

EMPIRE



MIDSHIPMAN book one

by Richard Stotts

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Midshipman

By Richard Allen Stotts

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Author's note:

What changes will occur in our languages and customs in the next three-thousand years? Conventional speech and terms are utilized in this work of fiction, anything else would be pure conjecture and a bit silly.

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Chapter One

Some History

Two-thousand nine-hundred and seventy-three years after man first stepped upon the Earth's moon. A very long time.

Total collapse of classical civilization had begun with the Sino-American war of 2017, about the time that Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle rose to meet the sky, along with all of China. Capitalism, socialism, communism, whateverism, they ceased to have any meaning when the electricity went off, when the supermarket was only a memory, when the darkness was upon the land. Governments ceased to exist in any form other than small gangs and petty war lords. Two hundred years of death and chaos passed, then mankind finally remembered what had once worked, mankind remembered the libraries, the knowledge stored in long forgotten vaults. Mankind remembered that well-intentioned democracies had always finally degenerated into socialism and decadence. Mankind remembered empires that had lasted for a

thousand years and more.

Easy choice.

The New Empire began in what used to be the state of Oregon, in what had once been called the United States. Like all beginnings it was modest, a valley, then two, a territory, a continent, a planet. Laws were what worked, laws that could be depended upon to be harsh but impartial. Absolute power in the hands of one person could be a terrible thing, it could also lift a population out of despair and suffering. Absolute power could move a people out to the stars.

And after a long while it did.

The New Empire was a roughly disc-shaped area eight thousand light years across and growing. Faster than light speed travel is not possible according to the known laws of physics. Any lawyer (few had survived the dark times) could tell you to always to look for a loophole in any law. A loophole was found. Don't ask me to explain the warped notions of space and time involved, suffice it to say that space and time can be manipulated given sufficient energy and wits. Faster than light travel had saved humanity from itself, all of it's eggs were no longer in just

the one small basket.

There were two-thousand-three-hundred and twelve human inhabited solar systems in the New Empire, a population measured in the trillions. If the reader of this text is looking forward to a politically correct utopian future of sexual equality, racial and cultural diversity, a future where all wants are supplied gratis, read no further. Life is hard, it always has been and it always will be. Work hard and you will tend to prosper, depend on others for your well being and you will sooner or later fall upon bad times. The New Empire did not supply it's citizens with material things, it did supply them with an environment in which they could provide their own material needs. The New Empire had relatively few laws, lawyers were few and far between. If you stole or killed you needed a lawyer and probably an undertaker. If you failed to keep your word on a business agreement you simply lost your good name and people shunned you and your business, forever.

Personal morals were in some aspects almost Victorian, civility in speech and manners were the norm, respect for family and Empire were paramount. Matters of honor sometimes ended in quite legal set duels. Sexual

promiscuity was looked upon as a sign of a lack of self control and responsibility, in past times millions had died of the diseases that such behavior had spread. At the same time simple nudity at the seashore or pool side was not regarded as anything but natural, false modesty had died but not 'proper' behavior.

Religion still thrived when mankind moved out to the stars, there was room for Christian, Jew and Muslim to exist separately and apart, no threat to each other, all loyal to the one Empire. The same could be said of the races, in the end and by mutual choice it was simply easier all around for whites to live on white planets, blacks on black planets, Asians on Asian planets. No racial discrimination exists where there are no different races to discriminate against. A black person could quite legally live on a white planet if they chose to, likewise a white person could live on a black planet, in practice it rarely occurred. The one co-mingling of the races occurred in the Imperial Navy, a ship's commander might be black or white or anything in between, it's crew always mixed, all were loyal to the one Emperor. And the race of the Emperor varied with time also. There was no Magna Carta decreeing that not even the Emperor was above the law, the Emperor was the law.

The Imperial Throne was not a birthright, it was not passed from father to son, that was forbidden. The new Emperor was always chosen by the old Emperor for a demonstrated ability to lead, for personal courage. It was an odd sort of royalty, there were no lords and ladies, no baron's, not even an Empress. If you had a claim to royal blood it was because one of your ancestors was an emperor, you had no title to go with the claim. The designated heir to the throne was named a Prince of The Empire until succession occurred. There were often more than one heir-designates, a sealed document written in the Emperor's hand held the order of preference. Only with the death of the Emperor was the document of succession unsealed, any remaining Prince(s) then lost their titles and privileges, often with great relief. Emperor was a job most sane persons would shun if given the choice, it held terrible responsibilities and loneliness.

Mankind was by no means alone in the universe. Intelligent life was fairly rare, most races tended to go extinct as soon as they developed atomic power, humanity had been very lucky. The current thorn in the side of the New Empire were the 'Snakes'. The Snakes were actually

almost human in general size and form, their skin gave them their name, snake skin. The human vocal apparatus cannot make the sounds that are the Snakes true name. The Snakes were a more communal society, individual achievement and initiative were not part of their makeup, they were highly xenophobic and regarded other races as pests to be exterminated or workers to be subjugated. Humanity did not take kindly to being treated as 'pests', a full scale war with the Snakes was looming, scattered 'incidents' had already occurred.

In the New Empire there was one absolute ruler, the Emperor, and one absolute unifying power, the Imperial Navy. The Navy needed the best people that the Empire could supply, the best people that mankind could produce to keep the peace and to protect the weak, to protect and expand the empire. Most young males didn't measure up to the requirements to be a naval officer, the Empire had very harsh standards for it's leaders and selection began at an early age.

In times long past the selection process to find a naval officer would have been considered to be inhumane, cruel, mean spirited, sexist and just plain nasty.

Tough.

You go with what works.

Candidates for the naval academies (too large of an empire for just one) were selected at age ten. In a distant history with wooden ships, midshipmen were often just as young, mere boys.

Every ten-year-old male citizen (I am so very sorry, mixed sexes in the military never really worked out) of the New Empire was entitled to take the preliminary screening tests. Most didn't take the test, it was just too damned hard. On average 94 percent who took the examination failed. There was no disgrace in failing, most did and went on to lead perfectly ordinary lives. If you passed, you were something most special, you were a cadet-candidate. If you and your family possessed sufficient grit you then went on to the pre-academy screening process, as many as seventy-five percent sometimes failed that screening, some poor lads occasionally perished in the unforgiving weeding out process. Those who survived the screening entered the academies, things eased up a bit there but about half would eventually wash out in that year long ordeal. Those who remained after academy were granted the rank of junior

midshipman and went on to active service with the fleet.

Full commissioning to ensign depended upon one's progress during shipboard duty, it was an apprentice program, you learned the job by working alongside those who knew the job. Some were commissioned as early as sixteen, a few as late as twenty. A very few were never commissioned at all and were persuaded to look elsewhere for employment. Commissioned naval officers were regarded with a certain awe and respect by both military and civilians alike, they were the Emperor's hand, the Emperor's fist and sword.

Chapter Two

Free Traders

There existed within the New Empire a small subculture of non-citizens, those who went there own way. The Free Traders swore no allegiance to the Emperor, likewise they were also scrupulous in obeying the empire's few laws and regulations and were in turn respected for their useful roll in the outer reaches of the empire.

Outlying colonies depended on the Free Traders cargo vessels for an inexpensive commerce link with the rest of the empire, new colonies were an iffy thing at best, being off the major trade routes left them isolated and alone. The New Empire didn't nurture and coddle new colonies, if they failed it was because they weren't viable to begin with, if they succeeded then they were worthy of a seat at the table.

The enormous cargo vessels of the Free Traders that plied the deep black were family run enterprises, their crews were mostly one single family by birth or marriage. The

ship was their home, they had bases of operations on various remote planets but their true home was the ship they earned their living in.

FTV Gryphon was transferring mining equipment down to New Albion, there was no return cargo as of yet from the new colony so the trip was a break-even venture. An agreement had been reached that promised Gryphon future business moving Albion's refined titanium to buyers more toward the empire's core. By coincidence there was also an Imperial fast attack cruiser in orbit around New Albion, HMS Rapier. The warship was there to show the flag and to prepare a report to the Empire on the colony's progress, and of course to test whatever local lads who showed up to take the pre-academy exam.

Gryphon's cargo shuttle number four was piloted by the youngest of three sons of the cargo vessel's captain. Daniel Grayson was qualified for orbit-to-surface-to-orbit and ship-to-ship cargo transfers and had been doing so for the last two years. Daniel wasn't yet rated for passenger transfers, but then Gryphon rarely carried passengers. Daniel Grayson was ten years old.

There were no age limitations on cargo shuttle pilots or much of anything else in the empire, if you could pass the written and practical examination you got your ticket, Daniel aced them both. Free Trader children went to work as soon as they could control their bodily functions and follow simple instructions. Hired labor was an unwanted expense the traders tried to avoid, family members worked for profit shares (if any). Each child assumed tasks best suited to their talents and intellects. Daniel was a prodigy, born to be a pilot. He could strap on a wooden plank and fly it through a tornado. The boy was already a small legend among the Free Traders, the diminutive pilot could do things with a shuttle that on first examination would seem impossible. It was a remarkable gift that his father put to good and practical use.

The cargo shuttle that Daniel piloted was well worn but well maintained, it looked like a giant insect with it's small command module and powerful drive unit. Underneath was an assortment of powered clamps and grappling devices for moving both the standard cargo containers and any odd shaped bits of commerce that came to hand. Outsized landing struts extended forty feet (when fully deployed) to accommodate bulky items. At twenty

standard tons unladed it flew like a pregnant whale in the hands of a skilled pilot, Daniel could make it fly like a hummingbird. The craft was not designed for high speed atmospheric flight, it had to slow to subsonic before entering a planet's air, it's cargo was exposed to the elements and had to be treated gently.

Daniel had just deposited one of six ore crawlers that had been consigned to the New Albion mining consortium. Time was money, so the boy had just waved to the ground crew and then made a quick departure. Dinner would be waiting at the end of this trip, or rather it wouldn't be waiting if he didn't keep to his time schedule. Mother took a dim view of tardy offspring. The cargo shuttle had just cleared the planet's atmosphere and was accelerating to orbital speed when Daniel picked up the distress signal from one of HMS Rapier's landing craft.

Orbiting trash and junk were the bane of undeveloped colonies, it cost a good deal of money to sweep unwanted objects from their various orbits. Collisions with orbiting junk could be minor or catastrophic depending on closing speeds and the size of the junk. Rapier's sleek landing craft had merged orbits with a six ounce locking pin,

collision speed was relatively low, only about six-thousand feet per second. The wayward locking pin entered the craft's propulsion spaces and neatly punched it's way through the mass converter before exiting the craft's opposite side as a streak of vaporized titanium alloy. The mass converter did as expected and quit converting anything at all, power was lost save for the emergency storage unit (battery). On board the landing craft were Rapier's commanding officer, one Captain Richard Fredericks, along with his intelligence officer, two midshipman and two enlisted ratings. The pilot was Ensign Waters. The craft would not survive an unbaked powerless reentry, if the friction of the atmosphere didn't fry all aboard, the full bore impact with the surface would finish them for certain.

If you are of even the most modest intelligence you can guess who was close enough to save their bacon.

“May day, may day (the ancient call was still used). This is Rapier auxiliary craft Alpha. Any vessel, any craft, we are unpowered and descending at critical speed.” The guy seemed pretty calm in Daniel's estimation.

“Rapier Alpha, this is Gryphon cargo shuttle number four, I have your beacon and can close on you from astern.”

Daniel tried to keep it as calm and professional as he could manage.

“Thank God, Gryphon! Say craft type please!” The guy was a tad more excited this time.

“Craft is a Heron class cargo shuttle, Rapier. With your permission I will attach my grapples and move you to a safe orbit.”

“Permission gladly granted! We estimate atmosphere in six minutes, can you handle that?” Not much time.

“I believe so, there won’t be time for delicate maneuvering, it may get a bit rough for you.” Daniel was more worried about denting his captain’s (father’s) shuttle than anything else.

During the three minutes it took to close with the damaged naval craft Daniel contacted Gryphon and told them what they already knew, all craft constantly monitored the emergency channels, dinner was put on hold. The Rapier was likewise in contact with their wounded bird, they were too far away to do more than watch and wait. Rapier did launch a tow craft and a pair of fighters to do recon and escort duty, if the civilian cargo craft managed to pull off a rescue.

Rapier's auxiliary craft still had power for communications and scanning equipment, the rear view screen showed an ungainly cargo shuttle closing at an alarming rate.

"He's approaching too fast!" Ensign Water's didn't quite scream his opinion. "Brace for collision!" He did scream that.

The collision didn't occur, instead the small auxiliary craft found itself suddenly shaded from the sun by the cargo shuttle which now hung motionless mere feet from the naval craft's hull.

"Good God!" Waters expressed the consensus opinion.

"He's extremely good," Captain Fredericks observed coolly, "I noticed that he also sounded very young."

Daniel extended the boa's, a set of twelve flexible snake-like grapples. They extended straight down at first, six to each side of the naval craft. Daniel hit the auto-conform button on the grapples controls and the thick boa's closed and wrapped themselves around the stricken craft's hull. It wasn't a very gentle embrace, inside the naval craft it sounded as if they were being beaten to bits and crushed

at the same time.

As Daniel hit the 'lift' button to pull the craft into place beneath the shuttle, Ensign Waters made another tense observation.

"Atmosphere is imminent, Gryphon!"

"I have you now, brace for hard acceleration," Daniel replied calmly.

The boy didn't want to have to explain a singed cargo shuttle to his captain so he poured on a good seven gravities worth of thrust. The brutal orbital shift lasted thirty seconds or so and abruptly ended with Daniel's quite message, "Stable orbit at one-hundred-ten-miles altitude. May I be of further assistance, sir?"

"Uh, standby one, Gryphon." Waters had nearly blacked out during the orbit shift, he wasn't alone. After Captain Fredericks' head cleared sufficiently he spoke directly with Daniel.

"Gryphon shuttle, you have our heartfelt gratitude, you saved our lives. Thank you."

Daniel smiled a bit, he had done a pretty neat job of it.

"You're very welcome sir. I spotted what looked like impact damage to your aft quarter, are you in any immediate danger?"

“It appears not, we have emergency power and our hull pressure is stable. May we impose on you to assist our rendezvous with Rapiere? We will gladly pay your tow fee.” A tow fee? Daniel’s business instincts weren’t as good as his piloting skills, he hadn’t even thought to ask for a fee, after all it was a rescue of a craft in distress and not a commercial operation.

“One moment sir, let me contact my captain.”

“Of course.” Fredericks wished all of his pilots possessed such calm presence of mind.

There were broad smiles on Gryphon as Daniel finished the short narrative of his successful rescue mission.

“Give them whatever help you can with my compliments, Daniel. Don’t accept a tow fee. Good job, son.” John Grayson was a very proud father at this moment.

“Thank you sir, I will keep you informed as things occur.” Daniel was a very proud son.

“Rapiere craft, I am authorized to provide you with whatever assistance I can, no fee is needed.” It was a rare event for Daniel’s father to turn down any fee, unheard of actually.

“Thank you again, Gryphon shuttle. May I ask who I have the honor of talking too?” Fredericks inquired.

“Daniel Grayson sir, out of the Free Trader Vessel Gryphon. And you, sir?”

“Richard Fredericks, commanding HMS Rapier.” Lord, he had saved their captain! “An honor to speak with you sir. What can I do to help?”

“If you could increase our orbit to two-hundred miles it would hasten Rapier’s rendezvous with us. Then if you can put us on Rapier’s hanger deck it would save a cumbersome transfer to our own tow vessel.”

“Very good sir, no problem. Please brace for acceleration in twenty seconds, a bit easier this time.” Daniel replied.

The two gravity orbital shift was a welcome relief from their rescuer’s last maneuver, not that Rapier’s people objected. Better a rough rescue than a fiery death. The ungainly combination of cargo shuttle and rescued landing craft was soon joined by two very menacing looking fighters from Rapier, they were more for moral support than anything else, Daniel had to do the heavy lifting. Another twenty minutes had them within sight of the Imperial warship.

“Gryphon shuttle, this is HMS Rapier. You are thirty miles ahead and five below us, can you maneuver to our position?”

“Gryphon shuttle here. Yes, I have you in sight, will close on you.” Daniel tried to suppress his excitement at being so closely involved with a navy he had only daydreamed about, escorted by fighter craft that had only seen pictures of.

Daniel closed to within one-thousand yards of the massive war craft and held position. What to do now? Instructions were forthcoming.

“Gryphon shuttle, please enter the aft hanger deck, escort fighters will lead the way.”

A failsafe atmosphere shield was universal on spacecraft, there were no large doors to open and close, the hanger door was shut only during battle and faster than light transitions.

“The flight deck chief will contact you and direct you to a landing spot. ”

“Understood. Thank you.” Daniel was all too glad to

play follow the leader.

The boy was used to a world of well used vessels and profit before appearance. The spotless and gleaming interior of the naval vessel was a new world for Daniel, he felt a bit embarrassed, his elderly cargo hauler would never pass inspection here.

“Gryphon, this is the Chief of The Deck. Welcome to Rapier. If you can, please place the lander on the emergency support pads directly in front of you.”

Daniel fully extended his landing struts and deftly positioned his cargo over the cushioned supports as directed, he was very aware of all of the eyes watching his every move, most of the off duty personnel on the warship were on the hanger deck. With extreme care he lowered his cargo onto the supporting pads and retracted the boa's. At the flight deck's chief's directions Daniel moved his shuttle over and onto Rapier's deck where he powered down his drive units. What's next?

Next was nearly a thousand crewmen cheering their captain's exit from the damaged and inert landing craft. Rapier's commanding officer then led his fellow rescued crewmen over to the rather used and abused looking cargo

shuttle in which Daniel sat frozen in the command module.

“Good Lord, I have to go and say hello!” Daniel was almost in a panic. He did manage to lower the shuttle’s landing struts to “shut down - exit position.” The boy only had to climb down about ten feet of foot and hand holds. A total silence had descended upon the hanger deck, no one was expecting a rather undersized ten year old to emerge from the civilian cargo shuttle.

Daniel rather nervously walked toward Rapier’s surprised Captain, when they were about ten feet apart Fredericks braced to attention and saluted the boy. Daniel did the same and returned a proper salute that protocol demanded from one craft’s commander to another. A great roar of approval went up from the assembled crewmen as Fredericks shook Daniel’s hand and leaned down a bit to speak.

“That was a remarkable piece of piloting young sir, again thank you for saving myself and my people.”

“You’re very welcome sir, I was lucky enough to be in the right orbital position.” Daniel felt like a fly on a dinner plate.

“Still, it was a very smart job you did. Where did you learn to fly like that and at such an early age, how old are

you, by the way?”

“I’m ten sir. I grew up manning the jump seat behind father, then I started handling the controls myself after a while. It’s my one and only talent, sir.”

“And you have your ticket?” Fredericks asked.

“Oh yes sir, for about two years now.”

Fredericks thought to himself, “Good sweet Jesus, this child qualified at eight!” Aloud the man asked if Daniel would be his guest for dinner.

“Yes sir, that would be very nice. I’m afraid I’m not dressed very well for a dinner guest.” Daniel felt a bit shabby in his worn and faded jump suit, not to mention the compact pistol he wore strapped to his right hip and leg. (It was s.o.p. for cargo pilots to be armed, occasionally there were attempts to unburden them of their cargo by certain elements of society).

“You’re dressed just fine. Come along with me now, my nerves have settled enough to eat a good meal.”

Daniel wished his nerves could say the same.

Daniel developed a bad case of swivel head as they proceeded through the ship to the Captain's Mess. He was introduced to the two escort fighter pilots and they too seemed very impressed with his flying skills, they offered

him some time in the flight simulator before he left the ship.
Speaking of which...

“Sir, I should let Gryphon know that I will be here a while.”

“Already taken care of, “answered Fredericks, “you have permission to stay for dinner.”

“Thank you, sir.”

On board FTV Gryphon

“I’ll offer even money that they give him an academy sponsorship.” John Grayson spoke to his family/crew as he finished saying grace for dinner. The man was torn between pride and anguish, if the boy entered the navy they would be very lucky to ever see him again, it would be hard to cross paths in so vast an empire.

Daniel’s mother, Elizabeth, was also torn. Her boy was something very special and not just for his piloting skills. Still, it would bring great honor to the family and Gryphon if Daniel did succeed at academy and became a naval officer, it was almost unheard of in the odd society of Free Traders.

“Do you think he would accept, a sponsorship that is?” Asked John Jr., the eldest son.

“If you’re a pilot and a young boy, what do you think?”
John replied to his son.
Question answered.

HMS Rapier

“On deck!” The Officers Mess snapped to attention as Fredericks and Daniel entered the Captain’s Mess.

“Stand easy,” Fredericks quietly ordered as he put one hand on Daniel’s shoulder. “Gentlemen, let me introduce you to Daniel Grayson. I would not be standing here were it not for him.”

Applause and shouts of “Well done!” followed, Daniel was introduced to and shook hands with the twenty or so officers present. Then it was time to eat.

“Be seated, gentlemen,” Captain Fredericks ordered. He motioned Daniel to the seat of honor at the far end of the large table, opposite from himself. As the boy nervously went to his chair one of the stewards whispered to him quietly.

“Honored young sir, it is customary to be unarmed here. May I store your sidearm for you?”

“Oh. I apologize. Of course.” Daniel quickly unbuckled the small but powerful revolver’s holster and handed it to the white jacketed rating. Yes it was a revolver, it fired a dense projectile and made a nasty hole in you. ‘Ray guns’ and ‘laser blasters’ existed, but they had certain unwanted side effects and certain limitations, they also cost more than they were really worth in the estimation of Daniel’s father.

As Daniel took his seat, Captain Fredericks lightened the mood a bit more.

“Thank you Daniel for disarming, we all feel much safer now.”

After the laughter had died down the red faced boy smiled and assured all at the table that he really hadn’t planned on shooting anyone unless the meal was really bad. More laughter.

At this table the meal was served in courses, on Gryphon it was piled on all at once, fork stabs were a definite possibility between hungry siblings. The Free Traders weren’t total slobs by any means, but if you had been working hard all day mother tended to ignore the more refined points of table etiquette. Sundays and special

holiday meals were another matter.

Conversation revolved around the near loss of the landing craft and how their guest had managed a last minute rescue. A junior officer from maintenance entered the room and gave a one-page written report to the captain.

“It seems we were skewered by a small piece of titanium, possibly a bolt or pin of some sort.” Fredericks announced. Angry comments about New Albion’s nonexistent orbital sweep program were heard around the table, Daniel held his tongue, he knew that they simply didn’t have the money for it.

“Daniel, do your people have to deal with a lot of this sort of thing?” This from the engineering officer.

“Yes sir, we trade mostly with the newer, outside colonies. They just don’t have the hard cash it takes to do proper orbital sweeps.”

The subject that Daniel’s father dreaded was finally broached by Captain Fredericks.

“Have you given any thought to a naval career?”

“Well, of course sir. I’m not a citizen though,” Daniel answered with his heart in his throat.

“You could get a non-citizen’s sponsor, for the

examination.”

“I know sir, but....”

“It’s very hard for Free Traders to find one.”

“Yes sir.”

“You’ve found one now, if you want one.” It was very quite at the table.

“Sir?”

“I’ll sponsor you, I owe you... we owe you that much at the very least.”

Daniel didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. What in God’s name to do now? In his heart he knew what he wanted, but what of his family?

“This is too large of a decision to make right at this moment,” Fredericks explained, “I’ll give you the sponsorship letter along with an Naval Commendation for your actions today. The examination is day after tomorrow in Bakerstown, ten AM local time. Speak with your family, use the letter if you make the decision to try for academy. Understand that I can only get your foot in the door, the rest is entirely up to you.”

Daniel nodded his head, almost speechless, then in a quite voice: “Thank you very much sir, thank you.”

Smiles and “well done’s” around the table. Then the port was served.

“The tradition is that the youngest at the table offers the first toast,” Fredericks explained, putting Daniel once more on the spot. The boy stood nervous and unsure of what to say, after a moment he raised the glass of dark red wine, he had never been allowed alcohol before.

“Gentlemen, long live the Emperor and God bless Rapier.”

All stood at the toast to the Emperor, glasses were raised in salute.

“Very well said Daniel, And may God bless Gryphon,” Fredericks added in the return toast.

Daniel decided that port must be an acquired taste and only took just the two sips.

As promised, Daniel got to try the fighter simulator before calling it a very long evening. Not even experienced fighter pilots were able to distinguish between the realism of the simulator and the real thing.

“It’s programmed as the new K-model Falcon,” explained Lieutenant Stein, “full g-force is simulated, everything is simulated.”

Daniel was sitting in the cockpit of the simulator, most of the controls he recognized, a few he didn’t. Stein gave him a rundown of the fire control systems, a bit condescending

perhaps. This child would probably fly it into the ground or something, then on the other hand he had saved the Captain's butt.

"I think I have it now, thank you sir," Daniel replied.

"Okay. Good luck then, remember it's only a simulator, you can't really break anything."

"Yes sir. Thank you for your help." Daniel didn't think he would break anything at all, he was right.

The adjustable seat was as far forward as it would go, and as high. Daniel was strapped in tightly, the g-force simulator field could smash you against the canopy if you failed to use the restraints.

The canopy hissed closed and the boy was suddenly parked on the aft hanger deck of Rapier, Lord it was so real!

"Falcon Alert 1, six incoming unknowns, launch in five seconds." The voice was Lieutenant Stein's

"Roger." Daniel responded with the age old acknowledgement.

The boy lifted the fighter off the deck a bit too fast and then quickly compensated, the controls were so much more sensitive than his shuttle's! Unsure of how fast he should exit the hanger he decided that speed was probably

important if bad guys were incoming. Daniel pushed nine gravities as he flashed out of the brightly lit hanger and into the deep black of space. The boy's g-force tolerance was something not easily explained. Lieutenant Stein, along with Captain Fredericks and most of the senior officers were in the simulator control space.

"Shit!" Stein forgot protocol and civil language as the simulated fighter broke the launch speed record (and regulations) for Rapier, maybe for the whole fleet.

"Falcon 1, proceed on intercept. Target's at five-thousand miles and closing." Stein wondered if the boy was even conscious.

"Roger, targets acquired, arming weapons."

"How is he doing that?" Stein had given the boy only a rudimentary rundown on the weapons systems.

"It would seem that young Master Grayson is much more than he appears." Fredericks observed.

He was indeed much more. Daniel closed on the delta-shaped formation of 'snake' craft with undiminished acceleration, three of the enemy craft were destroyed on his first blistering pass. The snakes lost formation and scattered in confusion, it took Daniel nearly five minutes to track down and eliminate the remaining enemy craft, none

of which came even close with their return fire.

Captain Fredericks dictated an addendum to his letter of sponsorship as Daniel 'returned' to Rapier.

"Recommend all attention be given to the cadet-candidate's remarkable piloting skills. Pilot-apprentice training is strongly recommended if academy program is successfully completed."

On board Gryphon

Daniel could probably have flown home to Gryphon without the cargo shuttle, it would be a day always etched in his memory. A thousand questions greeted the boy, the letters he carried answered most of them, but not the big one. His father and mother shooed off the rest of the family and sat down with their son in warmth of the common room, where the Grayson's usually gathered after the day's work was done.

"It's a terribly hard first year, most fail in the attempt," John Grayson explained to his son.

"I know sir, but I would like to try, if I may"

The man was silent for a time, his wife seemed close to

tears.

“I couldn’t live with standing in your way son, the decision is yours to make as far as I’m concerned.”

“Mother?” Daniel looked at the anguished woman.

“I don’t want you to leave us, ever. But you are entitled to live your own life, to become what you can be. You have my blessing, and you will always have my love.” All three shed a few tears that evening.

Bakerstown, New Albion

Testing was to occur in one of the spaceport warehouses that had been cleared out and cleaned up for this most important of yearly events. Large civic buildings weren’t in the small but bustling city’s budget as of yet. The sons of rich and poor alike were present, all were citizens of the Empire save for one. Some were dressed in well cut go-to-church suits, others in the rough home sewn clothing of people struggling to tame a new land. One boy was clad in his best flight jump suit. New Albion was a white planet, not by design or plan, such things just occur in the course of events, there were far more inhabitable worlds in the galaxy than people, no need for the races to compete for the most choice.

Save for his clothing, Daniel would not stand out in the crowd of young males. A bit short for his age, black hair cut close to his skull, very green eyes, almost handsome would describe him. All of the boys stood on their assigned spots a bit apart from one another in the closed warehouse. Most were strangers to one another gathered from all points of the fifty-year old colony. Parents and family were told to return in six hours, then they would either take their sons home or say goodbye to them, perhaps forever. The interior of the warehouse was divided into numbered places on the floor for the applicants. Rows of long tables with small view screens and 'paper' pads at each chair were in front of them, there was a mobile medical exam unit.

First things first, the physical examination. No point in testing someone who's body didn't pass the muster. The Empire wasn't looking for supermen (or boys), it was looking for all body parts present and in good working order.

"Pay close attention, no instructions will be repeated today! When your number is called go to the body scan module and strip to your skin. Place your clothing and shoes in the basket and then step onto the black squares when directed to, stand completely still until you are told to

move. Put your clothing back on when you're finished then return to your assigned spot." The test was being administered by Rapier's personnel officer, Lieutenant Tanaka, he presented a grim and unforgiving visage and tone by design. In fact Tanaka was a pretty nice guy if you ever got to know him.

Daniel was number eighty-seven out of ninety-three. On older colonies thousands of boys were tested on days like this. His letter of sponsorship had been accepted by the enlisted rating without comment, you would have never known that the boy had recently saved the life of the rating's captain. Daniel's letter of commendation was by now framed in a place of honor on Gryphon's bridge, a copy forwarded by Rapier to fleet command.

