to why...?” Ian had the feeling that he had badly dropped the ball and that now His Majesty was coming to straighten up the mess he had made of things.

“No, Sir Ian. The dispatch simply stated that Empire and the Orion Flotilla would be on station here in nine hours.” Klaus also felt that matters were being snatched from his hands.

“Perhaps I’ll just go back to the farm and raise beans,” Ian said in a low voice.

“I can drive a bean harvester,” Klaus offered, also the son of a farmer.

In fact they would only be dealing with a father and mother seeking their lost son.

A dim green light blinked on and off in the hills ahead of them. John and ‘Nurse’ Grinkle had been trudging through the sand and rocks for what seemed like hours, dawn could not be too far away. Like most high desert areas the nights here were chilly to the point of being icy.

“*About fucking time!*” Grinkle muttered as they stopped to see if the light repeated the sequence. It did and the woman took out a

small flashlight and returned the signal. *“Come on, our ride is up ahead.”*

John had been wondering for the last few miles if he might be a lot better off trying to make a break back to the military installation. But ‘Nurse’ Grinkle seemed very handy with her fat-barreled pistol and John was unarmed. Bashing her on the head with a rock didn’t seem like a very workable solution even though he had by now ceased entirely being deeply in love with her.

Orion and its nine lesser escort vessels rendezvoused with Drake above the far side of the planet’s single large moon. By now the hog had also returned to its place in Drake’s hanger. Sir Ian, Michael and Sammy stood alongside Captain Klaus as His Majesty stepped onto Drake’s hanger deck; the Lady Ellen and the other royals were remaining aboard Orion for the time being.

Ian had been and still was the Emperor’s life long companion and friend, but just the same he was nervous.

“Ian.” Daniel extended his hand.

“Sire. Things have not...”

“Stop calling me that you idiot. It’s just me, Daniel!” It was said very quietly so that the assembled personnel could not hear. Michael and Sammy were the only ones close enough to hear the exchange.

“Sorry. Things have gone from bad to awful. None of this should have ever happened.”

“I know that, not your fault. Stop blaming yourself. Now let’s see if we can get that wayward brat of mine back!”

Chapter Five Contact

John had spent two interminable bouncing hours tied up in the back of what had to be a manure hauler. In fact it was just a small enclosed delivery van long overdue for a hosing out. Nurse Grinkle was riding in the front seat with the driver and seemed to be little concerned with their 'cargo' or its comfort. Finally the van squeaked to a halt shortly after making it onto an actual paved road.

There was a roadblock, autos and trucks up ahead were being searched. John couldn't see anything from where he was on the floor of the van but he could certainly hear and see his two captors having a heated discussion.

"What's going on?" John loudly demanded.

"Shut your mouth!" Nurse Grinkle leaned over the seat and brought the butt of her pistol down hard on the boy's head. The blow didn't knock John out but he did shut up as the woman spread a filthy tarp over him and then piled some empty fiber board boxes on top of that. *"Stay quiet or you get shot!"*

John knew the words for "quiet" and "shot" and decided that obedience would be a good choice right now. Besides, his head hurt like hell and seemed to be bleeding a lot. He had in fact had his skull fractured.

The van inched forward for a few minutes in the line of vehicles waiting to be searched and finally it was their turn. Nurse Grinkle and

her companion almost got away with it until the police officer who looked in the back of the van spotted part of a foot sticking out from under the tarp. The officer started to pull his sidearm while shouting something to the others, then the woman shot him squarely in his forehead with her silenced pistol.

“GO!” Nurse Grinkle shouted while switching to the compact machine gun that had been lying at her feet; the woman seemed to be very familiar with firearms. John was almost deafened as she laid down a spray of bullets out of the still open back door of the accelerating van. Three officers at the roadblock and one poultry farmer waiting in his truck were killed outright. To their great credit the police held their own fire knowing that the much sought after boy was in the van.

Then the chase was on.

Roobars

Minister Wardling’s transport had arrived at about the same time that John’s captors took refuge in a farm house, adding the family of five who lived there to their hostage list. By now there was little thought of actually getting the boy out of the country; Nurse Grinkle and her co-mole were now more concerned with just cutting a deal and staying alive.

