

## Nightfall On August – Insectoids 04

Steve Gordon

Nightfall on August

Part I: Roughing it on August

Chapter 1: The March Across August

It had been victory, but at a terrible cost.

For nearly 20 years the Insectoids had occupied Alliance planets,

enslaving the human race. It was only after years of resistance, and the return of a rebuilt fleet led by War Admiral Norman North, that they were able to finally liberate their homeworlds.

But their victory had come at a terrible cost. As a parting act of spite, the Insectoids had used some sort of weapon to disrupt all power systems on nearly all Alliance worlds. The Queen leading the invasion, Zsst herself, came to August, the capital of the Alliance, in a mighty Chent ship, intent not only on disrupting the power on the planet but also destroying it utterly with a Chent superweapon.

Zsst used an energy dampener to disrupt the power on August, as she had on most major Alliance worlds. But then, just as she was about to destroy August with the superweapon, the Chent ship turned around, and simply disappeared from known space. No one knew why.

But the damage Zsst had done was significant enough. Most Alliance worlds were without power. That would be a disaster on any world.

On August, it was worse than a disaster.

Imagine a city so large that it spanned an entire continent, and you imagine August. Everything from transportation to food to medicine to industry relied on power. Even at the height of the Insectoid occupation the generators kept running, supplying the resistance with the power they needed to run their underground electrofarms. There were some conventional farms on the periphery of the continent, but they only produced a small fraction of the food needed to support the population.

And now, suddenly, the lights went out. Everything stopped working. The power generators cut out. The hot lamps which powered the underground farms cut out. The entire planet was cut off, surrounded by a sparkling

field of particles that prevented any ship from safely landing, that even prevented communications from coming in and out. August was one, big, prehistoric prison, and everyone on the planet was trapped there.

The power to all electrical devices had been cut off right after the energy suppression field hit. Unfortunately, one of those "electrical devices" was a small fighter, just in the process of taking off, when power was lost.

The wreckage from the long range Trobadore B two seater fighter littered the street, burning everywhere. A bloody hand reached up unsteadily to push some of the debris away.

A person attached to the hand struggled to free himself from the debris as well as the parachute attached to the chair ejection mechanism. The figure stood up, revealing the equally bloody but grim face of Clifford Croft, resistance leader and super spy, one of the Agency's Eight.

Croft wiped the blood off his forehead as he looked around. He felt fuzzy and lightheaded. It must be the concussion, he thought dimly.

Croft tried to look around, but despite the small fires burning around him a glittering haze was filling the air, preventing him from seeing more than a few feet in any direction. Had his vision been impaired?

Croft felt unsteady, like he had trouble standing; he fell back to the ground, and tried to cut through the buzz in his head and concentrate.

He had been in the backseat of the Trobadore B. The pilot had tried to eject, but when power was lost, the automatic eject system went out with it. His last memory was of the pilot pulling the manual eject lever....

Aeronautical engineers knew, of course, that pilots would have to eject under a variety of circumstances, including when they had lost power, and had provided a manual release mechanism. But the extra seconds that the pilot had taken to move from the automatic to the manual ejection button had nearly been fatal.

Perhaps fatal, for the pilot. Croft and the pilot of the Trobadore had ejected separately. He tried to look around, to see if he could see any signs of the pilot. But that dim, glittering haze was blocking his vision.

Croft felt the painful spot on his head. Had he suffered brain damage that injured his vision?

Croft stiffened as he heard crackling sounds, as if someone was moving through the wreckage. Could it be the pilot? No, not from the sound of it, unless the pilot brought several friends with him.

He was reaching for his blaster when he slumped over and blacked out.

Croft slowly awoke to find himself lying on a table in an underground room. The room was illuminated by a small flame driven torch on the wall.

The room was covered in that sparkling mist, making it difficult to see.

Croft closed his eyes hard, and reopened them. He saw people moving in the mist. Croft groaned, and started to sit up. His head was throbbing, and he felt a sharp pain in his side.

Someone came over to him out of the mist. "You're very lucky," said the figure.

"I'm not so sure," said Croft, guessing that this must be a member of the resistance. He felt his body. It was painful on his right side and right leg, like he had twisted something, but at least nothing seemed broken.

Maybe he was lucky. He tried looking around, but his vision was still blurry. "There's something wrong with my vision," he said.

"If you mean the mist, there's nothing wrong," said the man. "At least, not with your vision. It's from that bug weapon they used on us."

Bug weapon.

It all came back to Croft. The Insectoids had used some kind of weapon to dampen power on the entire planet. That's what the sparkling particles were.

"What about the pilot?" said Croft, standing up painfully. He checked his blaster; it was still in its holster. Good. Or was that now irrelevant?

"There was no sign of him," said the man.

Another shape moved in the blur.

"He's conscious, sir," said the man.

"Thank you, Corporal, you're dismissed," said the second man. He turned to Croft, stared at his face, and look startled. He said, "I think I recognize you, from the broadcast at the victory celebration. Could you really be..."

Croft looked up expectantly.

"Clifford Croft?" said the man.

"In the flesh," said Croft, groaning as he felt a pain in his back.

"Barely. What's the situation?"

"Lieutenant Pomiter, sir, resistance group 7-2," said the officer, saluting. "All power has been cut."

"Planetwide?" said Croft.

"There's no way to tell," said Pomiter. "We don't have power for the comm

system. The situation is already starting to get chaotic on the surface."

"I can imagine," said Croft. He considered the possibilities. "The fleet must know what's happened to us... if the fleet survived."

"Can we count on their help, sir?" Pomiter asked.

"It depends how high in the atmosphere this disturbance goes," said Croft.

"My guess is that we'll have to rely on ourselves, for the time being. "

"Yes sir," said Pomiter. "We're cut off from other resistance groups, except those closest to us. Our most immediate problem is the food situation."

"The food situation?"

"The power cut out to the heat lamps for our underground farms.."

Croft immediately understood the implications. Without light, the farms would die. "Can you move the farms to the surface?"

"Even if we could, there's no light out there."

"No light?" said Croft, stunned.

"Sir, you crashed in broad daylight, two hours ago, but right now there's only a dim light outside. Most of it is being jammed by those particles," said Pomiter.

"I think we're in trouble," said Croft.

They took stock of their situation. There had been nearly 50 men under Lieutenant Pomiter's command; but after the victory celebration, many had dispersed or gone their own separate ways; only 32 remained. There was enough stored food to feed those 32 for perhaps fifteen days. And there was no way to grow any additional food.

"Show me a map," said Croft automatically.

"I can't, sir," said Pomiter, pointing to the holodisplay. "No power."

"Then draw me one," Croft snarled.

"Sir, I can't draw an exact map--"

"A general map of our location on August will do," said Croft.

It took several minutes for Pomiter to find a writing implement. He drew a rough map of August, and their location.

From Pomiter's drawing, it appeared that they were a bit east of the center of the western continent, Concord.

Croft stared at the picture and hmm'ed to himself for a moment. "How long would you estimate it would take us to get to Sarney?"

"Sarney, on the east coast?" said Pomiter.

"Is there any other Sarney Sarittenden?" said Croft.

"On foot?" said Pomiter. He frowned, concentrating. "I don't know. Maybe 25 or 30 days.."

"Then that's where we have to go."

"Sir, we don't have enough food to get there," said Pomiter.

"If we have enough food for fifteen days, we'll make it if we go on half rations, if we cover, oh, maybe 20 miles a day," Croft figured.

"Half rations? How can we march 20 miles a day on half rations?"

"We don't have much choice," said Croft grimly.

"What can we hope to accomplish even if we get to Sarney?" said Pomiter.

"Is there any food stored there?"

"No more than anywhere else," said Croft grimly. "But that's just a stone's throw from Aridor."

"Aridor?"

"Think, Pomiter. What's just about the only place on this planet where vegetation is growing naturally?"

"The eastern continent," said Pomiter. "But we can't eat vegetation."

"We most certainly can, if it's a choice between that and starvation," said Croft. "And I see no alternative by staying here. We can't eat technosteel buildings. It's either go for Aridor, or stay here and starve."

"Sir, shouldn't we think about this?"

"Every minute we spend thinking about this is one more minute we give hunger to build, one less minute that we spend getting to Aridor," said Croft. "And each minute that passes the chaos on the surface will only increase. How long do you think it will be before wild gangs kill anything that moves on the surface, hoping to get a scrap of food?"

"We're disciplined soldiers, sir," said Pomiter. "We'll get you to Sarney."

"That's great," said Croft. "But discipline won't be enough." In a swift motion he drew his blaster and fired at the opposite wall. Nothing. "How will we even be able to defend ourselves?"

The troopers gathered up their remaining food and a few blankets and were ready to go an hour later, which was fifty minutes too long for Croft's tastes. To Croft's satisfaction, Pomiter set up the column in a staggered formation, designating advance scouts to go ahead of the main force. Perhaps this Pomiter was actually competent.

It was broad daylight outside but the particles were so thick that they blotted out the light. They could barely see where they were going. And



yet, these sparkly particles couldn't be touched, or felt. Only seen. What exactly had the bugs hit them with?

They marched with only two short breaks until nightfall, when travel was impossible. As they rested in an abandoned lobby, Croft groaned as he lay down. The throbbing in his head had subsided, but the pain in his leg had increased. He gingerly felt his leg. It was sore, but it functioned. That was good. A broken leg could be a death sentence right now.

It was pitch black outside. With the power out and the particles blotting out the light of the stars, nothing could be seen.

The morning came dimly. When it was bright enough to see a few feet ahead, they started marching again. The particles were so thick that psychologically it made them feel like they had trouble breathing, even though they couldn't actually feel the particles. Well, some of them claimed they could feel the particles, that it made their hair stand on end. Croft didn't speculate, but just kept walking.

From time to time they encountered other people, scavengers. A few stopped to beg for food, but they had none to spare. Croft's stomach rumbled most of the time after the two short meals they permitted themselves. Existing on half-rations were bad enough; but existing on half rations while marching miles every day was even worse.

And Croft knew there was no way they were covering 20 miles a day. They would undoubtedly run out of food before they reached Aridor. Once the food was gone it would be a race against time to get over to the Eastern continent before they starved to death.

Well, at least they were going in the right general direction, east. Croft

hoped that once they got close to Sarney he would recognize landmarks that would enable him to plot a more direct route. They had many opportunities to climb up tall buildings to check for landmarks, but none of the troopers, Croft included, had the energy to climb after marching for miles every day.

The pain in Croft's right leg gradually faded but was replaced by another kind of wearying pain in both legs.

"I wonder how far we've come," said Pomiter, on the seventh night. He was sitting near Croft in the darkness, though neither could see the other.

"It's hard to say," said Croft slowly. "My guess is that we're doing about 15 miles a day."

"A third of our food is gone already, even at half rations," said Pomiter.

"Do you think we're going to make it?"

"I think we don't have much choice," said Croft grimly.

"I feel exhausted," said Pomiter. "I wonder if there's something in this mist that's killing us."

"I think that's just fatigue," said Croft. "This mist only seems to have knocked out the power."

"How do you know?" Pomiter asked.

"I don't," said Croft. "But we just have to continue on and hope for the best."

The trouble didn't really start until the eighth day out.

They were marching on the morning of the eighth day, and they were so weary that they nearly didn't see it coming. The mist also didn't help. It was thick, not enabling them to see more than a few feet ahead. Croft,

though, thought that the mist was starting to thin a bit--or was it his imagination?

He was still considering this when suddenly a gang of scavengers appeared, blocking the way forward; and then, turning around, Croft saw their exit blocked as well.

"Just give us your food and none of you will get hurt," said their leader, holding a metal pipe.

Croft said nothing as the leader took a step towards Croft. The scavenger took Croft's silence for fear. "Let's have it," said the bandit.

"Whatever you say," said Croft, stepping forward swiftly despite the pain in his legs.

The ruffian swung at him but Croft was already spinning to the side, and chopped down hard on the ruffian's neck. He dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

In an instant, the other scavengers fled.

"All right, everybody, pick up a stick," said Croft, picking up the pipe.

He swung it experimentally. It was a bit short but would do.

"A stick?" said one of the men.

"A club, a stick, anything long and hard," said Croft. "We're going back to the stone age, gang."

After that they had several more run-in's with gangs, and each time they had to fight harder and harder to get through them. It was as if the word had spread that Croft and his team had food, and everyone, desperate to

survive, was coming after them. They faced an increasing number of bruising conflicts.

It was with a wary eye, then, on the tenth day, that Croft eyed a single scavenger in the street ahead of them. The lone scavenger didn't seem frightened, as loners often did; he just stood there, and stared at Croft and his men.

"Do you think it's a trap?" Pomiter asked.

"Quite possibly," said Croft. "Let's switch to another street."

They crisscrossed through several short avenues before setting out on a parallel street a few blocks down.

But standing there, waiting for them, was the scavenger.

At least, it looked like the same one.

"All right," said Croft, motioning with his hands for the platoon to assume a classic box position. "Be ready for anything, men."

They gripped their weapons more tightly, as if expecting a trap. But as they got closer, the man said, "Hi there," in a friendly tone.

This only made Croft more suspicious. They were on a ruined planet, in the middle of nowhere, and all of a sudden a friendly person pops up.

Croft stopped several feet away from the person, but in the mist had trouble making out the man's face.

"What do you want?" said Croft, getting to the point. He held his metal pipe in his right hand, looking left and right for the ambush.

"I recognize that voice," said the man. "What are the odds of that?"

And then Croft recognized not so much the other man's voice, but something about what he said about odds.

The man slowly stepped forward out of the gloom, his arms at his side, so

Croft and the others could see him.

"Well well well," said Clifford Croft. "Yosemite Catchbill. What are the odds of meeting you here?"

"I was asking myself the same thing," said Catchbill.

Yosemite Catchbill was one of the most renown con-men and crooked gamblers in the Alliance. Somehow he had always managed to avoid going to prison, perhaps because he on occasion provided valuable intelligence to the Agency. He and Croft had had occasional encounters in the past. But that didn't mean that Croft liked him.

"Actually, the odds are higher than you think," said Catchbill.

Croft raised an eyebrow.

"Before you were on the main thoroughfare to the east coast. I figured that someone important like yourself who was stranded out west would be heading to the coast, maybe even making for Sarney." He looked at Croft's face for clues to how close his guesses were, but Croft was impassive.

"If you wanted to go to Sarney, why not just go?" said Croft.

"There's the ah, security situation," said Catchbill. "The streets aren't very safe right now."

"And now the real reason?" Croft asked.

"Well, I figured a powerful delegation like yours might have a few scraps of food for a hungry refugee-

"Forget it," said Croft. He signaled Pomiter; the column started moving again.

"Wait!" said Catchbill. "At least let me go with you!"

Croft turned to Catchbill. "We're no less than 3 weeks out of Sarney.

There's no guarantee we'll find food when we get there." He left the knowledge of their final destination, Aridor, a secret for now. "We don't have enough food for ourselves, much less you. How will you survive that long?"

"I have food too!" said Catchbill, whirling around to reveal a backpack.

"Enough for three weeks?"

"Well... I can make it last," said Catchbill.

Croft looked hard at Catchbill. Finally, he nodded. "All right. But if I catch you stealing a crumb of food, I'll shoot you."

"With what?" said Catchbill.

"All right, I'll club you," Croft sighed. It was going to be one of those days.

Catchbill proved to be of some limited help, pointing out relatively safer routes away from the local gangs. But after a days march he too found himself in unfamiliar territory and was just another mouth.

And what a mouth he was! He was constantly trying to gamble with some of Pomiter's men to try to win their rations. Croft rapidly put a stop to that, tapping suggestively with his metal pipe as he caught Catchbill's eye.

They continued marching. The mist definitely seemed to be getting lighter; whereas before they could only see two or three feet ahead in the mist, now they could see five or six feet in the distance. It didn't make much of a difference, but it was some improvement.

They had several more encounters with gangs, and in one particularly fierce battle they actually lost one of Pomiter's men, who was clubbed to death during a sudden ambush. Then, two days later, they lost another man,

and another.

By the 27th day they were down to 25 men, including Pomiter and Croft, and they were extremely weary. They needed rest, but they knew if they even took one day off that it might make the difference between life and death, as their food supplies were almost depleted.

"We have only two days of food left," said Pomiter, rubbing a sore arm. He had zigged to the left when he should have zagged to the right and caught a blow to his right arm during a recent gang skirmish.

"Then we'll have to extend it," Croft said grimly.

"Extend it? How?"

"Quarter rations."

"Quarter rations? How do you expect us to survive on quarter rations?"

said Pomiter. His raised voice attracted the attention of the other soldiers, who looked tired, dirty, and bloodied. So far there hadn't been any desertions, though maybe this wasn't surprising given the fact that there was nowhere else to go for food. But once the food was gone, could Croft keep them together?

Keeping them together. How ironic. Croft was the classic loner. He didn't like sticking to groups, they only slowed him down. But they had come this far together. Somehow he felt almost responsible for this group.

"We'll survive because we have to," said Croft grimly. "I think we're getting close to Sarney," he lied. "It shouldn't be long now."

But in fact Croft was worried that he didn't recognize anything at all familiar that would indicate they were near Sarney, and it was only when they reached the ocean two days later that they understood why.

Suddenly, without warning, they came up on it. The sea. They had had to ration water as well, as the power to the planet's plumbing system had conked out, but the ocean was a saltwater body. Still, the sight of the ocean meant that they must be close to Sarney Sarittenden, right?

Wrong. Nothing looked familiar to Croft. It was only when they stopped a solitary scavenger and asked for directions that they realized why.

They had come too far south. Sarney Sarittenden was 30 miles to the north. 30 miles. A few minutes by shuttle, or ground transport. Fresh troops could march that distance in a day and a half.

Croft's troops were so exhausted and starved that they could barely do 10 miles a day. Even on quarter rations they only had enough food for two more days. Croft did the math in his head.

"Good news, troops," he said mirthlessly. "Sarney is only a two or three day march north."

"But we're going to Aridor," said one of the troops. "Why don't we just cross the water here?"

"With what?" said Croft. "We have no transport."

"We could build a raft," said Pomiter.

"If I recall correctly the ocean is some 90 miles or so wide at this point," said Croft. "It's narrowest point is at Sarney Sarittenden. And if we can locate the entrance to the underground tubeway, we won't need a raft at all."

The next day they continued marching but were so weary that they didn't notice a group of scavengers ahead until they were almost on top of them. But neither did the scavengers, who were busy fanning the flames of a



small fire. Over the fire was a long spit, and tied to the spit was a body. They were planning to cook and eat a person!

For a moment Croft just blinked, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Were they really going to eat human flesh? The scavengers turned and stared dully at his group. Maybe they would want to eat him too.

"Hey!" said a voice, and Croft realized it was coming from the guy on the spit. They weren't just eating a body, they were going to cook a live person!

"Hey, over there, don't be shy!" said the voice, and Croft could see a face now peering at them.

"Get out of here," one of the scavengers scowled, waving a stick. "This isn't your business."

Croft turned to look at Pomiter, who was already looking at him. Each was thinking the same thing. Croft's men were weary, and low on food. Did they even have the energy to fight the scavengers? Even if they managed to save the man on the spit, what would they feed him with?

"No," Croft heard himself mumble, not realizing he had made a decision.

Whatever their condition, whatever the situation, he couldn't let an innocent civilian die.

The scavenger saw the expression in Croft's face, and suddenly he realized Croft's intent, almost before Croft himself had. He and his companions, nearly 20 in all, closed on Croft. They all had clubs or sticks or sharpened weapons.

"This isn't your fight," said the man. Croft could see that he was covered with some sort of mud or dirt, though whether by choice or indifference

was hard to tell.

"Hey, don't let him tell you what to do!" said the voice from the spit.

"What are you, some kind of pushover?"

Mud face didn't bother looking over at his captive, but only had eyes for Croft.

"You can just walk away," he said in a low voice, slowly circling Croft.

"We outnumber you," said Croft, holding his metal pipe. Mudface was holding a long stick, a piece of a pole, maybe. It was longer than Croft's pipe, but certainly not as hard.

The man licked his dirty lips. "You're right," he said. "Let's talk about it."

He lowered his weapon and took a step forward, as if to open a dialogue.

But as he stepped forward he was raising his weapon, and slicing down-

Except that Croft was no longer standing there. He pivoted hard to the right, ignoring the pain in his legs, and parried Mudface's stick. There was a sharp crack of plastic against iron, and it broke in two.

Croft looked at Mudface expressionlessly.

Mudface hissed, and pulled back. His scavengers quickly followed.

"Oh, you were just great! Really!" said the man tied to the spit. "Hey, are you guys going to untie me? Don't forget, now!"

Croft nodded, and two of Pomiter's men untied the man on the spit. He plopped to the ground as soon as the ropes were untied. "Hey, easy on the merchandise," he said, rubbing his sore wrists. He looked up at Croft and smiled. "Hey, lucky for you I happened to be here," he grinned.

That grin. Something about him looked familiar. Several of the men were

frowning; they had made a partial recognition too.

The man got to his feet. "Hey, what're you standing around all day for?

Aren't we going to get going?"

"We?" said Croft.

"Sure," said the man. "Where are we going?"

"We aren't going anywhere," said Croft. "Not with you."

"Not with me?" said the man, looking hurt in a mocked way. "Was it something I said?" he grinned again.

"We don't have enough food for ourselves, much less you," said Croft.

"I've already heard this speech," Catchbill sighed.

Croft signaled Pomiter, and the column formed up and started marching again.

"Hey, hey, you can't just leave me here to starve!" said the man. "Someone might come and eat me again!"

That did it. That voice, that tone, that inflection. He turned to the man.

The face was a bit older, but, sure enough- "Shakey."

The man burst into a wide smile.

"You're a fan!"

"Shakey Walbaum?" said Pomiter. A murmur rose up among the men.

"Are you really going to let the world's greatest entertainer starve to death?" said Shakey.

"I'm sorry," said Croft.

"I'm sorry," said Shakey, imitating Croft's gruff tone. "It's so pro-forma. If you're going to leave me to die, can't you even shed a few tears, maybe?"

Croft turned to abruptly face Shakey. "We don't have food to share. We're going to run out ourselves before we reach our destination." He paused.

"But if we make it, there should be food where we're going. If it's a choice between certain starvation and coming with us, you come with us, there's a chance you could survive."

"There, now that's a hospitable offer!" said Shakey. "It's a deal! But if I starve to death before we get wherever we're going, promise me one thing."

"What?" said Croft.

"Only eat me when I'm cooked to well done, I don't taste right any other way."

Several of the troops chuckled, despite themselves.

Shakey Walbaum had been one of the foremost comedians for hundreds of years. His name had been legend not only on August but throughout the Alliance. However, the Insectoids cared nothing for human entertainment and Shakey had eeked out a living, if it could be called that, scavenging in the no-man's land on the western part of the continent. When August was liberated from the Insectoids he had started working his way eastward towards Sarney, to secure transportation off-planet. But that was before the disaster struck the planet.

Shakey had actually met Croft before, and, four days later, realized this fact. "I know you, don't I?" he said. "Croft. Croft. That name sounds familiar. No, maybe I'm thinking of someone else. Wait, I'm sure it's you I'm thinking of."

"It should," said Croft. "I saved your life."

"You did? When was this?"

"A number of decades ago."

"A number of decades years ago? Ha! What have you done for me lately?"

said Shakey.

Shakey had inadvertently come into the possession of a data disc with information that the Slurians wanted; and Croft had been assigned to protect him and find the disc. Croft remembered the incident clearly, but the events of the past evidently hadn't made much of an impression on Shakey. He was too concerned with his stardom.

"Do you like to gamble?" Catchbill asked Shakey.

"He has no food, Catchbill," said Croft.

"Oh. Never mind," said Catchbill.

They lay on the ground, in the sunlight, trying to get the energy to move further. Croft recognized where they were now, not more than 20 miles south of Sarney. One more good march would get them there.

The problem was, they were out of food, and exhausted. They should have started marching two hours ago when sunlight appeared, but they were still lying there. They would be lucky to cover 7 or 8 miles today.

And once they got to Sarney, they'd have to get down into the underground tube to get to Aridor. That would be another 50 mile hike, another week.

How could they survive another nine or ten days without food?

The answer: they probably couldn't.

But Croft refused to give in. At least water wasn't as serious a problem; while they had to ration it, they had collected rainwater as they went

along. Maybe they could make it, if they had enough water.

"What would you say our odds of making it are?" said Catchbill, as if he were reading Croft's mind.

"I have nothing left to bet with," said Croft mirthlessly. "We're all out of food." Catchbill had also run out of food two days ago, just as they found Shakey, who was also starved.

"Clifford Croft, the great Clifford Croft, what happened to you?" said Catchbill. "You're the great spy, the great hero who can survive in any environment. Then what happens? We get a little invasion for a decade or two, we go on a small hike for a few weeks, and you let yourself collapse like a sack of type 18 potatoes!"

"All right," said Croft, slowly and painfully getting up. He could no longer ignore the pain in his legs but he could deal with it. "Pomiter-" he started to say, stopping when he heard a sound down the street.

And then another, and another.

Another gang was approaching.

Pomiter's men quickly got on their feet, and painfully assumed a defensive formation.

This gang outnumbered Croft's men by about 2 to 1. And they appeared to be in a much better condition than his troops were.

The leader was a tall man with sparkling eyes who carried what looked like a long blade. He instinctively picked out Croft for a leader, and stopped a few feet away from him.

"The name's Tony," he smiled. "Wild Tony."

"That's nice," said Croft, struggling not to appear tired. The metal bar in his hand was growing heavier by the minute.

"Got any food?" Wild Tony asked.

"No," said Croft. "As I was just saying, you're two days too late."

"Really?" said Tony. "You don't mind if we look for ourselves, do you?"

The last thing Croft wanted was Tony's men walking in close proximity to his. They could launch a lightning attack and club them all.

"No way," said Croft.

"That's a shame," Wild Tony said. He looked away for a moment, the classic feint for someone who was about to attack. Croft didn't wait, but swung with his bar. But Tony was too quick, swinging with his sword. The force of the blow was so hard that the bar clanged out of Croft's hands to the ground. Wild Tony's grin grew wider as he eyed the disarmed and helpless Croft.

He whistled and his men attacked. Croft couldn't focus on what was going on around him as he directed his undivided attention to Wild Tony's sword. If he wasn't careful, he was going to get cut in half.

Wild Tony swung and Croft ducked to the side; he swung again, and Croft ducked again. But Croft was tiring, and Wild Tony knew that.

So when Wild Tony swung a third time, he wasn't surprised to see Croft slip and fall to the ground.

Only it was no accident; Croft kicked out with his feet, and Wild Tony went down in a heap. In an instant Croft was on top of him, punching Wild Tony in the face to stun him, grabbing the sword, and holding it to his throat.

"STOP!" Croft yelled at the top of his voice.

There was a delay, and then Wild Tony's men stopped in their tracks as

they saw what had happened.

"If any one of you lifts a weapon, Wild Tony won't be so wild," said

Croft. "Now get back, get back!"

Wild Tony's men mumbled, but did nothing.

"You tell them," Croft whispered fiercely.

"I ain't telling them nothing," said Wild Tony.

Croft pressed the blade against Wild Tony's neck so hard that he broke the skin and a thin line of blood started to seep down his neck.

"All right, all right!" said Wild Tony. "Get back, get back, you heard him!"

Wild Tony's troops reluctantly disengaged.

"Now tell them to march," said Croft. Another prod with the sword persuaded Wild Tony to relay the order.

Wild Tony's men marched to the corner and around it. Presumably, that's where they would wait to stage their counterattack. Well, at least it would give Croft and his troops something of a head start.

Croft glared at Wild Tony, as if considering his fate, and then released him.

"You're dead men," Wild Tony spat.

"What odds would you place on that?" said Catchbill.

"Come on," said Croft. They started marching in the opposite direction.

Wild Tony took off in the direction of his men at a run.

It wasn't long before Wild Tony's men were pursuing them again. Croft wondered if he had been wise to let Tony go. But the sword was heavy and he was tired of holding it up. He could barely walk, much less escort a captive.



As they played cat and mouse with Tony's men, Croft came up with a sudden conclusion. "We'll have to go underground."

"Underground?" said Pomiter. "But it's totally dark down there. We'll get lost."

"Hopefully so will Wild Tony's men," said Croft. They entered a building and took the stairs down.

It was dark. Really dark. Even in the days of the Insectoid Invasion, there had been emergency lighting on many of the wall panels, dim as it had been. Now there was nothing. It was pitch black.

Croft was first, and he felt his way forward by touch. Grabbing his hand from behind was Pomiter, and grabbing his hand was one of his men, and so on. It was the only way to avoid getting separated.

Croft walked down only two levels before feeling his way to an empty room.

The darkness was eerie--anything could jump out at them without warning.

Every time his foot kicked a piece of debris, creating a clatter, his adrenaline jumped.

They reached a room by touch which seemed empty. The entire platoon, including Shakey and Catchbill, filed in.

They sat in silence for several minutes.

"What is this, are we here to see a holofilm?" came Shakey's voice.

"Quiet," Croft hissed.

It was impossible to tell how long they sat that way. But after a time they heard sounds, many sounds, the sounds of movement.

The sounds were getting louder, and coming in their direction.

Everyone tensed up.

And then, they caught the tiniest reflection of light, coming from the hallway. The reflection grew brighter, and Croft could tell that it was the light from a flame.

Croft could tell the troops were restless. "Be absolutely quiet!" he hissed.

The sounds of movement grew louder, and louder, and the light from the flame grew brighter, as it partially illuminated the hallway outside.

"We'll get them... they're down here somewhere..." They heard. Everyone tensed for battle.

The sounds of movement grew still louder, as if they were in the room... and then the sounds started to recede. Father and father, until they were just a distant sound.

They had been close, but hadn't even passed by the room that Croft and his men had been hiding in.

Croft snapped his fingers twice, and they started on their trip back to the surface.

It was late afternoon when they emerged, but Croft kept them marching until after nightfall. Now besides starvation they had another obstacle to overcome--Wild Tony's scavengers.

The mist was still fainter the following morning, it was definitely starting to clear, at least a bit. Oh, the mist was still clearly visible, but now one could see several dozen feet in the distance. And the light from the sun was still dull, but clearer than it had been for weeks.

They kept up the march, only stopping for a break when they heard sounds of movement around them. Croft's legs were in agony, but he forced himself forward. If he couldn't keep up, he would die. He had long since gotten

past the stage of being hungry, but was merely weak and feeble. The men were hardly in a better shape. Catchbill looked listless, and Shakey, already thin, looked almost skeletal.

Still they kept pushing themselves, and before the end of the next day they found themselves on the outskirts of Sarney.

"There it is," Croft whispered hoarsely.

"Sir, we need to stop," Pomiter rasped. "Several of the men can't take another step."

Croft nodded dumbly. They settled down for the night.

Pomiter sat next to Croft, some distance from the men, and said, "How much farther?"

"Another mile or two to the underwater transit tube," said Croft. "Then another 54 miles underground to Sarney."

"That's another week," said Pomiter. "Some of the men won't make it another day or two without food." He left another thought unspoken, that none of them could march for another week without food.

"I know," said Croft, too tired to say more.

"Did you ever think it would end like this?" said Pomiter.

"No, no I didn't," said Croft. "I thought I might die in battle against the Insectoids, on the ground, in the air, in space. But not to die of starvation, not like this."

"The bugs got their revenge," said Pomiter. "I can only hope the War Admiral's fleet survived to get ours."

The War Admiral. Norman North. Throughout all this Croft hadn't given any thought to the fleet in space. Had they been immobilized by the energy

dampeners too? Was the fleet all dead of starvation, or, more likely, due to lack of oxygen? There was no way to know.

All of Croft's friends might already be dead. It wasn't an especially cheery thought.

The next day they stumbled towards central Sarney, close to the palace.

They were almost on top of a nearby underground entrance that would take them to the transit tube station when disaster struck.

Croft was guiding his weary team into a building to go underground when a large number of people emerged from the building. Scavengers.

More scavengers appeared behind them. To their left. To their right. There must have been more than 80 of them in all.

They had walked right into a trap. If Croft had had his wits about him, he would've spotted the trap; as it was, he could barely put one foot in front of the other.

None other than Wild Tony himself emerged from the building, grinning widely. He held a familiar sword in his hand.

"Did you drop something?" Tony grinned.

Croft had dropped Tony's sword early on when it was obvious that he could no longer walk with such a heavy thing. His metal pipe had also been discarded in his effort to stay as light as possible.

"Do you like my men?" said Tony. "You didn't realize that you only met up with a small part of my gang, did you?" He walked casually towards Croft, grinning widely as he hefted his sword. Tony's men started to call out jeeringly.

For once, Croft's starved brain couldn't come up with a response. He just

stood there, watching Tony dumbly.

"What's wrong? You look tired," said Tony, walking to within a few feet of Croft. He swung his blade experimentally in the air. Croft didn't move.

"Haven't eaten in a while?"

The catcalls grew wilder.

"Well, you're not much for conversation, are you?" said Wild Tony. He raised his blade. "I'll make this quick-" and then, he noticed the uncanny smile on Croft's face.

"What?" he wondered, delaying the blow because of curiosity.

Croft spoke for the first time, his voice no more than a hoarse whisper.

"You're surrounded," he rasped. "Give yourself up."

Wild Tony laughed, and his men laughed too, a big, hearty laugh. And then

Wild Tony raised his blade again, there was a scream, and-

Several platoons of soldiers slammed into Wild Tony's men from the rear.

The men, wielding unfamiliar poles and sticks, nonetheless did very well, driving into the mass of surprised and now fearful scavengers.

Wild Tony stared at the attackers for a moment, as if he was totally in a daze. When he turned back Croft was gone, heading for the nearest wave of attackers. Tony yelled, "Retreat!" at the top of his lungs, and the scavengers pulled back.

"This isn't over!" screamed Wild Tony, as he ran back into the building he had emerged from.

When the last of the scavengers had beat a hasty retreat, Croft could barely believe his eyes when several platoons formed up around him and Pomiter's men.

"Are you all right?" one of them said, as Croft allowed himself the luxury of falling to the ground and collapsing into unconsciousness.

Consciousness returned slowly to Croft.

"The Sarney Sarittenden garrison," he said slowly, his eyes closed.

"Yes," said a voice.

Croft opened his eyes, and found himself in a room lit by torches.

"I'm quite surprised to find you and your people still alive," said an officer standing by the cot that Croft was lying on. He extended a hand.

Croft used it to painfully get himself up.

Croft looked at the officer with tired eyes.

"But not so surprised when I learned who was leading them. It's an honor to meet you, sir," said the officer, and he actually saluted.

"You are...?"

"Oh. Captain Trigger, in charge of the transition-"

"Transition?"

"You're very lucky; if you had come two weeks later, we'd be gone."

"Gone?"

"We're being redeployed to the south as soon as our rooftop crops come in."

"Rooftop crops?" Croft felt his mouth water.

"About 10 days ago conditions improved enough for us to plant some 30 day potatoes. We think the mist has cleared enough to permit plants to grow again. We're just waiting to harvest them before we move south."

"Food!" said Croft.

Trigger held out a small plate with a piece of bread. "We're all on

half-rations until the crops come in, but we can spare-

Croft didn't wait, taking the bread into his mouth, and chomping quickly.

"Water," he rasped.

Trigger held up a waiting cup.

In a moment Croft felt at least part of his old self returning.

"My men?"

"All alive, though all are suffering from exhaustion and borderline starvation," said Trigger. "That's what I have to talk to you about."

Croft looked up at him.

"We have barely enough on half rations to survive two weeks until our crops come in. We don't have enough to feed more than two dozen additional men at that rate."

The implications immediately sunk in. "What can you do for us?" said Croft slowly.

"We can give you all the water you can handle. And if we tighten our belts further, we can give you each two days worth of half-rations," said Trigger. "Lieutenant Pomiter says you're going to Aridor. It's possible, with two days of half-rations, that you might make it-

"If it's the best you can do I'm thankful," said Croft sincerely. "We don't expect you to starve yourselves to feed us."

"I'm glad you understand," said Trigger, looking immensely guilty. "At the very least we'll escort you to the tube station."

"Is it still intact?"

"It is at this end," said Trigger. "But with the power out it will be very cold down there. We'll provide you with warm clothing and torches to help

you on your way."

They were escorted to the underground tube station. It was looted, like most of August, but the dark tunnel ahead hadn't been filled with water, which was a good sign.

"Eh, together again," said Shakey, looking ridiculous wearing a dirty blanket around him. "Guess they can't break up a winning team."

He called after the departing soldiers who had escorted him. "Hey, thanks for the single piece of bread! Is there any crusts that come with that?"

"Quiet," said Croft. "They're starving too."

"They look in better shape than we are," said Shakey. He looked at the blanket wrapping him. "Or maybe they're just snappier dressers."

"Ok, we're starting on the last leg of the journey," said Croft. "I don't know what conditions are like in Aridor, but once we get there, some of the vegetation should be edible."

"How long can we survive on weeds, sir?" one of the troopers asked.

"Captain Trigger also generously provided us with some precious seeds for farming. We'll plant thirty day potatoes in the ground the day after we get there," said Croft. He heard some grumbling. "Our survival won't be pretty, but we will survive. Lieutenant!"

"Form up!" said Pomiter hoarsely. "Column.... Forward!"

25 soldiers marched into the tunnel, including Croft, Shakey, and Yosemite Catchbill.

Croft estimated that even at their feeble pace that they would get out of the tube within five or six days. He had intended to feed the troops their first half ration the first day and save the second one for the third or fourth day. But his resolve broke down and they consumed all that was left



on the second day.

If indeed it was a day. With no sunlight, they had no idea how much time had passed; they could only guess how long they had marched and how far.

"Surely we've been down here for a week already," moaned Catchbill.

"Maybe three days, no longer," said Croft, as he marched quietly in the underground tube, holding one of the few remaining torches. To conserve the torches they traveled with only one lit at a time; now only two were left.

"This is not my idea of an ocean voyage!" said Shakey, rattling his teeth.

For it was cold. They were traveling in a tube on the ocean floor, one that heated track cars usually traversed in ten minutes. The route wasn't meant to be walked.

And then, on the fourth day (or was it the fifth?) the last torch went out, and it went dark. It was pitch black in the tunnel.

"Well, at least we know we're going the right way," said Shakey. "Say, how do we know that we didn't get turned around at some point, and that we're not heading back now instead of forward?"

Pomiter wondered the same thing but was no longer joking about it. That

"night" during a rest he said to Croft, "We've rested twice since we lost the last torch. We should've been out by now. Is there any chance we accidentally got turned around and are heading back the way we came?"

He couldn't see the expression on Croft's face, but Croft said, "No."

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

Croft said slowly, "I didn't survive an Insectoid invasion for 20 years to die due to getting lost in an underwater tunnel."

"But we should've been out by now. And the men can't continue much longer."

It was true. The men were exhausted and starving again, as bad as they had been when they arrived at Sarney.

"We'll make it," Croft rasped.

But the next "day" when he roused the men, no one got up. "What is this?" he said.

"We're too tired, sir," said one. "We can't go on."

"So you're just going to lie here, and die?" said Croft.

There was no answer in the darkness.

"Is there anyone who's still got the energy to live?" said Croft.

There was silence for a moment.

"Fine," said Croft. "I'll continue on myself. You all stay here, and give up."

He started down the tunnel, then stopped, waiting as he heard sounds of movement. Some, at least, were still with him.

But hours later he could barely walk and the sounds behind him had grown distant. First it sounded like a bunch of soldiers were following, then a handful, then one or two, and then the last one had dropped off some time ago. They had simply lost the energy to go on.

But not Croft. He was on his knees now, but he kept going, crawling and crawling. His anger was flowing; there was no way he was going to die in an underground tunnel simply because he didn't have anything to eat.

His mind stopped registering as he continued to crawl. He didn't notice that the tunnel was gently sloping uphill, had been for sometime. And then, an undeterminable time later, he felt himself bump into something in

front of him. He painfully raised an arm.

A ladder

Croft somehow painfully crawled up ladder. When he got to the top, he made a supreme effort and pushed himself out of a service hole and lay under sunlight for the first time in a week.

He lay in the sun, unable to move. He turned his head to look at the lodge. Levi! If Levi was there, he could bring him food.

As Croft turned his head his eyes unfocused, and it took a real effort to focus them again. His vision wasn't great anymore and the mist was still obscuring things. He squinted hard but couldn't see the lodge. And then, in a moment of clarity, he saw it, or what remained of it.

Burned to the ground.

He was all alone here. There was no one who could help him.

Croft tried to drag himself to a field of foliage in the distance, to anything, anything he could possibly consume, but his strength finally gave out, and he collapsed, on a barren dirt road.

Chapter 2: In the Land of Levi

"Arf! Arf Arf Arf!"

It was a tinny sound, the kind of sound made by small dogs who are consumed with self-importance. Croft thought toy dogs were ridiculous, and the sound he heard reminded him of a pompous little animal.

And then something wet touched his nose, and his cheeks, and his mouth. It

felt like a tongue!

Could a wild animal be attacking him?

Croft tried to will himself to open his eyes, but he didn't even have the strength for that.

Then he felt a hand on his wrist, feeling for a pulse. Then he felt something at his mouth, a container. Croft opened his mouth and swallowed.

It was water. He choked as some of it went down the wrong way, but the choking action helped him open his eyes.

He found the very concerned face of Levi Esherkol staring at him. Croft tried to speak, but no words came out.

Levi nodded even though Croft didn't say anything. He put something in Croft's mouth that felt like a cracker. Croft chewed, swallowed, and then

Levi gave him another cracker.

And then Levi lay Croft's head back on the ground, and Croft fell asleep again.

