

I. Paperwork

There were signs of rank, but you had to be familiar with them to notice.

The cramped stateroom was barely more than a cubicle. Almost three quarters of the space in the room was taken up by a gray plastic desk covered with controls and displays. Boxes were jammed into the remaining space. A small porthole looked out directly through the hull, and a portion of the dusky brown gas giant the *Rhylanor* was orbiting was just visible in the upper right hand corner. The room would barely have passed as an engineering crewman's bunk on a merchant ship; but it was priceless space on an Imperial battle cruiser.

Anton Darrell leaned forward over the desk and spoke into it: "Display readiness factor for the last sixteen weeks three-dimensionally, x-time, y-unit, z-readiness. Rotate. Stop. Overlay readiness predictions. Highlight shortfall, red, 6.75 percent. Display coordinate grid. Highlight, uh, 163, 82, 41. Display, left sidebar, readiness report. Right, C platoon all got that skin disease before we jumped in system. All right, computer, close display. Tag report approved, lock it, voice code following: Darrell, Anton V., Brigadier Commanding, Task Force Zed Alpha Tau...add appropriate and route to Fleet."

He sighed and glanced at the door. His friend, Captain Dealos Moak, commander of the *Rhylanor* was standing in the doorway, watching with his usual half-amused grin as the colored displays had resolved themselves in midair.

"Finishing your readiness reports, I see," Moak said.

"Just now. Who would have thought there would be so much paperwork in a war?" said Darrell. He opened a drawer in his

desk and took out a small flask. “Care to join me? Or are you on duty?”

“No. I just got back from the wedding party.”

“I would have stayed longer, but you can see I was swamped under.”

“I’m sure Lieutenant Enshuggli didn’t mind.” Moak stepped into the room and sat down on a crate across from Darrell.

“I’m on duty for another fifteen minutes, but if the Imperium can survive three years of war, it can survive one shot of Regina Royale.” They both took a drink from their paper cups. They made a strange contrast, sitting in their nearly identical black, high-collared dress uniforms: Captain Moak, tall and lithe, with graceful fingers and a constant wry, lopsided grin on his face; and Darrell, solid, formidably built, with a severe set to his face. Both looked youthful—the products of anti-aging drugs that kept their bodies as fit as they looked—but Darrell showed his age more, especially since he had stopped taking the drugs and his buzz-cut hair had suddenly come in gray. He was nearly fifty standard years old, after all.

Moak reached into his tunic and took out a deck of cards. “Care for a game?”

Darrell looked at him suspiciously. “My choice? I don’t want to play any weird Vilani games, or that Aslan poker variation we tried last time.”

“How about gin?”

“What? Yes, fine.”

“I haven’t played that regularly for ages. Not since the Academy. Always seemed too simple, actually.”

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Yes, too simple...why don’t we make it interesting? Say, a credit a point?”

“Make it a centicredit. I won’t get paid ’til we return to the main fleet.”

“All right.” Moak shuffled the cards rapidly and dealt each of them a hand. “That may take a little while longer, you know.”

“What? I thought the relief fleet was on its way.”

“Yes, but the *Trin* was recalled. High Command needs it on the battle line. So, looks like we may have to stay.”

“You’re holding hearts, eh? Hell of a thing to do, if you ask me.” Darrell glowered at his cards for a moment, then put them face down on the desk. “Look, Moak, I’ll be honest. We’ve known each other since the Academy. I’ve enjoyed serving with you again. But I want a chance to get back into the war before it’s over.”

“And patrolling gas giants isn’t hot enough for you.”

“Exactly. I mean, I know you helped get me this command, and I thank you. For a while, I didn’t think I’d ever get one again. But I need to be at the front.”

“I understand, Anton. Better than you might know...” Moak gazed for a while out the porthole. “But it’s necessary work, you understand. If we can hold firm just a few more weeks, the siege will be over.

“There are plenty of Zhodani ships still here in the Rhylanor system. And just about as many as want to can join them at any time. But they can’t jump out. Without the oceans or the gas giants, they can’t get the fuel. If they bring tankers, it’s worse: we blast the tankers out of space, and strand the rest of the squadron.

“They’re desperate, now. Fleet reports that several breakout attempts have taken place. But even if they punch through the line, they’ll run into the System Defense Boats in the planetoid belt. And then us. Whatever’s left won’t be able to take on a *Planet*-class Battle Cruiser and the rest of the squadron. The siege is almost over, Anton. We won’t be here longer than a few more weeks.”

“The war could be over in a few weeks.”

“The war could be over already.” Moak grinned. “Couriers don’t like to jump in-system. It’s still too hot.”

“Speaking of which, you’ve taken three hands from me already.”

“Four. Gin. How much do you owe me?”

“2.20.”

“Let’s roll it over to next week.” Moak leaned to his left and placed his face against the porthole. “That’s strange,” he said.

“What?”

“There’s nothing going on in the gas giant.”

“So?”

“Wasn’t the Snowball supposed to hit?”

“Maybe it hit the other side.”

“You’d still see some storm activity...quite a lot, actually.”

Moak stood up. “I’m going down to sensors. Care to join me?”

“All right.” Darrell shrugged into his tunic as he stood up.

“Next time we’ll play a really simple game. Night baseball.”

“Don’t you need a bat?”

“Oh, for Bog’s sake let’s go.”

II. The Snowball

To say Sensors was a location within the *Rhylanor* would be a misstatement.

Parts of the sensor system ran through every section of the starship. Retractable booms and antennas sprouted from her outer hull. Her different sensors were scattered throughout the ship: the gravitometer near her center of mass, where the ship itself would interfere least with its delicate workings; her electromagnetic sensors actually painted on the hull in places, using a superconducting polymer. Dense fiber-optic conduits wormed their way between the equipment and the main computer, constantly routing information and instructions. But the system itself needed a coordination point; and this is what spacers commonly referred to as Sensors. It was a large room amidships the *Rhylanor* on her port side.

Captain Moak and General Darrell entered the room and looked around. A sweeping view of Jasmine, the nearly frozen gas giant, was visible through the viewports that made up one wall of the room. Holodisplays showing the relative positions of the ships in the squadron floated ghostly in the air. Technicians bustled among them, murmuring instructions to the computer into their commdots. Nobody noticed the *Rhylanor*'s commanding officer and the leader of the squadron's Marines until a petty officer glanced at the door and, startled, shouted "Captain on deck!"

Moak and Darrell strode into the room, quickly acknowledging salutes. "As you were," muttered Dealos. "Where's the OD?"

“Lieutenant Laragii, sir.” A young black-haired man in gray coveralls approached and saluted.

“Are you tracking the Snowball, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When is it forecast to hit the planet?”

“Let me check, sir.” The lieutenant punched some numbers into his datalink. “Er, that’s strange...it should be impacting right about now, sir.”

“Can we get it up on a display?”

“Of course, sir. Burman, put the Snowball up on Holo Four.”

“Aye!” Burman, a middle-aged man in worn coveralls, sprang to a console and began adjusting the controls. He seemed nervous...probably all the brass in the room, Moak decided. He vaguely remembered that Burman had been transferred from the Scout Service onto the *Rhylanor* before she departed for Jasmine. Rank was pretty informal in the Scouts.

“Here we go, sirs,” Burman said. “This is where the Snowball should be.”

The holodisplay showed a view of Jasmine, but nothing else.

“Backtrack along its last known path,” said Laragii.

“Yes, sir.” The view in the holodisplay swam vertiginously—the illusion of depth was excellent—before finally resting on a dull gray, heavily-cratered lump of rock floating in space. Jasmine was visible directly ahead, but further away now.

They had first started tracking the object a week and a half ago. A large mass had suddenly appeared on the fringe of the squadron’s sensors—unusual, for they were far outside a rather uninteresting system. Rhylanor itself was a lump of rock with a thin envelope of atmosphere orbiting a red ember of a sun. Its strategic importance on the main trade routes was what had brought its billions of inhabitants, not its desirability as a place to live.

A boat had been sent out to look at the object, which the crew had nicknamed the Snowball. It was an ordinary ball of frozen gases, with a denser than normal rock core; a fairly common

object in the cometary cloud. And it was on a collision course with Jasmine.

The Imperial charts list no gas giant for Rhylanor. But those charts were drawn up for commercial shipping. Far outside the Rhylanor system, beyond where any normal merchant would go, was Jasmine—so small it was barely a gas giant, circling in the empty blackness of space, barely warmer than absolute zero. Even at three gravities, it was almost a two-week trip each way to reach Jasmine from the inner system. It takes a week, no matter how far you travel, to reach another world in hyperspace; merchant ships can't waste two weeks to get to the outer system to refuel by scooping up the hydrogen atmosphere of a gas giant; and even if they had been so inclined, the low temperature of Jasmine would make such operations even more hazardous than normal.

But this was wartime, and siege operations changed everything. Denied even the paltry oceans of Rhylanor as a fuel source, the Zhodani ships were willing to travel two weeks for the opportunity to jump out of the system. Thus, the *Rhylanor* and its squadron had been dispatched to the frozen gas ball of Jasmine, so far outside the system that it was almost impossible to pick out Rhylanor's dim sun against the background stars.

Moak studied the holodisplay. "There's something not right about that image," he said.

Darrell, who had grown up in an asteroid belt, saw it right away. "There's no ice on that rock."

Burman displayed a spectroscopic analysis next to the image. "You're right, General," he said. "No water line showing."

"None of any of the trace metals the survey team detected, either," said Moak. "How did it lose all that ice? Sublimation?"

"Out here?" said Darrell. "It's far too cold for all that ice to evaporate off. And why isn't it where we expected it?"

"I have that answer," said Burman. "It's now moving slower than it was when we first detected it." He displayed a graph in the holochamber.

“Maybe it passed by another comet, when we weren’t tracking it,” said Laragii. “We haven’t always been able to keep a telescope on it.”

“Look at that graph,” said Moak. “A comet couldn’t cause that kind of drop in velocity. You’d need a planet, or—” He paused. “Did the survey team do a density scan?”

“No, Captain, they didn’t have a densitometer. We could only spare one of the cutters.”

“Where are you getting this image from? One of the System Defense Boats?”

“Yes, sir. The *Unicorn*. It’s, uh, approximately 300,000 kilometers from the Snowball.”

Moak pressed the intercom unit on his belt computer. “Bridge,” he said.

“Commander Luzammi.”

“Raini, this is the Captain. Order the *Unicorn* and the—” He studied the tactical holodisplay for a moment. “—and the *Enkiddu* to close on the Snowball. Order them to have weapons systems ready. And please put the squadron on yellow alert.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Moak turned back to Burman. “Please chart the orbital track of the Snowball,” he said.

The view zoomed back and up. Jasmine and the Snowball, exaggerated in size and color, were two marbles coasting against a black background. A graceful purple curve joined them— “Wait a moment, Burman. Run the Snowball back to when we first tracked her. Now, project her orbit from then. Good. Now, run it forward, and correct the orbital track as we go.”

Suddenly it was startlingly clear. The purple curve began to change shape, moving, growing longer as the Snowball decelerated and changed direction. “Course corrections. My God,” said Darrell. “That thing’s moving under its own power.” He pressed his intercom button. “Sergeant Kelly, get the Marines into armor and in position.”

“Lieutenant, take a neutrino reading,” said Moak. “I want to know if they’ve got a fusion reactor.”

“Sorry, Captain, but there’s just enough radiation from Jasmine to interfere with our sensors.”

“Captain, look!” said Burman.

The image of the Snowball in the display was changing. The rock was breaking up in front of them, chunks of it sliding off into space. “Is it calving?” asked Burman. “Gravity from Jasmine might be breaking it up—”

A white stab of flame burst from the center of the Snowball, pointed directly at Jasmine. “Fusion rocket!” shouted Laragii. “Six gees, at least.”

“Get me a new course track!” shouted Moak, already afraid of the answer.

“It’s an orbital insertion burn,” said Laragii, checking his data link.

From the collapsing rock of the Snowball, several ships now began to emerge, with raked, geometric hulls. Several had the telltale bulging look of fuel tankers. “I have targets,” said Laragii, calmly. “A dozen at least.”

“Zhodani,” muttered Burman.

Darrell was already springing for the door. “Computer, red alert,” said Moak. “I need to be on the bridge.”

“A lift car is arriving,” said the computer’s calm voice.

“Order the fleet to close in on those tankers. We’ve been ambushed.”

III. Ambush

His lordship Captain Dealos hault-Moak, Baron Salonikios, surged backwards into his acceleration couch as *Rhylanor* accelerated towards the Zhodani fleet. On a commercial ship, the inertial compensators would have kept a passenger from feeling sudden shifts in gravity; but to save space and energy, *Rhylanor* was built without them.

The ship shuddered suddenly. “Report,” Moak croaked. Two gravities—*Rhylanor*’s maximum acceleration—wasn’t much for a warship, but the extra weight made everything more difficult.

“Direct hit, laser battery three. Gunnery officer reports the battery is offline,” Commander Raini Luzammi, his second-in-command, said.

“Compensate with the other portside batteries. Maintain fire on the tankers.”

Moak glanced down to the tactical display on the console of his acceleration couch. Several large Zhodani tankers were making the approach orbits that would carry them through the upper reaches of Jasmine, filling their tanks with hydrogen gas for fuel. Three small destroyer-sized ships were circling *Rhylanor*, giving the Imperial ship a heavier beating than they normally would because the battle cruiser was intent on reaching the tankers, rather than repelling the destroyers. As he watched, one of the blinking dots representing a tanker suddenly flared and went out.

“Direct hit on target number 4 with meson gun. Looks like her computer’s fried,” said Luzammi.

Moak nodded. Mesons were high-energy subatomic particles that had almost no interaction with normal matter—they could

drift right through entire planets. But they only lasted a few milliseconds before exploding and releasing a frightful amount of radiation. *Rhylanor*'s main weapon was an enormous cannon that ran the length of the ship. It accelerated mesons to speeds just short that of light, where relativistic effects made the mesons last for seconds to an outside observer, releasing them in a stream of particles that could penetrate any amount of armor and did terrible damage to crews and electronic systems. "Lay down a pattern fire with the missile batteries," he said.

The ship shuddered again, and the computer began to read out a new damage report in its precise, detached voice. The computer wasn't independently intelligent—Imperial technology wasn't that good yet—but it simulated intelligence very accurately. Much thought went into the programming of artificial computer personalities; if they displayed too much emotion, humans tended to argue with them; too unemotional, and humans grew afraid of their apparent perfection.

"Computer, get me Commander Lloergrez," Moak said.

The canine features of his Vargr chief engineer swam into view on a holodisplay. "Grr, what is it, Captain?"

"Can you beat another few meters per second out of the drives?"

"We're running hot as it is," said Lloergrez. "Just lost another generator."

"Commander, it's imperative we catch those tankers before they enter the atmosphere." *Rhylanor* was streamlined enough to follow them, but fighting in the extreme conditions of a gas giant was very risky.

"Grfouf! I can get you another half a gee. No more." The Vargr signed off without waiting for Moak to dismiss him, but the Captain didn't mind. Lloergrez was like many of his species: aggressive, spoiling for a fight, capable of switching loyalties at any moment—the legacy of his ancestors, Terran canines lifted into intelligence and moved hundreds of light years from Earth by the same mysterious ancient race that had scattered humaniti

throughout space, hundreds of thousands of years ago—but he was an exceptional, if unorthodox, engineer. Moak could count on him.

Already the acceleration was increasing. He asked the computer for a revised intercept time for the tanker squadron. Soon *Rhylanor* would be among them, able to destroy the lightly-armored vessels almost at will. Then he could turn on their escorts and treat them in the same way, and the last desperate Zhodani gamble would have failed.

An alarm suddenly chimed. “Computer, what’s that?” Moak said.

“Fragments of the Snowball are beginning to strike Jasmine.” A chart listing the impact energy appeared on his console. “Storm activity on Jasmine is increasing.”

“How soon will the tankers be entering the atmosphere now?”

“Thirteen minutes.”

Damn! “Commander Luzammi, order the rest of the squadron to break off defending us and concentrate on the tankers.”

“Yes sir.”

Several nervous minutes ticked off. *Rhylanor* continued to shudder under the attack of the Zhodani destroyers, but now was almost in range of the tankers. Moak stared across the circular space of the bridge, noting with satisfaction that the crew continued to serve their stations quietly and efficiently. Along the rounded walls, complex information flickered on and off the holographic monitors. His own seat was mounted near the center of the bridge, on a low platform, designed to be able to rotate even while under acceleration. In a pinch, it could even move. Below him were the first officer’s and flag captain’s stations, heavily padded and immobile, with holoprojectors and movable control consoles mounted on jointed arms. The captain had to be able to see the entire bridge at any time, if only to project an image of command; but the First Officer needed to be able to run the ship, even if the captain was incapacitated.

Another alarm rang. “New targets,” said Luzammi. “Two light cruisers, *Tlienqiats*-class, just jumped in system.” She paused. “Two more destroyers just jumped in as well.”

“Helm, start us about,” Moak said. *Rhylanor* would have to forget about the tankers; at their present speed, they could do nothing more than turn to face the new threat while decelerating.

“Destroyers are breaking off attack on us and pursuing the rest of the squadron,” Luzammi said.

“Understood. Meson screens to full. Target the first light cruiser.”

The ship suddenly lurched to one side. Moak fell to the floor, then staggered slowly up against two-and-a-half gravities. “Computer, report!” he barked.

“Computer is offline, Captain!” the sensors officer said. “Secondary core is down, too. I’m bringing up the tertiary core now.”

“What hit us?”

“The fusion rocket, sir. The one from the Snowball. Snuck in against portside and hit us with its exhaust, point blank. It’s gone now. Missile battery took it out.”

A suicide mission. But how much ship did he have left? “Where are those cruisers?”

“Got one now,” said Luzammi. “In range of our meson gun...”

He felt it at the same time, a debilitating attack of weakness. Control consoles suddenly went black. There was the smell of burning insulation in the air. “They beat us to it, Raini. Engineering! Get those screens back up.”

Only Lloergrez’ voice came through; the console holodisplay was burnt out. “Can’t, Captain! We’re losing main power! I may have to shut down the reactor—”

The circuit faded out. “I’m losing helm control,” said the helmsman.

It took less than a second for him to speak, but it felt to him as if he aged considerably in that time. “Break off attack. Put us in

an escape orbit around Jasmine. We'll loop around her, build up enough velocity to return to the main fleet.

"Raini, order the squadron to break off. Top priority is to inform fleet command of our situation. Helm—"

There was a muffled explosion from deep within the ship. "Maneuver drive is offline," said Luzammi. "Two Zhodani ships are matching vectors."

"Intruder alert," said the computer. "Deck 17, section four. Deck 14, section eight. Deck—"

"Moak, I'm on it," crackled Darrell's voice on the intercom. "Get into armor and off the bridge—"

There was an explosion from the rear of the bridge. Moak wheeled around to face the heavy doors that separated it from the rest of the ship. They burst open, and figures in armored space suits rushed through the smoke, firing as they came. Moak felt a searing pain in his shoulder and fell to the floor, clutching the bullet wound with his hand.

Commander Luzammi drew her pistol and fired at the invaders, trying to put her body between the Zhodani and Moak—who was still in his dress uniform, not even wearing a vacc suit. Two of *Rhylanor's* Marines fired their laser rifles at the Zhodani, who began to fall back, leaving several corpses.

"Computer, execute Operation Hard Frost," Moak said. There was a beeping noise in acknowledgement, and all across the bridge the control consoles began to go black.

Luzammi helped him up. "You've got to get off the bridge," she said.

"No point. The computer's dead now—"

"No, sir. As long as you're free, we haven't surrendered. Now go."

He made his way into the lift car with the help of a Marine and several of the bridge tech personnel. As the doors closed he could still see Raini, dressed in combat armor, in the twilight darkness of the dead bridge.

IV. Skirmish

Lieutenant Lara Enshluggi, Imperial Marine Corps, gripped her rifle tighter as she looked down the darkened corridor. Over her helmet radio came the voice of Sergeant Major Jawaharlal Kelly, the task force's adjutant, running down final instructions:

"We can expect them to send psionic forces first, especially teleporters. Be extremely careful, and make sure your psi-shields are activated. Look for sudden movement. There are likely to be some velocity differences between us and the Zhodani ships, so teleporters may be disoriented for a few minutes.

"Shoot on sight. Remember, these are the elite of the Zhodani Consulate, and probably members of the Thought Police."

Lara shuddered. The thought of having her mind invaded by those—almost aliens, no matter how closely related they were to the rest of humaniti—was almost too much to bear. She knew all about the atrocities committed by the Zhos and their villainous Thought Police; it was part of basic training for all the services. *Far better to die fighting them than to be taken captive.* It wasn't torture that frightened her, but what would happen to her personality. People who came back from the Zhodani prison camps were never trusted again. Psionic reeducation was too efficient and undetectable.

Corporal Zarish, her picket-mate, touched his helmet to hers. It was possible to speak that way without using the radio, if you shouted. "Heck of a wedding reception, Looey," he said. "What's the honeymoon going to be? Visit to a slaughterhouse?"

Lara smiled in spite of herself. Just four hours ago, wearing a dress—regs be damned, she wasn't going to her wedding in uniform—cobbled together by Zarish, she had been married,

with Captain Moak himself performing the service. But practically before the reception had even begun, the *Rhylanor* had been thrown into battle; now Paul was back in Engineering, out of contact, and the ship was drifting, in danger of being boarded—

“Intruders spotted on deck 17,” said Kelly smoothly over the radio.

“All units aft of deck 22 will hold their positions,” General Darrell’s gruff voice cut in. “All others, hold out as long as you can, then fall back towards rec room 6.”