Minister Wardling was eager to cut a deal also, but with the visitors from the stars. He did not take well to the news that John had been kidnapped from what was supposed to be the most secure base on the entire planet.

“The fucking nurse took him?” Wardling fairly screamed at General Goudsle.

“Killing three good men in the process,” Goudsle added in a voice of icy calm.

Wardling seemed to be working up to another outburst when the telephone on Goudsle’s desk buzzed. The Minister could only pace and fume while the officer listened silently to what was being said. “Tell them to stay put and not to move in on them, pull back and give things some time to cool off.”

Goudsle hung up the phone and looked at Wardling.

“The province cops have them trapped in a farmhouse about two hundred miles east of here. They’ve also taken a family hostage.”

“And the boy?” Wardling could have cared less about the family.

“Probably inside the house with them.”

Wardling was trying to figure a quick end to this nightmare when the water in a glass pitcher on the General’s desk started to ripple ever so slightly. Then the entire building began to vibrate as if attached to some great rumbling motor.

Then it grew dark as the shadow of Orion fell across the entire base.

Wardling and the General made it to the window at about the same time, both staring up at what could not possibly be. Finally Goudsle found a part of his voice and his mind.

“Well, I guess they’re back.”

Wardling nearly fainted.

The dry lake was a perfect landing site for a craft that was massive enough to naturally generate its own tiny but detectable gravity field. Orion had arrived without an escort, leaving the rest of the flotilla in close orbit around the planet. In a short time the planet’s thoughts of war would be replaced with more important matters. Small bright moons were now visible to the entire planet; but they were not moons and they were not small.

“They seemed to have gotten themselves organized, Your Majesty.” Admiral Kimmel said as a single ground car of some sort moved slowly out onto the dry lake and towards the grounded Orion.

“Yes, but they’re going to run into the shield,” Daniel replied. “Resize it when they get close enough.”

“This is close enough!” Goudsle’s words to the driver were instantly obeyed. The driver had volunteered for this short trip but now had serious second thoughts about it all.

Wardling had gathered himself into some semblance of self control but Goudsle was uncertain if he could even get the fat bureaucrat out of the car.

They were parked in front of a gigantic ramp leading up and into a curving titanium cliff. At the foot of the ramp was the same man

Goudsle had met the first time an alien craft had landed here. There was no one else in sight, especially not any of those armed nightmares.

“Come on, time to earn your beans.”

“No!” Wardling seemed to be paralyzed and Goudsle was out of patience.

“Listen to me, you fat fuck!” Goudsle then leaned very close to the man’s left ear. “If they had meant to harm us we would already be vaporized, or whatever the hell they do to people who piss them off! Either get out of this car and act like a man or I will personally blow your greasy brains out!”

This seemed to finally make an impression on the Minister of War, who was at least technically in command of Goudsle but was, at the moment, not even in command of himself.

“Welcome back,” Goudsle said as they shook hands. The towering presence of the alien spacecraft made it very hard to do anything but stare up at it in awe. *“This is our Minister of War, Emon Wardling.”*

Wardling did manage to shake Ian’s hand but seemed incapable of speech for the time being.

“I’m honored to meet you.” The speech translator had been improved by a quantum leap during the last twenty four hours. “Why isn’t John with you?”

Goudsle took a deep breath as he tried to voice some sort of plausible explanation. The truth seemed to be as good as anything else.

“He was taken by whom we believe to be enemy agents, but we have tracked them down and now have them under observation.”

“That does not sound like the truth.” Ian was looking the General very hard in the eye as he said that.

“I know it doesn’t, but it is what has happened.”

“Then you must come inside and explain all of this to His Majesty.”

“Who?” Goudsle thought that he had misheard or something.

“His Majesty, The Emperor.”

“Emperor of what?”

“There is no call for rudeness here.”

“I didn’t mean to be rude, but can you sort of educate me a little about things?”

Ian nodded in understanding, there was a very great deal that these people had no idea about.

“He is the ruler of The New Empire. He is the absolute monarch of nearly four thousand worlds and he is all of the power that there is.”