When Croft woke again he still was on the dirt road outside of the underground tube. But around him were bodies he quickly recognized. His men.

"Arf arf!" came a voice.

Croft turned his head to find a small fox-like dog with large whiskers not two inches from his nose.

"Arf-arf!" said the animal again.

"Awake, eh?" came a voice.

Croft sat up, to see the very familiar face of Levi Esherkol. Levi was the resident genius on August. He could study a field of science and quickly become an expert in it, whether it was robotics, computers, genetics,

physics, engineering, or anything else. But, ironically, all Levi really liked to do was cook. Levi had been instrumental in overthrowing the Insectoids, operating as an undercover agent on the Queen's flagship. He had worked his way in to become the Queen's personal cook, while playing a dangerous double game of passing on information to the resistance. But after the war Levi had disappeared. As Croft had correctly guessed, Levi had returned to his roots at the lodge, where he used to cook in what he boasted was Aridor's best restaurant. It was also its only one.

"I... you....," said Croft, looking over at the burned remains of the lodge.

"Here, have drink," said Levi, passing him a canteen. As Croft drank, Levi said, "Hunger big problem, but exhaustion bigger."

"My... men."

"21 others alive. Found three dead in tunnel, mostly exhaustion. Led rest here," said Levi.

Croft numbly pointed to the burned spot where the lodge stood.

"I blew up," said Levi proudly.

Croft looked surprised.

"Think I learned nothing from Agency?" said Levi. "Knew bugs want to take revenge, didn't want them to destroy. So I blow up lodge, making them think other bugs did it first."

"You blew up the lodge so they wouldn't blow up the lodge?" said Croft, finding his voice again.

"Yes. Preserved basement lab," said Levi. "Very clever, no?"

Croft nodded. He struggled to get to his feet, with Levi's help.

"Arf arf!" said the little animal.

"Yes, I know," said Levi.

"What is that?" said Croft.

"New pet. Type 212(b) Pomeranian."

"Type 212?" said Croft, still feeling light headed.

"212(b). I invent," said Levi. "Genetically engineered. Smarter than all dogs, even smarter than most people."

"A dog that's smarter than a person?" said Croft.

"Genius dog," said Levi. He whistled, getting the animal's attention.

"Quick, what is number at eighth decimal place for pi?"

The dog paused for a split second, then spoke. "Arf, arf, arf arf!"

"Four, very good!" said Levi. "Quick, go home now, tell Mindy prepare dinner."

The dog scampered off.

"Quick?" said Croft. "Did I hear correctly, did you actually name your dog after Steven Quick?"

"Steven Quick smartest person; my Quick smartest dog," said Levi smugly.

"Ah ha," said Croft.

He saw Lieutenant Pomiter groan and start to get to his feet. So did some of the others. Shakey and Catchbill ambled over.

"You seem surprised to see us," said Shakey. "What's the matter, don't you think comedians are as tough as soldiers?"

"It was a good gamble," said Catchbill. "And it seems to have been paid off."

"Follow, follow," said Levi, waving a hand.

They ambled over to the lodge. Levi's wife Mindy was there in a clearing just outside the lodge, cooking food over a fire. Croft saw vegetables and

a small amount of meat. Real meat! Where had that come from?

"Sit down, sit down," Mindy said, indicating rocks around the campfire.

"Levi, did they wash their hands?"

"Exhausted, can barely move," said Levi.

"All right," said Mindy, casting a dark glance at them all. "But in the future I expect you properly groomed for dinner."

She gave them servings on real plates (how? where had they come from?).

Croft noticed the portions were small, but it was the biggest meal he had had in a month. He ate slowly due to his weakened condition, as did the others.

The others ate silently, grateful to be alive, enjoying not only the food but the roaring of the campfire. They had been pushed to the point of almost terminal exhaustion; starved, almost frozen in the underwater tube, and chased by hostile gangs. And now... they were safe. It almost felt unreal, and Croft half expected something to jump out of the forest to attack them.

The forest. The entire continent was untouched, unspoiled. It was the compromise that had been reached when Concord, the western continent, had been covered with buildings. Aridor, the eastern continent, was not to be touched, except for a hotel on the western tip, and of course the lodge.

What had happened to the hotel? Croft asked Levi.

Levi gave a dismissive wave his hands. "Bugs level, years ago." He motioned Croft away from the fire. "Must talk situation."

Croft nodded, and they took a slow walk at a pace that Croft could keep up with.

"What are we up against, Levi?"

"Bugs use energy dampening weapon," said Levi.

"The mist."

Levi nodded.

"But it's clearing up," said Croft.

Levi shook his head. "Visual part, yes. But harmful part, that dampen energy, not effected."

"How can you tell?"

"Can test. Can generate tiny amount of energy-"

"You can???"

"Yes. With great effort. Generate power, but quickly disappear. Happens in microseconds. No change. And not enough time to power devices."

"So how long will this power drain last?" Croft asked.

Levi shrugged. "May never end."

"That means we'll be stranded here, permanently," said Croft.

"Are worse places to be," said Levi.

Croft knew what he meant. An image of the starving masses on Concord flashed through his mind.

"Can we be rescued?" Croft asked.

Levi shook his head. "Not see how. Any ship comes here, loses power, crash land maybe. Certainly no takeoff."

"Hmmm. ...."

"More immediate issue, food and shelter."

"Food and shelter?"

"Planted small crop for me and Mindy. Not enough for you. Can plant more, but will take 30 days to come in."



"How much food do you have, Levi?"

Levi whistled.

"Arf arf!" said a voice suddenly at his side.

"Quick! Mathematical problem. Consider food stores, half rations, 25 people," said Levi. "Question: how long can last?"

Quick paused, and then said, "Arf arf aaaarf!"

"20 days, eh?" said Levi.

"What?" said Croft. "You actually understand what the dog is saying?"

"Stretch out arf in context of math problem is ten multiplier," said Levi.

"What is this, some kind of four legged calculator?"

"Best calculator on planet," Levi chuckled. "Also only one, now that power gone."

"20 days of rations," said Croft. "That's trouble, if we have to last 30 days."

"Not so bad," said Levi. "Can supplement, hunt for meat, eat wild roots, bark, leaves."

"Yum," said Croft unenthusiastically.

Night was falling as they returned to the campfire. The pinkish sunset was casting beautiful colors on Mount Montalk, and adding a sparkle to the nearby Lake Kinneret. Shadows were cast on the rock walls of the nearby quarry. The troopers were still tired but appeared to be in a better mood, though a few started shivering as the temperature dropped rapidly.

"It's getting cold," Pomiter said.

"That brings me to the subject of sleeping arrangements," said Croft.

"I've been having a talk with Levi here, and he tells me we're going to have to sleep outside, on the ground."

"The ground?" said Catchbill. "Where do they sleep?" he asked, indicating Levi and Mindy.

"In Levi's lab under the remains of the lodge," said Croft.

"Why can't we sleep there too?"

"Come look," Levi waved, as he waddled towards the lodge.

He walked around the twisted and black smokey remains until he reached the back side, part of which was still standing. He opened a door, showing a stairwell leading down. Croft and several of the others followed.

They found themselves in a very compact lab. Almost every inch of floor space was taken up by tables in equipment. Only in one small corner was a small single bed which Levi and Mindy somehow squeezed into.

"I guess it's the outside for us," Croft sighed.

"Sleep in quarry," said Levi. "Use wall to protect from some winds."

Croft and the others took his advice, laying down against one of the walls of the quarry. It was a poor layer of protection, because it only protected them from winds coming out of the east, but it was better than nothing. The ground was filled with uncomfortable gravel that dug into his back, but as Croft hit the ground he could barely keep his eyes open. . . .

Croft woke to glorious sunlight streaming into his eyes. He heard the cawing of birds all around him. He opened his eyes. The area was still misty, but that couldn't disguise the fact that it was a beautiful morning.

He shivered. It had been a cool night, and the pebbles he had laid on had created indentations in his back.

Croft and his men rested the entire day; the planting would be delayed, but they were all seriously exhausted. They ate small portions presented by Mindy (twice in one day!), and went to sleep again. This time Croft wasn't so tired that he didn't feel the pebbles underneath him and the cool wind whipping against his face.

The following day they could delay no longer and Croft set the groaning crew to work under Levi's guidance. Fifteen of them went to work on the farm, under Levi's guidance, while a few of them went to hunt for roots and berries, and the remainder stayed with Mindy to try to build some shelter for them.

Croft went off on the roots and berries trip. Unfortunately, they didn't know which roots and berries were safe; and since Levi had to show the others how to farm, and Mindy had to show the other group how to build shelter, it was left to Quick to guide them.

"Take them, Quick, to show them edible berries, leaves, plants," said Levi. And the little dog said "Arf!" as if he understood every word.

"A dog is going to show us what to gather?" said one of the troops skeptically.

"Genius dog, very trustworthy and reliable," said Levi. He turned to the smiling Quick and said, "Can go now! And don't waste time hunting for rabbits, be home by dinner!"

"Arf!" said the dog.

"This is unreal," said Shakey, as he and Croft and two other soldiers followed the little dog. "We're being lead around by a mutant wind-up

poodle."

"Arf!" said Quick, glaring back at them as if to say that he wasn't a poodle.

"He's a Pomeranian, I think you may have hurt his feelings," said Croft, only half tongue-in-cheek.

"Is this dog supposed to understand everything we say?" said Shakey. "If we have a discussion of the best kind of hyperbooster, can he contribute to the discussion?"

"It's my understanding that he can't speak, but he and Levi have found a way to communicate in dog talk," said Croft. "And yes, I think he understands what we say."

"Ruff!" said Quick. At first Croft thought the Pomeranian was responding to him, but the Type 212(b) was standing by a tree, looking at it. Croft appraised it. "Either he had to go to the bathroom, or we've found some food," he said, eyeing the peeling bark. He pulled some off. It looked black and nasty.

"Is this what you're referring to?" said Croft, holding it up.

"Ruff!"

"What did he say?" Shakey asked.

"Well, since I left my Pomeranian-to-English dictionary back on Concord, I can only guess he's telling us to gather the bark," said Croft. He smelled it. The odor was hideous too.

Thankfully, Quick also had them gather some plants, berries and some sweet smelling leaves. The dog seemed to really know his stuff.

Finally, when they had gathered as much as they could carry, Croft said,

"Ok, boy, I think we've gotten enough."

"Ruff!" said Quick, turning around and heading for home.

"What an obedient genius dog," Croft remarked.

"He's so brilliant, he should be walking people on a leash," Shakey commented.

They got back just in time to see Mindy scolding Lieutenant Pomiter. "No, no," she said. "You must sew leaves THIS way," she said, demonstrating with a needle and thread.

"What difference does it make?" Pomiter snapped.

"Difference?" said Mindy. She held up Pomiter's work, crude stitches that held a group of thick, cottony leaves together. Croft had never seen leaves so thick before. Then she held up her own example, which were obvious much neater stitchwork.

"But it's functional, neatness doesn't matter," said Pomiter.

"You not good with hands, you work with Levi on farm." Mindy harrumphed and turned back to her sewing.

Levi had made better progress with the soldiers helping him farm. He had an easy going manner which the troopers liked.

"No, no, must hoe like this," he would say, but with a twinkle in his eye.

Slowly things improved. They cleared away the gravel over the part of the quarry where they slept. The ground was hard but at least it didn't dig into them like the rocks and pebbles did. Over the ground they put the stuffed leaves. They weren't nearly as soft as a real mattress, but they did make the sleeping experience a bit easier. Now all they had to do was

to cope with the elements.

They noticed that it started getting colder. Pomiter said as much.

"What did you expect?" said Croft. "With the power out, the weather modification net is offline. And it is the winter cycle."

The winter cycle. For centuries August had avoided the extremes of hot and cold with the weather modification towers. Even under the Insectoids the weather modification system had functioned automatically; at the end, the resistance had even used the weather against the bugs, making it artificially cold and freezing millions of them.

But when power was lost, so was the weather control system. Winter would once again have its bite.

Mindy had monopolized the most skilled troopers to try to weave together "leaf blankets" out of the cottony leaves, but the going was slow and the leaves didn't provide much warmth. The night winds were getting stronger and cooler, and even sleeping against one wall of the quarry left them exposed from three other sides. So they started constructing a wall, made of stone piled together.

But work on the wall was slow, as many of the soldiers were needed to farm or perform other chores. Only one of the three walls needed to encircle the sleeping area was built before another disaster struck--rain.

No one was able to sleep that night under the downpour, except for Levi and Mindy who slept in the crowded basement lab. More than once Croft was asked whether others could fit into the basement, but he told the troopers that it was filled with scientific equipment.

"What use is that with the power out?" said one soldier, Corporal Watson.

"Why don't we clear their stuff out and sleep there?"

"For one thing, I'm in charge here," said Croft, wiping the water from his face in the downpour and trying to prevent his teeth from clattering together. The ominous boom of thunder above them was not encouraging. "For another, if we ever do get power restored we're going to need that equipment."

He looked at the shivering soldiers, and he started shivering himself. He tried to wrap the leaf blanket tighter around him, but heard a sound as it ripped.

It continued raining into the next day, and everyone was waterlogged and caught colds.

So work stopped on creating leaf blankets and the rock wall, and Levi let everyone else go from farming except for two soldiers who showed the most promise. Very few people were needed to farm anyway, as the potatoes had already been planted; the only big job would be harvesting them, in about two weeks.

So during those two weeks all available manpower was put to building a roof, and quickly. With only two walls up--the natural wall of the side of the quarry, and the single rock wall perpendicular to it--and no natural roofing materials handy, it was not a job accomplished overnight.

At Levi's urging they gathered branches and lashed them together with vines. They were hardly waterproof, allowing water to drip through almost every nook and cranny, but at least they protected those underneath from the direct effects of the downpour. In practice, it meant that they would get wet more slowly, or less so during light rains.

The next night it was still raining, but the "roof" was only large enough

to cover four people. Croft held a lottery to choose the first four, who ended up spending the night only getting somewhat wet. The following day they enlarged the roof to cover a space large enough to cover eight soldiers lying side by side, but couldn't do any more without building the other walls for support.

The rain let up the following night but the cold winds didn't, and Croft and Pomiter arranged a rotation schedule for those lucky enough to sleep under partial shelter.

"Oh boy, a roof," said Shakey. He pulled his leaf coverings over him. "I'm sleeping in the best accommodations in Aridor."

"Would you rather be starving back on Concord?" Croft asked, trying to prevent himself from shivering in the night cold. The leaf blanket didn't really help much, the wind seemed to cut right through it. Maybe it if were layered?

"Actually, the dog sleeps better than we do, down in the lab," said Shakey. "How come the dog doesn't do a rotation here?"

"I don't think any of us could fit into the space the dog sleeps in," said Croft.

"I don't know, I could curl up and give it a try," said Shakey. "Do you think if I licked Levi on the face he'd let me sleep with him?"

The next morning they lined up for breakfast. Although food was still tightly rationed, at least they were eating something three times a day again. Unfortunately, the "something" they ate often left much to be desired. Levi's reserves weren't enough for all of them, so they had to supplement it with what they found in the forest.

"Yum yum, lukewarm bark soup with weeds," said Shakey, as he took a bowl.



"Is good for you," said Mindy, glaring at him as she stirred a large pot over a campfire. "Not weeds, but Kibiscus plant. Good vitamins, also from bark."

Shakey bit into a piece of pulpy bark floating in his soup. It tasted like mud. "And to think I was wasting my time all these years getting my vitamin C from oranges."

"At least we're not starving," said Pomiter.

"What about some meat?" said Catchbill.

"Levi hasn't had time to go hunting," said Croft. Levi and some of the other soldiers had been working to clear more land to plant more crops. A few days after planting the 30 day potatoes they had planted some rice, which would be good for a change.

Their living conditions continued to slowly improve. A month later, the last part of the sleeping area was enclosed, with walls made of rocks on three sides, and a roof made of leaves and branches on top. As the weather got colder it didn't keep them warm, but it did give them protection from the winds, and some protection from the rain. Levi showed them how to build a fireplace in one corner of the room they had built, and a week later they had a crackling fire going every night. A few people lying by the fire actually were warm all through the night.

The food improved too. After the potatoes and then the rice came in, they all started eating "normal" food on a regular basis, and the threat of starvation, already distant, receded.

Levi took some of the regular soldiers hunting for meat.

"How do you hunt without weapons?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Have weapon," said Levi proudly, raising what was obviously a homemade bow and arrow.

"You expect us to hit something with that?" said a soldier.

Levi knotted an arrow, pulled back the string, aimed carefully, and...  
thunk! An arrow imbedded itself in a tree two dozen feet away.

"I teach, you learn," he said simply.

Within a few days soldiers were going out on their own. There was still only one bow and arrow, and they sometimes returned without a catch, but more often than not they got used to having small pieces of meat in their diet again.

But there was still tension in their little community. Mindy was a skilled cook (though not in Levi's league) and a great organizer, but also a neatness freak. She would inspect every dish after they finished washing it off and if she saw one speck of dirt she would freak out. Even if the dishes were cleaned but not stacked properly the soldier in charge of the cleaning detail that morning would get an earful. She proved to be much less popular with the soldiers than Levi. A common topic of conversation in the evenings was how to make her disappear while making it look like an accident. Within a month the soldiers had come up with nearly fifty different suggestions, spurred on by Mindy's compulsiveness.

Her compulsiveness extended to all areas. Were the leaf cloths not stacked properly? Someone would get a lecture. Had the campfire area not been properly swept? Someone would hear about that too.

Croft could see that this was hurting morale and he spoke to Levi about it. But Levi merely shrugged, as if it didn't concern him. Levi was always

very inwardly directed, concerned with his own research and activities; anything else didn't interest him. He had achieved peace with Mindy with a compromise; she ruled everywhere but the lab, where he was free to do whatever he wished. Unfortunately the soldiers had no such exclusionary zone.

Another source of tension occurred at night. They started to hear sounds in the forest, of something or somethings stomping around. One time they heard a roar that woke everyone up and made them wonder if they should expect a hostile visitor.

Croft asked Levi about it, and was told it might be bears.

"Usually they don't come around here," said Levi. "But of course, I don't sleep outdoors, so hard to say."

But the biggest problem occurred when they woke up one morning to find the small supply shed that Levi maintained had been broken into. He used it to store seeds and farming equipment. In the early days the soldiers had petitioned to have the shed emptied so at least a few of them could sleep there, protected from the elements, but Croft had sided with Levi, believing that if the seed bags were left outside that they could be eaten by animals.

Now the shed was also used to store their modest reserves of food. But one morning they found that something or someone had entered the shed and consumed a portion of the food.

"Maybe it was an animal," said Pomiter, surveying the scene.

"An animal that opens doors?" said Croft. "And look at that bag--it hasn't been ripped open, it was untied."

"Do you think that one of our men was responsible?" said Pomiter.

"Unless you think that Levi is two-timing us, that's the logical conclusion," Croft said.

"I don't know," said Pomiter. "What if someone else came in and stole the food?"

"Someone else?" said Catchbill. "What are the odds of that?"

"There isn't supposed to be anyone else on Aridor," said Croft slowly.

"We don't know that," said Pomiter. "We got here from Concord. Maybe someone else did."

"Possible," said Croft. "We'll cover all our bases by posting a guard here around the clock." He paused. "We'll also post a guard at the quarry at night."

"Is that really necessary?" said Pomiter.

"I think it may be," said Croft.

He spoke about it later alone with Levi. They walked in the fields, between small rows of budding plants.

"You think it was someone from outside?" said Levi.

"No," said Croft. "I think the likeliest explanation is that one of the soldiers got hungry and decided to take an unauthorized snack. If it had been someone from the outside, they wouldn't merely have snacked but taken everything."

"Then why the guard at the campsite as well?"

"Because sooner or later I think we will have visitors," said Croft. "And we've seen the kind of anarchy on Concord. Sooner or later they're going to find out about us. I don't want to wake up one morning with my throat

slit."

"Good point," said Levi. "If think we be overrun, there is alternative."

"What?"

"Central grasslands. Four hundred miles east, in heart of continent," said

Levi. "Any stragglers come from Concord, we right here, they see us. Go through forest, central grasslands, no one there. Never be found."

"400 miles. That would be quite a journey."

"Need to build up food reserves. Take a few months," said Levi. "Also have to leave my instruments behind."

"They're not much use to us now," said Croft. He considered. "Start stockpiling food. Produce as much excess capacity as you can. We'll make sure that there's no more looting."

"You think we need to do?"

"I think we may need to leave in a hurry, and that we'll need the ability to if necessary," said Croft.

Croft had Pomiter post two guards, one at the maintenance shed and one in the quarry every night. Each pulled a four hour shift before being replaced with another guard. Sometimes Croft would get up in the middle of the night to check on things.

Three nights later he woke to hear a rustling in the forest outside. He instantly woke up. He stared out into the darkness. There was a small fire outside for the sentry on guard. Croft got up and cautiously stepped out of the doorway of the room they had built. He saw someone slumped over the fire. As if he had been attacked, or hit from behind.

There was a rustling in the bushes. Could it be an animal?

Animals didn't knock out sentries from behind.

And Croft didn't even have a weapon.

The sensible thing to do, he reflected later, would have been to go back to the hut and wake everyone else. But if he did that, whoever or whatever was in the forest might slip away.

Croft knelt down to the ground and picked up a sharp rock. It would have to do.

He crept towards the forest, trying to circle around some distance from the noise he heard. In retrospect, he realized that his actions were especially idiotic. What if the attacker had a spear? He could run Croft through before he had the chance to run or call for help.

Croft crept closer to the forest's edge, near the quarry. He saw but didn't hear a rustle in the bushes ahead, closer to the campfire. Was the attacker returning to finish the sentry off?

But Croft couldn't see the attacker yet, not clearly, for whoever or whatever it was still in the forest. Croft slowly made his way towards the spot where he saw the bushes rustling.

It was moving again, and Croft could see major movement as he got closer.

It was either a person, or a large animal. Either was bad news.

And then the intruder stepped out cautiously in the clearing, and Croft got a clear look for the first time. It was a person! The scavenger, clad in rags and crouched over, was slowly making his way to the fallen sentry.

Croft started to emerge from the forest as silently as possible. But as he moved he stepped on a twig, making a small snapping sound.

The intruder froze, looking this way and that. All was silent for a moment. And then the intruder started scampering towards the fallen sentry

by the campfire again.

Croft took a deep breath, emerged from the forest, and using techniques he had learned well in his work at the Agency, walked quietly but quickly, gaining on his target. He had to reach the intruder before he could do further harm to the sentry.

The intruder closed, until he was only a few feet from the sentry. And then he was over the fallen sentry, bending down--and Croft was on the intruder, tackling him. He wrestled the intruder, pinning his arms to the ground. The intruder struggled for a moment, but then stopped. Croft could see in the dim firelight that he was painfully thin, and clothed in rags.

"Eh? What's going on?" said the sentry, suddenly getting up.

Croft could see that the sentry was Shakey.

"Shakey? Are you all right?" said Croft.

"All right? Of course," said Shakey.

"I thought he... you....," said Croft. Suddenly it became crystal clear. The intruder hadn't attacked Shakey. Shakey had fallen asleep on duty.

"Who's that you got there?" Shakey asked.

"Let me go, please," said the intruder Croft had pinned down.

"Let me get some answers, first," said Croft. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"My name is Charlie, Charlie Taze," said the intruder. "I came looking for food."

"Did you break into our food supplies three days ago?"

"No, I haven't eaten in that time, I just got here," said Taze.

"How did you get here?"

"The tube, underground. I walked."

Croft stared at the youngster. He seemed terrified. Making a decision, he released the young man. He scampered to his feet and scuttled a few feet away, looking uncertain.

"Sorry about that," said Croft. "But that's what you get for sneaking up on us."

"I didn't know who you were," said Taze. "I still don't know who you are?"

"We're a comedic acting duo," said Croft. "My name is Clifford Croft. This is my sidekick, Shakey Walbaum."

"Me being your sidekick? That's not funny," said Shakey.

"Neither is falling asleep on duty," said Croft. "We'll deal with your punishment later."

They decided to feed Charlie, and he agreed to work with Levi on the farm, and so he informally joined the team. Over the next few weeks several more stragglers appeared. All had had the same idea that Croft had, that food would be more plentiful on Aridor.

Stragglers came in streams of ones and twos every week or so turned into ones or twos every day and then four and fives. It happened gradually, but at some point what had been an outpost for exhausted soldiers turned into a small frontier town.

### Chapter 3: The Cook In Charge

What a difference six months makes.

When they first arrived they had built scarcely more than a small hut in



the quarry. The fields had been expanded to grow food to support a mere two dozen or so people. Their tools were limited, and the only clothes they were able to make were the cottony leaf blankets.

But once Levi had gotten the ball rolling on the farming, he had decided to focus on creating inventions. The first thing he did once the immediate food crisis was over was to plant some cotton and to invent a loom. Very soon thereafter Mindy was supervising the creation of rough but adequate warmer clothes, just in time for the winter. Levi also created several more bow and arrows so that more than one person could go hunting at the same time, and he trained more people how to shoot. Then he went prospecting and found a naturally forming rubbery substance down by the river that had excellent insulating properties. He used that to patch over cracks in the roof to make them virtually leakproof.

Levi also built a blacksmithing forge that, with great effort, could be used to make metal tools. He used that to build a grill that could be used to cook food more evenly over the fire. Levi seemed to be everywhere at once, building, tinkering, walking around and muttering at all hours of the night as his mind worked over time thinking of new inventions. But that was what he did best.

Unfortunately, with Levi focused on creating inventions, he didn't have time to supervise the farming. And since none of the arrivals knew very much, if anything, about farming, there was only one other candidate to supervise the farm work, but Levi's choice of a successor stirred a lot of resistance among the farm hands.

"A dog?" said Corporal (now farm-hand) Watson. "You expect us to take

orders from a dog?"

"Not just any dog," said Levi, during a fireside chat.

"Arf!" said Quick.

"What does a dog know about farming, besides fertilizing the crops?"

Watson asked.

"Quick has watched me, knows what I know," said Levi. "Has also read agronomy text."

"The dog reads?" said Watson. "You have a dog that reads?"

Pomiter cleared his throat, "Ah, even if you want to put this dog in charge-"

"Not in charge, coordinator," said Levi.

"Ah, yes, coordinator, how will the dog-"

"Quick."

"Quick, how will Quick let us know what to do?" said Pomiter. "We don't understand animal noises."

"Quick!" said Levi.

The small type 212(b) Pomeranian's ears perked up.

"Here, boy," said Levi.

The Pomeranian trotted over to Levi. Levi reached down, whispered something in Quick's left ear.

The Pomeranian turned his head towards Pomiter, then looked at Levi. Levi nodded. "Go, boy!"

Quick scampered over to Pomiter. Pomiter looked down at the Pomeranian.

The Pomeranian looked up at Pomiter.

"Arf!"

Pomiter looked puzzled.

The Pomeranian moved his head from Pomiter's face, to gaze at the bowl in Pomiter's hand, that had formerly contained his dinner. "Roah!" he said.

"You want the bowl?" said Pomiter.

"Arf!" said Quick. He scampered over to another part of the campsite, twenty feet away. "Arf!" he said, looking at Pomiter, and then himself.

Carrying the bowl, Pomiter slowly walked over to Quick. Quick scampered away, another twenty feet. "Arf!"

The destination only became apparent when Quick arrived at the group of stacked bowls on the other side of the campfire. "Arf!" he said, as

Pomiter stacked his bowl.

"You see," Levi beamed. "You didn't know what I told him to have you do, but he managed to get you to obey."

"He'd be dynamite at charades," Shakey muttered.

And so Quick, the type 212(b) Pomeranian, took over as foreman, or foredog, of the farming team. He would instruct the work team what to dig, how to dig, where to dig, and what to plant. He would tell them when they had to water and how much. At first the farm hands thought it was extremely odds taking instruction from a toy-sized dog, but after a while they stopped thinking about it, and it just became natural.

"Arf!" said Quick, coming up behind Shakey, who was standing still in the fields. Shakey jumped. "Hey, I'm just taking a break, what do you want?"

"Arf!"

"Just a minute, ok?"

Quick grabbed onto Shakey's trouser with his teeth, and started to pull.

"All right, all right, Mr. Pomeranian boss sir, I'm working, I'm working."

"Roah!"

Watching from a distance, Croft smiled. He turned to Levi, who was taking a rare break. "Did he really read an agronomy textbook?"

"Did I mention that Quick can write, too?" said Levi. He turned away before Croft could look to see if Levi was smiling.

They constantly had to expand the area under cultivation as more and more people arrived. They also had to build more huts in the quarry to accommodate them. Croft could quickly see that the additional newcomers would consume any additional food supplies they built up, making it impossible for them to migrate to the central grasslands.

"What do you think?" said Croft. He was at top-level meeting with Levi and General Arkik in Levi's cramped lab below the lodge.

General Arkik had been one of the leaders of the resistance in the fight against the Insectoids on August. A retired military commander who hobbled on a cane, he had arrived three months after Croft had with a platoon of his own. They would have had trouble absorbing a group of that size if the general's men hadn't brought supplies of their own.

The General brought interesting but depressing news from Concord. With the loss of power, the western continent had descended into anarchy, even worse than when Croft had been there. Much of the organized military units who had resisted the Insectoids had fallen apart, and gangs ruled much of Concord. While they could grow food on rooftops, their yields weren't as productive as they had been when they used underground gardens and hotlamps, and roving gangs were constantly on the prowl to steal food. The General and his men had made their way here through the underground tube,

figuring, correctly, that there would be more opportunity and fewer predators on the eastern continent.

"Eventually they'll figure out you're here and come after you," said Arkik bluntly. "It's not a question of if, but a question of when."

"Which raises the question of migration again," said Croft. "Levi?"

Levi paused. "Problem is need to feed new immigrants. Barely keeping pace."

"What if we started turning them away?"

Levi paused. "If we turned them away, and concentrated on expanding acreage, maybe.... maybe in three months we could have enough for the journey."

"How defensible are these central grasslands?" said Arkik.

"Not very," said Levi. "All flat. But chances of being found are small. Is a very big continent."

"But our current location isn't very defensible either," said Croft. "Not unless we build a rock wall around our settlement, which would take a tremendous amount of time and energy."

"What about Mount Montalk?" said Arkik.

"What about it?"

"It's a mountain, is it not? Mountains are often defensible."

"Yes," said Levi. "Very steep. Only one good path up. Defensible."

"Yes, but we'd have to abandon our fields and sleeping quarters here to go there," said Croft. "Not an option of first resort."

"So what think?" said Levi.

Croft paused. "So far we haven't had any trouble. But from what the good

general tells us, we should expect trouble. I think Levi's three month goal of creating a sufficient food reserve so we could march to the central grasslands is optimistic, to say the least. And that would require us to let newcomers starve."

"I don't like the idea of letting people starve than you do," said Arkik.

"But if it's necessary for our survival...."

"If Levi had let us starved when we arrived, we'd be dead," said Croft. "I wouldn't wish that on anyone else. Most of the people arriving here are on their last legs. I don't think in good conscience we can let them die."

"We're not responsible for the whole planet," said Arkik.

He glared at Croft. Croft matched his stare. For a moment no one spoke.

"We are not going to let people die," said Croft. "There's been enough of that over the past 20 years."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Let's build up our defenses," said Croft. "Make weapons, establish a garrison at the exit to the tube. If things get desperate, maybe we can figure out a way to destroy the tube."

"Why not do that now?"

"We may need to go back to Concord," said Croft, purposefully not being specific. "Has there been any news from off-planet?" he asked, changing the subject.

"How could there be? We don't have a working comm," said Arkik. "The last I heard was that this energy draining thing had struck other planets. We have no idea how many, if any Alliance planets were struck by this thing."

"And what about the fleet?" Croft asked.

Arkik shook his head. "The last we heard was that the Glory was heading

out to intercept the Chent ship."

"And then we got hit," said Croft, suddenly realizing what happened. If the Insectoids had made a successful attack run, that must have meant that they got past the Glory. And War Admiral Norman North.

Then they really were on their own.

Arkik interrupted his train of thought. "Has there been any analysis of this mist?"

"Without power for our instruments, how could there be?" said Croft.

"I just wonder if it's really draining energy."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe it's kind of a sophisticated EMP pulse, that disrupts our electronics."

"Even if that were true, what difference would it make?" Croft asked.

"Well, if power were working but our machinery were broken, we could attempt to build new machinery and start things moving again," said Arkik.

Levi was slowly shaking his head. "No, General."

"No what?"

"Is not so. Machines work, or rather have potential to work," said Levi.

"Able to perform micro experiments, can see my generator begins to generate energy, only to have it absorbed."

"It doesn't seem to absorb all kinds of energy," said Arkik. "Certainly not the chemical energy that powers our bodies."

"But it does absorb most everything else, including, to a lesser extent, light from the sun," said Croft. "It's a very odd sort of Chent weapon. It doesn't destroy, but merely incapacitates."

"So?"

"So I wonder what the Chent used it for. They certainly had the power to destroy planets; if they had that power, why would they have a weapon like this?"

"Well, if there were any Chent around, we could ask them," said Arkik.

That sparked an idea in Croft, but he said nothing.

The settlement continued to expand, to one hundred, then two hundred, then to over three hundred people. Every new person who came into camp was offered the same deal--half rations for a week, and sleeping outdoors, which was all they could spare, in return for hard work. If they worked hard and helped boost farming output, they'd be made permanent members of the group, with full rations and a chance to get on the waiting list for permanent shelter. The growth in population had far outstripped their ability to create new housing, especially as most of their efforts were devoted to increasing the amount of arable land. Land had to be cleared even before it could be tilled, and that was backbreaking work.

Meanwhile other problems were cropping up, as time passed and the weather became warmer. They entered the dry season, and strain on the water supply increased. All of their water came from a stream from the nearby Lake Kinneret, but the lack of rain and the sudden growth of their population, combined with an increased need for water for farming, was draining the lake.

"We need to dig a new channel from the Kinneret to the new fields in sector four," said Levi, walking through the fields with Croft and General Arkik. "Quick, get it started."



"Arf!" said the Pomeranian, running off.

"I wish I had him in my army, he'd make a great master sergeant," said Arkik half-sarcastically.

"You engineered such a smart dog, but why did you make him so small, Levi?" Croft asked. "Why didn't you make a genius Collie, for example?"

"Didn't know would be used for farm work," said Levi. "Wanted something small and portable."

"Like a lappad computer," said Croft. "Steven Quick must be out there, somewhere. I wonder what will happen when he finds out you've named a dog after him."

"He be quite flattered, of course," said Levi.

"Oh, Of course," said Croft.

They walked to a staging area between the settlement and the entrance to the underground tube from Concord. Soldiers were sharpening the ends of sticks to make spears, and fingering crude bows in an unfamiliar way.

Croft, looking at the weapons, sighed.

"Well, at least they can't surprise us," said Arkik.

"Can't they?" said Croft. "That presumes they walk over here like we did."

"What's the alternative?"

"They could make a boat," said Croft.

"A boat? Without power? How would it move?" said Arkik.

"Oars. Wind. Sail," said Croft, patiently.

"Oh," said Arkik. "But it's over 50 miles to the coast. Do you really think such primitive vessels could get so far?"

"They've been known to travel farther," said Croft. "But we don't have

resources to station lookouts up and down the coast. A watch on the tube station will have to suffice, for now."

Already newcomers were being interdicted right as they emerged from the tube station and brought to the settlement. No one else had successfully sneaked up on them since Taze had arrived.

But not all the emigres from Concord were working out equally well. As they walked back towards the fields Croft saw one worker, leaning on a hoe and staring into the sky without a scare in the world.

"Is that lazy Ted?" said Croft, peering into the distance. "Or lazy Sil?"

Sil and Ted were two newcomers who hadn't shown a great enthusiasm for manual farm labor.

"One way to find out," Levi grunted. He gave a high pitched whistle.

"That wasn't very loud," said Croft. "Who can hear that?"

A moment later a small figure came bounding towards them. It was Quick.

Levi didn't say anything, merely pointing to the lacker in the field.

Quick, still in mid-stride, changed course and homed in like a guided missile, coming up behind the farm hand. He gave a hearty, "Roah!" and the figured jumped.

"Hey!" they could distantly hear him say.

"So it is Ted," Croft commented, as they walked on. They didn't bother to watch Quick remonstrate with Lazy Ted; Quick knew his job.

As they walked back to the camp they found Yosemite Catchbill sitting next to the fire.

"Aren't you supposed to be working on clearing the new field?" Croft asked.

"Arna volunteered to take my shift," Catchbill grinned.

"All right, what did you use to gamble with?" said Croft.

"Gamble?"

"If I have to ask again, you won't like how I ask," said Croft.

"Just a small bet whose soup bowl would be filled a bit higher last night."

"Really," said Croft. "And what did you bribe the soup handler with?"

"Croft," said Catchbill, looking hurt. "I'm shocked you would think I would do such a thing."

"I've got news for you, Yosi," said Croft. "It's time to get back to work."

"But... but... you can't outlaw gambling!"

"No," said Croft. "But I can outlaw cheating. You can gamble all you like, Catchbill. But everyone, including you, works your shift. If I catch someone else doing your work for you, you'll pull a double night shift back to back. Sergeant Benesh!"

Benesh, a former elite jump trooper with an iron barrel chest, stepped forward and saluted. "Sir!"

"Escort this fine gentleman to field clearing duty at grid 4B. I think there's a homemade machete with his name on it."

Catchbill looked up at the big beefy soldier and gulped as Benesh stood between Catchbill and the sunlight. Benesh stared at him for a moment, as if waiting, then grabbed his arm. "You will move or I will drag you!"

"I can see everything's well in hand," said Croft, as they walked away.

There was a need to keep morale up. In the beginning the vast majority of

the settlers were soldiers, but the constant trickle of newcomers were almost entirely civilians, changing the composition of the group. Most of the civilians were hard workers but weren't as disciplined as the military or even the former resistance fighters.

The sky and the sun was still shrouded in the mist, making the day seem dim even in what should've been bright morning or early afternoon. All that darkness was bound to have a depressing effect, and the repetitive drudgery of physical labor didn't help.

What people needed was hope. Hope of getting power back, hope of rescue from the outside. But there was no way of getting word from off-planet, assuming there was anyone left to send word who wasn't in an identical condition. And without technology, they had no way of trying to analyze the mist and counteract it.

Levi had spent a considerable amount of time trying to create a generator using alternative power sources that wouldn't be affected by the mist. But it didn't work. He made a simple solar collector, but the energy was drained as quickly as it was collected. All energy was being drained.

Why did the Chent create such a weapon? What use did they have for it? Was it a punishment for their enemies? Or did it have some other purpose? They would probably never know.

Levi still seemed convinced that the effect of the mist was not dissipating. According to him, the power drain could last for centuries, or longer.

And so without real hope the survivors needed the next best thing, a distraction, entertainment to keep their minds off of their situation. But there were no holograms on Aridor, no technological pyrotechnics that

could be used to entertain them. At night after they finished working, the settlers didn't even have much in the way of light, except for the large communal campfires.

So what they started to do was gather around the campfires and whisper to each other. That's how it started. And then one of them, an amateur actor, perhaps, got up in front of them and started to recite a few lines from his favorite holodrama. And then another did, and another. The only problem is that holodramas hadn't aired in 20 years, and many of them forgot the lines.

So they recited what they did remember, holocommercials. Every night the masses were treated to people singing the merits of soaps, fabrics, household appliances, and defunct eatery establishments.

"Eat at Hosteins, the yummy-yum-yum of the yummy-yum-yum-" a baritone voice sung, as others clapped.

"What morons," said Croft, watching from a distance.

"Cannot blame," said Levi. "Trauma of invasion. Lost all that is familiar to them."

"Berry's, wash good, wash right-"

"When the human race was conquered by the Insectoids, we fell a few notches in the evolutionary scale," said Croft. "When we lost the use of all our technology, we fell a few more. But when the human race is reduced to listening to puerile product sponsorships for entertainment, I'm not sure how much lower there is to go."

"What wrong?" said Levi. "We alive. Could be worse."

"I'll tell you what's wrong," Croft whispered. "I'm an infiltrator. I'm a

spy. That's what I do. I'm not a settler, not a farmer, and certainly not a farm administrator. I've been helping run things, and, I might say, I've been trying to keep things efficient, but Levi, I'm starting to get bored to tears."

Croft paused. "You know, Levi, I got up this morning and realized something. I'm in charge here. I never planned it, never asked for it. It just happened."

"You are take charge operative."

"Of operative teams, yes. But look at us Levi, we're a town, not an Agency team. Why is everybody following me?"

"You are the Croft," said Levi simply.

"As good an answer as any, I suppose."

"You do efficiently, that's why others follow," said Levi. "But if need help, maybe can get some military to help out," said Levi.

"I've started training a few of the midranking officers with that in mind," said Croft. "But Levi, even assuming I turn this burden over to someone else, what do I do then? Start pushing a plow?"

To that Levi gave no answer.

When the population reached 700 they had to stop emigration entirely. They couldn't build housing or clear fields fast enough to support the newcomers, and as the weather got warmer and they went into the dry season, the Kinneret started to drain to dangerously low levels. Between the dry heat, the drinking and water needs of the settlers, and the increased water demand of the crops, they couldn't afford to expand the population any more than they had.

But newcomers kept showing up. So what they decided to do was to give each newcomer a two day supply to food, a crash course on what in the forest was edible and what wasn't, a handful of seeds and information on places along the coast that might be arable.