During the long wait for the physical, Daniel had struck up a quiet conversation with the boy to his right, a somewhat thin and pale blonde boy from a farming family, Ian Murphy was his name. Ian was a wizard with mathematics and physics, he was beyond what might be deemed a genius, he was also very nervous.

"I feel like I could faint or something." Ian whispered softly.

“Don’t feel bad, I think everyone here is about ready to puke or curl up and die, myself included.” Daniel answered.

Ian felt a bit better knowing he shared a common feeling, he asked Daniel about his jump suit. Where was he from?

“Gryphon, it’s in orbit here now,” Daniel explained.

“You’re a Free Trader!”

“Uh huh, I managed to get a letter of sponsorship to take the test today.”

“I’ve never been anywhere off-planet, mostly I’ve never been off our farm,” Ian answered, a bit in awe of his exotic new acquaintance.

“What do you raise...or farm?” Farming was a total mystery to Daniel.

“Grain crops, mostly wheat and corn, pretty boring actually.” Ian replied.

“I’ve never been on a farm, maybe if we both flunk out I can stop by for a quick visit.”

Ian smiled for the first time, if nothing else today he had made a new friend. “That would be nice, mother is the best cook on the planet.” In the case of Ian’s mother it was actually true.

“Eighty-six!” Boomed the loudtalker.

“That’s me! Oh Lord!” Ian had almost jumped straight up even though he knew he was going to be next, Daniel gave him a pat on the shoulder as the blond boy took off at a run for the medical testing unit. Everyone tested so far at the medical unit had returned to their assigned spot on the warehouse floor, did that mean they had all passed, or would they tell them later?

“Eighty-seven!”

Ian was still pulling on his clothes as Daniel hustled over to the medical exam unit, he recognized the medical officer from the Officer’s Mess on Rapier. The naval doctor gave a quick nod of recognition to Daniel as the boy quickly skinned out of his clothing, the boy smiled briefly but said nothing, sensing that the man could show him no favoritism. The nervous boy stood with one foot on each of the black squares and remembered to hold still as the scanning ring passed down around him from head to toe and back again.

“Hold out your left arm.” Daniel still couldn’t remember the doctor’s name but obeyed instantly.

Small sting as blood and tissue sample is taken. Done.

“Get dressed, return to your place.”

“Yes sir.” Daniel wasn’t sure if he was supposed to say anything or not.

Finally all of the medical exams were over! Daniel and Ian stood as the rest of the boys did, wondering if they had passed or not, wondering what was next.

“The following numbers have the Empire’s respect and gratitude but have not met the needed physical requirements. Exit the building if your number is called.” Twenty-one of the boys heard their numbers called, neither Ian’s nor Daniel’s numbers were among them.

“We made it!” Ian whispered.

“So far, anyway,” Daniel agreed.

“What’s next?” Ian asked.

“Dunno, maybe written tests or something,” Daniel replied quietly.

There were indeed written tests, multiple choice tests, oral questions to the group from Lieutenant Tanaka. Mathematics, physical sciences, history (Daniel lost all hope after the history questions). Questions about what would you do ‘if’, questions of judgment, questions that sometimes made no sense. Aptitude tests, mechanical, spatial cognizance, language. Reactions to emergencies.

Reactions to emergencies was an explosive charge armed and tossed into the midst of the circled applicants, some fled for the doors, others prudently dropped to the floor, some froze and failed. Daniel and Ian shoved a table over on the phony device and hit the floor, the charge detonated with a small puff of smoke and a tinny recording that rather weakly announced “Bang! You’re dead!” All done.

“The following applicants have passed the initial screening test for midshipman academy, if your name is not called exit the building with the Empire’s best wishes and gratitude.”

“Adams, Jason.”

“Carter, William.”

“Chatsworth, Arnold.”

“Grayson, Daniel.”

“Irving, Paul.”

“Livingston, Morris.”

“Murphy, Ian.”

“Richardson, John.”

“Zeplinski, Aaron.”

Good Lord, he had made it! So had Ian!

Lieutenant Tanaka left an out for any with last minute qualms. “The personnel shuttle departs from this location in one hour for HMS Rapier, failure to board will be taken as a voluntary withdrawal from the selection process and your name will be stricken without prejudice or record. If you board the shuttle you will be subject to naval regulations and justice, you will obey all orders to the letter. HMS Rapier will transport you to the naval screening facility on New Tasmania, transit time will be one week. Any applicant failing the screening process or suffering death will be returned to this location at the convenience of the Imperial Navy.”

There were nine sets of very wide eyes after Lieutenant Tanaka’s last sentence, a guy could get killed doing this!

“Are you still going through with this?” Ian asked.

“Yes. I don’t like to quit before I finish something,” Daniel replied, maybe not as self assured as he tried to sound. “How about you?”

“I don’t think I’m cut out to spend the rest of my life plowing. I love my folks more than anything, but I’m in until the navy says scram.” Ian seemed as unsure of himself as

Daniel was.

“Come on. The hardest part is next, we have to say goodbye to our folks now,” Daniel said.

Saying goodbye was perfectly awful for all of the boys. Weeping mothers (and fathers), weeping siblings and cousins. Behave yourself, brush your teeth, eat right, do exactly what they tell you. Be careful, be careful, be careful. We love you. I love you. Goodbye.

None of the applicants, save Daniel, had ever been off-planet. The personnel carrier performed no extreme maneuvers, just the same it became evident why the navy hadn't fed the boys during the course of the day. Daniel couldn't understand why everyone looked so pale and had the dry heaves, but then again he had spent his entire life in one sort of spacecraft or another. Ian didn't complain but it was evident the distress he was in, Daniel didn't pester him with small talk and let him suffer in silence. Gravity returned to normal as the shuttle entered the artificial field inside Rapier's aft hanger and touched down, the flight had only taken thirty minutes or so.

“All out, line up by last name shoulder to shoulder.” It was the same Ensign Waters whose life Daniel had saved earlier and who now flew this shuttle. His only acknowledgement to the boy had been a brief smile and a nod of the head when they had boarded on New Albion. Given any choice the crew of Rapier would have welcomed Daniel with a brass band and dancing girls, however no favoritism could be shown to any cadet-candidate, none. Daniel understood this without it being explained to him.

Eight woozy boys and one perfectly fine boy tumbled out of the shuttle and with a bit of confusion did as they were ordered. To Daniel’s surprise the vessel’s commander, Captain Fredericks, arrived to address them.

“Pay close attention, I will not repeat myself.” Fredericks began, “If you think that you are something special for making it this far you are sadly mistaken. You are nothing on this vessel, you are not even cadets. New Tasmania is one week away, your basic assignment until then is to stay the hell out of the way and to do exactly as you are told. You can fail even before you reach the screening base, I can fail you, any officer on this vessel can fail you if you cause the slightest problem, disobey the least instruction. No favoritism can be allowed toward any of

you, no bias will be allowed against any of you. Any questions?”

No one was silly enough to voice anything, the total fools had already been weeded out.

There were no bunks to be wasted on would be cadets, a blanket and a place on the padded floor of the small gymnasium would suffice. The nine dazed boys were finally fed and watered, after the enlisted crew had dined, after the boys had cleaned the enlisted mess to the satisfaction of Chief Barker, the rating in charge. Sleep was finally allowed, no one felt the hard surface they rested upon, no one thought too long about family or friends. They all were still just ten-year-old boys who had been through a small hell, they all needed rest and that is just what they did. Until morning, which came all too soon.

The nine would-be cadets were at least allowed an hour a day to shower and toss their only clothes into the laundry units. The rest of the day they were a ready pool of unskilled labor for anyone on the ship who needed some extra hands. On the third day Daniel was detailed to one of the maintenance bays on the aft hanger deck, he was

designated 'gopher' and cleanup kid. At least it was better than mess duty, he got a chance to look over the shoulders of the flight mechanics as they installed a new converter unit in the shuttle that he had rescued.

They were having problems.

"There's still that damned harmonic vibration!" Chief O'Bannion was not a happy man, the converter unit should be as silent as an empty church when on the standby power setting.

Daniel could see what the problem was, he had seen the same thing happen on board Gryphon when new converters were installed. Should he say anything? He had been told to keep quiet and out of the way. He'd risk it!

"The phase shift unit is probably cross wired, sir." Four heads swiveled to look at the small boy who was telling them how to do their job.

"What?" O'Bannion snapped.

"The phase shift unit sir, the power leads are probably reversed." Daniel had figured out by now that he should have kept his silly mouth shut.

The maintenance supervisor squinted his eyes at the boy, remembering that he wasn't your average snot nosed cadet-candidate, he was a Free Trader brat.

“Phase shift, huh?” O’Bannion asked.

“Yes sir, I apologize for interrupting.”

“Perkins!” O’Bannion yelled, very pissed off. Daniel thought he had blown everything by butting in.

“Chief?” Perkins was the guy who had wired the phase shift unit.

“Check those leads and tell me that they’re not crossed!”

Perkins did just that, his body half disappearing into the access hatch. Perkins was quiet for a long while, then reappeared with a sheepish look on his face.

“I had em’ crossed, like the boy said. I reconnected the leads.”

Everyone turned to look at Daniel who by now was hoping to sink into the deck plates.

“How’d you know what was wrong?” O’Bannion asked, a smile had replaced his frown.

“I’ve seen the same thing before sir, on Gryphon.” The man nodded his head in understanding, “You can speak up anytime you have something worth saying, thanks for the help. You did good.”

“Yes sir. Thank you sir.” Daniel decided that he would be better off just staying out of the way and remaining very, very quiet.

That evening at the Captain's Mess, the Engineering Officer related a story told to him by Chief O'Bannion.

"The boy knew what was wrong with the converter, O'Bannion said that it was exactly what the boy said it was, crossed leads on the phase-shift unit."

"If that boy makes it through academy we may all be saluting him in a few years," observed Captain Fredericks.

The day before landfall at New Tasmania Lieutenant Tanaka gave a briefing to the nine rather worn down boys, but no one dozed off during this most important talk.

"There will be a total of twenty-seven candidates in your screening unit, the other eighteen candidates are from Eden Found. You will be dropped off at the screening unit's landing pad where you will receive your examination briefing. The obstacle course comprises the bulk of the test, you will be given a destination and nothing else. You will have no water, no food, no clothes, no shoes. Nothing. Use your wits and rely on each other, there are no rules on the obstacle course. You pass if you cross the finish line, if you quit you fail, if you are injured and can't continue you fail, if you die you fail. Questions?"

Of course there were none, who would be stupid enough to

ask anything?

The final night on board Rapiet found the supposed to be asleep boys having a whispered conference.

“The emergency ration sticks are in ship stores locker number three,” Zeplinski replied, he knew, he had to clean the damned place.

“Can we get in, tonight?” Daniel asked.

“It’s not locked or anything, who would want to steal that awful crap?”

“We would. Lieutenant Tanaka said there were no rules, so if we can sneak in some food sticks then we should at least try to,” Daniel replied.

“So where do we hide them if we’re going to be naked?” Ian asked, not an unreasonable question.

“In our pockets until we undress, they’re small, maybe we can drop them on the ground or something, so they don’t notice them,” Daniel explained.

“We could stuff them up your butt,” Carter offered.

“Very funny. When you’re starving, food sticks are lots better than no food sticks.”

In the end they successfully raided the store's locker and divided the emergency ration sticks equally among

themselves, they vowed to drink all of the extra water they could before landing at the exam site. Of course all of their secret activities were being closely monitored, it was all part of the screening process.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen this sort of useful preplanning.” Captain Fredericks said.

“Grayson seems to be the catalyst, he has a way of getting the others organized and into action,” Tanaka replied.

“True. He seems a natural leader without really trying, I find myself rooting for him, for all of them.”

“Yes sir, myself also.” Tanaka shared his captain’s opinion of Daniel.

Neither of their opinions would matter once landfall was made, there were no rules on the ground.

New Tasmania

The planet had been set aside for military training and exercises, arable land was at a premium, the place was mostly mountains, trees and wild weather patterns. There were no known micro organisms that were very harmful to humans, there were some dangerous animals that were

best avoided.

When Rapier's personnel shuttle landed, the group from Eden Found was already there and waiting. The nine Rapier boys tumbled out of the shuttle and lined up next to the others. Daniel's group was a bit bloated with excess water, a good pee would soon be in order. The landing area was mostly just a flat place in a small valley, there were a few small prefab buildings and a communications antenna. A small raised platform was in front of the two ranks of boys. Finally a marine officer strolled out of one of the buildings and stepped up on the platform (the Royal Marines were the ground force arm of the Imperial Navy, almost but not quite a separate military branch).

"Listen up you little pukes!" Captain M'Tebbe's voice didn't need any loudspeakers. "There is only one test here, the obstacle course. It's thirty miles long, mostly up and down miles! The finish line is on the other side of those mountains." M'Tebbe pointed to the snow dusted peaks that seemed to the boys to be at least one-hundred miles away.

"There will be food, water, medical care and rest on the other side of that line, there will be none of those things on this side of the line. I would suggest that you work

together and stay together. There are no rules about how you must proceed or how you must behave, use your brains if you have any, look out for each other. No questions are allowed of any of the staff you will see from time to time along the course, no assistance will be given by them. Follow the orange trail markers. You will now remove all articles of clothing, jewelry, shoes and socks. When I tell you to get moving the examination will have begun. Strip and pile your clothing in front of you, now!”

The morning was still quite cool as the group of twenty-seven scared and shivering boys stood as God had created them. Rapier’s group had palmed the small emergency ration sticks and concealed them as best they could manage from the all seeing gaze of the Marine officer.

“Move out!” M’Tebbe screamed, a quite “may Allah be with you” went unheard by the boys.

The object of the course wasn’t to sort out the strongest and most physically fit, it was to sort out the quitters, those who would give up in the face of the unendurable.

The boys’ initial mad dash quickly slowed to a trot then a careful walk. The ground was mostly rock and gravel with occasional stretches of loam and decaying plant

life. Ian and Daniel had paired up as usual, as of yet there wasn't a lot of talk in the group.

"Our feet are going to be cut to shreds on this stuff!" Ian complained.

"I know," Daniel agreed, "let's get everyone to stop for a minute, maybe we can figure out something to wrap our feet in."

The Free Trader boy ran ahead a ways and jumped up on a flat rock.

"Hey guys, hold up a minute!" Daniel yelled. Everyone stopped, wondering what was up.

"We need to work out some way to protect our feet or we'll never make it to the finish. Does anyone have any ideas?"

"Who appointed you commander?" One of the Eden boys asked with a bit of a sneer.

"No one, I'm not trying to be the boss or anything. We do need to figure out some sort of something for our feet. Also me and the guys from New Albion smuggled in some food sticks, we have about six apiece, we'll share them with you guys from Eden. We have to be just one group now."

The mention of the food sticks thawed relations between the two groups, everyone wound up with about

two of the sticks each. One of the boys from Eden hit upon some footwear.

“What about these goofy looking plants? Maybe we can tie them around our feet?”

The plants in question were all over the place, they stood about five feet high and were composed of long flexible leaf-like fronds about four inches in width. They were very tough but some hacking with a sharp rock would part the fronds from their base. Some trial and error in how to wrap and secure them around their feet finally resulted in a fairly effective bit of footwear. They could replace them as the tough fronds wore out, better than bloody feet.

Of course this was all being remotely observed from the command post back at the landing area.

“They hit on the foot wraps pretty quick” observed Lieutenant Sanchez, second in command of the post.

“Yes. That Free Trader boy seems to have a good head on his shoulders.” M'Tebbe replied.

“The report from Rapier says he was the one to come up with the idea of smuggling in the emergency rations.” Sanchez added.

M'Tebbe chuckled softly, he liked candidates who didn't always play by the rules, not that there were any rules here.

The first real obstacle was a fast flowing stream, it was cold and deep. They would have to swim for it. Daniel had been raised on a starship, he had never learned how to swim, the idea of plunging into the frigid water terrified him. Some of the boys had already made the plunge and crossed to the other side when Ian urged his friend to join him.

“Come on, it’s only a short ways, we won’t freeze to death.”

“I can’t swim.” Daniel said quietly.

“What?” Ian couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I never learned how.”

“Oh shit!” Ian wasn’t about to abandon his friend, he made their predicament known to the others. “We need some help here! Daniel can’t swim!”

The boys remaining on the side of the stream with Ian and Daniel made known their opinion of the sissy in their midst, Ian put them straight.

“He’s a Free Trader, he grew up on a starship, he never had a chance to learn how to swim! He’s one of us, let’s get him across!”

A Free Trader! Opinions quickly changed, the black haired kid was one of the legended people who lived among the

stars, the stars that the rest of the boys had only dreamed about until now.

With Ian helping, two of the better swimmers each took one of Daniel's arms and towed him across. Daniel crossed on his back trying not to swallow the stream. They made it.

"Th...th...thanks, guys." Daniel chattered, half from the cold, half from the fear he had felt.

"No problem," one of his two tow boats replied, "like you said, we're one group now."

The sun was getting to be more than hot as the leaf-shod group of bare boys picked their way up and down the rugged terrain, most were without suntans, as was Daniel. The Free Trader boy knew what sunlight could do to unprotected flesh, he knew about what most forms of radiation could do. He called another halt.

"Hold up guys!"

Now what? The boys thought they were making pretty good progress, why stop now?

"We're going to get really bad sunburns like this, a bad burn can make you sick, if we get sick out here it's all over!"

This made sense, the boys knew what a sunburn felt like, some of them were already getting a bit pink. What to do?

“Mud!” Zeplinski exclaimed.

“Huh?” Daniel was at a loss, there wasn’t any mud on a starship.

“You smear mud all over yourself, it blocks the sun!”

They found a clay deposit near the next small stream (shallow enough to wade) they crossed. The mud smearing party turned them into very odd looking creatures, what with their leaf-clad feet and all. At least they wouldn’t fry.

Thirst was making it’s presence known, was the water safe to drink on this planet? Could they make it all the way without drinking any?

“The streams look clear and they flow really fast, back on New Albion that usually meant it was okay to drink.” Ian explained.

“This isn’t New Albion, what if there’s some sort of microbe or chemicals in it?” Daniel had never drank from a stream in his entire life.

“I don’t think they would have the obstacle course here if the water was going to kill everyone or make them too sick to finish.” Ian made a good and logical argument.

They probably wouldn't have a choice anyway, they were only flesh and blood, and not very old flesh and blood at that.

The water debate was interrupted by some God awful animal scream from deep in the surrounding trees. Everyone froze in their tracks expecting to be pounced upon and devoured at any second.

“What the shit was that?” Whispered Daniel.

“Dunno. Let's keep moving, maybe it will go away.” Ian replied quietly.

Forward progress resumed at a faster pace with everyone picking up good throwing rocks or pieces of wood to use if the source of the hideous scream fell upon them. Daniel would have given important pieces of his anatomy for the trusty pistol that he wore when moving cargo.

Whatever had screamed at them failed to do anything more than just that. Mid afternoon found the mud-boys at the base of a steep slope, almost a cliff. The small orange markers that they had been following all day led up that slope. They hadn't paused for rest all day, now seemed a good time to Daniel.

“Guys! Let's rest here for a little while before we climb

that! Let's all eat half a food stick!" Daniel shouted.

It seemed like a very good idea to all concerned, most of the group had come to look upon the Free Trader boy as their defacto leader, or at least someone who offered advice worth listening to.

They had rested for all of ten minutes when a large runabout sled landed, a naval rating stepped off the utility craft with a three-foot long rod in his hand, it was called a 'starter'. In the time of wooden ships a 'starter' was a small leather whip or cane used to encourage speed among the crewmen, the one the rating carried could best be compared to an electric cattle prod. The rating was not a very pleasant chap.

"Get off your shitty asses and up that course!" The rating's order could best be described as a bellow. No one had to be told twice, still the rating managed to touch the rod to the legs and backsides of four of the boys. The shrill screams of the four boys told everyone all they needed to know about the starter.

"I want Simmons rotated out of here after this group," M'Tebbe said, "he enjoys his job too much I think."
Lieutenant Sanchez voiced his agreement, the rating went

beyond the needed harshness his job required.

By great good fortune all of the boys made it up the almost vertical slope, clawing for hand holds and helping one another past the worst patches as best they could. Skin was lost, bruises appeared, food sticks were dropped and lost as they scrambled for the safety above them. There really wasn't any safety above them. It was a plateau of ice and giant boulders. The only consolation was that it seemed as high as they would have to go, there were no more mountains above them. Were they halfway there? No.

The air had a real bite to it up here, they had better get across this and to lower elevations before night fell or they would freeze to death.

"Come on people, we need to get off of this ice and stuff! It'll be cold as hell here tonight!" Daniel's advice was all too obvious to the rest of the boys, this place would kill you if you tried to spend the night here in just a coating of mud and leaf shoes. Ice and rock offered both good footing and no footing, two of the candidates failed to cross the ice field uninjured. One had a badly sprained ankle, the other probably had some broken ribs. There was by now no way

that anyone would be left behind, everyone would fail before any of their group were abandoned to this place.

Darkness found the exhausted young males off the ice field and once more into the forested elevations. It was still very cold and they were still clad only in mostly flaked off mud and worn down leaf shoes. Puddles of melted ice had slaked their thirst along the way, no one had as of yet fallen ill from the needed moisture. What food sticks that remained were split up and passed around.

It was still very cold.

There was no fire, they had no way to rub two sticks together to make a fire, it was too damp to do that, too everything. They only had each other.

“ We need to get in a group, we can make it if we use each other for warmth!” Daniel once more gave voice to what seemed so right, if somewhat awkward and unmanly. They formed a circular mass, body to body. Those in the middle felt a delicious warmth and respite from the day’s struggle, those on the outside just wanted to be on the inside.

No one slept very much that night as those on the outside sought to migrate to the inside.

No one froze to death either.

Morning and light stirred the miserable boys into intelligent motion, maybe they would live through another day if they got moving. The food sticks were all gone, the two injured boys needed help to keep up with the group. Help was provided on a rotating basis, they would be God-damned if anyone failed to cross the finish line. There were no rules other than those they made for themselves.

Daniel was taking his turn helping the boy with the bad ankle when he heard a commotion and shrill screams from down the course ahead of him. Seaman Simmons was having some of his perverted fun at a choke point on the trail, him and his 'starter'. The obstacle course would take a ninety-degree divergence from the norm on this day.

"Wait here, I'll be back for you!" Daniel told the boy he had been helping along.

The awful screams came from his good friend Ian. Simmons had the poor boy down and curled in a ball from the agony of the powered rod he carried. Daniel went into berserker mode, no damned naval rating or anyone else was going to do that to Ian! A heavy arm-sized piece of a

branch provided Daniel with his attack weapon, Seaman Simmons' preoccupation with Ian gave Daniel time to close with his target. Simmons' fun ended when Daniel's home run swing neatly snapped the bone between the ratings' knee and ankle. Now it was someone else's turn to scream.

The burly rating half collapsed and half lunged at Daniel, swinging the starter wildly at the boy. He missed, the boy's next swing didn't miss and connected with the rating's good leg. The man fell heavily to the rocky ground, his howl of rage and agony filling the woods. Daniel missed on his next swing but not the one after that. The rating's hand that held the hated starter was shattered between the rocky ground and the iron hard branch that had everything behind it that the boy could muster. Even the starter was broken, spitting a few sparks in the process.

The rest of the boy's either stood in stunned amazement or yelled encouragement to Daniel.

"Finish the fucker!" More than one boy yelled that. If you think it ridiculous that a ten-year-old boy could disable a grown man you are wrong. Adrenalin and rage can turn the meekest of people into killers if need be, that and the

element of surprise brought down Simmons. Daniel had also been taught the martial art that was favored by the Free Traders, namely Q&D (Quick and Dirty).

“Sir! Come and look at this!” Sanchez exclaimed, not believing what he was seeing on the observation monitor. Captain M'Tebbe ceased his paperwork and moved to stand behind Sanchez to watch the small drama unfolding on the screen.

“It would appear that Simmons turned his back on the wrong boy.” M'Tebbe observed.

“Should I send in an emergency team, sir?” Sanchez asked.

“No. No rules, Simmons deserves whatever he gets.”

“And Grayson?”

“Mark his report that he shows outstanding initiative and physical bravery.”

“My thoughts exactly, sir.” Sanchez smiled.

Daniel didn't “finish the fucker,” although he felt like it. Ian was up and on his shaky legs by now, his dirty body badly marked where the starter had made contact. At Daniel's direction the boys just left Simmons to moan and curse his fate, besides they had a prize, the large runabout

sled.

“Come on, get aboard, it’s big enough to hold all of us!” Daniel yelled, “to hell with this nature hike crap!”

“But can we do that, is it allowed?” Ian asked, so did most of the other boys.

“You all heard the Captain, there are no rules here. If you want to walk the rest of the way then go ahead, I’m flying this piece of junk to the finish line!” Daniel’s words decided the point, screw this place!

“They’re taking the sled!” Sanchez exclaimed.

“Excellent! Good show!” M’Tebbe grinned from ear to ear.

The course record was shaved by a full twenty-three hours, some fast scrambling took place by the naval personnel to be in place and on hand when the runabout sled came whistling across the finish line. The filthy and exhausted boys stood for roll call and then were herded through hot showers and medical attention, clothing was returned and donned. Large quantities of liquids and hot food were placed before them, clean cots and blankets finished the day and they were left in peace. All of the boys

rated a pass on the screening test, none had given up, all had crossed the finish line. One particular boy had several long notes attached to his already full assessment sheet. Eventually someone went out and collected the still cursing and moaning Simmons.

Following tradition, a full report on the performance of their latest batch of candidates was sent along to HMS Rapier. Captain Fredericks took the unusual step of reading the detailed report over the ship's loudspeakers to the entire crew. It was some time before the cheering and back slapping ceased.

Chapter Three

Cadet

The Nimitz Naval Academy was four-hundred and seventy-three years old, uncounted thousands of young boys had passed or failed inside its stone walls. The name of the planet was Camelot, one of the oldest and most successful of the Empire's colonies. The academy's year was divided into quarters, at the end of each quarter surviving cadets were enlisted into the navy as junior midshipmen and a new group of cadets arrived to begin their four quarters of training and testing.

Daniel's group arrived well recovered from their trial on New Tasmania, by now accounts of their unusual method of finishing the obstacle course had circulated through the fleet. It would seem that Daniel had done what most of the officers in the fleet had at one time wanted to do, many had felt the bite of the starter and still secretly despised those who had wielded it.

Upon arrival the new group of cadets were subjected

to the sort of hazing and verbal abuse that all military schools have used to remind the 'freshmen' that they were less than nothing. Most of the training staff at the naval academies were career enlisted men, they had spent long years training and sorting out the young boys who would one day be the core of the Empire.

Courses taught ranged from proper table manners to the mind bending theories of the faster than light drive. The obstacle course had tested their body and their courage, the academies tested their mind and spirit. One year of education cannot prepare anyone for the responsibilities of a naval officer, it can determine who had the intellect and the grit that was needed, the real learning began when they would be enlisted as midshipmen.

Like everyone else, Daniel's memory of the first week of academy was a blur. Images that remained were ones of running everywhere, having unpleasant drill masters screaming in your face, being fitted with a proper uniform. Trying to stay awake with only snatched moments of sleep. The small sounds at night of some poor wretch crying himself to sleep, maybe crying a bit himself in the privacy of darkness.

His family was so very far away.

There were two boys per room in the dorms, they were actually allowed to choose a friend to bunk with. By now Ian and Daniel were fast friends, it had taken the rattled Ian a few days to realize what Daniel had put on the line to rescue him from his tormentor on New Tasmania.

Both boys were immensely proud of their new cadet uniforms, a light blue 'flight suit' with brass buttons that had better be polished mirror bright at all times. A matching beret topped off what little remained of their hair, black boots finished the uniform, they too had better be polished at all times. Everything had better be polished at all times, with perhaps the exception of the dorm room's ceiling.

During this first week there were already names dropped from the roll, a person who can take physical hardships and challenge cannot always do the same with the mental rigors and pressures of 'first week'. Daniel's first real challenge came after first week was over, during the first day of regular classes and instruction. They were going to be taught basic lifesaving technique in the academy pool. Daniel still didn't know how to swim and that

would not do for a naval officer.

The swimming instructor was bellowing at them to get naked, showered and out to the pool area.

“One demerit for the last slackard out the door!”

Daniel was in a blind panic, should he speak up and tell the instructor he couldn't swim? He decided maybe it might just be easier to drown or something. Ian wasn't much help.

“What do I do?” Daniel asked as they finished rinsing off and started to follow the wet mob out to the pool.

“You gotta tell him you can't swim!” Ian replied.

“Maybe he'll ask if everyone can swim.” Daniel hoped. Daniel got lucky in a way, the instructor did ask.

“Is there any dainty little momma's boy here who can't swim?”

Daniel felt like a total ass as he raised his hand, alone.

“Here sir.”

“Name!” Instructor Hughes' voice was almost a lethal weapon.

“Grayson, Daniel. Sir!”

Hughes remembered the name from his review of each boy's records. This was the Free Trader kid who had laid out that asshole of a rating on New Tasmania.

“Get over here!” Hughes commanded, Daniel almost fell down on the wet tiles complying, skidding to attention in front of the large man.

“No swimming pools on starships, I suppose that’s your excuse?”

“Yes sir.”

“Observe!” Hughes pointed to the nearest cadet and ordered him to dive in and swim across the pool and back. As the other boy was swimming, Hughes gave Daniel his one and only ‘lesson’.

