

A Peripheral Affair

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Out on the periphery, where the human worlds grew few and far between, a spider's web stretched between the stars.

It was an old web, its strands heavy with stardust. The spiders that patrolled it were fat and rusty, and it had been nearly fifty years since last a fly was snared. But still the web endured, though it had long outlived its purpose.

The worlds the web entwined still bore witness to that purpose, still wore the radioactive scars that told of the ancient struggle that had seared through the Periphery. It had been there, a century earlier, that the expanding globe of the Allied Starsuns of Terra had first come into contact with the rival empire that called itself the KwanDellan BrotherWorlds. It had been there that the long, bitter KwanDellan War had been fought—to no conclusion.

The web had been spun in the uneasy armed peace that came in the wake of that war. Amid a chaotic jumble of Alliance worlds and independent colonies and the home planets of a dozen alien species, the starspiders wove a complex network to catch KwanDellan flies.

The web spinners were the scouts, the swift, lightly armed three-man scouts. They were the smallest starships of all. But they were not small. Each was a quarter-mile long, its decks crammed with sophisticated sensing equipment. In the early days, more than 200 of them prowled the Periphery.

The spiders were the heavier ships, the cruisers and the battlewagons and the dreadnoughts. They were far fewer in number, but they carried the sting. Should a KwanDellan warship venture into the starweb, it would be they who caught and slew it.

But, for fifty years, there had been no warships to slay.

The hostile peace had lasted only a decade. There are many directions in space, and the region called the Periphery was just one frontier. Both Alliance and BrotherWorlds found easier expansion elsewhere.

Trade began as hostility waned. Human and KwanDellan discovered that they had a lot in common and that each had things the other wanted. A profitable business relationship ripened into friendship.

And meanwhile, in other sectors, new wars diverted Earth's attention.

The KwanDellans abandoned their own patrol web as soon as it was no longer needed. But human institutions are not so easily dismantled. The Periphery Defense Force remained. But it decayed.

Some ships were transferred away to fight in newer wars. Others were decommissioned and never replaced. Only a trickle of new ships were sent out to the Periphery to aid the aging starspiders.

The Periphery became a backwater. It remained a turbulent border region where a dozen species met and mingled and fleets of merchantmen plied their trade. But no

longer was it the front lines. The explorers and the adventurers had moved on to greener planets and blacker skies.

And then one day a light flashed red at Alliance Sector Headquarters on New Victory. Somewhere out between the stars one of the strands in the web had broken.

Or so it seemed.

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The monitor room was large and circular, and the holomap in its center was a pit of darkness. From the command catwalk built around the room the men on duty could look down into a mock void where the stars of the Periphery glittered in miniature, and smaller green pinpoints of light scuttled endlessly. The monitor panels themselves lined the walls up on the catwalk; banks of gleaming duralloy and steady green lights.

But now one light had gone red, and one of the pinpoints had blinked out down in the holomap.

Fleet Admiral Jefferson Mandel, the sector commandant, was notified at once, and he strode onto the catwalk almost eagerly. He was a short, bull-like man, with narrow dark eyes and a shining bald head. A row of multicolored ribbons danced on the chest of his dull black uniform while the silver galaxies of his rank spiraled on his shoulders.

His mouth was set grimly when he located the lieutenant in charge of the monitor room. "What is it?" he snapped.

"It's a red light, sir," the lieutenant replied. He pointed.

Admiral Mandel looked at him sternly. "I realize that, Lieutenant. What does it mean?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "It probably means the monitor computer is out of order. We're checking that now."

Mandel looked displeased at that. He glared at the red light, glared at the lieutenant, and put his hands on his hips. "Let's assume the computer is functioning properly. In that case, what does this red light mean?"

"In that case, sir, one of our scouts has been destroyed," the lieutenant answered calmly. "But that's hardly very likely."

"I'll be the judge of that," Mandel said. "Is there anything else that could account for this? Besides a malfunction, that is."

"No, sir," the lieutenant replied. "Not to my knowledge. The computer on every one of our starships is in constant linkage with our monitor computer here by subspace radio; so we know the location of each ship at all times. When a light goes red here, it means one of our ships has stopped signaling."

Mandel nodded. “Nothing else that could stop the signal besides an attack on the ship?”

“An attack wouldn't stop the signal,” the lieutenant said. “Nothing short of total destruction would. The ship's computer is in the heart of a starship, heavily armored by duralloy plates and shielded by special force screens. Even the crew would have difficulty getting at it. And there are two independent backups in case of malfunction.

“No, sir,” he concluded, shaking his head. “A ship's computer will continue to function and to signal as long as that ship is intact.”

Mandel looked over at the red light again. “Then it's war,” he said savagely.

The lieutenant looked aghast. “Sir!” he protested. “It's not—I mean—we don't—you can't—”

“Spit it out, Lieutenant,” the admiral said sternly.