It wasn't easy for these newcomers, but gradually smaller, independent settlements started to spring up along the coast. Some of them weren't really settlements; most couldn't manage to do more than gather berries in the forest and sleep in trees. Some of the newcomers attempted to steal food from the settlement, forcing Croft to string more guards around the area, especially at night. He wanted to build a fence or a wall to encompass the entire area, but they simply didn't have the manpower or the readily accessible materials to do so. Levi had already commandeered all the labor available that wasn't farming to build a new irrigation ditch from the Kinneret.

A few weeks before they cut off immigration an important person showed up. Actually, several important people.

Croft heard a commotion and walked over to the receiving area, to see a large smiling man carrying carrying a scrawny and pale much smaller man in his arms.

"I suppose this is something that I could have predicted," said Croft.

"Yes, yes, Croft always with the witty line," the one being carried hissed.

"Are you going to follow me everywhere, Mongo?" said Croft. "And Smiley, why are you carrying him?"

Mongo, the one being carried, was an Agency gamma operative, a sensitive

with the ability to see images of the future, or possible futures. His skill was very useful, but he was a little unbalanced and could (and did) rub people the wrong way).

Smiley was a different kettle of fish altogether. Always smiling, always friendly, Croft couldn't put his finger on the exact reason that Smiley was odd, at least until the time that Smiley got shot with blaster fire and didn't get a scratch. They still hadn't figured out who or what he was.

"Can let me down now, thanks," said Mongo.

"Sure," Smiley grinned, slowly dropping Mongo to the ground. "Hello Croft!" he said, his grin getting wider, if at all possible.

"Hey Smiley," said Croft. "Now can you tell me why you were carrying him?"

"He asked me to," Smiley smiled.

"Mongo, are you injured?" said Croft.

"Yes, injured, weak legs," said Mongo.

Croft did the necessary translation. "You got tired of walking, and got Smiley to carry you. How far has he been carrying you?"

"How many miles is tube thing underwater?" Mongo countered.

"You had him carry you for 50 miles?" said Croft.

"Mongo's feet delicate," said Mongo. "Just like his hands. Don't even think of making Mongo do naaaasty physical labor, no."

"Sir, do you want me to chuck these two out?" said Sergeant Benesh. He grabbed Mongo by the arm. Mongo squealed. Croft gestured for him to let Mongo go.

Mongo rubbed his apparently sore arm. "You will nearly choke on a carrot tonight at dinner," said Mongo, glaring at him.



Benesh looked confused.

"Everyone has to work here," said Croft.

"I'll be happy to work," said Smiley.

"That goes without saying," said Croft. "But what can you do, Mongo?"

"Has Croft forgotten, yes, forgotten what we can do?" Mongo said.

"We don't have a great demand for fortune telling on a farm," said Croft.

Mongo concentrated for a moment, but couldn't think of anything either. He squealed and tried to look pathetic.

"Should I send this one out, sir?" said Benesh.

"No, pleeeeeease!" said Mongo, grabbing Croft by the leg. He started sobbing. "Don't send poor Mongo away, please! Mongo will staaaarve...."

Croft considered. "Well, you're not really built for heavy farm work...."

He paused. Mongo looked expectantly. Croft tried to think.

"...but I suppose you could help with routine chores, like cooking and cleaning dishes."

"Cooking! Yes, Mongo make very good cook. Can create great recipes-"

"You forget that I've seen what you eat," said Croft. "You'll work under Levi or Mindy or whoever's in charge of cooking, on a temporary basis. If I get any complaints about you...."

"No, no one will complain!" shrieked Mongo. He petted Croft's foot vigorously. "Good Croft! Nice Croft! Very grateful for letting Mongo stay."

Benesh escorted Mongo to the cooking area.

"His gratitude should last for at least a few minutes," said Croft to himself. He heard a shriek in the distance. "Maybe I overestimated."

But the most important immigrant arrived two weeks before they closed the settlement to new visitors. If the visitor had arrived two weeks later, the history of the settlement would have been very, very different.

The most important immigrant was Senator Wellington Goodmon, one of the 88 senators in the old League of Unified Worlds which had been crushed by the Insectoids. Before the invasion Goodmon, a Senator for the past 200 years, had been one of the most powerful establishment figures on August.

But after the invasion he was just another laborer in an Insectoid work camp. He kept a low profile and just tried to survive. His strategy worked.

When a new kind of anarchy descended on August after the power was knocked out, Goodmon heard rumors of the settlement on Aridor and made his way there along with a handful of his former political aides. When he arrived, Croft welcomed him and gave him the dignity and honor someone of his rank deserved.

"You'll be put to work in the fields immediately," said Croft.

"The fields?" said Goodmon. "Why?"

"That's where we grow the food," said Croft patiently. "You'll get two meals a day like the rest of us and pull night shifts on watch when your turn comes. Your sleeping accommodations will be in the open section of the rock quarry."

"The rock quarry? Don't you have any permanent housing?" Goodmon asked.

"We do, but only enough for about half of us. When you've earned your keep you'll be put on a rotation list to spend some nights inside," said Croft.

"Rotation list? I should think I should go to the head of the list," said

Goodmon.

"Go easy on the thinking, it's in short supply here," said Croft reflexively. "If you have no further questions, Quick will escort you to the fields and provide you with your instructions."

"Quick?" said Goodmon, looking around but not seeing anyone.

"Arf!"

Looking down, Goodmon saw the small dog for the first time.

"Yes, that's Quick," said Croft. "Meet your new boss."

"Arf!"

"My good man, you can't be serious about putting us under the charge of a canine!"

"I'm very serious," said Croft.

"A man of my position can't be expected to do manual labor," said Goodmon.

"What did you do under the Insectoid regime, knitting?" Croft asked.

"That was different, I was a captive," said Goodmon.

"And you're not a captive here," said Croft. "You're free to leave any time you like. But there's only about three hours of dim sunlight left. If I don't see you at work in the fields in the next five minutes, I don't expect to see you here at dinner."

Goodmon opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"Give me a full report," said Croft, bending down to pet Quick on the head.

"Arf!" said the supervisor, wagging his tail twice.

Goodmon and his aides followed Quick onto the fields.

Croft looked vaguely satisfied as he folded his arms. "Finally, a

politician willing to get his hands dirty."

But, of course, it didn't end there. During their evening fireside free time, Goodmon did what politicians do best: talk. He started with small things. Weren't they tired of the same food? Always sleeping on the hard ground? Why was their labor so backbreaking? Who addressed their concerns? The others, who initially started listening to Goodmon out of indifference, started paying more and more attention to him during his fireside chats. After all, there wasn't much else to do after nightfall except listen to renditions of old holocommercials.

Croft could see where this was leading, but he didn't have a ready solution at hand. He couldn't exactly silence Goodmon; as long as Goodmon covered his workshifts--which Quick reported that he grudgingly was--any attempt to move against him would be perceived as heavy-handed. Goodmon wasn't guilty of stealing, or failing to perform his chores, but what he was guilty of was slowly but surely tearing the settlement apart.

"We have to do something about him," said Arkik acidly.

"But could we make it look like an accident," Croft idly wondered.

"I'm sure we could," said Arkik.

"I was just joking," said Croft.

"He's a troublemaker," said another officer, Major Rambus.

"Our lives are hanging by a thread here. We can't let that fool destroy the precious foothold we've created," said Arkik.

"What would you suggest?" Croft said.

"We get rid of him, expel him." said Arkik. The other officers present, Major Rambus, Lieutenant Pomiter, and a newcomer named Captain Kiley,

nodded.

"That might have been possible a month ago, but he's acquired too much of a following," said Croft. "And he's been smart enough not to break any of the rules."

"You know he's going to move against you," said Arkik. "Are you going to sit there and just let it happen?"

"Do I ever?" said Croft.

"Want to bet things will come to a head tonight?" Catchbill whispered to Lazy Ted and Sil, who along with others were filing towards the large public fire to enjoy the evening's entertainment.

Ted shook his head. "If you're willing to bet, it either means you're manipulating events or you have inside information on what's going to happen."

"You're so suspicious," said Catchbill.

Goodmon went in front of the crowd, as was now his custom, and started talking about grievances. But tonight he took a different tact. "We all have reason to be grateful to Clifford Croft. It was his effort, along with the brave military, that helped to overthrow the Insectoids. But what we're dealing with now is civilian administration. We can't expect a surveillance operative to have experience-"

"It seems you don't expect much of me," said Croft, suddenly appearing in front of the campfire.

Goodmon looked startled. This was the first time that Croft had made a front and center appearance at one of his evening speeches. He was put off-balance, but only for a moment.

"Ah, Croft, good. We were just wondering-"

"-who has more experience running a colony, no doubt" said Croft. "I now have over six months experience. Everyone who has more experience, raise your hand. Don't be shy, raise'm high."

There was silence for a moment.

"Ah, specific experience is not the issue," said Goodmon, recovering somewhat. "We were just looking for some more responsiveness on some issues."

"We?" said Croft. He smiled broadly for the audience. "You're all alone up here. Have you been picking up your speaking habits from Mongo?"

There was a scattered laughter in the audience, as well as a familiar screech.

"This is serious," said Goodmon. "This is not a dictatorship. What gives you the right to determine how this community is to be run? Who elected you?"

"Ah, I thought the issues were blankets and housing," said Croft.

"Those are symptomatic of the main problem, unrepresentative government."

"So, you want to hold an election," said Croft.

"Yes, to establish legitimacy," said Goodmon. "It's a basic tenant of sound government."

"Basic tenant, hm," said Croft. "Can't argue with that. All right, we'll hold an election."

"What?" said Goodmon. He hadn't expected Croft to concede this quickly.

"Right now," said Croft.

"But... what about the rules, procedure-"

Croft ticked them off on his fingers. "Anyone can nominate a candidate.

Each candidate can give a speech. After each candidate has spoken, we vote by secret ballot. The winner is by an absolute majority; if no one gets it, a runoff will be held the following night."

Goodmon looked surprised. "But, I need time, to prepare-"

"You?" said Croft. "Do you plan to run?"

"Well, I ah, might want to offer my services to the community-"

"Then by all means, offer them now," said Croft. He raised his voice.

"That's going to be tonight's entertainment, folks, a genuine democratic election. Doesn't that beat old holocommercial jingles?"

There was laughter in the audience.

"Very well," said Croft. "Who will be the first to be nominated?"

"I nominate Cliff-" came a voice.

"Out of order!" said Croft. "Please raise your hand to be recognized."

A sea of hands went up. Croft looked through them in the dim light until he saw the face he wanted, that of Marzipan, one of Goodmon's hacks. He recognized Marzipan.

"I nominate Wellington Goodmon!" said Marzipan.

Croft nodded. "Goodmon is nominated. Mr. Goodmon, would you like to address the audience to tell them why you should be elected. . . just a moment, what is it we're holding an election for?"

"Mayor." "Coordinator." "Dictator at large." Came the shouts.

Croft laughed. "Mayor will do, for now I think. Well, Goodmon?"

Goodmon was flabbergasted at the speed at which events were moving.

"Aren't you even going to accept other nominations first?"

"I will, after you give your speech," said Croft. "Each person will get

their say right after they're nominated."

"But that's not the way it's done," said Goodmon.

"Perhaps when you're running things," said Croft. "Would you like to address the crowd, or forfeit your right to speak before the vote?"

"But I've had no time to prepare!"

"That hasn't stopped you before," Croft noted. Someone in the audience laughed again.

"Very well," Goodmon said, licking his lips and trying not to look like a trapped animal. He gave The Speech. He spoke at length about his experience in public service, how he wanted to improve their situation, and how he would be a humble public servant, and so on and so forth. Croft tuned it all out, standing silently, not cutting Goodmon off. Some wondered why. And then Goodmon got to the interesting part.

"I had not intended to offer myself up for this post, but I do so for a most important reason," said Goodmon. "Above all else, we need a civilian in this role. Military and spies have their purpose in war, but we are not at war. We are trying to establish a civilian administration that's responsive to the people, and that's why we need a skilled civilian hand. Most of us, after all, are civilians, and we are not being accustomed to being ruled by the military-"

"Thank you," said Croft, suddenly speaking up. "Thank you. You've used up your time-"

"But I-"

"As well as the time of the following two speakers as well," said Croft, to laughter from the audience.

"You're not taking this very seriously," said Goodmon, staring



meaningfully at the audience.

"To be more precise, I'm not taking you very seriously," said Croft, again to laughter. "Now, are there any more nominations for Mayor?"

"I nominate Clifford Croft!" this came from Charlie Taze. Several other voices in the audience spontaneously said the same thing.

"Thank you," said Croft. "I appreciate it. But I must decline to be nominated."

Several hundred set of jaws dropped simultaneously.

"If nominated, I will refuse to run, if elected, I will refuse to serve," said Croft, giving a small smile. "I think Mr. Goodmon is right, we do need civilian leadership at the top. Although I am not in the military, strictly speaking, my line of work isn't exactly civilian. Therefore, it is with great sadness that I decline the nomination."

Senator Goodmon got over the stunned feeling to suddenly realize that the nomination was being handed to him. But why?

Now was not the time to wonder why. Goodmon stepped forward, opening his mouth to speak.

"Not yet, Senator," said Croft. "I'm still entertaining nominations. Are there any other nominations?" he asked. There was silence. Where there had once been a forest of hands competing for attention, there was now none.

"I say again, are there any other nominations?" said Croft, with an edge in his voice.

And then, slowly, in the back, a bony arm rose.

"Yes?" said Croft.

"We nominate... we nominate the Cook, yessss," said Mongo, speaking in a

forced tone.

"Who?" said Croft, giving a warning glance. "I can't hear you."

"Esherkol!" Mongo shrieked, as if he had been poked by a hot poker.

"That's a surprising turn of events," Shakey commented, sitting in the sidelines.

"I'm glad I didn't take bets on this one," was all Catchbill said. "I wonder what the odds were of that happening?"

Others in the audience thought it was a crackpot request, but Croft treated it seriously.

"Levi Esherkol has been nominated! Levi, will Levi please come to the front!" said Croft.

Everyone looked around. Levi, an intensely private person, never showed up for the evening campfire sessions. But slowly, a figure made its way forward in the darkness. It was Levi!

He looked reluctant, and spoke even more so.

"A cook," said Goodmon, softly under his breath. "They've got the cook to run against me?" He couldn't believe it. He was very surprised when Levi immediately launched into what, for him, was a speech.

"I run for Mayor," said Levi. "I live here, Aridor, longer than anyone.

Know this area, know how to farm, build things. Not a fancy politician," he added, purposefully not looking at Goodmon. "But agree that must have civilian control. Am civilian," he said, glossing over his history with the Agency. He spoke rigidly, mechanically, as if reading someone else's words.

Suddenly, everything became very clear to Goodmon. As it had become clear to Croft, earlier that day.

He had been in a private meeting with General Arkik, several of his officers, Mongo, and Levi. "Goodmon is going to make his move tonight," Croft had said.

"How do you know?" Arkik had said.

"Tell them, Mongo."

"Tell them, Mongo," Mongo had said, imitating Croft's voice. "Am not a trained parrot-"

"Mongo!"

"Badmon will call for elections tonight, standing on right side of campfire," Mongo had said. "May actually start out standing at left side of campfire, but will end up-"

"What will be his primary argument?" Croft had asked, interrupting him.

"Say many boring things, but push for civilian control, says must have civilians, yes, must not let military run things. Mongo agrees," Mongo had added earnestly.

"Is this reliable?" Arkik had asked skeptically.

"We have to treat it like it is," Croft had said. "And be ready for a counterpunch."

"What do you suggest?"

"Give them what they want--a civilian leader."

"A civilian?"

Croft looked meaningfully at Levi.

"No!" Levi had said. "No, no, and no. I not politician."

"You don't have to be," Croft had said. "We'll continue to run things."

You'll be mayor in name only."

"No! Definitely no!"

"Yes," Croft had said.

"No!"

"Levi!" Croft had said, raising a finger. "You are going to do this. And Mongo is going to help."

"No," Levi had again.

"And Mongo not help," Mongo had added.

"Thank you for election," said Levi, after the votes were counted. It wasn't even close. With the Senator's prime justification for the election taken away, his entire candidacy had unraveled.

He faced the audience for the first time, as Mayor to them all. Mayor Esherkol.

Croft subtly gestured for him to say something.

"I, ah, we, ah, will have victory soup for lunch tomorrow," said Levi. "I talk with Mindy about adding special ingredients to lunchtime soup."

There was silence for a moment, as if people were waiting for more.

And then a few hands clapped, then more, and more, and it became a thunderous applause. Evidently, they liked the idea of having a little variety in their diet.

Croft, General Arkik, and his senior officers continued to run things in private, of course. Levi continue to give them technical advice about farming, civil engineering, and logistics, while Croft and the military would make decisions behind the scene. The only difference was that Levi

would be the one to publicly announce them. He still looked uncomfortable engaging in public speaking, but was starting to get used to it. At least now Goodmon was temporarily neutralized and they could get back to the business of running the settlement.

Whenever Levi was called on to make a decision, however, he would look uncertain, and have to confer with the others. For example, one time Tanya Kerrick, one of the few civilian supervisors, was having trouble getting Lazy Ted and Lazy Sil work.

"What should I do, Levi?" Tanya asked.

"They not work?"

"They pretend to work. They work very very slowly, spending more time talking to each other than they do working."

"Hm," said Levi, apparently deep in thought, but with very little idea what to do.

"Would you like one of us to have a friendly talk with them, Levi?" said Croft, who along with a military officer was Levi's nearly constant companion.

Levi nodded dumbly.

"We'll send Sergeant Benesh to get in touch with their feelings," said Croft. "I'm certain he can find new ways to motivate them."

Kerrick, eyes flickering from Croft to Levi, had accepted that, but she, like the others noticed that Levi wasn't really in charge.

The situations only became more glaring during their evening campfire meetings. Circumstances required that Levi make regular reports from time to time in the evenings, partially to be responsive to the settlers, but

mostly because the audience had little else to do at night. So three nights a week Levi made a brief report (written by Croft or one of the other military officers) and made himself available for questions.

"When are we going to grow more food so we can eat three times a day?"

"Why isn't there ever enough water?"

"When are we going to be rescued?"

"When is there going to be enough space for all of us to sleep inside?"

Levi could field some of these questions on his own--when asked about the water supply, for example, he would launch into a discussion of the low level of the water table at Lake Kinneret and the need to develop new supplies. But his answers were technical and dry, not providing the kind of inspiration or excitement the audience seemed to be looking for. And on questions of policy, such as "What are work shifts going to look like next week?" Levi could only shrug his shoulders because Croft and the others hadn't worked it out yet.

Still, the fields were being plowed, shelter was being built, food was being hunted for, and bit by bit their colony was growing stronger. Croft felt confident enough to take off with Levi on a short hunting trip. Only they weren't hunting food. One thing they were short of was medicines and medical supplies. Every so often someone would get injured farming, or lifting something heavy, and they wouldn't have the means to treat the injured. There were several doctors among them but without supplies there was a limit to what they could do.

Levi, of course, had studied medicine, much as he had dabbled in other fields of science, and reported that he had vague memories of a plant that might have healing properties that grew somewhere a mile to the east of

the settlement. Levi just wanted to go off and find his plants, but Croft insisted on coming with him. There were other scavengers in the forest now, and it wasn't safe to walk alone. And Levi was certainly not expendable. Sergeant Benesh accompanied them.

"We go this way," said Levi, pointing to a path.

"Whatever you say, Mayor," said Croft.

Levi stopped, and pointed at Croft. "Not to call me that. Your idea, not mine."

"We needed a civilian face on the administration," said Croft. "Would you rather that Goodmon be in charge?"

"Am tired of meetings, being in public. Want peace and quiet, so I can work."

"We're giving you as much as we can," said Croft. "I've trained Captain Kiley to handle most administrative functions, and Major Rambus can handle logistics. We just need you there to ratify things."

"Am not a performer. Am a cook, an inventor, but not actor."

"Well, we don't always get to choose our roles," said Croft unfeelingly.

Suddenly, he felt something whisk past his face. He turned and saw an arrow thunk into a tree behind him.

"Down!" said Croft, as Levi and Benesh dropped with him.

"Did you see where it came from?" Croft whispered to Benesh.

Benesh shook his head.

"It seems not everyone happy with administration," Levi commented.

Could it be someone from the settlement trying to assassinate them? They had their answer quickly enough as a thin, scrawny voice said, "I know

you're still there! Get outta here!"

Levi's expression suddenly brightened, and he stood up.

"What are you doing?" Croft hissed.

"Rangon, you put down that bow," said Levi.

"No one gives me orders!" said the reedy, high pitched voice.

Croft caught Benesh's eye, made an encirclement gesture with his hand.

Benesh barely nodded, and scampered off, keeping low.

"You almost hit friend," said Levi.

"If I'da want to hit him, he'd be hit!" said the voice. "You're trespassing!"

Croft cautiously stood up. Looking in the direction Levi was, he saw a thin man in the trees two dozen feet away.

"Who are you?" said Croft.

"Rangon. Ranger Rangon."

"Says he's a long time ranger," Levi whispered.

"This is one of the rangers?" Croft asked.

"No," said Levi. "Just says it."

"Maybe he was unhinged by the invasion of the Insectoids," said Croft. The invasion and occupation had broken a lot of people.

"No," whispered Levi. "Been like this since before. Just a regular mad man. But not dangerous, usually."

"Usually," Croft whispered. "How reassuring."

"I see you whispering!" said Rangon. "You're talking about me, aren't you?"

"No, the weather," said Croft. "Now, why were you shooting at us?"

"This is my land, see?"



"All land is your land," said Levi wearily.

"That's right!"

"And what if we choose to walk here?" said Croft, wondering why they hadn't run into this person before. Maybe had been wandering farther afield in the interior of the continent.

"Then you'll be shot!"

"Lower your weapon," said Croft, seeing something new behind Rangon.

"Lower it, and you won't get hurt."

"Won't get hurt? I'm the one with the bow! Are you crazy?"

Sighing, Croft nodded. Benesh grabbed Rangon in a giant bear hug. Rangon, dropping the bow, tried to fight back, but as Benesh gripped him tighter, his struggling grew feebler and feebler. Benesh, carrying him like a sack of potatoes, carried him over to Croft and Levi.

"Now, what am I going to do with you?" said Croft.

"Let me go!" said Rangon, still wriggling.

"If I do that, you're liable to shoot one of us," Croft pointed out.

"Let me go!" Rangon said again, still squirming.

"I think our friend needs to be held a bit tighter," Croft observed

Benesh crushed him more in an iron grip.

"Arrrgh! No, ok!" said Rangon.

"Ok?" said Croft. "Does that mean ok, you won't shoot people walking around the forest?"

Rangon, glaring nodded slightly (that was about as much as he was capable of moving). "All right. I'll give you an easement to walk on my lands."

"How generous. I'm glad we were able to come to an understanding," said

Croft pleasantly. "You can let him go, Sergeant."

Rangon glared at them as he was released.

"You have a nice day," said Croft.

Other disputes could not be handled as easily. As Mayor, Levi had to be involved in mediating between disputes and handing out punishments. One typical "trial" was held as an evening campfire event where Levi presided over a case involving Lazy Ted and Lazy Sil.

"So it is your sworn statements that while you were on guard duty over the crops that you did not pick any of the corn and eat it for yourself, correct?"

"Definitely," said Lazy Ted. Lazy Sil nodded and smiled.

"Then how do you explain that the next day, five ears of corn were found eaten on the ground in the fields?"

"Uhhhh," said Lazy Ted.

Sil looked blank.

"Any ideas?" Croft asked.

"Maybe an animal snuck in and ate them," Ted opined.

"Maybe an animal snuck in and ate them," said Croft. "But upon examination, these corn cobs were cleanly picked, and bitten by human teeth. What have you to say to that?"

Ted struggled to generate a thought. "Maybe someone else got in and picked the corn.

"It was awfully dark," Sil added.

"Awfully," said Ted.

"But not so dark that a witness didn't observe the culprits the following night," Croft noted.

"A witness?" said Ted, looking more bewildered than usual. "I mean, how?

It was so dark-

"We used special night vision equipment." Croft turned to Levi. "Your honor, may I call my witness?" Levi nodded.

On cue, Quick, the Type 212(b) Pomeranian trotted up to the fire.

"The dog? You're calling the dog to testify?" said Lazy Ted. "You can't do that!"

There was widespread laughter in the audience around the fire. This was a kind of entertainment they liked!

Croft turned to Quick. "Do you swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

Quick actually raised a paw and said, "Roah!"

"You see, we suspected you of pilfering food for some time, and purposely left the two of you together on guard duty that night," said Croft. "But you didn't know you were being watched, did you?" He turned to Quick.

"Quick, did you see who ate the corn?"

"Roah!"

"Who?"

"Arf arf arf arf arf!"

"Ted and Sil, I see," said Croft.

"Wait a minute, how can you possibly understand what he's saying?" said Ted. "You could be making it all up!"

"Quick?" said Croft.

Quick trotted up to Lazy Ted, pointing at him with his snout. "Roah!" he said, before going to do the same with Sil.

"Do you have anything to say in your defense?" said Croft.

Ted wet his lips and looked at Sil, who looked blankly back at him. "We, uh, were just a bit hungry. We didn't take much."

The audience roared in disapproval. It took Croft and some guardsmen several minutes before they could restore order and turn the case over to Levi.

"We have power to get rid of you," said Levi.

Ted and Sil turned visibly pale, even in the dim light.

Levi continued. "But we give one last chance."

There were hisses and catcalls from the audience.

"If you caught stealing again, you are out. If your supervisors complain about you, you are out. You are sentenced to three days half rations."

Levi banged the rock that served as his gavel. The crowd perked up a bit when they heard the sentence. Lazy Ted and Sil left the light of the campfire to more jeers.

Later, Levi asked Croft, "Why give another chance?"

"They're so dumb that they would probably starve on their own," said Croft. "But we have to draw the line somewhere, and we've done that."

Things ran well for almost a year after that. Croft didn't start to notice the deterioration of the situation for some time. He was too distracted. After having effectively turned over most day to day duties to Major Rambus and Captain Kiley, Croft focused more on long range planning. It had been nearly a year and a half since they had lost all contact with the outside world. The energy depriving mist, after lightening up to a certain degree in the first few weeks, was now at a constant and

unchanging thickness. They could still see it all around them; it still dulled the light of the sun. It was unnerving to constantly be surrounded by the sparkling mist, which dramatically cut down on their vision.

Objects that could be clearly seen at 100 feet away were hazy at 50 feet.

And as they walked around the mist seemed to be sparkling on their skin, like millions of tiny bugs crawling around. There was more than one nightmare and even nervous breakdown in the settlement because of it.

For Croft the mist was the symbolic equivalent of a restraining force field, a cell that kept him trapped. Would he never be able to travel off planet again? Was he destined to spend the rest of his life in a primitive agricultural settlement? He almost wished for the days of the invasion; his life had been at constant risk, but at least he had been in action.

Croft racked his brains for ideas, either for escape, or to get power back. But Levi had done a number of intensive experiments and found no way to get the power back. The only power that seemed to work was the chemical power produced by the human body, or fire. Anything more sophisticated seemed to be dampened immediately the moment it was created.

As for escape, there was one possibility that had occurred to Croft. But the only place he might be able to escape to could be hostile, even lethal to him if he returned there again.

And so he was stuck on Aridor. As the struggle for day-to-day survival receded and was taken up by the others, his attention and interest in the settlement flagged. It was therefore, a little more than a year and a half after his arrival, not surprising that he was surprised when the coup happened.

A lot of little things had been building up. Like Croft, once the settlers realized they were going to survive they began aspiring for more. But there was nothing Levi could do for them. He gave his dry, technical reports three nights a week, which did nothing to inspire the settlers.

That's where Goodmon came in. He knew that there was a gap that could be filled and he filled it. After a long period of public silence he started criticizing the administration of the settlement again. He kept asking why after all this time they didn't have proper beds, or better huts, or a greater variety of food to eat. Levi's answers were as dry and technical as Goodmon's questions were dramatic and inflammatory.

Some of the former resistance leaders and guardsmen tried to warn Croft what was going on, but Croft was off in his own little depression and wasn't especially interested. Things might have gone on this way for some time had there not been a spark that ignited the discontent.

That spark was later called "The Mindy Affair". No, Levi's wife didn't commit adultery with another settler; she did, however, manage to inflame a great number of them with her obsessive-compulsive drive for perfection and neatness. Was firewood not stacked properly? Then it must be all restacked. Was the food not seasoned to her liking? Then the cooks must endure a public tongue-lashing. Were the clothes weavers not weaving as she instructed? Then they must start over and also be publicly humiliated.

Levi either couldn't or wouldn't rein in his wife, and over time she alienated a large number of settlers. People didn't think badly of Levi directly, but they knew that with one in charge they also got the other.

And then one day Mindy went too far, and a government was toppled as a result. Mindy did a spot check of the food right before dinner; a stew was

being served that night, a sign they were running out of food before the next harvest. But Mindy didn't think about that when she took a sip of the stew, spat it out, declared it unfit for human consumption, and ordered the entire batch thrown out and dinner restarted.

Except that when the food stocks were checked and it was discovered that supplies were so tight that there simply wasn't enough to serve dinner twice (one of their staple crops had recently failed, cutting into their reserves), the settlers were forced to go without.

So it was on empty stomachs that night and the distant sound of thunder that the settlers gathered for their nightly campfire. It was also unfortunate that this was one of the nights that Levi was supposed to come out and answer questions. All the questions were about the dinner they didn't have.

"What are you doing about this?"

"Do you understand how hungry we are?"

"Your wife is out of control!"

Levi didn't know what to say. In fact, he was speechless.

Goodmon saw this opportunity and took it. "I notice some unhappiness in the crowd," said Goodmon. "Have you ever considered submitting to a vote of confidence?"

"Vote of...?" said Levi numbly.

"You have never stated how long your term of office is," said Goodmon.

"How long is it?"

"I, ah..."

"In fact, you have never elaborated on the formal structure of your

government. You've been elected Mayor, but we have no committees for food distribution, no committees on farming, no committees on supplies, and so on. When do you propose to set up a proper governmental administration?"

"Ah..."

"Perhaps if we had more experience at the helm of government, we could have more regularity in its administration."

"Maybe you right," said Levi. At this point he was still numb by the attacks on Mindy and was hating his job more than ever. "Hold your vote," he said dismissively, waving a hand as he walked away from the campfire.

A guardsman ran off to look for Croft.

Goodmon looked startled but immediately took control of the agenda. "My friends, I believed what I said when I stated we needed to set up a formal structure in government. I think we need to-"

Within 5 minutes he had them eating out of the palms of his hands with his promise of participatory government and more food, housing, and comforts.

He did such a good job, in fact, that when he made the obligatory call for other candidates, no other hands were raised. Except one.

"Yes?" said Goodmon, peering in the darkness to see who he was recognizing.

It was Shakey Walbaum. "I nominate Quick."

"What?" said Goodmon, as if he didn't follow. "Do I understand you wish to nominate a... Pomeranian... for Mayor?"

"Yes," said Shakey. "He's a good supervisor, why not make him Mayor?"

"Out of order," said Goodmon. "Only human beings can hold office. Do we have any other nominations?" He looked around quickly so he could close it up and get to the vote. He would be running unopposed, which was more than



he had hoped for!

But then Shakey raised his hand again and waved it so vigorously that

Goodmon couldn't ignore him.

"You can't nominate the dog," said Goodmon.

"All right, then, I nominate myself," said Shakey.

"You?" said Goodmon.

"Yes, me," said Shakey. "I can be just as amusing as a politician. Only intentionally so."

"All right," said Goodmon reluctantly. "Get up here and give your speech.

But make it short, please."

Shakey ambled up to the front of the campfire. "Folks, you may think a comedian, even the most famous comedian on August, won't make much of a leader. But if you elect me, I promise to do whatever Quick says."

There was a wave of laughter in the audience.

"Think about it! He's a dog, sure, but he's smart, smarter than many of us," said Shakey. "In my opinion, he's been unfairly disqualified, but I think he could do a better job of running this place than any politician!

Elect me, and you get the dog too. My friends, whether we're four legged, or two legged, can't we all just get along-"

"All right, Shakey," Goodmon interrupted.

"But I'm not done!" Shakey said.

"Yes you are. Are there any other candidacies?" He waited a half second.

"No? Then let's get to the vote."

They voted as they had the first time; each settler picked up a pebble, and cast it into one of two baskets in the front by the campfire. They

formed a line leading up to the basket area, and Goodmon and his allies administered the voting. But when Quick got to the front of the line followed by Shakey, Goodmon shook his head. "It's a dog, Shakey. He can't vote either."

"First you won't let him run for Mayor, and now you're taking away his right to vote," said Shakey. "What's next, are you going to lock him up in a kennel?"

"Come on, Shakey."

To his credit, Goodmon conducted an honest vote count; he never needed to do otherwise. He got 615 votes; but it wasn't entirely a wipeout; Shakey, the protest candidate, got 84 votes, which, historians later noted, was the highest vote count a dog had ever received for election to any office on August.

By the time Croft was found and had returned to the campfire, it had all been settled.

#### Chapter 4: Rise of the Bureaucrats

"The food ration has been cut again," muttered Catchbill, eyeing the smaller portion in his plate as he sat under the dim midday sun.

"The Mayor says it's because of the bad weather," said Smiley, sitting down by them. "Them" consisted of Croft, Mongo, Catchbill, Levi, and several officers.

"Weather not change," said Levi.

"Then what is it?" said Catchbill. "Ever since the dog was demoted we've

been harvesting less food."

Quick had been relieved of his duties as farm foreman, and had been replaced with one of Goodmon's cronies. In fact, Goodmon's people held all the top jobs, which had formerly been held by an experienced cadre of military officers allied with Croft and Levi.

"There have been fewer people working the farm," said Croft. "Namely, all of Goodmon's cronies."

"I've seen them sitting around," said Major Rambus. "What are they doing all day?"

"Legislating," Croft snorted. "We now have a committee on farm production which hasn't pushed a single plow, a committee on housing that hasn't lifted a single stone, committees on trash, environment, sanitation, supplies, organization, and, incredibly, a committee on committees."

"What's that one do?" asked Lieutenant Pomiter.

"Much the same as the others," said Croft.

If Mayor Goodmon's administration wasn't accomplishing any visibly tangible goals, it at least was successful in providing evening entertainment. Every evening the "committees" (usually composed only of a chairman), gave their updates. That night was no different.

"-we haven't decided whether to go with the blue, or the brown," said Enrico Hardgep, Chairman of the Committee on Furnishings.

"But when are you actually going to make us some furniture!" someone called out from the audience. "I'm tired of sitting on rocks."

"Patience, patience," said Goodmon, who was chairing the evening's reports, as he always did. "First we must approve the design before

construction can begin." He peered into the dim light created by the bonfire, noticed a hand. "Yes?"

"How are you going to make furniture once you've actually settled on a design?" someone asked.

"We, ah, are studying the issue," said Goodmon. "I believe the committee on mechanization is studying this-"

"Instead of studying it, when are you actually going to get something done?" said the first voice.

"I assure you we are working as fast as can be done. We cannot produce miracles," said Goodmon.

"What about the food?" another person cried.

"What about it?" said Goodmon, getting tense.

"Why have our rations been cut again?"

"Well, that's a very complex issue," said Goodmon. "I have ordered the secretariat to begin an investigation-"

"And why haven't we had meat in days?" This question came from Lazy Ted.

"We are closely studying this issue," said Goodmon..

"There's been meat all right," Croft whispered to General Arkik. "But it only goes to Goodmon and his men."

"-when the secretariat reports, we'll have more information on the food issue," said Goodmon.

Lazy Ted opened his mouth to ask a followup.

But Goodmon spoke first. "I think we've spent enough time on the, ah, supply issue. Does anyone have any questions on any other topic? Yes?"

Shakey Walbaum, who had been sitting next to Lazy Ted, stood up. "I have a question."

"Yes?"

Shakey pointed to Lazy Ted. "Why don't you answer his question?"

The audience roared with laughter.

"I don't see why people put up with it," said Captain Kiley.

"You really don't know?" said Croft.

"Know what?" said Kiley.

"Goodmon has built a solid base of support," said Croft. "All those people who aren't farming are working on those useless committees. About a third of us now work for his 'government'."

"Yeah, but they're still not getting as much food."

"Yeah, but they don't have to work anymore," said Croft. "He's bought domestic peace by letting people sit around all day doing whatever they want. Meanwhile those of us not on the favorites list still have to grind away to produce."

"Parasites," Kiley muttered.

"You mean government," Croft corrected him.

Goodmon was very skilled at deflecting attention from the food situation.

Whenever anyone would complain about the food or housing situation, he would deflect the topic and draw peoples' attention elsewhere.

"What about the housing situation?" someone asked at an evening campfire session.

"We are working to create new housing as rapidly as we can," said Goodmon.

"Meanwhile nearly a quarter of us still have to sleep outside," said the complainer. Croft recognized him as one of the former guardsmen. "Why don't you divert some people from that mansion you're building?"

Goodmon was building, had built, actually, a large stone house "for government administration", which, by the standards of their rustic community, was quite luxurious. The house had two large built in fireplaces, a soft straw floor, interior walls for privacy (an unheard of luxury), and the only roof on Aridor that was actually fully waterproof. In that large space that could fit 30 people Goodmon and a handful of aides "administered" the site. The building was never finished, it seemed, as Goodmon kept thinking of new improvements to add.

"If you're referring to the government administration building, we need a central area to direct the development," said Goodmon. "You have to understand that we're building a government from the ground up. Why, we don't even have a name for our community. Do you realize that?"

Everyone was silent, as if Goodmon had said something startling.

"Yes! We've been laboring so long, lost in our struggle just to survive from day to day, and we don't even have a name for the gallant community we're building."

People immediately started shouting names. Goodmon smiled. "Slow down, one at a time, one at a time! The study committee on Appellations will need to consider this."

Goodmon actually milked this "controversy" for a week of night-time gatherings before settling on a name: Gateway Village.

"A brilliant piece of work, given that this is has always been the name for this part of Aridor," said Croft. "My only question is, why did it only take them a week to come up with it?"

"I think that was the maximum amount of time that Goodmon thought he could

milk out of it," said Yosemite Catchbill. "I can't wait to hear the new topic for tonight."

"Does it bother you that we have all this talking but nothing actually gets done?" said Croft. "Our food supply is slowly declining, housing starts are moribund, and-"

"And they've just eliminated the guard at the tube station," said General Arkik, hobbling over.

"What?" said Croft.

"They said it was unnecessary," said Arkik. "They've reassigned my men to farming."

"Makes sense, given that no one else is farming," said Croft. "But totally idiotic, from every other perspective."

"If everything's going so badly, why don't you do something about it?" said Catchbill.

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Take over," said Catchbill.

"All right," said Croft. "I know how your mind works. You've been laying odds on this for weeks, haven't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard about your little pool; you have a running pool going to determine the date when I take over, don't you?"

"Well, it's purely for entertainment purposes," said Catchbill.

"Well, you can relax, because I have no intention of taking back the reins," said Croft. "I have no interest in running this madhouse again."

Arkik cleared his throat. "Croft-"

"General, I'm not an administrator, or a farmer," said Croft. "I'm a spy, an infiltrator."

"But you agree with us that it's dangerous to leave the tube station unguarded," said Arkik.

"Sure," said Croft.

"Then why don't you at least talk with Goodmon about it?" said Arkik.

"Why don't you?" Croft countered.

"He doesn't exactly hold the military in high esteem," said Arkik.

"While he most certainly loves me," said Croft. He sighed, considering.

The afternoon work shift was scheduled to start any minute, and if there was one thing Croft really hated, it was farm duty. Going to talk to Goodmon might delay that for a few minutes. "All right, all right," he said, heading off to "Government House".

Workers were industriously working on a new addition to Government House when Croft arrived there. Croft walked through the doorway where he was immediately greeted at the entrance by Marzipan, Goodmon's executive secretary.

"Halt!" said Marzipan. He was flanked by two goons who looked coldly at Croft.

"Hey Pan-Man," said Croft, knowing Marzipan hated to be called that. "Is the G-man around?"

Marzipan looked infuriated. "Mayor Goodmon is available by appointment only."

"I'd like to make an appointment, then," said Croft.

Marzipan pretended to consult a non-existent piece of paper in front of him. "The Mayor's schedule is all booked up for the foreseeable future,"



he said, smiling sweetly.

"In that case, I'll see him now," said Croft, moving forward.

The two heavies moved to block his way.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" said Croft softly.

One of the guards reached out for him. Croft grabbed his arm and pulled the brute to the ground where he landed with a thud. As the second guard started to react, Croft introduced his foot to the guard's face. In a moment the second guard joined the first on the ground.

But the first was still conscious, and trying to decide whether or not to get up.

"If you get up, you're only going back down again," said Croft reasonably.

The guard, thinking about it, slumped back down on the ground.

"Smart move," said Croft.

"What is this?" said Goodmon, emerging from another room.

"This is 'Welcome to your afternoon', starring Clifford Croft," said

Croft. "Now, can we talk, or are you here to watch round two?"

Frowning, Goodmon motioned Croft into his office--an empty room with some homemade pillows on the ground.

"Really, Mr. Croft, you must learn to conform to the standards of a civil society," said Goodmon, sitting down on a bunch of homemade pillows that had been roughly arranged into a chair.

"I'm doing the best I can, Chief," said Croft. "But I didn't come to talk to you about my manners. I did come to talk with you about the guard at the tube station."

"What about it?"

"You've reassigned the guards posted there to farm duty."

"Yes," said Goodmon. "We need to boost agricultural output."

"At the extent of security?"

"We haven't had any trouble from that area."

"What about the scavengers from last week who broke into the food supplies?"

"There was no evidence showing where they came from."