“I see.” Goudsle was at least beginning to see. On the other hand Wardling seemed on the verge of running for the car.

“There is one more thing you must know about His Majesty,” Ian continued.

“Yes?”

“John is His Majesty’s first born son.”

“*Oh shit,*” Goudsle said quietly as he gazed up at the metal mountain that had arrived from the stars.

“Well said. Now come along with me, we’re keeping His Majesty waiting and he’s been a bit short on patience of late.”

John was still tied up but at least his head had stopped bleeding, no thanks to Nurse Grinkle.

“Thank you,” John said to the lady of the house they were now in. The farmer’s gritty wife had bluffed and stared down both of the kidnapers and then did what she could to put a makeshift bandage on the boy’s bloody head.

“*Who are these people, and who are you?*” She whispered as she was finishing up. John had been tossed none too gently onto the family’s sitting room couch and that was an improvement on the van’s filthy metal floor. The woman’s husband and three children were sitting huddled together on the floor up against one wall, looking as terrified as you might imagine.

“My name’s John.” He had understood the “who” in the woman’s question.

The ramp was the length of two playing fields so there were a few moments to talk as they climbed it. Ian did most of the talking.

“There are certain protocols to observe,” Ian began.

“*Of course.*” Being a military man Goudsle knew all about protocols. Wardling still looked like a cow being herded into a slaughter house.

“We will pause ten paces from His Majesty and bow. From there...”

“*We don’t bow here. We elect our leader.*”

“We are now on an Imperial vessel. You are no longer ‘here’ and we do not elect our leader.”

“*I don’t bow.*” Goudsle can be given some credit for keeping a spine in this incredible situation.

“Very well. But I would suggest...”

“*I can salute him.*” Goudsle offered.

“You also salute here? So do we. Salute him then.”

Orion’s gleaming central hanger deck finally came into view. At this point even Goudsle stopped walking and just stared while four thousand combat ready Imperial Marines snapped as one to attention.

“Come along, no harm will come to you here, this is a guard of honor.” Ian prompted as he glanced over at Wardling. The obese bureaucrat seemed a little more collected now, he had reviewed

countless troops before, albeit none like these and never inside a giant space ship.

The introduction to His Majesty actually went quite well. Sir Ian handled the presentations with the ease that comes of having done it many times before. General Goudsle saluted as discussed and was gratified that the man in the plain black uniform crisply returned the courtesy. Wardling managed a sort of hesitant half-bow and received a nod in return from Daniel.

Ian then introduced The Lady Ellen and the other royals present, Orion's officers, and then Michael and Sammy.

"My son Michael, and Midshipman Winslow. Mister Winslow is a ward of His Majesty and both lads are good friends of John."

"Midshipman? And so young?" Goudsle asked in amazement.

"Naval officers begin training at an early age, it is a sort of apprentice process," Ian explained. "John is also a midshipman and also a qualified Viper pilot. He has his father's talent for it."

"And we shot him down," Goudsle added in a soft voice.

"Yes, unfortunately his Viper's shield failed at the worst possible moment."

"Ian," Daniel nodded toward the waiting meeting room, there were urgent matters to discuss with these two people.

"Yes, Sire." Ian then turned to their two guests, "we need to move along now to a quiet place where we can all sit down and talk."

"Fine," Goudsle readily agreed. It was difficult to keep his mind focused on anything in the middle of an army out of hell. He was determined to get a closer look at one of those armored soldiers before he left this place. If he left this place.

John had dozed off for a time only to be awakened by Nurse Grinkle arguing with her companion. Apparently the two agents had been listening to the farmer's clunky looking radio. John still hadn't determined what the beefy looking guy's name was.

"He's not of any great value to anyone now, the damned sky seems to be full of his fucking relatives!" Beefy had a distinct look of panic about him.

"He can still keep us alive if whoever or whatever is in those spaceships wants him back badly enough!" Grinkle had her pistol in her right hand, she never seemed to let go of it.

"And what happens after we turn him over to them?"

"I don't know! Let me think, will you?"

John was happy that they were unhappy. He also really had to use the head.