The lieutenant pulled himself together. “There's no cause to talk about war, sir. It can't be a KwanDellan attack. It *can't* be. We've been at peace with the KwanDellans for fifty years, sir. They'd have no reason to attack our ships. Besides, these scouts have elaborate sensors. That's why they're out there. If a KwanDellan fleet—*orany* kind of unauthorized vessel—had been detected, the crew would have plenty of time to notify us. All we have here is a signal suddenly cut off. Probably a flaw in the monitor computer or the monitor panel itself. We're checking that, sir.”

“You're naive, Lieutenant,” the admiral said. “You haven't seen war. I have. Maybe these KwanDellans disguised their ship as a friendly merchantman until they got in range. Or maybe they've discovered a new gimmick to blank our sensors. All sorts of possibilities, Lieutenant. And this incident stinks of KwanDellan treachery. Those bastards have never forgotten the licking we gave them, you know.”

The lieutenant's mouth was hanging slightly open. “But—but, even so, sir, it might have been some sort of accident. An explosion in the warpdrives, or something. Or maybe the attacker wasn't a KwanDellan. If there *was* an attacker.”

Mandel considered that. “Hmmmph,” he said. “We'll be playing right into KwanDellan hands, but I suppose we had better check thoroughly first, before mobilizing.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant said smartly, looking enormously relieved. He glanced over the catwalk railing, down at the holomap. “We can get a couple of scouts to the last location of the missing craft in an hour, sir.”

“Scouts! Nonsense. The fleet is badly understrength as is, and I can't afford to lose any more ships if the attackers are still lurking out there. Let's send something that can fight back, Lieutenant. Something with a little firepower, like a battlewagon. Or even a dreadnought. Yes, a dreadnought.”

The lieutenant studied the holomap again, his trained eyes making sense out of the tiny dancing lights with practiced ease. “The *Durandal* is at Last Landing, sir. And

the *Mjolnir* is off Duncan's World. We can get either there in a day.”

“Good,” Mandel said. “Beam the *Mjolnir*. Give Garris a man-sized assignment for a change. Tell him to use all possible haste. And until we get his report, I want this place on full battle alert. The KwanDellan might be closing on New Victory even now.”

* * * *

In a small conference room on the Alliance Starship *Mjolnir*, First Officer Lyle Richey handed his captain a thick sheaf of papers. “The reports you wanted, sir.”

Captain John Garris accepted the papers and motioned his stocky, gray-haired second-in-command to a seat. Garris was the younger man of the two, tall and lean with gray eyes and thin lips and jet-dark hair cropped in a military crew cut.

He looked very unhappy at present. “Anything in here I should bother to read?” he asked Richey when the first officer was seated.

“Not much,” Richey replied with a half shrug. “The missing ship was named the *Defiance*. Standard scoutship in all respects. It was new, though. One of the newest ships in the Periphery. That's unusual, but it doesn't explain anything. It makes instrument malfunction even less likely.”

“Any experimental equipment aboard?” Garris asked.

“None,” said Richey. “There is one thing, though. I don't know what it means, but it's something.”

“Go ahead,” Garris said.

Richey hesitated. “The ship was undermanned. These scouts are all designed to operate with three-man crews. They use eight-hour shifts; so in theory someone is always on duty. But most of the scouts out here on the Periphery have been running on two-man crews for years. We're just not getting the manpower we request, and the ship's computer takes care of most of the routine anyway.

“But this ship—this ship was even more undermanned than usual. Less than a week or so ago, one of its two crewmen got sick. He was detached when the scout neared Last Landing, and the ship was ordered to complete its patrol sweep with only one man, until a replacement could be assigned.”

Garris leaned back in his swivel seat and considered that, looking thoughtful. “You're right,” he said finally. “It's something, but it doesn't provide any answers. And there are an awful lot of questions.”

He began to tick off questions on his fingers. “Number one,” he said, “—if the scout was attacked, why didn't the crew report it? The computer would have detected an attacker. Number two—why didn't they, or he, or whatever, run away? A scout is faster than any warship. Number three—why would anyone attack a single scoutship anyway? To save a war fleet from detection? But they'd have to knock out more than one ship for that. Number four—if it was an attack, who did it? The KwanDellan? But

why? That doesn't make sense. Number five—if it *wasn't* an attack, why did the ship stop signaling? What else could possibly destroy an armed and shielded starship in deep space? Number six—”

“Enough,” Richey interrupted, scowling. “I see what you mean. A lot doesn't fit together.”

Garris nodded. “Admiral Mandel has a theory,” he said, but his expression made it perfectly clear what he thought of the admiral's theory. “He thinks the KwanDellan hailed our ship openly, acted friendly, and then crept up into range and attacked. That answers some questions—like why the crew didn't run or call. But it doesn't explain the motivation for the attack. And theories that explain that don't explain the other things.” He frowned.

After a pause, the captain leaned forward again, and flipped through the papers until he found the crew roster. “Which one of these men was aboard?” he asked.

“Hollander,” Richey replied. “Craig Hollander, junior crewman.”

“Request a facsimile of the file on the man,” Garris ordered. “Maybe that will tell us something. And have someone locate his next of kin and inform them that he's missing.”