"No evidence, except the fresh tracks leading to and from the tube station," said Croft.

"We do have a night guard here at Gateway, Mr. Croft," said Goodmon.

"Not good enough," said Croft. "We need the guards back at the tube exit."

"Are you telling me what to do, Mr. Croft?" said Goodmon.

"You're very astute," said Croft. Then another thought occurred to him. If he were going to push, why not go all the way? "And while we're at it, I'm relieving myself of farm duty."

"You are?" said Goodmon, eyebrows raised.

"I can do a lot more things than push a plow."

"What would you do, Mr. Croft?" said Goodmon.

"Gee, I don't know," said Croft. "Maybe you could appoint me head of your committee on spying."

"We don't have a committee on spying."

"Then your committee on pottery, or the committee on leaf counts," said Croft. "Bottom line is, I'm not doing any farming any more."

"What an absolutist attitude," said Goodmon. "Where would we be if everyone like you refused to farm?"

"You've granted exemptions to a third of the population, you should know,"

said Croft. "That's why the food supply is dropping."

"We have adequate supplies," said Goodmon tensely. "But we cannot permit slackers in the community. If you or any guard refuses to work in the farm area, you will not eat."

"You think so?" said Croft, leaning forward. "I helped topple the Slurian Union, and a half dozen other empires and tinpot dictators. Do you think you'd be any greater challenge?"

"I refuse to be cowed," said Goodmon, biting his lip.

"Good," said Croft. "Because I refuse to milk you." He got up and turned to go. "Always remember one thing: you're in charge because we're letting you be in charge. Do all the ridiculous things that you bureaucrats do.

But I draw the line at putting this community in danger. If you get in my way on issues of security, you're out of here."

Croft went immediately to the farmlands.

"You're late," said Tad Harshbarger, the "Secretary" of Agriculture.

"Benesh! Pomiter!" said Croft. A pair of workers dropped their farming implements and trotted over.

"Report to the tube station for watch duty. I'll set up a watch schedule and inform you of your place on it."

They nodded and left without saying a word. But not Harshbarger.

"You can't do that."

Croft raised an eyebrow. "Don't you really mean 'I couldn't have done that?'" He turned and left.

The news passed around quickly. When Croft showed up for dinner the others were waiting for a showdown.

"If they don't feed you, Croft, I'll let you watch me eat," Shakey Walbaum generously offered.

"Thanks, Shakey, but I don't think it will come to that," said Croft grimly, as the food line slowly moved forward.

When Croft got up to the serving position the server turned around to where Marzipan was standing. Marzipan gave a quick nod and Croft was served.

"That wasn't so difficult," Croft commented as he sat down with his portion on the ground.

The real surprise came that night when Mayor Goodmon came out with a surprise announcement. He was appointing Croft to head a new committee on village security. If people's faces could have been seen in the dim firelight, there would have been a lot of stunned expressions visible.

"No surprise, really," said Croft, sitting next to General Arkik. "What politicians cannot dominate, they lick up to. It's their nature."

Arkik grunted. "What will you do with your free time?"

"Sleep," said Croft.

"And after that?" said Arkik.

Croft considered. "Sleep some more."

Croft's promotion wasn't the only surprise that night. Lazy Sil posed a question about the power situation. "When will we get power restored?"

"We're working on it," said Goodmon.

"How are you working on it?" Sil asked.

"We, ah, have a theory," said Goodmon. "The power drain may not be a power drain like we thought."

"This looks interesting," Arkik whispered to Croft.

"What do you mean?" said Sil.

"Well, whatever the Insectoids used on us may have only been an advanced form of EMP pulse," said Goodman. "That is, it may have destroyed existing electronics, but not new ones."

Levi audibly snorted in the audience.

"In fact, I have Levi looking into that right now."

Levi looked stunned.

"Levi, can you test whether what we're dealing with is a one-time EMP pulse rather than a continual energy drain?"

Levi scratched his head. "Suppose I could create a new circuit."

"Now?" said Goodman.

Levi nodded. "Just need a few minutes. But already know results will find." He whistled, and Quick appeared out of nowhere. Levi quickly rattled off the names of several electrical components from the basement.

"Got that?"

Quick said, "Arf!" and headed off.

Several minutes later Quick ran back, dragging a small bag designed for him in one paw.

Levi took the bag from Quick, and thanked him with a quick pet on the head.

"Can you do it?" Goodman asked.

Levi looked at the components in the dim firelight. He turned to Quick.

"You brought X-4 component, not X-5 component."

Croft wasn't very surprised; maybe Levi expecting too much, even from his

supersmart dog. How could a dog understand electrical components anyway?

"Arf!" said Quick.

Levi looked at the component again in the dim light. "Oh, I sorry, my mistake, was right one."

Quick ruffed. Several dozen people gave Quick an odd stare.

Levi hummed to himself for several minutes while Goodmon kept the discussion going. Finally, he looked up at Goodmon and caught his eye.

"Ready?" said Goodmon. "What do we have here?"

"Solar battery," said Levi.

"Solar battery?"

"With level monitor," said Levi, pointing to a dial. "Should register, even with firelight."

He held the device towards the fire. Goodmon, looking over his shoulder yelled out, "The needle moved!"

There was a loud murmur in the audience. Even Croft took notice.

"So it was an EMP pulse," said Goodmon.

"Wrong," said Levi, bursting his bubble. "These components of device that existed when mist hit. If EMP, would not work at all."

"So what does it mean?" said Goodmon.

"Device shows registration of energy, however minutely. Since device work, not problem of EMP, problem of energy drain," said Levi. "Energy drain almost immediate, but small amount stays long enough to be measured."

"Oh," said Goodmon. "Well, that's still an important scientific discovery!" Obviously he was unaware that Levi had discovered this over a year ago on his own. "I trust your future research will be just as fruitful!"

"But I-"

"I'm putting you in charge of scientific development," said Goodmon.

"But-"

"We'll expect regular reports on your progress."

"No-"

"No question about it, you're the man for the job," said Goodmon. "How about it, crowd? Let's have a hand for Levi!"

The audience started clapping, and Goodmon took this opportunity to put an arm around Levi.

"He's trying to co-op Levi too," Croft noted. "I wonder if he would make a campaign appearance with the bug Queen if she proved to be popular too."

Goodmon seemed to take a hands-off attitude towards Croft and Levi from that point on, with the exception of one incident, several days later.

Croft first heard of it when he saw Levi arguing with Goodmon and Marzipan outside the entrance to Levi's basement lab.

"No!" said Levi.

"Arf!" said Quick, for emphasis.

"But Levi, we need your space for government functions," said Goodmon.

"Have your parties somewhere else," Levi snorted.

A flash of anger passed through Goodmon's face, and then faded. "Levi, your basement is the only space shielded from the elements."

"Which is why you want it," said Croft easily.

Goodmon turned to Croft. "As the size of our government expands we need more space for administrative purposes."

"You forget, the lab is filled with Levi's scientific equipment," said

Croft. "What's Levi supposed to do, dump it all in the Kinneret?"

"Why, no," said Goodmon. "I suppose we could dig a pit, for temporary storage, of course-"

"Of course," said Croft. "Say, I just had a thought. Didn't you tell us a few nights ago that Levi was supposed to be working on a way to restore power?"

"Well, yes-"

"But how is he supposed to do that without his equipment?" said Croft.

"Well-"

"In fact, isn't Levi a member of your government? Isn't he a chairman of your scientific committee?"

"That's true-"

"Then the basement is already being used for government purposes," said Croft.

"But-"

"I'd hate to think what would happen the next time someone asked about the progress of the scientific division, and Levi was forced to report that you made him throw all his equipment into a pit." Croft stopped speaking, only looking meaningfully at Goodmon.

Goodmon took a breath. "Perhaps you have a point." He put an arm around Levi's shoulder. "All right, Levi, keep up the work." He slowly walked away with Marzipan.

"Hates it when he touches me," Levi muttered.

"Don't take it personally," said Croft. "It's just the politician's touch."



Trouble first arrived a few weeks later, in the form of some unwelcome visitors from the tube station. A steady stream of stragglers had arrived from Concord over the past few months, and Goodmon, in a rare burst of sanity, had continued with Croft's policy of giving them temporary shelter while sending them on their way.

But the latest newcomers were clearly something different, a team of bandits. When they emerged from the tube station, the guards on duty, Corporal Dayton and Private Lance, didn't like the look of the scruffy arrivals, and noticed that unlike previous arrivals these were armed with sturdy clubs. Dayton ordered them to go on their way. That's when they attacked.

Dayton and Lance were armed with spears, but they were outnumbered more than two to one. Things might have gone poorly if the call for reinforcements hadn't gone up. Quick, several hundred feet from the lookout point near the tube station, headed back to Gateway at a run. His presence there was no accident; when he had been relieved of his farming duties, Croft had persuaded Levi to have Quick perform regular patrols, especially around the tube exit, to use his eyes and foxy ears to be on the lookout for trouble.

"Arf, arf arf!" said Quick, running up to Levi, who was standing on line for lunch.

"What?" said Levi

"Roah! Arf!" said Quick.

"What is it?" said Croft.

"Intruders," said Levi. He paused. "At least, I think so. Either that, or fleas."

Croft locked eyes with several troopers, and they started off on the run.

When they got there Lance was already down and Dayton, bleeding from the hip, was encircled by four nasty bandits. A fifth lay on the ground, unmoving.

"Hey guys," yelled Croft.

The bandits turned.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size?" said Croft. He pointed to the giant Sergeant Benesh, who was standing to his right.

Two of the bandits turned and charged Croft and his men, while the other two turned back to Dayton.

Things might have gone poorly for Dayton, if he hadn't gotten some immediate help from an unexpected quarter.

While parrying the thrust from one attacker, Dayton turned to see another attacker raise his club, about to swing... and then drop his club and scream at the top of his lungs.

Looking down, Dayton saw Quick's mouth clamped down on the bandit's ankle.

The distraction was enough time for two of Croft's men to reach the scene, and they quickly overpowered both of Dayton's attackers.

"What do we have here?" said Mayor Goodman, eyeing the scruffy and now bloodied attackers.

"Bandits," said Croft, who had appointed himself in charge of the guard that had brought them there. "Good thing we kept a watch on the tube exit,

or else they would have been right on us."

Goodmon ignored Croft's sarcasm. He turned to the bandit who seemed least battered.

"You... who are you?"

"I am Captain Norbo, of the Army of August," said the bandit.

"Army of August?" said Goodmon.

"Yes," said the bandit. "I'm a representative of the government on Concord."

"Government?" said Goodmon. "I was under the impression that the situation on Concord was a bit, ah, fluid."

"We have restored law and order to Concord," said Norbo. "We came here to do the same."

"Tell that to Private Lance," said Croft. "He has a concussion and two broken ribs. Is that an example of your law and order?"

"He rejected our authority."

"How, ah, widespread is your government?" Goodmon asked.

"We rule the entire continent of Concord," said Norbo.

"Are you going to believe that?" said Croft.

"Obviously he's the representative of some kind of organized regime," said Goodmon. "I recognize the language of statescraft when I hear it."

"You would," Croft muttered under his breath.

"What is it you exactly want?" said Goodmon.

Norbo licked his lips, and looked calculatingly at Goodmon. "To establish peaceful relations. I am an ambassador of goodwill."

"And do you use your clubs to spread your goodwill?" Croft asked.

"Croft!" said Goodmon. He turned to Norbo. "I think we've had a misunderstanding here which has led to unnecessary conflict. Will you carry a message back to your government from me?"

"A message?"

"We have a civilization here, in Gateway Village, and we want peaceful relations with our brothers on Concord."

"Oh, I'll carry your message," said Norbo, failing to resist a grin.

"Good," said Goodmon. "One of my aides will direct you to a place where you can wash up and eat before you go." Norbo and his men were led out.

"Are you absolutely crazy?" said Croft.

Goodmon simply raised his eyebrows.

"You know what he's going to do," said Croft.

"No, but since you seem so certain, Mr. Croft, why don't you tell me," said Goodmon.

"He's going to go back to his gang and tell them that there's good plundering to be had here," said Croft. "And next time we won't have five guys with clubs to deal with. Maybe we'll have 50, or 100."

Goodmon shook his head. "You know, Mr. Croft, it never ceases to amaze me how you can assume the worst in people."

"Well, what do you assume?"

"I don't assume anything," said Goodmon. "But I think we should try to set off on the right foot before resorting to violence."

"Violence? What do you think they're going to do once they've learned of our existence?"

"What can they do?" said Goodmon. "There's over 50 miles of sea protecting us from hostile forces."

"And then, of course, there's the underground tube."

Goodmon snorted. "Mr. Croft, do you really think a large invading force is going to take the trouble to walk 50 miles in the cold, dark underwater tube just to get at our small community?"

"Yes," said Croft.

"I think you overestimate the risk," said Goodmon. He reached out to put an arm around Croft's shoulder.

"No touching, please," said Croft, pulling back. "You're making a big mistake."

Goodmon sighed. "What alternative is there? We can't simply kill them."

"They were well on their way to doing that to Lance and Dayton when we arrived," said Croft. "You have several choices: kill them, chain them together and make them farm, lock them up-"

"What humanist suggestions, Mr. Croft. Precipitated murder, slavery, or unjust confinement," said Goodmon.

"You're making a mistake," said Croft. He turned to go.

He spent an hour rounding out the senior officers and discussing alternatives. But by the time they had decided and gone looking for the prisoners, they were too late.

Norbo, fearing that Croft might have been able to change Goodmon's mind, had left with his fellow "ambassadors" the first chance he could. They had nearly an hour's head start, and were nowhere to be seen.

"This is only going to mean trouble," Croft declared, when no sign of the bandits could be found anywhere.

## Chapter 5: The Daring Raid On Concord

Croft and Arkik started an intensive training program for every guardsmen and former resistance fighter in Gateway. Every available military and resistance fighter was pulled off several of their farming shifts to prepare, and Croft made sure that all of them at least had spears. Goodmon was peeved, of course, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"How long before we can expect another attack?" Arkik asked.

"Say 4-5 days to get back, a day or two to prepare, and 4-5 more days to get back here," said Croft. "Just under two weeks before we can first expect an attack."

"We should have pursued them," said Arkik.

"In the tube? In the dark? That's a nasty place to fight, even if we could catch up to them," said Croft. "Besides even if we clobbered these guys, we would have been discovered sooner or later."

"You're doing a fine job of rationalizing," said Arkik. "I think you're just tired of farming and want to shake things up."

"That too," said Croft. He saw Mongo walking by, and snapped his fingers to get his attention. "Mongo!"

"You wants to know when attack come," said Mongo.

"Yes."

"Mongo foresee your request," said Mongo.

"And?"

"Mongo not know," said Mongo, almost smugly.

"Thanks," said Croft dryly. "Can you also foresee the next time I get angry with you and kick you in the behind?"

"Uhhhh..." said Mongo, squealing as he ran away.

"That wasn't very productive," Arkik remarked.

"If there was anything imminent coming, he would tell us," said Croft.

Arkik looked thoughtful. "How many lines of troops can walk in the tunnel at a time?"

"Maybe four or five," said Croft.

"And how many can come out of the tunnel at a time?"

"One," said Croft. "You know that. There's only one ladder."

"Then that's where we create the chokepoint," said Arkik.

"We stab anyone who comes out of the tube?" Croft asked.

"That could work," said Arkik.

"What if it's not a bandit, like many who have come out of the tube."

"We'll have to assume that as of now they'll take control of the other end," said Arkik.

Croft considered for a moment. "That's a reasonable assumption."

It was actually 15 days before trouble started. It was just after nightfall, but Croft had thoughtfully ordered a bonfire to be maintained just outside the tube exit.

A head popped up out of the hole in the ground. Then a figure pulled itself out. Then another, and another.

Croft heard the sound of a birdcall. He made one back.

A dozen troopers rushed up, armed with spears. A fight started by the tube exit. But this time Croft's people had the advantage of numbers, and they quickly prevented more people from climbing up the ladder and out of the

hole. After a brief but bloody battle the advance guard was overpowered. Bandits attempted to climb out of the ladder but after one got kicked in the face they stopped their ascent. Two of Croft's men kept their spears pointed down the dark opening while the others guarded the captured bandits.

"It would appear we've been successful," said Croft.

"Successful against the first attack," said Arkik.

"How are they going to get up that ladder?" Croft asked.

"I don't know," said Arkik. "But I don't think they've come 50 miles just to give up so easily."

Arkik was right. It was actually less than an hour before the second attack began. The first they heard of it was a scream from one of their soldiers in the dark.

Croft looked down at the troops standing at the bonfire by the tube exit.

They looked startled, but there were no signs of enemies there.

Then they heard another scream in the dark, away from the tube exit.

"What's going on?" said someone.

"They're coming from over there," said Croft, pointing to the darkness behind them.

"How?"

"We'll have to figure that out later," said Croft.

Bandits came rushing out of the darkness. They were easy to identify now, as they carried torches. Croft's men rushed up to engage them.

It was a quick, pitched battle. Someone stabbed out at Croft in the darkness. He felt rather than saw the blade as it skimmed against his side, and he instinctively reached out and stabbed with his spear. He felt



some resistance and heard a scream.

"Reform!" Croft heard Arkik say. Croft scrambled down into the clearing where the bonfire made it easier to see. Their attackers formed up on the other side of the clearing. There were a lot of them. They charged.

Croft's men might have been overpowered, but fortunately he and Arkik had a secret weapon in reserve: archers.

"Archers!" Arkik cried.

There was a twanging of bows, and several of the bandits screamed as shafts suddenly protruded from their chests or arms.

The battle was over several bloody minutes later. The bandits, not expecting such fierce resistance, fled into the darkness.

"How?" said Pomiter, stumbling out of the darkness with a bloody cut on his forehead. "We had the exit covered."

"Look," said Croft, turning one of the bandit bodies over with his foot.

It was wet. They all were.

They figured it out the following morning when they took a reinforced patrol to the beach at first light. There they could clearly see the tracks in the sand.

"There must be some kind of inspection hatch, somewhere near the exit, in the tube itself," said Croft. "They walk all the way here, get out of the hatch, and swim the last few dozen feet."

"That means we can't suppress them at any particular choke point," said General Arkik.

"That means we have to destroy the tunnel," said Croft grimly.

"No," said Goodmon. "That's our only link to civilization."

"So how do we do it?" said Croft. "Explosives?"

"Have no," said Levi.

"You cannot destroy it!" said Goodmon.

"Of course," said Croft. "The inspection hatch. We'll simply leave that open."

"How do they normally open it without flooding the tube?" Arkik asked.

"They must use an airlock system," said Croft. "All we have to do is jam it."

"No," said Goodmon.

"Good, let's go," said Croft, heading for the exit.

"Haven't you heard a word I've said?" said Goodmon.

"No, that's our only link to civilization, you cannot destroy it," said Croft in an exaggerated monotone. "Oh, and I think you said No once more after that." His expression hardened. "That's a link to chaos, anarchy, and violence, not civilization," he said. Croft turned to Arkik and Levi.

"Let's go."

They took 20 of their best guardsmen with them for protection. There was no way of knowing if any of the bandits were still in the tube. They went down the ladder one by one, cautiously, with burly guardsmen leading the way.

But the bandits were long gone.

"So where is this inspection hatch?"

"Keep looking along walls," said Levi. They walked slowly, the shadows of the torchlight bouncing off the tunnels, the only sound the drip drip of

water. The dripping sound grew stronger as they walked.

"There!" said Levi, pointing to the wall. He pointed to a hatch.

Croft said, "Do you think it's safe to-" but stopped in midsentence as

Levi hopped up and accessed the hatch. He disappeared from view as he slid it open and crawled in.

They waited a moment, and then two.

"Levi?" said Croft.

There was no response.

"Levi!"

They heard him wiggling out. He plopped out of the hatch and landed on his feet.

"Here," said Levi.

"Well?" said Croft.

"Not work," said Levi. "Sealock with mechanical safeguards. Cannot have inner door and outer door open at same time."

"Can we jam one of the doors open and then open the other one?"

Levi shook his head. "Mechanical control; both doors tied to each other by gears. Will not work."

"Well, then, what's the alternative?" Croft asked.

Levi was silent for a moment. They all stood in semi darkness listening to the drip, drip of water. Then Levi said, "Explosive."

"I thought we didn't have any explosive," said Croft.

"I make," said Levi. "Use fertilizer, few other things."

"Will explosives work with this power draining mist?"

Levi shrugged. "In theory. Have to try to see."

"How long will it take?" Croft asked.

"If all goes well?" Levi shrugged. "A day, maybe two."

It would take double that time for reinforcements to come through the tube. That would work.

They returned to Aridor.

Three days later...

"Levi, I thought you said it would be ready in two days!" said Croft.

"I thought so too," said Levi. "Formula eluding me."

"The formula?"

"Know formula," said Levi. "Question of finding natural elements that can substitute."

"Oh," said Croft. "So when will you be ready?"

"When ready," said Levi.

"That helps," said Croft.

He walked the uncomfortably short walk to the seashore. The lodge, as well as the quarry and their settlement area, was built only a few hundred feet inland from the shore. That made them vulnerable.

Groups of guardsmen were patrolling the shore. Even Quick pitched in, stopping to sniff the air periodically, as if he could smell the intruders even if they were underwater.

Croft walked over to the officer in charge.

"How's it going?" Croft asked Major Rambus.

"We're patrolling several hundred feet north and south of the estimated position of the tube," said Rambus. "But we're spread pretty thinly."

"Do the best you can," said Croft.

Arkik walked over to him. "How's Levi doing?"

"I just asked him that," said Croft.

"And?"

"When I know, I'll let you know," said Croft.

Levi was actually ready two days later. He had the fertilizer "bomb" encased in a small box.

"Nice," said Croft. "But how do you detonate it?" Standard electrical signals surely wouldn't work.

Levi pointed to a string sticking out of the box. "Got a light?"

"How quaint," said Croft.

Levi said they should detonate the explosives against the outer door of the airlock. He said that the supporting wall of the tunnel would be thinnest there.

As Croft walked with Levi and a support squad, Croft couldn't help but shiver. "I won't miss this dark, gloomy place."

"Same here," said Lieutenant Pomiter.

They reached the airlock, but as they stopped, the sounds of footsteps didn't stop with them. They saw the dim light of torches in the distance.

"Levi, set the explosives, quickly," Croft snapped. "Guardsmen! Take up position."

The guardsmen quickly formed up in two lines, each thrusting their spear forward. Levi climbed up and crawled into the airlock..

"Levi, hurry," Croft muttered. He heard a shout, and then he saw figures running towards them in the distance. They had been spotted.

"Levi!" said Croft more urgently.

"Need torch to light fuse," said Levi.

Time seemed to move in slow motion. Croft was moving to the hatch on the wall to hand Levi a torch, just as bandits rushed forward to attack the front lines. He ignored the sounds of combat and trusted the guardsmen to do their job and turned his back on the attackers to hand Levi the torch, fully aware that one thrown spear could impale him. . . .

Time speeded again as Croft turned, seeing the pitched battle before him.

Seconds later Levi plopped out of the inspection hatch. There seemed to be an endless stream of attackers in front of them. But fortunately the width of the tunnel only permitted five of them to attack at any one time.

Croft's men defended bravely, knowing they had to buy time.

But now their job was almost done. "Pull back, pull back!" said Croft. The line of troops, still engaged in battle, slowly started to pull back.

"Levi, how much time do we have?"

Levi shrugged. "Maybe a minute, maybe-"

At that moment there was a flash, and a powerful explosion sent them to the ground.

The combatants were stunned on both sides for a moment, and then they all struggled to get up. The two armed camps faced each other for a moment, one wondering what had happened, the other wondering what hadn't.

Croft turned and opened his mouth as if to say something to Levi, but at that moment there was a loud creaking sound, like a twisting of metal, and then a roar as a forceful wave of water blast out of the inspection hatch, pouring down on the ground between the combatants.

Soldiers on both sides slipped and fell to the ground again.

"Back to the ladder!" Croft yelled as he got to his feet and started to slog in increasingly deep water. The water was cold, as one might've expected, but that didn't make it any more pleasant.

Most of the bandits were trapped behind the water surge but those in front, realizing that the ladder was the only way out, were following them. All thoughts of battle faded as everyone started for the ladder at a run, or as much of a run as one could muster with the water level being knee deep. Croft wondered if they would get to the ladder before the tunnel filled up. It had seemed like such a short distance away when they had walked it just a few minutes ago.

The water was at their chests by the time the first soldiers reached the exit. Croft was the fourth to get there and forced himself to summon his energy reserves as he climbed the ladder. Once he made it to the top he lay exhausted on the ground, feeling the warmth of the sun, like the other survivors did.

Bandits and soldiers lay like that for several minutes, though Croft, not totally naïve, kept his weapon near and never closed his eyes. Finally, when he felt the strength to sit up, he went over to the ladder.

The water was at the top of the ladder now. Obviously this end, so close to the inspection hatch, would fill up much more quickly than the other 99% of the tunnel, but the tunnel would be effectively unusable now.

One of the bandits got up and started to get a shifty look in his eyes, as he made eye contact with the other bandits.

Suddenly Croft heard an "arf arf!" and saw Quick and Lieutenant Pomiter, leading a fresh squad of guardsmen in the clearing. "Take them away," said

Croft, as the troops detained the bandits.

"Yes sir," said Pomiter, thinking Croft was speaking to him.

"Arf!" Quick said, also thinking the same thing.

"Well, that settles that," said Mayor Goodman, looking satisfied with himself. "You've all done a fine job. I think someone's in line for a medal!" He started to think who it would be most politically expedient to award it to.

"Hold it, Mr. Mayor," said Croft. "Before we start the awards ceremony, I should warn you that we're not out of the woods yet."

"But... the tunnel is destroyed. We're safe," said Goodman.

"We've filled the tunnel with water, but that isn't the only way to get here," said Croft.

"But... if not under the water, how can they cross?" Goodman asked.

"How about... ON the water?" said Croft.

"How?"

"Ever heard of a boat?" said Croft.

"Of course," said Goodman. "But there's no power."

"Ever hear of oars? Or sails?"

Goodman looked at Croft as if he were mad. "You must be joking! Why, it must be more than 50 miles to Concord from here."

"Historically, trips have been made hundreds or even thousands of miles on sailing ships," said Croft. "50 miles is not that big of a deal. Just think--if the wind is at their back, and they can do five, or say ten miles an hour, how long would it take a ship to get from there to here?"

Goodman stared dumbly at Croft.



"Five hours, correct," said Croft. "So that's why we have to maintain a guard along the shoreline. General?"

General Arkik stepped forward and unrolled a crude map. He indicated positions along the shoreline.

"Is this really necessary?" said Goodmon. He peered more closely at the map. "And what are these dots further inland?"

"Other guard positions," said Arkik.

"If you're thinking of posting guards along the shore, why do you need them inland as well."

Arkik bit his lip and tried mightily to prevent himself from saying something acerbic.

"We barely have enough coverage to patrol a mile up and down the seashore here," said Croft. "But we don't have enough coverage to patrol over a thousand miles of seashore here along the west coast."

"But this is the closest crossing point," said Goodmon. "Why would they land anywhere else?"

"To get the element of surprise?" Croft hypothesized. "That's why we also want a ring of guards around the settlement in every direction. They won't be enough for large scale combat, but they'll be sufficient to warn us of approaching enemies."

"Where are we going to get the manpower for your grandiose war plan?" said Goodmon. "Most of your guardsmen work on the farm."

"That's why we're here," said Croft. "We need you to reassign people to farm work."

"Who? From where?"

"How about your 'government employees'?" said Croft.

"You mean our legislature? Our executive branches?" said Goodmon.

"Impossible! We're barely staffed enough to do our jobs as it is!"

"Your 'jobs' seem to primarily consist of issuing reports at the nightly fireside chats," said Croft. "In case you're confused, this isn't a request. Come on, let's go, General." He turned to leave.

"But... but... how will I explain it to the others?" Goodmon asked.

Croft turned for a moment and got a thoughtful expression on his face.

"You can just tell them that it's a political reform."

It wasn't more than a month later that they encountered their first infiltrators. The bandits on the other side first sent a team in a small boat to scout the area out. They were caught, of course.

Mayor Goodmon eyed the sullen captives. "I can't believe that these people would devote the resources to come over the sea to attack us."

"They just did," said Croft.

"Why would they want to make the supreme effort to come here?" Goodmon asked. "Isn't it easier to prey on those on Concord?"

"Remember the food shortage? Those on Concord probably have even less than we do," said Croft.

"Is that why you're here? To raid us?" Goodmon asked the prisoners.

"What do you expect them to say, that they're tourists?" said Croft. He turned to the guard. "Take them away."

As they filed out Goodmon said, in a low voice, "I really wish you wouldn't countermand my orders in public."

"Sorry," said Croft. "Perhaps we should hold our meetings in a more private venue."

The first set of infiltrators were followed, at irregular intervals, by others, small bands of roaming bandits over the course of the next several months. They caught some of the bandits, at irregular intervals, but Croft was fairly certain they weren't catching them all. What were the others doing? A few had made isolated attacks; but most seemed content to spy. What kind of information were they gathering, and why?

"There's only one way to find out," said Croft, meeting with his usual allies.

"A trip to August," said General Arkik. "Who do you propose should go?"

"I think we should send our best infiltrator," said Croft.

"If you weren't one of the Agency Eight I'd say you were boasting," said Arkik. "Who do you want to take with you? Benesh? Pomiter? Rallyt?"

"Smiley," mumbled a voice in the background.

Though it was spoken softly, Croft quickly turned to find Mongo camped in a dark corner. "What was that?"

"Nothing," said Mongo grumpily.

"I thought you said to take Smiley," said Croft. "Is there any reason why I should take him? This is spying mission; what use would Smiley be?"

"Smiley no use on spy mission," said Mongo.

"So?" said Croft. His expression hardened.

Mongo saw that he wasn't going to let it go with that. "Smiley only useful if the Croft does something foolish, as he frequently does."

"What kind of 'something foolish'?" Croft asked.

Mongo shrugged his boney arms. "Mongo not know."

"Come on, spit it out," Arkik snapped.

"His talent doesn't work like that," Croft sighed. "I only wish that it did."

"Croft understands," said Mongo. "Very first show of sympathy, however slight."

"But because Mongo can't be more specific, he's going to have to come with us," said Croft.

Mongo looked horrified.

"What?" said Arkik. "He's no good for this kind work."

"He's precisely what I need for this kind of work," said Croft. "Mongo has done this before--predict danger in general without specifics. But that's not enough. He needs to be with us, closer to the time and place of the event, to tell us what will happen."

"No!" said Mongo, shivering. "Nice Croft! Don't make poor Mongo go, no!"

"Pack your bags," said Croft. "Now, does anyone know where I can find Smiley?"

Smiley had no objection to going with Croft.

"It could be dangerous, Smiley," said Croft.

Smiley smiled.

"But then, I've seen you hit at point blank range with a blaster and not get a scratch, so your personal safety probably doesn't concern you, does it?"

Smiley shook his head, still smiling.

"You, ah, don't want to tell me how you do that little trick, do you?"

Smiley smiled.

"I hope Mongo didn't only pick you for your conversational skills," Croft groaned.

They took one of the small boats they had captured from the infiltrators.

The infiltrators, those they had taken alive, no longer needed them. They had all been put to work on the farm. Those that failed to show sufficient enthusiasm were encouraged by Arkik's men. They slept at night under guard in a makeshift stockade. Croft was a little uneasy at the thought of having enemies in the camp, but letting them go, and giving them an opportunity to report back to their bosses on Concord, wasn't really an option.

They loaded the boat with enough provisions for a week. That should be more than enough, Croft thought, especially since Smiley didn't seem to need to eat. Oh, he could eat, but he never complained if he didn't. Nor did he appear to lose weight. Another mystery.

The boat had a small sail, which Croft manned; he left the makeshift oars to Smiley. Mongo climbed into the forward section where he immediately curled up into a ball and closed his eyes.

Croft had allocated the work fairly. He knew that Smiley wouldn't object to rowing the boat all the way to Concord, all 50 miles across; so Croft lay back, pulling the small sail with a string. General Arkik and some of the other soldiers were there to give him a small sendoff.

"Be careful, Croft," said Arkik. "Don't take any unnecessary risks."

A small wind blew, and the boat started to float away from the beach.

"Right," said Croft. "I'll only take the necessary ones. Row, Smiley."

The shoreline started to recede, and in a few minutes the figures on the shoreline were distant dots.

"I hope they can cope without us," Croft commented.

Smiley said nothing.

In a few hours the shoreline was out of sight. Croft, surrounded by sea in every direction, felt a bit of claustrophobia, despite the fact that there was open air in every direction. What use was open space if there was no place he could go? His only freedom of movement was a foot to his left, a foot to his right, a foot forward towards Mongo, or several feet backwards, towards Smiley. The slight rocking of the boat unnerved him. He tried to ignore it.

Smiley unnerved him. It wasn't as if he feared Smiley, but he wondered about him. Smiley obviously wasn't fully human, if he was human at all. He didn't seem to need to eat or sleep, and seemed invulnerable to attack.

But what was oddest about him was his attitude; he always had that dopey smile on his face, as if everything amused him. What was the story with Smiley?

After several hours of traveling the clouds started to darken, and Croft found himself looking at Smiley.

Smiley smiled.

"Getting tired?"

Smiley shook his head.

"I'm guessing we must be more than halfway there." Steering had been relatively easy--all they needed to do was to go straight west, towards

where the sun was travelling.

Smiley smiled.

"So what's the story with you, Smiley?"

"The story?" said Smiley, giving a puzzled smile.

"You," said Croft. "You don't seem to need to eat."

"No."

"Or sleep."

"Also no."

"And you seem invulnerable to weaponfire."

Smiley grinned.

"So what's it all about?" Croft asked.

"All about?" Smiley smiled.

"You don't seem quite human," said Croft. "What are you?"

"I'm Smiley," Smiley said.

"That's just what we call you," said Croft. "What's your real name?"

The clouds continued to darken. Smiley didn't answer.

"Where are you from?"

Smiley didn't answer.

"Can you tell me something of your past?" Croft asked.

There was a cracking sound, one that Croft couldn't identify. He looked at

Smiley, and for the first time, saw that he was no longer smiling.

"I don't talk about that," said Smiley.

And then he was smiling again like nothing had happened, and the sun even

came out, dimly casting its rays through the dense energy mist in the

atmosphere.

They reached the shoreline by nightfall, which suited Croft fine. By landing at night they were less likely to be seen. They stashed the boat in a small alcove between two buildings. Mongo yawned and opened his eyes.

"Got here," he said. "Now we can go home?"

Croft looked around in the dim light. "I think we've done well," he whispered. "I think I recognize this area. We're no more than two or three miles north of Sarney."

"Is that where we're going?" Smiley asked.

Truthfully, Croft didn't know where they were going. His general idea was to locate the bandit base and do a little spying.

They walked along the metal seawall, heading south. Dilapidated buildings jutted out along the sea.

They walked in silence for nearly an hour. Finally Smiley said, "How will you know when you've found what you're looking for?"

Croft, looking ahead, merely pointed.

Straight ahead was a swarm of activity around a series of docks. There were a number of smaller boats but what caught Croft's attention was one, large boat that was obviously in the final stages of construction. It consisted of large pieces of metal that was laboriously banged into shape by a team of blacksmiths, with a group of large sails ringing the middle.

There were also spaces for oars on the side.

Croft, Smiley, and Mongo walked by a bandit who was walking towards them.

The bandit barely looked at them as they passed by. Croft would've been surprised if had; he and Smiley were wearing clothes appropriated from some of the infiltrators. The only thing that might give them away was



Smiley's moronic smile, or perhaps Mongo's hunchback posture.

They got closer to the boat. It looked ramshackle, but Croft, measuring the space with his eyes, figured it could easily fit 70 or 80 people. This wasn't a two or three person rowboat. In a few trips it could carry several hundred people across.

"You know what this means," Croft whispered.

Smiley smiled.

"That's right, invasion," said Croft. He paused. "What do we do?"

He looked at Smiley. Smiley said nothing.

"Don't worry, I wasn't asking you," said Croft. He considered. The boat was too large to sink, even if he had explosives. Croft had one small crude chemical grenade that Levi had prepared for him, but it wasn't powerful enough to destroy this ship. Well, if he couldn't destroy it, what did that leave?

He looked at Mongo. Mongo shook his head.

If he couldn't destroy the ship, maybe he could steal it.

Mongo hissed.

It had undoubtedly taken them months to build that ship. If he could steal the ship, it would take them months to build another one.

It was a nice plan. Except for the fact that even if he could operate the thing on his own (unlikely), it was even more unlikely that several dozen bandits would simply watch him and wave goodbye as he took it.

"What if we steal it?" Croft asked, whispering to Mongo.

Mongo shook his head. "Danger here. Must leave!"

"What kind of danger?"

But Mongo shook his head, and said nothing.

What alternative was there? He could return to Aridor and get more help.

They had a few boats now, maybe enough to bring a dozen guardsmen. Could a dozen guardsmen pull it off? More possible, but still less likely.

And besides, it looked like the ship could launch at any time. It would take Croft a minimum of two days to return to Aridor, gather a strike force, and return here. The bandits might use the ship to launch their attack during that time.

The key element, then, was to try to find out when the attack was planned for. Perhaps if he snooped around more closely....

Croft and Smiley, trailed by Mongo at a short distance, walked inland into the heart of the bandit camp. There were several hundred bandits here, a group so large that the addition of three more didn't raise any eyebrows.

No one paid them the slightest attention as they joined a line for food....

As they sat down for dinner by a large campfire, Croft was forced to admit that this situation bore some uncanny similarities to life at Gateway. Of course, the people he sat with there weren't cutthroats and bandits. And the evening entertainment was different too.

There was a stage that was illuminated by a ring of fires. A familiar figure, flanked by bodyguards, stepped out on stage, to a roar of shouts and yells.

Croft stood up. He recognized that person.

It was Wild Tony.

Or maybe he should be called Fat Tony. Croft noted that during this time of scarcity Tony, incredibly, now sported a large belly. He, evidently, had been eating quite well.

"Aren't we enjoying ourselves!" Wild Tony roared.

The bandits in the audience roared in response.

"Dinner was especially good tonight," Tony said. "Let's give everyone a warm thanks to the settlement north of here that donated their food for us!" That got a strong laugh.

"We also have a lot more to celebrate. Our ship is almost ready. We are almost ready to take the battle to the Easterners!" He roared, and his belly flopped. "The Easterners won't be able to resist us, especially with the help of our new ally!"

And then a group of men emerged from the other end of the stage, another leader flanked by bodyguards, and when this new leader got close to the firelight, Mongo couldn't help but gasp.

He had a blue beard.

Blue Beard.

\*\*\*\*\*

20 years earlier, during the Insectoid occupation, Mongo had been enslaved by a group of opportunistic bandits who had nearly worked him to death.

One of the cruelest guards had been a giant called Blue Beard.

Mongo remembered the giant almost suffocating him with a mighty boot on his throat. He remembered all the kicks, punches and attacks when he didn't move quickly enough to obey. And above all he remembered the taste of the electrowhip.

And there, standing before him now, was his old tormentor, now the head of a large gang of bandits.

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Mongo squealed. One of the bandits turned to look his way. Croft smacked Mongo on the head. "Don't be a weakling," he snarled.

The bandit laughed and looked away.

Croft moved closer to Mongo. "What is it?"

"You hit Mongo."

"I know, was it as good for you as it was for me?" Croft asked. His arm clamped down on Mongo's wrist. "Now talk."

"Blue Beard," said Mongo. "He tortured poor Mongo. Was slave, with-"

"With me," said Smiley. "Yes, I recognize him too. Do you think we should go over and say hello?"

"This is looking worse and worse all the time," Croft whispered. "An alliance between two gangs and a large ship spells trouble for us. We have to do something."

"If you say so," said Smiley moronically.

"We have to steal the-"

Croft was cut off in midsentence by someone hitting a loud gong.

Four prisoners with their hands tied behind their backs were pushed onto the stage.

"The evening entertainment," Croft whispered. "Why do I get the feeling this is going to be worse than one of Goodmon's speeches?"

It was even more worse than Croft feared. As the prisoners were pushed into the light, he had to restrain himself from shouting out.

"No..." he whispered.

For he clearly recognized one of the prisoners.

Preston.

Agency operative Jeffrey B. Preston! He had been one of Croft's closest associates in the Agency, back when the Agency still existed. They had worked together for literally hundreds of years. Croft thought Preston had been killed years ago by the Insectoids during the occupation. They had gotten separated during an Insectoid ambush and Croft had heard that Preston had been shot.

Was that really him? Croft squinted in the poor light. The face was a little older, wearier, and dust encrusted, but it certainly looked like Preston.

"We'll have the entertainment ready for you in just a few moments," said Wild Tony. "Some of the men have to finish sharpening up their spears!"

That was received by wild laughter.

Croft knew that he couldn't just sit there and watch his friend die. He turned to Mongo. "Can I rescue him?"

Mongo shook his head. "Certain death for both of you."

Croft, uncharacteristically emotional, grabbed Mongo by the collar of his shirt. "There must be a possibility."

Mongo gave an almost silent squeak as Croft went eyeball to eyeball with him. But then his gaze turned, ever so briefly to the right.

Croft turned as well, to see Smiley smiling idiotically at him.

"Smiley?" Croft whispered. "That's why you had me bring Smiley?"

"Knew you always do foolish, dangerous things, yes," said Mongo.

"So if I use Smiley..."

"Possible survival," said Mongo. "And no, Mongo not know odds. But if must rescue Preston, no other way. Mongo go now." He started to get up.

"Where are you going?" Croft whispered.

"To wait for you at big boat," Mongo whispered back.