Orion was the Imperial Flagship and as such it had a few more creature comforts than was the norm for naval vessels. The large round table that General Goudsle found himself seated at appeared to have been fashioned from some incredibly exotic wood and then

hand polished for several centuries. The entire 'room' fairly shouted power and vast wealth, in a subdued sort of shout of course.

His Majesty had several pointed questions.

"May We inquire as to exactly why Mister Grayson's craft was fired upon, General Goudsle? We observed the vid transmissions that the Viper relayed, there were no provocations."

Goudsle barely managed not to smile as he glanced over to Wardling, who was seated on his left. *"Minister Wardling issued that order, sir. It was an order that was by all accounts... reluctantly obeyed by the crew of the bomber."*

Wardling turned a shade or two paler with this explanation.

"Minister Wardling?" Daniel's fingers were tapping on his thigh, where his pistol might be had he decided to wear it this day. He rather wished now that he had worn it.

The Lady Ellen was also at the table and also looked about ready to commit mayhem.

"We...we are a country at war," Wardling began with a stammer, then he seemed to gather himself. *"An unknown craft was approaching our shores, there have been past sneak attacks on us. It was an order issued in haste and upon reflection an order that should not have been given. All that I can do is apologize to all of you for this unfortunate incident and offer whatever assistance we are capable of to recover your son...er, Mister Grayson."*

Even Goudsle was somewhat impressed with the man's words, he hadn't thought the fat bureaucrat capable of such reasoned words in his present mental state.

Daniel's fingers ceased their tapping and his eyes seemed to soften just a little, but only a just little. Sir Ian asked the next question.

"General, you mentioned earlier to me that you had John's location?"

"We do, sir. It appears to be a rather bad situation, the enemy agents were being pursued when they took refuge in a farmhouse. They are heavily armed and besides holding John...Mister Grayson, they are also holding the farm family there as hostages. We have pulled our people back for the present so as not to provoke them. If we move on the house there is no way to know what they will do, they are already looking at a death penalty for what they have done."

Michael and Sammy were sitting quietly off to one side of the meeting table on chairs next to one bulkhead. Sammy leaned over to whisper in Michael's ear.

"This is a piece of pie, we use the stealth suit!"

"The what?" Michael had never heard of the project.

Sammy explained it all, quickly.

"This is no bullshit?" Michael asked as he looked hard into Sammy's eyes.

"No bullshit. We used it to collect the DNA samples!"

"You did that?"

“Where have you been?”

“Out of the loop, I guess.” Michael decided that it was time to throw the dice and be damned with what the roll ended in. John needed help and there was a way to supply it!

“Pardon me!” Michael had stood while the room full of royalty and officers tried to decide on a course of action. It took a second and louder “Pardon me!” for the boy to be noticed by Daniel, who then held up his hand for all to be silent.

“Yes, Michael?”

“I apologize for interrupting, Sire, but Sammy may have the best way to go in and get John. We use the stealth suit, Sire.”

“Explain, Mister Winslow.”

Sammy stood up and did explain, as simply and as calmly as his sweaty-palm nerves allowed. No one interrupted the boy’s straightforward explanation, it was indeed a logical thing to propose, perhaps the only option they had other than a frontal assault on the house. The Empire had no magical ‘paralyzing ray’ to knock out desperate people from a distance. The Jaan device could be defended against but so far no working prototype existed that duplicated the beam’s effects.

Captain Klaus was also present at this meeting and only the fact that Michael and not Sammy had broached the subject made him to hold his tongue.

It was indeed the logical thing to try, but it was not something that Ellen could readily accept.

“It’s too dangerous!”

“Ma’am, I can do this easy. Very quiet, no fuss.” Sammy replied.

“But how do you get John out without them doing...?” Finally Ellen could see how he would do it and it made her shudder. Sammy’s talents with a one-at knife were well known, it was a matter of official naval records.

“He can do this thing, Ellen.” Alexandra’s calm words caught everyone’s attention. “Let him.”

“Then be very careful, Sammy.” Ellen finally whispered, defeated again.

“I will, ma’am.” The boy had no qualms at all about doing anything that was needed to rescue John.

The Marine assault craft carrying Lieutenant Chu and the stealth suit came screaming in over the air base while still moving at supersonic speed, it then slowed in a great arc and settled quickly beside Orion.