“Take note, he endeavors not to inhale the pool contents, he uses his arms and legs for propulsion. Any questions?”

“No sir.” Daniel had a very bad feeling about what was probably next.

After the other boy had climbed out and rejoined the others it was time for Daniel to walk on water, which seemed to Daniel about what was being required of him. Hughes ordered the petrified boy to stand on the edge of the pool. Daniel thought the instructor would order him to jump into the ten feet of water, instead Hughes just picked him up by his armpits from behind and tossed him in.

“I’m going to die,” he thought. Daniel was almost calm and detached as he sank deeper into the water.

Maybe he should try not dying first.

Daniel managed some bit of self control and proceeded to claw and kick his way to the surface and the breath of life.

Ian had been just about ready to jump in and save his friend when Daniel's sputtering head broke the surface. Despite the feared instructor's presence all of the boys cheered, Ian most of all.

"Shaddup!" Hughes roared at the group, he then turned his attention to Daniel.

"Use your arms you idiot! Kick with your feet!"

After some panicky floundering Daniel tried to imitate the boy in his 'lesson'. The desperate boy swam with no grace or speed, he swallowed some considerable amount of water, he did reach the edge of the pool. Hughes let slip a smile of approval, he had a feeling that this boy would swim rather than sink.

For the rest of the instruction period the waterlogged Daniel made the perfect 'victim' to be rescued, he really didn't have to fake it very much. Daniel would eventually be a passable swimmer, after a long time he even enjoyed it, sort of.

All cadets were required to pass the small craft piloting test prior to graduation. The small craft ticket was basically just a 'drivers license' to fly atmospheric craft, it did not involve the much more difficult skills involved in piloting a true spacecraft. It was still a challenge for most of the boys, there were a host of naval regulations to be memorized and then there was the mastering of the craft's control systems. Most of the lessons took place in the academy's simulator room. Daniel could have slept through everything except the regulations lectures, he still carried the plastic card that rated him a qualified cargo shuttle pilot, much to the total awe of the rest of the cadets (and the staff).

Ian could have easily taught the mathematics and physics courses, he could even understand the principles and practical applications of the FTL theory. Daniel was in total awe of his unassuming friend's command of the odd notions that were the core of interstellar travel. Ian needed more than a bit of help in mastering the small craft simulator, Daniel gave his all in after hours tutoring to see to it that Ian passed with if not flying colors, at least passing colors.

A cadets life was one of too many assignments to possibly finish, too many demerits to possibly work off by endless marching around the parade grounds after class hours. Yes sir, no excuse sir! Few of the cadets imagined they would ever make it to midshipman, about half eventually would make it.

During Ian and Daniel's third quarter, war was declared on the 'Snakes'. There was good reason for the Emperor's declaration, that reason crashed down upon Daniel one evening as Ian and the Free Trader were cramming for a naval history exam. The intercom in the boy's dorm room commanded them both to report immediately to the academy Commandant's office.

"What did we do?" Ian racked his mind for possible infractions or shortcomings.

"I thought we were in pretty good shape," Daniel was also at a loss, "we've passed all of the major stuff, our demerits are below the red line." Neither cadet had ever been before the Commandant, they hadn't even met him in person yet.

Both cadets did a quick inspection of each other

before knocking on the polished wooden door, it would not do to have a button out of place or fuzz and lint on their uniforms.

“You knock, I’ll report for us.” Daniel said.

“Gladly.” Ian had no wish to trip over his tongue reporting to the Commandant.

Ian knocked firmly the required two times.

“Enter.” The Commandant’s voice at least seemed human.

Both boys entered and closed the door, then marched smartly up to the correct ten feet from the man’s massive wooden desk.

“Sir, cadet’s Grayson and Murphy reporting as ordered.” Daniel managed to get it out without any flubs while both snapped their best salutes to the officer.

“Stand at ease,” Commandant Hyde ordered, “in fact have a seat.”

The Commandant motioned to the two chairs at each corner of the desk. Both boys replied with “thank you, sir” and sat nervously at attention. What had they possibly done? Were they being sacked? Why were they being allowed to sit?

Hyde truly hated this sort of thing, telling a boy the

words that no human ever wanted to hear.

“Cadet Grayson, I have asked your friend to be here for what I have to tell you, it’s the very worst sort of news about your family.”

“Sir?” Daniel’s mind would not accept what the man was saying.

“I’m afraid it has been confirmed that FTV Gryphon was lost during the Snake’s attack on New Hope. An examination of the wreckage remaining in orbit proved the identity of the vessel, two other cargo vessels were also destroyed in the raid. I’m very sorry to tell you, but there were no survivors from any of the vessels.”

“Oh no.” Ian whispered. Daniel only stared blankly at the Commandant, his mind and body frozen. Daniel finally found part of his voice.

“Is there... Sir, is there any chance...?”

“No. I had this news a week ago, I insisted on confirmation before telling you. That confirmation came within this hour.” Hyde replied softly.

Daniel could say no more, he remained in control of himself, save for the tears. The Commandant rose and came around the desk, both boys snapped to attention more out of instinct than thought. Hyde put one hand on

Daniel's shoulder and spoke quietly to him.

"This is very hard, as hard as it ever gets. You are excused from classes and duty for the time being. You need some time to sort this out, your friend here will help you, we all will."

"Thank you sir." Daniel replied, still hanging on to his self control as best he could.

Hyde nodded to Ian and toward the door, Ian understood and guided his friend out of the office, neither boy remembered to salute as required when they left, it didn't cross the Commandant's mind either. Hyde had a bit more than his usual two fingers of brandy that evening. Despite persistent rumors to the contrary, he did have a soul. Daniel just cried himself to sleep.

Daniel took just the one day off from academy routines, his bottomless sorrow was soon replaced with a smoldering rage, a need to avenge his murdered family. He couldn't do much to get even with the Snakes if he washed out of academy. His rapid return to classes caused some concern amongst the staff, a session with the councilor (psychologist/shrink) was in order.

"Are you sure you're ready to be back in class?"
Doctor Amundsen asked.

“Yes sir, I think I need to get busy again, sitting around idle isn’t going to help things much.”

“Do you have any family anywhere else, or family friends?”

“No family sir, my father had a lot of friends in the Free Traders, a lot of business partners.”

“You know you have the option of returning to them, no shame or discredit if you withdraw from academy.” Amundsen explained.

“I need to stay sir, I want to become a flight officer, a fighter pilot.”

“Why a fighter pilot?”

“May I speak very plainly, sir?”

“Of course, that’s what you’re here to do.”

“I want to become a fighter pilot so I can get even with those scaly fuckers, sir.” There was an ice cold matter-of-fact tone in the boy’s last statement, in his eyes. There was no madness about him. Maybe the Empire would be best served by unleashing him against the Snakes.

Graduation day. Enlistment day. If you took the oath you put on the dark blue uniform with the small round gold

shoulder pips. You could still back out, no one ever did though. If you made it this far you had by now decided what you really wanted to do with your life, Daniel had.

Daniel wasn't first in his class, his lack of a formal, structured education had left him behind in the more mundane subjects, he graduated fourteen out of three-hundred-twenty-one. No other cadet was even close to him in those skills that would best serve a fighter pilot. Ian cruised to second out of the class, his poor piloting skills kept him from first place, the navy would not care about that, he was a bloody genius. Aaron Zeplinski from New Albion, graduated first. Aaron had that special balance of natural abilities and intelligence that in the end added up to the most academy credits. Aaron would one day be Admiral of The Blue Fleet and he would always be one of Daniel and Ian's friends.

Chapter Four

Midshipman

HMS Franklin was a fleet class fighter carrier, it existed only to engage the enemy with it's two-hundred Falcon L model fighters. The carrier only very rarely came to ground, it needed a specially prepared 'dry dock' to sit it's three-thousand foot length down upon. Imagine a giant cylinder flattened along it's length to form the bottom of the vessel's hull, imagine the power it contained.

Pure chance had no part in Ian and Daniel both drawing Franklin as their first posting, the navy wasn't totally blind to the plight of an orphaned cadet and his need for some familiar anchor to hold onto. If it were a smaller empire there would have been leave time granted to the academy graduates, time to visit with family and friends. Vast distances and an ugly interstellar war dictated immediate active duty, life was still as hard as it had ever been.

It was a dark and stormy night. Really. The two very

young and green midshipmen were wrapped in their foul weather cloaks, sea chest's floating along behind them on their tethers. Camelot had a major naval base, it extended for miles. It seemed like the two boys had been hiking for miles (they had), at last they arrived at the massive vessel with the right hull number.

“Jesus! It’s about time!” Ian was about ready to collapse onto the rain soaked pavement.

“Courage. If we’re lucky it’ll probably lift off before we get up the ramp,” Daniel was pretty much done in also.

“Come on, we’ll be AWOL if we don’t sign on before midnight,” Ian wouldn’t have been too upset either way it went, the whole day had been a total disaster of missed flights and lost sea chests.

“Last one up the ramp gets ten demerits!” Daniel’s attempt at humor was a bit flat. They signed on in time, three hours to spare actually. They were the last of the complement of new midshipmen to board the vessel, the ship’s Captain wanted to know just why that was.

“Our sea chests were sent by mistake to the Marine base at Murchison, sir. No excuse, sir.” Daniel replied. Captain Hartman could sympathize a bit with that, the last time he had managed some leave they had sent his own

bags to a different star system. The officer merely nodded in understanding and asked them for their orders and records packets. Both boys still stood at rigid attention as the ship's commanding officer carefully read through their records, he allowed them to stand easy when he got to the meat of Daniel's packet.

Hartman looked up at Daniel and said, "Mister Grayson, I see you have recently lost your family, my condolences."

"Thank you, sir."

"You already have your cargo shuttle ticket?"

"Yes sir, for almost three years now." Both boys had recently just turned eleven.

The officer's eyebrows raised as he read the letter that Rapier's captain had penned.

"Captain Fredericks of Rapier seems to think very highly of your piloting skills. You actually pulled off an emergency grapple and boost?"

"Yes sir, my orbital position was quite good, a lot of luck was involved in being in the right place at the right time," Daniel answered. Ian had never been told of the incident and glanced at his friend in surprise.

"Such a maneuver involves more than luck, I shall

follow his recommendation that you enter the pilot apprentice program. Report to Commander Whitehorse in Flight Operations at 0800.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir,” Daniel didn’t quite float off the deck but felt like it.

“Commander Whitehorse is a very hard man to please, you may not be so grateful a bit later on.” Then it was Ian’s turn.

“Mister Murphy, it would seem that your brain is your best asset, did you also have any thoughts about being a pilot?”

“Oh no sir, my piloting skills are a bit... well, marginal.”

“Agreed. I think you will do well in propulsion engineering. Comments, Mister Murphy?” Hartman couldn’t have chosen any better.

“Engineering is what had I hoped for sir, thank you sir!”

“Like Mister Grayson, you probably won’t be thanking me this time tomorrow. Report to the Engineering Officer at 0800. You’re both dismissed. Find the senior midshipman, Mister Starling. He’ll get your quarters squared away and assign you your routine housekeeping duties.”

Both newly minted midshipmen executed crisp salutes, turned and marched out of the Captain's duty office. Hartman smiled a little as badly suppressed exclamations of glee drifted back to within his hearing. The officer went through Daniel's packet again, more slowly this time. He shook his head in amazement, wondering just who and what the navy had got it's hands on. A Free Trader of all things!

Midshipman Starling was a royal pain in the ass, or rather he was a pain in the ass with a small claim to royal blood.

"Nimitz Academy! Piss poor school in my opinion, I went to Annapolis on Earth," a fact he told everyone at every chance.

Ian and Daniel immediately hated this pimply prick, but then so did everyone else.

"You two get the rat hole, it's all that's left. Serves you right for being last on board," Starling continued.

"The rat hole?" Daniel inquired.

"It's the smallest middie's cabin, it has two bunks and a head, you'll need to take turns farting it's so small."

Starling was right, it was very small. The two tired boys did manage four hours of sleep after getting the tiny cabin in inspection order. There had been bed linen to chase down, bunks to make up, sea chests to unpack into cramped lockers. 0600 descended upon them all too soon and it promised to be another very long day. Ian and Daniel met a few of the other midshipmen during the hustle of dressing, getting the 'rat hole' in order for the day, breakfast in the small area of the officer's mess reserved for middie's. About half of the midshipmen were fresh out of academy, the rest had seen active duty for various lengths of time, Starling the longest, he was sixteen.

There were twenty-four midshipmen on Franklin out of a total crew of over two-thousand. The vessel had far more officers than the average naval vessel due to the large number of fighter craft it carried. Fighter pilots were usually officers from the lower commissioned ranks, it was theoretically possible for a midshipman to make pilot, it rarely occurred in practice.

Ian and Daniel parted after breakfast, they had

separate paths to pursue, different masters to please. Commander Whitehorse already had Daniel's packet in front of him when the nervous midshipman reported for duty.

"How in the hell did you ever get a cargo shuttle ticket?"

"I was taught by my father, sir. I took the test, I passed sir."

"Free Traders, a pretty odd bunch in my book." Whitehorse was trying to rattle the boy, so far with no luck.

"Yes sir, we are."

"It says here that you rescued Rapier's captain, among others. What were you flying?"

"A Heron class cargo shuttle, sir."

"Obsolete!" Whitehorse sneered.

"Yes sir, but still a good craft if well maintained." Daniel wasn't giving any ground.

"How did you accomplish this miracle?"

"I was in a good orbital position to start with sir, I intercepted Rapier's shuttle and used the boa's, the flexible grapples, to catch them. Then a hard acceleration to a stable orbit. We were just on the edge of the atmosphere, I had to push it fairly hard, sir."

“Indeed. I’m having a bit of trouble with this, let’s put you in a simulator and see if you’re what you claim to be.”

“Yes sir.” Daniel was a bit irked at the officer’s doubt, or was he just trying to test him?

It was the same K Model Falcon simulator that Daniel had ‘flown’ on board Rapiers. It was like coming home. Whitehorse thought he would put the boy in his place when he ordered him to strap in and power up the Falcon, in a way he was right. It was exactly where Daniel’s place was. By this time several of Franklin’s pilots had gathered to watch the new midshipman make a total fool of himself, what they saw was not quite what they had expected.

“Falcon 1 on alert standby,” Daniel calmly intoned. All of those watching had just observed the young boy do a by the book power-up of the Falcon, faster than the book said it could be done.

“Launch alert. Incoming targets, released to engage.” The simulator told Daniel that the bad guys were coming, go get them. He did.

The only mistake Daniel made in the entire simulation was departing the alert pad too fast, regulations indicated no more than a two-gravity acceleration until clear of the

carrier, Daniel pulled his usual nine gravities and caused some atmosphere loss at the hanger shield. Four of the nine incoming Snakes were eliminated on the first twisting pass of the Falcon, Daniel had remembered what he had done wrong in Rapier's simulator. Whitehorse and the assembled pilots were put in their own places, a green midshipman had just flown multiple circles around their best simulator efforts, circles around what they were humanly capable of.

"You launched too fast," Whitehorse explained, still not believing what he had witnessed, trying to find some fault he could use.

"Sir?"

"Launch acceleration is limited to two gravities, faster causes air loss at the shield interface."

"Yes sir. I didn't know that, no excuse sir."

Whitehorse ordered another simulator run, then another. Daniel only got better with each run, better than the fleet record for simulated intercepts, better than anyone of flesh and blood should be able to do. What do you do with an eleven-year old Free Trader cargo pilot who was apparently better at killing Snakes than anyone in the entire Imperial fleet, better than it seemed possible to be?

Whitehorse eventually called a halt to the simulator impossibilities, it was demoralizing his pilots.

“You did quite well in the simulator, I am conditionally assigning you to alert pad duties. You will after training be charged with keeping the standby alert craft powered up and ready for launch, ready for the craft’s pilot to take over and to launch. You will also be called on from time to time to shift various fighters about the hanger deck. Normal course studies will be maintained, if you fail to keep up with assigned subjects you will be dropped from alert pad duties. Questions?”

“No sir. Thank you sir.”

“Very well, now report to Personal Equipment and get fitted out with a pressure suit and helmet, make sure it fits properly too, you’ll be living in it for a good part of each day.”

“Yes sir, should I report back here after that, sir?”

“No. Find Lieutenant Sadat over at the alert pad, he’ll be expecting you and your new pressure suit.”

“Yes sir,” Daniel braced to attention and went off to search for the Personal Equipment section. Fortunately there were locator screens at regular intervals on the bulkheads and passageways, a person could get lost!

Chief Bowles stared down at the small midshipman who was asking for a flight pressure suit and helmet.

“Who authorized this?”

“Commander Whitehorse, chief. I’m to start training for alert pad duties.”

“Right out of academy?” Bowles wasn’t buying this.

“Yes chief, I’ve had previous flight experience.”

“And what might that be?”

“Free Trader cargo shuttles and small craft.” Daniel was getting a little steamed at the man’s third degree routine but remained polite. “Perhaps you should contact Commander Whitehorse for confirmation, chief.”

“Perhaps I should.” Bowles went over to the wall mounted com. unit and told it to contact the officer in question. Whitehorse was a bit sharp with the senior rating in putting him straight.

“My apology Mister Grayson, follow me and I’ll get you fixed up.”

“Thank you, no apology is needed, chief.”

Daniel had to stand naked on the scanner base plate and close his eyes as the light beams measured every hair and pore of his anatomy, the suit would be like a second

skin, precise fit was essential. Bowles then had the boy dress and sit down to wait, the automatic fabrication process would take about thirty minutes.

When Bowles finally produced the protective gear Daniel had to strip once more to try it all on. The suit and helmet came with four sets of thin and elastic 'long john' undergarments that could be laundered after each use. The suit itself was a slate gray color, the molded material about one-quarter inch thick. The helmet, gloves, boots and the metal fittings were a dull black save for the gold tinted faceplate of the helmet. The small flat backpack unit could supply emergency air for about four hours. It all seemed to fit perfectly, Bowles fussed over and checked every place where binding might occur. He carefully explained to the boy how every fitting worked, how to attach the disposable urine sheath and tubing, how to empty the urine bladder on the inside of the right thigh. If you had to empty your bowels you were in big trouble. More instructions: Air hose fittings, communication controls, helmet fittings, air supply controls and recharging the air supply, power packs. It all even came with a carrying case stenciled "Grayson, D.- 19812267-JM."

Bowles gathered the impression that the boy had used pressure suits before and of course he was right.

“This is much nicer than the suit I had on Gryphon, I only used it for outside work, never while flying.” Daniel explained. He felt a sudden pang of loss at his mention of his former home and life.

Bowles nodded and pushed an impressive form under Daniel’s nose. “Sign this, anything you lose or break through misuse you have to pay for. That suit is worth about three years of a midshipman’s pay.”

Daniel gulped and signed the form, he’d better be careful with this stuff!

Lieutenant Sadat’s small office was just off the alert pad on the forward hanger deck. Two fully armed and powered up Falcons always sat pointed toward the hanger door, their special deck space painted in yellow and black warning stripes. Franklin had yet to depart, so two rather fierce looking and rifle armed Marines stood guard by the Falcons, lest some unauthorized civilian worker wander too close.

Daniel skirted around the edge of the warning stripes

carrying the surprisingly light metal case containing his pressure suit. He knocked twice on the open door to the office.

“Enter!” Sadat barked, not sounding very warm and friendly.

“Midshipman Grayson reporting, sir.” Daniel gave his best by-the-book salute.

Sadat just glared at the boy for a moment before returning the salute, he shook his head in disgust before telling the boy to put down the case and to stand at ease.

“Do you have your cargo ticket on you?” Sadat asked quietly.

“Yes sir,” Daniel replied while unbuttoning his right breast pocket, “here sir.”

Sadat inserted the coded plastic card into a reader on his desk and carefully studied what popped up on the device’s small screen.

“You scored 100’s on both cargo exams?” Sadat asked.

“Yes sir.”

“Free Trader?”

“Yes sir.”

“My sources tell me that you’re a bit of a whiz on the simulator, a real hotshot.” Sadat continued.

“A simulator isn’t real, sir. You can do crazy things in a simulator without risking anything or anyone. Flying a real craft of any sort is serious business, my father taught me that.”

Sadat liked the boy’s answer but gave no outward indication, he would need a lot of convincing before this child ever sat foot in one of his Falcons.

“For the time being you will stay close to me, your job will be to observe and learn, along with whatever odd tasks I might require of you.”

“Yes sir.” Daniel had half expected the man to tell him to get lost.

Sadat produced a pile of ‘book cards’ containing endless training manuals on everything from fighter maintenance to navigation theories, “You are responsible for everything in these manuals, learn them, keep a reader with you. You can study in your idle moments here and in your cabin. Start with the one on flight deck traffic management.”

“Yes sir,” Daniel managed to drop one of the cards on the deck as he tried to pick them all up. Sadat produced an empty spares carton of some sort for the boy to dump them all in.

“Thank you sir, there’s quite a lot of them.”

“That’s just a start. Come along with me and I’ll find you an empty locker and suit rack,” Sadat explained.

The pilot’s locker room contained long rows of slim metal lockers, each next to a rack for holding their pressure suits and helmets. Sadat left Daniel to hang his suit as the others were, the rack was almost too large for the small size of the boy’s suit. Two flight officers sauntered over to see just what Daniel thought he was up to.

“My Lord, a midget pressure suit!” Commented wise ass number one.

“Maybe it’s for a trained monkey or something.” This from the second wise ass.

Daniel was doing his best to finish and get out of there, these guys were bound to start in on him.

“Midshipman, who belongs to that diminutive garment?” Asked w-a number one.

“It’s mine sir, I’ve been assigned to the alert pad for training sir.” Daniel explained politely, he had to be polite, these clowns were officers.

“Training to do what?”

“I’m in the pilot apprentice program, sir.”

“Name?”

“Grayson, sir.”

Both lieutenants looked at one another, the boy’s simulator exploits had been buzzing around the Franklin all day.

“Rumor has it that you already have a cargo shuttle ticket, is that so?” Asked w-a number one.

“Yes sir, I worked on my family’s ship.”

“Free Traders, those pirates must be proud as punch to have one of their own doing honest work for a change.” Daniel was getting very pissed by now. “They’re not proud of anyone, sir! The snakes killed them all when they raided New Hope, sir!” There was a look in the boy’s eyes that told the two flight officers that perhaps they shouldn’t push things any further and that perhaps they were making total and complete asses out of themselves.

“Our apologies, Mister Grayson, sometimes our mouths lead lives entirely of their own, disconnected from our brains.”

“Thank you sir, may I make so bold as to shake your hand on it?” Daniel asked.

“Indeed, the matter is closed then.” Said w-a number one as the two officers took turns shaking the boy’s hand. Giving personal offense to anyone, especially one of junior rank, on matters of family was very bad form and the officer’s knew it. Had they been civilians the boy would

have had the perfect right to call them out on a matter of honor. Dueling, however, was forbidden between members of the military, it was bad for discipline and good order.

The two somewhat chagrined flight officers went their own way, a small discussion of the encounter with Daniel ensued.

“He does seem to have a working backbone, for a moment there I thought he might go for our throats.” W-A number one observed.

“My remark was over the line, he seems not to be your average wet nose middie.” W-A number two concluded.

Daniel finished hanging the suit in the manner that all of the other's were hung, stowing the carrying case under the rack and the underwear on the shelf in the narrow locker. There were no names on the lockers, just numbers, his was number fifty-eight. Daniel did a fast tour of the locker room, noting where the showers and heads were before heading back to Lieutenant Sadat's tender mercies.

The rest of Daniel's day was just what Lieutenant

Sadat said it would be, observe, learn, stay close but out of the way. Occasionally he would be introduced to other officers and ratings, quick formalities only. Junior midshipmen could in theory give orders to the enlisted crewmen, in practice polite suggestions worked a lot better, the word “please” was best included in any request made of a rating. An errand that Midshipman Grayson was sent on demonstrates the technique. He was detailed to go ashore and pick up last minute financial records from the base accounting unit, two very junior ratings were to accompany him.

Ordinary Seamen Pratt and Toomey wore the side arms required for transporting important documents, both had been in the navy for less than one year but had already formed low opinions of new midshipmen. The last ‘middie’ they had been detailed too had nearly flown the utility runabout into base headquarters. It irked them to no end that the middie’s were the one’s who were supposed to do the flying. Daniel was by far the youngest and shortest midshipman that they were ever cursed with. As the boy approached the small utility flyer the two ratings exchanged whispered opinions.

“We’re going to die horribly.” Toomey concluded.

“And to think I was going to make the navy my career!” Pratt sighed.

Daniel tried to at least sound like he knew what he was about.

“Hello men, I’m supposed to pick up some records from accounting. They said you were to be the escort?”

“Right you are, Mister...?” Toomey replied.

“Grayson. Let’s get going if you please, Lieutenant Sadat said for us to hustle.”

“If you would prefer, Mister Grayson, one of us can pilot the runabout for you, we have our tickets.” Pratt offered.

“Not to worry, I can get us there in one piece.” Daniel said this as they entered the six seated craft. He handed his cargo shuttle card to Pratt to put them at ease.

“You’re the Free Trader kid... beg pardon, the Free Trader midshipman?” Pratt blurted it out before thinking. Daniel grinned as he settled into the command seat. “That’s me, hold on to your buttocks!”

It was actually the smoothest flight and the most uneventful detail the two ratings had ever been on with a midshipman. The only hitch occurred when the clerk at

accounting couldn't find what they had been sent for. Daniel solved this by a quick call to Franklin's personnel officer, the officer had sharp words with the clerk and the missing documents magically appeared. Pratt and Toomey lost their fear of flying, at least with this particular midshipman.

By the time that Ian and Daniel were back in the 'rat hole' it had been a very long first day for both of them. Tomorrow Franklin left dry dock for deep space, things could only get more hectic.

"I felt like I couldn't even remember how to dress myself, it was nonstop questions all day long!" Ian moaned.

"Same here. We both seem to be alive and breathing, that's something I guess." Daniel replied, as tired as his friend was.

"I could be harvesting wheat right now, somehow that seems really nice."

"I could be...." Daniel didn't finish what he started to say, he could be dead along with the rest of his family. Hot showers helped revive both boys, some studying even took place before sleep overwhelmed them. 0600 seemed to come after about ten minutes of pleasant dreams and awful nightmares.

Chapter Five

A Place Called Pearl Harbor

HMS Franklin departed dry dock with the slow grace of a cloud drifting away. Once free of the planet's influence the war craft merged into the deep nothingness of the faster than light field it generated. Hanger doors were closed during this time, no craft could be launched or retrieved during FTL transitions. Time's passage was no longer marked by the sunrises and sunsets of the naval base, it was marked only by the readout on the ship's timepieces. Any view port or observation monitor only revealed a slate gray blankness, nothing to look at out there. The FTL transition to Britannia would last eight days, ship's time. Eight busy days for all aboard, especially new midshipmen.

Ian was able to inhale the complex engineering texts as if they were the air itself. Daniel was no slouch but he had to work a lot harder memorizing the mountains of naval regulations and procedures that governed the operation and movement of even the smallest of craft assigned to Franklin. Between all of that the two boys had to cope with

the daily life of a lowly midshipman. Even with all of this Daniel managed to wheedle whatever extra time he could on the simulators. Lieutenant Sadat wasn't made of stone, he was coming to recognize that Mister Grayson was driven by his own small devils to avenge his family and that the boy had the talents to do just that. On the last day prior to landfall at Britannia Lieutenant Sadat threw the dice and gave Daniel his first small assignment that really mattered.

"Mister Grayson!"

"Sir!" Daniel put down his card reader and moved quickly to his superior's side.

"Move Falcon Four-Seven over to slot twelve."

"Sir?"

Was he hearing right?

"Are you deaf? Move Four-Seven to slot twelve!"

"Yes sir!" Daniel almost froze, almost forgetting his own name, let alone all that he had learned and tried to learn.

Sadat was betting with large chips here. If the boy so much as scraped the paint on the fighter Sadat would be having a long and unpleasant conversation with Commander Whitehorse and probably Captain Hartman.

The boy had easily passed the exam on flight deck procedures, his work in the simulators was more than perfection. There was no set rule on the if and when that a midshipman or officer could take command of an actual fighter craft, if only to move it about three hundred feet. Not to worry.

Daniel took several deep breaths as he walked quickly over to Falcon Four-Seven, he felt like running but officers and would be officers didn't run, it was bad form. The two ratings who were just finishing closing the maintenance access hatches on the fighter stood and turned toward the rather undersized officer-to-be.

"Lieutenant Sadat wants me to move this bird over to slot twelve. Standby to pull the deck clamps, if you please." Daniel tried his best to sound like he knew what he was doing. He did know what he was doing, but maybe these buys didn't think that.

"Did he detail you to move the bird, Mister Grayson?" Rating Bergstrom inquired.

"Yes he did, let's not do anything to get him upset." Daniel knew that Sadat was the bane of all of those who labored around the alert pad, or even the entire hanger deck.

Daniel climbed up the boarding ladder and strapped in according to procedures. A brief call to the deck boss was in order before moving the war craft.

“Falcon Four-Seven requests permission to power up and transfer over to slot twelve.”

“Permission granted, I.D. pilot?”

“Grayson, Midshipman.”

“Proceed at your discretion.” By now most of the hanger deck was all eyes, had Sadat totally lost his nasty mind?

“Roger, control. Powering up.”

The low rumbling moan that was distinctive to the Falcon’s powerful drive coils filled the by now quiet hanger. Daniel flipped on the fighter’s flashing anti-collision warning lights and took another deep breath. “Don’t mess this up!” He said to himself as the hanger’s warning klaxon signaled that a powered craft was moving.