"How did you know... wait, for you, this has already happened, right?" said Croft.

Mongo yawned. "Present is boring. Already happened in several ways.

Curious to see which way will become reality, but really more focused on several days from now, on the not-happened-yet." He got up and left.

Croft turned to Smiley. "Smiley, I need your help. But it may entail some personal risk. Even you might not get out of this one."

Smiley grinned. "What do you want me to do, my friend?"

A few minutes later, Wild Tony yelled, "And here they come!" as several men with spears came onto the stage. They circled the four prisoners, whose hands were still tied behind their backs. The bandits raised their spears, and...

There was an explosion on the other side of the stage as the small grenade that Smiley threw into the air detonated. It was a more advanced version of the explosives that Levi had used to destroy the underwater tube, detonated by a hand activator after a small delay. The sound of the explosion immediately turned everyone's attention to Smiley.

"This isn't very fair," said Smiley. "Why don't we do something more sociable, like a singalong?"

One of the bandits on stage snarled and charged Smiley with his spear.

Smiley nonchalantly grabbed it as if he were plucking a paper spaceship

out of the air, sending the ruffian sprawling. The audience started to laugh.

"Why can't we be friends?" said Smiley. "I'd bet we'd have more fun baking a cake together."

Three more ruffians raised their spear to charge. Smiley said, "I know what you want, my friends."

The three charged. Smiley dodged two of the spears, but the third impaled him.

There was a hushed silence for a moment as the audience waited for Smiley to die.

Smiley looked down at his midsection where the long spear impaled him.

And then. . . . And then and he grinned. He simply grinned! He slowly pulled the spear out of himself as if removing a toothpick from a bowl of jello, and handed the spear back to the stunned bandit. "I think you dropped this, my friend," he said.

By now all attention was focused on Smiley, and no one noticed Croft sneaking onto the other side of the stage where he hit the last ruffian from behind and motioned for the prisoners to follow him to the area behind the stage. It wasn't until the last prisoner was leaving from behind the stage that someone gave a startled yell.

Wild Tony caught on quickly. "Don't let them escape!" he yelled, his belly rippling.

"Hurry!" Croft hissed at the prisoners.

They had an advantage in that it was dark, and once they moved away from the stage they were harder to find, but there were a lot of bandits and

they only had a thirty seconds advantage.

Teams of bandits carrying torches roamed throughout the area. A group of them almost bumped into another team of five bandits who were dressed just like them but heading the other way.

One of the five bandits spoke to the leader of the small group when the other bandits had passed. "It really is you, Croft," said Preston. "Thanks for these outfits. But how..."

"Explanations later," said Croft. "We have to get to the docks. Walk quickly, and ignore any challenge."

They headed for the docks. In the confusion the roaming teams of bandits were spread out in all directions. So only a skeleton guard was on duty at the docks, five men, one of whom was arguing with a small, bony bandit standing in front of him.

"What do you mean, you want me to stand a little to my left?" the bandit said.

"Just to do it, you'll see!" said the hunched over bandit. The other bandits on guard duty laughed at this insane creature.

"This is ridiculous," said the bandit leader, taking a step to his left, just in time to receive a spear in his stomach.

"Right on time," Mongo cackled, as Croft and the prisoners ran past him to engage the four other guards.

The prisoners were tired, but the odds were more than even. They had Croft, the master of dirty fighting, on their side. Croft knocked out one of the guards quickly and clipped a second before Preston and his fellow prisoners could get rid of the other two.

But the sounds of combat were attracting unwanted attention.



"There!" someone cried in the darkness. A line of torches could be seen coming towards the docks.

"Come on!" said Croft, running for the big boat. They could more easily escape in one of the many smaller boats docked there, but they still had a mission to complete.

As they climbed onto the board Croft barely paused to throw a bandit into the water. "Cut the mooring lines!" he screamed. The line of torches were on the dock now, moving towards them.

The prisoners quickly cut the lines.

"Now row, row for your lives!" Croft screamed. Two prisoners went to each side of the large galley and picked up two oars. They dipped them into the water and pushed.

Nothing happened.

The line of torches were almost at the ship. Croft moved to the edge of the ship closest to the dock and hefted his spear. The first line of torches were just a few dozen feet away.

"Row!" he screamed again. "Row for your freedom! Row for your lives!"

Four pairs of oars dipped into the water again, and either it was Croft's imagination, or the ship actually moved a few inches.

"Again!" said Croft.

He could actually see faces now and in seconds the first of the bandits was on him. Croft jabbed out, sending the first bandit back, and then twirling the spear, like a quarterstaff, sent the other end crashing into the skull of another bandit.

But bandits were being replaced more quickly than he could knock them out.

In a few seconds he found himself attacked by three and then four bandits.

One of them sliced into his arm, pushing him back. Croft started to retreat further into the boat and steeled himself to give the order to abandon ship. They could swim for the shore and try to escape. If only he hadn't been greedy enough to try to take the big ship they might've-

Suddenly a bandit behind the first wave of attackers flew through the air and landed on one of Croft's attackers, squashing him. Then another bandit from the rear echelons flew through the air, landing on another attacker.

Someone was using bandits as artillery against the other bandits.

As a path was quickly cleared to the front of the bandit lines Croft saw none other than Smiley, lifting bandits and hefting them as if they were little more than Type 94 grapefruits. As he reached the front lines his aim changed direction as he tossed bandits behind him, over his shoulder.

As he got close Croft saw that Smiley was impaled in several places with spears, making him look a little like a porcupine.

The boat, which had been steadily but slowly moving forward, cleared the last of the dock at that moment, and the bandits were reduced to throwing spears. Croft judiciously took cover behind Smiley.

A spear went "thunk!" into the side of Smiley's head. Smiley, grinning, pulled it out, without even a drop of blood showing.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Croft asked.

"They're not very friendly, don't you think?" Smiley said.

Once they were out of spear range Croft ran to the sails and unfurled them, something he had been prevented from doing by their pursuers. A wind was blowing at their backs, but the breeze was sporadic. Nonetheless the ship started to pick up speed.

Mongo paddled over. "So, you made it again," said Mongo. "Never thank Mongo, no..."

"Thank you, Mongo," said Croft.

But Mongo, suddenly getting an odd look on his face, said, "Not over. Must hurry."

"What do you mean?" said Croft.

Suddenly he heard a shout and one of the prisoners stumbled forward, a spear protruding from his gut.

And then a bandit came out from behind the sails, and then another, and another, and Croft was fighting for his life again.

Smiley tossed one overboard with a splash, and then another, and Croft dispatched the third. Croft rushed to the other side of the boat to find Preston and the other two prisoners fighting with another bandit, and Croft, not in a generous mood, speared him from behind.

"Where did they come from?" Preston asked.

Croft ran to the side of the ship, and looked out at the gloom. They were already some distance from shore, but in the distance they could see the feeble torches from small boats. They must have been boarded.

"Row!" said Croft, bending down to check on the speared prisoner. He was dead.

They rowed for several minutes, and Croft tried his best to adjust the sails while keeping an eye out for other boarders in all directions.

Finally, after the dots of torch lights from other boats had receded into the distance, and there was no more sign of pursuit, he allowed himself to breath easy.

"Well, it looks like we made it," said Croft.

"We're exhausted, can we take a break?" said Preston.

Croft nodded. "For a few minutes, anyway."

Croft quickly caught up with Preston. "I thought you were dead."

"I'm not so easy to kill, you should know better than that," said Preston.

"I was captured by the bugs and sent to a labor camp. I spent most of the rest of the war in luxurious accommodations," he grimaced. "I managed to escape just before the end to give the bugs a bit of payback. If even a fraction of the things I heard about you were true, then you've done some amazing work."

"Well, I liked to keep busy," said Croft modestly. "Have you seen any of the others from the Agency?"

"No," said Preston.

"What's the situation like on Aridor?"

"There are gangs roaming everywhere. There are pockets of military control, but the food crisis has created anarchy," said Preston. "The reduction in the sunlight reduces the amount of crops that can be grown, meaning a lot of people are going hungry. Combine that with the total loss of power and you have a real mess."

Croft nodded. He didn't ask for any more specifics of what Preston had been through. There would more than enough time for that later. He just counted himself lucky that he had escaped.

Smiley came up to Croft and grinned.

"What are you smiling at?" said Croft. He noticed that Smiley had pulled all the spears out of his body. Though there were gaping holes in his clothes, there wasn't even a sign of a scratch on Smiley.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" Smiley grinned.

"What do you mean?" said Croft, tired but quickly becoming alert again.

"Haven't you forgotten something?" Smiley said again.

Croft looked around, as if something was missing. Then he ran from one end of the boat, and then the other.

"What's wrong?" said Preston.

"Mongo," said Croft. "Have you seen him?"

It took Croft only a few seconds to realize what had happened. When the boat, or boats, had boarded the ship, some of the bandits had grabbed Mongo while the others had attacked.

There was no way to know where Mongo was at the moment, no way to find him in this darkness and rescue him, if indeed he was still alive.

Croft was silent for the entire trip back to Aridor.

Mayor Goodmon proclaimed a day of holiday when he saw the ship and learned what Croft had accomplished. But Croft's grim expression unnerved him.

"What's wrong? You've just ensured the safety of our community!" said Goodmon.

"I've bought us some time until they can build a new boat," said Croft.

"Perhaps a few months."

"Do you really think they'll try again?" said Goodmon.

"It's certainly a possibility," said Croft. "But you're forgetting a more immediate problem. What about Mongo?"

"Your, ah, gangly friend?" said Goodmon. "I'm sorry for his loss, but this

certainly was a high-risk mission. . . ."

"That's not what I mean," said Croft. "Mongo has, shall we say, special skills."

"Can you be more specific?" said Goodman.

"I'm afraid you don't have the clearance," said Croft. "Let's just say that if they use Mongo's skills against us, they can conquer us with little or no effort."

"That little bony man! What can he do against us?" said Goodman.

"I hope you never find out," said Croft. He left Government House and headed over to a clearing where Levi, Quick, General Arkik, and some other senior officers were meeting.

"We have to get Mongo back, at whatever the cost," said Croft.

"We don't even know if the creature is still alive," said General Arkik.

"We can't take the chance that he's not," said Croft. "You know too well what he can do. If they get him to work for them, he can simply pick the probable future where they defeat us."

"If he can see futures, how did he get captured in the first place?"

Captain Kiley asked.

"I forced him to come," said Croft. "There are some situations where there isn't always a win-win outcome. Mongo tried the best he could, but even he can't always try to make the best outcome come about. And he did warn me," he said, looking distinctly unhappy.

"He's sure to be held under tight security," said Major Rambus. "How many of us should come with you?"

"None," said Croft. "I'll go alone."

"What?" said General Arkik. "Don't be a fool, Croft."

Croft stood up. He spoke quietly. "I'm not a fool, General. I'm one of the Agency Eight. Do you know what that means?" He cast a sharp glance at Arkik.

Arkik nodded.

Croft continued. "As far as I know, I'm the only one still alive. I've infiltrated places you've never even dreamed could be broken into. No offense, but none of you have the necessary skill that's needed. I have to go alone." He paused. "If I don't return, don't send anyone after me. It will simply be a waste of manpower. My parting advice to you would be to increase the patrols along the water, and start scouting out new areas to settle farther inland."

"You make it sound like maybe not coming back," said Levi.

Croft gave no response, but slowly walked west, towards the shoreline...

"Aaaaagh!" Mongo screamed, as the rope bit into his ankle and tugged cruelly at him. He was tied down to a table, with ropes pulling his body in all directions.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were in pain," Wild Tony chuckled.

"But fortunately I do know better."

A tall, hulking man entered the room, and Mongo's eyes widened as he saw who it was.

"Glad to see me?" Blue Beard yelled, swinging a giant fist into Mongo's gut. Mongo screamed.

"As you can see, I do remember you," said Blue Beard. "It wasn't until later that I heard rumors about what you can do that I figured out what

you had done to me. I've waited a long time for payback." He swung a beefy fist again and Mongo screamed even louder.

"I don't want to hurt you," said Wild Tony. "But I need your cooperation if I'm to protect you."

"Cooperation?" said Mongo. "What want?"

Wild Tony wet his lips. "I'm still a bit skeptical of your supposed skills. But I could be convinced. Describe for me how we could successfully attack the Easterners."

Mongo wet his lips. "Attack?"

Wild Tony said, "Give us an attack plan! One that will ensure our victory."

"Mongo can't think!" said Mongo wildly. "You hurt Mongo, Mongo in pain, can't think when in pain!"

Wild Tony considered. He glared coldly at Mongo for a moment. Then he spoke. "I think you're stalling," said Wild Tony. "I think I need to let you spend some quality time with Blue Beard."

"No! Noooooo!" Mongo screamed. Blue Beard gave a happy grin as he smacked his fists together.

Wild Tony headed for the door. "Try not to kill the creature, but I won't fault you if you get overenthusiastic..." He made eye contact with Blue Beard to make his meaning clear.

"No!" Mongo screamed again. "Croft! Croft! Help!"

Wild Tony chuckled. "Do you really think that's going to help?"

There was a sound like crumpled laundry dropping to the ground from behind him, and then a new voice said, "It might."

Wild Tony turned, speechless, to see Clifford Croft standing in the door,



in front of the body of one of his men.

"How did you get in here?" Blue Beard growled. "My men-

"A little misdirection. A little violence. A little of this, a little of that," said Croft. His voice hardened. "My name is Clifford Croft. I brought down the Slurian Union. I repelled the Bug Invasion. And now I've come for you."

Blue Beard roared and charged Croft, waving a club. Wild Tony, seeing that Croft was distracted, whipped out a knife and thrust it at Croft. Croft ducked aside from the club and wacked Wild Tony on the head with the blunt end of the spear. Wild Tony went down.

Blue Beard raised his club again.

"Right!" Croft heard a squeaky voice say.

Without looking Croft dodged to the right as Blue Beard swung. Croft pivoted to the side, landing a karate chop to the back of Blue Beard's neck. Blue Beard collapsed with a thump to the ground.

Croft, realizing he was breathing heavily, slowly walked forward to Mongo.

"I thought you couldn't think when you were in pain," he said, starting to loosen the bonds.

Mongo squealed as he was released. "So, Croft remember Mongo! Is a first time-

"I came back and risked my life, just to bring you back. That should mean something, even to you," said Croft. He eyed the bodies. Blue Beard wasn't moving, but Wild Tony was grabbing his head and slowly sitting up.

"That one might be useful," said Croft. He pulled Tony up, casually disarming him as the bandit reached for another knife. "Get up, fats."

Tony grumbled, glaring at him. "You won't get out of here alive."

"Then neither will you," said Croft simply, putting one of Tony's knives to his throat. He turned to Mongo, who was stalking Blue Beard with Tony's other knife. "Mongo, coming?"

Mongo said, "What about him?" indicating the fallen form of Blue Beard.

"He's napping. We don't have time to double date," said Croft.

"We should kill him," said Mongo, glaring at his fallen enemy. Weeks of physical pain and torture flashed before his eyes.

"Will killing him eliminate his gang?" said Croft. "They'll just chose another leader. There's nothing so special about this one."

"Croft usually more practical than that," said Mongo, scowling.

"Maybe because I don't like killing in cold blood," said Croft. "If you want to kill him, then kill him. But either way we've got to get going."

Mongo scowled again, bouncing up and down on each foot, considering. Then he bent down, and swish-swished with the knife.

He was like that for a full minute. Mongo finally stood up and said,

"Ready." When he moved away Croft could see the fallen form of Blue Beard.

Without the Beard. Instead, he had abraded and cut skin where Mongo had abruptly shaved him.

"Well, that will cause him to lose face," Croft muttered.

They left the compound, Wild Tony walking first, followed by Croft and Mongo. Croft kept a knife at Tony's back.

"One false move, fats, and you'll be instant shishkabob," Croft advised.

They walked through the center of the bandit camp. Some people gave them curious looks but Croft ignored them, quietly directing Tony to keep walking north.

One of Tony's lieutenants, sensing something was odd, approached with two of his men. "Sir," he began.

Tony glared at them, then moved his eyes to meaningfully glance behind him.

The bandits raised their spears, a whole courtyard full of reinforcements were alerted, and Croft brought the knife to Tony's throat. "Get back!" he yelled.

The bandits took a step back.

"Now, drop your weapons!"

The bandits did nothing.

Croft dug the blade into Tony's neck. "Tell them!"

"Drop your weapons!" yelled Tony hoarsely.

They dropped their weapons,

"Now, stand on one leg!"

The bandits looked puzzled, but complied when Tony repeated the command.

Croft whispered the next command to Tony, who obediently repeated, "Now, hop up and down on one leg."

Mongo looked puzzled at Croft as a platoon of bandits, after some reluctance, started hopping up and down on one leg.

"Now make boop-boop sounds!"

The bandits grimaced and looked skeptical, and it took another coerced command to get them to comply.

Slowly, one by one, the bandits, still jumping up and down on one leg, started to yell "Boop! Boop! Boop! Boop!"

Croft laughed. "I've always wanted to see that," said Croft. "Now keep

hopping and booping until we're gone. If I see anyone pursuing us on two legs, Fat Tony gets it!"

They retreated down an alley, leaving the hopping bandits behind them. But it wasn't long before they heard the sounds of pursuit.

"Quick, into the underground!" said Croft. He knew the underground around Sarney almost better than anyone.

They made their way into the underground. As they ran from their pursuers, Croft guided them towards a specific destination.

The secret entrance into Sarney Sarittenden, the palace itself.

The last time Croft had used it was to infiltrate the Insectoid base there, years ago. It almost felt like another lifetime ago. But now they would use the entrance to evade their pursuers. But first things first: they had to get rid of Fat Tony. Croft had no intention of showing him the secret entrance.

They paused in an empty room underground.

"So, what shall we do with you?" Croft asked.

Tony glared at him. "If you kill me, my men will-"

"They'll elect a new leader, I know," said Croft, aware that Tony was about to say something completely different. Croft paused, considering.

"If I let you go, what will you do?"

"Build another fleet and take you all as slaves," said Tony.

"Eeeeeer!" said Croft, imitating a buzzer as he slammed Tony on the head with the side of his spear. "Wrong answer." He considered. "Let me plant a thought in your head. It's possible, maybe, that someday you could overrun the settlement on Gateway. But if you do, be assured that I'll get away.

And when I do, I'll find you. You've seen how easily I can get to you."

He paused, to let that sink in. Tony, sweating, nodded.

"So if you attack us, I will come back and kill you," said Croft. "That's a promise. No amount of security measures or bodyguards will protect you.

What do you say to that."

Wild Tony wet his lips. "Perhaps... we can concentrate our activities on Concord."

"A pragmatist!" said Croft. "I always knew you were a moderate. We'll see how long you stay resolved. Just remember, I'll always be around, and if you break your little promise, I will come back for you, my fatty friend."

He put his face close to Wild Tony. "Don't forget it," he said.

Tony nodded.

"Good!" said Croft, drawing back. He looked around on the ground, noticing some cable. He picked it up, and started to tie up Wild Tony. "You'll be able to get out of this in a few hours, with more than enough time to get back to compliment Blue Beard on his close shave."

An hour later Croft and Mongo slipped into the Palace. The hiding place was exactly where Croft had remembered it and they entered without incident. Croft's intention was to slip out of the east exit and head to the small boat he had hidden on the shore.

But Croft was hit with a tremendous surprise when he entered Sarney.

The lights were on.

There were lights in Sarney Sarittenden!

How could this be? All power throughout August had been and was being absorbed by the energy mist. Could the power of the energy mist be

dissipating? Levi had conducted regular experiments to test the strength of the mist, and he found it just as potent as ever. Could the mist somehow be weaker here than it was on Aridor.

No. It must be something about the Palace itself. Croft always knew that there was something odd about Sarney Sarittenden the Palace, not the city around it. It was all in those mysterious spirals. The walls of Sarney Sarittenden looked silver, sometimes, when you looked at it; but other times they were green, or grey, or many other colors of the rainbow. It was as if the Palace itself had been built of some alien material. But the Palace had been there so long that its precise origin was a source of mystery to the inhabitants.

There was power in the Palace. That set off an explosion of thoughts inside Croft's head. But before he could consider further, he heard rapid footsteps, coming from another direction, and Mongo, looking very anxious, started tugging at his sleeve.

All right. For another time.

He and Mongo sped off in the opposite direction from the approaching footfalls.

When he and Mongo were safely on the boat and out to sea, Croft said, "So, how does it feel to be free?"

"Better than being caught because mean Croft forced Mongo to go on suicide mission," Mongo spat.

"Well, I can see you're no worse for your experience," said Croft. "It was a dangerous mission, but an important one."

Mongo gave a coarse laugh. "All Croft missions important."

"That's true," said Croft. "But if this mission hadn't been successful, it's a good bet that a lot of us would be dead or enslaved under Fat Tony and his buddy Blue Beard."

Mongo shrugged. "Mongo always get away."

"So my help was just incidental," said Croft. "From what I saw, you were doing quite well there on your own. Was it part of the plan to let them torture you with the ropes?"

Mongo made a dismissive sound with his mouth.

"You're welcome," said Croft cheerily. He looked out at the sea. Mongo, naturally, would not help with the roaring. Sighing, he picked up the oars and resumed his slow rowing into the night gloom. At least the pressure was off now.

## Chapter 6: Return of the Insectoids

Two years passed. The Gateway settlement continued to thrive. There were still occasional attacks from bandits, and other hazards the pioneers faced. But Tony kept to his word and never used his large coalition of bandits to attempt another mass invasion of Aridor. They had to face attacks from other pirate bands, however, and even some natural hazards.

"I thought the bears weren't supposed to be aggressive," said Croft, as Levi bandaged Lieutenant Pomiter's arm.

"Aren't usually," said Levi. "But weather controllers no longer functioning. Change of climate changes bears, maybe. Having to hunt

farther afield for food. As long as stay in camp, should be no problem."

"I'm sure the hunting and foraging parties and the security sentries who have to go outside of camp will appreciate the good news," said Croft dryly.

"Still intent on your trip?" said Levi.

"Yes," said Croft. "Everything seems well in hand here." Things seemed reasonably quiet here, and events on Concord were monitored on a regular basis. Croft had trained several teams in basic infiltration techniques and regular teams rotated into Concord to keep an eye on what the gangs were up to. They hadn't changed their brutal ways, but for the most part were keeping to their own continent.

"It will take you a month to get to the central grasslands," said Pomiter.

"What do you expect to find there?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm going," said Croft.

"But everything is well in hand here," Pomiter insisted. "Why are you going to scout out a new base?"

Croft sighed, and wondered if it was worth the effort to explain. "As a spy, and resistance fighter, it was always standard operating procedure to have a backup hideout. In fact, at times my group had multiple backup hideouts. We never knew when we would need them, but if we needed them in a hurry, we'd have them. Here in Gateway we have no backup 'hideout'. If we're ever overwhelmed by a sudden attack, we'd have no established base to retreat to. Now that the situation has finally stabilized, I now have the time to go and explore an alternate hideout."

"Who going with you?" Levi asked.

"I was thinking of asking for volunteers," said Croft.



Croft outlined where he was going at the fireside chat that night though was purposely vague on the reasons why. There was no need to alarm anyone.

When the time came to call for volunteers, a number of guardsmen stepped forward.

"I'm touched by your concern, but most of you are needed here," said Croft. "Keep in mind that it's going to be a lot of walking." He eyed the volunteers, looking for the hardiest one. "What about you, Sergeant?" he said, indicating the beefy Sergeant Benesh. Benesh nodded.

Benesh wouldn't be the greatest conversationalist, but at least Croft knew he was tough and could keep up with the pace he intended to set.

"Anyone else?" said Croft. He turned to a bony individual sitting by the fire. "Mongo?" he smiled.

Mongo shook his head.

"I'll go," came another voice.

"Who said that?" said Croft. He was surprised to see Shakey Walbaum step into the light.

"Shakey, this is going to involve a lot of walking," said Croft.

"It can't be worse than farming," said Shakey. That was met by chuckles all around.

Croft sighed. Well, at least he would have someone to talk to. "All right." He paused. "Any other takers?"

"Arf!"

Croft looked down to see Quick looking up at him with his pointed little ears standing straight up. "What is it, boy?"

"Arf!"

"Levi, can you provide subtitles?" Croft asked.

"Volunteer," said Levi.

"What?"

"Quick volunteer," said Levi.

There was widespread laughter among the campfire audience.

"Levi, this isn't going to be a little jog around the farm," said Croft.

"We're going to walk literally hundreds of miles inland. Can the little guy-"

"Little legs, yes, but augmented in 212(b) conversion," said Levi. "Your legs will tire before his."

"Hm." Croft looked down at the little dog. He knew Quick was bright, but he had never seen the dog be proactive before. Why would the dog want to come anyway? Maybe he was bored too.

"All right," said Croft. He waved a finger at Quick. "But you better keep up. Everyone has to pull their own weight."

Quick wagged his tail twice and smiled.

"What a team," Croft sighed.

Levi was there to see them off. He stood with them on the edge of a paved road that led inland into the forest. It was the Atil Trial, or AT as it was popularly called by hikers who used to ply the route all the way from Gateway on the west coast to Kamatchka on the eastern coast of Aridor. Hikers came from planets all over the galaxy for the several month long hike; ironically enough, however, seldom could a resident of August be seen on the trail. It was people from the frontier planets who found the idea of walking hundreds of miles appealing; the Concordites, addicted to

their modern conveniences, would have found such a trek inconceivable. It would be a long trip, but not so long as those adventurous hikers used to take. For they weren't going more than a third of a way towards the eastern coast. There was nothing interesting to see on Kamatcha, which until recently was the site of enormous Insectoid breeding farms, until the rebellion had engaged the weather controllers and frozen all the bugs there.

No, they were going only part of the way there to the Central Grasslands, to examine whether it could be a suitable place to settle, if they ever had to uproot their Gateway settlement. Levi had given them a list of plants and minerals to be on the lookout for, and given Croft a boring but quick course in how to identify them.

They had only enough provisions in their packs for two weeks. More than that, aside from a small blanket, they couldn't comfortably carry. That's why Croft and Sergeant Benesh carried small bows, which they would use to hunt for food. Croft also had a small fishing rod for when they passed near the central Aridor river. Hunting for food would slow them down, but Croft wasn't in any particular hurry. He needed time to think.

"Remember, is very easy, just follow AT," said Levi. "Will take you to Central Grasslands. Is not most direct route, but staying on road will make sure not get lost. If do, use sun for guidance to go east or west, as need be."

"Will do, Levi," said Croft, hefting his pack. It was time to go.

"Good luck!" Quick said.

Benesh nodded, Shakey smiled, and Quick arfed! cheerfully. They headed

down the road.

"If we make good time, we should reach the first cabin by nightfall," said Croft. A series of cabins had been built along the AT, many of them with emergency supplies. Croft had little hope that the cabins were still supplied, but it would be nice to have some shelter from the elements, as it was starting to get cold at nights.

They walked along in silence, Croft in the lead, followed by the large form of Sergeant Benesh, the skinny Shakey Walbaum, and Quick bringing up the rear. Croft didn't feel like talking at the moment. He needed time to think.

To think about escape. It had been nearly three and a half years now, three and a half years since he had been trapped on this planet by the energy suppressing mist. Ironically, he had had more freedom of action when the Insectoids had occupied August, having gone off-planet several times. But now he had been stuck on August for nearly four years. Croft couldn't remember the last time he had been on a single planet that long.

And so Croft thought of escape.

When, two years ago, he first discovered that power functioned in Sarney Sarittenden, he had been filled with hope. After bringing Mongo home, he had returned to Sarney with another infiltrator team and took a tour of the premises. Bandits were occupying part of the Palace, but the inside wasn't nearly as well guarded as the main entrances and exits, and Croft managed to move around without much difficulty.

For he had been looking for a very specific corridor. Memory flooded back to Croft.

He had visited the planet of the Capybaras, a race of intelligent aliens

who looked like large rodents, not once but twice. Twice the Professor, his Capybara friend, had brought him back to August in some mysterious way that Croft couldn't determine because the time he brought Croft back, he rendered Croft unconscious first.

But after his first trip back Croft was ready the next time around, and before the Professor knocked him out he had activated a miniaturized holorecorder on his belt. When Croft recovered consciousness back on August he hadn't had a chance to look at the recording because events were happening too quickly; but in the short time after the overthrow of the Insectoids, before the energy dampening mist came to August, Croft had found time to look at the recording.

And what he saw only confirmed his suspicions. He saw his unconscious body being lifted into a room onboard the Chent ship that the Professor had been piloting. The Professor activated a device, and Croft's body was nudged through a glowing wall, followed by the Professor himself, where they found themselves in a new room that Croft had never seen before. The Professor touched something on the wall and a section of the wall opened. Croft's body floated out into the hallway, clearly a section of Sarney Sarittenden, and the Professor telekenetically carried his sleeping form out of the Palace.

The big question was: where was that hallway?

Most hallways on Sarney looked alike. Every detail of the journey out of Sarney that was recorded on the holorecording were burned into Croft's mind, even though he had only seen the recording once--with the power out, it was impossible to view again. Even though the lights functioned within

Sarney, electrical devices that one brought into Sarney didn't. Croft had asked Levi about this, and he hypothesized that the electrical systems of Sarney were somehow insulated from the effects of the energy mist. But further research was impossible because they didn't have functional high energy weapons to cut into the insulation and examine it.

And so Croft searched and searched for the exact corridor he saw in the holorecording, almost risking his life twice when he nearly ran into pirate bands during his searches.

But he never could find the right location. Or he thought he did; but somehow, he couldn't seem to find a way to trigger the wall to open in the precise location where he and the Professor had emerged. Maybe the wall only opened from the other side? Ridiculous, since the Professor had obviously returned home through the same way.

So that avenue of escape was closed off. Even if Croft could use it, the portal or whatever it was seemed to be keyed to the planet of the Capybaras, and Croft wasn't exactly popular there right now--during his first visit, he had narrowly avoided vivisection, and on his second visit, he had stolen a Chent ship and broke a number of their laws. No, they wouldn't likely welcome a return visit.

So his efforts to escape would have to be channeled elsewhere. How to get off-planet? He racked his brain endlessly but couldn't come up with a solution. Maybe this long walk would help him think.

The disturbing thing was, somewhere in the back of Croft's mind he felt that Sarney Sarittenden was the key. Not to escape, but to solving the problem of the energy mist. Or maybe Sarney wasn't the key, but it reminded Croft of something similar, something that related to their

present crisis. But whenever Croft tried to retrieve the similar memory, he went up against a roadblock. It was almost as if he had a memory that he was suppressing. But why would he consciously do that?

So Croft had a lot to think about during their long trek. They came across the first cabin and found it in good condition. They made a small campfire and settled down for the night. Although Croft didn't think there was anything tangible to fear, he nonetheless dictated that they have a watch at night. Even Quick served a watch. The small dog (about ten inches in height), wasn't nearly big enough to threaten an intruder, but he could bark. Croft kept an eye on the dog the first night, when it was Quick's turn to take the watch. Could Quick be relied on?

He watched the small type 212(b) Pomeranian for several minutes. The dog's face was away from him, so it was impossible to tell if the Pom's eyes were open or not. Croft shifted almost silently and got up on his ankles, with the intent of tiptoeing around to see if Quick was awake or not.

But even the slight sound that Croft made in moving his muscles was enough to get a reaction--the head whipped around, and two little foxlike ears perked up. Quick matched stares with Croft. Croft nodded and lay back down. Quick made a dismissive snushing sound with his snout and returned to the watch.

They walked for two weeks without incidence. For Croft though it was tiring, it was a welcome break from the routine of the past three years at Gateway, almost like a vacation.

The ground started to go uphill, as they walked through gently sloping

hills that took them eastward. One day Quick started barking and acting strangely.

"Arf arf!"

"What is it, boy?" Croft asked.

"Arf!" said Quick.

"Sorry, but I forgot my Pomeranian to human dictionary," Croft said.

"Arf!" said Quick, walking a few steps back the way they had come. He walked a few more, looked at Croft, and walked a few more.

"He wants us to follow," said Croft.

"But that's the way we came," said Sergeant Benesh.

"Maybe he wants to go home," said Shakey.

Croft started following Quick, walking slowly.

"Arf!" said Quick, trotting more quickly as he barked at Croft, as if telling him to pick up the pace. Croft started running to keep up with the dog.

Quick ran down the road. Croft and the others followed. Croft was just wondering what this was all about when a man bolted from behind a tree and started running. Croft ran after him. The man was scrawny and obviously malnourished. Croft caught up to him quickly and tackled him.

The man fell to the ground but struggled with Croft before Croft pinned him down. When Croft looked at his face he found he recognized him. It was Rangon, the crazy hermit ranger.

"Have you come to give us the guided tour?" said Croft acidly. After considering for a moment, he got up letting Rangon go.

Rangon got up, dusting himself off as he glared at Croft. "There was no need to attack me."



"It's always good to keep in practice," Croft commented. "What are you doing here?"

"It's dangerous to be here," said Rangon. "You shouldn't go any further."

"Why?" said Croft.

"Dangerous monsters," said Rangon.

"What kind of monsters?"

"Monsters," said Rangon, obviously reaching the limits of his vocabulary.

"Monsters," Croft repeated. "Well, we eat monsters for breakfast."

Rangon started to turn away. "If you keep going this way, you'll regret it."

"Then I guess you're following us to see our expressions of regret," said Croft.

Rangon gave no answer but moved off.

Quick looked up at Croft expectantly, as if waiting for something.

"Good dog!" said Croft, reaching down to pet the small animal on the head.

Quick stuck out his tongue and smiled.

"What do you think he was talking about when he mentioned monsters?"

Shakey said.

"I have no idea," said Croft.

When their provisions ran low, Quick proved to be a good hunting dog, sniffing the area for rabbits and other game and quietly alerting the others by making eye contact and pointing with his snout. Quick even located safe berries and nuts that could be eaten. He was very useful to have along.

As they traveled Croft got the sense that Rangon was following them. But

he didn't seem intent on harming them, and they always kept up a watch at night..

"I wonder what it was he's seen, or think he's seen," said Croft as they sat one night in a cabin along the AT. "He's probably the only one around here to explore so far east."

Suddenly, they heard a roar in the wilderness. They all looked at each other.

"Probably just a bear," said Benesh.

They heard the roar again, and then a different sound, a high-pitched shrill squeaking sound.

"Not a bear," said Croft.

"Not unless one is learning how to sing," said Shakey.

And then they heard the sound of an animal screaming. And then all was silent.

"Probably the bear was hunting an animal," said Croft.

"It sounded like the bear was screaming," said Shakey.

"Maybe it was hunting another bear," said Croft.

"Maybe your efforts to improve morale are doing the exact opposite," said Shakey.

"I'll take the first watch," Croft declared.

The next morning the forest seemed more sinister than it had the previous night.

"See that black shape, there in the forest?" said Shakey.

"Where?" said Croft. Shakey pointed, and then Croft saw it. A large black something, partially obscured by a tree behind the path.

Croft, raising his bow, started walking towards it.

"It could be dangerous," said Benesh.

"So I'll just have to be real careful, then," said Croft.

He continued walking slowly. The black mass didn't move, although it surely should have heard him by now. As he got closer, his bow still notched, he saw that it was the body of a bear.

Coming around the tree he saw the bear was clearly dead. Huge gashes had been ripped out of the bear's side. The curved shape of the gashes didn't look like the work of another bear. The bear had also been partially eaten.

What was it out there that hunted large black bears?

Croft waved his hand and the others joined him.

"Looks nasty," said Shakey. "I think we should turn back."

"We haven't evaluated the Central Grasslands yet," said Croft.

"I have," said Shakey. "There are giant monsters roaming around that can tear bears apart. Conclusion: we shouldn't move here."

"First of all we don't know what attacked this bear," said Croft. "Second of all, you say monsters; whatever it is might be one of a kind."

"So we have to keep going forward to satisfy your morbid curiosity," Shakey sighed.

"Would you like to lead the way?" Croft smiled.

They traveled for another week without incident. The only change was at night they would, from time to time, hear distant screeching sounds. One night they found that by sundown they hadn't reached another cabin, and

they were forced to camp out in the open. Needless to say, Shakey wasn't exactly happy about that.

"How much longer?" Shakey asked, his features looking worried in the firelight.

"A week, maybe ten days," said Croft. He looked at Shakey. "You volunteered for this mission, remember?"

"I volunteered for a gentle walk in the woods, not to be hunted by some night creature," said Shakey.

"It might just be some kind of mutant owl," said Croft.

Shakey laughed bitterly.

"Besides, we have Quick to protect us, don't we, boy?" said Croft, giving the Pom a pat on the head. Quick opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out. Croft had become quite fond of the Type 212(b) over the past few weeks. He had proven to be quite reliable and levelheaded, especially for a mutant toy dog.

Shakey took the first watch that night. When he heard a screeching in the distance, he quickly ran to shake Croft.

Croft, his eyes still closed, said, "Wake me if it gets within 100 feet."

Suddenly they heard a scream, a very human scream.

Croft jumped to his feet, followed by Bensch a second later.

They heard the scream again.

Then all was silent

Croft gripped his spear tightly. In the distance he could hear slobbering sounds, like an animal feeding. Croft had a rough idea what direction the sounds were coming from, but in the darkness, away from the campfire, he wasn't about to go and check them out.

The slobbering sounds continued for some time. And then it was quiet again.

All four of them stayed awake throughout the night. While Croft and Benesh were on guard. Shakey sat with clattering teeth, looking into the night all around the campfire. He felt like the campfire was practically an invitation for miles around to be attacked.

The next morning as the sun rose Croft nodded to Benesh and they walked off the road to the direction that Croft thought he had heard the noise.

Shakey out to them, "Wait! Don't leave me without protection!"

"We're not," said Croft. "Quick!"

The Pom's ears perked up.

"Defend Shakey while we're gone."

"Roah!"

"How reassuring," said Shakey dryly.

Croft continued walking through the forest. He thought the creature, or whatever it was, would be long gone by now, but there was no way to be certain.

They walked farther and farther, until the road was a distant line in the trees, and Croft didn't want to go any further for fear of getting lost.

As he turned to go back he almost yelled out of fright and surprise.

The mutilated body of Rangon, the crazy ranger, lay on the ground by a tree. He could only tell it was Rangon by the clothes; the body had been...

the body had been largely eaten, by what Croft couldn't tell.

Shakey could tell by their grim expressions that something was up when

they returned to the road. He was even less happy when they told him what they saw.

"So the monster eats people now," said Shakey. "All right, we've seen enough. Let's go home."

"It didn't attack us," said Croft.

"Because it already had a large appetizer," said Shakey. "But what about tomorrow."

"We don't know what it is," said Croft. "It could be another bear."

"Bears eating bears, bears eating people," said Shakey. "It's a monster."

"We came out here to assess the Central Grasslands. We're most of the way there," said Croft. "I'm not turning back now."

"Well I am," said Shakey.

"Really?" said Croft. "So you're going to travel on the road alone?"

The answer, of course, was obvious.

They continued forward, albeit more cautiously. It didn't take ten days or even seven as Croft had predicted; actually, due to their quick pace, it only took another two anxious days of travel. One minute the road winded around the bend, and in the next the trees disappeared, and as far as the eyes could see they found themselves staring at acres and acres of grasslands.

"Nice," said Croft, smiling. "Let's make for that little hill to our left.

That should give us a view for some distance."

They headed for the small hill. Once they reached the top, they stared out at the miles of grasslands around them. Some of the grass was low, but in other areas it was tall, in some places even eight or nine feet in height,

like a field.

"What a view," Croft marveled. He turned to Shakey. "Worth the trip?"

Shakey looked around, and grudgingly nodded. "Now can we go home?"

Suddenly they heard a wailing sound.

"What's that?" said Sergeant Benesh, pointing to some of the taller grass.

There was movement in the grass, a ruffling of the grass. Something was running through the grass, running towards the hill.

"Look, over there," said Shakey. From two other directions there were also rustlings in the grass. The rustlings from all three areas were moving rapidly towards the hill they were standing on.

"Croft, I don't think those are bears!" said Shakey, not trying to get the fear out of his voice.

Croft thought quickly. Whatever they were, they were moving quickly.

Outrunning them would be difficult. Besides, he wanted to see what they were. "Quick, up the tree!"

Quick, hearing his name called, looked longingly at Croft. Croft realized the problem immediately, and picked up the small dog, suddenly recognizing the virtues of having a portable animal.

Sergeant Benesh grabbed a low branch and pulled himself up.

"Here," said Croft, tossing Quick in a gentle arc, where the Pom landed in Benesh's arms. Croft climbed up after him while Benesh made for a higher branch.

Croft climbed into the low branch and saw Shakey still trying to climb up.

He could reach the lower end of the branch but didn't have the lower body strength to pull himself up.

"Croft!" he cried, looking behind him. Their pursuers were now at the base of the hill, out of the grass but cut off from view by the slope of the hill. That would change, however, in a few seconds.

"Grab my arm!" Croft shouted, and Shakey did. Croft, hefting mightily, pulled Shakey into the lower branch. "We'd better get higher," said Croft, climbing for a higher branch that Benesh had thoughtfully just abandoned. Just as he reached the higher branch something very unexpected and deadly appeared on the lip of the hill.

An Insectoid trooper.

The Insectoids had returned.

The sight of the Insectoid hit Croft with a paralyzing surprise. He had never expected to see the dirty bugs again. The Insectoid's eye complexes stared at him, something clicked, and it started running for the tree. Two more Insectoids came into view over the edge of the hill.

Croft looked down, and realized that Shakey would easily be in range of the Insectoid on the lower branch. "Grab my arm!" he shouted again.