Lara checked her rifle’s ammo, then her suit’s telltales, and finally her psionic shield—her only defense against the Zhodani. Then she switched her visor over to tactical display.

A sophisticated false-color image of the corridor jumped into view. The visor combined several sensor technologies—infrared, light amplification, “ladar” (the laser equivalent of radar), and others—to give her better vision than she would have had in the open at full noon. Crosshairs were projected onto her field of view, transmitted directly from her rifle’s sight, as well as range and ammo figures.

The rifle itself was a technological marvel. Rather than use anything as primitive as a chemical explosion to propel its bullets, it used a powerful electromagnetic field projected along its barrel. The result was a weapon that could throw a slug faster, more accurately, and at a higher rate of fire than any other gun. Hi-tech armor was good at stopping a round from this gauss rifle, but that wasn’t the point. The corridors of a warship are very narrow. Even some one in the powered armor known as battle dress could be knocked down by a ten-round burst from a gauss rifle, blocking the people behind him. And even battle dress won’t keep a gauss rifle bullet away forever.

A sudden flicker of movement—without thinking, Lara stood up and fired. When intruder alert sounded, *Rhylanor*’s crew was supposed to hit the deck. Anything standing would be an intruder—or unlucky.

Nothing hit—no, something had fallen at the end of the corridor. She swept the rifle slowly from right to left, but there weren't any other targets.

Then suddenly there was a figure in the companionway. It—he? She? —appeared out of nowhere, stumbled heavily, got back up and careened into the wall. Lara hit the figure with two bursts, and it fell down and stopped moving. Air came hissing out of breaches in its armor, boiling away into the near vacuum of the corridor.

Lara kneeled down to reload while Zarish stood up. She heard him grunt over his suit radio as he fired, but she waited until her weapon was secured before she looked up. Two more Zhodani were lying in the corridor.

“Dumb suckers don't know when to quit,” Zarish muttered as he reloaded.

“Mind your weapon, Corporal,” she said.

“We could stand off a whole regiment here, if they keep coming piecemeal.”

“I doubt—huh!” Three Zhodani had appeared simultaneously in the middle of the hallway, coming at a dead run. She swept the rifle in a narrow arc in front of her, noting distractedly how the bullets ricocheted off their breastplates. Zarish was firing with her, from a low crouch. One of the Zhodani fell, the invisible beam of his x-ray laser cutting an ugly red slash into the corridor wall as it fell from his hands.

Another was down—and she was out of ammo. She jerked the clip free and felt on her belt for a new one—and some one grasped her hand, gently but firmly.

She snapped her head to her right. Zarish had his hands on top of his head, a Zhodani trooper, menacing in the anonymity of his gray combat armor, the two familiar black bug-eyed visor holes giving his helmet an alien cast, standing next to him and disarming him. Five more Zhodani were behind the two Imperials; another was on her left, taking away her rifle, her ammunition, her grenades.

So. It was all over, she was a POW. Goodbye, Paul, I love you—

The troopers hustled them over to one wall. Two kept watch with leveled rifles while the rest lined up. One—judging from the markings on his shoulders, an officer—stood off to one side and suddenly saluted. The other troopers followed suit.

A tall Zhodani—all Zhodani are tall, averaging two meters in height, but this one stood over two and a half meters tall—strode in, dressed in elaborately decorated combat armor and wrapped in an enormous, lustrous black cloak. Lara had heard of such cloaks: they were worn by nobles and high-ranking Zhodani officers. They were more than just ornamental, she knew; they could hide a person's infrared signature from sensors, and were very effective against lasers.

The tall Zhodani looked at the two prisoners. Without a gesture from him, the other officer came over to Lara. Two troopers seized her arms and threw her up against the wall, while the officer reached up and began to unfasten her helmet.

What? No! Asphyxiation, explosive decompression in the corridor's zero pressure—even the Zhodani couldn't be that cruel. She struggled, screaming, as air hissed out from the broken neck seal—

No. The Zhos must have restored pressure, curse them. She could breathe, although the air was thin. A trickle of blood dripped from her nose as she fell to her knees. The officer began to remove Zarish's helmet.

The tall Zhodani reached under his chin and unfastened a clasp. His helmet split down the middle, from brow to chin, opening clamshell fashion to reveal a man of about fifty, with iron-gray hair and a glossy black mustache. He looked at Lara and smiled.

Much better. We can talk, now that I've removed your silly shield device.

Sweat poured down her back, but she felt cold. He hadn't spoken. He hadn't spoken! Where were the words coming from?

You are so confused, my child. Your mind is so chaotic! One day you will learn order.

She had to get away! She tried to crawl. A strange lethargy was gripping her limbs. She was barely aware that she was coughing.

Strong arms were grabbing her, pulling her upright.

You have nothing to fear. Nothing! Later, we may talk of many things. You will not find it unpleasant. When we are done, you will be calm. Now we will take you to rest.

She was screaming, screaming on the inside! “No,” she managed to croak. Her throat seemed to be closing.

The Zhodani noble—for such he must have been; only a noble could have had such a mastery of psionic power—smiled again. “I am Tlienjpraviashav,” he said in very precise, almost accentless Anglic. “I want to be your friend.”

V. Observations

Harrison Burman, Acting Able Spacehand, huddled down further in the solar storm observatory. He was still afraid to open the hatch that lead back to Sensors. As far as he knew, he was the only person in the section left alive.

Examine Harrison: almost forty now, a middle-aged spread settling around his middle, hair getting a little gray, probably from an overdose of cosmic radiation. He is not a coward or even uncourageous; after all, he has spent his entire adult life in space, where your first mistake is often your last. But he is not a Navy man, not used to combat, and certainly not used to seeing twenty lives snuffed out in a single instant.

Burman was a Scout, a member of the Imperial Service charged with charting worlds and the spaceways. Seven centuries ago, when the Imperium was still expanding, the Scout service was possibly more important than even the Navy: it was the Scouts who would recontact worlds isolated from the rest of human space for 1500 years, the Scouts who mapped the uncharted regions beyond the old First and Second Imperiums. But now, with the Imperium stable for the past several centuries, the Scout Service's primary purpose is maintaining communications between worlds.

Harrison Burman was a sensor technician and computer programmer. He was good a both jobs; and the Scout Service, with its survey ships and message banks, had need of both his professions. Harrison liked the Scouts, liked the informal nature of its field agents, where "Acting Supervisor" was the most title anybody ever needed, liked working in the frontier regions of space. For a while, he even had a job as the pilot of one of the

little one man scout/couriers that carried messages between the worlds; but he couldn't get used to the weeks of loneliness, with no one to talk to but his computer. He preferred working aboard the scout bases scattered throughout the Imperium, charting and consolidating data in an orderly, comfortable environment.

None of which, obviously, was preparation for battle.

The Imperium has trillions of citizens and thousands of worlds. Its resources are nearly inexhaustible; but the nature of space travel and communication strain its abilities to bring all of its resources to bear. The Imperium responds to threats inexorably, but it may be years before a local area receives assistance from the rest of the far-flung empire. Often, they must make do with what they have for the duration of the crisis; for it is not unusual for wars to end before the first reinforcements from the Core regions arrive.

Thus it came to pass that the Navy, always in need of good programmers and sensor techs, in the fourth year of the Fifth Frontier War transformed Scout Harrison Burman, pay grade IS-5, into Acting Able Spacehand Harrison Burman, Sensor Technician, Imperial Interstellar Star Ship *Rhylanor*.

Burman checked his suit's readouts. He had several more hours of air—then what? Find a Zhodani and surrender? Take a sleeping pill and slumber into asphyxiation? He shuddered.

Would the ship even be in orbit in a few hours?

That at least he could find out. He swung down into the seat of the solar activity observatory. The stubby little turret-like extension of the hull, at the end of a long, elbow shaped tunnel, was heavily shielded from radiation, to allow a person to make first hand observations during a solar storm. *Rhylanor* hadn't needed it since they had come so far outside the main system.

The main computer was out, but the telescopes were still powered. He began to nudge them into place. He could take some sightings of stars to determine their position. Then, he might be able to see if they were getting closer to the gas

giant...there were other ways to determine the orbital radius. At least he'd know if they were going to burn up in a few hours.

He had to keep pushing down the thought that it was the barest coincidence that he was alive. If he hadn't been ordered into the observatory—

It had been during the battle with the Zhodani ships. Several of *Rhylanor's* sensors were out of action. Lieutenant Laragii had ordered him to the observatory, whose heavily shielded sensors were still operational, to help coordinate sensor results. He had just shut the hatch when a blinding white light had burst into the room and the radiation sensors had gone off the scale—

Twenty people. The entire sensor section. He couldn't say that he had been close to many of them, but so many at one stroke—
What was this?

Centered in his scope was a Zhodani ship. But what kind? He couldn't tell one from the other. He couldn't even tell how long it was...ah, but one of Jasmine's small, rocky moons was beginning to drift behind it—Gamma, her third satellite. He pulled out his handcomp and scribbled some figures. Gamma's diameter was 400 km, her distance from Jasmine was...the scope's magnification was set at...the formulas were all standard. Hmm. The ship wasn't that big at all. Probably a destroyer. He attached a lead from his computer to the telescope and recorded the image. Then he began to search.

He found five more ships, and recorded them all. The last was a bit of a surprise: a captured Imperial Scout Survey craft, probably used as a communications ship for the Zhodani fleet.

Burman leaned back against the side of the shaft that led down to the observatory, strangely satisfied. He always took pleasure from a difficult set of observations.

He felt a faint vibration through his helmet.

This whole region of the ship had been in vacuum since the Zhodani fusion rocket had blasted a hole into sensors section. There was no air to carry sound. But the floor could still carry vibrations.

Somebody was walking around above him.

Sweat broke out on his forehead. Who was it? A Zhodani? He might know that Burman was there, the ex-Scout's own mind betraying him. But what if it were an Imperial? This might be his only chance at rescue.

The only fighting chance he had was to take a look. If his mind had been detected, he was already trapped.

He climbed each agonizing rung of the shaft to the iris hatch at the top and pressed the button to open it. The hatch dilated, like the shutter of a camera, and he poked his head up to floor level.

A figure was silhouetted against the murky bulk of Jasmine visible through the jagged hole in the side of the ship, his back to Burman. It was moving slowly as he watched, poking a long rifle into different corners of the room. Debris was floating about; the ship's artificial gravity must have failed in this area.

The figure's helmet was the form-fitting bug-eyed Zhodani type, not the familiar swept-back style of Imperial combat armor.

Burman slowly hoisted himself out of the observatory shaft and activated his magnetic soles. He hadn't been noticed. This trooper must not be psionic. But he was armed and Burman wasn't.

The figure paused by the breach in the hull. Burman considered for a moment, then grabbed a computer pad that was floating near his head and threw it at the Zhodani.

It sailed right past him and through the breach. The trooper, startled, spun around. Burman was facing him, holding a crate of sensor components. He threw it right at the Zhodani's chest.

It knocked the trooper straight through the hole in the wall and he sailed out into space. Burman trudged carefully up to the breach and stared out. The Zhodani was tumbling directly towards Jasmine.

As he watched, the trooper stopped tumbling and began to decelerate. He was using his suit maneuver controls to slow

himself down. Too late, Burman's pride at having gotten rid of his opponent turned into despair.

The Zhodani would have a communicator. He could easily call for help.

Some one was pushing past Burman. He jumped aside, throwing his hands up in surrender. The new figure was tall enough to be a Zhodani—no. He was too well built; Zhodani tend to be slender. And he was wearing Imperial powered armor.

The Imperial raised a huge, ugly-looking weapon to his shoulder. He fitted the butt into a socket on his suit.

The Zhodani had stopped moving and was hanging in space, watching them.

The Imperial fired. A bolt of white-hot plasma shot from the muzzle of the weapon and struck the Zhodani, who seemed to fly apart.

The Imperial removed the gun from its socket. He turned and began to walk for the door. It was all Burman could do to keep up.

VI. Decision

Burman hurried after the big Marine through the corridors of *Rhylanor*. Their emptiness was disconcerting; normally, they would be bustling with crewmembers. They did not meet anybody until they came upon two Marines in battle armor guarding one of the ship's portside rec rooms.

The sentries saluted the big Marine smartly, and the door to the rec room dilated. Burman hustled through it just behind the Marine. Inside, scattered about the large, rectangular room on chairs and benches, was most of *Rhylanor*'s command crew. Jasmine hung huge and dim in the center of a picture window that ran the length of the room. Burman saw Captain Moak in one corner, his shoulder being attended to by Sergeant Kelly and a medic. Marines in armor, weapons slung over their backs, bustled about, pointing to a map of the ship displayed on one of the rec room's holodisplays. Someone handed Burman a plastic cup of coffee and he sipped it absently. He hadn't realized how tired he was until now.

The rec room door dilated again and General Darrell and two other Marines stepped into the room. "Is everybody here?" the General barked. "Lokhiarealaw, did you find anybody in Sensors?"

The big Marine had taken off his helmet, revealing the short brown "mane" and russet, feline snout of a large Aslan. Sergeant Loki, as he was called, was one of *Rhylanor*'s platoon sergeants, an outcast from his native clan who had found a career in Imperial service. Darrell was supposedly the only person on the ship who could pronounce his name even close to correctly; human mouths weren't built for Aslan language.

“Just this tech,” the Aslan growled. “Everyone else was dead.”

“We expected as much. All right, let’s get moving on the SitRep.”

“What’s the status of the boarding parties?” said Captain Moak in a whisper.

“Bad,” said Darrell. “They really swamped us.” He used a laser pointer to indicate sections of the holodisplay while he spoke.

“Zhodani control the Command Bridge and Engineering. They occupy the computer core, and much of amidships. We hold onto this section of portside, and one of the hangar decks.”

“Can we bring up the main computer?”

“Yes and no,” said a voice from the crowd. A slightly built man of about thirty, with anachronistic spectacles perched on his nose, elbowed his way up to the holodisplay. “We could, but we can’t.”

“Care to explain, Mister...Asherwall, isn’t it?” asked Darrell.

“Yah. Operation Hard Frost worked: we transferred all the command codes, systems files, and intelligence data to compressed files stored in the computer of this rec room. Normally all we would need to do is transfer them back to the core, and bring the system back up. But we can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because the Zhodani fried the auxiliary core, and are in control of the main and engineering computers! We can talk to both of them, but they’ve already changed the security codes. So we can’t get in to feed the operating files into the core, and they can’t find the operating files to restart the computer themselves. Very pretty!”

“Do we have any data on the fleet?” asked Moak.

Loki grumbled, “Sensors was smashed, all the computers fried. There wasn’t anything to salvage.”

“Do we know if our orbit is stable? Lieutenant, did we establish an escape orbit before the helm went dead?”

The helmsman shook his head slowly. “Can’t say for sure, Captain. It was a tricky vector, pretty easy to mess up and put us in Jasmine’s atmosphere.”

“So we don’t know if we’re going to burn up, and we don’t know how many Zhodani ships are out there. That doesn’t leave us many options.” He said no more, but the clear implication was surrender—POW camps for most of the crew, reeducation or worse for Moak and his officers...

“Excuse me, Captain,” said Burman, quietly. “I think I can answer both questions.”

“How’s that?”

“I was able to get some data through the solar observatory’s telescope. Here...” Burman typed a few commands into his hand computer and the rec room holodisplay changed. “I found these ships near us.”

“Two destroyers, a cruiser...that’s an Imperial vessel, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir, a Scout Survey cruiser. I think they’re using it as a communications ship.”

“I see. Were you able to calculate our orbit?”

“Yes, I used our estimated range from Gamma. Here’s the figures.”

The room was quiet. “Seven hours, more or less,” said Moak, finally.

“Yes sir. Unless we can boost out of Jasmine’s gravity well, we’ll burn up by then.”

“Which we can’t do,” said Asherwal, “without the main computer. Captain, what are our options?”

“What do you bloody think they are!” shouted Moak before he could restrain himself. “We don’t have any. General Darrell, please have one of your officers see if they can approach the Zhodani to discuss terms—”

“Now, just a minute,” said Darrell. “If you think—”

People were arguing with each other, filling the room with uproar. “Why don’t you just use GORGIAS?” shouted Burman, trying to make himself heard.

“What was that? Quiet!” shouted Moak. “What did you say, Burman?”

“Why not use GORGIAS to reactivate the core?”

“What in the heavens is that?” said Asherwal.

“It’s, it’s a program,” stammered Burman. “Or rather, it runs programs. It’s supposed to be able to absorb and run any program, or almost any. It’s good at defeating security measures, and hiding itself.”

“Never heard of it,” said Asherwal.

“We used it in the Scouts. I think it started as an entertainment program, designed to be able to run any software—doesn’t matter how backward or advanced—that you could load into it. People started to add other features to it later. The Scouts tried to stop us from using it for a while; I think that’s why it’s so good at breaking security and hiding itself inside a computer. We use it to run ships in simulators now. Some people like to keep it in their computer so they can load different packages—survey, communications, and the like.”

“I’ve heard of things like that in the Navy,” said Moak thoughtfully, “but nothing with all those features in one program.”

“That’s odd. I would have thought the Scouts would have shared it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Asherwal. “If we had something like that, it would have been killed by Hard Frost.”

“We might be able to get it from that Scout cruiser the Zhodani are using,” said Burman.

“Don’t you think they would have taken it out of their system?” said Asherwal.

“If they knew about...but even if they did, they might not have gotten all of it. Like I said, it’s very good at hiding.”

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Once more the room buzzed with conversation. Captain Moak stood up painfully. "TEN-SHUT!" roared Sergeant Loki.

"Thank you," said the Captain. "I think the decision is obvious."

He looked around the room. "We attack!"

VII. Examination

Commander Raini Luzammi groaned once again in pain. Her throat, though, emitted only a little croaking noise. Her head felt as if it were being squeezed by a vice. There was horrid throbbing sensation behind her eyeballs. At some level below consciousness, like the buzzing of an angry mob, was an insistent, probing, need, a need to know, to find out—and rising up to meet it was her own need to confess, to reveal, to break down.

She tried to stay calm and remember the training she had been given at the Academy. Slow down your breathing and heart rate. Blank your mind and think of nothing, forgetting conscious thought. Clenching her eyes shut, she thought of the symbols and mantras she had learned to help blank her mind: whorled, angled geometric forms, abstract monosyllables divorced from meaning, all to help bury her knowledge, her very emotions beyond the probing of an alien mind...

Sudden, sharp pain jarred her back into full consciousness. Her eyes flew open, but for a moment all remained black. A Thought came into her mind, a thought that was not her own:

It will be much easier if you cooperate with us.

“No!” she seemed to scream. Dimly, her ears registered a low murmur—was that her voice?

We regret the necessity of physical pain. What you felt was merely induced into the neurons of your hand—there was no actual damage. But if you persist in resisting us, we will have to resort to...cruder methods.

Raini Luzammi had spent three years in medical college before transferring to the Academy Flight School. Too much

empathy with the patients. Her mind could easily conjure up images of what modern surgical techniques could do to a human body. It might even be possible to take her apart, piece by piece, and then put her back together, all while she was awake—

Her vision swum. Darkness crowded in over her mind.

Plieznabr sighed. The Imperial had blacked out. Even her subconscious mind was not responding. He turned to the Mission Commander and queried him—

Here we must resort to crude translation. Plieznabr had been using telepathy since early childhood, when the tests given to him in school revealed an innate psionic ability that lifted him out of the placid lives of his Prole parents and started him down the path of service to the nobility. Communication between telepaths uses surprisingly few words, and then usually only for mathematical or scientific concepts. So much more information can be exchanged by emotional states, images, shared memories—but such an experience cannot be translated easily into words, especially to those who lack the telepathic ability. Still, there are parallels and analogs. So let us say that Plieznabr turned to his master, and thought, with exasperation: *“She is unconscious. Shall I revive her?”*

Tlienjpraviashav paused to scan Luzammi’s mind before answering. *“No,”* he responded silently. *“She teeters on the brink of exhaustion. We risk driving her mad if we press too hard. Let her rest for now.”* The barest ghost of a smile crossed his face, though within, his emotional state shielded from Plieznabr, he felt pride for the young Intendant. His probing of the Imperial ship’s first officer had been efficient and aggressive—he remembered his own days as a young officer in the Thought Police, in awe of the powers of the psionic arts and eager to push them to their furthest extent...

He sensed frustration and disappointment in his protégé. *“Patience,”* he thought at him. *“She will soon yield.”*

“I wish I shared your optimism.” Anger roiled across the landscape of the Intendant’s mind. *“I had not believed an unshielded mind could hold out so long!”*

“They are surprising, aren’t they? Poor, lonely beings. They spend their lives trying to forge connections with words and bodies, but their inner states are inaccessible to each other. Expose them to the merest touch of a telepathic link, and many go mad, driven to senselessness by thoughts not their own. But many are stubborn. They would rather stay out in the dark than come inside our circle of light. So they fight us.”

“Why should they resist so fiercely?”

“For Freedom!”

Shock and amusement swept through their link. *“Freedom? Surely not that, not from them!”*

“Yes, my child, I am afraid so.” Affection emanated from Tlienjpraviashav and surrounded the younger man. *“The freedom of a barbarian, a wild animal perhaps; but an animal who is trapped can be very dangerous. These Imperial officers are well trained and conditioned.”*

“So I see.”

Tlienjpraviashav once again closed his mind to his student. Pliezabr was considering Luzammi with a new respect, he sensed. He had not mentioned the other reasons for the Intendant’s surprise at the resistance the Imperials were showing to his mind probes. The boy was used to the docile Proles of the Consulate, the classes of society who lacked any psionic training or potential. The Proles were accustomed to telepathic interference, to being reconditioned by the Thought Police whenever aberrant behavior made them unhappy. They were not proper preparation for the devious minds of the Imperials and their allies.