The first officer nodded, rose, and saluted briskly. After he had left, Garris continued to turn the puzzle over in his mind.

The captain knew full well what Mandel expected him to find—evidence of a KwanDellan attack. Nothing would please the admiral more. It was common knowledge around the fleet that Mandel was an aging incompetent who had been sent to the Periphery to keep him out of the way. But a war—with him in the front lines—might wipe out some of the admiral's past mistakes and catapult him back into Earth's good graces.

Garris, on the other hand, didn't need a war. He was already indecently young to be wearing a captain's star clusters. And the *Mjolnir*, although a battle-scarred relic, was still a dreadnought, with awesome firepower and a crew of more than a hundred. Every captain in the fleet who didn't command a dreadnought wanted to—and Garris already had one. The Periphery wasn't exile for him. It was another step on the way up.

But there were still things in his way. Like Mandel, who despised him for his youth and his success and was doing everything in his power to block Garris' further advancement.

If he could crack this thing—and crack it in a way that made the admiral look foolish—it could only help, Garris figured. Mandel would probably be sent off to still more distant exile. And he, Garris, would get a promotion. Perhaps a transfer to one of the new dreadnoughts, engaging in real exploration.

The captain smiled faintly and began to pore over the papers that Richey had left. This was too good an opportunity to pass up.

* * * *

The service file on Craig Hollander was delivered to Garris hours later while he sat on the bridge supervising the *Mjolnir*'s methodical sweep through the last known location of the *Defiance*. He turned to it with interest.

There was a color photograph of Hollander on the file cover, showing a young man of medium height with a dark sun tan that spoke of birth under a sun harsher than Earth's. His hair, so blond that it was almost white, was worn long and combed forward so it fell across his forehead to his eyebrows. His eyes were bright blue, and he was grinning crookedly at the camera, which was rather unusual for a fleet mug shot.

Garris studied the picture briefly, then flipped open the file to begin going over its contents. But he had hardly glanced at the first paper when he was interrupted.

"We've got something, sir," the crewman manning the sensory monitors reported from across the bridge. "Not a ship. Debris of some sort."

Garris laid the file atop his command console and promptly forgot about it. "Hook on with tractors and pull it aboard," he ordered. He turned to the communications officer. "Get me the landing deck."

"Yes, sir," the comm man replied. The huge viewscreen that filled the entire forward wall of the bridge flickered, and the starscape it had been showing vanished. Instead, the tired features of the third officer took form.

"We've got some debris that might be from the *Defiance*," Garris told him. "They're bringing it aboard now with tractors. When they get it inside, spread it out on the landing deck and go over it carefully. Check for radioactivity and laser damage. And for any remains of the crew, of course."

The man nodded. "Right, sir. Will do."

"I'll be down shortly," Garris added. "I hope the junk will tell you something." He turned and nodded to the comm man, and the viewscreen went dark. An instant later, the starscape reappeared.

After turning over the bridge to Richey, Garris proceeded down to the landing deck. Like any starship, the *Mjolnir* was strictly a deep-space vessel. It was never meant to land, and so it carried in its capacious belly a small fleet of landing craft. Even the smallest starships—the scouts—never entered a planetary atmosphere, although they had only two small landing boats. The landing deck always adjoined a huge airlock, which was where the debris would be pulled aboard.

It was already spread out in a clear space between the boats when Garris arrived. A ring of crewmen encircled it, each carrying a sensing instrument. The third officer stood by and watched them work.

Garris looked over the small mountain of metal and plastic doubtfully. There didn't seem to be as much of it as there should be. Moreover, it all looked like electronic

gear of some sort. And nothing looked damaged. He turned to the third officer with a puzzled frown. "Well?" he asked.

The third officer looked equally puzzled. "I've got them checking it over again," he said. "The first readings don't make much sense, sir. No radioactivity, no signs of fusing, no damage. Nothing."

"Is that *all* ? I thought there would be a lot more. A scoutship is pretty big, after all."

"That's another thing, sir. We've got several tons of debris here, but, as you say, that's not nearly enough. The *Defiance* wasn't just blasted apart, by the looks of it. Most of it is just gone. Vaporized. But you *can't* vaporize duralloy, sir. And if you could, there would be some sort of vapor traces about. Have we detected anything like that?"

"No," Garris said. He looked thoughtful. "Look," he said, "when you've finished your recheck, I want your men to go over this junk and figure out exactly what it is. Or what it used to be." He threw a last scowl at the remains of the *Defiance* , then stalked back to the bridge.

* * * *

Garris wasn't quite sure what he had expected to find when the snarled debris had been identified and pieced together. But whatever it was, it wasn't what he found. He listened to the third officer's report with growing amusement and immediately got on a beam to Admiral Mandel's headquarters at New Victory.

Mandel frowned out of the viewscreen eagerly. "What was it?" he asked. "KwanDellan attack?"

Garris shook his head. "No, sir. Not an attack at all, from what we can determine."

"Not an attack? Then why did the ship stop signaling? Explain yourself, Captain."