Shakey grabbed his arm but in doing so his leg slipped off the lower branch. The Insectoid, only feet away, scrambled forward. The Insectoid swung out at a dangling leg with a sharp claw. At that moment Croft pulled Shakey up, and the claw missed by mere inches.

The Insectoid turned about, and grabbed onto the bark like it was about to climb. Croft fumbled to get at his spear, which was slung behind his back. But there wasn't enough time. The Insectoid scampered up the tree bark like it was a horizontal walkway. Then there was a thunk! and an arrow protruded in the middle of its ugly head. The Insectoid fell to the



ground, landing with a thud just as its two associates arrived.

Sergeant Benesh notched another arrow while Croft finally got his spear into battle position. The Insectoids climbed the tree from two sides.

Croft jabbed out at one, but it ducked down, evading penetration. Suddenly he felt a painful scratch in his back and he turned just in time to see the other Insectoid raising another claw.

Shakey, who was standing on the branch right next to Croft, reached out and kicked the Insectoid in one of its visual multiplexes, and it slithered down the bark, stunned.

The other Insectoid scampered up the bark, only to be shot in the side by an arrow. It cried out, tried to climb up again, but was shot a second time by Benesh. Spurting green blood, it fell to the ground.

The last remaining bug scampered up the bark again, but this time Croft was ready for it and not distracted by attacks from the other side. He lunged with his spear, catching the bug dead center. The bug fell back, and the spear with it. Croft, still grabbing the spear, fell out of the tree and landed on top of the body, which made a sickening crushing sound.

All was silent for a moment.

"Are you ok?" said Benesh, climbing out of the tree.

"Yeah," said Croft, slowly getting up. There was green goo on him from where he had landed on the bug. He turned away from Benesh. "How's my back?"

Benesh took a closer look. "A little blood, but the cut doesn't look too deep. Does it hurt?"

"Yes," said Croft, wincing as he tried to touch the cut. He looked up at

Shakey. "You can come down now. It's perfectly safe."

"Right," said Shakey, totally unconvinced. "Are you sure they're dead?"

"Quite sure," said Croft. He kicked the one he had landed on top of.

"See?"

Suddenly Croft heard a warning Arf! and he spun around just in time to see an Insectoid with two arrows in its lung at him. He dodged out of the way just in time and smashed the blunt end of his spear against the bug's face.

Shakey refused to come down until all three bodies were decapitated.

"So the bugs are here," said Croft, after Benesh had washed and dressed his wound. It still hurt, but the injury wasn't critical. "The question is, how?"

"Can we worry about how as we start walking home?" said Shakey nervously.

"We used the weather controllers to lower the temperature on the planet," said Croft. "They all should have frozen. Therefore, these must be new Insectoids."

But he was frowning as he said it. He looked over the bodies. "If these are new Insectoids, how did they get here? How could they land a ship through the energy dampening mist?"

"A good question, we should go home immediately and talk to Levi about it," said Shakey.

"These aren't typical Insectoid troopers," said Croft. "They're about a foot shorter than typical troopers. They're also leaner, not as large and intimidating."

"They're intimidating enough," said Shakey.

"Even if the Insectoids have bred a new kind of soldier that can survive here, how did they get here?" said Croft.

"Croft!" said Shakey.

"Don't you see?" said Croft. "If the bugs can land ships here, that means they have a way of defeating the energy mist. If we get one of their ships, we can get off-planet."

"Sounds like a plan," said Shakey. "We should head back to Gateway and gather up a strike team suited for this job."

"But where are they coming from?" Croft asked. "There's no sign of a base around here. They must be coming from Kamatchka."

"Kamatchka?"

"That's where their old base on Aridor was, it makes sense they would be coming from there," said Croft. "They took over the entire eastern seaboard of Aridor and converted it into breeding farms. I'm guessing that they've reestablished their old base there."

"A good piece of deduction," said Shakey. "Can we go now?"

"Yes," said Croft finally.

Shakey started to walk back the way they had come.

"Wrong way," said Croft.

Shakey turned around.

"Kamatchka is that way," said Croft, pointing in the other direction.

In the end, Shakey was persuaded to come with them when he considered the merits of traveling alone.

Still, he didn't accept it easily.

"It will take over two months to get to Kamatchka!" said Shakey.

"I'm guessing about three weeks, if we build a raft," said Croft.

"Raft?"

"I'm no expert on the geography of Aridor, but I did look at some of Levi's maps and I remember that the Hoop River flows from the Central Grasslands almost directly to the eastern coast. Using the current and a bit of paddling I'll bet we could get there in three weeks. Maybe even sooner."

"And what do we do once we get there?" said Shakey. "If the place is overrun with bugs, surely they'll-"

"We're just going to scout around, not commit a frontal assault," said Croft. "If we can steal one of their ships, just think, we can be back at Gateway in minutes, not weeks."

They found the Hoop River easily enough, following a stream which lead them to the River along the southern edge of the Grasslands. Croft and Benesh spent a day building a raft and makeshift oars. Even Quick helped, locating branches that could be lashed together to insulate the space between the larger pieces of wood. They tied up the wood using sturdy vines, also located by Quick. He listened to them carefully and seemed to understand immediately what they were up to, and what he could do to help. When they were ready to go Shakey made one last plea. "We don't even have guns."

"Neither do they," said Croft. "These mosquitos we took out weren't armed."

"And we almost got killed!"

"You knocked one out with a well-placed kick," Croft observed.

"It was pure instinct," said Shakey.

"I didn't realize comedians had killer instincts," Croft commented. "Now get on the raft, if you please."

The currents carried them rapidly through central Aridor. It was beautiful there--the forest was soon all around them again, there were animals running in meadows, birds singing, and majestic mountains in the distance. If not for the danger of the Insectoids, it would have been quite a relaxing outing. They didn't see any signs of Insectoids; if there were more of them, they weren't indigenous to this area.

As they rafted for three weeks Croft couldn't contain his excitement.

Finally, after three years, he had a hope of escape! He had no doubt that he could break into the Insectoid base and steal one of their spaceships. After all, he had done it before. The lack of energy weapons would only add to the challenge.

They approached cautiously, skirting the edge of the imposing Soaring Mountain Range, which traveled north of the Hoop River. They weren't very far from the east coast, perhaps four or five miles. And a mere two thousand miles east of that was the west coast of Concord.

They saw signs of the Insectoid presence even before they reached the edge of the old grubtree farms, tall shapes that caused them to duck behind bushes. The Insectoids were wandering about, this way and that, but were... somehow erratic. They didn't seem the same, not quite like the bugs that Croft had battled for more than two decades.

Croft guided the others through the Insectoid patrols. It would've been

easier doing this on his own, but if they found a ship, they would all have to be together if they were to escape.

But slipping through wasn't that difficult. Somehow the Insectoids weren't as methodical as they used to be.

As they slipped through denuded grubfruit trees Croft felt a wave of satisfaction. Levi had devised a virus which killed or stunted the grubfruit trees and prevented them from bearing fruit, which was the prime source of nutrients for the Insectoids. The trees were still barren; what were the Insectoids eating now?

As they made their way north they came across some breeding vats. Some were long abandoned, or littered with bug corpses, but others were bubbling with ferment. They were breeding more Insectoid troopers! But how were they sustaining them? Were they constantly flying in large quantities of food?

The answer might be in one of the storage huts they passed by. Croft left the others hiding behind some grubfruit trunks and slunk in, passing inches behind a guard who never saw or heard him coming.

The inside of the storage hut gave off a stank and Croft quickly saw why. It was filled with animal corpses--rabbits, deer, and other grazing animals. Well, he had the answer to one question. The Insectoids had somehow become carnivores.

He slipped his way out of the hut and made his way back to the others.

"Can we leave now?" Shakey whispered. Quick, looking alert with his foxlike ears pointed straight up, was scanning the horizon for trouble.

"We haven't found the spaceships, remember?" Croft whispered back.

"According to intel I received during the war, there should be a landing

pad just a mile or two north of here, if we are where I think we are.

That's where we'll make our escape, if all goes well."

They kept moving forward, crouching behind bushes and other natural cover.

There were Insectoids in the area but they didn't seem to be as actively patrolling as the ones on the perimeter. Indeed, a few wandered around almost listlessly.

After a few close calls they reached the edge of the spaceport. Spaceport might be an exaggeration: there were a number of landing pads, and a small port building, but little else.

No spaceships. Where were the spaceships?

"Maybe they land somewhere else," Croft whispered, knowing immediately that it was an idiotic thing to say. If there were Insectoids here, and functioning landing pads here, why wouldn't ships land here?

A suspicion started to form in his mind. A very nasty one. If he was right, they were all in great danger.

Croft hadn't gotten the concrete information he needed, and he certainly hadn't found a ship to escape in, but he at least had a working hypothesis, and that, for now, was enough. His duty was to survive long enough to warn Gateway. Because if he was right, these new Insectoids had a new and most dangerous ability.

They slowly started back. Croft's tentative plan was to head south towards the river and then plot a course home from there. The river now flowed in the wrong direction, and it would be a long, long walk home.

They would have made it back safely, if Shakey, whose training in infiltration techniques were non-existent at best, hadn't tripped over a

rock, alerting a nearby Insectoid.

Everyone froze, hoping the bug wouldn't see them. But they heard the thud thud of an approach. Croft, Benesh, Quick, and Shakey were hiding behind some boulders, but if the bug came really close...

A set of multiplex eyes peered out above the boulder where Croft crouched. He lunged with his spear and stuck the bug in the gut. It gave a loud shriek and collapsed to the ground.

Every Insectoid within a quarter mile turned to look at them.

"Time to run!" Croft said.

They ran through the grubfruit plantation, with swarms of Insectoids in hot pursuit. Every time they stopped to fight one or two more would appear. Finally, they just ran.

But when they reached the edge of a grubfruit plantation, breathing hard, they found a wall of Insectoids waiting for them. Turning around, they saw a horde behind them. They were unarmed but all had claws. They slowly closed in.

Croft turned to glare at Shakey as he dropped his spear and raised his hands. "If you think you're to blame for this, YOU'RE ONE HUNDRED PERCENT CORRECT!"

The bugs closed in.

"Bzzz bzzz bzzz," said their interrogator.

"I'm sure it's a great language, but I have no plans to speak it," said

Croft sullenly. He and Benesh and Shakey were bound by their hands and legs in one of the bugs administration centers. Each was being



interrogated in a different room. The bugs didn't seem to have their translation devices working--not surprising, because of the energy draining mist.

Another bug, who looked more like the old Insectoids Croft knew, a bit harder, sturdier, and taller than the rest, came forward.

"Bzzz bzzzz name?" it said haltingly.

"Master," said Croft.

"Master," came the voice. "What... bzzz bzzz doing here Master?"

"On vacation," said Croft.

The Insectoid buzzed menacingly.

"Let me ask you a question in return," said Croft. "What are you doing here? Where are your ships?"

"Ships?" The Insectoid buzzed, which might have been the equivalent of a laugh. "We... are... here. We... always... are here...."

That only confirmed Croft's suspicions.

"How... many... you...?"

"Just us," said Croft. "We're visitors from Concord."

"In-correct," said the bug. "Your companion... bzzz... already say... bzzz... west Aridor.... Bzzz...."

That would have to be Shakey. Now Croft had even more to thank him for.

"What are you doing here? You should be dead," said Croft. "The cold."

"Bzzz.. many die... bzzz... survivors... bzzz adapt..."

So that was it. Somehow some of them had managed to adapt to the cold.

They were smaller and sicklier, compared to the other Insectoids, but they had survived. They had also adapted by eating meat. Croft didn't want to

think how far that went.

"Need... humans... where... humans?"

"You'll find a lot on Concord," said Croft.

"Concord... too far... over sea..."

That confirmed another of Croft's suspicions. They had no power. They were just as helpless under the energy mist as Croft's people were.

"You will take us... bzzz... to Aridor humans."

"Sure," said Croft. He held out his hands. "Just untie me and we'll get started."

"Leave bzzz... tomorrow...."

Croft was carried into another room where Benesh and Shakey were also tied up. The door was open but an Insectoid stood guard there.

"Thanks a lot, Shakey," said Croft. "Now they know about Gateway."

"I couldn't help it! They threatened to torture me!" said Shakey.

"So you delayed discomfort by putting the lives of several hundred other people at risk," said Croft. "Do you know why they want to find other humans?"

"Uh, to make them slaves again?" said Shakey.

"Think again, Shakey. Have you noticed the change in their dining habits lately?" said Croft.

"Oh."

The silence filled volumes.

"Well, at least Quick got away," Benesh whispered.

It was true. During the confusion Quick had somehow escaped, using his little legs to dart past the Insectoids and escape into the grubfruit plantation.

"Well, maybe he'll get word back to Gateway," said Croft. An image formed in his mind of the little dog, making the lonely trek back home through the wilderness all by himself, chased by wolves and bears. He knew that Quick could probably find his way home, but despite his bravado, he really was only a lapdog--could he cope in the wilderness on his own without becoming prey to something much larger? Quick was versatile, but he was made for thinking, not fighting.

"Arf! Arf Arf Arf!"

Croft looked at Shakey. Shakey looked back at him.

"Arf! Arf Arf!"

"No, Quick, run," Croft muttered. He had an image of an Insectoid eating Quick in one bite. There was a rush of footsteps as Insectoids left the building, their guard included.

Croft immediately flopped over so that his wrists, which were tied behind his back, were next to Benesh's. "Can you feel my ropes?"

"I think so," said Benesh, trying to turn to get his hands in synch with Croft's wrists.

There was a sound of rushing movement outside.

"Trying to untie... but these are pretty tight," said Benesh.

Suddenly a small type 212(b) Pomeranian came hopping into the room. He twisted his head, and looked oddly at Croft.

"What took you so long?" said Croft. "Come on, don't just stand there!"

Quick hopped onto Croft's stomach, reached over and started biting his ropes. The sounds of rushing movement could still be heard outside.

Croft's hands were free! He quickly reached over and freed Benesh, then

Shakey, then started on his legs.

The thump-thump sound of the Insectoid guard returning could be heard.

Croft, quickly looking around, picked up a metal pipe. When the guard came to the doorway, Croft swung it with all his might.

The guard gave a shrilling sound and went down.

"Come on!" said Croft.

They ran for their lives, heading for the mountains. The nearby Soaring Range was tall, and snowcapped, even in summer.

But the Insectoids were faster, and were catching up with them. Croft saw that a group of them were going to cut them off before they reached the base of the mountains, and all they had to fight with was one metal pipe.

In between them and the mountains were a large cluster of bushes, extending for hundreds of feet north and south. Croft, catching Benesh and Shakey by the eye, dove into the bushes. The others did as well.

The thump thump thump of the pursuing Insectoid grew louder as many of them approached. Croft knew that with his metal pipe he'd be lucky to fight one of them, much less 20 or 30. No, his only option was to hide.

The Insectoids fanned out over the bushes. Most of the vegetation were on the outside of the bushes, so Croft's head was mostly covered by a thin layer of leaf petals. But inside the bush Croft could see a far distance in every direction. He could see Benesh and Shakey, also crouched down in the distance. Fortunately none of the Insectoids had the sense to crouch down and look sideways as he was doing.

But the Insectoids were roaming the bushes in large numbers. It was very possible that they could find him, either by bumping into him or seeing him through the thin layer of vegetation if they were directly over him.

Croft grasped his pipe tightly.

Suddenly, a sense of déjà vu gripped him.

\*\*\*\*\*

He was in another place, in another time. On an ancient Chent ship, being chased by a monster of horrible description. But he and his friends had to stand very, very still, or else they would be discovered.

\*\*\*\*\*

The Insectoids roamed through the bush. One came within two feet of his location and stopped moving. Croft stopped breathing for a moment. The Insectoid moved on. Croft allowed himself to silently exhale.

Suddenly, there was a scream. Croft looked sideways and saw Benesh lifted up. There was a rapid swish swish and Benesh's arms and legs fell to the ground, and then his torso. The Insectoids dived down into the bush and started chomping on the body hungrily, fighting among themselves for the body parts.

Croft use the noise and commotion to mask his movements, slowly crawling to the edge of the bush. If only one of those Insectoids lowered its head to bush level and looked sideways, he would be dead meat!

But only their claws were below bush level, not their heads, and they were too busy fighting each other for their newly found food source.

Croft crawled out of the bush and silently crawled some distance away

behind the cover of boulders, and tried to prevent himself from becoming sick.

Some time passed. Croft heard a noise nearby. He looked for his pipe, but he had been so shocked by the experience that he had lost it. Croft prepared to run.

Croft heard a sniffing sound. It grew louder and louder, until Quick, who must have been following his scent, came around the corner. Quick looked at Croft. Croft looked at Quick.

"Shakey?" said Croft.

Quick gestured with his snout, and started walking away. Croft followed, to a nearby group of boulders where Shakey was hiding.

He looked at Croft with fear filled eyes. "Did you see what they did to him?" he whispered.

Croft nodded. "Shakey, we've got to go."

Shakey, paralyzed with fright, and trembling, nodded. But he didn't move.

Croft used his hand to turn Shakey's head to face his. "Now," said Croft.

They crawled to the foot of one of the mountains in the Soaring Range. It actually wasn't far now. At the base of the mountain Shakey asked why they didn't flee north or south instead. "We can move quicker on flat land," he said.

"So can they," said Croft. "Come on."

They started climbing. They were lucky enough to have found a natural path leading up into the mountain face, perhaps created by hikers generations ago. Croft and Shakey climbed laboriously, always looking behind them for signs of pursuit. Quick, though he stuck out his tongue and puffed with

exertion, didn't otherwise show any signs of fatigue.

They had climbed for only 15 minutes when they heard a screech below them.

They had been spotted.

A line of Insectoids could be seen making their way to the mountain.

"We've got to hurry," said Croft. He estimated that they had maybe a 25 or 30 minute advantage, and the Insectoids were better climbers than humans were. Well, it would have to be enough.

They rapidly gained altitude as they climbed. The snowcapped peak loomed some distance above them.

"It's getting colder," said Shakey. "What if the path is snowed out at the top?"

"That's what I'm counting on," said Croft. He looked down. At this point in the trail the path wound beneath a narrow set of walls. Croft could faintly hear buzzing from their pursuers below them. Looking around, he saw a nearby boulder perched on a ledge. It wasn't large, for a boulder, about as high as Croft's waist, but it looked reasonably heavy.

"Why are you stopping?" said Shakey.

"Keep going," said Croft. "I'll catch up in a minute." He gave the boulder a push, and then another. In a moment, it was rolling down the path.

"What were you doing back there?" said Shakey, as Croft caught up.

They heard loud shrieks behind them.

"Just giving the bugs at the head of the line something to think about,"

Croft commented.

They kept climbing but the cold and the fatigue were taking their toll.

Several times Shakey wanted to collapse from exhaustion, but all Croft had

to do was to make him listen to the approaching buzzing sounds to get him to get moving again.

Finally, with the Insectoids in sight behind them, they reached the first bank of snow. Croft found that his teeth were clattering as an icy wind gripped him. He hadn't come equipped for this.

Shakey collapsed near the snowbank.

"Just a little farther!" Croft said.

"What? They're almost caught up to us," said Shakey.

"Just a little farther," Croft repeated, through clattering teeth.

They continued climbing. By this time it was close to nightfall. The sun was creating long shadows along the mountain face. Their pursuers could be seen behind them in the distance.

Finally Shakey collapsed in the snow. "I need a rest. I can't go anymore."

"Ok," said Croft, feeling the same. But rather than collapsing he looked around. Seeing what he was looking for, he reached over for a long icicle, snapped it off, and waited.

And waited.

Very, very slowly the line of Insectoids got closer. They were moving extremely slowly now. As they got closer, Croft saw that it wasn't even a line, but bunches of two's and three's. And the bunches of two's and three's became one's and two's as some of the Insectoids stopped moving and others leapfrogged.

Seven Insectoids closed within 20 feet. Five Insectoids closed within 15 feet. Four Insectoids closed within 10 feet. Two Insectoids closed within 5 feet.

One Insectoid, shuffling very slowly, towered over Croft. It swayed back



and forth.

Croft took a step back.

The Insectoid, glaring at him, collapsed.

Croft dropped the icicle, which was freezing his hand.

He collected Shakey and Quick. "Come on," he said. "We've got to get over the other side before we freeze too."

Croft explained it to Shakey once they were over the top and on their way down. The Insectoids had mutated in such a way so that they could survive the winter cold of August. But survive didn't mean they enjoyed it.

Instead of killing them, they had only evolved to the point that the cold forced them to go into hibernation. Croft hadn't known this for a fact, but he suspected that they still must have had some vulnerability to the cold, which was why he had chosen this mountainous escape route.

When they came down the other side of the mountain the next day they were hardly safe. Insectoid patrols could be seen from time to time, undoubtedly looking for them. But it was a big forest and now that they knew that they were being searched for, Croft felt confident they could stay out of harm's way.

"What if they send all their forces against us?" said Shakey.

Croft grinned. "You forget. What month is it?"

"November. What does that have to do with anything... oh, I see."

"Come December they'll all be asleep. If I had a team of commandos, we'd stick around here until they were all asleep and cut their throats one by one."

"I hope you're not planning to stay!"

"No," said Croft. "If something goes wrong and we get killed, Gateway will be attacked without warning. They'd never have a chance. This is a good opportunity to attack them, but our first duty is to survive."

"That's the first piece of good news I've had in a while."

"Well, then steel yourself for some bad news," said Croft. "It may take us three or four months to walk home."

"Walk home? Can't we find a river heading west?"

"Maybe," said Croft. "But I didn't study the maps of Aridor that closely. I didn't think we'd be coming out this far."

"Arf!" said Quick.

"What is it, boy?" said Croft, bending down.

"Arf!" said Quick again.

"You know a river going west? You've seen the maps?"

"Arf!" A tail wagged twice.

"Well, then lead the way," said Croft.

The next two months were tedious, but not especially eventful. Croft, having gotten more than his share of adventure, was glad for the tedium. For something was bothering him. Something important. And it came to him at night, always in his dreams.

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He stood under one light, Franklin under another. The thing, a dark whirling cloud, paused for what seemed like a long time, as if trying to figure out what was what. Then it launched itself at Franklin, and screamed. Croft shut his eyes for just an instant, telling himself to be

very still... when he opened them again, the creature was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Why was he having this dream, over and over again? It was one of the most unpleasant memories of his life. If anything, he tried to bury it deep down, to never recall the horrors of his experience on the Chent ship. Finding a Chent ship was considered one of the greatest prizes there were to be found in the galaxy; but after his escape from that particular Chent ship, he never told anyone about it. He never wanted that ship, and the thing inside of it, to be found by anybody ever again.

Croft felt a touch on his arm. He jerked into awareness, and saw Shakey touching him.

"You were moaning again," said Shakey. "From the way you mumbled, 'No, no', I get the impression it wasn't a fun dream."

Croft said nothing.

"You've been having these dreams ever since we escaped from Kamatchka," said Shakey. "I can't blame you, the experience really unnerved me."

"That's not it," said Croft, shaking his head. "I've seen death before.

That's not it."

"Then what is it, then?" said Shakey.

Croft shook his head again. "I don't know. I keep getting flashbacks to... something I encountered, a long time ago. It wasn't a pleasant experience."

"Well, maybe it's one nightmarish experience triggering another."

"No," said Croft. "It's definitely, definitely something else."

They continued their long trek back to Gateway. They reached the river so expertly located by Quick and built a raft. But the path back wasn't nearly so direct, and they had to walk almost half the way home after that, though Quick located a second river that they traveled on for a week. They never doubted the dog's guidance, or interpretation of maps he had seen months earlier.

The nights were colder as December came and went and January arrived. They took precious time to stop and make makeshift blankets out of some deer that Croft skinned, using a homemade bow and arrow he constructed. Quick helped out as always by helping them locate game. By the middle of December all signs of the Insectoids disappeared. But Croft knew that they were only gone for a short time. They knew where Gateway was, and they were going to come for it.

They would come to Gateway and kill everyone they could and eat them. And there was nothing that Croft could do about it. There were far more Insectoids than there were settlers at Gateway. Though the Insectoids didn't have weapons, they had deadly claws that could be used to cut their enemies. Could they hold off so many with spears and bows and arrows? Maybe if they moved to a more defensible position, such as Mount Montalk. Their only other option was to run, but there was no way a community their size could hide from the Insectoids for very long. Their only other choice was to return to Concord, and that wasn't very much of an option either.

Or.... Or....

There was another option.

There was!

If they could get the power back, they could fight the Insectoids with lasers. But why was he thinking about getting the power back? What was it that triggered that connection?

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Benesh was in the bushes, as Croft was. Both stood very still.

Croft was under one beam of light, and Franklin was under another.

The Insectoids could see Benesh's location, but they couldn't see his.

The swirling-darkness creature existed on energy, which meant that it could get to Franklin's location, but not his.

That was the answer! That was the connection! That was the solution!

\*\*\*\*\*

In all Alliance space there was now one lifeform, one man, who knew how to restore power to August and all the other Alliance worlds suffering under the energy mist. His name was Clifford Croft, one of the Agency Eight. And all he had to do to free August was to somehow communicate his findings to the outside world.

Croft jumped up and yelled into the night at the top of his lungs, "I did it! I did it! I did it!"

"What? What? What did you do?" said Shakey, looking groggy.

Quick, who had been on watch, turned a pair of pointed ears inquiringly on Croft.

"What did I do? Nothing yet," said Croft. "Just wait and see. Just wait and see..."

They returned to Gateway a week later, in the middle of February. Croft immediately had a meeting with the senior staff.

"You were supposed to return two months ago," said General Arkik.

"Everyone thought you were dead. I knew better, of course."

"What a pleasure it is to see you alive," said Mayor Goodmon. "We'll have a banquet in your honor-"

"Hold off on the banquet, unless you want to set places for 10,000 hungry Insectoids," said Croft grimly.

"Insectoids?" said Goodmon, his face falling.

"They're here. On Kamatchka. And they'll be coming," said Croft. He told them an abbreviated version of their adventures. When he got to the part about Benesh, a number of guardsmen clenched their fists or grit their teeth.

"He was a fine man, one of the best," said Captain Kiley.

"We will avenge him," said Major Rambus grimly. "When the bugs arrive, we'll teach them a thing or two."

"They may be the one doing the teaching," said Croft. "I don't know their exact numbers, but there are more of them than there are of us, and

they're fearsome fighters, even when they're unarmed. A claw can kill almost as quickly as a laser can."

"What makes you think they'll come?" said Goodmon. "After all, they are on the far end of the continent."

"They're hungry, Mr. Mayor, and they want meat," said Croft. "Or do I have to draw you a picture?"

"Surely... surely they wouldn't... they're not animals...."

"No, they're bugs," said Croft.

"How long do we have?" Arkik asked.

"I think we have some time. It's February now. I'm guessing it will be at least another month before they're sufficiently recovered from the winter cold to head off. I'm further guessing it will take them at least three months to get here, so perhaps we have until sometime in June. But they could attack sooner."

"What do you suggest?" Arkik said.

"We can't move around like a well-supplied mobile combat force. We have to tend fields and other facilities. We can't simply roam around in the hopes they won't find us. Eventually, they will," said Croft. "What I suggest you do is create fortified positions on Mount Montalk. If you can survive anywhere, it will be there."

"You say 'you'," said Arkik. "You make it sound like you won't be with us."

"I have another idea to try," said Croft. "If you'll excuse me, I have to see Levi."

He sat down with Levi and spoke with him for a long time. When he was done

Levi nodded. "Is possible. But what use is your knowing secret if you can't get off August?"

"There's only one way I know to get off of August," said Croft. "And that's by using the teleport device hidden somewhere inside Sarney Sarittenden."

"But couldn't find."

"But maybe you could, with your detection devices," said Croft. "They might work inside Sarney. Or maybe the communications equipment would work there. One way or another, maybe we can get the word out. All we need to do is to reach one Alliance ship."

Levi nodded. "When we leave?"

"First thing tomorrow," said Croft.

"You just got back! Are not tired?"

"No time to waste, Levi," said Croft. He turned to go, and another thought occurred to him. "Oh, and Levi?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for lending me Quick. He was really quite useful."

Quick came into the room with a hop and a bounce, his ears up. "Roah!"

"You welcome," said Levi, translating.

Two small boats headed towards Concord, one with Levi and Croft and two guardsmen, and another with four more guardsmen. General Arkik had assigned Captain Kiley with some of his very best men to see that nothing happened to them. Croft was silent, with a determined look on his face. He said nothing the entire trip.



When they got to Sarney they infiltrated into the Palace through the underground entrance. There were some bandits roaming around; Captain Kiley and one of his men knocked one out.

Croft took Levi to the hallway he felt sure contained the entrance to the teleporter. When they got there he simply pointed to the wall. Levi took out one of his devices and turned it on. Then he tapped it.

Nothing.

"It doesn't work?" said Croft. He already knew that blasters didn't work inside Sarney, but he hoped that devices that used less power might.

"No," said Levi. "Lights work, but must be shielded in some way."

"This is the wall, I'm sure of it!" said Croft.

"Hm," said Levi. "Time to use other detection techniques." He reached out and actually began tapping the wall.

Tap tap. Tap tap. Tap tap.

"Here," said Levi. "Tap lighter sounding than other places."

"So it is here," said Croft. He looked at the seamless wall. "How do we open it?"

Levi shrugged.

"Levi?"

"Have no analytic equipment, not even cutting equipment," said Levi.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" said Croft. Levi was a scientific wizard, he had never just given up like this. But then, he had never before been deprived of all technology. Maybe Croft expected too much.

Levi considered. He put his hand against the wall, then said, "Open."

Nothing happened.

"Very funny," Croft growled.

"Can't do anything without equipment," said Levi.

"The Meddler Capybara got the door open without equipment, at least, I think he did," said Croft.

"Without my equipment working, not possible to say how," said Levi.

"All right," Croft sighed. It was a long shot anyway, and even if they could have gotten the teleporter working, it might have taken them to the planet of the Capybaras, where Croft would be far from welcome. They still had one more chance; the communication center at the Central Rotunda. Croft nodded to Captain Kiley; they headed off.

There were several bandits in the Central Rotunda; for once Croft didn't get involved, letting Kiley and his men clear the area. He had one, last chance now. Either they would be able to notify the fleet and save August, or they wouldn't.

When the brief battle was over Kiley reported, "I think one of them may have gotten away. We don't have much time."

"Levi?"

Levi was already pouring over the equipment. Most of it was damaged by years of abuse and neglect, but some of it still functioned. More importantly, power seemed to run through these devices.

Levi started rapidly working on a console. Suddenly there was a static sound and Levi was speaking. "Hello. Hello. This is August. Anyone out there?"

There was static in response.

"Is it working?" said Croft.

In the distance they could hear the sound of feet running.

"We have to hurry," said Kiley.

Levi frowned, turned a dial, and checked a reading.

He turned to Croft, and his face said it all.

"Comm working," said Levi. "But energy drain interrupting signal."

"Are you sure?"

"Checked receiver. Should be receiving interstellar beacons, regular star pulses. Nothing but static," said Levi. "Can talk, but interference will prevent signal from getting out of atmosphere."

Croft's face fell.

"Hurry, we have to leave, now!" said Kiley, as the sounds of footsteps came closer.

Croft dumbly let himself be led away by Kiley. But he didn't feel like he was in a hurry. There was nothing to be in a hurry about. There was no way to get word of what he knew out to the rest of the galaxy.

He had failed.

As Croft let Kiley's men hustle him down a hallway, he reflected on the irony of it. He knew the answer; he knew the solution to their problem; but he would never be in a position to tell anyone who could help them with it.

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## Part II: The Alien Incursions

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## Chapter 7: Picking Up the Pieces

The Time: Right after Queen Zsst's attack on August, Four Years Earlier

"I tell you, Obe, it's discrimination."

Command Captain Idaho J. Took took a sip of his gauche and made a face.

The gauche on the Royal Oak was, if possible, worse than that on the Glory. The events of the past week flashed by him.

He and his wingman, Kato Obe, had been the first on the scene when they found the Glory, floating in space. The War Admiral had ordered the ship evacuated and then steered a course directly towards the giant Chent ship which threatened to destroy August. The War Admiral had planned to set the ship to self destruct when he got close enough, in the hopes of destroying the Chent ship as well.

But the giant Chent ship, apparently under the command of their dreaded enemy, Queen Zsst, simply turned around before encountering the Glory, and hadn't been seen in known space since.

Took and Obe landed in one of the Glory's large landing bays. It was eerie how empty it was; but the crew, of course, was gone. As they made their way to the bridge Took noticed anew how much battle damage the ship had suffered during two decades of flight from the Insectoids, and then again during the subsequent battles to push the bugs out of Alliance space.

When they got to the bridge, a single man sat in the center chair, waiting for them.

"About time, gentlemen," said the most brilliant war strategist of all time.

That was none other than the legendary War Admiral Norman North.

"And what's the first thing he did to thank me?" said Took. "He demoted me! What do you have to say to that, Obe?"

"You were the one who didn't want to be promoted in the first place," said Obe. "And as the War Admiral explained, since the size of the fleet has shrunk, there are fewer higher ranks to go around. I mean we have what, only three carriers left, two if you don't count the Glory, right?"

The Glory was under heavy repair and likely would be in that condition for months. The attack on the Insectoid fleets had taken their toll, but an even heavier toll had been taken by the ravaging Chent ship, which destroyed everything in its path. The first thing the War Admiral did after being rescued from the Glory was to transfer to the carrier Royal Oak. He quickly convened a meeting with senior staff, with some arriving in person but most participating in holo, while the Glory started to restaff and make repairs.

The War Admiral began. "Gentlemen, here is our situation. The Chent ship has hit nearly all of our planets with the energy mist suppressor."

He paused to let that sink in. Not only did that mean that none of their planets had electricity, or modern conveniences, but everyone would be trapped on those planets, cut off from outside contact.

"Of the 107 worlds comprising the former Alliance, 102 of them have been hit by the suppressor."

There was a murmur in the room. Most of the participants already knew

this, but hearing it spoken aloud was still a shock.

"Five planets remain untouched--Greenfields, Irplo, Erratta, Herefor and Pushkin. A few very small colony worlds survived untouched, but most don't have populations greater than a few thousand, and no industry to speak of."

"Of the five untouched planets, all except Irplo are major industrialized worlds," said the War Admiral. "But, more crucially, only one of them has a shipyard in orbit, Herefor. We have only one shipyard throughout the entire Alliance space to build and service our ships."

He paused to let that sink in. "Our ship situation isn't much better. Many of our ships were damaged or destroyed in their engagement with the large Chent ship. It is estimated that we have no more than 28 combat ready ships, with 44 more so badly damaged as to be inoperable. Of those 28, fourteen have varying degrees of damage but are functional."

"Are they being sent to the shipyard on Herefor for repairs?" asked Admiral Raymond Landry. He was the highest ranking Admiral in the former Directorate fleet. The Directorate had been the copartners with the League to form the Alliance. The Directorate had been led by the legendary Steven Quick, who was now nowhere to be seen, so Admiral Landry was now the senior officer in charge. Technically, all ships, Directorate and Alliance, were under the War Admiral's united command, but there had been friction in the past between the two.

"No," said the War Admiral. "We are not sending the damaged ships there. Our number one priority is to begin a crash program to build new warships. In our present state we could barely handle a single Insectoid fleet without significant risk."

"What about the shipyard at Quick's secret base?" asked General Karn, the defacto ruler of Pushkin. "What about Quick himself?"

"Quick is... gone," said the War Admiral. "I don't know where he went. We also have no way of contacting the shipyard at the remote base. It's so far out it would take years for a message to reach them."

Quick, with the help of some aliens, had set up a remote base many years outside of Alliance space to build up their forces for the eventual counterattack against the Insectoids. But the base was so far away that conventional transmissions, much less sending a courier ship, would take years. And as for Quick himself he had just gone. How the War Admiral wished his brilliant friend were still here.

"What about these aliens who helped us?" said another officer, Admiral Harkness. "Where are they hiding?"

"We haven't been able to get in touch with them either," said North. "It appears, gentlemen, that we're on our own. Our immediate concern is to secure the perimeter of Alliance space. It's not an easy task with so few ships. The initial reports indicate no sign of Insectoid forces within range of any of our ships."

"What about this Chent battleship?" asked Admiral Landry. "Is it true it simply turned around and ran away?"

"Yes," said the War Admiral.

"Do you have any idea why?" Landry asked.

The War Admiral shook his head. He remembered the scene vividly. He had expected to die on the Glory as he set the ship to self-destruct as the giant Chent ship closed on his position... and then, it had simply turned

around, left, without further announcement. No one had seen the Chent ship since.

"We can't count on their sudden good intentions," said Admiral Dayja.

"They could be massing for another attack."

"Agreed," said the War Admiral. "That's why I've ordered around the clock shifts at Herefor to build new ships. In addition, a number of civilian ships survived, and we're looking into whether they can be converted into attack vessels."

"What's the situation with the energy mist?" That came from Captain Stacy Wren, the former and soon-to-be-again Captain of the Glory. She had been one of the few captains invited to the meeting. She was the War Admiral's girlfriend, but that had nothing to do with it; the captains of all the few capital ships remaining were present, live or in holo.

"We've modified sensors so we can detect it," said the War Admiral. "At least we won't have any more ships running into it unaware. It seems to latch onto the atmosphere of planets where it's detonated on, and the surrounding space as well. The mist seems to move with the planets as they rotate around the suns. "

"What's it doing to the population of those planets?" Wren asked.

"Our scientists have done long range scans; as far as we can tell, it doesn't have any effect on the people, but it's admittedly hard to tell," said the War Admiral. "If it is killing them off in large numbers, it doesn't seem to be doing so very quickly. So far as we can tell, it only seems to be inhibiting the use of power."

"How can people survive without power?" another captain asked.

"People survived without power for thousands of years," said the War



Admiral. "They would have to revert to a simple agrarian life, and it wouldn't be easy, but it's certainly possible."

"And there's no way to make contact with them?" the captain asked.

"Holosignals don't seem to penetrate the mist, but our scientists are still working on it," said the War Admiral. "Our number one priority is to guard the five remaining planets, and that's where I've deployed the fleet, with our two biggest ships in the best condition, the Royal Oak and the Blue Luna, in position to guard the orbital shipyard on Herefor. We'll assess the situation further and have another meeting in 24 hours. That will be all, gentlemen."

There was indeed another meeting the following day, and the day after that, and then once every few days as it turned out there was little new to report. On the five planets they were able to land on there were signs of devastation everywhere from two decades of Insectoid occupation; but most of the population and much of the infrastructure had survived, and those planets started the painful task of rebuilding.

The situation was probably much worse on the planets affected by the energy mist, but there was no way of assessing their situation, and nothing that could be done, aside from long range scans.

Of the Insectoids no further sign was seen. Their spacegates had been destroyed, but at least one of their ships, the giant Chent battleship, could still be in the area. But as the days turned into weeks without sightings, it seemed that no attack was imminent. The Chent ship had simply... disappeared.

After two months of emergency repairs the Glory was ready to return to duty. The ship was still damaged and it didn't have the operational speed or fully functional armament of the old days, but it functioned. It could only travel at half its former top speed; two of the main turrets and a number of the secondary ones had been knocked out; and there was damage everywhere, but the ship could move, and it could land, service, and launch fighters once again.

Several more months passed. The War Admiral pressed Professor Stevenson and the other researchers to find a way to neutralize the energy mist. But they seemed to have no progress with their goal.

"Every probe we send into the mist, no matter how well shielded, no matter what energy source it uses, is simply neutralized," said Stevenson.

The War Admiral frowned. "It sounds like insulating the energy source won't work. But what about finding out ways of dissipating the mist?"

"We're working on it, but to be honest, we don't have a clue," said Stevenson. "We don't even know what this energy mist is composed of or how it works. Remember that this is a Chent weapon, and far above our technology. We could really use some help from the Chent about now."

The War Admiral gave a bitter nod. That had been their original purpose in striking out from Alliance space, to find Chent technology to use against the Insectoids. Things hadn't quite worked out that way, though they had found the help they needed to overthrow the Insectoids. But where was that help now?

"Keep working on it, Professor," said the War Admiral.

As the Professor left his office, the War Admiral got a buzz. "Yes?"

"Sir, we have someone to see you," said Captain Wren.

"Who is it?"

"He claims to be the President of the League," said Wren.

The President of the League? But Hov Marshall was long since dead, killed at the battle of Vitalics.

"Send him in," said the War Admiral, genuinely curious.

A middle aged man entered the room. "Ah, War Admiral, finally, so good to meet you," said the man, extending a hand.

The War Admiral just stared at it, and him. "And you are...?"

"Sorry," said the man, lowering his hand. "I thought I would be introduced. The name is Zorin, Roger Zorin."

The War Admiral thought quickly. "The Zorin-"

"No, just a distant relation," said Zorin. "I'm actually deputy chief water commissioner of Greenfields."

"But Captain Wren said-"

"Ah, yes, President of the League. She should have said 'Interim President'," said Zorin. "Are you familiar with the League constitution, Admiral?"

"To a certain degree," said the War Admiral guardedly.

"Amendment 209(g) states, and I quote 'Should the leadership become decapitated, leadership shall devolve to the highest ranking executive officeholder.'"

The War Admiral simply stared at him.

"Since I am the highest ranking office holder, that makes me President," said Zorin.

"Let me get this straight," said the War Admiral. "You're a water commissioner-"

"Deputy water commissioner-"

"And because you say you're the highest ranking executive branch official remaining, that you deserve to be President."

"More or less," said Zorin. "It says as much in the Constitution. As this is a League ship and you are a League officer, you are sworn to obey."