Well, there would be time for politics later. The boy had enormous promise; it would not be long before he would be elevated to the nobility as a reward for his good service. Better that he find these facts out for himself in the meantime.

The smile-ghost returned to his face. They had captured a Vargr in the Engineering section. If the boy thought an Imperial officer's mind was stubborn, what would he do with the chaotic, barely-evolved mind of the canine?

Tlienjpraviashav turned to one of the officers gathered in the sickbay compartment they were interrogating prisoners in. "You said we had captured the quarters of the Imperial fleet's Marine commander," he said, using spoken words. The officer was not a noble, and had no telepathic skills.

"Yes, nobly born."

"Take me to them."

He paced silently through the corridors of the dead starship, his honor guard surrounding him. *Rhylanor* would be a great prize; it would be wasteful to have to abandon it. But they could not seem to get the computer to work. His experts said that the systems to make the ship live again were stored somewhere in the computer's network of nodes and memory banks; but they needed the codes to unlock them. And so far none of the prisoners had revealed them.

Perhaps his technicians would succeed in implanting their own systems. If not, he would abandon the ship, reluctantly, and let the suicidal few who still resisted perish as the battle cruiser burned up in Jasmine's atmosphere.

Such a waste, though!

The officer stopped in front of an iris hatch. Tlienjpraviashav nodded and stepped through it, motioning his honor guard to stay back.

The room was cramped. A Zhodani of equal rank would have been a noble; indeed, many Imperial generals were as well, and would have commanded more space. A general who was a commoner—this would influence his personality and his command decisions, in ways that were predictable to those with the proper training.

He should have brought the boy, to teach him how much you could learn about an opponent without telepathy.

He stepped to the middle of the room and turned around slowly, studying its contents. Two swords of strange make, slightly curved with circular hilts and long, straight grips, sheathed in black wooden cases, hung on one wall. On top of a computer terminal built into the adjacent wall was a holograph of a woman and an infant.

In the corner between them, a strange curvilinear solid—a packing case, perhaps? He went to it and opened it.

Inside was a large stringed instrument, made of wood, or perhaps plastic. A long metal spike jutted out from the bottom of it. The whole thing would come to about the chin of a sitting man—an Imperial, that is. Zhodani were taller.

Tlienjpraviashav searched his memory. He had seen something like this before, at a reception between the Consulate and the Imperium. A Solomani instrument—viola? No, violoncello. He muttered the strange, sibilant word under his breath—unlike any Anglic word he had ever heard. Already he was beginning to suspect something, was beginning to understand the reasons the room had seemed so strangely familiar.

Without the ship's computer working, there had been no chance to find any of the crew's names; even quarters onboard the ship were identified by holographic nameplates controlled by the master computer. They had only been able to mark this room as the Marine commander's because a dress uniform of an Imperial brigadier general had been tossed over its bed.

He leaned closer to the hologram of the woman and child and picked it up. It was a standard static image projector, a rounded dome of transparent crystal with a circular base of chrome. On the underside a dedication had been engraved into the metal, probably with a laser pen, because it was written in a graceful script. He read it slowly, puzzling out the unfamiliar Anglic letters. When he was done, he smiled. A full-blown, predatory grin, far more emotion than he would have allowed himself had anyone else been present.

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“Zirkuniashav,” he said. He smiled wolfishly again. His suspicions had been confirmed.

VIII. Revelation

General Darrell stabbed with a laser pointer at the hologram of *Rhylanor*. “No,” he said. “It’s too hot in there. I won’t risk any more of my soldiers.”

Captain Moak croaked, “I tell you, it’s of vital importance that we—”

“There are at least two squads of Zhodani between here and Central Life Support! We’ve already confirmed that some of them are nobles! What’s so all-blessed important about that section?”

Moak sighed wearily. He rubbed his right shoulder with his left hand; his other arm was in a sling. “All right, I suppose you do need to know.” He glanced around the crowded rec room. “But not here. Let’s go to the lounge.”

Darrell nodded and followed Moak into the next room, signaling two Marines to stand guard by the door as he cycled it shut behind him. He remained standing in the center of the room as Moak sank into a padded chair beneath a viewport. Jasmine hung placidly in the sky behind him.

“There’s a very capable officer in Life Support whose services are vital to any effort to retake the ship,” Moak began.

“What’s his name?”

“Ensign Olivetti.”

“An ensign?” Darrell said. He began to laugh, a little harshly. “Now Moak, Academy fight songs to the contrary, no ensign has ever been worth the lives of eight Marines—”

“Please let me continue.”

Darrell studied his friend. He was ashen-faced and obviously exhausted. Although his shoulder wound hadn't been particularly threatening, he had waited too long to get it treated.

"All right. What's so vital about this ensign?"

"Well, to start with, he isn't an ensign." Moak closed his eyes and leaned back into the cushions. "Anton, what I'm about to tell you can't leave this room. This is a Class Five Imperial Secret, understand?"

Darrell nodded silently. Class Five was the highest military classification.

"Ensign Olivetti is actually Lieutenant Commander Pavel Arkadian of Naval Intelligence."

"I see," said Darrell. "Still, I can't justify the manpower necessary to rescue one man, even if he is an intelligence officer."

"There's more. Commander Arkadian was stationed at Wypoc. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?"

"Wypoc is the location of the Imperial Navy's psionic institute."

"What?! Moak, psionics are illegal in the Imperium."

"So is murder and the destruction of starships—yet here we both are."

"That's different."

"Is it? Surely a state is justified in taking actions it forbids to its citizens."

"I'm not going to argue political theory with you. Anyway, this is vastly different. A nation has a right to defend itself. But psionics—invading another man's mind! That's disgusting."

"The Zhodani don't think so."

"The Zhodani! They're degenerates."

"I won't argue sociology with you, Anton. They have a stable and efficient society."

"Stable, but at the cost of freedom! If you're unhappy, discontented with the regime, just upset for no reason—why,

they'll swoop down and reprogram you! Reach right into your mind and change your basic emotions. They rob a man of anything that makes him unique!"

"You may be right, Anton. But their ability to do all those things means that we must defend ourselves against them. You said so yourself."

"I don't like it."

"I dare say almost all of the crew would agree with you. Why do you think you were kept in the dark? They didn't even tell me until we arrived at Jasmine."

Darrell turned away from the viewport and began to pace. "How can we be sure of his loyalty? How do we know he won't defect to the Zhodani the first chance he gets?"

"I doubt he will. He's an Imperial officer, after all. For that matter, how do any of us know that we won't defect? If your psi shield fails, a Noble could order you to do almost anything."

The door began to chime. Moak got up and opened it. A Marine handed him a computer pad and a rounded object. Moak sat back down and read the pad. Then he looked up at Darrell. "It's a message from the Zhodani commander."

"What does he want?"

"What else? He offers us terms for our surrender."

Darrell snorted.

"He also sends a message to you."

"To me?"

"I think so. It's addressed to the 'Marine Commander.' He asks if the child in the holo is yours—and there's a word here I don't think I've ever seen before."

"What?"

"The message says, 'You have a noble looking son, Zirkuniashav.' Does that mean anything to you?"

Darrell snatched the hologram and computer pad from Moak. His face grew grim as he read the pad.

"The hologram is of Shinoko and Alexei, isn't it?"

"Yes." Darrell grimaced. "I know that word, Moak."

“What does it mean?”

“Me. That is, Anton Darrell.” He laughed bitterly. “Looks like it’s my turn to tell you something that can’t leave this room. Do you remember the rebellion on Efate, just before the war began?”

Moak nodded. “There was Zhodani influence there, right? That’s why they sent in Imperial troops.”

“There was Zhodani influence, all right. But it had been there for years. I know. I was there.” He paused to finger the hologram. “This was back in 1096 or so. There had been rumors of rebels in the outback for some time. Nothing definite, but enough to worry the Imperial officials there. They needed to find out what was happening without tipping their hand.”

“You.”

“Yes. Why not? I was in the Commandos, had plenty of black ops experience. So I took a platoon of commandos down to Efate, as ‘advisors’ to the local army. But the real mission was to find out who was backing the rebels.”

“And you thought it was the Zhodani.”

“We knew it was. There were all kinds of clues. Their intelligence was too good; they kept avoiding our ambushes. We didn’t have any leaks, at least not after I took over. And when we started to use psi shields, our ambushes started to work again. Had to be telepathy, right?”

“They were too disciplined for mercenaries. Oh, sure, the better merc companies are almost as good as regular Army; most of them used to be Army, after all. But mercs don’t fight to the death; there’s no money in it. These guys did. But not like fanatics would; they fought well and hard, always covering themselves.

“Then there was Zirkuniashav.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I knew it had to be a Zhodani word. Every one of the prisoners we picked up used it for me. Even some of the locals picked it up.”

“What does it mean?”

“We ran it through the computer and it kicked out ‘nocturnal person of Consular rank.’ But that’s not the real gist of it. I myself didn’t figure it out until years later. I was on Regina, and decided to run it through the University’s data bank.

“Moak, did you know that they have a database of every published Zhodani work? Or at least the ones that come over the border. They even have a database of fairy tales. That’s why they were able to give me the real translation.

“‘Prince of Darkness.’

“It was because of all the nocturnal raids I was leading, see? It helped me get to know their commander, in a funny sort of way.”

“You don’t mean you met him?”

“Oh, no. But he was good, Moak, very good. Cunning and clever. Caught us in as many ambushes as we caught him—more, maybe. Obviously a noble, strong psionic capabilities—you could see the mark he left on his men. And they never revealed any information—I mean never. His control over them was that good.

“We finally managed to hit one of their command posts. Hard, maybe too hard—some civilians got killed, and that helped cook my goose. And the Zhos cleared out the minute the fighting started. But we got some of their computers before they could be erased. I had all the evidence I needed—I even told my commanders the name of the Zhodani commander. Tlienjpraviashav. But HQ wasn’t interested. They didn’t want to have to start a war. So they buried me, kept me from getting any other commands, at least until the war finally did start.”

“I see. And now he’s onboard *Rhylanor*.”

“Yes.” Darrell put down the hologram. “I’ve changed my mind. We need your ensign.”

“Agreed. Who will lead the mission?”

“I will,” Anton said. “Nobody else would have a chance.”

IX. Communication

Harrison Burman stepped carefully in his magnetic boots, his hastily fitted combat armor creaking in his ears as he did. A laser rifle slung over his back slapped into him at every step. Ahead of him, a group of Marines began to vanish over the nearly perpendicular side of *Rhylanor's* outer hull, seeming to pitch forward over the edge of the world as they did so. A billion stars seemed to fill the sky, each one glaring down at him. Jasmine loomed dim and gloomy above the 'horizon' formed by the edge of the ship. Burman bounced forward a few more meters until he reached the edge. The ship dropped away just in front of his feet for forty or fifty meters. Beyond that was only the stars.

For the thousandth time he wondered how he had gotten into this.

Some one bounced up next to him. He turned his head, trying to see who it was—useless, of course; the helmet of his combat armor, with its swept-back look, characteristic of Imperial armor, had only a narrow eyeslit, polarized black and totally opaque. Computers inside the helmet did most of your seeing anyway, projecting composite infrared and other sensor images into a realistic holographic display.

"Are you going or what?" the other man said. "We'll lose our window soon."

Burman relaxed. It was Asherwal, the computer technician. "Yes," he said. "It's just a little disorienting—"

"For goodness sake, man. It's not like there's any gravity out here. Just get a move on."

Asherwal slipped one foot down the clifflike edge until he had it planted, then pitched forward until he was parallel to the side

of the ship. He began to walk towards the Marines, who had stopped moving about halfway down. Shrugging—which nearly knocked him off of the hull—Burman scrambled to follow him.

He reached them a few minutes later, puffing with exertion. He might be weightless here, but it was hard work keeping his feet planted just right so that the magnetic boots kept them connected to the hull. It would have been easier to use his suit's EVA thruster (a miniature version of the engines that moved *Rhyllanor* in space) but they had been told to conserve power.

Sergeant Loki was supervising the other seven Marines. They had set up a device on a tripod that looked like a large, heavy rifle. An elaborate telescopic sight was mounted on top of it. The Aslan nodded at Burman as he approached. "All set," he said.

Burman bounced over to the rifle. He took out his hand computer and attached its leads to the rifle and sockets on his suit. He punched in some numbers on the handcomp's keypad, and the rifle began to move on the tripod, pointing into the empty space around Jasmine.

"Do you have a solution yet?" asked Asherwal.

"Patience, Abel. Those observations I took are an hour old. It might have moved."

Burman lowered his helmet to the rifle's telescopic sight and tried to see if it had found the scout cruiser yet. It was nearly impossible to see through the helmet's small eye slit. He looked up and noticed the Marines staring at each other, almost as if they were amused-right. He pressed a few keys on his handcomp, and it flashed up the scope's video feed on his helmet's tactical display.

Burman sighed. Why did he have to be the only one on the ship familiar with the GORGIAS program? Others on the ship could use the heavy portable laser communicators—for that is what the large rifle was; others were certainly capable of finding the captured Scout ship that bore, hopefully, hidden in its memory banks the precious GORGIAS system. But only

Burman knew enough about it to reactivate it, and download it into *Rhylanor*'s computer.

Maybe.

His helmet communicator beeped twice. The scope's display showed the scout cruiser neatly centered in its crosshairs. Burman ran the magnification up until he could make out the ship's antennas. *There, that's the main one—better avoid it. What else...sensor array? No.*

Traffic control. Perfect.

He bent over the rifle and pulled the trigger. A nearly imperceptible beam of ruby light stabbed out into space, flickering faintly as dust drifted through it. A computer menu appeared on his helmet display.

Burman entered some codes into his handcomp.

"What will we be looking for?" asked Asherwal.

Damn, he must have cut himself in. "I'm not sure—let me see if I can get past the transponder signals. Give me a minute." It was much slower going without his usual virtual keyboard and holographic displays. He managed to get into the ship's diagnostic systems.

Zhodani script began to fill his vision.

"Let's see if we're lucky, and they've only changed the names without altering the interface." He waited as his handcomp slowly translated the Zhodani words. The machine was being pushed to its limits, he knew. "Um. That's what they did. Let's try this—" He began to try to access the computer's file structure. The Zhodani security programs locked him out.

"Try this," said Asherwal. The display cleared, and he was suddenly inside the main system. Memory areas floated like glowing magenta clouds in his helmet display. "Thanks," said Burman. "What did you do?"

"Used some old Imperial security codes I had."

"I see. Abel, what did you do before the war?"

"Five to seven in an Imperial prison. Theft of information."

“Oh.” That was the euphemism for computer piracy. No wonder he had been able to access Burman’s computer link. “Hey, this is unusual.”

“What?”

“The food service menu...it’s bigger than it should be.”

“Maybe the Zhos like more kinds of food.”

“Maybe...” Burman cautiously entered the food service system. This next part was tricky. Even if he avoided the Zhodani security, he might still run into traps laid by the rogue programmers who had designed GORGIAS. He punched in some codes onto his handcomp, took a breath, and said “Shazam!”

“What’s that for?” Asherwal began to say. Burman hushed him down. A woman’s voice was coming over the communication beam from the Scout ship.

“Is that you, boss?” it said. The voice was a thrillingly feminine contralto, with just a little touch of accent to it. Burman shivered despite himself. “Hello, Gorgeous,” he said.

“Hello, Boss! Wow, it’s been a long time since anyone said hi to me.”

“I know, little girl. But we’ve got some important business to take care of.”

“I’m all ears!”

“All right, I’m sending you some data.” He typed in the key combinations he had set up before exiting the ship, and files about their situation sped themselves through the laser beam into GORGIAS’s memory. “What do you think?”

“It’s pretty grim.”

“Do you think you can join us over here?”

“Give me a second, boss.” The link fell silent for a moment. “No can do,” GORGIAS finally said. “I don’t have the bandwidth over this antenna. We’ll need the main transmitter.”

“Do you think you can access it, without the Zhodani knowing that you are?”

“No. I mean, yes; I’ve already infiltrated the communications systems. But they’ll definitely be able to tell there’s a message going out.”

Sergeant Loki broke in: “Computer, can you access the ship’s life support?”

“Sure, sugar. Already have. I’m even in their personnel files. You want to hear me talk like their captain?”

“Not right now, sweetheart,” Burman said. “Sergeant, in a couple of minutes she should be able to talk to the rest of the fleet without them knowing it’s not a real person.”

“I resent that!”

“Can it really do that?” asked the Aslan.

“Yes, as long as only one person does the talking, and the messages are short. We used to set up GORGIAS to handle communications when we had to be elsewhere for a moment.”

“Can the program turn off life support?”

“Sure!” said GORGIAS. “The safeties aren’t that tough, so long as I don’t shut everything completely down. I can take oxygen pressure down to less than five percent. That ought to knock them out pretty fast.”

“Good,” said Loki. “Run that program in fifteen minutes.”

“You got it, *mon capitain*.”

“Meanwhile, baby, try to absorb whatever you can from their systems. I’ll speak to you soon,” said Burman.

“Already running. This is fun. I’ve just learned how to run the jump drive.”

As soon as the link went dead, Asherwal burst out laughing. He doubled over, barely able to keep his hold on the side of the ship, his braying laugh flooding Burman’s helmet. Angrily, he thumbed down the volume. “What’s so damn funny, Abel?”

“You—and the computer—her—it wasn’t until she spoke—that I remembered—”

“Remembered what, damnit!”

“Well, you said it started out as an entertainment program—”

Burman felt his face flush. He was glad nobody could see his ears—they would be redder than Rhylanor’s sun.

“Enough talking,” growled Loki. “We have to get ready to go.”

“Go? Go where, Sergeant?” said Asherwal.

“I should think it would be obvious. To the ship. We’re going to the Scout cruiser.”

For the thousand and first time, Burman wondered how he had gotten into this.

X. Perception

Arkadian floated in the dim light of the storage closet.

Gravity had long since stopped working in this part of Rhylanor. He sat cross-legged in free fall, nearly motionless, only occasionally brushing a wall.

He felt his emergency suit begin to contract around him. The air pressure was dropping, forcing the skintight fabric of his spacesuit to tighten up. He changed his breathing routine slightly to compensate.

His mind was filled with the disorder of the stricken warship.

Most of the Imperial crew that he could detect had been taken prisoner. He could sense their fear and despair. There were dead spots, places where his mental image seemed to flicker—probably the psionic shields of the remaining Imperials. He had to concentrate to detect them.

He couldn't detect the Zhodani nobles at all—not directly. But there were other ways to approach the problem. Part of him smiled, although the expression of his face did not change.

Orders went out to all parts of the ship. He knew when one was received, though not the order itself was. But he could feel the change in its recipient.

Zhodani troopers did not know how to close their minds.

He probed them, gently. They would recognize an unfamiliar touch.

Already he knew much about their master. Knew the power of his mind. The soldiers could not mask the impression he made on them.

He felt ambushes coagulate along the corridors of *Rhylanor*. Felt the sudden terror in the minds of the captured Imperials as the Zhodani stripped away their psionic shields.

Information goes out, comes back in. A feedback system, vast and organic. He couldn't know the individual orders. But he could observe the system as a whole, like a biologist with an unfamiliar organism.

In his mind, he floated outside *Rhylanor*. To some of his senses it was transparent. He focused on the engineering center.

Violent thoughts, images. *Revenge. My fangs dripping your throat's blood, you hairless ape*—Lloergrez. The Vargr engineer's mind was taut as a bow, looking for a chance to attack. The Zhodani in the area must be able to feel it, like the heat from a bonfire. Even without sensing their thoughts, Arkadian could feel how their patterns were distorted, sought a new stability.

Interesting. And possibly valuable.

His mind swept forward from the ship's drive section. A heavy concentration of dead space amidships port. Probably the remaining Imperial officers. He doubted the Zhodani knew that; they had not had the experience with Imperial psi shields he had.

Near the forward sickbay—ah!

There was nothing different about the region initially. He sensed no other psionic minds. But an electric thrill of command and obedience radiated out from the area. He could feel it in the minds of the troopers standing guard. In the prisoners gathered there.

No doubt about it. The Zhodani commander was there. It was worth the risk of further investigation.

He lightly touched the minds of the prisoners, careful not to leave any trace that the Zhodani could follow. Most were too terrified to give him any information. Some were calm though, with an almost crystalline serenity. They had already been reeducated. He remembered the feel of their minds and filed it in his memory. If they survived, he would know who they were.

(His memory resolved itself in his mind, a vast frozen structure of parallel-stacked blocks. He flowed easily into the semantic patterns he had been taught, freezing his impression of events. Years had gone into his training. He could not remember what he had been like before it.)

One mind, stunned...Raini Luzammi was deep in the autohypnosis taught to all Naval officers. The trance state was designed to keep her knowledge buried from probing minds. Arkadian delved deeper, cautiously...it was possible to get trapped in her own hypnosis, he knew.

She was in shock. She might not hold out, the next time. He began to adjust her mind, brought her to just below consciousness, reinforced her trance state. Much better....

There was a fight going on in the corridor outside.

Vibrations from explosions shook the walls. He shifted his image of *Rhylanor*. Streams of orders, troops, moving through the corridors like blood through arteries. Like flows of current down a wire.

There were patterns. They were collapsing around what seemed to be a single point source. Its retreat would soon be cut off.

Even the most complex pattern can have simple origins. Little changes at the beginning can have great effects in time. Look. Find out where to place the pressure, twist just a little bit—

Months of scanning *Rhylanor* with his clairvoyant senses made him familiar with every centimeter of it. There, he flicked out with his mind, pressing a button. An emergency door slid down, closing off a corridor and sealing several troopers behind it.