“*What exploded?*” Goudsle asked in alarm. No one on this planet had ever heard a sonic boom.

“Nothing,” Ian explained. “Simple shock wave effect. The pilot was in a hurry.”

“If you say so!”

Lieutenant Chu had the appearance of someone tossed off a cliff and then safely caught at the last possible moment. The man was at heart a laboratory research engineer and had little tolerance for heavy accelerations and random weightlessness.

“Sir Ian,” Chu saluted a bit unsteadily, “how may I be of service?”

“You have the stealth suit with you?”

“Of course, per orders. What is going on, sir?”

“There’s no time for explanations right here and now. Have your people bring along the suit and whatever support equipment you need.”

Onboard Orion an elite team of Marines was being assembled and readied for boarding one of the assault craft. General Goudsle would be along on this mission to help coordinate communications and to lend what advice he could to the rescue team. His Imperial Majesty would be the assault craft’s command pilot, no one had dared to try and dissuade him. The Lady Ellen’s attempts at being included in the mission had been met with multiple stone walls. Daniel loved her dearly but of late she was becoming a distraction from what needed to be done.

After meeting with Lieutenant Chu and getting his nervous briefing on the suit, Daniel led Sammy off a ways on the hanger deck for some quiet words.

“You will very likely have to use that knife on one or both of those people. Are you certain that you are up to such a thing? It is a terrible thing to take another human life.”

“They have John, Sire. I can do it.”

“Yes, but...”

“You know about the one-at that I had, Sire?”

“Yes.”

“The person who used to own it tried to kill me with it, so I shot him dead because it had to be done. This has to be done too.”

Daniel had to pause for a time before answering the boy. “Yes, it does have to be done. But take your good time when we get there, move slowly and silently. Take stock of the full situation around you with each step, before you take the next step.”

“Yes, Sire. Any good thief knows how to do that.”

Daniel didn't have the heart to leave Michael behind so the boy was along helping his father and Lieutenant Chu get Sammy stuffed into the stealth suit. General Goudsle had in his long career flown most of what could get off of the ground, but sitting in the right seat of the assault craft was a giant leap beyond all of that.

“It's beautiful.” Goudlse said aloud without realizing it. The view screen clearly showed the blue curve of the planet below them, even on this very short arc of a trip.

“It is,” Daniel agreed. “If this all works to the best you must come along to Earth for a visit.”

“Truly?”

“Of course. All We ever wanted to do was establish a peaceful contact with your planet, then things went very wrong.”

Neither man said anything more for a moment, then it was time to attend to what was before them.

“See if you can raise your people. The frequency you supplied can be accessed on com channel 7.”

Goudsle nodded in understanding, except that he could not sort out which button on the com panel was number seven. Daniel leaned over and touched the right number.

“Provincial Tactical, this is Goudsle, do you copy me?”

Even with recon drones relaying the signal the response was distorted and full of static.

“We hear you well. No change in the situation here.”

“Understood. All of your people are to hold their present positions, regardless of what you see arriving on scene. Is that clear to you?”

“It is, but just what is going to arrive here?”

“You’ll have to trust me on this. Just sit back and watch the show. And above all, hold your places!”

John finally was allowed to use the head, but only with a pistol pointed at his back as blessed relief was achieved.

“Go and sit with the others, now?” Nurse Grinkle hadn’t even wanted to untie him, but the mechanics of the situation had finally required that he be freed of the cords around his hands and feet.

“No problem, you ugly bitch!” John muttered as he activated the disposal lever on the commode-thing. He was pretty sure that the woman hadn’t learned any of those words and she now seemed not nearly as attractive as she once had.

The sun had dropped below the horizon when the Marine assault craft settled as quietly as it was capable of behind a low grassy hill to the east of the farmhouse. Sammy would have a half-mile hike just to get to his objective. The provincial police forces hadn’t even seen them arrive behind the line of officers surrounding the farmhouse.

“They have a basement, that’s the best way to get in.” Like the others, Goudsle was peering through telescopic viewers at the simple, two-story white farmhouse. The place reminded Ian of his family home on New Albion. They were all standing on the small hill surveying the situation as the Marines moved out to silently take up positions.