"I don't know if you've taken a look around lately but the Alliance, much less the League, has suffered a slump lately," said the War Admiral. "Most Alliance worlds aren't even accessible."

"But four of the five accessible worlds, with the exception of Pushkin, are League worlds, so that makes it my business," said Zorin. He gauged North's expression. "I'm not asking to be appointed dictator. And the constitution requires new elections to be held within six months."

"Hm. . . .," said the War Admiral. "Let me give it some thought."

And then, because he did give some thought, he consulted with his closest confidants, Captain Stacy Wren and Admiral Roger Dulin.

"What do you think?" he said.

"It's a joke," said Wren. "Making a water commissioner President.

President of what, four ruined worlds? It's a double joke."

"He does have a constitutional claim," said the War Admiral. "I've done some quick checking. So far, on the four League planets we can't find any other federally appointed officials who rank as highly. Which, after 20 years of occupation, isn't surprising."

"There really isn't much left of the League," said Wren. "I say we should

scrap it and start over."

"I see," said the War Admiral. His eyes flickered to the right. "Roger?"

Dulin frowned. "I agree that his claim is tenuous, but acknowledging his claim would help give us legitimacy."

"Legitimacy?" said Wren. "What kind of legitimacy do we need?"

"Political legitimacy," said Dulin. "I think he could be of great help.

Right now we need capable civilian administrators. We're soldiers, not administrators-"

"Speak for yourself," said Wren. She used to be the colony civil administrator on Ulos, before she joined the space forces.

"All right, but most of us aren't," said Dulin. "Just what sort of power would we be giving him anyway? Most of his efforts would be focused on reconstruction, and chances are that a civilian infrastructure could do a better job than we could."

"My thoughts precisely," said the War Admiral. "I've had misgivings about civilian control. Civilian control is what led us into this disaster at Vitalics. But we're in a different situation now, and we can use all the help we can get. In any event, his appointment would only be temporary, until elections are held."

"And if he gets out of line?" said Wren.

"We'll see," said the War Admiral.

Reconstruction continued. There was a celebration when the first new ships came off the assembly line at the Herefor shipyards--a pair of fast attack destroyers. One of them was named the Suny Blue and put under the command

of Tens Zender, one of the few captains to escape the disaster at Vitalics. He had been in command of another destroyer named the Suny Blue, which had been crippled during the battle to liberate Alliance space from the Insectoids, so his new command seemed fitting.

There continued to be no sign of the Insectoids. While most of the population of the Alliance was trapped on their respective planets, at least things were quiet. In fact, things might have gone without incident if it weren't for the first of the alien abductions.

It started on one of the small colony worlds that hadn't been touched by the energy mist, ironically named Mistfall, population 402.

The first thing they knew about it was when they received cries for help. An alien attack.

The Glory herself came to investigate. When they arrived, they found not so much of an invasion but a puzzle.

Aliens had landed on Mistfall. No, not Insectoids. What did they look like? No one knew. They wore silvery looking spacesuits with dark faceplates. They were humanoid in form, but if they were human, they'd have no need to wear spacesuits in Mistfall's atmosphere. They took four colonists by force... and then they left.

They were still analyzing this report when, two days later, there was another report of an abduction from another small colony world.

This time the Suny Blue happened to be on the scene. It scanned a small, cylindrical shaped ship breaking orbit. The Suny Blue moved to close in on the ship... and it simply speeded away, at such a quick velocity that the Suny Blue seemed to be standing still by comparison.

The War Admiral, studying holos of the scans of the cylindrical ships and

the growing reports of the abductions, said, "I think we have a problem."

## Chapter 8: Search for the Alien Abductors

"Why me, sir?"

"You always ask me that, Iday, and I always struggle to come up with an answer."

Command Captain Idaho J. Took was in the War Admiral's private office on the Glory.

"Seriously sir," said Took. "Investigating aliens? I'm a fighter pilot.

Isn't this a job for internal security, or the Agency?"

"For all intents and purposes the Agency no longer exists," said the War Admiral. "We've been trying to locate any of their agents on the four League worlds, but so far haven't had any luck. Someone like our mutual friend Clifford Croft would be perfect for this."

"Where is he, sir?"

"Our last reports indicated he was on his way to being extracted from August when the energy mist hit," said the War Admiral. "He's either dead, or trapped there."

"So why me?" said Took.

"You've proven your investigative skills in the past," said the War Admiral. "We're building a new bureau of investigations, but until we have experienced operatives, I'm putting my bets on you. Look into the situation and see what you can find out."

"Where should I begin?" Took asked.

"You can start at the site of one of the most recent attacks," said the War Admiral. "Currents."

Currents was a small colony world on the other side of Alliance space from Mistfall. To demonstrate the seriousness of the situation, the War Admiral dispatched Took on one of his most formidable ships, the pocket battleship Blue Luna, commanded by the irascible Myster Harkness. At Took's request, his wingman Kato Obe accompanied him.

They took their fighters down to Currents while the Luna stayed in orbit.

"It was awful, Mr. Took," said a middle aged woman named Risa Venacular.

"They landed their ship at the edge of town. We walked over to have a look, and they just zapped us."

"Zapped?" said Obe.

"Some sort of ray. It paralyzed us," said Venacular. "We dropped to the ground. We weren't unconscious, but couldn't move. Then those... things came over to us."

"Things?"

"They were wearing silvery spacesuits. One of them came over... and leaned over me." Venacular shivered.

"What happened then?" Took asked.

She paused, trying to regain her composure. Took waited patiently.

Finally, she said, "It was wearing a dark faceplate. I couldn't see inside, but it could see me. It stood, staring, inches from my face, and there wasn't anything I could do but blink. I.... I.... " She continued to shiver.



"I know this is difficult," said Took. "But we need to know everything that happened."

"He.. it... used some sort of machine that buzzed. Ran it over my body. Then it looked at me again, through that faceplate... I felt sure it was going to kill me," said Venacular. She stopped speaking again.

"What happened then?"

"After a while it stood up, walked away. I heard more sounds of walking around, then some screaming."

"Screaming? I thought you were all paralyzed?"

"We were," said Venacular. "I couldn't see what was happening. But a little while later I heard their ship taking off, and shortly after that my muscles started responding again. We all got up, and found that three of us were missing."

Obe nodded. "I have the names here. Is there anything else you can tell us?"

Venacular shook her head, obviously terrified. "What are they, Mr. Took?

And what do they want with us?"

"I don't know," said Took. "But we are going to try to find out."

They walked to the clearing where the ship had landed. An investigation team led by Professor Stevenson was scanning intently.

"What use will that serve?" said Took. "The alien ship is gone. I could tell you that without instruments."

Stevenson gave Took a glare. "We're looking for any chemical or spectrometric clues that might help us track the alien ship."

"And?"

"So far, nothing," said Stevenson, looking at his scanner. His eyebrows raised. "Wait."

"What?" said Took.

"I'm picking up a trail of Kaye particles," said Stevenson.

"Kaye particles... Kaye particles," said Took, trying to sound scholarly.

"What are Kaye particles?"

Stevenson replied without looking up from his scanner. "All you need to know is that if these readings check out, we'll be able to use them to trace your friends."

"Not my friends," Took snorted.

"We've transmitted the readings on these Kaye particles," said Took, speaking by holovision to the War Admiral. "The Professor says that these kinds of particles tend to decay after a few hours or a few days, depending on their concentration, and that may help us catch one of these ships."

"Where does the ship's trail lead?" the War Admiral asked.

Took shook his head. "It dissipates before it gets out of the solar system."

"Well, keep trying," said the War Admiral. "I'll disperse more ships to be on the lookout for these Kaye particles. What else have you learned?"

"Not much, sir," said Took. "I interviewed one of the people who had seen them. All we know is that they wear spacesuits like we do, so are probably humanoid."

"But also probably not human. What do you make of their intentions?"

"Abduction is seldom a friendly act in most cultures," said Took. "But that's all they seem to be doing, making abductions."

"Do you think it's a prelude to invasion?" the War Admiral asked.

"Possibly, but if so they're going about it the wrong way," said Took.

"Explain."

"The way I see it, if a new race is going to attack us, first of all they would scout us out more surreptitiously, without giving warning that they're there," said Took. "And secondly, they would scout out our military installations. The people they've abducted--in this raid a doctor, farmer, agronomist, and an administrator--don't know anything that would be useful to invaders."

"And your conclusion?"

"They want something from us, but what it is isn't clear," said Took.

"Also, that scan of the ship you relayed to us... it didn't look like any warship. At least, not any warship I recognized. They're small, and their speedy."

"Perhaps they're just advance scouts," said the War Admiral.

"Maybe," said Took. "But I don't think what they're after are our military plans."

"I would tend to agree," said the War Admiral.

"Great minds think alike, eh, War Admiral?"

The War Admiral looked at Took, as if noticing him for the first time.

"Continue with your investigation, Command Captain."

Elections were held six month after acting President Zorin was sworn in.

To no one's surprise, Zorin won. The entire political class had been decimated, and although others had run against Zorin, none of the voters on the four League planets had heard of any of them. Zorin, on the other hand, had used his office to maintain a very public profile, and campaigned vigorously to elect other members of the legislature who would support him.

Since August, the traditional capital, was no longer available, the first congress of the new session was held in the cramped planetary legislature on Greenfields. (The planetary legislature, in turn, bumped the largest national legislature out of its chamber, and so on and so on, until the lowest level county legislature down the line was forced to expropriate a local holothheater for the duration.)

Zorin took office promising a speedy rebuilding and generous benefits to the weary populace of Greenfields, Irplo, Erratta, and Herefor. Pushkin, formerly Sluria, the fifth major planet not currently dampened by the mists, didn't figure into this because it was not, strictly speaking, an Alliance planet. It was only an associate member of the Alliance, having joined when the old Slurian Union had been toppled, but was governed independently. After the chaos caused by the departure of the Insectoids, an experienced former Slurian General and resistance fighter, Stylus Karn, had stepped in and now ruled Pushkin.

And of course the few small colony worlds that escaped the mist didn't matter much either, as they didn't have voters, nor full planetary status to elect senators. So Zorin had focused his campaign on Greenfields, Irplo, Erratta, and Herefor, and it was no surprise when elected that he set the seat of government on Greenfields, his home planet.

One of the first acts of the legislature was to extend the term of all the politicians from four to six years "in the interests of greater stability" and to give themselves retroactive pay raises "to help cope with the continuing emergency."

Revenues began to be collected again and government started to spend those revenues and more. Slowly, things were returning to normal. Not that normalcy could be restored over night; the industrial bases of those four planets had been seriously damaged, and there were constant food shortages, though no one starved. But sacrifices had to be made--for one thing, people had to start working again. No longer could the planetary economies afford to have 90% of their population engaged in leisure full-time. A 20 hour workweek was instituted, (reduced to 15 hours when the predictable outcry ensued).

Finally! After more months of fruitless pursuits, the Blue Luna had picked up a fresh Kaye particle trail leading to Irplo. Curiously, however, there was no alarm raised from Irplo itself. Had an alien ship landed there?

Admiral Harkness took no chances. The Luna launched its entire complement of fighters (it had one squadron) to cast a dragnet in orbit while Took, Obe, and a shuttle full of marines headed down. Sensors couldn't pinpoint the exact endpoint of the trail of Kaye particles, but it seemed to be somewhere on the southern edge of a medium sized city called Dula.

Took and Obe walked around, flanked by the marines. All they got in return was curious stares.

"Doesn't look like anything going on here," said Obe.

"Or maybe we caught them before they started snatching people," said Took.

His eyes took in the scene--buildings, people, swaying trees, a flash of silver--there!

What was that? Between two buildings? Took had only glimpsed it for a moment, but it looked like a flash of silver. His eyes could have been playing tricks on him. Still...

"Did you see that?" said Took.

"See what?" said Obe.

"Follow me," said Took, pulling his holstered blaster. No sense in taking any chances.

He and Obe entered the small alley, their weapons drawn. Down the alley Took saw a banner, suspended by a wire, flapping in the breeze. The banner was silver colored.

Obe looked at Took skeptically.

Took looked at Obe.

And then, a block down in front of them, they saw it.

A silvery figure, in the middle of the alley. Standing there, just staring at them.

Took fired his blaster into the air to alert the marines. But by the time he was done firing the silvery figure was gone. He and Obe took off at a run after it.

They caught a glimpse of silver as they reached the corner. Looking left, they saw three silvery figures, two of them dragging something around a far corner.

Took and Obe followed. As they ran closer they felt a rumble and heard a hum. When they reached the corner they found themselves on the edge of a park. And in the park was a cylindrical shaped ship. Two bodies were being

dragged into it.

Took yelled, and fired his blaster. He was still too far to hit anything, but he hoped maybe that would scare the aliens.

One of the aliens coolly looked at him (at least, it seemed he did--with those black visors it was hard to tell), raised an odd looking device, and Took felt/heard vibrations ripple over his head. Took and Obe hit the ground, still firing.

The aliens, not apparently concerned, leisurely walked into their ship.

The hatch closed. A few seconds later, the ship started to take off. ....

"Hurry, back to the fighters!" said Took.

But it was over almost as they had taken off. The ship zoomed out of the atmosphere giving the orbiting fighters a scant two seconds to get a weapons lock and fire. And by the time the Luna was bearing down on it, it was gone, halfway out of the system.

Later, after they had been debriefed, Took and Obe reflected on what had happened.

"That was pretty creepy," said Took. "I wonder what they're doing with all those people?"

"I don't think I want to guess," Obe muttered.

"Moderate revenue enhancement measures," said the War Admiral, reading the press release. "But why can't they simply say 'raising taxes'?"

"It's idiotic," snorted Wren. "The economy is in shambles. This is a time to raise taxes?"

"To fund the social welfare net," said the War Admiral. "And it looks like

they're expanding the credit supply like mad. I had worried, for a brief time, that after the occupation that politicians might have forgotten how to govern. I can see now that I had nothing to worry about."

"Seriously, Zorin is going to ruin the economy," said Wren. "I used to be a colonial administrator, remember? I know how fragile economies can be."

"What do you suggest I do, tell him to repeal the tax hikes?" said the War Admiral. "I don't think that's going to get us anywhere." He changed the subject. "I'm more concerned about these alien attacks. They've now attacked seven times on five different planets. We can't seem to catch their ships in space, which means we have to catch them in the act on the ground."

"Is Took having any luck?"

"Not much," said the War Admiral. "But he can't be everywhere at once. I've tried to coordinate with the other ground forces, but they're quick--they come in, they grab some people, and they get out. If it weren't for the Kaye particle traces, we wouldn't be able to even get close to them in time."

"Let's look at the bigger picture," said Wren. "They've abducted, what, about 30 people? That's not great, but we've got millions of people who are fighting just to keep everything together, not counting the untold billions who are trapped on their own planets without power."

"You're right," said the War Admiral. He changed the subject. "I've looked at the latest reports on the energy mist. Our progress is not encouraging."

"There is no progress," said Wren. "Stevenson and the others don't have a clue. I wish Quick were here."



"Quick was brilliant, but he was no scientist," said the War Admiral. "I'm not sure even a Gary Topol or a Levi Esherkol could figure this out."

"What about Quick's alien friends?"

"We don't know how to get in touch with them," said the War Admiral.

"Well, with most of them."

"Most of them?" said Wren quickly.

"There is one," said the War Admiral. "But he doesn't want to help."

"Doesn't want to?"

"Keep in mind, Stacy, that these are aliens, each with their own agendas.

Theirs and ours may overlap for a time, but they're not identical," said the War Admiral. "No, we're going to have to figure out how to get out of this on our own, somehow."

If Took thought the sight of humans being dragged into alien spaceships was unsettling, he was not prepared for the sight of what he saw at the site of the next alien abduction. They arrived just after it happened. But this time, instead of weeping bystanders, they were also greeted by a new site.

Four bodies.

Two from each of the first two abductions. Covered with sheets until the medical examiner arrived.

"I don't think you want to look at that, sir," said one of the local soldiers.

"You're probably right," said Took, moving past the soldier. He lifted the sheet.

The bodies were more or less intact, but the heads had been sliced, each in different ways. One looked like it had been cut by a meat slicer.

Another was in chunks. Another-

Took had to turn away violently to avoid wretching on the bodies.

"I've seen the medical examiners report. Awful," said the War Admiral simply.

"Yes sir," said Took. Obe stood besides him.

"But at least we know what they're up to," said North. "We're nothing more than lab rats for them."

"Yes sir," said Took.

The hologram of the War Admiral seemed to consider for a moment. Then he said, "Aside from the obvious physical mutilations, there may be more that can be learned. I'm having the bodies transferred to Doctor Farb here on the Glory. Maintain your investigation."

"Yes sir," said Took.

He stood at attention as the image faded, only slouching when the War Admiral's image was gone.

"What does he need me for?" said Took, speaking mostly to himself. "All I ever do is say 'Yes Sir'."

"But you do it so well," said Obe, giving a rare grin.

The War Admiral contacted them by holo a week later. Doctor Farb had uncovered some interesting findings.

"They weren't merely dissected, they were experimented on," said the War Admiral.

"What do you mean?" Took asked.

"Every cell in their skin showed evidence of trauma on a molecular level.

I don't know if you noticed, but their skin color was a bright white,"

said North. "That was symptomatic of the trauma."

"Did this... trauma kill them?"

"Doctor Farb doesn't think so," said the War Admiral. "But they did show obvious signs of having experiments performed on them."

"What kind of experiments? Trying to find our weak points?" said Took.

"Possible," said the War Admiral. "Or maybe they're trying to find a cure for a disease. Either way, using our people for lab rats isn't acceptable."

"We'll keep up the search, sir."

"Good," said the War Admiral. "North out."

They continued the investigation. But it was only two weeks later that they came up with a finding that made their jaws drop. Took was so surprised that he had the sensor officer on the Blue Luna check it twice. But there was no mistake.

He signaled the War Admiral immediately.

"Yes?" said the War Admiral's holoimage.

"Sir... we've detected a Kaye particle trace coming from one of our planets..."

"You called just to tell me that?" said the War Admiral. "Did you pursue it?"

"No sir."

"Why not?"

"The trail was coming from Whenfor."

Whenfor. One of the Alliance planets that had been hit by the energy mist.

And an alien ship had apparently effortlessly gone in there, landed, taken captives, and left.

The War Admiral understood the implications immediately. "Their ships are immune to the energy mist." His mind was racing. "With that kind of technology, they might even know how to dissipate the energy mist." He faced Took eye to eye. "It's more vital than ever that you capture one of those alien ships. Restoring the freedom of our planets may depend on it."

"Yes sir. Oh, and sir?"

"Yes?"

"Is there any way you can put any additional pressure on me?" Took asked.

"I could really use more."

The War Admiral waved his hand dismissively. "Get going, Iday," he said, as his image faded.

## Chapter 9: The Loss of Obe

"I hardly find corruption to be surprising," said the War Admiral.

"On this scale?" said Captain Wren. "Public works projects are awarded at enormous prices to Zorin's buddies."

"Standard."

"20% of the revenue collected has simply disappeared!"

"A little overenthusiastic," the War Admiral admitted.

"And holoreporters who are uncovering these details have been arrested."

"That's going a bit over the line," said the War Admiral. "Let me read the report on it and speak to him."

The War Admiral did, and then he attempted to make contact with President Zorin. But the League President was busy; a flunkie offered to take a message.

Grinding his teeth, the War Admiral asked to schedule an appointment. The flunkie indicated that there was a five minute opening three weeks from now and should he write the War Admiral in?

"Not necessary," said the War Admiral. "The invaders will be firmly in place on Greenfields by then."

"Invaders?"

"Yes," said the War Admiral. "Could you just pass along a message? That invaders typically target offices of government administration. Could you do that? Thank you."

"Wait!" said the flunkie. "Let me get him." He pressed a button. "Get me the Capitol lounge, and hurry!"

In a moment the holoimage of Zorin appeared on the screen. He was wearing a polo outfit and was in the process of removing a boot.

"What's this about an invasion, War Admiral?"

"I don't know," said the War Admiral.

"My assistant mentioned something about an invasion."

"I was speaking in hypotheticals, perhaps he misunderstood," said the War Admiral.

Zorin glared at him. "Was there something you wanted? I'm very busy."

"I can see that," said the War Admiral smoothly. "It's come to my attention that you've been arresting journalists."

"I don't see why that should come to your attention," said Zorin. "That's hardly a military matter."

"I thought you were going to preserve the liberties we've become accustomed to," said North.

"Look around you, War Admiral, does the situation look normal?" said Zorin. "Our economy is still in shambles. Ninety-five percent of our worlds are inaccessible. Emergency measures are sometimes needed, to ensure stability."

"I think by arresting journalists you may not get the stability you're looking for," said the War Admiral.

"Are you threatening me, War Admiral?" said Zorin.

"No," said the War Admiral. "What I meant is that you may lose the confidence of the populace. Bad public relations and all that"

Zorin relaxed. "Oh. I see what you mean. Well, I had no idea that anyone was being detained. Perhaps it was the overzealous action of one of my subordinates."

"Of course."

"I'll look into it, War Admiral," he said.

The War Admiral nodded, and Zorin cut the connection.

Captain Wren, who had been standing just outside the range of the pickup, said, "He didn't used to be like that. In the first six months before the election, he was much more... subdued."

"That was before he solidified his hold on power," said the War Admiral.

He sighed. "I think this may be the beginning of trouble."

"I've only been saying that for what, over a year now?" said Wren.

"I don't know, Obe, how can we possibly predict it?" said Took. He and Obe were eating in the messhall on the Blue Luna.

"They always seem to get the jump on us," said Obe. "The only way to catch them is to be there before they strike."

"Swell," said Took. "There are a little over 100 planets in the Alliance. Most we can't even land on because of the energy mist."

"That's not true," said Obe. "There are a number of small colony worlds that have also been attacked."

"And how do you propose to find which one to go to?" said Took. "By the time we spot a Kaye trail, they're already on their way out."

"Gee Mr. Took, I couldn't help but overhear your problem," said a new voice.

They turned to see Billy Holiday, kid genius. He was actually no longer a kid, but still talked like one. He was currently posted to the Blue Luna as a troubleshooter, working on upgrades to the ship's computer.

"Yes, Billy, I don't see why I didn't come to you sooner," said Took. "We have a problem. We have to figure out which of 150 planets the aliens are going to attack next that doesn't have the energy mist surrounding us. Can you get us the answer by dinner?"

Billy considered. "Gee, I don't know, it sounds a bit complex. Would tomorrow morning be ok?"

Took looked at Obe, who looked back at him. Then both looked at Billy.

"You're kidding, right?" said Took.

"Just give me the data," said Billy. "I'll see what I can come up with."

So they gave Billy the data about the victims and the planets where the abductions had occurred.

They were just getting ready for dinner when Billy came up to them.

"Hey Billy, got the answer already?" said Took sarcastically.

"Gee Mr. Took, how did you know?" said Billy.

"You can't be serious," said Took.

"Come with me," said Billy.

He took them to the computer room, and punched up a series of starcharts.

"See, they hit there, and there, and there. There's a logarithmic pattern to it."

"Huh?" said Took.

Billy pushed a series of buttons, and sure enough, he had turned the incursions into a predictable mathematical equation.

"It's all a function of location, size of the colony, kind of atmosphere, and location of previous attack," said Billy.

"How reliable is this... equation?"

"Well, gee, it predicted all the previous attacks."

"Well, that's something," said Took. "But what about future ones?"

"The next attack will be here," said Billy, pointing a bony finger at a small colony world named Chach. "But you have only two days. Can you guys get there-" he turned around, but Took and Obe were gone.

The Luna headed at full speed to Chach. Harkness yelled at the chief engineer every several hours to go even faster. He even threatened to put Billy in charge of engineering if they didn't get to Chach in time.

Harkness knew from experience how reliable Billy could be.



When they finally got to Chach, Took and Obe were launching even before they were at extreme range.

But their sensors, keyed to the Kaye particles, detected nothing. Had they gotten there before the aliens? Or were the aliens simply not coming?

They got their answer just as they reached orbit, with the alien ship zooming past the Blue Luna towards the planet, where Took and Obe were already in orbit.

Took and Obe maneuvered their Wildcat 150-B's to intercept, though Took knew it was futile. What they needed now was the Ken Pilot; he would have the reflexes to shoot down that thing. Where was the Ken Pilot? Probably trapped on Graftonite like all the other maniac gunslingers.

The alien ship slowed down as it entered the upper atmosphere. Maybe they would have a chance to take a shot at it.

Took and Obe closed on the alien ship. But then, just as they got within maximum weapon's range in the upper atmosphere, a bright light stabbed out at them, illuminating Obe's ship.

"Obe? Obe?" said Took over the comm. There was no answer. Took locked weapons on target. He fired at extreme range, and missed.

And then there was a light filling his cockpit. He heard a strange pitched whine. The light was very bright. And then he couldn't move.

And then he was somewhere else. In a room, tied down on a laboratory chair. Aliens in silver spacesuits with dark face platings were walking towards him, carrying lethal looking objects in their hands.

They moved around his table. One of them reached out and passed a device over his face. It gave off a high intensity whine, so loud that Took

wanted to cover his ears, but he couldn't-

"Took! Took! Level off!"

Took blinked and found himself back in the cockpit, and a large mountainous landmass ahead of him. He banked up sharply, and just missed a peak, scraping some trees in the forest.

"What happened?" Took gasped.

"They had you in that light after they turned it off of me," said Obe. "I fired at them, which I think forced them to turn off the beam."

"But I was in the upper atmosphere... how long was the light on me?"

"A few minutes."

A few minutes? It had only been on Obe for a few seconds.

"Did you hit it?"

"No, but I got some near misses," said Obe. "It's pretty nimble. It's landed now, and I have a position on it."

"Then let's go," said Took.

Perhaps because Chach colony was so small, one town on the entire planet they found themselves greeted by what security forces there were upon landing.

"We're responding to your call," said their leader, a bearded man named Ircan. "Are there really aliens out there?"

"Believe me, you don't want to find out firsthand," said Took grimly.

"Let's go."

They walked through the village, heading towards where Obe thought the alien ship had landed. But Chach was a lush jungle planet; an alien ship could hide a few dozen feet in any direction and avoid detection.

"I'm picking up a large metal concentration that way," said Obe, using his

scanner.

"Let's go," said Took.

They fanned out, forming a line. Ircan only had a dozen men with him. Took hoped that would be enough. It would take at least a half hour for reinforcements to get down to the planet surface from the Luna.

Took walked through the jungle, alert to any noise. The problem was that the jungle was so teeming with wildlife that there was noise in just about every direction. Suddenly he caught a flash in the distance, as if the sunlight had reflected off of something bright.

Took caught Ircan's eye, and made an encirclement gesture with his hands.

He did the same with Obe, who was on the other side of him.

They started forward. If they could flank the enemy, maybe they could even capture one of them.

Suddenly, a silvery shape stepped out from behind a tree. It fired some kind of weapon, just as Took ducked behind a tree. He felt sudden vibrations from the tree, as if something had just given it a shaking.

When the vibrations suddenly stopped he stepped out from behind cover, firing even before he locked onto a target. His streaming blaster fire caused the alien to seek cover.

They continued trading fire for several minutes. Took wondered where Ircan's men were. Then, to his far right, he saw them, slowly encircling the alien.

The alien did too. It started to fall back.

Ircan's men unleashed a blistering blaster assault. But the alien fired its ray gun, forcing them to keep down. They pressed the attack as best

they could, while the alien worked its way back to its ship.

Before the alien reached the ramp, they saw another alien appear from around the side of the ship, dragging a body. They fired at the alien, but it was too nimble, pulling the body inside the ramp. And then the other alien ran in, and the ramp closed.

Their sizzling blaster fire resounded against the hull. They heard a loud roar, and the ship started to take off.

"Back to the ship, Obe!" Took yelled. He looked around.

"Obe?"

It took him five minutes of looking to convince himself.

Obe was gone.

That was the body they had dragged on to their ship.

By the time Took had returned to his fighter it was all over. The alien ship had evaded pursuit. They tried following its Kaye particle trail, but that gave out after two days. It was as if the aliens knew they were following the trail and could dim their emissions when needed. Perhaps they only needed to move more slowly to do so.

"Don't blame yourself, Iday," said the holoimage of the War Admiral.

"I don't seem to have gotten anywhere," said Took. "I've been investigating this for nearly two years, and the only thing I've managed to accomplish is to lose my best friend."

"Don't be harsh on yourself," said the War Admiral. "I have other investigative teams in the fields and none of them have managed to uncover a fraction of the leads you have." He paused.

"Yeah," said Took. "Sir, I request permission to resign from this investigation."

"Permission denied," said the War Admiral. He considered. "You'll need a replacement for Lieutenant Obe. I have just the ticket, and I'm sending her over in a long-range Trobadore-B."

"Sir-"

"Keep on it, Took. I'm not taking no for an answer." Without waiting for a response, the image of the War Admiral faded.

"Swell," said Took.

Took restrained himself from thinking about the loss of Obe. Loss. Was Obe dead? Dissected?

No time to think about that, he told himself. Every minute could count now.

He went to see Billy Holiday, and asked him a single question.

"Currents," said Holiday.

"Are you sure? They've already hit there twice," said Took.

"That's what the mathematical model says," said Holiday. "Gee, are you ok?"

Took called the bridge and ordered them to set course. Then he allowed himself the luxury of collapsing into a chair.

"You look bad," said Holiday. "I'm sorry about what happened to your friend."

Took, his face in his hands, nodded.

"If you have time, I want to tell you about another pattern I noticed."

Took, his face in his hands, didn't respond.

"I mean, gee, I just thought you might be interested, you're always running off before I can tell you everything-"

"All right," said Took, his face still in his hands.

"I noticed a pattern in the abductions."

"Really?" said Took, not really interested.

"I mean, gee, they used to abduct a cross section of people, based on age, gender, and profession."

Took didn't respond.

"And now they're focusing on one kind of people," said Billy.

"Professionals, mostly. Smart people. No more farmers or laborers. I'll have to factor your friend in, but he was pretty smart too, wasn't he?"

Took nodded, and then suddenly he looked up. He thought back to the alien probe in the Wildcat. They had been probing his mind. They had probed his mind for several minutes; while they had only probed Obe for several seconds.

Maybe they were more interested in him than they were in Obe. Maybe they meant to capture him and got Obe instead. Maybe if he persisted they would capture him next. Maybe they would dissect him.

Obe blinked as consciousness returned. He was strapped to a table. There were weird sensors taped all over his body, and a nasty looking device strapped to his chin. To his right he could see a glass partition, where someone else was strapped into a chair. Beyond the other room was a door with a large window built into it. From there he could see two of the silvery figures.

They still wore spacesuits, even here? They must be inside one of the

aliens' bases or spaceships. Why would they still wear spacesuits here?

They could tailor any atmosphere to suit them. It didn't make sense.

One of the silvery figures stared at him, or maybe they stared at the figure across the partition. It was hard to tell with that darkened visor.

Obe wondered what they looked like under the visor. What were they hiding?

There was a sound of a faint hiss. At first Obe thought it was coming from within the room, but he realized it was from the room next door, where the other fellow was strapped in. They were pumping some sort of gas in.

From his limited vantage point he could see the person in the chair strain against his bonds. His body started to convulse and then he went limp.

They had killed him! Gassed him!

And then the man in the chair stirred. He looked around coldly, first at his captors, then at Obe. He seemed like a different person.

The silvery figures seemed to turn some controls. There was a spark as the device on the man's head cackled. Then his body glowed with sparks, and he began to scream. . . .

Took blinked as he regained consciousness. He had had a nightmare about Obe being tortured. But the voice that was calling him was quite real.

"Took? Captain Took?"

Took opened his eyes, to see a very attractive woman standing over him.

"Huh?" he said.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I thought you were going to meet me in the landing bay. I had to find my way here," said the woman.

"Uh?"

"Are you quite all right, Captain Took?" said the woman.

Took started to sit up, realized he was shirtless, and grabbed his shirt, glaring at the woman. "You must be..."

"Onnica Purser," she said, extending a hand.

Took automatically shook her hand, and the shirt dropped. He picked it up again.

"Don't worry, Captain, the simple sight of a man's chest doesn't distract me in the slightest," she said.

The War Admiral had sent her. The memory came flooding back to her.

"Seen more in what sense?" said Took, still feeling groggy as he put the shirt on.

"In my work for the Agency."

The Agency. The War Admiral hadn't told Took very much about the "help" he was sending, besides the name. "I thought you guys, ah, gals, were all gone?"

"Not all gone," said Purser. "There's a few of us that the bugs managed to miss on Greenfields."

"Lucky for us," said Took, groaning as he got up.

"Are you quite up to this, Captain?" said Purser.

"Yeah, yeah I am," said Took.

"Good," said Purser. "We're due to arrive at Currents in five hours. I expect you'll bring me up to speed so I can make proper decisions."

"Of course," said Took automatically. Then he actually thought about it.

"But you won't have to worry about the decision making part, since I'm in charge of this investigation."

"You?" said Purser. She permitted herself to look amused. "I have to



admit, Captain, you've done relatively well, for a star forces pilot. But I'm a professional-"

"-professional nudge," said Took, finally feeling the blood moving in his body again. "Advise all you like, but I'm in charge until I hear otherwise from the War Admiral."

"All right, we'll be partners," said Purser, and at that moment Took knew that she hadn't had any authority to take control of the investigation.

"Partners," Took agreed, getting up. "Except this partner makes the decisions." He started walking away.

"Where are you going? Aren't you going to brief me?"

"Uh, I am," said Took. "But the managing partner has voted to go for a steaming hot cup of gauche, first."

They arrived at Currents, flanked by a half dozen warships. Though the fleet still numbered only little more than 30 ships, the War Admiral had assigned them additional forces to aid in the hunt.

The seven ships orbited around the tiny colony world. There were actually more people in orbit than there were on the planet.

And then they sat, and waited. And waited.

"When was this landing supposed to occur, Billy?" Took asked.

"Gee, about two hours ago, Mr. Took," said Billy.

"Two hours ago," said Took hollowly.

"Sir!" said the comm officer. "Getting a report of an alien raid, on Herefor."

"Herefor?" Harkness snapped. Since that was where their only shipyard was

located, it was the most heavily defended planet in Alliance space. "And?"

The comm officer listened to the report. "They kidnapped five people, and got away."

Harkness shook his head. "We need to come up with new tactics." He turned and glared at Billy, and then at Took, just for good measure.

In the corridor outside the bridge, Took asked, "What went wrong, Billy?"

"Gee, I don't know, Mr. Took, they weren't following pattern."

"Maybe something has happened to change their pattern," said Took, remembering his own mental interrogation.

"Maybe," said Holiday. "Let me get the details of this attack and try to factor them in."

"You do that," said Took.

He started walking away, but Purser caught up to him. "Where are you going?"

"To bed," said Took.

"Are you really going to rely on this child, who has just failed us?" said Purser.

"Do you have any other ideas?" said Took.

"We should go over the data again," said Purser.

"Good idea," said Took. "I'll view the information from my holopillow."

"Redeploy the fleet?" said the War Admiral. It was three days after the attack on Herefor; the aliens had launched a subsequent attack on Greenfields, and abducted eight people.

"We are under attack!" said Zorin. "We need the fleet to protect the seat

of government."

Meaning that Zorin himself wanted more protection.

"Mr. President, I understand your reaction," said the War Admiral. "But we need the fleet dispersed if we're to have any hope of locating one of these alien ships. If the entire fleet is here at Greenfields, the aliens will be able to plunder the other planets at will."

"It seems like they've already been able to do that," said Zorin.

The War Admiral worked at keeping his temper. "The fleet is only at a fraction of its size-

"And you only have a fraction of our planets requiring defense!" said Zorin.

"-and the aliens' technology is far in advance of our own. They're so fast that they're in and out of there almost before we can get a weapons' lock," said the War Admiral.

"I don't need excuses, War Admiral. If you can't lead, I'll find someone who can," snapped Zorin. He looked challengingly at the War Admiral for a response.

The War Admiral said nothing, but stared at him, long and intensely.

Zorin withered under his gaze, as if he had been hit by a blow. "I will not be threatened!" he said.

"I will deploy several more ships to Greenfields," said the War Admiral.

"Battleships! I want battleships!" said Zorin.

"We don't have many battleships, plural. But I will send the Majestic there," said the War Admiral.

"Very well," said Zorin. "But I want you to do something about this

situation."

"I'm starting to realize that it requires more of my attention," said the War Admiral, though he was purposely ambiguous about what he was referring to.

After Zorin's image faded, the War Admiral sat in silence for a long time.

Then he punched a button.

"Stacy?"

"Yes, War Admiral?"

"Get me munitions. And then Admiral Harkness and Iday Took, in that order."

"They left behind several more people on Greenfields," said Purser.

"People? You mean bodies," said Took.

"I mean people," said Purser, showing him the report.

Took looked at it. The aliens had released several of their abductees even as they had taken new ones on Greenfields.

But they were all severely brain damaged. None of them could talk about their experiences. In fact, almost none of them could talk at all. They were all babbling idiots. The only one who could say intelligible words could only yell "The Chair! The Chair!" at the top of his lungs, but no one could figure out what he was talking about.

"Permanent brain damage," said Purser grimly. "And they all show the same sign of cellular abrasion. It's as if someone has run some kind of current through their body."

"Would that account for brain damage?"

"No," said Purser. "Whatever they're doing to the people's brains, it's

something more intensive."

"I wonder why they're returning the people after they're done with them?"

"Perhaps to scare us, to hurt our morale," said Purser.

"No," said Took. "I don't think they care about us. If they care about hurting us, why didn't they attack the shipyard at Herefor while they were there?"

"Then what other reason could there be?" said Purser. "Out of kindness, returning the people when they were done with them?"

"I don't think there's much we can ascribe to kindness," said Took.

"There's a purpose to it, as just as there's a purpose to everything they do."

They continued their pursuit of the aliens. Billy couldn't get his mathematical formula working again.

"It's as if they know what we're doing, and have adopted another pattern, or a non-pattern," said Billy.

"Don't blame yourself," said Took. "It's amazing that you managed to track them once."

"No, there's something else," said Billy. "A pattern within a pattern. I'm sure of it. I just have to figure it out."

"Whatever," said Took dully. The entire investigation bored him. The results were always the same. They had been reduced to interviewing bystanders after attacks. What use did that do? Not much.

Purser berated him for his care-free attitude. "I hoped you would show a bit more interest in your work."

"I'll show more interest when there's something to show more interest in,"

said Took. "I'm smart enough to acknowledge that we're at a dead-end."

"But not smart enough to figure your way out of it," said Purser.

"Let's wait a bit, and see," said Took.

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Obe found himself shaking. He had been poked and prodded for a very long time--days, weeks, it was hard to tell. But now he was strapped to the chair with the device under his chin. Through the window he could see the two silver suited aliens, staring at him through their dark faceplates. He wondered what they were doing.

Then he heard a hissing sound in the background. He tried to hold his breath, but he couldn't, not for very long. The spacesuited aliens watched expectantly.

When he took a breath, his head felt fuzzy. He tried to grab his head, but his hands were tied down. He felt consciousness fading... and then everything became perfectly clear.

Obe turned and stared cunningly at the silvery aliens. Nodding, one of them pressed another button. An arc of electricity came out of the chair, coursing through his entire body. But then the device below his chin activated, and that's when he couldn't help but scream....

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"A breathing tax?" said the War Admiral.

"To support the environment," said Wren critically.

"I've heard of selling air bottles in domed environments, but this is ridiculous," said the War Admiral.

"Another source of moderate revenue enhancement," said Wren. "Did you read about the arrests in the latest intel report?"

The War Admiral nodded.

"I guess that's a form of moderate dissident containment," said Wren.

"That is, if you define dissidents as journalists, dissenting politicians, and anyone else who becomes inconvenient."

"Somehow I think another talk with Zorin isn't going to help," said the War Admiral.

"I don't think talking will help at all," said Wren.

"Then what do you propose?"

Wren was silent.

"A coup," said the War Admiral. "That's all right, you can say it. As you well know, I've been kicking myself for the past twenty years for not staging one right before the armistice. If I had, the tragedy at Vitalics might never have happened."

Wren stayed purposefully silent.

"But this isn't Vitalics. The future of the Alliance isn't at stake," said the War Admiral.

"Isn't it?" said Wren. "Did you read the text of the latest Emergency Powers Act? They've assumed near dictatorial powers."

The War Admiral frowned. "Let me try talking to Zorin again."

"It isn't going to get you anywhere," Wren predicted.

She turned out to be right.

"Really, War Admiral, this is none of your affair," said Zorin. "Last I checked, your responsibilities were exclusively military."

"And protection of the democratically elected government," said the War Admiral. "Last I checked, the government had become markedly less democratic."

"Nonsense! We will have elections, in another four years on schedule," said Zorin. "Assuming that future security measures aren't needed, of course."

"Emergency measures such as suspending freedom of the press, and arresting anyone who opposes your regime?"

"Enemies of the state must be dealt with," said Zorin. He wet his lips.

"Are you tired, War Admiral?"

"Tired?"

"You've been soldiering for a long time. Have you ever considered an extended rest, or even retirement?"

"No, I have not considered retirement," said the War Admiral.

"Well, I just offer it as a friendly suggestion, if you would like others to help you carry the burden," said Zorin. He cut the signal and his signal faded.

His friendly suggestion. Zorin would replace the War Admiral in a minute if he could. But although he had the legal authority to do so, there would be a political uproar, and perhaps a mutiny, if he tried it, and Zorin knew it. No, Zorin would bide his time.

The War Admiral sighed. He was starting to think he'd have to do something about Zorin. But what, short of radical action, could he do?



"I tell you, they're going to be on Erratta," said Took.