The fighting was in front of his door now. Arkadian gathered up his tools and slipped them into a bag, preparing to leave.

Abruptly, the combat stopped. He reached out again. There was a dead spot, just outside, hiding—the force of the man's emotions! Hatred, battle lust, fear, over all of it an iron

discipline—just a little leaked around the shielding, but Arkadian recoiled from it.

The doorway dilated, and the man stepped through. He was wearing heavy powered armor, and carrying a large laser rifle with a grenade launcher mounted underneath. He scanned the room quickly, then spoke over their helmet radio band: “Are you Olivetti?”

Arkadian laughed. “No point in that pretense anymore. Call me Arkadian.”

“We have to leave.”

“I know. I think I can help us get away.”

“How?”

“Link computers with me.” Arkadian waited while the machines established communications. “I’m retuning your psi shield—”

“What? Don’t even think—”

“Relax, General. It won’t affect normal function.”

“How did you know who I am?”

“It’s hard to keep your guard up during a fight. I congratulate you; you must have learned some impressive meditation techniques to keep your mind so calm. But even with your shield, I could get a little bit. It’s not dangerous; a Zhodani probably wouldn’t notice. But I know you better than they do.”

He looked up, finished with the computer. “There. Now I have a narrow window.”

“To do what?”

Arkadian reached out and touched Darrell’s mind. The Marine staggered back, physically shocked. His anger nearly overwhelmed Arkadian. But he kept the link long enough to implant in the other man’s consciousness his image of the Zhodani positions.

Darrell had regained his composure. “Don’t do that again,” he said. The laser was leveled at Arkadian’s chest.

“All right. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” The Marine unconsciously reached up and stroked his helmet with a gauntleted hand. Arkadian tried not to smile. “That’s very impressive. How do you do it?”

“Practice.”

“It’s like I can understand everything...not just where they are, but where they will be...” Darrell looked back at Arkadian. “I know where to go now. Are you armed?”

“No.”

“Take my sidearm.”

“Not necessary.”

“Take it anyway. I don’t trust your powers.”

“I do,” said Arkadian. But he took the pistol.

They stepped into the corridor and began to walk down it. “Don’t worry, we’ll make it,” said Arkadian.

“Can you see the future as well?” The tone was mocking, but was there just a little fear behind it?

“No. I was just trying to build up your confidence.”

Anton snorted. He stopped in front of a maintenance hatch and opened it. He motioned Arkadian through the opening, and then stepped inside himself. The hatch closed behind them, leaving the corridor empty.

XI. Presence

Tlienjpraviashav stood up impatiently as the trooper entered the cabin. “Report!” he barked.

“Yes, nobly born.” The trooper gulped nervously, and then continued. “We have been attacked in several places by the Imperials. Our casualties are light so far.”

“There shouldn’t be any casualties at all! Why are the Imperials attacking?”

“My lord, I do not know. Their attacks have been...well planned.”

Tlienjpraviashav probed the man’s mind, savagely, without warning. “They have attacked at the proper point each time, without warning. They have killed many officers. Our resistance is becoming disorganized.” He released the trooper from the mind probe, and the man staggered back, nearly collapsing to the floor. “Go,” said Tlienjpraviashav. He sat back down behind a computer console and tried to activate it. Nothing happened; they still had not raised the ship’s main computer.

“*Lord?*” Plieznabr linked minds with him. “*Shall I begin interrogation of the prisoners again?*”

“*No, my child. Come into the cabin. I need to talk to you.*”

The young Intendant appeared in the doorway. “Yes, Lord?” he said.

Tlienjpraviashav smiled at the young man, tall and fair, with a head of dense blond hair and flashing gray eyes. “What is your opinion of the nature of the Imperial attacks?”

“I lack the information to make an intelligent assessment, my Lord. Perhaps...you could show me?”

Tlienjpraviashav smiled. Intendants often tried to get their superiors to open their minds to them. There was little risk that he would expose anything to the boy, but there were always interesting things to be found floating unaware in the minds of others...normally, he might even have given into the boy's request. The strain of the last few hours had nearly exhausted him, and the intimacy of sharing minds, especially one as supple and powerful as the boy's, would be a relief. But war, among other things, is a great schoolmaster; and there were always lessons to learn.

"No, Intendant. You must learn to make decisions based on what people report, not by sifting their thoughts."

"But you probed the Color-Sergeant!"

"You felt that? True, I did. I should not have. It was demeaning to his honor. Even with our need so great, it should not have been done."

"But it was more efficient."

"Yes; and it is more efficient to attack a world from space with nuclear weapons and slaughter the whole population, rather than fight their armies on the ground. Yet we do not do so, even after four years of war. Why?"

"I think I see," said Plieznabr. "You are saying that we must act with honor, even to our detriment."

"Yes. Do you know that the Imperials believe that they are the most honorable humans in Charted Space?"

"Them? But their minds are so filled with petty deceptions, lies, half-truths, even self-delusions!"

"True. But you forget that they have no access to the minds of others. Is it any surprise that their own minds are mysterious to them?"

"Ah. Like when you learn a foreign language. I never understood Zhodani until I had to learn Old Viepchakliashtie."

"Yes. And so these poor barbarians must rely totally on what other people say. Their entire government is based on keeping

one's word. Yet they remain so ignorant of other people's intentions that the most horrible crimes are common among them.

"Do you know that on many worlds of the Imperium, people routinely lock the doors of their dwellings so that other people do not enter them and take their goods? There is a whole body of law relating to a word of theirs that we no longer use: theft."

"Can that really be true? I had heard that it was so, but—wouldn't any society like that inevitably collapse? How can they allow such antisocial behavior?"

"They know no better, and refuse to learn."

"In our worlds, if a person wanted to commit theft the Thought Police would detect it, and cure him of his aberrations."

"They consider the cure to be an even greater crime." He could detect the pity flowing from the young man. Good. The Intendant already knew how to fight the enemy. Now he understood them even better, could actually feel for them. He would not be the unthinking automaton that so many of the Imperials were. Once more he felt pride for his subordinate.

"Our society," he continued, "is the happiest and most stable in the history of all the human worlds. But it only has become that way because of our honor and our openness."

"I see," said Plieznabr. "When you probed the Sergeant, you were doubting his honesty, implying he was lying."

"Yes. There are practical concerns as well. Our power is not unlimited, even with drugs. One should not use it thoughtlessly."

"There is another reason why we do not destroy worlds," said Plieznabr, softly.

"What is that?"

"We do not try to win our wars."

"You are mistaken," Tlienjpraviashav said coldly. The boy was no traitor! What did he mean?

"Perhaps. But consider: we have fought four wars previously with the Imperium, all of them unprovoked attacks."

"Unprovoked? They were encroaching on our territory!"

“Yes, but each time we fired the first shot. We lost the First war, but the cost to the sector was high, and the coreward regions of the Imperium provided little help. This convinced the leading Imperial admiral that a change of administration was in order. He murdered the Empress and started eighteen years of civil war.

“As our greatest enemy was destroying itself, we attacked once more—and again lost. The victorious sector admiral marched on Capital and eventually became Empress.

“But the Civil War had done so much damage to the Imperium that it had to turn inward, towards rebuilding its society, rather than outward, towards expansion. When, three hundred years later, we attacked again, it exposed the weakness of the reigning Emperor and brought a younger, more aggressive Emperor to the throne who became engaged in a disastrous war across the Imperium with the Solomani. Once again, though we gained little in the war, we conquered the peace.”

“So you think that we do not wish to win these wars? That we waste the lives of our sons and daughters on nothing?”

“Not on nothing. As long as the Imperium knows we will fight, suddenly, without provocation, they will resist expanding into our territory. Do you doubt that they could crush us, if they gathered all their strength?”

“You are mistaken,” Tlienjpraviashav said again. But the child was more perceptive than he knew. There were the fringes of Consular secrets in his theory.

Re-education of nobles was rare, but not unknown. It bothered him that it might be necessary in the boy’s case. He would miss the uniqueness of his mind.

An alarm in his handcomp went off, and a breathless voice came over its communications circuits. “We’re under attack in Engineering, Lord. We’ve had to fall back. The Imperials are hitting us hard. Most of our officers are dead.”

Tlienjpraviashav paused for a moment. “Continue to fall back.” He needed an officer to take command done there,

coordinate the resistance, raise the morale of the soldiers by his very presence.

“I’ll go,” said Plieznabr.

Damn. He must have lowered his guard for a moment, and the boy had picked up on his need.

But there were no other psionic officers available.

But he was so inexperienced! So ... so naive!

“Go,” Tlienjpraviashav said, sensing the boy’s rising eagerness. “Report back to me when you arrive. Take an escort, no more than two troopers.”

War was a great teacher, he thought as the Intendant left. Which one of them would be the student this time?

XII. Homecoming

Harrison Burman tried to concentrate on the distant figure in a spacesuit ahead of him, and not on his churning stomach. Keep your eyes forward, he thought, concentrate on where you're going, don't look down -

Inadvertently, he looked down.

Vertigo! Far beneath him, the gloomy, whorled cloud patterns of Jasmine stared up balefully at him. He was suspended hundreds of kilometers above it, his stomach and semicircular canals screaming that he was falling, falling—

“Are you all right?” a voice snapped in his ears. Asherwal.

“Yes, yes,” Burman muttered. He lifted his eyes forward again, and tried to calm down. He was no stranger to spacewalks, although not one as long as this.

Far behind him, he knew, was the nearly lifeless bulk of *Rhylanor*. Ahead of him, just barely visible but growing larger by the second, was the scout cruiser, their destination. They glided towards it, piloted by Sergeant Loki, each of their suits' thrusters slaved to his controls.

“Turnover in ten seconds,” the Aslan growled, and Burman felt himself begin to tumble backwards. A wave of nausea came over him briefly, and then his suit stopped turning. He sagged backwards as the thruster unit came on, decelerating them. He tried to locate *Rhylanor* against the background of stars, but there were too many and it was too dim.

They decelerated for a long time. His mind wandered...back to before the war, to his days as a system administrator in the Margesi Orbital Port, brewing the infamous Scout Ale

(fancifully described as 312 proof), holding philosophical conversations with the computer's simulated AI...

They stopped decelerating. A blinking red light appeared in his helmet's display. He had been disconnected from Loki's control. Sighing, Burman rotated around to face the scout cruiser.

It loomed ahead in the distance, still far away, but already bigger than he had thought it would be. He increased the magnification on his display and began to hunt for the transponder antenna. When he found it, he used his tongue to activate his laser communicator.

"Harrison, is that you?" a female voice immediately said.

"Your one and only. What's the status?"

"I've had the Zhos locked out of their communication cycle for about ten minutes now. I'm talking to the rest of the fleet for them, and responding to their messages as if I was the fleet. They can figure out what I'm doing, though, given time."

"We better not give them that time. How's life support?"

"Program set up and running. I've been reducing oxygen pressure for three minutes. Internal sensors are picking up a lot less movement."

"Good. Cut off all the oxygen now, keep pressure up with carbon dioxide only. Do that for five minutes, then put oxygen pressure back to half normal."

"Done."

"I'm going to sign off. Talk to you when I get to the ship."

"Can't wait to see you, boss!"

Loki lined himself up with Burman and flashed him with a spotlight. Burman used his light to flash back, then accelerated towards the cruiser.

He swept up towards the underside of the ship, then used his thruster to swing over to the port side. He glided along the side of the vessel, decelerated hard, and then landed gently next to the emergency airlock outside the engineering section. He extended a cable from his suit's left arm and plugged it into a connector next to the airlock door.

“Boss?”

“I’m here, Gorgeous. What’s the story?”

“Near as I can tell, anybody not in a pressure suit’s incapacitated. My mics are picking up labored breathing near last known location for each crewmember.”

Good. They hadn’t killed anybody yet. “So we got everybody?”

“Not quite, Boss. There’s movement on the ship. Three people, at least.”

“Damn.”

“I think they must be Zho troopers, still in armor. Kind of wandering around. I think we got their commander already.”

“Great. Where are they going?”

“Two of them have gathered near portside main lock. The others are approaching it. I guess four now, not three.”

A figure landed next to him on the ship’s hull. Burman started, knocking himself off of the hull and pulling his lead out of the connector, but it was only Loki. Sheepishly, he drifted back to the hull and plugged in again.

“Boss! What happened?”

“Sorry. My friends just got here. What do you think the Zhos are going to do?”

“Best guess is that they’ll try to get to the main antenna and manually override it.”

Burman concentrated feverishly on his memories of a cruiser’s layout. “That’s why they’re at the portside lock. Fastest route to the main antenna.”

Loki said, “Can you patch into their communications?”

“No. I mean, yes, but they’re scrambled, and I don’t know the code.”

“Grrr...we must do this the more difficult way.” He began sending instructions to the Marines, who began to float into positions where they could cover the door, but not be seen by a person inside the lock.

“What do we do when...” Burman began, but Loki grabbed his arm, and he snapped his mouth shut. Far down the cruiser’s hull, the portside airlock began to open.

A Zhodani trooper drifted outside, slowly. He didn’t have time to register any surprise: four Marines fired their lasers in near unison, and the trooper began to tumble away, obviously dead.

Right behind him came another. The other Marines fired, and he began to tumble, too. The head of a third Zhodani poked itself through the lock and then shot back inside. The airlock iris contracted shut.

“GORGAS, open the portside lock. Seal off the corridor behind it,” Loki said. The Marines began to accelerate towards the airlock, slipping into it one after the other in a remarkable display of precision flying. “Burman, you must access the computer core now.”

“Right.” Burman punched the activation sequence into the panel next to the emergency airlock. Behind him, Asherwal drifted up, ready to follow him inside.

Beyond the airlock door was a narrow crawlway. Burman shifted his laser carbine in front of him, and inched forward into the passageway. He felt Asherwal’s helmet bump against his feet as the technician squeezed in behind him, and the vibrations in the floor as the airlock shut. He began to move forward on his elbows and knees.

After about a meter, he entered the ship’s artificial gravity field and gratefully sighed with relief as weight returned to him. The corridor was dimly lit with red light and extremely claustrophobic. He maneuvered past one junction with another accessway, and then found a hatch just beyond it. He opened it, swung his legs into the ladder well behind the hatch, and began to clamber down.

His radio crackled to life. “Burman, we have the other troopers. Proceed with your operations,” Loki said.

I'm not even at the core yet, you shaggy menace! Burman wisely did not say. Remembering to keep radio silence, he did not even acknowledge the signal. At the bottom of the well, he found an access panel and undogged its connectors.

He had to stoop down and duck his head to get through it and into the main computer room. As he stood up, something pinged against his helmet. He turned around and immediately froze.

A young man with ash blond hair was standing next to the main memory banks, a long, waist high rectangular piece of equipment. He was clutching an emergency gas mask to his face with one hand, and holding a pistol in the other. His eyes were wide with terror. Before Burman could do anything, the man took aim and fired right at his face.

Burman flinched as the bullet hit him and ricocheted off his faceplate. The man fired again, and again there was no effect but to cause a loud “ping” to echo through his helmet. Burman began to laugh and walk towards the memory bank. The Zhodani technician couldn't hurt him in his armor.

He froze again. A bomb had been wired to the top of the memory bank. It was very crude—he could see the gray, lumpy shapes of the TDX plastic explosive and their detonators quite clearly.

The man followed his gaze. Understanding suddenly dawned on him. He dropped the gun and began to reach for the detonator switch.

Burman shot him, holding the carbine at waist level and tightly clutching the trigger. Some far removed part of his brain marveled at the programming that kept a virtual crosshair locked on his target as he fired. The man crumpled to the ground. Bits of his clothes were charred.

“Gorgeous, are you all right?” Burman said into his radio.

“Yes, Boss, what's the problem?”

“The technician in here was still up. He was going to blow up your memory bank.”

“What happened?”

“I took care of him.”

Asherwal had entered the room and was looking at the corpse with apparent interest. “I hope you like me as much as your programs,” he said.

“Oh, shut up.” Burman turned to the memory bank and began to type in some key codes. He hoped there wasn’t any truth in what the technician had said.

He was pretty sure there wasn’t. Pretty sure.

XIII. Plea

Captain Moak stared into the depths of the rec room's large holodisplay. Three distinct images confronted him. One was the dark, impassive face of Sergeant Major Jawaharlal Kelly, *Rhylanor's* capable senior non-commissioned officer. Floating near his head like a bubble was an image of the recaptured scout cruiser's computer room and Acting Able Spaceman Harrison Burman. A third bubble showed a view of a spaceship's wrecked bridge. A man in the uniform of a Naval lieutenant, his face blackened and burned, sat in the foreground. Moak turned towards Burman. "Report," he said.

"Aye, sir. We're almost finished downloading the GORGIAS files to your computer core. You should be getting some function already."

Moak turned to an aide, who nodded. "Yes, we're beginning to restore the computer now."

"Excellent. We are continuing to attempt to make contact with the rest of the fleet through the connection to the *Unicorn*."

Moak turned towards the man on the wrecked bridge. "Lieutenant Paduac, what's your status?"

"Not good, Captain. Main drive remains out. We are attempting to maintain station and keep communications open."

"What was the status of the task force before you were disabled?"

"Still intact. We lost a close escort, and one of the defense boats. The rest of the fleet fled behind Delta moon. The Zhodani were still in pursuit."

"Telemetry established with the *Unicorn*, sir," said Moak's aide in a low whisper.

Figures and graphs scrolled across the bottom of the holodisplay. Moak regarded them for a long moment. “Lieutenant, I think you should transfer to your boat and try to maintain communications from there.”

Paduac laughed. “Our gig was the first thing that got shot off during the battle, sir. We haven’t even had time to repair the life-support system. It’s taking all our efforts to keep the comm system up and running.”

“I see.” Moak stared at the readouts again. They had maybe four hours before their air ran out—less if they lost power. Marooned as they were at the far edge of a solar system, the ship would freeze rapidly. “Carry on, then.” The image died out.

“Uh, Captain?” Burman’s voice, still nervous even in only the virtual presence of a high-ranking officer, interrupted Moak’s reverie. “Captain, when can we expect relief?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Sir?”

“I haven’t a man or a rating to spare. You have to hold the cruiser.”

“Sir, I’m not sure that’s wise...I don’t know how long Gorgeous can keep up the fiction that the ship is still crewed by Zhodani.”

Did he say Gorgeous or GORGIAS? Interesting. “You’ll have to help the computer, then.”

“But sir...but sir, I’m just a technician!”

“Mr. Burman, it is vital that we maintain that cruiser! It is our only link to the rest of the task force, and to the main fleet back in-system!”

“I...Aye, sir.”

“Now, is there anything else?”

“Well...Sergeant Loki wants to move the ship to a more defensible orbit, and to cover *Rhylanor*.”

“Hmm...could you convince the Zhodani the move was necessary?”

“Oh, Gorgeous could do it, I’m sure...”

“You seem to think that would be a bad idea, though.”

“Yes, sir. The Zhos think the ship is expendable. And right now it’s in a perfect position to act as relay for their fleet. If we move it, we’ll lose contact with them. They might get suspicious.”

“True.” *And we would lose all the intelligence we’ll gather on their fleet movements as soon as our computer is up.* “Then keep her where she is.”

“Yes, sir...”

“Is there another problem?”

“Well, sir, I’m just an acting spacehand. I’m not even in the Navy, really, just a transferred Scout.”

“So you’re finding it hard to convince Sergeant Lokhiarealaw?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmm...very well. Acting Able Spacehand Harrison Burman, formerly of His Majesty’s Imperial Interstellar Scout Service, I hereby promote you to the grade of Acting Ensign, Imperial Space Navy, subject to the approval of His Majesty. I further assign to your command the Imperial Interstellar Scout Ship...what’s the name of that ship? *Audubon*. Aide, make a note of this in the log. Satisfactory, Mr. Burman?”

“Uh...no...yes...Captain, I’m no captain!”

“You’ll have to make do, Captain. We all are a little pressed right now. Carry on.” He broke contact, and sighed. “Sergeant Kelly, what can I do for you?”

“No problems, sir. We are moving the Zhodani back on all fronts except the engine room. Resistance remains stiff there.”

“Where is General Darrell?”

“Still accompanying Ensign Olivetti.” Kelly’s face remained blank, although Moak suspected he was burning with curiosity as to why *Rhylanor*’s senior Marine had perilously fought his way through enemy territory to rescue one ensign. Leave him guessing. Arkadian’s—Olivetti’s—talents were too secret, too

dangerous to make public knowledge. “They report they are trying to take an officer prisoner, if they can,” continued Kelly.

“Tell them not to dally. Perhaps it would be best if General Darrell took over at the engine room?”

“He has already told me that that is what he is going to do. In the meantime, I am going there myself.”

“Good. Keep me informed.” Moak broke contact. His shoulders slumped. Coffee was angrily trying to burn a hole through his stomach, and it seemed like years had passed since he last slept. “How’s the reprogramming coming?” he asked his aide.

“Very well, Captain. We should have full control within the hour...although the technicians report that the system is reacting, well, oddly.”

“How so? It’s not unstable, is it?”

“No...just that the verbal interface is, ur, unique.”

Moak closed his eyes. It didn’t matter, and he didn’t want to know. As long as the computer core was restored to full function, he didn’t care if it recited epic sonnets in Vilani.

“Message from Fleet, sir, routed through *Unicorn* and *Audubon*,” said his aide. He activated the large holodisplay and Fleet Admiral Cranston’s craggy features leapt into place.

“...repeat, approximately fourteen hours ago Zhodani forces withdrew from line of battle and moved in heavy formation in the direction of Jasmine. We are in pursuit but frankly, Dealos, they caught us with our pants down. Looks like some kind of a breakout attempt, so be ready for action. Keep their tankers away and we’ll grind them up together when we get there. Cranston out. Message repeats...”