“Sir?” Sammy hadn’t seen what the man was talking about.

‘That small sloping structure attached to the house, it has a door that leads down into the storage space below the house. From there should be some sort of stairs up into the house itself.’

“I see it, sir. Better than kicking down the door.”

Goudsle still had great misgivings about this whole thing, he had yet to see the stealth suit that Sammy now had on in actual use. The thing looked like a badly tailored deep-sea diving suit fabricated out of cheap farming wire.

But then Lieutenant Chu and Sammy powered up the suit and Sammy blinked out of sight.

‘I’ll be dipped in shit!’ Goudsle quietly exclaimed. Some expressions, or their variations, are common to all human societies.

His Majesty had the final words before Sammy moved off towards the farm house.

“Remember what a good thief would do.”

“Yes, Sire. I’m not the heroic type.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. Do not trade your life for John’s life. The Empire might have some future use for you.”

“Yes, Sire. We’re sort of wasting good time here.”

“Agreed. Go and do us all proud.”

Daniel would have hugged him tight were it not for Lieutenant Chu’s warning about the surface voltages that spiked at random on the suit’s outer field interface.

Michael and Sammy parted with small waves (one seen, the other not) to one another and with the knowledge that they would always be friends, no matter how things turned out this night.

Had it not been for what was ahead the walk in the cool evening would have been very pleasant. The stars were out, the moon was showing a faint sliver of light. Inside Sammy's suit was a naval issue one-at knife, along with a pilot's survival pistol and that sort of spoiled the mood. Sammy passed through the loose line that the local police had set up as if it wasn't there, none of them had any idea he was there. Back at the landing craft all but the perimeter Marines had retreated inside to watch what Sammy was now seeing, and to hear what he was saying.

"The suit is showing all normal," Sammy felt the need to say something, if only to report what Chu's data display was already showing. Everyone could pretty much see the same thing that Sammy was looking at.

"I have the basement door in sight, the only light I can see in the house looks to be around at the front."

"Take your time, just ease up beside the basement door for now." Daniel was handling the com link, again no one had the audacity to suggest that the Emperor do otherwise.

"Yes, Sire. We all need to be sort of quiet now."

"Understood."

Even His Majesty knew when he had been very politely told to shut up.

Even with the knowledge that he was invisible Sammy still felt very exposed and very much a target. As he came within mere yards of the house he stopped and stood very still, just looking and listening. However there was nothing to see and nothing to hear, just the evening breeze gently rustling the oddly shaped leaves in the shade tree to one side of the house. At least these people didn't seem to have damned noisy dog. A few more soft steps had the boy standing beside the sloping door to the basement.

The wooden two-part door was designed to open outward with each side having its own handle. It was locked, of course.

"Shit!" Sammy only thought it and didn't dare to speak aloud. Time to use the one-at, carefully.

"What is he doing?" Goudsle asked as he peered over Daniel and Ian's shoulders, who were peering over Chu's shoulder at the display screen.

"I think he's preparing to cut away that lock mechanism," Ian replied.

"But...how?"

"Just watch, and please be quiet."

"Sorry."

Sammy gently pulled the sheathed one-at out of the suit-pouch, an act that was done more by touch than sight. Whenever he looked

down at himself when he wore the suit there never was really much to see.

The knife seemed to be floating in mid-air as Sammy carefully unsheathed it and then sat its powered sheath on the ground. The tough wood was like the proverbial butter being parted by a very hot knife as he sliced a wide circle around the lock holding the two doors together. Sammy's free hand lifted the lock free and sat it aside as the cut was complete, least it drop inside and make a noise.

Goudsle could keep silent no longer.

"Is he using some sort of light? They'll see it!"

"His helmet is equipped with a light amplification system, he isn't using a light at all." Daniel patiently tried to explain.

"But...!"

"General?" Daniel inquired, but not so patiently.

"What?"

"Shut up or We will have you shut up."

"Sorry."

It was very hard to watch and not ask any questions.