Leaving the canopy open, Daniel leaned out and gave the proper hand signal to the ratings to release the clamps on the landing pads. Free to fly! Or at least free to very carefully move a few hundred feet down the hanger.

With the control that a humming bird could envy, Daniel gently lifted the fighter until the landing pads were all of two feet off the deck, then he ever so slowly swung the craft's nose toward deck center. Moving then at a walking pace, the eighty foot long fighter moved as if on rails down to slot number twelve. More than a few comments were exchanged by the deck crew and officers on the lack of the normal sway and bobble of a fighter hovering just off the deck. The sensitive controls and powerful drives made the Falcon damned hard to hold steady. Lieutenant Sadat managed one of his rare smiles as Daniel precisely backed the fighter into slot twelve and gently lowered it to the deck.

Daniel resumed breathing after powering down the fighter, he remained strapped in until the deck crew had once more attached clamps to the landing pads, per regulations.

"Thanks for your help, men." Daniel shook the hands offered him by the deck crew, they knew that the boy had made better than a proper job of it. It was difficult for Daniel to suppress an enormous grin, he mostly succeeded. Even Lieutenant Sadat had a kind word and some good news.

"Well done, Mister Grayson."

"Thank you, sir."

“You have tomorrow’s alert pad duty. Falcon Two, delta watch.”

“Th..thank you sir!” Daniel totally failed to suppress this grin.

“Don’t thank me, you’ll soon be bored to tears just sitting there all of that time with no flying to do. Make sure you meet with Falcon Two’s pilot and with the other poor soul who will be manning Falcon One before you go on duty.”

“Yes sir, and I do thank you.”

“Have you finished the manual on munitions safety yet?”

“Er, not yet sir.”

“Then get busy on it, pad duty is a good time to get in a lot of reading. I want you up to speed on that munitions course, there will be an oral test, soon.”

“Yes sir.”

Back to reality.

“You got it?” Ian felt like giving a very unmanly hug to his friend.

“Yeah, Alert Pad duty, and I got to actually move one of the fighters today! I’m worried about Sadat, maybe he’s going soft or something.” Daniel was very pleased with

himself.

Ian had a bit of good news also.

“Lieutenant Barker asked me for my actual opinion about how to smooth out the fluctuations in the FTL power down phase, I even had an answer that they’re going to try out!”

Daniel knew better than to ask Ian to explain whatever the hell he was talking about, he did feel good that his friend was doing really well in Engineering. How could someone with such a powerful brain be such a hopeless pilot?

HMS Franklin shifted unto the reality that was Britannia’s solar system, there was quite a bit less vibration this time as the shift occurred. Midshipman Murphy’s technical suggestion was forwarded to fleet command, Ian had just made a name for himself among the loftier I.Q’s in the fleet.

All of this good progress would vanish very soon. The Snakes had targeted Britannia for their first major offensive, for their first massacre and domination of all who were not of their own kind.

“This mooring formation is insane!” Captain Hartman

voiced what many on Franklin's bridge were thinking. The flotilla that had been ordered together comprised a total of twenty-one major vessels, twice as many escort ships were also in attendance. They were all close-moored, attached to each other by flexible airlock connections, no room to maneuver or to flee quickly from attack, too used to peace time procedures. Captain Hartman remembered a military history lesson, it was about a place called Pearl Harbor.

By perfectly awful bad luck Senior Midshipman Starling had Alert pad duty with Daniel. Starling had only recently earned the right to sit in an armed and ready alert fighter, he wasn't quite the quick study that Daniel was. It had taken Starling nearly five years of lesser duties to get this far, that pipsqueak Grayson had done it in days! It was a toss up as to who despised the other the most, probably Starling held the edge.

Delta watch was from midnight to 0600.

"If you doze off it's a court martial and out the door. If you doze off during war conditions they usually shoot you." Starling explained with pure venom in his voice.

"I'll endeavor to remain awake, I have a lot of studying to do." Daniel replied coolly.

“I’ll be watching you.” Starling concluded their small talk and went to relieve the ensign sitting in Falcon One. Daniel turned and did the same at Falcon Two, Midshipman Chen was all too glad to turn over the duty to him.

“All systems are nominal, don’t forget your com. checks with operations every hour.”

“Will do.” Daniel replied. Chen had one more bit of advice.

“Watch Starling, if he sees you do the least thing wrong he’ll report you in a heartbeat.”

“Thanks. I wonder if he’s always been such an asshole?”

“He has been for as long as I’ve known him, see ya.” Chen seemed like a pretty decent guy to Daniel, but the universe would always have jerks like Starling.

A six hour watch in a pressure suit and helmet sitting in a cramped fighter cockpit could get a bit tedious after about ten minutes. The suit was connected to the fighter’s life support system and remained cool and comfortable, sort of. You could stand up and stretch in the open cockpit, but that was about all. No vid to watch, no music. Study your lessons. There was water to drink but that had consequences, you had to empty and clean the urine pouch

in the suit later on. There was one thing that tended to keep you on your toes, all of the fighter's weapons were very real and very armed. No playing with the shiny red buttons and switches! There were no deck clamps on these fighter's landing pads. As a practical matter there really weren't many good reasons to have a midshipman or ensign sitting in a fighter that even in an emergency would be flown by someone else. The duty was more about assuming serious responsibilities as early as possible in one's career.

Two hours into Daniel's first Alert Pad watch all of hell came for a visit.

Chapter Six

War

“Launch Alert! Launch Alert!” The nearly deserted hanger echoed with the booming synthetic voice and the howling siren that followed. Daniel nearly jumped straight up, had he really heard that? Of course he had, power up the fighter, get ready to jump out! Toss the lesson crap down to the deck! Daniel was about to unbuckle as the two Falcon pilots charged out of the ready room and onto the hanger deck. A searing flash and a hurricane of vanishing air halted his preparations, the two fighter pilots were nowhere to be seen. The deep black of space was to be seen, the hull had an enormous breach where the ready room used to be, stars were visible before the remaining air started to fog from the pressure drop.

Daniel’s mind went into auto-mode, you act without thought, instinct is in command. No one was going to fly his fighter, air pressure was vanishing. Shut the canopy, close your visor, lift the fighter off the rumbling deck! A glance over at Starling revealed a picture of total panic, the Senior

Midshipman had only managed to close his visor and now sat frozen in the fighter's still open cockpit.

"Operation's, this is Falcon Two, instructions!" Daniel heard only dead air in return on his helmet earpiece. The swift thought that first occurred to him was that he wasn't yet rated to launch this fighter. Another blinding flash in the now airless hanger supplied him with his second thought.

"I have to be alive to be face a court martial, if I stay here I'm dead!"

He launched at nine gees. Screw regulations, there wasn't any atmosphere left to lose anyway! A small part of him worried about Ian as he cleared the hanger, was his good and decent friend all right?

There were Snake 'fighters' everywhere. An enormous and alien warship filled a good part of the star field in front of Daniel, it was firing some sort of ghastly beam at the still moored together flotilla. Wherever the beam touched a huge hole appeared in the targeted vessel. Fish in a barrel. Daniel figured that he was probably as good as dead, maybe he could get at least a little even in the meantime. Scattered Falcons were appearing from the Imperial flotilla, a few of the major warships were trying to move away from the main group, too late if the Snake's

command craft continued it's awful work.

The Snake fighters weren't doing the worst damage, it was that damned 'beam' from the main ship.

"There's my target," Daniel thought as he selected "salvo" on his weapons selector, "here's something from Gryphon!"

The "something from Gryphon" didn't bother with the Snake fighters, he avoided them as if they were so many slow-moving flies. Daniel was at nearly point blank range when he let loose with everything his Falcon carried, down to the last rail cannon projectile. If the boy had any rocks on board he would have thrown them and screamed his vengeance.

Four seeker missile's left Falcon Two's racks, both rail cannons expended all of their explosive projectiles in less than five seconds. All four particle beam guns expended all of their charges and began drawing recharge power from the craft's mass converter. It all had the desired effect on the massive blister that housed the Snake's main attack weapon. In fact it had the desired effect on a good portion of the enormous war vessel, apparently the beam's power had sought another outlet after it's projector was destroyed.

You may wonder why nuclear weapons were not employed by either side. All surviving races in the universe had learned the hard way that an initial use of atomics was always returned in kind by those attacked. War is a terrible thing, so is suicide.

Events weren't standing still as Daniel barely avoided the titanic blast from the explosion of the Snake vessel's main weapon. Franklin was breaking up, a few fighters had managed to launch from the aft hanger but only a few. Escape pods could be seen moving away from the wreckage field, only three-hundred and twelve managed to make it out of the dying fighter carrier. The main flotilla had finally started moving in a coordinated manner, regrouping for a counter attack. A great shout had gone up on the bridges of the Imperial vessels when some crazy maniac in a Falcon had taken out the Snake's main weapon. That elation was replaced with a horrified moment of silence when eight more of the massive Snake warships had blinked into view from the non-space that was FTL travel. Say what you will about the Snakes, they were damned fine navigators.

The flotilla's commander, Admiral Shigata, gave the reluctant order. Disperse into FTL, rendezvous at Morganna, live to fight another day. They were simply outgunned, it would take a good many dreadnaught class warships to counter this massive Snake incursion. A later analysis of surveillance records would show that the Falcon that had disabled the Snake vessel was being flown by a very junior midshipman, the fighter's transponder had been coded with Daniel's ID, per regulation.

Admiral Shigata would in a matter of days be standing before His Imperial Majesty explaining just why he had moored the flotilla together, why he had not followed proper wartime dispersal. It was the last thing the officer would ever have to explain. Admiral Shigata was not even allowed the dignity of ending his life by his own hand.

Ian had been thrown bodily into one of the escape pods by a burly rating who called him a silly little shit for trying to man a dead control panel. The escape pod with Ian and twenty others in it was immediately taken aboard one of the alien warships. All of Franklin's escape pods were taken into the alien warships.

Daniel had watched in morbid fascination as the flotilla blinked out of existence and into FTL, he had a half-formed thought to try and return to one of the still functioning Imperial vessels. The appearance of the other Snake vessels had dashed all hopes he had of survival. His particle beam guns had by now recharged, may as well take as many of the scaly fuckers with him as he could manage.

“Lord, forgive me if you can. Bless my family, bless Ian.” Daniel’s silent prayer was his last well-formed thought before he accelerated toward his hated enemy.

The Snakes had a killing machine loose amongst them, after a while they simply turned and fled before Daniel’s fighter. What finally ended his furious revenge was a small piece of Franklin’s wreckage smashing into his port side drive coil. Britannia's surface was his only refuge, if he could get down without becoming a cinder, if the Snakes failed to see he was mortally wounded.

If.

The Falcon was horribly unbalanced, almost uncontrollable as it entered atmosphere. Daniel managed enough braking thrust to avoid frying himself and the fighter,

a powered landing was out of the question. The cockpit was itself a small escape pod, lowered on an old-fashioned parachute if any sort of normal landing was impossible. Daniel was down to ten-thousand cloudy feet when he decided it was time to part company with the doomed fighter, was there land or water under him. He would soon find out.

Daniel landed in a wheat field, Ian would have felt right at home. There was a twenty-knot wind blowing, after thirty seconds of bouncing and dragging across the field Daniel finally remembered the parachute disconnect lever. Silence.

“Pop the canopy.” Daniel mumbled to himself, still a bit dazed from the bouncing ride across the wheat field. After some thought he disconnected his suit from the cockpit-pod and crawled out into the still green wheat. The sky was overcast, the wind still blew, it all seemed so very peaceful. Was there really a war going on?

A low humming noise caused Daniel to turn around, there was a young girl on a battered flycycle hovering just above the wheat, a look of amazement on her face.

“Hello.” Daniel said for lack of any other words.

“Hello yourself, are you navy or something?”

“Yes, the Snakes attacked the flotilla, haven’t you heard anything on the news vids?”

“I’ve been looking for my stupid dog, it’s always running off somewhere. What snakes?”

Their somewhat disjointed conversation was cut short when one of the God awful Snake fighters howled overhead, apparently Daniel’s descent hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“Get out of here! Go home, now!” Daniel screamed at the startled girl.

“But...” The girl was totally confused.

“Get your silly ass out of here! That’s a Snake fighter! Go home!”

The girl hesitated a moment, finally grasping the situation she was in.

“Go!” Daniel was looking for a place to hide for himself, there wasn’t anyplace, the girl’s tiny flycycle couldn’t carry them both.

“I’ll tell my folks!” The girl yelled as she finally sped off. The girl wouldn’t be telling anyone, the Snake fighter blew her to small bloody bits on it’s second pass.

Daniel stood in open mouthed shock as he watched

the girl's gruesome death, another larger Snake craft was coming in to land, the fighter circling overhead. There was nowhere to run to, nothing to fight with except his two hands.

“Survival pack!” Daniel knew that there was a sidearm in the emergency kit, maybe he could get to it in time! He couldn't, the cockpit-pod blew up in a flash of heat, the blast knocking Daniel backwards into the wheat. When he gathered his senses there were four nasty looking 'rifles' pointed at his face with four nastier looking Snakes holding them.

“Crissss-e-pok!”

One of the Snakes had 'said' something, Daniel had no clue about what the ugly bastard wanted. “Maybe I should stand up?”

Daniel stood somewhat unsteadily, still clad in his pressure suit and open helmet. One of the scaly bipeds poked the boy in the chest with his/her rifle and gestured to the landing craft that they had arrived in. Daniel pushed the 'rifle' aside but did as they wanted him to, no point in trying to fight these monsters, they held all of the high cards. Now what?

Chapter Seven

Prisoner

The Long Creek Naval Supply Depot was one of several naval facilities on Britannia. The facility was now a Snake run prison for military captives. Prison wasn't too accurate of a description, it was more like a research lab for the Snakes to learn more about their enemy. One week after the assault on Britannia the facility housed eleven-hundred and fifty-two naval and marine personnel, the number had been slowly going down as prisoners were selected for 'interrogation' or dissection. Sometimes the Snakes would just single out some unfortunate soul for a few hours of bloody amusement.

Daniel's introduction to the place had been about average, they had taken his pressure suit, helmet and boots from him. He was left only with the thin 'long johns' that lined the suit. Apparently none of the Snakes spoke English, needless to say none of the humans spoke Snake. This didn't stop the captors from making their wishes known, the first thing they did when you arrived was to beat

you bloody with heavy batons just to be sure you paid good attention. Daniel made it through the routine beating with all of his teeth and bones in one piece, the cuts and bruises were starting to fade after his first week in hell.

The prisoner's were all kept in one giant warehouse that had been emptied for them. Ian had arrived shortly before Daniel, the two boys met in the warehouse, literally bumping into one another in the darkness. It was a toss up as to who looked the worse off after their beatings. Despite all of their trials and injuries the boys managed a teary eyed embrace, to hell with 'proper' military behavior.

There was water to drink, so far there had been no food. Anyone trying to venture outside the warehouse was simply shot on sight. The Snakes weren't terribly good marksmen and would sometimes only wound the would-be escapee. The unlucky ones were only wounded, better that they had been killed outright.

"We're going to starve to death if we don't get something to eat pretty soon." Ian voiced what they were all feeling.

"Those other warehouses, one of the ratings who was stationed here says there are emergency rations in one of

them.” Daniel replied. Both boys were gaunt and weak from lack of food, just like everyone else in the warehouse.

“Utility tunnels.” Ian said quietly.

“Huh?” Daniel wondered where his friend’s big brain was wandering to now.

“There has to be power, water and com connections to these buildings, they always run them underground.” Ian explained.

“I’m all ears.” Daniel could see where this was going.

“Come on, there’s a utility panel over in the south corner, maybe there’s some sort of access hatch there.” Ian explained.

Both boys picked their way carefully over to where Ian had said there was a utility panel, they had to be careful where they stepped, the floor was wall to wall with people. Ian traced the power conduits from the panel, they seemed to just disappear into the composite floor. But did they?

“This floor’s been here for ages, any access hatch may not be visible,” Ian explained, “stomp on the floor, see if there’s a hollow place.”

It seemed a hopeless waste of time but Daniel joined his friend in the odd dance. The two boys were attracting some also odd stares from the other prisoners but their efforts

paid off.

“Here!” Daniel had found it, a hollow sounding place, a hatch.

Ian and his friend were soon down on hands and knees, trying to find some sort seam or handle, anything. The light was dim, only some high skylights signaled that it was daylight outside.

“What are you lads up to?” Asked a lieutenant (Parsons) that neither boy knew.

“There may be a utility tunnel, to the other buildings, sir.” Daniel explained as he stood up.

“One of the ratings mentioned that there were emergency food stores in one of the other warehouses, sir.” Ian added.

By now there were a dozen or so men gathered around, what was going on?

“Let’s find the edges of this hatch!” Daniel went back to his search for a seam or crack in the floor.

Years of dirt and cleaning and more dirt had filled in the thin space between the floor and the hatch, but find it they did.

The two boys were pushed aside by stronger hands that dug and scratched with what small tools there were to

be found, the discovery of the pull handle soon had the metal plate off and slid to one side. It was of course pitch black in the now exposed utility pit.

“Where’s the guy who has that mini-light?” Lieutenant Parsons asked. The word was passed around the warehouse, someone had managed to hang onto a tiny ‘flashlight’ through his arrival beating. Don’t ask where he hid it.

“The tunnels are too narrow, you’d have to be a midget to get through them.” Lieutenant Parsons voice sounded muffled from his position down in the access pit. There were three of the utility tunnels leading into the pit.

“How about two puny midshipmen, sir?” Daniel asked from the back of the small crowd.

“Get down here and see.” Parsons replied. The assembled men parted to let Daniel and Ian through, only Daniel hopped down into the pit, there wasn’t room for all three.

“What do you think?” Parsons asked, “If you get stuck there’s no way for anyone to come and get you.” There wasn’t enough room, at least for an adult male. Maybe a kid could do it.

“Let me get past you sir, so I can try it for size.”

There was just enough room for an awkward hands and knees crawl, the pipes and cables in the tunnels didn't leave a lot of room, no room to turn around. If they came to a roadblock they would have to back all of the way out. But which tunnel led to the food warehouse? Time for a conference. Where was that rating who had told Daniel about the other warehouses?

It was well after dark when the two-boy expedition finally got under way. They had been endlessly lectured by the senior officers in the warehouse: Be careful, be quiet. If the Snakes show up here we'll have to close the hatch, wait for us to reopen it. Bring back as much as you can, if you find anything, if you can get into the other warehouse. If.

Bits of clothing were donated for the boys to wrap around their hands, knees and feet. Like many of the people in the warehouse they had only been left with their underwear and would be worn bloody from the rough tunnel floor without some extra protection. If they found what they were going after they would stuff their loot into two large undershirts tied off with strips of cloth.

Time to go.

“Who leads?” Ian asked.

“Let’s take turns, I’ll go first on the way over there, you can lead us back.” Daniel suggested.

“Okay by me. If we find any food let’s eat something before we head back.”

Both boys were weak and tired from the lack of anything to eat and they hadn’t even started yet. They shook hands with Lieutenant Parsons and the others and climbed down into the pit. Daniel turned on the tiny flashlight and put it in his mouth to leave his hands free.

“Leth’s gwo.” Daniel couldn’t talk very well with the light in his mouth.

It seemed like the tunnel went on forever, in reality it was only about three-hundred yards. It was a million miles when you’re belly hadn’t even smelled food for more than a week, when you didn’t know what was on the other side of the access hatch, if you could get it open. If there was any food at all.

“You okay?” Ian asked as they made their slow painful way through the too narrow tunnel, Lord he was so tired!

“Yeth, how bouth uoo?” The light in Daniel’s mouth

had a lifetime power supply, a good thing too.

“Just tired. This place looks like it’s been here for a million years.” The tunnel was a study in ancient dust and things better left unseen.

“We’re here.” Daniel announced, the light finally in his cloth wrapped hand and not his mouth. Ian crawled up beside his best of friends, both of them listened carefully at the hatch, what was up there?

“I can’t hear a thing.” Ian whispered.

“Me either. Let’s see if we can lift up the hatch.”

A strong adult male could have pushed up the heavy plate without much trouble, if he hadn’t been weakened by hunger. Ian and Daniel put their all into the effort, more than they really had to give. The hatch finally broke loose, they almost broke their hearts getting it shoved to one side, they did succeed. It was almost a half an hour before the two filthy tunnel rats rallied enough to poke their heads up into the almost pitch darkness of the food warehouse.

“Let’s stay back here at the rear of the building, just take stuff from boxes that we can close up again.” Daniel whispered.

“Right. Leave no clues that we’ve been here.” Ian agreed.

Creeping up and out of the pit they silently moved to the nearest aisle of metal racks that held endless cartons of what?

“Turn on the light just a sec, so we can read these labels.” Ian said quietly.

The first boxes read “field rations, self-cooking” - too bulky to carry very many. Moving on, they finally hit the jackpot when they found “concentrated energy bars with mineral and vitamin supplements.”

“Here we go, let’s stuff the undershirts with as many of these as we can.” Daniel’s mouth was already watering with the thought of food.

After carefully pulling off the sealed lid on the box both boys yielded to temptation and tore open one of the bars each, wolfing down the sweet tasting nourishment. It was heaven, they could have spent the rest of the night there just gorging themselves but duty and all of those hungry men in the other warehouse beckoned to them.

“Come on, let’s get these shirts filled and back to the men. Maybe we can make another trip tonight, after we rest for a while.” Daniel was already feeling a bit stronger

as the food bar's sugar content started its work.

They decided to leave the heavy hatch open, there was no indication that any Snakes had been in the food warehouse, maybe the stuff didn't agree with their digestive processes. The long crawl back was more difficult as they had to use one hand to lift along the heavy undershirts stuffed with food bars as they progressed. Finally, and after a few rest stops they arrived back at the prison warehouse, they were well received to say the least.

"Good God lads, you've saved us!" Lieutenant Parsons embraced both of the dirty gophers who carried treasure greater than diamonds. Between the two of them they had returned with over four-hundred of the small concentrated energy bars. There were still over eleven-hundred men in the warehouse, two more trips would be needed if everyone was to get a bar tonight.

"Why not give these out to the guys who are the worst off?" Daniel suggested. "We can make another trip or maybe even two tonight after we rest up a bit."

"You two eat one apiece of these first." Parsons ordered.

"We already have sir, back at the other warehouse."

Ian explained a bit sheepishly.

“Good for you then! Did you have any problems?”

“Just the hatch, it was almost too heavy for us.”

Daniel replied.

Parsons nodded his head, “Any sign of the Snakes?”

“No sir, the place looked like they haven’t bothered with it, maybe our food doesn’t suit them.” Ian answered.

“Good. You two sit here and rest for a while, eat another bar, you need the energy for your next trip. Do you feel up to it tonight?” Parsons didn’t want to totally wear out the only two people small enough bring them the desperately needed food.

“We’re all right, sir. We’ll rest here for a while first.”

Daniel replied.

Rest, water and the food bars had greatly restored the boys, much of their weakness had left them, the awful emptiness in their stomachs was gone. They did manage two more trips that night before Parsons called a halt. They also earned the undying gratitude of the starving men in the prison warehouse.

Days turned into weeks, everyone in the warehouse had lost a lot of weight but no one was starving to death. The Snakes still came from time to time to select someone who's luck had run out for their interrogations and medical investigations. The Snake scientific teams found something odd during one of their live dissections, the specimen had some food remnants in it's digestive track. Where did that food come from?

The Empire wasn't just biding it's time. Vast reserve forces had been called up, new ships began construction on a war priority basis. Retaking Britannia was considered the highest immediate military priority, both for strategic reasons and for the morale of the Empire. The people needed to feel that they could hit back and win.

The weeks in the fetid warehouse were telling on everyone, occasional fights would break out. At least they had the energy to fight. Ian and Daniel were treated with great deference, they were risking their young necks on a nightly basis to keep everyone alive. The boys were in pretty good shape physically, save for the scrapes and calluses on their knees and hands. At Parson's insistence Ian and Daniel ate two of the bulkier field ration meals every

day, no one begrudged them this extra food. The boys needed the extra food to fuel their endless trips through the tunnel. All food wrappers were carefully dumped into the pit and pushed into the two other tunnels.

Two events would soon disrupt the boys' routine, everyone's routine. The Imperial Navy was soon to launch a counter offensive against Britannia and the Snakes had finally figured out where the prisoners were getting their food from.

A trap was being laid for the night time food bandits. God help them.

"Come on. No rest for the stupid!" Daniel prodded his friend down into the pit for the first 'food run' of the night. Everything seemed normal as the two made their way along the now very familiar tunnel. As always when they arrived at the hatch they sat quietly and listened for any activity above them, no sounds were heard, as usual. It had been Ian's turn to lead the way this trip and after the usual struggle with the heavy hatch the boy stuck his head up for a quick look around. As Ian turned to tell Daniel that it looked all clear he was yanked bodily up and out of the utility pit.

“RUN! SNAKES!” Ian’s shrill scream echoed all of the way back to the prison warehouse. Daniel froze in horror for a moment, how could he leave his friend to those monsters? It was a moment too long as one of the scaly abominations jumped down into the pit and grabbed Daniel by his ankles.

Ian’s scream chilled the blood of the men who sat as always listening at the edge of the pit in the prison warehouse.

“Oh Jesus! They have the lads!” Parsons whispered.

Both boys weren’t immediately killed as they were sure they would be, instead they were taken to a metal ‘cage’ that had been placed before the prison warehouse. After being tossed bodily into the cage they were left alone, alone to wonder what was waiting for them.

“Are you okay?” Daniel asked his shaking friend, Ian was almost in shock.

“Ye..Yes. I’m all right, are you?”

“Mostly, I lost a little skin is all.”

Daniel hugged his best of friends close, they both knew that they were as good as dead. How would they be killed? How bad would it hurt?

“Ian, I think we’re just about history. I just want you to know that you’ve been the best friend anyone could ever have.”

“Se.. Second best. You’re the best.” Ian sobbed.

Nothing else happened until well after dawn. Then it became all too apparent that the Snakes were going to make a terrible example of the two food thieves.

Preparations had been made, a powered fence enclosed a large area in front of the warehouse, a thick wooden post had been sunk into the ground in front of the fenced off area. The post had a metal ring in it.

A large group of Snake ground troops entered the fenced area before it was turned on, then they charged into the crowded warehouse to drive all of the humans out into the fenced enclosure. Anyone not moving fast enough was immediately killed. A large Snake, maybe an officer (if they had officers) walked slowly to stand beside the post. The alien held up one of the food bars that had been keeping everyone alive, then the Snake pointed at the two small figures huddled in the cage. Point made.

Daniel had made up his mind to go first, maybe some

miracle would spare his friend. When the two guards came and unlocked the cage Daniel roughly shoved his friend to the rear and then stepped out without any resistance. He didn't feel as brave as he tried to appear, dear Lord what were they going to do to him? Daniel was marched over to the post where the two Snake guards clamped some type of manacles around his wrists, then attached those to the ring in the post. The boy hung suspended just off the ground, the manacles cutting into his wrists. One of the guards then ripped off what rags the boy had left in the way of clothing. A low moan went through the crowd of prisoners as the large 'officer' Snake approached Daniel, a long mirror polished metal baton in it's clawed hand.

"Daniel!" Ian screamed as the first blow fell, breaking both bones in Daniel's right forearm.

The slow methodical blows seemed to go on forever, it would seem that the idea was to keep the victim alive as long as possible. Daniel wasn't made of steel, he cried out and twisted in agony with each blow. Dear God it hurt so much! After a while the boy's responses grew weaker, he passed out just as the first Imperial ground attack fighter flashed overhead. Daniel never heard the first rumbling impacts that killed power to the prison camp, that killed

power to the fence enclosing the enraged men. The prisoners suffered many killed in their furious attack on the guards, but in the end all of the guards were dead, torn to pieces or shot with their own weapons.

Chapter Eight Getting Better

The civilian medical vessel Saint Damien had been dispatched to Britannia to help deal with the countless civilian casualties resulting from the Snake's invasion of the planet. The battle in space above the planet had been unimaginably fierce, casualties overwhelming all of the naval medical vessels. Daniel wound up on the Damien, as close to death as one is ever likely to be. The doctors on board the medical vessel had taken one look at what was left of the boy and popped him into a full body regeneration tank where he remained for almost a full month.

For a while the navy lost track of Daniel. The boy had been parted from his friend Ian during the chaotic ground fighting in and around the prison facility. Daniel needed urgent medical care, Ian was fit enough to be sent to one of the designated rest and recovery areas on Britannia. "No, you can't go with your friend, end of conversation!"

When Daniel had arrived on the Father Damien no

one had really given any thought about him being in the navy, there were also many civilian casualties. The boy had arrived beaten to a pulp, naked and on life support devices. Who he was would have to wait for later. Every member of the military carried a small I.D. chip implanted in the muscle tissue of their right shoulder, Daniel had his chip implanted when he graduated academy. But you had to think to use a 'chip reader' on the person in question.

The Father Damien was still in orbit around Britannia when Daniel eventually emerged back into the dry and cold world, the world outside the warm healing liquids and micro surgical devices of the regeneration tank. He even woke up after a while, eventually he stopped screaming. Regeneration does that to you.

"Hello there." A warm feminine voice said. Daniel's eyes were open and trying to focus on the blurry white object that hovered above him.

"Hello," he whispered. His throat felt very dry for some reason.

"Do you have a name?" asked the nurse.

"Yes."

"Well...?"

"Yes, ma'am. I have a name."

Regeneration often left one's mind in simple mode for a while.

“What is your name?”