"Well, we located what's left of the *Defiance* . There isn't much. But what there is hasn't been damaged at all. It's simply been—discarded."

Mandel didn't like that idea. "Discarded? What is that supposed to mean?"

Garris waved the sheet of paper with the third officer's report. "We've identified the debris, Admiral. We know exactly what it was. We've found the ship's computer and a ton or so of sensing instruments and most of the scout's armament. And that's all, sir. It was discarded. Just disconnected and set loose in space. There's no remains from the warpdrives or the hull or the life support system. Nothing at all."

Mandel's jaw quivered. "What does this *mean* , dammit!"

"It means, sir, that your scoutship wasn't destroyed at all. It was stolen."

"STOLEN! STOLEN! How the hell do you steal a starship, Captain? Just tell me that."

Garris shrugged. "I don't know, sir. But that's clearly what happened. The ship

stopped signaling simply because the ship's computer was disconnected. The *Defiance* was hijacked, not destroyed.”

Mandel, red-faced and glowering, considered that for a moment. He and Garris both knew that he was in serious trouble. He had put the Periphery and the Periphery Defense Force on combat alert, and Earth was going to want to know why. His reasons had better be good.

“All right,” the admiral said at last. “So the KwanDellan didn't attack our ship. Instead they captured it. Just as bad. Still an act of war.”

“But *how*, sir?” Garris said. “They couldn't just ask to send a boarding party over. The crewman would have been most suspicious. Starships don't pay each other social visits in deep space.”

Mandel smiled. “Maybe they pretended they were a distressed vessel. When the *Defiance* attempted rescue, the trap closed.” He made a clenching motion with his fist.

“Fleet regulations require a pilot to report if he goes to the rescue of a distressed ship, sir,” Garris pointed out. “Besides, the *Defiance* stayed on course right until its signal went out, according to your monitors, sir.”

“Well, then, the KwanDellan must just have captured the ship by force.”

Garris shook his head. “Admiral, the crewman could have run from an attacker. And he certainly would have had time to notify sector headquarters if someone was trying to capture his ship. Moreover, a scout has *some* armament. It could have resisted capture. In which case, we would have found some signs of a battle—debris from the attacker, or something.”

Mandel was starting to lose control again. “All right, young man,” he said, putting a sneer in the ‘young.’ “If you're so smart, *you* explain it!”

“I can't, sir,” Garris admitted. “I've been toying with a dozen different theories, and none make sense. The only thing I can think of is an accident. Something happened to the crewman. Incapacitated him in some way, so he couldn't run or report or resist.”

“Yes,” said Mandel, seizing on Garris' explanation eagerly. “And *then* the KwanDellan attack came—”

“Only that doesn't work, either,” Garris interjected. “Too many coincidences. The KwanDellan would have no way of knowing that this one ship, out of our entire fleet, was crippled. And the odds are equally astronomical against someone else blundering on a dead *Defiance* and capturing it.”

But this time Mandel was adamant. “No, Captain. You may be right about the odds. But nothing else makes sense. I'm ordering a mobilization. Proceed to Duncan's World at once. We'll issue those bastards an ultimatum. Return the *Defiance* at once—or we move against them.”

The viewscreen went dark suddenly. A dead silence swept over the bridge, broken only by the whirring of the instruments. Then someone spoke. "My God," he said, in a soft whisper.

Garris realized his mouth was hanging open, and shut it. "You heard the admiral," he said to the helmsman. "Set a course for Duncan's World. All possible speed." Then he rose from his seat before the command console and beckoned to Richey to follow.

They retreated to the conference room. Once the door had slid shut safely behind them, Garris exploded.

"I never expected anything like that," he said. "Mandel is worse than I thought. There's no telling what damage he'll do. He's determined to foment a war with the KwanDellan."

"That's a very serious charge, sir," Richey reminded him. "I think it's best if I forget I heard you say that." He sat down while Garris strode over to a wall and punched for drinks. They appeared a moment later.

Garris joined Richey at the conference table, handed him a drink, sat down, and emptied his glass with a quick snap of his wrist. "This is crazy," he said. "Crazy. Nothing fits. It *can't* be the KwanDellan. It just can't be. For one thing, what possible motivations could they have? Why capture an Alliance starship? It was a standard model, a bit improved but nothing revolutionary. What could they hope to gain? There was no experimental equipment on board, unless there's something I'm not being told."

He frowned and stopped to consider that possibility, then discarded it. "No," he said. "Impossible. It doesn't make sense."

"What if it weren't the KwanDellan?" Richey put in hesitantly. "What if it were some species we've never encountered. Out conducting their own explorations. An Alliance starship would be a novelty to them. Perhaps they'd capture it to see how it works and figure out the level of our technology."

"Unknown aliens? Maybe, but—no, that doesn't work either." Garris shook his head vigorously. "The crewman would have reported it if he detected a vessel of unknown design."

"The accident you hypothesized," said Richey. "He was out. Dead, or unconscious."