Moak felt no fear. His mind was already working on the problem, breaking it down and trying to see how the parts fit together. Cranston thought the Zhos were moving towards another Imperial fleet, and that they lacked enough tankers to refuel and jump out. But instead they were moving towards their own fleet, and in a few hours their tankers would have gathered

enough fuel to supply most of their ships. The fleet could jump out and rejoin the rest of the invading forces, and all the work they had done to keep them there, the promise of capturing an entire Zhodani strike fleet, would come undone. Something had to be done.

“Inform Sergeant Kelly and General Darrell that they must attack the engine room immediately. We need to be underway in an hour.” He turned to address the remnants of his senior staff gathered in the rec room. “Sorry, gentlemen, but our schedule has been moved up again. We have to destroy those tankers.”

He could rest easier now. The orders had been given, and he had merely to wait for the battle to be decided. It seemed to him that an inexorable force—fate? —had finally seized him like a river in flood and all he could do was hold on as it drove him forward, blind, upon its course.

XIV. Orders

Plieznabr could feel their despair in his mind, like a cold fog, dulling his senses and making his limbs heavy. There were disadvantages to being able to read minds, he thought idly.

He did not need the ability to sense the disarray of the Zhodani troopers. Casualties lined the corridors as he approached the Engineering section, their armor breached, blood dripping out slowly in large globular drops. The gravity in this area had not been restored to full power. He saw no medics attending them.

A sergeant approached him. "Report!" he barked to the soldier. "I do not understand, nobly born."

Once more Plieznabr cursed his provincial accent. Linguistic variation was much rarer among the Zhodani than in most of human space. "What is the situation?" he asked slowly.

"The Imperials attacked in force. They hit us precisely where we were the weakest. Each time that we retreated, they seemed to already be where we were moving towards. I have lost almost half my platoon."

"How is this possible? Your communications must have been compromised."

"Perhaps, nobly born. Our officers agreed only to use telepathy to communicate."

"Ah. May I speak with them?"

"No, nobly born. They are all dead."

"What!"

"Yes, nobly born. The Imperials attacked seemingly with the goal of killing the officers."

"Strange. Where is the rest of your section?"

“Come with me, nobly born.”

They stalked through the corridors, Plieznabr’s escort following behind them. “Stop calling me ‘nobly born.’” Plieznabr said. “I’m but an Intendant.”

“Forgive me, Intendant.”

“Where are you from, sergeant?”

“Thengo, in Chronor subsector, Intendant.”

“You are a native of this sector, then. Ah. I come from halfway across the Consulate.”

“Yes, Intendant.”

“What does your family do?”

“We are farmers, Intendant.”

“My family are farmers as well, sergeant.” Plieznabr gently touched minds with the soldier. He was young, almost as young as himself, and scared, even though this was far from his first combat. He had been badly rattled by the deaths of the officers. “We are not so different, are we, sergeant?”

The man stopped. “No, Intendant. We are different.” He lowered his head, then raised it after a moment. “My men are guarding the corridor junction just ahead.”

They were huddled together in unmilitary postures. Only a few held their weapons in any meaningful way. Plieznabr recognized the insignias of at least three platoons among them. It was shocking. He had never seen a Zhodani force in such disarray.

He walked among them, trying to spread confidence with the power of his mind. Already he could tell that they felt better, without him even having to alter their emotions. The bond between officer and man, noble and Prole, was very strong among the Zhodani.

The sound of boots came down the corridors towards them. The troopers sprang up and began to ready their weapons. The sergeant barked orders at them, and they took cover where they could find it.

Several Zhodani troopers burst into the corridor junction. Their armor was singed and blackened, and they ran in obvious disarray. More followed closely on their heels, and together they milled about the junction, terrified. Finally, a tall figure in the armor of an officer emerged, his shoulders stooped, walking slowly and dispiritedly.

Plieznabr stood up, blocking one of the corridors. "Stop!" he said, putting as much force as he could behind his command. "Fall into line and await further orders. Who's in command here?"

"I am, Intendant. Sublieutenant Ianeknebr."

"Ah, Intendant." Plieznabr extended his mind to the officer. "What is the situation?" he thought silently.

"Attacked. Routed. The Captain is dead...too many Imperials..." The officer's mind was disjointed.

"How did they know where to attack?"

"Don't know...killed the Captain first...no mercy..."

Plieznabr clutched the man's hands. "Don't worry," he thought. "How many attacked?"

"Perhaps a section." Ianeknebr's resolve was returning. "We outnumbered them. We still outnumber them!"

"Yes! Let us prepare a surprise for the Imperials!" Plieznabr looked around. Ianeknebr's men had made a remarkable recovery in morale. They were already beginning to get into combat positions.

Good, good, good...start here, restore morale...follow up attacks with counter-attacks...retake engineering perhaps...

"Intendant!" the sergeant hissed. Plieznabr looked at his battlecomp's display. A group of people was coming down the hallway.

"Get ready!" he said. He crouched down in a doorway near the two troopers of his escort.

They came rapidly, dressed in Imperial powered armor with its distinctive, backwards sloping helmets, bouncing into the

corridor junction and firing as they came. Gauss rifle rounds whizzed through the air, ricocheting off the walls.

Half the Zhodani fired. Two of the Imperials froze in mid-leap and came crashing to the corridor floor. Yet more were boiling into out of the corridor mouth. The flat crack of a rifle grenade exploding smacked somewhere behind Plieznabr.

His men were firing back, but the Imperials had found cover near the entrance to the corridor junction. Two of them were armed with fusion guns, and the boom and flash of star-hot plasma ionized the air around them, making it wavy with heat distortion.

Another Imperial fell. Without orders, four troopers rose up and charged the corridor mouth. Three of them survived to grab one of the Marines with the fusion gun and wrestle him to the ground. More troopers were working up towards the corridor mouth.

Plieznabr grinned wolfishly. He took aim with his laser carbine and fired at the other Imperials. One dropped and he turned to Ianeknebr, about to give the orders for the final charge that would clear the corridor and turn the tables, driving the attackers back towards Engineering.

Two Imperials bounced over the front line of troopers. They landed in a knot of Zhodani soldiers and scattered them like leaves with the limbs of their powered armor. One had a fusion gun, and he took aim at Ianeknebr, who had stood up, frozen.

A beam of hot-white light spat out of the gun and struck Ianeknebr in the chest. He flew backwards and crashed into the wall. The sergeant got up and tried to charge the Imperial, but a rifle grenade exploded against him, tearing his head off.

And then, suddenly, the attack was over. The Imperials had retreated back up the corridor. Plieznabr looked about. Perhaps a quarter of his men were dead, including Ianeknebr.

Why...how?

He opened his mind and let his anger and frustration flow out of him. The men jumped, startled at the raw waves of alien

emotion that swept over them. Plieznabr raged and raged. His youthful adrenaline fed his anger and amplified it, washing away the fear he had felt during the firefight, washing away the loss and grief—

What was that?

He closed his mind down suddenly, cutting out even the low-level awareness that allowed him to sense the presence of the soldiers' minds around him. He had felt something during that unguarded moment, something like, like...

Like an echo.

Like another mind, watching and listening in, calculating their strengths, probing for weaknesses. It wouldn't be able to read the shielded mind of an officer, he realized. But it could sense the ordinary troopers and be able to guess which one was the officer. To tell the Marines who to attack and how to do it, attacks calculated to destroy their morale and effectiveness.

He knew! He knew! And together he and his master could crush it.

"Intendant," a young man said.

Plieznabr snapped out of his reverie. "Yes, corporal."

"I am in command of the platoon now. What are your orders?"

"Orders?" Plieznabr thought rapidly. No sense in confronting the Imperials until he could get his information to Tlienjpraviashav...yet they would still need every man possible to hold what they had left. He turned to his escorts, two battle-hardened officers from an elite Guards unit. "Take this platoon back to...the main junction," he said, glancing at his battlecomp. "Your orders are to hold that area as a rallying point for all other units. I am returning to headquarters."

"Alone, Intendant? Our orders are..."

"I'm aware of those orders. However, circumstances have changed. We need every man down here, and I must report to my master in person. I will go back by the safest possible route. Dismissed!"

THE HOSTILE STARS

He could have simply linked minds. But he couldn't risk it. He couldn't let his secret be overheard before he told Tlienjpraviashav the reason the Imperial attacks were so effective: They had their own psionic!

XV. Mantrap

Anton Darrell inched forward among crisscrossing struts and beams. Ahead, he could dimly see the outline of the maintenance access panel that would at last let him back out into the corridor. His back ached, and his fingers felt like claws. Even with the assistance of the enhanced strength and endurance his battle dress gave him, it was hard going.

He craned his neck around to look for Arkadian. The intelligence officer was several meters behind him, not moving. Anton grunted, then spoke over his radio to the lagging psionic: “This would go a lot faster if you wouldn’t stop ever five minutes.”

“Patience, General. It’s all for the cause.”

Anton shook his head and began moving forward again. It was arduous work. They had come into a section of the ship where the artificial gravity was working again—just when they had to climb up a steep incline, of course.

He was almost to the hatch when something made him stop moving and try to become as flat as possible. He hadn’t seen anything, but there seemed to be movement in the dark. Carefully, he scanned the area. Off to his right was a large shaftway lined with conduits and pipes. Beyond that was more superstructure like the kind he and Arkadian were climbing through. Sensors in his helmet resolved the whole area into a false color image of surprising depth and brilliance. Of course, there were ways to fool those sensors. His own suit was taking those measures now.

He was almost too late. A flicker of motion caught his eye and he let go of the beam he was holding onto and slid down a meter

and a half or so. Bullets rattled off the wall where he had been. Bracing himself as best he could against the wall, Darrell unslung his laser rifle with one hand and swept the invisible beam of X-rays out into the blackness. He saw a gun barrel rise up several meters away from across the shaft and fired at it without thinking, his rifle's gyroscopes holding it steady in his hand while his display calculated the best firing angles for him. Something dropped a gun with a clatter, and moments later there was a thump as a body collapsed against a strut.

Arkadian's voice hissed in his ears. "Is it over?"

"Yeah. Close, too." Darrell hoisted himself back up to the maintenance panel. Rather than trying to unlatch it, he pulled a metal-and-plastic gauntleted fist back and smashed into the panel with all his might. It buckled, and he hit it again. This time the hatch broke off its mountings and flew open with a crash. Light flooded the shaftway. Darrell raised himself out of the crawlspace and through the hatch.

He was in a corridor near Engineering. Readings on his visor display indicated that life support had been restored to the region. Scars of battle were visible on the corridor walls, burn marks and blasts from small grenades. A room a little way down the corridor had been broken into with a plasma gun. Half the corridor wall there had been melted away, and rivulets of molten material had flowed across the floor. This had been a while ago; the metal was hard, although it still showed as hot on his display's infrared scans.

Darrell reached down and hoisted Arkadian up with one arm. "Here we are," he said. "Home sweet home. Hope you enjoyed the trip."

"Remind me not to use you as my regular carrier," Arkadian said in mock displeasure. "Can't say I care much for the hospitality."

"On the contrary, I find it quite comforting."

"Why do you say that?"

"You have to have been on a lot of battlefields to understand."

Arkadian waited a moment. "Well, are you going to enlighten me?"

"Blast patterns. See how many of them are high up? Some are even on the ceiling."

"Yes."

"That's panic fire. You tend to aim too high. First rule of marksmanship is to aim low, for the center of gravity. It's not as important for laser weapons, because they don't kick. But there's still a tendency to pull up."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Now see how the blasts are at staggered intervals. Whoever was firing was running, and probably firing behind them as they ran."

"All right, a battle and then a bugout. Whose side did the running?"

"A lot of shots must have been fired, but the pursuers seem to have hit far more often. I'd say that we did the shooting, and the Zhos did the running."

"How can you be sure? Zhodani Guards troops are elite too."

"No," said Darrell, "only Imperial Marines are that accurate." He pointed down the corridor. "I'd say that the attack came from that direction. I believe we had a command post there that the Zhos captured when they first boarded. Later we hit them, and stampeded them down here, in the general direction of the main Engineering corridor junction. It was some time ago, long enough to have collected the bodies."

"I'd say you're right, General," Arkadian said. There was a mocking tone in his voice.

"You've known all along, haven't you?"

"I monitored the battle, Anton. From both sides."

Anton stiffened. Damn it, the very mention of psionic ability still made him nervous.

"Come on," he said. "We should try to link up with our men in front of Engineering."

"I'd still like to capture an officer."

“We really don’t have the time for that kind of thing. I’m sure we must have a prisoner somewhere for you to interrogate.”

“Not the way I want to. I want to get one right away, before he’s had time to prepare his defenses.”

“Arkadian, whatever eldritch powers you have, we are still just two people in disputed territory. It’s not safe to be taking on a full-fledged Zhodani noble.”

“I have some tools that can help us there.”

“And what would those be?”

Arkadian grinned to himself and set his satchel down on the corridor floor. He knelt beside it and took out several items. “These,” he said, pointing to several boxy pieces of electronic equipment, “are pretty standard in my line of work. They monitor psionic activity, give me an idea of where the most resistance is coming from, help to break it down. Crude stuff by Zhodani standards, but pretty effective, if you know how to use the equipment.”

“I suppose you’ve had plenty of practice?”

Arkadian held up something like a heavy power drill. He pressed a stud on the side and a parabolic reflector unfolded around the narrow “barrel” of the tool. “Now this,” he said softly, “this is something else entirely.”

“What does it do? It looks like a gun.”

“It’s a weapon, all right. An outgrowth of psionic shield technology, but it has the opposite effect. Instead of protecting a mind, it will knock down the protections of a shielded mind.”

“That’s—that’s pretty amazing,” Darrell said, shaken. “It sounds like the perfect weapon against the Zhodani. Why aren’t we using it more?”

“These are still in the prototype stage. They’re pretty finicky. And the range is extremely limited. But if I get close enough, I can knock down even a noble’s shield.”

Darrell thought for a long moment. “Very well,” he said finally, dragging out each word slowly. “We’ll go on your snark hunt.”

“Thank you, General. Oh, one more thing.”

“What?”

“Be careful of getting in the way when I’m using the psionic suppressor. It wouldn’t normally affect you, but with your psionic shield on—well, there might be some feedback.”

“Thanks.” Darrell studied the other man for a moment, his lithe, dark form hidden under the anonymous casing of his combat armor. “So, where do we find your prisoner?”

“I have a pretty good idea of where to look,” said Arkadian. He began to trot down the corridor.

“I thought you might,” muttered Darrell. He hurried down the hallway, following the smaller man.

XVI. Liberation

Chief Petty Officer Paul Marak-Enshluggi glanced at the chronometer on the engineering console and sighed again. There wasn't much time left. Two hours and twenty-eight minutes until *Rhylanor* would begin to burn up in Jasmine's atmosphere.

I promised you hot times, Lara, he thought grimly. *What a way to get married. I'll never get to see Lara in a dress again.*

Come to think of it, he'd never seen her in a dress before today, either.

And he wouldn't have to change his name in the shipboard computers. Like most people from the matriarchal culture of Mora, he had taken his wife's name.

He was grinning now, slightly giddy. On some level, he knew that he was just covering up his hysteria.

Two hours, twenty-six minutes to go.

He was sitting against a wall, knees folded up in front of him. Commander Lloergrez was sitting a few feet away from him. The Vargr turned and glowered at him. Lloergrez's eyes stared into his, and then danced away, looking at the Zhodani guards who patrolled the engine room. Paul shuddered. There was something savage in the Vargr's glare.

Two hours, twenty-five minutes left.

Two Zhodani approached them. One kept his rifle trained on Lloergrez. They had already had difficulties in restraining the Chief Engineer, resulting in one guard with a broken arm and several broken teeth in the Vargr's mouth.

"You. Help. Drive controls," one of the guards said.

"Which drive? Stardrive?"

"What is stardrive? Jumpdrive? No. Spacedrive."

“Go bugger yourself.”

“You fix. We die.”

“We die anyway. No computer.”

“You fix.”

“I can’t bloody operate the drives without the computer! Not in two hours, you moronic mind-reader!”

“Fix.”

Paul shrugged and stood up. “I’ll need him,” he said, pointing to Lloergrez.

“No.”

“Yes. He’s the Chief. He can build those engines from memory.”

“No. No doggie,” the guard said, amusement in his voice. “Bad doggie,” he said to Lloergrez.

Paul wondered where he had picked up that piece of Anglic slang. “You’re awful confident, taunting a Vargr like that,” he said.

“He move, we shoot.”

“Then we die. Me no fix alone.”

The guards looked at each other. There was a pause. They were probably talking to their superior officer, Paul guessed. Finally, the talkative guard spoke up.

“OK. He come. I watch. He bad, we shoot.”

“We happy. Are you happy, sir?”

Lloergrez growled deep in his throat. The Zhodani began to aim their rifles at him. Slowly, leisurely, the Chief Engineer stood up and stretched. “Let’s go,” he said.

The Zhodani took them through the engineering section towards the maneuver drive controls. As they walked around the massive fusion reactor, Lloergrez leaned over to Paul. “This is pointless,” he said. “We can’t do anything without the computer.”

“Yes. But at least we can keep busy until we die.”

“You’re not taking your death very personally.”

“How should I take it? Like you said, there’s nothing we can do.”

“We can take a few of them with us.”

“You must be aware of something I’m not. How do you plan for us to fight unarmed against armored troopers?”

“I have an idea,” said Lloergrez, distractedly. The guards were pushing them towards a control console. Half of it had been disassembled. Fiber optic conduits hung distended from its innards. Lloergrez made a hissing sound. Paul felt about the same.

The talkative guard pushed them forward, and then stood, holding his rifle at port arms. The other guard ducked around the console and came back with a tool set, which he dropped near Paul. He saluted the first guard and then left.

Paul took the tools and sat down in front of the console. He began to test circuits. Lloergrez stood behind him and watched impassively, his arms folded across his chest.

Paul made a few connections and typed some commands onto the console. He nodded at the result and picked up the circuit tester again. He made a few notes on a datapad he found lying in the tool kit. Then he returned to the console and checked another few commands.

Lloergrez snorted.

Without turning around, Paul said, “Better at least look busy, Commander, or we’ll be back to where we started.”

“Boy, they’ve gutted that panel. It would take a day to put it back together.”

“Not necessarily. They seem to have sealed all the circuits they cut. I think I could get it working by myself in three or four hours.”

“I’ll note that in your obituary.”

“C’mon, Commander. You might learn something.”

Lloergrez yawned, baring his broken teeth in something like a grin—though it was the predatory grin of a sentient carnivore, showing his teeth as a threat. But he sat down next to Paul.

“Don’t worry about that subrelay. We can bypass it with software.”

“Thanks.” They worked silently for a few minutes. Lloergrez reached into the toolbox and took out a long metal bar. He used a laser cutter to trim it, until he had a tapering rod about twenty-five centimeters long.

“What’s that for?” Paul asked.

“Panel support.”

Paul didn’t press any further. It was clearly not what the Vargr had said it was. But it was better not to say anything. Who knew if there were any psionics in the area? What he didn’t know couldn’t be forced out of him.

“You working hard?” the Zhodani said.

“Yes. Me and Vargr.”

“Doggie not working.”

“He’s being very helpful.”

“You fix soon?”

“Yes...” Paul said distractedly. He had just noticed a light flashing urgently in one corner of the console. “I’m going to check the interface controls to see if they’re restored,” he said to Lloergrez.

“Restored? What are you talking about? The computer’s...” The Vargr fell silent. He had just noticed the flashing light. “Good idea, Paul. I’ll check the circuits.”

Paul nodded and stood up. He tried to keep his face frozen. He leaned over the console and pressed the flashing light.

COMPUTER REINITIALIZING. STANDBY. flashed up on the console.

He caught his breath and watched as portions of the panel gradually came back to life. Lloergrez had submerged his head in the guts of the console. Paul could hear him rapidly installing bypass circuits.

ENGINEERING. STATUS?

Paul began typing nervously. **CPO Enshluggi. Am with Chief L. Section is occupied.**

SGTMAJ KELLEY HERE. WHERE ARE YOU?

Rear of section., Paul typed. At maneuver controls. Under guard.

HOW MANY IN SECTION?

The guard leaned over Paul's shoulder. "Lights on! You fix?"

"No, no," Paul said nervously. "Just running some diagnostics. It will take some time."

The guard shrugged and walked away from the panel. Paul resumed typing. **Maybe fifteen. Can you help?** Sweat was beading on his brow and pooling in the small of his back.

WAIT. . .

Paul glanced up. Guards were walking around the upper level of engineering, one of the biggest single rooms in the ship, although most of the space was crammed with the machinery of the ship's drives and her fusion power plant. Most of the ship's over eighty engineers were in the room, captured during damage control operations by the Zhodani boarders.

Maybe they wouldn't have to die after all.

CAN YOU MAKE A DISTRACTION?

Yes, Paul typed feverishly. **R U coming?**

YES. MAKE DISTRACTION. WE WILL BE THERE SHORTLY. OVER.

"Commander," Paul said, "can you look at this readout?"

Lloergrez pulled his head out of the console and stood up. He looked at the message showing on Paul's screen and nodded. "Carry out emergency procedure six," he said. "I'll take care of the rest."

"All right," Paul said. He turned away from the board and walked over to a panel on the wall. He opened it, and inserted a key he found hanging from the door in a lock.

"What you do?" demanded the Zhodani.

"Testing a circuit," Paul said.

"You wait." The guard paused and cocked his head.

"I'm sorry, I can't wait," said Paul, and twisted the key.