“Grayson, Daniel 19812267-JM.” It came automatically to his lips.

“Navy?” The nurse's eyebrows shot up.

“Yes ma'am, I'm in the navy. Can I have some water?”

“Just a little, more later,” the nurse said as she put a dispenser to his lips.

Daniel had been on a special watch notice to all naval vessels, the Emperor himself had heard of the boy's accomplishments and wanted him found if he was alive. The boy's attack on the Snake vessel's main weapon had bought precious time for the flotilla, his actions with Ian while in prison had saved even more lives. Find him!

A team of three naval officers found Daniel half sitting up in bed as the nurse helped him with his first solid food. His muscles were still very weak and uncoordinated but that would eventually pass. Commander Hyde's first action before speaking to the confused boy was to hold a chip reader over Daniel's right shoulder. Yes, they had the right

kid!

“Midshipman Grayson, an honor to meet you.” Hyde began.

“Th..Thank you sir. Am I to be sacked, sir?”

“What? Why would you think that?” Hyde was taken aback somewhat.

“For launching my alert Falcon, I didn’t have permission, I wasn’t even rated for it yet.” It was about all the boy had thought about lately, perhaps not too rationally. Regeneration therapy often left the patient temporarily confused, both in mind and body.

“Lad, you saved the bloody flotilla! You’re not being sacked, you’re in for some very heavy commendations.” Daniel sat silent for a moment, trying to grasp what the officer had just told him. A few tears escaped his eyes as he managed a quite “Thank you, sir.”

Daniel was still fragile in mind and body, he would need a few weeks or months to regain his former self. The Emperor ordered the boy transported to Earth on a fast cutter class vessel. Daniel would be recuperating at the Imperial Summer Palace in a place that was once called Colorado.

Ian would be along for the ride.

Aboard HMS Mercury:

“This has got to be some sort of a nutty dream or something.” Ian was having a lot of trouble adjusting to this new reality. Mercury’s officers and crew were treating them as if they were some sort of royalty or something.

“If it’s a dream don’t wake me up. All I want to do is eat!” Daniel was working his way through his second helping of chocolate pudding. Both boys were in their shared ‘stateroom’ - actually the vacated executive officer’s quarters. When the Emperor wanted someone well treated they were very well treated indeed. Daniel still needed help walking but his arms, mouth and stomach were in good working order. Clarity of thought had also returned to the boy.

“I keep wondering what happened to everyone on the Franklin.” Ian said.

“Did you see any of them at the rest area?” Daniel asked.

“No, just the ones nabbed with me. They said that the Snakes had three military prisons on Britannia. No one I talked to knew much about the other ones.”

Daniel changed the subject, thoughts of dead shipmates had occupied too much of their time lately.

“We’re going to meet the Emperor, Jesus I’ll wet my pants!”

“They say he puts his pants on one leg at a time.” Ian offered.

“I hope I don’t say something really dopey to him, I’ll be a nervous wreck.”

“I think he just wants to sort of say thank you or something, you did mostly save the flotilla’s ass. A lot of guys might have died if we hadn’t swiped all of that food”

“I suppose. But the Emperor!”

Earth

Mercury carefully grounded on the Summer Palace’s huge landing pad, it was still morning and remained cool at this altitude, a few puffy clouds floated over the far peaks. The Summer Palace was the smallest of the royal residences, a small staff of one-thousand saw to it that things ran smoothly. The main building was of native granite, it’s sharply peaked roof sheathed in aged copper. The grounds and surrounding woods had been groomed and shaped for a thousand years.

The two junior midshipman had been spending a lot of time going over royal protocol, maybe they would remember some of it. Daniel had been exercising his legs nonstop, he could now stand and walk, still a bit unsteady at times. He had been offered a floater chair for the meeting with the Emperor but had declined it as being too weak and unmanly. It was show time now, the personnel ramp had been lowered, honor guards deployed. The Emperor himself was standing on the tarmac, almost an unprecedented show of respect for any visitor.

“Come on before he gets bored and wanders off.” Ian whispered.

With his hand on his friend’s shoulder, Daniel made his best speed down the ramp. Once on the tarmac both boy’s paused for a second before continuing the fifty yards or so to the waiting Emperor. They were supposed to bow at the waist when they were ten feet from His Imperial Majesty, they properly did so but Daniel’s legs weakened and he lost his balance, falling to his hands and knees.

“Oh no, I can’t believe I did this!” Daniel thought as he tried to regain his feet.

Ian and the strong hands of the Emperor helped him up.

Twenty other people had started forward to help but then halted.

“Are you all right, son?” Asked the absolute ruler of the New Empire.

“I apologize, Your Majesty. This is so embarrassing!” Daniel wanted to simply disappear as he stood to face his ruler.

“Nonsense. We’re amazed that you’re walking as well as you are. We’ve been keeping close tabs on the both of you.”

“Your Majesty, we want to thank you for asking us here.” It was what Daniel had been rehearsing to say.

“It’s Our honor to have the both of you here. Welcome to Our home.”

Welcome they were. When the Emperor has you over as an honored house guest a thousand people will grant your every wish. It takes a lot of getting used to, especially for two very junior midshipmen who had only recently been at the bottom rung of the social food chain. The first thing the boys’ host did was to have a private sit down talk with them to explain the ground rules. The east veranda overlooked a small lake, His Majesty shooed off the servants and aides so they could be alone.

“Sit,” the Emperor directed, “be at ease, no ceremony.”

“No ceremony” meant that “Sire” could be used instead of “Your Majesty,” Ian and Daniel remembered that much. Both boys properly waited until their host was seated before they took their respective chairs.

“You’re not here to be put on exhibit at court, you’re here for a vacation, to do as you please,” began the Emperor.

Two “Thank you, Sire’s” expressed the relief the boys felt.

“Here are the rules,” the Emperor continued, “you get up when you feel like it, you go to bed when you want to, you do what you want to. End of rules. Daniel, the Royal Physician will be checking your progress, she’ll be wanting you to get as much exercise as is possible.”

“Yes Sire.” Daniel smiled, for an absolute monarch this guy was all right.

“In a week or two there will be a bit of a ceremony,” the Emperor added, “you two are in line for a few gold stars on your grade cards, maybe a few other odds and ends also.”

Ian and Daniel gave each other questioning looks before once more expressing their thanks as their host concluded his brief talk.

“You will mostly be left to your own devices, no one will be pestering you much, Our self included. Anything you want or need just give voice to it. We will meet from time to time, at dinner and such. You are always most welcome to come to Us if the need arises. Questions?”

The boys had a thousand questions but only replied with “No Sire, thank you very much Sire.”

To describe their quarters as ‘guest rooms’ would be to describe the Pyramids as a minor historical site. The bathtubs were suitable for swimming in, the sinks and fittings appeared to be gold plated, it wasn’t plating. All of the furniture looked like it was a thousand years old and probably was. Both boys had man servants assigned only to them.

The Royal Tailor was their first visitor after they stopped stupidly wandering around in their vast ‘guest rooms’. Both boys needed new everything. New uniforms from duty jump suits to full dress mess kits. Civilian clothes, Ian and Daniel had forgotten how they even felt. It would all be ready by tomorrow, all hand tailored, even the underwear. Shoes and boots would be handcrafted by artisans who could and did charge totally obscene prices to

their normal clientele but nothing at all for mankind's only royalty.

By mid-afternoon Daniel was very tired, his body still not capable of all he wanted it to do. Ian shoved Daniel onto his enormous bed and pulled off his friend's boots. "Get some rest or I'll go fetch the owner of this museum!" Ian ordered. Daniel didn't argue very much and was asleep almost as soon as Ian tossed a priceless ermine spread over him. Ian then wandered off to explore the enormous stone palace, he only lost his way twice.

By the morning of their fourth day of 'vacation' Daniel was starting to get up to speed, his strength was returning at a good pace. Ian was presently trying to talk his friend into getting on an actual horse, much to the amusement of the stable master and assorted grinning spectators.

"It's huge!" Daniel protested.

"No it isn't, it's just sort of average." Ian explained patiently.

"It smells funny." Daniel had no real experience with animals larger than house cats and small dogs, no room for horses on a starship.

"It's a horse, it smells like a horse!" Ian was getting a

bit exasperated.

“I’ll fall off and get trampled to death!” Daniel’s excuses were getting a bit lame.

“Put your left foot in the stirrup and climb up, if the horse senses any fear it will simply turn around and eat you.” Ian explained a bit testily.

“Very funny.” Even Daniel knew that horses weren’t carnivores. Or were they?

Finally, and with his friend shoving on his butt to assist, Daniel was sitting atop the mildest and oldest mare in the large stable of horses. Daniel did not feel at all in control of the situation.

“Now what?” Daniel was holding onto the reins as if they were life itself. Ian had already mounted his own horse and had moved up beside his petrified friend.

“We’ll just walk them around the corral here for a bit.” Ian replied.

Easy for him to say.

“How?”

“Just kick lightly with your feet, the horse probably knows what to do from there.”

The horse did know, the mare had been picked by the stable master for its even temper and good sense.

Nothing very dramatic occurred during Daniel's first equine expedition, his mount mostly went where it wanted to, the great beast knew the lake trail like the back of its hoof. Two hours in the saddle left Daniel with a somewhat sore behind and a better understanding of large smelly animals.

"Well that was just the most fun since the obstacle course on New Tasmania." Daniel would never be a 'horse' person.

"I cannot believe you are the same fearless fighter pilot that single handed wiped out the entire Snake civilization." Ian replied with a laugh.

"Falcons don't smell bad and they do what you want them to." Daniel knew fighters, horses remained a mystery to him for the rest of his life.

"Let's go fishing." Ian suggested. It was mid-afternoon, if the fish weren't biting maybe they'd go for a dip in the lake.

"Fishing for what?" Daniel wished that Ian would come up with pastimes that a Free Trader knew something about.

"Lake trout. Jenkins (Ian's man servant) said there

were some real monsters in the lake here.”

“Monsters?” Daniel knew as much about fish as he did about horses.

“A figure of speech. Big fish.”

“How big is big?” Daniel asked.

“They won’t eat you, you eat them.”

Getting Daniel into the rowboat was almost as big of a chore as getting him on a horse.

“Where’s the power controls?” Daniel was actually kidding this time.

“Those two flat wooden things with handles, strap them to your feet and sit in the stern.”

“Nice try, I know what oars are.”

“Ever been to one?” Ian asked with a silly grin.

“Oh, whores! No, I never have to pay, I’m far too handsome.”

Much silly laughter ensued, all that either boy really knew about whores was that they were female and you paid them for sex.

The rumored monster fish never appeared after two hot hours of sitting on the hard wooden seats of the rowboat (no help to Daniel’s horse-sore butt). Clothes were

shucked, the water was freezing.

It was still one of the best days either boy had ever had.

Events were occurring on Britannia that would delay and radically alter the upcoming award ceremony. The remains of Falcon Two's crash had been located, the nearly indestructible memory cube from the craft's mission recorder was found intact and readable. What it held defied description.

The record that the memory cube contained was relayed to Fleet Headquarters on Earth, the assembled admirals who viewed the visual record of Daniel's flight sat in stunned silence for long minutes after it finished playing. The Chief of Staff for Fighter Operations was dispatched to the Summer Palace, yes His Majesty would see him.

"You Majesty, I deeply apologize for this sudden intrusion," began Admiral Lyman as he bowed before his Emperor.

"No matter. Stand at ease, no ceremony."

"Thank you, Sire. Something quite remarkable has come to light, concerning Midshipman Grayson, Sire."

This last statement now had all of the Emperor's attention.

“Come and sit.”

“Sire, I think the best thing to do is to play this mission recording of Mister Grayson’s attack on the Snake vessel, if I may?”

The Emperor nodded in agreement and indicated the AV player slot on his huge desk. The recording was exactly like the admiral had said it was, remarkable. Neither man spoke until the recording ended with Daniel’s escape pod parting company with the Falcon.

“He destroyed thirty-seven enemy craft confirmed in the space of one hour, and possibly six others, Sire.”

Admiral Lyman explained quietly.

“Just using his particle beam weapons?”

“Yes Sire, they were all he had left. It defies any logical explanation. His reaction times and anticipation senses are beyond what would seem humanly possible.”

“Who is the current fleet ace?”

“That would be Lieutenant Markov, Sire. Nine confirmed enemy kills, four of them were transport craft, Sire.”

“Mister Grayson’s were all fighters?”

“It appears so, Sire. It’s astonishing.” Lyman concluded.

“He’s an astonishing lad.” The Emperor looked off toward the distant peaks for a moment, wondering just what to do with this most special gift to the Empire. “Thank you for coming Admiral, you were quite correct in doing so.” The meeting was over, but not its consequences.

Ian and Daniel went camping by themselves. The terrain was not unlike that of the obstacle course on New Tasmania, the difference was that they could take their slow old time and pause to enjoy the scenery. Like before, they were kept under discrete distant surveillance, no harm would come to these guests of the Emperor.

While Ian and Daniel communed with nature, the Emperor summoned the Admiral of The Fleet for a conference.

“We (the Imperial ‘We’) intend to bestow knighthood on Midshipman Grayson. We have in mind to also award him the VC (Victoria Cross, yes it had survived the dark times, it still was all that any military person could ever hope for). Also the DFC for his remarkable skills and the Caged Lion for his actions while imprisoned, plus of course the Order of Sacrifice for his physical suffering.”

“Sire, I am in full agreement with the commendations,

but is a knighthood for one so young entirely wise?

Perhaps I speak beyond my station?" Admiral Banks had known the Emperor for many years, long enough to dare to delicately question his decisions.

"We are not all seeing, but We believe this lad is something most special, something not to be taken for what he may at first appear to be. We want him to have the title, he will not abuse it."

"He is indeed special Sire. Of course you have the fleet's full loyalty and support on this matter." There was a limit as to how far the admiral would go to oppose his Emperor. What remained of Admiral Shigata's head was still on a pike in front of fleet headquarters, as well it should be.

In the New Empire a knighthood was not given lightly, they were very few and very far between. In times long past knighthoods were given for such trivial things as musical talent or acting abilities. In the New Empire you had to actually demonstrate qualities that put you far above the average citizen. A Knight of The Empire was always addressed as "Sir" no matter what the military rank or social position of those addressing him might be. In an Empire's population that measured in the trillions, there were exactly

seventy-three Imperial Knights, soon to be seventy-four. The assembled Council of The Imperial Knights was the only body which could in theory vote to remove a sitting emperor, such a vote had only occurred once in the history of the New Empire and even then the motion had failed badly.

After Ian and Daniel's overnight trek into the mountains the sight of the vast stone castle was most welcome (especially to Daniel). The two hikers were grubby in the way that only young males have a real talent for. They were met at the north entrance by the Emperor's Chief of Staff, both boys wondered what was up as they approached the man.

"His Majesty wishes your presence as soon as you have bathed and dressed." The man didn't quite sniff at their dirty appearance.

"Of course, sir. Is something wrong?" Daniel asked.

"No, indeed not. His Majesty has some matters of some importance to discuss with you both."

The quick scrub and dress routine was aided by their assigned man servants, their naval uniforms were

suggested as suitable attire. Both midshipmen sensed that something had changed in the atmosphere of the palace, the way the staff looked at them. The staff already knew what had changed.

Out of habit both boys did a quick inspection of each other before approaching the two armed marines who stood watch at the massive oaken doors to the Emperor's private study. The marines snapped to rigid attention before swinging open the doors, as always the boys felt very self conscious at such treatment. Ian and Daniel paused for a moment before locating the Emperor, he was standing at the far window, apparently lost in his own thoughts for the moment. The soft sound of the doors closing behind the boys brought the Emperor around to face his guests.

"How was your camping trip?"

Both boys properly bowed before Daniel answered.

"It was very nice, Your Majesty. We spotted a bear and later some deer."

"Indeed! Was it a grizzly?" (DNA records had made possible their reintroduction to the ecosystem).

"No Your Majesty, we decided that it might be a black bear." Ian answered.

"Come and sit with Us, no ceremony."

“Thank you Sire,” were both of their responses. The Emperor indicated the couch opposite the one he sat down upon, he took note that the two boys seemed nervous and a bit ill at ease. Who would not be?

“We have decided on this Saturday for your decorations ceremony,” the Emperor began. Both boys gave one another a quick glance as he continued. “Ian, you will be first to receive your recognition. You will be receiving the Order of The Caged Lion for your actions while a prisoner on Britannia, in addition you are promoted to the rank of Fleet Midshipman for your exemplary service to the Empire.”

Ian was in open mouthed amazement, the Caged Lion was mostly given posthumously, Fleet Midshipman was a special rank awarded to only a very few for outstanding achievements. Ian managed a stumbling “Thank you sire” as Daniel grinned and clapped his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“No thank you is needed, you very much earned the recognition.” The Emperor turned to Daniel and paused for a long moment before continuing.

“Midshipman Grayson, where do We begin?”

“Sire?” Daniel asked, his question unformed.

“Before We say any more We must tell you that the mission recorder memory cube was recovered intact from your crashed Falcon, let’s watch that record. You will find it most interesting.”

When the recording finished Ian was staring at his friend like he didn’t know who the boy was anymore. Thirty-seven kills? Daniel was also somewhat amazed, in the raging fury of his attack on the Snakes he had quickly lost track of how many of the alien fighters he had destroyed.

“Everyone who has seen that has been struck dumb with astonishment Daniel, it is a most singular achievement in the long history of the Empire. It is agreed by all that your attack on the Snake main vessel and your engagement with their fighter forces allowed the flotilla the time to respond and move out of danger’s way. At least fifteen-thousand officers and men owe you their lives because of the time you bought them.”

Daniel didn’t know how to respond, how could he?

“For your actions against the Snake attack force you are to be awarded the Victoria Cross. For your unparalleled piloting skills the Distinguished Flying Cross, for your actions with Ian while in prison, The Caged Lion. For your

grievous injuries at the hands of the enemy, the Order of Sacrifice. Plus of course promotion to Fleet Midshipman and you now have your pilot's wings with the skull embellishment of Fleet Ace. Oh yes, you are also now a full citizen of the Empire."

The Emperor's quick recitation of some of the Empire's most cherished decorations and much more left Daniel in a daze, likewise Ian.

"Sire...I don't know.." Daniel's fumbling response was interrupted by the Emperor.

"There's one other thing."

"Sire?" Daniel wondered what else there could possibly be.

"We have decided to confer upon you the title and privileges of a Knight of The New Empire."

"Oh my God!" Ian blurted out, then he covered his mouth in embarrassment.

"Sire...this is... too much. I'm just a...I mean.." Daniel began haltingly.

"Are you questioning Our judgment, midshipman?"

The Emperor's voice was not unkindly, yet a small hint of a bite was in it.

"Oh no Sire, I apologize! It's just so much Sire. I'm

sorry Sire, I don't know what to even think." Daniel's mind was in a whirl, was he in a dream?

"Be at ease Daniel, We take no offense. You have several days to come to grips with this, We understand a bit of what you are feeling, We were also once addressed by the title of 'Hey you!'"

Ian and Daniel were very late in going to bed that night, a million odd thoughts to be sorted through. What would the ceremony be like, who would be there, would they die of terminal stage fright?

They would call him "Sir." Daniel couldn't come to grips with it.

"Jesus, I'm not even twelve yet!"

"Apparently you are one hell of a pilot," Ian observed, "thirty-seven kills."

"Yeah, well I can fly good. Does that make me a knight, I mean they're just two steps below the Emperor, sort of."

"His Majesty seems to think well of you, what else counts?" Ian asked.

As usual Ian's logical mind came up with what seemed sensible. In the end both boys decided that it would be easier to just move with the current, let it take them where it

would. If you cannot control events just do as best you can with what you are presented with.

The relaxed pace of the Summer Palace sped up considerably during the next few days. Important guests began filling all of the available rooms. Rehearsals for the ceremony began as naval and marine honor guards practiced on the landing pad. Ian and Daniel would be at the eye of the storm, a fact that did little for their peace of mind. Still, the two junior midshipmen put their all into trying to memorize what events would transpire, what they were expected to do. The Royal Custodian of The Rites was in charge of arrangements, she gave special attention to Ian and Daniel, especially to Daniel.

“After the last decoration is awarded, you will remain facing the Emperor. The bloodying ritual will proceed the actual conferring of your knighthood.”

“The bloodying ritual, ma’am?” Daniel asked, his eyes just a bit wider, perhaps a lot wider.

“Yes, it’s only symbolic, not nearly as bad as it sounds. Aides will help you to remove your uniform jacket, you will not be wearing a shirt beneath it. His Majesty will

approach you and draw the ceremonial dagger. He will then place one hand on your right shoulder and make a small cut on your chest just over your heart, only enough for a small amount of blood to flow. Then the flat of the blade is pressed to the blood and the dagger is given to an adjutant to be plunged into the soil beside you. This signifies that you are bound by blood to this Earth, that you are a part of the Empire forever.”

“Oh! That doesn’t sound very bad.” Daniel decided.

“I understand that it isn’t really very painful at all, just a small sting. I believe you have endured far, far worse.”

“Yes ma’am, I suppose that’s true.”

“If you can, try not to flinch when you are cut, grit your teeth a bit.”

“Yes ma’am, thank you for the advice.”

The instructions seemed endless, movements were practiced, responses memorized. It might not have been so bad if it weren’t for the fact that it was to be a public ceremony, one that the entire Empire would eventually get to view. How many trillions of eyes would see his every twitch and miscue? The most valuable piece of advice the Custodian of The Rites gave to those participating in the elaborate ceremony was “Be sure to use the toilet just prior to the ceremony, it lasts quite a while.”

The ceremony took place on the flat green meadow next to the expanse of the granite landing pad. In the background were the ageless Rocky Mountains, a few high clouds broke the blue of the noonday sky. A symbolic Falcon fighter sat just at the edge of the pad, behind it on the tarmac stood the ranked files of five-thousand Imperial Marines. His Imperial Majesty stood at strict attention as the Admiral of The Imperial Fleet read Ian's citation.

"We are assembled here in the year of our Lord four-thousand nine-hundred and forty-two to recognize and award The Order of The Caged Lion to Midshipman of The Fleet Ian Murphy for heroic service to the Empire while a prisoner of war." The Admiral's description of Ian's deeds went on for several minutes, no one became bored. Ian had the blue and white ribbon and silver colored medal placed around his neck by the Emperor himself, an almost unheard of break with protocol. The Emperor's handshake would have all eye's on wide open across the Empire, it was even more of a break with protocol.

"Well done, Ian. God bless you."

"Thank you, your Majesty. Thank you for everything." Ian had managed not to faint and he meant what he had said.

The recitation of Daniel's achievements seemed to the boy to last for days, he hoped no one had fainted under the noon sun, he hoped he wouldn't.

"For actions above and beyond...without thought for self.. The Victoria Cross."

"For unsurpassed skill and courage in a combat spacecraft.... The Distinguished Flying Cross."

"For selfless courage and sacrifice while a prisoner of war... The Order of The Caged Lion."

"For grievous injuries and suffering at the hands of the enemy... The Order of Sacrifice."

Finally Daniel stood bare chested before his Emperor and indeed the entire Empire. The small knife cut was hardly felt as the boy gazed steadily into the eyes of the Emperor, not even a blink. As rehearsed the dagger was then plunged into the green sod of the meadow. Helping hands quickly had Daniel once more fully clothed, his small wound already clotting and forgotten.

"Kneel before Us." The Emperor held an ancient claymore, a battle sword of epic proportions from a time long past but never forgotten.

"By the grace of God We dub thee Sir Daniel, Knight

of The New Empire. We bestow upon you all of the privileges and rights of the Sacred Council of Knights. We charge you with all of the duties and responsibilities of this most sacred title.”

The massive sword rested once, twice and then three times on the kneeling boy’s shoulders.

“Rise and stand before Us, Sir Daniel.”

A symbolic piece of silver chain mail armor was draped on the boy’s right shoulder and pinned in place. All of his uniform’s right shoulders would carry a stylized embroidery of silver filigree to represent his knighthood.

At last it was over. But of course it never would be.

Chapter Nine

Sir

Before Ian and 'Sir' Daniel resumed active duties they were rewarded with one final and perhaps best appreciated reward. One of the Emperor's smaller yachts was placed at Daniel's disposal, it was suggested by the Emperor that a week or so on Ian's home world of New Albion might be a good destination.

Ian certainly thought so. So did Sir Daniel.

Both Ian and Daniel were in sensory overload, perhaps the Emperor had sensed this when he suggested some time at Ian's home. Daniel was a pilot without peer, Ian's genius was beyond doubt. They were still young boys for all of that, some time with people you didn't have to bow before and who didn't call you "Sir" would help to set them back on a even keel.

Interstellar 'phone calls' were not a practical endeavor. Packets of data could be transmitted in one direction at a time in the odd reality that was non-space.

Ian had been able to send recorded messages and images to New Albion for later delivery to his family. As of yet there hadn't been time for a reply. It was sometimes a tedious and iffy procedure with the newer colonies. Sending a message to Ian's family that their most famous of offspring would be coming home for a while would probably have been a waste of time. Ian would probably get there in person before his message arrived.

HMS Isabella was one of six interstellar vessels assigned to the royal household, it was more of a gilded warship than a royal barge. It was held in reserve for quick, non-state visits by the Emperor, it was roughly in the frigate class in size and configuration. Isabella's crew was rotated more often than in the fleet at large, tedium was the crew's worst enemy, mostly they just waited around for orders that rarely came. The chance to actually move into space and perform duties other than practice drill was most appreciated by both the officer's and crew. They would be transporting the Empire's newest, shortest and youngest knight to New Albion.

"Welcome aboard Isabella, Sir Daniel." Commander

Holtz still had a bit of trouble accepting the size and age of this newest of Imperial Knights. An honor guard and the senior officers of the vessel stood in greeting at the boarding ramp.

“Thank you very much sir,” Daniel motioned toward Ian, “this is my good friend Midshipman... correction, Fleet Midshipman Murphy. We will try not to be a nuisance during the crossing to New Albion. I’m afraid we’re both still trying to get used to all that’s happened to us in the past few weeks.”

Holtz smiled at this welcome answer, “I can tell you with all honesty that it is a true honor to have you both aboard and I do understand a bit of what you must be feeling. Isabella is at your command, any request you make will be met as best we are able to, any order will be obeyed the same.”

“Sir, we...With respect, I have no intention of commanding your vessel. Myself and Mister Murphy’s only wish is to get to New Albion, we are just passengers. Please just treat us as midshipmen, it would be a welcome change, sir.” Daniel had been going over in his mind something proper to say to the vessel’s commanding officer, he hoped he had got it right.

He did.

The fast crossing to New Albion would take six days, both Daniel and Ian welcomed this quiet interval. The war with the Snakes seemed a universe away, even if all of the Empire's might and resources were presently engaged in that titanic struggle. Isabella carried six Falcons, Daniel spent most of his time catching up on flight regulations and procedures. Daniel could fly as easily as he could breathe, the small details of naval regulations still needed a lot of study and questions. Isabella's Falcon pilot's enjoyed playing the part of mentor to the young boy who was by several factors the Fleet Ace, they could only shake their heads when they played and replayed the recording of his attack on the Snake attack force. Ian spent most of his time in the ship's engineering spaces, he kept asking questions that no one had answers for, making polite suggestions that after examination seemed so obvious and correct.

Ian and Daniel had of course been assigned the Imperial cabins on board Isabella. They were entitled to take their meals in the luxurious rooms but instead had asked the vessel's captain if they could dine with the other midshipmen and officers. Both boys felt quite silly having naval personnel waiting on them. Isabella carried four other midshipmen and after duty hours they could often be found

in the Imperial cabins with Ian and Daniel. The usual bullshit sessions that midshipmen indulge in occurred, along with a few illegal coin tossing games that were the 'secret' pastime of all midshipmen. Isabella's midshipmen were in total awe of the decorations that their two guest middies wore to the dinner meal, in truth the whole crew would find themselves staring at medals so lofty that most had never even seen them on an actual human being. To say that the six Falcon pilots envied the small gold skull and bones that sat in the middle of Daniel's pilot wings would be an understatement of stellar proportions.

New Albion had so far been spared the main effects of war, the new colony was more preoccupied with good harvests and succeeding as a viable colony. The unannounced arrival of a royal vessel caused more than a stir among the planet's small populace, what interest did the Emperor have in so insignificant of a colony? Ian's family farm and the small town near it really did not need a vessel of the Imperial Household landing in one of it's bean fields.

"Sir, with your permission, could we just ground at Bakerstown? Ian and I could then take one of the runabouts to his folk's place."

"Of course, would you like an escorting force to

accompany you to Midshipman's Murphy's home?"

"Oh, please no sir. Not to sound ungrateful, but we would both really like to get away from everything for a short while." Daniel hoped he wasn't overstepping his position.

"I don't blame you. My crew can take some shore leave while you're at Mister Murphy's home." Commander Holtz thought it would work out well all around.

New Albion was well organized enough so that every residence on the planet had a locator code. Daniel entered the sequence that Ian gave him as he powered up the large runabout, more like a flying limousine with the Imperial crest emblazoned on it's side.

"The Founder's Day dance is five days from now, my mother always had us polished and shined for it. I guess it's sort of backwoods compared to what we've been doing lately."

"Ian, I could really use a little 'backwoods' for a while. My people worked hard for a living just like yours do," Daniel explained, "let's just be glad that we can be there."

"I'm sort of glad to be anywhere, after what we've been through." Ian concluded.

Daniel deftly lifted the gleaming black runabout off of

Isabella's hanger deck and with properly requested permission departed for Ian's place of birth.