"And I tell you that we should go to Tella," said Purser. "That's where all our top minds say they'll strike next."

"Well, my top mind says we should go to Erratta," said Took.

"The boy?"

"The boy, as you so quaintly call him, isn't a boy, and he has created more scientific wonders than you'll ever know about."

"This is not about tinkering with devices, it's about intelligence-

"of which Billy has a lot of-

"Intelligence as in covert operations-" said Purser.

"All right, all right," said Took. He appeared to soften. "Want to flip for it?"

"Flip for it?"

Took took out an old-fashioned coin. "Heads we follow my advice; tails we don't follow yours. Call for it!" He spun the coin into the air.

Purser was still digesting what he said when the coin landed on his hand.

"Heads!" called Took, just before it landed. He looked at the coin. "Well, what do you know? It's tails! You win," he said. He went to the comm. "Set a course for Erratta, top speed."

"Do you actually think you're funny?" said Purser.

"Yes, and especially with hard to please audiences," said Took.

They got to Erratta just before the alien ship arrived. That gave them time they needed to deploy the War Admiral's newest weapon. The Blue Luna

seeded the upper atmosphere with a series of explosives. The Luna was laying the last of them just as the alien ship arrived.

Took looked over at Purser. "See, I told you they'd come!" said Took triumphantly. "But noooo, you said we had to Tella!"

"Quiet!" said Harkness, glaring at him from his command chair. "This is a military operation!"

"What am I, chopped beef?" said Took.

"Security!" said Harkness.

Two guards stepped forward. "If Mr. Took speaks again before this operation is complete, shoot him."

Took looked at the serious guards flanking him. He opened his mouth to ask if they would really shoot him, but one of the guards shook his head as if to say that would be a bad idea. Took closed his mouth again.

"Status!" Harkness barked.

"We've cleared the atmosphere," said the helmsman.

"Weapons!"

"They're approaching the atmosphere, engaging atmospheric breaking," said the officer. "Either they haven't seen the mines, or they're ignoring them."

Harkness eyed the schematic on the holoscreen charting the progress of the alien ships and the positions of the mines.

"Get ready... ready..... detonate cluster four, now!"

There was a large blip on the screen as a group of mines exploded. The cylindrical ship wobbled on the monitors, then pitched about crazily. It started to fall into the atmosphere. It was going to crash!

"Don't just stand there, scramble!" Harkness barked.

Took left the bridge in a hurry. He launched just a few moments after the other of the Luna's fighters did, despite the fact that they were already on standby at the launch bay.

Once he cleared the ship he radioed in. "Status?"

"It crash landed on the northern continent. We're feeding you the coordinates now," said the comm officer. "We're sending a shuttle down with an assault team. Maintain air superiority but do not-"

"Yeah, yeah," said Took. He arrived at the crash site first, despite the fact that the other fighters had launched before him. A flyby showed that the alien ship had crashed in a field, on the edge of a forest.

The field had some relatively flat grasslands. Perfect.

There was a new crackle over the comm. "Took, you are not to land," came Harkness's voice. "Took?"

Took set down his ship. Never in all his years of pursuing the aliens did they have a chance like this, and he wasn't about to let it slip through his fingers by waiting. As he climbed out of his Wildcat 150-B he saw the alien ship smoldering in the distance through the tall grass.

As he marched closer he noticed a silvery shape exiting the ship. It saw him running through the grass and raised its weapon. Took ducked, and felt/heard vibrations in the air above him. He returned fire.

Looking up, he saw two more silvery shapes at the entrance to the ship.

More smoke was coming out of the ship now. All three were closing on his position, firing whenever he raised his head.

"Guys, could use some help here," said Took, realizing his urge to lead the charge had been a bit reckless. Overhead he saw the assault shuttle

approaching. Well, that was great. In the few minutes it would take them to land and get here the aliens could shoot and dissect him several times over.

And then another ship flew overhead, a Directorate Trobadore-A, and it raked the ground with laser fire. The Trobadore was moving fast, and the ground it chewed up was several dozen feet in front of the aliens, but they got the message, and returned to the ramp of their ship.

That delay gave the assault platoon time to reach Took's position. The platoon had brought a VIP too.

"I don't know if you're brave or an idiot," said Purser.

"We can work that out later," said Took grimly. "Covering fire!" he said, as he started to crawl towards the alien ship.

The marines raked the alien ship with blaster fire, forcing the aliens to flee into the ship. One of the was hit in the back by blaster fire, and he (it?) slumped to the ground, and had to be carried inside by its colleagues.

Good. They weren't immune to blasterfire. It was high time for some payback.

They leapfrogged one by one and made their way to the entrance of the alien spaceship. The smoke was getting thick here and their pulses were racing.

Took, pausing to catch his breath, was content to let the marines go first. But he regained enough courage to be the third person to enter the ship.

It was smokey inside too, and hard to see anything. There was blaster fire ahead, and one of the soldiers ahead of Took dropped to the ground. But

the other marine fired too, and a silvery figure dropped to the ground.

They proceeded nervously in the narrow corridors. Part of the ship was crushed, leaving them very few avenues to proceed. As they got deeper and deeper into the ship, Took became more and more uncomfortable. The corridors were very narrow, permitting only single file entry. They were on unfamiliar territory, and could be ambushed at any time.

That's just what happened when a door (or closet?) popped open and a spacesuited alien popped out. At the same time another alien jumped out from another door on the far side of the corridor.

But the marines had been well trained, despite the smoke and the surprise attack. They were firing even as the aliens were, and so was Took. He instinctively dropped into a crouching position, which may have prevented him from getting hit.

The marine in front of Took dropped, just as one of Took's blaster shots hit one of the aliens. The other alien swiveled to cover Took, just as another marine took him out.

Took stood up and looked around. They were right next to a room with a large window in it.

He stopped to pause even as marines ran past him. He looked in the window.

Kato Obe sat in a chair, looking despondent.

Took banged on the door, but Obe gave no response.

One of the marines who had gone past Took came back. "It's all fire up there, and it's spreading fast. We've got to get out of here."

"We've got to get this door open," said Took. He looked at the controls.

There was no obvious door latch.

"Stand back!" said one of the marines. Took pulled back.

He blasted the door. It buckled inwards, as if it were reinforced.

Several marines fired at once. After a few seconds of resistance, the door blasted inwards.

Took ran to Obe, noticing the odd machines clamped to his forehead. He pulled off the machine as quickly as he could and untied Obe.

Obe suddenly snapped awake when he saw Took.

"Obe?"

Suddenly Obe pushed past Took and jumped to his feet.

"Dancing, dancing, we must be dancing, ba-ba-ba ba-ba (clap clap)," said Obe. He started dancing vigorously, his feet moving up and down so fast that they were a blur.

"Obe?" said Took again.

"Dancing, dancing, we must be dancing, ba-ba-ba ba-ba (clap clap)," said Obe, continuing to dance so quickly that his feet could barely be seen.

"We have to get out of here! It could blow at any time!" said one of the marines. The smoke was getting thick now.

Took, turning his blaster on Obe, readjusted his setting and fired. Obe collapsed to the floor in midstep.

"Help me with him," said Took, as he took Obe's arms. Another marine took Obe's legs.

They carried Obe out of the ship. Other marines carried the others who had fallen.

They carried the fallen several hundred yards out of the ship. Took looked around at the bodies, noticed something.

"Didn't anyone take one of the aliens? We have to go-"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by the explosion of the alien ship. Took was thrown to the ground.

He woke up in the sickbay on the Blue Luna. Admiral Harkness was staring at him disapprovingly. "You're crazier than I thought. Luckily you're hard to kill as well."

Took groaned as he sat up, feeling pain in his arms. He noticed they were bandaged.

"Second degree burns," Harkness informed him.

Took looked around. There were several other marines there with burns as well.

"Casualties?"

"No fatalities," said Harkness. "The marines who were stunned were merely paralyzed."

"And Obe?"

Harkness spoke carefully. "Perhaps you should look for yourself."

They had him in an iso ward. He was standing and yelling that little song.

"Must be dancing, dancing, yeah yeah yeah," and his feet were moving at a blur.

"That's all he'll say," said Harkness. "We'll sedate him and give him a thorough examination. Why don't you get some sleep?"

Took nodded. But images of a maniacal dancing Obe tortured him in his dreams.

## Chapter 10: The Standard Imperium Is Born

"That's awful about Lieutenant Obe," said the War Admiral. He sadly eyed the holoimage before him while talking to another holoimage of Took.

"The docs say that a lot of his brain has simply... burned out. Whatever they did to him, they destroyed a big part of his mind to do it."

"And the impulse?"

"They don't know," said Took. "It seems that a side effect of whatever they did to his mind caused one impulse to take over him. The docs think that whatever force or current they send through his brain latched onto this random thought, which hitched a ride through his brain, and as the force moved through it, so did this thought."

"So they don't think he was being programmed for something?" said the War Admiral.

Took shook his head. "That's not what the doc thinks. They were trying to do something to his whole brain--even his visual and auditory centers, which one wouldn't need to touch for brainwashing. This mental obsession thing was just a... side effect of whatever they were trying to do."

"Any more word on what that was?"

"No," said Took. "The docs have no idea why his mind was zapped. They do note however that all the cells in his body show sign of abrasion, and that his skin was white from it, but that's not what caused the brain damage. It was some more specific torture to his brain."

"Does he remember anything? Can he talk?"

"They have him sedated," said Took. He flashed back to the memory of that morning



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Obe was strapped to a bed, staring dully into space. A small stream of drool escaped his lips.

"Obe," said Took.

Obe slowly turned his head to look at Took. His eyebrows furled, and then relaxed, as he seemed to recognize Took. His mouth started to move, but nothing came out.

"It's me, Took. You recognize me, don't you?"

Struggling, Obe nodded slowly.

"Do you remember what happened to you? Obe, can you tell us anything?"

Obe struggled to speak. Slowly, he said, "Ba."

"What?"

"Ba... ba... ba..."

"Ba what?" said Took.

"Must... be... dancing..." he said with an effort, and then fell off to sleep.

"That's all he'll say, even when sedated," said the doctor behind Took.

Took purposefully kept his face away from the doctor so he wouldn't see the tears welling in his eyes

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"No sir, he's not able to communicate," said Took. "I think there's been too much brain damage."

The War Admiral bit his lip. "My condolences again, Iday. I know you two

were friends for a long time. I assure you he'll receive the best of care."

Took nodded dumbly.

"I'm sorry to hear that we didn't recover any alien technology," said the War Admiral. "Still, our scientists are studying fragments from the destroyed ship, that might yield something. Did you get a chance to see one of them outside their suits?"

Took shook his head woodenly.

"There will be other opportunities, keep at it," said the War Admiral.

"Meanwhile, I have bigger issues to deal with. Keep at it, and give me regular reports."

Took nodded.

"Took? Do you need some time off?"

"No sir," said Took.

"All right," said the War Admiral, nodding, as he switched off.

Took, so self-absorbed, didn't stop to wonder what the War Admiral considered more important than the hunt for the aliens

"Arrested?" The War Admiral couldn't believe it.

"Two generals from Greenfields, and five from the other three planets," said Wren. "Charged with incompetence during the Insectoid Invasion."

"Incompetence?" said the War Admiral. "It was the civilian government that cut expenditures on ground forces. How was the army supposed to repel an invasion without substantial forces or air/space support?"

"I'm just reading the latest news, War Admiral," said Wren. She handed him

a computer pad. "Several distinguished resistance leaders on that list."

The War Admiral looked at the list and frowned.

"Aren't we going to do anything?" said Wren. "This is obviously an attack on you!"

"How so?"

"Don't play coy with me, Norm." They were alone, but while they were on duty she seldom referred to him by first name. "Zorin is seeing what he can get away with. If he can get these generals, he'll go after some of your closer associates next. And then maybe you."

"He could be using these trials for domestic purposes, to distract attention away from his government's problems, the dismal state of the economy," said the War Admiral.

"There's that too," said Wren. "How long are you going to let this go on?"

"What would you have me do?"

"Get rid of him. Hold new elections."

"New elections," the War Admiral mused. "How would that look, if I tossed out a democratically elected leader because the government was prosecuting some of my friends in the military?"

"Not very good," Wren admitted. "But it's the right thing to do."

"But maybe not the right time to do it," said the War Admiral. "And have you thought of what comes next?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if another leader is elected who's just as bad, or even worse?"

"Then we take action again," said Wren.

"Wouldn't that be a bit disruptive to keep removing bad leaders," said the

War Admiral.

"If it has to be done, then it has to be done," said Wren. "We can't let another Vitalics happen again."

"To that I agree. But this still isn't Vitalics."

The War Admiral swiveled his chair away, staring out into space for a moment.

"Are you just going to sit there?" said Wren.

The War Admiral abruptly swiveled back to her with a stern look on his face. Wren jumped back with a start, wondering if she had gone too far.

"No," said the War Admiral. He handed her a pad with a list on it, already prepared.

"What's this?"

"A list of military officers I want summoned to the Glory."

"Why don't you just contact them by holo? It will take them some time to get here."

"Let it take time," said the War Admiral. "And the discussions I'll be having can't be held over a holotransmission, no matter how secure."

"So just who is this specialist that you've called in?" Took asked Purser, as they stood in the Luna's landing bay watching the shuttle land.

"The less you know, the better," said Purser curtly.

"Well, gee, as the chief investigator," and Took stressed the word chief,

"I always thought it was the other way around."

The shuttle slid to a stop mere feet to the side of them.

"This man is a top-secret operative," said Purser. "Even his designation, as a gamma operative, is on a need-to-know basis."

"Wups, you let a secret slip!" said Took, as the door to the shuttle slid open. A large, husky man came out.

"Big fellow."

"That's just the guard."

Another big husky guy came out, and then, after that, a small, cowering man who was mumbling to himself. When he stepped out he looked around, and started mumbling to himself.

Took and Purser walked over to him, and as they got closer they could hear what he was saying.

"White shuttle with a grey ceiling. Ceiling of shuttle bay grey, but not so grey as in a destroyer."

Took looked quizzically at the man. The man looked at Took. "Fighter pilot uniform. Slight creases around the shoulders and waist. Very worn, not new, hardly new."

"Dalbo Alto, I'd like you to meet Captain Idaho Took," said Purser.

Took extended his hand.

"Not to touch," said Dalbo, shrinking back.

They started walking towards the medical section. "How is this... person going to help us?" Took whispered. "He looks like he's in need of help himself."

"Just wait and see," said Purser. "Actually it would make things easier if you didn't see. Once you see what he can do we'll either have to up your security clearance or kill you."

"Oh, I can't miss this then."

They entered sickbay and went into the iso ward where Obe was strapped

down.

"How is he, Doctor?" Took asked.

Doctor Farb looked grave. "His condition is deteriorating. That impulse keeps afflicting him, and each time it does it damages more and more of his mind."

"Dancing, dancing, we must be dancing, da-da-da," Obe said. His legs were frittering about this way and that even as he was strapped down in bed.

"Doctor, can you leave us?" said Purser. She didn't want any more people than necessary to see Dalbo in action.

Farb looked at Took, who reluctantly nodded.

"I'll be in the next room if you need me," he said, as he left.

Once he had gone Purser nodded to Dalbo.

"Eeeeeeeeh, dancing, dancing, we must be dancing, da-da-da," Obe said.

Dalbo took a step forward but recoiled, as if hit by an electric shock.

"What is it?" Purser.

"Mind unbalanced, greatly unhinged," said Dalbo, grasping his head. "It hurts!"

"Try!" said Purser. "It's really important, Dalbo."

Dalbo paused, and spent a minute recovering. Finally, he nodded, and turned back to Obe.

"Mind in great pain," said Dalbo slowly.

"The aliens. What does he remember about the aliens?"

"Aliens... silvery creatures. Give bad air that destroys brain."

"Air?" said Purser. They had never thought that a gas could do this kind of damage.

"New comes in. Then pain, much pain. New leaves, but pain still there,"

said Dalbo, concentrating.

"What do you mean, new comes in?" said Purser.

"Dancing!" Obe shrieked.

"Mind breaking down," Dalbo muttered.

"Their base, does he know where their base is?" Purser said.

"Da-da-da da da!" yelled Obe.

"Obe!" said Took, realizing that something was wrong.

Medical monitors started to sound alarmingly. Doctor Farb rushed into the room.

Obe screamed, "Dancing! Dancing!"

Doctor Farb reached for a sedative. But before he could inject it, Obe went limp.

"Dancing," he muttered, one last time, and then he stopped speaking.

There was a alarming hum from the medical monitors as Doctor Farb worked vigorously. Then, turning to face the others, he shook his head.

Dalbo broke the silence. "Mind in final stages of breaking down."

Farb nodded. "The other victims we've recovered have gone through a similar progression."

"Did you sense anything else?" Purser asked.

Dalbo shook his head. "Most disturbing, very disturbing. Can I have something to count now?"

Purser nodded, and gestured for the escorts to take Dalbo from the room.

Took stood there, still in shock. His friend, Obe, was dead. They had survived decades of dangerous missions against the Insectoids, and now, he was dead, killed horribly by some nameless, faceless alien race.

The funeral was held on Herefor. Normally, Obe would have been buried on his home planet, Karis, but as it was under the influence of the energy mist, there was no way to get there.

Took attended the funeral, as well as a wing of fellow pilots from the Glory who Took hadn't seen in some time. He was silent throughout.

The War Admiral made a surprise appearance. He spoke about Obe's dedication to duty, and his unwavering efforts to defend the Alliance.

Took had been offered a chance to speak about his friend, but he didn't think he could find the words without breaking up.

As they filed out of the cemetery his fellow pilots gave Took a pat on the shoulder.

The War Admiral, flanked by Fleet Captain Stacy Wren and Admiral Roger Dulin, approached Took.

"Iday, I'm so sorry," said Wren sympathetically.

Took nodded.

"Do you need some time off?" the War Admiral asked.

Took shook his head. "I just want to get the creatures who have done this."

"I understand," said the War Admiral. He thought about saying something else, decided against it, and walked away.

Took returned to work, mechanically pursuing all leads relating to the aliens. When Billy Holiday reported that he had tinkered with his mathematical formula again and found another likely location of attack, Took dumbly went with Purser to check it out.

His dulled senses and lack of caution almost cost him his life, because it



was a trap.

They found a Kaye particle trail leading down to the surface of Pushkin.

Although Pushkin was only an associate member of the alliance, they received clearance from the government, then lead by General Karn, to pursue their investigation. Pushkin was a heavily populated planet, formerly the home planet of the Slurian Union (back when Pushkin itself had been named Sluria), but the Kaye particles were leading to a remote village on the northeastern continent.

"Are you going to be ok?" said Purser, as the shuttle they were in touched down.

"Why do you ask?" said Took.

"Well, you haven't said anything idiotic since we boarded. And you seem sort of listless," said Purser.

"I'll work on making some lists," said Took dully.

They exited the shuttle, a full platoon of marines accompanying them, and fanned out across the village. The villagers looked at them with alarm.

Took walked for awhile, his blaster drawn. It wasn't long before he though the saw a silvery shape ahead, down a side street. Purser, who was accompanying him, saw it too. She ran ahead, while Took just kept walking.

When Purser had gotten some distance ahead, Took heard a door of a small building opening behind him, and when he turned he saw two silvery aliens.

One of them fired its weapon before Took could raise his.

There was a hum, and Took felt his eyeballs assaulted by a flashing white light as his whole body shook. Then, to his horror, he dropped to the ground. He was still conscious.

The aliens slowly approached him. Took could only watch as they bent over him. One of them lowered a device. He stared into their black visors with total fright.

The device hummed, and Took heard a whirring noise as white lights seem to assault his eyes while he felt vibrations in his body again.

The dark visor came right up against his face and Took almost thought he could see the outlines of something inside of it. And then the device was aimed against his head and the vibrations grew more intense.

Was this what they had done to Obe? Would he go mad and die a slow, painful death?

Took squeezed his eyes shut to avoid watching the dreadful black visor staring at him, so he totally missed what happened next.

There was a characteristic roar of blaster fire. Took opened his eyes. The aliens were firing at something beyond his range of vision.

There was blaster fire coming from another direction now, and the aliens turned about, as if attacked from another direction. They quickly left in a third direction.

A few seconds later Took saw Purser staring down at him. She seemed to be saying something, but he couldn't make out the words. Took couldn't move or say anything to respond. In any event, things weren't making sense.

There was more firing, but the sounds grew more distant. In a few minutes Took felt himself being lifted, and a while later brought back to the shuttle. He felt something pressed against his side, and he lost consciousness.

"There you are," said the ugly face of Doctor Farb, looking down at him.

Took blinked. "Where am I?"

"In the sickbay on the Blue Luna," said Farb. "Can you sit up?"

Took discovered he could by doing it. He started to get out of bed.

"Easy," said Farb. "You've had quite an experience."

Experience. Suddenly, Took remembered. He felt an odd buzzing in his head.

He lay back down. "Is the same thing going to happen to me?" he said thickly.

"Same thing?"

"The madness. The brain damage," said Took.

"You're not brain damaged," said Farb.

"You're sure?" said Took anxiously.

"Do you feel brain damaged?" said Farb.

"I feel this buzzing in my head...."

"That should pass," said Farb. "We hypothesize that the aliens used some sort of intrusive scanner on you. It caused a slight disruption in your neurotransmitter balance. The feeling should pass." He studied Took thoughtfully. "Are you ready for a visitor?"

When Took didn't respond, Farb said to someone, "You can come in now." He turned back to Took. "They've been very anxious to see you."

To interrogate, Took thought dumbly.

"How are you feeling?" said Onnica Purser. Dalbo Alto was muttering at her side.

"You won't need him," said Took. "I'm still capable of speaking."

"Belligerence. False bravado," Dalbo uttered.

"Can he really read minds, or was that just an act?" Took asked.

Purser cast a sharp glance at Doctor Farb.

"You're too late, I think he already knows."

"Dalbo is one of our most top-secret gamma operatives," said Purser. "We don't want his existence to become common knowledge."

"Knowledge is uncommon," said Dalbo. He looked up at the ceiling. "There are eight light panels in the ceiling, but only six beds. Eight to six, Eight to six."

"He seems a bit... fixated," said Took.

"He has... issues," said Purser. "Many gamma operatives do. But we're here to talk about you."

"What can I say?" said Took. "I got taken by the aliens. They scanned me. You rescued me before they did any serious damage."

"And that's it," said Purser.

"That's it."

"You didn't get any indication of their intentions, their technology, anything?"

"I was paralyzed on the ground at the time," said Took.

"Still, we did learn one thing," said Purser.

"What's that?"

"They were clearly after you," she said. "This was a trap just to get you."

"Just to get me?"

"They only attacked when you were alone," said Purser. "No one else was abducted. Once they lost their chance to get you, they left in a hurry.

Your boy wonder now thinks the whole thing was a trap just to get you."

A shiver went down Took's spine. Outwardly, he looked bored. "So? I'm

always in demand."

Purser nodded. "We'll talk later." She and Dalbo left.

Took slowly recovered from the shock over the next few days. Billy Holiday's mathematical formula could no longer seem to predict future alien incursions, which seems to lend credence that the aliens had broken Holiday's prediction formula and used it to set a trap for Took.

Took tossed and turned one night. Suddenly, he felt a strange beam of light latch onto him. He couldn't move.

Suddenly, he was in another room, a dark room. There were aliens in silver spacesuits all around him. One of them stared at him through that dark visor. It raised an instrument and pressed it. Electrical bolts surged from it, into Took's head.

He woke up screaming. Still in his underclothes, he raced to the bridge of the Luna.

"Is there anything out there?" he said to the duty officer, Half Commander Yiw.

"Sir?"

"Alien ships, signs of alien presence. I think we were just scanned!" Took babbled.

"Sensors?" said Yiw.

The sensor officer checked.

"Nothing, sir."

"Are you sure? Maybe it's cloaked," said Took.

The sensor officer checked again, and gave the same response. Ten pairs of

eyes looked at Took, raving as he stood half dressed on the bridge.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I guess is reality and the other was the dream." He left the bridge.

Took wouldn't respond to calls from anyone over the next two days, not from Purser, or the War Admiral, or anyone. He simply ate, and slept, and hid. He picked a small corner of a supply room, and sat there, day in and day out, simply thinking, even obsessing.

He heard a hissing as the door opened. "Go away!"

Admiral Harkness came into view. "This is a public supply room. You can't monopolize it."

Took said nothing.

Harkness looked down at him. "Look at yourself, just sitting there, taking pity on yourself. I can guess what you're thinking about."

Took stared silently at the boxes in the room.

"They almost got you, didn't they? They probably came closer to getting you than any of their actual victims," said Harkness. "It's bound to be frightening. Who wants to be experimented on and die like that? I don't. What you're thinking now is that you don't want to end up like your friend, Obe. You're thinking of quitting, of going someplace far away to hide."

"But you can't hide from your fears, Iday. You have to harness your anger.

Look at what they did to your friend! Look at what they tried to do to you! Is there any enemy you've fought, whether it be the Insectoids, or the Slurians, or someone else, that you haven't gotten even with?"

"No," said Took.

"Then don't let these faceless cowards get the better of you. Fight back

and get your revenge. Show them there's a price to be paid for attacking the legendary Command Captain Idaho J. Took, the most famous pilot there ever was in the Alliance Fleet."

Took looked up at Harkness, and there was a new hardness in his eye.

"But..."

"What if they get you? Then they win. But if you give up now, become a weeping coward, they also win. Is that what you want?"

"No," said Took.

"Aren't you angry over what they did to Obe?"

"Yes," said Took.

"Don't you want to avenge your friend?"

"Yes!" said Took.

"Then get up out of this box room and get back to work!"

Took jumped to his feet and nodded. Harkness put an arm around his shoulders as they walked. "You know, I wasn't going to tell you this, but great minds think alike."

"They do?"

"Yes, did you know that the War Admiral used to spend his time thinking in supply rooms too?"

"War Admiral," said Captain Wren.

"I've seen the report," said the War Admiral.

"We've been ordered to take food from starving people at Erratta and give it to Greenfields."

The War Admiral sighed. The situation was more complicated than that.

Greenfields used to be primarily an agricultural world, as its name implied. But rapid industrialization over the centuries had reduced its ability to produce food and increased its reliance on imports. The small colony worlds could barely produce enough food for themselves, and of the four other major planets, only Erratta had a substantial agricultural base.

While Erratta had been exporting food to Greenfields, Irplo, Herefor, and Pushkin, Greenfields felt it deserved a larger share. Greenfields had a larger population than the other three planets, but the amount of food available per person it had was also higher than on Herefor. But because it had a bigger population, and because that was where the political center of the government operated from, Zorin wanted to take food from relatively more hungry people on Herefor to feed relatively less starved people on Greenfields.

"Are we going to be a party to this?" said Wren. "If we do, we'll be a party to murder!"

She wasn't exaggerating by much. The food shipments from Erratta were helping to reduce the sharp edges of hunger.

The War Admiral said nothing. He pressed a button on his desk. "Get me President Zorin." He also pressed another button on his desk at the same time, and a few seconds later a flashing green indicator appeared on his panel.

"Do you really think talking is going to accomplish anything?" said Wren.

"No," said the War Admiral, just a few seconds before Zorin's image appeared on the screen. By the speed of his appearance he seemed to be expecting the War Admiral's call.



"Ah, War Admiral. Have your men secured the granaries on Erratta?"

"No, Mr. President," said the War Admiral.

"Why not?"

"I'm calling to ask you to reconsider," said the War Admiral.

"That's not your call," said Zorin. "Your job is to obey the civilian authority. If you can't obey, I'll find someone who can." And at that moment the real intent behind Zorin's order became clear.

"I think it is time to request relief," said the War Admiral.

Zorin looked surprised, as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Are you resigning?"

"No," said the War Admiral. "But you are."

The sound of gunfire could be heard in the background.

"What's that?" said Zorin.

"Your personal guard is being disarmed," said the War Admiral. "It's a moderate measure," he added reassuringly.

"What are you doing?" Zorin sputtered.

"Something I should have done 24 years ago," said the War Admiral.

The sounds of weapons fire came closer, and then the doors to the room were flung open. A squad of battle-ready marines entered. One of them, a senior officer, saluted in the direction of the holopickup.

"The palace is secure, sir," said the officer.

"Excellent, Colonel Fortran," said the War Admiral. "And the legislature?"

"They are being secured even as we speak," said Fortran. "Resistance is minimal."

"Good," said the War Admiral. "Have the former President and his staff put

in detention. And see that our jailed officers are freed."

"Sir, yes sir," said Fortran smartly.

Zorin said, "North! You can't do this! Wait, we can talk about this!"

"You had nearly four years to talk about this," said the War Admiral.

"Your loquacious skills haven't managed to solve any problems; in fact, they have exacerbated them."

Several minutes they watched the War Admiral's prerecorded message on the bridge. It was being broadcasted to all worlds not covered by the energy mist.

"This is War Admiral Norman North. An emergency situation has arisen. Over the past four years, the government of President Zorin has grown more and more corrupt and dictatorial. Freedom of the press has been curtailed.

Dissidents have been jailed. Funds and food shipments have simply disappeared. Bribery and kickbacks have become the rule rather than the exception. Political trials have become common. But the last straw was the attempt to divert food for political purposes. President Zorin wanted to distribute vital food supplies to reward political supporters rather than based on need."

"I could not tolerate this, so I have relieved President Zorin of his duties. He and his associates will stand trial for their action. The legislature and the judiciary, which is also packed with Zorin's cronies, have also been relieved of their responsibilities."

"From this point on there will be direct military rule of former Alliance worlds. I have spoken with the chiefs of the army, space navy, and marines, and they have all agreed to this. Order will be maintained.

Corruption will be rooted out, and our rebuilding will truly begin."

The War Admiral received a standing ovation from the bridge. But the positive action didn't come only from his personal associates; he received messages of support from all over the fleet, from all branches of the armed forces.

But the telling sign was the general populace. The press, which suddenly regained its freedom of speech, reported that massive rallies were being held in support of the War Admiral. He was their greatest hero, the man who had liberated them from the Insectoids. They didn't just want a caretaker authority; they wanted him to lead them.

The War Admiral sat in a meeting with the other top officers of the fleet and the armed forces.

"They want you, War Admiral," said Admiral Landry.

"I had envisioned a short rule, followed by new elections," said the War Admiral.

"That won't work, the situation is too precarious," said another officer, General Paste. "We're still in an emergency situation. Most of our worlds are cut off from contact, and the few we have remaining are in shambles. Our entire political class has been decimated. If we have elections and they elect another idiot without a track record, we could end up with another tyrant on our hands. Only the next one might not go without some real bloodshed."

The other officers nodded.

"You're suggesting a dictatorship, then," said the War Admiral.

"Don't call it that," said Admiral Landry. "Perhaps... an Imperium."

"Imperiums don't have good histories," said the War Admiral.

"Then how about a new kind of Imperium?" said Admiral Dayja. "One that respects rights while maintaining order. One that sets our house in order without corruption or cronyism."

"One that sets a new kind of standard," said Admiral Dulin.

"A Standard Imperium," said Captain Wren. "THE Standard Imperium."

They all looked at each other as if hit by a bolt of electricity.

"The Standard Imperium," said the War Admiral slowly. "It has a ring to it. But what would our mandate be?"

"It would only be temporary, for a number of years, until we rescue our other worlds and restore our economy and military," said Landry. "Once a degree of normalcy has been restored, we could hold elections again."

The War Admiral paused. They all waited breathlessly. Finally, he nodded.

"Very well," said the War Admiral. "The Standard Imperium it will be."

There was a round of applause at the table as history was made.

"But a few ground rules," said the War Admiral. "First, we never forget that our role is only a temporary one, to return power when the situation stabilizes. Secondly, we must never trample on the right of the people as Zorin has. That means freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and no oppressive government controls. And lastly, I will not be an Emperor."

"What will you be called?"

"Simply what I am called today," said the War Admiral simply.

And so a new era in history was born.

## Chapter 11: The Last Battle With The Aliens

"Very odd," said Billy Holiday.

"How odd?" said Iday Took.

"Odd enough," said Billy Holiday. "Shortly after your attempted abduction, my mathematical formula stopped predicting alien incursions accurately."

"Maybe they figured out that they were being predictable."

"Most probably," said Billy. "However, there's something else. The number of incursions over the past few months have dropped. Whereas there used to be one or two a week, now there have been only one in the past month."

"Signifying that they're taking a break, or maybe they're almost done with whatever it is they're doing, or they're moving on to a new phase," said Took.

"Yes," said Billy. "But that's not the odd part."

"Then what is?"

"I've been looking over the data on the old incursions, trying to figure out a new pattern, and one particular incursion struck me as usual." Billy punched up data on the holographic screen.

"Wincar," said Took, reading. Wincar was a small colony world. "Five people abducted. What's so odd about that?"

"That's one of the three incursions where we found no record of Kaye particles before or after the event," said Billy.

"We arrived too late, after it happened," said Took.

"None of the people we interviewed seemed to know the five people who were taken."

"Yes, that was odd," said Took, remembering. "But then we had to rush off to another attack location, so we didn't really have time to dwell on it."

"In fact, all your information were based on interviews with one woman, Irm Sebata, who provided you with the names and information about the missing people."

A list of names appeared on the screen.

"So?" said Took.

"None of our records show anyone with those five names settling on Wincar."

"You know how inefficient colony records are," said Purser.

"Perhaps one or two slipped through, but all five?" said Billy. "What are the odds of that."

"Quite small," Purser admitted.

"So, with no evidence of an alien attack, we are brought to this planet and told that five non-existent people have disappeared. Any idea why?" said Billy.

"Evidently, you do," said Took.

"Look at the map." Billy brought up a star chart. "Every inhabited planet in this sector has been hit at least once, some twice. But if there was no alien attack on Wincar, then Wincar was the only colony in this sector that didn't have an alien attack."

"Why would the aliens purposefully not attack one colony world?" Took mused. "Even more so, why would they want us to think that they had? Maybe if they had something to hide..."

"Maybe their secret base," said Purser. "We know they must have a local base of operation somewhere around here."

They all looked at each other, and the electricity in the room was palpable.

"I think we need to bring in the War Admiral on this one," said Took.

The image of the War Admiral listened attentively. "It makes sense," he says. "But the question is how to proceed. Assuming there is a hidden base there, if we rush in they may destroy their facilities before we can capture them. If it is their supersecret base, they may press the panic button the minute our marines show up on the planet surface, or even when our ships come into orbit."

"We need a stealthy operation," said Took.

"That we do," said the War Admiral. "And a special operative to lead it.

Iday, I want you to volunteer for a dangerous mission."

"What have you got in mind?"

"How would you feel about going down there, alone?"

"Alone?" said Took.

"They want you; that much is clear. And they may not feel threatened by your presence, especially if you're alone, especially if they've tried to capture you before."

"What if they capture me again?" said Took.

"It will be a high-risk mission," said the War Admiral. "Your safety is not guaranteed. But we'll take special precautions to keep you safe. And I think it's our best bet to take the installation intact."

Took thought for a moment about Obe. Then he thought about what Admiral Harkness had said. An anger boiled within him.

"I'll do it," he said simply.

Iday balked at wearing the new uniform. Now that the Alliance had been replaced with the Imperium, gone were the light blue uniforms of the League, or the all white uniforms of the Directorate. Replacing them were the black and bright blue uniforms of the standard imperium. The uniforms were more military looking, with thicker leather shoulderboards and a fierce looking hawk on the arm of each sleeve.

"Every time there's a revolution they redesign the uniform," Took grumbled, as he chafed in the pilot seat of the shuttle. His uniform was especially heavy, and cumbersome to walk around in. He tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling.

"Stop complaining," said Purser, as she sat in the copilot seat. The marines sat in back.

"So where exactly are we going?" said Iday. "I don't see any ship to rendezvous with."

Purser checked the instruments. "We're here. All stop."

Took cut the engines. "Where is here? And where is the ship we're supposed to meet? They look late to me."

"That's because you're not looking hard enough." She opened a comm channel. "We're here and we're ready."

"Right," said a voice on the comm. "We've been waiting for you."

There was a shimmering, and in front of Took's eyes, a ship appeared out of nowhere. It was long and cylindrical shape, though clearly of Alliance technology.

"Welcome to the subship Nautilus," said Purser simply.



After they boarded they made their way through cramped corridors to the bridge. The Captain was an officer named Hollister.

"It's some ship you've got here," said Took.

"We've cleared out about half of the regular crew to fit your marines," said Hollister. "Still, it's going to be a cramp fit. I hope you don't mind sleeping on the floor next to a torpedo tube."

"No, better next to it than in it," said Took.

"My orders are to drop you near the back side of the planet. Is it true that even the local colonial administration is not to be notified?"

"Yes," said Purse. "We don't want to risk having the aliens intercept our transmission. The rest of the fleet will be waiting at the edge of the system."

"What is your plan of operation?"

"That's on a need to know basis, Captain," said Purse.

"If you want a translation, that means they're sending me in alone," said Took. "Would you like to join me?"

"All alone! What chance do you have against an entire alien base?"

"We're not certain there is an alien base," said Purse. "But if there is, it will be up to Mr. Took to locate it."

"As usual, the fate of the galaxy is in my hands," said Took. "But I'm used to it."

The Nautilus dived into subspace for the trip to Wincar. When they reached the planet, the passive sensors showed no other ships in the area.

Took only started feeling jittery as he rode the shuttle down with Purse and the marines.

"We'll land a mile or two from the small town where the reported abduction took place," said Purse. "We'll accompany you to the edge of town, and wait for your signal."

"All right," said Took, raising a hand to wipe some perspiration off of his forehead. This new uniform made him feel hot!

It was just after sunrise when the shuttle landed and the platoon walked with Took to the edge of the small town. It was only when he started walking into the town alone that his stomach started jumping up and down. He was walking into the largest concentration of aliens in the sector.

The weather was warm but he put on the gloves he had been provided. He might look odd to the locals but the aliens would expect to see him in uniform.

Took walked through the narrow streets of the village. All looked quiet. A young woman was washing windows. Another was washing clothes. They both looked curiously at him, but that was understandable.

A man pushing a stack of clothes on a cart walked towards him. "Hello," said the man.

"Hello," said Took.

"Are you lost?" said the man.

"No," said Took. "Just going for a walk."

"Nice day for a walk," he said flatly.

Took look at the man. He seemed very... calm. Maybe he thought that was odd because of his anxious state.

"Wash day today?"

"Wash day today," said the man, in the same flat voice.

Took walked on. He entered a small grocery store.

"Hello," said the innkeeper, in the same flat voice.

"Hi," said Took.

There were two people in the store. They both stared at him.

"I don't suppose you have any gauche?" Took asked.

"I don't suppose we have any gauche," said the innkeeper in an even tone.

"Well, then that would settle that."

Took left the store. More people were walking outside now. Something looked odd, but he couldn't quite place it. People were moving... slowly.

They stared at him of course, which was understandable, given that he was a stranger in a small village, but they moved slowly, as if they were tired, or carried heavy weights.

Heavy weights. Just like this ridiculous uniform they had made him wear.

Took, feeling uncomfortable under the gaze of the stares, went inside again, this time to a restaurant. There were a number of patrons sitting there. The innkeeper approached him.

"I'd like some gauche, please."

"Gauche," said the innkeeper.

The innkeeper left for a moment, and then returned with his drink. "Here you are," he said in a flat voice. He turned to go.

It was at that moment that Took realized what had been bothering him.

Everyone he spoke to--the guy with the clothes, the innkeeper at the grocery store, this innkeeper--all had the same voice. They all had the

same exact voice!

Took looked around at the other patrons. They all had food in front of them. But none of them were eating! They were sitting there, scooping up food, putting it to their lips, but then simply putting it down again.

The innkeeper must have seen the look on his face, because he quickly returned.

"Is something wrong?" he said in that flat voice, the same exact voice as the others.

Took reached out and grabbed the man's wrist.

The man flickered, changed, and became a figure in a silver spacesuit with a black faceplate.

Took looked around, and saw that the other patrons were manipulating something on their wrists, and they too, flickered into silver suited aliens. Nine sets of black faceplates stared at him.

The alien whose wrist Took grabbed pulled a holstered weapon, but despite the shock, Took was quicker, giving him a push that sent him spiraling back. He bolted out of the door into the street.

Which was crowded with silvery aliens. They were on to him now.

Took ran down a side street. There were aliens that way. He turned to run back, but there were aliens behind him. He ran into a residence. It was empty. He closed the door and locked it.

Took reached for his comm. "Purser! Purser!"

All the comm gave was static. Of course, they were jamming his signals.

There was a sound of slamming against the door. Again, and again. They were breaking down the door.

Took raced to find another avenue of escape. He saw a small door, opened

it.

Revealing a silversuited alien in the closet, with a weapon raised.

Took heard a crashing sound, and slowly backed out. Looking to his left, he saw the room filling up with spacesuited figures. They looked at him for several heartbeats, all those black visors staring at him. There was no way he could outshoot all of them.

But he could try. He raised his blaster. . .

And one of them fired. Took felt the vibrations, saw the white flashes, and dropped to the ground, the blaster falling from his gloved hand.

The aliens stared down at him with their black faceplates. Took tried to contain his revulsion. They lifted him up and carried him away.

He was carried into another home, and then through a wall that slid aside.

And then they were in gleaming white corridors, sloping underground. They transferred Took to some kind of antigrav bed, and pushed him along down the corridor.

Took was transferred to a familiar looking room with a chair that contained restraints and a window built into one side. This was where they had tortured Obe. This was where they would destroy his mind.

Most of the silvery aliens left now, except for two who lifted him up and transferred him to the chair. One of them started to strap the restraints in.

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