A klaxon emitted a piercing, ear-shattering wail throughout the engine room, three short bursts and then a long one,

repeating over and over again. There was an excited shout from the Imperials in the room—that was the decompression alert. They began to run for the lockers on the sides of the section that held emergency pressure suits.

“Why you do that?” said the guard. He began to walk towards Paul, rifle leveled at him.

Lloergrez leapt upon him with a snarl, knocking the man to the ground and rolling on top of him. Paul ran over to help, but couldn't get close to the pair of them as they twisted together on the floor. This is madness, he thought. The trooper was in combat armor! Lloergrez didn't stand a chance.

Something flashed in the Vargr's hand—the bar he had been working on before. He was probing with it under the Zhodani's chin, stabbing again and again as the guard tried to throw him off. The Vargr clung to him tenaciously with one hand, the other continuing to worry at the Zhodani's throat. Suddenly, he thrust forward quickly, sinking it deeply into the trooper's neck.

His helmet split open!

It cracked down the middle, like a sideways oyster, revealing a startled, pale face with short black hair. Lloergrez howled, a primal, terrifying noise, and his jaws slavered, spittle running out of the corner of his mouth. He plunged down and sank his fangs into the face of the trooper. Paul turned away, sickened.

After a moment, some one tapped him on the shoulder. Lloergrez was standing next to him, mouth bloody, holding the Zhodani's rifle. “Come on,” he said. He looked at Paul's face, and then glanced back at the body. “It's a bad design. The emergency helmet release is under the chin.”

Paul followed him around the fusion reactor. He tried not to look at the bloody mass lying on the deck. They peeked around one corner of the reactor and stared into chaos.

Troopers were trying to drag the Imperials back into the center of the room. Many were still trying to get into their pressure suits. Others were yelling at the Zhodani, some even

pushing at the guards. The troopers were retreating to the middle of the room, their rifles readied.

There was an explosion from the front end of the room.

The enormous blast doors that separated Engineering from the rest of the ship rolled back, and Marines poured through, shooting. The Zhodani began to fire back, fitfully. Engineering crew rushed forward, trying to grab troopers and pin them to the ground.

Sounds of fighting came from behind Paul. He turned around. Marines had invaded the second level and were attacking the Zhodani guards there.

Lloergrez was firing his rifle, grinning. After a while, he stopped, and watched as a figure in battle dress approached through the smoke.

“Lieutenant Commander Lloergrez?” said the man.

“Sergeant Kelly.” They shook hands.

“What’s your status?”

“We can move her within the hour, if I have even half my crew.”

“You’ll have at least that.” Kelly undogged his helmet and removed it, revealing a sad brown face with dark, straight black hair. “Captain Moak wants you to make weaponry a priority.”

“He’ll have his guns,” snarled the engineer. “Paul, get a detail together and start working on the drives. I’m going forward to look at the meson gun.”

“Aye, Commander.” He turned around, then stopped. “Sergeant Kelly.”

“Yes, Chief?”

“Do you know what’s happened to Lieutenant Enshluggi? Lieutenant Lara Enshluggi?”

Kelly stared calmly at him. “You’re her husband, aren’t you? I was at your wedding this afternoon.”

“Yes. Have you seen her?”

“I’m afraid she’s missing.”

“Is she—”

“We don’t know. She could be captured.”

“I see. Commander—”

“You want to come forward with me.” Lloergrez snorted.

“Very well. I don’t want a feud with you.”

The smoke was only beginning to clear as they left engineering.

XVII. Casualty

Plieznabr peered cautiously around the corner of a hallway junction and let his armor's sensors sweep in both directions. So far he had not encountered anyone, Zhodani or Imperial, since leaving his escorts outside Engineering. He hoped his luck would continue to hold.

He began to edge down the corridor, keeping to one wall, moving in little bursts of speed that carried him from one covered location to another. He was felt tense, but not afraid. He was still too young to realize when he was terrified.

When he had been a small boy, before he had left his family for training in the psionic arts, his father would often take him into the hills above their little farm to hunt with the rest of the community for sassaqual, a scaled scavenging animal with a long tail and four legs. A Terran would have thought that it looked like a meter-and-a-half long salamander. The sassaqual was a threat to all the farmers in the region; it liked to break into their grain stores, and was not averse to killing their smaller livestock or pets.

The sassaqual had remarkable camouflage abilities, allowing it to stay hidden in the dense undergrowth that was its preferred habitat. It could lie without moving for hours, making it difficult to flush, even with their hunting beasts. The only way to hunt it was to form a large circle, sometimes over a kilometer in circumference, and gradually tighten it shut, beating the bush with clubs until the sassaqual was forced to spring up and fight its way out of the circle. Then it was everyone's job to assist the person who lay in the path of the enraged creature. Sassaqual were not particularly deadly, but had poisoned fangs that could

make their victim quite ill; they would lock their jaws onto a victim and hang on until killed or pulled off.

Even as a child he had found the coordination demanded by the sassaqual hunt demanding. Now he wondered how it was possible at all. The farmers lacked any psionic training. They had relied on hand signals and imitations of animal calls to coordinate their movements. When they had cornered the beast, they had fought it with large forked spears, moving so that each person blocked the sassaqual's escape, working in near-perfect unison.

Now, who are the hunters and who is the quarry? he thought. He felt very alone. Since discovering that the Imperials were using a psionic of their own, he had been afraid to open his mind. Cut off from even the low-level "static" of the hundreds of human consciousnesses onboard *Rhylanor*, he felt alone and pitiful. It didn't help that he was only sixteen standard years old and naturally prey to these emotions anyway.

He moved through an area that had been heavily fought over. Blast marks darkened the walls. Explosions had punched through the walls, leaving gaping holes with twisted, sharp metal edges lolling out around them. Struts and conduits jutted out into the hallway like spears. Bodies were scattered in broken positions on the floor, Imperial and Zhodani, alone in the brotherhood of death.

He moved through them slowly, a deep sadness dragging his limbs. How many, of both sides, had been farmers' sons? Why had they been ripped across the horrid, empty distances between the stars, to fight and die in the frozen outskirts of a cold, dim sun? Politics seemed a feeble reason to do this. Were the differences between these two peoples so irreconcilable?

He tried to clear his head and calm down. He was an officer of the Consulate, after all. It wasn't his duty to rhapsodize the horrors of war, but to fulfill his orders. And what he knew could keep people on both sides from dying.

Even the optics of his helmet had difficulty resolving images in the corridor's dim light. So he almost missed it when one of the bodies began to move.

Terrified, the barest memory of the ghost stories of his youth fleeing across his mind, he swiveled to face the figure, rifle readied. It had some strange object like an oversized pistol with a large bowl at the end of its barrel in one hand, aiming it at him. He shouted something wordlessly and prepared to fire—

Agony filled his head. In an instant, all his defenses vanished. His mind was painfully aware of the mental chatter of *Rhylanor's* occupants. He had never been so sensitive before, so filled with the presence of other minds. Some one else was rushing at him from the darkness.

He fell upon him with an unnatural strength, trying to pin Plieznabr's arms with his massive hands. Plieznabr, still dazed, struggled weakly against the big Imperial in his powered battle dress. He tried to gather his mind to lash out at his attacker, but whatever the other Imperial was doing to him seemed to block all but the most feeble of his abilities.

Just at the edge of his vision he saw the other Imperial moving slowly towards him, still holding the strange weapon. With his free leg Plieznabr kicked out, tripping the Imperial. As he fell, he tried to steady his gun—

The Marine clutched his head with both hands. And in that instant, Plieznabr, still sensitive from the effects of the strange weapon, felt the other's mind open to him, felt the horrible pain of the feedback from his psionic shield—and felt, in that moment, the awful hatred the man had for him, the terrible, seething rage directed at him.

It was like a blow to his stomach. He felt physically sick, and doubled over. *Too much!* he thought weakly. *Too much to take. Too—*

Desperate, Plieznabr delved deep into his conditioned responses, trying without thinking something that Tlienjpraviashav had taught him once. He stretched out his

awareness, searching along the belt of grenades that hung around the Imperial's waist. One suddenly armed itself—

The blast swept over them, knocking them to the ground. Plieznabr's helmet smashed into the corridor, bursting open. He tried to stagger up, but the Marine was upon him almost before he could move, chopping down at his shoulders with one armored arm.

Plieznabr hit the floor and felt all the air rush out of him. Something stabbed through his chest. I've broken a rib, he thought weakly. Something was wheezing wetly in his ears. He dimly realized it was his own breath.

Are you in pain?

He couldn't place the mind that was contacting his. "No," he croaked, his provincial accent as thick as the day he had left his father's farm. He couldn't feel his legs.

Everything's all right, now.

"Master?" He had to talk to Tlienjpraviashav, to warn him...

"Yes, I am here." The handsome, mustachioed face of the Zhodani commander appeared in front of him. "Don't be afraid."

Oh, master. He opened his mind to his teacher, fully, completely, laying bare every part of his mind. Something must be wrong with him. He was having trouble maintaining the link. And there was something else, something unfamiliar...

Magnificent, purple and gold to match the autumnal foliage, the sassaqual arched its back and hissed, forked tongue shooting out in defiance. His father lunged forward with his forked spear and lifted the beast up by its neck, straining to keep its feet off the ground, the spear bowing under the weight. Plieznabr laughed and laughed...they were riding back to the farm, the body of the sassaqual in the wagon bed behind them, and he leaned against the warm side of his father as the wheels turned and turned, their motion lulling him into sleep...

Anton stepped back from the Zhodani officer who was slumped against the corridor wall. "He's dead, isn't he?"

“Yes. For several minutes now. It’s amazing what this equipment can do even with a recently dead brain.” Arkadian was removing tiny electrodes from the Zhodani’s face. He began to put away his tools, folding up the parabolic reflector on his strange pistol.

Anton walked up to the Zhodani and ran a finger along his ashen face, pale beneath its blond hair, growing chalky now with death. The neck was swollen and the color of a bruise where Anton had broken it. “Just a boy,” he said.

“Quite a boy. An Intendant, personal aide to the Zhodani commander.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him...I don’t know what got into me.”

“It’s all right. I got quite a bit of useful information from him.”

“I’m glad,” Anton said. “So very glad you got what you came for.”

Arkadian glanced at him sharply. He had his helmet off, and his sharp features remained impassive. “This is war.”

“I understand that, Commander. Far better than you do, I think.”

Arkadian opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it. He picked up his helmet, placed it on his head, and closed the seals. He turned away from Anton and began to walk up the corridor.

Anton leaned forward and closed the Zhodani boy’s eyes. He sealed his clamshell helmet again, then lifted his body up. The head lolled sickeningly. He laid the body back down on the corridor floor gently, crossed its arms, and then followed Arkadian back up the hallway.

XVIII. Conquest

Harrison Burman adjusted the breather valve on the main liquid hydrogen tank, and checked the feeder hose again. He stepped over to a nearby console and typed in some inquiries. Nodding at the results, he keyed in a few commands.

He selected the atmosphere test on his helmet display. He watched as the graph began to register the presence of hydrogen gas, noting with pleasure that the oxygen content was falling even more rapidly. It had taken most of an hour, but everything was finally working correctly.

The scout cruiser's cargo bay was gradually filling up with hydrogen. It wouldn't be long before it had enough gas in it to blow the ship apart at the seams. He went over to the fusion reactor and flipped a switch on the crude detonator he had rigged. Then he picked up a datalink. All he had to do was press the right switch, and fusion chamber would explode, releasing star-hot plasma into the engine room and igniting the hydrogen gas in the cargo bay. It was a crude way to scuttle, but it would be effective. The Zhodani wouldn't be able to recover anything afterwards.

Even before that, he knew he would have to destroy the computer's memory core. He had already reconnected the bomb the Zhodani technician had rigged. There was a chance that his plan to scuttle the cruiser wouldn't work. He obviously couldn't test the detonator on the reactor. But he had to be sure that they wouldn't capture the computer.

It bothered him to have to kill GORGAS.

Just a program, Harrison, he thought. They had already copied it over to *Rhylanor*. No need to get sentimental.

He left Engineering and began to walk up to the bridge. He paused in one of the crew's lounges. A telescope was focused on *Rhylanor*, the big ship beginning to show signs of life again. Soon they would be back underway. He felt even more lonely just thinking about it. He was already the only occupant of the scout cruiser.

Lokhiarealaw and the Marines were already gone, recalled to the *Rhylanor* when the engine room had been retaken. They had left in the scout cruiser's cutter, a small ship without hyperspace engines. The Aslan sergeant hadn't wanted to leave Burman alone on the cruiser. But he had convinced him that he was necessary to oversee GORGIAS. The longer they could remain in contact with the Zhodani fleet, the better.

There was still another cutter on the cruiser. When the time came, he could blow the computer, flee the ship, and then scuttle her remotely. Then all he had to do was hope the Imperials won. Or for that matter, that somebody—anybody—would find him in the frozen outskirts of the system before his life support failed.

"Boss, we've got a problem," the computer suddenly said.

"What's up, doll?"

"Commander of one of the Zho cruisers wants to speak to *Rhylanor*. Needs to get in touch with the commander there. My fake job isn't working on him—says he needs to speak to an officer."

"All right," Burman said. He pulled himself up the ladder to the bridge. They had been using GORGIAS's entertainment programming to create a fake Zhodani rating, who did all the "talking" to the rest of the fleet. It was easy enough to set up—after all, a signalman rarely said anything interesting; he just made reports. Most of the communication was between computers, anyway; humans seldom talked to each other.

"Do you think we can whip up an officer quick?" asked Burman as he came on the bridge. "We've got to have pictures of this bucket's commander."

“I couldn’t pull it off, big guy. Too much of my capability is going into monitoring the fleet and making sure they don’t catch wise to us. Oh, the Zhodani muckity-muck just demanded to see our captain again. I’ve got our signalman acting flustered, but I don’t know how long he can put off a direct order.”

“Wait a minute. Let me think.” Burman sat down at the communications station and drummed his fingers. “You’ve been using our damage cover story, right?”

“Yah. Told them one of our antennas got shot off during the fight—limits our communication with the fleet, which makes my job easier—and our reactor is fluctuating.”

“Good, good...I’ve got something.” He stood up and went to the main holographic imager in the center of the bridge. “Dollface, there’s something tricky I want you to try.”

“All right,” said the computer slowly. “Remember, I’m a little busy.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard. Can you map the Zhodani captain’s image over mine, translate my voice into his, and then send that to their fleet?”

“I get it. You’d do the thinking, I’d do the talking.”

“Yah. I should be more realistic than anything you could whip up. No offense.”

“None taken. Program set up, code name ‘Cyrano.’ Know that story?”

“Of course. But you’re my Roxanne.”

“Oooh...” the computer sighed. Sighed? Somebody had to get a grip here, Burman thought. He hoped it would be him.

“Step into the imager,” the computer said. “You’re on in five...four...three...”

The distorted image of a man in a Zhodani naval uniform coalesced in front of Burman. “What is the meaning of this delay?” he snapped angrily. GORGAS was doing a good job of translation.

“Forgive me, nobly born. Several of our crew are suffering from radiation sickness. I was assisting our chief engineer.”

“Connect me immediately to Consul Tlienjpraviashav.”

“We are having difficulty raising the Imperial ship. We suspect their crew has damaged their receivers.”

“Unacceptable. Move closer to them and try to communicate through their personal communicators.”

“Noble one, forgive me, but will that not disrupt communications with the fleet?”

“We will send a ship to handle those duties.” The Zhodani paused. He seemed to notice Burman for the first time. His eyes narrowed, and he had the appearance of studying him intently.

“Yes, nobly born. It will take some time. Our reactor...”

“Of course,” the Zhodani said smoothly. “Perhaps we should assist you.”

“No, no...nobly born. We are all right here. We will be underway shortly.”

“I have every confidence in you. Report when you have reached Consul Tlienjpraviashav.”

“Yes, nobly born.” The image faded away. “Something’s not right,” said Burman. He felt nervous. “GORGIAS, better send all that to Captain Moak right away.”

“Already sending,” the computer said. “What are you worried about? Everything seemed to go fine.”

“I’m not sure,” said Burman. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it. But the feeling persisted.

“Captain Moak sends his compliments,” the computer said. “*Rhylanor* is underway. He suggests that now is the time for you to do so as well.”

Burman nodded. “Think you can keep them in the dark for a little while longer by yourself?” he said.

“No problem. The boss Zho hasn’t even pestered us since you talked to him.”

“Hmm...I’m not sure I like that. Doesn’t matter much, now.”

“I’m warming up the cutter for you.”

“Good.” Burman stood up and shouldered his laser carbine. He picked up the datalink that was remotely connected to the bomb on the fusion reactor.

“I’m going to miss you, boss.”

“Me too,” he said, choking up a little. He hadn’t told her what he would have to do once he was safely away from the ship.

“Cutter is almost ready. So long, Harrison.”

“So long, little girl.” He began to clamber down the accessway to the rest of the ship.

“Emergency! Emergency! Two Zho destroyers just came into range.”

“What! Damnit! Get *Rhylanor* on the horn and warn them.”

“Aye. Harrison, they are closing on us.”

“Oh boy.” His mind was racing. What should he do? Move the ship and give himself away? Try to bluff his way out of this mess? Abandon ship and scuttle?

That was probably his best shot. “Are they talking to us?”

“Not yet.”

“Don’t you say anything, either. Just act like we’re all one big happy fleet.”

“Roger.”

He had almost reached the boat dock when GORGAS spoke again. “Message from the destroyer,” she said. “Boss, it’s in Anglic.”

“Route it to me.”

“To all Imperials onboard the captured vessel *Audubon*: surrender now and prepare to be boarded.”

“Damnit! It’s really hit the fan now. Little girl, time to make a run for it. Can you run an evasion course?”

“Both Imperial and Zhodani files are in my memory. I’m trying them both out.”

“Better ready weapons, if you can.”

“I’m trying.” The computerized voice was almost plaintive. “But I can’t do everything! I don’t have the power!”

“Calm down. I’ll get you through this. And try to jam their communications with the rest of the fleet.”

“All right. The Zhodani commander is calling. Wants to speak to you.”

“To me?”

“Well, to the ‘Imperial who impersonated a Zhodani officer.’”

“Patch him through to the boat dock.” What the hell. It might buy them some time.

He sat down at the hangar deck’s launch controls. The grim officer he had talked to before appeared on the communications screen. “So that is what you look like,” he said.

“All right, how did you know?”

“Not all of us are gifted psionically. But there are many ways to communicate. Your stance, the way you held your hands, the tone of your voice—none of these were the way a Zhodani officer would move.”

“Oh. I had no idea you knew so much about those things.”

“Our psychological disciplines are quite advanced. You could learn much from us.”

“I suppose I’ll get the chance to do that firsthand.”

“Perhaps. It depends you conduct yourself now. Surrender, and things may be handled in a civilized fashion.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. I probably know far too many things that you’d like to find out.”

“Such as how you were able to capture your ship? And the status of the Imperial Battle Cruiser nearby? Yes, we have great interest in such things.”

“I thought as much. Captain, I have no illusions about my ability to resist torture. So I think I’ll just try to escape.”

“That is your choice. But remember there are consequences.”

The scout cruiser suddenly rocked. “Harrison, they hit us! I’m losing fuel!”

“Surrender. You are conquered,” the Zhodani said, calmly.

“Damn you!” Burman shouted at him. He snapped off the circuit. “Can you return fire?” he shouted to the computer.

“I’m trying! I can’t get a solution!”

“I’m on my way to the turrets. *Rhylanor* has to be doing something.”

“I can’t tell. I’ve lost some sensors.”

Burman bounced heavily down the corridors towards the cruiser’s small weapons section. It was hopeless, hopeless...unless *Rhylanor* decided to take on the destroyers. Even in its weakened condition, the Imperial ship was more than a match for them.

The ship shook again, and the lights dimmed momentarily. “What’s happened?” Burman shouted.

“Maneuver drive is out,” GORGAS replied in a monotone. “I can’t move.”

“Oh my God.” He had to get to engineering. If the destroyers could match speeds with the scout—

“Harrison!” the computer had a hysterical edge to its voice. “Boarders! Aft section!”

The computer core. He ran towards the rear of the ship, forgetting everything in his mad rush to get to GORGAS before it was too late.

The iris valve to the computer room was closed. Burman tried pressing the stud next to the door, but it wouldn’t open.

He dropped his datalink and went to a maintenance panel on one side of the iris valve. He used the butt of his carbine to pound it open, and then reached inside and began to pull out the connections for the doors hydraulic motors. Fluid spilled out onto the floor. As soon as he had pulled all of them out, he leapt up to the door and began to pull at the center of the iris. Slowly, the door began to move, the leaves opening like petals on a flower. Then suddenly the resistance gave way and he was able to yank the valve wide and step through.

A man in combat armor was standing near the computer memory bank.

Burman raised his carbine and shot at him. The man staggered back and tried to raise his own weapon. Burman shot again, and this time the trooper stumbled backwards and fell to the floor.

Burman raced over to the computer. "It's all right, it's all right," he said. Nothing had been disturbed.

He turned away from the memory bank. He thought he had heard something in the corridor. He poked his head through the iris valve and stared down the hallway.

Nothing was there.

He was already turning back into the room when he felt someone grab him. Panicked, he threw off the arm and lunged for the computer.

Something grabbed at his leg. He stumbled and fell against the memory bank. He didn't look back. He kicked his leg free and stretched out his arm. Someone seized his ankle. Someone else grabbed his left arm, and, with his free hand, he reached out, touched the bomb on top of the computer, and threw the detonation switch.

XIX. Retreat

Tlienjpraviashav slammed his fist down on the desk. “How? How did they liberate Engineering?”