"They'll all probably be in the fields if the harvest is on time, my mother should be getting things ready for the noon meal." Ian explained.

"You mean we'll be in time for lunch?" Daniel asked, his stomach was already signaling it's needs.

"Hopefully. Daniel, don't expect a big fancy house or much of anything fancy. We're just ordinary people, we don't really have a lot." Ian hoped his friend wouldn't think they were just a bunch of crude peasants.

"Don't be an ass, I didn't have any clothes that weren't hand-me-downs until I was ten."

"Ten! I had a new suit when I was eight!" Ian laughed, both boys laughed. It wouldn't have mattered to Daniel if Ian's family lived naked in a mud hut.

"There it is, the white house and barn!" Ian exclaimed.

Daniel was almost as excited as Ian was. "Let's take a quick fly around before we land, give me the grand tour!" The polished ebony craft flashed over the roof of the farmhouse, a structure that wouldn't have caused any comment if it were on the plains of Kansas so many

thousands of years ago. Only the huge stack of cargo pods by the barn seemed out of place.

“There! That’s Freddie on the reaper!” Ian was pointed at the small figure on the large farm machine, it was his big brother.

“Let’s give him a thrill.” Daniel accelerated and made a tight turn that left Ian crushed and gasping, the runabout dropped down to within feet of the ripe wheat field. Freddie nearly abandoned the lumbering reaper as the imperial crested runabout screamed by at just under supersonic velocity.

There was a large tree near the farmhouse, it was a native species that could have passed for an oak. Daniel gently nestled the shining runabout under the tree and powered down. A quick call to Isabella told the naval vessel that they had arrived and all was well.

“You go ahead, I’ll catch up.” Daniel said.

Elizabeth Murphy, Ian’s mother, was standing on the rear porch wondering who could be...was that the Imperial royal crest on that craft? Was it a naval vessel...Ian! Ian left proper behavior for an officer-to-be far behind as he broke into a run toward his mother. The woman managed

not to faint with joy as she moved toward her most special of children, in a moment they were together, both wept with the emotions of the moment. Daniel was a bit moist around the eyes himself as he stood to one side of the runabout watching his best friend come home.

Daniel's screaming circuit of the farm had caused all of the family to make a bee line for the house, soon Ian was surrounded by parents, and siblings. It took a while for the happy group to realize that a rather undersized Imperial Knight was standing next to a runabout belonging to the Emperor.

"Ian, who's that?" Asked little Mary, Ian's five-year old sister, as she pointed to the boy standing under the Big Tree.

"That's Daniel. He's the reason I'm alive." They did make him welcome. The family had received the navy's messages about their son. They had received their son's messages. If pride is a sin they would all go to hell.

John Murphy was the first to greet Daniel, he was Ian's father.

"Welcome to our home Daniel. Pardon me, Sir Daniel." The man was a bit embarrassed, had he offended

the young Imperial Knight?

“Thank you sir. Please just call me Daniel or anything else that comes to mind. I’m just Ian’s friend, we’ve been through quite a lot together.”

“I know that, we’ve received some messages, that and the local vid coverage. You saved my son’s life and a lot of other lives, I can’t ever repay that so I’ll just say thank you. Our house is your house.”

“Thank you sir, I’ll try not to get underfoot too much.”

“We’re busy as one-armed paperhangers right now, we’re just getting in the last of the wheat.” John Murphy explained.

“Then you have two more workers, although I don’t know a thing about farming.” Daniel replied.

“All it takes is a strong back and maybe a weak mind.”

“Then I guess I qualify, sir.”

“Fair enough! Let’s all go in and sit down to lunch, we have a million questions for the both of you.”

The food was simply prepared, there was plenty of it, and it tasted marvelous. Ian’s twin sister, (?) Ellen managed to sit next to Daniel, which was fine with him. How could dopey Ian have such a pretty twin sister? The girl was in awe of Daniel’s uniform with it’s silver shoulder

filigree, not to mention the decoration pips and that menacing looking skull on his pilot wings. She decided she might be in love.

Freddie, Ian's older brother, asked Daniel what the skull and bones meant.

"Oh that. It's sort of an award for killing vermin."

Daniel explained simply.

Ian set his brother straight. "Daniel is the Imperial Fleet Ace, he has thirty-seven confirmed enemy kills, all of them Snake fighters."

Freddie's mouth paused in mid chew, it was suddenly very quiet around the table. Ellen definitely knew she was in love. Daniel felt very self-conscious, wishing that Ian hadn't bragged on him so much. Change the subject.

"How big is your farm, Mister Murphy?"

"One-thousand acres right now, we can expand it to four times that much if things hold together, what with the war and all."

"Has the war been affecting things much on New Albion, sir?" Daniel asked.

"Crop prices have actually gone up, a lot of the inner colonies are stockpiling supplies in case things go too much in the Snakes favor. There has been a civil militia

organized to augment regular ground forces in case of an invasion here. Freddie and I are members, there's drill every Sunday afternoon."

"How is the militia armed, sir?"

"Right now it's mostly just with what personal rifles and small arms that we own, there's supposed to be some better stuff in the pipeline. Lord knows when it will get out this far."

"Maybe Sir Daniel and Ian could come with us to drill this Sunday, father?" Freddie asked, "everyone would really like to meet them."

John Murphy looked at Daniel, "Could you do that, it would pep up morale a lot?"

"Of course sir, I'm not very good at speech making, though." Actually Daniel didn't want to go to the meeting but he was a guest here and he owed them at least this much.

Eventually lunch was over, Daniel was stuffed. He could tell that despite the joy the family felt there was still the urgent need to get in the harvest that they had all worked so hard to bring to maturity. It was a matter of financial survival, no crop equals no money.

"So why don't we all get back to work, what can I do?" Daniel asked.

“Daniel, you really don’t have to....” John began.

“Sir, my family were Free Traders, I know how to work. Just point me in the right direction and tell me what to do.”

“Well, all right then. You and Ian put on some working clothes, Ian will show you what to do. And thank you, extra hands are always appreciated.” John Murphy decided that his son picked his friends quite well.

Ian led his friend upstairs to his old room, his mother still kept it as he had left it, on a mother’s hope that her son would return. Ian’s clothing was somehow too small for him after the year’s passage. Some of Freddie’s old clothes were pressed into duty, too small for Freddie and a bit large for Ian and Daniel, but they would do. Both boys had packed clothing for the stay (still in the runabout) but none of it was really suitable for farm work.

“Come on, we’ll probably be working on the packer.” Ian explained.

“What’s that?” Daniel had no clue.

“The grain goes right into shipping pods for the freight ships, the packer seals the pods and injects nitrogen to replace normal atmosphere. The lack of oxygen kills pests and keeps the grain from spoiling, the nitrogen doesn’t hurt

the grain and isn't poisonous or anything."

"Oh! We hauled lots of those on Gryphon, I guess I never gave much thought as to how the grain was actually grown and all."

It was hard hot work, Daniel did more sweating than he had in a very long time. On the job training had taken about ten minutes, Ian already knew the job by heart and Daniel just followed his lead. The grain had to be leveled off by hand using flat rake-like tools, wasted space in the pods was wasted money. A wealthier farm would have had more of the process automated, there was machinery for the heavy lifting but it was still tiring work. Daniel gained a new appreciation for the bread on the table that he had always just taken for granted.

After the days of 'goofing off' at the summer palace, the end of the work day left both Daniel and Ian pretty well done in. Hot showers and a change into clothing they had retrieved from the runabout had the two Fleet Midshipmen feeling mostly rested and restored. Dinner was another feast, how did that woman manage such miracles of taste and quantity? As dessert was being served the small com. link that Daniel always kept with him began chirping,

Isabella was calling.

“Yes sir, everything is fine here, I was going to check in shortly.” Daniel spoke into the small device as the family looked on with great interest. A few more words were exchanged before the connection was severed, all was well with the navy.

Little Mary had a small and direct question for her brother. “Was the Emperor nice?”

“Yes, he was. I think you would like him.” Ian replied patiently.

“Tell us about the palace.” Ellen asked.

“We were at the summer palace, it’s a lot smaller than the Sun Palace. I got lost twice exploring the place, someone told me that there were a thousand people that worked there. It’s very old.”

Freddie had a question of Daniel, one that neither boy wanted to hear. “What was it like in the Snake prison? The vids said it was really bad.”

Daniel said nothing but instead got up and abruptly left the table, without a word he went outside and sat on the steps of the back porch. Ian was left to explain why.

“Don’t ask Daniel about the Snakes, he hates them more than you can believe. They killed his family, I had to

watch while they nearly beat him to death, they broke just about every bone in his body, I have nightmares about his screams. The Snakes are worse than you can imagine, just leave it alone!”

John Murphy stood, “I’ll speak with him, you all stay inside for now.” The man quietly joined the boy on the back steps, sitting beside him without a word for a few minutes.

“Freddie didn’t mean any harm, I guess you two have been through a lot more than perhaps we know about.”

“Yes sir, we have. I apologize for being rude and walking out like that.”

“Don’t apologize, just try to understand that we care about you, sometimes people speak before thinking.”

“You have such a great family, sir. Sometimes I think about my family, what they used to be like. The Snakes took all of that away from me, I get pretty mad sometimes.”

“You have every right to get mad but don’t let it eat you up, that would be just one more victory for the Snakes.” Daniel looked up at the man for a moment before speaking. “Ian’s really smart, I can see where he gets it from, sir.”

Eventually both John Murphy and Daniel returned to the family, Daniel apologized all over again and got kissed

by Mrs. Murphy and Ellen. Everyone pitched in to help clear away the table and put the dishes in the cleaner. There was still some sunlight left as everyone settled on the large front porch. Freddie and his sisters went out to the runabout, they were fascinated by the sleek and luxurious craft.

“Maybe they would like to go for a ride?” Daniel quietly asked Ian.

“Is that allowed?”

“I’ve been doing a lot of studying about my knighthood and all. It’s allowed if I say it’s allowed.”

“Outstanding, I’m impressed!” Ian said in mock amazement.

“As well you should be, peasant!” Daniel could tease as well as Ian. “Let’s ask your parents along too, there’s plenty of room.”

“Okay, just remember that we’ve all just had dinner.”

“Point taken, I’ll fly nice.”

Ian’s parent’s were all too eager for a ride in the Emperor’s runabout, their three other children all the more so. All were soon standing beside the polished black craft, Daniel placed his palm against a small I.D. plate on it’s hull causing the hatch to swing silently down to form boarding

steps.

“Ladies first, mind your step.” Daniel offered his hand to the Murphy women as they gingerly climbed the short steps.

The cool interior of the craft smelled of expensive leather, trim and fittings were gold and silver. Everyone found a seat, Daniel and Ian took the command seats up front. Large areas on each side of the inner hull seemed to disappear as Daniel activated the view panels, they weren't really windows but the effect was the same.

“This is amazing!” Freddie exclaimed. The Murphy family flyer was a box kite compared to this gilded limousine. The ‘limousine’ also had teeth, formidable rail cannons hid behind retractable plates, as did two powerful particle beam weapons.

“Where does the Emperor sit?” Ellen asked.

“Anywhere he wants to.” Daniel replied with a grin.

Daniel was true to his word and kept the excursion smooth and right side up, the idea of cleaning dinner off of the plush interior of the runabout didn't bear thinking about. The small town of Freehold was the local center of commerce, there were schools and what served for entertainment out here in the farm country. Daniel dropped

down for a closer look as Ellen gave him a running account of the points of interest. It was getting a bit hard to see by now except for the central shops and businesses, the local hangout for the town's young people was well lighted.

"Anyone for icy's?" Daniel asked. Of course all of the Murphy offspring voted yes.

The sight of the large ebony runabout that bore the crest of the Emperor settling gently onto the parking pad of the 'icy' shop would be spoken about for years. Who are those people? Ian and Daniel had on their duty jump suits, the silver filigree on Daniel's shoulder told everyone just who was ordering a grape flavored icy. One of the small town's constables stopped to investigate, his eyes told him that yes that was the Imperial crest on that craft. Who was in that shop for the love of God? Constable Blount decided to go inside and see for himself. An undersized Imperial Knight approached him armed with a grape icy.

"Hello officer, is there any problem about where I landed?" Daniel asked.

"No.. I mean, I beg your pardon sir. I was just curious about who might belong to that craft out there. I meant no offense sir." Constable Blount instantly knew who the boy

was, it had been all over the vids for days.

“No offense is taken, officer. Come and sit with us, we’re just having some icy’s.”

“I don’t want to intrude, sir.” Blount found himself talking to a polite young boy who had the authority to have the constable’s head put on a pike, but apparently the boy only wanted to have an icy with him.

“Don’t be silly, sir. Come and join us.”

Constable Blount did just that, after a few minutes he realized that he was with good people, he already knew the Murphy’s. The boy with the knight’s insignia on his shoulder was also good people.

What passed for a crowd in the small town was gathering around the shop and the gleaming black runabout. Daniel would soon be exposed to what fame could mean, sometimes it was nice, sometimes it was a total pain.

“Maybe stopping here wasn’t such a good idea, look at all of those people,” Daniel observed. Some of them were working up the nerve to enter the small shop. Two young girls went beyond that and approached Daniel for autographs. The giggling girls got their autographs before being shooed away by Constable Blount.

It was time to go anyway.

Three more days of hard work finished the harvest, Daniel almost managed to forget about the war, the empire, knighthood and everything else. Almost. The Founder's Day Dance was tomorrow, a Saturday. Church was as always, Sunday morning. Ian and Daniel had quietly discussed when they should return to naval life, Monday seemed right, if they didn't leave fairly soon they both felt like they may never be able to. Life on a farm was hard work but it was good for the nerves, it was good for an injured soul.

The Murphy women were in a dither, the upcoming dance was very small town but it was the social event of the year. What to wear, what will I do with my hair, what, what? The males had it easier, do I wear my good shirt and pants or do I go naked? Ian and Daniel had their mess kits, formal uniforms worn to social occasions and ceremonial functions, the Royal Tailor had done well by his profession.

"How do I look?" Daniel finally had everything on, his decorations occupied a good part of his chest, half-sized dress editions of the actual medals with their colored

ribbons were in proper order. The mirror bright filigree pattern on his right shoulder left no doubt as to his title, the silver pilot wings and their central gold skull and bones left no doubt as to his profession.

“Your fly’s open.” Ian replied dryly.

Daniel glanced down anyway, a guy couldn’t be too careful.

“Very funny. Let’s go on down, the females must be about ready, I haven’t heard any wailing or screaming for a while.”

Everyone was scrubbed, polished and in proper order. Ellen was by now in total hopeless love with Daniel, much to his complete ignorance. The sight of Daniel in his dress uniform and medals had the girl in a state that was close to physical shock. Ian’s parents were as proud as it is possible to be of their son, they had come to understand just what that medal on his chest had cost him, that he was a cut way above what any parent could hope for. That an Imperial Knight (no matter how young) was their son’s best friend and was now considered a part of their family was an honor most singular.

It had just turned dark as the imperial runabout lit up the Freehold town hall’s landing area. The polished black

craft settled like a hawk among sparrows, family flyer's made up the majority of craft, even a few battered carryalls were present. All heads outside the hall turned and followed the Murphy family as they entered the large hall. An Imperial Knight, a person third only to the Emperor in power and privilege was with the Murphy's, everyone had been awaiting his arrival. The town's mayor (local elections were allowed under Imperial rule) was at the head of the small welcoming delegation, the man was perspiring a bit as he bid Daniel welcome. Prolonged applause from the full hall proceeded the mayor's short remarks

“Welcome to Freehold, Sir Daniel. We are all so very honored to have you with us this evening. I hope you will find our humble celebration to your liking.”

Daniel extended his hand in greeting. “Thank you sir, it's a privilege to be here, and I already find this celebration and the town of Freehold to my liking. Have you met Midshipman Murphy and his family?” Ian was standing next to Daniel, his family just behind. Everyone managed to get through the pleasantries with a brave face, except little Mary who kept trying to hide behind her mother.

Most of the hall was devoted to a large cleared area for the dance floor, scattered around the edge were chairs

and small tables. The Murphy clan was reserved a central place of honor because of Daniel and Ian. Elizabeth Murphy had a closely whispered request for Daniel.

“I’ll never ask anything of you again if you would ask Ellen for the first dance, it would make her so very happy.” Daniel knew he would have to dance with someone tonight, Ellen was going to be his first choice anyway. Mastering the waltz was one of the many odd lessons taught at academy.

“Of course ma’am, I’ll try to stay off of her toes.” There was a modest band, mostly string instruments, but at least it was live music. The mayor announced the first dance of the evening, motioning toward Daniel to take the initiative, to take the floor with his partner.

“Oh Lord, please don’t let me trip over my feet,” Daniel prayed silently. He stood and moved to where Ellen was seated, the poor girl’s heart was in her mouth.

“Ellen, would you do me the honor of the first dance?” Daniel bowed in the manner that he had been taught by the academy’s protocol instructor. Every eye in the hall was on them.

“Yes Daniel, I would be very pleased to dance with you.”

Ellen would have physically attacked anyone who stood in

her way, no one did.

Someone with intelligence was controlling the lighting in the hall as the music began, Daniel nervously led Ellen into the circle of light that centered on the dance floor. No one else moved onto the floor as the music began, even after all of these centuries the Blue Danube was still recognizable. For a few priceless minutes Daniel and Ellen moved with the ageless music, they were not smooth and professional dancers by any means but they held the hall transfixed with their simple elegance, with their innocence and youthful grace. Elizabeth Murphy had tears on her cheeks, her daughter would remember this moment for all of her days.

As the music progressed, a few couples dared to join the young couple on the dance floor, then many more filled the available space. John and Elizabeth Murphy moved and turned with the music, Ian had to choose between three girls who had the nerve to move to his side and then had asked him to dance.

Of course there was the proverbial fly in the ointment that evening, someone who did not share the feeling for this

special day.

Angus McPhee was fifteen years old, already an adult in physical stature. Angus had failed the pre-academy screening process with flying colors, physically he qualified, mentally he was qualified for, well... something else.

Angus now held a burning hatred for the Imperial Navy, for the Empire, for anyone who wore the uniform that he could never wear. Angus was very drunk, where he gained access to the alcohol was a bit of a mystery, it fueled his hatred, gave courage where courage was sometimes lacking.

Daniel was dutifully over at the refreshment table fetching Ellen some fruit punch when Angus ruined the perfect evening.

“You little navy shit! I’ll bet you’ve been getting some of that little bitch, how was she?” Angus stood a bit unsteadily in front of Daniel who couldn’t yet quite comprehend what this drunken lout was talking about.

“What did you say?” Daniel was starting to grasp the situation.

“Was she nice and tight you stinking piece of sheep shit?”

By now every male within earshot were on their feet and

moving toward this drunken source of profane insults. Angus felt moved to swing at Daniel with a right-fisted pile driver, Daniel's reaction time caused Angus to miss by some distance. Daniel didn't miss at all as his right foot connected with Angus McPhee's male parts. End of insults.

When the doubled up Angus had stopped vomiting all over the dance floor several angry men grabbed him and hustled him out of the building. The music had trailed off to nothing, every eye was on Daniel, the sound of a pin dropping would have echoed off the walls. The ashen mayor moved quickly to Daniel's side as did all of the Murphy family.

"This is terrible, Sir Daniel! Please don't judge all of us by that drunken young fool." The mayor seemed to perspire quite easily.

"Of course not sir, there's always one in any crowd, on any planet." Daniel replied, his brief anger fading quickly.

"How would you prefer that person to be dealt with, Sir Daniel?" The mayor asked. Angus' head on a pike was within Daniel's authority.

"I think perhaps a night in jail and a hangover will suffice sir, he will have to live with making an ass of himself

in front of all of these good people tonight.” Daniel decided.

“You’re very generous Sir,” the mayor said, “again, please accept all of our apologies for this incident.”

“No apology is needed, sir. Let’s consider this matter closed and just enjoy the rest of the evening.” Daniel was sort of learning diplomacy on the fly, the title of ‘Sir’ could bring a lot of unwanted problems and responsibilities.

The evening wasn’t totally ruined but everyone in the hall had something new to talk about besides crop prices. Ellen hadn’t heard Angus’ foul insults, none of the Murphy’s had. When pressed by Ian to tell the family what had been said to him Daniel just shook his head and changed the subject. He would have rather died than expose Ellen and her family to what that dimwit had said, what the alcohol had said. The final dance was much like the first, it was finally soaking into Daniel’s skull that Ellen was most taken with him. On reflection maybe he was a bit smitten with Ian’s female sibling, maybe more than a bit smitten.

Sunday morning church came very early after the late hours of the Founder’s Dance. Ian and Daniel’s mess kits were replaced by less showy shore duty uniforms. Both boys sat in the family’s regular pew, the small church had

two most special additions to the regular congregation that Sunday. The Reverend Murchison offered up a special prayer for those who fought against the enemy of the Empire. After the services Daniel and his adopted family were confronted outside the church by Angus McPhee's father. The large rough hewn man removed his hat as he approached to speak with Daniel.

"My son has brought shame on our family, I just wanted to tell you that I'm very sorry for what he did." Daniel and his 'family' breathed a sigh of relief.

"Sir, people sometimes get a bit silly when they drink too much. I don't have any bad feelings toward you or your family." Daniel replied, hoping the poor man would feel better.

"Thank you for that, and thank you for being so easy on Angus, he very much wanted to be a naval officer."

"Will he be free this afternoon, sir?" Daniel asked.

"Well, yes. They let him out of stir...er jail this morning."

"I'm going to be at the militia meeting this afternoon, can you both be there? Maybe we can work out any bad feelings between us?" Daniel offered the man more than he could have hoped for.

"We'll both be there. God bless you, Sir Daniel."

“And God bless you sir, and Angus.”

Church will do that to you when you pay attention to the sermon.

During lunch back at the Murphy’s farm Ian and Daniel broke the news that they would be returning to the navy tomorrow.

“But can’t you stay at least another week with us?” Elizabeth pleaded.

“We’ve already been off duty for a long time, we shouldn’t take any more advantage of the Emperor’s generosity. It’s time we went back on duty.” Ian explained to his mother.

“Do you know where you will be posted?” John Murphy asked.

“Not yet,” Daniel replied, “we’re supposed to report to fleet headquarters on Earth, I guess they’ll have something in mind. Shipboard flight duty, I hope.”

“Do you think they will keep you two together?” Sean asked.

“I don’t know sir, I hope so.” Daniel knew that Ian and himself would have to part ways at some time, hopefully not too soon.

Ellen’s heart was broken, the boy who was her first love

was leaving.

The militia meeting was at one, it was to be held on the match field near the town hall. John had passed the word that a certain Imperial Knight would be speaking to them. When the imperial runabout landed the loose group of men and boys quickly assembled into the ranks that they had practiced. The militia had no uniforms, just sturdy civilian work clothing, their weapons were an assortment of hunting rifles and personal side arms. John and Freddie hustled over to join the ranks as Ian and Daniel approached the militia's leader. A barked command called the group of perhaps two-hundred to attention, the leader turned and saluted Daniel and Ian.

"Thank you very much sir," Daniel returned the man's salute, "please put your men at ease."

"Stand easy!" Sean Hitchings had been elected company commander for his prior service in the Imperial Marines as a Gunnery Sergeant. Daniel extended his hand in greeting and introduced Ian, Hitchings explained things.

"Sir, I'm afraid we're not very professional just yet, we've only managed to get organized this last month. As you can see we have only what weapons that we own personally, no uniforms or other equipment. A few of the

men have voiced some feelings that we might just be wasting our time here.”

“I make no pretense of being a military expert, but I can tell you that you are certainly not wasting your time, sir.” Daniel replied.

“I was only a gunny in the marines,” Hitchings continued, “we have no real officer, the men sort of elected me as ‘captain’ for lack of anyone else with military experience.”

“I think a marine sergeant would be the perfect leader for this group, sir. The marines have always had to do the ground taking and holding, the hard part of war,” Daniel said.

Hitchings decided this young knight was all right, not some snotty little prig or something. “I have a loudtalker here for you to use if you would care to speak to the men.”

“All right, I’m not too good at speech making but I’ll do my best.”

Hitchings gave Daniel the voice amplifier and motioned the boy to get up on the raised platform in front of the group. Daniel had Ian join him before he began to speak. Back in the ranks John and Freddie Murphy were bursting with pride. Daniel noticed a small vid crew

recording the meeting.

“Men, I want to thank you all for asking me here today. The Empire also thanks you for what you are doing here today. On Britannia the local population did not have the time to get organized to fight the Snakes, they had time for very little except trying to stay alive. After a while small groups of armed men came together and began to stage small guerilla raids and sapper attacks on the Snake ground units. The Snakes don’t handle such sudden surprise raids very well, their strong point is centrally controlled mass attacks or large scale operations.”

“You are not wasting any of your time by being here to work and plan for a possible Snake invasion of this planet,” Daniel continued. “When the Imperial counter strike came at Britannia, the civilian guerilla units were a key factor in driving the Snakes off the planet. The guerilla unit’s knowledge of the terrain and of the Snake’s deployed units gave the Imperial forces a much needed edge.”

“New Albion is exposed, it is far out on the edge of the New Empire. New Albion could be a prime target for the Snakes, there’s no way to tell where they might strike next.

Pay close attention to your captain, he has the needed experience to train you. Take this very serious, myself and Midshipman Murphy here were guests of the Snakes at their Long Creek detention center on Britannia. If you can manage it, never allow them to take you captive, save one round for yourself. The Snakes are cruel beyond belief, we are all just potential slaves for them or pests to be eliminated.”

“That is basically what I wanted to say to you all, once again you must take this threat deadly serious because that is just what it is. Do any of you have any questions?”

“Will we be getting better arms and equipment?” This from a voice toward the back,

“I honestly don’t know anything about that, sir. I think if time allows and if materials and arms can make it here you should be getting something. Depend upon yourselves, not to speak poorly of you all but this is just one small colony on the outskirts of a vast empire that is right now fighting a serious threat to it’s existence.”

Another voice, “What about pay for the militia?”

Daniel was angered by the selfish question, “Sir, if you’re here to be paid for defending your home and family I think this group might be better off without you!”

One more question from the group, “Will you be staying on here, Sir Daniel? Also, I apologize for that last idiot.”

Laughter rippled around the assembly.

“No, we have to leave tomorrow, we have to get back to active duty.”

Daniel shook hands once more with Hitchings who then called the group to attention, Ian and Daniel saluted and left the small platform. Daniel had one more task to perform as the militia group started its drill and training for the afternoon.

Angus McPhee and his father were standing off at one end of the ball field.

“Come on Ian. Let’s see if Angus still hates me.”

“He’s three times your size and he’s sober,” Ian observed with some concern.

“Guess I’d better be nice then.”

Both Angus and his father seemed nervous and uneasy as the two midshipman approached, Daniel sought to break the ice with an extended hand.

“Hello again, Mister McPhee. Hello Angus.”

“Thank you for meeting us here, Sir Daniel.” Angus’ father took Daniel’s offered hand in his own calloused hand. The man looked toward his son as if for him to do the same.

“I was drunk and stupid last night, Sir Daniel. I apologize for what I said and for trying to hit you.” Angus said quietly.

“Apology accepted, I can move pretty fast when I have too. Are you all right, I kicked you pretty hard?”

“I still walk a little funny, the medics say I’ll be fine.” Angus smiled a bit as he said this, so did Daniel and Ian.

“Your father said your were very disappointed about not making it into academy.” Daniel said.

“Yes sir, I guess I’m more brawn than brains.”

“You shouldn’t feel bad about it, most people don’t make it, even those who do need a lot of luck to make a go of it.”

“I know you’re right about that, sir. I guess I don’t handle failing very well.”

“You know, those guys over there aren’t here today just to tell jokes and march around in circles. Have you and your father thought about joining the defense militia?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t think they’d have us now, after what I did and the things I’ve said about the Empire in the past.” Angus explained.

“Let’s go talk to them, I’ll twist their arms.” Daniel motioned the reluctant father and son to follow him.

Daniel should have been a diplomat.

Maybe he already was one.

That evening's meal wasn't the Last Supper but the mood was a bit somber. Ellen was close to tears, her true love would be gone tomorrow. Elizabeth wasn't much happier, her dear son was going off to that hideous war along with Daniel, whom they all considered by now to be one of the family. Life is indeed hard.

"I've been to noisier funerals than this!" Daniel quipped, hoping to lighten the mood a bit.

"We're just going back on duty again, not to a firing squad." Ian added.

"I don't want you to go!" Little Mary voiced what all were thinking.

"We'll be back as soon as we can, I'll have a present for you." Ian had a special place in his heart for his smallest sister.

Ellen just couldn't stand it any longer and fled from the table in tears, everyone but Daniel seemed to know why.

"What's wrong with Ellen?" Daniel asked in all innocence.

"You dope, she's had a crush on you since she first saw you,

!" Ian explained, wondering how his friend could be so dense.

Daniel finally put two and twenty together.

"What should I do?"

"Go and talk with her, let her know that you at least know she exists." This from Ellen's father, John new how sensitive a young girl's feelings were.

"I know she exists sir, I like her a lot." Daniel felt like a fool.

"Go, tell her." John Murphy pointed to the back door where his daughter had fled.

Ellen was out by the edge of the now barren wheat field, the harvest had left only a stubble on the once green and rich acres. The sobbing girl sat on the dusty earth, her knees drawn up, her Sunday dinner dress uncared for.

"Ellen?" Daniel approached quietly, unsure of what he should say or do.

"Go away!" Ellen sniffed.

"Are you mad at me?" Daniel asked, he didn't understand females, most males never would.

"No. I just don't want you to leave here."