Sammy ever so carefully re-sheathed the knife and returned it to his suit. Then he even more carefully lifted up one of the doors, very slowly. Any thief knows about squeaking hinges and hinges still squeaked even in the far more advanced New Empire, and this door started to squeak.

“Shit!” This time Sammy whispered it as he halted the door’s movement. He knew from experience that there were two ways to deal with a squeaky door; you either move it ever so slowly or you move it very fast. Sammy didn’t have the time needed to move it slowly so he opted for very fast.

It was a good choice, the rapid movement didn’t give the rusty metal the time to work up to a good squeal.

The basement was a complete black hole as far as ambient light was concerned so the suit’s tiny brain switched on the infrared beams. Sammy gently walked down the ten steps to the earthen basement floor.

“What a mess!” The boy thought as he picked his way between piles of absolutely weird junk, bins full of some sort of root vegetables and shelves lined with glass jars full of...what? Finally the predicted stairs upward were in sight and there was a thin slice of light at the top of them. Stop and listen. Collect your wits. Think!

The door at the top of the stairs didn’t even have a lock, but was it safe to open it? His suit-pouch held one additional small item that he had thought to include at the last minute, not even Lieutenant Chu had known about it. It was a ‘peeper’.

“What is he doing?” This time it was Daniel doing the asking. Sammy had pulled something else out of the suit and was now scrunched down at the top of the stairs. In a moment the Emperor’s question was answered as a small square containing a floor-level view of the home’s kitchen of came into view.

“He’s got a peeper! Chu exclaimed. “Pushed it under the door! Brilliant!”

“A what?” Daniel asked in exasperation.

“A peeper, Sire! It’s used for inspecting hard to view areas during maintenance work!”

“Who...?”

“I never thought of it, Sire! His idea, I suppose.”

The kitchen door didn’t squeak so Sammy stepped carefully into the quiet house, again he felt very exposed. Stop and listen. Wait. Try to keep thinking.

“Captain Brewster,” Daniel said into his headpiece, “move your Marines in close, now. Action is imminent.”

The Marines had already passed through the police lines with scarcely more notice than had been given to Sammy.

Chapter Five Family

The kitchen floor creaked loudly and Sammy moved quickly to one corner away from the doorway that led into the rest of the house. As footsteps could be heard coming to investigate, the one-at was quickly unsheathed and laid on the wide work counter. All the while Sammy was silently cursing at the damned floor and at squeaks and creaks in general.

Mister Beefy switched on the overhead light as he stood in the doorway, trying to see anything out of place or suspicious. He was carrying a large revolver in his right hand and slowly pointed it back and forth as if seeking a target. The man had almost turned to leave but then spotted the odd looking knife on the counter, he was sure that it hadn't been there before.

Flick!

In a blur of motion the knife had leaped off the counter and flashed through Mister Beefy's right wrist. The man watched stupidly as his gun and its attached hand thumped to the floor, blood spurting out of the stump where his hand had been.

Flick!

Mister Beefy's head and body collapsed as one to the floor with only a soft thud. The man's head actually rolled a short distance as Sammy stepped back quickly from the gory mess, massive amounts of blood were gushing out on the once spotless floor.

“Good God!” Lieutenant Chu whispered as the horrific scene unfolded. Daniel could find no words and Ian looked ashen-faced. Michael had to turn away completely. General Goudsle looked like he was going to be sick. Finally Daniel selected a channel and spoke again into his headset.

“Marines, be ready to enter on Our command.”

Still holding the one-at, Sammy moved to turn off the crude light switch that he had seen Mister Beefy use. At that very moment John’s bandaged head poked around the door frame. Then events seemed to move in slow motion.

“Sammy?” John had caught just a quick glimpse of a one-at floating across the kitchen, that and the ghastly mess on the floor. It was enough to tell him what was happening.

“Get down!” Sammy had no time for polite reunions as he kicked John’s feet out from under him, sending him sprawling to the floor. Nurse Grinkle was now very awake and was approaching unseen behind John with her fat barreled hand gun pointed directly at his back. The woman seemed to freeze for a moment at the now dimly lit sight of a knife wafting back and forth in front of her, and it was a moment that was just long enough.

Flick!

Several events happened in a very few seconds.

Nurse Grinkle’s severed forearm and gun dropped to the floor.