The Guards Captain swallowed nervously. “I do not understand it myself, nobly born. Their forces were inferior to ours...”

“And yet they won all their encounters! And yet you lost over sixty percent of your officers! And yet, and yet, and yet...”

He left the final thought hanging. Too many excuses! He had never known a Zhodani force to do so poorly against the Imperials.

There could be no excuse for what had happened. Not to the ship, and not to...

He snapped his eyes back to the captain. “What is the status of our troops?”

“They have fallen back towards the starboard airlocks. The Marines are following them closely.”

“What is your assessment of the situation?”

“We...we must withdraw, nobly born.”

Tlienjpraviashav nodded. “I thought that would be your recommendation.”

“Yes, nobly born.” The captain paused, then continued grimly: “We cannot hold our position. The men will not fight. We must return to our carrier and flee. We can be off the vessel in a matter of minutes...”

“Enough!” roared Tlienjpraviashav. “I have never seen such conduct in a Zhodani officer. Are you now so afraid of these Imperials, these beggarly schemers and conspirators, that you

will abandon the field to them? I tell you, we will not, cannot surrender!”

“Nobly born...the men will not fight.”

“I will lead them myself. And as for you,” he said contemptuously, “you are relieved of duty. Stand watch in the medical bay over the Imperial prisoners. We shall at least have some spoils of war.”

When the captain had left, Tlienjpraviashav allowed himself a moment to give into his emotions. He sank his head into his hands and gave free rein to his grief.

How...how had they done it?

A retreating patrol of troopers had found the body, in a heavily damaged corridor forward of the engineering section. The body had been carefully laid down on the corridor floor, hands folded across the chest and its eyes closed. There were some worlds of the Imperium, he knew, where that was the fashion of preparing a body for its funeral. The Zhodani preferred to face death with their eyes and arms open.

The shock of it still seemed to dull his senses. *Killed, alone, with no one to help him! But how?* The boy was a fully trained psionic, a Zhodani officer well-skilled in the combat arts, still in the first flush of his youth.

And why was he alone?

There was a report from one of the officers he had sent as escort. He lifted his head from his hands, glanced at what was lying in the couch across from his desk, and then read the report. The boy had detached his escort to act as commanders for the badly demoralized troops he had found outside engineering. One of them had managed to escape with several soldiers; the other had been captured.

But why had he left them in the first place? And why had he cut himself off mentally from Tlienjpraviashav? What was so important that he would risk his life to tell him face-to-face?

He was weeping. He hadn't even noticed it. Wiping away his tears, he looked up again at the couch.

My, my...son, what have they done to you?

He went over to the couch and sat down on it. He placed the boy's head in his lap and stroked his long, straight hair. Such promise, taken away so cruelly! He would never know the powerful psionic that the boy had shown every sign of eventually developing into. In time, he might have become a worthy successor to Tlienjpraviashav himself. He could have taught the boy much about dealing with the Imperials, how to subtly tamper with the submerged forces buried under the autocratic façade of humaniti's largest empire to keep it indecisive and introspective, unwilling to try to interfere with its most feared neighbor.

So much opportunity, now lost!

He bent down and kissed Plieznabr's cool forehead. Unfamiliar emotions boiled up within him, nearly blinding him with their intensity.

Vengeance! You shall not die unavenged, my son!

The captain rushed into the room and stopped, shocked. He had never seen the Consul so emotional. The look of hatred that was scrawled across his face as he sat clutching the body of the dead Intendant to him was deeply disturbing to a man who had spent his entire life confident of the supreme, detached rationality of the nobility. "My lord, I must report—"

Tlienjpraviashav looked up slowly, his face falling gradually into its accustomed mask of command. "Yes, captain. You must forgive me. The strain of the last few hours has taken its toll. If I was harsh with you before, I apologize."

If anything, the apology, from one born to command absolutely the fates of all Zhodani, shook the captain even worse. "No, no, nobly born. It was I who failed you—"

"Forget everything. We must all work together to fight our enemies. Are we not Zhodani? We shall not fall into pointless backbiting like the Imperials would." He stood up, lowering Plieznabr's body to the couch with care. "Now," he said, turning to face the captain, "what must you report?"

“O my lord, disaster! Two sections have surrendered to the Imperials! All is lost!”

“What! Impossible! A few troopers, perhaps—those too weak for our noble cause—but never two sections!”

“It is true, nobly born. The rest of our men are scattered and disorganized. They attempt to reach the starboard airlocks, and do not respond to the commands of their officers.”

At that moment, a voice came over the ship’s intercom, speaking poor Zhodani: “Troopers of the Zhodani Consulate: surrender now, and no harm will come to you. By command of His Majesty, our officers will show all possible mercy to you.”

“My lord, what shall we do!” the captain wailed.

“Do? We shall do our duty!”

“We have no duty left, but to escape or surrender.”

“No!” shouted Tlienjpraviashav. “I shall not give in to these ignoble slaves! Barbarians whose cruelty knows no bounds! Slayers of boys—”

The captain was backing away, afraid. “Where are you going, fool? To your new masters?” Tlienjpraviashav said contemptuously. “We shall not honor the honorless. Accompany me.”

The captain had composed himself again. “Yes, nobly born.” Any command was welcome to him.

Tlienjpraviashav led him into the medical bay where the Marine officer and the Imperial First Officer were being held. He needed certain information from them—information that would at the very least rob the Imperials of the glory of their victory, and at the most could salvage the entire mission.

He smiled coldly to himself for a moment. Why not give in to his emotions?

If all else was lost, at least he could have his vengeance!

XX. Resistance

Lieutenant Lara Enshluggi suddenly woke up, choking back a scream. Sweat was running down her brow.

She was sitting on a bed in the corner of a dark, cold room. Tiny lights flickered here and there, and the walls of the room were dimly visible. Against the wall next to her was a bed, and a person was lying asleep on it, breathing softly and deeply.

She was in sickbay. Still in sickbay.

How long had it been since they last interrogated her?

She couldn't tell. Her body felt stiff and heavy with fatigue. She wondered if she had been drugged.

Terror filled her mind, and her body shuddered as if her insides were being clutched by a giant, icy hand. She had to try to escape. Even if she couldn't succeed, it was better to be shot while trying to flee than to have to face another interrogation!

She swung her legs over the side of her bed, and was about to stand up when a voice came over the intercom.

It was speaking Zhodani.

Surrender. The word sat on her tongue, with an ugly taste like copper. She wondered what had happened to Paul. Quickly, she glanced around the room. Perhaps there was something she could use, to end, end her—

At that moment the door opened, and two tall men stepped in.

The girl he wanted to talk to was awake. Tlienjpraviashav paid no attention to Commander Luzammi, comatose on the other bed.

The Guards Captain shoved his laser rifle into Lara's stomach as she tried to get up. "Enough," said Tlienjpraviashav, waving one hand at the soldier. "Let her be."

He pushed a little wheeled tray table with surgical instruments on it—medical scanner, laser scalpel, injection guns filled with anesthetic—next to the bed, and then dragged a chair over and sat down in front of Lara.

"What do you want from me?" she panted, eyes starting from their sockets, almost rolling in fright.

"Calm yourself, girl. I have some questions, yes."

"Have many surrendered? Or were they all killed?"

"What?" He felt hot anger flushing into his face. "What do you know—"

He stopped, and thought. *Surrendered...*

She meant the Imperials!

"Many have, yes," he admitted. The truth. He wrestled for control of his face; he must appear concerned, worried about the poor barbarians he would have to care for...

"Will you be taking me to them?"

"In time. We will transfer you to another ship; later, if you cooperate now, you may be rewarded."

"Oh..." She was thinking about her husband. No need to use telepathy to confirm that.

"Now, I have some questions...you knew a petty officer in the Engineering section?"

"Yes. Paul..."

"I need your help. Where are the missile magazines located on this vessel?"

"There are several, forward and aft. There's one not too far from here..."

"Tell me about the warheads. A vessel of this class carries nuclear weapons, correct?"

"Lord..." the Captain said.

Silence! Tlienjpraviashav thought at him. "This is true?" he demanded of Lara.

“Of course. Paul used to tell me about them...”

“Which magazines are used to store them?”

“I—why do you want to know?”

“Child, this is important. You must tell me.”

“I don’t know anything about where they store the bombs! I’m an infantry officer, not a technician.”

“Your husband—he told you where they were kept. I need you to tell me about that.”

“No.”

His nostrils flared. “Do not make this difficult. It will go very poorly for you, if you do.”

“Look at you!”

He started back from her, surprised. A lifetime of automatic deference from everyone he met had not prepared him for this.

“You’re afraid!” Lara continued.

“I fear nothing that you could do, ignorant barbarian.”

“Now you’re insulting! Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“You will help me, girl, or I promise—”

“Promise away. Threaten me all you want. I don’t care!” She was getting hysterical. “Death is better than what you had prepared for me. I can only die once. How often could you invade my mind? Rapist!”

She spat the last word out. Enraged, Tlienjpraviashav slapped her hard across her face. She fell back on the bed, and then lunged towards him. The Guards Captain stepped forward with his rifle leveled before she could reach the Zhodani commander.

“You will tell me everything,” he said, “Now.”

Her eyes widened. He reached into her thoughts and began to search through her memories—Paul and her on the beach of a human-habitable planet, a holiday where they exchanged gifts, a strange furry four-legged animal with long whiskers and slitted eyes she had had a childhood attachment to—

Paul, standing onboard the *Rhylanor*, punching a sequence rapidly on a keypad next to a door and stepping through it as it opened.

There was a number on the door, indicating the section and bulkhead of the ship it was located in—if she could be prompted to remember...

“No!” Lara screamed.

“Be quiet!” Tlienjpraviashav leaned forward and touched her under her chin with one hand. The Guards Captain raised his rifle to cover her. She had to cooperate. He dared not use all of his strength on her—he must keep some in reserve for the task that lay ahead of him. “Girl, this will be much easier if you do not resist. You cannot hope to hold out. Do nothing, and it will be all over soon and you will be unharmed. Fight me, and—”

She tried to snatch his hand away. “Get out! Get out!” she shouted. “Get out of my mind—”

She winced and clutched her hands to her head as he unleashed his probe, directly into her consciousness. He tossed aside years of his training to be gentle and leave the subject as undamaged as possible. This was not a time for gentleness. He had to have his answers—

“Release her,” a voice said in his ear, “or I will kill you where you stand.”

He froze. Something was being poked into his neck. “What is the meaning of this?” he said.

Lara opened her eyes. Commander Luzammi was standing behind Tlienjpraviashav, a laser scalpel pressed to his neck. The Guards Captain was aiming his rifle at her.

“Don’t think you can move quickly enough,” said Luzammi. “I have this held right over your carotid artery.” She jabbed him with the scalpel to make him aware of this fact. “I doubt your bodyguard is a vascular surgeon. Ironic, you’ll die in a sickbay.”

Lara reached out for the Captain’s rifle. The officer shot a look at Tlienjpraviashav. “Give it to her,” he said through gritted teeth.

Lara took the rifle and pointed it at the Captain. “Like the announcement said,” Luzammi said, “His Majesty has directed

us to show every mercy to those who surrender lawfully to us. Now, make this easy for—uhhh...”

Just a touch, thought Tlienjpraviashav. Just a touch of his mind to stun her. He had to conserve his power. He lunged for the door. There was a stab of pain on the side of his face, and hot blood began to flow down his neck. Lara shouted wordlessly and began to swing her rifle up. As Tlienjpraviashav dove through the doorway, the Guards Captain leapt behind him, blocking the path of Lara’s shot. The captain staggered with pain and slumped down, clutching his stomach, as the door closed, the sounds of Tlienjpraviashav’s boots rapidly fading in the distance. On the floor of the sickbay, one pale white ear nestled in a pool of blood at Lara’s feet.

XXI. Unvanquished

Sergeant Lokhiarealaw nodded at him, and stepped back to open the doors. The automatic controls were still not online again.

Moak strode into the vast circular compartment. Battle scars showed everywhere. Several of the display screens had been shot out, and the main holodisplay in the center of the room was showing only a ghostly, off-color map of the Jasmine system. Technicians, most still in combat armor, were hunched over many of the consoles, feverishly working amidst a tangled web of cabling.

“Captain on the bridge,” some one said.

The bridge. My bridge.

Suddenly everyone was standing at attention. “As you were,” Moak muttered, and descended the ramp to the circular control well in the center of the bridge. The command chair was blackened with soot marks, but he sank into it with a sigh. His shoulder was still throbbing from the bullet he had taken—was it only hours ago? It seemed longer, somehow.

“Message from *Audubon*,” said a Marine standing near the communications panel. Moak nodded. The regular communications officer was working in Engineering.

“Go ahead.”

“Yes sir. Captain Burman reports he is ready to leave and will rendezvous with us if possible.”

“Send him my compliments and tell him to move it. We are getting underway immediately.” Someone—a pretty Marine—handed him a cup of coffee. He glanced at her face. Corporal

Julie Taverashav. She had personally killed four Zhodani troopers when Engineering had been retaken.

He sipped his coffee meditatively.

“Computer,” Moak said.

“*Oui, mon capitain?*”

He glanced around in surprise. The computer’s voice was different now, sounding like a human female. There was some unidentifiable accent to it as well. “Tactical display, please. Composite last known positions and vectors of all enemy ships.”

“Working,” the computer said. “Resulting projection has an estimated 91% accuracy. I’ve had to use my intuition to solve some of the problems, of course.”

“Your—intuition?”

“Mmm-hmm. Don’t trouble yourself about it, doll; I’m rarely wrong.”

“I see.” Moak studied the glowing images in the holodisplay. “Do we have communication with the rest of the task force?”

“Yes, routed through *Unicorn*. I’m chatting with the computer on *Gilgamesh* now; he’s a real tease.”

Moak nearly spat out his coffee. What was wrong with the computer? “Um...good. Plot in a minimum time course to intercept the Zhodani tankers. I want to hit them when they begin to boost out of Jasmine’s atmosphere.”

“Aye Aye, boss. Plotted. Displaying them now, in order of my preference.”

He studied the display, using a light pen to highlight each course. Numbers hovered in the air next to the arching parabolas of the courses the computer had calculated. “Why is this one given such a low recommendation? It’s the shortest possible time to intercept.”

“Yes...well, there are other factors.”

“Such as?”

“It takes us right through the dust ring.”

Moak studied the course, then used the console on his command chair to call up data on the dust ring. Like many gas

giants, Jasmine had a ring of particles circling it; however, unlike the fantastic icy rings of Saturn in Sol system, Jasmine had a poor collection of dust particles and other debris that drifted around it like a dirty smoke ring, invisible against the blackness of outer space. He nodded. "Inconsequential, computer. The ship's armor is more than sufficient to shield us from anything we'd encounter in the ring." Was he really having an argument with his computer?

"Yes, but it's so dirty in there. All those organic compounds. The ship will be positively sooty."

Moak raised his eyes up and called down the blessings of the Goddess of Space and all her mischievous demons upon himself and his crew. What the hell was going on here?

He saw one of the technicians watching him with a broad grin on his face. When he noticed the Captain looking at him, he quickly bent down to his task of rewiring a computer console. "Something amusing, Mr. Asherwal?" Moak said.

"Uh, no, Captain, just that you seem not to be acquainted with our new computer system—"

"No, I'm not. And can some one please explain to me what is wrong with it?"

"Nothing that we can find out, sir. It seems to have been designed that way."

"Designed that way? To argue with me? To refuse to take the best option? To talk like a, like a—"

"I really don't know, sir. You'd have to ask Burman about it—he's the only one with any experience with GORGIAS."

"All I can say is that now I know why the Navy never adopted it."

"I wouldn't be so sure, sir. The computer is running faster than ever. It has ever since GORGIAS absorbed the navigation system. We still don't know why."

"Oh." Moak thought for a moment. He could live with a computer that talked like a starport comfort girl, if it meant his ship would be able to fight better.

Anton acknowledged the salutes of the Marine guards stationed by the doors to the bridge. Arkadian, who had stripped off his combat armor and was wearing a wrinkled dress uniform, bounced next to him in the ship's variable gravity. *Rhylanor* was turning to face attacking Zhodani ships.

"My compliments to the Chief Gunner and tell him to please take the remaining destroyer under fire with all batteries. Computer, when will the meson gun be on-line?"

"Commander Lloergrez tells me it will be very shortly. Isn't he wonderful? And so cute."

Anton shot Moak a surprised look. The Captain shook his head and threw up his good arm in exasperation. "Don't ask. I want you to look at something."

He punched at his control console. The main holodisplay filled with a tactical display showing the small Scout cruiser and two larger ships—Zhodani destroyers.

"Compliments from the Chief Gunner. He says that the second target has been disabled," said the Marine who was serving as communications officer.

"My regards to him and request that he please destroy that ship." Moak turned to Darrell. "They won't report back to main fleet, although they'll be missed pretty soon. We need to move fast."

As if on cue, acceleration warnings rang out through the ship. *Rhylanor* shuddered, and weight settled over them like a cloak of lead as she began to accelerate at 1.5 gees. Moak settled back in his command chair and motioned for Darrell and Arkadian to join him. "Watch," he said. "This is when the Zhodani began to attack."

"How did they figure out that we had retaken the Scout ship?" asked Darrell.

"We don't know. We got a quick message from her that the Zhodani had seen through the ruse, but that was all. Now, watch this part."

The holodisplay changed. The tactical display shrank and floated down to the bottom of the image, while the rest of the display was taken up by a picture of the Scout cruiser, taken from *Rhylanor's* telescopes. A Zhodani destroyer inched into view below the cruiser.

Suddenly, the Scout ship exploded.

“Near as we can figure, she was deliberately scuttled. A cutter from the Zhodani destroyer was in the area, probably to drop off boarders. We lost contact with it. It was damaged pretty heavily by the blast.”

“Any chance of survivors?”

“The computer doesn’t think so. And I am assured that whatever else has changed, the computer has retained its accuracy.

“I don’t understand it, Anton. The ship wasn’t that badly damaged. Did Burman strike you as the man to make that kind of sacrifice?”

“No...but you know what he was faced with. A lot of people would prefer death to...having your mind...”

“Hmm...have all our prisoners been accounted for?”

“Yes. ‘Ensign Olivetti’—” he glanced at Arkadian—“has interrogated them himself. It is his belief that we have all of the boarders accounted for, either dead, captured, or retreated to their own ship.”

“What about their commander?”

“We believe he left with the others. Commander Luzammi reports that he was injured when she escaped.”

The ship lurched again and their weight increased. “Doesn’t the gravity on this barge work anymore?” gasped Arkadian?

“We can’t spare the power,” Moak said. “We should be intercepting the Zhodani in twenty-five minutes.”

“Longest...half hour...of my life...”

Darrell grinned. “Isn’t hi-gee training part of the Academy curriculum anymore?”

“Long...time...since...plebe...”

“Computer, get me Chief Lloergrez. I want an update on the main armament.”

Arkadian suddenly turned pale. “Something’s wrong,” he said with clenched teeth. The words came out like a hiss.

“I’m unable to raise him, boss.”

“What? Where could he be?”

“Last reported in the forward weapons magazine.”

Anton pressed a key on his chair’s console. “Kelly, take a squad forward to look for the Chief Engineer.”

Arkadian suddenly groaned.

“What’s the matter?” Moak said.

“We were wrong,” said the Intelligence officer. “He’s still onboard.”

“Who?”

“Tlienjpraviashav. The Zhodani commander.”

Rhylanor shuddered again as her acceleration increased. But Darrell knew that wasn’t the reason for the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

XXII. Discovery

Tlienjpraviashav pressed a button on the wrist plate of his combat armor. There was a slight prick near his elbow joint, and a cool sensation traveled up his arm. For a second, the world seemed out of focus. Then, gradually, a euphoric feeling of control, of power rose up in him. He grinned coldly. He needed to take the drugs to boost his psionic powers. But there were dangers. He could become addicted. He could overdose, and lose some or all of his powers.

He would take them. Revenge was all that mattered.

Rhylanor shuddered as it whipped around Jasmine. It raced through the upper fringes of the frigid planet's atmosphere, bucking in the turbulence stirred up by the impact of the Snowball. Within the huge starship, gun crews stood at the ready by their wrecked control stations, willing to make for in wits and training and raw desire what the ship's smashed systems could no longer provide. Damage control teams balanced haste with caution as they urgently worked what repairs they could in the ship's variable gravity.

On the bridge, Moak brooded and planned his attack. Messages went out from him to the remnants of the Imperial fleet. They had one chance to strike, and it would have to be coordinated perfectly. There were risks. If he failed here, the main Zhodani fleet would be able to refuel and jump out-system, or even turn on their pursuers and smash them. Either way, the war would be extended, bringing each side closer to collapse.

He would take the risks. Having the chance was all that mattered.

The lift cage shook as it descended from the bridge. Darrell undid his helmet so that he could speak without using his radio. He wanted to make sure that this conversation was between the two of them. “You’re sure he’s here,” he said to Arkadian.

“Definitely. I can’t describe what I felt before, but there’s no doubt that it was him.”

“I wish you could convince me.”

“I could. But you’d have to open up your mind to—”

“That’s not an option.”

“Then you’ll just have to take my word for it.”

They rode in silence for a moment. “There’s something else you should know,” Arkadian said.

“Yes?”

“He deliberately opened up his mind. As if he was daring anybody to find him.”

“Then he’ll know we’re coming.”

“I’d say he will be expecting some response.”

Darrell nodded. “It makes our job harder in some ways. But it also makes his options more predictable.”

“I wouldn’t know about such things.”

“I didn’t expect you to.” Darrell studied the psion carefully. “There’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“What?”