"I have to, I'm in the navy, there's a war."

"Why do you have to fight it, you and Ian?"

Daniel sat next to the girl, close enough to take her right hand and hold it in his. "I like you a lot, Ellen. Maybe I've been sort of dense about how you felt about me, how I felt about you."

"How do you feel about me?" Ellen looked Daniel squarely in the eye.

"Like this." Daniel leaned over and gently kissed the girl's wet cheek.

The two young people sat side by side for a while, arms holding each other close. There were no sexual feelings or sensations, they just knew that they cared for one another, maybe they even loved one another.

Time would tell. If they had time.

Chapter Ten

Return to War

Saying goodbye was as hard as you might imagine it would be. Both Ian and Daniel held themselves together (mostly), Ellen and her mother were less successful. John Murphy and Freddie also held it together (mostly). Ellen was left holding one of Daniel's pilot wings insignia, she would carry it for the rest of her days. Daniel had a small lock of the girl's hair in a silver locket that belonged to the girl's mother.

The flight back to Bakerstown was pretty quite, Daniel concentrated on his flying more than he really needed to, Ian just gazed out at the passing terrain. Both wondered when and even if they would ever see this planet again. The sight of the Isabella sitting ready for departure brought them both back into focus. The Imperial vessel had become a bit of a local attraction during its stay at Bakerstown's spaceport.

As carefully as ever, Daniel gently grounded the

runabout on Isabella's small hanger deck. Ian's farm now seemed a world away, soon there would be little time left for homesickness. Isabella's captain was waiting as his two passengers exited the runabout, salutes were exchanged.

"Welcome back Sir Daniel, Mister Murphy."

"Thank you sir, we had a really nice visit." Daniel replied.

"I have orders to transport the both of you to fleet headquarters, I believe they will have your new postings ready."

"Was there any word on where we might be going, sir?" Ian asked.

"No. No details other than that you are to report directly to the Admiral of The Fleet upon arrival."

Daniel could sense the Emperor's hand in this, The Admiral of The Fleet didn't normally deal personally with lowly midshipmen, even knighted fleet midshipmen.

The return voyage to Earth was much more subdued, neither boy could completely separate themselves from the good memories of New Albion. Ian's family could of course never replace Daniel's own family but they did help to fill the awful empty places in his soul. Ian didn't regret joining the navy but sometimes it could be a very big and cold place.

Sooner than either midshipman thought possible Isabella entered Earth orbit and then grounded on the vast landing area of Fleet Headquarters. A ground car was sent to fetch them.

“I wonder what he’s like?” Ian asked as they rode the five miles to their final destination.

“Dunno. If we can get along with the Emperor we should be able to get through this.” Daniel replied.

“He will have to call you ‘sir’.” Ian said.

“Yes, but I don’t think I had better push that very much.”

“True.” Ian knew that The Admiral of The Fleet was only one rank below God and the Emperor in the naval order of things.

The ground car’s driver pulled to a stop in front of the massive marble and stone building. They were met by a lieutenant who would escort them to the Admiral. As they walked up the steps Daniel asked what that odd object on the pole was.

“That’s Admiral Shigata, Sir Daniel.” Replied the lieutenant.

“Sir?” Daniel remembered the name, but what....?

“That’s his head, Sir Daniel. The Emperor was most

displeased with him.”

“Oh.”

Daniel and Ian glanced at each other. The Emperor wasn't just that nice guy who had them over as house guests.

The place was alive with senior officers and admirals and they all had their eyes on Daniel as he and his companion were escorted to that most inner of inner sanctums in the huge building.

“Wait here, if you please.” Their escort knocked on the door and entered, leaving Daniel and Ian to do their by now second nature inspection of one another. Ian picked a bit of fuzz off of Daniel's right arm.

“Why do I feel like we're in trouble?” Daniel asked.

“Conditioned reflex, I read about it once.” Ian explained.

“Oh.” It seemed to Daniel that Ian had read about almost everything.

Even the highest ranking officer in the fleet was required by protocol to stand and salute an Imperial Knight, Admiral Banks did so quite properly and with respect.

“Welcome, Sir Daniel, Mister Murphy. Please have a seat, both of you.”

“Thank you sir, we’re very honored to meet you.”

Daniel hoped he had said the right thing.

The Admiral wasn’t a man to waste time, “I’ll come directly to the point of this meeting. What would you two gentlemen prefer as your next posting?”

Daniel was left gaping for an instant. “Sir...I thought, I mean... Excuse me sir, but I thought perhaps you might be telling us.”

“No. His Majesty requested that you be given your choice of postings.”

Both Ian and Daniel looked at one another, no clue as to what to even suggest.

“Sir, excuse use but we really aren’t sure about what we should request.” Ian ventured.

“Shipboard fighter duty, Sir Daniel?” Banks asked.

“If I could sir, yes!”

“Engineering, Mister Murphy?” Banks continued.

“Yes sir!” Ian replied.

“Should I presume to post you both to the same vessel?”

Stupid question.

Banks smiled as he pushed across the posting orders he had already had drawn up. “I anticipated your preferences. Report aboard Valiant when she grounds day after

tomorrow at Port Ayers, don't be late, she'll only be there for one day. In the meantime, Mister Murphy, you may stay at the visiting officers quarters, Lieutenant Hassad will take care of that. Sir Daniel, you are to proceed at once to the Royal Armament Depot at Mojave, they have a new Falcon waiting there for you, a slot will be open for it on Valiant."

After they had left Daniel and Ian hoped that they hadn't overdone the "thank you, sirs" too much. It hadn't even occurred to them yet to ask just what type of vessel Valiant was.

While Ian was cooling his heels at fleet headquarters Daniel was working up a sweat at the Mojave Depot, the desert was living up to it's name. At least it was cool inside the personal equipment section, Daniel needed a new pressure suit.

The routine was familiar, undress-stand still-close eyes-get dressed-twiddle thumbs endlessly. It seemed to be taking longer this time. The senior rating finally returned with a somewhat special edition of the standard pressure suit.

"We've added the proper shoulder decoration sir, all of the metal fittings were done with gold. Oh yes, the fleet ace insignia has been applied to the helmet." Chief Stein was

quite proud of his handiwork, he had been given several days prior notice about who would be showing up for a suit.

“This is really nice, chief. Thank you!” Daniel was more than pleased with the suit, the gold skull and crossbones on the polished black helmet looked quite menacing.

“There’s a fee involved sir.” Stein explained.

“Beg pardon?” Daniel asked with wide eyes.

“Your autograph, if you would sir.” Stein produced one of the formal photos of Daniel taken at the Summer Palace. “We would very much like to hang it in our office here.”

Daniel’s new L-Model Falcon looked like polished black death. After a nervous night at the depot’s VIP quarters (Isabella had sent along Daniel’s sea chest) Daniel was finally standing beside the fighter assigned to him.

“It’s fresh from it’s acceptance trials,” explained Captain Hart, “we were requested by His Majesty to give it a distinctive appearance, thus the polished finish and the skull decoration on the central fin. The red gryphon emblem below the canopy was His Majesty’s contribution.”

“This is....amazing sir. Thank you for all of this!” Daniel was almost moved to tears at the sight of his family’s gryphon emblem.

“You’re most welcome, Sir Daniel. This is of course the L Model, it carries heavier beam cannons and two more missile racks. The controls are also a bit lighter.”

“Yes sir, I’ve been reading up on it for some time now, every pilot I’ve spoken with wants one of these.”

“Well Sir Daniel, now you have one. Would you care to take it up for a work out?”

Really stupid question.

While Daniel was screaming around in his new toy, Ian was making his way to Port Ayers, Valiant had grounded and he didn’t want to be late. Ian had done some research, Valiant was just off it’s own acceptance trials, a new vessel. Also a new type of vessel, it carried one-thousand assault marines with their own landing craft. In addition it carried fifty Falcons for overhead cover and air-to-ground assault strikes. Taking a lesson from the Snakes, Valiant was also equipped with four massive beam cannons.

HMS Valiant was at Port Ayers to take on it’s complement of marines and to pick up last minute personnel additions. There was one empty slot on the fighter deck, despite heated inquiries no one had explained

the missing fighter. Ian arrived in the middle of all the last minute confusion, the vessel's commanding officer did manage a few moments to greet the new Fleet Midshipman. In his own way Ian had gained some good measure of notoriety. Ian decided not to offer his knowledge about Daniel's impending arrival, let them have a bit of a surprise! Besides, they didn't really need any more to do right now, much less arrange a welcoming ceremony for Daniel.

To Ian's absolute shock and total horror, Midshipman Starling was on board and making himself hated all over again. Apparently when Daniel was engaging the enemy at Britannia, Starling had gathered his wits long enough to manage a ragged rendezvous with one of the departing Imperial vessels. Up until Ian's arrival Starling had been senior midshipman.

"I suppose you'll be wanting the senior's cabin?" Starling's voice could etch glass.

"Oh, no! You keep it," Ian smiled, "besides, there may be someone else coming aboard." Ian couldn't wait until Daniel showed up and booted Starling out on his pimply ass.

"What do you mean?" Starling asked quietly.

"Nothing." Ian had an excellent poker face.

Captain Everest was not a man long on patience, everything was aboard but that damned missing Falcon! There was still four hours until scheduled departure time, Everest decided not to wait.

“Button up and put us in orbit, if you please.”

“Yes sir, and the Falcon?” Inquired his executive officer.

“It can rendezvous in orbit, if it shows up!”

Ian was getting very worried by now, they were in orbit and ready to depart. Where the hell was Daniel? Maybe he should tell the Captain? Daniel had been delayed by a slight imbalance in the new Falcon’s drive coils, when he finally departed he was informed that Valiant was already in orbit, ahead of schedule.

“Shit!” Daniel hadn’t planned on cutting things so fine, he knew that commanding officers didn’t appreciate this sort of thing. Not a good way to begin a new posting. Daniel pushed the Falcon to near it’s limits to quickly match orbits and rendezvous with his new assignment.

“Valiant, this is Falcon assignment. Request permission to come aboard.”

“Falcon assign, permission granted, slot five-zero for

power down.”

“I want that pilot standing in front of me in five minutes explaining why he was so damned late!” Captain Everest managed not to shout his order, barely. Ian had been listening to the orbital com channel in engineering as he stood his first watch. A wide smile covered his face, Daniel had made it! Every eye on the hanger deck turned to watch what fool had almost managed to miss departure, every eye grew very wide indeed as that fool passed through the atmosphere shield.

Normal coloration for a Falcon was a flat, dark gray color. The sight of a polished black L-Model with a hideous white skull and bones on it’s center fin caused all work to cease and numerous mouths to stand ajar. Who the hell was that? The deck boss finally found his voice and queried the newcomer.

“Falcon assign, pilot I.D. and rank?”

“Grayson, Daniel. Fleet Midshipman, sir.”

It took a moment but a response finally came, “Welcome aboard Sir Daniel, slot five-oh if you please.”

“Who?” Everest demanded.

“It’s Sir Daniel Grayson, sir. The fleet ace, he’s the last Falcon.” The deck boss almost enjoyed his captain’s shock.

At slot five-oh on the hanger deck the shining black Falcon had grounded and powered down, every person on the hanger deck had moved into position to see just who climbed down from that fighter. Daniel wasn’t oblivious to the stir he had created.

“Lord, I hope I don’t fall on my ass getting down!”

Captain Everest managed to not quite run to the fighter hanger deck, he was just in time to greet the short figure descending from the fighter. Daniel was the first to come sharply to attention and salute, he still had on the suit’s helmet with the face shield open.

“Welcome aboard Valiant, Sir Daniel.” Everest began.

“Thank you very much sir. I apologize for this late arrival, my Falcon needed some small adjustments that took longer than anticipated, sir.”

“No apology needed Sir Daniel, we had no idea you would be assigned to Valiant.”

“You were very pressed for time, sir. Protocol would have required you to arrange an honor guard and all of that sort of nonsense and disruption.” Daniel explained.

“True, but I feel badly that something wasn’t arranged.”

“Sir, with all respect, please just treat me as what I am, a midshipman who’s pretty good at flying a Falcon.” Everest smiled and nodded. “Fair enough then, Mister Grayson. I appreciate your attitude. I have to warn you as I do all new arrivals, I run this ship by the book, no excuses or exceptions.”

“Of course, sir. As it should be.”

“I have to ask you, Sir Daniel. Your Falcon, it’s not exactly finished per regulation coloring and such?”

“No sir, that wasn’t my idea I’m afraid, nor this pressure suit.”

“Who...?”

“His Majesty requested it, sir.”

“Ah, well. Then I think it looks just fine.”

“Yes sir, so do I.”

It took some time and some doing but Daniel finally arrived at the midshipmen’s quarters, Ian was there to greet him along with all of the off duty midshipmen. Starling was asleep in his cabin.

“Welcome aboard most wonderful noble sire!” Ian bowed with a flourish in mock humiliation. The rest of the

awed midshipmen couldn't believe the disrespect that Murphy was showing.

"Thank you most lowly peasant wretch," Daniel said with his nose in the air, "where are the serving wenches?"

"I'm afraid they missed the boat sire, perhaps these sorry midshipmen here will suffice."

By now the other midshipmen had caught on, especially after Daniel caught Ian in a head lock and gave him a bad head rub. Ian made the introductions, friends were made. Except for one.

"You're never in this life going to guess who was senior here until I arrived." Ian said with an odd smile.

"Haven't a clue." Daniel replied.

"Starling."

"Good God, I thought he was dead!"

"Regrettably, no."

"Where is he?"

"In his cabin, the senior's cabin that is. He had night duty, he's probably asleep. I doubt if he knows you're aboard."

"Why aren't you in that cabin?"

"I wanted to watch you throw him out."

"We're both fleet middies, you're as senior as I am."

Daniel explained.

Ian pointed to Daniel's right shoulder. "I don't have that on my shoulder, you're senior now."

"That doesn't count..." Daniel started to protest.

"No arguments. Now go evict the miserable turd."

All of the other midshipmen were ear to ear grins at this exchange, they all detested Starling as much as Ian and Daniel did.

"I could just have him air locked." Daniel suggested. (The term "air locked" refers to being ejected into space sans pressure suit).

"Please do." Ian was only half kidding.

"Is there a rat hole?"

"Yeah, Billings has it, it only holds one. Three of the other cabins have spare bunks for two"

Daniel turned to the very junior midshipman. "Billings, would you mind sharing a cabin with someone?"

"It would be better than the rat hole, Sir Daniel."

Billings replied.

"You guys can drop the "Sir Daniel" when there aren't any officers around, call me Daniel or Dan or asshole if the occasion calls for it, okay?"

All agreed, this particular Imperial Knight was just a regular sort of guy!

“Wait here, I’m going to visit with Mister Starling for a bit.” Daniel found himself enjoying this moment more than he might like to admit.

Daniel knocked politely on the cabin door. This action produced no results so Daniel pounded loudly with both fists.

“Who is it?” Starling barked.

Daniel just knocked softly again. Starling could be heard cursing as he got up and swung open the door, he turned quite pale as he stood there in just his under shorts, he had finally focused in on who had awakened him.

“I’m so glad to see you alive and well, Mister Starling.”

“You... Murphy didn’t say...” Starling wasn’t making much sense.

“I just wanted to say how very much I appreciated your help and back up when the Snakes hit us at Britannia. It took a lot of courage to just sit frozen like that while Franklin was being blown to bits around you.”

“I saved the Falcon, I got a letter of commendation in my packet...” Starling’s voice trailed off under Daniel’s steady gaze.

“You saved your shitty ass, Mister Starling. Now get your garbage out of my cabin, you have the rat hole. If I

ever hear you bullying any of the junior middies you'll be on the nearest beach looking for honest work. Any questions?"

"No sir." Starling's small domain was no more, his worst nightmare had just told him so.

Daniel would savor this moment for all of his years.

Valiant shifted into faster than light where the hectic activity slowed to a more tolerable pace. The warship was bound for the fighting going on at Harmony, the Snakes had dug in deep, they didn't seem inclined to leave. Ten days would find Valiant in the thick of it.

Morning found Ian at his engineering post, Daniel was in the Air Commander's operations area talking with the AC.

"Sir Daniel, I have to admit I don't quite know what to do with you, I mean no disrespect to you when I say that." Lt. Commander Dennison had been handed an Imperial Knight (a very young one) who technically outranked everyone on board.

"I'm a pretty good pilot sir, that's what I do best."

"I need good pilots, people with combat experience. This is a new ship, I only have two pilots besides yourself with any real experience. Good Lord, you're the Fleet Ace, you should at least be leading a squadron!"

“Sir, look at me. I’m still basically a kid. Would you feel at ease with a twelve-year old (almost) leading you into combat?”

“No, I suppose not, but there is that silver stuff all over your right shoulder.”

“Sir, why don’t you just assign me to one of the flight squadrons. I follow orders a lot better than I know how to give orders.”

Dennison was silent for a moment, there was no real arguing with the simple logic that Daniel offered. “All right, there’s one slot open, Dog Flight, tail end position. It’s what any other pilot who was last aboard would get.”

Daniel’s face lit up. “Thank you sir. Could I ask just one favor?”

“Of course.” Dennison wondered if the boy was going to throw his title around.

“Could you just call me Mister or Midshipman, or even hey you?”

“I can do that, Mister Grayson.”

“Thank you again, sir.”

Ian’s assignment was all he could have hoped for, apprentice drive engineer. He already had a budding theory that would in short time give the Empire the edge it

needed to rid the Snakes from known space. No one had ever come up with a workable 'force field' to shield a vessel from attack. The atmosphere shields on a vessel's ports depended on a ring shaped projector that produced a 'soft' field strong enough to hold atmospheric pressures. The field could only be generated within the ring.

Ian had asked the Engineering Officer if he could tinker with an idea he had for a spherical field generator. The officer knew that Ian was a total genius and had agreed that he could use the facilities in the drive maintenance shop for his off duty research. A workable defensive shield was the Holy Grail of applied physics, maybe a brilliant young mind might find new ways of addressing the old problem. It was worth a shot even if the officer really didn't think it at all possible, especially for a young 'middie'. Ian thought that he had died and gone to paradise.

Since no flying was possible during FTL transitions the pilots attended combat tactics lectures and ran simulator practice flights. Daniel had been introduced to Dog Flight's ten members, his first duty day began with a tactics lecture by Flight Lieutenant Singh. No one in Dog Flight had actually been in combat, a fact that they were

painfully aware of. Daniel sat in one of the rear seats in Dog Flight's ready room, where a midshipman was expected to sit.

“As you know, the standard Snake attack formation is a vee of nine fighters, intelligence now believes that the controller for that vee is always the right wingtip of the formation. If the Snake controller is knocked out the whole formation breaks up. As you know the Snakes are at their worst when acting independent of one another.” Singh paused and looked at Daniel. “Mister Grayson, does that theory agree with your experience?”

“Sir, after the Snake's main vessel was disabled there weren't any organized vee-formations. It does sound logical that each formation would have one controller though, probably those controllers are in turn controlled by the main vessel.”

“That was to be my next point, Mister Grayson, that pressing through their fighter cover to the main vessel should always be foremost, ignore any easy kills on the way in, disable their controlling vessel.”

And so it went for most of the morning. Daniel's combat experience had been limited to that one furious battle over Britannia, mostly he just sat quietly and listened, you learn more that way. Lieutenant Singh noticed that there had

been none of the usual bragging and bluster from the other pilots, none of them had actual combat time and the Fleet Ace was sitting right behind them.

Daniel spent the afternoon starting familiarization with the marine landing craft, they had their own marine pilots but in the uncertainty of war it often paid to have more than one skill. In a pinch a fighter pilot should be able to command a landing craft, likewise the marine pilots should be able to do the same with a Falcon.

While technically part of the navy, the Imperial Marines had their own system of academies for their officers. The system was similar to the navy's except that academy entrance began at sixteen years of age because of the much heavier emphasis on physical strength and endurance. Being a marine was simply a more physically demanding profession, puny young navy cadets would be ground into hamburger the first day of marine academy (if they made it that far). There was as always a rivalry between naval and marine personnel, each thought themselves the superior of the other. Being an Imperial Knight and the Fleet Ace spared Daniel most of the ribbing a naval midshipman might expect from the 'jungle' (the

'jungle' being the naval expression for those parts of the vessel inhabited by the marines. The marine term for the rest of the vessel was 'fairyland').

The end of the day found Ian and Daniel in the senior midshipman's cabin, Ian was babbling techno-gibberish about his idea for modified field generators. Daniel did his best to follow what Ian was saying, Daniel's comments were usually limited to "uh huh" and "okay."

"Come on, I can get in a couple of more hours in the maintenance shop, you can help me wind the coils." Ian said.

"But I have to go over these marine flying regs."

"They can wait, this is more important!" Ian was really worked up over this, Daniel could see that his friend might really be on to something.

"You really think this will work?" Daniel asked.

"I know it will work, it can win the war."

"I'm at your disposal." Daniel had never seen his friend so deadly serious about anything. The late hours routine went on for four days, Daniel learned some more about living without sleep.

Ian's small prototype looked like, well... nothing in

particular. Daniel had been relegated to winding copper wire around the odd core shapes that Ian had produced/dreamed up and then usually abandoned for a better design. They always went way past the nightly two hours that Ian had originally promised, the last session was an all-nighter. The day watch came on duty as Ian was finally ready to power up his bazaar creation, Daniel had to be prodded awake at the workbench he was slumped over. Elsewhere, Valiant's engineering officer was not amused, why wasn't Mister Murphy at his assigned watch station? Dog Flight's Lieutenant Singh likewise wondered where Mister Grayson was.

“Stand back.” Ian had his hand on the power switch.

“No problem. You know we're both in really deep shit right now, it's past day watch duty stations.” Daniel explained.

“They won't care if this works like I think it will.” Ian replied.

“If, you said?”

“A figure of speech, here goes.” Ian punched the power button.

Nothing at all seemed to have happened, not even a hum or buzz. No sparks, sizzle or flash. Nothing.

“It’s not doing anything.” Daniel observed.

“Yes it is, toss those wire cutters at it.”

Daniel picked up the small tool and with an expression of hopelessness tossed it at the seemingly inert collection of coils and circuitry. The cutters arced to within four feet of the device and then with a sharp pinging noise bounced directly back toward Daniel. Daniel caught the tool out of sheer reflex and looked wide eyed at his equally exhausted friend.

“Holy shit.” Daniel whispered, suddenly he wasn’t tired anymore.

“Yes, holy shit.” Ian agreed.

“Do you have any idea what this means?” Daniel asked softly.

“Yes, I do. The Snakes lose.”

“I think that’s just the beginning, this will change everything. This is really big, more than big. You’ll be knighted at the very least, they’ll name schools after you, planets!”

The ratings assigned to the maintenance shop drifted in for the day watch, all of them gathered around the two groggy midshipmen to watch amazed as thrown objects failed to even dent the diamond hard shield that Ian’s small

device generated. Daniel finally used his position as an Imperial Knight, he told the intercom to summon the ship's captain and the engineering officer. Of course they were busy. Daniel politely ordered them to the workshop, now. They were not at all amused when they arrived together.

"Sir Daniel, will you please explain the meaning of this?" Captain Everest was quite red in the face with anger.

"Yes sir I will. I apologize for seeming to be impertinent by ordering you here like this. Mister Murphy has just won the war."

"What?" Everest demanded, still about ready to read both boys the riot act and bedamned Daniel's title.

"Observe sir, a spherical defense shield."

Daniel heaved a heavy hammer at the odd device, he dodged it's return arc and it clanged heavily onto the metal deck.

"Good God!" Everest said quietly.

"Yes sir," Daniel turned to Ian, "explain to Captain Everest just what that pile of junk is doing."

Ian did, no one understood. They did understand as he explained that it was just a low powered working model. If the coils were replaced with super conducting wire and enough power were applied it would protect the entire vessel, maybe even an entire planet.

“It’s polarity can be adjusted,” Ian continued, “the reflective effect can be made one way, objects or weapon beams can pass outward, but not inward.”

“Do you have recorded notes and drawings of this device, Mister Murphy?” Everest finally asked, anger forgotten.

“Yes sir, all of the basic design and theory.”

Everest turned to his executive officer who had by now also entered the crowded maintenance shop. “Transmit all of Mister Murphy’s notes and papers on this device to Fleet, have a full vid recording of this device made and include that. Send it at War Flash priority. Do it now!” If Valiant were vaporized tomorrow it wouldn’t matter, Ian’s device would be safe in the hands of the empire.

Ian and Daniel were both absent and excused from normal duty stations that day, both slept as dead until empty stomachs summoned them to the evening meal. Needless to say they were invited to the senior officer’s mess, the captain’s table. Daniel’s knighthood dictated that he should be seated at the end of the table opposite the captain, the seat of honor. No one objected at all when Daniel insisted that Ian sit in the place of honor, God knows he had earned

it.

The Sun Palace, Earth

The Admiral of The Fleet had arrived in person at three in the morning, he insisted that His Majesty be awakened. “Damn the hour, wake him up!”

“Admiral, it’s very late. What occurs?” His Majesty was rarely (never) in a good mood when rudely awakened.

“Forgive me for the time sire, but a most remarkable breakthrough has occurred. It will win the war, it will win it quickly and decisively!”

The Emperor was suddenly fully awake. “Do continue, Admiral.”

“We now have a fully workable defensive shield for our vessels, it stops anything aimed at it, it will make our vessels invincible, untouchable!”

“My dear Lord.” His Majesty said quietly.

“Yes sire, indeed.”

“Did the research group at Atherton do this?”

“No sire, it was the brainchild of one person, you know him rather well.”

“Who?”

“Midshipman Ian Murphy, Sir Daniel’s young friend. The lad’s a true genius, the elegance of his design is astounding everyone who can begin to understand it. Valiant’s captain also mentioned that Sir Daniel was Mister Murphy’s work assistant in the effort, the two of them did all of the work during their off duty hours.”

His Majesty had to sit down for a while, even absolute rulers can be overcome with emotion.

The Empire would be safe, the unthinkable was avoided. A child would lead them out of the darkness.

Valiant was two days out from Harmony and the raging war when Ian’s peculiar device had been replaced with one using super conducting wiring and a more physically sound mechanical structure. Ian had dithered and fussed during the construction of the new device, all concerned had patiently listened to and heeded the boy’s directions. The device that now sat welded to the deck at the mass-center of the warship would forever be known as a Murphy Shield. When Valiant flashed out of non-space she would be the most terrible weapon in the Empire’s arsenal.

It would be the beginning of the end for the Snake’s designs on humanity.

His Majesty had debated recalling Valiant, not wanting any harm to come to Ian and his wonderful brain. Ian was too valuable an asset to risk, perhaps now much more so than Daniel. But the situation on Harmony was rapidly deteriorating, Snake reinforcements in the form of large war vessels and more ground forces were now engaging Imperial forces. Valiant could lay waste to the Snake vessels with impunity, in a short time all Imperial warships would be shield equipped, for now there was just the one. Ian would be safely behind his wonderful invention's shield, he should be safe.

Chapter Eleven

Battle

Ian had his finger poised over the shield's power button, the shift to normal space was only seconds away. If his calculations were wrong Valiant would be exposed and in mortal danger, if he had calculated right the shield would be two miles in diameter and invincible. Daniel sat buckled into his Falcon, ready to launch along with the rest of Valiant's fighters. Would he have to?

Captain Everest watched the main view screens as Valiant entered normal space, there were Snake main vessels at all quadrants, their fighters were everywhere. The Snakes had all but routed the Imperial forces, they now took notice of Valiant.

"Activate the shield if you please, Mister Murphy."

Ian stabbed the glowing red button.

"Shield activated, sir." The only indication of anything different occurring was a power drain indication, the shield device was doing something, but what?

"Status, Mister Murphy?" Everest asked urgently.

"It seems to be working sir, power consumption is as

predicted.”

A standard flight of nine Snake fighters was closing on Valiant, it took all of Captain Everest’s will power to do nothing at all as they bored in for a point blank attack. If you can visualize an aircraft hitting a two-mile thick slab of steel at several thousand miles per hour you have some idea of what became of the nine Snake fighters. The shield was all that it was advertised as, Valiant was untouchable. It was time to bring hell down upon mankind’s enemy.

“Well done Mister Murphy, you have indeed won the war.” Everest said with some very real emotion, there were tears in the man’s eyes.

“Thank you sir,” Ian wasn’t given to flowery speech, “may I make so bold as to suggest we attack?”

“You may indeed, Mister Murphy.” Everest replied.

Valiant didn’t bother with the Snake fighters, they were no threat. The Imperial warship moved almost in a leisurely manner, her massive beam cannons coming to bear on the huge Snake vessels one after another. There was another major effect of Ian’s shield that until now had been under appreciated, anything impacting on the shield was reflected back on a precise return angle. Six of the

Snake vessels in effect destroyed themselves with their own weapons.

The battle around Harmony lasted nine hours, the last six hours being mop up operations by Valiant's fighters and the other remaining Imperial craft. The two surviving Snake main vessels had fled into FTL space, many enemy fighters were left behind to fend for themselves, something they did rather poorly. The nearly beaten Imperial forces rallied and added to the carnage, Daniel added another twenty-seven kills to his list. Valiant's fighter pilots were now no longer without experience, six were lost out of the fifty, those lost were well avenged. All that remained to do was to dig out the Snake ground forces on Harmony's surface. They would take a lot of digging out.

Like most of the Snake's invasion planets, Harmony had been sparsely settled, a new colony. There were just under three million inhabitants of the colony, fully half had been slaughtered by the Snakes by the time the Empire counterattacked. Most of the surviving inhabitants had fled to wilderness areas to wage a makeshift guerrilla war, some were captured and used as expendable slave labor.