"The coincidence involved would be mind-boggling," Garris said. "And, if these aliens of yours wanted a ship for study, why discard the armament and the sensors and the computer? Wouldn't those be the parts that would interest them the most? Especially if they're hostile—they'd want to take our weapons apart piece by piece, not throw them out into space."

Richey gave up with a shrug. "I don't know, then. I can't explain it."

"Neither can I," said Garris. He waved the first officer away. "Go take charge of the bridge. I'm going to stay down here and do some hard thinking. I've got to come up

with some answers before Mandel ignites a war just to gratify his ego.”

* * * *

Garris went to his cabin and thought through most of his sleep shift. It got him precisely nowhere. When he finally returned to the bridge, the *Mjolnir* was four hours out of Duncan's World, and the situation was getting tense.

A stack of reports was sitting on his command console. He read them one by one, starting from the top. Admiral Mandel had beamed the KwanDellan regional capital on ArsashNag and had demanded that the *Defiance* be returned. The local BrotherWorlds administrator had been baffled at first, then amused, and finally indignant. The session had ended with the admiral shouting threats.

Mandel had issued orders for the Periphery Defense Force to abandon its detection web, and reform into two battle fleets. The admiral was still unwilling to risk an out-and-out attack on the KwanDellan, but he wanted to set up blockades of the two nearest BrotherWorlds colonies. Since the KwanDellan had no warships in the region, it seemed like a safe maneuver.

The bottom report wasn't about Mandel at all, which Garris found to be relieving. The report said that Hollander, the crewman late of the *Defiance*, had no living relatives. But he did have a girl on Last Landing. Fleet personnel had tried to locate her to break the news, but without success. It was reported that she had gone off-planet, although she left no forwarding address.

That was unfortunate, Garris thought. She'd get the news eventually no matter where she went, of course. But there was no telling how, or when. A fleet representative might have been able to break things more gently. Terrible timing, it seemed—

He frowned in midthought. An odd suspicion had crossed his mind. He looked around for that file on Hollander he had intended to read once.

It was still on the console, covered by a pile of more recent documents. Garris brushed them aside and leaned back to read the file.

He smiled a bit as he perused the first page. Then the smile widened to a grin, and he chuckled softly to himself. He flipped through it page by page, still grinning.

Around page four, the grin faded and was replaced by a look of concern. He continued to read with mounting horror.

When he finished, he slapped the file down on the console savagely, straightened, and bellowed across the bridge at the startled comm man. “Get me Mandel. At once,” he yelled.

The admiral finally appeared on the *Mjolnir* viewscreen, harried and angry. “I hope this is important, Garris. I don't have time to argue with you. Coordinating a fleet in battle is a full-time job.”

“You're making a terrible mistake, sir,” Garris said. “Stop the mobilization. I've figured it all out. The KwanDellan have nothing to do with it.”

“Nonsense,” Mandel snarled. He pointed a finger at the screen. “I warn you, Garris, I won't tolerate any insubordination on your part. I'm the commandant in this sector, and I'll make the decisions.”

The admiral turned as if to signal to end the connection. Garris yelled loudly and shot from his seat. “Sir! I've got new evidence.”

Mandel grimaced. “Very well. But make it fast. What new evidence?”

“The crewman—the *only* crewman—on board the *Defiance* was named Craig Hollander,” Garris said simply.

“Is that supposed to mean something, Garris? You waste valuable time!” He started to gesture again and was stopped by another screech of protest from the captain.

Garris turned to his console, snared the Hollander file, extracted a sheet of paper, and held it up to the viewscreen. “Look at this, sir,” he said. “Hollander was inducted. When he took his physical, he had to fill out a medical history.”

He rattled the sheet and pointed to a row of boxes that occupied four columns. Every box was checked in red. “Look,” he repeated. “Hollander claimed every disease from hay fever to Swampworld slimerot.”

Garris put that back into the file and yanked out another sheet. “That's not all,” he said. “Here's another form he filled out at induction. Where it asks for religion, he put ‘Reform Druid.’ And down where it asks for occupation, he's answered ‘Freelance Assassin,’ with ‘former shepherd’ in parentheses.”

Mandel was still frowning, but he was listening. “What of it?” he said. “The man was obviously an insubordinate clown, but why does that matter? Even if he sold out to the KwanDellan when they attacked him, that still doesn't excuse the attack.”

“No, no, *NO* !” Garris said. “The KwanDellan *didn't* attack, sir. That name—Craig Hollander. Doesn't that mean anything to you, admiral?”

“No. Should it?”

Garris held up the file so the admiral could see Hollander's photograph. “Yes,” he said. “It should. Hollander was inducted about a year ago. He spent the first six months of his term in the New Victory stockade. For gross insubordination. It's all in his file.”

But Mandel was no longer listening. He was staring at the photograph, white-faced. “Yes,” he said. “I recognize it. I was conducting an inspection of the new recruits and—and—”

“And he was one of them,” Garris continued. “And he was wearing his hair like *this* .” The captain jabbed at the photo. The bald admiral's aversion to long hair was a fleet legend. “And you stopped when you saw him, and said, ‘Soldier, you'd better have a good reason for hair like that.’”