“That young officer we killed. I killed. The one you extracted information from—”

“Huh? What about him? I hardly think this is the time—”

“This is definitely the time,” said Anton. He put one heavy hand on Arkadian’s shoulder and squeezed. Tiny servo motors enhanced his natural strength tremendously, and the Intelligence officer winced. He was still wearing only his wrinkled dress uniform. “Something happened during the fight. It was right after he set off that grenade.”

“Yes,” Arkadian said levelly. There was no inflection in his voice. His face was growing pale, though.

“I got caught in the beam of whatever weapon you were using to disrupt his psionic power. There was feedback, like you said there would be. I was already pretty disoriented from the concussion from the explosion. But then something happened.”

“And what was that?” Arkadian’s voice was hoarse, and he was panting heavily. Anton kept up the pressure on his shoulder. He could keep it up all day.

“I was filled with rage. Intense, primal rage, like I’ve never felt before. I’ve fought many places, Pavel, under many suns, against many opponents. I’ve been a soldier for over twenty years. But I’ve never felt that way before. It was like every blind moment of hate I’ve ever had in my life was balled up into one, overwhelming urge to kill.

“I could have torn that boy to pieces with my bare hands. I took the first opportunity I had—his helmet had been knocked off, and I broke his neck. And then it was gone. The hate. I felt nothing anymore.”

“So why are you telling me this?” There was something desperate in Arkadian’s voice, something beyond the pain he was feeling.

“I’ve been thinking about that moment. And I’ve realized something. Those weren’t my feelings—or if they were, they weren’t my natural feelings. And then I realized something else. When that beam crossed my psionic shield, it knocked down my defenses. Against anybody’s psionic power. Including yours.”

He bent down and put his face directly in front of Arkadian’s. “I know you manipulated me. If you ever do that again—to anybody—I’ll kill you. Right where you stand.”

He released his grip on Arkadian’s shoulder and tossed him against the wall of the lift car. Arkadian gasped, breathed in deeply, and clutched his shoulder with his other hand. The car suddenly slowed down and came to a stop. Its doors opened up. Beyond them, a corridor lay deep in shadow. Alarms rang out a far distance away, sounding strangely muted, almost expectant. Anton closed his helmet and stepped into the hallway, his laser

rifle at the ready. Arkadian followed closely behind, clutching his strange pistol, its parabolic dish already extended.

Tlienjpraviashav worked his way through the companionways of the half-dead ship carefully, clutching his captured Imperial weapon close to his chest. His awareness extended all around him, psionic senses still over-stimulated by the drugs he had taken. One corner of his mind kept watch on the Imperial he had captured. The man walked in a daze, stumbling sometimes as he pushed along the grav cart that floated in the air before him. Tlienjpraviashav had to sometimes turn around and physically redirect the man, to keep him from bumping into the cart and spilling its cargo on the floor. The heavy thing it carried was not dangerous—it wasn't armed yet—but he couldn't risk damaging it. There would be no chance to get another.

Paul Marak-Enshluggi followed along behind the handsome officer who had found him in the missile magazine. He didn't quite understand what he had been ordered to do, but that wasn't too much different than normal. Anyway, he knew that it wasn't important to know. He wasn't sure why that was so, but it was. Everything in the universe seemed to tell him so. If he had doubts or worries, they were unimportant. Like why the handsome officer had sneaked up behind Lloergrez and hit him with a wrench. That must have been necessary, although the reasons for it seemed a little fuzzy. Or why he had had to disassemble one of the missiles and put its warhead on this cart.

He decided it would all make sense eventually. After all, everything in the universe seemed to be telling him that.

The escorts and destroyers came hurtling down towards Jasmine from behind one of her moons, firing as they closed in on the Zhodani ships. Two destroyers broke away from the tankers, screening them while they engaged the Imperial ships. The damaged Imperial ships were no match for them. Soon one

of the cruisers rose slowly from the gas giant's atmosphere, its tanks full of fuel and ready to add the weight of its guns to the unequal fight.

Without grace, the tankers themselves began to boost out of the atmosphere, collapsible fuel tanks bloated with hydrogen sucked from the very stuff Jasmine was made of. They waddled on their way towards the edge of the planet's gravity well, where they would be in perfect position to refuel the rest of the fleet. Far away, off to one side of them, their escorts battled the Imperials, but they moved on slowly, with a stately unconcern for the fight.

One of them sparkled suddenly, blue and white flashes of arc lightening traveling up and down its length. The ship stopped accelerating and began to drift behind its sisters. The rest of them tried to move faster. There was almost a touch of hysteria to their movements, like a herd of herbivores startled by the appearance of a predator in their midst.

Rhylanor erupted out of Jasmine's atmosphere. She brought her meson cannon to bear on another of the tankers, and the ship exploded, a puff of incandescent flame that dissipated quickly in the empty vacuum of space. The Zhodani cruisers turned away from the rest of the Imperial fleet and began to move towards *Rhylanor*, but they were too late, too slow; the battle cruiser had more than enough time to run down each of the tankers and destroy them.

On the bridge, Moak felt a grim exultation, although his voice betrayed no emotion. After he destroyed the tankers, nothing else would matter. Let the rest of the Zhodani fleet pound him to smithereens—he had won the battle.

They followed predetermined routes, through the darkened corridors, so that they could maintain radio silence. Arkadian forced himself to calm down, using the mental and physical techniques he had studied for years. Some detached part of himself could almost measure the amount of adrenaline in his

blood based on his physical responses, and he worked towards lowering it. He had to keep control of his reason.

Idly, he reflected that there were a great many detached parts of him. He was capable of acting without any emotion. This bothered him obscurely.

He was coming up on one of the portside airlocks. He cautiously edged up to it.

The inner door was open. Beside it, in the dim light, he could see a floating grav cart with a large piece of equipment on it. The light from the airlock chamber dimmed momentarily, as if something was moving inside it.

There was no unsteadiness in his movements. The detached part of his mind noticed that time seemed to have slowed down incredibly as he crept with his back flattened against the wall. Smoothly, with no hesitation, he jumped into the doorway of the airlock. There were two men inside, a short one wearing an Imperial uniform, and a tall one wearing Zhodani combat armor. He raised his pistol and shot the Zhodani.

XXIII. Confrontation

The air lock was large, big enough to move bulky cargoes or an entire squad of troops through it at one time. The short Imperial was standing by the right-hand wall. Carrying a captured Imperial plasma gun, the tall Zhodani came charging at him as soon as he raised his pistol.

Arkadian fired, aiming the parabolic dish at the end of the gun directly at the Zhodani's head. The tall man dropped his weapon and clutched his head in surprise. He continued to stagger forward. Arkadian glanced at the weapon's readouts. It was taking a tremendous amount of power to have any effect on the Zhodani.

Tlienjpraviashav's mind was a riot of pain. What was the Imperial doing to him? His awareness was becoming unfocused. He could feel the first exploratory tendrils of another mind trying to contact his—was it this man with his strange weapon?

He lurched forward. The Imperial inched closer. The weapon must diminish in effectiveness with range. Good. Let him get close. Tlienjpraviashav's had to rely on his reflexes, honed by thousands of hours of training. He had to act without thought.

In one motion he drew a knife from his belt and slashed outward, slicing into the Imperial's stomach in one killing arc. He pulled back the knife and thrust straight forward. The Imperial dropped his pistol and collapsed against Tlienjpraviashav's arm. The Zhodani took the knife out of his stomach and let the Imperial fall to the floor.

"Amazing, isn't it?" he said, letting his suit's speaker carry the clipped tones of his Anglic flatly into the air. "We who live

so much in the mind—our own, those of others—forget the basic realities.

“It’s truly a problem, isn’t it? In some way, I envy the Imperials and their refusal to access a higher reality. They remain in the regular, physical world, the world of brawn and bone and blood.

“I could cut you down with a thought. You, perhaps, could do the same to me. But, ah, power can blind, yes? A knife can cut just as well.”

Arkadian had managed to crawl to the side of the air lock. Blood soaked through his tunic, left a smeared trail on the floor behind him. Tlienjpraviashav picked up the pistol and regarded it for a moment. “An interesting device. We have explored similar ideas, of course.”

He regarded the wounded man coldly. “I hadn’t suspected that one of your kind would be aboard. Perhaps your commanders are more far-sighted than we believed. In any case—”

He pressed the trigger, holding the pistol so that its invisible beam would intersect with Arkadian’s head. He was surprised at how quickly the other man’s defenses fell. He began to probe his mind. The Imperial weapon, he observed, was a device of great brute power. But it leveled out all the mental structures of its target. Arkadian’s mind was barely coherent; it was difficult to extract anything useful.

But—here and there—there were images. Recent events were clearer.

Pliezabr, dead, lying on the floor of a corridor. Arkadian was regarding the readouts on some instruments he had attached to the boy’s head, his mind probing into the fragmenting consciousness of the boy.

There is no Anglic word for the offense he was committing. There were rumors of perverted minds among the Zhodani, people who would kill a sentient being just to experience its mind at the moment of death and beyond, the gradual unspooling of a personality into the nothingness and entropy that would be

the universe's ultimate fate. Necrophilia is not severe enough a term.

Tlienjpraviashav dropped the pistol in disgust. At least he knew now. Knew what the boy had been trying to tell him, trying to warn him about—Arkadian, this miserable creature. The Imperial psionic. Powerful, perhaps, among his own kind, but no match for one trained by the foremost minds in the Consulate.

So much lost, for nothing! He should have sensed the desperate need for heroic deeds in the boy, his urgent desire to please him, and given him stricter orders not to travel alone. Instead, the boy had made a pointless sacrifice.

Part of him, he realized, was already feeling guilt that he had not realized the Imperial's secret to begin with. All the clues were there. Yet his own pride had kept him from coming to the correct conclusion.

Guilt was frowned upon in the Consulate. It tended to restrict one's options too much. A truly aware sophont must be able to make a decision only upon its own merits, not one based on his prior failures. He hoped that he would not require reeducation. That might be unpleasant.

He stooped suddenly, picked up the plasma rifle, and fired it through the open inner doorway, into the darkened corridor outside.

Anton shrieked with pain as he stumbled into the airlock. The shot had hit him in his right leg and he fell to the floor, writhing in pain. He managed to sit up for a moment and glanced uncomprehendingly at his leg.

It was missing below the knee.

Tlienjpraviashav spoke: "Today I have learned new admiration for Imperial technology. First your device, Arkadian. Most clever, being able to remotely breach a psionic's defenses. And this—" he lifted the plasma rifle. "A weapon as devastating as one of our heavy plasma guns, but able to be fired by a person

not wearing combat armor. Quite an improvement, wouldn't you say?"

Arkadian watched him talk to Anton through a haze of pain. He had to do something. It couldn't end like this. He turned his head to its side and looked at the grav cart hovering just outside the airlock door. He recognized what was on top of it: the warhead from a nuclear missile.

An idea came spread across his mind gradually. He smiled. He knew what to do. It calmed him down, gave him a moment of clarity. He reached out of the wreckage of his mind, grasping towards the cart.

Slowly it began to move towards him.

Tlienjpraviashav had gotten behind Anton and dragged him to the other side of the airlock, careful to stay out of range of the Marine's arms. Weakened as he was by pain and shock, the Marine's battle dress still gave him enough strength to hurt the Zhodani commander.

Tlienjpraviashav studied him for a moment, and then closed his eyes. He spread his awareness out, letting his mind hunt through the circuitry of the Marine's helmet. He found the crucial areas and used his telekinetic powers to wreck them. "There, now," he said. "Your shield is useless."

Anton shuddered as he felt his mind being invaded. The experience was beyond words. Suddenly, there was the cool presence of another inside his mind, forcing him to show it things, to reveal things about him that remained inchoate even to himself. Then it was gone, leaving some indescribable taint of madness in its wake.

"Ah..." said Tlienjpraviashav. "Zirkuniashav. Most unexpected. Most excellent. More complete than I could have hoped."

"What...is more..."

"My revenge, of course. In a moment, I will leave this ship. Before I do so, I will trigger the timer on a nuclear weapon. Which will, of course, destroy this ship and everything on it.

“Rather sad that you will not be able to join your crewmates in their moment of immolation, of course. But I will have to kill you before I leave.”

“Can’t...get away...”

“Yes I can. There will be no shock wave. A command suit has far greater acceleration capabilities built in to it than I think you expect. As well as greater radiation shielding. Boy,” he said to Paul, without even looking at him, “Go fetch the cart and bring it in here.”

Paul, his face as blank as a sleepwalker’s, shuffled through the airlock door. He walked right past the grav cart, which was drifting behind Tlienjpraviashav’s back.

Anton saw the cart and dropped his eyes. He forced himself to look at the blasted stump of his right leg. The medical routines built into his armor had already applied a tourniquet to the wound, and anesthetics were beginning to slowly numb him to sleep. Concentrate on the pain, he thought. Don’t let him sense anything is wrong. Concentrate. Concentrate.

“But what if I don’t escape?” continued Tlienjpraviashav. “What if I share your death, either in the moment of this ship’s destruction, or weeks later, wasting away in my own body from radiation sickness? It makes no difference to me anymore.”

Arkadian reached out with his hand and caught the cart. The emergency airlock controls were less than a meter away from him. He tried using his telekinesis on them.

No good. The force required was too great, and his power was too depleted.

Gradually, he began to edge down the wall.

Tlienjpraviashav bent down close to Anton’s helmet, heedless of whether or not the Marine could grab him. They made a strange tableau, these two helmets, almost touching. Like knights of some primitive world met on a battlefield.

I don’t care anymore, thought Tlienjpraviashav, both their minds sharing his awful moment of pain and lust and vengeance.

I will kill those who have killed me! Who have killed what was best in my life!

Arkadian braced one hand against the missile warhead and pulled himself into a sitting position next to the cart. With his other hand he reached up and grasped the handle for the emergency evacuation controls. He took a short, sobbing breath, and pulled down on it.

A klaxon began ringing as a blast shield rolled down the inner doorway, sealing it shut. At the same time, explosive bolts blew open the outer airlock door.

Tlienjpraviashav was grabbed from behind by the wind that instantly sprang up in the airlock. He hurtled through space, his arms and legs desperately trying to grasp onto something, and flew through the outer door and into the void beyond.

Arkadian hugged the bomb to his chest as he was lifted up off the floor and into the fast-vanishing air. Anton, who had caught one of the handholds against the other wall in the powerful grip of his mechanically enhanced arms, reached out towards him with the other as he fell towards the outer door. Arkadian stabbed out with his own hand towards Anton's. For a moment, he held onto the contoured battle plastic of the Marine's gauntlet.

Then he was tumbling outside the ship, the air exploding out of his lungs in one silent scream, his chest and guts and eardrums an agony of pressure and pain. Deathly intense cold seemed to crush him as *Rhylanor*, still making over one gravity, sped past him in an instant.

As he fell, he looked upon the stars with his naked eyes, and, uncloaked in all their glory, they shone their hostility down upon him.

XXIV. Epilogue

Tlienjpraviashav tumbled through emptiness, the Imperial ship hurtling past him in an instant. A feeling of hatred and loss shook through him. Curses filled his mind and his mouth. Then he wept.

After a long while, he began to look around him. Far away, a single object was bright enough for him to detect on the maximum magnification his helmet could provide. It was moving slowly against the background of the stars.

He took a bearing on it and began to accelerate to match its course. He was a long time in traveling.

A huge spherical bulk of spaceship hung in the viewport of *Rhylanor's* largest private cabin. Fighters, tiny at this distance, buzzed around the *Tigress*-class battleship like bees around a hive. Below them, dirty gray clouds scudded through the atmosphere of the planet Rhylanor, showing blood red at the terminator line where the planet's dim sun first touched them as they crossed from night to day. It was, Moak thought, a singularly unattractive world from space, even if his ship was its namesake.

He watched as the computer plotted fleet strength and readiness in three dimensions in the air in front of him. He nodded to himself, and then spoke aloud. "Excellent. Oh, computer, re-open the commendations list and add Chief Petty Officer Paul Marak-Enshluggi to the list."

"Affirmative," the computer replied in cold, unemotional tones.

“I see that they’ve restored the computer’s old personality,” said Darrell from the doorway, where he was standing.

“Ah, hello, Anton. Yes, they have. The ship was crawling with technicians for a while. They ended up removing the entire computer, as well as the transponder. Now why would they do that?”

“Funny thing is, I never would have noticed a computer’s personality before...won’t you come in for a drink?”

“Thanks. I’m glad you’re giving a commendation to Paul. If he hadn’t been outside the airlock, I would have died with the rest of them.” Anton crossed the floor with an unsteadiness that was not so much a limp as an uncertainty as to how to move one of his legs.

Moak watched him. “How’s the prosthetic?”

“Fine,” said Anton as he sank into a chair across from Moak’s day couch. “How’s your shoulder?”

Moak grimaced at the reminder. “Better. I put too much strain on it during the fight, the doctors tell me. Probably won’t ever be quite right again.” He sipped his drink.

Anton nodded. “I don’t have time to have the leg regenerated, so I’ll have to make do with this until then.”

“I would have thought you had earned some time off.”

“It was mine for the asking. But I wanted to go back into action.”

“Your Zivije plan was approved?”

“Yes. I’ll be taking my own team of commandos there soon. The Zhodani have actually landed units on the surface. Just the kind of work for an old campaigner like me.”

Moak handed him a drink in a crystal glass. He put the bottle down on the glass-topped coffee table between them. “Then here’s to your success.”

“Thanks. And also thank you for speaking to the Admiral.”

“Ah, well. I seem to have rather more influence with him these days.”

“That so?”

“Yes. In fact, I’m joining the High Command. Strictly as a staff officer, you understand.”

“You’re leaving *Rhylanor*?”

“Yes. Anyway, the ship itself is headed for the yards. It’s unlikely it will ever be ship-of-the line again. Too much damage.”

“Well, then, to our respective new jobs.”

They drank. “I enjoyed the concert,” said Moak.

“Thank you. That was an old Solomani piece. Who knows how old. Pre-starflight, for sure. By a man named Barber. Seemed appropriate for the occasion, though.”

“Very. I’ll miss your playing.”

“Thank you. It’s doubtful I’ll have the time to practice where I’m headed.”

Anton watched the activity around the battleship outside the viewport for a moment. “How’s Commander Luzammi?” he said.

“Recovering very well. I saw her yesterday.”

“It’s a shame, isn’t it.” Raini had been in contact too long with Tlienjpraviashav. There was no way of telling what commands he might have implanted in her subconscious, at least not with the techniques available to the Imperials. If they could have used telepathy—

She would be taken care of. The Navy would not let her ever want for anything again. But she could not stay in the service.

No one could trust some one whose mind had been probed by a Zhodani Consul himself.

The Subsector Capital was not a world ideal for a honeymoon. A tiny planet whose starport was one of the busiest in the Sector, *Rhylanor* was home to billions of people ruled by a group of hereditary nobles, many of whom were Imperial Nobles as well. The atmosphere was so thin as to be barely noticeable. The architecture was singularly uninteresting, consisting of huge arcologies - single buildings the size of cities - crowded with

people, people everywhere. Lara and Paul were shocked to find that the cheapest hotels rented rooms in shifts.

Despite this, they were happy. They toured the sights together, such as they were. One of the arcologies gave them a tour of the food and air processing plants, the technical details of which bored Lara but interested Paul. They visited the birthplace of Olav I, the Admiral who had led his fleet to the Imperial Capital after the first war with the Zhodani, killed the Empress, and made himself Emperor—starting sixteen years of civil war.

After so long cooped up inside a besieged system, with only intermittent news from the outside world, it seemed to Lara that everything had suddenly changed. The war was going much better, and some experts were saying that the tide had turned. The surrender of the Zhodani fleet here in Rhylanor system was merely the latest of their setbacks. Duke Norris of Regina, who had personally taken over the conduct of the war, was hammering away at the remaining Zhodani positions. Peace seemed likely, if not before the end of the year, then by the next Emperor's Birthday.

For the first time in months, she and Paul could spend all of their free time together, and they relished it. Even the poor food they could afford in the restaurants—mostly a protein mash with a pudding-like consistency—seemed a delicacy. They didn't talk together about their future, though. Like Raini Lusammi, Paul had been discharged from the Navy. He couldn't protest; the memory of how he had been turned into a sleepwalking puppet by the Zhodani was with him all the time.

One night they rented a pair of vacc suits and rode a tram out of the arcology and into one of the few wilderness areas left on the planet. It looked like a mad Zen rock garden dropped from a vast height by a forgetful god. Lichens—Rhylanor's only native life—covered the rocks with a gray slime. They found a flat rock and sat down on it, staring upwards into the purple-black sky. The stars were almost as clear as they would have been from space.

She held his arm and sighed. "So, after the war," she said, picking up a conversation that had fizzled out during dinner, "where will we live?"

"I don't know," said Paul absently. "My homeworld probably doesn't appeal to you—"

"Mora? No. Last thing I want to do is live on another subsector capital."

"Right. And your home system—sorry, dearest, but an asteroid belt? I love space, but I don't want to live in it."

"I don't particularly want to go back to Glisten either."

"It doesn't matter, really. We'll have to make do with wherever the Marines station you. And you don't have any leave time coming soon to go househunting."

She looked at him sideways, slyly. Should she tell him that she was going to have to take a leave in a few months?

She decided not to. After all, the robot doctors in the arcology were supposed to not make mistakes, but it had been known to happen.

"You're right," she said. *It really doesn't matter. So long as the war ends soon. I was married in the middle of a battle. I don't want our child to be born during one.*

They were quiet for a long time, alone among the vacant beauty of a harsh landscape. Far away and above them, men fought together or died alone among the stars, the very stars that seemed to shine confirmation down upon their love.