Valiant's marines landed to relieve their besieged comrades near the main spaceport at Port Boone. Daniel and the rest of Valiant's fighters flew air cover until all remaining Snake fighters were swept from the sky, then the fighters switched to air to ground attacks against enemy positions. The Snakes were very good at tunneling and building underground installations, maybe that was the way they had evolved. The enemy had the unpleasant habit of swarming up and out of seemingly deserted terrain, surrender didn't seem to be an option to them even though they had been abandoned to this world.

The Emperor held off recalling Valiant until more Imperial forces could arrive at Harmony, by now every vessel in the Imperial Fleet were furiously constructing their own Murphy Shields according to the multi-encrypted detailed plans relayed to them. All of the new devices had destruct modules attached to them, after they were tested all plans and records of their construction were destroyed. The odds on one of the devices falling into enemy hands was remote but could not be risked. Construction of the devices was conducted by volunteers, if it appeared they were in any imminent danger of capture they would have to be eliminated.

Ian was working furiously on a modification of his invention, a shield that would function to protect ground installations. He was having trouble getting a shield to form inside such troublesome objects as the ground (or the ship's deck), perhaps half a shield might be the answer.

"Sir, I need to go down to the surface, I can't simulate the mass effect that the planet generates." Ian was trying to explain his dilemma to Captain Everest.

"The surface isn't secured, it isn't safe Mister Murphy." Everyone on board Valiant felt very protective toward Ian, the unassuming boy had provided the means to defeat the enemy.

"But sir, Port Boone has been quiet for some time now, I would only need to test the unit for a few minutes. If I can get it to work it could save a lot of lives should the Snakes decide to come back in force." Ian made a good argument, perhaps too good.

Everest was silent for a moment, he had orders to keep Ian safe, still it would be a small risk for a large benefit if the young genius could work out a ground defense shield.

"Prepare your equipment for transport to Port Boone, I will make sure that a safe area is prepared." Everest prayed he was doing the right thing.

“Yes sir, thank you sir.” Ian smiled as he properly braced to attention, he then sped off to arrange his odd collection of equipment for the move down to the planet’s surface.

Daniel wasn’t at all happy about Ian going down to the surface of the planet either, he voiced his opinion as forcefully as he could without breaking naval protocol.

“Sir, the Snakes keep popping up everywhere! Port Boone has been quiet for now, that could still change!” Everest nodded his head in agreement. “I understand that, Sir Daniel. I think the risk is small, Mister Murphy says he will only need a few minutes on the surface. You will be providing air cover along with ten other Falcons, a hundred marines will be providing perimeter guard.”

Daniel gave in to the inevitable although he was sorely tempted to pull rank on his captain.

Ian had passed academy with flying colors (except for flying), he performed his duties in a manner beyond reproach, he had literally saved the Empire from destruction. But Ian was no warrior and never really would be, he was just too gentle of a soul, his mind moved on higher levels than the norm. Daniel felt even more

protective of his good friend than he had back in those dark days on Britannia, when he had pushed Ian to the back of the cage that had held them both for brutal execution.

Daniel was in his pressure suit when he caught up with Ian on the flight deck, he wore a compact revolver as now did the other pilots. He pulled his friend aside for a few choice words.

“I tried to talk Captain Everest out of this nutty expedition of yours, it’s not worth the risk!”

Ian was slightly indignant. “It’s just for a few minutes, I’m not so good as to just stay safe and snug here on Valiant while you and all of those marines risk your necks!”

“It’s what’s between your ears that’s too good to risk it being blown to bits, no one thinks you’re a coward or anything, least of all me!” Daniel could see he had already lost the fight.

“I’ll be careful,” Ian replied, “you be careful too.”

Ian and Daniel had never managed to get really mad at one another, now was no exception.

“We’ll both be careful, but at the first sign of trouble get your dopey butt back on that landing craft! That’s an order!”

“Yes most excellent sire.” Ian smiled. Daniel hadn’t

been able to keep a straight face when he gave his 'order' to Ian.

Port Boone's small match field was selected for Ian's brief experiment, it was well away from any strategic sites, no Snake activity had been detected near it. Instead of several thousand excited soccer (yes, soccer) fans surrounding the now dry and neglected field there was a ring shaped deployment of Imperial Marines skirting the field. Ian's landing craft settled swiftly onto the middle of the field, overhead Daniel and Valiant's Falcons circled looking for any sign of enemy activity.

"It looks clear, no sign of anything. Okay for deployment." Daniel had given the okay for Ian to start his tests, he prayed nothing would prove him wrong. By unspoken agreement Daniel had assumed command of the fighters, Lieutenant Singh was quite at ease with the temporary arrangement.

The marine pilot of Ian's landing craft wasted no time in putting his craft onto the middle of the playing field, within seconds Ian and his escort of marines were unloading his equipment. Ian sat up his shield device about fifty feet from the grounded landing craft, some problems with the power

connections caused him to be delayed for a few moments. Overhead Daniel was getting antsy. “Come on Ian, get a move on,” he said to himself.

Ian’s concentration was shattered as explosions started erupting on the north end of the playing field, they were under some sort of artillery attack or bombardment! Daniel watched in horror as a half-destroyed building some distance from the playing field erupted with hundreds of Snake ground forces. The building hid an entrance to underground tunnels or bunkers.

“*Recall!* Get your asses out of there!” Daniel screamed into the com. link as he dove down to put his fighter between the Snakes and Ian’s landing craft. At almost a ground level hover Daniel began hosing his beam cannons back and forth across the approaching charge of the Snake forces. Valiant’s other Falcons followed suit turning the north end of the field into a hell on earth for the Snakes.

Daniel’s magical luck ran out as one of the Snake projectiles blew the back half of his Falcon off, only the short distance to the ground and the angle of impact saved his life. Ian wasn’t having much better luck himself, the

landing craft he had started running toward blew up in a ball of flame, the force of the blast tossing him backwards onto the dry grass. Daniel gathered his wits enough to scramble out of the shattered remains of his Falcon, sidearm drawn and ready. Where was Ian?

Daniel spotted his friend trying to regain his feet and started running toward him. The marine escort close to Ian's position were laying down fire as best they could, many were dead or wounded from the explosion of the landing craft and from the incoming Snake barrage. A few remaining Snake ground troops were still coming on through the smoke and dust, still firing their 'rifles' with more speed than accuracy. Daniel was about halfway to Ian when something knocked his left leg out from under him, he managed to get up again and turned just in time to raise his revolver. Daniel's aim was as deadly as ever, the scaly alien dropped like a rock with a bloody (red) hole where it's right eye used to be. Daniel glanced down at his left leg, there was also a red hole in his pressure suit and his leg wasn't working very well.

Ian was lying in a crumpled heap when Daniel finally reached him, his chest was bloody on the right side. He

looked up at Daniel with an expression of dazed befuddlement.

“Ian! You silly shit, talk to me!” Daniel half collapsed next to his friend and started to open the front of Ian’s jump suit, unmindful that his own leg was bleeding heavily.

“Behind you.” Ian pointed past Daniel’s right shoulder. Daniel whirled and fired in one motion, pumping two of the heavy slugs into yet another Snake. Where were they all coming from?

Ian had a sucking chest wound, Daniel a severed artery in his left thigh. It’s anyone’s guess as to who passed out first. The relief forces found them with three dead Snakes within feet of their position, Daniel’s revolver was empty. All of the marine escorts were dead.

Later on aboard Valiant, Midshipman Starling would have trouble suppressing his glee, he would once more be Senior Midshipman of the vessel.

Chapter Twelve

Peace

Hospital Vessel Mercy, inbound to Earth

“How’s Ian? Is Ian all right?”

Daniel’s first words as he slowly woke up, another white clad nurse was looking down at him.

“Mister Murphy is doing quite well, he’s in regeneration for another day or two yet. His right lung was badly damaged.”

“He’ll be all right then?”

“Yes, Sir Daniel, he will. How are you feeling?”

Thank you God, thank you God!

“Like I should maybe take up some other line of work.”

“You do seem to have some talent for winding up in hospital.” Nurse Amundsen replied with a smile.

“Where am I this time?”

“You’re on a hospital ship, the Mercy. You’ve been on board for almost a day now, we’ve just left Harmony. We’re due to arrive at Earth in eight more days.”

“Was I in regeneration too?”

“No, the surgeons were able to repair your leg quite nicely. You very nearly bled to death you know, I understand it was a close thing. Do you have any discomfort now?”

“My leg hurts.”

“Let me guess, your left leg?”

“Good guess, Nurse...?”

“Amundsen. At your service sir. I’ll get you something for your leg.”

The Sun Palace, Iberian Peninsula

The Emperor had been in a blind rage when he had first been informed about what had happened to Ian and Daniel, he had been very specific that at the very least Ian should remain safe. Daniel was the warrior and born leader of the two, Ian was the brains that the Empire needed at this desperate moment. Cooler heads had delicately persuaded His Majesty to delay having Captain Everest summarily executed. Wait for all of the details about the situation, wait for Ian and Daniel to give their own accounts of events.

An empire wide day of celebration to honor Ian and Daniel was being arranged. A ceremony of epic proportions would await the two midshipmen's return to Earth. Ian would be knighted for his empire saving shield, all of the research facilities in the empire would be forever at his disposal. Ian's family was being brought to Earth by fast cutter to be on hand when their son arrived. One-hundred thousand acres of prime New Albion farmland and ten-million Imperial Dollars were now in Ian Murphy's name, his family's name.

Both midshipmen would of course be promoted to ensign

The Emperor had reached a long pondered decision concerning Daniel, the boy would be named as a Prince of The Empire, a possible heir to the throne. The decision was reached after His Majesty had watched the Falcon and battlefield recordings of Daniel's actions during Ian's trip to the surface. Every marine's helmet carried four tiny vid camera's for intelligence analysis and mission assessments, Daniel's every action had been recorded. Beyond the simple physical courage and grace that Daniel had shown while wounded and under fire was a quality that the Emperor had sensed in the boy before, the effortless ability to lead and inspire those around him.

Perhaps one day he might lead and inspire an Empire.

On board Mercy

Daniel had been more than insistent that he be at Ian's side when his friend awoke from regeneration, he remembered his own experiences after coming out of the 'tank'. A direct command from an Imperial Knight, age not withstanding, was not to be ignored by the medical staff.

Daniel watched close to tears as his limp and helpless friend was transferred wet and naked from the warm fluid to be bathed and dried off. New pink skin covered a good part of the right side of his chest. A stimulant was then administered as Ian lay covered and curled up on the soft hospital bed.

"I'm sorry! I couldn't get it turned on!" Ian cried out as his eyes opened. Even Ian's great intellect was not immune to the confusing after effects of regeneration.

Daniel sat on the bed beside his best of all friends, his brother in all but name. Together both boys moved to hold onto one another, Ian seemed very weak, lost and terrified.

"Everything's all right, you did good." Daniel explained gently.

“The ground shield, I didn’t get it phased right! It was my fault!” There were tears in Ian’s eyes, panic in his voice, he was shaking as he clung to his friend. Daniel held up his hand to hold off the gathered medical staff.

“The shield works fine, you were hurt really bad when the Snakes attacked. You’ve been in regeneration, it causes you to be all confused and mixed up. Trust me Ian, everything is okay. You’ve saved all of our sorry butts you nitwit, rest easy.”

Daniel’s quiet words seemed to penetrate the panic and confusion in Ian’s mind, a tighter hug and a sigh of relief signaled that Ian was starting to return to rational thought.

Days passed.

“Three jacks and a pair of ladies.” Ian had handily won Daniel’s pudding serving plus his two cookies. Ian’s mind was once more as it should be, his body was lagging behind a bit but progress was being made.

“Shit! How do you do that?” Daniel had yet to win a game with Ian of the forbidden by regulations poker, ever.

“Superior intellect. Also you always bite your lower lip when you have a lousy hand.” Ian explained.

“I do?”

“Yes, it’s like you had ‘bad cards’ written on your forehead.”

“Shit!”

“You said that already, try not to be so emotional when you play poker.”

Daniel seemed to accept that he would never, ever beat his dear friend in any match of wits. Both boys were sitting on Daniel’s hospital bed, Ian was the more mobile of the two, Daniel’s left leg was sore and stiff but he could walk after a fashion.

“You know that he’s going to knight you, at the very least.” Daniel said.

“I don’t know that at all, I’m not the hero type. You were killing Snakes while I was just sitting there sucking air.” Ian replied.

“Dolt! Your defensive shield is what matters the most, it’s winning the war damned fast from what I’ve been hearing. His Majesty ought to make you Vice-Emperor, if there were such a thing!”

“Sir Ian. It sounds a bit silly to me.” Ian decided.

“Sort of like ‘Sir Daniel’.” Daniel agreed.

“It doesn’t sound that silly.”

“Very funny. By the way, happy birthday.” Daniel announced matter of factly.

“Huh?” Ian was at a loss.

“Your birthday’s tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Ian raised his eyebrows in surprise, “I suppose it is at that!” Ian would be twelve, Daniel would be the same in another two weeks.

Ian and Daniel’s last day on the medical vessel was mostly spent visiting with the many marine casualties who made up the bulk of Mercy’s patients. Both boys knew that they were no more of a hero than any of the wounded and maimed marines who had the nasty job of actually taking and holding contested ground. The marines also organized a simple birthday party for Ian, quite the best party he had ever had.

Upon arrival in Earth orbit Ian and Daniel transferred via shuttle to the light cruiser HMS Spear. Both boys only had their hospital clothing, loose (very loose) fitting pale green jump suits. They felt a more than a bit awkward and silly when they were met on Spear’s hanger deck by a full dress honor guard and most of the vessel’s assembled crew. Daniel was walking with only a slight limp by now, Ian was doing quite well but still tired rather easily.

“Welcome aboard Spear Sir Daniel, Mister Murphy.”

Spear's commanding officer, Captain Sanchez, saluted as he spoke.

"Thank you sir, very much. Please excuse our appearance, we seem to be lacking proper uniforms." Daniel explained after he and Ian crisply returned the salute.

"We would have been honored if you had both appeared in just your skin. New uniforms are waiting for both of you, there has been some considerable planning underway. You won't have to face His Majesty in just your hospital garb."

"That's a relief," Ian replied, "and thank you again for this nice welcome, sir."

"Come along with me then, there's a cabin for the both of you to change in, then we leave orbit for the Sun Palace. It wouldn't do to keep His Majesty waiting."

Perfectly fitting new uniforms were laid out in what would normally be the Captain's cabin, all of the proper decorations were present. Someone had done a proper job of it.

"How are you doing?" Daniel was as ever concerned about his friend's well being.

"I'm okay. I just hope whatever they have in mind

won't last all day. How about you?" Ian's endurance was returning but he was not anywhere close to a full recovery yet. Regeneration was somewhat unpredictable in the time it took to shake off its effects, every case progressed at its own speed.

"My leg's still sort of stiff and sore," Daniel replied, "but I feel fine. I'll tell Captain Sanchez that maybe we aren't quite ready for the obstacle course yet."

"Okay by me." Ian still hadn't been told that his family would be there, Daniel didn't know either.

Daniel had a quite word with Captain Sanchez outside the cabin as Ian was finishing dressing.

"Sir, Mister Murphy is doing pretty well but he's really not up to a long day. Do you know just what has been planned for him?"

"Oh my! Well, there's an even ten-thousand navy and marine personnel in the honor guard, most of Fleet Command will be there. Several million citizens. A royal procession from the landing area to the palace's grand plaza is laid out. His Majesty will be waiting for the both of you when the ramp is lowered. Mister Murphy's family will be with the Emperor. Shall I go on?"

"Good God! Sir, could you....?"

“I’ll appraise the palace of the situation, perhaps they can make some adjustments in the schedule.”

“Thank you sir.” Daniel debated if he should tell Ian about his family, their family. He had to, how could he not tell him?

“Captain Sanchez is going to see if they will sort of limit things today,” Daniel explained, “how does that sound?”

“It sounds good. I feel all right, I just sort of run out of steam.” Ian was just finishing a mirror inspection of himself.

“I know, I went through the same thing.” Daniel hesitated for a minute, no point in beating around the bush!

“Your folks will be there.”

“What!” Ian spun around to face his friend.

“Are you deaf as well as dense, Mister Murphy?” Daniel teased.

Ian’s smile was all that Daniel really wanted to see, it mirrored his own.

Chapter Thirteen

Separate Paths

Daniel and Ian's first experience with royalty and ceremony helped to prepare them for their arrival, it did not really lessen the impact of the sea of humanity that faced them as they stood at the top of Spear's main boarding ramp.

"Jesus, they're all looking at us!" Ian whispered while trying to maintain a calm appearance.

"Smile and pretend you're sort of normal, maybe they won't notice that we're both scared shitless." Daniel's reply went unheard by all except Ian, the two of them were somewhat apart from Spear's officers. The absolute ruler of all humanity was waiting for them on the tarmac below, so were Ian's folks.

"Come on, try not to faint." Daniel's words started the two of them down the ramp and into the history of mankind.

Neither Ian nor Daniel lost their balance and fell on their faces this time, it was still a trial for the both of them. Ian's family stood behind and to the side of the Emperor, it

was obvious to the boy's that they had been assisted with their modest wardrobes. The Emperor knew that Ian's people were hard working people of the land and had gently offered the assistance of the royal household's tailors and fashion consultants.

His Majesty again radically parted with protocol after Ian and Daniel had properly bowed before him, he motioned them toward himself, his outstretched arms gently gathered in the boys and embraced them.

"God bless the both of you, the Empire is forever in your debt."

A distant noise at first almost unheard grew and swelled to a rolling thunder as millions of voices welcomed home the two young humans who had been so central to mankind's deliverance from its terrible foe.

Despite all of this Ian's eyes were on his family, so were Daniel's. The Emperor was not altogether dense, with a smile he gestured toward Ian's people.

"Go, be with your family."

They did.

Daniel broke uncounted young female hearts when he placed a proper kiss upon Ellen's cheek, more so when she returned the kiss with a smile that could light up a world.

Five days later Daniel was given the honor of plunging Ian's 'blooding dagger' into the soil beside his friend. Ian had managed an even and unblinking gaze into the Emperor's eyes during the short ritual even though His Majesty had cut a little deeper than he had intended to. It didn't matter, Ian was bestowed his knighthood with his beyond proud parents watching, with the Empire watching.

What unimaginable quirk of fate had brought two boys from wildly diverse backgrounds to this very center of humanity? What quirk of fate had awarded them both honors beyond the reach of most mortals? That same fate would now put them on separate paths, one to the world of academic pursuits and achievement, the other to the very seat of all power in the Empire.

It was time for Ian's family to return to New Albion. The strain of being away from all that was familiar and then thrust into a whirlwind of ceremony and fame was taking its toll. His Majesty heard Daniel's quite request in the privacy of his study.

"Sire, may I ask a large favor of you?"

"Of course Daniel, you seem troubled?"

“It’s Ian’s family sire, I think that being here has been really hard on them. I think they need to go home now.”

“They are as the saying goes, ‘fish out of water’?”

“Yes sire. They are good people, the best, but this has all been a real strain on them, for Ian too.”

“We should have been paying more heed to them, tell them that they may return to their home with Our blessings and thanks. We shall meet with them before they depart. Ian should go with them also, he can use some peace and quite. We will arrange proper transport for them.”

“Thank you sire....what will I...?” Daniel had hoped to accompany his ‘family’ to New Albion.

“You are required to be here for the time being. Come and sit with Us, it’s time you were told of Our intentions for you.”

Daniel had an uneasy feeling as he moved to sit beside the Emperor, what was going to happen now?

“We have observed in you a special gift beyond your remarkable piloting skills. You have a natural ability to lead and command, people follow you and look to you for guidance.”

Daniel felt embarrassed at the praise, “Sire, I can command a Falcon....”

“You could command an Empire, perhaps with training and experience you shall one day. ”

Daniel’s mind was almost frozen, what was the man saying? “Sire, what do you mean?”

“We intend to name you as an heir to the throne. You will be the first that We have named to that position.”

Only Daniel’s firm grip on sanity kept him from leaping up and fleeing the room.

“Sire, please don’t do this! I’m just a...”

“Ensign Grayson, look Us in the eye!” The Emperor all but shouted at the boy.

As if shot Daniel locked his eyes on the tall black man.

“We were never given a choice, no emperor is ever given a choice! You have the qualities and even more that the Empire requires, you have no more say in this than We did!”

Daniel was pierced to his very core, this was insane!

The Emperor continued in a cooler tone.

“Your destiny was preordained, as was Ours. We intend to lead a long life, We will no doubt name others as possible successors. You will divide your time between your naval career and attending to your royal duties. Being a Prince of The Empire is perhaps the ultimate apprentice program, you will learn by observing and doing.”

“Oh God Sire, all I ever wanted to do was...”

“Shut up, Ensign Grayson! What you want is cast to the winds! Do the best with what is put before you, it is all that I...We have ever done.”

The Emperor stood, Daniel took a moment to realize that he was sitting in His Majesty’s presence before he bolted upright. His Majesty stood close to the boy and embraced him, holding him close.

“You think that We are cruel and unfeeling. We are charged with all of humanity’s safety and well being, it requires a certain detachment. Sometime it requires a cold and unfeeling logic, it requires more than flesh and blood can easily supply.”

“Sire, Ian is so much smarter than I am, wouldn’t he be a better choice?” Daniel replied quietly.

“Ian’s a true treasure of the Empire, he has a good soul and a truly great mind but he isn’t a leader. Ian is too gentle of spirit, he could never order a human’s death or command forces in combat.” The Emperor left little room for argument, Daniel knew he was right about Ian.

Daniel took a deep breath, “What should I do Sire, I...?”

“Bid Ian and his family goodbye for now, he has a different path to follow. The two of you will always be

friends, his family will always be your family. You will still see them from time to time. Keep this knowledge to yourself for now, a public presentation won't be for several weeks yet, tell no one."

Daniel seemed to accept his unwanted fate, a great burden and a cold loneliness had just settled upon his shoulders.

Daniel didn't know what to do or what to think, as if in a fog he found himself in the private chapel of the Emperor. Daniel prayed on his knees to his God for guidance, for strength. Dear Lord, why me?

Dinner that evening in the ornate rooms reserved for the Murphy's was a mixture of happy relief and some sadness. Daniel had revealed that they could all return to New Albion, save for himself. Ellen was almost in tears (again).

"But why can't you come home with us, at least for a while?" Ellen pleaded.

"His Majesty said that I was required to be here for a while, he told me why but asked me not to discuss it." Daniel explained, not at all happy himself.

"You seem very preoccupied Daniel," John Murphy asked, "can't you give us some hint about what's going on?"

“No sir, I’m sorry. His Majesty was very direct when he told me not to say anything. Sorry.”

“You’re not in some sort of trouble we don’t know about are you?” The man kept pressing the point.

“No sir there’s no trouble at all, nothing like that.”

“John, if Daniel was told not to say anything then we shouldn’t try to make him.” The look in Elizabeth Murphy’s eyes told her husband that he had better drop it.

“You’re right of course, but it all seems pretty mysterious.” John answered.

Daniel changed the subject.

“Sir, what are your plans for the farm now?”

“I almost don’t know where to begin, all of those new acres and all of that money. I think it’s probably best to go slow at first, we can automate our operations with new equipment, maybe hire some extra hands. I need to get used to a new way of thinking about the way I will be farming.”

“You’ll be more like the head of a large business.”

Daniel said.

“I suppose. Less sweat and more supervising perhaps.”

“Maybe I could get my own flyer?” Freddie asked with

a grin.

“That’s a big maybe son,” John replied, “maybe you can have our old flyer and I’ll get myself a new one.”

“Oh man! It’s older than I am!” Freddie’s dreams of something sleek and fast were evaporating.

“Get him a mule, father.” This from Ian.

“You always have a good solution Ian,” John nodded his head in agreement, “you can’t get into much trouble on a mule.”

“Ha ha, hear me laugh!” Freddie failed to see the humor in the situation.

Ian’s father continued, “You know Ian, that money is more yours than anybody’s, you should have the final say in how it’s used.”

“I think you had better handle the family’s money, father. I’d just squander it on gambling, drink and loose women.” Ian replied with a perfectly straight face.

Daniel agreed, “He’s right sir, many’s the time I’ve had to carry him back from town drunk as a lord and covered in lipstick.”

Finally there was laughter from all at the table.

HMS Isabella was once more Ian’s transport, it sat on the tarmac of the Sun Palace waiting for it’s passengers to

board. The Emperor had bade farewell to the Murphy's and stood back to give Daniel and his adoptive family some last moments together.

“Have a good rest, try not to wander off into some wheat field and get lost or something.” Daniel gave his best friend a rather unmanly embrace and then held him by his shoulders, “I’ll be in touch, you won’t ever be shut of me.”

“Be careful yourself, you don’t have to rid the universe of Snakes all by yourself.” Ian also held onto his friend’s shoulders for a moment. Daniel parted from his adopted family, from his brother in good and bad times. He waved as they disappeared into the royal vessel, then he was alone.

So very alone.

Chapter Fourteen

Royalty and Responsibilities

Daniel spent the next two weeks learning a little of what was to descend upon him. Protocol lessons, history, rights and privileges. He would be titled “Your Imperial Highness.” A small handful of people in the palace knew that the boy was to be named a possible successor to the throne, the official announcement would be in three days. It was at this point that Daniel staged a small rebellion and walked out on his instructors.

“I need a break, sir. I’m going to walk down to the beach and maybe go for a swim or something. I’ll be back later. Besides, it’s my birthday.”

“But Sir Daniel, we still have so much material on planetary administration and Imperial history to cover!” This from His Majesty’s Third Secretary for Civil Affairs.

“It can wait.” Daniel replied quietly as he walked out of the room.

His Majesty was duly informed about Daniel’s walkout.

“Sire, I’m afraid that Sir Daniel has....well, left for the beach sire. For a swim he said. He also mentioned that it was his birthday, I don’t believe anyone was aware of that.” The Third Secretary for C.A. seemed ill at ease in the roll of informer.

The Emperor frowned at the man at the mention of Daniel’s forgotten birthday. “In that case resume his instructions in the morning and could you please explain how was it possible for his birthday to be overlooked?”

“I’m at a loss to explain Sire, there has been so much activity and Sir Daniel never mentioned it to anyone that I know of.”

“Inform the staff that We require a special dinner celebration for Sir Daniel this evening.” His Majesty felt a bit ashamed that such an important point in the boy’s life had been overlooked. The Emperor also knew quite well that Daniel had a backbone and sometimes a bit of a temper, qualities that the boy would dearly need in the times to come.

It was over a mile down through the age-old gardens and manicured open spaces to the calm warm surf of the Mediterranean. While it seemed like he was quite alone during his walk he was of course under full surveillance and

only seconds away from protection if the need should arise. The beach was closed to the public for four miles in either direction, Daniel had plenty of apparent solitude to think and relax from the strain of the last few weeks. The boy just sat in the sand for a while looking out upon the blue sea, a few sailboats were visible in the far distance. The warm sun and the tempting water finally caused Daniel to shed all of his light civilian clothes for a swim in the clear water. He thought back to the first time he had tried to swim and laughed a bit, why had he been so frightened?

The equivalent of a royal park ranger was walking her beach patrol route when she spotted the boy swimming in a place forbidden to the public. This would not do!

“You! In the water! Come out right now, this is royal property, you’re not allowed here!”

Daniel hadn’t noticed the woman’s approach, he had been floating on his back in the buoyant salt water.

“Damn! Where did she come from?” Daniel said quietly to himself. He swam slowly to the shallows before speaking.

“It’s all right ma’am, I’m allowed to be here.”

“Come out of the water!” She didn’t seem too impressed with his answer. The remote surveillance detail

knew the identity of the woman and decided to just let the boy handle the situation.

At this point in history simple nudity in the proper setting was no longer an issue. Daniel didn't feel ill at ease as he left the water to stand dripping and bare before the uniformed woman, nor did she care about such things.

"I have some identification in my pants pocket, ma'am."

"Please show it to me." The woman was starting to wonder if perhaps she had made a mistake.

Daniel pulled out his small leather military identification wallet and opened it for the woman to look at. She seemed somewhat pale as she realized just who she was giving a bad time to.

"Sir, I apologize for bothering you! I had no idea who you were."

"That's all right ma'am, you were just doing your job and all." Daniel tried to put the woman at ease, extending his hand to shake hers. After more apologies the woman moved off to continue her patrol route, hoping that she hadn't offered enough offense to the young Imperial Knight to end her career.

Daniel just sighed and finally pulled on his clothes and

shoes. It would seem that even such simple pursuits as an undisturbed dip in the ocean were probably things of the past.

New Albion

One day before the official announcement of a successor to the throne the Imperial Palace had issued a short heads up statement to the press.

“His Imperial Majesty has chosen a possible successor and heir to the Throne of The New Empire. At noon tomorrow there will be an official presentation with the installation ceremony to follow in one month’s time.”

Needless to say this short message spread to all points of the Empire in record time. Ian and his family were just sitting down to dinner when the small vid display in the dining area caused them to put aside all thoughts of food.

“Oh my God, it’s Daniel!” Ian knew now why his friend had been so detached when they had parted, why the Emperor had ordered him to stay behind.

“Surely not, son! Not Daniel!” John Murphy couldn’t entirely dismiss what his son had said, it still seemed unreal to even imagine such a thing.

“Trust me, father. I’d bet the farm that it’s Daniel.”
Ilan’s tone and expression told the whole family that he was
right.
Ellen just sat mute and stunned. Daniel?

End of Book One