Mandel nodded. “And he said he did. And I asked him what it was. And he—and he—” the admiral purpled with remembered rage.

Garris supplied the line from Hollander's file. “And he said that he wore his hair long to hide the obscene words he wrote on his forehead. Sir.”

Mandel looked as though he was going to explode. “They let *that* man out on a starship! I'll have somebody's scalp for this. I told them to shoot him.” He swore. Then he stopped suddenly. “But this still doesn't explain anything. I don't—”

“It explains *everything*,” Garris said. “Hollander stole your starship, sir. He *stole* it. Himself. Alone. For his own reasons and use. He was alone in the ship, without supervision. He crawled up the repair tube and disconnected the ship's brain. He took it apart and jettisoned it so he couldn't be traced. He also got rid of armament and sensing equipment he didn't need. And then he lit out.”

“With several million dollars worth of starship,” Mandel said in a half snarl. “He probably intends to attack and conquer some helpless primitive planet somewhere and make himself a king. Or maybe go in for deep-space piracy.”

“No, sir. That's not it. He got rid of most of his armament, sir. Besides, that's not his style.. He's converted the *Defiance* into a merchantman, sir. He got rid of all that equipment to give him *room*. For freight, I'm willing to bet. He built himself cargo holds.”

Mandel had suddenly gone ashen, as some of the implications of what Garris was saying hit him. “The attack,” he said. “The mobilization. I'll have to cancel them at once. And Earth—” There was a note of sick whining in his voice. He was finished and he knew it.

Then his face hardened again. “Find him, Garris,” he ordered. “Find this Hollander character and crucify him. Blast him out of space if you must. But get him. You understand? GET HIM!”

Garris understood, all right. He understood too well. As the screen went dark, he slumped back into his command chair and dropped the Hollander file in disgust.

The admiral wanted revenge. Preferably on Hollander, who had just demolished what was left of Mandel's alleged career. But Garris would do as a surrogate. So Garris gets the assignment to find Hollander. And the admiral is sure to get *someone* —

The captain sighed and looked over at the comm man. “Wake up Richey,” he said. “I want him up here.”

The first officer, yawning, reported to the bridge a few minutes later. “What's up, sir?” he asked.

“The war has been canceled due to circumstances beyond our admiral's control,” Garris said drily, ignoring the shocked stares and repressed chortling of his bridge crew. “Turns out Hollander stole the *Defiance* and ran off with it. We've got to find

him, the admiral says.”

“Oh,” said Richey, taking everything in quickly. “How do we do that?”

“I was hoping you'd know,” Garris said. “He could be anywhere.”

Richey thought for a moment. “No, he couldn't,” he said finally. “He'd have to head out. If he went back into Alliance space, one of the other scouts in the detection network would've picked him up.”

“That's right,” said Garris. His mind was beginning to function again. “He'd head into KwanDellan territory. They don't bother to patrol any more, so no one would trace him.”

The captain straightened in his seat. “But he couldn't just start trading with a stolen Alliance scoutship. Someone would notice.” He remembered something else. “And then there's his girl. She's left Last Landing. Obviously they've got a rendezvous planned somewhere—he couldn't come back to pick her up without being detected. They must have planned the whole thing when the other crewman was detached—that was at Last Landing, too, if I recall correctly.”

He nodded to himself. “Give me a starmap on the viewscreen,” he said loudly to the comm man. “The Periphery and neighboring space.”

The map flashed into reality. Garris studied it intently for a few minutes. Then he looked over at the helmsman. “Set course for Rendlaine,” he ordered. “Max speed.”

“Why Rendlaine?” Richey asked.

Garris turned to face him. “Hollander's converting his ship to a merchantman,” he said. “But he needs pros to finish the job. And to disguise the ship's lines, so it won't be spotted as an Alliance scout every time he heads into Alliance space. But the *Defiance* is a starship, not a system boat. It can't set down. So he needs a planet with orbital space docks.”

He pointed at the map. “Rendlaine is perfect. It's a Free Colony, a human world, but not part of the Alliance. It's got extensive spaceport facilities in orbit and plenty of skilled workers. It's also got no scruples. Hollander can get rid of some more of his military hardware, pay for the overhaul, and still turn a nice profit.

“The Rendlainese will probably give him a registration to boot. They won't care if the ship's stolen, as long as it pays taxes. And he can pick up a cargo there.”

Richey, looking at the starmap, nodded in agreement. “Yes,” he said, “makes sense. Rendlaine's outside the Periphery proper, but fairly close. And the most direct route skirts Alliance space and goes right through the KwanDellan globe.” He frowned. “A good guess, Captain. But you'll never catch him.”

“Why not?” said Garris.

“The *Defiance* is a scout,” the first officer said. “It's lighter and faster than

the *Mjolnir*. And he's got a big head start. He'll beat you there by a week and be long gone when you arrive.”

“No,” Garris said, shaking his head. “I don't think so. They work fast on Rendlaine when the money's right—but converting a scout to a merchantman will still take time. And there's something else—”

“Yes?”