The gun discharged as it hit the floor with the round smashing directly into Sammy’s right knee.

Nurse Grinkle began screaming and careening around the living area, blood spurting in all directions.

Imperial Marines smashed in through nearly every door and window on the ground floor of the house.

The farm family started to add to Nurse Grinkle's screams.

Sammy collapsed to the floor and began to use all of his considerable collection of port rat profanity, his damaged stealth suit spitting sparks and finally going dead.

John then sat up and tried to make some sense out of the noisy chaos in the house.

HMS Orion

John and Sammy were in the same medical recovery room. John had suffered a depressed skull fracture and a blood clot that could have turned him into a vegetable had it ever dislodged. Sammy's right knee had been mostly destroyed and had required some considerable micro-surgery. But Orion and the Empire were not without some considerable medical resources.

"They seem so very small," Ellen said as she sat on the edge of John's bed. Both boys were still sedated and sound asleep, and would remain so for a good long while.

"We are all so very small," Daniel added as he stood beside his wife.

Iberian Peninsula , four months later.

The water was clear and warm. The sand was clean and white. It was a day a person would always remember.

“I’m going back to New Albion to be with Addie and help out with her shop, if she’ll have me.” Sammy said as all three of the boys sat warming in the sand after their ocean swim. As always they both had to make sure that Sammy didn’t drown in the low surf, he still couldn’t swim very well.

“Get off! We have to be at Ayers in two days!” John thought that his friend and brother was having one of his warped jokes on them.

“You do, I don’t. I submitted my resignation from service yesterday. His Majesty knows. We talked for a long time about it. He said it was okay and that he understood.”

Michael and John could only gape at each other. Finally John demanded why.

“You busted your ass for years to get into the Navy! It was what you always wanted to do! What happened?”

“When I had to use the one-at on those two creeps...there was something that I didn’t like very much about it.”

“Well sure, it was a hell of a thing to have to do! It took a lot of balls!” John agreed. It was something that John felt he could never do. It was so much more ‘personal’ than just pulling a trigger or pressing a firing button. Michael felt ill whenever he even thought about it. All of that blood! That head on the floor with the wide open eyes!

“No, there’s more.” Sammy said as he looked at John and then at Michael.

“Well, what?” Michael finally asked.

“That I liked doing it, a lot. Too much.”

Sammy had indeed talked to the Emperor the day before. It had been an emotional meeting. Sammy had for the one time let all of his feelings come into the full view of another person, all of his closely guarded thoughts. He had had a taste of what a normal life could be like, or as normal as it could be when in the midst of all the power in mankind’s universe. Normal was what he wanted most now.

He didn’t want to yield to the feelings he had when killing people.

Since Addie was the closest thing to family that Sammy had who could understand him and his background it was decided New Albion would be a good place for him to settle for the time being. Daniel knew well the healing properties of honest work. He had no doubt Addie would put Sammy to work; there would be no coddling. Another reason which Daniel didn’t share with Sammy was that Daniel’s family was also on New Albion and it would be easy to keep tabs on the boy without being too obvious. Imperial agents are all well and good for some things but there were other things that only family could have a real feel for.

After their talk and after Sammy had left, Daniel thought back on the time he had sent people to a gruesome death on a planet called Temple, and that he hadn’t been bothered by it. On a planet called Bones he had done far worse and with his own hand. He also

recalled how much that lack of remorse had later bothered him. He was gratified that Sammy was similarly bothered by his own bloody deeds.

Sammy's name was still on that locked away letter and would remain so. Time can alter all paths.

New Albion

An old fashioned bell above the doorway was traditional for almost any small shop in the Empire. Addie had purchased one only the day before but hadn't had the time to install the shiny brass thing yet. The girl had her back to the door and was busy cursing about the poor quality of the roses she had ordered. So were all of the other flower shop owners in the small but bustling city; roses hadn't done well this year and there was a shortage. She had orders to fill!

She didn't hear her latest customer quietly enter the shop.

"Got anything really cheap?" Sammy asked.

Something about that slightly rough voice caused Addie to stop and hold still for a second. Then she turned to see who it was.

"Runt!"