“His girl. If we had time to investigate, we'd discover that she booked passage from Last Landing to Rendlaine, I'd wager. Probably under an assumed name. But that doesn't matter. She'll be traveling in a commercial passenger boat, making several other stops. Hollander will have to wait for her. Only the *Mjolnir* will beat her there.” He grinned.

Richey looked impressed. “You know,” he said, “I think you're right, Captain. We may just do it.”

“We *will* do it,” Garris said confidently, picturing the promotion it would bring him. “I almost pity the poor guy. Almost. But not quite.”

* * * *

They caught them red-handed. When the *Mjolnir* arrived at Rendlaine a little over two weeks later, the *Defiance* was still tied up at an orbital repair dock, undergoing a major overhaul. That the ship in question was the *Defiance* there was no doubt. The Alliance markings on the hull had been painted over and replaced by strange red-and-white stripes the like of which Garris had never seen. But the lines were still those of a late model Alliance scoutship, although they were rapidly undergoing revision.

Yes, they caught them red-handed.

Only the Rendlaineese wouldn't let them do anything about it.

The Rendlaineese official was polite, but firm. “For the last time, Captain, we will not surrender the ship in question to you. Nor will we allow you to take its crew into custody.”

Garris fumed. “But it's a stolen Alliance starship,” he said. “It *belongs* to us.”

“The ship you speak of is a registered Rendlaineese trader. The commander is a Brish'dir named Tewghel-kei. Not even a human.” The Rendlaineese official shook his head. “You have no proof of your charges. And you must admit, they are outrageous charges. Stealing an Alliance military vessel. I mean, really, Captain.”

Garris glowered menacingly at the viewscreen. “You realize that I could take the stolen ship by force, if necessary? I remind you that the *Mjolnir* is an Alliance dreadnought.”

The official only smiled at that. “And I remind you that Rendlaine is protected by treaties with the KwanDellan, the Brish'diri, and the Miraashians. Not to mention the other Free Colonies. We will not be bullied, Captain Garris. Not even by an Alliance

dreadnought. You will take no action against the ship in question without our permission. And you will not obtain that permission unless you prove your charges.”

“If you'd get off your duff and come out to orbit and *look* at the *Defiance*, you'd have all the proof you need,” Garris said. “She's an Alliance scoutship. You can tell by looking.”

“That is not proof. Perhaps someone liked the design of your scouts and built a ship along similar patterns. Stranger things have been known to happen.”

“All right, then,” Garris said. “Then let us look at the ship's registration papers. There should be proof there.”

“A ship's registration papers are confidential documents. Neither you nor I may examine them without her captain's permission. Only authorized officials of the Rendlainese fleet and trade commission have free access to the information they contain.”

The Rendlainese shook his head one last time. “Perhaps you should contact the skipper of the ship in question, Captain Garris. Perhaps you'll get permission. That's the only thing I can suggest. Good day.”

The screen went dark. Garris slapped his command console in frustration, and winced at the force of the blow. He turned to Richey. “He knows.”

The first officer shrugged. “Of course he knows. But he's not about to let you do anything. The Rendlainese think the whole affair is terribly amusing. These Free Colonists have odd ideas of what's funny.”

“Where do you think they got this Brish'dir?” Garris asked.

“On Rendlaine. The *Defiance* is a three-man ship. Hollander had himself and his girlfriend; so he hired a third crewman from some other boat. An alien, to confuse things. Made him nominal captain for purposes of registration. All very neat.”

“Yes,” Garris agreed. “Very. This Hollander has a devious mind. I'm beginning to understand how it works, and it scares me.”

Richey tried to look sympathetic. “Whatever you do, you'd better do it soon. Work on the *Defiance* is nearly complete, and a cargo is being taken on. Trade goods, according to the man we bribed. Hollander is evidently going to try wheeling and dealing on his own, instead of just lugging freight. Moreover, we also have reports that a Terran female was aboard the last shuttle up to that orbital dock.”

Garris gave an exaggerated scowl and faced the viewscreen. “Get me the *Defiance*,” he snapped. “Or whatever it's called now.”

The ship was evidently not called anything at present. But it responded to the *Mjolnir*'s signals anyway. The hairless, bullet-shaped, and gray-skinned features of a squat Brish'dir took shape on the viewscreen.

Garris came right to the point. "Sir," he said, "the ship you are in is a stolen scout of the Allied Starsuns of Terra. You are making yourself an accomplice to a serious crime by joining her crew. You put yourself in danger. I must demand that you surrender the *Defiance* at once."

"You must be Captain Garris," the Brish'dir said politely in a bass rumble. "The Rendlaineese have told me all about you. I'm afraid you are mistaken. This ship is not your *Defiance*. I am its master, not your escaped Terran."

"If you have nothing to hide, then I ask that you release your ship's registration papers to us," Garris said.

"I am sorry, Captain Garris," the Brish'dir began gravely. "I cannot give credence to—" Then suddenly he stopped, and looked to the side. As if he were talking to someone out of viewscreen range.

The viewer's sound cut off suddenly, and it appeared that the Brish'dir was arguing with someone offscreen. Finally he turned back with the alien equivalent of a shrug. The sound came back on.

"Very well," he said. "I will comply with your request, Captain Garris. To prove that I have nothing to hide, as you say. But my ship departs soon, in hours, and there is much work. I must request that you do not bother me again."

He vanished from the viewscreen. Garris turned to Richey." He didn't want us to see the registration," the captain said. "He was overruled. By Hollander, I'll wager."

"Why?" said Richey.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps there's nothing damaging in the papers." He smiled. "Or maybe that's what Hollander thinks. But I think he's slipped. There'll be something, somewhere. Something that will betray him. Something that will show the commander of that ship is a human, not an alien. And, if we find it, the Rendlaineese will *have* to listen to us." He whirled towards communications. "Get me Rendlaine again and demand those documents."

But the Rendlaineese were still adamant. Yes, they said, Garris could see the papers if the captain had authorized their release. But they had not yet been notified of the release. So Garris would have to wait.

Garris waited. Waited and thought. And something dawned on him, hours later.

He knew how Hollander's mind worked. He'd read those forms. The man was a gambler, a clown, a joker. He'd take a chance and let Garris see his papers just for the hell of it, all right. That fitted. But he'd wait until the last minute to release them, gambling that Garris couldn't find anything until he was gone.

And he'd leave the system laughing, knowing that he'd never be found again. Space is vast, and Hollander had no reason to confine himself to the Periphery. Tramp traders such as he would be lived erratic lives among the stars, and the number of planets out there was dizzying.

Garris swore. Swore and waited. And started thinking about the possible giveaways in the papers. So he'd be ready to act quickly.

About seven hours after Garris had beamed the Brish'dir, the crewman on the sensing instruments looked up. "The *Defiance* is leaving, sir," he reported.

"Hook your sensors on tight," Garris said. "Keep track of it as long as you can. Keep all weapons systems trained on it as long as it's in range." The *Mjolnir* couldn't catch a scout, but Garris could stop it with threats and maybe cripple it if he got his evidence in time.

The comm man looked up. "Rendlaine on beam, sir," he said. "They're faxing up the documents you requested."

Garris grinned savagely. He had Hollander figured out perfectly. No sane man would take a stupid, unnecessary risk like this. But if Hollander had been sane, he never would have had the unmitigated gall to dream of swiping a starship.

"Let me see the documents as soon as they're ready," he ordered. It was going to be tight. The *Defiance* was fast, and there were a lot of documents coming over.

Moreover, the important ones came last. The early pages were useless—simple things like name of ship, name of owner, class of ship, type of registration. There would be scant evidence there, Garris had decided. He gave those sheets only a quick impatient glance as each was rushed over to him.

Then the important sheets began to come in. The ones where Garris expected to find something. He examined them eagerly, page by page.

The crew roster. Three crewmen, one Brish'dir male, one Terran male, one Terran female. But Hollander and his girl had used assumed names. No proof there. Mixed crews were common.

The ship's specs. Close to those of an Alliance scoutship. But not close enough. Hollander had had alterations made. No proof there.

Ship's planet of manufacture. That was Garris' brightest hope. If Hollander had listed an Alliance world, he was through. Fleet-design ships were not built for civilian use in Alliance worlds. But instead, Hollander had listed a Free Colony. It could be checked and disproved, but not until the quarry was long gone.

Garris shuffled through paper after paper, searching for the giveaway. That damned Hollander was such a joker. Surely, somewhere, he'd have blundered. His very frivolous nature would demand it. But there was nothing, nothing.

The sensor man called over. "Captain, the *Defiance* is almost out of range. And it's going into warpdrive."

Garris looked up, swore, looked back, shuffled some more.

“Gone, sir,” the crewman said a minute later.

The captain flung the papers to the floor in disgust. He'd lost. And he knew damn well he'd pay. Mandel would blame him for letting Hollander escape. And he wouldn't get a promotion again until the fugitive starship was caught. Which meant never.

Richey picked up the discarded documents and walked across the bridge to console Garris. “Tough luck,” he said. “But they can't blame you.”

“No?” said Garris. “Just you watch.” He took the papers Richey was holding, and began to sort them into some semblance of order. Mandel would want to see them, of course.

Finally he had them arranged according to page number. He started to set them aside. Then he happened to glance at page one. He paused.

Page one, entry one, name of starship. Right under the Rendlainese seal, neatly filled in by hand.

Garris had a brief vision of red and white stripes. He remembered the custom, strange to his military mind, that said the commander of a starship always chose its name. He remembered that the commander of the stolen ship was supposed to be an alien.

He remembered how page one had arrived first. How he had given it a quick glance. How he had tossed it aside.

Captain John Garris, commandant of the dreadnought *Mjolnir*, sat back in his seat before the command console and took very firm hold of himself. It did not become the dignity of a starship captain to be seen screaming before his bridge crew.

* * * *

Meanwhile, out beyond the Rendlainese system, the captain of the *Good Ship Lollipop* grinned and set a course for the stars.